

HI-FI CHOICE

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TESTS
INSIDE!



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ULTIMATE GROUP TEST >> CD PLAYERS

- FEATURING**
- > Arcam DiVA CD192
 - > Astin Trew AT3000
 - > Cambridge Audio 840C
 - > Naim CD5i
 - > Quad 99CD-S
 - > Vincent CD-S6

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CLASSE

Welcome to the issue...

HI-FI CHOICE MARCH 2007 ISSUE 291

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



Here at *Hi-Fi Choice*, we work hard to bring you the fastest, smartest reviews of the most exciting new hi-fi components the world has to offer. From vinyl and valves to the latest digital audio formats, we scour the planet to find the brightest stars of the hi-fi firmament, all for a single purpose: the pursuit of pure, unadulterated musical pleasure.

There are, of course, a number of British-based companies that know a thing about aural entertainment, and many of them are featured in this issue. Our chief cover story pulls together in-depth tests of three new high-end components from home-grown brands, collected under the headline: "Britain's New Breed". The first of these is Linn's Exotik, a multichannel preamp with digital processing that crosses the divide between hi-fi and home cinema with rare aplomb. Then there's Leema's Antila – not the first British CD player with a £2,500 price tag, but can you name another that incorporates 20 DACs? And finally, a music server from Cambridge-based Imerge that proves the words 'hard disk' and 'hi-fi' can be used in the same sentence. Three very different products, then – all fit to take on the hi-fi world in 2007 and beyond.

Of course, there's plenty more to shout about in this issue. The best of the Brit Pack take on new Chinese-built machines in our sub-£1,000 CD player *Ultimate Group Test*, Rega's classic P2 turntable gets a revamp and Flying Mole proves that digital amp technology really can compete with the best analogue designs... it's a veritable feast of hi-fi, so enjoy – until next time.

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

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 *HFC*'s deputy editor. Armed with a bristling contacts book, an encyclopaedic knowledge of what's what in hi-fi 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 STEWARD

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



KEN KESSLER

The hi-fi industry's own *Grand Complication*, Ken brings decades of high end experience to the fore in *HFC*. He has also been to every hi-fi show around the world. Many times over. Yet, he is still a stranger to the beard trimmer.

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.

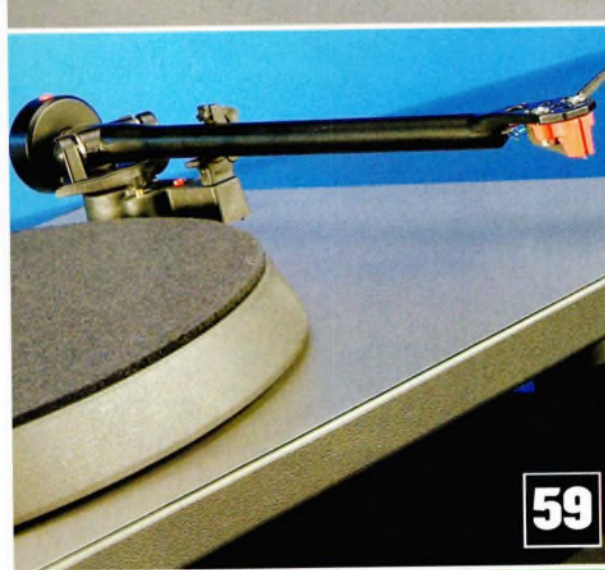


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ULTIMATE GROUP TEST

CD PLAYERS £600-£1,000

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BUYER'S BIBLE

The ultimate guide to high performance hi-fi and AV equipment, gathering together all our favourite products for your perusal.

Your shortlist starts here...

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Lyngdorf Audio

Denmark



Tired of listening to your room?

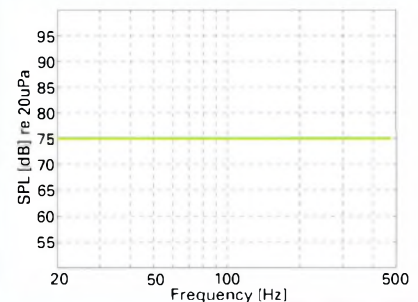
No matter how great your hifi, your room will dramatically compromise the way it sounds. Nearly half of what you hear comes not from your speakers but from reflections in your room, "high fidelity" music reproduction has simply been impossible in most rooms, until now.

Lyngdorf audio systems herald a new era in sound reproduction, removing the negative effects of your listening room so finally you can enjoy your music as it was intended, nothing added and nothing taken away.

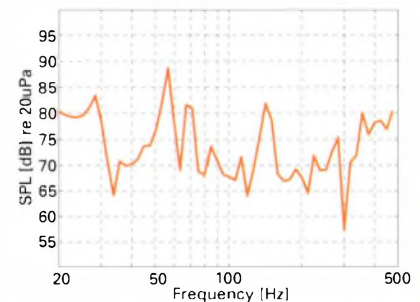


»Ingenious method of removing the room from the 'good sound' equation«

»RoomPerfect lives up to the name«



This graph shows the output of a loudspeaker equalized to a flat response in a test environment.



This graph shows the measured response of the same loudspeaker in an average living room.

Conclusion:

The room is the single most influential factor in sound reproduction – a factor eliminated by the RoomPerfect™ technology.

LYNGDORF



CYRUS DAB 8.0 DAB/FM TUNER

▶ This month we're tuned into the new, feature-packed DAB 8.0 radio tuner from Cyrus. The DAB/FM newcomer boasts many of the innovative features now common to portable DAB radios. Key to the tuner's appeal is a recording function, allowing users to record radio programs from the EPG (Electronic Program Guide) onto SD memory cards at the touch of a button.

The EPG means users can view forthcoming radio programs up to seven days in advance, on the tuner's four-line display. Programs can be recorded instantaneously, or in the future by using the timer function. And it doesn't end there. An internal buffer memory means live radio can be time-shifted – paused and rewind so you need never miss a beat. This is the first high-fidelity tuner we know of to sport this kind of functionality, which takes enjoying the airwaves to a new level.

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

PRODUCT Cyrus DAB 8.0

TYPE DAB/FM radio tuner

PRICE £500

KEY FEATURES SD card recording (up to 1GB)

▶ Rewind DAB radio ▶ Four-line display

CONTACT ☎ 01480 435577

🌐 www.cyrusaudio.com





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TIGHT**

**BASIS
B**

Reimyo

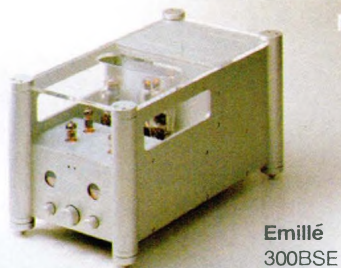
**Acoustic
Signature**

Harmonix



feastrex
a journey into space-time

AirTight
Emillé
Luxman
Melody
Reimyo
Acoustic Signature
Basis
EMT
Feastrex
Gershman
King Sound
Basis PSTT Cables
Boston Audio
Harmonix



Emillé
300BSE

A. Gershman Black Swan
B. Reimyo CAT-777
C. Reimyo PAT-777
D. Basis Vector Tonearm
E. Acoustic Sig. Analogue One
F. AirTight ATM2
G. Basis PSTT Cables

H. Basis 2800 & Vector Arm
I. Feastrex Coaxial Drive Unit
J. AirTight ATM300B
K. Feastrex D6
L. Harmonix TU-220MT
M. Harmonix HS-101 SLC
N. Emillé 300BSE

AudioLincs T. 01476 591090
Brighton Hifi Ex. T. 01580 878101
Retro Reproduction T. 0131 558 9989

Grass Dance T. 01764 650573
Hazelmere T. 01494 865398
Walrus T. 0207 7247224

The Sound Surgery T. 01392 662920



ASTIN TREW AT3500 CD PLAYER

It's not often that a new £1,150 CD player arrives on the scene and the new AT3500 from Astin Trew has really caught our eye. Designed in the UK with a careful eye on manufacturing in the far east, the player typically flaunts the kind of build quality and component selection achievable with increasingly common anglo-chinese production. The player is a beefed-up version of the hi-fi specialist's £647 AT3000 entry-level model, which is reviewed in this very issue (p69).

Astin Trew's proprietor, Michael Osborn, has paid particular attention to the clocking system. The player is installed with a high-performance clock that comes complete with its own power supply. Elsewhere, the player uses a strong mix of high-quality components with an equally promising standard of build. A further boon is the player's 96kHz upsampling feature, which can be switched on or off according to preference, plus a valve output buffer that contributes to the player's distinctive sound.

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

PRODUCT Astin Trew AT3500

TYPE CD player

PRICE £1,150

KEY FEATURES Upsampling CD player • Valve output stage • High-performance clock • Upgraded main power supply • 96kHz upsampling • Aluminium casework

CONTACT ☎ 01491 414494

🌐 www.astintrew.co.uk

NEW PRODUCT HIGHLIGHTS

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 740 SERIES

➤ Could this be the best CD player and stereo amplifier under £500? It's Cambridge Audio's new Azur 740C CD player and matching 740A stereo amplifier – two new products that feature many of the technologies seen in 2006's Azur 840 Series CD and amp. As both of these were Gold Award winners in our Awards issue (*HFC* 287), you can expect something special.

The CD player incorporates the same 32-Bit DSP with full 24-bit/384 kHz upsampling, Wolfson DACs and the Swiss-developed ATF (Adaptive Time Filtering) technology seen in the 840C CD player. The partnering 740A amplifier is a 100-watt powerhouse that uses technology from the 840A in combination with evolved circuitry from the 540A/640A V2 amplifiers. It features a customizable front panel with assignable inputs, plus two pairs of high output transistors per channel, said to drive difficult loads. Expect a review soon.

Price £500 each **Due** now

☎ 0870 900 1000 ✉ www.cambridgeaudio.com



KEF REFERENCE SERIES

➤ KEF has announced initial details of an all-new Reference Series. The new line-up will replace the previous Reference range launched in 2001 and will introduce a number of key innovations including a two-piece titanium tweeter, shallower midrange cones for wider dispersion and computer-optimized crossovers. The nine-strong speaker range has been developed from a cost-no-object concept speaker, the 'Austin', which was used as a test bed for the technologies in the Reference products. Keep 'em peeled for an in-depth *HFC* review.

Price from £3,300 to £12,000 per pair **Due** now

☎ 01622 672261 ✉ www.kef.com

DENON CX-3

➤ Denon has taken the mini system to the high-end. The £2,700 CX-3 is a complete two-box system supplied with its own speakers. Hand-built in Japan, the new mini has a brand new CD/SACD transport and high-power amplifier specifically designed for the product. It features a cast alloy construction, newly designed speakers and ultra short signal paths, according to Denon. Despite its compact dimensions, the system offers 150 watts per channel. Expect an exclusive review soon.

Price £2,700 **Due** now

☎ 01234 741200 ✉ www.denon.co.uk



ARCAM SOLO MOVIE 5.1

➤ Arcam's new Solo Movie 5.1 is a fully featured, one-box home cinema system. Boasting universal (DVD-A/SACD) disc playback, the latest Solo also benefits from HDMI switching and a 1080i video scaler. Inside the unit are five 50-watt amps, an AV processor and a DAB/FM tuner module. Connections include a HDMI digital output, two HDMI inputs and a second zone audio output with an independent volume control.

Price £2,000 **Due** late February

☎ 01223 203200 ✉ www.arcam.co.uk

NAD C525BEE

Say goodbye to NAD's budget C521BEE CD player and welcome in its replacement, the C525BEE. Engineers at NAD are said to have tweaked the circuit to improve performance from the latest copy-protected and hybrid CDs. The new op-amps are also claimed to improve musicality and detail. A 20-bit Burr-Brown DAC forms the heart of the player, with Burr-Brown op-amps and separate power regulators for the analogue and digital sections.

Price £200 **Due** now ☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.nadelectronics.com



YAMAHA SOAVO-1

Yamaha is continuing its two-channel resurgence with a high-end speaker called the Soavo-1. The new floorstander has been specifically designed to sound as natural as possible and features Yamaha's own bass/mid drivers. The cones are made

from Poly-Methyl-Pentene (PMP) injected-polymer material, which is said to be extremely light, rigid and sturdy. Along with the 28mm aluminium tweeter, which is mounted on a die-cast aluminium plate, the drivers are housed in a two-chamber, mitered cabinet that has no parallel sides.

Price £2,000 per pair **Due** now

☎ 01923 233166 🌐 www.yamaha-uk.com



MARANTZ DV7001

Marantz has launched a new HDMI-equipped universal disc player based on the acclaimed DV9600, but costing a fraction of its £1,500 price tag. The new DV7001 has an identical chassis and the same Cirrus 24-Bit/192kHz DAC across all six channels. Like its bigger brother, it also has an HDMI output, upscaling to 720p and 1080i, plus universal playback including support for DivX, MP3 and WMA computer audio and video files. The DV7001 also features the latest video DAC from Analog Devices and proprietary Noise Shaping Technology, which Marantz claims gives the most accurate signal representation possible.

Price £600 **Due** now

☎ 01753 680868 🌐 www.marantz.com



MORDAUNT-SHORT ALUMNI

The latest addition to Mordaunt-Short's expansive loudspeaker portfolio is the Alumni sub/sat system, which takes full advantage of the specialist's proprietary CPC (Continuous Profile Cone) driver technology. Alumni uses 100mm bass/mid drivers combined with a 25mm aluminium dome tweeter, all housed in a curvaceous cabinet designed to minimize standing waves. Remarkably, the matching Alumni subwoofer manages to fit a 200mm long-throw driver and a 120-watt amplifier into its diminutive cabinet.

Price £599 (5.1 system) **Due** now

☎ 0870 900 1000 🌐 www.mordaunt-short.com



Soundbites

ANVIL SOUND DISPLAY has launched two new ranges of custom-made loudspeaker stands called Series 3 and Series 4. Each stand is built to order and can be tailored to individual customer requirements. All parts and materials are UK-sourced and are fully interchangeable, allowing customers to mix and match colours. Prices range from £199 to £289.

☎ 0800 043 1207



ISOTEK has designed three types of high quality, audio-grade DIY power connector kits, for UK, US and European markets. Each connector uses deep cryogenically treated copper, heavily plated in 24ct gold. The connectors are said to accommodate and improve the performance of all mains cables. Prices start at £50.

☎ 01635 291357

THE CHORD COMPANY's latest interconnect cable, the Anthem 2, is a complete structural departure from its predecessor. Available with RCA phono, DIN or XLR plugs, the new cable features a multi-stranded, silver-plated core, surrounded by low density Teflon. The Anthem 2 is priced from £325 per metre.

☎ 01980 625700

ROBERTS has launched a range of desktop radios with an advanced roster of features. Heading the line-up is the £200 MP-Sound 30, which benefits from an EPG (Electronic Programme Control) guide, recording and playback to/from an SD memory card (supplied) and PausePlus technology. Prices start at £120 for the Sound 78.

☎ 01709 571722



AESTHETIX has added to its range of high-end preamps with the Calypso, a new £3,600 model. It's a six-input, high-gain line stage with an all-valve signal path. All inputs are available with balanced XLR connections, as well as single-ended RCA phono sockets. It's remote controlled and features a discrete resistor volume control with 88 separate 1dB steps.

☎ 01252 702705



The Insider

THIS MONTH, HFC TALKS TO...

GRAEME FOY

Job Title: Head of Acoustic Engineering
Company: Mordaunt-Short



What is your most exciting product in development at the moment?

We are currently finalising a new range of loudspeakers, using new proprietary CPC drivers and the next generation ATT tweeter.

What is the future of hi-fi in the home?

I reckon a large degree of divergence. Some people desire ever more discreet components, while others aspire to make a statement with a highly individual system.

What is the best innovation you've encountered recently?

The 840A XD amplifier developed by our sister company, Cambridge Audio. The development of a completely new class of amplification is outstanding – especially at its price-point.

Can generation iPod be turned on to hi-fi?

In my opinion, yes! The iPod itself is a fine-sounding piece of kit and listening to more music on the move is whetting peoples' appetite to rediscover the joy of sitting down and relaxing to music at home.

Are we experiencing a stereo resurgence?

Absolutely! I think the portable player has brought many back to their appreciation of music. It's up to the hi-fi industry to successfully embrace a new generation of consumers and try to understand their choice of format. The challenge is ours to face.

Hi-Fi Diary

FEBRUARY

23-25 **Sound & Vision – The Bristol**
Manott City Centre Hotel, Bristol
www.bristolshow.co.uk
The UK's largest hi-fi/home cinema show

MARCH

5-6 **The Connected Home Exhibition**
Olympia, London
www.the-connected-home.co.uk
Europe's largest connected-home show

MARCH/APRIL

31-1 **The Heathrow High Fidelity Show**
Park Inn, Heathrow Airport
www.chestergroup.org/heathrowshow07
London's premier dedicated hi-fi show

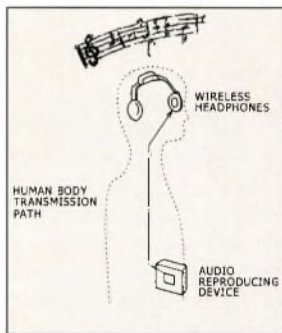
B&W Jag

B&W has announced that it is to work with Jaguar to develop "recording studio quality audio" in its cars. Jaguar's stunning C-XF concept car, shown at the 2007 Detroit motor show, features a Bowers & Wilkins loudspeaker system more technologically advanced than many high-end domestic varieties. It uses the company's Kevlar midrange units, diamond tweeters and some brand new thinking on the bass driver front. The 'Bass Beam' gets around the difficulties of fitting a bass driver in the car by being shaped to fit along the bottom of each door. Elsewhere, the absorbent pipe that usually sits behind a B&W diamond tweeter is replaced with a spiral damping panel to absorb rear firing soundwaves. Another development is Micro Matrix, a honeycomb-like structure that forms the dashboard and parcel-shelf panels. This provides a lightweight, yet incredibly stiff, baffle for the drive units. B&W-based sound systems will be available as an option on production Jaguar cars later this year.



Skin effect

Sony has applied to patent a system for transmitting signal through the human body. The company plans to use this technology to wirelessly connect a personal audio player with headphones and avoid the entangulation (that's a real word, by the way) that can result from traditional wired systems. The system uses a frequency between 500kHz and 3MHz and currently has a data rate of 48kbps. It's designed to ensure greater privacy than Bluetooth, but does require electrodes to be close to the skin at the sender (player) and receiver (headphones). Fortunately, the electrodes do not need to be physically in contact with the skin – fashion is a fickle thing, but that might be taking body art too far!



Big is beautiful

Horns have to be pretty big to give anything like the bandwidth of their box-bound cousins and Matt Hope seems to have taken this to heart with his Hornmassive mobile mono sound system. Weighing in at two tons, standing 3.5m high by 4m deep and voiced by a 300mm drive unit, this steel and aluminium creation is not for sale, but "functions as a mobile audio input station whereby people can plug-in in order to project 'content' a distance of 1 km". Matt describes it as "the ultimate monophonic sound projector, intended to catalyze social activities in multiple settings".



HD disarray

With sales of the new HD video formats failing to meet expectations on the US market, there are signs that some compromises will be necessary to garner public confidence. Warner is reported to be reworking its Total HD format, with both Blu-ray and HD DVD layers on the same disc. LG, meanwhile, has announced a true dual-format player dubbed the 'Super Multi Blue' or BH100 (pictured). It's the first machine capable of playing both Blu-ray and HD DVD discs, and is due to go on sale in the US within weeks.

Moreover, Sony's latest Blu-ray player – the BDP-S1 – would seem to be a totally video-oriented machine, as it's incompatible with both SACDs and regular CDs. It will play standard DVDs, but not the HD variety. And, in not-too-unexpected HD news, the AACs DRM (digital rights management) system used by both formats is under fire. A hacker dubbed Muslix64 posted details of how, when frustrated by his HD DVD player's inability to work via a DVI connection, he created a program that unlocked the content.



NAD gets protection

Lenbrook Corporation, which owns the NAD and PSB brands, has formed a partnership with Armour Home Electronics. Alongside NAD and PSB, Armour has responsibility for brands like Goldring, QED, Q Acoustics, Myryad and most recently Tivoli Audio. The partnership means that Lenbrook UK's MD Neil Wilson will be returning to the company's Canadian HQ, leaving Rob Hunt to join Armour as electronics products manager. The move will reduce Lenbrook's operating costs in the UK, but maintain its ability to support 250 dealers across the country.

Armour's managing director, Glenn McClelland, said: "We have really enjoyed working with Lenbrook to establish NAD into the custom install market. Now, with total responsibility for both brands and in all channels, we expect to see rapid growth with NAD and PSB."



JIMMY'S TWEAKS #50

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



Add a subwoofer to beat the boom

Boomy bass is one of hi-fi's occupational hazards. You'd think that extending the bottom end by adding a subwoofer would exacerbate any bass boom problems you might have, but (paradoxically) the opposite is often the case. Most subs have a phase switch, and the 'correct' setting is to have this match the phasing

of your loudspeakers. If, however, you switch the sub to the opposite phase (reverse absolute phase), you can effect a degree of upper bass cancellation over the frequencies that both sub and main speakers cover. This can be incredibly effective at controlling bass boom – even in situations that are almost a lost cause. Some hi-fi manufacturers use this little trick when demonstrating their equipment in those boxy and boomy hotel rooms used at shows.

TOP 10 OFF-THE-WALL ACCESSORIES YOU MUST TRY

1. Nanotech systems Nespa 1 CD finaliser
2. Townshend Audio Seismic Sink speaker supports
3. Granite chopping boards as isolation platforms
4. Ringmat Stamat CDi anti-static CD device
5. Tannoy Supertweeters
6. VPI HW16.5 record cleaning machine
7. Reson Licon for cleaning electrical contacts
8. Milty Zerostat 3 anti-static gun
9. Halved squash balls for isolation
10. Acoustic System resonators



New Music

IN THE STUDIO

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



INTERPOL

Title: *tbc*

Release date: **Late spring**

Acclaimed New York indie rockers Interpol spent much of 2006 writing material for their highly-anticipated third album and are now in the studio recording. After releasing their debut *Turn On The Bright Lights* in 2002 and its follow-up, 2004's *Antics* on Matador, the quartet has now signed a major label deal with EMI.

DIDO

Title: *tbc*

Release date: **March**

Dido spent most of 2006 in the studio with a number of different producers including Jon Brion, who has revealed that her third album will be considerably less mainstream than 2003's multi-platinum *Life For Rent*. "She wants something less glossy and further left," he says. "There's a certain kind of restraint in record making that she doesn't want anymore. That's good. That's a recipe for finding new things."

ANNIE LENNOX

Title: *Venus*

Release date: *tbc*

The forthcoming album from the former Eurythmics singer includes what may have been James Brown's last-ever recording, a duet recorded with Lennox on a song called *Vengeance*. Produced in LA by Glen Ballard (Michael Jackson/Alanis Morissette/Aerosmith), other duets on the album are believed to feature Kelis and Mary J Blige.

BRIGHT EYES

Title: *Cassadaga*

Release date: **April**

The prolific Conor Oberst follows up the two albums he made in 2005 under the Bright Eyes moniker (*I'm Wide Awake It's Morning* and *Digital Ash In A Digital Urn*) with a set he describes as "sort of folksy and trippy and



hopefully a little more cosmic". Guests include M Ward, Gillian Welch and Janet Weiss of Sleater-Kinney.

BRETT ANDERSON

Title: *Brett Anderson*

Release date: **26 March**

Anderson's first solo album finds the former Suede frontman in full-on confessional mode. "In the past I've hidden behind characterization and vignettes, but I've not done that here. I have taken a knife to myself and am showing the world my insides. The songs are a comment on how I really feel – no guests, no gimmicks, just me and the music."

ALSO COMING SOON

JAZZ/CLASSICAL

Sonny Rollins *Sonny Please* (Feb); **Harry Connick Jr** *Chanson Du Vieux Carré* (Feb); **Mischa Maisky** *Bach: Goldberg Variations* (Feb); **Elina Garanca** *Aria Cantilena* (Feb); **Janine Jansen** *Mendelssohn & Bruch: Concertos & Romance* (Feb)

SACD/DVD-AUDIO

Kenny Wayne Shepherd *10 Days Out... Blues from the Backroads* (DVD-A, Feb); **Tierney Sutton** *On the Other Side* (SACD, Feb); **Orchester Musikkollegium Winterthur** *Schonberg: Orchestral Works – Music of the Viennese School* (SACD, Feb); **Holthe, Kolbjorn and Aspaas** *Strauss: Sonata For Violin And Piano* (SACD, Feb); **Turtle Island Quartet** *A Love Supreme: The Music Of John Coltrane* (SACD, Mar)



Dominic Todd

New DAB for old

DAB may soon be better, but at a cost

Better DAB sound quality is on its way. It was just a few years ago when I, like many, was depressed by the very real possibility that the future of hi-fi radio wasn't high fidelity at all, but the utterly bland soundstage conjured up by the even poorer, MP2-based DAB radio. Yet salvation is coming.

Despite having only been around on the mass market for about five years, MP2-based DAB broadcasting is to be ditched in favour of a new AAC+ system. Likely to be marketed as DAB+, the new system is due to come on stream, depending upon broadcasters, in around two years' time. Combined with improved error-correction coding, it should mean that a bit rate of 64kbps will sound as

“The improved efficiency should not only increase the sound quality, but also rid DAB of the dreaded ‘gargle’ effect.”

good as 192kbps in today's money. The improved efficiency should not only increase the sound quality, but also rid DAB of the dreaded 'gargle' effect, that affects broadcasts in all but the strongest reception areas.

Less good news is that all of the DAB tuners built to date will eventually be obsolete. Rest assured, it won't be overnight, but I wouldn't be surprised to see FM (which may last until 2020 or so) outliving the 'old' DAB. While retailers will be rubbing their hands with glee at the prospect of yet another format to sell, it leaves owners of current sets with a sour taste in their mouths. Although I've never bothered with a separate DAB tuner (why would you when FM sounds so much better?), the Todd household is home to a couple of Pure Evokes.

Despite the limitations of DAB, I've grown rather fond of the things, especially the delightfully kitsch Marshall model, so to see them silenced in seven or so years' time will be particularly sad. Whereas an old DCC, open

reel, 8-track player, or even, for heaven's sake, a cylinder phonograph, will light up with the right media, the Evokes will be nothing more than a mute curiosity.

Therefore, if you're considering buying a DAB tuner this year, then it's well worth waiting for a compatible one. They should be out any time now and feature the new Venice 5 module from Frontier Silicon – the company which powers about 80 per cent of the DAB radios sold in the UK. By the end of the year, all tuners should support AAC+. I, for one, can't wait to hear them, but will reserve judgement until I hear a digital radio produce the *Proms* with all the conviction and involvement of a decent FM tuner. In the meantime, we have the recent announcement that yet more DAB radio stations have switched to mono. DAB+ can't come a moment too soon.

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



Stayin' alive

Is hi-fi a fragile, transient thing? Not 'arf...

Among the famous names lost to us last year, my mind often returns to memories of the late Alan 'Fluff' Freeman (who died last November) and the musical pleasure he brought to millions before retiring permanently to that big record box in the sky.

This got me to wondering what his Top 40 countdown would sound like with a hi-fi bias? What tales of the equipment that can be with us no more is Fluff spinning over at Valhalla FM? DJ, please cue up a downbeat tune...

"One-hit wonders Killer Volt come charging up to fifth place with a hot new remix of their hit *Stats Ate My Cat*." Cats have nine lives, panel speakers only one. For some reason, an occasional feline has been known to take a vertical walk up the grilles of a pair of doomed Magneplanars. These moggies obviously possess some sort of sixth sense, though, as none have ever been known to try the same thing on a pair of Quads.

"Dropping three places this week, it's those kings of ska, Badness, performing their classic *Baggy Jumpers*." Cable-knit jumpers, XL-sized shirts, long-sleeved T-shirts with a sleeve diameter more than 6cm larger than your wrist, a turntable and a cartridge – don't do it! Only if base jumping and extreme ironing have lost their thrill should you attempt aligning a cartridge whilst wearing loose-fitting clothing.

"And now, pop pickers, coming straight in at number three, we have... The Dented Cones with their smash hit *Can't Play No More!*" Joyous creatures though they are, children can represent a pretty terminal experience for loudspeakers, and I've wept over more than one tale of voice coils forever silenced by deadly little ninja pinkies.

"Sitting pretty at number two are The Shorts. Having sold over a million copies, *Live Wire* is still scorching off the shelves." The smell of barbecued silicon is not a pleasant one. Botched bi-wiring, a slip of the wrist, a soon to be ex-friend armed with a bottle of Tia Maria dancing to *The Birdie Song* next to your amp – all can kill off a bank of output devices unless the protection circuitry on your amp has 'Schwarzenegger' as its middle name. ▶

R

RETRO

HI-FI REVISITED

YAMAHA TC-800GL
CASSETTE RECORDER



Cassette decks were the workhorse of the home recordist in the 1970s and 1980s, before digital recording technologies

found their feet. Most were utilitarian to a fault, but Yamaha decided to break with tradition and employ the services of a top designer to provide a bit of pizzazz. The result was a truly unique design statement.

The designer they chose was not one of the British stalwarts like Kenneth Grange or a Japanese young gun like Toshiyuki Kita, but Italian industrial designer and architect Mario Bellini. Born in 1935, Bellini's Milan-based design studio (which opened in 1962) was by then already famous for some classic products, including Olivetti typewriter keyboards, Lami pens. Indeed, one of his video display terminals had already earned itself iconic status following its adoption for permanent display in a museum of modern art.

Even by the standards of its day, the TC-800GL cassette deck that was contracted by Yamaha was based on conventional technology. It used a single-capstan, single-motor, mechanically actuated mechanism. The metering included peak reading LEDs, and the unit was equipped with Dolby B, but not Dolby C or Dolby HX Pro, and switching was available for standard, chrome and FeCr tapes, but without fine tuning or the backup of automatic setup.

The TC-800GL design had its odd, even idiosyncratic points. Although nominally a mains driven deck, it had an internal battery compartment which meant it could be used as a true portable for location recordings, though for most users, this feature went largely unexplored. It was ill-equipped for life on the road otherwise, though it did have a battery check switch and a limiter to help provide belt and braces protection against the possibility of clipping during live recordings. A fine pitch control was available for playback, though this was probably included more to support karaoke than creative recordings. Of course, the Yamaha had microphone as well as line inputs, with the possibility of simple cross-mixing between the two.



"Yamaha decided to employ the services of a top designer to provide a bit of pizzazz."

The real joy of the deck was a combination of two principal design features. One was the slanted construction, which simply looked fabulous. It also meant that everything was readily accessible from almost any angle. The other was the long, high resolution and finely calibrated input and output sliders.

The TC-800GL was launched in 1975 and remained in the range for only a little under 24 months. Sadly, it transpired to be a one-off, albeit as it turned out, a distinguished one. There was no subsequent design replacement or upgraded successor, and the conclusion is obvious – the deck was not a great commercial success, at least in the determinedly budget-conscious UK market. That said, it has found an honoured home in Yamaha's hall of fame at its Hammamatsu factory in Japan.

At the time, the player was well liked for its aesthetic qualities. It also received some good reviews. Ultimately, however, the cassette deck failed to set the sales charts alight and fell between the two stools of cheap, high-volume cassette deck sales and the high-end market, at the time dominated by products from the likes of Nakamichi. But the TC-800GL was nothing if it wasn't well made; it was solid and its looks were a breath of fresh air. Why couldn't there have been more hi-fi components that were as well designed as this one? **HFC**

Alvin Gold



There's no change at the top spot this week, pop pickers. Yes, it's *Girlfriend with Over My Dead Body*. I've seen grown men reduced to tears as they bid a fond farewell to cherished gear, but there are some forces that simply cannot be resisted.

Jon Marks has been happily addicted to hi-fi for 20 years, especially since becoming a member of the hi-fi press in the mid-1990s



Record breaker

Reviewer goes on a product-smashing spree

The week before Christmas started out well enough. On Monday, Roksan's Touraj Moghaddam visited, to bring down the very elegant Radius 5/Nima turntable/tonerarm combo for me to review, and to brief me on the brand new Platinum series Caspian electronics. He mounted a Shiraz cartridge onto the Nima Unipivot and showed me how to lock the arm for transit.

"I hardly ever break review samples, but on that particular Wednesday, things went from bad to worse."

On Tuesday, Touraj rang. The Shiraz he'd left was urgently needed in Hong Kong, so could I please extract it and package it for collection? I could and would, but I got it all wrong, treating the Nima like a Naim Aro by trying to pull off the top section, with the result that I pulled out much of the internal wiring. It can be repaired, but not by me.

I hardly ever break review samples, but on that particular Wednesday, things went from bad to worse. I went looking for a sufficiently wide support shelf to house the English Valve Amplifiers Proteus amp. Reaching past a B&W 800D in my large store cupboard, I felt my jacket snag, looked down and realised that its zip had just destroyed the very expensive diamond dome of the tweeter. The pitch of its teeth had matched the tweeter's protective mesh cover, first pulling it off and then digging into the more-fragile-than-an-eggshell diamond dome underneath.

I was mortified, but B&W was very helpful, immediately dispatching a replacement motor unit. This arrived the next day, so Thursday involved replacing the 800D tweeter and incubating a cold I'd picked up on the Tuesday. The tweeter change proved surprisingly simple,

thanks to the comprehensive instructions that B&W had included. The cold worsened and lasted well into Boxing Day, so it goes.

The 800Ds had been temporarily in my store cupboard while I was getting acquainted with a pair of Quad 2805s that had arrived a few days earlier. However, while the Quads were working rather well with my regular Naim NAC 552/NAP 500 amp combo, they seemed less than ideal with the Proteus, so I was particularly keen to get the 800Ds back up and running, partly to help me assess the Proteus, but also to help with a number of other source and amplification components that were beginning to form a queue.

Although one might assume that just one top-quality speaker should be sufficient to assess any component, in fact, the aforementioned B&W and Quad models are beautifully complementary. The former is brilliant at providing detail and control towards the bandwidth extremes, while the dipole Quad has unparalleled evenness and transparency through the midband. The best of all worlds.

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



I've been served

Music servers still have a way to go

I finally find myself overtaken by the modern era in which convenience often takes precedence over other considerations when choosing hi-fi. As a result of being asked to review a music server and having spent a few weeks living with it, I admit that I have fallen for the charms of the hard disk-equipped, internet-enabled music-playing device.

Although I have been amazed by what, in truth, very little money can buy these days – which can be truly astonishing – certain aspects of the experience have left me less than overwhelmed.

While the product is phenomenally capable in terms of the performance and functionality it offers, persuading it to unleash its technical prowess is often fraught with unnecessary frustration. There seems to have been a lack of understanding on the part of the software engineers who programmed the user interface with regard to how users expect things to work. While the engineers have certainly achieved what was asked of them in purely technical terms, the results of their endeavours don't appear to make things as easy or as logical as they really should have been for the person who is trying to configure or operate the device. The same could be said of the people who wrote the instruction manual. All the required information is indeed there, but it is often buried so very deeply that it requires considerable time and effort to find and correctly interpret it.

For example, the server requires the user to connect it to a display device in order to access all of its set-up facilities. That it has a display panel on its fascia is, to a large extent, irrelevant for all the information it affords the user. What is needed, I feel, is a large, bold warning on page one of the guide saying, 'Before you do anything else, connect a screen, or you won't be able to access all the menus,' but it isn't there. In fact, I didn't realise this until I had become totally frustrated with my lack of progress and spoken to the company's technical-support department.

I don't think I'm being unnecessarily critical of the manufacturer. I am merely pointing out that many music server customers might imagine that, as audio devices, they will not



Few groups have promoted their first LP by begging people not to buy it. But when Liverpool's La's released their long-awaited

debut, the group's perfectionist singer and songwriter Lee Mavers did just that. "We hate it," declared the man who was waging his own war on modern recording techniques. "It never captured anything that we were about."

It wasn't that he hadn't tried. Mavers had gone through umpteen line-ups and attempts at recording, from eight-track set-ups to £1,000-a-day studios and onto an original Abbey Road desk, all in pursuit of a perfect, organic sound none but he could fathom. Producers including Mike Hedges, John Porter and John Leckie had all been found wanting.

Steve Lillywhite collated the group's terminal attempt at nailing the album at Chiswick's Eden Studios, after Mavers, bassist John Power, guitarist Peter Cammell and drummer Neil Mavers had, in their own words, "walked out". Released into an environment where house music and the melon-twisting dance sounds of Madchester prevailed, *The La's* sold modestly, with a number 13 hit for radio perennial *There She Goes* a poor consolation prize.

For anyone outside Lee Mavers' head, though, it seems preposterous to dismiss this album; Noel Gallagher noted in 1994 that the whole point of Oasis was to "finish what The La's started". On the surface it sounds retro, with the Rolling Stones, the Byrds, Love and Dylan all coming to mind, though this is only half the story. It's been said that the Stone Roses' debut, released the previous year, stole The La's thunder, but if the Roses' first is about self-aggrandisement, *The La's* is a reflective and complex affair. It clocks in at just 35 minutes, but feels like it goes on for much longer, tracing as it does an arc of confusion, elation, heart-bursting emotion, shame and finally, cosmic awareness, all to the melodic punches of Mavers' spine-tingling songs.

Timeless Melody and *There She Goes* are both elating pieces of music, but he set out his stall most simply with *Feelin'*. Centering on the sudden euphoria that the right chords, melody and rhythm can evoke, it also identifies where



"For anyone outside Lee Mavers' head, it seems preposterous to dismiss this album."

they might come from: "I get the feeling/ That I'm responding to a call/ I am receiving..."

There are, however, counterpoints to this benign view of catching songs from the air and letting the inspiration flow like water from a tap. *Failure* and *Doledrum* are self-explanatory, caustic expressions of predestined doom. *The Looking Glass*, which ends the album, brings some kind of closure, with its dilated-pupils assertion: "I'm in everybody/ Everybody's in me", articulating the mystic, everything-is-one mindset that would later see Mavers arguing, "the closer you get to perfection the closer you get to imperfection, simple as... The La's is a personal trip for the world!"

That trip, however, is also one that has yet to produce any more music. In 1992, even the faith-keeping bassist John Power departed, to form the mightily successful Cast. However, there were surprise La's shows in 1994 and then 2005. Zen-like La's fans continue to contemplate their seventeenth year of waiting to hear a follow-up.

But if Mavers never records again, the songs on *The La's* remain as fresh and extraordinary as the day he plucked them from the ether. This is just as well; one thread on the jungle telegraph of rumour is that the next time Mavers releases a record, it will be a re-recorded version of *The La's*. **HFC**

Ian Harrison

M

MUSO

CLASSIC ALBUMS

THE LA'S
THE LA'S

require connection to a screen – and many people won't have a screen in the same room as their hi-fi. I don't, and had to hijack a spare computer monitor for the task, after which all became relatively straightforward. Were one incorporating such a device into an AV system, then I guess this problem might not arise, or at least would be far more quickly solved.

Ultimately, this may be more a problem of customer mindsets than anything else: today's young, hip AV consumers, who doubtless have plasma screens hanging off every available square inch of wall space in their homes, must realise that even music products won't work without being connected to a screen. But what about old fogeys like me, who have a mental demarcation line separating A from V?

Malcolm Steward was one of the country's best-known and most outspoken hi-fi reviewers of the 1980s and 1990s. He currently publishes the hi-fi industry trade bible, the British Audio Journal



Word up!

Hi, I'm a whatchamacallit

Moving house is not without its charms. It's also not without its drawbacks. One of the biggest is making small talk with new neighbours. For me, the neighbourly conversations get difficult when it comes to the 'what do you do?' question. How do you describe this kind of job in a pithy manner? Not 'writer' (snobby), or 'reviewer' (vague), or 'journalist' (connotations with red-top low life) and especially not 'photojournalist' (no bullet wounds). Worse, saying 'I audition and review hi-fi and home cinema components' sounds a bit ostentatious when the other fellow said 'accountant'.

This made me think about the nomenclature of hi-fi. What do we hi-fi types call ourselves, especially to non-hi-fi people? 'Enthusiast' sounds a bit nerdy; 'aficionado' or 'connoisseur' might be okay for high-enders, but even then they're sort of snooty-sounding. Both might be fine as a suffix to 'cigar', 'watch' or even 'claret'... but not after 'hi-fi'. We may raise the finest examples of hi-fi to almost an art form, but to most people it's just wood and metal and wires, thrown together musically.



"Audiophile sounds icky, summoning up images of triodes, gimp masks and using Sorbothane in an inappropriate manner."

Of course, the word in vogue for years has been 'audiophile', but there's something distinctly uncomfortable about the term. For me, 'audiophile' sounds distinctly icky, summoning up images of triodes, gimp masks and people using Sorbothane in an inappropriate manner. Sorry, perhaps it's my *Carry On* training, but it's one of those words that's hard not to attach some hard-core *double entendre*, like 'pleasure', 'ooze' and 'vibraphone'. 'Admirer' and 'devotee' aren't much better, either. Then there are words such as 'fanatic', 'freak', 'fiend', 'nut', 'maniac' and 'addict', but all of these are essentially synonyms of the word 'weirdo'. Is that really making the right impression?

All of which doesn't leave much. Personally, I think it's time to take back words such as 'geek' and 'buff', just like the gay community has rehabilitated the word 'queer'. Instead of terms of abuse, we can again become proud of our hi-fi buffery or audio geekiness. It may be arch, but adding the suffix 'ist' to the term could be useful – 'audioist' and 'stereoist' sound sort of cool, although 'hi-fist/hi-fi-ist' just doesn't work, and 'hi-fist' sounds like a martial-arts discipline.

Does it matter? Well, we live in a world that defines itself by terms. What you are, what you do and what you enjoy needs a label.

So, what did I say to the neighbours? I simply told them I was a Grandmaster of Mornington Crescent, in forced retirement after a

particularly bad 'Dollis Hill loop' incident. Okay, I didn't really say that, but I wish I had; it sounds odd, yet it's still a lot safer than 'hi-fi buff'. But, give it time...

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



Three's company

A trio of different ethos run high-end hi-fi

Buy an expensive amplifier and you have likely answered one of the most perplexing questions in hi-fi: what is 'high-end' sound quality? It's an issue you'll have wanted to settle before signing on the dotted line and there are a number of well established takes on the subject:

One, Absolute Power. Unsurprisingly, this approach still rules in the US and continues to have its fan bases across Europe and the Far

East. The idea is to provide massive power and stability to drive exotic loudspeakers with desperately low impedances. Such designs nearly always sound beguilingly effortless and smooth, but have been accused by some of being rather slow and uninvolved.

Two, taking The Tube. Tubes (valves) have a warmth, grace and delicacy that sonic sledgehammers can't approach and earn their place on the stairway to audio heaven when matched with suitably efficient speakers.

Three, Brit-Fi de luxe. Where pace, rhythm and timing are emphasised as essential musical components above everything else. Adopted, to varying degrees, by several of the costlier British amp manufacturers.

Each camp has its strengths and can press home compelling arguments why its approach is the right one. But which one really is 'right'? The trick I've found most helpful over the years is to concentrate on transparency alone. It's the magical quality that allows you to hear through a recording so clearly that every last scrap of harmonic and timbral resolution, every nuance of technique, every ambient acoustic clue is laid bare. Amplifiers that are talented in this direction sound wonderfully fresh, open and detailed with excellent soundstaging, focus and incisiveness.

The aim is to have the clearest window possible on recorded music, and if this can be backed up with more than a hint of heavyweight potency so much the better. A heavy puncher with quicksilver reflexes and the hi-fi equivalent of dancer's hips is the ideal.

True transparency is most obviously manifested through the sheer openness, clarity and speed of the mid-band. It should be finely revealing but harmonically rich and rhythmically coherent. The treble should have brilliance and definition but no glare or grain, the bass weight and extension but control and structure, too.

When it all comes together, musicians and their instruments can almost seem to assume a tangible presence in the listening room, power and dynamics conveyed with foot-tapping, neck-tingling realism. It doesn't make them 'nicer' or more mellifluous performers, just more interesting to listen to. It's an odd sort of compliment being 'more interesting' but it's that ability to deliver the event – the music, the performance, the acoustic, even the production – that makes the listening experience real. If you're about to spend thousands on an amp, you want it real. The good news is world class transparency isn't the exclusive preserve of the high end. As to just how affordably it can be acquired, I'll leave that for you to discover.

David Vivian has been wallowing in gorgeous hi-fi and then describing its virtues and vices in Hi-Fi Choice since 1990

TECHNO

TECHNOLOGY EXPLORED

GROUNDING



The arrival of Russ Andrews' interesting little book *Sound Solutions* (see HFC 289) has prompted some *Techno*-type

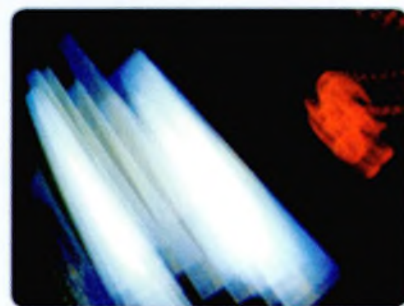
reflections. One of these concerns the issue of 'ground' or 'earth', in the electrical sense of the common return point to which voltages are conventionally referred.

Voltage is like distance: it requires two datum points to make sense. Just as you can't say that 'London is 100 miles' without saying where it's 100 miles from, it means nothing to say that a voltage at a point is '2V'. When we do say that, the unspoken assumption is that it's at 2V relative to 'ground', which by definition is at 0V.

Usually in audio we are dealing with signals defined with respect to ground – in other words, one datum point is the universal 0V shared throughout the system and generally linked to the mains 'ground' (or 'earth'). This in turn is at some point literally connected to the ground outside. This is all absolutely fine as long as ground really is the same everywhere. But is it?

No, it's not... mostly for two reasons. First, the moment you pass a current through a conductor, unless that conductor really has absolutely zero resistance, a voltage gradient appears along it – and voltage is different everywhere, if only by a little. Second, interference causes high-frequency variations in voltage from point to point, and time to time, across the conductor. This interference comes from all sorts of sources, such as mains-frequency magnetic fields from transformers, high-frequency radio waves from TV transmissions, mobile phones, Wi-Fi and more. The frequency range of these sources is from 50Hz to many GHz, a ratio of tens of millions to one.

It might seem that the answer to grounding problems is to use a conductor to 'tie' to an outside ground point. An external earth spike can help, but it's not the complete answer. In fact, rather distressingly, there is no complete answer. This is because the way a DC or low-frequency interference signal behaves in a circuit may be utterly different from the way a high-frequency signal behaves.



“Grounding is the biggest dark art in electronics. Talented designers gnash their teeth over it.”

At frequencies above a few MHz, the wavelength of a signal becomes comparable to the physical size of audio circuits and systems, and all sorts of odd things happen. Most importantly, just because a bit of wire happens to be grounded at one end, it's simply not safe to assume that the voltage everywhere along it is 0V. It almost certainly won't be.

At low frequencies, including mains 50Hz, magnetic fields are the fly in the ointment. These cause currents to flow in conductors, and again the finite resistance causes little voltages to develop. This is what happens when a 'hum loop' occurs: the conductors may all appear connected safely together, but the physical distance between them (which may be millimetres or metres) means they're subject to different magnetic fields, and hence a current flows round the loop, producing a voltage which is picked up by the circuitry somewhere and treated as a 'bona fide' audio signal – that is, amplified.

Grounding looks simple, but is probably the biggest dark art in electronics. Talented and experienced designers wail and gnash their teeth over it. But if audio circuits and systems were all truly balanced in operation (as a very few are), we wouldn't have all these problems! Sometimes, we should learn the lessons of the professional audio world. HFC

Richard Black



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION



TD510 March 2006



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TIME DOMAIN AUDIO SYSTEM

TD510 / TD508II



SYSTEM FILE

Mark Van Den Bergh took the long route to build a stylish system

THE SYSTEM

Shanling Omega Drive CDT 300 CD player
Gamma Acoustics Era Reference preamp
Pass Labs Aleph 0 power amplifiers (x2)
EgglestonWorks Rosa loudspeakers
Quadraspire Q4 equipment support
Nordost/Final Labs cables
Various Isolators, spikes, cones and things!

Some people buy a hi-fi system and stick with it for years and years. Meet the other extreme. Mark Van Den Bergh has gone through more high-end hi-fi than most reviewers, but by buying cannily and taking the second-hand route, he's managed to build a system that should cost as much as a large house for less than the cost of a small car. It's a really neat trick.

There's no way we can list even a fraction of the components that have gone into Mark's system over time, it would be a list of product

upon product. If we'd visited a year earlier, his system would have been very different. But for once, Mark is not sure when it will change again. The quest for the latest, best kit has fallen silent in the Van Den Bergh house.

Perhaps it has something to do with those EgglestonWorks Rosa loudspeakers and their granite sides. Lugging nigh on 200kg of floorstanding speakers through several flights of stairs is not attempted lightly. But they sound the business, and they look it, too.

LOOKS GOOD, SOUNDS GREAT

That's the prime mover for Mark. It not only has to sound right, it has to look right. "It's got to sound how I enjoy it," says Mark, "but the looks are very high on the list of priorities." Mark would actively choose the good looking, good sounding product over the one that merely delivers sonic perfection. Which is why the already pretty Gryphon Adagio CD player got replaced by an ex-demo Shanling blue-glowin', top-loadin', valve-sportin', up-samplin' Omega Drive CDT 300 CD player, a little over a year ago.

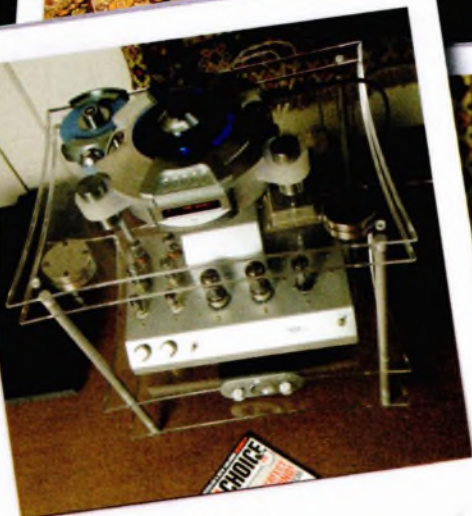
The preamp is truly unique. It's a Gamma Era Reference, from the copper chassis early days of this acclaimed, yet not big selling preamp. But this alone was not enough for Mark. Instead, he got in touch with Ellis Brown – the preamp's designer – and modified it to accept Sowter balancing transformers, rewired and changed the valve layout, and gave it a respray in silver to match the system.

Mark considers the two Pass Labs Aleph 0 (pronounced 'null') monoblocs to be the heart of the system. These two black, hot-running Borg cubes deliver 75 of the sweetest, most uncluttered watts ever heard in hi-fi and can control the Rosa speakers with ease, and a whole lot of charm.

The system is completed by a large and varied collection of cables and accessories, the majority of the electronics resting on a Quadraspire support with rare, non-magnetic, clear acrylic shelves, and equally rare Final Labs Daruma isolation bearings. It's a bitza system (bitza this, bitza that), but it sounds all the better for it.

Mark holds strong opinions about how music should be played. For him, it's not about high volume levels or bright, forward presentations. Instead, the system he has built strives to dig out the music's dynamics in mellifluous fashion. His musical tastes are catholic (although he does favour 1950s big band jazz) and in that context, his system is a stunner. **HFC**

Alan Sircom



C'MON - JOIN IN THE FUN!

If you'd like your system to be featured in *System File*, simply write a 'review' of your system using 500 words or less and send it to: System File, Hi-Fi Choice, Future Publishing, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW. Or email it to: hifisub@futurenet.co.uk (please include your name and address). If we pick you, you'll get a visit from one of our reviewers, plus a special 'goody bag' consisting of a Hi-Fi Choice T-shirt, IsoTek's System Enhancer CD and Russ Andrews' Sound Solutions book... so get writing!



The world according to...

Absolute Sounds

Ricardo Franassovici, the driving force behind Absolute Sounds, reveals how he turned a hobby into founding the UK's most renowned high-end distribution company. Interview: Malcolm Steward

On a cold winter's evening, *Hi-Fi Choice* donned a thick coat and went to meet Ricardo Franassovici, the founder of Absolute Sounds. In the warm and comfortable surroundings of London's Baglioni Hotel, we sipped espresso while chatting to the enthusiastic businessman who effectively brought high-end hi-fi to Britain by introducing such legendary brands as Krell, Sonus Faber, Audio Research, MartinLogan, Koetsu and Wilson Audio.

HFC When did you first arrive in the UK?

RF I came to live in the UK in the late 1970s. I'd had about 15 years in the music business and I came here to work for a major record label, which didn't turn out as planned. During my time in the music industry I'd developed what you might call a manic obsession, an audiophile disease – all the people working with me thought I was completely crazy. However, as a result of my obsession, I had already begun importing some highly esoteric hi-fi – moving-coil cartridges from Japan and valve preamplifiers from California – purely to satisfy my craving for better sound. That hobby eventually turned into a business and Absolute Sounds was born.

I was a real two-channel man, a genuine enthusiast whose passion had created a small business, almost by accident. But it certainly wasn't plain sailing. Things were very tough for me in those days – for starters, I had just arrived in this country with my family, and there was this tremendously insular resistance to anything that was above the two best-known UK brands of the day, Linn and Naim, who were effectively trying to corner the market and convince people that there was no life beyond their sound. To be fair to them, they had a wonderful story, even though it was controversial, but in those early days of the high-end market many retailers thought it an attractive proposition to put to their customers, and it became almost religious,



Ricardo Franassovici:
high-end evangelist

“At the time there was no high end. In the UK, the perception of many companies was that nobody needed high-end components.”

a cult thing. That made life difficult for me, because I was the new kid on the block with my unusual esoterica, but I feel in retrospect that opposition actually helped me, because it forced me to do a better job – to develop a better story and to ensure the integrity of my products. I wanted to deliver sound systems that were at that time not available on 97 per cent of the planet. Having spent much of my life working with musicians, I had a good idea of the sound I was looking to create. I believed that I could create a better sound than that of the original performance, which I soon realised was impossible, but at least it gave me the necessary drive and conviction to continue in my endeavours.

At that time there was no high end, no esoteric equipment. In the UK, the perception of many companies was that nobody needed high-end components. I'm pleased that over time that situation has changed and we now

have an industry that accepts that these types of systems genuinely deserve a place in the market, for those consumers who want hi-fi that offers the sort of exceptional performance that mass-market and Far Eastern producers, in all fairness, cannot provide. Those manufacturers concern themselves mainly with keeping up with the latest technology and hitting price points, which aren't major concerns for high-end producers and for the companies Absolute Sounds represents. Our goal is to produce systems that will wow and amaze people, and make them say: "I have never heard music sound that good before!"

In the early days, I experimented a lot and learned a great deal. I imported all sorts of products – ribbon-technology panel loudspeakers, planar loudspeakers and the legendary Beveridge electrostatics, which were a fabulous design and the only other electrostatics that Quad's Peter Walker said he

respected. In fact, some 27 years after hearing them I'm buying a pair to restore, because they had the type of performance one could never forget. We were also the first people to introduce a turntable that competed with the Linn LP12 – the Oracle – and I believe we helped to establish the market for high-priced moving-coil cartridges. I would like to believe that Absolute Sounds helped to create in the UK what is now called the high-end, two-channel industry.

HFC *Would it be fair to say that before Absolute Sounds there were no high-end components such as Krell amplifiers in the UK?*

RF There was nothing – or at least only a very tiny amount. Ira Gale had personally brought in two pieces of Audio Research equipment, one of which is now in my museum. So we had others, but in truth, as an industry it wasn't even at cottage level – more kitchen table!

At that time the nearest equivalent to a high-end system was Linn Isobariks with a Naim NAP 250 along with a Linn LP12/Grace/Supex turntable. I listened to it and, although it was very enjoyable and powerful, it lacked the definition I wanted. I felt that it seemed – perhaps intentionally – bandwidth-limited. It gave a good midband and upper bass, but that wasn't enough for me, so I began to introduce my 'toys'.

HFC *What were the first products you brought to the UK?*

RF The Beveridge loudspeakers, followed closely by the Oracle turntable. At that time life was really fun – I used to hire a van and go to shows in Stockport, Edinburgh, Manchester, Hull and Liverpool, and set the system up on my own. Things weren't perfect, because we hadn't yet developed a true system – we just had individual elements – but they were nonetheless really enjoyable.

HFC *In recent years the hi-fi industry has had its share of ups and downs, but you seem to have remained impervious to events that have had a dramatic impact on the budget- and mid-market sectors. Does being at the more expensive end of the market effectively insulate Absolute Sounds from recessions and suchlike?*

RF The company grew significantly and rapidly in its first ten years as our systems came together – we initially had excellent individual components, but it took time – and a fair bit of trial and error – to develop coherent systems. We then started importing Krell and Apogee, which afforded us an extraordinary breakthrough – apart from being outstanding individual products, they finally provided us ▶





with a fantastic system that was totally esoteric in its concept – ribbon-planar loudspeakers with pure Class A amplifiers along with the valve preamps we were using at that time. We were very creative in the way we assembled systems, and from that point on we became very credible in the market and started to attract a lot of attention.

HFC Have you also remained unaffected by other changes such as AV and iPods?

RF About five years ago we started feeling changes in the market, when even very credible publications that were traditionally two-channel started looking at new formats that were being offered to consumers. It wasn't that we weren't economy-proof, just that the attention of the consumer was being drawn somewhere else, to the point that we started bringing in home installation and home cinema products – from brands that we were already associated with, not by looking at new suppliers. But over the last two years, rather encouragingly, the situation has altered again, and we are seeing a tremendous resurgence of interest in two-channel music.

From that perspective, I think the iPod is a good friend, because of the massive promotion going on around the product, which is all about listening to music in stereo without any multichannel or serious vision element attached to it. Effectively, it's creating a lot of music enthusiasts. Whether it will be easy to move these people from their iPods to a

higher level of hi-fi, I don't know. But it's certainly encouraging to have more and more people telling us that they simply want to have a good stereo, especially when the term 'stereo' five years ago was virtually politically incorrect! It's good to know that there's a pride of ownership coming back to that simple, very honest format.

HFC Many people seem to think that multichannel music is dead in the water

RF I think that's correct. I think customers are fed up. We've seen situations – through our association with one of our suppliers, Theta Digital, which has always been at the pinnacle of digital technology – where by the time you had delivered a product to the customer, there was already another that had made it obsolete. Customers are sick and tired of that. But I have a slightly more poetic view about the resurgence of two-channel – I think we are in a world where customers are definitely rewarding themselves, and their senses, and they have different ways of doing that. As much as I don't understand him, I respect the man who enjoys a good cigar over an ordinary cigar; I respect the man who buys himself a nice analogue watch, even though it's not as accurate as a digital Seiko. I believe our ears have rediscovered that infinitesimal ability to discern better-quality sound.

“I think we live in a world where customers are definitely rewarding themselves, and their senses, in different ways.”

Because I'm still driven by the same passion – as are my suppliers, I'm pleased to say. We would be pleased to see people accepting the pride of ownership of very good stereos. I would like to think that over the years we have made it possible for people to reward their senses with good sound and have made it accepted in the luxury market, without wishing to make high-end hi-fi seem elitist. People will buy supercars, art and great bottles of wine to reward themselves, and I would like to see that grow to include high-end hi-fi.

In the last three or four years this has been happening. Our customer profile has changed. We still retain the hard-core hi-fi enthusiasts, but we're also selling to that group of people who want the best. One of my retailers recently told me of a client who said to him that he had the choice between upgrading his Porsche or buying a Krell system, and that he'd opted for the latter.

HFC It's gratifying to know that there isn't such a diminishing market as some might have thought for 'quality' audio and that it may, in fact, be attracting new customers.

RF One thing that is necessary for that growth to continue is that retailers – or some of them, at least – need to become less lazy, waiting for the good review to be published and then waiting for their phone to start ringing. Specialists need to be more proactive and invest more into their stores and staff so that consumers feel happy about dealing with them. In many of my best retailers, the staff gain so much confidence from their customers that the customers, after a couple of demonstrations, are completely happy to let the sales consultants decide on the best systems for them.

That is how it should be, because manufacturers and importers can only do so much – we can supply the ingredients and suggest a recipe, but ultimately it's the dealers' responsibility to 'prepare the meal'.

Yet another thing is that with age comes cynicism – especially in this country, it seems. I would ask our colleagues in the press to remember that when they write about components, they should convey more about the musical aspects of the components rather than be too disparaging.

HFC Surely that's a reflection of some magazines' beliefs that readers only want quick-hit reviews and small snatches of sound bite-style information?

RF We need a lot more proactivity throughout the industry. We need to tell people that good music exists and that its reproduction is not an antique pastime. Music is available in a variety of formats, so let us create high-quality systems that can make the most of all of them.

We are not antiques – certainly not when you compare our industry to, say, the car industry, which has been around far longer. We need to create an environment in which listening to high-quality music reproduction becomes an aspirational pursuit, and before we can do that, we need to ensure that the people who are designing the hi-fi are just as passionate about recreating the original performance.

Venturing out into the cold night air, it struck us as being refreshing to have discovered that Ricardo, despite his overt passion for vinyl and his plans to release some of his favourite recordings on that medium, isn't caught in any time warp and is still eager, after nearly three decades, to preach the high-end gospel to anyone with the inclination to listen. **HFC**

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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

MUDDY WATERS

Fathers And Sons

Chess/Speakers Corner

180g vinyl

Music: This album, with Mike Bloomfield and his Butterfield Blues band, as well as Muddy's regular 1960s piano man Otis Spann, is made up of ten studio tracks. These

include the driving *All Aboard* with its train like rhythm, and *Blow Wind Blow*, which features some fine picking from Bloomfield. The second disc contains 30 minutes of live material, including two takes on *Got My Mojo Working*, with Buddy Miles and Donald 'Duck' Dunn. ★★★

Sound: The sound on the studio cuts is pretty well as good as blues recordings got in the 1960s: clean, wideband and blasting with energy from Paul Butterfield's harp. The live sides suggest a cavernous venue with an oddly distant though clearly frenzied audience that seems to be mired in distortion – presumably why they are so far down in the mix. ★★★★★ JK

ELLA FITZGERALD

The Jerome Kern Songbook

Verve/Speakers Corner

180g vinyl

Music: Arguably the greatest female jazz singer in the world (Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith fans might disagree) is backed here by Nelson Riddle's orchestra, and the inventiveness of

the compositions combined with Ella's fabulous voice and Riddle's sumptuous sound make this a standout among Broadway songbook albums. There is a spark and energy here that one can imagine strongly influencing Steely Dan's Becker and Fagen. It's slick, certainly, but also compelling and possesses an edge all its own. ★★★★★

Sound: The tapes for this 1963 recording seem to have picked up a little hiss over the intervening years, but this is only obvious in the quiet sections. Otherwise, this is a tonally gorgeous slab of vinyl. ★★★★★ JK

LPs were supplied by Pure Pleasure
www.purepleasurerecords.com

COMPACT DISC & VINYL



THE BENCH CONNECTION

Around The House In 80 Days

50/50 recording

Music: Bench Connection have been lauded by the broadsheets as the last great undiscovered acoustic act of the 1970s – in reality, they are a new(ish) duo, featuring ex-Wolfhound and Acid Jazzer Matt Deighton along with his mate Pete Sheehan. The journos were right about one thing, though – BC really are a class act, with Deighton once again proving his ability to come up with effortlessly superb songs (which he and Sheehan sing in just the right tough but tender tones). Forget the inevitable Nick Drake, Davy Graham, Neil Young comparisons – Bench Connection are just themselves and that's more than good enough. A dazzling debut. ★★★★★

Sound: Deighton's always been into audio quality in both the home and the studio and it shows. Presence, simplicity and clarity abound. ★★★★★ PS



VARIOUS ARTISTS

Forever Changing: The Golden Age of Elektra

Rhino

Music: Every inch of this five-CD box set is dripping with the very essence of what made rock music such a durable invention. Elektra presided over that period of the late 1960s when upright protest singers became psychedelic warriors. From Judy Collins and Tom Paxton to Love, Tim Buckley, The Doors and beyond taking in, Nico, The Stooges, The MCS and Queen is quite a leap. Plus, the 76-page book features a colour illustrated analysis of each of these 117 songs. Peerless. ★★★★★

Sound: Newly remastered by Bill Inglot from the best possible sources, acoustic stuff by Fred Neil/Phil Ochs/Tom Rush is vibrant, while the complex executions of Love, The Doors and Bread have never had more presence – champagne for hi-fi buffs. ★★★★★ MP



SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 11

Mstislav Rostropovich (cond), LSO

LSO Live LSO0030

Music: From the opening of this desolate and sometimes violent music, you know this recording means business. The subject matter was the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution, but Shostakovich often 'coded' his works this way, and it is easy to see the 11th in an altogether less programmatic way. It doesn't deserve to be described as some in the West have done as 'glorified film music'. ★★★★★

Sound: This superb recording of a great and powerfully dynamic live performance was engineered by the estimable Tony Faulkner at London's Barbican (the home of the LSO) and exceeds his usual high standard. The disc is also available as an SACD and at its budget price the SACD must surely be the version to go for. ★★★★★ AG



RY COODER

My Name Is Buddy

Nonesuch

Music: After his intrepid global explorations (with special focus on Mexican and Cuban music), Ry Cooder finally returns to his own indigenous American musical roots with a set of country, blues, gospel and old-time music that recalls his early-seventies work on albums such as *Boomer's Story* and *Into The Purple Valley*. The main difference is that where those releases consisted mostly of covers, here we get a set of brand new Cooder compositions chronicling the "life, rambles, and political education" of a character called Buddy Red Cat. It's a peerless hymn to a fast-disappearing vernacular heritage by a master craftsman of the old school. ★★★★★

Sound: This is a mostly acoustic mix of banjos, accordions, harmonicas and guitars. And vocals, of course: while Ry Cooder's voice certainly isn't pretty, it boasts a rich and characterful patina impressively imbued with wisdom and experience. ★★★★★ NW



TONO Y TONADAS

Early Spanish Music and Folklore from South America

La Chimera

MA Recordings MO72A

Music: A curious recording from La Chimera, mostly of short works, most of which feature soprano accompaniment. This disc explores the musical cross currents between Spain and Latin America. The instruments are mainly period ones (Violas de Gamba, baroque guitars, lutes and so on), but with a leavening of modern instruments mixed in. It all works programmatically, and the performances are universally excellent. ★★★★★

Sound: A 96kHz, single-point microphone recording monitored on Stax Lambda electrostatic headphones, using custom-made equipment and Crystal Cable digital and analogue interconnects. Stunning. ★★★★★ AG



THIS MONTH'S CLASSIC HI-FI TEST DISC "A brilliant return to form"

KEITH JARRETT The Carnegie Hall Concert ECM

Music: Keith Jarrett's most recent recording only came out last September, yet it has already taken centre stage in many a collection of test discs. The tracks on here are shorter than his earlier live work (such as the near-legendary Köln Concerts), but they are no less intense, lyrical and have much of the beauty that marks him out. They are also on occasion a lot darker and more challenging. In short, this is a brilliant return to form. ★★★★★

Sound: It has been surprising that ECM, which has always made great-sounding recordings, has never put out an SACD or DVD-A, but this tells you why. If it can make CDs sound this good, why bother... although a small part of you will forever wonder: if CD can sound this good, how sublime would an SACD sound? Regardless, here we have a full-scale, full-bandwidth piano in an electric atmosphere. This is the power and glory of the event in full. ★★★★★ JK



TINARIWEN Aman Iman

Independiente

Music: The last year or so has seen a trio of rock-friendly African releases. All of these come from land-locked Mali, and after Amadou & Mariam's *Dimanche a Bamako* and Ali Farka Toure's remarkable posthumous *Savane* comes this magnificent, bluesy set from Tinariwen, a bunch of fearsome-looking nomadic Tuareg rebels from the Sahara. Having swapped their rifles for electric guitars, they make swaying, hypnotic music with a deep desert funk, characterized by long, snaking guitar lines that call to mind Mark Knopfler or JJ Cale. There are plenty of exotic tribal influences in the unusual rhythms and call-and-response vocals, but anybody who loves rock guitar will find an easy connection here. ★★★★★

Sound: Producer Justin Adams – who currently fills Jimmy Page's old shoes playing guitar in Robert Plant's band – creates an accessible rock vibe without losing any of the band's African authenticity. A rare blend of Western and Middle Eastern charms. ★★★★★ NW



DVD-AUDIO & SACD

SEAN NOONAN BREWED BY NOON Stories To Tell

SACD (stereo/multichannel SACD plus stereo CD)

Songlines

Music: If you are looking for an influence here, the Mahavishnu Orchestra comes immediately to mind. After all, there are multiple guitars, one played by Marc Ribot, Sean Noonan's drums, a viola, bass, percussion from three individuals and as many delivering vocal input, albeit not simultaneously.

On occasions the vocals can seem to be in competition with lead instruments but for the most part this is an excellent jazz-rock album and a must for those with catholic tastes. ★★★★★

Sound: This is a simply stunning-sounding album – play it in stereo or surround and you hear solid, vibrant and fully formed instruments and voices. While the SACD layer has the edge, a good CD player delivers superb results as well. This is one of those rarities – great sound and music combined. ★★★★★ JK



VARIOUS ARTISTS

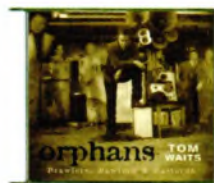
MA on SA

SACD (stereo-only SACD plus stereo CD)

MA recordings

Music: The 32 tracks on this sampler contain a surprisingly eclectic mix of musical styles, much of it classical, though above all it is a cross section of the MA catalogue. This includes works by Kalman Olah and Friends, *Sera Una Noche*, the *prelude, allemande and sarabande*, from *Suite en La mineur*, by Marin Marais, performed by Andrea De Carlo, plus works by Chopin, Paganini, Joao Paolo and Peter Epstein. The impressive part of the sampler is that surprisingly little of it is designed to impress in any obvious and over the top way, and overall it is step or three up the evolutionary ladder for a sampler, musically as well as sonically. ★★★★★

Sound: Unusually, this disc is a hybrid stereo-only SACD/CD disc in which the two formats have entirely separate programmes. All of which means a playing time of more than three hours from a single disc – 108 minutes plus on the DSD layer, and 73 minutes plus on the Red Book CD layer. Almost all the recordings were made with two spaced omni-directional microphones and the sound is superb. ★★★★★ AG



TOM WAITS

Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers & Bastards

Anti

Music: It would be hard to imagine the critical stock of the world's most famous wannabe carnie barker getting any higher. Split into his three main song types – the ragged rockers (Brawlers), tear-stained ballads (Bawlers) and some of his quirkier excursions into noise and storytelling (Bastards), there's nothing that will sound unusual to Waits fans, but while some maintain that he's been pretty much remaking the same album since 1983's *Swordfishtrombones*, when it's done with this degree of skill, verve and panache, who cares? ★★★★★

Sound: Audiophile sound quality has never concerned Waits, but while the murk can be frustrating, there is also fun to be had unpicking the *sturm* from the *drang* – and he knows how to create an atmosphere. ★★★★★ DO



NORAH JONES

Not Too Late

EMI

Music: Norah Jones' gazillion-selling first album of jazz-lite piano tunes saw her rather unfairly bracketed with the easy-listening likes of Callum, Mellua and Krall. But her third solo outing sees her leaving the jazz standards behind and exploring some of the country and soul influences from Texas, where she grew up. There are no cover versions this time around and there's more of an emphasis on guitars rather than keyboards, with just a hint of darkness on the edge of town. ★★★★★

Sound: Long-time songwriting partner and bass player Lee Alexander is back at the production helm and he makes no attempt to meddle with the richly cosy and warmly enveloping sound of the previous albums. 'Quality' hi-fi music, in other words. ★★★★★ DO

RICKIE LEE JONES

The Sermon On Exposition Boulevard

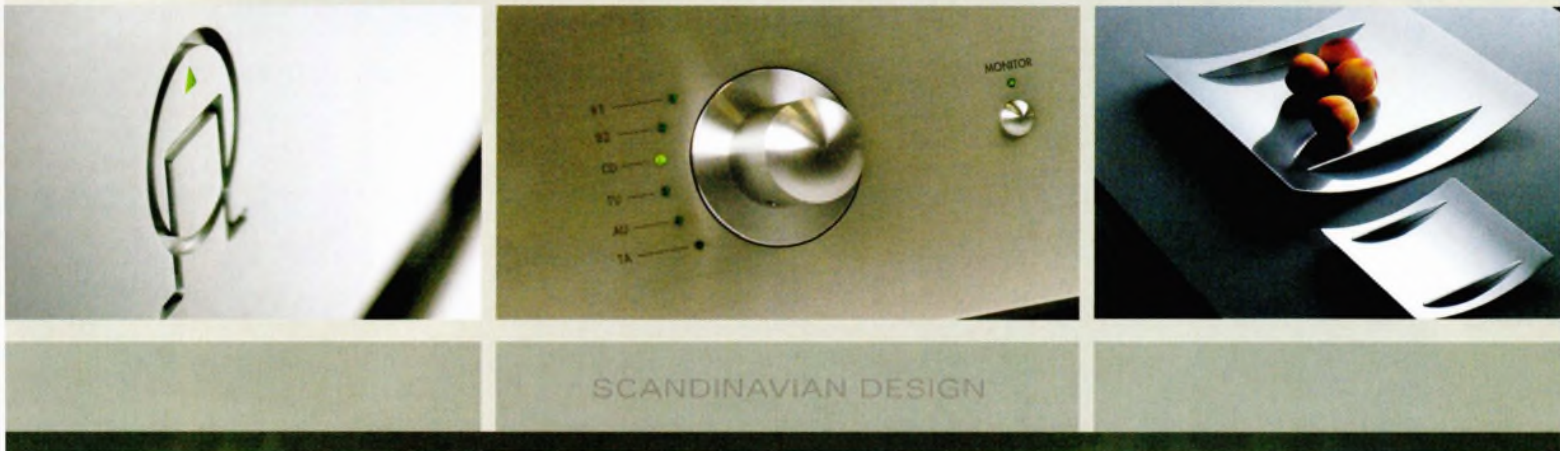
SACD (stereo/multichannel SACD plus stereo CD)

New West

Music: RLJ's early 1980s hit *Chuck E's In Love* should have set her on the road to pop rock superstardom, but she preferred instead to follow her muse and created a series of often inspired yet uneven albums that ensured she retained a cult following just on the edge of fame's spotlight. *Sermon* is a more rockin' excursion than we've been used to, rough (even raw) in places, with a spiritual underpinning (the lyrics are based on the words of Jesus Christ, but reapplied in a modern context) that suggests *Astral Weeks* if Van Morrison had been backed by the Velvet Underground. That's a good thing, by the way. ★★★★★

Sound: An unusual choice for the SACD treatment perhaps, but the largely acoustic line-up benefits greatly from the extra bandwidth and the dispersion of instruments into the round. The special edition includes a surround SACD mix, standard CD mix, and also a 'hi-res' MP3 version, which should cover pretty much all bases. ★★★★★ DO





SCANDINAVIAN DESIGN

I 130

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AN AMERICAN WRITES...

As a regular reader from the USA I tend to read only what looks interesting – product and music reviews, mostly. On a long-haul flight recently, however, I ended up reading all of the December issue (*HFC* 288). Your Creek Audio *Industry Profile* feature (not my normal read) was intriguing. I guess interviewer Malcolm Steward and Mike Creek have never heard of Sonos or NetStreams? Creek Audio plans on waiting until 2010-2015 to enjoy that 'future' technology of IP addressable speakers. Wake up, people... that technology is already here.



Below: Mike Creek of Creek Audio

Come on guys; this is the most exciting time I have known in hi-fi – anything seems possible. Digital files at any level of fidelity? You decide on what you need, you have it. 250 uncompressed albums in a gadget the size of a deck of cards? Why write platitudes when you can inform us? There is so much we need to know.

Ali Elam New York City

HFC We doubt anyone in the hi-fi business is unaware of the headway made by Sonos and NetStreams (in fact, Malcolm Steward interviewed Herman Cárdenas of NetStreams in *HFC* 285). But as Malcolm is at pains to point out in this issue's *Dispatches*, the technology still has some way to go before it reaches the ease of operation of a CD player. And Creek's kit is all about great sound and ease of operation.

While well received in the US, such systems are niche products to the specialist UK two-channel buyer. There are publications that cater more for digital music files and portable music players than *HFC*, simply because our focus is on high-performance hi-fi. We do, of course, keep an eye on the technology – check out the Imerge S3000 server review, starting on p46 of this issue – and bring it to our readers attention whenever relevant.

“Your Creek feature was intriguing. I guess Creek’s never heard of Sonos.”

A MONKEY TO SPANK

My system comprises Rotel RC850 preamp, Rotel RB850 power amp, Micromega Logic CD player, Arcam Delta Black box DAC and Arcam Delta speakers. I have up to £500 to upgrade this 15 year old system and I'm looking for some advice. I have heard good things about the Epos M12.2 and M5 speakers, but would I be better off replacing the source? Musically, rock and blues music is my preference, but I also like the odd classical piece.

Dave Willcocks via email

HFC If your speaker's drive units and surrounds are still in good condition, we'd replace the CD player. Our recommendations include Rega's excellent Apollo at £498, Marantz's SA7001 (£430) and the budget superstar, Cambridge Audio's Azur 640C v2 at £250. If your speakers do bite the dust soon, either of the Epos models you mention are both excellent choices, as is Rega's R3 floorstander at £448. ☑

Letter of the month

GOLD-PLATED STINKERS

I refer to January's *Choice Mail* and Mark Clayton's letter, *How to Review* (*HFC* 289). If you combine his point about the acclimatisation of equipment with Max Townshend's views on how reviewers need time to adjust to the sound of unfamiliar equipment, one gets nearer the complexities of a highly subjective reality. But, hi-fi should not refer back to itself. The ultimate reference points are vivid memories of how acoustic instruments sound in live concerts.

Robin Leavis via email

HFC We agree that referring to how instruments sound is a great way to assess hi-fi. Our reviewers are an active lot and get out to concerts regularly. Plus, we also have professional musicians such as Richard Black who oft tinkles the ivories.

That said, if an individual's rationale for owning a hi-fi system is to reproduce music without an acoustic frame of reference (such as dance), then benchmarking to acoustic music will produce poor equipment choices. We have to encompass both ends of the spectrum.



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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...)

LOOK BACK IN ANGER

I refer to your new *Natural Born Kessler* feature column (HFC 289). Why is this man so angry? I listen to music because it stirs my soul, reminds me of people, journeys, places, situations. It stirs my imagination, relaxes or invigorates me as I see fit. No, I cannot afford or justify a £2,000 system, but I am happy that some people have the means to buy top-end equipment because the technology trickles down to the boxes I can afford. I really enjoy reading about this amazing equipment that I would otherwise never have the chance to see, let alone own. Would I rather have a £10,000 system and ten CDs, or a £1,200 system and the £7,000-worth of CD discs that I have now? No competition. And I don't get bitter about it.

Name withheld Powys

HFC Like good music through great hi-fi, Ken Kessler also stirs the soul and has

already managed to ruffle a few feathers. Although his recent column picking his favourite systems fell short of a sub-£1,000 recommendation, Ken's low-cost suggestion of an Arcam Solo and PMC DB1+speakers is spot-on. Coincidentally, one of the HFC staffers runs this as a second system and fully concurs with the bearded one.

HARD EVIDENCE

I refer to January's *Choice Mail* and Andrew Lyalls's letter of the month, *Streaming Lunacy*, (HFC 289). He mentioned a few things I do not agree with; that there are very few people who own an external DAC; developments in computers and hard disks are certainly not spectacular anymore and very predictable; and developments in DACs? Hardly.

But his solution – a 'streamer' with NAS (Network Attached Storage), works fine and is certainly an alternative for an all-in-one

"I enjoy reading about amazing equipment that I would never own."

solution, like a music server. I have used a similar configuration (a Squeezebox) for a time and was quite satisfied, but I found a dedicated music server much more convenient. In your reply, you mention that music servers are still in their infancy, which is probably right if you mean Cambridge Audio, Yamaha and the old Imerge product. But, if you connect an external DAC to the digital outputs and use the server as a transport, it sounds better than most CD players.

Far more important, however, is the interface and functionality. And with the huge capacities available in some servers, now is time for the music industry to offer lossless downloads. As far as I know, US site www.musicgiants.com is the only one, but unfortunately, it does not have a very big collection.

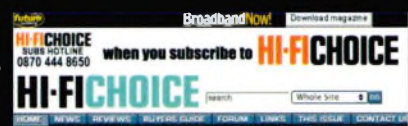
Johan van Buuren Amsterdam



HFC Digital music is the hot topic of our mailbag and it seems there are quite a lot of you who are getting involved with servers as a way of delivering music to your hi-fi systems. The issue of download quality, however, remains a constant source of frustration for many of you. Our music industry expert David Balfour reported on the latest developments in high-resolution downloads in the UK in last month's Dispatches (HFC 290) and although there is some hope from the majors, progress remains slow.

Onlinef@rum

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



You might be able to find otherwise unavailable online *Hi-Fi Choice* reviews at www.web.archive.org/collections/web.html. It's a non-profit organisation that has a grand goal of archiving all internet content in a series of snapshots. Although not well known, it's a really great resource.

Max

What are the main characteristics of an ideal hi-fi speaker? A flat frequency response over a wide range? If it is, then does it mean a good studio monitor will make a good hi-fi speaker?

Jeff

...I don't believe that a speaker that objectively measures a flat frequency

response will necessarily sound good too. Partnering components, and more importantly, room interaction – plus your own listening preferences – will determine the final sound. I have heard speakers with a ruler-flat frequency plot, which sound boring and lifeless.

Effem

I've recently started to use my Grado SR80 headphones a lot. They seem good in most respects, but I can't get the sound 'out of my head' and into the room (if that makes sense). Am I asking too much? I appreciate the natural limitations of headphones, but I've read reviews that suggest that some cans

produce a more realistic 'external' soundstage...

WhiteNoise

...I agree with you entirely. Alternatively, there are the 'head speakers' produced by the likes of Ergo AMT designs, which are like small speakers held slightly away from your ears. Expensive, but great.

PeteH

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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2006
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
CD PLAYERS
CYRUS CD68

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2006
CD PLAYER
BEST CD PLAYER £1000-£1500
CYRUS CD8x

WHAT HI-FI?
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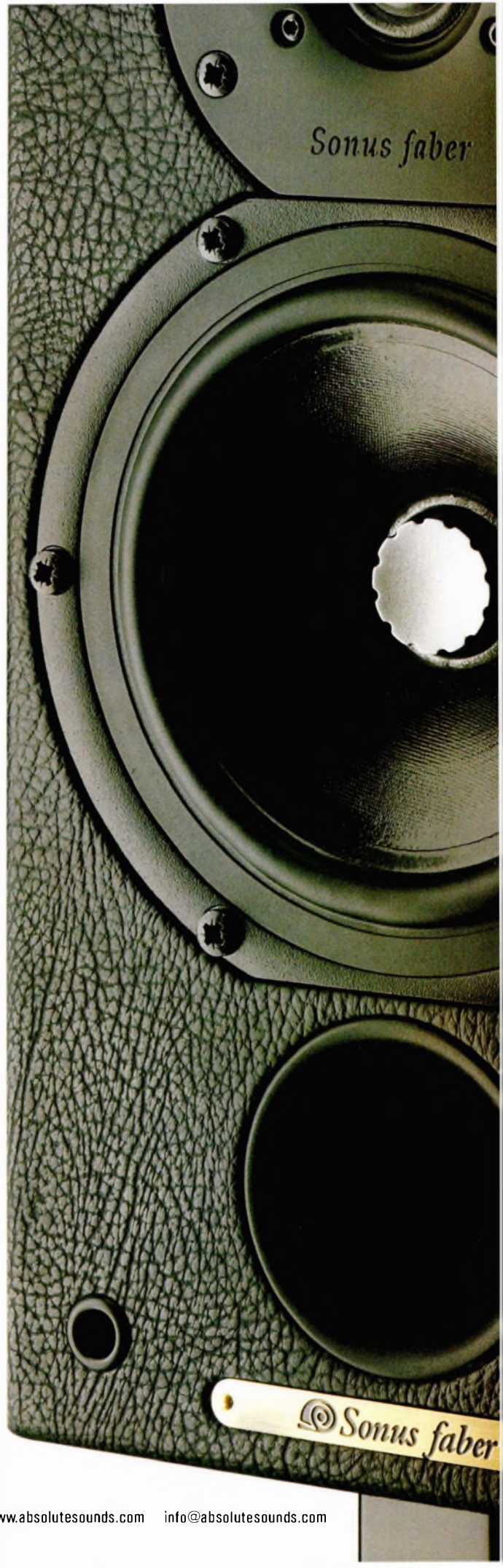
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NATURAL BORN KESSLER

In part two of his tribute to Chinese-made hi-fi, Ken Kessler assesses the country's flourishing high-end audio scene and concludes that it's time we accepted its products as worthy of the West's best

Like everything else that flies by in life, it's hard to remember a time when China had zero presence in serious audio. I mean, can you actually recall the time before mobile phones and then place yourself in it? If you think about how quickly (if you're old enough) computers integrated totally with our lives, how we went from three TV channels to hundreds, then you can appreciate the enormity of how China's emergence in audio has happened in under a decade.

Prior to the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, China was as mysterious to the West as Borneo, and as closed as the mind of a Taliban. But visionaries knew it wouldn't always be so. And while the gigantic Japanese and Korean electronics firms were the ones who subcontracted China Inc on a massive scale, they had negligible interest in specialty audio. Instead, the pioneers who paved the way for China to grab a serious slice of the purist hi-fi

action were, ironically, traditional brands who would/will eventually find homegrown Chinese wares competing against them. Mission, Quad, Wharfedale and others were among the very first to move some (or all) production to China, and thus the seeds were sown.

For our passions, China, of course, had an ace up its sleeve. Thanks to the abject idiocy, racism and vile hatred that splintered Yugoslavia into the morass it is today, the world lost one of the primary consistent sources of valves. Add to that the Wild West nature of Russia – bang goes the stability of

products, with names that would easily confuse someone for whom English was a foreign language. Aiwa clones were labelled 'Amwa', for example. Sony became 'Suny'.

Don't smirk about any *naïveté* on the part of Far Eastern consumers. How would you do deciphering labels on a jar of Korean vitamins, or traffic signs in Thailand? Think about it: take any alphabet from a language not based on Latin or European lettering, for which you have no comprehension. Would you be able to distinguish a minor letter change? That's how the pirates operated.

“Prior to the handover of Hong Kong, China was as closed as the mind of a Taliban.”

another valve-manufacturing state – and that left China as, of all things, the most secure supplier of valves in the world. And while the quality of Chinese tubes has been iffy, especially compared to some exceptional Russian offerings, it has been improving. If there's one thing China has learned, regardless of its refusal to comprehend the notion of 'intellectual property', it is the need to improve quality if it is to compete with the West.

SLEAZY LISTENING

But it wasn't just the raw valves that needed a boost. In the early-to-mid-1990s, local audio brands popped up like muffin-tops at Matalan. At first, they pumped out sleazy rip-offs of Japanese and American and European

This worked for the home market, but it clearly wouldn't fool even some schlub in Dusseldorf or Hull or Boise, Idaho. Almost communally (rather than communistically), Chinese valve manufacturers realised that they could make even more money producing the hardware that used their tubes. When I first visited China over a decade ago, I was simply staggered by the dozens of valve amp manufacturers that were unknown in the West. Yes, dozens even back then.

Launching the products in America and Europe, however, was a long way off. Quite simply, the products were not ready, especially in physical rather than sonic terms. Interestingly, the early Chinese valve amps, while a bit noisy, were warm and musical – no surprises when you consider that many were based on classics from the West.

Cleverly, with an eye to then-current trends, the majority used 300Bs. And that valve would be the key to the West for the bulk of the Chinese brands.

A vastly over-rated piece of crap, the 300B owes its reputation to the sort of bleatings and proselytising that has established many audio cults down the years. Japanese audiophiles worshipped it first, in single-ended form, and weak-minded sheep in the West, desperate for something to write about or to manufacture, latched onto it. As a result, a generation of valve users got saddled with unreliable, ☹



Above: Mission's m35 speaker. Mission was one of the first brands to relocate manufacturing to China

gutless amps that forced them to use excruciatingly bad-sounding speakers because of the need for high sensitivity: horns.

One must not blame the Chinese for this phenomenon, so much as the Japanese. 'Blame,' did I say? Yes, blame. Anyone who has heard a 300B amp driving horns the size of fridges in a 2x3m room will know why I find the experience about as pleasant as a colonoscopy. Bright, brittle, shouty – it's as if some audio hellspawn actively dialled out all the sonic reasons for loving valves. It's like non-alcoholic beer. But then, Japanese culture includes eating raw sea slugs, humiliating yourself with karaoke and buying tinned girls' knickers from automatic dispensers, so what do I know?

[Please take note: that is not racism. It is an observation about another culture, and probably my admission that I'm too unsophisticated to appreciate, say, hara-kiri or crap horror movies. Conversely, I adore Kurosawa, will eat fugu anytime and anyplace, and can sing all the lyrics to *Ue O Mu-ite* by Kyu Sakamoto when it's on the karaoke machine. And if you don't believe me, ask Oliva De Paravicini, Be Yamamura or Ken Ishiwata.]

CULT CULTURE

What's inescapable is that nowadays, slavish devotion to the 300B is a firmly-established subculture within the audio community, along with other cult streams like open-reel tape, ribbon speakers, et al. As an aside, those who delight in the purity and beauty of single-ended triodes per se, and who have even a smidgen of knowledge or taste, prefer 845s, 2A3s or other non-300Bs.

Anyway, the first Chinese valve amps suffered not just the use of 300Bs but also shoddy construction, deadly metalwork, weird cosmetics (especially the sort of label misspellings that provide bitchy fodder for

journalists) and a predilection for terrifying behaviour. Like exploding tubes. Then again, the Chinese did invent gunpowder and fireworks. But here's where the Chinese showed their true mettle: they adapted.

ECONOMIC MIRACLES

Quite clearly, the real economic miracle of the 20th Century was the emergence of Japan after WWII. Unlike the German recovery, which involved the rebuilding of a nation that already had a huge manufacturing infrastructure, Japan was nowhere near as 'modern' as Germany. So, for it to go from the destruction of the war years, through the 1950s when the country's output was strictly of the cheap-and-not-cheerful variety, to world leaders by the end of the 1960s, well, that's almost as fast as Great Britain going from world leader to world laughingstock under Labour rule.

Japan took roughly 25 years to go from zero to dominant. If you trace China's burst of creativity, starting with the mid-1990s, then they're set to achieve the same in an even shorter time. (No, I haven't forgotten the other economic miracle that is South Korea. But in terms of speed and scale, China has the edge.)

Let's ramp back down to our level – purist audio – and away from the manufacture of mobile phone batteries and plasma screens and the other mass-production items that are making China wealthy. In doing so, we now find that their audio equipment has, slowly and stealthily, acquired in a decade the sort of high-end credibility that the Japanese didn't attain until Stax, Nakamichi, Koetsu and others provided it in the late 1960s. That's a halving of the time frame. And now Chinese high-end gear is here, and it has to be taken seriously.

If I were to count all the pieces of Chinese purist audio equipment I've auditioned closely in the last five years – for some reason, I consider 2001-2 to be the turning point – it numbers around 25 pieces. They range from entry-level valve amps to exotic CD players to oddball speakers. Shanling and Cayin are perhaps the most highly respected, while PrimaLuna – though Dutch-owned and designed – and Quad have done more to establish Chinese manufacture as



Above: PrimaLuna's Prologue Six power amplifier. A Chinese/Dutch partnership. PrimaLuna typifies the new breed of intelligent trans-national hi-fi design

something to respect. Meanwhile, I've been living with pieces from either end of the Melody catalogue, and the results simply confirm the maturity of China's specialty audio sector.

Having already sampled the delights of PrimaLuna's ProLogues, I knew what the Chinese could offer for under a grand. While manufacturers in the West howl, the customers have voted with their wallets. So far, I have had no indication whatsoever that PrimaLuna's products have any reliability issues; I've been using one of the company's integrateds for over two years with no hitches whatsoever. As for Quad, its current valve amps are the best it's ever made, surpassing even the originals. So I guess I was primed for Chinese equipment for which no apologies would be needed.

THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN

Melody's adorable little SP3 II integrated amp (£875) reached me via Onix, which sells them under its own name in the USA. I'd seen this gem at countless shows on the Continent and in the USA, finally seeing it as well in the UK courtesy of Select Audio (☎ 01900 813064, 🌐 www.selectaudio.co.uk). Beautifully made, it uses four 5881, two 6922, two 12AX7 and two 12AU7 tubes to deliver a useful 36 watts per channel. Absolutely basic, with just two line inputs and a volume control, it is conceived as a no-frills 'starter' amp in terms of facilities. And yet its build quality, solid valve cage, protective 'cans' around the input and driver



Above: The humble 300B power triode – loved by some, considered by Ken Kessler to be the root cause of most modern famines, floods and civil wars. Or something

tubes, mock-WBT connectors and chunky volume control hint not at any economies.

Almost wickedly, it works magic with speakers like PMC's DB1+ and the ultra-cute Tannoy Autograph Mini, taming the latter's slight edginess and adding a needed bit of weight to its lower registers. Shove in a reasonable CD player, and you have all-tube bliss for a negligible outlay in relative terms. And I repeat: reliability has not been an issue. Costing slightly less than a PrimaLuna, it offers more grunt but a shade less finesse and fewer inputs. The choice is a tough one.

More impressive still is the Pure Black 101D preamplifier (£3,295), the sexed-up version of

of far longer pedigree. Inside, too, are touches to tickle a purist's fancy, like hard-wiring throughout, oversized capacitors, and so many parts that look suspiciously 'milspec' that you enjoy a frisson of naughtiness with this thing. Mysteries of the Orient, indeed.

I slotted it straight into my McIntosh C2200/Sonus Faber Guarneri set-up, using a range of sources. Its character was less analytical and precise than the McIntosh C2200's, and it possesses enough character of its own to ensure that personal taste will determine any verdicts. But for me the point was not that it sounded so marvellous, which it did, but that it represented for me a complete



Above: Melody's SP3 II – an adorable little integrated valve amplifier with an equally tempting price tag

“A spherical honey of a triode called a 101D that gives the unit its name.”

the earlier 1688. Tube crazies are gonna love it because Melody has, in what's becoming a Chinese tradition, opted for tubes other than the run-of-the-mill stuff found in Western models. In addition to the not-so-odd 5AR4 and a quartet of 6SN7s is an aged design, a spherical honey of a triode called a 101D that gives the unit its name. Originally a Western Electric creation like the dreaded 300B, this is surely the root of the unit's warmth.

TIGHTER DOWN BELOW

In use, the Pure Black 101D is deliciously quiet, well-controlled and tighter down below than I expected. It exhibited a confidence and a competence that one would attribute to units

break from the Chinese products of the past. I was able, in other words, to treat it exactly as I would a device from any British, American or European valve amp manufacturer.

While the Melody – and, no doubt, the Shanling and Cayin products – now exhibit proprietary designs, a few minor areas still need to be addressed. Fortunately, these manufacturers are adventurous, and are not slavishly following the styling of established brands. I know that a lot of Shanling's appeal is down to its outré look, while Melody has projects on the drawing board that will delight those who are bored with convention.

There is no doubt in my mind that the opinions expressed above will provide further

ammo for those who wish to think that I am a shill for the Chinese, that I'm their 'useful idiot'. So be it. The reality is that I am a militant capitalist, and a true free-marketeer. All I know is that certain Chinese audio brands can now offer remarkable value for money as well as – now that they have their own designs – an integrity denied those who merely pirate the work of others.

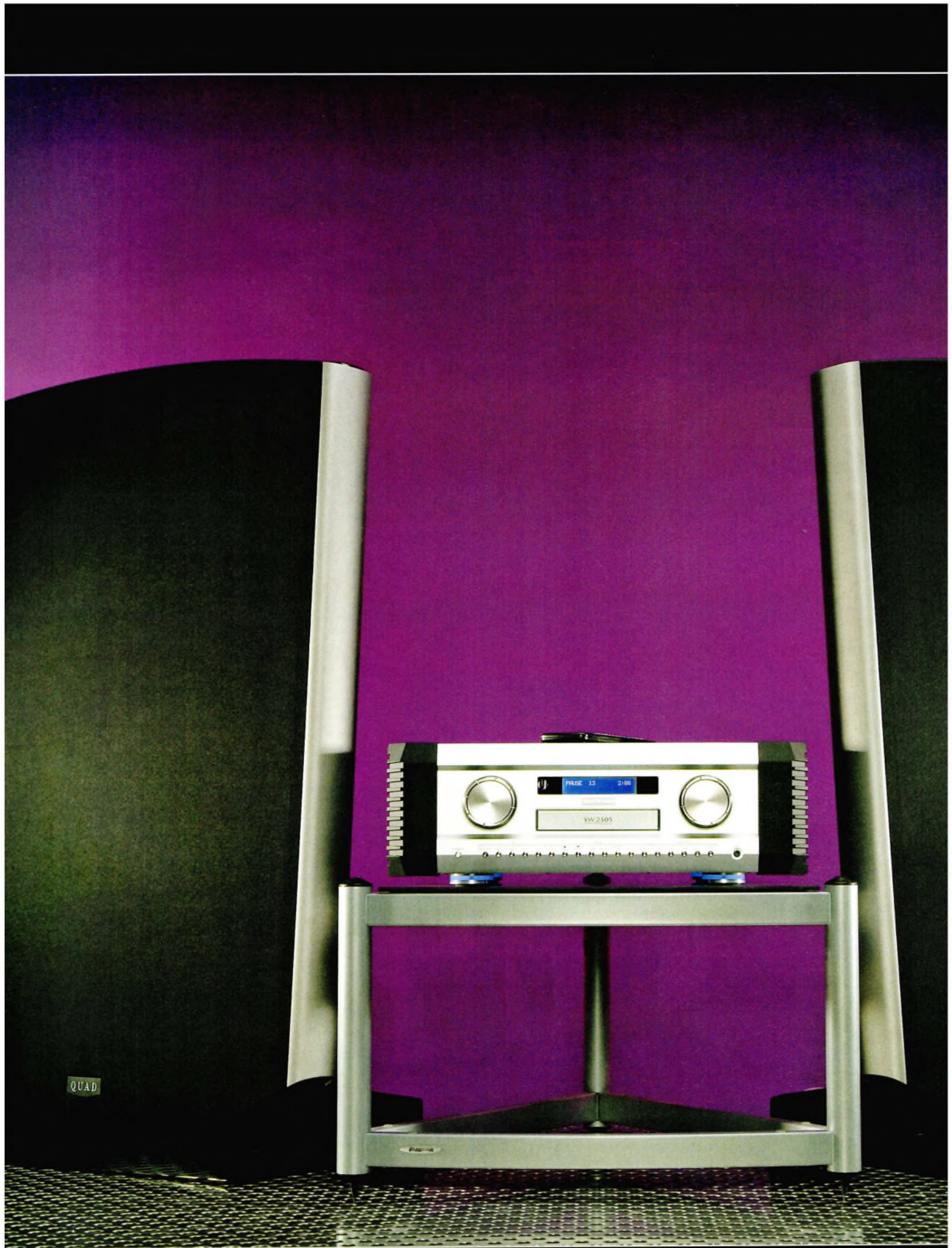
None of which will please their Western rivals. To which I will say only this: the Japanese juggernaut freaked you out for decades, but you're still here. Deal with it. Or disappear. Nobody has the right to tell a fledgling audiophile of limited means to turn down an awesome valve amp at under a grand, on the grounds that it's Chinese. **HFC**

Ken Kessler's opinions do not necessarily reflect those of Hi-Fi Choice or its staff



Main: Melody's Pure Black 101D preamp is a gorgeous example of top-notch Chinese hi-fi

Inset: The back panel of the 101D is as lovingly crafted as its front



QUAD

Boxing clever

If you think one-box simplicity means cute 'n' cuddly, think again. Meet the MF of all-in-one systems

The old audiophile adage 'there's no substitute for separates' has taken a few knocks in recent years. Not, of course, from the revolutionary concept of a single plug 'n' play unit that combines multiple sources and amplification – an idea that reaches all the way back to the radiogram – but from the opportunities opened up by 21st Century technology.

Linn's loveably cute and compact all-in-one Classik was arguably first to challenge, albeit modestly, the notion that serious music lovers had no option but to bite the bullet and piece together a synergistic coalition of components and then assemble all the necessary cabling and shelving it demands. Other separates stalwarts haven't been slow to cotton on. The likes of Arcam, Audio Analogue and Primare field one-box, just-add-speakers system solutions and, for those with £1-3k to invest in a hi-fi, the easy life option clearly has its attractions.

So here's the thing. As any typical, sensible market analyst will tell you, the budget/mid-fi sector is the natural, possibly the only, habitat for this type of product. After all, hard-bitten audiophiles actually like fondling pieces of wire, playing with spikes and levelling equipment tables millimetre by painstaking millimetre. Lovers of the high end wouldn't have it any other way and get dealers to do it for them. Which can mean only one thing: the market experts haven't heard of Antony Michaelson.

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Now, as regular readers of this feature will know, Musical Fidelity's boss Antony Michaelson doesn't have much patience with conventional hi-fi 'wisdom'. Nor is he in the least bit interested in making gear that doesn't have a healthy provision of watts or cutting edge spec that, like-for-like, puts rivals in the

uncomfortable position of looking hopelessly overpriced. Indeed, Michaelson believes that most hi-fi amplifiers are, like the Home Office, unfit for purpose, because they haven't the power to deliver decent dynamics when hooked up to the low-to-medium sensitivity speakers that flood the market. He's just as dismissive of most 'high-end' practitioners, claiming they charge more for the mystique of a hallowed name than the components, engineering and design talent.

So we really shouldn't be surprised by the £4,999 Musical Fidelity kW250S that anchors this month's *Beautiful System*. It both reinforces and subverts the emerging one-box-plays-all trend with a number of tactics close to Michaelson's heart and emerges as a unique product. Some have described it as an audio Swiss Army Knife, which is cute but rather undersells the weight, size and potency that goes with its 'kW' nomenclature. The other clue is in the 'S' suffix. It stands for 'six', as in the number of separates you'd have to amass to replace it. The kW250S uses the same tube hybrid preamp/phono stage and mono block configuration as Musical Fidelity's limited edition kW500 integrated superamp but with half the power – still an absolutely mighty 250 watts a side, mind you. Although the casework is the same size as a kW500's, MF also manages to shoehorn in a CD Player, FM/DAB tuner, DAC and phono stage. The 24-bit CD player uses 192k upsampling, based again on kW technology. There's a digital input and a jack for your iPod on the front.

Let's look a little more closely at what's under the lid. That upsampling digital-to-analogue conversion, for instance, isn't just for the CD section and DAB tuner, it also enhances digital sources connected via the rear panel. ☑

“The other clue is in the ‘S’ suffix. It stands for ‘six’, as in the number of separates you’d have to amass to replace it.”



Musical Fidelity kW250S CD/tuner/amp
£4,999

All-in-one simplicity and convenience, MF style. Hardly the 'invisible' solution, but considering what you get in the kW500-sized box, something of a sonic miracle nonetheless. With each individual component within the whole representing the pinnacle of CD, tuner and amp development as MF sees it, this is the one-box system writ larger than ever.



Quad ESL-2805 loudspeaker

£4,500 per pair
Not quite the last word in Quad's new electrostatic speaker range (the even larger ESL-2905 has greater bass extension) but utterly sublime even so. They may need their own mains supplies to energise the panels, they may need a large room to bring out their best and may not have the dynamic grunt of a top-notch 'box speaker'... but who cares when music sounds so natural, so unforced, so fluid... so right.

QUAD



And the phono stage is by no means tokenistic; it's a high quality affair that caters for both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges.

NON-STOP PLEASURE

The story goes that when Michaelson first took a kW250S home for the weekend, it was only after a few days that he realised he'd been using it almost non-stop. Whether this is a line or gospel, it doesn't really matter, the appeal of the kW250S is nose-on-face plain. It's a high-end system in a box. A big, heavy box with a long, long row of iddy-biddy fascia buttons it will take you an age to learn, but one box nonetheless. No stacks, no interconnect cables and general audiophile clutter, no need for an equipment rack the height of a multi-storey car park. One American commentator called it an "exit-level system for the middle-aged music lover who wants simplicity without compromising quality". In other words, if you've been through the audiophile mill and are feeling a little jaded, there is the salvation of simplicity without sacrifice. Setting up? You're joking, there isn't any. The kW250S weighs the best part of 40 kilos, so you'll need a good, sturdy shelf or table. Then you just plug it into the mains, connect the aerial and speakers,

grab the remote control (thankfully a lot easier to use than the fiddly fascia buttons) and let the music flow, with sublime simplicity.

'Sublime simplicity' seems an equally apt epithet for the new £4,500 Quad ESL-2805 electrostatics that partner the all-singing MF Quad electrostatics are often the speakers people 'settle down' with after trying all the others. So, is this the system to stop the endless cycle of hi-fi products? Seems to be shaping up that way.

QUID PRO QUAD

Although Quad makes its own, admittedly much cheaper, moving-coil speakers, it doesn't pull any punches when it calls the technology "fatally flawed". The company's assertion that not even the latest advances in materials science can address the shortcomings is hardly cheery for high-end conventional speakers. No, when it comes to transparency, speed, lack of coloration, coherence and the imaging only possible from a theoretically ideal point source, nothing beats the basic electrostatic principle of highly charged, ultra-thin Mylar membranes moving in response to the musical signal. The ESL-2805 and the larger ESL-2905 models are the latest evolution of the original 1957 ESL and

are altogether bigger, heavier beasts, with vastly more rigid construction. In essence, they're just as simple, though, with conventional connections for speaker cables and sockets for mains leads. The main differences are in the substantially increased weight of the base plate and the tensionable aerofoil-shaped rear brace, giving the overall structure a much more confidence-inspiring rigidity.

The ESL-2805, being the smaller of the two models, uses six panels rather than the eight of the '2905. The inner two panels use concentric anode rings for point source imaging, and the outer rings are linear in their response. The '2805 has less bass extension and dynamic headroom than its larger brother, but matches it in all other areas.

DAZZLING STANDARDS

It's a dazzling standard that immediately hits you as being brilliantly uncolored, fast and transparent. The traditional problem with electrostatics, unless the panel is very big, is that they don't do bass with much weight or conviction. True enough, the 'baby' Quads are unlikely to rearrange your hair-do, but they do have a bottom end that's taut, tuneful and focused, and imbued with a wonderfully articulate and finely textured quality.



“There’s terrific insight and resolution of fine detail, yet the sound never seems thin, as if the structural elements of the music are allowed to dominate at the expense of tonal accuracy.”

Analytical, certainly. But the detail never seems obvious or spotlighted. Yes, there’s terrific insight and resolution of fine detail, yet the sound never seems thin or stripped, as it can if the structural elements of the music are allowed to dominate at the expense of tonal accuracy and timbral shading. The wholly pleasing upshot is that you get it all, but in a way that sounds completely unforced and natural.

The ability to present fine detail in a musically coherent yet uninhibited manner is what marks out the truly great from the merely good, and this system definitely has the knack. Its handling of musical complexities and its effortlessly deft timing – sensationally crisp – are complemented by superb clarity and focus and a sense of having oodles of power in reserve.

As ever with electrostatics, they never seem quite able to pump out heavy rock with the authority and gusto of conventional moving coil towers with dinner-plate sized bass drivers, but the

Quads’ ability to deliver a vivid, dynamic and muscular sound nevertheless verges on the amazing. The system is capable of fantastic focus and clarity and real, in-the-room, presence.

WHISPER TO WHIRLWIND

The MF/Quad combo can go from whisper to whirlwind in a heartbeat. And rarely will you hear a system with as broad a spectrum of shades in its tonal palette. But it’s the way the system copes with the ‘architecture’ of a performance that really sets it apart. Without seeming overblown or in any way over the top, it gives you the big picture and presents music in a fashion so natural and coherent, you don’t just feel you could reach out and touch the musicians, but breathe the same air.

And yet, if you come straight from auditioning a more conventional high-end system, you might say the Quads lack a little ‘sparkle’. In fact, what you’re not hearing is any undue form of brightness or exaggeration. Any initial

impressions of a lack of impact soon vanish, replaced by the enduring sense of a beautiful, natural-sounding balance that you could listen to almost indefinitely without tiring.

There’s no distortion other than what’s on the recording, just astonishing levels of musical insight. Jazz trumpet has an almost luminous sonority and just the right degree of bite. Bass is pacy and uncoloured but also surprisingly full. And stereo perspectives are superbly handled with almost uncanny reproduction of acoustic cues and truly three-dimensional imaging.

Live with this system for any length of time and you might well experience some kind of epiphany. So what, you’ll say to yourself, if it can’t play at hurricane-force levels. There’s more to life than Slipknot. The worrying thing is, there’s more to Slipknot than you ever imagined, too. That’s what this system can teach you. It’s an education as well as a pure delight. **HFC**

David Vivian



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I could do with
one of those!



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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

...nor an... we liked... point here is... to the job of... recommend you...
 ...this with... £800 player, the... 17 MkII M, which has excellent build and... a very good impression in HFC 243. At... same price there's also the Cyrus 7, a... ng all-rounder in a compact case...
 ...er trying the Heart with the standard... s we switched over to the Siemens... grade, a comparison somewhat muddled by... e fact that it was a cold for hot swap - the... had been on for several days with the...
 ...after a while... w tubes shone...
 ...through. The Siemens-equipped player has an... n snappier sound with better timing that... es with dense material with remarkable... fidence and ease. It even seems to be

Our overall conclusion

...through. The Siemens-equipped player has an... n snappier sound with better timing that... es with dense material with remarkable... fidence and ease. It even seems to be

You can find... 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%

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 84%

PRO
Well built and fully featured with a snappy, open and dynamic sound.

CON
Unfortunately it's a £800 player - no bad thing in itself, but it's better than it looks!

CONCLUSION
This is a highly entertaining and colourful player at a competitive price. The build quality is good and the feature set strong. It's not the most subtle of players but if you're looking for a player to inspire you it could prove a bargain.

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



Best Buy

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.



Editor's Choice

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...

Have cake, eat it

A high-quality analogue preamp with top-notch digital processing to boot? Oh yes, this is Linn's Exotik

PRODUCT Linn Exotik

TYPE Multichannel preamplifier

PRICE £3,245

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 38.1x8x36.8cm

• Weight: 3.7kg • Analogue inputs: three stereo (RCA phono) plus 5.1 • Digital inputs: three electrical, three optical • Outputs: stereo/7.1 • Processing modes: Dolby Digital 5.1, Dolby Digital EX, DPLII/Music, DTS Surround, DTS 96/24, DTS CD, DTS-ES Matrix/Discrete

CONTACT ☎ 0141 307 7777 🌐 www.linn.co.uk

Linn has never been a company to follow the herd. The slightly austere-looking preamp you see before you is a rare example of a component that aims to satisfy both serious audiophiles *and* cinephiles. Of

course, it's not the first product to attempt this goal, but the new Exotik does things differently.

Like its predecessor of the same name, this latest Exotik is at heart an eight-channel analogue preamp, designed to make the most of any analogue source. That includes stereo components like CD players and turntables, as well as multichannel analogue audio from, say, DVD-Audio and SACD players. However, the new version also includes digital processing, adding digital inputs and a raft of processing modes to satisfy even the most fanatical home cinema buff.

The distinction between this and other multichannel preamp/processors is contained within the product's architecture and ethos: the Exotik is first and foremost intended to

perform as a high-quality analogue preamp with added digital processing, and not the other way around. The result, says Linn, is a "fantastic stereo preamplifier... (that) also brings the added value of delivering audiophile performance from non-audiophile digital sources like satellite receivers, DVD players and games consoles".

One tell-tale sign that the new Exotik is unlike most other processor-based units is that it sports a phono stage that can be configured for both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges (with Linn's reputation for vinyl, perhaps this isn't so surprising). Those who purchase the new, improved Exotik get both the digital processing and the phono stage included in the £3,245 price, while owners of existing





Stayin' alive

Is hi-fi a fragile, transient thing? Not 'arf...

Among the famous names lost to us last year, my mind often returns to memories of the late Alan 'Fluff' Freeman (who died last November) and the musical pleasure he brought to millions before retiring permanently to that big record box in the sky.

This got me to wondering what his Top 40 countdown would sound like with a hi-fi bias? What tales of the equipment that can be with us no more is Fluff spinning over at Valhalla FM? DJ, please cue up a downbeat tune...

"One-hit wonders Killer Volt come charging up to fifth place with a hot new remix of their hit *Stats Ate My Cat*." Cats have nine lives, panel speakers only one. For some reason, an occasional feline has been known to take a vertical walk up the grilles of a pair of doomed Magneplanars. These moggies obviously possess some sort of sixth sense, though, as none have ever been known to try the same thing on a pair of Quads.

"Dropping three places this week, it's those kings of ska, Badness, performing their classic *Baggy Jumpers*." Cable-knit jumpers, XL-sized shirts, long-sleeved T-shirts with a sleeve diameter more than 6cm larger than your wrist, a turntable and a cartridge – don't do it! Only if base jumping and extreme ironing have lost their thrill should you attempt aligning a cartridge whilst wearing loose-fitting clothing.

"And now, pop pickers, coming straight in at number three, we have... The Dented Cones with their smash hit *Can't Play Na More!*" Joyous creatures though they are, children can represent a pretty terminal experience for loudspeakers, and I've wept over more than one tale of voice coils forever silenced by deadly little ninja pinkies.

"Sitting pretty at number two are The Shorts. Having sold over a million copies, *Live Wire* is still scorching off the shelves." The smell of barbecued silicon is not a pleasant one. Botched bi-wiring, a slip of the wrist, a soon to be ex-friend armed with a bottle of Tia Maria dancing to *The Birdie Song* next to your amp – all can kill off a bank of output devices unless the protection circuitry on your amp has 'Schwarzenegger' as its middle name. ▶

R

RETRO

HI-FI REVISITED

YAMAHA TC-800GL
CASSETTE RECORDER



Cassette decks were the workhorse of the home recordist in the 1970s and 1980s, before digital recording technologies

found their feet. Most were utilitarian to a fault, but Yamaha decided to break with tradition and employ the services of a top designer to provide a bit of pizzazz. The result was a truly unique design statement.

The designer they chose was not one of the British stalwarts like Kenneth Grange or a Japanese young gun like Toshiyuki Kita, but Italian industrial designer and architect Mario Bellini. Born in 1935, Bellini's Milan-based design studio (which opened in 1962) was by then already famous for some classic products, including Olivetti typewriter keyboards, Lami pens. Indeed, one of his video display terminals had already earned itself iconic status following its adoption for permanent display in a museum of modern art.

Even by the standards of its day, the TC-800GL cassette deck that was contracted by Yamaha was based on conventional technology. It used a single-capstan, single-motor, mechanically actuated mechanism. The metering included peak reading LEDs, and the unit was equipped with Dolby B, but not Dolby C or Dolby HX Pro, and switching was available for standard, chrome and FeCr tapes, but without fine tuning or the backup of automatic setup.

The TC-800GL design had its odd, even idiosyncratic points. Although nominally a mains driven deck, it had an internal battery compartment which meant it could be used as a true portable for location recordings, though for most users, this feature went largely unexplored. It was ill-equipped for life on the road otherwise, though it did have a battery check switch and a limiter to help provide belt and braces protection against the possibility of clipping during live recordings. A fine pitch control was available for playback, though this was probably included more to support karaoke than creative recordings. Of course, the Yamaha had microphone as well as line inputs, with the possibility of simple cross-mixing between the two.



"Yamaha decided to employ the services of a top designer to provide a bit of pizzazz."

The real joy of the deck was a combination of two principal design features. One was the slanted construction, which simply looked fabulous. It also meant that everything was readily accessible from almost any angle. The other was the long, high resolution and finely calibrated input and output sliders

The TC-800GL was launched in 1975 and remained in the range for only a little under 24 months. Sadly, it transpired to be a one-off, albeit as it turned out, a distinguished one. There was no subsequent design replacement or upgraded successor, and the conclusion is obvious – the deck was not a great commercial success, at least in the determinedly budget-conscious UK market. That said, it has found an honoured home in Yamaha's hall of fame at its Hamamatsu factory in Japan.

At the time, the player was well liked for its aesthetic qualities. It also received some good reviews. Ultimately, however, the cassette deck failed to set the sales charts alight and fell between the two stools of cheap, high-volume cassette deck sales and the high-end market, at the time dominated by products from the likes of Nakamichi. But the TC-800GL was nothing if it wasn't well made; it was solid and its looks were a breath of fresh air. Why couldn't there have been more hi-fi components that were as well designed as this one? **HFC**

Alvin Gold



❑ "There's no change at the top spot this week, pop pickers. Yes, it's Girlfriend with *Over My Dead Body*." I've seen grown men reduced to tears as they bid a fond farewell to cherished gear, but there are some forces that simply cannot be resisted.

Jon Marks has been happily addicted to hi-fi for 20 years, especially since becoming a member of the hi-fi press in the mid-1990s



Record breaker

Reviewer goes on a product-smashing spree

The week before Christmas started out well enough. On Monday, Roksan's Touraj Moghaddam visited, to bring down the very elegant Radius 5/Nima turntable/tonearm combo for me to review, and to brief me on the brand new Platinum series Caspian electronics. He mounted a Shiraz cartridge onto the Nima Unipivot and showed me how to lock the arm for transit.

"I hardly ever break review samples, but on that particular Wednesday, things went from bad to worse."

On Tuesday, Touraj rang. The Shiraz he'd left was urgently needed in Hong Kong, so could I please extract it and package it for collection? I could and would, but I got it all wrong, treating the Nima like a Naim Aro by trying to pull off the top section, with the result that I pulled out much of the internal wiring. It can be repaired, but not by me.

I hardly ever break review samples, but on that particular Wednesday, things went from bad to worse. I went looking for a sufficiently wide support shelf to house the English Valve Amplifiers Proteus amp. Reaching past a B&W 800D in my large store cupboard, I felt my jacket snag, looked down and realised that its zip had just destroyed the very expensive diamond dome of the tweeter. The pitch of its teeth had matched the tweeter's protective mesh cover, first pulling it off and then digging into the more-fragile-than-an-eggshell diamond dome underneath.

I was mortified, but B&W was very helpful, immediately dispatching a replacement motor unit. This arrived the next day, so Thursday involved replacing the 800D tweeter and incubating a cold I'd picked up on the Tuesday. The tweeter change proved surprisingly simple,

thanks to the comprehensive instructions that B&W had included. The cold worsened and lasted well into Boxing Day, so it goes.

The 800Ds had been temporarily in my store cupboard while I was getting acquainted with a pair of Quad 2805s that had arrived a few days earlier. However, while the Quads were working rather well with my regular Naim NAC 552/NAP 500 amp combo, they seemed less than ideal with the Proteus, so I was particularly keen to get the 800Ds back up and running, partly to help me assess the Proteus, but also to help with a number of other source and amplification components that were beginning to form a queue.

Although one might assume that just one top-quality speaker should be sufficient to assess any component, in fact, the aforementioned B&W and Quad models are beautifully complementary. The former is brilliant at providing detail and control towards the bandwidth extremes, while the dipole Quad has unparalleled evenness and transparency through the midband. The best of all worlds.

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



Malcolm Steward

I've been served

Music servers still have a way to go

I finally find myself overtaken by the modern era in which convenience often takes precedence over other considerations when choosing hi-fi. As a result of being asked to review a music server and having spent a few weeks living with it, I admit that I have fallen for the charms of the hard disk-equipped, internet-enabled music-playing device.

Although I have been amazed by what, in truth, very little money can buy these days – which can be truly astonishing – certain aspects of the experience have left me less than overwhelmed.

While the product is phenomenally capable in terms of the performance and functionality it offers, persuading it to unleash its technical prowess is often fraught with unnecessary frustration. There seems to have been a lack of understanding on the part of the software engineers who programmed the user interface with regard to how users expect things to work. While the engineers have certainly achieved what was asked of them in purely technical terms, the results of their endeavours don't appear to make things as easy or as logical as they really should have been for the person who is trying to configure or operate the device. The same could be said of the people who wrote the instruction manual. All the required information is indeed there, but it is often buried so very deeply that it requires considerable time and effort to find and correctly interpret it.

For example, the server requires the user to connect it to a display device in order to access all of its set-up facilities. That it has a display panel on its fascia is, to a large extent, irrelevant for all the information it affords the user. What is needed, I feel, is a large, bold warning on page one of the guide saying, 'Before you do anything else, connect a screen, or you won't be able to access all the menus,' but it isn't there. In fact, I didn't realise this until I had become totally frustrated with my lack of progress and spoken to the company's technical-support department.

I don't think I'm being unnecessarily critical of the manufacturer. I am merely pointing out that many music server customers might imagine that, as audio devices, they will not

M

MUSO

CLASSIC ALBUMS

THE LA'S
THE LA'S



Few groups have promoted their first LP by begging people not to buy it. But when Liverpool's La's released their long-awaited

debut, the group's perfectionist singer and songwriter Lee Mavers did just that. "We hate it," declared the man who was waging his own war on modern recording techniques. "It never captured anything that we were about."

It wasn't that he hadn't tried. Mavers had gone through umpteen line-ups and attempts at recording, from eight-track set-ups to £1,000-a-day studios and onto an original Abbey Road desk, all in pursuit of a perfect, organic sound none but he could fathom. Producers including Mike Hedges, John Porter and John Leckie had all been found wanting.

Steve Lillywhite collated the group's terminal attempt at nailing the album at Chiswick's Eden Studios, after Mavers, bassist John Power, guitarist Peter Cammell and drummer Neil Mavers had, in their own words, "walked out". Released into an environment where house music and the melon-twisting dance sounds of Madchester prevailed, *The La's* sold modestly, with a number 13 hit for radio perennial *There She Goes* a poor consolation prize.

For anyone outside Lee Mavers' head, though, it seems preposterous to dismiss this album; Noel Gallagher noted in 1994 that the whole point of Oasis was to "finish what The La's started". On the surface it sounds retro, with the Rolling Stones, the Byrds, Love and Dylan all coming to mind, though this is only half the story. It's been said that the Stone Roses' debut, released the previous year, stole The La's thunder, but if the Roses' first is about self-aggrandisement, *The La's* is a reflective and complex affair. It clocks in at just 35 minutes, but feels like it goes on for much longer, tracing as it does an arc of confusion, elation, heart-bursting emotion, shame and finally, cosmic awareness, all to the melodic punches of Mavers' spine-tingling songs.

Timeless Melody and *There She Goes* are both elating pieces of music, but he set out his stall most simply with *Feelin'*. Centering on the sudden euphoria that the right chords, melody and rhythm can evoke, it also identifies where



"For anyone outside Lee Mavers' head, it seems preposterous to dismiss this album."

they might come from: "I get the feeling/ That I'm responding to a call/ I am receiving "

There are, however, counterpoints to this benign view of catching songs from the air and letting the inspiration flow like water from a tap. *Failure* and *Doledrum* are self-explanatory, caustic expressions of predestined doom. *The Looking Glass*, which ends the album, brings some kind of closure, with its dilated-pupils assertion: "I'm in everybody/ Everybody's in me", articulating the mystic, everything-is-one mindset that would later see Mavers arguing, "the closer you get to perfection the closer you get to imperfection, simple as that". The La's is a personal trip for the world!

That trip, however, is also one that has yet to produce any more music. In 1992, even the faith-keeping bassist John Power departed, to form the mightily successful Cast. However, there were surprise La's shows in 1994 and then 2005. Zen-like La's fans continue to contemplate their seventeenth year of waiting to hear a follow-up.

But if Mavers never records again, the songs on *The La's* remain as fresh and extraordinary as the day he plucked them from the ether. This is just as well; one thread on the jungle telegraph of rumour is that the next time Mavers releases a record, it will be a re-recorded version of *The La's*. **HFC**

Ian Harrison

require connection to a screen – and many people won't have a screen in the same room as their hi-fi. I don't, and had to hijack a spare computer monitor for the task, after which all became relatively straightforward. Were one incorporating such a device into an AV system, then I guess this problem might not arise, or at least would be far more quickly solved.

Ultimately, this may be more a problem of customer mindsets than anything else: today's young, hip AV consumers, who doubtless have plasma screens hanging off every available square inch of wall space in their homes, must realise that even music products won't work without being connected to a screen. But what about old fogeys like me, who have a mental demarcation line separating A from V?

Malcolm Steward was one of the country's best-known and most outspoken hi-fi reviewers of the 1980s and 1990s. He currently publishes the hi-fi industry trade bible, the British Audio Journal



Word up!

Hi, I'm a whatchamacallit

Moving house is not without its charms. It's also not without its drawbacks. One of the biggest is making small talk with new neighbours. For me, the neighbourly conversations get difficult when it comes to the 'what do you do?' question. How do you describe this kind of job in a pithy manner? Not 'writer' (snobby), or 'reviewer' (vague), or 'journalist' (connotations with red-top low life) and especially not 'photojournalist' (no bullet wounds). Worse, saying 'I audition and review hi-fi and home cinema components' sounds a bit ostentatious when the other fellow said 'accountant'.

This made me think about the nomenclature of hi-fi. What do we hi-fi types call ourselves, especially to non-hi-fi people? 'Enthusiast' sounds a bit nerdy; 'aficionado' or 'connoisseur' might be okay for high-enders, but even then they're sort of snooty-sounding. Both might be fine as a suffix to 'cigar', 'watch' or even 'claret'... but not after 'hi-fi'. We may raise the finest examples of hi-fi to almost an art form, but to most people it's just wood and metal and wires, thrown together musically.



"Audiophile sounds icky, summoning up images of triodes, gimp masks and using Sorbothane in an inappropriate manner."

Of course, the word in vogue for years has been 'audiophile', but there's something distinctly uncomfortable about the term. For me, 'audiophile' sounds distinctly icky, summoning up images of triodes, gimp masks and people using Sorbothane in an inappropriate manner. Sorry, perhaps it's my *Carry On* training, but it's one of those words that's hard not to attach some hard-core *double entendre* to, like 'pleasure', 'ooze' and 'vibraphone'. 'Admirer' and 'devotee' aren't much better, either. Then there are words such as 'fanatic', 'freak', 'fiend', 'nut', 'maniac' and 'addict', but all of these are essentially synonyms of the word 'weirdo'. Is that really making the right impression?

All of which doesn't leave much. Personally, I think it's time to take back words such as 'geek' and 'buff', just like the gay community has rehabilitated the word 'queer'. Instead of terms of abuse, we can again become proud of our hi-fi buffery or audio geekiness. It may be arch, but adding the suffix 'ist' to the term could be useful – 'audioist' and 'stereoist' sound sort of cool, although 'hi-fiist'/'hi-fi-ist' just doesn't work, and 'hi-fist' sounds like a martial-arts discipline.

Does it matter? Well, we live in a world that defines itself by terms. What you are, what you do and what you enjoy needs a label.

So, what did I say to the neighbours? I simply told them I was a Grandmaster of Mornington Crescent, in forced retirement after a

particularly bad 'Dollis Hill loop' incident. Okay, I didn't really say that, but I wish I had; it sounds odd, yet it's still a lot safer than 'hi-fi buff'. But, give it time...

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



Three's company

A trio of different ethos run high-end hi-fi

Buy an expensive amplifier and you have likely answered one of the most perplexing questions in hi-fi: what is 'high-end' sound quality? It's an issue you'll have wanted to settle before signing on the dotted line and there are a number of well established takes on the subject.

One, Absolute Power. Unsurprisingly, this approach still rules in the US and continues to have its fan bases across Europe and the Far

East. The idea is to provide massive power and stability to drive exotic loudspeakers with desperately low impedances. Such designs nearly always sound beguilingly effortless and smooth, but have been accused by some of being rather slow and uninvolved.

Two, taking The Tube. Tubes (valves) have a warmth, grace and delicacy that sonic sledgehammers can't approach and earn their place on the stairway to audio heaven when matched with suitably efficient speakers.

Three, Brit-Fi de luxe. Where pace, rhythm and timing are emphasised as essential musical components above everything else. Adopted, to varying degrees, by several of the costlier British amp manufacturers.

Each camp has its strengths and can press home compelling arguments why its approach is the right one. But which one really is 'right'? The trick I've found most helpful over the years is to concentrate on transparency alone. It's the magical quality that allows you to hear through a recording so clearly that every last scrap of harmonic and timbral resolution, every nuance of technique, every ambient acoustic clue is laid bare. Amplifiers that are talented in this direction sound wonderfully fresh, open and detailed with excellent soundstaging, focus and incisiveness.

The aim is to have the clearest window possible on recorded music, and if this can be backed up with more than a hint of heavyweight potency so much the better. A heavy puncher with quicksilver reflexes and the hi-fi equivalent of dancer's hips is the ideal.

True transparency is most obviously manifested through the sheer openness, clarity and speed of the mid-band. It should be finely revealing but harmonically rich and rhythmically coherent. The treble should have brilliance and definition but no glare or grain, the bass weight and extension but control and structure, too.

When it all comes together, musicians and their instruments can almost seem to assume a tangible presence in the listening room, power and dynamics conveyed with foot-tapping, neck-tingling realism. It doesn't make them 'nicer' or more mellifluous performers, just more interesting to listen to. It's an odd sort of compliment being 'more interesting' but it's that ability to deliver the event – the music, the performance, the acoustic, even the production – that makes the listening experience real. If you're about to spend thousands on an amp, you want it real. The good news is world class transparency isn't the exclusive preserve of the high end. As to just how affordably it can be acquired, I'll leave that for you to discover.

David Vivian has been wallowing in gorgeous hi-fi and then describing its virtues and vices in Hi-Fi Choice since 1990

TECHNO

TECHNOLOGY EXPLORED

GROUNDING



The arrival of Russ Andrews' interesting little book *Sound Solutions* (see HFC 289) has prompted some *Techno*-type

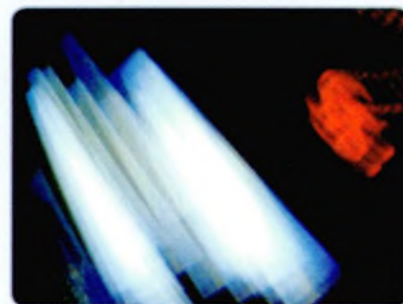
reflections. One of these concerns the issue of 'ground' or 'earth', in the electrical sense of the common return point to which voltages are conventionally referred.

Voltage is like distance: it requires two datum points to make sense. Just as you can't say that 'London is 100 miles' without saying where it's 100 miles from, it means nothing to say that a voltage at a point is '2V'. When we do say that, the unspoken assumption is that it's at 2V relative to 'ground', which by definition is at 0V.

Usually in audio we are dealing with signals defined with respect to ground – in other words, one datum point is the universal 0V shared throughout the system and generally linked to the mains 'ground' (or 'earth'). This in turn is at some point literally connected to the ground outside. This is all absolutely fine as long as ground really is the same everywhere. But is it?

No, it's not... mostly for two reasons. First, the moment you pass a current through a conductor, unless that conductor really has absolutely zero resistance, a voltage gradient appears along it – and voltage is different everywhere, if only by a little. Second, interference causes high-frequency variations in voltage from point to point, and time to time, across the conductor. This interference comes from all sorts of sources, such as mains-frequency magnetic fields from transformers, high-frequency radio waves from TV transmissions, mobile phones, Wi-Fi and more. The frequency range of these sources is from 50Hz to many GHz, a ratio of tens of millions to one.

It might seem that the answer to grounding problems is to use a conductor to 'tie' to an outside ground point. An external earth spike can help, but it's not the complete answer. In fact, rather distressingly, there is no complete answer. This is because the way a DC or low-frequency interference signal behaves in a circuit may be utterly different from the way a high-frequency signal behaves.



“Grounding is the biggest dark art in electronics. Talented designers gnash their teeth over it.”

At frequencies above a few MHz, the wavelength of a signal becomes comparable to the physical size of audio circuits and systems, and all sorts of odd things happen. Most importantly, just because a bit of wire happens to be grounded at one end, it's simply not safe to assume that the voltage everywhere along it is 0V. It almost certainly won't be.

At low frequencies, including mains 50Hz, magnetic fields are the fly in the ointment. These cause currents to flow in conductors, and again the finite resistance causes little voltages to develop. This is what happens when a 'hum loop' occurs: the conductors may all appear connected safely together, but the physical distance between them (which may be millimetres or metres) means they're subject to different magnetic fields, and hence a current flows round the loop, producing a voltage which is picked up by the circuitry somewhere and treated as a 'bona fide' audio signal – that is, amplified.

Grounding looks simple, but is probably the biggest dark art in electronics. Talented and experienced designers wail and gnash their teeth over it. But if audio circuits and systems were all truly balanced in operation (as a very few are), we wouldn't have all these problems! Sometimes, we should learn the lessons of the professional audio world. **HFC**

Richard Block

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SOUND AND VISION



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SYSTEM FILE

Mark Van Den Bergh took the long route to build a stylish system

THE SYSTEM

- Shanling Omega Drive CDT 300 CD player
- Gamma Acoustics Era Reference preamp
- Pass Labs Aleph 0 power amplifiers (x2)
- EgglestonWorks Rosa loudspeakers
- Quadraspire Q4 equipment support
- Nordost/Final Labs cables
- Various Isolators, spikes, cones and things!

Some people buy a hi-fi system and stick with it for years and years. Meet the other extreme. Mark Van Den Bergh has gone through more high-end hi-fi than most reviewers, but by buying cannily and taking the second-hand route, he's managed to build a system that should cost as much as a large house for less than the cost of a small car. It's a really neat trick.

There's no way we can list even a fraction of the components that have gone into Mark's system over time, it would be a list of product

upon product. If we'd visited a year earlier, his system would have been very different. But for once, Mark is not sure when it will change again. The quest for the latest, best kit has fallen silent in the Van Den Bergh house.

Perhaps it has something to do with those EgglestonWorks Rosa loudspeakers and their granite sides. Lugging nigh on 200kg of floorstanding speakers through several flights of stairs is not attempted lightly. But they sound the business, and they look it, too.

LOOKS GOOD, SOUNDS GREAT

That's the prime mover for Mark. It not only has to sound right, it has to look right. "It's got to sound how I enjoy it," says Mark, "but the looks are very high on the list of priorities." Mark would actively choose the good looking, good sounding product over the one that merely delivers sonic perfection. Which is why the already pretty Gryphon Adagio CD player got replaced by an ex-demo Shanling blue-glowin', top-loadin', valve-sportin', up-samplin' Omega Drive CDT 300 CD player, a little over a year ago.

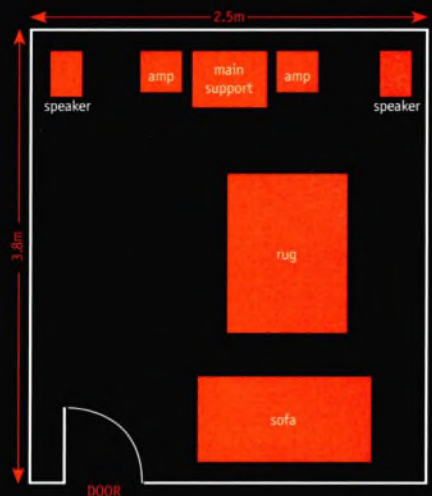
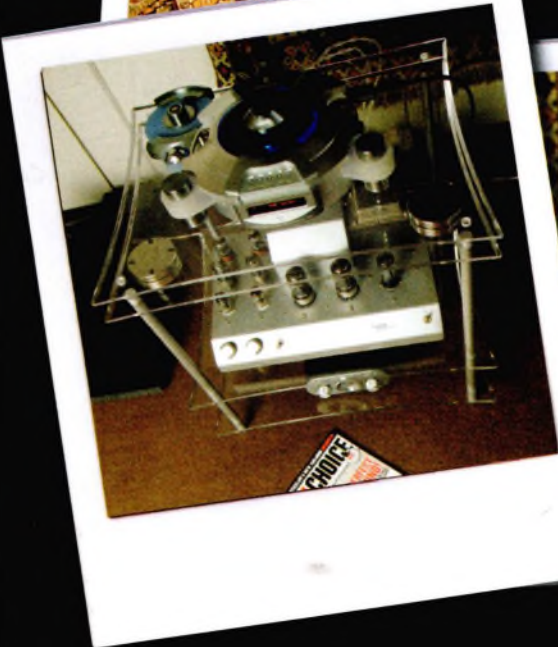
The preamp is truly unique. It's a Gamma Era Reference, from the copper chassis early days of this acclaimed, yet not big selling preamp. But this alone was not enough for Mark. Instead, he got in touch with Ellis Brown – the preamp's designer – and modified it to accept Sowter balancing transformers, rewired and changed the valve layout, and gave it a respray in silver to match the system.

Mark considers the two Pass Labs Aleph 0 (pronounced 'null') monoblocs to be the heart of the system. These two black, hot-running Borg cubes deliver 75 of the sweetest, most uncluttered watts ever heard in hi-fi and can control the Rosa speakers with ease, and a whole lot of charm.

The system is completed by a large and varied collection of cables and accessories, the majority of the electronics resting on a Quadraspire support with rare, non-magnetic, clear acrylic shelves, and equally rare Final Labs Daruma isolation bearings. It's a bitza system (bitza this, bitza that), but it sounds all the better for it.

Mark holds strong opinions about how music should be played. For him, it's not about high volume levels or bright, forward presentations. Instead, the system he has built strives to dig out the music's dynamics in mellifluous fashion. His musical tastes are catholic (although he does favour 1950s big band jazz) and in that context, his system is a stunner. **HFC**

Alan Sircom



C'MON - JOIN IN THE FUN!

If you'd like your system to be featured in *System File*, simply write a 'review' of your system using 500 words or less and send it to: **System File, Hi-Fi Choice, Future Publishing, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW**. Or email it to: hifisub@futurenet.co.uk (please include your name and address). If we pick you, you'll get a visit from one of our reviewers, plus a special 'goody bag' consisting of a *Hi-Fi Choice* T-shirt, IsoTek's System Enhancer CD and Russ Andrews' Sound Solutions book... so get writing!



The world according to...

Absolute Sounds

Ricardo Franassovici, the driving force behind Absolute Sounds, reveals how he turned a hobby into founding the UK's most renowned high-end distribution company. Interview: Malcolm Steward

On a cold winter's evening, *Hi-Fi Choice* donned a thick coat and went to meet Ricardo Franassovici, the founder of Absolute Sounds. In the warm and comfortable surroundings of London's Baglioni Hotel, we sipped espresso while chatting to the enthusiastic businessman who effectively brought high-end hi-fi to Britain by introducing such legendary brands as Krell, Sonus Faber, Audio Research, MartinLogan, Koetsu and Wilson Audio.

HFC When did you first arrive in the UK?

RF I came to live in the UK in the late 1970s. I'd had about 15 years in the music business and I came here to work for a major record label, which didn't turn out as planned. During my time in the music industry I'd developed what you might call a manic obsession, an audiophile disease – all the people working with me thought I was completely crazy. However, as a result of my obsession, I had already begun importing some highly esoteric hi-fi – moving-coil cartridges from Japan and valve preamplifiers from California – purely to satisfy my craving for better sound. That hobby eventually turned into a business and Absolute Sounds was born.

I was a real two-channel man, a genuine enthusiast whose passion had created a small business, almost by accident. But it certainly wasn't plain sailing. Things were very tough for me in those days – for starters, I had just arrived in this country with my family, and there was this tremendously insular resistance to anything that was above the two best-known UK brands of the day, Linn and Naim, who were effectively trying to corner the market and convince people that there was no life beyond their sound. To be fair to them, they had a wonderful story, even though it was controversial, but in those early days of the high-end market many retailers thought it an attractive proposition to put to their customers, and it became almost religious,



“At the time there was no high end. In the UK, the perception of many companies was that nobody needed high-end components.”

a cult thing. That made life difficult for me, because I was the new kid on the block with my unusual esoterica, but I feel in retrospect that opposition actually helped me, because it forced me to do a better job – to develop a better story and to ensure the integrity of my products. I wanted to deliver sound systems that were at that time not available on 97 per cent of the planet. Having spent much of my life working with musicians, I had a good idea of the sound I was looking to create. I believed that I could create a better sound than that of the original performance, which I soon realised was impossible, but at least it gave me the necessary drive and conviction to continue in my endeavours.

At that time there was no high end, no esoteric equipment. In the UK, the perception of many companies was that nobody needed high-end components. I'm pleased that over time that situation has changed and we now

have an industry that accepts that these types of systems genuinely deserve a place in the market, for those consumers who want hi-fi that offers the sort of exceptional performance that mass-market and Far Eastern producers, in all fairness, cannot provide. Those manufacturers concern themselves mainly with keeping up with the latest technology and hitting price points, which aren't major concerns for high-end producers and for the companies Absolute Sounds represents. Our goal is to produce systems that will wow and amaze people, and make them say: "I have never heard music sound that good before!"

In the early days, I experimented a lot and learned a great deal. I imported all sorts of products – ribbon-technology panel loudspeakers, planar loudspeakers and the legendary Beveridge electrostatics, which were a fabulous design and the only other electrostatics that Quad's Peter Walker said he

respected. In fact, some 27 years after hearing them I'm buying a pair to restore, because they had the type of performance one could never forget. We were also the first people to introduce a turntable that competed with the Linn LP12 – the Oracle – and I believe we helped to establish the market for high-priced moving-coil cartridges. I would like to believe that Absolute Sounds helped to create in the UK what is now called the high-end, two-channel industry.

HFC Would it be fair to say that before Absolute Sounds there were no high-end components such as Krell amplifiers in the UK?

RF There was nothing – or at least only a very tiny amount. Ira Gale had personally brought in two pieces of Audio Research equipment, one of which is now in my museum. So we had others, but in truth, as an industry it wasn't even at cottage level – more kitchen table!

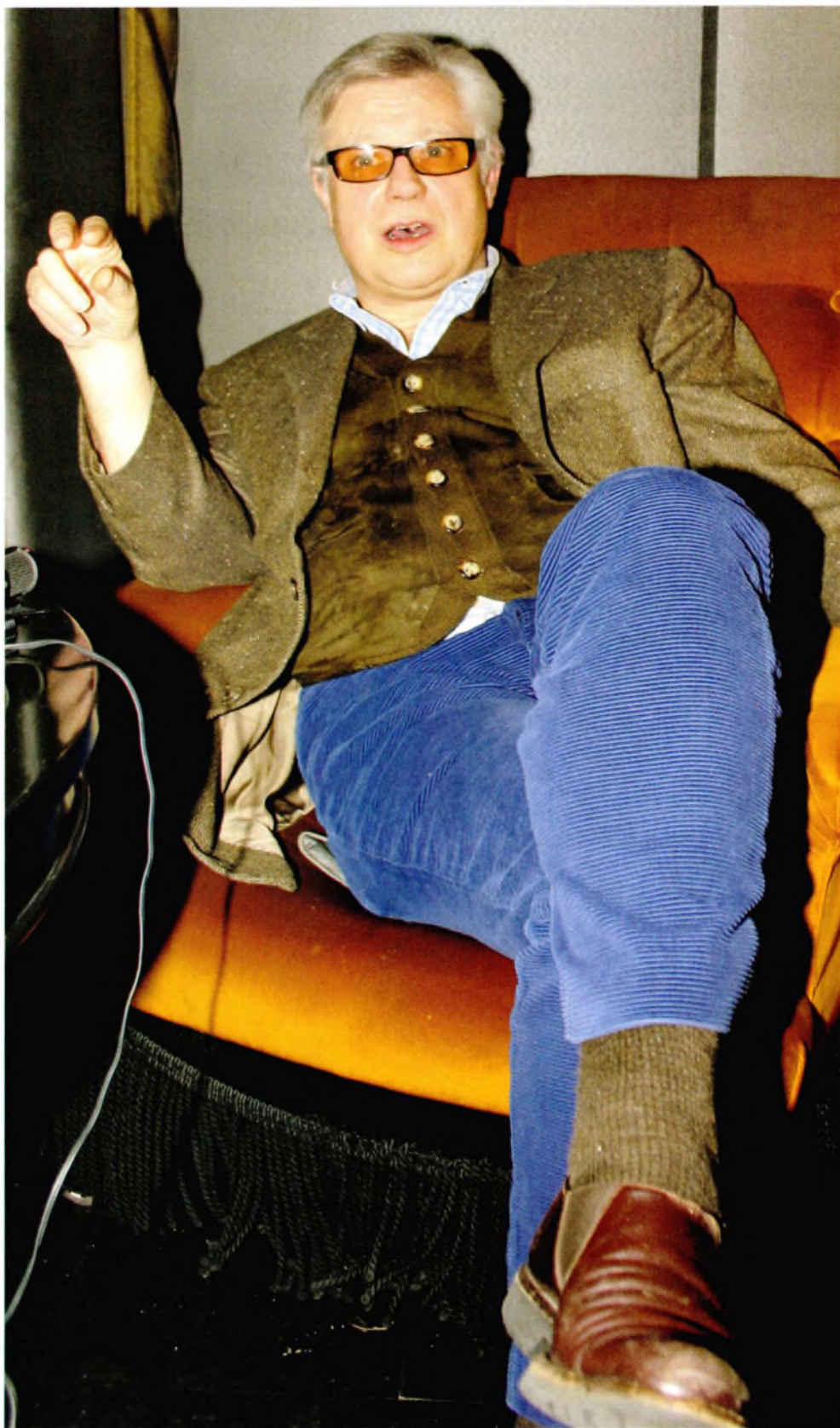
At that time the nearest equivalent to a high-end system was Linn Isobariks with a Naim NAP 250 along with a Linn LP12/Grace/Supex turntable. I listened to it and, although it was very enjoyable and powerful, it lacked the definition I wanted. I felt that it seemed – perhaps intentionally – bandwidth-limited. It gave a good midband and upper bass, but that wasn't enough for me, so I began to introduce my 'toys'

HFC What were the first products you brought to the UK?

RF The Beveridge loudspeakers, followed closely by the Oracle turntable. At that time life was really fun – I used to hire a van and go to shows in Stockport, Edinburgh, Manchester, Hull and Liverpool, and set the system up on my own. Things weren't perfect, because we hadn't yet developed a true system – we just had individual elements – but they were nonetheless really enjoyable.

HFC In recent years the hi-fi industry has had its share of ups and downs, but you seem to have remained impervious to events that have had a dramatic impact on the budget- and mid-market sectors. Does being at the more expensive end of the market effectively insulate Absolute Sounds from recessions and suchlike?

RF The company grew significantly and rapidly in its first ten years as our systems came together – we initially had excellent individual components, but it took time – and a fair bit of trial and error – to develop coherent systems. We then started importing Krell and Apogee, which afforded us an extraordinary breakthrough – apart from being outstanding individual products, they finally provided us





with a fantastic system that was totally esoteric in its concept – ribbon-planar loudspeakers with pure Class A amplifiers along with the valve preamps we were using at that time. We were very creative in the way we assembled systems, and from that point on we became very credible in the market and started to attract a lot of attention.

HFC Have you also remained unaffected by other changes such as AV and iPods?

RF About five years ago we started feeling changes in the market, when even very credible publications that were traditionally two-channel started looking at new formats that were being offered to consumers. It wasn't that we weren't economy-proof, just that the attention of the consumer was being drawn somewhere else, to the point that we started bringing in home installation and home cinema products – from brands that we were already associated with, not by looking at new suppliers. But over the last two years, rather encouragingly, the situation has altered again, and we are seeing a tremendous resurgence of interest in two-channel music.

From that perspective, I think the iPod is a good friend, because of the massive promotion going on around the product, which is all about listening to music in stereo without any multichannel or serious vision element attached to it. Effectively, it's creating a lot of music enthusiasts. Whether it will be easy to move these people from their iPods to a

higher level of hi-fi, I don't know. But it's certainly encouraging to have more and more people telling us that they simply want to have a good stereo, especially when the term 'stereo' five years ago was virtually politically incorrect! It's good to know that there's a pride of ownership coming back to that simple, very honest format.

HFC Many people seem to think that multichannel music is dead in the water.

RF I think that's correct. I think customers are fed up. We've seen situations – through our association with one of our suppliers, Theta Digital, which has always been at the pinnacle of digital technology – where by the time you had delivered a product to the customer, there was already another that had made it obsolete. Customers are sick and tired of that. But I have a slightly more poetic view about the resurgence of two-channel – I think we are in a world where customers are definitely rewarding themselves, and their senses, and they have different ways of doing that. As much as I don't understand him, I respect the man who enjoys a good cigar over an ordinary cigar; I respect the man who buys himself a nice analogue watch, even though it's not as accurate as a digital Seiko. I believe our ears have rediscovered that infinitesimal ability to discern better-quality sound.

“I think we live in a world where customers are definitely rewarding themselves, and their senses, in different ways.”

Because I'm still driven by the same passion – as are my suppliers, I'm pleased to say. We would be pleased to see people accepting the pride of ownership of very good stereos. I would like to think that over the years we have made it possible for people to reward their senses with good sound and have made it accepted in the luxury market, without wishing to make high-end hi-fi seem elitist. People will buy supercars, art and great bottles of wine to reward themselves, and I would like to see that grow to include high-end hi-fi.

In the last three or four years this has been happening. Our customer profile has changed. We still retain the hard-core hi-fi enthusiasts, but we're also selling to that group of people who want the best. One of my retailers recently told me of a client who said to him that he had the choice between upgrading his Porsche or buying a Krell system, and that he'd opted for the latter.

HFC It's gratifying to know that there isn't such a diminishing market as some might have thought for 'quality' audio and that it may, in fact, be attracting new customers.

RF One thing that is necessary for that growth to continue is that retailers – or some of them, at least – need to become less lazy, waiting for the good review to be published and then waiting for their phone to start ringing. Specialists need to be more proactive and invest more into their stores and staff so that consumers feel happy about dealing with them. In many of my best retailers, the staff gain so much confidence from their customers that the customers, after a couple of demonstrations, are completely happy to let the sales consultants decide on the best systems for them.

That is how it should be, because manufacturers and importers can only do so much – we can supply the ingredients and suggest a recipe, but ultimately it's the dealers' responsibility to 'prepare the meal'.

Yet another thing is that with age comes cynicism – especially in this country, it seems. I would ask our colleagues in the press to remember that when they write about components, they should convey more about the musical aspects of the components rather than be too disparaging.

HFC Surely that's a reflection of some magazines' beliefs that readers only want quick-hit reviews and small snatches of sound bite-style information?

RF We need a lot more proactivity throughout the industry. We need to tell people that good music exists and that its reproduction is not an antique pastime. Music is available in a variety of formats, so let us create high-quality systems that can make the most of all of them.

We are not antiques – certainly not when you compare our industry to, say, the car industry, which has been around far longer. We need to create an environment in which listening to high-quality music reproduction becomes an aspirational pursuit, and before we can do that, we need to ensure that the people who are designing the hi-fi are just as passionate about recreating the original performance.

Venturing out into the cold night air, it struck us as being refreshing to have discovered that Ricardo, despite his overt passion for vinyl and his plans to release some of his favourite recordings on that medium, isn't caught in any time warp and is still eager, after nearly three decades, to preach the high-end gospel to anyone with the inclination to listen. **HFC**

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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

MUDDY WATERS

Fathers And Sons

Chess/Speakers Corner

180g vinyl

Music: This album, with Mike Bloomfield and his Butterfield Blues band, as well as Muddy's regular 1960s piano man Otis Spann, is made up of ten studio tracks. These

include the driving *All Aboard* with its train like rhythm, and *Blow Wind Blow*, which features some fine picking from Bloomfield. The second disc contains 30 minutes of live material, including two takes on *Got My Mojo Working*, with Buddy Miles and Donald 'Duck' Dunn. ★★★

Sound: The sound on the studio cuts is pretty well as good as blues recordings got in the 1960s: clean, wideband and blasting with energy from Paul Butterfield's harp. The live sides suggest a cavernous venue with an oddly distant though clearly frenzied audience that seems to be mired in distortion – presumably why they are so far down in the mix. ★★★ JK

ELLA FITZGERALD

The Jerome Kern Songbook

Verve/Speakers Corner

180g vinyl

Music: Arguably the greatest female jazz singer in the world (Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith fans might disagree) is backed here by Nelson Riddle's orchestra, and the inventiveness of

the compositions combined with Ella's fabulous voice and Riddle's sumptuous sound make this a standout among Broadway songbook albums. There is a spark and energy here that one can imagine strongly influencing Steely Dan's Becker and Fagen. It's slick, certainly, but also compelling and possesses an edge all its own. ★★★

Sound: The tapes for this 1963 recording seem to have picked up a little hiss over the intervening years, but this is only obvious in the quiet sections. Otherwise, this is a tonally gorgeous slab of vinyl. ★★★ JK

LPs were supplied by Pure Pleasure
www.purepleasurerecords.com

COMPACT DISC & VINYL



THE BENCH CONNECTION

Around The House In 80 Days
50/50 recording

Music: Bench Connection have been lauded by the broadsheets as the last great undiscovered acoustic act of the 1970s – in reality, they are a new(ish) duo, featuring ex-Wolfhound and Acid Jazzer Matt Deighton along with his mate Pete Sheehan. The journos were right about one thing, though – BC really are a class act, with Deighton once again proving his ability to come up with effortlessly superb songs (which he and Sheehan sing in just the right tough but tender tones). Forget the inevitable Nick Drake, Davy Graham, Neil Young comparisons – Bench Connection are just themselves and that's more than good enough. A dazzling debut. ★★★
Sound: Deighton's always been into audio quality in both the home and the studio and it shows. Presence, simplicity and clarity abound. ★★★ PS



VARIOUS ARTISTS

Forever Changing: The Golden Age of Elektra

Rhino

Music: Every inch of this five-CD box set is dripping with the very essence of what made rock music such a durable invention. Elektra presided over that period of the late 1960s when upright protest singers became psychedelic warriors. From Judy Collins and Tom Paxton to Love, Tim Buckley, The Doors and beyond taking in, Nico, The Stooges, The MC5 and Queen is quite a leap. Plus, the 76-page book features a colour illustrated analysis of each of these 117 songs. Peerless. ★★★★★
Sound: Newly remastered by Bill Inglot from the best possible sources, acoustic stuff by Fred Neil/Phil Ochs/Tom Rush is vibrant, while the complex executions of Love, The Doors and Bread have never had more presence – champagne for hi-fi buffs. ★★★★★ MP



SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 11

Mstislav Rostropovich (cond), LSO
LSO Live LS00030

Music: From the opening of this desolate and sometimes violent music, you know this recording means business. The subject matter was the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution, but Shostakovich often 'coded' his works this way, and it is easy to see the 11th in an altogether less programmatic way. It doesn't deserve to be described as some in the West have done as 'glorified film music'. ★★★★★
Sound: This superb recording of a great and powerfully dynamic live performance was engineered by the estimable Tony Faulkner at London's Barbican (the home of the LSO) and exceeds his usual high standard. The disc is also available as an SACD and at its budget price the SACD must surely be the version to go for. ★★★★★ AG



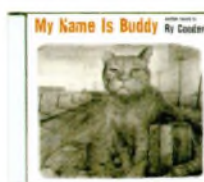
RY COODER

My Name Is Buddy

Nonesuch

Music: After his intrepid global explorations (with special focus on Mexican and Cuban music), Ry Cooder finally returns to his own indigenous American musical roots with a set of country, blues, gospel and old-time music that recalls his early-seventies work on albums such as *Boomer's Story* and *Into The Purple Valley*. The main difference is that where those releases consisted mostly of covers, here we get a set of brand new Cooder compositions chronicling the "life, rambles, and political education" of a character called Buddy Red Cat. It's a peerless hymn to a fast-disappearing vernacular heritage by a master craftsman of the old school. ★★★★★

Sound: This is a mostly acoustic mix of banjos, accordions, harmonicas and guitars. And vocals, of course: while Ry Cooder's voice certainly isn't pretty, it boasts a rich and characterful patina impressively imbued with wisdom and experience. ★★★★★ NW



TONO Y TONADAS

Early Spanish Music and Folklore from South America

La Chimera

MA Recordings M072A

Music: A curious recording from La Chimera, mostly of short works, most of which feature soprano accompaniment. This disc explores the musical cross currents between Spain and Latin America. The instruments are mainly period ones (Violas de Gamba, baroque guitars, lutes and so on), but with a leavening of modern instruments mixed in. It all works programmatically, and the performances are universally excellent. ★★★★★

Sound: A 96kHz, single-point microphone recording monitored on Stax Lambda electrostatic headphones, using custom-made equipment and Crystal Cable digital and analogue interconnects. Stunning. ★★★★★ AG



THIS MONTH'S CLASSIC HI-FI TEST DISC "A brilliant return to form"

KEITH JARRETT The Carnegie Hall Concert ECM

Music: Keith Jarrett's most recent recording only came out last September, yet it has already taken centre stage in many a collection of test discs. The tracks on here are shorter than his earlier live work (such as the near-legendary Köln Concerts), but they are no less intense, lyrical and have much of the beauty that marks him out. They are also on occasion a lot darker and more challenging. In short, this is a brilliant return to form. ★★★★★

Sound: It has been surprising that ECM, which has always made great-sounding recordings, has never put out an SACD or DVD-A, but this tells you why. If it can make CDs sound this good, why bother... although a small part of you will forever wonder: if CD can sound this good, how sublime would an SACD sound? Regardless, here we have a full-scale, full-bandwidth piano in an electric atmosphere. This is the power and glory of the event in full. ★★★★★ JK



TINARIWEN Aman Iman

independiente

Music: The last year or so has seen a trio of rock-friendly African releases. All of these come from land-locked Mali, and after Amadou & Mariam's *Dimanche a Bamako* and Ali Farka Toure's remarkable posthumous *Savane* comes this magnificent, bluesy set from Tinariwen, a bunch of fearsome-looking nomadic Tuareg rebels from the Sahara. Having swapped their rifles for electric guitars, they make swaying, hypnotic music with a deep desert funk, characterized by long, snaking guitar lines that call to mind Mark Knopfler or JJ Cale. There are plenty of exotic tribal influences in the unusual rhythms and call-and-response vocals, but anybody who loves rock guitar will find an easy connection here. ★★★★★

Sound: Producer Justin Adams – who currently fills Jimmy Page's old shoes playing guitar in Robert Plant's band – creates an accessible rock vibe without losing any of the band's African authenticity. A rare blend of Western and Middle Eastern charms. ★★★★★ NW



DVD-AUDIO & SACD

SEAN NOONAN BREWED BY NOON Stories To Tell

SACD (stereo/multichannel SACD plus stereo CD)

Songlines

Music: If you are looking for an influence here, the Mahavishnu Orchestra comes immediately to mind. After all, there are multiple guitars, one played by Marc Ribot, Sean Noonan's drums, a viola, bass, percussion from three individuals and as many delivering vocal input, albeit not simultaneously.

On occasions the vocals can seem to be in competition with lead instruments but for the most part this is an excellent jazz-rock album and a must for those with catholic tastes. ★★★★★

Sound: This is a simply stunning-sounding album – play it in stereo or surround and you hear solid, vibrant and fully formed instruments and voices. While the SACD layer has the edge, a good CD player delivers superb results as well. This is one of those rarities – great sound and music combined. ★★★★★ JK



VARIOUS ARTISTS MA on SA

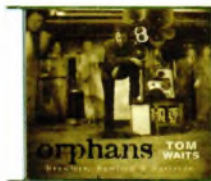
MA on SA

SACD (stereo-only SACD plus stereo CD)

MA recordings

Music: The 32 tracks on this sampler contain a surprisingly eclectic mix of musical styles, much of it classical, though above all it is a cross section of the MA catalogue. This includes works by Kalman Olah and Friends, *Sera Una Noche*, the *prelude, allemande* and *sarabande*, from *Suite en La mineur*, by Marin Marais, performed by Andrea De Carlo, plus works by Chopin, Paganini, Joao Paolo and Peter Epstein. The impressive part of the sampler is that surprisingly little of it is designed to impress in any obvious and over the top way, and overall it is step or three up the evolutionary ladder for a sampler, musically as well as sonically. ★★★★★

Sound: Unusually, this disc is a hybrid stereo-only SACD/CD disc in which the two formats have entirely separate programmes. All of which means a playing time of more than three hours from a single disc – 108 minutes plus on the DSD layer, and 73 minutes plus on the Red Book CD layer. Almost all the recordings were made with two spaced omni-directional microphones and the sound is superb. ★★★★★ AG



TOM WAITS

Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers & Bastards

Anti

Music: It would be hard to imagine the critical stock of the world's most famous wannabe carnie barker getting any higher. Split into his three main song types – the ragged rockers (Brawlers), tear-stained ballads (Bawlers) and some of his quirkier excursions into noise and storytelling (Bastards), there's nothing that will sound unusual to Waits fans, but while some maintain that he's been pretty much remaking the same album since 1983's *Swordfishtrombones*, when it's done with this degree of skill, verve and panache, who cares? ★★★★★

Sound: Audiophile sound quality has never concerned Waits, but while the murk can be frustrating, there is also fun to be had unpicking the *sturm* from the *drang* – and he knows how to create an atmosphere. ★★★★★ DO



NORAH JONES

Not Too Late

EMI

Music: Norah Jones' gazillion-selling first album of jazz-lite piano tunes saw her rather unfairly bracketed with the easy-listening likes of Callum, Mellua and Krall. But her third solo outing sees her leaving the jazz standards behind and exploring some of the country and soul influences from Texas, where she grew up. There are no cover versions this time around and there's more of an emphasis on guitars rather than keyboards, with just a hint of darkness on the edge of town. ★★★★★

Sound: Long-time songwriting partner and bass player Lee Alexander is back at the production helm and he makes no attempt to meddle with the richly cosy and warmly enveloping sound of the previous albums. 'Quality' hi-fi music, in other words. ★★★★★ DO

RICKIE LEE JONES

The Sermon On Exposition Boulevard

SACD (stereo/multichannel SACD plus stereo CD)

New West

Music: RLI's early 1980s hit *Chuck E's In Love* should have set her on the road to pop rock superstardom, but she preferred instead to follow her muse and created a series of often inspired yet uneven albums that ensured she retained a cult following just on the edge of fame's spotlight. *Sermon* is a more rockin' excursion than we've been used to, rough (even raw) in places, with a spiritual underpinning (the lyrics are based on the words of Jesus Christ, but reapplied in a modern context) that suggests *Astral Weeks* if Van Morrison had been backed by the Velvet Underground. That's a good thing, by the way. ★★★★★

Sound: An unusual choice for the SACD treatment perhaps, but the largely acoustic line-up benefits greatly from the extra bandwidth and the dispersion of instruments into the round. The special edition includes a surround SACD mix, standard CD mix, and also a 'hi-res' MP3 version, which should cover pretty much all bases. ★★★★★ DO





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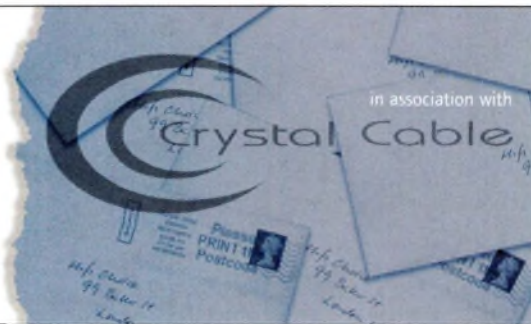


ChoiceMail



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



AN AMERICAN WRITES...

As a regular reader from the USA I tend to read only what looks interesting – product and music reviews, mostly. On a long-haul flight recently, however, I ended up reading all of the December issue (*HFC* 288). Your Creek Audio *Industry Profile* feature (not my normal read) was intriguing. I guess interviewer Malcolm Steward and Mike Creek have never heard of Sonos or NetStreams? Creek Audio plans on waiting until 2010-2015 to enjoy that 'future' technology of IP addressable speakers. Wake up, people... that technology is already here.



Come on guys; this is the most exciting time I have known in hi-fi – anything seems possible. Digital files at any level of fidelity? You decide on what you need, you have it. 250 uncompressed albums in a gadget the size of a deck of cards? Why write platitudes when you can inform us? There is so much we need to know.

Ali Elam New York City

HFC We doubt anyone in the hi-fi business is unaware of the headway made by Sonos and NetStreams (in fact, Malcolm Steward interviewed Herman Cárdenas of NetStreams in *HFC* 285). But as Malcolm is at pains to point out in this issue's *Dispatches*, the technology still has some way to go before it reaches the ease of operation of a CD player. And Creek's kit is all about great sound and ease of operation.

While well received in the US, such systems are niche products to the specialist UK two-channel buyer. There are publications that cater more for digital music files and portable music players than *HFC*, simply because our focus is on high-performance hi-fi. We do, of course, keep an eye on the technology – check out the Imerge S3000 server review, starting on p46 of this issue – and bring it to our readers attention whenever relevant.

“Your Creek feature was intriguing. I guess Creek’s never heard of Sonos.”

A MONKEY TO SPANK

My system comprises Rotel RC850 preamp, Rotel RB850 power amp, Micromega Logic CD player, Arcam Delta Black box DAC and Arcam Delta speakers. I have up to £500 to upgrade this 15 year old system and I'm looking for some advice. I have heard good things about the Epos M12.2 and M5 speakers, but would I be better off replacing the source? Musically, rock and blues music is my preference, but I also like the odd classical piece.

Dave Willcocks via email

HFC If your speaker's drive units and surrounds are still in good condition, we'd replace the CD player. Our recommendations include Rega's excellent Apollo at £498, Marantz's SA7001 (£430) and the budget superstar, Cambridge Audio's Azur 640C v2 at £250. If your speakers do bite the dust soon, either of the Epos models you mention are both excellent choices, as is Rega's R3 floorstander at £448. ☑

Letter of the month

GOLD-PLATED STINKERS

I refer to January's *Choice Mail* and Mark Clayton's letter, *How to Review* (*HFC* 289). If you combine his point about the acclimatisation of equipment with Max Townshend's views on how reviewers need time to adjust to the sound of unfamiliar equipment, one gets nearer the complexities of a highly subjective reality. But, hi-fi should not refer back to itself. The ultimate reference points are vivid memories of how acoustic instruments sound in live concerts.

Robin Leavis via email

HFC We agree that referring to how instruments sound is a great way to assess hi-fi. Our reviewers are an active lot and get out to concerts regularly. Plus, we also have professional musicians such as Richard Black who oft tinkles the ivories.

That said, if an individual's rationale for owning a hi-fi system is to reproduce music without an acoustic frame of reference (such as dance), then benchmarking to acoustic music will produce poor equipment choices. We have to encompass both ends of the spectrum.



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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...)

LOOK BACK IN ANGER

I refer to your new *Natural Born Kessler* feature column (HFC 289). Why is this man so angry? I listen to music because it stirs my soul, reminds me of people, journeys, places, situations. It stirs my imagination, relaxes or invigorates me as I see fit. No, I cannot afford or justify a £2,000 system, but I am happy that some people have the means to buy top-end equipment because the technology trickles down to the boxes I can afford. I really enjoy reading about this amazing equipment that I would otherwise never have the chance to see, let alone own. Would I rather have a £10,000 system and ten CDs, or a £1,200 system and the £7,000-worth of CD discs that I have now? No competition. And I don't get bitter about it.

Name withheld Powys

HFC Like good music through great hi-fi, Ken Kessler also stirs the soul and has

already managed to ruffle a few feathers. Although his recent column picking his favourite systems fell short of a sub-£1,000 recommendation, Ken's low-cost suggestion of an Arcam Solo and PMC DB1+speakers is spot-on. Coincidentally, one of the HFC staffers runs this as a second system and fully concurs with the bearded one.

HARD EVIDENCE

I refer to January's *Choice Mail* and Andrew Lyalls's letter of the month, *Streaming Lunacy*, (HFC 289). He mentioned a few things I do not agree with; that there are very few people who own an external DAC; developments in computers and hard disks are certainly not spectacular anymore and very predictable; and developments in DACs? Hardly.

But his solution – a 'streamer' with NAS (Network Attached Storage), works fine and is certainly an alternative for an all-in-one

"I enjoy reading about amazing equipment that I would never own."

solution, like a music server. I have used a similar configuration (a Squeezebox) for a time and was quite satisfied, but I found a dedicated music server much more convenient. In your reply, you mention that music servers are still in their infancy, which is probably right if you mean Cambridge Audio, Yamaha and the old Imerge product. But, if you connect an external DAC to the digital outputs and use the server as a transport, it sounds better than most CD players.

Far more important, however, is the interface and functionality. And with the huge capacities available in some servers, now is time for the music industry to offer lossless downloads. As far as I know, US site www.musicgiants.com is the only one, but unfortunately, it does not have a very big collection.

Johan van Buuren Amsterdam

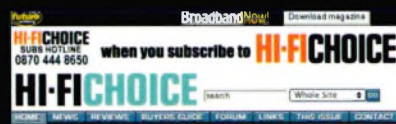
HFC Digital music is the hot topic of our mailbag and it seems there are quite a lot of you who are getting involved with servers as a way of delivering music to your hi-fi systems. The issue of download quality, however, remains a constant source of frustration for many of you. Our music industry expert David Balfour reported on the latest developments in high-resolution downloads in the UK in last month's Dispatches (HFC 290) and although there is some hope from the majors, progress remains slow.



Above: Arcam Solo one-box system

Onlinef@rum

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



You might be able to find otherwise unavailable online *Hi-Fi Choice* reviews at www.web.archive.org/collections/web.html. It's a non-profit organisation that has a grand goal of archiving all internet content in a series of snapshots. Although not well known, it's a really great resource.

Max

What are the main characteristics of an ideal hi-fi speaker? A flat frequency response over a wide range? If it is, then does it mean a good studio monitor will make a good hi-fi speaker?

Jeff

...I don't believe that a speaker that objectively measures a flat frequency

response will necessarily sound good too. Partnering components, and more importantly, room interaction – plus your own listening preferences – will determine the final sound. I have heard speakers with a ruler-flat frequency plot, which sound boring and lifeless.

Effem

I've recently started to use my Grado SR80 headphones a lot. They seem good in most respects, but I can't get the sound 'out of my head' and into the room (if that makes sense). Am I asking too much? I appreciate the natural limitations of headphones, but I've read reviews that suggest that some cans

produce a more realistic 'external' soundstage...

WhiteNoise

...I agree with you entirely. Alternatively, there are the 'head speakers' produced by the likes of Ergo AMT designs, which are like small speakers held slightly away from your ears. Expensive, but great.

PeteH

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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION

AWARDS 2006

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
CD PLAYERS
CYRUS CD64

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION

AWARDS 2006

CD PLAYER
BEST CD PLAYER £1000-£1500
CYRUS CD64

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION

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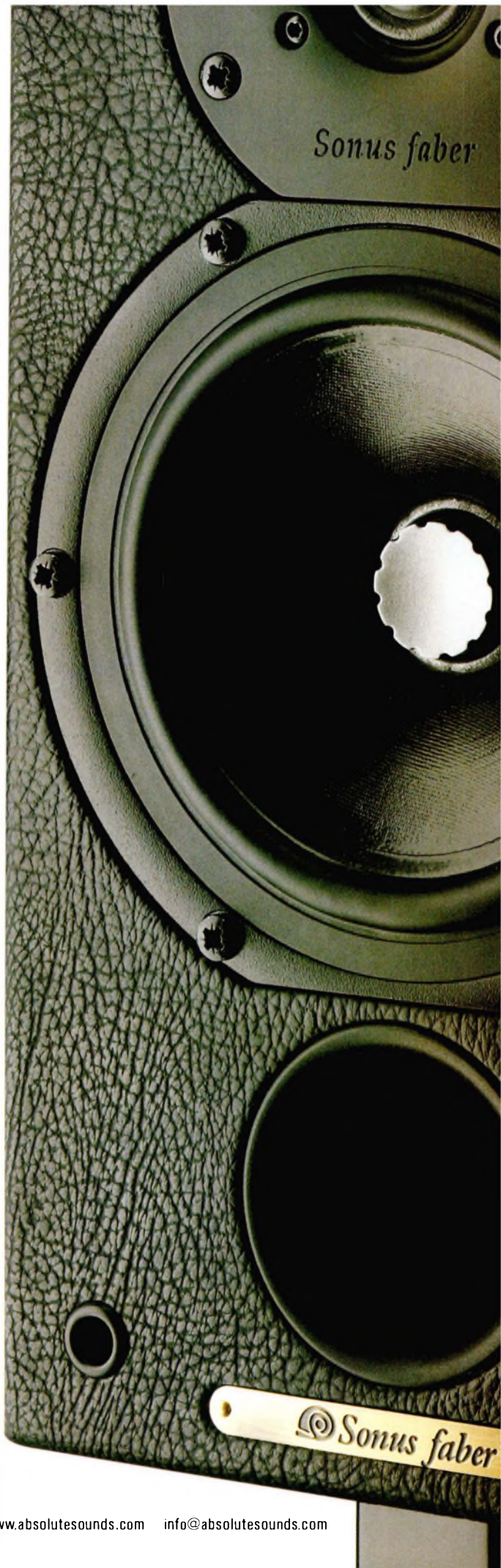
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N A T U R A L B O R N KESSLER

In part two of his tribute to Chinese-made hi-fi, Ken Kessler assesses the country's flourishing high-end audio scene and concludes that it's time we accepted its products as worthy of the West's best

Like everything else that flies by in life, it's hard to remember a time when China had zero presence in serious audio. I mean, can you actually recall the time before mobile phones and then place yourself in it? If you think about how quickly (if you're old enough) computers integrated totally with our lives, how we went from three TV channels to hundreds, then you can appreciate the enormity of how China's emergence in audio has happened in under a decade.

Prior to the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, China was as mysterious to the West as Borneo, and as closed as the mind of a Taliban. But visionaries knew it wouldn't always be so. And while the gigantic Japanese and Korean electronics firms were the ones who subcontracted China Inc on a massive scale, they had negligible interest in specialty audio. Instead, the pioneers who paved the way for China to grab a serious slice of the purist hi-fi

action were, ironically, traditional brands who would/will eventually find homegrown Chinese wares competing against them. Mission, Quad, Wharfedale and others were among the very first to move some (or all) production to China, and thus the seeds were sown.

For our passions, China, of course, had an ace up its sleeve. Thanks to the abject idiocy, racism and vile hatred that splintered Yugoslavia into the morass it is today, the world lost one of the primary consistent sources of valves. Add to that the Wild West nature of Russia – bang goes the stability of

products, with names that would easily confuse someone for whom English was a foreign language. Aiwa clones were labelled 'Amwa', for example. Sony became 'Sunny'.

Don't smirk about any *naïveté* on the part of Far Eastern consumers. How would you do deciphering labels on a jar of Korean vitamins, or traffic signs in Thailand? Think about it: take any alphabet from a language not based on Latin or European lettering, for which you have no comprehension. Would you be able to distinguish a minor letter change? That's how the pirates operated.

“Prior to the handover of Hong Kong, China was as closed as the mind of a Taliban.”

another valve-manufacturing state – and that left China as, of all things, the most secure supplier of valves in the world. And while the quality of Chinese tubes has been iffy, especially compared to some exceptional Russian offerings, it has been improving. If there's one thing China has learned, regardless of its refusal to comprehend the notion of 'intellectual property', it is the need to improve quality if it is to compete with the West.

SLEAZY LISTENING

But it wasn't just the raw valves that needed a boost. In the early-to-mid-1990s, local audio brands popped up like muffin-tops at Matalan. At first, they pumped out sleazy rip-offs of Japanese and American and European

This worked for the home market, but it clearly wouldn't fool even some schlub in Dusseldorf or Hull or Boise, Idaho. Almost communally (rather than communistically), Chinese valve manufacturers realised that they could make even more money producing the hardware that used their tubes. When I first visited China over a decade ago, I was simply staggered by the dozens of valve amp manufacturers that were unknown in the West. Yes, dozens even back then.

Launching the products in America and Europe, however, was a long way off. Quite simply, the products were not ready, especially in physical rather than sonic terms. Interestingly, the early Chinese valve amps, while a bit noisy, were warm and musical – no surprises when you consider that many were based on classics from the West.

Cleverly, with an eye to then-current trends, the majority used 300Bs. And that valve would be the key to the West for the bulk of the Chinese brands.

A vastly over-rated piece of crap, the 300B owes its reputation to the sort of bleatings and proselytising that has established many audio cults down the years. Japanese audiophiles worshipped it first, in single-ended form, and weak-minded sheep in the West, desperate for something to write about or to manufacture, latched onto it. As a result, a generation of valve users got saddled with unreliable, ☐



Above: Mission's m35 speaker. Mission was one of the first brands to relocate manufacturing to China

gutless amps that forced them to use excruciatingly bad-sounding speakers because of the need for high sensitivity horns.

One must not blame the Chinese for this phenomenon, so much as the Japanese. 'Blame,' did I say? Yes, blame. Anyone who has heard a 300B amp driving horns the size of fridges in a 2x3m room will know why I find the experience about as pleasant as a colonoscopy. Bright, brittle, shouty – it's as if some audio hellspawn actively dialled out all the sonic reasons for loving valves. It's like non-alcoholic beer. But then, Japanese culture includes eating raw sea slugs, humiliating yourself with karaoke and buying tinned girls' knickers from automatic dispensers, so what do I know?

[Please take note: that is not racism. It is an observation about another culture, and probably my admission that I'm too unsophisticated to appreciate, say, hara-kiri or crap horror movies. Conversely, I adore Kurosawa, will eat fugu anytime and anyplace, and can sing all the lyrics to *Ue O Mu-ite* by Kyu Sakamoto when it's on the karaoke machine. And if you don't believe me, ask Oliva De Paravicini, Be Yamamura or Ken Ishiwata.]

CULT CULTURE

What's inescapable is that nowadays, slavish devotion to the 300B is a firmly established subculture within the audio community, along with other cult streams like open-reel tape, ribbon speakers, et al. As an aside, those who delight in the purity and beauty of single-ended triodes per se, and who have even a smidgen of knowledge or taste, prefer 845s, 2A3s or other non-300Bs.

Anyway, the first Chinese valve amps suffered not just the use of 300Bs but also shoddy construction, deadly metalwork, weird cosmetics (especially the sort of label misspellings that provide bitchy fodder for

journalists) and a predilection for terrifying behaviour. Like exploding tubes. Then again, the Chinese did invent gunpowder and fireworks. But here's where the Chinese showed their true mettle: they adapted.

ECONOMIC MIRACLES

Quite clearly, the real economic miracle of the 20th Century was the emergence of Japan after WWII. Unlike the German recovery, which involved the rebuilding of a nation that already had a huge manufacturing infrastructure, Japan was nowhere near as 'modern' as Germany. So, for it to go from the destruction of the war years, through the 1950s when the country's output was strictly of the cheap-and-not-cheerful variety, to world leaders by the end of the 1960s, well, that's almost as fast as Great Britain going from world leader to world laughingstock under Labour rule.

Japan took roughly 25 years to go from zero to dominant. If you trace China's burst of creativity, starting with the mid-1990s, then they're set to achieve the same in an even shorter time. (No, I haven't forgotten the other economic miracle that is South Korea. But in terms of speed and scale, China has the edge.)

Let's ramp back down to our level – purist audio – and away from the manufacture of mobile phone batteries and plasma screens and the other mass-production items that are making China wealthy. In doing so, we now find that their audio equipment has, slowly and stealthily, acquired in a decade the sort of high-end credibility that the Japanese didn't attain until Stax, Nakamichi, Koetsu and others provided it in the late 1960s. That's a halving of the time frame. And now Chinese high-end gear is here, and it has to be taken seriously.

If I were to count all the pieces of Chinese purist audio equipment I've auditioned closely in the last five years – for some reason, I consider 2001-2 to be the turning point – it numbers around 25 pieces. They range from entry-level valve amps to exotic CD players to oddball speakers. Shanling and Cayin are perhaps the most highly respected, while PrimaLuna – though Dutch-owned and designed – and Quad have done more to establish Chinese manufacture as

something to respect. Meanwhile, I've been living with pieces from either end of the Melody catalogue, and the results simply confirm the maturity of China's specialty audio sector.

Having already sampled the delights of PrimaLuna's ProLogues, I knew what the Chinese could offer for under a grand. While manufacturers in the West howl, the customers have voted with their wallets. So far, I have had no indication whatsoever that PrimaLuna's products have any reliability issues; I've been using one of the company's integrateds for over two years with no hitches whatsoever. As for Quad, its current valve amps are the best it's ever made, surpassing even the originals. So I guess I was primed for Chinese equipment for which no apologies would be needed.

THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN

Melody's adorable little SP3 II integrated amp (£875) reached me via Onix, which sells them under its own name in the USA. I'd seen this gem at countless shows on the Continent and in the USA, finally seeing it as well in the UK courtesy of Select Audio (☎ 01900 813064, 🌐 www.selectaudio.co.uk). Beautifully made, it uses four 5881, two 6922, two 12AX7 and two 12AU7 tubes to deliver a useful 36 watts per channel. Absolutely basic, with just two line inputs and a volume control, it is conceived as a no-frills 'starter' amp in terms of facilities. And yet its build quality, solid valve cage, protective 'cans' around the input and driver



Above: PrimaLuna's Prologue Six power amplifier. A Chinese/Dutch partnership, PrimaLuna typifies the new breed of intelligent trans-national hi-fi design



Above: The humble 300B power triode – loved by some, considered by Ken Kessler to be the root cause of most modern famines, floods and civil wars. Or something

tubes, mock-WBT connectors and chunky volume control hint not at any economies.

Almost wickedly, it works magic with speakers like PMC's DB1+ and the ultra-cute Tannoy Autograph Mini, taming the latter's slight edginess and adding a needed bit of weight to its lower registers. Shove in a reasonable CD player, and you have all-tube bliss for a negligible outlay in relative terms. And I repeat: reliability has not been an issue. Costing slightly less than a PrimaLuna, it offers more grunt but a shade less finesse and fewer inputs. The choice is a tough one.

More impressive still is the Pure Black 101 D preamplifier (£3,295), the sexed-up version of

of far longer pedigree. Inside, too, are touches to tickle a purist's fancy, like hard-wiring throughout, oversized capacitors, and so many parts that look suspiciously 'milspec' that you enjoy a frisson of naughtiness with this thing. Mysteries of the Orient, indeed.

I slotted it straight into my McIntosh C2200/Sonus Faber Guarneri set-up, using a range of sources. Its character was less analytical and precise than the McIntosh C2200's, and it possesses enough character of its own to ensure that personal taste will determine any verdicts. But for me the point was not that it sounded so marvellous, which it did, but that it represented for me a complete



Above: Melody's SP3 II – an adorable little integrated valve amplifier with an equally tempting price tag

“A spherical honey of a triode called a 101D that gives the unit its name.”

the earlier 1688. Tube crazies are gonna love it because Melody has, in what's becoming a Chinese tradition, opted for tubes other than the run-of-the-mill stuff found in Western models. In addition to the not-so-odd 5AR4 and a quartet of 6SN7s is an aged design, a spherical honey of a triode called a 101D that gives the unit its name. Originally a Western Electric creation like the dreaded 300B, this is surely the root of the unit's warmth.

TIGHTER DOWN BELOW

In use, the Pure Black 101D is deliciously quiet, well-controlled and tighter down below than I expected. It exhibited a confidence and a competence that one would attribute to units

break from the Chinese products of the past. I was able, in other words, to treat it exactly as I would a device from any British, American or European valve amp manufacturer.

While the Melody – and, no doubt, the Shanling and Cayin products – now exhibit proprietary designs, a few minor areas still need to be addressed. Fortunately, these manufacturers are adventurous, and are not slavishly following the styling of established brands. I know that a lot of Shanling's appeal is down to its outré look, while Melody has projects on the drawing board that will delight those who are bored with convention.

There is no doubt in my mind that the opinions expressed above will provide further

ammo for those who wish to think that I am a shill for the Chinese, that I'm their 'useful idiot.' So be it. The reality is that I am a militant capitalist, and a true free-marketeer. All I know is that certain Chinese audio brands can now offer remarkable value for money as well as – now that they have their own designs – an integrity denied those who merely pirate the work of others.

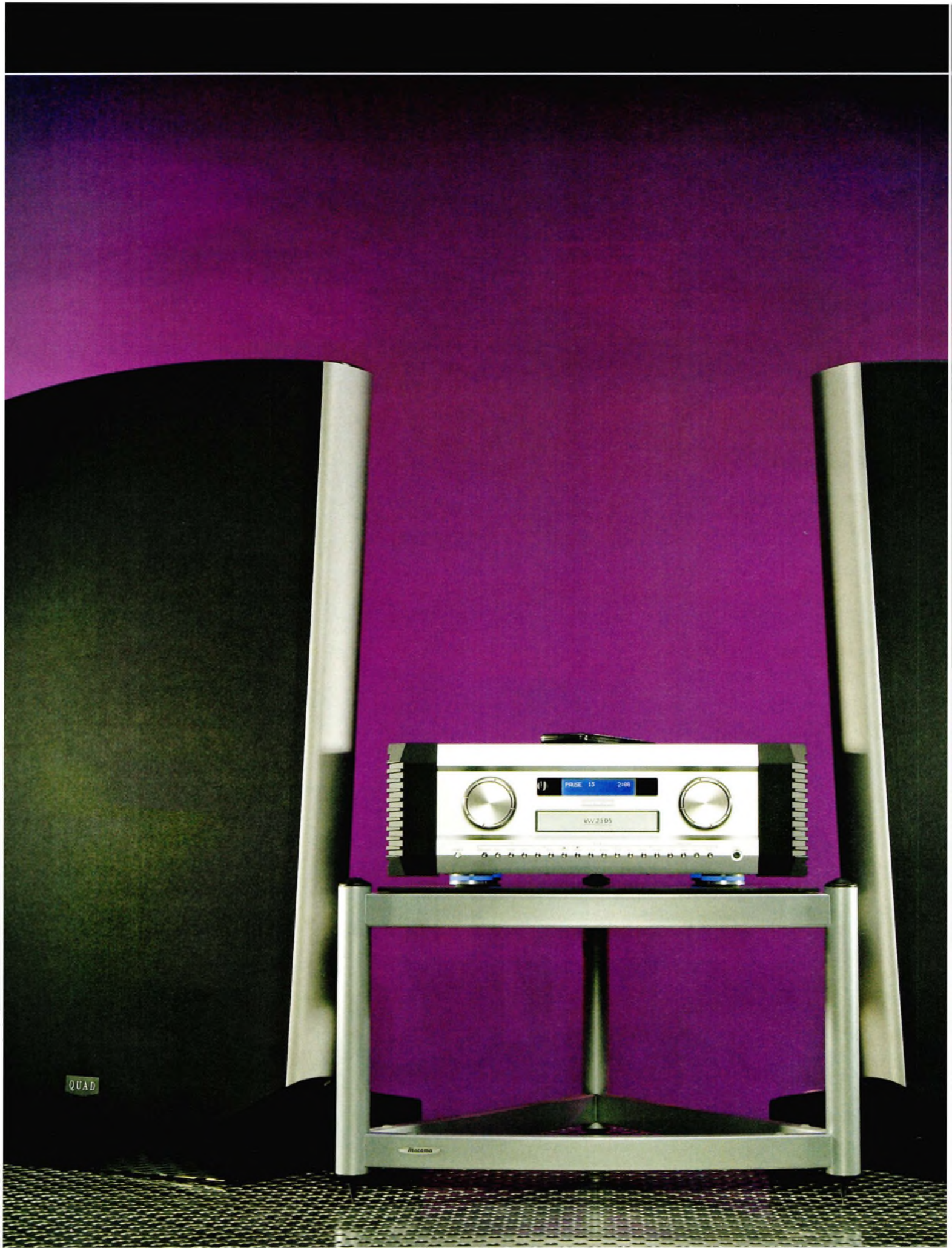
None of which will please their Western rivals. To which I will say only this: the Japanese juggernaut freaked you out for decades, but you're still here. Deal with it. Or disappear. Nobody has the right to tell a fledgling audiophile of limited means to turn down an awesome valve amp at under a grand, on the grounds that it's Chinese. **HFC**

Ken Kessler's opinions do not necessarily reflect those of Hi-Fi Choice or its staff



Main: Melody's Pure Black 101D preamp is a gorgeous example of top-notch Chinese hi-fi

Inset: The back panel of the 101D is as lovingly crafted as its front



MUSICAL FIDELITY KW250S CD PLAYER/TUNER/AMP | QUAD ESL-2805 LOUDSPEAKERS | £9,499

Boxing clever

If you think one-box simplicity means cute 'n' cuddly, think again. Meet the MF of all-in-one systems

The old audiophile adage 'there's no substitute for separates' has taken a few knocks in recent years. Not, of course, from the revolutionary concept of a single plug 'n' play unit that combines multiple sources and amplification – an idea that reaches all the way back to the radiogram – but from the opportunities opened up by 21st Century technology.

Linn's loveably cute and compact all-in-one Classik was arguably first to challenge, albeit modestly, the notion that serious music lovers had no option but to bite the bullet and piece together a synergistic coalition of components and then assemble all the necessary cabling and shelving it demands. Other separates stalwarts haven't been slow to cotton on. The likes of Arcam, Audio Analogue and Primare field one-box, just-add-speakers system solutions and, for those with £1-3k to invest in a hi-fi, the easy life option clearly has its attractions.

So here's the thing. As any typical, sensible market analyst will tell you, the budget/mid-fi sector is the natural, possibly the only, habitat for this type of product. After all, hard-bitten audiophiles actually like fondling pieces of wire, playing with spikes and levelling equipment tables millimetre by painstaking millimetre. Lovers of the high end wouldn't have it any other way and get dealers to do it for them. Which can mean only one thing: the market experts haven't heard of Antony Michaelson.

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Now, as regular readers of this feature will know, Musical Fidelity's boss Antony Michaelson doesn't have much patience with conventional hi-fi 'wisdom'. Nor is he in the least bit interested in making gear that doesn't have a healthy provision of watts or cutting edge spec that, like-for-like, puts rivals in the

uncomfortable position of looking hopelessly overpriced. Indeed, Michaelson believes that most hi-fi amplifiers are, like the Home Office, unfit for purpose, because they haven't the power to deliver decent dynamics when hooked up to the low-to-medium sensitivity speakers that flood the market. He's just as dismissive of most 'high-end' practitioners, claiming they charge more for the mystique of a hallowed name than the components, engineering and design talent.

So we really shouldn't be surprised by the £4,999 Musical Fidelity kW250S that anchors this month's *Beautiful System*. It both reinforces and subverts the emerging one-box-plays-all trend with a number of tactics close to Michaelson's heart and emerges as a unique product. Some have described it as an audio Swiss Army Knife, which is cute but rather undersells the weight, size and potency that goes with its 'kW' nomenclature. The other clue is in the 'S' suffix. It stands for 'six', as in the number of separates you'd have to amass to replace it. The kW250S uses the same tube hybrid preamp/phono stage and mono block configuration as Musical Fidelity's limited edition kW500 integrated superamp but with half the power – still an absolutely mighty 250 watts a side, mind you. Although the casework is the same size as a kW500's, MF also manages to shoehorn in a CD Player, FM/DAB tuner, DAC and phono stage. The 24-bit CD player uses 192k upsampling, based again on kW technology. There's a digital input and a jack for your iPod on the front.

Let's look a little more closely at what's under the lid. That upsampling digital-to-analogue conversion, for instance, isn't just for the CD section and DAB tuner, it also enhances digital sources connected via the rear panel. ▣

“The other clue is in the ‘S’ suffix. It stands for ‘six’, as in the number of separates you’d have to amass to replace it.”



Musical Fidelity kW250S
CD/tuner/amp
£4,999

All-in-one simplicity and convenience, MF style. Hardly the 'invisible' solution, but considering what you get in the kW500-sized box, something of a sonic miracle nonetheless. With each individual component within the whole representing the pinnacle of CD, tuner and amp development as MF sees it, this is the one-box system writ larger than ever.



Quad
ESL-2805
loudspeaker
£4,500 per pair

Not quite the last word in Quad's new electrostatic speaker range (the even larger ESL-2905 has greater bass extension) but utterly sublime even so. They may need their own mains supplies to energise the panels, they may need a large room to bring out their best and may not have the dynamic grunt of a top-notch 'box speaker' but who cares when music sounds so natural, so unforced, so fluid... so right.

QUAD



And the phono stage is by no means tokenistic, it's a high quality affair that caters for both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges.

NON-STOP PLEASURE

The story goes that when Michaelson first took a kW250S home for the weekend, it was only after a few days that he realised he'd been using it almost non-stop. Whether this is a line or gospel, it doesn't really matter, the appeal of the kW250S is nose-on-face plain. It's a high-end system in a box. A big, heavy box with a long, long row of iddy-biddy fascia buttons it will take you an age to learn, but one box nonetheless. No stacks, no interconnect cables and general audiophile clutter, no need for an equipment rack the height of a multi-storey car park. One American commentator called it an "exit-level system for the middle-aged music lover who wants simplicity without compromising quality". In other words, if you've been through the audiophile mill and are feeling a little jaded, there is the salvation of simplicity without sacrifice. Setting up? You're joking, there isn't any. The kW250S weighs the best part of 40 kilos, so you'll need a good, sturdy shelf or table. Then you just plug it into the mains, connect the aerial and speakers,

grab the remote control (thankfully a lot easier to use than the fiddly fascia buttons) and let the music flow, with sublime simplicity.

'Sublime simplicity' seems an equally apt epithet for the new £4,500 Quad ESL-2805 electrostatics that partner the all-singing MF. Quad electrostatics are often the speakers people 'settle down' with after trying all the others. So, is this the system to stop the endless cycle of hi-fi products? Seems to be shaping up that way.

QUID PRO QUAD

Although Quad makes its own, admittedly much cheaper, moving-coil speakers, it doesn't pull any punches when it calls the technology "fatally flawed". The company's assertion that not even the latest advances in materials science can address the shortcomings is hardly cheery for high-end conventional speakers. No, when it comes to transparency, speed, lack of coloration, coherence and the imaging only possible from a theoretically ideal point source, nothing beats the basic electrostatic principle of highly charged, ultra-thin Mylar membranes moving in response to the musical signal. The ESL-2805 and the larger ESL-2905 models are the latest evolution of the original 1957 ESL and

are altogether bigger, heavier beasts, with vastly more rigid construction. In essence, they're just as simple, though, with conventional connections for speaker cables and sockets for mains leads. The main differences are in the substantially increased weight of the base plate and the tensionable aerofoil-shaped rear brace, giving the overall structure a much more confidence-inspiring rigidity.

The ESL-2805, being the smaller of the two models, uses six panels rather than the eight of the '2905. The inner two panels use concentric anode rings for point source imaging, and the outer rings are linear in their response. The '2805 has less bass extension and dynamic headroom than its larger brother, but matches it in all other areas.

DAZZLING STANDARDS

It's a dazzling standard that immediately hits you as being brilliantly uncolored, fast and transparent. The traditional problem with electrostatics, unless the panel is very big, is that they don't do bass with much weight or conviction. True enough, the 'baby' Quads are unlikely to rearrange your hair-do, but they do have a bottom end that's taut, tuneful and focused, and imbued with a wonderfully articulate and finely textured quality.



“There’s terrific insight and resolution of fine detail, yet the sound never seems thin, as if the structural elements of the music are allowed to dominate at the expense of tonal accuracy.”

Analytical, certainly. But the detail never seems obvious or spotlighted. Yes, there's terrific insight and resolution of fine detail, yet the sound never seems thin or stripped, as it can if the structural elements of the music are allowed to dominate at the expense of tonal accuracy and timbral shading. The wholly pleasing upshot is that you get it all, but in a way that sounds completely unforced and natural.

The ability to present fine detail in a musically coherent yet uninhibited manner is what marks out the truly great from the merely good, and this system definitely has the knack. Its handling of musical complexities and its effortlessly deft timing – sensationally crisp – are complemented by superb clarity and focus and a sense of having oodles of power in reserve.

As ever with electrostatics, they never seem quite able to pump out heavy rock with the authority and gusto of conventional moving coil towers with dinner-plate sized bass drivers, but the

Quads' ability to deliver a vivid, dynamic and muscular sound nevertheless verges on the amazing. The system is capable of fantastic focus and clarity and real, in-the-room, presence.

WHISPER TO WHIRLWIND

The MF/Quad combo can go from whisper to whirlwind in a heartbeat. And rarely will you hear a system with as broad a spectrum of shades in its tonal palette. But it's the way the system copes with the 'architecture' of a performance that really sets it apart. Without seeming overblown or in any way over the top, it gives you the big picture and presents music in a fashion so natural and coherent, you don't just feel you could reach out and touch the musicians, but breathe the same air.

And yet, if you come straight from auditioning a more conventional high-end system, you might say the Quads lack a little 'sparkle'. In fact, what you're not hearing is any undue form of brightness or exaggeration. Any initial

impressions of a lack of impact soon vanish, replaced by the enduring sense of a beautiful, natural-sounding balance that you could listen to almost indefinitely without tiring.

There's no distortion other than what's on the recording, just astonishing levels of musical insight. Jazz trumpet has an almost luminous sonority and just the right degree of bite. Bass is pacy and uncoloured but also surprisingly full. And stereo perspectives are superbly handled with almost uncanny reproduction of acoustic cues and truly three-dimensional imaging.

Live with this system for any length of time and you might well experience some kind of epiphany. So what, you'll say to yourself, if it can't play at hurricane-force levels. There's more to life than Slipknot. The worrying thing is, there's more to Slipknot than you ever imagined, too. That's what this system can teach you. It's an education as well as a pure delight. **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

...nor an... we liked... point here is... p to the job of... recommend you... pare this with marantz's P800 player, the 17 MKII M, which has excellent build and e a very good impression in HFC 243. At same price there's also the Cyrus 7, a ng all-rounder in a compact case. For trying the Heart with the standard s we switched over to the Siemens grade, a comparison somewhat muddled by ie fact that it was a cold for hot swap - the... have had... for several days with the... w tubes shone... through. The Siemens-equipped player has an n snappier sound with better timing that es with dense material with remarkable fidence and ease. It even seems to be

Our overall conclusion

...through. The Siemens-equipped player has an n snappier sound with better timing that es with dense material with remarkable fidence and ease. It even seems to be

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%

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

PRO Well built and fully featured, with a snappy, open and dynamic sound.

CON Fortunately it's a £300 Marantz - no bad thing in itself, but it's better than it looks!

CONCLUSION For a highly entertaining and robust player at a competitive price, the build quality is great and the feature list strong. We had the best of both worlds - a great sound and a great value for money. Looking for a player to inspire you it could prove a bargain.

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



Best Buy

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.



Editor's Choice

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...

Have cake, eat it

A high-quality analogue preamp with top-notch digital processing to boot? Oh yes, this is Linn's Exotik

PRODUCT Linn Exotik

TYPE Multichannel preamplifier

PRICE £3,245

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 38.1x8x36.8cm

• Weight: 3.7kg • Analogue inputs: three stereo (RCA phono) plus 5.1 • Digital inputs: three electrical, three optical • Outputs: stereo/7.1 • Processing modes: Dolby Digital 5.1, Dolby Digital EX, DPLII/Music, DTS Surround, DTS 96/24, DTS CD, DTS-ES Matrix/Discrete

CONTACT ☎ 0141 307 7777 🌐 www.linn.co.uk

Linn has never been a company to follow the herd. The slightly austere-looking preamp you see before you is a rare example of a component that aims to satisfy both serious audiophiles and cinephiles. Of

course, it's not the first product to attempt this goal, but the new Exotik does things differently.

Like its predecessor of the same name, this latest Exotik is at heart an eight-channel analogue preamp, designed to make the most of any analogue source. That includes stereo components like CD players and turntables, as well as multichannel analogue audio from, say, DVD-Audio and SACD players. However, the new version also includes digital processing, adding digital inputs and a raft of processing modes to satisfy even the most fanatical home cinema buff.

The distinction between this and other multichannel preamp/processors is contained within the product's architecture and ethos: the Exotik is first and foremost intended to

perform as a high-quality analogue preamp with added digital processing, and not the other way around. The result, says Linn, is a "fantastic stereo preamplifier... (that) also brings the added value of delivering audiophile performance from non-audiophile digital sources like satellite receivers, DVD players and games consoles".

One tell-tale sign that the new Exotik is unlike most other processor-based units is that it sports a phono stage that can be configured for both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges (with Linn's reputation for vinyl, perhaps this isn't so surprising). Those who purchase the new, improved Exotik get both the digital processing and the phono stage included in the £3,245 price, while owners of existing

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analogue-only Exotiks can add the processing for £1,200 and the phono stage for £295.

As with all Linn electronics these days, you won't find a big mains transformer in this preamp; power is derived from a switch-mode supply that's rather more efficient than traditional power supplies. What you do see inside the casing is a sea of surface-mount devices (SMDs) and more than a couple of IC chips – it's a pretty hi-tech piece of kit. This means that despite the straightforward-looking fascia, there are myriad ways you can configure the Exotik for your listening pleasure. You can give the various inputs names of your choice, change the volume offset in order to balance the levels of different sources and adjust things such as the volume and mute rate (how quickly the volume is changed or the preamp goes in and out of mute). This might sound a little excessive, but some electronic volume controls are irritatingly crude in this regard. Luckily, the options are fairly intuitive to work your way around and you don't have to touch them if you don't fancy it – though it's great being able to rename a source to something more helpful than 'analogue6'.

Those are just some of the analogue variables; the digital processor side of things goes the whole nine yards, something that home cinema enthusiasts will be familiar with, but can be a little daunting to the analogue lover. But it's pretty straightforward stuff, with the option of setting up either 5.1 or 7.1 channels and the usual calibration facility for speaker levels.

One way that two-channel enthusiasts can investigate the potential of surround is to try the Dolby Pro-Logic II Music (DPLII) feature, which translates stereo signals into five channels. Unlike the cinematically-oriented alternatives, DPLII is designed for music and offers controls for changing the width of the soundstage. It can also be used to manipulate the surround sound in the room, which turns out to be quite a laugh and literally adds another dimension to the experience.

SOUND QUALITY

The Exotik's arrival at *Hi-Fi Choice* proved quite fortuitous for reasons other than the expected. We'd been assessing SME's big 20/12 turntable and having difficulty on the phono stage front – it induced noise in our reference Trichord unit. So a preamp with an MM/MC stage on board proved doubly useful, especially as both preamp and phono stage are above par. Linn seems to be rather good at phono stages – it also makes the acclaimed Linto standalone unit – and once set for MC, the Exotik delivered pretty much all of the vibrancy and power of our treasured vinyl collection. John Coltrane's *Africa/Brass* yielded a rasping, high-energy sound that rose up from an extremely quiet background – few MC phono stages get this inky in the black department, if you catch our drift.

Putting on a more up-to-date slab of vinyl revealed how standards have progressed ▣



“The distinction between this and other preamp/processors is contained within the product’s architecture and ethos.”



Q&A

We spoke to Linn's principal design engineer, Ian Wilson, about the philosophy behind the Exotik preamp/processor



HFC Is there really a market for an analogue preamp with full onboard multichannel processing?

IW We believe that there is a market for the Exotik. It is intended for the customer who has audio quality at the top of their list and has a simple method of selecting video sources. We noticed that many video-playback products (LCD/plasma/CRTs and projectors) have numerous video inputs, and likewise many customers don't have more than two or three video sources (DVD, set-top box, games console and so on). Even the set-top box is often integrated within the playback product.

Does the analogue side of the Exotik differ from its predecessor?

No, it has the same audio stages – in fact, an original Exotik can be upgraded to the new version with the multichannel processor for a small charge.

Does the inclusion of digital processing not detract from the analogue performance, and if not, how do you achieve this?

It doesn't detract. Our experience with the Kisto System Controller taught us important lessons on the importance of signal routing, separate power supplies and ground planes, and to treat the analogue and digital stages as individual products.

How does the Exotik differ from Linn's Kinoss home cinema processor?

In simple terms, no video routing, and therefore no on-screen set-up display. In practical terms, this proved the most challenging part of the product. A Kinoss uses a PowerPC microprocessor to generate the user interface and the on-screen displays. Such a complex processor was overkill on the Exotik, so it uses a simpler embedded processor. In essence, the Exotik is for the customer who has an extensive music collection and doesn't want to compromise the music playback, but also sees the benefit of multichannel SACD, DVD-Audio and movies. The Kinoss is a more comprehensive home theatre product for the customer who wants one of the best movie and music experiences.



in the studio, with Keith Jarrett's trio sounding significantly more real and in the room – albeit with the room conveniently expanding acoustically to encompass them.

Moving over to CD via an analogue input, the same musician's latest creation (*The Carnegie Hall Concert*) delivered its characteristic solidity and weight, with a little bit more bite to leading edges than usual. The sound isn't aggressive, but there is a little 'crispening' going on to sharpen up the attack of notes somewhat. This places an emphasis on the treble, which has the effect of increasing the perceived speed and definition – something that Linn's engineers, among others, like, because it gives the music snap and pace. It certainly brings a tightness and

precision to the bass, which struts along in an appealing and articulate fashion.

Where the effect is less attractive is with acoustic instruments that produce treble sounds (such as cymbals), where there is a loss of depth and shape. This is an area where some analogue preamps deliver a more natural and fully figured tonal character. Whether this is an issue depends to an extent on what you are looking for in music; if it's thrill power, then qualities such as tonal colour are less important than the immediacy that components such as the Exotik impart. It's rare to find a product that gives you both, even at this price.

Using the S/PDIF input with a high-end CD player (a Gamut CD3) didn't prove beneficial, the digital connection delivering a sharper and



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SOUNDSERVER S3000

At your service

Some say PCs and hi-fi don't mix, but Imerge begs to differ. Welcome to hard-disk music, hi-fi style

PRODUCT Imerge SoundServer S3000

TYPE Hard-disk music server

PRICE From £1,600 (£2,800 as tested)

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 44x10x37cm

• Weight: 8.4kg • Audio inputs: analogue (one stereo RCA phono), digital (electrical and optical) • Audio outputs: analogue (one to four stereo RCA phono), digital (electrical and optical) • Video outputs: composite, S-Video, VGA • Communications inputs/outputs: modem, Ethernet, USB, remote control (IR receiver and nine-pin serial) • Storage capacity: up to 400GB

CONTACT ☎ 01954 783600 • www.imerge.co.uk

We've seen a few sound servers before in *Hi-Fi Choice*, including a direct ancestor of this new machine, but it's likely that the breed will be unfamiliar to at least a few folks reading this. The idea is simple enough: store the contents of anything from a few dozen to a few hundred CDs on a computer hard drive and regurgitate them on demand without the user needing to swap discs all the time. It's much cleverer than that, though, most obviously because this is actually four players fed from the same drive. Each can play completely separately from the others.

If you're the sort of person who considers listening to music to be an active rather than a passive activity, and who therefore has no

interest in music being piped to the kitchen, the study, the bedroom or anywhere apart from the lone hi-fi system, you can buy a one-output S3000. The device works perfectly well as a simple jukebox, but its true home is definitely in a multiroom installation, where it makes the entire household's music collection instantly and effortlessly available to the entire household. Forget about the single-output machine, as there is, in fact, the choice of one, two or four outputs. You've got to love the flexibility: Alfie listens to Mozart in one room while Bertie listens to Radiohead in another, both off the same source. Caz, elsewhere, overhears Radiohead and decides to listen to the same track, starting from the top while Bertie is halfway through. Try doing that with a regular CD collection!

A hard drive is like a filing cabinet. You can put a lot of stuff in it, but unless you have a logical and efficient filing system, you may spend half your life looking for it. Imerge is fully aware of this and has put a lot of effort into making recordings traceable. In many ways it's considerably easier to find tracks on a sound server than in a CD collection.

In the S3000, Imerge has combined two technologies to make your music collection easily searchable: video and the internet. Video

outputs at the unit's rear (composite, S-Video and VGA) provide a full graphical user interface via a TV or monitor (basic operation is possible using the front-panel display), while the built-in modem and Ethernet enable the unit to connect to the online Gracenote database. This means the player can automatically download not only track and album details, but even the album cover artwork, all from reading the CD's table of contents.

Once the details have been stored on the S3000's internal drive, they can be used for searching by title or artist. You can also assemble playlists matching all sorts of criteria. If you've ever used a PC as a music source you'll have a pretty good idea, but this is even better, because the whole system (which is actually based on an embedded PC internally) is geared to that one function. We fell in love with it at once, though even after a generous review period we'd probably only investigated half the possibilities.

Two basic questions have probably already crossed your mind. One, how does the music get round the house; and two, how does it get on the hard drive in the first place? The first of these is easily answered: via regular stereo interconnects, preferably connected to a multiroom distribution amplifier, perhaps with



CAT5 signal cables concealed within your walls and under the floors, and therefore installed by a professional. Or, theoretically, you could just use very long interconnect cables. Yes, whatever scheme you use, it's going to cost a bit and cause some mayhem, unless you're having a pretty thorough domestic overhaul done at the time (a lot of new-build properties have all sorts of wiring pre-installed). There's a single digital output, which could in principle be relayed by a wireless link... and there's nothing to stop you using a Sonneteer Bard system to replace the wiring of one output, but that adds considerably to the cost as well.

As for question two, there are various ways to get audio onto the hard drive. The most obvious is to use the CD-ROM drive built into the S3000. Put a disc in and, a small number of button pushes later, the contents can be copied at high speed – a full CD takes only just over two minutes. You can also connect to a PC via Ethernet (and indeed control the S3000 from the same PC if you wish) and


“If you’re coming from traditional hi-fi, this is really a revolution, and a slightly daunting learning curve is in the nature of the beast.”

transfer music that way, which opens up the world of downloadable audio and allows you to transfer to and from portable players. The S3000 has digital and analogue inputs for real-time recording, but these are due to be enabled in a future software release, so we didn't try them. It's worth noting that various enterprising businesses will transfer your CD library to hard disk if you're too busy or you just can't face it. Oh – and you can play a CD direct from the drive should you ever need to.

Indeed, never mind loading all those CDs – you may very well wish to have the S3000 professionally installed. It's a complex bit of kit and takes some getting used to, and unless you're a real techno-head, we'd recommend

allowing some extra budget for installation and set-up – not to mention hand-holding while you get the hang of it. If you're coming from a background in traditional hi-fi, this is really a revolution, and a slightly daunting learning curve is in the nature of the beast. Trust us – it's worth it.

SOUND QUALITY

The mere news that this machine is based on an embedded PC may have some audio purists running for the hills. More fool them! The audio circuits are by no means an afterthought and the sound is actually perfectly respectable for, say, a £500 CD player. It's true that a fair few PC sound cards are noisy, grainy and 

Q&A

We spoke with Chris Janes, brand manager of Imerge, about the future of the music server



HFC How easy is it for the user to back up the hard drive in an S3000?

CJ Users can clone their entire music collection in a single pass, using the S3000's dedicated back-up feature – either to their PC (assuming they have sufficient disk space available) or direct to an Ethernet-enabled external hard disk. Restoring your collection to a new drive is similarly a one-touch operation from the menu.

Can the storage capacity be expanded?

The storage architecture of the S3000 itself is a single drive with up to 400GB – about 650 uncompressed CDs or 7,400 hours of music in MP3. For those with a truly huge music collection, the machine will soon be fully NAS-compatible (network-attached storage), meaning you can attach additional hard disk drives to expand the S3000's music capacity.

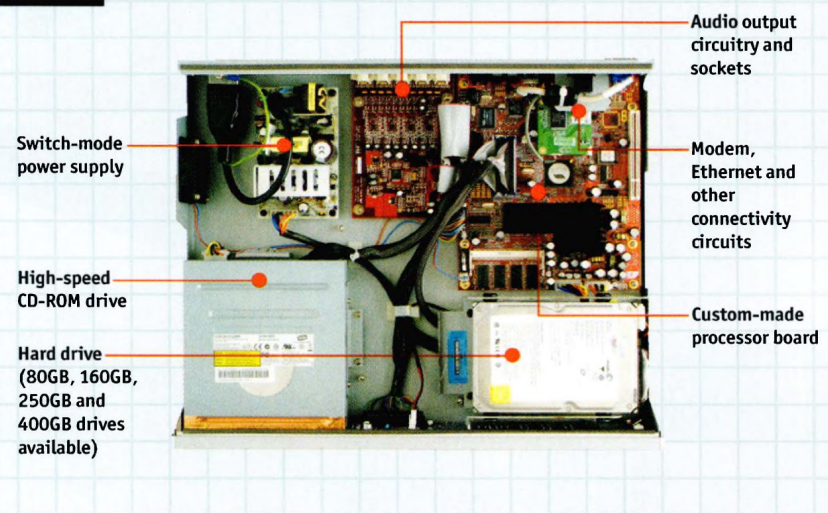
As the S3000 is almost a PC, is there a risk of encountering problems such as viruses and unauthorised remote access?

The S3000 uses several computer components, but it's actually a bespoke device using custom electronics, custom audio architecture and our own dedicated XiVA software. This makes for a very secure and robust system, because the onboard functionality is restricted to audio. The internet access is constrained to obtaining metadata from a couple of secure sites. As there's no internet browser pointing anywhere else, it's not possible to receive infected files via email. So the S3000 is far less prone to virus attacks than a PC.

Does Imerge have any plans to take advantage of Wi-Fi, with more digital outputs?

We see distributed media for the home developing in an IP (Internet Protocol) environment, so the S3000 can already output up to ten streams of digital audio over Ethernet to network-attached players. The S3000 already supports players such as those from Roku and Sonos. Integrating Wi-Fi into the device is possible, but it's more flexible to allow the installer to add their choice of wired or wireless Ethernet network externally. This ensures you get the very best audio performance at the remote location, although an audiophile-quality client device is essential, of course.

Detail



indistinct-sounding by the standards of proper hi-fi, but as we mentioned earlier, this device is conceived first and foremost as audio rather than computing equipment, and it shows, both in the good audio parts used internally and in the clear and detailed sound. There's plenty of body to the bass and the midrange is tonally neutral, leading on to an extended and admirably open treble.

A basic lab check confirmed that there's nothing unusual in the S3000's performance and it passes the usual tests with flying colours. But the story doesn't stop here, for as with most computer-based sound-storage devices, it offers a trade-off between capacity and quality. Yes, folks, this device supports MP3 and WMA, which at the same data rate is widely reckoned to be slightly higher quality. You get various options of data rate, the higher ones offering better quality but lower storage capacity. As hard-core audiophiles, we tested it mainly in 'native' CD-quality (WAV file) mode, where its performance is bit-for-bit identical to the original disc, but we also had a listen to some of the compressed modes, which revealed that, well, if you're not very picky, they'll do.

There's room for argument about the degree of improvement in going from 128kbps MP3 to 192kbps and higher, but in general there's always some quality hit. Lucky, then, that the S3000 is available with various hard disks fitted, from a basic 80GB (already enough for 100-plus CDs uncompressed, or up to ten

times that amount depending on MP3/WMA options) to a whopping 400GB, which will swallow most CD collections whole. Yes, the price rises (rather steeply, we feel, given the cost of raw drives these days), but we strongly recommend stumping up for a bigger drive and storing in uncompressed form.

There's one important factor in the sound we haven't mentioned: mechanical noise. The hard drive and small cooling fan in the S3000 are noisy, and you're unlikely to want this unit to be in the same room as any speakers you ever listen to properly. Of course, it's expected to be sited out of the way and has all the appropriate connectivity for remote control and so on – but then loading new material from CD becomes less convenient. That apart, the S3000 has a lot going for it, and we are suitably impressed that Imerge has maintained what audiophiles will recognise as good sound quality in a machine that's so versatile. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

SOUND >> 83%



FEATURES >> 95%



BUILD >> 88%



VALUE >> 86%



PRO
The sound quality requires no apology: tonality, detail and pace are all creditable for a mid-range CD player. Offers fabulous flexibility.

CON
The mechanical noise requires you to site the machine well away from any listening area, and the versions with larger hard disks seem somewhat ungenerously priced.

CONCLUSION
This is a particularly well executed solution to the problem of storing, sorting and accessing a music collection, as attractive to the music-lover as it is to the gadget freak. Proof, if it were needed, that hard-disk audio and 'real hi-fi' can sit side by side.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 85%



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Drought-buster

It might not lift the hosepipe ban, but this Canadian-born standmount makes great music

PRODUCT Totem Rainmaker

TYPE Standmount loudspeaker

PRICE £895 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 17.3x35.5x23cm
• Weight: 5.8kg • 25mm metal dome tweeter
• 130mm cast-frame main driver • Sensitivity: 87.5dB
• Impedance: 4 ohms (min) • Four real-wood finishes

CONTACT ☎ 00 32 15 285 585
🌐 www.totemacoustic.com

Canadian brand Totem is best known for making speakers that fall firmly into the 'small but perfectly formed' category, and that description is entirely appropriate for this pretty little standmount.

To call a speaker 'Rainmaker' might seem to be tempting fate, particularly here in Britain at a time when flood warnings have replaced drought orders in weather-related tabloid headlines. But the model sits alongside the Dreamcatcher in the Totem hierarchy, and its name is entirely consistent for a product range

that borrows much of its nomenclature from American Indian folklore.

The £895-per-pair price tag is far from cheap for a compact (nine-litre) standmount, but Totem has always been very much a premium brand, and the Rainmaker is actually one of its less costly models. Although the practised eye can detect some economies in cabinet-work compared to the classic Model 1 (which is smaller and considerably dearer), it would hard to spot the difference without placing the two side by side. The Rainmaker comes in a choice of four real-wood finishes: black ash, cherry, mahogany and maple. Close scrutiny reveals that each panel is veneered with several strips, the curved quadrants around the front and back panels don't quite match and the stain application looks crude.

But for all that close-up nit-picking, this is still a pretty little speaker, and if the cosmetics are a little less than the very best, plenty of work has gone into maximising the acoustic performance of the enclosure. Borosilicate

damping is applied to internal surfaces, mitred joints ensure serious structural integrity and a full vertical brace adds further stiffness.

Predictably enough, it's a two-way design, port-loaded at the rear, and based on the combination of a 130mm bass/mid driver and a 105mm-diameter flared cone, probably made of doped paper, plus a 25mm aluminium dome tweeter fitted with one of Totem's enlarged back chambers. Whereas the tweeter is flush-mounted into the front panel here, the main driver's shaped cast frame stands proud of the surface. Twin socket/binder pairs are fitted on the rear terminal panel, permitting bi-wiring or bi-amp drive.

This might be a small and relatively simple little speaker, but its size belies its sonic power. Surely no speaker this compact has any right to sound so big. Part of the explanation at least lies in the fact that the small-diameter port is tuned to a relatively low frequency, around 37Hz, which is well below the frequency at which such a main driver can be expected to

produce realistic output levels. Its purpose is therefore primarily to increase the effective low-frequency extension, and in this it's clearly successful, when measured under far-field in-room averaged conditions.

Thanks in no small part to the gain provided by room modes and reflections, this tiny speaker actually delivers realistic output right down to 30Hz. Less favourable – and doubtless as a direct consequence – is a significant lack of output in the mid to upper bass region, between 55Hz and 125Hz. Under some room conditions, sitting close to the wall could provide useful compensation, though this will almost certainly also result in a significantly less even midband. It's impossible to generalise here, and in our relatively large (4.3x2.6x5.5m) room, the Rainmakers performed best when positioned at least 1m out from the wall.

Above 125Hz, the frequency response is smooth and well ordered, while also showing a gentle down-tilt with a slightly suppressed broad presence (1-3.5kHz). Above that, the treble makes a pronounced recovery, running some 3dB above the presence zone between 4kHz and 9kHz. While these departures from true neutrality will undoubtedly introduce a measure of character to the sound, the transitions are mostly smooth, and the net effect is unlikely to be unpleasant.

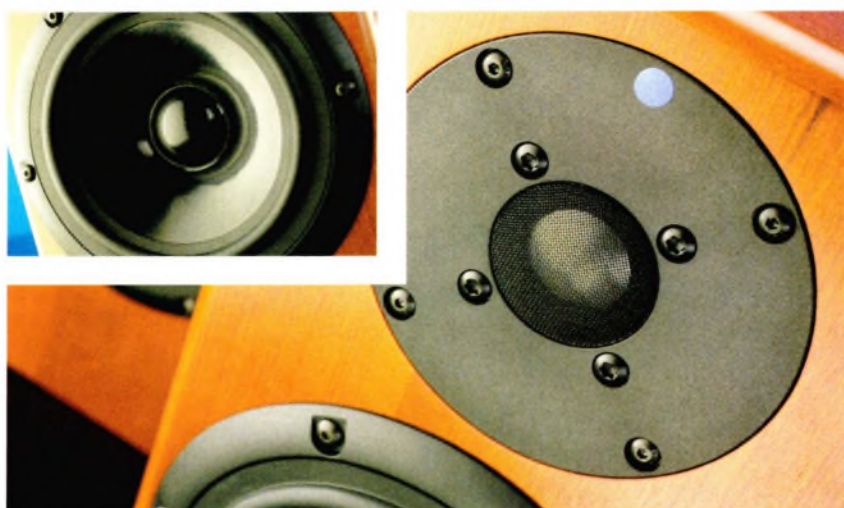
SOUND QUALITY

Totem claims a sensitivity of 87.5dB; our far-field measurements put it at about 86.5dB. While this is somewhat below average, it's a fair trade-off for the surprisingly good bass extension, especially since the minimum impedance is closer to five ohms than the specified four-ohm minimum.

Placed on the same Partington Heavi stands that were specified for Totem's Model 1 Signature (reviewed in HFC 277), and fed from high-quality Naim components – CDS3/555PS, NAC 552, NAP 500 – plus a Linn/Rega hybrid vinyl-spinner, the little Rainmaker caused much surprise in the testing room with the sheer scale of its sound.

By coincidence, its tonal-balance trends correspond pretty closely to those of the massive B&W 800Ds that constitute my regular reference speakers these days, so comparison between the two was interesting, revealing and indeed relevant.

Although the B&Ws obviously boasted superior bandwidth, dynamic range and expression, the two models' sonic similarities



“It was strange to find Totem’s tiddlers doing such an impressive imitation of the B&W 800Ds’ much bigger design.”

were also obvious, particularly when listening to relatively undemanding material, such as television speech. It was strange to find Totem's tiddlers doing such an impressive imitation of the B&Ws' much bigger design – provided the programme didn't contain dramatic contrasts or significant bass weight and complexity.

Given something truly meaty to get its teeth into, such as Squarepusher's *Ultravisitor* CD, the Rainmaker's bottom-end limitations become readily apparent, in terms of limited authority and modest grip at the bottom end of the bass range, as well as some lack of drive and warmth higher up. But for such a small speaker, it certainly punches above its weight.

Its rather strong and obvious top end is probably the Rainmaker's most contentious feature, and the consequences of this will depend very much on the kit it's used with. Combined with the bright but top-quality NAP 500 power amp, the sound was indeed bright, but also clean, open and very detailed; things might not be so comfortable with a less capable solid-state amp. Connected up to a high-quality Proteus valve amp with a sweet but

more restrained top end, the Rainmaker's bright top end proved just about ideal. In some systems, therefore, the brightness will be an advantage, while in others it might prove a handicap.

However, the Totem's biggest

strength lies in its very even and smooth midband. Its slightly laid-back character helps the speaker to avoid sounding aggressive, but it is also well enough controlled through the crossover transition to avoid sounding 'shut in'. There's little, if any, coloration or boxiness, and stereo images are well formed, with good air, transparency and depth perspectives.

The Rainmaker is a fine musical communicator that's easy to like. Its simplicity is a real virtue, the more so because of the obvious care that has gone into creating a seamless crossover transition and minimising unwanted enclosure effects, and deliberately low port tuning delivers a surprising impression of scale. Dramatic and dynamic bass-rich material inevitably betrays its modest size, but for most of the time, the Rainmaker does a remarkable job of hiding its limitations and playing to its strengths via a beautifully judged midband and presence. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

VERDICT	
SOUND >> 86% [Progress bar]	PRO Big sound from a very small speaker. The slightly laid-back midband and presence are beautifully smooth and even, with fine crossover integration and all-round coherence.
EASE OF DRIVE >> 79% [Progress bar]	CON Top end is bright and exposed, while the bass end could do with more authority, warmth and punch. Cabinet shows economies on close inspection.
BUILD >> 85% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 86% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION A pretty little standmount that offers a surprisingly big sound. The midband is laid-back and the presence is smooth, even and impressively coherent, though the top end may be too bright for some systems and the bass could use more punch and warmth.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 86%	



CrackerDAC

Why use one or two DACs when you can have twenty? So asks new Brit-fi brand, Leema Acoustics

PRODUCT Leema Antila

TYPE CD player

PRICE £2,495

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 44x11x30.7cm

• Weight: 12kg • Digital outputs: Toslink, RCA phono
• Analogue outputs: balanced (XLR), single-ended (RCA phono) • LIPS system integration

CONTACT ☎ 01635 291357

🌐 www.leema-acoustics.com

The Antila is the first CD player from British brand Leema Acoustics, a company that came to the fore not so long ago with its own take on the compact monitor loudspeaker. More recently, Leema has expanded its range to include a floorstander, subwoofer and five electronic components. The

latter feature excellent standards of finish and more than a few have a different take on curing the condition that is 'audiophilia nervosa' – the inability to sit back and just enjoy the music.

Leema's electronics are all named after constellations – these include the Cygnus phono stage, Tucana integrated amp, Hydra power amplifier and Corvus centre amp and stereo sub controller. This last appears to be an alternative way of adding multichannel capability to a stereo set up.

The Antila itself was named after a small constellation in the southern hemisphere, and looks unusual in that it has heat sinking down either flank. This seems a little out of place on a unit that doesn't run particularly warm, as it doesn't do a great deal of amplifying. We suspect that this arrangement

suits the rest of the Leema electronics range in production terms as well as keeping the look consistent throughout.

One possible reason for all those fins is the so called MD2 'Active Differential Multi-DAC'; not for Leema a mere converter per channel, or even per phase of each channel, but rather there are 20 DACs splitting the phase between them. This boils down to 10 stereo DACs, which means that each phase of each channel is converted by five 24-bit/192kHz chips. See our Q&A sidebar overleaf for the whys and wherefores of this unusual arrangement.

Prior to conversion, the bitstream is buffered in Leema's data pipeline, which is a way of reducing jitter in the incoming signal. This is popular with outboard D/A converters but is novel in a one-box player.



“Each phase of each channel is converted by five 24-bit/192kHz chips. That’s 20 DACs splitting the phase between them.”

The Antila uses a Philips VAM transport, which is one of the only audio-specific mechanisms still in production. Under such circumstances we can forgive its slightly clunky drawer mechanism, while reminiscing about Japanese-made drawers that seemed to glide on air. This drawer is at least fast, which is handy as the remote does not include 'eject/open' among its simple array of keys. In fact, there are only the basics on the handset and even these are spelled out rather than symbolised. Consequently, when operating the unit in low light, one tends to stab randomly in the hope of hitting the correct button. This is a learning curve that owners should inevitably scale in the medium term.

As with the rest of Leema's electronics, the Antila includes something called LIPS (Leema Intelligent Protocol System), which acts like a sophisticated bus system that allows connected Leema components to operate with the simplicity of an all-in-one 'stereo'. The player can either be a 'slave' – remotely controlled by a Tucana amp for, instance – or a 'master', in which case it can be used for input

selection and volume adjustment, showing the current settings on its display (useful if you want to keep the amp hidden away).

On the back panel you'll find a pair of LIPS connections alongside analogue outputs of both single-ended and balanced persuasions and digital socketry in electrical and optical flavours. It all looks very professional, which is as it should be but occasionally isn't with small companies and early production samples.

In fact, the only change between final production and this model is a software update that increases the functionality of the front panel controls. At least, that's the only one that Leema admits to. The fact that it seems to work entirely as expected would suggest that there's little to fix.

SOUND QUALITY

On the battle front that is the front line of high-end CD players, the Antila puts in a highly convincing and often enthralling performance, giving the competition something to think about with its subtle yet dynamically expressive ability to get into all

the musical nooks. In other words, this is a pretty damn fine player with a breadth of accomplishment that allows the music to shine bright and strong. It doesn't have one particular strongpoint, but an across-the-board transparency that marks it out as neutral in pretty well every sense of the word.

Put on Bill Withers' *Who is He What is He To You* and the first thing that hits you is the groove; the tight but loose timing that makes the tune irresistible and draws you into the shady undertones of the song itself. There are a number of percussion instruments on this track that could be more precisely defined – you know that there is a tambourine and a shaker but it's not entirely clear what sort. Further listening suggests that the high frequencies on the Antila are particularly refined, being extended and yet relaxed, so perhaps the limitation is with the recording and the fact that it's on a compilation 'best of' type disc.

Patricia Barber's rendition of *Summertime* suffers no such obfuscation; her voice rings out in ethereal fashion to fill out the soundstage completely, the player delivering the neck hair-pricking emotional power with little difficulty. Playing a few more discs, it became apparent that the Antila is very good at showing up the differences between recordings, contrasting the slightly hard edge that sophisticated compression ▶

Q&A

We talked to Mallory Nicholls, co-founder of Leema Acoustics and designer of the Antila CD player, about his latest creation



HFC With so many DACs, is there a danger of timing errors being introduced by manufacturing variations between the converters?

MN All of the timing is triggered on one edge of one of the control signals; the DACs all dump their data at that point on to the analogue bus. So, in theory, there should be no timing differences between the DACs once the data is in there. Basically, it's buffered up inside the DACs then converted. So, there shouldn't be any timing differences and looking at the square wave response you can't see of that kind of anomaly.

What are the benefits of using so many DACs per phase?

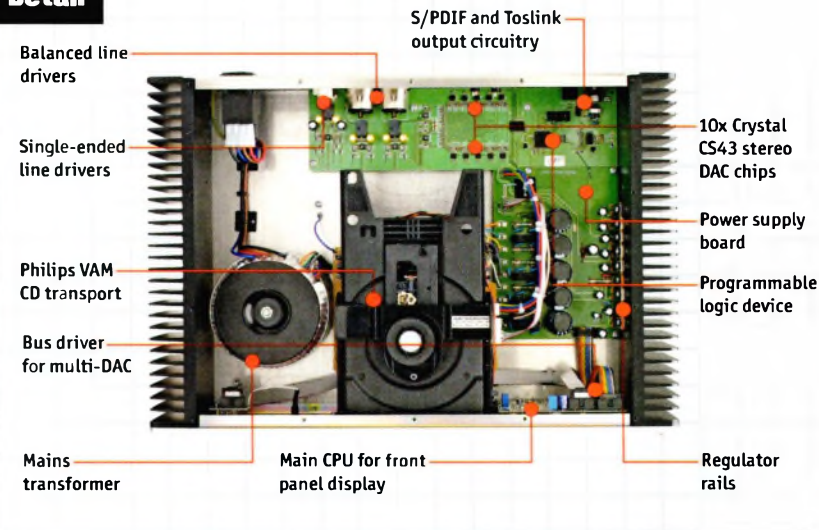
Using multiple converters irons out any slight differences between them. They form a homogenous single DAC, where any individual device error – or indeed timing errors – is averaged out. Each DAC is ultimately contributing a small part to the final result.

The way they're arranged is 10 stereo DACs arranged as phase and anti-phase, so basically you've got five DACs per phase if you like. They're then combined into summing amps, each one only contributing a fifth of the output signal. So, we get a noise improvement because the noise is non-related. You end up with an overall noise improvement and an averaging of any DAC errors, so if you've got a step error within the conversion or whatever it might be, it only contributes a fraction to the output rather than constituting the entire output, as it would if it was a single device.

The player features extensive heat sinking. Is this for aesthetic balance with the rest of your electronics or does it serve a purpose?

The heat sinking is partly aesthetic. The left hand panel serves no purpose whatsoever apart from holding the case together. However, the right hand heat sink has nine power regulators on it. The player has a fairly extensive power supply onboard, with separate rails for the front board, disc drive, DACs and so on. Incidentally we only have one rail for the DACs. We want all the DACs to operate exactly the same way otherwise the summation won't work properly, so they share a common rail.

Detail



produces with EST's latest offering against a more natural sound from Mina Agossi, for instance. It became intriguing to play music of similar styles just to hear how each recording had been treated. The player is very sensitive to micro-dynamics and produces the small differences in level between notes with ease. This brings out more of the character in each instrument or voice in the mix.

A necessary evil of reviewing is comparison, as it helps to place the newcomer in context and reveals its real strengths and weaknesses. We had a couple of interesting alternatives on hand: the Gamut CD3 that greatly impressed us in the January issue and our long-standing reference, the Resolution Audio Opus 21. The Gamut made a case for spending an extra £1,000 by delivering a somewhat faster and more nimble performance. The Resolution Audio, on the other hand, struggled to justify its extra £495, delivering a less subtle but more exuberant sound. In its defence, it was slightly hamstrung by the sudden dysfunctionality of our DIN-to-phono lead, which accesses its direct output, so our comparison had to be made using the volume-controlled balanced output instead.

Connecting the Antila's balanced output to a Classé CP-700 preamp and ATC SCM150ASL active speakers did little to undermine the player's case. In truth, it did the opposite, allowing it to positively shimmer with low-level detail and musical beauty. Things got

interesting when the player picked up an effect that In The Country had applied to the opener on their latest album, something we'd not noticed before. Then we put on an older favourite, *Time the Revelator* by Gillian Welch...

With this recording, the player revealed that the oft-heard hardness in the recording is a result of an overdriven microphone/preamp. This revelation allowed us to hear through it to the voices and guitars, letting us hear how Welch's accompanist harmonises a touch on the chorus lines, and the character of the two instruments. In fact, we'd go as far as to say that this is about the best we've heard the track, the Antila playing a significant part in this finding.

New British CD players of world-beating class are very rare things, but Leema seems to have cracked it with its idiosyncratic approach to D/A conversion. It makes one wonder whether more DACs would be even more beneficial... **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT

SOUND >> 92%



PRO

Very nicely built and finished with a sensitivity to recordings that is rare. Sound is beautifully transparent, natural and revealing across the band.

FEATURES >> 84%



CON

Rather basic remote features will irritate some and clunky drawer mechanism undermines the player's sophisticated looks.

BUILD >> 92%



VALUE >> 89%



CONCLUSION

It's very rare for a speaker brand to successfully break into electronics but Leema has bucked the trend. The Antila is a revealing and musically-engaging player that will have you combing your 'record' collection to hear exactly what's going on.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 90%

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HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



FLYING MOLE CA-S10 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

VOLUME

Making mountains

Flying Mole's new stereo integrated takes digital hi-fi amplification to new heights

PRODUCT Flying Mole CA-S10

TYPE Integrated stereo amplifier

PRICE £1,000

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 28.1x5.4x25.3cm

• Weight: 4kg • Inputs: three single-ended /line-level (RCA phono) • Outputs: preamp (RCA phono) • Rated power: 100 watts per channel (8 ohms), 160 watts per channel (4 ohms)

CONTACT ☎ 01442 399548 🌐 www.flyingmole.co.jp

According to the company blurb, Flying Mole embodies the concept of "accomplishing the impossible by tireless efforts underground". This is surely the sort of phrase that only the Japanese could have thought up. A small company that specialises in digital amplification, Flying Mole started out building little monoblocks for the professional world (which we once reviewed, without a great deal of enthusiasm) and has now started to make some rather distinctive integrated and pre/power designs.

The company was formed in November 2000 as a 'fabless' organisation, which means it doesn't manufacture but concentrates on planning, designing and selling. The people involved are a "group of engineers with an entrepreneurial spirit", quite a few of whom were formally with the Yamaha corporation.

This is how Flying Mole ended up with Ian Galloway, formerly Yamaha UK's managing director, as its distributor – without that connection the two would have been very unlikely to have hooked up.

The CA-S10 is the middle model of three domestic amplifiers. There's a single-input CA-S3 of tiny proportions at half the price and a pre/power combo with the same 100-watt output for twice the price. The compact nature of the rather attractive casework is a reflection of the digital internals – the Flying Moles use Class D PWM (pulse width modulation) technology and the CA-S10 has a variant called bi-phase PWM, which splits the signal prior to amplification. It doesn't have a regular mains transformer, but relies on switching power supplies – one for each channel – making it one of the only dual-mono amps in its price range. This approach makes the amp extremely efficient compared to Class AB designs. It does get warm but not enough to warrant ventilation or heat sinking, and its power consumption at idle is a mere six watts – very green.

It is also beautifully built, the casework being of a standard that only the Japanese can produce at this price. All this power and hi-tech internals, combined with great casework, means that savings have to be made

somewhere. In this instance, it's in the feature and input department – this is the first £1,000 integrated we've seen in a long while that doesn't offer remote operation. It's also rather peculiar for having only three inputs and a single preamp output, which reflects its purist aspirations. Flying Mole is clearly trying to make the best-sounding amplifier it can for the price and given the degree to which it has succeeded you have to respect its approach.

SOUND QUALITY

While this is a 100-watt amplifier, it doesn't have the energy that one associates with that sort of power rating, and it couldn't comfortably drive our big B&W 802D loudspeakers. This is not the first time they have made the life of an 'affordable' amplifier difficult, and given the price differential it's an unlikely real-world partnership. However, the pairing did stay together long enough to reveal the extraordinary levels of detail that the amp can produce. It achieves this as a result of having an uncannily clean sound, which makes alternatives sound electronic or mechanical by comparison. On the other hand, there is a slight fragility to the CA-S10's sound that discourages headbanging and leads your listening towards higher cultural ground. It will



“The Flying Mole design reveals what can be achieved if you leave out the bells and whistles and focus on the essence.”

play loud with a suitably sensitive pair of speakers, but is devoid of the punch and vibrancy of a top-notch Class AB amplifier.

This is either because it doesn't have certain euphonic distortions that create the sensation of energy, which is presumably a result of the characteristics of regular power supplies and output devices combined, or because it is intrinsically less muscular and less able to drive real-world speaker loads. Digital amps of yore have suffered from a far higher sensitivity to the load they are driving than their analogue counterparts, which can result in a sound that seems to lack dynamics. Given that early stumble when fighting above its weight with the B&W, we lined up a variety of different speakers to see how well this aeronautical lawn-breaker coped.

In the main, it handled things very well. The Mole was unfazed by Acoustic Energy's AE1, a compact, metal-driver speaker that's designed to take a lot of power. The amp extracted a solid and tight bass allied to a super-detailed midband and a well extended and remarkably clean top end, one which revelled in finer, high-resolution recordings such as David Wilczewski's *Room in the Clouds* SACD. Similarly, the more analytical qualities of ATC's SCM19 standmount did little to undermine the Mole's case. Here, the amp allowed the speaker to reveal decent tonal

variety from a male choir and a thoroughly engaging sense of timing. It also did a good job of distracting from the analysis and letting us hear the music.

Even the aforementioned 802D, while being too much of a handful for the amp to sound like it was in full control, illustrated how the quality of high-frequency resolve provides definition right across the audio band. The bass got a little boomy and lacked the conviction and gravitas that more powerful sounding amplifiers can extract from this speaker, yet the Mole did show the shape of higher bass notes well and managed to provide plenty of timing clues.

But of all the speakers tested, the Living Voice OBX-R speaker proved to be a very sweet match. The smoothness of its treble fused perfectly with the Mole's crisp top end, delivering a result with real sonic integrity, transparency and precision. So partnered, the amp shines in comparison to some impressive competition at around the same price: it's notably more revealing and 'snappy' than the Cyrus Pre vs2/6 Power combo we reviewed last month, and alongside the HFC Award-winning Cambridge Audio Azur 840A its ear for detail shines through, albeit with some shortfall in dynamic terms.

The Flying Mole design reveals what can be achieved with digital amp technology if you leave out the bells and whistles and focus on

the essence. This is a remarkably refined performer, even in the face of some seriously good recent amplifiers in and around the same price. The only real limitation is in the dynamic range, and even here this is a relatively mild shortcoming. This is not an amplifier that plays loud, but neither does it 'sound' loud at any given volume level. Normally, perceptibly loud amplification suggests distortion, but the CA-S10 understates the sound more than usual. Other low-distortion amplifiers seem louder because they pull out dynamics significantly better, which suggests greater sensitivity to level variations. Such designs are rare, but not impossible to find at the Flying Mole's price.

So it's a matter of picking your compromise – there's usually an alternative that does *something* a little better. But here it's pretty fundamental: do you want a refined and incredibly clean sound that demands a smooth, high-quality source, or do you want a ballsy sound with grunt that is better suited to rocking out? If you think that the former could be for you, then this small but beautifully-formed amp is a hard act to beat. So long as you don't want the bells and whistles, of course. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT	
SOUND >> 88% [Progress bar]	PRO Extraordinarily clean and revealing sound that brings a new level of refinement to the price point. Very nice casework, too.
FEATURES >> 60% [Progress bar]	CON Other amps sound more dynamic, and some listeners will want more 'oomph' overall. Needs careful partnering when it comes to speakers. No remote control.
BUILD >> 90% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 87% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION Features are basic, but for the purist this Mole delivers a mountain of detailed sound from its compact casework. It offers an astonishingly clean and detailed performance for the money, but should be partnered with care.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 88%	

Forest

Totem has spared no expense in making the Forest one of the best speakers available at any price... It's a two-way floor standing model that is surprisingly affordable, considering that it is a true super-speaker. The woofer and its aluminium dome tweeter, allow it to cover the full auditory range. Those aren't mere paper specs, either! The response is down only 6 dB at 28 Hz, a frequency most speakers can't reach. Its lock-mitred monocoque chassis, its slanted rear baffle, and its fine hand-crafted construction place it above lesser speakers of its size and price. Much of this is invisible, though by no means inaudible. As usual with Totem speakers, the fine wood veneer is also placed inside the cabinet, to equalise forces on the two sides of the walls. Why it's called the Forest? Well, where would you expect to find a totem? Well, a forest would be a good place to begin your search. However, a forest also imbues mystery, quietness and unpredictable, unexplainable power. In a real forest you are surrounded with sound, which can suddenly appear, surprise and then disappear. It can happen anywhere around you. Let the Totem Forest surprise you in the same way...

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Totemacoustic.eu



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Second coming

It left us for a while, but now Rega's classic budget turntable is back in new, improved form

PRODUCT Rega P2

TYPE Turntable and tonearm

PRICE £250 (without cartridge)

CONTACT ☎ 01702 333071 🌐 www.rega.co.uk

It doesn't seem all that long ago that Rega stopped making the P2 and apparently handed this sector of the market over to Goldring. It didn't leave the sector entirely, as it actually makes Goldring's GR2 (which, at £265 including cartridge, is a strong rival). But Rega's dealers obviously missed the company's classic budget deck, and now it's back in revised form.

The new P2 has an unusually deep 22mm platter that sits only a couple of millimetres off the plinth, its sloping sides making it look pretty substantial. This extra mass means a stronger flywheel effect and thus a more even speed with reduced flutter, and this translates into lower distortion. While the GR2 attempts the same trick with a steel ring set into the underside of a slimmer platter, Rega's approach is perhaps more attractive.

The P2 shares the GR2's plinth, with its big on/off switch and simple, solid construction. If memory serves, the new melamine-finished plinth with PVC edging isn't quite as nice as its painted predecessor, but then again, the current option may prove more hard-wearing.

The tonearm is Rega's evergreen RB250, still the finest budget arm on the market, with its

one-piece casting from headshell to bearing. It's very easy to use thanks to the big finger lift, as well as the deck's unsprung plinth. Our P2 sample was supplied with Rega's Bias 2 moving-magnet cartridge, which adds £50 to the price, but makes the turntable a lot more consumer-friendly. The Bias 2 is the base model in Rega's range, but features the same solid body as the dearest MM, albeit without a third fixing point.

SOUND QUALITY

With only rubber feet for isolation, the P2 is as sensitive to its supporting surface as ever, something that's true of pretty well all solid-plinth turntables to some degree. It delivers much of its characteristically energetic and propulsive sound on a standard equipment support, but using one with decent isolation brings significant rewards in terms of image scale, bass weight and distortion. If you can't stretch to a Townshend VSSS, try using a wall bracket and/or keep the turntable as far from the floor and speakers as you can.

Compared to the Pro-Ject Xpression II we tested last month, the P2 has more bite and muscle with a slightly more aggressive treble. This means that female voices, for instance, are easier to follow and leading edges are emphasised, bringing out the music's sense of pace. On the other hand, the Pro-Ject's smooth delivery does seem to be a little more subtle and refined, if less 'grunty' in the bottom end.

The P2 is all about the vibrancy and vigour of the music – it's less concerned with the niceties, and very keen to get down and dirty with whatever you care to spin. It delivers good image scale and has a clear, open midband that lets much of that vinyl flavour through.

Given the competition, it has its work cut out. The Goldring GR2 is a very similar product at a great price, and the Pro-Ject, while not as muscular, offers a touch more finesse. But the P2 has the best name in budget turntables on its side, plus a strong dealer network and good residual value if you decide to upgrade. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT

SOUND >> 78%



FEATURES >> 74%



BUILD >> 83%



VALUE >> 90%



PRO

Provides a strong, energetic sound with more rhythmic drive than most. Supplied with the high-quality RB250 tonearm. Bass performance is good, too.

CON

Requires a support with decent isolation to perform at its best. Pro-Ject and Goldring decks also include a cartridge for similar money.

CONCLUSION

This is a welcome return for a classic budget deck from the UK's foremost brand in the field. If you enjoy a lively and powerful performance and can live with less-than-polished edges, this is a highly entertaining and engaging turntable.

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



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PRODUCT REL T1

TYPE Active subwoofer

PRICE £595

CONTACT ☎ 01656 768777 🌐 www.rel.net

REL has bounced back from its takeover by the US Sumiko group with a wholesale revamp of its various ranges, the largest and most ambitious of which has yet to reach our shores. When we first saw what it was doing at last year's CES in Las Vegas, we were concerned that REL was in the throes of diluting its designs to suit the tastes of the US market. We were wrong, and the new REL has obviously worked extremely hard on the products we've seen so far from the R series. But now it's time to see how the entry-level T series fares. The T1 reviewed here is the largest of three otherwise identical models.

Perhaps a rather telling change is a thoughtful modification to the old REL control system. In its favour, the old system allowed the subwoofer to be wired simultaneously at speaker level so that the sub would adapt to music (with connections made in series

with the main stereo speakers), and from the LFE channel for multichannel operation, but the setting up procedure was opaque to put it mildly. The good news is that although it is much easier to configure, the dual input arrangement has been retained. This means you can switch between different types of source material without needing to change settings or even flicking a switch. The baby, it seems, has not been thrown out with the bathwater.

The T1 is rather different from previous RELs. For the first time, a forward-firing passive unit (ABR) has been added to a downward-firing actively driven unit, replacing the sealed box and vented loading. The sub is supported at an appropriate height with piano gloss-finished hardwood rails, one of the T1's two most distinctive features. The other, the domed covers over the two drivers, are shaped to allow the long cone excursions necessary at high SPLs.

SOUND QUALITY

In common with REL's standard practice, the T1 is designed to bolster the host system's low frequency output, without low-pass filtering

the main system, and operating only up to the low frequency cut-off of the main speakers. You can still cross over at 80Hz or even higher if it really turns you on, but most floorstanders work down to 30Hz, and normal size standmounts down to, say, 40Hz. The REL usefully adds half to one octave of extension to such speakers without materially affecting their performance, the low crossover frequency ensuring this happens where the ear is relatively insensitive to the handover.

ABR loading has the benefit of the extra LF extension you expect from port loading, but there is none of the wind noise expected from such designs. The T1 extends seamlessly downwards, and can be used to (excuse the Bush-ism) 'subwooferify' large speakers, including for this test B&W CM7 floorstanders and the Jamo C803, a largish standmount. As long as the levels are set with some care and sensitivity (after the subwoofer has been fully run in, by the way) the T1's output is reasonably flat in output down to its final cut-off, though you may encounter excessive warmth with what may at first seem like a natural handover to the main speakers. It goes loud too, without distortion or any audible compression.

The musical result is certainly impressive – the system sounds warmer and more tactile, and produces a bass output that can sound remarkably 'out of the box'. Sometimes it sounds 'out of the room' rather than being localised to the speaker complement. It is this expansiveness and a richer tonal colour palate that the T1 brings to the party. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



VERDICT

SOUND >> 85%



FEATURES >> 84%



BUILD >> 85%



VALUE >> 90%



PRO

A musical-sounding sub that delivers impressive bass extension and is capable of melding seamlessly with the host system. Flexible set-up and a strong delivery with both music and movies.

CON

Some limited residual unevenness of output makes particular demands on system set-up.

CONCLUSION

Affordable, high-performance subwoofer sets standards at its price level. Bass output is impressive, there are few cabinet related side effects and – most important of all – the T1 materially adds musical value to each of the systems tested.

HI-FI CHOICE >> **88%**
OVERALL SCORE

Tube Imp

TYPE Valve tester

PRICE £299

CONTACT ☎ 01234 741152 # www.britishaudio.co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice has never been about DIY audio, but for many owners of valve gear there's always an element of DIY when valves need changing. It's inevitable. But how do you know they need changing? Power valves sometimes make it obvious by glowing bright and then melting, but small-signal types just fade gently away and only provoke suspicion in the owner, impossible to confirm or deny without either specialist test gear or tedious hours of valve swapping. Neither of which is much fun.

Tube Imp to the rescue! This simple little device – a modern-day successor in some ways to the venerable AVO valve tester of old – is capable of testing the vast majority of commonly-used small-signal valves, giving direct numerical readouts on the display of gain, transconductance and cathode current. Unless you're a practised designer of tube gear those specs won't actually mean much to you, of course, but it doesn't really matter. Thanks to the well-written instructions, and



with a little help from the valve data (available from various websites, references are given), it's possible to check whether a particular valve is up to scratch or not. It's also trivial to switch from one section of the valve to the other (since the Imp tests exclusively double triodes) and check for side-to-side balance.

This may all seem a little nerdy and there's still much to be said for having valve kit

professionally serviced every few years, but if you have ever had the slightest urge to tweak a valve amp you'll find this quite invaluable. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

CONCLUSION

This is by far the best way we know of checking the performance and condition of valves old and new.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 85%

Wireworld Stratus 5

TYPE Mains cable

PRICE £120 (2m terminated)

CONTACT ☎ 020 8991 9200 # www.wireworldaudio.co.uk

Arriving with a batch of new Wireworld cables, this one caught our attention not least because of its novel shape. With what appears to be two flat conductors side-by-side, it is nearly an inch wide and less than a quarter as thick, and it just fits into the supplied MK mains plug. The IEC connector looks custom-made for this cable.

As usual in a mains cable, there is a third conductor (ground), which functions as a screen for both live and neutral cores separately. Each of these is a flat conductor surrounded by a rectangular screen. Wireworld points out that this gives an unusually high capacitance from live/neutral to ground, helping to filter out RF interference. The only drawback we can see is that the cable's a bit of a so-and-so to route, but perhaps 'no pain, no gain' could be applied here.

We certainly saw the point when we tested the cable. It doesn't negate the purpose of a full-on mains filter/conditioner unit but it is one of the most effective cables we've tried in



terms of lowering the apparent noise of a system and digging out more details. Or perhaps we should say it lowers the system 'grunge level', as the actual noise floor in the absence of any audio signal is unaffected – what improves is the clarity of audio, as if some kind of modulation noise is being reduced. As sometimes happens there's a slight tonal effect too, a subtle lift in the upper bass

that didn't bother us and may simply be due to more information coming through. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

CONCLUSION

A little awkward, but effective at increasing the amount of musical information coming through a system.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 88%

van den Hul 'The Bridge'

TYPE Loudspeaker cable

PRICE £67/m

CONTACT ☎ 01235 511166 🌐 www.vanden Hul.com

Looking pretty much like any other spaced-figure-8 cable, the description of this one on vdH's website proclaims so many technological features that one can only be impressed. Chief among these would seem to be the "dense silver coated high purity matched crystal oxygen-free copper". We couldn't find explanations for all of this, but we did note with interest vdH's analysis of different methods of silver-plating copper for audio cables – the company's chosen method apparently involves less mechanical stressing of the copper and leaves fewer damaging residues behind. The Hulliflex insulation material is also claimed to be far more resistant to penetration by air and other damaging chemicals than PVC (and is also a lot more environmentally friendly). vdH's 'Cable FAQ', by the way, runs to well over 46,000 words...

After all the words, does the cable actually sound any good? Bearing in mind its friendly price and good compatibility, we think it



sounds good in context, but we weren't completely blown away. We really liked its bass, which was tight, rhythmic and extended – although perhaps not always quite as tuneful as some. Midrange is good with clear and stable imaging and no obvious tonal issues. But the treble struck us as a touch dry, lacking 'air' and subtle ambience cues. Actual extension seems okay, it's just the way it's presented that concerns us. Then again, no

cable we can think of at the price manages that *and* bass that's as precise bass as this. Horses for courses! **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

CONCLUSION

Better in the bass than in the treble, and a good cable if your tastes run to the precise rather than the carefree.

HI-FI CHOICE
 >> **86%**

Lehmann Audio Black Cube Statement

TYPE Phono stage

PRICE £250

CONTACT ☎ 01235 511166 🌐 www.lehmannaudio.de

Lehmann is pretty well known for its phono stages, some of them decidedly upmarket. Despite the name, this recent model is an entry-level one. While it may look reminiscent of much cheaper models from NAD and Pro-Ject, it is in fact considerably more sophisticated than either of them. First, it has more complicated circuits using higher quality op-amps, and second, it has several options for tailoring its performance to suit the user's cartridge and following amplifier.

The most obvious bit of tailoring is the ability to set gain to low (for moving magnet cartridges) or high (for moving coil types). This is done on miniature switches underneath the amp, where it is also possible to select cartridge loading. The default is the usual 47k, but 7k and 100 ohms are also possible and if that's not enough you can install a resistor or capacitor internally to be selected by the fourth switch. There are also jumpers inside to add an extra 10dB of gain, roll off bass and bypass the output capacitors.



We were very taken by this little amp, especially with a moving magnet cartridge as source. Its sound is open and quick, with very good insight and also excellent extension at both frequency extremes, and its lack of hum and low noise level are also welcome. With a moving coil cartridge, especially any really low-output models, noise is less good and as a result definition and imaging suffer a little.

A head transformer between cartridge and Cube gives much better results, albeit at a price. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

CONCLUSION

Good value and fills the gap between budget phono amps and the high-end. Partners well with some cartridges.

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

GROUP TEST AND LAB REPORTS: RICHARD BLACK

CD PLAYERS

Resist the download generation with a top-notch, sub-£1,000 CD player

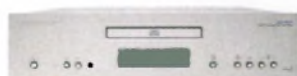
ON TEST



Arcam DiVA CD192
£875



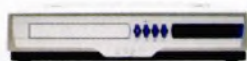
Astin Trew AT3000
£647



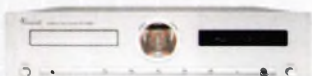
Cambridge Audio Azur 840C
£750



Naim CD5i
£850



Quad 99CD-S
£650



Vincent CD-S6
£999

Compact Disc may be under threat from internet downloads, but so far sales of discs are keeping up, thanks, conversely, to internet retailers. There's absolutely no doubt that CD continues to be the most popular music carrier and will probably remain so for a while yet, and the idea of spending the best part of a grand on a CD player is still far from ridiculous.

The players in this group span a narrow range of prices in a well-established and important part of the market. There's no point pretending that in raw 'sound per pound' terms they can compete with the best £250-odd players, but then seen in terms of an investment in several years' listening pleasure the extra £500 or so to buy one of these is easily justifiable as an absolute quality improvement.

We don't often review CD players at widely varying prices alongside each other and it's not always obvious what the advantages are in dearer players. It's certainly nothing to do with features, as the only things extra any of these six players on test here bring to the party is balanced output. Build quality and consequent pride of ownership can certainly be a part, but as for sound there's typically no single aspect that shows a vast improvement. Rather, the overall 'being there' feeling is the beneficiary. It's simply easier to forget that you are listening to a machine rather than live musicians.

SACD and DVD-Audio were supposed to enhance that feeling even further. What's happened to them? We've not been offered a DVD-A player in a while and no new SACD spinners crossed the radar while we were assembling this group. In a way, it's a shame that neither

seems to have achieved critical mass, but then with manufacturers finding new ways even at this late date to improve CD replay any disappointment is tempered somewhat.

It's interesting that most of these players use a 'real' audio CD mechanisms rather than a computer-type CD-ROM drive. The latter have some advantages in use and manufacture but are a pain in many ways. Some are infuriatingly slow to load a disc, and many emit a quiet but not quite inaudible rhythmic ticking noise, which is like Chinese water torture. It's comforting that the big players who make transports see audio-only CD players as a continuing market. With that in mind, let's continue with the test... **HFC**

EQUIPMENT USED

- Ⓢ Exposure 3010 integrated stereo amplifier
- Ⓢ Creek Evo integrated stereo amplifier
- Ⓢ EAR802 preamp/519 monoblocks
- Ⓢ ATC SCM20 loudspeakers
- Ⓢ Kimber, QED and custom hi-fi cables

MUSIC USED

- Ⓢ Pink Floyd *Dark Side of the Moon*
- Ⓢ Bertouch *Trio Sonatas*
- Ⓢ Otis Redding *Fa-Fa-Fa*
- Ⓢ Rossini *Stabat Mater*
- Ⓢ Ronald Stevenson *Nine Haiku*

EARS USED

As ever, we couldn't do all this without the keen ears and minds of our listening panellists who put their facilities so willingly at our disposal:

- Ⓢ Abbas Hussain (Wireworld)
- Ⓢ Ed Selley (Cambridge Audio)
- Ⓢ Phil Tindale (Densen)



STRUCTURED LAB AND LISTENING TESTS

Each of the players in the group was subjected to a rigorous programme of listening and laboratory tests. Measurements were made using a combination of custom-made CDRs, devised specifically for these tests, and a potent mix of 'traditional' lab instruments with a high-quality ADC, which converted the analogue output of each player back to digital for analysis on a PC, using principally Cool Edit Pro and Mathcad. Our methodology provides a searching analysis of a multitude of aspects, the most important of which are summarised in the bar graphs (with other significant findings mentioned in the text). Not all measurements are reported for all players – for instance, absolute speed accuracy, which was fine for most of them.

Our comprehensive listening tests were no less rigorous, conducted under blind, level-matched (to 0.05dB) conditions with some of the industry's most experienced hi-fi panellists. In addition, there were extended sighted listening tests by the author, using a wider variety of equipment and music and under a varied range of volume levels to attempt to determine real-world performance.

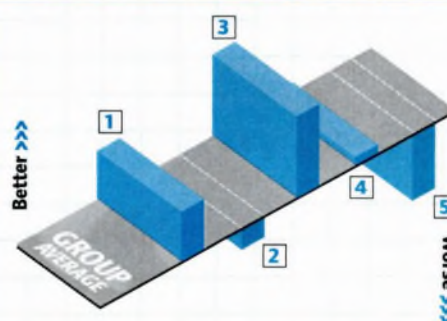
No other magazine offers an equivalent test and listening programme for comparative tests.

LAB REPORTS: THE BAR GRAPH

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

- 1] Total harmonic distortion:** The classic distortion criterion, measured as the purity of a single sine wave at various frequencies and levels
- 2] Jitter:** A measure of how stable the timing clock is. Measured at the analogue output, this distortion shows up as increased noise and/or low-level interfering frequencies, which can contribute to sonic 'grunge'.
- 3] Linearity:** How accurately the output behaves at very low levels. Poor figures can lead to distortion rising considerably in quiet musical passages.
- 4] Dynamic range:** This is effectively the same as signal-to-noise ratio, the difference between full output and the practical noise floor of each player.
- 5] Digital filtering:** Frequencies above half the sampling frequency should be efficiently filtered off. The filter is tested by playing tones at various frequencies and looking for ultrasonic spurious signals that accompany it.

OUR BAR GRAPHS: AN EXAMPLE



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Digital Integrated Amplifier

CA-S3

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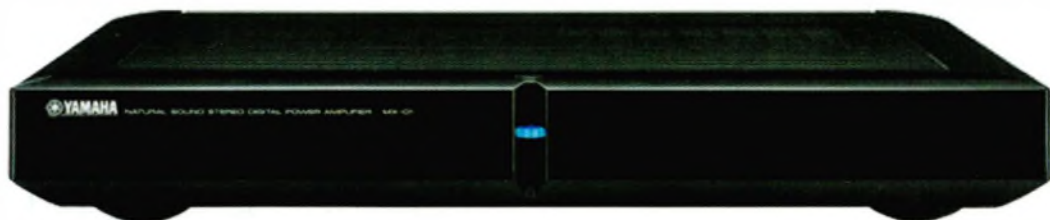
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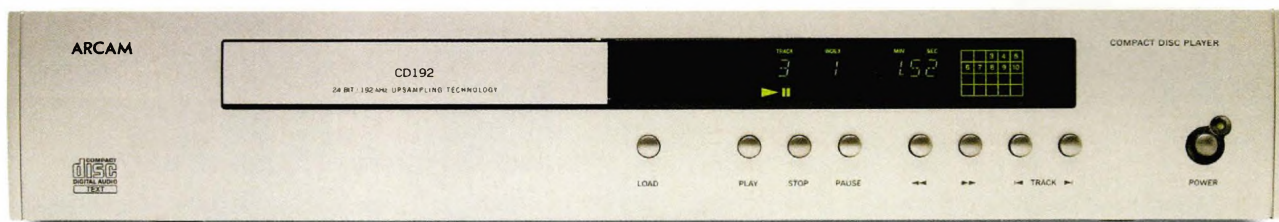
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ARCAM DIVA CD192

Does the top CD player in Arcam's DiVA range still sing as sweetly?

If the number in this model's moniker rings bells, it is of course because it is a common frequency, in kHz, for upsampling converters to use (there's nothing remotely sacred about it, by the way – 193kHz would work as well). And yes, Holmes, this is indeed an upsampling player. Despite that, and despite the impressive array of technological gubbins Arcam uses to effect that end, the model is part of the more modest 'DiVA' range rather than the upmarket 'FMJ'.

The obvious difference is external: DiVA products have less metal and more plastic around the place. It is, however, still distinctly smart, and with its alphanumeric display it is the only model in the group to support CD Text. But the clever stuff is inside. Removing the thin aluminium lid reveals an audio transport, a main board spanning quite a lot of the case, and a substantial aluminium screening cover, which conceals the upsampling and audio output board.

That board apart, the player is basically a CD73, Arcam's cheapest unit. However, the upsampling (retro-fittable for existing CD73 owners), with its associated higher-quality DAC and output circuits, adds an extra level of refinement. It uses a standard upsampling device and no less than four DAC chips to achieve its goals, together with familiar high-quality op-amps and passive components.

But beware! The light aluminium case produces rather high mechanical noise: a high-pitched hiss that can become annoying.

SOUND QUALITY

This seems to be a rather warm and 'cuddly' sounding player, if our listeners' notes are anything to go by. The bass drew consistent praise for its rich quality and tunefulness, married to fine extension and, where needed, weight. One comment referred specifically to the good dynamics in the bass region – an unusual thing to notice one way or the other, but we can see where that's coming from, as



there is an unusually good sense of ebb and flow in the lowest octaves.

Higher frequencies benefit from a nice, clear presentation with good detail, but there seemed to be some slight reservations about how detail holds together when the music gets really loud and complex. In the trickiest passages, images crowd together just a little and some of the purity of individual instrument timbres is lost.

With music of simpler textures that's not such a problem. This seems to be a particularly voice-friendly CD player, especially in tracks with just voice and a small handful of instruments. Anything from a simple ballad with guitar to classic 1950s rock benefits from a very informative approach to the midband and excellent dynamics all round, while a lack of any detectable spit in the upper reaches avoids listener fatigue. The same, naturally enough, is true of solo instruments, which share the voice register (lower saxophones, for example) while particularly high and bright instruments can sometimes be just a shade on the mellow side.

There's a lot to admire in this player's performance. If it doesn't score the highest in the group for detail, we would still rate it as highly as any for general listenability – it's both inviting and involving. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 84% 	Although this player offers a very comfortable and involving sound, its resolution of details is not always quite as searching as it might be, possibly limiting its appeal for detail freaks.
FEATURES >> 86% 	
BUILD >> 85% 	
VALUE >> 86% 	

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE 85%

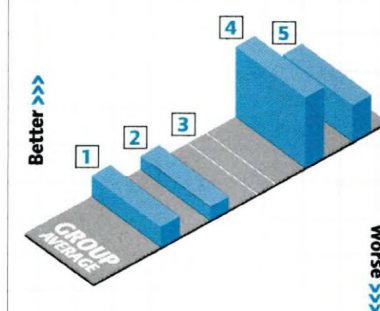


LAB REPORT

In the bad old days, CD players had a habit of showing distortion that worsened at low levels. That distortion is pretty much history, happily, but sometimes a trace survives and that's the case here. At or near full level, distortion is very low, while a few dB below that it pretty much vanishes. Below 60dB, though, traces crop up again at levels that just might sometimes become audible.

It's hard to be sure, though, and if that looks as if we're nit picking, it's probably because we are. Sort of. In fact, it's because we're hard put to find anything else to complain of except the near-invariable mild aliasing around half the sampling frequency – and even that is better than many rival products. Speed accuracy is more than adequate at 25ppm and is accompanied by vanishing levels of jitter. Noise is exemplary, frequency response across the audio band also, and output level normal.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Distortion >> +15%
- 2] Jitter >> +10%
- 3] Linearity >> 0%
- 4] Dynamic range >> +50%
- 5] Digital filter >> +25%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.2V	2.15V
Total harmonic distortion	0.0008%	0.001%
Signal-to-noise ratio	>114dB	109dB



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ASTIN TREW AT3000

A new name on the hi-fi scene that's well worth checking out

Astin Trew is still a pretty new name on the hi-fi scene, though the company's products are starting to enter the general consciousness. Designed in the UK, they are built in China and as a result offer the typically generous parts and build quality of their kind.

The AT3000 is built into a case constructed largely from aluminium channel sections, suitably cut and bolted together. That may sound industrial, but it's all very tastefully done. Inside, the workings are based on a CD-Audio mechanism surrounded by neat circuit boards populated with almost entirely through-hole components of good quality.

Of those components, the most striking is a lone valve, which buffers the output. We wouldn't want to accuse Astin Trew of valve tokenism, but the audio signal has already been through plenty of op-amps (good ones) in the filtering stages of the circuit and it's hard to see what one valve will contribute apart from a little local colour.

In common with many current players, this one offers upsampling to 96kHz, switchable so that one can listen without it if preferred. It's a satisfyingly quick loader and has very low mechanical noise levels. You need the remote to search within a track, a pet hate in these parts, but otherwise operation is pleasant.

SOUND QUALITY

Our listening panel heard this player in upsampling mode, our logic being that most listeners will use it that way. Subsequent experience showed this to be a wise choice as upsampling added a considerable degree of refinement to the sound. All the same, it's a sound with a degree of character that doesn't suit all tastes.

That character makes itself felt principally in the midrange, not surprisingly affecting voices more obviously than most instruments, though the precise details of how it hits you may vary. One of our listeners described the sound as



'plasticky' and lacking body, although he was happy enough to concede that in some specific areas, including detail, the performance was highly satisfactory. At the other extreme, one of his colleagues rather liked the player's subtle highlighting of the female voice in particular, finding that it added to the definition and clarity of presentation.

However you take it, there is definitely an emphasis on the presence band. Voices apart, though, it doesn't necessarily manifest itself as a tonal aberration. In purely instrumental tracks, it seemed instead that instruments whose sound is mostly in that band were slightly further forward in the stereo image, although this can occasionally lead to the dreaded 'listener fatigue'.

All the same, there is plenty to like in other areas. There's strong and tuneful bass (not quite as rigorously controlled as some but that's a compromise many will be happy with), treble is on the whole good, although it doesn't quite have the feeling of unlimited extension that the best players can manage, and detail is very solid.

Perhaps ironically, we felt the AT3000's strongest suit is in background music, where it vanishes quite successfully. But is that really all you want from a bit of specialist hi-fi? **HFC**

VERDICT	
SOUND >> 80%	A slight preference by this player for the presence band can make for rather forward images and less relaxed listening than with some, but extended and tuneful bass is a definite plus point.
FEATURES >> 82%	
BUILD >> 88%	
VALUE >> 84%	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE 82%	

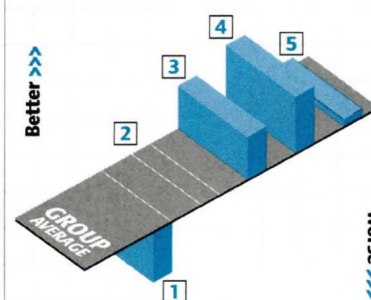


LAB REPORT

Output is distinctly on the high side, by enough to make the player stand out from the crowd in quick demonstrations. It is sourced from a low impedance that should have no fear of interconnects. Noise is good and low, with next to no hum in it, while distortion is pretty low but perhaps not one could call vanishing – at just above 0.01 per cent it is on the high side for modern CD players and may perhaps be marginally audible.

None of those parameters vary between upsampling and non-upsampling modes, but frequency response does vary slightly, mostly in the transition band where the upsampling filter cuts off just a touch faster, though still at too high a frequency – and jitter does quite a lot. When upsampling, the player's jitter matches the current trend for performance near the measurable limit, but otherwise it is sub-optimal, findings that may well explain our preference for upsampling in this case.

HOW IT COMPARES



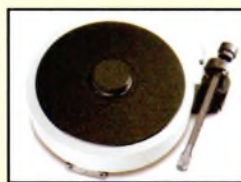
- 1] Distortion >> -35%
- 2] Jitter >> 0%
- 3] Linearity >> +30%
- 4] Dynamic range >> +40%
- 5] Digital filter >> +5%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.0V	2.35V
Total harmonic distortion	0.005%	0.025%
Signal-to-noise ratio	>110dB	108dB



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CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 840C

Cambridge Audio's top CD player offers something genuinely new

It's not easy to do something really new with CD replay, especially at a sensible price, but Cambridge seems to have achieved it with the 840C. The big feature here is 384kHz upsampling. Usually upsampling is to a more modest frequency, generally 96kHz or 192kHz, but Cambridge's implementation of 384kHz is a first outside the rather esoteric reaches of the high-end stratosphere.

The company has worked closely with Swiss digital signal processing specialist Anagram Technologies. Anagram's approach to upsampling is different from the norm but the differences are in details, which are arcane in the extreme unless you're a DSP expert – basically it does the usual upsampling thing and simplifies analogue filtering requirements while making the most of 16-bit/44.1kHz audio. Not wanting to waste all this high performance digital stuff, Cambridge also offers two digital inputs so that the 840C can function as a DAC, too, applying the upsampling benefits to any other digital source you may have around the place. What with digital outputs (no, they don't function at 384kHz, and you couldn't find anything compatible to connect them to if they did!), remote control in/out sockets, RS232 for firmware updating and balanced audio outputs in addition to phono sockets, this unit has easily the busiest back panel in the group.

The front is more modest, with buttons for essential functions and a comprehensive display to show what's going on.

SOUND QUALITY

It's surely significant that our 'blind' listening panel greeted this player with an almost complete absence of superlatives but still had almost entirely positive things to say. Superlatives are nice and make good advertising copy, but in relatively quick-fire listening (which, of necessity, our panel sessions are) can sometimes be indicative of an imbalance in performance. But the feeling



here was that everything is very neatly slotted into place and in a sense the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In a single word, the sound is satisfying. It makes sense of the musical structure and contains all the necessary elements but it never assigns its own sense of priority to them.

The nearest thing to outright criticism was a comment that timing didn't seem to equal the best in the group. That may be true, but it must be said that for some listeners there is no such thing as too much rhythmic 'kick' and in any situation the greatest degree of that will always be judged the best. Try as we might after the blind listening session, we couldn't find real fault with the 840C's sense of timing and we would rather just say that it doesn't exaggerate the trait.

It's always a good sign when imaging seems particularly stable, and that's the case here. It's also remarkably deep and instruments exist in a clear space of their own, with well-defined ambient clues and cleanly-defined instrumental timbre. In fact, tonality is admirably neutral, from bottom to top. Voices are very well differentiated from each other and free from any trace of sibilance. In short, the Cambridge is very good indeed. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >>> 88%

FEATURES >>> 91%

BUILD >>> 88%

VALUE >>> 94%

An undemonstrative player that nevertheless admirably combines tonal neutrality, effortless detail and a fine sense of rhythm and timing. Its appeal further enhanced by flexibility as a DAC and its approach to upsampling.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE 91%

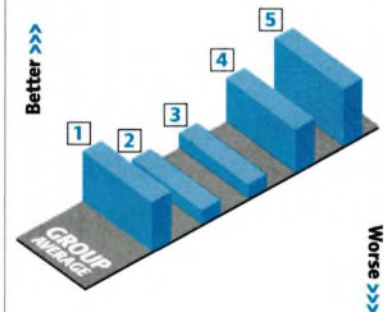


LAB REPORT

Not too surprisingly, there's not much we can find in the technical department to complain about. In areas where it's not the best in the group, it's one of the best. For example, Arcam beats it by a small margin on noise, but that's about 1dB improvement on already excellent performance. Distortion at full level is very good, but drop the level by only a couple of dB and the figure halves, leading to an effectively blameless performance at most frequencies and levels. Jitter is once again around the threshold of detectability, and the frequency response up to 20kHz is flat within a smidgin of a dB. Speed accuracy is exemplary and output level par for today's course.

There's just one thing... the Anagram Technologies filter is good, but it's not perfect and as commonly happens there's some aliasing around 22.05kHz. A slightly sharper slope on the filter would fix that, but would it improve the sound even further?

HOW IT COMPARES



1] Distortion >>> +35%

2] Jitter >>> +10%

3] Linearity >>> +10%

4] Dynamic range >>> +30%

5] Digital filter >>> +40%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	-	2.12V
Total harmonic distortion	0.0008%	0.0007%
Signal-to-noise ratio	>113dB	108dB

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NAIM CD5i

Naim's minimalist approach delivers an enjoyably honest sound

There's minimalist and then there's seriously minimalist, and it's arguable that Naim has come close to crossing that line with the CD5i. Its display, that shows either track number or time, but not both, and no 'pause' button (never mind fast forward or back) on the front panel, could make any user grit their teeth. Just make sure you don't lose that remote control!

On the other hand, one has to admire the upside of that minimalist approach, especially as Naim has so attractively illuminated the buttons and its own logo. What's more, the swing-arm disc-loading method is far the best anyone's come up with since CD's inception.

What you might not guess is that practically the entire player is contained within the swing arm. Beneath the mechanism (mounted on simple but ingenious silicone rubber supports for vibration isolation) is a circuit board carrying enough circuitry to provide an analogue output. This is passed down a ribbon cable to the single external circuit board where it is filtered, buffered and passed to the sockets (RCA phono and DIN). Of course, the power supply stuff is separate too and, this being a Naim, the PSU is substantial with a large toroidal transformer and generous smoothing capacitors. It's also upgradeable with an external super-supply.

Audio output is available on Naim's favoured DIN socket or more conventional phonos, and using the remote it is possible to select either or both. There's no digital output (another typical Naim touch) and this does limit options for connecting recorders or a remote DAC or such.

SOUND QUALITY

With Naim's reputation resting not least on the business of rhythm and timing, it's more than a little surprising to have to report that timing was just about the only area of this player's performance that attracted any criticism. No one suggested that it was seriously lacking, but a couple of comments compared it



unfavourably to other players in the group. If that was the downside, timbre was very much the up. Across the all-important midrange, this is an admirably neutral player that maintains a consistent policy of honesty as regards the tone of different instruments and voices.

Of course, that skill implies good detail retrieval as well as tonal honesty, and there's no doubt that Naim has achieved that too. It's not quite first class and as a result stereo imaging isn't always ultra-precise, but our listening panel felt that a good balance has been struck between an analytical approach that could result in rather 'dissected' sound and overall musical listenability.

There was some difference of opinion over the CD5i's bass – one listener thought that it seemed slightly compressed and lacking control, while another described it as "huge". These aren't necessarily incompatible views, though, and our subsequent sighted listening did confirm that with very deep bass sounds this Naim can occasionally slacken its grip. When that happens, the slightly overblown quality that results can make bass sound, paradoxically, both excessive in level and lacking true substance. But it's really quite a mild effect. Treble, meanwhile, attracted no specific comments at all from our listeners, a sure sign that they liked it! **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 86%

FEATURES >> 68%

BUILD >> 87%

VALUE >> 87%

This minimal machine's bass can be paradoxical, with great extension but slightly lacking control making it seem dry at times and affecting timing. Tonal neutrality higher up is excellent, however.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE 86%

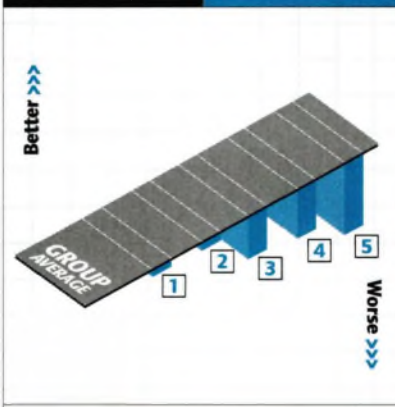


LAB REPORT

The one feature of this player that is substantially below par is arguably irrelevant – with no digital output, it will never matter that the speed is some way outside the usual specification, at 280ppm fast. What's more important for audio quality is clock stability and this seems fine, with jitter conforming to the usual pattern these days of near-ideal performance.

For the most part, distortion levels are very good. Noise is a little on the high side, but Naim's attention to power supply details is vindicated in the amazingly low level of hum harmonics, about as low as we've ever seen from anything with a transport mechanism. Frequency response has a tiny lift in the treble, which is probably not an issue, and rolls off in the ultrasonic region a little slower than most. In fact, Naim's oversampling filter is an unusual one that has an asymmetric ringing pattern, a detail which doubtless contributes to the sonic mix.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1) Distortion >> -5%
- 2) Jitter >> -5%
- 3) Linearity >> -30%
- 4) Dynamic range >> -35%
- 5) Digital filter >> -50%

SPECIFICATIONS

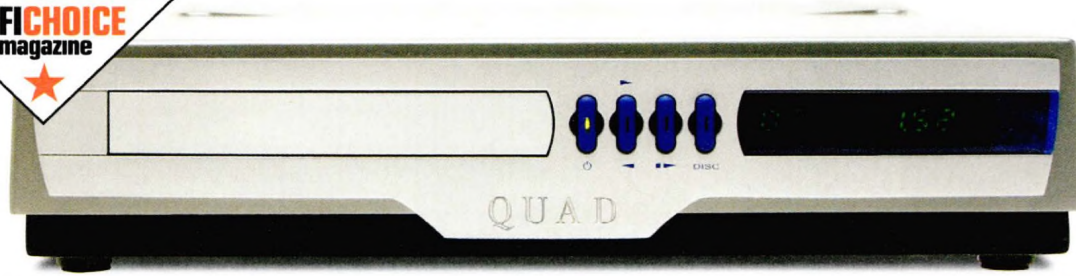
Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.1V	1.92V
Total harmonic distortion	0.1%	0.0045%
Signal-to-noise ratio	-	101dB

Some decisions are just so simple

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QUAD 99CD-S

Bold, beefy Quad loves large-scale music

The 99 series from Quad includes two CD players, and you'll have trouble distinguishing them from the front. It's another story from the back, as the more expensive 99CD-P adds inputs and other goodies, but the current contender is a perfectly straightforward CD spinner with phono socket audio outputs and a lone optical digital out.

But don't overlook the two D-type connectors, in and out, marked 'Quadlink'. Quad, like Cyrus, has embraced the one-brand system concept wholeheartedly and has made provision for 99-series components to connect together via short multiway cables that carry balanced audio as well as control signals. They also match visually, and in our opinion a rack of 99-series components looks much better than a single unit.

The bulk of the case is die-cast, common to all units in the range. It forms top and sides, from which the circuit boards are effectively hung. The transport is also fixed to the top and is a proper audio type with the usual advantage of quicker loading than CD-ROM versions. Quad tells us that this transport is a new one for this latest model, with the most up-to-date error correction software. It's supported by Philips chips and a Crystal Semiconductor DAC – a relatively simple digital path eschewing upsampling and using well-established parts. In a similar vein, the analogue stages are based on a very popular op-amp with decent passive components. The four front panel buttons actually manage to operate five switches, as one has top and bottom halves – we don't care for the feel much but the remote's fine.

SOUND QUALITY

This is a player that positively revels in the challenge of a really large-scale piece of music. In fact, the sound actually seems to get better – more solid, more 'present' – as the level and complexity increase. This is a rare situation,



though not quite unique, but in any case we've no intention of arguing as it makes its own strong case for the 99CD-S's credibility.

With smaller-scale works, there's little if anything wrong with the sound, but it seems a bit lacking in impact and immediacy. One listener to this player put his finger on it when he said that the sound seems to "snap into focus" above a certain level and this seems a very apt metaphor. In quiet music, the bass doesn't quite seem to connect with the listener, while in big orchestral climaxes or those wonderful rock'n'roll moments, there's an almost tangible body to the bass. Midrange and treble, meanwhile, remain defiantly distinct in a way that makes one sit up and take notice.

That has an impact on the player's tonal impression, which seems just a shade rich at times, and is also on occasion very slightly bright in the treble. The important midband is neutral, though, and voices are good and natural. Detail and imaging is also good, but if neither is quite the best of the bunch when one listens really critically, they both stand up comfortably to the standard of the group.

But hi-fi minutiae are not the point here, and this player will appeal to those who like to put on something noisy. Chamber music lovers and background music fans need not apply! **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >>> 84%

FEATURES >>> 83%

BUILD >>> 87%

VALUE >>> 88%



Despite its small size, this player revels in big music where its fearless presentation is unhindered by any kind of constriction, but smaller-scale works can seem somewhat lacking in musical focus.

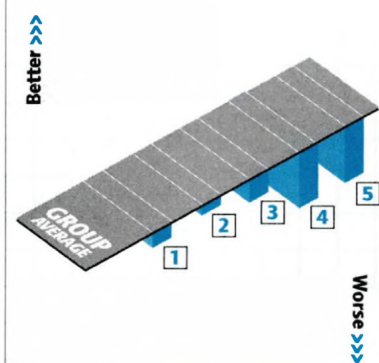
HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE **86%**



LAB REPORT

Once again, a largely clean bill of health emerges from the lab. The main area that stands out as a weakness is noise, where performance is more like barely satisfactory than actually good. Could this contribute to the player's relative weakness in quieter music? On the other hand, the unusually poor near-ultrasonic characteristic of the oversampling filter, which allows even more aliasing than usual in the 22-24kHz band, is likely to have more effect in loud music and in this case seems a minor drawback in practice. Interestingly, this filter (a little like Naim's) is an asymmetric type, but with far more post-ringing than pre-ringing. Distortion is typical, hovering around the 0.002 per cent level near maximum output at most frequencies: it does show slight signs of 'analogue jitter' (phase modulation) but only at a low level. Output voltage is a touch above average and speed accuracy is fine.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Distortion >>> -10%
- 2] Jitter >>> -5%
- 3] Linearity >>> -15%
- 4] Dynamic range >>> -40%
- 5] Digital filter >>> -40%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.4V	2.31V
Total harmonic distortion	0.002%	0.002%
Signal-to-noise ratio	95dB	100dB

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VINCENT CD-S6

A Sino-European connection brings out the valves in CD

Vincent Audio has its headquarters in Germany, but its products are made in China and imported into the UK by well-established speaker maker Ruark. Even if we didn't know it was Chinese-built, we'd have guessed, because only the economics of Far East manufacturing would allow a machine with this kind of specification to be sold at this price. When we say 'specification' we don't mean funky features (it plays HDCD but otherwise does pretty much exactly the same as the other machines here) but internal design and construction.

The most obvious internal feature is the use of valves. Turn the unit on and a lone valve in a window right at the front lights up – in fact it's lit, tastefully, from the sides by orange LEDs, whose brightness is controllable by a switch at the back of the unit. More functionally, three valves within the unit buffer the audio output, including sound sent to the balanced XLR sockets. They are mounted at the rear of one of the smartest circuit boards we've seen in any item of audio gear under a grand, all red-anodised heatsinks, For Audio polypropylene capacitors and so on.

Vincent really has pulled out the stops here, and while the initial appearance of a circuit can be deceptive, this one seems entirely made up of high-quality parts. The DAC is an all-in-one HDCD decoder, filter and DAC chip, and is just about the only surface-mount part, the rest being through-hole including good op-amps, precision resistors etc. The mechanism is an audio one and the mains transformer, concealed beneath an insulating cover, seems to be pretty generous in size. There's even a headphone output with its own volume control.

SOUND QUALITY

Does the mere mention of valves give you preconceptions about warm midrange, extended but 'loose' bass and treble with a touch of mellow about it? Well, you wouldn't be far wrong here. Whether it's due to the



valves or not, that's not too far from what our panellists thought of the CD-S6.

There's nothing very perturbing about that description and, right enough, this player was, on the whole, liked. Its trump card is its sense of realism, the unforced and natural image it creates. All those who heard it mentioned that directly or indirectly, and all felt it a benefit that at least balances, and perhaps outweighs, the occasional transgression from complete honesty.

Most of those transgressions are of a tonal nature, the easiest kind to forgive. For starters, the bass can sound a little excessive at times and the voice range is not always quite neutral, slightly favouring male over female voices with just a touch of plummy. In terms of detail and imaging there's some slight veiling in treble-rich music, which reduces the perceived depth of image.

There's also some lack of precision in the bass. This will certainly be most telling via well-extended loudspeakers, as it leads to a sense of overhang on bass notes of short duration, like jazz basslines.

But, the overall effect of 'being there' does a lot to compensate for any bottom-end shortcomings and with any music, this is an easy player to listen to and live with. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 84% 	Despite some occasional lack of bass precision and less than perfect image depth, this player gives a good feeling of presence to the sound that involves the listener, with a warm midrange and mellow treble.
FEATURES >> 85% 	
BUILD >> 90% 	
VALUE >> 86% 	

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE 85%

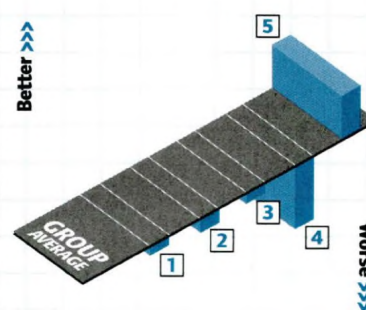


LAB REPORT

Giving a kick to the widely-held belief that valves intrinsically have high distortion, this player shows a worst-case distortion figure – at full output, of about 0.002 per cent. This is maybe fractionally worse than the best obtainable, but nothing to be in any sense ashamed of. At low audio signal levels a few spurious tones appear on the graph, notably 7.5kHz and 15kHz at about -100dB. Again, not disastrous results but they still shouldn't be there.

Distortion shows no sign of increasing at low frequencies and contains next to no phase modulation – a good result. Noise is good rather than great, while in terms of frequency response there's a tiny lift (0.1dB) in the treble before a considerably better-than-usual roll-off, 15dB down at 22.05kHz and basically vanished by 23kHz. Speed accuracy is spot-on while output voltage is a touch above average.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Distortion >> -5%
- 2] Jitter >> -10%
- 3] Linearity >> -5%
- 4] Dynamic range >> -45%
- 5] Digital filter >> +30%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.0V	2.32V
Total harmonic distortion	0.003%	0.0015%
Signal-to-noise ratio	95dB	99dB

CONCLUSIONS

Each of these players has its own strengths and weaknesses – it's all a matter of personal taste!

We mentioned at the outset that this is a group with quite a narrow price, so it is perhaps easier than usual to compare product performance and value. Or it looks like that at first – there's always a subjective fly in any easy-answer ointment. As so often happens, there's no logically obvious pecking order among these players, because so much depends on the priorities of the individual listener – you!

None of them is bad. They are all, as far as we can see, respectable, competent and

functional. This view we have reflected in the largely closely packed ratings, for which we make no apology. But none of them is perfect, which is why we entreat you to listen to as many of them as you can in order to see how their individual character suits your hearing. Our comments, lab findings and ratings will, we hope, assist you in flagging up areas of appeal, concern or interest.

All that said, we did end up with a soft spot the size of Texas for the Cambridge Audio Azur 840C. We're most impressed by its combination of high technology,

useful features (including digital inputs) and build quality, and it does offer some truly excellent sounds. One of its best features is that it does so without fuss or ostentation, and if you like show-off hi-fi you may not find it very exciting. But if you prefer listening to music, it's got a very great deal to recommend it.

Arcam, Naim and Quad are brands each with a strong 'family theme' but their players match that theme better visually, perhaps, than sonically. In fact, each has good and slightly disappointing features, with the Arcam warm and

inviting but a touch behind on detail, the Naim great at tonal honesty and resolution but sometimes uncertain in the bass, and the Quad big and bold but less assured in quieter moments.

We seem to have been a little less impressed by the valved models, though they differ considerably. The Vincent, indeed, has a lot to commend it in the way of 'traditional' valve virtues – warmth, listenability and so forth – but the Astin Trew does seem to us to have some issues with the presence band and it didn't quite hold our attention in the way the others did. **HFC**

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HINTS AND TIPS

>> When auditioning players, be aware that output levels are not always perfectly matched: louder often sounds 'better' in quick-fire demonstrations.

>> CD players aren't particularly microphonic, but any problems can be minimised by putting them out of the direct line of fire of the speakers.

>> Some players need a little warm-up time to sound at their best. If there's a 'standby' switch, use that instead of the mains switch – unless you're sure you won't be listening for a few days.

>> If the option exists to switch off the display and any other circuits, take it. The sound may well improve a touch.

CD PLAYERS AT A GLANCE



MAKE MODEL	Arcam Diva CD192	Astin Trew AT3000	Cambridge Audio Azur 840C	Naim CD5i	Quad 99CD-S	Vincent CD-S6
PRICE	£875	£647	£750	£850	£650	£999
SOUND						
FEATURES						
BUILD						
VALUE						
OVERALL						
CONCLUSION	Offers a very comfortable and involving sound, but resolution of details is not always utterly searching.	Slight presence-band lift makes for forward images and less relaxed listening than some. Extended and tuneful bass a plus.	Undemonstrative, but combines neutrality, detail and timing. Enhanced by flexibility as a DAC.	Bass has great extension but slightly lacks control. Tonal neutrality higher up is excellent, however.	Revels in big music thanks to fearless presentation, but smaller-scale works can lack focus.	Despite occasional lack of bass precision and slightly limited image depth, gives a good feeling of presence to the sound.
KEY FEATURES						
ELEC DIG O/P	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
OPT DIG O/P	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
CD R-W	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
CD TEXT	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
BALANCED O/P	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
DISTORTION	0.001% G	0.025% A	0.0007% E	0.0015% G	0.002% G	0.0015% G
JITTER	<0.1 ns E	<0.1 ns E	<0.1 ns E	<0.15 ns G	<0.12 ns G	<0.14 ns G
LINEARITY	<0.25 dB G	<0.1 dB E	<0.2 dB E	<1.0 dB A	<0.4 dB G	<0.3 dB G
S/N RATIO	109 dB E	108 dB E	108 dB E	101 dB G	100 dB A	99 dB A
STOPBAND REJECTION	102 dB E	110 dB E	103 dB E	30 dB P	48 dB P	96 dB G

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PowerMax review: Hi-Fi Choice, December 2006 (issue 288)

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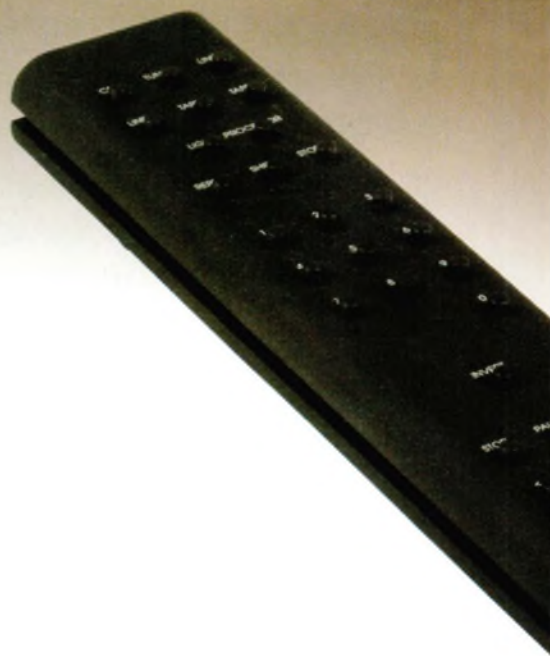


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HI-FI CHOICE BUYER'S BIBLE



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 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 44.1 kHz 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



Rega Apollo £498

Rega's latest entry-level player is a splendidly musical performer, given its modest price. Bass is good, midrange is great and high frequencies are truly exceptional.



Cambridge Audio Azur 840C £750

Sitting at the top of Cambridge Audio's Azur range, the 840C is a technically innovative player with a sound that belies its sub-£1,000 price – open, subtle and refined.

Our favourite 🏆 BEST BUY 👑 EDITOR'S CHOICE CD PLAYERS

Audio-only CD and SACD players

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SACD COMPATIBLE	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	CD-RW COMPATIBLE	CD TEXT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000												
🏆	Cambridge Audio Azur 640C	250	If you value the effortless flow of musical information, you should certainly hear this player	●	●	●				●		285
🏆	Cambridge Audio Azur 840C	750	Highly involving and rewarding music player at a sensible price		●	●	●		●	●		286
🏆	Creek Evo	495	A minute treble lift; otherwise this is a very capable player that offers fine value		●	●	●					285
🏆	Cyrus CD8x	1,000	Impressive mix of detail, musicality, analysis and appearance. Even better with the PSX-R power supply (£400)		●	●						270
🏆	Denon DCD-700AE	250	Excellent entry level quality CD player lacks for nothing. Musicians please note: even has variable speed replay	●	●	●	●			●		284
🏆	Marantz SA7001	430	Easy, relaxed sound arguably lacks true grit, but is extremely listenable from CD and SACD	●		●	●				●	281
🏆	Musical Fidelity X-RAY v8	1,098	Accurate, yet musical performer. £799, but requires £299 TRIPLE-X power supply outside of X-T100 system		●	●	●					288
🏆	Naim CD5i	825	As idiosyncratic as ever, but sonically the CD5i is the definitive player at the price				●					259
🏆	Rega Apollo	498	Unless you can't abide top-loaders, check this out: musically it's a highly praiseworthy performer		●	●	●					285
🏆	Sony SCD-XA3000ES	800	A good, if not truly great, all-rounder with CD and fine multi-channel SACD performance	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		276
🏆	Vincent CD-S6 MkII	999	With its tube output stage, a beguiling midrange, sweet highs and attractively figured lows plus fine dynamics		●					●	●	287
ABOVE £1,000												
🏆	Arcam FMJ CD36	1,200	Fine detail, extension, dynamics and neutrality: 'bland' or 'honest' according to listener taste!		●	●	●	●				280
👑	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
🏆	Ayre CX-7e	2,195	If you want a clean-sounding, revealing and entertaining player with fabulous build this is a strong contender		●	●				●		281
🏆	Classe CDP-102	3,000	Rich, dynamic CD/DVD player with a full bottom end, impressive dynamics and a luxurious yet revealing balanced		●	●	●	●	●		●	286
👑	Classe CDP-202	4,750	CD/DVD-A player with brilliant sound, if sophistication is your bag. Includes S-video and composite outputs		●	●	●	●	●		●	284
🏆	Copland CDA823	1,750	Don't let the laid-back character fool you - this player has plenty of insight too		●	●	●					280
🏆	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
👑	Esoteric X-03SE	4,995	Resolution and musicality close to the top of the game. For out and out transparency and build quality it's hard to beat	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		285
👑	Gamut CD3	3,500	Superb resolve of fine detail combined with a perfectly judged balance and an ability to draw you into the music		●	●	●			●		289
👑	Krell Evolution 505 SACD	8,777	Brilliant replacement for SACD Standard, superb musical discrimination. No high-res digital output	●	●	●	●					289
🏆	Linn Majik	1,950	Compact and capable of most CD formats, it's musically communicative with fine pace and enthusiasm		●	●	●					283
🏆	McIntosh MCD201	3,400	Superb CD performance and even better with SACD which has its own output level control		●	●	●			●	●	284
🏆	Meridian G06	1,695	Great combination of all-round attainment with superb looks and build quality, plus superb remote control		●	●	●					281
👑	Meridian 808i Signature	8,250	Stunning CD player with added preamp functions. Versatile and quite delightful		●	●	●	●	●	●		263
🏆	NAD M5	1,299	Beautifully made and very versatile CD/SACD player handles most formats with very superior dynamic range	●	●	●	●			●		285
🏆	Naim CD5x	1,450	Unique design nicely complements a sophisticated and highly capable performance		●	●	●					280
👑	Naim CDX2	2,800	Fine quality one-box CD player, but its best feature is upgradeability via outboard XPS supply		●	●	●					238
🏆	Rega Saturn	1,300	Attractive simple player does the basics superbly, delivering performance with great poise, precision and range		●	●	●					286
👑	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
🏆	Sugden CD21SE	1,395	Delivers its particularly musical touch brilliantly and warrants the attention of all true music lovers		●	●	●					271
🏆	T+A CD1230R	1,500	Filter options make this a player for all tastes, aided by top quality engineering		●	●	●					280
👑	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.



Esoteric X-03SE £4,995

Esoteric's entry-level CD/SACD player delivers astonishing sonic detail and precision, coupled with a gorgeous sense of musical structure. Truly, it's brilliant.

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

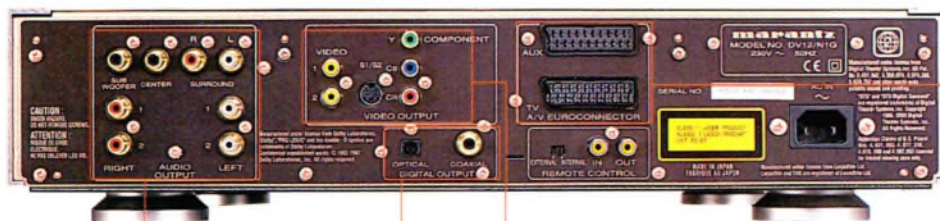
DVD-Audio is a high-resolution format that offers multichannel, stereo and Dolby Digital tracks on dedicated DVD-A discs. The discs can be played on any DVD player, but the CD-beating high-fidelity sound can only be appreciated with a DVD-A player.

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



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; red, 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.

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

Our favourite DVD PLAYERS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Audio/Video disc players

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	DVD-A COMPATIBLE	SACD COMPATIBLE	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000									
<input type="checkbox"/>	Arcam DVA DV78	700	Imagine almost all of the DV88 Plus at a knock-down price. Top picture and sound performance for the money.						254
<input type="checkbox"/>	Denon DVD-1920	250	Respectable (if unexciting) and flexible audio player, but something of a star from its HDMI equipped upsampling video subsystem.						276
<input type="checkbox"/>	Marantz DV7600	600	A mid-market cracker, with sound and picture quality that generally exceeds expectation.						274
<input type="checkbox"/>	Onkyo DV-SP503E	300	Budget Onkyo universal player is a straightforward Pioneer based implementation, which performs well with audio and video.						275
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sony DVP-NS9100ES	1,000	Video playback is foremost, with the iLink delivering significantly better sound than the analogue counterparts.						274
<input type="checkbox"/>	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									
<input type="checkbox"/>	Arcam DVA DV137	1,250	Good overall audio performance and excellent upscaling HDMI DVD-Video player, but stereo-only SACD playback at time of writing.						285
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cyrus DVD8	1,200	An impressive step up from the DVD7+, which includes component video outputs.						238
<input type="checkbox"/>	Denon DVD-3930	1,100	Well engineered universal player, with useful bypass facilities for pure audio, and unusually powerful video image processing.						287
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Denon DVD-A1 XV	2,500	Sophisticated universal player with state of the art video processing, high class disc replay, especially SACD.						266
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Linn Unidisk SC	2,995	Groundbreaking universal player with built-in preamplifier, with excellent picture for home cinema and sound for hi-fi.						259
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Meridian G98AH	3,625	Meridian's most widely compatible G-Series DVD player – groundbreaking DVD-Audio replay and a fine CD player too.						265
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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.



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



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



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

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 or 1.0m pairs. The first "run" will be supplied in a luxury Limited Edition 30th Anniversary Presentation case.

Demo sets are available from Authorised Dealers for home audition.



SUPRA[®] Cables

MADE IN SWEDEN

INTRODUCING: The UK version of Supra's LoRad MD06-BS/SP 6-way Mains Distribution Block

Approved to BS1363 standard.

MD06-BS/SP features 6 x 45 degree mounted 13 Amp UK mains sockets housed within an RF shielded aluminium extrusion. Tommy Jenvings' own 3-way Surge Protection system helps to prevent "nasties" getting into your hi-fi or AV system. When used with LoRad shielded mains cables, this can help improve your system from RF interference.



Special UK Launch Prices
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Supra AnCo TV cable only £24.99 (1m) (normally £29.99)
 Offer extended until 28/02/07 (as shipping quantities limited). Available from selected dealers E & O.E.

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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



Pro-Ject
RPM 5 £400

Pro-Ject's entry-level RPM deck is a good-looking, great-sounding package that delivers terrific value for money. A class act and no mistake.



The Funk Firm
Funk V £760

The more costly of two turntables from The Funk Firm, the Funk V builds on its sibling's virtues to deliver a sound of sheer class – dynamic, detailed and refined.



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
EC	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
EC	Clearaudio Ambient	4,220	Innovative use of materials leads to a fast, precise and thrilling sound (tonearm extra)	33/45		●	●	271
EC	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
EC	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
EC	Goldring GR2	265	Nicely finished Rega-manufactured deck with RB250 arm and an open, engaging sound quality	33/45			●	266
	Mitchell Technodec	767	Simple and smartly understated, performs above expectations – full-bodied and highly detailed	33/45			●	268
EC	Mitchell Gyro SE	1,058	New DC motor-equipped Gyro offers great looks and even better sound. Price includes RB300 arm	33/45	●	●		239
EC	Mitchell 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
EC	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
	Pro-Ject Expression II	250	A smooth and engaging turntable with the ability to revel in the glory of vinyl, with upgradable arm cable	33/45		●	●	289
	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		●	opt	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		●	opt	257
EC	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	Supplicaten design with accomplished sound quality, excellent imagery and good isolation (acrylic version tested)	33/45	●	●	●	248
EC	SME Model 10A	3,411	Elegant and extremely capable design, tested here with Series V/309 hybrid arm	33/45	●	●	●	195
EC	SME Model 20 2A	5,274	Beautifully built, extremely neutral damped and suspended deck with superb sound. Inc V arm	33/45/78	●	●	●	186
EC	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	
EC	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	●			266
	Denon DL-103R	200	Adds refinement to basic DL-103, at a price. One of the best rock'n'roll cartridges around			●	285
	Grado Prestige Gold	110	Produces rich, open and expansive music with the minimum of fuss	●		●	235
EC	Lyra Helikon	1,095	Highly capable and highly neutral, this is a cartridge for all seasons, albeit fussy about vinyl quality	●			215
	Ortofon Salsa	200	Despite a touch of midrange coloration, this cartridge really involves the listener with good extension and a clean, agile sound			●	290
	Sumiko Blue Point Spec Evo III	239	High output MC with refinement at high frequencies and a nimble, articulate and revealing sound			●	270
	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			●	235
EC	van den Hul Concor XCM	2,400	A stunning cartridge with stereo imaging, dynamics and detail resolution to die for			●	265
EC	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			●	253

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

PHONO STAGES

Phono stages

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS		
				MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	ISSUE NUMBER
	Cambridge Audio 640P	60	Tested with the almost-as-good £40 540P, this remarkable phono stage brings refinement and bass weight to budget vinyl	●	●	277
	Clearaudio Smart-Phono	250	Minute and very practical unit with slightly bright, but very detailed and low-noise, sound	●	●	268
	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	●	●	245
	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!	●	●	234
EC	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	●	●	201
	Trichord Dino/Dino+	498	Relaxed yet resolute with very good image depth and natural balance, not to mention great flexibility	●	●	234

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.

CARTRIDGES **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.

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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	PRICE	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIGNAL STRENGTH METER	ROTARY TUNING KNOB	ESCU NUMBER
FM TUNERS										
<input type="checkbox"/>	Creek T50	550	Very fine results indeed with precision, polish and insight added to excellent basics	FM,M,L	128					251
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cyrus FM-X	500	A classic no-nonsense FM tuner that achieves gratifying sonic results. Upgradable with PSX-R power supply	FM	7					283
<input type="checkbox"/>	Denon TU-1500AE	130	Well attuned to the crowded modern FM band, this tuner produces clear, detailed sound with plenty of gusto	FM,M,L	100					281
<input type="checkbox"/>	Denon TU-1800DAB	250	There's a little grain on FM, the generally decent performance on both bands makes this a great dual-band choice	DAB,FM,M	200					283
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Magnum Dynalab MD 90T	1,195	No remote or presets as standard, manual everything and valves... but its sound is simply sublime	FM	opt		opt			257
<input type="checkbox"/>	Marantz ST7001	300	FM reception could offer a little more detail and insight. DAB is fine, but near-identical Denon 1800 is cheaper!	200						283
<input type="checkbox"/>	NAD C422	180	Admirably free of roughness or other obvious nasties, with just a slight lack of clarity	FM,M	30					250
<input type="checkbox"/>	Primare T21	600	A very fine tuner – bass and treble are both well extended and detail is excellent	FM	30					230
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pure DRX-702ES	210	Apparently good value is restricted by persistent veiling on FM: 'PAC' on DAB mellows sound a little	DAB,FM,M	99					283
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rega Radio 3	398	Strong bass, clear treble and a high enjoyment factor make this an appealing FM performer	FM,M	20					283
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rotel RT-02	279	A highly competent tuner which always sounds appealing and fuss-free	FM,M	30					242
<input type="checkbox"/>	T+A T1210R	1,000	High-end looks are matched by the sound, which is detailed and sophisticated, with useful features too	FM	100					283
DAB TUNERS										
<input type="checkbox"/>	Arcam DIVA DT91	450	As good as any on DAB, with serviceable FM, this one-box solution offers good build and value	DAB,FM	16					269
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cambridge Audio DAB500	150	Very good sound, plus optional response tweaks, and slickest operation yet	DAB	10					248
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cambridge Azur 640T	200	Slightly ahead of the pack in DAB performance, though FM is never better than decent	DAB,FM	60					260
<input type="checkbox"/>	Denon TU-1800DAB	250	DAB reception is as good as any and FM performance clearly benefits from Denon's long experience	DAB,FM,M	200					274
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pure Digital DRX-702ES	330	Very flexible DAB (inc L-band) and FM tuner. DAB is good, FM a touch disappointing	DAB,FM,M	99					242
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sony ST-SDB900	200	Nicely designed UK-tuned model is a touch bright with both DAB and FM but generally insightful and clear	DAB,FM,M	60					259

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.

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Used Product Listing

Remember !! List is updated on our web site daily!

DIGITAL

Meridian 200 Transport and 203 DAC combo, absolutely mint, great sound	£349
Gryphon Adagio, immac, boxed, remote, puck, Be quiet!!! (£5700)	£2485
Micromega Aria, black, ex HiFi Choice review model (£2150)	£1395
Shanling CDT100, exc cond, gold legs, fully boxed (£1650)	£995
Micromega CD132, ex-dem, black finish, at new condition, boxed (£849)	£595
Naim CDX with NAXPS power supply, good condition, boxed	£1900
Arcam Diva 93t, silver, exc cond, boxed, manual, r/c, 1yr old, (£1000)	£595
Musical Fidelity DM25 DAC + Transport, only a few months old (£4000)	£2995
Musical Fidelity kW SACD player, boxed, factory sealed box (£4000)	£1995
AVI Lab Series CD, current spec, boxed, unmarked condition (£1499)	£1195
Shanling CDT300 Omega Drive, ex-dem, immaculate cond (£4000)	£2995
Resolution Audio Opus 21, 2 box cd player, boxed, black/silver (£2950)	£2295
Marantz SA-1151, mint, 6mths old, champagne finish, boxed (£1999)	£1395
Marantz SA15-S1, silver finish, unmarked condition, high end SACD! (£1100)	£795
Unison Research Unico Valve output CD, only 3mths old, latest ver (£1250)	£895

AMPLIFIERS

Exposure 23 Pre Amp, mint, boxed, remote (£1400)	£795
Exposure 28 Power Amp, mint, boxed (£1400)	£795
Bryston 4B-SST Power Amp, 2 months old, like new, 300wpc (£2750)	£2249
EAR Yoshino 834T Hybrid Int, mint, boxed, 8 months old! Bargain! (£2800)	£1995
Qinpu A1.0x, ex What HiFi review model, boxed in immac cond (£300)	£230
Qinpu A.8000 MK II, ex HiFi World review model, boxed as new (£1295)	£895
Parasound A21 Power Amp, immac condition, silver, only 1yr old (£1500)	£895
Musical Fidelity AS Int, 250wpc, 6 months old, boxed, as new (£1499)	£995
Musical Fidelity AS Power Amp, 6 months old, boxed, immac (£1499)	£995
Bryston B-100 SST Int amp, unmarked condition, boxed (£2750)	£1995
McIntosh C220 Pre, only 2 months old, boxed, mint, Simply stunning! (£3300)	£2795
Chord CPA2800 pre-amp-phono stage, £2800 new, in black, immac	£1395
Jadis DA30 valve integrated, mint, 2yrs old, fully boxed, 30wpc (£4000)	£1995
Bel Canto Evo 2i Integrated, boxed, mint cond (£2800)	£1695
Arcam FMJ Pre, good cond, boxed, manual, remote, only 1 year old! (£1200)	£795
Arcam FMJ P35 Power Amp, good cond, boxed, manual (£850)	£595
Jungson JA-88D Int, pure class A, Hi-Fi World 5 globe winner, ex-dem (£899)	£749
AVI Lab Series integrated, immac, boxed, remote, 200wpc into 8ohms! (£1599)	£995
AVI Lab Series Power Amp, immac, less than 1yr old, boxed (£1650)	£995
Pathos Logos, brand new sealed box! canc order, great opportunity (£2700)	£2295
Eastern Electric M520 Int, What Hi-Fi 5 star review, 4 mths old (£1539)	£1095
Eastern Electric Minimax Pre, ex-dem, mint condition, boxed (£769)	£649
Naim NAC 102 Pre Amp, good condition, boxed, serial no. 142xxx	£550
Naim NAP 250 Power Amp, good condition, boxed, serial no. 304xxx	£999
Manley Labs Neo Classic 300b Monoblocks, 25wpc, mint! Sensational! (£5895)	£3395
Krell PAM 5 pre-amp with phono stage, exc cond, boxed (£2000)	£549
MF Audio Passive Pre, only 9 months old, mint cond, boxed, manual! (£1500)	£1095
Cyrus Pre XVS, immac cond, only 5 mths old, one prev owner (£1000)	£749
Primaluna Prologue 5 Power Amp, EL 34 valves, 35 wpc, mint (£950)	£695
Nagra PSA Power Amp, very rare, only 6 months old, immac, stunning	£3595
Audionet Sam V2 Integrated, silver, boxed, exc cond (£2400)	£1195
ATC SIA2-150 Integrated, black, mint, as good as new, boxed (£2400)	£1895
ATC SIA2-150 Int amp, black, mint con, as good as brand new (£2400)	£1395
Shanling SP-80C Monoblocks, excellent, gold legs, fully boxed (£2000)	£1295
Lyngdorf (Tact) TDA2200, digital int, full room correction, excellent (£2395)	£1495
Unison Research Unico Line, only 3 months old, boxed, manual (£950)	£749
Unison Research Unico SE Int amp, mint cond, boxed, manual (£1375)	£795
Bow Walrus Power Amp, boxed, exc cond, 150wpc (£3995)	£1795
Bow Warlock Pre, boxed, exc cond, fully balanced, r/c (£3495)	£1495
Pass Labs X1 Pre Amp, mint, less than 1yr old, sep power supply (£4700)	£3795

LOUDSPEAKERS

Hyperion 938, gloss black finish, immac cond, very low hours (£3750)	£2895
Quad 989, Vintage finish, only 6 months old, boxed, mint cond (£5000)	£3795
Acoustic Energy AE1 Classic, ex-display, never been played, fully boxed (£845)	£650
Wilson Benesch Arc, silver stands and side cheeks, immac cond (£2600)	£1795
B&W CM4 speakers, in Rosent, 5 years old, boxed	£449
Sonus Faber Cremona, natural maple finish, 5 mths old, boxed, Superb (£5k)	£3795
Ref 3a De Capo-i, redwood finish, superb cond, boxed (£2500)	£1695
JM Lab Diva Utopia BE, exc cond, boxed, tweeter covers and spikes (£7500)	£4250
Mission Elegante E82, 1yr old, boxed in superb condition (£1300)	£749
Art Emotion Signature, maple, 1yr old, boxed with grills, mint (£9000)	£6495
Quad ESL-63 Electrostatics, mint condition!, vintage finish (brown grills)	£1149
PMC FB1+, cherry, boxed, immac cond, few mths old! (£1695)	£1295
Monitor Audio GR20, 2yrs old, black, boxed, exc cond (£1500)	£795
Monitor Audio GR20, cherry, good cond, orig boxes, great upgrade! (£1500)	£795
PMC OB1, in oak, boxed as new, 6 months old, simply stunning! (£2700)	£1995
JAS Orto, birds eye maple finish, mint, 10 months old!, fully boxed (£2300)	£1795
JAS Audio Orsa, ex HiFi Plus review model, poplar tumor (£1399)	£1149
Zingali Overture 3S, cherry, exc cond, orig packaging, 1 year old (£4250)	£2495
Art Shietta 6, maple, ex-dem, as new condition, boxed, wonderful! (£2000)	£1395
ProAc Studio 140 mahogany finish, brand new - never used but box opened, recent 5 stars What Hi-Fi!, evenly balanced sound with high quality finish!	£1195
JAS Audio Supertweeters, Review pair, sound awesome! (£649)	£595

ANALOGUE

Trichord Diablo phono stage, exc cond, only 9mths old, boxed (£750)	£495
Wilson Benesch Full Circle, boxed as new, exc (£2100)	£1495
VPI Scout inc JMW-9 tonearm, immac cond, boxed, very little usage (£1650)	£1195

MISC

Nordost Blue Heaven Speaker Cable, ex-dem, 4m pair, bi-wire (£489)	£349
Isotek Gil Minisub, silver front, current spec, immac cond (£545)	£395
Naim Hi-Cap power supply, good condition, serial no. 304xx, superb upgrade	£550
Isotek Mainline filtered mains cable, excellent condition (£200)	£95
Isotek Mainline digital filtered mains cable, exc condition (£225)	£110
Hovland Reference Speaker Cable, exdem, boxed, 8ft pair, single wired (£1200)	£649
Townshend Supertweeters, titanium finish, boxed as new, exc (£800)	£795
Nordost Thor, ex-dem, immaculate condition, boxed, Valhalla wired (£1600)	£1195
Isotek Titan mains conditioner, few months old, boxed (£1500)	£1095
Nordost Valhalla Speaker Cable, 3m per side, bi-wire with z-plugs (£5700)	£3995



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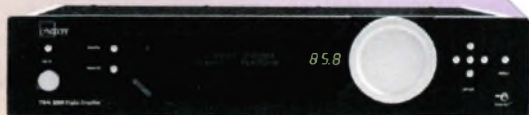
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Come over to the Dark Side

The Flagship 'Plato' Reference Loudspeaker from JAS Audio.

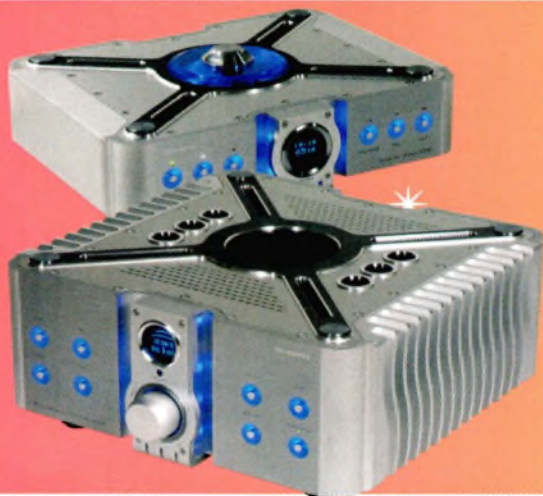


You could easily imagine to find the 'Plato' in Darth Vader's personal Hi-Fi System!

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Shanling sets new standards

The new reference Amplifier and CD Player from Shanling are gorgeous - visually & sonically!



The Reference CD500 CD Player and Reference A500 Amplifier from Shanling are finally here. Shanling wanted to make a true statement with these flagship products, not just sonically but visually as well. We think they have and even more impressive is the sheer value-for-money. Musically they challenge products at twice the price! Available - now.

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The end result?

Hi-Fi that really does stimulate the senses!



Nordost Valhalla

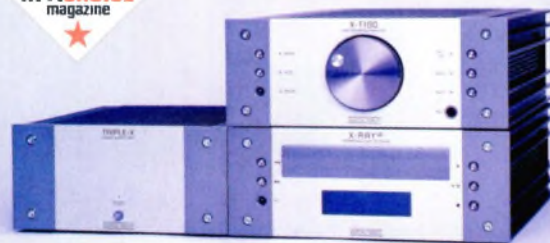
Full range available.

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X-Factor

Musical Fidelity products definitely have that X-Factor.



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Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi Choice Dec 06



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**RUNNER UP: EASTERN ELECTRIC
MINIMAX CD: £879**



"Something of an unexpected surprise, Eastern Electric has launched a welter of very impressive tube-based separates over the past year. From the decent Phillips CD12 mech to the fine build and tube output stage, this player has been engineered properly - and it sounds like it too."

Hi-Fi World January 2007

The speaker with big balls!

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Duelist Planets £800/pair
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Hear what your loudspeakers are really capable of.

The Bel Canto REF1000 represents the summit of audio amplifier performance with over 1000 watts of low-distortion, wide-band power available, fully regulated switching power supply, true balanced operation, 2 ohm drive and 120dB of dynamic range capability.

With REF1000s in your system it will sound like you are connected directly to the music source, the loudspeaker and amplifier effectively disappear in the large and compelling sonic picture. Fidelity and signal clarity is unmatched from the lowest audio frequencies through to the sweetest high frequencies.

A magnificent achievement in every respect!



We sell a different kind of Big Mac...

Complete McIntosh range available.



McIntosh are famous across the world for producing some of the finest Hi-Fi Products available today.

Owning a piece of McIntosh is like owning the finest car, the finest watch, the finest painting the eye can admire. Of course the difference is that McIntosh will delight your ears with music in a way that you inescapably just cannot put a

value on - because it is priceless.

The McIntosh range caters for every possible client requirement from a simple two-channel system to an extreme multi-channel, multi-room system.

Interested, curious?

Maximum resolution

Opus 21 can now give you a complete system.

For more than a decade, resolution audio has received praise for its meticulous attention to detail in creating highly acclaimed stereo components. The guiding philosophy behind the company has always been to build stereo components that deliver accurate and engaging musical reproduction at a reasonable price.



Available in a variety of configurations and color combinations, the Opus 21 can start as a simple cd player and evolve to a complete two-channel system. No analog interconnects are required, and only a single cord powers the entire system.

The Opus 21 frees you to focus on the music, not the equipment.



Have you signed up yet?

If you want to receive the latest product information, news and special offers in your InBox, all you need do is go to the Shadow Audio Home Page. Find the section 'Free Newsletter', type your email address in the box and click on the GO button - simple! You can unsubscribe at any time you wish.

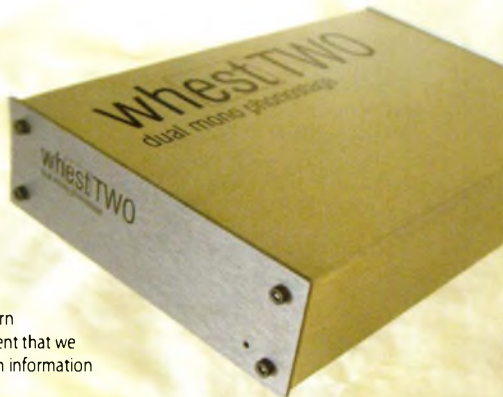
*subject to conditions

Look to the whest

New dual mono phonostage promises to really deliver.

With the NEW whestTWO you will hear much clearer mid and high frequencies and because the high frequency is extended ALL instruments down to basses and kick drums will sound much more realistic with better transient response and positioning within the soundstage.

It is only now by using modern audiophile playback equipment that we can appreciate just how much information there is on vinyl.



The Endorphin effect...

Pathos have tapped in to something very special with this CD Player.

Unique in its styling and high in its specifications, the Endorphin had already established itself as one of the most desired high-end CD players on the market.

A high quality Philips audio CD mechanism and top spec 192kHz/24-bit DACs and fully balanced outputs are used to stunning effect in its stand-out sound quality - rich in bass, open in sound stage and highly detailed and smooth top end.

This is truly a product to covet!



Is Vertex AQ magic?

No, but the way it improves a system is some trick.

"...once the Vertex AQ kit is in place, there's no going back, which means in some respects it is as fundamental to the sound of the system as the system itself.

Oh my!"

Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi+



Super Natural Winner

The Icon of IKON.

Using the already famed and celebrated Hybrid Tweeter Module and 2 x 6 1/2" paper/wood fiber cone IKON drivers, the IKON 6 has won the ears of both customers and the press alike.

"We've yet to come across a rival that can match the IKON 6's combination of full bodied midrange, treble sparkle and crisp timing."

What Hi-Fi

"A loudspeaker of exceptional resolve for the money, the IKON 6 will show what has been recorded in exquisite detail and with pin-sharp precision."

Hi-Fi Choice



New CD Player from Gamut

CD3 joins a range of products that really know how to lock on to the 'emotion' in music...



CD3 is a completely new player created on the sonic experience we gained from the highly acclaimed CD1. The CD3 is restructured and specified from scratch, focusing on electronic and mechanical stability.

The CD3 is built with extremely silent and linear components. Likewise, the DA-conversion is implemented with state of the art technology like the Burr Brown PCM 1792 converter.

With the CD3 we are approaching the performance maximum of the Compact Disc as we know it.

IsoTek

Free UK delivery, free cable and 30-day money back scheme - try IsoTek today....



"Perhaps there are still some undiscovered secrets to mains filtration, but as things stand the benefits are considerable and the value of this unit is not hard to confirm."

IsoTek Sigmas
Hi-Fi Choice, October 2006

IsoTek / Nordost Special Offers

On the following IsoTek/Nordost mains filtration systems:

IsoTek Nova	£1695	IsoTek GII Solus	£325
IsoTek Titan	£1495	Nordost Thor	£1599
IsoTek Sigmas	£995		
IsoTek GII Minisub	£545		

FREE delivery, FREE IsoTek mains cable worth £49 and a 30-day money back guarantee*.

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.

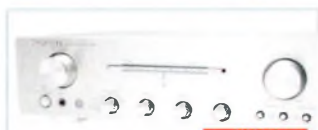
WHAT IS BI-WIRING AND BI-AMPING?

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.



Cambridge Audio
Azur 840A £750

Like the matching 840C CD player, this is a technically innovative product with a sound so refined it belies its price point – just check out that fantastic midrange!



Primare
I30 £1,500

Are you looking for an amp that combines weight and musical gravitas with rhythm, detail and subtlety, with gorgeous build quality to boot? In that case... here it is!



Copland
CTA405 £2,498

This amp's massively enjoyable musicality is hard to beat: all the effusiveness of a great valve amp and none of the stereotypical softness. Brilliant!

Our favourite BEST BUY EC 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 A70	500	A smart and practical amp offering good snap and pace, with natural dynamics and good detail	6	MM			60	289
	Arcam DIVA A90	850	Well-featured amp with little character of its own - highly informative sound	6	opt			90	286
	Cambridge Audio 640A V2	300	Nasty-feeling controls are the only real downside to this powerful and lively little amp	6				75	279
	Cambridge Audio 840A	750	Detailed and lively, with excellent midrange and treble detail	7				120	286
	Creek Evo	500	Not the most accurate, strictly, but its lively, energetic musical presentation is entirely lovable	5	opt			85	283
	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
	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
	Marantz PM7001	350	Detailed and highly communicative amp with fine treble and good bass extension - exceptional value for money	5				70	279
	Marantz PM7001KI	550	A self-effacing amplifier which serves the music admirably with fine bass, sweet treble and unforced detail	5	MM			70	289
	Musical Fidelity X-T100	899	By separating amp and TRIPLE-X power supply, this deceptively powerful valve-sporting amplifier is both enticing and musical	3				70	288
	Naim Nat 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
	Onkyo A-933	500	Puts the music first, with sound that delivers the basics correctly but above all involves the listener	5				80	278
	Primare i21	750	A confident and energetic amp, with just a touch of veiling at times. Great build quality	4				75	273
	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
	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									
	Arcam FMJ A32	1,200	Ultra-civilised amp with plenty of features that's also highly revealing and musical	7				100	266
EC	Audia Flight TWO	2,500	Quirky, but musically highly effective model which is expressive and analytical, with some minor operational quirks	8				100	280
	Ayre AX-7e	1,995	High end sound at a sensible price. Lacks the baills of less revealing designs but has precision in the timing department that is rare	5				60	284
EC	Bryston B100-SST DAC	3,850	A remarkable amplifier which is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of an impressive onboard DAC	6				100	275
EC	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
	Copland CSA29	1,900	A hybrid valve/solid state amplifier that gets close to offering the best of both worlds	6	opt			85	255
	Copland CTA405	2,498	Avoids pratfalls of many valve amps, yet retains the euphony typical of the best of breed	6	MM			50	286
	Creek Destiny	1,100	A highly assured performer that doesn't superimpose its personality on the music	6				100	286
EC	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
EC	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
EC	Krell KAV-400xi	2,698	The best integrated Krell yet is quick, agile, solid and finely detailed	5				200	247
EC	Lyngdorf TDA 2200	3,875	Sophisticated modular all-digital amp with room EQ, capable of adapting to the listening environment	4				200	289
EC	McIntosh MA2275	5,400	A valve amplifier that doesn't patronise. It's not soft-centred and it understands dynamics	5				75	271
EC	Moon Evolution i-7	4,750	Sophisticated, with an elegant build and sound quality, very limited features, even by high-end standards	5				150	288
	NAD M3	1,899	Massive and flexible, it goes very loud with fine authority and dynamic range, but lacks some sparkle	7				180	285
	Primare I30	1,500	A smooth, sophisticated yet agile performer, and beautifully built too	6				100	267
EC	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
	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
EC	Unison Research Perform.	5,500	Massive and bulky valve amp sounds brilliant, with good power for a single-ended design, wide bandwidth and fine neutrality	5				40	287

Our favourite BEST BUY EC 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
	Croft Precession I/Polestar I	1,400	Compact pre/power combo with battery preamp and hybrid power, with freedom from timesmear, bass could be firmer			6		25	290
	Cyrus Pre Vs2/6 Power	1,000	Pre offers stunning resolution and feature count for the money and power is subtle, open and musical					50	290
EC	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
EC	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
	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
	Naim NAC 122x/NAP 15Cx	1,575	Musically rewarding with outstanding sophistication, grip and insight for such a modestly priced design			6	opt	50	287
	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

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			
				PREAMPLIFIER	POWER AMPLIFIER	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
ABOVE £2,000							
<input type="checkbox"/>	Arcam FMJ C31	1,200	Professionally presented, beautifully built and exceptionally revealing, this preamp achieves much by doing little	●	●	5 opt	273
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Border Patrol Control Unit	2,995	Bluff looking valve preamp, with one of the most neutral yet dynamic sounds around	●	●	5 opt	277
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Chord Prima/Mezzo 140	6,100	Small, muscular, beautifully made and styled and sounds like a dream	●	●	5	120 269
<input type="checkbox"/>	Densen Beat B-200/B310	2,300	Lively, energetic combination that bring a great sense of scale to familiar recordings	●	●	8 opt	80 276
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ECS EA-1	6,000	Understated monoblocks with real transparency to the fine detail, passion and energy in your record collection	●	●		180 253
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Gamut D200 Mk3	3,950	A great power amp that's now even better – one of the best regardless of price	●	●		200 247
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Hovland HP-100/RADIA	12,745	Uncommonly musical valve/transistor hybrid transcends stereotypes, one of the genuine high achievers	●	●	9 opt	125 250
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Naim NAP 500	11,875	Wonderful neutrality, bandwidth and dynamic range, plus Naim's traditional leading-edge definition	●	●		140 208
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Naim NAC 552	12,100	Extremely expensive preamp, but still solid value. Magnificent sound with fine flexibility and convenience	●	●	6	233
<input type="checkbox"/>	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-AX759SE £550

If you're looking for an affordable multichannel amp that's good with music as well as home cinema, this is a top buy.



Arcam
DiVA AVR350 £1,500

Arcam's latest receiver offers a good helping of processing and connection options, with exceptionally musical sound.



Denon
AVC-A11XVA £2,500

A splendid 7.1-channel amp that packs in the latest digital links and processing formats without sacrificing sound quality.



Classé
SSP-600/CA-5200 £11,900

Anyone seeking a high-end multichannel solution that's equally adept with music and movies should park their ears here.

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

AV AMPLIFIERS

Multichannel amplifiers

BADGE	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	RECEIVER	LINE INPUTS	7.1 COMPATIBLE	5-CHANNEL POWER (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
MULTICHANNEL INTEGRATED AMPS								
	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	
EC	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	
EC	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	
EC	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 gimmickry		3	160	255	
SB	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	
EC	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	
	Sony STR-DB798	250	Cheap but effective, and passably good with pure audio sources, but control system messy		7	100	273	
	Sony STR-DB795	300	A superb value little amplifier, well appointed technically and successfully tuned for UK ears		7	100	260	
EC	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	
	Yamaha DSP-AX759SE	500	More a stereo amp with basic multichannel thrown in, but a great performer with music at this price		6	100	287	
MULTICHANNEL PREAMPS/PROCESSORS AND POWER AMPS								
	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 AWP700/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	
EC	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	
EC	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	
EC	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	
EC	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	
EC	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	
	Primare SP317/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.

Trichord Research

Tel: +44 (0)1684 311600
sales@trichordresearch.com

Fax: +44 (0)1684 311928
www.trichordresearch.com

Dino Phono Amplifier



SEE AND HEAR THE VERY BEST HI-FI AND HOME CINEMA AT SEVENOAKS



**WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2006**
ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEMS
BEST HI-FI SYSTEMS EDITION
ARCAM SOLO

Arcam SOLO MUSIC SYSTEM

Combining a high quality CD Player, FM and DAB Digital Radio and Amplifier in one stylish box.

"The Arcam's sound is so close to that of a top-notch separates hi-fi system"



Monitor Audio GOLD SIGNATURE

Monitor Audio's Gold Signature is a new flagship range that reaches unprecedented standards of design, innovation, performance, technical excellence, build quality and value in its class.

The line-up comprises the **GS10** stand-mount; the **GS20** and **GS60** floorstanders; the **GS-FX** surround speaker; a dedicated centre-channel speaker, the **GS-LCR**; and the **GSW-12** active subwoofer.



**WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2006**
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
BEST HI-FI SYSTEMS
ONKYO CS-515DAB

Onkyo CS-515DAB

This award-winning micro delivers exceptional performance and is superb value for money.

"A truly musical micro system"



**WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2006**
★★★★★
APRIL 2006

Yamaha

CRX-M170

CD Player DAB/FM Tuner
What Hi-Fi? Recommended



LOOKING FOR HI-FI SEPARATES OR A SYSTEM?

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Denon TU-1800DAB TUNER

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Marantz



Marantz is introducing a host of new products ranging from high-end hi-fi to HD-ready DVD players and AV receivers. Its hi-fi range includes the **CD5000** and **CD50010SE** CD players, the **SA7001** SACD player and the **PM4001** amplifier, offering a taste of high-end audio at an incredibly competitive price.

Primare

With class-leading build quality, and a unique blend of sophisticated Scandinavian design, Primare build elegant, reliable, easy-to-use systems that promise years of high quality performance.



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Arcam DiVA

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Rotel

Rotel's **06 Series** will give you years of enjoyment and offers excellent value for money. This range of separates creates a sound that, the more you hear it, the better it gets.

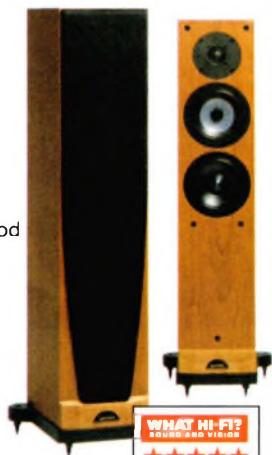


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■ Natural wood cabinets incorporating Dynamic Damping engineered to eliminate booming of bass sound.



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- Finish Options
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Monitor Audio

BRONZE BR2

Bronze Reference is Monitor Audio's new entry-level range. The range includes two stand-mounting speakers, the BR1 and the award-winning BR2.



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SOUND & VISION

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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



WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2006
CABLES
BEST OVERALL VALUE
QED CABLES RANGE

QED

Accessories make the difference

The quality of sound and vision a system produces is determined as much by its accessories as its main components. At Sevenoaks, accessories are not an afterthought - our staff can demonstrate the difference the right accessories can make to your home entertainment experience.



Arcam

SOLO MOVIE 5.1 DVD SYSTEM

This easy-to use system is a must for any discerning customer. Due early 2007.

COMING SOON



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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



Q Acoustics
1050 £330

This range-topping floorstander from newcomer Q Acoustics produces an engaging sound with fine dynamics and impressive transparency.



DALI
Ikon 6 £899

Complete with a ribbon super-tweeter, this is an exceptionally capable floorstander for the money, delivering a highly detailed and thoroughly engaging sound.



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 HDZ	FREE 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	18,29,25,5		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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
	ALR Jordan Note 3	1,350	Costly but clever; adjustable ABR gives much of the weight of a floorstander with the agility of a standmount	245,37,31,5		A	26			288
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
	B&W CM7	999	Floorstander could have greater dynamic expression, smooth and restrained sound is well balanced with bungs in place	20,91,30		A-	25			288
	Castle Richmond 3i	320	Pretty real-wood miniature sounds superbly smooth and even, if dynamically weak	17,33,23		A+	45			284
<input type="checkbox"/>	Castle Richmond 7i	900	Does all the musically important stuff flawlessly. A fine communicator that delivers reassuringly credible bass	18,92,5,26		A+	47			286
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	1487,5,16		A-	50			280
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Epos ELS3	200	Few affordable speakers sound as clean and convincing while taking up so little real estate	18,27,19		A-	60			241
<input type="checkbox"/>	Epos M5	349	Gorgeous miniature works well close to wall. Could be smoother but communicates with authority	18,33,21		A-	40			269
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Focal Chorus 816 V	1,000	Fine, warm balance, superior dynamics, and a sweet top end, but could be smoother	28,100,37,5		A+	20			288
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	20,36,27		A-	40			284
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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

SPCS & T **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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CHECK OUT OUR WEBSITE FOR EXDEM OFFERS

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO SPEAKERS

continued

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				
				SIZE (WxHxD) (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM 1/2"	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	PMC DB1+	625	Now with sweeter treble, this fun-size try lacks some weight and authority, but is beautifully balanced	16,29,24	A	50	●	261
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Q Acoustics 1010	99	Neatly styled miniature has limited bass and power handling but fine midband voicing at a very sharp price	15,21,5,19,5	A	48	●	286
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ruark Sabre III	799	Straightforward engineering combined with high finish quality that delivers a beautifully timed and engaging sound	20,33,5,27	A-	50	●	289
<input type="checkbox"/>	Triangle Antal Esw	995	Smoother than its predecessors, with a beautifully balanced bass and midband, though the top end is uneven	20,108,34	A	20	●	288
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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								
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	B&W XT4	1,800	Gorgeous, silver, super-slim floorstander has notably clean bass but perhaps sounds a little too polite	15,2,114,20	A-	25	●	281
	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Focal Chorus 826 V	1,250	Times nicely, goes loud with ease and will produce precise imaging if appropriately set up.	28,2103,8,37,5	A	45	●	287
	Focal Profile 908	1,300	Open and revealing especially of spatial and atmospheric detail, makes up for its bass restraint with joie de vivre	23,39,27,5	A	50	●	274
<input type="checkbox"/>	Focal Chorus 836V	1,549	Bulky, sharply priced three-way could be prettier. Has good bass with genuine grip, but top could be sweeter	28x115x38	A	28	●	290
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Focal 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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Focal 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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Focal Diva Utopia Be	7,599	Lovely slimline speaker combines remarkable transparency with fine dynamics and gorgeous bass	25,110,53	A+	30	●	255
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Focal 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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	MartinLogan Clarity	2,498	Relatively affordable and easy to live with electrostatic hybrid with class-leading resolving power	26,135,31	A-	46	●	245



Sound Fantastic

Olson's new Sound Fantastic range of units are specifically designed for both the home and professional hi-fi audio markets.

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Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE STEREO SPEAKERS

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WxD)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF USE	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREQ. SPACE	CLIP TO WALL	CABLE NUMBER
	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
EC	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
	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 Wafer 2	1,650	Clever 'hang-on-wall' speaker has minimal sonic compromises. Smooth midband delivers impressive stereo imaging	335,575,10		A+	45			285
	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
EC	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
EC	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
EC	Revel F32	3,200	Meticulously balanced, tonally neutral design makes for a taut, well disciplined sound	22,105,39		A	30			265
EC	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	2,000	Sharp looking speaker sounds exceptionally open and lively without aggression. Could be warmer and richer	20x100x25		A	22			290
	Ruark Talsman III	1,499	No bass demon, but a sophisticated and agile speaker epitomising Ruark's design ideals	22,84,31		A	22			259
	Sonus Faber Concerto D.	1,799	The Concerto Domus performs significantly above its price level, especially with acoustic material	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
EC	Sonus Faber Grand Piano D.	2,498	The Grand Piano Domus has a fabulous physical appearance and delivers a clean, refined sound	21,106,31		A-	32			283
EC	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
EC	Triangle Magellan Concerto	14,750	New 'sw2' version is less immediate than its predecessor, but it's easier to live with and remains highly entertaining	60,160,45		A-	32			290
	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
EC	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
EC	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
EC	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 AV SPEAKER PACKAGES

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Multichannel speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ATC Concept 3	4,877	Extremely engaging, revealing and musical multichannel system providing 360 degrees of full-on entertainment
	B&W 300 package	900	An excellent compromise between the requirements of music and those of home cinema (inc. subwoofer)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	B&W 600 S3 (602/601/LCR 600)	900	Unquestionably delivers the sonic goods. High-quality drivers in standmount enclosures
	Castle CAV Sterling	1,250	Lovely real wood veneers. Sound has fine dynamic drive and expression, but can sound a little hard
	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
	Final Sound Electrostatic system	4,875	Slim, attractive, electrostatic panels have clever connections, limited loudness but a breathtaking transparency
	Focal-JMLab Electra package	3,017	Bold, solid system, tremendous consistency and easy to expand with an added subwoofer
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Linn Akurate (242/212/225/221)	13,750	An extremely capable system that offers new insights into the potential for multichannel audio
	Mirage Omni 2	2,650	Dark tonality, but superb imagery makes this an excellent all-round choice
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
	Mordaunt-Short Genie	800	A prince among sub/sat packages – good integration and impressively little compromise compared to full-size models
	Mordaunt-Short Declaration 500	1,600	Good value vinyl THX Select package with Power Towers. Good authority, but must be 5.1-connected
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
	Tannoy Arena	1,200	Fabulously stylish sub/sats with Dual Concentric drivers. Unusually revealing for the breed, but sub lacks refinement

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)

SPECIFICATIONS					
EASE OF DRIVE	NUMBER OF SPEAKERS	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	SCALE NUMBER
A-	6	12	opt		255
A	6	27			241
A	5	22			224
A	5	28			224
A-	5	53			241
A-	6	20			251
A	5	50			232
A-	6	18			253
A	5	30			232
A	6	28			241
A-	6	38			262
A	5	25			210
A	6	20			268
A	6	29			269

Our favourite SUBWOOFERS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Bass speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	B&W PV1	950	Gorgeously styled sub shakes the air but not the floor, delivering a very clean sound with negligible coloration
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	B&W ASW850	2,000	Does all the things subwoofers should do with music and movies alike, but transparently and seamlessly
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Eclipse TD725sw	2,700	Delivers solid meaningful bass, but with unusual tunefulness, speed and articulation
	Monitor Audio ASW100	300	For the price, this compact subwoofer performs particularly well
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	REL 305	795	Landmark mid-price sub, works particularly well with low crossover frequency, looks great too
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	REL Stampede	550	Few subs at this price match the Stampede's subtlety and ease of integration. Much more hi-fi than AV
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	REL Strata 5	700	Highly musical sub that integrates well but the REL Stampede offers near-identical performance for less money
	REL Storm III	900	Excellent sub with powerful, detailed and deep bass. Comprehensive facilities, including flexible filter adjustment
	REL Storm 5	1,000	Well engineered, good bass depth, appropriate for mixed hi-fi & home cinema/multichannel systems
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
	Titan Saturn	800	Very bulky sub has curious styling, but decent filtering gives good weight and headroom
	Velodyne SPL-800R	699	Powerful, highly configurable sub with auto setup feature and attractive, compact packaging
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Wilson Benesch Torus	5,200	Amp and sub package built like a sophisticated pile driver, with deep, state of the art performance

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.

SPECIFICATIONS				
SCALE NUMBER	BASS FROM (Hz)	POWER (W)	SIZE WxHxD (CM)	FREE SPACE
259	500	20	29,34,35	
246	1000	18	53,56,52	
287	500	40	52,47,50	
225	120	27	32,32,34	
284	300	25	32,36,34	
257	100	18	28,40,29	
257	150	18	32,46,33	
225	150	18	42,62,33	
267	200	15	34,52,37	
217	200	16	59,56,39	
239	200	20	72,48,72	
286	1,000	28	26,27,33	
290	1,000	10	45x33x45	

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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	CIRCUM-AURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK	WEIGHT (g)	3.5MM JACK ADAPTOR	ISSUE NUMBER
<input type="checkbox"/>	AKG K44	20	Lively, enjoyable and remarkably detailed: a bargain						190	219
<input type="checkbox"/>	AKG K270 Studio	129	Pro oriented design which is very transparent and great with acoustic material						270	230
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	AKG K1000	650	Neutral, analytical and completely out of the head sound, suitable for connection to speaker outputs only						270	244
<input type="checkbox"/>	Beyerdynamic DT990	160	Impeccable balance, very extended bass and treble, and bags of detail place this model ahead of the pack						250	245
<input type="checkbox"/>	Beyerdynamic DT770	190	A touch coloured in the mid, but less than most closed cans: detailed and with excellent bass						290	287
<input type="checkbox"/>	Grado SR-60	90	For sheer musical enjoyment these are hard to beat. Retro styling may not be to everyone's taste						200	194
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Grado SR325i	310	Highly sophisticated and detailed sound with great extension: check for comfort						200	270
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Grado GS1000	995	One of the finest transducers on the planet, with detail to die for						250	288
<input type="checkbox"/>	Philips HP890	70	A remarkably sophisticated and very comfortable headphone						330	219
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sennheiser LX90	35	Brings recognisably hi-fi sound to in-ear transducers, with surprisingly good resolution						35	290
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sennheiser HD595	150	Technology from upmarket HD650 model makes this a very revealing headphone that's also extremely comfortable						270	266
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sennheiser HD650	300	Astonishing resolution and hardly less impressive tonal balance make this a true hi-fi experience						260	252
<input type="checkbox"/>	Shure E500PTH	420	Sophisticated in-ear design with three drivers, plus switchable 'voiceover' mic in the lead; high-quality stuff						20	285
<input type="checkbox"/>	Stax SR-001 Mk II	239	Expensive and power hungry, but this electrostatic drags personal stereo into the world of high fidelity						280	268
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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

SPECS KEY **ELECTROSTATIC** Uses electrostatic film instead of more common cone or dome dynamics. **SUPRA-AURAL** Earpads sit on ear rather than around it. **CIRCUM-AURAL** 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.

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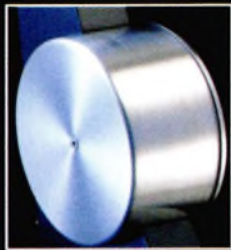
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nonconformist

adj. an individual who does not comply with conventional norms or socially approved patterns of behavior or thought

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

Interconnects and speaker cables

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIGITAL CABLE TYPE	SPECIFICATIONS
ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS									
	Black Rhodium Harmony	60	Clear and well defined sound with good bass and admirable articulation						290
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Black Rhodium Concerto	225	This DCT cable from the Polar range gives a distinctively dark timbre, rich in detail, with low subjective noise						270
	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Nordost Heimdall	370	Micro-monofilament cable, silver plated more affordable alternative to Valhalla, sounds transparent, detailed and neutral						278
	Oehlbach NF 214	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	TCI Tiger	30	Not the most detailed interconnect around, but performance belies its modest price, especially in the bass						285
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Townshend DCT300	300	DCT wire with hum-busting ferrite sleeves. Packed with enough detail to make rivals sound flat						234
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	VandenHul MC Silver II MkIII	2,250	Incredibly resolute and low distortion cable that makes the alternatives sound crude, pity about the price						289
	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									
	Atlas Compass	50	Slight improvement in detail over giveaway cables, plus distinctly more tuneful bass and more open treble, make this fine value						E 289
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Clearer Audio Silver-line	125	Very satisfying performance with finely-etched detail and sweet treble						E 278
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Kimber Select KS2020	629	Provides a subtle but rewarding lift in musicality with any DAC, justifying the price						E 260
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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									
	Atlas Hyper 2.0	15	A high degree of musical communication: detail is not perfect but one is seldom aware of the shortfall						290
	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 Epic Twin	80	Good all rounder, which generally sounds relaxed and musical, and a full bass that stops the right side of sounding blowsy						287
	Clearer Audio Copper-line A	10	Copper-line Alpha's strong, ringing bass and neutral tonality are plus points, but 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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Supra Sword	116	Zero inductance construction, medium resolution cable that has an excellent midband and is fundamentally musical						287
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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

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.

SALE

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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 Isoschelf	1,100	An enthusiast's equipment support stand free from coloration, if a little fiddly to set up
<input 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 Icon Signature	330	Gorgeous wood and glass looks; sound lacks a little detail but is nicely lively
<input type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design Icon 400	600	Beautifully built, conveniently adjustable and with little sound of its own, a very classy rack
<input 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 type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design Vantage	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 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)	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
80	66,46	5	Glass	247
81	50,50	4	Glass	217
82	43	4	MDF	193
87.5	48	5	MDF	193
75	53,5,45	4	MDF	217
75	56,37	4	Glass	286
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
<input 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 type="checkbox"/>	Kudos S50	159	Formidable bass with real authority, and a wide dynamic range across a broad bandwidth
<input 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"/>	Partington Heavi II	399	Robust to the nth degree, this stand helps produce very taut, precise bass and detailed upper frequencies
<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)	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
56	16,5,18	1		281
61	18,16,3	4		283
63	17,20	1		220
61	15,20	1		220
62	18,15	4		232
61	17,15	5		261
53	31,22	6		287
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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B&W 703 Speakers Rosenut E/D (2Yr G/tee)(2000.00)	£1395.00
Linn Klassik Music system Silver E/D (1Yr G/tee)(1250.00)	£745.00
Linn Unidisk 2.1 Disk Player E/D (2Yr G/tee)	.....(4850.00)	£2950.00
Naim CDS3/XPS2 CD Player-P/S S/H (1Yr G/tee)	.....(7875.00)	£4295.00
Naim NAC82 Preamplifier (1Yr G/tee) S/H	.....(2500.00)	£1095.00
ProAc Studio 130 Speakers E/D (2Yr G/tee)	.....(1099.00)	£769.00
ProAc Studio 140 Speakers E/D (2Yr G/tee)	.....(1399.00)	£975.00
Quad 22L Speakers Maple E/D (2Yr G/tee)(895.00)	£499.00
Spendor S3e Speakers Rosenut (2Yr G/tee) E/D(795.00)	£495.00

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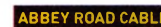
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Zingali Loudspeakers have been my passion – a crusade since I first heard them nine years ago. Since then many of my customers have discovered the superior performance of a crafted loudspeaker which will not be found in the High Street nor the pages of What Hi-Fi? Every month new owners add to a remarkable mail bag expressing gratitude and pleasure.

NEW FACTORY

Zingali's unique commitment to design all components and control all manufacture is the only way to make this loudspeaker. It is more expensive and a great deal more trouble but everything can be optimised and designed coherently to convey the full musical signal.

Last summer, Zingali occupied the largest loudspeaker plant in Europe. Demo facilities alone will comprise a foyer, two stereo rooms, a cinema, an outdoor rock stadium, and outdoor covered amphitheatre. Workshops include electrical, woodworking and paint shops which are the most advanced in Europe. Even the distinctive

soft-feel black has been replaced by a finish with improved lustre and depth; and water-based to contribute to ecological conservation.

All components, including the paint and varnish, are designed and quality-checked during assembly under one roof. This depth of control alone is unique and gives consistency as well as reliability. Of the 50,000 drivers made in the present series only two have been replaced!!

In February the company celebrates its 20th anniversary with a launch of the TWENTY range: using the same principle, the in-house drivers, crossover, cabinets, horns, indeed all-components have been taken forward to the next generation. All models use an acoustic lens which Zingali has discovered as the way to fully integrate woofer with horn on the upper frequencies.

Contact us today for the 2007 Newsletter, price list and special offers.

Jack Lawson
Specialist Hi-Fi Consultant
Audio Salon

ATTENTION DEALERS:

Zingali Loudspeaker S.r.l. is establishing four specialist Zingali centres in the UK. For details of the franchise and the dealer trip please obtain information pack by email to Jack at The Audio Salon.

Do you want to choose your hifi or home cinema system, in a comfortable and relaxing environment...?

Do you want friendly and impartial advice (and a cup of tea) ...?

Do you want to buy your system based on what you hear, and see, and not what somebody tells you...?

Do you live in GUILDFORD...?

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Nobody else in these areas carries all the following major hifi brands:

Apollo, Arcam(Diva/FMJ), Ash Design, Atacama, **Atlas** (spkr cables & interconnects) B&W, **Chord Company**, **Creek**, **Cyrus**, Denon, Epos, **Exposure**, **Genelec**, **Anthony Gallo Acoustics**, Harman Kardon, Infinity, Iso Tek, KEF (including **Reference**), Linn Products(including Knekt), **MJ Acoustics**, Meridian, Michell, **Mirage**, Mission, Musical Fidelity, NAD, **Naim**, Ortofon, Pioneer, **PMC**, **Primare**, **Proac**, Project, Pure, QED(including Systemline), Quad, Quadraspire, REL, Rotel, Sennheiser, Soundstyle, **Spendor**, Stands Unique, **Tag McLaren**, Wharfedale, Yamaha.

Nobody else in these areas carries all the following major Home Cinema products:

DVD players: Arcam & **FMJ**, **Cyrus**, Denon, Harman Kardon, Meridian, Rotel, **Tag McLaren**, Yamaha,

Processors: **Arcam FMJ AV8**, **Cyrus**, **Lexicon**, Linn, Meridian, Rotel, **Tag McLaren**.

Amplifiers: Arcam/**FMJ**, **Bryston**, **Cyrus**, Denon, Harman Kardon, **Lexicon**, **Naim**, Rotel, **Tag McLaren**, Yamaha.

Display devices: Plasma screens from Loewe, Panasonic, Pioneer and **Yamaha**. Televisions/LCD: Loewe.

Projectors: **Barco(CRT/DLP)**, **Sim (DLP)**, **Yamaha(DLP/LCD)** Screens: **Stewart/Draper/Vutec** ,

Video Processing: **Faroudja**, **I-Scan**, **Key Digital**, **Lumagen**, **Tag**. Control systems: **Crestron**, Lutron lighting.

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Moon

In a nutshell, Simaudio believes in evolution, not revolution. Each product has a delicately balanced combination of timeless appearance, battleship-build quality and jaw-dropping sonic performance. There is no miracle science to this – Simaudio's engineering team is not made up of magicians. It is the result of the passion for music & film coupled with very advanced R&D facilities, masterminded by raw engineering brain power that relentlessly pursues musical perfection.



Velodyne

Velodyne has achieved digital perfection with the Digital Drive Series subwoofers. The series consists of 4 digital subwoofers the DD-10 (10 driver, 8 piston diameter), the DD-12 (12 driver, 9.7 piston diameter), the DD-15 (15 driver, 12.7 piston diameter), and the DD-18 (massive 18 driver, 15.2 piston diameter). The Digital Drive Series features Velodyne's revolutionary Digital Drive room management technology that takes subwoofer room equalization to a new level. This latest Velodyne innovation allows the subwoofers frequency response in any room to be measured and digitally corrected in real-time using a supplied microphone, and stored in the units memory to assure ideal performance in the consumers listening area.

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they used to say, it's grim up north...

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Looking for a Home Cinema System?



..make sure you get the full service!

“ ...without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. ”

Isn't it easy to buy a home cinema system? You read the magazine product reviews, you find out who sells the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys at the cheapest price and you place your order. The system is delivered to your door still in the box. You get a friend who knows his onions to install it - and live happily ever after.

This is a fairly well-trodden path but it leads to dissatisfaction, endless upgrades and a lot of wasted money. Besides there being a bewildering choice of components on the market today, there are also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, plasma or LCD, conventional wide-screen CRT or back-projection TV? And on the audio side do you plump for a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub, and where do you site them for the best results? The choice of home cinema amp raises even more questions. Will you be listening to music through the same system? If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Do you need SACD, DVD-Audio, or HD-DVD capability? How many inputs do you need for video, s-video, component, coaxial digital, optical digital? The above are just a small percentage of the decisions that must be made. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

So how do you select a system? You could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that it will be a great system. But it probably won't be. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that **the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis, that is without professional input, are performing at way below their optimum level.** To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity.

Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

What and Where to buy

The system you think you want may not be right for you. So where do you start? Here's an important tip...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There is only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. Now it's likely you have preconceived ideas that may put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell 'top-end' gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. In short they're too expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to?

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Oscar Wilde wrote "Too many people today know the price of everything and the value of nothing." Specialist retailers know that not all potential purchasers will seek them out. They tend to attract the more discerning, thoughtful customers. Let's face it, a good deal is about far more than just price. After all, unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a nicer way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



Listed on this page are 20 of the best AV shops in the country. They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
SERVICE	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
FACILITIES	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
VERDICT	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

OUR TOP 20 UK SPECIALIST AV DEALERS

LONDON

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190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500
- **SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS**
61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea. 020 7924 2040

SOUTH

- **Ashford, Kent SOUNDCRAFT HI-FI**
40 High Street. 01233 624441
- **Brighton POWERPLANT**
40 Church Road. 01273 775542
- **Chelmsford RAYLEIGH HI-FI**
216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245
- **Colchester RAYLEIGH HI-FI**
33 Sir Isaac's Walk. 01206 577682
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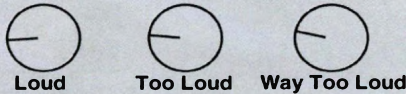
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Audio Note lo 1 MC cartridge. Surely one of the best cartridges in existence, the lo uses Alnico magnets and pure silver coils to extract everything from your LP's in the most musical way possible: £1,595.



The Nottingham Analogue Dais turntable is the result of many years of research by the company's founder, Tom Fletcher. In our opinion it offers unmatched performance at its £3,519 price level. It's pictured here with the 12" Nottingham Analogue Ace Space tonearm which costs £710.

J.C. Verdier Platine This spectacular turntable uses a high mass platter suspended by magnetic repulsion and an externally housed high quality DC motor. Its performance is as magnificent as its appearance suggests, offering a completely stable basis for the finest arms and cartridges. Prices start from £5,000.



Note products PhoNote uses an all triode valve audio circuit with short signal paths, low output impedance and no global feedback. The result is an exceptionally low noise design with breathtaking clarity and musical involvement. The MM version costs £1,500, the MC version £1,750.

CEC TL-51X this top loading transport is something rather special. Its novel design uses a belt drive (rather than the more common direct drive) to spin the disc. It produces a sound which is incredibly effortless, with tremendous resolution of acoustics and space: £1,200

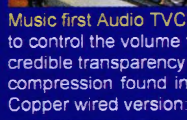


Consonance CD2.2 Linear This wonderful filterless CD player uses a 6H30 triode in its output stage. It produces the characteristically wide dynamic range of a filterless design, capturing great speed and energy on all CD's. Surely the most involving player at its £1,395 price.



Bewitch A30 integrated amplifier uses 6550 output valves in an ultra-linear pure class A push pull design producing 30 glorious watts per channel.

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Audion Silver Note One This is a specially commissioned amplifier exclusive to Noteworthy Audio. It uses a single 2A3 directly heated triode per channel in an ultra-purist single ended zero feedback design. It produces 3.7 of the finest watts available, if you have high efficiency speakers you need to hear this remarkable amplifier: £2,500.

The Usher CP6371 offer astonishing value for money. These very substantial speakers (they weigh 60kg each) and cost only £2,000 for a pair. A pair of wonderfully natural sounding carbon fibre filled paper cones are used in a two way configuration with a 1" soft dome tweeter covering the high frequencies. Their sound is potent yet not overblown, and the very rigid boxes mean that cabinet colouration is extremely low.



The Avantgarde Duo's use horns for the high and mid frequencies and as a result offer 104dB sensitivity. They produce all the speed and dynamics you'd expect from such a design and are effortlessly musical. These speakers really do have the most astonishing mid band performance, if you in the market for a pair of speakers at this £9,995 price point then you really must hear them.

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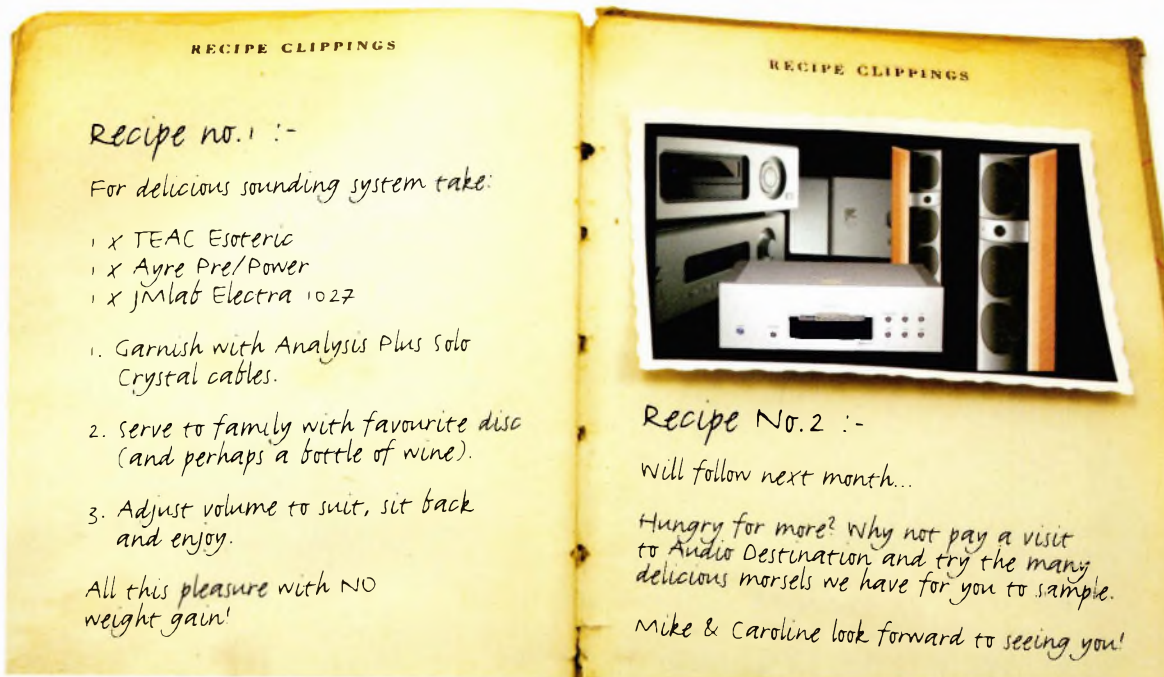
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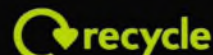
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cartridge audio

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A grand don't come for free, but it does buy a great CD player

Some of the best £1,000 CD player bargains are models that are nearly new. CD technology is still advancing, and with this comes ever-decreasing prices.

Enter the Meridian G08. Although this player was only launched in mid-2003 and costs around £2,250 new, we've seen early examples for half that. This may be at the top end of our budget, but the value offered is unquestionable. Unlike some £2,000-plus CD players, the G08 actually looks the part. The G Series replaced the 500 range and carries on that player's use of classy smoked-glass panels. The remote is also something to behold, and not only resembles a missile control unit, but boasts a handy learning capability, too. Motorola upsampling converters provide the G08 with an exquisite sound quality.

For refinement, staging and realism, this was, and still is, one of the best. It may not have quite the 'wallop' of some, but it's not exactly bass-shy either.

Even better news comes from the G08's excellent reliability record. Unlike the cheaper G Series CD players, it uses a CD-ROM. Audiophiles may turn their noses up at this, but it provides fast access, MP3 compatibility (from mid-2006 only) and, most crucially, dependable performance. In contrast to earlier Philips CDM12-equipped Meridian players, sticking sleds won't trouble you with this model. Being so new, parts and service availability simply aren't an issue, and Meridian even offers free software updates. For peace of mind and a fluid, well-textured sound, this has to be one of the very best players at its price.

Launched in 1998, the Naim CDX is older than the G08, but no less revered. Terms such as 'earthy', 'dynamic' and 'musical' were all used to describe it, along with 'refined' – rarely will you find this in the same sentence as the others. There's no doubt that the CDX can be tricky to match and, invariably, is at its best with other Naim equipment. Having said that, get the match right and it can prove addictive.

As with other Naim gear, the CDX can be upgraded using the XPS power supply. The only problem here is that one of these will cost you another £800-£900; as much as the player. Either way, though, the CDX,

with its early adoption of the Philips VAM1205 mechanism, has proved to be reliable. Should anything go wrong, Naim still keeps all the parts, and you can even check the age of a unit with the firm via its serial number. For a system that needs a little life injecting into it, the CDX could be the ideal tonic.

Next up, we have the rather intriguing Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista CD player. As you may remember, its brushed-aluminium looks were inspired by the Audi TT, while its

to fit Philips 'Double Gold Crown' 16-bit devices. These DACs were well loved in the late 1980s, and despite the CD7 being launched in 1999, they helped make the model an instant classic.

Costing £3,500 new, this is still a highly impressive CD player. It's not perfect, and certainly not as composed as the G08, but it has a texture and depth of sound that many newer and more expensive players fail to emulate. Many still feel it's the finest CD player ever built by Marantz.

“CD technology is still advancing, and with this comes ever-decreasing prices.”

electronics came from another generation – literally. Unique to this player were four Nuvistor output valves. Produced by RCA for weaponry use in the 1960s/70s, they have an expected life of 100,000 hours and a failure rate of 0.1%. Needless to say, you'd be very unlucky to find a player with duff valves. Just in case you do, however, Musical Fidelity has kindly kept aside an extra set for every Nu-Vista built – well worth buying and keeping to one side.

The rest of this highly rated and almost analogue-sounding CD player is equally robust. The Sony transport is reliable, and the other electronics are long-lasting. Despite the fact that only 500 of these players were ever built between 2001 and 2003, examples are now available for bang on our budget of £1,000.

One model that's not bang on our budget, but is too special not to include, is the Marantz CD7. Not so very long ago, these collectable CD players were going for £2,000. Now that figure is more like £1,500, and if you're able to wait a little bit longer, it's certain to come down further still. What makes the CD7 so special is its painstaking design and engineering by Ken Ishiwata. Not content with any of the single-bit DACs available, he decided

Mechanically, the CD7 has proved robust, although the modified Philips CDM12.3 transport can be problematic. It's worth testing with an 80-minute CD and checking that the CD player will play the last track. Getting hold of spares is possible, but more troublesome than with the others here. Marantz farms out service to a third party, which isn't that cheap. Proof of this comes from the £355 price tag quoted for a transport mechanism. Clearly, the CD7 isn't the safest second-hand bet, but its sheer charisma will be enough for some. **HFC**

Dominic Todd

Next month: £500+ tuners



Top: Naim CDX CD player
Above: Meridian G08 CD player

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ProAc Studio 140, mahogany finish, brand new - never used but box opened, recent 5 stars What Hi-Fi, evenly balanced sound with high quality finish!	£1195
JAS Audio Supertweeters, Review pair, sound awesome! (£649)	£595

ANALOGUE

Trichord Diablo phono stage, exc cond, only 9mths old, boxed (£750)	£495
Wilson Benesch Full Circle, boxed as new, exc cond (£2100)	£1495
VPI Scout inc JMW-9 tonearm, immac cond, boxed, very little usage (£1650)	£1195

MISC

Nordost Blue Heaven Speaker Cable, ex dem, 4m pair, bi-wire (£489)	£349
IsoTek GII Minisub, silver front, current spec, immac cond (£545)	£395
Naim Hi-Cap power supply, good condition, serial no. 304xx, superb upgrade	£550
IsoTek Mainline filtered mains cable, excellent condition (£200)	£95
IsoTek Mainline digital filtered mains cable, exc condition (£225)	£110
Hovland Reference Speaker Cable, exdem, boxed, 8ft pair, single wired (£1200)	£795
Townshend Supertweeters, titanium finish, boxed as new, exd (£800)	£649
Nordost Thor, ex-dem, immaculate condition, boxed, Valhalla wired (£1600)	£1195
IsoTek Titan mains conditioner, few months old, boxed (£1500)	£1095
Nordost Valhalla Speaker Cable, 3m per side, bi-wire with z-plugs (£5700)	£3995

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DEFINITIVE AUDIO

Sale of part exchanged and ex-dem items

ITEM DESCRIPTION	SALE	NEW
Clearaudio Goldfinger cartridge. Brand new, still in sealed box	£3500	£5640
Craft Charisma X phono/line pre-amp	£1500	£3000
Musical Fidelity KW series DM2S CD transport + DAC - boxed, brand new (still has protective film on plugs and & display)	£2900	£4000
Canary 301 300B Stereo power amp with LV upgrade - excellent	£3500	£6500
Mactone MA300B 20 watts 300B power amp - 30 hours use	£2500	£6500
Mactone XX330 line pre-amp - 10 hours use	£2500	£8000
Esoteric X01 CD player - perfect - boxed - 10 months old	£5500	£9600
SME V tonearm - standard wire - 10 years old	£850	£1800
SME V tonearm - 1 month - standard wire	£1400	£1800
Placette passive line stage - 3 inputs - 120v - remote control - 6 months old	£900	£1600
Living Voice loudspeakers - various ex-dem, part-ex, seconds, from very young to very old please call		
Tom Evans Groove Plus	£1900	£3000
Rega Jupiter CD player - professionally clocked + rebuilt with Black Gates	£600	
Audio Innovations P2 phono stage - completely standard	£700	
Transfiguration Esprit - 10 hours use - perfect ex-review bargain	£600	
Canary 903 4 box pre-amp - champagne facia - 3 months old - boxed	£2850	£6500
Border Patrol 300B SE - Western Electric valves - 8 watts - chamfer	£2800	£5000
Sugden Bijou mm/mc phono stage - 100 ohms - virtually new	£300	£650
Sonus Faber Electa Amator - Walnut - stand mount - lovely condition	£1750	£3500
Arl Audio PX25 - 5 watts - single ended stereo	£2500	£4500
Avalon Arcus loudspeaker - Maple	£3500	£7000
Tube Technology Prophet pre-amp - 30 hours use	£1250	£2500
Tube Technology Unisis Signature integrated - 30 hours use	£1250	£2500
Nottingham Analogue Spacedeck with Rega RB300 tonearm, Reson Recca cartridge and Living Voice mat.	£1000	£1633
Unison Research Smart 300B class A power amp - 1 year old	£2000	£4500
JPS Kaptivator power cables - very nearly new	£600	£1200
JPS SC3 interconnect - very nearly new £400 £795	£400	£795
Revel M20 bookshelf loudspeakers - Santos Rosewood - with stands	£850	£2000
Beard integrated amp - beefy boy - needs some help	£350	
Nordost Quattro Fil interconnect - 1m set - boxed	£400	£1000
Nordost Quattro Fil interconnect - 2m set - boxed	£700	£1800
Nordost Blue Heaven speaker cable - 4m - revision 2 - boxed	£500	
Mitchell Iso / Hera phono stage	£200	
Townshend Audio Seismic Sink - 3DHD (100 kilos) 48x48	£300	
Townshend Audio Seismic Sink - 3DSS (12 kilos) 48x48	£250	

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EX DEMO AND SECOND-HAND ITEMS

	Was	Now
Digital	3500	1799
Audio Synthesis DAX Decade 22 Bit Balanced S/H	2999	1499
Arcam Diva CD92 Silver dCS Ring Player S/H	799	449
AVI Lab Series CD Player S/H	1500	749
dCS P8i SACD/CD Player factory re sealed full warranty	7500	3999
dCS Verdi laScala SACD/CD Transport/up-sampler S/H	9000	4250
Densen Beat400 XS x demo	2600	1499
Linn Karik Numerik DAC S/H	1500	499
Linn Karik CD Player S/H	1999	499
Marantz CD65 Ki Sig MKII S/H	N/A	329
Orpheus Labs Zero CD Player x demo	4600	2999
Theta Generation V Balanced S/H	6200	1299
Theta Pro Basic II DAC with Oskom/Balanced S/H	2990	695
Wadia 302 Black x-demo	4000	2999
Analogue		
EAR B34P MM Volume Phono stage S/H	575	379
Heed Audio Orbit 1 TT PSU New & Boxed	225	179
Kuzma Stabi/Stogi S Turntable New & Boxed	N/A	1399
Mc Cormack Micro Drive Phono Stage S/H	650	399
Phonomena Phono stage MM/MC BINB	650	399
Phonomena BPS Battery supply for phono BINB	650	399
Rega P2 /Bias Turntable S/H	270	179
Preamplifiers		
Audio Analogue Bellini Remote Preamplifier X-demo	625	399
Audio research LS1 Hybrid Preamplifier S/H	2399	1750
Conrad Johnson PV14 Remote controlled valve x demo	4000	1999
Conrad Johnson Premier 18LS x-demo	6000	2299
Convergent Audio CAT SL1 Signature Black S/H	1100	799
Densen B200 Preamplifier S/H	1799	999
Electrocompaniet EC48 Preamplifier S/H	3998	1750
Krell KRC3 Preamplifier S/H	3200	1999
Orpheus Two Preamplifier x-demo	2299	995
Roksan L1 Preamp (requires PSU) S/H	2699	1299
Roksan L1 S Preamplifier (requires PSU) S/H	2300	1599
Sugden masterclass Preamplifier x demo	7600	4999
Spectral DMC 30s Reference Preamplifier x demo	N/A	329
Tag McLaren PA20r Linestage S/H		
Amplifiers		
Audio Research VM220 Valve mono Amplifiers x demo	9000	7499
Audio research VT100MKIII Valve Power Amplifier S/H	6400	3999
Bel canto EVO2 GenII x demo	2899	1899
Conrad Johnson MV60 SE Valve Amplifier S/H	2500	1895
Conrad Johnson Premier 350SA x demo	8000	5999
Craft TwinStar Power amplifier S/H	1800	999
Densen Beat 340 x demo	1800	999
Densen Beat 320 S/H	1800	999
Densen Beat 300ds x-demo	1800	999
Orpheus Thrice power amplifier x demo	2995	1799
Roksan S1 S stereo power amplifier silver S/H	1495	599
Sugden masterclass monos x demo	6600	4999
Loudspeakers		
Audio Physic Spark 3 maple X-demo	1699	1099
Diapason Adamantes III with stands S/H	2150	1299
JM Lab Micro Utopia Classic x demo	4700	3750
JM Lab Chorus 714s Style x-demo	479	349
JM Lab Electra 927 be Anniversary S/H	2800	1699
Martin Logan Aeon I Oak x-demo	3189	2300
Monitor Audio Radius 360 Subwoofer Cherry S/H	350	249
Pen Audio Rebel 2 x demo	995	699
Pen Audio Charm Active Subwoofer x-demo	1995	999
ProAc Future One Ebony S/H	7000	2999
Rega ELA 2000 S/H	850	449
Sonus Faber Concertino Home Piano lacquer S/H	699	399
Sonus Faber Leather Stands, fixed height, x demo	310	199
Spendar S3 Cherry S/H	599	379
Spendar SP1 Teak S/H	1200	999
Wilson Audio Witts S/H	11000	2999
Wilson Audio Sophia II Silver 3 months old S/H	11950	7999
Cables and Accessories		
BCD Engineering 1000 Table 4 tier S/H	1650	899
Cogan Hall Intermezzo EMD 0.75m RCA S/H	N/A	99
Madrigal MDC2 1m RCA/RCA 75ohm Digital Cable new boxed	430	249
Nordost Shiva 2m mains cable x demo	220	175
Shun Mook 1pr Spatial Controller x demo	450	229
Shun Mook Ultra Diamond Resonators set of 3 x demo	710	399
Siltech SPX20 1m IEC to Shuko S/H	229	99
Siltech SPX20 1m IEC to Shuko S/H	229	99
Siltech LS188 Classic 2x3m Silver & Gold Speaker cable BINB	3950	2995
Siltech Forbes Lake 1m Balanced GS Signature Interconnect S/H	2850	1299
Sound Organisation Record Rack with CD insert S/H	N/A	40
Spectral MI-350 20ft interconnect RCA-RCA x demo	1400	799
Transparent The Link 1.5m RCA-RCA S/H	190	99
Transparent Music Link Ultra 1m RCA-RCA S/H	998	499
Transparent Music Link Ultra 2m RCA-RCA S/H	1129	579
Western Electric 300b Valves 1Pair NEW	650	549
Tuners & Tape decks, power supplies		
Densen Beat 800 AM/FM Tuner x demo	850	599
Magnum Dynalab FTR remote/Tuner for Etude S/H	395	199
Naim Audio NATOS FM/AM Tuner S/H	855	699
Isotek Substation special version S/H	1600	795
Isotek Qube2K S/H	1495	849

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aluminata cables

JPSlabs Cables Prices shown in £	0.75m pair	1.0m pair	4-ft pair (-1.2m)	6-ft pair (-1.8m)	2m	per metre
Digital (SPDIF or AES)	995	1095				
Reference Interconnect (RCA or XLR)	1895	2095				
Reference Speaker Cable			3995	4895		450/ft
Set of 4 Bi-wiring Jumpers			299			
Reference Power Cord 1.0 metre minimum					2499	950/m

digital cables

JPSlabs Cables Prices shown in £	SPDIF 0.75m (RCA or BNC)	SPDIF 1.0m (RCA or BNC)	AES/EBU 0.75m (XLR)	AES/EBU 1.0m (XLR)
Ultra		55		
SuperConductor FX	165	195	205	225
SC-3	345	375	345	395
Aluminata	1195	1295	1195	1295

premium cables

JPSlabs Cables Prices shown in £	0.75m pair	1.0m pair	6-ft pair (-1.8m)	8-ft pair (-2.4m)	2m	per metre
NEWI SC-3 Interconnect (RCA or XLR)	695	795				300
NEWI SC-3 Speaker wire			1899	2099		100/ft
SC-1 (Bi-Wire)			699	799		50/ft
SC-2 Petite (Single run)			449	499		50/ft
Set of 4 Bi-wiring Jumpers			85			
The Kaptovator AC Power Cord					995	

superconductor cables

JPSlabs Cables Prices shown in £	0.5m pair	1.0m pair	6-ft pair (-1.8m)	8-ft pair (-2.4m)	2m	per metre
The SC fx Interconnect (RCA)	219	259				35
(fully balanced)	299	349				35
SC fx Bi-wire cable			399	439		20/ft
The Analog AC Power Cord					279	
The Digital AC Power Cord					279	
Power AC- for amplifiers					379	

entry level cables

JPSlabs Cables Prices shown in £	0.5m pair	1.0m pair	6-ft pair (-1.8m)	8-ft pair (-2.4m)	2m	per metre
The ultra interconnect (fully balanced)	89	99				30
Ultra Speaker Cable (Bi-Wire set)			139	159		10/ft
The 6PA-2 AC Power Cord			229	259		15/ft
					139	



JPSlabs Cables - why compromise?

4 Park Circus, Glasgow, G3 6AX, Scotland

0845 4000 400

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E-mail: heatherdale@hifi-stereo.com

Telephone: 01903 872288

Mobile: 07860 660001 Fax: 01903 872234

Speakers:

Origin Live OL-2 speakers	£250
Kef Concord speakers	£150
Dynaudio Audience 7 speakers & stands	£395
Hales Transcendence 5 Loudspeakers	£2900
TDL RTL3 speakers	£95
Tannoy Westminster Royal HE speakers	£9995
Mordaunt Short MS 902 speakers	£99

Pre-amps:

Naim Nac 92 with Nap 90/3 amp	£595
Proceed PAV pre-amp	£995
Mark Levinson 26S balanced pre-amp	£2500
Mark Levinson ML28 with phono stage	£995
Audionote M8 pre-amp with phono stage (£19,500)	£9995
Audionote Zero remote control pre-amp (new)	£695

Amplifiers:

Audionote Neiro mono-blocks	£5495
Mark Levinson ML383 integrated amp	£2995
Classe CA201 amp	£1995
Arcam Alpha 8P power amp	£195
Kora Triode 100SB	£3500
Mark Levinson 432 Power Amp	£4995
Mark Levinson 20.5 Reference Monoblocks	£4500
Exposure 15 integrated amp	£345
Mark Levinson ML33H monoblocks	£POA
Audionote Keron monoamps, mint (£28,000)	£11995

CD Players, Transport and DACs:

Denon DCD 590 CD player	£60
Sony CDP M41 CD player	£60
Micromega Drive 3/DAC1	£495

Miscellaneous:

Hitachi FT5500 Mk11 tuner	£125
Sony ST-SE570 tuner	£60
Technics ST-GT550 tuner	£65
Winds stylus gauge	£425
Transparent Musicwave-plus speaker cable 10ft, pair	£425
Nordost Red Dawn SE interconnect	£150
Mandrake balanced interconnect	£295
JPS 'The Power Plus' 2m power cable	£195
Sony FM/AM ST-SE370 Tuner	£75

Turntables, Cartridges and Tonearms:

Audio Tekne cartridge with step-up transformer	£2495
My Sonic Eminent cartridge (new)	£2750
Project 9c S carbon fibre silver wired arm	£375
Trichord Delphini phono stage	£250

Main Dealer for:

Mark Levinson, Ayre Acoustic, Tannoy Prestige speakers, Thiel speakers, Audionote, Esoteric, Bolzano Villetti speakers, SME, Stax, Cello, Lyra, My-Sonic, Revel, Audio Tekne, Michell.

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FOR SALE

ARCAM A65+ integrated amp, (£370) £245. Arcam P75+ power amp, (£299) £175. NAD 541i CD player, (£330) £165. Rotel 1062 integrated amp, (£595) £395. 01904 771041 (York).

ARCAM 8R integrated amp, 8P power amp, B&W DM602 S2 standmount speakers, £450, or may split. 07710 737232 (East Lothian).

ARCAM DIVA CD72 CD player. 24-bit DAC, CD Text. What-Hi-Fi? Awards product of the year 2001. Excellent condition, boxed with remote/manuals, £250ono. 020 8907 3246 (London).

AUDIOQUEST INDIGO speaker cable, 2x3m pairs, 4mm QED Airloc plugs, very good condition, £60. Stands Unique CD racks (two), 180 capacity each, mahogany finish, excellent condition, £250 both or £130 each. Raymond, 01900 65381 (Workington).

AUDIOQUEST EMERALD interconnects 1m pair (£260) £85. QED Silver Spiral Qunex 1m pair (£90) £35. 01278 782622 (Burnham on Sea).

B&W 602 S3 (£300) £200. All mint condition. Call Paul 07866 853944 (York).

B&W DM601 S3 speakers, unmarked, as new condition in sorrento. Boxed etc, £180. Apollo Olympus 50cm stands, mint work very well with B&Ws, £35. May deliver, readvertised due to time waster. Chris 01766 781211 (Harlech).

B&W 604 S3 black, four months old, boxed, mint condition, (£800) £600. Thomas 07835 056237 (Notts)

B&W 704 in rich American Walnut. 18 months old, perfect condition and boxed, £800. Naim

flatcap x2, 10 months old, only powered CD player, perfect condition, boxed, £400 delivered in UK 07729 458836 (Northern Ireland).

BONNEC TIMPANO preamp with phono stage. Latest spec, £3,500. Linn Klout power amps x2. Can split, £850 each. 01704 536852 or 07736 269707 (Merseyside).

CHORD SPA2200 pre with matching 1200B power. Unused since service at Chord. Original boxes and paperwork, £2,450 01825 722936 (Sussex).

CHORD SPM 1400E (x2) with four Integra legs. Black, silver badging/lettering, three years old, mint condition, £5,950. Phone Ian on 01789 261585 or 07941 424322 or email ian.brunt@zen.co.uk (Warwickshire).

CYRUS DVD7 mint condition, silver, with Russ Andrews Oak Cone Feet. Excellent sound and picture and fantastic with CD playback. Can demo, £350. 01234 306930 (Bedford).

CYRUS 8VS silver amplifier. Award winner mint condition, hardly used, boxed, fantastic sound and power, £475. 07739 822360 (London).

DENON CDR-M30 CD recorder £120. Nordost Cineflex speaker cable, 2x6m, £50. Toshiba SD350E DVD player £50. Denon RCD-100 CD/amp/tuner in one box, £175. All excellent condition. 01285 862539 (Cirencester).

EXPOSURE 17 preamp and two Exposure stereo power amps in mint condition. Four years old, fantastic sounding trio, reluctant sale, (£3,300) £1,500. Alan 01302 739976 or 07936 603015 (Doncaster).

FOCAL MEZZO UTOPIA seven years old, one owner, modified, (£7,250) £2,800. Photos available +00352 407702 or +00352 621 500756 or email barig@internet.lu (Luxembourg).

GRYPHON CALLISTO 2200 integrated amplifier. 200 watts, vgc, terrific clarity and dynamics. (£4,500) £2,250. 07968 189647 (London).

KEF QQDS rear dipole speakers, maple finish, 120 watts. Boxed, excellent condition, warranty, (£400) £200. Yamaha YST320 sub, 250 watts, (£375) £200. Good condition 01782 256087 (Stoke on Trent).

KRELL FPB300CX £7,500 plus shipping. Serious applications only to ewadv@hotmail.com (Israel).

LINN KLIMAX power amplifier, pair of 500 solos, £6,500. Pair of Chakra 500 twins, £2,750 each. Excellent condition, boxed, interconnects. Call for more info Barrie 01323 487781 (E Sussex).

LINN SONDEK LP12 Lingo PSU, Ittok arm, Dynavector Karat 17D2 (new). All mint and superb sound, £1,250ono. Custom made six-tier equipment rack, spiked top and bottom. Looks great sounds better, (£700) £210. Andy 0115 9126424 (Midlands). ☑

WANTED

ATLAS OR NORDOST Red Dawn interconnect. 07810 1039008 (Yorks).

AUDIO TECHNICA AT1100 tonearm, will pay £50. 01462 456006 (Herts).

LINN OR NAIM speakers. 01793 728103 (Wilts).

MUSICAL FIDELITY P150 power amps, will collect, must be vgc. 07733 167226 (W.Yorks)

MUSICAL FIDELITY TRI-VISTA DAC 21 in mint condition. Willing to pay good price. No scratches or dents please and fully functioning. 07772 291425 ((Tyne and Wear).

PINCH ROLLER part number 642-001 for Ferrograph Series Y open reel tape deck. 01592 750643 (Fife).

PIONEER A300R precision amplifier. 1970's Sugden A21a. Onyx A021. Nytech. Naim Nait amp. Inca Tech Claymore. Sonneteer Champion amp. Nordost Red Dawn. 07810 103908 (West Yorkshire).

STAX OMEGA electrostatic earspeakers up to £1,000 for mint condition example. 01333 311247 (Scotland).

WHARFEDALE 708 speakers 023 8073 8935 (Essex).

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

❑ **LUXMAN D322** CD player with variable output, boxed, in as new condition with manual and remote, £150ono. John 07855 121587 (W.Yorks).

LS3/5A ORIGINAL BBC Chartwell speakers on stands, offers. KEF Concerto speakers, £80. Marantz CD63 MkII K1, £175. Kenwood KX-5010 cassette recorder, £50. Denon TU660L AM/FM tuner, £55. 01865 882507 (Oxon).

MARANTZ PM7200. Arcam CD72 CD player. Boxed, both mint condition, £100 each. 01708 853702 (Essex)

MERIDIAN 200 CD and 203 D to A, pair of Linn Kaber 500 speakers powered by Linn LK1 preamp and Dirak power supply. Linn LK280 power amp, spark power supply, tri-wired, all in unmarked condition in original boxes. Needs to go, best sensible offer secures. 01242 577777 or 07831 762500 (Cheltenham).

MERIDIAN M2 active loudspeakers, two 70 watt amps in each enclosure. Mint with original stands. Gladly demo bring your own CDs, £425 ovno. Lecson HL1 horn loudspeakers, mint, and very rare in this condition, £375ovno. Call for more information 020 8678 1930 or 07985 520619 (London).

MONITOR AUDIO GR20 floorstanding speakers, cherry wood finish. Excellent condition, unmarked, boxed. Great sound, very good reviews, (£1,500) £650ono. 07802 936750 (Hampshire).

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-DAC V3 £275. X-10 v3 £175. X-PSU v3, £150. Or all three together, £550. 01603 440405 (Norwich).

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-PRE V3 preamp and XP200 power amp, mint, boxed, £1,250. Saverio 01332 843758 (Derbys).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A3 Dual Mono amp, £430. A3.5 CD player, £500. A3.2CR power amp, £500. All mint condition. Brian 07747 664742 (Dumfriesshire)

MUSICAL FIDELITY KW25 two-box CD player, new boxed, superb sound, (£4,000) £3,125. Sondek LP12 black, Lingo, Cirkus, Attok, Dynavector 17D2 (new) mint, £1,200ono. Six-tier equipment support spiked top and bottom, £175ono. Andy 0115 912 6424 (Notts).

NAD 524 CD player, £125. T562 DVD, £125. Both remotes and instructions. Optimum 6000AV stand, chrome legs, £150. Buyer collects 07976 956298 (Devon).

NAIM LINN LP12 (modded) Naim Armageddon power supply.

Naim Aro tone arm, £750, good condition. 01453 750183 eves or weekends. (Gloucester).

NAIM NAC 82 with MM phono stage, £1,100. NAP180, £650. SBL black, latest drivers, £1,000. All excellent condition and boxed. 020 7253 4469. (London).

NAIM NAC 82 preamp (1999), with black style NAPSC, remote, leads, plug-ins, manual, box. Can demonstrate, £1,025 ono. 07973 785360 (Sussex).

QUAD L-SERIES subwoofer, boxed, one month old. High gloss rosewood finish, 300 watts, £450ono. 01580 241491 (Kent).

QUAD 31/306 pre/power amp. Grey, heavy duty speaker connectors and new caps.

Excellent condition, £250 pair. 0121 382 0145 (Birmingham).

QUAD 33/303 power amp and preamp, with matching Quad tuner, all mint condition working perfectly, bargain, £295. Luxman L30 integrated amp, excellent sound, £50 +003531 2954076 (Ireland).

QUADRASPIRE Q4 hi-fi table. Standard four-shelf in maple finish with silver supports, mint, £200. 0292 042 6883 (S.Wales).

REGA 7 turntable, Exact cartridge. Rega phono stage as new, £950. Sony MiniDisc JA3DES plus discs, £175. 07736 773830 (Yorks).

SONAB OA14, two pairs for spares or repair, £100. Leak FM tuner, £65. Pioneer F91, £110. Mark, after 8.30pm 01474 708631 (Kent).

SME 20/2A turntable. Boxed as new, £4,000. Tom Evans Groove Phonostage mint, £1,000. Benz-micro Ruby2 cartridge, price negotiable. Loricraft PRC3 record cleaner, boxed, as new, £900. Daniel 01954 715266 (Cambridge).

SOUND ORGANISATION five-tier equipment support, black with glass shelves, as new, £85. Sennheiser HD495 headphones, good condition, £40. Jules, 01926 420208 (Leamington Spa).

STELLO CDT 200 CD transport, silver, two years old, boxed, excellent condition, (£900) £450. David 01926 315981 (Warwickshire).

TAG MCLAREN monoblocks (pair) 125 watts, boxed, manuals, excellent condition, £900ono 01926 653421 (Warwickshire).

TANNOY ST-100 supertweeters five years old. Gloss black, includes cables, fittings and packaging. One owner, photos available, (£1,100) £600ono. +00352 407702 or +00352 621 500756 or email barig@internet.lu (Luxembourg).

TDL MONITOR transmission line speakers. A powerful high quality classic design, £400. Please ring for details on 01793 541240 (Wilts).

TOWNSHEND ISOLDA DCT 100 interconnect (0.6m) XLR, £50. Ecosse Diva interconnect (0.5m), £50. Chord Chameleon Silver Plus interconnect (0.6m) XLR, £60. Siltech Paris interconnect (1m), £60. 01872 278711 (Cornwall).

TOWNSHEND ISOLDA DCT speaker cable 2x2.5 metre pair, will split, (£300) £150. Also Townsend DCT interconnects, both balanced and unbalanced. Please call 01208 76455 (Bodmin).

TOWNSHEND ISOLDA DCT speaker cable five metre, almost new, original boxed, perfect, £200. +0039 0221 50930 or email fedepenzo@hotmail.com (Italy).

TRIANGLE VOLANTE floorstanders, boxed as new, superb sound, amber, upgrading, (£4,500) £2,250. No offers please. Paul 07931 314536 (Oxon).

VAN DEN HUL FROG moving-coil cartridge, £725. New March 2006, only 60 hours use. 07729 626598 (Essex).



Above: Arcam A65+ amplifier

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