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PATHOS Stunning Digit CD player is a real work of art

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▶ ULTIMATE GROUP TEST TUNERS

Arcam DIVA DT91 • Cambridge Audio 640T V2 • Denon TU-1800DAB
Marantz ST7001 • NAD C445 • Onkyo T-4555 DAB



▶ BUYER'S BIBLE

The ultimate hi-fi buyer's guide: all of our favourite gear in one great directory





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CLASSE

Welcome to the issue...

HI-FI CHOICE OCTOBER 2007 ISSUE 298

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



It's raining and we've battened down the hatches here at *HFC* this month as we prepare not one, but two very special issues for you to enjoy during September. Not only will your regular November issue of *Hi-Fi Choice* be on the newsagents' shelves; you'll also be able to buy our sumptuous high-end annual, *The Collection 2007*.

Originally published as an annual 'special edition' nearly two decades ago, *The Collection* disappeared in the early 1990s, but returned in 2004 in response to demand from our readership. It proved to be a great success, and its popularity has ensured its reinstatement on *Hi-Fi Choice's* yearly schedule.

On sale 20 September, the 2007 edition will feature in-depth reviews of components ranging from turntables to universal disc players, all of them high-performance creations from many of the world's top hi-fi brands.

Some of these are *Hi-Fi Choice* favourites, reviewed within the last year and revisited here, while many more are UK or world exclusives, each accompanied by beautiful photography and fresh page design. To celebrate all this wonderful hi-fi, we'll be printing *The Collection 2007* on premium-quality paper, bound inside a very special cover design, to ensure the magazine itself looks and feels as fantastic as the equipment that nestles within its pages.



Dan

Dan George 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.



JIMMY HUGHES

With more than 40 years as an enthusiast under his belt, Jimmy is one of the country's best known hi-fi experts. His knowledge of system matching, hi-fi tweaking and record collecting is unmatched in the industry.



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).



ALAN SIRCOM

Alan began his journalistic career in the early 1990s. Now a successful freelancer, you too can benefit from his extensive hi-fi knowledge, from purist two-channel stereo to the latest multichannel gear... and beyond.



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.



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.

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

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BUYER'S BIBLE

Ultimate guide to high-performance hi-fi and AV equipment, gathering together all our favourite products for you. Your shortlist starts here...

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FREE MINI-MAG!

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

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- 7 Readers classifieds

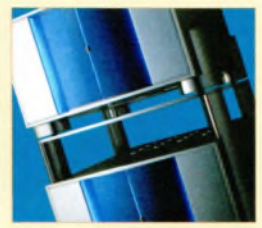


It's show time again!

the coffee break



your opportunity to discover the finest blend of hi-fi!

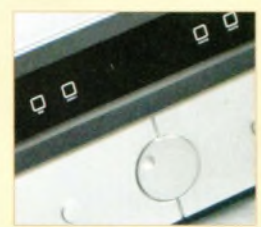


BOULDER They make the kind of products we all hope to one day aspire to. After many a request, Boulder has finally launched a more affordable range, allowing so many more to finally enjoy a Boulder unit in their system. The stunning new Boulder Integrated is amazing!

 WWW.BOULDERAMP.COM

HOVLAND Dedication and research has resulted in world-class components of truly enduring value. Each Hovland design contains original circuits, numerous proprietary parts, and custom wire. Perfect ingredients make for a feast for the ears!

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LSA AMPLIFIERS Available in three different versions (each more expensive than the next), Standard, Signature and Statement have taken reviewers and customers by storm. Reproducing the finest aspects of two technologies: valve and solid state, every LSA model is a class leader.

 WWW.THELSAGROUP.COM

VITUS Refusing to compromise in any way, shape or form can be very expensive, but the results far outweigh the cost and the Vitus range is proof of this. Using only the finest materials, Vitus is for those who want the finest system without any of the all too common pitfalls and shortcomings found elsewhere. State-of-the-art fulfilled!

 WWW.VITUSAUDIO.COM

Metropolis Music has searched the globe for the most exciting brands available today...

LUMLEY

What better person is there for the job of creating a state-of-the-art turntable, than a passionate music lover who has sold some of the finest hi-fi products available, to customer all over the UK for years? Think about it... The Stratosphere turntable just runs circles around the competition!

 WWW.METROPOLIS-MUSIC.CO.UK

KHARMA

Listening to a Kharma is an indescribable experience. You have to feel Kharma to experience it. No matter how large your room, or how large your budget, the Exquisite, Ceramique and Matrix series will deliver your wildest expectations from the first moment you hear them.

 WWW.KHARMA.COM

CODA

Any Product wearing the Coda emblem is born from the philosophies of innovative design, artistic expression, and no compromise engineering. Not surprisingly, Coda has a large and loyal customer base worldwide - testament to the quality and value of every product.

 WWW.CODA-CONTINUUM.COM

EDGAR

Many would argue that introducing an affordable range of valve products into an overcrowded UK market is a little crazy. BUT every time a customer audition's Edgar, they ask us if we have made a mistake on the price and surely it costs twice as much? Need we say more?

 WWW.EDGAR.SK

AYON

These components combine premium design, new construction principles, advanced technologies, explosive dynamics, purity of tone, neutrality, finesse, emotional realism and stable sound stage reproduction... You could not ask for more realistic reproduction of music as a real live event.

 WWW.AYONAUDIO.COM

HANSEN

Truly innovative in their approach to loudspeaker design, the final result is nothing short of breathtaking. Hansen recently launched a more affordable model aptly named 'The Knight' and it has already become a runaway success. When you audition a Hansen, be sure to ask about the 'Cloaking Device'!

 WWW.HANSENAUDIO.COM

ASCENDO

Key design features of Ascendo loudspeakers are: modular design, mechanical and electrical decoupling, variable Time-Alignment and three-way SASB-Technology (dynamic current-damped Woofer/semisymmetrical Bandpass). You don't need to fully understand them, you only need to listen to realise just how special these speakers are!

 WWW.ASCENDO.DE

BAT

The name Balanced Audio Technology refers to more than just their use of balanced circuits. It reflects the commitment to overall excellence. BAT bring the same uncompromising standards to every aspect of engineering, from circuit conception to vibration control and parts placement - as well as to visual design, customer service, and long-term support.

 WWW.BALANCED.COM

FURUTECH

Our mission is building the absolutely best products imaginable, whatever the effort involved, and offering them at a price/performance ratio that deeply satisfies every purchaser. Did you know that Furutech's Pure Transmission Design Concept improves every element of signal transmission, from the AC to the speaker?

 WWW.FURUTECH.COM

MUSICTOOLS

With so many stands on the market, you are right to ask what makes Musictools different from the others? We think it's the approach, care, attention, design and value for money. Many a satisfied customer agrees as well...

 WWW.MUSICTOOLS.EU

LSA SPEAKERS

These speakers may look quite ordinary at first glance, but the finest things in life can often be very deceptive. Designed more by the human ear and long listening sessions than just computer measurements, LSA speakers are almost organic in the way they reproduce music. Exceptional.

 WWW.THELSAGROUP.COM

MASTERSOUND

Valve amplifiers that with every note of music precisely reflect the emotions of the composer and the performer. Beautiful soundstage, focus and dynamics will flood into your listening room and captivate you long into the night...

 WWW.MASTERSOUNDSAS.IT

AUDIENCE

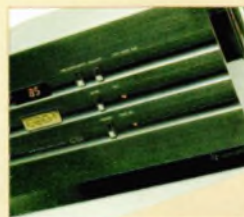
When Audience develops a product, no consideration is given to the end price until the product is finished. Focus is placed on developing the very best product possible. Sounds like a winning formula and all the Cables have an unconditional lifetime warranty. They have the best mains conditioners too!

 WWW.AUDIENCE-AV.COM

COPULARE

The intention to create the ultimate custom-made sound furniture, will always entail the commitment to supreme quality. No other range of stands look as beautiful or perform like a Copulare - period. Their support feet are outstanding too!

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FOCAL
the Spirit of Sound



ACCUSTIC ARTS SURROUND-PLAYER I UNIVERSAL DISC PLAYER

▶ Accustic Arts might not win any prizes for spelling, but the German company is fast gaining a strong reputation for its top-notch product line. The company's latest model, the Surround-Player I, is a universal player that supports SACD and DVD-Audio/Video in full 5.1 surround, as well as CD in stereo. Not content with taking an off-the-shelf universal player and putting it into a heavy case, Accustic Arts has heavily remodelled the donor device that forms the basis for the Surround-Player I, even to the point of replacing the transport mechanism with its own top-loading system.

With 24-bit/192kHz Burr-Brown DACs for each channel, extensive bass management

control for SACD and DVD-Audio, plus the option to switch off the video stages for optimum audio quality, this player offers an uncompromising approach to high-resolution audio. However, thanks to its full HDMI support, video is well covered too.

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

PRODUCT Accustic Arts Surround-Player I

TYPE Universal disc player

PRICE £4,495 (XLR-balanced version)

KEY FEATURES Top-loading player • 24-bit/192kHz Burr-Brown converters on all channels • HDMI connection with HDCP • Stereo XLR connections

CONTACT ☎ 01252 702705

🌐 www.accusticarts.de

Podium
Sound



MADE IN UK

Podium 1

Full-range super efficient flat panel loudspeaker

*no crossovers
no ribbons
no electrostatic devices
no cone drivers, no sub woofers
no large amplifiers necessary*

VERDICT 

shown with rear
cover removed

The Stereo Times, June 06. Clement Perry wrote:

"The Podium 1 loudspeaker created a certain sonic portrait that's unique even among panel designs because of its faithfulness to sounding closer to real-life. This auspicious first showing was in many ways the highlight of this years show." "The result were simple: this loudspeaker is destined for glory."

HIFI World, July 07. Adam Smith wrote:

"These loudspeakers are unlike anything I've ever heard - which is to pass absolutely no judgement, merely a statement of fact."

Flat panel fan or not - you won't want to miss the exciting Podium Sound demonstration at the London Sound & Vision Show!

Visit us in the Endeavour Room - Park Inn Heathrow. 21 - 23 September 2007.

+ 44 (0) 845 229 7922 | www.podiumsound.co.uk



AVI ADM9 ACTIVE LOUDSPEAKER

▶ This is called 'ADM9' for a reason – it stands for 'Analogue/Digital Monitor, 9-litre volume'. However, there's a whole lot more to it than that. AVI's ADM9 is an active two-way standmount loudspeaker, with a 100-watt amplifier directly driving the tweeter and a 150-watt amp for the woofer.

The loudspeaker takes the place of amplifier and speakers in a system. Simply plug the analogue output of your CD player into the speakers and use the AVI remote supplied to control the volume level. No preamp needed.

Perhaps the most exciting part of the ADM9 is the 'Digital' bit. As well as conventional audio links, the AVI loudspeaker includes a USB port, enabling connection to computers.

It means you can use your CD player and AVI speaker combination to rip CDs onto your computer. This bypasses the computer's own digital conversion, thereby maximising sound quality for audiophiles wanting to digitise their precious music collection.

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

PRODUCT AVI ADM9

TYPE Active loudspeaker

PRICE £1,000 per pair

KEY FEATURES Active loudspeaker with 100W and 150W amps • Built-in Burr-Brown DAC
• USB connection • Volume control from remote

CONTACT ☎ 07774 695621

🌐 www.avihifi.co.uk

NEW PRODUCT HIGHLIGHTS

MORDAUNT-SHORT AVANT 914i/916i

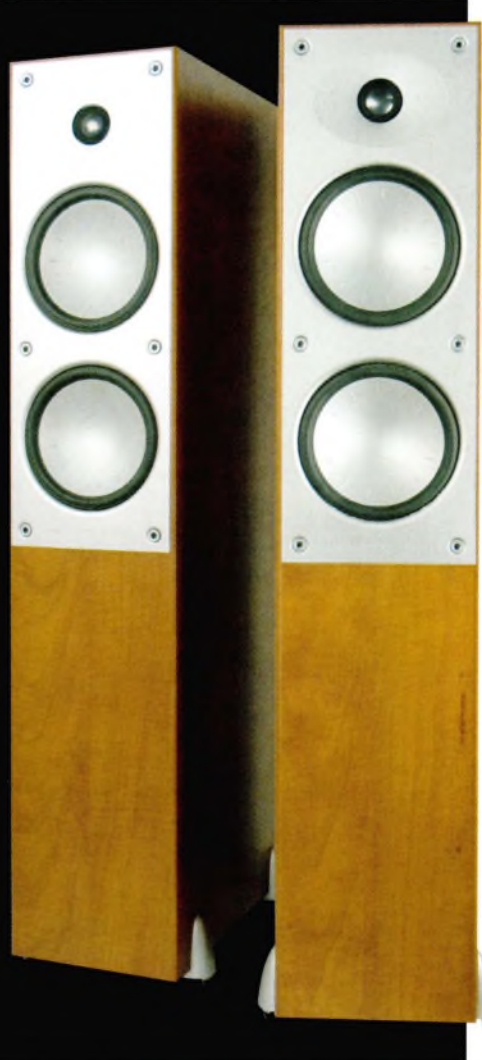
Mordaunt-Short is expanding its popular Avant range with two new floorstanding loudspeakers. Both the Avant 914i and the Avant 916i use the latest 165mm version of its CPC (Continuous Profile Cone) mid/bass driver in a cabinet that's larger than other Avants. The company has coupled the bass driver (one in the 914i, two in each 916i) to its own 25mm aluminium dome tweeter via an 'isolate mounted' crossover. This network also sports a unique DVP (Dual Value Parallel) configuration with two capacitors doing the job of one to maintain consistency across the frequency range. The larger cabinets are braced and strengthened in key regions. The 914i sports a ballast-load chamber that can be filled 'for increased punch', while the 916i features an internally partitioned ported chamber for the extra bass unit.

Price Avant 914i £300 per pair; Avant 916i £400 per pair

Due now

☎ 01753 680868

🌐 www.mordauntshort.com



SONUS FABER CREMONA M

Sonus Faber, best known for its elegant

loudspeakers, has revised the luxurious Cremona floorstander. The striking new Cremona M is a backwards-tilting, four-driver, three-way design with the company's distinctive and gorgeous lute-back cabinet. Each enclosure is made up of a sandwich of 20 solid maple layers and features cross-bracing ribs to reduce internal standing waves. The driver line-up comprises a 25mm ring-radiator tweeter paired with a single 150mm fibre-cone midrange unit, and two 180mm aluminium/magnesium-cone bass units. The distributor, Absolute Sounds, suggests the Cremona M is "a much better product than the Cremona it replaces... in other words, outstanding".

Price £5,394 **Due** now

☎ 020 8971 3909

🌐 www.sonusfaber.com



ADVANCE ACOUSTIC RANGE

French hi-fi specialist Advance Acoustic is making its entire hi-fi electronics range available in the UK, through T+A distributor Transparent Audio. The comprehensive 'entry-level' hi-fi components in the range include a CD player, three integrated amps, two preamps and two power amps, with an additional CD transport and a DAC expected soon. Prices start at just £300 for the MPP206 preamplifier, going up to £600 for the MAP305DA II 100-watt integrated amp, which is probably the most interesting item, with its built-in 24-bit/192kHz DAC. In addition to pure hi-fi kit, there's also a pair of iPod-ready products – the £400 EZY-7, which incorporates an AM/FM tuner, a 50-watt amplifier and an iPod dock, plus the MIP Station II, a full valve preamplifier for the Apple player.

Price from £250 to £600

Due now

☎ 01623 517000 🌐 www.advance-acoustic.com



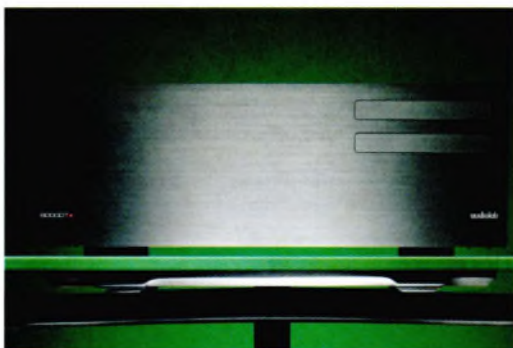
AUDIOLAB RANGE

Audiolab is the latest company to jump on the media-server bandwagon, with the 8000DT. The product is essentially a home-theatre PC armed with 500GB of storage and an HD-DVD-ready transport mechanism. It also features full HDMI 1.2 output connectivity, an ATI graphics card, dual disc drives and twin digital TV tuners. It currently runs Microsoft Windows XP Media Centre, but is expected to migrate to Vista in January 2008, with an optional upgrade for existing customers. Principally a video server, the 8000DT comes into its own when partnered with the new 8000AP audio processor, with full 24-bit/192kHz processing across all seven channels, and the 7x 100 watts 8000X7 power amplifier. This represents the company's first multichannel audio/video venture since the days of TAG McLaren Audio.

Price tbc **Due** tbc

☎ 01480 447700

🌐 www.audiolab.co.uk





PHILIPS STREAMIUM WACS7000/WAK3300

Tired of having your hi-fi confined to just one room, but not prepared to spend a fortune on custom-install equipment? Philips's latest Streamium WACS7000 wireless music system might be all you need. Its 'centre' unit features an 80GB hard drive – enabling you to store up to 1,500 CDs' worth of tunes – and streams music to a separate 'station' unit. Using Wi-Fi and UPnP standards, the system can also acquire tracks and updates from your PC. Extra 'stations' are available, as is a portable client box/alarm clock, the WAK3300.

Price WACS7000 £699; WAK3300 £100 **Due** now ☎ 020 7949 0069 # www.philips.co.uk

MARTINLOGAN DYNAMO

MartinLogan is best known for tall panel loudspeakers, but the company's subwoofers have recently been gaining attention. The newest – and cheapest – is the Dynamo. It follows in the footsteps of the Descent to deliver first-rate bass for audio and video systems. The Dynamo is unique in that its 250mm bass driver can be fired forwards or downwards into the floor. A built-in 200-watt switching amplifier drives the sub, and – rare for the price – it has a sealed-box design to help it keep up with musical content.

Price £499 **Due** now

☎ 020 8971 3909 # www.martinlogan.com



ONKYO DR-815

Onkyo's new DR-815 is a complete 'shoebox' micro system, the first to offer DVD-Audio and SACD replay alongside CD and DVD-Video. Delivering 18 watts into its five channels, the universal player/receiver features a 24-bit/192kHz DAC alongside a 32-bit DSP chip for surround sound. In addition to supporting every high-resolution audio format, the diminutive 815 also manages to squeeze in an iPod connector and a 30-preset AM/FM tuner. The system is supplied without speakers.

Price £275 **Due** now

☎ 01494 681515 # www.onkyo.co.uk



BRYSTON BCD-1

Canadian amplifier specialist Bryston has announced its first ever source component. The new BCD-1 is a hand-built CD player with a fully Class A output stage and a 24-bit/192kHz Crystal CS4398 DAC. It's claimed that the BCD-1 is built from first principles to adhere to the Red Book CD standard. It features discrete operational amplifier stages in place of the usual chip op-amps to deliver 'a more robust output' than that of regular CD players. The company has worked hard to virtually eliminate data jitter through the use of a high-precision master clock in both DAC and drive. Like all things Bryston, the CD drive is heavily over-engineered. Expect a review soon.

Price £2,450 **Due** now ☎ 0870 444 1044 # www.bryston.ca

Soundbites

PURE has been busy. The DAB specialist has revamped its ever popular Evoke radio. The £100 Evoke-1S features more presets, an auxiliary input, an OLED display, 'Intellitext' scrolling-text storage and an optional 'ChargePAK' battery. It even includes FM with RDS for those 'bad DAB days'. The company has also introduced a £50 DAB/FM clock radio, the Siesta. ☎ 01923 277488



MICROPRODIG MUSIC'S latest addition to its high-end portfolio is the Canadian loudspeaker manufacturer Hansen Audio. Hansen's first model to cross the ocean is the £12,000 floorstanding Knight. Said to be both time- and dispersion-coherent, the three-driver Knight also features Hansen's proprietary 'cloaking device', presumably reverse-engineered from a passing Romulan Warbird. ☎ 01435 867438

MORDAUNT-SHORT isn't content with just one loudspeaker launch this month. Dubbed 'the little home cinema speaker package that thinks big', its £600 Alumni 5.1-channel system features the company's highly praised continuous-profile cone technology throughout. The package includes satellite speakers sporting a curved cabinet design to reduce standing waves. A dedicated integrated LCR speaker (left, centre, right) priced at £260 will follow later in the year. ☎ 01753 680868

SHURE'S new SE420 earphones are sound-isolators featuring the company's clever micro drivers for bass and treble. Costing £250, they come with a range of flexible sleeves, which both block external noise and ensure the perfect fit, as well as an airline adaptor and a funky carrying case. ☎ 020 8808 2222

ISOTEK has launched an improved range of mains cables featuring DCT (Deep Cryogenic Treatment) technology. Priced from £60 for a 1.5m-long Premium right up to £195 for a 1.5m Supreme, its mains-cable range comprises 16- and 20-amp 'frozen' OFC leads with MK Duraplugs. The top-end Supreme cable boasts a specially treated Furutech mains fuse, too. ☎ 01635 291357



HAPPENINGS

The Insider

THIS MONTH, HFC TALKS TO...

TERRY MEDALEN

Job title: European market development director
Company: REL Sub-Bass Systems



What type of products really excite you?

Those that possess two fundamental characteristics: first, the ability to produce the sense of musical reality, which inevitably means full frequency response close to 20Hz or below, and second, the inherent capability of engaging with a component in a direct way. This allows you to dial in the performance of a product by ear so that the system, within the acoustic envelope of the room, works as a cohesive whole. Only then can the music live and breathe.

Are we experiencing a two-channel resurgence?

I think there is a return of self-confidence in the consumer that the pleasures of stereo are still there to be enjoyed and, in part, the iPod may even be responsible for some of this.

What's your all-time favourite hi-fi component?

I hate to sound like I'm towing the company line, but my truthful answer is a REL sub-bass system.

CD or vinyl, and why?

My immediate response is to say both, but I am reminded that when I want to show off my system, it's most often with a UK-pressed, 12" 45rpm piece of 1980s British pop. I love to see the grin appear on a slowly shaking head at the sheer, audaciously silly magic of it all. So I guess vinyl, while still guarding my collection of CDs.

Hi-Fi Diary

SEPTEMBER

- 4-9 CEDIA Expo 2007
Colorado Convention Center, Denver,
CO www.cedia.net
Custom installation goes pan-global
- 21-23 London Sound and Vision Show 2007
Park Inn, Heathrow
www.chestergroup.org
London's finest hi-fi show
- 29 Musicmania
Olympia Two, London
www.vip-24.com
One of the UK's largest music fairs

Wireless power

The era of the genuinely wireless loudspeaker could be with us sooner than expected thanks to Professor Marin Soljacic from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Fed up with his mobile phone waking him up because it needed recharging, he set out to find a way of recharging it wirelessly, and came up with the idea of using resonance. In much the same way that a soprano can break a wine glass if she finds the pitch at which the glass resonates, Professor Soljacic has demonstrated that it's possible to wirelessly power a light bulb by transmitting and receiving power via a resonator. The system has been dubbed WiTricity (wireless electricity), and uses a copper coil to send and receive electric power. According to a colleague of Soljacic, it does so with surprising efficiency too. Currently, transmission is limited to two metres, although it's hoped five will be possible in the future. Hopefully, a truly wireless speaker like the active Free speaker will follow soon.



Fopp flops

High street music retailers are feeling the full force of internet competition, and one company that attempted to take on the online discount stores, Fopp, has paid the ultimate price, with a chain of 105 stores being forced to close as the company went into liquidation. Originating 25 years ago with a stall in a Glasgow market, Fopp had recently expanded as a result of buying the Music Zone chain. Although Fopp claimed that the stores were profitable, the pace of growth undermined the viability of the company as a whole. The Fopp website now contains a simple message which states that "We have failed to gain the necessary support from major stakeholders, suppliers and their credit insurers to generate sufficient working capital to run our expanding business." The music-and-movie chain employed over 700 people and made its mark with a large selection of CDs priced at just £5. Fopp also hosted live in-store performances by bands including the Mystery Jets and Guillemots.



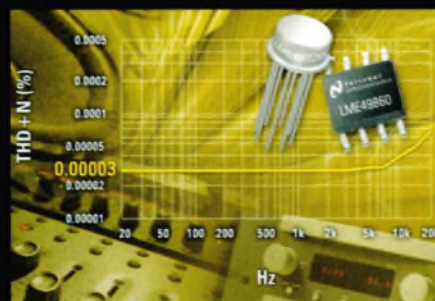
CD Wow fined

Internet retailer CD Wow has been fined £41 million for illegally selling CDs purchased in Asia to European customers in a case brought by the British Phonographic Industry (BPI), which monitors where CDs sold online were originally purchased. It is illegal to sell discs purchased outside the European Economic Area to EU residents, and, according to the BPI, CD Wow was buying discs in China and India, where they are considerably cheaper than they are in the EU. Commenting on the fine, CD Wow's chief executive, Henrik Wesslen, said, "The current copyright rules are mad, but that doesn't mean that we don't stick to them." He claims that the BPI was only able to cite 39 cases where the rules were being broken, a small proportion of the 10,000 CDs the company ships each day.



Low-distortion components

Analogue chip manufacturer National Semiconductor has managed to produce a range of op-amps with measured total harmonic distortion (THD) of only 0.00003% – an all-time-low figure that theoretically allows a bandwidth of 130dB. While low THD isn't a panacea in itself, it should certainly contribute to an increase in the resolution of hi-fi components and amplifiers in particular. The LME49680 dual op-amp runs at +/- 22V, while the LME49710 single, LME49720 dual and the LME49740 quad op-amps all operate at +/- 17V. These are claimed to produce vanishing levels of noise, have very high slew rates and drive loads of up to 600 ohms. In practice, this should result in far quieter amplification with greater speed. National Semiconductor's commitment to high-quality audio is backed up by the provision of a dedicated listening room at the company's HQ in California. This room has been acoustically treated and will use Wilson WATT/Puppy 7 loudspeakers.



Festival Hall overhaul

London's Royal Festival Hall auditorium has had its acoustics thoroughly revised as part of recent refurbishments. The RFH auditorium was designed in 1951 by Hope Bagenal, who used scientific principles to create a performance hall in which all the seats could enjoy equally good sound. However, the downside to this was that it resulted in a venue which failed to give acoustic musicians sufficient feedback, and as a result the RFH has never been considered a great venue for classical music. Now, thanks to the work of acoustician Larry Kirkegaard and his team, who consulted the original acousticians as well as contemporary conductors and musicians, the auditorium has been dramatically improved. The stage has been narrowed and deepened to improve feedback, the organ has been moved back and the plywood canopies on the ceiling have been replaced with tensioned fabric over timber-clad concrete. Every surface has been scrutinised for its acoustic effect and changed where possible. The result, according to Kirkegaard, is that you can now "hear a glow around the sound"



JIMMY'S TWEAKS #53

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



Get rid of neon lights

Some mains sockets, mains plugs and mains distribution boards have neon lights that helpfully let you know when things are plugged in and working. Unfortunately, neon lights are very noisy, and this noise gets into the power supply of your amplifier, CD player and so on, and leads to impaired sound quality. If you have such mains plugs

or wall sockets, it's worthwhile replacing them (or, in the case of wall sockets, getting a professional electrician to replace them for you) with ones that don't have lights. In the case of mains distribution boards, most sold for hi-fi purposes don't have indicator lights. You should notice quite an improvement in cleanness and clarity with the neon lights gone – the music will have better dynamics and a quieter, 'blacker' background. If other (non-hi-fi) mains sockets or plugs in the house have neon lights, it's worth getting rid of these too.

TOP 10 THINGS YOU CAN'T DO WITH A DOWNLOAD

1. Make a Frisbee-like disc out of it
2. Turn it into a Christmas tree decoration
3. Admire the cover art
4. Rest your coffee/tea/beer on it
5. Melt it into interesting shapes
6. Pick one up for a quid at a car boot sale
7. Put the download in the wrong sleeve
8. Show off your wall of downloads to your mates
9. Smear jam on it and pretend it still plays
10. Use it as a signalling mirror when stranded on a mountain top



New Music

IN THE STUDIO

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



STEVE EARLE

Title: *Washington Square Serenade*

Release date: 24 September

Since his last album in 2004, outspoken troubadour Earle has moved from Nashville to New York and married the singer Allison Moorer, who duets on the album on *Days Aren't Long Enough*, which they co-wrote. Despite being produced by the Dust Brothers, it's a mostly acoustic album. Earle also claims that the songs are among the most personal he's ever written.



THE VERVE

Title: *tbc*

Release date: late autumn

Ten years after their last album, *Urban Hymns*, a newly created official Verve website has confirmed the rumours: Richard Ashcroft is back in the studio recording with Nick McCabe, Simon Jones and Pete Salisbury. For the present, at least, it appears that the band's fifth member, Simon Tong, isn't involved, as he's otherwise engaged as the guitarist in Damon Albarn's latest project, *The Good, The Bad and The Queen*.

Gahan says, "We were very aware of the importance of keeping urgency in the sound and a feeling of spontaneity. We didn't want to get bogged down in trying to make everything sound perfect."

PJ HARVEY

Title: *White Chalk*

Release date: 24 September

Polly Harvey promises a new direction on her seventh studio album and follow-up to 2004's *Uh Huh Her*. Produced by long-time collaborators Flood and John Parish, she's currently putting the finishing touches to a project that has taken her almost a year to complete. According to her MySpace site, she composed most of the material on piano for the first time instead of guitar.

MARK KNOPFLER

Title: *Kill To Get Crimson*

Release date: 17 September

It's more than 20 years since *Brothers In Arms* by Dire Straits became one of those hi-fi-store demonstration records alongside the likes of *Tubular Bells* and *Dark Side Of The Moon*. Knopfler's latest solo album finds his guitar-playing sounding as crystalline as ever on a dozen new compositions.

DAVE GAHAN

Title: *tbc*

Release date: October

Taking a break from fronting Depeche Mode, Dave Gahan has been busy recording his second solo album, the follow-up to 2003's *Paper Monsters*. Produced by Tony Hoffer,

JAZZ/ CLASSICAL

Michael Murray Bach Organ Works (Aug), **Yoel Levi** Beethoven Overtures (Aug), **John Coltrane** Very Best Of The Atlantic Years (Sep), **Niels-Henning Orsted Petersen Trio** The Unforgettable NHOP Live (Sep)

DVD-A/ SACD

London Trumpet Orchestra 28 London Trumpet Players (SACD, Aug); **Kurt Masur** Brahms: Serenades No1, No2 (SACD, Aug); **George Benson and Al Jarreau** Givin' It Up (DVD-A, SuperDisc, Aug); **MDR Symphony Orchestra** Mahler: Symphony No2 (SACD, Aug); **LSO** Stravinsky: Le Sacre du Printemps (DVD-A, Aug)



Jon Marks

Power drain

PC-based audio systems to blame

As a keen and fairly green listening machine, I try to do my bit for the environment when it comes to obtaining my listening pleasure. I've issued orders to my family to shoot on sight any standby button inadvertently left switched on, and Class A valve beasts are now (sadly) less frequent visitors to my hallowed listening chamber, even though I could have done with the extra heat source during the height of our so-called 'summer'. While I'm happy to do my bit, and equally happy with a well-designed Class B amp and sources that get switched off at the mains when they're done, the direction in which more mundane hi-fi design is headed does worry the tree-hugger in me.

For an increasing number of people, music seems to mean one of those annoying little devices that cause rage on public transport or in public spaces by playing the world's most

"The direction in which more mundane hi-fi design is headed does worry the tree-hugger in me somewhat."

inane music or speech clip every time a call comes in. Although mobiles may be a great way of getting clouted by an octogenarian with a handbag full of horse shoes, and although they may have quite a way to go in terms of convergence before they constitute the heart of a hi-fi, at least they're efficient in terms of the amount of power they consume. No, what keeps me awake at night (apart from the itching caused by my organic yak-wool night gown) is the emerging behemoth of the computing world; the home-entertainment PC.

PCs are fast closing in on patio heaters at the top of many an environmentalist's hit-list. Often left permanently on, some of these machines can draw up to a kilowatt just sitting there playing a bit of background music off the internet or their hard-drive, emitting a shrill beep every now and then when yet another vital email flops into your inbox to inform you that you've just won £3.7bn on the national lottery of Bhutan. While a small number of PC makers are putting R&D funds into 'greening' their machines, a friend of mine relies on a laptop to do his DJing for him; he even trusted the playlist function on his machine to take

care of his wedding party. The sound quality that resulted was perfectly acceptable coming through a PA, especially after the guests had each worked their way through half a vineyard and twice their bodyweight in buffet bites. Home separates, if chosen wisely, can be considerably more energy-efficient than PC-based systems, especially when only the source being listened to is actually powered up. 90dB-efficient speakers have had a cult following for years, especially when partnered with low-power (and usually low-efficiency) valve amps; perhaps now, as awareness of environmental issues continues to grow, we'll see more speakers in this mould, alongside low-power digital amps that sound good. In fact, they are already here, as anyone who's heard a Flying Mole or a Bel Canto will attest. Whatever happens, look on the bright side – if we do ever end up lumbered with systems based around mobile phones, they're a lot easier to beat to death with a sledgehammer than either a PC or a separates system...

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



Dominic Todd

Green machines?

DAB radio letting the side down

Climate change is a serious subject and one that we rightly expect to see governments and industries acting upon. Within the hi-fi sector the results are mixed. On the plus side, the current consumption of a typical amplifier – the most power-hungry component of all – has fallen dramatically. Probably by luck more than design, the mass adoption of Class D technology has created markedly more efficient amplifiers. The sound quality of Class D products may require further development, but because Class D amplification is much more compact, fewer components and smaller cases are required and there can be no argument with Class D's contribution towards reducing global warming.

With products that are twice as efficient as before, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the hi-fi industry is eligible for a collective pat on the back. Unfortunately though, there's a fly in the ointment...

The problem comes from DAB radio. In my bathroom I have an old Sony FM radio in which I last replaced the four AA batteries in around 2005, I think. The DAB Pure Evoke that sits in the kitchen I wouldn't dream of using batteries with, as it devours six alkaline C-types in less than 10 hours. Of course, this isn't the fault of the Pure, it's merely that the technology used to process digital radio is so power hungry. Look for a more scientific example and you can see that the FM/AM Rotel RT1080 consumes just 10 watts whilst the DAB version, the RT1082, requires 15 watts. This may not sound like a great difference, but in percentage terms that's a 50% hike! Rather ironically, it's the government-funded BBC that are pushing so hard for us to make the switch to digital. Not surprisingly, one doesn't tend to hear a great deal about the clash of policy on BBC phone-in and discussion programs. But, at the end of the day, I guess it's just one of those awkward contradictions that's part of any governance. Basically, the hi-fi industry is doing a fine job

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

Stax

RETRO

HI-FI REVISITED

STAX
SR-Σ (SIGMA)



Without doubt the oddest earspeaker (Stax's terminology, not ours) to come out under the Stax badge was the Sigma, which consisted of two quite large and rather clumsy-looking boxes, attached to a standard two-piece Stax headband – an outer spring hoop to force them into contact with the ears, and a wide pliable leather band which sat on the user's head. The boxes – the actual ear speakers themselves – were heavily perforated by slots which were designed to be as open as possible to allow air in and out.

Strange as they looked – and I don't think 'ugly' and 'weird' is putting it too strongly – the Sigma was an entirely rational design that was built the way it was because it made good sense given its designation as a panoramic imaging electrostatic. The Sigma was intended to provide a realistic soundfield of the kind not normally associated with headphones. The Sigma was a true pair of earspeakers – more so than any other model Stax produced. If you were to look inside the earboxes, you would find that the large oval shaped transducers were positioned well away and in front of the ears, and at a 90 degree angle to the ear opening, similar to the layout of loudspeakers in a typical listening room.

Using the maker's own description, the fact that the diaphragms are larger than the outer ear allowed the outer ear to channel the waveform to the inner ear, so that the sound reached the eardrum in the most conventional and natural way. And because the transducers are placed in front of – rather than over – the ear, the sound appears to be coming from in front of the listener, mimicking the sound of a pair of loudspeakers. According to Stax, there's none of the tight, shut-in feel, or diminished scale of traditional earphones. Less than tight coupling to the ear cavity meant a somewhat restricted LF response, down to 30Hz on the official figures, and indeed the impression that the bass was restricted was a real factor on audition too. However, the Sigma was always a model that people loved or hated. Either they bought into what the design was aimed for, or they didn't. There was no middle ground.



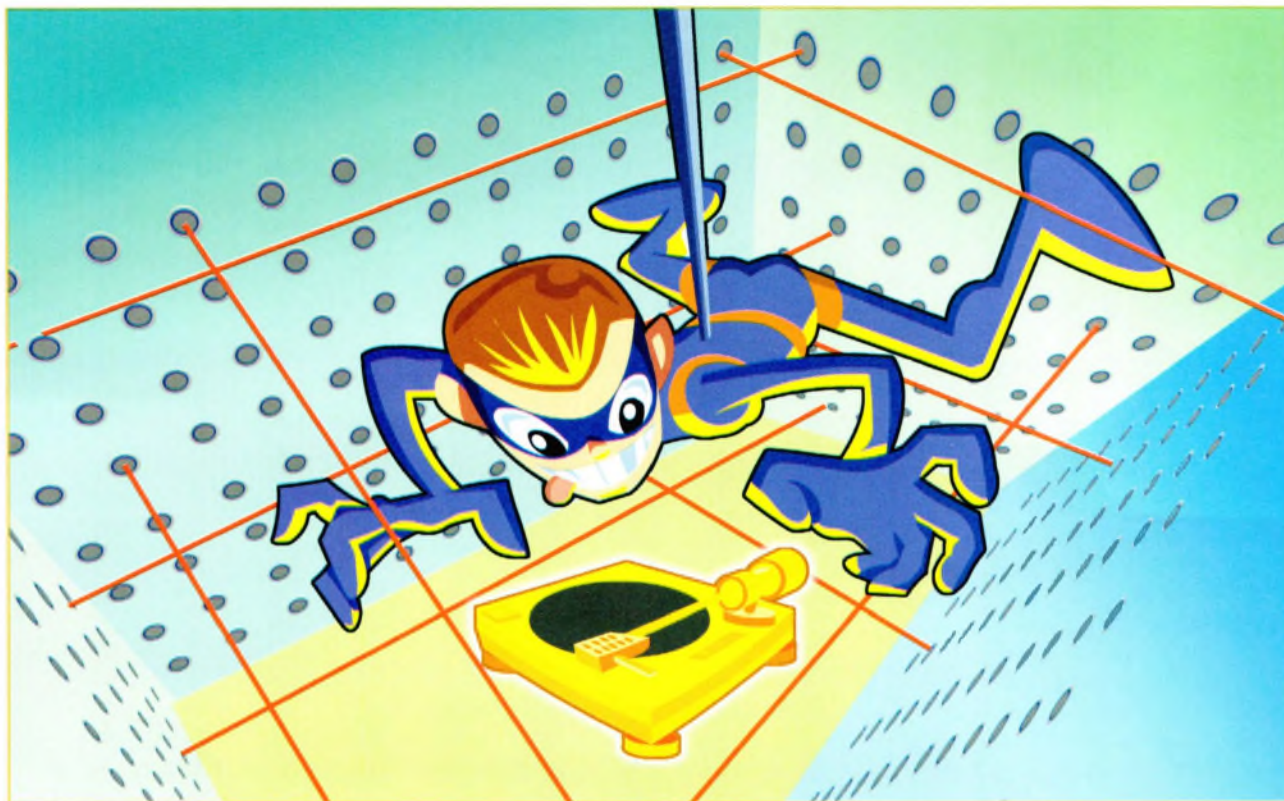
“The oval transducers were positioned in front of the ears, similar to the layout of loudspeakers.”

Even though the Sigma was the clumsiest and least aerodynamic earspeaker ever to make it into production, it was actually much more comfortable than anyone expected. In reality, each of the capsules and the acoustic loading boxes that surrounded them were relatively light in weight, partly of course because there was no requirement to seal them from the outside world. Indeed, the design positively encouraged some intermingling of the two channels before the sound hit the ears, and although this factor was not identified as such in the official product description, I do recall that Stax acknowledged it at the time.

Although I never owned a pair, I tried them on a number of occasions and found that their low-ish weight meant no great inertia when moving the head, meaning they stayed firmly in place without any excessive inwards pressure on the head. The earpad design also matched other Stax models, in particular the Lambda's amazingly comfortable circum-aural earpad design, which allowed the ears to 'breathe'.

Two versions were available. The Semi Panoramic was released in 1977, and the very similar Panoramic Pro, which heaves a wider gap between electrodes and diaphragm and delivered superior performance, but which also required a higher polarising voltage as a result, became available a decade later. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



Value for Money

Always subjective, never fixed

It's own-up time. I spend much of my time reviewing hi-fi equipment, and the one aspect of the job that consistently worries me is assessing value for money. Not the scores that appear towards the bottom of each review, which are rigorously specified, and which as far as possible are consistent in the sense that they are transferable between different components of the same type. No, I'm talking about something less tangible here. A simple example would be my first audio system, which consisted of a simple crystal radio with a mono (of course) earphone that I used to listen to AM radio at night after lights-out. I must have been eight years old at the time. Did it sound any good? Of course not. In any serious auditioning process it would have sounded hideous, but I used it to experience music I loved, and the radio cost – I'm guessing now – under a pound, so the musical merit, the value for money if you like, was sky high.

“Vinyl hardware pricing is becoming progressively steeper, and in some cases arguably hard to justify.”

These days a DAB radio or an iPod would plug the same kind of audio shaped hole as my old crystal radio, at an appropriately inflated, but still reasonable price.

However, the real issue here is of a different order, and follows different rules for different component types. Value for money in loudspeakers, for example, is notoriously difficult to define. We all know – it's been written about extensively in the past – that small bookshelf speakers often sound better than full-size, floorstanding variants of the same design. Indeed, they may even be the same design under the skin, with an internal shelf to define a smaller internal space, and the section that extends down to the floor being an empty box section designed to slow the sound down and encourage box resonances. Tall, vented loudspeakers are also prone to pipe resonances well within the audio band and yet you'll expect to pay more, usually much more. Here is a case where retail pricing is largely determined by material and engineering content. Nothing wrong with that of course, except that the supposedly 'better' larger speaker often ends up sounding worse.

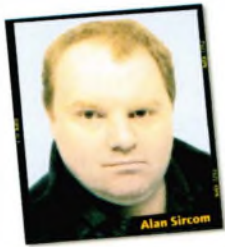
A similar situation prevails with CD players. It won't have escaped your notice that the

number of component CD players has diminished, but that at lower prices you can find what appear to be wonderful bargains in universal players. These machines usually come with upsampling, HDMI and all the toys, including a full-function video sub-section.

At the other end of the price scale are the true heavyweights, which in almost every case are CD players, often with an SACD player built-in. I make no pretence of hiding my personal admiration for the best products in this particular breed, but it can be hard to explain to someone how such a player, with no video capabilities, can cost 10-20 times as much as a fully loaded universal SACD/DVD-A/DVD-V/CD player.

And so it continues. Soon digital amplifiers will start to cause more soul-searching as their performance standards improve, though I do notice that vinyl hardware pricing is becoming progressively steeper, and in some cases arguably harder to justify, even though Pro-Ject seems to be almost single-handedly bucking this particular trend. And don't even get me started on valve amps...

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



Rent is the new buy

To buy, or not to buy, that is the question

You often hear the question these days: just how long will we be buying music on disc? It's a question with profound implications for both the music business and the hi-fi industry. However, it's also the wrong question. The question we should be asking is: 'how long will we be buying music?'

Music retailer HMV has posted weaker than expected profits due to market conditions. Industry darling Fopp has closed all 105 stores, because of over-keen expansion (interestingly, HMV has expressed interest in taking on the Fopp name and some of its stores). CD sales have declined by 10 per cent in the UK this year, while global sales of CDs dropped from 1.9bn to 1.7bn units in 2006. Less publicised, but just as telling, supermarket chain Asda recently announced that it would no longer sell CD singles due to poor demand. This is a bigger issue than it would first seem, because Asda was one of the main sellers of CD singles in the UK.

I think all of this presages a deeper shift in the way we play and 'own' music. At the moment, we look upon music as something we must physically own. Or, at the very least we subscribe to a model where we can store the music files we've downloaded on a hard disk. But this can change.

To some, this change has already happened: Sonos users who subscribe to Rhapsody in the US have access to around three million tracks through a monthly rental scheme (eMusic in the UK offers a slightly different format, with users able to download up to 90 tracks per month), with contributing artists receiving a cut of the subscription fee in proportion to the number of people accessing their tracks. This still effectively moves a data file from a server to your Sonos box, but the concept of owning material over the long term becomes alien to Rhapsody users.

And that's just the start. These files could be cached, like webpages on an internet browser. Or the files themselves could be time-limited. The BBC has been experimenting with such files in its iPlayer prototype, where a user can download a video file that has a use-by date built into the file's metadata and a secondary time-limiting flag that kicks in when the file is opened. This means you might download

M

MUSO

CLASSIC ALBUMS

THE POLICE
REGGATTA DE BLANC



Drummer Stewart Copeland's dream of exploring a rhythmically polyphonic universe hit its zenith on The

Police's 1979 album, the aptly titled *Reggatta de Blanc*. Since the incredible *Roxanne* single of 1978, an interlocking stroke of genius that welded dread beat to whiplash rock and on tour resulted in Sting bursting a blood vessel in his head from the sheer intensity of his vocal performances, The Police were on a mission both to innovate and sell like crazy. With *Reggatta de Blanc* they succeeded in spades.

The beauty of *Reggatta de Blanc* is that it catches The Police at the apex of their musicality as Sting's jazz/reggae bass riffs fitted perfectly with Andy Summers' almost psychedelic harmonised guitar riffs (remember that he was a member of 1960s acid band, Dantalion's Chariot) and Copeland's sharp-as-a-knife drum snaps. And, of course, it defines the era when smart new wave was king, long before Sting's egomania spiralled out of control. Regardless of whether you love or loathe Sting's later self-love and smugness, his work on this album is absolutely first-rate, producing four vital masterpieces in *Message In A Bottle*, *Bring On The Night*, *Walking On The Moon* and *The Bed's Too Big Without You* amid a deluge of fairly ordinary Stewart Copeland compositions, the best being the new wave group-vocal harmony of *Contact*.

Reggatta de Blanc, the track, was a group instrumental cadged from 1978's *Can't Stand Losing You* that ended up winning a Grammy in 1981 for Best Instrumental Rock Performance. But the real cream starts with *Message in A Bottle*, which involved phasing an amazingly distorted guitar riff that dips and darts throughout the number one single's near five minutes! Andy Summers' contribution to the album is immense, whether it's the shard-like electric guitar splinters that play off Sting's syncopated bass on the stellar *Bring On The Night*, or the way he smudges clouds of deftly distorted chords out of his instrument with delay to create an ambience around Sting's signature bass triad on the album's most famous track *Walking On The Moon*. That song



“The beauty of *Reggatta de Blanc* is that it catches The Police at the apex of their musicality.”

even used a device for which Brian Eno was famous – the tape loop!

On *The Bed's Too Big Without You*, Sting's shuddering and stuttering eight-part bass figure coupled with producer Nigel Gray's use of space is a standout moment. Outdoing The Clash at their own game this 'white reggae' was so good that hordes of bona-fide reggae artists queued up to cover it, with at least one, Sheila Hilton, having a hit with it in 1981. The song is not just memorable for Sting's sexy squeals and Copeland's massive reggae beats, but also for Summers' subtle walking note overdubs which in effect stitch the song's entire four-and-a-half minutes into an authentic tapestry of sound.

Recorded in a fortnight, in between touring commitments and with extra days for overdubs and mixing from February to August 1979, the band basically produced themselves with the help of Nigel Gray at Surrey Sound Studios. One of the last of the great analogue recordings, the album hit number one in the UK on its release in October 1979, and produced two number one singles into the bargain. Though the album has been re-mastered with extra video material, audiophiles should seek out original vinyl copies or early analogue CD versions to hear the full thwack of Sting's bass and Copeland's inimitable scattershot drums. **HFC**

Mark Prendergast

■ a file with a use-by date that stretches two months in advance, but once you start viewing the file, you have a few days to watch it before it times out. Within those few days, however, you can watch the file over and over again. Replace the word 'video' with 'audio' and you have a neat method of developing a rental model for music.

Of course this is flawed. It's flawed because such metadata time-locks are prime targets for code crackers. It's flawed because time-locks tend to anchor the file to a specific location, making downloading onto a computer and loading the track on your iPod impossible. But, these obstacles are hardly insurmountable. At the rate of change in the computer industry, all of these problems could be swept away in the blink of an eye.

So, just how long will we be buying music? Not as long as you might think.

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



Product testing

Staying objective isn't always easy

Us hi-fi reviewers are a peculiar breed, we work in isolation a lot of the time and get to listen to, struggle with and occasionally write about equipment which we can rarely afford to buy. It can be very frustrating to spend your life searching for the Holy Grail of sound, only to find it and hand it back two or three weeks later. But we struggle on as best as we can!

In order to get our review samples to sound as near to perfection as possible we are prepared to go to extreme lengths. This can mean anything from installing dedicated mains spurs, putting diffusers and damping on walls and ceilings, and generally ruining the appearance of what's often the best room in the house. We also employ the best racks and highest quality cables we can lay our hands on in order to help each component reach its full potential. I use a Townshend VSS equipment support for most of the electronics I review, sometimes a power amp is placed closer to the speakers on a Townshend Seismic platform, but in both cases I keep the component away from any vibration in the floor.



“It can be very frustrating to spend your life searching for the Holy Grail of sound, only to find it then hand it back a few weeks later.”

All this cossetting means that I can get the best out of each test product that comes my way and, as a rule, most of the gear I review sounds pretty good for its price. It sounds different to other gear, but usually there are more positives than negatives, in fact the hi-fi that appears in *Hi-Fi Choice* is generally of a decent quality, but each piece will have its pros and cons and we consider how each ranks in the context of price competition.

Of course, the average hi-fi enthusiast may not be able to dedicate quite as much space to their hobby, nor have as good an electrical and acoustic environment to use it in. This sometimes makes me wonder whether I should take an opposite approach and put the source and amp components on a basic rack right next to the speakers with a standard mains supply and bog-standard cables. You would then be able to tell how well the gear coped with worst-case scenarios. But, on the flipside, you wouldn't know how much sound quality could be extracted from a given product, nor would you discover its full potential, and that would be a pity.

In an attempt to keep things real I always use supplied cables when reviewing kit, so no fancy mains cables are substituted. What's more, in my new listening facility the mains supply is not on a separate spur, so it's as good and dirty as the computer in the next room makes it – it's a pretty real world in that respect. I also use largely sensible cables for the signal; van den Hul Orchid and Living Voice Potato interconnects with Townshend

DCT speaker cable. The latter however does make the life of most amplifiers easier by offering very low impedance, so there's another thing to consider!

So the system is generally sympathetic to incoming kit, fairly down to earth in many respects, but also highly revealing which is what it needs to be to do the job. All the equipment needs is to have some greatness to peek out in the first place, something we can all do in the long term.

Jason Kennedy began working on Hi-Fi Choice over 15 years ago, eventually rising to the position of Editor. He's currently indulging in his passion as a freelance hi-fi writer



Crossing over

Tales from the other side of the audio biz

Several years ago I crossed the line from audio journalist to the commercial 'dark side', the sharp end of the mid-to-high-end hi-fi industry. It's tough. And – here's the rub – it's very different from what I conceived it to be as a

louche audio scribe travelling the world at someone else's expense. Discourse with someone at the end of the hi-fi chain was a novelty. I rarely got to meet the public and it was even rarer that I got to meet a retailer. If truth be told I had very little idea of either the strength or importance of the British hi-fi market. Now I'm a bit more clued-up.

Firstly, let's consider the importance of the UK market. And it's crucial here not to confuse importance with actual sales figures! As far as sales are concerned, the UK is a strange beast. International markets and manufacturers are often surprised and/or dispirited to discover the relatively small market over here. Certain British manufacturers now see their export market as the mortgage payer and the UK market as little more than beer money. With certain hi-fi products some markets you wouldn't expect to be that strong, actually boot the UK straight out of the park – the Ukraine, for example. China and the Far East are another ball game entirely. Korea is a prime example of a country where distributors import significant numbers of seriously high-end products and apparently sell them in a flash. That certainly doesn't happen here, alas. Despite the UK's relative wealth, two channel hi-fi simply isn't a priority for the average upper middle-class family. However, they'll happily drop £10,000 on a custom installation for the barn conversion, £15,000 on a week's holiday at Sandy Lane and maybe £40,000 on a BMW X5.

Despite this – and without meaning to sound too contrary – there's a bit of a renaissance in the UK two-channel market that we can't afford to ignore. And it appears to be in the upper echelons of expenditure. This end of the market is stable and even improving a little, while the low to mid-range struggles somewhat. Importantly, certain retailers find that fewer customers are coming through the door, yet their turnover is up due to the increased spending power of those that do.

Where the UK is vitally important, however, is in worldwide influence of the specialist media. With the exception of one or two US publications, the UK hi-fi press is regarded as the world's reference guide to audio. Ten years ago a couple of top-drawer reviews meant that you'd more than likely sell a shed load of amps or speakers here. The truth is, not any more. What it does achieve, though, is sales in the developing and stronger markets around the world, plus international status and acknowledgement of your products. For every Best Buy or Five Star review in the UK there's probably a distributor heading off to Kiev for another Rolex to add to the collection. Jealous, mo?

Simon Apple was the former editor of *Hi-Fi World*. Having made a full recovery, he is now marketing director of hi-fi distributor UKD

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RADIO COMPARISONS

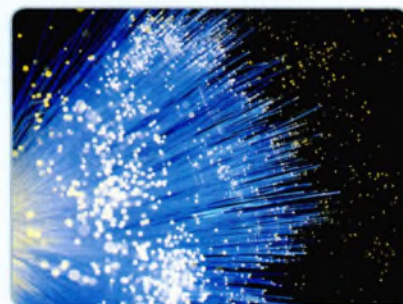


Given that this issue's Ultimate Group Test features six DAB/FM radios, we thought a look at some of the comparisons between DAB and FM would be welcome. It should be simple – switch between DAB and FM broadcasts of the same station and present our findings in a 'DAB sounds like this, FM like that' format. However, there are complicating factors...

For a start, FM sound depends critically on reception quality. However, even assuming that one has really good FM reception, the comparison is still tricky. Most of the stations that broadcast on both systems use different audio dynamics processing in the chain, typically compressing FM signals more than DAB. It's actually quite impressive how much they manage to compress some FM stations: when we sampled Radio 1 recently we found it had a peak-to-average ratio (PAR) of about 5dB, which is less than random white noise (PAR of 6dB). On DAB, the ratio is still not vast but it's more like 10-11dB, much like many commercial pop recordings. A similar comparison seems to hold most of the time with Radio 2, though the dynamic range on both media is wider than Radio 1.

Radio 3 certainly has the most dynamic sound on the 'dial', and we found on DAB that its PAR was around 20dB during a broadcast from the Proms, one of the BBC's flagship events for which engineering standards are generally very high. Indeed, the PAR was similar to that in a couple of highly respected audiophile recordings of similar repertoire, which suggests that little or no compression was being used by the BBC. On FM the PAR was a little lower at 15dB.

That's by far the biggest complication in the audio comparison between systems, but it doesn't quite stop there, for the compression used on FM is frequency-dependent and therefore the tonality of the broadcasts varies somewhat compared to DAB, although on the whole, the long-term average audio spectrum is very similar. It's not quite the same in the treble, though, as the high-frequency cut-off point of the systems vary. FM basically gets to 15kHz and just stops dead, while DAB has a sliding cutoff point that's set from moment to moment by the MPEG 2 coding process. At best, in practice, audio is



“It's actually mighty impressive just how hard they manage to compress some FM stations.”

passed up to about 19kHz (the BBC has recently installed new coders which add a couple of kHz compared with the old ones, and give more stable HF response too, a welcome change)

And then there's noise. FM has a pretty good signal-to-noise ratio, but DAB does quite a lot better. Low levels of background hiss don't wreck good sound but they can be quite insidious.

For all these reasons, the comparison between DAB and FM is a tricky one to make. And when it's done, what do we find? Not surprisingly, the results vary considerably from station to station, due to the differences in audio processing, but also because of different musical styles and, of course, the bit-rates used by stations. DAB is certainly most successful on Radio 3 where its high bit-rate, wide dynamic range and low noise all count in its favour, while the problems of achieving truly satisfactory reception on FM are most acute. On pop stations, lower DAB bit-rates, less dynamics and noise are all but irrelevant. As such, FM sound is often more detailed and more pleasant in the long run.

DAB has much to offer to many listeners: our complaint against it, is simply that it could have been a lot better. FM, by contrast, was just about the best system they could implement with the technology of 50 years ago and its very age is testimony to some impressive engineering. **HFC**

Richard Black

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The world according to...

Avid hi-fi

Hi-Fi Choice catches up with Avid hi-fi founder Conrad Mas, to talk turntable inspiration and business philosophy. Interview: Malcolm Steward

Where do you imagine that a small British turntable manufacturer would base itself these days? Under a railway arch, or in a similar low-rent commercial facility in the poorest part of town? A run-down factory building maybe? Think again. Avid has made its home in what used to be the offices of the CIA on the former USAF base at Alconbury, near Huntingdon.

Amid a welter of industrial and commercial operations housed in ex-military barracks, hangars and munitions silos, Avid operates from a spacious and bomb-proof, yet highly anonymous-looking HQ. The office's solitary window, company chief Conrad Mas told me, still contains bulletproof glass. Apart from the usual office areas – reception, storage and demonstration/training room – the building also houses the company's extensive

engineering facilities, complete with CNC machinery and lathes, which all help to reduce Avid's reliance on external suppliers to virtually nothing. Interestingly, while this machinery is grinding, drilling and doing whatever it's meant to do – usually the type of operation that calls for ear-defenders – the noise levels in adjacent rooms remain eerily low. Non-existent, in fact. One can only speculate why the CIA wouldn't want sound to travel very far within its premises...

HFC: *How did you begin designing turntables?*

CM: Like many hi-fi enthusiasts, I first owned a Connoisseur BD1 then progressed to a Thorens, which ended up tweaked and covered in Blu Tack. Eventually, I reached the stage where, probably very arrogantly, I felt that everyone else was doing things wrong.

I sold the lot and sat down with a blank sheet of paper to design every aspect of a turntable the way I thought it should be done. I designed it the way you'd design an electrical circuit, because I believe that one can convert most electrical circuits into mechanical circuits. I wanted to channel paths and signals, and electrical signals are only vibration. Then it was just a case of figuring out how to convert my drawings into a functional mechanical object. I had no qualifications or any background in engineering, which in hindsight I feel was an advantage. If you look at most audio engineering companies, they usually began life as engineering companies and then found their way into hi-fi for some reason.

A lot of the materials we use are cast components and I didn't have any knowledge or experience with foundries and the casting process. I got around this, and my lack of engineering knowledge, the obvious way: by taking a job in a foundry, where I was able to learn everything I needed to know about castings. All the other disciplines I've learned by either approaching universities and using their facilities, or by studying the narrow fields required. For example, I learned technical drawing from a library book. Years later I was introduced to CAD (Computer Aided Design), which we now use exclusively.

Initially, Avid started by sub-contracting much of its work out; effectively assembling components that were produced outside the company, from my garage. I then progressed to a double garage and from there moved to a 1,500 square feet facility. Now we have 15,000 square feet and that space has enabled us to install all our own engineering equipment and bring nearly every aspect of our turntable construction business in-house.

HFC: *It must have been an expensive operation investing in all that heavy machinery you have next door.*

CM: It was, and we didn't get much change out of £200,000. However, I always take a

"I sat down with a blank sheet of paper. I had no qualifications or background in engineering. In hindsight I feel this was an advantage."



long-term view of things and that was a very sound investment. Having all our own machinery also enables us to carry out the contract work we get asked to do – we produce close-tolerance components for medical, military, automotive and petrochemical companies, as well as for other hi-fi manufacturers.

What's more, having our own manufacturing capability enables us to carry everything we produce in stock – we don't have to build-to-order and the customer can have what he wants the following day rather than facing several weeks' wait.

HFC: *So where does Avid stand as a company at the moment?*

CM: We're currently shipping to over 30 countries around the world and we have about 30 UK retailers, which we hope to increase shortly. We're selling more turntables abroad though because, historically, UK retailers would phone and want to order one turntable while America would be on the other phone simultaneously ordering three pallets' worth, and as in any business, money talks. After I returned from a UK show recently – where I was amazed by the interest in Avid shown by retailers and the public – we decided that we had to start carrying stock in order to satisfy the UK market.

HFC: *Isn't holding stock bad news for any business, though?*

CM: It would be costly if we were having our parts made by sub-contractors, which we'd have to order in large quantities to keep costs as low as possible, but because we buy raw materials and make everything ourselves it isn't so prohibitive. On average we'll have ten or 15 of each model in stock at any one time. If we have the parts it makes sense to turn them into products, which we can test thoroughly and package ready for dispatch. That's one problem with the 'just-in-time' manufacturing process that many people employ: it doesn't offer the time we like to ensure that our products will not fail in our customers' home. For example, we often test our power supplies for three weeks and then package them, drop test them, and then re-test them again for a week. We don't want to send stuff to, say, the USA and have it returned because it failed to withstand the shipping.

HFC: *How do you view the state of retail in the UK?*

CM: I can see a lot of retailers going to the wall because they're not keeping up with changes in the market. Their customers have changed and have different requirements now, but many stores seem to want to carry on doing business the way they have for the





Conrad's years of training as a stage hypnotist clearly paid off

which we can offer our engineering services. Audio is probably 80 per cent of our business turnover now, but who knows how long that situation will prevail?

HFC: *What's the latest news in terms of product development at Avid?*

CM: One of our retailers who sells a lot of Linn equipment recently asked if we could produce our mid-range turntables in a fashion that would better suit Naim cosmetically. Hence the Black Series, which, when we showed it at a UK show, generated so much interest, especially from overseas, that I was gob-smacked. As a result of this, my relationship with Naim, I'm pleased to say, has flourished – no doubt helped by the Linn Keel upgrade, which precludes owners of the Naim tonearm and has, effectively, left a lot of Linn/Naim owners feeling 'orphaned', because to enjoy the turntable upgrade means they'll have to jettison their preferred tonearm. So we've developed what I consider to be an improved mounting system specifically for that tonearm

turntables and says that it will make their records sound much better and that, in fact, they can still buy LPs, they usually order one. So much so, in fact, that the USA has become our biggest growth market by far. Many rich Americans don't want to hide away their Avid turntables: they have them out on display as a bit of hi-fi bling!

HFC: *What materials do you favour, and how do they affect the sound of your turntables?*

CM: The majority of our turntables are made from aluminum because if you use just a single material you can far better predict and control resonances – where they're going to go and how they'll affect the sound. The sub-chassis is a coarse-grade aluminum coated with a paint finish that we specially developed to reduce the skin tension in the aluminum: low frequency energy stays in the core of the material while the high frequencies make their way to the surface – not unlike the 'skin-effect' in cables. This approach makes it very simple to dissipate energy within the sub-chassis rather than using outwardly superior beaded anodised aluminum, which is less effective.

HFC: *None of your turntables have a plinth. Is that a purely cosmetic consideration?*

CM: None of our products are primarily designed 'aesthetically'; they're all a case of form following function. For example, The Acutus, our first design, contains nothing that doesn't fulfil a purpose. Even the shape of the base, which looks like it might have been a cosmetic consideration, is the way it is to avoid having parallel surfaces, which are bad for resonance. The core design and fundamentals of all our turntables are the same but they use different materials and ways of doing things commensurate with their cost.

Our sub-chassis is a unique design that is founded on the view that absolutely nothing is rigid. Everything vibrates and everything moves, so it's important to ensure that the joint between the arm and the bearing is very rigid, while the less important areas, such as the suspension points, can be less rigid. In fact, the turntable is allowed to flex there because it has no effect on the sound. Our sub-chassis was designed in the early 1980s during some free time on a time-shared computer that was then being used by Saab to develop its turbo, and Windscale Nuclear to design reactor components.

What with the company being housed in a formerly 'secret' location and Conrad's tales of developing his sub-chassis using 'borrowed' time on a computer being used to develop parts of nuclear power stations, it was clear that there is far more to Avid than meets the eye. At which point we closed the interview and headed off to tour other covert attractions that Alconbury airbase had to offer. **HFC**

“This industry needs all the manufacturers to get together to try and revive its appeal rather than fighting for greater market share.”

□ past 30 years. Thankfully, there are new retailers coming up that are more in tune with today's market and I expect they'll do well. Specialist retailers denigrate Comet, but at least when you walk into one of those stores somebody takes the trouble to speak to you: they might only ask “Can I help you?” but at least they've acknowledged your presence in the store, which several specialists I've visited couldn't even be bothered to do. Sadly, many retailers' response to the present downturn in sales is to ask manufacturers to give them a larger profit margin rather than try to do something about the situation themselves.

This industry needs all the manufacturers to get together to try and revive its appeal rather than fighting amongst themselves for greater market share. I think it was Russ Andrews who recently suggested organising a large show at a venue such as the NEC, but I can't see that being a success. That strikes me as closing the stable door after the horse has bolted – only in this instance the horse bolted so long ago that it has died and turned to dust. What we need is a concerted effort from all parties involved to make hi-fi more appealing – sexier, even – to a much wider public.

I feel sure that we'll still be selling turntables and CD players in 30 years' time, even if it's to a much smaller, niche market. But that's why Avid is looking at avenues other than audio in

on our turntables, which has generated quite a lot of interest around the world.

HFC: *I also hear that you've been making moves into custom installation, which has me confused. I thought that custom install was all about hiding equipment away and I can't see that working for your turntables. Can you explain?*

CM: We're actually making 'double-sided analogue replay systems' that fit perfectly into the custom install ethos! In this country I see custom install as a fledgling industry with retailers fitting out small home cinemas with a plasma screen, an AV receiver and five loudspeakers. In America it's a completely different ball game: there are installers there who won't look at a job worth less than \$200,000 and they're very well-sorted businesses – they're not selling the equipment for nothing and making their profit on cables, for instance. Their customers spend \$100,000 without even thinking about it and those retailers have realised that when they sell these people a plasma they make \$100 or \$200: when they sell one of our top decks, they make a whole lot more and they've caught onto the idea of asking their very rich clients whether they have any LPs anywhere in their homes. The answer is normally, “Yes, but you can't buy them any more, and they don't sound very good.” When the dealer shows them one of our

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QUESTION:

What does the trapezoidal plywood cabinet help reduce?

- A: Infernal staggering wannabes**
- B: Internal standing waves**
- C: Intergalactic stumpy wolves**

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...to our last winner, Mr Churchill of Shoreham-by-sea, West Sussex, who wins a stunning Vincent SV-236 integrated amplifier worth £1,000!

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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

FLEETWOOD MAC

The Pious Bird Of Good Omen

Blue Horizon/Speakers Corner
180g vinyl



Music: This 1968 compilation brings together material from the first three of Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac albums. Despite starting out as a

blues band their biggest success was the totally non-bluesy instrumental, *Albatross*, which made Number One upon its release in 1969. The Mac was a very fine blues band and led the field among British scenesters of the time. You can hear as much from these dozen tracks, including *Black Magic Woman* and several songs featuring Eddie Boyd whose voice leant the band an extra degree of authenticity. ★★★★★

Sound: Quality varies with the tracks, but overall it's pretty good for the era and very good for the genre with proper stereo used on vocals and decent bandwidth and energy. ★★★★★ JK

THE LOVIN' SPOONFUL

Do You Believe In Magic

Kama Sutra/Speakers Corner
180g vinyl



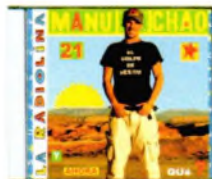
Music: The Lovin' Spoonful were a wacky bunch of New Yorkers who got together in 1965 to form a band which could very well have been

an inspiration for acts like the Monkees. Led by virtuoso blues-harp player and guitarist John Sebastian and Zal Yanovsky (guitar, vocals) they clearly had a strong blues background coupled with a light-hearted outlook which meant nothing got taken too seriously. Occasionally the wackiness gets in the way on their 1965 debut, but on the whole this is a highly enjoyable album for any aspiring student of the Sixties. ★★★★★

Sound: The sound is very much of the time. Although some labels did a decent job, Kama Sutra was among the many for whom limited bandwidth and a dual mono technique were clearly good enough. Great transcription though. ★★★★★ JK

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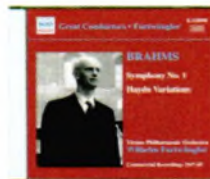
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La Radiolina

Because Music

Music: Coming on like a renegade cross between Bob Marley and Joe Strummer, Manu Chao shifted four million copies worldwide of his 1998 debut *Clandestino*. Yet somehow Britain remained mostly immune to his globalista party mix of rumba, ska, punk rock and whatever else took his eclectic fancy. Drenched in rock guitars, *La Radiolina* is surely about to change all that. Chao's trademarks are still in fine working order, but from the frenetic punk energy of *Panic Panic* to the catchy, grown-up pop of *Bleeding Clown*, this is not so much a world music record as an irresistible global-rock manifesto of polyphonic brilliance and universal eloquence. ★★★★★

Sound: Chao's clever, state-of-the-art laptop mixing creates an intricately layered soundstage that still sounds totally organic. ★★★★★ NW



BRAHMS

Symphony No.1 Haydn Variations

Wilhelm Furtwängler (cond) VPO

Naxos Historical (mono) 8.110998

Music: These recordings, made with the Vienna Philharmonic on inspired form, were made in the immediate post WWII years (1947 – symphony No1, 1949 – Haydn Variations), and the musical link between Brahms and Beethoven in this most Beethoven-like of all Brahms symphonies, has never been more obvious. The performances are both measured and impassioned. ★★★★★

Sound: The task of 'lifting the voices' from the original '78s was given to Ward Marston, who has won impressive plaudits. He keeps surface noise at bay most of the time, and the electricity and passion embedded in the notes come through intact, especially in the symphony. These recordings aren't high fidelity, but stand as an important historical document in their own right. ★★★ AG



TETSU INOUE

Inland

Fax PS 08/111

Music: For many years, New York-based ambient techno genius Inoue made double albums with Pete Namlook and Bill Laswell called Broadway. Obviously bored with the dance connection, Inoue has cut his electronica free from any beats and come up with an ambient album of startling brilliance. Pools of sound eddy in and out of consciousness as filigreed soundscapes. Images of breeze, drizzle, after-rain sunshine and the like populate what is probably the best ambient recording ever to come out of Fax. ★★★★★

Sound: Even in mono this is a beguiling experience. A quick listen to *Zen* has surprising sonic moments that just drop out of the speakers. Warm, rich and constantly bewitching, this disc will best test a system's high-frequency definition and separation. ★★ MP



RILO KILEY

Under The Blacklight

Warner Brothers

Music: After her country-tinged solo album, *Rabbit Fur Coat* featured on many critics' 'Best of 2006' lists, Jenny Lewis returns to front her hugely likeable band on surely their most commercial outing to date. Smartly straddling the fertile territory between indie cool and radio mainstream, even if you'd never heard of Rilo Kiley you'd know instantly that they come from LA. *Under The Blacklight* is a bright, sun-dappled exercise in jangling West Coast dance-pop that recalls a leftfield Fleetwood Mac on songs such as *Dreamworld* and *Breakin' Up*. The latter is driven by a euphoric chorus that declares "Oh, it feels good to be free" although strong hints of a darker reality beneath the glossy veneer prevent them ever descending into brash drivetime vacuity. ★★★★★

Sound: Chiming silvery guitars and politely slick funk rhythms abound, but there's no disguising the sheer class of Lewis's songwriting. ★★★ NW



HARVEY ANDREWS

I'm Resigning From Today

Transatlantic

Music: Birmingham schoolteacher Harvey Andrews gave up his day job to become a full-time singer-songwriter in 1966. Fifteen albums later – and with his bittersweet, oft socio-political, work covered by everyone from Mary Hopkins and Christy Moore to Max Boyce – he seems to have gotten away with his abrupt career change. This double CD compo includes everything he cut for folk label Transatlantic between 1965 and 1976. And what a diverse bunch these songs are – everything from folk-blues to neo-swing, TV big band and pop-blues. Think George Melly meets Davy Graham and you'll get the picture. Entertainingly broad. ★★★★★

Sound: Although never a rich label, Transatlantic boasted clarity and depth and this is no exception. ★★★★★ PS



THIS MONTH'S CLASSIC HI-FI TEST DISC "Finger-picking folktronica at its finest"

JOSÉ GONZALEZ Veneer Peacefrog

Music: A cross between Nick Drake and Suzanne Vega, Gonzalez has a superb picking style that's interesting without getting in the way of the songs, which are both emotionally honest and insightful. The big hit from the mobile phone advert, *Heartbeats*, was not actually written by Gonzalez and while it's great pop it's far from the best track on the disc, which benefits from double tracking of both guitar and vocals. ★★★★★

Sound: *Veneer* is an odd recording: most of the time it is simple, a little warm, but also very revealing. Occasionally, though, it lapses into overload, to an extent that is so obvious, you wonder if it was deliberate. We've tried two samples and found the same, but luckily most of it is clear, it images well and, through a good system, lets you get very close indeed to the man. ★★★★★ JK



SINEAD O'CONNOR

Theology

Rubyworks

Music: Sinead O'Connor has by no means followed a traditional rock career path. From tearful 1980s icon to showbiz pariah, she's often been known more for her outspokenness than her music. More recently, though, she has concentrated on making fairly low-key, more personal albums. Whether it be *Sean-Nós Nua*, an album of traditional Irish music, or the roots reggae covers of 2005's *Throw Down Your Arms*. Her latest is actually a double album of songs loosely based around the prophets of the Bible. One album features a full rock band, the other is the same songs in stripped-down acoustic mode. ★★★★★

Sound: The bare acoustic set is the more distinctive set of the two, showcasing O'Connor's unique voice without adornment, giving it free rein to rediscover some often maligned classics such as *Rivers Of Babylon*. ★★★★★ DO



DVD-AUDIO & SACD

ERNEST RANGLIN

Order Of Distinction

DVD-Audio (24, 96 multichannel) plus CD

AIX Records

Music: Guitarist Ernest Ranglin's influence on the reggae world cannot be underestimated. For this collection of audio and video discs he is joined by ten classy musicians including Monty Alexander and one-time Doors guitarist Robbie Krieger for a live jam at the Element club in Hollywood. The sound they make is smooth and on the money, while the tunes they play include *Many Rivers To Cross* and the first big hit to which Ranglin contributed – *My Bcy Lollipop*. Many of them are Ranglin compositions with reggae or calypso rhythms that have superb feel and great warmth, much like the man himself. ★★★★★

Sound: The DVD-Audio side only available in 5.1 multichannel, but flipping onto the CD side we were shocked at the quality. It's big, relaxed and powerful and impresses with its detail and dynamics. This is a stunning piece of work recorded direct to 24/96. ★★★★★ JK



BERLIOZ

L'Enfance Du Christ

Sir Colin Davis (cond), LSO

SACD (stereo/multichannel SACD) plus Stereo CD layer

LSO Live 0606

Music: If you come to this oratorio fresh, you may be surprised by what you find. This oratorio has nothing of the drama of Verdi's *Requiem*, the beauty of the Brahms *Requiem* or its counterpart from Fauré. Berlioz was not even a religious believer, though he was apparently an admirer of the Catholic church, a distinction that may seem strange now. This long piece (it's a two-disc set with a playing time of over 96 minutes) is not a requiem, but a musical account of the birth of Jesus, and is relatively gentle (a departure for Berlioz), and modest in its instrumentation and the vocal forces deployed. ★★★★★

Sound: It took a while for this music to register, but its understated passion certainly does so in the end on sheer musical merit – the work is nothing less than exquisite. The CD and multichannel SACD layers are well handled. In common with other LSO Live recordings, this one was recorded at the recently rejuvenated Barbican hall. ★★★★★ AG



STRAVINSKY

The Rite Of Spring

Robert Craft (cond), Jennifer Frautschi (violin), Philharmonia Orchestra.

Naxos 8 557508

Music: Robert Craft was a friend and collaborator of Stravinsky, which gives his recordings a degree of kudos that they probably don't always deserve. This performance is really quite special though. The programme is unusually eclectic and includes the perfect *Violin Concerto*, and the *Symphonies Of Wind Instruments*, as well as the little known *Zvedolikiy*. The Philharmonic Orchestra used in the *Rite* was on excellent form, and so was the soloist in the *Violin Concerto*, Jennifer Frautschi. ★★★★★

Sound: The *Violin Concerto* is particularly fine and the *Rite Of Spring* is also very measured, but the musical tension almost seems to gain from understatement. ★★★★★ AG



THE DRAGONS

BFI

Ninja Tune

Music: The three Dragon brothers cut their only album in 1970, but it's only now been issued for the first time. The Californian surf dudes were session musicians who played in the Beach Boys' touring band, but their largely instrumental brand of sun-kissed psychedelic soul found no record label home and the project was shelved until Ninja Tune's DJ Food re-discovered them and set about releasing this gem to the world. ★★★★★

Sound: Elements of *Smile-era* Beach Boys, early Doors and the Beatles combine on an organic sounding album that plays like a lost postcard from the first era of psychedelic experimentation. Groovy. ★★★★★ DO

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Fantasia On A Theme By Thomas Tallis

Robert Spano (cond), Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

SACD (stereo/multichannel SACD) plus Stereo CD layer

This disc unusually includes the original choral theme by Elizabethan composer Thomas Tallis on which Vaughan Williams' first masterpiece is based. *Why Fum'th In Fight?* lasts less than a minute, but it's delicately beautiful melody and harmony provide the springboard for an orchestral re-imagining that has become one of the most famous works in the English classical canon. The disc also includes the peaceful *Fifth Symphony* from 1943, seen at the time as an island of calm and serenity in the midst of WWII, and which still transmits a quietly serene power. ★★★★★

Sound: Conductor Robert Spano's reading maintains the measured pace of this work, evoking the rural English landscape as much as the devotional hymn on which it is based. The reading is particularly luminous in the surround SACD version, with sensitive placement of all the elements. ★★★★★ DO



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“FAST, TRANSPARENT, DYNAMIC, OPEN, CLEAR, VIVID.”

HI FI CLUBE / JOSÉ VICTOR HENRIQUES / CREMONA ELIPSA

Sonus Faber's introductions in the early "Noughties" of the floor-standing Cremona and the smaller Cremona Auditor were hailed as milestones in the industry's long standing quest to achieve the highly-desired marriage of both aesthetics and sound quality. Such a marriage would please both ends of the consumer spectrum, the audiophile as well as the cineaste.

Indeed, it seemed incredible that the legendary, exquisite craftsmanship of the original Cremona and the Cremona Auditor could have been surpassed

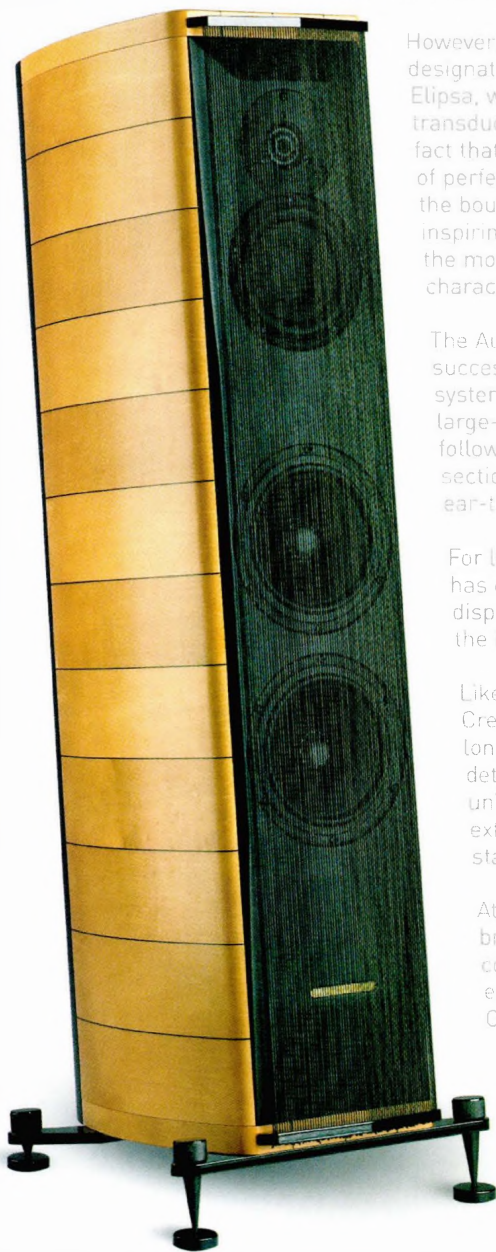
However, the recent launch of two new models with 'M' designations, along with a flagship speaker, the Cremona Elipsa, were inspired by that most astounding of transducers, the Stradivari. Thus, they are testaments to the fact that Sonus Faber's designers are in a constant process of perfecting the art of music reproduction, and of pushing the boundaries in the creation and engineering of awe-inspiring handcrafted works of art. These speakers are all the more precious because of their rarity, in a world characterised by so much automation and mechanisation.

The Auditor M, the smallest of the new Cremonas and the successor of the original Auditor, is a versatile two-way system ideally suited for smaller environments craving a large-scale musical picture. Its natural maple enclosure follows the Sonus Faber signature form of a lute in cross-section, while its components and final sound have been ear-tuned by the legendary Franco Serblin

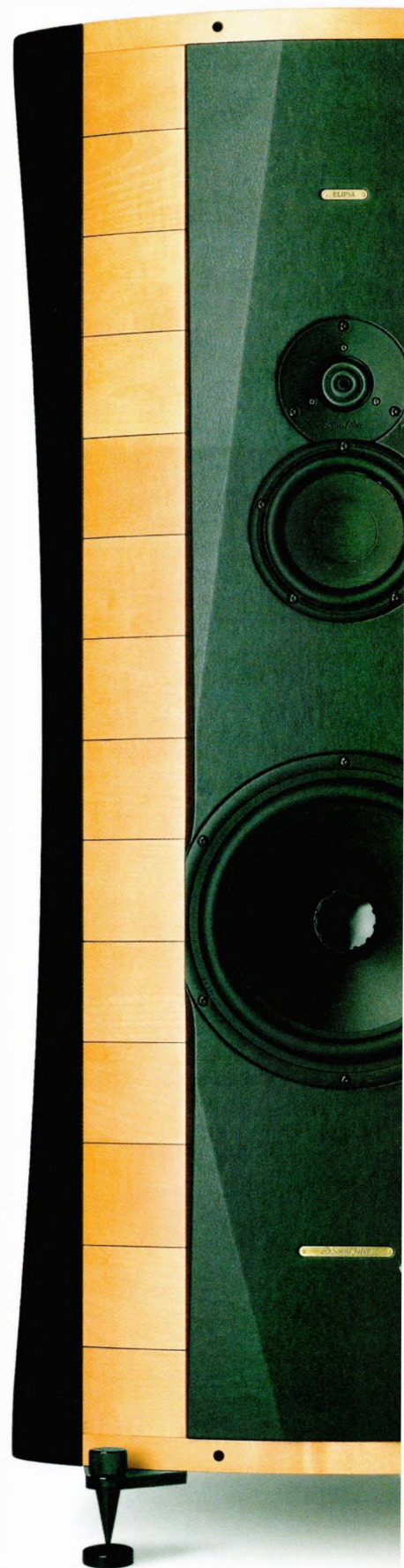
For larger rooms, the original floor-standing Cremona has evolved into the new superior Cremona M, which displays a more elegant, stylish finish and benefits from the introduction of new components

Like their Homage siblings, both the Auditor M and Cremona M reflect the findings of Serblin's longstanding research, with attention paid to every detail, from small components, to wiring, to the drive units themselves. Equally, the aesthetics and external details have been refined to indicate a new stage in the speakers' evolution

At the top of the new Cremona range lies the brand-new Cremona Elipsa, designed for the connoisseur with both the means and the environment to exploit a larger system. The Cremona Elipsa provides near-Stradivari performance in a more compact, economical package. Its sound is room-filling, open and natural, while its form is as beautiful as the speaker that inspired it. The Elipsa is, without question, another Sonus Faber masterpiece.



Sonus Faber CREMONA M



Sonus Faber CREMONA ELIPSA

For your nearest dealer contact:

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THE NEED FOR SPEED

We seldom hear reference to speed from a technical perspective with regard to hi-fi components these days. We used to speak about slew rates and the like in amplifiers and, of course, the ability of speaker cones to start and stop in some sort of sync with the music. The dynamics of a plucked or bowed string, the way air moves out of wind instruments, the contact of percussion and the timbre of human voices all exhibit a natural 'speed signature'. Anything less than accurate tracking of the fastest of these events must result in a kind of transient distortion. In this respect, it's good to see Lowther still making their excellent speaker drive units – they clearly understand the relevance of speed.

Douglas Marc via email

HFC It seems to hold that a system's speed is inversely proportional to its tonal accuracy, and right now the trend in the mainstream is to sacrifice some speed for accuracy in loudspeakers. That accuracy comes at the expense of efficiency and requires a more powerful amplifier to drive the speakers. And, of course, more amp power often comes at the expense of slew rates and rise times in the amplifier itself. However, there remains a healthy crop of brands – admittedly mostly high-enders – that understand the need for speed and are working to redress the balance.

VINYL VOLITION

I have been a reader of *Hi-Fi Choice* for many years, and have confidence in your reviewers'

"I have to replace my Rega 3 turntable with something that's around £3,000."

opinions. After a sufficient period of searching, I put together my system. It features Quad's ESL loudspeaker, Nagra's PL-L and VPA, a dCS P8i, a Kontrapunkt B and an EAR 834 MM/MC phono pre. I think I need to upgrade my Rega 3 turntable, probably with something costing around £3,000. Keeping in mind that I'm listening to mostly classical music and jazz, could your recommend me a good, musical turntable? I was thinking along the lines of SME 10, Clearaudio, Roksan...

Petre Deleanu Romania



Above:
Rega's
latest P3
turntable

HFC You're on the right track on all counts, Petre. The system you currently own is a true high-end wonder, and the turntable – while good – is outclassed by the rest of the products in the chain. Your SME and Clearaudio suggestions are both good, the SME being more accurate, the Clearaudio livelier. The Roksan is no bad choice either, although this might be more geared to the sort of close-knit musicality of rock

Letter of the month



SHOP TILL YOU DROP?

CD sales and HMV's profits are down, Fopp closed all its stores and the record-collector shops in London's Berwick Street are closing or struggling. What a change from when Oasis were photographed walking down Berwick Street for the cover of *(What's The Story) Morning Glory?* – which, purely incidentally, was the last album I bought on vinyl.

Is this the beginning of the end for music on disc or the end of retail? Worse, if CD is coming to an end, will hi-fi disappear with it?

Jeremy Ford via email

HFC Downloads are on the up and CDs on the way down, but don't start mourning the loss of CD yet. There are still millions of discs sold every week, both on the high street and online. Fopp's flop came more from acquiring too many stores in one gulp, rather than its CD-selling business. However, even if the gloom within the music business is well founded, terminal decline in hi-fi is unlikely. Just as manufacturers embraced CD in the 1980s, the same thing is happening with downloads today. All of which means the end is far from nigh for hi-fi.



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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...)

Below: Denon TU-1800DAB DAB/FM tuner



“Just how great would it be to have a radio phone-in about hi-fi?”

rather than the more expansive nature of classical. You might also want to check out the Kuzma, Michell and Amazon turntables at this price level. Whatever you choose, get a good cartridge with it – a good Clearaudio or Benz Micro should be a perfect match.

RADIO HI-FI

I listen to my digital radio and enjoy a couple of popular talk shows – *6.06*, a football phone-in, and *Sports Breakfast* at weekends. Just how great would it be to have a radio phone-in about hi-fi? I enjoyed two hi-fi demonstrations at a hi-fi show last January in Manchester. One was comparing three different CD players, priced at £2,900, £7,000 and £15,000. The other was comparing a dedicated hi-fi equipment table to a standard coffee table. The differences in sound quality amazed me. I'm sure such differences would be demonstrable on air, and it would make for interesting radio.

Julian Bedford Leeds

HFC There have been hi-fi phone-ins in the past; one of the last was a regular slot on London's LBC about a decade or so ago, conducted by *HFC's* very own relocated 'Norfolk Luhnunner' Alan Sircom. Unfortunately, there are rarely enough regular audiophile listeners to generate lively debate. It would be nice to even find a regular audiophile podcast online, but no such luck as yet.

The problems with conducting hi-fi demonstrations on air are twofold. First, the differences in performance found in hi-fi are unlikely to register when played through the signal compression endemic to talk-radio broadcasts – from our blind listening tests, it's clear that it's hard enough to determine differences in audio components under optimum conditions. Secondly, perhaps even more importantly to the broadcaster, a hi-fi demonstration on radio would dredge up nasty copyright and licensing issues that no talk-radio station would accept.

HI-RES HYPERBOLE

I recently bought into the whole HDTV thing, having got a SkyHD box for my flat-screen TV. Maybe it's just me, but I'm not convinced. The differences aren't as big as I'd expected. Worse, when I challenged the installer about this, he said I couldn't see the differences because my screen is too small. Perhaps people's speakers were too small for high-resolution SACD, too.

Mark Cox via email

HFC The installer may be right – HDTV needs a big screen. And yes, SACD sounds best through big, wide-bandwidth speakers.

UPGRADE PANIC

I've just rejoined the hi-fi train; thanks for a great mag. I'm presently in an upgrade panic and need your help. After six years, my £2,200

Musical Fidelity X-A100R, X-RAY and KEF Q55.2 set-up can still turn my head. However, I've now heard a Linn Sondek with all the bits. I have a budget of maybe £5,000 overall and want Linn vinyl and better/comparable sound on CD. What's to do? I'm happy buying reputable second-hand.

Peter Housden via email

HFC There have been more than 100,000 Linn Sondeks sold since the first one spun out of the factory in the early 1970s. Technically, it's possible to upgrade one of the very first decks to the latest specification, but in the process you'll change every single component in the deck.

Also, given that it's a precision piece of engineering that needs periodic maintenance, we'd suggest being very cautious when buying second-hand. Perhaps the best way is to buy direct from a Linn dealer, as they regularly have stocks of relatively recent decks that have been updated for a new model. However, if you did end up buying a bit of a clunker LP12, it's rarely a write-off. A skilled Linn 'deck tech' can bring many an ancient Sondek back to life.

Five grand still buys you a lot of new Linn turntable, though. For that money, you could just stretch to a Linn LP12 turntable, with Lingo power supply, Akito arm, Klyde moving-coil cartridge and Linto MC phono stage, with possibly just enough change to buy a good equipment table to support it.

Onlineforum

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



I was thinking of listening to vinyl again, but I've been told that most vinyl is now made using digital source material and no analogue gets anywhere near the process at all. So, are vinyl records now just big, floppy versions of CDs? What's really going on here – any thoughts?

custoz

...If you like listening to vinyl, there are plenty of used LPs to choose from. Some recordings made on CDs were never as good as those on LPs for some reason or other. For example, 1962 recordings of Beethoven's *Nine Symphonies* by Karajan conducting the Berlin Phil.

Blue_Max

...Since CD arrived in the mid 1980s, I've bought one LP. I have a good turntable, but I've never heard the alleged advantages of vinyl over CD. Both are great, but CD wins for convenience.

Still Tones

...I spent £30 on records this weekend. It bought

me 20 second-hand albums, most in excellent condition and only two that needed a clean because of dust. Being a bit of a Scrooge, that's the biggest plus about vinyl as far as I'm concerned.

Paul.r

...Vinyl is DEAD. It's been dead for ages. Only the

dinosaurs among this lot think any different. Buy CD, pay no less than £2,500 for the player and enter the next dimension.

Coffee

...If you have a vinyl collection already, then there's a lot to be said for having a decent turntable.

Papa Lazarou

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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2006

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AYRE CX-7E CD PLAYER | AYRE AX-7E INTEGRATED AMP | THIEL CS1.6 SPEAKERS | £5,885

Thiel the music

Ok, we admit it, any excuse to get our hands on some Thiel speakers. But never mind the star of the show... check out the supporting cast!

You know those well-worn phrases some people like to bandy about? Those so-called pearls of wisdom like "he who tires of London tires of life itself..." (Samuel Johnson), or "if quantum mechanics hasn't profoundly shocked you, you haven't understood it..." (Niels Bohr). Well, how about throwing this one into the mix: "If you couldn't give a toss about quantum mechanics and don't fancy a night in London town either, then buy a hi-fi system that incorporates a pair of Thiel speakers and chill out" (David Vivian). Okay, there's not much of a ring to it, granted, but give it time, give it time...

Why Thiel speakers? It's hard to say exactly. Being American helps, and the company's reputation for sonic quality is another significant factor. Chiefly though, it's all about the way they look. I'm thinking in particular of Thiel's flagship tower, the CS3.7, which, to my mind, is without doubt the greatest looking hi-fi speaker ever made. Featuring what you'd swear were truck hub caps for main drivers and something that looks like the front end of a vehicle that's been especially designed to burrow to the centre of the Earth as a tweeter. From the first time I saw a pair of 3.7s, I've wanted to review a *Beautiful System* that has Thiel Audio speakers. Just be thankful it isn't the 3.7s. Given the amount of time I'd have to spend just sitting and staring at them, mouth slightly agape, you'd now be looking at a blank page. Still, as you can see, the CS1.6 at the other end of the floorstanding range isn't exactly humdrum either.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Thiel Audio celebrates its 30th anniversary this year at its 35,000 square foot factory in Lexington, Kentucky. However, back in 1976, facilities were less impressive, and co-founder Jim Thiel

had to park his car in the drive so he could get the ball rolling in his garage. His chief obsession at the time (at least one obsession is *de rigueur* if you're going to start a hi-fi company in your garage) was to address the areas of time and phase coherence in loudspeaker design through the application of phase-correct crossover networks and time-aligned drivers. His quest to design speakers that, as he puts it, "translate electronic information into sound as accurately as possible, with the goal of faithfully rendering all the tonal, spatial, and dynamic information on the recording" led to a thorough reappraisal of cabinet design. Seeking to reduce diffraction and unwanted resonances through the use of rounded baffles, heavy internal bracing, and the use of materials like aluminium, concrete and marble has informed the highly distinctive and rather wonderful Thiel look since the early days.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Those guiding principles are as evident in the entry-level CS1.6 as they are in the CS3.7. There's the same rearward sloping baffle, the same heavily contoured corners and the same must-have allure. In essence, the CS1.6 is a compact two-way floorstander that measures in at almost a metre tall and claims a very decent, amp-friendly 90dB efficiency. The really clever stuff begins with the drivers: a high-efficiency, 25mm aluminium dome tweeter and 165mm aluminium cone bass-mid driver. Both drivers incorporate short coil/long gap, copper-stabilized motor systems, said greatly to reduce distortion. The woofer's voice coil is also unusually large in relation to the cone. As Mr Thiel explains: "With the coil nearer the outer edge of the cone, the large diameter allows the force from the voice coil to be distributed over a three-fold 🍌

"Why Thiel? It's hard to say exactly. The company's reputation for sonic quality is a significant factor. Chiefly though, it's all about the way they look..."



Ayre CX-7e
CD player

£2,195

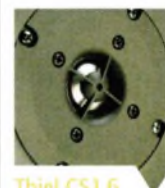
Unpretentious design, solid build and ease of use meet superlative sonics and long-term satisfaction. Live with it for a while and you begin to wonder how they manage to do it for the money.



Ayre AX-7e
integrated amp

£1,995

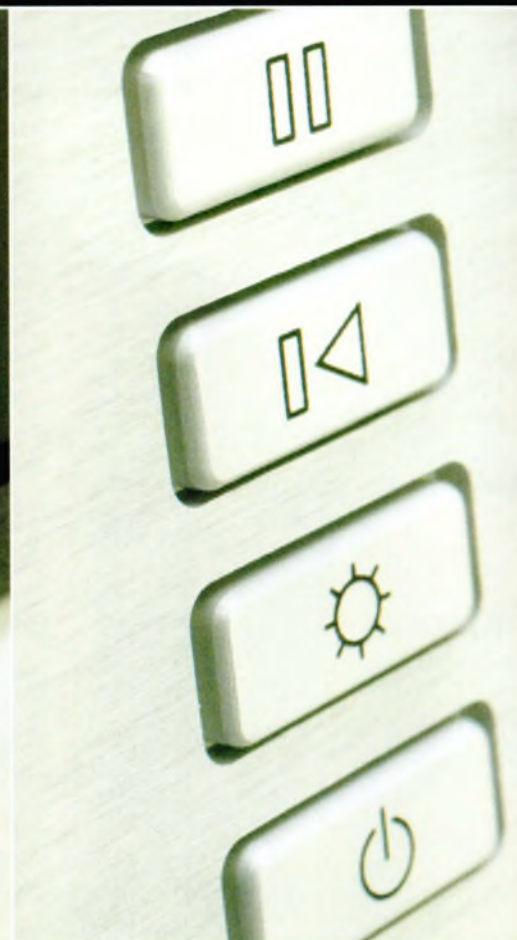
Proof yet again that power figures can be deceptive. Rated at 60 watts per side, the AX-7 sounds as big and dynamic as amps boasting three times the firepower. Clean, clear sound makes it a perfect partner for the Ayre CX-7e CD player.



Thiel CS1.6
speakers

£1,695

The babies of Thiel's floorstanding range punch above their weight to conjure up a sense of scale and power. These are accomplished in every area and a real tribute to their maker's legendary status in the hi-fi world.



greater area of the cone, rather than being concentrated at the centre of the cone. The result is a much stiffer diaphragm that moves unwanted resonances to a much higher frequency (9kHz) for greatly improved upper midrange performance."

THICK CHUNKS OF BAFFLE

The CS1.6 cabinet perfectly expresses Thiel's original approach with its exceptionally chunky build (50mm thick front baffle, 25mm thick cabinet wall), closely coupled and time-aligned drivers (wired up to a sophisticated first-order crossover for optimum phase coherence) and, the killer visual for this particular model, a front-firing reflex port that takes the form of a narrow slot a full 380mm long that runs down the belly of the baffle. The official explanation is that it reduces port noise (fair enough) and 'grille loading effects' (whatever they are). In any case, when a speaker looks this cool, who needs grilles?

Speakers of such superlative quality deserve nothing less than a quality feed from some exceptional electronics. And, as is so often the case with imported high-end hardware, the UK distributor (in this instance Symmetry) knows just the zip code to contact. Based in Boulder, Colorado, Ayre Acoustics is a relative

newcomer by Thiel standards, opening for business in 1993. However, the scale and direction of the company's ambitions align nicely with those of Thiel: 'superlative' sonics, eye-catching design, potent performance/price ratio. Technically, there's nothing that hasn't been done before, but the 'hard points' – fully balanced, zero feedback, beefy, high-spec power supplies – can usually be counted on to do the trick.

FILLED WITH FILTERS

Ayre Acoustics' CX-7e CD player follows the script to the letter. It's a substantial machine that weighs in at 11.5 kilos, yet isn't overly or gratuitously bulky in the name of industrial chic. The 'e', incidentally, stands for 'evolution', which is essentially an upgraded power supply lifted from Ayre's C-5xe universal player and the company's fantastic new multi-stage digital filter system.

The first filter in this system 'upsamples' to 176.4kHz at 24-bit, while the second 'oversamples' to 1.4112MHz at 24-bit. The transport remains a DVD-ROM drive and the DAC chips are from Burr-Brown. Round the back there are both balanced and single-ended outputs, but Ayre makes no secret of its conviction that balanced is the way to go.

Build quality is solid and the clean, uncomplicated design – full marks for the expansive display and its large blue characters – extends all the way to the simple and clearly marked bank of fascia buttons. The most interesting switch is to be found on the backplate though, and is used to toggle between the two digital filter algorithm settings: 'listen' and 'measure'. The former places the emphasis on accuracy in the time domain, while the latter is more accurate in the frequency domain.

Unsurprisingly, the AX-7e integrated amp shares the CD player's design philosophy by combining a great build, bold simplicity and sussed ergonomics. The amp also boasts some natty details, including what must surely count as the best binding posts we've ever seen, which actually clamp the cable plugs or bare wires securely in place. There are four inputs; two of which are balanced, and two that are single-ended, while the custom-designed remote volume control uses FET switches and precision metal-film resistors.

MODEST TOTING

Despite toting eight high-current output devices per channel, power is rated at a modest 60 watts per channel into eight ohms, though this rises to 120 watts into





“Settle down with a pile of your favourite CDs and you’re in for a treat. This is a system notably free from any showboating tendencies. It doesn’t exaggerate, it doesn’t manipulate. And it has truly great bass.”

four ohms. Driving the 90dB-efficient Thiels to high levels isn’t a problem.

All right, first things first. The digital filter settings on the CX-7e do offer a real choice. And for us, it’s a clear cut choice. ‘listen’ has the life brio and dynamic expression ‘measure’ lacks. Unless you listen exclusively to classical/small ensemble acoustic it’s a no-brainer.

KEEP YOUR SOCKS ON

That said, if you are expecting your socks to be propelled to the far corners of your listening room as soon as you hit the play button then you’re going to be disappointed. Nor will a cushion for your jaw be required. Let’s just say that Jim Carrey probably wouldn’t like it. However, settle down in a comfortable chair with a pile of your favourite CDs and you’re in for a rare treat. This is a system notably free from any showboating tendencies. It doesn’t exaggerate, it doesn’t manipulate. And it has truly great bass. Thing is,

it’s all a bit too easy to sound merely impressive. You’ve probably experienced it: big, butch floorstanders with huge amounts of bottom-end wallop but a conspicuous absence of shape, timing, texture and definition; oodles of low frequency energy that’s amorphous and undifferentiated – with a kind of subwoofery quality. This system, on the other hand, has terrific low-frequency definition, texture and dynamics. The overall bass presentation is quite dry but, in the long run, all the more rewarding for it.

However, the Thiel speakers give every impression of being true high-enders in every sense, and not just souped-up budget boxes. They major on focus, resolution, solidity, transient accuracy, timing and imaging. They seem to go louder with less distortion than most sub-£2000 floorstanders and make some sound opaque and closed-in through the mid-band by comparison.

At the other end of the frequency spectrum, treble has speed, shape,

pitch precision and tremendous high frequency extension, but thankfully, nothing detectable in the way of spray-on ‘sparkle’. It’s a remarkably natural kind of presentation, one that is totally devoid of manipulative emphasis, undoubtedly quite dry, but in the long run so much easier to live with. The midrange is just as beautifully judged, eschewing the hyped presence favoured by some for a realistic sense of proportion with believable solidity and acoustic specificity.

The results can be summed up in three words: ‘grace’, ‘balance’ and ‘resolution’. On paper, this isn’t an especially powerful system but, when you actually listen to it, power is never an issue. It’s that special talent for proportion and scaling again, a feeling of spatial coherence that ranks with the very best. The bottom line is that it keeps it real and, as with any *Beautiful System*, you really can’t ask for any more than that. **HFC**

David Vivian



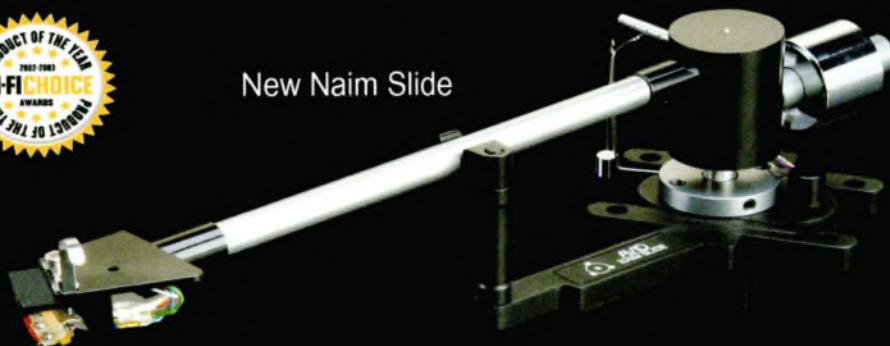


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of beauty*



New Naim Slide



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REVIEWS

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



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OUR RATINGS EXPLAINED

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

Our overall conclusion

...nor an... we liked... point here is... to the job of... recommend you...
...this with Marantz's £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 ring-all-rounder in a compact case.
...er trying the Heart with the standard... we switched over to the Siemens... grade, a comparison somewhat muddled by the fact that it was a cold for hot swap - the...
...after a livelier... tubes shone...
...ough the Siemens-equipped player has an... snappier sound with better timing that... es with dense material with remarkable... sidence and ease. It even seems to be

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

Jason Kennedy

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

VERDICT

SOUND >> 83%

FEATURES >> 85%

BUILD >> 85%

VALUE >> 85%

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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...

EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



REFERE

REFERENCE

Reference revamp

KEF has radically upgraded its Reference Series, starting with this muscular standmount

PRODUCT KEF Reference Model 201/2

TYPE Standmount loudspeaker

PRICE £3,500 per pair (£3,900 with stands)

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 248x41.7x40.5cm
Weight: 12.3kg
Brand new Uni-Q driver
All-new titanium dome tweeter
Bass reflex port exits at top rear

CONTACT ☎ 01622 672261 # www.kef.com

This pretty, compact but unquestionably muscular – and decidedly expensive – standmount is the first model in KEF's new Reference Series to escape from captivity. The anticipation has been growing for months: an AES paper supplied important clues last October; the press release went out in January; the products were there to stroke and admire at the Bristol show in February. But KEF wasn't going to rush things, and finding a company in Britain able to supply sufficiently exceptional cabinetwork and finish took time.

Over the last 30-odd years, KEF's Reference Series has become something of a British hi-fi institution, and the history is worth retelling. Back in the early 1960s, a young Yorkshireman named Raymond Cooke left his job as chief engineer at Gilbert Briggs's Wharfedale just outside Bradford and set up shop in a Nissen hut on the premises of a metalworking operation called Kent Engineering & Foundry in Tovil, a suburb of Maidstone. His plan was to create loudspeaker designs based on firm scientific and engineering principles, making use of the new materials and test techniques that were becoming available.

Advanced cone materials soon made KEF a major player on the hi-fi scene, and Cooke set about assembling an engineering team which went on to create some of the most interesting hi-fi speakers on the market over the subsequent decades.

The BBC's Research Department had highlighted sample consistency as a major problem in loudspeaker production during the 1960s. The introduction of synthetic diaphragm materials such as plastics was a major step in reducing sample variations, and also in eliminating hygroscopy (paper cones tend to change over time, especially in humid countries, as they absorb water from the atmosphere). In the mid 1970s KEF introduced its

first Reference Series models, which were guaranteed to hold within exceptionally close production tolerances, with each sample of a stereo pair consistent with the other and with the design prototype.

These close production tolerances, introduced with the radical R104 and more conventional R103, remain a cornerstone of the Reference

a tiny tweeter on the end of the pole piece in the centre of the bass/mid cone, so that it's actually positioned at the latter's effective acoustic centre.

As usual, there are positive and negative aspects to this. On the positive side, the Uni-Q makes crossover integration between midrange and tweeter relatively simple from an acoustic

“KEF has been steadily refining its Uni-Q design for 20-odd years, and many of the original constraints no longer apply.”

Series models to this day. However, 1988 saw an important innovation in the form of KEF's proprietary Uni-Q drive unit. Taking advantage of the development of ultra-compact and powerful rare-earth magnets, the Uni-Q driver is a variation on the coaxial theme, placing

point of view, and also ensures that output is entirely consistent and symmetrical at any given measurement axis (that is to say, it's 'axisymmetric'). It's therefore also free from the vertical axis 'lobing' that's invariably created in the crossover region where the two sources are spaced apart, as in conventional two-way systems. At the same time, it can be argued that placing a tweeter so that it's recessed within a cone isn't an ideal way to create wide dispersion, and surrounding it with a cone that is itself moving might also be best avoided.

However, KEF has been steadily refining its Uni-Q design for 20-odd years, and many of the constraints it originally had to contend with no longer apply. For example, developing rare-earth magnet technology means that limited tweeter sensitivity is no longer an issue. The latest versions of the tweeter are also the first to have drilled pole pieces, thus avoiding the back pressure created with a sealed-back unit.

In addition, the shape of the bass/mid cone and its surround has recently undergone a major change. This was first described by Mark Dodd, head of research at KEF's parent company GP Acoustics, in a paper entitled *Optimum Diaphragm and Waveguide Geometry for Coincident Source Drive Units*, which he presented to an Audio Engineering Society convention last October. In it he describes how the cone and surround of a coaxial/coincident Uni-Q driver act as a 'waveguide' to the tweeter output.

A tweeter tries to radiate its





POSITIONING

Despite the attempts to provide matching for boundary operation through the crossover network adjustments, this is really a free-space design that's best kept well clear of walls. The bass-alignment crossover adjustment in any case only subtracts a rather modest 2dB and operates across a fairly wide band extending to about 200Hz. A rather larger cut of 4-6dB is needed, across a narrower 50-100Hz band, to compensate for close-to-wall siting, and this can't really be achieved via the crossover network feeding a bass driver that operates well up into the midband.

The 201/2 is a little lean through the upper bass and lower midband, but its port is tuned to around 42Hz, quite close to the main circa-50Hz mode in our listening room. Introducing close-to-wall reinforcement would tend to create unwanted midbass 'thump' around this frequency. However, rooms and their modal behaviour do vary.

SYSTEM MATCHING

The 201/2 is nominally an 'easy' amplifier load, with an impedance averaging around ten ohms and minimums of 5.5 ohms around 140Hz and above 10kHz. Its demands on an amp's current supply therefore won't be very great. However, as the sensitivity is relatively low, a medium-to-high-power amplifier with decent voltage headroom will be preferable.

Because the power is shared between three drive units, thermal power-handling will be generous. The limiting factor is likely to be the excursion capabilities of the bass driver, which will depend on what you're playing and the source. Vinyl is usually the trickiest here, with its subsonic output and bass boost.

The tonal balance is a little brighter than average, so components that don't emphasise this – CD players, amps, interconnects and speaker cables with a warm and laid-back sound – are likely to work best here.



sound omnidirectionally, like a continuously expanding sphere, but with the Uni-Q design, this expanding sphere is constrained by the cone. If the sound is reflected from the cone, these reflections will cause phase interference with the direct sound and perturb the on and off-axis responses. The solution is to ensure that these reflections don't take place, and the

way this is accomplished is elegantly simple. The trick is to arrange

the shapes of both the tweeter diaphragm and the bass/mid cone and surround in such a way that the edge of the propagating tweeter wavefront is always kept perpendicular (at right angles, basically) to the cone profile at the point of contact. As long as this perpendicularity remains constant, the wavefront will continue to propagate without generating unwanted reflections, and consequently a clean, undisturbed tweeter output will be maintained. As a result of KEF re-engineering its two-part 25mm titanium dome tweeter, the additional 'Hypertweeter' of the previous Reference Series models is no longer needed or fitted.

Naturally, the Model 201/2 we're looking at features this new design; its 165mm Uni-Q driver has a flared 125mm plastic cone with an unusually flat surround. While this key component does most of the work, it's only used as a mid/treble unit here. By creating an enclosure with an attractively domed/tapered top surface,

KEF has also managed to squeeze a separate 165mm bass driver

with a 120mm paper cone into the compact cabinet, and this is loaded by a port that exits through the rear of the top surface.

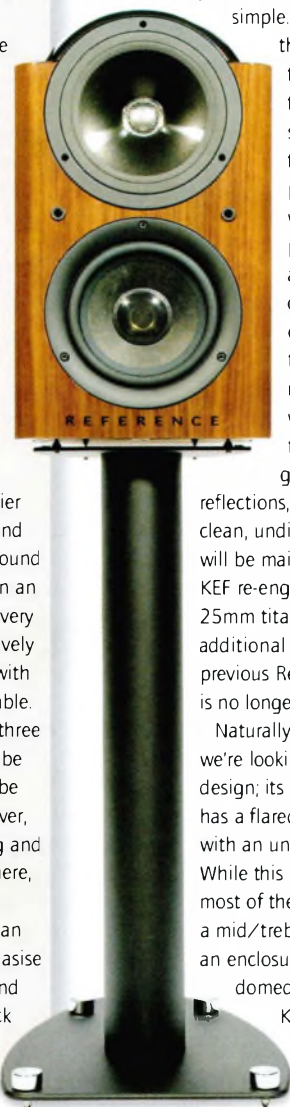
Aided by its modest dimensions, curved sides and top, and internal braces, the whole speaker feels exceptionally solid, and it weighs a hefty 12.3kg. Samples are available in a rather lovely high-quality deep-gloss piano black, lacquered-cherry, American-walnut and a very fine satin-sycamore, done of which disappoint.

The rear terminal block features three pairs of (non-locking but good-quality) terminals, enabling you to employ any combination of bi-/tri- wiring andamping. An interesting extra feature uses captive grub screws to provide a range of adjustments to the relative tweeter level (+0.75dB, 0, -0.75dB, -1.5dB), and also a -2dB bass cut to improve bass alignment if the speaker is placed close to a wall.

KEF was rather keen that we should use the model's matching stand, which actually bolts to the base of the speaker. It has substantial pressed-steel top and base plates, separated by a lozenge-shaped, 62cm extruded-alloy column that's stiffened by a bracing web. Classy chrome-finished spikes and chunky nuts add a touch of style, but the hefty £400 price tag reflects the low production volume that's inevitable with a model-dedicated stand. Some mass loading is recommended, and adding some Atabites certainly improves the physical stability – without it, the assemblage does seem rather top-heavy.

SOUND QUALITY

The specifications state that the 201/2 has a modest enough 86dB sensitivity, but even this seems a trifle optimistic, as our assessment based on in-room far-field conditions is 84-85dB. That's a low figure by any standards, but neither unacceptably nor unexpectedly so in view of the small dimensions and decent bass extension (-6dB is down at a surprisingly low 28Hz under in-room far-field conditions), as well as a relatively benign amplifier load, which dips only momentarily below six ohms around 140Hz and above 10kHz.



Our initial attempts to measure the frequency response revealed a minor problem to do with the treble-level adjustment. The speaker was obviously too bright when first delivered, but ruler-flat once the two treble-adjustment screw caps had been removed. Further measurement work showed that the calibration was faulty; KEF engineers were advised, and a potential short circuit was discovered in time for it to be dealt with before production got properly under way. Certainly the extreme change originally encountered has now been eliminated, but after modification, the insertion or removal of the little screw-cap adjusters doesn't seem to make all that much difference to either the impedance or the response.

Not that this matters, though, as the 201/2 delivers a beautifully flat and smooth in-room response from 400Hz upwards through the midrange and treble. Things are less smooth below 400Hz, but that's largely due to the effects of room modes. Output is a little lean through the upper bass and lower midband, but healthy output from a port tuned to 42Hz gives realistic bass extension down to 30Hz under far-field in-room conditions.

The success of KEF's latest Uni-Q driver is very evident in the listening experience. The first thing one notices about the 201/2 is its exceptional neutrality, helped by the seamless integration between midrange and tweeter. Another key strength is the fine consistency of sound as one moves around an unusually wide listening zone.

Being a compact standmount, it's inevitable that the model will lack some muscle and



weight at the bass end of things, but there's compensation in the freedom from boxiness and pinpoint imaging that such a small enclosure, positioned well clear of the ground, brings to the proceedings. This speaker has a lightness of touch rarely found in floorstanders, especially through the midband and in imaging terms, presumably because the space left beneath the speaker helps prevent early reflections from affecting the direct output from the bass and midrange drivers.

At the same time, the 201/2's tonal balance is attractively open, making voices impressively intelligible, even when the system is playing fairly quietly. However, the sound is in no way aggressive, and the upper range is essentially sweet. Midband coloration is generally low and stereo image location is excellent, though focus and ultimate coherence might have been slightly sharper, and dynamic expression seems a tad restrained.

The 201/2 might be a little bit lacking in warmth and weight, especially when situated in large rooms. However, it also proves a high-quality standmount can have real and positive advantages over the floorstander. And most

importantly, it demonstrates unequivocally that the Uni-Q driver has come of age, as the latest version used here delivers outstanding smoothness and integration through the vital midrange, presence band and treble. **HFC**

Paul Messenger



VERDICT

SOUND >> 89%



EASE OF DRIVE >> 79%



BUILD >> 89%



VALUE >> 78%



PRO
With its new Uni-Q driver greatly improving mid/treble integration and smoothness, this compact three-way shows the genuine advantages of a standmount design.

CON
It's a little lacking in warmth and weight, so the treble is slightly exposed. Crossover adjustments should have been more effective.

CONCLUSION

A great little standmount that, thanks to the improved Uni-Q driver, offers marvellous openness and neutrality. Probably best suited to smaller rooms, it nevertheless provides a persuasive argument in favour of standmounts over floorstanders.

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

EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Avid vinyl spinner

Avid's superb Volvere gets even better and now accepts a huge range of tonearms

PRODUCT Avid Volvere

TYPE Turntable

PRICE £2,750 (excluding arm and cartridge)

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 42x19.3x37.6cm

• Weight: 13.4kg • Platter mass: 6.8kg • On-board power supply • Speeds: 33, 45rpm • Three-point sprung subchassis

CONTACT ☎ 01480 457300 # www.avidhifi.co.uk

Avid has grown to become one of the UK's foremost turntable makers thanks to the popularity of its heavyweight, sprung-subchassis designs. The Volvere is its base model and its appearance in these pages marks the first major revision that the design has had since its introduction.

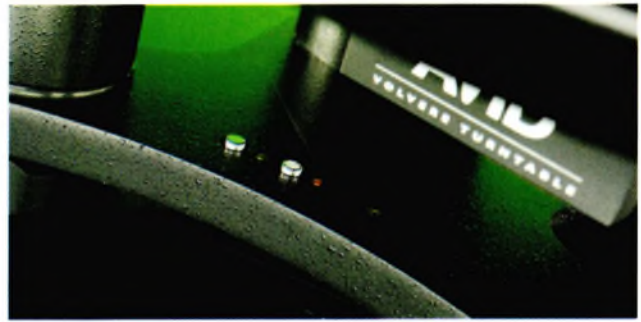
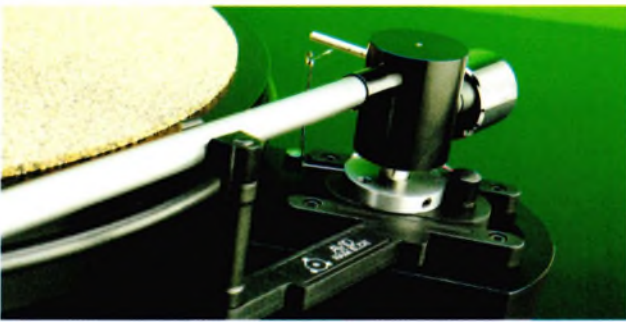
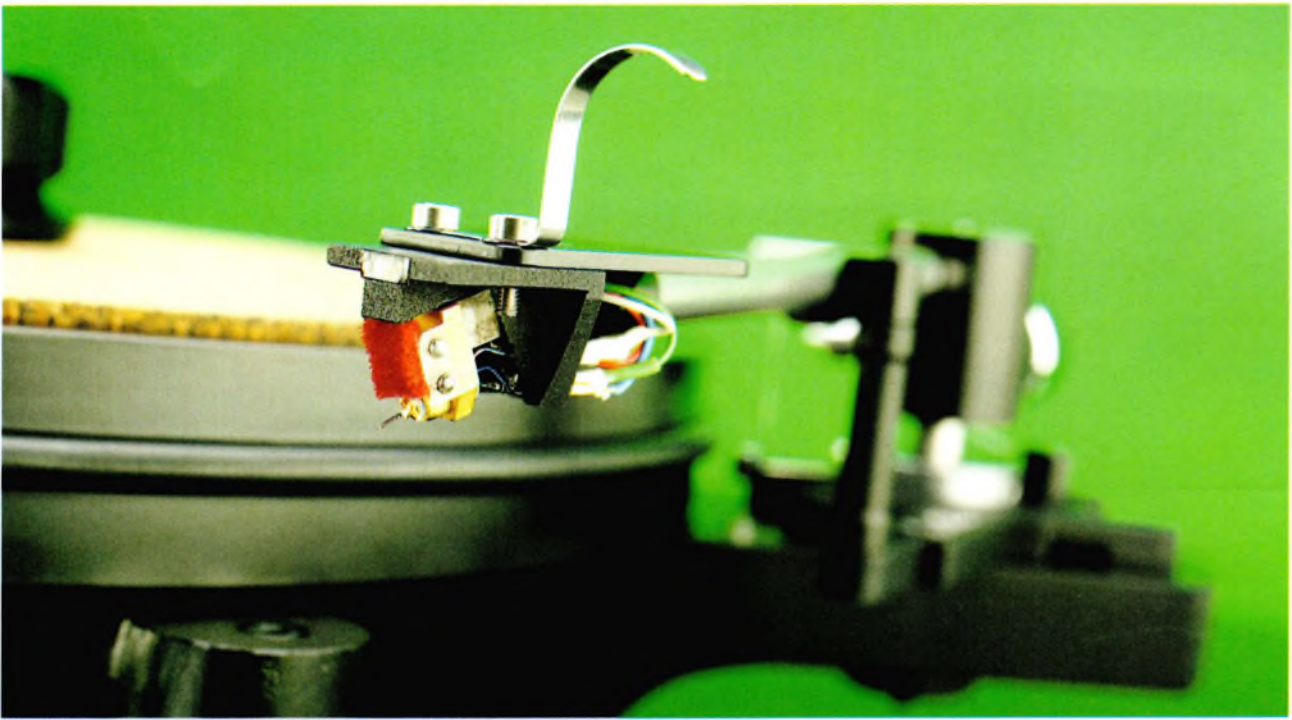
Avid's turntable range is fairly compact and is comprised of just four models; first comes the Volvere, seen here in an all-black version with green LEDs, specifically finished to match

Naim equipment (it comes in silver, too). Next up is the Volvere Sequel, which has the same platter and chassis, but an upgraded motor and power supply. Then you get to the Acutus, which comes in basic and Reference guises, with the latter costing £6,500.

The Volvere has changed in a number of small but significant ways; the main bearing was originally made from aluminium but is now fashioned from stainless steel, while the record clamp and adjustable feet are now scalloped rather than being fluted. This is both easier on the fingers and, in our opinion, also more attractive. More importantly, the thread on the clamp has been coarsened so it's much quicker to put on and take off, a significant factor given that you have to do this every time you change a record. The suspension has also been changed to allow adjustment from above with a supplied Allen driver, whereas previously you adjusted it at the side. The current method is

very easy once you get used to the idea that you're turning a spring and the high degree of friction involved in that action. The Volvere can be upgraded to Sequel status should the funds become available.

What you get with this deck is a heavyweight platter topped with cork that sits on a tapered stainless bearing, with the mass being taken by a tungsten-carbide ball at the top of the spindle. Unusually, this bearing doesn't require the addition of oil, but has oil-impregnated phosphor bronze bushes like those found in electric drills. Heat caused by friction draws the lubricant out of the metal, making it self-lubricating. Avid uses a large tapered shaft that fits over a spindle fixed to the aluminium casting that forms the suspended part of the chassis. The subchassis then sits in three springs and forms an extremely rigid platform for the arm and platter. Being a casting, it's not quite as slickly finished as the MDF that



“Here, vinyl has a weapon with which it can compete against digital on its own terms. You want slam, grunt, girth even? You got it.”

forms the base of the chassis, but it's solid and carefully shaped to minimise resonance.

Another change that Avid has made to the suspension is the way that the damping 'O' rings now hook onto screws on the underside of the subchassis. Previously, the design was more complex and presumably more expensive to make, but this arrangement seems to achieve the same end of controlling excess movement in the springs.

The motor's drive shaft sits under the platter, which makes hooking on the drive belt a little fiddly, but keeps belt length to a minimum. The belt used here is a round section, and Avid claims this type can move up and down the sub-platter with greater ease than flat belts. The high-torque PAPST motor is driven by a power supply located on the underside of the chassis; this keeps costs down by avoiding an extra box and keeps practicality high by having the switches on the turntable where they should be. The only drawback with the arrangement

is that you have to find the stop/start switch by feel, as it's hidden underneath the platter – it's easy to press the speed change by accident.

The Volvere's armboard is drilled to suit SME arms, but can also accept other types, including Rega's, with a suitable mounting plate. Avid doesn't supply tonearms itself, but has recently been getting good results with Naim's ARO unipivot design, Naim systems being one reason why the black finish was introduced. Avid is making an SME-style sled mounting for the ARO, the first example of which was supplied for us to try. It brings the opportunity to adjust overhang alignment, which means that this Linn cartridge-oriented arm can be used with other types, possibly for the first time.

SOUND QUALITY

The set-up process isn't intrinsically complicated, although at first glance the instructions may make it seem so. Luckily, it's usually carried out by the dealer anyway. We started out using our

benchmark tonearm – the SME Series V – on the Volvere, because it lets us know what the turntable itself is contributing to the party, and also because it's a doddle to set up. Once in action, the Volvere delivers a substantial sound. Its forte is bass, which it delivers with a weight and power that's rare among turntables at this price. If digital has any advantage over analogue, then bass is its trump card; silver discs can't match the natural sound of vinyl, but they do generally offer more powerful bass. No more, though. Here, vinyl has a weapon with which it can compete against digital on its own terms. You want slam, grunt, girth even? You got it.

Further up the band, things are pretty decent too. The midband isn't as refined as, say, that of the dps2 we're reviewing for *The Collection 2007* (reserve your copy now – see p98), but it keeps meticulous time and delivers a detailed and stable soundstage that you can walk into.

The treble is well extended and has more sparkle than our reference SME 20A, the lap steel guitar on Joni Mitchell's *Hejira* album sounding uncannily real in its capable hands. The quality of treble is also responsible for the precision in the bass. Perhaps surprisingly, you don't get crunchy bass without clear-cut treble. The Volvere is also more on the ball. ■

Q&A

We talked to Avid's managing director, Conrad Mas, about the new Volvere



HFC How does this design avoid transmitting energy from the motor to the platter via the drive belt?

CM Basically, the amount of energy that goes from the drive motor to the belt is non-existent. There are two types of energy; cogging in the drive motor and mechanical vibration. With the power supply that we use, mechanical vibration is so low it's not measurable through the drive belt. The belt is very compliant anyway, and we use this to alleviate cogging by using a high-powered motor and a high-mass platter. The weak part in the drive chain is the section of the drive belt between the platter and the motor expanding and contracting due to the cogging, but because pulley and hub diameters remain constant, there's no speed variation.

Why does the Volvere have to be used with a clamp?

It all comes down to the whole design philosophy of the turntable, which is that the mechanical energy in the record, that's created by the stylus, is drained down through the main bearing. If it wasn't coupled so tightly to the bearing – particularly with the mat being designed so that it reflects energy rather than absorbing or storing it – you would just retain energy within the vinyl. Effectively you would end up hearing the vibration stored in the disc. In a nutshell, it's fundamental to the design.

Which arms can the Volvere be used with?

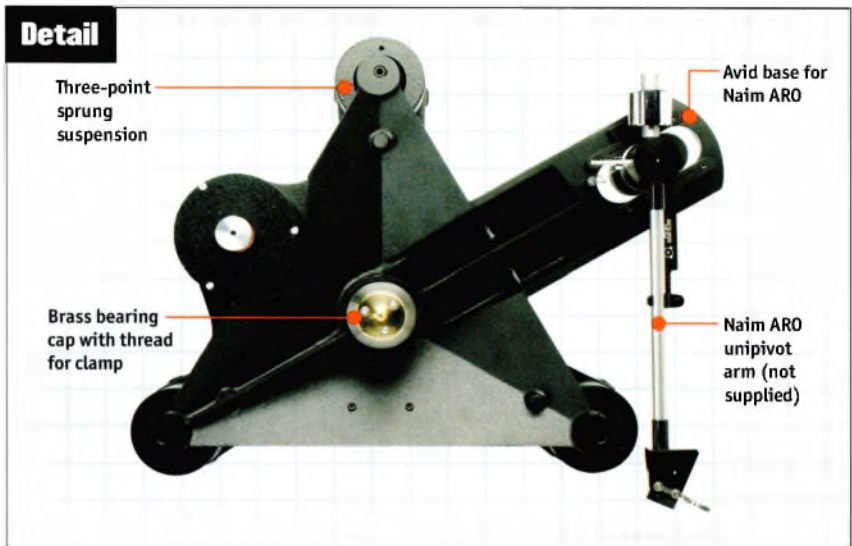
All our turntables are designed to accommodate any nine-inch pickup arm. It's optimised for a rigid bearing type of arm like the SME, Rega, Kuzma, Zeta and so on.

Unlike the Naim ARO!

It works surprisingly well with the Naim ARO. I suspect the reason for that is because it doesn't use fluid damping in the bearing. If you use fluid in the damping trough on an SME V, it rolls off the top end quite dramatically. Effectively, it'll work with any arm. In the Far East, most turntables go out with an SME mount, but we've done armboards for Graham, Morch and even classic-style Ortofon arms.



Detail



when it comes to rhythm and timing, surprisingly making the SME sound relatively cumbersome in comparison.

Dynamics and absolute resolution are both areas that could be enhanced. Rickie Lee Jones's *Flying Cowboys* is an unusually plush-sounding recording, but here some of its gloss is missing. This may be because the Volvere is a shade monochromatic and doesn't indulge tone colour as much as some designs.

We're not saying that it doesn't bring out instrumental timbre, just that other designs bring out a little more. It's likely that a different cartridge to the vdH Condor (pictured) used as a reference would do better; a Koetsu, for example, or the more fruity-sounding vdH Grasshopper.

With the Naim ARO unipivot (pictured) in Avid's custom-made sled base, the Volvere turns in a pacier, more nimble sound that encourages extended listening sessions, despite delivering less of the deck's bass power. Unipivots tend to be more fluent and less mechanical-sounding than rigid bearing arms, and the ARO did precisely this while delivering good solidity of image and an attractively open and spacious sound, albeit one which seems to major on image width rather than height.

There's still plenty of bass with the ARO, just not quite as much – the action being centred

on the midband, the heart of the music. You also get a sense of better bass articulation because it's not quite as extended; bass lines tend to be more nimble and give the overall sound the classic Naim 'groove'.

The new Volvere is a welcome replacement for what was already a very good turntable. It has a good deal of the power associated with the bigger Avids and delivers a solid and precise sound that makes a lot of competitors sound decidedly weak. If it's not as refined as some, that's because its strengths lie elsewhere. However, given the price, it represents a definite benchmark. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT

SOUND >> 89%



FEATURES >> 86%



BUILD >> 85%



VALUE >> 87%



PRO
A substantial design with decent suspension and good build quality that delivers a powerful, solid sound and is able to accept a wide range of tonearms.

CON
The finish of the cast chassis leaves a little to be desired and the control buttons aren't easy to see. The unit can't be used without the clamp either.

CONCLUSION
The combination of a heavy platter with sprung suspension makes vinyl sound powerful and solid. Some will crave a more refined sound, but there's no denying the combined appeal of detail, power, image scale and groove factor on offer here.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >>> **87%**



P S A U D I O

Come and meet Paul McGowan - designer of the PS Audio Power Plant.

Endeavour Room - London Sound and Vision Show. Park Inn Heathrow 21 - 23 September 2007.



Rack mount version shown (standard version without side cheeks)



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Christopher Breung, Hi-Fi News
May 2007 (Score: 20 / 20)

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Box clever

The first two models in a new range of digital micro components from Pro-Ject

PRODUCT Pro-Ject Pre Box and Amp Box

TYPE Stereo preamplifier and stereo power amplifier

PRICE £150 each

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 10.3x3.8x14.1cm (both units) • Weight: Pre Box 0.63kg/Amp Box 0.67kg
• Digital circuit architecture • Two line inputs
• 12V in and output (both units) • Modular design

CONTACT ☎ 01235 511166 • www.project-audio.com

Pro-Ject is on a roll. The company is expanding its already impressive range of turntables to include higher-performance variants; a valve-powered model; a headphone step-up; a turntable speed control; a monoblock power amp and a USB phono step-up for connection to a computer. The Pre Box and the Amp Box – respectively a stereo preamplifier and stereo power amplifier – are the first products from the extended range to hit the market.

According to Pro-Ject's owner and designer, Heinz Lichtenegger, most hi-fi components today are too big, too difficult to install and have too many features that end up not being

used. Worse still, performance tends to be poor because so much of the budget goes into the looks and features. Sound quality is reduced because of the need to compromise on the critical audio stages. Finally, customers pay over the odds for all these features that they don't even use. Generally speaking, the quality differences between components is small due to the low overall standard of performance. This isn't necessarily our take at Hi-Fi Choice, but it is Heinz Lichtenegger's.

Pro-Ject aims to resolve these issues with its Box design line, in which all products are made as small as possible and offer only key functions, yet produce 'audiophile' sound quality and are easy to use. The ability to mix and match components means you buy only the boxes and functions you need to meet your requirements. With Pro-Ject's Box range the money has been spent on what makes each product tick, rather than how it looks.

Tested here is the entry-level Amp Box; a stereo power amp rated at 2x25 watts into eight ohms, or 2x30 watts into four ohms. The model we're waiting for is a 28 watts into

eight ohms monoblock in identical packaging. The unit is truly tiny, and fits comfortably in the palm of a hand. The size is a by-product of the Flying Mole digital amplifier circuit at its core, which needs only minimal heat-sinking. In common with the Pre Box, power comes from a compact plug-top supply. External furniture consists of a pair of phono inputs for the preamp, and four good-quality gold-plated speaker terminals, plus a socket for the 20V power supply.

The preamplifier is equally as straightforward and just as diminutive. There are just two line inputs, which can be extended by an additional box that's yet to be made available – the so-called Switch Box – and the unit has an input for a simple 16V plug-top power supply. All of the controls are well engineered, and the unit is also motorised so it can respond to the supplied remote control. Facilities in this case are limited to two inputs, selected with a single press-button toggle, and the volume control. The only audio output is the one for the power amp. Both pre and power have two trigger sockets, which can be used to chain



“There is not a lot of power to spare for less sensitive speakers or for high volume, but what you do have is extremely usable.”

components together for simultaneous power switching, with power status indicated by blue LEDs. The two units feel solid and their simplicity, cool running and good build could be the key to a long and reliable working lifetime.

SOUND QUALITY

Some warming up was tried, but both Boxes are not particularly responsive to being left on for extended periods. The sound starts out okay, and changes a little, though it is possible that the limited inherent resolution of the two units helped mask subtle warming up effects.

There are some significant limitations, of course. There is not a lot of power to spare for less sensitive speakers or for high volume, but what you do have is extremely usable. The available power is delivered cleanly, and unless you go into hard clipping, which we wouldn't advise, the Pro-Ject is capable of forays into the reasonably loud part of the volume spectrum with no apparent ill effects or signs of distress. Other limitations include the limited number of inputs, no headphone socket and no tape circuit. Any recorder should be able to provide a unity gain audio pass-through, but there are bound to be some effects on sound quality. On the plus side, the tiny size of the units makes building a small system for use in secondary locations extremely simple, and space-efficient.

On the whole, sound quality is gratifying. The midrange and

treble in particular are clean, agile and moderately detailed, with just an occasional hint of grain or undue upper mid emphasis. There's little that could be described as colouration, and there are few signs of the digital origins of the sound. There's no shortage of bass either, but this is where the Pro-Ject comes off the rails to a degree. While the rest of the audio band is transparent, tonally neutral and even moderately dynamic, the bass has a very obvious personality. It sounds slow, detached and rather leaden, and is palpably lacking in detail and the ability to react quickly to changes in recorded musical structure. The difference in sound quality between the low and the mid/high frequency region is really very marked.

The reasons for this don't take to long to understand. It seems clear, partly from previous experience with digital amplifiers, that the controlling factor here is the limited performance of the power supplies. The low-grade plug-top supplies are just not man enough to perform when the amplifier is asked to deliver substantial amounts of current. Indeed, this is something that other amplifier manufacturers realised at an early stage in the history of digital amplification. Sony, for example, made a landmark multichannel digital amplifier that was as big and as heavy as was then available using tiny credit card-sized digital power amplifier modules.

Almost all of the weight and bulk was taken up with massive edge-mounted toroidal transformers and other PSU-related furniture.

Is the PSU issue a deal breaker? Well perhaps not. Because of the modular nature of the design, it is open to Pro-Ject to design some new power supplies that come closer to making the most of the intrinsic capabilities of the core design, which it could then sell as upgrades.

These two units are inexpensive, well-built and, musically, will make you smile. What lets each down is the power supply. The Pre Box and Amp Box are well worth considering as long as you have a clear understanding of the strengths and limitations. In the meantime, this is our report on what we have heard, and hopefully the maker will take the hint. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



| | |
|--|--|
| VERDICT | |
| SOUND >> 75% [Progress bar] | PRO With decent mid/treble output these are simple, ultra compact and flexible. There's also the ability to add extra inputs and improve the sound with monoblock or valve power using add-on modules. |
| FEATURES >> 82% [Progress bar] | CON Bass region sounds slow and opaque, and is clearly out of character with the rest of the audio band. |
| BUILD >> 86% [Progress bar] | |
| VALUE >> 80% [Progress bar] | |
| CONCLUSION Probably the smallest and neatest pre and power amplifiers you can buy, they are ultra simple to configure and use. They work well in concert with conventional source components and speakers, but suffer from limited functionality in standard form. | |
| HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 79% | |



Double Digit

Pathos's new CD player is certainly eye-catching, but does its performance match its looks?

PRODUCT Pathos Digit

TYPE CD player

PRICE £1,995

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 23x8.5x45cm • Weight: 5kg • Analogue outputs: RCA phono and balanced on XLR • Digital output: coaxial • Top-loading system

CONTACT ☎ 01753 652669 • www.pathosacoustics.com

Pathos Acoustics has established an enviable reputation as a purveyor of ultra-smart audio equipment that performs to high sonic standards, while successfully treading the fine line that exists between style-driven and audio-purist kit. From its base in Italy, the firm produces amplifiers and CD players that make a strong visual statement (they presumably don't please all tastes, but we think they're gorgeous) and

generally seem to perform as well as they look. Two CD players grace the current range: for £4,500 you can have the futuristic-looking and fantastically named Endorphin, but a little under half that amount will buy you the Digit. Okay, so the Digit doesn't get as punchy a name and is clearly less visually arresting than its more expensive sibling, but it does share quite a lot of the Endorphin's technology.

In terms of size and shape, the Digit would appear to be in danger of trespassing on Cyrus's territory, even though the look is significantly different. Apart from anything else, there are valves sticking up from the top. This is a Pathos speciality – most of the company's products use valves in combination with solid-state components, so as to make the most of each type's strengths. In this case, the valves are E88CC types – a familiar twin triode (two active elements per 'bottle') that partners well

with transistors, not least because, by valve standards, it works at quite low voltages.

Are valves in a CD player just for show, or do they offer 'to taste' tuning (degradation, even) of the sound? Not according to Pathos (see our interview with Gianni Borinato on p54), whose justification for them is well founded. Indeed, many designers would agree that the simple but high-performance circuits which are typical of valve applications have a lot to offer compared with the sometimes over-complex designs all too easily cobbled together with transistors and their miniaturised relatives, integrated circuits. Yes, the latter are an unavoidable part of digital audio life, but why compound the potential offence?

Within its stainless-steel case, the Digit spins discs on what is, in fact, a DVD transport. As Pathos points out, it does exactly the same job as a dedicated CD one, but it does have one



“The Digit presents things as they should be, rather than adding its own element of chance. It’s an admirably honest player.”

small downside: it takes longer to load discs, as it looks for DVD information before scanning for CD information. In common with most DVD drives, it emits a faintly audible ticking as it reads the disc, although it’s actually inaudible in any practical sense.

Conversion from digital to analogue is carried out by an integrated circuit, in this case from Cirrus Logic, the same chip that carries out digital filtering (as is usual these days). There’s no upsampling, but there is upsampling and word-length reduction as part of the filtering process. Further ICs handle the balanced audio output. Quite a large area of the audio circuit board is laid out for extra components but not actually populated with them, and the total audio path is about as simple as can be. Power comes via a small toroidal transformer snugly mounted at the rear of the case. Internal and external build quality seems generally very good. Just about the only thing we could find that struck us as being a little bizarre, not to say annoying, was the complete absence of legends on the front panel buttons. Yes, one gets used to the layout and which button does

which, but we did curse it once or twice. And yes, there’s always the remote.

SOUND QUALITY

We expected good things from the Digit and, on the whole, we weren’t disappointed. We didn’t necessarily expect a ‘classic valve sound’, and we were pleasantly surprised to find that that’s exactly what the player delivers – at least if you take the phrase to mean a sound that’s ‘lush but lax’. In fact, this is a player with a serious grip on proceedings, and this is very much a characteristic that cropped up during the test process. Throughout our protracted listening period with various amps (some employing balanced connection, since the Digit offers that facility) and speakers, we found it a consistent feature.

We wouldn’t want to imply that the sound is, therefore, relentless or dissected with some kind of grim determination, as there’s no hint of any such unpleasantness, but there is definitely a sense that things are in no danger whatsoever of getting out of hand. This is most obvious, not surprisingly, in the bass, but also

applies higher up the band – the decay into ambient noise of high-pitched percussion, for instance, is deliberate rather than entirely airy.

Is that praise or complaint? We’d say it’s praise – the Digit presents things as they should be, rather than adding its own element of chance. We’re confident in saying that because we tried several recordings of familiar performers in familiar spaces – familiar, that is, from live encounters – and the overall sensation was impressively lifelike. This player is admirably honest, particularly in its rendition of tonal character.

That said, we have reservations about certain aspects of the sound. Chief among these was stereo imaging. It’s a tricky thing to get just right, because it relies on very subtle cues to work well, so the smallest departure from perfection can have a noticeable impact. In this case, images seem to become compressed towards the front of the soundstage as the music grows in complexity and dynamic level. Image width is much less affected: if one is to be really fussy, there’s perhaps a slight narrowing, but it’s definitely the depth that’s more clearly affected.

Along with that, there’s just a trace of grain at times in some kinds of music, pretty much the kinds you’d expect to show it up – precise and polished classical, for a start. Some recent opera recordings are not quite as clear as we’ve heard them, while one or two rock ▶

Q&A

Gianni Borinato, chief designer at Pathos Acoustics, on the Digit.



HFC In Pathos's literature, it says that valves are used because they are 'the best voltage-amplifying device'.

Can you expand on that a little?

GB For their own nature, thermionic tubes work in voltage rather than in current. In other words, they 'respond' to voltage variations. By having a very wide voltage swing, they allow us to work within a small and extremely linear portion of their behaviour.

We noticed it's a DVD transport. Is that purely a pragmatic choice, or does it have implications for the sound quality?

Yes, it's a pragmatic choice. CD transports that are more affordable than the PRO2 are no longer available, so we chose what we believe is the best transport in this price range. By the way, we take the optical signal out of the laser and send it to our converter, so there is no real difference between a CD and a DVD transport.

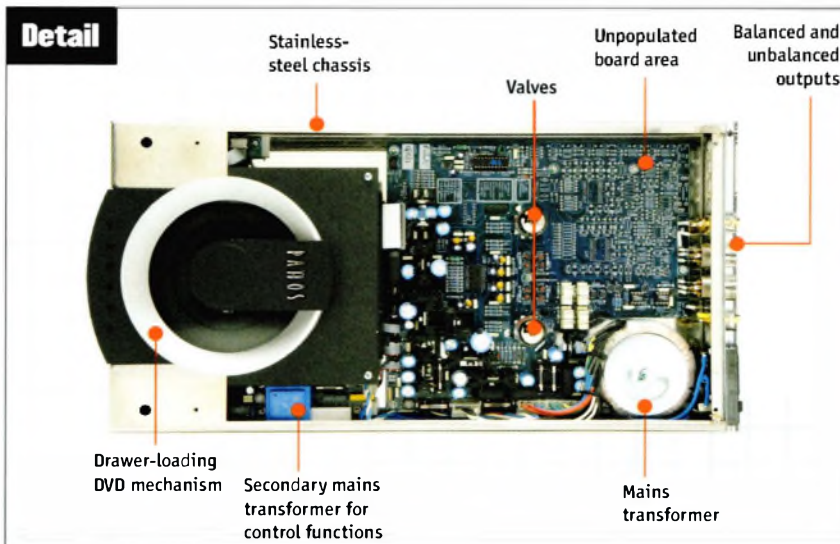
Pathos clearly regards balanced connections as important. What are the advantages of a balanced connection? And do they always outweigh the extra electronics involved?

Connections are one part of the game. We strongly believe a balanced system provides major advantages in terms of naturalness, transparency and resolution. In all our products we use a differential stage that works in Class A, balanced configuration, and also independently amplifies the positive and the negative portions of the balanced signal, therefore maintaining the integrity of the harmonic content.

How much does the Digit owe to the more expensive Endorphin player?

A lot. This has always been Pathos's way of developing products. Whichever project we're working on, regardless of whether it's an amplifier or a source, we always start with a no-compromise project with almost no cost restrictions. Later on, we try to bring most of our achievements to a wider audience by incorporating as much as we can in more affordable products. This is why we always launch top-of-the-range products first, and then we follow up with something more affordable. This is the case with our Endorphin and our Digit.

Detail



recordings made with audiophile principles in mind show up the same characteristic.

At very low levels we could find nothing amiss: the player's lack of intrinsic noise or grunge making for beautifully silent backgrounds, so whatever defect causes the grain clearly is a function of the audio signal itself. In fact, we've a suspicion it may be jitter, as this was the only measurement we took on the player, which fell a little short of the high standards that are so prevalent these days. But it's not a permanent feature of the sound, and most of the time the good aspects significantly outweigh the bad.

One particularly praiseworthy area of the Digit's performance is solo human voice. Because voice is almost invariably mixed near the centre and fairly forward, it's not affected much by any kind of imaging oddities, and its tonal nature makes it less critical of grain, so it can benefit fully from the Digit's excellent tonality as well as its fine dynamic ability. We listened to a wide range of vocal tracks in all sorts of styles and found ourselves getting really involved – the true nature and raw emotion of voices from Johnny Cash to Kathleen Ferrier come across with very little impediment. The Digit is similarly confident with piano music, where the grip we have

come to love (see earlier) makes for a sound with plenty of impact and clearly detailed resonance too.

On the debit side, orchestras and other large ensembles seem a little lacking in spatial scale, and choirs are perhaps a touch homogenised. This kind of thing tends to become more obvious the longer one listens, and we found that it dampened our initial enthusiasm for the player somewhat. Then again, a few minutes listening to the right sort of music restores positive feelings. Bizarrely, 'the right sort' included both highly energetic and very laid-back styles – it's the stuff in between that seems to trip the player up.

We may seem to have been a little harsh on what is without doubt a good player, but then standards around £2,000 are high, and we've become fussy through being spoiled. We have nothing but admiration for the Digit's looks and found a lot to like in its performance; we'd certainly recommend giving it a try. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

SOUND >> 88%



FEATURES >> 84%



BUILD >> 90%



VALUE >> 82%



PRO

Killer looks are matched by a no-prisoners approach to tonal accuracy and control. Dynamics are well judged over a wide range, there's plenty of detail, and it's also particularly confident when handling solo voice.

CON

Slightly constrained imaging at times and the occasional trace of grain.

CONCLUSION

A worthy rather than earth-shattering performer in its class, the Digit is not quite uniformly successful across musical styles. However, what it does well it does very well indeed, and that, plus unique styling, should ensure it a place in many hearts.

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

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ISOL-8

Isolate, *ī SŌ-lāt*, v.t. to render free from external influence



Mission control

Mission is back with a strong hi-fi presence. Can the Elan e34 recreate the company's glory days?



PRODUCT Mission Elan e34

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £650 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 35x95 6x33 4cm

○ Weight: 17kg ○ 25mm soft dome tweeter ○ 2x 125mm 'Paramid' mid/bass units ○ 3x125mm passive bass units ○ Sensitivity 87dB ○ Impedance: 8 ohms

CONTACT ☎ 01480 447700 # www.mission.co.uk

Back in the 1980s and early 1990s, Mission had an excellent reputation for budget and mid-range rock speakers. Recently, though, Mission has no longer been the default choice for those seeking a punchy, exciting speaker. But now, under the ownership of audio giant IAG, the new Elan range seeks to win back some of that respect.

Mission has already reinvigorated its high-end range with the Elegante and Pilastro models. These speakers use elegantly tapered cabinets with multiple drive units to great effect. Not surprisingly, the look of the Elegante has been used to create the new budget range. The company also has another aim with the Elan range: to bring back the Mission 'sound'. Well aware that previous Mission speakers may have sounded too polite, thus alienating traditional Mission owners, it has developed the Elan range to sound like Missions of old: this should mean a tight, punchy bass with excellent timing. A forward balance with strong projection and good treble detail are also traditional Mission traits. Mission calls it "enthusiastic vigour and liveliness", and has set out to achieve it in the following ways.

First off... the drive units. The sheer number of the things makes this speaker look loud. The tweeter is a 25mm soft-dome design placed in a symmetrical position between the two main woofer units. The idea behind placing it here rather than at the top is to promote even dispersion of high

frequencies. Topping and tailing the tweeter unit are two 125mm 'Paramid' woofers. These are constructed from Aramid polymer fibers sandwiched between pulp layers. The resulting material is light, stiff and has excellent internal damping characteristics. The last of these characteristics should reduce cone distortion, thereby improving the transparency and realism of sound. In addition to this, the woofers feature vented enclosures. Venting reduces air resistance, thereby playing a part in improving dynamics and timing. As you would expect from a modern speaker, both woofers are magnetically shielded. Beneath the driven part of the speaker lie three 125mm ABR (Auxiliary Bass Reflex) units. In addition to creating the visual aspect of power, they make the best use of the air within the cabinet by 'exhausting' it via passive cone movement rather than simple port extraction.

Backing up this mighty driver array is an equally impressive cabinet. It's by no means the largest of cabinets, but the tapering effect gives it an aesthetic appeal usually only associated with more expensive designs. Of course, those sensuous curves aren't just about looking good. By flaring the speaker's sides, the front baffle can be made narrower whilst keeping the internal volume the same; this promotes improved stereo imaging. Curved internal walls also prove more effective at breaking up standing waves, thereby helping the speaker sound less boxy. The cabinet itself is made up of a multilayer composite of MDF and particle board that Mission calls Grania. The various densities of woods used are designed to absorb a wider range of resonant frequencies. The layers are glued with 'radio frequency activated' glue that, once set, is said to provide further absorption and excellent rigidity properties. The technology certainly sounds impressive and, by and large, the build quality and finish are excellent for a speaker of this price. Only the slightly ill-fitting vinyl wrap lets the quality of this speaker down – hardly a big issue given the value on offer.

SOUND QUALITY

Mission has nailed it. For vitality, pace and sheer listener engagement, the Elan e34 isn't just reminiscent of Missions of old, but class-leading in its abilities. There's further good news in the e34's ease of placement and relatively benign amplifier load. Tried with a variety of amplifiers, the Mission worked consistently well. Similarly unfussy about



“While not being without fault, the Elan e34 succeeds in revitalising the Mission spirit of 20 years ago. This is quite an achievement.”

placement, we found the best position to be about 20cm from the rear wall and ever so slightly toed-in.

Power up and your first listen may not proceed as you'd expect. The real surprise with this speaker is that it doesn't sound as big as it looks. If you're expecting window-rattling bass, then you're in for a disappointment. In fact, the Mission sounds more like an accomplished standmount than a multi-speakered floorstander for much of the time – not that this is a problem, of course.

Listening to The Cardigans' *Erase and Rewind*, the pulsating bass line is found to be a little lacking. That said, one can't gripe about the definition, timing or integration of the lowest frequencies. Apart from lacking sheer grunt, the e34 presents even the lowest registers with skill and dexterity. Furthering the e34's impressive performance is a coherent midrange and treble. Although forward in presentation, just as Mission desired, the percussion and the vocals are detailed, clearly separated and free from harshness.

Moving on to rock, and The Jeff Healey Band found the e34 in fine form. The vocal presence is intense and engaging. The soundstage places the lead vocal not only squarely in the centre, but also at the correct height and

well forward of the rest of the mix. The sparkling guitar has great attack and the timing of the percussion cannot be faulted at this price. There's also a great sense of focus and an overall composure that makes for a compelling listen.

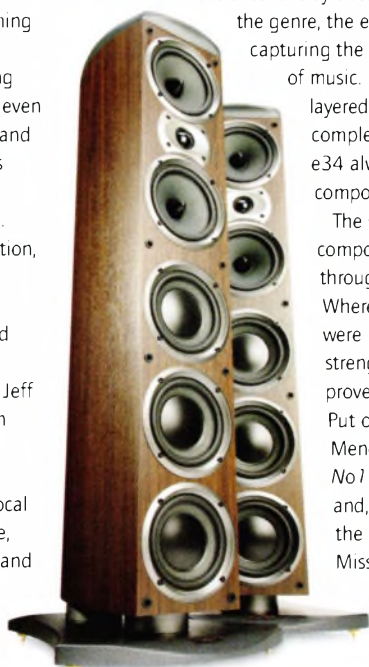
One of the concerns that potential Mission owners may have is whether this new-found 'vitality' will sound flat when the pedal's off the metal. Fortunately, when the volume is taken down from 11, and the pace lessons, the Elan e34 still proves to be an accomplished speaker. Although vocals may lack a little body by absolute standards, articulation and texture are excellent by class expectations. Whatever the genre, the e34 does a great job in capturing the mood and atmosphere of music. Backing vocals are well layered, and no matter how complex the mix becomes, the e34 always manages to remain composed and in control.

The same forward yet composed balance carries through with classical music. Whereas early Mission speakers were not known for their strength here, the Elan e34 proves surprisingly effective. Put on something like Mendelssohn's *Piano Concerto No 1* (CBSO, Hyperion label) and, with Stephen Hough at the keys, you'll find the Mission gives an electric

performance with all the vitality and pace that was present with other genres. True enough, piano timbre is a little lacking in body, but we can't think of another similarly priced rival that's any better here. Nor are there many that could better the scale or sheer precision of that sublime soundstage.

While not being without fault, the Elan e34 succeeds in revitalising the Mission spirit of 20 years ago. This is quite an achievement, yet what really impresses is just how few compromises this has entailed in other areas. Quite simply, the e34 will prove to be a consistently enjoyable speaker, whatever the genre. With talent like this, Mission is back on form and clearly deserving of a Best Buy tag. **HFC**

Dominic Todd



VERDICT

SOUND >> 87%



EASE OF DRIVE >> 87%



BUILD >> 80%



VALUE >> 88%



PRO
Lively, energetic sound quality that avoids harshness. Involving sound suits many tastes and systems. Stylish looks and solid build quality are also likely to appeal.

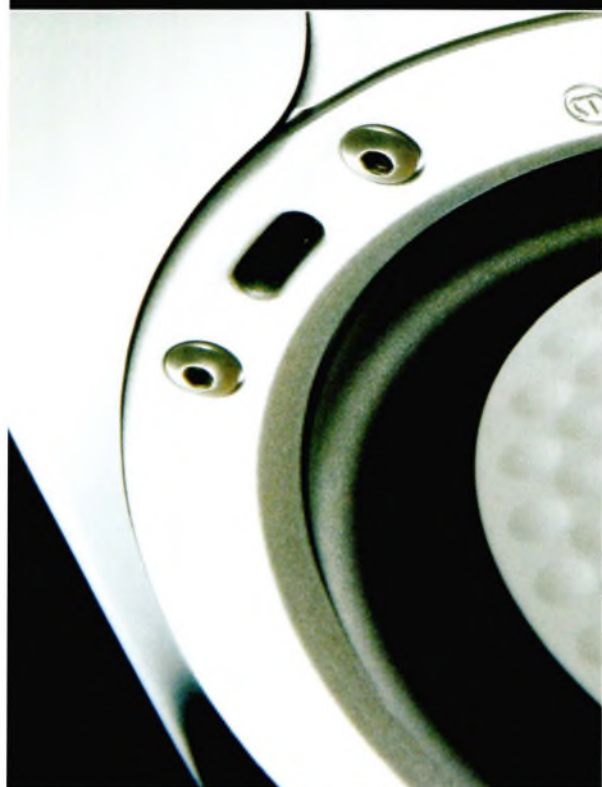
CON
May sound too forward for some. Others may have liked more warmth in the bass. Not the best vinyl finish for the money, either.

CONCLUSION

Energetic, punchy and involving, the e34 is a proper Mission speaker. What's more, it impresses with all genres of music. Only the forward nature and the lack of true bass could put a few people off.

HI-FI CHOICE >> **87%**
OVERALL SCORE

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PRODUCT Pure Sound A30
TYPE Integrated stereo amplifier
PRICE £1,100
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With only three line-level inputs, an output of just 30 watts per channel and no remote control, what was originally called the 'Bewitch' amp is hardly spell-binding in the feature stakes. However, those valves on the black chassis of the Pure Sound A30 suggest features don't matter here. The A30 uses two matched pairs of Russian-made Electro-Harmonix 6550 power output tubes in ultra-linear (push-pull) mode. These are run with an auto-bias circuit, so there's no need to adjust, reset or monitor the bias of the tubes across their life. Valves are also used in the input section, with a pair each of 6N9P and 6N8P. More uncommonly these days, a 5Z3P valve is used as a rectifier on each channel. Coupled with a large choke, this is an uncompromising way of supplying perfectly smoothed and controlled juice to the amplifier. The rest of the design – from the ALPS Blue Velvet pot and carbon-film resistors to the SCR capacitors and

high-spec output transformers – mark this out as a no-compromise design for the money.

Sets of four and eight ohm loudspeaker terminals complete the package. One omission that might upset some is the lack of a cage to keep the hot-running valves away from keen little hands, paws or house guests.

SOUND QUALITY

Pure Sound suggests the A30 is comfortable with almost any loudspeaker with a rated sensitivity of 88dB or more, and this is true up to a point. Loudspeakers with plastic bass drivers may end up sounding poorly controlled and thin, as they will with almost any valve amp. Fortunately, speakers (even very expensive ones) that work in harmony with the A30 sing out.

One hi-fi myth is that valve amps have a sweet, warm sound to them. Poorly designed valve amps may go for a deliberately warm sound to make them seem artificially sweet, but the A30 needs no such saccharine. It merely makes a good sound that's honest, accurate and extremely musical. Aside from the heat being given off, the only immediate pointer to the valve-like nature of the design is the soundstage 'shape', which tends to deliver a knot of instruments between and behind the loudspeakers, instead

of the virtual football field of musicians good solid-state electronics produce. The A30's tonal signature is one of invisibility and accuracy; rich in the bass, extended in the treble and extremely open in the midrange. It's not as beat-oriented as some designs, rather it's the overall sound that casts a spell with the A30. Partnered with care, it really is a bewitching little amp. **HFC**

Alan Sircom

VERDICT

SOUND >> 88%



FEATURES >> 70%



BUILD >> 85%



VALUE >> 89%



PRO
Sensational sound quality, the like of which you'll struggle to find at anything like this price elsewhere. Can be used with some truly high-end speakers...

CON
...but the wrong speakers will sound flat through the A30. Some will find the lack of inputs and valve cage an issue too.

CONCLUSION

This little amplifier is capable of playing with the really big and more expensive boys... and winning. If you partner it with the right speakers, the sound quality that the A30 can deliver is truly beguiling.

HI-FI CHOICE >> **89%**
OVERALL SCORE

BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



HYBRID CD PLAYER

AUDIO ANALOGUE

ROSSINI

AUDIO ANALOGUE

AUDIO ANALOGUE

Classic composure

This opera-themed CD player contains hidden valve technology, but can it make the fat lady sing?

PRODUCT Audio Analogue Rossini

TYPE CD player

PRICE £850

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 44.5x7.9x3.6cm

• Weight 8.0kg • Hybrid valve/solid-state circuit
• Delta Sigma D/A converter • Digital coaxial output

CONTACT ☎ 01753 652669 @ www.audioanalogue.net

The Rossini is an entry-level CD player from Audio Analogue's Composer series. It's also the first Audio Analogue CD player without a real line of descent, as it uses a valve stage. The company also offers a valve circuit player in its Primo series, yet the top-end Maestro line remains valve-free. The design goal was to create a technically advanced player at an affordable price, and at £850, the Rossini lives up to the brief.

The player takes its name from Gioachino Rossini, a 19th century Italian composer who managed to pen no fewer than 39 operas, including some well-known classics such as *The Barber of Seville* and *William Tell*.

So, that's the origins of the Rossini's name dealt with, but what of the player itself? Well, the audio signal is taken by the S/PDIF output of a TEAC CD5010A CD mechanism that's been especially developed by TEAC for high-end audio applications, and we found it to be good at avoiding interference from the mechanism itself. The DAC boards are separated from the main board to prevent interference from the digital section of the D/A converter and transceiver. The boards also contain a AK4114 digital interface transceiver, and a AK4395 Delta Sigma 24-bit/192kHz D/A converter with 8x digital filtering. They also host the support circuits, including the power supply regulation and decoupling capacitors. The DAC uses surface-mount technology to reduce the length of the signal paths, and reduce their susceptibility to radiation-related interference. The phase signal taken from the DAC is sent to the output – an idea developed in the Audio Analogue laboratories in order to obtain the best compromise between solid-state and tube technology. This configuration has shown such good performance that Audio

Analogue expects to use it in the future, perhaps even as a preamplifier stage in a component amplifier. The player's input uses an ECC88 valve and a bipolar buffer and the whole circuit is DC-coupled. Feedback levels are very low in order to retain the warmth of the tube's sound.

One key parameter that Audio Analogue has focused its attention on is the output bandwidth. The company believes that this is very often set too low in an attempt to minimise output noise, which can be damaging to soundstaging and to the perceived speed of reproduction. Therefore, the bandwidth chosen for the Rossini is particularly wide – in order to increase the width and depth of the soundstage.

A great deal of care has gone into the voltage regulation of the power-supply output circuit, and as a result, common-mode rejection is very good. The power supply uses a 130VA transformer with a discrete regulator and the measurement of the noise spectrum shows almost no 100Hz ripple on the output. All the components used are top-quality and



“What the Rossini really excels at is placing an image in space; few players at this price are quite as adept at soundstaging.”

high-tolerance, in common with other products from the Audio Analogue catalogue.

The Rossini is superbly built: dressed in a beautifully finished and lovingly polished aluminium case, with a very thick alloy front panel extrusion. There's a small gaggle of controls, on the front right-hand side, and an effective white-on-blue backlit LED display. The back panel has a digital coaxial output and a pair of phono analogue outs. The remote control is common to other Audio Analogue products and, although entirely practical and fairly compact, it looks as if it could have come with a far cheaper player.

SOUND QUALITY

The way the Rossini sounds can be inferred from the description above, at least to some extent. The declared intention was to use the valve stage and other elements of the design to add a touch of analogue warmth to proceedings, and it certainly succeeds in doing this. However, in our opinion, this alone does not totally define this player. The warmth is generally welcome, especially with close-up listening using a set of Stax SR-007 headphones and a valve energiser we borrowed from our forthcoming special edition, *The Collection 2007* (on sale 20 September).

Any kind of granularity or archetypal digital texturing tends to be highlighted under this kind of microscopic examination, but the Rossini clears this hurdle with a clean bill of health. In fairness, the control player for this test, an Arcam DIVA CD192

upsampling player, scarcely performed any worse for most of the time, but there was a touch of glare compared to the Audio Analogue player in powerful, fast-moving musical passages, such as the aptly named *Quarrel* from Prokofiev's *Cinderella* (track 2), transcribed for two pianos by Michael Pletnev, and played by him and Martha Argerich (DGG), where a touch of stridency crept into proceedings through the Arcam.

Perhaps stridency is putting it too strongly. It just sounds a little pushier and less polished through the Arcam. The Rossini seems to have a little more control, and is more subtly modulated. If you like, it's just a little better, but the difference is unmistakable. There is a possibility that in some systems – especially those that don't always work well with a digital source, and perhaps those that are optimised for vinyl replay – the Rossini might just sound a little too laid-back for comfort. But this may be a supposition too far, as it didn't seem to be realised in practice with any of the test systems we used.

What the Rossini really excels at, as the manufacturer is at pains to point out, is placing an image in space – in the depth plane as well as laterally. We've encountered few CD players, especially at this price, that are quite as adept at soundstaging as this one. The Rossini has an almost uncanny knack of placing instruments and voices in a three-dimensional context, without pushing the lead instrument too close, and although it can be said that the

Rossini isn't quite as hard-hitting as some

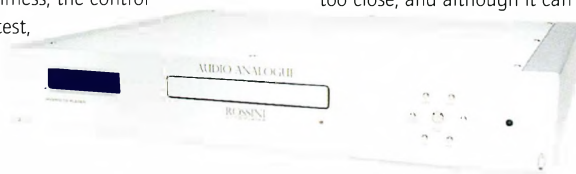
other players, everything is under such control, and so beautifully modulated, that it's hard to pick fault, especially when factoring in its ability to keep everything organised spatially when the musical dynamics change. Valve CD players haven't always figured highly on our personal hit list, but the Rossini is a player that doesn't throw the baby out with the bathwater. It slightly sweetens the sound, but doesn't soften it unduly.

Even by normal CD-player standards, this isn't strictly a high-resolution player, but it offers more than acceptable definition, and an unusually grown-up, accomplished sound with some real polish and a rich tonal colour palate. It's a great alternative to some of the better-known players from bigger-name suppliers. Tonally, the Rossini is just noticeably on the warm and rich side, with very good and unusually three-dimensional imagery, and it has a sophistication that puts some of its best-known rivals to shame. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



| VERDICT | |
|--|---|
| SOUND >> 85% [Progress bar] | PRO This straightforward CD player does its job properly at a moderate price and with no added gimmicks such as text support or universal disc replay getting in the way. |
| FEATURES >> 82% [Progress bar] | CON No optical digital output may inconvenience some users, and the remote control isn't manufactured to the same high spec as the player. |
| BUILD >> 90% [Progress bar] | |
| VALUE >> 85% [Progress bar] | |
| CONCLUSION For a player with an avowedly warm, valve-like sound, there have been few trade-offs, and this remains an excellent and, above all else, well-balanced CD spinner. The agile bass is particularly pleasing in a player of this class. | |
| HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 83% | |



TOM WAS AMAZED BY THE
TUCANA'S VICE LIKE GRIP AND
PRECISE CONTROL OF HIS
LOUDSPEAKERS



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BEAUTIFULLY ENGINEERED SOUND



Regal performance

Rega's latest P3 adds several new refinements to a turntable whose roots go back more than 30 years

PRODUCT Rega P3-24
TYPE Turntable
PRICE £398 (including arm); £546 (with TT PSU)
CONTACT ☎ 01702 333071 # www.rega.co.uk

Few hi-fi components have lived longer or exerted greater influence than Rega's Planar 3 turntable. Its absolute simplicity helped inspire the 'back to basics' movement that rejected the complexities of much imported hi-fi, thus re-establishing the specialist British hi-fi industry that thrives today.

The Planar 3 has undergone many changes over time, but Rega's new P3-24 is intended to replicate the original Planar 3's ability to provide genuine high-fidelity performance at an 'entry level' price. The design is deliberately simple, with a relatively light plinth stiffened by phenolic laminates, rigidly joined to the precision main platter bearing and arm base, and a decoupled Perspex cover. There's no environmental isolation, so a wall shelf is the best sitting option. The 24V synchronous motor is mechanically isolated and driven via a plug-top mains transformer. A more sophisticated outboard power supply, the TT PSU, is an optional extra that costs £148.

The platter itself is thick, heavy glass, topped by a 2mm-thick wool mat. It comes with a RB301 tonearm, but can also be supplied with an Elys 2 moving-magnet cartridge for £100 extra.

SOUND QUALITY

With an Elys 2 installed, the output was fed to a PhonoSophie Bi-Amp 1-4 amp equipped with a moving-magnet board and fed to KEF Reference 201/2 speakers in two-channel stereo mode. Sound quality is broadly satisfactory – free from any obvious distortions or unpleasantness, albeit with the obvious lack of precision that's to be expected at this price level. The deck loses some resolution towards the top and bottom ends of the audio band, and the midrange isn't without a degree of coloration either. The stereo image is a little vague, but essentially the musical quality of vinyl replay comes through in full measure, with expressive voices, excellent timing and a superior sense of musical flow.

To some extent the cartridge might well be a limiting factor, lacking the high-frequency delicacy of moving-coil types. The effect of the upgraded power supply is instantly impressive, and goes a long way to countering most of our criticisms. The image sharpens up noticeably, giving tighter focus, more precise locational

information and greater stability. Midband voice coloration is reduced, and resolution greatly improved at both frequency extremes, especially at the high frequency end of the spectrum.

The P3-24 on its own is an impressive beast, but by adding the TT PSU – initially or at some point in the future – you can upgrade its performance to a whole new level. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

| | |
|---|---|
| VERDICT | |
| SOUND >> 87% | PRO Beautifully made, inexpensive and simple to use, the P3-24 gets to the heart of the music, with fine voice-band expression. The optional outboard power supply offers a substantial upgrade path. |
| FEATURES >> 80% | CON The standard turntable lacks some precision in imaging and resolution at the top and bottom of the audio band. |
| BUILD >> 87% | |
| VALUE >> 83% | |
| CONCLUSION This great 'starter' turntable demonstrates why vinyl continues to thrive, with its fine musical-communication skills. Its basic sound is competent enough, if a little vague, and can be greatly improved by the addition of the outboard power supply. | |
| HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >>> 85% | |

Custom Design SQ 402

TYPE Loudspeaker stand

PRICE From £100 (per pair)

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

Calling the SQ 402 a 'stand' is a little inaccurate – it's actually a whole range of stands, under the one SQ 402 name tag. You can opt for steel or glass base plates, metal or solid hardwood vertical supports and steel or Acoustic Steel top plates. All the bases are spiked, of course, but floor protectors are available as an optional extra, and custom heights are available too.

Custom Design supplied us with both fillable metal and solid wood supports, enabling us to try both. Our test models' top plates are Acoustic Steel, which we know from previous experience is worth the £10 premium. We'd also recommend adding the company's Inert filler to the metal supports – another easily justifiable £20 to the ticket. Without Inert filler, the stands are just as stable, but adding a nicely tuned metal resonator to your loudspeakers just strikes us as unhelpful, and Inert kills the resonance pretty much stone dead.

A stand with only two supports will never be quite as stable as one with three or more, but



heavy ATC speakers were no challenge for our SQ 402s regardless of which supports we used, and both the ATCs and some smaller JBLs we tried were, on the whole, very happy to sit atop them. You may detect a little more upper-bass 'bloom' when using the wooden supports, but with both types you'll obtain solid images, and compared to super-solid reference stands, the SQ 402s seem to have little if any effect on midrange and treble tonality. Only in the deep bass is there some element of limitation, with grip slightly weakened. Still, most small standmount speakers don't produce that much deep bass anyway, and we regard that as an acceptable compromise. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

CONCLUSION
In addition to being attractive, the many guises of SQ 402s give highly acceptable results at a sensible price.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 85%

AudioQuest NRG-3

TYPE Mains cable

PRICE £138 (0.9m terminated)

CONTACT ☎ 01242 539100 🌐 www.audioquest.com

We've seen plenty of chunky mains cables over the years, but few rival this one for sheer bulk. Encased within an attractive three-colour nylon-braid sleeve, it measures a whopping 13mm in diameter. The claimed reason for the thickness is AudioQuest's 'Counter-Spiral HyperLitz' construction, an arrangement that uses several individually insulated solid-core conductors for live, neutral and earth. One result of this construction is that the cable's capacitance is higher than most, which will cause a slight change in the characteristics of the cable/ mains transformer circuit and hence, possibly, the sound compared to what you get with regular cables. Another potentially significant factor is the use of ferrite noise absorbers near both ends of the cable. The connectors are good-quality types, and well fitted.

With suitable precautions taken against lighter pieces of kit being dragged off the shelf (this is a very springy cable!), we tried NRG-3 with several components, both sources and



amplifiers. In most cases it has an effect, though it isn't always entirely beneficial. Yes, there seems to be a reduction in grain in the sound, especially with CD players, but there's also a slight change in tonality with several components that we're not sure we entirely love. Sounds in the lower midrange seem a little subdued, and this makes it harder to latch on to the line of melodies that use that register, as many do. It might act as a slightly unpredictable tuning tweak for systems that are a little proud in that area, but we find it oddly unsettling. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

CONCLUSION
It reduces grain, but other cables (some of which cost less) do too, without the tonal aberrations this one introduces.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> 70%

Black Rhodium Coda

TYPE Analogue interconnect

PRICE £150 (1m terminated pair)

CONTACT ☎ 01332 342233 # www.blackrhodium.co.uk

This cable embodies a number of Black Rhodium design features, notably the use of silicone-rubber insulation and an unscreened construction with two identical conductors twisted together. These are made of stranded silver-plated copper and terminate in Eichmann 'BulletPlugs', the funky plastic-bodied ones with minimal metal-to-metal contact provided by a single earth pin. It's a perfectly workable arrangement, though they're a very tight fit in most sockets and should be used with care. The cable itself is soft and very flexible despite its generous 9mm diameter, and the two channels are twisted together, which reduces the chance of hum pickup. We certainly had no problems on test either with this or with any other kind of troublesome interference.

The sound of this interconnect strikes us as admirable in just about every way. The strongest criticism we could make of it is that just occasionally, in very busy music, the treble

can seem a touch closed in and lacking air and acoustic space – but then, very few cables completely nail that aspect of performance. Lower down the spectrum, tonality is excellent, and there's also a great deal of detail on offer, effortlessly presented so as to avoid fussiness but make analytical listening possible, without undue exertion. And bass is strong but immaculately controlled, and as a result both tuneful and rhythmic, as required. What more could one ask? Highly recommended. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

CONCLUSION
Superb bass, neutral midrange and sweet treble add up to a fine all round performance. Constricted top the only flaw.

HI-FI CHOICE
>>> 90%

Profigold PGA3000

TYPE Analogue interconnect

PRICE £60 (0.75m terminated pair)

CONTACT ☎ 01923 205605 # www.profigold.com

After the success of Profigold's PGC82546 speaker cable (*HFC* 296), we thought we'd try one of the brand's interconnects. At a fairly modest price, it appears to offer some more than decent materials and construction, including silver-plated conductors in pseudo-balanced configuration (screen-connected at one end only) and very businesslike phono plugs with a split centre pin and locking collet for totally secure engagement and earth contact. There's one practical drawback, in that an unusually generous amount of space is required behind equipment to accommodate those long plugs plus stress-relief sleeves, but otherwise this is a promising-looking cable.

It's promising-sounding, too. It may not have quite the bass authority of the Black Rhodium

reviewed above, but it certainly has a tunefulness in the bottom octaves that appeals strongly. A slight lack of control is shown up by sounds such as plucked double bass and large drums, but the resulting mild overhang isn't unpleasant. Meanwhile, treble is comfortably extended and open, with a spacious quality that makes images seem unusually generous.

If truth be told, they're not always utterly precise, but again, this is a trade-off we're inclined to accept at this kind of price. Midrange detail is good and there's no feeling of veiling with complex, multi-stranded music. You could do a lot worse! **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

CONCLUSION
Not for lovers of clinical precision, this cable's character is however engaging, detailed and superbly extended.

HI-FI CHOICE
>>> 85%

GROUP TEST & LAB REPORTS: RICHARD BLACK

RADIO TUNERS

With DAB/FM combo models now the norm, choosing a tuner is all about the sound

ON TEST



Arcam DIVA DT91
£500



Cambridge Audio Azur 640T V2
£170



Denon TU-1B00DAB
£250



Marantz ST7001
£250



NAD C445
£350



Onkyo T-4555 DAB
£410

Looking at the six tuners we've obtained for this group test, it appears that the debate is largely over as far as the equipment purchaser is concerned – all six cover both bands anyway. There are still FM-only models at the super-cheap end of the market, and there are DAB-only tuners around too, but none of these six is exactly expensive, and we're delighted to see that the need for potentially annoying decision-making on formats has been largely avoided.

Lots has been written on the relative advantages and disadvantages of FM and DAB. Unfortunately, all too many commentators have managed to confuse two completely separate issues: sound quality and reception quality. To some extent these are linked, but strictly speaking, the sound quality of a radio format means what it's capable of given good reception. Reception quality is what you get with a given equipment set-up at a given location. Critically, the set-up includes the aerial.

There are several undoubtedly clever ideas behind DAB, and one of them is that it should avoid the majority of the reception woes that plague FM. To a large extent it succeeds in this aim, and in many locations it's possible to receive DAB perfectly (that is to say, to the sound-quality limit inherent in the format itself) with a very modest indoor aerial. At our south London test location, any old bit of wire poked into the aerial socket is sufficient for the task. Tuners with an error-rate display confirm this: zero errors equals perfect reception. That's one beauty of digital systems.

For FM, by contrast, we use a rather expensive roof-mounted aerial, which has been professionally installed on a rotator (because signals are received from two different locations and all high-gain aerials are directional), and even that doesn't always guarantee us perfect reception, which depends, among other things, on the weather and pirate-radio activity in the vicinity of the station one is listening to. When FM reception is good, though, the sound, in the case of most stations, is in almost all ways more lifelike than that of DAB, especially in the treble.

We can't advise you on what will work best for you and your particular home, but we would definitely entreat you to splash out on the best aerial you can afford and/or accommodate if you're serious about FM. That, plus one of the following models, should provide you with unlimited musical pleasure. **HFC**

EQUIPMENT USED

- ⊕ EAR 802 preamp and 519 power amps
- ⊕ Exposure 3010 integrated amp
- ⊕ ATC SCM20 loudspeakers
- ⊕ Sound Technology 1000A FM generator
- ⊕ Cambridge Audio Azur 640C CD player
- ⊕ Cables by Kimber, Bespoke and Atlas

MUSIC USED

- ⊕ Live classical broadcasts on Radio 3
- ⊕ Radios 2 and 4
- ⊕ Various commercial stations
- ⊕ Michael Jackson *Thriller*
- ⊕ Igor Raykhelson *Jazz Suite*
- ⊕ Mozart symphonies





LISTENING TESTS

The nature of radio makes it ill-suited to our usual listening-panel tests, which were therefore dispensed with on this occasion. Most listening was carried out at a venue in south London, where a great number of FM stations can be clearly received thanks to a large rooftop antenna mounted on a rotator – a radio junkie's dream. DAB reception at the same location is basically error-free with even the crudest indoor antenna. Each tuner was also briefly connected to a local FM generator fed from CDs, to check performance under artificially high and low-signal conditions.

LAB TESTS

Each tuner was measured with a variety of equipment, including the Sound Tech FM generator plus a Hameg distortion-measuring set, and also items of audio equipment (ADCs and DACs) adapted to lab duty and reporting data for analysis to *Cool Edit* and *Mathcad* on a PC. This approach enabled us to build up a picture of the tuners' performance under different conditions, both RF and audio, simulating the extremes of the real world. DAB performance was measured inferentially, by comparison with output from a known high-quality DAC, while receiving real broadcasts.

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 in terms of FM performance across five parameters. In each case, a percentage is given that falls above or below the group average. The parameters are:

1] Noise floor: This reflects not only the absolute level of residual noise, but also how the spectrum of that noise influences its audibility.

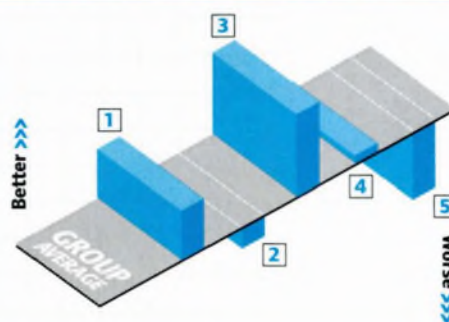
2] Distortion: Measured at various frequencies and levels, this shows how 'clean' the demodulation and audio circuits in the tuner are.

3] Stereo separation: A measure of how much left channel leaks into the right, and vice versa. This can affect stereo imaging precision.

4] Sensitivity: High sensitivity means a tuner can work quite well with a weak signal. However, this has no direct correlation with the sound when there's a strong signal.

5] Frequency response: FM radio is limited by design to a 15kHz bandwidth. Our measurement relates to flatness below that limit.

OUR BAR GRAPHS: AN EXAMPLE





£500 ☎ 01223 203200 🌐 www.arcam.co.uk

ARCAM DIVA DT91

A digitally inclined DiVA that's user-friendly and excels with speech

Arcam was the first UK manufacturer to embrace DAB and has lots of experience with FM tuners, so this is in many ways a product of mature reflection. At the same time, the company is prey to the same forces that drive other manufacturers to rely on specialists for internal functional modules that do a lot of the work with both DAB and FM sources, so it's not too surprising to find the usual little circuit board inside, in this case from RadioScape, which in fact handles both bands.

There's still a fair amount of Arcam's own work in evidence, though, not least in the digital-to-analogue conversion stage, which isn't included in the RadioScape module. Arcam has chosen a high-performance chip from Wolfson, aided by a couple of good-quality op-amps and passive components. All this is fed from a simple linear power supply, and the whole assembly, from mains input to audio output, is mounted on a single circuit board spanning most of the case.

The module has just the one input for the RF, which is in some ways a compromise, since a single antenna can't be properly matched to both FM and DAB bands. In many areas one will get away with it, a decent FM 'twig' picking up enough stray DAB for decent reception, but it could be a limitation. Another effect of the two-in-one module is that FM is available on the digital audio outputs.

Arcam's ergonomics are, we feel, among the best with both bands. FM manual tuning is nicer than on most digitally tuned units like this, while on DAB, station selection is quick and the display informative and easy on the eye.

SOUND QUALITY

We've had some reservations in the past about the sound of FM tuners that employ digital demodulation, as this unit does, and sadly we're not quite able to go overboard about this model's performance on that band. It's frustrating, as some aspects of the FM sound are admirable. For a start, the tonal balance is good, stereo imaging seems precise and the sound is always



quite lively. But it's beset by a degree of grain that quickly gets a bit annoying, most obviously with material featuring some decent dynamic range, such as on Radios 3 and 4.

If you prefer pop sounds you'll be less bothered by that, while the strong (but not overpowering) bass and relatively spit-free treble count strongly in the tuner's favour. All the same, there's still a little veiling of the sound, and the extent to which one can truly hear into a mix is somewhat limited. Where the DT91 definitely scores in terms of FM is speech; it's among the best in the group here, with voices sounding more natural than often seems to be the case. Large-scale classical music does pretty well, thanks to the bass and the generous aural perspective this tuner seems to offer – a function both of imaging and of relishing dynamic peaks and wide frequency ranges in the music. Jazz is well served too, its often 'busy' texture emerging clean and precise.

DAB performance varies much less between the models, but to the extent that it varies at all, it seems very good here. The DT91 doesn't remove any of the format's usual problems (twittering and odd modulation of low-level sounds), but for the rest, it's clean, clear and again strong, yet with well-controlled bass. In this case there's no marked preference for any musical style, and speech seems tonally similar to the efforts of most other models. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >>> 84%

FEATURES >>> 87%

BUILD >>> 90%

VALUE >>> 83%

The DT91's sound never quite frees itself of grain at low levels, but it's always lively, large in scale and tonally very natural. This is very smart and pleasant to use – there's a real pride-of-ownership factor.

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



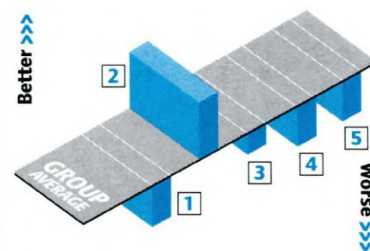
LAB REPORT

Doing FM demodulation digitally produces some rather interesting results, which include the complete suppression of the 19kHz 'pilot tone' that's used to decode stereo but which usually remains as a trace audible to many folks under the age of 30 or thereabouts. There are no such distractions here, nor any of the associated high-frequency intermodulation.

The model's 'ordinary' harmonic distortion is very low in mono (both channels identical), but slightly worse than with some of the tuners in this group when just one channel at a time is tested. The noise floor is also a little on the high side, at least in the 4-6kHz band, which gives a slight 'colour' to silent backgrounds, though it's not too subjectively obvious.

Meanwhile, the DAB performance is good, with a low noise floor, flat frequency response and a healthy output level.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Noise floor >>> -30%
- 2] Distortion >>> +40%
- 3] Channel separation >>> -15%
- 4] Sensitivity >>> -30%
- 5] Frequency response flatness >>> -30%

SPECIFICATIONS

| Measurement | Rated | Actual |
|---------------------------------|-------|--------|
| Output level (FM, max) | 0.9V | 1.3V |
| Distortion (FM, 1kHz) | 0.1% | 0.06% |
| Freq. response (FM, 20Hz-15kHz) | - | ±2dB |



£170 ☎ 0845 900 1230 🌐 www.cambridgeaudio.com

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640T V2

This nicely priced Cambridge model does a fine job with DAB

Like Arcam, Cambridge Audio has plenty of previous experience with DAB tuners, with two older models (the DAB300 and DAB500) still included in its catalogue. Sadly, this only serves to highlight one unfortunate feature of the 640T V2. Whereas the older models used the 'push and press' tuning-knob approach common to a great many DAB tuners, this new one requires the user to find stations using push buttons – you use the left and right arrow buttons to find a station, then *another* button to tune in, which is a right pain, frankly.

Still, we aren't going to rubbish the unit for one minor annoyance, and it's offset by such positives as a smart, slimline case and the presence of 'Natural Contour Technology', which is essentially a tone control with two positions besides 'flat', one a little brighter and one a little mellower. We reckon you'd need very bright tastes to use the former, but the latter's no bad thing. Other features include alarm and snooze functions. Surprisingly, there's no provision for using DAB's Dynamic Range Control (it's always off), and we wouldn't have minded an error-rate display rather than the less useful signal-strength indicator.

Inside the 640, a single module handles DAB and FM. It actually has a Cambridge Audio badge on it, though it looks a little reminiscent of a RadioScape module. It does the usual job via the usual connectors and passes digital audio to a Wolfson D/A converter. The main audio board boasts decent-quality, no-nonsense components, and it all looks very solid, with a decent-sized toroidal transformer.

SOUND QUALITY

Leaving NCT out of the equation in order to ensure a fair comparison with the other tuners in the test, this is a likeable model, especially with DAB. It has a relaxed yet informative sound, while the unavoidable artefacts of DAB transmission aren't accentuated. Imaging and detail are about as good as you're going to get without attaching an expensive DAC to a tuner's digital output, and there aren't any



obvious whistles or other nasties in evidence.

With FM, performance is mixed. It's pretty good with speech and seems fond of lively, busy music, which benefits from an appealingly 'boppy' presentation, but there's an issue with detail when one listens to a carefully nurtured broadcast on Radio 3 or anything else with dynamic range. Noise seems subjectively only a shade higher than with the quietest tuners in the group, but the general sense is of quiet sounds struggling to escape from a rather murky background.

That's a shame, because the tonal qualities of the tuner are decent, with a powerfully extended bass that still has plenty of control, natural midrange and treble that's extended without being over-bright. Loud music is also well served: FM tuners often suffer congestion at high levels due to rapidly increasing distortion, but here the effect is minimal. As with the Arcam, then, the preference is generally for pop music over classical, though for some reason this model seems less confident with jazz sounds – so many jazz tracks employ wire brushes on cymbals, and the 640 makes that particular sound rather indistinct. All the same, with its modest price tag, this tuner has its attractions – as long as you control it mostly from the remote! Viewed primarily as a DAB model, it's hard to beat. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 83%

FEATURES >> 85%

BUILD >> 87%

VALUE >> 86%

Operation-wise, this isn't the slickest model, but the sound on DAB is fine. FM suffers from residual noise and a slight degree of veiling, but the basic presentation is lively and bass is notably strong and assured.

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

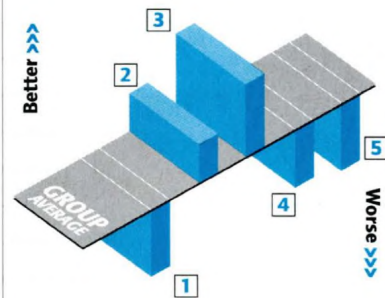


LAB REPORT

As usual, there's not a great deal to report on the DAB front, with all the basic measurements passing muster. Switching to FM, the model is afflicted mostly by a slightly higher-than-average amount of noise, with a preference for the higher frequencies – which is almost certainly the cause of the sonic drawbacks noted. Distortion, on the other hand, is good, especially at high levels, with no worsening when one channel at a time is tested (both channels carrying the same information is the easiest test for FM tuners to pass).

Frequency response is flat except in the deep bass, where it rolls off a little, belying the subjective performance – but then, there isn't much broadcast down at 20Hz anyway. There's a quiet whistle evident just above 5kHz, although it's only really audible if one deliberately listens for it under test conditions, and it never managed to bother us in real-world listening.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Noise floor >> -40%
- 2] Distortion >> +20%
- 3] Channel separation >> +50%
- 4] Sensitivity >> -35%
- 5] Frequency response flatness >> -40%

SPECIFICATIONS

| Measurement | Rated | Actual |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|
| Output level (FM, max) | - | 0.8V |
| Distortion (FM, 1kHz) | 0.3% | 0.25% |
| Freq. response (FM, 20Hz-15kHz) | ±0.6dB | ±2.2dB |

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DENON TU-1800DAB

Clean-sounding, consistently detailed FM is this Denon's key strength

We've featured this tuner before in a group test, but since then its 'street price' has fallen to £200 and new competitors have come along to challenge it. It also seems to have had one or two minor changes to its design. The basic set-up remains the same, though: separate FM/AM and DAB modules feeding a common audio output stage, the whole lot powered by a conventional supply based on a small frame transformer.

Denon's analogue radio module comes from Chinese supplier Kwang Sung, now one of the biggest manufacturers of these devices. It's more highly integrated than older modules, putting out completely demodulated audio, thus relieving Denon's engineers of the task of RF engineering almost entirely. The DAB module (from TBK) is similarly comprehensive, but outputs digital audio, which is converted to analogue by a Burr-Brown chip, a change from the Analog Devices part we spotted previously.

A particularly smart unit, the TU-1800 is also nice to use. The display is very easy to read and includes the error rate on DAB, the surest indicator of truly satisfactory reception. We love the 100 presets on FM – that's as many stations as the band is capable of holding!

SOUND QUALITY

We were impressed by this tuner last time we reviewed it, and we like it even more now. What we really appreciate is the overall cleanliness of the sound. Some FM tuners get dirty at high audio levels, and some at low levels (and a few just sound dirty under all conditions), but this one manages to avoid that and is nicely clear, open and detailed under most circumstances. It's also tonally neutral, apart from a slight lightness in the bass.

The consistency in retrieval of detail across the dynamic range pays real dividends in making this a model one can listen to in comfort for long periods. It's quite good in terms of real close-up analysis too, but listenability without fatigue is a particularly welcome trait in a



tuner, and the TU-1800 scores highly here. It has no particular preference in terms of musical styles, but does seem to prefer music to speech, which can sometimes seem a little bland and uncommunicative. Regardless of whether you're listening to pop, rock, jazz, classical, world music or whatever, there's always a good sense of real musicians playing real instruments.

Stereo imaging is reasonable rather than outstanding. On occasion sounds seem a bit bunched up in the middle of the soundstage, and depth is pretty limited – but then, it's seldom much to get excited about with most tuners. With that exception, though, this is a highly informative FM performer. Even AM is clearer than on most models.

Turning to DAB, we're slightly uneasy about a degree of veiling compared with the efforts of some of the others in the group. It's not vast, but somehow the clarity of good broadcasts is a little compromised. For all its limitations, DAB does some things well, and a low noise floor is one of them. While we weren't consciously aware of any worsening of this, it seems that sounds are sometimes enveloped in a subtle haze of noise or grunge that just slightly reduces clarity and definition of individual instruments. We're being picky, though, and for many listeners, this minor flaw will be more than outweighed by the fine FM performance. **HFC**

VERDICT

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| SOUND >>> 85% | Very good in the detail department, the TU-1800 gives a highly believable impression of real musicians playing. On the downside, imaging can be a little constricted and bass is occasionally a touch light. |
| FEATURES >>> 86% | |
| BUILD >>> 86% | |
| VALUE >>> 86% | |

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE 86%



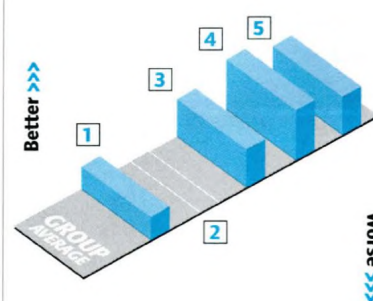
LAB REPORT

Most areas of performance show middling results in the lab. Noise, frequency-response flatness, distortion and channel separation are all par for the course rather than remarkably good or bad.

One thing the model does slightly worse than most is the change in noise floor in the presence of audio: with the majority of tuners the noise rises slightly, but here it's a little more than usual, a finding repeated from our last test of the TU-1800. It doesn't seem to do too much harm subjectively, but it may account for the limited stereo imaging, given that channel separation is perfectly decent at around 40dB, a typical FM figure. At 10kHz it's a surprisingly good 30dB.

In contrast with digitally demodulated FM tuners, distortion drops off quite dramatically as the audio level decreases, vanishing at levels below about -20dB. As for the DAB performance, once again, it seems basically fine.

HOW IT COMPARES

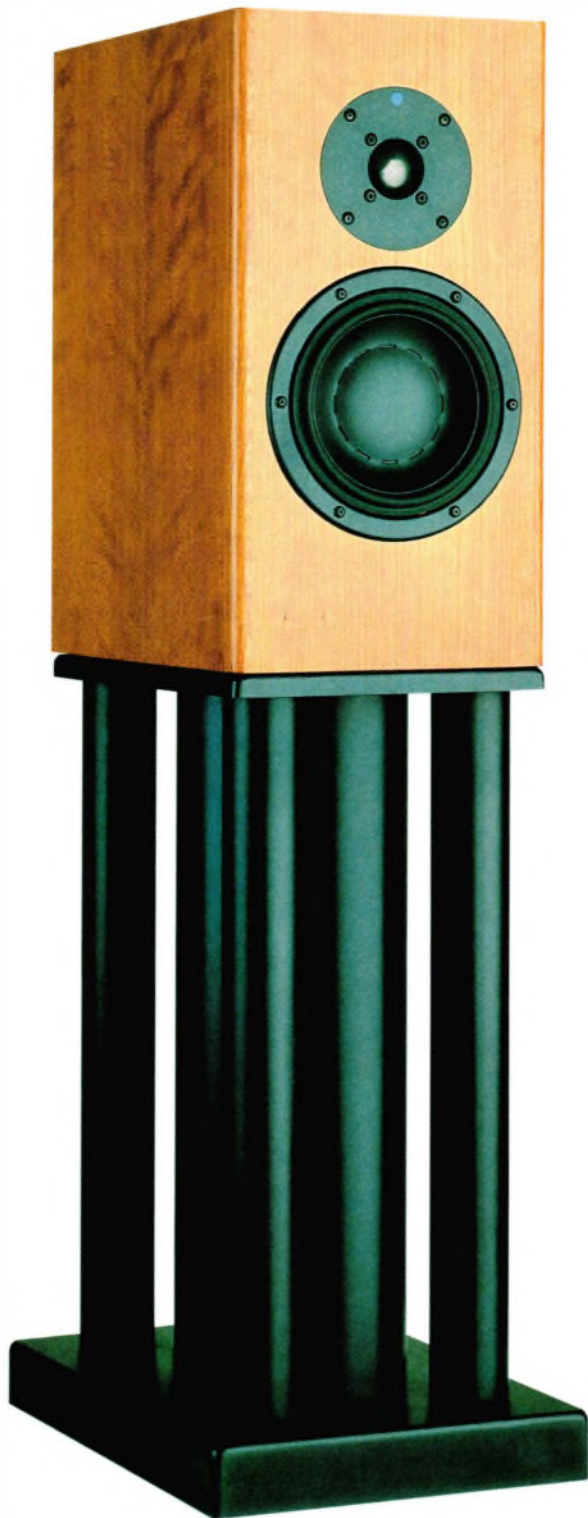


- 1] Noise floor >>> +10%
- 2] Distortion >>> 0%
- 3] Channel separation >>> +20%
- 4] Sensitivity >>> +30%
- 5] Frequency response flatness >>> +20%

SPECIFICATIONS

| Measurement | Rated | Actual |
|---------------------------------|-------|--------|
| Output level (FM, max) | - | 1.05V |
| Distortion (FM, 1kHz) | 0.3% | 0.4% |
| Freq. response (FM, 20Hz-15kHz) | - | ±0.5dB |

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MARANTZ ST7001

Its innards aren't that unique, but its tuneful, energetic character is

It's appropriate that this tuner should find itself adjacent to the Denon in this group's alphabetical ordering, since it is, in fact, very nearly the same component. Yes, the case, controls and display are different, but under the hood the main audio board is very, very similar, and the FM and DAB tuner modules are essentially the same parts, though we understand there are some small but possibly significant differences in the details.

So, is something funny going on? Actually, no: apart from the fact that Denon and Marantz are owned by the same parent company, this sort of thing is actually quite common. The modules are bought in and it's quite possible the main audio board is too. And it's obvious there are differences between the two models from the most trivial measurement – their FM-broadcast output levels are substantially different, which could be a symptom of all sorts of things.

The Marantz is better equipped for remote control thanks to in/out sockets at the back, and it also sports a service connection at the rear. It even adds a timer and 'sleep' operation. You also get the usual DAB/FM features, such as various station-name-ordering options, RDS on FM, 100 presets and a display dimmer. DRC is implemented on DAB.

SOUND QUALITY

It wouldn't be all that surprising if this tuner sounded similar to the Denon, but there are some differences. The DAB performances are really too close to call, but on FM, the Marantz definitely has its own character. This is most noticeable in the bass, with a highly likeable tunefulness in low registers – possibly not quite as well controlled as with some models, but given how many broadcasts tend to be over-present in the treble, we're not averse to some slight bass 'bloom', and that's basically what you get here. It helps underpin many musical styles, and is only perhaps a trifle excessive with solo piano. By contrast, walking basslines in jazz trios and quartets sound just great!



Treble is extended but never overemphasised, and has a nice sense of acoustic 'air' under most conditions that makes for comfortable long-term listening, only thickening up a little when it gets really busy – and perhaps here the Denon just has the edge in clarity. On the other hand, we feel this is pretty much the tuner to beat as regards detail and definition in the midband, offering as it does a precise and finely etched rendition of instruments and voices alike with solid and consistent imaging. The differences are quite small, though, and don't entirely mirror our findings of a year ago. Because FM-tuner performance varies quite critically depending on the set-up, we suspect this may be down to sample variability, in which case the sensible conclusion seems to be simply that this tuner offers perfectly respectable detail, as does the Denon.

One quality that the model shares with last year's test sample is a really good sense of energetic musical drive in any kind of upbeat tracks, a feature which for many listeners will override considerations about the finest degree of detail. Indeed, this is a highly appealing and entertaining FM tuner. With DAB performance, much like most models in the group, it makes a very good case for being a safe and good-value purchase. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >>> 86%

FEATURES >>> 86%

BUILD >>> 86%

VALUE >>> 86%

Midband detail and precision score highly, though treble tends to thicken up a little in busy music. Bass is tuneful and extended, and the overall effect is of energetic, extremely communicative music-making.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE 86%

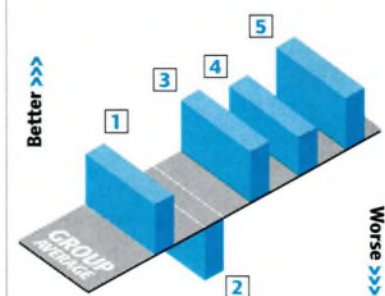


LAB REPORT

As we've mentioned, the Marantz's output level on FM is considerably higher than the Denon, while on DAB it's slightly lower. The distortion readings make for a rather interesting comparison, for while distortion on this model is slightly higher than the Denon's in mono, it's a touch lower with different information on each channel (a more realistic condition). Either way, it's quite good by typical FM-tuner standards.

Again, there's a little more modulation of the noise floor – essentially good and low – than the best models can manage, while channel separation is good, holding up to better than 30dB even at 10kHz (no, it doesn't sound like much in these days of digital audio, but experience suggests that it's perfectly adequate for good imaging). Frequency response is pretty much flat, but there's a small lift of about half a decibel in the high treble, towards FM's upper limit of 15kHz.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1) Noise floor >>> +30%
- 2) Distortion >>> -30%
- 3) Channel separation >>> +30%
- 4) Sensitivity >>> +20%
- 5) Frequency response flatness >>> +30%

SPECIFICATIONS

| Measurement | Rated | Actual |
|---------------------------------|-------|--------|
| Output level (FM, max) | - | 1.55V |
| Distortion (FM, 1kHz) | 0.3% | 0.8% |
| Freq. response (FM, 20Hz-15kHz) | - | +0.3dB |

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NAD C445

A tuner that's dynamic with DAB and subtly assured with FM

This is the first dual-band tuner we've seen from NAD – indeed, the first DAB one – and in essence it's everything one expects a dual-band tuner to be. It has separate FM/AM (okay, so it's triple-band, but we're talking about the hi-fi aspects here) and DAB tuner modules and the usual audio output board, a distinctly consumer-grade affair with no audiophile parts. Nevertheless, it sports a high-grade DAC chip, surface-mounted underneath the main board, with some similarly concealed high-performance op-amps, and the very fact that NAD has chosen to do its own D/A conversion (the fitted DAB module, a Frontier Silicon assembly, includes a DAC) suggests that the whole design is no hasty bodge.

The FM/AM module is from Kwang Sung and is the usual modest-looking assembly, which does almost everything, including decoding individual audio channels and RDS. Specification-wise, the model in many ways rivals quite fancy tuners of yesteryear and reminds us why we no longer test the RF performance of tuners as thoroughly as we once did – barring major component failure, every modern tuner passes all the tests with flying colours anyway. Audio performance is another matter, mind.

And it's the audio performance, naturally, of which NAD claims great things. At the same time, the company is refreshingly frank about the sound of DAB, pointing out how low data rates can cause 'unmusical effects'. NAD may, however, be unduly pessimistic in suggesting that good DAB reception requires line of sight to the transmitter. The error counter thoughtfully provided within the C445 proves that invisible DAB sources still give error-free reception (in south London, at least). Other features are basic: RDS, 30 FM presets, optical-only digital output. It's a typical NAD, really – no frilleries!

SOUND QUALITY

Having said repeatedly that the differences between DAB tuners typically aren't great, we'd



still wager that we could pick this one out in a sonic identity parade. It seems somehow to be just a little livelier than most of the others here: there's no obvious difference in tonality, but the music just seems more urgent and dynamic. That may be a positive feature – indeed, with CD players and amps we would probably argue strongly that it is – but in the case of radio in general (bright due to studio practices) and DAB in particular (bright due to the effects of MPEG data reduction) it may prove just a little too much of a good thing for some listeners. Exciting on first hearing, the sound does warrant a longer listen to check for the dreaded 'listener fatigue'.

FM performance is pretty well rounded, with the overall result being highly satisfying. What this tuner won't do is reach out and grab you by the proverbials, and as a result it may sound underwhelming in a brief demo. It is, in fact, quite laid-back in approach, but its resolution of detail is good, and as a result music and speech make a good impression.

The tonal balance strikes us as just a fraction bright, but bass has enough body to ensure that sounds aren't thin or screechy and the brightness is soon forgotten. Imaging is good and makes a decent stab at depth too – not an FM strength – while noise seems subjectively just about the lowest in the group. All things considered, we're rather fond of this tuner. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >>> 86%

FEATURES >>> 84%

BUILD >>> 83%

VALUE >>> 86%

The FM sound is laid-back, despite a bright-ish balance, and can seem unremarkable at first – but it has good detail and makes for pleasant long-term listening. DAB, by contrast, seems a bit livelier than with most models.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE 85%

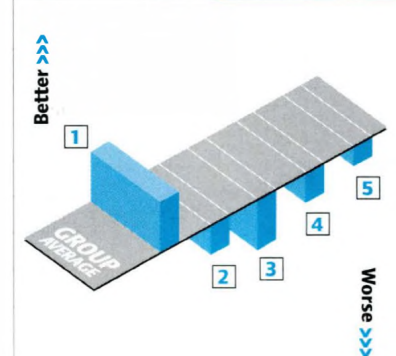


LAB REPORT

The exact cause of the sonic signature on DAB remains a NAD trade secret, as all the investigated areas of performance seem typical and, as such, entirely satisfactory. On FM, most measurements are good, but a few look below par, including, most significantly, channel separation, which is quite poor at high signal levels, though it improves as the level drops.

Frequency response isn't quite flat, with a slight droop being evident at both frequency extremes. That would appear to contradict the finding of brightness, but that may be due to a slightly above-average degree of distortion at high frequencies. At middling and low frequencies, however, and at most levels short of full output, distortion as good (the figure given refers to full modulation, where the result is a little less impressive). The noise floor is as low as on any model and varies little with signal level.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Noise floor >>> +30%
- 2] Distortion >>> -20%
- 3] Channel separation >>> -30%
- 4] Sensitivity >>> -20%
- 5] Frequency response flatness >>> -10%

SPECIFICATIONS

| Measurement | Rated | Actual |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|
| Output level (FM, max) | - | 0.85V |
| Distortion (FM, 1kHz) | 0.5% | 0.6% |
| Freq. response (FM, 20Hz-15kHz) | ±1.5dB | ±1dB |

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ONKYO T-4555 DAB

This slightly oddball Onkyo delivers on detail and minimises grain

The key thing that differentiates this model from the rest of the group is its upgradeable nature. The basic T-4555 is an FM/AM tuner, but a couple of screws on the rear panel can be undone, enabling the RF module and ancillary components to be removed and replaced by a module that handles DAB as well. It's a nice idea, although as far as we can see from a quick Internet search, plenty of dealers are offering the analogue/digital version as standard, and that's how we received our review sample.

The DAB module employed is from Frontier Silicon, while the FM one is unlabelled but looks much like all of them – about the size of a pack of cards. There's the usual audio board carrying output circuits and power-supply components, while power comes from a low-profile frame transformer of quite generous size.

While the other tuners in this group are much of a muchness in terms of features offered, this one is distinctly individual. For instance, it has a fantastic array of remote-control connections, making it a strong choice, one would think, for integrated multiroom installations. On the other hand it has no digital output. And one feature may catch a lot of audiophiles out: the Dynamic Range Control setting on DAB defaults to 1, which means maximum dynamic compression is applied by default. To switch this off you need the remote, and many people may never do it. We've argued in the past that this should have been the default setting from the outset, to encourage broadcasters to use DRC intelligently (thus maximising dynamic range for listeners who can be bothered to switch it off), but since that hasn't happened we have doubts about Onkyo's decision. Well, you read it here – be aware!

SOUND QUALITY

Once again, DAB sound quality seems to be very much on a par with the other models' efforts, save for one slightly surprising aspect – the sound is very much lower in level than in most cases. That's presumably to compensate for the DRC,



but with most stations, which don't implement DRC anyway, it may make the tuner sound very unimpressive in a comparative demo. Don't be put off, as it's perfectly competent.

It's also highly competent on FM. Justifying its price premium over most of the group, the T-4555 provides a remarkable amount of detail with a wide selection of radio stations, offering a cleaner and less veiled version of events than any of the other models by a noticeable margin. The sound has good body to it and tonality is gratifyingly neutral apart from a very mild trace of upper-bass boom, while noise isn't intrusive. The key point here is that the sound is much less like a radio broadcast and more like a recording being played on a good source component. FM is by no means perfect and tends to add a degree of grain and congestion to the sound, but this is something only the best tuners can (largely) avoid, and this model is frankly one of the best we've heard recently at such a sensible price.

The result is real hi-fi insight and resolution, together with precise and stable imaging and a fair degree of depth. Classical music is refined and appealingly multilayered, rock is energetic and lively, and jazz is tight and bouncy. There's room for improvement, and tuners costing £1,000 could still show this a few tricks in the detail department, but in the company of its peers this is a highly recommendable purchase. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 88%

FEATURES >> 84%

BUILD >> 85%

VALUE >> 87%

Admirably free of grain and obvious tonal blemishes, this tuner achieves a high standard in all areas on FM, offering unusually detailed and analytical sound. DAB is fine once DRC has been switched off!

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

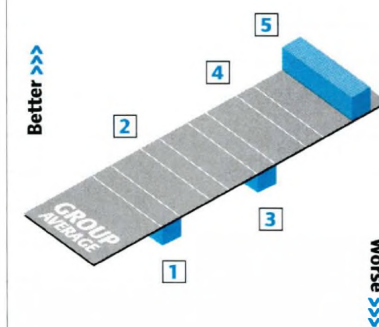


LAB REPORT

According to our meters, the Onkyo's DAB output is a full 6dB below the usual digital-source standard of 2V, while FM output is on the low side as well. But this isn't really a big deal – what's important is that the model's distortion is lower, in almost every area and under almost all conditions, than with any other tuner in the group. This is particularly noticeable at high frequencies, where the broad spread of distortions usually found is considerably suppressed, while at lower frequencies it's clear that in both mono and stereo mode the behaviour is unusually linear.

The Onkyo's channel separation is very good too, and is highly symmetric (left to right and right to left), which is always a good sign that design and alignment have been done carefully. Noise here is around the same as with most of the group, but is less dependent on audio signal level than with any other model.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Noise floor >> -10%
- 2] Distortion >> 0%
- 3] Channel separation >> -10%
- 4] Sensitivity >> 0%
- 5] Frequency response flatness >> +10%

SPECIFICATIONS

| Measurement | Rated | Actual |
|---------------------------------|-------|--------|
| Output level (FM, max) | | 0.7V |
| Distortion (FM, 1kHz) | 0.5% | 0.4% |
| Freq. response (FM, 20Hz-15kHz) | | ±0.7dB |

CONCLUSIONS

We've one clear winner (with a few little quirks), but every model in the group has its merits

Perhaps the first thing that should be said concerns the DAB performance of these tuners. In no case did we feel this was either woefully lacking or remarkably fine – in fact, differences were scarcely more than you might expect from swapping interconnect cables. Only the NAD seemed to stand apart, slightly, by virtue of a livelier presentation. Our sound-quality decisions, therefore, rest almost entirely on FM.

Just occasionally, a tuner comes along that seems to surpass its

peers by a clear margin. Onkyo has produced one of these in the new T-4555, and we have no hesitation in pronouncing it the overall winner of this group, by a head if not a full length. It has a few drawbacks on the features front (no digital output, slightly fussy operation), but its sound is admirable – simply clearer and less 'radio-like' than the others can manage.

That doesn't necessarily mean, though, that it'll please all tastes. In particular, those who like their music fast and loud may prefer the

Marantz's upbeat and energetic take on proceedings. The Denon and NAD units also have plenty to offer, both sounding lifelike and informative, though perhaps less immediate than the Onkyo. And of course they're cheaper, by quite a margin (on the high street) in the Denon's case.

Low price is a key advantage of the Cambridge Audio model, which does suffer a little from veiling of the sound on FM. It also shares with the Arcam the potential drawback of a shared RF input, which makes it

nearly impossible to optimise reception for both DAB and FM.

And what of the Arcam? The dearest model here, with some of the lowest scores, it looks a little forlorn – and yet we would still recommend it for DAB duty, taking into account its superior looks and ergonomics. In truth, the FM performance seems aimed at occasional or back-up duty only, but if you've already decided that most of your listening will be digital (due to reception limitations), it's most certainly worth a try. **HFC**

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SONUS FABER CTO DOMUS £1,799

A remarkably civilised, detailed speaker; makes the most of good broadcasts.

HINTS AND TIPS

>> For FM, use the best aerial you can accommodate, unless you can see the transmitter from your window. It's money well spent!

>> If you suffer occasional noise breakthrough, try a ferrite ring or two on the aerial cable.

>> Use decent cables, and keep them short – tuners aren't always too keen on driving long cables.

>> Even modern tuners can be slightly microphonic: investing in vibration-absorbing feet may well be worth the trouble.

RADIO TUNERS AT A GLANCE



| MAKE | Arcam | Cambridge Audio | Denon | Marantz | NAD | Onkyo |
|--------------------|---|--|---|---|--|---|
| MODEL | DiVA DT91 | Azur 640T V2 | TU-1800DAB | ST7001 | C445 | T-4555 DAB |
| PRICE | £500 | £170 | £250 | £250 | £350 | £410 |
| SOUND | | | | | | |
| FEATURES | | | | | | |
| BUILD | | | | | | |
| VALUE | | | | | | |
| OVERALL | | | | | | |
| CONCLUSION | Some grain at low levels, but the sound is lively, large in scale and tonally very natural. Very smart! | FM suffers from residual noise and slight veiling, but presentation is lively and bass notably strong and assured. | Very good detail and a highly believable impression of real musicians playing. Imaging can be a little constricted. | Midband is detailed and precise; treble can be thick, but bass is extended, and the sound is generally energetic. | FM is laid-back despite bright balance, but has good detail. DAB is slightly livelier than with most models. | Admirably free of grain or obvious tonal blemishes, this tuner achieves a high standard in all areas on FM. |
| KEY FEATURES | | | | | | |
| SIZE (WXHXD) | 43.5x8.5x32cm | 43x7x31cm | 43.4x7.4x28.6cm | 43.4x7.4x28.6cm | 44x7.9x35cm | 43.5x8.1x31.5cm |
| WEIGHT | 3.6kg | 3.9kg | 3.8kg | 4kg | 4kg | 4.7kg |
| BANDS | DAB/FM | DAB/FM | DAB/FM/MW | DAB/FM/MW | DAB/FM/MW | DAB/FM/MW |
| DIGITAL OUTPUT | Elec, Opt (DAB, FM) | Elec, Opt (DAB, FM) | Elec, Opt (DAB only) | Elec, Opt (DAB only) | Opt (DAB only) | No |
| REMOTE CONTROL | YES | YES | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| BALANCED INPUT | NO | NO | No | No | No | No |
| LAB CONCLUSIONS | E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR | | | | | |
| NOISE FLOOR | 72dB A | -70dB A | -76dB G | -77dB E | -77dB E | -75dB G |
| DISTORTION | 0.06% E | 0.25% G | 0.4% A | 0.8% A | 0.6% A | 0.4% A |
| CHANNEL SEPARATION | 30dB A | 44dB G | 35dB A | 38dB G | 28dB P | 32dB A |
| SENSITIVITY | 40µV A | 50µV A | 37µV G | 39µV G | 45µV A | 42µV G |
| FREQUENCY RESPONSE | ±2.0dB A | ±2.2dB A | ±0.5dB G | ±0.3dB G | ±1.0dB G | ±0.7dB G |

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8. KSL Kondo Gakuoh 300B Mono Amplifiers £48,500 9. Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD Player £2950 10. KSL Kondo V-z (1m) Interconnect £750

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angle, overhang, anti-skate, etc. The DVD also shows Michael demonstrating the most popular set-up tools, with hints and tips to ensure they produce the best results. Add to this a feature on George Marino, senior mastering engineer at Sterling Sound in NYC and you have an essential purchase for any LP enthusiast.

The DVD is presented in the American NTSC TV format, with no regional coding. This means it will play on virtually any DVD player, although people using older equipment should check their player and television set support NTSC pictures.

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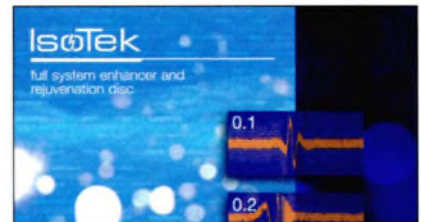
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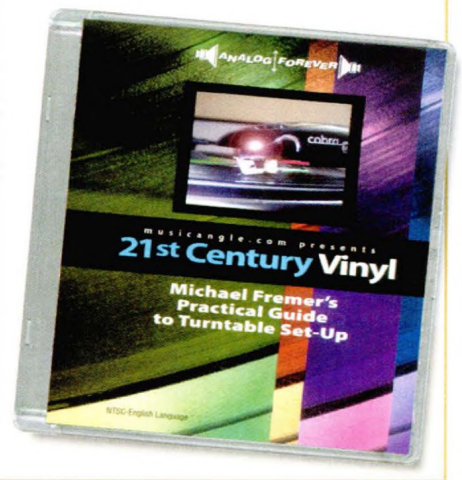
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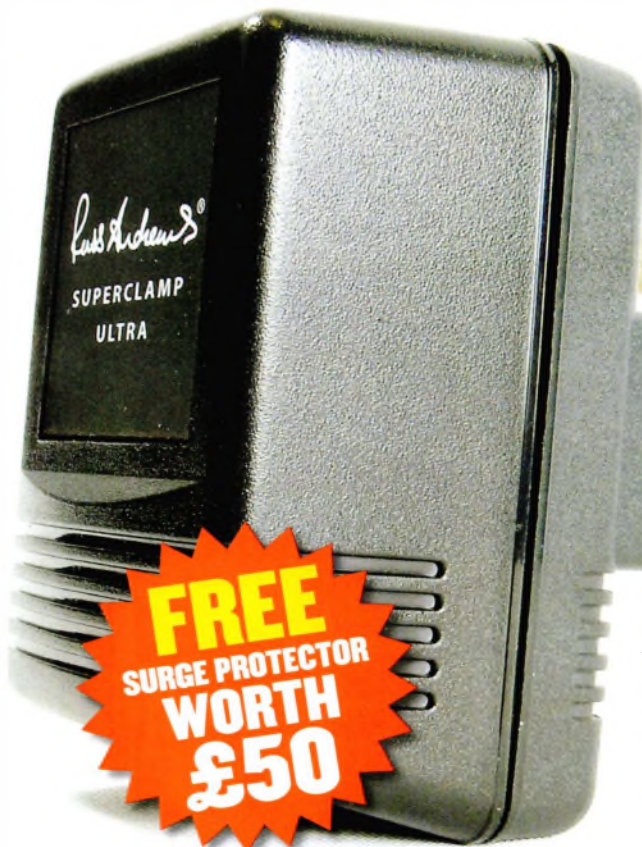
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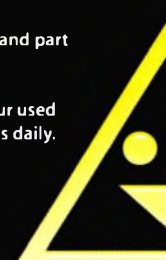
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| GamuT CD-1 (£2995) | £1995 |
| Micromega CD132 (£849) | £595 |
| Marantz CD 17 KI Signature (£1200) | £399 |
| Vincent CD 3 CD player (£800) | £649 |
| Naim CD5x (£1575) | £995 |
| Theta Chroma DAC | £295 |
| Musical Fidelity DM25 DAC and Transport (£4000) | £3395 |
| Musical Fidelity KW 250S (£4999) | £3795 |
| McIntosh MCD201, CD/SACD (£3400) | £2795 |
| Musical Fidelity NuVista CD (£3000) | £1395 |
| Resolution Audio Opus 21 (£2950) | £2395 |
| Marantz SA15-S1 (£1100) | £795 |
| Sony SCD-1 SACD player (£5000) | £1995 |
| Unison Research Unico CD (£1250) | £895 |

AMPLIFIERS

| | |
|---|-------|
| Exposure 3010 Integrated (£1000) | £595 |
| Chord 3200E (£6500) | £1995 |
| Mark Levinson 380 Pre (£4500) | £2695 |
| Cairn 4810 Integrated (£2700) | £1795 |
| EAR Yoshino 834T (£2800) | £1995 |
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| Audiolab 8000C and 8000P pre power combo | £399 |
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| Jungson JA2 pre-amp and JA50 (£3000) | £2250 |
| Krell KAV 250P pre amplifier (£2495) | £1095 |
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| Bel Canto S300i Integrated (£1799) | £1495 |
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| TacT SDAi 2175 (£1245) | £749 |
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LOUDSPEAKERS

| | |
|--|-------|
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| Wilson Benesch Arc (£2600) | £2095 |
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| Leema Acoustics Xone (£2245) | £1695 |

ANALOGUE

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| SME 20/2A (£6300) | £4495 |
| Graham Slee Elevator (£510) | £295 |
| Clearaudio Blue Emotion (£690) | £575 |
| Musical Fidelity Kw Phono (£2400) | £1250 |

MISC

| | |
|--|-------|
| Musical Fidelity A5 DAB Tuner (£1499) | £300 |
| Nordost Blue Heaven Speaker Cable (£695) | £489 |
| PS Audio Powerplant 300 (£1750) | £695 |
| Hovland Reference Speaker Cable (£1200) | £795 |
| Isotek Titan mains conditioner (£1650) | £1395 |
| PS Audio Ultimate Outlet (£400) | £295 |

Owning what is arguably the world's best CD
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to trade-in.



Legendary
Marantz launch new series

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 44.1kHz to 192kHz.

CAN I PLAY SACDS ON A NORMAL CD PLAYER?

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

CAN I PLAY DVDS ON A CD PLAYER?

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

TOP BUYS



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 | SPECIFICATIONS | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------------|-------|--|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|---------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | | | | SACD COMPATIBLE | ELEC DIG OUTPUT | OPT DIG OUTPUT | CD-RW COMPATIBLE | CD TEXT | BAL ANALOGUE OUT | HEADPHONE SOCKET | VARIABLE OUTPUT |
| 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 740C | 500 | Very flexible, this innovative upsampling player sounds exceptionally neutral and highly informative | | | | | | | | 293 |
| | Cambridge Audio Azur 840C | 750 | Purposefully underdemonstrative, combining neutrality, detail and timing; enhanced by flexibility as a DAC | | | | | | | | 291 |
| | 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-500AE | 160 | Cheap, well built and good, if slightly soft-edged sound quality | | | | | | | | 295 |
| | 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 |
| | Naim CD5i | 825 | Bass has great extension but lacks control, slightly. Tonal neutrality higher up is excellent, however | | | | | | | | 291 |
| | Quad 99CD-S | 650 | Reveals in big music thanks to fearless presentation; smaller-scale works can lack focus | | | | | | | | 291 |
| | 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 |
| EC | Audio Research Ref CD7 | 8,000 | Top of the CD playing tree, with a sound as open and musically accomplished as you'll ever find from the format | | | | | | | | 279 |
| | Ayre CX-7e | 2,195 | If you want a clean-sounding, revealing and entertaining player with fabulous build this is a strong contender | | | | | | | | 281 |
| | Classé CDP-102 | 3,000 | Rich, dynamic CD/DVD player with a full bottom end, impressive dynamics and a luxurious yet revealing balanced | | | | | | | | 286 |
| EC | Classé CDP-202 | 4,750 | CD/DVD-A player with brilliant sound, if sophistication is your bag. Includes S-video and composite outputs | | | | | | | | 284 |
| | Copland CDA823 | 1,750 | Don't let the laid-back character fool you - this player has plenty of insight too | | | | | | | | 280 |
| | Cyrus CD8x/PSX-R | 1,400 | Lightness of touch is the key here, but there is also good bass and some very fine detail on offer too | | | | | | | | 295 |
| EC | 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 |
| EC | 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 |
| EC | Krell Evolution 505 SACD | 8,777 | Brilliant replacement for SACD Standard, superb musical discrimination. No high-res digital output | | | | | | | | 289 |
| | Leema Antlia | 2,495 | Musically engaging player that will have you going through your CDs afresh. Balanced connection is best | | | | | | | | 291 |
| | Linn Majik | 1,950 | Compact and capable of most CD formats, it's musically communicative with fine pace and enthusiasm | | | | | | | | 283 |
| EC | Marantz SA-7S1 | 5,000 | Something of a bargain even at this price, the SA-7S1 sets the benchmark for CD/SACD players of its ilk | | | | | | | | 297 |
| | McIntosh MCD201 | 3,400 | Superb CD performance and even better with SACD which has its own output level control. | | | | | | | | 284 |
| | Meridian G06 | 1,695 | Highly refined player with a combination of analysis and self-effacing response to musical demands | | | | | | | | 295 |
| EC | Moon Supernova | 4,500 | Refined, high-performance player offers tremendous transparency and includes coaxial digital input | | | | | | | | 296 |
| | Musical Fidelity X-RAPY v8 | 1,098 | Accurate, yet musical performer. £799, but requires £299 TRIPLE-X power supply outside of X-T100 system | | | | | | | | 288 |
| | Naim CD5x | 1,450 | Unique design nicely complements a sophisticated and highly capable performance | | | | | | | | 280 |
| | Rega Saturn | 1,298 | Good detail, lively natural bass, and good integration of musical strands without losing their individual character | | | | | | | | 295 |
| | T+A CD1230R | 1,500 | Filter options make this a player for all tastes, aided by top quality engineering | | | | | | | | 280 |
| | Unison Research Unico CD | 1,495 | Strong timing and rhythm, this player is well equipped for more melodic music, with good detail resolution | | | | | | | | 295 |

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

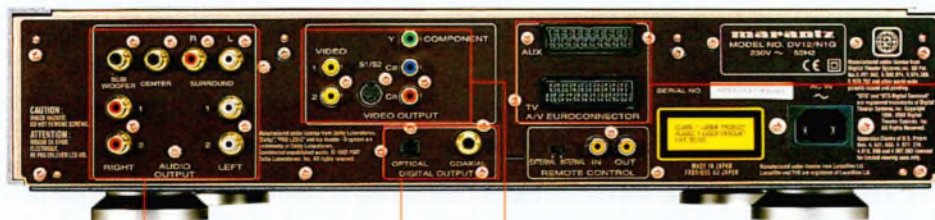
DVD-Audio is a high-resolution format that offers multichannel, stereo and Dolby Digital tracks on dedicated DVD-A discs. The discs can be played on any DVD player, but the CD-beating high-fidelity sound can only be appreciated with a DVD-A player.

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 BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE DVD PLAYERS

Audio/Video disc players

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | PRICE | COMMENTS | SPECIFICATIONS | | | | | ISSUE NUMBER |
|--|---------------------|-------|---|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|--------------|
| | | | | DVD-A COMPATIBLE | SACD COMPATIBLE | ELEC DIG OUTPUT | OPT DIG OUTPUT | HEADPHONE SOCKET | |
| UP TO £1,000 | | | | | | | | | |
| | Arcam DiVA DV135 | 900 | Unchanged looks and stereo-only DVD-A/SACD, but the overall performance is great across all formats. Stunning picture, too | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 296 |
| | Denon DVD-1920 | 250 | Respectable (if unexciting) and flexible audio player, but something of a star from its HDMI equipped upsampling video subsystem | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 276 |
| | Marantz DV7001 | 600 | Enhanced model based on DV6001, but with various improvements, including superior CD replay capabilities | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 296 |
| | Marantz DV7600 | 600 | A mid-market cracker, with sound and picture quality that generally exceeds expectation | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 274 |
| | NAD T585 | 800 | Easy to live with universal player that shows clear signs of rejuvenation of the Classic range | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 294 |
| | Onkyo DV-SP503E | 300 | Budget Onkyo universal player is a straightforward Pioneer based implementation, which performs well with audio and video | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 275 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 | | | | | | | | | |
| | Arcam DiVA DV137 | 1,250 | Good overall audio performance and excellent upscaling HDMI DVD-Video player, but stereo-only SACD playback at time of writing | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 285 |
| | Denon DVD-3930 | 1,100 | Well engineered universal player, with useful bypass facilities for pure audio, and unusually powerful video image processing | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 287 |
| EC | Denon DVD-A1XV | 2,500 | Sophisticated universal player with state of the art video processing, high class disc replay, especially SACD | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 266 |
| EC | Linn Unidisk SC | 2,995 | Groundbreaking universal player with built-in preamplifier, with excellent picture for home cinema and sound for hi-fi | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 259 |
| | Marantz DV9600 | 1,500 | With excellent, next-generation picture and impressive sound quality on CD and SACD, this sets a very high standard to beat | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 280 |
| EC | Meridian G98AH | 3,625 | Meridian's most widely compatible G-Series DVD player – groundbreaking DVD-Audio replay and a fine CD player too | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 265 |
| EC | Naim DVD5 | 2,565 | Naim's first DVD player is a real success, notable for its class-leading sound with CD and (optional) multichannel DVD-Audio | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 263 |
| | T+A SACD 1245 R | 2,000 | Dedicated stereo only/SACD/CD player avoids the usual compromises. It does a limited job, but it does it with fine fidelity | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 279 |
| EC | Townshend TA 565 CD | 3,000 | A universal machine that excels with music and is quite exceptional with good ol' stereo CD | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | 270 |

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

TOP BUYS



Marantz DV7600 £600

A universal player that's strong with all formats, including music on CD/SACD/DVD-A.



NAD T585 £800

This universal player borrows from NAD's Masters Series to make a cracking all-rounder.



Arcam DiVA DV135 £900

Stereo-only SACD and DVD-A, but excellent performance with audio and video.



Meridian G98AH £3,625

A digital *tour de force* – as exceptional with both audio and video as you'd expect.

HI-FI CHOICE

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VINYL

Turntables, cartridges and phono stages

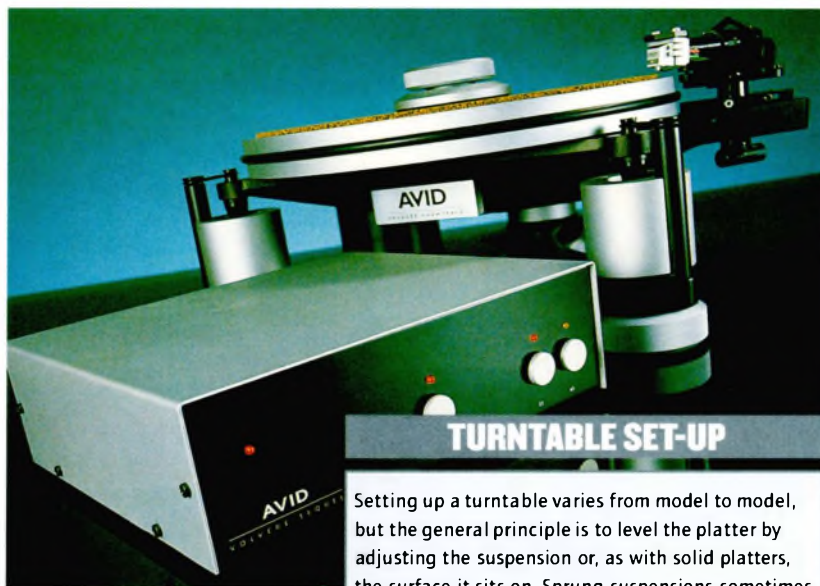


Record players or turntables offer the digital revolution serious competition when it comes to sound quality. Even a modest model can turn musical tricks that most CD players struggle with. Some call it vinyl warmth, but in reality it's a lack of digital hardness that makes the format so engaging. True,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

There are two types of phono



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.

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 | SPEEDS | SPECIFICATIONS | | | | ISSUE NUMBER |
|-----------------|----------------------------|--------|---|----------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| | | | | | SUSP SUBCHASSIS | SWITCHABLE SPEED CHANGE | SUPPLIED WITH ARM | SUPPLIED WITH CART | |
| | 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 |
| | Clearaudio Performance | 1,670 | Ceramic-magnetic bearing spells a surprisingly uncolored performance. Good arm and cartridge | 33/45 | | | | | 295 |
| 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 |
| | 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 | opt | 284 |
| | Goldring GR2 | 265 | Nicely finished Rega-manufactured deck with RB250 arm and an open, engaging sound quality | 33/45 | | | | | 266 |
| | Micell Technodec | 767 | Simple and smartly understated, performs above expectations – full-bodied and highly detailed | 33/45 | | | | | 268 |
| | Micell Gyro SE | 1,058 | New DC motor-equipped Gyro offers great looks and even better sound. Price includes RB300 arm | 33/45 | | | | | 239 |
| EC | Micell 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 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 |
| | Pro-Ject 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 6.1 | 550 | With its minimal chassis and huge platter this is a steady design that's capable of fine results with a decent cartridge | 33/45/78 | | | | | 294 |
| | 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 S/Nima | 850 | Sophisticated 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 20/12A | 11,133 | Brings a calmness and precision to vinyl replay that we have rarely encountered, build quality is second to none | 33/45/78 | | | | | 293 |
| 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 | MM | MC | SPECIFICATIONS | | ISSUE NUMBER |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|-------|--|----|----|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | | | | | | REPLACEABLE STYLUS | REPLACABLE STYLUS | |
| | Cartridge Man MM III | 625 | The MM III challenges MCs at twice the price, it produces detail, space and energy and has stunning resolve in the right arm | | | | | 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 Condor 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 | MM PHONO INPUTS | MC PHONO INPUTS | AUX GAIN | AUX 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 |

TURNTABLE SPECS KEY SPEEDS Speeds offered in rpm. **SUSP SUBCHASSIS** Turntables with a sprung or suspended support for the platter and arm. **SWITCHABLE SPEED CHANGE** Some decks require manual lifting of the belt from one pulley to another to change speed, but not these ones. **SUPPLIED WITH ARM** Deck is supplied complete with tonearm – some require a separate purchase in this department, but the dealer will fit it for you. **SUPPLIED WITH CARTRIDGE** Some decks are supplied with a starter cartridge and this is included in the price shown.

CARTRIDGE SPECS KEY MM Moving magnet cartridge – see amp and phono stage features to match this type. MC Moving coil cartridge – see amp and phono stage features to match this type. **REPLACEABLE STYLUS** Some cartridges have separate styli for ease of replacement, but it compromises sound quality.

SME

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Model 10



Model 20/2



Model 30/2



Series M2



Series 300



Series IV



Series V



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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.



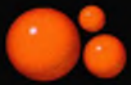
Magnum Dynalab MD 90T £1,195
FM tuner with valves – 'affordable' for an MD, but still streets ahead of most radios.

Our favourite TUNERS

FM & DAB HI-FI SEPARATES

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS | WAVEBANDS | PRESETS | RDS | REMOTE CONTROL | SIGNAL STRENGTH METER | ROTARY TUNING KNOB | SSIF NUMBER |
|-------------------|------------------------|-------|---|------------|---------|-----|----------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| FM TUNERS | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Creek T50 | 550 | Very fine results indeed with precision, polish and insight added to excellent basics | FM, M, L | 128 | | | | | 251 |
| | Cyrus FM-X | 500 | A classic no-nonsense FM tuner that achieves gratifying sonic results. Upgradable with PSX-R power supply | FM | 7 | | | | | 283 |
| | 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 |
| | Denon TU-1800DAB | 250 | There's a little grain on FM, the generally decent performance on both bands makes this an great dual-band choice | DAB, FM, M | 200 | | | | | 283 |
| EC | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | NAD C422 | 180 | Admirably free of roughness or other obvious nasties, with just a slight lack of clarity | FM, M | 30 | | | | | 250 |
| | Primare T21 | 600 | A very fine tuner – bass and treble are both well extended and detail is excellent | FM | 30 | | | | | 230 |
| | 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 |
| | Rega Radio 3 | 398 | Strong bass, clear treble and a high enjoyment factor make this an appealing FM performer | FM, M | 20 | | | | | 283 |
| | Rotel RT-02 | 279 | A highly competent tuner which always sounds appealing and fuss-free | FM, M | 30 | | | | | 242 |
| | 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 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 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 |
| | Cambridge Audio DAB500 | 150 | Very good sound, plus optional response tweaks, and slickest operation yet | DAB | 10 | | | | | 248 |
| | Cambridge Azur 640T | 200 | Slightly ahead of the pack in DAB performance, though FM is never better than decent | DAB, FM | 60 | | | | | 260 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | 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.

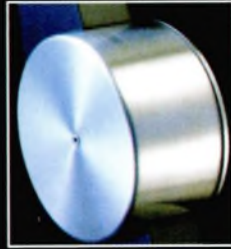


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ACOUSTICS

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The Absolute Sound

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nonconformist

adj. an individual who does not comply with conventional norms or socially approved patterns of behavior or thought

Reference 3 - Stainless Steel
suggested price £2400 per pair



DIGITAL AUDIO RECORDERS

CD, MiniDisc and hard drive recorders



MiniDisc

MD's strength is versatility. You can record and then re-record many times over. Editing facilities are second to none – you can erase mistakes, name tracks and re-order a disc's contents with a few simple button pushes, making it ideal for building compilations. They're pretty robust too.

Sound quality is below that of CD-R/CD-RW. The format uses a Sony-developed compression technology called ATRAC, which discards part of the data in order to squeeze it on the disc. If you're copying from CD to MD, the result tends to sound a little cold in comparison, lacking a degree of detail and ambience. But to most people it still sounds light years ahead of cassette – clean and hiss-free.

Recordable CD

With recordable CD you have a choice of two disc types: CD-R discs are the cheapest, but you can only record once; and CD-RW discs are a little more costly, but you can re-record on them *ad infinitum*.

Though the latest machines incorporate some useful editing facilities, CD-R/RW is not as flexible as MD. However, sound

quality is higher – if you're recording from a CD, the best models will give you a copy that is very close to the original. In terms of compatibility, most CD players will play back a CD-R disc, but older models might have trouble with CD-RW (though you can, of course, play the disc back on your own recorder). If you want to play a CD-R/RW on a DVD player, check for compatibility.

Hard drive

The latest contender on the digital recording scene is also the most flexible. Some HDD (hard disk drive) recorders can store whole music collections if you use a compression format such as MP3. HDD recorders are taking over from multidisc CD changers as sound servers in multiroom installations, where their ability to play more than one piece of music at a time is a great boon. HDD also offers impressive editing facilities on a par with MD, and they can also record from CD (or to CD-R/RW) at high speed.

At present, sound quality isn't the driving force behind the format – flexibility and storage capacity being bigger issues – and a plain CD-R/RW machine will outperform an HDD recorder in fidelity terms.

TOP BUYS



Yamaha
CDR-HD1500 £599

Combining hard disk with CD-R adds flexibility to digital audio recording.



Cambridge Audio
Azur 640H £600

Rip and store CD tracks on hard disk, create playlists, connect to a PC and more.



Hermstedt
Hifidelio Pro £850

160GB hard disk and CD-R/RW drive in a box – as music servers go, this is a cracker.



Imerge
S3000 £2,800

A flexible audio server that's well designed, easy to use and sounds great too!

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE DIGITAL RECORDERS

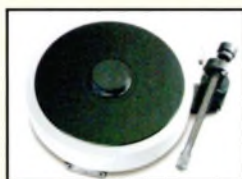
CD-R/RW, MD and HDD recorders

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS | DECKS | HO CAPACITY (GB) | OPTICAL IN/OUTPUTS | ELEC IN/OUTPUTS | ISSUE NUMBER |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------|--|-------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| CD-R/RW RECORDERS | | | | | | | | |
| | Denon CDR-1000 | 400 | A respectable player and recorder, though some midband congestion was noted when recording | 1 | | | | 218 |
| | Marantz DR6000 | 400 | No frills, but in its fundamentals this is one of the finest CD recorders on the market | 1 | | | | 233 |
| | NAD C660 | 500 | Audiophile twin deck offering high-speed copying, HDCD replay and notably fine recording from analogue | 2 | | | | 243 |
| | Philips CDR802 | 300 | Tacky looks and build notwithstanding, this is a well-equipped and technically sound 3-to-1 autochanger/recorder at a good price | 2 | | | | 233 |
| | Philips CDR951 | 380 | An improvement on previous models, it delivers the musical goods in some style | 1 | | | | 205 |
| | Pioneer PDR-609 | 270 | Classic CD recorder with outstandingly good sound for the money on both record and replay | 1 | | | | 243 |
| | Pioneer PDR-W839 | 350 | Good-quality twin CD burner makes recordings that can be hard to distinguish from the original. Good value too | 1 | | | | 218 |
| MD RECORDERS | | | | | | | | |
| | Pioneer MJ-D508 | 200 | Well equipped, but musically sleep-inducing that receives its recommendation owing to the price | 1 | | | | 205 |
| | Sony MDS-JE480 | 130 | Straightforward and effective, but the three real killer features are price, price and price | 1 | | | | 233 |
| HDD RECORDERS | | | | | | | | |
| | Cambridge Audio Azur 640H | 600 | Not so much a HDD recorder, more a complete audio computer and nerve centre in one useful box. Complex, but worth it | 1 | 160 | | | 276 |
| | Hermstedt Hifidelio Pro | 850 | Can be used as a CD player, but also as a recorder, and can encode MP3, play AAC and form the heart of a distributed audio system | 1 | 160 | | | 280 |
| | Imerge S3000 | 2,800 | Thought-out solution to the problem of storing, sorting and accessing a music collection. Sound wouldn't shame a good midrange CD player | 1 | 160 | | | 291 |
| | Yamaha CDR-HD1500 | 599 | Great for archiving a music collection or making compilations without compromising on flexibility or sound quality | 1 | 250 | | | 278 |

SPECS KEY DECKS Amount of drive mechanisms on board – twin-deck recorders use one to play while the other records. **HO CAPACITY** Amount of gigabytes of storage capacity, for HD only. **OPTICAL IN/OUTPUTS** Optical Toslink in and outputs for digital connection to a CD player or DAC. **ELEC IN/OUTPUTS** Electrical coaxial in and outputs for digital connection to a CD player or DAC.



Lucy just couldn't understand Tom's sudden lack of interest in an early night



Superb Hi-Fi

Just a little more desirable than the norm

Some decisions are just so simple

WHAT HI★FI?
SOUND AND VISION

AWARDS 2006

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

ROKSAN KANDY L.III



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.



Cyrus
6vs2 £600

The latest 'singing shoebox' from Cyrus is an absolute peach! Strong rhythmic flow, tunefully extended bass and excellent stereo imaging are among the highlights.



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 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 | Slightly cheap-feeling controls are the only real downside to this powerful and lively little amp | 6 | | ● | ● | 75 | 279 |
| ✓ | Cambridge Audio Azur 740A | 500 | Ticks all the boxes for bass, clarity, imaging etc. and invites the listener into the music with uncommon grace | 6 | | ● | ● | 100 | 294 |
| ✓ | Cambridge Audio Azur 840A | 750 | Excellent value - powerful and capable with useful features and clear, dynamic sound | 8 | | ● | ● | 120 | 293 |
| ✓ | Creek Evo | 500 | Not the most accurate, strictly, but its lively, energetic musical presentation is entirely lovable | 5 | opt | | ● | 85 | 283 |
| ✓ | Cyrus 6vs2 | 600 | Spunky little amp that reproduces instrumental timbres and acoustic spaces well, with real musical involvement | 7 | | | ● | 40 | 293 |
| ✓ | 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 |
| ✓ | Flying Mole CA-S10 | 1,000 | The Mole makes a mountain of detailed sound from its digital circuitry, if you choose your speakers well it's a short-cut to hi-fi nirvana | 3 | | | | 100 | 291 |
| ✓ | Marantz PM70C1KI | 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 |
| ✓ | Onkyo A-933 | 500 | Puts the music first, with sound that delivers the basics correctly but above all involves the listener | 5 | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | 80 | 278 |
| ✓ | Pioneer A-A9 | 600 | Takes on the mantle of the legendary A400. Not as cuddly, but very resolute and revealing for the money. Has USB input | 4 | ✗ | ● | ● | 80 | 296 |
| ✓ | Unison Research Unico P | 795 | Sound belies indifferent measured performance with good detail, balance and flowing melodic quality | 5 | MM | ● | | 50 | 293 |
| ✓ | Vincent SV-236 | 999 | Valve hybrid whose sound is as idiosyncratic as its styling, short on neutrality but high on sparkle | 6 | | ✗ | | 100 | 295 |
| ABOVE £1,000 | | | | | | | | | |
| ✓ | Aucia Flight TWO | 2,500 | Quirky, but musically highly effective model which is expressive and analytical, with some minor operational quirks | 8 | | ● | | 100 | 280 |
| ✓ | Bryston B100-SST DAC | 3,850 | A remarkable amplifier which is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of an impressive onboard DAC | 6 | ✗ | ● | ● | 100 | 275 |
| ✓ | Chapler 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 CTA405 | 2,498 | Avoids pitfalls 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 |
| ✓ | Densen Beat B110 | 1,200 | Great bass provides firm underpinning for involving and enjoyable listening - real 'smile factor' | 6 | opt | ✗ | | 60 | 292 |
| ✓ | 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 |
| ✓ | 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 |
| ✓ | Lyngdorf TDA 2200 | 3,875 | Sophisticated modular all-digital amp with room EQ, capable of adapting to the listening environment | 4 | | ● | | 200 | 289 |
| ✓ | McIntosh MA2275 | 5,400 | A valve amplifier that doesn't patronise. It's not soft-centred and it understands dynamics | 5 | ✗ | ✗ | | 75 | 271 |
| ✓ | 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 |
| ✓ | Musical Fidelity A1008 | 2,999 | With DAC, phono stage and built-in valve buffer, this powerhouse amp can really grab hold of a loudspeaker | 4 | ✗ | ● | | 250 | 295 |
| ✓ | NAD M3 | 1,899 | Massive and flexible, it goes very loud with fine authority and dynamic range, but lacks some sparkle | 7 | | ● | | 180 | 285 |
| ✓ | Naim SuperNait | 2,350 | Serious communicative ability meets convenience in this sophisticated and powerful integrated design | 6 | | ● | ✗ | 80 | 294 |
| ✓ | Primare I30 | 1,500 | A smooth, sophisticated yet agile performer, and beautifully built too | 6 | | | ✗ | 100 | 267 |
| ✓ | Sugden A21aL Series 2 | 1,299 | Lovely solid-state Class A amplifier, sweet as a nut and more powerful than its predecessor | 5 | opt | ✗ | | 21 | 296 |
| ✓ | 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 Res. Unico Secondo | 1,200 | Very good detail and coherence. Tonality is natural, imaging precise and deep, and dynamics are wide and unforced | 6 | opt | ● | | 110 | 297 |
| ✓ | Unison Res. Performance | 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 EDITOR'S CHOICE STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Pre/power amplifiers

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS | SPECIFICATIONS | | | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|-------|---|----------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|------------------|
| | | | | PREAMPLIFIER | POWER AMPLIFIER | LINE INPUTS | PHONO INPUT | REMOTE CONTROL | POWER OUTPUT (W) |
| UP TO £2,000 | | | | | | | | | |
| ✓ | 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 |
| ✓ | 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 |
| ✓ | 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 150x | 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 |
| ✓ | Russ Andrews HP-1/PA-1 | 1,198 | A highly enjoyable pre/power combination with fine levels of detail, good rhythm, stable and precise imaging | ✓ | ✓ | 2 | | 50 | 297 |

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 | LINE INPUTS | PHONO INPUT | REMOTE CONTROL | POWER OUTPUT (W) |
| ABOVE £2,000 | | | | | | | | | |
| | Arcam FMJ C31 | 1,200 | Professionally presented, beautifully built and exceptionally revealing, this preamp achieves much by doing little | ● | | 5 | opt | ● | 273 |
| EC | Border Patrol Control Unit | 2,995 | Bluff looking valve preamp, with one of the most neutral yet dynamic sounds around | ● | | 5 | opt | ● | 277 |
| EC | Bryston BP26 DA/2B SST | 5,550 | Bryston's top preamp is now a serious competitor. The power amp reveals a lot of signal and delivers serious grunt | ● | ● | 6 | opt | ● | 100 278 |
| EC | Chapter Preface/II+ | 9,800 | Among the finest amps available, the resolution of this preamp and power amp challenges the best at any price | ● | ● | 6 | | ● | 300 249 |
| EC | Chord Prima/Mezzo 140 | 6,100 | Small, muscular, beautifully made and styled and sounds like a dream | ● | ● | 5 | | ● | 120 269 |
| EC | Classé CP-700/CA-M400 | 13,350 | Pre plus mono power combo with superb build, huge power and enormous flexibility. Sounds stunning, too | ● | ● | 6 | opt | ● | 400 293 |
| | Densen Beat B-200/B310 | 2,300 | Lively, energetic combination that bring a great sense of scale to familiar recordings | ● | ● | 8 | | opt | 80 276 |
| EC | ECS EA-1 | 6,000 | Understated monoblocks with real transparency to the fine detail, passion and energy in your record collection | | ● | | | | 180 253 |
| EC | Gamut D3 | 3,430 | Creamy smooth, yet lets you hear all the fine detail that goes to making a tonally rich, dynamically strong sound | ● | | 5 | opt | ● | 265 |
| EC | Gamut D200 Mk3 | 3,950 | A great power amp that's now even better – one of the best regardless of price | | ● | | | | 200 247 |
| EC | Hovland HP-100/RADIA | 12,745 | Uncommonly musical valve/transistor hybrid transcends stereotypes, one of the genuine high achievers | ● | ● | 9 | opt | | 125 250 |
| EC | Krell FPB 700cx | 14,998 | Reference class amplifier may represent overkill in many systems, but when no compromise is called for, this is it | | ● | | | | 700 234 |
| EC | Linn Klimax Kontrol | 6,000 | Beautifully executed example of Scots audio art, sounds as clean as it looks and is a lot more transparent than most | ● | | 4 | | ● | 238 |
| EC | Naim NAP 500 | 11,875 | Wonderful neutrality, bandwidth and dynamic range, plus Naim's traditional leading-edge definition | | ● | | | | 140 208 |
| EC | Naim NAC 552 | 12,100 | Extremely expensive preamp, but still solid value. Magnificent sound with fine flexibility and convenience | ● | | 6 | | ● | 233 |
| | 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 AV AMPLIFIERS

BEST BUY
 EDITOR'S CHOICE

Multichannel amplifiers

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS | RECEIVER | LINE INPUTS | 7.1 COMPATIBLE | 5-CHANNEL POWER (W) | ISSUE NUMBER |
|---|---------------------------|--------|---|----------|-------------|----------------|---------------------|--------------|
| MULTICHANNEL INTEGRATED AMPS | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Cambridge Audio Azur 640R | 600 | Simple and elegant receiver. Attributes that reflect in good sound quality without the distracting toys you'll find elsewhere | ● | 7 | ● | 100 | 292 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Denon AVC-A1XV | 4,000 | Inlegant, but powerful and effective tool with excellent auto set-up and capable of driving two 5.1 systems simultaneously | ● | ● | ● | 170 | 266 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Marantz SR-12S1 | 3,000 | A multichannel amp that can be taken seriously in stereo too. Resources are in the engineering rather than the gimmicky | ● | 3 | ● | 160 | 255 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sony STR-DB798 | 250 | Cheap but effective, and passably good with pure audio sources, but control system messy | ● | 7 | ● | 100 | 273 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sony STR-DB795 | 300 | A superb value little amplifier, well appointed technically and successfully tuned for UK ears | ● | 7 | ● | 100 | 260 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Arcam AVP700/P1000 | 3,000 | Cutting-edge processor/tuner with HDMI sounds great, but the matching Class H power amp lacks finesse to match its power | ● | 8 | ● | 135 | 275 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Linn Exotik | 1,750 | Is hi-fi ready to make the jump to multichannel music? Linn think so with this musical preamplifier | ● | 4 | ● | ● | 260 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Linn Exotik + DA | 3,245 | Good analogue preamplifier with multichannel in/out up to 7.1 and a home cinema processor of quality combine to make a tempting package | ● | 8 | ● | ● | 291 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Meridian 861 | 9,833 | Powerful surround processor with flexible modular construction, marvellous versatility to drive any speaker configuration | ● | 2 | ● | ● | 230 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Primare SP31.7/A30.5 | 4,200 | Great all-round system which brings the qualities of good stereo high fidelity to a multichannel world | ● | 5 | ● | 120 | 238 |

SPECS KEY **RECEIVER** Integrated multichannel amp with built-in radio tuner **LINE INPUTS** Input sockets for source components with a line level output: CD players, DVD players, tape decks, tuners, phono stages etc **7.1 CHANNEL COMPATIBLE** The amp either has seven-channel in and outputs or in some instances is equipped with seven channels of amplification **5-CHANNEL POWER (W)** Power output in watts per channel of all channels driven by the amp.



After 5 years in production, the Dino is still one of the most popular phono stages around. Highly versatile with accessible switches on the baseplate to facilitate a wide range cartridges.

'Never Connected' power supply technology virtually removes all incoming mains noise allowing only the music to be heard.

Visit our website to learn more about this exciting product and the high performance Diablo phono stage.

Trichord Research

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 www.trichordresearch.com

Dino Phono Amplifier



BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
 magazine

SEVENOAKS



WHY CHOOSE SEVENOAKS

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision is the UK's largest specialist retailer of high-quality home entertainment solutions. With stores nationwide and a proud history of satisfied customers, Sevenoaks has a hard-earned reputation as the most comprehensive provider of home cinema, hi-fi and multi-room audio systems, offering excellence in customer service with a unique design and custom installation option available at many of its stores.

All Sevenoaks Stores:

- are staffed by experts in home cinema and hi-fi
- stock leading brands to offer a range of high quality products
- offer impartial and personal service
- have home cinema and hi-fi demonstration rooms

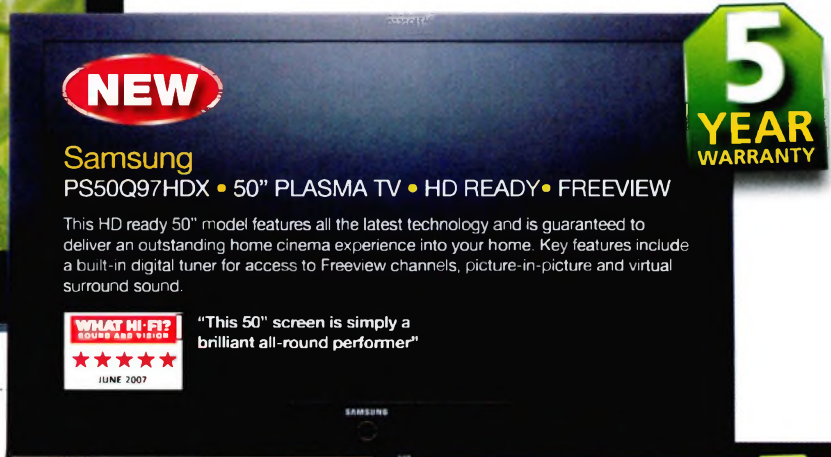
Come and visit us

HOME CINEMA PLASMA AND LCD TV



Pioneer G8 Series PDP-428XD
42" PLASMA TV • HD READY • FREEVIEW

Featuring Pioneer's new ultra black panel technology and an amazing contrast ratio of 16000:1, this 8th generation 42" plasma screen produces ever deeper blacks than before. Visit your local store and see the difference.



Samsung PS50Q97HDX • 50" PLASMA TV • HD READY • FREEVIEW

This HD ready 50" model features all the latest technology and is guaranteed to deliver an outstanding home cinema experience into your home. Key features include a built-in digital tuner for access to Freeview channels, picture-in-picture and virtual surround sound.

"This 50" screen is simply a brilliant all-round performer"



Sony Bravia KDL-40W2000
40" LCD TV • FULL HD READY • FREEVIEW

With a super wide viewing angle giving you a great picture from almost anywhere and a fast response time to ensure smoother sports and action sequences, this award-winning LCD TV includes a built-in Freeview tuner, 1920 x 1080 resolution and two HDMI inputs.

FIVE YEAR WARRANTY

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WITH A 26 INCH SCREEN OR LARGER

*SRP (Suggested Retail Price)
Not in conjunction with any other offer or promotion. £80E

Panasonic Viera TH-37PX70
37" PLASMA TV • HD READY • FREEVIEW

Panasonic's Viera screens come with a choice of mounting options including a pedestal stand or a dedicated cabinet. This 37" model is finished in a classy gloss black finish that will blend into any living space. With a built-in Freeview tuner and excellent connectivity, this screen effortlessly handles motion and produces vibrant, natural colours.



Loewe Individual 32s
32" LCD TV • HD READY • FREEVIEW

There can be no more excuses that the TV doesn't match your decor. Loewe's Individual Selection screens come in a choice of five different front colours which can be matched with interchangeable side panels in nine different colours. A choice of floor and table-top stand options are available or you can even suspend the TV on a floor-to-ceiling pole.



Sharp Aquos LC-37XD1E
37" LCD TV • FULL HD READY • FREEVIEW

This TV offers unbeatable picture quality. Its beautiful slim, graceful appearance makes this model a design classic for the future. This is not just a TV, it is a piece of art for your home.



Getting the most from your home cinema

Home cinema has evolved from a simple projector-and-screen set-up to a state-of-the-art way of enjoying TV, DVD and multimedia. Sevenoaks knows the ins and outs of every component and will tailor a system to suit your exact requirements. Whether you're replacing an individual component or taking a first step into home cinema, expert advice is available.

PROJECTION



Sim2 DOMINO D35

Sim2 Multimedia is a world-leading manufacturer at the forefront of home cinema technology and a name synonymous with high-end home cinema projection.

"This is a fine projector that's also a pleasure to use. One of the best at the money without a doubt."



CLAIM £200 towards the projection screen of your choice.

HOME CINEMA SYSTEM

Arcam SOLO MOVIE 5.1 SYSTEM

This new home cinema system from Arcam combines one-box simplicity with superb-quality sound and vision. Simply add a screen and speaker package for an amazing home entertainment system.

- Combined DVD/CD transport chosen for its performance resulting in world class picture and sound quality
- DAB/FM/AM - The clarity of reception will bring radio lovers hours of enjoyment
- Integrate music and pictures from your iPod using either Arcam's rDock or rLead



"Matches one-box simplicity with superb-quality sound and vision"

HOME CINEMA SEPARATES AND SPEAKERS



Denon

DVD2930 DVD PLAYER
AVR2807 AV RECEIVER

Featuring 1080p upscaling, this award-winning DVD player provides first-class picture and sound quality and is compatible with all popular disc formats including SACD and DVD-Audio. The 6.1 channel AVR2807 receiver features two HDMI inputs, one HDMI output and is supplied with a new 'Glo-key' remote control.



Arcam DIVA

DV137 DVD PLAYER
AVR280 AV RECEIVER

Delivering 80w across all of its 7 channels, Arcam's new AVR280 produces terrific sound with both movies and music. It is an ideal partner for Arcam's DV137 universal disc player. Compatible with DVD-Audio and SACD discs along with standard DVDs, the '137 impresses with its crisp, vivid images.



Sony

RDR-HDX1065 DVD RECORDER
STR-DA5200ES AV RECEIVER

Building on the abilities of Sony's award-winning 'HXD860, this new DVD recorder features twin tuners, an HDMI output, 250GB hard disk plus a USB input. When partnered with the STR-DA5200ES 7.1 channel receiver the combination promises excellent sound and vision performance.



Yamaha

DVD-S1700 DVD PLAYER
RX-V1700 AV RECEIVER

Designed for top-notch sound quality, the award-winning Yamaha RX-V1700 delivers a thunderous 130 watts across all seven of its channels. A host of impressive features hides behind its fascia. The multi-format DVD-S1700 disc player is an ideal partner, complementing the V1700 with both its looks and performance.

KEF KHT3005 5.1 SPEAKER PACKAGE

Winner of the 2006/07 EISA award for best Home Cinema speaker system, the KEF KHT3005's impressive looks are backed-up with superb surround-sound, powerful enough to fill even the largest of rooms.



REL R Series SUBWOOFERS

The R-Series is designed to augment the performance of "full range" speaker systems and to provide linear response down to below 20Hz. The R series comprises the 205, 305 and 505. All models feature class D amplification and are available in a piano black lacquer finish.



B&W Mini Theatre

MT-30 5.1 SPEAKER PACKAGE

With a combination of the latest R&D techniques and a passion for music, B&W produces a diverse range of products befitting the largest audio manufacturer in the UK.

The Mini Theatre MT-30 delivers excellent performance and is ideal for both home cinema and hi-fi applications.

Don't forget! 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.

CLAIM FREE ACCESSORIES WORTH UP TO £300

when you purchase selected hi-fi, AV separates and speakers at our normal selling price (RRP). Choose from QED, Soundstyle, Grado and more. Ask in-store for details.



PLEASE NOTE

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↓ Written details on request.

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Getting the most from your hi-fi system

Sevenoaks has 34 years' experience in the hi-fi market - and nobody knows more about getting the most from music. With the major brands in stock, Sevenoaks can help you choose individual components or design a complete system from scratch. Just tell our in-store experts what you listen to, when and where.

HI-FI SEPARATES AND SYSTEMS



Cyrus

If you've enjoyed listening to music before, try listening to it through a Cyrus system. With every product tuned by ear, Cyrus represents a quality of sound, which is rare at any price.

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- Uniquely broad upgrade options
- Luxuriously high quality of manufacturer



Arcam SOLO MUSIC SYSTEM Monitor Audio RS1 SPEAKERS

A great package coupling Arcam's award-winning all-in-one hi-fi system with the excellent RS1 speakers.

Ask in-store about our recommended cables and stands.



NEW KEF iQ Series

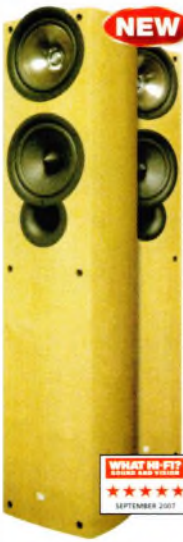
From the second you spot the soft sheen of titanium on the main driver cones, you know you're in for something special. And you won't be disappointed.

Utilising KEF's trademark Uni-Q technology, the iQ series delivers consistently detailed imaging and unrivalled off-axis response so everyone in the room gets the full benefit, wherever they sit.



iQ5SE

"These SEs are far more entertaining than the originals, yet leave the old speakers' fuss-free nature intact."



Spendor S Series

Each Spendor 'S' series speaker delivers a balanced energy output to guarantee a consistent sound and a seamless sound stage in a diversity of living environments. Each model features:-

- Hand-made 'e' generation bass-midrange drive units
- Dynamically damped cabinets which reduce energy re-radiation to inaudible levels.



Monitor Audio

Across a speaker range rich in its choice of style, shape and application, Monitor Audio's thirty year heritage of technical expertise guarantees great sound with tonal accuracy that is shared by every speaker. From on-wall, in-wall, ceiling and floor, Monitor Audio gives you the freedom to enjoy high-quality sound in every room of your home.



Ranges include Bronze Reference, Silver RS, Gold Signature and Radius



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.



Marantz

Marantz products range from high-end hi-fi to HD-ready DVD players and AV receivers. Its hi-fi range includes the CD5000 and CD50010SE CD players and the PM40010SE amplifier, offering a taste of high-end audio at an incredibly competitive price.



Rotel 06 Series

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.



Pro-ject

Revive your record collection with Pro-ject turntables. The range includes the award-winning Debut III (pictured above). This belt drive, two speed player comes complete with Ortofon cartridge.

WIRELESS MULTI-ROOM AUDIO

Sonos

Sonos is the first wireless, multi-room digital music system that lets you play your favourite tunes all over the house - and control them from the palm of your hand. You can play the same song in different rooms, or different songs in different rooms. To start listening, just grab the colour controller, pick a room, pick a song and simply hit play.

- Built-in wireless system
- Multi-room synchronous playback
- Expandable design, up to 32 rooms
- Familiar, simple user interface



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just a small selection of our amazing summer offers

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Create your own system and SAVE 15% with our HI-FI system builder

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DEDUCT 15% from the total

Includes most, but not all, brands. Contact your local store for details (NICWAOO)

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25% off original RRP on all end-of-line* hi-fi and A/V amps, receivers, CD and DVD players

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35%

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*Some are ex-display but all are sold with full warranty. (NICWAOO)

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Spend £1000 on home cinema separates at RRP and buy the amazing Pioneer PDP427XD TV for only £999* LAST FEW INCLUDES 1 YEAR WARRANTY

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Ask in-store for details (NICWAOO)

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Spread the cost of buying.
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* Written details on request.
 Licensed credit brokers. Minimum balance £400. Subject to status.

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



Tannoy
Mercury F4 £350
Tannoy's Mercury speakers have a long history of 'quality' sound at low prices, and the latest range is no exception – this floorstander is thoroughly engaging.



DALI
Ikon 6 £899
Complete with a ribbon super-tweeter, this is an exceptionally capable floorstander for the money, delivering a highly detailed and truly engrossing 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 (Hz) | FREE SPACE | CLOSE TO WALL | ISSUE NUMBER |
|--------|-----------------------------|-------|--|-----------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|------------|---------------|--------------|
| | 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 |
| | Acoustic Energy Aegis Neo 3 | 370 | Pretty, neutral floorstander sounds open with wide dynamic range and good bass weight | 20,90,5,24 | | A | 24 | | | 294 |
| | Acoustic Energy Aelite 3 | 750 | Wood-veneered all-rounder has exceptional neutrality with deep smooth bass | 20,103,39 | | A | 22 | | | 292 |
| | Acoustic Energy AE1 Classic | 845 | Sharply priced classic replica has a beautifully balanced midband, wide dynamic range and little boxiness | 18,29,5,25 | | A- | 45 | | | 283 |
| | 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 | 24,5,37,31 | | A | 26 | | | 288 |
| | ATC SCM11 | 849 | A very fine little speaker that's at its best with good, natural recordings where it adds little and reveals much | 21,38,25 | | A- | 55 | | | 293 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | B&W 683 | 899 | We have not come across this level of transparency in a sub-£1,000 speaker before, killer bass is sublime | 19,8,96,5,34 | | A | 38 | | | 297 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | DALI Monitor 1 | 1,000 | Beautiful miniature with advanced drivers sounds marvellously coherent with fine vocal expression | 16,32,24 | | A | 40 | | | 296 |
| | Dynaudio Focus 110 | 850 | Luxury real wood miniature with tapered enclosure sounds punchy, sweet and avoids boxiness | 17,30,28 | | A- | 38 | | | 279 |
| | 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 |
| | Epos ELS3 | 200 | Few affordable speakers sound as clean and convincing while taking up so little real estate | 18,27,19 | | A- | 60 | | | 241 |
| | Epos M5 | 349 | Gorgeous miniature works well close to wall. Could be smoother but communicates with authority | 18,33,21 | | A- | 40 | | | 269 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | 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 |
| | Monitor Audio BR2 | 200 | Good looking standmount has a muscular sound with superior coherence | 18,5,35,25 | | A- | 30 | | | 294 |
| | Monitor Audio BR5 | 400 | Not the best dressed in its class, but detailed, bold sounding, good value and an easy electrical load | 17,85,25 | | A- | 36 | | | 293 |
| | Monitor Audio GS10 | 800 | More neutral tonally than some recent MAs. Quality stereo design which takes its up little room and is easy to drive | 20,36,27 | | A- | 40 | | | 284 |
| | Monitor Audio Silver PS8 | 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 |
| | Mordaunt-Short Avant 906 | 350 | The generous, well balanced sound shows good enclosure control, could do with more grip and better spikes! | 16,5,85,29,5 | | A | 40 | | | 281 |

SPECS KEY SIZE WxHxD (CM) Width, height and depth of one cabinet in centimetres. **FLOORSTANDER** Speakers that don't require stands. **EASE OF DRIVE** How much power the amplifier needs (approximately) to drive the loudspeaker effectively. **A+** 25 watts plus **A** 50 watts plus **A-** 100 watts plus **ACT** Active – the speaker has its own in-built amplifier. **BASS FROM** How low the speaker goes – the smaller the number the deeper the bass. **FREE SPACE** The speakers work best away from wall(s). **CLOSE TO WALL** The speakers will work best when up against a wall (but avoid corners).

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Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO SPEAKERS continued

Stereo speakers

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS | SPECIFICATIONS | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------|--------|--|-------------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|------------|--------------|
| | | | | SIZE (WxDxH) (CM) | FLOORSTANDER | EASE OF DRIVE | BASS FROM (Hz) | FREE SPACE | CLOSE TOWALL |
| | PMC DB1+ | 625 | Now with sweeter treble, this fun-size tiny lacks some weight and authority, but is beautifully balanced | 16,29,24 | | A | 50 | ● | 261 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | Quadral Pico | 849 | Could be more muscular, but neutral and open with spacious imaging and little coloration | 19,34,26 | | A- | 30 | ● | 292 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | Revel Concerta F12 | 900 | Massive multi-driver floorstander is not pretty, but has great headroom, bass weight and impressive neutrality | 25,108,36 | ● | A | 22 | ● | 296 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | Tannoy Mercury F4 | 350 | Floorstander has an engrossing sound with good dynamics and a warm, restrained output | 20.5,97,29 | ● | A+ | 24 | ● | 294 |
| BEST BUY | Totem Rainmaker | 795 | Standmount has a big sound, with a smooth midband and bright top. Could have more punch and warmth | 17,35.5,23 | | A | 25 | ● | 291 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 | | | | | | | | | |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | ATC SCM19 | 1,499 | Super linear motor system, heavy weight construction and fabulous veneer that makes the ATC a pro favourite | 22,44,31.5 | | A- | 54 | ● | 285 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | 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 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | 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 |
| BEST BUY | Focal Chorus 826 V | 1,250 | Times nicely, goes loud with ease and will produce precise imaging if appropriately set up. | 28,104,37.5 | ● | A | 45 | ● | 287 |
| BEST BUY | Focal Chorus 836V | 1,549 | Bulky, sharply priced three-way could be prettier. Has good bass with genuine grip, but top could be sweeter | 28,115,38 | ● | A | 28 | ● | 290 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | 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 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | Focal Diva Utopia Be | 7,599 | Lovely slimline speaker combines remarkable transparency with fine dynamics and gorgeous bass | 25,110,53 | ● | A+ | 30 | ● | 255 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | 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 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | 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 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | 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 |
| EDITOR'S CHOICE | 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 |
| BEST BUY | MartinLogan Clarity | 2,498 | Relatively affordable and easy to live with electrostatic hybrid with class-leading resolving power | 26,135,31 | ● | A- | 46 | ● | 245 |
| BEST BUY | Mendian 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 |
| BEST BUY | Opera Seconda | 1,295 | Classy cabinetwork plus beautifully judged neutrality with crisp, clean and deep bass | 24,102.5,31.5 | ● | A- | 20 | ● | 297 |
| BEST BUY | 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 |

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Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO SPEAKERS continued

Stereo speakers

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS | SPECIFICATIONS | | | | | |
|--------|----------------------------|--------|--|----------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|---------------|
| | | | | SIZE (WxHxD)M | FLOORSTANDER | EASE-OF-DRIVE | BASS FROM (Hz) | FREEL SPACE | CLOSE-TO-WALL |
| 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 | 33.5,57.5,10 | | 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 EB1 | 5,950 | The best argument for large speakers that we've heard in a long time | 29,120,46.5 | ● | A- | 19 | ● | 292 |
| 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 |
| EC | Quad ESL 2805 | 4,500 | Uniquely wonderful natural realism, exceptional imaging, coherence and low level detailing | 70,107,38.5 | ● | A- | 45 | ● | 294 |
| | 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 | 20,100,25 | ● | A | 22 | ● | 290 |
| | Ruark Talisman III | 1,499 | No bass demon, but a sophisticated and agile speaker epitomising Ruark's design ideals | 22,84,31 | ● | A | 22 | ● | 259 |
| | 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 |
| 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 |
| | Tannoy Glenair 10 | 2,999 | With a 250mm dual concentric driver this is a generously proportioned, highly engaging speaker for a good price | 36,100,35 | ● | A+ | 38 | ● | 295 |
| | 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 | Wharfedale Airedale Neo | 9,000 | Expansive yet relaxed sounding, the Neo is a coloured but surprisingly musical and enjoyable speaker | 52,115,45 | ● | A- | 25 | ● | 296 |
| 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 |
| | Yamaha Soavo 2 | 1,200 | Cunningly crafted stand-mount with a beautiful balance that always sounds lively, open and involving | 22,38,35 | | A | 28 | ● | 296 |

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 | SPECIFICATIONS | | | | ISSUE NUMBER |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------|---|----------------|--------------------|----------------|------------|--------------|
| | | | | EASE OF DRIVE | NUMBER OF SPEAKERS | BASS FROM (Hz) | FREE SPACE | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | ATC Concept 3 | 4,877 | Extremely engaging, revealing and musical multichannel system providing 360 degrees of full-on entertainment | A- | 6 | 12 | opt | 255 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | B&W 300 package | 900 | An excellent compromise between the requirements of music and those of home cinema (inc. subwoofer) | A | 6 | 27 | | 241 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | B&W 600 S3 (602/601/LCR 600) | 900 | Unquestionably delivers the sonic goods. High-quality drivers in standmount enclosures | A | 5 | 22 | | 224 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Castle CAV Sterling | 1,250 | Lovely real wood veneers. Sound has fine dynamic drive and expression, but can sound a little hard | A | 5 | 28 | | 224 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Dynaudio Audience 42 package | 1,142 | Multichannel package for hi-fi purists with real authority and imaging, but needs subwoofer for full-bore movie sound | A- | 5 | 53 | | 241 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Final Sound Electrostatic system | 4,875 | Slim, attractive, electrostatic panels have clever connections, limited loudness but a breathtaking transparency | A- | 6 | 20 | | 251 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Focal-JMlab Electra package | 3,017 | Bold, solid system, tremendous consistency and easy to expand with an added subwoofer | A | 5 | 50 | | 232 |
| <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 | A- | 6 | 18 | | 253 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Mirage Omni 2 | 2,650 | Dark tonality, but superb imagery makes this an excellent all-round choice | A | 5 | 30 | | 232 |
| <input 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 | A | 6 | 28 | | 241 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Mordaunt-Short Genie | 800 | A prince among sub/sat packages – good integration and impressively little compromise compared to full-size models | A- | 6 | 38 | | 262 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Mordaunt-Short Declaration 500 | 1,600 | Good value vinyl THX Select package with Power Towers. Good authority, but must be 5.1-connected | A | 5 | 25 | | 210 |
| <input 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 | A | 6 | 20 | | 268 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Tannoy Arena | 1,200 | Fabulously stylish sub/sats with Dual Concentric drivers. Unusually revealing for the breed, but sub lacks refinement | A | 6 | 29 | | 269 |

SPECS KEY **EASE OF DRIVE** How much power the amplifier needs (approximately) to drive the loudspeaker effectively: **A+** 25 watts plus **A** 50 watts plus **A-** 100 watts plus
NUMBER OF SPEAKERS The amount of individual loudspeakers in the package **BASS FROM** How low the speaker goes, the smaller the number the deeper the bass.
FREE SPACE The speakers work best away from wall(s) **CLOSE TO WALL** The speakers will work best when up against a wall (but avoid corners).

Our favourite SUBWOOFERS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Bass speakers

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS | SPECIFICATIONS | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|-------|---|-----------------|-----------|----------------|--------------|
| | | | | SIZE WxHxD (CM) | POWER (W) | BASS FROM (Hz) | ISSUE NUMBER |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | B&W PV1 | 950 | Gorgeously styled sub shakes the air but not the floor, delivering a very clean sound with negligible coloration | 29,34,35 | 500 | 20 | 259 |
| <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 | 53,56,52 | 1,000 | 18 | 246 |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Eclipse TD725sw | 2,700 | Delivers solid meaningful bass, but with unusual tunefulness, speed and articulation | 52,47,50 | 500 | 40 | 287 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Monitor Audio ASW100 | 300 | For the price, this compact subwoofer performs particularly well | 32,32,34 | 120 | 27 | 225 |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | REL 305 | 795 | Landmark mid-price sub, works particularly well with low crossover frequency, looks great too | 32,36,34 | 300 | 25 | 284 |
| <input 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 | 28,40,29 | 100 | 18 | 257 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | REL T1 | 595 | Standard setter at the price: flexible, easily set up and packs quite a punch | 36,40,420 | 300 | 25 | 291 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | REL Strata 5 | 700 | Highly musical sub that integrates well but the REL Stampede offers near-identical performance for less money | 32,46,33 | 150 | 18 | 257 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | REL Storm III | 900 | Excellent sub with powerful, detailed and deep bass. Comprehensive facilities, including flexible filter adjustment | 42,62,33 | 150 | 18 | 225 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | REL Storm 5 | 1,000 | Well engineered, good bass depth, appropriate for mixed hi-fi & home cinema/multichannel systems | 34,52,37 | 200 | 15 | 267 |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | REL Stacium III | 1,500 | It's a bulky piece of furniture, but offers superior filtering as well as an ability to delve deep into the bass nether regions | 59,56,39 | 200 | 16 | 217 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Velodyne SPL-800R | 699 | Powerful, highly configurable sub with auto setup feature and attractive, compact packaging | 26,27,33 | 1,000 | 28 | 286 |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Wilson Benesch Torus | 5,200 | Amp and sub package built like a sophisticated pie driver, with deep, state of the art performance | 45,33,45 | 1,000 | 10 | 290 |

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.

HI-FI AND HOME CINEMA SPECIALISTS SINCE 1929

Acoustic Energy, Apollo, Apple, Arcam, Archos, Atacama, Audiolab, B&W, Beyerdynamic, Creative, Creek, Denon, Epos, Grado, Helios, Humax, iRiver, KEF, Linn, Marantz,

Mission, MJ Acoustics, NAD, Onkyo, Panasonic, Pioneer, Pro-Ject, Pure, Q Acoustics, QED, Quad, Rotel, Samsung, Sennheiser, Sony, Sound Organisation, Soundstyle, Tannoy,

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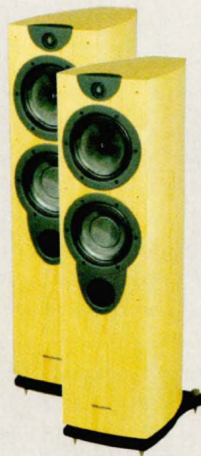
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SAVE: £595

£679.95



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SAVE: £300

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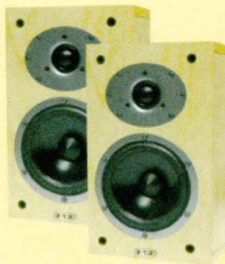
BOOKSHELF SPEAKERS

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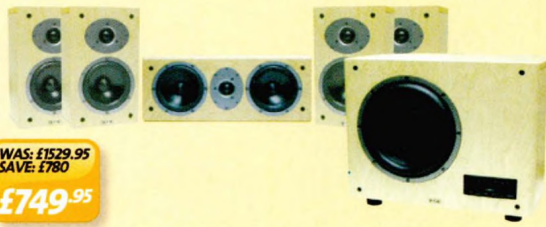


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5.1 SPEAKER PACKAGE LINN KOMPLEMENT 5.1

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Komplement 110
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CREEK SEPARATES CREEK EVO CD PLAYER

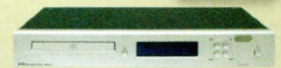
- 24 Bit/192 kHz Burr Brown Delta Sigma DACs deliver superior sound-quality
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HEADPHONES

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 |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | AKG K270 Studio | 129 | Pro oriented design which is very transparent and great with acoustic material |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | AKG K1000 | 650 | Neutral, analytical and completely out of the head sound, suitable for connection to speaker outputs only |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Beyerdynamic DT990 | 160 | Impeccable balance, very extended bass and treble, and bags of detail place this model ahead of the pack |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Beyerdynamic DT770 | 190 | A touch coloured in the mid, but less than most closed cans: detailed and with excellent bass |
| <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 |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Grado SR325i | 310 | Highly sophisticated and detailed sound with great extension; check for comfort |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Grado GS1000 | 995 | One of the finest transducers on the planet, with detail to die for |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Philips HP890 | 70 | A remarkably sophisticated and very comfortable headphone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sennheiser LX90 | 35 | Brings recognisably hi-fi sound to in-ear transducers, with surprisingly good resolution |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sennheiser HD465 | 65 | A great all-round headphone for occasional or even heavy use, refined in sound and comfortable, too |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sennheiser HD595 | 150 | Technology from upmarket HD650 model makes this a very revealing headphone that's also extremely comfortable |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Sennheiser HD650 | 300 | Astonishing resolution and hardly less impressive tonal balance make this a true hi-fi experience |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Shure SE420 | 240 | Expensive and no replacement for top conventional 'phones, but streets ahead of most in-ears with real refinement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Shure E500PTH | 420 | Sophisticated in-ear design with three drivers, plus switchable 'voiceover' mic in the lead; high-quality stuff |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Stax SR-CC1 Mk 1 | 239 | Expensive and power hungry, but this electrostatic drags personal stereo into the world of high fidelity |
| <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 |

| SPECIFICATIONS | | 3.5MM JACK ADAPTOR | ISSUE NUMBER | | | |
|----------------|-------------|--------------------|--------------|-------------|------------|-----|
| ELECTROSTATIC | SUPRA-AURAL | CIRCUMAURAL | OPEN BACK | CLOSED BACK | WEIGHT (g) | |
| | | | | | 270 | 230 |
| | | | | | 270 | 244 |
| | | | | | 250 | 245 |
| | | | | | 290 | 287 |
| | | | | | 200 | 194 |
| | | | | | 200 | 270 |
| | | | | | 250 | 288 |
| | | | | | 330 | 219 |
| | | | | | 35 | 290 |
| | | | | | 220 | 296 |
| | | | | | 270 | 266 |
| | | | | | 260 | 252 |
| | | | | | 15 | 295 |
| | | | | | 20 | 285 |
| | | | | | 280 | 268 |
| | | | | | 205 | 295 |

SPECS KEY **ELECTROSTATIC** Uses electrostatic film instead of more common cone or dome dynamics. **SUPRA-AURAL** Earpads sit on ear rather than around it. **CIRCUMAURAL** Earpads rest on the head around the ears. **OPEN BACK** Vented capsules let sound in and out. **CLOSED BACK** Sealed capsules. **WEIGHT** In grams. **3.5MM JACK ADAPTOR** Allows connection to personal stereos, computers etc.



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CABLES



Wires to hook your system together



Hi-fi cables come in two varieties: interconnects and speaker cables.

Analogue interconnects come in preset lengths, generally with RCA (phono) plugs attached, though some equipment uses XLR connectors for balanced connection – this can be sonically advantageous, especially over longer runs. Speaker cable is commonly sold by the metre and can be used without plugs or can

be fitted with screw or solder-on types.

Choosing cables is not quite as straightforward as it might seem. One problem is that components interact with the cables you use and this often results in audible effects, but there are few cables that are fundamentally incompatible with any components, and we recommend the advice of a good dealer. In any case, you should look to spend as much as you can afford.

Digital cables come in two flavours: electrical and optical. In most instances electrical varieties sound better than optical, given the choice, but optical cables may be a better bet over long runs (10m+). Optical inputs/outputs usually use Toslink connectors, while most electrical types use RCA plugs, but some opt for BNC connection instead – check your components before you buy.

Our favourite CABLES

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

| | | | | SPECIFICATIONS | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|---|----------------|------------|--------|--------|--------------------|--------------|
| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS | STRANDED | SOLID CORE | COPPER | SILVER | DIGITAL CABLE TYPE | ISSUE NUMBER |
| ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Atlas Questor | 70 | Very open and informative at high and mid frequencies, with slightly dry bass. Imaging particularly fine | ● | ● | | | | 295 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Audioquest Sidewinder | 45 | A lively and detailed cable, with fine tonality and excellent rhythm. Slight added upper-bass warmth does little to detract | ● | ● | | | | 297 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Black Rhodium Prelude | 80 | Practical and sensibly priced all-rounder that seems happily compatible with a wide range of kit | ● | ● | | | | 293 |
| <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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Cambridge Azur Reference | 50 | Performance wouldn't shame a cable at twice the price: especially adept in the treble with no trace of dryness | ● | ● | | | | 296 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Clearer Audio Cooper-Line Alpha | 50 | Sounding like something a good deal dearer, this cable offers near high-end detail and seems highly compatible too | ● | ● | | | | 295 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Clearer Audio Silver-line | 244 | Complex, well-screened cable which offers good sound all round with exceptional bass – at a price! | ● | ● | | | | 279 |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | CrystalCable Piccolo | 260 | Thin cable, but tougher than it looks. Piccolo has some qualities of a solid core type generally – notably resolution, focus and articulation | ● | ● | | | | 294 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Ixos Ixotica IX1 | 200 | Notable for its relaxing sound, this cable still presents plenty of analytical detail | ● | ● | | | | 283 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Monster M350i | 45 | Few cables at this price reveal so much about the recording space. Clear treble, too | ● | ● | | | | 281 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Oehlbach NF214 | 63 | The bass is a matter of taste, but suits many smaller speakers. Very good mid and treble | ● | ● | | | | 281 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Oehlbach Silver Express + | 70 | Good, firm bass is accompanied by clear treble and well defined stereo imaging | ● | ● | | | | 280 |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Supra Sword-ISL | 379 | Unusual inductance-free design, beautifully built, with bold, finely detailed and outgoing sound quality and excellent discipline | ● | ● | | | | 292 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | TCl Tiger | 30 | Not the most detailed interconnect around, but performance belies its modest price, especially in the bass | ● | ● | | | | 285 |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Van den Hul MC Silver IT MkII | 2,250 | Incredibly resolute and low distortion cable that makes the alternatives sound crude, pity about the price | ● | ● | | | | 289 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Wireworld Luna 5 | 30 | Authoritative bass and clear treble outperform many cables at twice the price | ● | ● | | | | 273 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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"/> | OED Qunex Signature 75 | 80 | First-rate balance and imaging – ever so nearly as good as it gets at any price | | ● | ● | | | E 265 |
| <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 PER METRE | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Atlas Hyper 2.0 | 15 | A high degree of musical communication: detail is not perfect but one is seldom aware of the shortfall | ● | ● | | | | 290 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Atlas Ascent 2.0 | 55 | A highly analytical cable, with more bass extension than at first appears and very fine detail across the board | ● | ● | | | | 294 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Chord Epic Twin | 40 | Good all rounder, which generally sounds relaxed and musical, and a full bass that stops the right side of sounding blowsy | ● | ● | | | | 287 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Kimber 8VS | 18 | Beautifully full, open and transparent sound right across the board | ● | ● | | | | 227 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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, hi-res and suitable for exacting systems | ● | ● | | | | 278 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | OED Silver Anniversary XT | 5.50 | Full bass and nicely detailed treble combine with good imaging - a budget bargain | ● | ● | | | | 276 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | OED 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 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | van den Hul The Bridge | 6 | Better bass than treble, with good detail though a touch of constriction at times | ● | ● | | | | 291 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Wireworld Luna 16/4 | 5 | Budget biwire cable offering tuneful and extended bass, good treble, and midrange with just a little lack of detail | ● | ● | | | | 292 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 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 |

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.

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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 BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS

Equipment supports

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------|---|
| | Alphason A5-G | 399 | Nice looking, very solid and practical with a pretty well balanced sound, but lacks a little detail |
| | Atacama Equinox | 280 | Stable, modular design with style. Excellent bass transients and a fresh design concept |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Audiophile Base | 615 | Price is justified by its earth-shattering sonic abilities – a worthy upgrade |
| | Avid Isosshelf | 1,100 | An enthusiast's equipment support stand free from coloration, if a little fiddly to set up |
| <input 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 |
| | Custom Design XL4 | 380 | Simple construction pays off in smart looks. Sound contribution is minimal and largely harmless |
| <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 Vantige | 449 | 'Acoustic Aluminium' shelves plus steel supports equal practicality plus musical satisfaction: just a shade bright |
| | Partington Minimi | 389 | Looks good, sounds good and is impressively flexible to boot |
| | 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) | WELDED | 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 |
| 65 | 60,42 | | 4 | Glass | 293 |
| 75 | 57, 41 | | 5 | Glass | 263 |
| 74 | 48,40 | | 4 | Metal | 247 |
| 62 | 49,44 | | 4 | Metal | 271 |
| 75 | 45,36 | | 5 | Glass | 261 |
| 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 BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

SPEAKER STANDS

Speaker stands

| BADGE? | PRODUCT | £ | COMMENTS |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----|--|
| | Anvil Sound Display Stand | 226 | A variety of smart looks available - sound is clear and precise |
| <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"/> | 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) | FILLABLE | WELDED | NUMBER OF LEGS | ISSUE NUMBER |
| 50 | 20,17 | | | 1 | 293 |
| 56 | 16,5,18 | | | 1 | 281 |
| 61 | 18,16,3 | | | 4 | 283 |
| 63 | 17,20 | | | 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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GLOSSARY

TECHNICAL TERMS

5.1-CHANNEL AUDIO Six discrete channels, typically front left and right, centre, surround left and right, and LFE (Low Frequency Effects) for a subwoofer.

BALANCE Most loudspeakers have a characteristic frequency balance resulting from emphasising parts of the audio range and/or de-emphasising others.

BASS The lowest three octaves of the audio band – 'low bass' refers to the bottom octave (20-40Hz), 'mid-bass' the middle octave (40-80Hz) and 'upper bass' the top octave (80-160Hz).

BI-AMP (Sometimes tri-amp) Loudspeakers equipped with separate access terminals to each drive unit can be driven by separate (matching) power amplifiers for each driver.

BI-WIRE (Sometimes tri-wire). Loudspeakers with separate access terminals to each drive unit can be driven by separate cable runs between the amp and each driver.

CD-R Recordable CD that cannot be erased, though discs that have not been completely filled can have tracks added until the disc is finalised.

CD-RW Re-writable or re-recordable CD, incompatible with older CD players.

CLASS A The operation of an amplifying stage or device in which current always flows, as opposed to Class B, where some of the devices are effectively turned off some of the time. Class A tends to have the advantage of offering lower distortion, while Class B tends to generate less heat.

CLASS AB Most practical amps operate in Class A for the first fraction of a watt and Class B thereafter.

CLIPPING An amplifier's output waveform is 'clipped' if the volume is advanced too far and no more 'volts' are available to sustain ever-increasing power levels. Distortion increases dramatically at this point.

CLOCK Any electronic oscillator that is used to generate a timing reference signal. Used to synchronise the data being taken from a disc.

CROSSOVER A simple electrical network which divides the full bandwidth signal received from the power amplifier, apportioning appropriate parts of the spectrum to the various drive units.

DAB (digital audio broadcasting). Digital radio using frequencies in the 217.5-230MHz band. Broadcasters use varying degrees of compression and offer a broad range of programming.

DAC or Digital-to-Analogue Converter. The stage in any digital component at which incoming digital data is used to reconstruct a recognisable analogue (music) waveform.

DOLBY DIGITAL A compressed digital audio format that typically contains five or more entirely discrete channels, eg 7.1 EX where side and rear channels are used

DOLBY PRO-LOGIC, DPL Forerunner to DD that 'steers' information to the front L/R, centre and mono surround channels via an analogue matrix.

DRIVE UNIT/DRIVER A transducer which converts electrical energy into acoustic energy, eg bass driver, tweeter.

DSD (direct stream digital) The coding format used for SACD offers a frequency response of over 100kHz and a dynamic range over 120dB. It has over four times the data capacity of CD.

DSP (digital signal processor). Integrated circuit that handles the decoding of digital audio streams. In 5.1 processors, it separates the left from right and front from rear, while managing the various bass options.

DTS or Digital Theatre Sound. Competitor to Dolby Digital with a reduced 4:1 compression ratio that, ostensibly, promises higher quality.

DVD-AUDIO High-resolution variant on DVD offering up to 192kHz bandwidth and 24-bit dynamic range. Discs are compatible with standard DVD players.

ELECTRICAL DIGITAL Any digital connection that uses an electrical cable rather than optical. Includes the balanced ('AES/EBU') interface.

FILTERS Filters are intrinsic to digital audio, both analogue and digital. These are often very sophisticated in design, and in total they probably have rather more to do with the 'personality' of CD player sound than most other factors.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE The range of frequencies, from low to high, which a loudspeaker will reproduce.

IMPEDANCE With speakers, the complex electrical load that a loudspeaker presents to the amplifier driving it.

JITTER An insidious distortion specific to digital audio caused by imprecision in the clock, used to regulate the conversion of data into analogue audio.

KBPS (Kilobits per second) Digital data rate measurement system used primarily with highly compressed formats such as MP3, DAB etc. The higher the amount, the better the quality.

LINE LEVEL Practically every modern source component (except phono cartridges) gives an output in the region of 1-2V, referred to as 'line level'. It follows that all inputs labelled 'CD', 'tuner', 'aux' or 'tape' are designed for this input level and are thus interchangeable.

LOSSLESS COMPRESSION A method of reducing the number of data bits (density) without corrupting the original description of the musical signal.

LOSSY COMPRESSION Reduction in data density by recourse to a complex psycho-acoustical model that predicts what is, and what is not, 'audible' within a sequence of music.

MIDRANGE The middle three or so octaves of the audio band, where the ear

is most sensitive, covering the approximate frequency span from 160Hz up to 3kHz.

MP3 (MPEG layer 3) Lossy compression format for digital audio that drastically reduces data content in order to squeeze music through internet connections or allow hundreds of CDs to be stored on a hard disc.

OUTPUT IMPEDANCE A measure of resistance to alternating current, a source with low output impedance (below 100 ohms) helps ensure compatibility with most amplifiers, even with long interconnect cables.

PCM (pulse code modulation) The digital coding system for analogue waveforms used for CD and DVD. Quality is limited by the oversample and bit rates used – CD is 44.1kHz/16-bit while DVD-A is capable of 192kHz/24-bit.

PRESENCE BAND Critical section of the audio band at the point where midrange and treble meet.

QUANTISATION NOISE A form of distortion or noise resulting from errors in the description of the musical signal by the digital code.

SACD (Super Audio CD) was launched in 1999 and is a Sony/Philips format based on DSD coding that offers high resolution stereo and multichannel sound from hybrid discs that can also be played on ordinary CD drives.

SAMPLE RATE The rate at which the musical waveform is sliced up into discrete chunks. For CD, this is 44.1kHz or once every 0.023msec. DVD will also support 48kHz and 96kHz.

SENSITIVITY The relative loudness that a speaker generates for a specific voltage input. Expressed in decibels per watt (dB/W), measured 1m from the speaker.

THX Standards system for home cinema set-ups which includes amplifier power and speaker dispersion characteristics. The latest THX Ultra 2 standard is more stringent than THX Select.

TOSLINK The proprietary name given by Toshiba to the optical fibre signal transmission system it invented for consumer applications.

TRANSISTOR/MOSFET The two main types of power semiconductor used in solid state amplifier output stages.

TREBLE High frequencies, the top end of the audio band, ie above 3kHz.

TWEETER Treble driver.

TWO/THREE-WAY Loudspeaker crossovers split the signal into two or three frequency bands, a two-way speaker can have more than two drive units.

WATTS (per channel) The watt is the unit of electrical power and the WPC rating is the maximum average undistorted power that an amp can deliver to a typical speaker. However, speaker sensitivity variations can make more difference than amplifier output.

WOOFER Bass driver.

DESCRIPTIVE TERMS

AGGRESSIVE Forward and bright sonic character.

AMBIENCE The impression of an acoustical space, such as the performing hall in which a recording was made.

ANALYTICAL Highly detailed.

ARTICULATE Intelligibility of voice(s) and instruments and the interactions between them.

ATTACK The leading edge of a note and the ability of a system to reproduce the attack transients in music.

BALANCE Essentially tonal balance, the degree to which one aspect of the sonic spectrum is emphasised above the rest. Also channel balance, the relative level of the left and right stereo channels.

BODY Fullness of sound, with particular emphasis on upper bass. Opposite of thin.

BOXY The sound of a loudspeaker with audible cabinet resonances.

BRIGHT A sound that emphasises the upper midrange/lower treble.

DARK A tonal balance that tilts downwards with increasing frequency. Opposite of bright.

DECAY The fadeout of a note, it follows the attack.

DEFINITION (or resolution) The ability of a component to reveal the subtle information that is fundamental to high fidelity sound.

DEPTH (of image) The perception of music being reproduced behind the loudspeakers and inhabiting a reproduction of the acoustic space of the original recording.

DETAIL The most delicate elements of the original sound and those which are the first to disappear with lesser equipment.

DRY A sound that is devoid of 'juice', which usually comes across as fine-grained and lean. Also a loss of reverberation as produced by a damped environment.

DYNAMIC The suggestion of energy and wide dynamic range. Related to perceived speed as well as contrasts in volume both large and small.

EUPHONIC An appealing form of distortion that generally enhances perceived fidelity, often ascribed to the harmonic elaborations of some valve amps.

FAST Good reproduction of rapid transients which increase the sense of realism and 'snap'.

FOCUS A strong, precise sense of image projection.

FORWARD(NESS) Similar to an aggressive sound, a sense of the image being projected in front of the speakers and of music being forced upon the listener.

GRAINY A slightly raw, exposed sound which lacks finesse.

GRIP A sense of control and sturdiness in the bass.

GRUNT See grip.

HARD Uncomfortable, forward, aggressive sound with a metallic tinge.

HARSH Grating, abrasive.

IMAGING (stereo) The sense that a voice or instrument is in a particular place in the room.

JUICY Sound that has joie de vivre, energy and life.

LOW-LEVEL DETAIL The quietest sounds in a recording.

MUSICAL or musicality. A sense of cohesion and subjective 'rightness' in the sound.

NATURALNESS Realism.

OPAQUE Unclear, lacking transparency.

OPEN Sound which has height and 'air', relates to clean upper midrange and treble.

PACE Often associated with rhythm, a strong sense of timing and beat.

PRESENCE A sense of an instrument or voice occupying a place in the listening room.

PRESENCE RANGE The upper midrange.

SEISMIC Very low bass that you feel rather than hear.

SIBILANCE An emphasis of the 'S' sound, often heard on radio.

SNAP A system with good speed and transient response can deliver the immediacy or 'snap' of live instruments.

SPEED A fast system with good pace gives the impression of being right on the money in its timing.

STURDY Solid, powerful, robust sound.

THICK A lack of articulation and clarity in the bass.

THIN Bass light.

TIMBRE The tonal character of an instrument.

TIMING A sense of precision in tempo. See speed and pace.

TRANSIENT The leading edge of a percussive sound. Good transient response makes the sound as a whole more live and realistic.

TRANSPARENCY, TRANSPARENT A hear-through quality that is akin to clarity and reveals all aspects of detail.

TWEAK To tune a system or component in an attempt to get the best performance from it.

TWEAKER Someone who enjoys this process.

VEILED Loss of detail due to limited transparency.

WARM A fullness in the lower midrange/upper bass.

WEIGHT A sense of substance and underpinning produced by deep, controlled bass.



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Hi-Fi World 5 globe review "Near faultless phonostage with glorious soundstaging, tremendous textural acuity and wonderful musicality."

The PhoNote is available as either a MM version for £1,500 or MC for £1,750 and is available exclusively from Noteworthy Audio.

www.noteproducts.com



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Audio Note 10 1 MC cartridge. Surely one of the best cartridges in existence, the 10 uses Alnico magnets and pure silver coils to extract everything from your LP's in the most musical way possible. £1,850.



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 space and is intensely musical for just £1,200.

The **Something Solid XR** has become our reference equipment support, its novel use of balsa end grain shelves and tensioned shelf suspension give it a neutral presentation that lets equipment perform without added artifice. 4 tier version available from £600. EXR 'Economy' version also available from just £300.



Consonance Linear CD players start from just £695 and use a filterless design to produce some of the most enjoyable results from CD imaginable. The CD2 2 Reference linear pictured left features a valve output stage and costs £1,395.

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 punst single ended zero feedback design. It produces 3.7 of the finest watts Available. If you have high efficiency speakers the we think you really need to hear this remarkable amplifier!: £2,500.



Music first Audio TVC pre amplifier Instead of using resistors to control the volume, a TVC uses stepped transformers. Incredible transparency without any of the dynamic compression found in conventional passive preamplifiers. Copper wired version: £1,600. All silver wired: £2,750.

Nottingham Analogue Dais turntable pictured right with 12" Ace Space tonearm. This stunning heavy weight turntable comes with Wave Mechanic power supply. It costs £3,520 excluding tonearm, with arms starting from £587 for a 9" and £710 for a 12" version.



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- ▶ Accoustic Arts Surround-Player I
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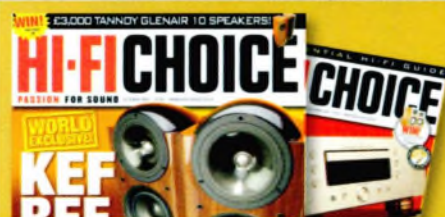
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2nd-hand shootout

Need a second-hand audio recorder? These four best represent their specific formats

Think reel-to-reel and the chances are that it will be the Revox B77 that springs to mind. First produced in 1977, this immaculately built Swiss gem didn't cease production until three years ago – when it signed out at a hefty £3,300. Every component of importance is die-cast and construction quality is of a genuinely professional level. Even today, many universities, theatres and other institutions still use a B77, or its professional market namesake, the PR99. Incidentally, you may also find the same machine badged as either a Studer or Ferrograph.

Particular care must be taken when choosing a second-hand model. We spoke to Revox-approved service agent, Brian Reeves (www.revoxservice.co.uk), and he gave us the following advice. Always try to buy from the original owner. This way you can be sure of the unit's history. Some B77s bought from online trading sites have been bodged with incompatible boards. If you're unsure of what the correct plug-in boards you'll need are, then it's best to seek specialist advice. As you might imagine, servicing one of these complex devices isn't cheap. Reeves charges between £150-£230, including collection, for a full electronics re-calibration and service. Parts aren't cheap either, but at least you've no worries with regard to supply. If you're feeling brave, there's also a huge selection of second-hand parts available on many specialist websites.

Provided you get a properly set-up model, the B77 still sounds stunning. Dynamic headroom is amazing, especially if you are used to compressed formats. For a model in good condition, prices range from £450 to £1,750. At this budget, you should be able to get an early 1980s model. Spend a little more and the Mk2 version becomes available: the only major difference here is the inclusion of a built-in varispeed unit.

From one legend of tape to another, the Nakamichi CR-7E. Quite possibly the best

cassette deck in the world, the CR-7E combines superb build and sound quality with ease of use like no other. Launched in 1988, with a price tag of around £1,100 the CR-7E has always been something of a luxury product. That build quality has stood it in good stead with regards to reliability, though. The only problem you should ever encounter with one is worn heads and capstans. As Nakamichi has switched distributors since the CR-7E's day, the official service agents are not Nakamichi UK, but Bowers & Wilkins. Rather confusingly, this is not the loudspeaker brand of the same name (B&W), even though they were once related in the dim and distant past. You can contact them at www.bowersandwilkins.co.uk. As with the B77 a full service isn't cheap (£200-£250) but, again, pretty much all the parts are still available. Be aware that cosmetic parts are far harder to get hold of, and that the printed legends do rub off. £500 should be enough to get a model in good condition, although you may need a little more if you're to



others here. Fortunately, the MDS-JA50ES is pretty reliable, although a screen display showing "TOC error" probably indicates that a new laser is required (around £80-£100 fitted). While it may not be the best-sounding recorder here, it's most certainly the best value. As little as £250 should be enough to secure a good unit, with £400 being the top price for a mint condition, guaranteed example from a dealer.

“Try to buy from the original owner. This way you can be sure of the unit's history.”

source a mint condition model with box, instructions and, preferably, a recent service.

If this pair are just a little too analogue for you, then how about MiniDisc? This once popular format was effectively killed stone dead by the advent of MP3 and the iPod, yet it shouldn't be dismissed. Although ridiculed by some, there were a few impressive recorders made. One of these was the Sony MDS-JA50ES. Launched in 1998, this £1,300 recorder offered the latest ATRAC 4.5, a Variable Coefficient digital filter, twin R-Core transformers and, yet again, first-rate build quality. Use a decent disc and recordings are impressively accurate. Against the Revox and Nakamichi you will find a softening of detail at frequency extremes, but by MiniDisc standards, it's still an impressive performer. Servicing one of these recorders, however, is a little more complicated. Sony prefers the customer to contact their contracted spares company, SEME. While friendly enough, they don't have the specialist knowledge of the

Finally, and most recent of all, we have the Cambridge Audio 640H. This 160GB hard disk drive (HDD) represents the new wave of recording. Like most media recorders, the 640H will burn CD-R/RW discs, stream internet radio, work with or without wires and generally perform all manner of tricks the others can't. Where it stands out over other HDDs, is in its audiophile specification, which includes a large toroidal transformer, a Wolfson WM8740 DAC and acoustically damped casing. Although recording quality arguably won't match the B77 or CR-7E, it's good by HDD standards. The interface is less impressive, but Cambridge Audio has at least improved this with various software upgrades. Later V2 models operate with fewer glitches, and you can download the latest firmware upgrades by registering at the Cambridge Audio website. Costing just £600 new, around £400 should be enough to get a nearly-new V2 model. **HFC**

Dominic Todd

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Below: Cambridge Audio 640H recorder



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|--|--------|-------------|
| Sale of part exchanged and ex-dem items | | |
| Esoteric P03 / D03 CD player - boxed - unused - owned 1 week - whoops! | £14000 | £20000 |
| Audio Research Reference 3 line pre-amp - with Jorma 15A mains lead | £6000 | £9500 |
| VPI/TNT Junior record player | £1500 | £4500 |
| Nottingham Analogue Hyperspace with LV mat - 15 months old - perfect | £1400 | £2450 |
| Lyra Helicon Mono - only very light use | £600 | £1200 |
| Sheu Premier MkII turntable with upgraded platter | £500 | |
| Schroeder DPS 9" toneorm - Barote wood - hens' teeth | £2000 | £3000 |
| Jan Allaerts Finish - light use | £1500 | £4000 |
| VDH Various MC cartridges - Frogs, Grasshoppers, Colibris - 10 - 150 hrs use | | please coll |
| Jorma Prime Interconnect 1m XLR - XLR | £1000 | £3200 |
| Jorma Prime Interconnect 2m XLR - XLR | £1400 | £4200 |
| Jorma Prime Interconnect 1.5m phono - phono | £1200 | £3600 |
| Kuzma Airline tonearm - Kondo silver internal and external lead - ouch | £3500 | £7500 |
| Kuzma Stagi 'S' unipivot toneorm - new - lovely sound - giveaway | £350 | £650 |
| Rogue Audio Zeus stereo power amplifier - very big and very heavy | £3000 | £7500 |
| Naim NAC 72 & NAP 140 | £650 | |
| Mactone MA300B 20 watts power amp - as new - 2 months old | £3000 | £6500 |
| Mactone XX330 line pre-amp - as new - 2months old - boxed | £2500 | £8000 |
| Avalon Arcus loudspeaker - Maple - very tidy | £2500 | £7000 |
| Unison Research Smart 300B class A monos - 12 months use - giveaway | £1800 | £4500 |
| Lavardin PE Reference line per-amplifier - 1 lady driver - perfect | £1500 | £2400 |
| Lavardin AP power amplifier - spotless as above | £2100 | £3400 |
| Exposure 3010 CD player - as new - boxed - 100 hours use | £850 | £1400 |
| Audio Aero Capitole CD24 / 192 - factory serviced - vgc | £1700 | £4000 |
| Audionet Art V2 CD player - perfect, as new - 6 months old | £1500 | £2500 |
| Audionet Art V2 CD player - perfect, as new - 18 months old | £1300 | £2500 |
| Audionet SAM integrated amplifier - perfect, as new - 6 months old | £1500 | £2500 |
| Cairn 4808 integrated amplifier with remote - 10 months old - boxed - mint | £550 | £1200 |
| Esoteric X03 CD player - perfect - boxed - 200 hours max use | £3750 | £5000 |
| Placette passive line stage - 3 inputs - 120v - remote control - 6 months old | £700 | £1600 |
| Cardas Golden Reference speaker cable - 3m single set - very light use | £1250 | £2250 |
| Border Patrol 300B SE - Western Electrics | £1900 | |
| Canary 601 line pre-amplifier - very smart - Living Voice upgrades - lovely | £1500 | £3000 |
| Nottingham Analogue Mentor - SME 345 toneorm - old timer - much loved | £1250 | |
| Canary 303 monos - 22 watts 300B power with Living Voice upgrades | £3500 | £7500 |
| Canary 608 integrated amp - standard unit | £1000 | |
| Canary 300B monos - 10 watts - excellent condition - giveaway | £800 | |
| Horning Agathon - Silver Ook - excellent condition - no packaging - giveaway | £1000 | £4000 |

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FOR SALE

ACCUPHASE T108 tuner, £600. Musical Fidelity X-PRE v3 preamp and X-P200 power amp, £1,000. All items mint, boxed 01332 843758 (Derbyshire).

ACOUSTIC ENERGY LINEAR 1 speakers, mint, boxed, £80.

Two pairs of Rothwell Attenuators, boxed, £18 per pair. 07941 174804 (Berks).

ARCAM CD82 CD player, silver finish, excellent condition, £250. 01482 503011 (Yorks).

ARCAM DV79 DVD player in black, as new. HDMI compatible, boxed, manual, remote, (£1,000) offers. 01772 745553 (Lancs).

ARCAM FMJ A32 integrated amp, boxed, mint, (£1,200), sell for £650. 01491 614325 (Oxon).

AUDIO PHYSIC LUNA 2 subwoofer, cherrywood veneer, mint condition, boxed, (£1,650) £850. 07776 143890 (Southampton).

AUDIO RESEARCH L55 preamp, excellent condition, hardly used, (£5,290) £1,000. ATC 20TASL, (£4,800) £2,000. Part exchange welcome on any hi-fi product. 020 8504 1638 or 07812 465326 (Essex).

AUDIOLAB 8000S amplifier, (£750) £250, Audiolab 8000CD player (£1,000) £290. Both items purchased new 1998, boxed, mint, with instructions. Call Peter 07882 791040 or email plapham@mac.com (Highland).

B&W 804 speakers, cherrywood, bought in February this year, absolutely mint, very little use, boxed, manuals, cleaning cloths, (£2,700) £2,200. Tel 01786 834796 (Kent).

BOSE QUIETCOMFORT 2 headphones, boxed, mint, (£295) £100ono 07891 533084 (Swansea).

BRINKMANN FEIN phono amp, 2006, mint, MC/MM, granite base, great finish in black, (£1,500) £750. 07968 189647 (Herts).

CHAPTER AUDIO PREFACE

Plus preamp, Couplet power £4,750. Apogee Stages £500. Kimber 8TC, (5m), £350.

Philosophy speaker cable (5m), £500. Buyer must collect 01843 600722 after 6pm (Kent).

CHORD COMPANY CHORUS

1m pair RCA to RCA, £90. Chord Chorus 0.5m pair RCA to RCA, £65. Naim NAC A5 speaker cable 3.5m pair, Naim termination, £50. 02893 369169 (N Ireland).

CLASSIC MERIDIAN M3 stands, compact monitors, cables, active, £295. Celestion A1 speakers, matching stands, excellent, boxed, (£1,200) £450. Roksan Kandy integrated, one year old, boxed £325. 01243 863371 (W. Sussex).

CYRUS 8VS amplifier plus PSX-R power supply, both black, in excellent condition, £650. 01394 274350 (Suffolk)

DENON 2900 DVD player. Gold finish, boxed, manual, excellent condition. multi-region, £350 ono. Call James 07977 135995 or 01442 234062 (Herts).

DENON TU1800DAB DAB/FM tuner with remote, boxed, one month old, (£250) £100. 01274 598818 (Bradford).

DYNAUDIO CONFIDENCE 5 speakers, black ash, perfect condition, £2,950 ono, 0151 727 3763 (Liverpool).

ELTAX SYMPHONY 6.2 stereo speakers, beech floorstanders. Mint condition, £50. 07852 132840 (Hull).

EPOS 12.2 standmount mahogany speakers, (£450) plus

Epos black speaker stands, (£120). As new condition, boxed, will demo, £395 for both. Adam 07815 046623 (Surrey).

JM-LAB 936 speakers in cherry finish, boxed with manuals, four years old and in good condition, £1,500ono. Buyer collects 01494 521937 or email martin.

skipi@btinternet.com (Bucks).

KEF 105/ 3 REFERENCE speakers in rosewood. Four-way, six-driver design. Excellent condition with original boxes/ packaging. (£2,400), £780ono. 07973 220663 (Leicestershire).

KEF Q7 floorstanders, black, excellent, boxed and still under warranty, (£800) £375ono. 01926 402824 or email pcs9@hotmail.co.uk (Warwick).

KEF RDM2 standmount monitors, black with thick high-gloss solid cherry side cheeks. Excellent sound and looks. (£700), £200. 0116 284 9087 (Leicester).

LINN LP12 turntable in black finish, with Ittok LVII tonearm, K9 cartridge and box. Purchased new in 1989 and all in excellent condition, £700. Call Alex 01189 834894 (home), 01252 304242 (Work) or email alex.
mcallan@ukonline.co.uk (Berks) ▶

WANTED

AUDIO TECHNICA AT1100 tonearm, will pay £50. 01462 456006 (Herts).

ARCAM DELTA 100 cassette deck. Must be in very good condition. 020 8509 0238 or 07900 076096 (London).

NAIM CDI in good condition, with box, manual and leads. Cash waiting for the right player in the right condition. 020 7042 4522 (London).

ORTOFON T-5 step-up moving coil transformers. Will pay £25. 01323 723292 (E. Sussex).

PIONEER A300R precision amplifier. 1970's Sugden A21a. Onyx AO21, Naim Nait amp. Inca Tech Claymore. Sonneteer Champion amp. 07810 103908 (West Yorkshire).

REL / MJ ACOUSTICS subwoofer with remote. Possible part ex for my Quad L-Series sub. 023 8073 8935 (Hants).

STAX OMEGA earspeakers, up to £1,000 for mint condition example. 01333 311247 (Scotland).

WIREWORLD OASIS 5 or Atlantis interconnect in mint condition. Fair price please as currently unemployed. 01323 487640 (Sussex)

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

■ **LINN NINKA** speakers, cherry, stands, manual, boxes, excellent condition, £700 ono. Norman 07957 650274 or email normanlevy@waitrose.com (London).

LOWTHER AUDITORIUM speakers x4 PM6AS, rebuilt, mahogany cabs, superb, £850 (or swap for Quad 57s or Quad ESL-63 electrostatic loudspeakers). 01722 334694 (Salisbury).

MARANTZ PM400 amplifier, one month from new, perfect, £100. 01205 724191 (Lincs)

MONITOR AUDIO 700 PMC bookshelf speakers, bi-wire

capable, £120. Energy Take 5.2 satellite speakers including stands (1 pair) and Energy centre speaker, excellent condition, £100. 01689 608925 or 07941 107141 (Kent).

MONITOR AUDIO RS6 loudspeakers, 10 months old, dark wood finish, slight scratches to top, hence price. Otherwise excellent condition, superb sound, bargain, £300. 07983 096202 (Kent).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A1000 amp, £350. Two pairs QED Silver Spiral interconnects, £20 per pair. 07941 174804 (Berks).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A308CR pre and power x2, (£6,600) £3,200ono. Townshend DCT

300 x3, (£300) £150. DCT speaker cable, (3m), two pairs, (£300) £150. Kimber KCAG, (£300) £150. MIT Z Cord 2 + IPS GPA2 with Wattgate, offers. Monster interconnects, £15. Six tier equipment rack, £210. All mint. 0115 912 6424 (Nottingham).

MUSICAL FIDELITY X SERIES XPU power supply, X-DAC converter, X-10D tube buffer, X-LP phono stage. Power supply will run up to four units. Collectable, £425. 07813 666686, 01494 766034 (South Bucks)

NAIM 112 preamp and 150 power amp, four months old, perfect condition, boxed, remote control, instruction manuals, £950. Can be posted if required. 01794 513003 (Hants).

NAIM CDI CD player. Mint, one owner from new, boxed with cables and manuals, Call for more information. 07899 808918 (Kent).

NAIM CDSI CD player, under guarantee, new, upgraded remote control, as new, boxed, hardly used, £500. Call Chris 01395 513529 (East Devon).

NAIM NAC 62 preamp (1992), NAP 90 power amp plus Hi-Cap, leads, plug ins and manual, all in good condition, can demonstrate, £725 (+£10 UK delivery) 01656 782523 (Porthcawl).

NAIM NAP250/ 2 two years old, £1,600. Linn Akurate 212 speakers without stands, rosenut finish, £1,700. Project Ground-it deluxe isolation platform, £140. All mint and boxed. 01285 862539 (Gloucestershire).

PIONEER A88X amplifier, £250. Mordaunt-Short A5000 amplifier, £195. Rogers Ravenbourne amplifier, £95. Tannoy P10 speakers (cherry), £210. Wharfedale 708 speakers (black), £195. Goodmans IC100 speakers, £120. Graham 07837 188670 (Ilford)

PIONEER VSX-D2011 Audio/Video multichannel receiver, £395. Crane CSS1 Oceana home theatre speaker set, inc QED cable, £250. 07970 826145 (Dorset).

PROAC SC1 standmount speakers, four months old, mint condition in cherry wood finish, £1,000ono. 01476 404574 (Lincs).

PROAC TABLETTE 2000 loudspeakers, mint condition, boxed, £350. Soundstyle ST122 silver speaker stands, Soundbyte loaded, vgc, £65. 01329 667809 (Hampshire).

QUAD ESL 2905 speakers. Factory sealed cartons. Why wait three months? £4,950. 01903 261931 (W. Sussex)

REGA ELA 2000 model loudspeakers. Maple. Good condition. Original boxes. Fantastic with acoustic music and vocals. Highly regarded, £350. Guy 01392 215112 (Devon).

ROGERS LS55 floorstanding loudspeakers, rosewood. Immaculate condition, boxed, owned from new in 2000. Manual, £120 or offers, buyer collects. 01584 831443 (Shropshire).

RUARK SABRE III speakers, walnut veneer, lively and detailed, demos on request. Mint and boxed, £600. 01970 615386 (Wales).

SOUNDSTYLE X105 hi-fi rack, four tiers, piano black, excellent condition, £85. 07946 553071 (London).

SYSTEMDEK IIX/ 900 turntable (no arm), RB300 armboard, good condition, new belt, £50. 01484 421426 (W. Yorks).

VERTEX AQ components, only three months use, as new condition: Silver Jaya mains filter (£545) £390; Roirama 1.5m mains lead (£345) £195. Call 01543 358617 or 07967 695790 (Staffs)



Above: Quad ESL 2905 loudspeaker

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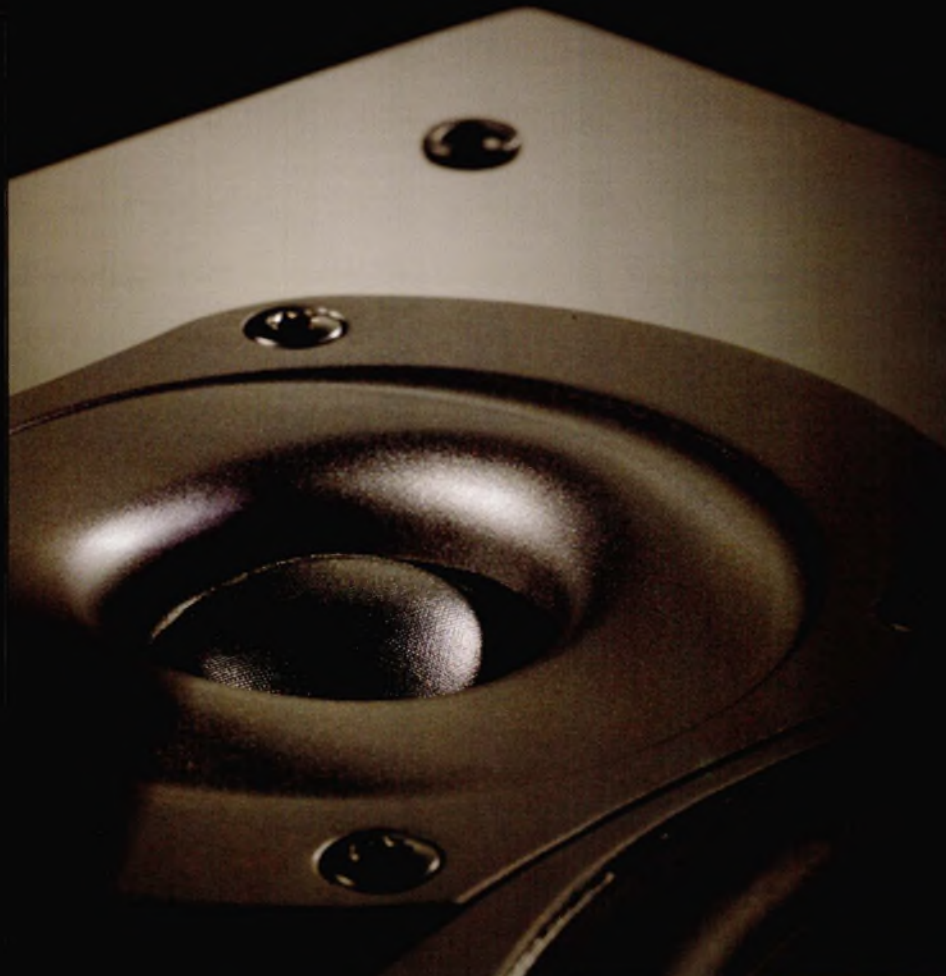
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