

HI-FI CHOICE

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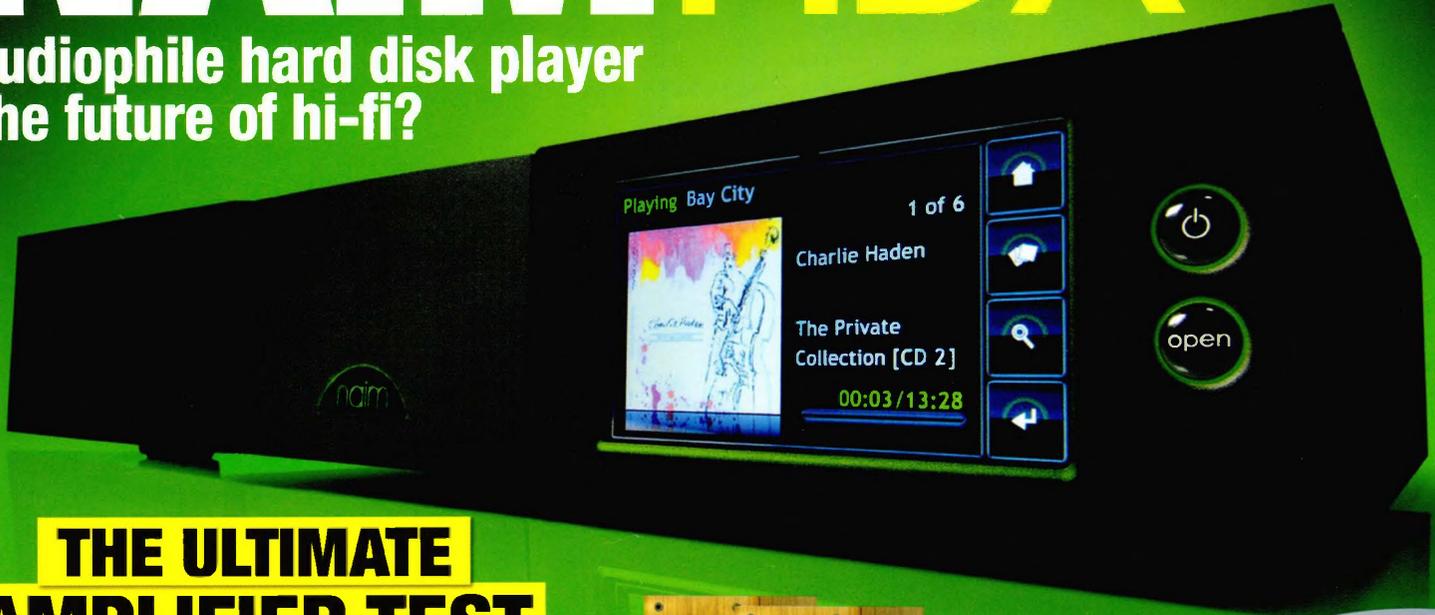
WORLD'S FIRST REVIEW

NAIM HDX

Audiophile hard disk player
The future of hi-fi?



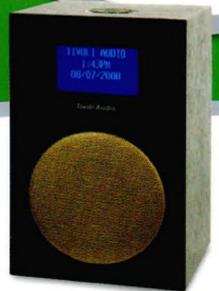
WIN!
Kudos C1 speakers
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See p23



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Electra S



When Focal wanted to follow the success of the Electra Be range with a speaker line with similar attributes but at a substantially lower price, the challenge seemed at first very difficult.

After all, the Be has proved to be the perfect speaker for many music lovers - and altering a classic recipe does not always guarantee savoury results.

In the end, the answer proved very simple. Change very little.

A new tweeter; an AL/Mg alloy unit in place of the exotic beryllium dome, and a simpler finish choice of Classic (left) or Macassar Ebony.

And that's about it - apart from the smaller price tag of course.

Simple.

Electra Be



Accept no compromise....

Electra 1037 Be

"A phenomenal balance of musical virtues".....

"Somewhere in the design process, someone wound the fun control round towards its end-stop".....

"The results are astounding".....

Hi-Fi + July 2007

"The Focal Electra 1037Be offers superb measured performance... That on-room response, one of the best I have encountered. Wow!"

"Transients were faster than sharp, approaching the ease, physicality and true speed that lets you know, even from down the block or round the corner, that you're hearing live music, not a recording".

Stereophile July 2007

Electra 1027 Be

"A beautifully sweet and sparkling top end, suffused with the finest and most delicate detail".....

"There's no shortage of deep bass weight or gravitas here"...

"It's a remarkable speaker for the money"...

Hi-Fi Choice Feb 2006 – Editor's choice award

Hi-Fi Choice July 2006 – Best buy

Hi-Fi Choice Sept 2006 – Component of the year < £5,000

HiFi Critic Dec 2006 – Speaker of choice < £6000



For full reviews please visit our website : www.focal-uk.com

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Welcome to the issue...

HI-FI CHOICE OCTOBER 2008 ISSUE 311

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



We're experiencing a bit of hi-fi history this month, with our incredible cover star, the Naim HDX. This ground-breaking source component is one of the most significant and important products in the timeline of high-end audio. Hard disk players will become the norm for us all soon enough, and if any company is going to turn us on to the technology, it's Naim.

For those *HFC* readers that are still uncertain of hard disk audio and how it will affect them, our comprehensive two-part guide *Understanding Music Servers*, starting on p24, explains everything you need to know about hard disk source components and how you can make more of your music.

Moving from the present to the past for a moment, we have a rather special three-page guide to the blues on p30 this month. Special because it has been penned by Nigel Williamson, one of *Uncut* magazine's leading contributors and a regular *Hi-Fi Choice* album critic. His knowledge of the blues knows no bounds and his album recommendations this month really are spot-on.

Capturing all that raw, earthy blues energy should be no problem for some of our featured review products this month. We have a very special PrimaLuna CD player, which not only boasts an impressive valve output stage, but also contains valves in its digital stage, the sonic results of which are revealed in Richard Black's comprehensive review on p52.

Finally, *HFC*'s Paul Messenger, the UK's foremost loudspeaker authority, has got to grips with two new models from PMC's i Series – the mighty FB1 and OB1 floorstanders. Both are state-of-the-art designs that stand out from the crowd with their exceptional performance, do seek them out if you can.

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

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

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

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

Wooden it be nice?

Annotated shots show you what's really going on inside

Interviews with designers give you extra background information

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

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

PAUL MESSENGER A former <i>HFC</i> 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 <i>HFC</i> .	MALCOLM STEWARD Former editor of <i>Hi-Fi Review</i> magazine, Malcolm was one of the best known and most outspoken reviewers of the 1980s and 1990s. He currently edits hi-fi industry bible <i>The British Audio Journal</i>	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 <i>HFC</i> , 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.	DOMINIC TODD A highly experienced journalist, Dominic's sharp ears and retail experience are a valuable mix for <i>HFC</i> . Each month, Dom dispenses priceless second-hand buying advice that always comes in handy.

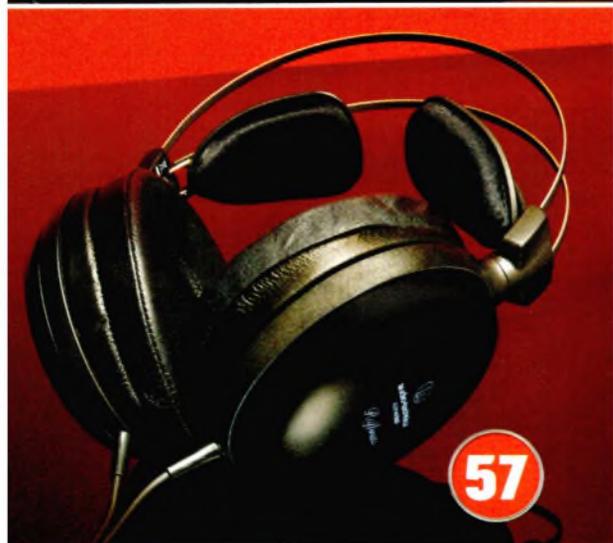
To ensure you get the best information, opinion and advice, *Hi-Fi Choice* employs the most knowledgeable and experienced hi-fi writers in the business.



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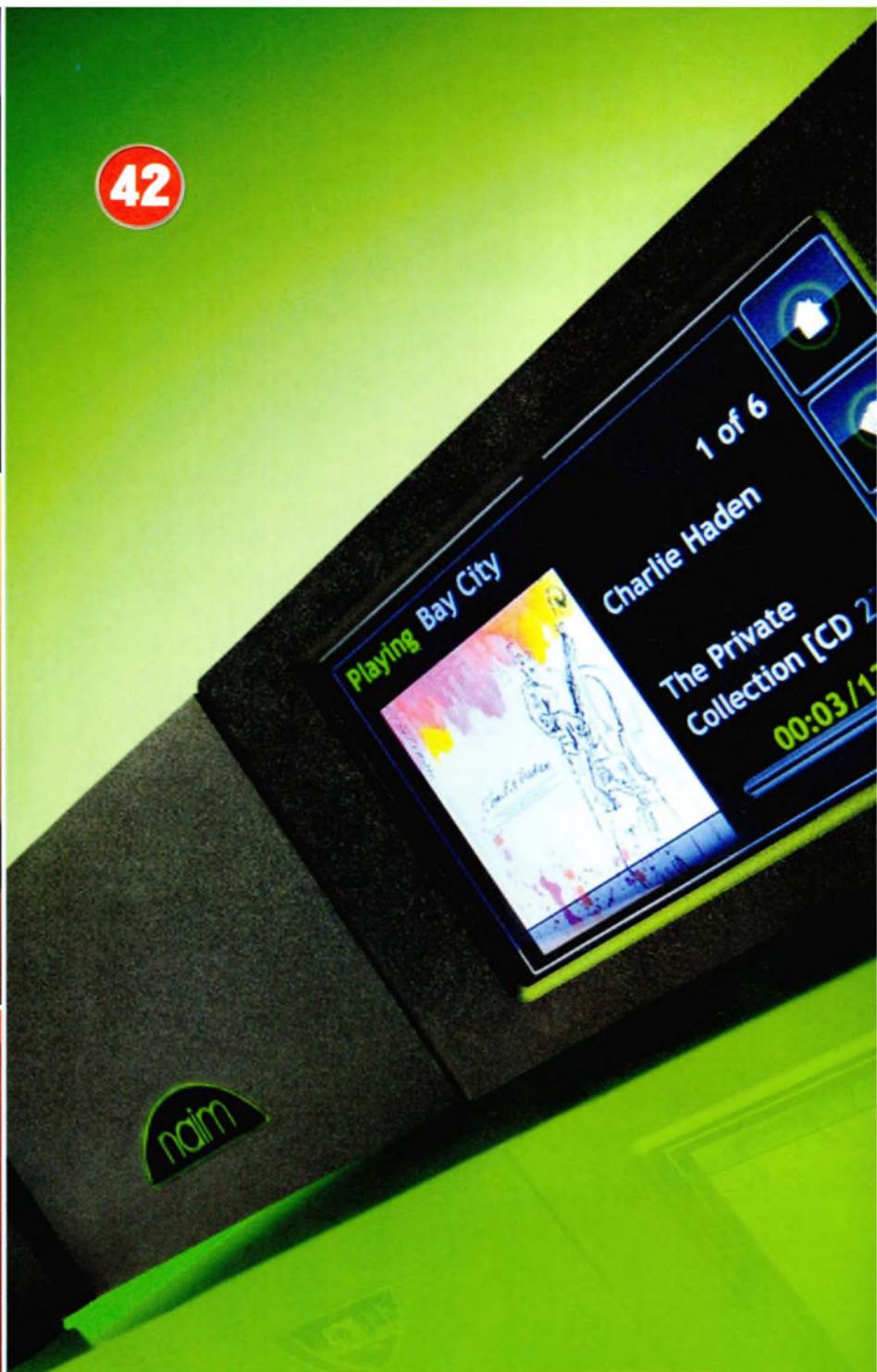


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Ultimate guide to high-performance hi-fi and AV equipment, gathering together all our favourite products for you. Your shortlist starts here...

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FURUTECH

Pure Transmission Technology

DeMag



Furutech's deMag Frees LPs,
Optical Disc Media,
Cables and Connectors of
Magnetically-Induced Distortion

— CES 2007 Best of Innovations Award winner

Disc Flattener



DF-2 LP Flattener

"... Those of you with voracious appetites for vinyl will find this little gadget indispensable."

—Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio.com

deStat



"... The Furutech deStat turned out to be a piece of tremendous value and it'll take permanent residence next to my turntable"

— John Pottis 6moons
Brutus Award
Positive feed back online



Ag-12 Phono Cable Series

"I don't know if the Furutech Ag-12 is the best phono cable on the market, but it's the best I've heard, a fact made all the more meaningful by its mid-level price. It's one of the phono cables to beat, and it's affordable to boot."

— Marc Mickelson, Soundstage.com Reviews Choice Award



Ag-12 (DIN/RCA)



Ag-12-L (L-DIN/RCA)



Ag-12-R4 (RCA/RCA)

Reference Series



"...Furutech's cables offer great transparency and purity, plus an uncanny ability to block out noise and grunge"

— Chris Martens The Absolute Sound 2007 Editors Choice Awards

FI-50 (R) Piezo Ceramic Series IEC Connectors



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LINN CLASSIK MUSIC AND MAJIK

Linn revamps its Classik one-box system and wades into another digital stream

Linn Products' Classik Music was one of the first 'big name' integrated CD/tuner/amp systems. First seen in 2000, the unit set the trend that was followed later by Arcam, Primare and others. The system has remained essentially identical ever since, but now it's seen the biggest change since its launch. The Classik Music features improved performance from its redesigned audio circuitry, which incorporates 'trickle-down' developments amassed over the last eight years.

The Classik Music is also housed in a new sleek, elegant casing reminiscent of Linn's top Klimax equipment. This also means a larger, clearer screen that can display more information and improved button layout. Although the rest of the specification remains unchanged – 75 watts per channel amplifier, RDS-equipped FM/AM tuner (no DAB), Knekt multiroom connections and switch mode power supply – the new model also features digital inputs, allowing it to act as a stereo amplifier for digital sources, such as satellite receiver or games consoles.

The Linn Classik Music is joined this month by a wholly new product; the Linn Majik DS. Available in black and silver (like the Classik Music), the Majik DS is a digital player ('DS' is short for 'digital stream'), designed to be used with Network Attached Storage devices. Users can

rip discs from their own PC, pay someone else to do it, or download music at every setting from baseline MP3 to Linn's own Studio-Master-quality, in addition to FLAC, AIFF and WAV files, sampling anywhere from 7.35 to 192kbps and at anything from 16 to 24-bit precision. All recordings are stored on a PC hard drive or an external NAS 'box' (Network Attached Storage – hard disk drives with network connections and a power supply) and are controlled and played through the Majik DS. It even has access to SHOUTcast Internet radio stations.

The digital stream player is fully UPnP (Universal Plug 'n' Play) compliant and runs along standard IP (Internet Protocol) lines, meaning it's as easy to plug in as a CD player. The Majik DS is also easily and readily upgradable and can even act as its own preamplifier when used with a Majik power amp (or similar). A natural partner with the rest of the Majik system (Majik-I integrated amplifier, or Majik control amp and Majik 2100 stereo power amp and Majik loudspeakers), will it replace the Majik CD player (Linn claims the Majik DS outperforms any CD player), which is an incredible statement, on one we hope to explore very soon.

Price £1,250 (Classik Music), £1,750 (Majik DS) **Due now**

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Red Reference CD player
CPA5000 Pre Amplifier
SPM 6000 Monoblocks

And for your second home

CPA 3000 Pre Amplifier
SPM 1050 Stereo
Power Amplifier



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KEF C SERIES

KEF's new entries into the entry-level speaker world

KEF has launched an all-new, entry-level range of loudspeakers set to introduce the public to low-cost, hi-fi sound. The Maidstone-based company's new C Series will be an important addition to the entry-level speaker market. The new models have a bold claim from the company, as they are said to have been, "engineered to uphold the company's long-held tradition of making speakers that provide the most accurate response possible at the price point." KEF also states that the performance of the new C Series is of a standard normally found in more expensive speaker designs.

The new range is designed to be versatile, so that it will work as comfortably with gaming consoles and downloaded music as it will with traditional hi-fi and home cinema. This means the speakers are manufactured to have very uniform power handling, so that they work well with a broad range of amplifiers. And yet, they are also designed from the outset to have cabinets that are as well engineered as the most hard-core of audiophile boxes, with two-layer front baffles and thick internal bracing. The slot-shaped front port has two distinct benefits; it allows wide dispersion and also bestows freedom of positioning (no rear port to prevent close-to-wall placement).

The C Series uses the same 19mm 'Tangerine' waveguide on an aluminium dome tweeter, as used in the latest KEF Q range, which is used throughout the range, to give a common family 'sound'.

There are four hi-fi models and one universal left-centre-right home cinema speaker in the range. The new C Series includes two two-way standmounts – the C1 and C3 – and two three-driver floorstanders in the C5 and C7. In addition, the C6 LCR (in D'Appolito layout) can also work as a standmount speaker. An as yet unnamed subwoofer will join the C Series at a later date.

Convenience is key with the KEF C Series. The standmount speakers are supplied with mounting brackets for easy attachment to walls and the floorstanders come with useful plinths to lower the centre of mass. At the time of writing, further details about the C Series – such as drive unit configuration and type, size, weight or any other specifications – are still to be confirmed, but we hope to test a pair or two of these new entry-level speakers just as soon as they leave the Kentish speaker expert.

Price from £140 (C1) to £480 (C7) per pair **Due** September
☎ 01622 672261 # www.kef.com



UNISON RESEARCH UNICO CDE



Unison Research's new top player is a

hybrid design. The new Unico CDE sports four twin-triode ECC83 valves in its output section to deliver what is claimed to be a "glorious, full-bodied and highly detailed sound." Styled to match the Unico 100 and 200 designs, the large player uses a TEAC CD transport and a Crystal CS4392 oversampling DAC to deliver the digital goods through its valve-based output stage to single-ended or XLR balanced outputs. The output stage sports an impressive line-up of four 12AX7 valves. It is also designed to be upgradable, with the software built into Unico CDE capable of being reprogrammed. A funky wood and metal remote and a profusion of audiophile-chummy components seals the deal.

Price £1,895 **Due now** ☎ 01753 652669 🌐 www.unisonresearch.com



BELLES LA-01 AND MB-200

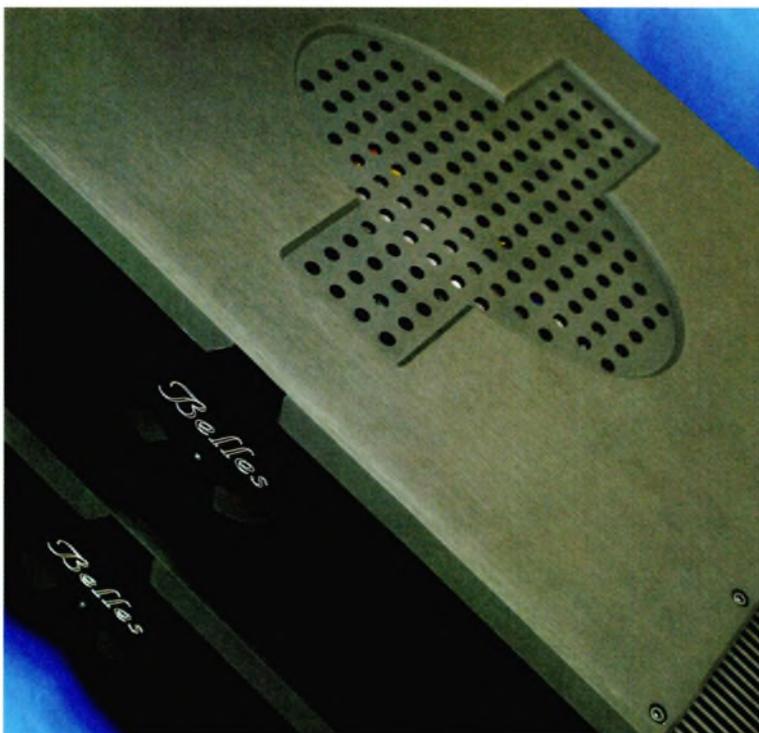


Based in New York State, Power Modules Inc is the company behind Belles amplifiers, run by one Dave Belles. The company's products have just started to appear in the UK, in time for the release of Belles' new statement LA-01 preamp/MB-200 mono power combination. The LA-01 is a high input impedance, low output impedance design. It features four single-ended line inputs, two line outputs and an onboard power supply, with four independent decoupling stages isolating it from mains-related noise.

The partnering MB-200 monoblock power amplifier produces 200 watts of class AB power into eight ohms, doubling to 400 watts into four ohms, with a peak current capability of 64 amps, so they should be capable of driving practically any speaker.

Price (LA-01) £5,500; (MB-200) £5,500 per pair **Due now** ☎ 01684 310849

🌐 www.powermodules.com



TEAC PD-2620



In a nod to a world before shuffle facilities on docked iPods, TEAC has announced a new budget five-disc carousel-type CD player. The one-bit, eight times oversampling PD-2620 will support CD-R/RW discs encoded with MP3, alongside regular CD audio discs, has a 32-selection random memory program, shuffle and intro check play facilities, plus the option to rack mount for custom installers. With all five discs loaded, it can play up to 750 songs in a row without needing to reload.

Price £150 **Due now** ☎ 0845 130 2511

🌐 www.teac.co.uk



DENON D-M37DAB



Following in the footsteps of Denon one-box systems dating back to the early 1990s, the new D-M37DAB is a UK-tuned, 21 cm-wide integrated system. Following Denon's 'simple and straight' ethos, the D-M37DAB features an integrated CD player, DAB/AM/FM tuner, 65-watt amplifier and a pair of two-way loudspeakers with a 120mm woofer and 25mm tweeter. The system, which is available in black or silver, also includes a USB port for portable music players and can be hooked up to an iPod using Denon's ASD-1R dock.

Price: £300 **Due now** ☎ 01234 741200

🌐 www.denon.co.uk



NAD MASTERS SERIES M4

The high-end Masters Series range from NAD has long featured a disc player, but no matching tuner. Until now; the new M4 supports both DAB and RDS-compliant AM/FM analogue radio. Said to be uncompromising in both analogue and digital domains, the 40 preset M4 has a high-sensitivity analogue stage (to improve reception) and a double-tuned FM detector, while DAB features high-class TI/Burr-Brown DACs and op-amps. Could this be the high-end tuner to end Magnum Dynalab's reign at the top spot? Find out soon when we review this newcomer in full.

Price £1,200 **Due now** ☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.nadelectronics.com



LG FA163DAB

LG may be the name on everything from huge Plasma screens and tiny Blu-ray players to air conditioners and washing machines, but it's not that well known in audio circles. That might change soon though, thanks to LG's latest FA163DAB iPod-docky micro system, which comes with distinct audiophile credentials. None other than US high-end guru Mark Levinson has breathed upon the performance of the piano-gloss CD/FM/DAB system with 160-watt amps, touch-sensitive controls, clever lights, iPod dock and a two-way USB port.

Price £250 (estimated) **Due now**

☎ 0870 873 5454 🌐 uk.lge.com



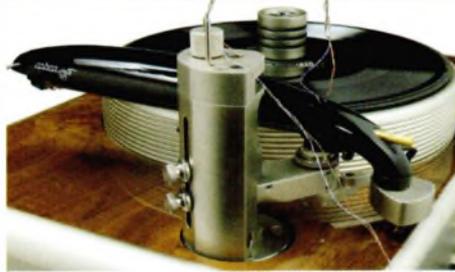
CONTINUUM RANGE

Antipodean high-end turntable brand Continuum has hit the UK. Best known for the no-compromise Caliburn deck, with vacuum-hold-down, wobble-proof nested platter and critically damped magnesium chassis, this is commonly partnered with the Cobra tonearm made from "resin impregnated fibre and tubules woven onto an aerocell core".

If this high-end, high-mass deck is too hardcore, there's always the entry-level Criterion turntable and Copperhead tonearm option. And that's the only time the words 'entry-level' will be associated with a £38,500 price tag.

Price (Caliburn/Cobra) £80,000 **Due now**

☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.continuumaudiolabs.com



ACOUSTIC ENERGY AE1 MK III SE

With custom drivers, cabinets and crossovers, Acoustic Energy's AE1 MkIII SE will be strictly limited to 250 pairs. Sporting a custom MDF cabinet faced with steel plates, a 12mm aluminium baffle and a special six-component crossover (as opposed to 13 in the standard AE1 Mk III) that sports high-end components like air-core inductors and wire-wound resistors. Even the 110mm aluminium cone bass unit and 38mm ring-radiator tweeter are unique to the Special Edition model. Supplied in three finishes (piano black, pearl white and cherry real-wood veneer) as standard, the AE1 MkIII SE can be finished in any high-gloss colour at a premium.

Price from £2,500 per pair **Due now**

☎ 01285 654432 🌐 www.acoustic-energy.co.uk



Soundbites

HEADROOM, the US headphone amp specialist, has developed an Audiophile Desktop system.



Comprising preamp, one of three power amps, Amphion Ion or Harbeth HL-P3ES-2 speakers and small stands, this turns the PC into a legitimate audio source. Prices from \$3,632! 🌐 www.headphone.com

ONKYO'S new £320

CS-52SDAB is virtually identical to its predecessor, the CS-515 one-box system. As the latter was top of its class, Onkyo has wisely decided not to mess with a good thing, except for the addition of a new USB port.



☎ 01494 681515

BRYSTON is

launching a BDA-1 digital converter. More details will follow, but the new DAC is strongly rumoured to deliver 24-bit/192kHz performance with low jitter, played through a Class A output stage. Price is expected to be around £2,000.



☎ 08704 441044

REVO'S hybrid DAB/DAB+ and

Internet radio has just grown an iPod dock, to become the £180 iBlik RadioStation. The company also announced the new £130 iBlik Wi-Fi, which includes the dock and Internet radio, but forgoes the DAB tuner stages.



☎ 01555 666161

MERIDIAN'S new i80 iPod

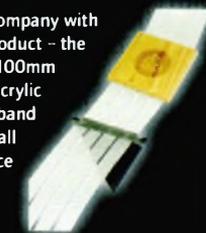
dock is designed to be controlled from the front panel of Meridian's popular F80 system. The i80, it's claimed, works on compressed music to bring out its hidden charms. Available now, the unit costs £195.



☎ 01480 445678

CABLESPIKE is a new company with

just one eponymous product – the £10 CableSpike. It's a 100mm highly polished black acrylic triangle with a rubber band along one end to hold all manner of cable in place and off the ground.



☎ 01775 761880

Hi-Fi Diary

SEPTEMBER

19-21 **London Sound & Vision Show**
Park Inn, Heathrow
www.chestergroup.org

OCTOBER

3-5 **High End 2008 Show**
Iris Congress Hotel, Moscow, Russia
www.hifishow.ru

12 **Audiojumble 2008**
The Angel Leisure Centre,
Tonbridge, Kent
www.audiojumble.co.uk

31-02 **Stuff Live/What Hi-Fi Show**
ExCeL London
www.bestofstuff.co.uk

JANUARY/ FEBRUARY 2009

31-1 **Smartlife North**
Radisson Hotel
Manchester Airport
www.chestergroup.org

20-22 **Sound & Vision: The Bristol Show**
Marriot City Centre Hotel
Bristol
BS1 3AD
www.bristolshow.co.uk

MARCH

28-29 **London High Fidelity Show**
Park Inn
Heathrow Airport
www.chestergroup.org

JUNE

13-14 **Northern High Fidelity Show**
Radisson SAS
Manchester Airport
www.chestergroup.org

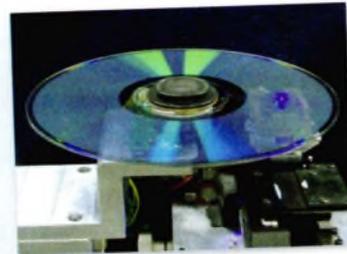
SEPTEMBER 2009

18-20 **London Sound and Vision**
Park Inn
Heathrow Airport
www.chestergroup.org

New gen Blu-ray

Pioneer has managed to increase the capacity of Blu-ray discs (BD) eight-fold. Discs currently store 50GB but Pioneer has increased the capacity to 400GB. It has done this by using 16 layers rather than the two found on conventional discs. Its reasoning for the development is that you can reduce the consumption of resources by putting multiple titles on a single disc. It singled out the *Godfather* series of films, but the application probably has more use for TV series.

At present, Pioneer says it can only achieve this data density on read-only discs, but believes that the technology could be applied to recordable BD media in future. Sony mooted the potential for upscaling BD capacity in the past, but considered that multiplying layers would lead to weaker signal strength and make it more difficult for each layer to be read accurately, problems which Pioneer claims to have addressed.



Imperial laser

A team of scientists at Imperial College, London have demonstrated the first plastic semiconductor laser diode, a step toward removing hazardous materials from disc-playing lasers. The breakthrough achieved by Dr Donal Bradley and his team means that inorganic materials such as gallium arsenide and gallium nitride could one day be eliminated from our CD and DVD players.

The new laser works by subtly changing PFO, a blue-light-emitting material synthesized by the Sumitomo Chemical Company in Japan. These changes have not only produced a plastic laser diode, but also a more efficient generator.

Other key advantages include reduced manufacturing cost and the potential to broaden the spectrum that laser diodes can cover. This would give access to the full range of wavelengths supported by optical fibres.



Ghosts in the machine

It would seem that Sony took R&D to new extremes in the nineties when it started investigating ESP and the paranormal with relation to the way we perceive sound. Lead lab researcher Yoichiro Sako told the 16th Annual Meeting of the Society for Scientific Exploration in 1997 that "What we require to meet the challenges of these unpredictable and confusing times is a new paradigm to guide a new age. I believe that the key to this new paradigm lies in the research of biological, mental and spiritual phenomena such as qi and other psychic powers that have been overlooked by modern scientists." Could this be the reason for the company throwing its resources into SACD? Is the key to the resolution of the format not its wide bandwidth, but its ability to tap into something we can only appreciate with ESP?!



From Handel to Hendrix

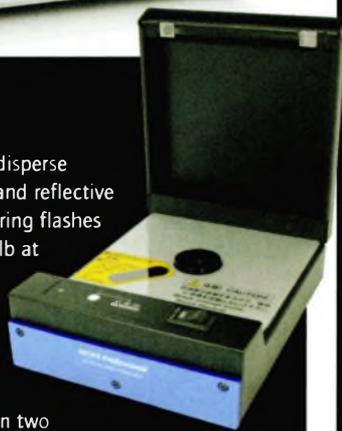
Meridian has been doing its bit to let the world at large know that there's more to sound quality than MP3. Meridian MD Bob Stuart chose the Handel House Museum in London for his 'Private deliberation on the authenticity of sound'. He treated the audience to a live recital of Handel's harpsichord music and played excerpts of the composer's music alongside that of Jimi Hendrix on a Meridian system consisting of an 808.2 CD player and DSP 7200 active speakers. An MP3 encoded version was also played to demonstrate the limitations of the format.

According to Stuart "Price isn't what it's about. It's a different kind of investment at Meridian. It's about the time you spend with your music. You can re-awaken a love affair with your CD collection. Even music you feel intimately aware of sounds fresh and new"



Trapped gas

Nanotech's Nespa is a device that claims to disperse bubbles of gas trapped between the plastic and reflective aluminium layers of a CD or DVD. It does this by firing flashes of high-intensity broadband light from a Xenon bulb at the disc, which is said to break up and disperse gas trapped at the manufacturing stage. The disc is then said to be more easily read by a player because it requires lower error correction. This 'finishing' process is said to produce big sonic differences in well known discs. The Nespa comes in two varieties with prices starting £399 for the model 1 and £549 for the Pro version which has greater flexibility and three times the light intensity at three million lux.



Dr Feelgood

Harvard Medical School surgeon Dr Claudius Conrad has come up with a theory that music exerts healing and sedative effects. His dissertation looked at the way Mozart seemed to decrease pain in intensive care patients, he even goes so far as to suggest that Mozart composed in order to cure his own ailments. Dr Conrad has played piano since he was five years old and uses music when he is working as an aid to concentration. He thinks that music stimulates a growth hormone normally associated with stress and which he considers to offer a new avenue in the physiology of healing.

Music therapy is not a new thing, but this is the first time that someone in the medical community has suggested that its powers can produce a clearly positive result... "Just take two concertos before bed and call me in the morning."



The Insider

THIS MONTH, HFC TALKS TO...

MRS. GABI VAN DER KLEY
Job Title: **President/ CEO**
Company: **Crystal Cable**



What is your most exciting product currently in development?

Our new Crystal Bridge and Crystal Dreamlink, a new application connecting hi-fi. Both are variations on the same theme; a revolutionary new patent-pending add-on cable for every audio and video system. It works by allowing your existing cable to 'piggy back' off the back of our cable, while our device simply improves dynamic range for sound and picture, lowers audible and measured distortion. All without modifying the equipment, and it ensures perfect phase with its >20GHz speed filter. The difference between the two designs concerns the quality of the filtration device.

Can 'Generation iPod' be turned on to hi-fi?

Yes, they listen and get used to a certain quality. Quality is in general a desire out of luxury (i.e. it comes with age if the interest and the means are there). As the upcoming generation mature and seek out the finer things in life, they will naturally want more from their music than listening through what little white earphones can offer. That's where hi-fi comes in.

Apple's iPod - blessing or curse, and why?

It's very definitely a blessing. The iPod provides relatively high-quality music everywhere you want and that's a goal we have all been searching for that's been finally achieved.

Are digital amps the future?

Yes, I think so. They are compact (which is domestically popular) and power-efficient (which is good for the environment). The quality is already proving promising and will undoubtedly improve over time.

Are online sales killing hi-fi separates?

Certainly. So retailers should start doing both. *There's nothing wrong with selling online especially if you are going to provide a more personalised service in the 'bricks and mortar' shops.*

What type of products really excite you?

Those that realise technical perfection and do so with a high level of musical performance. And those that do so while looking elegant in the process. The very best provide true artistic enjoyment for both ears and eyes.

Name a great album you've heard recently

Mahler's 6th Symphony, played by the Budapest Festival Orchestra with Ivan Fisher conducting, on Channel Classics.

What type of products will consumers be buying from you in five years time?

We will still be making cables of course, but we are also investigating the potential for introducing innovative and special design loudspeakers.



Mid-life crisis

My yearning for nostalgia

What's the difference between a mid-life crisis and an attack of nostalgia? Zilch, if my recent (credit crunch adjusted) buying spree is anything to go by. In the space of little over a month I've purchased seven audio products that define a perfect superimposition of the two conditions.

Undoubtedly, it has something to do with the close proximity of two shops in Canterbury, my nearest electronics retail therapy destination. One is Currys, purveyor of all mainstream things new and shiny and, on the opposite side of the street, Canterbury Hi-Fi X-Change, an Aladdin's cave of well-cared-for and used specialist hi-fi and musical instruments.

First blood to Currys who serviced the sudden and unexpected need to engage with the the MP3 iTunes generation. After years of refusing to have an Apple iPod in the house – a stand I felt every self-respecting audiophile should take – I bought three: a Shuffle (for its insane cuteness and clip-'n'-go convenience), a black 160GB Classic (wow, all that memory and the greatest user interface ever invented) and an 8GB Touch (sorry, I just couldn't help myself).

The Pods haven't transformed my life. Nothing, apart from live music, can deliver the the emotional hit of good separates hi-fi – though it's perfectly true that an iPod playing lossless files can form the basis of a very decent music system. But, whether through headphones or the excellent Klipsch iGroove HG dock I picked up in Currys for a song (ex-display), they have injected more music into my waking hours, especially on planes, where I seem to spend a planet-worrying amount of time these days. There's something intrinsic to the downloading culture that expands your musical horizons, both in the desire to explore new material and also revisit your past that might be best forgotten about.



“One is Currys... and, on the opposite side of the street, Canterbury Hi-Fi X-Change, an Aladdin's cave of well-cared-for and used specialist hi-fi.”

Which brings me to the secondhand hi-fi shop across the road. I'm going to assume you know roughly how this goes. You wander in purely out of curiosity, wallet firmly incarcerated in your back pocket. Then, there it is, your first proper hi-fi amplifier staring forlornly out at you from the stack and at a price you just can't ignore. In my case, it was a Creek 4040. Oh, the memories. On my next visit, a few weeks later...oh my God, a chrome bumper version Naim Nait 2, my first serious hi-fi amplifier (and still my all time favourite). A little pricier, but worth every penny. Another week passes and then, I don't believe it, a Pioneer A-400. This is the amplifier I had back when I first became a hi-fi reviewer and just a hundred quid too boot!

Yes, it's a kind of madness. But it's also restored a kind of magic to my enthusiasm for hi-fi. And, in a curious way, the mid-life crisis has gone away.

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



Loud and Proud

When is hi-fi, hi-fi?

There's always been a war of words over the technical quality of recordings. I've been interested in hi-fi for over forty years, and the battle raged as fiercely then as it does today. Many hi-fi enthusiasts invest in good equipment and then find that some (or many) recordings are simply not produced to a high enough standard.

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, the debate was all about LP pressing quality and how most vinyl discs sounded noisy and distorted when played on good equipment. Just recently I read an article in another hi-fi mag where the

writer was bemoaning the way that many modern recordings are mixed to sound 'loud'.

The idea is to compress dynamic peaks so the mean (average) level can be transferred at or near peak level. This creates a dense 'wall of sound' sonic presentation that sounds impressive on radio and allegedly sells more copies of the record. But it comes over as loud and unpleasantly aggressive on hi-fi.

The album given as an example was Oasis' (*What's the Story*) *Morning Glory*, but there are many others. I recently bought the second Franz Ferdinand CD *You Could Have It So Much Better* and found it quite wearing to listen to – it's exciting, but very loud and in your face. After a few tracks I was wiped out.

But maybe that's how it should be. And anyway, what's an old fart of 50 plus doing listening to Franz Ferdinand in the first place? I'd have been horrified and most upset if my dad had liked Cream or Jimi Hendrix. He thought it was a cacophony, which made it sound even better to me. Rock has always been about pissing your parents off.

There's nothing new about compression; the Moody Blues album *Days of Future Passed* from 1968 was recorded in something Decca called the Deramic Sound System. This used heavy compression and a sort of 'loudness' bass/treble boost (remember amplifiers with Loudness controls?) to create a 'new sound'.

Decca abandoned Deramic Sound after a few years, but compression has always been used to heighten the impact and immediacy of sound recordings. How ironic that, by compressing dynamics, you can make the sound appear more 'Dynamic' and immediate.

While I share the misgivings of those who worry that future generations of hi-fi buyers will find contemporary recordings unlistenable on good equipment, there may be another factor. Maybe younger people actually like this sort of sound!

When I first got into hi-fi, the reference standard was clear. Hi-fi tried to recreate the sound as heard live (and unamplified) in a good concert hall. Now, live music tries to sound like hi-fi. Bad hi-fi. But I'm assuming everyone's like me and wants to hear music reproduced with delicacy and finesse. Maybe they don't.

I was told by an engineer at Abbey Road studios that when Oasis recorded there they played so loud the sound spilled over into the big Studio One. Apparently it was deafening! Clearly their albums have exactly the sound they want. It's Hi-Fi Jim, but not as we know it.

Jimmy Hughes is one of the country's best known hi-fi experts. His knowledge of tweaking and his record collection know no bounds.

ABR

RETRO

HI-FI REVISITED

MISSION PILASTRO



At a time when other manufacturers were launching expensive, high tech flagship products as showcases for their capabilities, Mission joined in with a model called the Pilastro. In common with others of its ilk, the Pilastro was very big and very capable, but also very elegant visually, and (at the time) unfeasibly expensive at £20k per pair. Many of the design ideas it embodied were subsequently spun down for use in less costly models. The Elegante benefitted from some of the Pilastro technology. The Pilastro was also the first speaker to use the Vifa ring dome tweeter, which at this point was extremely expensive, but which has subsequently found a home in many high-end speakers. Even now, Mission is talking about introducing a new flagship which may or may not be called Pilastro, but which will be a different speaker, presumably inspired by its namesake.

But the Pilastro came at critical moment for the company and from this point in Mission's history, the Pilastro looks as though it may have been the straw that broke the camel's back. They cost a lot of money to develop and to tool and not many were ever sold. Not too long afterwards, the company moved from the UK to China and, although most of their models resumed production in the new home and some new ones were introduced, at this point the Pilastro was discontinued.

The Pilastro was all about sensitivity, authority, clarity and dynamic range. It was also an undeniably elegant looking speaker, which was not quite as intrusive as it may have seemed on paper, with just three drive units on show. The rest of the hardware was concealed down each side of the speaker, behind opaque covers, including two vertical arrays of four LF drivers, cross linked with steel trusses (Mission called them 'force pipes'), so there was no net mechanical effect on the enclosure and six ABR (auxiliary bass radiators) to extend bass down to around 25Hz. The ABR mass was designed to be tuned in the customers home to suit the listening room. The twin midrange cones were made from natural hemp, though



“...the Pilastro came at a critical moment and may have been the straw that broke the camel's back.”

in this form there was no psychoactive content. It was used because in Mission's words, hemp is the strongest material found in nature, while remaining pliable. It is stronger than high tensile steel, which is the reason why it is still used today (for example, in the manufacture of rope).

The Pilastro did have snags. Apparently the Granitech material use in the construction of the enclosure (a mix of a granite-like material and soft resin) was rather brittle. It sounds as though it may have been made with a little too much granite and not enough resin. Or as Mission once put it, after they were shipped they sometimes had to be swept up with a broom at the destination. Not a desirable fate for a loudspeaker that cost £20,000 a pair.

Mission was always rather defensive about this speaker. No reviewers – certainly none in the UK to my knowledge – ever got to hear a pair of Pilastros in their own home, which is more than shame. True, a bad review might have killed them stone dead. But no reviews at all was an even more stupid idea and this is a shame, because what little I can remember from the limited public outings was that it was a truly superb loudspeaker, so Mission had nothing to hide. If I had the readies, I would try and buy a second hand pair right now. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



Richard Black

Not so easy listening

The advantage of hiss!

How much noise do we want with our music? I ask this apparently stupid question prompted by a concert I attended last night in Birmingham's excellent Symphony Hall. As part of its generally superb acoustics, the hall has unusually low levels of background noise, which made me realise how much general hiss and rumble we live with in all sorts of environments, both at home and in music venues.

The funny thing is that in some ways I was finding the lack of hiss more distracting. To be more analytical about it, every tiny individual noise from the audience, or fluff from the orchestra, was more distracting than I normally find them to be. It got me thinking about whether a modicum of steady background hiss can make things sound better in some obscure way.

“Most of the time we simply hear and rely on the subconscious workings of the brain to alert us when something important comes along.”

I wrote recently in these pages about the 'golden age' of recording and how in that period the different artistic outlook was perhaps more likely to produce great results. But recordings from any time before 1980 inevitably had rather more hiss and other extraneous noise than we are used to today and, nevertheless, are often very highly regarded for sound quality. There are so many differences (microphones, microphone techniques, equipment all the way along the chain, etc.) that extracting one and making claims for its importance is dodgy, but background noise is a feature common to many of the recordings revered by audiophiles.

And then there's the business of digital noise reduction. Even when there are no warbly artefacts created by its use, noise reduction can sometimes make recordings sound less natural, especially in cases where there wasn't an awful lot of noise in the first place and the reduction can therefore almost eliminate it.

Why should a little hiss improve sound? It might be that it makes us concentrate harder on the listening process, and the concentration brings out details that would

otherwise go unnoticed. Obviously there will come a point where there is too much noise for any amount of concentration to hear past it, but it is certainly possible to hear quite a lot of detail in quite noisy recordings.

There's a conflict between ways of listening. Listening very intently, with full concentration, is tiring and no one does it for very long. Most of the time we simply hear and rely on the subconscious workings of the brain to alert us when something important (in ancient prehistory, something like the sound of a predatory bear or sabre-toothed tiger) comes along. Maybe the absence of sound in certain frequency bands is somehow unsettling, especially when there are sounds in other bands.

I'm not offering any answers here, just posing a question: can a little noise increase our enjoyment of music? I'm not aware of any research on this subject. If you know of any, please get in touch!

Richard Black is a professional musician, recording engineer and a highly knowledgeable hi-fi analyst to boot. He writes exclusively for HFC



Useful advice

The upgrade dilemma

A friend came to me recently looking for advice on what the next step should be on his upgrading path to sonic nirvana. He has a pretty serious system and has come to one of those points where it's not clear what the next logical move should be.

The system has five channels, but is used for both stereo and surround purposes. It consists of a Townshend Audio Universal disc player, SME Model 20 turntable (Series V arm, Reson cartridge, Art Audio phono stage), Bryston SP2 preamp/processor, Bryston 6B SST three channel power amp and an older Bryston 2B power amp for the rear channels. Speakers consist of ATC SCM100 stereo channels, an ATC SCM50 centre channel and Living Voice Auditorium surrounds.

A very nice system indeed, but its owner wants more (as do we all) and had come to the conclusion that upgrading the amplification for the stereo side of the system to Bryston 7B SST monoblocks would be the way forward. This would allow him to use the two spare channels from the 6B SST on the rear speakers, providing an upgrade there as well. I agreed that this would certainly improve matters, being in the process of assessing the 1000-watt Bryston 28B SST power amps for the *Collection 1* am fully aware of what a power amp upgrade can achieve. When I established that it was the stereo result that he was hoping to upgrade I confused matters somewhat by saying that he might get a greater improvement by adding a dedicated stereo preamp for use with the two channel sources.

By using a preamp with a unity gain or home theatre bypass mode you can integrate a stereo preamp into a multichannel system by using this particular input to bypass the volume control in the pre when running the surround system. While the Bryston SP2 is designed to offer one hundred per cent analogue preamplification of stereo signals and has a bypass mode that creates a discrete analogue signal path, I wouldn't be surprised if it could be outshone by Bryston's BP26 dedicated two channel preamp.

The problem is that the BP26 does not have a home theatre bypass mode and, as you



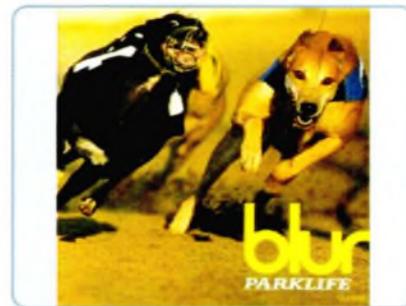
Blur's story didn't begin auspiciously. Hailing from Colchester, they'd scored a top ten hit in 1991 after hitching a ride on the indie dance jam-wagon, with a song called *There's No Other Way*. By 1992, the Madchester euphoria wearing off, they looked bound for the same status as such barely-remembered one-hit wonders as Candyflip or The Mock Turtles. Forward to 1994, though, and Blur were bona fide pop stars with a number one album. How did this happen?

The fight back had begun with 1993's *Modern Life Is Rubbish*. Never the most retiring of musicians, Blur singer Damon Albarn had become obsessed with the idea of revitalising English pop music and re-routed the band into an earlier strain of English pop of the sort The Kinks, David Bowie and The Jam used to play.

On their Sugary Tea Tour, one unreleased song got a rave reaction. The song was *Parklife*, a cocksure affair with a whiff of classic Madness and mocking lyrics of idleness and vice. The immediate popularity of this number wasn't lost on prime mover Albarn; consequently, his songwriting would become more and more of a highbrow examination of low life, depicting the country as a vast heritage centre whose inhabitants were more likely to celebrate St George's Day by sitting on a wheely bin drinking Carlsberg than reading Betjeman or digging the musty silence in a country church. There was aggression and pastiche here – see the savage, carnivorous cover art, photographed at Walthamstow greyhound racing stadium – but also humour and even romance.

With their Anglophilia sharpened by a gruelling two-month tour of America, they began recording in Fulham's Maison Rouge studio with ex-Smiths producer Stephen Street in August 1993. The album that resulted mixed electric disco, Smiths-esque indie, punk and art-rock.

The opiated *This Is A Low*, which uses the weather areas off the shipping forecast as an emotional barometer, is easily one of their best songs, while *To The End* is a French pop reverie to die for. The maddening singalong *Magic*



“The album that resulted mixed electric disco, Smiths-esque indie, punk and art-rock.”

America, named for an Italian TV porn channel, parodies a gawking Brit fantasising about living in the USA. Still, Albarn was dismayed when some saw *Parklife* as a kind of jingoism.

They finished the album in February 1994, and a month later the polysexual salute to Club 18-30 holidays that was *Girls & Boys* reached the top ten singles chart. On 7 May 1994, *Parklife* entered the album charts at number one and the same month the band played a sold-out UK tour during which they came onstage to a rousing excerpt from The Italian Job movie soundtrack – *The Self-Preservation Society*.

Mere months after their moment of triumph, however, Oasis' debut album *Definitely, Maybe* would top the charts, setting the scene for the following year's tabloid-engineered, Britpop-boom showdown between the two groups.

Blur would not compete on such mainstream terms again and, thereafter, made successful, forward thinking records rather than stadium-fillers. Though Blur are now on an indefinite hiatus, Albarn in particular has shown himself to be one of the most questing musical talents around. But *Parklife* could still be his most satisfying work. *Select* magazine knew what they were about when, in 1994, they said Blur were “the best British band since The Smiths”.

HFC
Ian Harrison

MUSO

CLASSIC ALBUMS

PARKLIFE
BLUR

can probably tell, this guy is quite committed to the Bryston brand. But he's not totally obsessed so I have been looking around for preamps that might fit the bill and while there are a lot of good preamps out there finding one that offers the requisite quality and doesn't cost an arm and a leg is tricky. I eventually settled on the Gamut D3i, which is a better looking and supposedly easier to use version of the D3 that we reviewed in 2005 (HFC 265). Getting to hear this in the context of his system will be difficult so I have suggested he take his preamp/processor to a dealer to compare the two side by side.

He may of course find that it's more effective to replace the power amps after all, both avenues makes sense, it's just that I have never heard a processor that does a stunning job with stereo. But I have never heard a Bryston SP2 either. This 'job' doesn't get any easier.

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.



Networking

Wireless sounds

Over the years I have been fortunate enough to have acquired a fair understanding of how computer networks function. I have operated a domain-based network in my home office ever since, decades ago, I realised that I needed to make PCs and Macs exchange data efficiently. That involved installing a seemingly OTT Windows NT domain, which was a heavyweight solution but unavoidable when simple peer to peer networks wouldn't allow such cross-platform communication. I later added a wireless segment so that I could take my laptops out in the garden if ever we had those balmy summer's days for which I'm still waiting...

I never imagined how useful that networking knowledge would prove in my reviewing career until I began toying with networked music players and discovered the fun and games one can experience when they refuse to co-operate entirely. This behaviour fills me full of trepidation if they're going to be installed in the home of a 'normal' person who is only bothered with the music and isn't perhaps



“I acquired a SqueezeBox Duet and asked my wife to set it up without any assistance other than the instruction manual.”

even remotely aware of the niceties of TCP/IP, DNS, DHCP, default gateways, and suchlike.

If that describes your situation might I suggest that you avoid complex networks unless you absolutely cannot? Leave everything at the default settings whenever possible because those seem to be what manufacturers of networked hi-fi assume you will use. Keep everything as simple as you can; for instance, let your router handle DHCP duties and don't alter its IP address unless you have no choice. And I know that wireless connections seem the easiest way to go, but cables are undeniably best where sound is concerned. Finally, if all else fails, go out and find yourself a pal who genuinely understands networking, buy him a beer, ask him to install your newest toys and then try to stay on the best of terms with him.

How, I wondered, do 'civilians' cope with all this palaver? I acquired a SqueezeBox Duet and asked one, my wife, to set it up without any assistance other than the instruction manual. In less than 30 minutes she had a working installation. I was duly impressed. I'll be doubly impressed, though, if she can figure out how to switch it from Wireless to Ethernet if I were to yank the network and power cables out of it surreptitiously and then replace them!

I wonder because I was recently running one player quite happily for a couple of weeks when I had to disconnect it from the network briefly. Upon plugging it back in I found that I could no longer access the music on my PC because the player seemed to have forgotten its network settings. Instead, when switched on again it sniffed around, found a wireless signal

and automatically latched onto that... without asking and, accordingly, without the necessary authorisation to gain access to the network. I had to resort to a factory reset on the player and then go all through the network set-up rigmarole again. Not much fun when you're tired and just want to listen to some tunes...

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



By any other Naim

The need to tweak

It must be more than twenty years since I first met Ingo Hansen, a large and resolutely cheerful German who was, at that time, importing and distributing Naim Audio equipment in Germany. He also made a Phonosophie turntable, a high performance variation on the Thorens TD160 theme, which Naim distributed in the UK for a short while after Naim and Linn went their separate ways.

Naim and Phonosophie parted company around 1990 and Ingo immediately started developing his own line of electronic components. These clearly owed a great deal to the Naim way of doing things – DIN socketry, outboard upgradeable power supplies, simple low-feature presentation – but also incorporated much of Ingo's own ideas and personality.

Naim has grown steadily into Britain's leading serious hi-fi electronics brand, despite (or because of) the very individual way it goes about things. Although things have softened a little recently, it has always espoused relatively mundane and inexpensive interconnect and speaker cables and done its best to discourage all forms of tuning and tweaking, in spite of the considerable activity and debate on its website forum.

Unlike the Naim people, Ingo is a prince amongst tweakers. At hi-fi shows he plays his systems like a musician on stage, demonstrating strange devices like the Artkustik Room-Animator to a hundred enthusiasts at a time. Some of his devices and techniques are pretty weird, but Phonosophie has a whole collection of more conventional accessories. I should stress that Naim itself certainly doesn't endorse the use of any of these and while I personally rather like and respect Naim's 'no tweaking' approach, I'm also aware that many enthusiasts enjoy tinkering with things that change the sound and musical qualities of their systems.

Since a number of Phonosophie's devices are specifically oriented towards DIN connectors and the two companies do share broadly similar hi-fi ideals, Phonosophie's accessories seem to offer a genuine opportunity to indulge in tweaking with a realistic chance of success.

Over the past several months I've tried a number of Phonosophie bits in my own Naim system with some very good results. I recently spent a fascinating day progressively adding a succession of Phonosophie bits, all of which seemed to result in incremental improvements in the overall warmth and the sense of humanity in the music, without in any way detracting from the detail or delicacy. I felt a real sense of loss once they were removed, and was much less satisfied with the overall sound of my system the following day.

The silver-plated mains Powercords and distribution block seemed particularly effective, as did the silver fuses for the individual components. The scary bit was that introducing the costly, yet entirely passive, Artkustik Power Animator also seemed to make a positive contribution, very much against my better judgement.

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

TECHNO

TECHNOLOGY EXPLORED

CAPACITORS



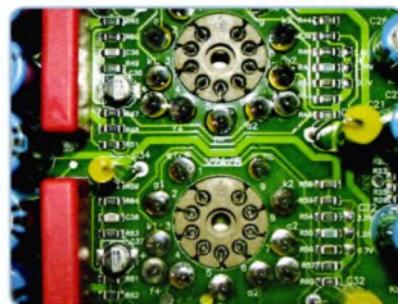
Continuing our occasional series looking at the components that go to make up our hi-fi kit, we thought we'd have a look at capacitors.

There are invariably plenty of these inside audio equipment, where they do a multitude of jobs, not all of them obviously related – for instance, smoothing the power supply and defining the frequency response of a phone amplifier. What makes this component so versatile?

Fundamentally, a capacitor stores electrical charge, the stuff which, when flowing, defines electric current. Continuing the good old analogy of water in a pipe, if electric current equals flowing water, charge is water standing still. In this case, a capacitor is like a bit of very stretchy rubber sheet across the middle of the pipe – it won't allow a continuous flow of water past it but you can use pressure (voltage) to stretch it out in one direction and force a little more water in behind it.

If you periodically reverse the direction of the water flow, the sheet will stretch one way, then the other, and the water will appear to behave as if the sheet were not even there. Similarly with capacitors: they won't allow DC to pass at all but AC will flow through them, the more readily as frequency gets higher. This is actually all they do, and the difference in their apparent function is partly down to the enormous range of values among practical capacitors, from picofarads (a million-millionth of a 'farad', the fundamental unit of measurement) up to a few hundredths of a farad in the case of big power supply capacitors. Little capacitors only pass very high frequencies, while big ones act as a short circuit even to mains frequency, hence their filtering function in power supplies.

To make a capacitor, you need two conductors and an insulator. Different insulator (or 'dielectric') materials are used, various plastic films in small-value capacitors and chemically-formed 'electrolytic' film in large ones. The best-known side effect they show is generally referred to as 'loss factor', which as you would expect refers to their tendency to lose some of the power passing through them. This can vary from 10% in electrolytic capacitors down to less than 0.02% in some plastic films, the lost power simply turning into useless heat.



“...good old analogy...if electric current equals flowing water, charge is water standing still.”

That isn't necessarily a problem but can lead to some slightly sub-optimal behaviour if one is trying to design very accurate filters, for instance. Another side effect is 'dielectric absorption', which is a memory effect – charge a capacitor and then discharge it, and the voltage across its terminals slowly rises again. Both of these effects can do odd things to frequency response but neither can be responsible for non-linear distortion. Capacitors also have stray inductance, usually not much of it but enough to produce a resonant circuit at a frequency that may not be much above the audio band. This can lead to distinctly unexpected circuit behaviour, but again (usually) no non-linear distortion.

All that said, and accepting that non-linear distortion is generally the much more audible kind, capacitors do sound different depending not only on the dielectric material, but also details of their construction. The reasons are not obvious, but there does seem to be a link to loss factor and dielectric absorption.

Independent researcher Cyril Bateman has published extensive tests on capacitors which show non-linear distortion, but only in small amounts. Perhaps if circuit design took detailed account of capacitor side-effects they could be nulled, but it's certainly simpler for equipment makers, looking for ultimate performance, to use the highest quality components. **HFC**

Richard Black



KRELL'S ANGELS

THE EVOLUTION CHAPTER

Since launching the legendary **KSA-50** amplifier a quarter of a century ago, **Krell** have established themselves as the absolute world leaders in the design of high end audio electronics, rocking the establishment over the years with novel technologies that have redefined the way we listen to music.

In 2005, chief designer Dan D'Agostino took the audio community by storm with the introduction of the stunning eight-chassis **Evolution One** and **Evolution Two** amplification systems, a creation that represented his ultimate strike of genius on the high end, and received accolades all over the world.

What's more, it doesn't stop there; this year sees the launch of a complete new range of **Krell Evolution** pre- and power amplifiers - plus two exciting source components and an extraordinary unique integrated amplifier.

Out go the sharp heatsinks, in comes the most beautiful casework ever seen, housing technology that delivers totally lifelike music, with nothing added and nothing taken away. Included in the line-up are the **Evolution 505** CD/SACD player, the **Evolution 525** audio-video source, the **Evolution 202** two-chassis preamplifier with the **Evolution 222** single case version, the **Evolution 402** stereo amplifier plus the incredibly powerful **Evolution 600** and **900** monoblocs.

For the home theatre, there is the powerful **Evolution 403** three-channel amplifier and the **Evolution 707** processor, a reference model that is without equal, and demonstrates Krell's passion for unparalleled performance and innovation.

Attracting huge interest and praise is the unique **FBI** Fully Balanced Integrated amplifier. Aimed at those who desire the superb performance of the long-established Class 'A' Krell **FPB** series in a single chassis, this is the true master of all integrated amplifiers.

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EVOLUTION 402



EVOLUTION 505



EVOLUTION 222

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www.absolutesounds.com info@absolutesounds.com



WIN!

A pair of Kudos Cardea C1 loudspeakers worth £1,450!

Kudos Audio may have started life as a maker of fine-quality stands in 1991, but its Cardea range of speakers is getting all the attention nowadays. The Kudos Cardea C1 is the company's first standmount speaker and this two-way design won a clear Best Buy badge when tested back in issue 304.

This is a classic design in the true sense of the word, when it comes to size, proportions and presentation. The sharp-edged, 12-litre, reflex-ported enclosure is built from 18mm MDF, damped internally and handsomely finished in a selection of very attractive 'book-matched' real wood veneers. Couple this to the highly regarded SEAS drive units (an Excel 25mm fabric dome tweeter and a 180mm doped paper bass driver) and the speaker has all the elements of a classic with low coloration and excellent timing. This means excellent stereo performance that few other loudspeakers for the price can match.

Used away from the walls, with any decent amplifier (and ideally on Kudos own S50 stands), the Kudos Cardea C1 is well worth its £1,450 price tag in the stores. But you could win one at the click of a mouse.

HOW TO ENTER:

For your chance to win, go online to www.futurecomps.co.uk/kudosc1 and follow the instructions, leaving your selected answer and details where prompted:

QUESTION:

What is the name of Kudos' loudspeaker range

A: Caldera **B:** Cardigan **C:** Cardea

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Answers must be received between 21 August 2008 and 17 September 2008. The prize winner will be selected at random from all correct entries received between the relevant dates and will receive a pair of Kudos Cardea C1 loudspeakers free of charge. The winner will be notified within 28 days of the closing date and will be required to give details of a delivery address in the UK to which the loudspeakers should be sent.

By taking part in a Competition, you agree to be bound by the Competition Rules, which are summarised below but can be viewed in full at www.futurenet.com/futureonline/competitionrules.asp. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Proof of posting (if relevant) shall not be deemed proof of delivery. Entries must be submitted by an individual (not via any agency or similar) and, unless otherwise stated, are limited to one per household. The Company reserves the right in its sole discretion to substitute any prize with cash or a prize of comparable value. Unless otherwise stated, the Competition is open to all GB residents of 18 years and over, except employees of Future Publishing and any party involved in the competition or their households. By entering a Competition you give permission to use your name, likeness and personal information in connection with the Competition and for promotional purposes. All entries will become the property of the Company upon receipt and will not be returned. You warrant that the Competition entry is entirely your own work and not copied or adapted from any other source. If you are a winner, you may have to provide additional information. Details of winners will be available on request within three months of the closing date. If you are a winner, receipt by you of any prize is conditional upon you complying with (amongst other things) the Competition Rules. You acknowledge and agree that neither the Company nor any associated third parties shall have any liability to you in connection with your use and/or possession of your prize.



Understanding: Music servers

Building a CD-quality library of your favourite albums has never been easier

Make no mistake: it's almost inevitable that one day soon you'll be buying a hard disk player or music server. The concept of storing music on a hard disk and playing that through your hi-fi system – or distributed audio system – is charging forward at a rate of knots. It hasn't quite reached the tipping point where it becomes the norm, but it's getting closer to widespread mainstream acceptance as each day passes. Why? One reason is its sheer convenience. Another, suiting the audiophile perspective, is that it's so inherently logical. The CD you purchase contains digital data that originally came from a hard disk in a recording studio's digital workstation, so why not remove the middleman from the equation when you play the music back? Discarding the CD – along with all the errors it can introduce – and transferring that data (music) straight to another hard disk in your home seems an eminently sensible and purist thing to do.

Often people – especially the baby-boomer generation – bemoan the thought of not having a CD insert or LP sleeve to read and artwork to admire while using a hard disk device, that truly is a specious argument. It's easy either to retain the insert or to find as much, if not more, information on the internet to peruse. And considering the clutter that pervades many of our music rooms, much of which consists of precarious piles of CD cases scattered around the floor and on every convenient horizontal surface, the marketeers' sales pitch about servers consigning all of your CDs to the loft or garage and clearing some living space is a clearly an attractive proposition.

Let's begin with a couple of definitions for the benefit of those who aren't

completely up-to-speed with this technology. Although seemingly outwardly identical, the hard disk player and the music server aren't the same thing. The hard disk server tends to be designed to be stored away in a cupboard and deliver (stream) music to various locations around the home simultaneously. The hard disk player usually aspires to

in the living room – or wherever else your primary hi-fi is located – rather than being tucked away under the stairs.

The alternative to a dedicated, hi-fi, hard disk box is, of course, a computer. By ripping your CDs onto a hard disk within a computer it's easy to store immense amounts of music – for example, a one-terabyte disk, which you

“the marketeers' sales pitch about servers consigning all of your CDs to the loft or garage is clearly an attractive proposition”

delivering better musical performance than the server can manage, but often has less in the way of facilities, fewer streams, for example. For this reason, players such as the new Naim HDX (see p42) tend to be installed

can buy for around £100 at the time of writing, will accommodate more than 1,500 uncompressed CDs. And that PC needn't be the very latest high-spec speed monster. If you use Linux and open-source software you





Above: Brennan JB7

can get away with an inexpensive PC or even a leftover from around 1999. (Linux doesn't demand the increasingly sophisticated hardware that other operating systems do.) Then you simply need a way to get the music into your system and that's where streamers such as the Slim Devices Squeezebox Duet or the audiophile-quality Logitech Transporter come in, you plug these into your hi-fi and can control them through a lightweight server application that runs on the PC. Both the models mentioned can be connected via Ethernet cabling or by wireless and both provide a choice of digital or analogue outputs. About the only possible downside to the Squeezebox is that it can't stream any files purchased from the iTunes Store, Zune Marketplace or any service that uses the Windows PlaysForSure DRM (Digital Rights Management) scheme. For the most part that's not really an issue, as there are plenty of DRM-free music stores online.

Anyway, as an audiophile you're hardly likely to be concerned with MP3s; no, you're doubtless more concerned with music that's free from any lossy compression, such as FLAC files or WAVs from your ripped CDs. Which brings us neatly to the topic of ripping, which is just a slang term for

the speed down on the drive, make sure the disc you're planning to rip is clean and learn a little patience. There really is no advantage in trying to rip audio at 52x, or whatever your CD drive's maximum speed might be, so set the speed to 4x and go have a cup of tea. We've found that the freely available Exact Audio Copy is one of the finest ripping programs. Like the sophisticated ripper in the Naim HDX, it performs multiple reads and uses AccurateRip technology to assist it in providing optimal data integrity.

Getting a flawless rip from a CD isn't as easy as people might imagine – especially those who insist that “digital music is just ones and noughts, the same as computer files, so any copy must be perfect”. Sadly, that isn't true, because CD was designed to provide audio in real time – continuously and without gaps. Because of this it isn't guaranteed to deliver a reliable data stream from the disc to a computer. Secondly, CD's cross-interleaved Reed-Solomon coding includes an extra facility that interpolates across uncorrectable errors on the disc. This means that the data read from an audio CD may not always be a faithful facsimile of the original. Then, of course, there's the hardware. Different CD drives offer widely

“...they'll usually rip a CD as soon as its inserted or once you press a button and then automatically save it to the hard disk.”

copying the audio data from your CD onto a hard disk. Now, hard disk players and servers come equipped with CD-ripping mechanisms and software, they'll usually rip a CD as soon as it's inserted or once you press a button, and then automatically save it to the hard disk. If, however, you intend to use a PC for storage, then you'll need some software and a suitable CD drive to perform the task. This is where you might need to do a little experimentation or investigation to find a drive-and-software combination that delivers the best rips. Remember that old computer maxim: garbage in, garbage out. To avoid the 'garbage in', you should at the very least turn

varying quality when reading audio. Some of the least expensive drives, such as those from Lite-On, can give far more expensive models a good run for their money in this respect. So choosing the best-suited isn't just a simple question of picking a prestigious brand or paying top dollar and assuming you'll get better performance.

When you get the set-up installed and ready to use, try to ensure you never run any other programs while you're ripping CDs. Even go so far as to turn off your screen saver to ensure that all your processing power is being devoted to the rip. And defragment the hard drive on which you

WHAT'S ALL THIS AIFF, FLAC, MP3 AND WAV STUFF?

MP3 is an abbreviation of MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3 (MPEG referring to the Moving Picture Experts Group). MP3s are lossily compressed files which throw away musical data in order to become smaller. The lower the number describing them, the worse the music will sound – 320Kbps might be acceptable, while anything below 128Kbps definitely isn't. This is hardly any surprise when you consider that CD sound is 1,411.2Kbps. The only saving grace is that MP3s are compatible with most media players on the market, including iTunes, Windows Media Player and Winamp. Use this format only for portable devices or if you lack space on your hard drive.

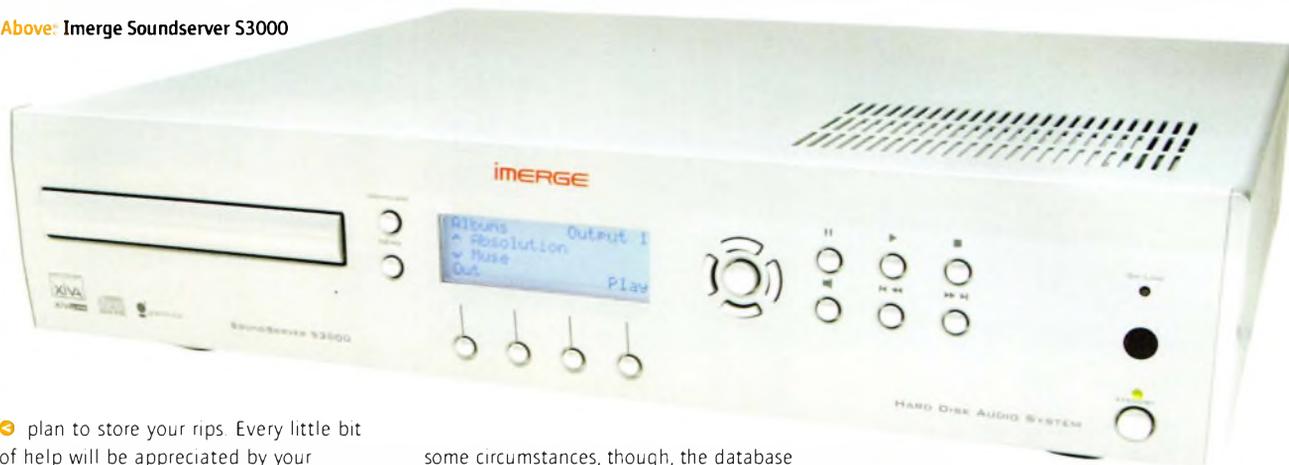
AIFF (Audio Interchange File Format) is Apple's CD-quality format. AIFFs are uncompressed, genuine CD-quality files that are compatible with several media players, including iTunes. They do, however, occupy a lot of hard disk space.

WAV (Waveform Audio Format) is, in essence, the PC equivalent of Apple's AIFF and because of that, is a ubiquitous and popular format. Even though audio CDs and WAV files use identical encoding for their audio – PCM – WAV remains a computer data format that CD players can't understand directly.

FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) is a CD-quality lossless digital audio format. It doesn't throw away data like other types of compressed audio files. Lossless compression still retains the low-level resolution of a standard CD. The advantage of FLAC files is that they take up less room on your computer than AIFF or WAV files. Several players are compatible with FLAC on both the PC and the Mac and HD players and servers are increasingly supporting the format.

[Feature] Understanding: Music Servers Part One

Above: Imerge Soundserver S3000



plan to store your rips. Every little bit of help will be appreciated by your ripper... provided, of course, you accept the notion that inanimate objects are capable of gratitude.

Now, Exact Audio Copy, unlike audiophiles, isn't snooty about compressed formats. Should you want to produce MP3 files it'll allow you to do so and to choose between CBR (constant bit rate) and VBR (variable bit rate) types as well as specifying the amount of compression to use. However,

“Thanks to various internet databases that rippers can access and acquire data from, finding tracks is rarely a problem.”

while compression might be appropriate for portable systems, where storage is restricted and sound quality hardly matters, in the domestic environment, where one can buy a couple of terabytes of disk space for £200 and use it to store 3,000 uncompressed CDs, why would anyone feel the need to degrade the quality of the music?

Let's assume, then, that you've ripped 3,000 CDs and that each contains, say, 15 tracks. That amounts to 45,000 songs. How are you ever going to find that one particular track you want to hear? Thanks to various internet databases that rippers can access and acquire data from, finding tracks is rarely a problem. The Naim HDX, for example, queries the Allmusic database, while Exact Audio Copy will interrogate the freedb service. These return all the data and metadata (data about the data) that you're ever likely to need about CDs. Under

some circumstances, though, the database look-up will return a blank, in which case you'll have to type in the details, unless you want to see "Artist: Unknown. Album: Unknown. Track: Unknown" on the display every time you play the disc. Allmusic and freedb will also often supply cover art for the player to show. There are several other databases providing similar services, such as Gracenote. All are useful so long as you live in Western Europe or the USA; discs from the

East aren't as well catalogued, which is something that needs to be addressed if these databases are to be recognised as truly global resources.

The use of databases makes it easy to find particular recordings, as you can search for them by artist, album title, genre, date or any other category for which your ripper has collected info. It also means you can quickly create playlists containing tracks of a particular type – ones with female vocalists, Mozart arias or acoustic guitar recordings, for example, or songs to suit a specific mood or time of day. Then if you hear a song that matches your criteria for playing while you have dinner, you can easily add it to your 'dinner party' playlist.

Be sure to read next month's instalment, where we hope to add more to your knowledge of hard disk players, servers and all that goes on inside them. **HFC**

Malcolm Steward



Above: Arcam MS250

MUSIC DATABASE GUIDE

allmusic is a metadata database founded in 1991 by pop-cult archivist Michael Erlewine. To offer the widest and most exhaustive music guide ever, Erlewine assembled an impressive roster of professional data-entry staff, editors and writers, including over 900 music critics. The company claims to own the world's largest digital music archive, including six million songs and over half a million album cover images. Other online features include catalogue data, artist biographies, album reviews, artist information and playlists.

www.allmusic.com

Exact Audio Copy (EAC) is a proprietary CD ripping programme for Microsoft Windows. Created by Andre Wiethoff in 1998, the software is designed to convert the tracks on CDs to .wav files. EAC also supports AccurateRip and can be programmed to include gaps, tracks and CD-text. Free to non-commercial users, EAC is a popular choice with audiophiles for its ease of use.

www.exactaudiocopy.de

Gracenote is an internet-accessible database founded in 1998. Recently acquired by Sony, Gracenote's CDDB technology was originally created from and continues to receive voluntary contributions from online users. Among the company's many attributes is a CD track-identification system and a digital file service that allows digital music files (such as MP3s) to be identified and playlists generated.

www.gracenote.com



Meridian F80. Listen closely.

The Meridian F80, developed in collaboration with Ferrari, represents 30 years of audio research and manufacture condensed into a small and beautiful shell. It's a complete system: a CD and DVD player with iPod connectivity and AM/FM/DAB digital radio. You'll be amazed that something so compact allows you to hear more of your music, recovering buried information from the recording and producing a sound full of detail and depth. But then it shares the same technologies as Meridian's flagship components and loudspeakers: sound systems so advanced that if a microphone can detect it, the system can reproduce it. Hearing really is believing. Call 01480 445678 to arrange a demonstration of the F80's outstanding performance.

"a brilliantly designed and made compact music system"
HiFi World

"truly unbelievable performance"
The Robb Report, January 2008.

"there is nothing available elsewhere that compares"
AVReview.co.uk

www.meridian-audio.com



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MERIDIAN

CHOICE CUTS



This month's varied musical morsels

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

AUDIOPHILE VINYL



STAN GETZ

Captain Marvel

CBS/Pure Pleasure 180g vinyl

Music: This 1975 outing finds tenor sax man Getz accompanied by the cream of jazz fusion musicians in Stanley Clarke and Chick Corea alongside Tony Williams (drums) and Airto Moreira (percussion). But this is a Getz record despite, or perhaps because of, his underdemonstrative style. The strongest force comes from the percussion giving many of these six tracks a Latin feel.

Sound: A reasonably open, but dynamically contained recording that deals with a lively sound in an even-handed fashion. *JK*



JOHNNY CASH

At San Quentin

Columbia/Speakers Corner 180g vinyl

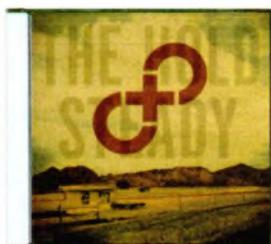
Music: *Walk the Line* the movie must have reinvigorated the Johnny Cash estate and helped sell a few more copies of his most famous album. Recorded in a very reverberant hall in the gaol of the same name it conjures up a tremendous atmosphere thanks to the highly appreciative crowd. It features nine of Cash's hits as well as plenty of bleeped banter to the inmates. Few live recordings can approach it for palpability and realism.

Sound: Featuring distortion in place of limiting this is a simple and effective recording, but hi-fi it ain't. *JK*



These LPs were supplied by Pure Pleasure
www.purepleasurerecords.com

COMPACT DISC & VINYL



THE HOLD STEADY

Stay Positive

Rough Trade

Music: In his late 30s, Craig Finn is hardly a youthful ingénue, but he hasn't grown world-weary and cynical, either. Instead, he's become a mature, incisive songwriter whose stories compellingly embrace life, death, sex and religion with a vividness not found anywhere on the new Coldplay album. This is music that recognises rock 'n' roll can't save the world – but still believes it can make it a better place.

Sound: Immediate and mysterious, intimate and yet epic, it's the sound of a cool, innovative band hitting their creative peak. *NW*



MOZART

Wind Serenades

Chamber Soloists of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Naim Classical CD117

Music: The first of the two serenades on this disc is an engaging one, perfectly formed and immaculately realised by the well-disciplined players of the RPO. The *Gran Partita* is the more substantial of the two and is complemented by the more widely celebrated *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik*.

Sound: Marking its return to classical music, Naim Audio's disc was recorded at London's excellent Cadogan Hall, which has plenty of presence. *AG*



BALTIC FLEET

Baltic Fleet

Blow Up

Music: Keyboardist Paul Fleming travelled the world using the nearest instrument to hand – in Brighton a battered pub piano, on the bus to Barcelona someone else's mini-synth, in Virginia the rant of a blues-obsessed cabbie... This mostly instrumental set shouldn't work, but it does. Eno, NEU! Sakamoto, DJ Shadow and Kraftwerk seem to have all seminal influences, but Fleming blends them well enough to hide the joins.

Sound: Amazingly, there's plenty of space here, giving the sound, and your system, a chance to breathe. *PS*



LOVE

Forever Changes

Elektra/Rhine

Music: The jewel in Elektra's sports lyrics about failure, death and war wrapped in a candy coating of effusive strings, upbeat horns and Burt Bacharach-like arrangements topped off with the beautiful high voices of Bryan MacLean and Arthur Lee. This fifth official release of the 11-track masterpiece, comes with a 21-track bonus disc – lots of out-takes and session tracks.

Sound: Dan Hersch and Bill Inglot have brought clarity to the acoustic/electric guitars and definition to the voices and percussion. *MP*



JAKOB DYLAN

Seeing Things

Columbia

Music: A solo singer-songwriter album by the only one of Bob Dylan's children to follow him into active service is a bold move, indeed. Away from his usual band, the Wallflowers, he's out in the open, stark and unadorned on a mostly acoustic album of songs that deal with visions of war and apocalypse. If there's nothing quite as coruscating as Dylan Snr's *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* or *Masters Of War*, songs such as *Evil Is Alive and Well* and *War Is Kind* pack a powerful lyrical punch over an appealingly sparse and roots-based accompaniment.

Sound: Despite being mostly acoustic, Rick Rubin's skilled production adds a sense of dynamics which are compelling. *NW*





THIS MONTH'S CLASSIC HI-FI TEST DISC

"The world is a duller place for the loss of this great musician."

EST Tuesday Wonderland ACT

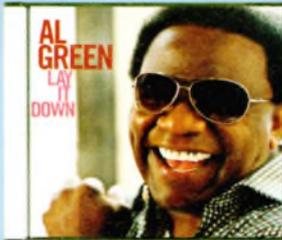
Music: The premature death of pianist Esbjörn Svensson in June came as a shock, so it seems fitting to remember his music at this time. His last studio album was one of his best. It has a strong jazz feel but is probably closer to blues in its roots. It's rhythmically very

strong and the interplay between musicians is superb thanks to the guidance that emanates from Esbjörn's left hand. The world is a duller place for the loss of this humble musician.

Sound: A solid and precise sound with plenty of body and decent imaging. The

emphasis is on energy and timing in this instance, so it'll let both your feet and your brain tell you if your system times as it should. *JK*

Music Sound ★★★★★



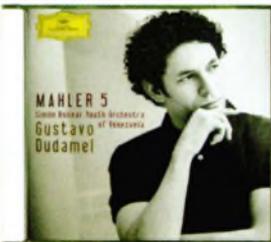
AL GREEN
Lay It Down

Blue Note/EMI

Music: At a stage when many successful performers would be coasting on their hits, Al Green is still producing new work of quality. Fortunately, he knows what he's good at and doesn't attempt to fully reinvent himself, working instead with gifted collaborators to create an updated version of his classic sound. It's all here: the cardboard box drums, coaxing horns, delicate guitar fills, swooning strings and, of course, that unique voice shifting effortlessly between heavenly falsetto and earth-bound grunt.

Sound: Produced by The Roots' Guestlove and James Poyser, the album manages the trick of coming close to the sound of his early seventies Hi Records heyday. *DO*

Music Sound ★★★★★



MAHLER

Symphony No. 5
Gustavo Dudamel (cond), Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela

DGG 00289 477 6545

Music: The Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela has become a centre of excellence, by involving young people with classical music. Here the young players strut their stuff in a performance of Mahler's gargantuan 5th, with its fearsomely complex and wide-ranging score, and has turned in a performance that although it has its flaws has a passion and a blazing intensity. **Sound:** The recording is good, although the soundstage image is rather uneven, tending to favour the strings over the woodwind. *AG*

Music Sound ★★★★★



SKYPHONE

Avellaneda

Rune Grammofon

Music: This trio of electronic experimenters from Denmark have all the usual trademarks of the modern 'folktronica' ambient crowd – lo-fi glitches and analogue synths. But what sets their bucolic chamber pieces apart are their strong melodies, with most of the tracks shot through with a wistful Scandinavian melancholy which may be something to do with the long winters, but makes for a gloriously woody sense of summer ending.

Sound: There's a temptation to turn up the system the better to render the tiny sounds of this lovely, warm, beautiful record. *DO*

Music Sound ★★★★★

HIGH-QUALITY AUDIO

THE LARRY CORYELL ORGAN TRIO

Impressions

Chesky

SACD (stereo/multichannel hybrid stereo plus stereo CD)

Music: Larry Coryell is a jazz guitarist who has been making records since the sixties, but his formative influences were Wes Montgomery and Jimmy Smith and it was this pairing of guitar and organ that inspired him to make this recording. It features Sam Yahel on Hammond B3 and Paul Wertico on drums and includes nine tunes, three by band members except the title track by Coltrane. Coryell is a fluid and subtle player, never dominating but guiding the music while his cohorts provide well-balanced counterpoint. One for the sophisticates, young and old.

Sound: Chesky goes to considerable lengths to get a good sound from its recordings and that's clearly the case with this open and natural example. It's unusual too for not having had the bass bumped up. *JK*

Music Sound ★★★★★



BEETHOVEN OVERTURES

Sir Colin Davis (cond), Symphonie des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Teac Esoteric TGGD90013

SACD (stereo/multichannel hybrid stereo plus stereo CD)

Music: This disc may take some hunting down, but will reward those who succeed. For a start, Beethoven's supposedly lightweight and commercial music for the theatre frequently transcends expectations. Anyone doubting this should sample the expressive, powerful *Coriolan* overture, or the *Egmont* overture, whose multilayer opening is superbly realised here by the Bayerischen Rundfunks orchestra under Sir Colin Davis.

Sound: Issued as part of Esoteric's 25th year celebrations, this celebratory issue uses a raft of Teac Esoteric hardware in its production and is, by any standards, an immaculate production, with much better stereo SACD sound to complement the already good Red Book layer. *AG*

Music Sound ★★★★★



HUGH MASEKELA

Hope

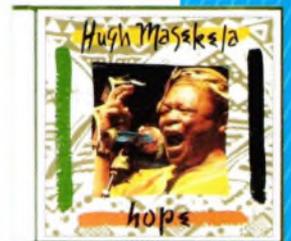
Analogue Productions

SACD (stereo/multichannel hybrid stereo plus stereo CD)

Music: By 1993, trumpeter Hugh Masekela had resettled in his native South Africa after three decades of exile and chose local musicians to record this live set spanning his career. Among the highlights are *Languta*, an Alexandria township tune which he first picked up in 1947, while *Abangoma* is reminiscent of the fusion of South African traditional music and jazz which first made his name in the sixties.

Sound: Originally recorded live in Washington DC's Blues Alley, the album benefits from the surround treatment, giving the musicians plenty of room to breathe, though Masekela's still-powerful trumpet and flugelhorn rightly command centre stage. *DO*

Music Sound ★★★★★



BLUES MASTERS

Which blues albums truly define the genre? HFC investigates...

The blues was shaped and formed out of the experience of itinerant, and mostly illiterate, black musicians born to an existence of sharecropping and poverty in the Mississippi Delta in the early years of the 20th century. From this specific and in many ways narrow world, the blues burst out to have a dramatic effect on the history of popular music, not only in America but all over the globe and to father a loud and raucous child called rock 'n' roll.

Listen to the music of the early blues pioneers and it's swiftly evident why their eerie sound had such a profound impact on an audience that had never seen a cotton plantation or been near a juke joint. The songs have a dark, deep intensity that generations of musicians have since found irresistible.

Today the blues has become something of a heritage industry, stronger on imitation than innovation, endlessly revisiting and referencing the classic repertoire of the past. Therefore, any definitive collection of the most important blues recordings is going to have a strong historical bias. This means that in many cases we're not talking hi-fi sound for audiophiles and these dozen recordings, some of them made in the most rudimentary conditions, have been chosen for their significance and their feel rather than their pristine recording quality. Nevertheless, modern remastering techniques and digital technology have successfully 'cleaned up' the sound of the early recordings without losing any of the feral atmosphere that made them so compelling in the first place.

ROBERT JOHNSON

The Complete Recordings (Columbia)

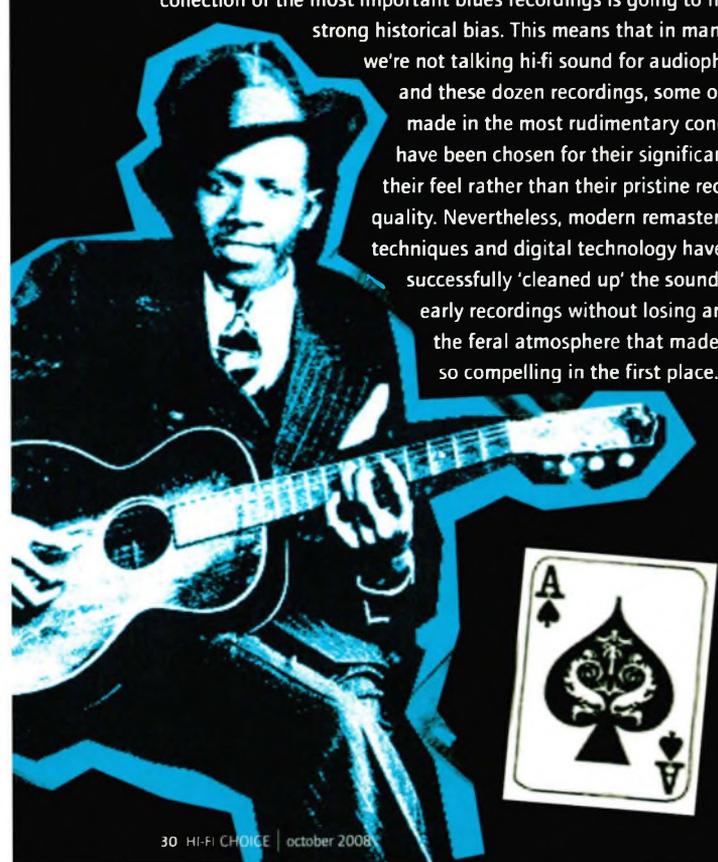
The most important figure in blues history, Robert Johnson defined the pre-war acoustic blues of the South in just two recording sessions in 1936-37. His entire legacy consists of 29 songs, presented in this two-disc set with 12 alternate takes. But what songs they were. The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and Eric Clapton all covered his compositions, but the originals are hard to beat, with Johnson singing in an intense, spooked voice like a man possessed, and with his dazzling guitar playing, juxtaposing shuffling rhythms and lead lines played with a slide in thrilling fashion. That he died in mysterious circumstances in 1938 at the age of 27 has only added to his legendary status.



BESSIE SMITH

The Collection (Columbia)

The first blues singers to be recorded in the 1920s were mainly women. Early pioneers such as Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey and Ida Cox all have their fans, but few would argue with the opinion that Bessie Smith was the greatest of them all. Between 1923 and 1933 she cut 160 songs, which can be found on the five-CD set *The Complete Recordings*. This 16-track collection offers a more accessible introduction to her indomitable spirit and spellbinding voice. From the perfect teaming with Louis Armstrong on *St Louis Blues* to the double entendres of *Empty Bed Blues* via the vaudeville swing of *Gimme A Pigfoot...*, everything here lives up to her nickname, 'the Empress of the Blues'.



BLIND WILLIE MCTELL

The Classic Years 1927-1940 (JSP)

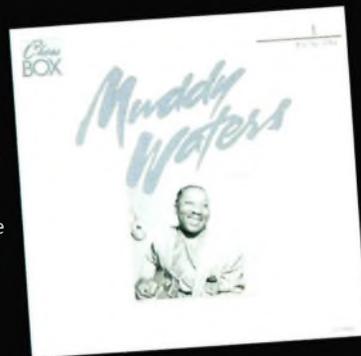
Different variants of the blues took hold in different parts of the American South and the so-called Piedmont blues of the eastern-seaboard states was less harsh and guttural than the form dominant in the Delta. Many of the Piedmont bluesmen favoured the more resonant sound of a 12-string guitar and the greatest of them was McTell, who sung in a clear and melodic light voice and played the instrument with a ringing, fluid style. His work spans blues, ragtime, gospel and dance tunes and this four-disc set collects everything he recorded in his golden period under a variety of different names for different labels.



MUDDY WATERS

The Chess Box (Chess/ Universal)

Muddy Waters – the original Hoochie Coochie Man – epitomises the migration of the blues from the South to Chicago and its development from a rural to an urban sound. First recorded as an acoustic country blues singer on a plantation in 1941, two years later Waters took a train to Chicago, where he plugged in and made his first recordings with an electric guitar in 1948. Over the next few years, his dark, majestic voice, thumping backbeat and undeniable sexual magnetism helped to forge the template for the city's electric-blues sound on the legendary Chess label. This three-disc set features 72 tracks from the period 1947-72, but will probably still leave you wanting more.



LEADBELLY

The Definitive Leadbelly (Complete Blues)

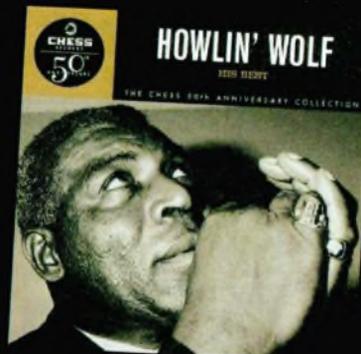
More than just a blues singer, Huddie Ledbetter defined the black American folk tradition with his vast repertoire of blues, ballads, minstrel tunes, gospel numbers and even children's songs. Convicted of murder, after he was pardoned he became a celebrity and made a career singing for well-heeled, predominantly white society audiences in New York. He even earned a major feature in *Life* magazine under the headline 'Bad nigger makes good minstrel' (well, it was 1937). His best-known recordings include folk songs such as *Goodnight Irene*, *Rock Island Line* and *Midnight Special*, and they sit happily on this budget-priced three-disc set alongside his more overly blues material.



HOWLIN' WOLF

His Best (Chess/ Universal)

The only rival to Muddy Waters as the king of Chicago's post-war electric thunder was Howlin' Wolf. Standing more than six foot tall and weighing 300 pounds, he was an electrifying performer who used his physical stature to enhance the emotional intensity of his singing, both on stage and on record. His voice was a gripping, elemental force and his harmonica playing wasn't far behind in its ferocity. He also had the huge advantage of Chess Records stalwart Willie Dixon writing most of his songs, including many on this 20-track anthology, all recorded between 1951 and 1964. *Spoonful*, *The (Little) Red Rooster* and *Back Door Man* among them.



JOHN LEE HOOKER

The Healer (Silvertone)

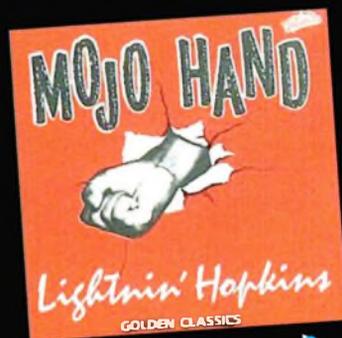
In a recording career that spanned half a century, it's hard to pick a single disc by John Lee Hooker, who possessed a voice as compelling and mysterious as any in the blues. Born in Mississippi in 1917, he moved north to Detroit, where he developed a unique and hypnotic boogie style. With his twangy electric guitar, deep voice and stomping foot, his early recordings are unmissable and were a huge influence on the British blues boom in the 1960s. But his biggest-selling album, *The Healer*, came in 1989. Featuring guests such as Keith Richards, Carlos Santana and Bonnie Raitt, it's a modern classic; the sound quality is brilliant and the boogie is timeless.



LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS

Mojo Hand: The Lightnin' Hopkins Anthology (Rhino)

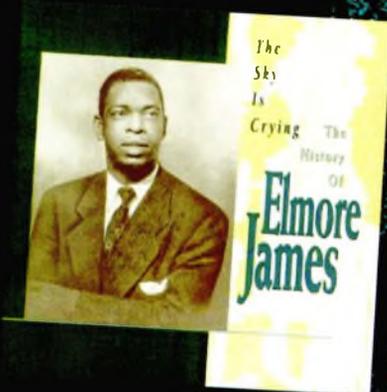
Down in Texas, the blues again had a different twist and no Lone Star State bluesman was more distinctive than Sam Lightnin' Hopkins. Like Hooker, Hopkins was a maverick boogie man with a disdain for formal musical structure that meant his best work was recorded solo. A poet among country blues singers, his recording career had two separate phases. In the late 1940s to early 1950s he cut some majestic sides that showcased him as a supreme storyteller, whether singing about the joys of fast cars and loose women or the darker stuff of death and destruction. Then in 1959 he made a comeback as an acoustic troubadour playing folk festivals. This two-disc compilation spans both incarnations.



ELMORE JAMES

The Sky Is Crying: The History Of Elmore James (Rhino)

Memorably described as "the first man to realise what a racket you can make with an electric guitar", Elmore James, with the dramatic slide-guitar motif on *Dust My Broom*, was responsible for perhaps the most recognisable blues riff of all time. In his work one can hear a hint of what Robert Johnson – whom he knew – might have sounded like had he lived into the era of amplification. His recording career lasted only a dozen years, from 1951 to 1963, but he left an indelible mark by adapting the slide-guitar technique of the first generation of Mississippi bluesmen to the electric guitar, and the Stones, Fleetwood Mac and Clapton all counted themselves as disciples.



ALBERT KING

Born Under A Bad Sign (Stax)

By the 1960s, young, black America no longer wanted to be reminded of the 'bad old days' that the blues represented and had opted instead for the 'say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud' soundtrack of soul music. Albert King bridged the gap. He was in his 40s when he signed for Memphis's Stax label in 1966, but backed by the likes of Booker T and the MGs and The Memphis Horns, he entered his pomp on a series of stirring singles such as *Crosscut Saw*, *The Hunter* and *Born Under A Bad Sign*, which spanned hard blues, funk and R&B and were collected together on this 1967 album.



STEVE RAY VAUGHAN

Texas Flood (Epic)

The blues needed Stevie Ray Vaughan. When he appeared on the scene in the 1980s, the genre was in the doldrums. Young, charismatic and with the flamboyance of a rock star, Vaughan was also a jaw-droppingly talented guitarist. And this astonishingly assured 1983 debut convinced an entire generation of rock fans who didn't remember the glory days of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf that for the first time since the 1960s the blues was relevant again. Indeed, some even claim that *Texas Flood* wasn't just a much-needed shot in the arm, but the album that saved the blues from extinction.



BB KING AND ERIC CLAPTON

Riding With The King (Reprise)

Having failed to find space for either BB King or Eric Clapton elsewhere in this list, we're making amends with this Grammy-winning blues guitar summit, recorded in 2000 the collection gave King the best-selling album of his career more than half a century after he began recording. The dozen duets are all covers, many of them familiar blues standards from King's past repertoire. But the two veterans play with the precision you would expect and lend the material a relaxed, laid-back feel that beautifully conveys both the respect in which they hold each other and the sheer fun they had in working together.



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STARLESS AND VINYL BLACK

I've been collecting vinyl for about 15 years and stopped buying CDs altogether last year. Yes, the selection of new releases on vinyl is far smaller than on CD, but actually that works in my favour. I have no desire to buy something like Leona Lewis' album, so I'm hardly compromised by it not being available on vinyl, but virtually all of the music I'm into makes it onto 12 inch discs. Good LPs cost more, but if you want to own a piece of music, I think it's worth investing in.

Tim Harris via email

HFC We suspect you aren't alone, Tim. Vinyl sales are bucking the trends; sales are

up where CD sales are down and people still love to thumb through the record racks. Although few of us here at *HFC* would abandon CD as you have, none of us have wholly lost the love of black vinyl either. We wonder how many other *HFC* readers have made the bold move and stopped buying CDs in favour of LP? Let us know...

ACTIVE MONITORS - THE UNSUNG HERO?

I have two good ears, but I am yet to listen to an audio system that trumps my laptop-fed active monitor speakers. While I appreciate the aesthetic value of a

"...virtually all the music I'm into makes it onto 12 inch discs."

beautifully crafted system, aren't we forgetting their *raison d'être*; sound quality? While audio artisans, boffins, purists, and those with a burning desire to impress may appreciate the finer points of hi-fi, isn't the money best spent on active monitors?

Andy Miller Edinburgh

HFC Life is not so clear-cut, Andy. Near-identical arguments have been made for electrostatic loudspeakers, single-ended triode power amps, single-driver virtual point source loudspeakers, horn loudspeakers, ionic plasma tweeters, ribbon tweeters and pretty much every technology. Active monitors are great, but they are not the only music-led option by far. Many listeners prefer to be able to choose their amplification for themselves instead of having the decision made for them by the manufacturer. In many cases, this has nothing whatsoever to do with a 'burning desire to impress', but simply a desire to listen to music. 



Above: Townshend Rock V/Excaliber II

LETTER OF THE MONTH

BIG, UGLY, HOT AND HARD

I read your *High End 2008* feature (*HFC* 308) with great interest, because it made me realise just how irrelevant most of that stuff is today. What's the point of £95,000 loudspeakers and £17,000 valve amplifiers? No-one outside of a select few audiophiles have heard of brands like Gamut or Esoteric, so there's none of the status of a Ferrari and anyone who is able to afford stuff like this works so hard they never get to listen to it. Most of it is big, ugly, hot and hard to use and the companies that make high-end

equipment seem to be proud of these factors, as if they're making you suffer for your art. I've heard some high-end kit and while it's big and impressive sounding, it's often not as musical as my little system, which cost about £1,000 five years ago. Hasn't hi-fi taken a wrong turn somewhere?

Bill Pelling via email

HFC It's only a guess, but we reckon you'll not be buying our *Collection* edition in September. It is chock full of the biggest, ugliest, hottest and hardest to use hi-fi money can buy!

WIN
RUSS ANDREWS'
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The author of our 'letter of the month' will receive a free copy of Russ Andrews' excellent hi-fi book, *Sound Solutions*. This compact and invaluable tome is an excellent guide to getting the best out of the equipment you already own. So drop us a line, or email hifimail@futurenet.co.uk

□ COUNT ME OUT

I was appalled by your selection of *Jazz Masters* (HFC 309). How can you possibly have a collection of jazz without including Count Basie or Duke Ellington? And, since when has jazz been wholly instrumental – jazz would have been very different without the voices of Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan and Lena Horne among others. And yet, Miles Davis gets two discs out of the 12 allocated. Why?

Terry Olsen via email

HFC We wholly agree that there are glaring omissions and arguments could be made for including anyone from John Abercrombie to John Zorn on the list. It's a problem without a solution too; trying to squeeze almost a century's worth of extremely diverse music into a list 12 albums long is impossible. And, whatever you might think of Miles Davis, his prolific output and his frequent genre jumps makes his work run like a red thread through post-bop jazz.

CD GLOOM

I read on the BBC website that album sales slipped eleven per cent last year in the US. Most of that is down to poor CD sales, because downloads are up. The same thing happened last year both in the US and UK. Does this mean music companies will soon drop CD in favour of downloading soon?

Nick Wheeler via email

HFC Switching off CD seems unlikely for now. Downloads may have replaced CDs for many people, but the download is meant as an alternative – not a replacement – to CD. This means as long as a fair proportion of the music-buying public choose not to obtain their music online, there will be CDs to support them. However, at the current rate of change, CD may one day become the 'alternative' music source, not the 'mainstream' one, just like LP is the alternative music source to CD.

BACK TO MONO

With Japanese companies abandoning home cinema for stereo products, why don't British hi-fi manufacturers go back to their mono roots? Monophonic sound isn't afflicted by phase and other problems that beset stereo. To my mind, most things sound better in mono.

William Atkins Notts

"I can tell when my kids are on their computers in the evening, because my hi-fi sounds worse."

HFC As far as we can tell, Japanese companies like Denon, Pioneer and Yamaha who have returned to stereo have not abandoned home cinema. All of these big names have feet in both camps these days. Mono does have its advantages as you suggest, but most people are so used to listening to music in more than one channel, mono is too big a step backwards.

BLUETOOTH FILLING

What is Chord thinking? Bluetooth might be fine for headsets and beaming ringtones from PC to phone, but to consider this a real-world hi-fi system? This new Chordette Gem (see HFC 310) is either the oddest range-filler in hi-fi, or a sign of an otherwise intelligent audio brand slipping its moorings. I can't help thinking that it's both!

Tariq Hammoud via email

HFC Bluetooth is a remarkably stable wireless data transmission system and – coupled with the recent A2DP technology boost – is capable of delivering a high-quality digital audio datastream along the same lines. There's no reason for a Bluetooth enabled device to have intrinsically poor audio quality, even if current examples of the breed (people playing music through their telephone speakers) are not up to much. The Chordette Gem allows that Bluetooth device to act as a high quality portable music storage device, treating the data held on that device with the same respect normally given to CD datastreams. After all, it's called 'wi-fi'... why not make Bluetooth live up to the 'fi' part?

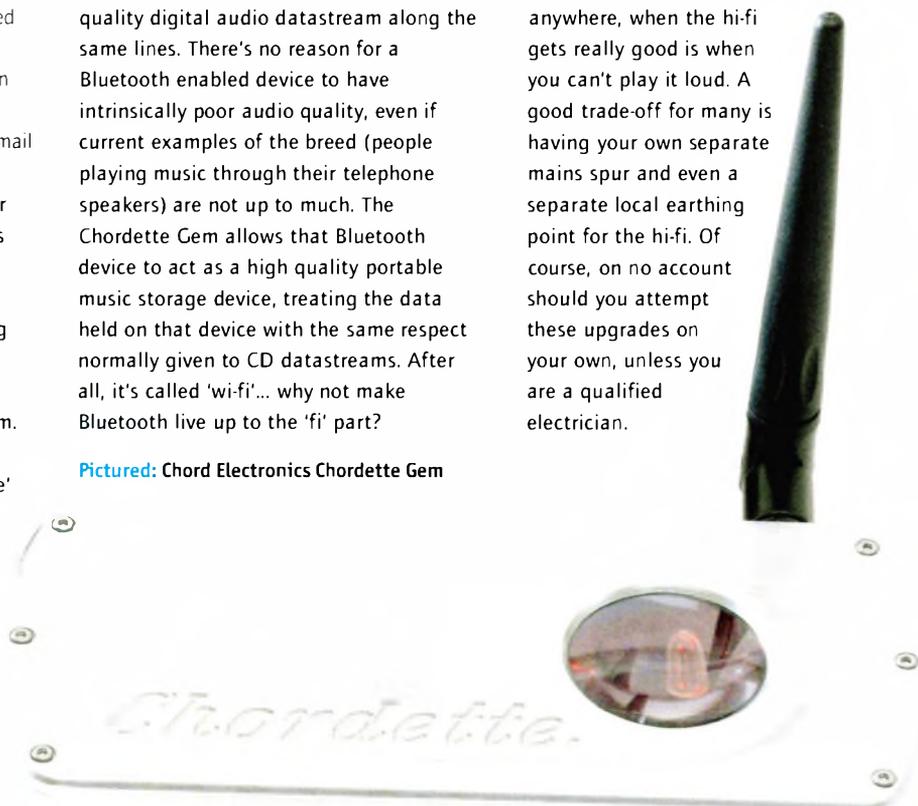
Pictured: Chord Electronics Chordette Gem

THE MAINS EVENT

I've found that more technology means less good sound and I blame the mains. I can tell when my kids are on their computers in the evening, because my hi-fi sounds worse. The same applies to the times when the Missus plays a DVD in the back room. It's not the sound from these products that spoils the performance of my system, it's simply having them powered up. Extrapolating that out to all the computers in nearby streets, is that why my system sounds best about 2am?

Alan Chandler via email

HFC It's not just the computers and DVD players that are putting a hex on your hi-fi. It's pretty much everything on the mains. Those millions of kettles that click on during the ad break in *Corrie*, your fridge deciding it's time to get frosty again, anyone using a lighting dimmer switch nearby... all contribute to poor mains. As these interferences go to sleep, so the performance of your system gets better, but unless you live miles from anywhere, when the hi-fi gets really good is when you can't play it loud. A good trade-off for many is having your own separate mains spur and even a separate local earthing point for the hi-fi. Of course, on no account should you attempt these upgrades on your own, unless you are a qualified electrician.



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TOP-HEAVY CD

Dear Alan,

I recently bought a second-hand Meridian 588 CD player, to replace my Arcam CD73. Now the funny thing is that my amplifier is a Marantz PM 7001 (speakers are DALI Ikon 6), which means that the new price of the CD player is roughly six times the price of the amplifier! But it sounds brilliant. Surely I can still improve a lot on the amplification, but to me this is 'hifi-logic' turned upside down. Or is this a case of a lucky shot in terms of finding the right combination?

Ernst Goselink Amsterdam, Holland

HFC We'd consider this a form of the 'top-down' systems that were popular in the 1980s. Back then it wasn't unheard of for people to use a turntable like a Linn LP12 as source and then connect it to a NAD 3020 and a pair of Wharfedale Diamonds. The thinking underpinning this concept was simple; that you can't improve the sound of the source. Although generally today 'source first' systems are no longer so rigidly enforced, your system shows there's still life in the concept.

You are quite correct in suggesting the amp can do with an upgrade. And we'd suggest going a bit crazy in the upgrade stakes, too. Why not look at an amplifier like the Pure Sound A30, a sumptuous valve amp that would work wonders with the DALI speakers. That would make a system that would be hard to beat.

BIG ROOM DYNAMICS

Dear Alan,

I am looking to buy a system comprising CD player, a stereo amplifier and floorstanding loudspeakers. I listened to a system consisting of a Rega Apollo CD player, Rega Mira 3 amplifier and Totem Arro loudspeakers. Although I liked the sound, I felt it missed something (bass?).

I would like to start from the Rega Apollo CD player as it is a top buy according to your excellent magazine. So my question is: which amplifier and which floorstanders would you recommend to make a perfect match? I am contemplating about the Naim Nait 5i, Cyrus 6vs2 or Roksan Kandy Mk LIII. My living room is not very small and rather 'hollow' so I think I need smoothness and warmth.

Erik Nijs via email

HFC The first choice would be the Roksan here; the combination of power and smoothness will win out in this context. You'll need the power to drive a pair of speakers in your room, too. We suggest looking at the Neat and PMC ranges of speakers, which offer the dynamics and bass you require, without sacrificing other elements of the performance in the process. Don't be too quick to dismiss the Totems, though, they are wonderful loudspeakers.

WHICH CD PLAYER?

Dear Alan,

I am currently looking for a CD player to team up with the rest of the kit that I have recently purchased, which comprises the Krell KAV 400xi integrated amplifier and the ATC SCM 19 speakers. My music tastes span from classical to Indian jazz (Nitin Sawney) to R'n'B.

Basically, I have a shortlist of CD players and I was wondering if you can either help me shorten the list based on the rest of my kit and my taste in music or even better say something

along the lines of 'without a doubt go for X'

It is impossible for me to demo all of these with my kit so if I can at least narrow it down to hopefully two or three then that saves a lot of time. Anyway, the list is as follows: Bryston BCD1, Copland CDA823, Gamut CD3, Leema Antilla (which I have heard with my kit), Marantz SA-11S2, Moon CD 5.3rs, Naim CDX2 and Resolution Audio Opus 21

Quite a long list, I know, but not my fault – there are so many decent products out there I don't want to be spending more than the price of the Gamut, which I believe is the most expensive player in this list. If it helps further at all, the room these items are going in is a 4.3m square room.

Raj Jobanputra via email

HFC We would narrow the list down to: Bryston, Moon and Resolution Audio then try to hear any or all of them. It's not critical that they be in your system, but that they are in a relatively neutral system, so avoid valves, unusual speakers etc. We really like all three but if pushed, we have to say that the Moon has the edge.

WHICH HIGH-END CD?

Dear Alan,

My current system comprises an Audionet ART G2 + EPS (External Power Supply) CD player, Leben CS-600 integrated amplifier, Living Voice OBX-RW loudspeakers, with Kondo speaker cables and interconnects and EPS Statement and Signature power cables. But now, I would like to buy a really good CD player. I have read reviews that speak well of the Chord Red Reference, the dCS Puccini and the Esoteric X-01 D2, but what do you recommend for my system?

Mário Dias via email

HFC Given your system as it currently stands, the Esoteric model would fit the bill

THE OTHER HALF

Dear Alan,

Our hi-fi sounds awful and it's my husband's fault! We own a Mission CD and amp and Mission 753 speakers, which were all bought about a decade ago. They sounded great until my other half started panicking at the sight of soft cushions. He has got this ultra-minimalistic, obsessive-compulsive thing going on. The living room floor is wood veneer, the walls are white and almost bare and everything else is steel and leather. It's like spending your evenings in an architect's reception. Is there anything I can do to stop this room from sounding like a big bathroom?

Katie Cooper via email

HFC Minimalistic living rooms are possibly the acoustically worst places you can plonk a hi-fi system, because the room will often have a short 'flutter echo' or 'slap echo' that will ruin

perfectly. That said, neither of the other two products are exactly behind the curve and will work well in any context. But the Esoteric goes for harmonic richness and structure, where the dCS goes for utter precision and the Chord goes for a more intense visceral, muscular approach.

Instead of cutting back on choices, we'll add more. Sorry about that. Check out the Accuphase DP-78 SACD/CD player and the 47 Laboratories digital product line. Any of these will prove a perfect match for a potentially top-notch system.

WHICH CD BURNER?

Dear Alan,

My Marantz DR 6050 CD recorder finally bit the dust. I would like a replacement, but they seem hard to come by these days and those that are on sale seem to have been on sale for a very long time. I would rather not rely on a PC to record my music, because I don't like the idea of converting the music into MP3 on a hard disk only to download it to CD once again. Are there any new CD-Recorders in the pipeline?

Marc Schaffer via email

HFC The audio CD-R/RW joins the compact cassette and more recently the MiniDisc on the endangered audio species list. There are a couple of surviving products in the domestic market – the Sony RCD-W100 and Yamaha CDR-HD1500 – with pro models from Alesis and Tascam and full recording studios in a box from Boss.

The domestic models are both several years old; of the two, the RCD-W100 is a traditional twin-drawer model like your old Marantz, while the Yamaha saves music to hard disk before writing a CD. It need not store in MP3 format, though, and makes a very fine CD-R.

the sound of the midrange. The two terms are misnomers (they are reverberations) and virtually interchangeable – slap echoes tend to be slightly shorter than flutter echoes, because slap is generated from sounds bouncing into the corners of walls, where flutter springs from wall to wall. Sadly, the only way to treat these slaps and flutters is to either furnish the room more heavily or use specific room treatments in key areas, which go heavily against the minimalist approach and may not be acceptable.

You can try adding sheets of Gyproc behind any posters or pictures that hang on the wall and then moving these to be near the first reflection points of the speakers, but this will not be a substantial improvement. The best scheme would be to try and come to some arrangement with your husband, or maybe even move the hi-fi into a less uncompromising room in your home).

KARMA KAN KURE

Dear Alan,

I haven't been keeping up with hi-fi for many years. My system is consequently quite old (Linn LP12/Ittok/Karma turntable, Rotel RCD-965BX CD player, Naim NAC 32.5/HI-CAP/NAP 250 amp, Linn Kan speakers on Kan II stands, all wired with NAC A4 speaker cable) and now I have several issues.

My cartridge sounds really worn and tired and I've been told I need a new one, but I have no idea what to choose that sounds like the Karma did. In addition, one of my Kans has started to develop a nasty buzz in the bass. Apparently there are no drive units left to repair this, but – like the cartridge – I'd rather not change it unless absolutely necessary. Finally, I wonder if there's a CD player that finally lives up to my Linn LP12 – I've tried recent Linn and Naim CD players, but still don't like the sound.

George Theotokis via email

HFC It's good news all round, George. Send the Karma to Expert Stylus & Cartridge Co (01372 276604, or email info@expertstylus.co.uk) for retipping and a full service. This normally costs around £250 (slightly more if the cantilever is damaged) and will bring your LPs to life again. Once it's back, treat your LP12 to a set up at a good Linn dealer.

Wilmslow Audio (www.wilmslow-audio.co.uk) supply a Monacor drive unit 'replacement' for the Kan's KEF B110 drivers. Alternatively, Recone Lab (reconelab@loudspeakersonline.com) can rebuild damaged drive units.

As to the CD player, at the lower end of the scale, Rega's excellent CD players are commonly used with Naim electronics, while Bryston's BCD-1 is the only 'commonly' touted high-end alternative.

ALAN'S TIPS ACOUSTIC TREATMENT

It's strange that many people spend thousands on their hi-fi systems without considering how the room in which it's housed will influence performance. In some respects, the room acoustics are more important than the hi-fi itself; being installed in a totally inappropriate room with dreadful acoustics has ruined many a great system. You can, of course, engage the services of an acoustics engineer, who can provide outstanding improvements to any room, but at a cost that will make almost any hi-fi system seem cheap. The shocking thing is that treating most rooms rarely requires 'pro' (read: ugly) treatments or even much expense to improve substantially.

The first thing is to place the system in the room according to the manufacturer's instructions. Then listen and adjust it carefully until it sounds as best as you can get it. Also clap your hands together while pointing them close to the corners of the walls and ceiling; ideally, your handclap should not reverberate dramatically, but not be acoustically 'dead' either (clap your hand close to a big mirror and a cloth-covered sofa to hear the extremes of an acoustically 'live' and 'dead' environment).

If the room is too lively, place rugs and paintings along the floor and side walls near the first reflection point, where the sound from the tweeters bounces off the floor and walls (this can be found by sitting in the listening position and have someone move a mirror along the side wall to find the point where you can see the drive units). If the room is too dead, take out the soft furnishings and rugs (you could even place mirrors in those first reflection points in extreme cases). To help remove flutter echoes from handclaps in the corners of the room, put up polystyrene coving. Many canny dealers put the empty boxes of floorstanding loudspeakers in the rear corners of the room to help soak up excess bass; you can do the same with plants.

Finally, break up any reflections bouncing off the rear wall, by storing your records, CDs or books there. Or, best of all, a combination of all three, all tightly packed to stop rattles. Now go back to the system and play. Then try moving it once more. The difference may amaze you.

These simple cheap tricks may not turn a bad room into a great one, but will help bring out the best in your hi-fi.



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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.



EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

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- 46** Opera Callas loudspeaker
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OUR RATINGS EXPLAINED

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

Our overall conclusion

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

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

VALUE ★★★★★

OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

PRO Good build and open, lively sound from a valve DAC with plenty of inputs. Transport is also great value for money.

CON DAC doesn't engage as well as the transport with loss of weight and power through the bass unless you prize some quality. Cables cost extra and competitors from single-chassis designs won't help.

Advance Acoustic is being very ambitious producing a two-box player of this build quality and price. Something just has to give and it is the DAC, which can't do justice to the transport's efforts.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

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 four stars may qualify for an HFC Award Badge

OUR AWARD BADGES EXPLAINED



Best Buy

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



Editor's Choice

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

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



Naim that tune

Is the hard disk the new audiophile source? The Naim HDX has us convinced

PRODUCT Naim HDX

TYPE CD/hard disk player

PRICE £4,500

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43.2x8.7x31.4cm
• Weight: 10.8kg • Capacity: 400GB (approx 600 uncompressed CDs) • Analogue outputs: 1x DIN, 2x RCA phono • Upgradable • Touch-screen interface

CONTACT ☎ 01722 426600 🌐 www.naim-audio.com

The Naim HDX is a hard disk player. It's not a hard disk server. That distinction isn't mere semantics; it's Naim encouraging potential customers to view this new-generation machine as a stand-alone, high-class hi-fi component, which is what it's primarily designed to be. The HDX is intended

to sit alongside the other sources in your hi-fi system rather than skulk under the stairs or hide in a cupboard with the rest of the gadgetry in a distributed audio set-up. And it's quite capable of handling all that custom-installation malarkey, but if that's what you're after, there's a range of NaimNet HD servers specifically designed for that purpose.

No, the HDX is aimed squarely at the audiophile – it's even performance-upgradeable through the addition of external power supplies. We tried it solo and with the £2,750 XPS2; if you've been financially blessed, the £4,750 555PS is doubtless the top option, although that's just an educated

guess, as we weren't fortunate enough to have one to try. Don't fret if you can't afford a power supply straight away, though – the HDX starts life more than adequately powered, as do most Naim electronics. That said, the sonic and musical differences the XPS2 makes are instantly appreciable and once you've heard them, you won't feel inclined to do without!

In addition to offering thoroughly modern convenience features, the HDX is a no-holds-barred example of Naim's traditional, 'God is in the detail' audiophilia. The prime manifestation of this is the CD-ripping 'engine', the mix of mechanics and software



used to create bit-perfect copies of the CDs fed into the front-panel drawer. Rather than rely on the widespread 'burst mode' ripping technology, which is prone to introducing and perpetuating errors, the Naim ripper works more methodically, reads discs multiple times and uses no caching to ensure you get replay that's free from inaccuracies or time offsets.

There are several ultra-convenient ways to operate this hard-core player. You can control it via its front-panel touchscreen, or using the supplied remote control with the display's output appearing on a TV. You can just as easily access it through a PC on the same network, or with a device such as a Nokia N800 Web tablet. Those with 20/20 vision could even use a Flash-enabled Web browser on a suitably flash mobile phone.

Music ripped onto the HDX winds up on a specially selected Seagate hard disk and every night it's automatically backed up to a similar internal drive. If you need more storage than the 400GB provided it's possible to add external disks in the form of USB drives or NAS (Network Attached Storage, which should also be frequently backed up for security) and, of course, the player can read shared files on any computer that's attached to the same network. Although the HDX will play a variety of file types, including WAV, FLAC and MP3, it only rips in uncompressed WAV format. As a result, its drive will accommodate about 600 CDs.

Feeding the HDX with new material is about the only boring aspect of using it; you could say the same, however, of any player or server with similar capacity. We used an NAS

“In addition to modern convenience features, the HDX is a no-holds-barred example of Naim’s traditional ‘God is in the detail’ audiophile.”

(network-attached storage) device from Linksys and USB drives from Western Digital and Seagate. While the HDX is near silent in operation, that wasn't always true of the Linksys, which we parked in our listening room, but could, of course, be situated anywhere within reach of your network cabling. One word of warning here, though: don't scribble on the drives you use in your NAS or USB boxes. Many data drives that function well in a normal PC environment perform poorly when asked to stream data, so, where possible, buy drives recommended for their streaming capabilities, such as the Seagate DB35 models. Naim will shortly release a list of recommended devices that have been proven to work well with the player.

We listened to the HDX mostly with an XPS2 power supply through a Naim NAP 250 tri-amp system driving active Naim DBL speakers, with the player and the CDS CD player connected to the NAC52 preamplifier with identical Chord Company Indigo DIN-to-DIN cables. We also used a smaller passive system featuring a Naim Supernait and Neat Petite speakers on Partington Super Dreadnought stands

SOUND QUALITY

The first thing you notice with the HDX is the ease with which you can listen to it. The sound

has none of the ragged edge or fragility you occasionally still experience even with high-quality CD players. This isn't to say the HDX sounds overly smooth or too polished. In fact, it does a fine job of sympathetically handling music that has a genuine raw edge. Its sound simply exhibits a sense of composure and unflappability, even when the music becomes utterly frantic.

Rodrigo y Gabriela's guitar playing on their self-titled album serves to demonstrate the superb control of the HDX alongside its musicality; it drags every scrap of detail and nuance from the recording, and replays it with a beautiful sense of flow, fluency and dynamics. And those dynamics are impressive for their precise gradation. Too many listeners imagine dynamics as a one-way street, wherein quiet sounds suddenly become louder. The HDX capably shows that they function just as effectively in the opposite direction, with louder sounds diminishing in volume. The dynamic gradation effectively differentiates the two guitars here, along with the two players and their different but complementary styles.

Furthermore, this dynamic acuity, along with the player's faithful recreation of note shape, adds chiaroscuro and genuine texture to the music. This is particularly noticeable when ▶

Q&A

We spoke to Naim's managing director, Paul Stephenson, about this intriguing new product from the company



HFC: Who do you envisage buying the HDX primarily – mainly early adopters?

PS: The HDX for many people will be a digital music hub bringing music files from home PCs, laptops, iPods and other drives into the main listening room. For some people it will be an archive and CD replacement. I think that most HDXs will be purchased by music lovers looking to find an easier way to store and play their music, but who aren't prepared to compromise sound quality to do so.

Are you at all concerned that sales of the HDX will affect those of your CD players?

No, I think the CD medium will look after itself; our CD players offer world-class performance from the silver disc, and for many CD will still be the way to go for many years. I think the HDX will live alongside our high-end CD players. It took years for CD to truly establish itself and I think it'll be some time before home hard disk music players take its place.

As the HDX is controlled by software, are there plans to add any new functions in the future, which, we assume, will be available as 'updates'?

Yes – I'm keen to add internet radio. It's totally feasible and the key bits are already in the HDX, but our software guys are insistent that we spend plenty of time testing before release. Much as I'm impatient to see the extra feature, they're right; we'll spend quite a lot more time testing before we even release a beta, to selected customers.

Why is there only 400GB of storage provided when disk prices are so low these days?

A good question. We chose the drives – from an excellent technical partner, Seagate – that performed well and were quiet. As an example, the 500GB drive is considerably louder in operation, and so in our opinion less interesting. We've always planned for the fact that our customers will add more hard disk space as they need it with NAS devices. We'll be publishing our suggestions as to suitable NAS drives when our tests are complete.



▣ Gabriela slaps the soundboard of her guitar and the full woody resonance – rather than just a dull, anonymous thud – emerges. The sheer vibrancy of the sound of the two instruments lends real excitement to the music – even to the duo's recreation of that stodgy old warhorse *Stairway to Heaven*.

Earlier we mentioned the benefits of adding an external power supply to the HDX. It's important to recognise that this doesn't bring about rudimentary improvements: it isn't a case of the player not doing something or doing anything wrongly without the power supply. The addition of the XPS2 or, we expect, the 555PS, simply enhances what's already present – instruments and vocalists gain a greater sense of body and presence and the most minute nuances surface readily from the depths of a mix to garnish the proceedings.

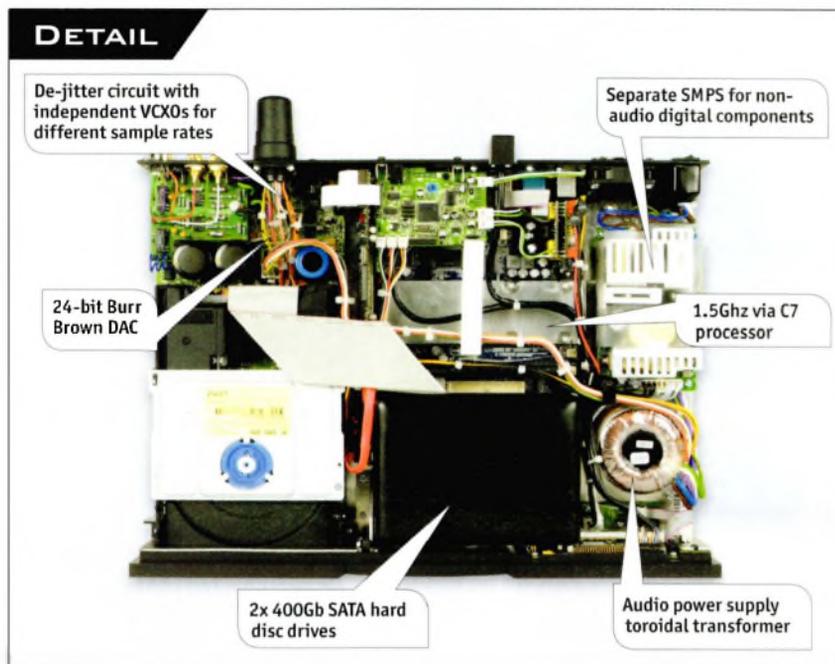
Alongside such hi-fi considerations, the HDX turns in an equally remarkable musical performance, which we assessed by

simultaneously listening to a Dr Feelgood CD and a rip of the same disc that we'd stored on the player's hard drive. The CD player used, a Naim CDS, is no slouch, and its performance, while spirited, is certainly not edgy – so it came as a surprise that the HDX/XPS2 managed to surpass it in several important respects. In comparison with the CDS, its dynamic contrast – in particular the way notes finish – lends its timing a sharper edge and provides a keener sense of space around the notes. At the same time, its sound has a more refined quality that's especially noticeable with hi-hat, which sounds, well, more like a hi-hat – you can hear the rush of air escaping as the hi-hat closes and the change in timbre when the two cymbal elements come together. Hi-hats can often sound disappointingly insubstantial, but that isn't the case here. It might only be a small consideration, but the difference in presentation is distinct and greatly increases the realism of the performance.



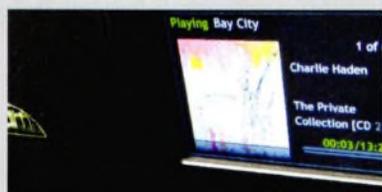
The greater sense of space also means that fast guitar lines are rendered with greater flow and clarity. Instead of them merging into a blurred flurry of notes, you can hear a clear melodic progression even on the speediest of arpeggios or sweep-picked phrases.

Perhaps, though, the composure and expressive abilities of the HDX – particularly when powered by the XPS2 – are most forcibly demonstrated with classical music, which is frequently rendered in such a captivating manner that even avid rock-music devotees will be keen to listen to it. We played both high-definition (96kHz/24-bit) and standard (44.1kHz/16-bit) recordings and each of them was portrayed with palpable instrumental timbre and within a credible acoustic environment. You can not only sense the reverberant qualities of the surroundings, but virtually pinpoint the position of the recording microphones. Ultimately, however, what emerges isn't just more detail or more timbre, but more music. The voices of the choir and soloists on Berlioz's oratorio *L'Enfance du Christ* exhibit a naturalness and fluency that's completely intoxicating, while the orchestra and leader on Dvorák's *Violin Concerto*, particularly in the *Allegro ma non troppo*, mix awe-inspiring



“...the composure and expressive abilities of the HDX are most forcibly demonstrated with classical music...”

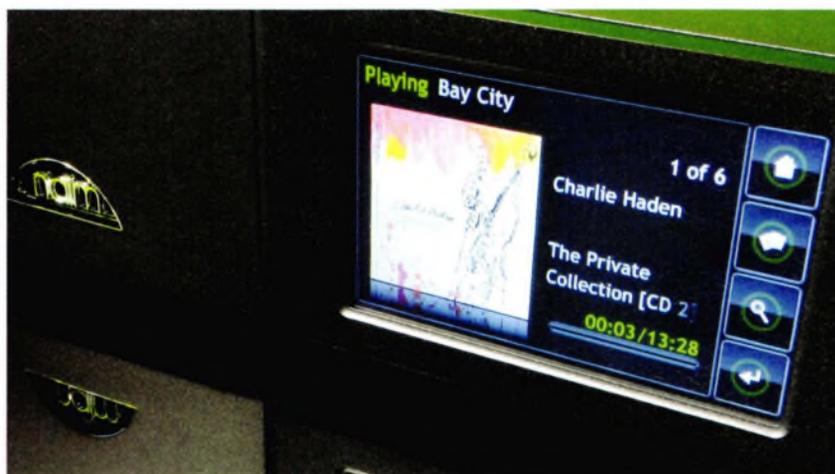
NAIM'S EXTENDED MUSIC DATABASE



Hard disk players traditionally store music in a database to enable you to retrieve it by searching for album names. This doesn't reflect the way that normal users select music stored on physical formats, especially those listeners who enjoy classical music, jazz and compilation albums.

Naim developed its Extended Music Database to counter the shortcomings with other search systems and to provide a more worthwhile 'user experience'. The company has created an internal database for the player using data from AMG (All Music Guide) among other databases, along with some sophisticated internal processing of the downloaded information.

In other words, searching for material is often quicker than finding the album in a well-organised music library, while the level of information displayed by the hard disk player (while playing music) is designed to rival the CD sleeve notes for added convenience.



weight with a delicacy of touch that delights as it reveals ever more about the performance quality.

We would argue, however, that the true measure of any hi-fi component's worth is whether you can read, write or truly concentrate on anything else while that component is playing. With the HDX, the answer to that question is a resounding no. We didn't expect to be won over by a computerised box of tricks, but we have. Now, it would seem, our rooms need no longer be littered with CDs. After all, who, apart perhaps from CD555 owners, really needs a CD player any more? **HFC**

Malcolm Steward

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	PRO A discreet-looking, but fabulous-sounding hard disk player that marries exemplary performance with extreme convenience.
FEATURES ★★★★★	CON It doesn't provide the tactile satisfaction of playing LPs or CDs. But that's not what the HDX was designed to do, so that's hardly a legitimate criticism.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	

CONCLUSION
This is a wonderful machine, whose music-making is additively persuasive. Strangely, its sound often struck us as displaying near analogue characteristics. It's certainly a must-hear before you even consider buying a new CD player.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

URL www.techradar.com/429074

EDITOR'S CHOICE
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine
★



An opera star

Innovative Italian standmount flaunts impressive technology

PRODUCT Opera Callas

TYPE Standmount loudspeaker

PRICE £2,195 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD) 23x37.5x34cm

○ Weight 12.5kg ○ Front drivers: 2x 25mm tweeters (neodymium) ○ 130mm mid/bass unit (magnesium)

○ Rear drivers: 3x 25mm tweeters (neodymium)

○ Sensitivity 86dB ○ Impedance 4 ohms (nominal)

○ Available in cherry or mahogany finishes

CONTACT ☎ 01753 652669 # www.ukd.co.uk

We first heard the Callas loudspeaker about a year ago at Opera's own factory near Venice. At the time it was a work in progress, but even then we were suitably impressed by its balance and overall coherence.

All drivers are manufactured by SEAS of Norway and customised for the role. And, whereas the original Callas was a more or less a conventional two-way design, this model boasts two coated Sonotex, fabric dome, front-facing tweeters with neodymium magnets. This reduces the overall diameter enough for all the drivers to be tightly packed together. They flank the sophisticated 125mm magnesium cone bass/mid driver, which also features a solid copper heat-dissipating phase plug, copper rings each side of the T-shaped pole piece, a 38mm low-inductance aluminium voice coil and a wide linear excursion (14mm peak). The design is also optimised for low distortion and compression. In addition, there are also three rear-facing tweeters, identical to the ones on the front, except that they are protected by mesh fingerguards. This feature is not unprecedented. Something similar was used, for example, with Opera's Tebaldi and Caruso, but it has been re-engineered for the Callas to fit the more restricted baffle area. The rear-facing triplet shares the rear panel with two small reflex ports and a single pair of high-quality 4mm terminals.

Although all five tweeters are physically similar, they're not all utilised in the same way. Using a three-section crossover with two independent sections for the front-facing tweeters, one is progressively rolled out of circuit as the frequency rises. The crossover includes an impedance-matching network on the front tweeters and the system has a

impedance of 3.2 ohms (minimum) and a nominal 4 ohms overall impedance.

Sensitivity is rated at 86dB/watt/meter, which is moderately impressive for such a compact speaker design.

If the two front tweeters are lumped together, it can be treated as a third order (18dB/octave) high-pass network, with an impressively low crossover frequency of

“It isn't strictly necessary to throw exotic hardware at the Opera in order to bribe it into singing like a thoroughbred...”

1.5kHz, the bass unit rolling in at 12dB/octave. The additional tweeter(s) serve to improve power handling ability as well as improving dispersion. Below about 2kHz, the two front tweeters produce the same SPL. The rear-facing tweeters are crossed over at 2kHz, which is calculated to produce an even overall response on the main listening axis. The crossover coils have ferrite cores and low permeability cores, while the capacitors are high-tolerance, high voltage MKT devices.

The build and finish quality is superb, with the baffle dressed in leather (also a common practice with Sonus Faber). The enclosure itself is more sturdily built than most and is finished in a choice of cherry or mahogany, with a translucent lacquer finish. It's manufactured from a combination of MDF, plywood and solid wood, with a classic teardrop cross section. The baffle and back panels are made from 30mm-thick MDF at the front and 60mm at the back (shaped to mitigate cabinet-edge diffraction) and the sides are made from 30mm multi-layer plywood, the stiffness of which is partly determined by the multiple layers of wood and glue, as well as its curved shape. The top, base and sides are made from 40mm-thick solid wood, while the veneered areas are made from butt-jointed sections. The cabinet looks initially as though it is constructed from staves, but the finish is nothing less than exceptional and fully justifies the price tag.

SOUND QUALITY

The wait for the new generation Callas has been worthwhile. It sounded good a year ago as a prototype and it is clearly good now, both at the factory and when listening on a system with a range of ancillary equipment from Krell, Goldmund and others (read more about these in *HFC's The Collection 2008*, on sale 18 September). It isn't, however, strictly necessary

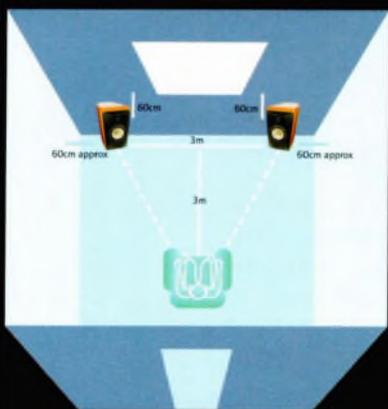
to throw exotic hardware at the Opera in order to bribe it into singing like a thoroughbred, but there is more than enough substance to make the effort and expenditure worthwhile.

Given its diminutive stature, the Callas is a surprisingly grown-up loudspeaker, which is capable of making a more than decent stab at larger scale orchestral works without any danger that it will end up sounding emasculated. The bass is acceptably deep and pure and it has more authority than you would expect from such a compact design. It is certainly tuneful and the result is that the speaker performs with great conviction.

As the technical description implies, the Callas needs extra reinforcement from the back firing tweeter triplet. With the appropriate acoustic reflecting conditions in place, the sound becomes bolder and sharper and more homogenous. However, from a vantage point near either loudspeaker the image tends to fall into the local loudspeaker, which is to be expected. From anywhere near a central axis, or even moderately off-axis, the Callas tends to generate an image that is perceptibly taller than you would expect from a speaker this size (on the stands used) and this seems to improve the sense of an open, involving acoustic with most recordings. The Callas is also more tolerant than most and works well from a low or a high vantage point, which gives it a useful flexibility.

Beyond this, the Callas is a speaker of considerable stature. The use of multiple

SET-UP



POSITIONING

Care needs to be taken with set up and positioning. We used a 19-inch-high pair of very heavy, acoustically dead pedestal stands from Atacama and positioned them about 60cm from the back wall, experimenting with various positions from the side walls finally settling with around 60-70cms. or so

Further experiment showed that this choice, which looks visually appropriate, is also acoustically sound and makes a big difference to the musical presentation of the system. Place it too far out (say a metre and a half forward of the back wall), or fire its rear output into a soft, absorbent curtain, and the sound becomes a little weak and disembodied. The bass also loses some of its tautness and integration with the rest of the speaker's output. Using the speaker too close to a room corner also detracts from the overall effect, adding a false bloom to proceedings. Opera recommends toeing the speakers in so that their axes cross just forward of the listening plane, but this tends to give a rather tight unexpansive sound. A more moderate angle gives an open, better projected soundstage and greater image width, without any perceptible trade-off.

This is a speaker that needs a significant amount of running-in before it sounds completely at ease. Perhaps this is because so many overlapping drive units are involved, and the necessarily complex crossover which use different slopes for most of the tweeters. But there is no absolute right and wrong here: setting up is largely a matter of personal taste and may vary with the acoustics and furnishings of the room.

DETAIL



▣ tweeters is probably responsible for the unusual solidity of the sound and its much better than class-average homogeneity. At the factory we used a number of recordings, including CDs of large-scale orchestral material and was surprised at the level of grip and conviction that the diminutive Callas was able to bring to the party. It didn't sound offensive with other non-classical, smaller-scale material and this positive impression was reinforced by subsequent listening using the production pair that was shipped for review.

This approach of using additional tweeters to broaden out the stereo soundstage is far from unprecedented: Mirage has done

something similar for a long time and with similar results. The sound is broader and more tactile and more detached from the box and room interactions become in some respects more obvious.

By any standards this is an exceptional loudspeaker, which retains the neutral tonality and transparency of other good compacts and builds in the areas of solidity, stability and image height (the latter partly, it seems, a function of the unusual crossover design and the use of twin front-facing tweeters). It also boasts good power handling capacity and bass extension – the equal to, though probably not better than, others of its size. Imagery is particularly impressive: a carefully positioned Callas pair has an unusual stability and image scale, without detracting from such areas as subtlety and fluidity. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



VERDICT

SOUND



▣ **PRO**
Architecturally solid, refined sound quality, good imagery, even when not sitting in the obvious hotseat

EASE OF DRIVE



▣ **CON**
Some modest deterioration in sound at high volume levels and positioning is of utmost importance. Too far from the wall and sound can be weak. Too close and the sound over compensates

BUILD



VALUE



CONCLUSION

Another name to add to the roster of high-class compacts, the new Callas is technically sophisticated, so positioning is important. But, above all, meticulous voicing has contributed to its musical integrity.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE



URL www.techradar.com/429144



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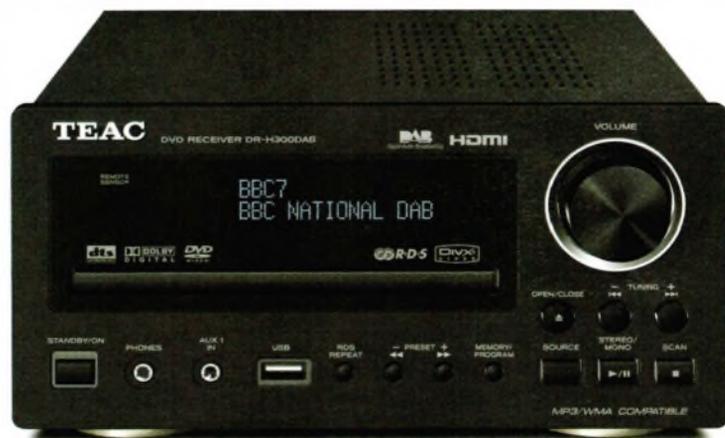
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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
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Fat fighter

Known for adding valves to Apples, Fatman has unveiled a 'serious' £1,500 integrated

PRODUCT Fatman iTube 452

TYPE Integrated valve amplifier

PRICE £1,500

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 26.5x42x15.4cm
• Weight: 23kg • Inputs: 4x line • Outputs: four and eight ohm loudspeaker taps • Rated power: 45 watts per channel • All-valve design • Supplied iPod dock

CONTACT ☎ 01462 492090 🌐 www.fat-man.co.uk

Fatman is, perhaps, best known for its compact valve amplification, often seen at A/V shows and dealers with Apple's iPod close by. The company has become synonymous with valve-based docking stations and brought 'analogue' to the diminutive digital device, but now it has upped the ante with a £1,500 no-nonsense valve amp.

Traditionally, Fatman products have comprised a dock with a small valve product attached, but the iTube 452 is different. The designed in the UK, made in China 45-watt per channel, full-sized integrated amp is beefy enough to stand on its own. As such, it's conceivable that people will buy one on the

basis of its audio performance and may never even take the iPod dock out of the box. It joins – at the top of the tree – the iTube ValveDock, iTube182 and 252 as standalone (read: speakerless) amp and dock systems; the range-topping iTube Mothership preamp and monoblocks are bigger still, but the flagship lacks the iPod docky component.

The amp is certainly cute. Resplendent in rich black matt paint, with a piano gloss top-plate and a layer of gold finish beneath the valve cage, the half-moon-shaped amplifier really looks the business. The valves (5x 12AX7s in the preamp stage and two pairs of self-biasing 6L6's in the power amp) are inset into the brushed-gold finish, which makes extracting the preamp tubes next to impossible, but gives them a low profile. This low profile is also aided in the source selector and volume control, which are on the glossy black top-plate. A VU meter on the front and a power switch on the right side of the amp complete the deal (a remote control comes with the unit, but don't get your hopes up – it only drives the dock).

Behind the four equally sized potted transformers lay four sets of phono sockets, an IEC socket for mains and two sets of speaker terminals. These have separate taps for four and eight-ohm loudspeakers and getting the impedance right does make a small difference to the sound. If in doubt, use the eight-ohm tap (better yet, experiment).

Repeat this like a mantra – Read The Ruddy Manual – because here it makes the difference between a perfectly working amp and replacing 13A fuses at a fair lick. The manual states the amp needs a five-minute cool down between power-ups. Miss this at your peril; the tubes will survive, but it will protect itself by taking out the mains fuse. We went through four mains cables before falling back on the manual. Similarly, the dock will power up (from its own plug-top power supply) and then turn itself off in a second, unless you turn it on from the remote and only the latest manual will tell you this. The latter does seem to be a limitation, though, a dock should spring to life automatically, not wait to be awoken by a gold handset.

On the subject of design, there seems to be a clash here. The predominantly black and gold, curvy amp is at odds with the black and chrome, angular ValveDock and the remote looks like it belongs to the amp, not the iPod product. This is not a big clash and is only skin deep, but there's not much in the way of family design, in the way other Fatman products mesh together. Part of the reason for this is the dock is common to the basic iTube, the iTube 182 and 252 amps, all of which are styled more in line with the 'ValveDock' (there are no valves in the ValveDock).

SOUND QUALITY

Given the Fatman name, it's only appropriate that we played tracks from late, lamented blues lard-tub, Freddie King. King's ability to wrest a groove out of a guitar was an inspiration to the likes of Clapton and all that followed down that path, so any potential flat spots in the amp's rhythmic performance. Fortunately, the iTube 452 turns in a very sweet sense of rhythm, or more accurately a



reasonably efficient and capable of handling a lot of power, but not the sort of boxes that explore the bottom of the deep-bass ocean as a matter of course. This is because the amplifier is not good at delivering deep, well-

“There’s a visceral sense to the sound. No shrinking violet here, music is presented red in string and stick; big, powerful and gutsy.”

very sweet sense of the melodic. No, it's not as tight as a solid-state amp, but what you lose in precision, you gain in fun factor.

Those 45 watts deliver one hell of a thwack, too. You can get to really turn up the wick to party levels, although you do get an extra dose of creamy-smooth even-order distortion when you decide to really raise the roof. This only makes things sound harmonically richer than usual (it's why guitar players still cling to valve amps). Not only can you turn the amp up to meaty levels, you find yourself drawn to the upper regions of the volume dial; not because the amp doesn't cut the music mustard at lower volumes, but just because you can.

You have to be canny in partnering up the iTube 452 though. The speakers need to be

controlled bass. We suspect this is down to iron, or the lack of it; the transformers could do with being bigger to help with the low notes. However, used with a pair of speakers that better match the amp, the rewards are potentially great.

There's a visceral sense to the sound of the iTube 452. No shrinking violet here, music is presented red in string and stick; big, powerful and gutsy. The accent is on the 'big' as the amp throws out a large-scale sound with a big, deep soundstage. These are not vital aspects to the sound though, what it has is 'mojo'. This elusive quality – part coherence, part dynamic range, part boundless energy – all adds up to an amplifier that just won't leave music alone.

All this talk of 'visceral' and describing the amp's 'mojo' underlies its one biggest flaw; it's not the most transparently neutral amp on the planet. Everything sounds really, really good through the iTube 452 and that's the problem; it pretties up music that sometimes doesn't need prettying up. Stick on something with plenty of boogie and you'll end up tapping your foot and playing air guitar; replace it with Schoenberg... and you'll end up tapping your foot and playing air cello. Every now and then, even the most heads-down of us want a brief view of the cerebral.

Oh yeah, there's an iPod dock, too... this is essentially neutral and the tone of the iPod sound is largely informed by the amplifier itself. This helps smooth out anything recorded in 128kbps AAC or less.

Like the girl with the curl, when the iTube 452 is good, it's very, very good and when it's bad, it's horrid. But if you like the enticing and downright funky (in a 'hot damn' not 'last year's stilton' sense) presentation, make a date with the Fatman and try it for size. **HFC**

Alan Sircom



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Hugely entertaining in the right system, delivering a creamy-rich valve sound that makes you want to tap your feet and turn up the loud button to the max.
FEATURES ★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON Bass limitations mean small speakers are the only legitimate option. Dock needs to be more intuitive. Not enough inputs for hi-fi use.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION The perfect antidote for anodyne audio, this enticing sound is nowhere near accurate, but it's capable of producing a loud and endlessly fun sound for those who like to party with their 'Pod and maybe want a CD player to go with it.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/434938	



Advanced audio

State-of-the-art CD player combines both old and new technologies

PRODUCT PrimaLuna Prologue Eight

TYPE CD player

PRICE £1,590

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 27.5x16.5x35cm
• Weight: 11.5kg • Analogue outputs: 1x RCA (unbalanced) • Digital outputs: 1x optical digital, 1x electrical • Valve output, plus valve in digital section

CONTACT ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.primaluna.nl

PrimaLuna is one of several manufacturers to have wholeheartedly adopted the principle of designing in Europe and manufacturing in China. The company is based in Holland and specialises in valve equipment which it divides into two

ranges, Prologue and the rather more upmarket Dialogue. The Prologue models share a case design, which must help keep costs down and partly explains the rather untypical dimensions of this unit.

The other part of the explanation is the use of valves. Small-signal valves in the output of a CD player are nothing new, but most are physically small and will fit in a much lower-profile case than this. PrimaLuna has gone one further, though, and included valve rectifiers which are considerably larger bottles. Until recently, valve rectification was strictly the stuff of deep, retro, kit-built electronics, but renewed production of the

relevant valves has brought it back in to the real world. It is claimed to be worth the extra trouble (and it's a lot of trouble, necessitating extra transformer windings for a start, never mind the extra space, valve sockets, etc.) because valve rectifiers typically produce less switching noise than solid-state types, reducing internal interference.

Even more surprising than that, though, is a valve in the digital section of this CD player. PrimaLuna claims this is a first and we've certainly no memory of it being done before in any production CD player. Although one might ask just what can a single valve contribute in a digital circuit with its

elements? The answer is that the valve in question, a tiny single triode concealed deep inside the player, forms the heart of the master oscillator which controls the digital-to-analogue conversion process.

PrimaLuna has an interesting justification for this, which is that transistor oscillators can contribute phase noise (jitter, in everyday audio parlance) because the transistors used have more bandwidth than is required to make the oscillator work. We're not absolutely convinced by this, since any well-behaved reference oscillator owes almost its entire performance to the passive component(s) at its heart – a crystal, in this and almost every CD player – but by the same token there's no reason to assume the valve won't work very well in its novel application. Apart from the

“... just what can a single valve contribute in a digital circuit with its hundreds and thousands of switching elements?”

listening, of course, the proof of this should be in the jitter, which PrimaLuna claims is particularly good by current CD player standards: again, we can't entirely concur, but only because many CD players in current production have such good jitter as to be practically unmeasurable.

The transport chosen by PrimaLuna is an audio-only one, which gives the player quick loading and mechanically quiet operation. The valves sit above it, while the rest of the audio circuit is beneath the rear enclosure, which houses the mains transformer. It's not all valve electronics, either – the critical digital-to-analogue converter chip is a modern part and it is connected to an asynchronous sample rate converter, while the analogue filter stage uses op-amps. These are the once-dented 5534, an audio veteran dating from the 1970s, which ten years ago was completely out of fashion in upmarket audio, but is now back on the shopping list for many designers.

That said, PrimaLuna doesn't claim that the 5534 is the ultimate in anything and has taken another unique step in making available an op-amp upgrade board. This is particularly clever: the (four) op-amps in the Prologue Eight, mounted in a line, in sockets. To fit the upgrade board, simply pull each op-amp from its socket and plug the upgrade in their place – it fits neatly into all four sockets and substitutes higher performance op-amps, offering lower noise and higher speed.



most these days are accurate in very large measure. In that case, we have to admit that the Prologue Eight is not the most accurate player we've heard. But on the other hand, it is one of the most appealing.

Obviously the degree of inaccuracy must be small and its type harmless, for the sound to be in any way acceptable to more than a handful of listeners. And that's certainly what is going on here. We don't want to suggest that the Prologue Eight is wildly off-beam, but there is just enough character about it to set it apart from the crowd and make it more than just another nice neutral player.

In terms of the basics, it does a straight enough job. The bass is strong and clear with good extension. Much the same could be said of the treble, while the midrange has just a hint of lift in the lower presence region, which very slightly favours female voice over male, violins over cellos ▶

The Prologue Eight's build quality is good, but the company has fallen into a trap of its own making with the rear enclosure, which is given a very high-gloss finish – unfortunately this shows up the minutest ripple in the underlying material. All the same, it's a smart piece of kit and the very luxurious all-metal remote control in no way lowers the tone.

SOUND QUALITY

Distinctive-sounding CD players are rare and one might choose to be absolutist and claim that as a blessing: either they're accurate or they're distorted and we're confident that



Q&A

We spoke with Herman van den Dungen, proprietor of Durob Audio BV and the initiator of the PrimaLuna line



HFC: The valve in the clocking circuit is indeed a novelty. Are you saying that the valve does a job that a transistor can't do as well here, or simply that it's a neater way of doing the job?

HD: Usually the clock oscillator uses a CMOS gate, which produces a lot of noise and harmonics along with the clock signal. Some jitter ends up in the data converters and superimposes noise on the audio signal, which is therefore noise modulated. So it is only logical to use a clean oscillator. A tube has a different noise spectrum from a transistor and since the noise spectrum directly relates to the 'sound' that the jitter lays over the audio signal, the noise of a tube sounds different from that of a transistor. It is a choice of which sound signature is preferred for a specific digital audio solution.

Many modern CD players have low jitter. Do ultra-low measurements make any kind of audible difference?

Yes, but there are many misunderstandings about the proper way to measure jitter and the interpretation of the data in relation to sound quality. Only jitter in the 0Hz-100kHz (roughly) sidebands of the clock frequency counts.

Valve rectifiers are also very unusual. What benefits do they offer?

Unlike semiconductors, valve rectifiers do not suffer from reverse conduction. This results in a lower noise contribution by the rectifier device.

How much of the Prologue Eight's sound do you attribute to the clocking circuit and how much to the output stage?

I would say that the clock is responsible for 40 per cent of the improvement above standard CD player quality, the I/V converter another 40 per cent and the valve output stage the remaining 20 per cent.

Do you think there is still much more improvement to be made in CD replay?

There is still much to improve, both in recording and in replay. I'd say we are only halfway, since 1983. There are still a whole lot of processes going wrong that will have to be addressed. Our experiments with 128FS (5.6MHz) DSD recording, sample rate converting and CD-production, as well as I/V converters, clocks and dedicated audio electronics indicate great improvements are on their way. We are currently working on the Dialogue Eight CD player and expect to make some more steps forward.

DETAIL



nothing particularly distracting, though, in anything but a direct comparison with other CD players it might go quite unnoticed. There's pretty good detail on offer and some very nice stereo imaging, too. The distinctive bit starts when one gets into a rather more prolonged listening session. For one thing, this is a subtly more rhythmic CD player than most. It's not quite as overt a rhythm king as classic Naim components, for instance, so one wouldn't necessarily notice at once, but after a little while one becomes aware that foot-tapping and air guitar have entered the picture and one may feel the need to tweak the volume upwards by half a notch or so, not to make up for anything missing from the sound, but because it's an unusually large amount of fun.

Not all music has a strong rhythm for a component such as this to maximise, but the Prologue Eight has other tricks up its sleeve. In classical music it slightly adjusts the usual perspective on the music, bringing the performers into rather sharper focus than usual. This isn't unequivocally a good thing, though, as it can slightly reduce the homogeneity of an orchestra, making each player more of an island rather than a contributing part of a whole. On the other hand, it suits chamber works very well, especially large ones such as Mendelssohn's *Octet*, for instance, where homogeneity is not so much the name of the game. Here, the importance of each player's contribution becomes clear and the overall result has a great feeling of presence.

Things are nearest to the 'conventional' version when simple musical forces are

involved and you won't quickly spot any great differences with simply accompanied voice, for instance. Solo piano is solid and believable, but not subject to remarkable new insights, while brighter instruments like violin seem a shade more present, perhaps a little further forward of the loudspeakers, but otherwise unsurprising.

To the extent that there is a downside, it's in the finest analytical detail of the music. If listening deep into the mix, digging out the subtlest difference between alternative takes, for instance, floats your boat, you may find this not the best player in the world. There's sometimes a little haze around the sound which reduces detail just a touch, but on balance we suspect most listeners will overlook that in the general enjoyment that this fine piece of audio electronics brings to any party. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

SOUND



PRO

A lively and above all involving player, which gets great musical value out of any decent recording and encourages both foot-tapping and extended listening sessions.

FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



CON

Fine detail is not the best we've ever come across. The case is highly resonant and could do with a little damping.

CONCLUSION

No one CD player will suit all tastes, but this one is likely to please many music lovers. It is different from the average in a subtly distinctive, but very communicative way and should be heard to be believed.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE



URL www.techradar.com/429351

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PowerMax Plus™, What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, April 2008.



Dec 2006

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Original PowerMax™ cable, Hi-Fi Choice, issue 288

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Integrated Amplifier £1000

- Larger power supply
- 110 watts RMS (as compared to 100W for the previous model)
- 6 line inputs, bi-wiring and bi-amping compatible
- Option to fit a MC or MM phono cartridge
- Remote control

Power Amplifier £800

- Larger power supply
- 110 watts RMS (as compared to 100W for the previous model)
- Capable of driving sophisticated speaker systems, in bi-amping mode or monoblock mode
- Clean and extended low frequency response

Get ahead

Audio-Technica's £700 flagship is a mixed bag

PRODUCT Audio-Technica ATH-W5000

TYPE Headphone

PRICE £700

CONTACT ☎ 0113 277 1441 🌐 www.audio-technica.com

In HFC 304 we raved about the £400 ATH-W1000 from Audio-Technica. Seeing as we've had a pretty good run of some fabulous headphones lately and finding that Audio-Technica had a model at nearly twice the price, we were more than merely curious. On arrival, the W5000 turned out to be one of the most glamorously packaged bits of hi-fi around. Housed in a plastic case, the interior of which is lined with red satin gave the product the appearance of some exceptionally rare wine or piece of antique jewellery.

But we want more than a nice presentation, we want quality. And the official description of the W5000 suggests there's plenty of that built in, from ebony ear cups to '8-nines' copper wire in the voice coil windings. As with the W1000, the ear cups are closed, making this a slightly more noise-blocking model than, for instance, upmarket Grados and Sennheisers. The seal to the ears is leather-lined, soft and comfortable, with support provided by an ingenious 'wing' headband, while the cable, a feature we criticised on the W1000 for transmitting frictional noise, is fairly flexible and considerably less noisy.

The heart of any headphone is, of course, the drive unit in each earpiece and these are 53mm-diameter types with a neodymium magnet. Audio-Technica gives no detail about the cone material, but the quoted treble response of 45kHz suggests it's something light. At the other extreme, bass is quoted to 5Hz, aided by a 'double air damping system' which presumably helps prevent bass resonance, one possible pitfall of closed-back headphones. Not that you'll hear 5Hz, of course... Weight is a little on the high side at 340g, but we found long-term use very pleasant.

SOUND QUALITY

In many ways, this is an admirable transducer. The relatively high sensitivity took a bit of

getting used to, but even after we'd adjusted our usual headphone amplifier settings we found that some kinds of high-frequency detail seem to stick out more than usual. This is only partly due to the W5000's slightly treble-rich balance and certainly bears tribute to the quality of the drive units. Of course, not all such detail is welcome, but at any rate you'll soon know if your favourite recordings are contaminated by buzzy hum, minute clicks or audible breathing from the backing band!

Despite that, detail is not always as good as one might like. When music gets dense and loud, the texture heard through the W5000 thickens considerably and the ultimate resolving power seems to us some way short of what we've heard from other high-end headphones. We'd wager that this is due to something in the design which contributes a very prolonged resonance. We noticed this by tapping the earcups with a fingernail while wearing the headphones, with no music playing. This simple test can be very revealing: ideally there should be a simple click of no distinct tone, followed by silence. With this model, there was a long (more than one second) tail of resonance, which must surely be excited by music and will then

proceed to colour the sound considerably and muddy detail.

The midrange and bass are certainly glorious and simple music is quite beautiful, giving a real life and energy to the bass, with sudden dynamic contrasts feeling very exciting. Whilst this is a good headphone offering high undistorted listening levels, on the whole, we prefer Audio-Technica's excellent ATH-W1000 at £400. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

SOUND



PRO

Fantastic bass, clean and rhythmic, with very extended treble too. High sensitivity and more than generous maximum sound output.

FEATURES



CON

Treble can be a little bright, and everything is undermined by a degree of muddle in complex sounds that we would find disappointing in a model at half the price.

BUILD



VALUE



CONCLUSION

Too much of a mixed blessing for straight recommendation, this headphone has potential that we hope future developments may be able to unlock. In the meantime, the excellent ATH-W1000 at £400 is what we'd recommend.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE



Image maker

The new XQ range from KEF brings sophisticated technology to Uni-Q

PRODUCT KEF XQ30

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £1,500 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 19x86x24 7cm
⊖ Weight: 14 8kg ⊖ 130mm Uni-Q main driver with 19mm tweeter, plus 130mm bass driver
⊖ Tangerine waveguide ⊖ Sensitivity: 87dB
⊖ Impedance: 8 ohms (nominal)

CONTACT ☎ 01622 672261 # www.kef.com

The XQ30 is an appealing slender floorstander from KEF's new XQ range, which currently includes a larger floorstanding loudspeaker, two compact two-ways (including the XQ20 reviewed in *HFC* 307) and a centre channel speaker. Currently there's no subwoofer in the range, although a dedicated model with matching finish will probably emerge in due course, although KEF

does have subs in other ranges. The XQ30 is the smaller of the two floorstanding models, an impressively slender compact that stands well under a metre tall and which, in the case of the test pair, is finished in a very fetching black gloss with a fine lacquer finish.

It's a three-way speaker, with a smallish dedicated bass driver supplementing a Uni-Q driver which, as always, incorporates a tweeter at the acoustic focus of the bass/midrange unit. The system is front-vented and is equipped with discreet outrigger feet at the back, where the enclosure is at its narrowest, for stability. KEF supplied the speaker with two different sets of floor-mounting hardware, a set of small pads which are intended for use on polished floors and carpet-piercing spikes. Also in the box are foam inserts to help tune the reflex port. If you find the system

overblown in the deep bass, then use the foam plugs to tune the bass down to around the port resonant frequency, which is somewhere in the 55Hz region.

Although KEF's patents on Uni-Q have lapsed in many territories, the technology has not been widely emulated elsewhere, though Tannoy use an alternative technology which does a similar job with Dual Concentric. Over the years, KEF has progressively refined Uni-Q to keep it abreast of the market and the XQ range uses completely revamped Uni-Q drivers. Two areas in particular have been addressed. First is the new profile for the interface between the tweeter and the bass unit, where the cone not only acts as a kind of horn loader for the tweeter, but is constantly moving fore and aft, therefore making this a tricky system to optimise. The new design is said to offer a much smoother tweeter response and

improved coupling between the two drivers. The other key change is the addition of the so-called Tangerine waveguide (the Tannoy counterpart, by the way, is known as the Tulip waveguide). This is a shaped piece, which from the front resembles a segmented tangerine in cross section and is placed in front of the tweeter in close proximity to the dome. It's designed to apply acoustic loading to the tweeter diaphragm, which increases towards the edge of the dome, where the dome geometry least resembles an ideal section of a pulsating sphere. Along with other changes, the units are said to offer better dispersion, improved integration and considerably reduced levels of harmonic distortion.

Construction of the system as a whole is undeniably impressive. The XQ30 is compact and elegant, with a teardrop cross-section using curved vertical panels to suppress internal reflections and cabinet resonances. The enclosure is equipped with high-quality bi-wire terminals.

Both larger cones are 130mm in diameter and the tweeter domes are made from aluminium, with an elliptical profile 19mm in diameter, rather than being hemispherical. Crossover frequencies are 450Hz and 2.5kHz, though the order of the crossover is not specified, sensitivity is rated at 87dB and impedance is rated at 8 ohms (nominal), though it dips down to 3.2 ohms. Power handling is up to 150 watts nominally and the system is magnetically shielded.

SOUND QUALITY

There are clear parallels between this model and the XQ20, as the XQ30 perpetuates the lean, dry balance of its smaller counterpart. Its main components are a degree of tonal brightness and a suggestion – usually no more than this – of aggression associated with the mid treble. So the dry, bright tonal balance referred to in our review of the smaller XQ20, is mirrored here, but on the whole this does little to mar the listening experience in practice. In the near field, the XQ30 is clearly very clean and explicit, while in the far field the system presents music with an almost tactile immediacy. The XQ30 can be a bit fussy about the quality of recordings as it occasionally has the effect of emphasising





“KEF has progressively refined Uni-Q to keep it abreast of the market and the XQ range uses completely revamped Uni-Q drivers.”

their less desirable qualities. This is especially true of recordings that could be criticised as sounding overtly ‘digital’ in character, though unusually this also extends to some SACDs as well as Red Book CDs.

Our review of the XQ20 also identified some dryness in the bass registers and you might expect this larger model to be more extended in the LF, but the numbers don’t support this: the -3dB point is 53Hz, 1Hz poorer than the XQ20 and, in practice, the balance of the bass against the overall sound is unlikely to be much different. At the other end of the audio passband, the tweeter is said to extend to 55kHz (-3dB), so there is no need for undesirable expedients like external super-tweeters, which some KEFs have resorted to in the past. In real life, bass extension is moderately good and clearly capable of dealing manfully with the sound of a full orchestra, but the numbers don’t tell the whole story.

The treble still tends to dominate proceedings, by adding a sheen to the sound and emphasising transients with, at times, a suggestion of edginess or granularity. But bass quality is very clean, open and intrinsically well-balanced even if it isn’t miraculously deep (the speakers having been positioned proud of nearby walls by 50cm or so). Despite the wide

dispersion of the Uni-Q driver, acoustic interaction with the listening room sidewalls was usefully low.

One fascinating feature of this model, however, is its exceptional stereo sound staging. For reasons that are not entirely obvious and to a greater extent than with previous Uni-Qs, the XQ30 delivers an unusually holographic image in space, especially in the near field. There’s an unusual sophistication about the way individual instruments in a complex soundfield are reproduced. They are portrayed in a manner that gives complete distinction from each another, which gives a far better, more realistic idea of a living, breathing soundfield and not just a bloated wedge of sound.

Other points that may well factor into any buying decision include the XQ30’s dispersion, which places less constraints on the listening position – an area where it echoes the qualities of the Opera Callas reviewed on page 46, albeit using a quite different enabling technology. Though as this writer has found with Uni-Q, the brilliance of the sound takes a sharp dip when listening from well off the normal listening axis. As an electrical load, the XQ30 appears to be unproblematic, despite the 3.2 ohm minimum impedance, though you will need to take care to choose ancillary equipment that is

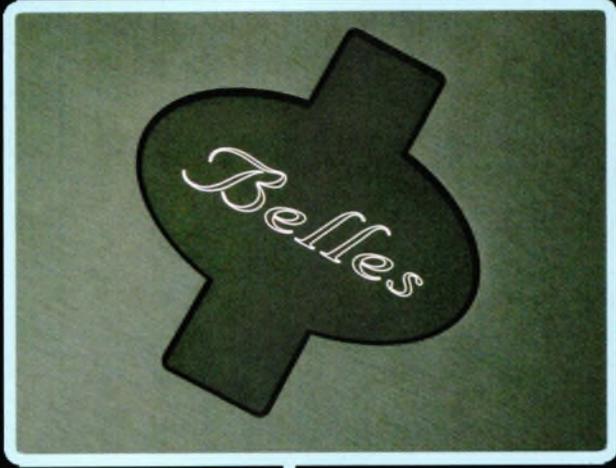
sympathetically balanced to avoid any sense of harshness.

The XQ30 sees yet another ramping up of Uni-Q technology, though the balance in some systems and rooms will be somewhat abnormal and this will have to be watched when planning a system, perhaps by choosing an amplifier and/or source component that’s on the polite side of neutral. Perhaps this speaker was primarily aimed at the Far Eastern markets, where popular musical tastes are often oriented to percussive sounds.

The clean, elegant lines and excellent finish of the XQ30 means it will slot in well in any domestic setting. It’s also superbly detailed with exceptional imaging, which for many audiophiles is a very attractive quality. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Compact overall dimensions help ensure an elegant-looking product that should be at home in almost any surroundings. Fine resolving power and exceptional imaging
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	CON Somewhat fierce tonal balance mandates unusual care over system balance, though offsetting this is the clean, detailed sound.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION Unusually explicit stereo imaging adds interest to the sound. The XQ30 boasts a well balanced, if relatively lightweight bass. But there is a hint of treble excess which, in some cases, could make system matching problematic.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
<small>www.techradar.com/429247</small>	



The Belles Range



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Tivoli goes global with a DAB/FM/internet radio

PRODUCT Tivoli NetWorks

TYPE DAB/FM/internet desktop radio

PRICE £495

CONTACT ☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.tivoli-audio.co.uk

One of the joys of radio used to be listening to stations from distant countries. Using Long Wave or Short Wave, plus a carefully optimised antenna and a lot of patience, one could 'pull in' broadcasts from all over Europe and even further afield. But many of those stations no longer broadcast and both Long and Short waves have disappeared from practically all tuners that are destined for inclusion in hi-fi.

On the other hand, internet radio has boomed. Dozens, indeed probably hundreds, of stations are available via your computer or, if you're lucky enough to have one, your sound server. But that's a lot of hassle... and this is where the NetWorks comes in. Not content to rest on its laurels as the most fashionable name in desktop radios, having pretty much reinvented the genre a decade or so ago, Tivoli has produced in the NetWorks the radio for everyone, capable of 'receiving' (if that's the correct word) internet radio 'broadcasts' alongside the more traditional DAB and FM.

Tivoli claims, quite correctly, that you don't need a computer to access internet radio. You do, however, need a broadband modem/router of some sort and a broadband connection, both of which you will probably have if you use a computer. NetWorks can connect wirelessly or via Ethernet to your broadband network, which means it doesn't have to be in the same room as the modem and once connected it seems to work very efficiently, loading a list of stations which you can search by name, genre and country. DAB and FM work in the usual way and with good results.

Additional features include a USB socket for connecting portable music players, which can function as sources controlled by the NetWorks – it can also play music on your home network, if you have any. There is a line input, a sub-woofer output, a connection for an optional right channel loudspeaker and a recording

output. Ergonomics are OK rather than brilliant, as long as you use the remote, although the top-mounted dial is a nice touch, even though we found some aspects slightly illogical. Use without the remote can be painful, as some functions are accessed via buttons on the back of the NetWorks.

SOUND QUALITY

We have to admit to a slight sense of disappointment with the basic sound quality of this unit. Although tone controls are available, no setting we could come up with quite banished a rather muffled quality which was not present on the headphone output and must therefore be blamed on the loud-speaker. Speech intelligibility is somewhat hindered by this and music is made a little bland. Given how impressed we've been by many previous Tivoli models we're distinctly perplexed as to how this was allowed to happen and we really hope it will be addressed in future models or upgrades.

That apart, there is a lot to like about this radio. Indeed the sound is not by any means all bad, for it has a room-filling quality which many table radios struggle (and often ultimately fail) to achieve. This is a question not just of volume but of scale of sound, and the NetWorks certainly has that. It has a basically quiet background, though listening on sensitive headphones one is occasionally aware of just a little noise and hum.

As for reception quality, it is good in all modes. FM is not particularly grainy, DAB is perfectly decent and internet radio quality is

probably the best we've heard – transmitted quality is improving as time goes by too, of course. You can have a lot of fun listening to Radio Tashkent, or folk stations from Paraguay, and NetWorks seems an excellent way of enjoying it, along with DAB and FM. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

SOUND

★★★★☆

FEATURES

★★★★★

BUILD

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

PRO

Exceptionally versatile and for the most part easy to use, capable of receiving broadcasts you never dreamed existed. Smart, well featured, and sounds big.

CON

Unfortunately, the sound suffers from a muffled quality that reduces listening enjoyment. Ergonomics have some room for improvement.

CONCLUSION

Despite quibbles, this is a great way to listen in on the world, a great improvement on faffing around with a computer to receive internet radio. Admittedly pricey, we see this as an aspirational gadget, albeit one that is comprehensive.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE



URL www.techradar.com/429459

The professionals

Increased performance at an increased price: PMC adds an 'i' to two popular floorstanders

PRODUCT PMC FB1i and OB1i

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeakers

PRICE (FB1i) £1,950; (OB1i) £3,200 per pair

KEY FEATURES (FB1i) Size (WxHxD): 20x100x30cm
◉ Weight: 18kg ◉ Drivers: 27mm soft-fabric dome tweeter, 170mm main driver ◉ (OB1i) Size (WxHxD): 20x102 5x32 5cm ◉ Weight: 21.5kg ◉ Drivers: As above with 75mm midrange dome ◉ Proper shaped plinth (both) ◉ ATL bass-loading (both)

CONTACT ☎ 0870 444 1044 # www.pmc-speakers.com

PMC is a relatively young operation by hi-fi standards and, unusually, has been equally successful in both the domestic hi-fi and professional audio sectors. It was founded by two ex-BBC engineers in the late 1980s and its one obvious advantage over its rivals is that co-founder Peter Thomas continues to head up the company and carry out all the design and development work.

This ensures the original philosophical heritage is preserved – notably the use of the company's Advanced Transmission Line (ATL) technology to load the bass drive units of both its domestic and professional models.

Another part of the philosophy is a preference for creating its core range one model at a time, merely adding refinements when they become available rather than making wholesale changes in the interests of fashion. One reason why we've put two models together in a double review is that earlier incarnations of both have been reviewed previously by *Hi-Fi Choice*.

An elegant two-way floorstander, the original FB1 was reviewed (and rated a Best Buy at its then price of £1,275 per pair) way back in 2000. An upgraded £1,625-per-pair

FB1+ was introduced in 2004, using an improved tweeter and crossover components and kits were made available so that FB1 owners could upgrade to an FB1+.

Four years on and the FB1+ has become the £1,950 per pair FB1i, maintaining the same two-way formula, but incorporating even more changes so that extensive upgrading is no longer possible. Once again, the main improvement concerns a new 27mm soft-fabric dome tweeter that PMC has co-developed with Norwegian drive-unit specialist SEAS, but there are also substantive improvements in crossover-network components, in the fit and finish of the cabinet and plinth and also in the bass/mid drive unit.

The OB1i might look very similar to the FB1i, but, in fact, it's a slightly larger three-way design. While it shares the same bass and treble drivers as its sibling, it also features a large (75mm) soft-dome midrange unit. When the original OB1 first appeared in 2003, it already incorporated the + improvements. Five years on, the OB1 now has the latest 'i' enhancements, while the price has gone up to £3,200.

Both models share similarly tall and attractively slim enclosures, with nicely rounded baffle edges and a top-quality finish on a choice of real-wood veneers. The chunky and curvaceous black MDF plinth also has a shiny new finish. More importantly, it extends the footprint, providing secure spike accommodation, and greatly improves stability as well as appearance.

ATL bass-loading is very much part of any PMC package. A long (approx 3m), tapered and damped conduit loads the back of the bass drive units here, effectively reversing the phase and, therefore, reinforcing the direct bass-driver output by the

time it arrives at a large port output at floor level. Although the folded, tapered line makes





“The most obvious improvements are in the treble, but both models show superior overall smoothness compared to their predecessors.”

cabinet construction costly and complex, the internal partitions also significantly stiffen the enclosure sides.

The bass drivers all have 170mm cast-alloy frames and 125mm doped-paper cones, the OB1i's cone using a wide-dome dust cover for extra structural reinforcement. Both models also share the aforementioned 27mm soft-dome tweeter, while the OB1i has that extra midrange dome unit, mounted between the bass and treble units in its own sealed enclosure. Although the extra driver involves considerably greater crossover complexity, it has the twin advantages of dramatically increasing power handling (as the amplifier's power output is now shared between three voice coils) and delivering a much more even off-axis output across the audio band.

In the interests of phase linearity and accuracy, PMC favours crossover networks with steep 24dB/octave filters. That necessitates careful component-matching throughout, as well as considerably more components for the three-way OB1i. Unusually – and most creditably – that model has triple terminal pairs, permitting full bi- or tri-wire/-amp flexibility. The FB1i has the expected twin terminal pairs.

SOUND QUALITY

Comparing the far-field in-room averaged frequency responses for these 'i' versions to those of their predecessors shows that although the changes are quite modest, they are also clearly worthwhile. The impedance traces might

only show a few differences, but the pair-matching here is exemplary, confirming the care taken in crossover-matching.

The most obvious improvements are in the treble, especially in the FB1i, but both models also show superior overall smoothness compared to their predecessors, with the OB1i being significantly more even than the FB1i. Both models are aligned for free-space siting and have easy-to-drive impedance characteristics, though the midrange sensitivities are between 87 and 90dB.

Fed from a top-quality Naim-oriented system, the superior smoothness and reduced coloration of the OB1i were immediately apparent. However, the FB1i also acquitted itself very well and since it costs a great deal less, it's virtually impossible to say which of the two represents the better value for money. If pressed we'd probably suggest that the FB1i offers 75 per cent of the OB1i's performance for 60 per cent of its cost, but that merely reflects the inevitability of the law of diminishing returns. Indeed, it's difficult to think of many obvious competitors to these two PMC models – in recent experience, only the GamuT Phi5 springs to mind.

First impressions of the FB1i are positive, and the new and more informative tweeter is very obviously significantly sweeter, smoother and consequently more discreet than its predecessor. The bass is satisfyingly even and deep, lacking only a little grip and tension compared to larger and more costly alternatives. The midband is well judged and

satisfyingly lively with a decent dynamic range, though it could have been smoother and voices, most obviously, do have a measure of 'cupped hands' coloration.

Interestingly, when changing from the FB1i to the OB1i, we weren't immediately impressed. It took a few minutes of acclimatisation to adjust to the OB1i's subtle charms, which are rather less 'in your face' than those of its less costly and somewhat cruder-sounding sibling. The senior model sounds a little more restrained and laid-back, so its superiority throughout the bass and midrange sort of sneaks up on you. The bottom end has just that little bit more authority and precision, while the midband is clearly less coloured and more detailed, especially when reproducing low-level stuff deep down in the mix. Imaging is more precise and well focused than that of its sibling too, though the soundstage is pretty well confined to the zone between the speakers and a touch limited in spaciousness and air.

One minor downside of that smooth and even midrange is that the top end is perhaps a shade too obvious: though sweet and smooth, it does tend to draw attention to itself, which might not be ideal in some system combinations.

Both speakers are essentially very well balanced overall. A modicum of presence restraint helps avoid aggressive tendencies, but it's not sufficient to make the speakers sound 'shut in' or interfere with low-level detail intelligibility. The OB1i clearly has greater smoothness, lower coloration and superior resolution at the bottom end of the dynamic range, yet both are winners **HFC**

Paul Messenger

VERDICT - FB1i	
SOUND ★★★★★	CONCLUSION A floorstander that boasts impressive bass extension and a smooth and sweet top end. The midband is lively, though not without a degree of unevenness and coloration.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/429594	

VERDICT - OB1i	
SOUND ★★★★★	CONCLUSION This floorstander delivers a smooth overall balance with wide bandwidth and dynamic range. Dynamic grip might be tighter, but it offers fine stereo and a sweet treble.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/429697	

Avid Platform

TYPE Turntable isolation platform

PRICE £190

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

Avid is best known as a manufacturer of turntables – its beautifully made vinyl spinners have a high reputation for performance, build quality and reliability. The company also makes a small range of accessories, including this simple platform. It was originally made for a turntable called the Diva which had a motor in a separate housing and was, therefore, a pain to move once set up (although no current Avid models fall into that category, there are plenty from other makes that do). But the Platform is more than just a flat surface, as it features vibration isolation in the shape of four feet. Made of a very soft grade of Sorbothane rubber, they're quite effective at blocking audio-frequency vibrations, and incidentally are quite tacky and hold fast to whatever surface they're placed on. The product is also available in light ash.

We tried the Platform under a couple of turntables, one suspended and one not, and



found that it made a major improvement to the latter, tightening up detail and stereo images considerably and reducing the bass 'bloom' by an appreciable degree. That last effect can sometimes sound like a loss of bass at first, but with time the increase in clarity becomes apparent and the net effect is distinctly positive. With the suspended turntable, improvements were less dramatic and we found the deck (a Pink Triangle) a touch twitchy with respect to footfall on the suspended wooden floor. A microphonic

valve amp also benefited, while CD players and solid-state electronics gained a shade of extra precision. The Avid is a smart and a very worthwhile investment, especially for owners of unsuspended turntables. **HFC**

VERDICT Simple and highly-effective with solid turntables – results with suspended ones may vary. It's also worth a try under electronics.	HI-FI CHOICE ★★★★★
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Custom Design Inert Casework Matt

TYPE Resonance-damping mat

PRICE £70

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

A piece of black-painted sheet metal – wow. But the Inert Casework Matt is more than that, as it's actually a piece of 'Acoustic Steel' (and non-magnetic stainless steel at that), Custom Design's favourite material, made by gluing together two sheets of metal with a special glue that makes for an exceptionally dead sheet. As such, it does very little, especially in terms of responding to vibrations. But when placed under or over a hi-fi component, the Matt can kill vibrations where they might otherwise set up harmful resonances. Even if you don't believe in equipment microphony (turning mechanical vibrations into spurious electrical signals), you can still easily observe that mechanical resonance in the case of an amplifier, CD player or whatever can colour sound –



simply snap your fingers or clap your hands near the undamped lid of some component and listen to the resonance that follows.

Because the Matt is solid and unventilated, there are limits to what it can sit on (no valve amps for a start!), but we found that it did tighten up the sound of a system fed from a CD player. We also rather liked its effect on a smart, but again resonant, glass-shelf stand, where it reduced the resonance of the glass without interfering with the nice looks; in such an application, the Matt will be

completely hidden under the component that sits on it. We also found it useful under a turntable, though at 40x25cm, it's too small for many of them – perhaps Custom Design would consider a larger size? **HFC**

VERDICT A very versatile product that can improve the sound of hi-fi components and indeed non-hi-fi objects that just happen to be in the listening room!	HI-FI CHOICE ★★★★★
--	------------------------------

Milty Foculpods

TYPE Isolation feet

PRICE £19.50 (set of 4)

CONTACT ☎ 01279 501111 # www.milty.co.uk

Also sold under the Deflex (on the packaging) and Spectra Dynamics (on the items themselves) brands, this product is nothing more than four squidgy feet in a packet. They're made of 'advanced polymer' (if it's not a softish grade of Sorbothane, it's something remarkably similar) and are 50mm in diameter and, unloaded, 20mm high. Each will support up to 10kg; a smaller version, the Polipod, is also available. They are, we suggest, an essential for every audiophile's accessories collection, not least because of the near limitless number of ways in which they can come in handy. Obviously the simplest application is to put one under each foot of your equipment and take advantage of their vibration-absorbing properties to give a little isolation. However, you can also site them elsewhere under the case, replacing or supplementing the fixed feet and damping vibrations in the bottom panel. Or put them under loudspeakers, or even on top of



something to damp case vibrations...

We tried several possibilities and while the results with speakers are admittedly unpredictable, they can also be positive so it's certainly worth a try. Both here and with electronics, the precise position of the Foculpods can be quite critical, making them a tweeker's delight. Get the positioning correct and the results may surprise you in their extent, with considerable gains in precision and subjective timing. At worst, there won't be much difference, but for £20 anyone can at least afford to give them a go. At the very

least, they're good for preventing equipment from sliding around on highly polished or glass surfaces! Buy a couple of sets and have a play – at this price you can't go wrong. **HFC**

VERDICT

An amazingly useful device for isolating and damping all sorts of things. Worth trying or experimenting with almost any hi-fi component.



SRM/Tech Silent Stage 1

TYPE Isolation platform

PRICE £150

CONTACT ☎ 01767 313691 # www.srm-tech.co.uk

If the Avid is the ultimate no-fuss isolation platform, then this is the other end of the scale – more of a kit of parts that can be used in various combinations to 'tune to taste'. The basis is two 10mm acrylic sheets, neatly finished, with a little spirit level set into one and mounting threads for spikes attached to the other. In addition, the kit includes a dozen large round circles of rubber material, four spikes, four spike cups (to prevent damage to wooden surfaces) and four short, fat rubber bands. The spikes, which are beautifully polished and either chromium or gold-plated depending on your preference, are height-adjustable by virtue of the screw threads. While the rubber bands are intended to fit over the top of each spike to damp it, though they didn't seem very resonant to us in the first place. The circles are made of three different materials and SRM/Tech recommends using one or another to give varying degrees of isolation between the acrylic sheets. Of course, you can use more



than one, and you can vary their position – as we said, fully tweakable.

While the degree of isolation isn't as high as with the Avid Platform, the results were still beneficial to most kit. We'd probably opt for something more compliant under an unsuspended turntable, on a wooden floor at least, but we found it made suspended decks, and various electronic components, enjoy subtly tighter sound in general and give us more fine detail within each recording. It's also worth

noting that this Silent Stage looks absolutely gorgeous, and the visual effect alone will probably sell it to some style-conscious audiophiles! **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

A highly attractive way of providing modest isolation to a wide variety of kit, with enough variables to allow for optimisation for each case.



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DVD SYSTEM
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INFORMATION

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Acoustic Energy



OUTDOOR SPEAKERS
Extreme 5

INFORMATION

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FLOOR SPEAKERS
Mezzo6

INFORMATION

For the richest, most dramatic soundstage, the Mezzo 6 floor stander is unbeatable. Using twin 6.5 CPC drivers but with the added bass extension that only an elongated cabinets can produce, this 2.5 way speaker produces a commanding performance time after time. A hand-picked wood composite is laminated and pressed ensuring critical tracing and consistent reproduction of every frequency.

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Harmony 1000
Logitech



7.1 AV RECEIVER

As part of the second generation of Onkyo high-definition capable receivers, the TX-SR606 is at the forefront of affordable home theater. The key is to have the most capable version of HDMI. The TX-SR606 provides high-definition video and audio processing for four source components - another first for Onkyo at this level.

TX-SR606
Onkyo

HD DLP PROJECTOR
HD700X

£ CALL FOR PRICE



Optoma

INFORMATION

Transform any room in your home with an ultimate High Definition entertainment experience. Making the largest big screen TV's seem small with an image that can fill a wall - the HD700X will immerse you in the action. Fantastic image quality provides life-size movie, sports or gaming.

IN-EAR HEADPHONES
SE420

£ CALL FOR PRICE



Shure

INFORMATION

Shure's SE420 sound isolating earphones feature Dual TruAcoustic MicroSpeakers and a sound isolating design. They use dedicated tweeters and woofers to provide a detailed sound stage that's free from outside noise. Lows, mids and highs are distinct and defined for accurate reproduction for all the details of your music.

MICRO SYSTEM
DM-37DAB

£ CALL FOR PRICE



Denon

INFORMATION

UK Sound Tune, 30 W x 2 High Power Output, Tridac noise reduction concept, Robust power circuit providing stable supply of electric current, Newly developed speakers inheriting DENON'S CX concepts and technology, Portable Player Connectivity (iPod, USB player,...) DAB (Band-III)/AM/FM tuner, Radio TEXT with RDS function, MP3 and WMA playback

MINI SYSTEM
CS-525

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Onkyo

INFORMATION

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The new iTube 252 is both stunning to behold and a thoroughbred performer featuring no less than 9 valves and three line input stages to offer 25 watts per channel of pure listening nirvana.

ITUBE 252

Fatman



TUNER

The Yamaha TX 497 FM/AM Tuner gives you highly sensitive reception capability and upgraded tuning performance. Paired with a Yamaha amp, cd player and some good quality speakers this tuner will form an integral part of your hi-fi separates system.

TX-497

Yamaha



CD PLAYER

Stunning sound quality and captivating good looks create a striking impression in any environment. The Antila CD Player with its unique MD2 active differential multi-DAC converter technology provides breathtaking realism and a tactile panoramic image. LIPS ensures the ultimate simplicity in use and flexibility for the future.

Antila

Leema Acoustics



CD PLAYER MKIII

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Kandy

ROKSAN

KEF

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SPEAKER PACKAGE
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Like the multi-award-winning KHT2005 from which it evolved, the reflex-ported KHT2005.3 pushes the performance envelope of midrange home theatre like no other system. The specification tells part of the story: with parabolic enclosures computer optimised to eliminate cabinet distortions, the full range centre and satellites all feature KEFs 100mm Uni-Q array incorporating the 19mm aluminium dome tweeter from the acclaimed Q Series.

Ateca

CHECK
ONLINE

AV STAND
BORDEAUX BOR126



INFORMATION

Ateca's Bordeaux AV stand is an innovative French design that would easily brighten up any modern living space. Featuring smoked glass, it is available in either oak or walnut finish and can handle any LCD or plasma TV up to 50". The shelves are 500mm deep for maximum storage.

Atacama

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FOR PRICE

SPEAKER STANDS
AURORA 6



INFORMATION

The design approach is certainly outside the box with the stand's column a clear glass cylinder and the base a clear glass teardrop with integrated spikes. The top plate is robust and the stand is held together with a central chrome tension tube which also doubles as a cable management system.

Alphason

CHECK
ONLINE

AV CABINET
ABRD1100



INFORMATION

Open stand with enclosed cabinet for LCD/Plasma screens up to 50 inches. Innovative design with space for 3 pieces of equipment. Smooth open and close door system enhancing child safety.

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GROUP TEST & LAB REPORTS: RICHARD BLACK

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

Six of the best mid-price amps to see you through the credit crunch

ON TEST



Advance Acoustic MAP-105
£400



Arcam FMJ A28
£750



Audio Analogue Primo Cento VT
£795



Cambridge Audio Azur 840A V2
£750



Creek Evolution
£545



Cyrus 6 vs2
£700

On the *Hi-Fi Choice* forum recently there was an interesting discussion of the age-old question of where to put the most budget (and implicitly, where to spend the longest time agonising): source component or loudspeakers? It seems few would elect to build a system from the amplifier outwards, yet the amp's performance is, of course, every bit as important as those of the rest of the components.

It also has a unique kind of link to the speakers, in that the finest loudspeakers are often quite difficult to drive properly and therefore require an amplifier of some ability and confidence. Drive £5,000 worth of speakers with a £100 amplifier and you may get some pretty strange results. And why are we mentioning that here? Well... because the £400-£800 price range (into which this month's group test fall) is where performance starts to reach the sort of level where quite upmarket loudspeakers can sensibly be handled.

We're not necessarily suggesting you should buy one of these amps to partner with a pair of Wilson or EgglestonWorks loudspeakers, but it's highly probable that a good integrated amp will see an upgrade or two of the loudspeakers connected to it and it needs to be able to keep its end up. In terms of individual load-driving performance, we're happy that all the models in our group are basically competent, but what we (and our expert 'blind' listeners, to whom we are beholden) are looking for in a £600-ish amplifier is performance that goes well beyond the budget and at least starts to hint at high-end sophistication.

That's from a line-level source, at any rate. It's nice that half the amps here include a phono stage as standard (one more has it as an option), but we would still counsel the regular vinyl-phile to put a little aside for a stand-alone phono stage as an urgent upgrade. Built-in phono stages can work well, but the benefits of 'outsourcing' this most delicate of amplifying tasks aren't hard to hear in most cases.

As you'll see, we feel entitled to get quite fussy over our amplifying electronics and yet the basic performance of all these amps is more than decent. Each has its place, and we hope that our subjective comments and technical findings will help them find it. **HFC**

EQUIPMENT USED

- ▶ ATC SCM20 loudspeakers
- ▶ Pioneer PDR-609 CD recorder (as CD transport)
- ▶ dCS Elgar D/A converter
- ▶ Chord DAC64 D/A converter
- ▶ Wireworld, AudioQuest, Kimber and Bespoke Audio cables

MUSIC USED

- ▶ Ian Dury *The Bus Driver's Prayer and Other Stories*
- ▶ Dick Hyman *Plays Fats Waller*
- ▶ Pallavicino *Madrigals*
- ▶ Mahler *Symphony No 5*
- ▶ Alan Bush *Song Cycles*

EARS USED

We are, as ever, most grateful to the highly experienced listeners from within the hi-fi industry who give up their time to come and listen under 'blind' conditions to our test models. This month's kind souls were:

Keith Haddock (freelance PR representative)
Damien McCauley (Audio Partnership)
Steve Reichert (Armour Home Electronics)





LISTENING TESTS

In classic *HFC* fashion, the centrepiece of the listening was a 'blind' presentation of each amp to a panel of expert listeners, in an attempt to remain free of prejudices and preconceptions. Listening levels were accurately matched and the same programme of music was played through each amp with minimal distractions. In addition, each amp was auditioned on its own more informally, to get the fullest picture of the character of each.

LAB TESTS

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

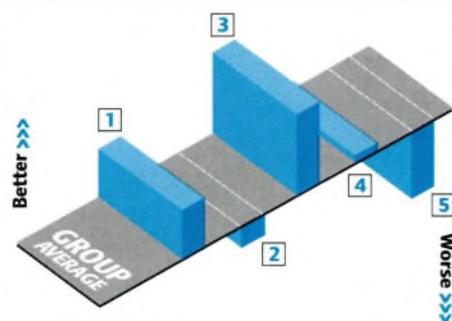
No other magazine offers an equivalent test and listening programme for comparative tests.

LAB REPORTS: THE BAR GRAPH

Our 3D bar graphs are a simple way of showing how the products compare across five technical parameters. In each case, a percentage is given that falls above or below the group average: a higher percentage means better performance (e.g. lower distortion, lower noise, flatter response). In this case, the parameters are:

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

OUR BAR GRAPHS: AN EXAMPLE





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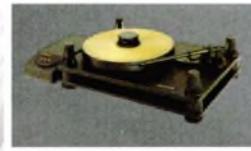
McIntosh MA2275

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Months: 36
Total payable: £6,500



ART Deco 10

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Months: 36
Total payable: £8,000



SME 20/2a

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Months: 36
Total payable: £6,800



Clearaudio Champion Ltd

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Monthly payment: £140.62
Months: 12
Total payable: £1,875



PMC EB1i

Deposit: £649.50
Monthly payment: £243.56
Months: 24
Total payable: £6,495



Wadia 581SE

Deposit: £999
Monthly payment: £250
Months: 36
Total payable: £9,999



Resolution Audio Opus 21

Deposit: £295
Monthly payment: £225
Months: 12
Total payable: £2,995



Marantz SA-11S2

Deposit: £280
Monthly payment: £210
Months: 12
Total payable: £2,800



ATC SCM19

Deposit: £149
Monthly payment: £112.50
Months: 12
Total payable: £1,499



McIntosh MCD301

Deposit: £420
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Months: 24
Total payable: £4,195



ADAM Gamma SA

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ADVANCE ACOUSTIC MAP-105

An affordable amp that injects plenty of energy into proceedings

Recently we've featured quite a few of the Advance Acoustic products in the pages of *HFC*, proof enough of the brand's growing popularity in the UK. With a head office in France, manufacture is actually undertaken in China, while distribution seems to be pan-European. The full range includes sources and loudspeakers and the MAP-105 is the current baby of the amplifier department.

Essentially, this is a completely traditional stereo integrated amp. There are one or two surprises, though, including a relatively ungenerous provision of line inputs (four) and a complete absence of a recording output. On the other hand, you get both flavours of phono input and separate pre-out/power-in sockets, the latter linked by default with external jumpers.

Build is typical of the breed, though the inclusion of separate toroidal transformers for each channel is quite a deluxe touch for a £400 model. Two circuit boards carry the circuitry, one looking after preamp functions and input-switching (done with relays) while the other has the power amplifier section, an all-discrete affair culminating in a single pair per channel of bi-polar power transistors, fitted to an internal heatsink. Component quality is good for the price, with practically all the resistors, for instance, being precision metal-film devices. We're particularly impressed with the output terminals; chunky types which are connected internally with low-resistance wire. The look of the unit is perhaps rather a matter of taste, but there's no denying that the all-metal front panel gives an air of considerable class to the model and the remote control is metal-bodied, which is another welcome break with expectations.

SOUND QUALITY

Cheap it may be, but this amplifier made some friends in our listening panel and quickly, too. Its sound seems to have a degree of energy



that was missing in earlier presentations and, as such, it provided relief to listeners who were beginning to wonder if something else in the system was perhaps restricting the musical communication. Its timing was felt to be among the best of the group and this was particularly welcome in the rock and piano tracks, both heavily reliant on rhythmic integrity to keep one's interest alive.

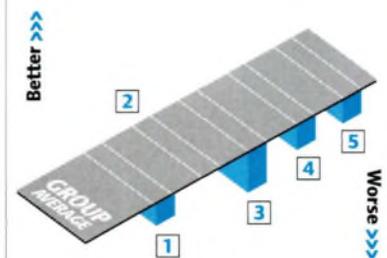
This isn't the only aspect to good sound, though and one listener expressed reservations about the MAP-105's resolution and tonal truthfulness. He felt that it was conveying less of the ambience of the recording space and even slightly limiting dynamic range compared with other amps in the group. He also pointed to a degree of sibilance in the sound and a rather superficial, 'safe' overall presentation that did little to maintain his interest as each track progressed.

Clearly this is a classic example of sound biased in a particular direction, which will consequently please some listeners a lot more than others. Our subsequent listening confirmed that the rhythm and timing aspect is well catered for, but we could certainly see why those who look for detail and precision in their sound will end up frustrated by this amp. Bass is certainly good by budget amp standards – well extended and crisp – but treble is a little loose at times, with less extension than one might ideally like and stereo imaging is more than a little approximate. The phono stage is pretty much okay for occasional duty, but regular vinyl lovers will appreciate an outboard unit and the moving-coil setting is noisy and, as far as we can see, a bit of an irrelevance. Still, this is a high value, lively and enjoyable amp that's certainly worth a try. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

It looks from the figures as if Advance Acoustic has exactly met its own power specification, but the amp's brochure quotes a figure with a 6-ohm load – which may be more accurately representative of today's speakers than the usual 8 ohms, but is slightly awkward for comparison purposes. In fact, the power available seems to be broadly constant across the usual range of possible loads: low impedances are driven perfectly well, but at high power the protection in the output chips cuts in, limiting maximum output. Strangely, despite the separate mains transformers, power drops slightly when both channels are driven rather than just one. Distortion is decent rather than outstanding, though the fact that it's basically the same at any frequency is good. Frequency response is average in the bass, but outstanding in the treble (less than 1dB down at 80kHz), two octaves above the limit of hearing.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >>> -10%
- 2] Frequency response >>> 0%
- 3] Dynamic range >>> -20%
- 4] Distortion >>> -10%
- 5] Output impedance >>> -10%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	75W	75W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.15%	0.12%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)		±0.2dB

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



Starting from an undeniable position of strength as obviously good material value for money, this amp offers an unusually lively and energetic presentation, though it scores less highly for subtlety.



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ARCAM FMJ A28

For subtle sophistication, not instant thrills, this is a fine choice

Arcam has been making a few changes to its 'Full Metal Jacket' (FMJ) line-up, and this amplifier is the new mid-range integrated model. We reviewed its big brother, the A38, in *HFC* 308 and certainly recognise a family likeness here, though some parts are clearly completely different.

The Arcam principle of operation is familiar enough, with the large knob used to adjust volume and menu settings and individually labelled buttons to select inputs and call up a few more functions. The use of electronic input-switching and volume control has enabled Arcam to offer such niceties as three sizes of volume step, input level trims and balance control. There's also the handy ability to record one source while listening to another.

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Six line-level inputs are provided, with phono (MM-only) as standard, too. Twin preamp outputs allow for use with external power amps, for instance in bi-amped set-ups and while there isn't a dedicated input direct to the power amp section, it's possible to employ the unit as a power amp by selecting 'processor mode', intended for use with an external processor as part of a multichannel system.

Internal construction is generically familiar Arcam stuff, though the circuit board is new (to us, anyway!). It uses mostly surface-mounted components, with fewer 'boutique' parts than the A38 but plenty of evidence of careful component selection at critical points. As we've seen in other recent Arcam models, there's quite extensive use of both electromagnetic screening and mechanical damping in the shape of suitable materials glued to key integrated circuits.

SOUND QUALITY

Although it didn't divide opinions quite as markedly as the Advance Acoustic, the A28 still brought forth some divergent comments. From 'rather boring' to describing the sound as 'civilised', well controlled, detailed and focused.



This is a classic example of the conflict between immediately attention-grabbing sound and a presentation that looks after the sonic pennies and leaves the pounds to take care of themselves, if you'll forgive the rather mangled metaphor. To some extent you might think that the latter would grow on you with extended listening, but it doesn't always work that way and, in fact, our listeners' notes suggest their patience was wearing thin even after the modest four tracks of the main presentation.

So if you care deeply about sound that has an instant visceral impact, this may not be the amplifier for you. We would rather dwell on its virtues, however, which will certainly appeal to some ears. Above all, there's a wholeness to the sound that's not always present in the performance of affordable electronics, a sense that all the various instruments and voices do after all, belong to the same musical phenomenon. This is largely a function of the amp's almost self-effacing retrieval of detail, which it presents in an unfussy but precise way, often without one being consciously aware of it.

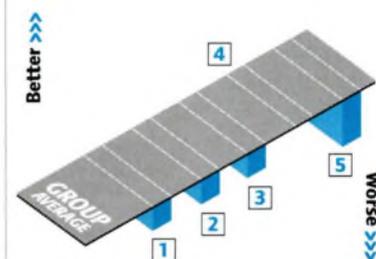
Tonal balance is also very good, with extended bass which, however, doesn't call attention to itself by overstatement or exaggerated impact. Treble is sweet and perhaps just a shade recessed, though always open and easy to follow. Voices are well portrayed and again the sense of integration is often welcome, returning the lyrics to the bosom of the accompaniment where some amps may seem to divorce the two – unduly forward vocals are a common complaint. It's not a high-energy amp, but it is a very well-mannered one, with an unusually detailed phono stage too, which is a nice bonus. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

If Arcam is seeking to achieve moderation in all things, our lab tests suggest it's largely succeeded. In every area, this amp measures well by current general standards, without breaking any records – the only figure that's outstanding is the standby power consumption. Any figure below a couple of watts is admirable and a comfort to any environmentally concerned souls who still prefer to switch off using the remote. As for output power, there's plenty on tap, considerably more than claimed and with enough current on hand to drive awkward speakers with gusto, too. Frequency response in the treble is good, while the bass is exceptionally well extended, less than 1dB down at only 5Hz – although the phono stage has a 3dB cut at 20Hz. Distortion behaves well, vanishing to near invisibility for output levels below a few watts and hardly greater at 20kHz than in the midband.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >> -10%
- 2] Frequency response >> -10%
- 3] Rumble >> -10%
- 4] Dynamic range >> 0%
- 5] Output impedance >> -20%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	75W	102W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.004%	0.07%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	+0.3dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	Principally a very civilised amplifier, with less assurance in the rhythm-and-timing department. What it does well, however, it does very well and the overall package is very attractive.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

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AUDIO ANALOGUE PRIMO CENTO VT

An Italian beauty that does things its own way

It's sometimes tempting to think, lazily, that there are only so many things one can do within the broad specification of a mid-market integrated amplifier. Then along comes something like this and proves that there are plenty of unexplored avenues in terms of design and build. The shape and dimensions are similar to those of the well-known Cyrus series of electronics, but the look is very different, based as it is on substantial lumps of aluminium, very smartly finished. To be brutally frank, we didn't care overmuch for the controls, especially the 'nudge'-type volume control (twist it a little and hold it there to turn the volume up or down), but that's obviously highly subjective and there's no denying that appearance-wise, the first impression this model makes is a good one.

Things are a little out of the ordinary within the case, too. The unit's considerable weight turns out to be largely due to its huge toroidal transformer, which occupies nearly half the internal space. Behind it are heatsinks for each channel and nestling between them a single valve – physically single, that is, but containing two active elements, one per channel. The components mounted on the heatsinks look at first glance like transistors, but turn out to be power integrated circuits, each one effectively a whole power amp on a chip. As a pair, they operate in bridged mode, making the output effectively balanced and increasing considerably the power available from a single chip.

Other internal points of note include a couple of the biggest polypropylene film capacitors we've ever seen and a tiny phono board which nestles near the right-channel loudspeaker terminals. It's capable of handling both types of cartridge, though you need to get the lid off to make the change. Input/output provision is quite modest, with four line inputs (five if no phono option is fitted) and a tape output.



SOUND QUALITY

Our listeners couldn't quite decide what it was about this amplifier that bothered them, but it's clear something in its tonality isn't absolutely neutral. Comments were made about a lightness of touch (which isn't always a bad thing, of course), but also, in other tracks, about good, deep bass that brought out details barely perceptible through the other amps. The amp also seems to be a touch shy in the upper bass, though the very lowest octave or two comes through nicely.

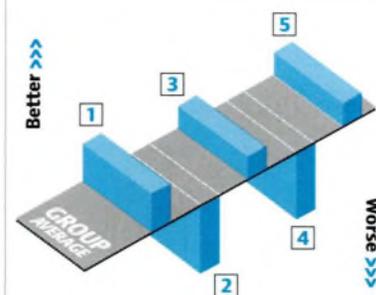
Sometimes tonal aberrations in amplifiers are symptoms of more complex limitations, but here it seems there's nothing more serious amiss and after a little while, one becomes accustomed to the balance and learns to accept it. That done, there's plenty to admire in the Cento VT's handling of detail, imaging and, especially, swiftly changing musical dynamics and textures. It is, as one listener commented, very agile. As a result, it relishes musical complexity, having a whale of a time with the swirling, kaleidoscopic orchestrations of many early-20th-century composers, but also gets on well with complex studio productions of contemporary rock and pop.

All the same, it does sometimes seem reluctant to commit fully, leaving you wishing for a little more involvement. Frustrated by exactly this aspect, one listener made a rather irritable comment about 'half-fat sound', and there is a slight lack of grip that can lessen musical communication. A well-mannered amp with a lot going for it, but it isn't the most commanding performer in the group. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

Audio Analogue appears to claim valve-like overload behaviour in its publicity for the Cento VT, with output power considerably higher, if one can tolerate a little distortion. That's rather at odds with our findings, which show pretty much classic solid-state clip behaviour. Driving both channels as usual, we achieved 88W output; this rises to 100W when just one channel is driven. That said, a lot depends on the input level. It appears that the valve input stage has been configured to clip just above the normal 2V input that would be received from most digital sources. But in the process it contributes distortion of up to a couple of per cent, mostly low harmonics. Inputs above 2.5V will overload it seriously, though the lower levels merely generate some distortion, almost certainly the cause of the coloration noted. We can't condone this design approach, but will concede that it does at least make for a distinctive sound!

HOW IT COMPARES



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

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	100W	88W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	-	1.0%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	±2.0dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★	A rather idiosyncratic amplifier, not suited for use with high-output sources, that slightly colours the sound and, at the same time, offers a rather less involving version of events despite admirable agility.
FEATURES ★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★	HI-CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

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CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 840A V2

This appealing all-rounder boasts low distortion and detailed bass

This amplifier has recently acquired 'V2' status, which denotes some minor (though not necessarily unimportant) upgrades to the balanced input and a few other circuit areas. It's currently the top of the Cambridge Audio integrated amplifier range, and, as such, offers a lot of features, both practical and technical.

Above all, the 'unique selling proposition' of the 840A is its novel output stage. We've all heard about the evils of crossover distortion in amplifiers, which, alas, seem unavoidable without going to the toe-curlingly painful lengths of full Class A operation (high-power Class A amps have been built, but they're inevitably big, hot and very expensive). Almost every amplifier designer has dreamed of circumventing crossover problems, but this amp comes nearer to achieving that than most by dint of its 'Class XD' (crossover displacement) output stage, which delays crossover to high output levels without incurring huge power-consumption penalties.

It doesn't completely avoid crossover, but it's an achievement to salute nonetheless. It's achieved in practical terms by a bi-polar transistor circuit, aided by a mains transformer of eyebrow-raising size and ingeniously laid-out circuit boards. Input-switching and volume control are both achieved by relays, while the rear panel is crammed with connections for nine line-level inputs (one balanced), two switchable speaker outputs and multiroom automation in/out too. Build quality is good and the front-panel display is easy to follow. Inputs are simply 'Input 1' and so on by default, but can be renamed, a nice touch.

SOUND QUALITY

In a group where no single amplifier uniformly blew our listeners' socks off, this was probably the most successful overall. It may not have



ticked all the boxes all the time, but it at least looked at all of them – detail, bass, treble, rhythm, dynamics and so on.

One area where it seemed to trump its rivals was in bass detail. Listening to the 840A towards the end of the presentations, one listener commented that he was hearing proper detail from the bass for the first time, and the others also commented in various ways on the increased resolution they could clearly hear in the lowest octaves. It still didn't quite seem to have the degree of bass attack that one of the listeners reckoned he'd heard in the past, but it still managed a pretty decent performance in that area.

Meanwhile, treble was felt to be very clear and open, with very good resolution of ambience and the natural decay of percussive sounds. It seems that dense musical textures aren't always fully resolved by the 840A and, as a result, while it can give an excellent degree of insight into relatively simple recordings, it doesn't always achieve quite the same with multilayered sounds such as an orchestra.

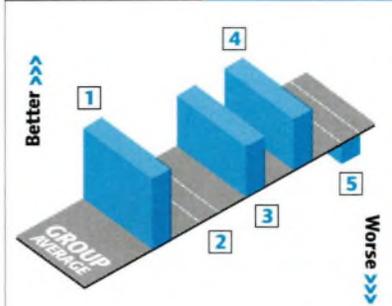
Imaging is good, though depth could perhaps be a little more clearly defined at times. But we can't close this review without referring to one characteristic of which our listening panel was unaware (because of the practicalities of comparing 120-watt amps with 40-watt ones): this amp does take wing when playing loud. Driving the nuts and bolts off our resident ATC speakers, it made some of the most foot-tapping noises we've heard from a sub-£1,000 amp. That, plus its skills in other areas and undeniable flexibility, makes it a recommendable purchase for many. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

Having tested a few samples of both the V2 and the original 840A, on this occasion we observed that distortion was a little higher than before, though hardly by an alarming margin: 0.012% (at the usual two-thirds of rated power) isn't exactly a lot of unwanted signal. It remains pretty much constant in level at any frequency and drops off to well below 0.01% at output-power levels below about 10W, a textbook result and an indication that Class XD is doing what's expected of it. Output power comfortably exceeds the 120W rating and holds up well into low impedances, as one might expect with such a meaty transformer fitted. In fact, it's not possible to check the sustained output power in the usual way, as the clever protection circuit reduces gain when the output approaches overload. Frequency response is very wide, with treble extension in particular quite exceptional, barely a tenth of a decibel down at 20kHz and noise is commendably low.

HOW IT COMPARES



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

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	120W	135W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.001%	0.012%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)		+0.2dB

VERDICT

SOUND



A chunky powerhouse with a lengthy and well-thought-out features list, this amp revels in loud music, but also achieves fine things with subtler tones, including good detail and clear, controlled frequency extremes.

FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



DEFINITIVE AUDIO



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



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CREEK EVOLUTION

Strong on attack and rhythm, the Evolution is a pleasing performer

To many, Creek's products were the poor man's Naim; plenty of affordable rhythm and they kept on working for years.

We've heard no suggestions that the electronic-reliability aspect is any different these days, but the aesthetics have changed notably for the better. Subtle styling has ensured the Evolution products stand out from the crowd despite their carbon-copy basic description (thick alloy front panel, two rotary knobs, a couple of buttons and a digital display, plus entirely typical dimensions), while the highly professional finish and presentation ensure they're not the poor man's anything, though the price is far from frightening thanks to the use of Chinese contract manufacturing.

Interestingly, Creek has eschewed modern miniature surface-mount components in favour of good old through-hole parts. There are various trade-offs for a manufacturer to consider in this area, as surface-mounting enables smaller overall circuit dimensions, meaning there's less to worry about in terms of interference pick-up and signal loss within the unit. On the other hand, physically small components are more prone to thermal modulation and 'flicker noise' and many designers believe that the typically much larger through-hole versions are preferable.

Creek uses quite large resistors and also capacitors of good quality, plus carefully selected active components culminating in a pair of bi-polar power transistors per channel. A good-size mains transformer caters for comfortable power delivery into awkward loads. Facilities are simple, with five line inputs, a preamp output and a single speaker output, plus a headphone socket. An optional phono stage will add £50 (MM) or £60 (MC) and lose you one line input.

SOUND QUALITY

Once again, our listeners judged this amplifier a fair success, but didn't feel inclined to go



overboard about it. Its opening salvo convinced two of the listeners that it was giving more attack and detail than the preceding amps, but prompted the third to question its dynamics. That may sound perverse, but attack isn't quite the same thing as dynamics (in mastering-engineer-speak, it's got more to do with 'microdynamics') and it's possible for both viewpoints to be correct.

At any rate, some aspects of performance did unite opinion. The bass, for starters, was felt to be slightly limited in extension, but largely made up for this with its excellent precision and control. As a result, subtle deep bass can sometimes seem slightly lacking, but any sounds that rely on tight upper bass are full and vigorous. And yes, in case you haven't just guessed, this also means that rhythm and timing are good. It's not an overtly rhythmic amplifier, but it does get the toes tapping and any style of dance music, from a Strauss waltz to modern disco, is infectious.

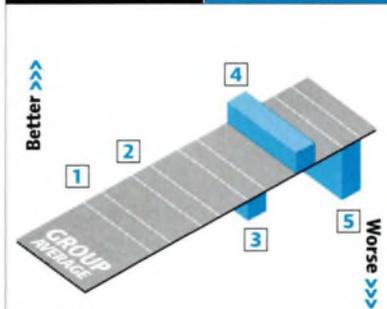
Midrange and treble tonality seems to be an interesting area. Subsequent listening confirmed that the higher frequencies are a shade bright in simple music, but basically neutral in busy stuff, the reverse of the more common finding that some amplifiers become bright when the treble is busy. On the whole, we'd find the Creek's opposite approach preferable, as it merely highlights treble a touch with such recordings as lone voice and guitar, while avoiding stridency in grandiose climaxes.

Detail is good, without being fussy or overemphasised and we also felt that the amp's overall presentation was conducive to long listening sessions. On the whole, it seems Creek has done a fair job of making an all-rounder of the Evolution and its competitive price merely adds to the appeal. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

Creek's power specification seems to be spot on, with good current delivery into low-impedance loads and a modest amount of dynamic headroom. The electronic volume control has a feature we've encountered before, of smaller steps at the top of its range and larger ones lower down. This is a bit of a waste since the top of the range will, in practice, seldom be used. Frequency response is well extended at both top and bottom, giving at least two octaves either end before even 1dB of attenuation is in effect. Distortion is quite good and as usual decreases with output level, but there's a surprisingly tenacious trace of second harmonic visible even down to -40dB output (10mW out). Output impedance is the lowest of the group, though whether the rather minor improvement over the other amps is enough to account for the bass precision is a matter of speculation rather than certainty.

HOW IT COMPARES



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

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	85W	85W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.11%	0.06%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	+0.2dB

VERDICT

SOUND



Although dynamics can sometimes seem a little understated, the energetic bass and fatigue-free treble of this amp, combined with its good sense of rhythm, make it an enjoyable listen in both the long and short term.

FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



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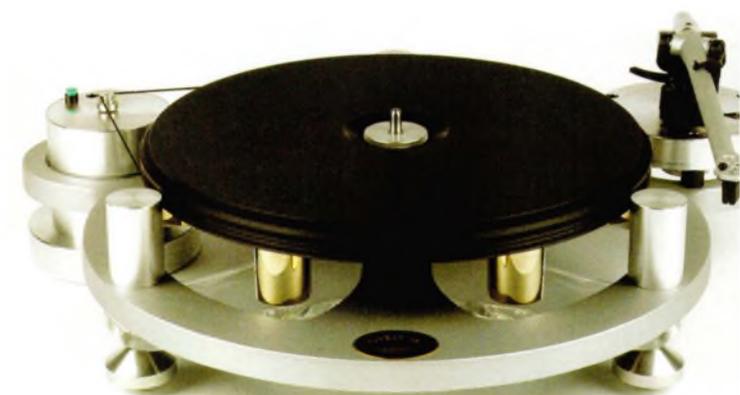


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CYRUS 6 VS2

It's not great at everything, but the Cyrus offers much to enjoy

We'd be tempted to describe this as the 'baby' of the Cyrus range, were it not for the fact that all current Cyrus products share the same baby dimensions, physically. Several of them are heavier than this one, though, suggesting – correctly – that it's not a vastly powerful unit. In fact, its rated output is by some margin the lowest here, at 40 watts. Of course, if power were everything we'd all be using 200-watt no-name amps bought on eBay, but it may look initially as if Cyrus is a bit lacking in present company. We'd beg to differ: we're positively glad to see a few lower-power amps around, for power costs money and if you don't actually need the power you may prefer to direct your pennies towards increased refinement and subtlety, which we hope this unit will prove to deliver.

Where it's certainly no lightweight is in the provision of connections. There are seven line-level inputs (no phono option is offered), tape and preamp outputs, twin speaker terminals (not switched, though) and a rear-mounted headphone socket. Between the inputs and outputs is a circuit almost entirely based on surface-mounted components, with bi-polar power transistors mounted on the heatsink sections of the case at the rear. A mix of integrated circuits and discrete transistors looks after the small-signal sections of the circuit, with electronic input selection and volume control. The power supply is fairly modest, as befits the rating, with both the toroidal mains transformer and the reservoir capacitors being smaller than those in most of the other amps here. There is, in fact, room in the case for a larger transformer, and although the amp isn't compatible with Cyrus's PSX-R power supply, there's a blanked-off hole in the rear panel where a PSX-R socket would sit: following these clues, it's not surprising to find that Cyrus offers a factory upgrade of the amp to turn it into the next model up, the 8 vs2, which shares many internal features.



SOUND QUALITY

In yet another case of modified rapture, this Cyrus had our listeners a little puzzled as one track gave way to another. Was it lively or simply slightly harsh in the treble? Was its bass unusually agile or just a little light?

As usual, the contradictions in the model's performance are partly a function of the music that's playing and partly of each listener's personal preferences and reactions. It's clear, for instance, that treble is a little more overtly present than with some of the other amplifiers here. Recordings that are already bright can become a bit much, but more neutral productions are attractively rendered, with not only detail but imaging convincingly pinpointed.

As for the bass, it's unlikely to shake the ornaments, but then you probably wouldn't buy a 40-watt amplifier for that purpose anyway. Actually, there's plenty of extension, but it's the impact of, say, the Cambridge Audio amp that's missing here. On the other hand, the bass is very tuneful and that for many will make up for a slight lack of depth. Rhythmically it's fair to moderate, with good but not astounding timing.

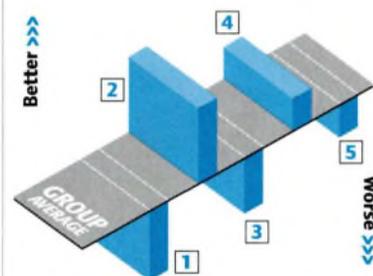
And then there's the question of dynamics. Perhaps, a little surprisingly, this seems to be a strong suit, thanks to very clear and precise handling of quiet music. Climaxes are just barely restrained, but the way this Cyrus handles very low sound levels gives it a good subjective dynamic range and it never seems bothered by being asked to swing rapidly from one extreme to the other.

Voices can sometimes recede a little and we found ourselves preferring this amp with purely instrumental tracks. It's clearly a bit of a mixed package, then, but it has its attractions. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

Given the comments on subjective dynamics, it may seem strange that this amp scores lowest of the group for measured dynamic range, but all that means is that it's merely very good while the others are even better – most line-level amps these days are comfortably better than most 16-bit digital sources, so differences are bordering on academic. Similarly, while it's the best of the group in terms of frequency response, four of the other five are also excellent. Distortion is rather higher than the manufacturer's claims suggest, but falls off very rapidly as volume decreases. Again, it stays largely constant with increasing frequency. Output power is well above Cyrus's rating, but the small mains transformer limits output into low-impedance loads, while dynamic headroom is quite high, but not maintained for very long. Still, short of overload, there's decent driving of awkward loudspeakers in evidence.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >> -40%
- 2] Frequency response >> +40%
- 3] Dynamic range >> -30%
- 4] Distortion >> +15%
- 5] Output impedance >> -15%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	40W	48W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.003%	0.05%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)		±0.1dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★☆	Performance is rather variable, but at best this is a very informative amplifier with good tonality and fine manners. A slight preference for the treble and occasional uncertainty with voices are the main drawbacks.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★☆	
VALUE ★★★★☆	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	

CONCLUSIONS

With all our amps having to work extra-hard to impress, two models emerge as front-runners

It's only fair to say that this group test seems to have been one of our less enthusiastically received, overall. There are a number of reasons for this, none of them necessarily a poor reflection on the amps themselves. For a start, the models are all quite modest in price, though our listeners knew roughly what price range they were detailing with and have plenty of experience of both dearer and cheaper models. Perhaps more significantly, there have been some really stellar examples of affordable amps in recent years, so the standards by

which judgements are apt to be made are high.

But there were plenty of positive things said about each of the amplifiers and in nearly every case we were able to identify particular tastes and/or applications for which each model would likely be suitable. It's often said that the most important component in a system is the room, but one could just as well argue that it's the listener (since most systems are listened to principally by the person who bought them!), and tastes do indeed vary, in sound and in music.

Looking at the numerical scores, the Cambridge and Creek models seem the favourites. They are indeed both very fine amplifiers, the Cambridge dearer and correspondingly higher-powered and better-featured. For value, we'd be hard-pushed to choose between them, but they do have different sonic characteristics and it's unlikely many purchasers will find themselves agonising over which they prefer, all things considered.

We gave the poor Audio Analogue amp the lowest overall score, but although we have reservations about its design

rationale, we feel a little mean when we consider its unusual presentation. Perhaps the best recommendation we can give it is to say that it may save the day for jaundiced audiophiles who feel too many amps sound much the same.

And then we have the Cyrus, Arcam and Advance: three really very different amplifiers each sporting the same scores. We certainly anticipate a wide range of reactions to each. The good news, though, is that from our point of view it seems all tastes are catered for somewhere! **HFC**

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HINTS AND TIPS

>> Amps generate heat! In a rack, leave at least three inches clear above any amplifier to allow heat to dissipate.

>> Use decent cables in and out and if your speaker cable has bare ends, be careful to avoid short circuits from frayed wires. Tighten terminals occasionally.

>> It's 'greener' to switch amps off at the mains than to use standby; switch on 30-60 minutes before listening, if possible, to allow for warm-up.

>> Routing cables neatly together does more than just look good; it helps reduce unwanted interference.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS AT A GLANCE



MAKE MODEL	Advance Acoustic MAP-105	Arcam FMJ A28	Audio Analogue Primo Cento VT	Cambridge Audio Azur 840A V2	Creek Evolution	Cyrus 6 vs2
PRICE	£400	£750	£795	£750	£545	£700
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSION	Good material value for money; but lively and energetic presentation is offset by some lack of subtlety.	A very civilised amplifier, with less assurance than the competition in the rhythm-and-timing department.	Not suited for use with high-output sources. It's also less involving than some, despite admirable agility.	A chunky powerhouse with features aplenty, this revels in loud music, but also offers detail and delicacy when required.	Dynamics can seem understated, but energetic bass and fatigue-free treble make it an enjoyable listen.	At best very informative, with good tonality and fine manners. Slightly bright and uncertain with voices.
KEY FEATURES						
LINE INPUTS	4	6	4	9	5	7
TAPE OUTPUTS	0	1	1	1	1	1
PHONO INPUT	Yes (MM/MC)	Yes (MM)	Yes (MM/MC)	No	Optional	No
SIZE (WxHxD)	44x11x35cm	43x8.5x27.5cm	21x7x36cm	43x11.5x38.5cm	43x8x34cm	21.5x7.3x36cm
WEIGHT	9kg	8.5kg	6.5kg	15kg	8.6kg	3.7kg
REMOTE CONTROL	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
BALANCED INPUT	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
CLIP POINT	24.5V G	28.5 G	26.5 G	33V G	26V G	19V A
FREQUENCY RESPONSE	±0.2dB G	±0.3dB G	±2dB A	±0.2dB G	±0.2dB G	±0.1dB E
DYNAMIC RANGE	100dB A	101dB A	103dB A	105dB G	101dB A	99dB A
DISTORTION	0.12% A	0.07% A	1.0% P	0.012% G	0.06% A	0.05% G
OUTPUT IMPEDANCE	0.14 ohm G	0.16 ohm A	0.07 ohm G	0.07 ohm G	0.05 ohm G	0.15 ohm G
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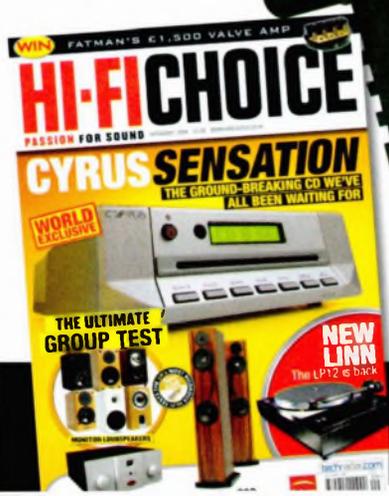
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piece of gear I have ever heard"

10 AUDIO REVIEW

"A new benchmark for musical communication" **STEREOTIMES**

"One of the truly special products I've reviewed in the past 18 years"
STEREOPHILE

Winner of Stereo Times magazine Most wanted component
of 2005 award 

"The best tonearm I've heard" **HI F I WORLD**



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Tonearm Models

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- Conqueror
- Illustrious
- Encounter
- Silver
- OL1

 2005 World Awards



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Since I've been listening to turntables professionally for 32 years and am aware of the pitfalls of ultimate proclamations, I hesitate somewhat to make this statement. Nevertheless, it is true. The level of musical communication available from the Illustrious/Aurora Gold is in a class by itself. It sets a new reference."

STEREOTIMES on the Aurora gold turntable & illustrious tonearm

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AUDIO WORKSHOP NORWICH

WORKSHOP NOTES 4: FORMAT FIST FIGHTS

Unlike in AV where format wars leads to one victor and one loser, audiophiles are happy with mixed formats. CD, SACD, Vinyl, FM. the more the merrier provided that it lasts and sounds good. This makes sense as great music does not always appear on every new format. True, SACD failed to replace CD, but has a lot to offer discerning audiophiles (it is faster, more organic and truer to the source). SACDs are dual layer, so buying a CD/SACD player can make musical and financial sense, except if downloads & servers are going trash everything in sight. But history suggests that they won't. We'll pick 'n' mix as usual....

So while music servers may well be the next big thing in audio, they will not **replace** the original and CDs will always sound better on a good CD player rather than the ripped copy. So if your current CD player is more than, say, five years old take advantage of the rapidly improving sound of CDs from modern players, and look into whether SACD is a format that you could benefit from.



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Home Cinema Separates

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DECEMBER 2006

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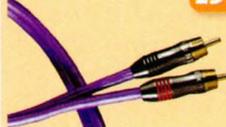


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HI-FI CHOICE BUYER'S BIBLE



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

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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 four stars overall are automatically considered for inclusion in the *Hi-Fi Choice Buyer's Bible*. Any Best Buy or Editor's Choice Badges awarded are also displayed.

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CD PLAYERS

Audio disc players for music only



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

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

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



again before being amplified and sent to the output sockets.

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

SUPER AUDIO CD

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



Q&A

WHAT'S A DAC?

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

WHY HAVE SEPARATE TRANSPORTS & DACS?

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

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

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

DO I NEED DIGITAL CABLES FOR A CD PLAYER?

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

WHAT IS OVERSAMPLING/UPSAMPLING?

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

CAN I PLAY SACDS ON A NORMAL CD PLAYER?

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

CAN I PLAY DVDS ON A CD PLAYER?

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

TOP BUYS



Rega Apollo £498

Rega's latest entry-level player is a splendidly musical performer, given its modest price. Bass is good, midrange is great and high frequencies are truly exceptional.



Cambridge Audio Azur 840C £750

Sitting at the top of Cambridge Audio's Azur range, the 840C is a technically innovative player with a sound that belies its sub-£1,000 price – open, subtle and refined.

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE CD PLAYERS

Audio-only CD and SACD players

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS							ISSUE NUMBER
				SACD COMPATIBLE	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	CD-RW COMPATIBLE	CD TEXT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	
UP TO £1,000											
BEST BUY	Arcam DIVA CD73	450	Neatly built and well presented player that's especially good at bass and timing, with detail hardly less assured	●	●	●	●	●			301
BEST BUY	Arcam CD37	1,000	Excellent detail and imaging, neutral tonality and above-average bass resolution do honours to CD and SACD alike	●	●	●	●	●			310
BEST BUY	Cairn Tornado	850	The Tornado is a full-on experience that shuns compromise and delivers intensely real sound for its price	●	●	●	●	●			305
BEST BUY	Cambridge Audio Azur 740C	500	Very flexible, this innovative upsampling player sounds exceptionally neutral and highly informative	●	●	●	●	●			293
BEST BUY	Cambridge Audio Azur 840C	750	Ultra-civilised sound is not to every taste: rhythm-lovers may find this player frustrating	●	●	●	●	●			306
BEST BUY	Creek Evo	495	A minute treble lift: otherwise this is a very capable player that offers fine value	●	●	●	●	●			285
BEST BUY	Denon DCD-500AE	160	Cheap, well built and good, if slightly soft-edged sound quality	●	●	●	●	●			295
BEST BUY	Denon DCD-700AE	250	Excellent entry level quality CD player lacks for nothing. Musicians please note: even has variable speed replay	●	●	●	●	●			284
BEST BUY	Marantz CD6002	280	A hint of treble unevenness is the only specific flaw: performance is class-leading in most areas	●	●	●	●	●			301
BEST BUY	Naim CD5i	850	Its strikingly competent musical performance comfortably exceeds the expectations of an entry-level player	●	●	●	●	●			307
BEST BUY	Quad 99CD-S	650	Revels in big music thanks to fearless presentation: smaller-scale works can lack focus	●	●	●	●	●			291
BEST BUY	Rega Apollo	498	Unless you can't abide top-loaders, check this out: musically it's a highly praiseworthy performer	●	●	●	●	●			285
BEST BUY	Sony SCD-XA3000ES	800	A good, if not truly great, all-rounder with CD and fine multi-channel SACD performance	●	●	●	●	●			276
BEST BUY	Yamaha CD-S2000	999	Sophisticated, this is a beautifully controlled, high resolution player, although SACD is stereo-only	●	●	●	●	●			309
ABOVE £1,000											
BEST BUY	Bryston BCD-1	2,050	Not as open as some but rather more timely than most, it sounds a lot more gripping than it looks	●	●	●	●	●			300
BEST BUY	Cairn Fog 3	1,995	Ergonomically challenged, high energy player with Gallic charm and digital preamp on board	●	●	●	●	●			302
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Chord Red Reference CD	13,345	The definitive statement in Red Book CD playing, this player's look and sound places it at the top of the tree	●	●	●	●	●			299
BEST BUY	Classé CDP-102	3,000	Rich, dynamic CD/DVD player with a full bottom end, impressive dynamics and a luxurious yet revealing balanced	●	●	●	●	●			286
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Classé CDP-202	4,750	CD/DVD-A player with brilliant sound, if sophistication is your bag. Includes S-video and composite outputs	●	●	●	●	●			284
BEST BUY	Cyrus CD 8 SE	1,100	A highly civilised player which can, nevertheless, deal convincingly with raw music.	●	●	●	●	●			310
BEST BUY	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	EMM Labs CDSA	6,995	Classy, stripped down to basics SACD/CD player with some excellent engineering below decks	●	●	●	●	●			302
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
BEST BUY	Leema Antila	2,495	Musically engaging player that will have you going through your CDs afresh. Balanced connection is best	●	●	●	●	●			291
BEST BUY	Leema Stream	1,095	The most timely disc player at its price point has tactile imaging and good dynamics, but unusual control system	●	●	●	●	●			306
BEST BUY	Linn Majik	1,950	Compact and capable of most CD formats, it's musically communicative with fine pace and enthusiasm	●	●	●	●	●			283
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Marantz SA-11S2	2,500	Superb value for money, this well-balanced player features various filter settings to customise performance	●	●	●	●	●			304
BEST BUY	Meridian G06	1,695	Highly refined player with a combination of analysis and self-effacing response to musical demands	●	●	●	●	●			295
BEST BUY	Rega Saturn	1,298	Good detail, lively natural bass, and good integration of musical strands without losing their individual character	●	●	●	●	●			295
BEST BUY	Roksan Caspian M Series-1	1,250	An exceptionally fine CD player that provides a high-end and musically rewarding performance	●	●	●	●	●			307
BEST BUY	Shanling CD-T1000SE	1,600	Commendably committed player which gets right to the heart of a wide variety of musical styles	●	●	●	●	●			306
BEST BUY	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.



Arcam CD37 £1,000

A welcome flagship newcomer, with sound that does honours to the venerable CD format, while also helping to prove the worth of SACD. Practical, unfussy and excellent value.



Marantz SA-7S1 £5,000

Stunning state of the art player aimed at the serious audiophile community, that offers remarkably transparent sound and CD quality on a par with SACD.

DVD PLAYERS

Disc players for audio and video



Although players featuring both DVD-Audio and DVD-Video are thin on the ground, the universal disc player (that also supports SACD and CD alongside the DVD formats) continues to dominate the worlds of audio and video alike. In fact, it's rare to find a DVD player that doesn't support DVD-Audio and SACD these days.

So, what advantages do universal disc players hold over traditional CD players?

Put simply... choice. A DVD player or universal offer the listener the chance to use far more than just your CDs and build up a wider collection of music and video, all played through one device. The technology has matured now, and the performance of all formats played through these devices gets surprisingly close to dedicated players these days. The same cannot be said of Blu-ray or HD DVD players, many of which are not yet good enough to play CD well.



DVD-AUDIO, HD DVD AND BLU-RAY

DVD-Audio is a high-resolution music format that offers multichannel, stereo and Dolby Digital tracks on dedicated DVD-A discs. The discs can be played on any DVD player, but can only be appreciated at their best with a DVD-A or universal disc player. In fairness, the DVD-Audio format has not proved to be a resounding success, and SACD discs are more readily available.



The two new kids on the block are HD DVD and Blu-ray. Both the same physical size as the CD and DVD disc, these formats offer even more data storage capacity than DVD (up to 50GB instead of DVD's 8.5GB). However, these formats are the exclusive domain of home cinema and gaming fans. Sadly, the possibility of super-high-resolution music-only Blu-ray or HD DVD discs remains distant at best.

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 HDMI, then component video, followed by RGB Scart. All these are 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.

WHAT IS 1080P?

HDTV is defined by the number of lines the picture creates and whether it's interlaced (like old TV) or progressive scan (like a PC monitor).

CONNECTIONS



HDMI LINK: A flat, multi-pin socket that carries digital audio and video, like a digital SCART lead. Arguably the best choice for HDTV pictures.

VIDEO CONNECTIONS: Yellow socket is composite; red, green and blue sockets are for component; the small black multipin socket is S-Video; the big one is SCART.

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

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

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE DVD PLAYERS

Audio/Video disc players

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				DVD-A COMPATIBLE	SACD COMPATIBLE	ELECTRIC OUTPUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	ISSUE NUMBER
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
BEST BUY	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
	Pioneer DV-LX50	450	Nicely built universal player for those who value finesse over speed and energy. Decent picture too	●	●	●	●	●	306
	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									
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Accoustic Arts Surr Player 1	4,495	A very high-quality Pioneer-based machine, excellent sound from both hi-res and regular formats	●	●	●	●	●	299
	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
	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Meridian G98AH	3,625	Meridian's most widely compatible G-Series DVD player – groundbreaking DVD-Audio replay and a fine CD player too	●	●	●	●	●	265
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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



Pioneer DV-LX50 £450
A universal player that does a good job across all formats and offers a great picture, too.



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.



Accoustic Arts Surround Player 1 £4,495
High-quality, high price Pioneer-based machine with excellent sound quality.

Billy Vee
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Just arrived the Naim Superline



NaimNet NS01 server available now

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CD PLAYER NAD C515BEE

"A big, bold and entertaining sound; good level of clarity." - WHF? S&V magazine

AMPLIFIER NAD C325BEE

"Much to admire...effortless." - WHF? S&V magazine

SYSTEM USUALLY £529.85

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SO YOU CAN
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MODEL: ID10



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Designed to fit most Apple iPod's, the smart silver finish looks good with black, white or even the new "Classic" silver iPods. WERE £49.95 1 Per Customer

SAVE £40 **£9.99**

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SAMSUNG BLU-RAY PLAYER

MODEL: BDP-1400



Top Brand Blu-ray player at a breakthrough price... how can you resist? This new Blu-ray player will not only get the best out of the latest 1080p HD format, but is also backwards compatible with conventional DVD For a Blu-ray player with its finger on the pulse, look no further than the Samsung BDP-1400. TSP £299.95

SAVE £130 **£169.95**

5Yr Guarantee Only £16.95

ONKYO MINI SYSTEM

MODEL: CS325



INCLUDES DS-A2 DOCK WORTH £65!

"If you want it all under one roof, and on a budget, then this Onkyo delivers in spades." - WHF? S&V magazine.

WHAT HI-FI? 5 STARS

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AZUR RANGE



LOWEST PRICE GUARANTEED **£799.95**

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JUST LAUNCHED! AZUR 840E PRE AMPLIFIER

Marking the pinnacle of amplifier technology at Cambridge Audio and, indeed, the amplifier market as a whole, the 840E/840W is one of the most impressive amplifiers available.

MS SPEAKERS

MEZZO RANGE



In 2004, Mordaunt-Short produced the award-winning Performance model which re-wrote the rule book.

Many of Performance's most significant features have now trickled down to the company's new range - Mezzo. All this means that true hi-fi bliss is available to a wider audience, most notably you and all at a phenomenally affordable price.

"THIS PERKY LITTLE TWO PIECE CAN BASH OUT A SPARKLING SOUND STAGE AND ITS CURVED DESIGN STOPS THE BUILD UP OF STANDING WAVES FOR CLEANER AND MORE REALISTIC AUDIO."

- The Gadget Show on Five of the Mezzo 2

MEZZO 2 BOOKSHELF SPEAKERS FOR ONLY £399.95

WHAT HI-FI? 5 STARS

MEZZO 6 FLOORSTANDERS FOR ONLY £699.95

Other models available are the Mezzo 1, 5, & 9.

Please ask in-store for price details

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KEF FLOORSTANDERS

MODEL: IQ5



"The KEFs are among the tidiest floorstanding designs we've seen... The standard of build and finish is well up to KEF levels and the Uni-Q tweeter arrangement makes for intriguing looks... these perform in spades." - WHF? S&V magazine. TSP £399.95

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AZUR RANGE



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All Azur components come in black & silver.

The 840E is a high-end pre-amplifier which uses Cambridge Audio's new proprietary Terrapin modules for unprecedented audio fidelity and forms the perfect partner for the accompanying 840W power amplifier.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AMPLIFIER

MODEL: 740A SILVER



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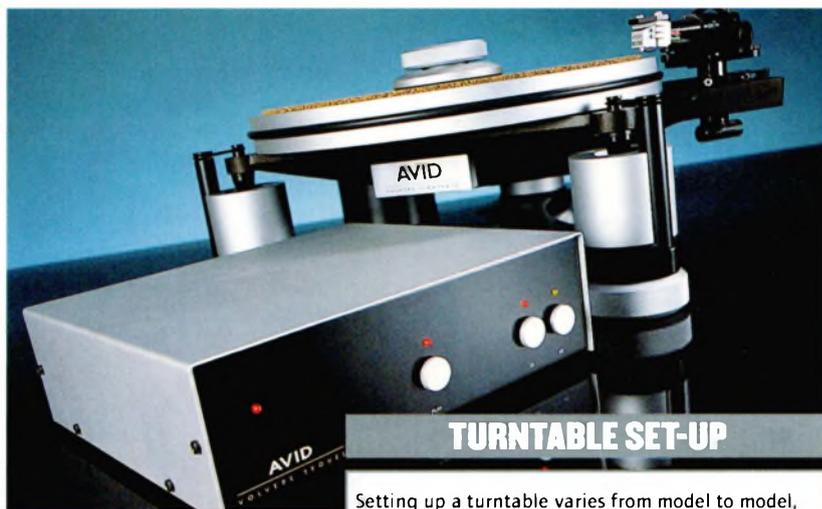
Turntables, cartridges and phono stages



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



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.

increasingly purchased separately for use with line-only amps.

There are two types of phono cartridge: moving magnet (MM) and moving coil (MC), and with a few exceptions the latter outperforms the former. But MCs produce a lower output and require better-quality amplification to be heard at their best. As a general rule, MCs offer a broader bandwidth, greater dynamics and more detail, but the better moving magnets do most things well enough to distract you from your CD collection.

TOP BUYS



Ortofon Rondo Red £300

Despite being the base model in the Rondo range the Red delivers detail, power and resolution and is very well priced to boot. A cut above its rivals.



Creek Audio OBH15 £220

Practical and highly compatible unit offering fine detail and a pleasing mellow balance. If you actually buy one, ask the supplying dealer what OBH stands for.



Funk Firm Saffire £1,900

Something of a gem the very individual Saffire is refined and pleasingly neutral with excellent dynamics and very strong timing ability.



Avid Volvere £2,750

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	SUSP SUBCHASSIS	SWITCHABLE SPEED CHANGE	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	ISSUE NUMBER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Avid Volvere	2,750	A combination of a heavy platter with a sprung suspension that makes the vinyl it spins sound powerful and solid	33/45				298
<input type="checkbox"/>	Clearaudio Champion	1,365	Smart, practical and good-sounding, with impressively 'dead' arm. Isolation recommended	33/45				268
<input type="checkbox"/>	Clearaudio Emoton	920	Beautifully built with open and clean sound emphasising mid and top, but delivering nice timely bass	33/45				309
<input type="checkbox"/>	Clearaudio Performance	1,670	Ceramic-magnetic bearing spells a surprisingly uncoloured performance. Good arm and cartridge	33/45				295
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Clearaudio Ambient	4,220	Innovative use of materials leads to a fast, precise and thrilling sound (tonearm extra)	33/45				271
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The Funk Firm Saffire	1,900	Individual design and a sound that's refined and neutral with strong timing and dynamics	33/45			opt opt	309
<input type="checkbox"/>	Goldring GR2	265	Nicely finished Rega-manufactured deck with RB250 arm and an open, engaging sound quality	33/45				266
<input type="checkbox"/>	Micell Technodec	886	Needs careful partnering but can deliver a very sophisticated result for the money	33/45				309
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pro-Ject RPM 5	450	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pro-Ject RPM 6.1	600	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pro-Ject RPM 9 X	1,200	A gorgeous turntable that sounds as good as it looks – vital and transparent! Price includes carbon fibre arm	33/45				268
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pro-Ject X-Pack	800	Combines some very strong elements (Ortofon Rondo Red) into a killer package with top sound and value	33/45				309
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rega P3-24	398	Very competent, uncoloured and musical, much improved by £148 outboard electronic power supply	33/45			opt	298
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Roksan Radius 5/Nima	895	Sophisticated design with accomplished sound quality, excellent imagery and good isolation (acrylic version tested)	33/45				248
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	SME Model 10A	3,411	Elegant and extremely capable design, tested here with Series V309 hybrid arm	33/45				195
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Townshend Rock V	7,000	If you want to hear everything that's on a record then there's no better machine for the job (includes Excalbur II)	33/45				307

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

PHONO CARTRIDGES

MM and MC cartridges

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	MM	MC	REPLACEABLE STYLUS	ISSUE NUMBER
<input type="checkbox"/>	Denon DL-103R	200	Adds refinement to basic DL-103, at a price. One of the best rock'n'roll cartridges around				285
<input type="checkbox"/>	Dynavector DV-10X5	250	A high-output MC with superb dynamics and fine timing that's difficult to mount, but well worth the effort				307
<input type="checkbox"/>	Grado Prestige Gold	110	Produces rich, open and expansive music with the minimum of fuss				235
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ortofon Rondo Red	300	Delivers detail, power and resolution and makes a good case for its price				307
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ortofon Saisa	200	Despite a touch of midrange coloration, this cartridge really involves the listener with good extension and a clean, agile sound				290
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sumiko Blue Point Spec Evo III	239	High output MC with refinement at high frequencies and a nimble, articulate and revealing sound				270
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	van den Hul Condor XCM	2,400	A stunning cartridge with stereo imaging, dynamics and detail resolution to die for				265
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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	AU/ GAIN	AU/ PRESENCE	ISSUE NUMBER
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cambridge Audio 640P	60	An outrageously good bargain that suits budget systems, but can confidently survive upgrades before and after in the chain					305
<input type="checkbox"/>	Creek OBH15	220	Practical and highly compatible unit offering fine detail and pleasing, mellow balance					305
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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 TYPES **MM** Moving magnet cartridge – see amp and phono stage features to match this type. **MC** Moving coil cartridge – see amp and phono stage features to match this type.

REPLACEABLE STYLUS Some cartridges have separate styli for ease of replacement, but it compromises sound quality.

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RADIO TUNERS

FM and DAB hi-fi separates



Radio is a fantastic musical resource that's in danger of being taken for granted, but whatever your tastes there's someone out there catering for it. If you haven't got a decent tuner hooked up to your hi-fi already, you're missing out!

DAB or FM?

Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) is now said to be available to more than 80 per cent of the population and the long-term plan is to switch public broadcasting over to digital entirely, but hardware prices have yet to come down to a point where this would be acceptable. Its advantages over FM include hiss-free reception, the potential for a wider range of stations and the ability to display comprehensive programming information. FM's RDS system means that station name and occasionally track titles are displayed, but the range of information is fairly limited.

Where FM scores over DAB is in the lower

cost of hardware and the greater reception area. It can also provide higher sound quality if reception conditions are favourable. Absolute sound quality judgements are muddled by the fact that you are listening to different forms of compression and processing at the studio for each station.

What is clear, however, is that there are more and more radio stations broadcasting on DAB that aren't available on FM. So if it's variety of programming you're after, they have a lot to offer.

RECEPTION

The quality of signal you feed a tuner will dictate its sound quality. So serious FM listeners should get a decent external aerial and connect it with as few junctions and splits as possible. Every time you split the cable (ie take a feed for another tuner) you halve signal strength! With DAB the same applies but get a DAB-specific aerial. See www.bbc.co.uk/digitalradio for details.

TOP BUYS



Denon TU-1800DAB £250

Combines DAB with FM/AM reception and good all-round design at a tempting price.



Creek Evolution £495

Classy tuner with a sound that's detailed, cohesive and extended tonally.



T+A T1210R £1,000

This FM tuner looks, feels and sounds top-notch – great detail and imaging.



Onkyo T-4555DAB £350

A real radio bargain, this DAB/FM tuner is free from grain and tonal blemishes.

Our favourite TUNERS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

FM & DAB HI-FI SEPARATES

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	SIGNAL STRENGTH METER	ROTARY TUNING KNOB	ISSUE NUMBER
FM TUNERS									
	Creek T50	550	Very fine results indeed with precision, polish and insight added to excellent basics	FM,M,L	128				251
	Creek Evolution	495	Sound is detailed, cohesive and extended both tonally and spatially – very classy	FM,M	80				308
	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, but the decent performance on both bands makes this a great dual-band choice	DAB,FM,M	200				283
	Magnum Dynalab MD 90T	1,195	No remote or presets as standard, manual everything and valves... but its sound is simply sublime	FM	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
	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	Some grain at low levels, but sound is lively, large in scale and tonally very natural. Very smart!	DAB,FM	16				299
	Cambridge Audio DAB500	150	Very good sound, plus optional response tweaks, and slickest operation yet	DAB	10				248
	Denon TU-1800DAB	200	Very good detail and a highly believable impression of real musicians playing. Imaging can be a little constricted	DAB,FM,M	200				299
	Marantz ST7001	250	Midband detailed and precise; treble can be thick but bass is extended, and sound generally energetic	DAB,FM,M	200				299
	NAD C445	300	FM is laid-back despite bright balance, but has good detail. DAB slightly livelier than most	DAB,FM	30				299
	Onkyo T-4555DAB	350	Admirably free of grain or obvious tonal blemishes, this tuner achieves a high standard in all areas on	DAB,FM	40				299

SPECIFIC **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.

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.



Russ Andrews HP-1/PA-1 £1,198

If you don't need lots of inputs or vast output power, this Russ Andrews combo offers solid sound pictures and is highly capable in a number of areas.



Pathos Classic One Mk3 £1,535

Gorgeous valve amp that gets close to bonding all the strengths of classic valve amp sound with solid-state. Beautiful musical presentation, highly recommended.



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 HB BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Integrated amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000									
HB	Arcam DIVA A70	500	A smart and practical amp offering good snap and pace, with natural dynamics and good detail	6	MM	●	●	60	289
HB	Adv. Acoustic MAP305DA II	600	A lot of amplifier for the money and capable of revealing and exciting sound in the right company. Includes 4 digital inputs	5	●	●	●	100	300
HB	Arcam DIVA A90	850	Practical, affordable and impressively flexible amp with a laid-back approach but plenty of insight too	7	opt	●	●	100	303
HB	Cambridge Audio 640A v2	300	Slightly cheap-feeling controls are the only real downside to this powerful and lively little amp	6	●	●	●	75	279
HB	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
HB	Cambridge Audio 840A v2	750	The biggest differences between this and most amps at twice its price are in looks and show-off factor. Powerful and detailed	8	●	●	●	120	299
HB	Creek Evo	500	Not the most accurate, strictly, but it's lively, energetic musical presentation is entirely lovable	5	opt	●	●	85	283
HB	Cyrus 6vs2	600	Spunky little amp that reproduces instrumental timbres and acoustic spaces well, with real musical involvement	7	●	●	●	40	293
HB	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
HB	Marantz PM7001KI	550	A self-effacing amplifier which serves the music admirably with fine bass, sweet treble and unforced detail	5	MM	●	●	70	289
HB	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
HB	Naim Nait 5i	725	More versatile than previous Nait's, the 5i is a great all-round amplifier that offers vivid insights into all manner of music	4	●	●	●	50	305
HB	Onkyo A-933	500	Puts the music first, with sound that delivers the basics correctly but above all involves the listener	5	●	●	●	80	278
HB	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
HB	Unison Research Unico P	795	Sound belies indifferent measured performance with good detail, balance and flowing melodic quality	5	MM	●	●	50	293
HB	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									
EC	AMR AM-77	4,400	A thrilling amplifier that brings you the dynamics of valves with the power of transistors in a substantial but well featured design	6	●	●	●	180	299
HB	Ayon Spirit	1,745	Pentode or triode operation is available at the flick of a switch with this muscular integrated	4	●	●	●	50	303
EC	Boulder 865	7,750	Extremely transparent to detail but less revealing of energy, high power, superb build but only balanced inputs	4	●	●	●	150	303
HB	Copland CTA405	2,498	A musical and involving amplifier, which also has incredible insight and is user-friendly by valve amp standards	5	MM	●	●	50	305
HB	Creek Destiny	1,100	A highly assured performer that doesn't superimpose its personality on the music	6	●	●	●	100	286
HB	Densen Beat B110	1,200	Great bass provides firm underpinning for involving and enjoyable listening - real 'smile factor'	6	opt	●	●	60	292
HB	Leema Pulse	1,195	An organic and revealing sound alongside good power reserves and superb features, including a great MM/MC phono stage	5	●	●	●	80	306
EC	Moon Evolution i-7	4,750	Sophisticated, with an elegant build and sound quality, very limited features, even by high-end standards	5	●	●	●	150	288
EC	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
HB	Mystère ia11	1,250	Small, deceptively powerful integrated valve amp with a crisp, pacy sound	4	●	●	●	40	302
HB	NAD M3	1,899	Massive and flexible, it goes very loud with fine authority and dynamic range, but lacks some sparkle	7	●	●	●	180	285
EC	Naim SuperNait	2,350	Serious communicative ability meets convenience in this sophisticated and powerful integrated design	6	●	●	●	80	294
HB	Pathos Classic One MK3	1,535	An attractive amp offering a beautiful musical presentation with good tonality and detail	5	●	●	●	70	305
HB	Primare I30	1,500	A smooth, sophisticated yet agile performer, and beautifully built too	6	●	●	●	100	267
HB	Pure Sound A30	1,100	Valve integrated, with the accent on music rather than rhythm. Needs more inputs, though	3	●	●	●	30	298
HB	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
HB	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
EC	Unison Research P70	3,495	Delightful valve amplifier with fine neutrality, sweet midband, impressive bandwidth and ample power	4	●	●	●	70	302
HB	Yamaha A-S2000	1,499	One of the few amplifiers to offer the benefit of true balanced operation at this price point	5	opt	●	●	160	309

Our favourite HB BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Pre/power amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS						
				PRE-AMPLIFIER	POWER AMPLIFIER	LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £2,000										
HB	Advance Acoustic MPP206/MAA406	900	This pair has good build and finish and a balance of qualities that's hard to beat for the price	●	●	4	opt	●	150	309
HB	Cambridge Audio Azur 840E/840W	2,000	Enterprising technology delivers a pre/power combo that always sounds detailed, composed and controlled	●	●	8	opt	●	200	309
HB	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
HB	Cyrus Pre Vs2/6 Power	1,000	Pre offers stunning resolution and feature count for the money and power is subtle, open and musical	●	●	●	●	●	50	290
EC	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
HB	Rotel RC-06/RB-06	598	A capable and surprisingly powerful-sounding combination which offers real value	●	●	5	●	●	70	285
HB	Russ Andrews HP-1/PA-1	1,198	Simply featured, but sounds appealingly realistic and solid. Highly capable in all areas design	●	●	2	●	●	50	303
ABOVE £2,000										
HB	Arcam C31/P38	2,050	Very civilised sound, in the best possible way. Well featured and smartly built	●	●	7	opt	●	100	308

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 BT BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO AMPLIFIERS continued

Pre/power amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	PRE-AMPLIFIER	POWER AMPLIFIER	LINE INPUTS	PICCO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
BT	Border Patrol Control Unit	2,995	Bluff looking valve preamp, with one of the most neutral yet dynamic sounds around	●	●	5	opt	●	277	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
BT	Bryston BP26/3B-SST	5,300	The epitome of the iron fist in a velvet glove school of hi-fi. Dynamically superb and very detailed	●	●	8	opt	●	150	308
EC	Chord Prima/Mezzo 140	6,100	Small, muscular, beautifully made and styled and sounds like a dream	●	●	5		●	120	269
EC	Classe 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
EC	Cyrus DAC XP	2,200	A knockout DAC/pre with naturalness and resolution to die for and six digital inputs for signals up to 96kHz	●	●	2		●		266
BT	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	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
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	Hövlund 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
BT	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	Marantz SC11S1/SM-11S1	5,000	Preamp and power amp duo delivers high resolution and is consistent with different loudspeaker loads	●	●	6		●	220	304
EC	Naim NAP 500	11,875	Wonderful neutrality, bandwidth and dynamic range, plus Naim's traditional leading-edge definition	●	●			●	140	208
BT	Roksan Caspian M Series-1	2,245	A well-matched, powerful and enjoyable sounding amplifier combo that brings out the strengths of its CD player	●	●	5		●	85	307

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 ProLogic (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)	SPEC NUMBER
MULTICHANNEL INTEGRATED AMPS								
	Arcam DivA AVR350	1,500	Sets the standard for music and movie performance at the price, although features count low and HDMI limited	7	100	284		
	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		
EC	Denon AVC-A11XV	2,500	Sensible, real world derivative of AVC-A1XV, but still immensely flexible, and well endowed with digital i/o		11	140	273	
EC	Denon AVC-A1XV	4,000	Inelegant, but powerful and effective tool with excellent auto set-up and capable of driving two 5.1 systems simultaneously			170	266	
EC	Lexicon RV-8	5,000	Classy multi-zone receiver lacks high tech digital attributes (HDMI etc) but majors on very effective audio engineering	10	140	267		
	Marantz SR-12S1	3,000	A multichannel amp that can be taken seriously in stereo too. Resources are in the engineering rather than the gimmickry	3	160	255		
EC	Pathos Cinema-X	4,750	No processing, just sexy Italian style, a sextet of valves and the chance of 450 watts in stereo! Cultured sound, too	5	110	270		
EC	Pioneer VSA-AX10Ai	3,000	State of the art one-box amplifier with enhanced sound quality, auto set-up and other enhancements	10	150	260		
	Sony STR-DB798	250	Cheap but effective, and passably good with pure audio sources, but control system messy	7	100	273		
	Sony STR-DB795	300	A superb value little amplifier, well appointed technically and successfully tuned for UK ears	7	100	260		
	Yamaha DSP-AX759SE	500	More a stereo amp with basic multichannel thrown in, but a great performer with music at this price	6	100	287		
MULTICHANNEL PREAMPS/PROCESSORS AND POWER AMPS								
	Arcam A90+ 7.1 mod, P90/3	1,920	Add Arcam's multichannel module and a P90/3 power amp to the A90 stereo integrated and you've got superb purist 5.1	8	90	250		
	Arcam AVP700/P1000	3,000	Cutting-edge processor/tuner with HDMI sounds great, but the matching Class H power amp lacks finesse to match its power	8	135	275		
EC	Arcam FMJ AV8/P7	5,750	High quality preamp/processor (£3,150) and seven-channel power amp (£2,600). An excellent fusion of stereo and surround sound	7	180	235		
EC	Classé SSP-600/CA-5200	11,900	Subtle, exacting sound, tremendous flexibility and high power audiophile standard amplifier - lacks hi-tech digital interfaces	11	200	278		
EC	Copland CVA306/CVA535	3,748	Tube analogue six-channel pre transforms multichannel audio from a novelty into a genuine advance for the high fidelity art	5	125	236		
	Linn Exotik	1,750	Is hi-fi ready to make the jump to multichannel music? Linn think so with this musical preamplifier	4		260		
EC	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		
EC	Meridian 861	9,833	Powerful surround processor with flexible modular construction, marvellous versatility to drive any speaker configuration	6		230		
	Naim AV2/NAPV175/NAP150	4,175	First truly credible multichannel system from Naim is idiosyncratic but offers excellent basic sound with modest spatial steering	5	50	238		
EC	Parasound Halo C1/A51	7,500	Powerful and flexible processor/power amp combo with impressive sound. Excellent value - processor includes onboard screen	11	250	243		
	Primare SP31.7/A30.5	4,200	Great all-round system which brings the qualities of good stereo high fidelity to a multichannel world	5	120	238		

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



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

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

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

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Dino Phono Amplifier



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 6LE £4,000

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 STEREO SPEAKERS

HI-FI CHOICE
BEST BUY [C] EDITOR'S CHOICE

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000										
[C]	Advance Acoustic UM20	200	Classy styling and finish, with solid build and fine overall balance when sited close to a wall	18,30,21		A	43			307
[C]	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
[C]	Acoustic Energy Aelite 3	750	Wood-veneered all-rounder has exceptional neutrality with deep smooth bass	20,103,39		A	22			292
[C]	Acoustic Energy AE1 Classic	845	Sharply priced classic replica has a beautifully balanced midband, wide dynamic range and little boxiness	18,29,5,25,5		A-	45			283
[C]	Amphion Ion L	750	Sharp styling, fine mid/treble coherence and a sweet treble, but less happy bass alignment in test room	16,2,32,6,26,5		A	40			310
[C]	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
[C]	Auroual A1	450	Single-driver system is coloured but wonderfully coherent and very effective at communicating emotions	20,5,36,27		A	40			299
[C]	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
[C]	B&W DM303	180	Chunky looking and lively sounding, with deep bass, a fine midband and a restrained top end	30,33,23		A	23			226
[C]	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
[C]	B&W 683	899	A fine all-round performer with high-class drivers at a very realistic price	20,99,34		P	20			304
[C]	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
[C]	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
[C]	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
[C]	DALI Monitor 1	1,000	Beautiful miniature with advanced drivers sounds marvellously coherent with fine vocal expression	16,32,24		A	40			296
[C]	Dynaudio DM 2/10	775	Unfashionably bulky standmount has fine dynamics, grip, bass and headroom and is delicate and well-mannered	27,5,45,35		A	22			299
[C]	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
[C]	Epos M5	349	Gorgeous miniature works well close to wall. Could be smoother but communicates with authority	18,33,21		A-	40			269
[C]	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
[C]	Focal Chorus 706V	369	Advanced drivers deliver a smooth, even, overall balance with healthy dynamic expression and tension	22,39,25		A	30			307
[C]	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
[C]	Heco Celan 300	595	Does tone colour, dynamics and detail with aplomb and communicates superbly in its +2dB mode. Sensitive, too	23,36,33		A+	40			301
[C]	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
[C]	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
[C]	KEF iQ9	800	Shapely and solid floorstander has wide bandwidth and dynamic range with superior neutrality and sensitivity	22,94,33		A	25			273
[C]	Mission élan e34	400	A return to form for Mission with a pacy, vibrant sound matched to good looks	35,96,34		A+	48			298
[C]	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
[C]	Monitor Audio BR2	200	Good looking standmount has a muscular sound with superior coherence	18,5,35,25		A-	30			294
[C]	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
[C]	Monitor Audio GS10	800	More neutral tonally than some recent MAS. Quality stereo design which takes up little room and is easy to drive	20,36,27		A-	40			284
[C]	Monitor Audio Silver RS8	800	Bold, dynamic sound marks it out from the crowd, and it's an easy load that works well in larger rooms	90,18,27		A	33			276
[C]	PMC DB1i	825	Could be more neutral, but a very effective musical communicator with fine warmth and sweet treble	15,5,29,23,4		A+	30			310

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).

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE
STEREO SPEAKERS *continued*

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				SIZE (W x H x D) (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF DRIVE	BASS (FROM Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL
	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
	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
	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
	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
	Quadral Pico	849	Could be more muscular, but neutral and open with spacious imaging and little coloration	19,34,26		A-	30	●	292
	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
	Russ Andrews SP-1	399	This tweaked Focal 705V RA has a sound that is immediate, engaging and, most importantly, great fun	192,31.5,24.8		A+	65	●	309
	Spendor S3/5R	725	Lacks dynamic muscle and loudness potential, but lovely smooth neutrality and good bass extension	16.5,30.5,190		P	25	●	310
	Tannoy Mercury F4	350	Floorstander has an engrossing sound with good dynamics and a warm, restrained output	20.5,97,29	●	A+	24	●	294
	Tannoy Revolution DC6	800	Pretty compact standmount likes wall loading, delivering a lively even bass and smooth coherent midband	23,36.5,23		A	40	●	307
	Triangle Antal Esw	995	Smother than its predecessors, with a beautifully balanced bass and midband, though the top end is uneven	20,108,34	●	A	20	●	288
	Wharfedale Diamond 9.1	180	Superior shape and finish at an exceptionally sharp price. Sound is laid back, but free from boxiness	19.5,30,28		A-	45	●	307
	Wharfedale Opus2-M1	1,000	Elegant mid to compact three way, a new direction in recent years for Wharfedale	23,51,36		A-	42	●	302
ABOVE £1,000									
	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
	Amphion Frio 520	1,600	Gorgeous styling and a lively sound with good voice band integrity and a sweet top end	16,104,22	●	A	40	●	302
	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
	ALR Jordan Note 3	1,350	Costly but clever; adjustable ABR gives much of the weight of a floorstander with the agility of a standmount	245,37,31.5		A	26	●	288
	ATC SCM16A	2,203	Makes a great case for the active speaker. Good value, including built-in amps, and fuss-free	27,45,33		ACT	42	●	300
	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
	Audio Physic Spark 3	1,499	Classy and discreetly laic back floorstander has delightfully neutral balance and surprising bass weight	15,98,22	●	A+	27	●	271
	AVI ADM9	1,000	Active mini-monitors that are exceptionally accurate and dynamic, and they give good iPod, too	20,30,26		ACT	60	●	301
	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
EC	B&W 802D	8,000	Great timing, superior dynamics and a sweet top end all enhance musical communication. Makes sweet music	37,115,56	●	A	<20	●	267
	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
	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
	Focal Chorus 816WSE	1,399	The W cone treatment makes some of the qualities associated with Focal's high-end models more competitive	998,282,37.5	●	A+	39	●	308
	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
	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
EC	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
	Free FS1	3,000	An elegant active design for anyone after the minimum of wiring. Wireless with Sonos or Airport Express	16,87,27	●	ACT	35	●	301
	Gamut Ph.5	2,550	Lovely and discreet floorstander has excellent sound and several very clever engineering touches	17,100,24	●	P	20	●	305
EC	Jamo Reference R909	7,500	Top model (in a class of one) is open, full and easy on the ear, and surely a classic in the making	48,127,54	●	A-	25	●	280
EC	KEF Reference Model 201/2	3,500	Very classy but costly three-way stand-mount with much improved Uni-Q; could be more transparent	25,42,41		A	30	●	298
	Kudos Cardea C1	1,450	A very pretty compact standmount with a delightfully subtle and delicate sound quality	20,35,27		A	40	●	304
	Kudos Cardea C30	5,250	An absolute honey that fully justifies its hefty pricetag, lacking only a little dynamic tension	20,112,27	●	G	22	●	310
EC	MartinLogan Source	1,599	Careful install needed, but capable of remarkable transparency at an extremely competitive price	24,120,37	●	A	42	●	303
	Monopulse 42A	1,495	Oddball styling, fine bass-to-mid balance and dynamics, and superb voice coherence, but untidy treble	26,110,25	●	A	25	●	302
	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

HI-FI CHOICE
PASSION FOR SOUND

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Our favourite BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO SPEAKERS

continued

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				SIZE WxHxD (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EDGE-OF-DRIVE	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL
EC	Monitor Audio PL300	5,000	Completely new level of sophistication from a brand best known for mainstream, cost effective designs	41,111,47	●	A-	28	●	301
EC	Mordaunt-Short Perf 6 LE	4,000	Striking moulded enclosure minimises coloration, while overall balance is smooth, neutral and open	24,115,43	●	A	22	●	308
BB	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
BB	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
BB	Neat Momentum 3i	1,745	Sounds a lot bigger than it looks, with good coherence and an impressively wide dynamic range	22,38,27	●	A-	23	●	302
BB	Opera Seconda	1,295	Classy cabinetwork plus beautifully judged neutrality with crisp, clean and deep bass	24,102,5,31,5	●	A-	20	●	297
BB	PMC Wafer 2	1,650	Clever 'hang-on-wall' speaker has minimal sonic compromises. Smooth midband delivers impressive stereo imaging	33,5,57,5,10	●	A+	45	●	285
BB	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
BB	PMC GB1i	1,275	Pretty little floorstander has great class with fine delicacy and sweet detailing	15,5,87,23,4	●	A	30	●	306
EC	Quad ESL 2805	4,500	Uniquely wonderful natural realism, exceptional imaging, coherence and low level detailing	70,107,38,5	●	A-	45	●	294
BB	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
BB	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	25	●	271
EC	Revel F32	3,200	Meticulously balanced, tonally neutral design makes for a taut, well disciplined sound	22,105,39	●	A	20	●	256
EC	Revel M22	1,800	A remarkably clean and revealing speaker with superb tonal and microdynamic capabilities	22,37,30	●	A-	48	●	274
BB	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
BB	Ruark Taisman III	1,499	No bass demon, but a sophisticated and agile speaker epitomising Ruark's design ideals	22,84,31	●	A	22	●	259
EC	Sonus Faber Cremona Audit	2,690	Open, exciting and with surprisingly good bass... this is 'The Little Speaker That Could' (stands £575 extra)	20,35,37	●	A	50	●	305
EC	Sonus Faber Grand Piano D	2,498	The Grand Piano Domus has a fabulous physical appearance and delivers a clean, refined sound	21,106,31	●	A-	32	●	283
EC	Tannoy Dimension TD8	4,000	This stylish speaker is a splendid all-rounder, with fine dynamics, precise imaging and minimal coloration	31,86,30	●	A-	25	●	240
BB	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
BB	Totem Model 1 Signature	1,595	Expensive, but very seductive miniature delivers a beautifully smooth and balanced midband	17,31,23	●	A	35	●	277
BB	Triangle Genese Quartet	1,895	Great material value and a solid all round sonic performance with great loudness potential	23,117,37	●	A	25	●	302
BB	Triangle Cellius 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
BB	Usher Compass CP-6381	2,500	Lots of speaker for your money, with plenty of deep bass, unusual styling and massive build	35,127,65	●	A	20	●	270
EC	Vivid Audio B1	7,750	Impressive cabinet design combined with hi-tech drivers to make truly world class speaker	27,110,38	●	A-	40	●	261
EC	Wilson Benesch ACT	8,400	Superb enclosure gives uncanny freedom from 'boxiness'. Well balanced, but top end might be sweeter	23,108,36	●	A	20	●	252
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	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
BB	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

Our favourite BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

SUBWOOFERS

Bass speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			
				SIZE WxHxD (CM)	POWER (W)	BASS FROM (Hz)	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	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
EC	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
EC	Eclipse TD725sw	2,700	Delivers solid meaningful bass, but with unusual tunefulness, speed and articulation	52,47,50	500	40	287
BB	Monitor Audio ASW100	300	For the price, this compact subwoofer performs particularly well	32,32,34	120	27	225
EC	REL 305	795	Landmark mid-price sub, works particularly well with low crossover frequency, looks great too	32,36,34	300	25	284
BB	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
BB	REL T1	595	Standard setter at the price: flexible, easily set up and packs quite a punch	36,40,420	300	25	291
BB	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
BB	REL Storm III	900	Excellent sub with powerful, detailed and deep bass. Comprehensive facilities, including flexible filter adjustment	42,62,33	150	18	225
BB	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
BB	MartinLogan Dynamo	449	Refined, compact sub brings established MartinLogan virtues to a new price and size point	29,35,32	200	25	301
BB	Velodyne SPL-800R	699	Powerful, highly configurable sub with auto setup feature and attractive, compact packaging	26,27,33	1,000	28	286
EC	Wilson Benesch Torus	5,200	Amp and sub package built like a sophisticated pile driver, with deep, state of the art performance	45,33,45	1,000	10	290

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.

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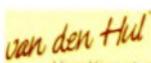
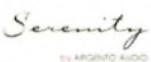
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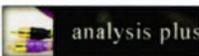
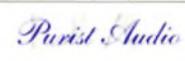
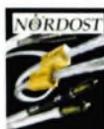
Selected Hi-Fi equipment

Accessories
Acoustic resonators
Bel Canto
Leema Acoustics
STAX Headphones
Echo Busters
Moving Coil
Lyra-Ortofon-Sumiko

Component cables
Digital Cables
HDMI
Optical Cables
S video
SCART
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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 EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

Stereo headphones

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS						
				ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUMAURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK	WEIGHT (g)	3.5MM JACK ADAPTOR
 	AKG K270 Studio	129	Pro oriented design which is very transparent and great with acoustic material						270	230
EC	AKG K1000	650	Neutral, analytical and completely out of the head sound, suitable for connection to speaker outputs only						270	244
 	Audio Technica ATH-W1000	400	Superbly comfortable and very revealing. Long listening sessions are a pleasure with new musical insights						250	304
 	Beyerdynamic DT770	190	A touch coloured in the mid, but less than most closed cans: detailed and with excellent bass						290	287
 	Beyerdynamic DT880	200	Informative, neutral and surprisingly close to good loudspeakers. Good for occasional and long-term listening alike						205	300
 	Denon AH-D2000	250	Among the best closed-back headphones we've heard and very fine by any standards.						350	309
 	Grado SR225	180	Tonally shows the way to Grado's amazing GS1000 flagship, but detail and soundstage are not truly class-leading						200	300
 	Grado GS1000	995	One of the finest transducers on the planet, with detail to die for						250	288
 	Sennheiser HD485	65	A great all-round headphone for occasional or even heavy use, refined in sound and comfortable, too						220	296
 	Sennheiser HD595	150	Technology from upmarket HD650 model makes this a very revealing headphone that's also extremely comfortable						270	266
EC	Sennheiser HD650	300	Astonishing resolution and hardly less impressive tonal balance make this a true hi-fi experience						260	252
 	Sennheiser PXC450	299	Noise-cancelling model: as good as it gets for making the most of listening in planes, trains and automobiles						240	302
 	Shure SE420	240	Expensive and no replacement for top conventional 'phones, but streets ahead of most in-ears with real refinement						15	295
 	Shure E500PTH	420	Sophisticated in-ear design with three drivers, plus switchable 'voiceover' mic in the lead; high-quality stuff						20	285
 	Stax SR-001 Mk II	239	Expensive and power hungry, but this electrostatic drags personal stereo into the world of high fidelity						280	268
EC	Stax SRS-2020 Basic Sys. II	349	Luxury option at its price, but the sound delivery is five-star quality all the way						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 connectors instead – check your components before you buy.

Our favourite CABLES

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Interconnects and speaker cables

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			ISSUE NUMBER
				STRANDED	SOLID CORE	DIGITAL CABLE TYPE	
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 type="checkbox"/>	Black Rhodium Coda	150	Superb bass and excellently neutral and detailed midrange; treble generally sweet with occasional slight constriction				299
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Black Rhodium Concert	255	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 generically – notably resolution, focus and articulation				294
<input type="checkbox"/>	Icos Isotica 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 type="checkbox"/>	Nordost Wyrewizard Dream	95	Slight lack of precision in extreme treble, otherwise detailed and neutral with authoritative bass				303
<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"/>	Profigold PGA3000	60	Not the ultimate for lovers of clinical precision, its character is engaging and detail and extension are good				299
<input type="checkbox"/>	Supra EFF-1X	77	Lively-sounding cable which maintains a high level of detail and neutrality. Musically, a great all-rounder				306
<input type="checkbox"/>	Townshend Isolda DCT100	99	Silky-smooth treble, with remarkably good detail too; midrange and bass also very fine				303
<input type="checkbox"/>	van den Hul Integration Hybrid	125	Bass is nothing remarkable, but mid and treble are outstandingly open and clear; very transparent				306
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wireworld Luna 5	30	Authoritative bass and clear treble outperform many cables at twice the price				273
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 type="checkbox"/>	Supra AnCo	80	This cable can give a useful fillip to a good transport/DAC combination, even in a high-end context				E 304
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Wireworld Starlight 5	90	Clear gains in detail and imaging precision are this cable's main strengths: good value and near-high-end performance				E 279
SPEAKER CABLES PRICE PER METRE							
<input type="checkbox"/>	Atlas Hyper 1.5	10	Don't look to this cable to beef up the bass, but its performance at higher frequencies is revelatory at the price				299
<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 Silver Screen	14	Screened speaker cable with excellent treble, but just a little light in the bass at times				310
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	CrystalCable Piccolo	1,480	Tougher than it looks, Piccolo has some of the qualities of a solid core type generically – notably resolution, focus and articulation				302
<input type="checkbox"/>	Kimber 8PR	12	A cable that really enjoys the music, also admirable for the levels of analytical detail it allows through. Excellent value				299
<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 Solstice 5 ²	45	Rather bulky and awkward, but performance amply justifies it with superb bass solidity				310

SPECS KEY **STRANDED** Cable has a number of (usually) twisted strands to conduct the signal. **SOLID CORE** Cable has one or more individually insulated strands to conduct the signal. **COPPER** Material used to form the conducting element of the cable. **SILVER** Alternative material used to form the conducting element of the cable. **DIGITAL CABLE TYPE** E – electrical, O – optical. Cables are one metre length unless otherwise stated.

STANDS AND SUPPORTS

Equipment racks and speaker stands

➤ If you want to get the most from your source and amp components, it's important to consider good quality support. Dedicated equipment supports are racks and tables made specifically to hold hi-fi gear, and the best can have a profoundly positive

effect on sound because, for example, they can help to isolate kit from ground-borne vibrations and mechanical or electrical interference. Equally, if you own a pair of small 'bookshelf' or 'standmount' speakers, it's important to place them on good quality, purpose-built speaker stands.

Our favourite EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Equipment supports

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS
	Alphason A5-G	399	Nice looking, very solid and practical with a pretty well balanced sound, but lacks a little detail
	Atacama Equinox	280	Stable, modular design with style. Excellent bass transients and a fresh design concept
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Audiophile Base Std Supp't	900	Not cheap and quite bulky, but it's all worth it as sound is unusually detailed and resonance-free
	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 checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design Icon 400	600	Beautifully built, conveniently adjustable and with little sound of its own, a very classy rack
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design Concept 400	700	Slightly drab looks, but great sound and efficient use of space ('Acoustic' version tested – standard version £300)
	Custom Design Milan	449	Respect is due to any stand that looks this good with nothing more to complain of than slight muddying of detail
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design Vantige	449	'Acoustic Aluminium' shelves plus steel supports equal practicality plus musical satisfaction: just a shade bright
	Partington Minim	420	Adds its own character to the benefit of rock most particularly, but slightly to the detriment of acoustic sounds
	Quadraspire Q4 Reference	480	Excellent performance from the school of wobbly racks. Natural sounding and plenty of detail
	Russ Andrews Torlyte Rack	988	Attractive modular system made of very light Torlyte: a touch of added warmth is its only vice
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	RA Torlyte Platform	130	This unassuming platform can be a godsend, cleaning away mid/treble muddle from the sound
<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
57	46,35		3	MDF	302
75	56,37		4	Glass	286
65	60,42		4	Glass	293
75	57,41		5	Glass	263
74	48,40		4	Metal	247
57	48,39		4	Glass	302
62	49,44		4	Metal	271
78	45,37	●	5	Glass	302
51.5	49,39.5		4	MDF	217
68	54,49		4	Torlyte	240
8	48,36		1	Torlyte	302
76	35,50		4	Glass	273

Our favourite SPEAKER STANDS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Speaker stands

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS
	Anvil Sound Display Stand	226	A variety of smart looks available - sound is clear and precise
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design RS300	110	An attractive stand whose lack coloration and ringing makes suits it to high resolution systems, at a tempting price
	Custom Design SQ402	100	More a range than a model, capable of fine results especially with Acoustic Steel top plates
<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"/>	Partington Ansa 60	99	Elegant flat-packer 'disappears' sonically; restrained but neutral and coherent
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Partington Dreadnought BS	295	Sound is better defined in almost all areas than cheaper, slimmer stands can offer
<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
62	18,16,5	●		2	299
61	18,16,3	●		4	283
62	18,15	●		4	232
62	17,23	●		5	309
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.

Equipment Racks

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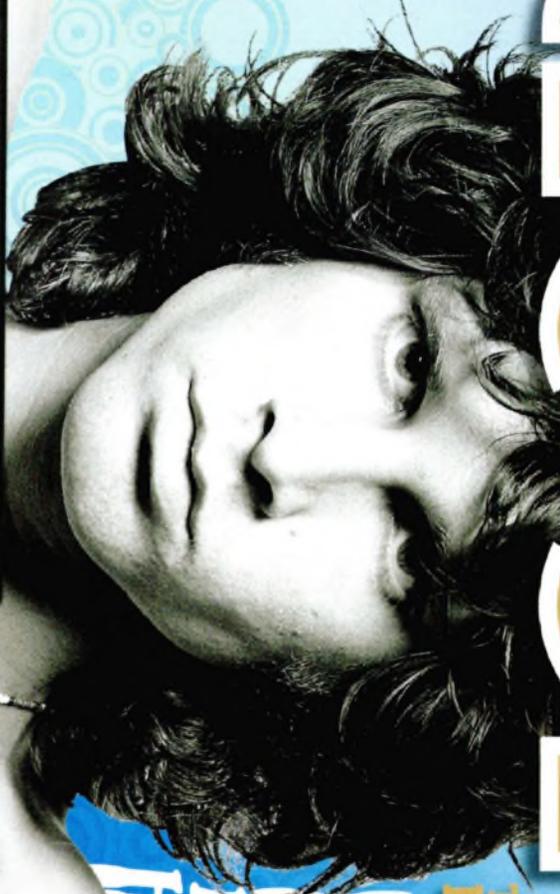
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ROKY
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Luxury Living Show Sensational System

Zingali - Pathos - MSB - Synergistic Research

Just a few of our listeners' comments...



"A Concert Hall performance!..."

"These speakers are beautiful!..."



"This is as good as it gets!..."

"The sound is sensational!..."

"I've never heard such detail!..."



Dealers for:
 Advanced Acoustics
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 Bel Canto
 English Valve Amps
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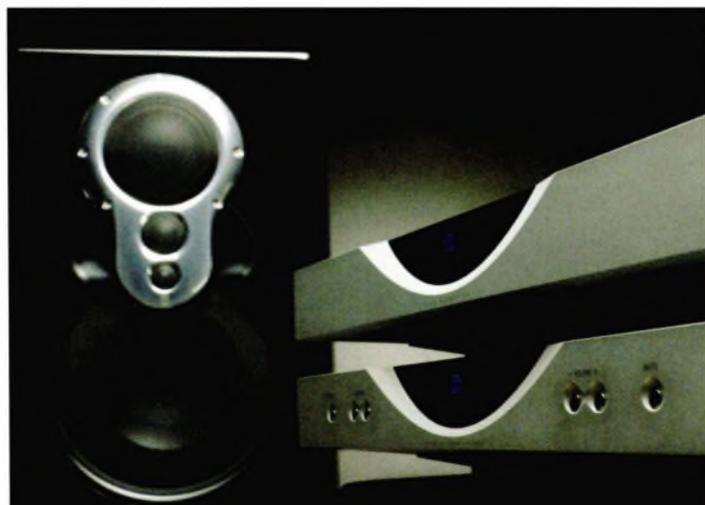
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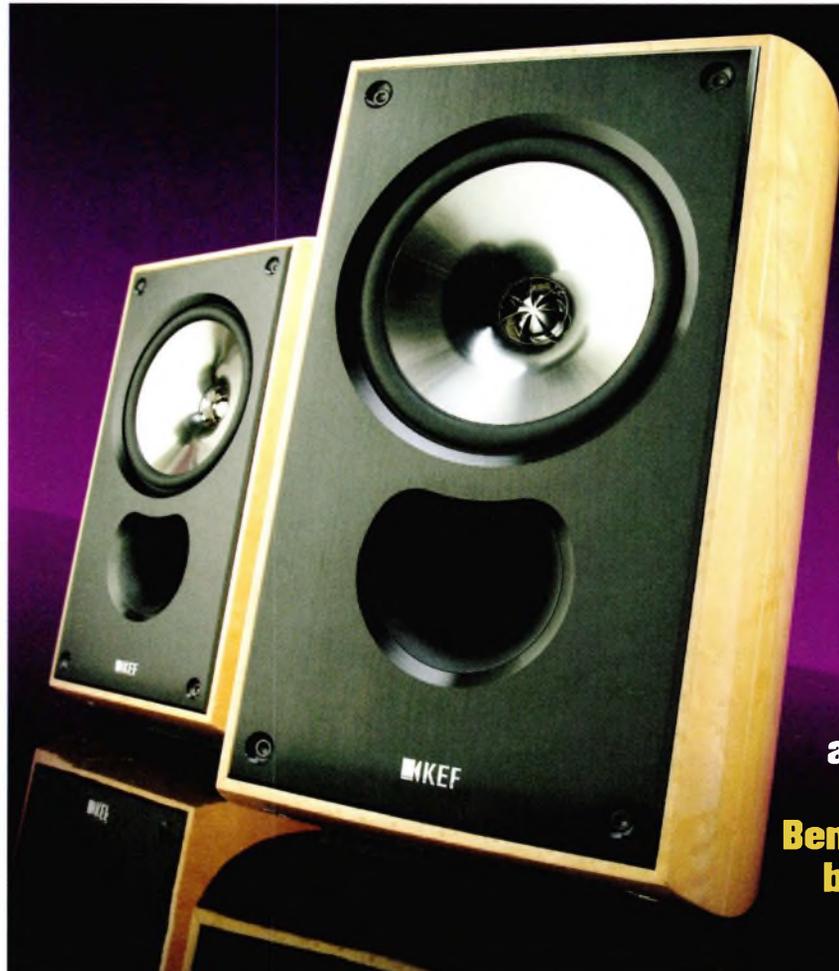
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Three grand will buy you a second-hand CD player with superb, reference-level sound quality. It will also get you exclusivity; since its launch in the summer of 2006, only around 50 units of the Pathos Endorphin, have been sold in the UK. Nevertheless, despite its current price of £5,000, we've seen a second-hand player sell for exactly £3,000.

Many would agree that the Endorphin is the best-looking player here, although the design does have its downsides. The multiple flat surfaces act as a dust magnet and the deliberate lack of markings on the buttons is confusing at first. The black Perspex finish isn't the most durable, so check for scratches.

All Pathos products are covered by a two-year guarantee, meaning that any example should be in perfect working order. The Endorphin is supplied with two remotes when new. Check that both the six-button and Philips-type programmable remote are present with the player. Although it's extremely reliable, it's worth checking that the integral puck assembly is in place – it can be damaged by careless use. Contributing to the musical coherence and mellifluous sound quality is the valve output. Obviously they won't last forever, but at £35 a pair, a new set of triode tubes won't break the bank.

Next up is a heavyweight player, in every sense of the word! Weighing in at over 22kg, the Marantz SA-7S1 contains enough copper to be a target for those usually found lurking around power substations and railway lines. It's very much a 'halo' product for Marantz, and demonstrates the firm's ability to make an esoteric player. Sadly, at least for Marantz, the lack of an esoteric-sounding name has meant heavy discounting, even when new. Although

it was launched less than 18 months ago for £5,000, there are already players – just – available within our budget.

With the player being so new and so well built, there are no issues with reliability. However, you do still need to take care. With discounters selling the player from \$5,500 (less than £3,000) in America, there has always been a great temptation to import. If you're buying second-hand, then be sure to check you're not getting a US model. While there's nothing inherently wrong with this, the player will need a mains-transformer modification. You may get yourself a bargain, but it'll have a huge knock-on effect come sale time, especially as Marantz's three-year guarantee won't cover products sourced from outside Europe. You have been warned!

Accuphase is a Japanese brand you might not have heard of, but its DP-75 is a well-respected and popular CD player. Sound quality is on the smoother side of neutral,

“Wadia is one of those esoteric brands whose very name suggests audio ecstasy.”

but the staging is certainly expansive. It's also one of those players whose solid-looking case panels give them serious menace, in a way that's unique to high-end Far Eastern and American kit. Launched in 1994, it lasted right through to 2000 with just a 'V version' cosmetic change.

In the UK Accuphase is distributed by RT Services, which claims that it has encountered no problems with the DP-75. As yet, RT hasn't even had to replace a laser. Having said that, the company reckons on £400-£500 being required for a new



Above: The ever-reliable Marantz SA-7S1

mechanism. While this may sound a lot, it's actually about the going rate for many high-end CD players. Our budget is easily enough for one of the last DP-75V models and for this money it should be in excellent condition.

Our final choice is the Wadia 302. Wadia is one of those esoteric brands whose very name suggests audio ecstasy. While the 302 was an entry-level player, it still possesses a great deal of the Wadia 'magic'. Launched in 2005 and only recently discontinued, the 302 makes an excellent choice if reliability and long-term service are your key concerns. Although the Philips transport can have the usual issue with regard to needing the tray re-greasing, the player is otherwise extremely well proven.

In terms of connections, the 302 features balanced XLR sockets and has a variable output. If you have a power amp with XLR inputs, it'll make an excellent preamp-less option. Although the player cost £4,300 new, less than half that will now buy you a decent example. Despite its excellent reputation, that puts it at the cheaper end of our quartet.

When buying, it's worth seeking a model with the expensive, optional metal remote control; the standard plastic one rather lets the side down. Black models tend to be worth slightly more than silver, but you can use this to your advantage if that's the colour you prefer.

Choosing between these four players is an enviable task that, as ever, depends on personal preference. Having said that, if it's peace of mind you're after, then the Marantz and the Wadia are probably your best bets. For the sheer visual and sonic thrill of it, though, the Pathos Endorphin narrowly gets our vote.

Enjoy! **HFC**

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Above: The uniquely designed Pathos Endorphin CD player

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Roksan Xerxes 20/XPS7, ex demo	1899 NAIM 42 S, Chrome, boxed, phonoboard, vgc	119 Roksan Atesa transport	399 Ruark Equinox, excellent in black
SME 3009, series 2 and 3, excellent from	149 NAIM NAP140, Olive, boxed	749 Rega Saturn, excellent boxed	749 Spondor S3/5e, in ebony vgc
SME Model 20/2A, nr mint ex demo	Call NAIM NAIT 5, original up-gradeable version, ex boxed	399 Slim Devices Transporter, mint boxed 4 months old	999 Spondor S5e, in maple nr mint boxed
STD 305M, SME cut armboard	199 NAIM XPS, ex boxed	1499 Sugden CD player, excellent, remote	Call Tannoy DC2000, vgc black
Systemdek IX900, ofboard p/s, acrylic platter and RB250	379 NAIM NAC112, current style preamp	349 TEAC VRDS10, good condition, boxed remote	79 TDL RTL2 fun little floorstander, good order
Systemdek II (biscuit tin), ADC arm, vgc	249 Pathos Classic One Mk2, ex demo	899 Technics SLP1200, excellent, domestic use only	249 Triangle Comete ES, ex demo nr mint boxed
Technics SL1210 mk2, various from	199 Pathos Cinema X, mint boxed	Call Wadia 302, as new, ex demo, warranty, boxed, remote etc	2999 Usher Audio Dancer CP8571, the most beautiful speaker ever?
Townshend Elite Rock, Excaltar arm, Merlin p/s, plinth & hd	749 Pathos Inpol 2, mint boxed	Call Radio/Recorders	
	749 Pathos Logos, ex demo nr mint boxed	Call Linn Kudos, excellent	SPECIAL SYSTEM DEALS
Accessories/Cables	Call Quad 44 Preamp, 405 Power amps NOW from	Call Meridian 204, excellent	299 AVI Lab Series Amp c/w phono, CD Player and pair Neutron IV
Chord - various cables, call for details	249 Quad 33/303, vgc for year fully serviced	99 Nakamichi DR2 ex boxed	249 Consonance Ping, superb one box system
Cyrus PSXR from	499 Quad 99/909, excellent boxed	999 Pure 702ES, excellent multiband tuner	149 Quad 99 Prie and 909 Power c/w 989 ESL speakers
Naim HXCR, late olive	Call Roksan Kandy Mk3 power	379 Quad FM3 and FM4, excellent from	149 Roksan Caspian Full system with FR5 floorstanders
Nordost, various ex demo	Call TACT (Lyngdorf) Audio SDA2175, great press, as new	699 TEAC TR610 FM tuner	99 Shanling MC30, cute little mini system
Van den Hul - various ex demo			49 TEAC CRH2571 in silver - Brand New - less than half price

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Speakers

Tannoy Sterlings Mint/Boxed	£1495
Acoustic Zen surround system, new (£7845) only	£5875
B&W ASW 4000 sub woofer	£795
B&W DM1800 speakers with stands	£195
B&W DM640 floor standers	£295
Quad 21L speakers, floor standers	£350
New Acoustic Zen Adajio speakers	£3125
New Alamarro M3 speakers	£2695
Hales Transcendence 5 speakers	£2895
Mordaunt Short MS5-40 speakers	£99
Acoustic Zen Adagio Junior speakers + stands, new	£2500
Acoustic Zen Adagio center speaker + stand	£1625
Mission 753 speakers	£349
Ruark Templars, boxed	£245

Pre-Amps

Audio Note M8 pre-amp with phone/remote	£7995
Wavac PR-T1 3 box pre amp as new. (£23500)	£10750
Proceed PAV pre-amp	£495

Amplifiers

Almarro A50125A integrate3d amp (NEW)	£3140
Wavac MD- 805M monos (£16500) AS NEW only	£7950
Goldmund SRM-250 mono's (£6590) new	£4995
Kora triode 100SB mono power amps (pair)	£3495
Bel Canto EVO 2 power amp	£1295
Roksan Caspian mono blocks superb/boxed	£1295
Yamaha DSP-E800 processor/3 ch amp	£175
Audio Note Zero pre-amp with monoblocks (ex demo)	£795

CD Players & DAC's

Audio Note DAC 1X mint/boxed	£395
Tri CD Player Bal? outputs, (NEW, made in Japan)	£1495
Denon DVD A-11, DVD/DVD audio/SACD player mint/boxed	£695
Esoteric x-03 SE (NEW)	POA
Goldmund Eidos 18 CD/SACD player (£3195) NEW	£2495
Marantz CD-873 CD player	£65

Miscellaneous

Isoclean Power 50A 111 US power block/filter, new	£850
Technics ST-610L tuner	£65
Sony ST-SE570 tuner	£60
Winds electronic stylus gauge	£425
Selection NEW Madrigal CZ gel balanced interconnect@ 30% discount	

Turntables and associated gear

Dynavector 507 Mk. 2 arm (new)	£1995
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Main Dealer for:

Mark Levinson, Ayre Acoustic, Tannoy Prestige speakers, Thiel speakers, Audionote, Esoteric, Bolzano Villetti speakers, SME, Stax, Cello, Lyra, My-Sonic, Revel, Audio Tekne, Michell.

DEFINITIVE AUDIO

Sale of part exchanged and ex-dem items

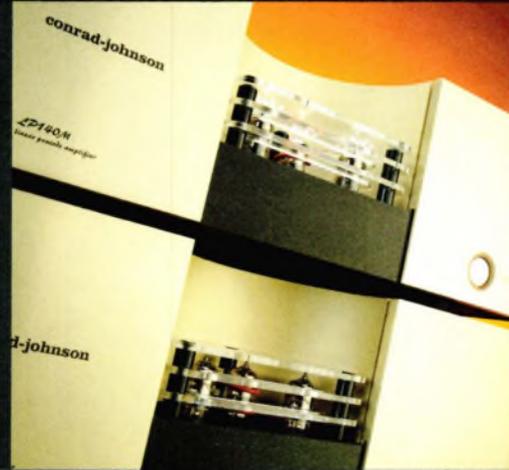
ITEM DESCRIPTION	SALE	NEW
Kondo KSL M77 preamplifier. Immaculate condition. Boxed with certificate.	£15k	-
B&W DM2 loudspeakers. 1970's. Good working order.	£100	-
Linn Kairn Pre-amplifier c. 15 years old with remote control, box, manual.	£400	-
Linn Karik CD player c. 15 years old with remote control, box, manual.	£300	-
Michell Gyro . Smoked perspex lid/ bronze. Approx 9 years old. Particularly nice cond.	£600	-
Horning Agathon Gold loudspeakers with Lowther PM4 Alnico drivers. Natural Oak.	£3000	c. £7500
KSL-Kondo Gakuon 211 mono amplifiers. (Yr. 2000). Big, ocean liner of an amplifier. Masculine and pout-inducing.	£21k	£65000
KSL-Kondo M100 DAC . Predecessor of KSL-DAC. Add a CEC transport and heaven is yours.	£7000	-
Western Electric Gotham type 39 mono amplifiers. 50 watts of 300B in Class A. Beefcake with manners.	£4000	£10000
Audio Innovations series 300 MKII integrated amplifier. 12 watt Class A ECL86 with phono. Nice with Lowther drivers.	£300	-
Pure Sound CD player, valve output stage, ex-demonstrator, as new.	£500	£900
Art Audio Quintet . Shiny EL 34 Class 'A' integrated. As new, ex-dem.	£2000	£3850
Art Audio Concerto integrated. Shiny triode 6550 integrated. Beefy sound. As new.	£3000	£4400
Sugden CD 21 Just serviced by Sugden. Excellent condition.	£500	£1100
Pioneer Precision F504 RDS tuner. Beautiful sound for the Radio 3 addict.	£300	-
Teac P700 transport . Bit scruffy but will do the job. Give-away at this price.	£200	-
SJS Arcadia model 1 pre amplifier. AN Japan manque. Hard wired purist line pre-amp. Lots of serviceable quality, not much outlay.	£500	-
SJS Arcadia model 2 pre amplifier. As above but built in full copper chassis. Copper sub chassis. Hard wired with silver, Cerafine reservoir caps.		
Panasonic volume pot. Sophisticated and luxurious sound. Rare bird.	£1000	-
Croft Epoch preamplifier. Hard wired, inc' phono stage. Excellent sound.	£800	-
Border Patrol 300B SE 4 weeks use - as new.	£3000	£5750
Audio Innovations P2 phono stage with Border Patrol upgrade. Sought after pre-amp with big reputation.	£900	-
Lavardin PE Reference line pre-amplifier - 1 lady driver - as new.	£1000	£2400
Finite Elemente Pagode Master Reference turntable wall shelf. Brand new, boxed.	£600	£1400
Magnum Dynalab MD10 surround sound decoder.	£1000	£2400
Mactone 6550 Integrated amplifier. Ex dem.	£2000	£6500
Avid Diva T/T with Rega fitting kit. SME mount as standard. £1200+£60 for Rega arm kit April 2007. Hardly any use.	£600	£1260
ART Stilleto 6 Maple. Boxed. Excellent condition.	£800	£2000
Martin Logan Aerius i with Oak sides. Lovely condition, boxed. Give-away.	£1000	£3500

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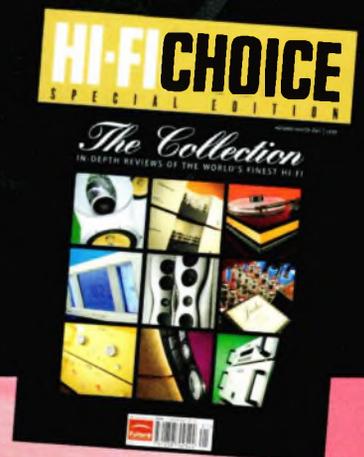


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ARCAM A70 amplifier, hardly used, boxed, mint, £350. Chord Rumour 2 speaker cable, eight metre pair, £39. Chord Crimson interconnects, boxed, £19. 01903 243806 (W. Sussex).

ARCAM DV137 DVD-Audio/Video player. Excellent condition, (£1,300) £500 ono. 07772 333874 (Warks)

ARCAM FMJ CD23 CD player, good condition, £400. A32 integrated amplifier, very slight mark to front, £350. T21 AM/FM tuner, good condition, £150. 01626 368003 (Devon)

AUDIO ANALOGUE PUCCINI amp, silver, mint condition, boxed, £200. 07881 553117 (SW London)

AVI LAB SERIES integrated with phono stage, excellent condition, with original box and manual, £850. 07795 652876 (Bucks)

B&W 684 floorstanders, one month old, five-year warranty, can demo (£699) £500. 01274 541282 (W. Yorks)

BLACK RHODIUM phono interconnects. Brand new, never used. 'Prelude' 0.5m, (£70) £45 plus £3 P&P. 01527 861014 (Worcs)

CAMBRIDGE DVD79 DVD player, Cambridge Azur 540R-S AV receiver, Gale 3050 mid-speaker, Gale Storm 10 active subwoofer, assorted cables, £250 the lot. siest@glamchick.eclipse.co.uk (Exeter)

CASTLE HARLECH S2 speakers in maple finish. Absolutely pristine, spikes, packaging etc. Perfect condition (£1,000) £500. Collect (M5, J5), 01527 861014 (Worcs).

CHORD DSC 900 DAC, silver, boxed, perfect condition, (£1,900)

£700. Teac T1 CD transport, VRDS mechanism, boxed incl Stereovox HDXC digital cable, v.good condition, £300. 01925 766 200 (Cheshire).

PIONEER A88X amplifier, £190. Rogers Ravensbourne amplifier, £60, unused. Wharfedale 708s loudspeakers (black), £145. Goodmans 'Imagio' IC100s loudspeakers, £85, mint, boxed. Various quality interconnects. Tel 07837 188670 (Essex)

CONRAD JOHNSON PV10A preamp, MV55 power amp, superb, new valves in pre, new set supplied for power, all boxed, manuals etc, £995, or PV10A £450, MV55 £600. 01706 345418 mail@rodtheobald.force9.co.uk (Lancs).

CREEK CD 50 MK 1 CD player. Immaculate condition, 10 hours use! Offered with Russ Andrews DV 30 digital cable and PowerKord. £200 plus £10 postage or collect. Bargain. 01527 861014 (Worcs)

CYRUS DAC X quartz silver, as new, boxed, instructions, 18 months old, £650 ono. 01422 885440 (W Yorks)

EPOS ES22 speakers in light cherry, superb condition and performance, virtually as new with original packaging, spikes and user manual, £475. 07963 232638 sjross99@msn.com (Herts)

KRELL FPB300CX in mint condition (unused), only taken out of the box for photo. 220v-50Hz £4,600 and shipping. For more details email ewadv@hotmail.com (Israel).

LINN GENKI CD player, grey case, excellent condition with Linn interconnects and original packaging, £395ono. Naim NAP

250 power amplifier, olive case in original packaging, excellent condition with Russ Andrews PowerKord but no interconnects £650 ono. 0114 2507866 (Sheffield)

LINN LP12 (1996), Basik LXV, Elektra (new), serviced and reset, £449. 07891 700542 or 01352 714568 (Flintshire)

MANA 5-TIER rack, £350. Naim Aro tonearm, £300. Linn LP12 with Mantra power supply, £300. Naim NAT 01, £400. 07831 745391 (Berks)

MARANTZ SR 8001 AV receiver, HDMI, (£1,200) £395. Marantz DV6001 DVD/SACD player, black, £195. Sony XA1200ES SACD player all as brand new with Marantz/Sony dealer warranty invoices. 020 8951 3178 (Middx)

MIRAGE M-1SI front loudspeakers, £1,300. M-7si rears, £400. MC-si centre, £300. BBSS-210 subwoofer, £700. LFX-3 crossover, £200. Classé 150 and Threshold S300 amps. Two processors. 01344 841455 or 07774 493493 (Surrey).

MONITOR AUDIO BR5 floorstander speakers, factory-sealed in original box in sumptuous walnut wood veneer.

Delivery in Edinburgh or surrounding area: £290 or picked up for £280. 07646 74717 or miller.andy@gmail.com (Edinburgh).

MONITOR AUDIO GOLD Signature 10 speakers, piano black finish, six months old, mint condition, boxed, manual with Atacama SE6 stands, £400. 07941 174804 evenings (Berks).

MOON I-3 amplifier £900, Totem Hawk Loudspeakers £1,500. Both mint condition and only six months old. Cost nearly £4,000 new. Will include Linn Karik 3 for breathtaking system at £2,550. 01738 629467 (Perthshire)

MUSICAL FIDELITY MVT and P170 pre/power amplifiers, with power supply, £349 ono. Celestion SL600 speakers, £299. All boxed, excellent condition. Carnival Silver Plus cables, 2.8m bi-wire pair, £79. 01984 640588 (Somerset)

MUSICAL FIDELITY Nu-Vista 3D CD player, in mint condition and owned from new, boxed with manuals, controls, £1,250. 01303 863424 (Kent)

NAIM 112 preamp, £299. Atacama R724 speaker stands,

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 demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

FOR SALE

£79. Boxed, vgc. Chord Carnival+ speaker cables 2.8m, bi-wired, factory terminated, £69pr. Naim NAC04 speaker cables, 3m, offers. 01984 640588 (Somerset).

NAIM 150 power amp, NAC112 preamp, CD5 player, NAT05 remote control tuner. Little used, mint, manuals, £1,850 the lot. Hutter black storage system, £240. ProAc Studio 1 speakers and stands, £270. 020 8977 6433 (Surrey).

NAD 352 amplifier and NAD 542 CD player for sale, excellent condition, £300 together or £175 for amp and £150 for CD player. 07940 659384 (E. Sussex)

NAIM NAIT 51 integrated amplifier. Ex-demonstration model, boxed and in perfect condition. £450. 07736 280018 davidp.warren@ntlworld.com. (N. Yorks)

NAIM SYSTEM NA CDX2 CD player, £1,450. NAC 282 preamp, £1,600. NAP 250-2 power amp, £1,300. Hi-Cap power supply, £500. Owned from new. In excellent condition and boxed. 0161 973 2583 (Manchester).

NORDOST SHIVA mains cable, £130, Nordost Pulsar Points (x4) aluminium, £35, Totem Beaks anti-resonance device, one pair, £50. All items mint with original boxes and packaging. 01792 464001 (S Wales)

ONKYO DV-SP 503ES SACD/DVD player, as new, boxed, £100 ono. Linn Basik pickup arm, excellent condition, £75 ono.

Audio-Technica AT-OC10 moving coil cartridge, excellent condition boxed, £75 ono. sykesmodo@hotmail.co.uk.

PMC GB1 floorstanding speakers, cherry veneer, perfect condition, superb build and sound, room-friendly size, huge saving on new, (£1,145) £595. 01462 680262 (Herts)

PRIMARE 30.1 amplifier, excellent condition, boxed, instructions, £450. 01255 675115 (Essex)

REGA APOLLO CD player, silver, mint condition, £375ono. ATC SCM10 excellent mini-monitor loudspeakers, walnut, vgc, £225. 01480 860075 (Camsb).

ROGERS LS3/ 5A loudspeakers with matching stereo AB1 subwoofer/stands (£1,200), £600. Vintage AKG C12A nivist microphone, variable polar diagram, perfect working order. 0131 551 6123 (Edinburgh).

RUARK EQUINOX speakers, Piano black finish. In very good condition, these high-end speakers sound and look superb. (£2,200). Bargain at £680. 01252 870861 or 07812 914460 (North Hampshire).

SONY SS-X70ED floorstander 150 watts, maple finish. Excellent condition, £275 ono. 01223 361598 (Camsb)

PRO-JECT DEBUT III, £60. Celestion SL6 loudspeakers, £130. Kenwood 3090 MiniDisc player, £60. Sugden C51/P51 amplifiers, £250. Sony Professional Walkman,

needs attention 01708 457691 (Essex).

SPENDOR S6 loudspeakers, three years old, hardly used, boxed, £600ono. Nordost Blue Heaven interconnect, £40. 07854 160942 (Lancs).

SUGDEN A21AL Class A amp, excellent condition, factory serviced, original packing, £525. 01403 255153 richermail@aol.com (W. Sussex).

SUMO ATHENA AND POLARIS pre and power amps, classic sound, 150 watts per channel, £900 pair. Meridian 200/203 CD transport and DAC, £500 pair. 07801 917291 (Berks).

UNISON RESEARCH hybrid valve system. Unico Secondo 120 watt integrated amplifier, Unico CD player, Unico R AM/FM/RDS tuner. Mint, with boxes, £2,500 (may split). Spare Quad 99, Primare CDI10 remote controls. 023 8073 8935 (Hants).

UNISON RESEARCH Smart 845 SET monoblocks (pair) £1,550. Avalon NP2 Evolution loudspeakers £1,200. Graaf WFB-One valve phono/line preamplifier £795. Moth RCM £50. 01923 219711 (Watford).

VINCENT CD 53 CD player, silver finish, one month old, XLR/RCA outputs, clean open sound, (£800) £500. 07727 244348 (Kent)

WHARFEDALE EVO 30 floorstanders, maple, mint, £475. Matching centre channel free with purchase of main speakers. Arcam A85, stereo amp, silver, mint, £475.

All for £950. 086 8543102 (Wexford, Ireland).

WANTED: Audiolab 8000P power amp, 'E' serial number, with manual and box. Also Chord Odyssey 2 speaker cables 2x3m, Chord Chameleon Silver Plus interconnect (RCA) and PMC DB1 speaker wall brackets wanted. 01234 302769 (Beds)

WANTED: Music library, LPs and 10-inch records from the 1960s and 1970s and related catalogues. 07807 866672 (Northants).

WANTED: Top-quality hi-fi separates and complete systems: Naim, Linn, Cyrus, Meridian, Arcam etc. Fast, friendly response and willing to travel/pay cash. 07815 892458 (Essex)

WANTED: Reggae and Ska 45s and LPs – 1960 to 1980. Condition immaterial if priced accordingly. Any quantity from 1 to 1,000. de.koningh@virgin.net 01732 832452 (Kent)

WILSON SYSTEM 8 Obsidian Black. UK purchased and installed. Immaculate condition and only 68 hours usage. Crates, manuals and all accessories. (£26,000) £16,500. Pictures on request. Telephone 01925 656990 or 07738 599051 for more info (Cheshire).

Above: Wilson Audio System 8 loudspeakers



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- ⊕ Sonus Faber Minima Vintage speaker
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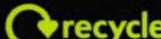
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