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See p23

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Spendor SA1

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techradar.com



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www.audio-t.co.uk

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*On stage and at home.
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Products featured: CD-S1000 CD player and A-S1000 amplifier

On the road and in the studio, Jools depends on his Yamaha piano for its clarity and purity of tone. At home, he enjoys the same standards of audio excellence thanks to Yamaha's total dedication to the listening experience. You can too. Visit www.yamaha-uk.com to find out more.



WELCOME...

HI-FI CHOICE DECEMBER 2008 ISSUE 314

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



Despite being choice-drunk consumers, with everything from hi-def video to high-speed Internet vying for our attention, *Hi-Fi Choice* has always made time for FM radio. So we were delighted to finally get NAD's high-end M4 tuner in for review after a long wait. It's one of only a few products with the potential to knock the mighty Magnum Dynalab from the top spot – a position it has held unchallenged for many years.

Elsewhere in the issue, we've more future-classic hi-fi worth shouting about. Spendor's new SA1 standmount (p54) is one of the finest sub-miniatures we've come across so far, so if you're considering some new small speakers, journey down to your local Spendor shop.

Dan
Dan George Editor

WHY WE ARE NO.1 FOR HI-FI...

- Since 1975, *Hi-Fi Choice* has delivered the world's most thorough, most reliable, no-nonsense guide to buying high-performance hi-fi.
- Every issue contains a potent mix of the latest hi-fi news, views, music, reviews and in-depth tests, brought to you by a prestigious team of expert writers who are the best audio journalists in the UK.
- Our test regime is the most rigorous in the business and we are the only hi-fi magazine to offer 'blind' listening sessions, along with user-friendly laboratory tests in our six-way *Ultimate Group Test*.
- That's why *Hi-Fi Choice* is...

The Essential Guide To Audio Excellence In The Home



THE MOST RESPECTED NAMES IN HI-FI JOURNALISM...



PAUL MESSENGER

A former *Hi-Fi Choice* editor, Paul has been writing about his beloved hi-fi hobby for more than 30 years. In that time he has become one of the world's most respected scribes and is undoubtedly 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 *Hi-Fi Choice*.



MALCOLM STEWARD

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



ALVIN GOLD

Alvin has been writing about his obsession for more than 25 years. In that time he has contributed his encyclopaedic knowledge to almost every hi-fi periodical you can think of (and several more besides). He is widely regarded as one of Britain's finest hi-fi reviewers.



ALAN SIRCOM

Alan began his journalistic career in the early 1990s. He brings his extensive hi-fi knowledge to *Hi-Fi Choice* in his role as Operations Editor and is always on hand to help with your questions and hi-fi related queries at hifisub@futurenet.co.uk



JASON KENNEDY

Jason Kennedy was a former editor of *Hi-Fi Choice* and spent an incredible 17 years on the title. Now a freelance hi-fi journalist with a system that'll blow your socks off, he remains a key player in keeping *Hi-Fi Choice* great.



DOMINIC TODD

A highly experienced journalist, Dominic's sharp ears and retail experience are a valuable mix for *Hi-Fi Choice*. Each month, Dom dispenses priceless second-hand buying advice that will save you time, money and a lot of legwork.

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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Contents

NEWS AND FEATURES

9 PRODUCT NEWS

The juiciest new fruit from the hi-fi tree

14 HAPPENINGS

Hot stories from around Planet Hi-Fi

19 DISPATCHES

The hi-fi commentators with clout

23 COMPETITION

Win a pair of Yamaha loudspeakers worth £1,200

24 UNDERSTANDING... HEADPHONES

A guide to personal listening pleasure

28 CHOICE CUTS

New music rated by our experts

31 CHOICE MAIL

A selection of your letters and emails

84 ASK ALAN

Your hi-fi questions answered and your technical problems solved

EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

IN-DEPTH PRODUCT TESTS

36 Esoteric X-05 CD/SACD player

40 Arousal VS loudspeaker

44 ATC SIA 2-150 integrated amplifier

48 NAD M4 FM/AM/DAB tuner

52 Denon AH-D7000 headphone

54 Spondor SA1 loudspeaker

58 Marantz PM8003 integrated amplifier

62 Pro-Ject Phono Box II USB phono stage

ROUND-UP

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS £115-£275

64 Creek OBH-11

64 Graham Slee Novo

65 Heed Can Amplifier

65 Pro-Ject Head Box SE II

ULTIMATE GROUP TEST

LOUDSPEAKERS £1,000-£1,800

71 Amphion Helium 520

73 JBL LS 60

75 Monopulse 62S

77 Opera Seconda

79 Tannoy DC6T

81 Wharfedale Opus 2-1

BUYER'S BIBLE

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

SOURCE COMPONENTS

96 CD players

98 DVD players

102 Vinyl

105 Radio tuners

AMPLIFIERS

106 Stereo amps

LOUDSPEAKERS

108 Stereo speakers

111 Subwoofers

ANCILLARIES

113 Headphones

114 Cables

115 Stands and supports

PRE-LOVED GEMS

Buy or sell your hi-fi in our special second-hand section...

124 2nd-hand shootout – this issue, CD players around £500

128 FREE Readers' classifieds

READER SERVICES

Our regular information service, including back issues, dealers guide, and the latest subscription offer

87 Back issues

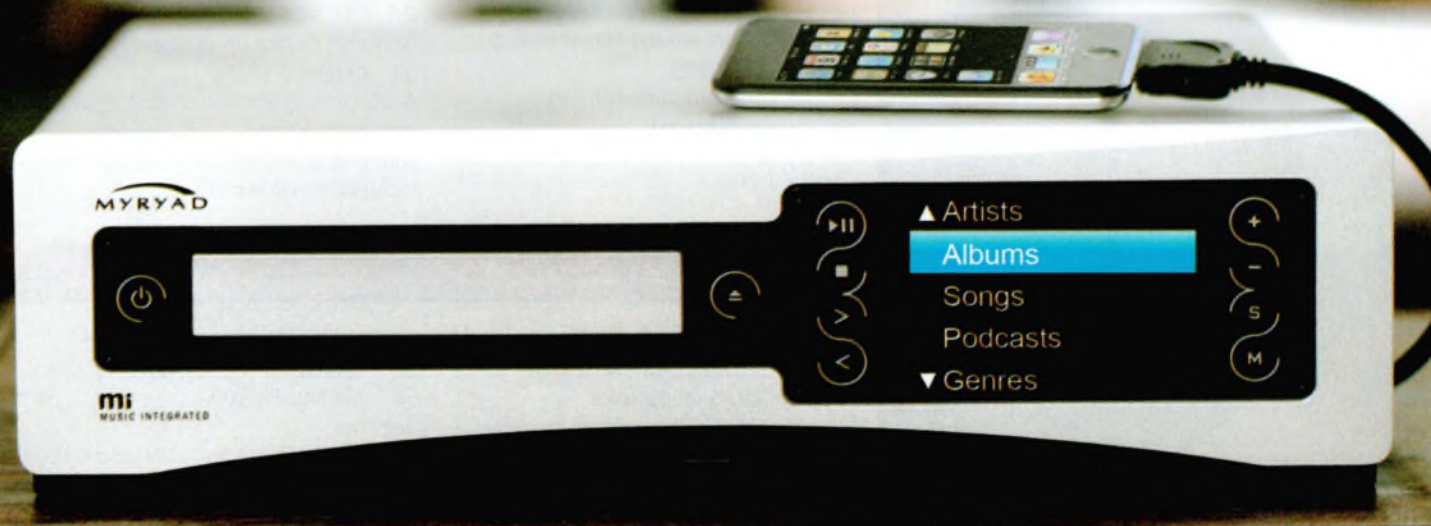
88 How to subscribe

116 Glossary

117 Dealer Guide

123 Dealer Directory

130 What's coming up in the January 2009 issue on sale 11th December



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MYRYAD

YAMAHA CD-S700, A-S700 AND M430

Exciting yet affordable new range coming from the music giant

Yamaha's return to its stereo roots has shifted into high gear with the launch of three more products in its ever-expanding two-channel range. Following in the footsteps of the well-received 1000 and award-winning 2000 series CD/SACD players and integrated amplifiers (HFC 313) the new CD-S700 and A-S700 pairing bring that newly re-minted Yamaha reputation to a lower price level.

The £350 CD-S700 is a dedicated CD player (that means no SACD capability, unlike its bigger brothers) that can also support USB audio from a port on the front panel. Although considerably cheaper (and shorter) than the SACD-supporting CD-S1000 and CD-S2000, the new player still features an aluminium front panel and Yamaha's proprietary Silent Loader drive mechanism, that uses wires in place of gearing to keep the player's tray quiet when in use. It also features a Burr-Brown 24-bit/192kHz DAC, an independent power supply and a Pure Direct option that disables the display and digital output. The USB port (and CD-R discs) can support MP3 and WMA file replay, too.

The £450 A-S700 integrated amplifier joins the CD player. A 90-watt design, the remotely controllable amp has both Pure Direct – which by-passes the tone, loudness and balance controls – and CD Direct (which even by-passes the source selector and volume, making a direct

connection between CD player output and power amplifiers). As ever, the design features Yamaha's TOP-ART architecture, which is claimed to give near-balanced levels of symmetrical amplifier design as well as suggestions of plenty of dynamic power and low-impedance drive, while the A-S700 also features loudness, tone and balance controls that vary to suit the volume level.

Priced at £300, the last product of the three is the M430 Micro Component System. This stubby form factor CRX-M430 all-in-one system (akin to recent models from Denon, Onkyo and forthcoming Cambridge Audio Fusion) sports a CD player with MP3 and WMA playback capability, DAB/AM/FM tuner, top-mounted iPod dock and delivers 25 watts per channel. The system also features the NX-700 two-way standmount loudspeakers, each one sporting a 110mm bass cone and a 25mm dome tweeter on a 25.5cm high and 16.5cm wide front baffle.

All three products are available in black finish as standard. There's also a silver finish, which is available for the M430 system, but currently Yamaha has no plans for the silver livery for the CD and amp in UK right now. Which goes to prove black is the new black.

Price £350 (CD-S700); £450 (A-S700); £300 (M430) **Due** mid-Nov
☎ 01908 366700 🌐 www.yamaha-uk.com





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TIME DOMAIN AUDIO SYSTEM

TD510



LUXMAN C-600F AND M-600A

80th Birthday products from Japanese expert finally reach the UK

➤ Exotic high-end Japanese hi-fi specialist Luxman turned 80 in 2005 and celebrating its birthday by launching a flagship range of 80th Anniversary amplifier products. These proved so popular in the home country that elements of the design trickled down into less lofty form and it's only now – three years later – that the fruit of Luxman's design studio could make it to UK shores.

The Luxman C-600f preamplifier sports features first seen in the Anniversary C-100f flagship model, including some of the clunkiest acronyms ever – such as ODNF 2.4 (the Only Distortion Negative Feedback circuit) and the LEUCA 1000WM volume control (LEUCA being short for Luxman Electric Controlled Ultimate Attenuator). The preamp features three single-ended and two balanced inputs and five single-ended and two balanced outputs. It is also, perhaps, the only preamplifier that allows you to engage or disengage tone controls from the remote control. Alongside the regular tone controls, the C-600f can adjust the absolute phase of each balanced input or output. It also features a line-phase tester next to the mains, to ensure your mains polarity is correct.

The 80th Anniversary products also influenced the design of the M-600A monobloc amps. Trickle-down technology found in the B-1000f amplifier, the new 30-watt (into eight ohms) pure Class A amplifier design features a stiff enough power supply to double its power into four and even two-ohm loads. Once again the amplifier features the company's line-phase tester for mains polarity and once again the M-600A sports the company's latest ODNF circuit. This works by isolating noise and distortion at the output from the music signal and applying small amounts of negative feedback to suppress them. By contrast, conventional negative feedback systems can have an adverse effect on the music by introducing phase distortion. It is claimed that the circuit features such an ultra-wide range, ultra-high slew rate and ultra-low distortion that it does not use phase compensation for the music signal amplifying circuits. This new technology is also said to ensure that the need for a DC servo circuit is alleviated, which should also improve sound quality.

Price £5,495 per unit. **Due now** ☎ 01900 813064 🌐 www.selectaudio.co.uk





SPENDOR A5/A6

Spendor has developed a new 'A' loudspeaker series using technology derived from the SA1 (see page 54). The new A5 and A6 floorstanders sport Spendor-made drive units based on the innovations first seen in that remarkable mini monitor. Rather than simply squeeze the same drive units into a different cabinet, Spendor has developed a pair of 150mm units and a 22mm soft dome tweeter for the A5 and a 180 bass driver (plus a whopping 29mm tweeter) for the A6. The flow-ported speakers both feature the company's new Dynamic Damping system. Instead of large layers of damping material, Dynamic Damping uses low-mass, constrained-layer dampers in key energy interface points inside the cabinet. This is said to deliver faster deep bass.

Price £1,495 per pair (A5); £1,895 per pair (A6) **Due now** ☎ 01323 843474
 www.spendoraudio.com



JAMO R907

Jamo's R909 loudspeaker wowed us back in issue 280, but they are on the big side. The new R907 brings the Reference Dipolar concept into smaller rooms. Essentially the same concept – a box-less loudspeaker with drivers mounted on the front baffle – the R907 features two 305mm bass units, a 140mm midrange and a decoupled 25mm tweeter in its 43mm thick ply baffle. This 52.4kg, cast-iron-braced speaker stands a healthy 119cm high – so the 'smaller' room is relative.

Price £5,500 per pair **Due now** ☎ 01923 205600
 www.jamo.com



PSB SYNCHRONY RANGE

Canadian loudspeaker expert PSB has brought its 'statement range' of loudspeakers into the UK. Comprising seven models in total, the hi-fi side of the range comprises two floorstanders – the five-way Synchrony One and Two – and a pair of two-way standmounts – Synchrony One B and Two B. The difference between One and Two models is scale – the One designs feature 165mm bass drivers, while the Two models sport 133mm units and the size of the cabinets vary accordingly.

Price from £999 (Two B) to £2,999 (One) per pair **Due now**
 ☎ 01279 501111 www.psbSpeakers.com



NAD C545BEE

NAD's traditional line is now its 'Classic Series' and the first new model in this range is the C545BEE CD player. Designed by NAD's director of advanced development Bjorn Erik Edvardsen (hence the 'BEE' suffix), the C545BEE is trail-blazer for a 'budget reference' hi-fi component line. The new CD player features Wolfson DACs and Burr-Brown op-amps, as well as a toroidal transformer in the power supply. Capable of supporting CD and CD-R/RW (with the option of playing MP3 and WMA tracks on disc) the C545BEE also features a 12-volt trigger for use in custom install settings. Using new industrial and mechanical design techniques, the player's also got strong green credentials, drawing less than a watt in standby mode.

Price £350 **Due now** ☎ 01279 501111
 www.nadelectronics.com



LEEMA STREAM

It might only be months since it first hit the streets, but the Leema Stream Multi-DAC CD player has already undergone its first refit. Although the basic 16 converter specification and minimalist styling remain unchanged, the new Stream benefits from replacing key surface-mount components in the signal chain with hand-matched, higher-grade audiophile versions. This is said to lower high frequency distortion by as much as 16dB at 20kHz. The upgrade is unlikely to be retrofittable to existing Stream players.

Price £1,195 **Due now** ☎ 01938 811900 🌐 www.leema-acoustics.com



TRON SEVEN MONO

The distinctive Tron range of high-quality valve amplification products began with the Seven phono stage, before producing a full-function preamp, two power amps and a line-stage. Now Graham Tricker of Tron has redesigned the original Seven phono stage specifically for lovers of mono recordings. Readily switchable between RIAA, CCIR and FFRR – with custom EQs available to order – the Seven Mono can accept two phono inputs and can be configured to suit moving magnet or moving coil cartridges.

Price £2,000 **Due now** ☎ 01895 833099
 🌐 www.tron-electric.co.uk



PIONEER SERIES 8

Pioneer UK's new three-model audiophile range comprises the S-81 floorstander, the S-81B-LR standmount speaker and a S-81C centre channel speaker for home cinema use. Using Pioneer's EX series as a starting point. The Series 8 feature Pioneer's own 130mm concentric tweeter/midrange driver (with an additional 130mm driver in the S-81), said to deliver up to 50kHz, with a supertweeter to deliver 100kHz. The S-81 is available in gloss black and white ash; the S-81B-LR is also available in walnut.

Price: £2,000 **per pair** (S-81), £750 **per pair** (S-81B) **Due now**
 ☎ 01753 789789
 🌐 www.pioneer.co.uk



KLIPSCH PALLADIUM P-39F

Now firmly entrenched in the UK, Klipsch has announced its seven-speaker top Palladium range. The flagship P-39F is a three-and-a-half-way floorstander with drivers designed at the company's Indianapolis HQ. These include a 19mm tweeter with two neodymium magnets in the company's Tractrix horn, which is also used in the 115mm inverted aluminium midrange driver. A trio of 230mm hybrid cone drive units bring up the bass. Two more floorstanders and a standmount complete the hi-fi side of the range.

Price £14,000 **Due now** ☎ 08450 800578
 🌐 www.klipsch.co.uk



Soundbites

WIREWORLD has announced a new flagship interconnect. Called Platinum Eclipse, the design uses four flat OCC conductors, Wireworld's 'Composite Dielectric Technology' (rather than a single insulation material) and a unique carbon-fibre connector housing. Prices from £1,300 for a half-metre pair.
 ☎ 020 8991 9200

BRYSTON has realised that supplying separate remotes for CD player, DAC and amplifier means a lot of handsets. So the company has a new BR2 remote that does the job of all of them. It's milled out of aluminium and is a snip at \$500!
 🌐 www.bryston.ca

DENON has been expanding its headphone range of late. Not only does it make a new high-end model (see p52), but it has also announced a new lightweight (160g) noise-cancelling design called the AH-NC732. Claimed to eliminate up to 99 per cent of exterior noise, they cost £250.
 ☎ 0131 273 4387

TEUFEL is a German loudspeaker company that has recently added an international website to its direct mail enterprise and will accept orders in Sterling from next year. With an eight-week test period and prices that reflect the lack of middle man, check:
 🌐 www.teufel.de

TEAC's top Reference Series range – the 380 Series – now features an internet radio option alongside DAB, AM and FM tuner sections. The £500 multi-component system is divided into separate CD player, 45-watt amplifier and tuner plus there's an optional iPod dock, available for £30.
 ☎ 0845 130 2511

ERRATA In the last issue, we printed the wrong telephone number for The Chord Company; the correct phone line is 01980 625700. In addition, we incorrectly listed the price of the Cambridge Audio pre/power combination. The real price for the Azur 840E/840W combination is £2,000. Our apologies for any inconvenience caused.

Hi-Fi Diary

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

FEBRUARY

8 Audiojumble 2009

Angel Leisure Center
Tonbridge, Kent
TN9 1SF
www.audiojumble.co.uk

MARCH

28-29 London High Fidelity Show

Park Inn
Heathrow Airport
www.chestergroup.org

MAY

21-24 High End 2009

M.O.C. Expo Center
Munich
www.highendsociety.de

JUNE

13-14 Northern High Fidelity Show

Radisson SAS
Manchester Airport
www.chestergroup.org

SEPTEMBER

18-20 London Sound and Vision

Park Inn
Heathrow Airport
www.chestergroup.org

NOVEMBER

14-15 Smartlife Scotland

Thistle Hotel
Glasgow
www.chestergroup.org

High-end iPod

US high-end digital audio expert MSB Digital is now modifying Apple iPods in order for them to be used as music servers with its iLink dock and Platinum DAC III (£3,995). The modification involves allowing the iPod to produce a digital output, so that it can stream losslessly stored music to the iLink base. The latter reclocks the signal with a temperature compensated clock and outputs via S/PDIF, optical and AES/EBU sockets. The iLink also has an RF transmitter facility so that you can use the iPod anywhere in the room. The iPod continues to function as a personal stereo, but at \$1,995 for the upgrade including iLink, it's an expensive one to carry around in your pocket.



Audio T merges and expands

The retailers Audio T, Audio Excellence and Practical Hi-Fi are to merge under the Audio T brand. This gives the chain 24 outlets across England and Wales consisting of Audio T's 14 stores in the South East, four Audio Excellence shops in Wales and the South West and six Practical Hi-Fi branches in the North West. The process of re-branding the shops as Audio T will be a gradual one, though.



Clarity Vinyl

Classic Records has started to use a new vinyl formulation dubbed Clarity Vinyl, which is devoid of trace metals and claimed to offer higher resolution and lower noise as a result. Classic Records opted on this approach having heard the benefits of Furutech's vinyl demagnetizer on its pressings. The company's MD Michael Hobson, subsequently heard that a compound called Black Kenan 550 (which it uses for its pressing) helps eliminate metals that are randomly magnetized and affect the cartridge used to play them. Clarity Vinyl will initially be introduced on the label's single-sided 45rpm, 200g issues. This range includes the titles *Blue Train* by John Coltrane, *Somethin' Else* by Cannonball Adderley and Leo Kottke's *6 & 12 String Guitar*.



Senso Systems, Truro

Cornish retailer Senso Systems has moved to new premises in Lemon Street, Truro. The store is in a Georgian town house and has two demonstration rooms where co-owner Marcus Reed lets "all auditions take as long as is needed." The company's driving principle is a "patience and a desire to achieve the best for each and every customer." As well as a good selection of mid to high-end components, the shop also has a multi-room system on demonstration.



Metallica too loud

⊖ The 'Loudness Wars' have taken an unusual turn with the release of Metallica's latest album *Death Magnetic*. In a story picked up by the BBC's *You and Yours*, fans have been complaining that the album is too loud and distorted. This hasn't stopped *Death Magnetic* from reaching number one in the album charts. The problem is that the CD has been so mercilessly pushed into the red or 'brickwalled' as it's known and compressed at the recording stage that it is obviously distorted. Mastering engineer Ted Jensen stated "In this case the mixes were already brickwalled before they arrived at my place", which lays the blame at the feet of producer Rick Rubin. Metallica's drummer Lars Ulrich claims "there's nothing up with the audio quality. It's 2008, and that's how we make records." Nothing up? It's bloody diabolical! - Ed.



Classical download

⊕ Passionato is the latest music download site to target classical music lovers. It claims to offer the world's largest catalogue of high-quality DRM-free classical music downloads and backs this up with both 320kbps and FLAC lossless versions of its material, the latter being theoretically as good as CD. Its thinking is that classical download sites have failed because they don't offer quality and breadth of catalogue, so as well as addressing those issues it hopes to tempt us with the offer of 10 free pre-selected tracks including an entire 30 minute work (currently Saint-Saens' *Symphony No.3*) to everyone that registers. Passionato offers the option to browse 60-second samples of every track in its catalogue. It also offers playback software called Player, which appears to work in a similar fashion to iTunes.



TechTube

⊕ Blackburn Microtech Solutions, a company with many years of experience in cathode ray tube (CRT) production, has turned its hand to audio valves (see page 21). Based in Mullard's former CRT factory it has launched the TechTube to produce new cathode-based valves that are a direct replacement for three ECC valves, namely the 81, 82 and 83. By using CRT technology, these valves can be run at a lower power and offer significantly improved lifespans. Applications for these tubes are found in valve preamps and guitar amps. The TubeTech variants have very similar names; E811CC, E812CC etc and will cost between £20 and £30. At the recent Heathrow show another new brand, Proteus, was using the E813CC in its Diamond amplifier.



Insider comment

Fancy a merger?

It's not altogether a surprise. Audio T, Audio Excellence and Practical Hi-Fi – three of the most successful surviving independent hi-fi retailers in the UK – have joined forces. Faced with increasing pressure from online retailers and a market suddenly highly resistant to buying 'big ticket' products of any description, pooling resources is one of the few ways to keep up. At a stroke, the regrouped Audio T becomes one of the big players in the UK hi-fi scene, up there with Sevenoaks and Richer Sounds. This leaves the smaller, specialist shops able to concentrate on their dedicated specialist markets.

If companies pick and choose their market positions carefully – and know their local market – there's room for big and small in the business. As an example, look at Kingston-Upon-Thames, just to the South-West of London; it has a Richer Sounds feeding the town's large community of students, a Sevenoaks for more engaged hi-fi and home cinema customers and Infidelity for the real specialist and custom install market. Okay, Kingston's shopping centre feeds into a large (and largely middle-class) London overspill, but the three co-exist comfortably without too many drive-by shootings.

Problems only emerge if the small one-man-band specialist has a very similar portfolio to a larger, nearby retailer. Manufacturers and distributors have catchment areas to prevent one retailer trading on the toes of another, but a retailer can always find a rival manufacturer or distributor. If two retailers have similar product lines (and, therefore, are after the same prospective buyers), the one with the best store location, the biggest client base and the largest advertising budget (to attract new clients to the store), will win. And that usually means the bigger guy.

So the specialist needs to become a specialist once more. It seems this is precisely what Senso Systems in Truro is doing by moving to a new demonstration area. That means a very close reading of the market and an honest assessment of its potential (there's no point opening a discount warehouse selling £100 amps below list price in rural Buckinghamshire and there's little point in opening a high-end emporium in Birmingham's Ladywood area). It also means finding a niche that is not just born out of desperation or purely personal taste (a love of 8-track cartridges can be a personal passion, but turning that into a successful commercial venture might prove a struggle). For many, this is the stumbling block – people engage with hi-fi out of a love of listening to music and with that passion can blinker people to commercial realities and significant changes to the market. Let's be realistic – those dealers who have turned their noses up at PC-based audio systems, home cinema, custom install, gamers wanting better picture and sound quality and even iPod docks have really turned away business.

Ideally, the newly minted Audio T group will revitalise the hi-fi retail sector in and around their specific store locations. And equally, this will also revitalise the rivals in these areas too, as they recognise that they need to rethink their strategy to deal with the 'threat' the new group might pose. At least, we hope it doesn't mean they just 'circle the wagons.'

Blu-ray music

Is Blu-ray really the future of high-resolution audio? Paul Messenger investigates...

It's difficult to say for certain that the hi-res digital audio-only formats SACD and DVD-A are completely dead – SACD still enjoys niche success in some overseas territories. But any remaining signs of life may well be extinguished by the emergence of Blu-ray hi-res video discs, as a high-quality carrier of both audio and video.

That was certainly the message being promoted by the BVA (British Video Association), when it took over Metropolis Studios at The Power Station in late September to promote the virtues of Blu-ray as a music-with-video carrier. The demonstrations themselves were quite convincing, if rather too loud for comfortable listening much of the time, while celebrity guests Phil Manzanera (Roxy Music) and Stewart Copeland (Police) were both wheeled out to endorse the new format as a music carrier.

Just as DVD offered something approaching ten times the data capacity of CD, so Blu-ray (so called because it uses a short wavelength blue laser with tighter focus than earlier red lasers) offers a similar c10-times increase in disc data capacity over DVD. Furthermore, it has already effectively 'won' the format battle it waged for several years with the rival Toshiba-backed HD DVD.

The way is now clear for a format that is entirely capable of delivering high-definition video alongside uncompressed high-resolution multichannel sound. That's certainly good news, especially as a two-channel soundtrack (probably with 96kHz sampling and 24-bit resolution), will also normally be provided for those who prefer their sounds in stereo (with the ever-available option of switching off the TV to enjoy the sound quality without visual distractions).

The superior performance capabilities of Blu-ray are clear enough and certainly sound like the answer to many an audiophile's prayer. However, 'improved performance' alone doesn't successfully launch a new format – enhanced convenience or capabilities are nearly always the core critical factors. And while there's no disputing Blu-ray's substantial picture and sound quality advantages over DVD, that



advantage alone might not be enough to guarantee consumers will take the bait.

The BVA supplied some interesting statistics in support of Blu-ray. Apparently half of households now have an HD-ready display. More significantly, the UK population of standalone Blu-ray players is currently reckoned to be about 250,000 and machines from respected multi-national brands can be found for less than £200. Furthermore, PlayStation 3 consoles are also capable of replaying Blu-ray discs, which allegedly expands the installed hardware base by a very substantial 1.4m units. (The 'PS3 factor' was probably a major reason Blu-ray triumphed over HD DVD in the US, although it's unlikely to repeat the massive success of its PS2 predecessor.)

The commercial factors involved are still far from certain this early in the game and the portents are not entirely favourable. Music DVDs might have established a presence in the music scene, but they represent only a tiny part of the market and are in decline.

The pop/rock Blu-ray discs on show at the 'launch' were a mixed bunch. Recent examples featuring Robbie Williams and Justin Timberlake were disappointingly gimmicky, while the most

impressive example was Freddie Mercury and Queen performing live on a 35mm film transfer from 1981. Maybe footage of such legendary performers could lead the way for Blu-ray music. Best of all its high-res video-with-audio makes it the perfect medium for opera, ballet and musical theatre enthusiasts, who have been poorly served to date.

But most hi-fi music enthusiasts show little interest in the video side of things and only a limited enthusiasm for multichannel sound. Yet there's no denying the fact that, at its best, well-mastered surround sound music can sound wonderful – at least for the one individual sitting in the ideal spot. But as Phil Manzanera (who had the misfortune to be seated rather close to one of the rear/surround speakers) pointed out, its sheer precision can itself be a problem for those outside a relatively small optimum listening zone. Perhaps the fact that it's less position-critical is one reason why many hi-fi enthusiasts prefer to stick with two-channel stereo.

While Blu-ray undoubtedly has the potential to provide high-resolution stereo audio, there's little sign yet of anyone on the music industry side exploiting this potential, which is rather a



shame given the modest price of the available players. Furthermore, it seems most unlikely that any of the small specialist hi-fi manufacturers will ever be able to produce Blu-ray players, as the cost of entry is far too high (though I guess some tweeky operations might modify mass market players).

definition video with hi-res multichannel sound and that provides the window of opportunity that Blu-ray needs to exploit. It seems inevitable, however, that internet download speeds will continue to rise as fibre-optic cabling reaches the home at last and the iPod/iTunes approach to music consumption



Blu-ray clearly has much to offer, especially since it's seen off its HD DVD rival, the several years spent wrangling over the format winner might mean it's a Pyrrhic victory. That's because the last few years have seen dramatic growth in an alternative means of delivering entertainment to the home – internet downloading – as well as the emergence of the practical hard disk servers and PCs that make it easy to store such material. Practically speaking, today's typical internet data download rates are still too slow to handle high-resolution stereo music, let alone high-

has already become an integral part of the culture, especially among the younger age groups that are the principal music consumers. Although no-one could accuse Blu-ray of offering too little, there are obvious fears that it might be too late. Building a successful format requires both software and hardware to be in place and while the hardware is readily available at very sharp prices, the software, especially on the music side, is still limited and carries a price premium. Plenty of people will still prefer their software on disc, but Blu-ray's window of opportunity may be short. **HFC**

Discs just in...

Music on Blu-ray

Led Zeppelin – The Song Remains the Same
Led Zeppelin's only (official) filmed concert includes many of their greatest hits.

Blue Note plays Ray Charles
An unusual perspective of the music of the inimitable Ray Charles.

Queen Rock Montreal and Live Aid
Freddie Mercury and Queen rock again in these now vintage selections in high-definition.

Elton 60 – Live from Madison Square Garden
Elton John celebrates his 60th birthday with 33 songs and a sell-out concert.

Tchaikovsky/ Russian Philharmonic Orchestra – Piano Concertos Nos 1 & 3
This Blu-ray disc presents the Tchaikovsky melodies in 7.1 DTS-HD surround sound

The Jimi Hendrix Experience – Live at Monterey
Historic concert footage is given the high-resolution treatment in this tribute to the legendary Hendrix.

Justin Timberlake – FutureSex/ LoveShow – Live from Madison Square Garden
Pop megastar Justin Timberlake sings his favourite repertoire in this live concert from 2007.

Tony Bennett – An American Classic
A variety show that chronicles the singer's life with Bennett singing duets with the likes of Barbra Striesand and Stevie Wonder.

Jethro Tull – Live at Montreux 2003
Live from the 2003 Montreux Festival, Ian Anderson and his band perform a range of classic and contemporary hits:

AC/ DC – Live at Donnington
Recorded live at Castle Donnington in 1991, this remastered concert includes 18 tracks.

John Mayer – Where the Light Is
Live in Los Angeles, John Mayer's versatility includes a Trio set with Steve Jordan and Pino Palladino.



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Atlas Voyager • April 2002
SPEAKER CABLE
Atlas Ascent • October 2003
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Best Buy 2007
Best Buy 2003
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HiFi Interconnects 2002 & 2003
Hi-Fi NEWS
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Atlas Elektra All Cu PTFE
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SPEAKER CABLE
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COMPONENT VIDEO CABLE
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AWARDS



Dominic Todd

Back in DAC

The separate converter makes a comeback

Just as economic bust follows boom, so every hi-fi category has its moment. I've lost count of the number of times vinyl has had its 'revival'. Yet, perhaps the most surprising Phoenix of recent times has been the rebirth of the DAC (Digital-to-Analogue Converter).

In the days of the last economic downturn, DACs were pretty big business. If not as big as the CD or cassette deck category, they did at least merit separate tables within hi-fi mags and, indeed, even spawned companies that made nothing else.

However, once CD players adopted the then-new Bitstream technology, the need for a separate DAC fell away. But not any more. Now there's a wide range of new DACs available, with some of the big names of the 1990s re-entering the market. Cyrus has featured a separate DAC for some time now and Musical Fidelity has a solid range. Interestingly, MF's most basic DAC, the V-DAC, costs just £160. Along with the recently resurrected Cambridge Audio DacMagic (a fine upsampling model priced at £200), it represents resurgence in the budget DAC market.

Finally computer audio is beginning to be taken seriously and with it is the need for sound quality that's better than the average sound card can muster. One option is a pair of active speakers with a built-in DAC, such as the excellent AVI ADM9.1, but for those who've already got a decent amp and speakers, the best solution is a separate DAC, now sporting a USB connector as testament to the computer application. Clearly, the sales of DACs are not going to overtake CD players or amps... at least, not in the foreseeable future. They are still a minority category. Yet it is a significant minority and one in which could just make all the difference to some ailing hi-fi manufacturers.

Will the current craze last? Probably not, but it would be a rash man indeed, who ruled out the chance of the DAC from ever making a comeback.

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

MUSO

CLASSIC ALBUMS

KING OF THE DELTA BLUES SINGERS
ROBERT JOHNSON



Despite the title, it's less as a singer and more as a guitarist that Robert Johnson entered the pantheon of music greats. In fact, he continues to intrigue, fascinate and infuriate each new generation of guitarists 70 years after his death.

He died at the age of 27 in 1938, with the entirety of his recorded works already behind him. This was a series of 29 tunes, only a dozen of which were released on 78s. His talent survived his passing through these songs and would form the foundation stone of rock when this first collection of his recordings eventually appeared in 1961.

Johnson wasn't born great. As a young harmonica player and would-be guitarist in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, he wandered around the Delta for a couple of years and returned playing some of the most audacious blues anyone had ever heard before or since. Apocalyptic lyrics of hellhounds and impending doom, sparkling flashes of melodic invention and a pulsing boogie bassline, all played on an acoustic Gibson guitar by the man himself with a weird vocal intonation that varied between a gruff bark and a ghostly wail. The legend would grow up that he sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads in exchange for his musical genius and that he knew he wouldn't have long to live.

Robert Johnson's entire recorded output was laid down in two sets of mono recording sessions for the American Record Company (ARC) in 1936 and 1937. Three days in a room at the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio, Texas, in November 1936 yielded 16 tunes and a clutch of alternate takes, including his biggest contemporary hit, *Terraplane Blues* and *Kind Hearted Woman Blues*. In June 1937, he recorded a further 13 sides over two days at the Brunswick Records building in Dallas, Texas, including haunted classics like *Hell Hound On My Trail* and *If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day*.

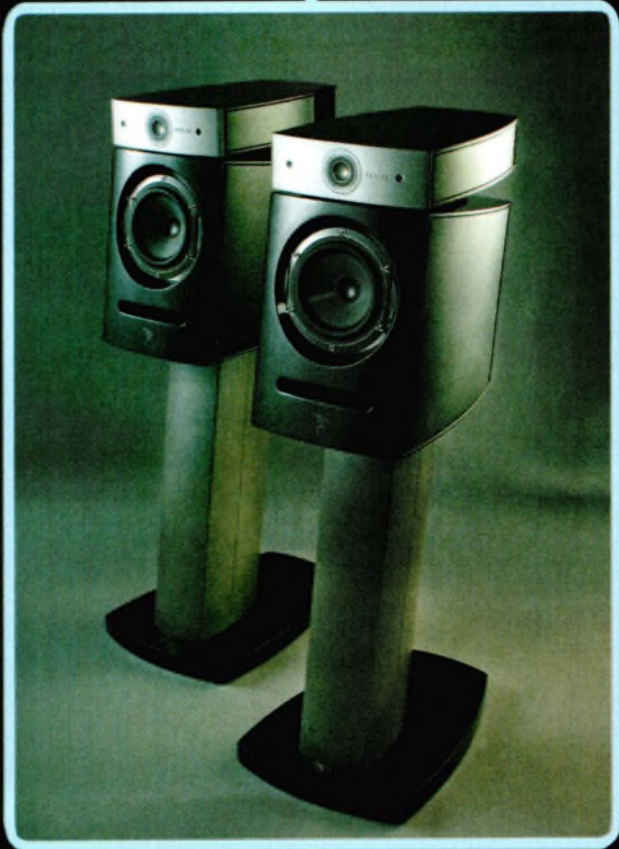


“...he wandered around playing some of the most audacious blues anyone had ever heard before or since.”

He had some local success during his lifetime, but like a juke joint Van Gogh, his artistry was best appreciated after his death. Columbia's legendary producer and talent scout John Hammond tried to seek him out for the first of his *From Spirituals to Swing* concerts at Carnegie Hall at the end of 1938, only to discover his recent death. Years later, as the folk revival gathered pace in the late 1950s, he persuaded his label to put out an album collecting the best of Robert Johnson.

It wasn't a huge seller, but word spread among the cognoscenti and it became a primary influence among fledgling rock giants such as Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page. *Volume 2* eventually emerged in 1972, rounding up the rest of the original songs in the Johnson cannon and since then the albums have been reissued in various forms, finding their apex in Columbia's *The Complete Recordings*, a 20-bit remaster which pulls together all Johnson's recordings on two CDs, including almost identical alternate takes. Completists will of course prefer this, but it's the first album, forming a bridge between two eras, which carries its own mythology. **HFC**

Dave Oliver



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Trapped Wind

Want a better sound? Open a door

The hackneyed phrase 'fact-finding mission' is often an excuse for journalists to discover what facts lie at the bottom of a beer glass, but a recent fact-finding mission to the Marantz European HQ in Eindhoven was actually fact-filled. Bain Capital has acquired D&M Holdings recently, so the people behind Denon and Marantz are now owned by the people behind Burger King and Toys 'R' Us. 'No change at Marantz' was the script, but that wasn't the sole point of the trip.

Brand Ambassador Ken Ishiwata has signed off a new listening room, built along non-parallel lines to help reduce standing waves. It also features a considerable amount of room treatment to keep the room's reverberation times down to a minimum, but not so 'dead' as to make the room almost anechoic.

This room – designed for final listening of Marantz designs – is dry and well-controlled through the bass and treble. This makes it perfect for determining the performance of equipment in something approaching a (large) real-world room without making the room dominate. The room manages to absorb a lot of energy however, and this can make the system sound like it's struggling at mid-to-high volume levels. But, the room (and system) quickly and significantly improved when the door was left open.

What was brought to the fore in Eindhoven was undermining the sound *chez Sircom*, too. And the cure was identical; simply opening the door gave the system a sense of dynamic freedom it lacked with the door shut. Without a room as near-perfect as Ken's Eindhoven project, this could be ascribed to almost everything except the room. Of course, in my room, this only applies to playing at volume, and opening a door while wicking up the dial is in direct contravention of the Treaty of Wife. But, I wonder how many hi-fi 'faults' are really room-related?

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

TECHNO

TECHNOLOGY EXPLORED

THE VALVE



For me, a definite highlight of this year's Heathrow hi-fi show was the discovery that a company in Blackburn, TechTube, has

recommended UK production of valves, those funny little glass things which devotees swear are the only way to amplify audio signals. I wouldn't put it that strongly, but like many audiophiles, I've great fondness for them and the news that a new production line is starting up is good. What's even better, though, is that it's applying the latest technology to producing what should be better valves.

There were thousands of valve types around once, but most hi-fi products since about 1950 have used a very small subset of them.

TechTube is initially making just three, or rather drop-in replacements for them. Each is a small-signal double triode, in other words, two simple voltage-amplifying elements in one glass envelope, the models differing from one another in details of their amplifying parameters. The basic performance of each TechTube model is very close to that of the originals, but the claim is that life expectancy and consistency during that life will be better.

The way a valve works is not difficult to understand if you don't think about it too hard (like a lot of physics, the harder you think about it the more obscure it becomes). A little electric heater heats a 'cathode' and this causes electrons to be emitted from its surface. A 'grid', which is an array of fine wires close to the cathode, repels the electrons to some extent, depending on its voltage relative to the cathode. Any which do make it to, or past, the grid come under the influence of the 'anode' which runs at a high voltage and attracts electrons strongly: as the valve is under vacuum conditions, electrons are able to whizz across the gap and cause an electric current to flow.

One beauty of the valve is that its parameters are almost all defined by physical dimensions of the elements – spacing between grid and cathode, spacing of the wires that make up the



“A little electric heater heats a ‘cathode’ and this causes electrons to be emitted from its surface.”

grid, and so on. Quality control was largely a matter of physical precision, and firms like Mullard gained its reputation for quality mostly by ensuring that machines were well made and maintained and operators were well trained.

There is one part of a valve that's a little more complicated, though, and that's the cathode. The bulk material of the cathode is not very important, but its surface is critical. Very early valves used pure tungsten – which had to operate at a very high temperature – or thoriated tungsten, which was slightly more forgiving. Most 'modern' (post-1930s) valves use cooler-running cathode materials and this is where TechTube's expertise lies.

Most of TechTube's cathodes have been for use in TV tubes, but it's a nice full circle: the company that was once Britain's most famous valve maker (before transistorised products started flowing in from the Far East) spent so many years developing this highly specialised technology and then started applying it to audio valves as these devices have risen to a new peak of popularity, thanks to low-cost production of amplifiers in China.

Look forward to a more indepth evaluation of TechTube valves. **HFC**

Richard Black



KRELLS ANGELS

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HOW TO ENTER:

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

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A: Yardley Lily of the Valley Soap **B:** Brut 33 Splash-on Lotion **C:** Talc

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Answers must be received between 13 November 2008 and 11 December 2008. The prize winner will be selected at random from all correct entries received between the relevant dates and will receive a pair of Yamaha Soavo 2 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 product(s) 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: Headphones

Get an earful of our guide to headphone pleasure

The headphone is a simple and obvious idea. If you want to simulate, in the listener's eardrum, the effect of a voice, an instrument or a vast orchestra, why bother shifting vast quantities of air in a room when you can simply put the transducer right up close to the ear and move a relatively tiny amount instead? This was what was done in the very earliest days of electronic sound reproduction, simply because the means had not yet been invented to produce sensible sound levels over a wider area. Loudspeakers soon took over for obvious reasons of comfort and companionship, but earpieces and headphones always had their place on grounds of practicality.

It's arguable which was the first 'true hi-fi' headphone. Perhaps Beyer's DT48 model in 1937 qualifies, but in commercial terms the first Koss 'Stereophone' made more of an impact, in the mid-1960s, as the first headphone to capitalise on the advent of stereo. Sennheiser got into the game shortly after with the HD414, an open-back model which, with its highly distinctive yellow foam earpads, achieved the sort of world dominance (particularly in radio – look at practically any old colour photo of a DJ in action!) that most manufacturers only dream about, for the best part of two decades.

But simple though the task of the headphone appears to be, there have been substantial developments over the years and some highly divergent approaches to designing them. Before getting into the details of specific products, let's have a look at why this is.

First and foremost, a headphone should not have a flat frequency response. This sounds like a bizarre statement, but is literally true and is, in fact, a result of how the human ear works – or, if you like, how sound works in

the context of the human ear. Loudspeakers aim to recreate the sounds of instruments and voices at a distance from the listener which is of the same order of magnitude as that of the original sound source. That certainly does require a flat frequency response, or something close, but the way a headphone generates sound, only a few centimetres from the

tonal variation between headphones, even high quality models, which you will notice in seconds when comparing models.

Luckily, we are very forgiving when it comes to tonal accuracy. There are limits to what we can deal with, but a slightly uneven frequency response is something we get used to very quickly. Other aspects of headphones are very

“Sennheiser got into the game with the HD414, an open-backed model, with its highly distinctive yellow foam earpads...”

eardrum, means that some frequencies end up getting considerably accentuated. In order to approximate the ear's response to 'free field' sound (normal everyday sounds), headphones should have a tailored response.

If we put it like that, it might seem that the ideal would be to make headphones with a flat acoustic output and equalise electronically, but that's never caught on and would really require a custom equalisation for each headphone – ideally for each listener – which rather defeats the 'plug in and go' convenience factor of headphones. Instead, manufacturers have to be cunning with the mechanical details of their products to give them a response which sounds acceptable. That said, there is plenty of

personal, including the extent to which they exclude ambient sounds. Some people find it very unsettling to have room noise cut out, others love the seclusion. Obviously, no two headphone wearers will find the comfort factor exactly the same with a given model and then, of course, there are the usual hi-fi imponderables of each individual's taste in music and listening level. For all these reasons and more, there is plenty of scope for variation between headphones.

If headphones don't necessarily have advantages over loudspeakers in terms of overall response flatness, they can easily score



Pictured: Beyerdynamic's Best Buy winning DT880



Above: Grado's luxurious RS2 **Right:** Denon's flagship AH-D7000

in terms of distortion. Because of the tiny amount of movement required to shift a few cc of air, distortion levels (especially in the bass) can be an order of magnitude or more better than even quite fancy loudspeakers. Bass quality is also much easier to achieve: there may be some rolloff of bass response in some models, but there is almost never the sort of lumpy and resonant bass that plagues far too many loudspeakers. Basically (sorry!) there just isn't anything in a typical headphone that resonates at bass frequencies.

Stereo imaging is much more consistent than with speakers as the relationship between transducers and ears is fixed. 'Ideal' loudspeaker listening (speakers equidistant from the listener with symmetrical room placement etc.) may give better imaging with most recordings as it is normal to master for loudspeakers rather than headphones, but headphones will certainly beat speakers randomly dumped into a domestic environment.

But what about the differences between types of headphone? There are several areas where they can differ, including the type of drive unit, whether the drive unit is enclosed at the back and how they sit on the head. By far the most common drive unit is effectively a miniature loudspeaker drive unit, with a voice coil in a magnet gap and a conical, or possibly domed, membrane attached to it. Other systems have been used, though, including

the electrostatic principle – see the boxout 'headphones or earspeakers?':

Assuming a regular electromagnetic driver is used, the surrounding body can be open at the back or closed off, giving better isolation from the world, but potentially creating a resonant chamber which may colour the sound. Open and closed headphones alike can incorporate earpads which surround each ear ('circumaural') or sit on it ('supra-aural').

The difference between the last two is largely one of comfort, though some listeners find that the positioning of headphones on the head is critical to the sound, and relatively tight-fitting circumaural headphones are the most consistent here.

There's a further approach to headphones which is very much a recent development, the 'in-ear monitor' or earphone. These tiny devices first entered the collective consciousness as a practical accompaniment to portable audio devices and most early examples (and indeed many cheap current ones) are sonically vile. Thanks to the efforts of such manufacturers as Etymotic Research, in-ear transducers have achieved standards that can legitimately be called hi-fi and they certainly have advantages on the noise-exclusion front, since they function as earplugs at the same time as music-playing devices. It must be said, though, that some listeners never get on with them, and getting decent sound depends critically on fitting them correctly in your ears. ➔

GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR CANS

Assuming you are going to be doing at least some of your headphone listening at home with a 'proper' hi-fi, you can often do better than use the headphone output built into an integrated amp or CD player. The latter may not even have a volume control, but even if it does it will probably be an afterthought requiring about 50p-worth of components and a rough approximation to the correct output configuration to drive headphones (which vary in electrical characteristics) properly. Several manufacturers offer dedicated headphone amplifiers, starting from as little as £50 and extending up to such rarified devices as the EAR/ Yoshino HP4 at around £2,500.

As luck would have it, in this very issue our *Roundup* considers four such products – turn to Page 64 for more information!

[Feature] Understanding: Headphones

Ⓢ Mention of reducing ambient noise brings us to another modern headphone variant, the noise-cancelling variety. The principle here is to use a microphone somewhere near the earpieces to detect ambient noise and then amplify this and add it in antiphase to each ear's signal so that it is effectively cancelled out at the ear. This can work quite well (especially with low-frequency sound) and Sennheiser and Bose, in particular, have sold a lot of such models to frequent flyers. The disadvantage is the need for electronic amplification and with it a battery to power everything – and, of

“Mention of reducing ambient noise brings us to another modern headphone variant, the noise-cancelling variety...”

course, the extra circuitry has something of an impact on quality, in principle at least.

Wireless headphones also need a battery or two. The idea of freeing the listener from the headphone lead – which apart from being a literal tie to the hi-fi system is also a liability when one gets up in a hurry and snags it on something – is clearly attractive and wireless headphones linked to the sound source via a miniature radio transmitter have been around for a while. Quality has never been quite what one might hope, though, and now that so many people have some kind of portable music player (MP3 etc.) it may end up more attractive to load the music on to that and have done with the limited range, tendency to drift off channel and other tiresome side effects of wireless models.

Perceived headphone quality, not surprisingly, is much like any other bit of hi-fi: the more familiar you become with it, the more demanding you are likely to be. It's therefore hard to say just how much money one should spend to get 'good' headphone quality, but certainly compared with loudspeakers the cost is modest. You can spend over £1,000, especially on electrostatic models, but some very, very fine headphones cost less than £500. In a recent *Ultimate Group Test (HFC 312)*, we were particularly impressed by Sennheiser and Beyerdynamic models at little over £300 and £200 respectively. In a world where a 'mid-price' interconnect cable costs £50-£100, we don't feel the least bit embarrassed at recommending the headphone user to part with at least £70. Below that price, you are likely to miss out on a good deal of musical pleasure: above it, the virtues of good hi-fi typically start to become apparent. Headphones are not for every listener, nor perhaps for every day, but a good pair is a great investment for any keen audiophile. **HFC**

Richard Black

Above: Audio-Technica's top ATH-W5000 headphones

HEADPHONES OR EARSPEAKERS?

Electrostatic loudspeakers go back to the 1950s: electrostatic headphones go back nearly as far. The idea is the same, using high-voltage electric fields to move a charged, flat sheet of light plastic which in turn moves air. Speakers need square feet of sheet and thousands of volts, while headphones make do with a few square inches and perhaps two or three hundred volts – still quite a lot to have right next to your bonce! Stax of Japan is the big name here and is responsible for the term 'earspeakers', though Jecklin (Switzerland) and even Sennheiser have been competitors in the past. As dynamic headphones have improved, the justification for 'stats has decreased, but some still swear by them: for this writer, the experience of hearing Stax Sigmas in the 1980s was a revelation.

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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



CHARLEY MUSSELWHITE'S SOUTHSIDE BLUES BAND Stand Back!

Vanguard/Pure Pleasure 180g vinyl

Music: Charley Musselwhite's 1967 debut at the age of 22 is a remarkable piece of work. A blues harp player at the time of rock's ascendancy, Musselwhite and the Southside Blues Band bridge the divide between the two styles with considerable verve thanks to the edgy guitar of Harvey Mandel. Dr Feelgood would have killed to sound like this!

Sound: This is a decent recording for the time with good bandwidth and dynamics, alongside excellent tone and stereo for the lead instrument or voice. **JK**



DUKE ELLINGTON Ellington Uptown

Columbia/Pure Pleasure 180g vinyl

Music: This early 1950s album contains five 'concert arrangements of popular numbers' from Ellington's back catalogue. It includes *The Mooche* with Jimmy Hamilton on clarinet, *Take The A Train* with vocals by Better Roche and probably the finest version of *A Tone Parallel to Harlem (Harlem Suite)*. The opener is drummer Louis Bellson's *Skin Deep* which shows off his double kick drum skills to perfection and things just get better from there on.

Sound: A top-notch mono recording, this is one of the best of its era thanks to the efforts of Columbia's finest engineers. **JK**



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

COMPACT DISC & VINYL



MARIZA

Terra EMI/World Connection

Music: Portuguese fado singer Mariza has become the darling of the world music crowd, but her fourth studio release exudes a wider appeal. Her repertoire is broadened by Cuban, Brazilian, Spanish and Cape Verdean collaborators, plus the classical guitar playing of String's long-time sideman Dominic Miller.

A new direction then, but one that is completely fitting and natural.

Sound: The instrumental is subtle and shimmering throughout, but never detracts from the centrality of her voice, which finds her singing with greater lucidity and emotional nuance than ever before. **NW**



DAVID BOWIE

Live Santa Monica '72 EMI

Music: All of Bowie's best early 1970s music is here, played with the bravura of a born superstar as the alien landed with Mick Ronson and the Spiders in the USA in 1972. The critics were bowled over by Bowie's arrival on stage to Beethoven's *Ode To Joy* and were then blitzkrieged by a roll of music now so famous it's almost impossible to imagine that it was then all new.

Sound: Bowie has always treasured the intensity that he and Ronson achieved here especially on the splintering acoustic guitars. Mind-blowing quality for a bootleg. **MP**



DIGITONAL

Save Your Light For Darker Days
Just Music CD

Music: Part Philip Glass on prozac, part ambient orchestra, Digitalon are a Brit band who create lush swirling tunes. There are moments during this album that you could envisage being danced to by both ravers and waltzing old-timers. It's mostly dark, rather than shiny, but there's no denying the epic, eclectic power of it all.

Sound: Grandmaster Simon Heyworth has given this his usual crisp, mastering treatment on this album. It cuts through well without erring into sharpness. **PS**



SEUN KUTI & FELA'S EGYPT 80

Many Things Tot Au Tard/Proper

Music: The youngest son of Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti first played with his father's last band, Egypt 80, when he was nine. The band still delivers a hard-edged mix of James Brown-style good foot funk. But this is only his second album, so it'll be interesting to see if he'll step out from the great man's long shadow.

Sound: Producer Martin Meissonnier has worked with the likes of Khaled and King Sunny Ade and clearly knows how to get the best from large, polyphonic groove machines. **DO**



TRACY CHAPMAN

Our Bright Future Nonesuch

Music: In the 20 years since Tracy Chapman burst on the scene with *Fast Car*, she's pursued her own quiet path over half a dozen high class albums that have placed dignity and

honesty above flash attention seeking. This is no new departure, but the 11 songs, perhaps, seem less like internal monologues and more outward-looking. There's still plenty of philosophical musing on 'big' subjects as destiny, God, love and war, but also the warm humour of the jazzy cabaret ballad *I Did It All* and the sly wit of *A Theory*.

Sound: The close-miked, intimate production places the vocals almost disconcertingly high in the mix. Yet it works, for the effect is to leave you hanging on Chapman's every word. **NW**





THIS MONTH'S CLASSIC HI-FI TEST DISC

"...superb electric bass and guitar contrasting with the voice and strings."

SERGE GAINSBOURG Histoire De Melody Nelson Philips

Music: This 1971 creation from chanteur Serge Gainsbourg is a concept album of a different stripe. It's the story of how SG meets the young Melody (Jane Birkin) then becomes obsessed with her before falling in love and, inevitably, the heartbreak of her loss. The combination of his

Gitanes-and-cognac voice and the lush string arrangements by Jean-Claude Vannier make the journey constantly entertaining in particularly Gallic fashion. The musicianship is also extremely good, superb electric bass and guitar contrasting with the voice and strings.

Sound: A top quality recording, you won't find a rounder bass string sound anywhere and the vocals are perfectly pitched. Philips clearly knew what it was doing back then. *JK*



YOUNG, GIFTED – AND FOREVER

Nina Simone Sony BMG

Music: Nina Simone may have been more technically accomplished as a pianist, but it's as a vocalist that she retains her position as one of the great stylists of American music. This triple CD (plus DVD) includes a mix of studio performances spanning her career, including hits such as *My Baby Just Cares For Me* and *I Put A Spell On You*, but also many live and previously unreleased tracks, including a storming version of Richie Havens' *No Opportunity Necessary, No Experience Needed*.

Sound: The quality of the recordings can vary alarmingly, but never distracts from Simone's beautiful emotional vocal delivery. *DO*



MOZART PIANO CONCERTOS 17 & 20

Leif Ove Andsnes (piano)

EMI Classics 50999 5 00281 2 2

Music: I cannot recall a recording of Leif Ove Andsnes (soloist and conductor) in which the results were ever less than enthralling. The playing is lively and beautifully judged, orchestra and soloist alike having a unity of purpose that makes every note seem cherished.

Sound: The balance of orchestra and soloist is natural, the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra flowing and expansive, the piano alive to every nuance in the score. The sound is open and textured, the orchestra sounds sweet and pure. Overall it is hard to think of better overall accounts of these works. *AG*



BRUCKNER SYMPHONY NO 9

Bernstein (cond), Vienna Phil

DGG 435 350-2 (live)

Music: Bernstein is not widely regarded as a natural Brucknerian, and rarely recorded Bruckner, but when he did so, the result was this measured account of the great final symphony in the Bruckner opus, which in many ways has the same stature as Beethoven's ninth.

Sound: The performance feels more comfortable in the later movements. The opening *Feielich*, *Misterioso* movement and the famous *Scherzo* that follows are immensely powerful, yet somehow constrained. The great concluding *Adagio* however, has real scale and majesty. *AG*



HIGH-QUALITY AUDIO

THE HOT CLUB OF SAN FRANCISCO

Yerba Buena Bounce

Reference Recordings

DVD-R HRX

Music: This is the first non-classical disc in Reference Recordings HRX series, discs that you play on a PC because they are recorded at 24-bit/176.4kHz as WAV files and sold on DVD-R. The music is a homage to the Hot Club de Paris where Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli made their names. The SF Hot Club features three acoustic guitars, violin and double bass with a guest appearance by David Grisman on mandolin. The 17 numbers are interpretations of Reinhardt tunes and show precisely what made him so popular.

Sound: The result is stunning, clearly ahead of SACD and even DVD-A at its best, HRX virtually turns your PC into a high-resolution source. No solid format can compete when it comes to this degree of naturalness of highs and scale of image. *JK*



RAVEL

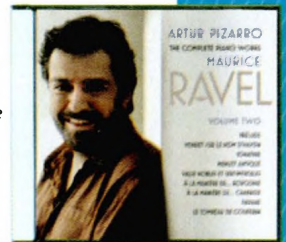
Complete Piano Works vol 2

Artur Pizarro

SACD (stereo/multichannel hybrid stereo plus stereo CD)

Music: This disc includes some of Ravel's most wonderfully elliptical works, including the *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, a personal favourite, and the muted but deservedly popular *Pavanne Pour Une Infant Defunte*. Pizarro brings the sensitivity and melancholy at the core of these works to the forefront. This version includes the relatively obscure *Forlane*, an ironic reaction to Pope Pius X's attack on the 'lasciviousness of tango'.

Sound: Recorded at St George's Church, Bristol, Pizarro's own Blunthner piano, lends a soft-hued, atmospheric edge to the music. As usual with recent Linn recordings, this one is available in a range of versions, from MP3 to 24-bit/88.2kHz high-resolution Studio Master downloads, as well as this multichannel hybrid SACD disc. *AG*



GROOVE ARMADA

Goodbye Country (Hello Nightclub) Pepper

SACD (stereo/multichannel hybrid stereo plus stereo CD)

Music: Never as overtly party-hungry as fellow electro sampling Londoners Basement Jaxx, Tom Findlay and Andy Cato aka Groove Armada nevertheless know how to, well, groove. Opener *Suntoucher* strikes a widescreen balance between John Barry-style spy soundtrack and classic low-slung hip-hop, while *Superstylin'* offers another inspired blend, this time of acid house and dub. While there are occasional lapses into the easy listening electronica ghetto, there's enough good stuff here that's fit for purpose both as party starter and post-bacchanal come-down.

Sound: GA's big, widescreen productions are brilliantly suited to the surround format and they're well served here, with a broad and detailed scope that draws in the listener and exhibits a nice attention to fine detail. *DO*



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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2008

CD PLAYERS

BEST CD PLAYER £1500+
CYRUS CDXTSE/DAXT

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2008

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

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CYRUS VS2/PSX-R/B POWER



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What Hi-Fi Sept 2008 CD6 SE



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Hi-Fi Choice Sept 2008 CD8 SE



"A stunning new arrival (well, new in that it's the latest version of an incredibly successful and popular series of CD players from Cyrus) that slaughters all of the opposition totally without effort. It's certain proof that there's still plenty of reason to keep stocked with CD's".
CD6 SE WHF High-End Ultimate Guide 2008



"Timing, a traditional Cyrus strong suit, is immaculate here - each strum, pluck or hit starts and stops with great precision and easy fluidity, making light work of testing tempos or sudden changes of emphasis. There's an eye for detail the most nightmarish Sergeant-Major would be proud of, and the ability to lay the minutiae of a performance bare without ever losing sight of the performance as a whole."
What Hi-Fi.com Sept 2008 CDXT SE



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VINYL COMEBACK?

I am responding to the reply given to 'Starless And Vinyl Black' (*Choice Mail*, HFC 311). My response is not specific only to your statements, but to statements by vinyl devotees in other magazines and on internet forums.

I neither like or dislike vinyl, but I get a little upset at the implications about what vinyl supporters say about a resurgence of sales in comparison to CDs or simply in general. I accept that there is a renewed interest in vinyl, but let's keep it in perspective. I may not have my numbers straight, but I believe my point is valid. A few years ago vinyl sales were so meagre that they might be regulated to a niche of a niche market. Since that time, true enough, there has been a resurgence in interest and in sales, but if vinyl sales have increased a hundredfold over the past few

years and CD sales have decreased 20 or 30 per cent annually, CDs still outsell vinyl eight, nine or ten times to one. And vinyl, I believe, is now a distant second to music download sales. So while I encourage you to enjoy your music on vinyl, let's keep a leash on its overall impact on music sales.

Mike Kulfan Phoenix, Arizona

HFC There has been a downturn in CD sales recently, largely due to the traditional music buying market (those under 30) moving to downloads. Vinyl is standing up to that downturn slightly better, because the typical vinyl buyer is over 30 and also seems not as interested in downloading. In addition, there's a disproportionate number of vinyl supporters in the audiophile community,

"CDs still outsell vinyl eight, nine or ten times to one."

compared to an identical, non-audiophile, demographic. But our enthusiasm for the upswing in LP sales is tempered by the fact that CD still outsells LP by about 280:1, not 10:1 as you suspect. Regardless, we think today's hi-fi enthusiast should be truly platform agnostic, enjoying music on whatever format takes his or her fancy.

WORLD-CLASS HI-FI?

I'm in two minds what to say about M. Ryan's feelings toward Chinese hi-fi ('Local Hi-Fi For Local People', *Choice Mail* HFC 312). On the one hand, I am not happy with the idea of small manufacturers having to move production to China at the expense of UK jobs. On the other, we now get great products at lower than ever prices and many of these are better made than anything the smaller UK companies ever did.

I can't help feeling that when the UK hi-fi industry was at its peak, we fell victim to an audio isolationism that meant the quality dropped. I had a series of UK-made products back then, including a turntable that could ▶

Pictured: Linn LP12 Basik turntable



LETTER OF THE MONTH

LOW-FI, HIGH STREET

I was in the Far East on business a few months ago and was shocked at how significant hi-fi still seems to be in many countries. Every big city seemed to have a store dedicated to electronics with a whole floor for hi-fi and home cinema. Big names like Sony were there, but hi-fi brands like Krell were often on sale, too. In the UK, similar shops would only sell iPod docks and really cheap micro systems. Why are we less interested in good audio?

William Price via email

HFC It's interesting that some parts of the world have very different feelings about the buying and selling of hi-fi products. Less than a generation ago, good-quality separates rubbed shoulders with rack systems in most good high-street electrical retailers in the UK. Now, hi-fi is a specialist pursuit here, but this does not follow elsewhere on the planet. In some parts, owning a good hi-fi is even something of a status symbol. That hasn't been the case here since the 1970s.

WIN
RUSS ANDREWS'
SOUND
SOLUTIONS BOOK



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 alan.sircm@futurenet.co.uk

❑ never make up its mind what speed to play 33rpm records at, and an amplifier that billowed acrid smoke the first time I turned it on. But both products were praised in print and at dealers because they were the 'Best of British' – if a burning amplifier was the best, what was the worst like?

Dan Smart via email

HFC One upside of layers of Euro-legislation has been to weed out the more unscrupulous end of the consumer electronics market. Products that could set fire to the curtains or electrocute your loudspeakers were never that common even in more lawless times; they are practically unheard of today, irrespective of where the product is actually built.

ONLY COLLECT

I love *The Collection!* It's great to see some of the best hi-fi in one place, even if I could never even dream of owning any of this remarkable stuff. OK, it's a bit frustrating, like driving round in my Punto and reading about Ferraris, but a guy's got to dream! Why don't you put more of this high-end dream equipment in the regular magazine? It's sometimes hard to wait a year for my next 'fix'.

Simon Orford via email

HFC Perhaps you have answered your own question, Simon. Many like to read about high-end audio 'in one place', as you suggest. We do regularly publish reviews of esoteric audio equipment, but collate those reviews with wholly new material for *The Collection*. That way we get to play with Fiats and Ferraris in equal measure!

“OK, it's a bit frustrating, like driving around in my Punto and reading about Ferraris...”

HISS OFF

With reference to Richard Black's 'Not so easy listening' column (*Dispatches*, HFC 311), I have also recently been made aware of the odd effect of the lack of background hiss. I recently bought three of the new Blue Note records re-issue series cut at 45 rpm for better sound quality. These records are so well produced that there is essentially no background noise during replay. At first, I found this lack of hiss unsettling, as if there was something missing compared to listening to other LPs, a lack of presence. However, I have got used to this now and I now hear and appreciate a much improved presence of the actual instruments. Now my other LPs sound noisy and one Liberty-produced Blue Note in particular sounds positively harsh. These new LPs have spoiled me.

Just for information, for this re-issue series, the Blue Note catalogue is being shared between two companies, Music Matters and Acoustic Sounds, in the USA, but both use the same production facility. Both are issuing two titles per month on a limited run of 2,500 copies per title. Each original LP now becomes a double LP. From what I have heard so far, I can strongly recommend these records to those who like the 1950s/1960s Blue Note style of modern jazz. As far as I am aware, they are only available as imports from these companies in the USA.

Rod Ward via email

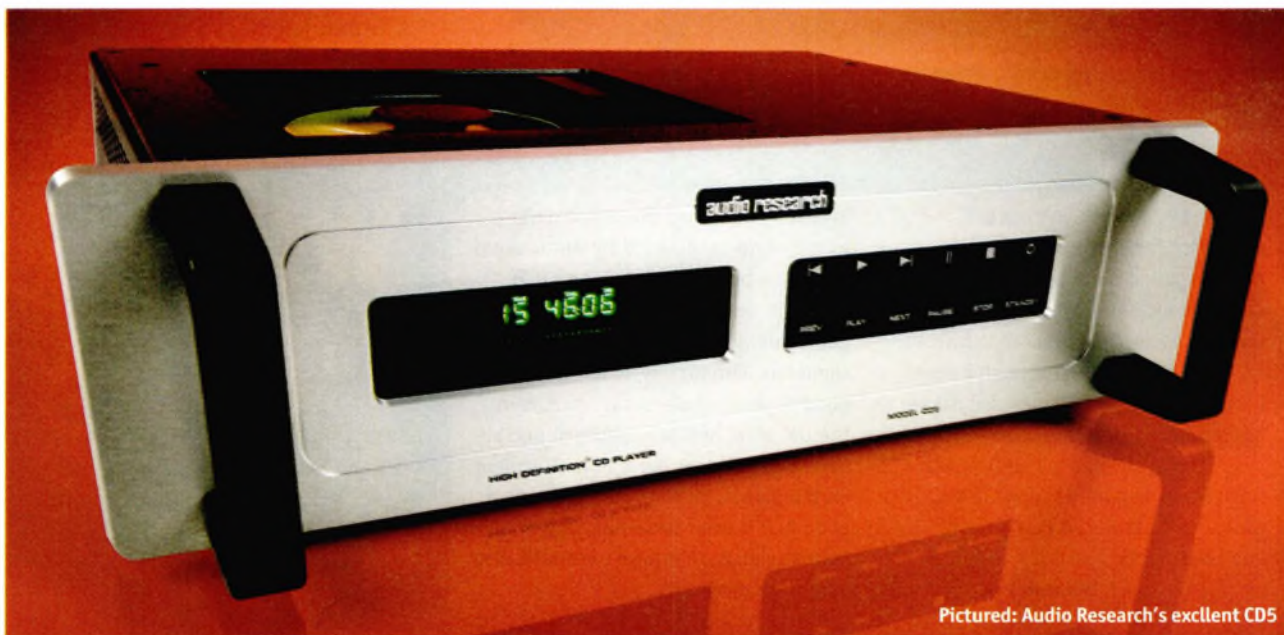
HFC Thanks for the tip. It is also odd how the lack of surface noise from a good LP is a completely different 'absence' compared to the lack of hiss from an all-digital CD recording. There is also a body of evidence to suggest what we like about vinyl is the introduction of hiss, as well as crosstalk (small amounts of left channel sound bleeding into the right, and vice versa).

WHY CD?

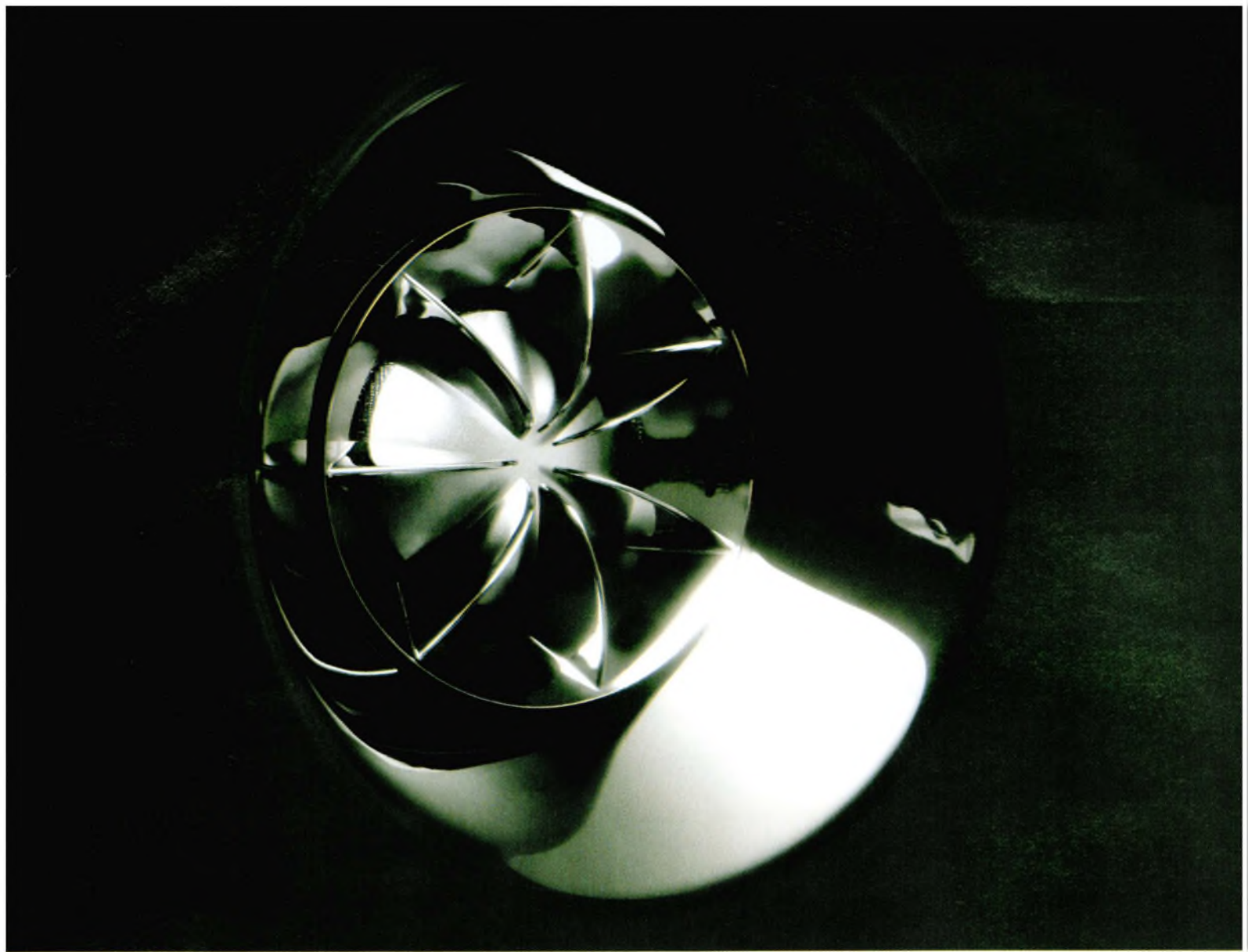
Why does HFC keep recommending high-end CD players? Surely a good SACD player would do better, especially as they also do CD at the same time. I think it's time that the CD-only player was put out to pasture.

Nigel Timmins via email

HFC We keep recommending high-end CD players because they keep sounding good, Nigel. You might not see why if you look purely at the on-paper specifications, but the performance goes far beyond that. We think that those with a large collection of CD discs – who have decided not to take the next step to SACD – will prefer a really good CD player over a player that offers more formats, but a less remarkable CD performance. That should take precedence over everything else, and is one of the reasons why – even if the rest of the world turned to downloading their music tomorrow – there will still be a strong demand for dedicated CD players.



Pictured: Audio Research's excellent CD5



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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
★★★★★

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T3

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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

- 36** Esoteric X-05 CD/SACD player
- 40** Arousal VS floorstanding loudspeaker
- 44** ATC SIA 2-150 integrated amplifier
- 48** NAD M4 FM/AM/DAB tuner
- 52** Denon ADH-D7000 headphone
- 54** Spendor SA1 loudspeaker
- 58** Marantz PM8003 integrated amplifier
- 62** Pro-Ject Phono Box II USB phono stage



ROUND-UP

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS £115-£275

- 64** Creek OBH-11
- 64** Graham Slee Novo
- 65** Heed Can Amplifier
- 65** Pro-Ject Head Box SE II

ULTIMATE GROUP TEST

LOUDSPEAKERS £1,000-£1,800

- 71** Amphion Helium 520
- 73** JBL LS 60
- 75** Monopulse 62S
- 77** Opera Seconda
- 79** Tannoy DC6T
- 81** Wharfedale Opus 2-1



OUR RATINGS EXPLAINED

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

Our overall conclusion

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

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

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT

SOUND	★★★★☆	PRO Good build and open, lively sound from a subtle DAC with plenty of inputs. Verdict is also great value for money.
FEATURES	★★★★☆	CON DAC doesn't engage as well as the transport with loss of weight and power through the bass unless you go for the upgrade. Cables cost extra and competitors from single-chip DACs don't help.
BUILD	★★★★☆	
VALUE	★★★★☆	
CONCLUSION	★★★★☆	Overall, this is a very solid, producing a two-tone player of this build quality and price. Something just has to be said for the DAC, which can't be faulted to the detriment of the rest.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

OUR AWARD BADGES EXPLAINED

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

EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
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ESOTERIC X-05

OPEN/CLOSE



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⊖ Weight: 17.2kg ⊖ Digital outputs: Toslink optical, RCA phono electrical ⊖ Analogue outputs: XLR balanced, RCA phono ⊖ Word clock input: BNC

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Esoteric, the high-end arm of TEAC, has been making some serious inroads into the audiophile disc player market recently. It has done this by starting with a small portfolio of highly aspirational and extremely expensive players and then slowly trickling down the technology developed for those, er, esoteric models to more affordable options. Audiophiles in the know will appreciate that it is often these 'trickle-down' players that offer the most value in terms of sound per pound, rewarding those patient enough to wait for the 'late adopter' models that arrive later in the season.

The most recent development from the audio expert is the X-05 SACD player, which drops the entry level for an Esoteric player down by a substantial £1,500, from the previous base model, the X-03ES. Not only has the entry point to Esoteric ownership become more achievable for audiophiles, the X-05 is the most affordable model in the range to feature the acclaimed VMK-5 transport (see boxout on p38) – itself an incredible feat of engineering and an impressive commitment to hi-fi.

Given that this is an engineering-led Japanese company, that cost-cutting must have taken some doing. It's hard to find too; the X-05's exterior makes some concessions to economy, but not many. The disc drawer is machined from solid aluminium on the X-03SE but constructed more conventionally here with a plastic tray fronted by an aluminium billet. Where there was a laser-cut brand name on the top-plate, there is now a window whose contents are illuminated when the drawer opens and closes – it dims when in play and stop modes. The lights reveal the attractive

“Esoteric, the high-end arm of TEAC, has been making some serious inroads into the audiophile disc player market recently.”

aluminium 'turntable' that clamps the top of the disc, a spoked affair that reflects the engineering standard throughout the player.

We have highlighted two of the key aspects of the engineering of the VMK-5 transport in our info boxes (see over), but there are other factors that are also significant. The casework, for example, is constructed out of aluminium for the top, front and sides, with only the base and rear panel in steel – the important base plate being 5mm-thick like the sides and top. This would explain the grunt-worthy weight. The X-05's three 'pinpoint' feet are a two-part decoupled construction in quench-hardened

steel that rattle when you lift the unit. They work in a similar fashion to the cup-and-ball-type isolators sold as accessories. This is a state of affairs that suggests Esoteric keeps its ear to the ground on matters of fine tuning.

Inside the box there is a Cirrus Logic CS 4398, 24-bit/192kHz digital to analogue convertor operating in dual-mono mode and sending signal to the equally separated analogue output stages. The signal is output in balanced or single-ended form from the back panel, which also supports Toslink and coaxial digital outputs and a word clock sync port.

SOUND QUALITY

Previous Esoteric players we have encountered have been very impressive and extremely clean sounding; the X-05 is a little bit more organic than that and, perhaps, easier to live with as a result. The extremely revealing top end of the dearer models can make lesser recordings sound the way they are, ie a little less than sweet or clean. The X-05 achieves the fine balancing act of revealing what is on the disc, without exaggerating the unpleasant aspects of poorly recorded discs. In the real world, this is a very valuable attribute and gives users a much wider range of useful material to enjoy. ▶



Q&A

We spoke to Kazutaka Tsuda (Department Manager, Overseas Sales) at Esoteric about the X-05 SACD player.



HFC: You use polycarbonate for the disc clamp, is this because it is a good impedance match and will drain resonances?

KT: Exactly. The turntable should be stiff, but light weight and less resonant. To reduce resonances we used a hybrid (aluminium and polycarbonate) turntable for our VMK-5.

Our research found that polycarbonate is the best material. It drains the unwanted resonance, and does not colour the sound much because it is the same material as is used for discs.

You say the VMK-5 transport "keeps the rotational inertia within a minimum level."

What does that mean?

The 2.6-times-faster-than-CD disc rotation of SACD with a turntable-equipped design creates much higher rotational inertia compared with conventional CD drive mechanisms (such as those without a turntable).

The VMK-5 features a hybrid turntable with a 'spoke style' weight relief design to minimize the rotational inertia of the turntable. This enables us to design the mechanism housing/chassis more easily compared with big brothers such as the X-01 D2 or X-03SE. The mechanism/housing has moderately reduced mass, but is still rigidly built using a BMC resin and steel hybrid turntable bridge. VMK-5 is still very rigid and heavy duty compared to conventional non-VRDS designs.

You state that the analogue stage is dual mono but is it balanced in the usual sense?

Yes, the analogue output of the X-05 is balanced. The X-05 uses one Cirrus Logic CS4398 24-bit/192kHz DAC per channel, and each DAC has a four-channel output, so we use it in differential mode.

What are the benefits of the compact and low-profile design of the VRDS transport?

The low-profile mechanism implementation enables us to mount the VMK-5 in a lower-profile chassis such as the P-05 transport (which stands 126mm tall). However, the Esoteric X-05 is built in our standard 153mm-height case. We wanted to use the same front panel as is used for the higher class X-01 D2 for the X-05.

That is the reason why the X-05 is built in Esoteric's standard 153mm height. We believe that giving the player the same look as the higher-class model will make X-05 customers even more happy!



With Gillian Welch's *Time (the Revelator)* in the super-smooth drawer the tendency that this disc has to sound a little hard-edged is countered with an open and relaxed presentation that allows the vibrancy of the music to shine through. It's a considered balance that lets all the emotional power of the music through, along with an awful lot of the low-level detail. One's ear is drawn to instruments like banjo and mandolin on this record a little more than usual, but only because the tone is so well resolved. The bass is rich and sonorous when called for with good shape to low acoustic guitar notes. What strikes you most, however, is the lack of any sense of the digital, which might indicate that the top end is smoothed-off slightly, but whatever it is, it sure sounds natural.

Timing is strong, too; it revels in the tension and attack on est's live rendition of *Tuesday Wonderland (Live in Hamburg)*, the drums are right on it as they say, very precise and rhythmically strong. The Esoteric X-05 plays tunes like this so well in fact that it's difficult for the reviewer to concentrate on the sound, which is a good sign and one that makes our job seem somewhat less proper, but still, one mustn't grumble.

Next to our reference Resolution Audio Opus 21, which is £500 more affordable, the X-05 is notably calmer in presentation but no less dynamic or resolute. In other words, it sounds less like a CD player, which is something the Resolution Audio is pretty good at already.

This sense of composure and naturalness encourages some rash ideas; one being to play



THE VMK-5 TRANSPORT

Turntable motor and pickup structure

The motor in the VMK-5 version of Esoteric's VRDS Neo transport has an unusually short spindle that allows for the mechanism as a whole to have a very low profile. Something that invites the question 'why is the case of normal height?' The answer being who would pay four grand for a slimline player! The short spindle is claimed to be beneficial because it "contributes to stable turntable rotation, eliminating vibration and the random movements associated with long spindle designs." In other words less moving mass makes the system easier to control and less resonant.

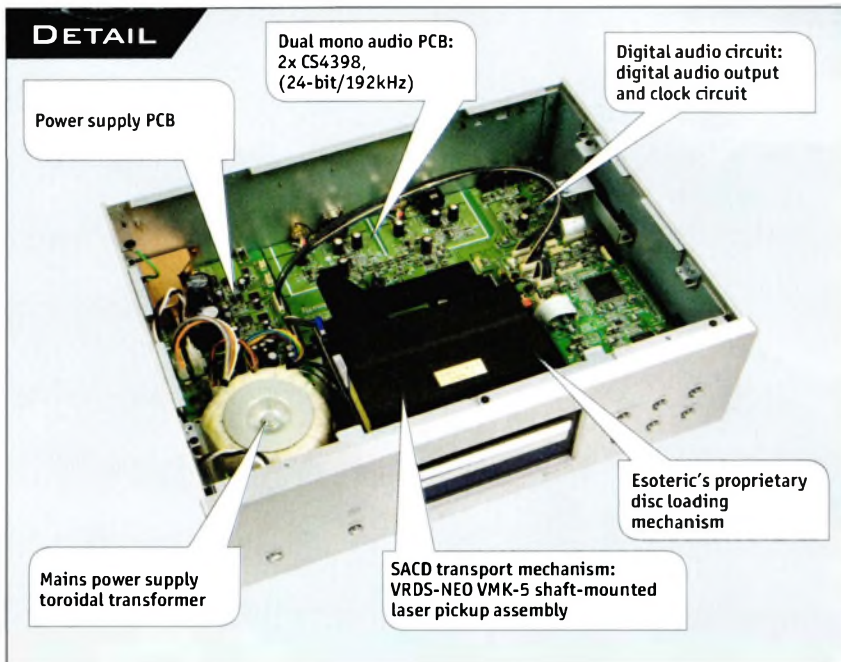
The laser pick-up has a highly accurate shaft-mounted assembly, which is designed to ensure that the optical axis of the laser is always at the centre of the pit track on the disc. This makes the job of reading the pits easier and removes the need for off-axis error correction. The same system is used in Esoteric's P-01 and P-03 transports.

a copy of Mahler's 8th Symphony (Solti, Chicago SO). It opens with a large choir and orchestra in full effect, something that the Esoteric has little difficulty in presenting in seemingly full scale given the limitations of the room. What is most impressive is that, despite the density of the work, the player reproduces Mahler's 'Symphony of a Thousand' in a coherent and communicative manner that makes it accessible to those of us who not used to this style of aural assault. The fact that so many instruments and voices can be captured with so little resort to compression is a lesson to non-classical engineers.

THE VRDS 'TURNTABLE'

The VMK-5 transport is suggested to be an evolution of 20 years of Esoteric turntable disc drives. It is optimised for the higher RPMs required for SACD and combines a precision aluminium turntable – the spoked wheel you can see through the window – with a polycarbonate anti-resonance disc clamp. Given that polycarbonate is the plastic used to make CDs, it seems a rather hard material. Esoteric seems to have taken a philosophy from the vinyl turntable world where acrylic is used in platters because it is said to be very similar to vinyl and thus provides a good impedance match for channelling extraneous energy away.

The design is said to keep "rotational inertia within a minimum level" which we quizzed Esoteric's Department Manager, Kazutaka Tsuda, about in our Q&A over the page. It states that this ensures high reliability, controlled resonance and extremely quiet operation, which we concur with based on our test sample.



“An exceptionally well-built player that brings impressive levels of resolution without sacrificing its grip over the music.”

Back in the more familiar world of Me'Shell NdegeOcello, the player brings its strong sense of drive to her bass-heavy work and lets it rip along at a well defined pace. The bass retaining its girth while the atmosphere of the recording, provided by low-level ambient detail, gives the production its electric feel.

Another classical work, Liszt's Sonata in B minor (Lazardis) on SACD, reveals that the X-05 does an equally good job with the high-resolution format. Here the piano has a body and power that you rarely encounter in recordings. It also sits in a huge space that Linn's engineers have done a great job of capturing and something that's clearly apparent with this player doing the spinning. David Wilcewski's *Room in the Clouds* SACD reveals tape hiss, something which appears on a surprising amounts of discs with this player, and which gives a good idea of how good it is at digging out the quietest sounds. The other thing that emerges is that the midrange is a little better served than the frequency extremes compared to more expensive players. It's not obvious but there's less solidity to the highs and not so much grunt in the bass. There's still quite a bit, though, and you need a wideband system to pick it up.

Back on regular CD Fink's latest album *Distance and Time* has a fine track called *This is the Thing* that has a superb voice recording and well judged reverb on its simple

instrumentation. A combination that makes the hairs stick up on your neck under the X-05's auspices. You really want to hear more of the music when its this well timed, articulated and exposed, so the volume keeps creeping up for even greater effect.

This is an exceptionally well-built player that brings the impressive levels of resolution that Esoteric has become known for, to a new, much lower price point. It manages the task, too without sacrificing the all-important grip it holds over the music. It's still a £3,495 disc player, but the price is a lot less than Esoteric has asked for in the past. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT	
SOUND (CD) ★★★★★	PRO Superb build quality makes for extremely slick operation and very high resolution in a player that can do pace and attack in the context of a natural presentation.
SOUND (SACD) ★★★★★	
FEATURES ★★★★★	CON The remote is system oriented which means a lot of buttons. The player slightly prefers handling the midband than the frequency extremes.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION Esoteric has done a fine job of cutting costs without compromising the resolving power. We can safely say that the brand name's reputation will remain as strong as ever thanks to the musicality and transparency of this player.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/478365	

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One-way street

Aurousal's A1 standmount has matured into an elaborate, but still essentially simple floorstander

PRODUCT Aurousal VS

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £1,650 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 21.5x107.5x26.8cm
 Ⓞ Weight: 20kg Ⓞ Drivers: twin 90mm Jordan full-range drivers Ⓞ Adjustable 20mm soft dome tweeter
 Ⓞ Sensitivity: 89dB Ⓞ Impedance: 4 ohms

CONTACT ☎ 07837 956069 # www.aurousal.com

Aurousal is a relatively new operation. It started out with a smart-looking standmount speaker called the A1, based on a solitary port-loaded 'full range' Jordan drive unit with a 90mm metal foil diaphragm (that's claimed to flex progressively towards higher frequencies). As is usually the way with such systems, this crossover-less system had fine coherence, but delivered limited performance as one moved towards the top and bottom extremes of the audio band.

The £1,650 per pair VS floorstander is intended to counter both these areas of criticism, while adding some extra sensitivity and loudness capability. Instead of a single metal-diaphragm driver, it uses two in parallel (effectively rather more than doubling the radiating area) and uses its much larger floorstanding enclosure to load them with a variation on the transmission line theme.

There is also a tweeter, included as a 'variable' option: it only augments (rather than replaces) the main drivers and a little knob tucked next to the input terminal pair allows its output level to be adjusted (upwards from zero) according to personal taste – a neat example of having one's cake, yet also being allowed to eat as much or as little of it as one likes.

The enclosures (on our samples) came in a particularly handsome real wood veneer. The standard choice available here is between light and dark cherry veneers, or piano black lacquer at an additional price premium of £200. Built from veneered 20mm panels, this substantial enclosure comes fitted with a little black chamfered plinth, which accommodates the well-founded, though rather blunt spikes and just slightly extends the footprint and stability margin.

The enclosure is reinforced by an internal vertical partition and is said to load the main

drive units by a variation on a quarter-wave transmission line theme, where the line is terminated by the mass of air in a reflex port. It's difficult to say exactly how this operates or is implemented, but that's always been true of transmission lines in general, as their impedance traces look just like a much simpler reflex-ported arrangement. The design is apparently based on work by Dr Martin J. King, and further details may be found at www.quarter-wave.com.

Ted Jordan was one of the earliest pioneers of metal diaphragm drive units and has been refining his designs for more than thirty years

“By using a twin driver arrangement, the sound radiation pattern is modified from a point source to a line source.”

to create the controlled flexure that enables practical full-range operation. Although the cones used here are just 90mm in diameter, the combined area of the pair is rather more than the cone area of a nominal 165mm unit and the effective area of the two drivers is actually rather larger still, because of the way they couple acoustically. At the same time, because the width is just 90mm, good lateral dispersion will be maintained to a reasonably high frequency.

By using a twin driver arrangement, as here, the sound radiation pattern is modified from a point source to something moving towards a line source. Whereas a point source effectively radiates sound in a spherical pattern, the pattern generated by a line source tends towards cylindrical, increasing the 'throw' into the horizontal far field and reducing the relative quantity of sound radiated upwards and downwards, which should improve stereo imaging.

SOUND QUALITY

Full-range-driver speakers rarely generate sufficient output towards the top and bottom ends of the audio band, but the VS, with its port tuned to around 33Hz, turns out to have more than ample sub-55Hz bass output.

Sensitivity on our measurement is a generous 89dB (2dB better than claimed, perhaps because we base our figure on a far – rather than nearfield measurement?). To put this useful figure into context, bass output is a strong -3dB at 20Hz, and about +4dB between 28Hz and 55Hz; the amplifier load stays mostly between 4 ohms and 6 ohms throughout. The overall tonal balance under in-room conditions holds within impressively modest +/-3dB limits from 60Hz up to 3kHz (in-room, far field), though it should be added it's not particularly smooth. ▶



There is good treble extension even when the tweeter is effectively turned off, but the degree of treble roll-off above 3kHz is significantly greater than the ideal under these conditions. This can be more than compensated by turning the control up, as this can add up to something like 8dB at 20kHz and looks very well integrated with the main drivers.

Aural promised exceptional stereo imaging for the VS and this was amply confirmed in our listening tests, which turned out to deliver spectacularly good stereophony with excellent depth perspectives. The overall tonal balance is also very satisfactory indeed, especially when the treble control is carefully adjusted: subjectively we found the halfway setting on the control about right and this was confirmed by our measurements. The little potentiometer on the terminal block is clearly well-chosen.

The bottom end can thump with some material, so it's essential to keep the VS well clear of walls. Indeed this factor probably explains why some degree of tweeter output is desirable, as it's subjectively desirable to balance some excess at one end of the band with compensating strength at the other. If the tweeter is turned right down (presumably completely off), the overall character is dull and heavy. Add some extra treble – enough to be audible, but not enough to be too obvious – and the extra air lightens up the character and restores a natural neutrality.

The sound could be sweeter through the voice band and has a thin, edgy and bright character, though it does have good clarity and very good coherence. The speakers sound particularly good on the *Heartworn Highways* CD, a relatively simple but very high-quality recording of country music from the early 1970s, but the same was also true of other fundamentally simple recordings – and indeed radio broadcasts



“Aural promised exceptional stereo imaging for the VS and this was amply confirmed in our listening tests...”

– which the basic simplicity of this speaker system seems to complement beautifully.

For the very best results, the ears should be equidistant from the two main drivers, so the mid-point between the two drivers should be aimed directly at this listener's head. This will deliver the best possible coherence and stereo focus, as well as maximum upper treble. To this end, it might be desirable to arrange the spikes to give the speaker a slight backward tilt.

Although there are no serious or obvious weaknesses here, the real strength of the VS lies in its exceptional overall coherence and

superb stereo imaging and while the latter shows a worthwhile degree of transparency, dynamic expression and tension are both a little weak and the speaker seemed rather happier when dealing with acoustic sources rather than heavy rock or dance material.

Above all, it takes the concepts and strengths of the full-range driver system and deals rather successfully with the limitations that are usually experienced towards the frequency extremes and that is an achievement that's all too rarely achieved. **HFC**

Paul Messenger



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Combines the coherence and imaging strengths of the full-range driver system with techniques that address the limitations usually experienced towards the frequency extremes.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON Could have better dynamic expression and tension and some 'edgy' coloration is audible in the voice-band.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION Attractively presented floorstander has the coherence and imaging strengths of a full-range. Dynamics might be more vigorous and have better grip, but criticisms are minor and comfortably outweighed by the positives.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
www.techradar.com/479149	



79 SERIES

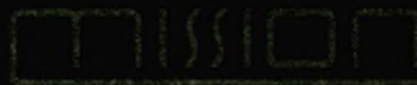
"The Missions combine warmth, transparency, strong bass, an even tonal balance and smooth clear treble."

David Berriman
Hi Fi News - Oct 08



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EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Top of the class

Is there more to ATC's new integrated than a fresh new look and a lower price?

PRODUCT ATC SIA 2-150

TYPE Integrated amplifier

PRICE £2,248

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 13.5x43.5x35cm

○ Weight: 22kg ○ Analogue inputs: 4x line plus tape in/out

○ Analogue outputs: preamp, subwoofer, headphone

○ Power rating: 150 watts/8ohms

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There's a thin and often blurred line between a makeover and a redesign. We're all painfully used to so-called 'revolutionary' new products that turn out to be last year's gear in this year's fashions. In that light, we can't help but applaud ATC and its SIA 2-150 amplifier.

ATC – Gloucestershire's finest maker of loudspeakers, amplifiers and the combination of the two: active loudspeakers – has radically redesigned the look of its cult integrated amplifier, but there's no hint of a 'Mk II', a 'Special Edition' or a 'Limited'. There's not even a change to the product name; what used to be called the SIA 2-150 amplifier is still called the SIA 2-150 amplifier. The reason for this is simple; what's inside this box is not so different to what was in the previous version. There have been changes to the PCB layouts and extra functions have been added, but ATC has stuck with what it considers to be a pretty solid design. This means a wide bandwidth, low distortion, low noise floor and high output power design... and all of these features were already readily available from the last model. So perhaps this is the ultimate expression of the 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' ethos in today's hi-fi industry.

We originally reviewed the last SIA 2-150 in June 2002 and it was not a brand new product then, what's more it cost £2,375. The fact that the latest version costs more than a hundred quid less than it did six years ago is apparently because ATC has refined its production process to be more efficient; there's also an economy of scale, as ATC upped the numbers it builds to accommodate demand from new markets. Nevertheless, for a company to be able to add

“ATC, being a company with strong ties to the studio world, believes in power being a necessity for accurate music reproduction.”

a better looking bit of casework and extra socketry while reducing the price in both real and actual terms is hugely impressive.

The snappy product name remains merely a stark description of its role: SIA stands for stereo integrated amplifier, 2 for the amount of channels and 150 indicates the power in watts that it's specified to deliver into an eight ohm load. Its beautifully machined aluminium front panel is 12mm thick and offers the minimum of controls, one large knob adjusts volume while the other is used to click through the four inputs indicated by green lights in the central bar. The two smaller buttons are for standby and monitor, the latter accessing whatever is connected to the tape input, who knows it might even be a tape recorder.

There is also a slightly lightweight remote handset which can be used to do all of these things as well as mute the output. Outputs

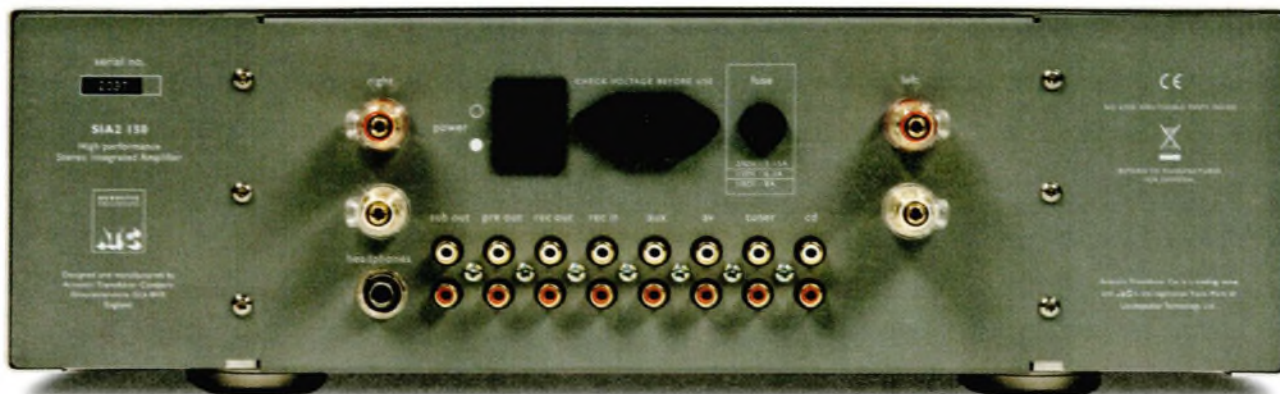
consist of preamp (variable), subwoofer (fixed) and headphone socket. The good news here is the socket is the traditional 6mm jack (instead of the all-too-common 2.5mm mini jack nicked from portable audio); the bad news is that it's placed on the rear panel, which is inconvenient but does keep the front looking good.

ATC, being a company with strong ties to the studio world, believes in power being a necessity for accurate music reproduction. This

is why this amplifier has a massive power supply that delivers a class A/B output of 150 watts. The first two thirds of which are said to be in class A. This puts it in a pretty select group for its price; there are only two other integrated amplifiers that compete on watts per quid in our listings and both of those come from large companies.

SOUND QUALITY

The power on tap from the amplifier does not specifically characterise its sound but, it allows the SIA 2-150 to do things that most similarly priced integrations struggle with. Primarily that is to reproduce music in a large scale, dynamic and full bodied fashion. There is little sense of compression when the demands of the material get higher, if a loud passage comes along, it is realised without distress or restraint. This can be frightening with some music. ▶



Q&A

We spoke to Billy Woodman, managing director and all-round amp and speaker guru at ATC, about the 'new' SIA 2-150.



HFC: Why has this amplifier's name not changed with this new incarnation?

BW: Historically, we haven't changed a product's name after an update, so we just carried on the tradition with this new product. The SIA name has been around for a long time and it seemed a good idea to keep it. Calling it mark 2 makes it a bit of a mouthful.

What has changed since the last SIA 2-150?

New PCB layouts to reduce the noise floor and better output connection options, specifically pre-out, sub-out and headphone.

This SIA 2-150 is less expensive than it was in 2002, how have you achieved this?

The new version is less expensive because we have designed it to go together in a more production engineered way, cutting down build time. Another factor is our success in both Asia and Russia allowing economies of scale not available back in 2002. However, it is important to point out that despite the increase in demand, all ATC products are manufactured in house.

Why have you waited until now to bring out a new version?

ATC is a very busy company and updating products without a very good reason is not an option. It is our policy to design products that have at least a six-year design life and in the analogue world this is still possible and desirable to our customer base. This policy also has an important benefit in terms of waste management; unnecessary obsolescence will become increasingly unacceptable and expensive for both producers and retailers. It is very unlikely that any ATC product has ever found its way into landfill and we regularly service twenty-year-old products.

Is there any substance behind the rumour that you will be bringing out a CD player?

Yes, ATC is working on a CD player that will also feature preamp functions; these will include S/PDIF, analogue volume control, DAB input (for a planned ATC tuner) plus two phono inputs. This would allow the owner of active ATC speakers to just have this unit without a separate preamp. It also allows the use of a PC input.



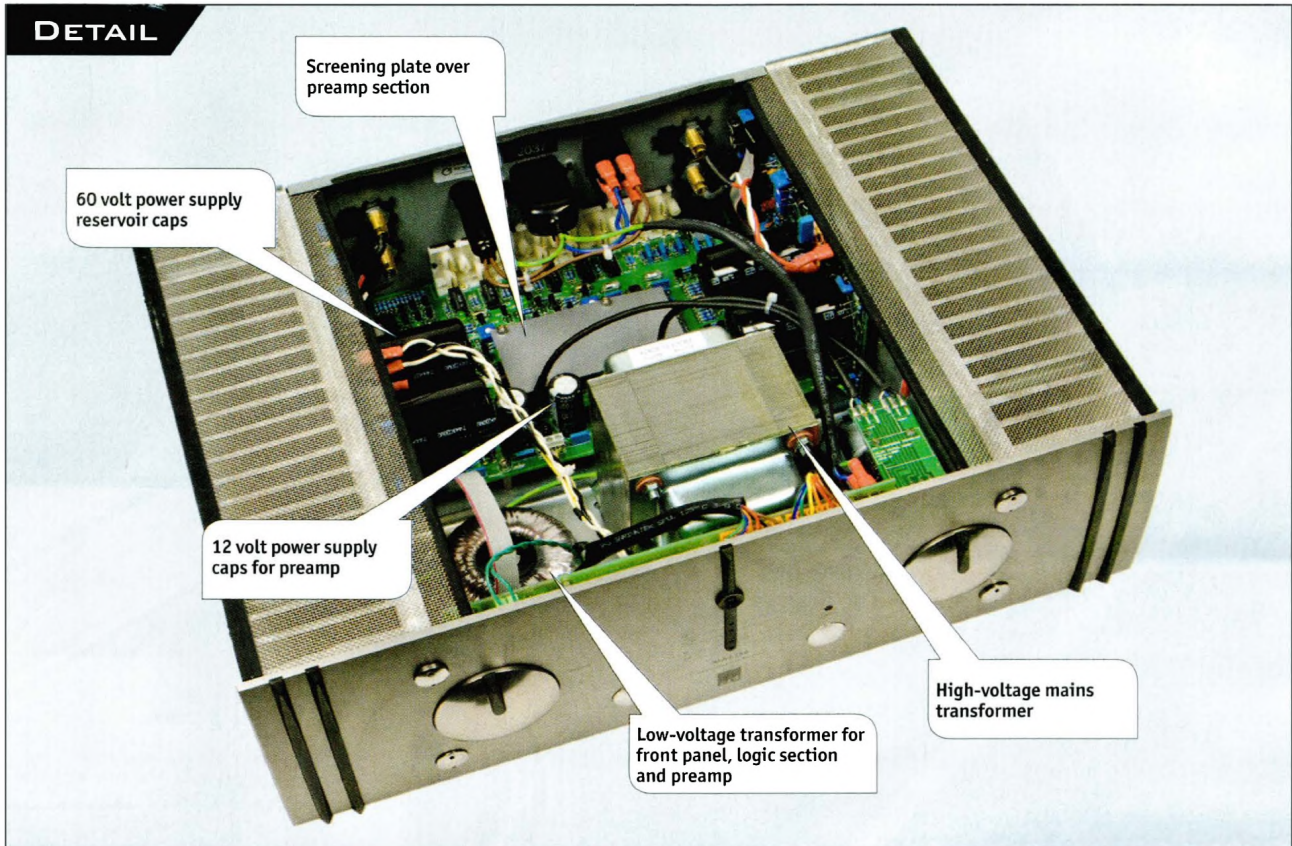
◀ We put on the Murcof's new *Versailles Sessions* disc and were pinned to the seat by the power and drama of the music. The way that the artist has recorded classical acoustic instruments and remixed them is intense and almost hyper-real when you have an amplifier that can rise to the occasion. The SIA 2-150 does just such that, it gives you what it gets in an explicit and unpolished fashion that, speakers allowing, makes for a highly engaging and powerful musical experience.

The speaker pair that allowed this particular experience was the Adam HM2, a standmount from Germany with a ribbon tweeter that seems to be well suited to the ATC amplifier because it too can cope with big dynamics and delivers decent bass extension. A more familiar reference is Bowers & Wilkins' 802D, a revealing and wideband speaker that offers a more challenging load than one would normally partner with an amplifier with a price

tag this side of about four grand. The 802D nonetheless revealed a lot of what the SIA 2-150 is about... and understandably, bass isn't as rock solid as a 200-watt Classé CA-2200 power amplifier (£3,950), but this is more than forgivable compared to a £4k power amp. The ATC amplifier still delivers a lot of low end grunt; if you put some Me'Shell NdegeOcello through it the grip on offer is very impressive for an integrated amplifier at any price. This is something we associate with the brand to be frank, but the quality of timing on offer exceeds expectations – the bass stops and starts precisely, so there is plenty of rhythmic drive to the music.

This is one aspect of the sound that we don't recall being so well executed on the previous version, which was similarly 'warts 'n' all' revealing, but too hard-edged for some tastes, so the improvements are a real boon. This incarnation is not smoothed or mellow but it is





cleaner so you can play considerably louder without discomfort and the leading edges of notes have the right degree of bite. Precise without being edgy. It even coped with the testing opening to Mahler's Eighth in fine form, allowing the massed voices to deliver much of their power and glory with little sense of compression.

BOARD MEETING

Aside from the new styling exercise, the changes to the SIA 2-150 could seem mild to those not used to modern circuit design. Re-laying a printed circuit board can often mean not a single component value changes, but can result in a mild (or occasionally, wild) change in both the cost of the product and even the sound quality. But why?

A modern PCB design is a complex mixture of electronics skills on the part of the designer and the ability for a computer design program to express those skills in a three-dimensional space. In many cases, it's also a function of the efficiency of the surface-mount devices being applied to the PCB itself. The level of sophistication of CAD/CAM and in particular SMD production engineering has improved immeasurably in recent years – a by-product of lead-based solder being rendered obsolete by recent RoHS rulings. As production engineering became more efficient, so prices dropped and the quality of any given electronic circuit design could be maximised.

“It offers a degree of grip that is unusual outside of separate power amplifiers, but does not let this dominate the sound.”

The more expensive Leema Tucana integrated (148-watt, £2,995) delivers a bass that's 'shapely' and has an upbeat and lively character, which suggests that the top end has a greater sense of revelation. Going back to the ATC, however, confirms that it has the upper hand when it comes to solidity of power. Perhaps equally impressive is that there is no shortfall in the timing department, because the Tucana is notably good in that respect. A closer price match was provided by Sugden's elegant A21 SE (48-watt, £2,145) which being an all Class A design does not compete on power terms and required the introduction of easier speakers to the listening room. Combined with the Living Voice Auditorium OBX-R, the Sugden produces a big spacious sound that fails to match the ATC in terms of dynamics but does have an appealing ease. While the SIA 2-150 is not aggressive, it has a lot more bite and precision than the dedicated Class A design as one might expect. In fact, the ATC amp works well with the Living Voice speaker, delivering a well balanced and tonally attractive result that benefits from the control and dynamics on offer from the amp.

Whatever you partner it with, ATC's superbly finished amplifier seems to deliver a revealing, powerful and ultimately engaging result. It offers a degree of grip that is unusual outside of separate power amplifiers, but does not let this dominate its sound. Combine all this with a confident six-year warranty and you have an amp that's extremely hard to beat. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Revealing, dynamic and powerful amp that works with a wide range of speakers, superb build quality and finish, and a long manufacturer's warranty.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON Lightweight remote handset compared to casework, rear mounted headphone socket, rather small input legends on front panel.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION The previous version of this amplifier won its <i>Ultimate Group Test</i> in <i>Hi-Fi Choice</i> six years ago and we'll be surprised if its namesake doesn't do even better. If you want dynamics and the groove it's serious competition for any amp near its price.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/478483	



NAD DAB it

Can NAD's best tuner climb to the top of the radio twig?

PRODUCT NAD M4

TYPE FM/AM/DAB tuner

PRICE £1,250

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43.5x10x30cm

⊙ Weight: 8.9kg ⊙ Bands: FM, AM (MW only), DAB (Band III and L-band) ⊙ Inputs: FM aerial (75ohm coaxial), AM aerial (wire clips), DAB aerial (F connector) ⊙ Outputs: Analogue (unbalanced), digital (DAB only, electrical and optical) ⊙ Presets: 40

CONTACT ☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.nadelectronics.com

NAD's high-end 'Masters Series' components have been in the stores for a while now and the range has made plenty of friends. It has, however, conspicuously lacked a tuner, a lack NAD evidently felt needed addressing: the result is the NAD M4 and a tastier-looking piece of radio kit we haven't seen in a while.

Looks aren't everything, of course, but in an age of greatly improved industrial design, compared with as little as ten or even five years ago, styling is now something significant. Something, indeed, for which people have realised it is worth parting with a fair wad of extra cash; so we're delighted to report on this tuner's substantial and nicely sculpted aluminium front panel, its tasteful and clearly labelled control layout and its generous dot-matrix display – not to mention the very robust steel casework. The remote control is a good example of the breed, too, not so fancy as to be unusable and better laid out than many.

Like many other tuners, the M4 receives good old FM radio, new-fangled DAB Digital Radio and grandfather AM. It has 40 presets for storing analogue stations, a single analogue output plus digital outputs (both flavours), which only work with DAB, and even basic connectivity for home automation. In terms of

tweaky features, about all it offers is 12.5kHz-step tuning on FM (a very handy feature though, allowing one some leeway to sidestep annoying pirate radio stations which may be close enough to legitimate stations to cause interference) and 'blend', another FM feature which trades off some high-frequency stereo imaging in the interest of improving general clarity when reception conditions are difficult.

On DAB, the usual station ordering etc. features are present and, of course, there is the range of display options – station type, scrolling 'music playing' display, technical details including station bit-rate and our

“Like many other tuners, the M4 receives good old FM radio, new-fangled DAB Digital Radio and grandfather AM.”

favourite, error rate readout – the one way the user can be sure that reception is tickety-boo (error rate is either zero or sub-optimal, basically). On FM, RDS gives a similar, though slightly more restricted, set of display choices.

Inside the case, it's interesting to see how money has been apportioned. It's already apparent from the rear of the unit – with its separate aerial inputs for FM and DAB – that NAD has not gone down the 'digital FM' route. Tuners that receive and decode FM broadcasts via the DAB module have to date tended to disappoint, but in this case the functional blocks are separate as far as the audio output circuit.

The FM and AM sections are handled on a large circuit board which, perhaps surprisingly, bears a legend connecting it with one of

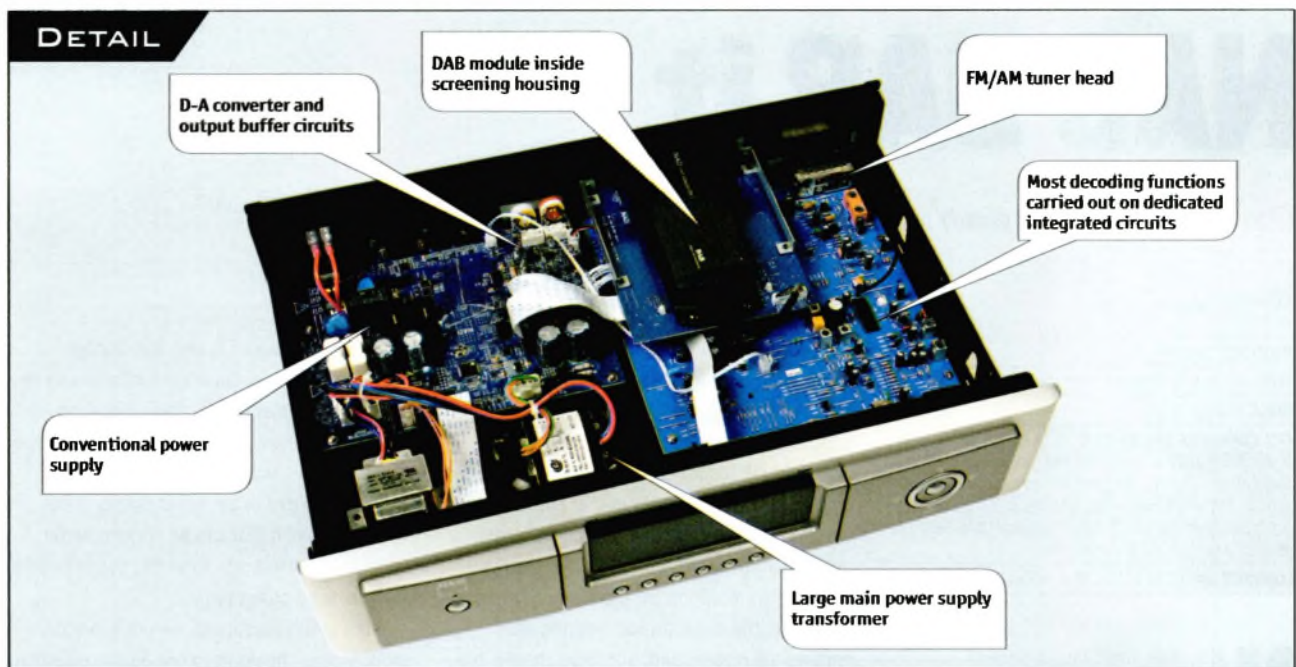
NAD's much cheaper tuners and features regular commercial-grade components and an off-the-shelf tuner head. It does, however, use some of the latest integrated circuits to receive the two bands and, as we've pointed out before in reviews of upmarket tuners, there isn't really much that can be done to better these unless a manufacturer sets out to build a really cost-no-object tuner.

In the DAB department, a Frontier Silicon module does the donkeywork, again something shared with various much cheaper tuners. Here, though, NAD has made two significant modifications. First, the module is encased in a

very solid metal housing that provides a significant degree of screening to and from the rest of the unit. Second, there is a very high grade DAC appended. This is built on a separate board, which also buffers the audio output from the FM section and houses the well-specified power supply.

On a practical note, NAD has set the output from the FM tuner lower than from the DAB, with the latter already lower in level (at peak output) than most CD players. Because of the compression of dynamics used in both radio systems, subjective results seem to be quite well-balanced against typical CDs. Basic measurements of both sections suggest that technical performance is very good, though we have seen lower levels of ultrasonic output from FM tuners. 📺





SOUND QUALITY

DAB tuners vary considerably less than FM ones, and it was to the FM section that we turned first, in high hopes of hearing something revelatory. Maybe that was a high bar to set, but it's certainly true that we heard many things that we very much liked. First, foremost and enduringly, we heard some remarkably clean radio reception. This was in part due to a decent rooftop aerial, a purchase we would highly recommend to anyone considering this or any other high quality FM tuner if circumstances permit. Still, most tuners reviewed in these pages have been fed from the very same aerial, and in that context the M4 does stick out as one of the cleanest. Indeed, it makes a good stab with just the supplied indoor aerial, the usual T-ribbon.

FM is capable of very good sound, but one of the toughest gremlins to eliminate is a degree of harshness, especially in built-up areas where multi-path distortion is a perennial problem. Over the years, advances in the integrated circuits and tuner heads used in most FM tuners have helped considerably in this area, but good performance is by no means automatic. NAD must be congratulated on wringing some very fine subjective results from the components it uses in the M4. With both

BBC and commercial radio stations, we found the sound to be almost completely devoid of any such effect and, as a direct result, very informative and listenable in the long term.

Naturally, detail is well preserved in the sound because of this. Getting the ultimate in detail out of an FM transmission may be one trick beyond this model, and we do feel there is some justification left, in this parameter above all others, for the even high prices of a few dedicated FM tuners from Naim and others. On the other hand, few of those models can manage to better the tonal balance of the M4, which is again very fine indeed. The bass is very extended, but without excess or lack of control, while treble is unconstricted: as the original designers of stereo FM realised, a band limit of 15kHz is barely perceptible as a restriction if it is well implemented.

Truly neutral midrange is exceptionally rare among tuners, but also hard to gauge because of the way recordings are processed. By putting into service our own FM generator, fed from a local CD player so that the reference is available at the flick of a switch, we became aware of a slight chestiness to the sound, something we've heard from many models. However, we really do mean 'slight' and only with the most carefully prepared broadcasts on

Radios 3 and 4 were we able to convince ourselves that we could pick it up in typical use and then only by listening specifically for it. To all intents and purposes, this is an even-handed tuner, tonally speaking.

We've little to say about DAB here, save that it is clearly very competent and better than any current broadcast is likely to explore in detail. It is admirably quiet and also well behaved, with no unpleasant surprises when re-tuning to a different station.

In terms of raw performance, this tuner does not necessarily stand out from the best on offer in the sub-£500 bracket: clearly, the law of diminishing returns with tuners sets in. But it is a very fine product and visually and ergonomically a cut above most and, of course, a perfect match to the rest of the NAD Masters range. We are happy to give it a warm, if not entirely unqualified, welcome. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Very good – in truth, nearly excellent – FM performance in partnership with a good aerial: cleanliness and clarity are admirable and tonal purity also above average.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON The last word in detail on FM just escapes it, and midrange is not absolutely neutral. Not best suited to difficult reception conditions.
VALUE ★★★★★	

CONCLUSION
A well-judged tuner which combines carefully thought-out FM performance with good DAB, and all in an unusually attractive and well-built package. Well suited to the regular user of both broadcast bands.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

URL: www.techradar.com/478435



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MERIDIAN

EDITOR'S CHOICE
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine
★

DENON

Head of headphones

Denon's headphone masterpiece is more than just mahogany earcups and luxury leather earpads

PRODUCT Denon AH-D7000

TYPE Headphone

PRICE £800

KEY FEATURES Weight: 370g ◉ 50mm Neodymium diaphragm ◉ Frequency range: 5Hz-45kHz
 ◉ Recommended maximum input: 1800mW
 ◉ Sensitivity: 108dB ◉ Impedance: 25ohms
 ◉ 3m cloth covered connecting cable ◉ 6mm headphone jack socket

CONTACT ☎ 01234 741200 ≡ www.denon.co.uk

Hot on the heels of recent Grado and Audio-Technica high-end headphone offerings, comes this new AH-D7000 range-topper from Denon. Smart satin-lined packaging and first-class finish are a given at this price, but what's behind the facade?

The differences between a model like this and something more mundane are largely in the details. 50mm drivers with neodymium magnets are hardly surprising, though the use of microfibre diaphragms is less common. The closed earcups are made of mahogany, finished so well on the outside that to the casual glance it looks like plastic. The frame is made of light metals, magnesium and aluminium alloy and it adjusts with the businesslike click of a sturdy precision mechanism. Earpads and the headband are lined with particularly luxurious soft leather.

One subtlety cited by Denon is an 'Acoustic Optimiser', which we take to be the damping in the earcups. Closed cups run a much higher risk of resonance than open ones, and controlling how the sound off the rear of each diaphragm is reflected, transmitted and absorbed is critical. A simple test of tapping on the outside of each cup suggests

that Denon has this well covered. One feature that does slightly concern us is the lead, which is fabric-covered to reduce tangling; the fabric generates mechanical noise as it slides over skin or clothing and that noise is efficiently coupled up to the ears.

SOUND QUALITY

That aside, we are happy to report some very impressive results with the Denon flagship. We've yet to hear a headphone that is absolutely neutral, but this model gets closer than most. There is even considerably less sibilance than we've heard from many

“The real glory of this headphone is its bass. It has a degree of extension, coupled with solidity and control, that is remarkable.”

headphones. The midrange is mostly neutral, with only mild congestion in the general region of female vocals preventing us from dropping the 'mostly' bit.

The real glory of this headphone, though, is its bass. It has a degree of extension, coupled with solidity and control, that is remarkable going on unique for a headphone. To use a venerable hi-fi test favourite as an example, the 'heartbeats' on the very first track of *Dark Side of the Moon* are so weighty one could easily believe they are being felt as well as heard, a particularly rare trick for any headphone to achieve. At the same time, they don't dominate proceedings and the excellent detail relayed by the AH-D7000 means that one hears the background speech more clearly than usual.

Just occasionally, that bass can become oppressive, particularly in tracks where there is relatively high-speed use of bass drum, for instance. Such tracks are not too common, though, so the drawback is relatively minor.

As with most fine headphones, detail is really very good indeed; a clear improvement over the standard of most affordable loudspeakers. Instruments and vocals have tons of character and individuality. Each instrument here exists in harmony with the others, but within its own tonal and physical space. Imaging is more 'left and right' than 'seamless stereo', but it is also clear, stable and precise. The closed-back design also gives better exclusion of outside noise than several models we've tried recently, and less 'spill' outwards, too.

Having only recently completed an *Ultimate Group Test* on upmarket headphones (*HFC*

312), we feel confident in proclaiming this one of the finest models around. Our favourite, the Grado CS1000, is open-backed and very different in presentation, but among closed models, this is the most persuasive we've heard and is even more neutral than Audio-Technica ATH-W5000.

£800 feels like a lot of money for a pair of 'cans' if you've never experienced what really good headphones can do. A trial of Denon's AH-D7000 could change attitudes, though. You'll be won over in an instant. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Truly stupendous bass, its level perhaps a touch exaggerated but its extension and precision are revelatory. Excellent comfort and very good detail too.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON As with many headphones, there is slight sibilance, and a little upper-midrange congestion. Cable transmits some mechanical noise.
VALUE ★★★★☆	
CONCLUSION Definitely one of the best headphones around, especially among closed-back designs but also bearing comparison with the finest open models. Beautifully built and clearly differentiated from the competition.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/478417	



BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine
★



SPENDOR

Miracle Baby

Spendor's SA1 is back and it's a classy new miniature

PRODUCT Spendor SA1
TYPE Standmount loudspeaker
PRICE £1,100 per pair (matching stands £400 per pair)
KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 16.5x30.5x19cm
 • Weight: 5.4kg • Drivers: 22mm soft dome tweeter with 19mm diaphragm • 150mm in-house polymer mid/bass cone woofer • Sensitivity: 85dB
 • Impedance: 8ohms (nominal)
CONTACT ☎ 01323 843474 # www.spendoraudio.com

Spendor has a long and illustrious history in the UK loudspeaker business. The company started almost 40 years ago with Spencer and Dorothy Hughes (hence the name Spen-Dor) harnessing the expertise gained from Spencer's years in the BBC's sound engineering department.

One of Spendor's earlier successes (along with the classic BC1 and of course the LS3/5a) was the then-diminutive SA1. This time, the initials stood for the Spendor bass/mid driver and the Audax tweeter – rather as the BC1 was christened after its Bextrene cone main driver and Celestion tweeter. A chunky little speaker with a much squatter shape than the LS3/5a, the SA1 built a strong reputation at the time as a serious (and to many ears

superior) alternative to the LS3/5a. However, the absence of the BBC badge-of-approval probably prevented it from establishing a similar worldwide cult status.

End of history lesson. Although sticking to the core principles of the originator, Spendor is a wholly different company these days. It's still British owned and run, but since 2001, it's been owned and run by Philip Swift (before Spendor, Swift was 'Mr Audiolab' in the days before TAG McLaren and IAG).

The new SA1 doesn't have a whole lot in common with its predecessor, but it does offer

“The new SA1 doesn't have a lot in common with its predecessor, but it does offer serious competition for other LS3/5a look-alikes...”

very serious competition for the numerous other LS3/5a look-alikes that several brands (including Spendor) produce. With similar dimensions to the LS3/5a and its clones (albeit swapping width and depth), this £1,100 per pair speaker costs roughly 50 per cent more than Spendor's own award-winning S3/5R (reviewed in *HFC* 310). Add a further £400 for the matching stands and you're looking at a considerable sum for one of the smallest hi-fi speakers on the market. From the outside at least, the new SA1 looks a decidedly expensive prospect that might well struggle to justify its price tag.

However, just as one shouldn't judge a book by its cover, one shouldn't judge a speaker by its price tag or the size of its lacquer-over-zebrano-wood-veneer enclosure. This speaker (especially when used on its partnering stand) has surprising and hidden depths that are immediately evident as soon as one starts listening and it is clearly a cut above the *Ultimate Group Test* of sub-£900 mini-monitors we reviewed just four issues back.

The reason lies in the very subtle and detailed approach to developing both the speaker itself and its stand in order to achieve an exceptional level of refinement in resonance control. The enclosure uses both critical

bracing and three different thicknesses of relatively light and thin panels to supply stiffness and resonance control while avoiding significant energy storage. Similar techniques have been applied to the stand, to make it light, rigid and essentially non-resonant.

Recently, Spendor had a commanding reputation designing its own drivers and not simply picking out drive units from OEM manufacturers. The SA1 continues that trend. This sealed-box two-way has a new 150mm Spendor bass/mid drive unit. It uses a 90mm ep38 polymer cone, a wide surround, a high

excursion motor with powerful magnet and (perhaps most significantly) it operates up to a high 4.8kHz. An unusual 22mm tweeter drive unit uses a small 19mm diaphragm and a 'proper' surround to extend its potential operating bandwidth. A single pair of high quality WBT terminals feeds a refined crossover network using top-quality components and internal wiring.

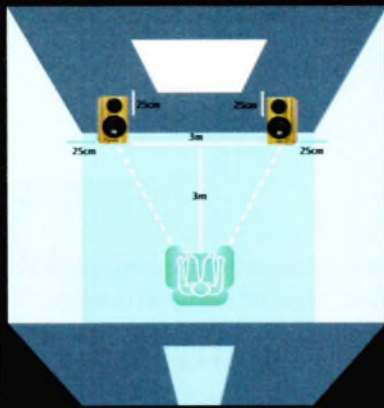
Three alternative finishes are offered, including the rather bold lacquered zebrano of our samples, a black piano lacquer and a more restrained satin-finished wenge, while concealed magnets hold the optional grille in place. In each finish, the partnering stand has a matching inlay in its central pillar. This nicely shaped tripod stand base has good spiking arrangements and fine stability. The top plate has small compliant studs and both top and base incorporate constrained damping layers. We consider it a vital part of the SA1 package.

SOUND QUALITY

Listening tests began with the speakers well clear of walls and that brought the first surprise. Although there's an obvious lack of low bass weight and authority here, the SA1 really didn't sound at all like a small speaker, dynamically speaking. ▶



SET-UP



POSITIONING

The Spendor works very well in free space, and this siting will result in the lowest coloration and best stereo imaging. However, this does result in a lightweight sound.

Measurements of the averaged power response in the far field and under in-room conditions were revealing. With the speakers clear of walls, output was even across the midband, from 125Hz right up to 3kHz. Below 125Hz, it averaged about -4.5dB, and treble rolled off gently and progressively.

Moving the speakers closer to a wall boosts the 50Hz-125Hz zone significantly, albeit not particularly smoothly. This effectively extends the bandwidth down to 50Hz, though the presence zone is less than smooth.

We found that best results were obtained by leaving a gap of about 25cm between speakers and wall. This provided adequate bass 'fill' down to 50Hz (far-field, in-room) without compromising imaging or coloration too severely.

SYSTEM MATCHING

The SA1s delivered flat in-room balance across the broad midband, but at a relatively low sensitivity of around 84dB. This would seem to rule out low powered amplifiers, in theory at least, and the ultimate loudness available will be somewhat limited.

That said, a generous power handling rating of 125 watts on an unclipped program is quoted, so decent enough levels in the upper 90dB will be viable with a powerful amplifier.

The impedance stays above 6.5 ohms throughout and is actually much higher than that through most of the range. While plenty of volts will be needed to get this speaker going, it won't require too many amps to keep it that way.



❑ This is nearly always the obvious limitation of very small speakers and was very much the norm in the aforementioned mini-monitor *Ultimate Group Test*. So much so that it seemed to come with the territory. The SA1 very effectively demonstrated that this doesn't have to be the case though. It makes no pretence at being a large loudspeaker, but this is the small box that those who like big boxes can learn to love without too much strain. Coming from a reviewer who has a strong affinity for big box loudspeakers, this is high praise indeed. So, while it doesn't possess the full drama and vivacity of significantly larger

models, it's nevertheless much more dynamically literate and informative than prejudice might lead one to expect.

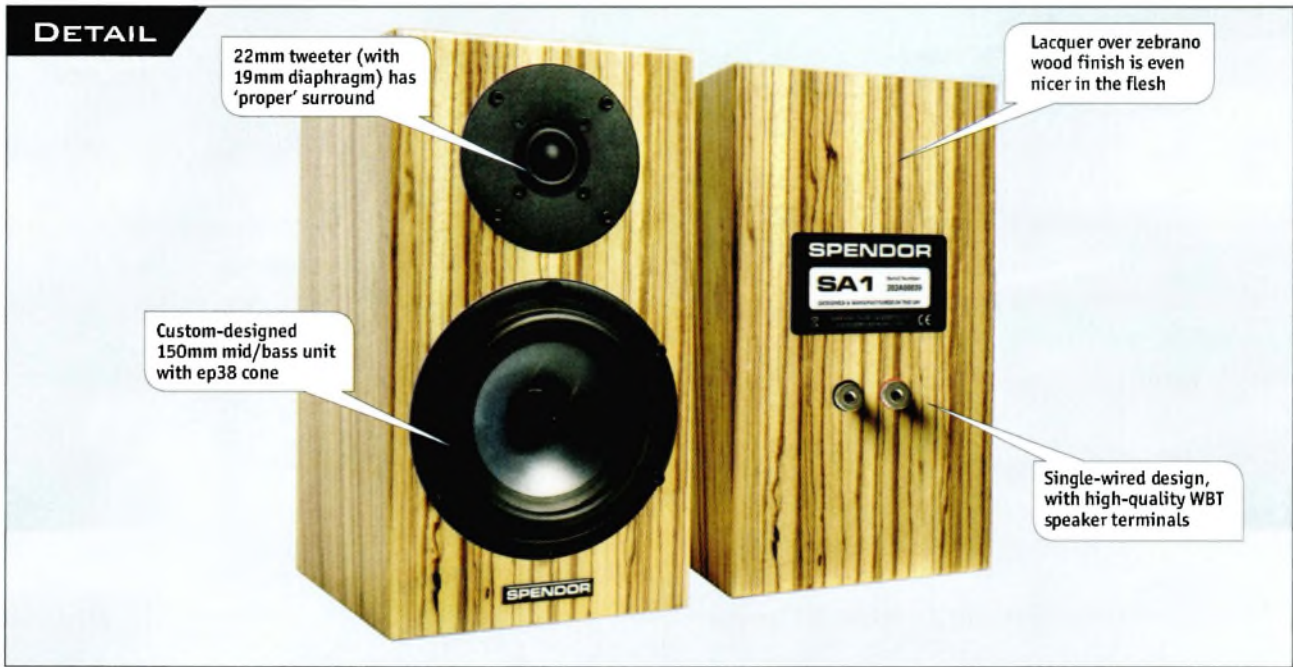
Why should this be the case? A small main driver like the one used here is certainly not going to move a whole lot of air, but two other possible factors can play. The first is that a small enclosure inevitably creates much less enclosure 'noise' than a large one, so the 'noise floor' of the box is low and dynamic range is correspondingly enhanced.

The other possible factor is a phase response that's more accurate than most – something that sealed-box loading tends to promote – as this will tend to sharpen transients and improve dynamic expression.

The SA1 benefits from its small enclosure in other ways. Because its surface area is small and resonances are well controlled, it adds only modest coloration to the sound. And because the frontal area is very small, dispersion is consistently wide and imaging sharp.

Both these factors were clearly audible. Coloration is very low and boxiness is notable for its





absence, while imaging is exceedingly precise, with fine lateral positioning, plenty of air and spaciousness and excellent depth perspectives.

Although the SA1 works well in free space, listening tests reveal that some bottom-end help from wall proximity is beneficial. Sealed box loading usually allows for more positioning flexibility than reflex-ported designs and that does seem to be the case here, though exactly where best to place these little Spendors ultimately comes down to personal taste

Exactly how much will depend on the room characteristics too, since the free-space placement varies with size and construction, while boundary use involves some trade-off

FACTORY FRESH

Although back in the old days, Spendor's product codes defined where the drive units came from, Spendor today has taken a very different route. If you look on Spendor's website 'FAQ' (frequently asked questions) section, it states - in the company's typically modest way - "All Spendor LF and MR drive units are designed and built at our factory for exclusive use in our loudspeakers and HF units are made to our rigorous specification by leading specialists."

This is, in fact, one of the key advantages Spendor has over its rivals, many of which source all loudspeaker drive units from a range of OEM suppliers. Even some high-end loudspeakers costing five-figure sums choose off-the-shelf drive units from third-parties. Instead of taking this easier route, Spendor makes its own midrange and bass drivers. This helps Spendor control the sound of its loudspeakers... and the results really do speak for themselves.

“Although the SA1 works well in free space. listening tests revealed that some bottom-end help from wall proximity was indicated.”

with image precision and midband coloration. Under our conditions, a gap of about a foot (25cm) between the speakers and the wall seems to give the best overall results, lifting the bass up to match the level of the midband.

While it still won't match the scale and weight of much larger models, provided you're not shy in using the volume control, the SA1 delivers a surprisingly wide bandwidth and does so in an impressively even and smooth way, with very superior overall neutrality.

Intrigued to check the role of the rather special stand, a quick comparison with our regular reference Kudos S100s (sadly no longer in production, although the similar but lighter Kudos S50 - especially when filled with Atabytes or similar - is a good alternative) showed that Spendor's stand does indeed possess a slight advantage with this little speaker. It isn't a big difference, but the Spendor's lightweight confection was just a little more agile and light on its feet and doesn't seem to sacrifice any image precision.

Spendor considers its £400 stand to be almost an integral part of the SA1's appeal, from both a visual and sonic perspective. Based on our findings both on and off the Spendor stands, we can only agree. It might be a lot of money to spend on a stand at first glance, but the rewards are more than justified.

While there remain several good reasons for preferring larger speakers, especially for those

who like to play their music loud and have the room size to cope, it should not be overlooked that there are several other factors to favour the tinies (over and beyond their extreme physical discretion) and the SA1 is a perfect ambassador for small speaker sound.

This is a very easy loudspeaker to love and as stated above, that's from a reviewer not known for having much enthusiasm for tiny loudspeakers. More than simply ticking an impressive roster of sound quality boxes, it's an effortless and engrossing musical communicator and a sub-miniature that surely, at last, puts the LS3/5a out to grass. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Surprising dynamic expression from one so small. Sounds impressively smooth with low coloration and excellent stereo imaging. Above all it's a fine musical communicator
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON The down side of any small loudspeaker with decent bass extension is that sensitivity will be low and ultimate loudness capability will be modest.
VALUE ★★★★★	

CONCLUSION
Although relatively expensive, this tiny speaker with its partnering stand might be the best sub-miniature around. Subtle blending of a complex cocktail of carefully chosen ingredients deliver a remarkable dynamic performance.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

URL www.techradar.com/478466

marantz
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER PM8003

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FM/NO CD TUNER AUX/DVD 1 RECORDER 2 MUTE

POWER

POWER AMP DIRECT

SOURCE DIRECT

VOLUME

PHONES

SPEAKERS

BASS

TREBLE

BALANCE

MIN

MAX

L

R

marantz
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER PM8003

Black box

New 8003 amplifier to match the mighty 8003 SACD player

PRODUCT Marantz PM8003

TYPE Integrated amplifier

PRICE £630

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 44x12.5x36.5cm

○ Weight: 11 kg ○ Rated power: 70 watts per channel

○ Inputs: 1x phono (MM), 5x line level

○ Outputs: 2x recording, preamp, 2x speaker terminals (switched) plus headphone

CONTACT ☎ 01753 680868 🌐 www.marantz.com

Back in HFC 312 we reviewed Marantz's SA8003 CD/SACD player, part of the company's latest raft of products. For practical reasons, we were unable to include the matching PM8003 amp, so here it is now, all gleaming in traditional black.

In common with most of the rest of the world, Marantz seems to be updating its ranges more rapidly these days than a few years ago, but certain aspects of this amp look familiar from mid-range Marantz models of yore. The use of HDAM (Hyper Dynamic Amplifier Module – effectively an op amp circuit, but built with discrete components and optimised for audio duty) circuits certainly comes under the heading of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' and we'd swear we've seen some corners from the rest of the circuit before too.

In terms of new design, Marantz is keen to emphasise that there has been considerable influence from its upmarket amps, which act to some extent as technology proving grounds for more mass market designs. There has also been input from Ken Ishiwata, whose initials used to be added to other Marantz products: we understand that now the Ken'd versions, of which this is one, have their own model number. Hence the PM7003 is the direct

descendant of the PM7001, the PM8003 of the PM7001KI – and the differences in each case follow a similar pattern.

The power supply starts with a large toroidal transformer, which feeds a bridge rectifier made up of high speed diodes mounted on the main heatsink. A rectifier diode seems an awfully prosaic component to tweak, but regular ones have been shown to create high-frequency interference which, while not necessarily directly audible, seems to cause some mild degradation of fine detail in delicate audio signals. High-speed ones reduce that and mounting them on a big heatsink is

“The use of HDAM (Hyper Dynamic Amplifier Module) circuits certainly comes under the heading of ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’...”

even more beneficial as it 'swallows up' most of the radiated field from the diodes.

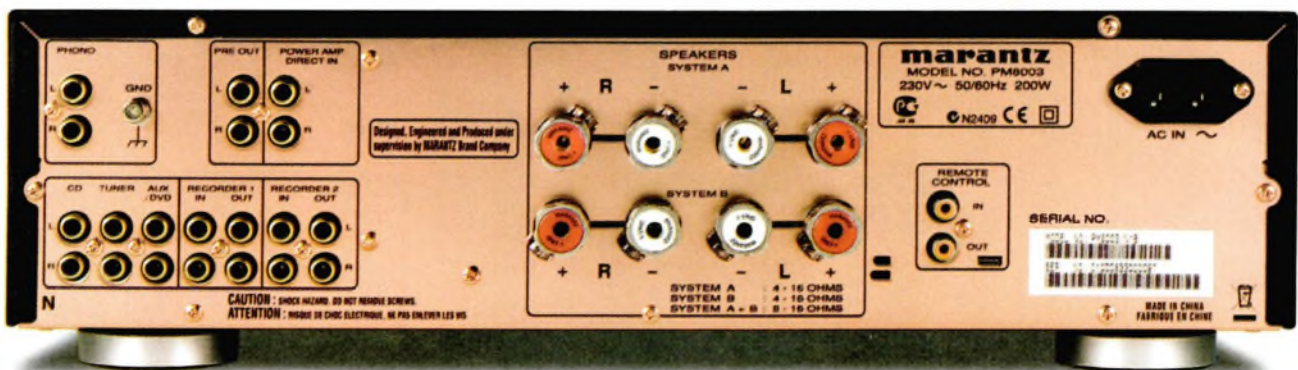
The next stage after diodes is smoothing capacitors and here again Marantz has done the listener proud with unusually generous provision. This is another of amplifier design's near-intangible issues, but there is substantial accumulated evidence to support the argument that larger capacitors are very much a good thing, tending to give a fuller and also clearer bass.

As for the main circuitry, there is less evidence of tweeky construction here and indeed most of the passive components (resistors and capacitors) are thoroughly mundane types. They are assembled to a circuit board that in today's high-tech age

looks frankly retro, with wire links and not a surface-mount component in sight. About the only real concession to modernity is a solid-state switch for input selection, a familiar part which we've found in the past to offer good performance: it also avoids a weakness of some such parts with regard to high input levels, which it accepts without complaint. The volume control is the noted Alps 'blue velvet' type, a component not found in many mass-market products, motorised for remote control convenience. Although it has good sound quality credentials, we did find it a bit twitchy to use over some of its range.

Finally, there is a phono stage, suitable for moving magnet (high output) cartridges only. Assembled on its own circuit board as far as physically possible from the mains transformer, it is quite a deluxe-looking affair built from discrete transistors rather than the usual single op amp afterthought.

Physical build of the amp is good, with decent-quality connectors, nicely weighted switches and some very chunky output terminals, a little pretentiously finished in 'faux metal' – they're actually plastic on the outside. From them issues a healthy output: Marantz's rating of 70 watts is conservative and we got more like 90 watts, with admirably low distortion and impressively flat frequency response from line and phono inputs alike. ▶



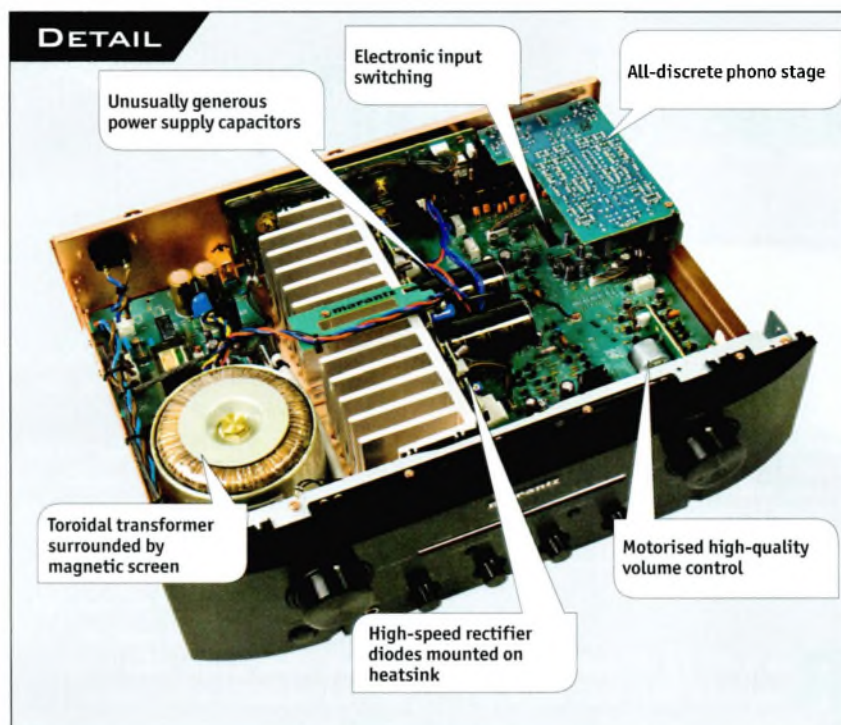
❑ SOUND QUALITY

Having been used to high standards from Marantz amps over recent years, we were just very slightly underwhelmed by PM8003, which seems to lack some of the insight we've found in previous models. The sound is large-bodied, tonally full and never less than pleasant, but it doesn't seem to have quite the level of detail that the PM7001 KI offered.

Now to be fair, we were very impressed with the 7001 and it set a high bar for future models. In addition, the newcomer seems to be more tonally neutral, having lost a slight chestiness which we found in both standard and KI 7001 incarnations. We also continue to approve wholeheartedly of the family likeness in the way these amps handle bass. This is where performance goes beyond expectations of mid-price hi-fi, approaching a high-end standard indeed.

We've said many times in these pages that hi-fi value for money has been on an upward trend for years. While it's also true that high-end achievement has also been increasing, products like this do suggest that the gap is in many ways not that vast and the extent to which the 8003 can grab hold of a woofer and vibrate it with precision, conviction and attack would really not disgrace an amp at a considerably higher price. We tried all the usual 'trouble tracks' everything from church organ to plucked double bass, piano, kick drum and more: in every case, we were rewarded with tight, but always tuneful extension and a highly convincing sense of realism.

The treble is also highly commendable, perhaps not quite a strikingly fine, but still very good for the amp's price. The big problem with high treble reproduction (and this seems to hold for amps, sources and speakers alike) is combining extension with that sense of air and space around the sound that is so essential to the lifelike replay of delicate treble details. In this case the extension is indisputable, while the space is very good, certainly among the better examples we've heard in this class.



And as already mentioned, midrange is neutral with excellent vocal quality as a result. We've found some Marantz amps in the past a little more partial to male than female voices, but this one seems very even-handed. It's also very lively, again by our reckoning rather more so than previous models: it's a little tempting to link this to the improved neutrality, as coloration can have an odd effect on one's perception of rhythm and dynamics, especially in A-B comparisons. Whatever the cause, this amp really does seem to enjoy bopping along to lively tunes and has a good deal of that sought-after 'foot-tappingness'.

Which really only leaves that niggle about detail. For less than two-thirds of a grand we aren't asking for the sort of analysis that allows one to identify the make of guitar pick being used, but we have experienced some very high standards in this area recently and on one of our favourite test discs, for instance, we had rather more trouble identifying which

instrument in the orchestra was playing which line than we'd expect and also found the imaging of the choir less clear than we've heard. Imaging and detail often go hand-in-hand and certainly here the former loses some depth and precision, though there's still plenty of width on offer.

Perhaps we are asking for the moon on a stick. Bass and treble extension this good are worth making a little sacrifice for and detail isn't everyone's top priority. We're more than happy to recommend this amp on grounds of tonality, liveliness and unusually clear-sounding phono stage: and with Marantz's usual good looks and ergonomic operation, it's a welcome arrival. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★☆	PRO Above all, this is an amp that's not scared of bass, which is plentiful but also well controlled, precise and tuneful. Neutral tonality all round and nice airy treble too.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★☆	CON We reckon Marantz has offered more detailed amps and if you really seek analytical skills you may find this one a little wanting.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION While we'd all like to find the product with everything at an affordable price, it probably doesn't exist and this amp's virtues are considerable, including a better phono stage than most. Excellent for lively, rhythmic music.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
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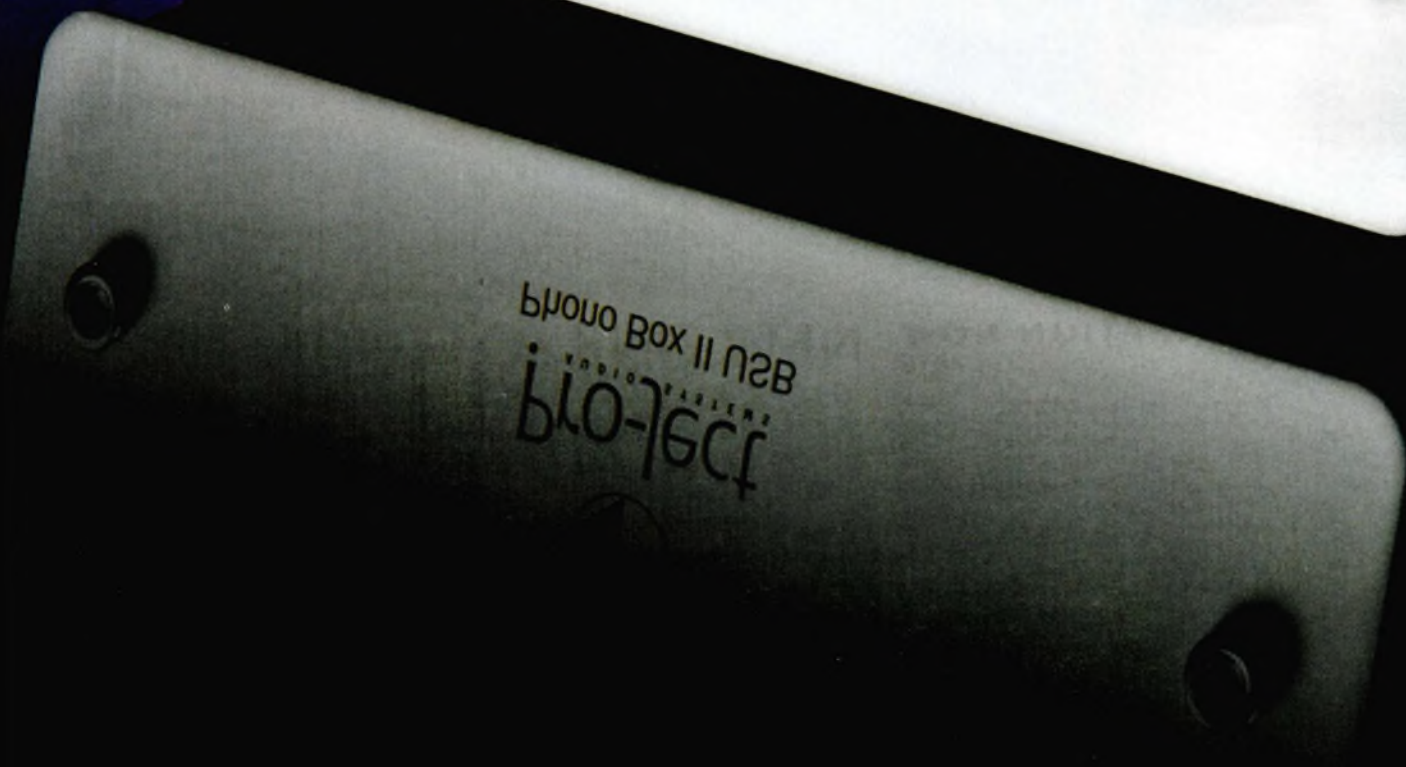
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TYPE USB phono stage
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 ○ Outputs: stereo phono and USB (1.1) digital
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CONTACT ☎ 01235 511166 # www.project-audio.com

Pro-Ject is, of course, the great success story of the LP turntable market, having started when most others were giving up: it has gone on to achieve eminence with a large and varied product range. Of late, products have appeared which are not uniquely devoted to vinyl reply, including the rather lovely 'Box' range of electronics – minute components (mostly, like this one, about 10cm square by 3.5cm high) including a tuner, USB DAC, two-input preamp and 20-watt switching power amp. This particular unit is an LP-based one, but this sly little phono stage comes with a twist for the computer age, in the shape of a USB socket.

USB is the computer connection that hooks just about everything to everything else, allowing cameras, mobile phones, audio devices, printers and more to connect as simply as one plugs sources into an amplifier. With a device like this, the computer recognises the Phono Box for what it is and sets everything up for you. All you need to add is some bit of audio recording software and you can be digitising your LPs in a couple of minutes. There is, of course, a 'normal' audio output too, for regular listening. If this isn't the best example of 'Plug & Play' around, what is – you plug in the Pro-Ject box and play your records.

About the only thing we found that needed a little care was hum loops. As it turned out, both our computer and the hi-fi were earthed at the mains, but a ground-less amp sorted that one out and otherwise we found operation quite painless. The Box digitises LPs at a 48kHz sample rate (thanks to a built-in 16-bit Delta-Sigma analogue-to-digital converter); if your software expects another sample rate it may convert with sonically unpredictable results, so attend to that if you care about quality.

Within the case, two op-amps per channel look after amplification, with that good-quality

“The sound has a degree of life and energy that is distinctly a cut above what one expects from cheap phono stages.”

ADC interfacing to the USB socket. Amazingly given the price, you even get MM and MC compatibility, though the latter is a little on the noisy side. A healthy output of 9V ensures that overload is unlikely to be a problem with any normal cartridge.

SOUND QUALITY

The good news with this little gadget is that all the basics are there. The even better news is that it manages to go a surprising way beyond the basics to give a sound that is believable, well proportioned and with good extension in both bass and treble. This is true, at any rate, with moving magnet cartridges; with moving coils, the noise intrudes just a little too much and the result is seldom very engaging.

If you want to use a MC cartridge, invest in a step-up transformer. With MM cartridges,

though, the sound has a degree of life and energy that is distinctly a cut above what one expects from cheap phono stages. In all sorts of music, with both 'hot' and relatively tame LP cuts, the Phono Box USB seems to get to the heart of the matter and present a very involving version of events. Where it does show its budget heritage is in retrieval of the finest details, and it doesn't offer the most subtle insights nor indeed the most precise imaging, but for this sort of sum it would be downright unreasonable to demand that.

For purposes of both immediate listening and archiving to computer, we took a trip

down memory lane with some LPs used in HFC turntable reviews nearly 20 years ago. Sure, converting them to digital loses some of the magic but we were impressed just how much remained. If you are used to the rather indifferent analogue input performance of most computer sound cards, this will be a revelation. And heard direct the music really came to life in a most enjoyable manner. Performance is balanced and more than just competent in all areas – a fine result! **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★☆	PRO Good extension and precision at the frequency extremes, neutral midrange, and plenty of life and verve; a very enjoyable presentation all round on moving magnets.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★☆	CON Detail is not the best we've heard and the moving coil setting is too noisy for general recommendation.
VALUE ★★★★★	Connection is slightly fiddly.
CONCLUSION A perfectly respectable phono stage at the price, the addition of a capable ADC with simple USB connectivity makes this a real bargain; good sounding, easy to use and smart too! Just remember to stick with moving magnet cartridges.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.hifichoice.com/478340	

Creek OBH-11

TYPE Headphone amp

PRICE £115

CONTACT ☎ 01442 260146 ☉ www.creeaudio.co.uk

This is Creek's basic headphone amp. It shares with the rest of the OBH range a neat design based on a length of aluminium extrusion, cut to length and faced at the front with a very smart aluminium panel. Facilities are the usual – phono input with a phono output connected directly to it for daisy-chaining to the rest of the system, a volume control and single quarter-inch jack socket. The circuit is based on ICs and powered by a universal wall-wart supply. It will deliver a fairly typical 5V into high-impedance headphones, but unusually features a high output impedance, around 200 ohms, which means its output into low impedance cans is limited (though still capable of achieving plentiful SPLs). In addition, the tonal balance may be subtly different from other headphone amps with some headphones.

Be that as it may, this is a lively little performer. It did indeed have a very slightly



leaner bass with the excellent Denon AH-D7000 tested on page 52 – and no harm done there either, since the bass of that model is just a touch on the generous side. Both with those and with higher-impedance Beyers, its sound is detailed and also remarkably energetic, positively relishing music that features rapid changes in texture and dynamics. There is a very good sense of control and, as a result, there's also a high degree of analysis. Just occasionally one

might feel, in comparison with some other (dearer!) headphone amps, that the sound is a touch dry, but it is by any reckoning a significant upgrade on a typical CD player headphone output. **HFC**

VERDICT

A modest little unit that nevertheless achieves good results with a wide range of headphones. At its best with livelier musical styles.

HI-FI CHOICE

★★★★★

Graham Slee Novo

TYPE Headphone amp

PRICE £235

CONTACT ☎ 01909 568739 ☉ www.gspaudio.co.uk

Nearly identical in size to the Creek model, Slee's new Novo even uses basically the same power supply, a universal switch-mode type that, with the supplied adaptors, can be plugged in to practically any socket in the world. The amp itself is built into a solid metal case that's actually a 'clamshell' design held together by front and rear panels. Inside is a circuit built entirely from discrete transistors, using (Slee tells us) multi-path feedback, a remarkably painstaking approach to such an apparently simple job as driving headphones. In agreement with Slee's specifications, we found distortion not quite as vanishingly low as some can offer, though still in practice more than adequate, while frequency response is not entirely flat: treble slopes off perhaps just audibly at some volume-control settings, while bass is a little leaner into low impedances than high, 3dB shy at about 24Hz/ 15Hz respectively.



In a group which showed subtle, but consistent character differentiation between the contenders, this was very much the beguiling one. That's not to say that it is perceptibly short of detail or any other particular quality, but it does seem to specialise in a very attractive vocal register in such a way as to seduce the listener, particularly with ballads, gentle instrumental pieces and anything at all sentimental or smoochy. On the other hand, given something lively like a Mozart symphony or some upbeat jazz, it bops

along most cheerfully, with perhaps a little subjective highlighting of middling-range instruments, but also plenty of extension in both bass and treble, the latter being admirably open and 'airy'. An excellent choice, we feel, for regular long-term headphone listening. **HFC**

VERDICT

Particularly engaging in the midrange, which has a highly attractive roundness to it and nicely complements the often bright sound of headphones.

HI-FI CHOICE

★★★★★

Heed Can Amp

TYPE Headphone amp

PRICE £275

CONTACT ☎ 01452 858269 # www.heedaudio.hu

This unit is a little larger than the others, for the simple reason that it includes a mains transformer rather than using an external power supply. Wall-warts are easier to change if one moves to another country (but how often does one do that?) and reduce the potential for mains interference, but in reality the audio signal levels in a headphone amp are high enough for that to be an eminently manageable problem and we certainly found no worrying signs of it here. Otherwise, features are typical of the breed, with phono input and output and a single headphone jack. The circuit is a little unusual, using as it does an op-amp in conjunction with a single-ended Class A output stage using exactly one transistor per channel. Measured performance is excellent, the bandwidth going far beyond the audio range in both bass and treble, with low distortion into any normal headphone impedance and plentiful output.



Output level isn't everything and the Pro-Ject will in any case drive even harder, but this amp impressed not least on account of its large audio scale. Indeed, even with quite modest volume-control settings the sound just seemed big and generous, tonally, dynamically and even spatially. Once again, there's a lot of detail, but the dominant impression is of size. Funnily enough, this was perhaps more pronounced with some unaccompanied solo vocals than with orchestra or mega-rock, but that just serves to

remind one that the human voice can indeed be a very big instrument. Perhaps if you like your music a bit on the polite side this may seem a touch excessive, but we freely confess that we just loved it. Tonality is great too. **HFC**

VERDICT

This amp does all one might expect of it and goes a little further too with a larger scale of music than headphones normally achieve.



Pro-Ject Head Box SE II

TYPE Headphone amp

PRICE £165

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

The Unique Selling Proposition here is obvious at once: two outputs, each with their own volume control. In effect, this is two separate headphone amps sharing an input (with the usual daisy-chain phono output of course). There are other headphone amps on the market with twin output, but for one thing they have only a single volume control and for another two pairs of low-impedance headphones can be a very taxing load. In this case, you can have two completely unmatched pairs at each listener's preferred level – his'n'hers at home, or indeed engineer and producer in a recording studio. To achieve this, Pro-Ject has used a pair of dedicated headphone driver integrated circuits, each preceded by a high grade op amp – not a bad component count for the money. Output levels are generous, with a full-level output equivalent to 1W into low-impedance headphones: enough to rattle your teeth if the headphones don't melt first. Use with care!



At first seeming a little undemonstrative, this amp proved a real grower as we listened with various headphones. Like a lot of good audio kit, it has that happy knack of presenting lots of information without making a fuss or forcing dissected detail on the listener. We ended up with considerable respect for its abilities and, yes, affection too. Treble, for instance, is excellently extended and very open, but without any degree of emphasis, so in a quick audition one may not notice just how good it is.

Bass is also extended, strong and very well controlled, while detail is effortless, but comprehensive. An excellent all-rounder. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

While it may not blow many listeners away on first hearing, this Head Box is remarkably capable and involving in the long run.



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GROUP TEST & LAB REPORTS: PAUL MESSENGER

LOUDSPEAKERS

Six upmarket floorstanders have plenty to offer buyers

The six candidates in this month's *Ultimate Group Test* carry price tags between £1,000 and £1,800 per pair. So perhaps it's not all that surprising to find that all are floorstanders, even though there's no clear and linear relationship between size, complexity and price.

The simplest and least expensive is the Amphion Helium 520, which is a straight two-way, but with twin main drivers mounted above and below a waveguide-loaded tweeter. Very similar to the Prio 520 reviewed in *HFC* (issue 302), it's also considerably cheaper, which has to be good news.

The Monopulse 62S is also at heart a two-way, despite adding a supertweeter to enhance the top-end air. The 62S has 'form' with *Hi-Fi Choice* (issue 304), but the designer has modified it to take account of our original criticisms.

Both the Tannoy DC6T and Opera Seconda are two-and-a-half-way designs, with extra bass-only drivers to augment a basic two-way operation. The Tannoy is a close relative of the DC6 stand mount

we liked a lot in *HFC* 310, while the Seconda was very well received way back in *HFC* 297, and is unusual in featuring sealed-box bass loading.

It's hard to argue with the perceived value of the £1,500 Wharfedale. This elegant and purposeful three-way's curved, lacquer finished enclosure, massive construction and proper steel plinth ticks so many boxes, even without taking its 75mm midrange dome driver – rare at twice the price – into account.

JBL has long been a master of the horn-loading found in both its flagship models and its massive rock concert arrays, but the new LS series introduces it, albeit only at high frequencies, at a price and package that won't panic the most average consumer.

Nowadays it's virtually impossible to specify the country of origin of a speaker, because the ingredients are truly worldwide. Here we have three British brands alongside one each from Finland, Italy and the US. But Wharfedale is owned by Chinese interests; Tannoy by a Danish operation. Amphion got its price

down by sourcing Chinese drive units, and the JBL also looks as though it's sourced from China. **HFC**

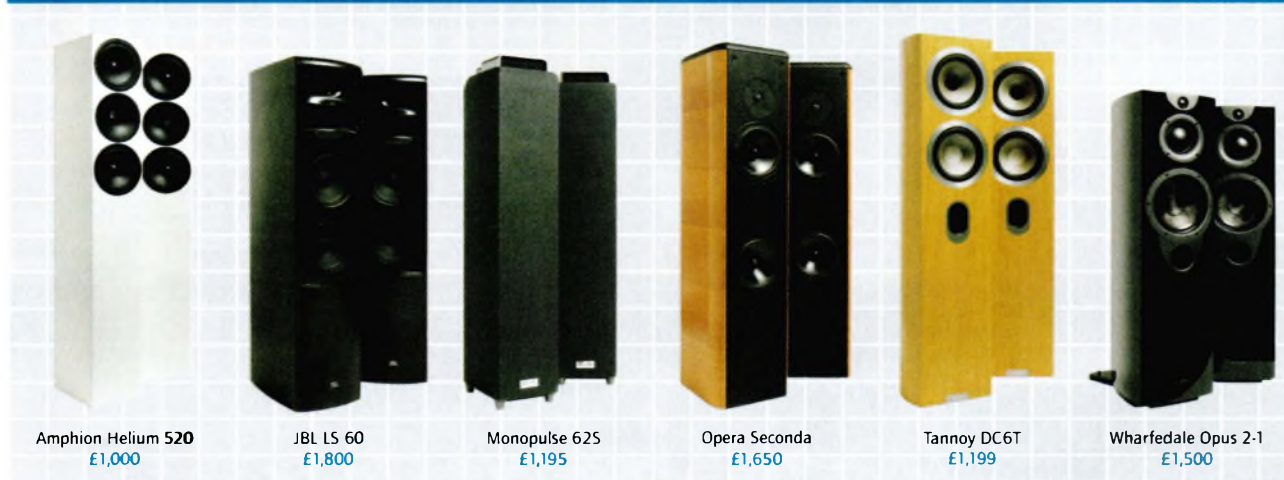
EQUIPMENT USED

- ⊕ Naim CDS 3/555 PS, Meridian 808.2 CD players
- ⊕ Linn Sondek LP12 (modified)/Rega RB 1000/Apheta turntable/arm/cartridge
- ⊕ Magnum Dynalab MD 106T tuner
- ⊕ Naim SuperLine phono stage
- ⊕ Naim NAC552 preamp
- ⊕ Naim NAP500 power amp
- ⊕ Cables from Chord Company, Vertex AQ, and Naim

MUSIC USED

- ⊕ Ennio Morricone *The Soundtracks*
- ⊕ Various artists *Heartworn Highways*
- ⊕ Mavis Staples *We'll Never Turn Back*
- ⊕ Laurie Anderson *Strange Angels*
- ⊕ Tom Waits *Orphans*
- ⊕ Wagner/BPO Karajan *Tannhauser Overture*

ON TEST



Amphion Helium 520
£1,000

JBL LS 60
£1,800

Monopulse 62S
£1,195

Opera Seconda
£1,650

Tannoy DC6T
£1,199

Wharfedale Opus 2-1
£1,500

LISTENING TESTS

Loudspeaker listening poses an altogether more complex set of problems from those involved in assessing components further up the hi-fi chain. Loudspeakers vary dramatically in size, type and tonal balance, and also interact strongly and often unpredictably with the room, according to where they're placed. The fatal difficulty facing sequential unsighted loudspeaker presentations is the strong tendency to judge each example according to how its balance differs from the model that preceded it. Accordingly, extended hands-on listening sessions were adopted, giving proper scope to adjust to the inevitable changes in balance and also to experiment with the positioning of different models.

LAB TESTS

The speakers were tested under in-room conditions, in order to be as representative as possible of real world operating conditions. The test equipment used was a Neutrik Audiograph analogue signal generator with synchronised pen recorder, and this was used to plot the far-field in-room averaged response traces, as well as the impedance plots, which provide the core of the measurement work. Pair-matching was also checked at one metre.

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

LAB REPORTS: THE BAR GRAPH

1] Sensitivity: Sensitivity is a measure of how loud a speaker will go for a given voltage from the amplifier. It's scaled to 2.83V at 1m (corresponding to one watt of power for an eight ohm load).

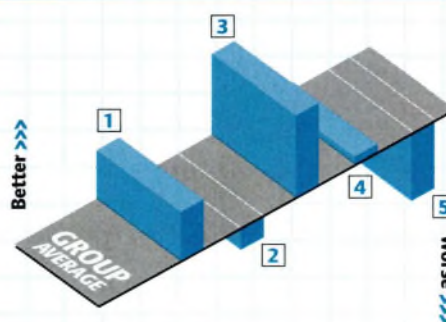
2] Bass extension: The bass behaviour of loudspeakers is heavily modified by the room in which they are used. To replicate 'real world' conditions, our figure represents the averaged bass rolloff frequency at -6dB ref the broad midband, measured across the far field for a stereo pair in a 4.3x2.6x5.5m room

3] Ease of drive: The lower the impedance of a speaker, the more current it will extract from the driving amplifier for a given voltage (volume) setting. Lower impedance designs are therefore theoretically harder to drive, but they also tend to be more sensitive.

4] Overall frequency balance: The overall broad frequency response trends do much to define the character of a speaker, although true neutrality is the obvious goal

5] Response smoothness: Beyond the overall tonal balance of the speaker, small scale smoothness has much to do with sound and harmonic shading

OUR BAR GRAPHS: AN EXAMPLE



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AMPHION HELIUM 520

A lower cost version of a familiar and attractively slim floorstander

Finnish brand Amphion has been around for about a decade, but we only reviewed our first speaker from the brand – the Prio 520 – in HFC 302. Amphion has designs on the much larger marketplace that exists at lower prices and has managed to achieve such substantial cost savings that it's now launching the Helium 520. This new speaker is very similar to the Prio we tested at the beginning of the year, but carries a much lower pricetag of £1,000 per pair. Indeed, the only obvious difference lies in the grille treatment.

The super-clean Scandinavian lines, painted graphite black or white, look agelessly contemporary, as if design guru Dieter Rams had sketched them for Braun some 40 years ago. Twin bass/mid drivers are mounted above and below the tweeter, in the configuration named after Joseph d'Appolito. And because these are relatively small 130mm units, with 100mm flared paper cones, the speakers

themselves are remarkably slim. The main drivers operate in parallel, so their combined acoustic centres effectively coincide with the location of the tweeter.

The tweeter is a 25mm metal dome affair, but it's mounted back down the throat of a 'waveguide' – a species of horn but with a truncated throat and a very wide flare. This has several benefits: it allows the crossover point to be lowered (to around 1.6kHz), it helps match the acoustic sizes of the bass/mid and the treble drivers; and by recessing the tweeter, its potential time alignment with the two cone units is improved.

The enclosure comes complete with a plinth to aid stability and now has much better spiking arrangements than those we found in the Prio. There might be some advantage in tilting this speaker slightly backwards, as best focus will be obtained when the two main drivers are precisely equidistant from the listeners. A single pair of high-quality terminals is fitted close to the floor, just below the generous rear port; foam bungs are supplied to block the ports if preferred.

SOUND QUALITY

The Prio 520 was impressive enough in its own right, but ironically it's utterly eclipsed by this less costly variation. The Helium 520 has all the good qualities shown by the Prio, most notably its very superior coherence through the critical crossover and presence regions, but does so with improved smoothness right across the band, including the previously slightly troublesome bass alignment.

The speakers worked well clear of walls and equally satisfactory with the bungs inserted when close to a wall. Genuinely deep bass is somewhat restricted, but the overall tonal balance is impressively neutral and the sound has a reassuring warmth through the upper bass and lower midband, the part of the band where many rivals tend to show weakness.

Imaging is precise and tightly focused, capable of delivering decent depth and ambience when this is available from the source material. A mid-1960s Sibelius 5 recording (Maazel/VPO on Decca) demonstrated this beautifully, with the brass at the back of the orchestra clearly operating in a genuine and convincing acoustic space.

This is a truly exceptional and clever speaker, offering a rare combination of warmth, neutrality, coherence and fine imaging. It might not be perfect, but it's about as close as you'll get for £1,000. **HFC**

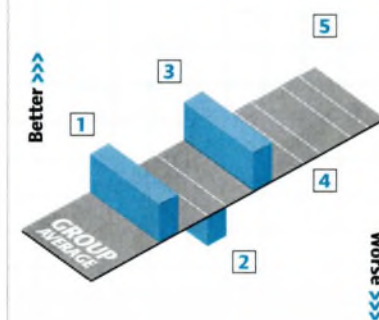


LAB REPORT

The physical differences between the Helium and Prio 520s are very small, so it's not surprising that the measurements are basically very similar. Comparison of the impedance traces shows that the two models are virtually identical above 150Hz, with precisely the same resonance glitches appearing again at 180Hz and 760Hz, while the change in bass/mid drivers has slightly changed the bass loading and marginally reduced the port tuning frequency (from 56Hz to 52Hz).

However, while the overall frequency is very similar overall, the new model is significantly smoother than its more costly predecessor. Which is not to say it's particularly smooth now, but it is less uneven than before, with a balance that errs a little on the warm side of neutral. Close-to-wall siting with the bungs fitted looks an interesting alternative to free space. Sensitivity is a generous 90dB, alongside impedance minima of 5 ohms.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1) Sensitivity >> +20%
- 2) Bass extension >> -15%
- 3) Ease of drive >> +20%
- 4) Overall frequency balance >> 0%
- 5) Response smoothness >> 0%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Sensitivity @ 1m/2.83V	89dB	90dB
Impedance (nominal/minimum)	4 ohms	7/5 ohms
Estimated bass extension (6cB)	-	28Hz

VERDICT

SOUND



Elegant floorstander cleverly uses a waveguide to improve coherence. It could be smoother with deeper bass, but the sound is warm, lively and essentially neutral, with superior musical communication skills.

PRACTICALITY



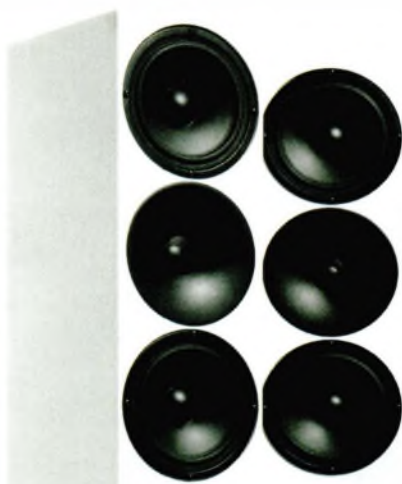
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VALUE



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JBL LS 60

Smart newcomer draws on JBL's extensive horn-loading knowhow

A major part of the US Harman International group and one of the oldest names in hi-fi loudspeakers, JBL is also one of the biggest, in part because it's active across a much broader front than just specialist hi-fi. That being said, the home hi-fi ranges are very extensive, although not all of these necessarily find their way to the UK.

The new LS Series is a relatively upmarket range consisting of five models, three stereo pairs, plus a subwoofer and a centre-front model for home cineastes. All bar the subwoofer (naturally) share the same horn-loaded treble drivers, varying in their complement of bass and bass/mid drivers.

This £1,800 LS60 is the middle of three stereo pairs and the smaller of two floorstanders. It's an attractive and very solidly built speaker, charcoal finished on front, back and sides, with a tapered plan view decorated by shaped and lacquer-finished veneered sides. The most unusual feature though, is the use of horn loading for the higher frequencies.

Four drive units are arranged in a three-and-a-half-way configuration. Two 165mm drive



units with 130mm paper cone diaphragms operate through the bass region, assisted by a large reflex port tuned to 42Hz. The lower driver is rolled off gently at 6dB/octave above 400Hz, the upper one continues on up to 2kHz, whereupon a 50mm titanium dome compression driver, loaded by a bi-radial horn, comes in with 24dB/octave slopes. This unusual unit, clearly related conceptually to the rather larger horn used in the redoubtable K2 S9800 'flagship' model, operates across the next two octaves and then a much smaller horn tweeter takes over above 8kHz. A bonus with these horn units is that their diaphragms are well hidden from prying fingers.

Twin terminal pairs offer a bi-wire/bi-amp option and the speaker comes with blunt studs or rubber feet rather than spikes. Stability is not great as no separate plinth is provided to enhance the footprint – a label on the back is considered adequate warning against tilting!

SOUND QUALITY

Clearly intended to be sited well clear of walls, the bass here errs on the full side, adding a little thickening to male speech and having a tendency to thump on some material. Ultimate weight and scale is a little lacking on the JBL LS 60, but it's nonetheless satisfyingly firm, solid, authoritative and powerful, all the while demonstrating good grip on musical material.

The LS 60 is not the smoothest or most neutral performer. Timing is slightly slow and smeared and dynamics sound a little constrained, but it handles high power levels with more than ample headroom and seems to have plenty of loudness capability in reserve for those with powerful amplification.

Although its overall character is noticeably laid back, it also somehow manages to avoid sounding obviously shut in. As a result, the sound shows a degree of restraint alongside an impressive freedom from any aggressive tendencies, even when the volume is being pushed hard.

However, the JBL LS 60's major strength lies in its exceptionally fine image precision and focus with excellent depth perspectives. The listener really feels as though he or she is afforded a clear window onto the recording venue. That's presumably a consequence of the controlled directivity properties of the horn drivers, which favour direct over room-reflected sounds, and deliver a sound quality that has a distinctive character rather different from conventional direct radiators and none the worse for that. **HFC**



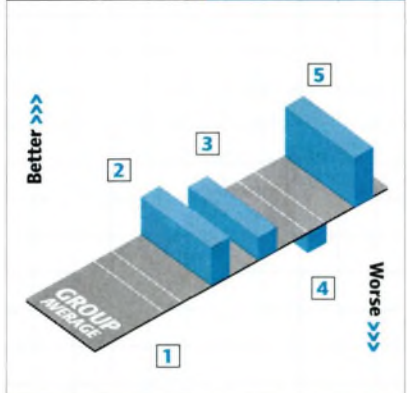
LAB REPORT

The far-field averaged in-room response is not all that smooth here. That being said, the bass is impressively even and full from 30Hz right up to 250Hz, apart from a peak around 55Hz at a major room mode. This is (perhaps unsurprisingly) close to the 42Hz port tuning frequency.

There's some loss of energy 250-600Hz, and a slight peak around 900Hz. Above 1.5kHz, where the horn drive units come into play, the balance becomes somewhat uneven, especially at the transition between the two horn drivers, but holds within tight +/-2dB limits.

Sensitivity comfortably meets the specified 87dB – in fact 88dB looks closer to the mark under our regime, and this is impressive in the context of a very easy amplifier load that stays comfortably above 8ohms below 7kHz, and 6ohms thereafter, and decent bass extension (-6dB at 23Hz) too. Pair matching was also pretty good.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Sensitivity >> 0%
- 2] Bass extension >> +20%
- 3] Ease of drive >> +10%
- 4] Overall frequency balance >> -10%
- 5] Response smoothness >> +30%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Sensitivity @ 1m/2.83V	87dB	88dB
Impedance (nominal/minimum)	6 ohms	8/6 ohms
Estimated bass extension (-6dB)	-	23Hz

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★☆	A bit of a mixed bag; the horn drivers make for impressive imaging, but greater overall neutrality and better floor coupling
PRACTICALITY ★★★★☆	arrangements (plinth, spikes) would be appreciated at this price level.
BUILD ★★★★☆	
VALUE ★★★★☆	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	

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MONOPULSE 62S

MonoPulse has revised the 62S we reviewed less than a year ago

Allan Hendry's MonoPulse loudspeaker designs were developed by applying lessons he learned when working on phased array radar systems. The decision to go for a fabric-covered presentation was probably made to help achieve the desired time alignment between the drive units, which imposed significant constraints on driver disposition. The use of fabric allows the speakers to be available in a wide choice of different colours, while the back is covered in a thin foam sheet.

MonoPulses come in two distinct ranges, the larger A-series, and the more compact S-series. We originally reviewed this £1,195 per pair 62S in issue 304, with somewhat mixed results, but it has since undergone some revision and so has returned for an update.

One could call this compact floorstander a two-and-a-half-way design, but in truth it's really a two-way, as the extra 'half' here is just a little piezo-electric supertweeter that adds a little more air at the extreme top end. This is mounted within a metal bracket on the top

surface, which also provides a useful hand-hold when experimenting with positioning.

Despite its very slim appearance from the front, the 62S still has room for a 160mm bass/mid driver with a large diameter voice coil. The main tweeter has a relatively large 31mm soft dome diaphragm, which is presumably why a supertweeter is used.

In the interests of time alignment, the main driver is mounted above the tweeter here, and the enclosure is reflex-loaded by a downward-firing port in the base. Metal feet keep the port clear of the floor, with or without the use of thumbwheel-tightened spikes, but there's no extra plinth, the footprint is very modest, so physical stability is severely compromised. Alternative length spikes (or indeed no spikes at all) allow some re-tuning of the port frequency, which might be useful. Electrical connection is made via twin terminal pairs, set rather high off the ground, so trailing wires are sadly unavoidable.

SOUND QUALITY

Generous in-room output from the port mean that the MonoPulse 62S is best kept well clear of walls, if mid-bass 'thump' is to be avoided. The overall tonal balance is reasonably neutral, but does tend towards the thin and lean side thereof, so the overall character does rather lack warmth and richness through the upper bass and lower midband.

Happily, our criticism of the original version (that it was altogether too laid back to the point of sounding rather shut in through the presence band) no longer applies. As a result the 62S now has the fine crossover zone coherence that made the larger models in the MonoPulse range such an interesting proposition and the overall sound now has a much more neutral – though still not particularly smooth – voice band.

It's not the most dynamic speaker around, but it is relatively smooth and lucid, if slightly lean and forward. Plus it's somewhat lacking in warmth and muscularity, especially in contrast to the mostly rather larger floorstanders assembled for this *Ultimate Group Test*.

Reflecting the fine coherence, stereo images are well formed and focused, though some midband coloration was also audible. And the treble proper does sound rather detached and strong, so that its presence is rather too obvious and not all that smooth or sweet. Although the modifications have significantly improved the 62S, some room for further improvements in the fine detail remain. **HFC**



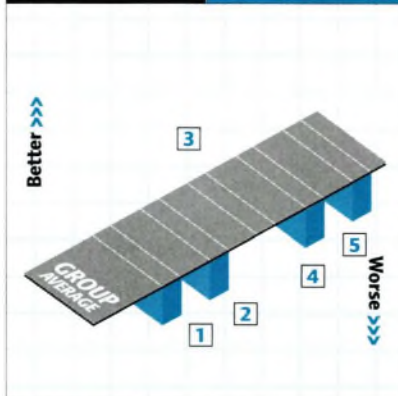
LAB REPORT

Happily the lack of presence energy that marred the original MonoPulse 62 samples reviewed in *HFC* 304 has been corrected here. Although the speaker is a trifle lean through the upper bass and lower midband, the response holds within reasonably tight ± 3 dB limits across most of the band, but it's far from smooth and is particularly strong and spikey above 5kHz.

MonoPulse might now claim a sensitivity of 89dB for the 62S, but our samples still only achieved a more modest 87dB under our in-room far-field averaged regime. However, the bass extends usefully down to 30Hz or so (with a port tuned to 45Hz) and the amplifier load looks particularly easy to drive, staying above 8ohms throughout.

The pair match is pretty good, with just minor variations at low frequencies, while the rather obvious enclosure resonance seen on all MonoPulse models is again visible at 220Hz.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Sensitivity >> -20%
- 2] Bass extension >> -20%
- 3] Ease of drive >> 0%
- 4] Overall frequency balance >> -20%
- 5] Response smoothness >> -20%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Sensitivity @ 1m/2.83V	89dB	87dB
Impedance (nominal/minimum)	8/6.1 ohms	8/6.5 ohms
Estimated bass extension (-6dB)	25Hz	28Hz

VERDICT

SOUND



PRACTICALITY



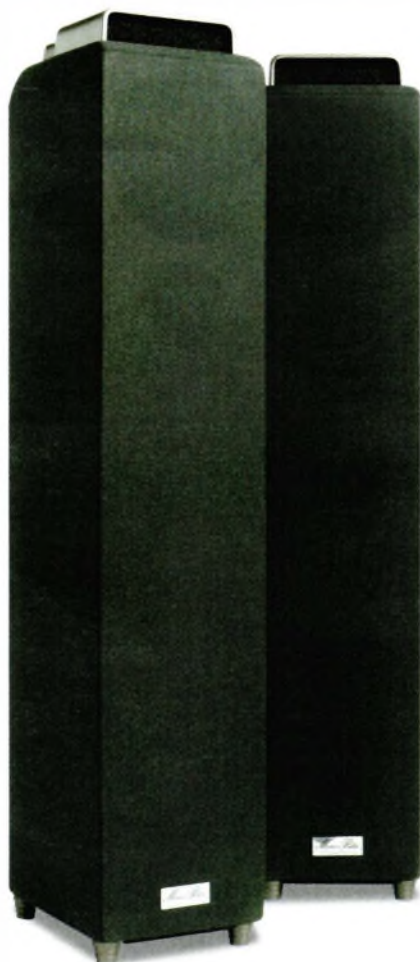
BUILD



VALUE



Network modifications have removed our earlier criticism of a lack of presence energy, and the fine mid-to-treble coherence remains, though the overall sound is lacking in warmth and the treble proper could be smoother.



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OPERA SECONDA

Italian elegance is combined with sealed-box bass loading

Opera is the specialist speaker part of a sizeable hi-fi manufacturing operation based just outside Treviso, in the north east corner of Italy. It shares premises with the respected Unison Research, which makes both solid-state and valve electronics components.

A tall and attractive two-and-a-half-way floorstander, the £1,650 per pair Seconda was originally reviewed some eighteen months ago (HFC 297). Available in cherry, mahogany or piano black, the veneer of the wood finish examples is laid on in a series of wide horizontal stripes, in what's become an Italian speaker tradition. Shaped, curved sides expand immediately behind the front baffle, and then taper to a slightly narrower back, which should help avoid focusing internal horizontal standing waves. The front, back and top are covered in leather, which is a nice touch.

Unusual in an era that finds the overwhelming majority adopting port-loading, this is a sealed-box speaker. Although a port supplies more bass output 'for free', the sealed

box offers superior phase relationships and a gentler ultimate roll-off. Each cone driver – the bass only and the bass/mid unit – operates in its own sub-enclosure, the partitioning giving the vertical panels some extra stiffening

Sourced from Norwegian specialist SEAS, the two main drivers both have 180mm cast alloy frames and 125mm aluminium alloy cones. The tweeter meanwhile has a larger than usual 28mm fabric dome diaphragm.

Floor coupling is unusual though quite effective, with a decent fore'n'aft footprint, hefty 10mm spikes, plus a wide steel stabiliser bar with brass-headed spikes. However, the lack of lock-nuts is a regrettable oversight.

Twin terminal pairs provide an option to bi-wire or bi-amp. They feed to a fairly complex crossover network, with 12dB/octave upper roll-off to the midrange and 24dB/octave high pass feeding the tweeter.

SOUND QUALITY

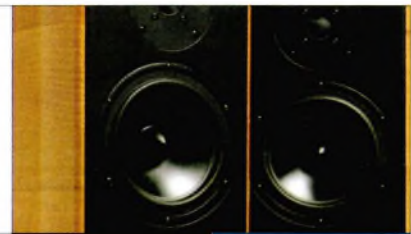
Our new Seconda samples might not have delivered a frequency response as smooth as before, but the sound quality still clearly retained the smooth evenhandedness and fine voicing that is this model's hallmark strength.

Neutrality is impressive, helped by a bass end which is dry, smooth, well extended and essentially free from 'one-note' thickening and if the Seconda doesn't have the most exciting sound dynamically speaking, it is supremely well balanced overall.

The bass end has plenty of weight and power, driving the music along crisply, without overhang or heaviness. The midband neatly judges the line between emphasising detail and becoming aggressive. It's very well voiced and smoother than average, with just a hint of forwardness to project voices well and maintain good low-level intelligibility.

Criticisms are minor and are mostly sins of omission than commission, as this speaker does a rather good job of simply going about its business without drawing attention to itself. The top end is perhaps a shade obvious, and could be sweeter and more transparent, but overall this is an impressively discreet design.

Dynamics could be a little livelier and more invigorating and subtle textures are not particularly obvious. Stereo images are airy, out-of-the-box and well formed, with respectable focus and depth, though transparency and dynamic tension are both a little weak. Beautiful presentation helps justify the price, while the sonic performance vindicates the sealed-box loading. **HFC**



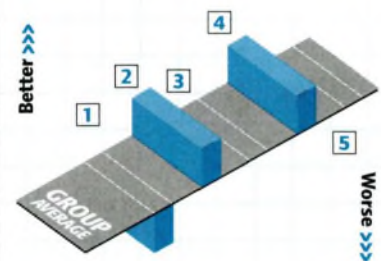
LAB REPORT

Although the Seconda looks exactly the same as the model we reviewed back in issue 297, the measurements do reveal some subtle changes that seem to have occurred over the intervening months.

The Seconda works best well clear of walls. Measured under far-field in-room conditions, the overall frequency balance is mostly well ordered, with good bass extension (-3dB at 20Hz in-room). Although much of the audio band stays within tight +/-3dB limits, unlike the earlier samples there's a significant loss of energy 250-700Hz followed by a slight peak around 800Hz, so the net result is significantly less smooth.

Sensitivity is around average at 87dB, while the amplifier load looks relatively easy to drive, staying above 5 ohms throughout with the main driver/box resonance at 53Hz. Pair matching is again very good, though the impedance around 1.2kHz is somewhat different.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1) Sensitivity >> -20%
- 2) Bass extension >> +20%
- 3) Ease of drive >> 0%
- 4) Overall frequency balance >> +20%
- 5) Response smoothness >> 0%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Sensitivity @ 1m/2.83V	89dB	87dB
Impedance (nominal/minimum)	4/4.2 ohms	7/5 ohms
Estimated bass extension (-6dB)	-	20Hz

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	The Seconda combines an attractive cabinet with nicely judged voicing. The bass is crisp and deep; the midband is open and informative, although the sound might be dynamically more expressive and transparent.
PRACTICALITY ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	



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magazine



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TANNOY DC6T

A floorstanding 2.5-way version of the Best Buy DC6

One of Britain's oldest hi-fi and professional audio brands (albeit now owned by TC Electronic of Denmark), Tannoy first introduced its Dual Concentric drive unit back in 1948 and a variation on this component lies at heart of the company's latest domestic Revolution Signature range.

The RS line-up consists of four stereo pairs and two centre-front models and this £1,199 per pair DC6T is the larger of two pairs of floorstanders. It's a two-and-a-half-way design based on a 150mm dual-concentric main driver, backed up by a cosmetically similar 150mm bass-only driver.

Tannoy's famous dual-concentric driver is a coaxial design, using a horn-loaded tweeter firing through the middle of a bass/mid cone, assisting crossover integration with full off-axis symmetry. This latest variation combines a 150mm alloy frame with flared 115mm doped paper bass/mid cone, crossing over to a 25mm titanium dome at 1.8kHz.

Said drivers are mounted in an attractively shaped, real wood veneered enclosure in either

light oak or a darker 'espresso' finish. The deep grain and matt finish used here makes a rather attractive alternative to the high-gloss surfaces that seems to be fashionable right now.

The 30-litre enclosure is loaded by a front port and the front panel is necessarily wide enough for the drive unit, while the very slim back only just has room for the five terminals. The top and base are flat, but the sides form a quite tight curve, which stiffens the structure, distributes the horizontal standing waves and disperses reflections. Although spikes are included, no separate plinth is supplied.

Four terminals are quite normal for a two-and-a-half-way loudspeaker; the fifth is a Tannoy initiative that allows the main driver chassis to be earthed back to the amplifier to minimise RF interference. Unfortunately, few (if any) cable brands supply a five-conductor speaker cable, so the practical use is limited. The grille is held in place by hidden magnets, avoiding unsightly lugs if it's not used.

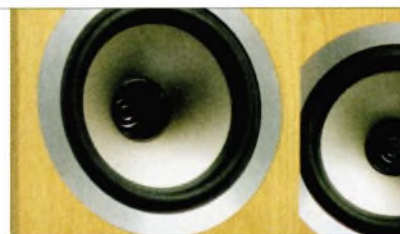
SOUND QUALITY

Whereas the DC6 standmount definitely required close-to-wall bass reinforcement, this T-for-tower variation with its extra bass unit and enclosure volume has ample bass output for operation well clear of walls.

That is true enough, and the DC6T has an impressively even and well extended bottom end, albeit one that's a little lacking in authority, grip and drive. However, the anticipation that such positioning would necessarily result in low midband coloration didn't really turn out to be the case, because the midband is rather over-projected here and not particularly smooth with it either. As a result the speaker delivers lots of detail, especially at modest listening levels and does so with agreeably low box coloration, but it also has a regrettable tendency to sound edgy and aggressive if played loud.

Listening to a live Promenade Concert of Shostakovich 4, with Haitink and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, my notes refer to: "slightly squeaky tendencies", as the presence and/or top end don't sound particularly sweet.

That said, the speaker is encouragingly light on its feet, with good timing and an excellent dynamic range. Speech shows fine intelligibility in spite of a modest degree of timesmear and stereo images are well formed, with good sharp focus. However, despite the attractive presentation at a very sharp price, the sonic whole doesn't quite manage to be more than the sum of the parts. **HFC**

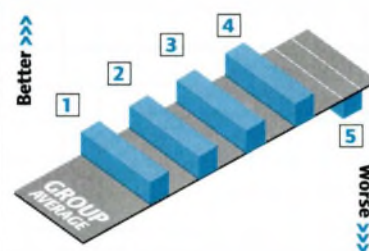


LAB REPORT

Following hard on the heels of our reviews of the Revolution Signature DC6 standmount, because it shares the same bass/mid/treble dual concentric driver, this floorstanding DC6T can be expected to have much in common with its smaller brother. Indeed, where the standmount clearly required some close-to-wall reinforcement to balance up a rather forward broad midband, one naturally expects this Tower version to work similarly well out in free space.

To some extent that's true, as the 'fill in' provided by the extra bass driver looks very effective, low (32Hz) port tuning giving generous bass extension down to 22Hz in-room ref 89dB sensitivity. The amplifier load is not unduly severe, though it does have 4 ohm minima. However, on our DC6T samples the dip around the mid-to-treble crossover zone seemed rather more obvious than with the standmount, which is some cause for concern.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Sensitivity >> +10%
- 2] Bass extension >> +10%
- 3] Ease of drive >> +10%
- 4] Overall frequency balance >> +10%
- 5] Response smoothness >> +10%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Sensitivity @ 1m/2.83V	89dB	89dB
Impedance (nominal/minimum)	8 ohms	6/4 ohms
Estimated bass extension (-6dB)	34Hz	22Hz

VERDICT

SOUND



This compact floorstander has a lovely wood finish and high-class drive units. The bass is deep and even and the midband gives good detail at low levels, but the sound does tend to get edgy when pushed.

PRACTICALITY



BUILD



VALUE



HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE
★★★★★



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WHARFEDALE OPUS 2-1

The Opus range has some very classy ingredients at a sharp price

Over its long history, stretching back some 75 years to the earliest days of hi-fi, Wharfedale has become almost synonymous with high-quality budget speakers, like the small Diamond 9.1 standmount that we reviewed earlier this year. Less well known is that Wharfedale also has a number of more upmarket ranges above and beyond the Diamonds, including elaborate creations like those in the Opus 2 range.

One of five stereo pairs in the Opus 2 line-up, this three-way design is a handsome beast to be sure and its pricetag seems surprisingly reasonable considering the high number of impressive bullet points on the features list.

The most unusual of these, perhaps, is the midrange driver, which in this case is a 75mm soft fabric dome. Such drivers – edge-driven by a very large diameter voice coil and looking a little like giant tweeters – are seldom found in domestic hi-fi speakers, but are well regarded in professional monitoring circles.

The advantages of a dome midrange include exceptionally high power handling and the maintenance of reasonably consistent dispersion across the whole frequency range.

Commensurate disadvantages, however, include the inevitable extra complexity of a three-way, and relatively modest sensitivity.

Viewed from above, the generous and very solidly built boat-shaped enclosure has a slightly convex front and strongly curved sides leading to a very narrow back panel, all of which will help disperse internal reflections and prevent the focusing of horizontal standing waves. Our samples came in piano-lacquered black; lacquered real wood veneer finishes are also available.

Beneath the dome midrange, bass is supplied by a relatively large 200mm drive unit that's equipped with a 150mm woven Kevlar cone and augmented by a large front port. Both dome units have textile diaphragms, the tweeter's being 27mm in diameter. A shaped and extended plinth ensures good lateral stability, and while the very substantial spikes are well founded and look very impressive, only thumbwheel locknuts are provided.

SOUND QUALITY

Don't even think of locating these speakers close to a wall. There's ample bass output when the speakers are clear of walls here, with notable firmness and authority, to the point where the somewhat larger Opus 2-2 (2x200mm) and Opus 2-3 (2x250mm) models would probably have rather too much bass.

Although the tonal balance is essentially impressively smooth and neutral, the overall character is certainly on the bright side, arguably tending to emphasise the presence and treble a little too much. As a result, the Opus 2-1 sounds exceptionally open and brings excellent intelligibility to voices, even at very low listening levels.

The downside is that it does sound a little on the edge and can become a too aggressive when fed with the compressed and poorly mastered recordings that have regrettably become all too common in the iPod era. Paradoxically, in view of the massive boost in power handling promised by that large dome midrange, this means that the Opus 2-1 works best when not played too loudly.

The hefty build and decent bass delivery endows the Opus 2-1 with real authority and impetus and the effectiveness of the cunningly shaped enclosure is reflected in an impressive 'disappearing' trick. While it could be faster, punchier and more dynamic, the firm, solid neutrality alongside a fine freedom from boxiness makes for a thoroughly entertaining experience indeed. **HFC**



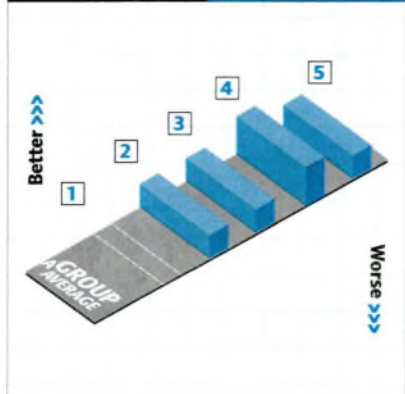
LAB REPORT

The Opus 2-1 delivers a broad overall in-room frequency balance (power response) under far-field conditions that holds comfortably within +/- 4dB limits. It is also impressively smooth along that frequency balance chart.

It is, however, not without certain salient characteristics that are bound to impose themselves on the subjectively perceived balance. The bass region (25-110Hz) is on the strong side, but output is then a little weak 110-900Hz, while the upper midband is delivered as a broad and forward peak centred on 1.7kHz. The treble thereafter is flat and smooth though again a little strong.

Sensitivity is a respectable 88dB or thereabouts, while the load only dips very briefly below 6 ohms. However, the impedance plot itself is rather more complex than might first seem, with a mild resonance at around 220Hz, and the pair match around the port resonance is poor.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Sensitivity >> 0%
- 2] Bass extension >> +10%
- 3] Ease of drive >> +10%
- 4] Overall frequency balance >> +20%
- 5] Response smoothness >> +10%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Sensitivity @ 1m / 2.83V	89dB	88dB
Impedance (nominal/minimum)	6 ohms	8/6 ohms
Estimated bass extension (-6dB)	37Hz	23Hz

VERDICT

SOUND



With its substantial build, the Opus 2-1 represents exceptional material value for money. The sound is firm, solid, smooth and essentially neutral, albeit with slightly forward, bright and edgy tendencies.

PRACTICALITY



BUILD



VALUE



HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE



CONCLUSIONS

Six floorstanding loudspeakers in search of a Best Buy tag... but which one's best?

A The hard part about these *Ultimate Group Tests* (apart from the unpacking, re-packing, running in, cabling up, spiking and de-spiking) is not so much carrying out the reviews themselves, but in the invidious task of awarding Best Buy badges to some but not to others.

That's because there's no such thing as the perfect loudspeaker, not at these prices anyway. In fact poor or seriously flawed loudspeakers are a comparative rarity these days and at a pinch we could be reasonably happy living with any or all of these models,

learning to forgive their various imperfections and enjoying the things that they do well.

But in making the decision to 'badge' some but not all, we're compelled to try and weigh up and compare different attributes that are not really comparable. Are apples better than pears or bananas? It's a silly question because one can enjoy all three, but for different reasons.

Starting with the least costly, the Amphon Helium520 stands out for its sharp price, fine balance, top-notch coherence and great styling, but it's no bass excavator.

The Tannoy DC6T looks a particularly neat and attractive package at a keen price and it certainly ticks all the right boxes. However, no amount of box-ticking can make up for the speaker's basic lack of sonic charm and sweetness.

The redesigned MonoPulse 62S is unusually neat and compact and again has superior coherence, but it's a bit of a lightweight and the top end could have been smoother and less obvious.

It's hard to argue with the Wharfedale Opus 2-1's perceived value, or its powerful bass, but the overall character is on the bright

and light side of neutral and we suspect this could become fatiguing over the long haul.

The Opera Seconda remains and open and engaging charmer, but the fact that our review sample was not quite as good as those we tried eighteen months earlier remains a minor worry.

And the JBL LS 60 remains a bit of a mixed bag, with lovely textures and pin-sharp imaging, but a rather heavy character that lacks some openness.

So, the Amphon, Opera and Wharfedale win Best Buy tags, but all are worth checking out. **HFC**

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NAIM NAC 122X/NAP 150X £1,575
A sophisticated and musically rewarding pre/power combo. Outstanding grip.

CD PLAYERS

CYRUS CD 8 SE £1,100
A radical CD drive delivers a civilised and musically convincing sound.

REGA SATURN £1,298
Top end sweetness and transparency, but the Saturn delivers across the board.

HINTS AND TIPS

- >> Floor-coupling spikes should have tight lock-nuts, but don't over-tighten!
- >> Finding the right place to put the loudspeakers is very important. Do take time and trouble experimenting.
- >> Most valve amps have outputs for 4 and 8 ohm speakers. Try out both.

- >> Moving a speaker from a free space location until it's close to a wall will substantially boost the mid-bass.
- >> Expect speakers to improve steadily over the first 100 hours or so.
- >> Use good speaker cable, if you want your system to perform at its best.

LOUDSPEAKERS AT A GLANCE



MAKE MODEL	Amphon Helium 520	JBL LS 60	MonoPulse 62S	Opera Seconda	Tannoy DC6T	Wharfedale Opus 2-1
PRICE	£1,000	£1,800	£1,195	£1,650	£1,199	£1,500
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
PRACTICALITY	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSION	Sharp styling and fine value for money with excellent voice band coherence.	Wonderful image focus and delicate textures but some heaviness and lack of openness.	Unusually compact with superior voice-band coherence, but a bit lightweight overall.	Fine styling and finish plus very superior voicing, if a shade lacking in warmth.	Lovely finish and fine material value, but midband is rather forward with some coloration.	Great material value and a solid if bright and forward sound; great loudness potential.
KEY FEATURES						
SIZE (WxHxD)	16x104x22cm	22x100x34cm	17x92x22cm	24x102.5x31.5cm	22.6x95x22.5cm	26x100.5x41cm
DRIVER CONFIG	2-way	3.5-way	2.5-way	2.5-way	2.5-way	3-way
MAIN DRIVER SIZE(S)	2x130mm	2x165mm	1x160mm	2x180mm	2x150mm	1x200mm+1x75mm
STAND/FLOOR?	Floor	Floor	Floor	Floor	Floor	Floor
CABINET FINISH	Painted	Lacquered wood/paint	Cloth	Real wood/leather	Real wood	Lacquer
BI-WIRE?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
SENSITIVITY	90dB _G	88dB _A	87dB _A	87dB _A	89dB _G	88dB _A
EST. BASS EXTENSION	28Hz _A	23Hz _G	28Hz _A	0Hz _G	22Hz _G	23Hz _G
IMPEDANCE (NOM/ MIN)	7/5ohms _A	8/6ohms _G	8/6.5ohms _G	7/5ohms _A	6/4ohms _A	8/6ohms _G
OVERALL FREQ. BALANCE	0% _A	-10% _A	-20% _P	+20% _G	+10% _A	+20% _G
RESPONSE SMOOTHNESS	0% _A	-30% _P	-20% _P	0% _A	-10% _A	+10% _A

DEFINITIVE AUDIO



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



- 1. CEC TLOX Belt Drive CD Transport
- 2. Living Voice OBX-RW Loudspeaker in Ebony
- 3. KSL Kondo DAC
- 4. KSL Kondo Neiro Integrated Amplifier

- 5. SME 2012A Turntable with KSL Kondo iOJ Cartridge
- 6. New Audio Frontiers KT66 Legend Integrated Amplifier
- 7. Kore-Eda LLA-1 Control Amplifier & PLA-1 Power Amplifier



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VTA... WTF?

Dear Alan,

A friend of mine said I need to adjust the vertical tracking angle of my record deck for every record I play, but I can't see how I can do this. I use a Rega Planar 3 with an RB300 arm and Elys cartridge. What is vertical tracking and am I damaging my records by not correcting the angle every time?

Tim O'Neill via email

HFC Vertical tracking angle (or VTA) is the angle between the cantilever of the cartridge and the horizontal plane. And technically, if you compare an 180g vinyl pressing with an ultra-thin RCA Dynaflex album from the 1970s, the difference in thickness of the two albums will mean the VTA has to be adjusted both times to be precisely accurate. Those who painstakingly adjust VTA on a disc-by-disc basis feel that the sound gets richer and has a better soundstage as it approaches a notional ideal of 'perfect' VTA. However, very few arms allow precise on-the-fly adjustment of VTA, preferring instead a fit and forget setting that's close enough; the RB300 in its standard guise is one such arm. As long as the top of the tonearm's headshell (and the bottom edge of most cartridges) is parallel to the horizon when playing a record, no damage is taking place and you needn't even think about VTA here.

MAKING A MAC SERVER

Dear Alan,

Your two-part *Understanding Music Servers* feature was reasonably comprehensive... for PC users. I'm taking a radically different route. I plan on using a Mac Mini, with a matching Iomega 750GB hard drive, plugged directly into my Arcam DiVA A90 integrated amplifier and then to a pair of Focal Chorus 816V loudspeakers. Will this work well?

I also have two questions: will the Mac Mini benefit from using an external DAC and if so, which one? Secondly, is there anything akin to Exact Audio Copy for Mac users? I want the server to make music at least as good as a CD player and wondered if there's any difference between WAV or AIFF files? I do not plan on using any compression, even Apple Lossless.

Greg Hartley via email

HFC Your Mac system will work exceptionally well in this context, especially as the Mac Mini is almost noiseless in use. However, it could well do with a DAC upgrade, as the internal D-A conversion process will be letting the side down. The Cambridge Audio DacMagic (reviewed last issue) would be perfect in your system, delivering excellent sound without tilting the overall system cost too heavily. Although not a like-for-like replacement to EAC, Max (www.sbooth.org) is open source, free software for the Mac that allows the user to rip discs either at speed or using error correction (either comparison ripping using CDparanoia). Pillage (www.bratproductions.com) is an even simpler front-end that also uses CDparanoia, although it has yet to be tested with the latest iTunes and requires a US-keyboard set. As both WAV and AIFF are built on

uncompressed PCM data, there should be no difference in audio quality. AIFF is 'native' to Mac platforms and allows iTunes metadata tags, however. Be warned that your no compression plan soon ends up with very full hard disks – your 750GB hard disk will hold just over 1,000 CDs in uncompressed form, but nearer 1,600 CDs in Apple Lossless. Regardless of format used, for safety's sake, you'll need to backup everything you ripped and – if you use iTunes – remember to turn on error correction.



FIRST-FI CHOICE

Dear Alan,

I'm stumped on what to do with regards to buying my first 'proper' hi-fi system. With an unhealthy amount of (no doubt useless) knowledge and no local dealer from which to audition gear, I need to be pointed in the right direction on what to buy. I know this is a bad way of going about it, but I don't seem to have much choice in the matter. Obviously almost anything is going to sound 'unbelievable' compared to the JVC shoebox I've had for what seems like forever. My lounge is 7.5m x 4.5 (granite walled, not plasterboard) with plenty of soft stuff to boot. My musical tastes go right across the board. Pink Floyd, Massive Attack, Brandi Carlile through to classical so it's a broad spectrum of sounds. I've lumped a system together from what I've gleaned from reviews purely to give you an idea on what kind of outlay I am

CREDO REONE

Dear Alan,

I read in the October issue of *Hi-Fi Choice* (HFC 311) that you offered good news to someone needing a speaker repair, under the heading of 'Karma Kan Kure'. You gave some good news to the reader, offering contact details for Recone Labs. I have now been on their website and contacted them direct and am advised that they have shut down the operation due to a huge backlog and moving in a new business direction.

I am looking to get a torn cone repaired on a Naim Credo speaker unit. I am advised that the unit is a 6514 item and a new unit can be bought from Naim, but this solution is cost-prohibitive, hence the need to repair the damaged unit. As Recone appear to have stopped operating, can you suggest any other solutions?

Alternatively, can replacement drive units (non-Naim) be used to replace them?

Paul Nadin via email

HFC Recone labs are not the only game in town. DC Boultons (www.audioloudspeakers.co.uk/boultons.shtml) offer a similar cone repairing option. Unfortunately, dropping one drive unit in place of another is never a simple task. It requires changing both bass drivers and then re-voicing the crossover to bring the tone of the speaker back into some semblance of balance. If you used to build your own loudspeakers and are *au fait* with redesigning crossovers... go for it. Otherwise, leave well alone, because you'll never get things right.

thinking of money-wise. So, would the Cambridge Audio Azur 840A v2 plus matching disc spinner coupled up with Mordaunt-Short Mezzo 6s be a half decent set-up? Or is there something better?

Keith Burford via email

HFC We think your selection is a very fair one, Keith. The Cambridge Audio duo is very good at delivering a well-balanced, exciting sound that works well with a wide variety of genres. The Mezzo 6 loudspeakers are good room-fillers, too. And that's the key issue – with a room the size of yours, you'll need a speaker with a lot of oomph. Our only concern is that – despite the soft furnishings – a large granite box of a room can sound extremely bright and may trap a lot of energy, especially if you have to keep the door closed when playing music.

POD POWER PLUS

Dear Alan,

There seems to be a lot said about the sound quality of the Apple iPod when docked, but not much about how it sounds on the move, which it was originally designed for, of course. I can't get on with earphones, so I have to use 'proper' headphones. I would like to get a decent set of headphones, but the sound of the iPod seems to lack energy and volume, which makes me think it won't justify the upgrade. Is there anything that can boost the volume of the iPod without sacrificing quality? And, if so, what headphones do you recommend? I have a 80GB iPod Classic and only use Apple Lossless.

Mike Pallas via email

HFC We have yet to test the device, but the Graham Slee Voyager portable headphone amplifier might be the ideal option for you. It's about the same size as your Classic (albeit slightly thicker), runs off a 9V battery and gives your iPod a healthy 10dB boost, which is ideal for use with conventional headphones. There's also a company called Headroom, which has two products – the Total AirHead Portable Micro Amp – that you have to import from the USA. As to headphones, we're impressed by the Grado and Sennheiser ranges and many find satisfaction with a pair of Grado SR60 or SR80 or a pair of Sennheiser HD595. If you do a lot of commuting and want to block out the outside world, a pair of closed-back Audio-Technica or Denon headphones could do well, too.

"I can't get on with earphones, so I have to use proper headphones."



ALAN'S TIPS

PLAYING MUSIC THROUGH YOUR PC

The path to audio righteousness on a Mac is relatively straightforward, because there isn't the profusion of freeware available that exists on PC. Nevertheless, there are good, better and best choices to be had on the Microsoft platform.

The simplest option is to go with what's supplied as standard. That means Windows Media Player. If you use WMA lossless or uncompressed WAV files, the performance is pretty good. Apple's iTunes for PC is also free and the default choice for iPod users. It offers virtually identical features to Windows Media Player. Once again, setting the iTunes client software as described in 'Making a Mac Server'; to help increase ripping speed, iTunes (on both PC and Mac) does not error correct discs when ripping by default and this single-handedly helps to seriously undermine the quality of most CD-iTunes transfers. Go to the 'Preferences' box on iTunes, click on the 'advanced' button (a gear icon), go to the importing tab and turn on the 'Use error correction when reading Audio CDs' button. While you are there, change the 'Import Using' choice section from 'AAC Encoder' to 'AIFF Encoder' or 'WAV Encoder'. Pedants could also use the custom settings to match the characteristics of CD audio files (44.1kHz sampling rate, 16-bit sampling size and 'stereo' channels).

It's possible to go a lot further than this. Exact Audio Copy (www.exactaudiocopy.de) takes CD ripping to the extreme. Like MAX for Macs, it allows for full error correction from a disc – far superior to anything that could be played in real-time. Of course, the downside to this is CDs take an extremely long time to rip (sometimes even far longer than the 74 minutes a CD might hold).

Computer audiophiles also praise Foobar2000 as audio player. This Windows XP and beyond based freeware is said to be the most transparent music player around. It can also support Apple's iPod. However, it's not the most human-friendly program to set up, but that makes it extremely popular with the Alpha geeks on the Hydrogenaudio forum.

This only scratches the surface of music replay on a computer. Getting the thing to work noiselessly, hooking up additional storage, backing up and getting past DRM-encoded CDs... that all comes much later.



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AV SPEAKER PACKAGE
KHT1005.2

INFORMATION

The KHT1005.2 is a new version of KEF's compact egg home theatre system. The 5.1 system comes complete with the now iconic egg satellite loudspeakers, a centre channel and the new Kube-1 subwoofer. The satellites and centre channel have an enhanced sound performance and an improved output but the most significant change comes from the introduction of the compact and lightweight Kube-1 subwoofer.

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CINEMA SYSTEM
A102HCS12

INFORMATION

The DMR70 has an input for iPods and MP3 players, upscales normal DVD playback via an HDMI connection. Oh, and don't forget handy features like an integrated FM radio with RDS. The DMR70 is more than a traditional standalone DVD receiver. Built to match Jamo speakers A102 & A400 and subwoofers SUB200 and A400SUB, the DMR70 is the epitome of understated Scandinavian design.

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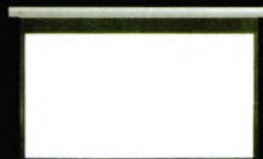
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DM-37DAB

Denon

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M SERIES SCREEN

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10013

Beamax

BANDWIDTH HEADPHONES PXC 350



Sennheiser

INFORMATION

The PXC 350 is a circumaural high-end travel headphone set with NoiseGuard Advance technology for active attenuation of ambient noise. The PXC 350 enables an unprecedented sound experience for people on the move, thanks to its adaptive baffle damping in combination with the patented Duofol diaphragms.

IN-EAR HEADPHONES SE530



Shure

INFORMATION

Shure Sound Isolating Earphones featuring Triple TruAcoustic MicroSpeakers create an expansive soundstage. A dedicated tweeter ensures that highs and mids are incredibly accurate and detailed, while dedicated dual woofers provide the ultimate in balanced, full-bodied bass.

UNIVERSAL REMOTE Harmony 1000



Logitech

INFORMATION

The Logitech Harmony 1000 features a brilliant 3.5" colour touch screen that allows for one-touch activity-based control of even the most sophisticated AVV components. Say goodbye to the wasted time and unnecessary complexity of multiple remotes controlling multiple devices; Logitech's patented Smart State Technology makes it easy!

DAB AND FM RADIO Evoke Flow



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INFORMATION

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TX-SR876
Onkyo



CD PLAYER
The NAD C525BEE is a versatile, high performing, and highly affordable CD player. It offers significantly reduced jitter and improved tracking ability, especially from CD-R and CD-RW discs. It also has welcome programming features and is a great addition to any fledgling hi-fi separates system.

C525BEE
NAD



AMPLIFIER
Roksan have done it again with the new Kandy K2 range. The Kandy K2 Integrated Amplifier is an improvement on the ever popular Kandy LIII amp, offering performance expected of high end amplifiers costing double the price. The K2 brings with it a more accurate, delicate and powerful sound than its predecessor whilst maintaining the same impressive price point.

Kandy K2
Roksan



CD PLAYER
For years Roksan have lead the way in the hi-fi separates market, creating components of outstanding quality at affordable prices. With the new Kandy K2 CD Player they have really stepped things up a notch, improving vastly on the previous Kandy MKIII yet managing to maintain the same, popular price point.

Kandy K2
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INFORMATION

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HIFI RACK
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INFORMATION

Combining high performance with practicality and good looks, the Atacama Equinox Series offers a flexible approach to hi-fi equipment rack design. The Equinox has the unique ability to grow with your hi-fi system by allowing you to begin with a 2 shelf base module, you then simply stack on top individual single shelf modules to create a 3, 4 or even a 5 shelf rack.

Alphason

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INFORMATION

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Music - quality or quantity?

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Music Compression - friend or foe?

A remarkable thing has happened within a few short years. The music industry has become what must be one of the very few, alongside perhaps the food industry, to be driven downwards in relation to quality by consumer demand - and the majority of consumers are not even aware of it!

It is normal for an industry to try and improve on what has gone before. High definition TV's are an obvious upgrade from the previous standard. The computer industry constantly strives to provide faster processing speeds and larger memory capacity. However, it is the crossover of the computer industry with the music industry, the linking of the two, where things have started to go wrong. This is not to fault the computer industry, for speed and user convenience are the selling tools of its trade. Nor is the music industry inherently culpable, although it has largely acquiesced while complaining of lost revenues through illegal downloads. It is consumers that have driven quality down through a deepening, but blind, love affair with the MP3 and AAC formats and the ubiquitous iPod.

Falling Music Sales

I do not believe it is any coincidence that world-wide music sales tumbled in 2007 to their lowest level since 1985 and this is despite an overall far more affluent population than all those years ago. So why put the finger on MP3 & AAC (iTunes default format) and the iPod? It is not that they exist, nor resentment at their undoubted success. It is more the lack of knowledge on the part of consumers in what they are embracing and the hi-fi industry must shoulder its share of the blame. Both of these formats are compressed mediums, with different levels of compression. There is information irretrievably lost and they lack the full dynamic range. In short, they are inferior mediums in comparison to the standard CD format, let alone even higher resolution formats

now available (such as studio quality 24 bit, 96kHz FLAC files). The sad part is that convenience and 'music on the move' has helped to create a demand for these inferior substitutes and, what is even sadder, is that most users are not even aware of what they are missing.

There are still discerning people around who know how exciting and involving music can be, how it can deliver an emotional experience. Twenty years ago there were many hi-fi enthusiasts who enjoyed pursuing quality. It mattered which speaker leads were used, or the quality of the interconnects, or the rigidity provided by speaker stands. These still make a very significant difference but relatively few realise it now. The performing artists, musicians and sound engineers who strive to make the recording quality as high as possible must despair at the current trend.

Quality or Quantity?

When a friend's teenage son bought his first iPod, he was thrilled that it could store 2000 tracks. That this was at a low quality setting with a high degree of compression was not a relevant or indeed a cognitive factor. The maximum download quality for AAC is 320kbps. Most tracks are available at no better than 192kbps but many iPod users legally download at 128kbps, the most popular, or even 64kbps because either that's all that is available, or because they can store a greater number of tracks or, very often, because they're unaware of the difference. The cost is usually the same regardless. If you are jogging and using a cheap pair of in-ear headphones, you probably wouldn't greatly appreciate a high quality recording. But play back through a decent quality hi-fi and all you are doing is amplifying a very poor quality signal and the difference from, for example a full resolution CD (1,411kbps), is huge. The old maxim holds true - rubbish in, rubbish out. The 80 Gigabyte iPod Classic is advertised as holding 20,000 songs (4MB per song). In comparison, a high quality music server will use approximately 500MB to store an average CD (with say 10 tracks) at full

resolution, a ratio of 10 or 12:1. It's no wonder that the music server, also a flexible computer based product, can reproduce music far more faithfully and far more enjoyably and is, therefore, more suitable as a prime listening source. The reality is that a generation is now growing up without recognising the loss and appears to be indifferent to quality, almost as if it's an irrelevance. This may be because so many have not heard the difference. Earlier generations enjoyed listening to 78rpm records until LP's came along. A cheap hi-fi stack system could be enjoyed until CD's came along (although a high quality record deck could, and still does, compete). The point is, once you've heard better, it's difficult to downgrade again.

So where do we go from here when many hi-fi systems feature an iPod docking station as standard? Manufacturers are responding to demand but the wider hi-fi industry appears to have been slow to recognise the danger. If a customer asks for an iPod, or a system with a docking station, most dealers would sell one without hesitation. A specialist hi-fi dealer would probably ensure their customers understood that MP3 & AAC recordings should not be used as a prime listening source through a decent system. That is not what the formats were designed for. If used for

background music and the highest transfer resolution has been utilised, you may find it acceptable, especially for its convenience factor. However, no discerning music lover would use these download recordings as a prime source. There's just too much missing, for all the subtleties, detail and secondary harmonics that really make a difference are lost, and the more demanding and complex the music, the less it can be enjoyed.

Get Expert Advice

Specialist hi-fi manufacturers continue to try to make their products perform to the highest standards in any given price range. Specialist dealers, of which the ones listed on this page are amongst the very best in the UK, know how to choose the products that combine as a superb system and how to get the best out of it. However, it also needs the consumer to get listening again and to demand quality, to seek expert guidance on how to achieve the best performance at home and to have it expertly installed and set up. If there's a price premium over an internet purchase by using a specialist dealer, it's probably a small one but it is undoubtedly worth the difference.



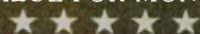
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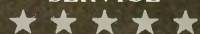
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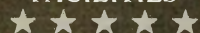
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HI-FI CHOICE BUYER'S BIBLE



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

Reviews you can trust

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

How to use this guide

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

Products that score more than 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.

SOURCE COMPONENTS

- 96 CD PLAYERS
- 98 DVD PLAYERS
- 102 VINYL
- 105 RADIO TUNERS

AMPLIFIERS

- 106 STEREO AMPLIFIERS

LOUDSPEAKERS

- 108 STEREO SPEAKERS
- 111 SUBWOOFERS

ANCILLARIES

- 113 HEADPHONES
- 114 CABLES
- 115 STANDS AND SUPPORTS

DEALER CLASSIFIED

- 116 GLOSSARY
- 117 DEALER GUIDE
- 123 DEALER DIRECTORY

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 75 ohms impedance are useful when connecting the player to a digital recorder or DAC.

WHAT IS OVERSAMPLING/UPSAMPLING?

Oversampling involves multiplying the sampling frequency by a whole number, usually between four and 32, but sometimes higher, and is designed let the DAC to work in a more linear fashion.

Upsampling is where the data stream is stretched out by interpolation and is typically used to refer to large changes in sampling rate such as from 44.1kHz to 192kHz.

CAN I PLAY SACDS ON A NORMAL CD PLAYER?

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

CAN I PLAY DVDS ON A CD PLAYER?

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

TOP BUYS



Rega Apollo £498

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



Marantz SA8003 £700

Just missing our Awards judging for 2008, the high-scoring SA8003 is our current favourite player under £1,000. Playing both CD and SACD, the 8003 is a class act.

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											
	Arcam DVA CD73	450	Neatly built and well-presented player that's especially good at bass and timing, with detail hardly less assured	●	●	●	●				301
	Arcam CD37	1,000	Excellent detail and imaging, neutral tonality and above-average bass resolution do honours to CD and SACD alike	●	●	●	●				310
	Cairn Tornado	850	The Tornado is a full-on experience that shuns compromise and delivers intensely real sound for its price		●	●				●	305
	Cambridge Audio Azur 740C	500	Very flexible, this innovative upsampling player sounds exceptionally neutral and highly informative		●	●	●			●	293
	Cambridge Audio Azur 840C	750	Ultra-civilised sound is not to every taste: rhythm-lovers may find this player frustrating		●	●	●			●	306
	Creek Evo	495	A minute treble lift; otherwise this is a very capable player that offers fine value		●	●	●				285
	Denon DCD-500AE	160	Cheap, well built and good, if slightly soft-edged sound quality			●	●			●	295
	Marantz CD6002	280	A hint of treble unevenness is the only specific flaw: performance is class-leading in most areas		●	●	●			●	301
	Marantz SA8003	700	Classic Marantz sound in a classy and attractive package: Our favourite sub-£1,000 player.		●	●	●				312
	Naim CD5i	875	Its strikingly competent musical performance comfortably exceeds the expectations of an entry-level player			●	●				307
	Quad 99CD-S	650	Revels in big music thanks to fearless presentation: smaller-scale works can lack focus			●	●				291
	Rega Apollo	498	Unless you can't abide top-loaders, check this out: musically it's a highly praiseworthy performer		●		●				285
	Sony SCD-XA3000ES	800	A good, if not truly great, all-rounder with CD and fine multi-channel SACD performance	●	●	●	●	●	●		276
	Yamaha CD-S2000	999	Sophisticated, this is a beautifully controlled, high-resolution player, although SACD is stereo-only	●	●	●	●	●	●		309
ABOVE £1,000											
📌	Audio Research CD5	4,500	Audibly better than most CD players on the market – natural and refined, yet assertive and very dynamic		●	●				●	312
	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
	Cairn Fog 3	1,995	Ergonomically challenged, high energy player with Gallic charm and digital preamp on board		●	●				●	302
📌	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
	Classé CDP-102	3,000	Rich, dynamic CD/DVD player with a full bottom end, impressive dynamics and a luxurious yet revealing balanced		●	●	●	●		●	286
	Cyrus Audio CD 8 SE	1,100	A highly civilised player which can, nevertheless, deal convincingly with raw music		●	●	●				310
	Cyrus Audio 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
📌	EMM Labs CDSA	6,995	Classy, stripped down to basics SACD/CD player with some excellent engineering below decks	●	●	●	●			●	302
📌	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
📌	Leema Antlia	2,495	Musically engaging player that will have you going through your CDs afresh. Balanced connection is best		●	●	●			●	291
	Leema Stream	1,095	The most timely disc player at its price point has tactile imaging and good dynamics, but unusual control system		●		●				306
	Linn Akurate CD	3,985	This highly engaging multifunction non-video player doesn't have huge transparency, but is musically addictive		●	●	●			●	299
📌	Marantz SA-11S2	2,700	Superb value for money, this well-balanced player features various filter settings to customise performance	●	●	●	●			●	304
📌	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
📌	Meridian G0B	2,250	Advanced digital processing with special apodising filter that gives a very clean sound		●	●			●		312
📌	Naim HDX	4,500	The HDX hard disk player represents an entirely new paradigm for high-fidelity replay: Who needs CD players?		●	●	●				311
	Rega Saturn	1,298	Good detail, lively natural bass, and good integration of musical strands without losing their individual character		●	●	●				295
	Roksan Caspian M Series-1	1,250	An exceptionally fine CD player that provides a high-end and musically rewarding performance		●	●					307
	Shanling CD-T1000SE	1,600	Commendably committed player which gets right to the heart of a wide variety of musical styles		●		●			●	306
	Sony SCD-XA5400ES	1,199	Elegant, refined control system and very strong CD/SACD performance. Sound is bold with high resolution	●	●	●	●	●	●		313

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.



EMM Labs CDSA £9,495

Although expensive, the high-end CDSA from Canadian expert EMM Labs manages to redefine the performance of both CD and SACD. A true audiophile piece of kit.

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	T	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					ISSUE NUMBER
				DVD-A COMPATIBLE	SACD COMPATIBLE	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	
UP TO £1,000									
	Arcam DiVA DV135	900	Unchanged looks and stereo-only DVD-A/SACD, but the overall performance is great across all formats. Stunning picture, too	*	●	●	●	●	296
	Denon DVD-1920	250	Respectable (if unexciting) and flexible audio player, but something of a star from its HDMI equipped upsampling video subsystem	*	●	●	●	●	276
	Marantz DV7001	600	Enhanced model based on DV6001, but with various improvements, including superior CD replay capabilities	●	●	●	●	●	296
	Marantz DV7600	600	A mid-market cracker, with sound and picture quality that generally exceeds expectation	●	●	●	●	●	274
	NAD T585	800	Easy to live with universal player that shows clear signs of rejuvenation of the Classic range	*	●	●	●	●	294
	Onkyo DV-SP503E	300	Budget Onkyo universal player is a straightforward Pioneer based implementation, which performs well with audio and video	*	●	●	●	●	275
	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									
EC	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
EC	Meridian G98AH	3,625	Meridian's most widely compatible G-Series DVD player – groundbreaking DVD-Audio replay and a fine CD player too	●	●	●	●	●	265
EC	Naim DVD5	2,565	Naim's first DVD player is a real success, notable for its class-leading sound with CD and (optional) multichannel DVD-Audio	●	●	●	●	●	263
	T+A SACD 1245 R	2,000	Dedicated stereo only/SACD/CD player avoids the usual compromises. It does a limited job, but it does it with fine fidelity	●	●	●	●	●	279
EC	Townshend TA 565 CD	3,000	A universal machine that excels with music and is quite exceptional with good ol' stereo CD	●	●	●	●	●	270

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

TOP BUYS



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.

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Marantz CD6002

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SYSTEM WAS £559.80

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WORTH £450
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AMPLIFIER: £749.95
Cambridge Audio 840A v.2 (Sil/Bik)

CD PLAYER: £749.95
Cambridge Audio 840C (Sil/Bik)

SPEAKERS [PAIR]: £449.95
Mordaunt-Short Mezzo 2

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SAVE £40
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iPod Not Included

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CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DAC MAGIC



WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2008
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 BEST HI-FI CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DAC/MAGIC

"... a powerful, full-bodied yet subtle and driving presentation; one that caters for all types of music equally well... this Cambridge Audio DAC is the best of the bunch"
 - WHF? S&V magazine.

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 - WHF? S&V magazine.

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 - WHF? S&V magazine said of the Mezzo 6.

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 - The Gadget Show on Five of the Mezzo 2

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VINYL

Turntables, cartridges and phono stages

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

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

A fourth element is an amp dedicated to the delicate job of amplifying and equalising the cartridge's insubstantial output. This is called a phono stage and can be found in some integrated amplifiers and preamps, but is



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, 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 £325

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	SPECIFICATIONS				ISSUE NUMBER
				SPEEDS	SUSP SUBCHASSIS	SWITCHABLE SPEED CHANGE	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	
EC	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
	Clearaudio Emotion	985	Beautifully built with open and clean sound emphasising mid and top, but delivering nice timely bass	33/45			●	309
	Clearaudio Champion	1,365	Small, practical and good-sounding, with impressively 'dead' arm. Isolation recommended	33/45			●	268
	Clearaudio Performance	1,940	Ceramic-magnetic bearing spells a surprisingly uncoloured performance. Good arm and cartridge	33/45			●	295
EC	Clearaudio Ambient	4,220	Innovative use of materials leads to a fast, precise and thrilling sound (tonearm extra)	33/45		●	●	271
EC	EAR Disc Master	7,695	Combines new 'no contact' drive technology and high-quality materials to bring state of the art resolution	33/45/78	●	●	opt	276
	The Funk Firm Funk	450	You won't find another turntable at the price that can touch the Funk for dynamics, tone colour or detail	33/45			opt	279
	The Funk Firm Funk V	750	Vector drive brings a refinement to the standard Funk that increases resolution. For high-class analogue sound, it's a killer	33/45		●	opt	284
EC	The Funk Firm Saffire	1,900	Individual design and a sound that's refined and neutral with strong timing and dynamics	33/45		●	opt	309
	Goldring GR2	265	Nicely finished Rega-manufactured deck with RB250 arm and an open, engaging sound quality	33/45			●	266
	Michell Technodec	886	Needs careful partnering but can deliver a very sophisticated result for the money	33/45			●	309
	Pro-Ject Expression II	250	A smooth and engaging turntable with the ability to revel in the glory of vinyl, with upgradable arm cable	33/45		●	●	289
	Pro-Ject RPM 5	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
	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
	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
	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
	Rega P3-24	398	Very competent, uncoloured and musical, much improved by £148 outboard electronic power supply	33/45		opt	●	298
	Rega P5/RB700	698	Combines a great sense of timing with market-leading resolution and a phenomenal tonearm – a hard act to beat	33/45		●	opt	257
	Rega P7/RB700	1,298	A highly capable player that could hold its own in the most exalted company – a vivid and natural performer	33/45		●	opt	257
	Roksan Radius 5/Nima	895	Sophisticated design with accomplished sound quality, excellent imagery and good isolation (acrylic version tested)	33/45	●	●	●	248
EC	SME Model 10A	3,411	Elegant and extremely capable design, tested here with Series V/309 hybrid arm	33/45	●	●	●	195
EC	SME 20/12A	11,133	Brings a calmness and precision to vinyl replay that we have rarely encountered, build quality is second to none	33/45/78	●	●	●	293
EC	Townshend Rock V/Excalibur II	7,000	If you want to hear everything that's on a record then there's no better machine for the job (includes Excalibur II)	33/45	●	●	●	307

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE **PHONO CARTRIDGES**

MM and MC cartridges

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			
				MM	MC	REPLACEABLE STYLUS	ISSUE NUMBER
	Denon DL-103R	200	Adds refinement to basic DL-103, at a price. One of the best rock'n'roll cartridges around		●		285
	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
	Grado Prestige Gold	110	Produces rich, open and expansive music with the minimum of fuss	●		●	235
	Ortofon Rondo Red	325	Delivers detail, power and resolution and makes a good case for its price		●		307
	Ortofon Salsa	200	Despite a touch of midrange coloration, this cartridge really involves the listener with good extension and a clean, agile sound		●		290
	Sumiko Blue Point Spec Evo III	239	High-output MC with refinement at high frequencies and a nimble, articulate and revealing sound		●		270
	van den Hul MC One Special	699	A gorgeous cartridge that's worth the price every time you hear a familiar track in a whole new light		●		235
EC	van den Hul Condor XCM	2,400	A stunning cartridge with stereo imaging, dynamics and detail resolution to die for		●		265
EC	Wilson Benesch Naked Analog	1,450	With its smooth clean highs, transparent midband and nimble bass, this is a lot of performance for the money		●		253

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE **PHONO STAGES**

Phono stages

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				
				MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	AUO GAIN	AUO IMPEDANCE	
	Cambridge Audio 640P	60	An outrageously good bargain that suits budget systems, but can confidently survive upgrades before and after in the chain	●	●			305
	Creek OBH15	220	Practical and highly compatible unit offering fine detail and pleasing, mellow balance	●	●			305
	NAD PP2 phono stage	50	A fine buy for turntable users on a tight budget – open tonality and clarity is distinctly impressive for the money	●	●			245
	Tom Evans Microgroove	400	For dynamics and real bass extension with good tonal colour this is the one to beat. The Plus version (£700) is even better!		●			234
EC	Tom Evans The Groove	1,800	Plenty of detail, excellent imaging and almost flawlessly neutral: a good choice for maximum information retrieval off any LP		●			201
	Trichord Dino/Dino+	498	Relaxed yet resolute with very good image depth and natural balance, not to mention great flexibility	●	●	●	●	234

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

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

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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. However, 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. Sound quality judgements are muddled by 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 £285
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

FM & DAB HI-FI SEPARATES

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIG. STRENGTH METER	ROT. TUNING KNOB	ESQ# NUMBER
FM TUNERS										
	Creek Audio Evolution	285	Sound is detailed, cohesive and extended both tonally and spatially – very classy	FM, M	80					308
	Creek Audio T50	550	Very fine results indeed with precision, polish and insight added to excellent basics	FM, M, L	128					251
	Cyrus FM-X	500	A classic no-nonsense FM tuner that achieves gratifying sonic results. Upgradable with PSX-R power supply	FM	7					283
	Denon TU-1500AE	130	Well attuned to the crowded modern FM band, this tuner produces clear, detailed sound with plenty of gusto	FM, M, L	100					281
	Denon TU-1800DAB	250	There's a little grain on FM, but the decent performance on both bands makes this a great dual-band choice	DAB, FM, M	200					283
EC	Magnum Dyalab MD 90T	1,295	No remote or presets as standard, manual everything and valves... but its sound is simply sublime	FM	opt		opt			257
	Marantz ST7001	300	FM reception could offer a little more detail and insight. DAB is fine, but near-identical Denon 1800 is cheaper!	200						283
	NAD C422	180	Admirably free of roughness or other obvious nasties, with just a slight lack of clarity	FM, M	30					250
	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

SPECS KEY WAVEBANDS Which bands are supported: FM, M – medium wave, L – long wave, DAB – digital audio broadcasting. PRESETS How many stations can be stored in memory. RDS Radio Data System – station names and program titles can be displayed among other facilities (FM only, DAB has more comprehensive display potential). REMOTE CONTROL For the couch potato. SIGNAL STRENGTH METER Useful for setting up an aerial. ROTARY TUNING KNOB An ergonomic alternative to buttons.

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Integrated and pre/power amps



Amplifiers come in two basic forms: integrated and preamplifier (pre) plus power amp. Integrated simply means that both pre and power are in one box. There are definite advantages to separating the 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.

The fundamental of amp/speaker interfacing is power rating and speaker sensitivity. You can drive a high-sensitivity speaker with a 10-watt valve amp, but it takes a 200-watt behemoth to get the best out of speakers which present a difficult load. Although, 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.

Q&A

SHOULD I LEAVE MY AMP ON FOR THE BEST RESULTS?

All audio electronics (including amplifiers) perform better when they are warmed up. To help protect the environment, switch your amp on, at least one hour before listening.

WHAT IS BI-WIRING AND BI-AMPLING?

Running separate cables to the treble and bass/mid terminals on a speaker is bi-wiring. 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.

WHY DO VALVE AMPS HAVE SO LITTLE POWER?

Valve amps are inherently low powered, but when partnered with high-sensitivity loudspeakers, they are quite capable of producing perfectly adequate head-banging levels.

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Integrated amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	PRICE	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	SPEAKER NUMBER
UP TO £1,000									
✓	Arcam DVA A70	500	A smart and practical amp offering good snap and pace, with natural dynamics and good detail	6	MM	●	●	60	289
✓	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
✓	Arcam DVA A90	850	Practical, affordable and impressively flexible amp with a laid-back approach but plenty of insight too	7	opt	●	●	100	303
✓	Cambridge Audio 640A v2	300	Slightly cheap-feeling controls are the only real downside to this powerful and lively little amp	6	●	●	●	75	279
✓	Cambridge Audio Azur 740A	500	Ticks all the boxes for bass, clarity, imaging etc. and invites the listener into the music with uncommon grace	6	●	●	●	100	294
✓	Cambridge Audio 840A v2	750	A chunky powerhouse with features aplenty, this amp revels in loud music, but also offers detail and delicacy when required	8	●	●	●	120	311
✓	Creek Audio Evolution	545	Dynamics can seem understated, but energetic bass and fatigue-free treble make it an enjoyable listen	5	opt	●	●	85	311
✓	Cyrus 6vs2	600	Spunky little amp that reproduces instrumental timbres and acoustic spaces well, with real musical involvement	7	●	●	●	40	293
✓	Denon PMA-700AE	250	One of a growing number of new low-cost amps, it offers good timing and analysis at up to moderately high volume levels	4	MM	●	●	50	284
✓	Marantz PM7001KI	550	A self-effacing amplifier that serves the music admirably with fine bass, sweet treble and unforced detail	5	MM	●	●	70	289
✓	Musical Fidelity X-T100	899	By separating amp and TRIPLE-X power supply, this deceptively powerful valve-sporting amplifier is both enticing and musical	3	●	●	●	70	288
✓	Naim Audio Nait 5i	750	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
✓	Onkyo A-933	500	Puts the music first, with sound that delivers the basics correctly but above all involves the listener	5	●	●	●	80	278

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

Integrated amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000									
	Pioneer A-A9	600	Takes on the mantle of the legendary A400. Not as cuddly, but very resolute and revealing for the money. Has USB input	4				80	296
	Unison Research Unico P	795	Sound belies indifferent measured performance with good detail, balance and flowing melodic quality	5	MM			50	293
	Vincent SV-236	999	Valve hybrid whose sound is as idiosyncratic as its styling, short on neutrality but high on sparkle	6				100	295
ABOVE £1,000									
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
	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
	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
	Creek Destiny	1,100	A highly assured performer that doesn't superimpose its personality on the music	6				100	286
EC	Jadis Orchestra DiP	2,995	A smooth, refined, yet dynamic-sounding tube amplifier with the added 'novelty' of an iPod dock	5				40	313
	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
	Mystère ia11	1,250	Small, deceptively powerful integrated valve amp with a crisp, pacy sound	4				40	302
	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 Audio SuperNait	2,400	Serious communicative ability meets convenience in this sophisticated and powerful integrated design	6				80	294
	Pathos Classic One MK3	1,535	An attractive amp offering a beautiful musical presentation with good tonality and detail	5				70	305
	Primare I30	1,500	A smooth, sophisticated yet agile performer, and beautifully built too	6				100	267
	Pure Sound A30	1,100	Valve integrated, with the accent on music rather than rhythm. Needs more inputs, though	3				30	298
	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
	Unison Res. Unico Secondo	1,200	Very good detail and coherence. Tonality is natural, imaging precise and deep, and dynamics are wide and enforced	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
	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 BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE **STEREO AMPLIFIERS** *continued*

Pre/power amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				PRE-AMPLIFIER	POWER AMPLIFIER	LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	POWER OUTPUT (W)
UP TO £2,000									
	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
	Cambridge Audio Azur 840E/840W	2,800	Enterprising technology delivers a pre/power combo that always sounds detailed, composed and controlled			8	opt	200	309
	Croft Precession I/Polestar I	1,400	Compact pre/power combo with battery preamp and hybrid power, with freedom from timesneer, bass could be firmer			6		25	290
	Cyrus Pre Vs2/6 Power	1,000	Pre offers stunning resolution and feature count for the money and power is subtle, open and musical					50	290
EC	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
	Rotel RC 06/RB-06	598	A capable and surprisingly powerful-sounding combination which offers real value			5		70	285
	Russ Andrews HP-1/PA-1	1,198	Simply featured, but sounds appealingly realistic and solid. Highly capable in all areas design			2		50	303
ABOVE £2,000									
	Arcam C31/P38	2,050	Very civilised sound, in the best possible way. Well featured and smartly built			7	opt	100	308
	Border Patrol Control Unit	2,995	Bluff looking valve preamp, with one of the most neutral yet dynamic sounds around			5	opt		277
	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	Bryston BP26 DA/28 SST	5,500	Bryston's top preamp is now a serious competitor. The power amp reveals a lot of signal and serious grunt			6	opt	100	278
EC	Chord Prima/Mezzo 140	6,100	Small, muscular, beautifully made and styled and sounds like a dream			5		120	269
EC	Classé CP-700/CA-M400	13,350	Pre plus mono power combo with superb build, huge power and enormous flexibility. Sounds stunning, too			6	opt	400	293
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
	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	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	Hvland HP-100/RADIA	12,745	Uncommonly musical valve/transistor hybrid transcends stereotypes, one of the genuine high achievers			9	opt	125	250
EC	Krell FPB 700cx	14,998	Reference class amplifier may represent overkill in many systems, but when no compromise is called for, this is it					700	234
EC	Marantz SC1 1S1/SM-11S1	5,300	Preamp and power amp duo delivers high resolution and is consistent with different loudspeaker loads			6		220	304
	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

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.

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 HI-FI CHOICE BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE **STEREO SPEAKERS**

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000										
	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
	Acoustic Energy Aegis Neo 3	370	Pretty, neutral floorstander sounds open with wide dynamic range and good bass weight	20,90,5,24	☞	A	24	●		294
	Acoustic Energy Aelite 3	750	Wood-veneered all-rounder has exceptional neutrality with deep smooth bass	20,103,39		A	22	●		292
	Acoustic Energy AE1 Classic	845	Sharply priced classic replica has a beautifully balanced midband, wide dynamic range and little boxiness	18,295,255		A-	45	☞		283
	Amphion Ion L	750	Sharp styling, fine mid/treble coherence and a sweet treble, but less happy bass alignment in test room	162,32,6,265		A	40	☞		310
	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
	Aurousai A1	450	Single-driver system is coloured but wonderfully coherent and very effective at communicating emotions	20,5,36,27		A	40	●		299
	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
	Bowers and Wilkins DM303	180	Chunky looking and lively sounding, with deep bass, a fine midband and a restrained top end	30,33,23		A	23	☞		226
	Bowers and Wilkins CM1	500	Luxury miniature has neutral, laid-back sound, with low coloration, fine imaging but weak dynamics	16,5,28,28		A-	40	☞		279
	Bowers and Wilkins 683	899	A fine all-round performer with high-class drivers at a very realistic price	20,99,34	☞	P	20	●		304
	Bowers and Wilkins 705	900	Deft, delicate and delightful, if a little bass light, with clever enclosure and driver engineering	22,42,29		A	35	☞		253
	DALI Ikon 6	899	Needs care with setup, but rewards you with impressively transparent and almost obsessively detailed sound	19,100,33	☞	A	37	●		271
	DALI Ikon 7	999	Bulky vinyl floorstander has high sensitivity and a bright sound with superior coherence, delicacy and transparency	20,114,34	☞	A+	22	●		275
	DALI Monitor 1	1,000	Beautiful miniature with advanced drivers sounds marvellously coherent with fine vocal expression	16,32,24		A	40	●		296
	Dynaudio 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
	Epos M5	349	Gorgeous miniature works well close to wall. Could be smoother but communicates with authority	18,33,21		A-	40	☞		269
	Epos ELS 303	399	Midband is impressively smooth, even and coherent, but the sound lacks some dynamic grip and top end detail	18,85,20		A-	28	☞		273
	Epos M12.2	449	A true classic standmount with lovely presentation, fine sound balance, superior coherence and low coloration	20,37,25		A-	40	●		265
	Focal Chorus 706V	369	Advanced drivers deliver a smooth, even, overall balance with healthy dynamic expression and tension	22,39,25		A	30	☞		307
	Focal Chorus 816 V	1,000	Fine, warm balance, superior dynamics, and a sweet top end, but could be smoother	28,100,375	☞	A+	20	☞		288
	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
	JBL Studio L880	700	Good value floorstander with neutrality, massive headroom and plenty of punch. Could be more transparent	22,99,37		●	A	25	●	275
	KEF iQ3	280	Snapely, vinyl-covered standmount has lively dynamics and fine imaging, but could be smoother and sweeter	22,37,33		A+	40	●		284
	KEF iQ9	800	Snapely and solid floorstander has wide bandwidth and dynamic range with superior neutrality and sensitivity	22,94,33		●	A	25	☞	273
	Mission élan e34	400	A return to form for Mission with a pacey, vibrant sound matched to good looks	35,96,34		●	A+	48	●	298
	Monopulse 42A	995	Uniquely different in style and sound, midband time coherence is magnificent but treble is too restrained	26,110,25		●	A+	28	●	271
	Monitor Audio BR2	200	Good looking standmount has a muscular sound with superior coherence	18,5,35,25		A-	30		●	294
	Monitor Audio BR5	400	Not the best dressed in its class, but detailed, bold sounding, good value and an easy electrical load	17,85,25	☞	A-	36	☞		293
	Monitor Audio GS10	800	More neutral tonally than some recent MAs. High-quality stereo design which takes up little room and is easy to drive	20,36,27		A-	40	☞		284
	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
	PMC DB1i	825	Could be more neutral, but a very effective musical communicator with fine warmth and sweet treble	15,5,29,234		A+	30	●	●	310

SPECS (BY 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 (WxHxD)	FLOORSTANDER	EDGE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM Hz?	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
<input type="checkbox"/>	PMC TB2+	795	Classy transmission line standmount has superior midband, restrained presence and a bright clean top end	20,40,30		A	28	✳	275	
<input type="checkbox"/>	ProAc Tablette Ref Eight	699	Stunning standmount with electrostatic-like imagery. Its Signature brother costs £200 more and is even better!	15,27,23		A+	40	✳	267	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Q Acoustics 1010	99	Neatly styled miniature has limited bass and power handling but fine midband voicing at a very sharp price	15,21,5,19,5		A	48	●	286	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Q Acoustics 1050	330	Great value, the sound lacks smoothness but has fine dynamics and impressive transparency	19,5,97,5,30	✳	A+	28	●	284	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Quadral Pico	849	Could be more muscular, but neutral and open with spacious imaging and little coloration	19,34,26		A-	30	✳	292	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rega R1	298	Cute baby sounds busy, coherent and involving, if a touch thin. Sweet and delicate treble with even bass	15,32,24		A	50	✳	269	
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tannoy Mercury F4	350	Floorstander has an engrossing sound with good dynamics and a warm, restrained output	20,5,97,29	✳	A+	24	✳	294	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tannoy Revolution DC6	900	Pretty compact standmount likes wall loading, delivering a lively even bass and smooth coherent midband	23,36,5,23		A	40	✳	307	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Triangle Antal Esw	995	Smoother than its predecessors, with a beautifully balanced bass and midband, though the top end is uneven	20,108,34	✳	A	20	●	288	
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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										
<input type="checkbox"/>	A2T Mezzo	2,000	Seamless overall coherence, with persuasive monitoring capabilities. Sounds a little mid-forward. Top could be sweeter	27,5,40,26		A+	40	✳	281	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Amphion Prio 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	
<input type="checkbox"/>	ALR Jordan Classic 5	1,200	Slim, laid-back floorstander has sweet sound with fine coherence, imaging and dynamic range	17,99,26	●	A	28	●	275	
<input type="checkbox"/>	ALR Jordan Note 3	1,350	Costly but clever; adjustable ABR gives much of the weight of a floorstander with the agility of a standmount	245,37,31,5		A	26	●	288	
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Audio Physic Spark 3	1,499	Classy and discreetly laid-back floorstander has delightfully neutral balance and surprising bass weight	15,98,22	✳	A+	27	●	271	
<input type="checkbox"/>	AVI ADM9	1,000	Active mini-monitors that are exceptionally accurate and dynamic, and they give good iPod, too	20,30,26		ACT	60	●	301	
<input type="checkbox"/>	AVI Duo	1,299	Sophisticated floorstander, a natural partner for AVI's electronics. Unusually clean and honest musical presentation	19,77,28	✳	A	50	●	280	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Bowers and Wilkins 805S	1,600	Classy standmount with excellent coherence and imaging. Can sound laid back but otherwise a real delight	24,39,33		A	25	✳	271	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Bowers and Wilkins 802D	8,000	Great timing, superior dynamics and a sweet top end all enhance musical communication. Makes sweet music	37,115,56		A	<20	●	267	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Dynaudio Focus 220	1,850	Cleverly tapered floorstander has a brilliantly smooth, neutral balance and very sweet treble. Could be more dynamic	20,5,98,29,5	●	A-	<20	●	281	
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Focal Chorus 816WSE	1,399	The W cone treatment makes some of the qualities associated with Focal's high-end models more competitive	99,8,28,2,37,5	●	A+	39	●	308	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Focal Chorus 836V	1,549	Bulky, sharply priced three-way could be prettier. Has good bass with genuine grip, but top could be sweeter	28,115,38	●	A	28	●	290	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Focal Electra 1027 Be	4,000	Outstanding mid and top with fine delicacy and low coloration, but lacks some bass grip and drive	26,5,111,35	●	A-	25	✳	276	
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Gamut Phi5	2,550	Lovely and discreet floorstander has excellent sound and several very clever engineering touches	17,100,24	✳	P	20	✳	305	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Guru QM10	1,595	A very clever close-to-wall standmount with fine imaging, that sounds a lot bigger than it looks	30,25,2,23,2		A	40	●	313	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	KEF Reference Model 2012	3,500	Very classy but costly three-way standmount with much improved Uni-Q; could be more transparent	25,42,41		A	30	●	298	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Kudos Cardea C1	1,450	A very pretty compact standmount with a delightfully subtle and delicate sound quality	20,35,27		A	40		304	
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MartinLogan Source	1,599	Careful install needed, but capable of remarkable transparency at an extremely competitive price	24,120,37	●	A	42	✳	303	
<input type="checkbox"/>	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	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Monopulse 82	2,495	Could be more neutral, but excellent coherence, lively dynamics, fine imaging and a wide dynamic range	27,110,25	●	A-	<20	●	281	

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ACOUSTIC
ENGINEERS



Our favourite 🏆 BEST BUY 👑 EDITOR'S CHOICE STEREO SPEAKERS continued

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				SIZE WxHxD (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	BASE OR FRAME	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL
🏆	Monitor Audio PL300	5,500	Completely new level of sophistication from a brand best known for mainstream, cost-effective designs	41,111,47	👑	A-	28	👑	301
🏆	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
🏆	Neat Elite SE	1,499	Smooth and natural performer with notably expressive midband. Fine voice articulation and unusual sweetness	20,90,18	👑	A	25	👑	267
🏆	Neat 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
🏆	Opera Callas	2,195	Technically innovative multi-tweeter system, this is a grown up and articulate performer	23x37 5x34	👑	B	32	👑	311
🏆	Opera Seconda	1,295	Classy cabinetwork plus beautifully judged neutrality with crisp, clean and deep bass	24,102,53,15	👑	A-	20	👑	297
🏆	PMC Wafer 2	1,650	Clever 'hang-on-wall' speaker has minimal sonic compromises. Smooth midband delivers impressive stereo imaging	33,5,57,5,10	👑	A+	45	👑	285
🏆	PMC FB1i	1,950	A floorstander that boasts impressive bass extension and a smooth sweet top end	20x100x30	👑	G	20	👑	311
🏆	PMC GB1i	1,330	Pretty little floorstander has great class with fine delicacy and sweet detailing	15,5,87,23,4	👑	A	30	👑	306
🏆	PMC OB1i	3,200	This floorstander delivers a smooth overall balance with wide bandwidth and dynamic range	20,102,53,25	👑	A	20	👑	311
🏆	Quad ESL 2805	5,000	Uniquely wonderful natural realism, exceptional imaging, coherence and low level detailing	70,107,38,5	👑	A-	45	👑	294
🏆	Rega R7	1,498	Super-slim and super-smooth floorstander has fine agility with a slightly bright overall character	27,98,35	👑	A	25	👑	271
🏆	Rega R9	2,498	This subtle, laid-back but very informative performer has a very superior dynamic range, especially in the bass	17,103,39	👑	A	25	👑	271
🏆	Revel F32	3,200	Meticulously balanced, tonally neutral design makes for a taut, well disciplined sound	22,105,39	👑	A	20	👑	256
🏆	Revel M22	1,800	A remarkably clean and revealing speaker with superb tonal and microdynamic capabilities	22,37,30	👑	A-	48	👑	274
🏆	Roksan Caspian FR-5	2,000	Sharp looking speaker sounds exceptionally open and lively without aggression. Could be warmer and richer	20,100,25	👑	A	22	👑	290
🏆	Ruark Talisman III	1,499	No bass demon, but a sophisticated and agile speaker epitomising Ruark's design ideals	22,84,31	👑	A	22	👑	259
🏆	Sonus Faber 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
🏆	Sonus Faber Minima Vintage	2,150	Easy, graceful sounding compact is a natural for acoustic material at moderate volume levels	20,33,27,5	👑	A-	55	👑	312
🏆	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
🏆	Tannoy Glenair 10	2,999	With a 250mm dual concentric driver this is a generously proportioned, highly engaging speaker for a good price	36,100,35	👑	A+	38	👑	295
🏆	Totem Model 1 Signature	1,595	Expensive, but very seductive miniature delivers a beautifully smooth and balanced midband	17,31,23	👑	A	35	👑	277
🏆	Triangle Genese Quartet	1,995	Great material value and a solid all round sonic performance with great loudness potential	23,117,37	👑	A	25	👑	302
🏆	Triangle Celius Esw	1,395	Not the smoothest sound around, but has great vigour and enthusiasm, plus good scale and weight	20,117,34	👑	A	22	👑	277
🏆	Triangle Magellan Concerto	14,750	New 'sw2' version is less immediate than its predecessor, but it's easier to live with and remains highly entertaining	60,160,45	👑	A-	32	👑	290
🏆	Usher Compass CP-6381	2,500	Lots of speaker for your money, with plenty of deep bass, unusual styling and massive build	35,127,65	👑	A	20	👑	270
🏆	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
🏆	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
🏆	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
🏆	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
🏆	Yamaha Soavo 2	1,200	Cunningly crafted standmount with a beautiful balance that always sounds lively, open and involving	22,38,35	👑	A	28	👑	296

Our favourite 🏆 BEST BUY 👑 EDITOR'S CHOICE SUBWOOFERS

Bass speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			
				SIZE WxHxD (CM)	POWER (W)	BASS FROM (Hz)	ISSUE NUMBER
🏆	B&W PV1	950	Gorgeously styled sub shakes the air but not the floor, delivering a very clean sound with negligible coloration	29,34,35	500	20	259
🏆	B&W ASW850	2,000	Does all the things subwoofers should do with music and movies alike, but transparently and seamlessly	53,56,52	1,000	18	246
🏆	Eclipse TD725sw	2,700	Delivers solid meaningful bass, but with unusual tunefulness, speed and articulation	52,47,50	500	40	287
🏆	Monitor Audio ASW100	300	For the price, this compact subwoofer performs particularly well	32,32,34	120	27	225
🏆	REL 305	795	Landmark mid-price sub, works particularly well with low crossover frequency, looks great too	32,36,34	300	25	284
🏆	REL Stampede	550	Few subs at this price match the Stampede's subtlety and ease of integration. Much more hi-fi than AV	28,40,29	100	18	257
🏆	REL T1	595	Standard setter at the price; flexible, easily set up and packs quite a punch	36,40,420	300	25	291
🏆	REL Strata 5	700	Highly musical sub that integrates well but the REL Stampede offers near-identical performance for less money	32,46,33	150	18	257
🏆	REL Storm III	900	Excellent sub with powerful, detailed and deep bass. Comprehensive facilities, including flexible filter adjustment	42,62,33	150	18	225
🏆	REL Storm 5	1,000	Well engineered, good bass depth, appropriate for mixed hi-fi & home cinema/multichannel systems	34,52,37	200	15	267
🏆	MartinLogan Dynamo	449	Refined, compact sub brings established MartinLogan virtues to a new price and size point	29,35,32	200	25	301
🏆	Velodyne SPL-800R	699	Powerful, highly configurable sub with auto setup feature and attractive, compact packaging	26,27,33	1,000	28	286
🏆	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

SPECS KEY: SIZE WxHxD (CM) Width, height and depth of one cabinet in centimetres. POWER (W) How many watts the onboard amplifier of active models delivers. BASS FROM How low the sub goes, the smaller the number the deeper the bass.

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value

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HEADPHONES

For your ears only



Headphones come in several varieties and some are designed for particular usage. The majority of 'cans' use dynamic cone and coil-type drive units and can be used with anything from a personal stereo to a dedicated amplifier. Other types also exist, most significantly electrostatics that use a charged panel membrane to produce a distinctly refined sound. These are supplied with their own dedicated amplifiers, which tends to increase the price.

Cans are split into several types. There are open and closed-back designs, the latter being

best for noisy (or noise sensitive) environments as they minimise leakage and intrusion. Open-back types tend to have a more open, less 'in-head' sound. There are also three variants of earpad design: circumaurals enclose the ear and press on your head, supra-aurals press on the ear and intra-aurals sit in the ear and are particularly popular with personal stereo users.

Getting the best from your cans

Getting a good result with headphones is not

quite as straightforward as it should be. Merely plugging them into the output on your CD player or amp will not give particularly engaging results unless you are very lucky. If you are planning on serious listening, invest in a dedicated amp – the increase in dynamics is not in the least bit subtle. A variety of models are made and prices start at around £80 for a QED, a little more for designs from, say, Creek or Musical Fidelity. And if you're really into cans, look up the valve-powered Earmax.

Our favourite HEADPHONES

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Stereo headphones

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUMAURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK	WT (g)	3.5MM JACK ADAPTOR	ISSUE NUMBER
	AKG K270 Studio	129	Pro oriented design which is very transparent and great with acoustic material						270		230
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	AKG K1000	650	Neutral, analytical and completely out of the head sound, suitable for connection to speaker outputs only						270		244
	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	230	Combines musical involvement with a high degree of analytical virtues. Very comfortable						205		312
	Denon AH-D2000	250	Among the best closed-back headphones we've heard and very fine by any standards						350		309
	Denon AH-D5000	500	Sound is comparable with good open-back models, while isolation both inward and outward is useful						320		312
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	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
	Sennheiser PXC450	299	Noise-cancelling model: as good as it gets for making the most of listening in planes, trains and automobiles						240		302
	Sennheiser HD650	330	Clear and detailed, with very natural tonality through bass and midrange and just a little treble coloration						275		312
	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
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Stax SRS-2020 Basic Sys. II	349	Luxury option at its price, but the sound delivery is five-star quality all the way						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.

Equipment Racks

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Equipment Racks

CABLES



Wires to hook your system together



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

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

or can be fitted with screw or solder-on types.

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

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

Our favourite CABLES

 BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Interconnects and speaker cables

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				ISSUE NUMBER	
				STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER		DIGITAL CABLE TYPE
ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS									
 	Atlas Questor	70	Very open and informative at high and mid frequencies, with slightly dry bass. Imaging particularly fine	●	●	●			295
 	Audioquest Sidewinder	45	A lively and detailed cable, with fine tonality and excellent rhythm. Slight added upper-bass warmth does little to detract	●	●	●			297
 	Black Rhodium Prelude	80	Practical and sensibly priced all-rounder that seems happily compatible with a wide range of kit	●	●	●			293
 	Black Rhodium Coda	150	Superb bass and excellently neutral and detailed midrange; treble generally sweet with occasional slight constriction	●	●	●	●		299
 	Black Rhodium Concert	255	This DCT cable from the Polar range gives a distinctively dark timbre, rich in detail, with low subjective noise	●	●	●	●		270
 	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
 	Clearer Audio Copper-Line Alpha	50	Sounding like something a good deal dearer, this cable offers near high-end detail and seems highly compatible too	●	●	●	●		295
 	Clearer Audio Silver-Line	244	Complex, well-screened cable which offers good sound all round with exceptional bass – at a price!	●	●	●	●		279
 	CrystalCable Piccolo	260	Thin cable, but tougher than it looks, Piccolo has some qualities of a solid core type generally – notably resolution, focus and articulation	●	●	●	●		294
 	Kimber Timbre	118	A very neutral cable that will complement even very upmarket systems	●	●	●	●		312
 	Monster M350i	45	Few cables at this price reveal so much about the recording space. Clear treble, too	●	●	●	●		281
 	Monster M1000i	200	Very capable, with only a hint of bass dryness to set against excellent results elsewhere	●	●	●	●		284
 	Nordost WyreWizard Dream	95	Slight lack of precision in extreme treble, otherwise detailed and neutral with authoritative bass	●	●	●	●		303
 	Oehlbach NF214	63	The bass is a matter of taste, but suits many smaller speakers. Very good mid and treble	●	●	●	●		281
 	Profigold PGA3000	60	Not the ultimate for lovers of clinical precision, its character is engaging and detail and extension are good	●	●	●	●		299
 	Supra EFF-1X	77	Lively-sounding cable which maintains a high level of detail and neutrality Musically, a great all-rounder	●	●	●	●		306
 	Townshend Isolda DCT100	99	Sound has a particularly enjoyable cohesion and naturalness that makes for a great listener involvement	●	●	●	●		312
 	van den Hul Integration Hybrid	125	Bass is nothing remarkable, but mid and treble are outstandingly open and clear: very transparent	●	●	●	●		306
 	van den Hul The Wave	100	Generally neutral, with a hint of upper-bass richness: images seem to reside slightly further away than most	●	●	●	●		312
DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS									
 	Atlas Compass	50	Slight improvement in detail over giveaway cables, plus distinctly more tuneful bass and more open treble, make this fine value	●	●	●	●	E	289
 	Clearer Audio Silver-line	125	Very satisfying performance with finely etched detail and sweet treble	●	●	●	●	E	278
 	Supra AnCo	80	This cable can give a useful fillip to a good transport/DAC combination, even in a high-end context	●	●	●	●	E	304
 	Wireworld Starlight 5	90	Clear gains in detail and imaging precision are this cable's main strengths: good value and near-high-end performance	●	●	●	●	E	279
SPEAKER CABLES PRICE-PER-METRE									
 	Atlas Hyper 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
 	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
 	Chord Silver Screen	14	Screened speaker cable with excellent treble, but just a little light in the bass at times	●	●	●	●		310
 	CrystalCable Piccolo	1,480	A chip off the old block, this speaker cable has a similarly fast, fluid and subtle sound	●	●	●	●		302
 	Kimber 8PR	12	A cable that really enjoys the music, also admirable for the levels of analytical detail it allows through: Excellent value	●	●	●	●		299
 	Monster MCX-1s	8	Notable for its bass, which is perhaps a touch overdone at times but could be a good foil to small speakers: Good mid and treble	●	●	●	●		280
 	Nordost Heimdall	162	Alternative to Valhalla, silver plated, micro-monofilament construction, low coloration, hi-res and suitable for exacting systems	●	●	●	●		278
 	OED Silver Anniversary XT	5.50	Full bass and nicely detailed treble combine with good imaging – a budget bargain	●	●	●	●		276
 	OED X-Tube XT300	10	A natural and well controlled sounding cable that's cost effective for mid-priced systems	●	●	●	●		234
 	Supra Sword	116	Zero inductance construction, medium resolution cable that has an excellent midband and is fundamentally musical	●	●	●	●		287
 	Townshend Isolda DCT	50	Cryogenically treated 'impedance matched' cable with stabilising components added: great sound all round	●	●	●	●		241
 	van den Hul The Bridge	6	Better bass than treble, with good detail though a touch of constriction at times	●	●	●	●		291
 	Wireworld Soislice 5 ²	45	Rather bulky and awkward, but performance amply justifies it with superb bass solidity	●	●	●	●		310

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	SPECIFICATIONS					
				HEIGHT (CM)	TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)	WELDED	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Alphasound A5-G	399	Nice looking, very solid and practical with a pretty well balanced sound, but lacks a little detail	80	66,46		5	Glass	247
	Atacama Equinox	280	Stable, modular design with style. Excellent bass transients and a fresh design concept	81	50,50	●	4	Glass	217
	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	57	46,35		3	MDF	302
	Custom Design InertMatt	70	Isolation platform that can improve the sound of hi-fi components, but is a bit small for most kit		40x25			Metal	311
	Custom Design Icon Signature	330	Gorgeous wood and glass looks: sound lacks a little detail, but is nicely lively		56,37		4	Glass	286
	Custom Design XL4	380	Simple construction pays off in smart looks. Sound contribution is minimal and largely harmless		60,42		4	Glass	293
	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	57	48,39		4	Glass	302
	Custom Design Icon 400	600	Beautifully built, conveniently adjustable and with little sound of its own, a very classy rack	75	57,41		5	Glass	263
	Milty FoculPods	19.50	A set of four isolation pads that are amazingly useful for damping vibration and improving sound	2	5			Polymer	311
	Partington Minim	420	Adds its own character to the benefit of rock, most particularly, but slightly to the detriment of acoustic sounds	78	45,37	●	5	Glass	302
	Quadraspire Q4 Reference	480	Excellent performance from the school of wobbly racks. Natural sounding and plenty of detail	51.5	49,39.5		4	MDF	217
	Russ Andrews Torlyte Platform	130	This unassuming platform can be a godsend, cleaning away mid/treble muddle from the sound	8	48,36		1	Torlyte	302
	Russ Andrews Torlyte Rack	988	Attractive modular system made of very light Torlyte: a touch of added warmth is its only vice	68	54,49		4	Torlyte	240
	Townshend VSSS	1,300	The Seismic Sink goes all glassy and attractive, yet retains the same excellent vibration-killing sound quality	76	35,50		4	Glass	273

Our favourite SPEAKER STANDS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Speaker stands

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				HEIGHT (CM)	TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)	FILLABLE	WELDED	NUMBER OF LEGS	ISSUE NUMBER
	Anvil Sound Display Stand	226	A variety of smart looks available – sound is clear and precise	50	20,17	●		1	293
	Custom Design SQ402	100	More a range than a model, capable of fine results especially with Acoustic Steel top plates	62	18,16.5	●		2	299
	Custom Design RS300	110	An attractive stand whose lack of coloration and ringing suits it to high-resolution systems	56	16,5,18	●		1	281
	Custom Design SQ404	200	Robust four-pillar design gives very low coloration and maximises performance of speakers great and small	61	18,16.3	●		4	283
	Partington Ansa 60	99	Elegant flat-packer 'disappears' sonically; restrained but neutral and coherent	62	18,15	●		4	232
	Partington Dreadnought BS	295	Sound is better defined in almost all areas than cheaper, slimmer stands can offer	62	17,23	●		5	309
	Partington Heavi II	399	Robust to the nth degree, this stand helps produce very taut, precise bass and detailed upper frequencies	53	31,22	●		6	287
	Russ Andrews Torlyte	299	Very relaxed sound from this metal-free design, with excellent imaging too	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.



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.

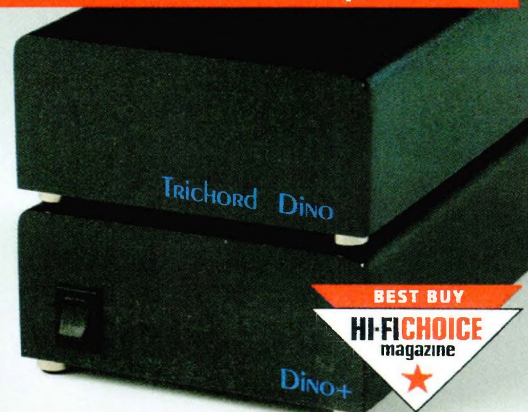
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DINO PHONO Amplifier



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DINO+

GLOSSARY

TECHNICAL TERMS

S.1-CHANNEL AUDIO Six discrete channels, typically front left and right, centre, surround left and right, and LFE (Low Frequency Effects) for a subwoofer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

QUANTISATION NOISE A form of distortion or noise resulting from errors in the description of the musical signal by the digital code.

SACD (Super Audio CD) was launched in 1999 and is a Sony/Philips format based on DSD coding that offers high resolution stereo and multichannel sound from hybrid discs that can also be played on ordinary CD drives.

SAMPLE RATE The rate at which the musical waveform is sliced up into discrete chunks. For CD, this is 44.1kHz or once every 0.023msec. DVD will also support 48kHz and 96kHz.

SENSITIVITY The relative loudness that a speaker generates for a specific voltage input. Expressed in decibels per watt (dB/W), measured 1m from the speaker.

THX Standards system for home cinema set-ups which includes amplifier power and speaker dispersion characteristics. The latest THX Ultra 2 standard is more stringent than THX Select.

TOSLINK The proprietary name given by Toshiba to the optical fibre signal transmission system it invented for consumer applications.

TRANSISTOR/MOSFET The two main types of power semiconductor used in solid state amplifier output stages.

TREBLE High frequencies, the top end of the audio band, ie above 3kHz.

TWEETER Treble driver.

TWO/THREE-WAY Loudspeaker crossovers split the signal into two or three frequency bands, a two-way speaker can have more than two drive units.

WATTS (per channel) The watt is the unit of electrical power and the WPC rating is the maximum average undistorted power that an amp can deliver to a typical speaker. However, speaker sensitivity variations can make more difference than amplifier output.

WOOFER Bass driver

DESCRIPTIVE TERMS

AGGRESSIVE Forward and bright sonic character.

AMBIENCE The impression of an acoustical space, such as the performing hall in which a recording was made.

ANALYTICAL Highly detailed.

ARTICULATE Intelligibility of voice(s) and instruments and the interactions between them.

ATTACK The leading edge of a note and the ability of a system to reproduce the attack transients in music.

BALANCE Essentially tonal balance, the degree to which one aspect of the sonic spectrum is emphasised above the rest. Also channel balance, the relative level of the left and right stereo channels.

BODY Fullness of sound, with particular emphasis on upper bass. Opposite of thin.

BOXY The sound of a loudspeaker with audible cabinet resonances.

BRIGHT A sound that emphasises the upper midrange/lower treble.

DARK A tonal balance that tilts downwards with increasing frequency. Opposite of bright.

DECAY The fadeout of a note, it follows the attack.

DEFINITION (or resolution) The ability of a component to reveal the subtle information that is fundamental to high fidelity sound.

DEPTH (of image) The perception of music being reproduced behind the loudspeakers and inhabiting a reproduction of the acoustic space of the original recording.

DETAIL The most delicate elements of the original sound and those which are the first to disappear with lesser equipment.

DRY A sound that is devoid of 'juice', which usually comes across as fine-grained and lean. Also a loss of reverberation as produced by a damped environment.

DYNAMIC The suggestion of energy and wide dynamic range. Related to perceived speed as well as contrasts in volume both large and small.

EUPHONIC An appealing form of distortion that generally enhances perceived fidelity, often ascribed to the harmonic elaborations of some valve amps.

FAST Good reproduction of rapid transients which increase the sense of realism and 'snap'.

FOCUS A strong, precise sense of image projection.

FORWARD(NESS) Similar to an aggressive sound, a sense of the image being projected in front of the speakers and of music being forced upon the listener.

GRAINY A slightly raw, exposed sound which lacks finesse.

GRIP A sense of control and sturdiness in the bass.

GRUNT See grip.

HARD Uncomfortable, forward, aggressive sound with a metallic tinge.

HARSH Grating, abrasive.

IMAGING (stereo) The sense that a voice or instrument is in a particular place in the room.

JUICY Sound that has joie de vivre, energy and life.

LOW-LEVEL DETAIL The quietest sounds in a recording.

MUSICAL or musicality. A sense of cohesion and subjective 'rightness' in the sound.

NATURALNESS Realism.

OPAQUE Unclear, lacking transparency.

OPEN Sound which has height and 'air', relates to clean upper midrange and treble.

PACE Often associated with rhythm, a strong sense of timing and beat.

PRESENCE A sense of an instrument or voice occupying a place in the listening room.

PRESENCE RANGE The upper midrange.

SEISMIC Very low bass that you feel rather than hear.

SIBILANCE An emphasis of the 'S' sound, often heard on radio.

SNAP A system with good speed and transient response can deliver the immediacy or 'snap' of live instruments.

SPEED A fast system with good pace gives the impression of being right on the money in its timing.

STURDY Solid, powerful, robust sound.

THICK A lack of articulation and clarity in the bass.

THIN Bass light.

TIMBRE The tonal character of an instrument.

TIMING A sense of precision in tempo. See speed and pace.

TRANSIENT The leading edge of a percussive sound. Good transient response makes the sound as a whole more live and realistic.

TRANSPARENCY, TRANSPARENT A hear-through quality that is akin to clarity and reveals all aspects of detail.

TWEAK To tune a system or component in an attempt to get the best performance from it.

TWEAKER Someone who enjoys this process.

VEILED Loss of detail due to limited transparency.

WARM A fullness in the lower midrange/upper bass.

WEIGHT A sense of substance and underpinning produced by deep, controlled bass.

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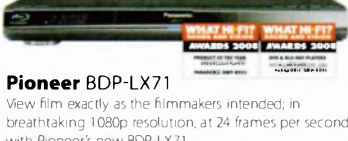


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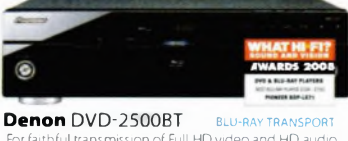
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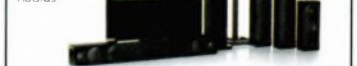
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2nd-hand shootout

Good second-hand CD players don't have to cost a fortune, as this £500 selection shows

The Sugden CD21 first saw the light of day in 1999. As is typical of the company, rather than continually launch new models it prefers to evolve existing ones. Proof of this can be seen from the A21, which has been doing the rounds for over three decades now. The first upgrade to the CD21 came in 2001 with the introduction of the MKIII Philips Short transport. This can be a troublesome unit and is particularly prone to slipping out of alignment, especially when transported. In late 2003, an improved L1210 system was fitted and, fortunately, our budget is enough for such a model. Around two years ago, the CD21 was cosmetically reworked and became the CD21 Series Two. Although it's nice to have a later model, the 2003-2006 version sounds just as good. The good news for buyers of any second-hand CD21 is that Sugden keeps a supply of spare parts for all its models dating right back to 1988. It won't surprise you to learn that the CD21 works especially well with the A21. Even with a different brand, though, your £500 buys you an effortless sounding player with a natural timbre.

One of the reasons the Sugden CD21 holds its value so well is the limited supply. Others, such as the Arcam FMJ CD36, show what over-supply can do to resale values. Launched in June 2005, the FMJ CD36 was designed to take on the rash of multi-format disc players popular at the time. Despite costing £1,400, there's little doubt that it succeeded. The problem for the FMJ CD36 came later when Arcam dealers, keen to clear through soon-to-be-replaced stock, sold the model at huge discounts. By April 2008, we saw new CD36s selling for £800, which at a stroke destroyed second-hand values. Since then prices have now settled to between £500-£600, making the FMJ CD36 a stunning second-hand buy.

Below: Arcam's FMJ CD36 CD player



Above: Sugden's CD21 CD player

All FMJs enjoy a five-year warranty, meaning that even the oldest model will have at least 18 months cover left. Cosmetically, the control legends can rub off, but otherwise this is an extremely reliable player. Should anything go wrong then Arcam has one of the widest dealer bases of any manufacturer – just make sure your player comes from a reputable source in order to maintain the warranty.

Holding its value rather better is the Naim CD5*i*. Now, notice the italicised 'i' here for this is important. Although the CD5*i* dates back to 2003, the upgraded CD5*i* version brought about a series of improvements in 2007. A new DAC, upgraded power supply and star grounding were the main improvements. The result was an even purer sound quality that many would argue, even to this day, leads to

Naim. Also check that the puck is in place – without it the disc won't clamp correctly. Naim service now uses a Returned Material Authorisation (RMA) system, which means that it won't accept returns directly from a customer. It's worth considering this if you live miles from a Naim dealer.

Somewhat older than the CD5*i*, but with just as strong a following, the Linn Genki HDCD equipped CD player was originally launched in 1999 and has only recently been discontinued. The strong appeal of this player stems from its sound quality and reliability. After listening to what many would consider brash and forward sounding CD players, the smooth, dark sounding Genki is something of a tonic for many listeners and their systems. Added to this relaxing sound quality is the reputation for

“One of the reasons the Sugden CD21 holds its value so well is the limited supply.”

the CD5*i* being the finest sounding CD player under £1,000. Such praise means that the latest CD5 is very much in demand with even 18 month old examples just fitting our budget – quite some value retention when you consider the cost new is £875. Still, continual demand and a strong brand should mean the CD5*i* will continue to depreciate slowly, making it a fine investment. Buying second-hand you should ensure that that you're getting a proper 'i' version. If you're unsure then you can check the serial number with

durability. The Genki has proved to be very reliable with no major faults reported. The laser on very early examples may need replacing, but it's not uncommon for eight year-old examples to be in fine fettle and showing no signs of imminent expenditure. The loading tray is rather flimsy and vulnerable to being knocked, so check it is squarely aligned and runs smoothly. Unlike the others here, prices appear to vary enormously. We found second-hand examples from £400 to £750. Despite this, we reckon our budget should easily buy you a model that's less than four years old and complete with all the accessories. Supply is certainly strong enough to be able to pick and choose right now.

For £500, none of these CD players will disappoint. If it was our money, though, the Arcam CD36 looks like the biggest bargain of the lot. **HFC**

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Resolution Audio S30 Integrated amplifier. Works in conjunction with Opus 21 CD player. Very neat office style solution. New unused.	£800	£215
Resolution Audio Opus 21. Silver/silver. 3 years old. Condition as new.	£1650	£295
SME 20/12A turntable with KSL silver wired 3125 arm. Demonstrator - less than a year old.	£8500	£115
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Michell ISO /Hera phono stage.	£200	—
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Above: Leema Stream CD player

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CORK RECORD MATS with label recess. Nicely made, good quality. 'The best sounding mats' £10 + £1.75 p&p. 07914 696538 (Derbys)

CYRUS CD7Q/PSX-R, boxed, manuals, £550. Rotel RB991 power amp, boxed, £375. 01977 609839 (W Yorks)

CYRUS CD8X/PSX-R, Cyrus 8 integrated amp. All manuals, remotes and boxes. £600 no offers. Buyer collects, will demo. 07900 024524 day/01483 892955 weekend (Surrey)

CYRUS PRE VS 2 X-Power (x2), Cyrus PSX-R, mint condition, boxed. All between one and two and a half years old. Offers between £1,850 and £2,000. Spendor SSE, mint condition, boxed, £625. Manuals for all products. Buyer collects. 01721 723 946 (Tweedale)

ELAC FS 207.2 speakers, Jet3 ribbons, cherry finish, with boxes and manual, mint condition, £395. 02920 419226 (S Glams)

FORTY CURRENT hi-fi magazines for sale, £20. Buyer collects, bargain, 01268 767841 after six (Essex)

GAMUT DI 150 integrated amplifier, as new, manual and box, etc. £3,450 ono. 07814 717249 (Cornwall)

GARRARD 301 turntable, with Origin Live-upgraded Rega arm and Goldring 1042 cartridge, £700. ATC integrated amp, £1,600. 01422 340639 or mchalep@yahoo.co.uk (W. Yorks)

GRADO SR80 headphones, brand new, £80+ p&p. 07791 936281 (Kent)

KLIPSCH KG5.2 floorstanding speakers in oak, very rare, excellent all-round condition, grills included, stunning sound, £275. 07725 072878 (Leicester)

KRELL FPB 300CX power amp, one of the best in the world, new, 220v-50Hz, £4,500 ono. and shipping from Israel. The buyer who pays the asking price can also buy used Transparent Ultra XL speaker cables, excellent condition, (£2,300) £700 inc shipping. Serious applications only to ewadv@hotmail.com

LEEMA STREAM CD player and Leema Pulse amp. Boxed and like new. Complete with remote controls, manuals and original packaging. Three year warranty card, £1,600. 07796 226641 or email robdh@keme.co.uk (Leics)

MARANTZ CD17 (£800) £400. Musical Fidelity X-A1 amp (50 watts per channel) £300. Musical Fidelity X-LP phono stage, £90. 07787 166713 (London)

MARIGO LABS 3-D Stabilizer, Stealth Mat Series 2, for CD

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

and DVD, latest version, as new, £35 including shipping. 01268 415017 (Essex). **MIRAGE M-151** 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).

MORDAUNT-SHORT PAGEANT II speakers, 1981, classic silver-wired, with stands, £120. Pioneer PDS801 CD player, £130. Both mint, will accept £200 for both. Can demonstrate 07700 431963 (Cheshire).

MYRYAD MA240 power amplifier, boxed and in perfect condition, £400. 07736 280018 or e-mail davidp.warren@ntlworld.com (N Yorks).

NAIM CDX2 with XPS2 power supply, immaculate condition, 15 months old, 21 months left on warranty, complete with boxes, manuals etc, £3,700. 01235 765986 (Oxon).

NAIM NAC 72 preamp with MC phono board. Naim NAP 180 power amp, black, £750 the pair. Rega R3 speakers, £350. All excellent condition. Cash only. Buyer collects, can demo. 07773 756277 (Bristol).

NAIM NAP250 power amp, old style, but recent full service and update by Naim, £750. NAC72 preamp, with MM, MC and spare boards, £325. 01453 750183 evenings (Glos).

NAIM SYSTEM CDS1 CD player, 122X, 150X pre and power combo with Flat-Cap x2, Naim Intro II speakers in maple finish. All in mint condition, boxed, leads, remotes (£4,000), £2,750. 01656 782523 (S. Wales).

PIONEER DV 656A DVD-A/SACD player, £70. Tannoy M15 with stands, Denon UPO-250 power amp, silver, £60 each. QED Digit, £30. NAD 4020a and Rotel RT-850AL tuners, £25 each. 01621 772884 (Essex).

PRIMARE C32 Deluxe remote control, titanium finish, never used, still in box, £400ono. 01753 704762 (Wilts).

PRIMARE I21 amp, black, two years old, excellent condition, boxed, £300, price negotiable. 01689 834136 (Kent).

PROAC RESPONSE 1SC. Late model with bolt-on back panel and massive high-spec crossover. Stunning speakers and a rare second-hand purchase opportunity, £500 no offers. 07876 705266 (W. Yorks)

QUAD 306 power amp, Quad 34 control unit and Quad FM4 stereo tuner, £360 the lot. 0208 977 6433 (Surrey).

ROKSAN CASPIAN five-channel power amp, excellent condition, £100. TAG McLaren AVR 20 processor, centre channel indicator light faulty, but unit works fine, excellent Condition, £85. Buyer Collects 01909 731413 (Notts).

ROTEL RA-05 amp, Rotel RCD-06 CD player, latest models, immaculate, boxed,

£350. Half price! No offers. 01384 412234 (W Mids)

RUARK PROLOGUE 2 floorstanding loudspeakers, Dialogue 2 centre channel with bracket, Epilogue 2 compact standmount loudspeakers. Ruark Logrhythm 150 ASW subwoofer. All natural cherry finish, mint condition, (£3,000) £1,500. 01324 815461 (Stirlingshire).

SOUNDSTYLE XS310 AV rack. In excellent condition. Ultra-rigid, fully-welded epoxy powder-coated frame. 6mm toughened safety glass shelves to British Standard, (£365) £125. 078 2832681 (Glocs).

SOWTER OUTPUT transformers, 2x 9593, 2x 9066t, 2x 9508, 1x 9521 (mains). High spec, excellent bass extension, suitable for parallel push-pull amps. 07895 197571 or email saselec2000@yahoo.co.uk (Cambs).

SPENDOR S5E loudspeakers, boxed, £500ono. Audiolab 8000S, £200ono. Soundstyle five-tier equipment stand, £100ono. All excellent condition, buyer collects. 01603 744000 (Norfolk)

SUGDEN C51, P51 and T51, one channel needs attention. Cambridge Audio P100 (blk), P50 (Silver), T55 (silver). Neal 103, needs attention. Offers. 020 8650 6127 (Kent).

TANNOY CHESTER, 1978, loves valves, £400. Quad 12L, Rosewood piano gloss, £250. Partington Dreadnought Ultima flagship heavyweight stands, (£350) £150. All no offers.

Priced for quick sale. 07876 705266 (W. Yorks).

TDL RTL2 floorstanding speakers, matched pair in very good condition, black, £50 ono. Buyer collects. 01229 584509 (Cumbria).

TOWNSHEND DCT 100 interconnects, 2x 0.6m pairs, both XLR, £120 or £60 per pair. Ecosse Diva interconnect, 0.5m, single-ended (phono), £50. Chord Chameleon Silver Plus interconnect, 0.6m XLR, £60. Chord Chameleon Silver Plus interconnect, 1m XLR, £75. Pair of Townshend Isolda speaker cables, 2.5m, £150. Chord Chameleon Silver Plus interconnect, 0.6m, phono to DIN connector (for Quad), £70. Nordost Heimdall interconnect, 0.6m XLR, £200. 01872 870602 (Cornwall).

TRANSPARENT CABLE Transparent Opus MM, XLR, 1m, boxed with certificate, £8,000. Transparent power cable, Power Link MM, £650. 07501 797971 (London).

UNISON RESEARCH hybrid valve equipment: Unico Secondo 120-watt per channel integrated amplifier with phono inputs, (£1,560) £825 ono. Unico CD player, (£1,450) £725 ono. Excellent reviews, mint. Two pairs Rothwell attenuators, £25 ono per pair. 023 8073 8935 (Hants).

WANTED: Linn Sondek clear turntable lid. Must be in good condition. 01926 853106 (Warks)

WANTED: Moon i-5 amplifier. Must be in good condition. 01491 614325 (Oxon)

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)

WHARFEDALE EVO 30 speakers in maple, as new, £180. Naim N-Cent centre speaker in cherry, excellent condition, £200. 07730 987689 (Surrey).

ZETA TONEARM, fitted with van den Hul tonearm cable, in great condition, £375. 07730 431380 (Berks).



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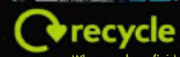
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