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WELCOME...

HI-FI CHOICE JANUARY 2009 ISSUE 315

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Welcome to the first issue of 2009, even though it's likely you're reading your copy pre-Christmas! 2008 was a great year for hi-fi product, so judging our 2008 Awards issue was one of the toughest jobs we've had for quite a while, such was the standard of new kit turning up at HFC towers. And it was nice to see a few 'trends' coming back too, such as

standalone DACs and high-quality compact hi-fi components.

2009 looks likely to be a year of enhancing the systems we already have and being more selective about future upgrades and this is where we come in. Let HFC show you how to get the best from your system and guide you to the finest product with our unrivalled comparative testing.

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*.
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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

'Gripper' 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 in our *Ask Alan* feature.



JASON KENNEDY

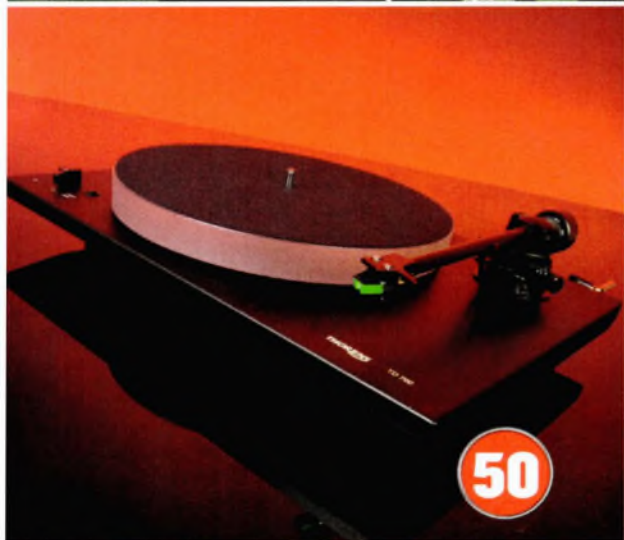
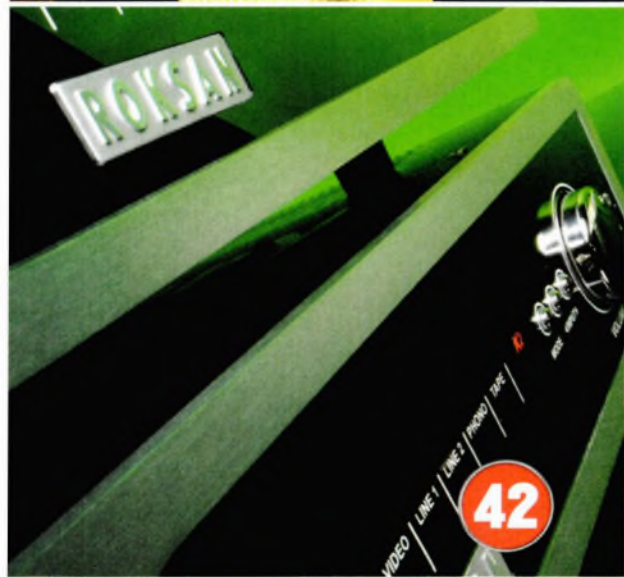
Jason Kennedy was a former editor of *Hi-Fi Choice* and spent an incredible 17 years on the title. Now a freelance hi-fi journalist with a system that'll blow your socks off, he remains a key player in keeping *Hi-Fi Choice* great.



DOMINIC TODD

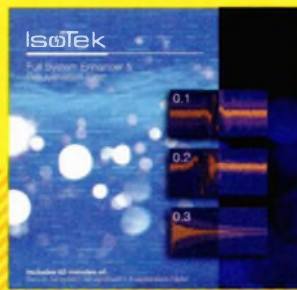
A highly experienced journalist, Dominic's sharp ears and retail experience are a valuable mix for *Hi-Fi Choice*. Each month, Dom dispenses priceless second-hand buying advice that will save you time, money and a lot of legwork.

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

All the very latest hi-fi products

14 HAPPENINGS

HFC visits Yamaha's new HQ

16 DISPATCHES

The hi-fi commentators with clout

25 COMPETITION

Win a pair of PMC FB1i loudspeakers worth £1,950

26 CHOICE CUTS

New music on CD, SACD and audiophile vinyl rated by our industry experts

29 CHOICE MAIL

A selection of your letters and emails, good, bad and ugly

85 ASK ALAN

Your hi-fi questions answered and your technical problems solved

EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

IN-DEPTH PRODUCT TESTS

34 Myryad Mi one-box hi-fi system

38 Bowers & Wilkins 684 loudspeaker

42 Roksan Kandy K2 CD player and integrated amplifier

46 Pro-Ject USB Box USB DAC

50 Thorens TD700 turntable

54 Unison Research Unico CDE CD player

58 KEF iQ50 loudspeaker

62 ACS T2 ear-canal earphones

ROUND-UP

MAINS ACCESSORIES £70-£180

64 Silverman Labs Clarity 1

64 Supra Mains Block MD06-BS/SP

65 True Colours Industries Baby Constrictor

65 Wireworld Aurora 5²

ULTIMATE GROUP TEST

CD PLAYERS AND AMPLIFIERS £1,200-£1,700

71 Advance Acoustic MCD403/MAP305 II DA

73 Arcam CD17/A38

75 Cambridge Audio Azur 840C/840A V2

75 Marantz SA8003/PM8003

79 Pioneer PD-D9/A-A9

81 Yamaha CD-S1000/A-1000

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

100 Vinyl

103 Radio tuners

AMPLIFIERS

104 Stereo amps

LOUDSPEAKERS

106 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,

Amplifiers around £1,000

128 FREE Readers' classifieds

READER SERVICES

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

89 Back issues

90 How to subscribe

116 Glossary

117 Dealer Guide

123 Dealer Directory

130 What's coming up in the February issue on sale 8th January

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LEEMA ACOUSTICS AGENA, ALTAIR AND PYXIS

A trio of star-cross'd Leemas light up the high-end firmament

Fuelled by the success of its entry-level range, Leema Acoustics has returned its attention to the high end. Designed to match the company's top Antila 20-DAC CD player, the new Agena reference phono stage, Pyxis preamp and Altair mono power amp all follow Leema's spaced-out nomenclature; they are named after stellar objects.

Pyxis is a small constellation in the Southern Hemisphere and the preamp that bears the name handles single-ended, balanced and computer audio inputs, has an optional built-in phono stage and sports 'non-intrusive, audiophile' bass and treble adjustment. It also uses the company's Leema Intelligent Protocol System to drive suitably equipped power amps at the best possible signal-to-noise ratio at any given volume level.

These would be amplifiers like the new Altair monoblocks. Named after the brightest star in the constellation Aquila (although the 'IV' suffix in the photo suggests it could also be named after the destination in 1950's cult sci-fi classic *Forbidden Planet*), the 45kg cube chucks out a whopping 550 watts per channel, with the promise of two kilowatt, 100 amp peaks. The front panel of the Altair is festooned with LEDs for a power amp, with status indicators showing LIPS volume, start-up protection, overheat and fault diagnosis. The balanced or single-ended

inputs are matched by a set of balanced and single-ended outputs for those daring enough to consider bi-amping and two sets of WBT speaker terminals make for easy bi-wiring.

Agena (or β Centauri) is in the southern constellation Centaurus, but in Leema-land it's the new top phono stage from the company. With two fully adjustable sets of single-ended inputs and one optional balanced input, each with two separate head-shell settings, the Agena is capable of storing cartridge loading information for up to six MM or MC cartridges. The Agena outputs to both balanced and single-ended analogue outputs, but also includes an analogue-to-digital converter and outputs to both USB and S/PDIF connections. This makes archiving your record collection to a PC – without sacrificing quality – a distinct possibility. The Agena also features a full display panel (useful when you can control a range of high and low-pass filters and monophonic modes) that can be put into 'sleep' mode for claimed improved audio performance. This new phono stage sits one down from the company's five-grand Cygnus; where the Cygnus supports a range of legacy disc equalisation curves, the Agena handles RIAA alone.

Price £2,995 (Agena); £8,495 per channel (Altair); £3,995 (Pyxis)

Due January ☎ 01938 811900 🌐 www.leema-acoustics.com



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TIME DOMAIN AUDIO SYSTEM

TD510





NAD C326BEE AND T587

A giant-killer amp and the first Blu-ray player from NAD

For three decades, NAD has had a reputation for being the giant killer in amplifier circles. Starting with the mighty 3020 in 1978, the company consistently made budget products that outperformed considerably more expensive products in sound quality terms.

NAD's new C326BEE – from its freshly minted budget-priced 'Classic Series' – looks to build on that giant-killing reputation. The 50-watt integrated stereo amplifier is the successor to the hugely popular C325BEE. Like its predecessor, the C326BEE has been designed by Bjorn Erik Edvardsen (hence the suffix) with the sole intention to create a "budget reference" product. With six inputs (including one mini-jack front panel connection for 'music players') and a tape loop, the remotely controllable C326BEE includes a front-panel tone defeat button to bypass the bass, treble and balance controls.

The NAD C325BEE also features Edvardsen's PowerDrive, BEE Clamp and Distortion Cancelling circuits, as well as NAD's legendary Soft Clipping system. All of which means the amp will likely sound more comfortable at higher gain levels than most budget solid-state amplifiers in its class. Suggested to be extremely eco-friendly, the NAD C325BEE is claimed to draw less than one watt in standby mode.

NAD Electronics has also announced its first-ever Blu-ray player, the T587. The Profile 2.0 player (that means it supports internet connections, but not – of course – Blu-ray-Audio Profile 3.0) includes HDMI v1.3 and Ethernet connections. The HDMI link allows both 1080p images and 7.1 channel linear PCM soundtracks to be sent to decoders and amplifiers, while the Ethernet hookup allows for BD-Live extended online content, if connected to an appropriately equipped router.

The T587 is also claimed to be fast loading, addressing a common criticism of current-generation Blu-ray players. An actual load-up figure has not been cited, but is said to take less than a minute to load. Acronym collectors can rejoice that as well as BD-ROM, BD-R and BD-RE formats, the T587 supports DVD (both PAL and NTSC), DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW, CD-R/RW and Audio CD. It also speaks BD Java, supports all the latest video and audio-video formats and even includes a USB port on the front panel for playing computer audio files.

Price £275 (C326BEE); £850 (T587) **Due now** ☎ 01279 501111

www.nadelectronics.com





BANG & OLUFSEN BEOSOUND 5

Bang & Olufsen's new BeoSound 5 is a digital music storage and internet radio streaming device. It features a large (but not touch-sensitive) colour LCD screen next to a large multilayer, multi-function command dial. The unit features MOTS ('more of the same') software that automatically generates playlists from the music stored on your hard drive. B&O likens the process to planting musical seeds, scanning the music itself for similar rhythms, syncopations, tones or harmonies.

The BeoSound 5 is designed to work with the BeoMaster 5 black box, which includes key circuitry, internet connectivity and up to 500GB of internal storage (ideally, also connecting to a PC to rip discs). It can also act as preamp for B&O's active loudspeaker systems.

Price €4,000 **Due** March 2009 ☎ 0800 1380525 🌐 www.bang-olufsen.com



PRIMARE DVDI10

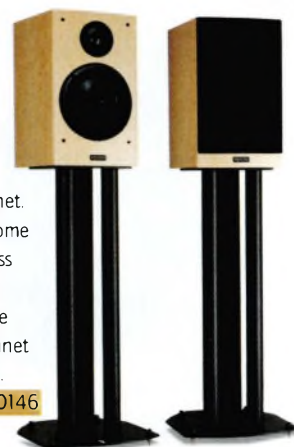
Primare's CDi10 was the one-box system to beat. Now Primare has raised the game with the DVDi10, a stereo DVD-playing one-box system that brings video to the party. The new system retains the elegant style, DAB/FM tuner and 75-watt Class D amplification of the CDi10, but adds all the trappings of a modern video replay format. It shares a lot of technology from Primare's popular DVD26, including a modified Shinwa SHD-2503 CD/DVD drive and an Analog Devices video DAC. This means upscaling to 1080p through the HDMI connection ('legacy' Scart and component video are included too). The DVDi10 includes a dedicated powered subwoofer channel and is claimed to be very control-chummy; talking to iPods and RS232.

Price £1,500 **Due** early 2009 ☎ 01423 359054 🌐 www.primare.net

EPOS ELS 8

Epos Acoustics has announced the replacement to its budget ELS 3 loudspeaker. The new ELS 8 is a standmount two-way, claimed to deliver smooth, deep frequency response, thanks to its bigger cabinet. It features a shielded Epos-designed metal-dome tweeter and a 150mm polypropylene mid bass unit with a 25mm voice coil. It also sports an injection-moulded grille that fits flush into the curved front baffle. The rear-ported MDF cabinet comes wrapped in a choice of maple or black.

Price £250 per pair **Due** now ☎ 01442 260146 🌐 www.epos-acoustics.com





STEINWAY LYNGDORF

Take one of the world's finest piano makers, mix in one of the most innovative digital audio designers on the planet and the result is Steinway Lyngdorf. The company's new Model C Music System features a wholly digital solution from input to loudspeaker, using Lyngdorf's RoomPerfect digital room correction. It also features two floorstanding dipole speakers and boundary subwoofers. As befits the Steinway side of the enterprise, rich piano black and gold finish is standard, with 23 alternate finishes available.

Price £91,000 **Due now** ☎ 0845 262 2882 🌐 www.steinwaylyngdorf.com

SAMSON STUDIODOCK 3i AND 4i

Recording studio expert Samson has delivered a pair of active near field monitors, designed specifically for the home... and the Apple iPod. The new StudioDock 3i and 4i can connect to and even charge an iPod through a top-mounted dock on the right hand speaker, and also include both USB and 3.5mm stereo inputs. Both feature a 25mm silk dome tweeter, but where the 30-watt 3i features a 83mm copolymer woofer, the 40-watt 4i uses a 108mm version.



Price £109 (3i); £149 (4i) per pair **Due now**

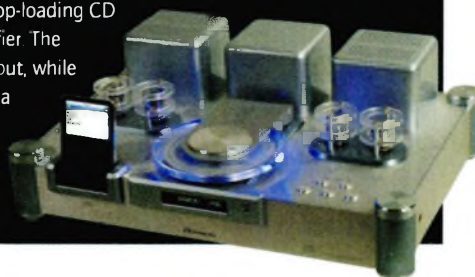
☎ 01462 480000 🌐 www.samsontech.com

SHANLING MC-30 AND MC-3000

If you thought music centres were a thing of the past, think again. Shanling has revised the concept with a 21st Century spin. Two new models feature top-loading CD players, a tuner and an iPod dock, coupled to a valve amplifier. The MC-30 uses a pair of 6P1 valves to deliver a three watt output, while the larger MC-3000 delivers a beefy 60 watts and includes a valve headphone amplifier and three additional line inputs. Both share Shanling's distinctive house styling.

Price £750 (MC-30); £1,250 (MC-3000) **Due now**

☎ 0870 9096777 🌐 www.realhi-fi.com



Soundbites

TANGENT'S Duo is a stylish £130 clock radio that sticks to mono FM radio (or an iPod through its mini-jack) for analogue alarm calls. Five finishes, retro styling and furniture-grade cabinet could make it sound as good as it looks.

☎ 01494 551551



SCIENCE & SONS

Phonofone II is a table-top unpowered ceramic acoustic horn loudspeaker for the Apple iPod. The iPod rests in a groove while the standard white Apple in-ear phones slot into two cups that feed the €350 horn speaker.

🌐 www.charlesandmarie.com



REVO'S new Blok iPod dock features a 40-watt digital amplifier and speakers based on NXT's Balanced Radiator technology. It sports real wood veneers and milled aluminium inserts. Sold exclusively in John Lewis stores in the UK, Blok costs £200.

☎ 01555 666161



MERIDIAN has updated its website (www.meridian-audio.com) and announced a new DSP7200HC Horizontal centre channel for its DSP7200 series digital active loudspeakers. Designed for home cinema (or studio mixing console) use, the new DSP-packed centre unit costs an incredible £8,995 per speaker.

☎ 01480 445678



FURUTECH'S FI-50R piezo-ceramic, damping, clamping, non-magnetic, earth/ground jumping IEC connector sports nano-sized particles, carbon powder, nylon and fibreglass. The £125 connector has already won a Best of Innovations award at 2009's CES, six weeks before the show started!

🌐 www.furutech.com



PURE'S £170 Evoke-2S is the company's flagship stereo digital DAB/FM radio. An evolution of the Evoke-2XT, the new radio uses Pure's Clearsound end-to-end digital audio subsystem, which delivers a healthy 30 Class D watts to drive the twin speakers.

☎ 0845 1489001





Making music

When Yamaha invited HFC to see its new combined hi-fi and musical instrument HQ, the timing was spot-on. **Alan Sircom** reports...

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



Yamaha's Milton Keynes headquarters is a very musical place to be

On June 16, 2008, the UK arm of Yamaha underwent the single largest change to its company structure. At a stroke, Yamaha Electronics (UK) Ltd was dissolved and the hi-fi and home cinema division moved from Watford to Milton Keynes and joined forces with the company's MI (musical instrument) division, under the one Yamaha Music (UK) Ltd banner. This is not some fly-by-night idea and is not just a UK-only move.

The merger plans were made back in Japan by the board of the Yamaha Corporation and applies all

over the world. "Everywhere you've had separate businesses for Electronics and Musical Instruments," explains Ed Selley, Yamaha's AV and hi-fi marketing manager, "they now all come under the banner of the music business. But more importantly, it's about taking on the hi-fi and AV products in their own right; it's not been put into a corner of the music business. It's a separate division, but it just happens that division has the same director as electronic keyboards."

From both perspectives, the merger makes perfect sense. Finally, the company that offers stem-to-stern music (musicians might conceivably play on Yamaha instruments, mixed and recorded on Yamaha pro equipment, monitored and mastered on Yamaha speakers) extends the chain right up to the loudspeakers in the listener's living room. And does so under one roof.

"The first thing that happened was an incredible amount of enthusiasm was bought to the party," explains Ian Galloway of ICG Consultants. "These guys are so excited to bring hi-fi into the business. And that's right from the top – Andrew Kemble the managing director." In fact, it seems so logical to couple music making with music playing that to most people at Yamaha Music it seems strange that the merger didn't happen before. Yamaha has a very strong market share in keyboards in the UK; to develop a similarly powerful position in hi-fi and AV is a challenge that its team is more than ready to take up.

After 25 years working in a company, most might expect a gold watch and a handshake when ushered into the boardroom; Electronic Keyboards Sales and

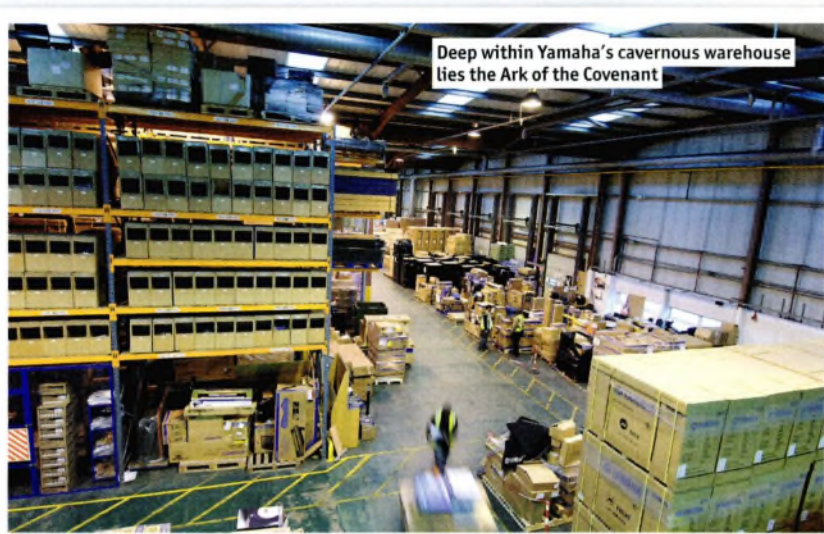


Yamaha's power chord: Takamichi Kaitonaka, Robert Webster and Ed Selley



Galloway and Webster: "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Marketing Director Robert Webster got a hi-fi division to lead. And he's leading it with boundless zest and enthusiasm. "When I look at hi-fi, I only see opportunity" beams Webster. "I come from a traditionally dominant position (nine out of 10 top electronic keyboards sold in the UK are made by Yamaha), but with all the same challenges of any director of finding growth. I've looked at the product categories that we have and will have in hi-fi and AV and I thought 'we can go somewhere with this'."



Deep within Yamaha's cavernous warehouse lies the Ark of the Covenant

The company has begun the long process of rebuilding its brand in the UK. It's already returned to demonstrating at hi-fi shows around the country. "We're back at the Bristol show, taking two stands to show our commitment to both hi-fi and AV," explains Webster. And in just a few months, the Yamaha brand has shown a return to form and increased enthusiasm for the brand in both sectors. "We're putting so much energy into the AV division and we're doing really well in tough times," says Webster. Even faced with the Credit Crunch, Webster is unfazed; "this won't be a good year, but that doesn't stop us making things better next year."

Webster and his team already have a valid and successful model that makes Yamaha electronic keyboards hugely successful and it's coming to a hi-fi store near you. Whether it's pushing the likes of Comet to support high-end audio and video, or it's transforming the showrooms of independent dealers, with something akin to its Homeworld store revamps in keyboard shops, Yamaha means business.

Moving into 2009, there's a raft of Yamaha products coming to build on that energy. Webster calls it "a more vibrant catalogue" in all walks of music replay. It's little wonder Yamaha calls itself 'the Sound Professionals'. **HFC**



So you think a radio is hard to tune? Yamaha's musical reputation is honed here

Words by *Ian Harrison*

Classic Album

MADNESS



ONE STEP BEYOND...

MADNESS

One Step Beyond
EMI

"By November 1979, *One Step Beyond* was at number two in the LP charts and Madness begun two years of promotion."

Like the onstage moves of vibesman, "nutty dancer" and vocalist Cathal 'Chas Smash' Smyth, the Madness story is one of frenzied motion, sudden stops and unexpected detours. The band began life just as punk was exploding, but preferred to play reggae and R'n'B covers. They rose as part of the year-long 2 Tone boom, but translated into mainstream pop success. And, despite charges of unsophistication, theirs was a multi-layered music as adept at melancholy and complexity as it was making anthems for twelve year olds to moonstomp to. Nowhere did their art translate so effusively to vinyl than on their 1979 debut album, *One Step Beyond*.

Formed by keyboardist Mike Barson, guitarist Chris Foreman and sax player Lee Thompson in London's Kentish Town and Muswell Hill, by early 1979 Madness's six-piece core line up was set, with Graham 'Suggs' McPherson as waggish vocalist and Smyth a floating proto-Bez figure. Stylistically they were an amalgam of ted and skinhead styles, with crepes, Ben Sherman shirts, Levis, suits, Harrington jackets, pork-pie hats and Dr Marten's all in evidence. The music was similarly varied, taking in soul, reggae, and rock and roll. The band shared an appreciation of the witty, observational London songs of Ian Dury's first group Kilburn & The High Roads (as did John Lydon and Jerry Dammers, founder of The Specials). "I remember Suggs saying he wanted to emulate Ian Dury's approach of normal people talking in normal language," says drummer Dan 'Woody' Woodgate. "We also had a pact - Make People Dance. If a song didn't work it was dumped immediately."

They started recording their debut on 11 September 1979, just a week after signing to spirited indie label Stiff. Made in a fortnight with production duo Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley at Eden studios in Acton, it captured a live set that had been honed by a

year playing north London pubs like the Dublin Castle and the Hope & Anchor. Even now it sounds like a band having a huge laugh and has boundless confidence as well as freshness. These are brassy, vivid sounds, with Woodgate's stomping drums propelling killer songs like the title track, a tune written by Jamaican ska innovator Prince Buster, who was saluted in the album's lead single *The Prince*.

The Kinks-flavoured *Bed & Breakfast Man*, for example, is a bittersweet vignette of a sofa-surfing youth, while *Land Of Hope And Glory* recalls sax player Lee Thompson's time in borstal. "Clive and Alan took care of the music. It was all laid out in front of us and we refined it as we went, into a fine art," recalls Thompson. "Everyone knew their place, and got on, and enjoyed themselves and got paid!"

By November 1979, *One Step Beyond* was at number two in the LP charts and Madness had begun two years of relentless gigging and promotion. They were soon fixtures in the UK singles and albums charts, producing a startling run of 20 Top 20 chart hits, maturing convincingly, never releasing sub-par music and in the process becoming one of the greatest British groups of them all. They split in 1986, but reformed in 1992, playing semi-regularly in their original formation and starting every show with the chantalong "Hey you, don't watch that, watch this..." of *One Step Beyond*.

Almost thirty years on, it still defines them. Chris Foreman is sanguine about this. "In the dictionary of rock, Madness were sort of, 'cheeky chappies, Camden Town, whacky zany...'" he says. "Which is better than 'crap one hit wonders!'" Suggs agrees. "We were never trendy after 2 Tone. But we're still here." **HFC**

Words by **Richard Black**

Technology

In this month's *Ultimate Group Test*, we feature several amps and SACD players with digital inputs on them. Traditional practice is to play digital discs in a machine which converts the digits to analogue, then transport the analogue signal down a couple of wires to the amp. Digits only needed to be moved between equipment when one added an outboard DAC as a cost-effective or no-holds-barred upgrade, or on occasion when recording digitally to DAT, MiniDisc etc. Now we have digital sources coming out of our ears, pretty much literally in some cases, not to mention 'digital amps', computers with digital audio outputs.... Is there any 'best practice' way to deal with all this?

The quick answer, unfortunately, is no. There is no invariable rule as to how best to proceed – as so often, it depends on circumstances. In fact, this was true even in the 'old days' when you simply had a CD player and the option of adding a DAC. A DAC with poor jitter or distortion figures could actually worsen the performance of a decent CD player, or else make no significant difference to the performance. The trouble is that there is no real way to tell what the situation is except by listening!

A case in point is the Advance Acoustic transport/amp combination in our test, which does digital-to-analogue conversion in the amplifier. It just happens that the transport is distinctly jittery and the DAC has rather sub-optimum jitter rejection, so the end result is less technically pure than some. Partner that DAC/amp with a regular CD player, via the latter's digital output with lower jitter and the sound will be different. It may be better or worse than the CD player in question, though in all probability not by a vast amount, so you'll have a question of taste rather than plain 'right or wrong'.

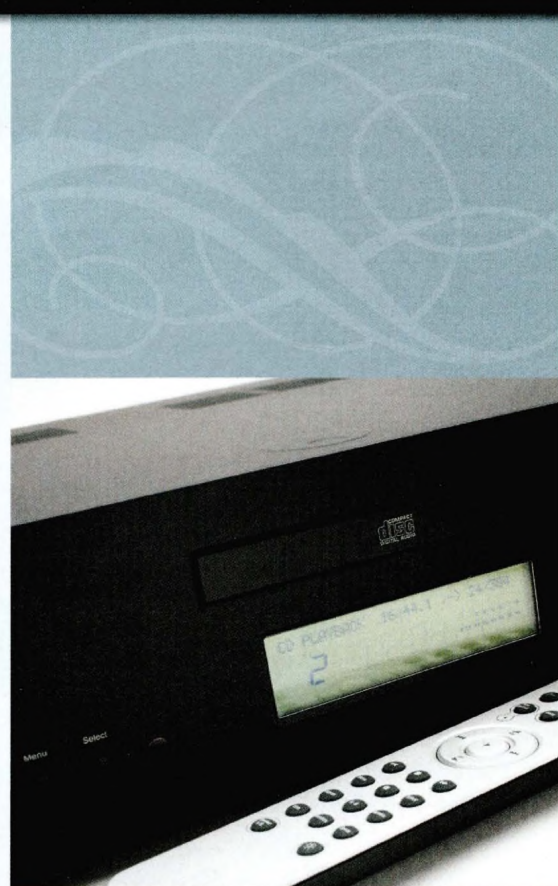
By contrast, the digital input on the Cambridge 840C has pretty good jitter

rejection and very fine performance in other ways, so connecting it digitally to many other CD players to replace their internal DAC is likely to be an improvement, on paper at least. Meanwhile 'digital' amps with switching stages may in some cases keep signals fully digital up to the output, converting analogue inputs to digital, so obviously in this case you're likely to be best off leaving everything in the wires digital if possible.

But what about USB and suchlike digital connections? The Marantz SA8003 has a USB connection for portable music players, from which it receives digital data for conversion. In this case, it's almost a dead cert that the quality will be given a leg up because the digital to analogue conversion in a tiny, low-power, portable player is highly unlikely to be a match for what Marantz can achieve with decent space and power budgets in a machine like that.

The Pioneer A-A9 amp has a different flavour of USB socket for connection to a computer. In this case, however, the D-A converter is not of the highest quality, and (perhaps even more significant) it's hard to be sure what you're getting from a computer. Never mind such niceties as jitter: most software, running on most computers, runs a high risk of the data being resampled and quite possibly altered in volume, in ways over which you have no control and which may not be the highest quality.

In fact it turns out that computer audio is a bit of a nightmare from this point of view: it's very hard to be sure what's going on, even with test equipment – without it, basically impossible. Unfortunately, the best honest advice we can give at present, regarding such situations is 'suck it and see'. **HFC**



Cambridge Audio 840C CD player

"A DAC with poor jitter or distortion figures could actually worsen the performance of a decent CD player."

exposure



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Malcolm Steward

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

Internet geeks

The world of the dreaded internet hi-fi forums

"Unfortunately, we suffer democracy on the internet, which means that any lunatic with half-a-brain can post his opinions."

There seem to be a few audiophiles who are not exactly what one would call enthusiastic about computerised music even though it appears to represent, in one format or another, the 'way forward'. I have to nail my colours to the mast here and say that I still believe that vinyl is the most persuasive and enjoyable replay source, even though compact disc can improve on some areas of its performance – on a good day and with a following wind. Regardless, my hard disk player will comfortably outperform or, at worst, equal most CD players.

Yet contrary to my entirely favourable reaction and acceptance of these oh-so-user-friendly sources of high-quality sound, there is a vociferous group of hi-fi enthusiasts who seem determined to remain violently opposed to this new generation of players.

This argy-bargy reminds of the mid-1980s when compact disc was introduced and battle lines were immediately drawn: on one side there were the new format's Perfect Sound Forever proponents with their camp followers; facing them were the vinyl-loving analogue die-hards for whom digital was nothing less than an abomination. Each side took turns to hurl facts, figures, science, pseudo science, surmisings and insults at the other camp.

Arguing about formats really is a waste of time: no matter how indignantly we audiophiles protest we get what big business deigns to give us. The best we can do, if we don't like it, is to work on the replay equipment to try to extract more music out of the format we've been given. It might take a few years' endeavour but we get there: compare the sound of one of those early, catastrophic, overpriced wallpaper strippers to even a budget modern player and you'll realise the transformations that can be wrought.

The most vituperative outpourings about computerised music can be found on internet

forums where you will encounter some of the most bigoted, argumentative individuals on the planet. On many occasions I have wanted to go onto these forums and post equally insulting comments in answer to the rubbish that some imbecile is spouting as though it were the indisputable truth, but I have thus far resisted the temptation.

Unfortunately, we suffer democracy on the internet, which means that any lunatic with half-a-brain can post his experiences and opinions, no matter how limited, alongside the more considered thoughts of rational, sane human beings. Or at least, those sane human beings who do not spend their leisure hours listening to their wonderful hi-fi systems, but prefer willy-waving about them on forums.

It seems that sensible, reasoned discussions about the subject of computerised music are beyond the scope of most internet critics, who appear to get stuck in one gear. For example, a friend and I were listening to some newly ripped CDs, the other night, through the YBA amplifier I was reviewing with Neat Momentum 4i speakers and not my usual set-up to which my pal is accustomed. "This is not a bad little system," he commented. "It certainly lets you hear the silences properly." In his experience, the best computerised audio sources always seemed able to define clearly the rests between notes without any ambiguity.

That might be a difficult concept to convey in words, but there was no mistaking its audibility. The only thing that was certain was that I was not going to share his insight on any forum. For goodness sake, how would people who refuse to believe that there's no difference between music from iTunes on a Mac and music from VLC on a PC ever get their heads around judging audio by listening to the way it presents silences? **HFC**



YBA YA 201 amp (tested next issue)

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Paul Messenger

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

Music update

Understanding the appeal behind music downloads

"...far from knowing their place and staying there, computers are steadily moving in on our hi-fi systems."

The world is divided between those who embrace computers with an enthusiasm rarely lavished upon an inanimate object and those who tolerate the Artificial Stupidity of these devices with a mixture of forbearance and irritation.

I belong firmly in the latter camp, even though I've had to use them to earn a living for more than twenty years and as computers have evolved, becoming dramatically more powerful with huge memories, they've had an increasing influence on my life, whether I like it or not.

Back in the 1980s, the computer was essentially merely a smarter alternative to the typewriter.

Come the 1990s, e-mail avoided the need to post floppy discs, while the new century saw broadband internet access change many of our lives and ushered in downloading as a new source of music. As a result, far from knowing their place and staying there, computers are steadily moving in on our hi-fi systems.

While hi-fi enthusiasts are justifiably snuffy about the sound quality of compressed digital formats like MP3, widely used for downloading, computers are becoming an increasingly popular source of full CD-style 16-bit PCM material. They might not offer the last word in high fidelity, but their hard drives offer enormous storage capacity, they're relatively inexpensive and most importantly, they're exceptionally convenient to use.

Until about eighteen months ago I kept my hi-fi and my computer well apart. Then I upgraded the latter to a MacBook Pro and added wi-fi internet access. Around the same time the CD recorder I sometimes used packed up and a friend showed me how to use the iTunes program which came pre-loaded in the new laptop.

I figured it was about time I learnt something about computer-based music and that this might be the opportunity. However, I'm not sure it was the best decision I've ever made. Although I've managed to get decent enough results, my lack of interest in and enthusiasm for computers has

proved a real handicap. The heart of the problem with computers seems to be that there are usually umpteen different ways of doing any one particular thing and figuring out the right one requires both considerable patience as well as a significant amount of computer expertise.

Putting a hi-fi system together is a relatively simple and straightforward matter of choosing sources, amplification, speakers and linking it all together. That's much less true of the erasable data stored on a computer's hard drive and they do have an irritating habit of throwing up nasty surprises, as I discovered just the other day.

In order to get music from the computer to the hi-fi, I decided to use something called an SB+, an audiophile-tuned variation on the SqueezeBox theme from Bristol-based At-tunes, with improved power supplies and clocks. This sits with the hi-fi, taking the computer's music signal via the wi-fi system and converting it to stereo audio.

Then came the time to update the computer – something that has to be done all too often, as computers as a breed are permanently 'work in progress'. When the installer brought it over all sorts of aggravation broke out, as the operating system had changed. What should have taken an hour, max, took all day and we never did get the SB+ going before he had to leave.

In the meantime, I'm getting very satisfactory results using a Russ Andrews DAC 1 USB – but it does mean running an inconvenient cable across the room from laptop to hi-fi.

I've no doubt we're still at an early stage of what will ultimately prove to be the biggest revolution to hit hi-fi since the Compact Disc. But the SB+ incident highlights my concern over computers as a hi-fi source. They might be highly convenient, but they remain immature and represent a moving target for those who don't wish to enter into an emotional relationship with one. **HFC**



Russ Andrews DAC 1 USB



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

HIFI NEWS / OCTOBER '05 / ROB WADSWORTH / REF 3

AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE 3 VACUUM TUBE PRE AMPLIFIER



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

HIFI PLUS / ISSUE 46 / ROY WILSON / PH7

AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE PH7 VACUUM TUBE PRE- PRE AMPLIFIER



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

HIFI THE COLLECTOR / MAY '06 / ALAN BROWN / CD7

AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE CD 7 VACUUM TUBE CD PLAYER

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

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

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

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

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Alvin Gold

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

Sony vs Apple

Sony's new personal player is a modern miracle...

"At 128kbps, sound quality is somewhat inferior, but at 256kbps it comes alive."

Undeniably the most influential and least expected development in recent years has been in the area of personal audio. Sony's cassette, CD and later MiniDisc-propelled WalkMen were usurped an aeon ago by Apple's ubiquitous iPod family and, for some years now, the iPod has set the pattern that all others have followed. But none of the pretenders has had the success of Apple in this market and that also goes for big names like Microsoft, as well as the guys who invented the concept of personal audio – Sony.

The iPod came along just as hard disks were becoming small enough and abstemious enough in power consumption to cope in a personal stereo environment. Its divide and conquer approach to music distribution owes much to iTunes, which is virtually a brand name as iPod itself – though nothing like as intuitive or helpful. The ergonomics of the iPod has also been widely praised and copied – the sincerest form of flattery. But there are now signs that Apple may not have it all its own way for much longer.

My personal dissatisfaction with the iPod relates to its performance. While it's true that my fifth-generation iPod has been enhanced by a pair of Sennheiser's sexy PXC250 noise-cancelling headphones, during a recent stay in hospital, I didn't bother with the player at all, instead using the radio in my mobile phone.

But now I've heard a player which has reawakened my interest in personal audio players, a version of the model which I'm discussing here, an MP3 player from that old stalwart of the WalkMan era, Sony. I first heard it playing some music – I can't remember what – which was aurally a complete knockout. It sounded bolder and more dynamic than my iPod and clearer, too. When I got back to the office I requested a sample of the senior model in the range for evaluation, the NWZ639F.

It is an absolute knockout. It comes in various colours – mine is a rather fetching burgundy –

and is small enough to fit with room to spare in my credit card wallet. It measures a mere 42.9x89.5x7.5mm and weighs only 46 grams. The model I requested has a 16GB of Flash memory (the largest available currently), which means no rotating hard discs, but it remains good enough for 126 hours of playback time at 256kbps MP3, or 103 hours at 320kbps VBR. Enough to cope with a respectable music collection.

At 128kbps, sound quality is somewhat inferior, but at 259kbps it comes alive. This is what the iPod is supposed to do, but in my experience simply doesn't and much the same applies using Apple Lossless. There is simply not enough quality in the audio circuitry to allow the iPod to perform.

Nestling under its mobile phone-like interface is a full suite of video capabilities. You can store JPEGs and the player comes pre-loaded with a number of short music videos, even part of a football match, which are displayed on a superb 50mm TFT QVGA (240x320 pixel) variable aspect ratio display. The Sony will also support the BBCi Player, so it can be used to view the last seven days of broadcast TV. Software includes the legal version of Napster and much of the under the skin intelligence comes from Microsoft Media Player 11.

All this is controlled by a simple, interface which is elegant and intuitive and the unit includes a clock and plenty of below-skin customisation – an equaliser, for example.

Please Sony, keep it simple. Don't load future models with too many gratuitously useless toys (though I wouldn't mind outlook diary integration). It's probably the relative simplicity that allows the Sony's output stage to sing as well as it does. In any case, for the first time in ages, it is now Sony that is setting the pace. **HFC**



Sony's new MP3 player, the NWZ639F

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"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". CD 6 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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PMC's first dedicated home hi-fi speaker, the FB1, has long been considered one of the best floorstanding loudspeakers money could buy. First seen way back in 2000, the slim speaker with the deep, deep bass has been through several changes this decade and the new FB1i is clearly the best version ever.

The big change to the speaker is the use of a new tweeter, a 27mm soft-fabric dome model, designed in association with Norwegian speaker specialist SEAS. This is coupled to a 170mm mid-bass driver, which is used to feed PMC's special Advanced Transmission Line to help deliver real power from a deceptively svelte speaker shape. In addition, a redesigned crossover and refinements to the cabinet and plinth mark out the FB1i as something special.

We reviewed the FB1i – and its bigger OB1i brother – in *HFC 311*, and we gave it a healthy but richly deserved Best Buy badge, thanks to its improved treble and overall smoothness; building on the rock-solid foundation of the FB1 and FB1+ that went before. Best of all, you can win this loudspeaker at the click of a mouse.

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The PMC FB1i uses a...

- A:** Activated Manumission Lane
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TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Answers must be received between 12 December 2008 and 08 January 2009. The prize winner will be selected at random from all correct entries received between the relevant dates and will receive a pair of PMC FB1i 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.

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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



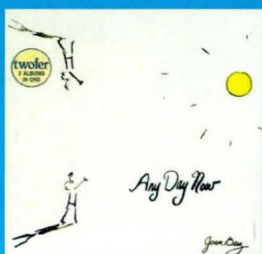
BLOOD, SWEAT & TEARS

Blood, Sweat & Tears

Columbia/Pure Pleasure 180g vinyl

Music: The second outing from nine-piece BS&T was its first without Al Kooper on keyboards, a factor which reveals the band's jazz inclinations rather more clearly than their debut. It begins and ends with works by Satie which seem a little out of place, but the stuff in-between sounds like the beginnings of jazz-rock. It's high-quality playing, but isn't quite sure which style it's aiming for.

Sound: A little thin and compressed, there is however plenty of detail and reasonable amounts of energy as well as a bit of a struggle to fit all the brass in. *JK*



JOAN BAEZ

Any Day Now – Songs of Bob Dylan

Vanguard/Pure Pleasure 180g vinyl

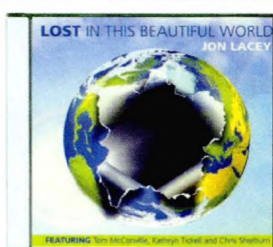
Music: This double album from 1968 evokes the protest movement of the early 1960s folk scene in no small way. Baez's clean, pure voice makes a distinct change from the way we are used to hearing these 16 tracks and a refreshing one too, it serves to illustrate the quality of both songs and singer. The backing band were Nashville's finest, but you only occasionally get a twang of country and sometimes just the voice alone.

Sound: An open, clear and pristine recording this could have done with a bit more body but is certainly true to the period. *JK*



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

COMPACT DISC & VINYL



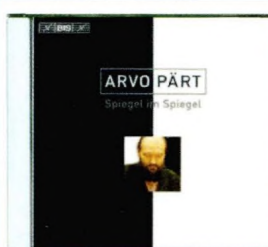
JON LACEY

Lost In This Beautiful World

Winding River CD

Music: Jon Lacey is a young Brit who's been making acoustic waves for a good few months now. Melodic, dynamic and intelligent, the dozen self-penned songs are all strong. The touching John Lennon tribute *Stolen* and the energetic, feel-good *Return To The Sunshine* are perhaps the strongest, but there really are no major weak points.

Sound: Lacey produced and mastered this – with a bit of help from Ron Agus at Durham's Studio One – and he's done himself proud. Vocals and guitar cut through superbly. *PS*



ARVO PÄRT - FRATRES FOR VIOLIN & PIANO ETC

Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, Tallinn Quartet etc.

BIS CD-11434

Music: Here is one of the finest retrospectives of Arvo Pärt music to appear to date. Although religiously inspired, his music has a depth and range at odds with other comparable composers and the music can be approached on its own terms, simply as pure music.

Sound: It would be unfair to single out individual pieces for mention, as this disc is excellent throughout and is accompanied by particularly good, wide-ranging sound from the BIS engineers. *AG*



MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN (PIANO)

In A State Of Jazz

Hyperion

Music: Though the disc booklet declares 'There is no jazz in this recording', this simply means the music contains no improvisation. The work is from 20th century composers who are described as 'particularly successful, each in their sometimes peculiar fashion, in fusing the spirit or the letter of jazz with music intended for the concert hall'.

Sound: Marc-André Hamelin's playing does full justice to the startling complexity of the scores. The performances are percussive, but sensitive when called for. *AG*

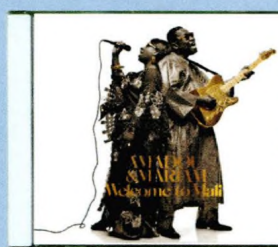


FRIPP & ENO

No Pussyfooting DGM/Panegyric

Music: Recorded in Brian Eno's London flat on two Revox tape machines in September 1972, *The Heavenly Music Corporation* was the pair's first brave step into ambient electronica. Clouds of micro-sounds floated upwards and outwards to guarantee 100,000 sales when it appeared on *No Pussyfooting* a year later. Fripp called it 'the best thing I've ever done' whilst Eno's maverick pop status was cemented forever.

Sound: Simon Heyworth's 24-bit remaster brings out all the shimmering quality of the original sessions. *MP*



AMADOU & MARIAM

Welcome To Mali Because Music

Music: Having sold half a million of their last Manu Chao-produced album *Dimanche A Bimako*, the pressure is on the blind Malian duo Amadou & Mariam to live up to their status as Africa's top-selling current act. In Chao's absence they sensibly haven't attempted to replicate his ostentatious Euro-disco makeover on the follow-up, although Damon Albarn pops up on two tracks. Amadou plays some stingingly funky desert blues guitar and Mariam wails soulfully on a set of original compositions steeped in African heritage, but with a distinctively international

sensibility in a solid, pleasingly non-flashy set.

Sound: The two Albarn tracks are quite different from the rest of the album, particularly the single *Sabali*, which sounds like an African version of *Flaming Lips NW*





THIS MONTH'S CLASSIC HI-FI TEST DISC

"Great use is made of dynamics and the subtlety of the piano playing is particularly engaging."

THIRD WORLD LOVE Avanim AsaI/NMC

Music: The members of this Israeli band play trumpet, piano, drums and bass, with occasional vocal contributions. The group's first album was released shortly after they formed back in 2004 and successfully fuses a beautifully diverse melange of styles to tremendously entertaining effect.

As the line-up would suggest there's a strong jazz element to it all, but it's influenced by both eastern and western musical styles and never disappears up its own proverbial. Great use is made of dynamics and the subtlety of the piano playing from Yonatan Avishai is particularly engaging.

Sound: This is a fine recording even though it seems to have been self made. Trumpet is unusually devoid of stress and they have captured the vibe of the session extremely well. JK



SAVINA YANATOU Songs Of An Other ECM

Music: It's common for artists who gain some international renown to soften their artistic urges and rein in some of the more outré aspects of their

sound. Not so with Yanatou. She sings in a variety of languages, using the original folk arrangements as starting points before taking off into ethereal flights of fancy that fall somewhere between folk and jazz.

Sound: Her voice is an extraordinary instrument, shifting from a lilting flutter to full-throated microtonal howl in a heartbeat and is ably supported by her band. ECM delivers its usual pristine recording values capturing the full range of this marvellous acoustic set. DO



HIGH-QUALITY AUDIO

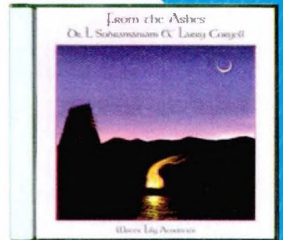
DR L SUBRAMANIAM & LARRY CORYELL

From the Ashes Water Lily Acoustic

SACD (stereo multichannel hybrid plus stereo CD)

Music: The pairing of jazz guitarist Larry Coryell and violinist 'Mani' Subramaniam has its antecedent in John McLaughlin's work with Shakti in the seventies, yet it is dedicated to Django Reinhardt and Stephan Grappelli. It's a meeting of musicians from east and west who produce music of a distinctly transcendental persuasion. These musicians have worked together in the past so maybe it's not so remarkable that it only took them a day to compose the four pieces on here. But the result is remarkable, it's gentle stuff that keeps you engaged thanks to the quality of playing.

Sound: This is a superb recording with purist credentials and hardware from Tim 'Baron' de Paravicini for the original analogue recording and custom-built Meitner A to DSD decoding for the SACD. JK



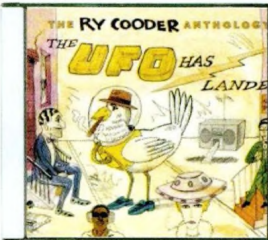
MAHLER SYMPHONY 4

Bernard Haitink, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra RCO 07003

SACD (stereo/ multichannel hybrid plus stereo CD)

Music: Apart from the soprano's addition to the final movement, this is a relatively short, accessible work and the most classically straightforward of Mahler's symphonic output. The work as a whole offers predominantly light, open orchestral textures and as well as being wonderful musically, it also offers the perfect starting point for those who might have been put off by the perception that Mahler's music is hard work.

Sound: The sound is of the highest standard and although there are not many interpretive surprises, the performance is distinguished and flows beautifully, topped and tailed by an exquisite performance of *Sehr behaglich* with soprano Christine Schaffer hitting just the right note (in both senses). SACD here adds definition and space and is well worth having. AG

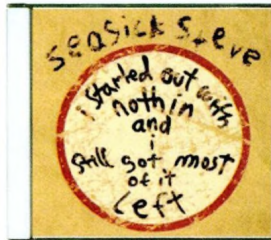


RY COODER

Anthology: The UFO Has Landed Rhino

Music: Few musicians deserve a comprehensive box set more than Ry Cooder, but he's always vetoed such a move on the grounds they are for the retired and/or deceased and not for musicians still on active service. He's finally allowed his son Joachim to compile a 32-track, two-disc set that's heavily weighted towards the blues-rock albums he made in the 1970s. As a tribute to one of the great virtuoso slide guitarists, it's long overdue.

Sound: Diverse and eclectic, it's got it all, country-blues, rocking RnB and the moody soundscapes of his film music for *Paris, Texas*. NW



SEASICK STEVE

I Started Out With Nothin'... Warner

Music: *I Started Out With Nothin' And I Still Got Most Of It Left*, to give it its full title, is the itinerant blues man's third album at the age of 67 and his first for a major label. Using customised guitars and his 'Mississippi Drum Machine', actually a wooden box that he stomps on, he treads that fine line between sounding loose and exquisitely precise which bluesmen have been striving for since Robert Johnson.

Sound: It's cleaner than its predecessor, *Dog House Music*, but it doesn't take too much of the edge off Steve's rough 'n' ready take on the blues. DO



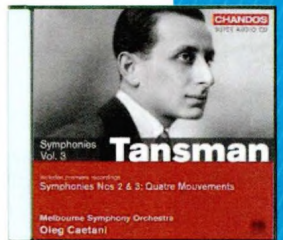
TANSMAN SYMPHONIES VOL 3

Oleg Caetani and Melbourne SO Chandos

SACD (stereo/ multichannel hybrid plus stereo CD)

Music: His name may be little remembered today, but in Paris between the wars, Polish-born Alexandre Tansman was seen as an equal of Ravel and Stravinsky and he was celebrated enough to perform for both Charlie Chaplin and Gandhi. This welcome SACD manages to squeeze in both the sweepingly majestic *Second Symphony* (1926), the first movement of which owes something to Debussy's *La Mer*, and the Gershwin-esque *Third Symphony* (1931).

Sound: This recording by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in their home town was conducted by Nadia Boulanger protégé Oleg Caetani and gives this unaccountably obscure music the benefit of a lustful and enthusiastic interpretation. DO





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The pick of this month's best letters

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

TOMORROW'S HI-FI?

Is there a future for hi-fi? My local dealer (Audio T in Eastbourne) is no more; everyone's talking about recession and iTunes has replaced the HMV shop as the place to buy your music. All of this must have a really bad effect on the sales of hi-fi. So what am I going to do tomorrow?

Alex Craven via email

HFC Only a fool would suggest everything in the world of consumer electronics is rosy right now, but hi-fi has weathered many storms. Back in the late 1980s for example, hi-fi had to contend with the Black Monday stock market crash and the 'perfect sound, forever' of CD undermining traditional LP sales. Perhaps surprisingly, more than 20 years later, people are still designing, building and selling turntables. Doubtless we will see big changes in the way music is recorded,



distributed and replayed in the coming years – and those changes may spell radical shifts in the fortunes of brands, distributors and dealers – but people will

“...everyone's talking about recession and iTunes has replaced the HMV shop.”

always want to listen to music through more than just a pair of white earphones and that's where we come in.

VALVE RETURN

Why has there suddenly been a plethora of valve-based products on the pages of *HFC*? Valve amps were the preserve of the high-end and the tweaky for a long time, yet now they are everywhere. There are even a few available with iPod docks. Have we all taken a step backwards in time, or am I missing something?

Chris Doveton via email

LETTER OF THE MONTH

SUGGESTION BOX

I have been a reader of *HFC* off-and-on since the very first issue by Angus McKenzie in the 1970s (Is the gentleman still around by-the-way?).

I would like to make a few comments in relation to *HFC* and what in my opinion might make it even better. You publish a lot of one-off reviews; they have their place, but in my opinion they are of limited value. You might also be in danger of confusing your readers by having lots of solitary Best Buys with no context or reference point. Why not, for example, do an *Ultimate Group Test* of all the top-line Best Buy products and contrast their relevance to different music tastes and room situations?

Also, to make *HFC* more interesting, I suggest you consider doing articles on the actual hi-fi equipment readers have in their homes.

Your second-hand shootout is always top of my list. I understand that it's hard to fit

everything in but you have the most unfortunate habit of not including photos of all the equipment that you feature in each article, even if it meant more pages to the feature. It would be space well spent.

Wilf Carter Belfast

HFC Thanks for the comments. We do strive to submit products that have been solo tested into *Ultimate Group Tests* wherever possible, but we love the idea of a Best of the Best Buys test... expect to see something along these lines soon. Unfortunately, such a test is unlikely to feature the real high-end these days, as these manufacturers are not supporters of the

comparison group test format and one of the reasons why these products feature strongly in our *Collection* special. We have periodically run features on reader's equipment, but these features 'play' badly with the majority of our readers. As to the *Second-Hand Shootout*, we typically find we can only source images of about two-thirds of the products we list. The transition from film to digital photography meant a lot of

products from five or more years ago have a limited range of historic images on tap. So, we decided to stick with using just two images. Sadly, Angus McKenzie MBE passed away in 2005 after a long illness. He was 71.



❑ **HFC** China happened, Chris. The Chinese manufacturers currently supplying the mid-to-high end of the hi-fi market have got a real thing about valves. Also, companies that were initially interested in producing valve amps, but were unable to do so because of high costs, can make models in China for a fraction of the price today. There is also an argument that as music gets more compressed and the formats used to make music get brighter, so the amplifier needs something like valve sound to smooth things over. Add to the mix that a lot of people like the sound of valves and they certainly look the part, and perhaps its no mystery at all why the little hollow-state wonders are popular again.

FRANKEN-FI

I've been rebuilding an old amplifier – a Leak Stereo 20. Because it's wired 'point-to-point' (no circuit boards – this thing was made in the days of the Cuban Missile Crisis) it's relatively easy to replace all the components. I hope to give my creature life soon. Point is, even when it was still using all the old components, it sounded wonderful. Will modern hi-fi – with PCBs and surface-mount components – be as easy to repair and still sound as good in 45 years' time?

Ian Bartley via email

HFC The Stereo 20 was a particularly fine example of the valve amp maker's craft back in the 1960s. And yes, it's easy to repair and maintain and still has the potential to sound remarkable today (indeed, Icon Audio's modern range of valve amps are based around Harold

“...no circuit boards – this thing was made in the days of the Cuban Missile Crisis...”

Leak's designs from half a century ago). However, few people reach into the past to restore classic preamplifiers, many of which are best consigned to history. So, when we look at classic products of latter years, it's always good to remember that not everything was wonderful back then.

Although most amps now use circuit boards in construction (to keep on the right side of Euro-legislations, as well as making the build quality simpler), this doesn't make the products unable to be repaired or restored in the future. The *HFC* crystal ball is currently out of action (due, of course, to unforeseen circumstances), but we think some of the best of today's hi-fi will be around and still sounding wonderful for a very long time.

SHOW WOE

What's happening to the quality of hi-fi shows in London? It wasn't so long ago that we had two shows – one in Heathrow, one in Hammersmith – that bristled with the latest goodies from the big names. This year, though, the show near the airport was far smaller than before and those who were showing were hardly big name hi-fi brands like Marantz or Linn. I'd hoped for something better from the Stuff show at ExCel; I couldn't attend that weekend, but a friend who went said it was almost completely free from hi-fi. Is this a pattern forming?

Derek Shillinglaw via email

HFC It isn't a good time to promote a show, with many companies spending their Credit Crunched resources in other directions. Nevertheless, the turn-out at these particular shows was especially low this year. We hope for better prospects next season, but in the meantime... there's always Bristol.

SYSTEM ADDICT

I think there's a big failing of hi-fi magazines, *HFC* included. You review in isolation. I tried – and failed – to find a demonstration of your budget CD, amp and speaker Award winners in combination, but I'd lay good money down that the three put together would sound dreadful, even if the individual components sound good on their own. Why don't you compare complete systems, ideally ones that you can readily buy in shops?

Mark Richardson via email

HFC It's a good idea (and part of the reason why we have tested one-brand CD and amp packages in this issue) but a logistical nightmare. A good dealer will often pick and choose their products with great care, blending CD, amp and speakers from three different brands and sealing the deal with equally well-chosen stands, supports and cables. Just adding the permutations of six CD players, six amps and six speakers at a similar price makes for 216 different combinations to sift through to find the one that produces the best synergy. As we test the products separately, so their Award winning status applies as a standalone product.

Pictured: The handmade Icon Audio Stereo 25 valve amp



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

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"They can switch from fast and furious to smooth and cosseting in the blink of an eye and never miss the slightest hint of anything lurking in the background"

- Hi-Fi World October 2008



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

- 34** Myryad MI one-box hi-fi system
- 38** Bowers and Wilkins 684 loudspeaker
- 42** Roksan Kandy K2 CD player and integrated amplifier
- 46** Pro-Ject USB Box USB DAC
- 50** Thorens TD700 turntable
- 54** Unison Research Unico CDE CD player
- 58** KEF iQ50 loudspeaker
- 62** ACS T2 ear-canal earphones



- 64** Supra Mains Block MDO6-BS/SP
- 65** True Colours Industries Baby Constrictor
- 65** Wireworld Aurora 5²

- 73** Arcam CD17/A38
- 75** Cambridge Audio Azur 840C/840A V2
- 77** Marantz SA8003/PM8003
- 79** Pioneer PD-D9/A-A9
- 81** Yamaha CD-S1000/A-1000



ROUND-UP

MAINS ACCESSORIES £70-£180

- 64** Silverman Labs Clarity 1

ULTIMATE GROUP TEST

ONE-BRAND HI-FI SYSTEMS £1,200-£1,700

- 71** Advance Acoustic MCD403/
MAP305 II DA

OUR RATINGS EXPLAINED

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

Our overall conclusion

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

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

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT	
SOUND	★★★★☆
FEATURES	★★★★☆
BUILD	★★★★☆
VALUE	★★★★☆
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE	
★★★★☆	

The things we like most about the product

The things we think could be better

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

OUR AWARD BADGES EXPLAINED



Best Buy

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



Editor's Choice

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

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

MYRYAD



A close-up view of a CD player's control panel. The panel is black with white icons for various functions: a volume knob, a play/pause button, a stop button, a previous track button, a next track button, a repeat button, and a menu button. The LCD display shows the following information: "CD Audio" with a volume bar, "Track 1" with a progress bar, "9:49PM" in the top right corner, "Track 1 of 17" with a progress bar, and "01:13" on the left and "05:03" on the right. The "M" menu button is illuminated.

Ahead of the crowd

Myryad leads the way with Music Integrated technology

PRODUCT Myryad Mi

TYPE One-box hi-fi system

PRICE £1,250

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 35x9x33cm

⊙ Weight: 5.5kg ⊙ Digital outputs: Toslink optical, RCA phono electrical ⊙ Built-in sources: CD, DAB/FM radio ⊙ Inputs: x2, digital x2, iPod ⊙ Outputs: loudspeakers, headphone, line, digital

CONTACT ☎ 0844 800 8258 # www.myryad.co.uk

Amazingly, it has been some four years since we last saw a new product from Myryad. Or maybe not so amazing: one of the things we always liked about Myryad's products was the way they seemed to be a step ahead of the crowd in certain areas, most notably styling and features. If the company decided it was time to stop developing for a while and simply capitalise on its lead by selling some nice kit, we can see the point. Being taken over by Armour Home Electronics presumably allowed some breathing space, too.

But the world soon catches up and the question then is how to recapture the lead? The answer is the Mi, or 'Music Integrated'. It's hard to quibble with the 'Integrated' part of the name, as few products manage to cram quite so many options into one box. CD, FM and DAB radio, iPod connector, optional Bluetooth input and amplifier – it's a lot in something with an LP-sleeve footprint. LP is about the only thing not catered for, in fact, but the line inputs could allow for that with an external phono stage.

One other feature the Mi doesn't have is Internet connectivity. That may seem perverse to some, but what in the end does the Internet offer right now to the music lover?

Downloadable music is provided for in the Mi with the iPod and Bluetooth connections – just download to computer or iPod first, which is likely to be a lot easier than loading direct to audio kit. For the rest, there's Internet radio (plentiful, but very often terrible quality) and database access. But since the Mi plays real CDs rather than 'ripped' versions you've presumably got the sleeve, complete with track listing and artwork. Anyway, it's got excellent support for CD Text, so many modern CDs will display verbal track titles rather than just track numbers.

“...few products manage to cram quite so many options into one box. CD, FM and DAB radio, iPod, Bluetooth input and amplifier.”

'Display' – ah, now we're getting warm. You see that nice-looking display on the right of the unit? It's one of the most attractive features we've seen on any audio kit in quite a while. A full colour graphic display is a very flexible device and Myryad has made the most of it, giving not only track number or title but beautifully legible indications of what buttons do in menu mode (no obscure and fiddly icons) and a 'thermometer' indication of how far into a track one is. Using the remote, you can scroll down a list of tracks, viewing four to one screen and buttons on the remote or front panel are acknowledged clearly and informatively.

We're talking about CD replay there because that's what most writers for *Hi-Fi Choice* tend to default to. But, we are slowly getting used

to iPods and suchlike and whatever one thinks of their sound – of which more in a moment – their user interface is typically more informative than that of CD. The Mi reflects that interface on said screen and as a result one ends up with something of a 'dream team' – iPod information and convenience with hi-fi sound and loudspeaker output. All right, other well-designed iPod docks exist, but few are quite so sleek in this department.

It's easy to dismiss portable music players as low-fi because they are so closely associated

with data-reduced systems such as MP3. Most, however, can store uncompressed data (WAV files) which contain the same bits as a CD. When connected digitally to a device like this, the portable device is pretty much a 'bit bucket' without a sound of its own and the explosion of storage capacity in recent years (16GB micro-SD card, for example) has made uncompressed storage perfectly feasible.

If your music is stored on some other format with analogue or digital outputs you're not missing out, for the Mi includes two each of analogue and digital inputs, the latter optical, only. There's even a recording output, plus a digital output and a couple of 3.5mm jack sockets on the front, one an extra line input, the other a headphone output. ▶



Q&A

We spoke with Steve Reichert – industry veteran and PR Manager of Armour Home – about the Myryad



HFC: We're slightly surprised to see a product like this with no hard drive included. Should we expect one of those soon, perhaps? Or does Myryad reckon the iPod fills that need?

Steve Reichert: The Mi is designed to delight all lovers of music, including the new generation who 'carry their music with them' and want to enjoy and share that same music, with even greater fidelity, when they relax at home. With this in mind, their iPod, or other portable MP3 device is the perfect source component.

HFC: The digital power amplifier looks unfamiliar. Is this Myryad's own development?

SR: The digital output stage is our bespoke implementation of some very advanced technology from D2Audio.

HFC: Do you feel that a product like this can, in principle, rise to the sonic level of decent separates these days?

SR: Yes, absolutely. But more than that, the Myryad Mi is a direct response to consumer demand. Today's music lovers don't just demand high performance. They want it from compact, stylish boxes that are familiar to operate and reflect their lifestyle.

HFC: Why use a flying lead for the iPod rather than a dock?

SR: The Mi's large display reflects the iPod's own menus, allowing easy, armchair operation from across the room. Because owners don't need to see their iPod's display, it allows for greater flexibility of placement. Unlike its competitors, the Mi can be sited on shelves as well as the top of units.

HFC: Of all the high-tech features in the Mi, which was the hardest to get worked out?

SR: Frankly, the most difficult aspect of our work on the Mi, was fitting all the separate parts of the design into the space provided.



And then whatever source you select is passed to the power amp, rated at 100 watts into 4 ohms (so think 50 watts into 8 ohms). Even before we'd read the brochure or removed the covers we'd guessed that might be some kind of switching amp in the space available, and it turns out it's a Pulse Width Modulated Class D Digital amplifier, built into a particularly diminutive enclosure at the rear.

Everything is kept digital as far as the power stage, proof of which can be found in the measured figures for jitter, which is lower at the loudspeaker output than at the line output. The FM tuner function is digital too and is handled on the same module as DAB reception. Operation is pleasant via either the remote or the touch-sensitive buttons on the front panel.

SOUND QUALITY

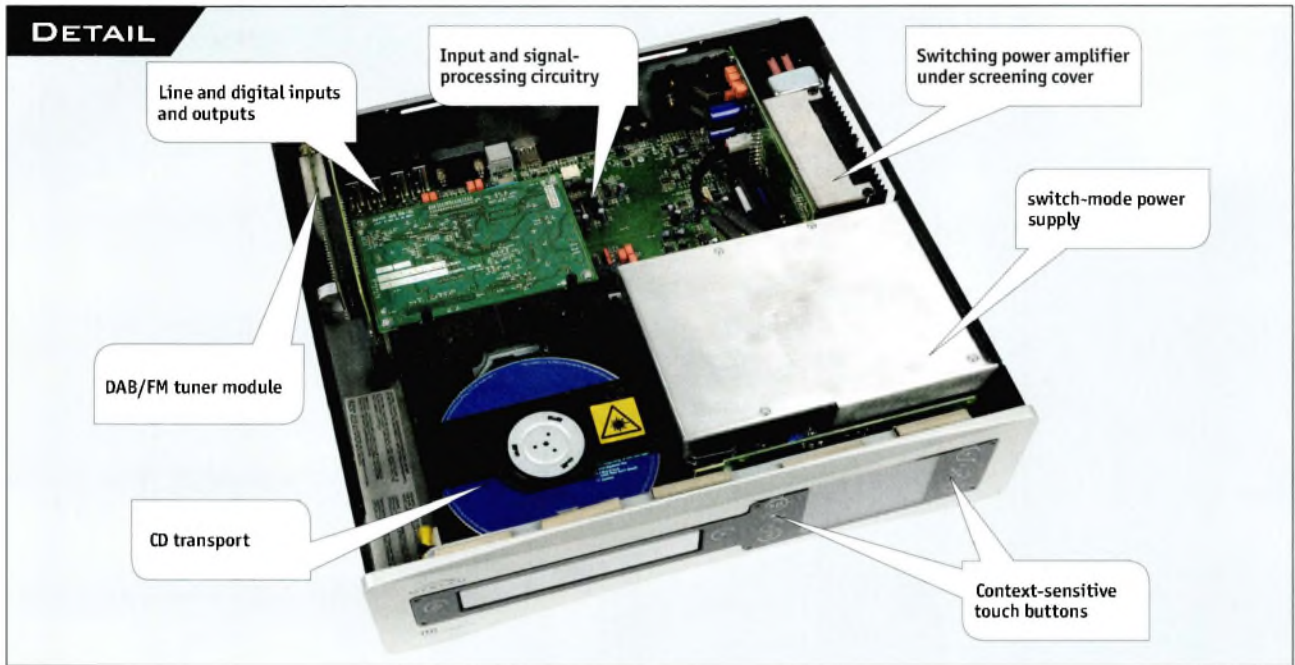
All our enthusiasm for the appearance and interface could go for naught if the sound doesn't cut it and there's no denying that standards are pretty high in this area. The Arcam Solo Mini is probably our favourite to date, but there are plenty of other competent – and more-than-competent – one-box systems

around in various shapes and forms, within sight of the Mi's price. It's a relief, therefore, to be able to say that not only is this a good unit sonically, but it's a distinctive one, too.

Let's start with CD replay, which at the very least has the virtue of being unambiguous with no scope for digital compression variables, broadcasting foibles and so on. After a cursory play with as many of the Mi's features as possible, we dug out a few old favourite silver discs and got stuck in. It soon became apparent that we were hearing a very pleasing version of them, but there was at the same time no denying that it is still, to be pedantic, a version. Specifically, it is a little soft-grained and, well, 'cuddly'.

Playing on a regular basis with some of the finest hi-fi separates, we at HFC are accustomed to the quest for ever greater levels of detail and precision in sound reproduction, in general an admirable goal. But it's almost as if Myryad's designers had consciously taken a small step back from that and decided to go for the bigger picture, with details left rather more to the imagination. If it was a photograph, you would guess the photographer had chosen the old 'Vaseline on the lens' approach.





Is that valid? At £1,250 for a comprehensive system, we feel it is: and we're not embarrassed to admit that we greatly enjoyed it. It encourages a stress-free, low concentration listening experience which is still musically involving, a bit in the way your first transistor radio/portable cassette/budget turntable was – all of those were severely shaky in absolute sound quality terms, but they got a message across. The Mi is nothing like shaky, it's just not as incisive as much modern hi-fi, and it does rather prove the point that insight is not everything. Oversight is good, too!

You might be wondering what performance is like in terms of rhythm and excitement and

DIGITAL AMPLIFICATION

Some amplifiers are more digital than others, but the simple fact is that this one has a switching output stage which is very efficient and is driven digitally. Efficiency doesn't just lead to reduced power consumption: it makes considerable space savings possible as the large heatsink of a conventional amp can be replaced by something much smaller. Digital drive means that all control, including volume and tone controls, is done in the digital domain, and analogue sources must be digitised before they can be amplified. In practice, though, the user doesn't need to know about this – what matters is the end result, what one hears! – and the only giveaway is the unit's size and weight. Myriad's digital amp module is one of the smallest we've seen, but no doubt it will be trumped soon enough - this is very much the technology of the future.

“...it's little surprise that performance with an iPod source, playing uncompressed material, is basically identical to CD.”

while it's not quite up to the standard of fine separates it's actually rather good. The soft focus doesn't extend much into the bass, so when someone whacks a drum and plucks a bass you get plenty of impact and those 50 watts are plenty enough to move air convincingly even with quite inefficient speakers (we used ATCs for most of our listening). What's more, there is certainly no bright, hard edge to the treble so listening fatigue is low and that surely helps in keeping one's attention where it should be.

Given what we said above about using an iPod as a 'bit bucket', it's little surprise that performance with an iPod source, playing uncompressed material, is basically identical to CD. We felt the line input was a little loose and vague in the bass, but the digital inputs seemed much closer to CD and, as such, very listenable. The only real let-down, to our ears, is the FM tuner section which is at best only so-so. We've yet to hear a DAB/FM module which turns in more than basic FM performance and this one is muffled, rather inclined to graininess and distinctly coarse in the quality of its background noise. DAB performance is good, though.

We ended up with real affection and respect for the Mi. It is pleasingly different in makeup and operation from anything else

we've come across and its sound also stands out. It's probably entirely sensible that Myriad has not aimed at the highest standards of purity, because in the circumstances that would probably have failed. Instead, a characterful but musically communicative performance nicely complements a distinctive package, making this a fine choice for exactly the sort of application one would guess at – second systems, spare room, holiday home... anywhere you have a little room for indulgence! **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★☆	PRO Cleverly designed with a very good feature set and adorable user interface, plus distinctive and beguiling sound that's big on general musical effect.
FEATURES ★★★★★	CON Don't look here for the last word in musical analysis! FM reception is a bit coarse, and portable music player support is currently limited to iPod devices.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION The Mi does not try to be all things to all men. It sets its own parameters and succeeds very well within them. In the process it sacrifices some audio purity but the overall performance is nevertheless highly attractive.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/483748	

BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Pick of the bunch

Bowers and Wilkins's 684 floorstander incorporates much of the company's classy technology

PRODUCT Bowers and Wilkins 684

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £699 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 20x91x30cms

⊖ Weight: 18kg ⊖ Drivers: 1x 25mm aluminium dome tweeter, 1x 165mm Kevlar cone bass/mid, 1x 165mm cone bass unit ⊖ Sensitivity: 90dB ⊖ Impedance: 4 ohms ⊖ Separate plinth improves stability ⊖ Tweeter has alloy dome and rear tube loading

CONTACT ☎ 01903 221500 # www.bowers-wilkins.com

Worthing-based Bowers and Wilkins is the world market leader in hi-fi loudspeakers. The company has a huge selection of models, subdivided in numerous different ranges oriented towards specific market niches. The 600-series goes back further than most and is essentially the company's beer budget hi-fi range, eschewing such fripperies as real wood veneer and (in this latest 68-series guise) opting for Chinese manufacture in the interests of keeping the prices competitive.

First introduced in 2007, there are four stereo pairs in the 68-series and the 684 is the latest to come in for *HFC* scrutiny. It's the smaller and simpler of two floorstanders and costs £200 less than the larger and more complex 683 we reviewed back in *HFC* 304.

Whereas that larger model is a three-way design, with bass, midrange and treble drive units specifically designed for their duties, the 684 is a two-and-a-half-way design, with two matching 165mm bass/mid drivers. The lower one is just used to reinforce the bass region, while the upper one covers the complete bass and midrange part of the audio spectrum. Both have cast frames, woven Kevlar cones around 118mm in diameter and fixed central 'bullet' phase compensating plugs.

The bass loading arrangements used here are particularly interesting and unusually flexible. Each of the main drivers operates into its own port-loaded sub-enclosure: the bass-only unit works into the larger sub-enclosure, loaded by a flared front 'flowport'; the uppermost bass/mid driver has the smaller volume sub-enclosure and its reflex 'flowport' is located high up on the rear. Differences in the sizes of the sub-enclosures and the ports ensure that the reflex port

outputs are set at quite different frequencies. Furthermore, Bowers and Wilkins supplies two of its 'flexibungs' with each speaker. These can either be left whole, in order to block a port completely, or their centres can be removed, creating a much smaller diameter foam-lined port which shifts the tuned frequency downward. If our calculations are correct, the different

Two pairs of terminals enabling bi-wiring are sensibly sited quite close to the floor.

SOUND QUALITY

This 684 might be smaller, simpler and less costly than the 683, but it actually measures rather better, at least under our admittedly rather basic and simplistic regime. The far-field in-room averaged 'power' response is

“The 600-series is the company's beer budget hi-fi range, opting for Chinese manufacture in the interests of keeping prices competitive.”

permutations and combination of bungs and ports allows for some nine possible variations in bass alignment. Some might consider this a potential source of confusion and indecision, but it does at least mean that it should be possible to obtain a good room match.

A shiny asymmetric tweeter faceplate, doubling as the maker's name badge, looks a little strange but gives the rather prosaic styling a bit of edge. The diaphragm is a rather exposed and vulnerable-looking 25mm aluminium dome, with no separate grille protection, loaded at its rear by an internal tapering tube.

The whole thing weighs a very substantial 18kg and construction feels very solid and hefty. It looks purposeful enough and the weight indicates you do get plenty for your money. The front panel is textured black, optionally covered by a full-height moulded frame grille, while the rest is finished in vinyl woodprint with a choice of four alternatives: 'cherry', 'light oak', 'black', and the dark brown 'wenge' of our samples.

When we reviewed the 683 (*HFC* 287), no plinth was supplied or available, which not only handicapped the aesthetic appearance, but also made the physical stability very marginal. Since then Bowers & Wilkins has included plinths with both the 683 and 684, which is a significant and worthwhile improvement. The plinth supplied here has rather sharp corners, but does the job well enough, with secure spike accommodation.

remarkable impressive, holding within unusually good ± 4 dB limits right across the band, from 22Hz to above 15kHz. The overall smoothness and evenness is only interrupted by a minor peak around 800Hz, and another in the extreme treble around 13kHz.

Under our room conditions the bottom end worked very well with both ports unobstructed and the speakers sited well ▣



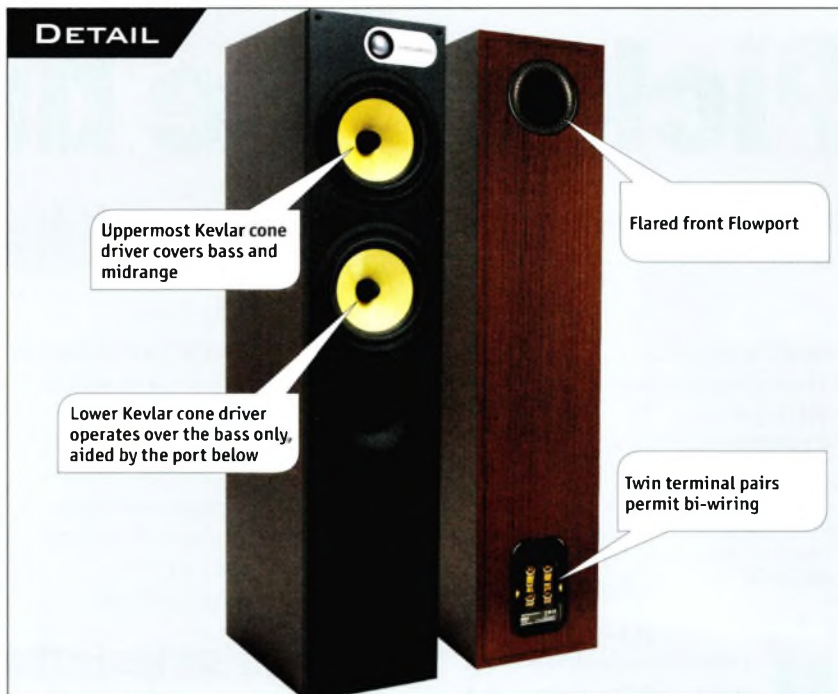
clear of walls. Sensitivity is a quite generous 90dB, especially since the bass is well extended (-6dB @ 22Hz in-room) and the easy-to-drive impedance stays above 6ohms through most of the band (dipping marginally below this above 10kHz).

Pair matching is satisfactory enough, albeit with minor variations at low frequencies and the impedance also shows a minor 'glitch' at 950Hz. The front port is tuned to 37Hz (28Hz with foam lining), while the rear port is tuned to 68Hz (50Hz when lined)

As predicted by the in-room responses, the 684 delivers an impressively neutral and evenhanded sound that's thoroughly competent in nearly every respect, even though it does reflect its modest price and aspirations to some extent.

Interestingly, the mild lack of presence energy that seems to be a regular feature of most Bowers & Wilkins designs is virtually absent on this occasion and in this respect the 684 has an attractive openness that is not shared by many of its stablemates. Rather less happy is the top end, which sounds a little too obvious and slightly congested, especially as it doesn't have the sweetest character through this part of the band. Whether that mild hardness at the top end is related to the upper treble peak which showed up on the room measurements is hard to say; it's also curious to note that the same peak was much less obvious in the 683 model, which shares the same tweeter.

That combination of an open presence and slightly coarse top end means that the 684 sounds happiest when operating at modest levels, which suits its fundamentally open neutrality particularly well. Start winding up the volume and although the speaker hangs together



“As predicted by in-room responses, the 684 delivers an impressively neutral and evenhanded sound that’s thoroughly competent.”

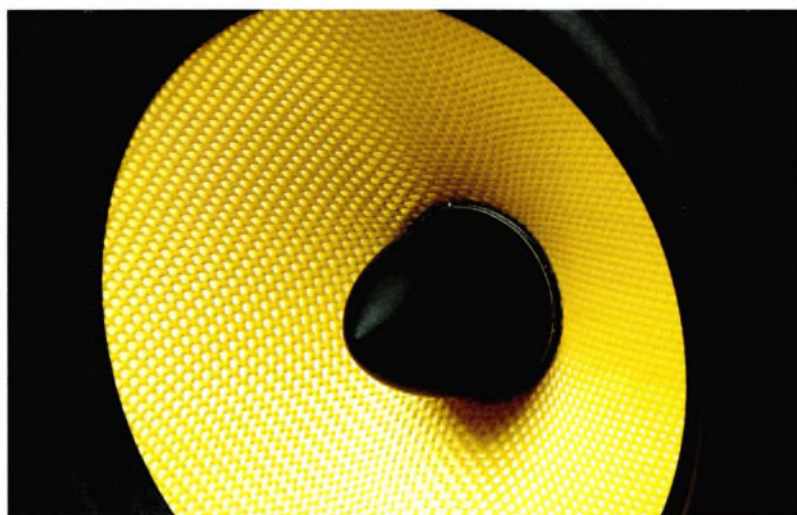
very well, delivering a powerful bottom end foundation, the mid and top moves progressively out of its comfort zone and starts to sound harder and more edgy, betraying the inevitably compromised ingredients of a budget speaker.

The dynamic performance – specifically the limitations thereof – is the other factor that constrains the performance of this speaker. While dynamic range *per se* is satisfactory enough, there is clear room for improvement – subtle low-level detail, such as the fine texture of orchestral instruments, tend to be masked. Stereo images focus well laterally,

but depth perspectives are somewhat limited and ambient information isn't very well resolved. Furthermore there's also a clear lack of overall dynamic tension. Again this is quite normal for a speaker of this type, but remains a limitation nonetheless.

The above criticisms should not be taken as harsh. When its reasonable price is taken into account, this is actually a very good loudspeaker delivering a fine all round performance with an unusually smooth and neutral overall tonal balance. **HFC**

Paul Messenger



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Tonal balance is impressively smooth and even, delivering superior neutrality with nicely open voicing. Good sensitivity is combined with fine, flexible bass extension and an easy amplifier load.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	CON Dynamic capabilities are somewhat limited. Bass is weighty but lacks some tonal discrimination.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION A fine all-round performer at a very realistic price, this floorstander has an impressively smooth and even tonal balance. It sounds nicely open at modest levels but the top end can become congested when the volume is turned up	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
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The Ascent of K2

Roksan significantly upgrades its high-end starter combination

PRODUCT Roksan Kandy K2

TYPE CD player and amplifier

PRICE £750 each

KEY FEATURES (CD player) Size: (WxHxD) 43.2x9x38cm

○ Weight: 9kg ○ Digital outputs: 1x 75 ohm coaxial, 1x AES/EBU XLR, 1x Toslink optical ○ Analogue outputs: 1x RCA phono ○ (Amp) Size: (WxHxD) 43.2x10.2x38cm ○ Weight: 14kg ○ Outputs: 1x preamp, 1x tape, 1x headphone ○ Inputs: 5x line-level, 1x MM phono ○ Power rating: 125 watts / 8 ohms

CONTACT ☎ 020 8900 6801 # www.kandyline.co.uk

For those in the know, K2 is the name of one of the tallest and, therefore, most frightening mountains on Earth. It also happens to be the appellation that Roksan has chosen for its most recent iteration of the Kandy CD player and integrated amplifier. However, unlike the scary precipices and fathomless drops that await you on the real-life K2, the only danger you possibly face from its namesakes is a broken toe if you drop one of the substantial cases on your foot: the amplifier weighs 14kg and the CD player is no lightweight, topping the scales at 9kg.

As well as being weighty, these units are also impressive-looking (not unlike the mountain, itself). Whereas the look of most British hi-fi, is probably best described as prosaic, the Kandy's elegant new designs will ensure that they catch the eye on the dealers' shelves. And the appearance is not just a matter of providing eye candy: the designer has addressed many

elements that affect the whole 'user experience' – to use that loathsome expression – including the layout and tactility of the controls and ensuring that the amplifier will provide decent performance from a variety of loudspeakers. The K2 amplifier has been engineered to 'punch above its weight' and can power loudspeakers that would not usually be too happy being connected to an integrated, even one that claims to deliver 120 watts per channel into eight ohms.

easy reach, but such that it will not easily be operated by accident. The switch is relocated from the conventional back panel position, which can pose access problems for some rack users and sited on the left-hand corner of the base panel, where it is also effectively out of sight, but easy to reach if needed. We, however, kept both components powered up for the duration of this review.

“Part of this remodelling process produced significant sound quality improvements over previous award-winning Kandy models.”

And here is an important distinction: the K2 models should not be regarded as budget high-end designs; instead, Roksan says, they represent high-end designs that have been re-engineered to enable them to be more affordable. Parts of this remodelling process – such as the revised circuit board layouts – conveniently also produced significant sound quality improvements over the previous, well-received and award-winning Kandy models.

A small point, but one that demonstrates the care that was taken with making these components user-friendly is the position of the mains switch, which is placed within

We auditioned the K2s driving Neat Momentum 4i floorstanders, which are, (despite not being technically challenging) candid, revealing loudspeakers whose performance capabilities demand a musically sympathetic amplifier that can adequately drive and maintain firm control over them. The amplifier and CD player were supported on Quadraspire Sunoko Vent racks and all cabling was from the Chord Company.

SOUND QUALITY

Starting with a selection of tracks from Radiohead's *Pablo Honey* CD, the K2



Q&A

We spoke to Roksan designer Touraj Moghaddam about the development of the K2 system.



HFC: How important an issue was cost when it came to the K2 combi?

Touraj Moghaddam: The requirement to keep down the costs of the K2 products meant that there was no way, for example, that we could use multiple circuit boards in the CD player so we had to design a single board that would accommodate all the components. We also wanted to eliminate the signal, data and power cables used to link the different circuits. These requirements turned out to be a blessing rather than a curse because the revised design resulted in significant improvements in the player's performance.

HFC: What other improvements are there?

TM: The new DAC is now located close to the control section and is controlled by a custom-made master clock. We have updated the CD drive and data acquisition systems to ensure that we extract an accurate copy of the data from the disc and the revisions to the power supply regulation mean that we achieve the highest signal integrity with the lowest amount of noise interference. Most of these improvements came about as a result of the development work we were doing on the upcoming top-of-the-range Platinum CD player. We realised that by using these techniques not only would the K2 CD benefit from better performance and long term reliability, but it would also be easier to manufacture. This ensured the new design would be within budget despite the extra cost of some of its new components.

What methods do you employ to minimise noise interference?

We also use a single PCB in the K2 amplifier and, again, we have managed to extract a fantastic performance from it through a simple optimisation strategy. For example, we keep the power transformer and rectifier circuits well away from the audio circuits, which minimises noise interference. And the careful routing and shape of the power tracks on the board ensures stable operation, while having the motorised volume control located in the middle of the preamplifier circuits helps keep the signal path very short and clean. To maintain the cleanliness of the signal path we do not use any low-level cables to carry audio.

How has the amp been tweaked?

The preamplifier section is now optimised to ensure its performance matches the new power amplifier section, which has been improved to produce higher and cleaner power with even better loudspeaker control.



◀ system demonstrates its dynamic balance, deftly contrasting the often fragile quality of Thom Yorke's voice alongside his robust power chords, not favouring either element over the other, but presenting the music as a thoroughly coherent and integrated performance. This amplifier displays fine control throughout the entire frequency spectrum. The Neat Momentums can be quick to expose any weaknesses in this respect; their isobaric bass arrangement will highlight any flabbiness in the low end and the tweeters can sound rather overexposed if the top end isn't well controlled and smoothly integrated with the mid-band.

Similarly they will take delight in revealing any shortfall in musical coherence, if, for example the system does not render pitch, rhythm and timing information such that the music flows correctly, or if the temporal progression of the music is interrupted by detailing that distracts the listener (which is why listening to a transistor radio can often be more musically persuasive and rewarding than a high-end hi-fi).

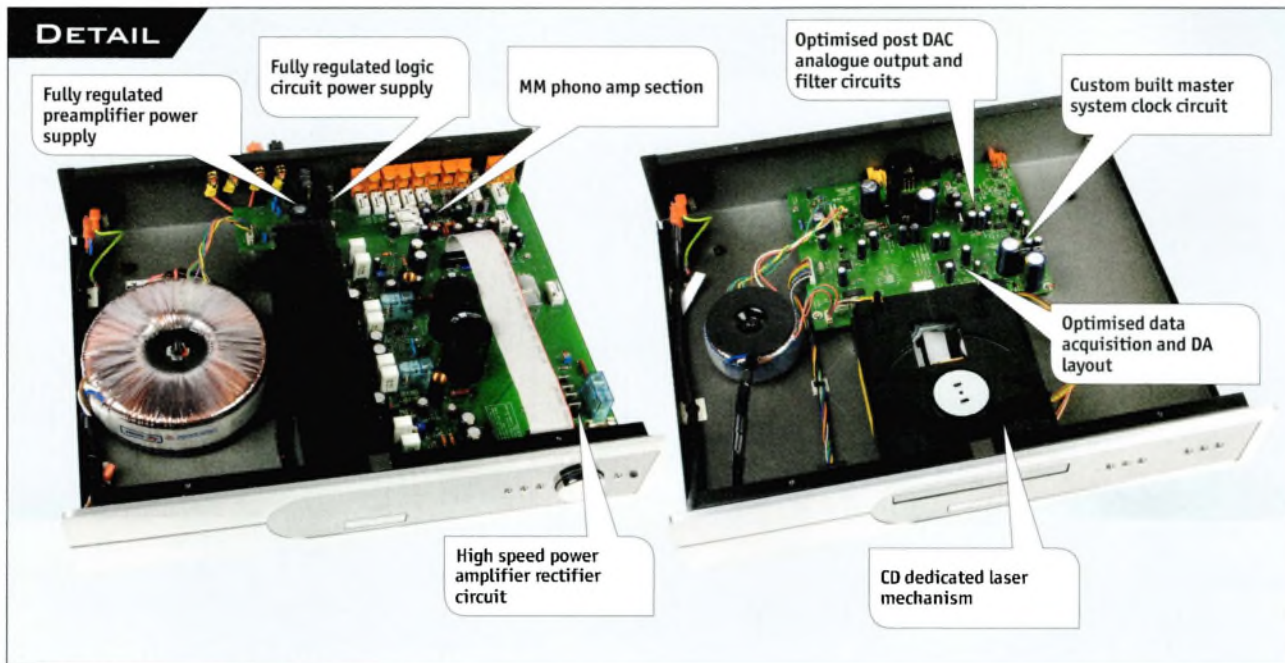
The Radiohead CD, which brims with potentially distracting elements that can cause a disjointed presentation, comes across with agreeable cogency and a thoroughly natural flow with all the detail tightly knitted into the music's structure.

The way the system handles bass guitar demonstrates how it can both separate and combine elements: while the bass line coheres and drives the songs along perfectly, it would be easy for someone who was learning that instrument to listen exclusively to that part of the arrangement and in appreciable detail, too.

The same delicacy and openness is apparent on the beautifully recorded Renata Youngblood CD *The Side Effects of Owning Skin*, where the predominantly acoustic instruments exhibit rich timbre and substance to match the expressive and dynamic range of the young singer/songwriter's wonderfully communicative voice.

Continuing to play independent, minor label discs, the system also manages to display instrumental timbre with fine acuity





when differentiating between the characters of the various electric and electro-acoustic guitars on the eponymous *Nils Lofgren Band Live* CD. This double album is not spoiled by banks of studio electronics processing all the life and vitality out of the music. The Roksan pairing delights in such recordings, burying itself deeply in the wealth of musical detail they present. It seizes hold

“It delivers the sort of performance that will satisfy both the music aficionado and the hi-fi enthusiast.”

of timing subtleties just as eagerly and delivers the sort of performance that will satisfy both the music aficionado and the hi-fi enthusiast. It's fascinating, having heard Lofgren talk about the problems that he and many other guitarists encounter reining in their enthusiasm and playing in strict time, to hear him getting 'out of the pocket' and pushing subtly ahead of the beat. And in the track 'Message', the forceful and graphic way the K2 components reveal the contrast between the effects-laden guitar and the pristine cleanliness of the drum-kit and bass is breath-taking; the distortion and delay on the guitar muddying the leading edges and decay of notes while the drums, in particular, punch through the mix with absolute clarity leaving you in doubt about how or exactly when they are being hit. Even the constant fizz of Timm Biery's ride cymbal reveals distinct pulses that show when it is being struck.

And playing at front-row SPLs, the K2 amplifier maintains its grip on the Momentums, right across their extensive bandwidth, whether it's Wade Matthews' bass or Timm Biery's drums exercising the isobaric bass drivers or Lofgren's bouncing guitar harmonics working the tweeters.

Similarly the system allows the Naim CD *Hands on Heart*, of Tim Hugh playing a selection of works on his cello to reveal the

wide range of expression, dynamics and tone that skilled hands and a bow can wrest from four strings. This K2 impresses with the sheer breadth of tonal colour it reveals in his powerful, but understated playing, along with the realistic, appropriately scaled portrayal it creates of the piano accompaniment. Even the Wigmore Hall applause sounds completely true-to-life!

In short, the K2 system delivers musical delicacy and drama in flawlessly balanced proportion... and for a very reasonable outlay. That it looks so polished and presentable is an added bonus. **HFC**

Malcolm Steward

DIFFERENCES...

Quite apart from the obvious cosmetic differences between the Kandy K2 models and their predecessors, there have been significant improvements made under the bonnet of both the CD player and the amplifier.

The K2 CD player uses a newer generation of the Sanyo-manufactured dedicated CD mechanism, which connects to a new generation Burr Brown DAC, the PCM 1798, along with a custom-built master clock.

The amplifier now uses the Swiss-made signal and power relays from the Platinum range, while the power amplifier stage uses the same input transistors as the Caspian amplifiers. The power supply has also undergone worthwhile improvements including upgraded rectifier diodes and smoothing capacitors. The amplifier also benefits from a massive, centrally positioned heatsink, which physically divides the toroidal mains transformer on one side of it from the electronics on the other.

Finally, the preamplifier and power amplifiers stages have been fine-tuned further to ensure that they work together optimally.

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO The K2 combination delivers a delightfully balanced performance. These relatively inexpensive, but substantial components absolutely reek of high-end class.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON With this sort of highly capable and enjoyable performance on offer at this price it would honestly be churlish to pick fault.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION This is a very sophisticated combination whose performance should satisfy even the most critical of listeners. The previous generation Kandy amplifier was outclassed by the CD player but this pairing is far more equally matched.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/483697(CD)/483722(amp)	



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PRODUCT Pro-Ject USB Box

TYPE USB DAC

PRICE £75

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 10.3x3.8x14.1cm
 ⦿ Weight: 540g ⦿ Outputs: 1x RCA phono socket
 ⦿ USB-input: Digital serial data protocol USB 1.1
 ⦿ Operating systems: Windows, MacOS and Linux
 ⦿ AD converter: 16-Bit Delta Sigma

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

In an age in which we are all submerging under stuff – electronic stuff being probably the worst offender – Pro-Ject's space-saving miniature series of 'Boxes' clearly has the makings of a Very Good Thing. You might think that you can't get much in a metal box the thickness of three CD jewel cases and rather smaller in footprint, but Pro-Ject has managed to get a power amp in one, a two-input line preamp in another, headphone and phono amps in a further couple: and in this one, a dedicated USB-only DAC.

Not that space was the problem here. Thanks not least to a handy little integrated circuit from Burr-Brown – one of the big names in digital audio chips – Pro-Ject has managed to fit the entire circuit on a board with a surface area of some 26 square centimetres. Were it not for the height of a couple of output coupling capacitors and the output sockets, the board would comfortably fit in a Swan Vestas matchbox!

Rather more sensibly, though, Pro-Ject has put it in a robust metal case, with a choice of black or silver front panels available. On the rear are a pair of phono outputs and one of the smaller variants (why there's more than one type is an enduring mystery) of USB input.

There's no power connection at all, as power is taken from the USB line. That saves hassle and expense, but does impose one restriction: the power coming down a USB cable is delivered at only 5V, so unless trouble is taken to step this up the maximum audio output will be limited to only a volt or so – in fact Pro-Ject quotes 0.775V – and you'll need to advance your amp's volume control a bit. But practically all modern amps have enough gain range for that.

“The sound has a real snap to it and while bass extension may not be the ultimate, it's good enough to deliver plenty of impact...”

SOUND QUALITY

The beauty of USB is that you just plug in and go. It sets itself up and that's it – in principle. Actually it may not be quite that simple.

Depending on your computer and the software installed on it, you may or may not have 'kernel streaming' drivers which ensure a bit-accurate output via USB. Pro-Ject had omitted these with our unit, but assures us they will normally be supplied: luckily we already had them installed. There can also be occasional problems getting output via new audio hardware, usually because of the multiplicity of software settings which won't all necessarily be changed automatically by the new hardware as it installs itself.

Still, we had no trouble getting our sample working and were rewarded with some very lively sounds. 'Lively' is very much the key with this DAC. It isn't always the most subtle device

around but it does get on down and boogie without any reservations at all. The sound has a real 'snap' to it and while bass extension may not be the ultimate, it's certainly more than good enough to deliver plenty of impact when a drummer whacks something hard.

That's the plus side. The minus side is that detail stop some way short of fabulous, though it's arguably as good as one might dare to hope for at £75. You can hear most of the way into a mix, but the highest precision of timbre,

and of both tonal and spatial definition, escapes the USB Box. Tonal balance, however, is good, with just a hint of brightness but a very neutral midrange.

For the price of a mid-range pair of interconnects, the USB Box delivers a performance which we are happy to call excellent value. It gets on with most music, but its lively and engaging ways best suit it to rock, upbeat jazz and other energetic styles. As a budget upgrade to a computer sound system, or indeed partnered with a cheap laptop as a budget sound server system, it's hard to beat. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO A fuss-free unit that takes up minimal space and offers clean, full-bandwidth sound, enthusiastically presented with plenty of energy and verve.
FEATURES ★★★☆☆	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON Detail isn't the best available, and stereo imaging can be a touch vague at times. Low output level compared with most modern kit.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION With no user controls in sight, this unit aims only at doing a simple job well. Within the context of its price, we're happy to hail it a success: a handy adjunct to any computer-based audio system.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/483623	

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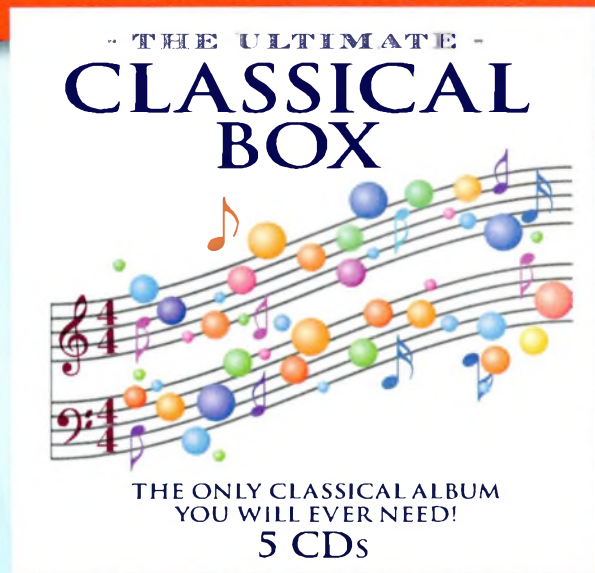


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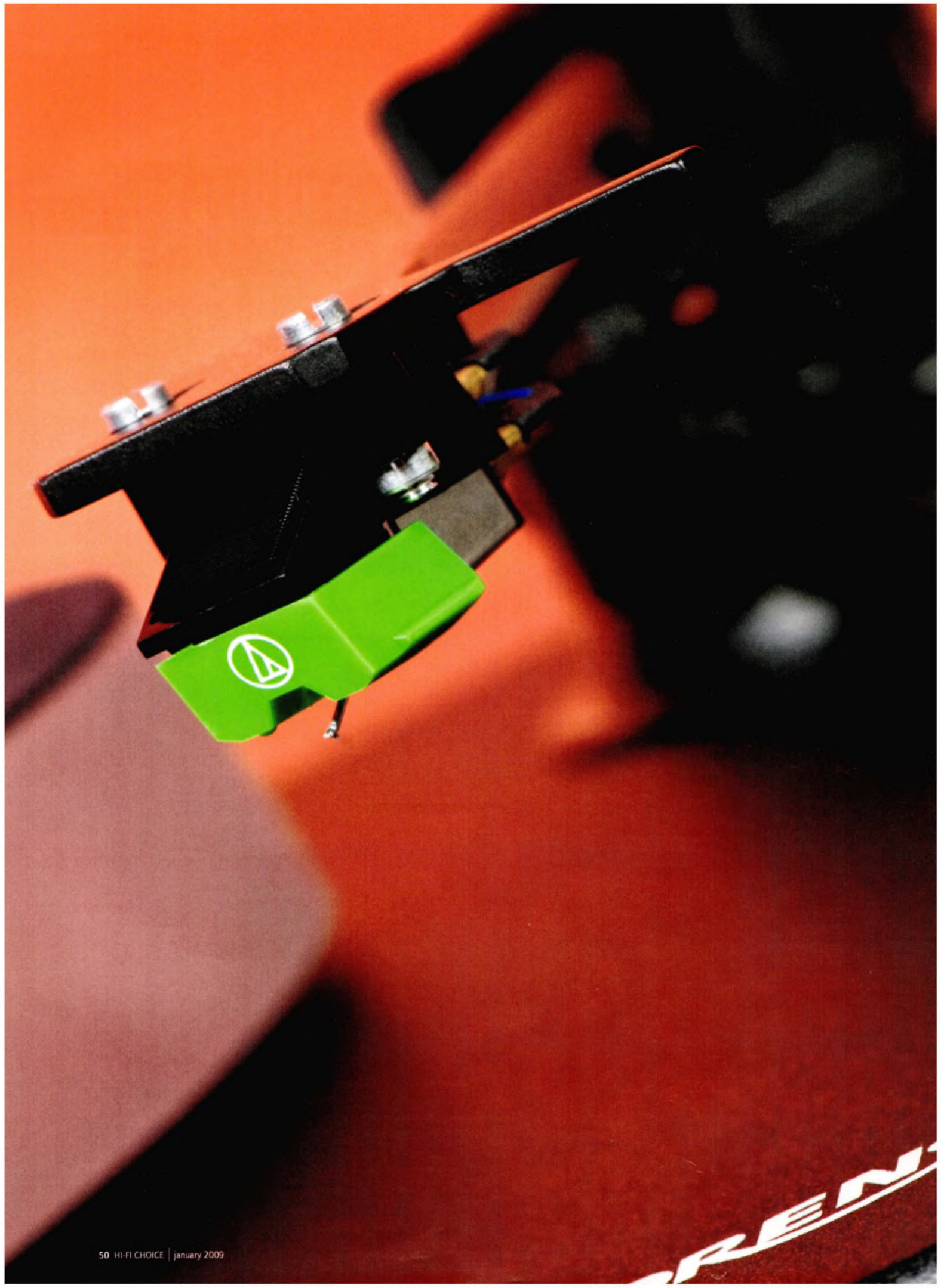
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OPEN

Plug 'n' play

A user-friendly turntable offering fuss-free performance... and more

PRODUCT Thorens TD700

TYPE Turntable, arm and cartridge

PRICE £875

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 46.5x14.5x3.5cm
 Ⓞ Weight: 10.1kg Ⓞ Belt driven from AC synchronous motor Ⓞ Electronic speed change (33 and 45 rpm)
 Ⓞ Comes fitted with Thorens TP42 tonearm and Audio Technica AT95E cartridge

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

Thorens has always been an immediately recognisable name in turntables for those of a certain age. For baby-boomers the name, along with AR, Walker, Fons, Logic and Ariston has the same magical resonance as Linn, Rega, Garrard and SME. Thorens, however, stands above all the rest because, not least, the company has been around for 125 years. Turntables, such as the TD160 represent contemporary history: perhaps more Conran than Bauhaus, but just as significant as the latter. Even though today's market is dominated by the Czech-built Pro-Ject designs, Thorens decks have a certain gravitas and an undeniable legacy that absolutely demands respect.

As a business, the company has seen its ups and downs in recent times, but now seems to have been resolutely grasped and brought into the 21st Century under the dynamic CEO-ship of Heinz Rohrer. The UK distribution has been awarded to UKD and the brand looks set for an appropriately noteworthy, but suitably discrete re-entry into the British market.

We are looking here at one of the new generation of Thorens record players, the TD700. We say record players because the TD700 comes already kitted out to play records only minutes after you've removed it from its packaging. It is fitted with a Thorens TP42 tonearm and an Audio Technica AT95E moving-magnet cartridge, which was a favourite audiophile starter cartridge thirty years ago. It's rewarding and reassuring to see that it's still around and popular.

Unlike many of its modern-day rivals, the TD700 sticks with a traditional design. There's no skeletal, Perspex plinth to be seen here, for example, although Thorens has introduced acrylic plinths models into its range. There's simply a straightforward

rectangular fibre board plinth to which the mechanics, the electronics and the tonearm are fixed. If you want to be stylistically different, however, you can specify one of four finishes for your turntable – the review sample was black, but the deck can also be delivered in red, silver, or blue.

The TD700 is a completely fuss-free design to set up. In fact, the words 'set up' overstate what needs to be done and only truly apply to adjusting the tonearm settings. All the deck then needs is a low-voltage power connection on the rear of its plinth – supplied by a wall-wart – and a connection to an

“The mechanical aspects of the turntable are fairly typical; it is belt driven by a synchronous AC motor with electronic speed change.”

amplifier (phono input, of course,) or phono preamplifier from the sockets behind the tonearm. Thorens supplies a suitable cable for this task.

The mechanical aspects of the turntable are fairly typical of the breed; it is belt driven by a synchronous AC motor with electronic speed change. The belt drives a sub-platter, upon which sits a substantial acrylic outer platter. This is topped off with a thin, floppy felt mat.

Thorens recommends siting the deck on “a sturdy piece of furniture” so we utilised a Quadraspire Sunoko Vent stand. This excellent stand also supports the rest of our system, including the Funk Vector LP12. Unlike the LP12, though, the deck has no suspension: instead its plinth rests on three compliant feet.

Care needs to be taken with supporting this turntable because the way the feet are laid out seems to affect their efficacy: the two at the front appear to tolerate a finger tapping reasonably firmly on the plinth, while the single foot at the rear seems less successful: any tapping along the rear of the plinth provoked stylus skipping.

It's also worth considering only using the lid to cover the turntable when it is not in use. The hinges are not especially smooth in operation and, anyway, we've always

preferred the sound of decks with their lids completely removed for serious listening.

We auditioned the Thorens through the phono input of a Roksan Kandy K2 amplifier feeding a pair of NEAT Motive 1 loudspeakers through Chord Company Epic cables.

SOUND QUALITY

As noted above, the TD700 is supplied with an acrylic platter covered with a thin felt mat, so we simply have to try dispensing with the latter. The sound of discs placed directly on the platter is less musically enjoyable and cosmetically not so appealing. Then we

substitute an (acrylic) Funk Firm Achromat and discover that that it works its usual magic, particularly with bass guitar, adding weight, tone and definition to the instrument. It adds an appreciable degree of precision and control to music overall as well. We reckon that discriminating listeners might consider the addition is worth the £60 it adds to the price. Out of interest we substitute a Linn felt mat in place of the standard Thorens mat: this too improves the performance but not to the same extent. The TD700 certainly seems ripe for tuning, though. Then we remember that this is not an article devoted to turntable tweaks...

As supplied, however, the TD700 gives a respectable account of itself playing music that ranges from Dr John through classical organs and choirs to Art Pepper. Pianos sound secure in terms of pitch, which is always a good sign, and when a double bass player begins mirroring the pianist's left hand the two instruments remain distinct and individual. Further up the spectrum things don't always seem as well organised, though; there's an occasional hint of distortion creeping in on energetic vocals and busy guitar work, especially when these occur close to the end of a side. 📌

Q&A

We spoke to Heinz Rohrer, Managing Director and CEO of Thorens about the company and its products.



HFC: How long have you been in charge at Thorens?

Heinz Rohrer: I took over control at Thorens around eight years ago and have been rebuilding the product range and the sales since then. It's not quite a case of "I liked the product so much I bought the company" but that's not too far from the truth. It's no secret that Thorens suffered from the success of CD, but we have rebuilt the brand name and the sales and are just beginning the next stage of our strategy. We'll say more on that at the Munich show next year.

HFC: We counted a dozen different turntables on your web site. Why does Thorens have such a complex range?

HR: Thorens is distributed in around 40 countries worldwide and different markets have differing fashions and requirements. In some markets the acrylics are more important to sales, while in some others the TD160HD and TD350 are the key sellers. The UK has always been a complicated market in that its requirements are generally simple. That sounds peculiar, but in most markets sound quality is just one of the reasons why the retailers and consumers buy particular products. In the UK the sound quality aspect is amazingly high on the scale of importance. That is certainly not a bad thing as it pushes all manufacturers harder to deliver products that perform. It also means that a brand usually needs fewer models in the UK than it might elsewhere.

HFC: Do you use the TP42 tonearm to differentiate your offering from that of other manufacturers who used Rega-sourced arms or do you simply not like them?

HR: Indeed we use Rega OEM arms on our turntables – for instance, on the award-winning TD160HD. But, being realistic, they are too expensive to use on the TD700 turntable. That would mean compromising on other areas of the design. There are elements at which the TD700 excels – pitch accuracy, for instance, – and that is a combination of mainly platter, belt, motor and speed control. We could certainly reduce the costs to spend more on the tonearm, but then playing piano recordings, as one example, might not be nearly so enjoyable. The TP42 is in excellent balance with the overall design of the TD700. Turntable design is like most other elements of hi-fi design in that synergy is absolutely critical.

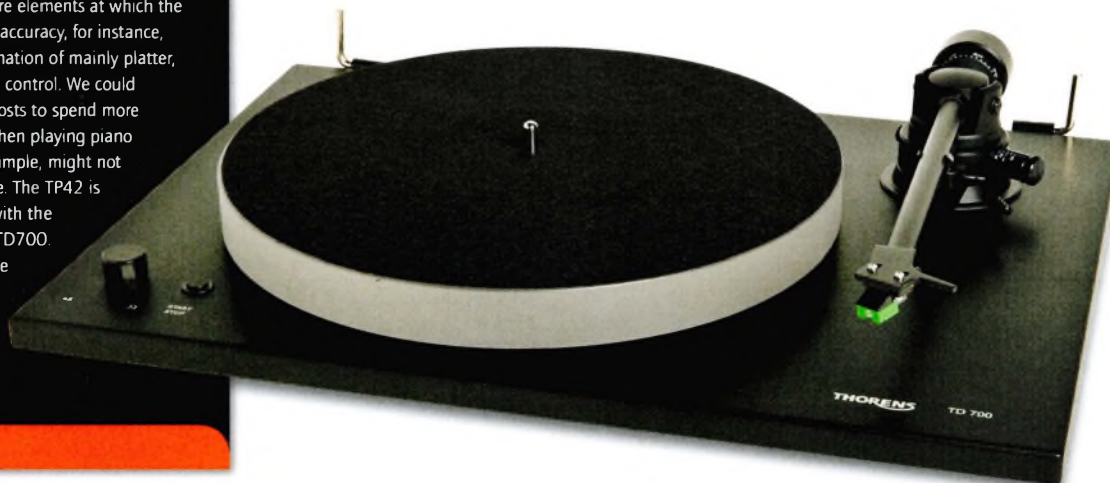


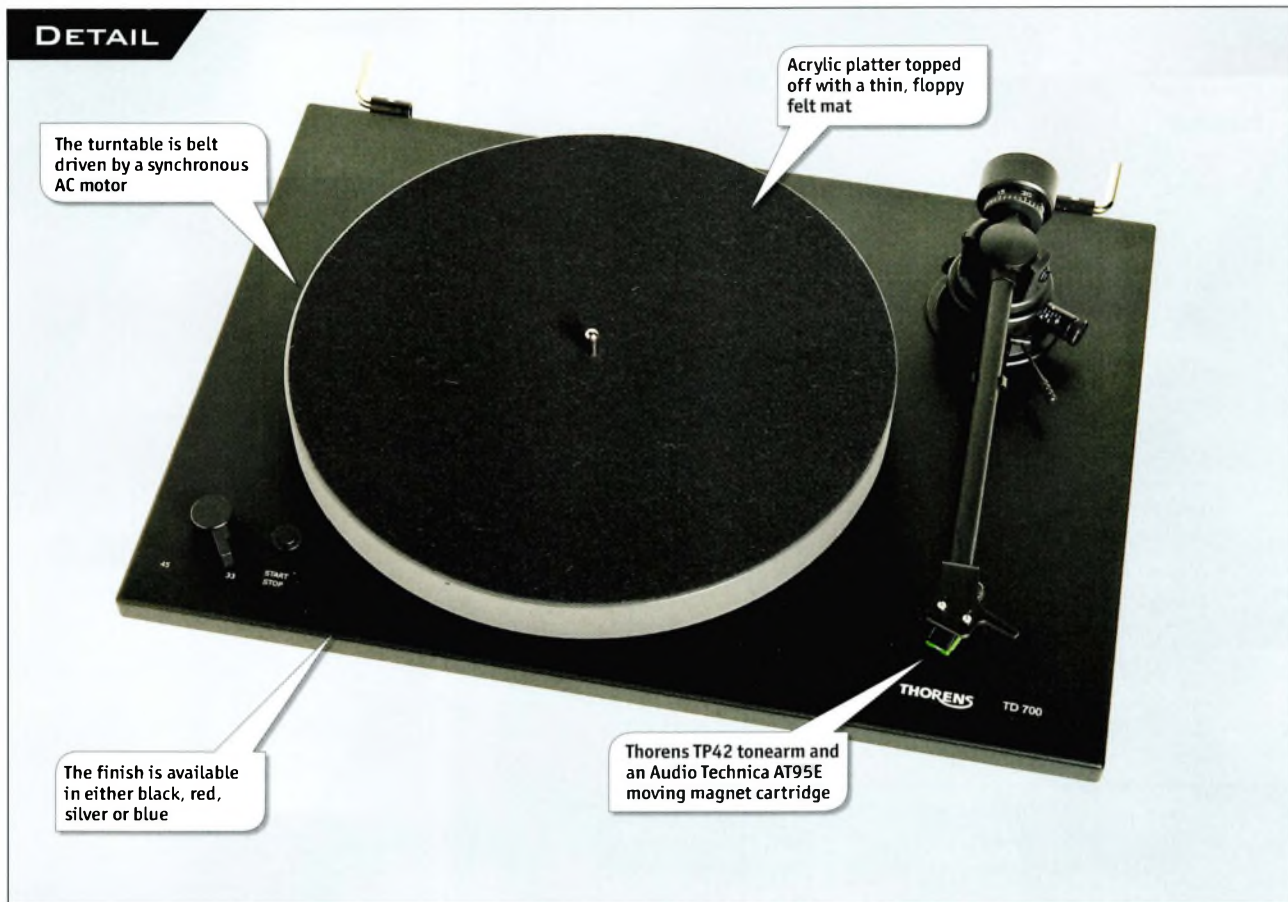
Time to drop some science! We decide to try an age-old ploy to refine and elevate the performance of the AT95E. We remove the stylus assembly and apply a judicious couple of drops of that famous rigidity-enhancing chemical C6H7NO2, otherwise known as SuperGlue, to help it connect better to the cartridge body. It works a treat and, combined with a precise realignment of the cartridge in the headshell we even have the inexpensive AT95E tracking organ and madly dynamic piano torture tracks without flinching.

The TD700/AT95E combination might not have the leading edge attack of a top-flight deck, but then neither does it have the typically stratospheric price tag that

accompanies such machinery. Nonetheless it can replay music with a more than decent sense of pace and energy; it definitely does not suffer from being laid-back as Art Pepper's up-tempo track *Straight Life* convincingly demonstrates.

Neither is it wanting in terms of dynamics: it puts in a very fine showing on that *Art Pepper Meets the Rhythm Section LP*, carefully sifting through Philly Joe Jones' drumming, Paul Chambers' bass and Red Garland's piano looking for – and uncovering – the slightest change in level in any instrument. It is similarly fluent in portraying Pepper's saxophone, delivering it rich with tone and timbre. On this brilliantly recorded





1957 LP the Thorens seems at its most persuasive and comfortable.

Having already tried a couple of tweaks on this deck there is one further alteration we are keen to assess and that is to see how the deck responds to a more sophisticated

“...there is one further alteration we were keen to assess and that is to see how the deck responds to a more sophisticated cartridge.”

THE BALANCING ACT

This turntable's performance and ability to be upgraded are both products of the fundamentally well-balanced nature of the design.

This begins with the rudimentary components such as the drive chain: a low voltage, AC synchronous motor delivers ample torque along with low levels of vibration through the standard Thorens drive belt to the substantial platter, which is supported by a finely polished bearing to ensure low levels of rumble. These elements combine to provide excellent speed stability and fine pitch coherence with no dynamic wow or flutter. As a result, piano music exhibits none of the watery, unsteady pitch that other decks often deliver.

Equally, the TP42 tonearm shows itself to be capable of accepting much higher performance cartridges than the one supplied. We suspect that it would happily accommodate even moving coils such as the Dynavector DV10-X5. Usefully, its height can be adjusted to allow for setting the VTA when fitting such cartridges or when swapping turntable mats.

cartridge, the popular and widely respected Goldring 1042.

The better cartridge allows the deck to perform with greater delicacy and expression – a delicacy that the inexpensive AT95E merely hints is there. Instrumental timbre, for example, takes on more delicate hues and the sound as a whole becomes more secure: you tend to avoid those edge-of-the-seat moments that the AT can deliver on hard-to-track discs. The 1042 sounds more firmly planted in the groove and, accordingly, the music sounds freer and easier.

Then we substitute a pair of £30 Chord Company Crimson interconnects for the supplied leads and realise another marked improvement. Our only failure comes with sitting the deck's feet on CD cases, which often provides improvements but only, it seems, with items that have no built-in isolation. Here the cases destroy the music's timing, upsetting the temporal balance between the instruments.

Ultimately, the Thorens TD700 delivers a very respectable musical performance for what is an unduly expensive record player straight out of its box. The fact that you can then easily improve on the deck's performance with a small amount of tweaking is definitely an added bonus. **HFC**

Malcolm Stewart

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



PRO

The Thorens performs well for those who just want to take it out of the box and play records, but it is also responsive to being tweaked and upgraded, which is good news for more enthusiastic users.

CON

It works best when its stylus is fixed in place, though the best option might be just to replace the cartridge.

CONCLUSION

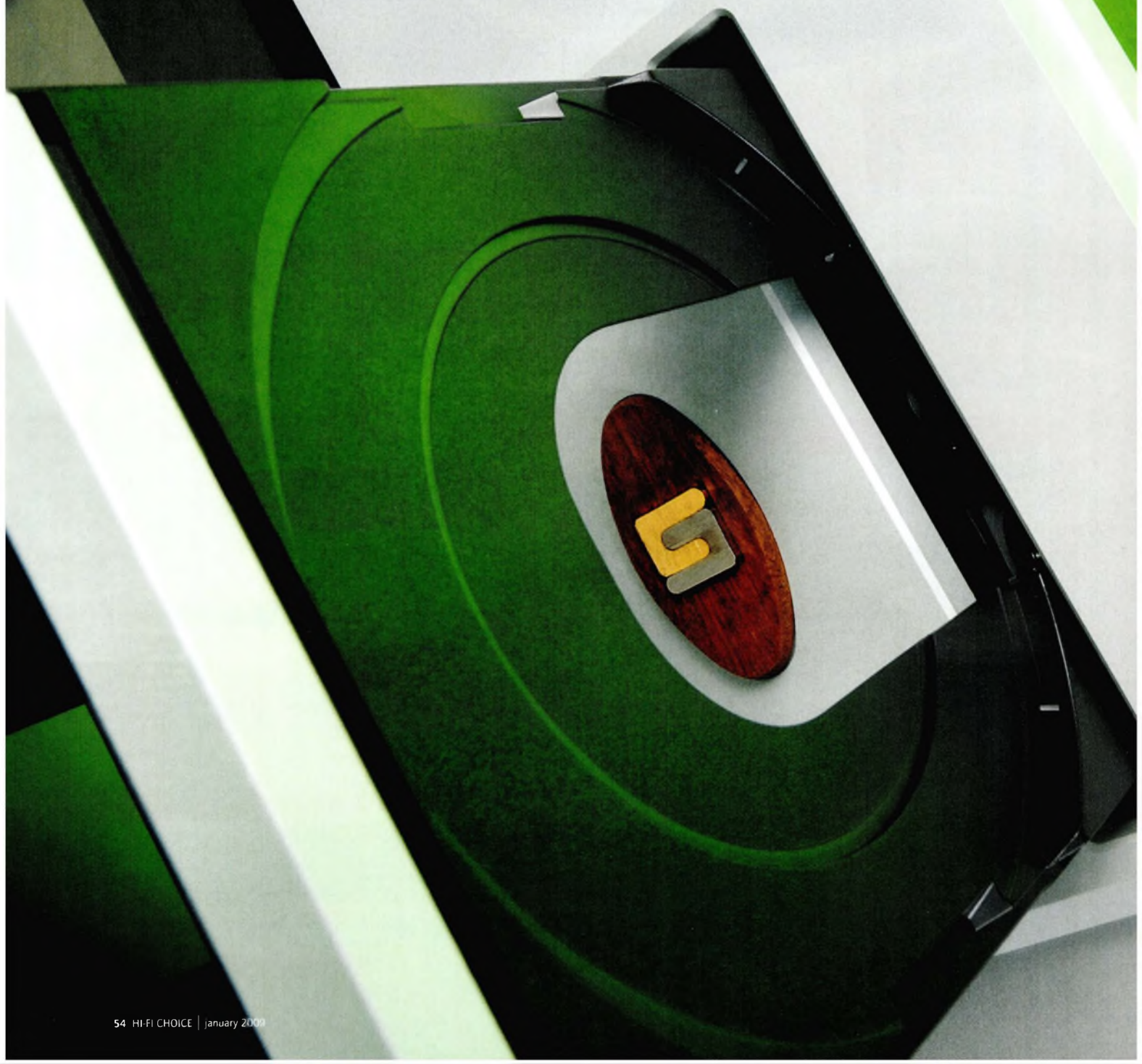
The TD700, which is a sturdy, thoroughly no-nonsense design, absolutely maintains Thorens' heritage and turns in a dependable, enjoyable performance. A better cartridge (than the one supplied) will also enhance the performance.

HI-FI CHOICE ★★★★★
OVERALL SCORE

URL www.techradar.com/483543

BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine
★

Apple iPod shuffle



Crystal clear

The Unison Research CDE marks an evolution in high-end CD players

PRODUCT Unison Research Unico CDE

TYPE CD player

PRICE £1,950

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x13x43cm

⊙ Weight: 12kg ⊙ Digital outputs: 1x 96Hz, 1x AES 3, 1x IEC60958 (S/PDIF) ⊙ Analogue outputs: 1x RCA stereo, 1x XLR stereo ⊙ Large graphical display with advanced option menu accessible from remote handset

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

Unison Research in Northern Italy now has an extensive track record in valve and hybrid power audio electronics, including amplifiers, the associated Opera loudspeaker brand (which is many ways comparable in stature with Sonus faber) and CD players. The company's new Unico CDE disc spinner is the latest addition to the company's high-end components and was first introduced in Italy in April 2008. Arriving in the UK slightly later, it has reportedly, and deservedly, established itself as a strong seller, thanks in part to its sonic performance, cutting-edge componentry and exceptional build quality.

The Unico CDE was developed from the earlier £1,495 Unico CD (reviewed and awarded Best Buy status in *HFC* 295), but now has a larger chassis and an improved TEAC CD5010A transport mechanism. In its current configuration it utilises a new four-valve output stage using ECC83s (12AX7) in a double triode parallel cathode follower configuration.

In other respects, this is a typically idiosyncratic offering from Unison Research, which is upgradable and includes the ability to accept internal DAC modifications on a

small PC board that can be readily fitted once the top cover has been unzipped. The Unison factory also supplied the DAC upgrade for this test – see boxout on the next page – a very reasonably priced unit, which co-exists piggy-back fashion with the original equipment DAC. The latter is a Crystal CS4392 unit which operates at 24 bit/96kHz, either of which can be selected using a front panel menu.

The upgrade DAC_OP2 (option) board is a simple auto-configuring plug-and-play board which uses the same Crystal CS8420

“The Unico CDE was developed from the earlier Unico CD, but with a larger chassis and improved TEAC CD5010A transport mechanism.”


receiver as the standard converter, but whose main active component is the well regarded Wolfson Micro WM8740, used here as a dual-mono, dual-differential design.

That's the plus side, but there is another view. It may seem unfair to criticise any player such as this for not being what it was never intended to be, but it is regrettable that the Unico doesn't cater for SACD. After all, experience shows that SACD can be included on players without noticeable detriment to CD replay performance.

The back panel repays examination. There are two main pairs of analogue outputs, one single-ended, the other balanced on XLR connectors. There is also

a low and a high output gain switch, the latter adding 9dB of voltage gain using a solid-state opamp at the DA output, ahead of the valve output stage. In addition there is a digital interface, an electrical SPDIF in/output which can be fed to an offboard D/A. There is also a matching SPDIF digital input, so the player can be used as D/A for an external digital source.

For the first 30 seconds after power up, the output is muted, with a countdown timer displayed on the large, but rather low contrast LCD front panel display (its

backlighting adapts to ambient light conditions). After this, performance continues to improve for the first ten minutes according to the manufacturer; though you may notice some further improvement for at least the first hour, until the player reaches thermal equilibrium. A so-called advanced menu option is available to select the required DAC and for related housekeeping tasks – to reset the DAC or the whole player, for example, for troubleshooting and to switch off the display. After this, the unit responds to a conventional set of controls on the front panel, or using the elaborately crafted remote control, the only slight oddity being that there is no programme 



Q&A

We spoke with Stefano Salvadori – chief engineer at Unison Research – about the Unico CDE



HFC: Can you explain some of the key ideas that underpin the CDE?

Stefano Salvadori: We started the DAC design project with a clean sheet of paper and the clear understanding that not all newly designed DACs sound good. We decided we would choose according to how they performed musically, not by the measurements. In our development programme we started with a single DAC to get the basic sound, only at the end of the process switching to using two stereo DACs in a dual mono layout for reduced noise. We also chose to work at higher than normal five volts, the higher voltage swing giving better headroom and dynamics.

Why did you stick to the Crystal Delta Sigma DAC for the baseline converter?

The basic Crystal design that is standard on the CDE (E, by the way, stands for Enhancement) is still fundamentally a very good design, with excellent sound quality and we had to work quite hard to achieve noticeably better. In the old CD player (the one that preceded the CDE), we used a tube output after the DAC with a solid state driver to ensure a low impedance output using a relatively simple circuit. In this case we doubled the valve complement and used ECC83s as a cathode follower instead of ECC82s, which reduced output impedance, with no gain in the output after the DAC.

Can you describe any other changes that have been made?

Other improvements include a new mechanism, the Teac CDS010A with improved internal shielding and the power supply uses a new custom designed toroidal transformer with a 100 VA rating, enough for many integrated amplifiers, with eight independent voltage regulators.

Have there been any physical improvements to the new player over the Unico CD?

Yes, the fascia is bead blasted using small ceramic beads, which causes a layer of aluminium oxide to form on the surface and this helps provide hardening. The 128 x 64 pixel display has a backlight that adjusts to ambient light levels, which can be switched off using the remote control.



play option, though the traditional scan, skip and repeat options are on tap.

Build quality is excellent. The case uses black finished panels and a well-engineered matt aluminium fascia. The internal layout is clean, with a minimum of cable runs and a well-endowed power supply.

SOUND QUALITY

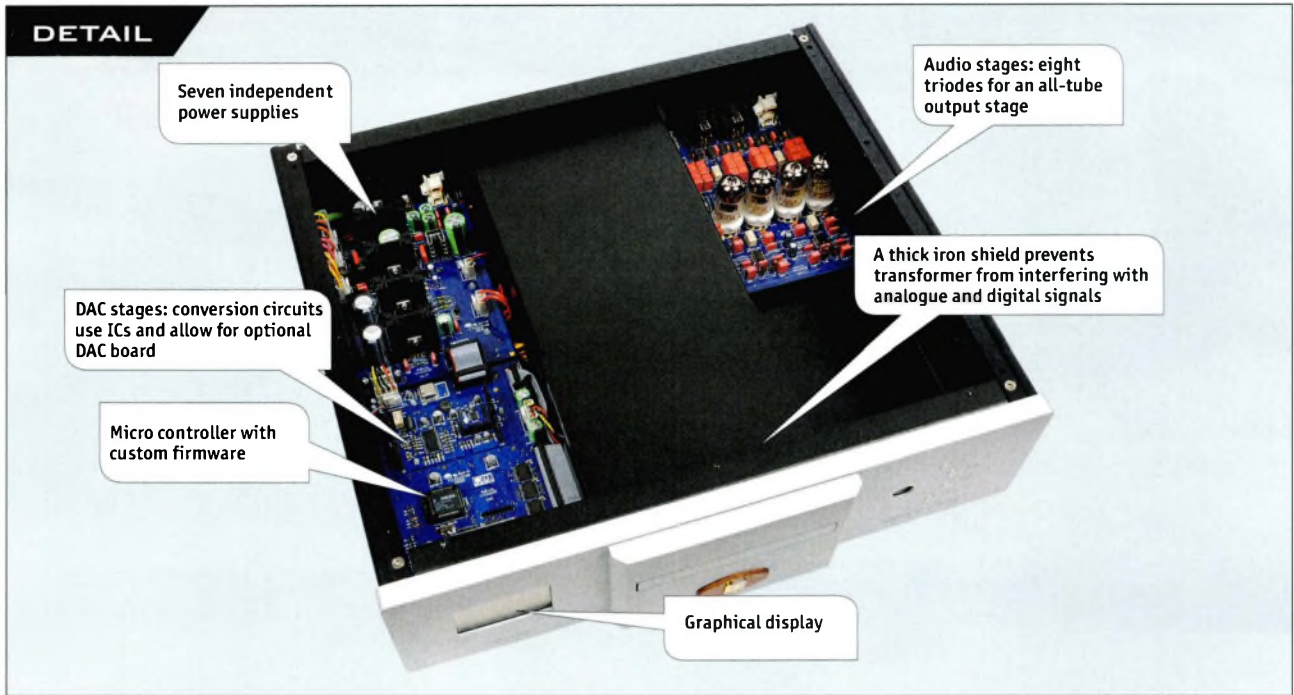
We're not always enamoured of the sound of overtly valve-flavoured audio electronics, which sometimes come across, at least, as lacking in grip, heavy-handed or soft-edged – or a combination of the above. But not in this case. The CDE is a well-judged design that has got it just right. Without being in any way obvious about it, this is, above all, a relaxed, easy-sounding and genuinely musical player that nevertheless gives a broad, expansive stereo image and an unusually positive impression of musical dynamics – never clipped or aggressive, but always cleanly articulated and always convincing.

The easy on the ear quality is something that often comes as standard with valve electronics, but usually there is a price to pay. In this case, the achievement is just about

seamless, the only possible and very mild criticism being a hint of softness at the very lowest frequency extreme. The mid and treble are of a different order – fast, expressive and almost luxuriantly coloured at appropriate times. Strings for example sound distinctive and homogenous in an orchestral setting without being homogenised. Vocals have a real passion and purity and piano has the right mix of percussiveness and sustain, retaining the authentic 'voice' or personality of the instrument. The end result: music reproduction that breathes, that sounds expressive and that simply gells.

It took about three A-B comparison runs between the two DACs before we quite suddenly achieved these results. The upgrade DAC sounds (tonally, at least) in many ways similar to the standard model, presumably because so many of the audio components and sections are shared. But the upgrade DAC, in fact, has a clearly superior instrumental and vocal separation, giving a feel of greater contrast and range and for this reason a superior impression of dynamic shadings, especially in more subtle, undemonstrative musical passages that don't naturally show





high levels of internal contrast. The bass, too is just right, if arguably not quite as authoritative as the best of solid-state as implied earlier, but the mid and high frequencies are notably sweet and pure. This was clearly audible in a recently

“...this is a relaxed, easy sounding and genuinely musical player that nevertheless gives a broad, expansive stereo image...”

DAC_OP2 DAC UPGRADE

The DAC_OP2 upgrade board fits on risers attached in the main audio board of the player, just above the standard issue Crystal DAC which remains in place. It is a plug-and-play device and is self-configuring – there is no need to tell the player it’s there, though it must be selected from the appropriate menu and it can be hot selected from the stop mode, without turning the player off or digging around inside.

The Wolfson Micro WM8740 is a high-performance stereo 24-bit/192kHz DA converter intended for use in CD and DVD players. In this application, Unison Research has gone further than the baseline processor, by using two stereo converters in a dual mono, dual differential circuit, with benefits to noise and dynamics as a result. It is proposed to design further converter boards for this player in the future.

acquired disc of Grieg, including the evocative music used as the soundtrack for the recent Joanna Lumley TV programme about the Northern Lights. Through the Unico CDE, the music, which when reproduced with less distinction can sound hackneyed, sang with an understated, but still very real passion that made the hairs on the back of the neck rise. There were similar experience on offer with other recordings, one very good example of which was the second movement and the vocal finale from the excellent Bernard Haitink/Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra version of Mahler’s 4th symphony (see review on page 27). In both cases and with a number of other recordings, too the sense of a living, breathing sound stage was palpable

There’s a feeling among many hi-fi devotees that valves often lead to a lazy attitude to design – which does many things superficially right, but when push comes to shove often doesn’t work. This player is the opposite: a

design based on a clear understanding of what valves can and can’t do and which doesn’t fall for the usual pratfalls.

It is, in short, an excellent player, well built, well priced and one that plays music extremely well, with great purity, expressiveness and range, irrespective of its enabling technology. And it benefits from an unusually welcome degree of flexibility, thanks to the upgrade able DAC option from the factory plus its ability to act as a simple, high-quality D/A converter for external digital sources. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Elegant, uncontrived sound quality that makes the most of virtually all discs used, with no noticeable artifice. It also has flexible output options and easily upgradeable DACs.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	CON Hint of softness in the bass extreme, though this is never taken to excess. It won't play SACD discs.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
<p>Here is a first-rate CD player from the Unison Research team, who have taken on board the lessons on the Unison CD and extrapolated the design to a higher level – at a price that allowing for the excellent build quality, is very reasonable.</p>	
<p>HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★</p> <p>www.techradar.com/483759</p>	

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KEF's nifty fifty

KEF's brand new iQ-series models feature its latest 'tangerine' waveguide technology

PRODUCT KEF iQ50

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £499 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 17.5x81.5x26cm
 ◉ Weight: 10.2kg ◉ Drivers: 19mm aluminium dome tweeter, 130mm Uni-Q bass, mid and treble, 130mm bass-only ◉ Sensitivity: 88dB (8 ohms) ◉ Uni-Q has new 'tangerine' tweeter waveguide ◉ Bass driver features new dual composite cone with 'labyrinth' damping ◉ Large port reflex loads whole enclosure

CONTACT ☎ 01622 672261 🌐 www.kef.com

KEF might now be owned by Chinese interests, but its headquarters and engineering research facilities are still located in its traditional base in Maidstone, Kent. However, the combination of UK design with Chinese manufacturing skills is undoubtedly powerful, giving the company an impressive mixture of unique and well-developed technologies alongside costs that keep it fully competitive on the world stage.

KEF's traditions go back more than forty years and the Uni-Q driver that gives this range its name was first introduced in the 1980s. Made possible through the development of ultra-powerful (hence ultra-compact) neodymium magnet technology, it's a variation on the co-axial theme, placing a tiny 19mm tweeter on the polepiece in the centre of the bass/mid driver's 95mm polymer cone. A refinement that takes the Uni-Q one step beyond the simple co-axial to what KEF calls 'coincidence' is that the tweeter is positioned at the acoustic centre of the bass/mid cone.

Uni-Q construction has both advantages and disadvantages. It makes crossover integration between midrange and tweeter relatively simple from an acoustic point of view and also ensures that output is entirely consistent and symmetrical at any given measurement axis. It's therefore also free from the vertical axis 'lobing' that is invariably created in the crossover region where the two sources are spaced apart, as in conventional two-way systems. However, it can also be pointed out that placing a tweeter so that it's recessed down in the neck of a cone is not an ideal way to create wide

dispersion, while the additional complication is that said cone is moving to and fro in response to the music signal.

The Uni-Q has undergone steady and painstaking refinement over the years. More powerful magnets have improved tweeter sensitivity; drilled pole-pieces avoid creating back-pressure behind the diaphragm; and the

smallest of three floorstanders and is an unusually attractive and compact example of the type, thanks to a combination of 130mm Uni-Q driver for bass, midrange and treble with an extra 130mm bass-only driver, both sharing the same front-ported enclosure. Shaped foam bungs are supplied to block these ports if desired. ▶

“The latest ‘tweak’ is the so-called ‘tangerine’ waveguide that first appeared on the more costly XQ series released early in 2008...”

tweeter's dome diaphragm now has an elliptical profile. The latest 'tweak' is the so-called 'tangerine' waveguide that first appeared on the more costly XQ-series released early in 2008, but which has already trickled down to its near-budget iQ-series models.

Viewed from the front, this waveguide does indeed look a little like the segmented structure of a tangerine. It actually consists of eight small vanes extending inwards from the outside edge of the tweeter dome, splitting its output into seven segments. The rationale is that driving a tweeter dome at its edge by normal to-and-fro voice coil motion doesn't quite replicate the pulsating sphere ideal, but the vanes provide extra loading and relative output around the edge that help the dome more closely approach the ideal.

Besides the new tweeter treatment, KEF has introduced a number of other improvements. Crossovers have been re-mapped to improve integration. An all new bass driver has a 95mm 'dual-composite' cone with 'labyrinth' internal damping. And there's now an attractively shaped moulded plinth, which does feel a bit lightweight and resonant, but holds the spikes securely in place and helps the speaker pass the 'topple test'.

In addition to the above mentioned improvements, this latest iQ range has added a zero to the model numbers that were used for its predecessors. Of the five stereo pairs, supplemented by a couple of partnering home cinema extras, this £499 per pair iQ50 is the middle model. It's the



❑ The back and sides of the enclosure are formed into a continuous curve, tightening at the back, which not only looks unusually attractive, but should also improve overall stiffness and avoid focusing the internal lateral standing waves. The front panel too is very gently curved. At the standard price the enclosure comes finished all over in a choice of walnut, dark apple, or black ash vinyl woodprint (real wood veneered light oak and walnut are available at extra cost). A moulded black 'bump' covers much of the top surface, matching the curve of the Uni-Q driver frame. The twin terminal pairs themselves seemed a little reluctant to tighten and stay tightened, but they come connected by wire links, which are certainly preferable to the brass strips almost universally used elsewhere.

SOUND QUALITY

Positioned in free space, well clear of walls, the far-field, averaged in-room measurements show a dry bottom end alignment, even with



“Sensitivity matches the specified 88dB, a healthy figure for such a small speaker, especially given the good bass extension...”

the ports entirely unobstructed. A little judicious closer-to-wall assistance might well be worth trying here, but the bungs should only be used if the speaker has to be sited very close to a wall.

The port tuning frequency of 45Hz gives good ultimate in-room extension down to around 23Hz, though the bottom end might have been smoother. Sensitivity matches the specified 88dB, a healthy figure for such a small speaker, especially given the good bass extension and an amplifier load that stays above five ohms throughout. The pair match

of our samples looked pretty good, though the impedance traces do show several resonant perturbations, most obviously at 180Hz and 33Hz, but also at 750Hz and 1.2kHz.

The overall frequency power response (in-room, far-field) holds within good +/-4dB limits right across the band, from 40Hz to above 15kHz, which is impressive enough, but the trend is not without a degree of unevenness, showing some prominence around 150-200Hz and 750Hz-1.25kHz which is bound to be reflected in the sonic character.

Small speakers always have some inherent advantages and this iQ50 has a lovely spacious quality, with fine imaging and a decent measure of transparency, too. Furthermore, the advantages of the Uni-Q driver are immediately apparent in the way the sound stays entirely – almost uncannily – consistent, not just with small head movements, but also as one stands up and moves around a decent size listening zone.

The treble improvements do seem to be effective, as this element in the overall performance seemed seamlessly integrated, very well judged and tolerably sweet. The midrange was rather less happy: although there was no obvious boxiness or significant nasality, speech did seem a trifle over-projected and voices had a touch of 'cupped hands' coloration.

Not too surprisingly, the bass end is not its forte. While it certainly does go down to a respectably low frequency, it's a bit dry and lack lustre, punctuated by the occasional interjection of port thump. Not the most convincing qualitatively, it lacks dynamic grip.

Weak dynamic performance is really this speaker's nemesis, as it all too easily robs music of much of its tension and vigour, and consequently its interest. Although not slow in a time-smeared sense, this also seems to make the speaker sound a bit sluggish and lazy.

There is much to commend this speaker, however – it's attractive and discreet and the latest Uni-Q driver brings notable advantages. While it enjoys the usual benefits of a small loudspeaker, it also suffers from the limitations of the breed in its lack of authority. **HFC**

Paul Messenger



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★☆	PRO Cute compact floorstander has the latest Uni-Q driver which delivers fine spacious imaging, a sweet treble and good consistency across a large zone. Fine overall tonal balance.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★☆	CON Although the overall balance is respectable, the midband is a little over-projected and the bass lacks tension and gnp.
VALUE ★★★★☆	
CONCLUSION Cute styled and beautifully discreet, this latest Uni-Q has attractively spacious imaging, good overall balance, a sweet treble and fine consistency. Ultimately the bass lacks real authority and dynamic behaviour is weak.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/483527	

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EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



King of the road

High-end custom-moulded earphones offer the ultimate in on-the-go audio

PRODUCT ACS T2

TYPE Ear-canal earphones (custom fit)

PRICE £500

KEY FEATURES ◉ Weight: 28g ◉ Sensitivity: 109dB (at 1 mW) ◉ Impedance: 27ohms (nominal) ◉ Frequency response: 20-16kHz ◉ Custom-moulded earpieces ◉ Kevlar lead ◉ Pelican storage case ◉ Choice of finish, cable length and cable exit

CONTACT ☎ 01295 266665 # www.hearingprotection.co.uk

Back in the spring (HFC 305) we reviewed the £150 Etymotic ER-6ic ear-canal earphones fitted with tailor-made silicon earpieces from hearing specialist ACS. We loved the way the custom-fit earpiece offered significant background noise reduction combined with all-day comfort, but had some reservations about the thin-sounding, bass-light presentation, so ACS suggested we try the more upmarket T2, which at £500 are significantly more 'audiophile'.

The T2 was originally developed for the performing musician and one of the key features arising from the custom-fit silicon earpiece is a 26dB reduction in background noise. The benefits to the on-stage musician are clear, but such significant natural noise-reduction is also highly advantageous for users of portable music devices, in effect shutting out so much intrusive background noise, that the tiny miniature drivers are allowed to operate in near-ideal conditions.

The T2 utilises twin balanced-armature transducer technology (Knowles ED9689, BK-1957) with an integrated crossover delivering a frequency range up to a claimed 16kHz and down to 20Hz, which for its driver size is commendable.

Housed in silicon (the grade specially selected for sound performance) the driver's output travels down two tubes to the aperture which is positioned in the inner ear. The T2's custom moulds are bigger and more comprehensive

“...one of the key features arising from the custom-fit silicon earpiece is a 26dB reduction in background noise.”

than that of the ER-6ic, covering a greater surface area of the outer ear. The custom-fitting procedure remains the same, however, and involves visiting one of the 300 audiologists in UK who take impressions of your ear and then send them off to ACS.

SOUND QUALITY

Ear-canal earphones are something of a 'marmite' product – you either love them or hate them. And the T2's with their custom-made earpieces give the most intimate fit you could imagine and, therefore, require a period of adjustment and acclimatisation. In use, the moulds offer a phenomenal degree of noise reduction and it's this freedom from intrusive

background attack that helps give the T2s a wonderful coherence through the midband and high levels of intelligibility in the crucial midrange spectrum. Its ability to uncover detail in the mix is highly praiseworthy and to a degree, makes the T2 another 'discover your music collection again' product.

It's important, however, to put the earphone's performance in context. They are, of course, aimed at performing musicians but transfer well for the on-the-go user. And whilst they

have the edge on the in-ear earphones on the market, whether noise-cancelling or not, they are not a substitute for a good pair of conventional high-quality headphones, such as the Sennheiser HD650 (£330) when at home.

But, on its own territory – travelling – the T2 comes into its own. The sparkling midband is matched with impressive bass definition, sublime coherence and genuine all-day comfort.

The moulds isolate the user from the outside world, letting nothing but the music through as if the sound is hard-wired to your brain. Expensive, yes, but if you're a frequent traveller these really are a first-class experience. **HFC**

Dan George



VERDICT

SOUND



PRO

Class-leading 'natural' noise reduction of 26dB, gives the drive units scope to work at their best. Midband clarity and coherence a particular strength. All-day comfort, too.

FEATURES



BUILD



CON

The laws of physics mean the T2s can't compete with a conventional headphone's scale and dynamics. Price will exclude some buyers.

VALUE



CONCLUSION

Compared to the current in-ear earphones on the market, the T2s are the pick of the crop, with impressive midband intelligibility and a knack for digging out the detail. Not a replacement for home-use headphones, but the ultimate travel companion.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE



URL www.techradar.com/479584

Silvermann Labs Clarity 1

TYPE Mains cable

PRICE £70 (1.2m)

CONTACT ☎ 08707 747480 # www.silvermann.co.uk

Silvermann is a UK-based manufacturer specialising in mains cables: the company website also lists two interconnect models. Clarity 1 is the basic model in the mains range, a shielded design using silver-plated copper conductors. It is available with the usual IEC connector, but we chose to test it fitted with a figure-8 (Telefunken) connector fitted, as this is still quite a common fitment and is rather under-supported by audiophile mains cables generally. The figure-8's small dimensions don't exactly make it a natural for bulky upmarket cables, but Clarity 1 is quite modest in size as these things go and Silvermann has fitted it neatly into the connector with the aid of plenty of heat-shrink sleeve. It does need around four inches of 'bend space' behind the equipment though. A ferrite noise blocker is fitted as standard.



We tested this cable mostly with a Pioneer CD recorder, a much-used device of familiar performance and were definitely favourably impressed with the performance in both recording and replay mode. Rather unusually, the result seemed to be most audible in the bass – we've heard this before from mains cables, but detail and treble seem to be more common beneficiaries. Here, we were treated to a small increase in bass resolution, which seemed to add a semitone or two of extension and increased the clarity of the

lowest notes. As a result, rhythm becomes a little tighter and more involving. A quick check with a couple of other fig-8 equipped components suggested that this improvement is not unique to the Pioneer. **HFC**

VERDICT	HI-FI CHOICE
A rarity in two ways: first, in the connector fitted, but second and more important, in affecting the bass in a pleasingly positive way. Good value.	★★★★★

Supra Mains Block MD06-BS/SP

TYPE Mains block

PRICE £150

CONTACT ☎ 01223 441299 # www.jenving.se

There are quite a few upmarket mains distribution boards available, with more or less filtering built in and so forth. This one is quite modest on the filtering front: it has a 'Non-Intrusive Filter' which is described simply as a 'mild transient filter', plus surge protection between all three conductors. A green LED indicates that surge protection is active. Construction is based on an aluminium extrusion, with sockets (all the common international variations are available) mounted behind a Supra-coloured faceplate. Internal wiring is good thick stuff, neatly executed. The block doesn't include a mains lead as standard, having instead an IEC inlet: we used one of Supra's 'LoRad' one metre cables – £40 including Supra's new custom IEC connector, or £20 if purchased with the MD06/SP.

Obviously that cable plays a part in determining the sonic contribution of the mains block, as do the cables leading from the



block to the equipment. Even with standard commercial leads in the latter application, though, we noticed an improvement due to the MD06, with a subtle, but worthwhile lowering of general background noise – not to put too fine a point on it, the typical result of a decent, basic mains filter. There's just a shade more detail in the sound and we were gratified to note that clicks from our usual test appliance (a dodgy switch left unrepaired for such testing!) were definitely reduced in audibility. We'd say that a filtered distribution block like

this is a sensible solution for first-step mains upgrades to mid-range systems and in that context the value is fair. **HFC**

VERDICT	HI-FI CHOICE
Fitting upgrade mains cables to every component can work out expensive: this block achieves a broadly similar result even with standard cables at its outputs.	★★★★★

TCl Baby Constrictor

TYPE Mains cable

PRICE £70 (1m)

CONTACT ☎ 028 9267 3024 🌐 www.true-colours.com

TCl's basic mains cable may be priced at the budget end of things, but it looks very much the high-end part, thanks to that appropriately snake-like braid cover. Its construction uses multiple conductors woven together in an 'RFI-filtering' assembly, with a healthy cross-sectional area more than capable of handling the requirements of any component fit to be plugged in to a normal socket. The connectors at both ends are regular commercial types. Insulation of the internal cores is PTFE, a high-performance material which, last time we checked, was not recommended for mains use due to its limited resistance to repeated flexing, but the 11mm diameter and stiff nature of this lead should discourage any attempt to bend it more than absolutely necessary!

After years of testing various mains cables, we are starting to see some patterns emerging, one of which is that woven cables like this give an improvement in treble



clarity and apparent extension. In fact this is far more likely to be due to a reduction in high-frequency noise and 'hash' than any change in the frequency response of connected kit, but the subjective result is as if a restriction has been removed from the higher frequencies, allowing them to breathe more easily. This is particularly noticeable with delicate percussive sounds, which seem to decay more naturally and with well-

recorded vocals, which benefit from better-integrated consonants. Midrange is perhaps a touch improved in clarity, bass as far as we could tell essentially unchanged, but the treble improvements make this cable well worth its modest price. **HFC**

VERDICT

While improvements seem limited to the treble, they are clear to hear and welcome, the sound gaining an extra sparkle and some precision too.

HI-FI CHOICE



Wireworld Aurora 5²

TYPE Mains cable

PRICE £180 (2m)

CONTACT ☎ 020 8991 9200 🌐 www.wireworldcable.co.uk

If the price didn't already give it away, a glance soon will: this is not a cable for the faint-hearted. Very nearly an inch wide and distinctly awkward to handle and route, it fairly screams 'specialist'. We managed to fit it between various source and amplifier components and the mains, though, with care. As you might guess from the appearance, each phase conductor (live and neutral) is separately insulated and jacketed and each appears to be screened too. Conductors are made of silver-plated copper, while insulation is unspecified. The IEC connector is Wireworld's own and fits the cable perfectly: the UK plug on the other end has been made to fit surprisingly well.

We were particularly impressed with this cable's contribution to the sound of each of the components we used with it, as it seems to bring with it an unusually wide range of improvements. The commonest mains cable effect, of improved detail, is certainly there,



but we also noted additional subjective extension in both bass and treble. As suggested in the TCl review above, it's hardly plausible that a mains cable can in any way affect the frequency response of equipment, but by reducing the level of noise in a band it can make detail more apparent and thus seem to extend the frequency range and that is evidently the case here. Bass benefits in reach and precision, while treble becomes

more crystalline. Stereo imaging also tightens up a little as a side effect of this and the end result is a very attractive net benefit. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

In a basically well-tuned system, this cable can contribute a further level of refinement, thanks to its reduction of noise and grain across the board.

HI-FI CHOICE



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- WHF? S&V Magazine.
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WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION ★★★★★

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GROUP TEST & LAB REPORTS: RICHARD BLACK

ONE-BRAND HI-FI SYSTEMS

Do one-brand systems offer the last word in hi-fi synergy?

ON TEST



Advance Acoustic MCD403/ MAP305 II DA
£550/£680



Arcam CD17/ A38
£500/£1,200



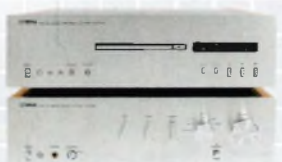
Cambridge Audio Azur 840C/ 840A V2
£750/£750



Marantz SA8003/ PM8003
£700/£630



Pioneer PD-D9/ A-A9
£650/£600



Yamaha CD-S1000/ A-S1000
£800/£900

This *Ultimate Group Test* breaks with our usual practice of considering six products in a specific category, for this month we have six prestigious one-brand CD/amp combos. With dealer numbers shrinking, making it harder to undertake proper comparative auditioning, we thought it was time to examine one-brand combos of CD player and amplifier from six different companies, testing each pair together to give a rather different perspective on performance. Can these one-make systems offer the ultimate in synergy?

There's obviously no law that says you have to put, say, an Arcam CD player with an Arcam amp and plenty of audiophiles live happily with all sorts of multi-make combinations. Still, sticking to a single make in this way has its attractions, not least visual, and the results of our deliberations will evidently be more directly applicable than ever, given that each combination is likely to be available for audition and purchase from many dealers. Mixed-make systems are notoriously hard to audition as no one dealer stocks every make!

We anticipated lively interest from manufacturers and indeed were greeted with exactly that initially, but for various practical reasons (availability of stock, impending range redesign and so forth) ended up with little choice in the matter of which systems to review. Things could hardly have turned out better, though. We had set a broad price range, but ended up with a surprisingly tight spread, with all the kit in the most competitive mid-range sector. We also received a good mix of established and new models, giving some useful points of reference.

We're also interested in the rise of other digital sources and it's good to see that manufacturers are dealing with that. Advance Acoustic has digital inputs on its amplifier, Cambridge Audio offers digital inputs on its CD player, Marantz has a USB input on the SA8003 and Pioneer includes a USB input on the amp. Three of the CD players also support SACD and MP3/WMA discs.

You may or may not think you need any of those features, but we feel it's good for the general health of hi-fi that support exists for users of the many new formats, be they higher quality or greater convenience. But, of course, what you're really interested in is how the kit sounds – so read on! **HFC**

EQUIPMENT USED

- Ⓢ ATC SCM20 loudspeakers
- Ⓢ Various mid-range interconnect cables from Ixos, Atlas, Black Rhodium and Wireworld
- Ⓢ Speaker cables from Kimber
- Ⓢ Pink Triangle PT TOO turntable with SME 309 arm and Highphonic MC-A3 cartridge
- Ⓢ EAR 'The Head' step-up transformer

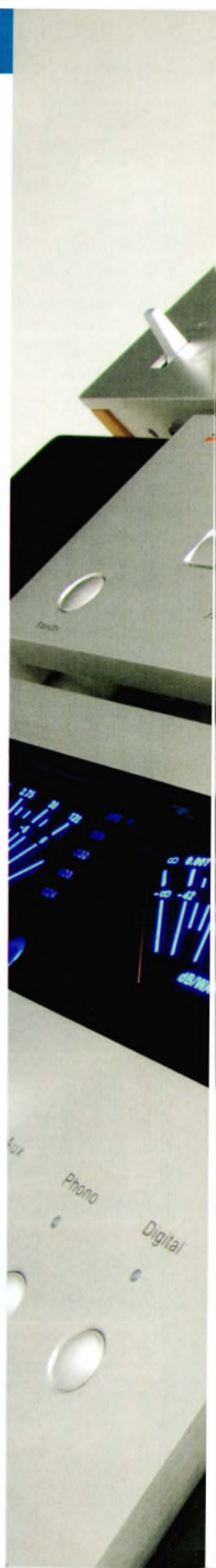
MUSIC USED

- Ⓢ Michael Jackson *Thriller*
- Ⓢ Ian Dury *The Bus Driver's Prayer and Other Stories*
- Ⓢ Dick Hyman *plays Fats Waller*
- Ⓢ Guzman *Ambrosio*
- Ⓢ Pink Floyd *The Wall*
- Ⓢ Pizzetti *La Pisanella*

EARS USED

As ever, we are deeply grateful to the kind souls in the audio industry, experienced and expert listeners, who give up their time to come and listen, 'blind', to the equipment. On this occasion, the listeners were:

Ben Beaumont (Audio Partnership)
Phil Hansen (Red Sheep Marketing)
Geoff Meads (Arcam)





LISTENING TESTS

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

LAB TESTS

Each unit was measured with a variety of test gear, including a Hameg distortion measuring set and also items of audio kit (ADCs and DACs) adapted to lab duty and reporting data for analysis to Cool Edit and Mathcad on a PC. This approach enabled us to build up a picture of the equipment's performance under different conditions of frequency, level and load.

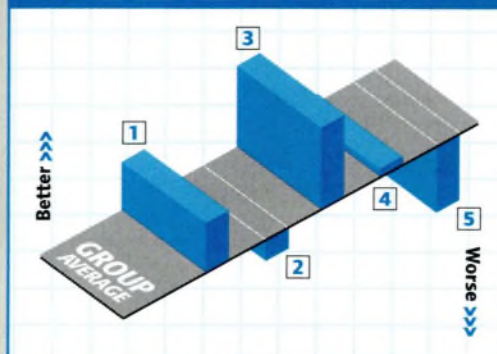
No other magazine offers an equivalent test and listening programme for comparative tests.

LAB REPORTS: THE BAR GRAPH

Our unique 3D bar graphs are a simple way of showing how the products compare across five technical parameters. In each case, a percentage is given that falls above or below the group average. In this test, the parameters are slightly different from our usual, one each referring to amp and CD player, the other three reflecting overall performance of the pair.

- 1) Dynamic power.** This reflects an aggregate of continuous and peak (instantaneous) power, giving an indication of power available under realistic conditions.
- 2) Frequency response:** This is a measure of how smooth the frequency response is within the audio band. In every case in this group, performance is dominated by the amp.
- 3) Dynamic range:** An indication of the background noise level, as related to maximum power output. Amp and CD player performance are equally important here.
- 4) Distortion:** An aggregate figure drawing on measurements of both units at different frequencies and levels. Generally dominated by the amp.
- 5) Jitter:** A measure of how stable the CD player's timing clock is. Measured at the analogue output, this distortion shows up as increased noise and/or low-level interfering frequencies which can contribute to sonic 'grunge'.

OUR BAR GRAPHS: AN EXAMPLE





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(NEW) ATC SIA2-150

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Jason Kennedy, HIFi Dec 08

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0%*



(NEW) McIntosh MCD500

SACD/CD, Digital Inputs, Unique parallel DAC and Volume Control add up to one stunning NEW Flagship CD Player from McIntosh. Did we mention that it sounds truly sublime too? It's available on our 0% finance scheme as well*

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Marantz TT-15S1

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0% Deal*: Dep: £119 + £90 for 12months

0%*



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ADVANCE ACOUSTIC MCD403/MAP305 II DA

This combo's unusual appearance disguises its performance level

The MCD403 is a CD player, Jim, but not as we know it: it is, in fact, a dedicated transport with no audio output. As such, at its price, it's a rare (unique, even?) beast, but there it is: phono, Toslink and XLR sockets at the back, one of each, outputting data only. Meanwhile, the 'DA' suffix denotes a version of the MAP305 II amp with a digital input board fitted, sporting one Toslink and four phono sockets (the '403's XLR matches the company's upmarket standalone DAC).

You may like or loathe the appearance, but there's no denying the build quality. Each unit is housed in a robust steel case with aluminium front panel and alternative rubber feet are provided (which is a nice touch), although we stuck with hard plastic cones. Operation is nothing out of the ordinary, though the button layout on the transport seems a little illogical. The amp's power meters are purely indicative and very slow-reading: entertaining, anyway.

With no D-A conversion or signal processing in the transport, the case is occupied mostly by power supply circuitry, well spaced out on a large circuit board. The amp, by contrast, is well filled with DAC board, phono board (MM/MC), large toroidal transformer and separate boards for each power amp, mounted on their respective sides of the unit on very large heatsinks. Component quality is impressive for the price, with a good DAC aided by high-quality op-amps, twin pairs of bipolar output transistors and relay selection of input. Internal metal screens isolate functional blocks of circuit and also brace the structure physically.

SOUND QUALITY

Our listeners seemed to agree on most aspects of this duo's presentation and liked a good deal about it. Most of all, they seemed to appreciate its sense of scale, which is considerable and very ably assisted by good bass extension with a nice combination of weight and impact. Presenting each duo via a tried and proven selection of extracts, we began with that old favourite, Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, which very quickly sorts out equipment that can do grandiose and expansive – this kit certainly can. All our listeners felt that both the special effects at the start of the track and the over-the-top music production when it joins in, were presented with real verve and enthusiasm.

There was the odd mild criticism, though, principally in the areas of detail retrieval and stereo imaging, two closely related subjects. One of the tracks we used includes a particularly tricky bit of rhythmic figuration on the piano and it was clear here that this was less easy to follow compared to some of the other kit on test. Another track has some of the most precise imaging around and one listener pointed out that this was compromised in both dimensions in the Advance combo's rendition.

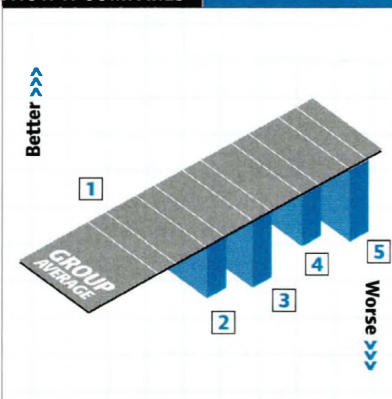
Just occasionally, too, there's a hint of tonal hardness in the sound, which is almost certainly closely related to the slight lack of detail. These are quite minor effects, though, and it's clear that for sheer life and energy these units are hard to beat. If you value engaging musical presentation more highly than absolute precision, this could be a sensible purchase. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

Power output is very much par for the course these days, with moderate headroom but plenty of current available for low-impedance loads. The frequency response of the amplifier is a shade rolled off in the treble and this may be just about audible in direct comparisons with some of the flatter amps around at present, though it's nowhere near alarming. What's probably of more significance is the distortion of each unit, which is higher than average and probably just enough to account for the slight loss of detail noted. The CD player is near-blameless at low and midrange frequencies, but HF distortion creeps up. In addition, there's rather more jitter than we're used to seeing these days and blame for this must be shared: the transport produces more than others we tried in its stead, but the DAC in the amp should reject it and clearly doesn't. The phono stage, in MC mode, has around 2dB of treble cut in the top couple of octaves.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >> 0%
- 2] Frequency response >> -30%
- 3] Distortion >> -40%
- 4] Dynamic range >> -30%
- 5] Jitter >> -50%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	100W	98W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.05%	0.03%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±	±0.6dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	Energetic, large-scale music making is hardly hindered by a little smudging of detail and occasionally compromised stereo imaging. Great bass, but treble sometimes a touch hard.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★
VALUE ★★★★★	

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ARCAM CD17/A38

At first glance prices seem ill-matched, but take a closer look...

When we asked manufacturers for pairs of CD player and amp, we took care not to be too restrictive in terms of price, giving only an overall ballpark target. Arcam could have fielded several combinations that would have met our request, but took what turned out to be an unusual approach in sending an amp costing over twice as much as the CD player. We can easily see the logic here, though: we've opined in this very publication that the law of diminishing returns sets in quicker with CD players than with amps, so apportioning the budget in this way is not something we regard as bizarre.

In many ways these two units are well matched – obviously visually, but also in terms of general internal and external construction. They both feature sensible use of modern components and circuit techniques (both use surface-mount components very widely), with shrewd employment of high-grade passive parts among the integrated circuits. The amp has a rather more modest-looking output stage than some of the other amps in this group, but it uses some rather clever output transistors with enhanced thermal stability, which should help it cope with heavy loading and the toroidal transformer is adequate rather than over-specified.

Arcam has not deprived these units of features. The CD17 supports CD text, albeit with some limitations and the amp has such niceties as input level trims and a choice of volume steps (2dB, 1dB, 0.5dB) thanks to the electronic volume control. Main switching is by relays, with electronic switches apparently routing the record selection, which can be independent of the listening selection. Build quality is good and the lightweight top cover of each unit is efficiently damped.

SOUND QUALITY

It's always nice to have our previous reviews borne out by new listening test evidence and in this case our listeners reiterated comments from the past about civilised, polished performance from these units. The bass was well-liked, but it seemed to be the upper midrange and treble where these units were most clearly distinguished from their peers, with great detail and refinement going hand-in-hand with excellent integration.

There was slight disagreement about the tonality, which we tend to interpret as a question of presentation rather than actual frequency response (which is, of course, essentially flat, as expected). Some comments suggested that the sound can be a little thin at times, which implies an over-emphasis of the treble, while others praised tonality as neutral. It seems that the particularly clear quality of the treble has differing effects on listeners, some finding that it draws attention to the upper frequencies in such a way as to boost them subjectively. This is just the kind of subtle difference, we feel, which justifies the existence of multiple products in the market.

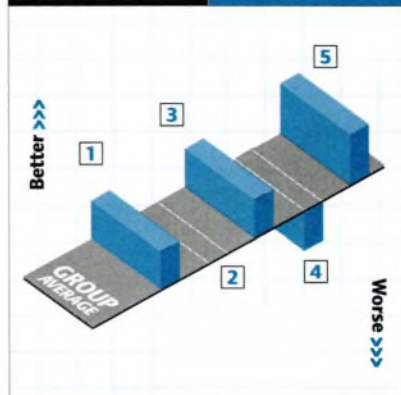
Bass is strong and well extended, but perhaps not quite as full of impact as some of the combinations produced. It just isn't the tightest of the group, but there's still decent rhythm to be heard. Stereo imaging is good in terms of precision and stability of instrumental placing, but there's rather less space and air around the performers than we've sometimes heard. Still, the precision makes it easy to pick out individual lines and while the sound is not hyper-analytical it's plenty clear enough to allow one to hear detail. Incidentally, sighted listening after the main panel session suggested that the CD player and amp are indeed very closely matched in sonic attainment. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

Despite the relatively modest dimensions of the amp, it's quite powerful and also has relatively high power headroom. Its frequency response is beyond reproach; flat to less than 1dB a full two octaves above and beyond the audio band. Distortion is extremely low and is very similar in level whether the amp is driving 8 ohms or 4; in fact, high-frequency distortion is actually slightly lower into 4 ohms, a highly unusual situation, but not one we're inclined to agonise over when the level in question is still well below 0.01 per cent. The CD player has similar distortion to the amp at low and midrange frequencies and full level, though it effectively vanishes below about -10dB output. Jitter is hardly measurable and noise from the CD player is very low: the amp's noise floor is a little higher than average, but still more than adequate. The amp's output impedance is higher than average, but the overall effect on speaker damping will be small.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >> +20%
- 2] Frequency response >> 0%
- 3] Distortion >> +20%
- 4] Dynamic range >> -20%
- 5] Jitter >> +30%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	100W	116W
Distortion (1 kHz/8 ohms)	0.005%	0.0015%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±	±0.2dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	Sound is above all civilised, with a positively deluxe feel to the super-smooth – but highly detailed – treble. Bass is clear if not the weightiest ever. Stereo imaging is good in terms of precision, though not the tightest in the group.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	

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CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 840C/840A V2

Highly respected duo from Cambridge holds its own

These are very much old favourites from previous *Ultimate Group Tests*, having competed with various newcomers over the last couple of years and generally holding their own. The 840C is based on a transport modified by Cambridge with its own servo unit, housed under an internal screen and, at least, partly responsible for the unit's admirably swift response to any user command – disc loading in 2.5 seconds is about as good as it gets.

The transport feeds an audio board which includes an upsampling filter from Anagram Technologies, boosting the sample rate to 384kHz from which it is converted to analogue by an Analog Devices chip and an absolute minimum of analogue filtering.

Not only is there unique filtering present, but Cambridge has thoughtfully provided the unit with two digital inputs so that the benefits can be extended to other digital sources. Further sockets at the rear allow connection to a multiroom system and the amp, of course, features the same interconnection facility, along side its numerous inputs – effectively nine of them if you don't mind reaching round the back to switch 'Input 1' between balanced and unbalanced connections.

In full-on purist style, Cambridge selects between those inputs with relays and uses more relays to adjust volume setting in 1dB steps. That's great, but we still find the noise made by the relays an irritation! The power output section uses proprietary 'Class XD' operation to achieve near-Class-A distortion levels with near-Class-B power consumption, and the whole thing is fed with power from a vast toroidal transformer, around which the heatsinks are cunningly profiled.

SOUND QUALITY

If our listeners didn't entirely fall in love with this duo, they certainly respected it vastly. Here, perhaps, lies one of the biggest problems facing hi-fi designers: not every listener always wants the pure, unvarnished truth all the time. How else to explain the comments? – and noting also from the lab report that it's near-impossible to find technical fault with this equipment.

The comments we refer to are almost entirely positive as regards specific areas of performance, from tight and well extended bass to good soundstage, excellent treble and midrange detail, good distinction between the notes... And yet no one seems to have been entirely transported by the overall performance. This, despite the unqualified acknowledgement that there was, at least, as much information coming across as with any of the duos in the test. Nor was there any accusation that the information was unnaturally dissected, as can happen with some replay kit.

Two possible explanations occur to us. One is simply that the extra detail was distracting our listeners. We're inclined to reject that, though, as most of the others were also highly detailed. The other is that the merest smidgen of added distortion – call it 'colour' – is often no bad thing and there's quite a lot of evidence for that. There's also evidence, though, that in the long term, colour can lose its attraction.

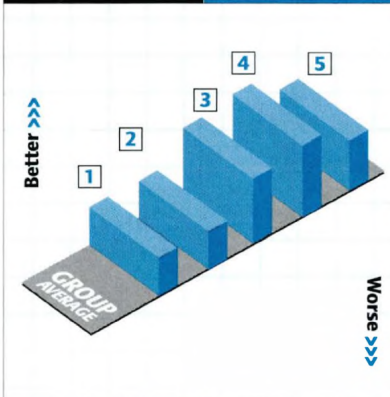
It's evident, whatever one's take on that, that this equipment is superbly capable and its combination of assurance, resolution and tonal evenness (all areas specifically praised by the panel) is well worth hearing. In longer, sighted, listening sessions we were never less than highly satisfied and we are confident in giving both these units our recommendation. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

In a group that features plenty of technically assured equipment, these units are probably the most capable. Power output is the highest in the group and Cambridge's clever overload protection, which backs off volume setting, makes it near-impossible to overload the amp for more than a brief instant. Frequency response of the amp is almost ridiculously flat in the treble, one-tenth of a dB down by 50kHz and hardly more curtailed in the bass, while noise from both units is very low and distortion approaches the limits if measurement. Near full output the amp's distortion is similar to others here, but Class XD shows its mettle in reducing distortion below about quarter power and even into 4 ohms there basically isn't any. Much the same holds for the CD player, which also shows negligible jitter. The digital filter gives slightly less aliasing distortion than most, though there is still a small amount.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >> +25%
- 2] Frequency response >> +10%
- 3] Distortion >> +40%
- 4] Dynamic range >> +50%
- 5] Jitter >> +30%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	120W	128W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.001%	0.0012%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±0.3dB	±0.1dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	Incredibly detailed, impeccably neutral and possessed of more than a hint of high-end assurance, the whole sometimes seems less than the sum of the parts. A technical <i>tour de force</i> by any standards.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

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MARANTZ SA8003/PM8003

Latest additions to the Marantz range show great potential

These are the latest additions to the Marantz range and replace the well-loved SA/PM7001 KI units that have been in the range for some years now.

As you might guess from the 'SA' prefix on the CD player, it actually handles SACD discs as well as regular CDs. In the usual modern manner there is no multichannel support, nor is there a high-resolution digital output. The transport is an open-frame affair (a little noisier mechanically than we would ideally like), which feeds an audio board based on a Cirrus (Crystal) chip. The analogue output stages use Marantz's 'Hyper Dynamic Amplifier Module' or HDAM, a circuit made up of discrete transistors. Marantz has also provided a USB input for solid-state music players, iPods etc.

Over at the amplifier, business starts with an electronic input selector followed by a traditional motorised volume control. Beyond that, the circuitry again uses discrete transistors and culminates in a single pair per channel of output devices, mounted on an internal heatsink. Power is fed from a large toroidal transformer. Despite being new models, both units use almost entirely traditional construction techniques, with through-hole components mounted on single-side circuit boards with wire links where necessary, a stark contrast to Arcam, for instance. Most components are regular commercial-grade but a few key parts are higher quality. A discrete-transistor phono stage is mounted next to the relevant input sockets.

SOUND QUALITY

Our solo reviews of each unit in recent months suggested that these were quite classy pieces of kit and our panel of 'blind' listeners tended to agree. It was immediately obvious to them

that the bass of the combination is a bit special, something we'd found especially with the amplifier and they were very taken with not just its extension but also its control and precision. Clear, tight bass like this gives a real sense of authority to music, they suggested, and they also felt that the midrange and treble were very well balanced against the bass and well presented in counterpoint to it.

Detail was felt to be good, if not outstanding, but what's perhaps more important in the long run is that there's no diminution of detail as dynamic levels increase – sound which becomes congested at high levels soon becomes tiring. On the contrary, our listeners specifically pointed to the way the detail in loud climaxes remains clearly audible as a strength of these units. To the extent there is any lack of detail, it's shown in the slight lack of air and space around performers and the mild compression of image depth. In fairness, it's so mild that were it not for direct comparisons with equipment even more capable in that regard, it might have gone unnoticed.

What may be the deciding factor for many listeners is the excellent rhythm and timing that Marantz seems to have built into these units. In any style of music and at any replay level there's a lovely vitality to the sound which, as one listener commented, keeps the foot tapping even when one isn't actively concentrating on the music. This kind of characteristic certainly sells equipment and, happily, typically keeps the buyer satisfied!

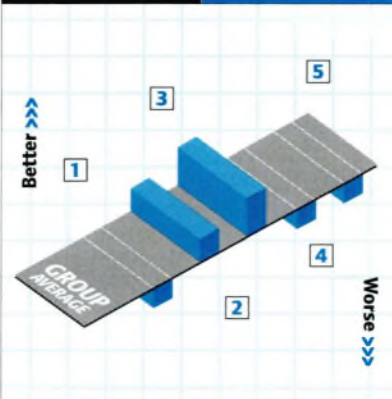
We can't close without mentioning the phono stage, which is a very clear cut above the usual standard one expects to find in a mid-price integrated amp. Fed from any decent moving-magnet cartridge, it achieves beautifully clear and well-balanced sounds, adding greatly to the amp's appeal for analogue lovers. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

Despite a rather more modest rating than several amps here, the PM8003 comes very close to the 100 watts average in practice, though it has relatively little peak headroom. Its frequency response is once again remarkably flat, barely a tenth of a dB down at 20Hz and not even that at 20kHz. The disc player, of course, has a flat response within the audio band, but while the basic response shape is familiar, the digital filter used has an unusual feature in that its impulse response is asymmetric, with no pre-ringing. The significance of this is very much open to question. Another surprise in the SA8003 is the presence of some jitter, albeit not very much, but recent Marantz models have tended to show near-vanishing amounts. Distortion performance of both units is very good in general: the amp's distortion climbs into 4 ohms, as expected, and also rises a little at high frequencies.

HOW IT COMPARES



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

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	70W	91W
Distortion (1 kHz/8 ohms)	0.02%	0.002%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±0.3dB	±0.1dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	If detail isn't the best we've heard, the vitality of the sound from any source – CD, SACD or vinyl – makes this combination sound never less than inviting and frequently quite thrilling.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	

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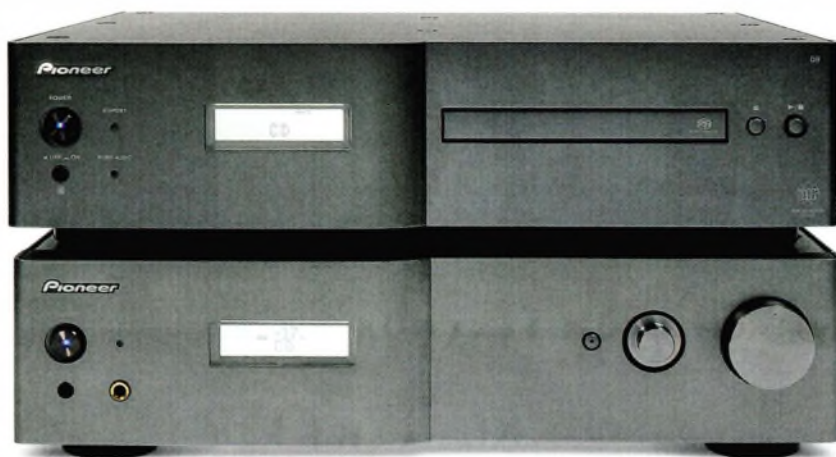


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PIONEER PD-D9/A-A9

Distinctive-looking combo marks Pioneer's welcome return to separates

These distinctive-looking siblings are part of Pioneer's 'G-clef' range which marked its return to hi-fi separates after an absence of a few years. Tuned for sound at London's Air Studios, they aim to recreate the glory days of the A400 amplifier, though how much electronic DNA they share with that fabled model is unclear. Certainly the A9 has come right into the 21st century with a full set of features that weren't in the A400, starting with full remote control. In fact, remote control is key to both units – lose the remote and you lose access to quite a few features, from tone controls on the amp to track skip on the disc player, which we found frankly irritating.

Apart from that, the D9 is conventional enough, as SACD players go – for it does indeed play the high-res discs. The only surprising thing about it is its considerable weight, due as far as we can see to the heavily braced base. Component quality within is good, with high-performance op-amps, Wolfson DAC chips and switch-mode power supply. The transport looks similar to the one used by Marantz and makes a similar, slightly audible, whine. 'Legato Link' digital filtering is selectable as an alternative to more the conventional brickwall filter, giving some tuning versatility.

The A9 amp is thoughtfully equipped, for though there are only four regular line inputs, there is a phono stage (MC/MM) and also a USB digital input suitable for connection to a computer. Input switching and volume control are both electronic, the latter using a single-turn motorised control whose position is translated into a setting for the attenuator. Volume steps are theoretically 1dB, but some of them seemed to be inaccessible on our sample. There are also tone and balance controls and a 'Sound Retriever' setting which is claimed to have a near-magical effect on MP3 and suchlike

sources – we weren't entirely convinced. Circuitry appears to be dual mono, with separate mains transformers for each channel.

SOUND QUALITY

It's probably fair to say that our listeners preferred the generalities of this combination to the specifics, finding a few points to criticise while still enjoying the experience overall. Indeed, some of the comments read as if there's a conflict between head and heart, the head suggesting that this, that and the other is perhaps not quite right while the heart simply likes the sounds coming from the system.

Tonally, the bass is clear and well-defined with good weight, but perhaps not quite the tautness that some combinations in this test managed. The midrange seems slightly depressed in the upper vocals region, making voices less prominent than one is accustomed to hearing, while the treble is, if anything, a little more pronounced than most.

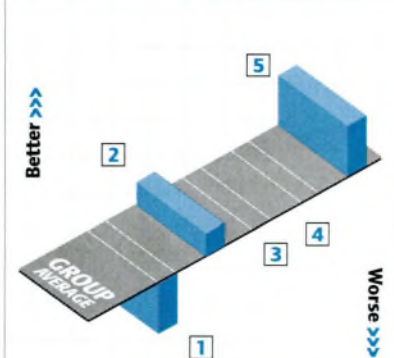
Detail again encountered mixed reactions. While it may not be to the highest analytical levels, it nevertheless seems to be all there and is presented without fuss, making listening stress-free. The lack is only felt when one tries to pick out fine details within a complex mix of sounds, a task which is certainly easier with some of the other combinations here.

We were quite impressed by the phono stage, at least in its MM (low gain) mode. Again, it is not hyper-analytical but it has a very pleasing flow to it and preserves the life and energy of classic vinyl very well. The USB input seems rather less successful, a little congested and coarse though plenty adequate for occasional use. These units certainly have their appeal, but if you are particularly fussy about detail and resolution you may find them a touch frustrating. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

Clearly the least powerful unit here, the A9 still manages a healthy enough output which, thanks to the dual mono construction, is identical into one channel or two. Output impedance is remarkably low, though typical speaker cable will raise it significantly. Frequency response is just detectably attenuated at the audio extremes, while noise is exceptionally low but slightly corrupted by low-level hum harmonics, in practice unlikely to be audible. Distortion from the amp is low and barely rises when the load is changed from 8 to 4 ohms. The phono stage has admirably flat response, even in MC mode extending well below 20Hz. Performance from the D9 is also very assured, with low distortion, noise and jitter. The frequency response within and above the audio band varies depending on whether Legato Link is selected, showing some roll off above 20kHz with LL and also appreciable aliasing distortion.

HOW IT COMPARES



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

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	55W	66W
Distortion (1 kHz/8 ohms)	0.05%	0.004%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±0.3dB	±0.1dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★☆	Enjoyable and involving sound, though some of the specifics are open to mild criticism, especially detail and tautness, both of which fall short of standards achieved elsewhere in this Ultimate Group Test.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★☆	
VALUE ★★★★☆	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	

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YAMAHA CD-S1000/A-S1000

Solid engineering from Yamaha guarantees a large-scale sound

Like Pioneer, Yamaha's dedication to hi-fi separates has not been conspicuously constant over the years. These two certainly proclaim a certain seriousness of purpose, with large dimensions, considerable weight (especially the power amp, which houses one of the largest mains transformers we've seen in an integrated amp) and rather smart trim.

In fact there's plenty of good solid engineering in there as well. The amp boasts several more or less unusual features internally, including a complex 'floating balanced' arrangement that, in principle, should give more accurately symmetrical performance than normal configurations and a very cunning arrangement for the volume and tone controls.

It turns out that the volume, balance and tone control knobs all operate regular variable resistors which, however, don't handle audio, but instead feed a setting back to the digitally controlled circuits which implement the respective functions. At centre position, the tone and balance controls are out of circuit: turn any knob a little off-centre and a relay clicks internally as the relevant circuits come into play. The volume is a motorised control which of course 'remembers' settings just like a traditional volume control, but adjusts volume in precise half-dB steps. A built-in phono stage handles both types of cartridge.

The CD-S1000 is, in fact, an SACD player, stereo-only like most of the current crop and with the usual SACD minor drawbacks of slow disc loading and slight mechanical whine. It is neatly assembled inside and there's plenty of fresh air in the case despite the presence of a fairly large mains transformer. Construction of both units is good, with damping of any mechanical parts likely to resonate, including the heatsinks in the amp.

SOUND QUALITY

Although these units produce a sound of considerable scale, there were some doubts about both tonal neutrality and the precision of presentation. It's a shame to have to report that such a good-looking and thoroughly-thought-out new arrival on the market emerged as one of the less successful in the test (among a strong field, let it be said), but that's pretty much the inescapable conclusion of our blind listeners' notes.

Not that there wasn't some praise and we're happy to report that these units could be just the thing for lovers of big bass. Low frequencies seem quite untrammelled and extend way down with real weight and attack. Possibly slightly more weight than there should be, but then that's not such a crime and after all can work as an effective foil to the slightly light bass of many smaller speakers.

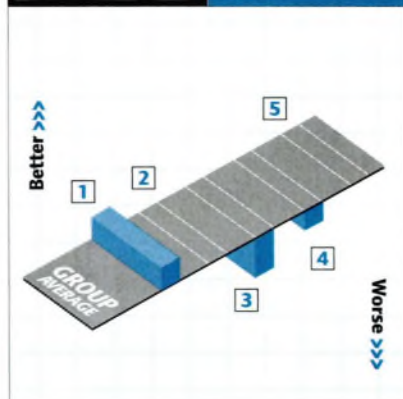
At the other extreme, treble is clear and crisp, though perhaps a little too crisp for some tastes. However, midrange is good with particularly clear presentation of voices, so much so that listeners whose main musical fare is voice-based could easily forgive the slight bass and treble foibles.

As for precision, there's an occasional hint of raggedness and some vagueness in the stereo image, plus a slight lack of 'air' around the sound (also audible with SACDs), which was commented on at various points by all our listeners. The phono stage slightly accentuates this and also the treble lift, but its bass is actually a little more natural than the line inputs'. In general there's a welcome degree of get-up-and-go in the sound, which brings plenty of life in its wake and, in combination with the large-scale nature already mentioned, makes for a listening experience that can certainly induce a grin, with the right music. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

Biggest doesn't necessarily mean most powerful, and the A-S1000's output is spot on the group average. There's plenty of current available to drive low-impedance loads and at any output level the distortion into 4 ohms is barely higher than into 8, which confirms that loading isn't a big deal for this amp. Absolute distortion levels are quite low, but not as low as some in this group and there's quite a high degree of hum modulation present especially on high-frequency signals. Noise on line inputs is not outstanding, but it's very good on the phono inputs which have impressively low hum levels. The SACD player has low distortion and good measurements in most areas except jitter, where a little modulation of the noise floor by high-frequency signals shows that clock stability is not as high as it might be. Frequency response above 20kHz is typical and the player inverts absolute phase.

HOW IT COMPARES



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

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	90W	102W
Distortion (1 kHz/8 ohms)	0.015%	0.008%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±0.3dB	±0.2dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★☆	Some interesting design ideas have gone into these units, which nevertheless seem a touch lacking in both detail and tonality. Strong bass is a plus, occasionally ragged presentation a drawback.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★☆	
VALUE ★★★★☆	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

CONCLUSIONS

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

These six systems were well matched in price and in many ways also in sound. At least, their overall level of attainment was not vastly disparate, but their specific strengths and weaknesses make for some very interesting comparisons. None was in any sense a dud, nor did any stand out as clearly 'the best'. Of course, we did end up with some preferences, but it's the grounds for those preferences that are the interesting bit.

Although the Yamaha scored lowest for sound, it is in no sense bad audio kit. Both CD player and

amp have plenty to offer and the bass, in particular, is very appealing. Pioneer's units also came in for some criticism, but despite a few specific areas being found (slightly) wanting, the overall sound they produced went down really rather well and we consistently found them inviting and pleasant to listen to.

Advance Acoustic is a relatively unfamiliar make in this country and it takes an unusual approach with the combination reviewed here. Measured performance may look rather unimpressive (though most of the figures we obtained

are perfectly respectable – its showing on the bar graph does reflect the high group average), but it has rather a grand sweep to its sound that it's hard not to like. Yes, detail could perhaps be improved, but it's the energy of the presentation that clearly made the biggest impression on our listening panel.

Arcam, Cambridge and Marantz are stalwarts of the hi-fi scene going back many years and each of their submissions to this group has a lot to offer. Arcam is memorable, not least for its super-sophisticated treble, a real taste of high-end

sound that is in no way undermined by the high degree of precision achieved elsewhere. Cambridge's 840 series components are an engineer's dream, but also sound astonishingly clear, detailed and analytical. Almost too pure for their own good, they do reveal recordings in their true colours. And Marantz's all-new 8003 models excel in rhythm and timing, with beautifully neutral tonality and plenty of detail too. We would hate to have to choose in objective terms between those three especially – it's very much a taste call. **HFC**

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HINTS AND TIPS

» Amps generate heat! In a rack, allow at least three inches clear above any amplifier to dissipate the heat output.
» Use decent cable in and out and beware frayed ends of speaker cables. Tighten screw-down connectors every few months.

» It's 'greener' to switch off at the mains rather than use standby and there's usually no sonic difference as 'standby' powers the audio circuits down anyway.
» Amps and CD players may be slightly microphonic, so place them out of the loudspeakers direct line of fire.

CD PLAYERS AND AMPLIFIERS AT A GLANCE



MAKE MODEL	Advance Acoustic MCD403/ MAP305 II DA	Arcam CD17/ A38	Cambridge Audio 840C/ 840A V2	Marantz SA8003/ PM8003	Pioneer PD-D9/ A-A9	Yamaha CD-S1000/ A-S1000
PRICE	£550/£680	£500/£1,200	£750/£750	£700/£630	£650/£600	£800/£900
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSION	Energetic, large-scale music making with great bass: a little smudging of detail and occasionally compromised imaging.	Civilised sound, with a deluxe super-smooth – but highly detailed – treble. Bass is clear if not the weightiest ever.	Incredibly detailed, impeccably neutral and possessed of more than a hint of high-end assurance.	Detail isn't the utmost, but great vitality from any source – CD, SACD or vinyl – makes this combination quite thrilling.	Enjoyable and involving sound, though some of the specifics are open to mild criticism, especially in regard to detail.	Sound is a touch lacking in both detail and tonality. Strong bass is a plus, occasionally ragged presentation a drawback.
KEY FEATURES						
DIGITAL OUTPUT ELEC/OPT	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes
BAL OUT(CD)/ IN(AMP)	No/No	No/No	Yes/Yes	No/No	No/No	No/No
CD TEXT	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
OTHER DISC FORMATS	-	-	-	SACD, MP3, WMA	SACD, MP3, WMA	SACD, MP3, WMA
INPUTS: LINE/ PHONO/ DIG	3/ MM/ MC/ S	7/ Optional/ 0	9/ 0/ 2	5/ MM/ USB-A	4/ MM/ MC/ USB-B	4/ MM/ MC/ 0
RECORD OUTPUTS	1	2	1	2	1	1
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
CLIP POINT (8ohm)	28V G	30.5V G	32V G	27V G	23V A	28.5V G
FREQUENCY RESPONSE	±0.6dB A	±0.2dB G	±0.1dB E	±0.1dB E	±0.1dB E	±0.2dB G
DYNAMIC RANGE	98dB A	99dB A	106dB E	101dB G	102dB G	103dB G
DISTORTION	0.03% G	0.0015% E	0.0012% E	0.002% E	0.004% E	0.008% G
OUTPUT IMPEDANCE	0.1ohm G	0.15ohm A	0.04ohm E	0.06ohm G	0.03ohm E	0.04ohm E
JITTER	0.5ns A	<0.12ns E	<0.12ns E	0.3ns G	<0.12ns E	0.25ns G
POWER CONSUMPTION	3W/66W	/35W	15W/98W	/30W	1.2W/62W	/57W

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 KT166 Legend Integrated Amplifier
7. Kore-Eda LLA-1 Control Amplifier & PLA-1 Power Amplifier



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DJ CABLE UPGRADE

Dear Alan,

I want to upgrade my speaker cable and was thinking of Chord Carnival Silverscreen, QED Silver Anniversary XT, Kimber 4PR, 8PR or 4VS. What would you recommend? The length of cable will have to be 10 meters to each speaker. I use a Marantz CD63 SE CD player, a Musical fidelity X-A1 amp, Cyrus FM 7.5, Nordost Black knight interconnect, and B&W 602 S3 speakers. I currently use Proel 12awg speaker cable (from a DJ music shop) I was also thinking of upgrading CD player to Cyrus CD6S or CD6SE. I mainly listen to modern music.

Martin Moran via email

HFC We rarely recommend spending a great deal on wire, suggesting 10-15 per cent of the total cost of the system should be good enough to make the kit shine. But the samples you have suggested all fit the profile. Of the cables you shortlist, we'd go for the Kimber 8PR, especially if you choose to bi-wire the speakers. This is because at 10 metre lengths, the interference-reducing weave of the cable really makes a lot of sense.

The update from Marantz to Cyrus is a good one, but it's possibly not the magical transformation some have come to expect from an upgrade. Chalk that one down to the original Marantz product. Nevertheless, the upgrade is still significant, but definitely worth an audition.

SQUEEZING OUT THE CD

Dear Alan,

My interest in hi-fi has recently been rekindled by the demise of my Cyrus7 CD player, which despite a trip back to Cyrus and a new laser, still will not play a single track without skipping violently.

I read with interest your articles on music servers and was thinking about using a Logitech Squeezebox in place of a new CD player. The trouble is my PC is in a different room, and the thought of having to turn the computer on to listen to music after spending the whole day in front of one fills me with horror.

After reading the recent review of the Cambridge Audio DacMagic I am wondering if this is the way to go. I could get a 2nd hand CD player to use as a transport, and the DacMagic will improve the performance of my DVD player as well. I believe the DacMagic can also be connected to a PC via a USB cable as well, though I am not sure how complicated it is to get iTunes to stream digital data through the USB port? Also I got to thinking I could feed the DacMagic with an iPod Classic: 120GB could hold 150 CDs in uncompressed format, more than enough for my everyday use. This must be a reasonable solution, though I suspect not as good as a replacement for the CD7.

Lastly, is there any manufacturer of internet tuners for hi-fi as I have a wireless connection at home? I believe the Squeezebox incorporates this feature, but I don't know of any standalone units.

Michael Stopher via email

HFC You have just described three (actually a lot more) fine pathways to good sound. The Squeezebox option is a great one, although as you point out, you need your computer powered up. At least initially – a network attached storage box can run SqueezeCentre as a standalone. This will also help improve the pathway to internet

radio into your system, although for that, you need your PC up and running.

You can also improve the Squeezebox by adding a DAC like the DacMagic, which can also improve the lot of an older CD and a DVD player. Whether the server solution or the CD solution is best for you depends on the age of the transport and how you rate the concept of using a server to hold all your discs.

The DacMagic-plus-iPod solution is a good one, but only one dock will allow you to gain access to the digital datastream in your iPod – the Wadia 170t. And that costs nigh on £400, before you include iPod or DAC. This also slows down the access time to your iPods controls, but it does turn your iPod into a *de facto* server.

MONITOR MISMATCH

Dear Alan,

At the risk of asking another boring upgrade question, I would appreciate some expert advice to avoid a mismatch. I have a pair of Monitor Audio GS60 floorstanders, which have recently replaced a pair of Spondor SP1s. I also have a pair of new Sennheiser HD650 headphones. I play this through a 1980's vintage Tandberg Series 3000 (150wpc), pre/power amp/tuner. This is partnered with a Thorens turntable and an early Phillips CD player. I plan to replace the FM tuner in the short term, probably replacing this with a digital tuner at a later date. I also expect to change the CD player soon (although the turntable is no longer required). I am also considering replacing the pre/power with a ▶



DO I DAB?

Dear Alan,

I am in my 80s and I currently have an Audiolab 8000T FM/AM tuner. My concern is that I don't want to end with an obsolete tuner (or indeed leave it for my family) if DAB replaces FM. On the other hand, I don't like to lose a good quality tuner and get a digital one that might not be as good. There doesn't seem to be any advantage in getting DAB/FM since FM will be dropped when digital comes in.

My current set-up uses Naim amplifiers, a Micromega CD, Pioneer cassette and Mission loudspeakers. I listen to classical, C&W, Irish and Scottish folk and even some 50s pop.

Robert Grant Newcastle-upon-Tyne

HFC Reports of FM's demise are greatly exaggerated Robert. While there are distinct

advantages to DAB (if you want to hear classic BBC radio comedies, for example, BBC 7 is a DAB-only channel that virtually justifies the format on its own), performance isn't necessarily one of them. And you shouldn't worry about the FM switch-off, either. The chance of FM being turned off in the next dozen years seems remote at best. No date has been set for FM – or even AM – switch off. Although analogue radio will eventually be turned off, that particular switch is unlikely to be thrown this side of 2017, or even 2020, as the BBC has recently suggested to a Government taskforce on the subject. We'd say if you want to experience the joys of DAB's extra channels, buy a Pure Evoke portable radio. But keep the Audiolab... it's a honey.

pure Class A or maybe valve design. Or possibly bi-amping the speakers with Cyrus and using a valve-based CD player instead. I am also looking at Sugden and Bryston.

I frequently use the tuner and headphone set-up, for which a socket/amplification is needed. I seek to achieve a warmer sound. The new GS60s, to me, have marvellous scale and detail, but have a slightly harder sound in my present set-up. A short list of mid-range Pre/Power Amp/CD/Tuner combinations and cables suitable for the GS60s would be most helpful. I realise that it finally depends upon my ears and listening room, but recommended possibilities would be most helpful in reducing the guesswork.

John Pearce via email

HFC The joy of Monitor Audio speakers is they are easy to drive... but not that easy. The bass drivers in particular can be punishing to smaller valve amplifiers and generally we recommend something solid-state as a perfect partner for the GS60. On the other hand, too bright and steely a solid-state amplifier can make the speakers sound 'zingy'. If always played at lower listening levels, the Sugden A21 SE is a perfect partner, but if you feel the need to wig out from time to time, you'll need something more gutsy.

The Bryston BP26/3B-SST is ideal here, as is Arcam's C31/P38 combination. Both the Bryston and Arcam sport headphone sockets. We still favour the Cambridge Audio Azur 840C, Arcam's FMJ CD37 and Cyrus CD8SE players for the front end, but you could also include Leema's Stream player in the mix. If you are intent on an FM-only tuner, the Creek Evolution is a budget superstar, while the Onkyo T-4555 is the excellent all-round DAB/FM choice.

TWO CASTLES

Dear Alan,

It's hard to get an honest opinion of my current set-up and what the next upgrade could possibly be. My set up is a Naim CD5i CD player, powered by a Naim NAC 122X preamp and Naim NAP 150 power amp. Speakers are a pair of Castle's Howard S3s and I have spent some dosh on good cables and a power filter.

Separately, I have through another integrated amp (an old Pioneer 7.1, but it does the job) that is hooked to my DVD player (Marantz 9600) and a pair of Castle Sterling, placed next to the Howard. What would you suggest for a next purchase to upgrade my stereo side?

Mark Brandon via email

HFC First, we'd suggest running through the same speakers along the front. Your home cinema speakers sing along in sympathy whenever you play hi-fi and vice versa. Finding a way of using the



Naim to drive the front speakers in your home cinema system would provide a sound for both. We're also less than convinced of the efficacy of expensive cables and a power filter for Naim equipment. Most Naim equipment seems to work best with low-bling cables.

You seem particularly fond of the Castle sound (given both your speaker choices); as such, you need to look at designs from the likes of PMC, Neat and Spendor. You could also check out the Ruark Talisman III as a suitable alternative.

ALAN'S TIPS

GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR TUNER

Although DAB makes life relatively easy for radio enthusiasts – DAB's signal handling generally means either the tuner works... or doesn't – FM radio is more demanding. In particular, FM can be plagued by noisy signals and multipath distortion (where the signal from the transmitter is undermined by reflections of the same signal bounced off tall buildings and the like). Many of these problems can be fixed with the simple expedient of a good, roof-mounted FM aerial.

A dedicated FM aerial, aimed at the correct transmitter mast will maximise the original signal, while an aerial with a good 'rejection rate' will help reduce the negative effects of signals coming from other areas. Of course, if you listen to stations from more than one transmitter (BBC and commercial stations for example), you either have to use a circular aerial (at the expense of some multipath distortion) or an aerial with a rotator and re-target the aerial whenever you listen to a station on a different transmitter. If you listen to Radio 4 exclusively and have no plans to listen to anything else, go for a directional aerial; if not, an omni directional will be a better option. One thing that really doesn't work, though, is to use the TV aerial on a 'splitter'. The TV and radio signals are deliberately kept apart to prevent one interfering with another, so they are at different frequencies and polarisation. Which means you would be far better off with even a cheap omni aerial for radio.

There is also a temptation to boost a weak signal by using a gain amplifier, most commonly found on cheap TV-top aerials. However, this can often be the cause of more trouble than it purports to cure, because if you have a signal plagued with multipath distortion, you boost the distortion as well as the original signal.

If you fancy a spot of roof-mounted DIY, then Antiference is a good name to look for in aerials. But don't dismiss the local aerial installer; they have a geographical sixth sense born out of a remarkable understanding of the tricks and traps of the region and will be able to install an aerial faster and align it more accurately than us mere mortals could ever hope to do. Check out the Confederation of Aerial Industries Ltd website (@# www.cai.org.uk) to find a local expert.

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AV SPEAKER PACKAGE
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INFORMATION

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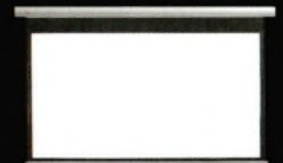
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INFORMATION

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C525BEE

NAD



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Kandy K2

Roksan



CD PLAYER

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INFORMATION

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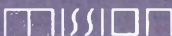
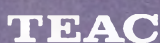
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INFORMATION

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- 98 DVD PLAYERS
- 100 VINYL
- 103 RADIO TUNERS

AMPLIFIERS

- 104 STEREO AMPLIFIERS

LOUDSPEAKERS

- 106 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 44.1 kHz to 192kHz.

CAN I PLAY SACDS ON A NORMAL CD PLAYER?

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

CAN I PLAY DVDS ON A CD PLAYER?

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

TOP BUYS



Rega Apollo £498

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



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	VARIABLE OUTPUT	
UP TO £1,000												
	Arcam DIVA 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 CD5r	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												
EB	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
EB	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
EB	EMM Labs CDSA	6,995	Classy, stripped down to basics SACD/CD player with some excellent engineering below decks		●	●	●				●	302
EB	Esoteric X-05	3,495	Superb resolve of fine detail combined with a perfectly judged balance and an ability to draw you into the music		●	●	●				●	314
EB	Leema Antila	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 multiformat non-video player doesn't have huge transparency, but is musically addictive		●	●	●					299
EB	Marantz SA-11S2	2,700	Superb value for money, this well-balanced player features various filter settings to customise performance		●	●	●				●	304
EB	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
EB	Meridian G08	2,250	Advanced digital processing with special apodising filter that gives a very clean sound		●	●	●			●		312
EB	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
EB	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	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000				DVD-A COMPATIBLE	SACD COMPATIBLE	ELECTRIC OUTPUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	
	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									
👑	Acoustic 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
👑	Meridian G98AH	3,625	Meridian's most widely compatible G-Series DVD player – groundbreaking DVD-Audio replay and a fine CD player too	●	●	●	●	●	265
👑	Naim DVDS	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
👑	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. **ELECTRIC 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.



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

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Naim HDX - A Hard Disk Revolution



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The new Naim HDX is an ideal product for those who value their album collection but want it all in one place with a flexible search facility while retaining that unique Naim quality. The HDX will play CD, most popular formats, store 600 albums, offers USB, extra NAS storage and helps grow your musical horizons with 6 streamed outputs. You can also upgrade the power supply. Contact us to audition this unique performance product. (For more info visit - billyvee.co.uk)

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				
				SPEEDS	SUSP SUBCHASSIS	SWITCHABLE SPEED CHANGE	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	ISSUE NUMBER
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
	Micell 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 onboard 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	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	ISSUE NUMBER
	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.

High End Cable

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Stereovox
Townshend
True Colour Industries
van den Hul
Wyrewizard
IsoTek

CableSpike
STAX

The Rock V Turntable
Universal speaker cradles

Selected Hi-Fi equipment

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

Component cables
Digital Cables
HDMI
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SCART
Firewire
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Sub woofer cables
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Previously owned cables. Reference cables include free Burn In.

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PASSION FOR SOUND

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Hi-Fi Choice Readership Survey
May 2008



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For a more consultative approach
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Brad.francis@futurenet

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

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

FM & DAB HI-FI SEPARATES

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIG STRENGTH METER	ROT TUNING KNOB	ISSUE 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
	Magnum Dynalab 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-AMPING?

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	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000									
<input type="checkbox"/>	Arcam DiVA A70	500	A smart and practical amp offering good snap and pace, with natural dynamics and good detail	6	MM	●	●	60	289
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Arcam DiVA A90	850	Practical, affordable and impressively flexible amp with a laid-back approach but plenty of insight too	7	opt	●	●	100	303
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cambridge Audio 640A v2	300	Slightly cheap-feeling controls are the only real downside to this powerful and lively little amp	6	●	●	●	75	279
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Creek Audio Evolution	545	Dynamics can seem understated, but energetic bass and fatigue-free treble make it an enjoyable listen	5	opt	●	●	85	311
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cyrus 6vs2	600	Spunky little amp that reproduces instrumental timbres and acoustic spaces well, with real musical involvement	7	●	●	●	40	293
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	Marantz PM7001Ki	550	A self-effacing amplifier that serves the music admirably with fine bass, sweet treble and unforced detail	5	MM	●	●	70	289
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	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
<input type="checkbox"/>	OnkyoA-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)
UP TO £1,000								
BEST BUY	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
BEST BUY	Unison Research Unico P	795	Sound belies indifferent measured performance with good detail, balance and flowing melodic quality	5	MM ● ● ● ●	●	50	293
BEST BUY	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								
EDITOR'S CHOICE	ATC SIA 2-150	2,248	Revealing, dynamic and powerful amplifier that works with a wide range of speakers. Superb build quality	4	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	150	314
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Arcam FMJ A38	1,200	A winning combination of sonic virtues including highly developed detail and musicality	7	opt ● ● ● ● ● ● ●	●	105	314
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Boulder 865	7,750	Extremely transparent to detail but less revealing of energy, high power, superb build but only balanced inputs	4	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	150	303
BEST BUY	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
BEST BUY	Creek Destiny	1,100	A highly assured performer that doesn't superimpose its personality on the music	6	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	100	286
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Jadis Orchestra DiP	2,995	A smooth, refined, yet dynamic-sounding tube amplifier with the added 'novelty' of an iPod dock	5	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	40	313
BEST BUY	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
BEST BUY	Mystère ia11	1,250	Small, deceptively powerful integrated valve amp with a crisp, pacy sound	4	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	40	302
BEST BUY	NAD M3	1,899	Massive and flexible, it goes very loud with fine authority and dynamic range, but lacks some sparkle	7	● ● ● ● ● ● ●	●	180	285
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Naim Audio SuperNait	2,400	Serious communicative ability meets convenience in this sophisticated and powerful integrated design	6	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	80	294
BEST BUY	Pathos Classic One MK3	1,535	An attractive amp offering a beautiful musical presentation with good tonality and detail	5	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	70	305
BEST BUY	Primare I30	1,500	A smooth, sophisticated yet agile performer, and beautifully built too	6	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	100	267
BEST BUY	Pure Sound A30	1,100	Valve integrated, with the accent on music rather than rhythm. Needs more inputs, though	3	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	30	298
BEST BUY	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
BEST BUY	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Unison Research P70	3,495	Delightful valve amplifier with fine neutrality, sweet midband, impressive bandwidth and ample power	4	● ● ● ● ● ●	●	70	302
BEST BUY	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									
BEST BUY	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
BEST BUY	Craft Precession i/Polestar I	1,400	Compact pre/power combo with battery preamp and hybrid power, with freedom from timesmear, bass could be firmer	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	6	● ● ● ● ● ●	25	290
BEST BUY	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
BEST BUY	Rotel RC-06/RB-06	598	A capable and surprisingly powerful-sounding combination which offers real value	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	5	● ● ● ● ● ●	70	285
BEST BUY	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									
BEST BUY	Arcam C31/P38	2,050	Very civilised sound, in the best possible way. Well featured and smartly built	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	7	opt ● ● ● ●	100	308
BEST BUY	Border Patrol Control Unit	2,995	Bluff looking valve preamp, with one of the most neutral yet dynamic sounds around	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	5	opt ● ● ● ●	277	
BEST BUY	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Chord Prima/Mezzo 140	6,100	Small, muscular, beautifully made and styled and sounds like a dream	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	5	● ● ● ● ● ●	120	269
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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	
BEST BUY	Densen Beat B-200/B310	2,300	Lively, energetic combination that bring a great sense of scale to familiar recordings	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	8	opt ● ● ● ●	80	276
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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	
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Gamut D200 Mk3	3,950	A great power amp that's now even better – one of the best regardless of price	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	200	247
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Hovland HP-100/RADIA	12,745	Uncommonly musical valve/transistor hybrid transcends stereotypes, one of the genuine high achievers	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	9	opt ● ● ● ●	125	250
EDITOR'S CHOICE	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
EDITOR'S CHOICE	Marantz SC11S1/SM-11S1	5,300	Preamp and power amp duo delivers high resolution and is consistent with different loudspeaker loads	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	6	● ● ● ● ● ●	220	304
BEST BUY	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

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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						
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
	Amphion Helium 520	1,000	Sharp styling and fine value for money with excellent voice band coherence	16,104,22	G	28			314
	Amphion Ion L	750	Sharp styling, fine mid/treble coherence and a sweet treble, but less happy bass alignment in test room	162,326,265	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
	Aurousal 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 marvelously 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	28,100,37,5	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	Shapely, vinyl-covered standmount has lively dynamics and fine imaging, but could be smoother and sweeter	22,37,33	A+	40			284
	KEF iQ9	800	Shapely and solid floorstander has wide bandwidth and dynamic range with superior neutrality and sensitivity	22,94,33	A	25			273
	Mission élan e34	400	A return to form for Mission with a pacy, vibrant sound matched to good looks	35,96,34	A+	48			298
	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 DB11	825	Could be more neutral, but a very effective musical communicator with fine warmth and sweet treble	15,5,29,23,4	A+	30			310

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

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

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				SIZE (WxD) (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM HD	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL
	PMC TB2+	795	Classy transmission line standmount has superior midband, restrained presence and a bright clean top end	20,40,30		A	28	●	275
	ProAc Tablette Ref Eight	699	Stunning standmount with electrostatic-like imagery. Its Signature brother costs £200 more and is even better!	15,27,23		A+	40	●	267
	Q Acoustics 1010	99	Neatly styled miniature has limited bass and power handling but fine midband voicing at a very sharp price	15,21,5,19,5		A	48	●	286
	Q Acoustics 1050	330	Great value, the sound lacks smoothness but has fine dynamics and impressive transparency	19,5,97,5,30	■	A+	28	●	284
	Quadral Pico	849	Could be more muscular, but neutral and open with spacious imaging and little coloration	19,34,26		A-	30	●	292
	Rega R1	298	Cute baby sounds busy, coherent and involving, if a touch thin. Sweet and delicate treble with even bass	15,32,24		A	50	●	269
	Russ Andrews SP-1	399	This tweaked Focal 705V RA has a sound that is immediate, engaging and, most importantly, great fun	19,2,31,5,24,8		A+	65	●	309
	Spendor S3/5R	725	Lacks dynamic muscle and loudness potential, but lovely smooth neutrality and good bass extension	16,5,30,5,190		P	25	●	310
	Tannoy Mercury F4	350	Floorstander has an engrossing sound with good dynamics and a warm, restrained output	20,5,97,29	●	A+	24	●	294
	Tannoy Revolution DC6	900	Pretty compact standmount likes wall loading, delivering a lively even bass and smooth coherent midband	23,36,5,23		A	40	●	307
	Triangle Antal Esw	995	Smoother than its predecessors, with a beautifully balanced bass and midband, though the top end is uneven	20,108,34	●	A	20	●	288
	Wharfedale Diamond 9.1	180	Superior shape and finish at an exceptionally sharp price. Sound is laid back, but free from boxiness	19,5,30,28		A-	45	●	307
	Wharfedale Opus2-M1	1,000	Elegant mid to compact three-way, a new direction in recent years for Wharfedale	23,51,36		A-	42	●	302
ABOVE £1,000									
	A2T Mezzo	2,000	Seamless overall coherence, with persuasive monitoring capabilities. Sounds a little mid-forward. Top could be sweeter	27,5,40,26		A+	40	●	281
	Amphion 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
	ALR Jordan Classic 5	1,200	Slim, laid-back floorstander has sweet sound with fine coherence, imaging and dynamic range	17,99,26	●	A	28	●	275
	ALR Jordan Note 3	1,350	Costly but clever; adjustable ABR gives much of the weight of a floorstander with the agility of a standmount	24,5,37,31,5		A	26	●	288
	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
	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
EC	Auroual VS	1,650	The fine coherence and imaging of a single driver system, plus extra help at the frequency extremes	215,107,5,26,8		G	20	●	314
	AVI ADM9	1,000	Active mini-monitors that are exceptionally accurate and dynamic, and they give good iPod, too	20,30,26		ACT	60	●	301
	AVI Duo	1,299	Sophisticated floorstander, a natural partner for AVI's electronics. Unusually clean and honest musical presentation	19,77,28	●	A	50	●	280
	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
EC	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
	Dynaudio Focus 220	1,850	Cleverly tapered floorstander has a brilliantly smooth, neutral balance and very sweet treble. Could be more dynamic	20,5,98,29,5	●	A-	<20	●	281
	Focal Chorus 826 V	1,250	Times nicely, goes loud with ease and will produce precise imaging if appropriately set up	28,104,37,5	●	A	45	●	287
	Focal Chorus 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
	Focal Chorus 836V	1,549	Bulky, sharply priced three-way could be prettier. Has good bass with genuine grip, but top could be sweeter	28,115,38	●	A	28	●	290
EC	Focal Electra 1027 Be	4,000	Outstanding mid and top with fine delicacy and low coloration, but lacks some bass grip and drive	26,5,111,35		A-	25	●	276
	Free FS1	3,000	An elegant active design for anyone after the minimum of wiring. Wireless with Sonos or Airport Express	16,87,27	●	ACT	35	●	301
	Gamut Phi5	2,550	Lovely and discreet floorstander has excellent sound and several very clever engineering touches	17,100,24		P	20	●	305
	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
EC	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
	Kudos Cardea C1	1,450	A very pretty compact standmount with a delightfully subtle and delicate sound quality	20,35,27		A	40	●	304
	Kudos Cardea C30	5,250	An absolute honey that fully justifies its hefty pricetag, lacking only a little dynamic tension	20,112,27	●	G	22	●	310
EC	MartinLogan Source	1,599	Careful install needed, but capable of remarkable transparency at an extremely competitive price	24,120,37	●	A	42	●	303
	Monopulse 42A	1,495	Oddball styling, fine bass-to-mid balance and dynamics, and superb voice coherence, but untidy treble	26,110,25	●	A	25	●	302
	Monopulse 82	2,495	Could be more neutral, but excellent coherence, lively dynamics, fine imaging and a wide dynamic range	27,110,25	●	A-	<20	●	281



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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 sit on the ear and intra-aurals sit in the ear and are particularly popular with personal stereo users.

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.

Getting the best from your cans
Getting a good result with headphones is not

Our favourite HEADPHONES

BEST BUY
 EDITOR'S CHOICE

Stereo headphones

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS							
				ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUMAURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK	WEIGHT (g)	3.5MM JACK ADAPTOR	ISSUE NUMBER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	AKG K270 Studio	129	Pro oriented design which is very transparent and great with acoustic material						270		230
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	AKG K1000	650	Neutral, analytical and completely out of the head sound, suitable for connection to speaker outputs only						270		244
<input type="checkbox"/>	Audio Technica ATH-W1000	400	Superbly comfortable and very revealing. Long listening sessions are a pleasure with new musical insights						250		304
<input type="checkbox"/>	Beyerdynamic DT770	190	A touch coloured in the mid, but less than most closed cans: detailed and with excellent bass						290		287
<input type="checkbox"/>	Beyerdynamic DT880	230	Combines musical involvement with a high degree of analytical virtues. Very comfortable						205		312
<input type="checkbox"/>	Denon AH-D2000	250	Among the best closed-back headphones we've heard and very fine by any standards.						350		309
<input type="checkbox"/>	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"/>	Denon AH-D7000	800	One of the best closed-back designs, bearing comparison with the finest open models. Bass, in particular, is excellent						295		314
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Grado GS1000	995	One of the finest transducers on the planet, with detail to die for						250		288
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sennheiser HD595	160	Technology from upmarket HD650 model makes this a very revealing headphone that's also extremely comfortable						270		266
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sennheiser PXC450	299	Noise-cancelling model: as good as it gets for making the most of listening in planes, trains and automobiles						240		302
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sennheiser HD650	330	Clear and detailed, with very natural tonality through bass and midrange and just a little treble coloration						275		312
<input type="checkbox"/>	Shure SE420	240	Expensive and no replacement for top conventional 'phones, but streets ahead of most in-ears with real refinement						15		295
<input type="checkbox"/>	Shure E500PTH	420	Sophisticated in-ear design with three drivers, plus switchable 'voiceover' mic in the lead; high-quality stuff						20		285
<input type="checkbox"/>	Stax SR-001 Mk II	239	Expensive and power hungry, but this electrostatic drags personal stereo into the world of high fidelity						280		268
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Stax SRS-2020 Basic Sys. II	349	Luxury option at its price, but the sound delivery is five-star quality all the way						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.

MidRange Audio

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CABLES



Wires to hook your system together



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

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

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

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

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

Our favourite CABLES

🏆 BEST BUY 🏆 EDITOR'S CHOICE

Interconnects and speaker cables

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIGITAL CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
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 generically - 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 Wyewizard 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
🏆	vandenHul 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	6	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
🏆	QED Silver Anniversary XT	5.50	Full bass and nicely detailed treble combine with good imaging – a budget bargain	●	●	●	●		276
🏆	QED X-Tube XT300	10	A natural and well controlled sounding cable that's cost effective for mid-priced systems	●	●	●	●		234
🏆	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 Solstice S²	45	Rather bulky and awkward, but performance amply justifies it with superb bass solidity	●	●	●	●		310

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

STANDS AND SUPPORTS

Equipment racks and speaker stands



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

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

Our favourite EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Equipment supports

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS
	Alphason A5-G	399	Nice looking, very solid and practical with a pretty well balanced sound, but lacks a little detail
	Atacama Equinox	280	Stable, modular design with style. Excellent bass transients and a fresh design concept
<input type="checkbox"/>	Audiophile Base Std Supp't	1,200	Expensive and quite bulky, but it's all worth it as sound is unusually detailed and resonance-free
<input type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design InertMatt	70	Isolation platform that can improve the sound of hi-fi components, but is a bit small for most kit
	Custom Design IconSignature	330	Gorgeous wood and glass looks; sound lacks a little detail, but is nicely lively
	Custom Design XL4	380	Simple construction pays off in smart looks. Sound contribution is minimal and largely harmless
	Custom Design Milan	449	Respect is due to any stand that looks this good with nothing more to complain of than slight muddying of detail
<input type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design Icon 400	600	Beautifully built, conveniently adjustable and with little sound of its own, a very classy rack
<input type="checkbox"/>	Milky FoculPods	19.50	A set of four isolation pads that are amazingly useful for damping vibration and improving sound
	Partington Minim	420	Adds its own character to the benefit of rock, most particularly, but slightly to the detriment of acoustic sounds
	Quadraspire Q4 Reference	480	Excellent performance from the school of wobbly racks. Natural sounding and plenty of detail
<input type="checkbox"/>	Russ Andrews Torlyte Platform	130	This unassuming platform can be a godsend, cleaning away mid/treble muddle from the sound
	Russ Andrews Torlyte Rack	988	Attractive modular system made of very light Torlyte: a touch of added warmth is its only vice
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Townshend VSSS	1,300	The Seismic Sink goes all glassy and attractive, yet retains the same excellent vibration-killing sound quality

SPECIFICATIONS					
HEIGHT (CM)	TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)	WELDED	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
80	66,46		5	Glass	247
81	50,50		4	Glass	217
57	46,35		3	MDF	302
	40x25			Metal	311
	56,37		4	Glass	286
	60,42		4	Glass	293
57	48,39		4	Glass	302
75	57,41		5	Glass	263
2	5			Polymer	311
78	45,37		5	Glass	302
51.5	49,39.5		4	MDF	217
8	48,36		1	Torlyte	302
68	54,49		4	Torlyte	240
76	35,50		4	Glass	273

Our favourite SPEAKER STANDS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Speaker stands

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS
	Anvil Sound Display Stand	226	A variety of smart looks available – sound is clear and precise
	Custom Design SQ402	100	More a range than a model, capable of fine results especially with Acoustic Steel top plates
<input type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design RS300	110	An attractive stand whose lack of coloration and ringing suits it to high-resolution systems
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design SQ404	200	Robust four-pillar design gives very low coloration and maximises performance of speakers great and small
<input type="checkbox"/>	Partington Ansa 60	99	Elegant flat-packer 'disappears' sonically; restrained but neutral and coherent
<input type="checkbox"/>	Partington Dreadnought BS	295	Sound is better defined in almost all areas than cheaper, slimmer stands can offer
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Partington Heavi II	399	Robust to the rith degree, this stand helps produce very taut, precise bass and detailed upper frequencies
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Russ Andrews Torlyte	299	Very relaxed sound from this metal-free design, with excellent imaging too

SPECIFICATIONS					
HEIGHT (CM)	TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)	FILLABLE	WELDED	NUMBER OF LEGS	ISSUE NUMBER
50	20,17			1	293
62	18,16.5			2	299
56	16,5,18			1	281
61	18,16.3			4	283
62	18,15			4	232
62	17,23			5	309
53	31,22			6	287
60,50	15,21			3	280

EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS **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 **HEIGHT** Of each stand, not including spikes. **TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)** Width by depth of platform. Single figures indicate a square platform. Speakers generally overhang top plates.

FILLABLE The stand can be mass-loaded with sand and/or lead to stop ringing. **WELDED** As opposed to bolt-together construction. **NUMBER OF LEGS** That support the stand.

Equipment Racks

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Equipment Racks

GLOSSARY

TECHNICAL TERMS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

Heatherdale

● audio limited

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Speakers

Acoustic Zen surround system, new (£7845) only	£5875
B&W DM1800 speakers with stands	£195
B&W DM640 floor standers	£295
New Acoustic Zen Adagio speakers	£3125
New Alamarro M3 speakers	£2695
Hales Transcendence 5 speakers	£2895
Mordant Short MS5-40 speakers	£99
Acoustic Zen Adagio Junior speakers + stands, new	£2500
Acoustic Zen Adagio centre speaker + stand	£1625
Mission 753 speakers	£349
Ruark Templars, boxed	£245
JBL TI 6K speakers mint/boxed	£1495
Tannoy Super Tweeters (ex display) full warranty	£795

Pre-Amps

Wavac PR-T1 3 box pre-amp as new. (£23500)	£10750
Proceed FAV pre-amp	£495
EAR 834L pre-amp	£395

Amplifiers

Almarro A501 25A integrated amp (NEW)	£3140
Wavac MD- 805M monos (£16500) AS NEW only	£7950
Kora triode 100SB mono power amps (pair)	£3495
Yamaha DSP-E800 processor/3 ch amp	£175
Audio Note Zero pre-amp with monoblocks (ex demo)	£795
Cambridge Audio Azur 840 A-B XD integrated amp Mint	£395
Denon AVR-3802 surround receiver	£395
Mark Levinson ML 336 power amp	£2495
Quad 306 power amp	£175
Meridian 551 integrated amp excellent cond	£695

CD Players & DACs

Audio Note DAC 1X mint/boxed	£395
Denon DVD A-11, DVD/DVD audio/SACD player mint/boxed	£695
Esoteric x-03 SE (NEW)	POA
Goldmund Eidos 18 CD/SACD player (£3195) NEW	£2495
Accuphase DP 65 CD player	£995
Tri CD player (made in Japan) ex-demo	£995
Meridian 506 20 bit CD player, superb cond.	£695
Accustic Arts Drive 11 reference CD transport with Accustic Arts reference tube DAC 11 SE. UK supplied, full warranty, brand new factory sealed. Normal price £12300	offered for only £6995

Miscellaneous

Technics ST-610L tuner	£65
Sony ST-SE570 tuner	£60
Winds electronic stylus gauge	£425
Cambridge Audio Azur 640T V2 FM/DAB tuner Mint	£95
Selection NEW Madrigal CZ gel balanced interconnect@ discount	
Townshend S/Sink 3 tier equipment rack	£350

Turntables and associated gear

Dynavector 507 Mk. 2 arm (new)	£2295
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Main Dealer for:

Mark Levinson, Ayre Acoustic, Tannoy Prestige speakers, Thiel speakers, Audionote, Esoteric, Bolzano Villetti speakers, SME, Stax, Cello, Lyra, My-Sonic, Revel, Audio Tekne, Michell.

DEFINITIVE AUDIO

Sale of part exchanged and ex-dem items

ITEM DESCRIPTION	SALE	NEW
Audio Note Japan M7 Line and phono pre amplifier Very desirable. Built 1996.	£5000	—
Audio Note Japan Kageki Parallel single ended 2A3 stereo amplifier Sought after rare bird. Built 1999.	£12000	—
Audio Note Japan M7 Line pre-amplifier Built: 1999.	£4500	—
Resolution Audio 530 Integrated amplifier. Works in conjunction with Opus 21 CD player. Very neat office style solution New unused.	£800	£2150
Resolution Audio Opus 21 Silver/silver. 3 years old. Condition as new.	£1650	£2950
SME 20/12A turntable with KSL silver wired 3125 arm Demonstrator - less than a year old.	£8500	£11500
Living Voice Avatar II Maple.	£1500	£2700
Living Voice Avatar I Black gloss.	£1000	£3000
Lector MM phono stage. Nice looking. Sounds alright as well.	£400	£800
LV MC step up transformer. 80 Ohms.	£350	£650
Michell ISO / Hera phono stage.	£200	—
Benz Micro Glyder As new.	£400	£650
Transfiguration Esprit Only 20 hours use. Perfect condition..	£600	£1200
Jan Allaerts MC2 Finish Gold Only 100 hours of use.	£1750	£4500
VDH Condor XPM Platinum Optimum load 40 ohms / 15 mv output. Less than 20 hours use. Perfect.	£1850	£2850
VDH Black Beauty Special X Optimum load 500 ohms / 5 mv output. Just serviced & calib. by VDH.	£1500	£3700
VDH Grasshopper III GLA. Optimum load 500 ohms / 45 mv output. Just serviced & calib. by VDH.	£1500	£3350
VDH Grasshopper III SLA. Optimum load 200 ohms / 65 mv output. Just serviced & calib. by VDH.	£1250	£2700
Kuzma Airline tonearm. Boxed. Bit of a palaver, but sounds great. Perect condition.	£5000	£7500
Sugden A21SE Integrated. 3 years old. Very tidy.	£1000	£2150
Sugden A21 power amplifier Titanium.	£475	£1200
Cairn Integrated. Remote control & balanced input. Black.	£450	—
Monopulse 42A loudspeakers. Sand.	£450	—
Vitavox MM300 12" high power handling bass drive units Very light use. Super serious.	£400 pr	—
Vitavox RH330 4-cell mid range horn.	£400 pr	—
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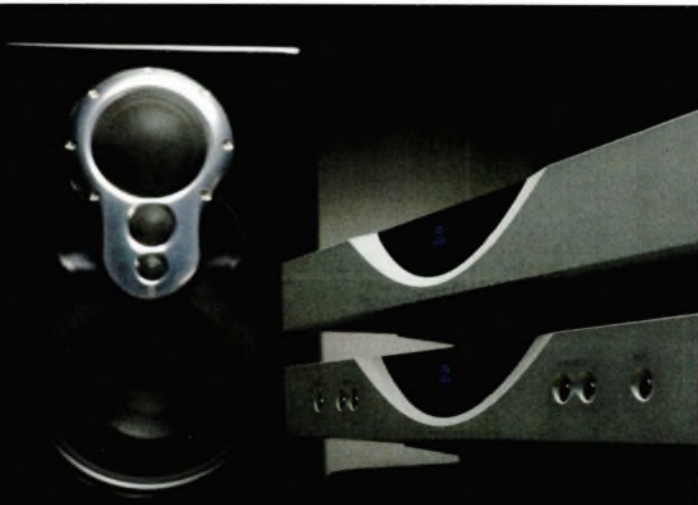
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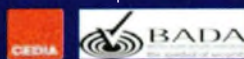
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2nd-hand shootout

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The Audio Analogue Maestro Settanta may not be the snappiest named amp, but it's one worth seeking out. This Italian integrated first appeared in 2003 and charmed us with its smooth, beguiling sound quality. Since its launch there have been a number of minor changes with a major revision in early 2008. The latter version can be identified by its bright blue display, whereas earlier examples had a green one. The warranty is for two years and, provided the original receipt is kept, is transferable. Our budget is probably not quite enough for a newer version (now £1,850), but it will buy a later 'green' one from a dealer; hopefully with a warranty. No matter what the age, it's important to check that the amp has both its original remote and mains cable. The remote is a heavy brass affair with full functionality. Without it, some features are inaccessible. The standard power cable is a chunky, four-core lead that's finished in a distinctive bright blue. As it's a decent cable in its own right, you might find the previous owner has been tempted to keep it!

If it's long term satisfaction you seek, then you could do a lot worse than the Quad 99/909 pre/power amps. With 140 watts to hand and Quad's famous 'current dumping' system, this powerful combo will drive most speakers with ease. Since its launch in 1999 there have been no significant changes to the specification, making buying second-hand easy. Reliability is typically Quad-steady, although some early models suffered from poor quality capacitors. The quality was soon improved and offending examples are easy to detect with their crackling and popping sounds emitted through the speakers. Our budget is easily enough for a pair under five years old, effectively avoiding any teething problem models. Should anything go wrong then Quad prides itself on keeping parts dating back to

Below: Audio Analogue's Maestro Settanta amplifier



the '50s! Servicing can be direct or via a dealer and Quad can even supply original packaging. The warranty, however, is not transferable. Although the pair will work independently of one another it's worth having the AmpBus lead. Not to be confused with Quad Link, this link joins pre and power amp to give a balanced connection and remote switching. This link also makes it easy to bi or tri-wire the power amps, making the 99/909 eminently upgradeable.

If you like the idea of a classic British pre/power pairing, but are put off by the Quad's laid-back persona then it may be worth considering the Linn Kairn and Klout. The Kairn was introduced way back in 1990 and served right though to the its replacement by the Exotic in 2004. The later Kairn Pro (1992) was effectively the same thing, but with the phono stage removed. Various software and control board upgrades improved its compatibility over the years, but the greatest change came with the introduction,

“...it's important to check that the amp has both its original remote and mains cable.”

in 1994, of the Brilliant Switch Mode Power Supply. You can spot one of these later, SPS models by looking for a serial number post 5000. In actual fact, although the sound quality improved, the reliability has proved less than brilliant in a number of cases. It's not unknown for an early Brilliant equipped device to intermittently power down. The supply was improved in late 1994 (5309 onwards) and then again in late '95 (7000 onwards for the Kairn, 6000 onwards for the Kairn Pro).



Above: Sonus faber's Musica integrated amplifier

For the best sound quality and reliability seek out a post 7000/6000 model. For a good cheapie look for a pre-5000. The Klout power amp has been subject to fewer changes although later ones do sound slightly better. Models made between 1992 and 1996 can suffer from an initial buzzing sound when powered up. This was cured by fitting ferrite rings to the transformer and look for serial numbers post 3796 for this fix.

A rather more obscure choice, but charming nonetheless, is the Sonus faber Musica. Sonus is, of course, better known for its speakers but this sweet little integrated is not without talent. Sonus faber uses the 50-watt solid-state amp to voice its speakers and the Musica has been engineered to give a smooth, rich sound, if not the last word in transient attack.

As you'd expect from the manufacturer of some of the most beautiful speakers in the world, the Musica features a solid walnut front panel. Although extremely rare, we've seen a couple of examples crop up at our price range around half of their new cost of £2,300. UK distributors Absolute Sounds warns of the risks of 'grey' imports. To ensure full service back-up it's worth contacting an Absolute Sounds or an official UK Sonus faber dealer and checking the serial number. But the few sold in this country have been reliable and there shouldn't be any specific problems with the amp.

These four amps offer something for everyone. It's hard not to be tempted by the Maestro Settanta for its beguiling presentation but, then again, the 99/909 is a great long-term bet. As ever, the best advice is to listen to the options and take it from there. **HFC**

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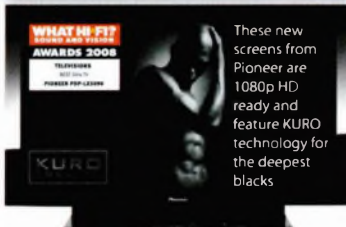
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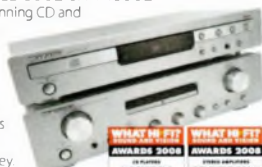


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B&W 600 Series

The fourth generation of the 600 series features new drive units, crossovers and a whole new design



B&W MiniTheatre MT30

Award-winning 5.1 speaker system available in silver, black or white.



Dali Lektor 1

These speakers deliver remarkable performance from compact enclosures

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Smart styling complements the Q Acoustics award-winning performance



KEF KHT2005.3

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Monitor Audio

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Radius HD

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Denon's micro systems are back. This award-winning model, available in silver or black, features a CD player, capable of reading MP3 and WMA discs, a DAB tuner, 30W amplifier and optional SC-M37 speakers.



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Award-winning integrated CD, Radio and Amplifier with iPod control via optional iLead/rDock.

NAD Viso Five

This stylish, award-winning, system from NAD gives excellent performance with DVD and more than holds its own with music too.



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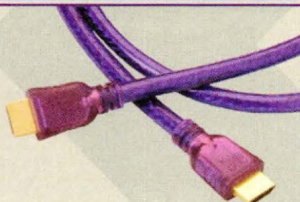


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remembering to include your phone number and county. The simplest way to send your ad is via email to: alan.sircon@futurenet.com. Or mail to: **Reader Classified, Hi-Fi Choice, Future Publishing, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW**. Please note that this service is open to private advertisers only.

FOR SALE

ACCUPHASE E213 integrated amplifier, one year old, as new condition, boxed with manual, paperwork etc, amazing amplifier, (£2,450) £1,500ono. 07786 262144 (Berkshire)

ADVANCE ACOUSTIC MPP206 and MAA406 pre/power. Best Buy August *HFC* MM/MC, full remote, balanced or phono, boxed, as new, £645. Tannoy DC3000 floorstanders, superb, rare rosewood, 92dB, ideal for valves! Boxed, £445. 01243 863371 (W. Sussex)

ARCAM ALPHA 5 amp and tuner, Technics SL-P5900 CD TDL RTL 2 speakers, truly vibrant sound, Thorens TD1605 with SME 3009 and Shure V15/3, £180. 0115 929 7706 (Notts)

ARCAM ALPHA 9 CD player, mint condition, black finish, boxed, £155. B&W P3 compact floorstanders. As new appearance, black ash, boxed, £135. 01752 790419 (Devon)

ARCAM SOLO £650. Epos M5 real wood speakers, £180. Both boxed. Soundstyle Z2 speaker stands, 6 metres QED cable, £40. 01474 355296 or email david.pryor@tiscali.co.uk (Kent)

ARCAM 170.3 CD transport. 1991 vintage, black, still reads discs, with remote control, booklet and interconnect 01929 480181 (Dorset)

AUDIO ANALOGUE Bellini preamp and Donizetti power amp. Excellent condition, £400. 01384 894284 (W. Mids)

AUDIO RESEARCH VS110 power amp, one month old, as new and mint, stunning amp, (£4,400) bargain at £2,400. 02380 224003 (Hants)

AVI DUO loudspeakers in excellent condition, one year old, cherry finish, superb sound quality (*HFC* Best Buy), £600. 0770 917525 (Surrey)

CHORD RUMOUR bi-wire speaker cable, 2x9m, (£300) accept £180. Also Chord Silver Siren interconnects, offers. 07891 533084 (Swansea)

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 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. Spondor S5E, 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)

GRADO SR80 headphones, brand new, £80+ p&p 07791 936281 (Kent)

HI-FI NEWS January 2007 to March 2008. *Hi-Fi Choice* January 2005 to December 2007 40 copies, £20. Buyer collects. 020 8590 8530 (Essex)

KLIPSCH KG5.2 floorstanding speakers in oak, very rare, excellent all-round condition, grills included, stunning sound, £275. 07725 072878 (Leicester)



Above: Advance Acoustic MPP206/ MAA406

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. ewadv@hotmail.com (Israel)

LINN CLASSIK CD player/amp/tuner mint condition in black, £300. B&W DM601 S2 speakers mint in black, £100. Musical Fidelity X-LPS phono stage mint, £40. (07748) 320549 (Suffolk)

LUMLEY REFERENCE LV1 preamp, very good condition, £150. B&W DM7 loudspeakers, £30. Speakers to collect. 07956 236764 or 0191 417 1669 (Tyne & Wear)

MARANTZ CD6000 KI Signature CD player, £275. Rotel RA05 amplifier, £275. 01903 813883 (W. Sussex)

MARANTZ CD17 (£800) £400. Musical Fidelity X-A1 amp (50 watts per channel) £300. Musical Fidelity X-LP phono stage, £90. 07787 166713 (London)

MARANTZ CD17 MkII KI Signature, £400. Arcam A85

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

amp, with Arcam phono boards, £400. Marantz CD Recorder DR6000. Plays, but needs attention, offers, can demo. 07941 015908 (Surrey).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A5 CD player, as new, upgrading, low usage. (£1,500) £800. 01268 415017 (Essex).

MUSICAL FIDELITY XA-50 monoblock power amplifiers (pair) £320. Musical Fidelity X-PSU £160, X-PRE, £130 (or £250 for both). All in excellent condition, lightly used in 2nd system. 07882 791040 (London).

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 NACD 3 CD player, NAC 62 preamp, NAP 140 power amp, plus KEF Q55 floorstanding speakers. All perfect condition, £500 the lot. 01254 233745 (Lancs).

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, £400. 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).

PRO-JECT RPM5 turntable, good condition, hardly used, one year old, £300. 07946 465191 (London).

PRO-JECT RPM5 turntable with Ortofon Tango cartridge. Pro-ject Phono Box II. Excellent condition, 15 months old, £200. 07525 069114 (Middx).

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)

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).

SENNHEISER HD 600 headphones, boxed (£269) accept £90. 07891 533084 (Swansea).

SENNHEISER HD 650 headphones for sale, £170. Reason for sale: I am upgrading. 01793 541240 (Swindon)

SILTECH SIGNATURE Forbes Lake XLR, £1,200. Golden Ridge digital XLR, £320. Ruby Hill mains, £500. Musical Fidelity MVX-2 preamp A370-2 power amp (£5,000), £1,000. 07900 394165 (London).

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)

SPENDOR S5E loudspeakers, boxed, £500 ono. Audiolab 8000S, £200 ono. Soundstyle five-tier equipment stand, £100 ono. All excellent condition, buyer collects. 01603 744000 (Norfolk).

SUGDEN C51, P51 and T51, one channel needs attention. Cambridge Audio P100 (black), 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)

TOTEM ARRO front speakers, Totem Dreamcatcher Centre, Totem Lynx dipole rears. Mission M5 subwoofer, boxed, all maple, mint, (£2,900) £1,400. 07891 533084 (Swansea).

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: Audioquest speaker cable, two or three metre pair. Bi-wire preferred, medium to high-end. 01772 468116 (Lancs)

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: Nakamichi CR-7e cassette deck, preferably mint/excellent condition. 07759 205820 or 01483 271669 evenings. e-mail s.banks@surrey.ac.uk (Surrey).

WANTED: Roksan Xerxes lid and hinges, mid-90s model. Also wanted: a working record cleaner. 07731 699579 (Stoke-on-Trent)

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).



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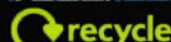
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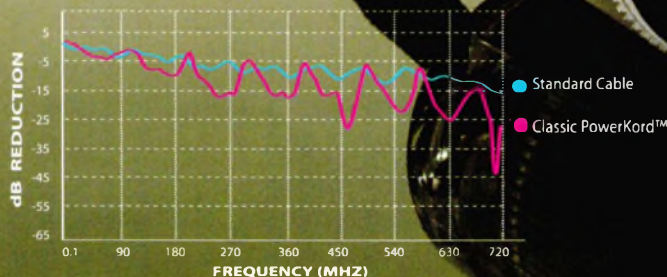
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HiFi Choice magazine

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What Hi-Fi Sound and Vision, November 2008



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