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WELCOME...

HI-FI CHOICE APRIL 2009 ISSUE 318

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If our bulging Reader Classified postbag is anything to go by, the second-hand hi-fi market is in a very healthy state. In fact, many of you tell us that our free Reader Classified pages and our Second-Hand Hi-Fi Buyer's guide are two of your favourite sections in the magazine. Well, they're our favourites, too and we enjoy scouring the ads as much as you do. In fact, to further

assist you in your bargain-hunting, we may start highlighting those ads that we feel offer the best value. It's all part of the service!

We're also bidding a fond farewell this issue to Alan 'Deep Bath' Sircom. Alan's heading off to look after the high-end bi-monthly *Hi-Fi +*. We wish him every success and will miss his quick wit and cake-buying expertise.

Dan
Dan George Editor

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

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

The Essential Guide To Audio Excellence In The Home



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



PAUL MESSENGER

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



JASON KENNEDY

Jason Kennedy was a former editor of *Hi-Fi Choice* and spent an incredible 17 years on the title. Now he's back as HFC's Operations Editor, ensuring that things run smoothly whilst continuing to review and contribute to the UK's best hi-fi title.



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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Here are our top 75 favourite products bought by customers using our very affordable: 0% Finance* and Buy Now Pay Later* Schemes...

BRAND	MODEL	MRP	10% DEPOSIT	MONTHS	MONTHLY PAYMENT
McIntosh	MCD301 CD Player	£4,795.00	£479.50	24	£179.81
Accoustic Arts	Tube Dac II	£7,050.00	£705.00	36	£176.25
Chord	Indigo 2 1m pair interconnect	£925.00	£92.50	12	£69.38
ADAM	Pencil Active Loudspeakers	£5,999.00	£599.90	36	£149.98
Marantz	SA-751 Legendary Series CD Player	£5,900.00	£590.00	36	£147.50
Clearaudio	Champion Ltd Turntable	£3,510.00	£351.00	12	£263.25
ADAM	Gamma SA Loudspeakers	£9,999.00	£999.90	36	£249.98
ADAM	Tensor Beta A Loudspeakers	£21,499.00	£2,149.90	36	£537.48
Marantz	AV8003 & MM8003 AV Pre/Power	£4,098.00	£409.80	12	£307.35
ART	Moderne 8 Loudspeakers	£3,000.00	£300.00	12	£225.00
Wilson Benesch	Discovery Loudspeakers	£6,262.00	£626.20	24	£234.83
ART	Deco 10 Signature Loudspeakers	£12,000.00	£1,200.00	36	£300.00
Accoustic Arts	Drive 1 mk 2 & Dac 1 mk 4 combo	£8,650.00	£865.00	36	£216.25
ART	Deco 20 Signature Loudspeakers	£22,500.00	£2,250.00	36	£562.50
Audionet	ART G2 CDP CD Player	£4,150.00	£415.00	18	£207.50
EAR/Yoshino	V20 Integrated Amplifier	£4,715.00	£471.50	36	£117.88
Bel Canto	DAC 3	£2,199.00	£219.90	12	£164.93
Bryston	BDA-1 DAC	£2,150.00	£215.00	12	£161.25
SME	30/12 Turntable	£19,189.00	£1,918.90	36	£479.73
ART	Moderne 6 Loudspeakers	£2,400.00	£240.00	12	£180.00
Bryston	4B-SST2 Power Amplifier	£4,000.00	£400.00	24	£150.00
ART	Deco 6 Signature Loudspeakers	£8,000.00	£800.00	36	£200.00
Chord	Signature Speaker cable 3m pair	£750.00	£75.00	12	£56.25
Clearaudio	Stradivari MC Cartridge	£2,700.00	£270.00	18	£135.00
Gamut	CD3 CD Player	£5,400.00	£540.00	36	£135.00
Clearaudio	Ambient Turntable	£3,990.00	£399.00	24	£149.63
ART	Moderne Stiletto Loudspeakers	£1,950.00	£195.00	12	£146.25
Creek	Destiny amp and Destiny CD	£2,800.00	£280.00	12	£210.00
Aesthetix	Rhea Signature Phono Stage	£6,450.00	£645.00	36	£161.25
EAR/Yoshino	Acute CD Player	£2,838.00	£283.80	18	£141.90
Bryston	BCD-1 CD Player	£2,500.00	£250.00	12	£187.50
Marantz	PM-11S2 Premium Series Integrated Amplifier	£3,300.00	£330.00	24	£123.75
Gamut	Di-150 Integrated Amplifier	£8,750.00	£875.00	36	£218.75
Hyperion	938 Loudspeakers	£4,750.00	£475.00	24	£178.13
Nordost	TYR 1m RCA Interconnect	£1,500.00	£150.00	12	£112.50
Clearaudio	Champion Ltd Turntable	£3,510.00	£351.00	12	£263.25
McIntosh	C2300 Pre-amplifier	£6,695.00	£669.50	36	£167.38
Klipsch	La Scala Loudspeakers	£6,000.00	£600.00	36	£150.00
Marantz	TT-1551 Turntable	£1,399.00	£139.90	12	£104.93
Creek	Wyndors TT Turntable	£2,000.00	£200.00	12	£150.00
Marantz	SC-1151 Premium Series Pre-amplifier	£2,899.00	£289.90	24	£108.71
Audionet	Pre 1 G3/AMP1 V2 Power	£8,375.00	£837.50	36	£209.38
Marantz	SM-1151 Premium Series Power Amplifier	£3,300.00	£330.00	24	£123.75
Aesthetix	Rhea Phono Stage	£3,700.00	£370.00	24	£138.75
Marantz	SC 752 Legendary Series Pre-amplifier	£7,999.00	£799.90	36	£199.98
Shanling	CD1500 CD Player	£2,000.00	£200.00	12	£150.00
McIntosh	MC275 Power Amplifier	£4,195.00	£419.50	24	£157.31
Gamut	Phi 3 Loudspeakers	£1,610.00	£161.00	36	£40.25
Aesthetix	Atlas Power Amplifier	£8,200.00	£820.00	36	£205.00
McIntosh	MS750 Music Server	£6,895.00	£689.50	36	£172.38
PMC	PB11 Loudspeakers	£5,500.00	£550.00	36	£137.50
McIntosh	MA7000 Integrated Amplifier	£8,195.00	£819.50	36	£204.88
Shanling	CD5000 Ref CD Player	£3,750.00	£375.00	18	£187.50
Marantz	SA-1152 Premium Series SACD/CD Player	£3,299.00	£329.90	24	£123.71
Wilson Benesch	Curve Loudspeakers	£5,383.00	£538.30	18	£269.15
McIntosh	MC2301 Monoblock Tube Amplifier Pair	£23,790.00	£2,379.00	36	£594.75
Klipsch	Heresy III Loudspeakers	£1,500.00	£150.00	36	£37.50
McIntosh	MA6600 Integrated Amplifier	£6,695.00	£669.50	36	£167.38
Musical Fidelity	Titan Power Amplifier	£19,999.00	£1,999.90	36	£499.98
Nordost	Valhalla 1m RCA Interconnect	£3,300.00	£330.00	24	£123.75
PMC	OB11 Loudspeakers	£3,600.00	£360.00	24	£135.00
ART	Moderne 10 Loudspeakers	£5,000.00	£500.00	24	£187.50
SME	10a Turntable	£4,105.00	£410.50	24	£153.94
EAR/Yoshino	834p Deluxe Phono stage	£1,234.00	£123.40	36	£30.85
Whest	PS30R Phono stage	£1,599.00	£159.90	12	£119.93
Wilson Benesch	ARC Loudspeakers	£2,691.00	£269.10	12	£201.83
Gamut	L5 Loudspeakers	£9,700.00	£970.00	36	£242.50
Wilson Benesch	ACT Loudspeakers	£9,101.00	£910.10	36	£227.53
McIntosh	MCD500 CD Player	£7,195.00	£719.50	36	£179.88
Wilson Benesch	Trinity Speakers & Torus Sub Woofer	£9,728.00	£972.80	36	£243.20
McIntosh	MT-10 Turntable	£10,395.00	£1,039.50	36	£259.88
SME	20/2a Turntable	£7,115.00	£711.50	36	£177.88
Aesthetix	Calypto Pre-amplifier	£4,150.00	£415.00	24	£155.63
PMC	EB11 Loudspeakers	£7,000.00	£700.00	24	£262.50
Marantz	MA-952 Legendary Series Monoblock Amp	£6,999.00	£699.90	36	£174.98

0%*



ART Deco 10 Signature

The Deco10 is based on the highly successful Emotion Loudspeaker, utilising the same drive units and internals. With a unique "DECOLAM" cabinet process and downward firing bass reflex port, the 10 sounds truly magnificent!

0% Deal*: Dep: £1200 + £300 for 36 months

0%*



Dac 1 mk 4 not shown

Accoustic Arts (Transport + Dac) Drive 1 mk 2 & Dac 1 mk 4 combo

Designed and built exclusively in Germany, Accoustic Arts products are designed to offer uncompromisingly high-end quality and exceptional value for money.

0% Deal*: Dep: £695 + £173.75 for 36 months

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Wilson Benesch ACT

A masterpiece of carbon fibre and real world engineering, the ACT continues to lead the field not only in it's peerless build quality but also in it's ability to deliver the most controlled tuneful bass, wide open midrange and crisp, detailed treble.

0% Deal*: Dep: £910.10 + £227.53 for 36 months

0%*



(NEW) McIntosh MCD500

SACD/CD, Digital Inputs, Unique parallel DAC, Volume Control and battleship construction add up to one stunning NEW Flagship CD Player from McIntosh. Did we mention that it sounds truly sublime too? One of our best sellers...

0% Deal*: Dep: £995 + £172.22 for 36 months



0%*

THE STUNNING NEW
PB1i

The impact, dynamics and sheer scale are the signature of the latest addition to the award winning *i* series range. The **PB1i** is a direct development of the heavy hitting **EB1i** and therefore displays the similar traits of ultra low bass extension, delicate razor sharp imaging and gripping presentation from a slimmer aspect.

Its ability to resolve every nuance in the mid and high frequencies derives from the combination of a silky smooth **PMC/SEAS** developed *i* series tweeter and a professionally proven three inch (75mm) soft dome mid-range, that also feature in the larger **EB1i** model.

Though substantially built, the **PB1i** offers an easy load and is therefore easily matched with a wide range of high quality amplifiers. This ease of drive is readily apparent on audition, the response remaining even and smooth throughout.

The NEW **PMC PB1i** is simply breathtaking.

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0%*

Gamut Di-150

It's really simple. With the sonic and technological heritage of Gamut, this superior integrated amplifier will simply take your breath away.

0% Deal*: Dep: £950 + £138.88 for 36 months



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SME 10a

It is one of our most popular selling turntables, because nothing else comes even close at the price! Loved by reviewers and customers alike, the **SME 10a** is very special indeed. Buy on our finance scheme and it's even more affordable!

0% Deal*: Dep: £419 + £157.29 for 24 months



0%*

EDITOR'S CHOICE
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Marantz SA-7S1

This multiple award-winner is a technical tour de force with one goal – to let you hear more musical detail than you thought possible from CDs and SA-CDs. It does and then some!

0% Deal*: Dep: £500 + £125 for 36 months



0%*

Bryston BCD-1

With today's increased clarity and dynamic range in recordings you need equipment that not only equals but surpasses the parameters of the most demanding material available. The **BCD-1** CD Player is without peer in meeting this performance challenge.

0% Deal*: Dep: £217 + £163.41 for 12 months



0%*

Bel Canto 3 Dac

The **Dac 3** transcends the expected performance from all of your digital audio sources. Providing the functionality of 3 separate audio products: DAC, Master Clock, Preamplifier in one product. The **Dac 3** provides value rivalled only by its performance. Hear it today and rediscover your music library.

0% Deal*: Dep: £199 + £150 for 12 months



0%*

Aesthetix Rhea

The **Rhea** is a three input, high gain phono stage utilising five valves per channel with no solid state amplifying devices in the signal path. Winning world-wide acclaim, the **Rhea** has become the choice for many an audiophile.

0% Deal*: Dep: £695 + £166.66 for 36 months



0%*

Musical Fidelity TITAN

Limited to just 50 pieces world-wide, the **TITAN** is the finest amplifier ever made by MF. No expense has been spared in their pursuit to create the finest power amplifier the world has ever seen. Be quick if you want one!

0% Deal*: Dep: £1,999 + £500.00 for 36 months



0%*

Clearaudio Champion Ltd

Includes Satisfy Tonearm

The **Champion Limited** Turntable features the base and platter of the **Champion Basic**, but upgraded with the massive stainless steel feet of the **Champion Level 2** for improved resolution, bass, and musicality.

0% Deal*: Dep: £258 + £96.75 for 24 months



0%*

Wilson Benesch Combo Trinity Speaker & Torus Sub

We think it could be the ultimate Speaker Combo! Incredible detail retrieval, incredible speed and incredible dynamics make this speaker system a musical tour de force.

0% Deal*: Dep: £975 + £243.75 for 36 months



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

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...with 0% finance*

*subject to status



0%*

System 1

McIntosh MXA-60 - £5,500 (This reference-quality 60th Anniversary system features a high-performance 75wpc amp, state-of-the-art CD/SACD/MP3 player, vacuum tube preamplifier, as well as an AM/FM/RDS Tuner and speaker system with 2-way bass reflex.)

Please call for finance details*



0%*

System 2

McIntosh MCD-301 CD Player - £4,795
McIntosh MA-6600 Integrated Amp - £6,695
ART Deco 8 Signature Speakers - £10,000

Deposit: £2,150*
Pay £537.22 for 36 months*



0%*

System 3

McIntosh MCD-500 CD Player - £7,195
McIntosh MA-7000 Integrated Amp - £8,195
ART Deco 20 Signature Speakers - £20,000

Deposit: £3,600*
Pay £885.05 for 36 months*



0%*

(NEW) McIntosh MCD500

0% Deal*: Dep: £995 + £172.22 for 36 months



0%*

McIntosh MA7000

0% Deal*: Dep: £995 + £200 for 36 months



0%*

McIntosh C2300

0% Deal*: Dep: £695 + £166.66 for 36 months

Above are just examples. All McIntosh Products are available with 0% finance*

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BOWERS & WILKINS CM5 AND CM9

A new floorstander and standmount join Bowers & Wilkins illustrious CM Series

Bowers & Wilkins luxury miniature CM1 loudspeaker quickly became the perfect template for a small family of loudspeakers for hi-fi and home cinema systems. Fitting snugly between the company's value-driven 600 Series and its high-performance 800 Series, the CM models are designed to deliver performance and elegance in that all-important middle ground. The CM1 soon begat a CM7 floorstander and a CM Centre, but now, Bowers & Wilkins has added four more models to the range, including two key stereo speaker pairs.

The CM5 standmount – like the CM1 – is a two-way ported standmount design, but the new speaker features a larger cabinet, larger bass driver and has slightly deeper bass. With its 165mm woven Kevlar mid/bass unit accompanying the 25mm aluminium dome tweeter (which sports the distinctive Nautilus tube), the CM5 delivers bass down to a claimed 45Hz (-6dB), but does so with a comfortable 88dB efficiency (the CM1 could only reach a suggested 84dB).

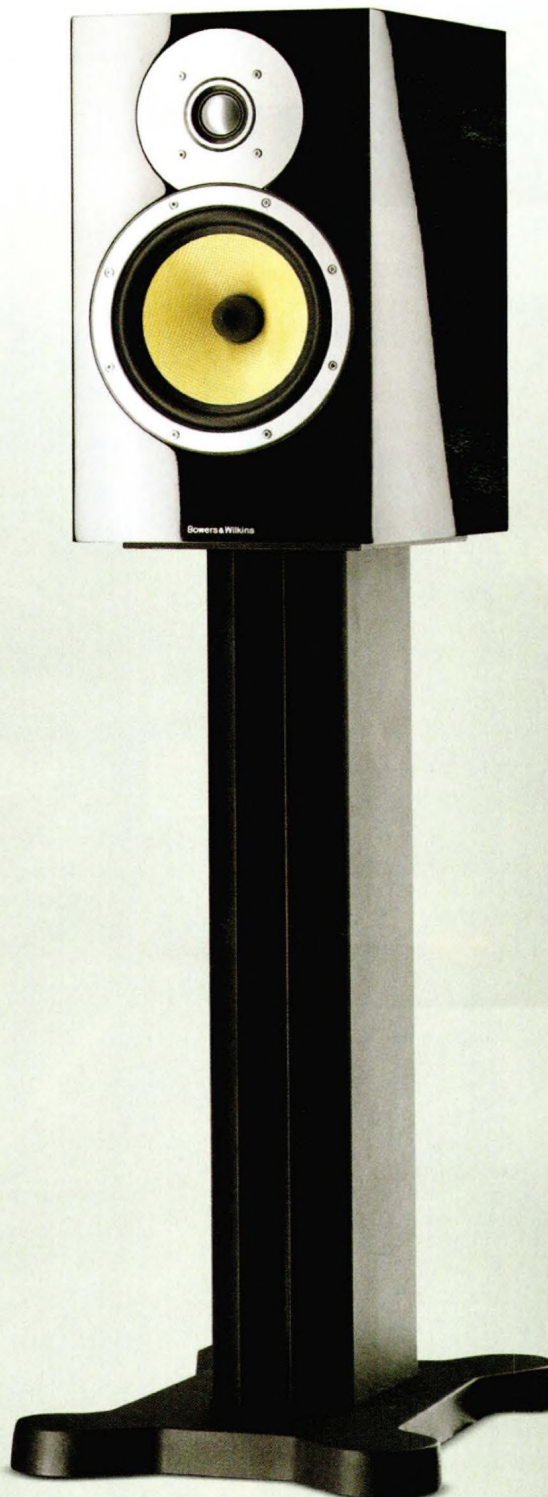
This is joined by the flag-carrier of the CM Series, the new CM9 floorstander; a ported three-way, four-driver design. Like the CM5, it features the same tweeter configuration, this time allied to a single 150mm woven Kevlar 'surroundless' FST (fixed suspension transducer) midrange cone driver and two 165mm composite doped paper and Kevlar cone bass units. This gives the speaker bass down to 30Hz (-6dB), once again with a comparatively easy 89dB efficiency claimed by the company. Unlike the CM7 floorstander, the 26kg loudspeaker is supplied with a plinth to widen the footprint and lower the centre of gravity in the process. All CM Series speakers are available in Rosenut or Wenge veneers, or a gloss black painted finish.

As has become standard in the better classes of Bowers & Wilkins speakers, the CM Series all feature rear-firing Flowport vents. With a dimpled surface, the Flowport vent is designed to reduce port 'chuffing' by lowering friction between the surface of the port and the air flowing over it.

In addition to the stereo newcomers, Bowers & Wilkins have added the new upmarket CM Centre 2 – priced at £734 – and the range's first powered subwoofer, the 500-watt ASW 10CM, which costs £856. The Centre 2 brings a FST midrange and larger bass drive units to dialogue, traditionally held up by the original CM Centre speaker. This £390 centre channel speaker will remain in the line-up alongside its new big brother.

Price £782 per pair (CM5); £1,761 per pair (CM9) **Due** April

☎ 01903 221500 🌐 www.bowers-wilkins.com



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DF-2 LP Flattener

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—Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio.com



DeMag



Furutech's deMag Frees LPs, Optical Disc Media, Cables and Connectors of Magnetically-Induced Distortion — CES 2007 Best of Innovations Award winner

deStat



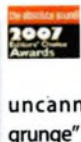
"... I now consider the deStat a mandatory accessory for any self-respecting audiophile who wants to extract the best from his music."

—John Crossett-Soundstage.com



Brutus Award
Positive feedback online

Reference Series



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

—Chris Martens
The Absolute Sound 2007
Editors Choice Awards

Ag-12 Phono Cable Series

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

—Marc Mickelson, Soundstage.com Reviews Choice Award



Ag-12 (DIN/RCA)



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



Ag-12-R4 (RCA/RCA)

CF Series NEW



CF-102 (R)



CF-201 (R)



CF-202 (R)

"Elegant, lustrous, non-resonant carbon fiber and nonmagnetic stainless steel bodies plus leading-edge technology and materials for enthusiasts seeking musical perfection."

FI-50 (R) Piezo Ceramic Series IEC Connectors



Carefully chosen and tested "active" materials mechanically and electrically damp Piezo connectors as they "interconvert" thermal, mechanical, and electrical energy for the finest Furutech Pure Transmission signal imaginable.



Carefully chosen and tested "active" materials mechanically and electrically damp Piezo connectors as they "interconvert" thermal, mechanical, and electrical

Furutech Pure Transmission Technology, improving every element of signal transmission, from the AC to the speaker

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TOWNSHEND ROCK 7

Stripped back to basics, the new Rock breaks the £1,000 price barrier

Townshend Audio is, perhaps, best known these days for its Seismic Sink supports and Isolda DCT cables, but the company 'made its bones' with turntables. Recently, the firm introduced the cost-no-object Rock V and from that chassis came the skeletal Rock 7, a stripped-to-the-bone, deeply upgradable design that can be built to a level that approaches the company flagship.

Starting with a basic platter and a substantial black, powder-coated solid steel chassis on symmetric spring/bellows feet, the base Rock 7 can support Rega, Linn, SME and Townshend's own Excalibur II arms as standard, with other arm outriggers available to special order. The deck appears to be made with a belt-and-braces approach to engineering, with a precision-ground steel shaft one-piece bearing resting on a steel ball and lubricated with synthetic oil developed for F1 racing cars. This arrangement sits at the bottom of a brass bearing journal that is fixed to the main chassis of the Rock 7 and the bearing extends to form the record spindle itself. This has a threaded hole at its centre to accept the optional (but, apparently, highly recommended) record clamp. The platter is made from high-density polyethylene, chosen to have virtually identical physical properties as the vinyl LP.

This basic Rock 7 package lacks even the unique front-end damping trough common to all other Rock designs. However, this silicone-fluid damping trough and paddle arrangement is the Rock 7's most obvious first (£499) upgrade. Other upgrades include a custom record clamp, beefed-up motor and flat belt and the Merlin II electronic power supply. These last two are claimed to give a significant reduction in noise and more accurate stability.

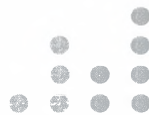
Even the standard motor is substantial, though. It uses a 24-pole, 250rpm synchronous motor design and a two-speed pulley, to assist the round-section belt rotate the platter at 33 or 45rpm. This motor and its power supply and switchgear, sits independently of the turntable assembly and is further divorced from its surroundings by being suspended from a series of Nytrol elastic bands.

With the promise of taking a good basic turntable design at a keen price and adding the damping trough design that sets Townshend apart from its rivals, it's easy to see why this is potentially one of the most important decks to have emerged in the last few years. Rock on!

Price from £999 Due now ☎ 020 8979 2155

🌐 www.townshendaudio.com





SONNETEER MORPHEUS

Sonneteer has announced a complete digital music centre called Morpheus. The sleek black product is a radical departure for the UK-based electronics company, as the Morpheus is Sonneteer's first media player, with full internet radio and music streaming capacity and optional Bluetooth compatibility. The 100 watt per channel built-in amplifiers are fed by what the company intends to be a complete digital music hub, which can support anything from a memory stick to an iPod. It can even be wall-mounted.

Price £2,200 **Due now** ☎ 01483 566990 🌐 www.sonneteer.co.uk



BRYSTON SST² AMPLIFIERS

Canadian power-merchant Bryston has announced it is redesigning all its amplifiers, following the success of the 28B-SST² monoblock. The revised SST² power amps bristle with minor changes said to produce a performance advantage over previous SST models. Depending on model, the changes include anything from redesigned balanced input and power supply circuit boards to a new soft-start circuit and reduced point-to-point wiring. Everything down to the on/off switch – including, in many cases, the whole chassis – has been reworked.

Price from £2,850 (2B-SST²) to £7,500 (28B-SST²)

Due now ☎ 0870 444 1044 🌐 www.bryston.ca

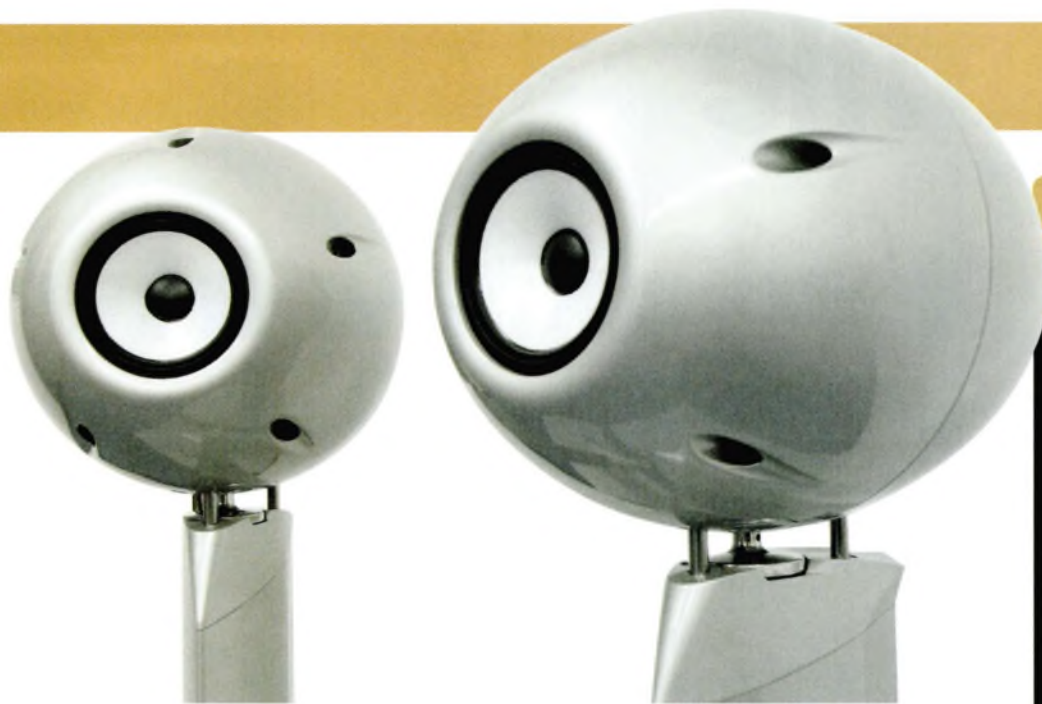
MUSICAL FIDELITY TITAN

Tweaking the nose of economic downturn, Musical Fidelity has announced its strictly limited Titan power amplifier. Capable of churning out a titanic 1,000 watts per channel, only 50 samples of this two-box design will be made and at £19,999 we can see why. Claimed to have been two years in development and capable of doubling its power as impedance halves (it delivers almost 4kW into two ohm loads), the Titan features a separate PSU with two 3kVA transformers. With a claimed frequency response from 10Hz-100kHz and with low distortion across that whole range, the Titan is said to deliver a 126dBa signal-to-noise ratio, giving it the sort of dynamic range few amps could dream of. A matching Primo Class A preamp is waiting in the wings, too.

Price £19,999 **Due now** ☎ 020 8900 2866

🌐 www.musicalfidelity.com





ECLIPSE TD712Z MK II

The single-driver Eclipse flagship – the TD712z – has been at the top of the company's tree since 2004. To find a replacement, Eclipse investigated all elements of the original design. The new TD712z Mk II's driver is claimed to have 10 per cent more magnetic flux density and the cabinet is claimed to have increased in volume by one-fifth. The result is said to have a wider frequency response, greater power-handling and improved impulse response than its predecessor.

Price £5,000 per pair **Due** Spring ☎ 020 7328 4499 🌐 www.eclipse-td.com

SENNHEISER HD800

Sennheiser's new hand-assembled flagship HD800 is suggested to redefine headphone performance, reducing distortion to an impressive 0.02 per cent at 1kHz (1Vrms). This is done by a means of a unique 56mm 'ring-transducer' diaphragm. This large doughnut-shaped transducer produces a larger wavefront than conventional headphone diaphragms. Capable of delivering frequencies between an impressive 13Hz-44.1kHz, these transducers are also angled to time-align the HD800 to the listener's ears. The distinctive HD800 also includes ear-pads made of Alcantara, a stainless steel case for the transducer, a high-tech damped plastic headphone mounting and sandwich design headband designed to buffer out vibrations, as well as a four-wire Teflon-coated and Kevlar-strengthened oxygen-free copper wire. Even the headphone socket features gold-plated plugs with silver solder.

Price £1,000 **Due** now ☎ 01494 551551

🌐 www.sennheiser.co.uk



DEVILSOUND VERSION 2

Proof of the increasing impact of the hard disk on music replay, the latest version of Devilsound DAC is a custom USB-stereo phono cable with a built in digital decoder. You simply plug your PC into one end, your amp into the other and the DACable (well, what would you call it?) does the rest. Inside the square box interface is a DC-DC power converter chip powering a pair of Analog Devices 16-bit, non-oversampling DAC chips and a single-stage op-amp output.

Price £250 **Due** now ☎ 0560 2447377 🌐 www.devilsound.com



Soundbites

MERIDIAN'S i80P is an iPod dock designed to take advantage of the company's skills at handling digital audio and video. It features proprietary analogue circuitry designed to maximise the iPod's performance, even enhancing compressed audio signals. The i80P will cost £195. ☎ 01480 445678



THE CHORD COMPANY'S new Indigo Plus digital interconnect combines the resonance-damping acrylic plug surrounds of the standard Indigo cable with high-purity, oxygen-free, solid-core copper conductors, a gas foamed polyethylene dielectric and a unique combination shielding system. Price is £995 a metre. ☎ 01980 625700



MONSTER Beats by Dr Dre is an oddly named £120 in-ear headphone designed with tangle-free ribbon cabling and what's claimed to be "a host of innovative audio technologies" to make the ideal for reproducing hip-hop. Word up, homies! 🌐 www.monstercable.com



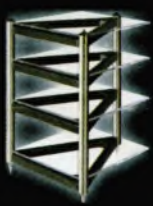
MARANTZ has a new iPod dock with a twist. The £260 IS301 dock features a removable cradle with an A2DP Bluetooth transmitter. This allows you to operate your iPod from your armchair, but still play music through your system. ☎ 01753 680868



SENNHEISER has upgraded its popular CX 300 in-ear headphone. Called – perhaps unsurprisingly – the CX 300-II, the new design has been completely overhauled with new drive units, but the price stays at £40. ☎ 01494 551551



GRAND PRIX products – the range of equipment stands and tables designed by former Indy Car engineer Alvin Lloyd – are now available in the UK through high-end distributor Symmetry. Developed to maximise the isolation properties of equipment supports, GP prices start from £1,995. ☎ 01727 865488



Nordic know-how

Alvin Gold reminisces on the golden age of beautifully crafted, high-end kit from the legendary Scandinavian, Primare



Hi-Fi Choice jumped at the recent invitation to visit Primare's HQ and manufacturing facility in Växjö, Sweden. We dispatched our very own Judith Chalmers (Alvin Gold) who whilst admiring the beautiful boxes, caught up with Primare's Managing Director Lars Pedersen. The man behind the must-have hi-fi was more than happy to bring us up to speed on what the company is up to now and how it all began...

Some twenty years ago Primare owned a factory (Xena Audio), with a manufacturing licence from

Copland's Danish designer Ole Muller and QLM loudspeakers. The products sold well, particularly in China, where they were also rumoured to have been extensively copied.

One of the key members of the Primare team was designer Bo Christensen, who joined in 1986 with a brief to make the best products that he, or the market had ever dreamed possible. Christensen concentrated his efforts on build and sound quality, as well as design and performance in their broadest sense. This was the original eye-popping Primare 900 range, but the finished products turned out to be extremely expensive.

"A great deal of money was invested in the project," as Lars explains, "Bo has a tremendous eye for design. The equipment earned some extremely enthusiastic reviews and cornered just about every front cover available, but a complete system cost about 30,000 US dollars."

Pretty steep then, even by today's standards. At the time, nothing less than astronomical. But did it sell? Well, not really, as very small numbers were produced and sold. So why was it so expensive? Well, it was all down to Primare's unwillingness to cut corners. Yet, even with this attention to detail, the failure rate on the product was, according to Lars, around 75 per cent. "They didn't break or fall apart, but were so intricate that by the time they had been assembled they failed to perform as they should have."

Fearsomely over the top in just about every respect, it was virtually impossible for Primare to make a return on the investment. The use of costly materials, such as



MARCH

14-15 World of Hifi
Kongresshaus
Baden Baden
Germany
www.highendsociety.de

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

MARCH/ APRIL

20-13 Ideal Home Show
Earls Court
London
www.idealhomeshow.co.uk

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

14-15 World of Hifi
Congress Center
Westfalenhalle
Dortmund-Germany
www.highendsociety.de



Even this oven has its own sound system



Primare's oversized hamster wheel provides free electricity for low-current tasks

stainless steel, instead of the more currently preferred aluminium, obviously didn't help. But they did look contemporary. In fact, they still do and Lars acknowledges that most people's reaction on seeing these products for the first time is a sharp intake of breath and a sincere desire that they should immediately be put back into production.

Bo left Primare in the early nineties and an investment team took over. By 1995, it was

obvious that Primare wasn't going anywhere apart, of course, from establishing a name for design. Meanwhile, Lars was doing well with the Copland brand and was contacted to see if he would take over the company. At that time he said no, on the grounds that he was too busy, and because turnover was very low. The offer was repeated six months later and a deal was finally done, whereby in a reverse takeover Primare bought Copland instead.

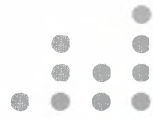
It would probably be possible to bring the 900 series back to life, if there was a will, or a sniff of a viable market. But all bets are off

with some of the other components. "You'd have to be insane." Lars opines, "We have asked our distributors how many they would order if they were to go back into production. They'd say 'two' and then when asked to confirm an order, nothing would materialise."

Back in those times, Primare equipment even put the early Bang and Olufsen kit to shame. The problem was, that Primare product didn't really belong in the real world. Looking more at home in a museum of innovations, perhaps. But things are different now – who wouldn't want a rack of Primare kit at home? **HFC**



Primare's lid-making machine was having an off-day



Words by David Oliver

Classic Album

There didn't seem much chance that the young Salif Keita would become one of Africa's biggest pop stars. Born in the extremely poor, landlocked West African state of Mali in 1949, he claims descent from royal blood going back to Soundjata Keita, the founder of the Malian Empire in 1240. But as an albino, he was considered unlucky and rejected by his father when he first expressed a desire to play music (it was seen as a disgrace for people of his royal caste to become entertainers).

Moving to the country's capital of Bamako in 1967 his voice, even more than his unusual looks, marked him out and he soon became a fixture on the local scene, graduating to featured singer in the legendary Rail Band, which used traditional Malian music and instruments, but reworked them for a modern, pop-oriented crowd.

Being the lead singer in the most famous group in Mali wasn't enough for Keita and he moved to Paris in 1984, where he found his reputation had preceded him among the 15,000-strong Malian community.

But he had ambitions to preach beyond the converted and hooked up with Ibrahima Sylla, the Senegalese production visionary whose credits would come to read like a who's who of modern African stars.

Sylla was already keen to lift the profile of African music and see it compete on the same platform as Western popular music, rather than be consigned to local popularity or a niche world music ghetto. Keita was also keen to make the most modern-sounding album he could, even waiving his advance so that the money could be spent on improving the production.

The pair got to work on Keita's first solo album, of which Sylla said: "I wanted to improve the technical level of African music, working in good studios, with good engineers and arrangers."

He pulled in a 20-piece big band of African musicians as well as French jazz/prog producer-arrangers François Bréant and Jean-Philippe Rykiel. Together they created a symbiotic new sound that made use of African rhythms crossed with latin, funk and RnB influences, traditional percussion and other instruments such as the harp-like kora with the latest synthesiser sounds, programmed drums, slap bass and fuzzed-up electric guitars.

There are funky dance tunes like the powerful *Sina*, which opens with Keita's acapella voice sounding like an Islamic muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. Then the band crashes in with a poundingly insistent rhythm driven by a panoply of drum figures, lifted by sparkling electric guitar riffs, funky bass, strident female choruses and aggressive horn stabs. But there are also quieter, more atmospheric moments like *Sanni Kagniba*, which balances lilting kora notes over a bed of shimmering synths with Keita's high, keening tenor floating on top. Then there's the audacious title track, a three-part suite which features different tempos and percussive textures, moving from a traditional sound, to a more overtly pop one – the album's entire concept captured in nine minutes of brilliance.

The album caused a sensation on its release in 1987, reaching beyond the newly-coined world music scene to present him as an African pop star with global ambition. But it proved to be a tough act to follow and Keita's subsequent releases lacked the same magical balance, before he eventually returned to his roots with a more acoustic sound in 2002. But it's this album, the success of its vision and the justly renowned Golden Voice of Mali at the height of its powers, that remains his crowning achievement. **HFC**

Salif Keita
"SORO"



SALIF KEITA
Soro
Mango Records

"Being the lead singer of the most famous group in Mali wasn't enough for Keita and he moved to Paris in 1984."

Words by **Richard Black**

Technology

In this issue we feature one of several recent products to include a USB-connected DAC, in this case the Consonance Ping (see page 44). USB actually stands for 'Universal Serial Bus', which translates into everyday language as 'system for connecting computers to all kinds of peripherals using a wire with not many cores'. It's quite a high performance system, theoretically capable of transmitting 480 million bits of data per second, which is several hundred times more than is involved in sending normal CD-format digital audio. In principle, then, sending audio via USB should be simple enough. In practice, it was something of a head-scratcher for the boffin who designed the PCM270... series of chips, a man by the name of Hitoshi Kondoh.

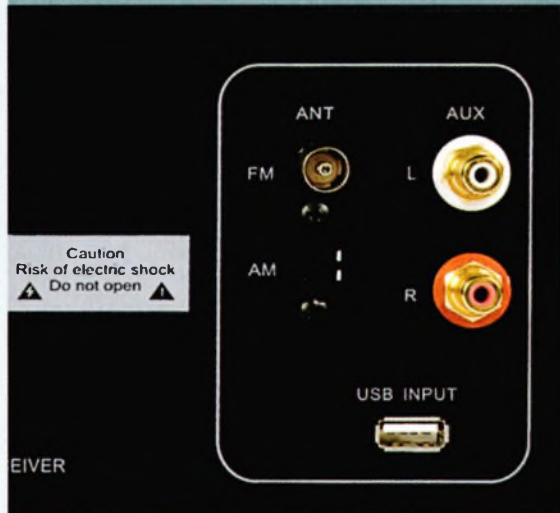
There is an important difference between audio and more common USB applications like connecting printers, disc drives and even portable audio players (for downloading). All of those tasks require data to be shifted, but there is no set time at which it must be done. Sending audio to a DAC, by contrast, is a real-time operation and if there is a hiccup in data delivery there will be an audible glitch in the sound.

With so much bandwidth available in a USB cable, it might look as if there will never be a problem at audio speeds. But the system would have to buffer an awful lot of data in order to be sure that dropouts never happened and simply buffering data would give huge delays ('latency') which would make the system incompatible with video operation. No one wants a two-second delay between vision and sound, a quarter of a second is already pretty disconcerting. Things are made worse by the way USB actually sends data, in 'packets': a few hundred or thousand bits are sent at high speed to each connected device, with a gap in between of about a millisecond.

One saving grace of USB is that it has an 'isochronous' mode for time-critical data, which sends packets with reasonable regularity. There still isn't a clock signal, though, and as with S/PDIF the clock must be determined from the data. In the case of S/PDIF the data arrives with regularity on a scale of microseconds, but to the extent USB has anything clock-like about the data it is on a scale of milliseconds and even within that there is a lot of jitter.

Recovering a clock signal from (fairly) regular data is done by a circuit called a Phase-Locked Loop or PLL. Done properly, this can significantly reduce jitter on the data stream, but there is something of a trade-off between lock-up time and amount of jitter reduction. The solution that Kondoh came to, aided by a 20-year-old piece of work by one Prof. Kobayashi, uses a PLL that switches operation mode once it reckons it has worked out the incoming data rate. He named it 'Sampling Period Adaptive Controlled Tracking System', inexplicably shortened to SpAct (pronounced 'S-Pact', apparently). It locks up very fast but then changes its parameters to give the jitter-reduction performance of a slow-locking circuit.

The end result of this, in practical terms, is that USB can now be used quite simply by manufacturers to give decent DAC performance. The PCM270... chips include a basic DAC, but several of them also include an S/PDIF output which, with the help of a second PLL further on in the circuit and a separate, dedicated DAC chip, can give fully hi-fi performance. We've seen some slightly sub-optimal implementations, but with just a little care it's clear that USB can now rival more traditional ways of sending digital audio from place to place. **HFC**



USB port on the rear of the Consonance Ping

"Sending audio to a DAC is a real-time operation and if there is a hiccup in data delivery there will be an audible glitch in the sound."

SHADOW AUDIO



Hi-Fi World
VERDICT 

Hi-Fi Choice September 2007. Alvin Gold wrote:

"If you want a disc player that will do the very finest musical job possible with your CDs and SACDs - the only really serious remaining audio disc formats - the Marantz SA-7S1 can even be considered a bargain..."



Hi-Fi World
VERDICT 



SC-7S2 • MA-9S2 • SA-7S1

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Malcolm Steward

Malcolm Steward was one of the country's best-known hi-fi reviewers of the 1980s and 1990s. His intolerance to less than gripping sound systems is legendary.

Ripping yarns

Who gives a tinker's cuss for high-definition audio?

"...owners of HD TVs always tell me that they love the 'big pictures' they produce. They are talking purely about quantity rather than quality..."

Self delusion is a trap waiting to snare even the most experienced listener. Recently, I and a colleague were assessing a collection of rips I had been making for a computer audio article I was writing. We were happily discussing the nuances of what we were hearing when a stark realisation hit us both simultaneously. "This is all crap. I could not and would not suffer living with this," we intoned as one voice. Some cosmic guardian of reality had flipped a switch inside our brains that made us suddenly realise that all we were doing was ranking degrees of mediocrity. We were intellectualising pointlessly over which flavour was the most tolerable of what, quite frankly, was a selection of brokenness. It was hardly the best use of our time nor of a revealing stereo system that has, over the years, set me back the price of a small northern town.

To snap myself out of this near delusory state into which I had fallen I ripped one of the CDs I'd been using to produce my test rips onto my Naim HDX, a machine that was designed and purpose-built by audiophiles to rip CDs. I compared its output to the computer-generated rips. To say that the difference was night and day would be an understatement of some magnitude. Oh, would that those internet forum critics who reckoned that they could build an HDX for £300 from computer store components had been there to hear that difference!

As both an HDX owner and someone who has for the past couple of decades been building his own computers, I no longer believe that the DIY computer is a viable alternative to off-the-peg machines for most purposes. I could barely assemble even a basic utility PC for the kind of money these proles were suggesting was sufficient to build something as specialised as an audiophile grade ripper/hard disk player.

Anyone who fancies competing with the HDX, nonetheless, had better get started quickly

because, searching the website of one major computer retailer, I could only find three CD-ROM drives on offer. Another large supplier listed none at all. The problem now for computer and hi-fi builders is that insufficient people want CD drives any more. If DVD drives have not made the CD-ROM extinct they have certainly rendered it moribund.

The problem is that DVD drives are nowhere near as good as CD drives for playing CDs. To extract even a half-way decent performance from them requires a great deal more effort, a fact of which you'll be aware if you've ever played music on most DVD players. Even specialist manufacturers whose R&D engineers have striven to make their DVD players perform the best they can with CDs will admit, if they're being entirely honest, that it is not the easiest of tasks.

Even so, the early adopter types are already buzzing about the potential for hi-def music on Blu-ray discs. Have these people been asleep while SACD and DVD-A have effectively died? The mainstream buyer does not give a damn about high definition audio.

If I am honest, I do not believe that most people give a tinker's cuss about hi-definition anything: owners of HD TVs always tell me that they love the 'big pictures' they produce. They are talking purely about quantity rather than quality here. Diameter matters more to them than definition.

One can only hope this might change now that the BBC has the Formula 1 television contract. I first saw hi-def Formula 1 courtesy of Pioneer and it was a genuinely revelatory experience. But am I deluding myself by imagining that anyone other than me really cares? If not, I will be at my kitchen table tomorrow building Blu-ray music players because there's going to be a massive market for them! **HFC**



The Naim HDX



"A WINNER AND HIGHLY RECOMMENDED ESPECIALLY AS ITS PRICE TAG IS MUCH LOWER THAN MANY 'HIGH END' COMPETITORS"
HI FI CRITIC / APRIL '07 / MARTIN COLLOMS / REF 3

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"SOLID, FAST AND ROBUST, YET TRANSPARENT AND DELICATE; ONE COULD WANT FOR NOTHING MORE"
HI FI NEWS / OCT '08 / KEN KESSLER / VS115

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"YOU COULD LIVE VERY HAPPILY EVER - AFTER WITH A CD PLAYER OF CD 5'S CALIBER. IT DOESN'T GET MUCH BETTER THAN THIS"
HI FI CHOICE / NOV '08 / JIMMY HUGHES / CD5

AUDIO RESEARCH CD 5 CD PLAYER

For Audio Research, the knowledge gained through the design process of their Reference series components must benefit every model in their range. Phono stages and digital sources, pre-amplifiers, power amps – Audio Research believes, like Formula 1 car designers, that benefits gained at the cutting edge should be shared.

While the existing Reference 3 pre-amplifier and the REF110, REF210 and REF610t power amplifiers reign supreme for 2009, a host of new, highly-affordable models will deliver a taste of "REF" sonics to a wider audience. For the best value in high performance pre-amplifiers, the fully-featured and supremely functional SP17, with or without phono stage, is a dream match for the VS115 stereo power amplifier.

For Absolute Sounds, the VS115 is one of the most astonishing entry-level Audio Research power amps ever introduced. Its technology has now inspired a new 'baby' stereo power amp, the VS60, and for those who prefer a one-box solution, the VSi60 integrated amplifier. Both the VS60 and the amplifier section of the VSi60 have new input stages and more robust valves to sound better and last longer. Like their larger siblings, both use classic 6550 output tubes.

For analogue supporters, the all-tube Ref PH7 phono stage is probably the best phono section available. Audio Research still believes in CD, too: not one but three new digital products have joined the family. So commanding was the CD3 Mk II that replacing it required something monumental: enter the CD5 Player/Transport, with balanced and single-ended inputs and outputs. At Reference level, the CD7 has led to the magnificent REF CD8, with new valve line-up, superior chipset and user-dimmable display. And the stand-alone DAC7 digital processor delivers conversion magic to stand-alone transports as well as computers: it offers a front panel USB input.

An Audio Research tradition: The bloodline strengthens.

For details of the full range and your nearest dealer, contact AbsoluteSounds.



Paul Messenger

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

Digital deal

To preamp or not to preamp, that is the question!

"Hi-Fi Choice guru Alan Sircom had recently tried the Russ Andrews DAC-1 USB with good results, so it was shipped down for me to try."

Six months ago, if anyone had told me I'd find a digital preamplifier useful, I'd have laughed. A few components – usually CD players – have had digital inputs of various kinds for years, if not decades, but I've never quite figured out quite why, nor had any real use for one – let alone two. 'Til now, that is.

The reason for the first one was the acquisition of a new computer. That's usually a mistake, because changing computers usually involves considerable trauma, especially for someone like yours truly who has to spend most of his working life operating one, but has little or no interest in – or enthusiasm for – computers per se.

I figured out that the best way of minimising the trauma would be to choose a 'new' computer that was apparently (and allegedly) identical to the one I was replacing – a 15-inch MacBook Pro. It was 28 months since its predecessor and my retailer/installer reckoned he'd be in and out in half-an-hour max. Six hours later, he gave up. He'd managed to download new operating systems and transfer files, but couldn't get the new OS to talk to my SB+ (an audiophile version of the Squeezebox), which wi-fi'd music and radio from my computer's iTunes program to the hi-fi.

I guess I'll get the SB+ up and running again sometime and there's always the computer's headphone output for emergencies. But it also provided an excuse to try out an external DAC. *Hi-Fi Choice* guru Alan Sircom had recently tried the Russ Andrews DAC-1 USB with good results, so it was shipped down for me to try. I too got very good results, but sadly it's now all sold out, rendering further endorsement superfluous.

Its only apparent drawback would seem to be an inability to switch remotely between the four digital inputs (two optical, one electrical, one USB). This matters to me because I recently purchased a Sky+ satellite TV/radio receiver, a very clever box of tricks that has an optical digital audio output (alongside an analogue stereo pair), and like the computer, it

sounds much better when used with a decent outboard DAC.

Since I now have two digital sources, I want a digital preamp/DAC that can switch between them by remote control and am not sure whether such a device exists. None of the six examples reviewed by Richard Black in *HFC* 316 came with remote control (though the Cyrus is a little ambiguous). Most of the components capable of switching digital inputs remotely are CD players and preamps and most are more costly than I consider appropriate for the relatively compromised digital audio signals supplied by computers and satellite receivers.

The key point here is that I already have a very high quality hi-fi system with vinyl, CD and FM analogue sources. With their powerful computing chips and switch-mode supplies, both computers and satellite receivers are essentially hostile to a high-end analogue system and since I regard them very much as secondary sources, I'm most anxious to avoid them compromising the performance of the core system. The best way to keep them 'at arms length', so to speak, would be to use Toslink optical links and avoid the same mains spur.

Two solutions present themselves. The cheapest is to use two separate low-cost DACs, but it will use up an extra analogue input on the main system preamp. The nearest thing I can find to a remote-switching digital preamp is Cambridge Audio's 740C CD player, which has two optical (or electrical) digital inputs and costs around £500.

As an interesting footnote, the BBC tends to compress the audio signal on Radio 3 FM, in order to make it more palatable to in-car users. Satellite Radio 3 transmissions, on the other hand, might not sound as sweet as a classy analogue FM tuner, but they do seem to be free from compression, which is definitely an unexpected bonus. **HFC**



Cambridge Audio's 740C CD player



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Opera Mezza



Opera Grand Callas



Opera Callas



Unison Research Unico 100



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Alvin Gold

Alvin Gold began writing about hi-fi more than 25 years ago and has since become one of the most internationally renowned reviewers in the field

Credit crunch

Is it all over for the hi-fi industry?

“What is interesting is the sheer ambition that is driving some of these designs, the best of which are nothing less than stunning.”

Looking around the CES show in Las Vegas, which I wrote about in last month's column, it was abundantly obvious that the world of hi-fi is not in particularly good odour. The number of exhibitors was well down on previous years and the same applies to the number of visitors, which remember represents trade interest only as CES is not a public show. The satellite High End show (T.H.E show) at the nearby Alexis Park hotel was similarly thinly attended and offered a much smaller number of exhibitors.

I, for one, left the show with the distinct feeling that although the corner has not yet been turned, there is reason for some optimism about the long term future for high-fidelity, which may, after all, be more positive than some have predicted. In other words, the industry may be down, but it isn't yet out.

Ironically, what is happening may be best modelled by something superficially bizarre that Sony had on show, which had absolutely nothing to do with high-fidelity. It was the company's entry into the hard fought market for Netbooks (small, internet enabled computers), in which they, the Sony designers, dispensed with the generic grammar of other similar designs. Instead it was designed to more closely model the shape of the keyboard, even though this meant ditching some of the features of competitors, most obviously the trackpad.

The result is even smaller and lighter than most of its breed. And, on paper at least, it is absolutely gorgeous, as well as being amazingly light and compact. Oh, and one other difference: it costs nearly three times as much as any other model of its ilk. Never mind for now whether this disadvantage can be justified. I don't know if it can hold its own commercially, but I suspect it may do because it looks more fashionable and more clearly upmarket than its peers.

There were numerous examples of similar thinking in the high-fidelity arena. I briefly mentioned last month about a number of Israeli loudspeakers at the

show. What is interesting here is the sheer ambition, the chutzpah if you like, that is driving some of these designs, the best of which are nothing less than stunning. I am not really qualified to say where this comes from. Israel itself is not a large enough market to sustain such an industry and, indeed, most of these products are aimed primarily at the US – some are even made there for reasons that will be obvious to any high-end speaker manufacturer.

But this is far from indicating what is really going on. Time and time again, as I came across outstanding high-end products at the show (and at similar events in the recent past), it was apparent that what used to be described as the mainstream middle market was suffering badly. The low-end, epitomised by small form factor MP3 family players and downloads, has also been growing at a prodigious rate, while the older middle market has been either static, or has declined.

The high-end market is definitely doing well, as I discovered to my satisfaction from talking to any number of exhibitors and other attendees. SACD, for example, has capitalised on its status as the preferred and the only available carrier to offer better sound than CD (on a good day) and although there may not be a lot of real growth left for the format to pursue, it has established itself a significant and relatively stable niche, which is of interest to anyone into decent sound quality first.

This really was the story all round. What I saw with loudspeakers applies equally with source components and amplifiers. Buyers are interested in products that perform well and that are expertly designed (in the broadest sense), as well as stylish. Some familiar names are certainly suffering, but others are surprisingly healthy with plenty of customer orders to guide them through our current economic woes. **HFC**



Las Vegas consumer show 2009

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WIN!

An Astintrew amplifier worth £1,350!

Astintrew is one of the champions of the 'made in China, designed in the UK' school of hi-fi. The new AT2000 integrated amplifier typifies this increasingly happy relationship; the amp bristles with the sort of functions you would be hard-pressed to find on an European-built design for anything near the money. Not content with featuring valves and delivering a healthy 65 watts per channel, the AT2000 also sports extensive multiroom controls and even balanced XLR inputs and outputs. It even features a sophisticated Fenson & Co 'Never Connected' power supply, which protects it from mains noise and unwanted interference. It sounds great, too. Best of all, you can win a silver one by simply answering the question below:

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Choice Cuts

New music reviewed and rated by our experts

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

COMPACT DISC



VAN MORRISON

Astral Weeks Live at the Hollywood Bowl

Manhattan Records

www.manhattanrecords.com

Music: Last November at the Hollywood Bowl, Morrison performed his landmark *Astral Weeks* album in concert for the first time ever. He didn't offer a carefully staged note-for-note recreation of his recording of 40 years ago, but seamlessly revamped the songs, teasing their lyrics in his trademark improvised, incantatory style. The result is a rare live album that not only makes you wish you had been there, but dramatically enhances our appreciation of the original studio recording.

Sound: The youthful timbre of his voice has given way to a richer, fuller tone, but it remains an instrument of mysterious and inspirational expression. **NW**



RICHARD STRAUSS

Eine Alpensinfonie

Franz Wälschli (conductor), Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester

EMI Classics www.emiclassics.com

Music: The *Alpine Symphony* is the final Strauss tone poem and is a dramatic work, with palpable echoes of Mahler and Wagner. It's constructed in 22 sections, the first of which consists of every note of a descending scale built up to a conclusion in which all notes are played simultaneously. The Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra is on superb form, paying with passion and commitment as this evocation of nature goes through its paces.

Sound: Recorded in the celebrated Musikverein in Vienna, reputedly one of the finest concert hall acoustics of all, the sound is atmospheric without ever becoming cloying, unerringly clear and lifelike, retaining the clarity of the music line throughout. **AG**



BISH

Surrounded By Mountains

LFT Records

www.myspace.com/bishmusic

Music: Despite starting with the slow-to-start *Cynthia*, this second album from Pogues' bassist Darryl Hunt is a little gem. Not everyone will love Hunt's dry, near fey, vocals but they contrast well with the breezily effortless tunes he conjures up and the combination makes for great driving music. There's somehow great variety, too, within a limited operating range – numbers like the moody *Tale of Two Cities* would have provided great cover material for Johnny Cash while the droll, ethereal *World Turns Around You* deserves to crop up on some future Jarvis Cocker album.

Sound: Recorded by Brian O'Shaughnessy, who's kept the jingles and jangles clear without being see-through. **PS**



NEIL YOUNG

Sugar Mountain

Warners

www.warnerbrosrecords.com

Music: In November 1968, Neil Young recorded two acoustic performances at Canterbury House, Ann Arbor, Michigan, in order to test the response to his performance as solo artist after the demise of Buffalo Springfield. Only 23 at the time, Young is affecting with his juvenile banter and guitar asides, yet the strengths here are fascinating versions of future classics like *The Loner*, *The Old Laughing Lady* and *Last Trip To Tulsa*. Crowning the whole enterprise though is an evocative rendition of the first song he ever wrote, *Sugar Mountain*. Entrhralling, in a word.

Sound: Captured on a TEAC two-track tape machine the sound perfectly evokes the atmosphere of a coffee house gig of old. **MP**





ALELA DIANE

To Be Still

Names

www.namesrecords.wordpress.com

Music: If the likes of Lily Allen, Lady GaGa and the rest of the current gaggle of brash young pop women are a little gauche for your tastes, Alela Diane offers a more elegant and traditional take on the art of female singer-songwriting. Her second album is a warm, country-folk gem of yearning songs that rely on instinct rather than artifice and are delivered in a fashion best described as homely. As such, the record's mood fits perfectly into the vogueish freak-folk movement inspired by such 1960s practitioners as Vashti Bunyan.

Sound: Wistful, sparse arrangements sung and played by a bunch of trusted friends, including the splendid pedal-steel stylings of Pete Grant. **NW**



EMMY THE GREAT

First Love

Close Harbour

www.myspace.com/emmythegreat

Music: Emma Lee-Moss is a 24-year-old singer songwriter with an acoustic guitar, a band and a clear, deceptively naive voice. If the melodies and her voice make more than a nod and a wink to Joni Mitchell's *Blue* period, the lyrics are pure 21st century London girl. Less acerbic than Kate Nash or Lily Allen, hers is a uniquely skewed world view with a keen eye for juxtaposing the contrasting little details of life, like wondering whether the music soundtracking a car crash is by "either Mia, or MIA".

Sound: Played no more than adequately well, with bargain basement production values, it has an amateur charm that's gilded by Emmy's quietly intense vocals, quirky tunes and highly personal lyrics. **DO**



RUTHIE FOSTER

The Truth According To Ruthie Foster

Proper

www.proper-records.co.uk

Music: This Texan singer-songwriter offers a powerful mix of folk, soul, blues, gospel, R 'n' B and old-style Memphis soul of the sort you didn't think they made any more. She's joined by a top session band including blues guitar licks from Robben Ford, funky Hammond organ from Muscle Shoals legend Jim Dickinson and the Memphis Horns. Her big, soulful, bluesy voice knows when to hold back and when to give it everything she's got, making the most of covers like Ann Peebles' *You Keep Me Hangin' On* as well as her own material.

Sound: Recorded in Memphis's Ardent Studios, often used by Isaac Hayes, you can almost smell the sweat and feel the heat of the valve amplifiers. **DO**



STRAVINSKY

Later Ballets

Jeu de cartes
Danses concertantes
Scènes de Ballet

Philharmonia Orchestra
London Philharmonic
Orchestra



IGOR STRAVINSKY

Later Ballets

Robert Craft (conductor), London Philharmonic Orchestra

Naxos www.naxos.com

Music: Naxos is reissuing the extensive catalogue of Robert Craft conducting Stravinsky originally issued on other labels, with some new recordings to plug the gaps. These are fine works, some with a distinctly American flavour and are predominantly cheerful in disposition. They clearly come from a febrile imagination.

Sound: It's possible to criticise Robert Craft for a certain stiffness of expression, but that's not the issue here. The works are crisply performed and transparently recorded, no matter how complex the orchestration, as well as being extremely idiomatic – somewhat like Stravinsky's recordings of his own works, but more modern and much better recorded. **AG**





MUDDY WATERS

I'm Ready

Blue Sky/Pure Pleasure
180g



Music: White bluesman Johnny Winter brought in guitarist Jimmy Rogers and harp player Big Walter Horton to augment members of Waters' touring band for this 1978 production. The line-up delivers a high spirited and bold performance that rips into familiar tunes like *I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man* and *Good Morning Little School Girl*, alongside new material such as the rebellious *33 Years*. High energy, hard-edged stuff that rebuilt the Waters legend.

Sound: A tight, coherent soundstage that's strong on detail and energy. It's not the most refined recording, but it delivers the goods. *JK*



TAJ MAHAL

Maestro

Heads Up
180g



Music: This double LP finds second generation bluesman Mahal teaming up with younger artists in an attempt to emulate John Lee Hooker's success in his latter years. Guests include Ben Harper, Jack Johnson and Los Lobos among others, a line-up that occasionally overshadows the main act. Standards vary from 'for the fans' to rather good with the numbers featuring New Orleans Social Club and Los Lobos marking the highlights.

Sound: Big and lively, but pushed rather too close to the red, this is clearly a 21st century blues record with all that entails. *JK*

HIGH-QUALITY AUDIO

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

String Quartet In C Minor op.18 & B Flat Major op.130
Fry Street Quartet

Isomike

SACD (stereo/ multichannel hybrid disc)

www.isomike.com

Music: The Chicago-born Fry Street Quartet is an award-winning group and the pieces presented here suggest that they are at the top of their game. The upbeat *op.18, no.4* is clearly influenced by Beethoven's mentor Haydn, but it's *op.130* that makes the emotional connection. The music is significantly more personal and powerful. The *Grosse Fuge* is so far ahead of its time that it was only appreciated in the 20th century and is played here with a vivacious subtlety that brings it to life.

Sound: This is a direct to DSD recording in two and four channels with dynamics, timbre and depth to die for. A rare combination of great music and sound quality. *JK*



BENJAMIN BRITTEN

War Requiem Opus 66

Helmuth Rilling (conductor)

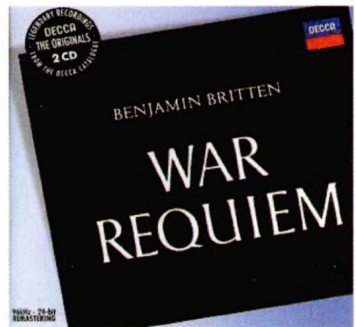
Hanssler Classic

SACD (stereo/ multichannel hybrid disc)

www.haenssler-classic.de

Music: This is a setting of poems from First World War poet Wilfred Owen, though the work was commissioned for the opening of the new cathedral in Coventry, which had been destroyed by enemy action in 1940. The Requiem works on many levels and is scored for a large orchestra, a chamber orchestra, a chorus, a boy's choir and three vocal soloists. This emotive performance is a new candidate for standard bearer for this work.

Sound: By any standards, this recording is a tremendous achievement, which has a rare unity of purpose and which elicits consistently excellent performances from all involved. If there is only one 20th century work in your collection it should be this one. *AG*



PIXIES

Bossanova

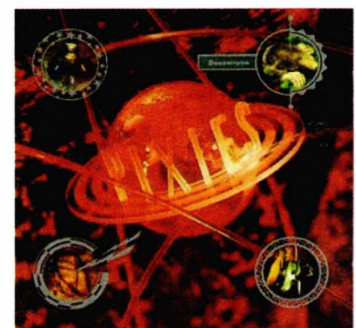
MOFI

SACD (stereo/ multichannel hybrid disc)

www.mofi.com

Music: The Bostonian proto grungers' third album is the latest to get the SACD treatment from California's Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab and while it doesn't quite hit the heights of its predecessor, *Doolittle*, it's certainly worth making room for. By 1990, the songs sounded more polished, but something of their early verve and spark had deserted them. But moments to savour include *Velouria* and the hard driving *Rock Music*.

Sound: The MOFI remastering lifts Gil Norton's big, open, reverby production, beautifully balancing Kim Deal's driving bass against Joey Santiago's spiralling guitar lines and Black Francis's screeching vocals to excellent effect. *DO*



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Diablo review, Hifi+ magazine


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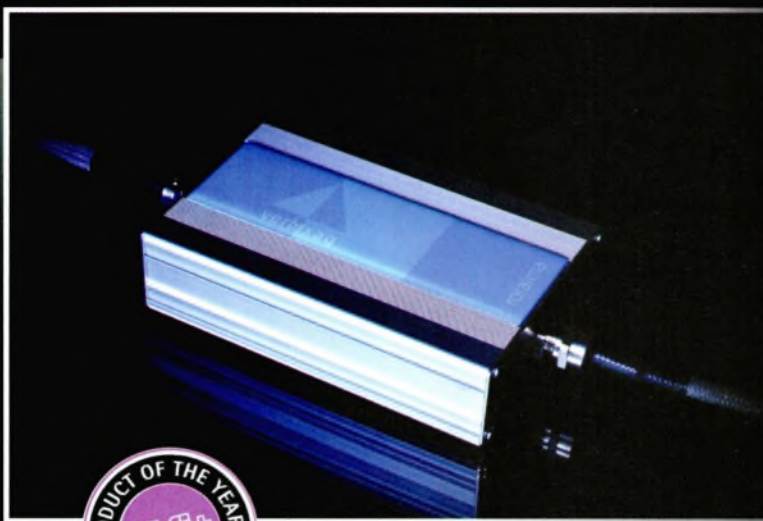
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Paul Messenger, HiFi+ issue 29

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Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi+ issue 48

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Roy Gregory, HiFi+ issue 54

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Choice mail

The pick of this month's best letters

Write to: Letters, Hi-Fi Choice, Future Publishing Ltd, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW. Or email your letters to richard.holliss@futurenet.com

Direct stream does it

In the September 2008 issue of *Hi-Fi Choice*, Richard Black wrote that the Arcam CD37's DAC converts both PCM and DSD data streams "into what is effectively a middling format before conversion to analogue, thus losing the conceptual simplicity of pure DSD." Arcam's website claims the CD37 employs "pure DSD conversion." So, what exactly goes on inside this player?

'Connie' via email

HFC Oops! Score one for Arcam. The Arcam CD37 features a Wolfson 8471 DAC. This is

a high-quality 24-bit/192kHz chip, but one of the only ones that can also process DSD (direct stream digital) in its native form. Instead of converting the DSD stream into PCM (pulse code modulation), the chip has a second processing pathway for native conversion. Our apologies for any confusion.

Back in DAC

I liked your DAC special, but I still can't fathom why these products should come back from the dead. A few years ago, these things were all the rage, then CD players got a lot better and they fell from favour. That was

"...CD players got a lot better and they (DACs) fell from favour."

more than 10 years ago... but now they are back. Have DACs improved or have CD players got worse?

Colin Batch via email

HFC The reason for the DACs revival has more to do with what came after CD than CD players directly. Although many of the latest DACs feature hi-fi standard coaxial, optical and XLR balanced connections, an increasing number now also sport USB connections to hook them up to computers. A new generation of music lovers are rediscovering decent sound quality thanks to the DAC's ability to transform the likes of iTunes.

Slave to the rhythm

Many Japanese companies include a second set of loudspeaker terminals, which allow you to run a slave system in a separate room. Is this really a good idea? I've got a pair of speakers with the system in the living.

Pictured: Inside the Arcam CD37 CD player



LETTER OF THE MONTH

Ode to joy

I picked up a copy of *Hi-Fi Choice* while browsing for something to read on a train journey. I was thinking of buying a cheap micro system and yours was the only magazine that didn't have a TV or something costing tens of thousands on the cover. But I soon realised that what I want, I can't get from a budget system, so I booked a demonstration and now am the proud owner of an Arcam CD17 and A38, with a pair of KEF iQ10s. I actually wept a little when I heard this, because it sounded like I always wanted Beethoven to sound. Thanks for turning me on to this and for preventing me from buying cheap.

Jane Williams via email

HFC We're delighted that, amid a row of home cinema magazines, the distinctive cover style of *Hi-Fi Choice* caught your eye, Jane. We're also pleased that it helped you to rediscover Beethoven. Everyone who has ever worked in hi-fi lives for that moment. Irrespective of the price of the system, seeing someone transfixed and almost transformed by the music to such a degree that it brings tears to their eyes is one of the pleasures of working in the business. It's a pity we can't switch more people on to the joy a good hi-fi system can bring to our sometimes hum-drum, modern lives.



The author of our 'letter of the month' will receive a free copy of Russ Andrews' commendable 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 richard.holliss@futurenet.com

room and another pair in the bedroom, but the sound isn't very good there and it's a complete pain going all the way downstairs to turn the sound down. There has to be a better way

'Devi' via email

HFC There is... it's called 'multiroom audio'. Depending on your budget and the level of complexity you require, you can do anything from simply running a second set of speakers and a remote control to a nearby room to having dedicated (and, if you want, hidden) amplifiers and speakers in separate room zones. These zones can control the main system, perhaps play a different source in a different room and more. Really advanced systems get all James Bond, with controls for home automation, lighting, alarms, HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) and more. The Custom Electronic Design and Installation Association (www.cedia.co.uk) is a good starting place.

Your second set of speakers probably don't sound too hot because of signal loss due to long runs of speaker cable. A remote amp and speakers would help a lot.

This witch is not for burning

What is it with all these hi-fi and weirdo accessories, such as power conditioners? Take mains cables for example. There's mile upon mile of dirty great copper wire between you and the generator, but a few feet of ludicrously expensive cable between the plug socket and the product is said to make all the difference. That makes no sense whatsoever.

Really, some of this audiophile mains nonsense is little more than witchcraft and –

“What is it with all these hi-fi and weirdo accessories, such as power conditioners?”

as they said in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* – ‘what do we do with witches?’

Danny Martin via email

HFC Some of the excess of the audiophile accessory industry is indefensible from any scientific or engineering standing. The sole rationale is 'if it sounds better, it is better' – which can sometimes be thrown completely out of kilter by 'listener bias'. Worse, these non-scientific claims are often accompanied by supporting pseudo-scientific 'white papers' that can easily mislead those who buy hi-fi out of a love of music and not an understanding of electronics or physics. However, there are also products that do deliver better quality results (even on the mains – a Furman or PS Audio power conditioner, filter or regenerator all offer legitimate improvements over existing mains supplies), a claim that can be backed up without recourse to magic spells or rune casting. It is our job (and that of the buyer) to spot the difference between snake oil and the real deal.

Roksan rocks

I fully expected the Roksan Kandy K2 CD player to be pretty bad. Your detailed picture in the *HFC* 315 depressed me – it's just an empty box with a circuit board, a transport and a small transformer. How can this compare with the big boys, I thought?

After I listened to it, I realised I'd been guilty of prejudice. There may not be much in the box, but what's there is thoroughly good value for money, especially from the sound quality stakes. It must be hard to divorce yourself from the stuff inside the case when reviewing a product, but I have to thank the writer for not reviewing it by component count.

Adnan Hussaini via email

HFC We're glad you like the Kandy K2. It's a fine player and proves that you don't necessarily need dirty great honking heatsinks and transformers the size of car tyres to deliver a good sound. The amplifier's a bit of a honey, too and a perfect match for the CD player you now love. Both are well worth checking out, if you have not already done so.

Game for a laugh?

I've read online that sales of computer games outstrip sales of both CD and DVD combined. Is this true? If so, what does this mean for hi-fi? Will we all be listening to our music through TV speakers in the future?

Ben Sisley via email

HFC It's true that games titles sell in greater numbers than music or video discs. One of the more interesting statistics we sometimes get fed from companies that compile such things, is a demographic breakdown of who buys what. Interesting, because there is no market for hi-fi separates in the under 30 category, exactly the demographic that spends money on gaming. In fact, there never was a big market for hi-fi with the under 30s, even before games consoles became all powerful.

While it's a generalisation, it seems that as people begin to grow out of games and gadgets, so buying hi-fi and music takes a hold, which lasts pretty much until they blow their final valve. Far from worrying about the encroachment of gaming on the traditional music market, we should be finding a way to bring out the best in games consoles. Don't forget that the Xbox 360 can be used as a music server (even if there are better solutions to be found elsewhere) and the Playstation 3 is one of the best Blu-ray players on the market. And after all, isn't *Guitar Hero* just another way of enjoying music?



we're almost jam-packed

which leaves little room left at the inn....

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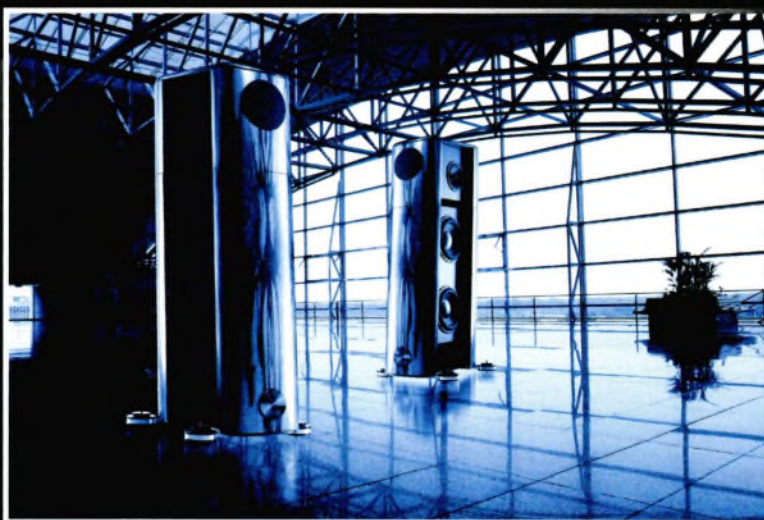
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REVIEWS

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



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OUR RATINGS EXPLAINED

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

...nor am... we liked... point here is... to the job of... recommend you... compare this with... 17 MkII M, which has excellent build and... a very good impression in HFC 243. At... same price there's also the Cyrus 7, a... ng all-rounder in a compact case... 'er trying the Heart with the standard... s we switched over to the Siemens... grade, a companion somewhat muddled by... e fact that it was a cold for hot swap – the... d never had been on. For several days with the... after a livelier... w tubes shone... through. The Siemens-equipped player has an... n snappier sound with better timing that... es with dense material with remarkable... idence and ease. It even seems to be

Our overall conclusion

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

The things we like most about the product

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★☆	PRO Good build and open, lively sound from a valve DAC with plenty of inputs. Transport is also great value for money.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	CON DAC doesn't engage as well as the transport with loss of weight and power through the bass unless you grip. One quality. Cables cost extra and competition from single chassis designs won't help.
BUILD ★★★★☆	
VALUE ★★★★☆	

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



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

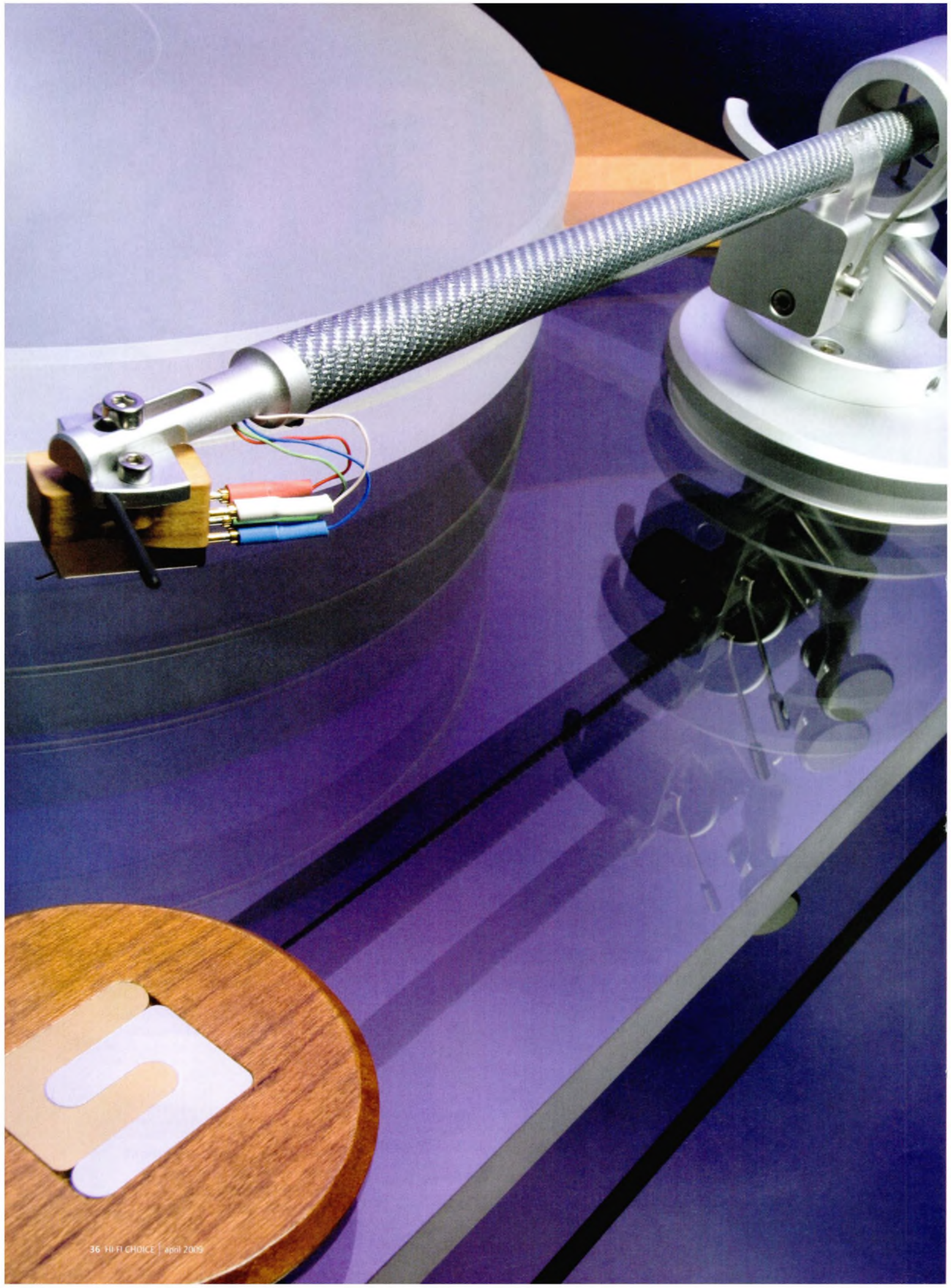
A component receiving the coveted Hi-Fi Choice Best Buy Badge has been judged to deliver excellent performance at its price point, thereby offering outstanding value for money.



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...



Gironimo!

Reflecting increasing interest in vinyl replay, Unison Research has added a turntable to its portfolio

PRODUCT Unison Research Giro

TYPE Turntable, arm and cartridge

PRICE £2,750 and £375 UR1 cartridge (optional)

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 49x15x39cms
 ◉ Weight: 52.4kg ◉ Tonearm shaft is carbon fibre tube ◉ Magnetic bias compensator ◉ Cartridge alignment is very easy ◉ Motor separated from turntable ◉ Thick acrylic platter, belt driven around its edge ◉ Conveniently positioned on/off/speed control

CONTACT ☎ 01753 652669 # www.unisonresearch.com

It was more than twenty years ago that an otherwise intelligent PR person from a major consumer electronics brand assured this reviewer that vinyl would be dead by 1990. Certainly the makers of turntables suffered quite badly for about a decade after the late 1980s, as consumers deserted in droves to the sexy new silver digital discs, boxing up their vinyl collections and consigning them to the attic. Indeed it is said that only three British turntable makers survived the 1990s shake-out unscathed, which may well be true.

Since around the Millennium, however, interest in vinyl and sales of record players have been slowly picking up, with most territories showing steady growth. Increased availability from both existing manufacturers and dealers has played its part. But major brands sourcing turntables from OEM suppliers and reintroducing them to their product portfolios have also helped increase visibility.

The latest entrant from the latter group is electronics brand Unison Research, a company based just outside Treviso in North East Italy, which shares premises, ownership and management with Opera loudspeakers. Unison

“...makers of turntables suffered quite badly, as consumers deserted in droves to the sexy new silver digital discs...”

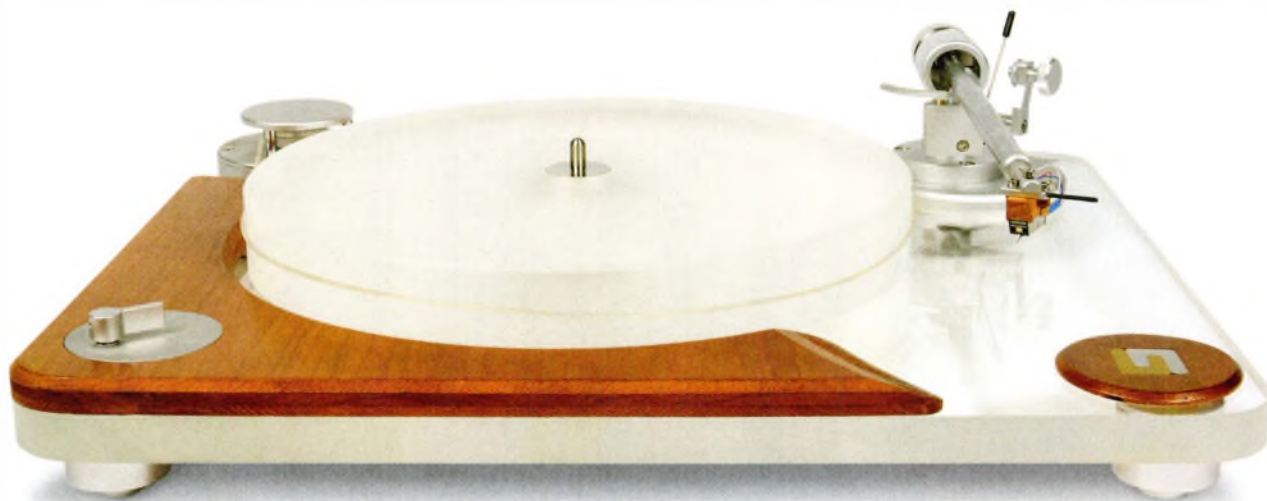
has a comprehensive Unico line of solid state amplifiers and loudspeakers, but is perhaps best known for its single-ended valve amps.

These differ from the herd, not only in their fine sound quality, but also in the unusual application of shaped hardwood pieces to add a uniquely distinctive and attractive style. And incorporating similar motifs within an already very classy looking turntable means the Giro is an exceptionally pretty vinyl spinner.

Maintaining this hardwood styling device was considered essential, because many customers like the separate components of their hi-fi systems to look well coordinated. That also helped determine that the Giro would be a complete record player (ie including tonearm and cartridge), selling for around the £3,000 that customers typically spend on their valve amps. In fact, late in the day (possibly responding to rapid shifts in exchange rates), it was decided to make the

Unison UR1 moving magnet cartridge an optional £375 extra, on top of a turntable/arm price of £2,750. (A high output moving magnet cartridge tends to be an easier match to valve phono stages.)

However, for the duration of the review programme the UR1 had been deemed an integral part of the package, so most of the review work was carried out using this cartridge. Appropriate matching might have been a problem, since this reviewer has long favoured low output moving-coil cartridges and is not normally geared up to handle the higher output types. Happily, Unison brought along a couple of prototype MM phono stages which allowed the use of regular pre and power amplification. One of these, powered by an output supply, is the latest version of the valve-based Simply Phono, incorporating an extra input triode to improve the noise performance. The other unit was solid state – an early prototype of the Unicophono, and powered by rechargeable batteries. Both proved very interesting and effective in practice, but most of the work was done with the valve unit since the solid state unit ▶



Q&A

We spoke to Professor Giovanni Sacchetti, the original founder and designer of Unison Research's valve amplifiers, about the Giro turntable.



HFC: Unison has long been known as an electronics specialist and it's well known that you take particular pride in your single-ended valve amplifiers. The Giro is clearly made for Unison by German company Clearaudio, but do you have any experience in turntables or tonearms?

GS: Back when I was teaching at high school, the mechanical engineering department had a high-quality lathe and I experimented by making a number of tonearms. A very long one gave rather good results!

And turntables?

Turntables are rather more difficult, need much more costly machinery and are also difficult to produce in quantity.

What sort of relationship do you have with Clearaudio?

We've known the company for a long time and then about three years ago I put forward some turntable design ideas of my own. This was the starting point and we gradually developed the Giro from then.

To what extent is the Giro an 'off-the-shelf' Clearaudio design? Has Unison made any significant contributions?

The Giro is loosely based on Clearaudio's Performance, with the latest motor development, but we have incorporated some of our own ideas too. The feet are a unique solution to isolating the turntable from shelf-borne vibrations without the inconvenience of springs. They combine three hard spheres in a concave seat with soft plastic – we experimented with ceramic spheres but steel proved more practical and cost effective. We also use laminated hardwood to damp any resonances in the main chassis.

What type of rechargeable batteries do you use to power the Unicophono?

We've chosen lead-acid because, with careful charger design, it's more reliable and has a longer service life than Lithium types.



arrived fully charged, but without any means of recharging.

It was pretty obvious from the ingredients that the Giro had been sourced from leading German manufacturer Clearaudio. Although Unison has had its own input on both the engineering and the styling of the Giro, checking the Clearaudio catalogue suggests it's related to the latter's Performance model. It certainly shares the Performance's Satisfy carbon fibre shaft tonearm and the UR1 is a wooden-bodied moving magnet cartridge from the Clearaudio range, though the turntable proper is rather harder to pin down. A glance through Clearaudio's very extensive range shows how many subtle variations on several basic themes are available by using a generous parts bin. The Giro has an outboard motor drive like a Performance and a similarly thick acrylic platter, but the platter main bearing here replaces the anti-magnetic approach with

a tight-fitting inverted steel shaft and ceramic sphere. The main structure is thick acrylic bonded to Unison's trademark shaped and polished hardwood sections, the latter deliberately made from three layers laminated with different grain directions. Unison has also had significant engineering input on the design of the feet (see interview on this page). Regrettably, no dust cover is supplied, though we daresay it will be possible to find something suitable.

The outboard motor is a pretty hefty affair, and showed no obvious evidence of vibration while it was running. It's a synchronous type with electronically synthesised drive (to effect 33/45 rpm speed change), and it's certainly significantly larger than those usually used, though that may just be down to substantial casing, or indeed the speed control electronics that are presumably housed inside. It takes its power via a very modest plug-top transformer, and a grooved pulley drives the platter's outside edge using a clear polymer elastic belt.

This separately sited motor is spaced by about 10mm from a scallop-shaped cutout in the main structure. This approach should reduce motor vibration reaching the turntable chassis, especially when both motor and turntable are mounted on something as solid as the Vertex AQ Kinabalu granite platform used for this review. The down side, of course, is that it's impossible to control belt tension precisely.



The Satisfy tonearm seems to have good-quality bearings and plenty of opportunity for adjusting alignment in various planes, albeit at some expense in mechanical integrity. The Unison-badged cartridge could be any one of a several similar satin-wood-bodied, aluminium cantilever models in Clearaudio's Aurum range; no specific information was provided.

SOUND QUALITY

Set up is relatively simple, though a little more information – for example a recommended bias compensation setting for the supplied cartridge – would have been welcome.

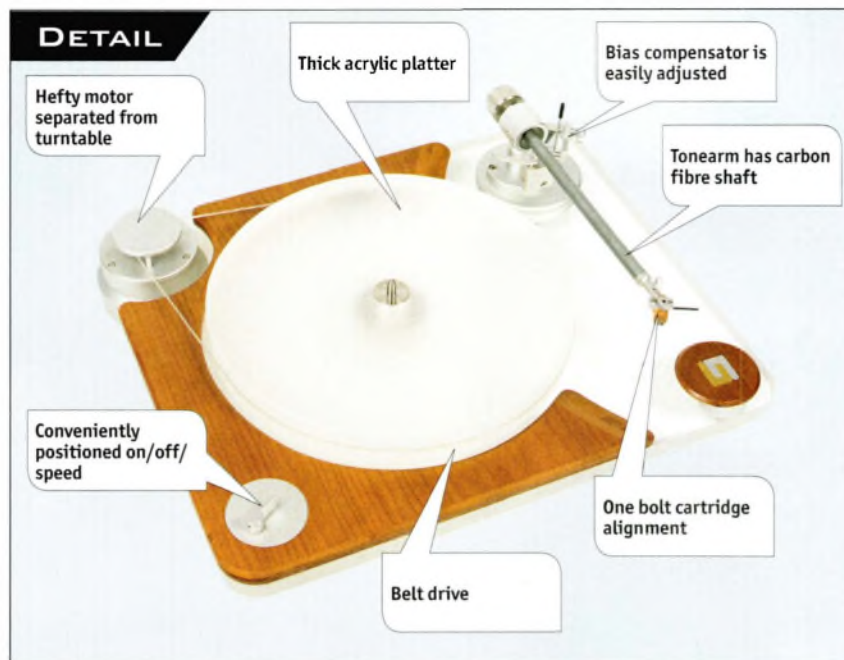
Start-up is initially a bit of a surprise. Switch the front-left lever from 'off' to '33' and, for a while, nothing much happens. You wonder: does it need a little push to get it going? No: just a little patience. After a second or five (it varies), it swings into action and gets up to speed quite quickly. Although there's plenty of inertia to keep it turning without drive, the motor acts as a brake, so it also stops quickly. This is handy, since there's no separate platter mat, the record resting directly on the relatively hard acrylic, so it's best to turn it off when changing or turning over discs. Because the (fixed) cartridge cantilever protrudes from the front of the cartridge, cueing (and, for that matter, initial alignment) was greatly facilitated, though this does make it vulnerable to accidental damage.

Most listening was done with the complete Giro package, plus supplied phono stages. From the phono stage's line outputs, signals were fed to Naim NAC552/NAP500 amplification and thence to PMC IB2i loudspeakers. Brief checks were also carried out by substituting a Rega Apheta low output moving-coil cartridge via a Naim Superline phono stage.

The sound quality is rather good, with fine timing, wide dynamic range and a notably lively and dynamic midband. This vinyl spinner is an immediate reminder of the reasons why this ancient format has stubbornly refused to die and is currently making a comeback.

While the broad midband is handled with enthusiasm and gusto and the music as a whole drives along with good pace and momentum, definition and detail does start to ebb away as one moves towards both frequency extremes.

Lead instruments and voices are confidently projected – perhaps a little too confidently – as these main components of the mix could become a little too strong. Here, the presence zone verging on the aggressive as it becomes more complex when extra instrumental layers are progressively added.



“This thoroughly entertaining turntable is blessed with gorgeous styling and will look amazing in any hi-fi system.”

On the late Lowell George's splendid solo album *Thanks I'll Eat it Here*, several tracks start very simply and gradually build up, steadily adding layers of backing female vocals and brass sections as the track evolves. The Giro player seemed happier when the track was relatively simple and the brass, in particular, began to sound a little uncomfortable and congested as complexity increased.

A similar effect was also found on the Maazel/VPO Sibelius Fifth Symphony, where again stereo depth perspectives seemed somewhat constrained and both the brass and violin desks seemed to become a little edgy and uncomfortable when approaching the loudest passages. Once again the midband and presence seemed to take precedence over the low bass and upper treble.

This overall character seems reasonably consistent, although there is also a clear difference between the sonic character of the two supplied phono stages. On balance, the battery-powered Unicophono stage was marginally preferred. It doesn't quite have the midrange sweetness or the warmth of the new Simply Phono design, but it does seem rather more neutral overall, cleaner in the bass region and with less forwardness in the stereo image. Had we been using a valve amp, the preference might well have reversed.

Substituting the Apheta/Superline cartridge/phono stage allayed much of the

criticism, confirmed the slightly bandwidth-limited, but wide dynamic range of the turntable/arm combo, but also strongly suggested that the moving magnet cartridge may well be the limiting factor in the overall sound quality. This thoroughly entertaining turntable is blessed with gorgeous styling and although it's primarily intended to match Unison's valve amplifiers, it will look amazing in any hi-fi system. Greater sonic performance may well be available by using a higher quality cartridge, and some less costly turntables could also match its performance, but we'll bet no alternative package will look as good. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★☆	PRO Gorgeous styling, not merely as a partner for Unison valve amps, but also in its own right. Nice ergonomics, with easy cartridge alignment and cueing.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON Tonearm lacks some mechanical homogeneity and integrity. Sound quality is rather mid-oriented, perhaps due to cartridge.
VALUE ★★★★☆	
CONCLUSION Gorgeous-looking turntable has a lively and entertaining sound, albeit rather mid-oriented and upfront with some lack of delicacy and subtlety using supplied cartridge. Easy cartridge alignment and cueing, but no dust cover.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/516104	



epos

6b02

Tiny dancer

Six years on, the popular Epos ELS 3 has a new and slightly larger brother

PRODUCT Epos ELS 8

TYPE Standmount loudspeaker

PRICE £250 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD) 18x31x21.5cm
 Ⓞ Weight: 5.7kg Ⓞ Drivers: 25mm metal dome tweeter, 150mm polypropylene cone mid/bass Ⓞ Sensitivity: 85dB Ⓞ Impedance: 6 ohms (nominal)

CONTACT ☎ 01442 260146 🌐 www.epos-acoustics.com

Throughout most of its 25 year history, Epos was a luxury brand with a small range of high-performance speakers finished in real wood veneers. However, the brand's direction started changing soon after it was purchased by Mike Creek in 1999. And a few years later, the inexpensive ELS-series of models was introduced, the initials in this case standing for Epos rather than Electrostatic loudspeaker.

The key model was – and still is – the ELS 3 miniature standmount, a speaker which is designed to be equally at home in two-channel stereo or multichannel AV surround sound applications. By using Chinese manufacture and vinyl woodgrain finish, the cost (and hence the price) could be kept as competitive as possible, enabling Epos to mix it with established names in the beer-budget sector for the first time.

The ELS 3 was actually reviewed in *HFC* 241 some six years ago and it's to Epos' and the original design's credit that the model is still available today and with the same £200 price tag it originally carried.

Some three years after the ELS 3 appeared, Epos introduced an ELS 303 variation on the theme, which used the same drivers as the ELS 3, but in a floorstanding two-and-a-half-way configuration, with an extra bass-only driver below the bass/mid and tweeter units.

Although it fills a broadly comparable market slot, this ELS 8 augments rather than replaces the ELS 3. It's also a miniature, but is slightly larger in each dimension and both the weight and the price are increased by about twenty per cent.

According to Epos, the new ELS 8 has been designed to develop a wider bandwidth and have improved appearance. It has a larger,

internally braced cabinet made from substantial 18mm-thick board, with a stylish curved front baffle to reduce diffraction. Certainly it's a very good-looking example of the type, albeit studiously conventional and

interfering with the rearward output from the port.

According to our in-room far-field averaged technique, this gives as good a 'power response' as any, though in truth none of the

“...this speaker needs some help from a nearby wall, in order to avoid sounding too lean through the mid-bass region.”

conservative in shape.

The 150mm bass/mid driver has a moulded frame, a 100mm diameter polypropylene cone and a pointy central dust dome that moves with the cone. A new 25mm metal dome tweeter has a very shallow horn-shaped front plate and is claimed to supply smoother and more extended high frequencies.

The speaker comes in a choice of light maple or black vinyl finishes, the former a very fine imitation indeed. The rear panel accommodates a relatively large-diameter port, which is tuned to 56Hz and a single pair of good quality-terminals feeds second order crossover network arms, with film capacitors in the tweeter feed. A removable cloth grille fixes to tiny and very discreet black lugs. A partnering Epos ST35 stand is available, though we actually used our reference Kudos S100s.

SOUND QUALITY

Sensitivity is conservatively rated at a modest 85dB, alongside an impedance described, again conservatively, as '6 ohms nominal'. In fact, both figures err on the cautious side: we'd be generous and go for 86dB sensitivity, while pointing out that the impedance stays above 6 ohms throughout, indicating an 8 ohm rating. Though an easy enough load from the amplifier's perspective, the modest sensitivity will probably put a ceiling on the loudness capability.

The specification that accompanies the Epos recommends that the ELS 8 should be located, at least, eight inches (20cms) out from a wall, presumably to avoid the wall

locations we tried gave a particularly smooth, even or flat tonal balance.

Certainly this speaker needs some help from a nearby wall, in order to avoid sounding too lean and lacking through the mid-bass region. A related problem is that the closer a speaker is to a wall, the more the reflection will interfere with and cause peaks and/or troughs in the midband, so a compromise has to be found.

Under our conditions, the best overall siting seemed to be with the speakers a little more than a foot out from the wall (say 30-35cms for metric fans). There's some exaggeration around 50Hz, because the 56Hz port ▶



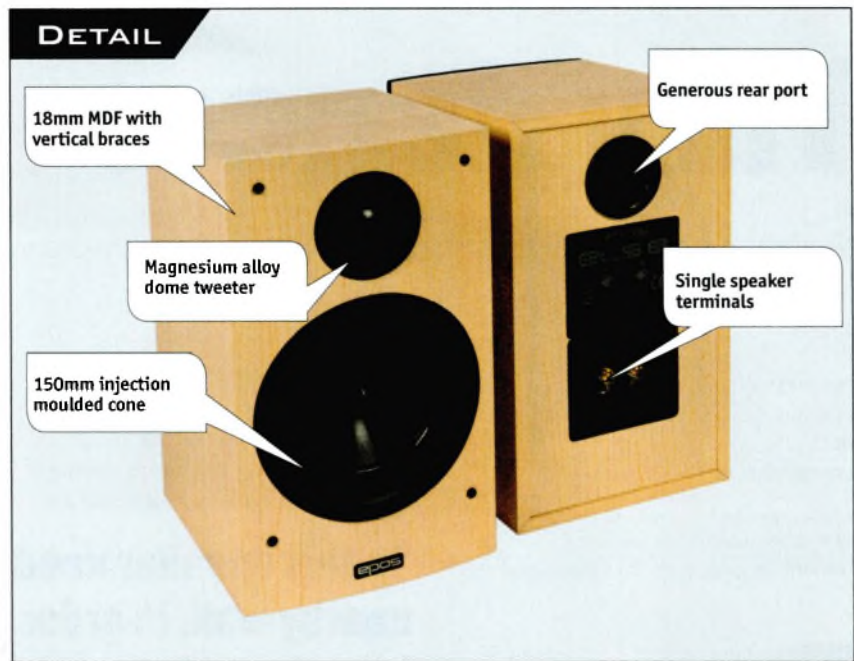
□ tuning frequency is very close to a major standing wave in our room, but for the rest the bass end is reasonably well-balanced with worthwhile extension down to 40Hz under in-room conditions.

Further up the band, output in the upper bass and lower midband is a trifle lean, but then starts rising towards a prominent region in the upper midband, 800Hz-1.2kHz, followed by a rather steep drop of about 8dB into a suckout at around 1.8kHz, which doesn't bode well for voice reproduction. Happily, the treble above 2kHz looks smooth and well judged and reasonably well extended – the tweeter's dome diaphragm resonance occurring above 20kHz.

However, while the top end trace does indeed look significantly smoother than that found in the ELS 303, the ELS 8's crossover transition is rather less well handled, with a rather more obvious suckout at a rather more sensitive (ie lower) frequency

The sucked-out presence zone tends to dominate the sonic character of this speaker. Bob Dylan's excellent *Theme Time Radio Hour* (broadcasts every Thursday evening on Radio 2), requires one to listen rather quietly because it goes out at a very anti-social time slot. This can be difficult with the ELS 8 because of the way consonants – especially sibilants and fricatives – are somewhat suppressed. Dylan's speaking voice isn't the easiest to understand at the best of times, but with these speakers we had to turn the volume up higher than we'd normally like, to hear what was going on

The upside, of course, is that it's quite difficult to make these speakers sound aggressive. Sticking with the Dylan theme,



“Timing and overall coherence is impressive and it’s very clear that the tough little enclosure is doing a very good job.”

his harmonica work on *Highway 61 Revisited* can be unpleasantly edgy and altogether too close-miked for comfort. However, this was not the case with the ELS 8. The speakers rendered the harmonica much more tolerable than usual and allowed the volume to be turned up quite high without any significant discomfort. However, dynamic expression and grip are both a little weak and while stereo imaging is spacious and free from boxiness, the focus could be tighter, and we found depth a little flattened in our testing.

If the relative lack of presence energy is this speaker's most salient subjective feature, then the ELS 8 is not without its merits. Timing and overall coherence is impressive and it's very clear that the tough little enclosure is doing a very good job. The top end too, is sweet, clean and very nicely judged.

Ultimately, the ELS 8 is fundamentally inoffensive and is unlikely to reveal any unpleasantness during performance if used with low cost sources and amplification, but the end result is inescapably closer to bland than invigorating. **HFC**

Paul Messenger



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★☆	PRO A very well built and styled enclosure in a realistic woodprint vinyl. With careful positioning bass is solid and quite even, while treble is smooth and sweet
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★☆	CON Not good for late-at-night listening, as consonants are rather too suppressed for easy intelligibility. It also lacks dynamic vigour.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION Well built and attractively styled miniature at a competitive price. Bass is solid, treble is smooth and sweet, but lack of presence energy impairs intelligibility especially at low listening levels, while dynamics lack grip.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
Full www.techradar.com/516106	

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Gold Signature GS10

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Andrew Everard, November 2007

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20-58:39

CONSONANCE

MODE



Box of delights

Opera Consonance celebrates its 15th anniversary with a high-quality one-box hi-fi system

PRODUCT Consonance Ping

TYPE One-box hi-fi system

PRICE £1,695

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 45x11x33cm

⊖ Weight: 19kg ⊖ Built-in sources: CD, FM/AM radio

⊖ Inputs: 1x Line input, 1x USB ⊖ Power outputs: 100

watts ⊖ Cool Class A amplifier technology

CONTACT ☎ 01273 325901 # www.opera-consonance.com

Opera (Beijing), the company behind Consonance, may just hold the world record for the most rapidly expanding hi-fi range. About to celebrate its fifteenth anniversary, it has progressed from a kitchen-table enterprise to boasting a catalogue that includes dozens of products divided into several different series. Some of these are distinctly outré, but the 'Forbidden City' products, including the Ping, are clearly intended for the real world.

Although once derided, the all-in-one system has now been restored to hi-fi credibility, thanks to such products as the Arcam Solo (HFC 307) and the Myriad Mi (HFC 215). Yet, typically of Consonance, the Ping's construction would have seemed the norm twenty years ago, while the Solo and Mi make the most of modern miniaturisation. The Ping's CD transport is a perfectly normal one, the power supply is linear and based on a big toroidal transformer, while the monoblock power amplifier boards use, for the most part, through-hole components with a Cool Class A output stage.

In truth, the highly integrated tuner module is smaller than those of yore, but

there's room for a larger version. More contemporary is the 'A-format' USB socket – which is intended for use with a PC. The same as those normally found on computers, it looks as if it might be

smaller steps (experience suggests that 1dB is about the resolution that one needs to find the 'perfect' listening level), setting up the control system like this strikes us as a wasted opportunity.

“If there's one area in which the Ping definitely blows away the competition, then it's in the solidity of the assembly.”

compatible with an MP3 player, but the Ping doesn't read such devices and connects instead via the useful five-metre cable provided with the unit.

If there's one area where the Ping definitely blows away the competition, then it's in the solidity of the assembly. The front and side panels are 10mm-thick aluminium, while the entire unit screams 'high end' in a way that most affordable all-in-ones just don't. By contrast, the Ping loses out in the flexibility stakes. The addition of a second line input, a line-level output and, perhaps, digital in and/or out would have been a real boon to this product.

Other features that strike us as odd include the electronic volume control – '80 steps' is perfectly acceptable, but several at the top of the range do absolutely nothing and level '70' is just one dB lower than '80'. Normal listening levels will be around the '30' mark, at which point step size has increased from 0.5dB to 1.5dB, getting even coarser lower down. When the component that actually regulates volume is capable of

In terms of day-to-day operation the Ping is pleasant enough. It reads CDs briskly and quickly responds to buttons pressed on the front panel or remote control. The latter adds a few functions that are not otherwise available, including selecting the internal sampling rate (digital filter) for CD replay. Unusually, this also affects the playback level by a perceptible amount. As with many units, its mains switch is at the back, but 'standby' uses very little power. An alternative red and black colour scheme is available for the visually bold.

SOUND QUALITY

Obviously there is plenty to say about a product with as many features as this, but if we had to sum up the Ping's performance in one word, it would be 'characterful'. In any mode, with any kind of music, it has its own view of things. In other words, if you are after the plain unvarnished truth this may not be the perfect product for you.

But even though that implies that the Ping is ultimately untrue to the highest ▶



Q&A

We spoke with Peter Richards, a partner in UK distributor Alium Audio about the Ping



HFC: The Ping strikes us as an unusual mix of convenience and specialist hi-fi. Who is it aimed at?

PR: Primarily it is aimed at the user whose top priority is high-quality sound. This is why the amplification was considered to be of the utmost importance.

Was the inclusion of DVD and/or SACD considered for the product?

The Ping is aimed strictly at the music lover, not the A/V market at all, hence no DVD. As for SACD, unfortunately it has not lived up to expectations and demand is, as far as we can see, almost non-existent.

How about DAB? Isn't that an important bit of future-proofing?

No not really. Within hi-fi circles and perhaps beyond, DAB is still regarded mainly as a convenience format. DAB is a very inefficient system by today's standards, but when DAB+ arrives with its higher bit rates it may be taken a little more seriously. FM is still superior sonically and, more importantly, the inclusion of a USB connection opens up the world of Internet radio with literally thousands of stations available. Just connect to your home computer, fire up your internet browser and tune in!

To what extent does the design draw on existing Consonance products?

The Forbidden City range starts off with separate amplifiers and CD players and the Ping condenses these conveniently into a one-box solution.

The USB input apparently features some clever technology. What does that achieve in practice?

The USB input uses a Burr-Brown PCM2707 chip as the receiver, which employs TI's SpAct (Sampling Period Adaptive Controlled Tracking system) jitter-reduction technology to achieve minimal levels of jitter from the USB interface. The digital signal then benefits from the same filterless DAC as the CD player, with no oversampling or upsampling. This, together with the short signal paths employed, gives a much clearer, more natural sound than other DAC technologies can offer.



ideals of hi-fi, we aren't inclined to be dismissive. Chiefly because there are plenty of products out there that meet the 'unvarnished' criterion already. We would rather judge it on its own terms as a musical performer, in which case it has plenty to recommend it.

Above all, the Ping is lively. It's pretty hard to imagine that any music played through the unit could be described as 'boring' (unless the performance itself is simply dull and beyond redemption). There is a cheerful, devil-may-care, energetic verve to the sound, which makes the most of rhythmic snap and rapidly changing soundscapes and, especially at high volume, this makes the sound most inviting.

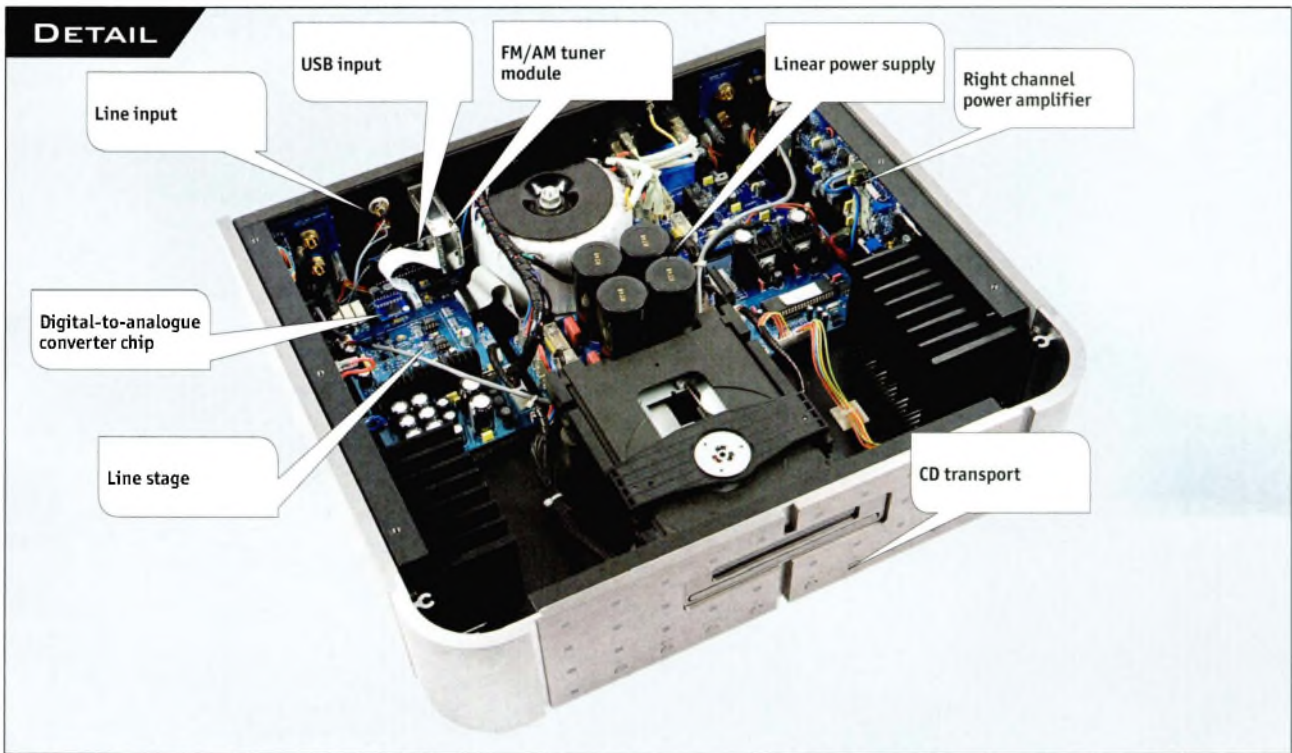
At the same time, there is a certain lack of subtlety and insight that may bother some listeners. The extent of this depends on the recording, but with something complex and multi-layered like well-produced rock or symphony orchestra, we did find the sound a little congested compared with alternative

renditions. Not surprisingly, the extent varies somewhat depending on how the Ping is used.

The only part which can be auditioned in isolation is the amplifier, fed via its line input. In this state, the sound has plenty of 'bite' and attack, but is a little short on fine detail. The treble can be a touch coarse, at times, but the midrange is good and the bass is really energetic. It may not be incredibly well-extended, but it's so engaging that one doesn't really notice.

With CDs played on the internal transport, though, the Ping's character really blossoms. This is where the sound develops a real sense of swing and excitement, contributing in a very positive way to the right sort of music – think of anything with a bit of grit in it as a matter of course and you'll have the general idea. From thrash to live nightclub jazz, there's plenty to like. Even some classical recordings can benefit, but on the whole we found classical sounds less well favoured by the Ping interpretation, the life and energy





outweighed by the lack of detail. It's not gross, but one does have to use a little imagination to hear the inner workings of an orchestra, for instance. Do try both digital filter settings, by the way, as the differences are quite noticeable (see box-out on oversampling).

OVERSAMPLING?

The Consonance Ping's digital filter selection, selects between oversampling (as in practically all players of the last 20 years) and non-oversampling – in which case the filtering is very simple and all analogue. While the latter allows much more aliasing distortion to pass through and also causes the frequency response within the audio band to tail off a little, it gives next to no ringing in the filter's response and an apparently nearer ideal impulse shape.

In fact, there is no reliable evidence that ringing is audible either directly or indirectly, but the subjective comparison between the filter types is intriguing. With the Consonance Ping, we found them most clearly differentiated with voices, the oversampled ('16FS') one having clearer diction, while non-oversampled ('8FS') had punchier vowels.

Now, if only some clever clogs could combine the virtues of both!

“...it reproduces both male and female voices very clearly and with admirable balance between vowels and consonants.”

Notwithstanding those comments regarding different musical genres, if there's one sound the Ping really does get on with then it's solo human voice. In all kinds of songs, from Schubert lieder to Ian Dury and Damien Rice, it reproduces both male and female voices very clearly and with admirable balance between vowels and consonants – always the key to good intelligibility.

The balance between voice and accompaniment is also generally good, although where the accompaniment consists of several instruments their individual tonality is slightly sacrificed to the vocal line. Multiple voices are also slightly less well-favoured and a favourite test track of ours, involving quite a large chorus was a shade homogenised compared with the best renditions we've heard. That same track is also a great test of stereo imaging and it showed the Ping to be good on-extension in both dimensions, though slightly lacking precision within the space.

The USB input shares much of the CD player's sound, not too surprisingly. The FM tuner is good and has a quiet background and good resolution with tricky real-world radio signals. Its slightly slow tuning is about our only criticism.

As usual, we ran a few technical checks which suggested that the amplifier has rather more distortion than the majority of others we've tested here in *Hi-Fi Choice*. The CD player has considerably more and it's certainly enough to account for the subjective findings. At the end of the day, this is not a product that will suit all tastes, but it's sufficiently attractive for us to issue it with a recommendation, albeit a qualified one. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Imposing, well-made product that combines features in a sensible, practical way. Sound is strong on life and energy, with a real kick to it and excellent timing.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON Sonically, detail is less than we'd like. Imaging precision is also a little below par and the single line input will not satisfy all users.
VALUE ★★★★★	

CONCLUSION
An interesting and attractive alternative to other 'one-box' solutions. The sound will not cater for all tastes, but if you find too many modern products bland and boring this could be just what you're after.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

URL www.techradar.com/516146

EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



This box rocks

This substantial yet discreet floorstander has an unusual take on bass delivery

PRODUCT PSB Synchrony One

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £3,000 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size 22x109x32.5cm

⊖ Weight: 28kg ⊖ Drivers: 1x 25mm tweeter with Ferrofluid, 1x 102mm midrange, 3x 165mm bass units
 ⊖ Sensitivity: 90dB ⊖ Impedance: 4 ohms ⊖ Enclosure combines aluminium alloy with veneered MDF
 ⊖ Three differentially tuned rear ports

CONTACT ☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.psbSpeakers.com

Although probably an unfamiliar name to most readers, PSB has actually been in the speaker business for more than 30 years. That said, this is only the second time that this well-established Canadian company has made an appearance in *Hi-Fi Choice*. But then its products weren't distributed in the UK until quite recently thanks to the proximity of a considerably large and lucrative US market.

Canada has long been a major player in loudspeakers. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, it has lots of forests for making wood-based enclosures. Secondly, and rather more significantly, Canada has its own extensive National Research Council (NRC) facilities in Ottawa, and the Acoustics and Signal Processing department has provided a 'home from home' for PSB's founder and designer Paul Barton over the past 25 years. (The PSB initials actually refer to the husband-and-wife team of Paul and Sue Barton.)

We first met Paul Barton at a Heathrow hi-fi show back in 2004, around the time the Platinum series speakers were launched (see *HFC* 266) and it was clear that he had a very firm grip on the subtler aspects of loudspeaker design. When we met again at the 2008 Munich show, he took time out to explain the reasoning behind his new Synchrony range and the £3,000 per pair Synchrony One, in particular.

It's a very interesting and cleverly designed loudspeaker, though not, it must be said, a particularly attractive one. It can be argued that it adheres closely to the form-follows-function dictum and also looks commendably discreet, but some may dismiss its appearance as just plain boring, especially in the all-black

finish of our review samples. The dark cherry veneered option pictured on the website does look rather less funereal. And, while we suspect that PSB might derive some commercial benefit from employing an

in diameter, the midrange 75mm. The tweeter has a 25mm titanium dome diaphragm.

The enclosure is a very elaborate and exceptionally rigid affair, with gently curved aluminium extrusions for the front and back

“Canada has long been a major player in loudspeakers... it has its own extensive National Research Council (NRC) in Ottawa.”

industrial design consultant, there's no denying the technical creativity at work inside this speaker, especially in the way the bass delivery is organised

This is essentially a three-way speaker, though it actually uses five drive units, as the bass is delivered from three apparently identical 165mm drivers, widely spaced along the front panel – one at the top, one near the middle and one close to the base. Each of the bass drivers is loaded by its own partitioned section of the enclosure, while each sub-enclosure is loaded by a rearward-facing port.

By tuning each enclosure/port combination differently and also rolling off each driver at a slightly different frequency, the various individual resonances won't coincide and a smoother bass delivery will be achieved. Likewise, by generating the low bass from up to twelve separate locations (for a stereo pair), individual room standing wave modes and floor-first reflections will also be more evenly spread. PVC bungs are supplied to block any or all of the ports according to individual taste and room characteristics.

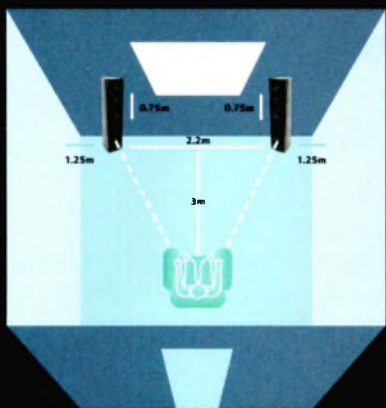
Both the midrange driver and the tweeter are mounted below normal seated ear level, but because the tweeter is positioned below the midrange with its deeper set voice-coil, the main axis between the two in the crossover region is directed upwards.

The four cone drivers all have diaphragms made from a sandwich of fine-weave fibreglass and natural fibres, to provide good rigidity with low mass and optimised self-damping. Around a solid aluminium 'bullet' phase plug, the bass diaphragms are 120mm

panels that lock rigidly to veneered, curved seven-layer MDF sides, enhancing overall rigidity and avoiding parallel reflecting surfaces. Twin terminal pairs are fitted and a black, acoustically transparent perforated



SET-UP



POSITIONING

When the combined cone area of the three 165mm bass drivers is summed and additional allowance is made for the mutual coupling and the contributions of three separate ports, there's more than ample bass output here to drive even large rooms.

Our solidly built 4.3x2.6x5.5m listening room is also on the large side, so best results were obtained with the speakers well clear of walls and all three ports blocked by the supplied plugs – whereupon, the bass delivery was well controlled, with good ultimate extension down to 20Hz.

Although the ports are differentially tuned, the differences in tuning frequency aren't all that great, varying by only about 5Hz altogether in the 33Hz-38Hz region. Under our averaged far-field in-room power response, extra bass in the 30-50Hz zone is available by opening one or more ports: one port adds 2-3dB; two ports 4-5dB; three ports 5-6dB. These figures will all be modified according to specific individual room modes.

SYSTEM MATCHING

Although the sensitivity is close to average at 88-89dB and bass extension is very good, the one down side with this model is a rather evil-looking impedance characteristic, which dips below three ohms around 75Hz – a region where power demands are likely to be high in any case. It again drops down to three ohms around 1.3kHz, another zone where there's plenty of sound energy.

Consequently, it's worth choosing a partnering amplifier with ample current delivery capabilities and it's also probably true that solid-state amps will be preferable to valve types.



aluminium grille, as well as 6mm floor-coupling spikes are also supplied. Perhaps, regrettably, there's no additional plinth to enhance physical stability and given its tall and slender design, we doubt it would pass a 'knock over' test, which might prove to be a problem in a home with boisterous children.

SOUND QUALITY

This is a very clever speaker indeed and the effectiveness of its unusual bass driver layout is reflected in an unusually smooth and even

in-room far-field averaged power response through most of the audio band.

Indeed, with the speakers well clear of walls and all the ports blocked, this frequency response held within ± 5 dB right across the band and within an extremely creditable ± 3 dB above 70Hz. The broad midband is much smoother and flatter than is usually the case, the mid-to-treble crossover is virtually seamless and the far-field treble roll-off looks very well judged, with just a little peak at around 18kHz confirming the use of a metal dome tweeter.

Opening the ports progressively adds extra bass output around 40-50Hz, but this proved progressively excessive under our room conditions, so best results were obtained with the ports blocked.

The driving system consisted of a Naim CDS3/555PS CD player, a Linn Sondek LP12 (modified) turntable with Rega RB1000 tonearm and Soundsmith Strain Gauge cartridge, a Magnum Dynalab MD 106T tuner, a Naim NAC552/NAP500 pre/power amplifier and Vertex AQ cables.

The most immediately obvious factor one notices when the Synchrony One is connected up, is its superb overall neutrality and beautifully judged frequency balance. No part of the audio band seems out of place (provided the ports are all plugged) and the voicing is delightfully open without ever becoming unpleasantly aggressive.

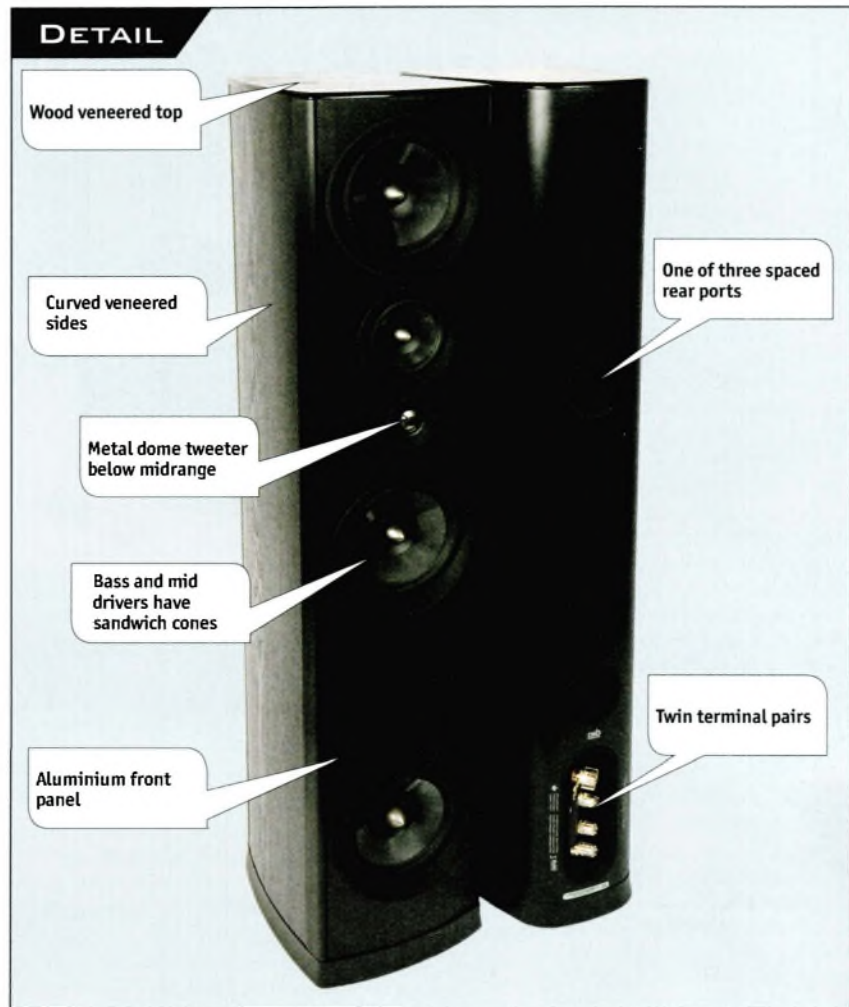
No less obvious is the excellent stereo image focus, particularly through the voice band. This may well explain the lack of



aggression and, probably, indicates good control over phase. But the fine enclosure engineering and rigid alloy baffle also plays an important part, by ensuring a substantial freedom from boxy effects and hence a reluctance for the image to hang around the speakers themselves, rather than filling the space around and between. The bass and lower mid is generally free from box colorations, though its attractive warmth and harmonic richness is achieved at some cost in crispness and drive.

We might have anticipated that the image would lack height, since the tweeter is set well below seated ear level, but that didn't seem to be the case at all with the Synchrony One. In fact, the imaging as a whole is very high class.

So far the news has been exceptionally good, but there are a couple of reservations that should be mentioned. The first was encountered when playing Massive Attack's *Protection*, with its repetitive bass figures. These sound appropriately smooth and even, when properly seated, but the bass line thickens up and becomes much more obviously coloured when changing the listening position. There's no definite explanation for this observation and it wasn't repeated with any regularity on other material. It's just possible then, that it might be related to the vertical path differences between listener and bass drivers.



DISTRIBUTED BASS DRIVE

Those responsible for designing and selling home cinema equipment would have one believe that the route to deep bass nirvana consists of placing a small, but powerful subwoofer somewhere out of sight. That might make sense from a sales and marketing angle, but acoustically speaking, it's definitely the wrong way to go about things.

A solitary source (especially one placed close to the floor) is one of the best ways to ensure that the bass is lumpy and uneven, because just one set of room modes will be excited. Add a second source (say with full range stereo speakers) and a second set of modes is excited and the net result will be significantly smoother overall.

The Synchrony One goes even further, with three bass drivers and ports per speaker, all well distributed, which will not only smooth room mode excitation, but by mounting the bass drivers at very different heights the 'floor-bounce' cancellation frequencies will also be spread across a broader range to performance advantage.

“The most obvious factor one notices is its superb overall neutrality and beautifully judged frequency balance.”

The other criticism concerns the dynamic performance. The dynamic range itself is very wide, thanks to the very substantial and intelligent enclosure engineering. But dynamic tension seems a little muted and expression lacks some vigour and drama. The latter observation is actually widespread among general commercial speakers, although some listeners seem not to notice it at all. But, as far as we're concerned, it distinguishes 'real' from 'reproduced' sound and is one of the reasons some enthusiasts opt for large, costly and ungainly horn speakers and the like.

The Synchrony One might not scale the heights of the extreme high end, but it is an exceptionally safe pair of hands that the overwhelming majority will find immensely satisfying. The fact that it's also a very intelligent and creative design that

successfully adopts radical solutions to enclosure construction and in-room bass drive is further icing on the cake. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Superb sound quality at a realistic price, with superior stereo image focus, an attractively open and smooth neutrality and exceptional freedom from boxiness.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON Might have too much bass for small UK rooms. Load is also tough on amplifiers. Styling lacks flair and a plinth would improve stability.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION Slim and discreet floorstander if a little lacking in the design stakes. However, it delivers superb sound quality and the superb bass is flexible. The load is demanding and dynamics could have more grip.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/516267	

sounds of music

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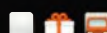
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Q-ACOUSTICS LOUDSPEAKERS
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A budget speaker that successfully rewrites the value-for-money rule book

PRODUCT Q Acoustics 1020i

TYPE Standmount loudspeaker

PRICE £140 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 17.5x25x26.5cm

⊖ Weight: 4kg ⊖ Drivers: 25mm fabric dome tweeter, 125mm bass/mid driver ⊖ Sensitivity: 88dB

⊖ Impedance: 6 ohms (nominal) ⊖ Curved silver front ⊖ Twin terminal pairs

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

A decade or so ago, inexpensive British baby speakers used to be a substantial part of the hi-fi scene, although the increasing cost of manufacture and rising retail prices threatened to make them a thing of the past. Then the China factor came into play and its low manufacturing costs once again made decent-quality budget speakers a practical possibility.

The Q Acoustics brand might have only been around a couple of years, but its rationale still makes plenty of sense. It was set up by Armour, Britain's leading budget-oriented specialist hi-fi group, which owns and distributes such well known brands as QED, Alphason, Myriad and Goldring. Other brands included Mission's budget speaker range, but this arrangement fell through when Mission changed hands. Armour, therefore, decided to create its own speaker brand and the initial Q Acoustics range, designed by a very experienced European team, was very well received by trade and press alike.

Late 2008 saw the introduction of a revised collection of models from the same team.

These might look identical to their predecessors, but now have an 'i' tacked onto the end, as well as a number of improvements.

As before, there are four stereo pairs alongside multichannel, AV-oriented extras.

“Then the China factor and its low manufacturing costs made decent-quality budget speakers a practical possibility.”

Last time around, we tried the largest (the 1050) and the smallest (the 1010 baby), both of which offered a lot of speaker for relatively little money.

The same basic formula still holds with the new models, though on this occasion we're examining the £140 per pair 1020i, a worthwhile step up the 'size ladder' from the tiny 1010, but at seven litres still very much a miniature. Indeed, the 1010 is so small it's really only suited to surround sound duties, whereas the 1020i should work pretty well as a stereo speaker system, especially in smaller rooms and when close to a wall.

These factors will help compensate for the limited bass supplied by the 90mm cones of the 125mm bass/mid drivers and 65Hz-tuned twin front ports. The chunky-looking MDF enclosure, finished in cherry, beech or black vinyl woodprints, seems very tough and needs no extra bracing. The wrap edges are nicely post-formed, a 25mm soft dome tweeter is

rear-mounted into the curved, silver-painted front layer of an extra thick baffle and the signal is applied via twin terminal pairs.

SOUND QUALITY

Such a small speaker can hardly be expected to offer much in the way of bass extension, but the compromises adopted here are very well judged,

provided the user is happy to

locate the speakers quite close to a wall.

With this assistance – and care is needed to achieve the smoothest overall balance – the 50-100Hz octave is boosted to match the broad 100Hz-1kHz decade, at a generous sensitivity of 89dB (1dB better than claimed).

The treble is notably smooth and well judged, but there is a peaky tendency around 700Hz-1kHz. The impedance is around 4.5ohms across much of the band, with mild variations between the two samples.

Sure you don't get much in the way of dynamic drive and there's no deep bass to speak of either. But those are amongst the rarer and more costly features and utterly improbable at £140 per pair.

Accepting these constraints, the 1020i does nearly everything else impressively – nay, remarkably – well, delivering an overall sound quality that would do credit to a speaker two or three times the price. Beautifully balanced and quite smooth too, if a tad forward in the voice band. It's also lively and very informative – a remarkable combination for such an inexpensive speaker. **HFC**

Paul Messenger



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★☆	PRO Chunky little standmount represents exceptional sonic value for money, with a sound that's smooth and well balanced, yet also lively and very communicative.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★☆	CON Needs careful positioning for best results. Modest bass extension, not much dynamic grip and some upper midband forwardness.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION: Outstanding value for money, the smooth, well-balanced and lively sound makes for a fine communicator. Small size inevitably limits bass extension and dynamic vigour, but speaker balances well with some help from wall proximity.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/516273	

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The Pure Evoke-2S signifies a new level in the future of portable radios

PRODUCT Pure Evoke-2S

TYPE DAB/FM portable radio

PRICE £170

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 29x21x12cm

⊖ Weight: 1.45kg ⊖ Power output: 30 watts ⊖ Drivers: 2x 75mm midrange, 2x 20mm tweeters ⊖ Inputs: 1x 3.5mm aux, 1x USB ⊖ Outputs: 1x headphone, 1x line

CONTACT ☎ 0845 148 9001 🌐 www.pure.com

The latest version of Pure's Evoke DAB/FM radio, the 2S, includes a number of key improvements that take the audio performance to a new level. The most significant include the addition of high-quality tweeter units – taking the Evoke's speaker system two-way – plus Pure's digital end-to-end audio subsystem, ClearSound.

There's also a new digital power amplifier that Pure claims delivers 30 watts, plus an impressive new OLED display that shames the LCDs of old and is a pleasure to use in both light and dark listening conditions.

The Evoke-2S receives both DAB and FM, using the same tuner module and aerial, the latter being the usual telescopic, swivel-mount type that can be quickly adjusted to suit either band (typically vertical and about 40-45cm long for DAB, horizontal and 75cm or so for FM). 3.5mm jack sockets at the rear cater for a single line input, line output and headphones, while power is sourced from the mains or a Pure 'ChargePAK' rechargeable battery. Apart from various alarm clock and timer functions, the most interesting addition from an audio point of view is 'ReVu', which

allows you to pause, rewind and fast forward by several minutes. With the additional features of Intellitext and textSCAN, you can pause and browse the accompanying scrolling information broadcast by the station.

“Compared to the original, the new model is noticeably better in terms of clarity and coherence and especially speech intelligibility.”

SOUND QUALITY

There's no doubt in our mind that adding the tweeters has improved the sound quality significantly. Single drive units are all very well (after all, some highly regarded speakers use that approach) but their dispersion is often relatively poor, making the sound particularly variable as one moves around the room. In this case, there is quite good treble in most directions and speech intelligibility is definitely better than we found with earlier Evoke models.

There's also some good life and verve in music. We found this radio particularly successful with BBC Radio 3 on digital, the uncompressed sound coming across cleanly and pleasantly, while the high-frequency 'warbling' that tends to characterise DAB sound through true hi-fi equipment is much less noticeable when played through a table radio. Radio 4 also did well, as did some lighter-textured varieties of popular music broadcast on Radio 2.

The Evoke 2S's improved sound quality is down to more than just the new tweeters, however. Pure's ClearSound suffix describes its digital end-to-end audio subsystem, which uses high-quality Class D amplifiers

and digital audio shaping technology to provide clear dynamics with low power consumption to suit the times.

Compared directly to the original Evoke 2, the new model is noticeably better in terms of clarity and coherence and especially speech intelligibility. Crucially, though, it remains unflappable even when pushed to maximum volume. Throw high-quality music files at it (from iPods etc) and the output remains composed right up to the output's limit, which we found impressive.

We'd say this is an excellent radio for speech, very good for music, and certainly an improvement on Pure's previous models. When you consider its impressive features, stunning display and ease of use, the Evoke-2S really does sit at the top of the pile when it comes to DAB/FM portables. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Attractive and well thought-out, with many useful features including pause and rewind. Well-balanced for speech and very enjoyable with much classical music.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★☆	CON Absolute volume levels are, perhaps, a touch limited and the price is not exactly cheap. Some users may find the smaller Evoke 1-S a better fit.
VALUE ★★★★☆	
CONCLUSION The Evoke-2S with its ClearSound technology and high-quality tweeters is noticeably better than its predecessor and its rivals. Sound quality is spot-on and the features are very useful indeed. Although not cheap and quite bulky, it sets standards.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
www.techradar.com/516285	

Atlas Hyper Bi-Wire

TYPE Loudspeaker cable (bi-wire)

PRICE £222 (three-metre set)

CONTACT ☎ 0800 731 1140 🌐 www.atlascables.com

Atlas's Hyper range includes both and single- and bi-wire cables and like one or two other makers, Atlas has chosen to offer different sizes and specifications of conductor for bass and treble sections, connected together at the amplifier-end only. In this case, bass is carried down a two square millimetre pair of conductors of stranded construction, while treble has 1.2 square millimetre of solid copper. The arguments over solid/stranded conductors are old and unresolved, but Atlas explains that treble is best served by a solid-core construction while bass is simply in need of more copper, which is more practical in a stranded design.

Both conductors are made of high-purity copper, insulated with Teflon, a low-loss material whose properties are slightly compromised, we found, by the cotton and paper fillers used and the PVC overall sheath.

We particularly liked what this cable does with the upper midrange and treble, which

seems to be clear and open. For large ensembles, it is easy to pick out individual instruments, while voices are clearly and distinctively characterised. Bass is also quite good though less strikingly, so: we had the occasional moment of doubt that its extension is quite as good as some of the cables in this group can offer and it sometimes has a less-rounded quality to it, as well, making more of a dull thud out of what had previously been a clearly pitched low note. The extent to which that is audible depends on the loudspeakers and with smaller standmount models it's

hardly detectable. The cable is, perhaps, less well-suited to super-extended larger-sized loudspeakers. **HFC**



VERDICT

The admirably clear upper frequencies heard through this cable make it a good choice for the listener who desires detail and clarity above all else.

HI-FI CHOICE



AudioQuest CV-4

TYPE Loudspeaker cable (bi-wire)

PRICE £394 (four and a half-metre set)

CONTACT ☎ 01452 858260 🌐 www.audioquest.com

One of the vintage names in audio cables, AudioQuest has remained true over the years to certain design principles while still managing to innovate. This cable illustrates both of those approaches, featuring as it does AQ's familiar 'Perfect Surface Copper' solid-core conductors alongside the relatively new 'Dielectric-Bias System'. This is a rather interesting idea, which uses a small battery (housed in a plastic moulding which clips to the side of the cable) to provide a 48-volt bias to the insulation within the cable, effectively stressing it uni-directionally before any audio signal is applied. The aim is to reduce 'energy storage' in the insulation, though no-one has ever demonstrated that to be a problem: nor is it obvious that the DBS would reduce its effects. Come to that, the claims AudioQuest makes for the existence of distortion in normal cables are not well supported by

scientific evidence. Anyway, the star-quad geometry with four mixed-diameter cables and the low-to-moderate resistance, will do no harm at all to an audio signal.

Indeed, we found the sound of this cable to be perfectly acceptable, if not entirely groundbreaking in the way AQ's publicity might lead one to hope for. It seems to have a nice solid bass with plenty of rhythmic impact, but also a pleasingly tuneful quality, and this makes for sound which grabs the attention and holds it

well too. Such limitations as there are show up in the treble, which can sound a little dry at times. Nevertheless there is good detail and nice stable stereo imaging across the frequency range. **HFC**

VERDICT

A good mix of abilities across the range, if not truly outstanding. Bass is particularly good, while midrange is clear and detailed.

HI-FI CHOICE



QED Revelation

TYPE Loudspeaker cable (bi-wire)

PRICE £15 (per metre pair)

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

It's little short of astonishing how many variants on the classic 'QED79' theme the QED company has come up with – but then there's no evidence that there was ever anything fundamentally wrong with the figure-8 cable construction. This new model integrates developments from QED's 'Genesis' cables and also from the 'X-Tube' models and though the firm is not specific exactly which features are taken from which range, it's clear that this cable uses counter-spiral-wound arrangements of conductors in the two cores. In fact, there are ten conductors, each made up of multiple smaller strands wound together, spiralled round a central non-conducting core in X-Tube style.

Conductor material is silver-plated copper and insulation is hard, transparent polythene which gives the cable very low dielectric loss: resistance is average.

We had quite a consistent result with this cable across a range of amps and speakers.



Its sound seems to combine good performance in all areas, without necessarily standing out in any of them. Bass and treble are both well extended, though the former lacks some of the extreme depths we've heard from some cables in the past and the latter is not quite as airy and detailed as the very best. Midrange is very natural and voices are well served, with plenty of characteristic resonance and clear consonants. Rhythm and timing are good, too and the sense of 'snap' that we

heard from systems connected with Revelation is, perhaps, its strongest suit. In typical QED style, this is very much an all-rounder. **HFC**

VERDICT	
Sensibly priced, this cable offers a performance which is a step up from budget types. Compatibility is excellent and satisfaction for all but bass freaks.	HI-FI CHOICE ★★★★★

van den Hul The Wind

TYPE Loudspeaker cable

PRICE £50 (per metre pair)

CONTACT ☎ 01235 511166 # www.vandenhul.com

Some cable theories hold that conductor material is the most important factor, while some lay the emphasis on geometry. It seems vdH swings the former way, for this cable is supplied as a single conductor, making geometry a variable in the hands of the end user. The company's advice is to twist the conductors together, but one could equally space them well apart over a small or large distance and, in doing so, will significantly alter the inductance and capacitance of the cable. Clearly those of experimental bent will want to try various options.

The materials used are classic vdH - silver-coated copper plus Linear Structured Carbon for the conductors with a 'Hulliflex' jacket. There's quite a lot of copper in there and resistance is usefully low, making this a suitable cable for ultra-low impedance speakers and/or long cable runs.

For most of our listening we stuck with the twisted conductors option and found this for

the most part satisfying. The sound is quite nicely balanced tonally and bass is powerful and energetic, but it seems to have a slightly coloured tonal quality which makes the bass seem rather darker than usual – not exactly veiled, but at any rate a touch less prominent especially when the low-frequency content is more melodic than rhythmic. Sudden bass impact can be quite impressive, though, really jumping out of the mix. Treble is a little dry and lacks some sense of space and this is where we felt there is room for manoeuvre by adjusting conductor spacing: tight twisting gives the most open treble, though still not quite on a par with the Atlas Hyper, for instance. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT	
Separate conductors provide plenty of room for experimentation and the plentiful conductor quantity keeps resistance low.	HI-FI CHOICE ★★★★☆

Xanda



Some of the best ideas seem to happen almost by accident...

Just look at the founding of Leema Acoustics. Ex-BBC film sound engineers Mallory Nicholls and Lee Taylor, created the compact Xen loudspeaker as a research project and then made it commercially available to professional sound studios.

The Lee and Mallory partnership showed off their new speaker gem at the 1998 Bristol Hi-Fi Show. There, they found a welcoming response from discerning listeners.

This early success spawned a range of loudspeakers, from bookshelf to full-range floor standing models, but Leema Acoustics was soon to build on its reputation for outstanding acoustic design, with a successful range of audio electronics.

Critically lauded CD players and amplifiers became part of the Leema Acoustics range.

Last year, the original Constellation Range was supplemented by the more affordable, but no less high-quality, Spectrum Range, including the Pulse integrated amplifier and the Stream CD player both based on their more upmarket counterparts.





Having successfully entered two sectors of the market, Leema Acoustics has now released its biggest and best statement to date in the form of the **Reference Series**.

The word Reference conjures certain expectations. Not least the use of fine quality materials, seamless build quality and innovative, even groundbreaking design. None of these new products disappoint.

Pre nuptials

Starting with the Pyxis pre-amplifier, the Leema family shape is already in evidence. The 8mm-thick aluminium billet front panel presents two large control knobs. On the left, volume, on the right, input source or record output. When the corresponding row of blue LED's are lit, the input source is indicated. Press the button, and the LED's change to red, indicating the record feed. This can be output via the traditional tape-out sockets, the on board USB interface or the S/PDIF outputs.

Returning to Source mode, we're afforded the choice of onboard or external phono stage, CD, Tuner, Aux/MP3 or Analogue tape inputs. If you need to feed a direct digital source into the unit, there's again either S/PDIF or USB inputs to choose from, making use of the Pyxis' onboard DACs.

room for control

A closer examination of the controls reveals two buttons located just below the volume dial. The left is marked Setup, and pressing this once alters the function of the volume control to that of a bass equalisation control. Pressing it a further three times allows the function to cycle through treble, balance, and finally, input gain. With the exception of balance, each of these settings is individually stored for each input.

These facilities allow differences in relative loudness and tone between, say, a CD player and a radio tuner to be eliminated.

The other button is labeled Mute which very quickly fades the volume to zero.

Pressing it again fades back up to the previous listening level.

- Visit: www.leema-acoustics.com
- Phone: +44 (0)1938 811900
- Email: info@leema-acoustics.com
-

In the middle of the fascia are four more buttons. The first is labelled EQ and allows the user to switch the EQ circuit in and out for easy comparison.

Occasionally a source will be fed into the Pyxis that benefits from overall phase inversion. The Invert button reverses the absolute phase of the signal.

The next button is labeled Mono. Pressing this results in both channels being summed together, useful for Mono recordings and internet radio.

The fourth and final button is labeled AV Direct. This comes into its own when using a dedicated external multi-channel processor, equipped with it's own volume control.

The Standby button, located at the far right of the fascia, switches the unit on and off. This Standby control also serves to power up any other Leema unit connected via LIPS.

More than Lip service

LIPS stands for "Leema Intelligent Protocol System". LIPS 1 is standard throughout the Constellation and Spectrum ranges and allows the units to communicate intelligently.

For example, switching on the CD player will power up the connected amplifier, select it's CD input and set the volume.

LIPS 2 is connected via XLR-5 connectors to control reference series amplifiers, such as the Altair. This allows volume control to be carried out at the power amplifier end, which means the audio signal level in the inter connect can be held at a high level to minimise induced noise.

Pyxis

Reference pre-amplifier

'the most advanced stereo pre-amplifier currently available'



Altair for power



Using fully balanced signal connections enables the Altair monoblocks to be located a considerable distance from the Pyxis – up to 500m away if required.

These massive 45kg cubes feature heatsinks running down both sides. The backs panels have both XLR and RCA inputs, as well as LIPS connectors. WBT NextGen are used for the loudspeaker binding posts.

Each Altair includes two sets of speaker terminals because, although it's described as a monoblock, each chassis comprises two amplification modules. While unbalanced connectors may be used, all of the internal circuitry is based on a fully balanced topology, as is that of the Pyxis.

The power amplifier's input section contains a long-tail pair of ZTX 753 transistors. From here the signal runs into a current mirror using ZTX 653 transistors. This ensures optimum balance in the input stage for vanishingly low distortion. After this comes a Darlington driver stage using Sanken transistors, leading to six pairs of Toshiba output devices per module.

All of this combines to produce a substantial power rating of 550W/ch into 8 ohm, with the ability to deliver up to a 2kW peak into a 2 ohm load. Short-term current delivery is an incredible 100A. Other figures are equally impressive: the signal-to-noise ratio is specified at 135dB and the frequency response encompassing a 5Hz to 100kHz bandwidth.

Needless to say, it requires a very special pair of loudspeakers to handle such prodigious electrical muscle, and Leema has developed the Xanda floorstander to fulfill this task.



For a unit that is capable of dealing with the maximum output of an Altair amplifier in full song, the Xanda is more compact than you would initially think. Standing a mere 1160mm high on its RDC cone feet, and leaving a footprint of only 380mm wide by 480mm deep, this is a room-friendly design that will fit into most living rooms comfortably.

Xanda can be supplied in any automotive paint colour. This allows matching with even the most outlandish decor. Whether conventional or metallic finishes are chosen, the final result gleams and shimmers in a piano-gloss finish.

The wide section at the bottom houses a 250mm aluminium long throw driver, with a column of five drivers above. Four of these are the familiar 100mm polypropylene units found in other Leema speakers. These are configured as two bass/mid units and two mid rangers. In between all these sits a 30mm soft-dome silk tweeter, ferrofluid cooled.

Internal components include hand-wound, air-cored coils and polypropylene caps in high power areas. The two pairs of binding posts are gold/copper WBT NextGen.

Connection of all of this complex sounding equipment is a cinch, thanks to the LIPS systems. After switching on, a few seconds is required for the protection circuitry, and the soft start function in the Altairs to operate. This is required because of the high inrush current on power up which, without a staged switch-on procedure, would trip most mains circuit protectors.

Insane sounds

Firing up the Antila CD player with Radiohead's triple-platinum selling 1997 album OK Computer, and the second track – the hit single 'Paranoid Android' – filled the room. The opening guitar and shaken percussion were soon joined by the emotion-ridden tones of vocalist Thom Yorke. Over the next six minutes he explores the album's recurring themes of insanity and violence. From such a seemingly gentle start the song builds and builds, then abruptly changes gear with a harmonised vocal backing to Yorke's increasingly intense vocalisations; and then into a classic rock section with modern electronic effects. The end is sudden, almost as though a plug has been pulled.

The sound that flows out of the Xanda speakers would delight the band and come close to the experience that they would have had in the recording studio at St Catherine's Court, Bath. The acoustic of the 15th-century manor house is obvious through this system. Little hints of background details and the unusual decay of notes immediately tell you that you are listening to music being played through a very special ensemble of equipment indeed.



The persuader

There are some systems that give the listener clinically precise imaging and spatiality, but may fail to deliver the subtleties of the change from intimate close-miked vocals at the beginning of this song, to the anthemesque ending. The Leema Reference system provides both, by the bucket load, along with a persuasive drive to the slow and measured beat of the music.

The USB outputs allow archiving to computer from all sources, including vinyl. Playing Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* on a Clearaudio Master Reference turntable shows the speakers ability to dig deeply into the bass regions. The album features a very deep pulsing 'heartbeat'. Through most systems this is only apparent at the beginning and the end. The fact that this pulse runs all of the way through the record is obvious when played through the Leema Reference system.



Agena again

If your main sources are digitally based and you only have a modest record collection then the onboard phono stage option will be sufficient for most needs. If vinyl is your primary source then Leema have come to your rescue with the Agena Reference phono-stage.

Once again this blends with other Leema components and like all Leema electronics is available in either satin black or natural silver anodised finishes.

Agena is superbly specified with three inputs, two unbalanced using RCA phono plugs, and one XLR-equipped balanced input option. Each input has two headshell settings, allowing the use of up to six different cartridges. This may seem overspecified, but some high-end turntables – such as the reference Clearaudio deck – can readily be fitted with up to three tonearms. This allows the user to fit both stereo and mono cartridges, and perhaps a cheaper unit to allow other family members to play records without risk to a very expensive item.

Selection is made through the user configurable interface. Moving coil and moving magnet inputs are catered for, with independent adjustments for sensitivity, resistance and capacitance. Outputs are through either RCA phono, XLR or alternatively, via the onboard A-to-D converter, again through USB or S/PDIF.



Sounds of the Seventies

Turning to Pink Floyd again, this time through the Agena phono stage, is a true revelation in just how much information top-quality equipment such as the Clearaudio Goldfinger cartridge and the Graham Phantom B44 tonearm can extract from the groove. Feeding this high-resolution source into an equally transparent-sounding set of electronics is an astounding experience. You are transported to the control room in Abbey Road Studios, and are suddenly surrounded by people sporting long hair and flares as 1973 pours out of the speakers into the listening room.

From the operatic pretensions of 'Great Gig In The Sky' to the opening ringing and clatter of cash registers in 'Money' and the harmonious ramblings of 'Brain Damage', you are listening to a convincing performance of the music, now, not a second-hand reproduction of that moment nearly four decades ago.

This vividness applies across the musical world. Play Bach organ works, or Miles Davis exploring his trumpet's sonic extremities, and this awesomely specified powerhouse of a system responds effortlessly. You find yourself listening in one of the world's great cathedrals, or in a small smoky club in New York. Put on Fairport Convention's LP *Full House*, jump to the track 'Sloth', and you are sitting in front of the band. The vocals of Thompson, Nicol, Swarbrick and Pegg hang in the air, supported, in particular, by Richard Thompson's beautiful guitar playing. The whole effect is nothing short of mesmerising.

Now this sort of excellence may not come cheaply. The Agena phono-stage is £2935 with the Pyxis pre-amplifier costing £3925. The Altair power amplifiers cost £8325 each, and allow £8495 for a pair of Xanda loudspeakers. For the performance on offer the price is moderate. Rival components struggle to come close to the Leema Reference's ability to set a holographic, almost physical image in front of the listener. Neither would they have the same level of agility in the bass department. While it's not impossible to find powerful amplifiers that can produce a big sound they will often sacrifice speed and the dexterity to stop and start deep notes accurately. This 'overhang' blurs the timing, draining the energy from the rhythm.

There are no such problems here. The Altairs and Xanda loudspeakers have a bass agility comparable to, in automotive terms, a Bugatti Veyron, or, that other Top Gear favourite, the Pagani Zonda. Combining this with the system's seductive musical fluidity, and a seemingly endless, seamless, fuss-free power delivery proves a winning combination.

Leema Acoustics has excelled itself in producing a reference system that lives up to its name and justifies its price tag in the most convincing way possible. It is nothing short of a reference benchmark for reproduced music.

GROUP TEST & LAB REPORTS: RICHARD BLACK

CD PLAYERS

A range of mid-priced disc spinners that stand out from the crowd

ON TEST



Arcam FMJ CD37
£1,100



Cyrus CD6 SE
£900



Leema Stream
£1,170



Shanling CD2000
£1,000



Unison Research Unico CDE
£2,350



Yamaha CD-S2000
£980

There's no point trying to hide it: we had to do quite a lot of research and chasing in order to get six suitable CD players for this month's *Ultimate Group Test*, more than we've been accustomed to over the years. There are always plenty of good reasons why products may not be available – we've reviewed them before, or they are about to be replaced by a new model, or the manufacturer is simply so heavily back-ordered that none can be spared for review. There are also less good reasons, which you can doubtless imagine... as well as the fact is that there are simply less CD players around now than there once were.

Well, it's not quite the end of the world. Many of our old CD players are still working satisfactorily and with some of us beginning to feel the pinch as the recession wends its weary way, this might not seem like the best time to consider an upgrade. However, if you are in the mood for a little quality music-making (and we all need something to lift our spirits when the news is so often glum) there is still plenty to choose from.

In fact, given some of the epitaphs that have been penned, arguably prematurely, to the CD recently in the mainstream press, there's a perhaps surprising wealth of good kit still out there, offering variety in price, appearance, feature sets and approach to sonics. Leaving aside the stuff in the 'if you have to ask you can't afford it' bracket, a lot of this kit shows a high degree of technical and subjective performance, as you'll find out on the next few pages and even if prices have risen a little due to the falling Pound,

compared with a decade ago you still get a lot for your money.

In considering CD players around the £1,000 mark (the budget-end of our *Ultimate Group Test*), we expect to find sound quality that's noticeably ahead of what you get from a budget player or perhaps a midrange DVD or universal disc player, as well as looks and/or features that make the product a bit more aspirational than some characterless plastic-fronted slab that does a basic music-playing job. We certainly found those boxes ticked by the following products. **HFC**

EQUIPMENT USED

- Ⓢ Cambridge Audio Azur 840A integrated stereo amplifier
- Ⓢ EAR802 preamp / 519 monoblocks
- Ⓢ Bowers and Wilkins 803S loudspeakers
- Ⓢ ATC SCM20 loudspeakers
- Ⓢ Kimber, Furukawa and custom cables

MUSIC USED

- Ⓢ Miles Davis *Kind of Blue*
- Ⓢ The Mavericks *Trampoline*
- Ⓢ Pink Floyd *Dark Side of the Moon*
- Ⓢ Bach *Sonatas for cello and keyboard*
- Ⓢ Shostakovich *Symphony no. 7*

EARS USED

Many thanks once again to our expert listening panel, who gave up their time (and fought their way through particularly dismal traffic) to listen to each CD player and comment on what they heard:

Ben Beaumont (Audio Partnership)
Phil Hansen (Red Sheep Marketing)
Steve Reichert (Armour Home Electronics)

LISTENING TESTS

Our comprehensive listening tests were no less rigorous, conducted under blind, level matched (to 0.05dB) conditions with some of the industry's most experienced hi-fi panellists. In addition, there were extended sighted listening tests by the author, using a wider variety of equipment and music and under a varied range of volume levels to attempt to determine real-world performance.

LAB TESTS

Each of the players in the group was subjected to a rigorous programme of listening and laboratory tests. Measurements were made using a combination of custom-made CD-Rs, devised specifically for these tests, and a potent combination of 'traditional' lab instruments with a high-quality ADC which converted the analogue output of each player back to digital for analysis on a PC, using principally Cool Edit Pro and Mathcad. Our methodology provides a searching analysis of a multitude of aspects, the most important of which are summarised in the bar graphs (with other significant findings mentioned in the text). Not all measurements are reported for all players - for instance absolute speed accuracy, which was fine for all of them.

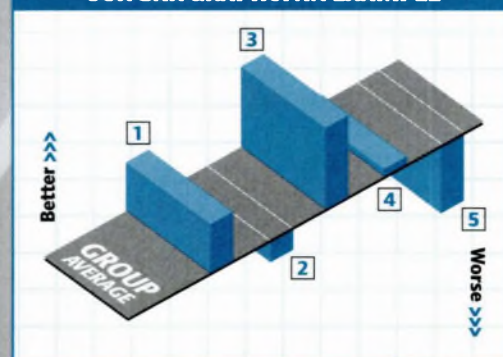
No other magazine offers an equivalent test and listening programme for comparative tests.

LAB REPORTS: THE BAR GRAPH

Our 3D bar graphs are a simple way of showing how the products compare across five key technical measurements. A percentage is given that falls above or below the group average.

- 1) Total harmonic distortion.** The classic distortion criterion, measured as the purity of a single sine wave at various frequencies and levels.
- 2) Jitter:** A measure of how stable the timing clock is. Measured at the analogue output, this distortion shows up as increased noise and/or low-level interfering frequencies which can contribute to sonic 'grunge'.
- 3) Linearity:** How accurately the output behaves at very low levels. Poor figures can lead to distortion rising considerably in quiet musical passages.
- 4) Dynamic range:** This is effectively the same as signal-to-noise ratio, the difference between full output and the practical noise floor of each player.
- 5) Digital filtering:** The filter is tested by playing tones at various frequencies and looking for ultrasonic spurious signals that accompany it.

OUR BAR GRAPHS: AN EXAMPLE





£1,100 ☎ 01223 203200 🌐 www.arcam.co.uk

ARCAM CD37

FMJ's performance offers a few surprises

Although one or two of Arcam's more AV-oriented disc players have, over the years, supported SACD, the CD37 is the first of its stereo-only CD players to include SACD replay. There's no denying that SACD is a bit of a minority interest, but it's likely that its inclusion didn't cost Arcam very much – nor, by implication, will it cost the purchaser. The big far-Eastern manufacturers of subassemblies and components are tending to build SACD into the standard parts and, as a result, one might find that having designed a CD player, one has accidentally produced an SACD player, too.

But even if you never play a single SACD, there's a certain comfort that comes from knowing the audio circuits are designed to support the higher resolution of that format. In other words, they should be more than a match for the requirements of CD. And looking at the inside of the CD37, we get the distinct impression that Arcam is leaving little to chance in terms of recovering precious details of audio signals.

The circuit board – quite large for a current CD player – contains plenty of recent, good-quality parts, as one would expect. The power supply uses two separate toroidal transformers and everything is immaculately laid out. There is also quite extensive use of damping, both mechanical and electromagnetic. The former includes bits of rubber glued to key components, while the latter takes the form of ferrite discs attached to critical integrated circuits. The idea is to prevent radiation of electromagnetic noise within the case. More mechanical damping is applied to the lightweight aluminium lid, which is unusually non-resonant. The player is particularly pleasant to use thanks to its clear display and intelligent control layout.

SOUND QUALITY

We hesitate to say it, but this player shows some evidence of what we've come to think of as the Arcam 'house sound': clear, detailed, a little understated and hence, to some ears, not quite as involving as some. Or, at least, not quite as immediately gripping as some.

For obvious reasons our 'blind' listening sessions are very short compared with a relaxed evening's listening to a new piece of kit, but even under these test conditions our listeners warmed to the CD37's sound.

Starting with a famous bit of Miles Davis, this player brought forth comments that were positive, but perhaps a little lukewarm – 'good' rather than 'very good' and so on. But even the specific areas of sonic performance that were greeted in such terms had started to attract much stronger praise by the time the final, orchestral, track was reached and, in general, it seems our listeners were connecting with the music much more readily, where before they had been a little reserved. Terms like 'absorbing performance' took the place of technical comments on bass and treble and the sound was clearly thought to be more involving.

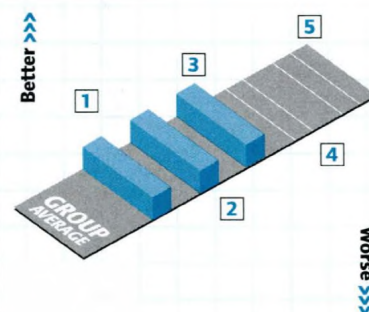
Throughout the presentation, two areas were consistently praised: detail and bass control. The latter can sometimes be at odds with extension and tunefulness, but that doesn't seem to be the case here. There were favourable comments on both those areas and also on the power with which orchestral percussion was portrayed. As a result, this player makes convincing work of large-scale music and is particularly assured in distinguishing between the tone and location of instruments within the ensemble. Voices, too, are well differentiated from each other and from their backing.

If anything, the character is even more marked with SACD replay, which similarly shows up its full quality only after listening for a while. This player may not immediately impress from a five-minute dealer demo, but half an hour or more in its company can be extremely satisfying indeed. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

If this player does not quite score the highest on any single parameter, it still achieves a technical performance which is quite hard to criticise on rational grounds. Take distortion, for instance. The raw figure measured at 1kHz is already very good, but what's probably more significant is that it only improves with falling signal level. In fact, if one looks within the audio band, for all signal levels and frequencies up to 20kHz, the sum total of noise, distortion, hum and other spurious signals is well below -90dB. Jitter is just high enough to measure, but its worst effect is to raise the noise floor by a couple of dB in the presence of (unrealistic) full-level 20kHz test signals. The CD37's intrinsic noise is low, but contains a few spurious signals. However, since these are in the region of -120dB it's hard to see how they could ever affect sound. The digital filter is good but, as usual, does allow some aliasing between 20kHz and 22kHz.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Distortion >> +10%
- 2] Jitter >> +10%
- 3] Linearity >> +10%
- 4] Dynamic range >> 0%
- 5] Digital filter >> 0%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.3V	2.16V
Total harmonic distortion	0.002%	0.0015%
Signal-to-noise ratio	109dB	107dB

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



A highly capable player which achieves much by doing little. At a first listening, its sound may not seem immediately outstanding, but on longer familiarity its confidence is most impressive.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE
★★★★★





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CYRUS CD6 SE

New 'SE' player takes advantage of proprietary technology

We first investigated Cyrus's new 'Servo Evolution' technology, in the context of the £1,100 CD8 (HFC 310). It has now been applied to the whole of the Cyrus CD player range, including this new entry-level model which (according to Cyrus) outperforms the original, pre-SE, CD8! The idea of Servo Evolution is bold and commendable. In essence, Cyrus has developed its own transport, taking a more detailed view of exactly what goes on at the sharp end of the laser than most hi-fi manufacturers, who incorporate transports purchased as ready-made subassemblies.

That said, Cyrus still buy in the mechanics: it's the signal processing that is unique. So why bother? Well, principally because the servo system in normal transports is optimised more towards readability of dodgy discs than the finer niceties of high fidelity. Cyrus reasoned that the customer who pays £900 for a CD player probably takes great care of his/her CDs! And although the proof will be in the listening, we find this kind of design approach admirable. We also rather like the adoption of a slot-loading mechanism, which experience has taught us is actually better than a tray – easier to navigate without looking, while the open/close button no longer disappears beneath the tray itself. Ejecting the disc a few millimetres more would have helped, though.

Audio conversion and conditioning is carried out by good-quality parts, including a 192kHz-capable DAC – ironically the chip used by Cyrus for the SE circuit also includes a DAC which, being of lower quality, is simply ignored. This model is not compatible with the PSX-R power supply either, but a lone digital output provides some upgrade potential.

SOUND QUALITY

Another well-balanced and generally very capable performance, with lots going for it in most areas. To the extent that if there was any criticism, it centred on the sound not being quite as large-scale as a couple of the

listeners might have wished for, with less of the 'reach-out-and-grab-you' quality that characterised one or two of the other players. Otherwise, comments were pretty much praise all the way.

Of particular note is the way this player can offer detail and precision at the same time as rhythmic vitality. This is quite a rare combination: plenty of audio kit can do one or the other, but finding both together is pretty much the Holy Grail of hi-fi. It's only fair to admit that the degree of detail seems (both from our 'blind' listeners' notes and from our own sighted listening) a shade behind that of the Arcam, say, and the rhythmic aspect is not quite on a par with the Unison Research, but the crucial point is that unless comparisons like that are on hand, you wouldn't be aware that the 6SE is missing anything.

As a result, the thick scoring of Shostakovich is clearly revealed and laid neatly before the listener, while the energy and sheer pleasure in the music-making of The Mavericks comes across quite unfettered. Indeed, that latter track was, perhaps, best served overall by this player compared to others in the test. By identifying each instrument without losing any gusto, the 6SE arguably got closer than any to the soul of the track.

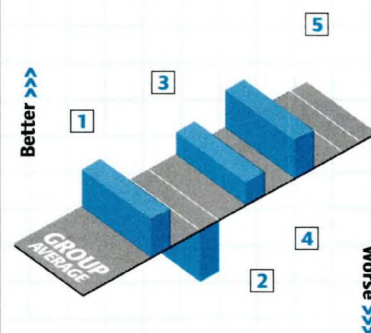
Frequency extension is excellent at both ends, with powerful, but still controlled bass and elegantly sparkling treble, while the midrange is very neutral and portrays voices with natural resonance and high intelligibility. Stereo imaging is rock-solid and has very good depth which remains stable with changes in level and texture. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

The exceptionally good distortion percentage is just part of a very assured performance in terms of unwanted output under most conditions. With bass and midband test signals, we found total spurious output to be consistently below -100dB, about as good a result as we've ever seen from anything and mains hum is extraordinarily low in level, below -110dB. Thumbs up for Cyrus so far! There are some signs of distress with high frequency test signals, though. First, 19/20kHz intermodulation distortion is relatively high at about 0.02%, suggesting mild slew limiting somewhere: with levels below maximum it soon drops off. Second, jitter is surprisingly high by modern standards, high-level signals at 20kHz effectively modulating the noise floor by over 10dB. However, signals like that don't occur in music and the subjective effect is likely to be slight to vanishing. The noise floor is as clean as a whistle and the digital filter is average.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Distortion >> +20%
- 2] Jitter >> -30%
- 3] Linearity >> +10%
- 4] Dynamic range >> +20%
- 5] Digital filter >> 0%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.1V	2.12V
Total harmonic distortion	0.02%	0.0005%
Signal-to-noise ratio	110dB	108dB

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



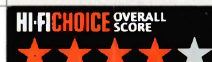
BUILD



VALUE



The CD6SE is a winning combination of detail and sheer musical energy. Although no one area entirely excels, the overall performance has more than a hint of the high end to it.





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LEEMA STREAM

Good all-round performer has a few tricks up its sleeve

Leema started life as a loudspeaker manufacturer and has expanded into electronics, its range now including CD players, amplifiers and a particularly interesting universal phono stage. Realising, no doubt, that 'me too' products are not going to pave anyone's path to glory, the company has developed an enviable record of innovation and ingenuity, exemplified in this particular product by the multi-DAC design. Where most manufacturers use a single digital-to-analogue converter chip to do the crucial job of turning binary numbers into analogue audio, Leema uses eight of them (the claim of '16 DACs' is justified as each chip is stereo – i.e. there are eight DACs per channel)

This is a cunning ploy, because it allows the averaging out of errors in each individual DAC – errors which show up in audio terms as distortion and noise. To some extent this has been done before, in different ways, but we're not aware of any manufacturers taking it quite as far as Leema has done. The DAC in question is a tiny part, making it easier to accommodate in quantities and doesn't cost a fortune, though its data-sheet performance looks pretty good even in solo operation. Not so many years ago, eight DAC chips would have been an expensive luxury indeed!

For the rest, the transport is a familiar Philips audio type, with a low-jitter digital interface chip and conventional power supply providing support, while the analogue output uses good quality op-amps. The user interface is unique to Leema and uses a single rotary/push control. It's absolutely fine, but we'd have liked a slightly more informative display: the two-digit affair fitted gives track number only, or a two-letter clue to what's happening and it's not much to go on. We found it a bit frustrating that it's impossible to know where you are in a track.

SOUND QUALITY

It seems the particular strength of this player is in the bass, which is extended, taut and also tuneful. What's more, it has great insight

and detail, tricky attributes to get right in the lowest octaves and often considered among the preserves of the high end. Practically all music has bass in it, of course, and getting this just right is a fine basis (literally!) for all-round performance.

That said, there seems to be a touch less precision in the upper half of the audio spectrum than some of the players in this group could offer. This is only slight and clearly didn't bother our listeners at all in some of the test tracks, but there was the occasional comment about blurred textures and spatial positioning. It seemed most apparent in the cello and piano track, where the piano tone was felt to be just a little muffled and the distinction between the instruments was less clear-cut than in previous presentations.

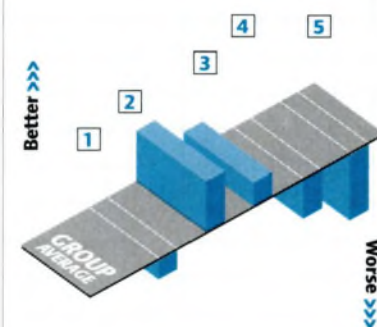
A little perversely, though, the two most complex tracks were thought clear and well-presented in terms of instrumental definition. There was also concerted praise for the handling of dynamics, on large and small scales, in these tracks, with a real sense of drama in the Shostakovich. Vocals were communicative and unforced, while imaging was multi-dimensional and stable.

Summing up, we'd incline to the view that this player has a very slightly warm balance. Listening over longer periods than our panel could partake of, we soon became completely accustomed to this and were able to enjoy to the full the Stream's bass and also its good timing and rhythmic drive. It's a strong performer in almost every way, though in the most delicate treble moments it just slightly lags some competitors for sweetness and 'air'. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

The ideal distortion performance from a digital source shows little distortion at high levels and basically none at lower levels, just like a good amplifier. This player mildly violates that rule, with a trace of third harmonic that refuses to go away except at ultra-low levels, leading to an apparent 3% distortion for signals at -80dB. That's arguably of purely academic relevance, though, and in practical terms performance is very good. Distortion is consistent across the frequency band, too. There's just a trace of jitter but nothing significant, while the noise floor is comfortably lower than that of normal CDs. The digital filter is interesting, with a distinctly asymmetric impulse response that has much more post-ringing than pre-, though there is still some of the latter. Its passband response is as flat as any, but it doesn't roll off quite as fast as most and the relatively poor stopband rejection figure reflects mild aliasing across the audio band.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Distortion >> -10%
- 2] Jitter >>> +30%
- 3] Linearity >>> +10%
- 4] Dynamic range >> -20%
- 5] Digital filter >> -40%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.0V	2.37V
Total harmonic distortion	0.005%	0.0012%
Signal-to-noise ratio	-dB	105dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★☆	Performance garnered much praise from our 'blind' panel. Bass is excellent in every way, but the slightly warm balance can occasionally detract from what is, in fact, a highly detailed presentation.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★☆	
VALUE ★★★★☆	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	





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SHANLING CD2000

Competitively priced, but can performance match up?

Shanling is probably best known for its visually stunning valve-equipped products, which take audio to new levels of visual art (if you've an eye for design). The company does appreciate, however, that some listeners prefer a plain rectangular box: hence this player. It's also devoid of valves, but still promises the 'organic Shanling sound'.

Whether organic or artificially fertilised, the sound is actually produced by some old friends from among the ranks of digital and analogue components. The transport is from Chinese specialist Asatech – apparently it's capable of reading DVDs, though that function is disabled here and there's no obvious reason why that should make it any better or worse for audio duty than a 'normal' CD transport. The digital-to-analogue conversion uses a high-quality chip, followed by some fast op-amps which turn the DAC's current output into a more useful voltage and then there's the usual gentle analogue filtering and output buffering.

The power supply uses an 'R-core' type of mains transformer and importer Real Hi-Fi assures us that this is a specific 240V model, one of Real's '3D Shanling' upgrades done as standard for UK stock. Mains transformers intended for worldwide use may saturate, with audible side effects, on the UK mains which is only theoretically harmonised with the rest of Europe for voltage. There's generous provision within the power supply for smoothing and regulation of supply rails, and all parts of the player are very well built, with a strong preference for through-hole components over surface-mount types. Output sockets are high-quality types, connected internally with screened cable and the case is solidly constructed from aluminium, with little tendency to resonate.

SOUND QUALITY

For one reason or another, none of our 'blind' listeners quite clicked with this player. Comparing their notes, it seems the core of the matter is that the CD2000 is more keen

on the midrange than on the frequency extremes and, in addition, is a little lacking in analytical skills. Take these two factors together and you have a sound that is basically pleasant, but not as involving as one might wish for, nor as revealing.

On a more positive note, stereo imaging is very good laterally. Depth is not class-leading, but width has both extension and precision and has little or no tendency to wander with dynamics, as can sometimes happen. There's also some nice 'bop' to the sound, thanks to a lively upper bass region which gives good timing in most musical styles.

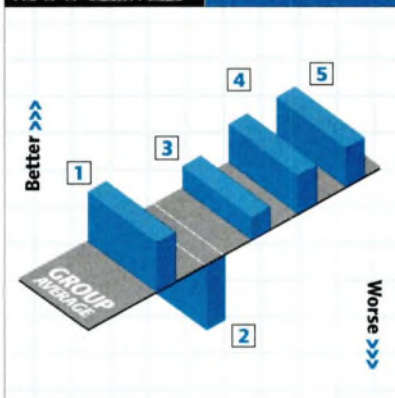
But despite those talents, the CD2000 doesn't entirely convince. The bass is deep, but lacks definition and tunefulness and, as a result, has a tendency to 'plod' when it should excite. High treble, by contrast, seems a little harsh and over-bright. Dynamics, too, are rather restrained and the sound is reluctant to blossom, or indeed explode, as the music dictates.

So our listeners ended up making lots of polite comments about 'good' this and 'OK' that, but very little in the way of 'very good' or 'excellent', nor suggestions of new musical insights, that might suggest that this player was highlighting previously unappreciated facets of the music, or causing re-evaluations of fundamental recording quality. It puts the music across, but doesn't seem very enthusiastic about it and while we could hear everything on the recording there's no new insight that makes one really sit up and take notice. We've been highly impressed by Shanling in the past, but this one seems to have missed out on some of the magic! **HFC**

LAB REPORT

Another player that exhibits exceptionally low levels of distortion, the CD2000 maintains this performance over the full range of signal levels and frequencies and under all conditions the distortion consists entirely of harmless second and third harmonics. Noise and other spurious signals are also very low indeed (there's a rise in noise level above 10kHz, but it's still below the reference level of a normal 16-bit CD) while hum is below -125dB, a superb result for anything mains-powered. The one figure that looks disappointing is jitter, some ten times higher than the effective measurement limit from CD. This means that in the presence of high-level, high-frequency signals the noise floor rises significantly, though there are no discrete spurious tones associated with it. Still, is this really a big problem? The most rapidly changing signals we've ever seen in real music would hardly show the problem up to measurable extent in practice.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Distortion >> +30%
- 2] Jitter >> -40%
- 3] Linearity >> +10%
- 4] Dynamic range >> +20%
- 5] Digital filter >> +20%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.0V	2.18V
Total harmonic distortion	0.002%	0.0007%
Signal-to-noise ratio	115dB	108dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★☆	Although the sound has plenty of good aspects, treble is harsh and dynamics restrained. It doesn't seem to be class-leading in any one area and the overall result fail to impress. Timing is its best suit.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★☆	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	



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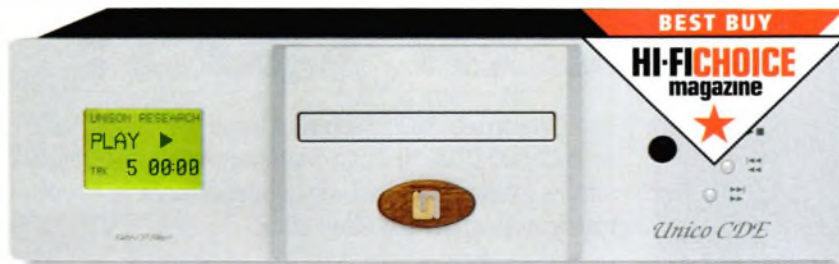
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Michael Fremer, Stereophile Magazine
November, 2008

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UNISON RESEARCH UNICO CDE

This player combines classy looks and top performance

It may be the dearest player here by some margin, but even a cursory glance at the CDE tells you it's a classy product. That nicely satin-finished front panel is thick, solid aluminium, for a start, and the wood-bodied remote is a very deluxe item indeed, only slightly let down by the unapologetic screw-heads protruding from the top surface.

But as far as we are concerned, beauty must be more than skin deep if it's to appeal for longer than a few seconds and inside the neat and robust aluminium case there are some interesting features. Most obvious among these are the four valves which sit on the audio board and buffer the audio signal to both the unbalanced and balanced output sockets. Unison has a long track record of valve products and likes to drop the odd handful of them into even its solid-state-based units and we've had plenty of pleasure in the past from various valve-assisted digital sources so we aren't about to complain.

There's another point of note on the other side of the chassis, where (in our review sample) a pair of Wolfson DAC chips and a sample-rate converter sit on a little sub-board above the main DAC. This board is, in fact, an optional extra (£150), an upgrade DAC which sits directly above the onboard DAC and SRC: once it has been fitted, one can select between the two DACs via the remote control, an unusual and intriguing provision. Both DACs are also available to the outside world thanks to a single digital input at the rear, selected via a push-button next to it.

Build quality is excellent, with good-quality components throughout. The transport is a TEAC CD-ROM type, connected via its digital audio output, while the power supply is based around a generous toroidal transformer, situated behind the transport and covered by a steel shield.

SOUND QUALITY

Merely mentioning the word 'valves' can encourage all sorts of preconceptions in listeners, which is why we're so keen on our

'blind' listening tests – no one knows which of the players is valued. But those preconceptions have some grounding in reality, at least if this player's performance is any guide. Of all the players in the group, this was the one that encouraged the most enthusiastic comments from our listening panel and it's certainly significant that many of these comments were about musical, rather than technical, areas of performance.

Yes, there was the odd comment about bass, treble and imaging, but far more about rhythm, dynamics and sheer involvement. Perhaps most telling was one short sentence: 'You get the complete performance!'. That, after all, is the aim, in a nutshell.

There was a lone comment about bass lacking some small degree of extension in the Shostakovich track, which certainly has more need of that than any of the others, but otherwise it's clear that bass is full and precise, with clearly defined tuning when required and plenty of impact on percussive sounds. Bass timing is tight and there's a rich quality which extends into the midrange, aiding integration between frequency bands.

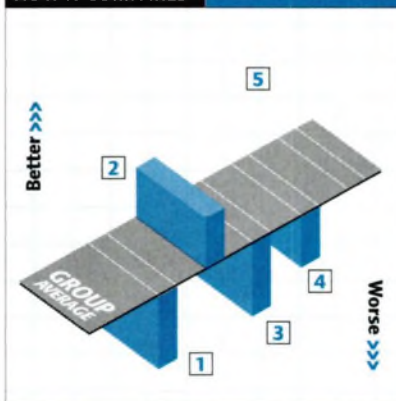
Treble is clear and succeeds, not least by simply not drawing attention to itself, and by being well-integrated into the bigger picture. Midrange is neutral and has plenty of detail, which helps voices stand clear of the backing without unnatural emphasis. Stereo imaging is excellent in both width and depth.

Overall, though, those qualities are very definitely second to the superbly natural flow of the music heard through this player. The way all kinds of genres communicate effortlessly through it is a great tribute to its musical performance. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

The figures given in the comparison table refer to the optional DAC since that was how most listening was carried out, but it's interesting to compare both DACs. One might expect that the valve output stage would dominate distortion, but, in fact, the differences between the DACs suggest that isn't the case, the onboard one measuring rather better at some 0.008%. What may be more significant is that distortion of the optional DAC is reluctant to fade away with signal level, reaching 4% at -60dB and about 25% at -80dB. At -100dB the signal apparently vanishes. There are plenty of other differences between the two DACs, not the least of which is a 0.8dB level difference between them which is likely to be audible in comparisons. Both DACs share a gentle treble rolloff, about -1dB at 20kHz, while jitter is very good – barely measurable. Absolute speed is neither very accurate (+200ppm), nor very stable.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Distortion >> -50%
- 2] Jitter >> +30%
- 3] Linearity >> -50%
- 4] Dynamic range >> -30%
- 5] Digital filter >> 0%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	V	2.40V
Total harmonic distortion	%	0.014%
Signal to noise ratio	dB	103dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	Despite an unpromising technical performance, the sound of this valve-equipped player is unusually strong on musical communication (whatever the genre) and is highly convincing overall.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★☆	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	



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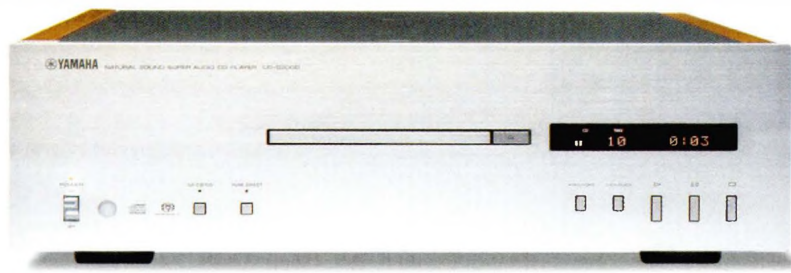
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YAMAHA CD-S2000

Mid-priced Yamaha player keeps it relaxed

Having got back into stereo hi-fi with enthusiasm, after a brief period when its dedication seemed to waver, Yamaha has produced quite a range of separates among which this CD player and its matching amp (A-S2000) are currently, it tells us, 'Pre-Eminent'. In appearance, both units are remarkably similar to the '1000 models which we reviewed in *HFC* 315. Indeed the similarities go deep and one could, with some justification, regard this as a 'Special Edition' CD-S1000.

The SACD transport is the same, while the power supply is not quite the same. The S2000 has a deluxe arrangement with two transformers, one toroidal and one frame-type, which keep the analogue and digital sections separate right back to the mains. The audio board is shared with the '1000, but in this case some spaces left vacant in the cheaper model are populated with components to drive the balanced output, which is, of course, doubled by the usual phono sockets.

Components on the audio board are in some ways an odd mix. The DAC chip is a thoroughly modern device capable of handling both PCM (CD) and DSD (SACD) datastreams in their native format with excellent performance, but it is followed by analogue circuitry based on an op-amp from the 1970s and passive components which could have come practically out of the ark, all mounted in an old-fashioned through-hole manner, the resistors standing up as they did in those well-loved Yamaha amplifiers and cassette decks of pre-CD days. Operation is fine, although like all SACD players, it's distinctly on the slow side with disc loading.

SOUND QUALITY

Something of a mixed success, this player impressed on grounds of bass and also of smoothness, a quality that is very much a question of taste. It does have its place, though and the Bach cello/piano track was

well served by it, the intricately interweaving lines flowing naturally and clearly without any undue roughness to the sound. Funnily enough, The Mavericks also seemed quite well flattered here – their sound may be bright, but it is actually quite civilised and a smooth approach is sympathetic.

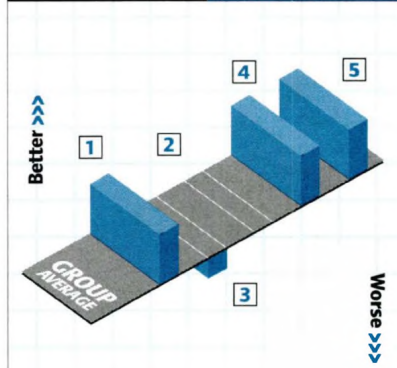
In both those cases, the good tonal balance achieved by this player was appreciated and conducive to easy unravelling of the music's textures – if one chooses to listen that way. Of course, smooth presentation also allows more 'passive' listening with practically any music: there's less likelihood of anything startling or disturbing! The problem really is that some music does need a bit of an edge to it in order to work most effectively, and (assuming the performance and recording haven't already smudged that) equipment like this that takes some of that edge away is doing the music something of a disservice, especially for listeners who are sensitive to that kind of thing.

One member of our listening panel is particularly sensitive to it, and for his ears, this player was simply too relaxed to appeal. His colleagues certainly spotted the smoothness, but were clearly far less perturbed by it, one finding the player overall quite exciting, the other having mixed feelings. There is some good timing and rhythm in evidence and dynamics work well in a slightly understated way – one doesn't always notice that music is getting loud until it really is, just like real life. Treble is decent rather than superb, but midrange is impeccably neutral and detail and imaging are good too. A fine player, just not one for all tastes. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

This is another player which exhibits performance approaching measurement limits in many parameters. Distortion behaves exactly as one would wish, very low in level for signals approaching maximum output and vanishing for lower-level signals. That's harmonic distortion, anyway: jitter is not quite so well behaved and, in fact, has an unusual quality to it. Instead of simply raising the noise floor a little, it shows up as a series of low-level peaks on a spectrum plot, probably indicative of switching-circuit noise interfering with the master clock somehow. Still, the absolute level of this interference is very low and we're not sure it's ever going to become even indirectly audible. Regular idle noise is extremely low and the digital filter is nearly exemplary except for the usual near-20kHz slight aliasing. Linearity at very low levels is a little poorer than most and the player inverts absolute phase.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Distortion >> +30%
- 2] Jitter >> -10%
- 3] Linearity >> 0%
- 4] Dynamic range >> +30%
- 5] Digital filter >> +30%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Maximum output level	2.0V	2.12V
Total harmonic distortion	0.002%	0.0008%
Signal-to-noise ratio	116dB	110dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	Sound seems dominated by a smooth character which may, for some listeners, prove something of a handicap to appreciating the good insight and tonal balance of this generally fine player.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	



CONCLUSIONS

These six CD players cover a lot of bases in terms of detail and performance

We mentioned in the introduction to this *Ultimate Group Test* that we had a little trouble getting six players together, which obviously implies that we didn't have much say in selecting them. We could hardly have wished for a more disparate group, though, in terms of what they variously offer and achieve and it's probably fair to say that if at least one of them doesn't press your buttons you're a mighty hard customer to please. Each has its strong points and, yes, its weaknesses, even if the latter are largely a matter of taste (and a

thousand pounds says that taste is a legitimate concern).

Only one player scored full marks overall and at two-and-a-half times the price of the cheapest one here, that's somewhat reassuring. The Unison Research Unico CDE is a slightly quirky component from a company that has never shown interest in 'me too' products. It does its own thing and in the ears of our listening panel that 'thing' is musically convincing and entirely worthy of recommendation.

At the other end of the scale, the Shanling CD2000 made an uncharacteristically weak case for

itself. It's an attractive machine with some impressive talents, including a nicely rhythmic upper bass, but its performance didn't quite convince our listeners that they were hearing live musicians. Shanling has some tasty models in its range and we'd tend to look at them first.

The Leema Stream and Yamaha CD-S2000 look, perhaps, a little lacklustre on their points scoring, but both proved highly listenable players with distinct appeal. The Stream has some of the best bass we've heard from any digital source below £3,000 and that alone will

mark it out as a winner for many listeners. It also has very good resolution of detail, which is not really compromised by the rather warm balance. The CD-S2000 is civilised almost to a fault and super-smooth in presentation, but it, too, is admirably adept at analysis.

Finally, both the Arcam CD37 and the Cyrus CD8SE prove that musical and technical virtues need not be at odds. Although their characters differ somewhat, both provide real musical involvement along with tonal neutrality and plenty of fine detail. **HFC**

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LOUDSPEAKERS

ATC SCM11 £849
Needs a bit of driving, but its neutral, revealing nature is quite addictive.

PMC OB11

£3,200
Floorstanding model with great bass and superb dynamics, plus very even balance.

HINTS AND TIPS

>> When auditioning CD players don't be misled by differences in playback level – louder often sounds better initially

>> Many CD players emit a just-audible mechanical whistle. The easiest 'cure' is not to place it too close to your listening seat and use the remote control!

>> Most players aren't microphonic and resonances in their casework can be minimised with suitable feet and/or damping material placed on top.

>> Use a CD lens cleaner regularly. Dust slowly accumulates and is easier to remove before it gets baked on.

CD PLAYERS AT A GLANCE



MAKE MODEL	Arcam FMJ CD37	Cyrus CD8 SE	Leema Stream	Shanling CD2000	Unison Research Unico CDE	Yamaha CD-S2000
PRICE	£1,100	£900	£1,170	£1,000	£2,350	£980
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSION	Sound may not seem outstanding, but on longer familiarity its confidence is most impressive.	A winning combination of detail and musical energy. The performance has more than a hint of the high end to it.	Bass is excellent, but the slightly warm balance can and does occasionally detract from the highly detailed presentation.	Sound has plenty of good aspects, but isn't class-leading in any one area and fails to impress overall.	Despite unpromising technical performance, sound is strong on musical communication and highly convincing.	Sound dominated by a smooth character, which may mask the good insight and tonal balance of this fine player.
KEY FEATURES						
ELEC DIG O/P	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
OPT DIG O/P	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
CD R-W	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
CD TEXT	No	No	No	No	No	No
BALANCED O/P	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
OTHER FORMATS	SACD	-	-	-	-	SACD
SIZE WXHXD	43x8.5x35.5cm	21.5x8x36cm	43x9.5x31cm	43x10x36cm	44x12x39cm	43.5x13.5x42cm
WEIGHT	6.2kg	3.1kg	4kg	6kg	11.5kg	13kg
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
DISTORTION	0.0015% E	0.0005% E	0.0012% E	0.0007% E	0.014% A	0.0008% E
JITTER	0.2ns G	1.1ns A	0.15ns G	1.2ns A	0.15ns G	0.5ns A
LINEARITY	<0.1dB E	<0.1dB E	<0.1dB E	<0.1dB E	3dB P	0.5dB G
S/N RATIO	107dB G	108dB E	105dB G	108dB E	103dB A	110dB E
STOPBAND REJECTION	82dB G	80dB G	52dB A	95dB E	84dB G	100dB E

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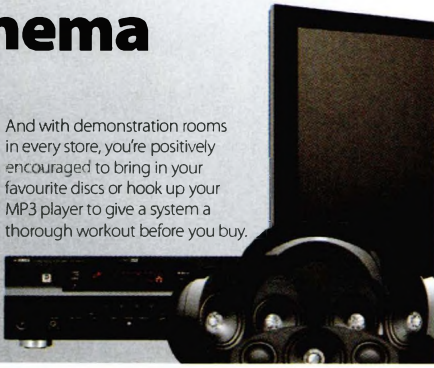
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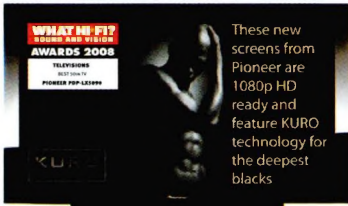
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MORE GRUNT REQUIRED

Dear Alan,

I have slowly put together my system over a few years and have been really happy with it, until now. I have an Arcam FMJ CD23 and A22 amp and, until recently, was using Celestion A2 speakers. I was lucky enough to be able to try out a big selection of cables and rather surprisingly, found the QED Silver Anniversary to be the best. The sound was spot on, but ever since I got the A2s I wished I'd had enough cash for the monstrous A3s. As luck would have it, I secured a pair on eBay and after being blown away by the amazing detail, soundstage and other improvements, I feel that the sound is missing something. The bass feels particularly lacking. I love the CD23, but guess the A3s need some grunt to get them singing. Any suggestions

Ray Perry via email

HFC The A3 needs an awful lot of power to bring it to life. It can work with something really big and powerful feeding it; like a big Bryston, Classé or Krell, for example. Unless a speaker drive unit is broken or you are trying to use 'em in a 3x2m room, you need to seriously upgrade your equipment to better fit the A3. As a starting place, we'd recommend trying out a Quad 99/909 pre-power combination which will tighten up and deepen the bass, but something like the Leema Tucana would be a more entertaining option all round.

PREAMP PURSUIT

Dear Alan,

I've recently upgraded my system, from an Audiolab 8000A (working as a preamp.) and 8000PX power amp, to an Audiolab 8000Q preamp driving that 8000PX. The sound has improved quite substantially in the bass and mid and in imaging (very solid, crunchy and extended bass, very neutral and with real presence for the mids), but I find there is something missing in the treble: cymbals seem to lack some air and attack (the old 8000A used to have more of this) as if they are kept a bit in a second plane. I listen via loudspeakers as well as headphones

What other preamp would you recommend that could, at least, keep the same quality in the bass and mids as the 8000Q and improve the treble? My budget is around £1,000 (but could be a little more, if deserved) and would consider purchasing second-hand equipment as well. Do you think that a passive preamp (like Creek's OBH 22) would make it?

I listen mainly to rock and pop, as well as some classical and jazz. The rest of my system consists of a Musical Fidelity A3CD, B&W CM7 bi-wired, Kimber Silver Strike interconnects, Nordost Blue Heaven and Kimber 8TC speaker cables, GradoRS1 and Amity headphone amp.

Juan Pinales Madrid, Spain

HFC A spot of housekeeping first. Decide on either using Nordost or Kimber speaker cables; using both as a hybrid will make it almost impossible to balance the sound of the system. We've heard good things from Cambridge Audio (840E), Densen (Beat B-200), Primare (A30) and Roksan (Caspian) and have been told good things about the EAR 834L; we'd concentrate on these preamps over, say, a Naim or Rega design,

as they should give a step up on the Audiolab without a substantial tonal shift. On the other hand, in the second-hand market, you might pick up a nice Audio Research SP16L if you hunt around.

As to passive preamps, these can sound wonderful or terrible depending on how close you can get the CD, preamp and power amp. Without active gain stages in the preamp, signal attenuation across lengths of cable kicks in pretty quickly and the treble rolls off fast.

THE KRAKEN WAKES

Dear Alan,

My Current music system comprises the following: Squeezebox 3 playing FLAC and WAV files with Russ Andrews power supply, fed by a QNAP TS101 NAS box via Ethernet cable. The SB3 links (via Chord Codac Silver Plus coaxial cable) to a Musical Fidelity X24 DAC with custom toroidal power supply. This feeds an Alchemist Kraken Mk1 Class A (60 watts per channel) amplifier with twin toroidal external power supply linked to DAC with Crystal Piccolo (courtesy of yourselves!). Finally, Castle Compact 3 speakers and a REL Stampede subwoofer connected with QED Silver Anniversary are used as loudspeakers. This all runs through a 'Sound Fantastic' Mains block.

Space is a major constraint, and led to the use of the SB3, which I'm pleased with. I also only have space for very compact speakers with severe constraints on positioning (one wall-mounted, one on the sideboard). I am now in the position to upgrade the system with a budget of around £600 and am not sure which direction to take. I listen to all genres of music and find it currently sounds fairly even with all types, possible better with instrumental. Where would you think the most benefit could be realised? I like the amp for it's aesthetics (stainless steel and gold

DAC TACTICS

Dear Alan,

I would like to improve my CD listening even more and would like to know if the addition of a DAC in my system would do this. I have a Marantz SA7001 KI CD/SACD player, Naim NAIT 1 (mint) and a pair of Harbeth HL Compact 7ES Anniversary speakers linked by Chord cables. My budget is up to £1,500 and I was considering one of the following: Stello DA 220 MkII, Lavry DA10 and the Benchmark DAC1 USB. I would probably sell the Marantz and buy a second-hand transport like a Meridian, which I used to have and thought was rather good.

I listen to Traffic, Lou Reed and mainly 1970's music. I'm not concerned about the SACD facility as 99 per cent of my music is CD based and my collection of SACD is all hybrid. All three of these DAC's receive very

good reviews. Any advice please.

Gary Armitt via email

HFC We have yet to test the Benchmark, but have heard nothing but good things about it. However, in our own tests, the Stello did well in a solo test, but the Lavry did exceptionally well in our recent *Ultimate Group Test (HFC 316)*. However, unless this is the first step in a migration away from CD, why are you considering selling the Marantz for an older transport? You may find the DAC upgrades the performance of the Marantz enough to keep you happy. If you are determined to upgrade to the second hand Meridian, make sure the transport mechanism inside the player is still supported.

version), but could it be significantly improved? In the States you can get the circuitry of the Squeezebox improved, possibly another option. I tend to think the speakers could be the key to improvement and have considered Leema Xero, AVI Neutron 5 or Tannoy Revolution Signature DC4.

Alan Bridgens via email

HFC You are right in thinking it's the speakers that could do with an upgrade. The Castles weren't bad, but you can do a lot better in today's market. Of the trio you mention though, the Leema must be discounted out of hand because they need more space between them and the back wall than your set-up can provide. The Revolution DC4 and Neutron 5, on the other hand, will suit your system well, but their clean sound can come as a bit of a shock and (in the case of the AVI speaker) might highlight limitations in the amp. Something closer to the Castles, but also worth checking out in your context (especially with that subwoofer) is the Sonus Faber Toy.

VINYL REVIVAL

Dear Alan,

I am writing to you for some help with choosing a replacement turntable for my age old Dual which has finally given up the ghost. This has offered good service for over 20 years and has been the last piece of the puzzle to upgrade. My current system consists of the following components: Myryad MCD100 CD player, Myryad MI120 integrated amp (fitted with MM phono stage), Myryad MA120 power amp, Myryad MT100 FM

Tuner, Monitor Audio Monitor 3 floorstanders – bi-amped using Cable Talk 3.1 cables, with Transparent interconnects and Russ Andrews yellow power cables.

I have a budget of around £1,000-£1,200 to spend, but on looking around the choice of turntables, arms and especially cartridges is a minefield and either well under or over budget. I have narrowed my choices down to the following, however, if you could suggest others worth auditioning that would be great: Audio Note TT 1 with a Rega 301 arm and Rega exact cartridge, Roksan Radius 5 (not sure of what cartridge would be best), Clearaudio Emotion or Rega P5 with Exact cartridge.

Adrian Masters via email

HFC We would add a Pro-Ject 6 turntable with an Ortofon 2M moving magnet cartridge, or a Michell Tecnodec (pictured below) with a Rega arm and Goldring 1012GX cartridge. We would also partner the Roksan with the company's own Chorus Black cartridge. Most important of all though, we'd go for a long auditioning session, if possible.



LP MEETS CINEMA

Dear Alan,

I'm new to *Hi-Fi Choice* and have a dilemma, which I hope you may be help with. Current set up is a mix of original and add-ons and is as follows: Cyrus CD8, DACX, 8vs2 integrated amp and PSR. Ruark Sabre 3 speakers (four years old). Interconnects are Atlas Anthem or Cyrus and the speaker cable is Ecosse MS 4.45 bi-wire (although used in single wire at present).

I want to buy a decent turntable/arm/cartridge and phono stage as I have 400 LPs gathering dust. I also want to make an upgrade somewhere else and have so far considered adding a Cyrus 8 Power and another PSR. I want to add AV at some point with an AV Receiver (probably Cyrus again).

I could at a push go to £2k. The dilemma is whether to blow the £2k on a top-notch analogue set up (I have seen the T+A G10 advertised at £1,895) or go for something around a £1k and make the other improvements. Is £2k too much to spend considering the standard of the rest of the kit. I would appreciate an opinion – not a solution, as I realise that it is ultimately down to what I want – but a second opinion is helpful.

Tony Greenaway via email

HFC That last sentence of yours should be writ large, Tony. It's absolutely the right way of going about things. As such, instead of running through a list of options, we'll just highlight the solution we would probably end up with in your position. We'd choose a Cyrus AV Master 8.0 (with its built-in amps) to power the home cinema section. We'd then recommend a shortlist of turntables, of a Clearaudio Emotion package, a Pro-Ject X-Pack or a Rega P5/RB700 with a Rega Elys 2 cartridge, with a Cambridge Audio 640P phono stage to go with them. This little lot will soak up most of your budget, but really deliver the goods for home cinema and those 400 LPs.

When your bank balance has recovered, you could also upgrade the CD player to SE status, or add a PSX-R power supply to the transport, with a mind to adding a third PSX-R to the DAC X when funds permit. Only when that's sorted, should you consider going the power amp route, and we would not recommend adding the PSX-R until you upgraded the integrated to a preamp in its own right.



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HI-FI CHOICE BUYER'S BIBLE



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

Reviews you can trust

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

How to use this guide

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

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

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CD PLAYERS

Audio disc players for music only

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

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


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



again before being amplified and sent to the output sockets.

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

SUPER AUDIO CD

 SACD or Super Audio CD is a relatively niche 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. Many pundits believe that SACD's future lies with classical recordings, a genre that remains buoyant for the format.

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, and for 2009 DACs are back!

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 192 kHz.

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



Yamaha CD-S700 £400

The CD-S700 is a good, no-frills CD player, without any of the SACD gubbins found in its bigger brothers. It does, however, include a USB port for connecting to an MP3 player.



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	P	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS							ISSUE NUMBER
				SACD COMPATIBLE	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	CD-RW COMPATIBLE	CD TEXT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	
UP TO £1,000											
	Arcam CD17	500	Civilised sound, with a positively deluxe treble. Bass is clear, if not the weightiest ever	●	●	●	●	●			315
	Arcam CD37	1,000	Excellent detail and imaging, neutral tonality and above-average bass resolution	●	●	●	●	●			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		●	●	●		●		315
	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.	●	●	●	●				315
	Naim CDSi	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
	Roksan Kandy K2	750	State-of-the-art technology and precision engineering produces a fine CD performance		●	●	●		●		315
	Yamaha CD-S2000	999	Sophisticated, this is a beautifully controlled, high-resolution player, although SACD is stereo-only	●	●	●	●	●	●		309
ABOVE £1,000											
	Audio Research CD5	4,500	Audibly better than most CD players on the market – natural and refined, yet assertive and very dynamic		●	●			●		312
	Bryston BCD-1	2,050	Not as open as some but rather more timely than most, it sounds a lot more gripping than it looks		●	●			●		300
	Cairn Fog 3	1,995	Ergonomically challenged, high energy player with Gallic charm and digital preamp on board		●	●			●	●	302
	Chord Red Reference CD	13,345	The definitive statement in Red Book CD playing, this player's look and sound places it at the top of the tree		●	●	●		●		299
	Classé CDP-102	3,000	Rich, dynamic CD/DVD player with a full bottom end, impressive dynamics and a luxurious yet revealing balanced		●	●	●	●	●	●	286
	Cyrus Audio CD 8 SE	1,100	A highly civilised player which can, nevertheless, deal convincingly with raw music		●	●	●				310
	Cyrus Audio CD8x/PSX-R	1,400	Lightness of touch is the key here, but there is also good bass and some very fine detail on offer too		●	●					295
	EMM Labs CDSA	9,995	Classy, stripped down to basics SACD/CD player with some excellent engineering below decks	●	●	●	●		●		302
	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
	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
	Marantz SA-11S2	2,700	Superb value for money, this well-balanced player features various filter settings to customise performance	●	●	●	●		●		304
	Marantz SA-7S1	5,000	Something of a bargain even at this price, the SA-7S1 sets the benchmark for CD/SACD players of its ilk	●	●				●		297
	Meridian G08	2,250	Advanced digital processing with special apodising filter that gives a very clean sound		●	●			●	●	312
	Naim HDX	4,500	The HDX hard disk player represents an entirely new paradigm for high-fidelity replay. Who needs CD players?		●	●	●				311
	Roksan Caspian M Series-1	1,250	An exceptionally fine CD player that provides a high-end and musically rewarding performance		●	●					307
	Shanling CD-T1000SE	1,600	Commendably committed player which gets right to the heart of a wide variety of musical styles		●	●	●		●	●	306
	Sony SCD-XA5400ES	1,199	Elegant, refined control system and very strong CD/SACD performance. Sound is bold with high resolution	●	●	●	●	●	●		313
	Unison Research CDE	1,950	Valve CD player with interchangeable DACs that can double as a standalone DAC that oozes musicality	●		●	●		●	●	315

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.

TOP BUYS



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 £9,995

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.



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VINYL

Turntables, cartridges and phono stages



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

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

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



TURNTABLE SET-UP

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.

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.

TOP BUYS



Dynavector DV-10X5 £250

Although fiddly to mount, this high-output MC cartridge has superb dynamics and equally fine timing, making it well worth the effort of proper fitting.



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 BB BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

TURNTABLES

Record players

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				ISSUE NUMBER
				SPEEDS	SUSP SUBCHASSIS	SWITCHABLE SPEED CHANGE	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	
EC	Avid Volvere	2,750	A combination of a heavy platter with a sprung suspension that makes the vinyl it spins sound powerful and solid	33/45	BB	BB		298
BB	Clearaudio Emoton	985	Beautifully built with open and clean sound emphasising mid and top, but delivering nice timely bass	33/45			BB	309
BB	Clearaudio Champion	1,365	Small, practical and good-sounding, with impressively 'dead' arm. Isolation recommended	33/45			BB	268
BB	Clearaudio Performance	1,940	Ceramic-magnetic bearing spells a surprisingly uncoloured performance. Good arm and cartridge	33/45			BB	295
EC	Clearaudio Ambient	4,220	Innovative use of materials leads to a fast, precise and thrilling sound (tonearm extra)	33/45		BB	BB	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	BB	BB	opt	276
BB	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
BB	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		BB	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		BB	opt	309
BB	Goldring GR2	265	Nicely finished Rega-manufactured deck with RB250 arm and an open, engaging sound quality	33/45			BB	266
BB	Michell Tecnodec	886	Needs careful partnering but can deliver a very sophisticated result for the money	33/45			BB	309
BB	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			BB	289
BB	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			BB	279
BB	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			BB	294
BB	Pro-Ject X-Pack	800	Combines some very strong elements (Ortofon Rondo Red) into a killer package with top sound and value	33/45			BB	309
BB	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			BB	268
BB	Rega P3-24	398	Very competent, uncoloured and musical, much improved by £148 outboard electronic power supply	33/45		opt	BB	298
BB	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
BB	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
BB	Roksan Radius 5/Nima	895	Sophisticated design with accomplished sound quality, excellent imagery and good isolation (acrylic version tested)	33/45	BB	BB		248
EC	SME Model 10A	3,411	Elegant and extremely capable design, tested here with Series V/309 hybrid arm	33/45		BB	BB	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		BB	BB	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		BB	BB	307

Our favourite BB BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

PHONO CARTRIDGES

MM and MC cartridges

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			ISSUE NUMBER
				MM	MC	REPLACEABLE STYLUS	
BB	Denon DL-103R	200	Adds refinement to basic DL-103, at a price. One of the best rock'n'roll cartridges around		BB		285
BB	Dynavector DV-10X5	250	A high-output MC with superb dynamics and fine timing that's difficult to mount, but well worth the effort		BB		307
BB	Grado Prestige Gold	110	Produces rich, open and expansive music with the minimum of fuss	BB		BB	235
BB	Ortofon Rondo Red	325	Delivers detail, power and resolution and makes a good case for its price		BB		307
BB	Ortofon Salsa	200	Despite a touch of midrange coloration, this cartridge really involves the listener with good extension and a clean, agile sound		BB		290
BB	Sumiko Blue Point Spec Evo II	239	High-output MC with refinement at high frequencies and a nimble, articulate and revealing sound		BB		270
BB	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		BB	BB	235
BB	van den Hul Conдор XCM	2,400	A stunning cartridge with stereo imaging, dynamics and detail resolution to die for		BB		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		BB	BB	253

Our favourite BB BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

PHONO STAGES

Phono stages

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				ISSUE NUMBER
				MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	AOL GAIN	AOL IMPEDANCE	
BB	Cambridge Audio 640P	60	An outrageously good bargain that suits budget systems, but can confidently survive upgrades before and after in the chain	BB	BB			305
BB	Creek OBH15	220	Practical and highly compatible unit offering fine detail and pleasing, mellow balance	BB	BB			305
BB	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	BB	BB			245
BB	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!		BB			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	BB				201
BB	Trichord Dino/Dino+	498	Relaxed yet resolute with very good image depth and natural balance, not to mention great flexibility	BB	BB	BB	BB	234

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

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

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The Rienzi in Tone Audio
2008 - Review by Jeff Dorgay

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Parsifal Ovation in Stereophile
December 2008 - Review by Sam Tellig

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RADIO TUNERS

FM and DAB hi-fi separates



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

DAB or FM?

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

Where FM scores over DAB is in the lower cost of hardware and the greater reception area. It can also provide higher sound quality if reception conditions are favourable. Sound quality judgements are muddled by listening to different forms of compression and processing at the studio for each station.

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

RECEPTION

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

TOP BUYS



Denon TU-1800DAB £250
Combines DAB with FM/AM reception and good all-round design at a tempting price.



Creek Evolution £285
Classy tuner with a sound that's detailed, cohesive and extended tonally.



T+A T1210R £1,000
This FM tuner looks, feels and sounds top-notch – great detail and imaging.



Onkyo T-4555DAB £350
A real radio bargain, this DAB/FM tuner is free from grain and tonal blemishes.

Our favourite TUNERS

FM & DAB HI-FI SEPARATES

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIGNAL STRENGTH METER	ROTARY 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
EC	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!	FM	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
RM	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					298

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									
✓	Arcam DIVA A70	500	A smart and practical amp offering good snap and pace, with natural dynamics and good detail	6	MM	●	●	60	289
✓	Adv Acoustic MAP305DA II	600	A lot of amplifier for the money and capable of revealing and exciting sound in the right company. Includes 4 digital inputs	5	●	●	●	100	300
✓	Arcam DIVA A90	850	Practical, affordable and impressively flexible amp with a laid-back approach but plenty of insight too	7	opt	●	●	100	303
✓	Cambridge Audio 640A v2	300	Slightly cheap-feeling controls are the only real downside to this powerful and lively little amp	6	●	●	●	75	279
✓	Cambridge Audio Azur 740A	500	Ticks all the boxes for bass, clarity, imaging etc. and invites the listener into the music with uncommon grace	6	●	●	●	100	294
✓	Cambridge Audio 840A v2	750	A chunky powerhouse with features aplenty, this amp revels in loud music, but also offers detail and delicacy when required	8	●	●	●	120	315
✓	Creek Audio Evolution	545	Dynamics can seem understated, but energetic bass and fatigue-free treble make it an enjoyable listen	5	opt	●	●	85	311
✓	Cyrus 6vs2	600	Spunky little amp that reproduces instrumental timbres and acoustic spaces well, with real musical involvement	7	●	●	●	40	293
✓	Denon PMA-700AE	250	One of a growing number of new low-cost amps, it offers good timing and analysis at up to moderately high volume levels	4	MM	●	●	50	284
✓	Marantz PM8003	630	Detail isn't the utmost, but great vitality makes this amplifier quite thrilling	5	MM	●	●	95	315
✓	Musical Fidelity X-T100	899	By separating amp and TRIPLE-X power supply, this deceptively powerful valve-sporting amplifier is both enticing and musical	3	●	●	●	70	288
✓	Naim Audio NAIT 5i	750	More versatile than previous Nait's, the 5i is a great all-round amplifier that offers vivid insights into all manner of music	4	●	●	●	50	305
✓	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					ISSUE NUMBER
				LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	
UP TO £1,000									
	Roksan Kandy K2	750	Superior design and high performance credentials makes this amplifier a must-have bargain	5	MM			125	315
	Unison Research Unico P	795	Sound belies indifferent measured performance with good detail, balance and flowing melodic quality	5	MM			50	293
	Vincent SV-236	999	Valve hybrid whose sound is as idiosyncratic as its styling, short on neutrality but high on sparkle	6				100	295
ABOVE £1,000									
EC	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
	Arcam A38	1,200	A winning combination of sonic virtues including highly developed detail and musicality	7	opt			105	314
	Astin Trew AT2000	1,349	If you prefer the timbral and timing qualities of music to its bone-crunching potential, then this is a serious contender	4				65	317
	Copland CTA405	2,498	A musical and involving amplifier, which also has incredible insight and is user-friendly by valve amp standards	5				50	305
	Creek Destiny	1,100	A highly assured performer that doesn't superimpose its personality on the music	6				100	286
EC	Jadis Orchestra DIP	2,995	A smooth, refined, yet dynamic-sounding tube amplifier with the added 'novelty' of an iPod dock	5				40	313
	Leema Pulse	1,195	An organic and revealing sound alongside good power reserves and superb features, including a great MM/MC phono stage	5				80	306
EC	Moon Evolution i-7	4,750	Sophisticated, with an elegant build and sound quality, very limited features, even by high-end standards	5				150	288
EC	Musical Fidelity A1008	2,999	With DAC, phono stage and built-in valve buffer, this powerhouse amp can really grab hold of a loudspeaker	4				250	295
	Mystère ia11	1,250	Small, deceptively powerful integrated valve amp with a crisp, pacy sound	4				40	302
	NAD M3	1,899	Massive and flexible, it goes very loud with fine authority and dynamic range, but lacks some sparkle	7				180	285
	Naim Audio NAIT XS	1,250	Delivers a spellbinding, refined musical performance that sets a new benchmark for all integrated amplifiers	6				60	317
EC	Naim Audio SUPERNAIT	2,400	Serious communicative ability meets convenience in this sophisticated and powerful integrated design	6				80	294
	Primare I30	1,500	A smooth, sophisticated yet agile performer, and beautifully built too	6				100	267
	Pure Sound A30	1,100	Valve integrated, with the accent on music rather than rhythm. Needs more inputs, though	3				30	298
	Sugden A21aL Series 2	1,299	Lovely solid-state Class A amplifier, sweet as a nut and more powerful than its predecessor	5	opt			21	296
EC	Unison Res. Unico Primo	1,450	Line input can be converted to phono (at extra cost). Sonically, this is an excellent mix of valve and solid state virtues	5				85	317
EC	Unison Research P70	3,495	Delightful valve amplifier with fine neutrality, sweet midband, impressive bandwidth and ample power	4				70	302
	Yamaha A-S2000	1,499	One of the few amplifiers to offer the benefit of true balanced operation at this price point	5	opt			160	309

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

Pre/power amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					ISSUE NUMBER
				PREAMPLIFIER	POWER AMPLIFIER	LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	
UP TO £2,000									
	Advance Acoustic MPP206/MA4406	900	This pair has good build and finish and a balance of qualities that's hard to beat for the price			4	opt	150	309
	Cambridge Audio Azur 840E/840W	2,000	Enterprising technology delivers a pre/power combo that always sounds detailed, composed and controlled			8	opt	200	309
	Croft Precession I/Polestar I	1,400	Compact pre/power combo with battery preamp and hybrid power, with freedom from timesmear, bass could be firmer			6		25	290
	Cyrus Pre Vs2/6 Power	1,000	Pre offers stunning resolution and feature count for the money and power is subtle, open and musical					50	290
EC	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
EC	Rotel RC-06/RB-06	598	A capable and surprisingly powerful-sounding combination which offers real value			5		70	285
	Russ Andrews HP-1/PA-1	1,198	Simply featured, but sounds appealingly realistic and solid. Highly capable in all areas design			2		50	303
ABOVE £2,000									
	Arcam C31/P38	2,050	Very civilised sound, in the best possible way. Well featured and smartly built			7	opt	100	308
	Border Patrol Control Unit	2,995	Bluff looking valve preamp, with one of the most neutral yet dynamic sounds around			5	opt		277
	Bryston BP26/3B-SST	5,300	The epitome of the iron fist in a velvet glove school of hi-fi. Dynamically superb and very detailed			8	opt	150	308
EC	Bryston BP26 DA/28 SST	5,500	Bryston's top preamp is now a serious competitor. The power amp reveals a lot of signal and serious grunt			6	opt	100	278
EC	Chord Prima/Mezzo 140	6,100	Small, muscular, beautifully made and styled and sounds like a dream			5		120	269
EC	Classé CP-700/CA-M400	13,350	Pre plus mono power combo with superb build, huge power and enormous flexibility. Sounds stunning, too			6	opt	400	293
EC	Cyrus DAC XP	2,200	A knockout DAC/pre with naturalness and resolution to die for and six digital inputs for signals up to 96kHz			2			266
	Densen Beat B-200/B310	2,300	Lively, energetic combination that bring a great sense of scale to familiar recordings			8	opt	80	276
EC	Densen Beat B-250/B-350	8,200	Upgradeable to surround, with sweet preamp and slightly coloured power amp, but sound is big and assured			6		125	270
EC	Gamut D3	3,430	Creamy smooth, yet lets you hear all the fine detail that goes to making a tonally rich, dynamically strong sound			5	opt		265
EC	Gamut D200 Mk3	3,950	A great power amp that's now even better – one of the best regardless of price					200	247
EC	Hovland HP-100/RADIA	12,745	Uncommonly musical valve/transistor hybrid transcends stereotypes, one of the genuine high achievers			9	opt	125	250
EC	Krell FPB 700cx	14,998	Reference class amplifier may represent overkill in many systems, but when no compromise is called for, this is it					700	234
EC	Marantz SC11S1/SM-11S1	5,300	Preamp and power amp duo delivers high resolution and is consistent with different loudspeaker loads			6		220	304
	Roksan Caspian M Series-1	2,245	A well-matched, powerful and enjoyable sounding amplifier combo that brings out the strengths of its CD player			5		85	307

SPECS KEY **LINE INPUTS** Input sockets for source components with a line level output: CD players, DVD players, tape decks, tuners, phono stages etc. **PHONO INPUT** Input sockets and onboard phono stage for a cartridge. Either MM (moving magnet) or MC (moving coil), occasionally both. **REMOTE CONTROL** A remote control is supplied with the amplifier. **HEADPHONE SOCKET** To drive your cans with. **POWER OUTPUT** Manufacturer's rated output in watts per channel.

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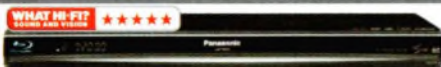
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SAVE £90

£159.95

5Yr Guarantee Only £15.95

PANASONIC DMPBD35



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ALSO DMPBD35 WITH MULTI-REGION DVD PLAYBACK £199.95

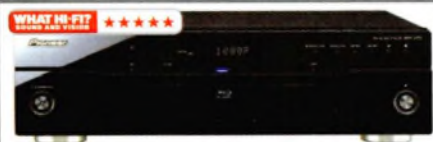
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PIONEER BDP51FD



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SONY STRDA2400



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MORDAUNT-SHORT MEZZO 6



If you're looking for a floorstanding speaker that refuses to make compromises, then you owe it to yourself to take a listen to the Mordaunt Short Mezzo 6.

Of course, it matters little how good the woofer and treble are if the cabinet can't live up to their quality. Fortunately the Mezzo 6's cabinet is more than a match. TSP £799.95

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KEF KHT2005.3



"The KEF's deliver a natural soundstage that majors on both timing and insight." - WHF? S&V magazine. TSP £799.95

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WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2008 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR DIGITAL MEDIA PLAYERS & ACCESSORIES SONOS BU150

WHF? S&V listed all the things they love about the BU150 set-up: "Compact units; easy to set up and use; sounds terrific; wireless range; Napster". Sonos have made wireless multi-room affordable AND easy.

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STEREO SPEAKERS

Speaker pairs for stereo sound



While loudspeakers are relatively straightforward in construction, they have one of the most difficult jobs in hi-fi – turning an electrical signal into an acoustic one. Most consist of two or more drive units in a box that usually has a port in it to make life easier for the cone in your mid and/or bass driver. Alternatives to this arrangement include panel speakers, which use electrostatic or ribbon technology, and horns, which use drive units in complex cabinets that greatly improve efficiency.

Box speakers are either designed to stand on the floor (floorstanders) or on a stand (stand or shelfmounts). Floorstanders have greater internal volume which can translate into greater efficiency and/or bass extension, but less substantial designs also introduce cabinet resonance and thus distortion. But they don't need stands and therefore have the aesthetic edge. Standmounts have less cabinet to vibrate and often score in terms of imaging and timing, but need good stands to work well.

Positioning

The closer the speaker is to a wall, the greater the reinforcement of bass. As all rooms differ, there's no simple formula for placement and experimentation will yield the best results. Altering the angle at which the speakers face the listener can also make a difference to balance and stereo image.

Going multichannel

Many stereo speakers can be augmented with centre and surround channels from the same brand to create a multichannel system. The most important element is a centre channel, which needs to match the stereo pair as closely as possible. For the best musical results, surrounds should be as per the front left and right channels, but if space or funds don't permit, smaller designs can be used quite effectively.



Choosing speakers

Because speakers and the rooms they are used in vary so much, choosing a pair tends to be quite subjective. To find some that will suit you, try to listen to a good variety to hear how they differ, and if possible, audition some at home. Tonal balance tends to vary the most, but is less important than more subtle factors such as timing and dynamics. Finally, listen with your ears not your eyes – great-looking speakers aren't necessarily great sounding.

Spikes

Floorstanding speakers and stands have threaded inserts for spikes that allow rigid coupling with the floor. These have the advantage of draining resonance from the speaker and giving tighter bass, but can result in more vibration getting back to the electronics and often cause the floor to resonate as well.

POWER

Though some speakers have a power rating, this isn't as informative as a rating for how difficult they are to drive, nor does it indicate wattage extremes for the partnering amp. In practice, an amplifier cannot be too powerful. Our listings quote ease of drive to indicate how much power

your amp needs to avoid a mismatch. An above-average (A+) speaker will work with amps rated at 25W plus, while an average (A) speaker will need 50W or more, and a below average (A-) speaker could require 100W plus to sound its best. These are guidelines rather than rules.

Q&A

IF SPEAKERS ARE RATED AT 75 WATTS, DOES THAT MEAN I NEED A 75 WATT AMP?

No, see the box on power for the full story.

WHICH SPEAKERS ARE BEST FOR SMALL ROOMS?

Those designed to work close to the wall will be smoother in confined spaces. Speakers that have relatively dry, tight bass will also sound better.

WHICH SPEAKERS ARE BEST FOR BIG ROOMS?

Big, efficient, easy-to-drive designs are more likely to be able to fill a room better than compact models.

DO I NEED TO BUY CENTRE AND SURROUND CHANNELS FROM THE SAME BRAND AS MY STEREO SPEAKERS?

Yes, assuming that you're wanting to create a homogenous surround sound experience, where voices don't change when they move from one channel to another.

TOP BUYS



KEF
iQ50 £489
Cute and beautifully discreet, this latest Uni-Q has attractively spacious imaging, good overall balance, a sweet treble and fine consistency.



DALI
Ikon 6 £899
Complete with a ribbon super-tweeter, this is an exceptionally capable floorstander for the money, delivering a highly detailed and truly engrossing sound.



B&W
805S £1,600
A superbly well-engineered standmount that's capable of delivering magnificent musical communication, alongside superior subtlety and delicacy.



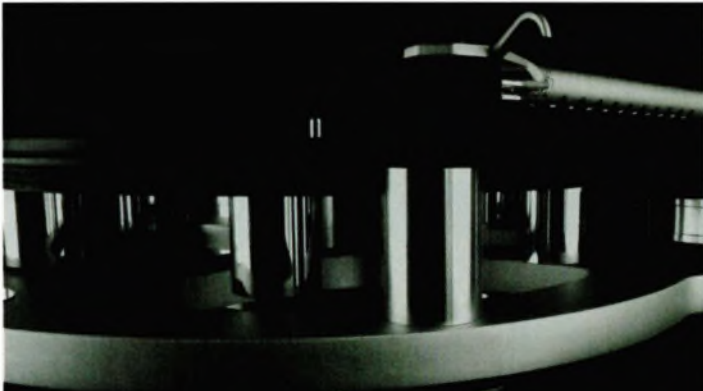
Mordaunt-Short
Performance 6LE £4,000
This extraordinary speaker stands at the pinnacle of Mordaunt-Short's current range. State of the art resolution and imaging are among its many attributes.

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

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WxHxD, CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM Hz	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000										
MB	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
MB	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
MB	Acoustic Energy Aelite 3	750	Wood-veneered all-rounder has exceptional neutrality with deep smooth bass	20,103,39		A	22			292
MB	Amphion Helium 520	1,000	Sharp styling and fine value for money with excellent voice band coherence	16,104,22	*	G	28			314
MB	Amphion Ion L	750	Sharp styling, fine mid/treble coherence and a sweet treble, but less happy bass alignment in test room	16,226,26,5		A	40			310
MB	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
MB	Auroual A1	450	Single-driver system is coloured but wonderfully coherent and very effective at communicating emotions	20,5,36,27		A	40			299
MB	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
MB	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
MB	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
MB	Bowers and Wilkins 684	699	A fine all-rounder at a realistic price, this floorstander has a smooth, even and nicely open balance	20,91,30	*	G	22			315
MB	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
MB	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
MB	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
MB	DALI Monitor 1	1,000	Beautiful miniature with advanced drivers sounds marvellously coherent with fine vocal expression	16,32,24		A	40			296
MB	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
MB	Epos M5	349	Gorgeous miniature works well close to wall. Could be smoother but communicates with authority	18,33,21		A-	40			269
MB	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
MB	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
MB	Focal Chorus 706V	369	Advanced drivers deliver a smooth, even, overall balance with healthy dynamic expression and tension	22,39,25		A	30			307
MB	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
MB	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
MB	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
MB	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
MB	KEF iQ50	489	Looks cute and very discreet, with spacious imaging, good balance, a sweet treble, but weak dynamics	17,5,81,5,26		A	23			315
MB	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
MB	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
MB	Monitor Audio BR2	200	Good looking standmount has a muscular sound with superior coherence	18,5,35,25		A-	30			294
MB	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
MB	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
MB	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
MB	PMC DB1i	625	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).



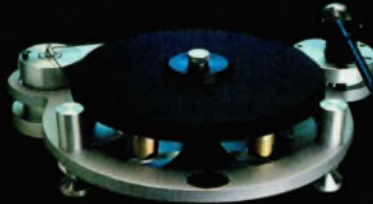
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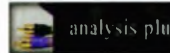


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Hi-Fi Choice Readership Survey
May 2008



Our favourite BB BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO SPEAKERS *continued*

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				SIZE (WxD) (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EDGE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM Hz	FREQUENCY	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	192,31,5,24,8		A+	65	●	309
	Spendor S3/5R	725	Lacks dynamic muscle and loudness potential, but lovely smooth neutrality and good bass extension	16,5,30,5,190		P	25	●	310
	Tannoy Revolution DC4T	599	Ultra-compact floorstander that lacks bass weight and dynamic tension, but sounds open and coherent	15,85,16	●	G	40	●	316
	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									
	Amphion Argon [®] Anniversary	1,200	Notably superior coherence and focus, fine neutrality and dynamic range with low coloration	19,38,31		A-	24	●	317
	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	24,537,31,5		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	Aurousal VS	1,650	The fine coherence and imaging of a single driver system, plus extra help at the frequency extremes	21,5,107,5,26,8	●	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
BT	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	1,695	A very clever close-to-wall standmount with fine imaging, that sounds a lot bigger than it looks	30,25,2,23,2		A	26	●	317
EC	Jamo R 907	5,500	Arguably the more 'chummy' of Jamo's dipole flagships, it offers a powerful bass and open midrange	44,118,9,7	●	A	30	●	317
	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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Our favourite BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO SPEAKERS

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				SIZE WxHxD (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREEL SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL
EC	Monitor Audio PL300	5,500	Completely new level of sophistication from a brand best known for mainstream, cost-effective designs	41,111,47	●	A-	28	●	301
EC	Mordaunt-Short Perf 6 LE	4,000	Striking moulded enclosure minimises coloration, while overall balance is smooth, neutral and open	24,115,43	●	A	22	●	308
□	Neat Elite SE	1,499	Smooth and natural performer with notably expressive midband. Fine voice articulation and unusual sweetness	20,90,18	●	A	25	●	267
□	Neat Momentum 3i	1,745	Sounds a lot bigger than it looks, with good coherence and an impressively wide dynamic range	22,38,27	●	A-	23	●	302
EC	Opera Callas	2,195	Technically innovative multi-tweeter system, this is a grown-up and articulate performer	23x37.5x34	●	B	32	●	311
□	Opera Seconda	1,525	Fine styling and finish, plus very superior voicing, if a shade lacking in warmth	24,102,5,315	●	A	20	●	314
□	PMC Wafer 2	1,650	Clever 'hang-on-wall' speaker has minimal sonic compromises. Smooth midband delivers impressive stereo imaging	33,5,57,5,10	●	A+	45	●	285
□	PMC FB1i	1,950	A floorstander that boasts impressive bass extension and a smooth sweet top end	20x100x30	●	G	20	●	311
□	PMC GB1i	1,330	Pretty little floorstander has great class with fine delicacy and sweet detailing	15,5,87,23,4	●	A	30	●	306
□	PMC OB1i	3,200	This floorstander delivers a smooth overall balance with wide bandwidth and dynamic range	20,102,5,32,5	●	A	20	●	311
EC	Quad ESL 2805	5,000	Uniquely wonderful natural realism, exceptional imaging, coherence and low level detailing	70,107,38,5	●	A-	45	●	294
□	Rega R7	1,498	Super-slim and super-smooth floorstander has fine agility with a slightly bright overall character	27,98,35	●	A	25	●	271
□	Rega R9	2,498	This subtle, laid-back but very informative performer has a very superior dynamic range, especially in the bass	17,103,39	●	A	25	●	271
EC	Revel F32	3,200	Meticulously balanced, tonally neutral design makes for a taut, well-disciplined sound	22,105,39	●	A	20	●	256
EC	Revel M22	1,800	A remarkably clean and revealing speaker with superb tonal and microdynamic capabilities	22,37,30	●	A-	48	●	274
□	Roksan Caspian FR-5	2,000	Sharp looking speaker sounds exceptionally open and lively without aggression. Could be warmer and richer	20,100,25	●	A	22	●	290
□	Ruark Talisman III	1,499	No bass demon, but a sophisticated and agile speaker epitomising Ruark's design ideals	22,84,31	●	A	22	●	259
EC	Sonus faber Cremona Audit.	2,690	Open, exciting and with surprisingly good bass... this is 'The Little Speaker That Could' (stands £575 extra)	20,35,37	●	A	50	●	305
EC	Sonus faber Minima Vintage	2,150	Easy, graceful sounding compact is a natural for acoustic material at moderate volume levels	20,33,27,5	●	A-	55	●	312
□	Spendor SP3/1R2	1,600	Conservative styling, superb neutrality and coherence with unusually low coloration	22,40,28	●	A	37	●	317
□	Tannoy Glenair 10	2,999	With a 250mm dual concentric driver this is a generously proportioned, highly engaging speaker for a good price	36,100,35	●	P	28	●	314
□	Totem Model 1 Signature	1,595	Expensive, but very seductive miniature delivers a beautifully smooth and balanced midband	17,31,23	●	A	35	●	277
□	Triangle Genese Quartet	1,995	Great material value and a solid all-round sonic performance with great loudness potential	23,117,37	●	A	25	●	302
□	Triangle Célius Esw	1,395	Not the smoothest sound around, but has great vigour and enthusiasm, plus good scale and weight	20,117,34	●	A	22	●	277
EC	Triangle Magellan Concerto	14,750	New 'sw2' version is less immediate than its predecessor, but it's easier to live with and remains highly entertaining	60,160,45	●	A-	32	●	290
□	Usher Compass CP-6381	2,500	Lots of speaker for your money, with plenty of deep bass, unusual styling and massive build	35,127,65	●	A	20	●	270
EC	Vivid Audio B1	7,750	Impressive cabinet design combined with hi-tech drivers to make truly world class speaker	27,110,38	●	A-	40	●	261
EC	Wilson Benesch ACT	8,400	Superb enclosure gives uncanny freedom from 'boxiness'. Well balanced, but top end might be sweeter	23,108,36	●	A	20	●	252
EC	Wilson Benesch Curve	5,000	Much (but not all) of the ACT's performance in a much more compact and affordable package	23,91,37	●	A	28	●	254
EC	Wharfedale Opus	1,500	Great material value and a solid, if bright and forward sound. Has great loudness potential	26,100,5,41	●	A	23	●	314
□	Yamaha Soavo 2	1,200	Cunningly crafted standmount with a beautiful balance that always sounds lively, open and involving	22,38,35	●	A	28	●	296

Our favourite BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

SUBWOOFERS

Bass speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			
				SIZE WxHxD (CM)	POWER (W)	BASS FROM (HZ)	ISSUE NUMBER
□	B&W PV1	950	Gorgeously styled sub shakes the air but not the floor, delivering a very clean sound with negligible coloration	29,34,35	500	20	259
EC	B&W ASW850	2,000	Does all the things subwoofers should do with music and movies alike, but transparently and seamlessly	53,56,52	1,000	18	246
EC	Eclipse TD725sw	2,700	Delivers solid meaningful bass, but with unusual tunefulness, speed and articulation	52,47,50	500	40	287
□	Monitor Audio ASW100	300	For the price, this compact subwoofer performs particularly well	32,32,34	120	27	225
EC	REL 305	795	Landmark mid-price sub, works particularly well with low crossover frequency, looks great too	32,36,34	300	25	284
□	REL Stampede	550	Few subs at this price match the Stampede's subtlety and ease of integration. Much more hi-fi than AV	28,40,29	100	18	257
□	REL T1	595	Standard setter at the price: flexible, easily set up and packs quite a punch	36,40,420	300	25	291
□	REL Strata 5	700	Highly musical sub that integrates well but the REL Stampede offers near-identical performance for less money	32,46,33	150	18	257
□	REL Storm III	900	Excellent sub with powerful, detailed and deep bass. Comprehensive facilities, including flexible filter adjustment	42,62,33	150	18	225
□	REL Storm 5	1,000	Well engineered, good bass depth, appropriate for mixed hi-fi & home cinema/multichannel systems	34,52,37	200	15	267
□	MartinLogan Dynamo	449	Refined, compact sub brings established MartinLogan virtues to a new price and size point	29,35,32	200	25	301
□	Velodyne SPL-800R	699	Powerful, highly configurable sub with auto setup feature and attractive, compact packaging	26,27,33	1,000	28	286
EC	Wilson Benesch Torus	5,200	Amp and sub package built like a sophisticated pile driver, with deep, state-of-the-art performance	45,33,45	1,000	10	290

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

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HEADPHONES

For your ears only



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

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

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

Getting the best from your cans

Getting a good result with headphones is not

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

Our favourite HEADPHONES

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Stereo headphones

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				3.5MM JACK ADAPTOR	ISSUE NUMBER
				ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUMAURAL	OPEN BACK		
	ACS T2	500	Earcanal earphones display an impressive midband intelligibility and a knack for digging out the detail					28	315
	AKG K1000	650	Neutral, analytical and completely out of the head sound, suitable for connection to speaker outputs only					270	244
	Audio Technica ATH-W1000	400	Superbly comfortable and very revealing. Long listening sessions are a pleasure with new musical insights					250	304
	Beyerdynamic DT770	190	A touch coloured in the mid, but less than most closed cans: detailed and with excellent bass					290	287
	Beyerdynamic DT880	230	Combines musical involvement with a high degree of analytical virtues. Very comfortable					205	312
	Denon AH-D2000	250	Among the best closed-back headphones we've heard and very fine by any standards.					350	309
	Denon AH-D5000	500	Sound is comparable with good open-back models, while isolation both inward and outward is useful					320	312
	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
	Grado GS1000	995	One of the finest transducers on the planet, with detail to die for					250	288
	Sennheiser HD595	160	Technology from upmarket HD650 model makes this a very revealing headphone that's also extremely comfortable					270	266
	Sennheiser PXC450	299	Noise-cancelling model: as good as it gets for making the most of listening in planes, trains and automobiles					240	302
	Sennheiser HD650	330	Clear and detailed, with very natural tonality through bass and midrange and just a little treble coloration					275	312
	Shure SE420	240	Expensive and no replacement for top conventional 'phones, but streets ahead of most in-ears with real refinement					15	295
	Shure E500PTH	420	Sophisticated in-ear design with three drivers, plus switchable 'voiceover' mic in the lead; high-quality stuff					20	285
	Stax SR-001 Mk II	239	Expensive and power hungry, but this electrostatic drags personal stereo into the world of high fidelity					280	268
	Stax SRS-2020 Basic Sys. II	349	Luxury option at its price, but the sound delivery is five-star quality all the way					205	295

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

Equipment Racks

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Equipment Racks

CABLES



Wires to hook your system together



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

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

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

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

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

Our favourite CABLES

Interconnects and speaker cables

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				ISSUE NUMBER	
				STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER		DIGITAL CABLE TYPE
ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS									
	Atlas Questor	70	Very open and informative at high and mid frequencies, with slightly dry bass. Imaging particularly fine	●		●			295
	Audioquest Sidewinder	45	A lively and detailed cable, with fine tonality and excellent rhythm. Slight added upper-bass warmth does little to detract	●		●			297
	Black Rhodium Prelude	80	Practical and sensibly priced all-rounder that seems happily compatible with a wide range of kit	●		●			293
	Black Rhodium Coda	150	Superb bass and excellently neutral and detailed midrange: treble generally sweet with occasional slight constriction	●		●			299
	Black Rhodium Concert	255	This DCT cable from the Polar range gives a distinctively dark timbre, rich in detail, with low subjective noise	●		●			270
	Cambridge Azur Reference	50	Performance wouldn't shame a cable at twice the price. especially adept in the treble with no trace of dryness	●		●			296
	Clearer Audio Copper-Line Alpha	50	Sounding like something a good deal dearer, this cable offers near high-end detail and seems highly compatible too	●		●			295
	Clearer Audio Silver-line	244	Complex, well-screened cable which offers good sound all round with exceptional bass – at a price!	●		●			279
	CrystalCable Piccolo	260	Thin cable, but tougher than it looks, Piccolo has some qualities of a solid core type 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 WyreWizard Dream	95	Slight lack of precision in extreme treble, otherwise detailed and neutral with authoritative bass		●	●			303
	Oehlbach NF214	63	The bass is a matter of taste, but suits many smaller speakers. Very good mid and treble	●		●			281
	Profigold PGA3000	60	Not the ultimate for lovers of clinical precision, its character is engaging and detail and extension are good	●		●			299
	Supra EFF-1X	77	Lively-sounding cable which maintains a high level of detail and neutrality. Musically, a great all-rounder	●		●			306
	Townshend Isolda DCT100	99	Sound has a particularly enjoyable cohesion and naturalness that makes for a great listener involvement			●	●		312
	van den Hul Integration Hybrid	125	Bass is nothing remarkable, but mid and treble are outstandingly open and clear. very transparent	●		●			306
	van den Hul The Wave	100	Generally neutral, with a hint of upper-bass richness: images seem to reside slightly further away than most	●		●			312
DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS									
	Atlas Compass	50	Slight improvement in detail over giveaway cables, plus distinctly more tuneful bass and more open treble, make this fine value	●				E	289
	Kimber DV-30	59	A superb performer that lacks very little, even when compared to Kimber's high-end models	●		●		E	317
	Merlin Scorpion Digital	130	Reduces distortion, making sound clear with unusually revealing low frequencies	●				E	317
	Supra AnCo	80	This cable can give a useful filip to a good transport/DAC combination, even in a high-end context	●		●		E	304
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
	OED Silver Anniversary XT	5.50	Full bass and nicely detailed treble combine with good imaging – a budget bargain	●		●			276
	OED X-Tube XT300	110	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 5 ²	45	Rather bulky and awkward, but performance amply justifies it with superb bass solidity	●		●			310

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

STANDS AND SUPPORTS

Equipment racks and speaker stands



If you want to get the most from your source and amp components, it's important to consider good quality support.

Dedicated equipment supports are racks and tables made specifically to hold hi-fi gear, and the best can have a profoundly positive

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

Our favourite BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE **EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS**

Equipment supports

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				HEIGHT (CM)	TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)	WELDED	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Alphason A5-G	399	Nice looking, very solid and practical with a pretty well balanced sound, but lacks a little detail	80	66,46		5	Glass	247
	Atacama Equinox	280	Stable, modular design with style. Excellent bass transients and a fresh design concept	81	50,50		4	Glass	217
<small>EC</small>	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	57	46,35		3	MDF	302
<small>EC</small>	Custom Design InertMatt	70	Isolation platform that can improve the sound of hi-fi components, but is a bit small for most kit		40x25			Metal	311
	Custom Design Icon Signature	330	Gorgeous wood and glass looks: sound lacks a little detail, but is nicely lively		56,37		4	Glass	286
	Custom Design XL4	380	Simple construction pays off in smart looks. Sound contribution is minimal and largely harmless		60,42		4	Glass	293
	Custom Design Milan	449	Respect is due to any stand that looks this good with nothing more to complain of than slight muddying of detail	57	48,39		4	Glass	302
<small>EC</small>	Custom Design Icon 400	600	Beautifully built, conveniently adjustable and with little sound of its own, a very classy rack	75	57,41		5	Glass	263
<small>EC</small>	Milty Foculpods	19.50	A set of four isolation pads that are amazingly useful for damping vibration and improving sound	2	5			Polymer	311
	Partington Minim	420	Adds its own character to the benefit of rock, most particularly, but slightly to the detriment of acoustic sounds	78	45,37		5	Glass	302
	Quadraspire Q4 Reference	480	Excellent performance from the school of wobbly racks. Natural sounding and plenty of detail	51.5	49,39.5		4	MDF	217
<small>EC</small>	Russ Andrews Torlyte Platform	130	This unassuming platform can be a godsend, cleaning away mid/treble muddle from the sound	8	48,36		1	Torlyte	302
	Russ Andrews Torlyte Rack	988	Attractive modular system made of very light Torlyte: a touch of added warmth is its only vice	68	54,49		4	Torlyte	240
<small>EC</small>	Townshend VSSS	1,300	The Seismic Sink goes all glassy and attractive, yet retains the same excellent vibration-killing sound quality	76	35,50		4	Glass	273

Our favourite BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE **SPEAKER STANDS**

Speaker stands

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				HEIGHT (CM)	TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)	FILLABLE	WELDED	NUMBER OF LEGS	ISSUE NUMBER
	Anvil Sound Display Stand	226	A variety of smart looks available – sound is clear and precise	50	20,17			1	293
	Custom Design SQ402	100	More a range than a model, capable of fine results especially with Acoustic Steel top plates	62	18,16.5			2	299
<small>EC</small>	Custom Design RS300	110	An attractive stand whose lack of coloration and ringing suits it to high-resolution systems	56	16,5,18			1	281
<small>EC</small>	Custom Design SQ404	200	Robust four-pillar design gives very low coloration and maximises performance of speakers great and small	61	18,16.3			4	283
<small>EC</small>	Partington Ansa 60	99	Elegant flat-packer 'disappears' sonically; restrained but neutral and coherent	62	18,15			4	232
<small>EC</small>	Partington Dreadnought BS	295	Sound is better defined in almost all areas than cheaper, slimmer stands can offer	62	17,23			5	309
<small>EC</small>	Partington Heavi II	399	Robust to the nth degree, this stand helps produce very taut, precise bass and detailed upper frequencies	53	31,22			6	287
<small>EC</small>	Russ Andrews Torlyte	299	Very relaxed sound from this metal-free design, with excellent imaging too	60,50	15,21			3	280

EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS SPECS KEY HEIGHT Of complete stand. TOP PLATE SIZE (CM) Width by depth of the supporting platform(s). Single figures indicate a square platform.

WELDED As opposed to bolt-together construction. NUMBER OF SHELVES To put your kit on (different configurations are often available). SHELF TYPE Material that shelves are made of.

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

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



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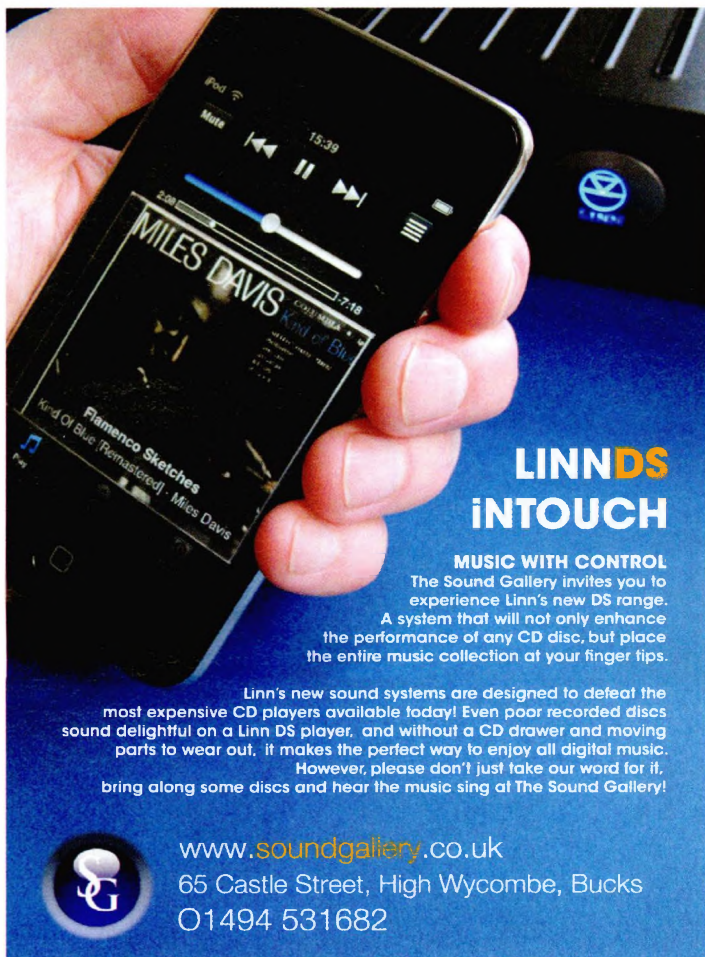
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Music - quality or quantity?

Music Compression - friend or foe?

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

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

MUSIC

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Falling Music Sales

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

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

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

Quality or Quantity?

When a friend's teenage son bought his first iPod, he was thrilled that it could store 2000 tracks. That this was at a low quality setting with a high degree of compression was not a relevant or indeed a cognitive factor. The maximum download quality for AAC is 320kbps. Most tracks are available at no better than 192kbps but many iPod users legally download at 128kbps, the most popular, or even 64kbps because either that's all that is available, or because they can store a greater number of tracks or, very often, because they're unaware of the difference. The cost is usually the same regardless. If you are jogging and using a cheap pair of in-ear headphones, you probably wouldn't greatly appreciate a high quality recording. But play back through a decent quality hi-fi and all you are doing is amplifying a very poor quality signal and the difference from, for example a full resolution CD (1.1kbps), is huge. The old maxim holds true - rubbish in, rubbish out.

The 80 Gigabyte iPod Classic is advertised as holding 20,000 songs (4MB per song). In comparison, a high quality music server will use approximately 500MB to store an

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

So where do we go from here when many hi-fi systems feature an iPod docking station as standard? The future of quality music in the home is certainly not MP3 & AAC recordings because they are not suitable as a prime listening source. That is not what the formats were designed for. Download speeds are now far faster and computer hard drive memories far larger than a few years ago when these formats came into mass usage. Discerning music lovers using downloads will be listening to studio

quality FLAC files, or their equivalent, in the near future. The quality is so far removed from MP3 that the additional cost is easily outweighed. Even CD quality recordings are left behind. Vinyl has staged a strong comeback recently because it's still immensely enjoyable to listen to. However, technology doesn't stand still and it's therefore more important than ever that you seek out a specialist hi-fi dealer to set you on the right path.

Get Expert Advice

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



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REDUCED!!! 1299</p> <p>Chord Blu Transport, ex demo mint boxed Call</p> <p>Cyrus DAD3024, excellent Due in 1499</p> <p>Esoteric SA10, ex demo nr mint 2899</p> <p>Esoteric XO3SE, ex demo nr mint 3499</p> <p>Esoteric DV60, ex demo nr mint 4499</p> <p>Esoteric X-01, nr mint boxed, absolutely stunning 4499</p> <p>Esoteric P03/Unid-03, nr mint boxed, absolutely stunning 12495</p> <p>Krell CD DSP Top loader, very stylish sweet sounding player 999</p> <p>Krell KID iPod dock ex demo 499</p> <p>Linn Karik, v late version ex boxed 499</p> <p>Linn Numerik, v late SPS version 499</p> <p>Marantz CD635e KI Signature excellent boxed 199</p> <p>Marantz CD6000 KI Signature excellent with remote 199</p> <p>Musical Fidelity NuVista CD, excellent, remote, box 999</p> <p>NAIM CDSX Due in Call</p> <p>NVA 'The Transparent Statement' - just amazing - crated, vgc 1749</p> <p>Pathos Digit, superb 1649</p> <p>Pathos Endorphin, crated ex demo unit 2999</p> <p>Primare CD31, nr mint ex demo unit 899</p> <p>Roksan Kandy L3, nr mint ex demo unit 349</p> <p>Roksan Alessa transport 399</p> <p>Shanling CD130, excellent 399</p> <p>Roksan Kandy L3, nr mint ex demo unit 349</p> <p>Shanling CDT200, excellent boxed newer model! 1999</p> <p>Shanling CDT300 Omega Drive, fully boxed and complete 1999</p> <p>Stello DP200 DAC Preamp, superb build and value 748</p> <p>Sugden SCD11 player, excellent, remote 949</p> <p>Sugden CD21, excellent, remote ex demo 949</p> <p>TEAC VRDS10, good condition, boxed remote 399</p> <p>Unison Research Unico CD, excellent Call</p> <p>Radio/Recorders</p> <p>Nakamichi CD2 recent importer service 199</p> <p>Pure 702ES, excellent multiband and DAB tuner 149</p> <p>Quad FM3 and FM4, excellent from 99</p> <p>Sony JA50ES, nr mint boxed 349</p>	<p>Loudspeakers</p> <p>Audio Magic ST-1 mk2, silver wired with stands new £5k+ Offers</p> <p>Audiovector M3 Sig, active crossovers, new £4k+, amazing Offers</p> <p>AVI Neutron IV, excellent ex demo units boxed in cherry 349</p> <p>Castle Howard S2, Mahogany 599</p> <p>B&W 805S, excellent boxed 1199</p> <p>Dynaudio 52SE, maple excellent boxed 499</p> <p>Dynaudio Audience 8 Floorstanders nr mint bargain Due in</p> <p>Kudos Cardea C20 excellent boxed, owner upgraded to 30s 1749</p> <p>Linn Keilich, passive, nr mint late versions, with Ku Stone 349</p> <p>boxed 3999</p> <p>Martin Logan Vantage, nr mint 1999</p> <p>Martin Logan Purity, ex demo, for details 5499</p> <p>Martin Logan Summit, ex demo slight mark, BARGAIN! 5499</p> <p>Meridian DSP5000, excellent 1199</p> <p>Mission 752, fair, boxed 199</p> <p>Monitor Audio RS8, ex demo 549</p> <p>Monitor Audio CS10, excellent, BARGAIN 599</p> <p>Monitor Audio Radius 270, ex demo 299</p> <p>Proac Response ISC, excellent boxed 699</p> <p>Proac D15, vgc boxed 899</p> <p>NEAT Motive ex demo, excellent Call</p> <p>Opera Callas nr mint ex demo boxed 1699</p> <p>Opera mini, with dedicated stands 499</p> <p>Peak Consult Princess Signature inc Stands, nr mint boxed 2499</p> <p>Q Acoustics 10D AV 5.1 speaker package, as new black 399</p> <p>Quad 211, in Maple, excellent 349</p> <p>Quad ESL989, excellent boxed BARGAIN! 1999</p> <p>Reqa Ela, originals in black 149</p> <p>Tannoy Music 5 (New RW45), brand new cancelled order! 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2nd-hand shootout

Second-hand budget phono stages

The idea behind this quartet of budget phono stages is to provide a half decent second-hand alternative to a super-cheapie new one. All should be sub-£100, with one of the models being available for as little as £25 – true budget territory!

Our first phono stage benefits from a something of a minor cult following. Launched in 1994, the Rotel RQ970BX was an instant hit, with good reviews for its value and upgrade potential. It lived a long life (until 2001) and even today Rotel have considered launching a MkII version: alas, demand has never proved to be quite strong enough. Although it only cost £165 new at most, the Rotel looks the most expensive here. It's the only one to benefit from a full-size casing. Like most phono stages, the RQ970BX is a straightforward design. It has good quality components fixed together in the conventional manner, with no surface mount technology. This not only makes it reliable and easy to fix but also highly tweakable. Be careful buying second-hand, though, as some upgrades will have been carried out more successfully than others. Rotel told us that not all parts are available now with the low noise parts particularly hard to source. They went on to say that the MM/MC switch should be checked for signs of poor connection and that the phono sockets can become contaminated over time; nothing serious here and easy to check. This fine sounding phono stage, with the potential to sound even better, is available second-hand from around £50 to £75.

The compact Creek OBH15 is typical of the breed. No larger than it need be and with the power supply separate from the electronics. Creek has a long history of quality phono stages and the OBH15 is arguably the best sounding here. Like the others, the Creek is switchable between MM and MC. It's worth noting that a special, high-gain MC version was also available for low output MC cartridges. But, if you're buying one then make

sure you get the version best suited to your cartridge. Now four years old, Creek reported no issues with the design and confirmed that all parts were still available. One important thing to check is the power supply. The OBH15 should come with a regulated power supply called the OBH2. The unregulated OBH1 will also work with the phono stage, but won't sound as good – check you're not palmed off with the lesser power supply. Costing around £220 new, this fine quality phono stage is now available second-hand for £100.

At first, the range of Musical Fidelity X-LP phono stages can seem rather confusing. Over the years there have been five models that break down as follows. Launched in 1997, the original X-LP is now something of a second-hand bargain. Although it used the memorable "tube" casing it was not in fact valve driven like the similarly encased X-10D. Like the Rotel not all parts are available now,

“...some upgrades will have been carried out more successfully than others.”

although this shouldn't be a problem as the MM/MC switch is reliable and the electronics of good quality. It's not, perhaps, the best sounding phono stage here, but given that we saw one for £25, certainly the biggest bargain. Ignoring the X-LP2 monoblock stage, as it's too expensive for this test, the next in line was the X-LPS. This offers a substantial sonic improvement over the earlier X-LP, while keeping its ribbed-barrel good looks. Cosmetic parts are tricky for this one, but electronics should be fine. Look at paying £50-£75 for one of these. The X-LPSv3 sounded pretty

been banned under European RoHS regulations. For this reason servicing can't be guaranteed without changing the sound quality to some extent. Having said that, this is an extremely musical phono stage and one well-worth taking a chance on. We found one for sale at just £55 – not bad when a new ZSE costs over £200. Well worth seeking out is the PSU1-24 power supply (around £160 new). This works with all Gram Amp phono stages and gives useful improvements in terms of noise, dynamics and sound-staging. If you see one for under £75 then snap it up; it will transform the sound of your Gram Amp.

These are four great phono stages with excellent reputations and they are all available for little more than your typical "Maplins-Shack" special. Budget hi-fi doesn't come much sweeter than this. **HFC**

Dominic Todd

Next month: £1,000 CD players



Pictured: The compact Creek OBH-15

similar to the X-LPS, but came in a more conventional casing. This is still fully supported and has only relatively recently been replaced by the X-LPS V8. The v3 easily rivals the OBH15 and, like that phono stage, can be had for upwards of £100.

The Graham Slee Gram Amp 2 is a hand-built phono stage that has also earned much respect, with the basic design still used in today's Gram Amp 2SE. As with many other classic hi-fi products, some of the components used in the original Gram Amp 2 have now



Pictured: The straightforward design of the Rotel RQ970BX

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ACURUS (MONDIAL) RL11

preamp, black with aluminium dials, superb sound, excellent condition, with remote, (£700) £265. 07725 072878 (Leics).

ARCAM A85 amp, £350.

Arcam P85 amp, £300. Arcam CD93 CD player, £350. PMC TB2+ loudspeakers, £350. All approximately three years old, but not used much due to working away. All mint condition, boxed with original packing, manuals, remotes. Buyer collects. 02392 257626 (Hants).

ARCAM ALPHA 7 CD player,

£85. Rotel RA971 Mk2 amplifier, £95. Castle Durham 3 speakers, £175. Dynaudio Audience 42 speakers, brand new, £300. All boxed. 07900 866232 (Yorks).

ARCAM CD73 CD player,

black. Arcam A80 amp, black. Both boxed and in mint condition, £200 each. Buyer collects. Please phone after 5pm. 01384 897009 (W. Mids).

ARCAM FMJ A22 amp

with phono board, £350. Arcam FMJ CD 23 CD player, £350. Arcam FMJ T21 tuner, £100. Linn Sondek LP12, £400. Rack, £25.

peter@brookes.org.uk or 07966 086593 (W. Mids)

AUDIO RESEARCH REF3

(£8,500), £5,500. Nordost Valhalla power cords (£1,924), £1,200. 5m speaker cable (£9,500), £4,900. 7m interconnects, XLR (£6,999), £3,900. 1m XLR, 1m RCA (£2,595), £1,290 each. 01797 253073 (Sussex).

B&W 703 loudspeakers, maple finish. Slight damage to cabinet, otherwise excellent. Two years

old, £800. Serious offers.

07943 164393 (Kent).

BENCHMARK DAC1

under 12 months old, bought DAC pre, £390. Chord Signature Digital cable, RCA-BNC, 1m, £90. 01752 773369 (Devon).

BOSE ACOUSTIMASS

series 5 subwoofer and two satellite speakers with all wiring, excellent condition, £300 ono. 0115 854 9677 (Notts).

BOWERS & WILKINS 802D

Diamond loudspeakers, rosenut finish, mint condition, boxed, £5,350. Musical Fidelity, Trivistor 300 hybrid integrated amplifier, 300 watts/channel, mint, boxed, new valves, £1,350. Or £6,200 the pair. 07859 388167 (SE London).

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR

640A amp and 640C v2 CD player, good condition, £160 the pair. Also Yamaha RX-V420RDS AV receiver, £80.

07900 243100 (Lancashire).

CHORD MAINS CABLE

1.5m long, (£160) £75. Apollo Olympus speaker stands with Atacama Atabytes, (£85) £35. 07868 175364 (W. Mids).

CHROME MAXELL UDIICD

cassette tapes if you still record! Two sealed packs of five 90 minute tapes. 01661 823606 (Northumberland).

CREEK OBH-21SE

headphone amp, £100, Sennheiser HD 600 headphones, £90. All fine condition, will demo, no offers. 01483 892955 (Surrey).

CYRUS CDXT

silver, boxed, as new, can demo, £315 ono. 07766 415325 (W. Mids).

CYRUS PRE X

preamplifier £350. Marantz PM66SE K1 Signature amplifier, £175. 01977 609839 (W. Yorks)

DALI IKON 7

floorstanders. Hi-Fi Choice Best Buy, mint, hardly used, (£1,000) £550. 07896 348829 (Surrey).

DENON AVR-2106

home cinema receiver, with remote and manual, £170.

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S30 loudspeakers,

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(London).



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

LINN KATAN Speakers in piano lacquer white, six months old, still boxed plus corresponding Linn stands. In superb condition, not suitable around young children, hence sale, £500. 01932 849553 (Surrey).

LINN LK289 power amplifier, more musical than 85/100/140. Excellent condition, Linn box, bargain, £240. Nottingham Analogue Spacedeck with Incognito Rega arm/Tecnoweight plus AT110E cartridge, excellent condition, original boxes, £765. 01243 863371 (Sussex)

MARANTZ PM7200 amp, little used, but run in, excellent condition. Class A and A+B, £220 ovno. Marantz PM66SE amp, excellent condition, full working order, hardly run in, £80. Yamaha KX393 stereo cassette player (as new), a brilliant piece of kit, £80 ovno. 01685 350176 (Merthyr Tydfil).

MARANTZ SA15II SACD player, £499. Pioneer PDS801 CD player, £99. Albany S508 power amplifier, £250. Mordaunt-Short Pageant speakers, £99. All mint, can demonstrate. 07708 431963 (Cheshire).

MERIDIAN 566 24-bit DAC £450, 502 preamp £500, 557 power, £600, Ruark Prologue One speakers, £450, Audiophile Base 3, £450. All pristine. £2,000 for everything. 01392 444182 timiambeing@yahoo.co.uk (Exeter).

MISSION M25AS active subwoofer, ash black, phase

control. 250mm front-ported driver, 100 watts, mint condition, £90 o.n.o 07814 633624 (Leics).

MONITOR AUDIO GR10 loudspeakers, boxed with free cables, £400. 01224 321419 (Aberdeen).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A3²⁴ DAC, silver, mint, boxed, (£800) £250. Chord Chorus interconnect, half-metre, £100. 07854 160942 (Lancs).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A5 CD player, as new, mint condition, low usage, upgrading to SACD, (£1,500) £800. No offers. 01268 415017 (Essex)

MUSICAL FIDELITY A300 amplifier, mint, boxed, 150 wpc. £1,400 new. Will accept £450. Bargain, no offers, buyer collects, upgrading. 01446 741825 (S Wales)

NAIM ALLAE speakers in maple, unmarked and in very good condition with boxes, £895. Naim CDX, includes remote and packaging, £895. 01276 503994 or andyuk777@yahoo.co.uk (Surrey).

NAIM NAC 112 preamp, £269. Naim Arriva floorstanding speakers, cherry finish, 2005, £495. Chord Anthem 2 interconnects, RCA factory termination 0.5m, £109. Odyssey 2 loudspeaker cables 3m unterminated, £45. 01984 640588 (Somerset).

NAIM SUPERNAIT amplifier, boxed, as new, (£2,350), £1,200. Naim Powercord, 2m, (£350) £180. 01491 614325 (Oxon)

PMC OB1 speakers, four months old, brand new, still in boxes, light oak, (£2,850) £1,500. Quick sale, inc three year warranty. Bargain. 07920 124888 (London).

REGA PLANAR 3 turntables (two) with Ortofon cartridges, £140 each. NAD C350 integrated amp, £90. Yamaha KX 393 cassette deck, £30. All excellent condition. 01942 492889 (Lancs)

ROKSAN KANDY L111 amplifier, 18 months old, perfect, £325. No offers. 01205 724191 (Lincs)

RUARK TEMPLAR MK2 loudspeakers, rosewood, immaculate, (£626) £199 Bargain. 01702 556116 (Essex).

SAP RELAXA 1 magnetic equipment support, two available, floating platform gives total isolation from external vibration to greatly improve performance of turntables, CD, DVD players etc. £200 each. 07734 850600 or pcaveller@yahoo.com (Gloucs).

70 LYRITA LPs, unplayed, so as new, £350, also Cogan Hall loudspeaker cable, £75. 02392 453382. (Hants)

SICK KRELL 300 CD player with CD drawer stuck closed, otherwise in excellent condition. Does anybody fancy taking it on? Any offers? 01359 259152 (Suffolk).

STANDESIGN FIVE-LEVEL equipment rack with cable management, black finish, offered in excellent condition, boxed, £250 new, urgent space

required, hence silly price, £50. 01934 521621 or stemar1@tiscali.co.uk (Somerset).

SUGDEN CD21 great analogue sounding CD player, excellent condition, £495.

Arcam AVR300 surround sound receiver in silver, as new, £475. 01403 711778 or 07813 367409 (West Sussex)

TANNOY MERCURY MX3 floorstanders, maple, £95. Ion Obelisk 3 amp, black, £110. Both excellent condition. 01925 470619 (Cheshire).

TOWNSHEND SPEAKER cable 3m (£310), £180. Kimber KCAG interconnect (£416), offers. MIT Z cord 2 power cables 1.5m x2, £70. Monster Cable 300², four pairs and one pair 400², £12 each + p&p. Stratos 3 (£110), £35. Six-tier equipment support, oak. Offers. All ono. 0115 912 6424 (Notts)

UNISON RESEARCH hybrid valve equipment; 'Unico' Secondo, 120 watts per channel integrated amplifier, £780. 'Unico' FM/AM RDS tuner, £475. Opera Seconda speakers, stunning design, cherry finish, £825. All half price. Chord Rumour 4 bi-wire speaker cable 2x9m, (£430) £180. 023 8073 8935 (Hants)

WANTED: Chord Odyssey 2 speaker cable 2x3m, with silicon jacket and Chord plugs. Also wanted, PMC DB1 speaker wall brackets. 01234 302769 or 07840 428253 (Bedford). **WANTED:** Kenwood KD 750 or L-07D turntables, Yamaha NS 2000 and Sonus Faber Electa loudspeakers. + 32 (0)16 62247, +32 (0)494 190796 (Belgium).

WANTED: Good-quality record deck/turntable, Garrard or Thorens, tonearm and cartridge, valve amplifier and speakers from 1960s onwards. 01726 812966 (Cornwall).

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)

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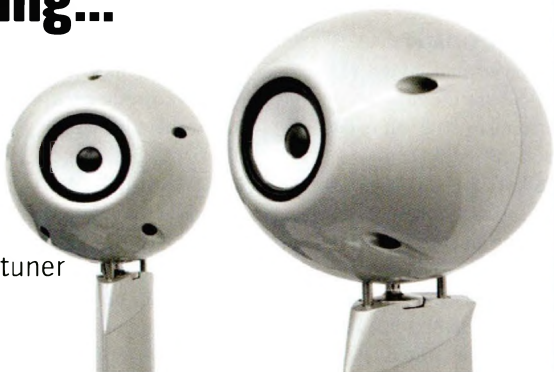
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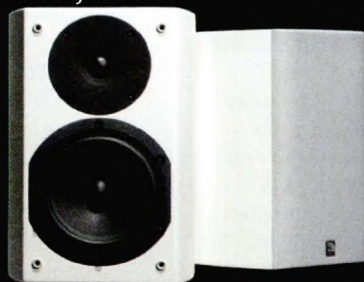
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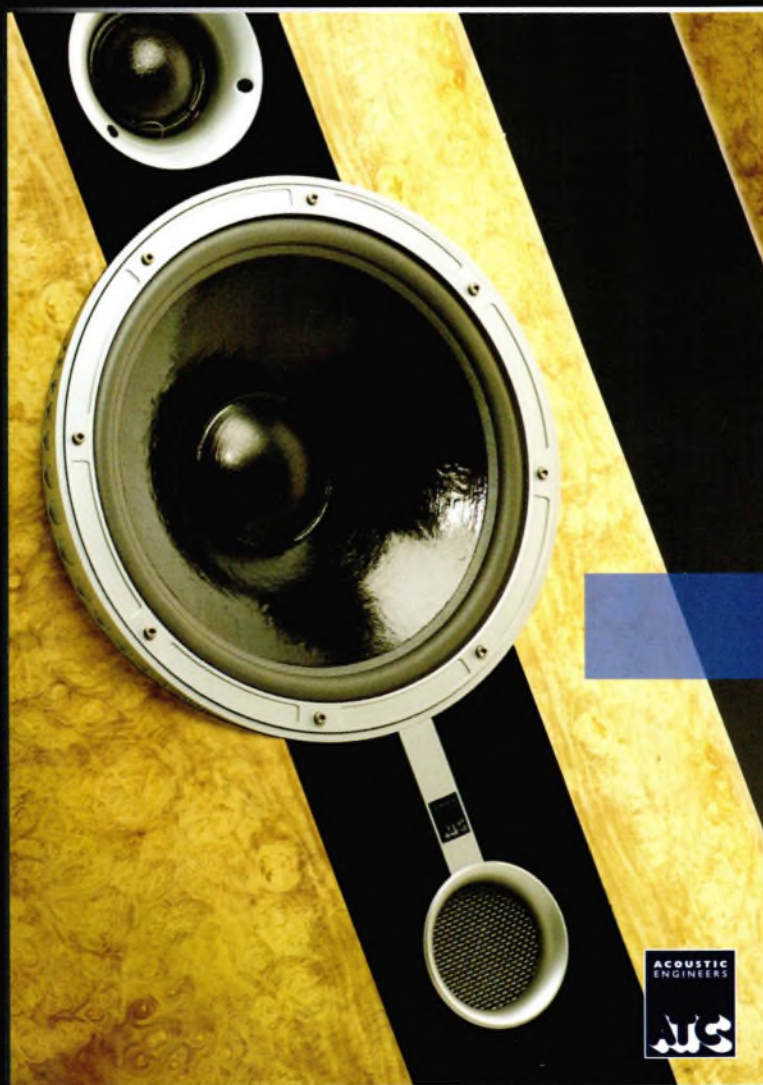
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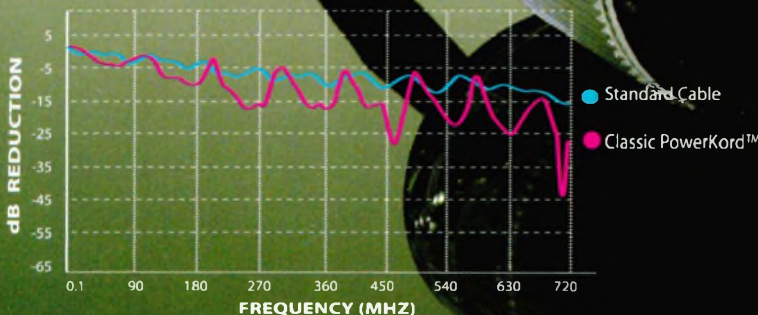
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