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POWERPLANT: is the integrated amplifier: a 480 Watt at 4 Ohms powerhouse, with the unique T+A switch-mode out-put stages.



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T+A is "brand of the year 2009" as awarded by Audio, Stereoplay & Video Homevision magazines.



WELCOME...

HI-FI CHOICE JUNE 2009 ISSUE 320

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



HFC's resident super-tweaker Jimmy Hughes was in heaven this month, when he took the call asking if he'd like to review the £115,000 Continuum Caliburn turntable – the Bugatti Veyron of the turntable world, with price to match! This incredible piece of engineering is, we think, the best possible way to enjoy your record collection and although most of us,

myself included, will likely never own one, Jimmy is here to tell us every bit about its performance and what it can do for your vinyl. Coincidentally, and at the opposite end of the scale, there's another Australian turntable in this issue. Max Townshend's £1,500 Rock 7 is an affordable masterpiece for the real world. Both reviews make fascinating reading this month for analogue lovers. Enjoy.

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.

Because our 0% Finance* and Buy Now Pay Later* Schemes have been so popular, we thought we'd put together a booklet to tell you more! It features the top 75 favourite products bought by customers using our two very affordable purchase schemes... download your copy from our web site today.



Bryston 7B SST Monoblocks (pair)

The 7B SST is a MONO block design capable of over 600 watts at 8 ohms and over 900 watts at 4 ohms. This gives the 7B ST the power to drive, with breath-taking ease and clarity, speakers, which have been considered "impossible" loads in the past.

0% Deal*: Dep: £800 + £200.00 for 36 months



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



Wilson Benesch ACT

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



McIntosh MA7000

Designed to deliver a continuous 250 watts per channel, the MA7000 Integrated Amplifier is the most powerful integrated amplifier McIntosh has ever offered.

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



Dac 1 mk 4 not shown

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

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

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Bel Canto CD-2

The shortest path to sonic purity. The CD-2 provides uncompromising playback of your treasured CD collection. Using the CD-Pro2M professional top loading CD mechanism as the core of the design, the CD-2 provides the best access to the source of digital music both in audio data retrieval and mechanical reliability.

0% Deal*: Dep: £269 + £202.50 for 12 months



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



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2 Special NEW Products from

MUSICAL FIDELITY



0%*

Musical Fidelity Primo (NEW) Valve Preamplifier

MF have been developing the Primo for the last twelve years. The Primo is a zero feedback, pure Class A triode, fully balanced design with superlative technical performance.

Considering that the Primo has no overall feedback its distortion is incredibly low at 0.0035% from 10Hz to 50kHz. Its noise ratio of -119dBa is equally exceptional. And then you realise this is done with tubes and zero feedback. It's quite something!

Musical Fidelity have gone all out to make the best preamp possible and that is the Primo...

0% Deal*: Dep: £790 + £197.50 for 36 months



0%*

Musical Fidelity TiTAN (NEW) Power amplifier

The Titan is fully balanced from beginning to end. It has both single ended and balanced inputs. Its power is 1kW into 8 Ohms, 2 kW into 4 Ohms and a whisker under 4kW into 2 Ohms. Its technical performance is remarkable. It has less than 0.01% distortion from 10Hz to 50kHz. Even at 100kHz distortion is hovering around 1%. The noise ratio is exemplary. The Titan is one of the quietest power amps ever made.

Limited to just 50 pieces world-wide, the TiTAN is the finest power amplifier ever made by Musical Fidelity. Place your order early so as not to be disappointed...

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



The NEW reference – The PMC IB2, MB2 & BB5 join the ranks of the / series range

The astoundingly successful /series upgrade package has been applied to all three models and includes the stunning PMC/SEAS[®] SONOLEX™ domed tweeter unit and dispersion plate that provides the signature pin point imaging and delicately natural open top end. All three models feature PMC's massively engineered soft dome mid range unit and newly modified thirty two element, twenty four dB per octave, /series crossover. The sonic integration and dispersion is improved creating an even larger soundstage in all planes. The presentation of delicate nuances is delivered with the utmost subtlety with strident dynamics handled like no other loudspeaker range can. The sheer sense of scale, detail and dynamics of these larger /series models is truly awe inspiring.

All three models have been based on professionally proven models that are currently serving at Emil Berliner / Deutsche Grammophon, Stevie Wonder's Wonderland Studios, Kraftwerk' Kling Klang facility and many more world renowned music makers or broadcasters worldwide.

0% Finance Deals*: available
on all PMC Models. Please call
or email for details.

*subject to status †subject to conditions



ART Moderne Range (NEW)

Although diminutive in size, the Moderne range delivers a sound that belies its stature. The soundstage is vast with breathtaking clarity and its perfect for the confines of city living and truly magical in the intimate small hours. Hear your music as it was meant to sound, forget hearing what's in the recording, and start enjoying the performance. Very special speakers in every respect...

Moderne 4

0% Deal*: Dep: £195 +
£146.25 for 12 months

Moderne 6

0% Deal*: Dep: £240 +
£90 for 24 months

Moderne 8

0% Deal*: Dep: £300 +
£112.50 for 24 months

Moderne 10

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



0%*

Marantz SA-751

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%*

McIntosh MXA-60 (NEW)

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*



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BUYER'S BIBLE

Ultimate guide to high-performance hi-fi, gathering together all our favourite products for you. Updated monthly...

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FURUTECH

Pure Transmission Technology

The Evolution II Cable Line **NEW**



Evolution Power UK



Evolution Audio II (RCA)



Evolution Audio II (XLR)



Evolution Speaker II

Pure Transmission Performance for value conscious audiophiles

Featuring resonance - damping cable clamps and
PVC/Carbon powder dielectric



"... 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



Ag-12 (DIN/RCA)



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



Ag-12-R4 (RCA/RCA)



"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."

--- Mare Mickelson, Soundstage.com Reviews Choice Award

CF Series **NEW**



CF-102 (R)



CF-201 (R)



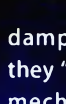
CF-202 (R)

"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.



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

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Firgrove Road, Cross in Hand,
Nr Heathfield, East Sussex TN21 0QR
Tel: +44(0) 1435 867 438
www.metropolis-music.co.uk



PSB IMAGINE



Affordable new PSBs in the Synchrony mould

Canada's PSB loudspeakers has introduced a new line-up called Imagine, which it claims offers the build quality associated with its Synchrony series at a more affordable price point. PSB's chief designer Paul Barton said: "It would be almost criminally misleading to dismiss the Imagine as 'Synchrony Junior,' but we freely acknowledge that a good deal of what we learned over Synchrony's three-year development, particularly in cabinet design and manufacture, empowered the Imagine concept and execution and has thus enabled us to complete its development in far less time." This might sound like marketing speak, but as Paul Messenger found with the Synchrony One in the April issue (*HFC* 318), PSB certainly can deliver on its promises when the budget is sufficient.

The Imagine range speakers share common drive units, the biggest of which is a 135mm clay/ceramic-filled polypropylene woofer – its yellow finish somewhat reminiscent of Bowers & Wilkins' Kevlar cones. High frequencies are delivered by a 25mm titanium-dome tweeter. These are housed in 1.5inch-thick cabinets that boast compound curves on every vertical surface and heavy internal bracing, an approach that should lead to high stiffness and reduced internal reflections. It also makes for a domestically acceptable exterior when combined with the "cathedral" matched veneers in black ash or dark cherry wood.

Heading the line-up is the Imagine T tower (£1,200), a two-and-a-half-way floorstander that's 945mm high and weighs in at 18.5kg. At this price, it's set to compete against *HFC* favourites such as Tannoy's DC6T and PMC's GB1i. The Imagine B (£600) is a two-way bookshelf design that, like the rest of the range, has a low four ohm impedance – making it slightly harder to drive than the 87dB sensitivity figure would suggest. Flushed with success from the April issue, we're sure PSB would be more than happy to pitch one of these new models against the establishment in an upcoming *Ultimate Group Test*.

Price (Imagine B) £600; (Imagine T) £1,200 **Due now**

☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.psb speakers.com



Definition

HIGH END 2009
THE BEST SOUND - THE BEST VISION

21-24 MAY 09 M.O.C. MUNICH
ROOM D112, ATRIUM 3



Definition is an outstanding new range of audiophile loudspeakers from Tannoy. Designed to get the very best from stereo music in the home, Definition distils and refines Tannoy's eight decades of loudspeaker expertise into a design of unrivalled performance value and stunning aesthetics.

Defining the art of sound

The three strong range features the very latest Tannoy Dual Concentric™ drivers with WideBand™ tweeter technology, innovative ply-wood cabinets and revolutionary Deep Cryogenically Treated crossovers. Capturing the fundamental dynamics of music yet majoring on the finest instrumental detail, Definition defines the art of sound.

tannoy.com

TANNOY

TANNOY DEFINITION

The 1990s are back in fashion

Tannoy has launched a new range of Definition loudspeakers, following the range's original debut back in 1993. The new line-up sits between Tannoy's Revolution and Dimension models in the portfolio and covers a wide range of price points. The only similarity between the 1990's versions and 2009's is the use of dual concentric (DC) drivers with matching bass units, but in all other respects, this is a completely new range.

The series consists of three new models, all based around the latest evolution of Tannoy's dual concentric drive units. The DC8 standmount (£2,499) has a single 200mm DC driver, while the floorstanding DC8T (£3,999) combines the unit with a bass driver of the same diameter. Topping the range is the DC10T (£4,999) with a 250mm DC unit and bass driver.

The latest iteration of the DC driver features a tweeter with an ultra-rigid titanium-dome, backed by a pure neodymium magnet assembly which is rigidly coupled to the rear of the acoustic cavity. The tweeter sits at the centre of a multi-fibre low-frequency cone in an attempt to provide optimal time coherence from a point source. By using a trapezoid shape and parabolic curves the company has attempted to minimise resonance and internal reflections. The drive units are fixed in place using a lossy coupling called Differential Material Technology (DMT), this is designed to damp the system and minimise resonance.

One pretty radical aspect to this range is the fact that the crossovers are given deep cryogenic treatment (DCT), something we've seen on cables in the past but not on whole crossovers. This process involves super-cooling to -190C and then slowly thawing; the result being a permanent reduction of internal stresses within the components, according to Tannoy. The cabling used in the Definition range is silver-plated oxygen free copper, which connects the crossover to WBT binding posts. In true Tannoy style the bi-wire terminals incorporate a fifth terminal with which you can ground the driver chassis to reduce potential RF interference.

Price from £2,499 **Due** now ☎ 01236 420199

🌐 www.tannoy.co.uk





CONSONANCE CYBER-880A

By using four 2A3 triode valves per channel, Consonance claims that its new Cyber-880A power amplifier can deliver 30 watts per channel. Whilst not a terribly impressive figure on its own, it's unusual to find a parallel push-pull amplifier using this classic valve. According to Consonance, you don't need to worry about having valve-friendly speakers as this amp, 'can handle anything'.

The 2A3s are combined with a low- μ octal driver to produce "an amazing amount of musical clarity". The case – in hand-finished aluminium with a silver metallic lacquer – also includes a hardwood top plate over the transformers. Bias can be manually adjusted using the meter behind the valves to keep the eight output tubes operating optimally.

Price £2,895 **Due now** ☎ 01273 325901 🌐 www.aliumaudio.com

CABASSE ALTURA MC

French speaker specialist Cabasse has added two models to its Altura MC series, both featuring the company's trademark Spatially Coherent System (SCS) coaxial mid-treble drive units. SCS is said to solve the problem of achieving a point source from multiple driver loudspeakers. In this case, Cabasse has used its twenty years of experience in producing SCS drivers to make the BC-13 two-way unit for the new Egea 3 and Iroise 3 models. The BC-13 is 120mm in diameter and has a 27mm Kaladex tweeter at its centre – the external ring forming the midband driver. The unit boasts a 900Hz to 23kHz range.

In the Egea 3 (£2,700) the unit is augmented by two 170mm Duocell bass units in a 111cm tall, 30kg cabinet. The Iroise 3 (£3,400) houses a pair of 210mm bass units alongside the BC-13 in a 116cm tall cabinet, that's five kilos heavier and 3dB more sensitive at an impressive 93dB.

Price from £2,700 **Due now**

☎ +33 298 05 88 12

🌐 www.cabasse.com



TRINNOV OPTIMIZER ST

Trinnov Audio, the French digital audio expert, has produced a room acoustics optimiser called the Optimizer ST. It uses something the company calls a digital acoustics engine to combine, "automatic and manual room equalization with impulse response measurements and cutting-edge time-frequency analysis." As well as room EQ features, such as target curves and phase optimisation, the Optimizer ST offers volume control, source selection and crossovers, making it an unusually well-equipped preamplifier and DAC.

The unit's automatic crossover alignment function is designed for precise bass management in systems with a subwoofer – usually multichannel systems for home cinema. Connections have a distinctly pro-audio bent, with analogue in and outputs in balanced XLR form only. There are also two digital inputs in AES/EBU, optical and coaxial forms. Two processing channels operate at 96kHz/64-bit using floating point processing.

Price €2,950+VAT **Due now** ☎ +33 1 47 06 61 37

🌐 www.trinnov.com





MARANTZ M-CR502

➤ Marantz has launched a new mini-sized all-in-one hi-fi system to rival Denon and Onkyo. The M-CR502 CD DAB receiver combines compact dimensions with good looks and (hopefully) matching sound quality. The one-boxer packs 'two mighty' 25-watt digital amplifiers that are said to have 'bi-amping possibilities' and can even be diverted to speakers in another room. A subwoofer output feature also allows the use of an active sub.

Its CD drive is compatible with CD-R/RW discs, as well as those encoded in MP3 and WMA and the DAB/FM/AM tuner section offers 50 presets. The system has a mini-jack input on the front panel enabling the use of portable music players, plus Marantz also offers users a choice of two iPod docks as add-on extras. Further features include a front-facing USB port, alarm clock with sleep functions and a headphone output for late-night listening.

Price £500 **Due now** ☎ 01753 680868 🌐 www.marantz.com

HARMAN KARDON HD/HK 990

➤ Harman Kardon has produced its most powerful amplifier yet. The HK 990 integrated (£1,000) is rated at 150 watts into eight ohms and combines analogue and digital inputs to provide a power source of considerable flexibility. Harman Kardon calls it a 2.2 channel amp, because it has two subwoofer outputs for those after maximum firepower. Features include four digital inputs, two optical, two coaxial, plus clock synchronisation for compatible CD players. On the analogue side, there are six line inputs, two phono inputs (MM/MC) and two XLR balanced inputs.

Harman has also introduced a matching CD player, which uses the same clock synchronisation system as described in the amp. The HD 990 has twin Analogue Devices DA converters and fourth-generation Real Time Linear Smoothing, said to create 'a spacious, richly detailed sound'. The player upsamples to 24-bit/384kHz, uses a 32-bit DSP to minimise distortion and offers true balanced outputs alongside the single-ended variety.



Price £1,000 (HK 990), £500 (HD 990) **Due now** ☎ 01707 278100 🌐 www.harman.com

SCANDYNA RANGE

➤ Armour Home Electronics is bringing in the Scandyna range of loudspeakers and electronics. Included in the range is the Minipod speaker, designed in the UK by Blueroom and once a common site on The Big Breakfast TV show. It was originally made by Bowers & Wilkins in glass fibre, but since 1996 has been built by Scandyna in ABS. Today, Scandyna has a wide range of speakers and iPod-related electronics, including the £299 V Dock that comes with a pair of Micropods, plus the particularly curvy The Drop model (pictured), which can be hung from the ceiling. The range comes in a variety of colours including black, white and the HFC art ed's favourite, pink.

Price from £289 (without V Dock) **Due now**

☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.podspeakers.com



Soundbites

THE CHORD COMPANY's new entry-level SuperScreen mains cable takes a radical approach to termination with a moulded mains plug. By paying attention to the way the wiring was laid out within the plug, Chord discovered that moulded plugs can actually sound better than conventional varieties. SuperScreen has contra-rotated overlapped dual foil shields and it costs £85 for a one-metre cable.

☎ 01980 625700

IXOS has an entry-level mains cable, the XHP425-150, priced at £60 for a 1.5 metre length. It uses braid shielding and tightly wound twisted pairs to keep out RF and EM (electromagnetic) interference. Pure crystal OFC conductors are connected to gold-plated plugs for optimum results.

☎ 01844 219 000

GRADO has upgraded its long-standing SR60 headphones to SR60i status. It now has an upgraded driver design and the mass distribution in the plastic housing has been enlarged and optimised. The £100 SR60i is said to offer improved control across frequency spectrum.

☎ 01279 501111

DENON's Fourth Generation Link offers HDMI without jitter. By adding Denon Flow Control to an HDMI interface, Denon Link takes over the master clock and jitter control, allowing the DAC in the processor to share its clock with a DVD or Blu-ray player. Current reference-class AVP- and AVC-A1HDA products can be upgraded for free over the internet.

☎ 01753 680568

AVID the turntable specialist has produced an alignment gauge for cartridge set up. Available in universal and SME, Rega and Linn variants, the gauge has a mirrored surface to eliminate sighting errors and provide better lighting. To see this and the Avid facility, the company is having an open day on June 24th. Get in touch for further details.

☎ 01480 457300

ATLAS CABLES has upgraded its Equator loudspeaker cable. Termination is with Atlas Z plugs and the price is £8.50 per metre, plus £6 for the cold-weld plugs. A bi-wire version is available for £12.

☎ 01563 572666

▶ Hi-Fi Diary

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

OCTOBER

11 Audiojumble
The Angel Leisure Centre
Tonbridge
Kent
www.audiojumble.co.uk

NOVEMBER

14-15 Smartlife Scotland
Thistle Hotel
Glasgow
www.chestergroup.org

28-29 World of Hi-fi
Congress Centre
Westfalenhalle
Dortmund-Germany
www.highendsociety.de

JANUARY 2010

7-10 CES
Las Vegas Convention Center
Las Vegas
USA
www.cesweb.org

FEBRUARY

26-28 Bristol Sound and Vision Show
Marriott City Centre
Bristol
USA
www.bristolshow.co.uk

Headphone talk

Prof. Jorg Sennheiser has never before spoken to the UK press, but the launch of the HD800 got him talking...

Sennheiser's new flagship, the HD800



The launch of Sennheiser's new flagship, the £1,000 HD800, is of tremendous significance to the 63-year-old company. With performance approaching that of the legendary Orpheus headphone system – but at just one-tenth of the price – the HD800 may prove to be just as iconic, whilst being in-reach of the majority of audiophiles.

At the recent European launch event, near Hannover, *Hi-Fi Choice* took the opportunity to talk to Sennheiser's chairman of the supervisory board



Prof. Jorg Sennheiser

himself, Prof. Dr. Jorg Sennheiser – a man who has never before been interviewed in the UK press. Flanked by the firm's president of manufacturing and logistics, Volker Bartels, we asked the elusive company head about the HD800 and what the future has in store.

With a very successful, if limited niche carved out for Sennheiser, we couldn't help but wonder if the company was planning to expand. "This is a question that pops up every once in a while" said Volker, "particularly with this new business unit (Consumer Electronics). We (first of all), produce the goods which we know we're good at, we earn the money with the products we're good at, and then we check out is there anything beyond that we could do, but it needs to be something different, we don't want to be manufacturer number 354, coming up with another MP3 player – this would not be something that's good for us."

Yet back in January at the CES unveiling, the rumour was that Sennheiser was planning a range of products, based around the HD800. "We're not quite there" commented Volker, "however, of course, things like the innovation of this new transducer – the ring radiator – forms a perfect platform that we could explore with new and additional models below and above. We would certainly think about some new additions."

With *HFC* having heard the HD800 during the course of the day, fed via a T+A SACD player and a bought-in headphone amp, we wondered why the company lacked this crucial device in its portfolio. "This a certainly an option that immediately comes to mind, there have been thoughts going on, we're not



The iconic HD414

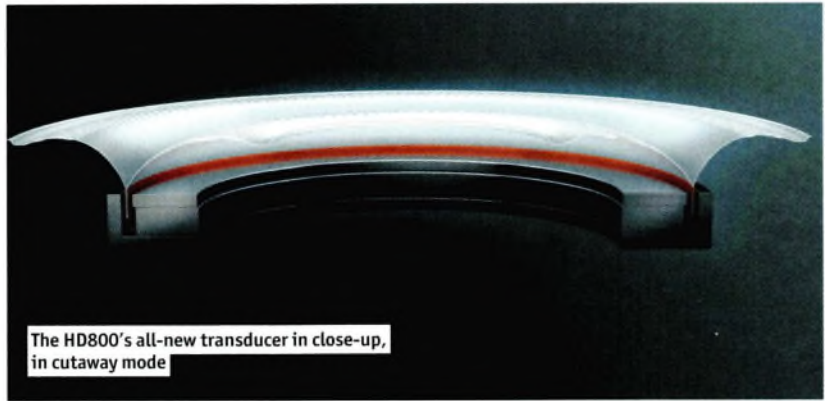
quite there, but this is certainly an idea we have in our mind." So, naturally, we pushed Jorg for a head amp recommendation in the meantime: "The ones we use upstairs... Lehmann brand." (Lehmann Audio Black Cube)

Regular *HFC* readers will have seen the recent rise of the high-end headphone, with upmarket models from Audio-Technica, Grado and most recently Denon competing for market share. So what took Sennheiser so long? "New ideas and new technologies cannot be generated just like that!" said Jorg. "And we stick to our claim, 'time for perfection' it takes time!" added Volker.

Reasoning that perfection is what all audiophiles are after, we asked if the HD800 had just been designed for music, or if AV users had been considered? "Not at all" said Jorg. "Because home cinema is something totally different and you have all these

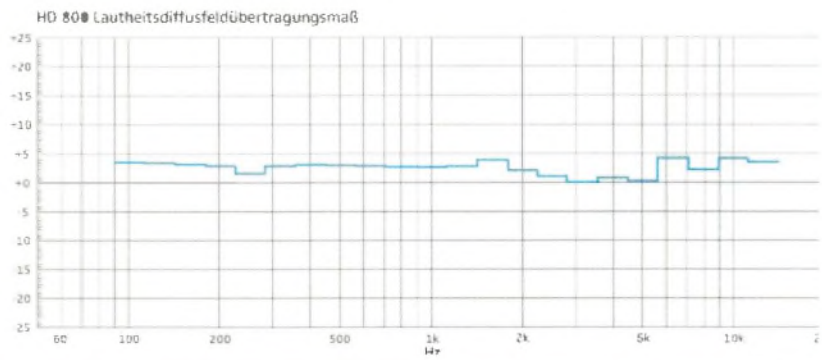


Assembly of the new transducer



The HD800's all-new transducer in close-up, in cutaway mode

The HD800's impressively flat frequency response



multiple loudspeakers and woofers and whatever; phantom, surround-sound, it's nothing actually real. Here you have the real stuff, that is, music! Just stereo."

We couldn't help but admire Jorg's enthusiasm for stereo, although sceptics might argue that now is not the best time to be launching one of the company's most expensive headphones ever! We had to probe

him if the order book was full. "Yes! Absolutely." said Jorg. "Actually, it was more successful than we anticipated. Of course at this time, we have a full order book, which is nice, which is wonderful, but we also know there is a certain channel-filling effect, that you sell to the stores and we need to be aware of how the market really reacts to this." **HFC** Expect an in-depth review of the HD800 soon.



The world's press go nuts for the HD800, including recent *HFC* defector, Alan Sircom



Words by *Dave Oliver*

Classic Album

Of all the flotsam washed up on Hitsville's shores by the punk new wave, surely Jonathan Richman was the least likely. His deceptively simple garage-pop songs, *faux-naïf* lyrical approach, adenoidal voice and nerdy demeanour must have seemed fatally out of step in the early seventies, at least before David Byrne and Talking Heads took that ball and ran with it into the charts during the eighties.

Aged 18, Richman moved to New York in 1969 from the Boston suburbs with the dream of hanging out with the Velvet Underground. However, while he did meet them, he struggled to establish himself and returned to Boston the following year to form a band which would be called The Modern Lovers and included David Robinson, later of The Cars, on drums and future Talking Head Jerry Harrison on organ.

The band came to the attention of Warners and recorded some demos in LA in 1972. But Richman was already thinking ahead and decided he wanted to abandon their garage-band style in favour of something smoother. Warners dropped them in 1973, and they split up the following year.

That might have been that, but while Richman was breaking in a new Modern Lovers band, the tapes were picked up by independent Beserkley Records and released in 1976 as *The Modern Lovers*. The album proved to be an undercover hit, providing an alternative framework for the way punk and new wave would develop, away from the buzz-saw guitars of the Ramones and nihilistic bile of The Voidoids.

Brian Eno said of the Velvet's first album that not many people bought it, but those who did formed a band, so *The Modern Lovers* became essential listening for punk's cognoscenti. The Sex Pistols released cars-'n'-girls classic *Roadrunner* on their soundtrack album *The Great Rock 'N' Roll Swindle*, and

the nerdy-outsider style has influenced almost every indie band since, from The Fall to Pavement to Franz Ferdinand.

Fortunately, few would attempt to directly copy Richman's uniquely personal approach, but the simple song structures, confessional lyrics and eccentrically individualistic subject matter hit a nerve with the emerging iconoclasts who rejected rock's traditions. The influence of the Velvets is clearly strong, but Richman's lyrics bear little resemblance to Lou Reed's heroin-ravaged visions.

This was probably as close as Richman ever came to angry adolescence. His later lyrical concerns would include abominable snowmen in the market and rockin' rockin' leprechauns, but here the focus is on pained adolescent love. Who else in 1972 was declaring with the heart-stopping honesty of *Someone I Care About*, "I don't want just a girl to fool around with... What I want is a girl that I care about / Or I want nothing at all"? Or reducing the appeal of genius and celebrity to the ability to pick up girls, as on *Pablo Picasso* ("Pablo Picasso never got called an asshole / Not like you")?

Richman himself virtually disowned the album on its release and has gone on record as saying that 1977's *Jonathan Richman & The Modern Lovers*, recorded with an entirely different band and featuring a softer, more acoustic sound, was really his first.

Richman has been doing sporadically brilliant stuff ever since, but the basic template is all in place on *The Modern Lovers*. The hooky melodies, the rudimentary sound and the wry observations on humanity as delivered by a wide-eyed, pre-cynical adolescent are pretty much what he's been doing ever since. Long may he continue. **HFC**



THE MODERN LOVERS
The Modern Lovers
Beserkley Records

"The album proved to be an undercover hit, providing an alternative framework for the way punk and new wave would develop."

Words by **Richard Black**

Technology

If you keep in touch with hi-fi gossip, you probably noticed the furore about a year ago when Russ Andrews Accessories was prevented by the Advertising Standards Agency from claiming that Kimber's woven mains cables reduced radio-frequency interference (RFI) in mains cables and that RA's own 'Clamp' products could lower the noise floor of audio equipment. The point was that there was no proof to support RA's claims, though there wasn't any proof to the contrary either.

Back in February, Russ Andrews announced that research it had commissioned from freelance audio boffin Ben Duncan had filled the gap and supplied the proof that the ASA was asking for to validate the original claims. Duncan makes the perfectly valid point that testing all the possible permutations of cables, conditions, audio kit, interference type etc. would take several lifetimes, but overall his work arguably raises more questions than answers. There are two papers, one dealing with the efficacy of woven mains cables in reducing conducted RFI in the frequency range up to several hundred MHz, the other examining the success of the 'Clamp' products in reducing high-voltage spikes on the mains. In both cases, there is also consideration given to the real-world effects on audio components resulting from the products under test.

The trouble is that the results don't add up to any kind of proof that cables or Clamps work as implied, to improve sound. Some simple facts are certainly established beyond reasonable question. It's clear from Duncan's measurements that under the conditions he set up in the lab, regular mains cable has some filtering effect on RFI, while Kimber's woven cables have rather more. That's good to know, though it does raise the question: why not just add the simplest mains filter (one component, a capacitor, would probably

suffice) to get the same effect? It's also clear that the Clamps really do reduce the severity of brief high-voltage spikes, and that such spikes can cause some breakthrough to the supply rails of a typical audio product.

Duncan even produces results which show how RFI can cause an increase in audio distortion. But the frequency and level of RFI that cause this are not likely to be seen on domestic mains, according to our own experience and any research we've seen and Duncan does not give any evidence of such levels being found in practice. Nor does he provide any figures for the real-world intensity and frequency of occurrence of high-voltage spikes.

In order to support fully the claims that these products improve the sound of audio components, it would be necessary to show that they improve in some definable way the audio output of the components to which they connect, in the presence of levels of interference typically found on normal mains. Duncan's work does not do this – though it may meet the criteria specified by the ASA.

We're not trying to assert that RA's claims are incorrect. There are, however, various other mechanisms which could equally explain the sonic effect of specialist cables etc. connected on the mains inlet side of audio components. For instance, interference can be conducted in common mode, as by a telescopic aerial, which makes the situation very different from the differential-mode case examined in these tests. There is also a complex interaction between the mains transformer and whatever is connected to it on both sides. The hard information uncovered by Duncan is welcome, but this is only a small piece of the jigsaw, not the whole picture. **HFC**



ASA-friendly: Kimber's woven mains cable

"The trouble is the results don't add up to any kind of proof that cables work as implied to improve sound."

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Martin Pipe

Martin Pipe is a leading technology expert and was instrumental in the co-development of Future Publishing's specialist Tech Lab Operation

Game for a laugh

Could computer games possibly breed audiophilia?

"Back then, entrepreneurs such as Alan Sugar made money by flogging 'mug's-eyeful' audio."

For the average consumer, music is now merely the background soundtrack to other 'stuff'. Today's hectic schedules, coupled with a greater choice of lifestyle-activities than ever before, mean that the key music-listening opportunities are now traffic-jams, workouts (both gym and computer) and household chores.

It's a far cry from the audiophile lifestyle of twenty something years ago, when we'd listen intently to the must-have LPs of the day on Thorens/Shure/Pioneer/Akai/Celef systems that had been gradually pieced together. An involving experience, we allowed ourselves no distraction other than the music itself.

Back then, entrepreneurs such as Alan Sugar made money by flogging 'mug's-eyeful' audio to the mass-market punters of the day. Sugar's public-profile has since, of course, shifted from the role of consumer-electronics sage to reality-TV star and the money is now being made elsewhere.

A recent product launch from Japanese AV specialist Onkyo merely underlined this. Although we were shown a prototype two-channel audiophile amplifier and matching CD/SACD player, the event's main purpose was to introduce a range of budget AV receivers – the first in the world to offer the front-height channels of Dolby Pro-Logic IIz.

However, Onkyo was just as keen to emphasise the inclusion of DSP modes engineered specifically for computer games. The earnings of this multi-billion dollar industry have already eclipsed those of music, and it's not far behind the film business. As lifestyle activities go, gaming is big business.

A gaming 'evangelist' – whose day job is ironically with HFC's publisher Future – was wheeled in by Onkyo to reveal how much attention designers also pay to 'sound design'. The days of the monotonous 'bleep' are long gone; now, it's a 5.1 mix that puts some movies to shame – and yes, games developers have the budgets.

Yet such effort is wasted if the carefully crafted audio is heard through the frequently appalling

sonics of most flat-panel TVs. The player loses the subtle audio 'cues' that position him within the arena of gameplay – and a competitive edge may be lost. He also misses out on the sheer entertainment-value of a decent soundfield, such as a sense of the bullets whizzing behind him.

Our evangelist had first-hand experience of the benefits, thanks to the budget Cambridge Audio-based 5.1 rig he bought. He's not the traditional consumer of such systems – their more established music and movie roles are currently of secondary interest to him. But if he does choose to indulge in these more established forms of entertainment, then he's almost there.

His Xbox 360 and PS3 consoles will play CDs and DVDs (the PS3 is, of course, also the world's biggest-selling Blu-ray player). The same digital audio connection needed for 5.1 surround-gaming is also a movie soundtrack boon. But it also facilitates CD playback of a standard that most will find acceptable. Like many in the 25-34 age group (gaming's growth-market), he also has an iPod.

A tenner buys him the 3.5mm-to-phono cable that connects it to his receiver's front-panel AV input. For very little extra outlay, then, he will also own a half-decent music-playback system that sacrifices none of the iPod's convenience. And there's no reason why others buying multichannel audio systems primarily for gaming can't also use them to rediscover their music collections.

Yes, these systems and formats do have their performance limitations. Maybe some of these gamers will catch the hi-fi bug, and rediscover the unique joy that well-reproduced music can bring into their lives. Who knows? They might even entice 'real' (as opposed to 'virtual') friends around for a listen. Well, it's a thought... **HFC**



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Luxman M-800A power amplifier
Constantine Soc, Dagogo Review, 2008

LUXMAN



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Chris Martens, The Absolute Sound Magazine

USHER



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Ken Kessler, HiFi News, February 09
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Wayne Garcia Source: The Absolute Sound
MBL 5011, MBL 1521, MBL 1511



1) Voted Power Amp of the Year - The Absolute Sound, USA
2) Grand Prix 2007 (equivalent to Power Amp of the Year) for Reference 9 V2 - HiVi, Japan

NUFORCE



In June 2008, Stereoplay magazine carried out an extensive group test of 10 loudspeaker manufacturers including Focal, Kef, Jamo and T+A. agreed the clear winner was Audio Physic.

[audio physic]



"If I were in the market for an integrated amplifier at or near the V-10's asking price, there would be nothing else on the shortlist."

Ken Kessler, HiFi News

T+A



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Paul Messenger

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

What credit crunch?

The £6,000 cartridge I just *had* to have...

"I was sufficiently impressed by what I heard to take a deep (£6,000) breath and place an order."

For as long as most enthusiasts will remember, vinyl-replay pickup (phono) cartridges have invariably operated using the principles of magnetism. Moving magnet, moving coil and moving iron are the three basic variations on the common magnetic theme, whereby tiny voltages are generated corresponding to the velocity changes that occur as the stylus traces the groove. The generated signals are then processed via the established RIAA equalisation curve to achieve a neutral tonal balance.

However, there are alternatives. Back in the sixties, for example, inexpensive record players from Dansette, Dynatron and others came with cheap crystal or ceramic cartridges that generated electrical signals using the piezoelectric effect (the same principle employed by the spark igniters on gas hobs). This was a bit before my time, so I can't comment on their performance. I believe they avoided the need for equalisation, were better suited to valve than solid-state amplifier inputs and tended to be 'dissed' by hi-fi people on the grounds of sample inconsistency.

Back in the mid-sixties there was also a radical cartridge called a Euphonics Miniconic that operated on the strain-gauge principle. The resistance of a strain gauge changes when subjected to a mechanical force, so it must be used alongside a power supply that effectively measures these changes in resistance. Strain-gauge cartridges have, very occasionally, resurfaced since then, most recently in the form of the Soundsmith product I encountered at the Heathrow show a year ago in the Artisan Audio room.

I was sufficiently impressed by what I heard to arrange for a subsequent demonstration under familiar home-system/environment conditions. That delivered equally impressive results and since no review sample was available, I took a deep breath and placed an order.

For various reasons my cartridge took about nine months to arrive, by which time the pound had

plunged against the dollar, with the result that the thing cost me an arm as well as a leg. The ISA took a pounding, but I've no regrets, as the cartridge sounds quite wonderful in almost every respect.

I can't comment on the performance of previous strain-gauge cartridges, but the Soundsmith Strain Gauge differs from its predecessors in using massively larger and more elaborate partnering electronics, which might well be significant. Its best feature is the way it handles the human voice, with a delicacy and a range of expression that, to these ears at least, is unequalled by other means of vinyl replay.

There's also an unusual degree of 'unflappability' to the sound. One might perhaps interpret this as a slight lack of dynamic punch and expression, but in my opinion it has more to do with an unusually clean and tidy character one doesn't normally encounter with vinyl reproduction. Indeed, in a very real sense I find the Strain Gauge combines the best characteristics of normal vinyl and CD replay, offering the clean and tidy low-distortion nature of CD, but with the timing and delicacy one associates with vinyl.

So far I've found just two drawbacks. First, it doesn't gloss over the inadequacies of poor recording practice. Indeed, I was uncomfortably aware of how the quality of genuine humanity and realism has tended to decline over the years, as the degree of processing and manipulation has tended to increase. Ironically, my recordings from the fifties and sixties often sound significantly more natural than more recent material.

But the real sting in the tail is the price, which starts at £6,100 for the least costly variation. Admittedly that includes a special preamp that delivers a flat line-out signal and even provides other preamp features, but it's a painful sting all the same. **HFC**



Soundsmith Strain Gauge phono cartridge system

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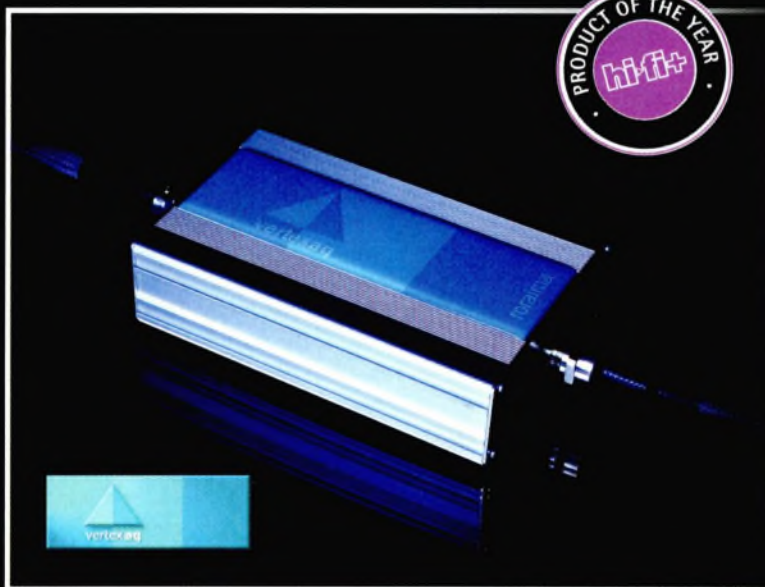
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Roy Gregory, HiFi+ issue 54

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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

Vinyl demand

Turntable sales are defying the economic gloom

"Those who have lost their jobs, or will do so during the course of our economic woes, are in real trouble."

Any gathering of industry people – hi-fi industry that is – inevitably turns into a bout of naval-gazing on the state of the market, which you may have noticed is not in the rudest of health right now. Sure enough, at a recent press event put together by Onkyo, it didn't take long for talk to turn into the now ritual lamentations on the state of the market.

But this time I had some ideas of my own, that were, perhaps, on the cusp of an important change. On this occasion, Onkyo laid out a presentation by GfK, the body responsible for collating statistics for the consumer electronics industries, primarily to reinforce their growing dominance in the home cinema sector. Sure enough GfK's evidence is that Onkyo is indeed doing extremely well.

Of course the overall industry figures we were presented with did reinforce the generally bleak situation. Their measure of consumer confidence for the CE sector (consumer electronics) showed that this much-prized commodity was 4 per cent down in January from the month before, which in turn was a massive 24 points down from the same time the year before. The biggest losers were large electrical appliances, aka white goods, but in stark contrast, overall sales of hi-fi, home cinema and the like was actually up by a couple of percentage points. The equivalent trends for the last recession (1989-1994) show that the overall market was not drastically affected long term. The market shrunk by 12 per cent from its previous peak, but the drop was not sustained and the market recovered after a couple of years in the doldrums.

Other trends highlighted in the figures are that the market was flat before Christmas 2008. But for most of January, the latest period for which figures were available, retail sales were well up, largely due to bargain hunting, no doubt. Much of the growth was in flat-screen TVs (not least HD-compatible models) and in DVD players (Blu-ray particularly), but headphones and receivers also performed well.

Traditional component hi-fi sales trends were less buoyant – amplifiers, tuners CD players and speakers, for example, were well down year-on-year in January, but this was against a backdrop of continued interest in personal audio. Turntables, such as the very costly Continuum Caliburn (p36) and the more mid-priced Townshend (p54) also bucked the trend and there is sustained interest in areas like custom install and distributed audio using audio servers.

What I think is happening is not easy to decipher, but is not entirely negative. Put it this way: those who have lost their jobs or will do so during the course of our current economic woes are in real trouble. Some have lost their homes and regrettably, this trend is bound to continue. But for those who are in secure employment, interest rates are a long way down from their peak and mortgage interest costs are such that they may be feeling very comfortable. There is certainly a disinclination to buy cars and expensive holidays, while loans for house buying are not easy to come by. Yet there is, at least, some evidence that many people are continuing to spend to improve their homes and a newly upgraded hi-fi system is one of the best known ways of doing this.

Leaving GfK to one side, this is the picture that I have been hearing from audio suppliers too. As usual in such times, the sales of mid-market equipment, the kind of equipment sold primarily in Currys, Comet and the like, are not exactly healthy, but the high end is surprisingly buoyant. Those with a good story to tell are continuing to experience real interest in their products. The last few months have seen the demise of poorly run downmarket stores including Woolworths, but the more upmarket, service-oriented John Lewis continues to perform well enough to keep the wolves from the door and there are signs that trends of this kind will continue. **HFC**



Recession-proof? The £115,000 Caliburn (p36)

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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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COMPETITION

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Shanling is a respected 'chi-fi' manufacturer in the audio field, with a reputation for bold-looking, valve-based hi-fi that has it all: looks, good build quality and great sound. Its latest product – the new multi-source MC3000 (MC standing for Music Centre!) – combines a CD player, FM tuner, iPod dock and hybrid amplifier in one case. And a stunning case it is, too, with volume and input selectors atop the two columns and small signal valves poking up within acrylic protectors. The MC3000's combination of visual flair and sound quality is impressive – we recently awarded it a Best Buy badge in the May issue (*HFC 319*). It manages to combine fine rhythmic drive with plenty of life and 'kick'. Power delivery is assured and confident and high treble is clear and precise. We also found it had enough detail and analytical skill to convey instruments with convincing layering and spatial precision. What more could you ask for?

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COMPACT DISC



SCHUBERT

Death and the Maiden
(String Quartet in D minor adapted by Andy Stein)

Symphony No. 8, 'Unfinished'
(Completed by Brian Newbould and Mario Venzago)

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra • JoAnn Falletta



SCHUBERT

Death And The Maiden, The Unfinished

JoAnn Falletta (cond) Buffalo Philharmonic

Naxos www.naxos.com

Music: This disc is a real oddball. The intimate *Death And The Maiden* is converted to a full orchestral reading, while the *Unfinished symphony* has been completed, in part, using material from *Rosemunde*, which it was thought was originally intended for the job. On balance the 8th symphony works well enough in its newly completed form, but *Death And The Maiden* lacks the purity of the chamber orchestration and for this listener, just doesn't work.

Sound: There is no problem here with the Buffalo orchestra, while the acoustic of the Kleinhans Music Hall in their home town has been well handled. Whether the completions are preferable to the originals, however, is a matter for debate. **AG**



LEONARD COHEN

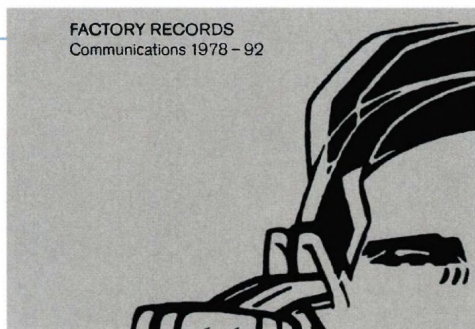
Live In London

Sony-BMG

www.sonybmgmusic.co.uk

Music: One would normally hesitate to recommend a live album to an audiophile audience, but this two-disc, 25-song set recorded at Cohen's first London show at the O2 arena last July is an exquisite gem. At 73, Cohen's intimately controlled and finely calibrated presentation of such classic songs as *Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye*, *Suzanne* and, of course, *Hallelujah*, has reached a ripe perfection and his between-songs patter is just as expertly judged as it ever has been. The sound of a true master at work.

Sound: Meticulous, pin-dropping definition that highlights both the gravity and the warmth of his voice with exemplary lucidity, while the precision of his backing band is afforded equal clarity. **NW**



VARIOUS ARTISTS

Factory Records Communications 1978-92

Rhino

www.rhino.co.uk

Music: Just listening to the OMD, Joy Division, Distractions and Durutti Column sequence on CD1 is a breath-taker. The sonic beauty inherent in *Time Goes By So Slow*, *Transmission* and *Sketch For Summer* is so profound that you understand why Factory Records is so important. This was giant music: heroic, innovative but human and now it has been stamped on history with this magnificent 63-track, four-CD box set. Big names like Happy Mondays and New Order jostle with obscurities like The Names and Crispy Ambulance.

Sound: At last you can throw away the old Factory 45s – for the sound here will blow you away. It's wide and deep while retaining that warm analogue burr of old. **MP**



EMMA TRICCA

Minor White

Bird

www.emmatricca.com

Music: Although comparatively young, Emma Tricca has already been lauded by folk legends John Renbourn and the late Odetta. Her crystal-clear, soaring voice is perfectly showcased on this dynamic, charming acoustic set and manages to remain uniquely her own while still conjuring up faint echoes of the greats – Nina Simone, Joni Mitchell etc. The finger-picking guitar is a revelation as well, while the light percussion and Hammond touches only add to the atmospheric magic. Exceptional stuff.

Sound: The broad dynamic range on this simply recorded acoustic set helps make it a treat for the ears and a wealth of vocal detail in particular makes this a real hi-fi pleasure. **PS**





RAMBLIN' JACK ELLIOTT

A Stranger Here
Anti Records
www.anti.com



Music: Now 77, the one-time Woody Guthrie disciple and Bob Dylan inspiration Jack Elliott, follows 2006's *I Stand Alone* with an exhumation of Depression-era country blues standards. Highlights include Son House's *Ginnin' In Your Face* and Blind Lemon Jefferson's *Rising High Water Blues*. His worldly, cracked voice is well-nigh perfect for these skeletally evocative songs, which he treats with respect rather than reverence. The result is a beautiful, vibrant record that sounds

every bit as much fun to have made as it is to listen to.

Sound: Produced by Joe Henry (Solomon Burke), these sparse acoustic arrangements achieve an intimacy that implies Ramblin' Jack is singing them in your living room. **DO**



NEIL YOUNG



NEIL YOUNG

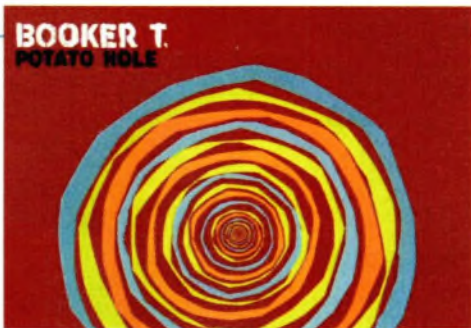
Fork In The Road
Reprise
www.warnerbrosrecords.com



Music: Young's multi-disc *Archives* set has once again been postponed because a new set of songs came along to distract him. Strange songs they are, too, mostly inspired by the Linc-Volt electric car project which he's currently funding. Hence we get titles such as *Off The Road*, *Hit The Road* and *Fork In The Road* with banal lyrics such as "she looks so beautiful with her top down, let's jump inside and take a trip to town,"

plus a smattering of references to global recession.

Sound: Unvarnished and rudimentary throughout – which is surely how such densely layered, murky, squalling guitar roadhouse boogie is meant to sound. **NW**



BOOKER T

Potato Hole
Anti Records
www.anti.com



Music: The man behind *Green Onions* and the leader of arguably the most successful backing band in history, Booker T returns without the MGs for his first solo album for 20 years. But if you're expecting the low-slung funky grooves of his sixties and seventies heyday you'll be disappointed. On these ten tracks, including covers of Outkast's *Hey Ya* and Tom Waits' *Get Behind The Mule*, Mr T lets his rock hair down, his mellifluous organ abetted by crunching rock guitars courtesy of Neil Young, the Drive-By Truckers and T himself.

Sound: The southern boogie feel would have been greatly enhanced by the old-school environs of the original Stax studio – this sounds just a tad too clinical to do the material justice. **DO**



IGOR STRAVINSKY

The Firebird, The Rite of Spring etc
Sir Simon Rattle (cond), Birmingham Symphony Orchestra
EMI www.emiclassics.co.uk



Music: Most of the works on this four-CD survey of Simon Rattle's Stravinsky feature the Birmingham SO, predating his move to Berlin, but the set provides an unusually fine and fairly complete overview, including the three great ballets (*The Firebird*, *Pulcinella* and *The Rite Of Spring*). In general the performances are quintessentially Rattle-like: careful, studied, but fiercely committed, which is exactly how Stravinsky should be. *The Rite*, for example, still sounds radical and violent, almost a century after its first performance.

Sound: These recordings are excellent versions in virtually every case, despite being made in different venues, including, but not limited to Birmingham and Berlin. **AG**



Keith Jarrett
Yesterdays
Gary Peacock
Jack DeJohnette

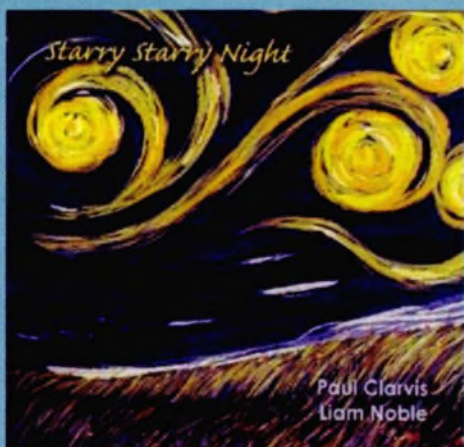
**KEITH JARRETT/
GARY PEACOCK/
JACK DEJOHNETTE**



Yesterdays
ECM 180g www.ecmrecords.com

Music: *Yesterdays* contains nine tracks recorded in 2001, all but one of them in front of a live audience in Tokyo. This is very much a standards album, featuring jazz pieces and songs from the bop era, and others such as the title track by Jerome Kern, from an even earlier era. The playing is superb, light and spontaneous, with Jarrett clearly enjoying himself with material he loves.

Sound: Live and superbly balanced this is a high-quality recording that sets a benchmark. *JK*



**PAUL CLARVIS &
LIAM NOBLE**



Starry Starry Night
Pure Pleasure 180g www.purepleasurerecords.com

Music: This contemporary album features Paul Clarvis on percussion and Liam Noble on piano. As with the Jarrett, it's not the material that is original, but the playing and choice of titles. Ellington's *Mood Indigo* and Moondog's *Paris* are the top and tail of an eclectic selection that this inventive percussionist and beautifully timed pianist make their own.

Sound: Recorded at Abbey Road using a variety of ribbon mics this is tonally superb. It has a more relaxed feel than the ECM and as a studio rather than live recording, an inevitably quieter background. *JK*

HIGH-QUALITY AUDIO

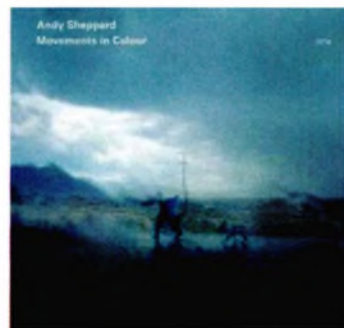
ANDY SHEPPARD

Movements In Colour
ECM

CD
www.ecmrecords.com

Music: British saxophonist Andy Sheppard's ECM debut finds him in the company of John Paricelli (guitars), Eivind Aarset (guitar, electronics), Arild Andersen (dbl bass) and Kuljit Bhamra (tabla). This global-spanning ensemble produces a sound that's reminiscent of Shakti on one track, Jan Carbarek on another and John Abercrombie on the excellent opener *La Tristesse Du Roi*. Sheppard's mellow, but textured style is supremely musical and the quality of backing is very strong, with an expansive scale and considerable finesse. If its atmosphere you're after, Sheppard delivers it in spades.

Sound: It's only a CD, but ECM has a way with sound that few can match. Rich tonality over a vanishing noise floor makes for an astonishingly revealing recording. *JK*



HAYDN STRING QUARTETS

Fry Street Quartet
Isomike

SACD (stereo/ multichannel hybrid disc)
www.isomike.com

Music: Although nearly 30 years separates the quartets Op9 No4 and Op77 No2, they both rank as mature works, requiring a very high level of virtuosity. The Fry Street Quartet are lyrical and note-perfect, without even being in danger of sounding mechanical. Dynamics are expressive, aided by the excellent engineering, with the benefits of the SACD medium particularly well-exploited.

Sound: Ray Kimber (of Kimber Cables) developed the system in which a large heart-shaped baffle between left and right microphones reduces mid/low frequency cancellations. The *Quartets* are recorded straight, with no gain riding or limiting and the result is open, clean and immensely dynamic. *AG*



GARETH WILLIAMS POWER TRIO

Shock!
Linn Records

SACD (stereo/ multichannel hybrid disc)
www.linnrecords.com

Music: Serial accompanist Williams takes centre stage for the first time with his own jazz combo and though he can play guitar, violin and sings too, he sticks to piano and Fender Rhodes here. This is fusion before a maelstrom of pointless noodling gave the genre a bad name and academic analysis took all the fun out of mixing and matching elements of rock, funk, bop and classical. Among the originals the delicately beautiful *Zelda* is a standout, as is a blistering piano-led version of John Coltrane's opus *Giant Steps*.

Sound: The sound is open and relaxed, as it should be with SACD, with plenty of room for Laurence Cottle's articulate bass and Ian Thomas' beautifully judged drumming. *DO*



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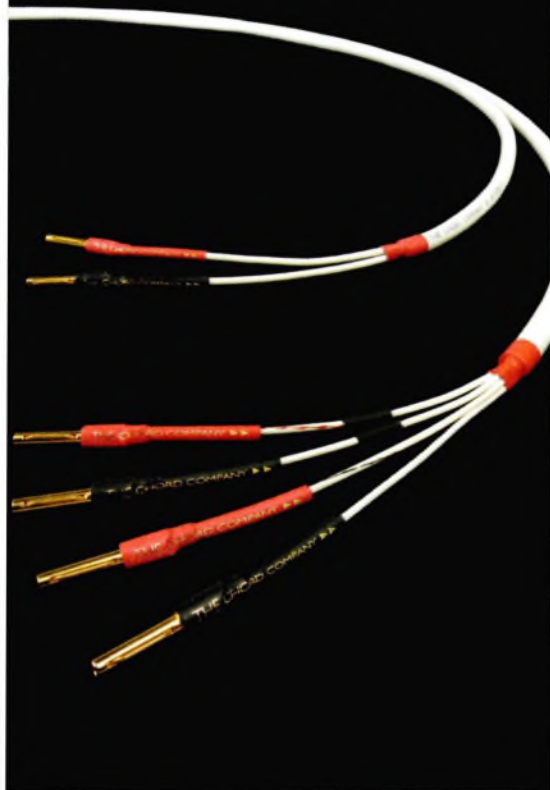
* terms & conditions apply

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 jason.kennedy@futurenet.com

Below: The Chord Company's Rumour 4 bi-wire cable



The Chord Company shines


I went to the Bristol Sound and Vision show last Saturday and bought what I thought was a four-metre pair of The Chord Company's Rumour 4 speaker cable and 12 banana plugs. When I got home I put the plugs on and realised they were too short – I measured the cable and it was only three metres long! On Sunday I called the hotel who passed a message to the The Chord Company who called me back. I explained to them what had happened and they were very sorry and said they would replace the cables straight away. They arrived today all professionally terminated. I'd like to say a big thank you to Nigel and The Chord Company.

Hixy HFC Forum

HFC You can't beat that for service! We know Nigel Finn at The Chord Company and have to agree that he is an asset to the industry as a whole. This story illustrates the benefits of buying from a respected name as you won't get this kind of service from many of the internet traders. (For more info on the Bristol show see our report in *HFC* 319).

Valve voodoo

Does anyone out there believe in voodoo? As I've had a hi-fi experience that defies all logical explanation. A week or so ago, I decided to sell my old Audio Innovations Series 400 amp, the reason being that they failed repeatedly to drive my speakers the way I wanted. I took the amp to a potential buyer, but the 400 sounded so poor on his system, I actually talked him out of buying it! In the meantime the only transistor amp I love, a YBA Intégré DT arrived at my flat as the replacement for the Audio Innovations. I fired it up and left it on for two days and then started listening. To put it briefly, after the third day, out went the YBA with the conclusion that even though it had more punch and somewhat better defined bass and detail than the 400, it lagged behind the valve amp in terms of musicality.

A friend of mine just finished his 'new' home built all-valve amplifier, so it was high time to give it a try. It was much more impressive than the YBA and justified its pedigree by having even better grunt and bass than the 400, as well as a sweet 

“...recently I had a hi-fi experience that defies a logical explanation.”

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Sad but true

I got my first hi-fi separates 16 years ago, because the Denon midi system I bought at the time kept on clipping. After a bit of research I realised that there was a whole world of interesting kit out there to try, so I took my cash down to Bill Hutchinson's in Glasgow (anyone remember him?) and I got my first kit combi featuring Marantz, Denon and Mission. It blew me away!

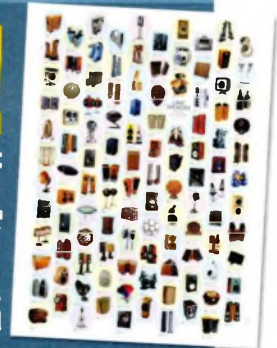
I'm now in charge of a much better and much more expensive system, as well as an appreciation of well-priced and good-quality kit. In fact, if I'm being honest, I'm now probably more into the kit than the

music. I still buy lots of music, but confess that buying a new bit of kit excites me far more than the latest release from my favourite band. It's sad, but true. Music is definitely the master, but who else out there is willing to admit to the same hi-fi addiction as myself?

Cyrus Stu HFC Forum

HFC It sounds like you've got it bad, Stu but we know where you're coming from. After all, the kit keeps getting better, but the same cannot necessarily be said of the music!

WIN!
**LOUDSPEAKERS:
A VISUAL
HISTORY
A1 POSTER**



Letter of the month winners will receive a limited edition (100) A1 loudspeaker history print, by a former *HFC* staffer. With photographic images of products from 1874 to the present day, this is one audiophile collectible you can't afford to miss. So drop us a line now: jason.kennedy@futurenet.com

and detailed midrange. I decided then and there that once I had managed to sell the Audio Innovations, I would ask my friend to build the same amp for me.

Then came the voodoo-surprise: on putting my 400 back in the system and powering it up, everything I missed from its sound (not much, actually) was suddenly there, including drive, power, bass definition and a more transparent soundstage, etc. A true high-end sound resulted.

But how and why did this change occur? I was aware that all contacts were touched when de- and re-connecting, thus, I knew from experience some sonic improvement was to be expected – but not this obvious. It sounded as if the amp had learnt how to sound excellent. To make sure of what I heard I invited some friends who were pretty familiar with the sound of my system to listen to the change, but didn't tell them what to expect. They all agreed with me.

The only 'reasonable' explanation I could come up with for what happened was that, by being driven 'harder' or more intensively by the more powerful amp, my speakers just sounded better. Or perhaps, the amp had learnt something about performance from its peers?

Attila HFC Forum

HFC That is indeed freaky stuff. As you say, unplugging and plugging in connectors tends to clean them, which would certainly help. Also, by using a more powerful amp such as the YBA, you've probably loosened up the suspension on your loudspeakers. Usually a speaker runs-in over the first six

"I know of four people who regularly buy *Hi-Fi Choice* and all of them listen to vinyl."

months and stays pretty similar thereafter, but this explanation cannot be discounted. One other factor is that you took the 400 to another place and put it in a different system, which may have blown away a few electronic cobwebs.

The notion that it learnt how to sound great from its peers is appealing, but does infer rather greater learning skills than one usually associates with a valve amplifier, or any other piece of hi-fi kit for that matter.

The vinyl alarm

This is the first time that I can recall where I haven't found any readable items for we vinyl fiends in your 'comment' section. I look forward to this each month, as it's my only 'read-while-listening' piece! While I realise that there may not be much happening in the proper hi-fi (analogue) world, my advice is dig deep. After all, I did read with great interest a piece on the record groove in one of your competitors' recent issues.

I would, however, like to make a relevant point which I will also offer to your fantastic forum for comments. In my social circle I know of four people who regularly buy *Hi-Fi Choice* and all of them listen to vinyl. In fact, three of us refuse to play any digital 'noise' whatsoever. And it's not through any form of snobbery or lack of funds, but because, as a music format, digital is generally unsatisfactory.

It's my opinion, that the vast majority of your readership wants to see more on analogue music reproduction. The digital buffs are, I'm sure, more than happy with the 'Whats' and 'Which' magazines of this world. It's also my humble opinion, that the digitals don't buy magazines, preferring to browse instead. A pastime that prevents real lovers of hi-fi from finding your esteemed tome on the newsagents' shelves. There I've had my rant, so please take my points on board. I don't want to lose *Hi-Fi Choice*.

Ivor J via email

HFC We're all big vinyl enthusiasts here at *HFC* and try to get as many turntable oriented stories into every issue as we can. You'll have noticed that we have the extraordinary Caliburn Continuum turntable from the antipodes and the remarkable Townshend Rock 7 in this issue. We hope this makes up for previous omissions and promise to include proper analogue hi-fi at every opportunity.

Power is important

I am playing host to a lovely Chord Electronics power amplifier, the powerful SPA 1032 studio version. At 330 watts into 8 ohms and 500 watts into 4 ohms, it is more than a handful for my KEF Reference 3.2s. It's the very first time that I've had the opportunity to drive these very demanding speakers with enough power to realise their full potential.

For me, it's been a real eye-opener as I thought the 100 watts of the Meridian 556 or the 150 watts of the PS Audio (the amplifiers I have been using for a period of time), would be more than enough. Not so I am afraid. It's obvious to me that, if one wants to drive large (and difficult) speakers 'properly', one needs appropriate amplification to do the job. Question now is, should I give it back or should I keep it? Bah! And I thought I'd reached the end of the road!

Arthur74 HFC Forum

HFC End of the road – why would you want to get there? Now that you discovered that power can bring forth such a sonic revelation there is a whole host of kit to audition and appreciate. We enjoy smaller amps but couldn't live without real welly.

Below: A vinyl lover's fantasy – the sexy Koetsu Urushi Vermillion cartridge



KEF iQ50 - 'at this moment
and at this price, the KEFs
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competition'

What HI-FI Sound and Vision, November 2008



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REVIEWS

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



EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

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OUR RATINGS EXPLAINED

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

Our overall conclusion

The things we like most about the product

The things we think could be better

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

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

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★☆	PRO Good build and open, lively sound from a valve DAC with plenty of inputs. Transport is also great value for money.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	CON DAC doesn't engage as well as one that transports with less weight and power through the bass unless you prioritise quality. Cables cost extra and competitor from single chassis designs won't help.
BUILD ★★★★☆	
VALUE ★★★★☆	
CONCLUSION Acoustic is being very ambitious producing a two-box player of this build quality and price. Something just has to give and it's the DAC, which can't do justice to the transport's efforts.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	

OUR AWARD BADGES EXPLAINED



Best Buy

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



Editor's Choice

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

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

EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Priceless!

Continuum's £115k Caliburn has set a new benchmark for vinyl replay

PRODUCT Continuum Caliburn, Cobra and Castellon

TYPE Turntable, tonearm and stand

PRICE £115,000

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): turntable 61.5x20.5x40cm; stand 64x102.5x50cm • Weight: turntable 73kg; stand 80kg • Speeds: 33,45,78rpm • Cobra dual-pivot tonearm • Motor drives up to 80lb • Computer-controlled start-up • Battery-powered DC motor • Finishes: Black lacquer or various wood veneers

CONTACT ☎ 020 8971 3909
 🌐 www.continuumaudiolabs.com

Turntables come in all shapes, sizes and prices. But here's one so extreme in its pursuit of perfection it breaks the mould. The Continuum Caliburn is not only the most expensive turntable ever made; it's also one of the heaviest, one of the most solidly engineered and (not least) one of the most functionally attractive and elegant too. The Caliburn is undoubtedly a *tour de force* – a labour of love. The design aim was simple: produce the finest turntable possible, regardless of cost.

But this is 2009, not 1979. That the 'obsolete' vinyl LP still fascinates fresh generations of listeners is nothing short of remarkable. The creators of the Caliburn are living proof of this. They didn't start as vinyl aficionados; being of a certain age, their introduction to hi-fi came via CD. The love affair with analogue LPs began when they

encountered a top-class turntable and experienced a quality of sound CD didn't approach. This led to a desire to produce a new 'super turntable' – one designed from the ground up and without compromise.

“The Caliburn is a labour of love. The design aim was simple: produce the finest turntable possible, regardless of cost.”

Access to universities with advanced testing and measuring facilities meant the early part of the design process could be 'simulated' using advanced computer software. After certain fundamentals were established, prototypes were built and evaluated. While no single factor explains the Caliburn's superior performance; there are several significant design details.

Among the most important is the motor – a battery-powered DC-type, developed to be free from the 'cogging' effects common to virtually all motors. It has sufficient torque to drive the 30kg platter and is in absolute control – power isn't reduced once the platter reaches speed, nor is any deliberate belt slippage allowed (two-ways lesser turntables reduce the cogging effect). The motor is built in-house and constitutes a significant part of

the Caliburn's cost. Speeds of 33, 45, and 78rpm are available, with +/- fine-tuning.

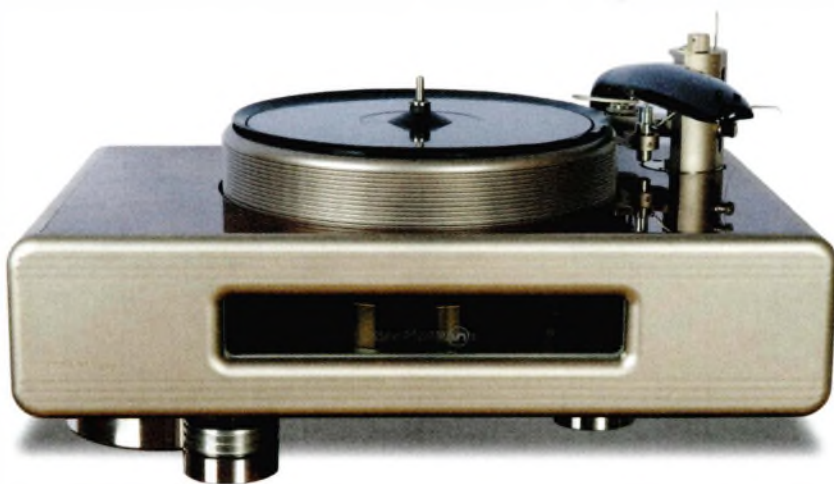
The Caliburn's chassis is made from solid magnesium alloy, chosen for its strength and low resonance properties. However,

magnesium is a difficult material to work with and not easy to finish, so the front and sides of the deck were given aluminium panels, creating a more attractive appearance, with the top section veneered in French walnut as standard.

A magnetic suspension system was developed for the centre bearing and plinth suspension. With the latter, powerful magnets are placed with their poles opposite one another to create a 'floating' system that's firm, but de-coupled. While the platter weighs a hefty 30kg, magnetic part-suspension ensures the Oil-Pressurised Hydrostatic centre-bearing only supports a load of around 2kg. Magnets also play a similar role in the Castellon stand.

A great turntable deserves a special arm and the Cobra looks quite different to most tonearms on the market. Its shape was dictated by the desire to avoid symmetry, which might lead to common resonance modes. The arm shell is made from fibrous resin and is inherently self-damping. Many different types of bearing were considered, but eventually a kind of stabilised uni-pivot arrangement was chosen. This has the advantage of very low friction, high torsional stability and excellent rigidity.

Cartridge vta and azimuth can be precision-adjusted while the disc plays and the counterweight is placed below the tonearm's centre of gravity to improve stability and the tracking of warped LPs. Not that warped LPs would trouble this deck; the Caliburn incorporates a special vacuum mat with air pump that sucks the (continues p39) ▶



We spoke with Dr Murali Murugosu, Continuum's head of development, about the Caliburn.



HFC: Why the choice of a battery-powered DC motor?

MM: We chose a suitable battery power supply to provide an adequate filter and instantaneous current supply for the motor-drive electronics. We take the incoming local AC and drop it down to low voltage via transformer and other circuitry to trickle DC into the battery system. The drive electronics then regenerate clean three-phase AC from the battery power supply to drive the brushless DC motor topology we've built. We generate each of the three pure sine waves by means of DSPs and combine this into a true zero-cogging drive. That means no magnetic cogging, no hall transition effect, no hysteresis, no back EMF, no PWM chopping etc.

In choosing materials for the deck (i.e. plinth, platter), what criteria were you guided by? Did you avoid certain materials?

Firstly, in our opinion, all turntables have a plinth. Even the 'plinthless' ones. Whatever material the bearing/platter assembly sits on becomes the 'plinth'. That means choice of materials is critical. Our engineering experience led us to understand that any moving mass (such as a platter) would generate flexural modes in the attached bearing and chassis (or plinth) assembly. The ability of the material (used for the 'plinth') to handle the 'platter' vibrational modes is critical. Measurement analysis using Young's Modulus, Poisson Ratio, Damping Factor, Coefficient of Expansion etc, had a profound impact on our choices.

The platter mass (chosen for inertial stability) drives the choice of bearing material and associated design, which drives the chassis material and associated design. We always try to use off-the-shelf materials where possible, but found many of the engineering problems we encountered required us to create specifications for application-specific materials. For example, where a portion of the design indicated a need for more damping factor, we engineered the materials to address the need.

Our experience with advanced metallurgy meant we could customise the material properties to address the underlying engineering need. Where polymers or aramids were appropriate, we selected the properties required by the design objective.

How big a part did measurement play in the design? Was there a clear correlation between measured performance and sound quality, or were there instances where, say,

a chosen material measured well but didn't sound as good as a material that measured less well? And if so, which did you choose?

Measurement plays a big part in our methodology. We believe an engineer can't fix what they can't see. To that end, we have access to some of the most advanced measurement technology currently available today. That includes an NDT ultrasonic, laser interferometer, three-axis accelerometer and other well-respected measurement tools. However, these tools measure an end outcome: the finished product. That means the design has to anticipate the problems, which the measurements will disclose. We use advanced visualisation technologies such as Finite Element Analysis (FEA) and shape optimisers to refine designs.

We also believe the ultimate measurement is how it sounds. If a design or material sounds 'wrong', it is wrong. As engineers we're trained to avoid subjective arguments, but as audiophiles we understand the music must come first. Our design methodology allows the engineering and audiophile viewpoints to co-exist in harmony. If the audiophile in us hears a sound effect, then the engineer in us will work to explain the cause and effect. In this way we increase our knowledge base and develop accurate models to predict the behaviour of designs.

That means what we measure must actually sound 'correct'. An example is the Castellon. After the design and FEA work, we used three-axis accelerometers and broadband noise sources to stimulate the stand. We then measured the attenuation of the device and were satisfied as to the efficacy in real-world operating conditions. When we turn the levitation feature in the Castellon to the 'off mode', the sound is less optimal than with it in the 'on' position. In this case the measured and actual sonic performance agree.

Were you guided by subjective appraisals of sound quality, or was it more a question of producing a deck that met specific technical criteria? Or was your aim to achieve both?

Our reference is live music, both acoustic and amplified. The bandwidth within the constraints of the media should be open and even. The technical design criteria had one goal in mind: accurate rendition of the source material. Our listening panel is comprised of experienced audiophiles and music lovers. Many of us play instruments or attend regular live performances of classical, jazz, blues, rock and other genres.

We expected the Caliburn system to 'get out of the way' and let whatever is in the groove out by not interfering with the LP and the cartridge. If the recording engineer let the music in, we will let it out. Our design approach has been proven in other fields, such as aviation, where we spent many years solving complex engineering problems.

With the turntable, ideas were taken from their DNA to reality through a mixture of deterministic and systematic design methods and principles. These still allow for the wild card of a passionate designer and team thinking outside the box. The many key design elements such as the 'floating' arm board, which were new to turntable design, led to breakthroughs in sonic performance.

While we have a heavy reliance on software design tools, we don't allow these tools to corner us into a box of systematic conformity. Though a design can always be optimised with the help of software, we allow our designs to be free and unconstrained, yet proven by physics and reality.

The listening test is crucial for us. We believe the real-world performance of a component when playing music is the ultimate test. We lessened the engineering challenge by using advanced software to optimise the performance in the virtual world. This isn't simple Computer-Aided Design (CAD), but a revolutionary approach where shape-optimisation software is used to prototype and measure the performance of a device in the virtual world based on accurate material properties and constraints.

The design is the work of the designer, who places these virtual objects into the optimisation process. Due to our prior experience with these tools, we expected an accurate correlation between our design, the software [see www.advea.com and www.mscsoftware.com] and the end result. We were delighted when both the technical and performance objectives were met. The virtual world when fashioned into a real product worked beyond our expectations.

Would you say there's a particular aspect of the Caliburn's design that gives it its unique quality? Or is the design all of a piece?

There is a balance of the individual components that make up the whole design. While each area was addressed as a separate module, the overall goal was always in mind. The core design concept of 'quiet' zones meant that the motor had to reduce cogging and hysteresis to hitherto unrealised levels. We understood jitter would be influenced by servo-correction systems, so that meant a holistic design where belt drive was chosen over direct drive. The platter had to exist in its own 'quiet' zone, so that required a nested platter, where inertial and support loads are segregated to reduce plate modes under the LP surface. The chassis, while appearing to be non-suspended, was actually designed to address the flexural issues from having a large platter mass in motion. The arm board technology was also a breakthrough in design terms. A revolutionary approach to fixing an arm board rigidly, while creating an isolation-and-damping mechanism so that any tonearm could sit in a 'quiet' zone. ▶

Other parameters such as vacuum hold-down had been done before, but we extended this to include an ultra-quiet pump that turns off during playback. An oil-pressurised hydrostatic bearing was chosen over air, to again lower the noise floor. We partially levitate our platter by magnetic means to avoid the springing and bouncing an ungrounded design would suffer from. This vertical bouncing modulates the music signal. We took great care to design our bearing system to prevent 'bounce' modes, which arise from precessional rocking of any spinning mass. Again, we show evidence of this in finite element models on our website, showing dynamic conditions of a rotating platter across a broad frequency range. Our design for the Caliburn revealed that without a tonearm and matching stand, the performance would be limited in ultimate potential.

How important is the Castellon stand? Given the design of the Caliburn, isn't it relatively independent (sonically speaking) of what it sits on?

Anyone who's heard the difference the Castellon makes will attest to the performance increase. The heavy damping the Castellon provides can be measured using active broadband noise sources in proximity to the stand. The Castellon is also designed to address the residual motions of the Caliburn chassis, bearing and motor system, as well as lessen the effects of external inputs. In some space-limited installations, we've placed the system directly in the path of very powerful speakers with no deleterious effects.

False modesty aside, is the Caliburn/ Cobra/ Castellon the best that could possibly be achieved for vinyl replay at this point in time? If some rich, crazy audiophile wanted to spend even more, could you possibly come up with something even better?

The Caliburn/Cobra/Castellon, while a no-holds-barred approach to vinyl playback, was limited by some commercial constraints. For example, there were more exotic materials that were only available in non-commercial samples at the time we formalised the Caliburn system. Some of these held great promise and we look forward to the day when they'll be more readily available.

We are pleased that the Caliburn system has generated so much interest in vinyl as an ultimate quality source and has been recognised by industry peers and experts as having broken new ground. Our R&D process is ongoing, and we invest heavily in engineering research on many fronts. Fortunately we have access to many tools and technologies not usually found in turntable-design companies. Our website highlights the backgrounds of the team who worked on the Caliburn and Criterion systems.



record flat to the platter. This virtually eliminates LP dishing and warpage, while dampening resonances that might occur within the vinyl LP itself. The pump takes a few seconds to achieve suction; after that, it's switched off while the record plays. Our review Caliburn was pre-fitted with a Koetsu Red K Signature which sounds absolutely magnificent – rich, tactile and highly detailed – even if it could be considered a bit 'low-priced' in this context!

Although the Caliburn is highly inert and very well isolated, the Castellon stand is an integral part of the package. It provides a solid, stable platform for the turntable, houses the motor power supply and pump, and raises the deck to mid-chest height, making it easy to use. The complete package comes in six boxes with a total shipping weight of about 450kg and an actual weight of 300kg. Installation is a two-man job, taking about eight hours.

SOUND QUALITY

So – what might the 'perfect' turntable actually sound like? While CD sets a benchmark in terms of pitch stability and overall security, it lacks other qualities. The Caliburn certainly equals CD on its home territory, giving an exceptionally solid, secure and stable musical presentation. It sounds absolutely unflappable – as though nothing short of an earthquake could upset it.

On instruments such as piano or acoustic guitar, there's no wobble or pitch waver.

Playing a recording of Beethoven's *Pathétique* piano sonata, the heavy chords that open the work decayed with absolute steadiness. There was no hint of pitch variation – none.

Not knowing, most listeners (this one included) would assume that a CD was being played – it's that stable. And the Caliburn boasts another type of stability. Voices and instruments stay put in the stereo soundstage and don't shift or wander as the music alters – each individual strand maintains complete independence and individuality, while overall the music sounds cohesive and coherent.

Playing the live 1982 LP *Ongaku Kai* by the Crusaders, the turntable creates a coherent, yet holographic soundstage with huge amounts of percussion detail. Partnered by darTZeel amplification and Magico V3 loudspeakers, it reveals previously hidden space and detail. On the 1989 LP *Sybil*, the spatial width and depth of the various layers of voice and backing are almost palpable; the music seems to hang in free space – behind, above and around the loudspeakers. The bottom end is very deep, with impressive weight and power. ▶



It's like listening to master tapes rather than LPs. The music has the sort of effortless ease and fine subtle detail you get from first-generation masters. Soundstaging is airy and holographic – very 'out of the speaker boxes' – extremely dynamic and lively. The Caliburn offers an intriguing mix of opposites: exceptional tightness and control, allied to extremes of bandwidth, dynamic contrast and tone colour, topped off with a creamy-smooth effortless ease.

It's capable of the utmost subtlety and delicacy, quiet passages possessing considerable refinement. Yet there's nothing fragile about the sound; it's always solid and full-bodied and the overall presentation has an impressive robustness. The deck is like the best CD you never heard; it presents the music with comparable security, but brings extra finesse and broader dynamic extremes to the mix.

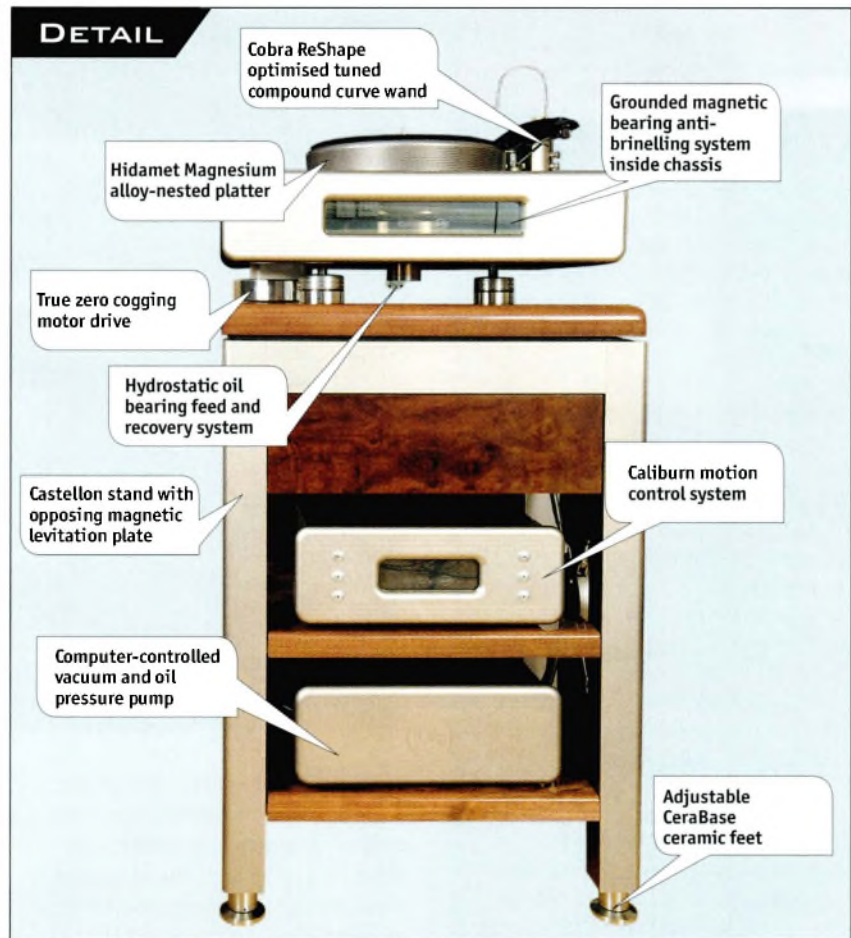
The Caliburn also has the ability to keep surprising you. One minute it sounds smooth and honey-rich, the next it's sharp and tactile. But, to be accurate, it's not the turntable surprising you; it's the music and the original recording. The Caliburn liberates your recordings – allows them to be more like they really are, rather than constrained by limitations in the playback equipment. As a result, voices and instruments display a greater range of tonal colours.

It's this that distinguishes the turntable from even the best CD players. The Caliburn produces a wider variety of sounds. Given a reasonably good LP, the music keeps on surprising. By comparison, CD has a degree of 'sameness' – LP offers subtler individual tonal colours, plus more finely shaded dynamics.

Of course, the vinyl experience encompasses more than just sound quality. There are all those enjoyable little rituals – removing the disc from its sleeve, wiping the surface, cleaning the stylus, cueing the arm. Playing LPs is a very 'hands-on' personal thing. Because you're part of the process, you're more involved.

And there's something else. When you play an LP – especially a vintage original – something intangible happens. Your listening experience changes. It's almost as if the living, breathing aura of the musicians permeates the LP sleeve and grooves, making the music sound and feel different. Fanciful, perhaps – but often, that's how it seems as the stylus touches down...

The Caliburn/Cobra/Castellan is an exceptional combination, producing results far greater than the sum of its parts. It offers outstanding focus and solidity, allied to incredible detail and stunning dimensionality.



“...how do you define ‘expensive’? Aston Martin recently launched its One-77 sports car in Geneva – at a cool £1.25m...”

Of course, it costs a bomb. But you definitely get what you pay for.

Value is a tricky subject. A product that offers class-leading standards of performance, a genuine pride of ownership, plus an exceptional finish and battleship build quality can be said to offer good value even if its price is very high. And anyway, how do you define ‘expensive’? Aston Martin recently launched its One-77 sports car in Geneva – at a cool £1.25m, it makes the cost of a Caliburn look like small change.

But equipment like the Caliburn is worth celebrating. Yes it's expensive, but it also sets standards. It takes a certain dedication to the cause to push the theoretical performance limits of a format beyond typical price constraints. And as Dr Murugasu says in our Q&A, the quest for absolute perfection was only limited by the restricted amount of exotic materials his team could get their hands on. Will anybody else put this much

effort into finding perfection ever again?

The Caliburn is for life. It's not inexpensive, but how do you value a lifetime's pleasure and enjoyment? **HFC**

Jimmy Hughes

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Represents the absolute ultimate in vinyl replay. In terms of both engineering and sound quality, the Caliburn is quite simply in a class of its own.
FEATURES ★★★★★	CON Very big, very heavy and very, very expensive! Sadly, perfection doesn't come cheap. And there's no lid or cover included.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION The Caliburn is one of those elite products audiophiles dream about – a pinnacle to aspire to, a benchmark by which others are measured. It's hardly cheap, but for those able to afford the best, it's an inspiring product that sets new standards.	
HI-FI CHOICE ★★★★★ OVERALL SCORE	
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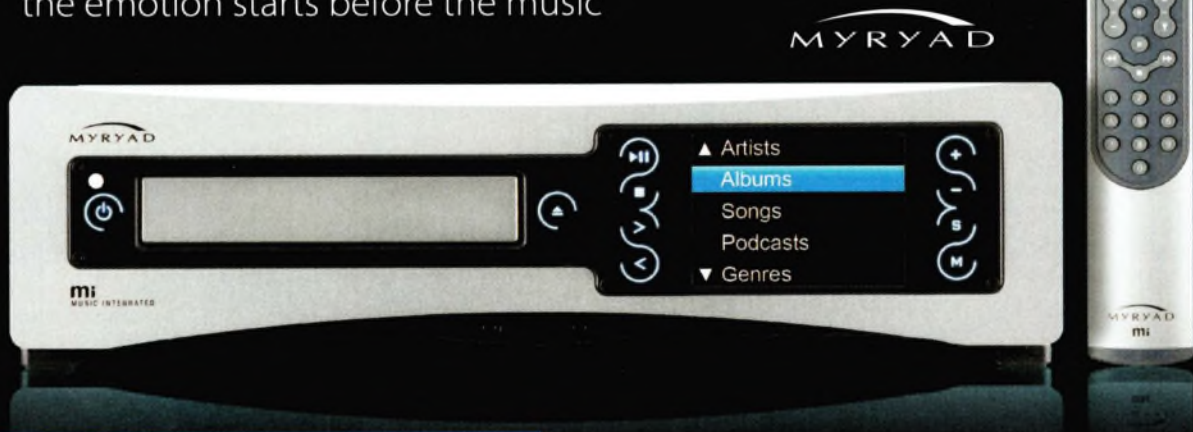
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BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Looking radiant

This AE model might look familiar, but the Radiance is totally new throughout

PRODUCT Acoustic Energy Radiance 3

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £1,500 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD) 23x92x29.7cm

⊖ Weight 18kg ⊖ Drivers: 38mm Beryllium diaphragm annular tweeter with DXT lens-loading, 95mm metal-cone midrange, 2x 120mm metal-cone woofer
 ⊖ Sensitivity 90dB ⊖ Impedance 8 ohms ⊖ Real-wood-veneer finish ⊖ Curved sides and advanced enclosure construction ⊖ Outrigger feet (for aiding stability) ⊖ Ultra simple crossover

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

Acoustic Energy first appeared in the late eighties, attracting plenty of attention with its tiny but high-performance AE1, a pro-style design with a black textured external finish. This design included a number of radical solutions, among them costly plaster-lined enclosure treatment, but essentially brought considerable credibility to both the manufacture of tiny speakers and the use of metal diaphragms for drive units, the latter in particular inspiring plenty of imitators.

Since those early days the company has grown substantially, been bought by Malaysian interests and greatly expanded the types and ranges of models it produces. Certain trademark features have helped to maintain its identity throughout, most visibly the use of the metal cone drivers with their characteristic pointy central dust covers that the company pioneered.

The Radiance range is the result of three years of development work. It consists of five models in total, including three stereo pairs. And our review focuses on the largest of these, the three-way Radiance 3; there's also a smaller floorstander and a standmount.

We had a definite feeling of *déjà vu* when these speakers emerged from their carton. A couple of years ago (*HFC 292*) and a couple of years before that (in *HFC 265*), we reviewed two subtly different versions of an Acoustic Energy model called the Aelite 3, and this new Radiance 3 has much in common with those earlier models, outwardly at least. Essentially it shares the same basic size and shape of enclosure and the same

three-way, four-driver configuration, but all the important details have changed, which is probably just as well, since the price is much higher – £750 for the Aelite 3 in 2007; £1,500 for this new Radiance 3 today.

“Curved sides are also functional, helping disperse internal reflections and avoid generating focused standing waves.”

Whether or not the enclosure is similar, this is a handsome floorstander. It has attractive and functional curved sides and front edges, is finished in either pale or dark real-wood veneer (albeit of rather anonymous appearance) and sits on proper cast-alloy outrigger spiked feet that ensure fine mechanical stability. Proper 8mm spikes with real locknuts provide good floor coupling. The cabinet construction itself is interesting, as the sides are formed by filleting the insides of the 15mm MDF panels with closely spaced, deep grooves, allowing the curved shape to develop. This increases damping, but reduces the rigidity and structural integrity, so this is restored by using horizontal partitions that also serve to create the separate chambers for each of the cone drive units.

Curved sides are not only fashionable; they're also functional, helping disperse internal reflections and avoid generating focused standing waves. The enclosure is much narrower at the back than at the front, but wide enough to accommodate a terminal panel with two pairs of socket/binders, plus no fewer than three ports – one for each of the cone drivers. A plug conceals a cavity near the base that can be filled with dry sand, for example, for extra stability, though frankly this is hardly needed. And the optional grille is cleverly held by magnets hidden beneath the veneer, so its removal leaves no visible means of support.

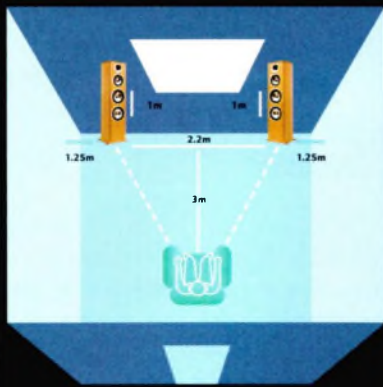
All three metal-cone drivers have AE's pointy dust caps – the two bass units have 160mm cast frames and 120mm cones; the smaller midrange-only driver uses a 130mm

frame and a 95mm cone. While based on those used in earlier ranges, these drive units have undergone considerable development. Finite element analysis (FEA) modelling of cone termination has resulted in break-up

points at substantially higher frequencies, while moving mass has been reduced and magnet design optimised to increase sensitivity. Harmonic distortion and thermal compression have both been reduced too. ▶



SET-UP



POSITIONING

This speaker, with its combination of two 160mm bass drivers each loaded by its own 40Hz-tuned rear port, has ample bass output to fill even our relatively large (4.3x2.6x5.5m) listening room when placed at least one metre clear of walls.

Smaller rooms and/or closer-to-wall positioning are very likely to result in rather too much bass output. However, one advantage of port-loading is that port-blocking is always an option (rolled-up socks are very effective!) and provides a useful degree of potential flexibility.

One bonus from the use of the sophisticated DXT lens, is that the far-field 'power' response won't be too adversely affected if the speaker is placed fairly close to side walls.

SYSTEM MATCHING

The Radiance 3 has a generous sensitivity of 90-91dB. This means the speaker should be reasonably easy to drive with almost any amplification, although the impedance is quite low at a couple of points through the bass region and this is likely to require a fair amount of current from the partnering amp.

The load dips to around 4.5 ohms in the mid-bass (120-130Hz). However, few amps are likely to find this problematic, though low resistance cables are to be preferred.

At the very top end of the audio band, the impedance starts to fall slightly at frequencies above 8kHz and has fallen to below 4 ohms by 20kHz, which is a little less than ideal from the point of view of amp stability. However, again this is very unlikely to cause any mischief, as there's little program energy at these frequencies, especially as it seems to be flattening out at the 20kHz limit of our measurement.



❑ The tweeter used here has a 38mm 'ring radiator' or annular soft-fabric diaphragm, and is loaded at the front by a DXT waveguide that controls its dispersion (see 'Lens-loading' box over the page). Fed from twin terminal pairs, the crossover network is deliberately kept as simple as possible, reducing the component count, increasing the quality of those components used and eliminating resistors.

SOUND QUALITY

It came as no surprise to find that a generously proportioned floorstander with twin port-loaded 160mm bass drivers such

as this needs to be kept well clear of the walls. Measured under far-field in-room conditions, the Radiance 3 delivers healthy bass output down to 27Hz, assisted by 40Hz port-tuning.

Furthermore, it delivers an overall frequency response that holds within an impressive ± 3 dB across nearly the whole audio band, alongside a generous 90dB sensitivity. Although the overall response limits are impressive, the trace isn't without a degree of 'character', showing some lack of output in the midband (250-500Hz) as well as some excess in the upper mid (700Hz-1.5kHz).

Perhaps, complementing the relatively high sensitivity, the impedance is quite demanding in terms of amplifier current, twice dropping to around 4.5 ohms, once at the tuned port resonance 35-43Hz, and again a little higher up, 110-130Hz, the latter a sector of the audio band where typical program levels are quite high. Above 8kHz the impedance also falls, though there's little program energy at these highest frequencies.

The first thing one notices on plugging in and playing the Radiance 3s is just how 'quiet' the enclosures are. The sort of 'cabinet grunge' that normally serves to restrict and obscure detail resolution at the lower end of the total dynamic range seems largely absent here, or at least exceptionally well controlled. The consequence is a speaker that sounds uncommonly 'clean'.

However, perhaps in part as a result of that very low enclosure signature, the mild

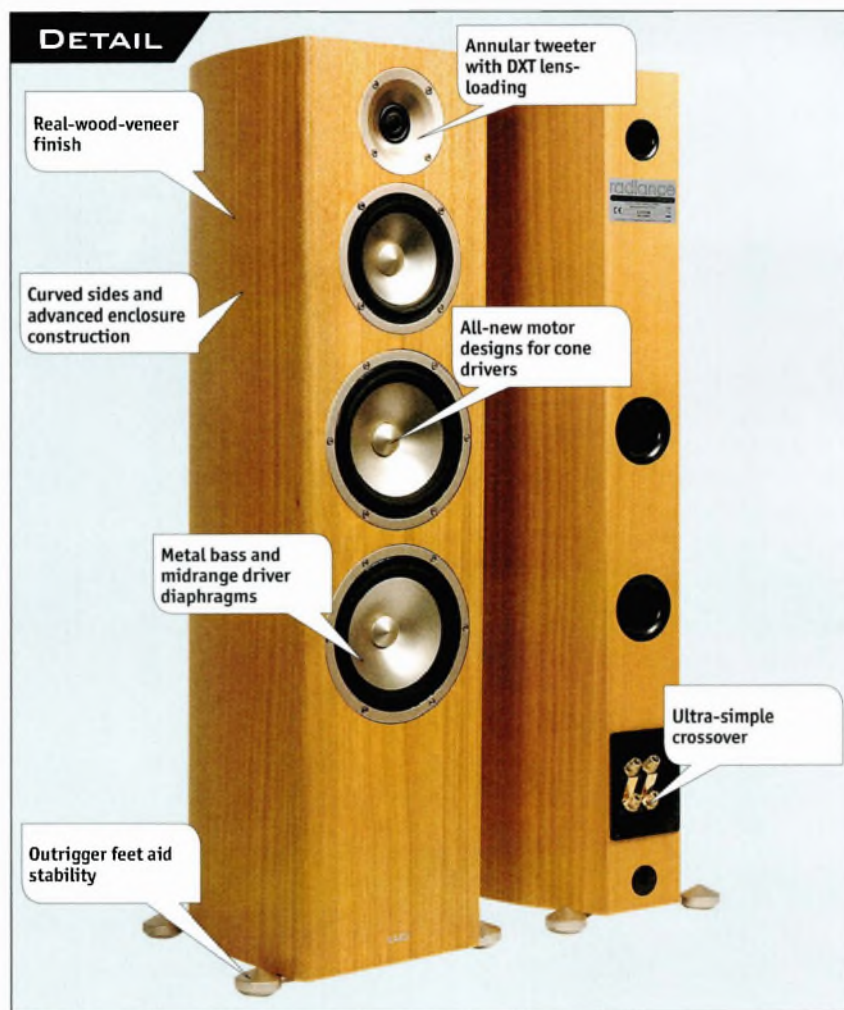


imbalance through the broad midrange isn't easy to ignore, leaving the upper frequencies here a trifle too exposed. The result is that voices can sound a little too explicitly projected, with a slightly 'cupped hands' or megaphonic effect. While this certainly makes it very easy to hear song lyrics and speech when the speaker is playing quietly, it also means that things can get a trifle aggressive and shouty when the volume is wound up high. What is unquestionably nice at low volumes starts to get a bit uncomfortable as levels are increased.

While the dynamic range is unusually wide, the actual dynamic behaviour does fall a little short of that obtainable at higher prices. Although it drives the music along with good purpose and weight, the bass end would benefit from rather more grip and tension, while the midband is slightly softened by a degree of time smear, which again serves to take the edge off the expressiveness inherent in the performance.

Stereo imaging is a major plus, as the soundstage shows no tendency to cluster around the boxes and depth perspectives are well portrayed, especially on recordings with a large and believable acoustic, such as choral material.

The sweet and smooth top end is certainly a major strength, as it supplies plenty of



LENS-LOADING

A possible disadvantage of mounting a tweeter conventionally on a flat front baffle is that there's an inevitable discontinuity in dispersion between the relatively small diaphragm of the tweeter and the much larger diaphragm of the midrange driver around the crossover zone. Careful application of waveguide or lens technology can help to mitigate this effect.

Lenses or waveguides have recently started to become quite fashionable, with notable examples from KEF and Amphion, to name but two.

The lens developed by company DXT (www.dxt.dk) and used by Acoustic Energy in the Radiance 3s is more complex than most and consists of carefully calculated and shaped concentric rings, whose purpose is essentially to maintain a consistent dispersion and hence power response right through the tweeter's operating range, as well as a good match to the midrange driver's dispersion through the crossover region. Measurements suggest this is successfully achieved.

“The first thing one notices on plugging in and playing the Radiance 3s is just how ‘quiet’ the enclosures are.”

subtle detail without ever seeming to draw attention to itself. The annular tweeter used here has long been regarded as one of the better examples around, even appearing on some very exotically priced models, and its performance here, assisted by the DXT lens, is certainly well up to the expected level.

The only real complaint arose when some friends were visiting and we were rocking out with the sounds of Beefheart, Little Feat, Tom Waits and suchlike at relatively high levels. Under these circumstances the slightly 'shouty' character and lack of tight dynamic grip became mildly irritating, so we changed over to a speaker costing six times the price.

Taking cost into consideration, however, and in regular day-to-day use over a period of at least ten days – using a wide variety of material from diverse sources including vinyl,

CD, radio and TV – this Acoustic Energy acquitted itself very well indeed, and proved most satisfactory and satisfying. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Very effective enclosure engineering ensures a wide dynamic range and a very clean sound. Offers impressive sensitivity and a good overall balance, with well-judged bass and a smooth top end.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON Upper midband is a little too exposed, while some time smear takes the edge off dynamic expression.
VALUE ★★★★★	

CONCLUSION
This speaker is impressive in a number of respects, its very effective enclosure ensuring a wide dynamic range and a very clean sound with a smooth, sweet top end. The upper midband is a little too exposed, though, and some time smear is evident.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

URL www.techradar.com/587236

P R I M A R E



R20

Lost and found

We unearth a hidden gem in the Primare catalogue

PRODUCT Primare R20 MkII

TYPE MM/MC phono stage

PRICE £550

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 21.5x7.5x27.5cm

Weight: 4kg Gain: MM – 35/41dB, MC – 55dB

Input impedances: 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 47k ohms

CONTACT ☎ 01423 359054 🌐 www.primare.net

Alvin wasn't the only hi-fi reviewer to visit Primare last November. I went along too, and was shown around the Swedish company's warehousing-and-testing facilities in the unpronounceable town of Växjö. It's apparent that MD Lars Pedersen runs a very efficient organisation in all but one respect – no one from the UK, at least, seemed to know he had a phono stage in the range. I spotted one at the factory and took the opportunity to request a sample.

The R20 is built in the solid style of all Primare products, but being relatively small, the heavy-gauge steel casework and precisely etched front panel seem even more substantial. The theme continues with three aluminium-and-rubber feet. Another Primare trait is the hidden power switch, located under the front left side of the case, which keeps up the clean appearance and discourages switch-off.

At the rear there are inputs and outputs attached directly to the PCB and floating from the chassis itself, presumably as a means of keeping hum at bay. There's switching for MM and MC cartridges and six impedance settings. We'd like to have seen a one-kohm setting as well, and haven't come across many MCs that require the very low settings available. But undoubtedly some do, and the R20 could prove very useful in those situations.

Internally there's the option to add a shorting

jumper across two pins on either channel, which increases MM gain. This is the first time we've come across such a feature, and initially we thought there was an error in the manual. After all, greater MC gain is more likely to be

dynamics on offer from that quarter either, but it does have a more luxurious feel that works well with turntable-and-cartridge combinations that err towards the lean in balance terms.

Musically, it gets things right, delivering a

“It delivers a nimble, engaging result with any decent slab of vinyl. Its smoothness also encourages higher-level listening.”

required. But no – it's for MM alone; however, Primare can increase MC gain if requested.

SOUND QUALITY

To start with we connected the R20 to the output of a Sumiko BPS Evo III high-output MC cartridge, which has similar characteristics to an MM, with a 2.5mV output and a preference for 47-kohm load impedance. It therefore worked best on the R20's MM gain setting, producing a lush and large-scale result which, while not as clear-cut and gritty as with our Trichord Delphini reference, was inviting and musically engaging.

But when we switched over to a van den Hul Frog MC with a 0.55mV output and a preference for impedances above 100 ohms, there was clearly a shortage of both gain and high-frequency resolve. So much so that we went back to Primare to check that all was right – a request that prompted a re-evaluation of the R20 by the firm and an update to MkII status. This change enabled it to reveal its ability to reproduce space, detail and a strong sense of timing. It's not quite as transparent as Trichord's slightly dearer Dino Mk2/Dino+ model (£563) and doesn't quite match the

nimble and engaging result with any decent slab of vinyl. Its smoothness also encourages higher-level listening, as the mid and top are less inclined towards hardness. This also helps with less refined recordings, which can sound a bit strident via the Trichord – those with heavy saxophone or trumpet workouts, for instance, where the microphone can sound like it's under serious duress. The scale of the soundstage the model produces is quite enticing too, solid and placed well behind the speakers.

The R20 is well suited to more affordable MCs and leaner-sounding turntables. It works with other varieties too, but its luxurious sound balances out the former extremely well. For example, it would suit a Rega P7 better than a Pro-Ject RPM 9X. However, it'll provide the joy of vinyl with either. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Boasts high build quality along with a good range of impedance settings, and produces a warm, generous sound that's sure to seduce the romantic.
FEATURES ★★★★★	CON Variable gain for MC might be more useful than for MM, and a one-kohm impedance setting would also be useful for some MCs.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION Very well put together, with high-quality components and casework, the R20 has a large, expansive soundstage which is high on luxury. It times well and has decent bass resolution too, and thus will slot nicely into many vinyl systems.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/587260	

EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Japanese giant

Pioneer's massive new standmount features high-tech drivers developed by TAD

PRODUCT Pioneer S-2EX-W

TYPE Standmount loudspeaker

PRICE £5,200 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 29.1x56.5x42.5cm
 ◎ Weight: 28kg ◎ Drivers: 35mm tweeter with beryllium-diaphragm, 140mm mid/treble, 180mm Aramid woofer ◎ Sensitivity: 86.5dB ◎ Power: 200W
 ◎ Impedance: 6 ohms ◎ Real-wood finish
 ◎ Sculpted concave baffle

CONTACT ☎ 01753 789789 🌐 www.pioneer.co.uk

It's a shame, but there's no avoiding the fact that the British hi-fi industry is prejudiced against Japanese loudspeakers. There's no denying this is the case – and there are reasons for it too, though frankly they're not very good ones. Partly it's out of respect among retailers and customers for Britain's own speaker brands (which remain popular and are respected internationally), and partly it's due to a historic lack of interest on the part of the Japanese multinationals – who had the mass market in hi-fi electronics comfortably sewn up back in the seventies and who saw little point in shipping bulky wooden boxes halfway across the world.

But in this reviewer's experience, the few Japanese speakers that do make it to the UK are well worth a second listen. And the fact that the legendary Air Studios has selected these as monitors (as it proclaims loudly on the carton) is a powerful endorsement.

That said, despite the Pioneer name, we believe these particular 'Japanese' speakers are actually put together in China with Chinese cabinets and Japanese-made drive units, while design was carried out in France in consultation with a US-based Welshman called Andrew Jones! Such is globalisation.

Pioneer's various S-EX models are certainly very serious speakers indeed, in no small part because they use drive units based on the legendary TAD units made by Pioneer's pro-audio division, Technical Audio Devices. Since the days of Laserdisc, Pioneer has been a key player on the home cinema scene, and visitors to Sound & Vision shows over the years may well have been reduced to

quivering wrecks by a complete multichannel S-EX surround sound system in full flight. Floorstanders, centre-front dialogue, subwoofers and standmount speakers all share similar driver technology, similar

With nominal crossover frequencies at 400Hz and 2kHz, each of these drive units is expressly designed for its operating range. The driver frames are open and unobstructive, while compact neodymium magnets make

“Appearances can be deceptive, as this is actually a three-way design. The midrange and treble are handled by a coaxial unit.”

enclosure construction and, of course, similar styling and presentation.

This S-2EX is a big and decidedly hefty three-way standmount. Unfortunately, it has also become a rather expensive one recently, as the plummeting value of sterling has led to a dramatic price rise, from the £3,500 per pair we thought the speaker cost when this review was originally commissioned to a wallet-hammering £5,200 per pair.

At a not inconsiderable 28kg, a weight-lifting belt is advisable when unpacking and lifting each speaker onto a stand. Although it's well suited to the normal 60cm-high stand, the model's substantial footprint means you'll need one with a relatively large top surface. Furthermore, the curved shape really suggests that Pioneer's own matching stand is probably the best choice. Designed to complement the look of these impressive speakers, the proprietary stands are available at an additional cost of £1,000 per pair.

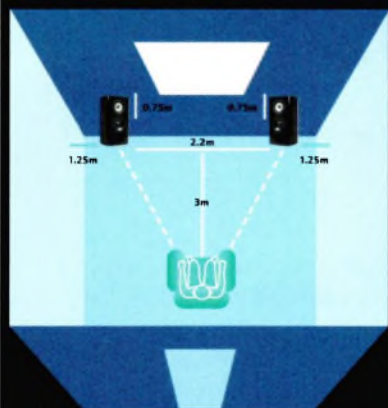
The technology behind these speakers is hugely impressive. Pioneer's TAD division is (of course) responsible for the two high-tech drive units. However, appearances can be deceptive, as this is actually a three-way design. The midrange and treble are handled by a coaxial unit, which combines a 140mm midrange driver with a 35mm tweeter. Pioneer implies exclusivity for this so-called CST (Coherent Source Transducer) technology, though the similarity to KEF's 20-year-old Uni-Q approach is hard to ignore. A 180mm unit, reflex-loaded by a substantial flared front port, supplies bass.

their own contribution to avoiding reflections.

The 180mm bass driver has a very large (65mm) voice coil and a 140mm cone/dome diaphragm. For extra strength, the latter is formed from a single piece of woven Aramid matrix (not unlike Kevlar), while the surround is a damped-cloth concertina affair. The midrange diaphragm is a magnesium-alloy ▶



SET-UP



POSITIONING

The in-room measurements do suggest that free-space siting on 60cm stands will give best results. Though the speaker is tall for a standmount, because the tweeter is located in the middle of the midrange driver, such a stand will place it at around seated ear level.

The bass alignment is quite dry, so some close-to-wall reinforcement could be worth trying. Its effects are rather unpredictable, as they'll depend on how the port output interacts with the modes of your room.

The port here is tuned to 40Hz, which is perhaps a little on the high side for a speaker of this size, and also a little close to a major mode in our listening room (at around 50Hz). Under our conditions there's plenty of output down to 40Hz, but little below that point.

SYSTEM MATCHING

Sensitivity is around average here, but the load presented to the driving amplifier looks decidedly demanding, dipping to a minimum of 3.3 ohms at around 120Hz, a frequency around which inherent programme power is likely to be quite high. Power handling is quoted at 200 watts, though we suspect this design can handle significantly more.

Certainly a high-quality solid-state amp is indicated here, given the unexceptional sensitivity, the high power-handling capacity and the fact that the loading on the amp will require substantial current if the full loudness capability is to be exploited.

Furthermore, these speakers' fine overall sound quality demands that they're used with top-quality sources, amplification and ancillaries such as cabling. Their analytical neutrality and wide dynamic range take no prisoners, so they're quite capable of ruthlessly revealing any shortcomings in the signal.



❑ cone 110mm in diameter, while the 35mm dome tweeter is formed from that stiffest of all metals, beryllium.

By placing the tweeter down in the 'throat' of the midrange cone, the two diaphragms can be time-aligned in terms of the distance from listeners, while the shaped concave baffle sets the rather deeper woofer somewhat ahead of the CST unit, to bring it into time alignment too.

No mention is made of the crossover network or its components in the propaganda, which is a little surprising, though the impedance trace looks very complex. Twin terminal pairs are mounted directly through the wooden back and are supplied with high-quality wire links.

Neodymium magnets are light as well as compact for their power, so it's likely that much of that intimidating 28kg is down to the hefty enclosure, which is immensely strong and tough. The curved sides and back are constructed by laminating together many thin layers of MDF and the total thickness apparently varies between 30mm and 100mm. The surface is covered in good-quality satin-finish real-wood veneer – very dark, almost black, on our samples, though a high-gloss beech is also available.

PERFORMANCE

Although it's been a busy month for speaker reviewing, with no fewer than eight models lining up for attention, this Pioneer stands head and shoulders above the others, well

justifying its elevated price through

an impressive collection of pluses and very few negatives.

Though basic, the measurements are as usual rather revealing. The far-field in-room power response is exceptionally flat and neutral, give or take the odd room mode. However, in view of the size of the enclosure, the rather average 88dB/2.83V sensitivity (somewhat better than Pioneer's figure, probably due to differing measurement conditions) and the quite demanding impedance characteristic, the bass isn't particularly well extended,



registering -6dB at 37Hz under our in-room conditions. While the broad midband, presence and much of the treble are notably flat, even and quite smooth, things look rather untidy between 10kHz and 20kHz, due to the coaxial layout.

Although the in-room responses do indicate clear-of-wall siting, the bass alignment is quite dry, so the speakers could be set a little closer to a wall without causing problems.

The bottom octave is audibly largely absent, partly because the bass end of this speaker is unusually clean and clear of any significant coloration. It operates with impressive grip, drive and a real sense of purpose that underpins the rest of the range with enthusiasm, agility, drama and authority.

This is a genuine monitor in every sense of the word. It doesn't do sweet and it doesn't do 'easy on the ears'. It tells it like it is with an efficiency that some might find a little too ruthless, but which this listener interprets as a refreshing honesty.

As a monitor it's exceptionally effective, due to its superb open neutrality, wide dynamic range, fine grip and superb low-level resolution. It demonstrates superior dynamic linearity and tracking across a wide range, always seeming to maintain proper contrasts from lowest to highest levels,



“Voices demonstrate fine expression and articulation, making it easy to tell specific voices and their individual accents apart.”

TIME COHERENCE

One of the key features of the Pioneer S-2EX is its fine time coherence, an aspect of performance that's always difficult to achieve in a multi-driver speaker system, and requires several factors to be in place.

The S-2EX's front panel or baffle is deliberately formed into a concave curve, which has the effect of placing the bass driver slightly ahead of the mid/ treble coaxial unit. This compensates for the bass driver being lower down on the speaker; bringing it forward in this way should put it at roughly the same distance from the listener's ears as the mid/ treble.

Meanwhile, one advantage of a carefully designed coaxial mid/ treble driver is that the acoustic centres of the two units can be made coincident.

Those geometric factors help achieve time alignment, but the crossover is just as important, as each 'order' introduces a 90-degree phase shift. A fourth-order network, therefore, gives a full 360 degrees and returns the drivers to an in-phase situation. Alternatively, the midrange could be connected out of phase with the bass and treble, using second-order network arms.

whatever the volume-control setting. Voices demonstrate fine expression and articulation, making it easy to tell specific voices and their individual accents apart, and communicating their intentions and inflections very accurately and effectively.

Total coherence does seem to be slightly compromised, due perhaps to a little untidiness towards the top of the audio band, but timing is nonetheless very good and stereo images are beautifully focused, with a fine rendition of depth and ambience.

The lack of deep bass didn't seem too much of a problem in isolation, but when the Pioneers were shipped for photography and replaced by a much larger (and more costly) pair of pro monitors (PMC IB2is) offering considerably more deep bass, the improvement was obvious and beneficial, the extra weight and scale somehow making the whole listening experience more relaxing, without adversely affecting the musical enjoyment or the subtle detail.

The S-2EX does, therefore, have its limitations. It needs a powerful, high-quality

amplifier and does lack a little warmth and welly low down. But at the end of the day, its powers of analysis are prodigious and its ability to enable unfamiliar music forms to communicate effectively is exceptional. It goes without saying that there's a great deal to like here. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	PRO A genuinely neutral monitor with prodigious powers of analysis. Boasts fine timing, outstanding dynamic range and grip, and excellent stereo soundstaging.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆	CON Needs a good, powerful amp, and lacks a little warmth and welly low down. Top end could be sweeter, and the recent price rise is unfortunate too.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★☆	

CONCLUSION
This monitor offers superb midband neutrality and exceptional clarity even with unfamiliar music, handling timing, dynamic range, grip and imaging really well. You need a lot of power to drive it, though, and it lacks some warmth and weight.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

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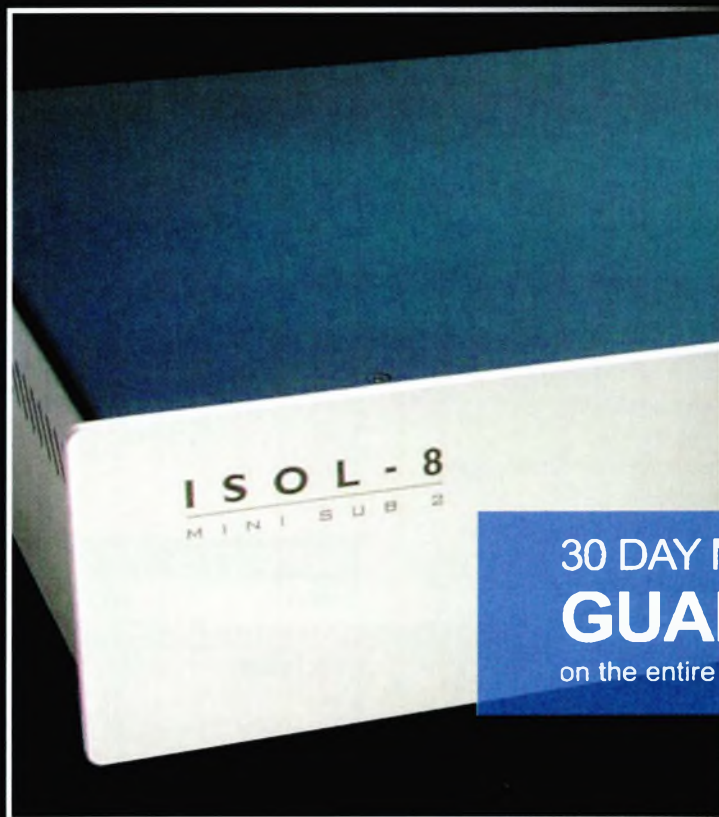
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Ken Kessler - Jan 2009 Review of Isol-8 PowerStation

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[audio physic]

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Review of Audio Physic Sitara

30 DAY MONEY BACK
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on the Audio Physic Sitara

See the full review on the Audio Physic Sitara Loudspeaker in this issue - pages 50, 51 & 52.

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BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



TOWNSHEND F

TOWNSHEND F

Rockin' good fun

Bargain Rock turntable is one of the best you can buy

PRODUCT Townshend Rock 7

TYPE Turntable (and trough)

PRICE £1,498

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 40x15x34cm

⊙ Weight: 14.5kg ⊙ Speeds: 33.3, 45rpm manual change ⊙ Arms accommodated: Rega, Linn, Townshend ⊙ Can be upgraded to full Rock V spec

CONTACT ☎ 020 8979 3787 # www.townshendaudio.com

The Townshend Rock 7 is the latest in a long line of affordable variants on the Rock theme – turntables that feature a damping trough full of silicone fluid that sits over the record. This range started with the original design at the Cranfield institute of Technology, which became the first Townshend Rock in the early 1980s. The trough remains the same but the rest of the turntable has been through at least six iterations including the mighty Rock V that we reviewed and rated back in 2008 (*HFC* 307).

In an attempt to build a turntable that is affordable and also incorporates the key technologies that underpin the Rock V, Townshend has decided to offer the Rock 7 in trough-less guise. The cost is £999, but it doesn't really live up to its billing until you spend another £499 and add a trough, so we decided to review the system as a whole.

The Rock 7 is based around a solid steel plinth which is supported on three pneumatically damped, sprung feet. These are the same feet that are found on the Rock V

albeit hidden within the heavily damped chassis. They consist of a large coil spring within a rubber bellows that has small holes at the top and bottom, these holes slow down the rate at which the springs can move and thus

“Any vibration that gets to the platter or cartridge via the tonearm will add to the signal being traced by the stylus.”

damps the system so that it doesn't bounce up and down like more conventional suspended-sub-chassis turntables. The feet are designed to keep vibrations in the surface that supports the turntable away from the platter, tonearm and ultimately the bit that reads the vinyl; the stylus. As the fluctuations in the groove on a piece of vinyl are minute, any vibration that gets to the platter or cartridge via the tonearm will add to the signal being traced by the stylus. So it's essential that the stylus/vinyl interface remains as free from external resonance as it can be. The trough is there for the same reason, (see our 'Trough Times' box on p57).

One unusual feature of the Rock 7 is the counter balance on the left hand side of the plinth. This is an adjustable arm where you can add mass to in order to balance the weight of the tonearm and cartridge. It seems a little strange, but that's because there is no adjustment available with the suspension feet.

All other suspended turntables offset this inherent imbalance by offering adjustment of the springs that attach a sub-chassis to the main plinth. Here everything sits on the suspension and while it is possible to adjust the

feet to a degree, it's not enough to compensate for the weight of the arm and arm base, which is where the counter balance comes in. We used an old-style Rega RB300 tonearm on the Rock 7 which required quite a bit of ballast to balance out. Fortunately, the suspension works more effectively with more weight on it. The Rock V for instance, weighs significantly more than this turntable, yet sits on very similar springs.

The Rock 7 has the same platter material as the V, not acrylic, but high-density polyethylene in a distinctive white finish (it was going to be black, but that proved to be too revealing of finger marks). The platter is 39mm thick and differs from the Rock V in lacking a glass layer underneath it. It sits on a sub-platter in the same material and this rests on a precision, ground-steel bearing in a brass journal. Townshend supplies 'state-of-the-art synthetic oil' to keep it running smoothly. ▶



Q&A

We spoke to
Townshend Audio's
head honcho Max
Townshend about the
Rock 7 turntable.



**HFC: Why Rock 7?
We don't recall
a Rock 6.**

MT: Because six is unlucky in some countries. In other countries four is unlucky. I went to my astrologer and this is what they told me, anyway. There was a Rock 3 in the mid-nineties made out of the Seismic Sink; we made it in America with an acrylic platter and it sold well over there. We made it in our Houston factory, where things were going quite well until one of the partners in the business screwed things up.

What upgrade options are available for the Rock 7?

The upgrade options are the V platter which has higher mass and a bigger, fatter, more powerful motor. You can also add an electronic power supply. There's no bearing upgrade, as it's the same bearing, technically, they're interchangeable, so there's no benefit to changing it. The only bearing upgrade I can do is the hydraulic lift-off bearing, which is in the pipeline for an ultimate turntable. The first upgrade I would recommend is the record clamp, that makes a significant difference.

What elements does this turntable share with the Rock V?

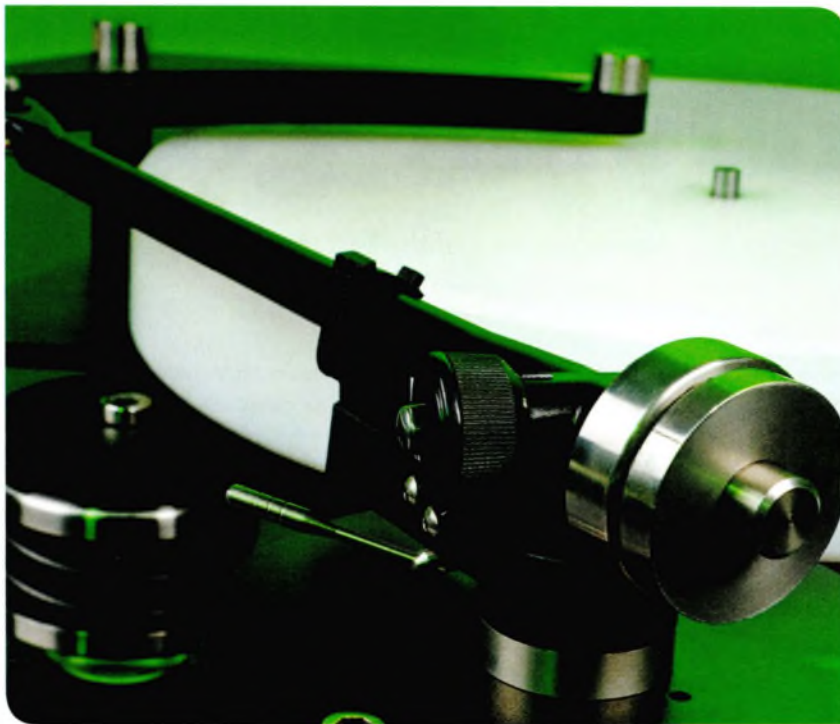
Same platter material, same belt, same bearing ball and the same feet. These are crucial parts.

Why did you go for the skeletal design?

I was looking at what other people were doing, which is making skeletal turntables and charging a fortune for them. There's nothing in these things – there's nothing there – and they're charging thousands of pounds for them. I said, I'm going to have a bit of that. With the Rock V there's a base, there's feet, there's a cover and a front and a back panel, a socket and a switch and a light. I'm making all these things that the other guys aren't making; they're just making a chassis. At least you get a suspension with this one – a lot of them just have spikes to the ground.

Was it not possible to include adjustment for the suspension?

It's better that way, because you can't have unequal weight on your suspension, or it won't isolate anywhere near as well. You get far, far better isolation if you've got equal weight on each leg. It's technically vital to balance it like that.



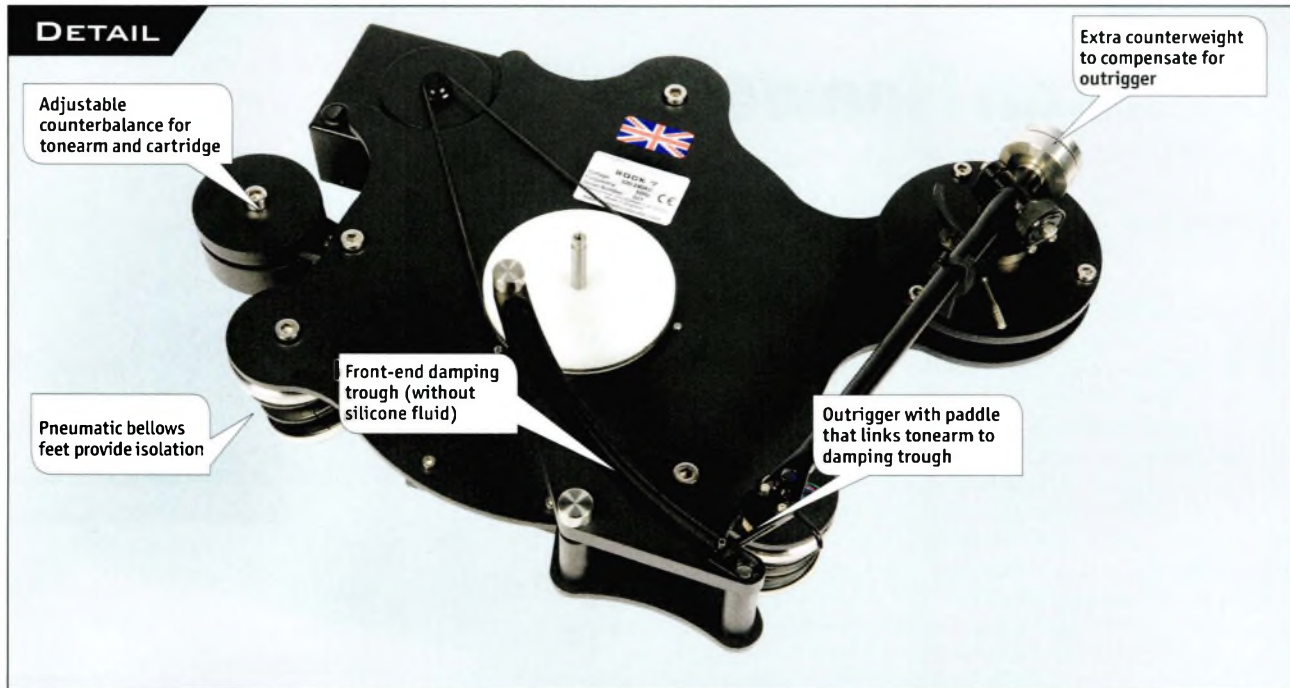
▣ The motor is suspended on Nytrol bands within a free-standing case with adjustable feet, driving the sub-platter via an O-section belt and pulleys for the usual speeds. The on/off switch is on the same box. Townshend makes arm bases for Rega, Linn and its own Excalibur II arm as standard, but can supply bases for other arms if required. With all but Townshend arms, you need to clamp the headshell with an outrigger that sits in the silicone goo. As this is an intrinsic part of the system, it needs to be fixed precisely and solidly. But it also has to be positioned so that the cartridge is aligned, fortunately the outrigger's straight edge makes the alignment process somewhat easier than is usually the case.



Setting up the Rock 7 from scratch proved a little tricky for us, but we have given plenty of feedback to Townshend on how to clarify the instructions. To be fair, we had the earliest example that we could prise out of the company, so didn't expect the smoothest ride. It's essentially quite straightforward: fit the bearing through the sub-platter, clean and oil the journal and let it bed down. Then fit the tonearm to the base and the outrigger to the headshell along with the cartridge (Townshend supplies an extra counterweight for Rega arms). It pays to follow instructions at this point because the outrigger's 'paddle' needs to sit properly in the trough as it transcribes the record. The trough can be adjusted so that it fits the arc of the arm via the chunky stainless bolts that hold it to the plinth. You then need to balance the arm with the right amount of weights on the counterbalancing outrigger, then get a spirit level and adjust the position of the outrigger until the turntable is level.

Finally, once everything is appropriately set up, you can fill the trough with silicone fluid. This is the aspect of the design that most people find disconcerting, fearing that the stuff will get on their vinyl. In practise it's not an





issue, just remember to wipe off the excess if you take the outrigger out of the trough for any reason. In normal use this is not necessary.

SOUND QUALITY

The sonic result is impressive in its sheer resolution – this turntable has much of the neutrality that we found with the Rock V. It gets out of the way and lets you hear what's in the groove be it Keith Jarrett's clanky piano at *The Köln Concert* or Frank Zappa's grungy guitar on *Chunga's Revenge*. You hear the character of the instruments, voices, venue and

“It's closer to digital bass than any other turntable in its price range and has more body than most CD players can muster.”

recording plain as day. This Rock has very little in the way of character and the trough has a calming effect on whatever cartridge you use and is, therefore, well suited to designs that otherwise might be a little too edge-of-the-seat, but what you hear is pretty much what the needle is capable of extracting from the disc.

It also does what Rocks have always done well: it produces taut and powerful bass, there is none of the overhang or blowsiness in the lower registers that you often get with vinyl. The bass here is juicy, dynamic and textured when the source allows. It's closer to digital bass than any other turntable in its price range and has more body than most CD players can muster. Timing is also good, maybe a bit behind the best in class but tight and clean, it's certainly not difficult to appreciate the quality of musicianship on a beautifully timed piece like Rickie Lee Jones' *Flying Cowboys*, the drumming on this is just sublime. It also does a superb job with Keith Jarrett's fluidity on the album *Changes*, his fingers producing a rippling water sound on the piano that is quite extraordinary.

Jeff Beck's rendition of *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* delivers all of the atmospheric buzz of the guitar amp alongside the power and dynamics that do this track off the *Wired* album proud. The calm platform that the turntable offers confers a sense of effortlessness to replay that

makes for very convincing instruments and voices and when you've got a great recording you know all about it. This is partly because the turntable is so good at digging out fine detail; at low and high level you get the full picture of events. It could be more refined and powerful as we've heard with the Rock V, but the fundamental information comes through.

The Rock 7 is a good turntable without the trough, add it and you have a giant-slayer. It's not the prettiest of its ilk, but it represents the most revealing turntable at its price and that is what high fidelity is all about. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

TROUGH TIMES

The trough is the thing that differentiates Rock turntables from all others. Only Townshend has a licence to use the design and while other companies have used silicone damping on tonearms, it has always been at the other end, near the main bearing. The idea with the trough is to lock the tonearm at the cartridge end; this is in order to kill resonance in the arm and cartridge body, leaving the stylus to get on with its job unimpeded. The silicone fluid allows the slow (low frequency) movement of the cartridge as it traces the vinyl, but damps fast movement which is closer to the high frequency at which the stylus moves. It effectively means that the arm is anchored at both ends, rather than at the pivot point, as is usually the case. As a result it offers a far more stable platform for the cartridge to operate on. Rock turntables are so named because of the solidity that the damping trough brings to the sound.

VERDICT

SOUND



PRO

Solid build and sound quality and massive resolution for the money. Excellent suspension means it'll work on most surfaces, too.

FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



CON

Industrial finish means it's not the best looking turntable at the price, set up is a bit of a kerfuffle and it could turn you into a vinyl junkie!

CONCLUSION

The Rock 7 may look basic, but its ability to pull detail out of a vinyl groove is anything but. If you want to hear the record, not the record player, beat a path to Townshend's door and get hold of one of the most resolute turntables at any price.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE



URL www.techradar.com/587280

Alphason Finewoods FW750

TYPE Equipment rack

PRICE £239 (complete)

CONTACT ☎ 0845 1306686 # www.alphasondesigns.com

We've tended to consider hi-fi racks strictly from an audio perspective, but we were keen to get our hands on this model when Alphason offered it, so that we could see just how the audio performance of an AV-oriented product like this might, er, stack up. It looks wide and it is, though this is actually the narrowest variant: the 750 denotes overall width in millimetres, but there are also 1100 and 1350 models, even the former capable of housing two normal hi-fi units side-by-side. With a usable width of just under 55cm, this model will take one normal unit or two 'shoebox' format (Cyrus etc.) ones on each shelf.

The FW750 is robust, claimed to support TVs up to 80kg (it certainly supported this 65kg reviewer OK). The side units are hollow, made of fairly thin board and veneered in walnut, light oak or black oak and have threaded holes for the rectangular frames that support the toughened glass shelves.

The back panel also has generous cut-outs for cables.

We tried various items of kit on it, including turntables, to which it proved an uncomfortable match: acres of glass and LPs don't mix well. With digital sources and amplifiers, however, the sound is good and stable, with a nice open treble but a hint of plumminess in the upper bass that's not unpleasant, but does very slightly mask detail in that very vulnerable region. Low bass fares better, with good extension and decent, but perhaps not amazing, control. Not a true audiophile product, then, but good value for the smart looks at the very least. **HFC**



VERDICT

A very nice-looking, if bulky, stand for simple systems and/or some AV. The price is attractive too. Sound is a little coloured, but pleasant enough.



Hi-Fi Racks Podium

TYPE Equipment rack

PRICE £500 as tested (£125 per tier)

CONTACT ☎ 01572 756447 # www.hifiracks.co.uk

A fairly recent arrival on the scene, Hi-Fi Racks offers a simple, but adaptable range of products, all made from solid wood rather than the more common veneered particleboard. The Podium racks are basically a series of stacking tables, while the intriguing Tri Iso is a skeletal design with three legs. Various leg lengths are available as standard with custom to order, making the rack suitable for just about any kit. Each tier stands on spikes which locate on little dimpled discs on the tier below: the arrangement seems robust in practice and the resulting rack is stable and, to our eyes, particularly attractive. The only slight problem we found was that the legs don't always screw up tight at the right angle, but we got round this by swapping them around a bit until all four on each tier both looked and felt right. The review sample (as photographed) had no locknuts on the spikes, but we understand these will be provided as

standard by the time you read this.

We really liked the sound our equipment gave us when sitting on the Podium. There's a great sense of low-frequency solidity but also considerable clarity, with no sense of resonant overhang. A solid-body turntable sounded a little vague, but a suspended one was beautifully clear and open, about as good as we've heard from any floor-standing support. A couple of CD players sang out particularly convincingly and it's worth noting that a rather twitchy CD player seemed unusually tolerant of footfall when sitting on a Podium shelf. **HFC**



VERDICT

A keenly priced bit of high-class furniture that also happens to sound great under all sorts of kit. Easy upgrading is a welcome bonus.



Quadraspire Q4

TYPE Equipment rack

PRICE £500 as tested (£85 per level)

CONTACT ☎ 0117 986 3228 🌐 www.quadraspire.co.uk

We've reviewed this rack before on at least one occasion, but apart from the fact that revisiting old acquaintances is always interesting, there's a new feature to mention in the form of a very superior finish. Quadraspire now offers the basic particleboard shelf finished in a sophisticated paint/hand-rubbed polish in black, white or red. That might sound a bit uninteresting, but for one thing we're not alone in having noticed in the past some differences of sound with surface finish (Stradivarius violins are generally reckoned to owe much to their varnish, after all): for another, the finish in question really is quite striking. Many manufacturers talk about 'piano black', but this is actually a higher grade of gloss than is applied to most pianos and in addition seems to be very hard-wearing, an important consideration since scratched, scuffed gloss is never in fashion.

Assembly is the same as ever, the verticals being supplied in sections, which screw together and clamp the shelves in place and the structure is rigid and stable. 32mm legs are available instead of the standard 19mm, which are presumably more rigid still, at the cost of losing 13mm of the (generous) 49cm accessible width.

It's a long time since we heard a Q4 but, if our notes are anything to go by, the new finish has indeed somewhat tidied up the presentation. Turntables are a little marginal, even suspended ones, with some audible confusion in the bass, but audio electronics gives a clear sound with tight bass and very



clear midrange and treble. There's just a hint of coloration in the upper mid, but it's not really distracting. **HFC**

VERDICT

The new paint really looks a million dollars and sound seems improved over the basic finish too, with particularly fine treble.

HI-FI CHOICE



Stands Unique Carbon Fibre Support

TYPE Equipment rack

PRICE £684 (complete)

CONTACT ☎ 01933 412227 🌐 www.standsunique.com

This is something of a new twist to the glass-based rack in that the legs use carbon-fibre-reinforced resin. Carbon fibre has all sorts of advantages including great strength: while the considerable weight of this rack (thanks to the use of 10mm glass) requires reasonable strength when one picks it up. What's far more useful to audiophiles is that such materials naturally resist resonance, while being very stiff. It can be tricky jointing to carbon fibre, but Stands Unique has arranged brass threaded inserts which seem to be very robustly fixed and the stand screws together easily. If the price seems too high, Stands Unique has various other models in its range with more conventional leg materials such as wood.

We were keen to try the Carbon Fibre, though and loaded the rack up with various items in different shapes and sizes. Different weights, too, for thick glass like this expects to be heavily loaded and the loading makes a

difference to the sound. Quite a lot of a rack's sound is due to mechanical resonance in the rack, which is damped by the equipment and we did find that substantial items of upmarket audiophile kit work well on this model. With modest and/or lightweight kit the sound seems a little uneven in the bass and also has a hint of midrange coloration which slightly reduces detail, but with high-end equipment there's a synergistic match which leads to admirably clear, crisp and detailed sound across the range. Turntables will appreciate some additional decoupling, though. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

An expensive stand that suits expensive kit, with sound that's largely free of coloration and resonance. Highly listenable and informative.

HI-FI CHOICE



GROUP TEST & LAB REPORTS: RICHARD BLACK

ONE-BOX HI-FI SYSTEMS

All-in-one hi-fi systems offer real credit crunch-beating value, but which ones are best?

ON TEST



Arcam Solo Mini
£750



Denon RCD-M37DAB
£300



Myryad Mi
£1,250



NAD Viso Two
£800



Shanling MC3000
£1,400



T+A Caruso
£1,850

Once upon a time there was the music centre and it was generally regarded as rubbish. Notwithstanding the efforts of companies like Bang and Olufsen and the occasional flash of brilliance from this or that Japanese manufacturer, the term was mostly associated with dodgy plastic LP-playing mechanisms, noisy electronics, cheesy user interfaces and similarly nasty FM tuners and cassette recorders. In fact, one-box systems were so bad, their demise was not widely lamented.

But even then there was no good engineering reason why a fairly decent system couldn't be built into one box. And in these days of electronic miniaturisation, with a hundred billion transistors in a package the size of a child's fingernail, the challenge is all the more easily met. It must have felt pretty brave when the first few hi-fi specialists dipped a toe in the 'all-in-one' waters a scant four or five years ago, but the time was obviously right and the breed has really taken off.

There are still plenty of challenges involved in putting a CD transport, a tuner and an amplifier of any reasonable output power, into a single box. The CD hasn't got any smaller since 1982 and amplifiers (even digital/switching ones) generate a certain amount of heat which must be dealt with. There also needs to be a display at the front and quite a lot of sockets at the back, so the physical design is still a head-scratcher, but it can be done and here, in various forms, are six examples to prove it.

What's particularly interesting is that they are all from manufacturers with a good track record in two-channel audio,

companies with a reputation to protect and who have much to lose by launching products that perform badly. Yet, by the same token, they know a few tricks when it comes to putting good-sounding electronics together at a competitive price.

Having tested a few of these units in recent issues of *Hi-Fi Choice*, we already had the necessary background knowledge on how they perform individually. Now that we can make comparisons in this month's *Ultimate Group Test*, we can better illustrate just what sort of standard can be achieved in a low-cost, low-fuss, space-saving system. **HFC**

EQUIPMENT USED

- Ⓢ ATC SCM20 loudspeakers
- Ⓢ Bowers and Wilkins 805S loudspeakers
- Ⓢ Arcam Muso loudspeakers
- Ⓢ Speaker cables from Kimber and Atlas

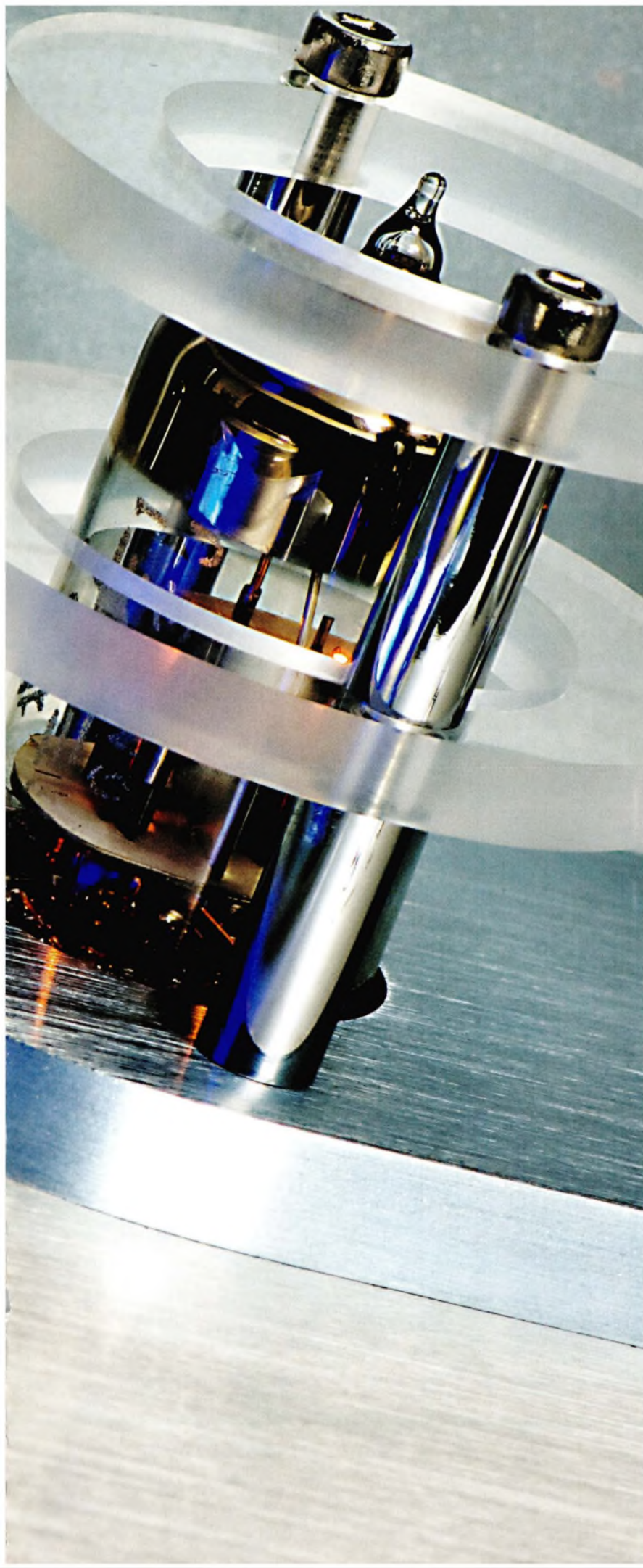
MUSIC USED

- Ⓢ Michael Jackson *Thriller*
- Ⓢ Miles Davis *Kind of Blue*
- Ⓢ Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances*
- Ⓢ Bertouch *Trio Sonatas*
- Ⓢ Pizzetti *Rondò Veneziano*

EARS USED

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

Roger Batchelor (Denon)
Ben Beaumont (Audio Partnership)
Geoff Meads (Arcam)



LISTENING TESTS

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

LAB TESTS

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

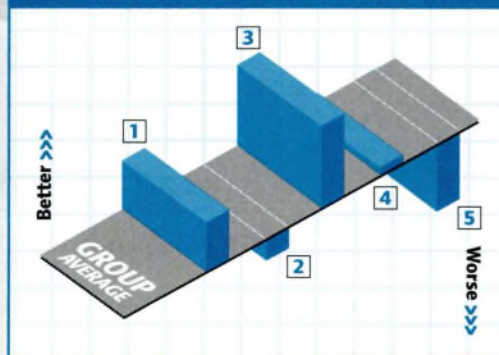
No other magazine offers an equivalent test and listening programme for comparative tests.

LAB REPORTS: THE BAR GRAPH

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

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

OUR BAR GRAPHS: AN EXAMPLE



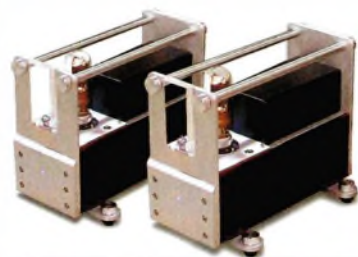
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ARCAM SOLO MINI

Deluxe audiophile touches at a budget price

The Arcam Solo was one of the first products that set the scene for the current revival of the one-box system: the later Mini version offers a good deal of the same performance and features, but in a half-width package. It is, indeed, a very well-specified unit, with a CD transport (a slot-loader which, at the very least, saves space), DAB, FM and AM radio, USB input and iPod control connection. It also boasts five line inputs (one being a mini-jack at the front), recording output and a preamp output ready for the day when you decide to upgrade by adding a beefier amp than the Mini's 25-watt output.

Achieving all that in the space provided has required some lateral thinking from Arcam's designers, who have ended up using a pair of integrated-circuit power amps (linear, not switching), but managed to squeeze in a decent-sized toroidal transformer to power them. Another definite plus is that the DAB module is separate from the AM/FM one and it drives the outside world via the digital-to-analogue converter and filter, also used by the CD player and achieved with good-quality chips. There are even Arcam's trademark ferrite discs stuck on many integrated circuits and mechanical damping applied to other key parts. Audiophile touches like these are definitely deluxe at this sort of price.

Less impressive are the basic loudspeaker output terminals, but we're not going to carp, they're reasonably solid and do little or nothing to lower the tone of what is clearly a serious piece of kit. The chassis is robust and the display pleasantly informative, while control from the top panel or the remote is straightforward. There are basic tone controls and even a clock. As with all the systems in this group, the USB input is only for portable audio players or storage, not connection to a computer.

SOUND QUALITY

There seems no point building up suspense over this product: our listeners simply loved

it. For the first time in just about any *Ultimate Group Test* we can recall, not one listener had a single specific criticism to make of any aspect of the sound. The nearest anyone came was a suggestion that the music on one track seemed to be racing towards the end, but that's pretty much a feature of the piece and the way it's played.

As for specific praise, the bass was certainly well liked and was felt to have plenty of rhythmic impulse and good 'foot-tapping potential'. It is also precise and clearly tuned and hence works equally well to maximise appreciation of percussive and melodic bass instruments. Treble was described as bright, but in a good way – that is, lively and open, but not aggressive or screechy.

Most of the comments, however, used more musical than technical terminology – always a sign that sound is connecting emotionally with the listeners and hence clearly a good thing in itself. The atmosphere created was praised for its realism and warmth and the presentation was described as bold and full of drama. Detail was described as clear and this contributed to excellent insight and also an effortlessly natural light and shade in the musical images. Quite simply, this is a highly enjoyable performer.

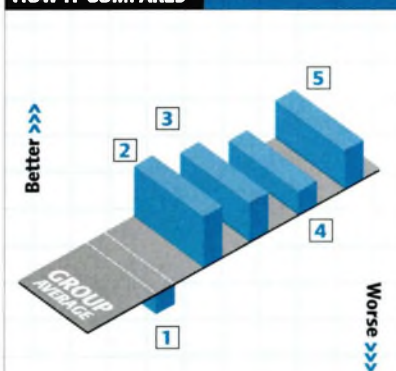
Both the DAB and the FM tuners put in a fine performance, the latter certainly one of the best in the group with good impact and admirably clear sound when fed a good radio signal. The USB input works well, too, though it doesn't recognise uncompressed audio files. The line inputs, meanwhile, maintain the high standards of CD replay. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

If one believes that there is any correlation at all between measurements and sound, the reasons for this unit's subjective success are not hard to find. In most respects, it puts across a performance that stands comparison with standalone amps, or CD players, costing as much as the whole Mini. Distortion is decent rather than shockingly good and shows a slight rise at high frequencies, but at any frequency it disappears into noise as the output level drops below about -20dB. Noise is very low and frequency response is extremely flat within the audio band and very well-extended beyond it. Jitter is practically immeasurable and consists of just a tiny degree of hum modulation, certainly of no practical significance. Volume steps are an accurate 1dB right across the range. Output power comfortably exceeds the 25-watt rating and peaks momentarily at roughly double that.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic Power >> -10%
- 2] Frequency response >> +30%
- 3] Distortion >> +20%
- 4] Dynamic range >> +10%
- 5] Jitter >> +20%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	25W	32W
Distortion (1 kHz/8 ohms)	0.04%	0.008%
frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±0.5dB	±0.1dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	A well-featured unit that packs a lot into a little and sounds remarkably clear, detailed and above all musical and involving. Simple and pleasant to operate, the Mini has a performance to match.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	



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DENON RCD-M37DAB

There's lots on offer for the price with the M37

Very much the baby brother in this group on price grounds, Denon's physically diminutive system still packs plenty of features into its chassis. In fact, the list very closely matches that of the Arcam Solo Mini, though the Arcam has a couple more line inputs and Denon's mono line output is unique. That being the case, one naturally looks for signs of corner cutting or cheese-paring to explain how Denon managed to offer so much for so little.

Impressively, there's not very much to give it away. The mains transformer is a frame type and slightly smaller than Arcam's, while the power amplifier is a single stereo hybrid circuit offering about the same output. But there's the same complement of separate DAB and FM/AM tuners, in addition to the CD transport, USB socket and iPod control port (adapter required).

Assembly is on several circuit boards carefully shoehorned into place and component quality is certainly nothing remarkable, though it's decent enough. The user interface was, for us, something of a drawback: we like the rotary volume knob, but the layout of the function buttons seems a little arbitrary and some functions are awkward to use and access – FM tuning is a low point, being just gruesomely slow from the front panel or remote. It's not always clear what menu options are on offer, due to a combination of inefficient use of the display and rather unclear instructions, but we got round it all in the end.

This system is very much of a piece with the matching loudspeakers and certain functions are optimised for them, notably frequency response. The tone controls have a clever twist which will help protect any small loudspeakers, in that boost settings have no effect at high volume control settings, while 'Super Dynamic Bass' is a digital-age version of the old 'Loudness' control which boosts bass at low volume settings – of course this sort of thing is much easier to do when everything is digitally controlled.

SOUND QUALITY

To our listeners, there seemed to be quite a lot going for this unit, in a rather individual kind of way. In fact, it appears that Denon has pulled off a very smart trick in providing sound that grabs the listener on first hearing, but doesn't wear thin after a few minutes. Starting with an old favourite from Michael Jackson, the sound was quite energetic and driving in the bass, and seemed a little warmer overall than previous systems had made it. While detail was a touch soft, there was still plenty of atmosphere to both music and special effects.

The very bright tones of Miles Davis and colleagues were, perhaps, slightly less edgy than usual, but it made the track easier to listen to and digest. There's clearly an issue here of 'active' versus 'passive' listening – Davis was an uncompromising individual and probably wouldn't have approved of his music being repackaged for the background, but the fact remains that our listeners nevertheless found it involving and a sound of this nature has its place in a domestic environment.

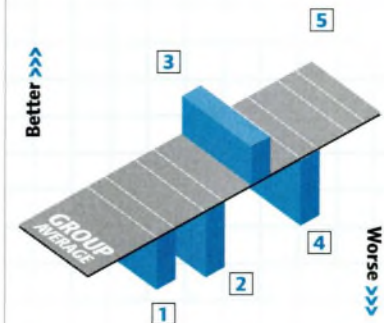
In the two classical tracks we used – both of them naturally miked and with wide dynamics – the sound seemed a little less assured in the bass and some lack of detail was noted. All the same, image depth was fairly good and the music had a good sense of flow that maintained a pleasing degree of realism. Much the same could be said of the DAB and FM sources: they're respectable and certainly get the fundamentals well sorted. Little in our listeners' notes would make anyone think this the most accurate system in the group, but it's clear it is a more-than-competent musical performer. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

By far the most striking feature of this system's performance is the frequency response, which has been tailored, presumably, for the matching speakers. High treble is lifted by about 1dB, while in the bass there's a bump of a little over 1dB around 120Hz, below which response fades out fast, some 5dB down at 50Hz. This may seem perverse when the speakers have relatively little bass, but it simply prevents wasting power (and speaker excursion) moving air in a fashion that won't be heard anyway. Denon rates the M37 at 30 watts but that's into a 6 ohm load: into 8 ohms the continuous output is about 27 watts and peak power some 45 watts – there's not very much more into a 4 ohm load, but below clip the output stage seems quite happy with low impedances. Distortion is not bad at all, consisting mostly of low harmonics and a little hum modulation, while jitter from the CD transport is excellent.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic Power >> -30%
- 2] Frequency response >> -40%
- 3] Distortion >> +25%
- 4] Dynamic range >> -40%
- 5] Jitter >> 0%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	30W	26W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)		0.007%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	dB	±5dB

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



Although there's no denying that this unit looks its price, it doesn't sound it. In performance, it packs an impressive punch and while not super-analytical, maintains a good level of musical communication.



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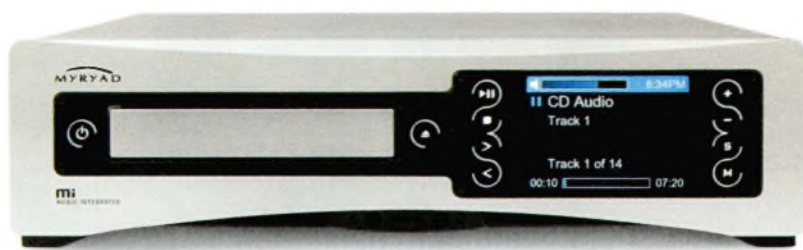
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MYRYAD MI

High-tech appearance coupled with a fine performance

In one of the most visually varied groups we've ever featured, the Mi stands out as particularly striking. A lot of which has to do with the colour graphics display, which also makes for an unusually soothing user experience (well, most of the time – skipping between tracks on CD can try your patience). The tastefully backlit touch-sensitive controls also help and the display works well with iPods. It also carries CD-Text information in a very legible text font and size.

The high-tech appearance is not in any way deceptive and behind the fascia sit both a switching power supply and a switching ('digital') power amplifier, both of these contributing to the unit's low weight and relatively small dimensions for a unit of its power rating. Both are well shielded to reduce the chances of switching noise contaminating the audio. Compared with most of the other units in this group, the Mi has a fair amount of empty space inside, with a single main audio board covering most of the base area and the radio module mounted near the left-hand edge.

Said module is a single unit that receives both DAB and FM digitally. Compared with separate DAB and FM units, there are both advantages and disadvantages to this approach. The former include savings in cost and space, the latter the impossibility of having an aerial properly optimised to both bands. Reception performance is not always what one might hope for either, especially on FM.

Apart from CD and radio, inputs include four line inputs (one at the front) and two optical digital, plus an 'M-Port' connection for Myriad's iPod dock accessory. The only preamp output is a digital one: all sources are digitised internally. A USB socket on the back is not in use in current Mi builds.

SOUND QUALITY

One of the group's qualified, rather than outright, successes, the Mi found most favour when its characteristic 'big sound', mentioned

explicitly in one track or another by all the listeners, was given free reign. This made it a good match to the large-scale orchestration of Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*, to which it brought impressive bass drum and a great sense of scale. Opinions varied as to the naturalness of the musical flow, though, one listener liking it, another finding it a little restricted and uncertain.

In smaller-scale tracks, it's clear that something about the Mi's treble was unsettling the listeners. One commented that Miles Davis's trumpet seemed harsher than usual, while another felt there was some unnatural dissection of that same track going on. Taking all the comments together, the conclusion emerges that the treble is a little dry and lacking air and grace, which closes in images to some extent and reduces the degree of detail that is audible without effort.

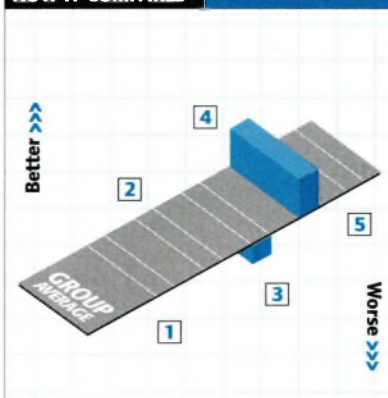
Funnily enough, given the comments on big sound, very low bass also seems to be a little compromised. This isn't such a paradox, though, when one remembers that it's more the upper bass that impresses: very low bass is much more subtle and isn't always noticed or missed, at first. Here, its reticence showed up in a slight lack of tunefulness to sounds like gently played timpani or low piano notes.

Throughout the presentation of this unit, our listeners felt its basic presentation was generally enjoyable, if at times a little lacking in refinement and occasionally rather smooth, bordering on bland. We felt it scored a little higher when tuned to DAB broadcasts, where its character seemed to offset slightly the limitations of the format, but found it a little coarse on FM. The digital inputs work well and are a handy bonus. **HFC**

LAB REPORT

The most obvious sign of a digital amplifier is the residual high-frequency signal that leaks out, a bit under a volt of signal at over 100kHz. We've never found that to do any obvious harm, though, and tend to think that the usual measures like distortion are more relevant in explaining the Mi's performance. In fact, distortion behaves pretty well: its level at high outputs is a little greater than most, but it sinks obligingly into noise below 1W or so output. Distortion is predominantly third harmonic in nature. There is some hum modulation present in the output, which makes assessing jitter accurately a tricky task: however, it seems that jitter via the line (recording) output is actually slightly worse than at the loudspeaker outputs. Frequency response is largely flat, although the output filter makes the response a little variable with loading. Line inputs are easily overloaded, with headroom of only 2.2V.

HOW IT COMPARES



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

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	50W	53W
Distortion (1 kHz/8 ohms)	-	0.04%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±0.5dB	±0.3dB

VERDICT

- SOUND**
★★★★☆
- FEATURES**
★★★★☆
- BUILD**
★★★★☆
- VALUE**
★★★★☆



The sophisticated display makes this an unusually nice unit to use and the specification is good. Sound occasionally disappoints on grounds of constricted frequency extremes, but the sense of scale is appealing.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE
★★★★★



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NAD VISO TWO

Packed with goodies, but not all relevant to the hi-fi buff

A group like this is obviously going to feature some well-equipped kit, but this unit certainly has the most bits, bobs and gizmos in it, not least because in addition to doing audio, it is a fully-featured DVD player complete with upscaling HDMI output and various video ins and outs. If we listed it all, we'd have no space for the actual review.

From an audio point of view, it's a fairly close match to the Myryad Mi, with CD plus FM radio (DAB's an add-on module, though) built in, three analogue and two digital inputs and a connection for an iPod dock add-on.

The inclusion of video has meant there's some compromise over front-panel control layout and the remote doesn't strike us as a model of ergonomic brilliance either, though the way it lights up blue is admittedly impressive. Still, a little experimentation soon shows how to access and control the various functions and the only real frustration is the slowness of FM tuning. The volume display, cleverly, is calibrated so that '0dB' corresponds roughly to full power from 'peak bit' on CDs, with positive numbers indicating more gain than this and negative, less.

NAD's case design for the Viso is unusual in appearance and also in assembly – even after removing 20 screws we were still unable to get inside! A little peering informed us that a large frame transformer supplies power, while an array of decent commercial-quality components looks after audio and power supply functions. The power amplifier is constructed against a fan-assisted heatsink, but the fan is intelligently controlled and never came on while we were playing music.

SOUND QUALITY

Despite the presence of all the video gubbins, this unit attracted almost nothing but praise and did so at what we can only call an extremely competitive price. Its sound was described as airy and yet punchy, as well as detailed and with good depth.

The only 'but' to be attached to that, is the fact that the sound is not particularly

analytical: if you demand from your hi-fi the ability to dissect sound so that you can tell what make and model of instrument each musician is playing, you'd better keep looking. But few people with those expectations will even have started to read a review like this! There's also the valid point that our listeners were comparing the Viso with equipment of like intent, but it's surely not irrelevant that all of them had heard some quite fancy kit in the same room, driving the same speakers, not so long ago and still didn't recoil in horror from the sounds on offer.

On the contrary, they took immediately to the highly attractive soundscape produced by the Viso, appreciating it for its combination of realism and punch. It handles voices very well, with a good balance between vowels and consonants (no trace of excess sibilance) and also between vocal and accompaniment and this sets up a high standard of communication, which is maintained in purely instrumental tracks. A stereo image of good width and depth, coupled with an unforced tonal character across the spectrum, makes sound easy to enjoy and to follow. The image isn't pinpoint in its precision, but in the circumstances one somehow doesn't even want to care.

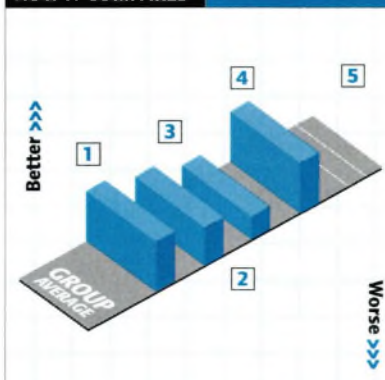
The very bottom few notes of audibility are, perhaps, a little vague and power delivery at climaxes can occasionally seem just a little slapdash but, again, there's sufficient cohesion and general plausibility to the sound that these are minor quibbles. The FM tuner is, likewise, a lively and full-bodied performer. By any reckoning, this is an impressive showing for full-featured convenience audio. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

The measurements on this unit show up some slightly odd behaviour when playing CDs, with some very odd distortion frequencies appearing. Fortunately these are at a low level and are not likely to have any obvious 'dirtying' effect on the sound. The largest single distortion component is third harmonic, but it soon drops off with decreasing output level so that the spectrum is practically unscathed below about a quarter of a watt output. There is a little of what looks like hum modulation in the output too. Jitter, on the other hand, is well suppressed and residual noise is also low. The digital filter allows a moderate amount of aliasing to occur and this may also contribute to the unit's sound in a mild way. With momentary peak output of about 100 watts, the output stage is pretty fearless and its very low output impedance will help maintain the accurately flat response into any loudspeaker.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic Power >> +30%
- 2] Frequency response >> +20%
- 3] Distortion >> +10%
- 4] Dynamic range >> +30%
- 5] Jitter >> 0%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	50W	60W
Distortion (1 kHz/8 ohms)	0.08%	0.015%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±0.5dB	±0.2dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	Even better equipped than most, thanks to some comprehensive video features, the Viso Two succeeds astoundingly well at audio too, with both a verve and poise that out-classes the competition
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★



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SHANLING MC3000

Well-designed unit combines appearance and performance

A fine example of lateral thinking, this unit combines the convenience of the modern 'music centre' (Shanling uses that very description) with the appearance and, to some extent, electronics of specialist high-end audio. We're referring in part, of course, to the valves, proudly displayed on the oh-so-retro chassis, but there are some audiophile components and tweaks inside the case, too. Overall, the unit is very much a ringer for some of Shanling's CD players and like them, it too shares the top-loading CD mechanism, a great feature for the impatient (as it reads CDs very quickly) and for once operable even when the unit is in a rack, as the top cover need not be raised any higher than the top of the towers at the back.

Those towers contain the mains transformer and the two channels of power amplification, while CD replay functions and line-level amplification are handled on the main board, beneath the CD transport. The FM tuner is a separate enclosure, a bought-in unit that's actually capable of receiving AM, but is only connected via the FM socket. And then there's the iPod dock at front left, avoiding the need to buy an accessory in order to connect one's portable music storage. This also benefits from a composite video output at the rear, which can convey the iPod's display to a suitable TV or monitor. Also on the rear panel is a digital preamp output (but no recording output) and three line inputs: the headphone socket is concealed on the right-hand side and will require a right-angled jack plug when the unit is in any kind of rack.

The input selector and volume control are both rotary, built respectively into the left and right front support pillars at the unit's corners. Operation from the few buttons on the top panel is OK, but we much preferred the remote, which is simple but well designed.

SOUND QUALITY

The care paid to audiophile details has evidently paid off, for our listeners consistently found this unit to be more

detailed and precise than its peers in this group. In particular, it seems to have the most extended bass, very low notes exhibiting a nicely tuned quality with good impact, too and admirable control – not restriction, but control in the best sense. Treble is also extended and open, seeming a touch bright by comparison with some of the units here. Slightly concerned by that finding, we compared the treble subsequently, not only with the others in the group, but also with well-regarded separates and came to the conclusion that this is, in fact, true to the music – its brightness merely a reflection of a rather 'smooth' group average.

There's a surprise, though, in that the overall musical atmosphere was thought some way short of the best. We thought we heard some dryness at times, a tendency to present details in themselves rather than as part of a bigger picture. This was most apparent, during the blind sessions, with the baroque track, which has lively movement from around half a dozen instrumental lines. The listeners could easily follow each line, but commented that the relation between the lines was less clear; as was the way they joined to form the whole.

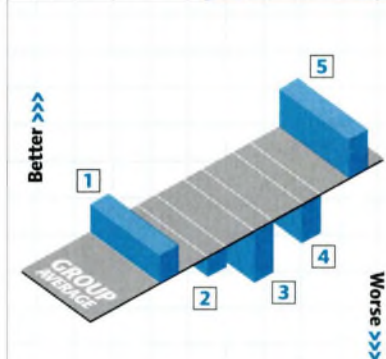
Rachmaninov's structurally simpler melodic/harmonic music fared better, both tonally and spatially. Both here and in the Michael Jackson track, rhythmic drive seemed a little behind the best, but the good bass control made for a particularly believable and full-bodied orchestra. Dynamics also seemed particularly good through this system. iPod-sourced music is similarly confident: the FM tuner is good, though, and seemed a little less clear than Arcam's, for instance. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

If the intention in building in the valves was to add a little 'flavour' to the design, our measurements suggest Shanling was successful. Distortion analysis clearly shows that there is a classic valve character, with mainly second harmonic, but smaller amounts of the next half dozen or so, too. The overload point of the amp is clearly defined, as with most transistor-output designs, but shortly before this occurs there is a marked increase in hum modulation, which may cause the sound to harden a little just before it actually overloads. On the digital side the unit is very clean, with negligible jitter and low noise, though not quite as low as the amplifier is capable of. Frequency response is very flat with just a trace of bass roll-off below about 50Hz. Oddly, the claimed 1dB volume steps turn out to be 0.5dB for the top 20dB of range – the majority of which will never be used!

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic Power >> +15%
- 2] Frequency response >> -10%
- 3] Distortion >> -30%
- 4] Dynamic range >> -20%
- 5] Jitter >> +20%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	60W	55W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.1%	0.1%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±1dB	±0.5dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★☆	A great looker, thanks to the valves, but sound is something of mixed bag. At its best, it is energetic and dynamic with very good bass control, but, it can sometimes sound a little dry and disjointed.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★☆	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	

OUTPUTS

CH 2

CH 3

CH 5

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NEXT

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POWER



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CTA305 - High Performance valve preamplifier



CTA520 - Power amplifier (stereo or mono)



CVA306 - Multi Channel Valve preamplifier



CVA535 - 5 channel Audio Video amplifier

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T+A CARUSO

Lots of on-board extras justify the price tag

This unit really is a horse of a different colour and only just fits in with the rest of the group. The main reason for that is that while it includes power amplifiers, they are uniquely married to the internal speakers (there is a dedicated output to drive T+A's matching active loudspeakers). Using those, however, would have made fair comparisons with the other systems impossible, so we chose instead to use a Cambridge Audio 840A as a power amp, a good performer of generally neutral character and reasonably in tune with T+A's own high-tech principles. Internal speakers can be switched off and were (of course) for our tests.

At its simplest, this is an exceptionally upmarket and well-featured kitchen CD/radio. It has two mid/treble speakers and a subwoofer, each driven by its own power amp with frequency dividing carried out actively. It also has a versatile display, but outputs at the rear for component video give away that there is full-colour display available – this is, in fact, a DVD player as well as CD. Inputs are well provided for, with a front-panel USB socket for portable music players etc. and an iPod dock on the top surface. There are two line inputs behind and a LAN (Local Area Network) socket for connection to your home computer network and/or the Internet.

That last connection will allow you to enjoy the vast range of Internet radio stations in addition to those receivable via FM (there's no DAB). Compared with some other Internet radio receivers we've tried, this one is easy to use once one gets used to it, but in general we're not blown away by the user interface. Buttons don't always do what one at first expects them to do and abbreviations like SCL (Streaming Client – any outboard digital source, basically) and SRC (not Sampling Rate Converter, although its exact meaning is never explained in the instructions) don't help. On a more positive note, the Caruso is very well put together and fit and finish are to a high standard.

SOUND QUALITY

Bearing in mind that the power amp was not T+A's own, our 'blind' listeners were auditioning effectively a CD player and preamp. In the event, they had mixed reactions to what they heard and there were some reservations about the ability of this system to capture and hold on to the imagination.

Musically, it succeeded best with large-scale events and was another good match with Rachmaninov's large orchestral forces. By contrast, the smaller-scale jazz and baroque works somehow didn't quite connect. It's clear from the listeners' notes that something hard to pin down was bothering them, as various specifics get praised even as the overall effect is found just a little wanting.

Our conclusion, based on those notes and on our own later listening, is that the problem lies in the treble. It's tonally a shade bright and can, at times, be harsh too. In fact, it never quite manages to shake off a slight halo of graininess. When the music is strong in the bass this is considerably less noticeable, but lighter textures suffer from it. This remained the case when we tried various other power amplifiers and indeed via the headphone output.

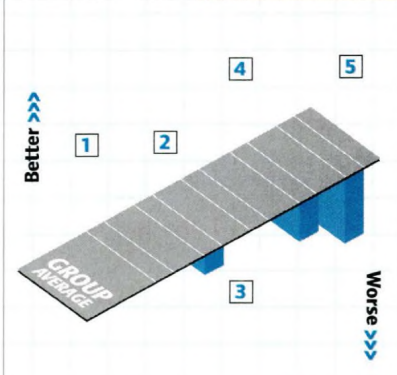
The FM tuner is much of a muchness with the other units in the group, which is to say, decent. Internet radio proved a lot of fun and the sound from this and also iPod and USB sources seemed good too. The USB input will play uncompressed files (most won't) so is, in principle, capable of full fidelity. Although in some respects this system disappoints sonically, it has a lot of good features in its favour and we enjoyed using it. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

In terms of basic distortion this system certainly needs no special pleading – there's very little of it and it is mostly harmless low harmonic order. What we did find was jitter, quite a lot of it by current standards and it seems to be a function of the disc transport, as it wasn't there when we loaded test files to a USB memory stick and used that as a source. This could well explain the treble oddities that perturbed our listeners. Noise is not vanishing but decently low, while frequency response is very level. The digital filter allows a little aliasing, but otherwise behaves well. The spectrum is free of odd signals breaking through from the display or control electronics – this is a frequent problem with highly integrated units like this, but T+A seems to have nailed it firmly. There's also an admirable absence of anything mains-related. Volume control steps are 1dB across the full range, making accurate setting easy.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic Power >> n/a
- 2] Frequency response >> -10%
- 3] Distortion >> 0%
- 4] Dynamic range >> -20%
- 5] Jitter >> -40%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	n/a	n/a
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.02%	0.003%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	±0.2dB

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★☆	Expensive compared to the competition, but certainly deluxe. Despite a dowdy front panel, the Caruso is great as a true all-in-one (including speakers), but also good enough to form the heart of a decent hi-fi.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★☆	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

CONCLUSIONS

These one-box hi-fi systems are a serious challenge to a separates set-up

The question is, why would one want an all-in-one hi-fi system? Well, now that we have some idea of what the performance standard is like, it seems appropriate to ponder a few possible answers to that. Even though you might not expect us to recommend one as the heart of a primary audio system, we reckon it's still an excellent way to get started on the hi-fi path. Of course, it's still possible to put together a separates system for less than the cost of most of those featured here, but we wouldn't expect it to provide a dramatically

higher standard of sound. If chosen with care, maybe a little higher, but not vastly different. On the other hand, we probably wouldn't suggest one of these one-box systems as an upgrade from any basically decent separates assembly. If you already own something like that, you may be attracted to a one-box setup as a second system for either the kitchen or bedroom or, in the case of the comprehensively video-equipped NAD, as a cost-effective home cinema system. While none of them is upgradeable to 5.1 channel, given the choice between

two good channels and five iffy ones, we'd plump for the former every time. We agonised for a while over how to assign scores and, in the end, opted to judge the breed on its own merits rather than in strict comparison with the best separates we've ever heard (which would have resulted in sound scores a good point or two lower all round). Even so, our experiences in preparing this review suggest that the best of the breed need little or no special pleading when compared with decent budget separates.

Certainly both the Arcam and NAD put in a performance that could easily fool many folk that they were listening to a separates system costing twice as much. Denon's baby is obviously outrageous value and was a shoo-in for full marks on that score, but even in absolute terms it's amazingly good. The Myryad and Shanling were slightly less recommendable than the Arcam and NAD, but still have plenty of good things going for them, while the Caruso stands apart both for price and for features, but makes its own case with conviction. **HFC**

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AVI NEUTRON IV £499

Needs power in a big space, but has the potential to get the most from any of these systems

HINTS AND TIPS

- » All these systems generate some heat; so don't box them in too tightly in a rack or on a shelf.
- » Use decent speaker cables, avoid frayed ends and make sure the terminals are tight.

- » When tuning in FM, make sure you have the strongest signal – there may be two or more for the same station.
- » Go through the setup menus to see what features are available and check they're set to suit your tastes

ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEMS AS A GLANCE



MAKE MODEL	Arcam Solo Mini	Denon RCD-M37DAB	Myryad Mi	NAD Viso Two	Shanling MC3000	T+A Caruso
PRICE	£750	£300	£1,250	£800	£1,400	£1,850
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSION	Well-featured unit; packs a lot into a little and sounds remarkably clear, detailed, musical and involving.	Belies its low price, packs an impressive punch and maintains a good level of musical communication.	Sound occasionally disappoints on grounds of constricted frequency extremes, but the sense of scale is appealing.	Even better equipped than most (DVD), the Viso Two succeeds astoundingly well at audio too, with both verve and poise.	At its best energetic and dynamic, with very good bass control it can sometimes sound a little dry and disjointed.	Great as a true all in one (including speakers), but also good enough to form the heart of a decent hi-fi.
KEY FEATURES						
DIG OUTPUT ELEC/ OPT	0/0	0/0	0/1	0/1	1/0	0/0
CD TEXT	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
OTHER DISC FORMATS	MP3	MP3, WMA	MP3	DVD V, MP3, WMA	-	DVD-V, MP3
INPUTS LINE/ DIGITAL	5/0	3/0	4/2	3/2	3/0	3/0
RECORD OUTPUT	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
PREAMP OUTPUT	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
CLIP POINT (8 OHMS)	+0.1dB E	+5dB P	+0.3dB G	+0.2dB E	+0.5dB G	+0.2dB E
FREQUENCY RESPONSE	+0.1dB E	+5dB P	+0.3dB G	+0.2dB E	+0.5dB G	+0.2dB E
DYNAMIC RANGE	100dB G	90dB P	101dB G	103dB E	97dB A	97dB A
DISTORTION	0.008% E	0.007% E	0.04% G	0.015% G	0.1% A	0.003% E
JITTER	<0.15ns E	<0.3ns G	<0.3ns G	<0.3ns G	<0.15ns E	1200ns P

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| Artcoustic | Chord Electronics | Goldring | Loewe | Musical Fidelity | Pioneer | QED | Samsung | Sound Org | Teac |
| Atacama | Cyrus | Grado | Logitech | Nevo | Pixel Magic | Quad | Sennheiser | Sound Style | Toshiba |
| Audiolab | Da-Lite | In Focus | Marantz | Onkyo | PMC | Quadraspire | Sharp | SpeakerCraft | Van Den Hul |
| B&W | Denon | Ixos | Meridian | Optimum | Primare | REL | Sim2 | Spectral | Yamaha |

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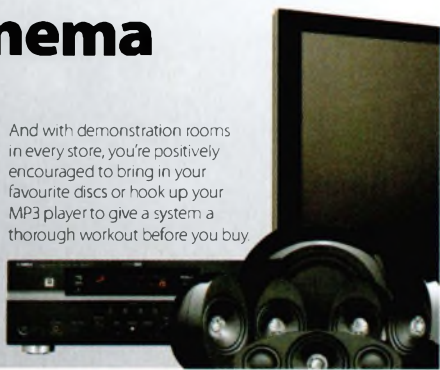
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Samsung NEW
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NEW

"This new 42" Plasma TV impresses with its convincingly neutral colour palette and deep black tones"

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★★★★ TX-P42X10B APRIL 2009

Panasonic VIERA NEW
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★★★★

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PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
BEST TV

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For an unforgettable experience, fire up an InFocus projector and start playing BIG movies, TV and games.

HOME CINEMA SEPARATES

Onkyo NEW
Onkyo's 2009 range includes the new TX-SR607 - the first product to support Dolby ProLogic IIz which enables two extra front height speakers.

NEW

The award-winning Servo Evolution CD players - CD6 SE, CD8 SE & CDX t SE

Yamaha
The award-winning DSP-AX763 & 863SE AV amplifiers feature full support for HD audio formats ensuring maximum enjoyment of all high-definition sources.

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PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
BEST AV AMPLIFIER
YAMAHA AV AMPLIFIER

Denon
Denon's outstanding range includes the AVR-1909, AVR-2309 and AVR-2809 AV receivers

WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
BEST AV RECEIVER
DENON AV RECEIVER

Sony STR-DA2400ES & BDP-S550 NEW
Highly-acclaimed new AV receiver and Blu-ray disc player from Sony [What Hi-Fi Group Test Winner - March 2009]

NEW

WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
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BLU-RAY DISC PLAYERS

Panasonic DMP-BD60 & 80 NEW
These new players from Panasonic blend comprehensive features with top-drawer picture and sound quality

NEW

WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
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Pioneer BDP-LX71
View film exactly as the filmmakers intended; in 1080p resolution, at 24 frames per second with the BDP-LX71.

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For faithful transmission of Full HD video and HD audio signals bringing out the full quality of film.

WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
BEST & BEST BUY PLAYER
DENON DVD-2500BT

HI-FI SEPARATES

Cyrus NEW
Following the remarkable Servo Evolution CD players, Cyrus has introduced a new range of amplifiers. Featuring circuitry developed for its DAC XP, the **8 XP d** and **Pre XP d** include digital inputs - ideal for playing music stored on your computer - while the entry model, **6 XP**, is based on the 8 XP but without the digital option. These new models also include two-zone multiroom capability.

NEW

WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
BEST CD PLAYER
BEST CD PLAYER
BEST CD PLAYER

The award-winning Servo Evolution CD players - CD6 SE, CD8 SE & CDX t SE

WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
BEST CD PLAYER
CIRYUS CD PLAYER

Roksan Kandy K2
Roksan replaces its hugely successful Kandy series with the Kandy K2 amplifier and matching CD player.

Pro-Ject Turntables
Pro-ject's excellent range includes the multi award-winning Debut, versions include Debut USB - ideal for converting your favourite tracks to your iPod and Debut colour - available in finishes to suit any decor

WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
BEST TURNTABLE
PRO-JECT TURNTABLE

Genie 2
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Marantz CD6002 & PM6002
This award-winning CD and amplifier from Marantz gives true high-end performance and represents outstanding value for money.

WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
BEST CD PLAYER
BEST CD PLAYER

Arcam FMJ Series
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LOUDSPEAKERS

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WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
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BEST SPEAKER SYSTEM
MONITOR AUDIO SPEAKER SYSTEM

Radius HD
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WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
★★★★★
SOUND & VISION

Spendor A5 and A6 NEW

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WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
★★★★★
OTHER AT 18 FEBRUARY 2009

Dali Lektor NEW

Dali complements its range with the Lektor 2. Only slightly larger than the award-winning Lektor 1, this new model represents outstanding value.

KEF KHT3005SE
Award-winning 5.1 speaker package available in high gloss black or silver.

WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
BEST SPEAKER SYSTEM

Q Acoustics 1010i 5.1
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WHAT HI-FI FIT AWARDS 2008
★★★★★
SOUND & VISION

ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEMS

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



Teac Reference Series 380

This new three component system's strong feature set includes DAB/DAB+ and WIFI Internet Radio, MP3 playback from CD or via a front-mounted USB socket, an optional iPod dock, high-quality circuitry, tone and balance controls and CD Direct function.



B&W Zeppelin

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Former Hi-Fi Choice editor Paul is widely regarded as the UK's foremost loudspeaker expert and is on hand to answer your speaker questions



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With more than 40 years as an enthusiast under his belt, Jimmy is one of the country's best known hi-fi experts. He's also HFC's 'Mr Tweaker'.



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Richard is a professional musician and recording engineer and a highly knowledgeable hi-fi analyst to boot. If your question is technical, he's your man



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Former editor of Hi-Fi Review magazine, Malcolm was one of the best-known and most outspoken reviewers of the 1980s and 1990s. Still going strong, he only writes for Hi-Fi Choice.



ALVIN GOLD

Alvin has been writing about his obsession for more than 25 years. He has expertise across all product types and despite the photo is 'happy to be of service'



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 and loves giving

GOLDEN OLDIE

I'm building a plinth for a classic Garrard 301 turntable – hardly state-of-the-art, I realise, but still a very decent motor unit and one which I've heard sounding extremely good in other systems. Now that I have the plinth and turntable, I need a suitable arm, one that'll be a good sonic match as well as having sufficient height adjustment to work with the relatively high combination of the Garrard's cast chassis and the platter on top of it. I guess I could put in a wooden or metal space under the arm base, but it'd be more elegant and, to be honest, easier if that wasn't a necessity. What suggestions would you have for a suitable arm?

T Mullan London

HFC The traditional pickup-arm choice for the Garrard was SME's 3009-series arms. These are available second-hand and would be a nice choice so long as you want to use a high-compliance cartridge, which limits you to the likes of van den Hul's and some Denons, along with some varieties of moving-magnet design. If you want to use one of the more typical moving coils on the market, you'd be better off with a contemporary SME design such as the 309 or even the 12-inch 312. These offer enough height adjustment to work with your Garrard motor unit without a spacer. Check out the Loricraft website (www.loricraftinternetshop.co.uk) where they have examples of the 301 with a current SME arm (Series IV).

CARTRIDGE CONUNDRUM

I'm about to upgrade the cartridge on my set-up, which consists of a Rega Planar 3/RB300, an Audio Innovations S400 all-valve integrated with MM phono, and Quad 22L2 loudspeakers, all connected with Coincident cable. The music I listen to varies from baroque choral to Bartók to King Crimson to John Coltrane. As a clue as to my requirements, I'm after a great high-output MC or MM in the range of £200-£500. Any advice?

Attila HFC Forum

HFC We recently tested the Lumley Heliosphere turntable, which came equipped with the latest incarnation of a classic mid-priced MC, the Sumiko Blue Point Special Evo III (£229). This is a high-output MC that has remarkable refinement and resolving powers for its price. Just as important is the fact that it plugs directly into an MM input, such as you have on the Series 400. The other option would be Dynavector's DV 10X5 (£295), another high-output MC, but with a more vibrant sound and great timing.



STARTER FOR 21

I'm trying to put together a starter system for my daughter to give her on her 21st birthday. She's a trained drummer and wants a vinyl system as she likes the impact and says it comes closer to the real thing. She also has a wide range of tastes, so she can make good use of her old man's records, too.

The system so far consists of a Naim NAC 62 preamp, Acoustic Energy AE205 floorstanders and a pair of Grado SR80 headphones. The turntable, I'll take her out and let her choose. Her main diet is indie music, plus a big dollop of Led Zep, Nine Inch Nails, White Stripes etc. I'm going to find a Naim power amp, probably an NAP 140 or the like.

I have a good friend who owns one of the last small family owned hi-fi shops left (The Den in Keighley). He recently showed me an S-shaped Rega tonearm. It's obviously a bit on the old side, but it's pristine and really quite sexy. I don't know what model it is or anything – I don't know Rega arms except my origami RB300. Do you know anything about this arm? I know it's a bit vague, but surely there can't be many S arms of Rega origin out there?

Anyway, it's mine for £30. Is it a dog or a lost treasure? Please help, as I don't want it going if it's good enough for, say, a Pro-Ject or similar at around £300.

Ivor J HFC Forum

HFC It sounds like your daughter will have the best system at her university – there are clearly some benefits to having an audiophile for a father!

The first Rega turntables had an S-shaped arm that was made in Japan for them, called the Acos Lustre or R200. Rega tells us there were two models used between 1973 and 1978. I suspect that its price is as good an indication of its desirability as anything from a sound-quality perspective. It may have been a good-value option in the seventies, but it won't be in the same league as Rega's arms today. It might be worth having to put on the shelf as a point of interest, but it's probably not worth building a turntable around it today.

MATCHING BOXES

I'm looking for a speaker match for an Audiolab system consisting of an 8000CD MkII, an 8000S integrated and an 8000P power amp. I know this is deeply unfashionable kit, but I like it – what I need is

ULTIMATE CD PLAYER

I have two questions about the CD-player *Ultimate Group Test* in the April issue. Firstly, if it's the 'Ultimate' group test, shouldn't it feature the top players (at any price)? And secondly, why did you choose to include the Cyrus CD 6 SE and not the CD 8 SE?

OK, I'm being a bit picky, but it just seemed a little strange on both counts. I'll admit bias, having the CD 8 SE (together with the PSX-R power supply, which in my opinion makes a considerable difference).

Bob Fasoli via email

HFC We call our group tests 'Ultimate' because they represent the most comprehensive, trustworthy and unbiased reviews in the industry. Our exclusive use of 'blind' listening



panels, combined with our extensive listening and in-house test and measurement is unmatched in the hi-fi press, so *Hi-Fi Choice* group tests truly are the 'ultimate'.

We tested the CD 6 SE because we've already reviewed the CD 8 SE (in *HFC* 310). You won't be surprised to hear that it garnered high praise on that occasion. We will endeavour to include the CD 8 SE in our next suitably priced CD player *Ultimate Group Test*.

a speaker to match, at around the £500 mark. Second-hand is OK and the budget fairly flexible. I have a small listening room and a wide taste in music. Any ideas?

Bobcat HFC Forum

HFC There's a lot of choice at this price point and we can understand why you need some input. The Audiolab kit is pretty neutral – some might say dull – but its lack of character should be an asset when it comes to reproducing music. The 8000P is a 100-watt power amp that'll be able to drive pretty well any speaker in your price range.

If you want spacious imaging, good overall balance, a sweet treble and fine consistency, then the KEF IQ50 could be the speaker of choice. Alternatively, if you want a speaker that tells it like it is, then ATC's compact, but revealing SCM7 would be the model for the job. A third option would be Bowers and Wilkin's 684 floorstander. This stretches your 'flexible' budget a little at (believe it or not, thanks to the VAT cut) £684, but is an awful lot of speaker for the money. With a smooth, even and nicely open balance, it should work well with your system.

CLASSIC REVIVAL

The surrounds have started to deteriorate on my old JPW AP3 speakers because I stored them in the attic. They have eight-inch main drivers, I think, and were great last time I used them. Do you have any suggestions as to what I could replace them with that won't prove too brutal on the bank account?

Dave Astell via email

HFC The AP3 was one of the classic Snell-inspired JPWs from the eighties. It was the biggest

standmount with an eight-inch paper cone. Unfortunately there aren't many speakers around these days that have a similar sound, but one name that comes to mind is Heco. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the man that runs Pure Sound, which distributes this brand, used to work for JPW, so there is some conceptual continuity at work. Heco makes a standmount called the XT 301 which costs £700; we reviewed its predecessor (the Celan 300) and found it highly engaging.

If you don't want to splash out that much, you have the option of replacing the main drivers on your AP3s. Pure Sound sells new units for £65 each. If you're handy with a soldering iron you could save a few hundred pounds and keep your classic speakers.



COMPATIBILITY

Will this amplifier work with that CD player? Will this speaker be compatible with that amplifier? A lot is made of the potential compatibility issues of different components and often people take the safe route of buying everything from the same brand to avoid any mismatches.

The advantage of getting source and amplification from the same company is that the two should both be pulling in the same direction; the company will have developed both with the same goals. But often one brand will make better CD players than amps and vice versa, so there are advantages to mixing things up.

Compatibility problems are only likely to arise where transducers are involved. That is, with loudspeakers and cartridges on turntables. In the case of loudspeakers, you need to have sufficient power in the amplifier to avoid it becoming stressed by the speaker's load. It often improves matters to have plenty of power, as this delivers greater control and better resolution of detail, timing and dynamics – all other things being even. Speakers that have the capacity to time well are also dependent on the same quality being available from the amplifier.

Moving-magnet cartridges will work with any MM phono input, but moving coils that aren't high-output types depend on a dedicated MC amplifier, usually a standalone phono stage if they're to deliver all of their potential. Generally you need a phono stage of a similar price to your cartridge if you want to get the best out of it.

The final area where compatibility issues can occur is cabling. These links between components can have a disproportionate effect on the tonal balance and, therefore, need to be selected with as much care as the separates themselves. The only compatibility issues arise with amplifiers that depend on a speaker's electrical characteristics for their stability. The brand that's most susceptible is Naim, hence the company's insistence that you use its speaker cabling, which has high inductance. Put a low-inductance/high-capacitance cable with a Naim amp and you're asking for trouble.

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SEVENOAKS 01732 459555

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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 192kHz.

CAN I PLAY SACDS ON A NORMAL CD PLAYER?

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

CAN I PLAY DVDS ON A CD PLAYER?

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

TOP BUYS



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	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS							EST. 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
	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
	Cyrus CD6 SE	900	A winning combination of detail and sheer musical energy with more than a hint of high end to the performance	●	●	●	●				318
	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 CD5r	875	Its strikingly competent musical performance comfortably exceeds the expectations of an entry-level player	●	●	●	●				307
	Quad 99CD-S	650	Revels in big music thanks to fearless presentation; smaller-scale works can lack focus	●	●	●	●		●		291
	Rega Apollo	498	Unless you can't abide top-loaders, check this out: musically it's a highly praiseworthy performer	●	●	●	●				285
	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											
	Arcam CD37	1,100	Excellent detail and imaging, neutral tonality and above-average bass resolution	●	●	●	●				318
<small>EC</small>	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
<small>VA</small>	Cairn Fog 3	1,995	Ergonomically challenged, high energy player with Gallic charm and digital preamp on board	●	●	●	●		●	●	302
	Classe 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
<small>EC</small>	EMM Labs CDSA	9,995	Classy, stripped down to basics SACD/CD player with some excellent engineering below decks	●	●	●	●		●		302
<small>EC</small>	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
<small>EC</small>	Leema Antlia	2,495	Musically engaging player that will have you going through your CDs afresh. Balanced connection is best	●	●	●	●				291
	Leema Stream	1,095	The most timely disc player at its price point has tactile imaging and good dynamics, but unusual control system	●	●	●	●				306
	Linn Akurate CD	3,985	This highly engaging multi-format non-video player doesn't have huge transparency, but is musically addictive	●	●	●	●		●		299
<small>EC</small>	Marantz SA-11S2	2,700	Superb value for money, this well-balanced player features various filter settings to customise performance	●	●	●	●		●		304
<small>EC</small>	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
<small>EC</small>	Meridian G08	2,250	Advanced digital processing with special apodising filter that gives a very clean sound	●	●	●	●		●	●	312
<small>EC</small>	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-XAS400ES	1,199	Elegant, refined control system and very strong CD/SACD performance. Sound is bold with high resolution	●	●	●	●		●	●	313
	Unison Research CDE	2,350	Valve CD player with interchangeable DACs that can double as a standalone DAC that oozes musicality	●	●	●	●		●	●	318

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 £1,100

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.

SPECIAL READER OFFER

HI-FI CHOICE



Worth
over
£1,000

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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 BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE TURNTABLES

Record players

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				SPEEDS	SUSP SUBCHASSIS	SWITCHABLE SPEED CHANGE	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	SUPPLIED WITH CART	ISSUE NUMBER
EC	Avid Volvere	2,750	A combination of a heavy platter with a sprung suspension that makes the vinyl it spins sound powerful and solid	33/45	●	●			298
BB	Clearaudio Emotion	985	Beautifully built with open and clean sound emphasising mid and top, but delivering nice timely bass	33/45			●	●	309
BB	Clearaudio Champion	1,365	Small, practical and good-sounding, with impressively 'dead' arm. Isolation recommended	33/45			●		268
	Clearaudio Performance	1,940	Ceramic-magnetic bearing spells a surprisingly uncoloured performance. Good arm and cartridge	33/45			●	●	295
EC	Clearaudio Ambient	4,220	Innovative use of materials leads to a fast, precise and thrilling sound (tonearm extra)	33/45			●	●	271
EC	EAR Disc Master	7,695	Combines new 'no contact' drive technology and high-quality materials to bring state of the art resolution	33/45/78	●		opt		276
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			●	opt	284
EC	The Funk Firm Saffire	1,900	Individual design and a sound that's refined and neutral with strong timing and dynamics	33/45			●	opt	309
	Lumley Heliosphere	2,495	A distinctive-looking turntable with a distinctive sound and a performance that reflects the vinyl you spin on it	33/45			●	opt	319
BB	Michell Technodec	886	Needs careful partnering but can deliver a very sophisticated result for the money	33/45			●	●	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			●	●	289
	Pro-Ject RPM 5	450	Great looks plus an on the ball, engaging sound that puts it in the serious league, needs good isolation for best results	33/45			●	●	279
	Pro-Ject RPM 6 1	600	With its minimal chassis and huge platter this is a steady design that's capable of fine results with a decent cartridge	33/45/78			●	●	294
	Pro-Ject X-Pack	800	Combines some very strong elements (Ortofon Rondo Red) into a killer package with top sound and value	33/45			●	●	309
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			●	●	268
	Rega P3-24	398	Very competent, uncoloured and musical, much improved by £148 outboard electronic power supply	33/45			opt	●	298
	Rega P5/RB700	698	Combines a great sense of timing with market-leading resolution and a phenomenal tonearm – a hard act to beat	33/45			●	opt	257
	Rega P7/RB700	1,298	A highly capable player that could hold its own in the most exalted company – a vivid and natural performer	33/45			●	opt	257
	Roksan Radius 5/Nima	895	Sophisticated design with accomplished sound quality, excellent imagery and good isolation (acrylic version tested)	33/45			●	●	248
EC	SME Model 10A	3,411	Elegant and extremely capable design, tested here with Series W/309 hybrid arm	33/45			●	●	195
EC	SME 20/12A	11,133	Brings a calmness and precision to vinyl replay that we have rarely encountered, build quality is second to none	33/45/78			●	●	293
EC	Townshend Rock W/Excalibur II	7,000	If you want to hear everything that's on a record then there's no better machine for the job (includes Excalibur II)	33/45			●	●	307

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE PHONO CARTRIDGES

MM and MC cartridges

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			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		●		285
	Dynavector DV-10X5	250	A high-output MC with superb dynamics and fine timing that's difficult to mount, but well worth the effort		●		307
BB	Grado Prestige Gold	110	Produces rich, open and expansive music with the minimum of fuss		●	●	235
	Ortofon Rondo Red	325	Delivers detail, power and resolution and makes a good case for its price			●	307
	Ortofon Salsa	200	Despite a touch of midrange coloration, this cartridge really involves the listener with good extension and a clean, agile sound			●	290
	Sumiko Blue Point Spec Evo III	239	High-output MC with refinement at high frequencies and a nimble, articulate and revealing sound			●	270
	van den Hul MC One Special	699	A gorgeous cartridge that's worth the price every time you hear a familiar track in a whole new light			●	235
EC	van den Hul Condor XCM	2,400	A stunning cartridge with stereo imaging, dynamics and detail resolution to die for			●	265
EC	Wilson Benesch Naked Analog	1,450	With its smooth clean highs, transparent midband and nimble bass, this is a lot of performance for the money			●	253

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE PHONO STAGES

Phono stages

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				
				MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	AU IN/GAIN	AU IN/REARCASE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Cambridge Audio 640P	60	An outrageously good bargain that suits budget systems, but can confidently survive upgrades before and after in the chain	●	●			305
BB	Creek OBH15	220	Practical and highly compatible unit offering fine detail and pleasing, mellow balance	●	●			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	●	●			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!		●			234
EC	Tom Evans The Groove	1,800	Plenty of detail, excellent imaging and almost flawlessly neutral: a good choice for maximum information retrieval off any LP	●				201
	Trichord Dino/Dino+	498	Relaxed yet resolute with very good image depth and natural balance, not to mention great flexibility	●	●	●	●	234

TURNTABLES 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.

Arcam's A38 takes on the best amplifiers in its class

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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

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

FM & DAB HI-FI SEPARATES

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIG. STRENGTH METER	ROT. TUNING KNOB	SCALE NUMBER
FM TUNERS										
	Creek Audio Evolution	285	Sound is detailed, cohesive and extended both tonally and spatially – very classy	FM,M	80					308
	Creek Audio T50	550	Very fine results indeed with precision, polish and insight added to excellent basics	FM,M,L	128					251
	Cyrus FM-X	500	A classic no-nonsense FM tuner that achieves gratifying sonic results. Upgradable with PSX-R power supply	FM	7					283
	Denon TU-1500AE	130	Well attuned to the crowded modern FM band, this tuner produces clear, detailed sound with plenty of gusto	FM,M,L	100					281
	Denon TU-1800DAB	250	There's a little grain on FM, but the decent performance on both bands makes this a great dual-band choice	DAB,FM,M	200					283
	Magnum Dynalab MD 90T	1,295	No remote or presets as standard, manual everything and valves... but its sound is simply sublime	FM	opt		opt			257
	Marantz ST7001	300	FM reception could offer a little more detail and insight. DAB is fine, but near-identical Denon 1800 is cheaper!	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 FMJ T32	550	A highly cost-effective way of optimising the airwaves. iPod functionality is definitely a bonus	DAB,FM	100					319
	Cambridge Audio DAB500	150	Very good sound, plus optional response tweaks, and slickest operation yet	DAB	10					248
	Denon TU-1800DAB	200	Very good detail and a highly believable impression of real musicians playing. Imaging can be a little constricted	DAB,FM,M	200					299
	Marantz ST7001	250	Midband detailed and precise: treble can be thick but bass is extended, and sound generally energetic	DAB,FM,M	200					299
	NAD C445	300	FM is laid-back despite bright balance, but has good detail. DAB slightly livelier than most	DAB,FM	30					299
	Onkyo T-4555DAB	350	Admirably free of grain or obvious tonal blemishes, this tuner achieves a high standard in all areas on	DAB,FM	40					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-AMPLING?

Running separate cables to the treble and bass/mid terminals on a speaker is bi-wiring. In most instances, this improves sound quality so long as identical cables are used. Bi-amping is using two stereo amps to drive one pair of speakers, using one amp to drive the treble and the other for the bass/mid sections.

WHY DO VALVE AMPS HAVE SO LITTLE POWER?

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

Our favourite STEREO AMPLIFIERS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Integrated amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				
				LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)
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 PMB003	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
✓	Onkyo A-933	500	Puts the music first, with sound that delivers the basics correctly but above all involves the listener	5		● ●	80	278

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE STEREO AMPLIFIERS continued

Integrated amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
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									
	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 TrewAT2000	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
	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
	Moon Evolution i-7	4,750	Sophisticated, with an elegant build and sound quality, very limited features, even by high-end standards	5				150	288
	Musical Fidelity A1008	2,999	With DAC, phono stage and built-in valve buffer, this powerhouse amp can really grab hold of a loudspeaker	4				250	295
	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
	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
	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
	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

Pre/power amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	PRE-AMPLIFIER	POWER AMPLIFIER	LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £2,000										
	AdvanceAcoustic MPP206/MAA406	900	This pair has good build and finish and a balance of qualities that's hard to beat for the price			4	opt		150	309
	Cambridge Audio Azur 840E/840W	2,000	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
	Naim NAC 122x/NAP 150x	1,575	Musically rewarding with outstanding sophistication, grip and insight for such a modestly priced design			6	opt		50	287
	Rotel RC-06/RB-06	598	A capable and surprisingly powerful-sounding combination which offers real value			5			70	285
	Russ Andrews HP-1/PA-1	1,198	Simply featured, but sounds appealingly realistic and solid. Highly capable in all areas design			2			50	303
ABOVE £2,000										
	Arcam C31/P38	2,050	Very civilised sound, in the best possible way. Well featured and smartly built			7	opt		100	308
	Border Patrol Control Unit	2,995	Bluff looking valve preamp, with one of the most neutral yet dynamic sounds around			5	opt		277	
	Bryston BP26/3B-SST	5,300	The epitome of the iron fist in a velvet glove school of hi-fi. Dynamically superb and very detailed			8	opt		150	308
	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
	Chord Prima/Mezzo 140	6,100	Small, muscular, beautifully made and styled and sounds like a dream			5			120	269
	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
	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
	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
	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	
	Gamut D200 Mk3	3,950	A great power amp that's now even better – one of the best regardless of price						200	247
	Hovland HP-100/RADIA	12,745	Uncommonly musical valve/transistor hybrid transcends stereotypes, one of the genuine high achievers			9	opt		125	250
	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
	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

SPECIFICATIONS **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 on-board 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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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

Cutely styled 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										
	Advance Acoustic UM20	200	Classy styling and finish, with solid build and fine overall balance when sited close to a wall	18,30,21		A	43			307
	Acoustic Energy Aegis Neo 3	370	Pretty, neutral floorstander sounds open with wide dynamic range and good bass weight	20,90,5,24		A	24			294
	Acoustic Energy Aelite 3	750	Wood-veneered all-rounder has exceptional neutrality with deep smooth bass	20,103,39		A	22			292
	Amphion Helium 520	1,000	Sharp styling and fine value for money with excellent voice band coherence	16,104,22		G	28			314
	Amphion Ion L	750	Sharp styling, fine mid/treble coherence and a sweet treble, but less happy bass alignment in test room	162,326,265		A	40			310
	ATC SCM11	849	A very fine little speaker that's at its best with good, natural recordings where it adds little and reveals much	21,38,25		A-	55			293
	AudioPro Avanti A.10	350	A tough and effective little speaker. Overall balance is quite smooth and even	19,29,26		A+	38			319
	AVI Neutron IV	499	A great example of what can be done with a genuinely small speaker, but the warts-and-all balance won't suit all	15,27,21		A-	65			260
	Bowers and Wilkins DM303	180	Chunky looking and lively sounding, with deep bass, a fine midband and a restrained top end	30,33,23		A	23			226
	Bowers and Wilkins CM1	500	Luxury miniature has neutral, laid-back sound, with low coloration, fine imaging but weak dynamics	16,5,28,28		A-	40			279
	Bowers and Wilkins 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
	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
	DALI Ikon 6	899	Needs care with setup, but rewards you with impressively transparent and almost obsessively detailed sound	19,100,33		A	37			271
	DALI Ikon 7	999	Bulky vinyl floorstander has high sensitivity and a bright sound with superior coherence, delicacy and transparency	20,114,34		A+	22			275
	DALI Monitor 1	1,000	Beautiful miniature with advanced drivers sounds marvellously coherent with fine vocal expression	16,32,24		A	40			296
	Dynaudio DM 2/10	775	Unfashionably bulky standmount has fine dynamics, grip, bass and headroom and is delicate and well-mannered	27,5,45,35		A	22			299
	Epos M5	349	Gorgeous miniature works well close to wall. Could be smoother but communicates with authority	18,33,21		A-	40			269
	Epos ELS 303	399	Midband is impressively smooth, even and coherent, but the sound lacks some dynamic grip and top end detail	18,85,20		A-	28			273
	Epos M12.2	449	A true classic standmount with lovely presentation, fine sound balance, superior coherence and low coloration	20,37,25		A-	40			265
	Focal Chorus 706V	389	Advanced drivers deliver a smooth, even, overall balance with healthy dynamic expression and tension	22,39,25		A	27			319
	Focal Chorus 816 V	1,000	Fine, warm balance, superior dynamics, and a sweet top end, but could be smoother	28,100,37,5		A+	20			288
	Heco Celan 300	595	Does tone colour, dynamics and detail with aplomb and communicates superbly in its +2dB mode. Sensitive, too	23,36,33		A+	40			301
	JBL Studio L880	700	Good value floorstander with neutrality, massive headroom and plenty of punch. Could be more transparent	22,99,37		A	25			275
	KEF iQ3	280	Shapely, vinyl-covered standmount has lively dynamics and fine imaging, but could be smoother and sweeter	22,37,33		A+	40			284
	KEF 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
	Mission élan e34	400	A return to form for Mission with a pacy, vibrant sound matched to good looks	35,96,34		A+	48			298
	Monopulse 42A	995	Uniquely different in style and sound, midband time coherence is magnificent but treble is too restrained	26,110,25		A+	28			271
	Monitor Audio BR2	200	Good looking standmount has a muscular sound with superior coherence	18,5,35,25		A-	30			294
	Monitor Audio BR5	400	Not the best dressed in its class, but detailed, bold sounding, good value and an easy electrical load	17,85,25		A-	36			293
	Monitor Audio GS10	800	More neutral tonally than some recent MAs. High-quality stereo design which takes up little room and is easy to drive	20,36,27		A-	40			284
	Monitor Audio Silver RS8	800	Bold, dynamic sound marks it out from the crowd, and it's an easy load that works well in larger rooms	90,18,27		A	33			276
	PMC DB11	825	Could be more neutral, but a very effective musical communicator with fine warmth and sweet treble	15,5,29,23,4		A+	30			310

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

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

Stereo speakers

BADGE	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				SIZE (WxD) (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM Hz	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL
	PMC TB2+	795	Classy transmission line standmount has superior midband, restrained presence and a bright clean top end	20,40,30		A	28	●	275
	ProAc Tablette Ref Eight	699	Stunning standmount with electrostatic-like imagery. Its Signature brother costs £200 more and is even better!	15,27,23		A+	40	●	267
	Q Acoustics 1010	99	Neatly styled miniature has limited bass and power handling but fine midband voicing at a very sharp price	15,21,5,19,5		A	48	●	286
	Q Acoustics 1020i	140	Outstanding value for money, the smooth, well-balanced and lively sound makes for a fine communicator	17,5,25,26,5		A+	60	●	318
	Quadral Pico	849	Could be more muscular, but neutral and open with spacious imaging and little coloration	19,34,26		A-	30	●	292
	Rega RS1	398	Clever close-to-wall speaker has fine coherence and good communication skills	15,32,23,6		A+	23	●	319
	Russ Andrews SP-1	399	This tweaked Focal 705V RA has a sound that is immediate, engaging and, most importantly, great fun	192,315,248		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 ² 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	245,37,315		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
	Auroual VS	1,650	The fine coherence and imaging of a single driver system, plus extra help at the frequency extremes	215,107,5,268	●	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
	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
	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
	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
	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	Ochhal styling, fine bass-to-mid balance and dynamics and superb voice coherence, but unlitly 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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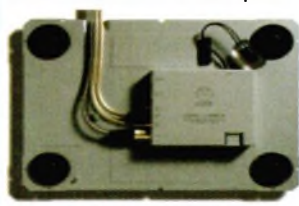
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GLOSSARY

TECHNICAL TERMS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TREBLE High frequencies; the top end of the audio band, i.e. above 3kHz.

TWEETER Treble driver.

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

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

WOOFER Bass driver.

DESCRIPTIVE TERMS

AGGRESSIVE Forward and bright sonic character.

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

ANALYTICAL Highly detailed.

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

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

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

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

BOXY The sound of a loudspeaker with audible cabinet resonances.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOCUS A strong, precise sense of image projection.

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

GRAINY A slightly raw, exposed sound which lacks finesse.

GRIP A sense of control and sturdiness in the bass.

GRUNT See grip.

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

HARSH Grating, abrasive.

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

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

LOW-LEVEL DETAIL The quietest sounds in a recording.

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

NATURALNESS Realism.

OPAQUE Unclear, lacking transparency.

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

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

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

PRESENCE RANGE The upper midrange.

SEISMIC Very low bass that you feel rather than hear.

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

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

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

STURDY Solid, powerful, robust sound.

THICK A lack of articulation and clarity in the bass.

THIN Bass-light.

TIMBRE The tonal character of an instrument.

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

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

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

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

TWEAKER Someone who enjoys this process.

VEILED Loss of detail due to limited transparency.

WARM A fullness in the lower midrange/upper bass.

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

Our favourite BB BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO SPEAKERS

continued

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				
				SIZE WxHxD (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EDGE OF DANCE	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE
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
BB	Neat Elite SE	1,499	Smooth and natural performer with notably expressive midband. Fine voice articulation and unusual sweetness	20,90,18	●	A 25	●	267
BB	Neat 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	23,37,5,34	●	B 32	●	311
BB	Opera Seconda	1,525	Fine styling and finish, plus very superior voicing, if a shade lacking in warmth	24,1025,31,5	●	A 20	●	314
BB	PMC Wafer 2	1,650	Clever 'hang-on-wall' speaker has minimal sonic compromises. Smooth midband delivers impressive stereo imaging	335,575,10	●	A+ 45	●	285
BB	PMC FB1i	1,950	A floorstander that boasts impressive bass extension and a smooth sweet top end	20,100,30	●	G 20	●	311
BB	PMC GB1i	1,330	Pretty little floorstander has great class with fine delicacy and sweet detailing	15,5,87,23,4	●	A 30	●	306
BB	PMC OB1i	3,200	This floorstander delivers a smooth overall balance with wide bandwidth and dynamic range	20,1025,32,5	●	A 20	●	311
EC	PSB Synchrony One	3,000	Slim and discreet floorstander that delivers superb sound quality and flexible bass	22,109,32,5	●	A 45	●	318
BB	Rega R7	1,498	Super-slim and super-smooth floorstander has fine agility with a slightly bright overall character	27,98,35	●	A 25	●	271
BB	Rega R9	2,498	This subtle, laid-back but very informative performer has a very superior dynamic range, especially in the bass	17,103,39	●	A 25	●	271
EC	Revel F32	3,200	Meticulously balanced, tonally neutral design makes for a taut, well disciplined sound	22,105,39	●	A 20	●	256
EC	Revel M22	1,800	A remarkably clean and revealing speaker with superb tonal and microdynamic capabilities	22,37,30	●	A- 48	●	274
BB	Roksan Caspian FR-5	2,000	Sharp looking speaker sounds exceptionally open and lively without aggression. Could be warmer and richer	20,100,25	●	A 22	●	290
BB	Ruark 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
BB	Spendor SP3/1R2	1,600	Conservative styling, superb neutrality and coherence with unusually low coloration	22,40,28	●	A 37	●	317
BB	Tannoy Glenair 10	2,999	With a 250mm dual concentric driver this is a generously proportioned, highly engaging speaker for a good price	36,100,35	●	P 28	●	314
BB	Totem Model 1 Signature	1,595	Expensive, but very seductive miniature delivers a beautifully smooth and balanced midband	17,31,23	●	A 35	●	277
BB	Triangle Genese Quartet	1,995	Great material value and a solid all round sonic performance with great loudness potential	23,117,37	●	A 25	●	302
BB	Triangle Celius Esw	1,395	Not the smoothest sound around, but has great vigour and enthusiasm, plus good scale and weight	20,117,34	●	A 22	●	277
EC	Triangle Magellan Concerto	14,750	New 'sw2' version is less immediate than its predecessor, but it's easier to live with and remains highly entertaining	60,160,45	●	A- 32	●	290
BB	Usher Compass CP-6381	2,500	Lots of speaker for your money, with plenty of deep bass, unusual styling and massive build	35,127,65	●	A 20	●	270
EC	Vivid Audio B1	7,750	Impressive cabinet design combined with hi-tech drivers to make truly world class speaker	27,110,38	●	A- 40	●	261
EC	Wilson Benesch ACT	8,400	Superb enclosure gives uncanny freedom from 'boxiness'. Well balanced, but top end might be sweeter	23,108,36	●	A 20	●	252
EC	Wilson Benesch Curve	5,000	Much (but not all) of the ACT's performance in a much more compact and affordable package	23,91,37	●	A 28	●	254
EC	Wharfedale 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
BB	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 BB BEST BUY EC EDITOR'S CHOICE

SUBWOOFERS

Bass speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			
				SIZE WxHxD (CM)	POWER (W)	BASS FROM (Hz)	SIZE NUMBER
BB	B&W PV1	950	Gorgeously styled sub shakes the air but not the floor, delivering a very clean sound with negligible coloration	29,34,35	500	20	259
EC	B&W ASW850	2,000	Does all the things subwoofers should do with music and movies alike, but transparently and seamlessly	53,56,52	1,000	18	246
EC	Eclipse TD725sw	2,700	Delivers solid meaningful bass, but with unusual tunefulness, speed and articulation	52,47,50	500	40	287
	Monitor Audio ASW100	300	For the price, this compact subwoofer performs particularly well	32,32,34	120	27	225
EC	REL 305	795	Landmark mid-price sub, works particularly well with low crossover frequency, looks great too	32,36,34	300	25	284
BB	REL Stampede	550	Few subs at this price match the Stampede's subtlety and ease of integration. Much more hi-fi than AV	28,40,29	100	18	257
BB	REL T1	595	Standard setter at the price: flexible, easily set up and packs quite a punch	36,40,420	300	25	291
BB	REL Strata 5	700	Highly musical sub that integrates well but the REL Stampede offers near-identical performance for less money	32,46,33	150	18	257
	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
BB	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					ISSUE NUMBER	
				ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUMAURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK		WEIGHT (g)
	ACS T2	500	Earcanal earphones display an impressive midband intelligibility and a knack for digging out the detail						28	315
	Audio Technica ATH-CK10	279	In-ear headphones offer unforced detail, natural dynamics and excellent clarity						15	319
	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
	Etymotic ER-4P	195	Fiddle with in-ear earpieces and angles of approach and you'll be repaid with super-detailed sound						20	319
	Sennheiser HD595	160	Technology from upmarket HD650 model makes this a very revealing headphone that's also extremely comfortable			●	●		270	266
	Sennheiser IE8	260	With its combination of neutral midrange and treble, this is arguably the best for in-ear all-round sound						20	319
	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.



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

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Dino Phono Amplifier



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	
ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS								
HB	Atlas Questor	70	Very open and informative at high and mid frequencies, with slightly dry bass. Imaging particularly fine	●				295
HB	Audioquest Sidewinder	45	A lively and detailed cable, with fine tonality and excellent rhythm. Slight added upper-bass warmth does little to detract	●				297
HB	Black Rhodium Prelude	80	Practical and sensibly priced all-rounder that seems happily compatible with a wide range of kit	●				293
HB	Black Rhodium Coda	150	Superb bass and excellently neutral and detailed midrange: treble generally sweet with occasional slight constriction	●				299
EC	Black Rhodium Concert	255	This DCT cable from the Polar range gives a distinctively dark timbre, rich in detail, with low subjective noise	●				270
HB	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
HB	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
HB	Clearer Audio Silver-line	244	Complex, well-screened cable which offers good sound all round with exceptional bass – at a price!	●				279
EC	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
HB	Kimber Timbre	118	A very neutral cable that will complement even very upmarket systems	●				312
HB	Monster M350i	45	Few cables at this price reveal so much about the recording space. Clear treble, too	●				281
HB	Monster M1000i	200	Very capable, with only a hint of bass dryness to set against excellent results elsewhere	●				284
HB	Nordost WyreWizard Dream	95	Slight lack of precision in extreme treble, otherwise detailed and neutral with authoritative bass		●			303
HB	Oehlbach NF214	63	The bass is a matter of taste, but suits many smaller speakers. Very good mid and treble	●				281
HB	Profigold PGA3000	60	Not the ultimate for lovers of clinical precision, its character is engaging and detail and extension are good	●				299
HB	Supra EFF-1X	77	Lively-sounding cable which maintains a high level of detail and neutrality. Musically, a great all-rounder	●				306
HB	Townshend Isolda DCT100	99	Sound has a particularly enjoyable cohesion and naturalness that makes for a great listener involvement		●			312
HB	van den Hul Integration Hybrid	125	Bass is nothing remarkable, but mid and treble are outstandingly open and clear: very transparent	●				306
HB	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								
HB	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
HB	Kimber DV-30	59	A superb performer that lacks very little, even when compared to Kimber's high-end models	●				E 317
HB	Merlin Scorpion Digital	130	Reduces distortion, making sound clear with unusually revealing low frequencies	●				E 317
HB	SupraAnCo	80	This cable can give a useful fillip to a good transport/DAC combination, even in a high-end context	●				E 304
SPEAKER CABLES PER METRE								
HB	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
HB	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
HB	Chord Silver Screen	6	Screened speaker cable with excellent treble, but just a little light in the bass at times	●				310
EC	CrystalCable Piccolo	1,480	A chip off the old block, this speaker cable has a similarly fast, fluid and subtle sound		●		●	302
HB	Kimber BPR	12	A cable that really enjoys the music, also admirable for the levels of analytical detail it allows through. Excellent value	●				299
HB	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
EC	Nordost Heimdall	162	Alternative to Valhalla, silver plated, micro-monofilament construction, low coloration, hi-res and suitable for exacting systems	●				278
HB	QED X-Tube XT300	10	A natural and well controlled sounding cable that's cost effective for mid-priced systems		●			310
HB	QED Revelation	15	Sensibly priced, this cable offers a performance which is a step-up from budget types	●				318
EC	Supra Sword	116	Zero inductance construction, medium resolution cable that has an excellent midband and is fundamentally musical	●				287
EC	Townshend Isolda DCT	50	Cryogenically treated 'impedance matched' cable with stabilising components added: great sound all round		●	●		241
HB	van den Hul The Wind	50	Separate conductors provide plenty of room for experimentation and the conductor quantity keeps resistance low		●	●		318
HB	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 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>BEST BUY</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>BEST BUY</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>EDITOR'S CHOICE</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
	Mitty 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>BEST BUY</small>	RussAndrews 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>EDITOR'S CHOICE</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 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>BEST BUY</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>EDITOR'S CHOICE</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>BEST BUY</small>	Partington Ansa 60	99	Elegant flat-packer 'disappears' sonically; restrained but neutral and coherent	62	18,15			4	232
<small>BEST BUY</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>EDITOR'S CHOICE</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>EDITOR'S CHOICE</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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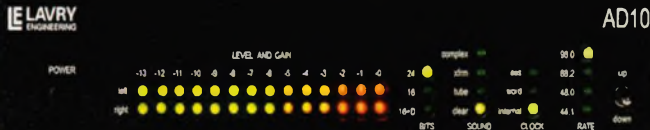
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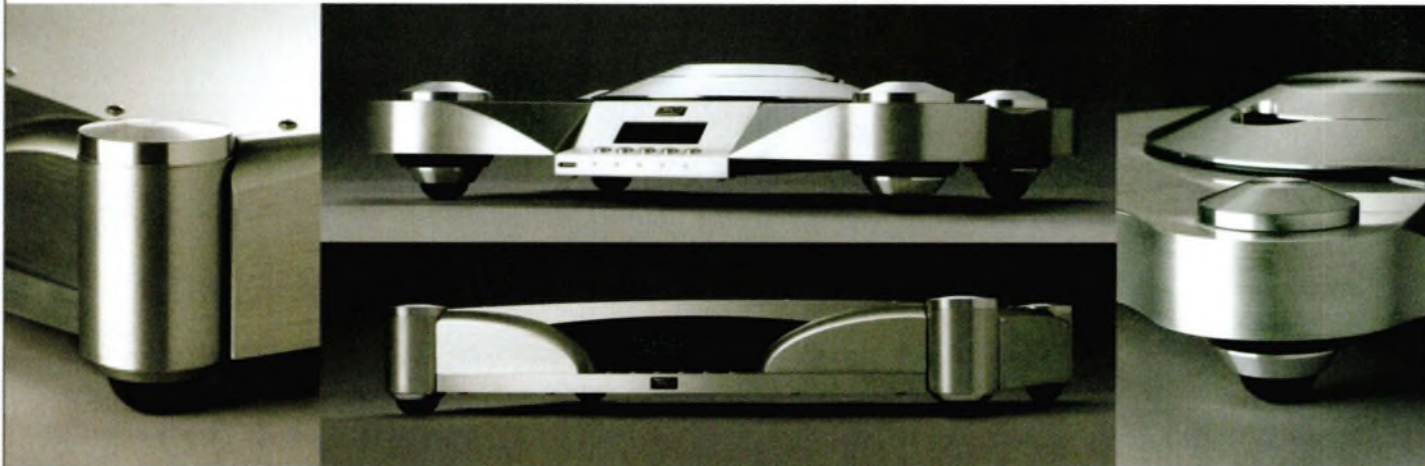
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Music Compression – friend or foe?

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

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

Falling Music Sales

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

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

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

M

USIC ~

Quality or Quantity?

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

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

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

So where do we go from here when many hi-fi systems feature an iPod docking station as standard? 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.



QUALITY OR QUANTITY?..

...Ask our Top 20 UK Hi-Fi Dealers

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They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards hi-fi that will give years of musical enjoyment and total satisfaction.

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2nd-hand shootout

Great-sounding amplifiers for just £1,500

Spending £1,500 on a second-hand amplifier opens up a huge range of options. Perhaps one of the more unusual is the ATC SIA2-150. Although ATC is better known for its studio speakers, the firm is nonetheless highly respected by a small number of dedicated audiophiles, and this chunky integrated (first launched in 1999) has only just been superseded (see our review in *HFC* 314).

Rather confusingly, the newer model is also called the SIA2-150, and is actually cheaper than the old one. Still, this is great news for bargain-hunters, as ex demo and nearly new models are easily available on our budget, the older SIA2-150 having cost around £2,500 brand new. The updated version looks totally different, even though the electronics are very similar. More good news for second-hand buyers is that the generous six-year warranty is transferable to any number of owners. What's more, ATC reports very few problems and, with its reputation for robust studio equipment, this is thoroughly believable. In fact, it reckons on a 30-year lifespan, with the only problem being a lack of some cosmetic parts. So, for a powerful-sounding amplifier with similar construction, the ATC is unlikely to disappoint.

Somewhat better known is the Arcam C31/P1 pre/power combination. We're always happy to recommend Arcam in these pages, because it offers fantastic second-hand value and ease of service with, in most cases, excellent sound quality. The Arcam C31 preamp was launched in 2005 and the P1 monoblock amps a year before that. Buying all three new would cost you the best part of £3,000, but we found examples for nearly half that. Although £1,750 is typical, we did find a trio for just £1,600 – pretty close to



Pictured: The impressive Chord Electronics CPM 2600

budget. Reliability is excellent with the C31/P1, although Arcam did point out that the front panels are expensive to replace.

Like the ATC, the Arcam range comes with an excellent warranty. In this case it's for five years and it is transferable. Having said that, Arcam told us the original receipt must be available for inspection upon return, so don't buy without one. Standard C31s come without a phono stage, but Arcam can supply one for £110. Our advice, however, is to stick to a quality, separate phono stage at this level. For this reason, a C31 complete with phono stage isn't worth more than one without.

The award for the most outrageous amp here goes to the Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300. Back in 2003, this mammoth integrated cost a whopping £4,000. Key to its appeal were the military-use 5703WB valves, which helped give the big MF no fewer than 350 watts per channel – into an eight-ohm load! Yet for all that power, the Tri-Vista was always one of MF's more refined big amps. With the valves hard-wired, there's no need to worry about finding replacement valve holders. Should you be unlucky and need a new set of valves, we managed to find pairs for a reasonable £30.

“We're always happy to recommend Arcam in these pages, because it offers fantastic second-hand value and ease of service.”

All models will now be out of warranty, so if you're after peace of mind, then buy from a dealer. If you're buying blind, then do make sure you get the separate power supply, the two Neutrik-terminated power connections and the XLR connection cable. The Tri-Vista 300 came with rather novel feet that were lit red on standby, orange on warm-up and then blue after about 45 minutes. If these lights fail to come on or stay orange after an hour or so, then find another model. The Tri-Vista is perhaps not the safest bet here, but if your speakers are tricky to drive, it's still one of the most powerful integrated amps about.

Our final choice is the Chord CPM 2600. The model was launched in 2001 and replaced by the CPM 2650 last year. At £3,500 (£4,150 new), this integrated amp would have been



Pictured: ATC's highly respected ATC SIA2-150 amp

a keen rival for the Tri-Vista back in 2003. According to Chord, only the remote controls were changed during its production period. The last models used 'Stealth' remotes, and these are the only replacements currently available. Reassuringly, this is another product with an excellent warranty and service back-up. The standard warranty is for five years and, like that of the Arcams, transferable with proof

of original purchase. Furthermore, Chord states that the CPM 2600 is still fully serviceable and supported by its factory.

There are no reports of any problems with this amp, and users generally speak highly of it. One rather curious option was that of the extra-cost "Integra" legs (it's debatable whether or not these improve the sound). Although models are often for sale around the £2,000 mark, we found one with the 'lovely legs' for just £1,500 – fantastically good value.

Choose any of these four options and you'll have a very superior amplifier at a bargain price. And that, as they say these days, has to be a no-brainer. **HFC**

Dominic Todd

Next month: £500 speakers

READER CLASSIFIED

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified*, the UK's first and best free private ads service for second-hand hi-fi. These pages are a must-read if you're thinking about buying used kit, and if you want to sell something it's definitely the place to be. It's free to place an advertisement – simply submit your ad of up to 30 words,

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FOR SALE

LINN LP12 turntable three years old in black. Ekos tonearm with Adikt cartridge and Cirkus bearing. Hardly used – immaculate condition. (£3,600) £1,700. 01269 595271 (Carmarthenshire).

KIMBER SELECT KS-1021 (-11dB attenuation) mint boxed £250 bargain. Graham Slee Solo headphone amp inc PSU (£600) £280. Grado RA-1 headphone amp, battery powered (£350) £200 mint 01908 661094 (Bucks).

CYRUS PRE V2 six months warranty £400ono. Cyrus X Power amps (two) two to three years old £550ono. Cyrus PSX-R power supply two years old £250 ono. Spondor S5E speakers, three years old, cherry £600ono. All mint condition, original packaging with manuals. Buyer collects. 0131 317 9977 (work) or 01721 723 946 (home) (Peeblesshire).

ATC SCM11 speakers £425. Naim CD 5i £375. Naim Nait 5i £375. email: frank8ush@ntlworld.com, 02920 419226 (S Wales).

QUAD 33/ 303/ FM3, wooden rack £200. Nakamichi 680ZX cassette deck £150. Pioneer PD 6700 CD player £50. A&R Cambridge T21 FM Tuner £30. QED phono lead £5. IXOS 104 OFC phono lead £10. 01228 544376 (Cumbria).

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 640C V2 silver CD player with remote and power cable, boxed as new. Well cared for with no defects. £140 including postage. 07837 322576 (Cambridgeshire).

RUARK PROLOGUE 2 speakers, HFC recommended, cherry, excellent condition, boxed, (£1,250) £450. Buyer collects please. 01268 774416 (Essex).

DENON AVR1909 AV receiver black £150. Yamaha AX763 AV amp black £150. 01625 433996 (Cheshire).

MUSICAL FIDELITY E624 24-bit CD player, as new £175. Sugden AU41 power amp, 100 watts per channel, bargain £90 as new. 01371 850665 (Essex).

SONUS FABER MINIMA Amators/stands £750. Audion 300BPSE triode monoblocks £1,450. Kuzma Stabi SD/Stogi S/vdHul Frog £1,500. Art Audio Vinyl One,mm/mc £950. 01453 544354 (Gloucs).

KEF XQ1 in silver. Matching stands. Excellent condition, as new. Genuine reason for sale. £600 ono. 07766 078281 (London).

B&W DM1101 speakers and Apollo stands £50. Jamo centre 200 and 100 rears with Jamo stands £40. All in very good condition, will split. 07941 471561 (Camps).

ARCAM CD92 CD player, Rotel RC1070 preamp, two Rotel RB980BX power amps. All mint, boxed, manuals etc. £650 the lot (upgraded). 01535 6522992 (W Yorks).

ATACAMA EQUINOX hi-fi two-shelf base unit in silver and arctic frost glass shelves, £65. Onkyo CS515UK micro system in silver, CD, DAB, speakers, as new £150. 07970 115378 (Avon).

YAMAHA DSP A5 AV amplifier DTS, Dolby Digital, 5x70 watts. Excellent condition £40. 0784 6675141 (Northants).

CLEARAUDIO EMOTION turntable £550. 07747 663377 (Herts).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A308 pre/power combo, simply stunning, amazing build quality. Rarely for sale second hand, mint. (£3,800), accept £1,900, absolute bargain. Quad 12L rosewood piano gloss, mint £200. 07876 705266 (W Yorks).

WANTED: Stax SRD-7/SB energiser, Stax Lambda earspeaker (normal bias, Moth 30-watt stereo power amplifier) chris@christalclear.co.uk, 01923 286760 (Herts). **WANTED:** Henley WR5 equipment support, cherry finish. Paul 07766 443030 (Merseyside).

HEYBROOK INTEGRA classic stereo amp, £300. Tandberg TR2055 stereo receiver, needs attention, classic original, service manual, offers over £100. 01566 783199 (Devon).



Above: ATC SCM11 standmount loudspeakers

ARCAM ALPHA 6 amplifier, Alpha 5 FM tuner, B&W DM4 speakers/stands. Good condition/boxes. Also Alpha 5 CD player (not working) £100 ono. 0151 428 1524 (Merseyside).

MISSION 751 speakers £50, Chord mains cable 1.5metres £70. No offers. 07868 175364 (W Mids).

ARCAM DV79 DVD player, black, mint condition, remote, instruction manual, boxed, HDMI interface £275 ono. 01772 745553 (Lancashire).

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

QUAD 306 power amp, Quad 34 control unit and Quad FM4 tuner, all with original instruction books, £350. 020 8361 3435 (North London).

ROKSAN L2.5/ S1.5 pre/power amps with DS1.5 (PSU) £1,100. TEAD Microgroove+ phono stage (0.5mV output) £450. Sony TCK6ES 3H cassette deck, Dolby B, C, S & HX Pro £120. 07805 731653 (Surrey).

REVEL M22 speakers in maple, immaculate condition, highly recommended standmounts (£1,800) £850. 01872 870602 (Cornwall).

CYRUS PRE X preamplifier boxed £350. Rotel RB991 power, 200-watt, £350. Or swap for Naim. 01977 609839 (W Yorks).

CARY AUDIO CD-308 upsampling CD player, HDCD, remote volume control, high end performance and construction in black, mint condition, boxed (£800) £345. 07776 143890 (Hants).

OPERA SECONDA speakers (cherry) £750. Unison Research hybrid valve equipment; Secondo 120 watts per channel integrated amplifier £750. Unico FM/RDS tuner £450. All below half price. Chord Rumour 4 bi-wire speaker cable 2x9m £180 (£430) 023 8073 8935 (Hants)

PROJECT RPMS turntable, good condition, hardly used, one year old £250 ono. 07946 465191 (N London).

ACURUS (MONDIAL) RL11 preamp, black with aluminium dials, superb sound, excellent condition, with remote, (£700) £265. 07725 072878 (Leics).

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

ARCAM CD73 CD player, black. Arcam A80 amp, black. Both boxed and in mint condition, £200 each. Buyer collects. 01384 897009 (W Mids)

LIMITED EDITION A1 poster illustrating the history of the loudspeaker, as seen in *Hi-Fi Choice* February issue. Over 100 images of the most groundbreaking, classic and outrageous loudspeakers ever made. Price £20, plus £3 p+p. To order email d.gentleman@btpenworld.com or call 07879 650913 (Herts).

BENCHMARK DAC1 under 12 months old, bought DAC pre, £390. Chord Signature Digital cable, RCA-BNC, 1m, £90. 01752 773369 (Devon).

MUSICAL FIDELITY Trivistor 300 hybrid integrated amplifier, 300 watts per 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).

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

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

GRADO SR60 headphones, £45. Sennheiser HD 595 headphones, £75. Both highly rated models, boxed and unused. 01943 463510 (W. Yorks).

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).

B&W 703 loudspeakers, maple finish. Slight damage to cabinet, otherwise excellent. Two years old, £800. Serious offers. 07943 164393 (Kent)

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 ono. 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 ono. 01685 350176 (Merthyr Tydfil).

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 the lot. 01392 444182 timiambeing@yahoo.co.uk (Exeter).

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

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

ARCAM A85 amp, £350. Arcam P85 amp, £300. Arcam CD93 CD player, £350. PMC TB2+ loudspeakers, £350. All approximately three years old. All mint condition, boxed with original packing, manuals, remotes. Buyer collects. 02392 257626 (Hants)

MISSION M25AS active subwoofer, ash black, phase control. 250mm front-ported driver, 100 watts, mint condition, £90 o.n.o 07814 633624 (Leics).

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).

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) 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).


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