

New Musical Fidelity amp rated



In-depth test on the new M3i integrated

£1,350+ speaker super test

Spendor, KEF, PMC and more go head-to-head



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 337 October 2010 £3.99

Crown jewels

Verdict on B&W's new 802 Diamond

System heaven

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More information on Amphion products on
www.amphion.fi



amphion

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YOUR EXPERTS



PAUL MESSENGER
EXPERTISE: SPEAKERS

PAUL is the UK's foremost expert on loudspeakers. Having worked as a speaker designer and reviewer for over 30 years Paul is internationally recognised for his ability to assess loudspeaker performance, and report on developments in the field.



JIMMY HUGHES
EXPERTISE: SYSTEM OPTIMISATION

JIMMY has been involved in hi-fi for over 40 years. His knowledge of tweaking and optimising systems is unrivalled in the hi-fi industry and he brings enormous expertise to the pages of Hi-Fi Choice. If anyone can help you improve your set-up, it's him.



RICHARD BLACK
EXPERTISE: TECHNOLOGY

RICHARD writes exclusively for *HFC* and brings his experience as a successful musician and recording engineer to the title. As Technical Consultant, he's our authority on tech testing, ensuring that our verdicts are beyond compare.



JON MARKS
EXPERTISE: DIY AND VINTAGE

JOHN previously edited *Hi-Fi World* magazine before joining the UK's leading title, *Hi-Fi Choice*. Jon has a wealth of reviewing experience, as well as a passion for vintage audio gear and a gift for repairing and upgrading ageing kit.



ALVIN GOLD
EXPERTISE: PERFORMANCE AUDIO

ALVIN is an internationally respected audio reviewer who has contributed to a huge range of magazines over the years. He has a very full 30 years of reviewing under his belt and has a passion for both high-performance and high-end hi-fi.



JASON KENNEDY
EXPERTISE: TURNTABLES

JASON edited *Hi-Fi Choice* through the Brit-pop era and relinquished the helm after 17 years on the title. A hi-fi addict since his twenties, Jason fell for the beauty of vinyl and has never looked back. He's here to help you get the best from your LPs.



MALCOLM STEWARD
EXPERTISE: EMERGING TECH

MALCOLM is a legend in hi-fi magazine circles. A former editor of *Hi-Fi Review* he was one of the best-known and most outspoken reviewers of the 1980s and 1990s. He now writes exclusively for *Hi-Fi Choice* and he loves being 'back'.

Welcome...

www.hifichoice.co.uk Issue No. **337** October 2010



We're delighted to be the first magazine in the world to bring you a comprehensive review of **Bowers and Wilkins' new 802 Diamond**. The iconic 800 range is recognised right across the globe as some of the finest speakers on the planet. Although expensive, it's our view at *Hi-Fi Choice* that **the 802D is the pick of the bunch** and on p50, Paul Messenger gets to grip with this incredible behemoth. Speaking of world scoops, we're also bringing you the first test of **Theta's incredible Compli** universal disc player, which at £3,000 puts the high end in reach for us mere mortals. Check out Alvin's report over on p72. But, as ever, the bulk of the issue is dedicated to high-performance hi-fi at real-world prices and **Musical Fidelity's** new £1,000 M3i integrated amp (p66) is a case in point.

Dan

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OUR PROMISE TO YOU

HI-FI CHOICE is passionate about high-fidelity. We're dedicated to the very highest standards of sound reproduction. Our commitment is to bring you the most reliable, in-depth hi-fi equipment tests anywhere and we're backed by the UK's biggest technology publisher. Our expert writers will help you get the most from your hi-fi and guide you towards the best-performing products for your budget. Our passion is your passion.



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Major Event Announcement

(Jordan Acoustics exclusive)
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This is the first time that
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been performed in the
UK. Having won critical
acclaim in Hong Kong, this
is a unique opportunity to
experience what can only
be described as '**State-of-
the-art high resolution
SACD multi-channel
audio**'.

Ken Ishiwata in conjunction
with **Jordan Acoustics** will be
personally hosting this very exciting
demonstration. Ken will also be
available to answer questions after
each presentation.



**National Audio
Show 2010
September 25th-26th 2010
Ground Floor
Syndicate Room 11**

Super Audio Multi-Channel

We are demonstrating the ultimate
in **Super Audio Multi-Channel
recordings**. Read on...

Source

For the source, the **multi award-
winning Marantz UD-9004 Blue
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to provide the high resolution signal.

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S1's main soundboards**, the
UD-9004 has proven itself to be the
universal player of choice for the
discerning music lover.



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● CHORD ●



Great Hi-Fi really can come in extraordinarily small boxes

NEW at Jordan Acoustics



Beautifully conceived and beautifully executed, each product in the Chordette series offers the flexibility and functionality without the compromises often seen in other products.

Until you see a Chordette product in the flesh you cannot fully appreciate just how incredibly compact each one is. It is without a doubt no small feat of engineering and design.

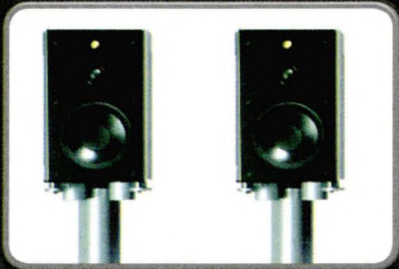
Use a single Chordette product in your existing system or put together a complete Chordette system, where then it really does come into its own. Chord have even designed a beautiful rack to support and show off the Chordette range. Perfect.

0% FINANCE OPTIONS* AVAILABLE



Amplification

Amplified via 3 'cascaded' Marantz PM11-S2 stereo integrated amplifiers, the PM11-S2 was designed around the Legendary Series SC-7 Pre-amplifier and MA-9 monoblocks. Not only does it have similar circuitry but it also keeps the 'cascade' feature, which allows up to 6 pre-amplifiers to be cascaded giving 12 channels!



Speakers

Wilson Benesch Trinity satellites will be deployed to achieve both the wide bandwidth data and lightning fast transient response of the Marantz Integrated amplifiers. Infrasonic sound to be delivered by the patented Wilson Benesch Torus infrasonic generator.

A demonstration not to be missed!



These closed door demonstrations will be strictly limited so please book early to avoid disappointment.

Saturday 25th	Sunday 26th
11.00am	12.00pm
12.15pm	1.15pm
1.30pm	2.30pm
2.45pm	
4.00pm	



*subject to conditions

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**WORTH
£900**

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Paul Messenger, B&W 802 Diamond p50

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Audiofile

All the latest news and views from the hi-fi industry



Little wonders

Chord brings the high end to the masses with an affordable range of micro hi-fi

PRICE: £412 TO £2,195
AVAILABLE: NOW/SEPTEMBER (MAX/TOUCAN BLUE)
CONTACT: 01622 721444
WEB: CHORDELECTRONICS.CO.UK

Super-flexible components that are designed to integrate into any existing hi-fi system

Chord Electronics has expanded its Chordette range of affordable, compact hi-fi products to bring its engineering expertise to the masses.

The new range of super-flexible components join the existing Gem DAC (£412) which is designed to integrate within an existing hi-fi system and enables the transfer of music through Bluetooth as well as

volume control. It can also be bridged for 80 watts in mono by pressing the switch at the rear. It also boasts an overload protection circuit that is said to prevent damage when using a PC as the source.

Also new to the range is the Dual phono amplifier (£800), designed to provide the high-level of boost amplification and frequency shaping necessary to match the low-level output from high-quality moving coil cartridges. An onboard analogue-to-digital converter enables vinyl recordings to be archived to a computer as digital copies, too.

The Toucan headphone amplifier (£800) will, according to the Chord, add high-definition headphone compatibility to any hi-fi system. It also boasts two headphone jack sockets, so that 'two can listen' at the same time, hence the Toucan tag.

Also joining the range soon is the Toucan Blue headphone amplifier (£1,495) and the Max power amplifier, both of which sport both USB and Bluetooth connectivity. Completing the range is the Mogul micro PC (see below). A stand is available for £495, with additional sides priced at £180.

The new lineup is available now, with the exception of the Max and the Toucan Blue, which will be out in September. Watch out for reviews in *Hi-Fi Choice* soon. ●

PC CONNECTIVITY

THE MOGUL MICRO PC marks a slight departure for Chord, normally known for its high-end hi-fi products, rather than IT equipment.

Priced at £2,195, the compact Mogul acts as a media streamer at the heart of a flexible system. With full web access and support, the Mogul makes it possible to play music, download and playback a missed TV programme, check email, or browse the internet.

As well as being able to connect to each product in the Chordette range via USB, the Mogul enables dual VGA and simultaneous HDMI output.

Preinstalled with Windows 7, the Mogul is also supplied with a full-size wireless keyboard and a USB Wi-Fi adapter for connection to wireless networks.

direct streaming from a PC using the USB. Based on the same design, the new Peach DAC (£799) also includes Bluetooth and USB, while also adding optical and coaxial inputs.

Designed as the control centre for the Chordette or existing hi-fi system, the Prime preamplifier (£1,495) can connect to up to four sources using the analogue inputs while USB enables connection to a PC.

The Chordette range's stereo power amplifier is known as the Scamp. This diminutive unit has its own RCA phono inputs, USB port and gain control so that it can be used as a standalone integrated amplifier from a single source, or a power amplifier when combined with the Prime. The Scamp is a 40-watt stereo amp with built-in USB DAC, high-gain analogue input and rotary



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Mission to thrill

Mission launches MX series speakers from just £150

Mission has unveiled a new range of speakers that is it claims will deliver excellent sound quality at affordable prices.

The MX Series has been designed to work well when positioned close to walls, making them ideal for homes where space is at a premium, says Mission.

The range includes five stereo models: the MX-1 (£150 per pair) and MX-2 (£200 per pair) are standmount models, while the MX-3 (£350 per pair),

MX-4 (£500 per pair) and MX-5 (£600 per pair) are floorstanders. For home cinema use, there are also two centre channel speakers; the MX-C1 (£130) and MX-C2 (£180), along with a compact multipurpose model – the MX-S (£120 per pair) which can be wall, shelf or stand-mounted.

Equipped with an integrated treble waveguide that's said to optimise dispersion, each model is designed to deliver a balanced sound, both on- and off-axis, no matter where the listener is seated.

Drive units are equipped with cones made from an advanced fibre formulation and these hand over to Mission's traditional 25mm silk dome tweeter, through its sophisticated crossover network.

All speakers in the range can be either single- or bi-wired, while the base of the floorstanders can be weighted with filler for extra stability and additional enclosure damping.

Cabinets will be available in a choice of finishes including black, cherry, rosewood and walnut.



PRICE: £150-600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01480 447700 **WEB:** MISSION.CO.UK

Affordable luxury

New hi-fi separates from Marantz with ultra-low prices

Marantz is set to offer a taste of high-end audio at a budget price, with the introduction of two new budget hi-fi separates.

Priced at £220, the remote-controlled CD5004 compact disc player boasts a sturdy, low-resonance, acoustically damped chassis. The deck features a CD transport mechanism with high stability for optimum CD data retrieval. Under the chassis, is a Cirrus Logic

CS4392, 24-bit/192kHz DAC, chosen for accuracy and low noise.

Also new, says Marantz, is the PM5004 integrated stereo amplifier, which it's claimed delivers a hefty 55 watts per

channel and has five line inputs, an MM phono stage, two sets of speaker terminals and a headphone socket. It also weighs a considerable 6kg.

Both designs come in either black or silver/gold finishes.



PRICE: £220 (CD5004); £250 (PM5004) **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 02890 279839 **WEB:** MARANTZ.CO.UK



FM switch-off update

RADIO LISTENERS will determine when analogue radio switch-off takes place, through listening habits and purchasing decisions, says communications minister Ed Vaizey. Speaking at the recent Intellect Digital Home Conference, Vaizey said: "The Digital Radio Action Plan I am publishing today sets out our clear commitment to make progress towards digital radio switchover. But I am not setting a date. The industry believes 2015 is an achievable target date and we will work to support that ambition".

Paul Smith, general manager of DAB specialist PURE, commented: "Despite the strategic nature of digital broadcast and the inevitable need for technological advances, there have been many confusing messages around digital radio switchover and this announcement gives much needed clarity to consumers and the radio industry as a whole."



Part-ex your old amp

CYRUS AUDIO has introduced a special summer promotion that enables you part-exchange your old amplifier for a brand new Cyrus XM amp with digital inputs (excluding the DAC XP+).

A Cyrus spokesperson commented: "For this special summer promotion, we have introduced a brand new limited edition 6XP d integrated amplifier. Based upon our award-winning 6XP platform, this limited edition model incorporates a DAC that introduces five digital inputs, including a USB port." All makes and models will be accepted.

CONTACT: 01480 435577 **WEB:** CYRUSAUDIO.COM

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HI-FI WORLD

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www.soundfoundations.co.uk www.isoteksystems.com

"The whole auditioning process took about 30 seconds. Play a piece of music on GII Mini Sub. Play it again on Aquarius and wonder why you were so attached to the GII Mini Sub." "Very highly recommended"

HI-FI PLUS. ISSUE 68,



SIRIUS



ACCESSORIES



ORION



VISION



SIGMAS



TITAN

Elite performance

Musical Fidelity unveils "most advanced" Class A power amplifier

The AMS100 from Musical Fidelity is, according to the company, "the most advanced pure Class A amplifier ever made".

Based on the fully balanced circuit design of its successful AMS50 model, the new amp boasts an impressive quoted power output of 100 watts (eight ohms).

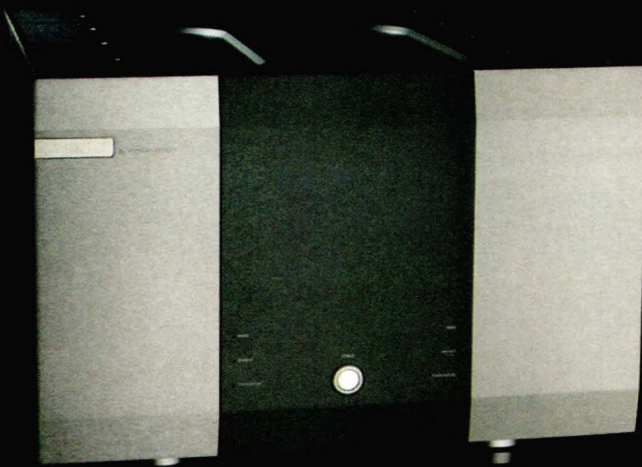
According to Musical Fidelity, the amp has been designed for an elite band of audiophile purists, who will probably be the only people likely to shell out for the £13,000 asking price.

Although based on the same circuit design used in the AMS50, the new AMS100 incorporates some important differences. The new amp has a separate power supply for each half of the bridge, which is highly significant for dynamic stability. What's more, each power supply (for each half of the bridge) has its own separate, dedicated 'dual bifilar' choke regulator. This unique system has a quoted power supply noise rejection ratio of 88 to 1, which is the equivalent of multiplying capacitance by more than

88 times. According to ME this has a significant effect on the technical and sonic performance of the amplifier and also provides high-quality mains noise filtration.

The AMS100 uses a large quantity of high-performance capacitors, which, say the company, enables it to offer optimum dynamic consistency under all load conditions.

Tipping the scales at a reassuringly hefty 100kg, the AMS100 amp even comes with its very own wooden packing crate.



PRICE: £13,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 020 8900 2866 **WEB:** MUSICALFIDELITY.COM



Four for vinyl

AUDIO-TECHNICA has introduced three new cartridges, along with a step-up transformer. The AT33EV cartridge replaces the AT33ANV, which was introduced to celebrate Audio-Technica's 45th anniversary in 2007. The AT33MONO and AT33MONO 3/SP are both mono models, the latter being specifically designed for use with shellac records.

A 0.5-inch standard-mount elliptical cartridge, the AT33EV, features a tapered duralumin cantilever which is designed to reduce the effective mass of the unit and promote durability. The Dual Moving Coil design is also said to increase channel separation and extend frequency response.

Designed for flat response and flexibility, the AT2000T step-up transformer is compatible with a range of MC cartridges from two to 17 ohms. Boasting a floating insulation, the AT2000T is based around an EI Core transformer.

A 20 per cent online price reduction is available on these products until 31 August, using the discount code INTRO. The offer also extends to the recently introduced OC9/MLIII, F3/III and F7. Keep your eyes peeled for reviews of the AT33EV and the AT3000T in upcoming issues of HFC.

PRICE: £529 (AT33EV); £389 (AT33MONO); £199 (AT33MONO 3/SP); £1,120 (AT2000T)
AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: 0113 277 1441
WEB: AUDIO-TECHNICA.COM

DAC's entertainment

Furutech launches new Alpha Design Labs sub-brand

Cable specialist Furutech has launched its second brand – Alpha Design Labs.

The first product from ADL is the GT40 24/96 USB DAC which, somewhat unusually, is equipped with a phono stage. The design is said to make the new model ideal for audio PC use and for small hi-fi systems.

Priced at £395, the 'audiophile-grade' GT40 is a high-performance 24-bit/96kHz USB DAC that is wired with Furutech's renowned GT2 cable. The GT40 is the first in its category to include a built-in low-noise MM/MC phono preamp, making it perfect for recording vinyl to hard disk via the USB output, says Furutech.



PRICE: £395
AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: 01276 501392
WEB: SOUNDFOUNDATIONS.CO.UK

NEWS IN BRIEF

A selection of news-breaking stories on everything hi-fi



• **PHILIPS'** Fidelio DS9000 iPod dock boasts the maker's PureDigital sound processing and has been designed to appeal to audiophiles, says the company. philips.co.uk



• **QED** has introduced the 'ultra-value' XTC loudspeaker cable which is due to hit shops in September, with a suggested price of £4 per metre. qed.co.uk



• **SEVENOAKS SOUND AND VISION** is set to join forces with Audio T to become the biggest independent hi-fi and home cinema retailer in the UK. sevenoakssoundandvision.co.uk



• **PURE DIGITAL** recently expanded its range to include the Oasis Flow – it's first weatherproof and splash-resistant, internet-connected DAB radio. pure.com



• **HARMAN KARDON** has unveiled a new website that is intended to reflect its scientific approach to testing research and product development. harmankardon.com/scienceofsound

Eco-friendly hi-fi is here

NAD's new energy-saving integrated amplifier is a powerful performer, that's packed to the hilt with special features



NAD Electronics has introduced a new integrated amplifier in the form of the C356BEE. The company's director of advanced development, Bjorn Eric Advarden (the 'BEE' in the model name) has incorporated the knowledge gained from the brand's flagship Masters Series M3 integrated amplifier into the C356BEE design.

According to NAD, its patented PowerDrive amplifier circuit offers a very high dynamic power and low-impedance drive capability for detailed and relaxed sound, while accurately controlling

sometimes difficult to drive loudspeakers.

At elevated listening levels, NAD's exclusive Soft Clipping circuit is said to be designed to transform the sound waveform to save speakers from damaging clipping distortion.

The C356BEE expands NAD's Modular Design Construction (MDC) offering in its Classic Series. MDC is said to improve ease of use, while offering expansion and customisation options.

Eco-friendly buyers will be pleased to hear that, in line with NAD's commitment to environmental sustainability,

the engineering team have redesigned the amp's power supply to ensure that it uses less than 0.5 watts in standby. What's more the official line is, that NAD's proprietary PowerDrive circuit has the dynamic capability of an amplifier twice as powerful, while using only half the power. There's also a handy, energy-saving fully off 'vacation' switch. The power output measures 80 watts per channel into a continuous four-ohm load.

Other features include preamp out, new improved speaker binding posts and front panel mini-jack for iPod or MP3 and remote control.

PRICE: £600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01279 501111 **WEB:** NADELECTRONICS.COM

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

Andy Giles founder and Senior Partner of AGA PR chooses his vital four discs – all on vinyl



THE STROKES IS THIS IT

This LP restored my faith in modern music when it first burst on the scene in 2001. I loved the Strokes' fresh, ballsy attitude, best exemplified for me on the track 'Last Night'.



VAN MORRISON VEEDON FLEECE

This is sublime, especially if you're Irish, as it embraces all the troubles and beauty of the island. It's *Astral Weeks* with a delicious Celtic stream of consciousness.



NEIL YOUNG ON THE BEACH

It's both absurd and impossible to say that this is Neil Young's finest recording. But it probably is. Don't expect to hear Neil rocking – this is sheer unashamed reflection.



LED ZEPPELIN PHYSICAL GRAFFITI

Not a stairway in sight, but take it from someone who knows, this is Led Zeppelin at their very best. Check out the track *In My Time of Dying* and, erm, just die. Fulfilled.

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DENON

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Denon D-M38DAB Micro Component System // Following in the footsteps of the What HI-FI? Sound and Vision award winning D-M37DAB, this new stereo all-rounder from Denon's D-M family comes with even more intelligent features. Most remarkably, the front panel USB port now features iPod/iPhone digital direct connectivity, which truly brings your mobile music libraries to life. Experience the beautiful D-M38DAB at your local Denon dealer. Visit www.denon.co.uk for more details.

Also available in:



Black | Black



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The future from the legend

Paul Stephenson, Naim Audio's Managing Director and Simon Drake, the General Manager of Naim Label, discuss the future with *Adam Hartley*





Rewind back to 1991. If you are of a certain age, you may remember that Naim very publicly criticised the sound quality of early CD players. It actually took eight years after the launch of the CD in Europe for Naim to produce the CDS, its first CD player the company considered good enough to

launch (discontinued in 1998 and replaced by the CDS2). Naim has always embraced new technology, whilst continuing to maintain a traditional portfolio and an unswerving, consistent and utterly obsessive focus on audio quality. The company offers some of the best home server set-ups on the market today and still continues to deliver classic

products such as the NAC 552 preamp, NAP 500 power amplifier and CD555 CD player. If you want to stream your music around your house and control it with your iPhone, Naim has one of the best solutions to allow you to do so. In addition to home audio control, NaimNet's forthcoming iPad app promises to let you

control pretty much everything in your home, wherever you are, from video, heating and lighting through to your net-connected security cameras. We spoke with Naim Audio's Managing Director, Paul Stephenson and Naim Label's General Manager, Simon Drake to find out more about the company's plans for the future.

Naim was one of the first hi-fi stalwarts to properly recognise the importance of servers and streaming technology. Has it paid dividends?

"We had a vision for a server many, many years ago which led on to the development of our NaimNet custom install solutions," says Paul Stephenson. "This drove us down some interesting technology paths and to the product that today is HDX. This meant that we were able to take charge of ripping, storage and control as well as audio distribution – something we see as a key advantage over other solutions.

"With streaming, we saw an opportunity to add this functionality into a product we had already specified [the NaimUniti] as we were able to capitalise upon

"Research indicates that our customers are music enthusiasts first and hi-fi enthusiasts second."

an opportunity in the marketplace. The response was fantastic and we have been able to follow this up more recently with UnitiQute. The development of this all-in-one platform has also enabled a terrific level of knowledge that we know will move into our Reference products when we are completely happy with the performance at that level."

"Our vision of a very successful sound quality-based hard disk player has proved to be absolutely correct. Server and streamer products at Naim are a very significant contributor to the top of bottom lines and enable the significant expenditure of R&D."

Is it fair to say that you are serving two fairly distinct types of hi-fi enthusiasts? Those that have fully embraced digital and traditionalists who prefer to stick with vinyl and CD?

"Firstly, all our research indicates that our customers are music enthusiasts first and hi-fi enthusiasts second," Stephenson is quick to point out. "This is absolutely key to all-out thinking and totally follows the views of all of us at Naim."

"There are indeed Naim owners who are still totally enjoying their CD players and feel no rush to move to servers and streamers and there are owners who have moved totally to HDX as a source. There are, of course, the people in the middle who want or have both. And we are also seeing people with traditional systems purchasing NaimUniti as a second system."

What is the latest server and streaming tech on offer?

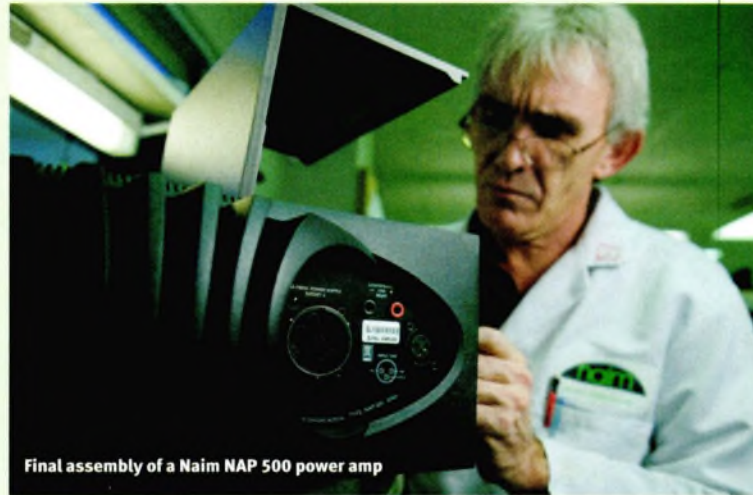
"HDX with the Naim DAC and a 555 PS power supply is a pretty hard act to follow, but expect to see some further launches this year," teases Stephenson.

"UnitiServe is just being delivered and forms the heart of UnitiSystem: a budget wireless multi-room system with NaimUniti or the new UnitiQute in up to six rooms. UnitiServe is clever in that it's dual-purpose and as it rips, serves and stores we control the total quality of the chain. It can act as a high-performance UPnP server and at the same time feed the highest-quality digital output to a Naim DAC.

"Later this year we expect to announce another significant product in this segment. The Naim forum is already buzzing with speculation."

Will there be a point in the near future where you stop manufacturing CD players?

"We see other manufacturers stopping as an indication of how few CD players they were selling, nothing more," Stephenson says. "For Naim, this is an opportunity to pick up new business, as we take CD players very seriously. We have launched the CD5 XS and CD X2/2 this year. The market is reducing



Final assembly of a Naim NAP 500 power amp



Above: Naim factory and right, Simon Drake, General Manager of Naim Label

overall, but we are not seeing any significant changes to our sales."

What about the Naim Label? How is the label connected to the hi-fi business?

"The increasing interest in hi-res formats and our own online download store means that the link is getting stronger, as we develop



NaimUniti all-in-one system

Brennan JB7

Good news for CD owners

British company re-invents the HiFi

"Mr Brennan you are a genius. The JB7 is truly a wonderful thing. I have only owned mine for two days but already it feels like an old friend. I admire its simplicity of operation, its range of functions, its unobtrusive size, and the quality of sound simply delights me. It's all I could wish for. Thank you. Kind Regards."

When Martin Brennan designed the Brennan JB7 he threw out the rule book. The Brennan is a CD player with a hard disk that stores up to 5,000 CDs. It saves space and clutter and delivers near immediate access to an entire music collection. JB7 owners rediscover then fall in love with their music again simply because the Brennan makes it so accessible.

The Brennan also records from vinyl and cassette so you can enjoy your entire music collection but keep it out of the way in another room or retire it to the attic.

You can use the JB7 in two ways. You can use it with loudspeakers or you can play it through your existing HiFi. The Brennan gives names to tracks and albums from a database of 2.6 million CDs as you load each CD. It takes a few minutes to load a CD.



Small enough to pick up with one hand, Big enough for a lifetime of music

The Brennan has a unique text search facility that shows a reducing number of matches as you press successive letters on the remote control. Once you get the hang of it you can find one track or album out of your entire music collection in a few seconds. So to find "Nessun Dorma" you would press letters "NES" or "DOR" and scroll through the shortlist of matches.

What's the point of owning CDs you don't play?

What's the point in owning hundreds of CDs worth thousands of pounds if you never listen to them?

The problem with CDs is that it's quicker to make a cup of coffee than dip into a CD. Try timing how long it takes to pick a CD, load it in the CD player, play a snippet from a track or two, eject it and put it back where it came from. Then there is the problem of finding music. The print on a CD spine is tiny. What if the track is on a compilation CD? What if the CD is in the car? Then there is the clutter. You need to keep your CDs near the player or you won't play them. So you are forced to share your living space with hundreds of cheap plastic boxes.

CDs are great but they are also inconvenient, inaccessible and a bit of a chore – that's why Martin Brennan designed the Brennan JB7.



in seconds • Browse albums by spinning the volume knob • Display tracks by name as they play • Load CDs in about four minutes • 2.6 million album database – updated monthly • Seven rainbow colour coded playlists • 180 X 32 soft scrolling vacuum fluorescent display • Segue function blends one track into the next • One touch record from vinyl, cassette or radio • Loads and plays MP3 from USB • Remote control or front panel • Volume knob pushes to use as a selector • Delete tracks you

don't like • Clock with alarm • 60 Watt power amplifier • 4.8 X 16 X 22cm steel and aluminium construction • Small and tough enough if you are on the move • Used by restaurants, hotels, pubs, dentists, schools • Sold to more than 30 Countries • Backup music to external USB hard disk for safe keeping • "Superb" - Gramophone • "Best Buy" - Hi Fi choice • Choice of colours Navy Blue or Gun Metal • Optional matching loudspeakers • Prices from £359.

Key Points

Three sizes – up to 5000 CDs

- One button plays the entire collection at random • Text search finds tracks/albums/ artists



The face behind Brennan



Martin Brennan

Martin is a physicist and computer engineer. He has around twenty silicon chips to his name, written over a million lines of computer code and co-designed the world's first 64 bit games computer.

"I always liked the promise of CDs. It wasn't so much the quality but the quick access to a given track. After vinyl and cassette that was a real plus. My first CD player was a five CD multi changer. My second was a ten CD changer for the car. I liked the idea of quick access to more than one CD and music that didn't repeat after 40 minutes. These players were fine but a bit clunky – there were several seconds of silence between CDs and in the car I could never find the right CD.

A few years ago I had a go at loading my cassette collection onto a PC. Cassettes were obsolete but I owned around 100 and the music on them reflected an important period in my life. I recorded all of the cassettes on to the PC over a period of several weeks. The thing is I never listened to the music on the PC. Somehow using the computer to listen to music never worked out. Maybe the computer was in the wrong place but I think it lacked the immediacy of a physical play button. In the end the computer got a virus and the music files were lost – I still had the cassettes thankfully. The JB7 is really my personal ideal music player".

To get the whole story and order visit www.brennan.co.uk



NaimNet's customisable Naim iPod app offers control over the whole system

products that will playback these formats," says the Naim MD.

Naim Label started back in 1991, following Naim's first venture into the realm of digital music playback with the CDS. Back then, Naim was struck with the stark reality that the sound of commercially available compact discs was sub-standard. Hungry for some material that could provide a superior listening experience, but also help demonstrate just how ground-breaking the Naim CDS was launched and Naim Label was born. Almost two decades later, Naim Label boasts a catalogue of over one hundred releases, from alternative rock to Beethoven symphonies.

Along with acclaimed recording engineer Ken Christianson, Naim has pioneered the True Stereo analogue recording technique, an honest and naturally vibrant method that allows recordings to sing on our very own home audio systems. In addition to this, Naim uses the world's most celebrated studios, including Capitol Studios in LA, Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios and Abbey Road in London to satisfy the passion for achieving the best possible results from a diverse range of recording methods.

Naim Label Manager Simon Drake is quick to remind us that, despite the challenges currently facing the record industry, the label

has grown substantially in the last few years. In his opinion the reason behind this growth is clear.

"Without great music, there is no need for great hi-fi," says Drake.

"Hence we channel our passion for creative art by handpicking the music we want to get out there and have done for almost twenty years.

"Three diverse labels now operate under the Naim Label umbrella, including Naim Classical, Naim Jazz and Naim Edge. Irrespective of genre, we look for creative and technical quality in our music, aiming to bring

"Naim Label boasts a catalogue of over one hundred releases, from rock to Beethoven."

something inspired, deserving and enjoyable to members of the Naim family and beyond.

"The digital age empowers the music consumer. There has never been such a range of diverse and ubiquitous methods of absorbing music and culture. Naim Audio has reflected these changes at the highest end of the consumer audio market, with Naim Label providing an important grass-roots indicator of the changing habits of the listener."

What are the future plans for Naim's lossless download store?

"Naim Label's store offers high-quality MP3, CD-quality and fully uncompressed WAV or lossless FLAC files. Our model is simple: it works by track or by album in the format of choice and we even have our own dedicated Naim Label Download Manager to assist with the arduous process of downloading multiple large files."

"Every bit of the Naim Label catalogue we could find in analogue has been lovingly re-mastered in 24bit/96kHz for download. We strive to make sure every new artist we work with and record has high-quality in mind. Our artists love the idea of making music available to the consumer in the best possible quality. It is a real selling point of working with Naim, as is our love for vinyl. With every record release that is successful, we go to Abbey Road to cut it for vinyl. Despite our successes in the digital world, we have not lost sight of our love for analogue!"

NAIM TIMELINE

MILESTONES IN NAIM'S HISTORY

- 1971** - NAP 160, the company's first power amp
- 1973** - Naim Audio Limited formed
- 1975** - NAP 250 power amplifier (still in production and still as popular today); NAPS preamplifier power supply
- 1977** - NAXO, the first electronic crossover for active loudspeaker systems - Naim has always considered the active system as being the best way to deliver top performance
- 1980** - Moved to current premises at Southampton Road, Salisbury
- 1983** - NAIT, first integrated amp
- 1984** - NAP 135, first mono power amplifier; Hi-Cap, preamplifier power supply; NAT 01, FM tuner - even now, the NAT 01 is considered one of the best FM tuners ever available
- 1985** - Won the Queen's Award for Export Achievement
- 1986** - SBL, first in-house made loudspeaker
- 1989** - ARO, Unipivot tonearm
- 1991** - Naim Label started; CDS CD Player (replaced in 1998 by the CD52) - Naim very publicly criticised the sound quality of early CD players. It wasn't until 1991 (eight years after the launch of CD in Europe), that Naim considered that it had designed a CD player good enough to launch
- 1992** - CDI, extended range of CD players
- 2000** - NAP 500 power amplifier
- 2002** - NAC 552 preamplifier, supplants the NAC 252 as the company's flagship preamp
- 2005** - CD555 flagship CD player
- 2007** - SUPERNAIT reference integrated amplifier
- 2008** - NaitXS integrated amplifier and HDX hard disk player - the world's first performance-upgradable hard disk player.
- 2009** - Naim Uniti all-in-one audio player; Naim DAC stand-alone DA-Converter; Naim Ovator S-600 loudspeaker
- 2010** - UnitiQute launches; Naim wins Queen's Award for Enterprise

For more information go to:
naimaudio.com
naimlabel.com




Paul Stephenson, Managing Director of Naim Audio



Naim Label's new website features news, updates and merchandise

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Ken Kessler | Hi-Fi News | Jan 2010



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Roy Gregory | Hi-Fi+ | Issue 64



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I've heard. ■ ■

Jonathan Valin | The Absolute Sound | Jan 2010

Over 40 years Audio Research has established a new syntax of emotional, evocative sound. Motivated by the uncompromising pursuit of the ultimate musical experience, Audio Research has created a succession of products that have each gained iconic status. Built by hand with the end user always in mind, Audio Research components combine innovation with longevity – all units being repairable to original performance standards, no matter how old.

The Audio Research collection encompasses both valve and solid-state technology, delivering some of the most critically acclaimed CD players and amplifiers yet devised. The three components featured above – the latest additions to the world-famous Reference line – have already received the rapturous reception one expects of this prestigious marque.

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Web radio: the new FM

Richard Black explains why for audiophiles internet radio has the scope to become the new FM come the switch-off

In this issue's *MiniTest* (p100), we consider four table radios, three of which receive internet radio as well as regular FM and DAB. It's clear that internet radio is growing rapidly, but what exactly is it? What does it offer? Is it the future or just a fad?

In its basic form, internet radio is just an internet 'stream' of whatever existing radio stations are broadcasting by more traditional means. Since all radio these days is sent around digitally (even if its ultimate transmission medium is analogue FM or AM), it's not too tricky to encode it via some MP3 or a similar coder and squirt the data down the internet. The digits can be picked up by any device connected to the internet anywhere in the world and reconstituted into audio.

Obviously there are a few provisos to this. The most obvious is that you need sufficient internet bandwidth. If you still use a dial-up modem with a maximum connection speed of 56kbps (kilobits per second) you aren't going to get any sense out of a broadcast at 128kbps.

With broadband available practically everywhere, though, this is less of a problem than it was only a couple of years ago. If your download speed is generally better than 1Mbps you shouldn't have any problems. Another limitation concerns the country you're in: a few stations (mainly American, in our experience)

PURE's new Oasis internet radio is reviewed next month



are not available in other territories, though if you're nerdy enough there's bound to be a way around that.

In audio terms, the quality of internet radio varies enormously. Non-music stations tend to be broadcast at very low bitrates, but even some music ones are put out at 48kbps. On the other hand, some broadcast at admirably high rates (up to 320kbps). The majority use MP3 coding, but WMA and AAC are also reasonably common. Classical music lovers seem to be particularly well catered for in the quality stakes, with several European stations broadcasting in reliable 320kbps MP3 – still not CD-quality, but noticeably better than anything you'll get on DAB, Freeview or satellite.

Why the web really works

There's an important difference between internet broadcasting and regular radio. Both analogue and digital radio broadcasts send information at a constant rate so that it can be received, decoded and played out in real time. The internet was never conceived for that sort of application and information is sent in 'packets' (that's actually the technical terminology, believe it or not) which can come quite irregularly. In general, it's impossible to predict exactly when these will come, but statistically they are likely to arrive fairly soon after each other. Because of this uncertainty it is necessary to 'buffer' the data – collect it in a memory store, from which it can be clocked out at a steady rate suitable for decoding and replay.

This accounts for the fact that it always takes a few seconds to 'tune in' to an internet station and during the delay there is often a message displayed about buffering. But even with buffering it can sometimes happen that the delay before the next packet arrives is longer than expected and the buffer empties, with the result that the reception is interrupted. As the internet overall gets faster and more reliable, this kind of thing should decrease in frequency.

There are plenty of add-ons to internet radio already. Many stations transmit text information about broadcasts (like RDS, or DAB's text display, but more detailed and easier to read), and some even send still pictures. 'Podcasts' or play-on-demand replays of past broadcasts are another attractive feature. If you want to record programmes there are software packages for this, so if you haven't already investigated this intriguing and wonderfully international world, I strongly suggest you do so soon!

Several European stations are broadcasting in reliable 320kbps MP3 – still not CD-quality, but noticeable better than anything you'll get on DAB, Freeview or satellite



RICHARD BLACK

A musician and recording engineer, Richard knows a thing or two about hi-fi – he's been writing about it for over two decades

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Hi-fi untangled

Your system may already have more wireless potential than you think, says a clutter-free **Ed Selley**

Physical cabling has remained a key part of most audio systems from the outset of hi-fi. The importance ascribed to them has waxed and waned over the years, but it is generally accepted that they are essential. Indeed nothing in this article will suggest that power be delivered any other way and many sources will still require physical cabling. There are, however, many instances where wires can be relinquished with no detriment to audio quality and considerable gains to convenience.

The first is how your system accesses content in the first place. The 'audio client', a device with no transport of its own, but the ability to stream and decode audio stored on a computer or server, has been gaining in popularity and looks to be the growth area of the moment. Whilst many of these devices are still based around receiving data over Ethernet, an increasing number can receive the data wirelessly. Current wireless standards will allow for the transmission of lossless files without constraint or interruption, which is a boon for anybody pondering how to run forty feet of CAT6 from wherever their data happens to be stored. Once configured, the standard advantages of a client are realised – your entire music collection can be browsed remotely and is also available simultaneously in more than one location on the network.

For iPod users, losing the wires has a different advantage. In this day and age there are precious few manufacturers who do not provide some form of iPod integration in their product line. Whilst many of these products have an extremely strong sonic performance, they all share the curious disadvantage that to use them, you must place a device that owes much of its success to a superb interface in a dock and control it via a remote that rarely comes close to matching the iPod you have docked.

Thankfully, Yamaha has approached this differently. By placing a special transceiver into the dock socket of the iPod, you retain it for control whilst the audio – again up to including lossless – is sent over a proprietary wireless system. Yamaha describes the system as 'Air Wired' and it has moved from small speaker systems into their AV products and hopefully beyond.

Your wireless future

Wireless technology is also starting to make inroads on the actual business of audio transmission. American company Airfonix has been making considerable progress with its



System control via iPod: Yamaha's 'Air Wired' system

range of 24-bit transmission systems. These take the form of two boxes, one with the source equipment that can accept both line and digital outputs depending on model. The second box lives with the speakers and will receive the transmitted signal. Some of the products in the range have their own amplification to which speakers can be connected directly (essentially rendering any existing speaker active), but equally many simply present a set of pre-outs to which any suitable power amplifier, be it a huge solid-state monster or minute output SET.

The promise of a totally wire-free audio experience is still a long way from being realised, but there are a number of clever solutions on the market today that could simplify an average system, or increase its capability. Indeed anyone still wedded to the idea of cables might first want to dabble in the world of wireless by using something like the Airfonix system to simply allow another amp and loudspeakers (or even simply the speakers) to benefit from their source equipment in another room. Alternatively, the wall of CDs could be ripped and placed on a central server. This could be accessed by a client in the existing system and additionally by a client in the bedroom system you always promised yourself. Don't let copper hold you back.

Current wireless standards will allow for the transmission of lossless files without constraint or interruption



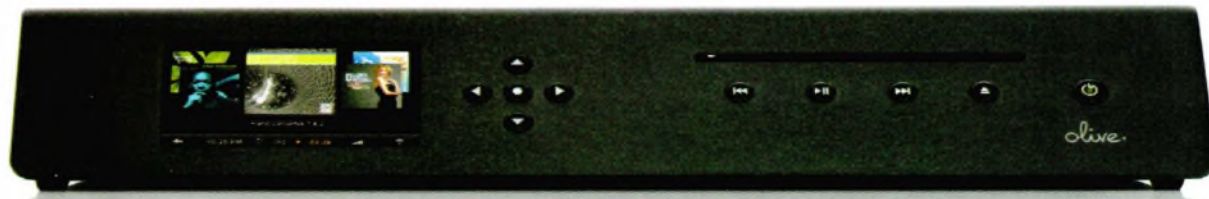
ED SELLEY

Ed worked in retail before joining some of the biggest names in the hi-fi industry creating and supporting audio products

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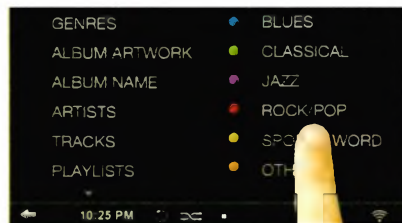
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Mods and rockers

Jason Kennedy looks back at a remarkable 'modded' 1990s CD player that finally dragged him away from his beloved vinyl

Back in the day when men were men and any self-respecting music lover was aware that analogue was the only path to audio nirvana – I refer of course to the early nineties – CD was a format for which I had little regard. What was the use of silent backgrounds if the music itself failed to compel any emotion or enthusiasm, this, combined with a grainy treble and flat dynamics, meant that CD made a pretty ugly sound compared to the myriad wonders of vinyl. The fact that I had so much of the black stuff and a pretty decent turntable might have had something to do with it, but CD was the devil incarnate in those days.

I was also undoubtedly influenced by the opinions of Paul Messenger and other vinyl-lovers in the industry, but at that point no one had produced a disc-spinner that made music in a convincing manner. This all changed when Trichord supplied us with a player that it had modified with an aftermarket quartz crystal oscillator or clock.

Trichord was a small company run by Tom Evans, Graham Fowler and John Cheadle, engineers and audio enthusiasts who had pinpointed the clock as being the weak link in CD player design and produced a mod to address it. This clock managed to invigorate CD players in a manner that was a revelation to digital cynics like myself. Suddenly the format became dynamic and enjoyable. The treble grain almost vanished and you were left with a format that had the potential to eject the listener from his lounge chair and get him or her playing the air Stratocaster. In truth it was always him, after all how many ladies even feel the urge to pretend to be playing a guitar, let alone give into it?

This revelation came courtesy of a sumptuous piece of JVC engineering, a CD player with a cloyingly smooth sound at the best of times. But with a clock onboard it was inspiring enough to get me started with silver discs. Partnering the JVC with one of the many DACs that were coming onto the market at the time helped things along quite considerably, it made a great transport.

Jump forward about five years and Tom Evans had designed the classic Iso phono stage for John Michell, as well as finding a player that he could go a bit further with, than merely upgrading the clock. This was the Pioneer PD-904, the first relatively affordable Stable Platter model it made with a Legato Link S DAC. Tom went to town on this machine incorporating his Lithos power supply



The Tom Evans-modified Pioneer Acoustic Precision Eikos

regulators as well as Elna Cerafine and Nichicon Muse caps, this turned a decent but typically smooth-sounding Japanese player into a literal giant-slayer. He called it the Acoustic Precision Eikos. The modification was pretty thorough – it involved 204 component changes and the insertion of 11 new PCBs, the only key components to remain unchanged were the chassis, DAC and transport.

Given the cottage industry nature of Tom's company, at that stage you wouldn't have expected such a drastic modification to produce a reliable machine at the end of the day. After all there have been a few high-profile manufacturers that have struggled with this issue, but I have been using an Eikos for what must be nearly 15 years and it's still running faultlessly, which is a testament to both Pioneer and Evans' attention to detail.

The best transport around

The Eikos didn't look quite like a Pioneer, it had a two-pack black paint job and sat on a damping plinth with what appeared to be squash-ball feet. This aspect of the player is the only bit to show its age – the feet are now properly squashed.

Tom made 400 Eikos players in all and a small percentage have been modified to include a substantial external power supply with separate Lithos 6 regulator for both digital and analogue sections of the player. These so called 'final versions' are still considered to be among the very best, a fact I was reminded of when speaking to Tim Denning of Audio Images, who recommended it as the best transport he had found to use with the Synthesis Matrix DAC (reviewed on p60). I think it's time I sent mine back for the treatment. ●

The fact that I had so much of the black stuff and a pretty decent turntable might have had something to do with it, but CD was the devil incarnate



JASON KENNEDY

A former editor on *Hi-Fi Choice* and now a freelance journalist, Jason has been a hi-fi addict for longer than he cares to remember

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Headstrong

There seem to be fads which come and go in the hi-fi community – tone controls were all the rage in the 1970s, but gradually disappeared from amps during the following decade. Most tonearms used to have removable headshells too, then these seemed to go out of fashion for years, before making a bit of a come-back recently. I'm still surprised there aren't more of them, as they make cartridge swapping so fast and easy.

D Turnbull, via email

HFC There's no doubt headshells make comparing cartridges quick and painless, assuming, of course, that you have more than one cartridge. Herein lies a divide in audiophiles: some invest as much as they can in the best cartridge they can possibly afford, others prefer to spread their cash a bit more thinly over two, three or more cartridges. Obviously, if you're one of the former, a detachable headshell is no more use than a fixed one.

The resonances in detachable headshells were a definite public enemy amongst tonearm designers from the late 1970s onwards and for good reason: they could have a serious impact on sound quality. Designers tried a range of different materials to eliminate these colorations – ceramic, rhodium and layered carbon and boron fibres (in the case of the headshell supplied with Kenwood's L-07D direct drive from 1980). Skeletal headshells like Orsonic's are another option, but the typical headshell socket of yore with its vertical pin and finger-tightened collar, is rarely a particularly rigid coupling. At least more modern variants like SME's clamp-on type are considerably better in that respect.

Single-piece armtube and headshell castings, or vestigial headshells like the one on Clearaudio's Satisfy tonearm, are less likely to add their imprint to the sound of your vinyl. If swappability is still a must, but headshells bring you out in a cold sweat, there are always arms from Naim, Graham,



A skeletal headshell from Orsonic

faces here at the HFC offices; innovation is really quite rare in the audio market, though as you say yourself, it might work perfectly in the lab, but if it's virtually impossible to produce, it'll never make it into dealers' showrooms. At least, with the advent of surface-mount components, the concept of a headamp in a headshell is much more likely to become reality these days than, say, 20 years ago.

If Ortofon's heavyweight SPU can survive for decades, there's no reason another weighty, integrated device couldn't take off. After all,

Hadcock, Moerch and others – which have interchangeable arm assemblies.

... and headamp

I had to smile a bit at the answer Linn's Trevor Stacey gave to your third question regarding upgrades, in the review of the Linn Uphorik MC/MM phono stage in HFC 334.

The reason? Well, I have a good friend, Murray Zeligman, who over many decades designed some very creative electronics and speakers for audio (unfortunately, much of it never became commercial, though you can see some of his work on the SEAS internet site). Anyway, a couple of decades ago, when moving coils first became popular and when tonearms mostly had detachable head shells, Murray designed a FET headamp which fitted in the head shell. The headshell became the FET's heatsink and there was even a set of LEDs which told you when the head amp was on. This is half way to Linn's 'impossible dream' of a preamp mounted behind the head shell and behind the cartridge.

My friend was often coming up with these sorts of creative ideas, but creativity and production are two totally different things, and audio was much the poorer for this. **Allen Edelstein, New Jersey, USA**

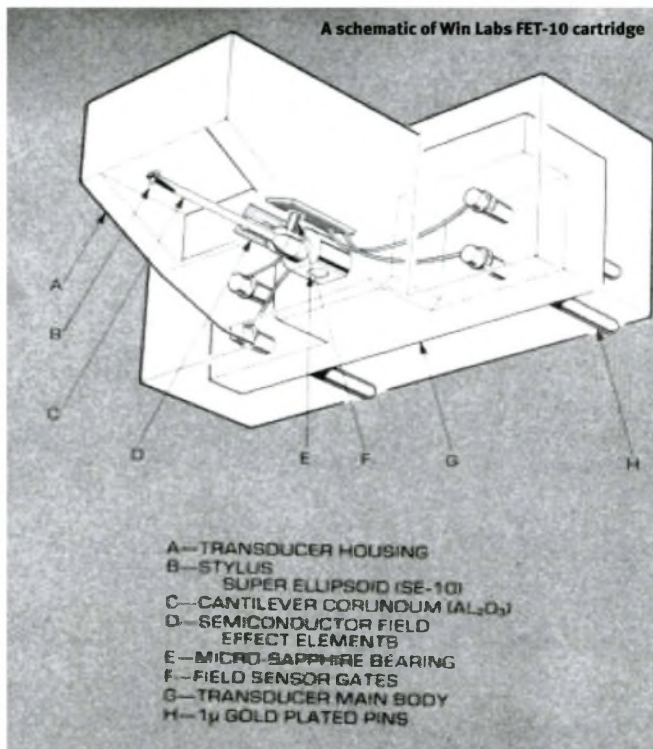
HFC Reading of Murray's creations put a smile on our

Audio Note's Io Ltd cartridge has its field coils powered by an external power supply, so adding power leads to signal leads isn't an insurmountable problem. It would be wonderful to see full advantage taken of cartridges like the Win Labs FET-10, Soundsmith Strain Gauge or even a reincarnation of the Kenwood Supreme 20 photo-electric, by mating such unusual designs with their required amplification without the requirement for signal interconnects.

Wired for sound (and data)

I'm thinking of wiring up my house for multiroom music running from my PC, but my girlfriend has an aversion to wi-fi (regardless of there being no real proof of it causing any health problems). There's no way I'm putting in miles of ethernet cable to hook everything up, so I'm considering setting up the network over my house's mains with a network-over-mains system. Having spent

A schematic of Win Labs FET-10 cartridge



money on mains conditioners and fitting a dedicated spur for my hi-fi equipment, I'm understandably wondering if this sort of networking might have a negative impact on the sound quality of my system. I'd be grateful if you'd share your experiences on this subject.

Dave Tetworth, via email

HFC In our experience, the high-frequency signals superimposed



on the mains by such networking systems can vary quite widely in the impact they have on the sound of a system. In some set-ups, the effect of installing and turning on a mains network seems to be nil, or close to negligible; in others, at high volume levels and during quiet musical passages, garbled signals or noise can be heard. We suspect the only way to ascertain the affect on your own system will be to try a couple of the plugs and listen carefully.

This variability reminds us somewhat of testing to see which digital interconnect sounds best between any given DAC and transport. Generally, cables will tend to sound very similar when hooked up to a DAC which is highly resistant to jitter on its input. So it is that the design of some components endows them with rather greater immunity to mains-borne interference than others and the only way to find out how your own equipment will fare is to put it to the test.

Hot and bothered

I'm hoping you can help me with some advice on the EAR 859 amp which I bought recently. I'd like to change the valve set used by my amp, partly because it would be less costly than paying £2,500 for the replacement 869 amp.

I contacted those nice people at EAR Yoshino, who advised me to replace the original EL509s with PL519 valves, as that is what they now use. The problem is, changing

the valves to PL519s would involve altering the heater circuit to supply 40V. This is not possible on my amp as there is no 40V tap on the power transformer. My question is: should I change the transformer to allow the change in main valves, or should I just replace the existing 509s with new 509s?

I guess my amp was made in the early nineties and it may have been a self-build kit, judging by some of the mains wiring which I have just improved (I used to work on valve equipment as an apprentice many years ago, though I'm a bit rusty after all these years).

I have 'progressed' from Leak equipment in the sixties, through Naim/Linn/Arcam in the eighties and nineties, to the EAR 859 with Meridian CD and Reference 3A de Capo speakers which I have now.

Alan Huitson, via email.

HFC Our advice in this sort of situation is normally to take an upgrade in small steps. If you're happy with the sound of your amp with its existing EL509s, why not continue to use it that way?

However, if as you say, you've already worked on your amp and are fully aware of all the necessary safety precautions, which are vital when working around electricity, particularly high-voltage DC, you might want to try fitting 519s. If the 40V heater supply is the only required alteration, you could fit a suitable power supply to provide this voltage.

Of course, that would open up a new can of DIY worms: should you use R-core, C-core, toroidal, or EI transformers, etc? If you could obtain a new mains transformer direct from EAR Yoshino, that would simplify matters considerably. A word of warning though: if this first taste of audio DIY gets you hooked, you could well end up with solder burns all over the carpet, as well as spending more time building and modifying the hi-fi than listening to it.

Unfortunately, the EL509 valve is now obsolete



LETTER OF THE MONTH

Whither the music shop?



Popularising the turntable, the Rough Trade RT Edition Rega

I KNOW it's not just my maudlin imagination that many, many independent record retailers are going to the wall these days.

If the small, independent shop vanishes from high streets across the land, it can only be to the detriment of our listening pleasure. Remember that every click of the download button on some mega-site is another nail in the coffin of the people who really care about the music they sell and not just the profit margins on it!

crankEboy, via email

HFC Amen, brother! Here at HFC, we've got no beef with storing ripped files on a PC, which is, after all, pretty much guaranteed to be the future of music. The real problem lies in the way that a relatively small number of very large download sites is increasingly dominating the buying habits of the British public. Granted, the exchange of opinions on web forums et al is a great way to break new musical territory and add new blood to your collection, but relying solely on the web for guidance on buying and the purchasing itself is, in our view, not the right way to keep music retailing healthy.

Clearly, the big download sites are giving people what they want, but then a lot of people know of nothing beyond that form of retail experience. Still, in the teeth of a recessionary gale and against some very steep odds, a hardcore of independents continues to survive and, hopefully, thrive.

WIN A RUSS ANDREWS POWERMAX MAINS LEAD WORTH £45!

Letter of the Month winners will receive an impressive Russ Andrews PowerMax mains lead worth £45, so drop us a line now: hifichoice@futurenet.com



How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most rigorous test and measurement regime in the business and here we explain why our definitive verdicts count



Hi-fi reviews

No other magazine offers a more reliable standard of hi-fi testing. Technical Consultant **Richard Black** explains...

EXPERT TESTING

FOR OVER THREE decades, *Hi-Fi Choice* has been trusted for its combination of subjective and technical review expertise. The crucial consideration for any audio component is how it sounds, but it is important to back this up with laboratory measurements for many reasons – everything from the wish to check basic performance to the possibility of uncovering peculiar behaviour under conditions, perhaps slightly different from those of the subjective tests.

Listening

Subjective testing doesn't necessarily require the world's sharpest ears. What's more important is the experience to analyse the sound arriving from the hi-fi and this is where our subjective reviewers come in: they have been listening critically to audio equipment for aeons and have learned to identify the characteristics that make kit informative, involving or just plain dull.

Measurement

But even the most experienced listener, with a stack of familiar recordings heard in familiar surroundings, can't always know what is causing a particular

characteristic in the sound. Brightness, for instance, may be a function of frequency response or distortion and this is where measurements come in. We analyse a range of parameters to see just where the correlation lies between sound and design. Our test equipment has been tried, tested and added to over the years and again our experience with it is unrivalled.

Straightforward presentation

We call on that experience to boil down the measurements to simple bar charts, which show at a glance how well a component behaves relative to others in its category. It's this combination of subjective and technical expertise that makes our reviews the most useful in the field.

“crucial consideration for any audio component is how it sounds, but it is important to back this up with laboratory measurements...”

OUR AWARDS



EDITOR'S CHOICE: Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver reference-standard performance



RECOMMENDED: The products we feel meet a certain high standard of performance



GROUP TEST WINNER: Comparative tests can only have one true winner, and this badge says it all

STATE-OF-THE-ART HI-FI TECH

HFC's test equipment is the most advanced kit available



AT HI-FI CHOICE, we have access to some of the most advanced test equipment currently available on the market, including the Audio Precision APx585, which you'll find in the labs of many top hi-fi manufacturers. The 585 can be configured to test a variety of key hi-fi products, such as amplifiers, CD players/DACs and – with the help of a specially-calibrated microphone – loudspeakers.

In conjunction with some conventional lab equipment at our disposal, the 585 will also be used to test analogue playback equipment including phono stages and turntables. These objective measurements – which conform to recognised industry standards – are designed to complement subjective evaluations such as the listening panels organised by our internationally respected reviewers.

The standard of our test facilities is unrivalled in the UK press. Quite simply, no other magazine offers this level of cutting-edge testing, making the verdicts in *Hi-Fi Choice* the only ones you can really trust.

Unrivalled group tests

Hi-Fi Choice is the only magazine to offer blind-listening group tests, fully backed up with objective data

BLIND-LISTENING TESTS

THE MAJOR ADVANTAGE in carrying out 'blind' listening tests is that it removes any prejudices the listeners might have regarding either the brand or the specific model being auditioned. In the case of loudspeakers, an acoustically transparent curtain is strung across the end of the listening room, while prior measurements and sighted listening helps determine the optimum locations

for each model being tested. A sighted operator installs the speakers in a random sequence, and, taking care to try and maintain consistent perceived loudness, a selection of short tracks covering a broad spectrum of music (compiled at full WAVE resolution onto a CD-R for convenient replay) is played for about 15 minutes per presentation.

SIGHTED LISTENING

WHILE 'BLIND' LISTENING tests provide useful information that's free from prejudices and obtained under formal and controlled conditions, they do have several significant limitations, which can be countered by hands-on work.

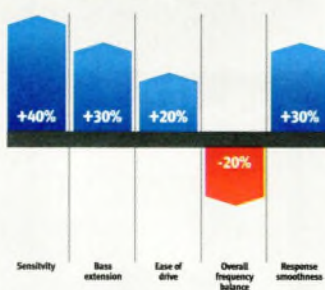
Their very formality can cause some stress in listeners, which may reduce the powers of discrimination. Another innate difficulty lies in the variations in tonal balance that are inevitably

found between one speaker and another (and indeed one listening seat and another), with the problem that there's a strong tendency to judge each speaker in the context of its predecessor.

Hands-on work gives each speaker a chance to strut its stuff over the longer haul, under more relaxed circumstances and a far wider variety of sources, including radio and vinyl discs.

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



THE SOUND heard from a stereo system is actually a combination of the two loudspeakers, plus their interaction with the listening room. Our analogue approach provides information about the frequency response and tonal balance of a given pair. Running rapid sinewave sweeps, moving the microphone to different positions, establishes the 'real world' far field averaged frequency response and bass extension of a stereo pair.

By feeding all the speakers under test at the same predetermined

setting on the amplifier volume control, the sensitivity of the speaker may be derived. Impedance sweeps provide information about amplifier loading and the closeness with which the two examples of our pair match.

SENSITIVITY
Sensitivity represents the relative loudness of a speaker for a given amplifier voltage. It's scaled to 2.83V at 1m (corresponding to one watt of power into an eight ohm load).

BASS EXTENSION
Our figure is the averaged bass roll-off frequency at -6dB ref. the broad midband, for a stereo pair in the far field of a 4.3x2.6x5.5m room

EASE OF DRIVE
Low impedance and sensitivity both make a loudspeaker theoretically harder to drive. Low impedance is especially important at low and midband frequencies

OVERALL FREQUENCY BALANCE
True neutrality is an obvious goal, though some 'tailoring' is both acceptable and widely practised

RESPONSE SMOOTHNESS
Beyond the overall tonal balance, the detail smoothness has much to do with the delicacy of the sound and its ability to deliver subtle harmonic shading.

TESTING EQUIPMENT USED

Sources:
Naim CDS 3/555PS
Rega Isis
Linn LP12 (modded)

Amps:
Naim NAC552
Naim NAP500
Rega Osiris

Cables:
Vertex AQ, The Chord Company, Phonosophie, Naim

TEST MUSIC USED

LAURIE ANDERSON:
STRANGE ANGELS



CAMBRIDGE SINGERS, RUTTER:
THERE IS SWEET MUSIC



MARI BOINE:
EALLIN'



THIS ISSUE'S BLIND PANEL

This month's panel of experienced listeners from within the industry are:



PAUL BENGE
JOB: HEAD OF SALES

A WHEELER and dealer of secondhand equipment, Paul Bengé has heard more high-end hi-fi than most mortals could dream of. Paul is head of sales for distributor ABC Audio



DAVE WOOD
JOB: HI-FI DEALER

DAVE WOOD alias 'The Hi-Fi Guy' spent many years playing in a rock band, before making a living buying and selling hi-fi equipment



SIMON POPE
JOB: MARKETING CONSULTANT

SIMON BEGAN with Faber Music, nearly became an opera singer, worked at The Exchange and UKD before deciding to take up hi-fi journalism and PR

DEFINITIVE VERDICTS

No other magazine offers an equivalent listening programme

Quite often a nervous manufacturer will get on the telephone to ask how things are going. The answer invariably has to be fundamentally noncommittal, albeit laced with cautious optimism, because any final judgements on the overall performance and value for money of an individual loudspeaker can only be arrived at once the whole test procedure has been completed and all the various strands can be pulled together.

Individual reviews have their place, especially when it comes to dealing with the more unusual and upmarket components. But the comparative *Blind-listening Group Test* is a much more effective means of evaluating a component, as each may be directly compared to a norm established by the group as a whole. Even though loudspeakers show rather greater variations in size of main drivers and enclosures than other components, this remains an exceedingly powerful tool.

TESTED THIS MONTH: LOUDSPEAKERS
TURN OVER NOW!

CAN'T STOP PLAYING?



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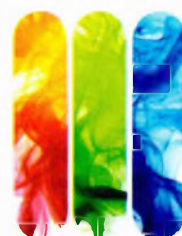
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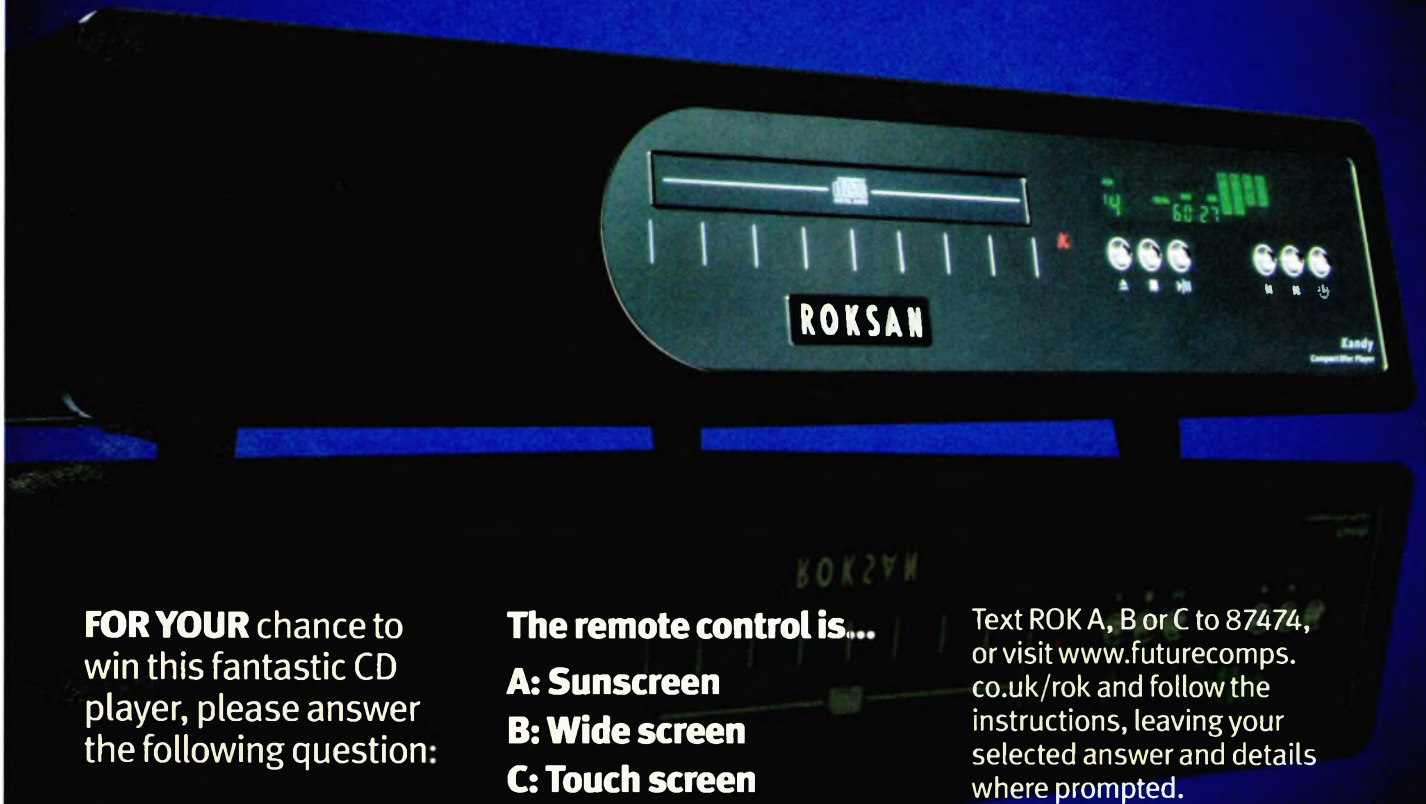
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Text ROK A, B or C to 87474, or visit www.futurecomps.co.uk/rok and follow the instructions, leaving your selected answer and details where prompted.

THOUGH IT WAS up against some extremely tough competition, the Roksan Kandy K2 was awarded a *Blind-Listening Group Test* winner badge by our technical consultant Richard Black, when he reviewed it back in *HFC335*.

Built around a swift and responsive CD Audio transport, the deck offers a no-frills package with a highly competitive price tag. Pushing all the right buttons, the

player offers a solid sonic performance, displaying Roksan's trademark rhythmic assurance and integrity (which is good news for fans of rock or dance music). It's also outstandingly good on more melodic styles, far outperforming its group test rivals, with an immediately communicative sound.

The touch screen remote control adds an extra touch of class and can also be

used to control a wide range of kit from other manufacturers. What's more, the full, almost excessive, bass offers thoroughly beefy sound that will have you clamouring to crank up the volume.

Clearly impressed by the Kandy K2, Richard said, "Rhythmically top-notch and generally full of life and verve. An excellent all-rounder, this player makes the most of any music."

TERMS AND CONDITIONS To enter the Roksan Kandy K2 competition, you can either (a) text your answer to 87474 at any time between 19.08.10 and 15.09.10, or (b) enter online at www.futurecomps.co.uk/rok with your entry being received between 19.08.10 and 15.09.10. By sending your entry, you agree to these competition rules and you confirm you are happy to receive details of future offers and promotions from Future Publishing Limited and carefully selected third parties. If you do not want to receive information relating to future offers and promotions, please include the word STOP at the end of your text message or at the end of your postal entry. Texts will be charged at £1.00 plus your standard network tariff rate.

By taking part in a competition, you agree to be bound by the Competition Rules, which are summarised below but can be viewed in full at www.futurenet.com/futureonline/competitionrules.asp. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Proof of posting (if relevant) shall not be deemed proof of delivery. Entries must be submitted by an individual (not via any agency or similar) and, unless otherwise stated, are

limited to one per household. The Company reserves the right in its sole discretion to substitute any prize with cash or a prize of comparable value. Unless otherwise stated, the Competition is open to all GB residents of 18 years and over, except employees of Future Publishing and any party involved in the competition or their households.

By entering a Competition you give permission to use your name, likeness and personal information in connection with the Competition and for promotional purposes. All entries will become the property of the Company upon receipt and will not be returned. You warrant that the Competition entry is entirely your own work and not copied or adapted from any other source. If you are a winner, you may have to provide additional information. Details of winners will be available on request within three months of the closing date. If you are a winner, receipt by you of any prize is conditional upon you complying with (amongst other things) the Competition Rules. You acknowledge and agree that neither the Company nor any associated third parties shall have any liability to you in connection with your use and/or possession of your prize.

Blind-listening Group test

LOUDSPEAKERS £1,350-£2,100

Is design simplicity the critical factor?

Paul Messenger tests six luxury British speakers each with varying levels of design complexity, to discover if keeping it simple really is best

THIS RELATIVELY costly group of British speakers is representative of the marketplace and highlights the dilemmas and decisions facing anyone considering upgrading to a bigger and better model.

Our six models are from some of the biggest names in speaker manufacturing and each have their own approach to delivering a high standard of music reproduction. This group matches one tiddler against five floorstanders – an interesting contrast where the winner caused some surprise.

Naturally enough, all are beautifully finished and presented and on this occasion all six come from respected British brands. Some indeed are substantially made in Britain, though their ingredients may well come from elsewhere in Europe or indeed the rest of the world, as is the norm these days.

Four of our six are simple and relatively conventional two-ways, essentially based on mixing and matching high-quality ingredients from various in-house

or external sources. The two models from the largest and longest established brands – KEF and Bowers & Wilkins – are both three-way designs and both feature their own unusual proprietary driver technology.

Although the little Acoustic Energy standmount is inevitably and comfortably the smallest member of the group, it doesn't necessarily look that way by the time it's placed on a stand. The three smaller floorstanders, from KEF, Kudos and PMC, certainly don't look significantly bulkier and might well appeal on purely aesthetic grounds. Especially the little KEF, which is undoubtedly the most stylish in our group. The variety certainly makes for some interesting verdicts...

“Our six models each have their own approach to delivering high standards” ▶



PRICING

OUR GROUP of six have 'official' pricetags somewhere between £1,350 and £2,100 per pair, though it's quite likely that web research will reveal numerous variations for some models. It's impossible to make a direct connection between price and engineering content – the Bowers and Wilkins CM9 is comfortably the largest, has the most drive units, yet is around the middle of the price ladder, while the tiny Acoustic Energy is nearer the top.



ON TEST



(AE) AE1 MK3 (£2,000) p37

Harking back to the original AE1 – the company's first model which gained instant cult status back in 1988 – this latest and slightly larger variation on a classic two-way miniature theme retains the metal diaphragm main driver and exceptionally solid build. Cosmetics are considerably improved, too.



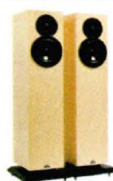
B&W CM9 (£1,800) p39

The CM9 is a substantial three-way floorstander that shares the same overall driver configuration as the budget 683 and the upmarket 804 Diamond. All three have the company's special FST midrange driver, though in truth this CM9 is closer to the 683, albeit with prettier cosmetics and improved engineering.



KEF XQ30 (£1,500) p41

This is an exceptionally attractive and very compact three-way, in its complex shape, the high-gloss finish, and the careful detailing. The midrange and treble are supplied by a relatively small version of KEF's latest Uni-Q co-axial driver; using this alongside a small bass driver helps keep the front slim.



Kudos X2 (£1,350) p43

This little floorstander is dressed in real wood veneer. For extra physical stability, it comes already fitted with a proper plinth just below a downward-firing port. High-quality SEAS-sourced drivers include a small bass/mid unit with a doped and flared paper cone, crossing over to a soft fabric dome tweeter.



PMC GB1i (£1,525) p45

This compact floorstander looks super-slim from the front, thanks to a small-diameter bass/mid driver, loaded by a ported transmission line of generous length. The whole enclosure is attractively finished in a choice of real wood veneers and is mounted on a nicely shaped plinth that extends the stability footprint.



Spendor A6 (£2,095) p47

A good size two-way floorstander, the generous size bass/mid driver has a transparent flared polymer cone and a 29mm tweeter with an unusually wide surround. A wide port exits at floor-level and there's a clever arrangement for locating the spikes firmly and securely at the edges of the integral plinth.

BLIND-LISTENING
LOUDSPEAKERS
£1,350-£2,100

GROUPTEST





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AUDIO IMAGES

TIM DEARING
Lowestoft, Suffolk
01502 582 853

www.triangle-fr.com

Acoustic Energy AE1 MKIII £2,000



Acoustic Energy gives its traditional substantially built miniature a classy cosmetic makeover

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK
WEIGHT: 11kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 185x310x250mm
FEATURES:
- 10mm aluminium baffle reinforcement
 - Enclosure-lined with steel plates
 - Lightweight anodised metal cone
 - Scandinavian-sourced annulus tweeter
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Acoustic Energy
TELEPHONE: 01285 654432
WEBSITE: acoustic-energy.co.uk

Acoustic Energy's 1988 debut with the diminutive and defiantly pro-look AE1 caused quite a sensation when it first appeared and effectively launched the brand. This £2,000 per pair MkIII is the middle model of three current variations on the same tiny two-way theme.

Unlike the much less costly Classic with its 'utilitarian' pro-style presentation, this MkIII's piano black enclosure has some seven layers of high-quality lacquer finish, while the front panel is decorated by a 10mm-thick, shaped and polished aluminium sheet, reinforcing the baffle and concealing the driver mounting hardware.

As the substantial total weight of 11kg implies, the exceedingly hefty build continues beneath the surface. The rear-ported enclosure combines 12mm MDF backed by 5mm steel plates, secured by a damping adhesive and with a tensioned cross-member bracing the sides apart.

Although the MkIII's small (130mm) metal cone bass/mid drive unit with its point integral dust cover looks very like the original AE1 unit, this deep-anodised hyperbolic-shaped alloy cone is, in fact, significantly thinner and, therefore, represents a break with tradition, abandoning the original's metal dome in favour of the fabric annulus ('ring radiator') device from a Scandinavian supplier.

High-power capacitors and radio metal-cored inductors are used to achieve a superior quality crossover network. PTFE-insulated single strand silver wire is used internally and signal is applied via a

single pair of good-quality WBT multi-way socket/binder terminals.

SOUND QUALITY

Last of the group to be presented to the panel, there was considerable surprise when the curtain was finally dropped to reveal the smallest model in our test group by a considerable margin. The fact that the little AE1 MkIII also scored the highest marks overall, is confirmation of the vital role an enclosure plays in the total sound of a loudspeaker and evidence of the advantage possessed by a small loudspeaker of heroic construction.

There are down sides of course – there always are. The listening tests attempt to equalise perceived levels as far as possible and naturally this low-sensitivity model requires rather more amplifier power than the others and this will affect the practical maximum loudness too.

There was criticism of some bass end 'thump' too and of limited tonal discrimination at the bottom end, but the overall impression of warmth and richness was quite convincing and no panelist accused this speaker of sounding small or undernourished.

The midrange here is quite exceptional – smooth, neutral and evenhanded, with vanishingly low levels of cabinet coloration and notably superior space, air and delicacy. Vocal reproduction is clearly a class act, especially with the massed voices of a choral piece.

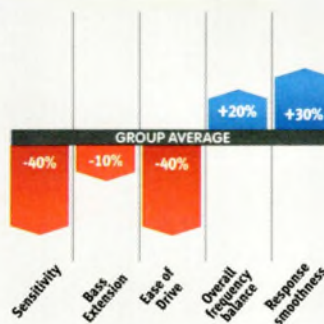


TECH LABS

Despite its small size, this speaker is clearly intended to be sited well clear of walls, as the 44Hz-tuned port gives rather too much midbass output for the relative midband level. Furthermore, the 87dB sensitivity claim looks very optimistic – our own findings across the broad midband (measured in the far field) are more like 84dB (though achieving 87dB below 300Hz), which corresponds well with the subjective findings. The impedance characteristic looks reasonably benign, with a good pair match and a 5.5 ohm minimum at 3.8kHz. However, the modest sensitivity means that low-powered single-ended valve amps are probably better avoided.

The far-field averaged in-room frequency response is unusually smooth and well balanced, holding within +/-2dB above 300Hz and +/-4dB above 60Hz. A modest depression is centred on 3kHz, which should tame any aggressive tendencies, while the treble is a little strong 4 – 5kHz.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lovely midband smoothness, with superior image focus
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Bass can thump a bit and lacks subtle detail
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Neutral with low coloration through the midband, though the bass could be improved
- PRACTICALITY** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Somehow Coventry didn't seem such a bad place after all



Pro-Ject
AUDIO SYSTEMS

Worth the odd sacrifice.

Distributed in the UK by: Henley Designs Ltd, 01235 511166
www.henleydesigns.co.uk, e-mail - info@henleydesigns.co.uk

Bowers & Wilkins CM9 £1,800

This large wood-veneered floorstander with advanced driver technology looks fine value

DETAILS

ORIGIN: UK/China
WEIGHT: 26.6kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 200x1030x300mm
FEATURES:
• Tube-loaded 25mm aluminium dome tweeter
• 150mm woven Kevlar FST mid driver
• Flowport rear reflex port with tuning bungs
• Magnetic grille attachment
DISTRIBUTOR: B&W Group Ltd
TELEPHONE: 01903 221500
WEBSITE: bowers-wilkins.com

Back to the days when Bowers and Wilkins simply called itself B&W, the company had three distinct ranges of hi-fi speakers: the beer-budget 600s, the mid-market 700s and the upmarket 800s. Perhaps the 700's external tweeters and asymmetric enclosures were a little too radical, as some time over the last few years they seem to have been quietly replaced by a rather more conventional CM series, featuring real wood veneers or a gloss black finish, but in conventional rectilinear enclosures with normal built-in tweeters.

There were just two CMs to start with, but now there are four stereo pairs, of which this £1,800 per pair CM9 is the largest. And, unlike the neat little standmounts in the range, there's no way anyone could accuse it of looking cute. In short, it looks a little too monolithic and massive to be considered cute, a situation not enhanced by a large, effective but also rather unattractive plinth.

It's a substantial floorstanding three-way, with twin 165mm bass drivers, a 150mm FST midrange and a 25mm aluminium-dome tweeter, all designed in-house. The bass drivers here have 120mm cones in a paper/Kevlar fibre mix. The FST midrange unit is unusual in having a 'free edge' compression surround, designed specifically to absorb the edge vibrations from the 145mm Kevlar cone. Sound generated from the back of the unprotected and rather vulnerable-looking aluminium dome tweeter is absorbed down an internal damped tube.

Although the driver line-up and box size are very similar to the 683 at the top of the budget 600-series range, our measurements reveal significant engineering differences over and beyond the CM9's superior surface finish.

SOUND QUALITY

The panel singularly failed to agree on the overall quality of this speaker. While two panelists didn't really get on with it, the other two both commented that they felt the speaker had steadily improved during the course of the presentation and that they had warmed to it by the end. This, one feels, might reflect the difficulties encountered in trying to adjust to a something that is essentially different, but by no means necessarily 'wrong'.

Certainly the deep and full bass was universally recognised and for the most part welcomed, though it also attracted some criticism, possibly due to excessive 'weight' and probably exacerbated by the rather restrained treble end. Balancing the top and bottom ends with respect to the midrange is important, and more than one listener complained of insufficient top end here.



TECH LABS

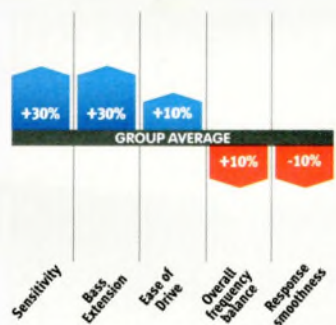
LAB REPORT

Bowers & Wilkins claims 89dB sensitivity, which seems a little conservative, but even our 90dB is rendered cautious by the unevenness of our averaged response measurement. In fact, it averages about 90dB across most of the midband (250Hz-2kHz) and is closer to 93dB below 250Hz (86dB above 2kHz).

While the treble looks smooth (and its somewhat lower output is not unusual under our far-field, in-room measurement regime), the midband is rather uneven, with distinct peaks at 750Hz and 1.5kHz.

The bass is full, strong and well extended (-1dB at 20Hz in-room), while the supplied bungs may be used to reduce output somewhat below 80Hz if desired. The generous sensitivity is somewhat compromised by a load that drops to about 3.3 ohms around 120Hz and some impedance variation between our two samples was seen at 90-800Hz.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Good value with lots of bass and loudness potential
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Ugly plinth and vulnerable tweeter
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Well finished speaker for the money; goes loud with plenty of bass, but not enough treble for some tastes
FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

DEFINITIVE AUDIO

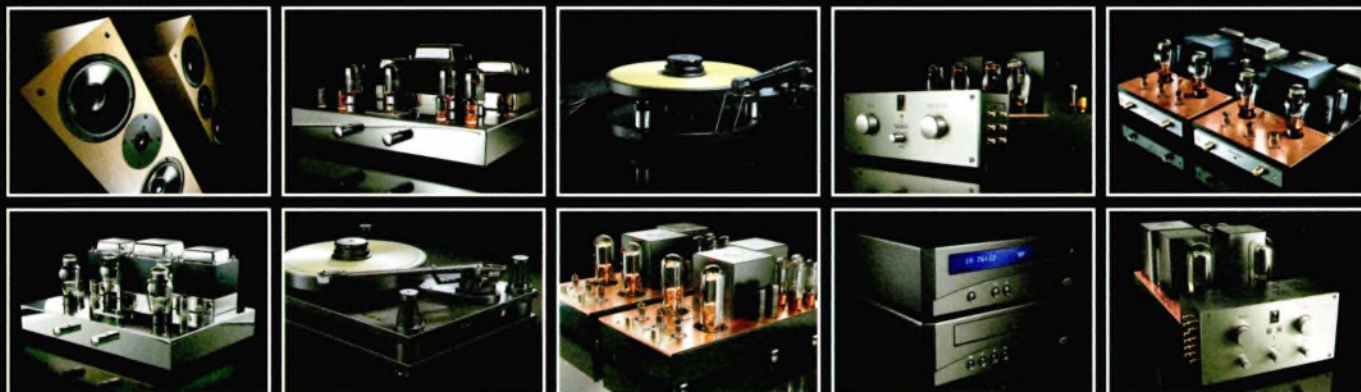
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LIVINGVOICE

Loudspeaker Systems

Main image: Living Voice OBX RW loudspeaker in Santos Rosewood



L to R: 1. Living Voice IBX R2 2. Art Audio Concerto integrated amplifier (GE) 3. SME 10 & Series V arm 4. KSL Kondo Neiro integrated amplifier
5. KSL Kondo Gakuoh 300B mono amplifiers 6. Art Audio Argento 300B integrated amplifier (WE) 7. SME 2012 & KSL Kondo lo-J cartridge
8. KSL Kondo Gakuon 211 mono amplifiers 9. Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD player 10. KSL Kondo Ongaku 211 integrated amplifier

T. +44 (0)115 973 3222 E. shout@definitiveaudio.co.uk www.definitiveaudio.co.uk

KEF XQ30 **£1,500**

This beautifully designed and finished compact floorstander has an advanced Uni-Q mid/treble driver

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
UK/China

WEIGHT:
14.8kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
190x860x247mm

FEATURES:
• Tangerine waveguide Uni-Q mid/treble driver

• Curved enclosure sides, top, base
• Gunmetal front
• Twin terminal pairs

DISTRIBUTOR:
GP Acoustics

TELEPHONE:
01622 672261

WEBSITE:
kef.com

Although it operates globally as part of the Hong Kong-based Gold Peak Group and takes advantage of competitive Chinese manufacture, the KEF design team still operates out of Maidstone, Kent, using proprietary technologies like the Uni-Q co-axial drive units that have been steadily refined over the decades.

The XQ range sits quite high up an impressively large collection of hi-fi and home cinema speaker systems. The smaller of two floorstanders, this £1,500 XQ30 is an attractive and compact design, based around a recent development of KEF's proprietary Uni-Q driver, alongside cunningly curved cabinetwork. It has a beautiful lacquer finish, over black paint or either birdseye maple or khaya mahogany real wood veneers.

The 130mm Uni-Q driver is a 'coincident' variation on the co-axial theme, using ultra-compact neodymium magnets to place a tiny tweeter in the centre of the bass/mid cone. With the addition of a matching 130mm bass driver in a ported enclosure (for which blocking foam bungs are supplied), the whole thing feels very solid, weighing a substantial 14.8kg. The curved top, base and sides all help increase the stiffness and avoid concentrating and focusing the internal standing waves.

Two pairs of terminals fit directly through the enclosure, and wires links are supplied. Outriggers at the rear improve stability, though the rather blunt cone feet look better suited to hard floors than carpeting.

SOUND QUALITY

The listening test results for this very stylish-looking speaker were rather disappointing, with the panel agreeing to award it the lowest marks of the day. Although generally described as smooth and pleasant, less complimentary adjectives like 'slow' and 'bland' also appeared, along with complaints that dynamics

were rather muted and that fine detail was difficult to make out.

While there's no disputing the panel findings, they do seem unfortunate for a design from a leading and reputable brand that seems to tick all the boxes. Further hands-on examination seemed worthwhile.

The option of fitting the port bungs and placing the speakers close to a wall was explored, but didn't prove helpful. The most likely root of the problem is that the XQ30 has a very strong presence output. Listening test attempts to match the levels of different models subjectively tend to focus on the presence band (where the ear is most sensitive), so a speaker with strong presence may well be played rather more quietly than its competitors, to its detriment.

Whether or not that explains the listening test findings, the XQ30 does have an unusually strong presence

output and its top end character isn't particularly sweet, either. While this ensures fine clarity at low volumes, the sound does tend to become a bit hard when the volume is turned up. Furthermore, the bottom end wasn't all that convincing and some midband coloration was also heard.

This KEF is unquestionably one of the most stylish speakers around and decent material value for money, too. Whether the sound quality appeals, however, may be a matter of personal taste.

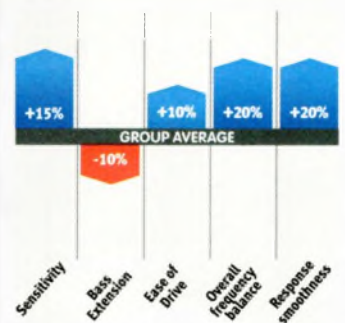
TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

Our sensitivity rating of 88-89dB is somewhat higher than KEF's claim for 87dB and our impedance minimum, 4-5 ohms is also rather higher than the spec's 3.2 ohms. If that's the good news, it's balanced by a significant impedance variation between our two samples – often as much as one ohm and across nearly the whole band – which is not clever.

What is rather clever, however, is the measured far-field, in-room averaged frequency response, which looks exceptionally well ordered right across the band above 60Hz, needing only +/-3dB to accommodate the occasional dip and wrinkle. The only worry is that this does mean the the presence zone (1-4.5kHz) is rather 'hot', which may have subjective repercussions. However, the ports here are tuned to 40/45Hz and this leads to a substantial rise in output at the 50Hz mode in our test room – KEF supplies foam bungs as a port-blocking option.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



PRACTICALITY



LIKE: Cute styling, beautiful presentation and lovely finish

DISLIKE: Strong presence can become aggressive when volume is turned up

WE SAY: Lovely styling, but strong presence compromises the sound

OVERALL



"THESE PMC'S ARE EXCEPTIONAL,
HIGHLY DESIRABLE IN EVERY WAY"

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION



April 2010

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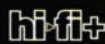
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"Make no mistake, this speaker is the real deal; the fact that it looks so good is just a distraction!"

Issue 73



"This is an excellent speaker with excellent imaging, good bass extension and beautifully styling"

Dec 2009



"Natural, dynamic with an exceptionally live sound and outstanding finish"

A truly great design

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"More than mere hi-fi, this was a musical performance. **fact:8** is a great loudspeaker"



"They do everything well. Man, I Love these speakers - Highly Recommended"

TONEAudio



fact:3
HAS ARRIVED

The **fact:8** in Tiger Ebony

Kudos X2 £1,350



This compact floorstander is Kudos' first attempt to offer its sound quality at a lower cost

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK
WEIGHT: 12kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 166x780x206mm
FEATURES:
- Separate plinth enhances stability
 - Spikes secured by polymer thumbwheels
 - Reflex-ported through base
 - 10 year guarantee
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Kudos
TELEPHONE: 0845 601 9390
WEBSITE: kudosaudio.com

A relative newcomer on the British loudspeaker scene, the Kudos range has rapidly become popular, despite quite substantial pricetags. The reason behind the new X-series is to provide comparable quality at rather lower prices, though nobody could really consider £1,350 per pair particularly cheap!

A simple two-way floorstander with a small 150mm bass/mid drive unit, the X2's power handling and bass extension will inevitably have some limitations, though it should be more than adequate for normal listening levels, while its simplicity and high-quality ingredients (English cabinetwork, Norwegian SEAS drive units and crossover components from Clarity Caps and Volt) can provide their own reward. The bass/mid unit has a 95mm-diameter flared and doped paper cone, the tweeter a 25mm fabric dome.

The 18mm MDF enclosure comes wrapped up in a wide choice of real wood veneer finishes – black, cherry, maple, oak, rosenut and walnut, alongside satin-white. Edges are sharp and the whole thing sits on a pretty black-painted plinth, cunningly shaped with some chamfering, and usefully extending the footprint for good stability. The spikes have nylon lock-wheels that proved very effective at keeping the spikes tight without damaging the threaded sockets. Small optional grilles are magnetically held in place and signal is applied to a solitary terminal pair.

SOUND QUALITY

The X2 was well received by the listening panel and if its overall score fell just a little short of that registered by the top model, the margin was small. This Kudos is also considerably less costly. The X2 might not be the best in the test, but it's probably the best value for money, which must pose any reviewer with something of a dilemma.

Its main strength is an impressively lively demeanour, with a vibrant, open and coherent sound quality that seemed unusually convincing with acoustic instruments in particular. Although its warmth was praised, a couple of the panelists did complain about a lack of true bass weight and extension, as well as a slightly 'thumpy' character which tended to mask detail here. Image depth and height both received some mild criticism too, but lateral positioning and separation was good, and plenty of fine detail was evident on the textures of instruments.

Extensive subsequent hands-on listening did reveal a mild degree of nasal coloration on speech, presumably related to the measured dip at 1.5kHz, close to the crossover, but it seemed subjectively quite innocuous. However, playing the speakers at high levels did reveal some lack of sweetness and a mild tendency to become a bit aggressive,

especially at the top end of the band. However, at normal listening levels, the midband and top end are really this speaker's strong points, delivering both music and speech with fine temporal coherence and plenty of enthusiasm.

This attractive speaker might look a little understated, but that's surely a point in its favour and one that certainly doesn't apply to a sound quality that's invariably entertaining and musically informative, provided the volume level isn't pushed too hard.

TECH LABS

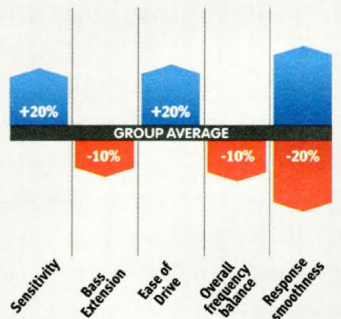
LAB REPORT

Kudos might claim only 86.5dB sensitivity for the X2, but that seems very conservative. Our tests indicate that 88dB is closer to truth under real world conditions, though the overall balance is sufficiently uneven to make it difficult to pin down a precise figure.

Whatever, it's still a useful sensitivity in the context of an 'easy' amplifier load (impedance), which stays comfortably above six ohms throughout, albeit with minor perturbations at 220Hz, 1.2kHz and 3.6kHz.

Bass extension is usefully maintained down to 27Hz -6dB (stereo pair under in-room, far-field conditions), though that's partly because the 44Hz port tuning frequency is close to a major room mode, so the bass alignment was marred by some 50Hz excess. The most worrying feature, however, is a very obvious -6dB dip centred on 1.5kHz, following a minor peak around 1kHz.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

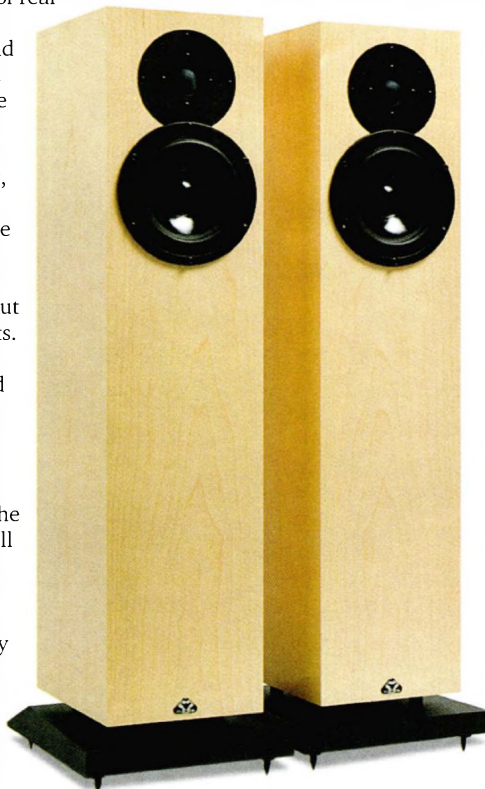


Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Attractive presentation alongside a lively sound makes for an involving experience
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** That measured 1.5kHz dip remains a worry
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** It might not deliver the smoothest sound, but is always lively
- PRACTICALITY** ★★★★★

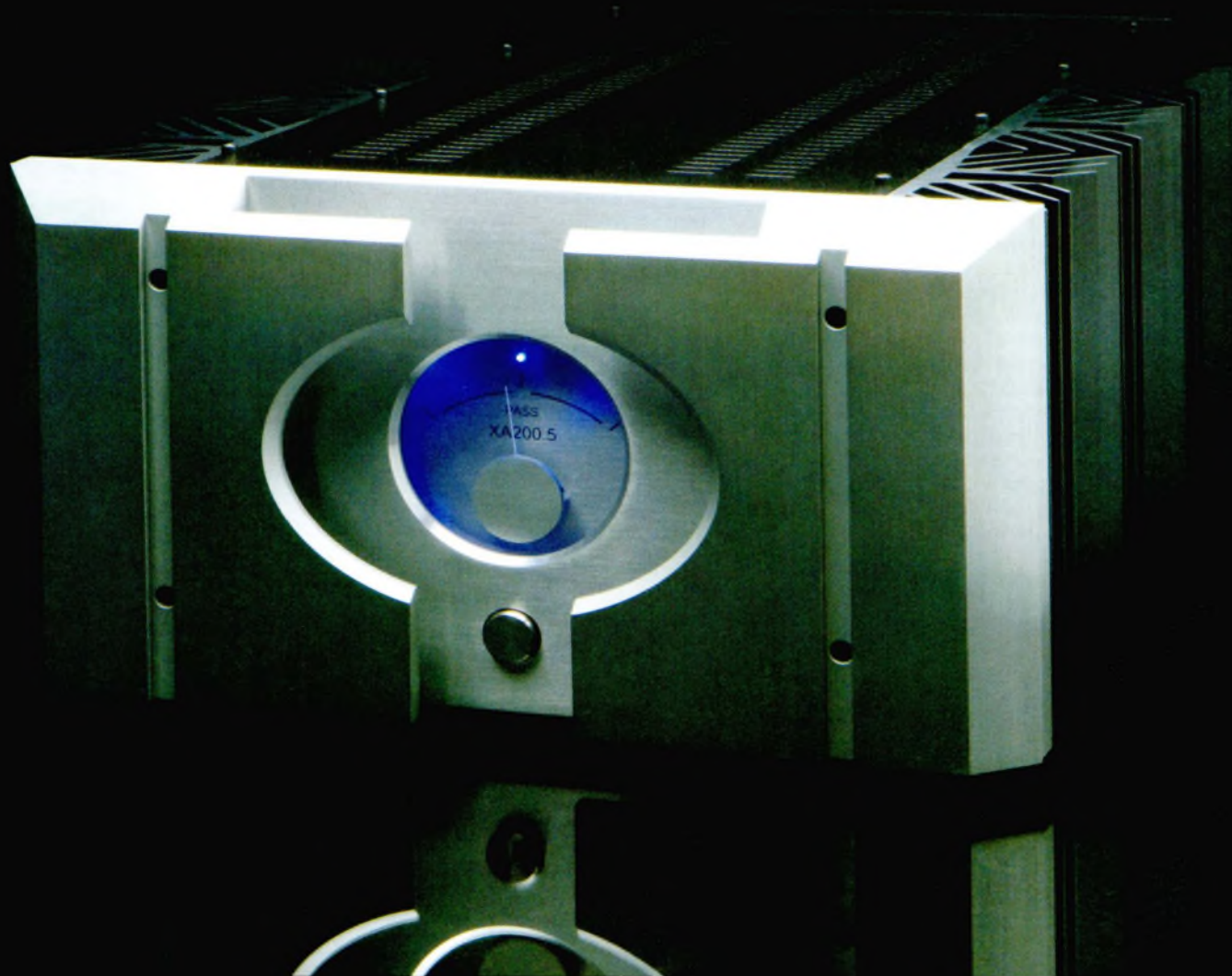
OVERALL



pass

Pass Labs *by the numbers:*

125 reviews
76 awards
47 products
43 articles/projects
35 countries
18 years
7 patents
1 Nelson Pass
.....and counting



PMC GB1i £1,525



Opinion might be divided on this PMC, but there's no doubting its ability to take on the competition

DETAILS

- ORIGIN: UK
- WEIGHT: 10.5kg
- DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 155x870x234mm
- FEATURES:
 - 28mm Solonex soft-dome tweeter
 - Advanced transmission line bass loading
 - Separate MDF plinth
 - Twin terminal pairs
- DISTRIBUTOR: PMC Ltd.
- TELEPHONE: 08704 441045
- WEBSITE: pmc-speakers.com

The key factor that distinguishes PMC speakers from the herd is an ATL. This stands for 'advanced transmission line' and refers to a bass loading technique that is uncommon, though by no means unique. Much more complex than the almost ubiquitous port loading, the efficacy of TL loading might still be a topic of fierce debate in some quarters, but a folded line does create a very stiff and solid structure.

Because it uses a relatively small (140mm) bass/mid driver, the £1,525 GB1i still manages to accommodate a 2.4-metre line, terminated by a large port near the floor, within the confines of a very compact floorstanding enclosure. Obviously, low-frequency power handling won't match that available with a larger driver, but a small driver has advantages at the top end of its working range and can use a smaller diameter line.

Viewed from the front, this is an unusually slim speaker, so a chunky and neatly shaped black-painted MDF plinth is used to extend the lateral footprint to ensure good stability and also provide secure spike accommodation. All bar the plinth is finished all over in cherry, oak or maple real-wood veneers.

The main driver uses a cast frame and a 95mm-diameter doped, flared paper cone, while the tweeter, co-developed with Norwegian driver specialist SEAS, has a 28mm Solonex soft fabric dome. A high-quality crossover network is fed via twin terminal pairs, permitting bi-wiring or -amping options.

SOUND QUALITY

The GB1i performed respectably enough in the listening tests, though the reactions of panelists did somewhat vary – two actually gave it their highest marks, but the other two were clearly less convinced, so it's virtually impossible to establish a consensus of views.

With hindsight and after further hands-on work, a little more wall

reinforcement might have been helpful, but that's hardly surprising in view of the small main driver. And since the free space alignment is quite dry, moving the speakers a little closer to the wall is unlikely to create unwelcome thump or boom.

Furthermore, what bass there is shows decent agility and tonal discrimination, which is more than one can say for several others in this Blind-listening Group Test.

The overall tonal balance was considered generally acceptable by all, with a slightly laid-back character that will tend to favour higher listening levels. The GB1i has an engaging and communicative sound quality and is notably free from boxy effects, with fine focus and spacious imaging.

The overall character does somewhat emphasise the midband, yet this is arguably quite acceptable



because it delivers superior reproduction of voices and speech, with fine expression and subtlety, alongside minimal coloration.

The key to getting best results from the GB1i probably lies in experimenting with siting, in order to achieve the best possible bass alignment under the specific listening room conditions. Get it right and results can be very impressive, especially from something so small and discreet, with fine imaging, low coloration, superior coherence and good musical communication skills.

TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

PMC's sensitivity rating is a relatively modest 87dB, very close to our 88dB figure and respectable enough in the context of an amplifier load that stays comfortably above six ohms throughout and which will ensure that this loudspeaker is fundamentally easy-to-drive. The pair matching of our samples was pretty good – essentially perfect above 50Hz, though with minor differences at very low frequencies. Some small perturbations were seen around 150Hz and 1.2kHz.

The transmission line is tuned here to 40-45Hz, giving decent output down to 30Hz (-6dB) under far-field, in-room conditions. Output is just a little lightweight and could be smoother throughout the bass region, while the midband peaks up a little at around 1kHz, while showing well-judged restraint through the presence zone. The overall balance is pretty good, even though the midband is a shade prominent.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lovely voice reproduction; fine overall agility and well judged balance
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Bass could be smoother and speaker needs careful positioning
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A very neat and petite package that needs careful placement
- PRACTICALITY** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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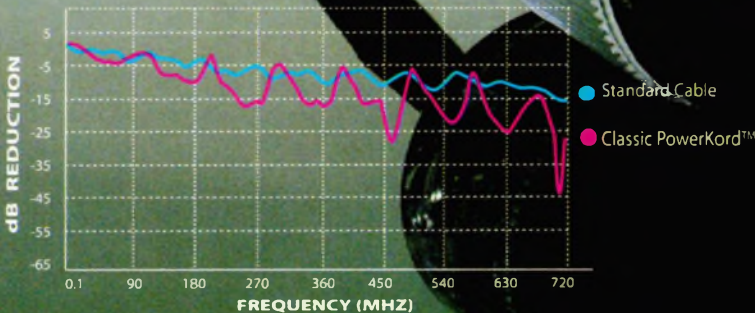
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May '04



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Russ Andrews Classic PowerKord



Sept '01



Hi-Fi World
Aug '02

'Impressively detailed and crisp, improving imaging and reducing high-frequency hash. Rhythmic portrayal was excellent, and so too was clarity.'
HiFi Choice magazine

'I've just attached a Classic PowerKord™ to my Marantz CD6000 and rather than bore you with superlatives about the improvements, I would simply like to say that I won't be upgrading to a newer CD player for some time. Well done nice product.'
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What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision Ultimate Guide to High End Entertainment, Sept. 08



Issue 288



SEPT 08

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Spendor A6 £2,095

A worthy successor to the S6e, this speaker adds extra refinement on several fronts

DETAILS

ORIGIN: UK
WEIGHT: 18kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 192x875x280mm
FEATURES:

- 180mm main driver with ep38 cone
- 29mm wide-surround tweeter
- Plinth with special spike locators
- Spendor linear flow reflex port

DISTRIBUTOR: Spendor Audio Systems
TELEPHONE: 01323 843474
WEBSITE: spendoraudio.com

Spendor first emerged from the BBC Research culture some forty years ago. It has been through numerous changes since then, but that original culture seems to have largely survived, albeit somewhat modified by marketplace trends, including the current fashion for floorstanders.

This £2,095 per pair A6 is the middle of three floorstanders that make up the company's A-series successors to the S-series. Very similar in many respects (including dimensions and measured behaviour) to the S6e we reviewed in *HFC* 257, it's a good size two-way floorstander, dressed in real wood veneer (black ash, cherry, light oak or wenge) and mounted on a black-painted MDF plinth the same width and depth as the enclosure proper.

Inside, the enclosure is kept as free from damping materials as possible, relying instead on small strategically placed polymer blocks to absorb unwanted energy. The bass/mid driver is reflex-loaded by a large 'linear-flow' port on the rear at floor level and a very clever arrangement, using substantial steel discs, enables the spikes to be firmly fixed close to the edge of the cabinet, ensuring good physical stability.

The main driver here has a fairly large 180mm cast-alloy frame, but a pretty standard 120mm diameter cone; this has a flared profile and is formed from ep38 plastic. The tweeter has a quite large 29mm doped-fabric dome with an unusually wide surround.

Signal is applied via a solitary pair of WBT terminals and silver-plated copper cables to a 4kHz crossover with audiophile-grade capacitors. Tapped autochoke inductors allow the compromises involved in using attenuating resistors to be avoided. No port blocking arrangements are available here, so the A6 should be kept well clear of walls.

SOUND QUALITY

The listening panel gave the A6 good marks, praising its overall coherence, fine timing, a high standard of clarity, and a wide dynamic range. Voices were well formed and projected, though they did err a little on the smooth and polite side and had a slight tendency to lose a little texture and grain.

The tonal balance might have been more neutral – the slightly 'pushy' upper mid and reticent treble were both identified, but neither was considered unpleasant and the ears quickly and easily adjusted to this mild degree of 'character'.

While it might certainly have been smoother – slight 'one note' tendencies were apparent at times – the bass gave a good impression of scale and weight and provided a firm foundation with convincing dynamic expression.

Despite slight forward tendencies on some tracks, the stereo image showed good width and was praised

for decent depth and the nice sense of space and air that was developed around individual instruments.

Hands-on work largely confirmed the panel findings. The A6 does impose a little of itself on the sound, but its slight vocal forwardness is well balanced by an innately smooth and polite character.

The A6 is a worthy successor to the S6e, with which it has much in common. There are some minor grounds for criticism, but the total package is very well-founded and above all, entertaining.

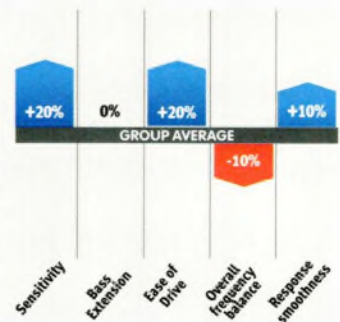
TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

The claimed 88dB sensitivity looks pretty close to the mark, is quite generous and correlates pretty well with our own findings (provided one ignores a rather prominent 900Hz-1.6kHz plateau). Since the impedance stays comfortably above six ohms throughout, this should be an easy speaker to drive. The impedances do show a resonant 'bump' at 450Hz, but the pair match between our two samples was outstanding.

Although the far-field, in-room response looks reasonably smooth, it's not particularly flat. That prominent upper mid plateau (+2dB 900Hz-1.6kHz) is followed by a reasonably well-ordered presence band and a rather restrained treble. The broad midband looks a trifle lean, save for the 150-300Hz octave, while the bottom end is marred by a hefty peak, where the 41Hz-tuned port interacts with a major 50Hz room mode. However, this does help achieve bass extension down to 25Hz(-6dB).

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Easy on the ears; fine vocal clarity

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** A little too smooth and polite; could be more neutral

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A handsome speaker with several clevertouches. Sound quality is smooth, polite, entertaining and coherent

PRACTICALITY ★★★★★

OVERALL



Conclusions

Tiny miniature takes on the floorstanders – and wins!

FOR THE SECOND speaker group test running, the winner turned out to be the smallest model in the group. This emphasises how important the enclosure is in the performance of a speaker – the small speaker not only has a much smaller enclosure surface area to radiate sound, it also has the budget to lavish on building a seriously tough and well-damped box.

However, although the AE1 MkIII led the way through its smooth and well integrated midband, it wasn't all that far ahead of the Kudos X2 and PMC GB1i models; both of which cost considerably less. Under these circumstances, the requirement to pick an overall winner is burdensome – to what extent should one take price into account?

The one almost universal complaint concerns the bass alignments. Four of our six had reflex ports tuned to around 40-50Hz, and these interacted poorly

with a 50Hz resonance mode in our listening room, giving a substantial boost around this frequency. This in turn tended to give a 'one note' bass effect that blurred subtle discrimination. The two exceptions were the PMC with its critically damped transmission line, which actually benefited from a little extra wall assistance in the bass and the big Bowers & Wilkins, which arguably had rather too much bass for our room, though at least it was free from boom.

The problem for the manufacturer and the reviewer, is that all rooms are different and it's impossible to predict how a given pair of speakers will work in a given room. But this is certainly a problem area that deserves much closer attention.

In answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this feature, it seems that in this particular instance, keeping it simple really has paid dividends for the engineers at Acoustic Energy.



AMPLIFIERS:
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Electrocompaniet PI-2 £1,600
 A superb all-round performer that combines fine insight with effortless musical flow







CD PLAYER:
Leema Antilla II £2,750
 Serious performance from multiple DACs, plus excellent build quality

THE WINNER IS...

It might be quite costly, but the Acoustic Energy AE1 MkIII did justify its price. It surprised the entire panel – and the reviewer subsequently – by storming ahead of the larger floorstanders, simply because you hear more of the drivers and less of the box, plus the drivers themselves have been painstakingly developed and linked up with top-quality components. And by the simple expedient of reducing the sensitivity, it doesn't lose out unduly at the bass end either.



RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	 Acoustic Energy AE1 MKIII	 Bowers & Wilkins CM9	 KEF XQ30	 Kudos X2	 PMC GB1i	 Spendor A6
Price	£2,000	£1,800	£1,500	£1,350	£1,525	£2,095
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Practicality	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	Smooth and neutral with low midband coloration and fine imaging, though bass has room for improvement	Goes loud with plenty of bass, but there might not be enough treble for some tastes	A very attractive speaker, but strong presence and weak bass compromise the sound quality	Not the smoothest sound around, but this good-looking speaker is always lively, willing and able	Appealing and petite speaker needs careful placement, but delivers excellent detail with agility and coherence	Sound quality is smooth, polite, entertaining and coherent, with fine timing

Key features

SIZE (WxHxD) (mm)	185x310x250	200x1030x300	190x860x247	166x780x206	155x870x234	192x875x280
Driver Config	2-way	3-way	3-way	2-way	2-way	2-way
Main driver size(s)	1x130mm	2x165mm + 1x150mm	2x130mm	1x140mm	1x130mm	1x180mm
Stand/floor?	Stand	Floor	Floor	Floor	Floor	Floor
Cabinet finish	black lacquer	real wood veneer	high gloss veneer	real wood veneer	real wood veneer	real wood veneer
Bi-wire?	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No

Lab conclusions E = Excellent | G = Good | A = Average | P = Poor

Sensitivity	84dB B	P 89dB G	88dB G	88dB G	88dB G	88dB G
Bass extension	26Hz A	20Hz G	24Hz A	27Hz A	28Hz A	25Hz A
Ease of Drive	-40% P	+10% A	+10% A	+20% G	+20% G	+20% G
Overall balance	+20% G	-10% A	+20% G	-10% A	-10% A	-10% A
Smoothness	+30% G	-10% A	+20% G	-20% P	-10% A	+10% A

In 2010,
size matters

From October,
slim is the new large.
Seriously.





Diamond hearing



The new 802 Diamond is the best loudspeaker that Bowers and Wilkins has ever made according to **Paul Messenger**

First sight of Bowers and Wilkins new 800-Series Diamond models immediately called to mind that much quoted comment from a nineteenth century French journalist: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose".

It's easy to track this new and imposing £11,500 three-way 802 Diamond model right back to the Nautilus 802 in 1998. The two models look superficially almost identical and you'd be hard pressed to tell them apart from across the room.

Indeed the only visual differences apparent in these latest series-Diamond variations seem to be a little extra bright trim around the drivers, a shiny phase plug in the centre of the midrange driver, smaller dustcovers for the bass units and revised signal input terminals. However, if the outline and basic cabinetwork looks very familiar, much of the internal engineering has now undergone two distinct stages of improvement.

In 2005, we tested the 802D (HFC 267), a successor to the original Nautilus 802 and this speaker's immediate predecessor. Seven years had given the people working away in Bowers and Wilkins'

Research Labs – idyllically located in Steyning, a few miles inland from the main Worthing factory – plenty of time to work on upgrades. The most important of these was the introduction of a diamond dome tweeter on the more upmarket models, alongside a simplified crossover network with superior components, improved bass unit diaphragm material and so on.

911 of the speaker world

All those features and more (along with many new ones too) have been carried through to the latest generation of 800s, now dubbed the 800 Diamonds because all the models are now equipped with diamond diaphragm tweeters.

Once again, Bowers and Wilkins sees the Porsche 911 as its model – a car whose basic silhouette remains essentially unchanged from decade to decade, while the under-skin engineering is continuously under development and improvement. This new 802 Diamond might look very like a Nautilus 802 or 802D, but most of the hidden bits have changed significantly.

The diaphragms might be much as before, but the motors driving them have seen big changes. The

manufacturers have a very extensive collection of computer modelling techniques, including the highly regarded Klippel suite and these have provided the tools for reducing motor distortion and maximising sensitivities.

Large ferrite magnets (traditionally used for bass drivers) inevitably place a large, flat and, therefore, very reflective surface immediately behind the diaphragm. Rather, the 802 Diamond's twin 200mm bass drivers mount twin neodymium/iron/boron alloy magnets actually inside the voice coil, improving the field symmetry and lowering distortion. And the new motor considerably reduces the reflecting surface immediately behind the cones.

A new four-magnet motor is also used for the diamond dome tweeter.

Form follows function

Whether or not you consider the 802 Diamond's appearance attractive, the whole design is firmly based on 'form follows function' principles. Each of the 'ways' has its own specifically

"Superb imaging and excellent coherence, this speaker has been designed by people who listen to and love music."

optimised enclosure, mechanically isolated from each other via lossy mountings and the whole thing sits on a cast-alloy plinth, that houses and isolates the crossover network and the twin terminal pairs. The latter are now made from oxygen-free copper (OFC) and give superior results to the more easily machined brass that is almost universal.

The speaker actually comes fitted with ball-casters, but a reversible spike/foot kit with the option of nylon studs or massive, wicked spikes is also supplied. The plinth is shaped to mimic the shape of the curved and reasonably slim enclosure, while the spikes are set well in from the sides. Lateral stability is, therefore, not great, especially with that massive Marlan 'head' well off the ground, but its total weight of 72kg is unlikely to be knocked over accidentally.

The bass enclosure is formed from a single piece of 26mm plywood, shaped in a continuous curve around the sides and back. It comes in a choice of three finishes: rosenut or cherry wood veneers, or high-gloss

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Bowers & Wilkins
802 Diamond

ORIGIN:
UK

TYPE:
Three-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
72kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
368x1138x563mm

- FEATURES:**
- Separate enclosures for each 'way'
 - Curved, Matrix-reinforced bass enclosure
 - Massive moulded sphere/cone decoupled midrange enclosure
 - External, decoupled cast alloy tube-loaded tweeter enclosure
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Bowers and Wilkins
- TELEPHONE:**
01903 221500
- WEBSITE:**
bowers-wilkins.com



A teardrop-shaped sub-enclosure houses the 140mm midrange cone

Q&A...

WE SPOKE WITH MIKE GOUGH, SENIOR PRODUCT MANAGER AT BOWERS AND WILKINS



HFC: *The 802 incorporates a number of changes over the 802D. Can you describe the sequence in which these different changes were introduced?*

MG: Apart from the tweeter, where the magnet followed the new surround, most of the changes were worked on concurrently. Crossover component assessment continued throughout the project. New technology was available to us, and we wanted to make the most of the improved top-end performance.

We completely reworked the bass driver magnet systems, resulting in significantly lower distortion at higher replay levels and better dynamics. At the same time we also worked on a series of smaller changes, such as our new in-house OFC terminals.

Our measurements show a very high 92-93dB sensitivity alongside a relatively low 3.5 ohms minimum impedance. Why not sacrifice a couple of decibels of sensitivity to make the load less demanding?

Several times over the years we have looked into using higher impedance voice coils. The trouble is that the thinner wire needed gives a less rigid coil and can also produce a mechanical impedance mismatch to the cone. A thicker coil also has greater thermal mass so doesn't heat up so quickly. That and the higher sensitivity tend to give a more dynamic speaker.

Why did you change the tweeter surround material in the first place?

We did not actively seek to change the surround material, but samples sourced from a different supplier coupled to the dome in a more beneficial way. Having discovered the improved imaging and driver integration that resulted from the wider high-frequency dispersion, we were not about to throw them away, but did have to address the reduced on-axis output that resulted from a wider sound energy spread.

Squeezing all that extra magnetic flux into a very narrow gap, that would normally be fully saturated, could only be achieved with the more complex magnet design.



DIAMOND has the highest stiffness-to-density ratio of any material, so assuming it can be appropriately formed and worked, it's potentially ideal for extending the piston behaviour of a tweeter diaphragm to way beyond the audio band.

Although the pure diamond dome diaphragm and long tube-loading cast metal housing remain unchanged, a change in the surround/suspension has led to wider dispersion at the top end of the working range and at some cost in on-axis sensitivity. To compensate for the latter, the motor has also undergone considerable revision and now uses four small and strategically positioned NeFeB (neodymium) magnets rather than just one.

piano black. Inside, Matrix 'honeycomb' bracing further increases rigidity. Besides the very compact motors described earlier, the twin 200mm drivers each have 150mm diameter 'sandwich' diaphragms, with thick cores of Rohacell structural foam laminated between woven carbon fibre. A port fires downward between the base and the plinth to add further bass output.

The midrange unit is virtually unchanged in this model. It's unique 'free edge' design known as an FST (fixed suspension transducer), in which the outside edge of the 140mm diameter woven Kevlar cone rests against a foamed polymer damping ring. This is housed in a sizeable and very heavy teardrop-shaped sub-enclosure, made from mineral-loaded Marlan (a mineral-loaded polymer) and finished in high-gloss black. The internal shape is essentially a combination of a sphere and a cone, which is claimed to be very effective at dissipating the rearward radiation from the driver.

A substantial tapered metal tube on the very top, again smartly finished in high-gloss black, houses the 25mm tweeter and is designed to absorb the rearward radiation from the diamond diaphragm. Diamond is very hard and when fashioned (artificially,

using a technique called vapour deposition) into a tweeter dome its high stiffness pushes the first breakup mode up to 74kHz – way above the audio band. The main problem is that it's also very expensive (and incidentally rather fragile in the eggshell-thin form used to keep the mass low).

A small removable (magnetically held) mesh grille is supplied to cover the diamond dome; while this does compromise the sound a little, it's probably best left on as an accident here could be rather costly. Those who prefer to hide their drive units can use either or both of the fabric covered grilles supplied for the midrange and bass drivers, the latter held magnetically in place.

Reassuringly expensive

All this advanced speaker technology doesn't come cheap and the 802 Diamond is unquestionably an expensive speaker. It also costs significantly more than its predecessor, which presumably helps pay for the considerable engineering resources that underpin the Bowers and Wilkins operation.

But the more significant factors are simply the effects of inflation and the fall in the value of the pound – many of the components used in manufacture are priced in Euros or Dollars.

Although the 802 Diamond might seem costly, but the whole 800-series Diamonds are actually very good value in the context of most of today's high end offerings. It all depends on whether you can accept that a single well-resourced brand is as capable of creating genuine high-end models as it is of designing very competitive mainstream models.

No prisoners

Not unexpectedly, the in-room measurements showed that this speaker should be kept well clear of walls, just like its predecessor.

The 802 Diamond was mostly driven from a system comprising a Naim NAC552 preamp with NAP500 and MSB Mono 202 power amplifiers. Speaker cables were Vertex AQ Moncayo, while Mini Moncayo bi-wire links were also used. Sources included a Rega Valve Isis and Naim CDS3/555PS CD players, a Magnum Dynalab MD106T FM tuner, and a Linn/Rega/SoundSmith vinyl record player.

Given the five year gap, it's impossible to say for sure just how much of an improvement the 802 Diamond offers over its 802D predecessor,



DETAILS



- 1** Rear of top-mounted tweeter is loaded by a cast metal transmission line, and decoupled from the Marlan midrange 'head'
- 2** Tweeter has new four-magnet motor and costly vapour-deposited diamond diaphragm, with optional magnetic grille for protection
- 3** Midrange is handled by a 150mm FST driver mounted in a teardrop-shaped, gloss black Marlan sub-enclosure
- 4** Twin 200mm bass drivers have 150mm 'sandwich' diaphragms between carbon fibre skins, and new compact neodymium motors
- 5** Back and sides of the substantial plywood bass enclosure are formed into a continuous curve
- 6** Twin terminal pairs are specially fabricated in OF copper and mounted on the cast alloy plinth that also houses the costly crossover network



THE VITAL THING to stress is that the 802 Diamond is very transparent, both in terms of its coherent image transparency and exceptionally wide dynamic range. It doesn't take prisoners, especially at the upper end of the audio band, so top-quality source components and amplification are absolutely essential here. One might query whether the Naim NAP500 power amp used throughout the test was ideal, as it isn't the best at delivering depth perspectives, but it does offer great top-end detail. Although the relatively low impedance suggests that single-ended types are best avoided, the fine sensitivity and top end delicacy should be well suited to push-pull valve amps, as well as vinyl sources.

uncannily clean. But it also means that partnering components need to be of comparably high quality, as this speaker takes no prisoners and all too clearly reveals any shortcomings further up the chain. It was no surprise to find that vinyl, was often preferred to CD, for example.

Although the in-room response traces do indicate some unevenness, this doesn't seem to result in significant levels of coloration. Two factors are likely to be responsible. First, any enclosure-generated colorations are exceptionally low: this is very obviously audible in the speaker's vanishingly low 'hash' floor, which makes the gaps between the notes as clean and clear as the notes themselves. Secondly, the overall coherence and timing right across the whole audio band is quite outstanding.

The acid test for any speaker is to get it onto your home turf and play familiar material through and from familiar components. The 802 Diamond has a wonderful ability to distinguish between FM radio, CD and vinyl sources and then to go further by clearly revealing the quality of the recording. This is indeed a genuine monitor.

Anyone who speculates that Bowers and Wilkins might be hidebound by its very impressive engineering resources, only has to spend an hour or two with a pair of 802 Diamonds. Superb imaging, dramatic dynamic range and excellent total coherence, this speaker has unquestionably been designed by people who listen to and love music. It's undoubtedly the best Bowers and Wilkins speaker that we've heard to date.

That all this has been achieved through painstaking refinement rather than headline-grabbing radical innovation is also rather appealing. ●

especially as the 802D's bigger and rather superior 800D acted as a regular reference loudspeaker through much of the interregnum.

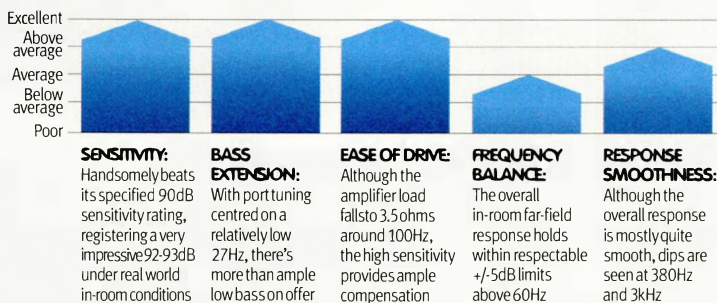
What is absolutely certain is that the 802 Diamond is a truly exceptional loudspeaker and indeed one that even improves on the earlier 800D in several significant respects. It might not match its older, bigger brother in terms of bass grip, authority and drive – arguably the 800D's biggest

strength – but the overall out-of-the-box transparency, low level articulation and stereo image precision are all clearly superior to anything the previous generation could offer.

As the measurements showed, this latest 802 Diamond is a couple of decibels brighter than its predecessor, relatively speaking. This is clearly audible and also mostly welcome, as the top end always sounds almost

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Airy, spacious midband imaging with clean bass reproduction
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks warmth and can sound a little thin
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** An open, agile sound alongside great styling. Works best with warm ancillaries and modest levels
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Concept a reality



Richard Black finds a way into Clearaudio ownership that won't break the bank – the new £1,050 plug 'n' play Concept

Clearaudio's impressive range of turntables is, to the best of our knowledge, just about the broadest on the planet, stretching downwards from the delightfully over-the-top 'Statement'.

The company doesn't compete with the Regas and Pro-Jects of this world in the budget arena, but the new Concept model puts Clearaudio within reach of more analogue-lovers than ever, bringing the price of entry down significantly.

Predictably, with a name like that, there's plenty of piffle in the literature about how this model is a whole new design, sorry, concept – but fair's fair, it is in fact genuinely novel in some ways.

The basic outline has a particle-board chassis, plastic platter, DC motor and pivoted arm. Differences from the norm are most obvious in the arm, which has a magnetic bearing, an ingenious arrangement that functions pretty much as a unipivot but with better stability and handling qualities than those notoriously fussy devices usually provide. It's also effectively friction-free.

It's actually very simple, relying on a pair of very strong magnets: one is fixed to the top of the arm tube, the other to the top of the bearing yoke and they hold the arm up. It is prevented from jamming itself against the top magnet by a tie wire fixed below, which also transmits the anti-skating force.

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Clearaudio Concept

ORIGIN: Germany

WEIGHT: 7.5kg

DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD)
420x140x350mm

FEATURES:

- 30mm plastic platter
- DC motor
- 230mm arm with magnetic bearing
- Captive arm lead

DISTRIBUTOR: AudioReference

TELEPHONE: 01252 702705

WEBSITE: clearaudio.de

The chassis is also distinctive, though less obviously so. Particle-board (MDF etc.) components on LP players are notorious for adding their own resonance unless carefully treated, but Clearaudio has addressed that with damping measures including the aluminium trim, which apparently plays a significant part – whatever the details, it's certainly very much better damped than most of its kind, as is evident from the simplest test of tapping it in a few places.

Level-headed

Another feature that is unusual, possibly even unprecedented in a high-quality turntable, is that the Concept is ready to play discs straight out of the box. Well, all right, you have to put the platter in place and plug in the power supply, but the cartridge is fitted and aligned and even the tracking force is preset. The arm and cartridge are Clearaudio's own, of course, the latter a moving magnet design, but if you prefer not to use them you can replace either.

You can also adjust all the usual parameters – offset and overhang, VTA, tracking force, anti-skating – but the clever part is that you don't need to. A spirit level is provided so that the user can adjust the three spiked feet to set the deck level.



Drive is from a small DC motor, the sort of thing one used to find in cassette decks (remember them?), which operates via a flat belt. The motor is resiliently mounted: Clearaudio claims it's 'completely decoupled' which is clearly an overstatement, but the small amount of noise it produces is adequately suppressed by the decoupling.

In addition to the usual 33 and 45rpm speeds, 78 is available for those who collect shellac as well as vinyl – you'll ideally need to change the cartridge as no LP stylus ever

sounds great playing the relatively cavernous grooves of shellac discs, but it's a useful option to have.

The power supply is a tiny plug-top switch-mode affair and while ultra-purists may wince at that thought, it's effectively free of hum fields and both it and its associated wiring are a good long distance from the sensitive signal wiring in and around the arm. There's also no electrical path (not even an earth link) between it and the audio.

Only one feature seems to us to be missing – a lid. It may seem a small

detail, but a lid both reduces acoustic feedback from the loudspeakers to the deck, and keeps dust off, and no LP collector will need reminding what a pernicious enemy dust can be. That apart, this is a very nicely turned-out deck, attractively finished and presented. We've never had cause to query the general standard of fit and finish from Clearaudio; just about the worst that could be said is that the surfaces show dust and fingerprints, but then so do wine glasses, fine furniture and so many other things. Anyway, this deck has

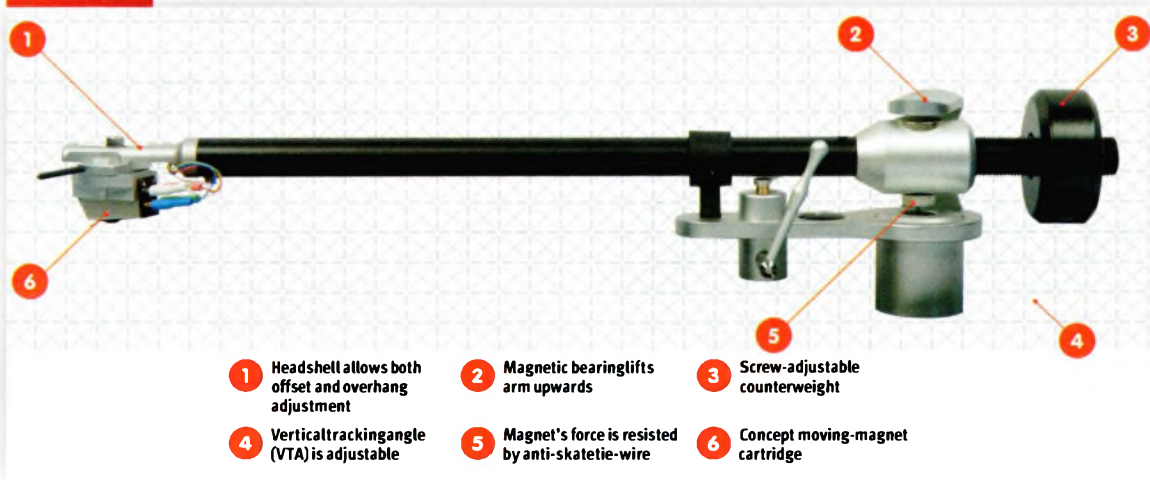


TALKING POINT
THE ARM'S magnetic bearing is intriguing and the promise of zero friction certainly appeals. There are, however, two problems with it.

The first one it shares with all unipivots and plenty of more conventional arms: the pivot point is too high. If the axis about which an arm pivots up and down is above or below the level of the disc, any warping in the disc will cause the cartridge to travel a little forwards and backwards as well as up and down, introducing speed variations or 'wow'.

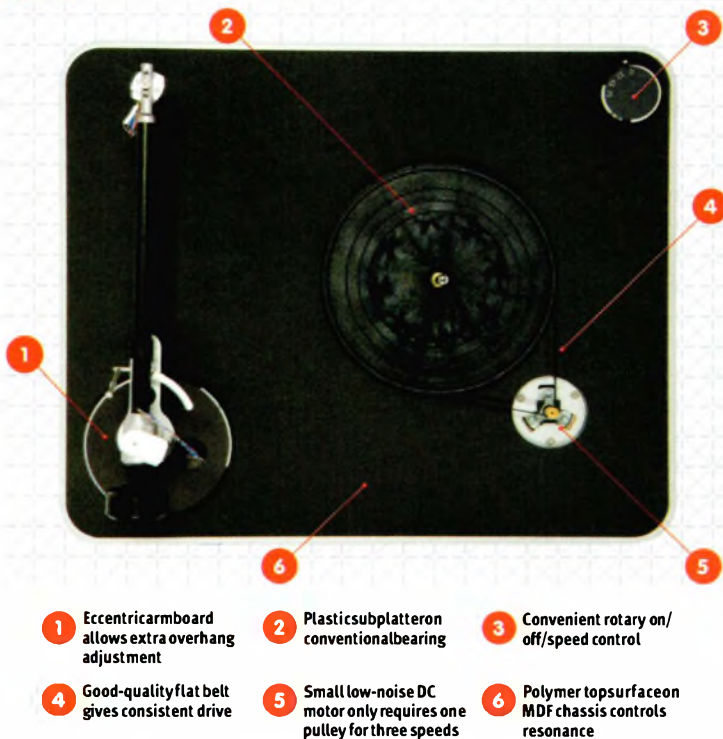
The second problem is that the arm's suspension point can vibrate laterally, both side-to-side and fore-and-aft, again introducing wow and also subsonic noise. Clearaudio reckons it's a trade-off worth making.

CLOSE-UP



- 1 Headshell allows both offset and overhang adjustment
- 2 Magnetic bearing lifts arm upwards
- 3 Screw-adjustable counterweight
- 4 Vertical tracking angle (VTA) is adjustable
- 5 Magnet's force is resisted by anti-skate wire
- 6 Concept moving-magnet cartridge

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Eccentric armboard allows extra overhang adjustment
- 2 Plastic subplatter on conventional bearing
- 3 Convenient rotary on/off/speed control
- 4 Good-quality flat belt gives consistent drive
- 5 Small low-noise DC motor only requires one pulley for three speeds
- 6 Polymer top surface on MDF chassis controls resonance

more matt and less shiny surfaces than many and is quite forgiving in that regard. We can't comment on the accuracy of settings as supplied, but attention to detail certainly reflects the manufacturer's usual high standards. We were particularly impressed with the bearing, which has an admirable combination of low friction and low play.

No blur in oasis

Lacking anything in the way of a proper suspension, this deck is never going to sound its best on a structure closely coupled to the floor, so we used our usual isolation table for most of the listening. Thus configured, the Concept produces some very good sounds, clearly much better

than the budget turntables which it (very superficially) resembles and thus vindicating Clearaudio's damping measures and arm.

What's most noticeable about it is the way it largely avoids the midrange blurring that affects so many unsuspended decks. Avoiding that is one of the biggest challenges facing designers and manufacturers, and we'd say Clearaudio's team has done very well in that regard.

Scale, openness and detail

The results are most obvious in large-scale music – symphony orchestra, big rock and so on – where there's a lovely sense of openness and scale, combined with very good detail and also excellent



WE SPOKE to Dave Denyer, Clearaudio's PR man in the UK, about system-building options based around the Concept. He pointed out that the 'plug'n'play' idea of the Concept rather presupposes an existing system. However, he was quick to point out that Clearaudio markets various phono stages, which would certainly be on the menu – most likely the Smart Phono (£400) or Nano Phono (£235).

The lowish-priced integrated amplifier market is flush with fine models these days, while among loudspeakers the ideal would be something neutral and extended but not too bassy, as that can exacerbate the rumble inherent in many older recordings. Dave recommends the Cardea models from Kudos and also highly rates the Leema Xone.

imaging. By the same token, simple recordings such as solo guitar are very clear and full of the little details that make the character of an instrument or player unique.

Where this player does yield a little ground to dearer models is in the bass, which is decent but not astounding. There's some quite good extension, but control and solidity aren't really up there with the best. All the same, because the upper bass is tight and dynamic, one isn't much aware of anything being amiss in recordings where most of the low-frequency action is in the bass.

High treble is probably just as much a function of the cartridge as of the deck itself, a suspicion strengthened by a brief spell with another cartridge in place, but it's somewhere between basically likeable and very good, with a slight question mark over its sweetness when it gets very busy: the sound can thicken up a little. But as with the midrange, getting this really spot-on is invariably a costly business and for the asking price this deck does a very good job.

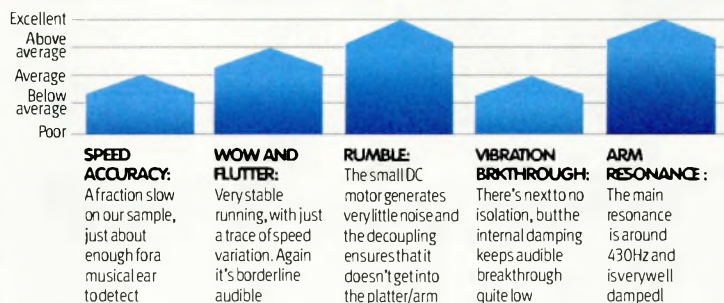
Devotion to the cause

As always, what's more important than the specifics is the overall musical impression and this is really where the Concept scores. It isn't perfect, but the minor technical blemishes are very much in the background and out of one's general awareness. If the disc is rock, the Concept rocks. If jazz, it swings. If romantic, it smooches.

Watching the analogue renaissance over the last few years has been a heartening experience. Clearaudio's combination of audio and aesthetic design has produced a winning combination here which we feel sure will both win converts and keep them devoted to the analogue cause. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Ease of setup/use; lively, involving music-making with plenty of detail
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Noddy bass not quite the firmest; treble occasionally a little thick
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** One of the simplest ways of getting into analogue, with excellent results for the price
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL





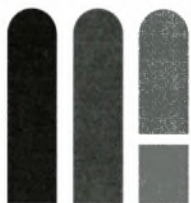
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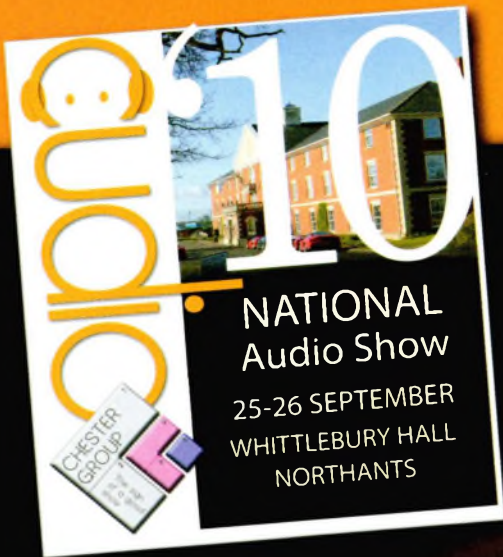
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Mobile library



Malcolm Steward discovers a neat solution for losslessly storing up to 3,000 ripped CDs with zero effort, a minimal outlay and no catch

The Vortexbox name represents two things: it is a suite of Linux (Fedora-based) software applications that provide users with a music library. It is also the name of the software installed on the company's ripping NAS (Network Attached Storage) appliances. The software is freely downloadable, while the hardware – a range of fully equipped DLNA-capable (Digital Living Network Alliance) appliances – starts at the genuine value-for-money price of £385.

3,000 albums at CD-quality

You can load Vortex Box software onto any PC, where once installed, it will automatically rip CDs to FLAC and MP3 files, ID3 tag those files and download the cover art. It will then serve the stored music to network media players, including those from Arcam, Linn, Logitech, Naim and Sonos.

We opted to test the complete £385, 1TB VortexBox package: the software installed on an energy-efficient hardware platform specifically designed to suit it and provide general-purpose NAS functionality, along with CD-ripping and audio server capabilities.

The compact appliance is based upon a 1.6GHz Intel Atom processor and 1GB of DDR2 RAM. It connects

to the rest of the world through a GigaBit (10/100/1000 Mbps) NIC (Network Interface Controller) and Ethernet cable. Its 1TB hard disk will provide sufficient storage for around 3,000 CDs, using the lossless FLAC format level 5 (default) compression

The box is fitted with six USB connections: four at the rear, allowing you, for example, to connect external hard disks for back-up purposes, as well as two at the front, which are convenient for quick downloads of music from memory sticks.

The silent type

The VortexBox Appliance is a very neatly assembled unit and is contained in a modestly proportioned, substantial and good-looking case. Its internal layout is made tidier through its use of an external power supply. This is a switch-mode type, so we plugged it straight into a Russ Andrews Silencer mains unit to counter any negative effects it might have.

Based on a Micro-Star 7418 mini-ITX motherboard, the unit offers connections for on-board audio, but VortexBox is keen to point out that this unit really is a NAS and ripper, rather than a media player.

Satisfying sounds

We tested the VortexBox both as a UPnP server and as a media player

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT: VortexBox Appliance

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Automatic CD-ripping NAS

WEIGHT: 3.9kg

DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 300x65x240mm

FEATURES:

- Built-in dual-layer drive

- Low-power: 25 watts

- Built-in consumer-quality soundcard

- Can also store photos and documents

DISTRIBUTOR: VortexBox

TELEPHONE: 01892 888456

WEBSITE: vortexbox.co.uk

with a USB connection feeding a Cambridge DacMagic USB input (which admittedly doesn't deliver the DAC's optimum performance) and a small Arcam/NEAT system. The results were encouraging, nonetheless.

At the end of the day, the VortexBox works well and delivers a consistent, musically rewarding performance through all the media players in residence. It is whisper-quiet and communicates without any glitches, over a mixed Windows domain/workgroup network.

Whether added through a revealing high-end system or a simpler set-up typical of the sort deployed in a music-lover's office, the tunes emerge flawlessly with no evidence of constriction or audible limitations. Pitch accuracy, dynamics, detail and timing information all seem spot-on and the all-important pace and rhythm aspects are resolutely well defined. Overall, this commodity-priced ripping NAS gives a commendable performance.

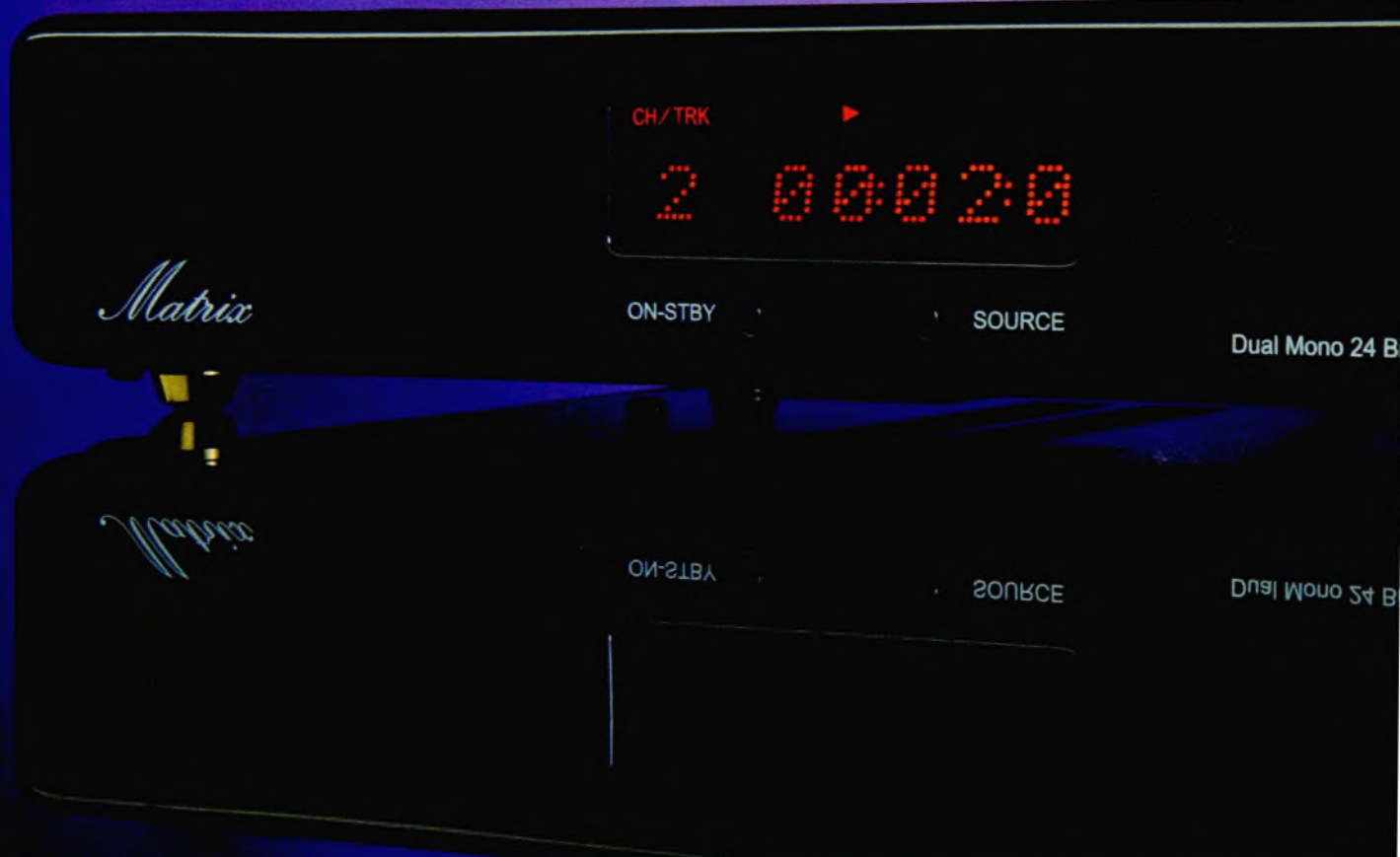
Ticking the boxes

The VortexBox Appliance ticks all the boxes. It's a well-equipped NAS and it rips capably. It's also environmentally sound and very reasonably priced. If you want storage for your unpackaged media, then there surely cannot be a better, more cost-effective option. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: It does what it says on the tin and does it well
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: It needs a more comprehensive manual
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Apart from one hiccup, which a call to the distributor sorted in minutes, everything about using the VortexBox is plain sailing
FEATURES ★★★★★	
OVERALL ★★★★★	



The great transformer

The valve-equipped Matrix DAC from Synthesis transforms ordinary CD players into extraordinary ones, says **Jason Kennedy**

Sometimes a product comes along that manages to create a buzz without any fanfare whatsoever and the Synthesis DAC, from a relatively unknown Italian company, has done just that. In fact, Synthesis doesn't even feature the Matrix DAC on its website, so full credit must go to UK distributor Audio Images, for this cunning bit of stealth marketing.

Synthesis, not to be confused with Audio Synthesis of passive preamp fame, makes a system's worth of electronics and speakers and finishes it in some very Italian colours. It's clearly into the sound of valves, so it's no surprise to see two pairs lying horizontally under a vent in the top of the unit, but how they fit the

transformers into such a slim box is something of a mystery.

Valves inside

The answer lies in the fact that Synthesis employs low-profile transformers. And, as this isn't a power amplifier, it doesn't need something beefy to help it drive loudspeakers.

The tube complement under the lid consists of two 12AX7WA triodes and a pair of Philbrick K2-W op-amps. This is the first time we've encountered a valve op-amp and this is an example of the first op-amp ever produced. It was introduced in 1952 and production ceased in 1971, so this is a new old stock (NOS) component. Op-amps are the building blocks of most low-power

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Synthesis Matrix

ORIGIN: Italy

TYPE: DAC

WEIGHT: 6kg

DIMENSIONS: 320x60x22mm

FEATURES:

- 24-bit/192kHz upsampling
- Wolfson WM8740 DAC
- Philbrick K2-W op-amp
- S/PDIF inputs: 2x coaxial, 2x optical

DISTRIBUTOR: Audio Images

TELEPHONE: 01502 582853

WEBSITE: audioimages-hifi.com

audio circuits. They're compact amplifiers that are usually in chip form and are a lot cheaper to use than discrete circuits.

The Matrix is a compact and beautifully finished convertor with four S/PDIF inputs for optical or electrical signals, the fifth input is a USB B socket for use with PC sources.

The digital to analogue convertor that beats at the heart of this black box is a Wolfson WM8740 – an upsampling 24-bit/192kHz type. In fact there are two DACs – one for each channel, which means that this convertor could be run in balanced mode if it makes so desired. As it stands, however, it is a single-ended component with only single-ended RCA phono outputs.

In use it has an on/off button that says standby but actually kills the thing dead (something you will want to do if you pay the electricity bill because it sure runs hot). The other button selects between inputs, which you will need to do if you have multiple digital sources as the DAC stays with the last input selected rather than automatically finding the live source.

Attention to detail

The Matrix has been built with plenty of attention to detail; the casework is very well finished and the socketry is of a standard that one expects at this



WE ASKED Tim at Audio Synthesis's distributor, Audio Images, what he would put with the Matrix to build a complete and coherent system. For the transport Tim suggests the Synthesis Pride CD player (£1,499). While there is no transport in the Synthesis range at present, this CD player is a good match. Amplification would consist of the penultimate Synthesis integrated design, called Shine. This is a 40-watt push-pull pentode amplifier, with remote control that comes in at £2,499 in black.

All the prices quoted including the Matrix DAC are for the piano black finish (a wood finish can be had for £50 less in each case).

Tim's preferred speaker choice is the Triangle Quartet (£2,495) – a speaker we enjoyed at the Music Rooms recently (HFC 335) – this has enough sensitivity and a perfect balance to match the valve electronics.

phrasing so well. This extends to making lyrics easier to understand in more intense passages and it revels in the character of every line.

This DAC doesn't have the same extension in the bass as a good, solid-state alternative, but it does have plenty of weight and plays a mean tune in the lower octaves. It's also excellent at delivering the attack of a snare drum or electric guitar, Synthesis also manages to avoid undue softness in the sound and with a good recording it achieves results that are simply captivating. With lesser recordings its clean and smooth top end is very forgiving.

It doesn't quite deliver the full openness and dynamics that the best valve stages can produce, but this

“It's that bit smoother, warmer and richer than a transistor device and that does wonders for instruments and voices.”

makes it easier to live with because you don't hear the shortcomings of noisy recordings.

Enchanting

Having said that, the Matrix transforms the sound of most mid-priced CD players. We used it with a Cambridge 840C, which sounds a little too 'warts and all' through highly revealing speakers, but works a treat with this DAC. It's a beguiling piece of kit that does a superb job with timbre and avoids the valve pitfalls of sounding vague and overblown. It images well and has a decent sense of timing. It's a pity our sample didn't work with a PC because we suspect that its qualities would suit such a source rather nicely.

This Italian DAC has a lot to commend it, not least its fluency and the way it brings singers into the room. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Enchanting sound that does fabulous things for voices
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Our sample didn't work with our laptop and it displays 99k for a 96k signal
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** This is a refined operator that will turn most affordable CD players into out-and-out charmers
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



price. The display is large and clear if a little idiosyncratic; hooked up to a DVD-A player outputting a 96kHz signal the DAC indicates that the incoming bitstream is actually at 99kHz. Less impressive, though, is the fact that we struggled to get our Macbook laptop to see the Matrix as a USB device whatever switch-on procedure was employed.

The competition in the valve DAC arena includes a number of models from Audio Note UK which has the DAC2.1x for £2,340, this is a non-oversampling type with transformer interfaces and a zero-feedback output

in a chunky metal chassis. It's not as pretty as the Matrix and doesn't have a display, but is likely to offer greater transparency and dynamics.

Living voice

Coming to the Matrix after a solid state CD player you can't help but hear its classic valve qualities. It's that bit smoother, warmer and richer than a transistor device and that does wonders for the timbre of instruments and voices. The latter, in particular, sound fabulous and convey considerable intimacy thanks to the way the DAC seeks out nuances and

CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA phono single-ended outputs
- 2 Coaxial digital inputs
- 3 13-amp IEC 'kettle' mains input allows for upgrades
- 4 toslink S/PDIF digital inputs
- 5 USB-B input



Swede love

A £515 power amp with the ability to work in Class A makes the Swedish-made XTZ an attractive proposition, says **Richard Black**

XTZ hails from Sweden and is responsible for the room acoustics measurement system we reviewed a few issues back (*HFC* 330). The company's range isn't huge, but it includes an integrated amp, a CD player, a variety of speakers and some home cinema-oriented electronics and speakers, too. There's no preamp yet, though we'd be prepared to bet on the imminent arrival of one.

Running hot

The big thing with this amp is its ability to work in Class A, the 'holy grail' of amplifiers that avoids the dreaded crossover distortion by ensuring the output transistors are always passing current. It also operates in conventional Class AB and you can select which mode it employs from the front panel.

XTZ cautions that the unit runs hot in Class A and it certainly does. It also runs pretty warm in Class AB and, in fact, it evidently runs with more standing current than most in this mode. XTZ quotes 110 watts in Class AB and 50 watts in Class A, though with the latter mode you can still get 110 watts from the amp, they just aren't Class A watts. This means that the decision on which mode to use is entirely down to sound quality.

Power-hungry

Construction is very solid and based around an internal steel frame, which also provides screening between input, power supply and the two power amp circuit boards. Large internal heatsinks handle the heat. Construction is good, but not tweeky, with no fancy brand-name components, but plenty of good-quality parts, nevertheless. The amp can optionally be made to shut down when no music is played for a while, and it can be bridged for the power-hungry.

Full-bodied

Obviously it's tempting to play with the mode switching and see how much difference one can hear. We decided to avoid that, however, and instead had a good, long session with the amp in Class AB, so we could get a general feel for it, before switching to Class A. This turned out to be a good plan, because we soon became accustomed to the amp's character. It's lively and full-bodied and it can do some lovely subtle things with quieter tracks, but it's not always the most detailed or sophisticated.

Very competitive

We've long enjoyed using symphonic recordings on the Water Lily Acoustics label for auditioning hi-fi.

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT:
XTZ Class-AP100
ORIGIN:
Sweden/China
TYPE:
Power amplifier
WEIGHT:
21kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
445x158x468mm
FEATURES:
• Unbalanced (phono) and balanced (XLR) inputs
• Switchable mode Class A/Class AB
• Single speaker outputs, unswitched
DISTRIBUTOR:
Audio Sanctum
TELEPHONE:
07517889738
WEBSITE:
xtz.se

These recordings are unusually ambient due to their simple microphone technique, but they have lots of detail: it just takes a special kind of hi-fi to bring it all out. The Class-AP100 doesn't quite get as much out of these discs as some we've heard.

Despite that, it presents the music both plausibly and attractively. In other recordings and repertoire, it preserves those qualities consistently and avoids many of the pitfalls of other budget separates, including significantly the issue of coloration.

Its tonal rendition of sounds that experience has shown to be tricky, such as male vocals, is very good, with perhaps the merest trace of lower-midrange richness, but hardly the sort of thing to get upset about. The deep bass is not quite as weighty and solid as some but has enough kick for rock and enough extension for church organ, while extreme treble is just a shade on the dry side but, in context, very good.

There's not much around that we can compare this amp to directly, at least not in the way of power amps, but among integrated models it competes with favourites from Creek, Cambridge Audio, Arcam and so on. That it does so, while retaining its own character – and its mode-switching feature too – is admirable. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Lively sound with plenty of musical appeal
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Detail not always among the best: runs exceptionally hot in Class A mode
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Offering a realistic and distinctive alternative to sub-£1,000 integrated models
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



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Until the merger is complete, which will take a few months, Sevenoaks Sound & Vision and Audio T will remain separate legal entities.

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HI-FI SEPARATES



Hi-Fi Choice
EDITOR'S CHOICE

CYRUS

Cyrus' award-winning CD Xt SE and DAC X have been upgraded with a + suffix. In a recent review, this combination when used with 2 x PSX-R power supplies, received the prestigious 'Editor's Choice' award by Hi-Fi Choice magazine.

The XP amplifiers are based on the circuitry of the top of the range DAC XP+. The entry-level 6XP includes 6 line level inputs along with a zone 2 feature while the 8XP d combines the XP series pre-amplifier with a newly revised power amp, and contains an onboard DAC for digital sources.



- CDX t SE+ CD8 SE
- CD6 SE DAC X+
- DAC XP+ 6XP / 8XP

8XPd PRE XP

X POWER PSX-R



LEEMA ACOUSTICS

ANTILA II

TUCANA II

With stunning sound quality the Antila II CD player features unique MD2 active differential multi-DAC converter technology to provide breathtaking realism.

The dual mono designed Tucana II amplifier uses three heavy-duty toroidal transformers and is capable of swinging over forty five amps of current, ensuring a vice like grip and precise control of the speakers.



- STREAM III
- PULSE III

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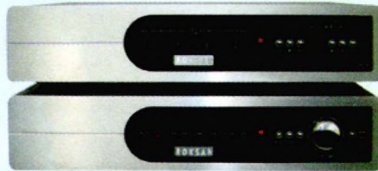
Combining sleek design, flexible connectivity and sound quality far beyond that of budget separates.



- CD17
- CD37
- A18
- A28
- A38

ROKSAN KANDY K2

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



- K2 CD
- K2 AMP
- CASPIAN M2

TURNTABLES

PROJECT

ESSENTIAL

The Essential is a new, 2 speed, entry-level turntable. It comes fitted with an Ortofon OMB 3E cartridge, dust cover, is easy to set-up and sounds great.



NEW

MARANTZ

- CD6003
- PM603

This award-winning CD and amplifier continues the Marantz tradition of building products that represent outstanding value.



- CD5004
- PM5004
- SA-KI PEARL
- PM-KI PEARL

ROTEL 06 SE SERIES

The 06 SE series includes four new components and updated versions of the classic CD player and 3 stereo amplifiers.



- RCD-06SE
- RA-04SE
- RA-05SE
- RA-06SE

MICHELL

GYRO SE

Based entirely on the GyroDec, but without the costly acrylic plinth and dustcover, the Gyro SE brings the same qualities in a more affordable and compact package. A Gyro SE can always be converted into a GyroDec by purchasing a plinth and dustcover.



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HI-FI SPEAKERS

MONITOR AUDIO PLATINUM • SILVER RX

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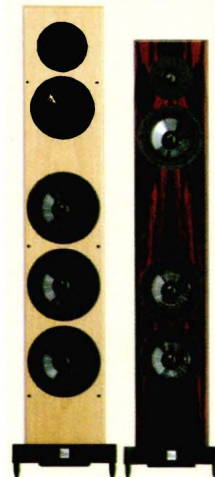
Silver RX - Available in a choice of real wood veneers and high-gloss piano finishes, Silver RX uses techniques and materials from the Platinum and Gold ranges for outstanding performance.



Diamond 10.1 This 10th generation version combines insight, precision and control along with fine build and finish.

WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 10.1

VIENNA ACOUSTICS CONCERT GRAND



Concert Grand As with all models in the Grand™ range, the composer name is selected based on the scale, complexity and power of performance for which they are best known. Featured here are the Beethoven 'Concert' and 'Baby' Grand.



Reference Launched to worldwide acclaim in 1973. The range remains, for many, the benchmark for high-end audio and is legendary for its clarity and precision.

KEF REFERENCE

B&W CM SERIES • 600

CM Series from Bowers & Wilkins has long been a favourite among its discerning customers. Offering a combination of high performance and exquisite styling at a very affordable price.



600 - This, the fourth generation of the 600 Series, features improved drive units, minimalist crossovers and a whole new design.

SPENDOR A-LINE

A-Line - A5 and A6 speakers are compact, high performance, floor standing speakers. They utilize drive units and other design innovations developed for Spendor's flagship ST & SA1 speakers.



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B&W Zeppelin and Zeppelin Mini docking systems combine beautiful looks with amazing sound.	ZEPPELIN	ARCAM NEW Offering supreme audio and build quality, the new rDAC is an ideal upgrade for conventional sources and network audio products alike.	rDAC	SOLO NEO Arcam's new Solo Neo combines superb music performance and network audio capabilities allowing it to play stored music in a multitude of formats, along with its internal CD player and radio tuner.
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SONOS This multi-room digital music system lets you play your favourite tunes all over the house and control them from the palm of your hand. You can even play different songs in different rooms.	BU250 BUNDLE	OLIVE Access all your digitized music from one centralized library. Everything from 24-bit HD files to 16-bit converted CDs will be at your fingertips. Convenient storage, easy touchscreen access and the ability to play it all in any room of your home. Now you'll enjoy your music collection more than ever.	4HD
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BLU-RAY PLAYERS

PANASONIC This new range includes the Full HD 3D capable DMP-BDT300 along with conventional 2D players			NEW
DMP-BD65	DMP-BD85	DMP-BDT300	
SONY Sony's new range includes the 2D BDP-S370 and 3D ready BDP-S470 and BDP-S570.		DENON Denon's new range of 3D ready, universal disc players, deliver high-end picture and sound quality	PIONEER Get the most out of your movie experience with Pioneer's new BDP-330 and BDP-LX53
NEW	NEW	NEW	NEW
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Fast lane for new M3i

Musical Fidelity has gone back to basics with its new, affordable M3 Series. **Ed Selley** test-drives the 'engine' behind the new range

Over the last fifteen years, Musical Fidelity products have literally come in all shapes and sizes. They have sported both extremely high and comparatively low power outputs and frequently mixed a variety of valves into the mix.

This has, of course, resulted in a number of interesting products, all of which incorporate design thinking from the flagship Titan power amplifier (see the *Talking Point* box opposite).

The M3i tested here is the entry-level, full-width Musical Fidelity amplifier and it finds good company in the matching M3 CD player. It's also a styling match for the new M1 DAC, if you have moved beyond CD for music replay.

The M3i pitches into the keenly contested £1,000 amplifier market with a relatively conventional

specification. Unlike MF's rather pricier AMS units, which are entirely Class A, the M3i retains a Class A preamp stage, but the output stage is class A/B, which is a more practical proposition at this price point. This arrangement gives a claimed 70 watts per channel and in use seems unfazed by any remotely normal speaker load. This is due, in part, to the customary care that Musical Fidelity has paid to the power supply of the M3i. The preamp section has its own power supply with separate transformer windings, effectively separating it from the power amp section. The transformer itself gives the M3i good current reserves and contributes to the ease that the M3i sets about most speaker loads.

Specs appeal

The M3i sports six line-level RCA inputs, one of which can be switched

DETAILS

- PRODUCT:** Musical Fidelity M3i
ORIGIN: UK/Taiwan
TYPE: Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT: 9.2kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 440x100x400mm
FEATURES:
 • 70w integrated amplifier
 • Class A preamp and AB power amp stage
 • Circuitry related to the flagship Titan power amplifier
DISTRIBUTOR: Musical Fidelity
TELEPHONE: 020 8900 2866
WEBSITE: musicalfidelity.com

to act as a fixed input should you wish to use the M3i in an AV system. The balanced input and USB input of the larger M6 are lost, which is a shame but understandable given the M3i is less than half the price.

The good news is that the M3i retains the sturdy, all-metal casework of its bigger brother (albeit in a slightly smaller size) and less the external heat sinks. As such it joins the new Musical Fidelity aesthetic that we, at least, think is rather handsome.

The fit and finish is good – the all-metal casework feels sturdy and the controls are solid. Round the back, the connections are gold-plated and well spaced, while the speaker terminals are solid enough to accept heavyweight cabling without baulking.

The M3i is also fully remote-controlled, with both volume and input selection being available from the handset, as well as controls for the matching CD player. The handset itself is not the last word in elegance, but it is logically laid out and is easy to use. A slight gripe is that the motor in the volume pot is not especially fast, so quick changes in volume are better done by hand.

The result is a solid proposition at the asking price. It is possible to find more highly specified amplifiers for the same money – internal phono stages are available, as are balanced inputs, USB or other digital connections



and more power. While, the M3i does not have these features, it retaliates with solid internal engineering and sturdy build.

The power output is unlikely to constrain your choice of loudspeakers, or require you to change existing ones and the six line inputs and AV bypass ought to allow it to slot into most hi-fi or AV systems without a problem.

Ultimately, the decision on whether this is sufficient will rest on any requirement you might have for the features that the M3i does not have. It is also worth considering that elsewhere in the range, the very

competitive V Series components can give the M3i, digital inputs, a headphone amp or a phono stage for a small increase in cost.

Of course, we would always encourage that any purchasing decision of this type be reached with the aid of a demonstration and should you do this, the case for the M3i grows rather stronger than from the specification alone.

Heavy-hitter

Out of the box with zero running-in time, the M3i gives a good impression of what it can do. None of the key personality traits

change dramatically with more hours under the belt, but there is slight sense that the amp frees up a little and becomes a little more open.

This amp is a revealing and insightful performer, able to extract great amounts of detail from recordings without losing sight of the performance as a whole. In part, this is due to a slight lift in the top-end performance, which pushes detail which can often be overwhelmed a little further forward and gives a pleasing vibrancy to performance. This could potentially become too much of a good thing



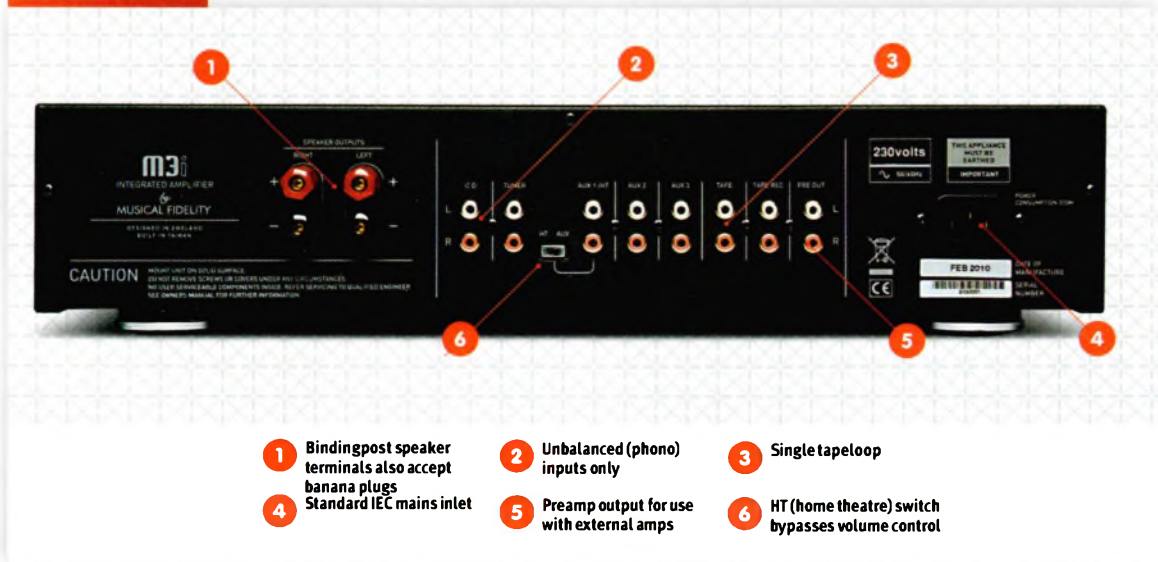
TALKING POINT

MUSICAL FIDELITY is justifiably proud of the flagship Titan power amplifier. As well as acting as the flagship of the range, it has also served as the template for all of the Musical Fidelity amplifiers in the current line up.

The basic circuit of the Titan is replicated in the M and AMS series of amplifiers and the sonic signature of the Titan (if not the awesome power output) now forms the basis and the design philosophy of the Musical Fidelity range. The circuit seems to prove amenable to being class A/B (as here in the M3i) and as class A in the AMS series.

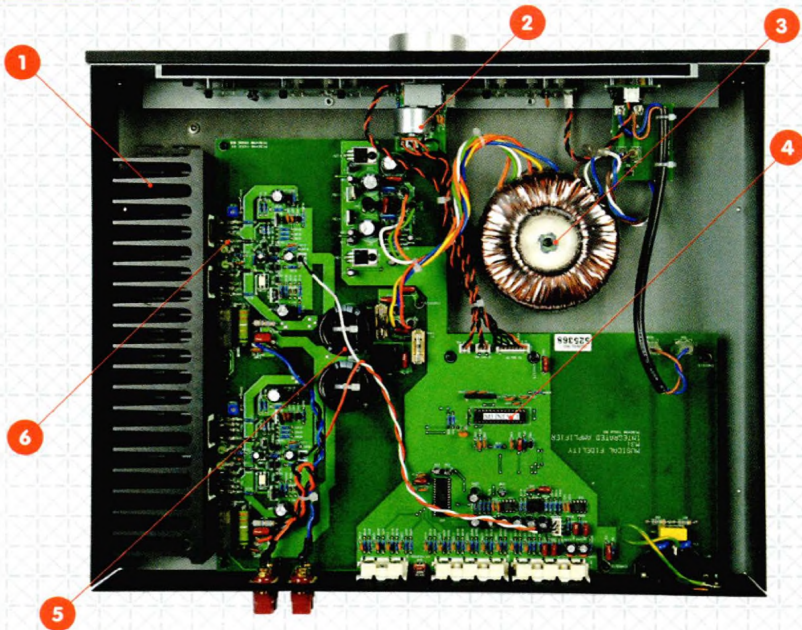
MF's Anthony Michaelson feels that the sonic signature of the Titan is present and correct in the M3i which at one twentieth the price of its bigger brother is no mean feat.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Bindingpost speaker terminals also accept banana plugs
- 2 Unbalanced (phono) inputs only
- 3 Single tapeloop
- 4 Standard IEC mains inlet
- 5 Preamp output for use with external amps
- 6 HT (home theatre) switch bypasses volume control

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Massive heatsinks
- 2 Motorised volume control
- 3 Toroidal mains transformer
- 4 Microcontroller
- 5 Reservoir capacitors
- 6 Class AB output stages

reproduce it with fantastic speed and assurance that makes it a must-listen for anyone with preferences towards rock or dance music. Timing can be a tricky concept to define and explain but by most standards the M3i has it in spades. When given gentler music to work with, this can manifest itself as if the M3i is trying to add pace and excitement to material that is less suitable for it to work this trick on.

For some, this slight relentlessness might prove distracting while others will revel in this sense of liveliness. To round off an impressive set of sonic attributes, the M3i generates a substantial and convincing soundstage with musicians placed believably within it. The results are not as panoramic as some of the competition, but neither is there the sense of sound clinging closely to speakers and giving a very 'left/right' presentation.

Life in the fast lane

Summarised in one word, the M3i could only be described as 'entertaining'. It will replay anything with a sense of excitement and liveliness that is hard not to like. That this punch and timing is coupled to excellent tonality and soundstage and placed in a well-finished and relatively well specified box, results in a very strong performer at the price point.

The slightly boisterous presentation it can sometimes display with gentler music may not be to everybody's taste, but many will revel in the sheer enjoyment that the M3i can bring to listening.

If this is the result of a new Musical Fidelity philosophy and an example of what we can expect in the future, then we hope it is one that the firm will follow enthusiastically for some time to come. The M3i is definitely a welcome addition to the fold. ●

and we would advise against partnering the M3i with very forward loudspeakers, but running into a pair of Neat Momentum 4i's, the results are lively and exciting without tipping over into harshness or aggression.

Pushed very hard indeed, the M3i will harden up a little and lose some of the sweetness it demonstrates at lower volumes, but the level this occurs at is a great deal higher than what we would regard as 'normal' listening levels. Tonality is good throughout the frequency spectrum, with instruments and vocals possessing a convincing realism and a very natural sense of attack

and decay. Special mention must go to the reproduction of piano pieces, which is a harder trick to pull off than is generally assumed and can prove a challenge for amplifiers that are rather more expensive than the M3i.

Sonic attributes

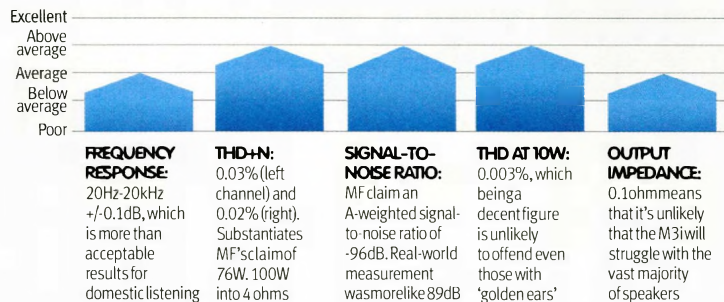
The well-lit top end and excellent tonality combines with a deep and musical low end that is amongst the best in class. The results are never less than convincing be it the reproduction of a kick drum, bass guitar or purely electronic rumble. Give the M3i a complex and fast-moving bass line and it will



THE M3I presents no serious obstacles to system-building. The 70w output and good current delivery mean that the M3i can handle most speaker options. Of more importance will be choosing models that benefit from the slight top end lift of the M3i rather than exacerbate it. The Neat Momentums used during the review worked well and indicate that metal tweeters should not be ruled out. Beyond the Neat range, Bowers and Wilkins CM series and PMC's FACT range would also represent strong candidates. Source-wise the matching M3CD would be a naturally strong candidate as would the interesting M1 Dac for those with post CD systems. For those looking to add turntable capability, Michaelson feels that the V-LPS is a strong contender.

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Extremely engaging performer with excellent sonics and solid build
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** May be too forward if incorrectly partnered
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Thoroughly enjoyable performer that will work well across a variety of systems
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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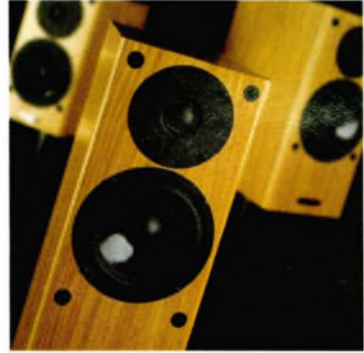
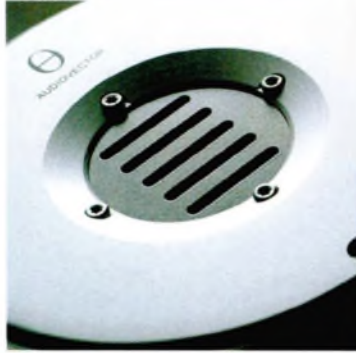
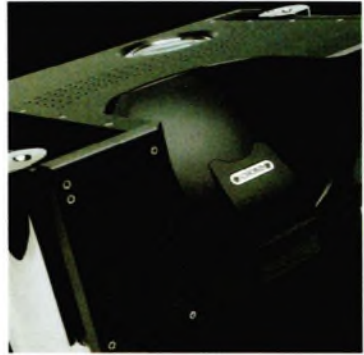


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The only real hi-fi shop in Guildford

Flexible friend

Richard Black finds the new Audio-Technica ATH-ES10 small enough for music on the move and big enough for sound adventures at home

Portable is a vague term applied to headphones. Clearly even the chunkiest models are portable if you've got a big enough bag handy, while many would balk at carrying anything bigger than an in-ear model. The ATH-ES10 isn't quite pocket-sized, but it's small enough to fit in a small briefcase or handbag; with the earpieces rotated it's about 25mm-thick. We've spotted plenty of cool dudes wearing similar-size models on the street, and for the audiophile (or indeed audio professional) on the move, maybe expecting to spend quite a lot of time in trains, planes and hotels, it looks a practical proposition.

Must-have 53mm drivers

The big news on the audio front is that this model includes A-T's latest 53mm drive unit, not bad given each earpiece is only 75mm diameter on the outside. As we've noted before, 53mm is the current 'must-have' size and A-T developed this unit for high-end duty. In this case it's housed in a closed-back surround made of titanium, with soft-leather padding which rests mostly on the ear, making this strictly a supra-aural design, though it's really betwixt and between that and circumaural. The headband is similarly padded and that, plus the light weight, makes this a comfortable headphone, although the rather tight fit can lead to hot ears in warm weather.

Likes to go loud

The tight fit does ensure good isolation from the outside and if this doesn't quite give Etymotic-like sensory deprivation, it certainly does mitigate the annoyance of noisy surroundings. Against that, we should report that the lead (which is very flexible) still transmits quite a lot of friction noise to the ears.

Sensitivity is quite high and the moderate impedance is well judged to give ease of drive (hence good sound), but still plenty of volume from portable devices. If A-T's numbers are to be believed, the maximum output is just about enough to blow your ears out – we didn't experiment!

Flip side

What this headphone does well, it does very well indeed. As luck would have it, we tried it out first on some well-produced classic rock and it gave a cracking performance. The

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Audio-Technica
ATH-ES10

ORIGIN:
Japan

TYPE:
Portable headphone

WEIGHT:
200g

FEATURES:

- Impedance 42ohms
- Lead length 1.2m

DISTRIBUTOR:
Audio-Technica

TELEPHONE:
0113 277 1441

WEBSITE:
audio-technica.com

bass is just a little lifted compared with what we regard as neutrality, but only a little and the rest of the frequency range seems well balanced. At the same time, there's a really superb sense of rhythm and loads of detail, which all adds up to a highly convincing and persuasive performance.

The other side of the coin was shown by a familiar test recording of classical voice and piano. This was much less successful, both voice and instrument sounds coloured, with a synthetic quality to the piano, an uncomfortable imbalance between consonants and vowels from the singer and a general feeling that detail is blurred.

High-octane

Clearly if a reproducer sounds coloured with any one kind of sound it really is coloured, but the crucial consideration is how much that coloration affects any particular track one is listening to. It just happens that solo piano and relatively ambient male voice are the very worst things for this headphone, but with most recordings it sounds much more natural. A couple of large-scale orchestral recordings proved that it's got nothing against classical music as such and its imaging is unusually good. These discs have plenty of detail which came through well and it was possible to hear some slight tonal balance anomalies, but nothing serious.

Clearly, the natural home of the ES10 is high-octane rock, jazz, pop and similar. It is one of those components that puts in such an energetic performance that minor blemishes in areas like tonality simply cease to matter. With more laid-back sounds one gets used to the tone quality and sound seems to improve after a few minutes, but the right sort of music brings on a satisfied grin at the outset and total satisfaction. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

LIKE: Great sense of energy; stonking bass; good sound isolation

DISLIKE: Can sound coloured with some musical styles

WESAY: One for high-octane rock, jazz and pop; great results with the right sort of music

OVERALL

★★★★★



Hi-fi's own HD box

Theta's Compli Blu is a state-of-the-art universal (Blu-ray) disc player that, says *Alvin Gold*, brings HDMI into an audiophile context

What is your view of the ideal disc player? There are a number of possible answers to this, but definitely high on the list would be those models that bridge the apparently irreconcilable gap that distinguishes the various flavours of both the audio and video disc with the minimum loss of fidelity.

Using versatility and performance as yardsticks, this new model from Theta potentially, at least,

comes near the top of the list and, perhaps, at the absolute pinnacle. How so? Well this is a high-end transport which can be used as a full standalone player. It's happy dealing with almost any 12cm disc that is round and silver, be it audio or video.

Versatile performer

First and foremost, the Compli Blu is a universal audio transport, that can recognise and play CDs, DVD-Audio and SACD

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Digital Compli Blu

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Universal disc player

WEIGHT:
5.1kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
430x77x336mm

FEATURES:

- Compatible BD-Video, DVD-Video, DVD-Audio, AVCHD, SACD, CD, HDCD, Kodak Picture CD, CD-R/RW, DVD±R/RW, DVD±R DL, BD-R/RE
- HDMI v1.3 with HDCP output up to 7.1 channel high-resolution PCM, 5.1 channel DSD
- 1GB internal storage for Blu-ray
- System control over HDMI via remote

DISTRIBUTOR:
Absolute Sounds

TELEPHONE:
02089713909

WEBSITE:
thetadigital.com

discs, be they stereo or multichannel. The Theta is also HDCD compatible. This means that it will also play DVD (and AVCHD) video discs and, unlike almost all so-called 'universal players', Blu-ray discs.

Because the Theta has an HDCP-protected HDMI output, it brings a whole new level of capabilities to the party, by being able to stream music from SACD in digital form – Bitstream or native DSD, depending on menu set-up. Of course, being a transport, this is dependent on your amplifier having an HDMI input, which current AV amps do have, but audiophile amplifiers do not.

In addition, the Compli Blu supports the main variations on the Blu-ray theme, including BD Live (interactive BD-ROM profile 2) and Bonus View, which adds PIP (picture-in-picture). The Compli Blu also has a USB card reader as a media reader and rear panel socketry includes RS232 for



system control and to flash the internal firmware.

Like an increasing number of well-connected components, there is also a LAN connector, which can be used to download additional BD-Live content from the internet – previews, trailers, special features and more besides.

No specialist producer can design its own Blu-ray player from scratch and the Compli Blu is no exception, being based on an Oppo BD83 platform. But although functionally similar, the two players are not the same, as noted on the Theta website entry for the this model which states: 'The Compli Blu is based on a manufacturing kit obtained from a third party then optimised by Theta Digital. In the past, we've partnered with Sony, Phillips and Pioneer. This time, we're pleased to partner with Oppo and establish yet another benchmark of performance by Theta Digital in the transport product category'. So say what you like, but there is no attempt here by Theta to pull the wool over anyone's eyes as to the origins.

"The Compli Blu is a knockout piece of equipment that helps highlight the true potential for HD audio."

Changes that Theta has made to the basic Oppo player are as follows: the mechanism is now damped rather than sprung and has been moved to a lower position in the transport for stability; while the chassis has been built from thicker-gauge steel and the PCB tracks doubled in thickness. The internal firmware has also been customised for the Theta and is regularly updated.

The high-capacity (seven-amp) power section has been completely respecified. It is now a linear design based on four independently rectified and regulated supplies and multiple transformers, headlined by an 80-watt torroid.

Finally, the player has been built into a case that mirrors the presentation of other Theta

products, with obvious physical and visual benefits. What effects these various changes make to sound (and picture) quality is unknown, given that no Oppo model was available for comparison.

Our only criticism is that it's a pity (although in some ways understandable) that Theta feels it has to support the scourge of regional coding. Interestingly, the Oppo opposite number is available in an all-region version, though whether the hack involved can be applied to the Theta is not known. In accordance with licensing requirements, the player can only be specified for a single region, though a patch is available to change which region is supported.

Tracking down

The fact that, as we mentioned earlier, the Compli Blu is not entirely Theta's own work has become a matter of some controversy. The Oppo, for example, is much cheaper than the Theta and some frenzied (and in some cases spectacularly



TALKING POINT

THE COMPLI BLU is based on HDMI version 1.3, but Theta is currently working on Version 1.4. This will involve a major upgrade to the unit, including a new power supply and audio boards, and the interface which has major licensing implications, too. The new version should be available by September.

Whether existing players will be upgradable is not certain yet, as the player design has still to be finalised. Upgrades, however expensive, could also support 3D which, for better or worse, is one of the main drivers for HDMI 1.4.

Q&A...

HI-FI CHOICE SPOKE WITH DAVE REICH, PROJECT MANAGER AT THETA DIGITAL



We discussed the Compli Blu with Dave Reich (ex-founder of Classe Digital), in particular the analogue design which, in combination with the underpinning capabilities of the Oppo, helped shape what the Compli Blu has become.

HFC: What role did Theta play in the evolution of the Compli Blu?

DR: I am fundamentally an analogue designer and what Theta wanted to do was to improve the parts of the unit that were under our control, in particular the power supply and the physical elements of the design. These areas are where our strengths lie. We wanted to produce a player that was visually part of the Theta family and that had the kind of performance-led qualities that we have built into our existing range of products.

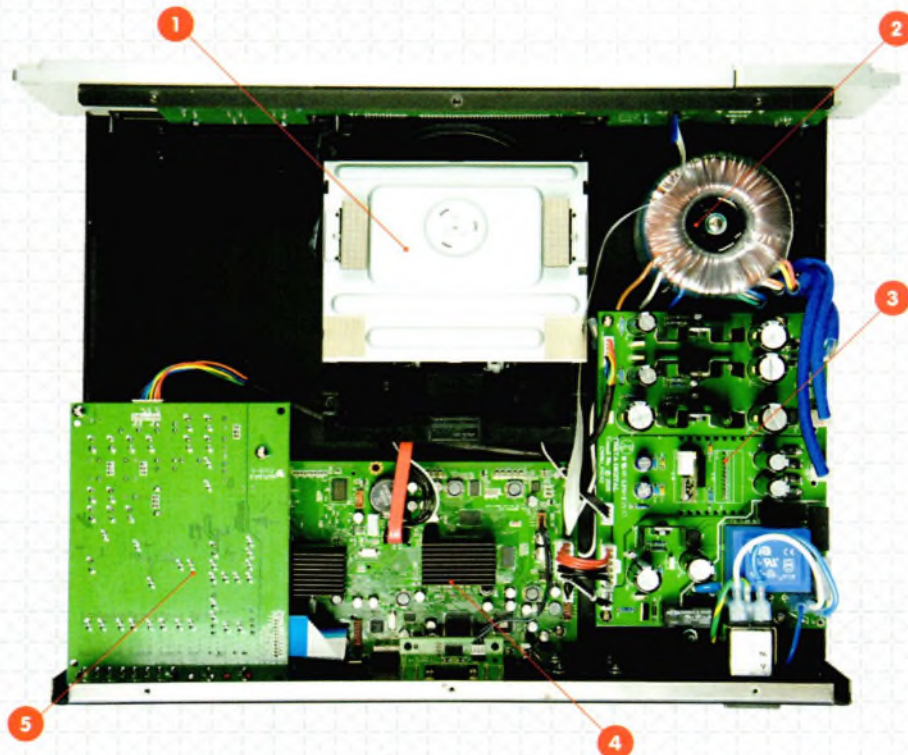
Did you work directly with Oppo on the design?

The answer is yes. They supplied us with the basic kit on which the player is based. Oppo then worked with us, modifying the internal firmware and the decoding software to our specific requirements.

But this was after we approached a number of suppliers in China and elsewhere and asked them if they could supply us with the basis of a player we could enhance and sell. For the most part they said 'yes', but they would only play ball on the basis of an initial order for, say 10,000 units. They also wanted to know how many thousands (!) we would take every month. This is a bit like asking how many Bugatti Veyrons a market like the UK can absorb.

Of course it is not possible to sell this kind of quantity to the audiophile market and we were very pleased that Oppo were able to offer us an extremely competitive and well-developed platform, as well as the fact that they were willing to take a more realistic attitude towards our requirements.

HIDDEN TECH



- 1** BD/DVD/CD mechanism
- 2** Theta custom Toroid transformer
- 3** Theta custom-designed analogue power supply
- 4** Main CPU, video and mechanism control board
- 5** DACs/analogue output board

misinformed) comments in the blogosphere seek to claim that the difference in price is questionable.

Before we leave the question of price and the cost differences between the Oppo and the Theta, it's probably worth mentioning that the Oppo BDP-83 is listed at around £600 for the Region Two (UK) model. According to Theta, the price of its Compli Blu is consistent with other Theta models and given the quantities they reportedly produce this is certainly believable. If so, it makes any charges of profiteering seem wide of the mark.

In the end we remain agnostic about the value for money rating, but if you really want an out and out bargain, then the Oppo is possibly the player to go for. That's if you can find a Region 2 model and there's little or no reason to assume that it will outperform the Theta. What's more, Oppo product is not exactly easy to track down in the UK (as we discovered when researching this review). Also, what strikes us forcibly about the Compli

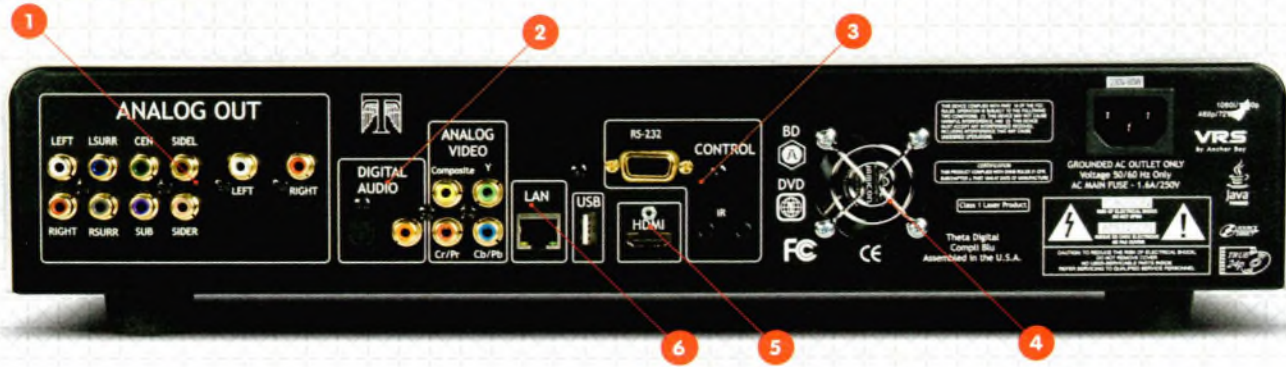
Blu is that, far from being expensive, it seems to be quite sharply priced.

True heavyweight

Any lingering thoughts that the Theta wouldn't stand up to the traditional virtues of the brand would be very wide of the mark. Although the Compli Blu is officially a transport rather than a player, the lines are blurred to say the least, because it does have analogue outputs, including two-channel and multichannel alternatives. The main limitation is that the analogue outputs will not deal with high-resolution audio, DTS Master Audio and Dolby True HD from Blu-ray discs without a processor at the far end of the HDMI link, which is also needed to extract a high-resolution DSD (or Bitstream) data from high-resolution audio discs (SACDs in particular). Note that some discs will downgrade the audio to a slightly homogenised lower level – the instructions and your ears can guide you here.

One thing that will cause real surprise is the speed with which the

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Discrete analogue outputs with additional left and right stereo mix-down
- 2 TOSLINK and Coaxial digital audio outputs
- 3 RS-232 (DB-9) and remote IR control
- 4 Fan and mains inlet
- 5 USB for updating and HDMI
- 6 LAN 'RJ' network connection

Theta identifies what kind of disc has been inserted and then proceeds to play. This fast-tracking discs makes a pleasant change from the general sloth-like behaviour of many other players, including non-universal Blu-ray models.

On the minus side, the loading mechanism isn't the smoothest ever and the player is mechanically rather noisy during play, though you'll be unlucky to hear it in your listening room in practice.

As a plain Red Book CD player, the Compli Blu is a true heavyweight. It is smooth and articulate, with a delicately refined sense of detail and a layered stereo image, as well as certain degree of spaciousness, which works well with some of our usual acoustic, rich-flavoured musical fare. And yet it is suitably raunchy and outgoing with more rock-flavoured material.

You can also use the display dimmer and the pure audio buttons on the remote control to improve

performance further – the pure audio circuits which kill the video circuits being by far the more useful of the two. As a CD player, this level of refinement and musical ability is just what is expected of a brand like Theta.

When used as an HDMI source, the final level of performance is partially dependent on what's available at the far end of the HDMI cable and the concept of audiophile-quality amplification which uses this interface is in its infancy (though it is only fair to say that it is on everyone's radar).

In many ways the prospect of high-resolution audio (stereo and multichannel alike) is more exciting than HD video, but for this test we were limited to the AV amplifiers we had on tap – from Sony, Onkyo and Denon, none of which are from the top level of their type. Nevertheless, they worked well.

The Theta is a refined and capable video player, with excellent screen

HOW IT COMPARES

THE CURRENT Casablanca preamp/processor is now the acknowledged obvious partner for the Compli Blu. It talks to the outside world though HDMI, and is capable of dealing with all the relevant formats, including Dolby True HD and dts Master Audio, as well as accepting uncompressed DSD data from SACD and bitstream from DVD-Audio.

Naturally the compressed (downscale) audio formats available from the Compli Blu are all compatible with the Casablanca and are handled transparently to the user, though you would not achieve the kind of performance that is available from the uncompressed HDMI interface.

Unsurprisingly, as an electronics specialist, Theta would not be drawn on the loudspeakers it thought people should use. But it did point to its existing range of amplifiers as being appropriate matches, but the same arguments would apply to any high-quality range from other sources.

contrast and good colour, making for very subtle images. The audio is handled particularly well and the Theta has enough of what counts under the bonnet to show the potential of DTS Master Audio and Dolby True HD lossless codecs, the senior citizens of the audio world which are designed to bring HD audio into the world of HD video.

Knockout

The Theta seems a little ahead of its time in some ways, as a universal player/transport (call it what you will) that anticipates changes that are already in progress in the world of audio and video. By any standards the Compli Blu is a knockout piece of equipment. It's presence helps to highlight the true potential for the new fledgling generation of HD audio codecs from Dolby and dts. And yet it supports the legacy formats, SACD, CD and even DVD-Audio, with real depth and conviction. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Support for HDMI in audiophile context; rapid disc-type recognition
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No setup status information without display and noisy mechanics
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A very accomplished transport which can be used as a capable standalone player
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Roksan

Warranty Notification

Effective 1st November 2009, all Roksan electronics and turntables supplied via authorised dealers are to be covered by a 5 year parts and labour warranty.* As a gesture to existing customers, this will also be extended to all current owners of K2 products.

In an age where product longevity and second hand resale values are constantly under threat, Roksan wish to reward their loyal customers by allowing their warranty to be transferrable from owner to owner. Thus, the warranty stays with the product from initial date of sale to 5 years old as long as it remains within the country of origin.

* terms available upon request



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A wise step-up

Jimmy Hughes discovers a step-up transformer from MFA that's capable of transforming vinyl performance for dedicated MC pickup users

Boosting delicate low-level signals from a moving coil pickup cartridge is one of the most difficult challenges in audio, because the gain required is huge. The slightest problem with noise or RF is emphasised to an alarming degree.

It gets worse: things like circuit layout are hyper-critical. Slight errors in track routing or grounding, that would pass virtually unnoticed at line level, can produce significant losses of sound quality or noise with a phono stage.

MFA's Moving Coil Step-up transformer is not a complete phono preamp, but the all-important first-stage. It needs to be partnered with a phono-stage featuring RIAA equalisation and a standard type MM input sensitivity/impedance.

Since nearly all modern phono stages include the option of a solid-state MC step-up device, you may wonder what's the point of this MFA device? Aren't you buying something you already have? The simple answer is – yes; but that misses the point.

Being (in effect) a passive device, a step-up transformer produces virtually no noise. It is, therefore, especially effective when used with ultra-low output MC pickups – say,

those with an output voltage of less than 100uV.

While ultra-low output cartridges are usable with solid-state step-up preamps, you're on the borderline so far as noise and gain are concerned. An LP cut at a low volume level may require an increase in gain that reveals excessive preamp hiss.

High class

The MFA is a fairly minimalist device, with a single set of inputs and outputs and a three-position switch that offers a choice of 14, 20, or 26dB gain, plus an impedance switch.

When correctly configured and optimally positioned, the MFA should be completely hum-free. But it is very sensitive to ground loops and stray hum fields. So you need to take care with wiring and placement. Screened interconnects are essential.

High-class Stevens & Billington TX-103 transformers are employed and these are claimed to have a virtually flat response from about 5Hz to beyond 100kHz. Copper wire is used for the coil windings, with the option of silver at a higher cost.

Swiss-made switching

The casework is made from brushed aluminium and the unit has a classy look and feel. High-quality, Swiss-

DETAILS

PRODUCT: MFA Moving Coil Step-up
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Transformer for MC pickups
WEIGHT: 4.5kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 880x216x200mm
FEATURES:
• Impedance switchable from 10kohms to 80kohms, plus open circuit; three separate gain settings
• Switchable grounding for low hum
• Silver-plated ELNA switches
• Individually hand-made – hard-wired throughout
DISTRIBUTOR: MFA
TELEPHONE: 01424858260
WEBSITE: mfaudio.co.uk

made ELNA rotary switches, with silver contacts are employed and internal cabling is via 0.6mm silver-coated, single strand wire with PTFE insulation.

At £1,695, the MFA MC transformer is hardly inexpensive. And that's just for the copper-coil version; for those able to spend more, there's a variant with 99.99 per cent pure silver coils, priced at a cool £2,695!

Solid-state

For those comparing the MFA against solid-state alternatives, the former really comes into its own when partnered with ultra-low output cartridges. With the MFA you will notice much less noise and a stronger cleaner sound.

But even for those with higher output cartridges, the MFA still has tangible benefits. Put simply, through the MFA, the music sounds fuller, cleaner and more solidly focused. Naturally, everything depends on the quality of the solid-state unit you compare the MFA to, but few (if any) will offer such a winning combination of rich, silky smoothness and focused incisive clarity.

Fine detail

The MFA – even the standard copper version – is not cheap. Yet it offers tangible improvements in sound quality and greatly reduced noise – even compared to the best solid-state MC step-up preamplifiers.

Used with MC cartridges having 300uV+ output voltage, the MFA is perhaps something of a luxury – albeit a very worthwhile one. But for those using ultra low-output (100uV or less) cartridges, the MFA transformer is all, but essential.

The sonic benefits of ultra-low output MC cartridges – incredible delicacy and subtle finesse – tend to be lost when a solid-state MC step-up is used. The MFA, however, lets you hear these cartridges at their best.



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Solid, open sound quality; ultra-low noise
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not inexpensive – needs care over placement to avoid hum
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** MFA's step-up transformer produces results from MC pickups that transforms the sound of vinyl
FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL





Binary beauty



US valve stalwart Audio Research has launched its first Class D power amp and as **Jimmy Hughes** reports, its 450 watts prove addictive

Given its penchant for producing large, heavy, behemoths, Audio Research's launching of a Class D power amp is more than slightly surprising. While Pure Class A still sets a benchmark when the highest quality results take precedence, there are many practical drawbacks – excessive heat, large size, high price, massive power consumption – need one go on? The DS450, on the other hand,

features an analogue-based Class D pulse-width modulated switching output stage. High output power, low-running temperature, low-power consumption and excellent sound quality are promised. But can such clever technology really challenge Class A's sonic supremacy?

Up the stakes

Like most power amps, the DS450 is fairly simple. You've a choice of unbalanced/balanced inputs – via

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT: Audio Research DS450
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Class D stereo power amp
WEIGHT: 25kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 480x178x467mm
FEATURES:

- Unbalanced/balanced inputs
- 450W per channel
- Eco-friendly design and power consumption
- Brushed aluminium casework

DISTRIBUTOR: Absolute Sounds
TELEPHONE: 020 8971 3909
WEBSITE: audioresearch.com

RCA/XLR sockets – and a single set of loudspeaker output terminals using Cardas binding posts. Add a mains on/off switch, plus sockets for remote on/off and that's about it.

Audio Research first used pulse-width modulation technology in its DSi200 integrated. But the DS450, ups the stakes, employing twice as many 500-watt MOSFET power devices on each side. As a result, the DS450 delivers around 450W per channel into eight ohms.

A conventional Class A/B amplifier offering this sort of output would run fairly warm. But the Class D DS450, being around 93 per cent efficient, produces hardly any heat. So, you could hide the amplifier away in a cupboard without having to worry about ventilation.

Audio Research's website mentions this and even suggests users might want to leave the amp permanently switched-on for best sound quality. However, the DS450 sounds good from 'cold' and is pretty close to optimum after about 25-30 minutes,

so there's not much need. Idle, the DS450 only consumes 55 watts.

Many previous ARC power amps have been massively big and heavy, producing huge quantities of heat, while drawing sizeable amounts of current from the mains supply. Indeed, the company's reputation was built on no-compromise designs that sacrificed everything for sound quality.

So the eco-friendly DS450 is a totally new departure. It's not just that it's solid-state, rather than tube; Class D pulse-width modulation technology is the real talking point. Given the reputation of ARC's Class A tube designs, the DS450 has a lot to live up to.

While no one's claiming Class D amplifiers are sonically superior to their pure Class A counterparts, the practical and environmental advantages of the former are not to be under-valued. So, listen without prejudice – the DS450 sounds extremely good.

The best sound is produced via the balanced inputs. To utilise these you'll need a preamp with balanced outputs. Audio Research's LS26 offers this option. With balanced you can look forward to a more spacious sound, with increased dynamics. So, investing in a set of XLR balanced cables is mandatory.

Physically, the DS450 is almost totally silent – no transformer buzz, and (obviously) no noise from



TALKING POINT

SOME BELIEVE Class D represents the future and will come to dominate mainstream audio. However, designing and building a Class D amplifier for critical audiophile use is significantly more demanding than conventional linear-type amplifiers.

Class D amplifiers are either digitally controlled or analogue controlled. Audio Research's DS450 opts for the latter and the fact that its circuits operate with zero negative feedback indicates that many tricky technical design issues have been solved.

The DS450 measures very well. The neutral transparency and crisp open detail produced by the DS450 indicates a design that is free from serious non-linearities. Its ability to reveal the sonic signature of partnering ancillary equipment testifies to its excellence.

cooling fans. The amp is quiet electrically, so those with ultra-efficient speakers should hear no residual hiss or hum – even with an ear to the drive units!

Traditional image

In terms of styling, the DS450 is traditional Audio Research, complete with signature grab handles on the front. While the DS450 is not massively heavy, it is fairly big and ungainly, so the handles are useful. The amp is quite solidly made, but we're not talking heavy 'battleship build' here.

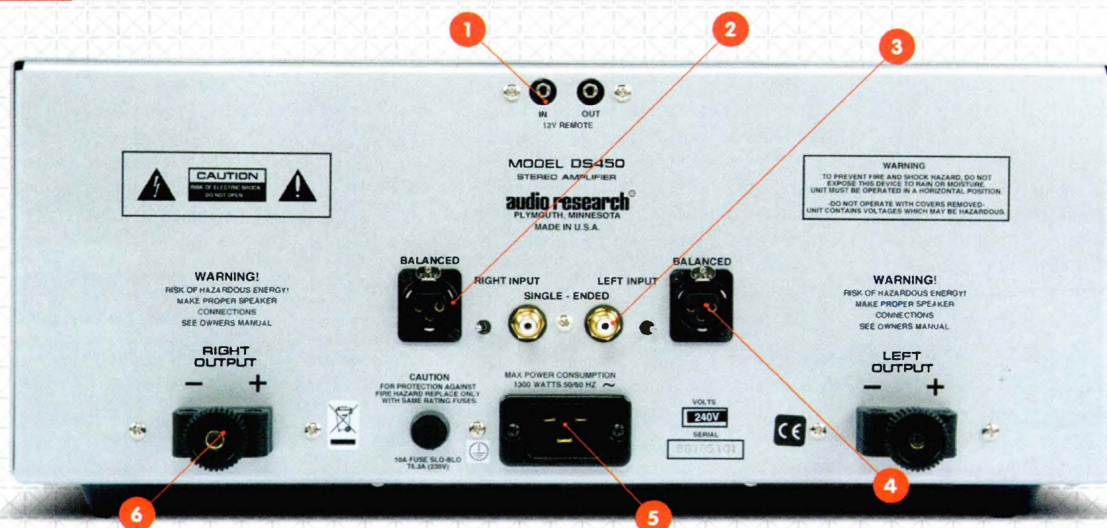
The casework is made from brushed aluminium, with a front panel just under one millimetre

“It's Class D pulse-width modulation technology is the real talking point.”

thick. Being non-magnetic, aluminium should deliver a sweeter, more open sound compared to a steel case, due to reduced eddy current effects. Meanwhile, the lightweight chassis should also reduce the adverse effects of air and structure-borne vibration.

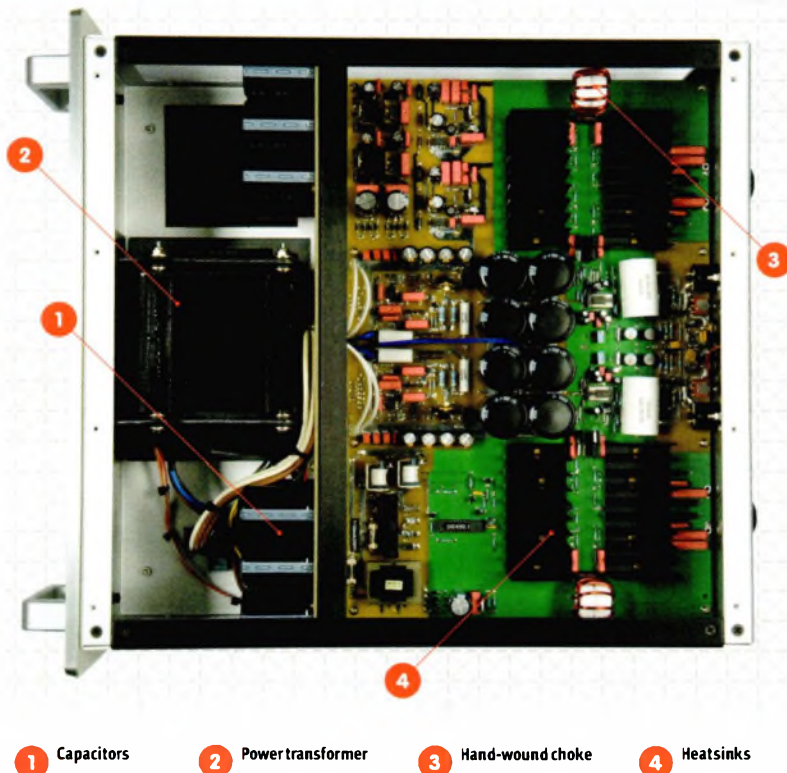
Finish is extremely good and the sculpted Audio Research logo looks cool and classy. The internal layout is extremely neat and the Cardas

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Remote sockets
- 2 Balanced inputs
- 3 Unbalanced inputs
- 4 Balanced/unbalanced switch
- 5 Mains input
- 6 Speaker binding posts

HIDDEN TECH



speaker binding posts are easy to use and give clean and tight connections.

ARC has given the amp a generous power supply with a large power transformer and something like 1239 Joules of energy storage – twice that of the DSi200! Hence the DS450 weighs in around 25kg (55lbs) and is somewhat front-heavy, because the power transformer is forwardly placed.

Manufactured, built, and tested in ARC's Plymouth Minnesota factory – the DS450 is not assembled from parts fabricated elsewhere, or built in the Far East. Many components are custom-made and/or designed in-house, including power transformers, filter chokes and the Litz wiring used internally.

Lucid sound

The DS450 replaced a Musical Fidelity kW-750 power amp driving Impulse H1 loudspeakers. Our preamp was a Musical Fidelity Primo (pure Class A tube) with a Musical Fidelity AMS tube CD player. The kW-750 is a powerful (750 watts) Class A/B bridged design with unbalanced inputs.

The power amp delivers a clear, clean, open sound with tight, firm bass and crisp definition. Used with unbalanced cables (the MF does not offer balanced) the DS450 initially sounds very slightly 'smaller' in scale, compared to the kW-750, even after volume levels are increased.

However, after replacing the MF Primo with an Audio Research LS26



ALTHOUGH the DS450 is an outstanding product in its own right, it will only produce great results when partnered by top-class ancillary equipment.

Consequently, the choice of preamp and CD player is crucial. As mentioned in the text, Audio Research's LS26 makes an excellent partner.

While the DS450 can be used with either balanced or unbalanced interconnects, your chosen preamp must have balanced outputs to enable balanced operation.

With a CD player offering balanced outputs, you'll get a similar improvement compared to the unbalanced option.

The LS22 actually lets you switch between balanced and unbalanced from the remote handset – so you can compare the difference without having to switch cables.

preamp (£5,499) and using balanced interconnect cables, the DS450 sounds bigger and easily matches the big MF for scale and dynamics. Sonically, the LS26 and DS450 seem to go very well together – a very symbiotic partnership.

Although the LS26 is a hybrid tube/transistor design, it has a classic tube sound – open, rich, full, and very holographic, with excellent detail and dynamics. Paradoxically, the all-tube Primo produces a sharper more lucid sound – crisp, tactile and open – and to its credit the DS450 mirrors this accurately.

Partnered by the LS26, the DS450 sounds fuller, smoother, and surprisingly tube-like. The balanced interconnects definitely create a bigger/deeper soundstage, enhancing size, scale and dynamics – qualities one associates with Audio Research components. Bass has impressive power and weight.

While the DS450 isn't a replacement for ARC's classic tube amplifiers, it is without question an impressive-sounding, highly capable amplifier in its own right – powerful, solid and clean, yet fast, energetic, delicate and subtly detailed too.

Ear-pleasing

By any standard, the DS450 sounds very clean and neutral, with tremendous dynamics and ample power. Partnered with an LS26, the DS450 delivers real Audio Research performance in a package that's practical and relatively affordable.

While some Class A/tube diehards may not take the DS450 seriously, because of its Class D output stage, those with an open mind will find much that pleases the ear. If you always fancied Audio Research, but were put off by things like size, weight, heat, and price, the DS450 is the answer to a prayer. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Very neutral transparent sound; lots of power and low running temperature
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: No serious grumbles or complaints
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Audio Research is an iconic brand and the DS450 may well be a watershed product
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





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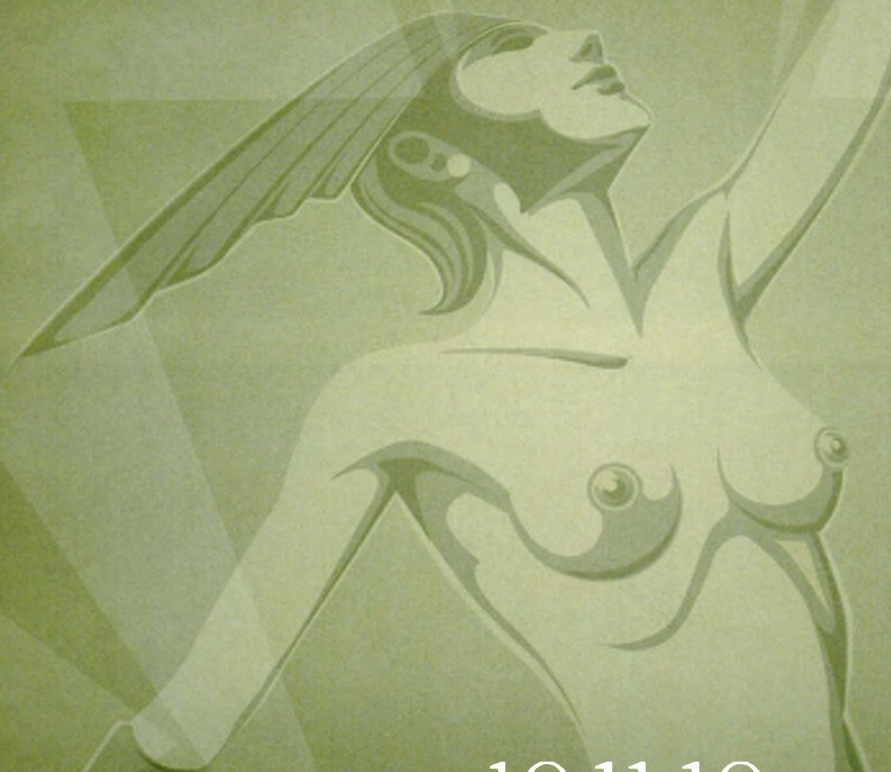
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4 the record

Mark Prendergast continues his quest to find the Holy Grail of recorded music – the unreleased album

part2



The Rolling Stones' *Exile On Main St* is, without a doubt, this year's most celebrated reissue.

It first saw the light of day in 1972, during a time when the band had successfully conquered America with a number of live performances. Feted as the 'greatest and baddest' rock and roll band in the world, the Stones conveyed their unique position in the public consciousness through the rip-roaring intensity of their music.

Insiders argue that they have never sounded better than when they were in concert, ripping their way through songs like *Happy* or *All Down The Line*. And this is probably why Mick Jagger wanted everything they did at the time of the tour recorded for a future double-album. Entitled *Keep Your Motor Running* – it was to be a blistering live set that promised to be (even against such classics as Thin Lizzy's *Live & Dangerous*) the greatest 'live' rock album in history.

Decca commissioned it and arranged for high-end equipment to be flown out to record the Stones shows at Forth Worth and

Houston in Texas and then in Philadelphia. But nothing came of the venture and, even though bootleg versions are available on the internet, the original ten-track album (which also featured Stevie Wonder) never materialised. One problem was that their old friend and former manager, Allen Klein, held the rights to their '60s songs and wouldn't release them without renegotiating costs!

All smiles

From the example of an album that never got past the planning stages, to one that was withdrawn during preproduction. Such was the fate that befell what is arguably the number one unreleased album of all time; The Beach Boys' *Smile*. Its creation involved a young pop genius spending six months working with a slew of weird and wonderful electronic instruments in four different Los Angeles studios, before presenting the fruits of his labour to a shocked Capitol records.

The year was 1966, and the Beach Boys' song *Good Vibrations* had gone straight to number one, as well as being feted as the

greatest single in history. A huge success, it made the suits at the band's record label ecstatic and fuelled a demand for a complete album. It was not to be, however, as legend has it that the band's chief songwriter Brian Wilson, tried to burn the *Smile* master tapes. A rash decision, perhaps, given all the 'hard work' that reportedly went into the album, including Wilson's endless sessions with collaborator Van Dyke Parks.

A filler record, *Smiley Smile*, finally limped out in September 1967, while later Beach Boys albums featured 'bits' of *Smile*. Fortunately, the master tapes survived incineration and have quickly become bootleggers heaven. Even some of the half-million record sleeves that Capitol supposedly destroyed were also rescued.

Smash hits

Not unlike Brian Wilson, Jimi Hendrix was also a complete perfectionist when recording in a studio. He would usually do take after take until he collapsed from exhaustion. After *Electric Ladyland* in 1968, he wanted to make an even better album, build his own studio and use the best Ampex tape recorders and Marshall speakers money could buy. But this wasn't so easy, due to his pretty chaotic lifestyle.

“Legend has it that the Beach Boys chief songwriter Brian Wilson, tried to burn the *Smile* master tapes.”



The Beach Boys during their heyday in the mid-sixties





Hendrix in 1969, the year he began recording *First Rays of the New Rising Sun*

“Atom Heart Mother, with its terrifyingly mundane cover of a cow, rocked the UK charts.”

Due to unforeseen complications over copyright, Jimi Hendrix’s album *Live & Unreleased*, appeared briefly as a five-disc vinyl and three-CD boxset in 1989. The quality of the music throughout is breathtaking, a highlight of which is a version of Bob Dylan’s *Like A Rolling Stone*. But, because it was compiled from an American radio show, the package also included a snippet of Sting singing *Little Wing*. Court injunctions flew and the set was withdrawn. However, as anyone who has heard it can attest, it was impossible not to be impressed by the sheer quality of the content, including 20 rare or unreleased tracks!

In the pink

In early 1971, Pink Floyd arrived at the Abbey Road studios with a number one album under their belt. The unconventional *Atom Heart Mother*, with its orchestral tones and terrifyingly mundane cover of a cow, that had rocked the UK charts.

The success had given Floyd a massive boost and so, for their next project, band members Roger Waters, Richard Wright, David Gilmour and Nick Mason decided to abandon all conventional instrumentation, in favour of pots, pans, glasses, mixing bowls, rubber bands and paper clips, for an album entitled *Music For Household Objects*.

The painstaking work of creating a sound, recording it on tape, making a loop and then recording another sound went back to the 1950s, when composer Karlheinz Stockhausen successfully transferred his electronic miracles to disc in Cologne, Germany (see part one in *HFC* 336, for a reference to Stockhausen).

But the Floyd were restless and put *Household Objects* aside, in order to record the albums *Meddle* and *Dark Side Of The Moon*. During the Winter of 1973, they once again turned their attention to the project, eventually giving up on it altogether.

Fragments of the aborted *Household Objects* have appeared on 1975’s *Wish You Were Here*, especially in the opening bars, where one can distinctly hear the clink of drinking glasses amidst the piercing guitars and synthesiser effects.

Buffalo roaming

Neil Young’s first band, Buffalo Springfield were, like The Byrds, a rowdy bunch who played hard and drank hard. After guitarist Stephen Stills penned their 1966 smash hit *For What It’s Worth*, they lost their bass player Bruce Palmer amid plenty of infighting between themselves and their management. During the recording of their second album *Stampede*, writers Young, Stills and Richie Furay fought tooth and nail for control of the band. Young eventually walked out and *Stampede* never saw the light of day. After Monterey Pop in 1967, the band regrouped and recorded *Buffalo Springfield Again*, rumoured to be a more pleasant studio experience than the story behind its embittered predecessor.

Another 1960’s group, Arthur Lee’s Love, was similarly tested by band squabbling, this one exacerbated more by drug problems than anything else. After Lee forced the band to put a hold on their drug intake, he returned to the studio in early 1968 to begin another Love long-player. Two brilliant songs, full of acoustic bravado and classical flourishes *Your Mind And We Belong Together* and *Laughing Stock*, were recorded at Sunset Sound Recorders, but the rest of the album *Gethsemane* was never released, because Elektra label boss Jac Holzman felt the material just wasn’t good enough! *Next Month in part three of ‘4 the record’, we reflect on the those albums that, having actually been released, are still considered the rarest records in history.* ●

With Neil Young (centre), Buffalo Springfield in the year they recorded two albums, *Stampede* and *Again*



After recording *Dark Side of the Moon* in 1973, Pink Floyd returned to the aborted *Household Objects* project

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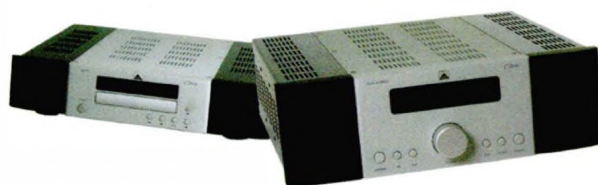
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- Hi-Fi Choice Room Analyzer Review



"The player itself tips the scales at a healthy 9kg and some of the features found on it are, again, astonishing considering the price."

"...I settled down to do some serious listening, still half convinced that there should be another digit in front of the price tag..."

"Superbly built and with an impressive sense of pace and weight, the CD100's performance belies its affordable price tag."

"At £600 (with a decent quality DAC and phonostage built in, along with the Class A option) it offers superlative performance at the price."

- Hi-Fi World CD100 Review

- Hi-Fi World A100D3 Review



Jimmy Hughes uncovered one of hi-fi's best kept secrets - XTZ. Here are just some of the comments from the exceptional Hi-Fi Choice (Issue 333) system review:

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- Hi-Fi Choice

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- Hi-Fi Choice

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90 **Various Artists**
A Complete Introduction to Chess



90 **Crosby, Stills & Nash**
Crosby, Stills & Nash



91 **Wagner**
Tristan Und Isolde

Music reviews

Hi-Fi Choice's pick of the latest high-quality music releases

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



HOT PICK

“The band did not enjoy London’s weather, traffic or anything else.”

“This is not my greatest moment as a producer”. He went on to claim he had been forced to mix the record in a room he did not like and had been frustrated by bassist Mike Mills and guitarist Peter Buck constantly asking to be turned down, which left him with “nothing to build the mix around”.

He is arguably being over-critical of an album that is admittedly more inconsistent than REM’s best work but which, nevertheless, has an evocative if strange vibe that makes it subtly different from anything else in the band’s catalogue.

However, there is no question that the 2010 remix has dramatically

lifted the original sound and given its eerie textures considerably more body, the trademark ringing guitars to the fore where they belong but with the rhythm punching with a weight it lacked in Boyd’s original mixes. It is particularly fascinating to contrast the demos the band recorded in Georgia and the final London studio versions. Not surprisingly, the American rehearsal takes – all recorded ‘live’ in four hours with minimal overdubs – are sunnier and less moody. To be able to hear for the first time how the songs were then transformed – as much by what was going on in the band’s heads in London as by anything that happened in the studio – makes this expanded 25th anniversary edition a particularly rewarding exercise. **NW**
Standout tracks: Feeling Gravity’s Pull; Maps and Legends; Can’t Get There From Here

REM

Fables Of The Reconstruction

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★★★★

Capitol/IRS

2-CDs and 180g vinyl

Recorded in 1985, REM’s third album marked a departure from the post-punk jangle pop of their early forays on *Murmur* and *Reckoning*.

For a start, they temporarily abandoned the comfort zone of their Athens, Georgia base and relocated to London to record with Joe Boyd, the producer credited with more or less inventing English folk-rock via his productions with Fairport Convention, Nick Drake and Richard Thompson.

They brought a new batch of songs with them but, unlike the first two REM albums – which were full of material the band had been playing on stage for months before entering the studio – the new songs were essentially first drafts. But what extraordinarily vivid compositions they were – richer in narrative style than anything before and steeped in the timeless, gothic

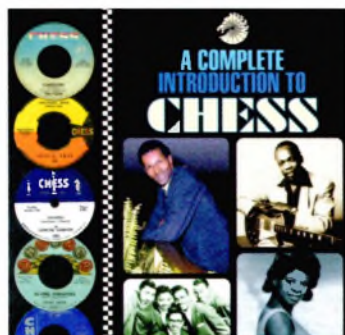
mystery of life in the American south, with an additional twist of characteristically cryptic allusion from lyricist Michael Stipe.

In the event, it seems that most of the band did not enjoy London’s weather, traffic or anything else about their stay and their feeling of disaffection and dislocation resulted in the songs taking on a darker, twisted and, in places, even sinister tone. A second disc offers early demos of all 11 songs that made it on to the final album, plus three additional tracks that failed to make the cut, including *Throw Those Trolls Away*, a legendary song among REM fans which has never made its way on to an official album until now.

At the time, neither band nor producer were entirely satisfied with the album that emerged. Boyd in particular, was disappointed with his work and recently admitted:



Could the relocation to London be the reason why REM look somewhat uncomfortable?



Various Artists

A Complete Introduction To Chess

umusic.com

★★★★★

Universal

4-CD box set

Not sure how many times the Chess catalogue can be remastered, repackaged and resold – but when you're talking about one of the richest and most important archives in 20th century music and one that has influenced everyone from the Rolling Stones to the White Stripes, then the answer is probably infinite. And as overviews go, they don't come much better than this collection of 100 tracks by the likes of Chicago blues pioneers Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, early rock'n'roll sides by Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley and soul diva classics from Etta James and Fontella Bass.

The Chess studio in Chicago may have been cramped and the equipment not necessarily state-of-the-art, but whether it was due to the skill of the engineers or the dynamics of the room, there was always an alchemy to the Chess sound that was unerringly thrilling in its raw, primal energy. Clever remastering emphasises rather than modernises those original qualities. You can hear it on the spooky, metallic zing of the guitars on Koko Taylor's *Wang Dang Doodle* and in the sparkling clarity of *Johnny B Goode*, on which Chuck's guitar really does 'ring like a bell'. **NW**

Standout tracks:

Elmore James: *Dust My Broom*; Muddy Waters: *Hoochie Coochie Man*; Howlin' Wolf: *The Red Rooster* – and at least 50 others!



Richard Strauss

Eine Alpensinfonie

lso.co.uk

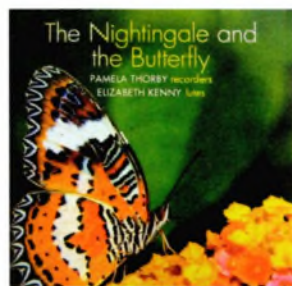
★★★★★

LSO

SACD/CD hybrid

THE LAST PURELY instrumental work that Strauss wrote includes some of his finest, most complex and dramatic material and is structured as a sequence of 22 contiguous passages. It is a peerless depiction of the majesty of a mountain seen at close quarters and the violence of a storm raging near its summit.

This is one of those wonderful Haitink/LSO recordings, where everything seems to gel magically in a way that is not open to any doubts about interpretation, orchestral virtuosity or commitment. The conductor and orchestra perform as one. This is probably the most compelling account of the work I have heard, in an recording that is also technically superb. A great CD and an even better multichannel SACD. **AG**
Standout track: Track 2: Sonnenaufgang (Sunrise)



Pamela Thorby, Elizabeth Kenny

The Nightingale and the Butterfly

linnrecords.com

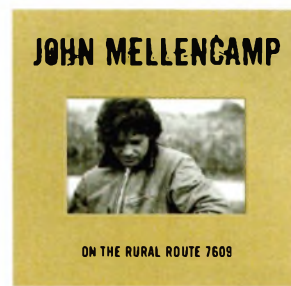
★★★★★

Linn

SACD/CD hybrid 2.0/5.1 channels

PAMELA THORBY has made several recordings for Linn as a recorder soloist and as a past member of the Palladian Ensemble. The music on this disc is performed with a lute accompaniment and the music is typical of the French Baroque, being fluid, highly articulate and with a very graceful, unmistakably vocal quality. The recorders she plays have a vocal compass and the heart-singing melodies seem to arise naturally from the physical makeup of the instrument.

The music is predominantly bright and summery and the recording is an extremely fine one, beautifully articulated, very positive and precise in its voicing, with an exuberant quality in many of the works. **AG**
Standout track: 33 Dieupart Menuet from Suite No 6



John Mellencamp

On The Rural Route 7696

islandrecords.com

★★★★★

Mercury

4-CD deluxe box set

FROM HIS EARLY DAYS as pop idol Johnny Cougar to his later incarnations as modern American folk singer and gritty roots rocker, Mellencamp's career has followed a fascinating path over almost four decades. His arc is tracked here across 54 tracks, presented not as the customary chronological collection of greatest hits, but as a cleverly themed juxtaposition of tracks from different eras to show both the continuity and the development of his muse.

Sonically, it's instructive to track how he has stripped down his approach to the core essentials, from the big bang productions of the 1980s to tracks evocatively recorded on 1940's mono equipment. **NW**
Standout tracks: Jack And Diane; Rain On The Scarecrow

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

Crosby, Stills & Nash Crosby, Stills & Nash rhino.com



★★★★★

Atlantic

180g vinyl

THE FIRST American supergroup of the 1960s never made a better record than *Crosby, Stills & Nash*, a 1969 album which effectively gave

birth to the trend for mellow countryfied rock with a strong acoustic edge. The harmonic blend of all three voices and the consummate songwriting skill, which led to the brilliantly seamless combination of elements of folk, jazz, ethnic and blues produced a timeless winner.

When they appeared at Woodstock they virtually debuted their masterpiece live, the intertwining mesh of acoustic guitars and beautiful vocal harmonics birthing the entire West Coast scene from James Taylor to the Eagles. Today what impresses is the

modal guitar improvisations of Stills and Crosby and the sheer commercial poppiness of Nash, his top tenor finishing off a perfect vocal blend.

Though released on CD three times before, you can feel the incense rise through the grooves of this new vinyl cut, so graphic is the sound, so precise is the stereo imaging. This cut finally does their awesome live reputation the justice it deserves. **MP**
Standout tracks: Judy Blue Eyes; Marrakesh Express; Guinnevere; You Don't Have To Cry; Wooden Ships; Helplessly Hoping; Long Time Gone



Ten Years After

Think About The Times: The Chrysalis Years 1969-72

emirecords.co.uk

★★★★★

EMI

3-CD set

THE TRIPLE SPLIT-SCREEN

scenes of fastest-guitarist-in-the-west Alvin Lee and his band barnstorming their way through *I'm Going Home*, was one of the more epic moments of the original *Woodstock* movie. Yet in the 40 years since, TYA's role as British blues-rock pioneers has been largely neglected by musical historians.

All these years on, it's hard to imagine how TYA were once seen as part of the 'progressive' rock scene, for their no-frills electric blues work-outs now sound decidedly traditional. The remastering does its best to disguise the fact that Lee's weak voice was never the group's strongest selling point. **NW** **Standout tracks:** Love Like A Man; I'd Love To Change The World; You Give Me Loving.



Abba

Voulez-Vous

universalmusic.com

★★★★★

Snapper Music

Deluxe 2-CD Edition

YOU HAVE TO plough through a lot of cheese to get to the meat of this release, but it whacks you over the head when that familiar synth roll at the beginning of *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* brings you back to the source of Madonna's *Hung Up*. Yes, this was 1979 and Abba's sixth studio album (recorded in their customised Polar complex in Stockholm) was an immediate No1 in the UK.

The album's recording added 22 extra musicians to the core of Benny, Bjorn and the incredible voices of Anni-Frida and Agnetha. The bottom-end is obviously well catered for, but there is relief from the relentless disco throb most notably on the complex balladry of *Chiquitita*. It comes with a fascinating DVD of concert and TV footage. **MP**

Standout tracks: Private Sorrow; Voulez-Vous; I Have A Dream



Stackridge

Friendliness

angelair.co.uk

★★★★★

Angel Air

CD

STACKRIDGE produced seven albums in the first half of the seventies and this was their second and arguably most successful effort. They were a light-hearted band, with a pop-friendly sound that occasionally drove into more adventurous terrain. The presence of flautist Mutter Slater gives some tracks a distinctly Jethro Tull feel and there is plenty of variety, with *Amazingly Agnes* a whimsical story in the ska style.

Having spent too much on their eponymous debut, Stackridge opted to self-produce *Friendliness*, with the aid of engineer Vic Gamm, in a small studio near London's Kings Road. Unfortunately, this is a thin-sounding production, that seems compressed and lacking in bass. **JK**

Standout track: Purple Spaceships

HIGH-RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

Afro Celt Sound System

Capture: Chorus

bowers-wilkins.com

★★★★★

Bowers and Wilkins

24-bit/44kHz stereo



FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER the bass-heavy festival favourites formed, they have released this remixed

and remastered compilation of some of their finest crowd-pleasers. Perhaps not as groundbreaking as they appeared in the nineties, they thankfully retain all the power and subtlety of the originals.

This 24-bit/48kHz recording – really complements the rich, dense textures and dynamic chiaroscuro that underpin this music. The diverse character of the multitude of instruments, ranging from uilleann pipes to the bodhran and talking drum and the vigour of the polyrhythmic beats come across persuasively. **MS**

Standout tracks: Mojave; Whirl-Y-Reel #1

The Creole Choir of Cuba

Undiscovered Voices of the Carribean

bowers-wilkins.co.uk

★★★★★

Bowers and Wilkins

24-bit/48kHz stereo



FROM THE OUTSET, this music demonstrates the versatility and power of the human voice:

not only its physical might but also its spiritual and emotional energy, that functions even when the music is being sung in a language that is completely alien to the listener.

This recording works on all levels, not least its ability to showcase the tonal wealth and individuality of the voices. The rendition of the singers' subtle harmonies is superb, as is the portrayal of their metronomically precise phrasing. Listening to this album is an enjoyable and educational experience... even if you are not a chorister and do not speak Creole. **MS** **Standout track:** Edem Chanté: Maroule

BLU-RAY AUDIO

Wagner Tristan Und Isolde opusarte.com



★★★★★

Opus Arte

2-CD box, HD video, dts-HD Master Audio, PCM 2.0 SACD/CD 5.1/2 channel hybrid

Tristan und Isolde is a landmark work in many ways, not least for its epic scale and length, but also

because for many it marks the start of a transition to a new type of music, away from the romantic, to a previously undreamed of synthesis of poetry, drama and the visual. There are other views on this, but the work is complex, multi-faceted and has more interpretive depth and ambiguity than seems possible.

It's a true masterpiece and won't leave you unmoved, despite the startling modernism of the staging here.

This HD Blu-ray includes plenty of extras spread across two discs and was recorded

live in the auditorium that was designed by and built for Wagner himself – Bayreuth. Of course, it is impossible not to acknowledge that Wagner was deeply anti-Semitic, or that his music was appropriated by Adolf Hitler, but there is no doubting the positive qualities of his music, which are very much to the fore here. The dts multichannel sound is good, if not perfect and corresponds to what we know (entirely second hand, regrettably) of the famous Bayreuth acoustic. **AG** **Standout track:** Disc 2, track 1 (Act two)

Sound of the suburbs

Jason Kennedy discovers a 'celebrity' London hi-fi dealer, with a skillful knack for system-matching to every taste and pocket

Certain names stand out among the legion of dealers across the land and Infidelity is definitely one of them. Situated in Kingston Upon Thames, this store is run by Simon Byles, a man who has served time with Naim, Rega and Grahams Hi-Fi and is now the chairman of the British Audio-visual Dealers Association (BADA). He has been running Infidelity for 18 years, a business which does custom installation, home cinema and two channel components from the most established brands in the business. The shop itself is small, but well-stocked and has a single demonstration room that opens out onto a garden when the weather encourages it.

The average system sale at Infidelity is between eight and ten thousand pounds, but you can start a lot lower than that as Simon demonstrated when we went to see him. In fact, Simon was particularly excited about a system comprising a Wadia 170i iPod dock, with a NuForce Icon HDP headphone amp and DAC driving a pair of Grado cans.

Discussing his approach to system-building, Simon made the point that "some systems can be impressive to listen to at first, but can often end up being quite hard work in the average acoustic of the average sitting room, which is less furnished than it's ever been before." Simon added that with such rooms being quite reverberant, they are "... difficult to work in." This is undoubtedly why all of the systems we heard at Infidelity were pretty smooth through the mid and top, even the most affordable one being remarkably calm and controlled.

THE EXPERT



SIMON BYLES, INFIDELITY
KINGSTON-UPON-THAMES, SURREY
020 8943 3530 INFIDELITY.CO.UK

AUDIOANALOGUE.COM
USHERAUDIO.COM, REGA.CO.UK
DYNAVECTOR.COM, LINN.CO.UK
PMC-SPEAKERS.COM,
NAIM-AUDIO.COM
BOWERS-WILKINS.CO.UK

MUSIC USED

RADIOHEAD



IN RAINBOWS CD

TOM WAITS



SWORDFISHTROMBONES VINYL

KEITH JARRETT



THE KÖLN CONCERT WAV FILE

SYSTEM 1 - LA DOLCE VITA

This is just one of a few occasions in which we've heard Usher speakers properly and have to say that it's clearly time we heard more of them.

Simon describes the S-520, the company's entry-level model, as "the best value speakers at that price by a country mile. They will flatter any system." Which coming from a dealer that sells Bowers and Wilkins and Focal is certainly saying something. He is also very keen on Audio Analogue, an enthusiasm he shares with The Music Rooms, the last dealer we visited (HFC 335).

Crescendo is Audio Analogue's entry-level series, but the company considers it to be uncompromised nonetheless. The CD player benefits from a fifth order output filter which is used in its benchmark players and it has a TEAC transport mechanism. The amplifier is a 50-watt design, with five inputs, plus a front-panel socket for an iPod or similar. It has a rather attractive LED display, which indicates volume level and accommodates a must-have accessory – headphones.

Expert matching

The Usher S-520 is beautifully finished for such an affordable speaker. It's available in gloss colours, as well as veneers, but the piano black is stunning. It combines a five-inch polyprop main driver and a one-inch dome tweeter, in a design that works at both high and low levels, according to Simon. He finds that dynamic range suffers in most small speakers when listening quietly, but the S-520 doesn't fall into that trap.

On the end of the Crescendos the result is pretty impressive for the money. There is plenty of bass in the context of a sound that is both musical and detailed. The balance is much smoother than your average affordable bookshelf and you can see why it is never likely to emphasise the shortcomings of the partnering electronics. Not that the Audio Analogues are likely to be delivering anything that might be considered edge or forward.

Easy listening

Radiohead's *In Rainbows*, fills the end of Infidelity's medium-size room quite effectively. The system's smoothness means it's not quite 'close-your-eyes-and-you're-there', but it is remarkably accomplished for such a compact and affordable system. Bass is not hyped for effect, but it extends well; the weighty sounds of Meshell NdegeOcello's bass-playing didn't upset it a jot.

Simon describes this system as being "very friendly, very easy to listen to. It's not harsh or in any way uncomfortably forward and works in modern rooms rather nicely." If you are after an edge-of-your-seat experience, this is probably not for you, but if you want to enjoy a broad range of music with a system that's remarkably refined for its price, you could do a lot worse.

If you could afford to spend a bit more on this system, then Simon recommends combining the Crescendo amplifier with a CD player upgrade, possibly a Naim CD5i – although clearly his confidence in the Usher speaker is very high.

1 AUDIO ANALOGUE
CRESCENDO CD PLAYER
£600

2 AUDIO ANALOGUE
CRESCENDO INTEGRATED
AMP
£600
audioanalogue.com

3 USHER S-520
£350
usheraudio.com

TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE:
£1,550



SYSTEM 2 - BRIT POP

Like us, Simon is a big fan of the PMC GB1i floorstander. He considers it to be a natural successor to the Rega ELA, that was designed during his tenure with the company which also employed a transmission line rather than the more common reflex loading. Simon thinks that it's easy to drive and works well at low levels, but you need a decent amp and source to use with it because, while it doesn't need a lot of power, it's pretty revealing of the incoming signal.

We selected a turntable as a source for this system and Simon chose the Rega P7 – the penultimate model in Rega's extensive range. This has a ceramic platter, as per the top P9, but in this case it's not as heavy a platter. The arm is the RB700, which differs from the P9's RB1000 in its finish and bearings. It's a good-looking turntable with its black or silver aluminium surround and Simon had fitted it with a Dynavector DV-20H moving coil cartridge. The 'H' stands for high-output, which makes this cartridge usefully compatible with moving magnet inputs; useful because the amp selected for this system has an MM phono stage only.

Majik sound

Linn's Majik-I is the only integrated in its range and thanks to a recent power supply upgrade, it represents excellent value according to Simon. "Linn makes a version of this which has an integrated streamer built into it called the DS-I. Our experience suggests that the DS-I is a great little package, but actually neither the amp nor the DS part work as well as two separate packages."

The Majik is a six input design with a front panel minijack input like the Crescendo. It's rated at 100 watts per channel and uses Linn's Chakra switch-mode power supply for maximum efficiency.

Hooking up the turntable and amp to the PMCs with Chord cables, vinyl sounded pretty damn special. This system

has a coherence and solidity that allows you to forget about the mechanics and drift away with the music. There's something about the effortless delivery of detail and timing cues that is addictive.

We played Tom Waits' *Swordfishtrombones*, which might seem a bit of a mouthful but is a great tune with some wonderful lyrics and words that are easy to follow thanks to the clarity of midband on offer. Keb Mo's *Peace... Back by Popular Demand* is a rich and powerful recording that is delivered in full-figured form, thanks to the deep, tight bass afforded by this system. It's also a little revealing of Keb's limited vocal powers, but that's the price you pay for resolution!

Satisfaction

We have heard more lively vinyl systems but Simon clearly prefers a calm and coherent sound over one that might be initially thrilling. This is the sort of insight you get with a good dealer; you get a system that will give you maximum satisfaction in the long term, rather than one whose appeal can wane.

A suggested upgrade option here would be a Naim SuperNait integrated in place of the Majik-I. This would add nearly a thousand pounds to the system price, but you end up with fewer watts. It proves that it's not about the numbers.

1 **REGA P7**
TURNTABLE
£1,298

rega.co.uk

DYNAVECTOR
DV-20H
CARTRIDGE
£449

dynavector.com

2 **LINN MAJIK-I**
£1,595

linn.co.uk

3 **PMC GB1I**
£1,525

pmc-speakers.com

TOTAL SYSTEM
PRICE: £4,867



SYSTEM 3 - RIVALS UNITED

Being a keen Linn and Naim dealer it was not surprising that Simon selected a streamer for one of these systems, but it is interesting that he chose one for the most ambitious one. Linn has abandoned disc players altogether in favour of its DS or digital streaming devices and the Akurate is the second most expensive model it makes. Simon had it hooked up with Ethernet cable to a hard drive in the basement and controlled playback wirelessly with a notebook PC running Linn's Kinsky software.

Partnering the Akurate was Naim's NAC 202 is a six-input preamp that can either be powered by the power amp or run off a separate supply, which in this instance was the venerable HiCap. With the matching 70-watt NAP200 power amp, the pairing represents the first step in Naim's Classic range. The 805 Diamond is the first of Bowers and Wilkins new Diamond 800 series models to roll off the line and, according to Simon, represents a major upgrade over its predecessor (see p50 for the 802D).

Ripping

Simon's experience of well-ripped CDs has been a revelation. Of particular interest is that discs that often sound underwhelming on a CD player are transformed by the DS approach. And if the poise we encountered with this system is anything to go by, then it's not hard to understand its appeal. Why it's so effective is another question.

This system has a presence and precision that puts it in a different league to the more conventional system set-ups we heard. There's an uncanny transparency to it that removes any sense of the electronic in the sound and leaves you with pure music in the room.

KD Lang's *Miss Chatelaine* has a luxuriousness and grip in the bass that is hard to resist – even if you're not a fan. You would have to use a CD player of at least equal price to the Akurate DS to achieve this result and even then it would be a very close thing. Another piece, Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert*, featured one of the least appealing

pianos he ever recorded live, but this system reveals as much without emphasising the brashness that usually accompanies it. Clearly this is a top-notch system from start to finish and what it can do with a WAV file is nothing short of breathtaking.

A revelation

This is not entirely down to the streaming element of the system, of course, the other components here are also top-notch, the speakers in particular image superbly and combine crisp detail with a totally clean presentation and that sense of grip comes from the Naim amplifiers. They are also largely responsible for the strong sense of timing, if previous experience of Naim is anything to go by.

If you could spend a little bit more Simon suggests upgrading the speakers to Bowers and Wilkins 804 Diamonds. If space is an issue, however, then he would go for a preamp upgrade to the Naim NAC 252.

1 LINN AKURATE DS
£3,985
linn.co.uk

2 NAIM NAC 202
PREAMP
£1,700

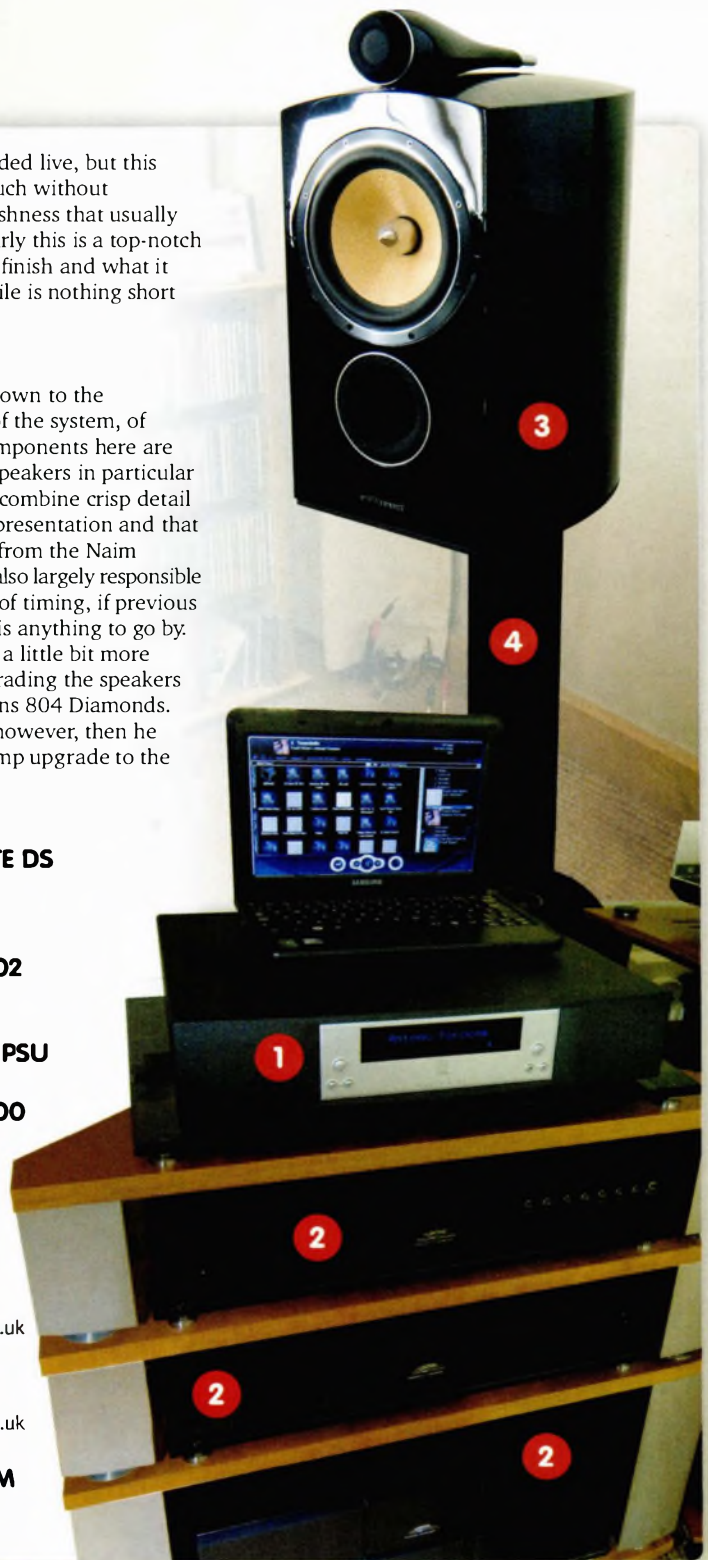
NAIM HICAP PSU
£1,100

NAIM NAP 200
POWER AMP
£1,625
naim-audio.com

3 B&W 805
DIAMOND
£3,750
bowers-wilkins.co.uk

4 B&W STAND
£400
bowers-wilkins.co.uk

TOTAL SYSTEM
PRICE:
£12,560



Infidelity is an odd name for a dealer that clearly holds the concept of fidelity in high esteem. The standard encountered with all three systems was compellingly good and any one of them would do justice to a decent music collection.

Most interesting was the choice of a Linn DS as the source in the top price system. In a store with Linn LP12s and other appealing source components on demo, this shows a distinctly forward-looking approach and one that will keep Infidelity's

customers in touch with the important developments in audio technology without forgetting the key legacy formats. However you store your 'records' this is one dealer that will be able to make the most of them for your budget. ●

HØRNING

by Tommy Hørning



Sati 520B Ultimate Amplifier



Eufrodite and Aristoteles Loudspeakers

Ending the endless search...

Discerning music lovers and critical reviewers the world over have praised the uniquely natural, effortless and tangible musical illusion created by Hørning speakers with just a few watts of amplifier power.

High efficiency is a major priority in a Hørning loudspeaker, for it allows us to fully exploit the superior sound quality of today's low-powered, single-ended valve amplification.

They are three-way but musically coherent, true full-range emotional communicators. The Aristoteles uses two pairs, the Eufrodite four pairs, of isobarically loaded B" woofers per cabinet for a fast, tight bass. Definitely no need for subwoofers.

Uncanny natural musical reproduction is the result of 25 years of intensive research into the acoustic properties of horn speakers. This groundbreaking research led to the creation of transducers with unique, true to life dynamics, unsurpassed tonality and 3D soundstaging, allowing the music to live and breathe in your room like never before.

Tommy Hørning with his world patented H.D.A.Q.C.S. (Hørning Double Asymmetric Quarter Wave Cabinet enclosure System), where every driver has its own, tailor-made, rear-loading chamber that ultimately feeds in to a shared hyperbolic horn output with port, has rewritten the rules. Unnatural colourations of any description become a thing of the past...He also believes in stiff drivers with big magnets and short throws. In other words, speed. With speed comes transparency and immediacy. Any type of music is reproduced faithfully at lower or higher volumes with both micro and macro dynamic contrasts intact. And all this comes with no drawbacks or penalties whatsoever.

Hørning loudspeakers really have to be heard to be believed!

A Turntable, a Phonostage, an Integrated Amplifier, a CD Transport & DAC, designed to compete with the world's best, complete the range, which is as unique as it is rare in the way it brings music to life.

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YOUR EXPERTS



PAUL MESSENGER
EXPERTISE: LOUDSPEAKERS

HAVING WORKED on both sides of the audio industry for over 30 years, as loudspeaker designer and reviewer, Paul is ideally placed to offer thorough, in-depth analysis of every speaker reviewed, as well as cutting-edge developments in the field.



JIMMY HUGHES
EXPERTISE: SYSTEM OPTIMISATION

AS EVERY audiophile knows, there's so much more to getting a system to sing than merely throwing components together. Jimmy Hughes has spent 40 years tweaking and optimising systems, as well as voraciously collecting records.



RICHARD BLACK
EXPERTISE: TECHNOLOGY

WRITING EXCLUSIVELY for HFC, Richard brings his experience as a successful musician and recording engineer to bear in our rigorous *Blind-Listening Group Test*. As our technical consultant, Richard is the authority on HFC's test and measurement.



JON MARKS
EXPERTISE: DIY AND VINTAGE KIT

FORMER EDITOR of *Hi-Fi World* magazine, Jon has a wealth of reviewing experience, as well as a passion for high-end vintage audio gear. Handy with a soldering iron, Jon also enjoys bringing classics back to life and pitting them against modern gear.



ALVIN GOLD
EXPERTISE: SEASONED REVIEWER

HAVING WRITTEN for a huge range of magazines, both internationally and in Britain, Alvin has a very full 30 years of reviewing under his belt. A guru of all component types, he's now extending his expertise by building PCs for audio too.



JASON KENNEDY
EXPERTISE: TURNTABLES

ANOTHER EDITOR, Jason opted to become a freelance contributor when he relinquished the helm of HFC after 17 years on the magazine. A hi-fi addict since his twenties, Jason fell for the beauty of vinyl and has never looked back.

ASK US A QUESTION TODAY!

Our experts are on hand to answer your questions. Whether you're looking for future-proof upgrades, advice or help with your current set-up, our two-channel Einsteins have all the necessary expertise and several hundred years of combined audio knowledge to slake your thirst and support your passion for perfect sound. Email your questions now: hifichoice@futurenet.com

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Q After reading Malcolm Steward's articles on computer audio, I wondered if he has considered AIFF as a file format, as it supports metadata and 16-bit PCM (the same as WAV). I have ripped CDs in iTunes using AIFF with very good results.

Geoffrey Fearn, via email

A Malcolm replies: I have not tried AIFF, as I neither like nor trust proprietary formats. What is more, AIFF only runs on Apple computers, which I do not use. My preferred format is FLAC, which is open format, hardware

agnostic and for which there is reassuringly widespread support.

I have heard good things about XLD from Mac-using friends. Apparently, it also integrates well with the iTunes music database, which some people find important.



Transport and DAC, or stick with new CD player?

Q I have an Arcam DiVA CD192 CD player, a Naim NAC 202 preamp and NAP 200 power amp going through a pair of Bowers and Wilkins CM7 floorstanding speakers. I wish to upgrade the CD player and wondered which route I should take?

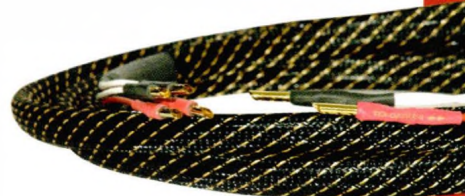
Do I add a Naim DAC to the Arcam and use the CD192 as a transport, or would a Naim CD X2 give far superior quality?

If I were to buy the DAC, I suppose I could replace the Arcam at a later date with, perhaps, a Cyrus CD Xt ES. Would that work well with the Naim DAC? Many thanks for any advice you can offer me.

David Nevitt, via email

A Given the fact that the Arcam's laser will soon be entering its twilight years (assuming you've used it regularly since purchase), we think the long-term reliability of your system would benefit from a CDX2 rather than a DAC to partner the CD192. The same holds true for system synergy, where you could use Naim's favoured DIN-terminated interconnects between player and pre, and upgrading, where you have a number of external power

supplies to choose from, before perhaps eventually opting for Naim's own DAC some way down the line.



Got my back to the wall, but need floorstanders

Q I'm hoping you can point me towards an appropriate way forward with my set-up.

At the moment my system has Meridian electronics: my G02 pre and G57 power amp are fronted by a G08 CD player. The cabling consists of a TCI Super Constrictor power block plus mains cables, TCI Cobra XLR interconnects and TCI King Cobra biwire (pictured above) going to a pair of Celestion C3 floorstanders with a set of Tannoy ST50 super tweeters on top. My room is 11ft by 14ft.

I listen to various types of music, but mainly heavy rock and electronic stuff. I can't help thinking that the C3s are holding the system back a tad, but any replacement would have to work well



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Analogue

Acos Lustre, excellent Japanese tonearm
Ariston RD80 Superior, Mission 774, vgc
Benz Micro Glider, excellent low hours
Cardas Neutral Reference Tonearm Cable, weeks old
Clearaudio Unify tonearm, brand new
Decent Audio Wallshelf, used
Garrard 301, good cosmetics, full working order
Linn LP12, Bask LVX, boxed
Linn LP12, Ekos in black ash
Linn LP12 Rosewood, Cirkus, Lingo, Ittok, boxed
Linn Ekos 2, excellent with T cable
Linn Unto, excellent condition
Michell Hydraulic Reference, SME 3009, new lid
Michell Electronic Reference (no arm, SME cul)
Monitor Audio MA500 Direct Drive, excellent!
NAD 533 Turntable (Planar 2), RB250, Goldring Elektra
Project RPM 10, speedbox, nr mint boxed
Project X Pack, very low hours, nr mint boxed
Rega P3, in green
Rega P1, ex demo
Rega Planar 2 c/w RB250 and Super Bias, excellent
Rega RB250 with stubmod
Roksan Reference PSU in black, ex demo
Roksan TMS1 & DSU superb boxed, recent TM service
Roksan Radius 5, Nima arm, acrylic finish ex demo
SME 3009/2, excellent
Systemdek IIX, c/w Systemdek arm, vgc
Thorens TD125, excellent original box/packing
Tom Evans The Groove, excellent
VPI Super Scoutmaster, SDS, Clamps, Feet etc superb
Wilson Benesch Act 1 Tonearm, nr mint superb

Radio/Recorders

Arcam FMJ26DAB
Nakamichi ZX1000L, just serviced, vgc
Quad FM3, vgc
Quad FM4, vgc
Yamaha KX580 nr mint

Digital

Arcam CD17, nr mint boxed
Arcam CD33T, as new boxed
Audio Research CD3MK2
Cambridge Audio 640v2, excellent boxed
Consonance CD2 2 24bit, excellent boxed
Copland CD822, excellent boxed
Cyrus PSXR, excellent smooth black boxed
Cyrus CD6SE, excellent silver boxed
Cyrus CDXTSE, nr mint in brushed black, boxed
Cyrus DACX, excellent brushed black boxed
Esoteric DV60, mint boxed, SAVE £2000!
Linn Numenik, vgc
Marantz 8003, excellent boxed, Due in
Marantz SA15, excellent boxed
Marantz CD17Ki, excellent boxed
Marantz CD12/DA12 Due in
Micromega CD10, nr mint boxed new model
Micromega CD30, nr mint boxed new model
Naim CD5, excellent boxed
Naim CD3, excellent
Naim CDS2/CDPS, nr mint boxed
Naim CDX2, excellent boxed with remote
Pathos Digit, superb boxed
PS Audio Digitalink DAC, as new ex demo
Rega Apollo, ex demo
Rotel RCD02, excellent with remote
Sugden CDMaster Biju CD player, as new boxed
Tag McLaren CD20R, excellent boxed
TEAC PD600, mint boxed due in
TEAC P700/D700 excellent boxed 1/2 size pair
Vincent CD-S6, excellent boxed, due in

AV/Accessories/Cables

Chord Epic Speaker cables, factory terminated pair
Isotek and LAT extension blocks
Naim XPS2, nr mint boxed later version
Naim Supercap in Olive, new Burnby
Onkyo 507, 607 & 807, as new ex demo boxed

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149 Audio Innovations S700 499
279 Arcam A28, nr mint boxed in black 499
399 Audio Synthesis Flame T, excellent boxed remote 499
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999 Audiolab 8000R, UK version 299
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1299 Audio Zone Amp 2 Monoblocks 799
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599 Bryston B60R integrated, nr mint boxed 999
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249 CR Developments Calypso, excellent boxed 699
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999 Krell Evolution 600 Monoblocks 17499
499 Levinson No27 Power amp, vgc 1499
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119 Melody 2A3 Integrated, ex demo Call
Call Melody 300b integrated, excellent boxed 799
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299 NAIM NAP250.2, excellent boxed 1749
1099 NAIM NAC82, napsc, excellent boxed 899
2749 NAIM NACS2, excellent boxed 1999
799 NAIM NAC202, excellent boxed 799
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99 Roksan Kandy K2 integrated ex demo 599
179 Rotel RCD6 & RB06 Pre/power mint boxed 399
49 Tag McLaren 60rv, nr mint boxed 399
Vincent SA31 Hybrid Preamp, excellent boxed 299

Loudspeakers

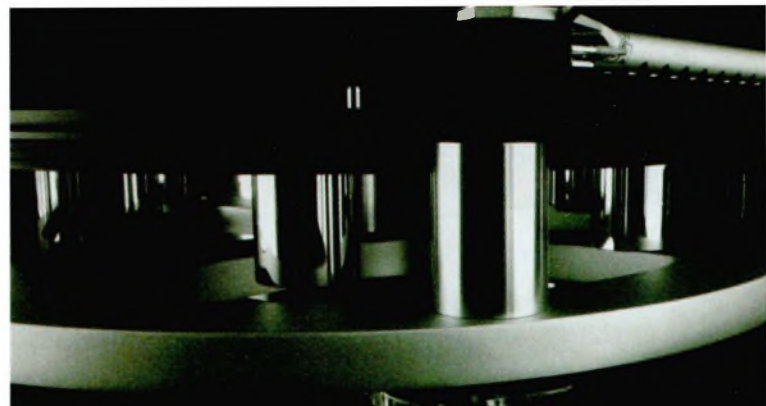
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1499 Castle Conway 3, excellent boxed 299
179 Definitive Technology Mythos 2, pair, bargain! 399
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549 Kef Reference 103 3, with Kube Call
249 Kudos C10, early bi-wire pair in Rosenut 1299
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499 Monitor Audio Platinum 300, excellent crated 3499
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Call Wharfedale Active Diamond 7.1s - rare boxed! 119

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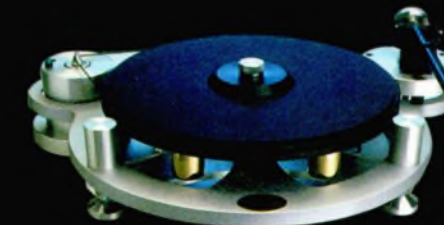
BRITISH DESIGN AND
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After 35 years, Michell is still a family run business
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producing quality turntables and accessories



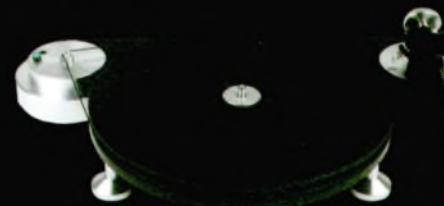
Orbe SE

The Michell flagship for music lovers
who are not prepared to compromise



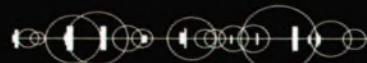
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over many years of development to
its current level of performance.



TecnoDec

Entry level turntable incorporating
features from the classic Gyro



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J A Michell Engineering Ltd
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Telephone: 020-8953 0771
Fax: 020-8207 4688
michell-engineering.co.uk

Tivoli Networks+

PRICE: £495 CONTACT: 01279 501111
WEBSITE: TIVOLIAUDIO.COM

TIVOLI MADE ITS NAME with the FM-only table radio that started the genre's revival and has always traded on sound quality first and foremost. This unit brings the brand firmly into the present, with both DAB and internet radio, plus the ability to stream music from a computer and a USB socket for playing files from a portable music player or memory stick. It's mono, but a second loudspeaker can be added for stereo and, of course, a stereo headphone output is available. Finish is to a good standard, with real wood veneer available in various options. A credit-card remote control is supplied, which we would certainly recommend in preference to the controls on the unit, most of which are on the back. We got used to it, but it's a bit counterintuitive. Tivoli is keen to point out that the firmware is upgradeable, which could be useful if internet radio standards evolve.

There's no doubting the quality of the sound from this unit, which is clear and full-bodied. All the same, it's not entirely devoid of coloration and we found it rather more successful with smooth-sounding music than with percussion-rich pieces, which tend to trigger its slight propensity to over-fulness in the upper bass, resulting in a rather fatiguing sound. Voice, both spoken and sung, is clear and communicative and this would probably be our radio of choice for anyone who listens to more speech than music radio. We also felt a couple of times that just a little more gain would be useful – compressed pop radio plays plenty loud, but classical could do with a notch or two more volume. Where it clearly wins is in FM reception, which is a significant cut above the rest.

VERDICT FM RECEPTION IS EXCELLENT and the sound is good – but it's not the best. At this price we'd like a more neutral balance.



Vita Audio R1 MkII

PRICE: £160 CONTACT: 01702 601410
WEBSITE: VITAAUDIO.COM

LIKE MONITOR AUDIO'S Airstream, the Vita Audio radios originate from a loudspeaker manufacturer, though in this case Ruark set up a whole new brand for the purpose. It's not been around many years but has rapidly built up a fine reputation and we've certainly enjoyed testing the various Vita products that have come our way.

This new version of the original R1 radio has more power, the option of adding a battery pack for portability, a larger display and DAB+ compatibility, so that when DAB+ broadcasts start it will be ready. It also has tone and loudness controls, which we found a mixed blessing. What it doesn't have is internet access of any kind, which doubtless explains (in part, at least) its lower price compared with the others here. It is available in high-gloss black or white, as well as the wood finish we received.

Overall, we found this the most sonically successful of the bunch. The FM reception is not quite as good as that of the Tivoli, but it's not bad (and the aerial is detachable, meaning that one could pretty easily fit a better one), and via DAB or the line input the sound seems to us to have just the right combination of punch, extension and midrange neutrality. There's enough gain and power on tap to play satisfyingly loud in a medium-size room, but the crucial thing in the R1's favour is that at any level the sound has detail and a really plausible wholesomeness that just seems to escape many such products. Engaging and very enjoyable. ●

VERDICT LIMITED TO DAB/FM and line inputs, but the sound really is very satisfying with better neutrality and detail than most can manage.



Obviously no true audiophile is ever going to use a table radio like these as a primary system, but they can serve a very satisfying purpose in bedroom, kitchen or workroom. And our experience shows

clearly that there is much to be gained by being picky, as the best of the breed can give sound verging on real hi-fi, certainly much better than most computer speakers, for instance.

Care with positioning can pay large and instant dividends. Your mileage may vary, but we found that all of these sound more detailed if sited clear of obstructions, or near the edge of a shelf.

...over **75 brands** ...with more being added every week!*

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FOR SALE

UNISON RESEARCH S6 valve amp (not working) open to offers. Buyer collects. **01482853091 (Hull).**

RUSS ANDREWS Kimber Crystal CU interconnect one metre (£150) £70. **07891 533084 (Swansea).**

PRO-JECT record deck and Pro-Ject phono amp, Music Fidelity XA-1 preamp, Arcam Alpha 9 CD player, Arcam P60 power amp, Rogers Studio 5 speakers. Includes all power cords (Russ Andrews), cables, speaker stands and equipment stand (£3,700) £1,600 ONO. **+00353 87 637 6623 (Co Wicklow).**

MICHELL TECNO black tonearm, as new, 15 hours' use, upgraded, (£445) £375, no offers. **07736 773830 (Yorkshire).**

ISOTEKELITE 1.5 metre mains cables x 4, cost £300. Open to any sensible offer. **07891 533084 (Swansea).**

ARCAM FMJA18 six-months old, £350 ONO, Pro-Ject 1.9 Classic (cherry) turntable, MC35FL cartridge,

£300 ONO, Trichord Dino, Dino and phono, PSY, £300 ONO. **07896 410722 or 115 9176776 (Nottingham).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY KW550 amp, perfect, boxed, buyer collects, £2,500 ono. Arcam CD player 192, perfect, boxed, £350 ONO. Quad CDP99 (MK I) £400 ono. **01273 305176 (Brighton).**

ARCAM FMJ DV29 high-end DVD audio/video player, silver, good condition, in original box with manual, £350 collected. Price includes 10 DVDs. **01452 614515 (Gloucestershire).**

WANTED: Cambridge CD3 service manual. **brian.hill25@btopenworld.com 01228 792344 (Cumbria).**

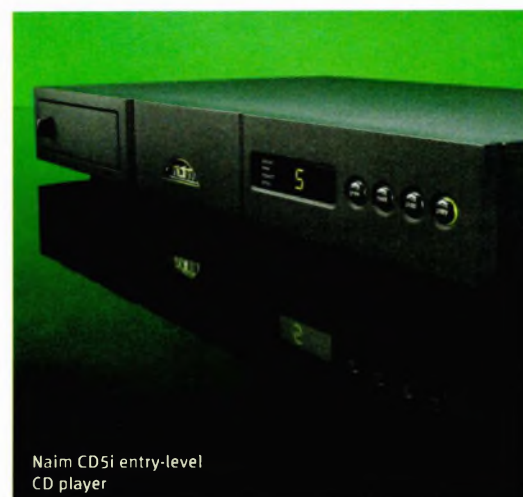
CHORD ODYSSEY 2 cables 4-metre pair, terminated (£214) £120. Black Rhodium illusion DCT interconnect 1metre (£250) £150. Audio Note Lexus interconnect 1 metre (£275) £150. **01243 528010 (West Sussex).**

Musical Fidelity Elektra E100 Amp, 70 watts per

channel, digital and phono inputs, E600 CD player, E500 tuner, all in piano black finish, Celestion CS6 speakers, all in excellent condition with manuals and remotes, £650. Marantz 6003 CD player, only two months old, as new, £200. **02380 224003 (Southampton).**

ROTEL RA-06 AMP /RCD-06 CD/Epos M5 speakers (£1200) £550. All boxed in pristine condition. Includes Chord Crimson interconnect and Chord Silverscreen speaker cable, Marantz CD6002 CD player, award winner in silver, boxed in pristine condition (£280) £120, Kimber Classic Powercords 1m, boxed as new. Under half price! £40 each, two available. Both for £70. **leet2009@hotmail.co.uk or 01384 412234 (West Midlands).**

MARANTZ SA-11 S2 SACD player, excellent condition, £1,900 ono. Shunyata Hydra 2 £275, Shunyata power



Naim CD5i entry-level CD player

cables £100 each. **07810 434589 (Surrey).**

THORENS TD160 BC with SME 3009 fixed head Grado cartridge, Pro-Ject phono amp, Standesign two tier (glass/ metal) stand. A1 condition. £400 ono. **mike222@blueyonder.co.uk or 01562 638119 (Worcestershire).**

TRANSPARENT MUSIC wave plus bi-wire 15-foot pair £200 ono, Mandrake silver wire interconnect phono, 1-metre pair £100, Roksan Kandy AM/FM tuner KT-1 mint, unboxed £100 ono. **020 8368 4228 or petersmyth2@googlemail.com (Barnet).**

MISSION M33 in beech finish with NAD C352, 80 watts per channel integrated amplifier. Unmarked in boxes with remote and manuals. £185. **01908 376966 (Milton Keynes).**

PIONEER FD-1009 301 disc CD multiplayer. In excellent condition, with remote control and handbook. £50 ono. **vs006i9281@blueyonder.co.uk or 01622 208476 (Maidstone).**

KIMBER D-60 digital cable 1-metre only, five hours' use £295. Kimber KCAG -14db CD interconnect 0.5metres £295. (£560 the pair) **01902 884694 (Dudley).**

SONY CD Player SCD 555 ES (£1,000) £375. Sony DAB/FM/AM tuner D777 ES (£500) £175, matching Champagne Gold finish. Can dem. **02476 711668 (Coventry).**

WANTED: Top quality Hi-fi separates and complete systems, Naim, Linn, Cyrus, Meridian, Arcam etc, fast, friendly response and willing to travel/pay cash.

781 5892458 (Colchester).

NAIM CD5i-2 CD player £500, Naim Nait 5i-2 amp £400, Monitor Audio RS6 (cherry) speakers £300 all as new and boxed. Naim/Kudos upgrade forces sale. **07791 339784 or gary.pritchett@ntlworld.com or (Nottingham).**

ROBERTS MP23 CD/radio sound system unit, under warranty, boxed, only four months old. (£250) £145. **01304 360230 (Kent).**

DUNLOP SYSTEMDEK transcription turntable (the original one) finished in charcoal nextel, hinged lid, new RB350 arm and Goldring 1042 cartridge. Excellent condition. **07771 508444 (day) or 01205 722000 (Lincs).**

OPERA SECONDA loudspeakers finished in cherry (£1,800) £750, Unison Research Valve/Mosfet Secondo 120 watts integrated amplifier (£1,800) £750, Unico valve, FM/RDS/AM tuner, (£1,100) £450. All mint. **023 80 738935 (Southampton).**

NAD 315 B66 amp, NAD 515 B66 CD player, Q Acoustics 1020 speakers, as new, A1 condition, all boxed, can be demonstrated, £250 ono. **01255 553774 or email:**

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!

peterp.webb@btopenworld.com (Essex).

GRADO SR 60

headphones, boxed, mint. **07891 533084 (Swansea).**

MILLER AND KRIESEL

V.125 powered subwoofer, 12-inch driver, mint condition, £195. NAD preamp £15. **01722 334694 or 07979 705644 (West Yorkshire).**

KIMBER KABLE Select KS

1011 1metre interconnect, WBT-0110cu, termination, (£765) £475 ovno. **01656 653976 (Mid Glamorgan).**

Mana Base table wall shelf,

3 levels, £400. Tom Evans Micro Groove Lithos, £250. Foundation Audio 18-inch four column stands (20kg). **020 8898 3383 (Hounslow).**

ATC 20-2 active

loudspeakers, under warranty, with boxes, £1,995. HNE granit stands polished with leather, £375. **01766 781211 (Gwynedd).**

REGA R5 loudspeakers,

good condition, £440. Ixos bi-wire cable, 2X 3m, £25. Two Cambridge P. 500 power amps, 55 watts, £150. **0161 9020719 (Manchester).**

LINN KAN speakers,

immaculate condition, black four column stands, spiked, £195. **07737 471547 (South Yorkshire).**

MERIDIAN 504 tuner, no

marks, no box, £300. **07956 236764 or 0191 4171669** after 6pm **(Tyne & Wear).**

MORDAUNT-SHORT

Performance 6LE, mint condition, (£4,000) £2,500 ovno. **07866 727448 (Southend-on-Sea).**

MARANTZ amplifier PM

6002, Marantz CD 6002, Monitor Audio RSI speakers with stands and cables, all boxed as new, £550. **01943 467859 (West Yorkshire).**

TRICHORD DIABLO with

NCPSU phono stage £600, Audio Synthesis DAX Decade £700 (stored for four years), Audio Alchemy DDS3 with Trichord clock modification £400. **0118 9760756 (Berkshire).**

TRANSPARENT AUDIO

Reference phono to phono interconnect (1m) £850, Mana 4-tier rack £600. **0118 9761257 (Berkshire).**

CHORD DAC64 Mk II,

two years old, unmarked condition, dual outputs, (£2,300) £1,095. **07788 504037 (Kent).**

KEFRDM2 speakers

(cherry), original boxes £395. MFX10D Tube Buffer £85. Ixos Gamma XHA806 RCA 0.5m pair £20. QED Qorum, Reference speaker cable (terminated) 2x4m £35. **01684 290581 (West Midlands).**

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO

DAC Magic boxed, mint £150. Arcam FMJ CD23, original ring DAC, light use, £150. **07889 951316 or allan.robbs@tiscali.co.uk (Hampshire).**

CARLSSON 0A-50.3 £300,

Proton power amp £250. Also supra cables. **07545 313889 (London).**

AUDIO RESEARCH LS-1

preamp, mint condition £495. Meridian M1 active speakers, immaculate condition £495. **02380 224003 (Southampton).**

REGA SATURN CD player,

boxed. (£1,250) £500. **07899 721899 (London).**

MARTIN LOGAN Vantage

hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers (dark cherry), two years old, A1 condition; (£5,000+) £2,500. **Jackcrawley@btinternet.com (West Yorkshire).**

SILVER MAINS power

cable, voodoo cables. With silver-plated Maringo and mains plug. (£250) £85. **07981 025698 (Bristol).**

THIEL CS 2.4 loudspeakers,

14 months old (natural cherry). Easy to position. www.thiel.com for the outstanding reviews, (£3,900) £2,100. **01296 437314 or jez@btinternet.com (Bucks).**

RUSS ANDREWS Torlyte

equipment shelf under half price, £45. **01794 514916 (Hants).**

TEAC Z5000 cassette

deck (£800) £150. Mission 700L speakers £35. Pioneer PL115D £40. Technics STG55 AL tuner £55. KEF Coda 3 speakers £35. Marantz 50SE CD £50. **01708 457691 (Essex).**

MONITOR AUDIO PL300

speakers (Ebony finish), brand new, unused, (£6,000) £3,500. **079201 24888 (London).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY A5

CD player (VS), boxed, manual, remote. Valve output stage £650. **07812935242 (Surrey).**

ESOTERIC X03SE CD player

(one-year warranty) £3,500, ATC SIA-2-150 amp (five-year warranty) £1,500, ATC SCM 40 speakers (five-year warranty) £1,500, all mint condition, boxed, manuals, remotes. **07970 012450 (Hants).**

KIMBER D-60 digital

interconnect 0.5 metre, hyper-puresilver, Ultraplate phonos, boxed as new in hardcase, (£240) £120 ono, Musical Fidelity KWDM-25 DAC, mint, boxed, valve and solid-state Class A output S (£2,000) £600 ono, ATC SCM50 ASL active towers in walnut, Class A amps, boxes etc. (£9,500) £5,500. **07876 705266 (Huddersfield).**

MARANTZ MA500 mono

blocks x4, 380 watts (superb sound), mint condition. Boxed with manuals £650, Kingsound Queens electro static speakers (six months old). (£2,000) £950. **02380 224003 (Southampton).**

KEFRDM2 speakers (cherry,

excellent, original boxes) £395, MFX10D tube buffer £85, Ixos Gamma XHA806 RCA 0.5 metre pair £20, QED Qorum Reference speaker cable (terminated) 2x 4 metres £35. **01684 290581 (West Midlands).**

LIVING VOICE OBX-R

speakers (Yew finish). Outboard crossovers, Townshend Audio Isolda DCT 4x 1 metre cable and original packaging £2,200. **01737 246968 or deakin04@btinternet.com (Surrey).**

RUSS ANDREWS

silencers, 3x £35 each, or £90 for all three, two QED Qunex1 interconnect, one metre cables £17 each or £30 for two. **01902 884694 (Wolverhampton).**

AUDION SILVERNIGHT

Integrated pureClass A, £725 ono, Michell Gyro SE, Tecno Arm mounting, £725 ono. **07896 206056 (Sussex).**

PROAC TABLETTE 2000

shielded speaker (maple), excellent condition (£690) £320, Atacama sand-filled speaker stands. (£120) £40. **07966 347787 (Surrey).**

SUGDEN MASTERCLASS

integrated, pure Class A, mint and boxed £3,870) £1,800. **07899 721899 or yatetherapy@googlemail.com. (London).**

MARANTZ SAKI Pearl,

as new with anniversary book and certificate of authenticity, £1,900. **07809 383556 or neilmacmillan36@hotmail.com (Dumfries & Galloway).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY

3.2CR amp, preamp and

CD player £1,500, JAS Orsa speakers (birds eye maple) £600. **07797 732147 or paul.camara@moorestephens-jersey.com (Jersey CI).**

NAIM SBL MK2 model

(black), boxed, £670, Naim IBL (black) £280, ProAc Studio 150 (yew) £570, Rega XEL (rosewood) £350, Monitor Audio R852MD (teak) with matching stands £180.) **01252 668000 (Hampshire).**

MONITOR AUDIO RS6

speakers (cherry finish), excellent condition, £350. **07940 659384 (East Sussex).**

QUAD QC 24-VALVE

preamp, 2x Quad 11 valve monoblocks (superb condition, boxed with instruction books). £2,995. **01202 481 386 (Dorset).**

GAMUT D200Mk3 power

amplifier 200 watts per channel (eight ohms), boxed with manual. As new £2,500. **07803 969706 (Scotland).**

STANDS UNIQUE Sound

Tower in natural ash, five shelves, plus base plate and isolation platform. (£500) £175, plus p/p. **07738 467556 (West Yorkshire).**

NAIM CD3.5 cd player £495,

NAIM NaC102/522 preamp £550, NAIM 90.3 power amp £250, NAIM flatcap x2, £200 each, Sennheiser HD570 headphones £60 (all mint and boxed). **07738 761299 mike_jeffers@btinternet.com (Lancs).**

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Hi-Fi Choice

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Whilst most hi-fi and home cinema enthusiasts are happy to accept the influence that interconnects and speaker cable can have on the performance of a system, many people struggle to accept that a digital cable can be equally influential.

The common reaction is that since the cable is only carrying a digital signal, the design and quality of materials used in the cable will have far less influence. Listening tests however, show this is not necessarily the case. Repeated listening tests using high quality digital to analogue converters and home cinema receivers have shown that digital cables can and do have an effect on the sound quality of the system in which they are used. Digital cables are capable of affecting levels of detail, dynamics, sound staging and the rhythmic and tonal characteristics of a system.

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Hi-Fi Choice Buyer's Guide



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BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS



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Badge	Product	Price	Comments						Issue number
●	Arcam CD17	700	Civilised sound, with a positively deluxe treble. Bass is clear, if not the weightiest ever			●	●	●	315
●	Audio Analogue Crescendo	599	Simple player that's clear and communicative with the appropriate partnering equipment			●	●	●	329
●	Cyrus CD6 SE	900	A combination of detail and sheer musical energy with a hint of high end to the performance				●	●	318
●	Denon DCD-1510AE	900	If the SACD format is what you're into, then this player is capable of some impressive sounds			●	●	●	335
●	Harman/Kardon HD990	550	Highly detailed with excellent extension at both extremes and impressive resolution	/594818		●	●	●	323
●	Marantz SA7003	600	Highly civilised sound may not be to all tastes, but there's plenty of detail to be heard			●	●	●	323
●	Marantz SAB003	830	Classic Marantz sound in a classy and attractive package. Our favourite sub-£1,000 player	/456022		●	●	●	315
●	Micromega CD-10	799	The cheapest in the range, the CD-10 has been fine-tuned to please the audiophile			●	●	●	328
●	Moon CD.5	999	Admirably energetic music-maker from this very well-built player			●	●	●	335
●	NAD C545BEE	350	Apart from slight lack of bass control, sound is very fine indeed – treble is beautifully detailed			●	●	●	322
●	Naim CD5i	895	Its competent musical performance exceeds the expectations of an entry-level player				●	●	307
●	Pioneer PD-D9	850	A mostly well-balanced player that's arguably at its best with classical music	/636734		●	●	●	326
●	Roksan Kandy K2	899	State-of-the-art technology and precision engineering produces a fine CD performance			●	●	●	335
●	Rotel RCD-1520	695	Lacks optical digital output, but feature-count is fine and sound quality is expressive and open	/608305		●	●	●	323

Above £1,000									
Badge	Product	Price	Comments						Issue number
●	Arcam CD37	1,300	Excellent detail and imaging, neutral tonality and above-average bass resolution	/395096		●	●	●	318
●	Audio Research CD5	5,055	Audibly better than most CD players on the market – assertive and very dynamic	/455309		●	●	●	312
●	Consonance Droplet CDP3.1	1,995	A CD player which gets to the nub of what music is about. Engages the listener every time			●	●	●	322
●	Copland CDA B25	3,985	This a highly revealing player that delivers music in a realistically engaging form			●	●	●	332
●	Creek Destiny	1,400	This player presents the music and nothing but the music and is thoroughly recommended			●	●	●	328
●	Cyrus Audio CD 8 SE	1,200	A highly civilised player which can, nevertheless, deal convincingly with raw music	/399370		●	●	●	323
●	Denon DCD-2010AE	1,700	Well equipped, finely detailed and with good support for compressed audio and iPod			●	●	●	328
●	EMM Labs XDS1	18,995	Very high-performance two channel only player with the option of a standalone D/A converter			●	●	●	327
●	Esoteric X-05	3,995	Superb resolve of fine detail with a perfectly judged balance and an ability to draw you in	/478365		●	●	●	314
●	Leema Antila II	2,735	Great build and multiple DACs give this a fast, revealing and totally engaging sound	/612396		●	●	●	323
●	Marantz UD 8004	2,450	Sophisticated and highly capable universal player that just about does it all			●	●	●	336
●	Micromega CD-20	1,249	No SACD, unfortunately, but without doubt one of the better mainstream players			●	●	●	332
●	Mimetism 20.1	5,107	An impressive player that produces a very convincing and musical sound			●	●	●	330
●	Moon CD3.3	2,200	Excellent detail and a fine choice for those who like their music straight from source	/594609		●	●	●	328
●	Moon 750D	7,950	Very few CD players can extract as much information off the disc as the 750D			●	●	●	331
●	Naim CD5 XS	1,790	Its composure and openness results in a musical performance that is extremely seductive			●	●	●	334
●	Rega Isis	5,998	A magnificently musical CD player at a realistic price. USB input is a useful addition			●	●	●	329
●	Resolution Audio Cantata	5,995	CD player/streamer that's revealing enough to set it far apart from the competition			●	●	●	336
●	Sony SCD-XA5400ES	1,199	Elegant, refined control system and very strong CD/SACD performance	/465933		●	●	●	313
●	Unison Research CDE	2,495	Valve CD player with interchangeable DACs doubles as a standalone DAC that oozes musicality	/483759		●	●	●	318

SPECS KEY **SACD COMPATIBLE** Plays high-resolution SACD discs in 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.

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Turntables

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Badge	Product	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	Switchable speed change Suspension subchassis Speeds	Supplied with arm	Supplied with cart	Issue number
●	Clearaudio Emotion	1,185	Beautifully built with open and clean sound emphasising mid and top, nice timely bass		33/45	●	●	309
●	Continuum Caliburn	125,000	Luxury turntable with state-of-the-art design includes Cobra tonearm and Castellon stand	/587169	33/45/78	●	●	320
●	Dr Feickert Woodpecker	2,995	Offers superb bass, excellent build quality and range of arm choices		33/45	●	●	335
●	The Funk Firm Funk V2	1,390	Not only as beguiling as those that preceded it, this turntable is also more substantial to boot		33/45	●	●	324
●	The Funk Firm Saffire	2,450	Individual design and a sound that's refined and neutral with strong timing and dynamics		33/45	●	opt opt	309
●	Hanss Acoustic T-30	3,600	The only multi-armbase deck in its price range, it boasts image stability and precise bass		33/45	●	opt opt	331
●	Lumley Heliosphere	2,495	A distinctive-looking turntable with a unique sound and a performance that reflects your vinyl	/560765	33/45	●	opt opt	319
●	Michell Technodec	608	Needs careful partnering but can deliver a very sophisticated result for the money		33/45	●	opt	309
●	Michell Gyro SE/RB250	1,565	A marriage of shot-putter-strength, build quality and robust audio (including arm substitute)		33/45	●	●	324
●	Pro-ject RPM-1 Genie 3	190	The Genie is that rare thing of a product with good looks, fine build and excellent sound		33/45	●	●	332
●	Pro-ject RPM 6.1	750	With its 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	1,000	Combines very strong elements (Ortofon Rondo Red) a killer package with top sound and value		33/45	●	●	309
●	Rega P3-24	390	Very competent, uncoloured and musical, improved by £148 outboard electronic power supply		33/45	opt	●	298
●	Roksan Radius S/Nima	1,375	Sophisticated design with accomplished sound quality, excellent imagery and good isolation		33/45	●	●	248
●	SRM Arezzo	699	The Arezzo is an excellent source component for those wanting a superb turntable for vinyl replay	/625025	33/45	●	●	325
●	Townshend Rock 7	1,720	Has the ability to pull detail out of a vinyl groove, making it the most resolute turntable at its price		33/45	●	●	324
●	Townshend Rock V/Excalibur II	7,000	If you want to hear everything that's on a record then there's no better machine for the job		33/45	●	●	307

Phono cartridges

MM and MC recommendations



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Replaceable stylus	MM	MC	Issue number
●	Dynavector Karat 17D3	699	One of the most thrilling sounding cartridges on the market			●	334
●	Goldring Legacy	595	An MC cartridge better suited to the smoother-sounding turntable, it unearths a mountain of detail			●	328
●	 Grado Prestige Gold	149	Produces rich, open and expansive music with the minimum of fuss			●	235
●	Ortofon Rondo Red	385	Delivers detail, power and resolution and makes a good case for its price			●	307
●	Ortofon Cadenza Red	750	There's much to admire in this cartridge's fine detail and unfussy presentation			●	330
●	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
●	van den Hul Condor XCM	2,400	A stunning cartridge with stereo imaging, dynamics and resolution to die for			●	265

Phono stages

Make your turntable sing



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	MM phono inputs	MC phono inputs	Adj impedance	Adj gain	Issue number
●	Cambridge Audio 640P	100	An outrageously good bargain that suits budget systems, but can confidently survive upgrades				●	●	305
●	Lehmann Audio Black Cube	335	This phono amp is a very distinguished performer with an MM source				●	●	335
●	Linn Uphorik	1,850	Exceptional sound quality, the Uphorik could easily win over the next generation of LP enthusiasts				●	●	334
●	Pro-ject Tube Box SE II	435	The big picture is the most evident thing here, but the finer details are there, too				●	●	335
●	Soundsmith Strain Gauge	6,100	Revolutionary kit assembly that rewrites the rules about vinyl playback	/618387					324

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. **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.

HFC TOP PICKS



Cambridge Audio 640P **£100**

If you need a low-cost way to get your turntable talking to your amplifier, this is by far the best option, just pop into your local Richer Sounds



Dynavector Karat 17D3 **£699**

The 17D3 gets very close to the results achieved with MCs at twice the price and few can touch it in terms of sheer musicality and resolution of detail



Townshend Rock 7 **£1,720**

A great turntable for those upgrading from an entry-level deck. Sound engineering at a bargain price sets this deck apart from the competition



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Amplifiers



Our pick of the best one-box amps out there

Up to £1,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Line inputs	Remote control	Headphone socket	Power output (watts)	Issue number
●	Audio Analogue Crescendo	599	In a room of appropriate dimensions, this amplifier has real musical presence	5		●	50	329
●	Cambridge Audio 840A v2	800	A chunky powerhouse with features aplenty, this amp offers detail and delicacy (silver finish)	8	●	●	120	327
●	Denon DCD-1510AE	900	Offers a taste of high-end excellence at an affordable price	5	MM/MC	●	70	335
●	Moon 1.5	999	A likeable amp in many ways, with admirable bass, treble and imaging	5	●	●	60	321
●	NAD C3226BEE	320	Unusually confident into awkward loads and very assured especially in bass. Treble a touch recessed	/603281	7	●	50	322
●	Puresound A10	685	A superbly involving valve amp at a very competitive price and with genuinely excellent results	2			10	331
●	Roksan Kandy K2	895	Superior design and high-performance credentials makes this amplifier a must have bargain	/483722	5	MM	125	315

Above £1,000

●	Arcam A38	1,480	A winning combination of sonic virtues including highly developed detail and musicality	7	opt	●	100	332
●	Astin Trew AT2000PLUS	1,740	If you prefer timbral and timing qualities of music to its bone-crunching potential, this is a contender	4		●	65	332
●	Audio Analogue Pucini Settanta	1,450	Detailed and lively, particularly in the upper octaves, but lacks a little bass extension	5	MC	●	160	320
●	Creek 5350 Evolution	1,075	One of the most attractive amps in its price range, with a sound that's immediately satisfying	5	MM/MC	●	120	334
●	Denon PMA-2010AE	1,700	High-class, well-equipped integrated, with a performance that is muscular, refined and detailed	6	MM/MC	●	80	328
●	Electrocompaniet PI-2	1,600	A superb all-rounder, with insight on one hand and effortless musical flow on the other	6		●	100	327
●	Electrocompaniet ECI-3	1,650	This is an impressively resolute and powerful integrated amplifier for the money	/618304	5		70	324
●	Gryphon Atilla	6,995	Exceptional subtlety and definition, has enough power to cope with just about anything musical	5			100	328
●	Harman/Kardon HK 990	1,000	Very clever, with built-in DSP room correction – but most importantly a powerful and revealing ampl	/594820	7	MC	160	321
●	Leema Pulse	1,270	Admirable bass which combines extension, tautness and clarity. Higher frequencies are highly detailed	5	MM/MC	●	70	327
●	Leema Tucana II	3,425	Highly featured, well-built and not short of power, this is a highly resolute and organic amp	/612396	7		148	323
●	Luxman L550A-II	3,000	An accomplished all-rounder that's able to handle virtually any system	4	MC	●	20	335
●	Micromega IA-100	1,125	Fast and fluid performer that brings a touch of panache to its role	5	MM	●	100	332
●	Mimetism 15.2	5,415	A powerful amplifier with great dynamics and high resolution that's rare even at this price	6			180	330
●	MSB Platinum M200	13,656	This amplifier's devastatingly good all-round sound quality sets a benchmark that few will approach	/603452				322
●	Myryad MX12080	1,200	Sound is more assured at the top of the frequency range, though bass is melodious and detailed	8		●	80	327
●	NAD 375BEE	1,000	A good, solid amplifier that is fundamentally musical and gives a great bang for your buck	/625323	7	●	150	325
●	Naim Audio NAIT XS	1,250	Its spellbinding, refined musical performance is a challenge to all integrated amplifiers	/498536	6	●	60	317
●	Rega Osiris	5,998	Very solid all-round performer has massive power reserves and splendid stereo imaging	6			162	329

Pre/power amplifiers



Separate boxes can bring clear advantages

Up to £2,000

●	Cambridge Audio Azur 840E/840W	2,000	Enterprising technology delivers a pre/power combo that always sounds detailed and controlled	●	●	8	opt	200	309
●	NAD C165BEE/C275BEE	1,550	An alternative to the usual integrated route and one that offers flexibility and fine sound	●	●	6	MM/MC	130	336

Above £2,000

●	Arcam C31/P38	2,450	Very civilised sound in the best possible way. Well featured and smartly built	●	●	7	opt	100	308	
●	Bryston BP16/ 2B SST2	5,700	Preamp and power amp combo offers superb sound quality	/608649	●	●	6	opt	100	323
●	Bryston BP26	3,670	Cracking preamp brings detailed results	●	●	8	opt		308	
●	Chord Prima/Mezzo 140	7,135	Small, muscular, beautifully made and styled, and sounds like a dream	●	●	5		120	269	
●	Classé CP-700/CA-M400	9,200	Pre plus mono power combo with superb build, huge power and enormous flexibility	●	●	6	opt	400	293	
●	Cyrus Pre XP D/B power	2,225	Detailed and subtle, with little character added to sound	●	●	5		60	336	
●	Digital Do Main Ba-1	6,495	By recreating the V-FET, DDM has built one of the most thrilling amplifiers on the market	●		4		300	327	
●	Hovland HP-100/RADIA	18,900	Uncommonly musical valve/transistor hybrid transcends stereotypes, one of the genuine high achievers	●	●	9	opt	125	250	
●	Naim NAC152XS/NAP155 XS	1,920	Preamp and power amp duo offers excellent performance and classic Naim virtues	●	●	6		60	324	
●	Roksan Caspian M Series-1	2,800	A powerful and enjoyable-sounding amplifier combo that brings out the strengths of its CD player	●	●	5		85	307	
●	Rotel RC158/RB1582	2,100	It looks high-end and it really sounds the part, too	●	●	5	MM/MC	200	336	
●	Trilogy 909/990	10,390	Extremely musical valve-based pairing with hybrid power and beautiful finish	/625226	●	●	6		100	325

SPECS KEY **LINE INPUTS** Input sockets for source components with a line level output: CD players, DVD players, tape decks, tuners, phono stages etc. **PHONO INPUT** Input sockets and 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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Cables

Cables really can make a difference, especially our top recommendations

Analogue interconnects

Model	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	Stranded	Solid core	Copper	Digital cable type	Issue number
● Audioquest Sidewinder	45	A detailed cable, with fine tonality and excellent rhythm		●		●		297
● Black Rhodium Prelude	90	Practical and sensibly priced all-rounder that seems happily compatible with a wide range of kit		●		●		293
● Black Rhodium Coda	150	Superb bass with neutral and detailed midrange, treble sweet with occasional slight constriction		●		●		298
● Black Rhodium Polar Illusion	250	A good all-rounder, with clear and purposeful bass and particularly fine treble		●		●		321
● Cambridge Azur Reference	50	Performance wouldn't shame a cable at twice the price: especially adept in the treble		●		●		296
● Chord Co. Indigo Plus	995	Costly, and high-class cable needs running in, but this is a finely detailed design overall	/608313	●				323
● Clearer Audio Silver-line	283	Complex, well-screened cable which offers good sound all round with exceptional bass		●		●		279
● CrystalCable Piccolo	348	Thin, tougher than it looks, has some qualities of a solid-core type – resolution, focus and articulation			●		●	294
● Kimber Timbre	145	A very neutral cable that will complement even very upmarket systems				●	●	312
● Monster M350i	45	Few cables at this price reveal so much about the recording space.		●		●		281
● Monster M1000i	230	Very capable, with only a hint of bass dryness to set against excellent results elsewhere		●		●		284
● Nordost Wyrewizard Dream	110	Slight lack of precision in extreme treble, otherwise detailed and neutral with authoritative bass				●	●	303
● Oehlbach NF214	63	The bass is a matter of taste, but suits many smaller speakers with good mid and treble		●		●		281
● QED Signature Audio S	190	Mellifluous and rounded, this cable is a great choice for lovers of the human voice				●	●	332
● Supra EFF-IX	77	Lively sounding which maintains a high level of detail and neutrality, musically, a great all-rounder					●	306
● Townshend Isolda DCT100	99	Particularly enjoyable cohesion and naturalness that makes for great listener involvement				●	●	312
● van den Hul The Wave	125	Neutral, with a hint of upper-bass richness: images seem to reside slightly further away than most		●		●		312

Digital interconnects

● Atlas Mavros	285	By any reckoning this is a very revealing wire			●	●	E	336
● Kimber DV-30	59	A superb performer that lacks very little, even when compared to Kimber's high-end models		●		●	E	317
● van den Hul The Wave	65	The results this cable achieves are excellent and it scores highly for value			●	●	E	336

Speaker cables (price per metre)

● Atlas Hyper 1.5	12.5	Don't look to this cable to beef up the bass, but at higher frequencies is revelatory at the price		●		●		299
● Atlas Ascent 2.0	60	A highly analytical cable and very fine detail across the board		●		●		294
● Chord Co. Silver Screen	6	Screened speaker cable with excellent treble, but just a little light in the bass at times		●		●		310
● CrystalCable Piccolo	1,395	A chip off the old block, has a similarly fast, fluid and subtle sound (price - 3 metre pair)			●		●	302
● Kimber 4VS	155	In the right system, this cable is a good choice (price reflects 2.5 metre terminated pair)		●		●		329
● Monster MCX-1s	5	Notable for its bass, perhaps a touch overdone at times but could be a good foil to small speakers		●		●		280
● Nordost Heimdall	185	Alternative to Valhalla, silver-plated, micro-monofilament construction, suitable for exacting systems		●		●		278
● QED X-Tube XT300	12.5	A natural and controlled-sounding cable that's cost-effective for mid-priced systems				●	●	310
● QED Revelation	15	Sensibly priced, this cable offers a performance which is a step-up from budget types		●		●		318
● Townshend Isolda DCT	50	Cryogenically treated 'impedance-matched' cable with stabilising components added				●	●	241
● van den Hul The Wind	50	Separate conductors provide room for experimentation, conductor quantity keeps resistance low				●	●	318
● Wireworld Solstice 52	25	Rather bulky and awkward, but performance amply justifies it with superb bass solidity		●		●		310
● Wireworld Oasis 6	40	Excellent bass with tunefulness and extension all first-rate. Awkward to handle, though	/617560	●				324

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.

HFC TOP PICKS



QED Revelation **£15 (per metre)**

Giving a consistent result with a wide range of amplifiers and speakers, the Revelation speaker cable boasts a good performance in all areas.



Kimber DV-30 **£59 (0.5 metre)**

A superb performer that lacks very little, even compared to Kimber's high-end models. Tonality, detail and imaging are really very fine.



Black Rhodium Polar Illusion **£250**

This super-cooled, unshielded interconnect with solid, silver-plated copper insulation, delivers a treble performance that's admirably clear and crisp.

BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●

Stereo speakers

The most influential link in the chain



Size - width, height, depth (cm)
 Floorstander
 Bass from (Hz)
 Ease of drive
 Close to wall
 Free space
 Issue number
www.techradar.com

Up to £1,000		Price	Comments							
Badge	Product									
●	Acoustic Energy Aegis Neo 3	363	Pretty, neutral floorstander sounds open with wide dynamic range and good bass weight		20,90,5,24	●	A	24	●	294
●	Acoustic Energy Radiance 1	600	Limited bass, power handling and dynamics, but exceptional mid-to-treble voicing		18,5,32,25	●	A	33	●	325
●	Amphion Ion L	900	Sharp styling, fine mid/treble coherence a sweet treble, but less happy bass alignment		16,2,32,6,26,5	●	A	40	●	310
●	ATC SCM11	867	A very fine little speaker t-at its best with natural recordings where it adds little		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
●	Bowers and Wilkins CM1	488	Luxury miniature has laid-back sound, low coloration and 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, has a smooth, even and nicely open balance	/483503	20,91,30	●		22	●	315
●	Bowers and Wilkins 683	879	High-class drivers and a great price makes for a warmly recommended speaker		20,99,34	●		20	●	304
●	DALI Ikon 6	999	Needs care with setup, impressively transparent and obsessively detailed sound		19,100,33	●	A	37	●	271
●	Dynaudio DM 2/10	880	Has fine dynamics, grip, bass and headroom and is well mannered		27,5,45,35	●	A	22	●	299
●	Focal Chorus 706V	389	Advanced drivers deliver an even, healthy dynamic expression and tension		22,39,25	●	A	27	●	319
●	Focal Chorus 726V	950	Compact and realistically priced, the Chorus 726V is a good all-round performer		22,99,37,5	●	A	25	●	325
●	JBL Studio L880	700	Good value floorstander with neutrality, massive headroom and plenty of punch		22,99,37	●	A	25	●	275
●	KEF IQ50	599	Looks cute and very discreet, with spacious imaging, good balance and a sweet treble	/483527	17,581,5,26	●	A	23	●	315
●	Monitor Audio BR2	230	Good-looking standmount has a muscular sound with superior coherence		18,5,35,25	●	A-	30	●	294
●	Monitor Audio BR5	450	Not the best dressed in its class, but detailed, bold-sounding and good value		17,85,25	●	A-	36	●	293
●	Monitor Audio Silver RS8	850	Bold, dynamic sound, it's an easy load that works well in larger rooms		90,18,27	●	A	33	●	276
●	Monitor Audio GS10	900	More neutral tonally than some recent MAs, the GS10 is easy to drive		20,36,27	●	A-	40	●	284
●	PMC DB1i	985	Could be more neutral, but a very effective musical communicator		15,5,29,23,4	●	A+	30	●	334
●	ProAc Tablette Ref Eight	704	Stunning standmount with electrostatic-like imagery. Its brother is even better!		15,27,23	●	A+	40	●	267
●	Q Acoustics 1010	110	Neatly styled miniature has limited bass and power handling, fine midband voicing		15,21,5,19,5	●	A	48	●	286
●	Q Acoustics 1020i	140	Outstanding value, t smooth well-balanced and lively sound makes a fine communicator	/516273	17,5,25,26,5	●	A+	60	●	318
●	Rega RS1	390	Clever close-to-wall speaker has a fine coherence and good communication skills		15,32,23,6	●	A	23	●	319
●	Russ Andrews SP-1	352	This tweaked Focal 705V RA has a sound that is immediate, engaging and, and great fun		19,2,31,5,24,8	●	A+	65	●	309
●	Spendor S3/SR	750	Lacks dynamic muscle and loudness potential, smooth neutrality and g bass extension		16,5,30,5,190	●		25	●	310
●	Tannoy Revolution DC4T	599	Ultra-compact, lacks bass weight and dynamic tension, but sounds open and coherent	488857	15,85,16	●		40	●	316
●	Tannoy Revolution DC6	900	Pretty compact standmount, delivering a lively bass and smooth, coherent midband		23,36,5,23	●	A	40	●	307
●	Wharfedale Diamond 9.1	150	Superior shape and finish. Sound is laid back, but free from boxiness		19,5,30,28	●	A-	45	●	307
●	Wharfedale Diamond 10.5	480	Despite the price, the 10.5 ticks many of the boxes, with superior voice band coherence	/636778	22,88,30	●	A-	50	●	326

Above £1,000		Price	Comments							
●	Adam Audio Tensor Delta	8,400	This active loudspeaker brings a powerful range of capabilities to its performance		33,56,34	●	A	50	●	329
●	AE Energy Radiance 2	1,000	This speaker boasts fine neutrality, sweet top, fine imaging and wide dynamic range		18,5,92,25	●	A	30	●	334
●	AE Energy Radiance 3	1,500	This speaker's effective enclosure ensures a wide dynamic range and a very clean sound	/587236	23,92,29,7	●	A	27	●	320
●	Amphion Argon2 Anniversary	1,200	Notably superior coherence, focus, fine neutrality and dynamic range with low coloration		19,38,31	●	A	24	●	317
●	Amphion Argon 3L	2,300	Solid build ensures an impressively clean sound with loads of bass and fine neutrality		19,92,5,30,5	●		26	●	322
●	Aspara HL6	4,300	Acoustic material sounds great and there are many strengths in design and performance		18,5,93,34,5	●	A		●	332
●	ATC SCM16A	2,376	Makes a great case for the active speaker. Includes built-in amps and is good value		27,45,33	●	ACT	42	●	300
●	Audioplan Kontrapunkt IVB	2,898	Boasts exceptional stereo imaging and mid-through-treble coherence		16,35,26	●	A	45	●	329
●	Audiovector S3 Super	2,600	Useful ability to upgrade, offers good musical communication and stereo imaging		19,103,31	●	A	50	●	328
●	Aurousal VS	1,650	Fine coherence and imaging of a single driver system, extra help at the frequency extremes	/479149	21,5,107,5,26,8	●		20	●	314
●	AVI ADM9	1,125	Active mini-monitors that are exceptionally accurate and dynamic sounding		20,30,26	●	ACT	60	●	301
●	Bowers and Wilkins CM9	1,760	Tall, elegant, expressive midband and expansive, but well-controlled bass	/597244	20,102,5,32	●	A	60	●	321
●	Cabasse MC40 Java	1,360	This large and handsome speaker has a notably smooth and evenhanded neutrality		25,110,35	●	A	20	●	325
●	Cabasse Bora	2,200	A real enthusiast's choice with high sensitivity, strong bass and powerful dynamics	/618354	33,27,50	●	A	52	●	324
●	Dynaudio Focus 220	2,630	Cleverly tapered floorstander has a brilliantly smooth, neutral balance and very sweet treble		20,5,98,29,5	●	A-	20	●	281
●	Focal Chorus 816 V	1,099	Fine, warm balance, superior dynamics and a sweet top end, but could be smoother		28,100,37,5	●	A+	20	●	288
●	Focal Chorus 826 V	1,349	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	1,499	The W cone makes some qualities associated with Focal's high-end models more competitive		99,8,28,2,37,5	●	A+	39	●	308
●	Focal Chorus 826W LE	1,879	Focal has turbo charged the 826 resulting in lots of energy, excitement and fine detail		28,2,103,8,37,5	●	A		●	330
●	Focal Electra 1027 Be	4,399	Outstanding mid and top with fine delicacy, low coloration, but lacks some bass grip and drive		26,5,111,35	●	A-	25	●	276
●	Free FS1	3,500	An elegant design with the minimum of wiring. Wireless with Sonos or Airport Express		16,87,27	●	ACT	35	●	301
●	Gamut Phi5	3,040	Lovely discreet floorstander has excellent sound and several very clever engineering touches		17,100,24	●		20	●	305

Stereo speakers (continued)

Shapes and sizes for every budget

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	Size - width, height, depth (cm)	Floorstander	Ease of drive	Bass from (Hz)	Free space	Close to wall	Issue number
●	Green Mountain Audio Rio	2,000	Fabulously tight timing and coherence makes for a very expressive and musical performer		208,406,34.9	●	A	80	●	●	332
●	Guru QM10	1,595	A very clever close-to-wall standmount with fine imaging, that sounds a lot bigger than it looks	/465869	30,25,2,23.2	●	A	26	●	●	317
●	Jamo R 907	6,600	Arguably the more 'chummy' of Jamo's dipole flagships, powerful bass and open midrange	/498515	44,118,9.7	●	A	30	●	●	317
●	JBL Everest DD66000	44,000	Awesome performance in the true meaning of the word & exceptional musical communication		111,96,5,47	●	A	50	●	●	331
●	Kudos Cardea C2	1,950	This floorstander is a fine all-round performer with fine voicing and neutrality		20,92,5,27	●		23	●	●	322
●	Kudos Cardea C30	5,250	An absolute honey that fully justifies its hefty pricetag, lacking only a little dynamic tension	/394973	20,112,27	●		22	●	●	310
●	Magico V2	18,000	High pricing derives this speaker's superb painstaking engineering & impressive performance	/624700	25,5,115,30	●	A	32	●	●	325
●	Magneplan Magneplanar 1.6	2,500	Great with acoustic and classical material, this dipole panel speaker has superb sound quality		48,1,65,5	●	A	43	●	●	329
●	Mission 796	1,300	Clean, open and detailed, smooth, relaxed loudspeaker does exactly what it says on the box	/594834	20,6,99,8,31.8	●	A	25	●	●	321
●	Monopulse 42A	1,995	Oddball styling, fine bass-to-mid balance and dynamics and superb voice coherence		26,110,25	●	A	25	●	●	302
●	Monitor Audio PL200	4,750	A costly, but beautifully presented loudspeaker with outstanding voicing and character		25,5,100,28.5	●	A-		●	●	330
●	Mordaunt-Short Perf 6 LE	4,799	Striking moulded enclosure minimises coloration, overall balance is smooth, neutral and open		24,115,43	●	A	22	●	●	308
●	Neat Momentum 3i	1,790	Sounds bigger than it looks, with good coherence and an impressively wide dynamic range		22,38,27	●	A-	23	●	●	302
●	Opera Callas	3,195	Technically innovative multi-tweeter system, this is a grown up and articulate performer	/429144	23,37,5,34	●		32	●	●	311
●	Opera Seconda	1,995	Fine styling and finish, plus very superior voicing, if a shade lacking in warmth		24,10,25,31.5	●	A	20	●	●	314
●	Pioneer S-2EX-W	5,200	This speaker offers superb midband neutrality and exceptional clarity	/587272	291,56,5,42.5	●	A	37	●	●	320
●	PMC FB1i	2,100	A floorstander that boasts impressive bass extension and a smooth sweet top end	/429594	20,100,30	●	A	20	●	●	329
●	PMC OB1i	3,600	This floorstander delivers a smooth overall balance with wide bandwidth and dynamic range	/429697	20,102,5,32.5	●	A	20	●	●	311
●	PMCFact. 8	4,600	Beautiful styling, alongside a superb all-round sound with a notable wide dynamic range		15,5,105,38	●	A	55	●	●	327
●	PMC IB2i	8,900	Delivers a top-class sound quality, fine imaging and exceptional dynamic grip	/617595	33,74,46,5	●	A	25	●	●	324
●	PSB Synchrony One	3,500	Slim and discreet floorstander that delivers superb sound quality and flexible bass	/516267	22,109,32,5	●	A	45	●	●	318
●	Revel F32	3,200	Meticulously balanced, tonally neutral design makes for a taut, well disciplined sound		22,105,39	●	A	20	●	●	256
●	Revolver Screen 3	2,799	Visually dramatic and very successful in delivering genuine high-quality hi-fi sound		50,140,11	●	A	35	●	●	329
●	Roksan Caspian FR-5	2,475	Sharp-looking speaker sounds exceptionally open and lively without aggression		20,100,25	●	A	22	●	●	290
●	Sonus faber Luito Monitor	1,690	Subtly designed, elegant-sounding package, especially with good recordings	/603221	18,5,35,33,5	●	A-	55	●	●	322
●	Sonus faber Minima Vintage	2,490	Easy, graceful-sounding compact, a natural for acoustic material at moderate volume levels	/455417	20,33,27,5	●	A-	55	●	●	312
●	Sonus faber Cremona Audit.	3,350	Open, exciting and with surprisingly good bass, this is 'The Little Speaker That Could'		20,35,37	●	A	50	●	●	305
●	Spendor SA1	1,295	Very high-quality sub-miniature with notably superior sound		16,5,30,5,19	●	A	30	●	●	334
●	Spendor SP3/1R2	1,600	Conservative styling, superb neutrality and coherence with unusually low coloration		22,40,28	●	A	37	●	●	317
●	Tannoy Definition DC10T	5,000	Classy speaker has massive base, high sensitivity and precise image focus	/608326	34,112,5,32	●	A+	35	●	●	323
●	Triangle Genese Quartet	2,775	Great material value and a solid all-round sonic performance with great loudness potential		23,117,37	●	A	25	●	●	302
●	Triangle Magellan Concerto	16,250	New 'sw2' version is less immediate than its predecessor, but it remains highly entertaining		60,160,45	●	A-	32	●	●	290
●	Teufel Ultima 800	2,498	Exceptional value for money due to direct sales and easy system-matching		22,98,37	●	A	42	●	●	335
●	Vivid Audio K1	14,495	With a subtle, fast and wide bandwidth, this speaker is one of the finest on the planet	/625361	28,130,45	●	A	35	●	●	325
●	Wilson Benesch Curve	5,383	Much (but not all) of the ACT's performance in a much more compact and affordable package		23,91,37	●	A	28	●	●	254
●	Wharfedale Opus	1,500	Great material value and a solid, if bright and forward sound. Has great loudness potential		26,100,5,41	●	A	23	●	●	314
●	Yamaha Soavo 2	1,200	Cunningly crafted with a beautiful balance that always sounds lively, open and involving		22,38,35	●	A	28	●	●	296
●	Zu Essence	3,750	Realism and communication skills are more than compensation for balance shortcomings		30,5,125,30,5	●	A	25	●	●	327

SPECS KEY **SIZE W,H,D (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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BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●

Equipment supports

Hi-fi equipment supports come in all shapes and sizes



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Top plate size (Cm) Height (Cm)	Number of shelves Welded	Shelf type	Issue number
	Atacama Equinox	409	Stable, modular design with style and excellent bass transients	81	50,50	● 4	Glass 217
●	Audiophile Base Std Supp't	1,200	Expensive and quite bulky, but sound is unusually detailed and resonance-free	57	46,35	● 3	MDF 302
●	Blok Stax 300	180	A simple and effective design that gives some useful isolation across most of the audio band		40,46	● 3	MDF 334
●	Custom Design Inert Matt	70	Isolation platform can improve the sound of hi-fi components, but is a bit small for most kit		40x25		Metal 311
	Custom Design XL4	380	Simple construction pays off in smart looks. Sound contribution is minimal		60,42	● 4	Glass 293
	Custom Design Milan	509	Good-looking stand with nothing more to complain of than slight muddying of detail	57	48,39	● 4	Glass 302
●	Hi-Fi Racks Podium	500	A keenly priced piece of high-class furniture that also happens to sound great		59,5		Wood 320
●	Isonoe Isolation feet	98	A set of four isolation feet that are ideally suited to microphonic kit like turntables				Alloy 327
	Partington Minim	470	Adds its own character to rock, but to the detriment of acoustic sounds	78	45,37	● 5	Glass 302
●	Quadraspire QX25 Support	25	Beautifully simple design, cheap and easy to use. Excellent with CD players				Acrylic 327
●	Quadraspire Sunoko-Vent T	800	The sound is detailed and largely uncoloured, while the design is rigid and beautifully veneered		59,47	● 4	MDF 334
	Russ Andrews Torlyte Rack	988	Attractive modular system made of very light Torlyte: a touch of added warmth is its only vice	68	54,49	● 4	Torlyte 240
●	Townshend VSSS	1,380	This attractive Seismic Sink retains the same excellent vibration-killing sound quality	76	35,50	● 4	Glass 273

Speaker stands

Not all stands are made equal - try one of our top buys



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Top plate size (Cm) Height (Cm)	Number of shelves Welded	Shelf type	Issue number
	Anvil Sound Display Stand	229	A variety of smart looks available – sound is clear and precise	50	20,17	● 1	293
●	Custom Design RS300	110	An attractive stand whose lack of coloration suits it to high-resolution systems	56	16,5,18	● 1	281
●	Custom Design SQ404	220	Robust four-pillar design gives very low coloration and maximises performance	61	18,16,3	● 4	283
●	Partington Ansa 60	119	Elegant flat packer 'disappears' sonically; restrained but neutral and coherent	62	18,15	● 4	232
●	Partington Dreadnought BS	299	Sound is better defined in almost all areas than cheaper, slimmer stands can offer	62	17,23	● 5	309
●	Partington Heavi II	499	Robust to the nth degree, this stand helps produce very precise bass and upper frequencies	53	31,22	● 6	287

SPECS KEY **HEIGHT (CM)** Height of equipment support and speaker stand (not including spikes) in centimetres. **TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)** Width by depth of the supporting platform(s). 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 SHELVES** To put your kit on (different configurations are often available). **NUMBER OF LEGS** That support the stand. **SHELF TYPE** Material that shelves are made of.

HFC TOP PICKS



Quadraspire QX25 Support £25
Fashioned from two identical pieces of acrylic sheet that slide together, these feet create a very impressive degree of isolation



Partington Dreadnought BS £300
Probably the best speaker stand you can buy for the money – heavily engineered and backed up with sound theory, the Dreadnought is real class



Townshend VSSS £1,380
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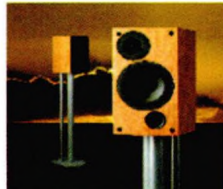
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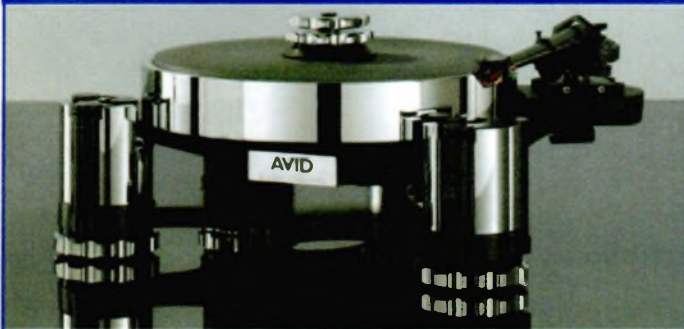
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Noughtie ones

Malcolm Steward thought building a digital-fronted hi-fi system would be easy, yet binary's proving to be a real bother

I foolishly imagined when I began this series of columns about my progression from an arcane audiophile life into the seemingly more clear-cut world of computerised music that everything would be uncomplicated and predictable. Boring even. After all, the whole process revolved around 'ones and noughts' and what could be simpler? Little did I realise that the absolute opposite would be true.

Digital is not straightforward. It is nowhere near straightforward. To clarify that statement I will aver that while digital might well appear straightforward, the problems that afflict it certainly are not and the effect they have on the sounds emerging from one's loudspeakers are rarely predictable.

For example, a friend visited me yesterday. His imminent arrival always has me slightly concerned because his listening faculties are highly acute, having spent a great deal of his life voicing loudspeakers and his sensibilities are not entirely the same as mine. Minor performance aspects that niggle me can pass him by unnoticed until I point them out and vice-versa. Last night, though, I knew something was not as it should be. I had spent a trying day reconfiguring my system, clearing out of lots of reviewing detritus ready for the introduction of equipment about which I was writing for *HFC's The Collection* (coming soon).

Even after I had removed all the excess power supplies and interconnect cables and restored my system to some semblance of order, it still sounded 'off' – rather coarse, bright and unsophisticated and definitely not fit to pass muster with my pal. I was reaching the point where I truly did not wish to listen to it, much less use it to demonstrate the most amazing new toy in my arsenal of digital tweaks that he was driving miles to hear.

Nonetheless, I persevered and then he arrived and we set about restoring the sound of the system to its usual magnificence. All it required was a little more cable dressing and the exchange of a couple of 'new' digital interconnects for their original counterparts, and switching a couple of mains plugs into different outlets, as well as the removal of another redundant mains cable or two and disconnecting some now surplus-to-requirements Cat 5 leads...

That is the problem of living with a system honed for cutting-edge performance: it takes next-to-nothing to switch the sound from being engrossing to being enervating. However, that is a sacrifice I am happy to make for the joy

when it is on-song, of being able to appreciate the effects of items such as my newest toy.

Nuked cable

Common sense and accepted wisdom told me that this new plaything – a military-specification shielded SATA cable to connect the hard disk in my NAS – should not have any effect on the sound of my system. Unfortunately, common sense and accepted wisdom were both wrong in this instance. The cable brought about a dramatic, icing-on-the-cake improvement in musical performance. It is one of those infuriating enhancements that makes you wonder how you ever managed to live without it before. Comparing the SuperSATA to the standard issue, run-of-the-mill cable it had replaced made me realise just how sadly deficient the latter was.

The American-produced Critical Cable is currently only available through BitPerfect Systems to buyers of its media servers but MD, Karl Woodward tells me that he will soon be making it available to the public at large as a stand-alone item. He is also considering making other of his 'nuked' digital cables more widely available, like the one I "borrowed" to connect my Naim HDX to my DAC.

So, months into this binary-fuelled escapade, all I can tell you with any surety is that life is never boring or predictable when you mix computers with hi-fi. Thank heaven for that! ●

A new can of worms: introducing the military-spec SATA cable, where differences can be heard

That's the problem of living with a system honed for cutting-edge performance: it takes nothing to switch the sound from being engrossing to enervating



MALCOLM STEWARD is the former editor of *Hi-Fi Review* and one of the most outspoken reviewers around. He writes exclusively for *Hi-Fi Choice*

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BUILD QUALITY
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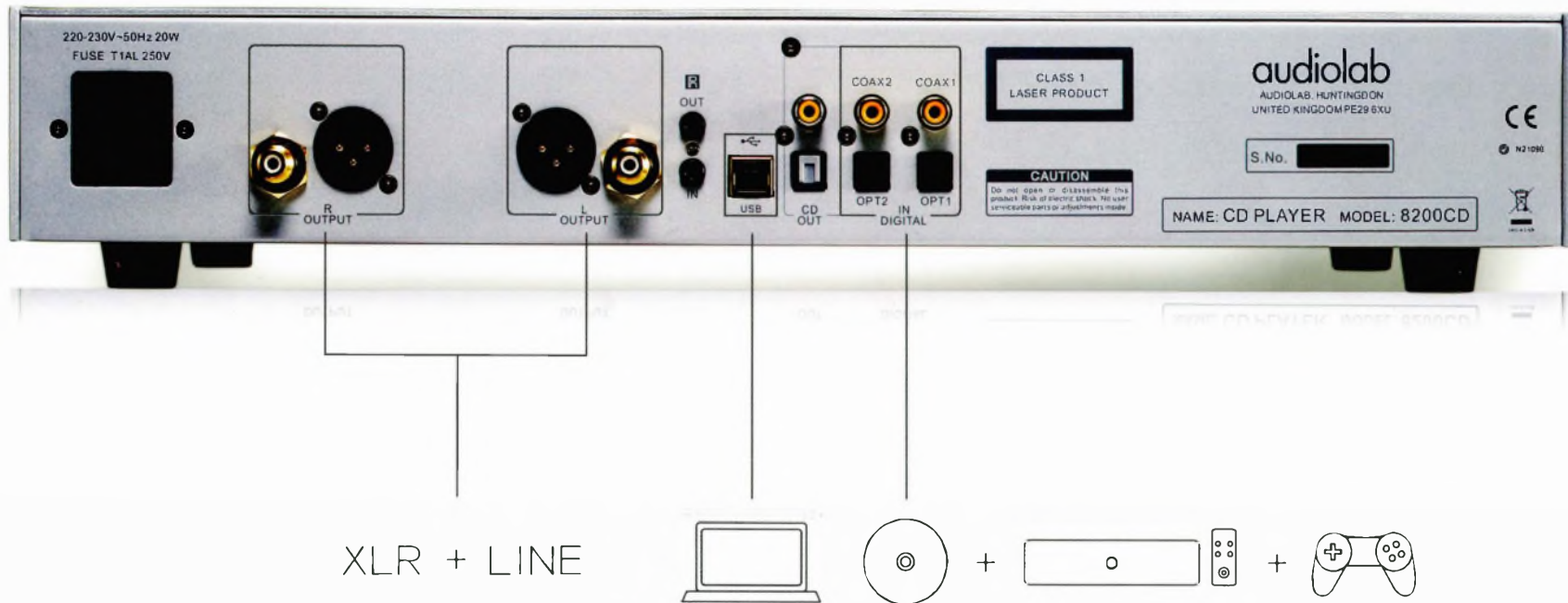
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