

Quad Elite: 10-year wait finally over

After a decade in development we ask has it been worth the wait?

Systems supertest

Matching CD/amps compared: Marantz, Rega, Roksan and more



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

www.hifichoice.co.uk

April 2011

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Baby B&W

Is the new £1,250 CM8 Britain's most desirable loudspeaker?

Marantz's streaming beauty

Unique AirPlay-spec player makes sweet music from a world of content

25 selective tests including: Boulder, Creek, Vitus, Peachtree, Isol-8 and Musical Fidelity



EXCLUSIVE

Future
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66 E3



Swedish temptations

Exclusive! In-depth review of Primare's exquisite new switching amp and CD player

COMPETITION WIN!

Canton Vento 820 speakers worth £1,200!

How many CDs do you own but never play?



Comes with credit card size remote control

Store, browse and listen to your complete CD collection on the revolutionary Brennan

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 literally hundreds of cheap plastic boxes.

CDs are a great way to listen to music but they are also inconvenient, inaccessible and a bit of a chore.

The Brennan JB7 is a CD player with a hard disk that stores up to 5,000 CDs - and that's not all

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 the originals in another room or retire them to the attic.

Small enough to pick up with one hand yet big enough for a lifetime of music, the Brennan JB7 is one man's brilliant idea for everyone's forgotten music. Starting at just £366* it's only available direct from Brennan at www.brennan.co.uk.

Key features

- ▶ Browse albums by spinning the volume knob - push to play
- ▶ Display track names as they play
- ▶ Delete tracks you don't like
- ▶ Seven rainbow colour coded playlists
- ▶ Segue function blends one track into the next
- ▶ One touch record from vinyl, cassette or radio
- ▶ One button plays the entire music collection at random
- ▶ Plays MP3 downloads - future proof
- ▶ Clock with alarm
- ▶ 60 Watt, 4.8 x 16 x 22 cm steel and aluminium construction
- ▶ Backup music to external USB hard disk for safe keeping
- ▶ You can use it with your existing hi-fi or on its own



"I've suddenly re-discovered my love of music - it's amazing"
"I feel like a teenager all over again - thank you Brennan"

The Brennan JB7 is available in Cobalt Blue or Titanium Metallic



Money back guarantee

If you're not suitably impressed with your Brennan JB7 we'll collect it free of charge and refund you in full.

* Plus P&P

The face behind Brennan

Martin is a physicist, computer engineer and silicon chip designer. He 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. I liked the idea of quick access to more than one CD and music that didn't repeat after 40 minutes. A few years ago I had a go at loading

my music onto a computer - but I never listened to it - I needed something simpler, more immediate. In the end the computer got a virus and the music files were lost - I still had the originals thankfully. The JB7 is really my personal ideal music player"



Martin Brennan

To get the whole story on the Brennan JB7 and order visit www.brennan.co.uk

brennan

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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.



ED SELLEY
EXPERTISE: TROUBLESHOOTING

ED has spent the best part of a decade selling, developing and supporting products from some of the biggest names in audio. As *HFC*'s troubleshooter, he is on hand to help you answer your questions and help you create that perfect system.



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. **344** April 2011



There are times when hi-fi is a bit like buses: nothing for ages and then three come at once. That's exactly how we've felt this month, with one of the best review line-ups in memory. Where to start?

How about a definitive six-way blind test of CD and amp systems? Or how about a trio of exclusives: Primare's new I32 CD and I32 amp; Marantz's new AirPlay-ready NA7004 network music player; or B&W's new CM8? No other hi-fi magazine can deliver the goods like *Hi-Fi Choice*, which must explain why more and more of you are joining us each month.

Elsewhere in the issue, Jason Kennedy has uncovered some beguiling systems in his latest dealer visit and Jimmy Hughes tackles the contentious issue of mains conditioning with his Isol-8 product reviews on p80. We're also revealing a new take on racks p65, our new reference earphone (p77) and a class-leading new DAB radio from Tivoli (p79). Enjoy.

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.

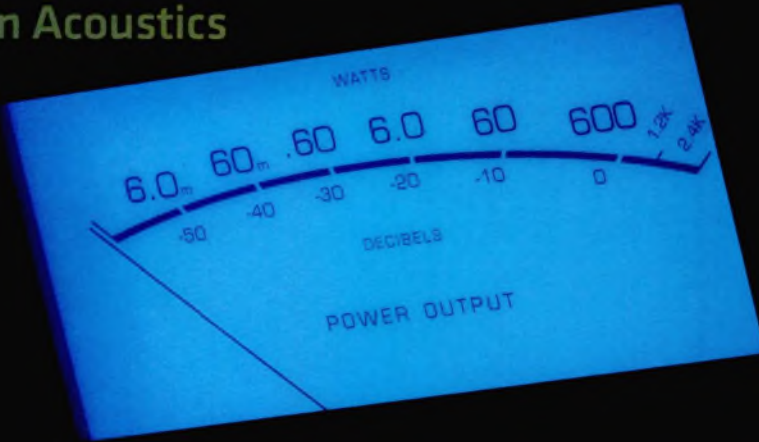


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Have you visited the **Apple iTunes Store** and downloaded the **FREE McIntosh Music Player App**?

Jordan Acoustics



POWER GUARD



McIntosh
MC601
QUAD BALANCED
POWER AMPLIFIER

METER
WATTS
LIGHTS OFF HOLD

McIntosh

LEGENDARY

MC601 - The replacement for the legendary 501 has arrived. Available now.

Ordinary isn't for everyone...



NEW - MC601 Power Amplifier Pair (front)

600 watts, newly designed 8-inch wide True Wattmeter, Power Guard, Sentry Monitor, extraordinary distortion-cancelling quad-differential design. Delivers absolute transparency and musical accuracy into speaker loads of 2, 4, or 8-Ohms.



NEW - MCLK12 "ICONIC" Clock (front)

Designed to either hang on the wall or to fit in an equipment rack. Illuminated digital meters for hours and minutes. Universal Power Supply, battery back-up system, Power and Meter Control Capable, adding to its usefulness in a fully integrated home entertainment system. A true collectors piece for all McIntosh fans.

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The Tensor Series by Adam Audio - A True Reference

Creating world-class loudspeakers is a fine art...



NEW - ARTist Series

The ARTist Series delivers a clear compression free, high definition sound in your own home. Designed to function as part of a classical stereo setup or multi-channel system, the ARTist Series are hard to beat.



Tensor Series

A completely new concept lies at the heart of the Tensor High-End-Series. Numerous new approaches and technical developments let these Active loudspeakers deliver an unfettered performance: the precision and harmony of all frequency bands guarantee an unparalleled experience of music reproduction.

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WORTH
£1,200



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Jimmy Hughes, Pioneer PL-12D, Opinion column p27

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Isol-8 Substation mains conditioner

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Audiofile

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



New Yorkers

East Coast giant launches new hyper-fi for 2011

PRICE: £6,495-10,995

AVAILABLE: NOW

CONTACT: 0800 1214771

WEB: MCINTOSHLABS.COM

Fasten your seatbelts, McIntosh, the US high-end hi-fi giant, has launched three new pieces of hyper-fi, destined to set UK pulses racing.

First up, is the £10,995 MCD1100 CD/SACD player. This takes technology from the smaller McIntosh players and really pushes the boat out. Most important is its DAC: this is an evolution of the quad-balanced technology first seen in the MCD500 and here is upgraded further to a 32-bit/192kHz version for even higher performance. This is put to good use as the DAC not only takes a feed from the internal transport, but also from the five digital inputs on the rear panel.

The MCD1100 supports coaxial, optical, BNC, AES and USB inputs, allowing it to act as a convincing

digital hub in any system. This functionality is even more useful when partnered with the MCD1100's outputs. Like some of the smaller McIntosh players, the MCD1100 features a set of conventional fixed-level outputs for connection to a pre or integrated amplifier, but additionally, is equipped with a variable output and volume control to allow connection directly to a power amplifier.

This is useful, given the arrival of two new power amplifiers that the MCD1100 can be directly connected to. The MC452 and MC302 are all-new and boast considerable power reserves thanks to the use of 'Quad Balanced design.' This promises: "the most music with the best fidelity."

The £8,495 MC452 has a full 400 watts per side to call upon, making it

the most powerful stereo amp produced by the company! The £6,495 MC302 makes do with a mere 300. Both use the traditional McIntosh 'semi open' chassis which helps provide cool, quiet, long-life performance. Both support balanced and unbalanced inputs and looped outputs, should you need more than one of these monsters. Both models also use bespoke speaker terminals.

Aesthetically, all three units could only be McIntosh. All feature large, light-up McIntosh logos on the front panels with large control knobs. The

The MC452 has a full 400 watts per side, making it the most powerful stereo amp produced by the company!

amplifiers are equipped with the trademark power meters which are larger than before to improve their legibility at a distance.

The MC452 completes the look with front panel-mounted handles, which might make moving the huge 50kg weight fractionally easier. All three models are on sale now. ●



DITCH THE PRE

MCINTOSH HAS offered CD players with volume controls for some years now. This allows direct connection of the player to a power amp for a single-source system. The advantages of this method is that the signal paths are direct (and thus shorter) and the requirement for a separate preamp is eliminated. Systems of this nature have generally been single source, but the MCD1100's bank of digital inputs allow it to function like a digital preamp for multiple sources.



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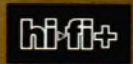
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ULTIMATE LOUDSPEAKERS

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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 beautiful styling"

Dec 2009



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

A truly great design

sempre-audio.at

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



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION



"These PMC's are exceptional, highly desirable in every way"

April 2010



fact:3
HAS ARRIVED

The **fact:8** in Tiger Ebony

Super-fi

Musical Fidelity revisit the 'Super Integrated' concept with the M500i

Musical Fidelity products have not traditionally been short of power, but the M6 500i – the latest in a long line of 'Super Integrated' amplifiers – takes this to another level.

Although the £3,999 M6 500i is a single-chassis integrated, it contains a pair of separate 500-watt monoblock power amplifiers, each with its own power supply for a genuine dual-mono design.

The preamp has its own separate power winding and the input sockets are

connected directly to the board for extremely short circuit paths.

MF claims low distortion, very linear performance and 'unconditional stability'. A precision volume control with front display completes the impressive specification.

Musical Fidelity has also announced the £99 V-Link asynchronous USB to S/PDIF convertor. This enables high-quality file transfer from USB sources to DACs.



PRICE: £3,999 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 020 8900 2866 **WEB:** MUSICALFIDELITY.COM



Melody makers

UNIQUE MELODY is a new company specialising in high-end ear-canal monitors. The three-strong range all feature custom-moulded ear pieces, the use of which necessitates contacting an approved audiologist. Unique Melody will also supply 'any colour on earth' for the faceplate, shell and tips along with personalised artwork as part of the asking price.

The range consists of the £495, three-driver Aero, the £595, four-driver Mage and the £795 Miracle (featuring no less than six drivers per side). The frequency response is tuned for the particular shape of the mould, a design tweak which allows them to demonstrate very high levels of performance with incredible comfort. Look out for an in-depth review soon.

PRICE: £495-£795 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 020 3384 6392
WEB: UNIQUEMELODY.CO.UK



Are you going to the fayre?

FOLLOWING on from last year's success, the second annual Thames Valley Audio Fayre will be held on Sunday 17th April at the Bracknell Leisure centre. The Fayre will feature a huge amount of professional and domestic equipment, music on a variety of formats and a wide range of accessories. Stallholders include private sellers through to industry retailers and accessory manufacturers.

Dealer and distributor Deco Audio will also be demonstrating and selling equipment in the Mezzanine suite.

Entrance to the fair is in two stages. If you're keen to snap up a bargain, an 'Early Bird' ticket is available for £10 from 9.30am. Those who turn up after 10.30am will be charged £5.

PRICE: £5-£10 **DATE:** 17TH APRIL
CONTACT: AUDIOFAYRE@AOL.COM
WEB: THAMESVALLEYAUDIOFAYRE.CO.UK

New old Pros

ProAc reworks its classic Tablette speaker for its 30th anniversary

ProAc has been making its Tablette for 30 years and to celebrate this, the company has announced the £1,250 Tablette Anniversary. Featuring a new five-inch kevlar driver with a large rear port, ProAc promises 'uncanny bass extension' from the diminutive design. It has also matched this with a newly developed 20mm tweeter, surrounded by a special material, said to reduce phase anomalies.

PRICE: £1,250 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01280 700147 **WEB:** PROAC-LOUDSPEAKERS.COM



Altogether, Eclipse systems couldn't sound sweeter.

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Jet-set JBL

Refreshingly different line-up from American speaker giant

JBL has been busy putting the finishing touches to its new Studio range. This comprises three stereo pairs of speakers with supporting centre speakers and subwoofers. The most striking aspect is the distinctive front panel, which features a full-size cover, 'slashed' diagonally with the front baffle. Behind these distinctive grilles are four-inch drivers in the

Studio 110 standmount and supporting centre, and larger 6.5-inch drivers in the floorstanders. The range-topping Studio 190 features two of these, plus a four-inch driver supported by a one-inch tweeter, which is an impressive compliment considering the relatively modest £480 asking price. All models are available now.



PRICE: £100-480 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01707 278113 **WEB:** JBL.COM/EN-GB



Shure can

SHURE has announced three new models, two from its professional range and one in its in-ear monitor series. The £99 SE215 in-ear monitor features the same detachable cable system as the more expensive models and offers up to 90 per cent isolation from outside noise.

The other two models are both full-size over-the-ear designs. The £99 SRH550DJ is designed for DJ use and general listening and features a collapsible headband that can be worn in different positions plus a carrying bag. The £249 SRH940 is optimised for audio monitoring and mastering and is said to offer high levels of isolation and comfort.

Additional features include a solid carry case and the option of changing between straight and coiled leads.

PRICE: £99-£249 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01992 703058
WEB: SHURE.CO.UK

Tasty new Olive

Server hero launches no-compromise new flagship

The £4,600 O6HD server, is Olive's most sophisticated offering yet and the result of five years of design work.

Built around a 2TB internal hard drive, cushioned in eight layers of noise-cancelling padding, its digital-to-analogue conversion is handled by high-specification Burr-Brown

chips and a 24-bit/384kHz upsampler. The rear panel features both balanced and unbalanced outputs and there is a headphone socket with dedicated headphone amp.

The exterior is dominated by a 10.1-inch wide, high-resolution, full-colour touchscreen for easy navigation of the library.



PRICE: £4,600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01235 511166 **WEB:** OLIVE.US

NEWS IN BRIEF

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



•**AUDIO TECHNICA** has launched the Retro Series ATH-RE70 headphone and styled it like its 30-year old ATH-2, but with the technical advantage of a contemporary performance.
eu.audio-technica.com



•**ACOUSTIC ENERGY** launched the new Compact at Bristol claiming the c£150 mini monitor will shake up the market.
acoustic-energy.co.uk



•**KIMBER'S** new Select cabling range are, according to the company, serious cables designed for use with very serious hi-fi systems.
russandrews.com



•**ELIPSON** is newly arrived in the UK with a range of speakers that include the Planet L, said to combine high-end performance with a lifestyle design.
elipson.com



•**VAN DEN HUL** daims that ten years of research has gone into its 3T True Transmission technology, which is now fitted to the Rock, Hill and Valley ranges of cables.
vanden Hul.com

Epos Epic

New Epos range hints at the past

Three new speakers have just been launched by Epos. The Epic range includes two standmounts (Epic 1 and 2) with 100-watt power handling and one floorstander (Epic 5), offering 200 watts. All are styled in a way that bring to mind Epos models from the past and each unit is supplied with both an audiophile baffle with no cover and a more child-proof 'covered' version.



PRICE: £495-£995 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01442 260146 **WEB:** EPOS-ACOUSTICS.COM

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

Adam Thompson, of Henley Designs selects four beer-drinking discs



JEFF BUCKLEY
GRACE

I'm embarrassed to admit that it was some years after he had died that I first discovered this fantastic album. Now rarely a week goes by when I don't listen to it at least once.



NICK DRAKE
FIVE LEAVES LEFT

A stunning album that even without his tragic back story (depression, public apathy and an overdose, aged just 26) it can move you like no other album can.



DAVID CROSBY
IF I COULD ONLY REMEMBER MY NAME

This album is at times haunting and at other times eerie, but always beautiful. With the help of artist friends, he created an album of heartfelt emotion.



JONI MITCHELL
BLUE

A bit of an obvious choice I guess. I've always been a bit of a sucker for female singer/songwriters, but I feel that Joni really is in a league of her own and this is my favourite.

CYRUS

Explore your music

The new streaming platform from Cyrus provides the perfect solution for all music lovers. These new streaming music players provide you with immediate access to your entire network music library. Plus you can listen to literally thousands of different internet radio stations from across the world; all in true hi-fi quality.

With the **n-remote** you can quickly find specific albums, artists or tracks and it makes browsing your network music library a real pleasure. With its sleek body, full colour screen and two-way control, the **n-remote** is just one of the features that make the new Cyrus streaming music players very special.



Cyrus has been designing, developing and manufacturing high performance hi-fi for over 25 years. This new streaming platform incorporates all our understanding of high-end audio design together with the art of knowing how to tune circuitry for musical advantage. It is understandable that with our reputation for exceptional audio engineering and network technology the result will inevitably appeal to the most discerning consumers.

Product available from March 2011



SE technology award



SE CD player of the year



CD 8 SE CD player of the year



Cyrus 8 XP, November '09



Did You Know

The n-remote is packed full of features including backlit keys and a motion sensing backlight to name but a few.

Designed manufactured and supported in England by Cyrus.

For the latest news on products or to download a brochure, please visit www.cyrusaudio.com

Cyrus sales 01480 435577



Jumbling for joy

Vintage hi-fi aficionado Martin Pipe highlights the best bits on offer at the spring Audiojumble

We'd like to think that we had something to do with it, courtesy of the February issue of *Hi-Fi Choice* and our recent 2010 YouTube video – but organiser John Howes told us that this spring Tonbridge Audiojumble – one of the UK's most popular events for lovers of vintage hi-fi equipment – broke all records! The weekend event saw more than 140 stalls in two halls, which were perused by over 600 visitors, including a surprising

number of audiophiles from Eastern Europe and China.

Among the stallholders were *HFC*'s own Richard Black – who parted with his Quad ESLs for £300 – and the legendary Paul Messenger, who was to be seen engaging with *HFC* readers.

The NAG-Fi audio club also attracted a considerable amount of interest, as did a number of record dealers with rack upon rack of tempting vinyl on display. Music First Audio were running continuous demonstrations of

its Classic preamplifier, too. But by far the biggest attraction, especially if you're eagle-eyed or have electronics experience, was the sheer quantity and variety of equipment bargains to be had.

Forget eBay – Audiojumble allows you to inspect and handle the goods of interest, chat with the seller and then close the deal with a sensible offer.

Hi-Fi Choice was there with a three-strong presence and what follows is our guide to some of the best bits...

SHOW REPORT: AUDIOJUMBLE 2011, TONBRIDGE, KENT



“The best nearfield speakers
I have ever heard.”

Günter Pauler, Stockfisch Records on Amphion Argon3.



Would you like to hear what Mr. Pauler from Stockfisch Records hears in his studio? Now you have access to the same speakers that are used in the recording process of some of the all time audiophile reference recordings.

Even if Mr. Pauler feels Argon3 are the best nearfield speakers he has ever heard, Argon3's were designed to work best in normal acoustically non-treated rooms, where most of the audiophiles enjoy their music.

More information on Amphion products on www.amphion.fi



MCINTOSH

1 To hi-fi enthusiasts, the familiarly styled and substantially built gear from McIntosh recalls the good ol' US of A with the same vigour that moon-landings, Disney and Bruce Springsteen do for everybody else. Here we found a pristine example of a MR74 analogue FM/AM tuner, which admittedly isn't as desirable as some of the earlier tubed Macs. However, this 1973-vintage beast couples a musical sound quality with some neat features such as variable selectivity, a boon on today's crowded VHF/FM band. Whether it's worth £450 or not, certainly in the UK, is also debatable. A sword of Damocles hangs over FM's future; our government is after all hell-bent on switching us over to mediocre DAB, and eventually flogging off that 20MHz slice of spectrum to the highest bidder. Shame.

TECHNICS SP10

2 One of the great joys of the Audiojumble is turntable-spotting. And if you're in the market for something that can spin those vinyl wonders, chances are you won't go home empty-handed. A classic Thorens TD160 had a £70 pricetag on it, and other 'tables we came across included several Linn

LP12s, Garrard 401s and budget Dual 505s. Over recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in well-engineered direct-drive decks. Cream of these was this Technics SP10, a three-speed unit that was commonly used by BBC local radio. The seller of this one, complete with plinth, wanted £1,000 for it. A more affordable example, in lesser condition, was sold the moment it was wheeled in by its owner. Such is the respect the SP10 commands!

NAKAMICHI 1000

3 At last year's Audiojumble, we reported on a Nakamichi ZX7. This, however, is an even rarer find. It's the Nak that started it all – the 1000. A true milestone, this was the deck that transformed the cassette from dictation tool to serious audio medium. Launched in the early 1970s, the 1000 established a number of firsts including a frequency response extending as far as 20kHz (a miracle with the cassettes of the day!), three heads optimised for their jobs, calibration and head azimuth-alignment. The chap selling this alas rather tatty example – the fascia of the left meter had been accidentally shattered, a cover is missing and the cabinet is rather scuffed – told



us it worked. And the price? £100 is maybe a small price to pay for a lump of heritage!

LABORATORY 9

4 Want a pickup arm for your bargain turntable? A fair number encompassing all manner of designs and eras, were on show. They ranged from Rega RB200s to a pristine £200 specimen of a SME Series 2. But for sheer scarcity, how about this boxed 'Laboratory 9' from Maidenhead-based Audio and Design Limited? A unipivot design, circa 1970, it was apparently designed for low-mass cartridges of high compliance tracking at low stylus pressures. Contact between the moving arm and fixed pivot was made using a mercury bath – and a phial of this poisonous liquid metal was still in the box, together with the necessary silicone damping fluid. What would Health and Safety make of this engineering wonder?

SPECIAL SONY

5 We certainly came across all manner of unusual gear, from 1960s-vintage, French-made transistor amplifiers to ex-BBC peak-programme meters. But, what's shown here is particularly rare. This a Sony U-Matic VCR that had been modified for the recording of stereo 16-bit digital audio in the early to mid-80s. The

seller told us that it – and another one – had come from a famous London studio (no, not that one) where it had been used to master some 'pretty famous' albums. Had you spent the £100 asking price, though, you would merely be the proud possessor of a vintage video doorstop. This is because the partnering PCM-1630 convertor was nowhere to be seen. And trust us, you wouldn't miss something so large – even at Audiojumble!

IMERGE

6 Yes, analogue accounts for the bigger slice of Audiojumble's attraction. But digital sources were very much in evidence, with plenty of CD players – from personals to two-box behemoths – vying for your attention. But our camera eye has instead captured for posterity, this Imerge Soundserver S1000. The first purpose-designed domestic 'hard-drive jukebox', the S1000 – basically, a specialised Linux PC with a high-quality soundcard and a clever user interface – would accept your CDs and 'rip' them to its drive for convenient playback. With a mere 80GB on board (admittedly a lot in the year 2000), chances are that music lovers with sizeable collections would have used the MP3 compression option. The £100 asking price beats the original RRP by some measure.



SHOW REPORT: AUDIOJUMBLE 2011, TONBRIDGE, KENT



CONNOISSEUR BD1

7 It's hard to believe now, but before 1980 or so it was common to make your own hi-fi; ready-built equipment of a decent standard was beyond the income of many at the time. Specialist magazines published amplifier designs (John Linsley-Hood's were popular and several self-constructed examples could be found at Audiojumble), and to this day Wilmslow Audio sells loudspeaker kits. But turntables? The Connoisseur BD1, sold by Yorkshire-based A. R. Sudgen, could be assembled into a self-built plinth over several spare evenings. It attracted a cult following and the seller of this still-boxed kit regaled us with stories of the tweaks hard-pressed audiophiles had devised to enhance sound quality – supports made of jam-jars, partially filled with water to move resonant frequencies out of hearing range. Hi-fi history, for a mere thirty quid!

ALTO

8 Not all of the hi-fi up for grabs at Audiojumble is old or packed with tubes. This 2005-vintage Audio Innovations Alto, one of the more striking-looking integrated amplifiers of recent years, is capable of delivering 35 watts per channel into 8 ohms. Capable of a most satisfactory musical performance, although lacking in absolute bass performance, it was considered to be one of the best in its price range at the time. Newbie audiophiles wanting to play LPs would need to buy an external phono stage, though, because one is not built-in. This Alto was in

excellent condition and could grace your hi-fi system for a mere £120 or near offer. That's pretty good value, considering the iconic amp sold for £300 when new.

LP HEAVEN

9 Audiojumbles are not just about the equipment – you can also buy media, LPs especially. Just about every format you can think of has some kind of presence there – cassettes, CDs, reel-to-reel tape, 8-track cartridges and of course vinyl. A number of stalls were selling lovingly preserved vintage vinyl, as well as audiophile pressings. One of Audiojumble's regular record sellers (Diverse Vinyl) could not make it, but others catered amply for the vinyl-lover.

This careful 180g reissue of Canterbury Glass' church-influenced 1968 prog classic *Sacred Scenes And Characters* was being offered for just £20 'on the day' by Stamford Audio – the Lincolnshire record label responsible for it.



GALES

10 Among this treasure-trove are the distinctively coloured forms of two Lecson AC1 preamplifiers – an early product of the Boothroyd-Stuart design team that went on to form Meridian. Utterly radical for its time, the AC1 – and its cylindrical power amplifier the AP1 – was awarded a Design Council award in 1974. These AP1s were both in excellent condition, as was the AC1 that was elsewhere on the stand.

Above the AC1s is another classic British hi-fi product that looks (and for that matter sounds) good even today. The chrome-plated end-plates of the Gale GS401 define the speaker – an infinite-baffle design which boasts two 200mm bass drive units, a 100mm midrange and a 19mm dome tweeter – nearly four decades after its original introduction. As for its 'Valentine virtues'? Well, it's a nice thought...

GEC/EMI VALVES

11 This stereo valve power amp is believed to be a GEC or EMI design, dating back to the late 1950s. Claimed to offer somewhere in the region of ten watts per channel, this would be a good match for efficient speakers. The seller, who was hoping to fetch

£395 for it, had undertaken a complete rebuild. All capacitors, resistors and bottles are new – and although the mains transformer is vintage, the output ones are hand-wound replacements. This, we were told, was because the originals had gone open-circuit. Enthusiasts with bigger budgets could choose from other valve amps – among those we spotted were Quad IIs, Grant-Lumleys, Radfords and Audio Innovations.

KEF B139

12 Spare parts are another Audiojumble opportunity for those with equipment in need of TLC. Tubes, test equipment and incomplete equipment sold for 'spares or repair' are among the show's key attractions. Take for example this pair of KEF B139 bass drive units. Used not only in KEF's own speakers B139s could also be found in the products of third-party manufacturers; it was a popular choice for imposing 1970s-era transmission-line designs.

Next Audiojumble: Sunday 9th October 2011. Early entry (9.30am) £10; standard entry (10am) £5. audiojumble.co.uk and our vid: youtube.com/watch?v=QpVm_WtABH4 ●



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Better quality CD?

A new type of CD technology offering improved data-recovery is taking Japan by storm. **Richard Black** investigates...

Two or three years ago, something called 'Super High Material' created a small blip on our radar. It's a new variety of polycarbonate plastic, used to make CDs which are claimed to sound better than regular versions. At the time it was only available in Japan and we naturally assumed a European launch would be along soon.

No such launch was forthcoming, but just recently SHM popped up again, gathering quite a following on the various websites that make up the hi-fi grapevine, 2011-style. It's still officially only available in Japan, but Amazon and other internet stores are offering quite a few of the discs, so we thought it must be worth a look.

According to the website cdjapan.co.jp, which seems to be the semi-official shop window for SHM, the 'format' gives 'enhanced audio quality through the use of special polycarbonate plastic... improved transparency... allowing for more accurate data-reading'. Calling it a 'format' is stretching a point a little and could lead to confusion, as could the logo which strikes us as bearing some resemblance to that for HDCD, High-Definition Compatible Digital, the higher-bit encoding system promoted by Pacific Microsonics a few years ago and later taken on by Microsoft. In our most cynical moments we might almost suggest... OK, no, we won't.

Data integrity

The idea of improving data-reading from a CD is hardly new. Hardcore audiophiles have been

super-cleaning, polishing and green-penning their discs for years, not to mention such practices as cutting a bevel on the circumference, all in the name of better data integrity. Of course, the objectivists always come back with the response that discs read well and have plentiful error correction built in and, well, bits are bits.

It's easy to see what's going on in terms of data integrity. You can 'rip' a disc on a computer which will report any uncorrectable errors, you can play it on an audio CD player and store the digital output on a computer, comparing it with the ripped version bit-by-bit and if you've got the right CD-reader, you can do a detailed error analysis, including correctable errors. Having found a CD title that was available in both regular and SHM versions, in stock and at a sensible price (some are eye-wateringly expensive in the UK), we ordered both and got to work.

Quite simply, it's obvious why the SHM will sound different and (to most listeners) better: it's mastered at a higher level. Not massively higher, about 1.3dB, but that's just about enough to tip the scales. It actually overloads in a few places, though even knowing where those places are we had trouble hearing it. Anyway, equalisation and dynamics are identical.

A similar level shift may or may not apply to other SHM discs. What's more interesting is the claim of more accurate data. Both discs read perfectly in three random CD players and two computer drives, but when we loaded them into the error-checker the SHM one had about half the number of errors. That sounds significant, but the non-SHM disc was still very comfortably within the error limits for perfect data reconstruction and, by general standards, is a very good disc.

If the digits coming out are identical, jitter is still a possible culprit. Lower correctable errors, some folks assert, give lower jitter. There is some theoretical justification for this but in practice we've yet to see it demonstrated in a modern CD player. We've tested dozens of players, sometimes with (deliberately) scruffy test discs and seen jitter levels around or below the limit of measurement.

Funnily enough, SHM does seem to have slightly better resistance to scratching. On the whole, though, this little episode simply strengthens our inclination to be suspicious of improvements to aspects of audio that weren't broken and the level shift is a salutary lesson in not overlooking the obvious!

Both discs played perfectly in three random CD players and two computer drives, but the SHM had about half the number of errors



With a market limited to Japan, we're not sure how much impact SHM will have here, despite web availability



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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Streaming made simple

Apple's AirPlay control system intends to make streaming something that anybody can do. **Ed Selley** looks at how we can all get involved

Whenever I discuss the possibilities that computer audio and wireless streaming may potentially offer, one of the most common objections raised is the complexity of starting from scratch. Whilst I have argued that a modicum of networking expertise is a more transferable skill than setting VTA (even for someone that reviews the odd turntable now and again), there is some validity to this. Even when a standard such as UPnP is applicable, there are enough minor differences between various pieces of equipment to ensure that the perfect results every time are not guaranteed.

Into this space comes AirPlay, the latest offering from Apple. This is not its first effort in this direction – the Airport Express and iTunes have offered reasonably straightforward wireless streaming for some years now, but AirPlay intends to make the business of streaming something that anyone can do. Any iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad or iTunes-equipped computer running the latest version of software is automatically equipped as an AirPlay source. If this device is on the same wireless network as a piece of audio equipment that supports AirPlay, a symbol will appear. Press it and the source will stream to the playback device, no set up required.

This is the main area of strength for Apple – there is nothing hugely innovative in AirPlay, but it takes good practice and good ideas from multiple sources and combines them in a slick, well marketed, widely available product.

This would be of little interest to the hi-fi fraternity, if the supporting source equipment was limited to portable speakers and desktop audio, but AirPlay looks to have secured some important manufacturer support. Bowers & Wilkins has upgraded the Zeppelin dock to support AirPlay and the Marantz NA7004 (see p60) will also act as an AirPlay client. Denon has announced that a number of AV receivers will be so equipped.

Talking to other manufacturers about AirPlay reveals widespread awareness of the functionality and considerable effort being expended to support it. More encouraging still is that some of these manufacturers are working at price points well into the high end. The wider the net is cast with AirPlay support, the more times the little symbol is going to appear on your source equipment. Familiarity is key to the success of any concept and widespread manufacturer support backed by the marketing grunt of Apple can only be a good thing.

Streaming

The benefits of AirPlay beyond simplicity are considerable. As I have mentioned in the past, one of the main selling points of the iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad is the interface. AirPlay keeps this interface in the hand, while delivering music to an audio system which is far superior to the practice of docking the device and picking up a little plastic remote to control it.

AirPlay is also selective about what you stream. If you are watching a music video on an iPad, AirPlay will let you stream the audio to an AirPlay client while the video continues as before on the screen in front of you. An AirPlay client with video could take both audio and video, but the idea that your hi-fi can get on with the job of giving you the best music reproduction possible whilst you enjoy it with an extra twist is an appealing one.

There will be those that object to the proprietary nature of Apple software. That said, the sheer number of Apple devices in the market (to say nothing of iTunes users) ready to operate as source equipment, gives AirPlay a momentum that should inspire many manufacturers to produce compatible equipment. A wide choice of suitable equipment coupled with absolute simplicity should hopefully win over a fresh set of converts.

AirPlay looks to have secured some important support: Bowers & Wilkins, Marantz and Denon



Coming soon: easy streaming with the simplest of control systems, Apple-style



ED SELLEY

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

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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The defining deck

The inexpensive Pioneer PL-12D was a landmark turntable that changed everything, says *Jimmy Hughes*

Someone young, newly encountering a Pioneer PL-12D turntable today, might find it hard to understand exactly why it was such an important, ground-breaking product. It has to be appreciated in the context of its time. Put simply, it trounced its competitors, creating a new benchmark for performance, finish, build and – say it loud – value!

During the early '70s, cheaper turntables offered three or four speeds and featured platters driven by a rubber idler wheel. This produced a nice high-torque drive, but was prone to transmit physical noise (rumble and hum) from the motor. Belt-drive was the answer – but was only found on much more expensive turntables.

Budget turntables were fitted with rudimentary tonearms, offering poor rigidity, high bearing friction and mediocre finish. Many featured auto-play cueing systems that involved levers and cams to ensure the arm lifted and returned to rest at the end of an LP side – something that increased mass and lateral friction.

The lids supplied with budget turntables were quite literally a joke – you either lifted them on and off (no hinges), or the hinges were crude and rudimentary. The lid might be held upright by means of a vulgar plastic strut. Even Linn's legendary LP-12 had such a lid in its earliest days – hence the slot on the right side of the plinth.

Into a world of shoddy compromise came Pioneer's PL-12D. It was a svelte two-speed, belt-drive deck with sprung-suspended chassis, a medium-mass tonearm with low-friction bearings and a quality of finish comparable to an SME arm. And it had – pause to draw a deep breath – a sprung-hinged lid.

Needless to say, that was its most important and amazing feature. With no fear of exaggeration, many of us regarded the PL-12D's spring hinges as the Eighth Wonder of the World. Never mind putting men on the moon; that was old-hat. A sprung-hinged lid that stayed put wherever you left it – that's where it was at.

Horribly tinny

Overnight, all those horribly tinny Garrards and Goldrings were rendered obsolete. How could you recommend a Goldring-Lenco GL-69 (or a GL-75 for that matter?) when faced with a PL-12D that did everything better for maybe 30 per cent less money? You could buy one for well under £40. At that price there was no competition.

Pioneer must've sold thousands of PL-12Ds. But, did anyone make any profit from it? Seems doubtful. The early '70s were the days of cut-throat cash and carry pirates and Pioneer



A belt-driven turntable was such a rarity in entry-level hi-fi circles that it was worth advertising on the product

was a heavily discounted brand. A specialist shop might ask £39.95, but you could still save £10-£15 by shopping around.

Arguably, Edgar Vilchur's legendary AR turntable – undoubtedly the most copied and influential vinyl-spinner of all time – provided a plausible alternative. But, only to a point. AR's arm bearings were nowhere near as rigid and friction-free and you had to forgo those amazing sprung hinges – a touch of luxury even Thorens couldn't match.

The PL-12D was a landmark product, because it was one of the first relatively inexpensive mass-produced consumer items to offer a standard of finish and an attention to detail even costly alternatives did not equal. It was one of the first instances where you paid less and actually got more.

Today, of course, we demand such things as a right. Buying a computer or a digital camera, we automatically expect each new model to offer higher technology for the same or less money. But, that's a comparatively recent phenomenon. Back in the sordid Seventies, you didn't always get top quality, even when you paid top-dollar... Pioneer's PL-12D raised the bar in its sector of the market. And, sadly, those manufacturers who did not meet the challenge – Garrard, Lenco – eventually fell by the wayside. Mind you, Linn's LP-12 – played slightly more than a bit-part in its demise, too. ●

Never mind putting men on the moon, that was old-hat. A sprung-hinged lid that stayed put wherever you left it – that's where it was at



JIMMY HUGHES

A hi-fi enthusiast for four decades, Jimmy's knowledge of system-matching and record-collecting are unmatched in the industry

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Brewing up a storm

I know that the effect of esoteric mains cables on audio performance is controversial and much debated. For years I remained extremely sceptical about their benefit, however I am now a complete convert – and not just with regards to hi-fi. So I'm writing to tell other readers about my experience.

I was discussing my firm disbelief with a friend who had recently spent £870 on an IsoTek mains lead. I did not use these exact words (I wanted to retain his friendship), but I thought he had lost his sanity. In the end, to settle the argument, he offered to lend me the cable for a weekend.

To my utter astonishment (and embarrassment) I did notice a definite improvement using the cable, most obviously with the power amplifier. I also tried it with the CD player, but the effects were less evident.

Now I know how cranky this will sound, but it suddenly dawned on me that the industry standard IEC plug on the cable would fit my kettle! Now if there's one thing I like just as much as sonic perfection, it's a really nice cup of tea, so I just HAD to try it. I unhooked the cable from the power amp and minutes later I was waiting for the kettle to boil.

The results were amazing! Firstly (despite the old adage about watched kettles), it actually boiled faster than with the standard lead. The hiss the kettle made as it came to the boil was also different – much richer and fuller in the low frequencies, and the annoying sibilance I had always noticed was all but gone.

But the best was yet to come, as having made the tea I did the taste test – what a flavour! There was a definite presence such that, when I closed my eyes, I felt instantly transported to Ceylon. I also noticed a marked difference in the 'fluidity' of the tea, which was almost indefinable; it was just somehow less 'lumpy'. There was also a subjective reduction in the amount of film that is sometimes present on the surface of a hot drink such as tea or coffee.



Can high-performance mains leads make a better brew?

I realise these effects will seem far-fetched and that I cannot produce any scientific explanation or measurements, nor have I tried a blind A/B test, but frankly the difference in the tea was so pronounced that there would seem little need for such technicalities.

It is, perhaps, best to just accept that the cable does what it does and not let our judgement become clouded by facts. I am indebted to my friend and am now saving hard to buy two of these cables – so that I can enjoy enhanced hi-fi sound, while securing for myself a better tasting drink at the same time!

Jonathan Peters, via email

HFC We detect a slight amount (OK – a lorryload) of cynicism in this one. It does ring true that some of the claimed benefits of aftermarket mains cables on audio equipment must by definition be repeatable on other pieces of equipment. We haven't really tested this theory very much – the Hi-Fi Choice kettle is one of the modern types with a captive mains lead base that separates from the kettle completely, thus negating

its use as a test subject. We are otherwise a little low on devices with IEC plugs.

With regards to a blind test, as we only have space for a single group test with listening panel and measurements, we have steered away from cables and chosen electronics, because it appeals to a wider variety of readers. The minitest where the vast majority of our cable reviews are done doesn't have the same amount of space available for measurements.

It ain't what you do

As winning the lottery seems highly unlikely, the high-end kit featured in *The Collection* must, alas, remain out of my reach. I am, however, smitten by the stunning designs that some manufacturers bring to the table. Awesome design, cutting edge technology, inherent musicality – truly works of art. There is no reason, however, why I cannot still dream!

This leads me nicely onto a recurring theme within the magazine, most recently featured in Jimmy Hughes's back page column – enjoying the music. Surely the most important point

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A9

Amazingly clean transparent sound
seamless integration
relatively unfussy about positioning
What Hi-Fi



A6

Outstanding true must hear hi-fi
What Hi-Fi

A5

All round brilliance
shines through
What Hi-Fi



Linn Akurate DS: state-of-the-art, but still sounds fantastic

of all, is being able to enjoy and appreciate the music itself, whether it is played through Continuum, Krell and Vivid or through an iPod and earphones.

While digital streaming and storage has taken the mainstream away from the delight of browsing through vinyl in record shops and CDs in HMV, it has opened up a world of new music. I take great pleasure in listening to previously unheard music through Napster and Linn Radio to name but two, noting my particular favourites and then buying them on CD, only to rip into Lossless format.

Having reasonably high-quality sound on a NAS drive ensures that more music than ever before is at my fingertips and only a click away. On the occasions that I have time to listen, really listen, placing the compact disc in a dedicated transport will always remain an option for me.

I had a little chuckle to myself while reading Graham Lynn's letter (HFC 342), when he mentioned "the posers (surely poseurs!) who want to show off with the latest Apple invention". These are probably the people who are having the most fun, getting the most out of their music collections. Presumably the person who told Mr. Lynn that "the sound quality on MP3 was absolutely fabulous" is the same person who told us that compact discs promised "perfect sound forever"?

Musicality, by its very nature is subjective. One audiophile's idea of musicality may not necessarily be another's. The important thing is to derive

pleasure from the music itself and this is often, overlooked.

Nigel Sharpe, via email

HFC *The strapline of Hi-Fi Choice has been 'Passion for Sound' for some years now and we do essentially agree that if you lose sight of the fact that the equipment is for the further enjoyment of music, you begin to lose sight of the point.*

To this end we have covered developments in hardware and software, such as Spotify and networked audio from the outset. Anything that makes music more accessible and easy to use is a good thing as far as we are concerned. We judge these new advances and technology in the same way that we have always done; do they get the feet tapping and give us a real sense of enjoyment and insight into the music? If they do, then the technology and the price are secondary.

At the same time, we are concerned that some of the improvements in choice and convenience are at the expense of quality, which we are less keen to endorse. Previous technical advances have managed to combine improvements in convenience with a matching improvement (or at least no real decline) in performance.

The iPod and computer audio are able to produce excellent results – we wouldn't be featuring them if they didn't, but we are concerned that the quality expectations of younger people are lower than they

have been for some time. It is a balancing act, but one we intend to keep working at.

Divided loyalties

I buy *Hi-Fi Choice* to support what I consider to be the most reliable and relevant magazine. The *Blind-listening Group Tests* represent one of the most important sections and so it was with considerable disappointment that I read the little piece included in the comparison of UK integrated amplifiers.

You excluded both Naim and Linn, which would surely be on most potential buyers' short lists, with a very feeble argument. Surely your prime loyalty should be towards your readers and not the manufacturers? Is it unreasonable to expect that in such situations you then purchase the two missing candidates? If resold after the test the net cost would only be a few hundred pounds.

The result would have been a much more complete test giving very valuable input to potential buyers like me. As it is, I am left with considerable doubt as to where your true allegiances lie.

John Forshaw, via email

HFC *To be clear, we excluded neither brand from the test. If a manufacturer is unwilling to participate, there is not a huge amount that we can do about it. In this instance, we felt that the absentees were sufficiently significant to warrant a quick explanation about their absence – something that we will continue to do when a group test has a puzzling omission*



Creek's Destiny 2: less of a group test winner due to absentees?

from the ranks. For a number of reasons, the concept of buying amps to make up the shortfall is a non-starter. The first (as with so much in life) comes down to money. While you are correct that depreciation need not be crippling, the sad fact of the matter is that a sustained additional cost of a few hundred pounds per month – whilst not an enormous amount – is not something that we could easily handle going forward.

Equally our "allegiances" could equally be called into question if we were the personal owners of any of the participants in a Blind-listening Group Test. People might question whether we would issue an honest, but negative review to a piece of equipment that we knew we needed to sell on? Even if we didn't specify which products we purchased, we would introduce a different area of doubt into the processes of the test. Put bluntly we're damned whatever we do, but going forward we are likely to retain the system that we are using at the moment.

With regards to the Blind-listening Group Test in question, we do feel that the Creek proved sufficiently dominating that we don't think our verdict would have been different, even with the absent models in attendance.

Point of reference

Most, if not all manufacturers now offer reference ranges or items. It was always my understanding that you need two reference points to get an accurate bearing. Ideally with a bit of distance between them. Could I, therefore, suggest that the next time you do a Blind-listening Group Test, you include something from a lower price range as your second reference point?

For instance, if you decide to do tonearms, you could include the tonearm from the Technics SL1200. I have read lots of articles in magazines

and forums which follow the same line, 'the first thing to do is change the tonearm, it's not very good'. I am sure that with the technology at your disposal you could test this arm in conjunction with the others. The differences between the high-end items are so small that we may not be in agreement, but only a technician can really visualise the differences. We could better comprehend the bar graphs, lab reports and harmonic distortion values if we saw the other end of the scale.

Hugh MC, via email

HFC This is an interesting idea although it alters the current basis of the Blind-listening Group Test measurements somewhat. At present, the measurements in the group test show the performance of the product relative to the group average – hence the positive and negative bars for each. There is no external reference – good or bad – included in this average. Essentially, what the measurements show is whether one or more products in the group test has measurements that are radically better or worse than the average of the group. We prefer this method because the measurements themselves are a compliment to our listening panel results

Introducing a fixed reference, would change how we showed tech lab results. Relative to either a baseline or absolute reference, all the results would either be consistently red or entirely blue. We can imagine that whatever references we would choose would prove to be contentious as well. None of these problems are insurmountable but we would need to know the changes will be an improvement. We are always looking for ways to improve and we will look at our measurements and their relevance to our readers.

Tech lab data: more or less straightforward for the introduction of a reference?

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



SENSITIVITY:

The manufacturer claims 92dB. Our in-room technique gives a slightly more modest 90dB – still good in view of the easy amplifier load

BASS EXTENSION:

The in-room -6dB point at around 35Hz is not particularly impressive, but it's close to the claimed 38Hz

EASE OF DRIVE:

A good sensitivity rating is here combined with a relatively easy-to-drive amplifier load that stays at or above 8 ohms throughout

FREQUENCY BALANCE:

The actual bass extension is modest. Across most of the band the overall FB holds within a tight +/-3dB limit

RESPONSE SMOOTHNESS:

Smooth response, although the two octaves in the upper midband (500Hz-2kHz) are a little prominent. Peak around 5.5kHz

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Climate of change



An audio 'gas-guzzler'?

I AM LOOKING at my latest electricity bill, which has continued on an upward trend that began a few years ago. I've been a valve amp user for over twenty years now, but I am looking at the attendant costs and wondering if it might be worth considering a move to solid-state.

We surely cannot be far away from a point where the dreaded energy rating stickers start to appear on new hi-fi equipment. It's even possible that at the more ordinary price points, the requirement for equipment to be energy efficient is going to become ever greater. Many of the current high-power amps are going to be reminiscent of muscle cars after the oil crisis – a huge amount of fun and remembered fondly, but no longer practical in the modern world. ●

Paul Towler, via email

WIN A RUSS ANDREWS POWERMAX MAINS LEAD WORTH £45!

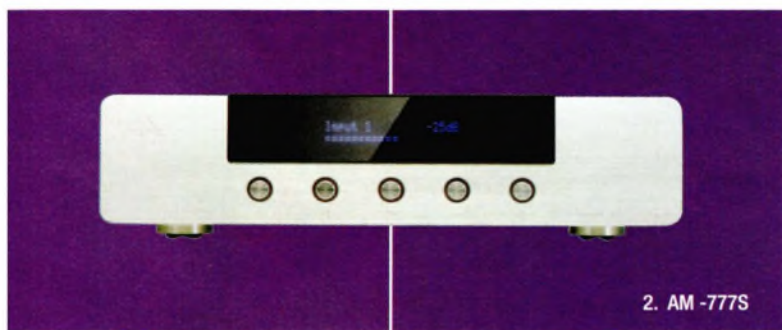
Letter of the Month winners will receive an impressive Russ Andrews PowerMax mains lead worth £45, so drop us a line now: hifichoice@futurenet.com



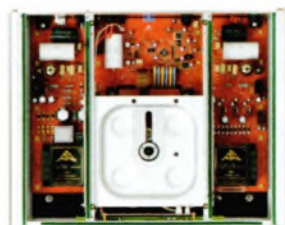


AMR 777 SERIES

1. **AMR** Compact Disk Processor CD-777 2. **AMR** Pre-Main Amplifier AM-777 3. **AMR** Phono Stage PH-77



2. AM-777S



3. PH-77T



Abbingdon Music Research

"Analogue, Musicality, Realism"



1. CD-777B

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The power to deliver 'clean' power

Syncro is IsoTek's latest product and the company's most advanced mains cable – but it's also so much more.

Syncro incorporates innovative electronics, housed in an anti-resonant aluminium case, designed to synchronise the mains supply in order to promote a perfectly symmetrical sine wave, delivering significant sonic improvements.

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"IsoTek is the leader in mains conditioning products"

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HI-FI CHOICE

















"IsoTek has built itself a reputation as a purveyor of mains conditioners that actually improve (as opposed to just alter) the sound"

HI-FI WORLD

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2006 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Full System Enhancer CD	2006 T.A.S. Editors Choice Nordost Thor by IsoTek	2006 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek Sigmas	2006 Hi-Fi News Product of the Year IsoTek Sigmas
			
2005 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Gemini 6 Way	2005 Hi-Fi Choice Editors Choice Nordost Thor by IsoTek	2005 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Titan	2005 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek Titan
			
2003 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek Mini Sub (Mk1)	2004 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek GII Vision	2004 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek GII Mini Sub	2004 What Hi-Fi? Category Winner IsoTek GII Vision
			
2002 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek SubStation	2003 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Mini Sub (Mk1)	2003 Hi-Fi Choice Editors Choice IsoTek Mini Sub (Mk1)	2003 What Hi-Fi? Category Winner IsoTek Mini Sub (Mk1)
			
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WIN!

A PAIR OF CANTON VENTO 820 SPEAKERS

WORTH
£1,200

TO WIN this fantastic prize please answer the following question:

Where has Canton employed Finite Element Modelling?

A: Tweeter

B: Bass driver

C: At the Airfix HQ

Please text your answer: Canton A, B, or C to 87474 or visit futurecomps.co.uk/ Canton and follow the instructions, leaving your selected answer and details where prompted

The Canton Vento 820s are some of the most talented speakers we've tested for around a grand. We loved the open, clean and agile presentation that escapes the confines of the cabinet; the speaker creates a fabulous and involving soundstage with outstanding stereo imaging. They always stay in control and retain excellent tonality.

These qualities are due in no small part to the level of care and attention that has gone into the design. Canton designs and build its own drivers, employing its Finite Element Modelling process to create a tweeter with a more rigid dome and excellent dispersion characteristics. The icing on the cake is the excellent build quality and beautiful finish that would be in keeping with a speaker twice the price.

Thanks to the nice people at Canton, we are giving one lucky *HFC* reader the chance to win a pair in this month's competition.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS To enter the Canton competition, you can either (a) text your answer to 87474 at any time between 03.03.11 and 30.03.11, or (b) enter online at www.futurecomps.co.uk/Canton with your entry being received between 03.03.11 and 30.03.11. 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/competitionrules2.s.p. 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.



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

THIS CRUCIAL test involves relatively rapid-fire comparisons of the test units for a panel of three listeners who are not aware of which product they are listening to. Levels are accurately matched and the test is conducted with the minimum of distractions, playing the same programme through each system while the listeners take notes of whatever pleases or bothers them.

In this way, an evaluation free of prejudices based on brand, price or appearance can be made, while the different tastes and sensitivities of each listener help round out the analysis and make it more widely applicable. Occasional repeats of kit give a 'sanity check', while years of experience help make the process efficient and reliable.

SIGHTED LISTENING

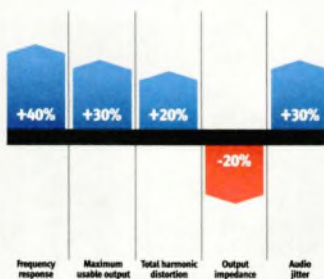
IN ADDITION to the 'blind' test, the author also spends a longer period listening to each system with various items of partnering equipment and a wider range of music. Apart from the obvious fact that this is how most people listen most of the time, this also has the advantage that interesting aspects of the sound can be investigated and different musical

styles tried out to see what works, not to mention experimenting with such variables as listening level.

Long-term reference pieces of equipment (some from past reviews) get substituted for the kit under test from time to time, in order to check on performance relative to the rest of the audio world, while recordings made by the author provide a live reference.

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



THE POINT OF THE LAB TESTS is twofold: first, to establish basic operating criteria for the equipment and make sure it will work under likely conditions of load, input level, etc. And second, to find out what lies behind the subjective observations noted. To this end, all the units in this group were checked for maximum output power and response flatness using basic analogue test equipment – signal generator and AC level meter, plus an oscilloscope to look for the onset of overload. The CD Players jitter levels were analysed using Miller Audio Research equipment and a specially designed test disc. Anything out of the ordinary is commented on in the lab report which compares like with like across the whole six-way group. Finally, five basic parameters are summarised for each unit in our unique bar graphs.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Amplifiers should have a response that's flat within a small fraction of a dB. We test this by sweeping a signal across the band and noting the largest deviation.

MAXIMUM USABLE OUTPUT

The basic power measurement is continuous sine-wave power into eight ohms. We also take into account short term delivery into low-impedance loads as well.

TOTAL HARMONIC DISTORTION

Each amplifier is driven to produce 10 watts into an eight-ohm load. We measure the distortion levels present at this level. 10 watts is real world power and represents the average power output consumers will likely use to drive their loudspeakers.

OUTPUT IMPEDANCE

A low output impedance means good control of a speaker driver, while a high one can lead to response irregularities. We measure this by examining the degree of output 'sag' when a load is applied to the amplifier.

AUDIO JITTER

This term is applied to distortion caused specifically by the instability in the 'clock', which controls the data-flow to the digital-to-analog chips. It's a subtle effect, but can contribute to sonic veiling.

TESTING EQUIPMENT USED

- Source:**
 • Cambridge Audio Azur 640C CD player plus DacMagic
 • Pink Triangle PT Export/SME309/Highphonic MCA3/EAR 'The Head'
- Amplifiers:**
 • EAR 802 preamp/519 power amps
- Speakers:**
 • ATC SCM20
- Bowers and Wilkins 803s
- Cables:**
 Furukawa, Kimber, QED, Wireworld

TEST MUSIC USED

- IAN DRURY: THE BUS DRIVER'S PRAYER AND OTHER STORIES



- PENGUIN CAFE ORCHESTRA: CONCERT PROGRAMME



- DVORAK: CARNIVAL OVERTURE (WATER LILY ACOUSTICS)



THIS ISSUE'S BLIND PANEL

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



PHIL HANSEN
JOB: OWNER, RED SHEEP COMMS.

PHIL IS A PR and marketing consultant, having previously worked as a marketing manager in hi-fi manufacturing.



STEVE REICHERT
JOB: PR MANAGER, ARMOUR HOME ELEC.

WITH TWENTY years of industry experience in technical sales and marketing, Geoff now runs Presto AV Ltd, a training company whose clients include CEDJA, BADA and a number of other manufacturers, distributors and retailers.



ED SELLEY
JOB: HFC STAFF EATER

ED HAS SPENT the best part of a decade selling, developing and supporting audio products. He now works full-time with HFC.

DEFINITIVE VERDICTS

No other magazine offers an equivalent listening programme

Few, if any, magazines in the world can equal our dedication and thoroughness in combining blind and sighted listening with extensive lab tests and detailed internal examination of equipment passing through our hands. Each of these is equally important and it's not just that we do them – we also bring to the table decades of audio experience.

Our listeners in the *Blind-Listening Group Tests* for example, are experts from within the hi-fi industry. Each and everyone of them is used to listening critically during product development and initial product testing. In fact, many of them also get involved in making recordings and their own music.

One of these is HFC's Technical Consultant Richard Black, who has been involved with designing, testing and evaluating audio equipment for a quarter of a century.

It's the culmination of all the aspects mentioned on these pages that makes for the most reliable hi-fi verdicts in the business.

TESTED THIS MONTH: CD/AMP COMBOS
TURN OVER NOW!

Blind-listening Group test

CD/AMP SYSTEMS £1,200-£1,840

Should you match your CD with your integrated?

Same-make source and integrated combos should make synergy a given. **Richard Black** investigates whether one-make set ups are the right place to start

'SYSTEM-MATCHING' USED TO BE one of the thorniest subjects in audio – the idea that components in a system, however good they may be in isolation, needed to be in harmony to give a whole that wasn't in some way less than the sum of its parts.

There's still something in that, of course, but almost certainly less than in days of yore. The simple reason for that is that the baseline of equipment performance has generally inched up over the years and on the whole, there's more accuracy and less 'character' in most hi-fi. (We don't necessarily expect everyone to agree with that, but it's definitely our feeling after all these decades of testing the stuff.)

Still, some element of character and personal taste remains and it's to be expected that there will be a degree of consistency within a brand and within a range. Even the big firms tend to have quite a small team of designers and critical listeners and these people will obviously have a tendency to 'voice'

equipment in a reasonably consistent way. With that in mind, it's likely that one-make pairs of source and amplifier will perform well as a unit, as well as looking well-matched and (often) sharing a remote control.

"The baseline of performance has inched up over the years, there's more accuracy today."

We are not for a moment trying to suggest that this is the only way to build a system. Simply because it is rather an obvious way, though, we thought it would be interesting to try one-make pairs of CD player and amplifier against each other. Could we extend this to include loudspeakers? In practice, probably not – not least because relatively few manufacturers make both speakers and electronics. We did have a lot of fun testing these pairs, though!



WITH A SPREAD between £1,200 to £2,000, these pairs form a fairly tight price group. They wouldn't quite fit into the general bracket of 'budget', but for most people they probably sit around the first upgrade tier and as such will be expected to perform to a high standard.

In most cases the CD player and amp are identical or similar in price, with only the Rega pairing significantly breaching that. Similarity in price is not such a bad thing – putting all one's cash into one end, or the other of a system, is seldom the most effective way.



ON TEST



Audio Analogue Crescendo CD/Crescendo amplifier
£600 each **P41**

The cheapest units in the group – but you'd hardly say they look like it. AA has really pulled off a trick by making the Crescendo twins look high end, without seriously skipping on the insides either. Some highly intelligent thinking has gone into the user interface, too, and the electronic volume control is particularly well implemented.



Exposure 2010S2 CD player/2010S2 amp
£710 each **P43**

In some ways the opposite of the very modern Audio Analogue, this is straight-down-the-line classic British hi-fi at its most understated. Nonetheless, the CD player includes some bang-up-to-date parts and the circuit in the amp has been honed over several years of use in its basic outline. Can it still compete?



Marantz KI Pearl Lite SACD player/amplifier
£920 each **P45**

Making the most of audio magician Ken Ishiwata's long association with the Marantz brand, these units implement much of his thinking in a significantly more affordable package. Smart looks combine with a traditional feature set on the amp, while the CD player usefully offers digital inputs, including iPod.



Rega Saturn CD player/Mira 3 amplifier £898/£460 **P47**

Rega through and through, these units conform to no-one's idea of 'average' from the outside. We've had plenty of good results from Rega in the past, though, so we're certainly not complaining. The top-loader CD transport is a particular boon for those who equate the scraping of a plastic tray with fingers on a blackboard.



Roksan Kandy K2 CD player/amp £750 each **P49**

Our experience of these units separately has been very positive and they put up a very smart appearance. Roksan, of course, made its name in turntables and later loudspeakers, majoring in pace, rhythm and timing. There's perhaps less scope for those attributes within electronics than with transducers, but can they still shine through?



Rotel RCD-1520/RA-1520
£695 each **P51**

Rotel has for many years occupied a careful middle ground between the small specialists and international mega-brands and has a strong following particularly for amplifiers. Of late, the range in separates such as these has contracted somewhat, but we felt among old friends as soon as we unpacked the boxes. If the sound has the old magic too...



AUDIO ANALOGUE

TRACK 05
TOTAL TIME 14:09

COMPACT DISC PLAYER

ROTEL

BALANCE

RECORDING

LISTENING

CD ● AUX ● TAPE 1 ● TAPE 2

AUDIO ANALOGUE

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



Introducing the new Olive 4HD. Choice without compromise.

The new ultra quiet 2TB Music server *



Store up to 20,000 high-resolution HD tracks in 24 bit. With more than 250 times the resolution of CD's, you'll hear the difference immediately.

Find the music you want - fast.



Use the high-resolution touchscreen to select by genre, artist or album; flip through album covers; do a quick search; or save internet radio stations as favorites.

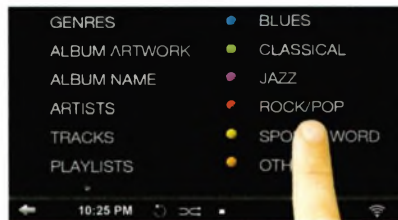


To control your Olive 4 from anywhere in your home, get our iPhone remote app.



Connect multi-room Olive 2 Hi-Fi Players to a wired or wireless home network and you can access your music library and enjoy it in high fidelity in every room of your home.

Easily integrates with your current system.



Just insert a CD, tap import on the touchscreen and a few minutes later your music is appropriately tagged and neatly categorized in your music library. Your Olive 4 Hi-Fi Server holds up to 6,000 CDs in original quality.



Unlike listening to your music on a computer, iPod or MP3 music players, the Olive 4 Hi-Fi Server combines a high-resolution DAC, optimized circuit design, CD quality digital sound, ultra-quiet hard drives and passive cooling to eliminate fan noise to deliver the best possible hi-fi audio experience

* Olive 4HD Music Server, from around £2200 at great Hi-Fi stores nationwide

Distributed in the UK by;

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01235 511166

www.henleydesigns.co.uk



Audio Analogue Crescendo £600 (each)

Understated elegance, clever stuff on the user interface front, plus an incredible price for Italian-made hi-fi

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** Italy
WEIGHT: CD/amp 7kg/10.5kg
DIMENSIONS: CD/amp (WxHxD) 445x81x350mm 445x81x380mm
FEATURES:
- (CD) Electrical digital output
 - (Amp) 5 line inputs (one switchable to bypass) at rear
 - 1 line input (minijack) at front
 - Amp nominal power: 50 watts
 - Record output
 - Headphone output
 - Single speaker output
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Audio Futura
TELEPHONE: 0039 0572 954513
WEBSITE: audioanalogue.com

It takes some doing, these days, to build smart audiophile products in Europe to a retail price of £600. These units are very nicely finished, with solid aluminium front panels, individual but easily usable ergonomics and a general feeling of class that one just doesn't expect at the price.

There are some very intelligent features, too, on the amp. The volume knob is a push 'n' twist control, which when briefly prodded switches to the next input. There are four different characteristics available for the electronic volume control, accommodating loudspeakers of different sensitivity (that is, with small volume steps over different parts of the range) or simply 79 1dB steps. Balance is adjustable and the amp can optionally be set up as a power amplifier. Inputs are all line-level, including one mini-jack on the front panel.

The CD player is rather plainer but offers all the usual features plus 'Sleep' mode, in which it switches to standby after a preset time. It only plays regular audio CDs, however.

The CD player uses a TEAC IDE (computer-style) transport, apparently optimised for audio, which keeps design simple on the control front and allows AA to implement a relatively complex audio output circuit.

The amp is based on integrated circuits for switching, volume control and actual amplification – including the output. Again, this keeps costs manageable and frees up some budget for a surprisingly large toroidal mains transformer.

Sound quality

Although they never felt this to be the most insightful combination, our 'blind' listeners enjoyed many aspects of the Crescendos' performance. They felt it was particularly good at the casual, droll style of the Ian Dury track. The bass line, while not especially deep or powerful, was easy to follow and clearly tuned. The solo piano track, with its captivatingly complex offbeat rhythms, was clear and precise, though possibly a little over-bright at times.

Opinions diverged rather more over the presentation of our full orchestral track. One listener found

this very satisfying, with power, good imaging and a striking sense of acoustic space. Another was less convinced, missing some energy and conviction in the reproduction and also some bass extension.

Our overall feeling is that this combo has a slightly inconsistent approach to detail, managing it better in some areas of the spectrum than others. Our limited experiments with the units suggested that the amp is something of a bargain, the CD player less obviously so, though still clearly competent.

TECH LABS

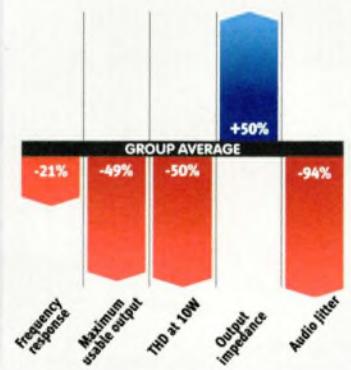
LAB REPORT

In our rigorous tests the Crescendo CD player and integrated amplifier did not fair too well. The integrated amplifier's frequency response variation was higher than usual at +/-0.23dB and real-world distortion was a bit high at 0.03%.

This isn't much distortion, but at 10W output, we expect solid-state amplifiers to run with lower figures. Additionally, we measured a lot of jitter from the analogue outputs of the Crescendo CD player – 1788.5ps. This is quite a lot and may affect the perceived sound quality of the CD player.

On the other hand, the Crescendo integrated has a very low output impedance of 0.02 ohms, which will help it control speaker cones with a vice-like grip. It is a modest-powered amp (45W), but with the right speakers this integrated amplifier will be able to reach loud SPLs with fairly low distortion.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



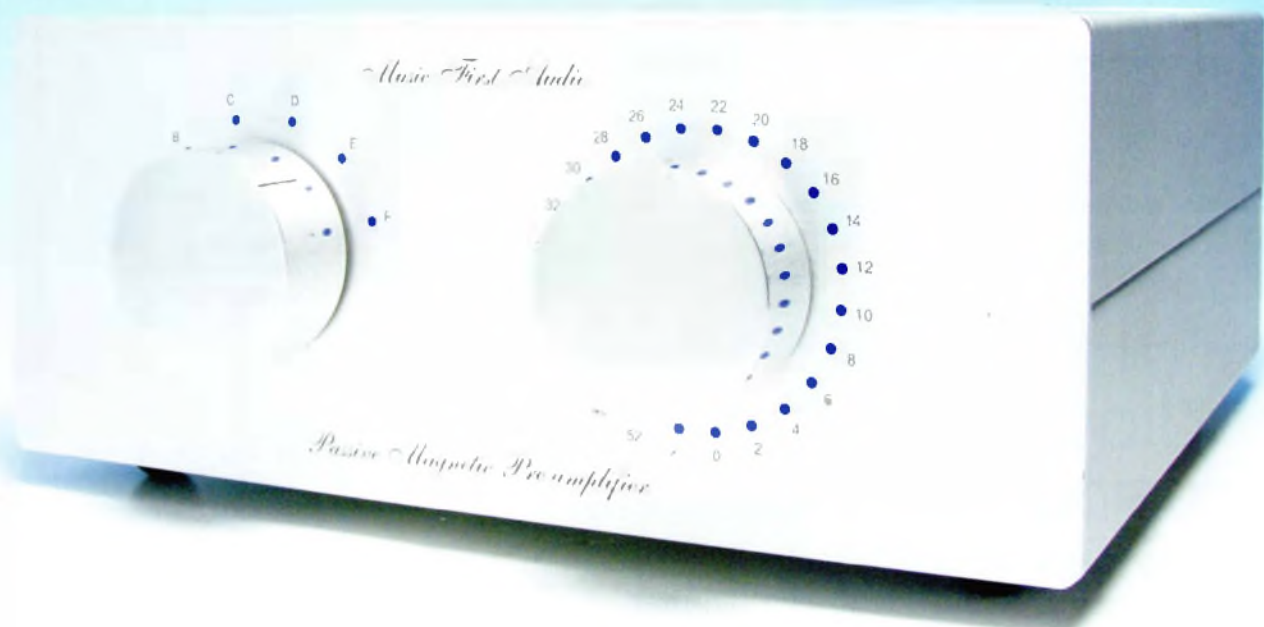
Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★
LIKE: Good detail in the midrange and treble plus good imaging
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★
DISLIKE: Bass can be a touch vague
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★
WE SAY: If you're not too bothered by the bass resolution, then this combo has a lot to recommend it
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL





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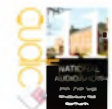
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they were listening to at the time. From the outset, the 2010S2 units drew almost unqualified praise for their performance, covering both technical aspects and general musical qualities. Above all, the listeners agreed that this combo really got to the heart of the matter and simply played music that one really wants to listen to. They are energetic and full of sparkle and life, with good attack and body to the sound, too and the results are highly convincing across the full range of musical styles.

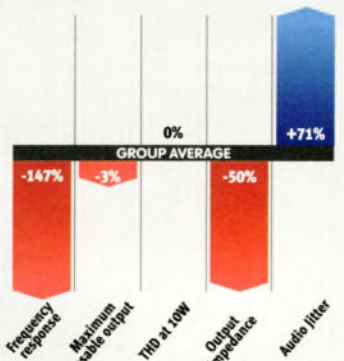
TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

On the tech bench, the Exposure combo measured very modestly. There wasn't much bad, but none of the tech data stood out either. Our real world distortion test of THD at 10W was relatively low at 0.02%. Output Impedance was modest as well at 0.06 ohms. The Exposure integrated should be able to handle most moderately sensitive loudspeakers. Usable watts were very good at 85W. It exceeded the manufacturer's specification by more than 10%. Jitter levels were also quite good and we measured 262.6ps of jitter.

The only measurement that stood out was the frequency response. At +/-0.47dB, this variation will more than likely have an influence on the sound of the integrated amplifier. Not a deal breaker, but we expected a flatter response from a modern integrated.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Exposure 2010S2 £710/£752

Looks and features are old-school to perfection, but the sound is bang-up-to-date from this 2010 combo

DETAILS

ORIGIN: UK

WEIGHT: CD/amp 5kg/7kg

DIMENSIONS: CD/amp: (WxHxD) 440x90x300mm 440x90x310mm

FEATURES:

- (CD) Electrical digital output (BNC)
- (Amp) Nominal power: 75 watts
- 6 line inputs (one optionally phono)
- Preamp output
- Record output
- Twin speaker outputs

DISTRIBUTOR: Exposure Electronics

TELEPHONE: 01273 423877

WEBSITE: exposurehifi.com

Exposure has always been the epitome of fuss-free hi-fi. The equipment is typically well put together but not flashy, adequate but not excessive on the features front and generally quite low key in a comfortably confident sort of way.

As with the Audio Analogue models, they are built to a tough price, but the savings necessary to do this have been achieved thoughtfully. Take the case design, for instance: the complete case of both units is made of aluminium – believed by many to be preferable to steel because of its non-magnetic properties. It's more expensive than steel, but Exposure has taken advantage of it in other ways, notably in the amplifier where its good thermal conduction is utilised in making the entire base the heatsink, saving a significant cost. Sure, that won't allow full-power operation for long periods, but music doesn't work like that and we found no signs of distress in practice.

These may be the latest versions of the long-standing 2010 range, but electronic construction of both

units is distinctly old-school, with through-hole components everywhere apart from the DAC chip and a few control parts; the amplifier even uses a single-sided circuit board. Each unit has a decent-size mains transformer and the CD player uses multiple parallel power supply capacitors and several regulators for the various circuit stages. The disc transport is a dedicated audio one – in our review sample it was a bit noisy mechanically, producing a rather louder hiss than we'd ideally care to have around the listening room.

The CD player's digital output is on a BNC, theoretically better than a phono though possibly a wasted effort given how often people end up with a BNC-phono adaptor in circuit. Over at the amp, features include a preamp output and the option of converting one line input to phono with an inexpensive add-on circuit board.

Sound quality

The fuss-free approach certainly seemed to do it for our listening panel, who were, of course, unaware of which combination



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Excellent integration, makes for lovely listenability
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Sonically, there's an occasional hint of hardness
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** An admirable example of affordable hi-fi. Pleasant to use and simply very satisfying
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL





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- Hi Fi Choice



PATHOS

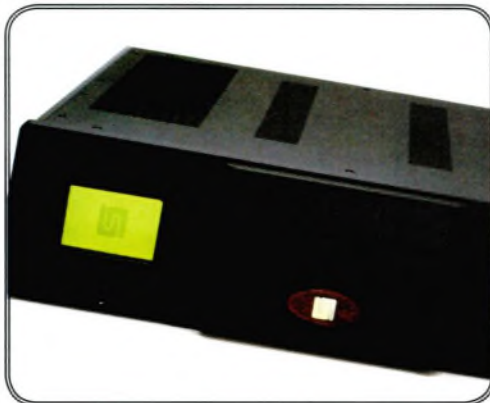
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Marantz KI Pearl Lite £920 (each)

Ken Ishiwata's finest brought down to a real-world price, the Pearls have real specs appeal and incredible heritage

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
Japan

WEIGHT:
CD/amp
14.5kg/20kg

DIMENSIONS:
CD/amp (WxHxD)
440x105x330mm
440x130x350mm

FEATURES:

- (CD) Electrical and optical digital out
- Electrical, optical and USB-B digital in
- USB-A music player/iPod input (front)
- (Amp): Phono stage
- Amp nominal power: 90 watts
- 5 line inputs
- 2 record outputs
- Preamp output
- Power amp direct input
- Two switched speaker outputs
- Headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR:

Marantz UK Ltd
TELEPHONE:
00 44 28902 79830
WEBSITE:
marantz.com

Few individuals in the hi-fi world are as visible and as charismatic as Ken Ishiwata, very much the public face of Marantz hi-fi. He has been with the company for 30 years and the 'KI Pearl' amp and SACD player were released to mark the anniversary. But Marantz understands the value of the 'trickle-down' effect and the Lite variants bring most of the KI Pearl experience to a less well-heeled audience.

The look and construction of both units is typical of Marantz's mid-range stuff of recent vintage, albeit enhanced by the side cheeks which are finished to an almost implausible degree of piano gloss. Both feel very substantial, though, quite a lot of this is due to a thick piece of steel having been screwed to the base (not just ornamental; it stiffens the assembly and provides very effective damping through the constrained layer effect).

In fact, circuit design is not vastly different from cheaper Marantz kit either, but that's really just a

reflection of the fact that basic circuits have evolved about as far as they're going to go. What you get here is a more painstaking realisation of the basic configurations, with fillips like high-grade components, mechanical damping, some extra measures against interference and so on. The amplifier has a particularly generous mains transformer and a well-filled phono-amp board, while the disc player sports a latest-generation DAC chip and, of course, SACD replay alongside good old CD. Digital inputs (including iPod) bring the DAC's capabilities to users of computer audio.

Sound quality

There seems to be a bit of an issue here with performance at the frequency extremes, which to some extent wrong-footed our listeners and shows up one of the downsides of relatively 'quick-fire' listening tests. In fact, by the end of the fourth track it seems from their comments that the panel members had already started to adapt to the

slightly laid-back treble of these units and were, therefore, better placed to enjoy the notably civilised and detailed midrange. Including the upper bass and most of the treble – it really is quite something.

Of slightly more concern was a little slackness in the bass itself: this doesn't seem to be a lack of level – church organ plays back just fine – more a sense that the bass is lagging the rest of the ensemble by a little. It's most obvious in styles like rock, with full-bodied driving bass.

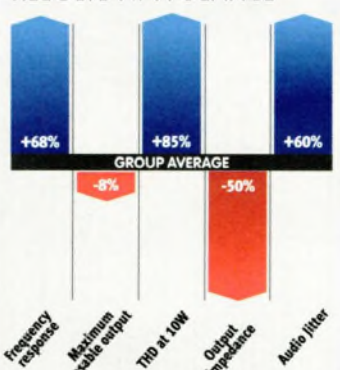
TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

The Marantz combo turned in a good performance. Output power was well above the manufacturer's listed specification of 70W into 8 ohms – we measured 95W of usable output power. Combine this with an output impedance of 0.06 ohms and you have a combo that should be able to power most modern speakers without a problem. Distortion levels were exceptional low at 0.003%.

Frequency response was quite flat at +/-0.06dB, so users should not be able to hear any sound anomalies. Marantz is known for making very high-quality source components, so we were surprised to find that the Pearl Lite SACD player had quite high levels of jitter – we measured 365.1ps.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Detailed, precise and beautifully liquid midrange
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** The treble is rather reticent; deep bass can be slow
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** When it's good, the sound is excellent but the treble takes a little getting used to
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL





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Rega Saturn/Mira 3 **£898/£460**

The legendary Essex rhythm kings are making a rare group test performance and always remain on the beat

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK
WEIGHT: CD/amp 5kg/6.5kg
DIMENSIONS: CD/amp (WxHxD) 435x100x270mm 435x100x270mm
FEATURES:
 • (CD) Electrical and optical digital outputs
 • (Amp) Amp nominal power: 60 watts
 • Phono input
 • 5 line inputs
 • Record output
 • Preamp output
 • Single speaker output
DISTRIBUTOR: Rega Research Ltd
TELEPHONE: 01702 333071
WEBSITE: rega.co.uk

You'll notice that the CD player is a good deal dearer than the amp and one of its more upmarket touches is an aluminium front panel, whereas the Mira amp has plastic. Despite that, they match very well visually and the control illuminations chime pleasantly together, too. Again, control layout is somewhat out of the ordinary, with the amp apparently lacking a knob; as with the Audio Analogue, the volume knob also selects inputs. In this case, you press it to convert to selector mode, then rotate to select. You soon get used to pressing it a second time to go back to volume mode, which it otherwise does automatically after a few seconds.

Once again, it's possible to see where costs have been cut, in the amp at least, but it's nothing we'd feel inclined to complain about. The mains transformer isn't the biggest ever, but it's more than good enough for the rated output and the main amplifying circuit is neatly executed with discrete transistors.

There's a phono stage built-in and full record output and monitoring. Output connectors are nickel-plated

rather than gold, but that's probably more due to Rega's noted disdain for tweekery than cost-saving!

The Saturn employs a top-loading transport, which is very quick and pleasant to use and commits to audio purity via a pair of latest-generation Wolfson DAC chips and discrete-transistor output circuits.

Sound quality

Our listeners were quick to point to a slight lack of bass from this combination, but it doesn't seem to have interfered very seriously with their enjoyment of the sound. Indeed, one pointed out in the very same sentence that this was one of the most foot-tapping presentations of the group, which certainly serves well in any strongly rhythmic music. At the same time, there is a good degree of clarity in the sound, with detail always present, but not unduly spotlit.

Interestingly, two comments on the same track specifically mention the lack of any harshness or 'nasties' – this kind of double-negative is uncommon in our experience and taken together with the general tone of the comments, we feel it may be because there wasn't much to say beyond 'it sounds right'.



Intrigued by the bass character, we separated the units and listened to each with familiar references. It seems clear that the amp is responsible for this transgression and indeed the Saturn CD player is, if anything, quite strikingly full-voiced in the lower reaches.

The two are well-matched in terms of detail, though it's also worth noting that the phono stage in the Mira restores some of the neutrality that's missing via line inputs. For serious vinyl lovers, we would recommend something a little fancier.

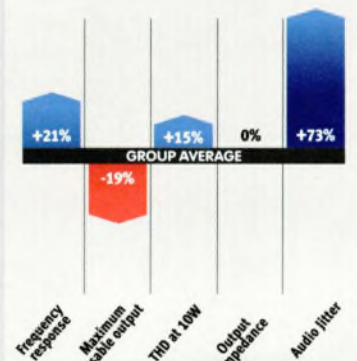
TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

The Rega combo performed admirably on our test bench. Output power of the Mira 3 integrated was 71W into 8 ohms. This exceeds Rega's listed specification by 18%. Output impedance was also commendably low at 0.04 ohms. We measured 246.9ps of jitter from the Saturn CD player. This is a very good jitter measurement.

The only measurements that weren't stellar were the frequency response and THD at 10W. Frequency response was average at +/-0.15dB. User's should not hear any sound irregularities, but we would have liked to of seen a flatter response. Real-world distortion levels were average as well. We measured 0.017% distortion, which is quite low, but we think distortion levels should be lower at 10W of output power.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** The sort of sound that can easily make you forget you're listening to reproduction
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Some signs of stress under sustained hard driving
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** With the right speakers it could be a stunning combination
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL





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Roksan Kandy K2 £750 (each)

Futuristic-looking, the K2 combination is lively and assured and with great detail and resolution

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK
- WEIGHT:**
CD/amp 9kg/14kg
- DIMENSIONS:**
CD/amp (WxHxD)
435x105x380mm
435x105x380mm
- FEATURES:**
- (CD) Electrical, optical and AES/EBU digital outputs
 - (Amp) Amp nominal power: 120 watts
 - Phono input
 - 6 line inputs
 - Bypass input
 - Record output
 - Preamp output
 - Single loudspeaker output
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Henley Designs
- TELEPHONE:**
01235 511166
- WEBSITE:**
roksan.co.uk

These two well turned-out units, are in many ways the naggiest in the group, with illuminated legends that appear behind the semi-transparent panels that surprise you at switch-on. The chassis is very well built from heavy-gauge steel with aluminium front panels and there is very good provision in important areas – for instance, the power supply in the amplifier (very big mains transformer and a goodly dose of smoothing capacitance), the twin pairs of output MOSFETS on a large internal heatsink and good-quality components throughout.

The amp is built with a mixture of integrated circuit and discrete amplifying devices, while the CD player sticks with integrated circuits including a latest-generation DAC chip. The player's power supply is also quite generous and the analogue output stage is a little more sophisticated than most. The amp also has a built-in phono stage, a tiny assembly hiding modestly on the main circuit board.

Sound quality

There seems to be a slightly warm balance to the sound the Kandy units make together. For one of our listeners, this seemed more like a lack of sparkle in the treble, but the others tended to point towards lifted low end. As usual, we would tend to suspect that it's not an actual frequency-response shift, but it doesn't really seem to do much more harm than one: maybe it's a little harder to ignore, but it's not unpleasant.

This combination shows great aptitude in balancing rhythmic qualities with detail and resolution. Such a balance is less rare now than it was only a few years ago, but it's still not something one can take for granted at this kind of price and the Kandy's manage it very well. They are very good with the human voice, which is invariably natural and communicative and also well-balanced with the accompaniment.

The rhythm and timing were particularly obvious to our listening panel in the solo piano track, which features deliberately

confusing offbeat accents which, though many replay systems, can be extremely hard to follow. Here they were more obviously intentional and the whole track had a great bounce to it, the piano almost seeming to project out of the loudspeakers and into the room.

Perhaps the full orchestral track tested the limits of the units' detail, but it still had excellent body and a good sense of many individual players working together. On the whole, it seems the CD player is a little more detailed than the amp.

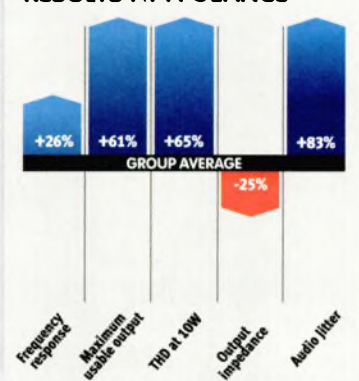
TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

The Roksan Kandy series has been on a role since its introduction. On our test bench, it performed exceptionally well. Power output exceeded the Roksan's claim by a wide margin and we measured 142W into 8 ohms. There is plenty of power on tap from this integrated amplifier and combine this with a decent output impedance of 0.05 ohms and you get a unit capable of a lot of power. Distortion levels at real-world power are also exceptionally low at 0.007%. The Kandy K2 CD player also had outstandingly low jitter. We measured 154.6ps, which puts this source component into the state-of-the-art class in terms of jitter levels.

We measured a +/- 0.14dB variation in frequency response. This should not affect the sound, but a flatter response tends to contribute to a more truthful sound.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- OVERALL**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Lively and assured on the rhythm and timing front
- DISLIKE:** Detail not always the best and disappointing feel to volume control
- WE SAY:** Very civilised units with a good blend of qualities



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Rotel RCD-1520/RA £695 (each)

Rotel's only current CD player and integrated amplifier retain a classic look, but hide clever modern internals

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** Japan/Malaysia
WEIGHT: CD/amp 4.5kg/8kg
DIMENSIONS: CD/amp: (WxHxD) 435x100x320mm 435x95x365mm
FEATURES:
- (CD) Electrical digital output
 - (Amp) Amp nominal power: 60W
 - Phono input
 - 5 line inputs
 - 1 line input at front (minijack)
 - 2 record outputs
 - Preamp output
 - Headphone output (minijack)
 - Two loudspeaker outputs (switched)
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Rotel Europe
TELEPHONE: 01903 221 763
WEBSITE: rotel.com

Believe it or not, these are Rotel's only current CD player and ditto integrated amplifier, though there's quite a choice of separate pre- and power amplifiers. If you're familiar with past Rotels these don't look too outlandish, though there are tweaks and updates internally. The most obvious bit of updating is the slot-loading CD transport, but under the lid there's plenty more bang-up-to-date technology, including Wolfson's latest and greatest DAC chip, plus good-quality op-amps. The 'media player' input on the front of the amp is a distinctly 21st-century touch too.

Internally, the amplifier looks a good deal less modern than the CD player. Where the latter has surface-mounted components assembled on a small and very neat circuit board, the amp is full of through-hole components on a very large and quite spread out board, with quite a lot of flying wires around the place. Rotel has also put money into specific areas, for instance the twin pairs of output transistors.

Most manufacturers would only use single pairs in an amp of this rating, but twins give better protection against hard driving (not to say abuse) into low-impedance loads. The volume control is a good-quality part from ALPS, motorised and input-switching is by means of relays, though the separate record-out selector is a mechanical switch. Like Marantz, Rotel includes tone controls and these, plus the record selector and the phono input, make for a very well-featured amp.

Sound quality

There's much to admire here, but some specific areas still drew criticism from our 'blind' listeners. The good points include a very open, welcoming sense of acoustic space with performers clearly laid out in the soundstage. Tonally the sound is even, with just a little brightness in the treble, but in a largely harmless way which helps keep details sounding lively and urgent. Bass extends very well and very evenly, with plenty of power when needed, but no risk of overpowering the mix.



Timing is good, though perhaps not the best of the bunch. Detail is also a little bizarre, being very good in complex music but slightly less assured in smaller ensembles, the reverse of the common finding. Still, this is all rather nit-picking when it's clear that these units were much enjoyed overall by our panel and indeed by us in our sighted-listening tests.

If you're after high-resolution sound this may not be it, but simple musical pleasure is here in abundance.

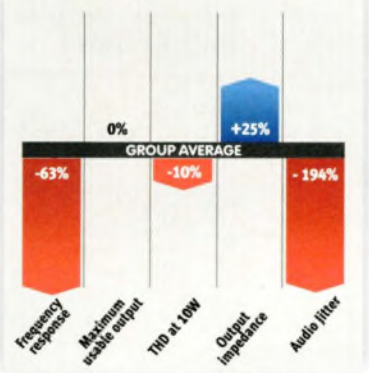
TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

The latest iteration of Rotel components performed commendably on our test bench. The integrated amplifier produced a relatively flat frequency response of +/-0.07dB. Users should not be able to discern any sound anomalies. Output power was very good at 88W into 8 ohms. It exceeded Rotel-listed specification by a staggering 46%. Output impedance was equally impressive at 0.03 ohms and the amp will have no trouble driving most speakers to loud SPLs.

The real-world measurement of THD at 10W produced mediocre results, we measured 0.022% distortion. This is low distortion, but at 10W we expected lower levels. The 1520 CD player produced very high jitter levels -2705.6ps. Levels this high could create noticeable timing errors and may affect the sound quality of this source component.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★
- LIKE:** Enjoyable presentation, full-hearted and inviting
DISLIKE: Ultimate resolution a little limited; phono stage rather dull and unconvincing
WE SAY: A well-specified system that should appeal to orchestral fans

OVERALL



Lab conclusions

Different brands with different technical approaches, our consistently strong group threw up a few surprises on our lab test bench

TECH LABS

Each manufacturer in our *Blind-listening group test* has put countless hours of engineering into its products and it really shows. Our own rigorous tests have then put them through their paces to see how well they perform. As is sometimes the case, the 'winner' wasn't the one that performed the best in our tech lab. Perfect figures often don't equate to the best sound quality, which is why *Hi-Fi Choice* doesn't obsess with test and measurement like some mags.

The Audio analogue pairing bring up the rear of the pack. The measurements are the poorest of the

group and this seems to have had some bearing on the outcome of the blind listening sessions.

Next up, we have the Roksan and Rotel. Both of these combinations put in excellent measured performances – in the case of the Roksan, the best in the group. The Rotel also put in a strong performance whilst showing some very innovative design features. This was echoed in their performance in the subjective listening tests, which picked up on some notable qualities.

The Marantz produced the second best measurements in the test and matched this with a strong showing

from the panel. The Rega produced solid measured performance and was consistently well-placed by our blind listeners.

But the real surprise as far as our lab tests were concerned was the poor results from our ultimate winner, Exposure. This pairing did not measure especially well and in some areas was nearer the bottom of the pack than the top. But, their subjective audio performance was never in doubt, however and the combination won over our experts in both the blind- and sighted-listening tests. As we said, measurements are only part of the story.



Choosing a 'matched pair' of separates from the same manufacturer has a few clear advantages. Both units are likely to have been designed with one another and should compliment each other sonically and aesthetically. There is also a good chance that both units can be controlled from a single remote handset. Do remember that mixed combinations can out-perform single market systems so always demo first.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Make/model	Audio Analogue Crescendo	Exposure 2010S2	Marantz KI Pearl Lite	Rega Saturn/Mira 3	Roksan Kandy K2	Rotel RCD-1520/RA-1520
Price	£600 (each)	£710/£752	£920 (each)	£898/£460	£750 (each)	£695 (each)
Sound	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	Sound doesn't quite live up to the high-quality visual appearance of the units, with detail somewhat inconsistent	Affordable hi-fi at its best, making great music in a way that doesn't draw attention to the equipment	When it's good, the sound is excellent, but the treble takes a little getting used to. Bass could be more energetic	Plays music very convincingly. With the right speakers (warmish balance) it could be a stunning combination	Very civilised units with good integration and textural discrimination, which transcends the limited analysis	A well-specified system that plays music with gusto: at its best with large groups of instruments

Key features

Digital output elec/opt	1/0	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1 + AES/EBU	1/1
Formats	CD	CD	CD, SACD, MP3, WMA	CD, MP3, WMA	CD	CD
Line inputs	5	5	5	5	6	5
Phono input	No	Option	MM	MM	MM	MM
Headphone output	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Preamp output	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Lab conclusions

E = Excellent | AA = Above average | A = average | BA = average | P = poor

Frequency response	+/- 0.23dB BA	+/- 0.47dB P	+/- 0.06dB A	+/- 0.15dB BA	+/- 0.14dB BA	+/- 0.07dB A
Max usable output	45W (8 ohms) P	85W (8 ohms) E	95W (8 ohms) E	71W (8 ohms) E	142W (8 ohms) E	142W (8 ohms) E
THD at 10W	0.03% A	0.02% A	0.003% AA	0.017% A	0.007% AA	0.022% A
Output impedance	0.02 ohms E	0.06 ohms A	0.06 ohms A	0.04 ohms AA	0.05 ohms A	0.03 ohms AA
Audio jitter	1788.5ps P	262.6ps A	365.1ps P	246.9ps AA	154.6ps E	2705.6ps P

Blind-listening verdicts

Matching single-brand CD players and amplifiers is not only one way to build a hi-fi system, it has some positive advantages as our blind group test reveals

WE SAID IN THE INTRODUCTION

that we had a lot of fun with this particular CD player/amp combo group test and while there was, of course, the odd criticism along the way we were overall very impressed by the standard.

The blind-listening session concentrated exclusively on the electronics as pairs, but during our hands-on sessions we experimented a little with splitting them up – without, it must be said, learning a huge amount of new information about them. It seems our gut feeling – that performance should be pretty much balanced between source and amp – was proved right.

So in a high-scoring group we gave the lowest marks to Audio Analogue, Roksan and Rotel. Four stars for value in each case might seem a touch mean, but it should also be pointed out that all are highly capable, even if we felt that they didn't quite bring as much to the party as the others.

Of the three, the Rotel did play some sweet music, while some of its specifics could, to our ears, take a little improvement and it did lack some detail.

The Rega and the Marantz come confidently recommended. If you have strong views on how hi-fi should look you won't take long deciding between them, one way or the other, but if sound takes top priority it's not cut and dried.

The Rega is probably slightly more mellifluous, the Marantz more rhythmically energetic, but they both achieve good things in both areas. Roksan's weak point here is fine detail, while Rega could, perhaps, use a slightly more forthright bass.

In both cases, however, we felt that the phono stage performs well and both amps work well with a vinyl source. In fact, the choice between the two is very much a question of taste and we wouldn't presume to dictate. ●

THE WINNER IS...

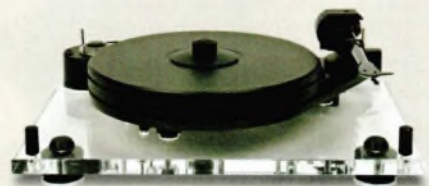
EXPOSURE'S 2010S2 pairing may not look like the sexiest thing on planet hi-fi and may, in fact, be getting on a bit in some ways, but the sound is as fresh as the proverbial daisy. What we most appreciated about these units was the way they combine detail, tonal balance, imaging and all the other hi-fi specifics with simply enjoyable music-making of a high order. There's more than a hint of the high end in the way they integrate the different strands of a musical mix, without homogenising them or losing the individuality of each voice or instrument, and the result is sound full of new details even in familiar recordings.



Looking to build a system? We look at three perfect partners to make a sublimely synergistic set-up around our CD/amp combos

TURNTABLE: Pro-Ject 6 Perspex £1,280

Magnetic suspension and a very high-tech arm made of carbon fibre combine here with low-resonance materials and profiles to give a high-performance turntable that's smartly built on an acrylic base and topped off with a dust-banishing lid. A disc clamp is provided to help couple LPs to the plastic platter, which should reduce the level of parasitic vibration within the disc itself when playing. The sound is well balanced tonally apart from a very slight hint of lift in the lowest bass and there is plenty of detail on offer. We were particularly impressed with the deck's handling of musical dynamics, which are wide and very assured across the whole range. Partnered with a suitable cartridge, this is an excellent way to get top-quality results from your vinyl collection at an affordable price.



LOUDSPEAKER: Spendor SP2/3R2 £2,295

In many ways this speaker harks back to the company's origins in the 1970s. Of particular interest is the use of relatively flimsy, but very well-damped, materials for the cabinet construction – the aim being both to reduce the amplitude of any structural resonances and to move their frequency down to the bass where we are much less critical of this kind of thing. A simple two-way design, with a large reflex port, the SP2/3R2 is on the large side by modern standmount norms, but doesn't unduly dominate a room. Its sound is remarkably natural and very well detailed, with very good timing. Bass may not always have quite the 'kick' that some models offer, but not everyone (or every piece of music) wants that and the upside here is very convincing and communicative music-making. With a relatively easy load and good sensitivity, this speaker shouldn't cause stress to any of the amps in this group.



IPOD DOCK: PURE i-20 £80

Upgrades don't come much more cost-effective than this. The PURE i-20 is an iPod transport with a digital output. In time you can connect this to a separate DAC, but what makes the i-20 phenomenal value is the fact that it also has an onboard DAC that possesses more than a reasonable performance out of the box. Give the i-20 files of reasonable quality, or better still lossless and prepare to be impressed. The PURE is an engaging and tuneful addition to any system and one that allows your friends to see just what an iPod is capable of. If you are fortunate enough to own an iPod Touch, which thanks to onboard Wi-Fi can stream media from the internet, the i-20 becomes your system's gateway to new music.





Pride of Britain



Exclusive! **Paul Messenger** looks at the new £1,250 slimline CM8, a high-value tower that's shaping up to be the pick of the Bowers range

Bowers and Wilkins currently has four main ranges of hi-fi speakers: the budget-priced 600 series; the super-slim, metal-jacket XTs, the upmarket 800 Diamonds and the CM-series, one of which (the sensibly priced CM8) is exclusive to *Hi-Fi Choice* this month.

You may recall that we reviewed the CM9, the larger of the floorstanders in a recent *Blind-listening Group Test* (HFC 337) and while it is clearly good material value for money – significantly bigger in both cabinet size and driver area than its group test rivals – it was also arguably rather too large for our 4.3x2.6x5.5m room, delivering a bit too much bass output when the effects of room gain were added to the substantial bass output of a stereo pair.

The good news is, however, that the CM-series has evolved significantly down the years. As a world leader in hi-fi loudspeakers, Bowers and Wilkins is definitely a pacesetter in driving the market forward and it has a clever ability

to find and create niches within the overall loudspeaker scheme of things and build appropriate models to suit. New models are continually replacing earlier ones in order to introduce engineering and styling improvements. So, with the memory of the cabinet size and substantial bass of the previously mentioned CM9 fresh in our minds, we were naturally very enthusiastic when the company announced the more petite CM8.

Instead of two 165mm bass drivers, for example, it uses two smaller 130mm units and that use of smaller bass drivers also permits a slimmer, more compact and consequently more attractive and domestically acceptable enclosure. As is usually (though not entirely logically) the case, this smaller model is also considerably less costly at £1,250 per pair, against £1,800 per pair for the CM9.

The slim advantage

Whereas the CM9 rather looks like a bit of a bruiser, perhaps best chosen by those with large rooms and/or a penchant for heavy rock, the CM8



The CM8 is an exceptionally elegant package: slim, sharp-edged and surprisingly hefty

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Bowers and Wilkins CM8

ORIGIN: UK/China

TYPE: Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT: 19.5kg

DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 165x96x28mm

FEATURES:
• 25mm alloy dome tweeter

• 130mm woven Kevlar FST midrange driver

• 2x130mm paper/Kevlar bass drivers

• Port on rear near base

• Tube-loaded tweeter

• Super-slim enclosure

• Finished in wenge or rosenut veneers, or painted gloss black or white

• Separate plinth enhances appearance and stability

• Concealed magnets attach the grille

• Silver trim decorates the drivers

• Spike or stud floor coupling

DISTRIBUTION: Bowers & Wilkins

TELEPHONE: 01903 221500

WEBSITE: bowers-wilkins.com

is an exceptionally elegant package. The very slim, sharp-edged and surprisingly hefty and solid enclosure comes dressed in a choice of two fairly dark real-wood veneers (wenge and rosenut), with painted options in white and high-gloss black.

A moulded frame grille attaches via concealed magnets, so there are no unsightly mounting lugs if it's left in the carton. Omitting the grille normally adds a little to the sound quality and also here reveals a considerable amount of shiny silver bling surrounding each of the four drivers. Regrettably, however, the metal tweeter dome diaphragm is left entirely unprotected (except during transit) and is, therefore, very vulnerable – especially to inquisitive tiny fingers, who tend to regard a shiny silver 'button' as something that's crying out to be pressed. Said 25mm tweeter has a shiny silver faceplate with a cut-out segment that allows its diaphragm to be closer to the midrange unit as would otherwise be the case.

Because the small diameter drivers allow the enclosure to be unusually slim, it's possible to view the CM8 as a little like a CM1 with

“As a world leader in hi-fi loudspeakers, Bowers is definitely a pacesetter in driving the market forward.”

a built-in passive subwoofer. However, it differs in using an FST-type driver (see Talking Point) in place of a bass/mid drive unit. Since an FST is designed for minimal cone excursion, it therefore only performs midrange duties, a fact which necessitates a separate bass-only section.

Driver bang for your buck

The two bass drivers are reflex-loaded by most of the enclosure's internal volume and a port located low down at the rear. Left open, this port is tuned to around 37Hz, but Bowers and Wilkins also supplies a two-piece foam bung. Inserting the whole bung virtually blocks the port and effectively re-tunes the enclosure to sealed-box operation (with the drivers/box resonance at 53Hz), reducing bass output. This option is likely to work best if the speakers have to be located fairly

Q&A...

INTERVIEW WITH MIKE GOUGH,
SENIOR PRODUCT MANAGER,
BOWERS AND WILKINS



HFC: *Could you give us some more information about the Chinese manufacturing side of your operation, such as who owns it and where it's located?*

MG: The factory is in Zhuhai, which is just over the water from Hong Kong. It belongs to the Group and is divided into two with both Bowers and Wilkins and Rotel brand products being manufactured there.

What steps do you take to ensure high standards of manufacturing sample consistency and quality control?

Exactly the same ones we do for anything made in Worthing. In fact, you would be hard pressed to see any difference in equipment and procedures between the two locations. Every driver or complete speaker system is compared in end-of-line testing to a laboratory-maintained reference. Apart from a visual inspection and the basic rattle and buzz test, we measure frequency response, impedance and distortion as well as checking for air leaks.

Do you ship loudspeakers direct from China to your distributors, or via the UK?

We have several distribution hubs around the world that take products directly from Zhuhai, depending on the final destination. For Europe, most products are shipped via either Worthing or Halle in Germany, although Russia gets shipments direct from Zhuhai. We have other hubs in Boston, USA and Hong Kong.

Traditional hi-fi speakers were much wider than today's ultra-slim speakers like the CM8. How do you cope with the latter's lack of baffle width?

Slim is good; it benefits dispersion. Of course, if you have a large diameter bass driver you have to have a wide cabinet, but almost every speaker we have made with a large driver has had smaller midrange and tweeter housings on top. The exceptions have been products like our CT Series that are designed to be built into custom furniture and not to be free standing.



IT'S NOT UNUSUAL to find that three-way designs – especially those with twin bass drivers, as here to have a rather low impedance minimum in the upper bass region.

The CM8's load drops briefly to around 3 ohms in the vicinity of 140Hz, which does imply that amplifiers capable of ample current delivery are preferable and also, perhaps, that valve amps and class A designs might be better avoided. That said, the voltage sensitivity is quite high, so a modest nominal power rating should prove ample.

Furthermore, Bowers & Wilkins' clever double 'sleeved' bung provides some flexibility in tuning the port to suit the room characteristics.

close to a wall. The 'half-bung' option, removing a foam cylinder from the centre of the bung and leaving just a foam sleeve, re-tunes the port to around 28Hz.

Just below the port sits a standard-moulded terminal block with two pairs of terminals. The speaker was supplied with these linked by brass strips, which may be removed to make bi-wire or bi-amp connection.

Underneath the whole speaker, a plain but unquestionably effective plinth bolts to the base of the tower providing secure spike accommodation, improved physical stability (presumably to meet the EC 'topple' test), and also enhancing the overall appearance.

Getting connected

It was, perhaps, a trifle unfortunate that the CM8s arrived during a period when the very much bigger and significantly more costly 800 Diamonds were still residence in the listening room! The 800s intimidating presence led you to surmise that perhaps the little pipsqueaks didn't stand much of a chance. And yet, while there was no denying the significant superiority of its bigger brother, the CM8 by no means disgraced itself in comparison.

That said, it took a little time to find the best location and port tuning for the CM8s. When the port is completely open and the speakers positioned well clear of walls, the bass region as a whole sounds a little too dominant. Sleeving the port undoubtedly helps somewhat, though the most even bass delivery is actually achieved with the ports completely blocked and the speakers located about 25cms out from the wall. In the end, that 25cm spacing seems to give the best overall results, but it's really a matter of personal preference, whether to block the port completely or leave just the sleeve in place.

The speakers were mostly driven from a system comprising a Naim NAC552 preamp, with NAP500 power amp, driven from Naim CDS3/555PS, Rega valve Isis CD players and a Magnum Dynalab MD106T FM tuner.

Vinyl replay was supplied via a Linn/Rega hybrid record player, with a Soundsmith Strain Gauge cartridge. Cables included examples from Naim, Phonosophie, The Chord Company, TM Systems and Vertex AQ.

The ear test

While the CM8 is neither the liveliest nor the smoothest speaker around, it is fundamentally very well balanced overall and delivers ample deep bass alongside an impressively wide dynamic range. The latter has much to do with the solidity of the enclosure here, assisted by the stability of the plinth, both helping provide a firm, substantial and stable 'mechanical earth' against which the driver diaphragms can operate.

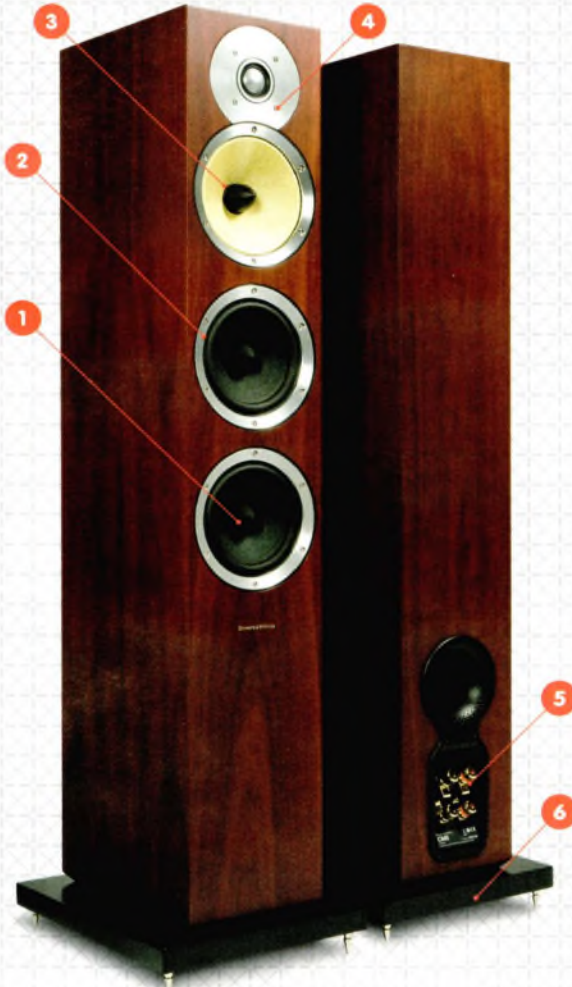
That same very solid build, not only helps minimise cabinet coloration and maximise the dynamic range, it also plays an important role in helping to create very fine out-of-the-box stereo imaging. The other key factor that plays a part here is the unusually narrow enclosure, which helps to ensure tight image focus. Add in the observation that both timing and overall coherence are also very good, and you have a recipe that also adds a measure of transparency to the soundstage, ensuring decent depth perspectives. Furthermore, the consistently wide dispersion helps maintain good correspondence between the axial and the integrated power responses.

The midrange is certainly the CM8's greatest strength, combining smoothness, evenness and considerable delicacy, so that human voices are both believable and expressive. It has become something of a Bowers and Wilkins tradition to incorporate a degree of restraint through the presence zone. When taken to extremes this may lead to a rather 'shut-in' character, but that isn't the case here. While the speaker does indeed show a modicum of restraint and certainly doesn't sound 'upfront' or 'in yer face', the top end sound balance is actually quite bright and this provides more than ample compensation for low-level listening. Indeed, the sound can actually tend to become a little aggressive if the volume is turned up high.

While the midrange is its strongest point, the top end is also quite smooth and well ordered, if rather less sweet than the best. It certainly behaves very well, but does have a tendency to draw a little too much attention to itself and can also contribute to the slightly aggressive tendency when the volume is turned up high.

However, the bass end of things doesn't really measure up to the performance higher up the band. It's not so much that there's any shortage

DETAILS



- 1** Twin bass drivers have 95mm paper/Kevlar/resin mix diaphragms mounted in a 130mm cast alloy frame
- 2** Polished alloy trim decorates the mounting of all four drive units
- 3** Midrange is handled by a 130mm FST (fixed suspension transducer) driver with 120mm Kevlar diaphragm
- 4** Rear of 25mm metal dome tweeter is loaded by a 'tube' transmission line, the better to absorb rearward diaphragm radiation
- 5** Twin terminal pairs feed a crossover network with the fewest possible components, including a single capacitor tweeter
- 6** Separate plinth enhances the overall appearance and improves the physical stability

TALKING POINT

SINCE THEY FIRST appeared more than a decade ago, Kevlar-coned 'fixed suspension transducer' (FST) have become an integral part of all Bowers & Wilkins' larger three-way models. Because a midrange-only driver doesn't need to make the substantial fore'n'aft excursions required of a bass or bass/mid driver, the surround at the edge of the cone has no need to accommodate excursion and can merely 'butt-up' to the cone edge to avoid leakage. Consequently its shape and material can be specifically chosen to terminate and absorb (rather than reflect) the vibrations that travel out through the woven Kevlar matrix cone from the voice coil.

of bass extension or relative loudness, rather that it lacks a little poise, a sense of purpose and any serious authority and grip. It hangs on in OK, but doesn't really drive the music along in the way a larger, more powerful (and costly) speaker can. This matters little with much of the material that's around, but certain tracks and albums where the bass effectively takes the lead, can prove a significant disappointment.

Playing Massive Attack's *Mezzanine*, for example, especially the stand-out track *Inertia Creeps*, which uses several instruments through the bass region, it was quite difficult to distinguish the separate parts. Furthermore, the rather limp and vague bass delivery lacks the grip and momentum needed to bring the music properly to life and provide it with sort of tension and sense of drive that's essential in conveying the menace inherent in this track.

Associated with the relatively weak discrimination through the bass region, dynamic expression is also a little lacking, though not unreasonably so in view of the driver complement and price point.

Indeed, within the inevitable constraints imposed by its price, the CM8 does a pretty impressive job and if its low frequency performance is a weakness, quite the opposite is true of the imaging, which is precise, beautifully focused and entirely free from any boxiness.

Interestingly, although this isn't a particularly tall loudspeaker, it's well able to create height as well as depth in the stereo soundstage. However, the bottom line, at least as far as most potential customers will be concerned, is that this is an exceptionally attractive-looking loudspeaker, well-suited to British rooms and selling at a very realistic price. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Superior midband, fine imaging and wide dynamic range
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Bottom end lacks convincing grip, drive and authority
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Exceptional looking speaker with a fine midrange and superior imaging
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Bowers & Wilkins



Concert for one

P5 Mobile Hi-Fi Headphones What's it to be? The rush-hour commute, the stuffy office, the queue at the local supermarket? Or the control room at Abbey Road Studios, a box at the Met, the front

row at CBGB in 1976? The noise-isolating P5. It's not a set of headphones. It's a transportation device.

Listen and you'll see.

www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk/p5

Assured elegance

It's classically styled, yet crammed full of technology, **Richard Black** meets the radio that streams, surfs, receives and replays

Best known for its classically styled desktop radios, Roberts has launched a feature-packed contemporary radio, that retains the iconic 'Revival' look that keeps them selling by the truckload.

What makes this black-only beauty so special is its connectivity: FM; DAB; Wi-Fi internet radio; media streaming; USB-A and a traditional line-in. So, not only are you spoilt for choice in terms of receiving broadcasts, you can also playback lossless audio files from your home computer, with all the portability that comes with a small 1kg box. The 100-page manual explains all, but ours was ready in just five minutes.

A wireless, wireless

Calling this a 'radio' distinctly undersells it, but it's true, not least because its most impressive functions rely on wireless connection to a computer network and, hence, to the internet. This at once means that you

have access to not only your local quota of DAB and FM stations, but also the 17,000 or so internet radio stations, foreign radio, special-interest stuff, or even your usual fare which may very well be available in better quality via the internet than on DAB. The bitrate may be the same, but the coding systems used for internet radio are generally more efficient than DAB's MPEG 2.

Personalised radio

Since you're connected to your home network, it makes sense that the Revival iStream can also play audio files on your home computer, as long as they are the right format. Obviously that includes the usual MP3 and also MP4/AAC and, we were delighted to discover, FLAC as well. WAV doesn't seem to be, though, nor are other lossless formats. It's not that it matters so much for a little portable, just that true audiophiles are likely to have their digital music library in an uncompressed or lossless format anyway.

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Roberts Revival
iStream

ORIGIN:
UK

TYPE:
Table radio/media
player

WEIGHT:
1.1kg

Dimensions:
(WxHxD)
250x150x125mm

FEATURES:

- FM/DAB radio
- Internet radio
- Media streaming
- Detachable telescopic antenna
- Line input
- Stereo headphone output
- USB-A input
- Alarm clock functions

DISTRIBUTION:
Roberts Radio

TELEPHONE:
01709 571722

WEBSITE:
robertsradio.co.uk

There's also the option of tuning to the subscription 'personalised radio' service at last.fm, and a USB socket on the top of the unit allows you to plug in suitable music players or memory sticks.

Modern traditional values

The retro look of the Revival iStream conceals the inevitable hi-tech innards, though the loudspeaker is nothing fancy – a single drive unit, bass reflex-loaded by the case. The back side of the case hinges open to give access to the battery compartment.

On the top, the layout manages to be nearly as retro as the rest of the case, with a pair of knobs and some push-buttons. The knobs are twist-and-push controls, which look after tuning, input selection and also a selection of options in menus, while the push-β buttons bring up the main menu, give information choices and so on.

Shock verdict

When we reviewed the non-iStream Revival a few issues ago we were rather disappointed by its dull sound. Either the iStream was always different or Roberts agreed with us, as this radio seems very well balanced on the whole. It's not the cleanest, or least coloured, or loudest table radio we've ever heard, but it does have a nice general quality that makes the most of lively music, does a fair job of quieter, more subtle stuff, and reproduces voices very well with excellent intelligibility. Bass is obviously limited, while treble consistency is good off axis.

Maximum loudness is fine in a room of about 20 square metres and we didn't detect any obvious rattles or whistles from the cabinet. There are quite a few competing products around, but as internet-compatible table radios go this is good value in terms of both features and sound. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★☆ **LIKE:** Lively, sound with decent levels of detail and neutrality; good features

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly limited loudness and very little real bass

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★☆ **WE SAY:** A handy way to get internet radio and media streaming throughout the house

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL





Streaming made easy

Marantz's NA7004 is the first 'proper' hi-fi product to make streaming simple says **Malcolm Steward**, thanks to Apple's AirPlay technology

Given its very reasonable price and wide-ranging capabilities, the Marantz NA7004 network audio player might well tempt those who have not yet sampled the delights of networked music. Be warned, though, that despite its size and weight this is not an all-in-one player like the Arcam Solo Neo or the Naim Uniti. There is no amplifier lurking inside the case to drive your loudspeakers... the most it will accomplish is powering your headphones. It simply provides a line-level analogue output to feed music to your preamplifier/amplifier and a digital output to supply a DAC or digital recorder.

What makes it especially appealing, though, is the ease with which it

integrates into any home network/hi-fi system and its extremely user-friendly approach to what can sometimes be a tricky discipline to get your head around.

Introducing Apple Airplay

Recently, however, the NA7004 has become even more accommodating thanks to the inclusion of Apple's AirPlay wireless connectivity. This technology means that you can wirelessly transmit music from your iTunes library (be it on a laptop, desktop PC, iPod/Phone/Pad) to your NA7004 and so listen to it through your hi-fi system. You can play and control the music with your iPhone or any i device running the iOS4.2 operating software. Marantz also has a system remote control app for the

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Marantz NA7004

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Network audio player

WEIGHT: 6.5kg

DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 440x110x350mm

FEATURES:
• Airplay connectivity to iTunes

• Unit control with remote or iPhone app

• No wi-fi network connection – only Ethernet cable

• DLNA 1.5 compatible

• Optional Bluetooth connector available

DISTRIBUTOR: D&M Audiovisual Ltd

TELEPHONE: 00 44 28902 79830

WEBSITE: marantz.co.uk

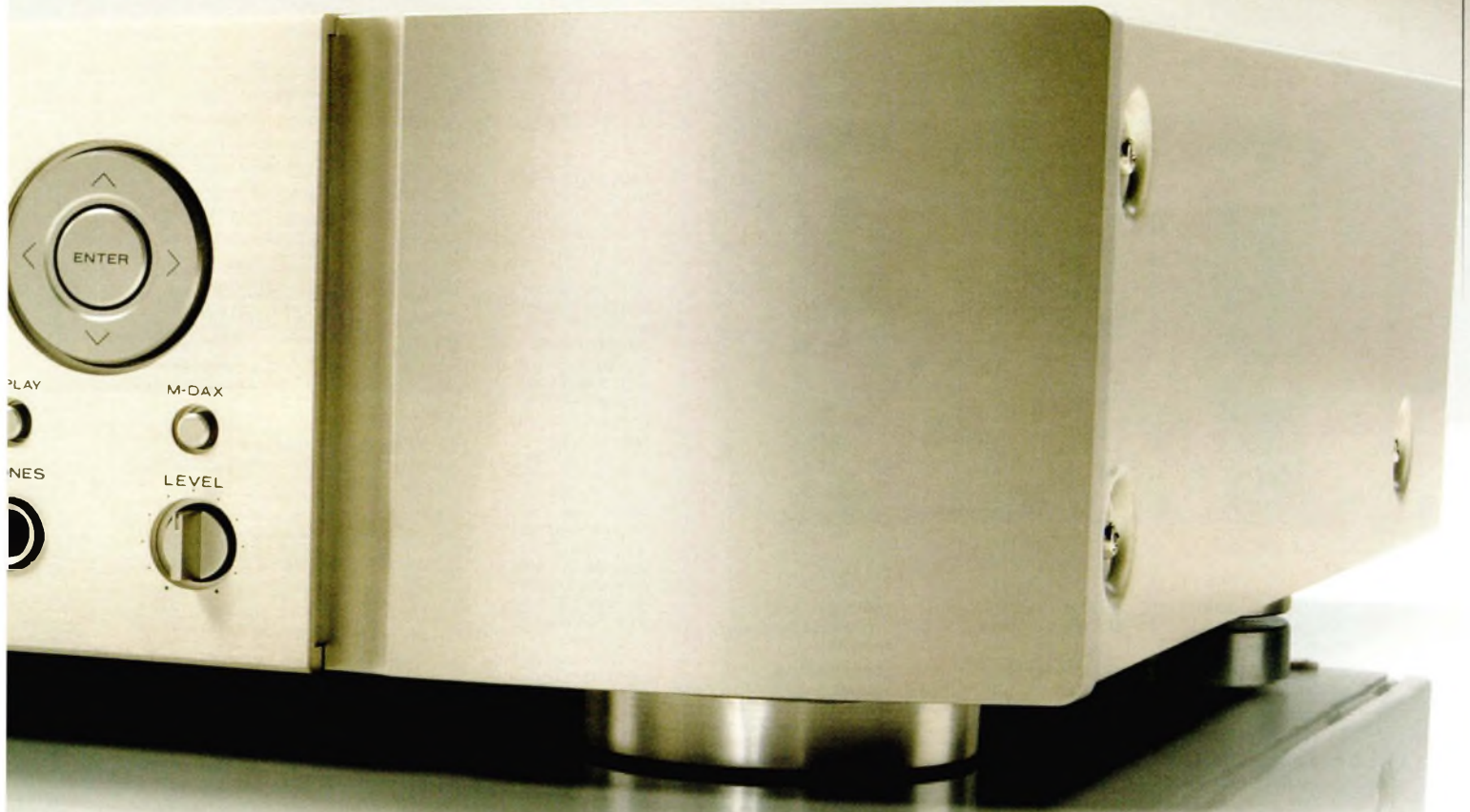
ubiquitous iPhone called Wizz – no puns intended – for your added couch potato convenience.

The NA7004 user manual is a weighty tome. It needs to be, because this unit offers such a wealth of features that need documenting. It is rather like the audio version of the Swiss Army knife.

As well as its network capability, it also offers: AM/FM radio; DAB radio; internet radio; Napster; Last.FM; USB playback – for memory stick and computer and, of course, the NA7004 can also operate as a stand-alone DAC using its integral Cirrus Logic CS4398 chipset. The DAC will handle signals at sampling frequencies up to 192kHz through the co-axial and optical inputs and up to 96kHz through its USB port.

The USB connection seems to have been better implemented than some we have encountered to date: it was completely free from noise suggesting that Marantz has taken great care over the power supply arrangements.

The NA7004 boasts HDAM-SA2 (Hyper Dynamic Amplifier Module) circuits in its analogue output stage, along with M-DAX (Marantz Dynamic Audio Expander) processing to 'optimise' data-reduced audio sources such as MP3 and AAC files. This is said to compensate for the high-frequency roll-off in such files,



and has a three-position selector. We found it to be musically pretty ineffectual, even when listening to MP3s from an iPhone. Switching it on merely introduced slight tonal variations and occasionally created an impression of enhanced vitality in a mix, but it was not something that we felt we could never live without. This, of course, may not be a feature aimed at audiophiles who should rip losslessly, but it may help mainstream users with compressed collections.

The unit fared much better rendering higher-quality uncompressed files

“The NA7004 is a product that virtually demands our recommendation”

from our NAS drives. Presentation wasn't extreme high-end, but it was more than acceptable. Bass sometimes appeared poorly defined, although quite weighty and the top end did not have outstanding cut or presence, but the music's fundamentals were adequately portrayed.

What really and truly delighted us was the sheer ease, simplicity and reliability with which the NA7004 switched between its selection of inputs: it provided carefree access to an endless variety and flow of music at the touch of the input button.

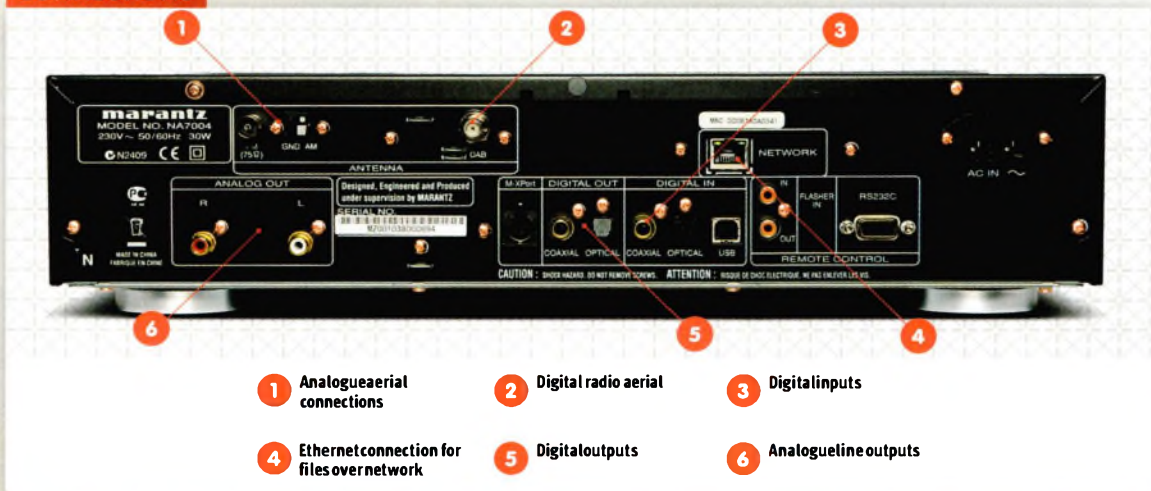
Marantz has even considered users who have no home network: they can simply connect the NA7004 through a USB cable to their PC and the PC will recognize the NA7004 as an external sound card. You can then pipe music from your computer to your hi-fi.



THERE HONESTLY are no products that can be used in a like-for-like comparison with the Marantz NA7004. The only two that come close enough to be considered are the Naim UnitiQute, which costs nearly twice as much or the more costly, Linn Sneaky DS. Both of these, however, do have amplification on board.

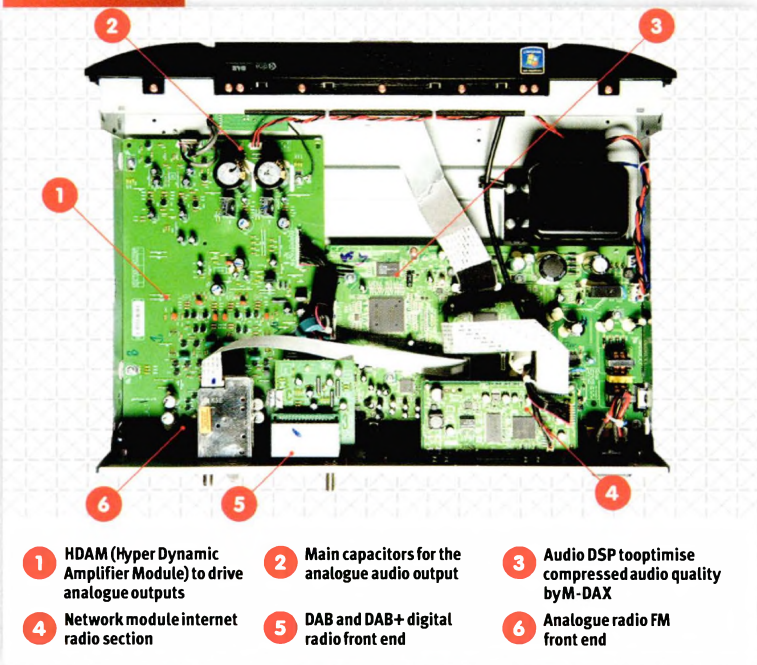
Regardless, we auditioned the NA7004 alongside the UnitiQute and think that the Marantz, although not wi-fi enabled, certainly has the edge in terms of facilities, while the Naim triumphs in terms of absolute sound quality when streaming from a NAS drive: it is musically more engaging. For anyone looking to integrate their iPod or iPhone with their hi-fi system, the Marantz makes an excellent choice, especially if you use the cable-free, Apple Airplay facility.

CONNECTIONS



- 1** Analogue aerial connections
- 2** Digital radio aerial
- 3** Digital inputs
- 4** Ethernet connection for files over network
- 5** Digital outputs
- 6** Analogue line outputs

HIDDEN TECH



AIRPLAY EXPLAINED

AIRPLAY IS APPLE'S new wireless technology that has already attracted the attention of major league audio companies including Bowers and Wilkins, Denon, Marantz and JBL. Any AirPlay-enabled devices appear as a menu item on iTunes (Windows and Mac versions) or on your iPod or iPhone display. So, you can select where to send the music you are listening to on your computer or iPhone by simply choosing a destination such as 'Marantz [NA7004]' instead of 'iPhone'.

You are not restricted to a single destination. Choose 'Multiple Speakers' and your music will find its way to every AirPlay-enabled receiver within reach through wi-fi and ethernet, along with its cover art and metadata. Nor do you need to be in the same room as the device to which you are directing the music output from. You can be in one room with, say, your iPhone controlling what is playing in another location.

inconsistent, varying from one album to another. Some appear shouty and unrefined by contrast. Bass, though, seems stodgy and overblown. The cure for these ills is bypassing the analogue outputs and feeding a digital signal straight to a DAC. The presentation immediately improves dramatically – the NA7004 becoming far more even-handed in the way it presents tracks and is more consistently balanced across all its inputs. The player does show an especially appealing way with voices, rendering vocalists and radio announcers with realism and authority. We were occasionally convinced that the voice we heard was that of another person in the room and not a comment issuing from the loudspeakers.

Its internet radio performance is also impressive, as is its showing with streaming services such as Napster and Last.FM. iPod and iPhone users will enjoy its brisk, full-blooded and detailed presentation, especially with lossless AIFF files, heard either through the USB/iPod wired input or by way of Airplay. It even sounds enjoyable playing 320kbps MP3s through the hi-fi. There, we said it.

Hi-tech romance

We enjoyed the NA7004, especially when listening through its digital output. It is delightfully easy to operate and it integrates with both hi-fi systems and computer networks with "your-Grandma-could-do-it" ease. AirPlay functionality makes this a simple streamer for the uninitiated.

An iPod can effectively be 'docked' yet still be in your pocket – the height of convenience. What is more, the unit is aesthetically restrained and subtle and so should look comfortably at home in any equipment rack. This is a product that virtually demands our recommendation. ●

Not a case full of air...

There is a definite pride of ownership vibe about this unit. Despite being inexpensive, it looks, and is, very elegant. Furthermore, it is robustly built. It is also reassuringly simple to operate. Turn the rotary input selector and the central display indicates the chosen input, while the menu control to the right allows you to access selections applicable to that input: for instance, if you have opted for Music Server, this will let you scroll through the available UPnP (Universal Plug and Play) or DLNA servers to which you can connect.

Input connection was not always as immediate as we would have liked. It took a few moments before you'd hear any music with some inputs, because there is a lot going on 'in the background'.

Inside the chassis you will find more than the usual Mini-ITX circuit

board found in many products. The circuitry is, in fact, contained on eight individual PCBs, in total filling the enclosure. The only gap where there is no PCB is occupied by a substantial mains transformer.

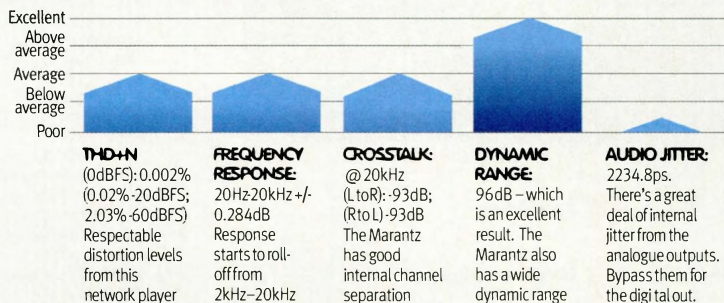
Digital beats analogue

The most important function of the NA7004 is the way it replays music off a NAS or local computer. The news here is good: access through Ethernet is totally pain-free and reasonably quick, even when enumerating thousands of tracks – mostly regular CD rips, but also a great many high-resolution 24-bit/96kHz downloads with a few MP3s thrown in for good measure.

Listening to the unit through its analogue connection gives results that often seem warm and gentle in character, although rather

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Slick operation and goodsound through digital output

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Built-in Wi-Fi would make it fully competitive

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Easy to use, the NA7004 makes getting into streaming simple and all for a great price, too

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL





5

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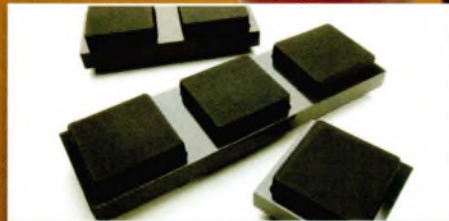
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The right balance



With Magic Racks your hi-fi literally floats on rubber bands and as **Richard Black** discovers, it provides a unique way to isolate your system

There have been plenty of new designs for equipment supports over the years, the majority of them taking rigidity seriously along with such anti-vibration measures as spikes. A few, though, seek to decouple equipment more thoroughly using sprung or otherwise 'floppy' support systems, with or without damping.

Newcomer Magic Racks has come up with an ingenious way of implementing the floppy approach, using what are basically rubber bands – long strips of neoprene rubber, placed between supports in such a way that they keep equipment clear of the floor or the level underneath, while allowing it to bounce freely. In the standard configuration, two such strips are used, attached to substantial chunks of MDF (painted black in our review sample, though we understand alternative colours are available to order) which are held apart by two pieces of varnished oak.

Strapping newcomer

The Magic Rack is modular, with a single level consisting of one strap/ side assembly plus a pair of spacers (again large chunks of MDF) which fit on the sides with a pair of thick, stubby oak dowels. A further level can sit on top and when you're done you simply top off the assembly with a pair of decorative oak pieces.

The end result is bulky and looks a little odd, but it does support equipment in a way that provides real isolation from the floor. The straps are adjustable and equipment can be levelled side-to-side simply by sliding it a little to left or right. Items like turntables with an outboard motor can be supported on a slab of something solid: Magic Racks recommends MDF, but we imagine that a piece of stone (marble, maybe, or granite) could do a good job and look stunning with it.

Ideal balance

A little care is needed in dressing cables, to avoid pulling equipment

► DETAILS

PRODUCT: Magic Racks MR1

ORIGIN: UK

WEIGHT: 35kg

DIMENSIONS: WxHxD

790x590x450mm

FEATURES:

• Adjustable neoprene support straps

• MDF sides

• Solid oak spans and top trim

• Modular: tiers can be added later

• Available in different sizes/colours to order

DISTRIBUTOR: Thomas Audio Support Systems

TELEPHONE: 07895 815636

WEBSITE: magic-racks.co.uk

off the ideal balance point, but it would need a really hard tug to unseat any item completely. The resonant frequency is in the range 5-10Hz, lightly damped by the intrinsic lossiness of the rubber, which means that at all audio frequencies there is a high degree of attenuation of incoming vibration: similarly, there will be very little vibration transmitted between levels of a rack.

But does it work

Most modern electronic components are not significantly microphonic, but some valve amps and FM tuners show distinct sensitivity to vibration, many CD players seem to have a small degree of microphony and practically all turntables 'read' their support in great detail. We tried each category of component and were on the whole quite impressed. Certainly we felt that valve amps gave a very good result on the MR1, with bass tighter than ever and stereo imaging noticeably more precise than on a rigid floor-mounted support. We really couldn't find a downside in this case, although for many valve amps you'll need an extra-high spacer to allow for the generous dimensions and heat.

That's magic

With solid-state amps and CD players differences were naturally more subtle. The acid test is the turntable, and here we had mixed results. Basic isolation is very good and the sound clearly benefits. However, on a suspended floor you can easily run into problems with footfall, and even with more subtle vibration from adjoining rooms or from outside. The trouble is that the suspension is quite free in a rotational sense, which can easily lead to simple up/down vibration turning into wow and flutter, one of the most audible ills of LP replay. On a solid floor, though, results are excellent. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Gives real isolation across the audio band,

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Can convert ultra-low frequency vibration into turntable wow; bulky

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: At its best it's very effective, but care is needed with setup to get the best results

FEATURES



OVERALL





Tomorrow's world

Peachtree Audio's next-gen iDecco offers an amp, multi-input DAC, head amp and iPod dock all for £1,000 and **Ed Selley** just loves a good deal

Peachtree Audio has already graced the pages of *Hi-Fi Choice*, when we reviewed the Nova integrated amplifier and DAC (HFC 341). Now the superficially similar iDecco is here for your consideration, but beyond the similarities in appearance, the iDecco is an altogether different piece of equipment. In fact, Peachtree see the iDecco being used in a different way

to the Nova and while the two units share some components, they are a different design.

Peachtree claim that the iDecco is the first "valve hybrid integrated amp with digital iPod dock, headphone amp and multi input DAC." While we are fairly sure that the word 'first' could easily be changed to 'only', the iDecco is a well-specified and flexible device. It produces 40 watts into six ohms, which should be sufficient to

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Peachtree
ORIGIN: USA/China
TYPE: Integrated amplifier, digital iPod dock and multi-input DAC
WEIGHT: 10.5kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 380x130x355mm
FEATURES:

- 40 watt integrated amplifier
- Class A preamp with switchable valve stage
- On board DAC with USB, coaxial and optical input
- Inbuilt digital iPod dock

DISTRIBUTOR: Computers Unlimited
TELEPHONE: (0)20 8358 9593
DISTRIBUTOR: unlimited.com

drive most speakers likely to be partnered with it (see Building a System). The preamp features a single 6N1P triode visible via a window in the front panel. This can be switched in and out of the circuit via a button on the front panel and the remote, which makes the iDecco able to operate in both hybrid and completely solid-state modes.

PURE thoughts

As well as the internal amplification, the iDecco features on board digital-to-analogue conversion. And like the larger Nova, this is built around a version of the ESS Sabre DAC (see Talking Point), that is capable of extremely high measured performance and variants – which feature in a number of highly regarded products, including the Audiolab 8200CD (HFC 340).

The relationship to the Audiolab is stronger than the chipset used, as John Westlake (the designer of the Audiolab) also designed the Peachtree DAC which accounts for

the similarity in approach between the two devices.

The iDecco DAC board features eleven regulated power supplies and transformer coupling of each input. This is an impressively rigorous practice in a product of this type. While the Nova features, five digital inputs, the iDecco has only four, a USB, coaxial and optical connection on the rear panel and the fourth is allocated to the iPod dock on the top of the unit. This is closely related to the PURE i-20 (HFC 342) and, if the performance of the PURE is anything to go by, this is no bad thing.

The iDecco also reduces the number of analogue inputs supported to just one, but adds a component video output that allows the iDecco to output video material from an iPod to a screen while replaying the audio. Preamplifier outputs and a Class A headphone socket complete the connectivity.

For £999, this is a lot of functionality and the appeal of a product that offers the flexibility of direct iPod connectivity with the performance of a separate iPod transport is a strong one. It would be possible to construct a system of roughly equivalent price that would be able to match the functionality of the iDecco, but this would rather miss the point of the Peachtree, which combines this functionality in a single neat package rather than in a host of little boxes, all requiring an attendant mains plug and cabling between them.

Back in black

Aesthetically, the iDecco is styled in a similar fashion to the Nova, with a wraparound chassis with appealing curved edges. We think that the gloss-black finish of the unit is more handsome than the 'wood' finish of the Nova and combines with the silver front panel to good effect. The fit and finish of the iDecco is generally good. The controls operate with slickness and precision and panel gaps are small and consistent.

“The tonality feels accurate and voices, in particular, sound engagingly real.”

The iPod dock could benefit from a dust cover to keep the connecting socket clean and the remote is rather hideous and nowhere near as pleasant to use as the front panel controls.

Given what the iDecco is offering in terms of features and considering the price, these are not serious gripes. At 380mm wide and with the iPod socket on top, its either going to have to stand on its own, or be on the top of a stack of equipment, should you need to take this into account.

Smooth operator

Connecting a Cambridge Audio 840C to the iDecco (via the analogue input) in order to get some sense

CONNECTIONS



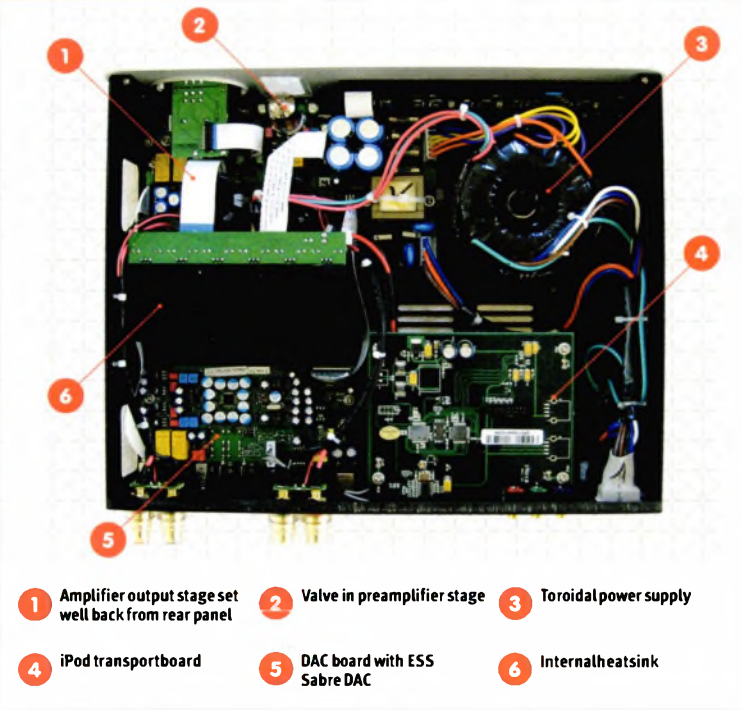
TALKING POINT

THE SABRE DAC used in the iDecco has been news in audio circles since it appeared at CES in 2008. The iDecco uses the 24-bit 9006 chipset, while the Audiolab uses the newer 32-bit 9018. Both can perform well beyond Red Book CD levels.

What makes the Sabre useful in the Peachtree, is the patented jitter-reduction circuit. The ESS circuit is regarded as very effective. As the Peachtree is almost totally reliant on digital inputs, the ability to effectively deal with even sky-high levels of jitter is a very useful one.

- 1 Component video output from iPod dock
- 2 Switch for adjusting voltage
- 3 Adjustment for digital filter
- 4 Adjustment for jitter acceptance
- 5 Analogue line input
- 6 Digital inputs

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Amplifier output stage set well back from rear panel
- 2 Valve in preamplifier stage
- 3 Toroidal power supply
- 4 iPod transportboard
- 5 DAC board with ESS Sabre DAC
- 6 Internal heatsink

BUILDING A SYSTEM

THE IDECCO should be able to drive most speakers that it is likely to encounter in the £400-£500 price range.

UK Distributor, Computers Unlimited are offering the iDecco as a package with the Canton Chrono SL520, which they also distribute. This should be a good combination and offers a useful £100 saving if bought as a pair.

During our test of the iDecco, we also secured excellent results partnering it with the new Monitor Audio BX5, which is well within the iDecco's ability to drive and offers good bass extension and drive. The Mordaunt-Short Mezzo 1 standmount also worked well although being considerably smaller than the Monitor Audio was not able to match the bass extension of the BX5.

listenable with all, but the most heavily compressed material.

This presentation stays consistent across the three rear panel digital inputs, including the USB. This connected to both PC and Mac quickly and efficiently and possessed the same sonic qualities as the coaxial input. The iDecco also features an adjustable digital filter and a jitter bandwidth switch. The latter allows it to better 'lock on' to a source with very high jitter levels, but nothing we had to for the test produced enough jitter to defeat the switch in the 'narrow' position, let alone the wide one.

The filter produced subtle, but noticeable changes to the presentation, with the 'slow setting' making the iDecco more forgiving of compressed and bright material, while the 'sharp' position allowed lossless material more space to breathe.

An iPod connected and playing AAC lossless files is indistinguishable from a laptop connected over USB playing the same material. This is extremely impressive for an inbuilt device and gives the iDecco a very strong advantage to anyone who has made the jump with their iPod from peripheral to hi-fi.

Boxing clever

The iDecco has much to commend it as a piece of design and audio engineering. This is a well-built and well-thought out piece of kit that is perfect as a modern take on the music centre or as a very high-quality addition to a PC or Mac. Some of the features are a little gimmicky, but Peachtree do at least give you the option to turn them off. The quality of components in the DAC board make this a consistently talented performer with modern digital sources.

This is a lifestyle product with sufficient hi-fi credentials to appeal to a broad church of users and it has the performance to offer something for all of them. ●

of perspective of the amplifier on its own, the Peachtree revealed some likeable traits. This is a smooth and refined performer which can be listened to for hours without coming across as fatiguing or overly bright. The tonality feels accurate and well-judged and voices, in particular, are well handled and sound engagingly real.

Connecting the CD player to the digital inputs did not significantly alter the presentation of the iDecco, but the presentation becomes slightly more forward with a little more attack to the leading edges of notes. Switching the valve in the preamp on – signified by an extra light illuminating the valve window on the front panel – produces mixed results.

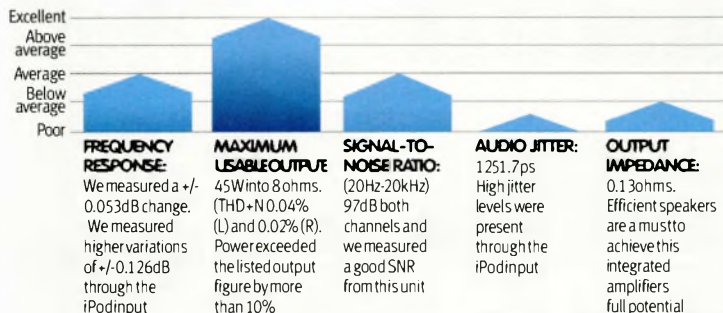
The valve sound is slightly stereotypical, in that there is a

“Quality of components make this a talented performer with modern digital sources.”

pronounced midrange bloom and a softening of the low end, but this can make thin and aggressive recordings more listenable and switching it back out of the circuit is simple enough to do. With up tempo music, there can be a sense that the iDecco does not pick up the pace and stays a little relaxed to be truly exciting, but equally (even when pushed very hard) there is little sense of harshness or stridency. Given that the unit is likely to encounter quite a bit of compressed music, it is good news that performance remains very

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Smooth, tonally accurate sound across multiple inputs
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Clunky remote, slightly bloomy presentation with valve switched on
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★
- FEATURES** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A well-equipped, one-stop solution for iPod and digital audio users

OVERALL



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Just for the record

Can a humble cartridge-maker craft the perfect phono stage? Dynavector's radical P-75 looks to invigorate *Jason Kennedy's* LP collection

On many respects you would expect companies that make cartridges to be the best placed to design a phono stage, but this is still quite a rare practice (van den Hul and Rega are notable exceptions).

Dynavector is not just a cartridge maker of course, it has an electronics wing in New Zealand and used to make an amplifier with stereo-enhancing circuitry, there is also a discontinued head amplifier on its website. Its compact P-75 phono stage is now in its second generation and has something of a cult following, so we thought it time to investigate.

Degrees of grain

The P75 does a couple of things rather differently to most. For a start it uses a switching power supply based around a tiny 250kHz transformer, an approach which should mean that there's no benefit in upgrading the simple DC wall-wart power supply. It's a technique that the rest of the world is catching up with for energy efficiency reasons, but one that few companies apart from Linn have worked with for some time. It's USP however, is a patented phono-enhancing circuit or PE, designed specifically to get the best from moving coil cartridges by short circuiting them with zero ohms

and then taking the current rather than the voltage produced. It's a radical approach that Dynavector claims reduces distortion caused by non linearities within the magnet and results in a more linear result.

For other cartridges, including moving magnets, the P75 MkII can be used in a conventional manner with a range of typical impedances and degrees of gain. These variations are accommodated with a selection of internal jumpers rather than switches, which makes things more fiddly than usual, but does keep costs down.

Easy load

Build quality is not elaborate, but is to a very high standard. The case is steel, with an acrylic front panel and the bare minimum of socketry, the earth point has a bolt rather than a knurled nut, but DV does provide a suitable Allen key.

The PCB components are all surface mount (SMD), which is rare with small audio companies and increases perceived value, something that this stage is not terribly hot on because of its diminutive stature.

There is no shortage of competition at this price, but our benchmark is the Trichord Dino with its Plus power supply, which costs slightly less than the P75 but takes up more rack space with its two boxes. That stage also

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Dynavector P75 MkII
ORIGIN: New Zealand
TYPE: MM/MC phono stage
WEIGHT: 450g
DIMENSIONS: (WXHXD) 133x44x83mm
FEATURES:
 • Gain levels: 40, 60, 63dB
 • Output range: 0.15 – 2mV
 • Impedance settings: 0, 25, 30, 100, 470, 47k ohms
 • Ultra low-noise switching PSU
DISTRIBUTOR: Pear Audio
TELEPHONE: 01665 830862
WEBSITE: dynavector.co.jp

has easy access load and gain switching, which is a boon for end users. The other contender is Tom Evans' Microgroove, which is available in three quality levels and is renowned for its dynamics, the £500 X model has adjustable impedance loading.

Compelling sound

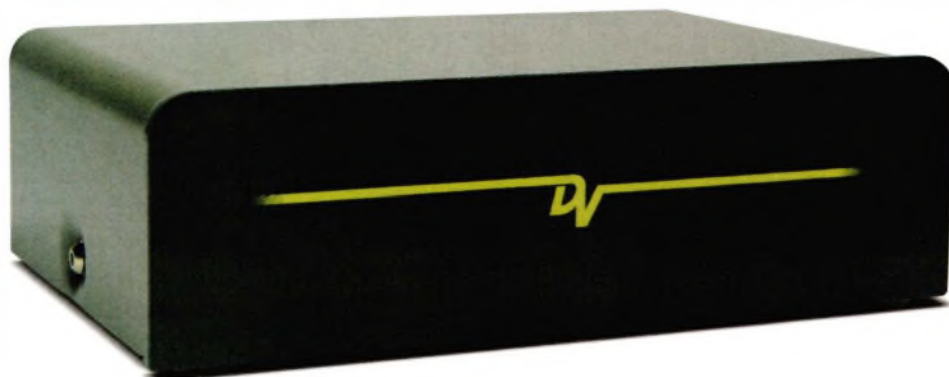
Using this stage with a van den Hul DDT II MC cartridge proved a highly engaging, if not downright thrilling experience. The P75 emulates the character of DV cartridges with a pacy and articulate sound that draws you into the music and keeps you hanging in there listening out for the best licks and the sweetest solos.

It's a slightly drier sound than the Dino, which has the edge in terms of openness and tonal depth, but has a distinct edge when it comes to perceived speed. We tried standard versus enhanced mode and found the latter gives greater tonal richness and reveals more of the acoustic space that the recording was made in. We also found that while the highest resistance setting produced the greatest output and the juiciest balance, the middle one improved the highs and the timing with them, making it the setting of choice.

Basic instinct

The balance may be on the dry side, but this helps extract sound texture and to differentiate instruments from one another – it is very easy to follow bass lines for instance. More importantly its relative lack of time smear means that it can produce a highly engaging and entertaining result with all your favourite records.

The P75 MkII is a very capable and resolute phono stage for the asking price, it may not be quite as straightforward to set up and use as the best in this respect, but it's highly flexible and should work well with virtually any cartridge. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Highly articulate and flexible, it will get your foot tapping
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: You don't get a lot of hardware for your money
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A stage that will put spring in the step of any decent cartridge you can throw at it
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Prime candidates



With its new approach to Class D amplification and a new CD player, Primare's new duo is a force to be reckoned with says tech guru **Richard Black**

Primare has at last updated its distinctive CD player and matching amp for 2011 and on the amp especially, it has gone to town. From the outside the DC32 and I32 don't look wildly different from previous Primare offerings, so what's new?

Most obviously, the I32 amplifier is a whole new design, using as it does a Class D topology. As Primare is at

pains to point out, this isn't digital amplification, but it is a switching approach, modulating the power applied to the output at a fast rate rather than tracking it in traditional analogue manner.

The CD player is less revolutionary, but still has some new features, including a USB-A socket for connecting a memory stick, music player or hard disc.



THE I32 uses a switch-mode power supply, rather than a linear transformer/rectifier arrangement. There are concerns though, about the amount of noise they can inject.

This arises because, in response to a sinusoidal input voltage, they draw a current waveform that is anything but sinusoidal—in general, it's very distorted.

Power Factor Correction (PFC) is a way of reducing this distortion. The Primare PFC certainly doesn't achieve this perfectly, but it does better than a regular transformer-based supply.

Quick-switch act

Class D amplifiers aren't new (the idea goes back decades) and they aren't exactly rare in 2011, either. That said, there aren't all that many individual designs. Many manufacturers are using bought-in modules to do most of the hard work, such as Bang and Olufsen's successful Icepower modules.

Primare, however, has gone it alone and developed a proprietary circuit called UFPD, short for Ultra Fast Power Device. 'Fast' is very much to the point in Class D circuits, because when you are switching a signal on and off rapidly, any departure from truly instantaneous on/off transitions upsets the whole performance.

Primare's claim is that the unusually fast switching achieved in UFPD allows more consistent feedback to be applied to the circuit. In the great majority of modern amplifiers, linear and switching, feedback is used to turn a basically accurate circuit into a highly accurate



one, but it can be a double-edged sword. Primare has arranged things so that the feedback applied to the circuit is the same at all frequencies, which is generally a safe route to consistent performance.

As a result, we're told the specification of this amplifier over the whole audio range is at least as good as previous Class D designs and in the treble a lot better. In addition, performance is more assured into real loudspeaker loads. One of the unavoidable drawbacks to switching amplifier design is the need to filter off the high-frequency 'carrier' signal so that it doesn't fry tweeters. Trouble is, the filter tends to be a bit intrusive on the audio signal path. It increases the output impedance, which in turn gives response variations into real-world loudspeakers: sometimes it distorts the audio signal, too.

The I32 still has an output filter, but it's been designed as part of the overall amplifier circuit rather than a bolt-on extra and so it has a less

intrusive effect. Output impedance is lower than from most switching amps, especially in the treble, and response is therefore much closer to flat – and, of course, the damping effect on a loudspeaker is better.

“Our first impression is of exceptionally assured sound, with gorgeous solidity.”

Other benefits of Class D still apply, including better efficiency than a conventional linear amplifier, in turn reducing the requirement for large heatsinks (there are still heatsinks but they're small for the I32's 120-watt rating) and allowing Primare to build the amp into an unvented case. With dust being one of the biggest enemies of electronic reliability – a blanket of dust is the best way of getting components to overheat – that can only be a good thing.

Discs and transistors

The CD32 much more closely resembles CD players we've come to love over the years, with a conventional drive mechanism, high-quality sample-rate converter, digital filter and DAC chips of recent vintage, as well as a linear power supply based on an R-core transformer.

One rather unusual feature is the use of discrete transistors for the current-to-voltage convertor which follows the DAC. This isn't unique, but most CD players use an op-amp at this point. Many of them achieve very good results too, but Primare isn't alone in believing that discrete transistors still have advantages if done right. The relevant circuits are implemented with surface-mounted components on small circuit boards, screened with solid copper plates.

Features on the CD32 include balanced analogue outputs and also a balanced digital output (AES/EBU), alongside the usual phono and S/PDIF versions. The USB input we

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Primare CD32/I32

ORIGIN:
Sweden

TYPE:
CD player/integrated amplifier

WEIGHT:
9kg/11kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
430x110x385mm
(each unit)

FEATURES:
• (CD 32) Unbalanced and balanced audio out

• Optical, electrical and AES/EBU digital out

• USB socket for media player

• (I32): 2 balanced inputs

• 3 unbalanced inputs

• Record out

• Preamp out

• Nominal power 120 watts

DISTRIBUTOR:
Karma AV

TELEPHONE:
01423 358946

WEBSITE:
primare.net



Q&A...

WE SPOKE WITH PRIMARE MANAGING DIRECTOR LARS PEDERSEN



HFC: What is the main advantage of UFPD over conventional linear amplification?

GF: It's very efficient, always running cool and using a fraction of the mains power required by an equivalent linear amplifier.

Why go to the trouble of designing UFPD, when off-the-shelf switching power amps modules are available?

We wanted to develop a wideband technology with all the advantages of Class D, but which could operate successfully with low-distortion across the entire audio band and beyond. Normal class-D amps have characteristics which are affected by the load, so when playing music, normal class-D actually changes all the time. In UFPD we have strived to make the amp independent of the load.

Are there any differences in terms of system-matching that people should beware of with switching amplifiers compared with linear amps?

It is important not to class the I32 as just another switching amplifier. UFPD in the I32 is capable of producing a wide, low-noise, low-distortion, accurate response with any loudspeaker. The I32 uses an isolated Power Factor Control (PFC) technology in the power supply, which controls the current from the mains voltage, so that it forms a pure sine wave having the same frequency and phase as the mains voltage. This provides lower EMI and a clean environment for the amplifier to work in.

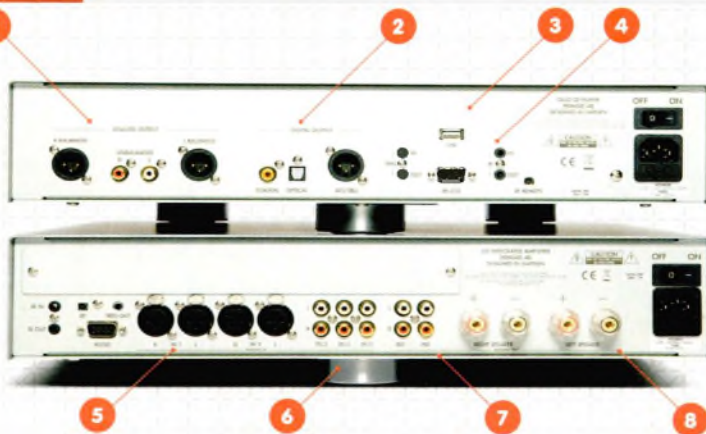
Why was the decision taken not to support SACD in the CD32?

We just wanted to make a pure CD player. The CD32 will play MP3 files recorded onto CD or on a USB stick or powered hard drive.

When will the media upgrade will be available and what will it cost?

This has still to be confirmed and we intend it to be very special. The very ecologically minded idea is that you don't replace the amp, you just upgrade its capabilities.

CONNECTIONS



- 1** Balanced and unbalanced outputs permanently active
- 2** All three flavours of digital output
- 3** USB socket for media players, USB sticks etc
- 4** Remote control provision section
- 5** Two sets of fully balanced inputs
- 6** Three-line inputs
- 7** Preamp output
- 8** Speaker terminals accept 4mm plugs, spades or bare wire

mentioned is a nice touch, though we were disappointed to find that it only recognises MP3 and WMA files. WAV and/or FLAC compatibility would be nice. With memory prices for SD cards and USB sticks now down to barely £1 per GB (60p per hour for CD-quality WAV format), surely MP3's days in any audiophile environment must be numbered?

The I32 doesn't offer a vast array of features in standard form, though we certainly approve of the two pairs of balanced inputs. A total of just five line inputs isn't enormously generous by current standards and there's no option to add a phono stage. The clever part, though, is that Primare has announced (though not yet made available) a 'media upgrade' for the amp, which adds a host of latest-generation features: digital inputs of all flavours, Ethernet (and wireless) network connectivity and hence media and internet radio compatibility.

We do have one quibble, though, and it concerns the operation of the CD player. The amp responds exactly as one would expect to front panel and remote controls and it's no trouble at all. The CD player has several functions only available from the remote and we're not sold on it. For one thing, it's just not the sort of device we'd want to have alongside four grand's-worth of classy hi-fi. It looks and feels every bit like the remote for a £200 telly from Tesco.

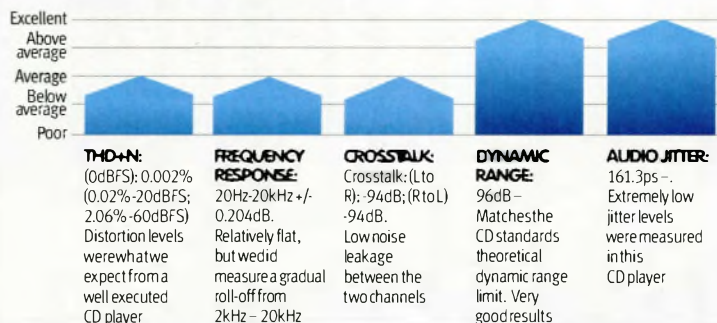
Also less than ideal is the fact that, although the CD32 can upsample to 48kHz (unusual!), 96kHz, or not at all, it's only mentioned in passing in the instructions. Anyway, both that and the remote itself are addressable concerns and we very much hope that Primare will consider our comments.

Making sweet music

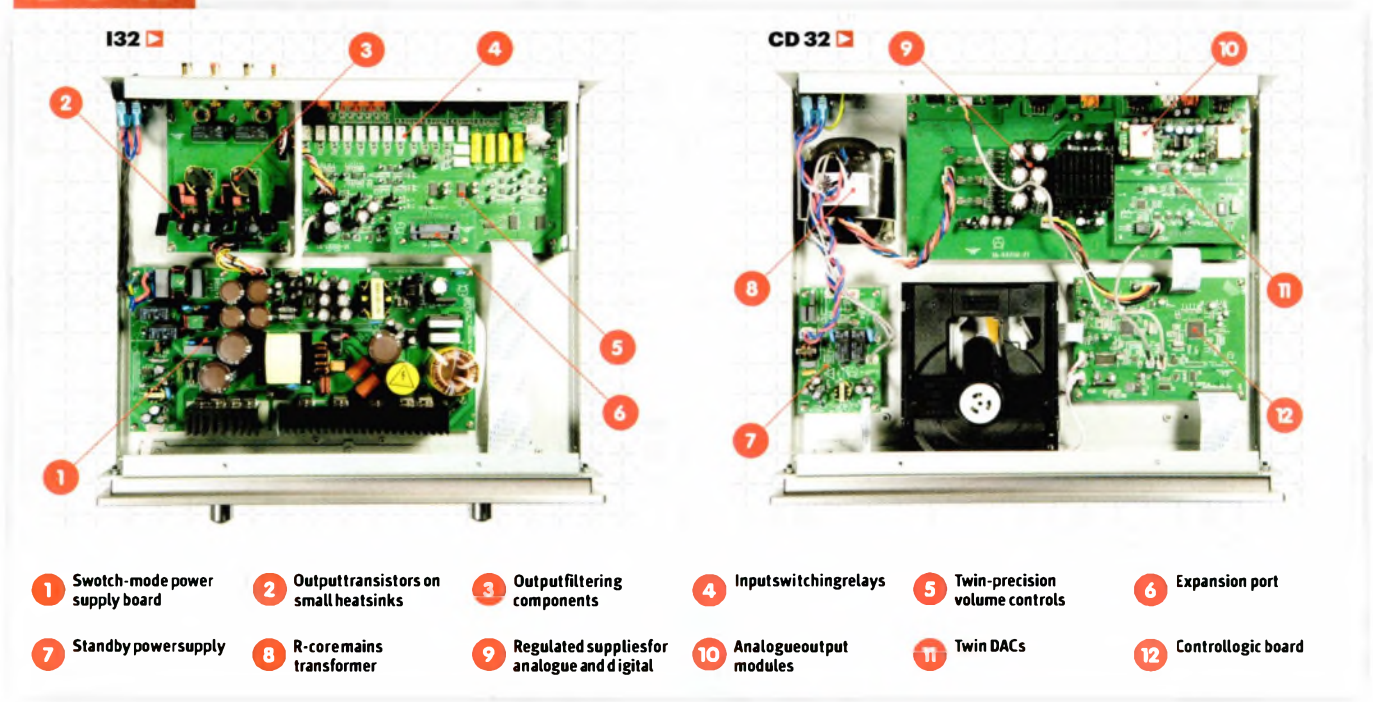
Our first impression is of exceptionally assured sound, with

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE - CD32



HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Switch-mode power supply board
- 2 Output transistors on small heatsinks
- 3 Output filtering components
- 4 Input switching relays
- 5 Twin-precision volume controls
- 6 Expansion port
- 7 Standby power supply
- 8 R-core remains transformer
- 9 Regulated supplies for analogue and digital
- 10 Analogue output modules
- 11 Twin DACs
- 12 Control logic board

heaps of detail, beautifully neutral tonal balance and really gorgeous, tactile solidity. Close your eyes and you're convinced that with just a couple of steps towards the speakers you'll be in danger of impaling yourself on the end of a cello spike or copping a drumstick on the nose.

Images are simply superb, immaculately spread out in all directions and utterly stable, fully vindicating the 80-year-old confidence trick that is stereo.

It's a finding we repeated over and over as we trawled through the widest selection of recordings, old and new, from jazz to rock to classical to unclassifiable. Cue up some operatic monster and the panoply of 200 players and singers is there before you: play the simplest voice and guitar ballad and the intimacy is immediate.

The specifics

We did make an effort to check the usual hi-fi specifics, though we'd struggle to identify any we could criticise. Bass ticks all the boxes, with extension, weight, solidity, tuning and kick all first-class. Midrange is natural and lifelike with no coloration we could detect. Treble is open, clear and pure with entirely believable decay into ambience and not a hint of exaggeration or spit when things get busy. There's lots of power on tap and at no point did we feel the amp was struggling even at levels barely below overload. Timing? Like an atomic clock. The CD player's upsampling options make very little difference: we slightly preferred 96kHz, but not by much.

Perhaps, just perhaps, we slightly preferred the unbalanced connection to balanced, but that could simply



AS AN ALTERNATIVE to the new Primare models, we couldn't avoid thinking of the Leema Stream III CD player and Pulse III amplifier. At approximately £1,500 each, they're some two-thirds the price of the Primares, but it seems fair to ask what, if anything, the extra grand-odd buys you.

Leema's models are similarly up-to-date technologically, though the amp is a conventional linear one, rather less powerful than the I32 at about 70 watts.

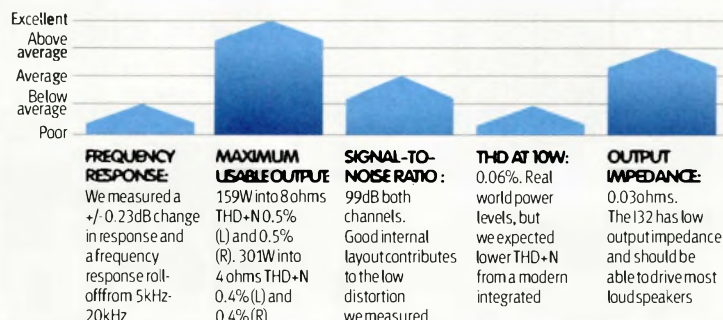
In both our review of the pair (*HFC 339*), and the Pulse's subsequent *Blind-listening Group Test* appearance (*HFC 342*), we found performance to be very good indeed, with excellent resolution and very good long-term listenability.

What the extra money really buys you, though, is that sheer assurance that comes with really special hi-fi. For £3k it seems you get excellent hi-fi: for £4.4k, you get a substantial step closer to the music.

have been our cables. Sonically, we have nothing but praise for these newcomers and that would still be true if they were considerably more expensive. Now, if Primare could just sex up that remote control... ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE -I32



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - CD32

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Smart, slick and with balanced output plus selectable upsampling
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Cheesy remote control and no WAV or FLAC
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Looks every bit the high end part. User interface less than ideal, but hardly detracts in reality.
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - I32

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Gorgeous sound full of detail, with precise timing and effortless musicality
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Only five line inputs and no phono
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Very appealing hi-fi, the prospect of future upgrades is truly mouth-watering
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

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A Shure thing



Shure's flagship SE535 is the closest you can get to a good hi-fi system on the go. **Dan George** marvels at the triple drivers making it happen

Opod sales, now into the hundreds of millions, have driven enormous growth in the headphone and specifically, earphone market, to the benefit of music lovers everywhere. With growth comes investment and with that comes developments in technology, leading to flagship models such as the SE535.

These sound-isolating earphones are all about the triple drivers they contain. Tri-drivers are something we're now seeing in high-end in-ears and Shure has squeezed a balanced armature-type tweeter inside, along with two bass drivers for a claimed range of 18Hz – 19kHz. The aim, Shure says, is to offer 'rich' bass and 'spacious sound' – a soundstage if you will, only *inside* your skull.

Little wonders

The SE535 is a marvel of mini engineering. Inside the (sweat-resistant) casing lies several tiny components: three drivers; a crossover; an acoustic seal for the drivers and a 'shock-isolator'.

On the outside, Shure provides a detachable, kevlar-reinforced, wire-form fit cable, the usual raft of different-sized ear-tips (eight in total), a carry case, airline adaptor,

in-line volume control and a 6.3mm adaptor. You can choose between a bronze finish and (our favourite, see pic below), clear, and the whole package tips the scales at 30 grams.

The triple-driver SE535 sits at the top of the flagship SE range as Shure's ultimate in-ear. Noise attenuation is claimed at up to 37db and impedance is said to be 36 ohms.

From a purely practical point of view, we've snagged enough cables and consequently damaged enough earphones to welcome the detachable nature of the wire, which also allows for future upgrades. And speaking of practicality, there's enough ear tips to provide a comfy solution for any ear. These days, you can always get custom moulds retro-fitted by a third party, too.

Well screwed

Build quality is right up there. Shure has a 'prosumer' background, so bomb-proof build has been a genuine requirement from day one and it shows. Nice touches include the kevlar reinforcing on the cable and the indestructible appearance.

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Shure SE535

ORIGIN:
USA/China

TYPE:
Noise isolating earphone

WEIGHT:
30g

DIMENSIONS:
N/A

FEATURES:
• Triple micro driver: tweeter and two bass units

• Detachable, 162cm kevlar-reinforced cable

• Impedance: 36 ohms

• Noise attenuation: up to 37db (claimed)

• Range: 18Hz to 19kHz (claimed)

DISTRIBUTOR:
Shure

TELEPHONE:
01992 703058

WEBSITE:
shure.co.uk

Above all, they simply *feel* bulletproof. Only time will tell.

At £470 (£400 if you look around online), this is not a cheap earphone. But it's not intended to be, either. It's Shure's flagship, taken from its best range (SE). Rivals at this level include custom-mould heroes such as ACS and Chinese newcomers Unique Melody (review coming soon), who also boast triple-driver models in its range.

In-skull entertainment

In a variety of test conditions: underground train; overground train; wombling free and complete silence, the SE35s were surprisingly good at suppressing external noise. The wide range of ear tips facilitates this, of course, and comfort is reasonable, too, unless you're accustomed to custom-fit moulds, that is.

With noise blocked, the SE535s truly shine. They are monitor-like in their ability to 'see' into recordings and will reveal productions good and bad. The triple drivers *do* deliver a wide and spacious soundstage and give listeners the chance to follow the different tracks in a mix with ease.

There's plenty of bass here, too. Clean, well defined and well extended bass for that matter. But the most impressive aspect is the way it all gels together. This is a very natural-sounding earphone approaching ideal performance for its product type.

A defining product

In-ear performance will never beat on-ear, but for music on the move the SE535s are the best we've heard so far and they will be eclipsing our reference ACS T2s. £400-ish is a lot of money, sure, but if performance matters to you, it is spot-on. And remember, a custom mould will take performance higher still. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Class-leading sound quality, cracking build and nice detachable cable

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Quite bulky compared to some; slight cable microphony

BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



WESAY: Our new reference in-ear delivers natural sound with ease

OVERALL



Finally... our definitive answer to the audio cable debate



Kimber Tonik
analogue
interconnect

How can a mains cable make any difference?

How can one metre or so of cable between the socket and your Hi-Fi possibly make any difference to its sound? Well, in our opinion, based on years of detailed research and listening, it can make a huge difference – indeed, in many cases, we believe it can bring about a greater improvement than actually upgrading the piece of hardware itself.

Numerous customers have commented that their enjoyment of music has been dramatically enhanced after upgrading their mains cables. Here's just one example:

"I don't often provide feedback. The fact that I have done so is an indication of how good I think this cable is... it is difficult to describe just how fantastic the system is now beginning to sound... There is a clarity and

focus to such a degree that I can now hear individual strings on guitars when chords are played. Where musicians were in the background before, they now accompany vocals in sharp focus and with tremendous subtlety. Absolutely beautiful ... When I bought my CD player, I also auditioned other players that were considerably more expensive. In my opinion, the improvement gained with the SuperKord is greater than I could have achieved by spending the money upgrading my player." Mr Waghorn, Kent

How do you decide?

There's a lot been said about mains cables over the years. We have pioneered research into this area since the 1970s. Russ launched the very first high-fidelity mains cable back in 1985. At the time they were considered with suspicion; as outside the mainstream of accepted Hi-Fi wisdom.

Even today mains cables still remain controversial. Those who have listened to them, and used them, swear by them. The Hi-Fi press give them five star reviews. But there are still sceptics, and that's good. No-one should ever just take what we say for granted.

But, when you have these conflicting opinions, who do you believe? How do you decide who to trust?

Well, here at Russ Andrews Accessories, we believe that the best person to decide whether one of our mains cables can improve your listening pleasure... is you!

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King of the airwaves

Tivoli's new Model 10+ is wasted on the general public; for here's a small radio for the audiophile, says **Richard Black**, whether it's FM or DAB

Tivoli, you may recall, made a big splash by pretty much re-inventing the high-quality table radio about a decade ago. Its Model One combined high-quality RF engineering in its FM tuner section, with an unusually decent speaker to make sounds that rivals would aspire to live up to and even try to replicate. Now, the new Model 10+ aims to do something similar for DAB. The + in the name actually refers to DAB as in the USA and in some other territories they don't have DAB: FM and AM reception are common to all versions of the Model 10.

DAB, FM and AM

The Model One was all-analogue, but this one is mostly digital – digital tuning, digital user interface. The critical FM and AM signal path is still analogue, though, to preserve Tivoli's reputation for quality and the auxiliary input at the rear of the unit is analogue too; you can connect an iPod with a normal

audio cable but there's no dock as such. Digital operation has brought the added function of RDS and also the convenience of a credit-card-sized remote control.

Auto-tune in a good way

Operation is effected via a push-and-twist control on the top of the unit. Its default mode is as a volume control, but with a single brief push it becomes a tuning control and after a double push, it selects between sources. One gets used to this quickly enough, though it's not the most obvious thing at first.

The remote control adds easy access to a menu with various functions including basic tone controls, stereo/mono switching and a setting we found most useful, which adjusts the way the tuner scans when auto-tuning on FM. It can be set up to stop only at strong stations, which saves a lot of time in a more urban location, where most tuners would stop for lots of almost unlistenable stations.

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Tivoli Model 10+
ORIGIN:
USA/China
TYPE:
DAB/FM desktop radio
WEIGHT:
1.5kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
118x210x118mm
FEATURES:
• FM/AM/DAB tuner
• DAB Plus compatible
• Alarm clock functions
• Tone controls
• Two line inputs
• One line output
• Subwoofer output
• Headphone output
DISTRIBUTOR:
Tivoli Audio UK
TELEPHONE:
0844 800 8528
WEBSITE:
tivoli-audio.co.uk

Clearly better?

We loved the Model One and are delighted to report that the Model 10+ is very much in the same mould, with sound that has delightful clarity and naturalness, on both speech and music. The Tivoli hallmark of well-above-average FM reception is certainly present and indeed, if one listens on headphones the FM sound is comparable with that of a decent hi-fi tuner.

The sound from the speaker(s) is a fine example of what can be achieved from small enclosures on a tight budget. As you'd expect, deep bass is mostly notable by its absence, but upper bass is well handled and after the first few seconds one doesn't really miss the lower stuff. This works particularly well with speech, of course – all the better because the critical band where bass merges into midrange is handled very well indeed, nicely even and non-resonant. Music also benefits from this, no less than from the open and detailed treble, which retains most of its quality a surprising way off the axis of the speakers.

Musically convincing

As a result, any style of music plays with real conviction and a degree of realism that defies one's expectations of such a product, equally convincing in energetic, smoochy or intellectual moods. Maximum loudness is limited, but the clarity makes the sound satisfying at a modest level and, unlike some less accomplished radios, the Model 10+ doesn't make one want to keep turning the level up in a (usually fruitless) search for some kind of satisfaction. DAB sounds decent, FM very impressive, even AM is not half bad. 10 out of 10+! ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Easily intelligible speech and remarkably satisfying music
DISLIKE: Ergonomics not to everyone's taste; little deep bass
WE SAY: In mono it's a fine way to put music in a bedroom or kitchen environment

OVERALL





Getting the cleaners in

A noisy mains supply can ruin the sound of your hi-fi says *Jimmy Hughes*, as he discovers the latest technology from Isol-8's SubStations

Sooner or later, even the most sensible hi-fi enthusiast starts to wonder what sort of difference having a mains conditioner might make to the sound of their equipment. Mains electricity is the 'fuel' that powers your system. So it stands to reason; the cleaner the fuel, the better things should sound.

But then doesn't the power supply in each individual hi-fi component deal with whatever impurities that might be present in the electricity supply? Well, to a degree – yes. But noise and the presence of even small amounts of DC can create all kinds of problems that prevent your equipment from delivering its full performance.

► DETAILS

PRODUCT: Isol-8 SubStation LC/HC
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Passive mains conditioner
WEIGHT: 5.8kg (LC) 10.9kg (HC)
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 432x125x230mm
FEATURES:
• Munford two-inch flat-plate inductors; Isolated outputs (LC)
• ETA circuit-breakers; choice of UK 13-amp or Schuko sockets;
• CNC-milled casework
DISTRIBUTOR: Isol-8
TELEPHONE: 020 8856 8856
WEBSITE: isol-8.co.uk

Plug 'n' play

Isol-8 SubStation conditioners are passive 'plug and play' devices. There are no user-adjustments to fiddle with. Some devices (like Isol-8's PowerStation, for example) allow users to alter the frequency of the AC mains from the UK's 50Hz to a higher value. But this isn't possible with the Isol-8 – it's purely a mains cleaner.

The design aim is to use inductive/capacitive filtering to reduce mains noise, without compromising current delivery. For example, lots of small 3,300uf electrolytic capacitors are used (18 in the LC and 34 in the HC) rather than a single, large capacitor. This reduces ESR (Equivalent Series Resistance) to less than one milli-ohm.

The input has a special choke to reduce common-mode noise and a separate choke is used in the earth line. There are many different types of noise on the mains and the Isol-8 SubStation attempts to deal with all

of them to ensure than the output is pure and free from harmful high-frequency noise, DC components, and voltage spikes.

You can specify the type of mains socket your SubStation comes fitted with – choosing from either a standard 13-amp UK-type, or a 15-amp Schuko. Both kinds of socket feature a hinged protective cover that prevents dust from contaminating the pins, as well as keeping out tiny fingers!

The four sockets on the LC version are individually isolated – each has its own separate filtering network. Some hi-fi components produce self-noise which can get on to the mains supply, affecting the performance of other components. Having each socket individually isolated helps avoid cross-contamination.

The HC's two output sockets, on the other hand, are not individually isolated – they draw power from a common source point. The design of the LC and HC versions are broadly similar, but the latter is intended for situations where much greater current delivery is called for – up to 16 amps, compared to the LC's eight amps.

To protect against excessive current draw, a press-button circuit-breaker is fitted. This is designed to trip should a certain current threshold be passed. The circuit-breaker can be used as a mains on/off switch, though being situated on the back of the unit means it's a bit awkward to access.

Built to last

Each Isol-8 SubStation is housed in a CNC-milled alloy box. Apparently, full-production samples will feature bituminous damping pads to reduce the risk of case-resonance. But our pre-production Isol-8s were not fitted with them – more on this later.

The casework has a brushed surface and looks very smart. Internally, things are neatly laid out with plenty of space between the different groups. Expensive, high-quality components (such as Mundorf flat-wound inductors) are used and the internal wiring features silver-plated copper conductors with PTFE insulation.

A high-quality mains cable is included and this connects via a twist and lock Neutrik plug. Given



IN AN IDEAL WORLD, the mains supply would be a clean pure 50Hz sine wave, with stable voltage and ample reserves of current. In practice, reality falls somewhat short. Things vary according to area, but even at-best, the 50Hz AC signal is contaminated with noise and possibly a small DC component.

While DC is blocked by the mains transformers in the equipment itself, its presence saturates the transformer primary and has the effect of reducing efficiency. With power amps, this restricts the peak power levels that can be achieved, reducing dynamic range and softening transient peaks.

Noise and DC on the mains supply can sometimes lead to physical noise (hum/buzz) from power transformers. If one of your hi-fi components is mechanically noisy, partnering it with an Isol-8 SubStation might quieten it down – though an Isol-8 PowerStation (with its variable mains-frequency option) almost certainly will.

the build quality and high-spec components employed, Isol-8's SubStation conditioners offer very good value. But, 'value' also hinges on how big a difference adding one (or both) makes to the sound of your system.

If you're lucky and the mains supply where you live is very pure, improvements might be fairly small. However, the nature of the modern electronic world we live in makes this most unlikely. For the great majority, mains quality is not clean, so having a clean-up device like the Isol-8 SubStation should prove highly beneficial.

“In the future, problems with mains contamination are likely to get worse rather than better.”

Plus – and here's where things get really scary – in the future, problems with mains contamination are likely to get worse rather than better. As electrical devices proliferate, our environment will become increasingly noisy and polluted.

What the effect is...

Obviously, the degree of improvement you're likely to hear with devices like these depends greatly on how dirty your mains supply is. Many audiophiles find the sound produced by their hi-fi varies according to the time of day. Things often sound best after midnight when people switch off TVs and computers.

As a result, the amount of improvement you hear may well alter according to the time of day or night you make the comparison. The dirtier your mains supply, the greater the benefit produced by the Isol-8 SubStation. But, even with relatively 'good' mains, you can expect a cleaner sound, with wider dynamic range and sharper crisper detail.

The presence of noise on the mains makes your hi-fi sound slightly muzzy and out of focus. After installing the Isol-8 SubStations, we noticed the music sounds slightly more focused and immediate, with crisper transients and greater depth. The upper treble sounds smoother and cleaner, with less 'edge' and reduced harshness.

Listening without the Isol-8s, things definitely become slightly lethargic and less well-separated, with noticeably poorer delineation of detail and

CONNECTIONS



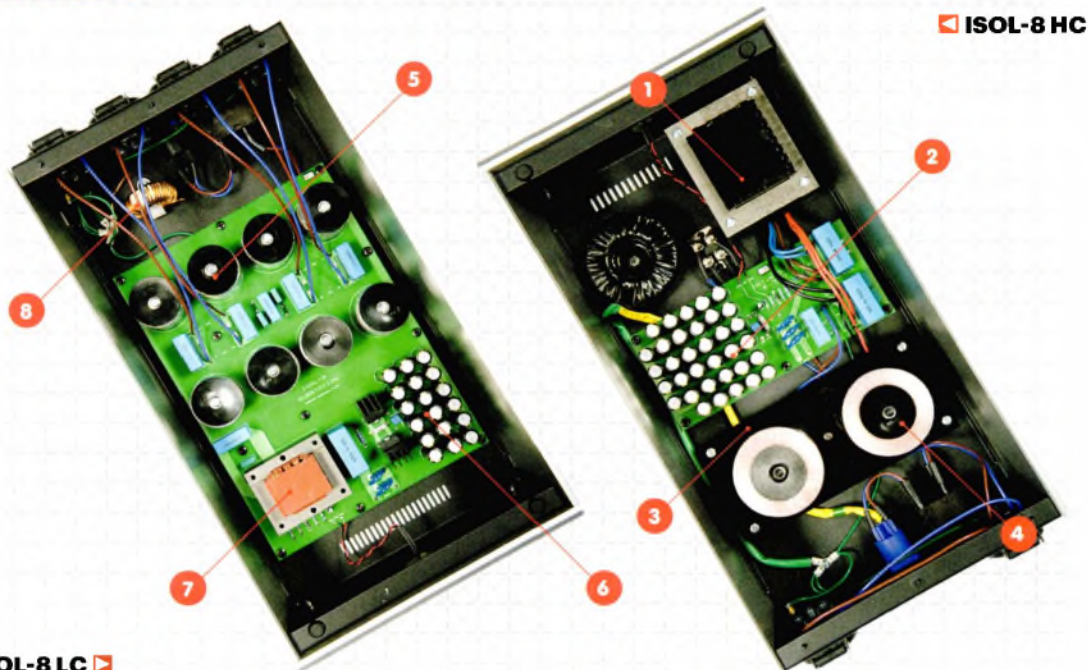
?
HOW IT COMPARES

WE REGULARLY use a PS Audio Premier Power Plant regenerator (£1,995) with our hi-fi equipment – a component that takes a radically different approach to mains purification. It turns the mains AC signal to DC, then completely regenerates it into a new AC signal, via its own internal oscillator and 1,500-watt power amplifier.

The PS Premier reads the distortion present on your mains supply (in our case it was around 2.3 per cent during the afternoon, dropping to 1.8 per cent by late evening) and offers the option of something called Multiwave – whereby the equipment is powered by a more complex waveform than a pure 50Hz, to improve efficiency. It's a credit to

Isol-8 that its SubStation compared very well to the sophisticated PS Premier. Our hi-fi system was comparably clean when powered by either device, but the sound had slightly greater sharpness and immediacy when powered through the Isol-8. Via the PS Premier, the sound seemed subtler and more delicate.

HIDDEN TECH



ISOL-8 LC

ISOL-8 HC

- 1 Input choke
- 2 3,300 µF capacitors
- 3 Toroidal transformers
- 4 Mundorf flat wound inductors
- 5 Mundorf flat wound inductors
- 6 3,300 µF electrolytic capacitors
- 7 Input choke
- 8 Choke

dynamics. As a result, we felt inclined to turn up the volume a notch to try and make the music project more. In simple terms, the sound suddenly seems less special.

With the Isol-8 SubStations back in circuit, things perked up again. Individual voices and instruments sound cleaner, with greater individuality – both tonally and dynamically. Bass seems firmer and cleaner, with less smearing and overhang, while the treble is airier.

There's an innate 'rightness' about the difference produced. It feels like you're hearing your system sound the way it was meant to be – a thick layer of 'grunge' having been removed. This enables you to play things quieter, with no loss of presence, while seemingly allowing greater dynamic headroom for loud peaks.

The LC SubStation is very quiet, mechanically – virtually silent – but the HC version produces a 'buzz' with our Musical Fidelity kW750 power amp. Trying the smaller Cayin SP-40M tube power amp (HFC 343) in place of the big MF, we found the buzz is greatly reduced. So, the noise level is definitely down to higher current-draw.

Virtually silent

Speaking to the manufacturer, it seems the cases on our early-production review samples had not been fitted with bitumous damping panels and they confidently expect full production Isol-8 SubStations to be virtually silent. The noise actually comes from the wound cores of the inductors creating a sympathetic resonance with the case.

Incidentally, we tried the MF power amp with the LC SubStation and to our surprise it works without tripping the circuit breaker. This means that – unless you have a really big power amp that draws huge amounts of current – the LC SubStation may be entirely adequate with most normal-sized amplifiers.

Nevertheless, we feel our system sounds slightly better when the MF power amp is being used with the HC SubStation, rather than going through the LC. Both units run very cool, by the way – there are no heat issues to worry about – and the units have been designed to be left switched-on at all times.

While products like the SubStation ideally need to be auditioned in the home, we feel confident that 99 per cent of users will find very

worthwhile benefits with either or both of these devices. Not only should your system sound fresher and more real, you should also find the quality of sound is more consistent on a day-to-day basis.

Given that it can power up to four components, including medium/large power amps, the SubStation LC version is the one to start with. If you like what you hear and already own a large power amp, the HC version (or even a PowerStation) could always be added later. But be warned; we think you'll find the Isol-8 difference addictive! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Your hi-fi system performs near its best, regardless of mains quality

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: On/Off switches (ETA Circuit Breakers) are a bit inaccessible

BUILD QUALITY



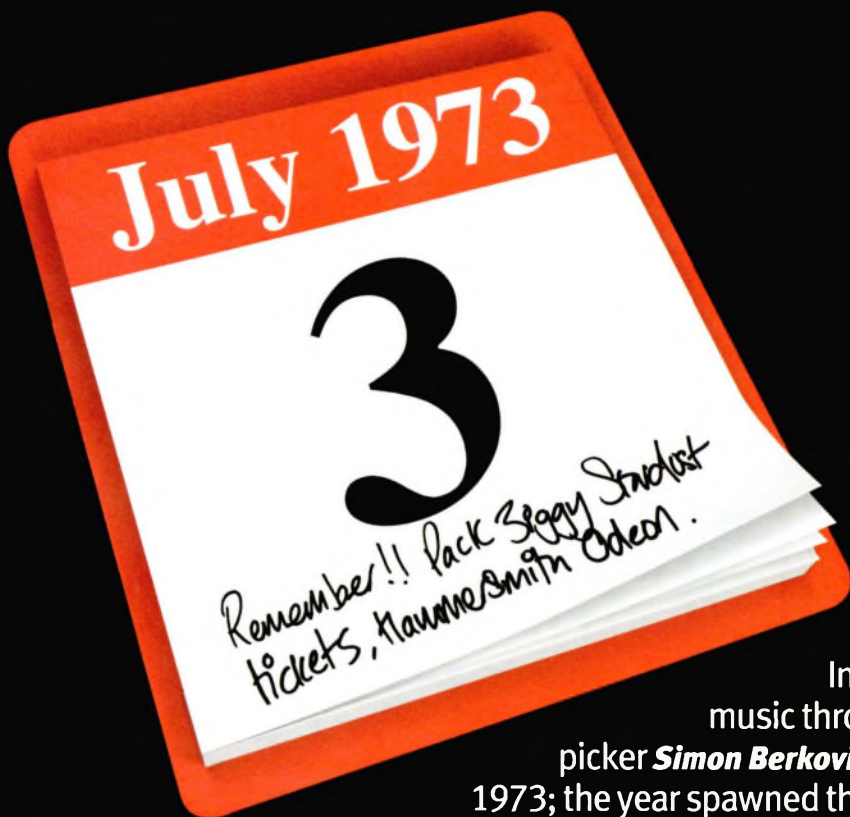
WESAY: If your hi-fi sounds inconsistent, these power conditioners could bethe answer to your prayers

FEATURES



OVERALL





SIMON BERKOVITCH
A music historian, ex-record shop guru and Production Editor on *HFC's* annual high-end celebration, *The Collection*, Simon not only knows music, he lives it through his love of vinyl and high-class hi-fi

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
Do you remember the seventies? – how about '73? Tell us your memories. Email us now: hi-fichoice@futurenet.com

In the first of a new series exploring music through the decades, dedicated pop-picker **Simon Berkovitch** looks back at the highlights of 1973; the year spawned the LP12 and some old Floyd album

With so many recordings available at just a couple of mouse clicks away on websites like Amazon, the excitement and sheer event of buying music in the past has been replaced, to some extent, by a commonplace yet sterile experience – and often one without a tactile, tangible product at the end of your transaction.

So, how better to reignite that passion than by tapping into the music of your youth; music that has changed formats with you over the years. We're starting this month by remembering the highlights of 1973.

Men behaving badly

With student protest in the streets and strikes on the Underground, a deeply unpopular political administration acting like Robin Hood in reverse and the economy in meltdown, you may be forgiven for thinking that we're already back in the 1970s, the era when most of you were making your formative hi-fi and music purchases – on vinyl and 8-track cartridge.

1973 was definitely a musically eventful year – the year of one of the biggest albums of all time (more on that later) and a great year to be a fan of music, but not necessarily a high-profile musician.

Not for the first time in their careers, the Grateful Dead took the biggest hit – bassist Phil Lesh was arrested for drug possession and boozey keyboard player Pigpen finally checked out at just 27 years old. In fact, if you'd been in a major band in the '60s – and 60s' bands don't come bigger than The Beatles and The Stones – 1973 was a good

year to be a bad boy. Mick Jagger's request for a Japanese visa was rejected thanks to his 1969 drug conviction, putting his band's Far East tour plans in freefall. Even Paul McCartney was busted and fined for growing pot on his Scottish farm.

But, while the icons of the '60s counter-culture were washing their dirty laundry in public, it's more likely that your mum was still washing yours. Pocket money and formative jobs may have been funding your vinyl habit back then – with an expensive idle daydream on which to play them (see *38 Not Out*, p86). And with cash a limited commodity, we'll wager that the humble 7-inch single will bring back some fond memories of the start of your quest for audio nirvana.

No matter what cool, challenging and innovative records and CDs now line the walls of your listening room, it's the number one records of the day that ultimately define your past. The likes of Genesis and Van der Graaf Generator may well have been your bands of choice, but it's the pop music of the era that soundtracks the multitudinous retrospectives.

The great British public's fave rave of 1973 was the cloying sound of Tony Orlando and Dawn's *Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree*, but Glam rock was infiltrating the charts in a major way. Films and TV programmes about 'the decade that style forgot' would be a lot poorer without the hits of this year. All the major stars associated with Glam had massive hits in 1973 – the Sweet (*Ballroom Blitz*), Slade (*Cum on Feel the Noise* and *Merry Xmas*

Everybody) and Mott the Hoople (racking up an impressive trio of hits with *All the Way From Memphis*, *Honoloochie Boogie* and *Roll Away the Stone*) – but one Glam rocker outglittered them all.

Another Time, Another Place

David Bowie's star was in the ascendant, with singles *Drive-in Saturday* and *Life on Mars?* (pulled from 1971's classic *Hunky Dory*) capitalising on Ziggy Stardust's commercial clout. Hysterical fans had to scream farewell to Ziggy in July: Bowie famously killed off his most famous creation at a farewell concert at London's Hammersmith Odeon Theatre to make way for his next exotic creation, *Aladdin Sane*.

A scan of the soundtrack to the BBC TV series of *Life on Mars* – lifting no small part of its mythology from Bowie's 1973 single of the same name – reads like a love letter to the big hits of 1973: David Essex *Rock On*; Paul McCartney and Wings *Live and Let Die*, Thin Lizzy's *Whiskey in the Jar* and Roxy Music *Street Life* (CD available from amazon.co.uk).

The inclusion of the latter is a testament to the prolific work-rate of leader Bryan Ferry. The dapper Geordie's appetite in 1973 alone puts contemporary artists to shame. Classic Roxy Music albums *For Your Pleasure* and *Stranded* (post-alien synthesiser player Brian Eno) both hit the shops this year, as well as the singles *Pyjamarama* and *Street Life* and the second Ferry solo album, *Another Time, Another Place*. With that frantic a work-rate, one can

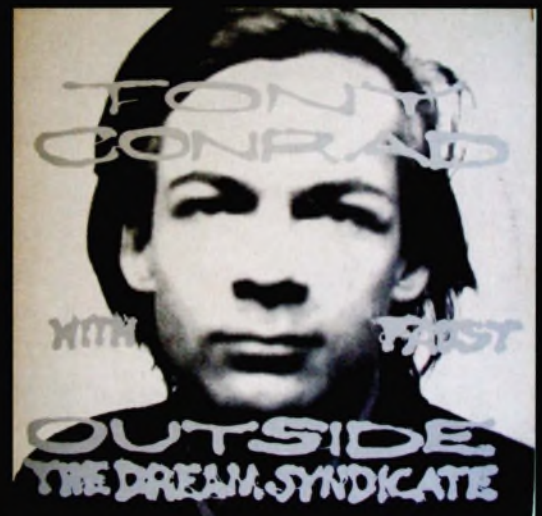
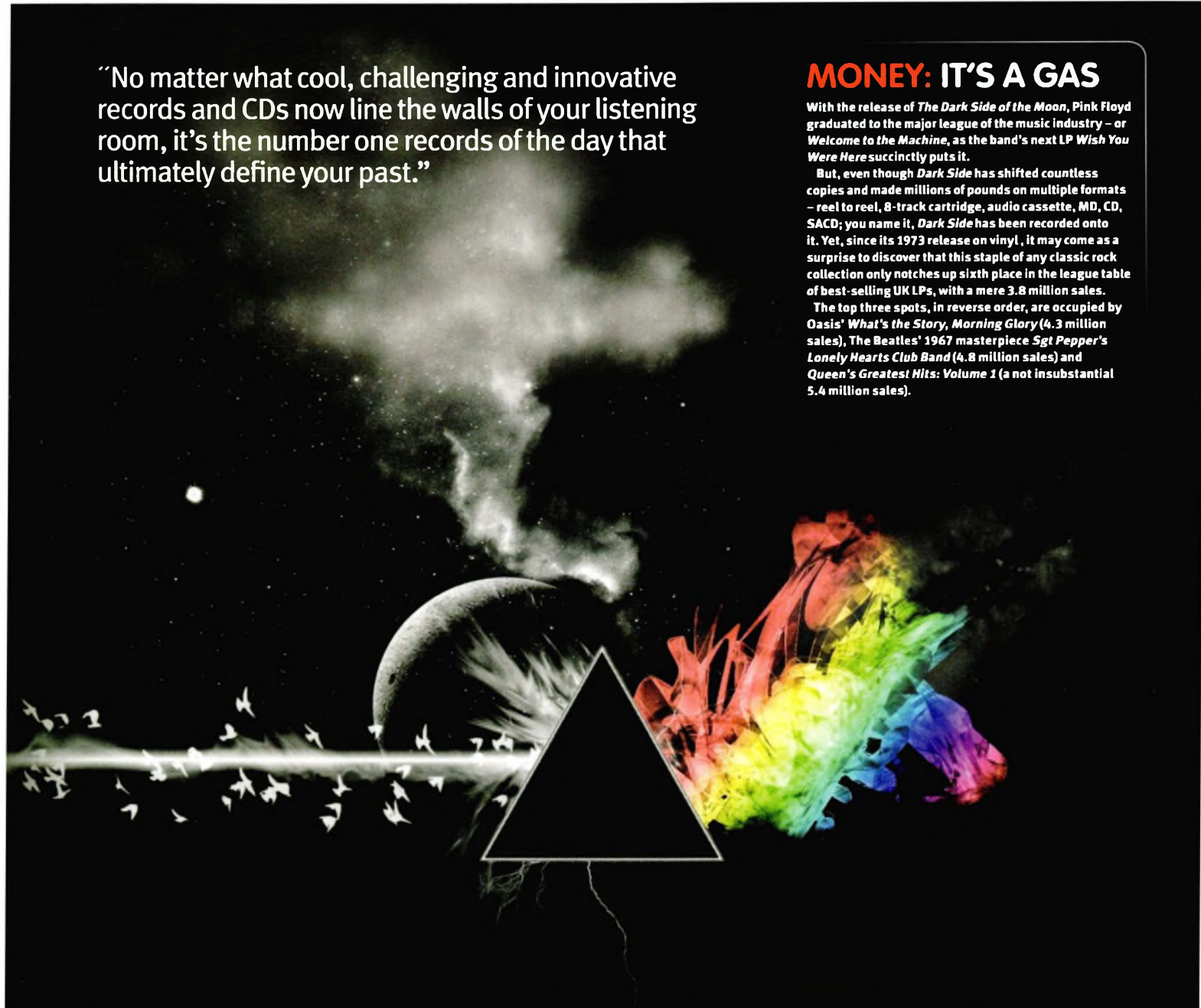
“No matter what cool, challenging and innovative records and CDs now line the walls of your listening room, it’s the number one records of the day that ultimately define your past.”

MONEY: IT’S A GAS

With the release of *The Dark Side of the Moon*, Pink Floyd graduated to the major league of the music industry – or *Welcome to the Machine*, as the band’s next LP *Wish You Were Here* succinctly puts it.

But, even though *Dark Side* has shifted countless copies and made millions of pounds on multiple formats – reel to reel, 8-track cartridge, audio cassette, MD, CD, SACD; you name it, *Dark Side* has been recorded onto it. Yet, since its 1973 release on vinyl, it may come as a surprise to discover that this staple of any classic rock collection only notches up sixth place in the league table of best-selling UK LPs, with a mere 3.8 million sales.

The top three spots, in reverse order, are occupied by Oasis’ *What’s the Story, Morning Glory* (4.3 million sales), The Beatles’ 1967 masterpiece *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (4.8 million sales) and *Queen’s Greatest Hits: Volume 1* (a not insubstantial 5.4 million sales).





The Kyoto 5600 8-track player didn't help save the short-lived format

hardly imagine that Bryan had time to visit his Mayfair barber, consult his Saville Row tailor or take Jerry Hall out to dinner.

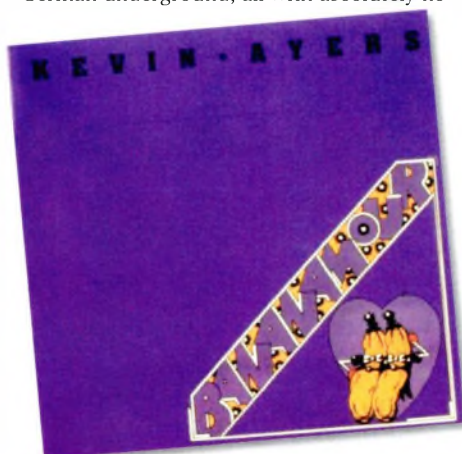
Aging Glam rockers like Alvin Stardust and the (now disgraced) Gary Glitter may have ruled the airwaves and inexplicably commanded the attention of teenage girls' hearts and purse strings, but 1973 was also the year that the underground became mainstream, catapulting one of its mainstays out of the university concert halls and into venues as sizeable as Earls Court.

Progressive rock acts like Genesis (*Selling England By The Pound*), Yes (*Tales From Topographic Oceans*) and Soft Machine (*Six and Seven*) may have also released albums this year, but it was Pink Floyd's eighth long-player, *The Dark Side of the Moon* that was embraced by an audience outside of dope-smoking longhairs. The band had undeniably come a long way from its early, improvisational days as darlings of the psychedelic underground when Syd Barrett was still principal songwriter and guitarist.

The Dark Side of the Moon is Pink Floyd's artistic peak for many; the band never functioned as well as a unit nor delivered such catchy material. Millions of words have been written on one of the best selling UK releases of all time (see *Money: It's a Gas*, p84), so there's little more to say about the cycle of songs nestling within this classic's iconic 'prism' cover. Apart from that, the pulsing VSC3 synthesiser that drenches *On the Run* points directly towards the futuristic electronica that was setting Germany's underground aflame.

Going underground

Pink Floyd may have gone overground with *Dark Side*, but plenty was happening in the German underground, all with absolutely no



commercial considerations, thankfully. Imaginatively dubbed Krautrock by our beloved press, the music of the German scene was as taut and futuristic as *Tales From Topographic Oceans* was bloated and 'very' 1973.

The template for the following year's breakthrough LP, *Autobahn* was being etched by Kraftwerk in the grooves of 1973's *Ralf und Florian*, exploring the possibilities of drum machines and the latest synths. Can released *Future Days*, its last LP with Japanese vocalist Damo Suzuki and Neu! Continued ploughing their motorik furrow with its second LP, going under the no-nonsense title *Neu! 2*, housed in a pre-punk, spray-painted sleeve. Tangerine Dream's *Atem* was DJ John Peel's Import Record of the year, the band's last before its wholehearted embrace of synthesisers with the following year's *Phaedra* on fledgeling label Virgin.

Experimental collective Faust also released their latest LP *Faust IV*, with Richard Branson's then underground label and an even more experimental affair in collaboration with drone violinist Tony Conrad – *Outside the Dream Syndicate* – on Virgin's budget Caroline outfit. This was definitely Virgin's year as a commercial force: former sideman to ex-Soft Machine member Kevin Ayers, Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* – the first Virgin LP – was an unexpected hit that was made even more famous by its use as the theme music to early-70s horror classic *The Exorcist*.

Naked hippies on acid

If your listening experience took you out of the headphones and into the mud of the festival scene, classic line-ups abounded this year; almost enough to get you misty-eyed. The national institution of Glastonbury was still in its formative years, only a couple of years on from Michael Eavis' 'Pilton Pop Festival' held on his estate. Information is scant, but you can bet a sheet of blotter acid that the spaceship Hawkwind will have been orbiting the site in some shape or form in 1973.

If you were unable or unwilling to ride the Glastonbury's ley lines, you could have always caught the movie of 1971's *Glastonbury Fayre* at the cinema. Featuring captivating performances from folk rock legends Fairport Convention and Terry Reid and directed by Nic Roeg (*Performance*, *Walkabout* and Bowie vehicle *The Man Who Fell to Earth*), this classic festival artefact is now available on DVD (amazon.co.uk)

Equally eye-catching was July's Buxton Rock Festival. It boasted a killer line-up of Tony McPhee's inventive power-trio Groundhogs, refuseniks Eggar Broughton Band and Canned Heat – even Chuck Berry made it to the bill. Well worth the small change admission fee!

As the appropriately initialled writer L.P. Hartley famously observed in the opening sentence of *The Go-Between*, "the past is a foreign country: they do



Mike Oldfield and some memorable tubular bells

things differently there," but not that differently it seems. The ripples of 1973 can be felt to this day. As you read this, Roxy Music have filled London's massive O2 arena to capacity with the reconvened band's *For Your Pleasure* tour, the album's material losing none of its vitality over the intervening – deep breath – 38 years.

Artists who made their recording debuts in 1973 – like Queen and Aerosmith – are still with us in some shape or form. Progressive rock legends Van der Graaf Generator are as vital (pardon the prog rock pun) as ever, playing fresh, new material to sold-out theatres this March. Generations of new bands draw on the electronic innovations of Neu!, Faust, Can and Kraftwerk. Glastonbury Festival goes from strength to strength. Dreadful pop music still dominates commercial radio. In some respects, it's still 1973. ●

38 NOT OUT

For Glaswegian hi-fi audio equipment manufacturer Linn, 1973 was the year of its birth.

The Scottish company has come a long way since its '70s inception, producing a bewildering variety of products now including multiroom and in-car audio and recently 'killing' CD from the product line-up. To many hi-fi fans of a certain age however, Linn is associated with one product and one product only – the Sondek LP12 turntable.

This turntable's success was key to re-establishing the standing of belt-driven turntables, in the face of direct-drive competition. It went on to become the definitive source of the seventies and early eighties for many dealers and after nearly four decades of upgrades and improvements, continues to be sold to this day. Unlike flares, patchouli oil and lava lamps, this staple of the 70s has definitely stood the test of time.



Guildford Audio

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Audio Research
Audiophile Base
Copland
Crystal Cable
Dartzeel
Dream Vision
EAT
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Krell
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90 - Traffic
John Barleycorn
Must Die



90 - Can
Future Days

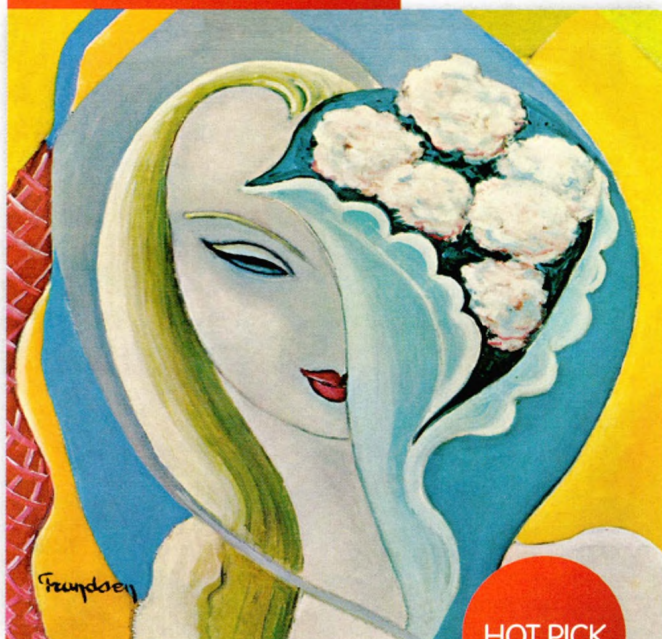


91 - David Sylvian
Sleepwalkers

Music reviews

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

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



HOT PICK

Derek & The Dominoes

Layla & Other Assorted Love Songs

universal.com

★★★★★

Universal

2-CD deluxe edition; 4-CD/DVD/2-LP super deluxe edition

WHILE TOURING AMERICA with Blind Faith in 1969, Eric Clapton had so much fun moonlighting with support group Delaney & Bonnie, that he broke-up the world's first 'super-group' and eloped with them. A year later, Delaney & Bonnie's backing musicians – Carl Radle (bass), Jim Gordon (drums) and Bobby Whitlock (keyboards) – turned up at his home in Surrey, England, looking for a gig.

Clapton had just released his first solo LP and wasn't looking to form a new group. But he did so anyway, and dubbed them Derek and The Dominoes – a name intended to show that he simply desired to be just one of the 'boys in the band'.

After three months of rehearsals, they decamped

to Criteria Studios, Miami to record what was to be their only studio album. Despite this, it was clearly Clapton's band, if only because most of the songs came from him. Inspired by his unrequited love for George Harrison's then-wife Patti Boyd, he came up with classics such as *Bell Bottom Blues*, *I Looked Away*, *Why Does Love Got To Be So Sad?* and *Layla*.

But according to reports, the initial sessions did not go well – perhaps because of the low-key, humble bloke persona Clapton had adopted. Then Duane Allman turned up and instantly provided the catalyst Clapton needed. Within ten days, a double album of immense power had emerged, the alchemy between the two

“Clapton simply desired to be just one of the ‘boys in the band’.”

guitarists transforming both the ambition and the execution of the record and firing Clapton into recording one of the landmark albums of his career.

Roots rock, electric blues and gospel, some of Clapton's finest songwriting and the best twin guitar attack you've ever heard – can it be true that 40 years ago the original album failed to chart? These remasters balance the contrasting sound of the two guitars with greater empathy than ever before.

This is heard nowhere better than on *Layla*, the mix emphasising the fiery intensity of the axe duelling on its first part and then the delicacy of the famous piano-led instrumental coda as Clapton and Allman weave lovely, filigree lines that

seem to caress each other over Jim Gordon's plaintive minor-key chords. Arguably, Clapton never found a better musical foil than Allman in his entire career.

Always something of a reluctant vocalist, Clapton's singing is also pushed higher up in the mix, emphasising a genuine soulfulness, presumably inspired by the unrequited love that courses through so many of the songs.

A second disc compiles half-a-dozen tracks recorded for an abandoned second studio album, which badly miss Allman's incendiary presence.

Audiophiles will be also be interested in the additional material in the four-disc version, which includes DTS 5.1 and Dolby Surround 5.1 versions of the original album, mixed by Elliot Scheiner, arguably the world's leading surround sound engineer. His mixes add an epic, cinematic quality unimaginable when the album was first recorded. **NW Standout tracks:** Layla; Bell Bottom Blues; Have You Ever Loved A Woman



The 'boys in the band'



Traffic

John Barleycorn Must Die (Deluxe Edition)

universal.com

★★★★★

Universal

CD

HAVING SMOKED, drank and lived the dream of creating music live in a Berkshire Cottage, Traffic were all but burnt out by 1969 when Steve Winwood joined Eric Clapton in Blind Faith. Only lasting six months and a disastrous American tour, the supergroup dissolved and left Winwood band-less. Working alone in Island studios, he was soon joined by Jim Capaldi and Chris Wood and the superlative John Barleycorn was born.

Not only did the 1970 Traffic high-watermark boast the 17th Century acoustic folk-tale *John Barleycorn Must Die*, but also a series of other compositions which deftly fused jazz, blues and rock. On release, the album soared to No 5 in the US charts.

Reissued before in 1999, this Deluxe Edition boasts three fabulous out-takes and live material from the subsequent US tour. One of few occasions the bonus disc outshines the original in every way. Buy on sight! **MP**
Standout tracks: John Barleycorn; Stranger To Himself; Every Mother's Son



Marianne Faithfull

Horses And High Heels

dramatico.com

★★★★★

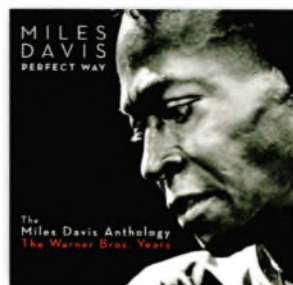
Dramatico

CD

THE RECENT REINVENTION of the one-time swinging-sixties beauty and drug-addled seventies train wreck as scorched earth torch singer of a certain age has been surprisingly successful. It's due in part to some strong material, but also that beguilingly fractured croak of a voice that only seems to improve with age.

Her 23rd solo album has a stronger soul and blues influence than previously and there's also room for some Celtic swing, straight-up rock and doomy folk. The sound is warm and welcoming and none too brash, heavy on the guitar twang and giving the impression of being put together more or less live in the studio. **DO**

Standout tracks: No Reason; Gee Baby; Horses And High Heels



Miles Davis

Perfect Way: The Miles Davis Anthology

warnerclassicsandjazz.com

★★★★★

Warner Classics & Jazz

CD

MILES DAVIS' EARLY

explorations were a hard act to follow, but as this 24-track anthology shows he produced some strong later work, too.

There are two soundtracks including a great collaboration with John Lee Hooker for The Hot Spot, live performances from the *Dingo OST* and a couple from his foray into hip hop with *Easy Mo Bee*, with live material and five previously unreleased tracks.

The sound varies with the recording, so while the Miller albums have a slightly bludgeoning drum sound, the bass guitar is superb and the trumpet pretty sweet with it. *Murder* with John Lee has the most powerful atmosphere of the lot. **JK**

Standout tracks: You Won't Forget Me; Trumpet Cleaning



Gang Of Four

Content

gangoffour.co.uk

★★★★★

Groenland Deutschland

CD

LEEDS' GANG OF FOUR were among the Thatcher-baiting explosion of talent that characterised much of the post-punk new wave. Singer Jon King might run a contract publishing company these days, but his shouty, angsty vocals have regained some of the spark the band seemed to lose before their original split in the early eighties.

Recorded at Gill's London studio with a replacement rhythm section, the sound of the basic drums, bass, guitar line-up is refreshingly brittle and edgy, if perhaps a little cleaner than the band sounded on early near-hits like *At Home He's A Tourist*. Then again, that will probably do them no harm in appealing to fans of more recent GoF acolytes like Franz Ferdinand and Bloc Party. **DO**
Standout tracks: She Said; You'll Never Pay For The Farm

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

Can Future Days spoonrecords.com

HOT PICK



★★★★★

United Artists

180g

HAVING DEFINED one of the heaviest sounds in rock, improvisational kraut rockers Can also boasted one of the loudest PAs of the early 1970s. They bravely

refused a support slot with Pink Floyd in 1972, ostensibly because they wouldn't shorten their long set for Waters and co.

For 1973's *Future Days*, Can decided to jettison the metallic sound of their first four albums for an environmentally themed ambient concoction of looped birdsong, ratcheting guitars, soft-shimmering vibes and beautiful grooves.

The four tracks were recorded on two-track, live at Innerspace in KULn in the long hot summer of 1973. The erotic title track opens

with Holger Czukay's edits and treatments before uncovering a tantalizing drum/bass riff which you will replay for years. *Spray* hints at the stuttering, instant composition of old and mixes some fifties-style rock 'n' roll bass riffs with Jaki Liebezit's lithe cyclical drumming before the band hit the motherlode on the 20-minute *Bel Air*. A hazy, sun-soaked tingle of a song, it feels like sunshine on the brow and was inspired by a Portuguese sojourn. **MP**
Standout tracks: Bel Air; Future Days; Spray





Tangerine Dream

The Virgin Years
1974-78

virgin.com

★★★★

Virgin

3-CD box set

THE CLAIM BY TANGERINE

Dream founder Edgar Froese that his Krautrock pioneers would achieve in music what Salvador Dali had done in painting, was a touch grandiose. But they were, perhaps, the finest of the Pink Floyd-inspired peddlers of ambient 'head' music, reaching their peak on the five albums remastered on this three-disc set: *Phaedra* (1974); *Rubycon* (1975); the live and heavily improvisational *Ricochet* (1975); *Stratosfear* (1976) and *Cyclone* (1978).

The least impressive material here comes from *Cyclone*, on which they ill-advisedly layered their haunting, meditative beauty with more conventional prog-rock excesses. **NW**

Standout tracks: Phaedra; Mysterious Semblance At The Strand Of Nightmares



Gustav Holst

The Planets

lpo.co.uk

★★★★★

LPO Records

CD

AT 43 MINUTES, this version of *The Planets* (recorded live at London's Festival Hall) is one of the fastest ever – even speedier than the old Steinberg/Boston account on DG, or Stokowski/LAPO on EMI.

For those wanting a typically English performance in the Boulton mould, Jurowski's incisive virtuoso account might seem a bit frenetic. But Holst's own recording of this music (with the LSO) also set fast tempi – some even quicker than Jurowski's!

The sound is vivid and clear, with blazing brass and plenty of impact. Balances are forward and immediate, but the sound still retains reasonable depth and spaciousness; it's certainly up-front, but not nearly as dry as Colin Davis's live Barbican account on LSO Live. **JH**
Standout track: Uranus



Peter Tchaikovsky

The Nutcracker

Simon Rattle (cond)
Berlin Philharmonic

emiclassics.com

★★★★

EMIClassics

2-CD

RATTLE BRAVELY ADMITS

to 'not liking' Tchaikovsky's music, though he claims to have a soft spot for the ballets. In this beautifully-played and often quite sumptuous account, he (and the Berliners) hardly put a foot wrong.

It's a suave thoroughly accomplished performance that marries sensitive playing to some ravishing sonorities.

That said, turn to Svetlanov, and you hear something that goes beyond surface polish – a real performance of far greater imagination, conveying a deeper love of the music.

EMI's sound is typical of its Berlin productions – smooth and well-balanced, with a deceptively wide dynamic range. **JH**
Standout track: 8 The Battle

HIGH-RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

David Sylvian

Sleepwalkers

sylvian.oxfordmusic.net

★★★★★



Samadhisound

16-bit/44.1kHz stereo



AS THE PRIMARY songwriter and vocalist with Japan, David Sylvian had a remarkably

distinctive vocal style and a unique approach to composition that continued with his subsequent solo recordings after the band imploded. *Sleepwalkers* represents some of the most significant of these collaborations and, in Sylvian's own words, the "more playful side" of his body of work.

Although 'only' a 16-bit recording, the album still brims with life and vitality. Nothing seems able to rob this music of its sublime energy and the glorious evocative qualities conjured up by Sylvian's matured vocals. **MS**
Standout tracks: Ballad Of A Deadman; Money For All

Dan Arborise

Of Tide & Trail

linnrecords.com

★★★★★

Linn Records

24-bit/44.1kHz stereo



MY INITIAL REACTION as soon as this music started to play was shock and surprise: the guitar and voice

were so amazingly reminiscent of John Martyn... but not so languorous, more animated and fired-up. Hardly your typical singer/songwriter, Arborise penned this 'instrumental ambient' recording, as he describes it, while living for two years in a woodland yurt.

The 24-bit/44.1kHz recording represents this often ethereal music vibrantly. It fully exposes the timbre and dynamics of Arborise's voice and guitar. Furthermore, it demonstrates the strength of his subtle melodic compositions along with the intricacy of his guitar playing. **MS**
Standout tracks: Another Side Of The Sky; You'll All Get What's Coming To You

BLU-RAY DVD

Emerson, Lake & Palmer Live At Montreux 1997 eagle-rock.com



★★★★ Eagle Vision

DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1,
Dolby Digital 5.1, LPCM 2.0

ALL THREE MEMBERS of the one-time supergroup have aged remarkably well considering that this highpoint of their nineties

revival came twenty years after their heyday and the playing is likewise not a lot less powerful than it once was. Emerson has his full seventies keyboard and synth array, including old-school control panel and Carl Palmer maintains his reputation for excess in the drum array department.

ELP were about unadulterated progtaasticness in all its glory, with classical interpretations, jazz interludes, drum solos and dagger-wielding keyboard abuse. The daggers have been put away or confiscated by Swiss

customs, so now Emerson gets things going with an attachment to his rig that emits sparks!

The sound is probably a lot better than it was back in the day, thanks to the capabilities of modern PA systems – it's certainly got plenty of energy. The LPCM track is more evenly balanced than the DTS-HD and has a bit more going for it in terms of depth and dynamics, but neither is shabby and some may prefer the multichannel balance. **JK**
Standout track: Knife Edge; Lucky Man

Audio alchemists

Legendary southeastern hi-fi dealer Sounds of Music has a new location, new owners and even a new name – 15 Audio. Run by an engineer and an ex-customer **Jason Kennedy** drops in

Sounds of Music was an iconic hi-fi dealer in the south east. Occupying an enormous chunk of real estate in Heathfield, Sussex, it gave audiophiles a chance to sample a huge range of brands side-by-side and it also acted as the UK importer for exotica such as Boulder and Vitus, under the Metropolis Music name.

The company was recently bought by SoM engineer Brett Hunnisett and customer Peter Woolliscroft, who moved the business to the nearby county town of Lewes and have recently re-named it 15 Audio, in honour of the cast iron door number on the former workshop that they now inhabit.

They have three dem rooms and stacks of high-end goodies, including brands distributed by Metropolis such as Hansen loudspeakers, Bladelius electronics, Ayon valve components and, of course, Boulder's sculptural megaliths.

Peter is also promoting the new store as a hi-fi 'club', where enthusiasts can hang out and listen to high-quality kit in a friendly atmosphere.

Peter comes from a pro-audio background and worked as an engineer in the eighties and nineties, one of his most successful projects was Talk Talk's *Colour of Spring!* Many readers will know that pro-audio types and exotic, expensive hi-fi do not mix, but at 15 Audio there's a harmony that has Peter chomping at the bit to show us his system-building expertise.

So, we challenged the guys to build us three systems: a real-world, everyman set up; something more exotic for the free-thinking audiophile; plus a high-end, aspirational system to show off Metropolis Music's portfolio at its best.

THE EXPERTS



15 AUDIO
LEWES, EAST SUSSEX, 08448 221115
SOUNDS-OF-MUSIC.CO.UK
QUAD-HIFI.CO.UK, BLADELIUS.COM, PEARLEVO.COM,
BOULDERAMP.COM, HANSENAUDIO.COM

MUSIC USED



TALK TALK
THE COLOUR OF SPRING
CD



THE DECEMBERISTS
THE HAZARDS OF LOVE
CD



THE IMAGINED VILLAGE
EMPIRE AND LOVE
CD

SYSTEM 1 – SERIOUS STUFF

Peter and Brett's first choice of system is also the most expensive and is based around two of the key brands in their portfolio: Boulder and Hansen. Brett described this system as being: "very musical and extremely good at drawing you in, it produces a lovely wide open sound and does many things as well as some of the more expensive systems we've heard. The build quality of the Boulder and Hansen products is fantastic and it's one of those systems that you can listen to for a long period time and always enjoy."

Digital in

As they didn't have any dedicated transports in house when we visited, a Vitus CD player was pulled in for the purpose. It's by no means a slouch but is, perhaps, a little OTT in the context of a system which has a very good DAC in the preamplifier. The SCD-010 is from the Vitus Signature series, which has DSP-based upsampling to take the frequency up to 384kHz. Vitus also goes to considerable lengths in the analogue output stage, not to mention build, which is substantial and superbly executed.

However, in terms of substance it's hard to beat Boulder, the company that builds some of, if not the biggest amplifiers in the business. The 1060 is the least expensive power amp in the 1000 series, but weighs 63kg and delivers 300 watts per channel. The power inlet isn't your usual IEC socket, but an industrial three-pin device that makes a mockery of the north American mains plug.

The partnering 1012 DAC preamplifier only has balanced analogue connections. In fact, the only non-XLR signal socket on the back panel is for an optical Toslink input. It houses four Burr-Brown DACs per channel and also uses DSP to achieve upsampling to 192kHz, but numbers aren't everything and Brett considers that the digital link to the DAC/pre-combo gives a better result than using a non-converting preamp. Despite the heavyweight build, the actual circuit boards are populated with surface-mount devices which don't take up much space.

The final link in the chain is the Hansen Knight loudspeaker. It's built in Canada where the company makes the woofer and midrange drivers using a sandwich of materials. The cabinet is described as a composite matrix material that is built of three layers in a mould. Hansen doesn't indicate what the material is, but it's clearly not MDF. It also incorporates a 'cloaking device', which is a fourth layer on the inside, that is said to 'lower the distortion floor'. The Knight stands a metre high on its spikes and is the least expensive floorstander in the catalogue.

Low coloration: more colour

Having heard Boulder components in the past we were expecting a cool, dry sound, but what it actually achieved is a rich and musical result that draws you into the music in a relaxed fashion. The Hansen is clearly an excellent match for the electronics, it revealed loads of instrument timbre on Miles' *Kind of Blue*, with horns of both types giving up all of their metallic subtlety and character thanks to the minimal colouring imparted by the system.

John Martyn's *Couldn't Love You More* revealed stacks of harmonic structure on all the instruments and lone voice and this in the context of a very distinct acoustic. When pressed on a possible upgrade route, Brett suggested changing the power amp to a pair of Boulder 1015 monoblocks for even more control.



1 VITUS SCD-010
£16,950

vitusaudio.com

2 BOULDER 1012
£15,200

boulderamp.com

3 BOULDER 1060
£19,500

4 HANSEN KNIGHT
£20,000

hansenaudio.com

**TOTAL SYSTEM
PRICE: £71,650**

SYSTEM 2 – THE SWEDISH ADVANTAGE

The second system that 15 Audio played for us was in a larger room with a pitched ceiling and damping panels hanging overhead; an unusual space, but a good-sounding one thanks to Peter and Brett's efforts. Here they had a few different systems, but concentrated on the Bladelius electronics from Sweden. This company was formerly called Advantage, but its designer Mike Bladelius decided to rebrand with his surname a few years back.

We reviewed the rather impressive Embla HD player in the 2009 edition of *The Collection* and got some excellent results with it. As it was also in the racks, Peter gave it a spin after we'd enjoyed the main system.

How to navigate

The Bladelius Freja MkIII is a beautifully executed universal player with a substantial front panel that has the company name carved out, a mere four buttons and a solid aluminium disc drawer. It's a two-channel player that follows the Bladelius ethos of being fully balanced throughout. It's also an upsampler with two Burr-Brown converters per channel and separate power supplies for digital and analogue sections. The clock is even placed very close to the DACs in order to minimise jitter.

Being a DVD-A player with no video out, we wondered how you are going to navigate that often illogical medium. It turns out that the remote control has a switch specifically for seeking out the correct soundtrack format.

Bladelius refers to the Tyr as the little giant – small price, big quality – a statement that Peter seems to agree with, as he has nothing but praise for this well-finished amplifier from the company's entry level range. Tyr has one balanced and three unbalanced inputs, plus a tape loop and pre out. All terminals are high quality WBT types and output is a respectable 100 watts a side.

Peter partnered this with a speaker from Pearl Evolution, an Italian company with a small range of open-baffle models in which the BLR 401 eight-inch is the penultimate model by virtue of bass driver size. The bass is the only part of the speaker that has a cabinet and even that isn't all that

big, a factor which contributes to the relatively low mass of the whole speaker. The drive units are interesting too, the highs are delivered by an isodynamic tweeter, midrange by a pair of soft domes and bass is produced by a magnesium alloy cone.

Peter likes this system "because of its natural, organic sound, it's similar to the sound you get with valves and avoids the harshness you get with mid-priced CD players and amps. Again, it's very good value for money, the amp gives you three grand plus quality. This system enables me to take the the shutters off and open the door and get in and listen to more of it."

A degree of openness

What struck us was the degree of openness in the sound, this reflects the room and the relatively wide spacing of the speakers as well, but it's hard to disassociate the sound from the physical openness of the speakers themselves. There is no shortage of detail and image scale, all presented in a homogenous and engaging fashion.

When we asked how this system could best be upgraded Peter changed sources from the Freja over to the Embla. This four-grand HD player delivers a rather more substantial sound with greater musicality and excellent lyrical intelligibility, a proper upgrade in all, but breadth of format choice.

1 **BLADELIUS FREJA MKIII CD/SACD/DVD-A PLAYER**
£2,800
bladelius.com

2 **BLADELIUS TYR**
£1,850

3 **PEARL EVOLUTION BLR 401 8"**
£4,250
pearlevo.com

TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £8,900



SYSTEM 3 – FOR THE LOVE OF QUAD

The Elite range was introduced last year as the entry level for Quad electronics and replaced the 99 series with more restrained casework and colouring. The system that Peter had assembled in his most cosy dem room takes up very little space, but consists of well-built components with cast-alloy chassis and discreet styling.

It's more subtle stuff than classic Quad of yore, but he says that it maintains a continuity with the brand's extensive legacy – many of his customers are only just trading-in Quad components bought in the seventies. If that doesn't prove the value of decent hi-fi we don't know what does!

The right connections

The Elite CDS runs a 24-bit/192kHz Crystal DAC from a Sony transport and offers both single-ended and balanced analogue outputs, plus the usual varieties of digital output. Along with the rest of the system you can hook it up with Quad's dedicated Quadlink and Ampbus system that minimises clutter behind the components, but Peter recommends using good-quality interconnects for best results. In fact, he recommends Quad's own QA900 interconnect and QL900 speaker cables and these come in a very Quad shade of brown.

The Elite preamp is a four-input, plus MM/MC phono control unit with almost identical casework to the CDS. It features bypassable tone controls and Quad's classic Tilt control. The difference between these two very similarly named options being that the tone controls allow the usual rather crude alteration of level in one section of the treble or bass spectrum, while Tilt offers six response shapes plus a flat setting.

The latter are rather more useful for counteracting aberrations introduced by the room or problems

with a recording than plain tone controls and have been a feature of Quad preamps since their heyday.

The Elite Stereo is one of two power amps in the range and is specified to deliver 90 watts a channel, it can accept signal from an RCA phono input or one on the balanced Ampbus system. The loudspeaker selected is Quad's 22L2 floorstander in a beautiful birds eye maple veneer, it sports a pair of 6.5-inch drivers: one for bass and another for mid/bass and both have Kevlar cones, treble is handled by a soft-dome tweeter. The enclosure is unusual inasmuch as the midrange is sealed but the bass driver sits in a vented chamber.

Nice and easy

Peter is of the opinion that this Quad system represents excellent value for money and that it always sounds appealing, particularly to the classical music enthusiasts among his customers. It's not hard to hear why, the system is revealing in an easy, forgiving fashion that emphasises the music over the sound. It reveals plenty of difference between recordings and lets us enjoy the weighty bass of the *Imagined Village* album, as well as the dry humour of the band's rendition of *Cum on Feel the Noize* – probably the most downbeat rendition on record.

On the John Martyn piece, the reverb on the vibes goes way back and his voice is really warm, a result that made it essential to look the track up when we got home. Danny Thompson's double bass sounds superb, too and this inspired Peter to put on Lou Reed's *Walk on the Wild Side*, another great-sounding seventies classic with the master of American double bass session players, Herbie Flowers.

We were quite taken with these electronics, so much so in fact, that we called Quad to get some delivered to Jimmy Hughes for a more leisurely listen. Expect a full review soon.

**1 QUAD ELITE CDS
£800**

quad-hifi.co.uk

**2 QUAD ELITE
PREAMP AND
ELITE STEREO
£850/£699**

**3 QUAD 22L2
£900**

**TOTAL SYSTEM
PRICE:
£3,249**



So it's farewell Sounds of Music and hello 15 Audio. Whilst we understand the need for a fresh start, the SOM name has been well known for what seems like an eternity, so we hope the new venture will be just as enduring for the south east.

15 Audio is a friendly place with some good-sounding rooms and even better-

sounding kit. It could do with a few more turntables, but this is something that is in the pipeline. In fact, it looks like SME is on the cards for representation.

The systems we heard were quite distinct in sound and price and, while the Quad represents excellent value for money, we were rather taken by the

Bladelius-based system. It's not often that you get this combination of build and sound quality at such a reasonable price.

The big Boulder system was, of course, the most revealing, but the extra cost means your returns diminish at quite an alarming rate. But even at this level, it's still possible to get good value. ●

Help & advice

We've got the answers to everything you've ever wanted to know about hi-fi and weren't afraid to ask. Email us now at hifichoice@futurenet.com or write to: **Hi-Fi Choice Q&A, Future Publishing Ltd, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW**

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.



ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: DIGITAL AUDIO

RESIDENT IN the audio industry for over a decade, Ed has considerable experience of both CD and SACD formats on disc, as well as an increasing personal interest in streamed high-resolution audio and network based systems.



ALVIN GOLD

EXPERTISE: HIGH-END

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 My Linn Axis turntable has reached the end of its life and I need to replace it. I have £750 - £1,000 to spend and want something that's easy to set up and improves on the Axis.

Marcus Garvey, via email

A Our thoughts would swing towards the £900 Project X Pack, that we reviewed in HFC 309. It's certainly a good place to start as it includes such niceties as electronic speed control and an Ortofon Rondo Red cartridge (worth £300 in its

own right). Set up is a breeze and the performance is superb for the price and should be an improvement on the Axis. The ubiquitous Michell Tecnodec is also an excellent performer, but will take you right to the top of your budget once arm and cartridge are added to it.



Direct desires

Q I am looking for an integrated amp that will accept the preamp input from the X-Can V8P, or a power amp, which in turn will feed the output through IXOS 604 OFC bi-wire speaker cables to a pair of Monitor Audio Silver RS1 speakers.

Furthermore, as my wife can hear a gnat burp at a thousand paces, I am looking for some non-leaky headphones to replace (or, preferably improve upon) my venerable HD580s. Your thoughts would be greatly appreciated.

Nigel Sharpe, via email

A The good news is that amplifiers with a fixed-level input are very numerous thanks to the fact that they are usually labelled up as an 'AV Bypass' and fitted to allow the amp to be attached to a home cinema amp. AV or not, they will work equally well with the pre-out of a headphone amp.

You do not specify a budget, but recent amps we have tried with this functionality were the £999 Musical Fidelity M3i (HFC 337), which has an input that can be switched to operate as a fixed input on request and the



Musical Fidelity M3i: life in the fast lane

£1,495 Arcam A38 (HFC 342), which can be configured to work in this manner. Any separate power amplifier can be run from the output of the headphone amp and function as it would from a conventional preamplifier.

We have not reviewed many closed-back designs of late as current fashion seems to prefer open or semi-open types. The £500 Denon AH-D5000 (HFC 312) would fit the bill, along with the recently announced AH-100 special edition type.

The dB level of a gnat burp was not something we could verify, but rest assured that noise leakage is commendably low.

Playing the system

Q As a hi-fi beginner, I would appreciate some advice on assembling a budget system in my 12x33x12 ft (high) living room. I listen to all kinds of music (pop, jazz, rock and classic).

Given a budget of £2,000, can you recommend the 'best' budget amplifier, CD player and speakers as well? Suggestions on speaker cabling would also be greatly appreciated.

Alternatively, would buying a Rotel RCX-1500 all-in-one system with Bowers and Wilkins 684 speakers and bi-wire speaker cables, using van den Hul Tea Track (since it would be within my £2,000 pound budget) be a good idea? If there are recommendations that exceed £2,000, I can consider them.

Kumaran Palasubramaniam, via email

A We hope that the this issue's Blind-Listening Group Test (p38) might have been of some use to you as a number of the combinations tested fall usefully into the budget that you mention.

The room you describe is relatively large, which means

that some of the smaller speakers that we have tested recently, whilst excellent will be too small to work efficiently in the room in question.

We would definitely suggest that the combination of Exposure 2010S2 amp and CD player, with the Mission MX5s (HFC 341) would be a good start. The combination would be slightly over budget, less cabling, but would offer room-filling sound and the ability to handle a wide variety of musical types without a problem. This would leave you limited for cable choice within budget, but the components would be good and could run on basic cabling until such time as your budget could look at something like the Kimber Tonik – our 2010 award-winning interconnect (HFC 339) or the Chord Carnival speaker cable, also reviewed in HFC 339.

The Rotel and Bowers and Wilkins combination is an interesting alternative and one that we think would not give a huge amount away in performance to the separate amp and CD combinations, while offering more features.

If you are going to use media streaming, the Rotel has much to recommend it. You can make use of a good-quality radio at no extra cost, which is potentially very useful. The separate amp and CD player do offer you greater upgrade potential going forward, so you will need to decide whether this system is going to be in place for a while, or the path to greater things.

In search of speed

Q My system comprises a Naim CD5i and Supernait, with a recently added Squeezebox Touch via digital into the Supernait. This then outputs via Chord cables into a pair of Spondor S5e loudspeakers.



AE1 MkIIIs: deep bass with no overhang

I have recently moved house and while I am delighted to have gained a listening room and thus avoid competition from the TV, I am finding that the move to a smaller room on a suspended floor is not without issue. The Spondors now sound slightly plodding and confused, as if the bass is half a beat behind and I believe that there is a very high degree of room interaction going on.

I really need to cure this and while I was considering selling the CD5 and buying a Naim DAC to connect to the Squeezebox, I could instead spend the same amount (roughly £2,000, perhaps a little more) on a speaker solution that will work better in this space. What are my options for better control and tighter bass?

Jim Cox, via email

A Before we get stuck into the cash and replace the Spondors, there are a couple of small tweaks that are worth trying. The Spondors might benefit from better isolation from the floor. This need not be expensive to try – a pair of paving slabs from a DIY centre (the stylish might want to use granite for a better aesthetic) underneath the speakers may tighten up the bass considerably and reduce the amount of room interaction that you are suffering from. The time-honoured practice of socks in the bass port is harder on the Spondors, as the port is not an especially sock-friendly shape but it may help. Finally play about with positioning with regards to the rear wall and corners.

If these inexpensive fixes don't work, we would suggest looking at the Acoustic Energy AE1 MKIII (HFC 338). Placed on a solid pair of stands (which will take you over budget), the AE's have deep, but very tight and focused bass and enjoy a degree of decoupling from their surroundings that can avoid excessive room interaction. The Supernait should have no trouble driving them given the excellent current delivery.

Alternatively, the Spondor SP2/3R2s we reviewed last month (HFC 343) would blow the budget, but achieve some of the same decoupling and keep the Spondor sound.

Super sonics

Q I currently own an ATC CA2/P1 pre/power and ATC SCM11 speakers.

I bought an Audiolab 8200CD and I'm a bit disappointed to be honest. It seems to have the loading tray of a mid-90's budget PC and control buttons that would be more at home on a digital watch bought at a petrol station.

As for the sound – it's obvious that the CD player was secondary to the rest of the unit's bells and whistles. As such, I am looking for a replacement that just needs to be a really, really good CD player. I'm considering Naim 5i-2, Cyrus 8SE and Rega Saturn, but I am open to other suggestions.

Matt Robbins, via email

A We are a little suprised about your findings on the Audiolab, but it shows that experiences vary. The ATC equipment will have

Rotel's RCX-1500 - a serious competitor to separates



the brand sound which will be explicit and detailed but not overly warm, so any choices that you make will need to take that into account in order to avoid a system which is extremely revealing, but rather unforgiving of poor or harsh recordings.

We rate the Naim very highly and the fit and finish is absolutely superb – we can't see you finding a PC with a tray mechanism like that. Our only concern is that the very explicit performance of the Naim might be too much of a good thing when partnered with your amp and speakers, so a demonstration would be essential.

The Rega is also a fantastic CD player. The sound is warmer and, dare we say it, more analogue than the Naim. We suspect that this partnership would be more forgiving, if slightly less dynamically exciting than the Naim. The Cyrus sits somewhere between these two points, but we are not entirely sure what you will make of the 'inhaler'-type drive that the current Cyrus range use in terms of PC analogies.

One possible candidate that we would add to the list is the Yamaha CD-S2000 (HFC305). This is built like a piece of lab equipment and includes a completely bespoke transport mechanism. More importantly, the sound is open and natural and we feel that this would form a happy partnership with the ATC amp and speakers.

Slimming-down

Q I am currently using a Marantz CD60000SE CD player with a Rotel RA930BX integrated amp and Bowers and Wilkins 602S2 loudspeakers. I am looking at a complete upgrade for the system to celebrate finishing work on the

house to put it in. I have a budget of £3,500 for a system that offers a radical step forward over my existing system.

There are some provisos to the upgrade that I want to keep to. The first is that I want to switch to a streaming system and free-up space by archiving my CDs and stowing them away. I would also like to reduce the overall 'mass' of the system – the 602S2 feel large and bulky and if I can go less than full width for electronics, I would be happy to do so. Can I get more performance with less bulk?

Carl Rose, via email

A We think so. As we see it, there are two options that would offer strong performance and reduced size overall. You don't specify a room size but we think that based on the performance of the 602, we would suggest looking at the £1,695 Totem Staff (HFC 34C). It might seem strange to replace a standmount with a floorstanding design, but the Totem is such an elegant and compact unit, we feel that the space it takes up is considerably less.

To partner them, we would suggest that you try the £1,550 Cyrus 8 XPD (HFC 342) and the Logitech Squeezebox Touch (HFC 338). Partnering a £260 streamer with a amp and speaker combination that totals over £3,000 might seem a little odd, but thanks to the digital inputs on the back of the Cyrus, the Squeezebox will only be asked to output a digital signal allowing you to make use of the excellent and well thought out interface.

Another option is the £1,350 Naim UnitiQuite (HFC 335). A single, half-width box, the Naim offers streaming with both internet, DAB analogue radio and iPod integration. The 35-watt output should be enough to drive the Staff's to real world levels.



Cyrus 8 XPD: small, but fully featured

THE HI-FI CHOICE GUIDE TO: TONE CONTROLS

EXPERT ADVICE



IN AN IDEAL world, no amplifier should require tone controls. They are an additional circuit that increases the complexity and the cost of the amplifier. The measured performance of any amplifier is usually best with the tone controls in a zero setting or bypassed altogether.

Outside of this ideal world, tone controls can make rather more sense than the numbers might suggest. The single biggest influence on the performance of the system (aside perhaps your state of mind) is the room it is placed in. If the response of the room is especially uneven, the perfect measurements of an amplifier without tone controls is not going to do much good. The ability to handle a small peak or trough in your frequency response that is the result of the room is a useful thing to be able to do.

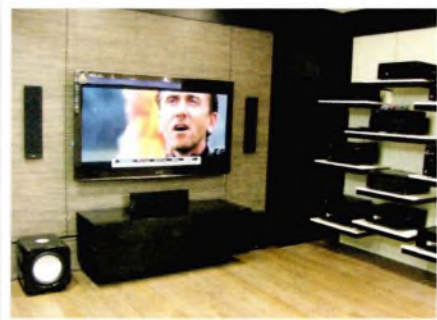
As such, there are tone controls and there are tone controls. A well-designed circuit should have a negligible effect on performance when switched in and out. The effect of the controls themselves should be predictably linear and +/- 6dB adjustment is ideal for most domestic situations. For every situation where a minimalist 'straight line' amplifier works, there is one for a design with tone controls as well. ●

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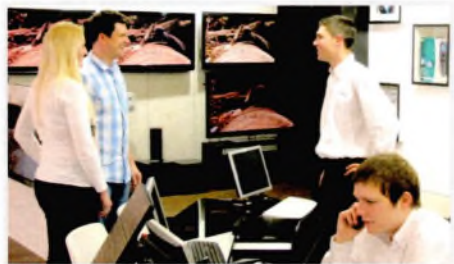
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AUDIOLAB 8200CD • 8200A CD / AMPLIFIER
The 8200 range includes the award-winning 8200CD which features a wealth of digital inputs that will keep it playing all your music regardless of how it may be stored.



YAMAHA 3D / UNIVERSAL DISC PLAYER
This new BD-S1067 3D Blu-ray player has been designed for high performance and for optimum matching with Yamaha AV receivers and is SA-CD and DVD-Audio compatible.



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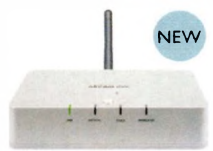


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Minitest

Do you use headphones? Then **Richard Black's** invaluable guide to the best head amps is for you

Creek OBH-21SE

PRICE: £280 CONTACT: 01442 260146
WEBSITE: CREEKAUDIO.COM

CREEK TAKES HEADPHONE-driving seriously, with two dedicated headphone amps in its lineup – three, if you regard the OBH-21 and -21SE as different models. Although both employ the same circuit, they use different components at key points, including the op-amps that do the actual amplifying. The SE uses a fast and relatively high-current part that is well suited to the task, giving a maximum output of about 100mW into headphones between 30 and 200 ohms impedance – that's most of them. Both higher and lower impedances can be driven, with slightly reduced output in both cases. There are two output sockets and Creek mentions that these have slightly different output values which could, in some cases, give subtly different sound into low-impedance headphones. A line output at the rear is permanently connected to the line input, easing connection to systems.

Irrespective of the output used, this amp has the highest output impedance of any in this group (if not by a vast margin) and it's perhaps not surprising that its sound seems a little more characterful with low-impedance headphones, including in-ear models. It is by no means unpleasant and, given the vagaries of headphone frequency response, it's not necessarily a bad thing in any sense. We were very taken with the way the bass of the Bowers and Wilkins P5 acquired just a little more roundness, which didn't seem to have a downside. High-impedance cans are driven very cleanly, with excellent detail and no listener fatigue after long spells.

VERDICT **AVERY FINE AMP** that offers good detail and insight. It's tonally more individual than most amps with low-impedance headphones

★★★★★



Firestone Cute Beyond

PRICE: £199 CONTACT: 0845 345 1550
WEBSITE: FIRESTONE-AUDIO.EU

FIRESTONE SPECIALISES in miniature hi-fi, so the diminutive Cute (at 80mm wide the smallest of these four) is very much part of the overall range. Its features are very simple, though it does include a gain switch mounted at the rear, which gives 15dB extra boost – this could be of use when driving high-impedance headphones. Inside the unit is a further feature and a most unusual one at that: a pair of switches which allow one to configure the volume control for series or shunt operation, thus giving a slightly different slope to its attenuation. Interesting to try, though it doesn't seem to have any effect on sound quality as such. Amplification is by op-amps and Class A pairs of discrete transistors, which help maintain the unit's exceptionally low output impedance of well under one-ohm. Current is limited, though, and maximum output into low impedances is well below the others in the group (e.g. 15mW into 30 ohms) – if arguably still enough to endanger hearing!

The tonal character of this unit is noticeable mostly by its absence, with a very consistent sound into various headphone models. It is ruthlessly revealing, perhaps more than some folks will want to live with even, but if you don't mind being told the bad news as well as the good about your treasured recordings this is a good way to learn it. Detail is good and imaging is precise, though not always the most extended out to the sides. There's a real sense of grip on the headphone drivers and rhythm and dynamics are lively and captivating.

VERDICT **AVERY INFORMATIVE** amp that may lack a little output into the lowest impedances, but shows no sign of running out of grunt or energy in real life

★★★★★

Lehmann audio Rhinelander

PRICE: £425 CONTACT: 01235 511166
WEBSITE: LEHMANNAUDIO.COM

LEHMANN'S PRODUCTS always seem to be highly individual, and this amp is no exception. OK, it's basically the same as all the other units here in essential operation, but it can be reconfigured (by means of internal jumpers) to serve as a single-input preamp. If the jumpers are set to 'in' you have, instead, the option of selecting between two inputs, which for many users could remove the need for a separate preamp. Gain is also adjustable via internal jumpers. Maximum output is impressive into low impedances, with the ability to drive nearly half a watt into 15 ohms. The distortion rises, but that hardly matters because your ears will have overloaded long ago! Under more sensible conditions, distortion is as low as any. Output impedance is quite low at 6 ohms, which should ensure consistent operation into any normal headphone load.

Although the basic component count doesn't immediately look like twice the value of the others in this test, sound quality does seem to justify the outlay as this is clearly an exceptionally capable device. The basics are all there, with detail, imaging, rhythm and so on clearly in very good order, but above and beyond that there is a magnificent sweep and assurance to the sound that's as effective with a Schubert song as it is with glam rock or a big band. Perhaps, more than with any affordable headphone amp we can recall, the sound just keeps you there listening after bedtime and you'll find yourself enjoying familiar recordings as never before.

VERDICT AN UNUSUALLY CLASSY little box which drives any headphones with the greatest panache, but also has the subtlety to bring out fine details



Musical Fidelity V-Can/V-PSU

PRICE: £100/£152 CONTACT: 01279 501111
WEBSITE: MUSICALFIDELITY.COM

ATON ISN'T A LOT TO ASK for a headphone amp and one might expect a few corners to have been cut internally. The circuit board material is not the fanciest, but in fact the circuit mounted on it is not a million miles short of that used for the other amps here, featuring as it does a pair of medium-power transistors per channel in classic power amp configuration, driven by decent-grade op-amps. The rest of the components are nothing fancy, but are perfectly respectable.

There are no additional features or options, but you do still get a line output connected directly to the input. V Series distributor Armour was keen for us to try the V-Can with the optional V-PSU, which is basically a large mains transformer and some rectifiers in a box, intended to replace the simple wall-wart supplied as standard with the V-Can: the V-PSU can power three V Series units at once.

With either power supply there's plenty of output drive and head-rattling levels can be achieved with low-impedance headphones: high-impedance ones are driven to about the same maximum as the other amps in the group. And one can easily be tempted to play this amp pretty loud, because it has a lively get-up-and-go to it that just encourages unrestrained rock'n'roll listening. It's good at other musical styles too, but less convincing with really subtle stuff than with big musical landscapes. Detail is good, maybe not quite up to the standards of the Lehmann, say, but certainly enjoyable. The V-PSU adds some finesse, though unless you own at least a couple of V Series units it is, perhaps, hard to justify in value terms. ●

VERDICT EXCELLENT VALUE, with detail and tonal discrimination only just short of the best. Sound really comes to life with lively, big-scale tracks



A dedicated headphone amp is an easily justifiable purchase along with any fine headphone. Built-in headphone outputs on CD players, amps etc. can often end up sounding quite muted and lifeless.

As you can see, all the amps tested here are badge-winners and will give an obvious lift in performance. In fact, if you listen more than very occasionally to headphones you'll enjoy the results.

Do go easy on listening levels, though: with good headphones and amps it's easy to get carried away and end up listening at potentially dangerous loudness. Remember, quality over quantity!

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LECTOR CDP 7TL Italian valve player with separate PSU. Latest current spec model, mint. (£2,400) £1,100. **02084739890** or email: Johnvarcoe@sky.com (London).

NAD C355 BEE integrated amp, titanium, nine months old, excellent condition. (£250) £200. No offers, buyer collects, genuine reason for sale. **01933 626185** (Northamptonshire).

SONY SCD1 SACD/CD player. £2,000 of Audiomod modifications including UltraClock £1,850. Now £5,000. Musical Fidelity V-DAC as new £100. **01462 670786** or email: jr812@hotmail.com (North Herts).

EUPHYA Alliance 270 40-watt high-end amplifier. Remote control, five inputs, inc M/M. Silver casing, mixture of non-magnetic metal and perspex (£1,745) £750. **01243 528010** (West Sussex).

MARANTZ PM66-KI signature amp £90, SA67-SE CD player £50, or £130 the pair, (both boxed with remotes, manuals etc.) Black, excellent condition **01529 307976** (Lincolnshire).

MURPHY A674SR, early stereo radiogram, 1962. MW, LW, VHF, magic eye tuning. Garrard turntable plays 16, 33, 45, 78. In working order, wood cabinet in good condition. Buyer collects £60. Email: zen135838@zen.co.uk (Surrey).

WANTED: Yamaha CDR-H1500 digital audio recorder in black. Must have original box and accessories and be pristine. **07941842605** (West Sussex).

MARANTZ CD6002 and PM6002 CD and amplifier in

silver, £135 each, £250 the pair. Cambridge Audio Azur 740A amplifier in silver. As new condition £260. **07970 115378** (Bristol).

NAIM CDX2 CD player £1,350. Soundstyle tripod four-shelf equipment rack £45. Heybrook S1 speaker stands £40. Aiwa ADF700 cassette deck, boxed £35, or last three items £100. **01691 610589** (Shropshire).

MARANTZ SA-751 CD player. Owned from new. Still regarded the reference CD player. (£5,199) £3,200. **01296 437314** or email: jez35@btinternet.com (Bucks).

AUDIOLAB 8000Q preamp, £220. Audiolab 8000P 100-watt power amp (black), £240. Both boxed mint, seven months old. **07876 197 188** (Nottingham).

REGA P3/24, TT PSU, Funk Firm 5m Achromat, Isokinetic GT2s subplatter (£120), Dynavector DV-20x2 moving coil cartridge (£500). Three month's old, as new, selling for £600. **07930 878582** (North London).



NAD C355BEE - a lot of amp for £200

HITACHI FT-5500 FM/AM digital tuner £20. Cambridge Audio A1 v2.0 amplifier (some marks on case) £35. Pioneer DV-636D DVD player some marks on case £50. **01932 856971** (Surrey).

VPI Scoutmaster turntable/JW memorial nine-inch arm/SDS controller/VPI heavyweight clamp. Immaculate. Boxed with manuals. (£3,500) £1,500. Ortofon Jubilee MC less than 50 hours use. (£1,500) £600. Get both for £2,000. **07973 892901** or email: patmarcus172@googlemail.com (Solihull).

BEAM Echo Avantic 1950s integrated stereo amp. Requires attention. Offers. **07866 364770** or email: hughpenfold@yahoo.com (Oxford).

QUAD 22L2 speaker (£900) £600. Quad 606 amp and preamp £250 each. Luxman DP300 turntable £300. Sony 557 ESD CD player £100. Also sensible offers please for a Nakamichi BX300E tape deck and Luxman T102L digital synthesiser. **01935 412 949** or email: abhuie@hotmail.com (Scotland).

BOWERS & WILKINS 801D (Rosenut). Four years old, as new condition. Complete with all original packing. £6,500, no offers. Very heavy, buyer to collect. **Tel/Text: 07929 721714** or email: b.revill@hotmail.co.uk (Nottingham).

FINITE ELEMENT HD02 maple three-shelf equipment rack,

mint, (£3,450) £2,450. Ayre Acoustics Signature 1.5m power cables with Furutech plugs, boxed. £350 (two for £600). **01797 253073 majba13@yahoo.co.uk** (East Sussex).

ARCAM Solo CD/FM/DAB immaculate condition, used as second system, boxed £680. Monitor Audio Silver RS6 in Natural Oak, immaculate, light use, boxed £380. Sennheiser HD650 Reference headphones, immaculate, boxed, less than 10 hours use, £220. **07786 962373** or email: nick.j.dee@hotmail.com (Warwickshire).

ROKSAN Radius 5 turntable, in maple, extremely good condition, upgraded with a Tabriz tonearm, £950 or will separate: turntable £550 and tonearm £400. **07725525001** or email: alan.strudwick@googlemail.com (South Wales).

RUSS ANDREWS Crystal Ag. hi-end interconnect (£850) £299. Same spec as Hero Ag and fitted with WBT Ag Phonos. **07981 025698** (Bristol).

ROTEL RA-05 amplifier, mint, £220. Rega R200 arm with new spare bias belt, £65. Pair of Rothwell attenuators £25. **07850 775814** or email: Mike.eady@royalmail.com (Midlands).

ASR Emitter1, version blue, three-box amp, £4,750. Marantz SA7-S1 SACD player £2,950. Both good condition and

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!

2.5 years old. **07831 500338 (Worthing).**

GRADO SR25i headphones, boxed and mint. Will accept £75ono. **07891 533084 (Swansea).**

SENNHEISER HD650 headphones £175. Creek OBH21SE headphone amp £125. Russ Andrews 4m speaker cables, £75. Alternatively £350 the lot. All good condition and boxed. **07729 600847 (West Sussex).**

REVEL F32 speakers (Maple veneer), unmarked, original packaging, £1,350 **01243 582411 (West Sussex).**

EASTERN ELECTRIC M520 valve amp, as new, 12 months old. 25 watts. (£2,000) £1,050. **02920 628861 or 07971 296699 (Cardiff).**

SHANLING CDT 100 CD player. Valve or solid-state output, valve headphone output. Onboard preamp if required. Mint condition, boxed with manual. New (£1,650) £550. Can email photos if required. **01424 446282 (Sussex).**

GARRARD 401 £1,000ono. Turntable power supply £300ono. Technics Equaliser £150. Class A amplifier power supply £300ono. Arcam 9 power amplifier £250ono. Maplin 50-watt board £25. **020 7499 8729 (Cambridgeshire).**

SME Model 10 precision turntable with Series V tonearm (£5,700) £3,200. One owner, superb condition, will demonstrate, photos available. Original packaging. Buyer collects. **01604 410726 or 07711 702836 (Northants).**

DENON CD player DCD1500 mk11, immaculate, hardly used, very good sound and build quality, £125 or £200 with my TDL RTL 3 transmission line speakers. **07751 537148 (Oxon).**

DYNAUDIO Master Evidence (Cherrywood and Gloss Black). Very rare opportunity to own a pair of superb speakers. Excellent condition (£78,400) £28,000ono. Photos available. **07970028771 or email: white-a64@sky.com (South Bucks).**

QUAD II Forty Monoblocks in unmarked, as new condition.

Svetlana Cryogenically treated KT88 valve upgrade. Absolutely fantastic condition. Boxed with manuals (£4,000) £1,850. **02380 224003 (Southampton).**

AYRE CX7 silver CD player, very lightly used, mint condition, boxed, looks and sounds wonderful, genuine sale. Latest version costs over £2,400, bargain at £1,200. **07851 715446 (Watford).**

SONY 7.1 AV amp/receiver STR-DN1000, black, 7x85 watts per channel, 4-in-1 out HDMI, auto calibration, tuner, DTS-HD, True HD, DTS-Es etc, purchased Dec 09, hardly used £190. **01843 586261 (Kent).**

DYNAUDIO Contour S3.4, (Piano Black) excellent condition (£5,060) £2,250ono. Bower and Wilkins' SCMS surround speakers (Black Ash), perfect condition £850ono. Primare amp 30.1, very good condition £500ono. Arcam FMJ CD36 silver, excellent condition £575ono. **07970028771 or email: white-a64@sky.com (South Bucks).**

MERIDIAN 504 FM tuner lightly used, in pristine condition. Complete with user guide. (£660) £350ono. **07841 011397 (Leeds).**

ART AUDIO Maestro Valve monoblocs x2. 50 watts each and ART valve preamp VP1, vgc, serviced recently by ArtAudio (with new valves). Original around £9,500, only £2,500. Can demo. **01476 579201 (Grantham).**

T+A Pulsar 1230R CD player (silver) immaculate condition, recently serviced includes remote, (£1,800) £700. Can demonstrate. Also, Exposure 3010 integrated and power amplifiers, condition as above £400 each. **01482 887409 (East Yorkshire).**

BOWERS AND WILKINS CM1, eight months old, mint, original packaging including stands £250. **01757 289375 or email: gregory@469btinternet.co.uk (Selby).**

MERIDIAN 508.24 CD player, £400. Primare A30.1 100-watt amp, £400. Sennheiser HD595 headphones, £50.

Sony MDS-JE780 Minidisc, £50. Videologic DRX-601E DAB tuner, £40. Cash only, buyer collects. **01428 605002 (S.W. Surrey).**

PROAC Tablette EBT loudspeakers with matching sand-filled stands, teak finish. Good clean sound. Excellent value £200. **01923 855359 or email: wombat.jr@tiscali.co.uk (Herts).**

ART AUDIO 'Diavolo' 300B SE amp (11+11w), polished stainless-steel chassis with gold anodised trims £1,600. Sony SACD 555ES SACD player (champagne finish) £350. Can demo. **01454 414361 or email: beedeel@yahoo.co.uk (Bristol).**

ROTEL CD930AX CD player. Rotel RA930AX amp. NAD533 turntable. Infinity REF11 speakers. Excellent condition. Complete set £250 or will split. **0151 3427860 (Merseyside).**

OPPO DV-980H DVD/SACD player, excellent condition £75. HDMI cable 5m £10 **020 8951 3178 (London).**

SPENDOR S3 in maple £325. Chord DAC 64 mint, boxed £800. Naim NAC 82 plus NAC SC (2001) K boards, mint, boxed, £800. Naim HI-Cap (chrome bumper) mint £300. **07729 620621 (Worcs).**

RINGMAT 330 MK11 XLR 3mm record support £20. **01202 515474 (Bournemouth).**

FERRANTI Type A1016, EKCO Model U363. Phillips Type 151U. Pye Ref 069009,

Cosson Melody Maker. All valve radios, £40 each. Sharp GF555 twin-tape, radio, speakers, internal amp, battery and mains (silver) £75ono. Panasonic RXDS45, CD, tape, radio, mains and battery, £35ono. **01684 290581 (West Midlands).**

NAKAMICHI CR 7E. Hardly used, cosmetically excellent. No remote. £600ono. **020 7485 5077 (daytime) or email: peter@ccmusic.co.uk (London).**

WANTED Cyrus CD 6s and Cyrus 6vs2, in mint condition and at a reasonable price **01753 523350 or email: jamesdjd@yahoo.co.uk (Berkshire).**

NAIM NaitXS amplifier (£1,380) £880. CD5i CD player (£915) £600, or both £1,450. PMC DB1i (walnut) speakers £600. Equipment purchased March 2010. All mint condition, boxed. **01233 713250 (Kent).**

BLACK RHODIUM Polar Illusion 1m pair stereo interconnect, deep cryogenic version. *Hi-Fi Choice* award winner (£250) £125. **01243 528010 (West Sussex).**

SIMON YORKE S7 record player and Koetsu coral £8,500. Finite Element MR HD07 four-shelves £3,250. MR HD09 amp stand £600. **01237 473057 (North Devon).**

RUSS ANDREWS mains cables, filters, Kimber and digital interconnects. Other items including active studio monitors, too many to list, all mint condition. **01902 884694 (Dudley).**

AUDIO SYNTHESIS Passion 8m passive preamp. Excellent condition, boxed with remote control, manual and transformer p.s. £595. **01628 626085 (Berkshire).**

AUDIOPHILE BASE hi-fi support system, incorporating vibration control technology. Four platforms (£800) £200. **01270 624008 or email: janhud16@talktalk.net (Cheshire)**

NAIM DVD 5 CD/DVD player, hardly used £695. 112x preamp £229. 150x power amplifier 2008, £479, or £649 for the pair. All mint/boxed. **01984640588. (Somerset).**

ATC 50a active speakers (rosewood), good condition (£9,500) £2,500. Stax 3050 Mk2 headphones and stand (silver) immaculate (£850) £500. New vinyl at 40 per cent of RRP. For list, **01453 519700. (Gloucester).**

REGA P3 turntable and RB300 arm, Elys cartridge, boxed, excellent condition. Recent motor upgrade. Arm new and cartridge light use, £375. **07843 762212 or email: atj.harding@googlemail.com (Hants).**

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Buyer's Guide



Welcome to the *Hi-Fi Choice Buyer's Guide* – the ultimate directory to the very best high-performance hi-fi gear that you can buy. Here, you'll find our favourite current products listed under easy-to-use categories, with up-to-date pricing and trustworthy verdicts.

Reviews you can trust

Hi-Fi Choice test results are the most reliable in the business. We employ the UK's most respected hi-fi journalists and use the most stringent techniques to ensure our ratings are the ones you can trust. All the equipment we rate most highly is contained within these pages, from CD and vinyl to the latest disc players, amplifiers, tuners and loudspeakers.

Reviews online

We've also included *techradar* listings where our reviews appear online.

To access selected *Hi-Fi Choice* reviews, simply type: techradar.com/ into your browser, followed by the six-digit number printed in the first column of our *Buyer's Guide*.

How to use this guide

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

BADGES EXPLAINED

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

NEW ENTRIES...

Every month, our buying bible is updated to include our latest reviews. These new entries are highlighted in yellow and reflect the very best reviews from the previous issue.

SOURCE COMPONENTS

108 _ CD players

Whether CD or SACD, we list the very best players for the job

111 _ Turntables

Everything is listed here, from a £190 Pro-Ject to a £115k Continuum

111 _ Phono cartridges

The best in both magnetic and moving coil cartridges

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Surf the airwaves with any one of these carefully selected tuners

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Badge-winning headphones for your personal listening pleasure



AMPLIFIERS

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Our pick of the world's best one-box integrated amplifiers

115 _ Pre/power amps

For those occasions when two boxes seem better than one



CABLES

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Our favourite cables for transferring delicate signals are all here

117 _ Speaker cables

Priced per metre, these are our top recommendations for home use



LOUDSPEAKERS

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An invaluable guide to the best loudspeakers for your electronics

STANDS & SUPPORTS

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Our selection of the best equipment supports for your precious kit

123 _ Speaker stands

Stands come in all shapes, sizes and prices, so take your pick from our list



DEALER CLASSIFIED

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A veritable *pot pourri* of hi-fi dealer classified advertisements

129 _ Dealer directory

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BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●

CD players



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CD-RW compatible
OPT digital output
BAL analogue out
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CD text
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Issue number

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Badge	Product	Price	Comments							
●	Advance Acoustic MCD-204	795	CD player with warm valve sound. Harmonically rich and inviting performance							342
●	Audiolab 8200CD	700	No SACD support, but excellent detail, neutrality and communication							340
●	Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD	400	Musical, precise, involving and with great energy at a superb price							340
●	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 Pearl Lite SA-KI	899	A key CD/SACD player at an attractive price, with support for digital							338
●	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
	Pro-Ject CD Box	300	This player belies both its size and its price with sounds worthy of a decent mid-range system							338
●	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							
●	Arcam CD37	1,300	Excellent detail and imaging, neutral tonality and above-average bass resolution	/395096						340
●	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 825	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
●	Icon Audio CDX1 Signature	1,350	Has an open, vinyl sound with a very high listenability factor							341
●	Krell S-350A	2,695	Accomplished CD player with real breeding underpinning its excellent performance							341
●	Leema Stream III	1,495	This is a superb CD player that improves on the performance of its predecessor, the Stream							339
●	Marantz UD 8004	2,450	Sophisticated and highly capable universal player that just about does it all							336
●	Meridian 808.3 Signature	10,000	Extraordinarily revealing and open CD player with a first-class performance level							339
●	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
●	Roksan Caspian M2	1,600	This impressively engineered CD player is punchy and dynamic, with excellent timing							338
●	Theta Compli Blu	2,998	A very accomplished universal player with support for Blu-ray and HDMI							337

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 arm Suspension subchassis	Issue number
●	Clearaudio Concept	1,100	One of the easiest ways of getting into analogue, with excellent results for the price		33/45	● ● ● ●	338
●	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
●	Edwards Audio TT1	325	Classic, no-nonsense design, with exemplary performance at the price		33/45	● ● ● ●	342
●	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
●	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 Tecnodec	608	Needs careful partnering but can deliver a very sophisticated result for the money		33/45	● opt	309
●	Michell Gyro SE	1,140	A marriage of shot-putter-strength, build quality and robust audio		33/45	● ● ● ●	338
●	Michell Gyro SEduction	2,245	Limited edition version of above with TecnoArm, HR power supply and blue-steel finish		33/45	● ● ● ●	342
●	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 6 Perspex	1,280	Plenty of detail and good rhythmic qualities (arm included)		33/45/78	● ● ● ●	338
●	Pro-Ject X-Pack	1,000	Combines very strong elements (Ortofon Rondo Red) a killer package with top sound and value		33/45	● ● ● ●	309
●	Roksan Radius 5.2	1,399	Sophisticated design with accomplished sound quality, excellent imagery and good isolation		33/45	● ● ● ●	338
●	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	www.techradar.com	Replaceable stylus MM MC	Issue number
●	Dynavector DV-20X2L	499	Revealing and open sound from a well-built and easy-to-align MC cartridge		● ● ● ●	342
●	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 1	150	Unusually assured 'presence' region is the basis of a beautifully musical and involving presentation		● ● ● ●	338
●	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
●	Ortofon Vivo Red	200	Never less than musically convincing, this all-in-one cartridge is remarkably capable		● ● ● ●	338
●	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



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



Pro-Ject 6 Perspex £1,280

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Surf the airwaves with these carefully selected tuners

FM tuners

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	Wavebands	Presets	Stg. Strength Meter RDS	Rot. tuning knob remote control	issue number
●	Creek Audio Evolution	350	Sound is detailed, cohesive and extended both tonally and spatially – very classy		FM,AM	80	● ●	●	308
●	NAD C426	220	If you aren't already wedded to DAB, then this is a very attractive purchase		FM,AM	80	● ●	●	339
●	T+A T1210R	1,200	High-end looks are matched by the sound, which is detailed and sophisticated		FM	100	● ●	●	283

DAB/FM tuners

●	Arcam FMJ T32	600	A highly cost-effective way of optimising the airwaves. iPod functionality is a bonus	/559242	DAB,FM	100	● ● ● ●	●	319
●	Onkyo T-4555DAB	400	Admirably free of grain or obvious tonal blemishes, this tuner achieves a high standard		DAB	40	● ● ● ●	●	298

DAB/FM portables

●	Monitor Audio Airstream 10	225	The range of features on this DAB/FM/Internet radio is certainly impressive	/636713	DAB,FM,Web	4	● ● ● ●	●	337
●	Pure Move	80	A feature-packed, beautifully built DAB/FM radio that is a pleasure to use	/608367	DAB,FM	20	● ● ● ●	●	323
●	Pure Sensia	250	One of the smartest table radios around, offering wireless computer-sourced music		DAB,FM,Web	40	● ● ● ●	●	331
●	Tivoli Networks+	495	FM reception is excellent and a cut above everything else this radio has to offer		DAB,FM,Web	5	● ● ● ●	●	337
●	Vita Audio R1 MkII	160	Limited to DAB/FM and line inputs, but the sound quality is very good		DAB,FM,Web	10	● ● ● ●	●	337
●	Vita Audio R2i	300	Very smartly built with a sound that's full-bodied, neutral and detailed	/611865	DAB,FM	30	● ● ● ●	●	323

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

Headphones



Audiophile solutions for home and travel use

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	Electrostatic	Supra-aural	Circumaural	Open/Closed back	3.5mm jack adaptor Weight (grams)	issue number
●	AKG Q701	500	A welcome addition to the ranks of the world's finest transducers					●	235	341
●	Audio Technica ATH-W1000X	649	Fine advert for the virtues of closed-back headphones, with great bass and background noise reduction					●	350	334
●	Beyerdynamic DT770	179	One of the most tonally satisfying closed-back headphones around with excellent detail					● ●	270	333
●	Beyerdynamic T1	880	A characterful, enjoyable music-maker with a detailed, weighty sound					●		331
●	Bowers and Wilkins P5	250	A superb headphone with B&W's sound and build quality sealing the deal					● ●	195	333
●	Grado SR60i	100	A strong contender with out-of-class sound in most areas: a brilliant budget all-rounder	/603478				●	210	322
●	Grado SR80i	120	A beautifully neutral and open-sounding headphone that's lively and energetic too					●		322
●	Grado GS1000i	1,100	A superb transducer, capable of astonishingly high performance standards	/624782				● ●	500	325
●	Grado PS1000	1,795	Offer excellent detail and effortless dynamics, but they can be heavy to wear after a while					● ●		329
●	Klipsch Image X10i	229	Natural sound and fit; lightweight and unobtrusive in-ear headphones						10	342
●	Sennheiser HD380	140	This model offers good sound and is a worthy alternative to in-ear monitors					● ●		327
●	Sennheiser HD800	1,000	These headphones will convert loudspeaker listeners to the delights of personal stereo performance	/619269				● ● ●	350	324

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

HFC TOP PICKS



Bowers & Wilkins P5 £250

The P5 is a no-brainer for iPhone users but this well built and attractive design should be able to win friends from outside the Apple camp as well



PURE Sensia £250

PURE's ground-breaking touch-screen DAB radio has changed the way we interact with radio forever and sets the standard for innovation



Beyerdynamic T1 £880

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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	Phono input	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 840Av2	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
●	Marantz Pearl Lite PM-KI	899	Great all-rounder and attractively priced, the PM-KI transcends its £899 price	5	MM			70	338
●	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	7				50	322
●	Puresound A10	685	A superbly involving valve amp at a very competitive price and with genuinely excellent results	2				10	331

Above £1,000

●	Arca mA38	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
●	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
●	Creek Destiny 2	1,600	Excellent tonal balance and gorgeous, effortless detail	6	opt			116	342
●	Cyrus 8xp d	1,550	Best heard in the context of a Cyrus system, this amp nevertheless has some great qualities	6				80	342
●	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 EC15	2,750	Big, characterful and beautifully built amp, with equally big and unforced sound	6				120	340
●	Emillé Ara	2,450	An extremely competent valve amp in its own right with a useful set of features	2				22	343
●	Leema Pulse III	1,495	Offers a clean, smooth sound and has an unusually wide array of inputs	6	MM/MC			70	342
●	Leema Tucana II	3,425	Highly featured, well-built and not short of power, this is a highly resolute and organic amp	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	7					322
●	Musical Fidelity M31	1,000	Extremely engaging performer, this power amp boasts excellent sonics and solid build	6				70	337
●	Peachtree Audio Nova	1,099	This amp/DAC combi is a fine heart for a computerised desktop system	3				80	341
●	Resolution Audio Cantata	3,995	This perfectly formed amplifier reveals that the language of music is easy to understand	4	opt			50	342
●	Roksan Caspian M2	1,600	This muscular-sounding amplifier is load tolerant and more powerful in practice	6				85	338
●	Unison Research Unico Nuovo	1,650	A truly successful marriage between tubes and solid-state amplification	7				100	339

Pre/power amplifiers

Separate boxes can bring clear advantages



Up to £2,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Line inputs	Phono input	Remote control	Headphone socket	Power output (watts)	Issue number
●	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

●	Audio Research DS450	7,000	Power amp features a very neutral transparent sound with lots of power and low-running temperature					2	450	337
●	Bryston BP16/ 2B SST2	5,700	Preamp and power amp combo offers superb sound quality	6	opt			100	323	
●	Bryston BP26	3,670	Cracking preamp brings detailed results	8	opt				308	
●	Cayin SP-305/SP-40M	3,346	Smooth clean sound quality, this combo is well-balanced and natural-sounding	4	MM			40	343	
●	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 Mono X300	2,495	A power amp with a rare combination of speed and resolution					2	300	341
●	Linn Akurate Kontrol/2200	7,550	Reviewed as part of an entire system (streamer and speakers), this combo offers a crisp, open sound					2	200	343
●	Mark Levinson No. 326S	8,000	Excellent USB implementation, natural sound and solid build. Excellent performance levels	7					338	
●	Musical Fidelity M6PRE/PRX	4,998	For those wanting a powerful high-end pre/power combo at a realistic price, this is a fantastic package	9					260	340
●	Roksan Caspian M1	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	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

Brand	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
●	Peerless Sigma	70	A cable that belies its modest price with sound that's detailed, neutral and full bodied		●		●		343
●	QED Ref Audio Evolution	63	Tonally favours the bass, but overall detail and imaging are very good		●		●		343
●	QED Signature Audio S	190	Mellifluous and rounded, this cable is a great choice for lovers of the human voice				●	●	
●	330								
●	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
●	Black Rhodium Jive	14	Bi-wire cable which is full of sonic virtues. It's highly practical, too				●		339
●	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 Teatrack	35	A bi-wire cable with a sound that's impeccably timed, neutral and full of detail				●	●	339
●	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



van den Hul The Teatrack £33 per metre
Curious name aside, this bi-wire cable has assured bass and a positive sense of rhythm whilst extracting an impressive amount of detail



Kimber 4VS £133 (2.5 metre pair)
A wonderfully natural performer that makes itself unobtrusive and lets music take centre stage. The fit and finish is extremely high as well



QED Signature Audio S £190 (1 metre)
The Signature Audio S has the rare ability to impart no sonic signature of its own to the equipment it connects to, getting you even closer to the music

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Up to £1,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Size: width, height, depth (cm)	Floorstander	Ease of drive	Bass from (Hz)	Close to wall	Free-space	Issue number
●	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	●	A	22	●	●	315
●	Castle Knight 2	400	A true resurgence for the Castle brand, the Knight 2 has a beguiling sound quality	20,38,33,5	●	A+	42	●	●	338
●	DALI Ikon 6	999	Needs care with setup, impressively transparent and obsessively detailed sound	19,100,33	●	A	37	●	●	271
●	EB Acoustics EB2	669	Excellent value speaker, its composite enclosure gives a very clean and neutral sound	22,5,45,30	●	A	64	●	●	341
●	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 iQ 50	599	Looks cute and very discreet, with spacious imaging, good balance and a sweet treble	/483527 17,5,81,5,26	●	A	23	●	●	315
●	Mission MX5	600	An engaging listen and worth an audition, if you have the room	25,99,5,39	●	A-		●	●	341
●	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 R58	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	192,31,5,24,8	●	A+	65	●	●	309
●	Spendor S3/5R	750	Lacks dynamic muscle and loudness potential, smooth neutrality and g bass extension	16,5,30,5,190	●	A	25	●	●	310
●	Tannoy Revolution DC4T	599	Ultra-compact, lacks bass weight and dynamic tension, but sounds open and coherent	488857 15,85,16	●	A	40	●	●	316
●	Tannoy Revolution DC6	900	Pretty compact standmount, delivering a lively bass and smooth, coherent midband	23,36,5,23	●	A	40	●	●	307
●	Teufel T500	568	Good value, solid build and an extended warranty	19,5x10,5x32,5	●	A-		●	●	340
●	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

●	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
●	AE AE1 MkIII	2,000	This speaker has a lovely midband smoothness and superior image focus	18,5,31,25	●	A	24	●	●	337
●	Amphion Argon 3L	2,300	Solid build ensures an impressively clean sound with loads of bass and fine neutrality	19,92,5,30,5	●	A	44	●	●	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 Ki3 Signature	1,890	Very attractive and discreet, with fine stereo imaging and low coloration	14,98,27	●	A		●	●	343
●	Audiovector S3 Super	2,600	Useful ability to upgrade, offers good musical communication and stereo imaging	19,103,31	●	A	50	●	●	328
●	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
●	Bowers and Wilkins 802	11,500	This high-end speaker has an airy, spacious midband, with clean bass reproduction	36,8,138,56,3	●	A	27	●	●	337
●	Cabasse Bora	2,200	A real enthusiast's choice with high sensitivity, strong bass and powerful dynamics	/618354 33,27,50	●	A	52	●	●	324
●	Canton Vento 820	1,200	Really emphasises the benefits of the standmount, with great freedom from boxiness	22,36,31,5	●	A+		●	●	342
●	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	●	A	20	●	●	305
●	Green Mountain Audio Rio	2,000	Fabulously tight timing and coherence makes for a very expressive and musical performer	20,8,40,6,34,9	●	A	80	●	●	332

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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
●	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 X2	1,350	Attractive presentation alongside a lively sound makes for an involving experience		16,6,78,20,6	●		27	●		337
★	Linn Akurate 242	7,300	Wide, smooth high-frequency dispersion, with excellent sound		21,100,38	●			●		343
●	Magico V2	18,000	High pricing derives this speaker's superb painstaking engineering & impressive performance	/624700	25,5,11,5,30	●	A	32	●		325
●	Magneplan Magneplanar 1.6	2,500	Great with acoustic and classical material, this dipole panel speaker has superb sound quality		48,16,5	●	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		24,11,5,43	●	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		24,10,2,5,31,5	●	A	20	●		314
●	Pioneer S-2EX-W	5,200	This speaker offers superb midband neutrality and exceptional clarity	/587272	29,1,5,6,5,42,5	●	A	37	●		320
●	PMC GB1i	1,525	Fine voice reproduction, overall agility and well-judged balance		15,5,87,23,4	●	A	40	●		337
●	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 fact .8	4,600	Beautiful styling, alongside a superb all-round sound with a notably wide dynamic range		15,5,10,5,38	●	A	55	●		327
●	PMC IB2i	8,900	Delivers a top-class sound quality, fine imaging and exceptional dynamic grip	/617595	33,7,4,6,5	●	A	25	●		324
●	PSB Synchrony One	3,500	Slim and discreet floorstander that delivers superb sound quality and flexible bass	/516267	22,10,5,32,5	●	A	45	●		318
●	Revel F32	3,200	Meticulously balanced, tonally neutral design makes for a taut, well-disciplined sound		22,10,5,39	●	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	18,5,3,5,33,5		A-	55	●		322
●	Sonus faber Minima Vintage	2,490	Easy, graceful-sounding compact, a natural for acoustic material at moderate volume levels	/455417	20,3,3,2,7,5		A-	55	●		312
●	Sonus faber Cremona Audit.	3,350	Open, exciting and with surprisingly good bass, this is 'The Little Speaker That Could'		20,3,5,3,7		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 SP3/3R2	2,295	Lovely overall balance with fine voicing and transparency		27,5,4,5,3,2,5		A		●		343
●	Tannoy Definition DC8	2,500	Stylish-looking, this speaker is a fine communicator with clean, crisp and dynamic sound		27,4,7,2,6			55	●		343
●	Totem S1taf	1,695	This speaker delivers good scale with a fine midband		16x8,5x24,2	●	A		●		340
●	Triangle Genese Lyrr	3,300	A well-balanced speaker with generous sensitivity, fine imaging and good expressiveness		23,30,3,11,13,3	●	A	30	●		338
●	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	28,1,30,4,5		A	35	●		325
●	Wilson Benesch Curve	5,383	Much (but not all) of the AC'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		30,5,1,2,5,30,5	●	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).

HFC TOP PICKS



Castle Knight 2 £400

The Knight 2 continues in the great Castle tradition of excellent finish and solid build and climbs to the top of the pile with excellent sonic performance



Focal Chorus 826W LE £1,879

Focal has taken the 826 and turbocharged it, keeping the virtues of the stock model but with increased energy, excitement and detail



PMC fact .8 £4,600

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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	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	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



Partington Dreadnought BS £300
Probably the best speaker stand for the money – heavily engineered and backed up with sound theory, the Dreadnought is real class



Quadraspire Sunoko Vent T £800
A clever solution to the twin problems of equipment cooling and resonance, thanks to a unique shelf design, makes this a worthy 2010 award winner



Townshend VSSS £1,380
Although not cheap, Max Townshend's skillfully engineered rack nears the ideal in terms of isolation and spending more doesn't really bring big gains

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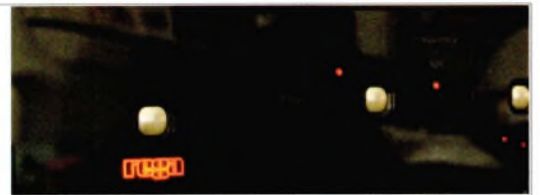
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My CD valentine

Jimmy Hughes's 2010 accounts are in: £1,300 on classical CDs; £0 on music downloads and there's not a streamer in sight

You've amassed a lot of points!' commented the staff member at HMV as he swiped my purehmV loyalty card. I don't think it was chat-up line – honest. Seems I'd spent over £1,300 on classical CDs with HMV in a period of about 12 months. Is that a lot? Maybe – maybe not. But he seemed impressed...

On January 5th 2011, the HMV/Waterstones group published its trading results for the lead up to Christmas. It made grim reading. Overall, group sales were down by 10.2 per cent, compared to the equivalent period last year, with HMV's sales down by 13.6 per cent. The company said it would have to close around 60 HMV stores as a result.

Whatever you think of HMV as a music retailer, it's one of the few places (in the big branches, at least) that carries a comprehensive stock of music CDs. For collectors of classical music in central London, HMV's flagship, Oxford Street store (near Oxford Circus) is almost the only place left that offers a really broad choice of titles.

Were HMV to close its big Oxford Street branch, there'd be nowhere left for me to buy classical CDs – not being a Harold Moores fan, I'd have to buy from Amazon and HMV on-line (as I do already). Without shops, sales of CDs will continue to fall – as they've been doing for some years now. Eventually, the CD will die out...

Now, such a scenario may never happen. After all, vinyl LPs can still be bought despite their 'demise' 20 or more years ago. But, if CDs do eventually disappear, downloads may well become the only way to obtain recorded music. At that point – whatever your feelings about downloads – you're more or less forced to capitulate.

Or are you? With new releases of 'standard' classical repertoire (say, a new recording of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto by the latest 10-year-old wunderkind pianist) becoming less and less interesting to older collectors, there may well be enough material already issued on CD to satisfy even the most omnivorous buyer.

But, if something new and desirable is only released as a download, you're kind of stuck between a rock and – well, a maybe not-so-hard place. Hence the likelihood that many of us will be drawn into the misty, murky twilight world of streamed music and downloads, by default. The non-availability of CDs would act as a catalyst.

Why I 'invested' in SACD

At the moment, I'm still 'resisting' downloads. Why? I guess because it's 'easier' than capitulation. I'm happy and comfortable buying/

playing discs, so – why change? Indeed, I recently shelled out for an SACD player – howzat for nailing your colours to the mast of an obsolete technology with no future?

In spite of appreciating all the many advantages and benefits of downloaded music, I like CDs. I grasp the arguments for downloads on an intellectual level, but choose to stick to what's old and familiar. At the same time, I also sense that – were I to get a taste for streamed music – I might never want to play a CD ever again.

The question is – how to take that giant leap? Can one encompass such a huge change via a series of small manageable stages? The longest journey starts with a single step. So, perhaps, the first measure has to be – linking your computer (or phone) to the hi-fi. Once that's done, you're able to proceed with internet-based sources.

From that tiny acorn-seed may a giant oak grow. Just as many of us began our long-term love-in with (and eventual marriage to) CD by initiating a casual, occasional flirtation that grew ever more intense with time, so it's likely that our shift from disc-based sources to those on a hard drive will begin in a quiet and unspectacular fashion.

What will (probably) win the day for downloads is not sound quality, but ease of use and convenience. Eventually, the thought of going out to buy CDs and having to get up every hour or so to put on a new one, will seem terribly cumbersome; the sonic equivalent of a coal fire – lovely to look at and very romantic, but a pain in the arse to upkeep. ●

I recently shelled out for an SACD player – howzat for nailing your colours to the mast of an obsolete technology with no future?



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