



Quad Elite system review inside

CD, pre/power and the 11L speakers: is this hi-fi's sweetest set-up?

New vinyl champion?

Can Well Tempered's £1,500 Simplex beat Michell's test-winning Giro?



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

www.hifichoice.co.uk

July 2011

£3.99

High times

Britain's best big speakers: six-way supertest reveals this summer's top buys

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essential reviews: NAD, Pro-Ject, EPOS, Rotel, Wharfedale Lehmann and more...

Computer audio explained: How to get started in audiophile streaming



Truly 'universal' player here at last

Tested: Oppo's £999 universal redefines the genre – all the formats, networked audio and even 3D Blu-ray!

Valve va-voom

Lush £3,000 Unison S6 tube amp breathes life into recordings

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. 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.

The face behind Brennan

Martin Brennan, who designed the JB7, has worked with Sir Clive Sinclair and Sir Alan Sugar and has designed over 20 silicon chips in his career. He was a real pioneer in the computer games industry - he played a central role in the design of the worlds first 64 bit games computer.

Ever since CDs were invented Martin wanted a CD player that would hold his entire CD collection. He wanted something as simple to use as a light switch but at the same time something that would let him find a particular track without leaving the armchair.

A word about copyright

"In 2006 the record companies said unequivocally that they are happy for you to load your own CDs onto a hard disk but the Advertising Standards Authority have asked us to tell you that it is unlawful to copy material without the permission of the copyright holder. Find out more and have your say at www.brennan.co.uk"



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. **347** July 2011



This month, I've been reflecting on the internet, more specifically the good and bad that it has done for hi-fi. There's no doubt that downloadable music files have stifled our hobby and

strangled growth from newcomers. The internet has also cannibalised the book market and now the enormous video console world is under threat from web-enabled smartphones.

Then again, taking a more holistic view, audio 'files' have taken music global. More people are listening to two-channel. And as every week passes, it seems, we get a step closer to the promise of studio-quality, HD music; rumours are rife at present, (more on this next month).

So having witnessed the internet cripple high-quality sound reproduction in the home, it's perverse that it will eventually provide the long-awaited crutch to hi-fi's holy grail: studio-quality sound. It will be there for everyone, not just us audiophiles with expensive systems.

Dan

Dan George Editor
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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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web site:

www.jordanacoustics.co.uk

Jordan Acoustics

Geometry

by wilson benesch

The all new Geometry Series from Wilson Benesch pays homage to the importance of geometry in all good design. With the Geometry Series Wilson Benesch applies these principles, with passion, to Acoustic Engineering.

The Geometry Series aspires to be the evolutionary development of the time tested Odyssey Series that is now in its tenth year. This collection provides the summation of many years of considered thought and re-evaluation, encouraged in part, by new technologies and new manufacturing capabilities.



*subject to conditions

free unbiased advice ▶ large product range ▶ free parking ▶ 0% flexible finance*

With the Geometry Series, only the artist who composed the music and the musicians that interpreted it will be present at the event...



NEW Vector

by wilson benesch

The Vector is a 2.5 way, highly optimised, advanced materials technology, floorstanding loudspeaker. Thanks to the cleverly engineered A.C.T. monocoque / poly alloy shell structure, complex bracing is no longer accepted as a design compromise. The shell design delivers huge amounts of air volume, despite its small external surface area, which is another key factor in the success of this superior design.



NEW Vertex

by wilson benesch

The Vertex is a 2-way highly optimised advanced materials technology stand mounted loudspeaker. Unlike many stand mounted designs, the Vertex and its stand, work in harmony to attain structural integrity, vital to the control of key components. Mounted with high tensile bolts, the speaker and stand become one.

bournemouth showroom

telephone:

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e-mail: bournemouth@jordanacoustics.co.uk

address:

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Parley Green Lane, Hurn, Bournemouth, BH23 6BB

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Centre of Excellence

Adam Audio Tensor
ART Loudspeakers
IsoTek
Marantz Legendary
McIntosh Laboratories
Systemdek
Wilson Benesch



Where it all began

The Glenrothes Store in Scotland is where it all began and in just a short space of time, Jordan Acoustics established itself as one of the UK's top premier specialists of high-end Hi-Fi systems.

BRANDS (NOTE: Selected brands may not be available from both stores. Please call to confirm before travelling.)

Adam Audio
Allnic Audio
Analysis Plus
ART Loudspeakers
Audio Note
Bel Canto
Bryston
Chord Electronics

Clearaudio
Denon
EAR/Yoshino
Isotek
Leben
Marantz
Mastersound
McIntosh Laboratories

Musical Fidelity
Nordost
PMC
Quadraspire
SME
Solidsteel
Sugden
Systemdek

Transfiguration
Usher
Weiss
Whest
Wilson Benesch
and many more...



*subject to conditions

generous part exchange* ▶ large selection of used items ▶ home demonstrations*

Setting a new reference in the pursuit of uncompromising musical excellence...



Reference Supports
by solidsteel

Beautiful Italian design and manufacture by ex-Ducati engineers. Now available in the UK! Since their introduction in 1991, Solidsteel audio tables have established a new level of technical and aesthetic refinement for audio and video component support and isolation.



Reference CD Players
by weiss

The JASON CD Transport was created to partner the already famous and multi-award winning MEDEA D/A Converter. For many, this is the ultimate CD Combination, bringing digital sound to life like very few others can. If there was ever a player that could challenge the finest turntables head-on, the Weiss will happily enter the ring and more than likely win! An audition is highly recommended.



Reference Conditioners
by isotek

No matter how powerful the amplifier, however current-hungry it may be, Super Titan delivers a super-clean, ultra-consistent supply of electricity without limitation, ensuring the world's best amplifiers perform to their full potential. The ultimate high-current mains conditioner?
Unquestionably.

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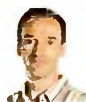
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"There's something pretty damn addictive about the Well Tempered sound."

Jason Kennedy, *Well Tempered Simplex, turntable* p60

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Subscribe and get Blue Horizon accessories worth £45! (p32)

Absolute Zero

Zingali's new Zero series is designed to bring no compromise design down to an affordable price point

PRICE: £1,695-£5,495
AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: 0141 333 9700
WEB: ZINGALI.IT

Zingali has designed its new Zero range to "achieve a performance which competes with used loudspeakers available on the used market at half price or even less." This is nothing, if not ambitious, but the Zeros do look to be a remarkable proposition.

The entire range makes use of Zingali's 'Omniray Horn.' This is designed to mimic the performance of much more expensive compression drivers and produce a completely linear response across the midrange, as well as avoiding the sense of confusion from multiple drivers and directional 'beaming.'

The Zero range uses 'live wood' cabinets that are designed to work in sympathy with the drivers and crossover, without adding additional colouration to them. Further tuning is achieved by a downward-firing bass port, which is claimed to be an improvement on previous designs and offers fast, clean extension.

The range includes a £1,695 standmount design plus three floorstanding models from £2,850. Unusually, the floorstanders are all two-way designs that pair an Omniray with twin bass drivers. These range from six inches in the £2,850 Sei to a beefy ten inches in the flagship £5,495 Deici. A centre speaker and

subwoofer are also available for multichannel systems.

The Zeros are extremely sensitive, with a claimed sensitivity ranging from 92dB/w from the smaller designs to an impressive 94dB/w from the larger Deici. Impedance is also designed to be benign and consistent. This makes them ideal for use with lower output amplifiers, although the power handling is good enough for most amplifier designs to be suitable.



TECHNICOLOR

ZINGALI IS particularly proud of the colour options for the Zero range. Four wood finishes – natural, walnut, cherry and wenge – are available for the horn aperture. If wood is not to your liking, you can have the horn aperture and the cabinet finished in a range of lacquers. The colour can be anything from the RAL Palette, which consists of over 200 separate shades. Most impressive of all is that thanks to Zingali's production methods, all this customising can be done at no extra cost.



The Zero range uses 'live wood' cabinets that are designed to work in sympathy with the drivers



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fact[®] loudspeakers represent the ultimate in luxury and audiophile performance; they convey the unadulterated essence of a recording from a wholly elegant form.



"It does everything so well, but with an air of calm, level-headed restraint that never gets in the way of the music."

 April '11

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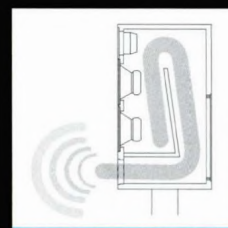
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- **Performance enhancing stand** featuring the same elegant design cues of the fact[®]8 floorstander
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Bespoke Stand



High Compression ATL™

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www.fact-speakers.com



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www.pmc-speakers.com

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New Ethos

Stunning new Pathos amp features three digital inputs

Pathos has announced the new Ethos integrated amplifier. The Ethos is a 100-watt design that makes use of a proprietary INPOL circuit that blends small signal valves with solid-state power amplification. As well as seven line inputs, two of which are balanced, the Ethos features three 24-bit/192kHz-capable

digital inputs. Two of these are accessible over USB, while the third is a conventional S/PDIF interface.

In keeping with being a Pathos product, the casework is a lavish affair with the signature logo-based external heatsinks.

Look out for our exclusive review in next month's *Hi-Fi Choice*.



PRICE: £4,200 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01753 652669 **WEB:** PATHOSACOUSTICS.COM

High times

Amphion launches entry-level Helium 410 standmount

Amphion has launched the Helium 410, its smallest standmount loudspeaker. Designed to work equally well as nearfield monitors or as more conventional standmounts, the Helium pairs a 4.5-inch paper-cone mid bass with a one-inch titanium tweeter and is hand-assembled in Finland.

As well as a black and white finish for £599, or birch, cherry or walnut for an additional £100; an 'enormous variety' of coloured grilles are also available.



PRICE: £599-£699 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** +31 (0) 493 744020 **WEB:** AMPHION.FI



The big four

ACOUSTIC ENERGY has formally released the £699 Neo 4 floorstanding speaker first shown at the Bristol show earlier this year. The Neo 4 is the largest member of the Neo range and has been developed to fulfil requests from various markets for an "more potent" member of the Neo range.

Equipped with a pair of 6.5-inch bass drivers, a single 5.25in midrange and a 38mm dual ring tweeter in a cabinet no less than 1.2 metres tall, the Neo 4 should be a fairly imposing performer. The Neo 4 is available from UK dealers in walnut and black finishes.

PRICE: £699 **AVAILABLE:** NOW

CONTACT: 01285 654432

WEB: ACOUSTIC-ENERGY.CO.UK



Hi-Fi Choice back issues

GREAT NEWS: it's now possible to obtain a far wider range of *Hi-Fi Choice* back issues, thanks to our partnership with electronic publisher Zinio. Readers who have missed an issue can get a electronic copy for PC, Mac or iPad for just £2.49 (UK). There are even smartphone versions of certain issues for iPhone and Android handsets.

Web users across the globe can now buy any edition of *Hi-Fi Choice* from September 2009 (HFC 323). Every page is reproduced exactly as it was in the original magazine, giving you the chance to obtain otherwise unavailable content with just a few mouse clicks.

PRICE: £2.49 EACH (UK) **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ZINIO.COM

"If you want to make someone feel emotion, you have to make them let go. Listening to something is an act of surrender."

Brian Eno



Hear it
as they intended



Chord Indigo Plus Digital

Whilst most hi-fi and home cinema enthusiasts are happy to accept the influence that interconnects and speaker cable can have on the performance of a system, many people struggle to accept that a digital cable can be equally influential.

The common reaction is that since the cable is only carrying a digital signal, the design and quality of materials used in the cable will have far less influence. Listening tests however, show this is not necessarily the case. Repeated listening tests using high quality digital to analogue converters and home cinema receivers have shown that digital cables can and do have an effect on the sound quality of the system in which they are used. Digital cables are capable of affecting levels of detail, dynamics, sound staging and the rhythmic and tonal characteristics of a system.

The improvements that the Indigo Plus Digital can bring to a system should not be dismissed lightly.



THE
CHORD[™]
COMPANY

www.chord.co.uk

Get advice on all aspects of hi-fi and home cinema from the Cable Doctor and sign-up for our newsletter, keeping you in touch with the latest product development news, exclusive competitions and technical tips

Mr Universe

Townshend's Glastonbury universal player breaks cover

Townshend has taken the wraps off its Glastonbury universal player, designed to complement the passive preamplifiers announced last month.

The Glastonbury CD is designed to offer optimal performance from CD, SACD and DVD audio. To this end, Townshend have taken the unusual step of using transformers in the output stage instead

of op-amps. This is combined with a six-volt sealed lead-acid battery supply that is connected to external mains only when the Glastonbury CD is in standby. When powered up, the battery gives the player up to thirty hours of playback between charges. The power levels are indicated by a power gauge on the front.

As with the preamps, construction is high-grade, natural-anodized aluminium.



PRICE: £10,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 020 8979 2155
WEB: TOWNSHENDAUDIO.COM

DacMagic rival?

New £260 DAC promises high-end performance

UK retailer and distributor AmpCity has released the new £260 Matrix Mini I DAC. The Mini I offers variety of digital inputs including USB-B and balanced AES, as well as S/PDIF over BNC and TOSLINK. Analogue outputs are available over both balanced and unbalanced

outputs. The Mini I is also a fully functioning headphone amplifier and has a full-size front-panel headphone socket.

The unit is also capable of functioning as a digital preamplifier and it is possible to switch between fixed and variable outputs via the front panel interface.



PRICE: £260 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 020 3384 6392 **WEB:** AMPCITY.CO.UK



A real Titan

QUADRAL'S eighth generation of its flagship Titan VIII loudspeaker is the largest model in the high-end Aurum range. In continuous production since 1981, the latest iteration of the Titan Quadral was formally unveiled at the 2011 Munich High-End show on the 20th May. Smaller than the preceding Titan VII, it retains key Quadral features, such as the ribbon tweeter.

Quadral are sufficiently confident in the build of the Titan VIII to supply a ten-year warranty with the speaker. And, as befits a flagship product, the Titan VIII is available in over 190 different laquer finishes from the RAL catalogue.

PRICE: £11,300 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01785 748 446
WEB: QUADRALGB-IE.CO.UK



NEWS IN BRIEF

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



•**BLACK RHODIUM** has launched the Oratorio stereo interconnect, which uses DCT-treated silver wiring and is available from £1,250 for a one-metre RCA pair. blackrhodium.co.uk



•**RUSS ANDREWS** has released a complete range of "Zapperator" Zobel network filters for mains and cables. russandrews.com



•**ROBERTS'** new £200 Union Jack Revival DAB/FM radio will, we are told, be built in limited quantities. robertsradio.co.uk



•**JAMO** has released a three-strong range of earphones, some of which include an inline remote and mic for iPhone control. jamo.com

•**CORRECTION:** our review of the Dynamique cables last issue had the wrong contact phone number. The correct number is 07786 310 910. dynamiqueaudio.com

New Image

New range of PSB loudspeakers

PSB has unveiled its new Image 5 series of loudspeakers for the first time in the UK.

The range consists of the T5 floorstander, the B5 bookshelf and the C5 centre speaker. There's also the Subsonic 5i subwoofer.

The range uses a 25mm titanium tweeter, paired with 133mm clay/

ceramic-filled polypropylene coned bass/mid-range drivers. The range is designed with a view to working together as a multichannel package, but PSB says that the B5 and T5, "are also both excellent stand-alone stereo models, good enough to delight music-lovers in their own right."

The range is finished in black ash and is available from PSB dealers now.



PRICE: £229-£599 AVAILABLE: NOW CONTACT: 01279 501111 WEB: PSBSPEAKERS.COM

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

John Roberts, of Midland Audio Exchange picks four timeless cuts



DAVID BOWIE
THE RISE AND FALL OF ZIGGY STARDUST
Every track on this album shows what a genius Bowie is, while the bit I really liked was the sleeve note that says, "To be played at maximum volume."



FREE
FIRE AND WATER
This still remains one of my all-time favourite plays. It shows how simple arrangements have high impact from a four piece band with outstanding vocals.



YES
THE YES ALBUM
This pretty much sums up that whole period of fabulous musicianship that was prevalent amongst many bands. I could name others, but this one sticks out from the crowd.



SIMPLE MINDS
SONS AND FASCINATION
This album set new standards in modern music, with its fabulous bass playing from Derek Forbes and eerie guitar textures from Charlie Burchill.



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SOUND OF NORWAY



The New Integrated Amplifier ECI-5 MK II

Our aim when designing the ECI-5 MK II was to make the sound more modern, enhancing the details and dynamics.

Feedback from our listening team tell us that we have succeeded –
"this amplifier sounds much larger than the size and the price tag"

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SHOW REPORT

Montreal 2011

Kevin Emden drops in on the exotic-sounding Salon Son and Image Show for the latest hi-fi from across the pond

Every spring, as Canada begins to thaw, dozens of hi-fi companies gather at the spacious Hilton hotel in Montreal for the Salon Son & Image Show in order to display their latest products.

This year there were also signs that the hi-fi world is starting to reverse the financial down-spiral of the last decade, with exhibitors talking about renewed growth and the future of audio. And, as was the trend at CES earlier this year, you rarely walked into a room without a standalone DAC being the primary source. Yet surprisingly, DACs were

not the featured product. Instead, companies were showing off their latest amplifiers, cables, phono-stages and loudspeakers.

The skyrocketing prices of hi-fi components showed no sign of letting up though and many exhibitors were happily showcasing products in the five-figure price range.

All-in-one units have started to catch-on and the battle to make the best one-box solution is really starting to heat up and hi-fi has seen a wave of loudspeaker innovation, which was also clearly evident at this year's show.

1 RAYSONIC REFERENCE 26

Exotic hi-fi designer Raysonic introduced a new statement monoblock amplifier called the Reference 26. Each amp runs twelve 7591AEH vacuum tubes in a traditional push-pull design, producing a whopping 180 watts per channel.

Designers chose to utilise Mundorf MCap Supreme Silver/Gold/Oil capacitors and Kimber audio cables are used internally. The redesigned circuit board focuses on shorter signal paths and simpler designs. What's more, this massive beast weighs 46kg and will be available for \$16,500. raysonicaudio.com

2 ORACLE AUDIO PARIS

From the creators of the Delphi Mk VI turntable comes their latest creation, the Paris turntable. This brand new

design uses Delrin, a crystalline plastic that acts as a mechanical filter and prevents unwanted noise from reaching critical components. Belt-driven, it uses the advanced motor system found in the Delphi MK VI to ensure the rotational accuracy of the platter.

Numerous tonearms can be used with the Paris and it will be available for a starting price of £3,295. oracle-audio.com

3 ATOLL ELECTRONIQUE CD400 AND IN400

French company, Atoll, was showing off its CD400 and IN400. This CD/integrated amplifier combo creates a visually striking piece of hi-fi gear.

Internally, the CD400 utilises two separate Burr-Brown PCM 1794 DACs and eight regulated power supplies.

The IN400 is a dual-mono design that produces 160 watts into 8 ohms. Its visually unique aluminium chassis was designed to absorb external vibrations, while still effectively

“Many exhibitors were showcasing products in the five-figure range.”



cooling. Retail prices will be £5,900 for the CD400 and £5,400 for the IN400.
atoll-electronique.com

4 MUSICAL FIDELITY M6500I

Adding to its upmarket M6 line, the M6500i is a true dual-mono design. This integrated amplifier uses circuitry that is derived from its flagship Titan amplifier.

It uses an all-new Class-A precision volume control and the power amplifier utilises 12 bipolar transistors that are supposedly capable of producing 200 amps. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the M6500i is rated at 500 watts.

For £4,000 you get an integrated amp on steroids.
musicalfidelity.com

5 SIMAUDIO 850P PREAMPLIFIER

From its Moon Evolution Series comes Simaudio's latest flagship preamp – the 850P. Like its predecessor, the P-8,



it uses a two-box design in which one box houses the audio circuitry and the other 'dirty box' houses the power supply.

It uses a proprietary M-Ray volume control, which has a staggering 530 steps. Updates include an all-new chassis and M-Octave damping system that effectively decouples the main audio circuit to reduce microphonic vibrations. It will be available soon for a mere £18,500.
Simaudio.com

6 PROAC RESPONSE D40R

ProAc has updated the Response D38 with the D40R. It now uses two 165mm carbon-fibre bass/midrange drivers that are made in-house from an ultra-fine weave of carbon fibre. Additionally, a ribbon tweeter is implemented to recreate high-frequencies notes.

If you don't enjoy the sound of a ribbon tweeter, however, ProAc offers a convention dome tweeter as an option. This new



loudspeaker retails for £6,125 in standard finish.
proac-loudspeakers.com

7 TOTEM ACOUSTIC ELEMENT SERIES

Montreal-based Totem Acoustic was showing off its new Element Series loudspeakers, with some advanced engineering.

Each driver takes over seven hours to manufacture and under-hung motor systems are used in each. The woofer uses 16 to 17 individual magnets and this advanced system allows the driver to have a full one-inch of throw capability. In addition, the woofers have no active or passive crossover parts.

They are priced from £5,600 and £12,125.
totemacoustic.com

8 TRANSPARENT AUDIO OPUS SERIES CABLES

In the world of high-end audio there are expensive cables and then there are Transparent Audio cables, who makes some of the world's most exotic wires. Pictured above is a loudspeaker cable from its

flagship Opus series. These cables incorporate advanced damping and suspension systems and each is individually calibrated to work with specific components based on their internal geometry (i.e. transistor or vacuum tube).

Loudspeaker cables start at roughly \$33,000. Interconnects start at roughly \$19,000.
transparentcable.com

9 YG ACOUSTICS ANAT REFERENCE II STUDIO

The self-proclaimed 'best loudspeaker on Earth' was on hand: the Anat Reference II Studio, which is CNC-machined out of solid slabs of aircraft-grade aluminium. Crossovers are designed using advanced proprietary software and advanced internal geometries eliminate cabinet resonances that can degrade sound quality.

These are cost-no-object speakers and they will set you back £76,000 for a pair.
ygacoustics.com

10 WADIA SERIES 9

A unique set up from Wadia included the entire Series 9

CYRUS

Streaming Audio Excellence

Stream X is the latest model from Cyrus' new range of streaming audio players. Based on the remarkable Stream XP platform, the Stream X is a dedicated source component that delivers high quality streamed audio into hi-fi systems that already have a DAC such as the range of Cyrus XpD integrated amplifiers and preamplifiers. Stream X provides you with immediate access to your entire network music library whilst also featuring a USB connection for an iPod. Plus you can listen to over 30,000 internet radio stations from around the globe using the inbuilt TuneIn radio.

Stream X comes complete with the stylish and intuitive **n-remote** that makes browsing your network music library a real cinch. **n-remote** also has an infra-red learning capability, so that it can swiftly learn to control other products in your home. With its sleek body, two-way control and full colour screen to view album artwork, the **n-remote** is just one of the features that make Stream X very special.



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Cyrus sales 01480 435577



line-up, featuring the 971 CD transport, 931 Digital Controller and a pair of 922 Mono Decoding Computers.

Internally, there's a proprietary interpolating digital filtering system, digital preamplification and ClockLink technology. Working together, this system offers an advanced pure digital solution for any hi-fi enthusiast.

To enjoy this cutting-edge digital source expect to pay £47,998 for a complete Series 9 system. wadia.com

11 TOTEM ACOUSTIC STORM

A colour revolution was on display from Totem Acoustic. The Storm comes in various

wood and painted veneers and its unique driver array consists of an eight-inch active driver flanked by two eight-inch passive radiators. Internal power comes from a 300-watt amplifier. The crossover can be disabled to allow for external control from a processor.

If you are looking for a funky looking subwoofer, look no further, but expect to pay around £1,100. totemacoustic.com

12 BURMESTER 088

Burmester's latest preamp, the 088, is a dual-mono design that endeavours to reduce internal crosstalk. A multi-layered circuit board design helps reduce crosstalk on the inputs.

The 088 can be configured with an internal phono stage or D/A converter to allow consumers to customise the unit to their own needs.

Like all Burmester products, this preamplifier is finished to an extremely high standard and the price? £22,000. burmester.de

13 SIMAUDIO 880M

An amplifier to rule them all – the Simaudio 880Ms are truly powerful monoblock amplifiers. They boast 800 watts into eight ohms and can double their power into a four-ohm load.

The 880M uses specially designed bipolar output transistors, which provide improved gain linearity and help preserve the integrity of

the audio signal. They are a no-overall-feedback design that is made possible by proprietary Lynx circuitry.

To own these Canadian monsters, you will have to find £29,000 [Simaudio.com](http://simaudio.com)

14 MONITOR AUDIO GOLD GX SERIES

Monitor Audio has been updating its entire range and the Gold GX loudspeaker series is the latest update with a ribbon tweeter, updated midrange and bass drivers, updated crossovers and Pureflow Silver internal cabling.

Prices range from £950 to £3,000 for the GX300 floorstander pictured above. monitoraudio.co.uk



15



16



17



18



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19

15 THRAX SPARTACUS

Thrax is a new company from Bulgaria. Its Spartacus monoblocks are based on a directly heated triode design and produce a modest 70 watts into an eight or four-ohm load.

It also makes good use of a two-stage shunt regulator and a special Japanese transformer. Each unit is made out of aircraft-grade aluminium. A pair of Spartacus monoblocks is £27,000. thrax.bg

16 NAGRA 300i

Most Nagra products are visually unique-looking products and the new 300i integrated amplifier is no different.

The unit is a traditional push-pull design producing 20 watts per channel using two pairs of 300B vacuum tubes.

Expect to pay around £14,950 for this newcomer. nagraaudio.com

17 NORDOST LEIF CABLE RANGE

Nordost has been shaking things up in the hi-fi world of late, with its exotic Odin and Valhalla cable ranges.

The company has now gone back to its entry-level range and revamped it with four different lines: White Lightning; Purple Flare; Blue Heaven and Red Dawn. A new 2.0 USB has been introduced to the Blue Heaven line and the range starts at around £110. nordost.com

18 T+A MUSIC RECEIVER

All-in-one units are becoming increasingly popular and German hi-fi manufacturer T+A has jumped on the bandwagon with its new music receiver.

This unit houses a 160-watt amplifier (four-ohm) CD player and double-mono 32-bit Sigma-Delta oversampling D/A converter. It's also DLNA- and UPnP-ready, has seven digital inputs (including two USB slots) and can even broadcast the radio.

The T+A Music Receiver will set you back roughly £3,000. Taelektroakustik.de

19 JOSEPH AUDIO PERSPECTIVE

A small speaker manufacturer from New York, Joseph Audio,

was demonstrating its compact floorstander called the Perspective. This loudspeaker utilises a unique patented crossover design called 'Asymmetrical Infinite Slope.' Essentially, this crossover allows all the drivers to work together harmoniously – eliminating wave interference and greatly increasing the size of the listening window.

The Perspective retails for around \$11,800. Josephaudio.com

20 THIEL SC4T

Kentucky-based Thiel was showcasing its SC4T floorstander. This two-way designed loudspeaker uses a coaxially-mounted midrange/tweeter configuration to help maintain correct phase of both drivers. The cabinets are made from one-inch-thick MDF and incorporate a die-cast aluminium baffle to create a structurally solid foundation for the drivers. A first-order crossover design is utilised internally. Pricing to be confirmed. thielaudio.com

It was clear at this year's show that hi-fi companies aren't just sitting around idly, or riding on the success of older products. Instead, the majority of exhibitors demonstrated how busy they have been breaking new ground with innovative technologies that distinguish themselves from the competition. In fact, most were exploring new approaches to achieving that ever-elusive 'live sound' feel.

Compared to the overwhelming feeling that plagues the CES show in Las Vegas, the Salon Son & Image show had a much more relaxed vibe. Exhibitors took special care in setting up their stands, while demo rooms were made to be comfortable and relaxing.

Now that the world economy is picking up again, albeit slowly, the hi-fi world looks to be following suit. Certainly, if the products on display at this year's show are anything to go by, then we're all in for a great 2011. Watch this space. ●



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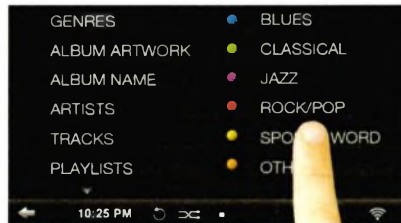
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Sparkling sound for less

HFC's tech lab manager **Martin Pipe** argues that there's little point in spending big where modern-day DACs are concerned

Much of the harshness and granularity of first-generation CD players could be attributed to the digital-to-analogue converters of the time. By today's standards, they were primitive and relied on analogue multi-pole 'brickwall' filters that could mess around with phase (and thus soundstaging). Back then, the importance of timing imperfections – known as 'jitter' – wasn't fully understood, either.

Some pioneers tweaked those early players for better subjective sound, generally by redesigning the analogue circuitry, but the improved chippery that was to follow better-explored CD's possibilities. Another key development was the late '80s separation of high-end players into disc-transport and DACs. The latter could also be partnered with other digital sources, such as satellite sound-broadcasting and DAT.

Consumer technology has, of course, advanced considerably since then. There's Blu-ray, broadband and HDTV, to say nothing of high-res audio. 16-bit/44.1kHz PCM audio is no longer the technical challenge to designers it once was. Even a mass-market digital audio product (MP3 player or CD portable) has a delta-sigma 'DAC-on-a-chip' of far more potential than the circuitry of those first-generation CD players.

And chips of this nature are also, of course, at the heart of audiophile DACs. Much of today's serious digital audio is dominated by a handful of DAC-chip manufacturers that include Burr-Brown/TI, Wolfson and Analog Devices. Driven by the global demand for products like Blu-ray players, even the cheaper devices are pretty capable – support for 192kHz sampling rates and 24-bit resolution is commonplace.

Chips off the old block

These varieties of chip crop up in different audiophile-grade DACs, although the circuit configurations employed by the product manufacturers may vary. A pair of DACs is, for example, frequently dedicated to a single stereo channel – the advantages of this 'dual-differential' mode include better dynamic range and superior imaging (less crosstalk, because the two DACs dedicated to each channel are usually in a single chip that less-critical designs use as a complete 'stereo solution').

You'll have some DSP before the DAC, for digital filtering and (sometimes) the upsampling of CD sources. These days, a USB interface for computer audio is *de rigueur*. And then there's the power supply, any jitter-reduction circuitry (reclocking, etc.) and the analogue electronics (buffers and filters) that 'condition' the signals from the DAC(s) for compatibility with your hi-fi equipment.

Power supplies and analogue signals are grist to the mill of audio engineers (as indeed are some of the technologies – tubed buffers are not uncommon). All can contribute to how a DAC will sound. However, that chip is one of the most important factors.

All this has led to an interesting phenomenon. During listening tests, it's not unknown for a blind panel to prefer the sound of a modestly priced DAC to that of a vastly more expensive unit. A great example here is the Cambridge DacMagic, a unit with – according to *HFC's* own Richard Black – "a performance which, in practically every way, rivals anything on the market at any price."

The DacMagic contains two pairs of Wolfson WM8740s – a British-designed DAC chip – running in the aforementioned dual-differential configuration; others using Wolfson silicon, include Arcam, Linn and Rega. In the last issue (*HFC* 346) we reviewed the Rega DAC. Praiseworthy audio and five *HFC* stars in all ratings and you'll get change from £500.

Another DAC that sounds good and measures well in the lab is Musical Fidelity's M1, which uses Burr-Brown conversion. Yet it's only £400; you can spend over £5,000 on a DAC – but do you need to? A sub-£500 DAC could be one of your most astute hi-fi purchases. It'll give many CD players a clean pair of heels, transform TV/radio sound (most set-top boxes have a digital output) and bring computer-held music into the realms of respectability.

Rega's £500 DAC: Our current champion



You can spend over £5,000 on a DAC – but do you need to? A sub-£500 DAC could be one of your most astute hi-fi purchases

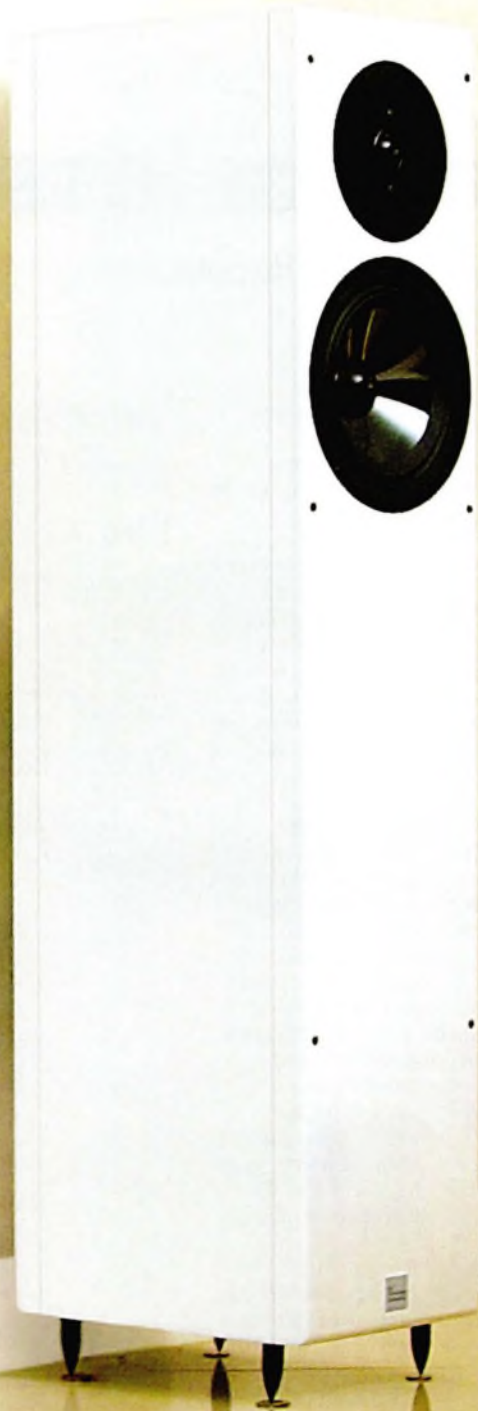


MARTIN PIPE

Martin Pipe has been an audio enthusiast for 30 years and a tech journalist for 20 of those. He also help set up *HFC's* tech labs

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do diminishing returns kick in at £500 where DACs are concerned? Why spend more? Email us now: hifichoice@futurenet.com



Style & Performance

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Ownership vs rentalship

Spotify has evidence that access to music is becoming more important than owning it. **Adam Hartley** looks at the future for the audiophile

Many of my friends who are passionate about music happily describe themselves as vinyl junkies.

Even if you only buy three or four slabs of vinyl a year, buying records is a mark of pride in our ADHD-driven culture of incessant digitisation. A salvo in the ongoing war against the hegemony of the low-quality compressed MP3.

Most music-lovers still buy far more CDs than vinyl. They also download a lot of music (legally and illegally) and some use streaming services and mobile phone apps from the likes of we7 and Spotify.

However, despite offering a higher-quality 320kbps stream to its paying subscribers, Spotify and its ilk cannot (yet) offer audiophiles access to a fully lossless stream of its immense library of music on tap. But it does represent an interesting shift in the way in which we think about, and value, the music we love. In that an increasingly large number of music fans, who used to spend an inordinate amount of time obsessively scraping through bargain bins in record stores, or hunting that must-have 180g vinyl online, are now happy to rent their tunes instead of owning them in the form of a chunk of plastic.

Matthew Hawn, VP of Product at Last.fm is one man who is well aware of the fan's desire for ownership, reminding me that "music is a powerful medium, so it's easy to understand why there's sometimes a strong desire for ownership." Hawn also thinks this joy of ownership is unlikely to ever disappear, "but the ability to access and listen to music without owning it is something which can allow you to explore and discover new music like never before."

Sally Whatley, UK PR manager for Spotify feels our "music-listening habits are set to change drastically over the coming years and we are already seeing evidence that access is more important than ownership. If you look at some of the best user experiences, such as radio and TV, you simply switch it on and it works instantly, which has been key to their long-term success. Access to music will follow suit, available on all phones, TVs, cars, you name it – any device that can play music, will, flowing across all devices just like water."

Which begs the question, is music rentalship becoming more important than ownership? And is this part of a bigger cultural shift in our attitudes to possessing and using things? If you

want to borrow a car, or a drill, or a dress, or a movie, or a book, or a nice apartment for a city-break, or whatever else for a few hours or days, then a quick Google will provide you with details of a service that offers a short-term rental to meet your immediate needs. By extension, if Spotify or we7, or Apple or Amazon, or whoever else can crack the lossless streaming nut soon, might we audiophiles finally be persuaded to stop collecting?

The vital question is...

Trusted British hi-fi brands such as Naim, Bowers & Wilkins and Linn already offer lossless audio downloads and streams, while leading US sites such as HD Tracks (hdtracks.com) and iTrax (itrax.com) envision a potentially lucrative market for hi-def audio downloads. But can a download or stream – no matter how good the quality – ever really replace the sheer physical pleasure of dropping a needle on a record, or reading the liner notes in a new CD?

These are vital questions for anybody who cares about music right now. With Spotify in talks with Google, and Apple having already signed up Warner to its own soon-to-be-unveiled cloud-music service, increased competition in the music-streaming market will hopefully result in a lot more options for those of us that demand quality over convenience.

Gilad Tiefenbrun, MD at Linn Products, summed up the current state of play, when he told me that any successful music rental model "needs to offer music at high-quality and in an open, standard format. Something that provides people flexibility to use their music how they see fit, is future-proofed against new products and technology, avoids the danger of customer lock-in and guarantees them permanent access to their precious music, in the event that the service is discontinued."

Increased competition in the music-streaming market will hopefully result in a lot more options for those that demand quality over convenience



ADAM HARTLEY

Adam is a technology journalist who regularly contributes to HFC's sister site techradar.com the UK's biggest tech site

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It's cool to be Square

Was the Square Wave the most potent hi-fi measurement ever invented?
Jimmy Hughes provides the answer

Since time-immemorial (well, the 1950s – same thing) all hi-fi manufacturers have grappled with the same problem: how to convince punters that their stuff is the best. The difficulty is hi-fi is an aural medium and you're trying to sell it in a visual one, like magazines. So, how do you demonstrate sonic superiority visually?

Audio legend Harold Leak's legendary 'Point One' was probably the first example of a 'benchmark' standard for amplifier performance that everyone understood and respected. Point One? Simple! It was a measurement expressing the total amount of distortion produced – the sonic equivalent of a sub four-minute mile.

Soon, 0.1 per cent distortion became the yardstick for judging a hi-fi amplifier. Which was fine and dandy, but limited from a marketing standpoint; unfortunately (like sub-four-minute milers) lots of amplifiers could meet this standard. Something more was needed. For Harman Kardon that 'something' turned out to be the Square Wave.

Square Waves tell you lots about how an amplifier performs, yet are very easy to understand and compare. They indicate things like rise time (transient attack), stability (over-shoot and ringing) and bandwidth (frequency response). Pretty much everything you need to know in one simple shape.

Accurate square waves (especially at frequency extremes) demand an amplifier with wide bandwidth, excellent stability and fast transient response. For example, if the leading and trailing edges of the square wave show signs of tilt and the top part looks wavy, then the amplifier in question has issues with bandwidth and stability.

It gets better (or worse). An amplifier might produce beautifully square Square Waves into a simple resistive load, only to misbehave horribly when a bit of capacitance and inductance is added to the mix – as might happen in real-life when driving speakers like Quad's ESLs. So, Square Waves were both informative and revealing.

Nowadays, square-waves have been replaced by those subtle, complex Waterfall charts. These look immensely impressive and contain oodles of information, but are of limited use since they're only understood by about half a dozen boffins worldwide. The rest of us find them totally baffling.

Undoubtedly, the Square Wave Kings were HK's Citation range – lavish up-market amplifiers offering superb build quality and hefty price tags. To torment outsiders, HK published The Square Wave Club – a newsletter expressively aimed at causing dissatisfaction



Harman Kardon's Citation 12: the Square Wave king

and deep concern in the minds of all non-HK owners. Attaboy!

By the '70s, the company had obtained the services of one Matti Ojala; a maverick electronics designer, and promulgator of the dreaded Transient Intermodulation Distortion – a hugely scary new distortion that manifested itself under 'dynamic' (music) conditions – one of many skeletons being discovered in the transistorised closet at that time.

If it ain't Square, it ain't there

Ojala proselytised the importance of square waves for pure audio results and we all duly took note. Technically speaking, it seemed futile to defend the performance of amplifiers that produced mangled square waves. Anything that did this had to be naff – even if our ears told us it sounded good!

Generically, these '70s HK amplifiers and receivers sounded clean, tight and crisply focused. Warm, alluring and lush-sounding they were not; the sound was classic '70s transistor – the antithesis of those slightly 'soft' romantic-sounding tube amps from the '50s and '60s.

For example, its 60-watt Citation 12 power amp boasted a frequency response of 1Hz to beyond 70kHz, with a phase shift of just five degrees at 20Hz; at 1Hz it was around 15 degrees. Rise time was quoted as two microseconds. Such excellent figures made older tube amps look decidedly dodgy.

Whether these HK amps would still pass muster today is a moot point; things have moved on a lot since then. But – whatever the answer – for a while at least, its Square Waves were the Greenwich Meantime of hi-fi; a beacon of engineering excellence and technical correctness one just couldn't ignore. ●

The difficulty is hi-fi is an aural medium and companies are trying to sell it in a visual one like magazines



JIMMY HUGHES

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

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How do you remember 1970s hi-fi? Maybe you're still running some in your set-up? Email us now: hifichoice@futurenet.com

S3/5R² NEW

The Spendor S3/5 (1997-2007) achieved worldwide recognition amongst audiophiles and critical reviewers as the natural successor to the BBC LS3/5a mini-monitor loudspeaker.

The Spendor S3/5R (2007-2010) achieved what many thought impossible - New levels of transparency and imaging coherency, more articulate bass delivery, and the enjoyable fatigue-free listening experience which so clearly distinguished the original S3/5 from other small loudspeakers.

Now the Spendor S3/5R² takes a big step forward with significant improvements in low frequency articulation, dynamics, power handling, transparency and sound integration.



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A3 NEW

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Buyer's Guide size...

I am a regular reader of your magazine and love it, but I notice that items in your *Buyer's Guide* seem to fall off the radar fairly quickly. Is there anywhere older items can be accessed? I was looking for the review of the Cyrus DAC XP+.

By the way, I shall now be subscribing to your iPad version.
Chris Lloyd, via email

...and width

In view of the complicated nature of DACs and the wide variety of facilities that they potentially offer, might it be possible for the specs part of the *Buyer's Guide* to be a little more detailed in the 'Streamers/ Music servers' and the 'DACs' sections, as these expand?

I feel that the issue of buffering streamed material needs to be included, in addition to the other important considerations such as supported sampling rates, etc.
Brian Walsh, via email

HFC *The Buyer's Guide occupies a fixed portion of each issue, so that the turnover of products in each category will, by necessity, be fairly high. The good news is that reviews published in Hi-Fi Choice are also added to the excellent TechRadar site (techradar.com) - Britain's biggest technology website - a short time after the magazine, which allows you to find our opinion on a huge range of products (including the Cyrus) and see more information than we have room for in the Buyer's Guide.*

For this reason, we are wary about adding more information categories to the Buyer's Guide as the results of trying to make it more informative could actually result in it being less useful for our readers.

We will be looking at whether the categories that we have selected for DACs and streamers are the most useful ones, however, and if there are more suitable options than the ones we are using, we will certainly be looking at ways to include them.



The Buyer's Guide - is more product and more detail needed?

Rotten fruit

Hi-Fi Choice is something I look forward to each month, as here in Australia we have a very limited hi-fi scene.

But hi-fi to me doesn't include an iPod, so I purchase original CDs, or preferably SACDs and your thoughts echo mine when discussing compressed files (*Opinion HFC 339*).

Compressed files, or MP3, have their place in my listening only as a temporary measure, prior to the purchase of the real article. There is an element of being a collector and supporting the artist in my drive to pay for the album.

Thumbs up to the honest people who choose to buy legit, via iTunes and the like, but I fail to comprehend why many pay for massively compressed music at album prices.

The poor old CD is probably in its last three to five years, unless it goes totally niche like 180g LP etc. It was a sad day when Technics stopped producing the SL1200 turntable, for example, as I maintain that the high-end audiophile and the DJ scene kept the presses running for both LP and 12-inch dance singles.

Your reviews and comments on the fact that CD players of recent incarnation sound great is also excellent news. I recently bought a Yamaha CD S2000 and it exceeded all my expectations. I run JBL Studio Monitors in a tri-amplified configuration, fed by a Rane active crossover to a

bank of preamps by Yamaha, Australian Monitor, Yorkville and Krell.

This is a system that delivers realistic 'concert' sound and, while not to everyone's taste, reggae at these levels brightens your spirit any time you hit play! Undoubtedly, when one reflects on the best marketing or marketed device/product of all time, then the iPod will be top of the pile, but this modern craze for 'i' toys still makes me cringe.

Ben Stuart (Australia), via email

HFC *We think you have us at a slight cross purpose, but thanks for the kind words.*

Where we agree, is that the replacement for a 25-year-old format should not be technically inferior to it. We also feel that the pricing and availability of downloaded content, be it compressed or high-resolution, is not right at the moment.

Where we differ slightly is with the iPod itself. Beyond the hype (and we will freely admit that a full-on Apple evangelist is a terrifying thing) the iPod has a place in the modern day hi-fi system and the influence it has had on aspects of design in this industry have been largely positive. The ubiquity of the iPod has allowed the industry to commit to good integration without the fear that their efforts will be undone by changes later on.

The interface of the iPod and iPod Touch has also had a massive effect on the quality of control interfaces, as well as (in the case of the iPod Touch and iPhone) becoming the control interface themselves. Here at Hi-Fi Choice, we believe that the audio industry without the iPod would be a poorer one.

Coming on stream

I've now moved over to streaming and there's no way I'll go back. Here's why and here's how. Around 18 months ago I had a Sonos system demonstration and was pretty impressed, but

www.hifichoice.co.uk

I was unable to raise the £700 entry cost. Anyway, it nagged away at me that there had to be an easier and a cheaper way with which to accomplish the same results. Then came Apple TV.

To give you some background; I spent my big money on hi-fi in the mid-nineties, after auditioning Linn, Naim and Meridian and ended up with a Linn Sondek, Meridian 508 CD player, Meridian 502/557 pre/power and ProAc Response 2.5 loudspeakers. It gave me the sound I was looking for and it still does, so not a bad investment.

I attached the Apple TV to my Samsung TV via HDMI and then the TV into my hi-fi with phono cables. I then connected the Apple TV wirelessly to my PC and bingo: streaming MP3 with the album cover displayed on the TV! I'd heard better, but it was a start.

The process to improved sound then went like this: upgrade wireless network to Wireless N throughout (cost £15 for new wireless card for PC) and use Netgear Stora MS2000 with 2x 500GB drives (£90 from a BT shop); rip 1,100 CDs to Stora in Apple Lossless format (five days and some nights); include Arcam rDAC (£299) and connect TV to rDAC with optical cable and the latter to hi-fi with phono cables; connect the Apple TV direct to the Wireless hub with 10 metres of Cat 6 network cable (£10).

Total cost was £513 and the result is sound quality that is, at least, equal to the CD-playing system I have already (though still not as good as vinyl) with no drop-outs or glitches of any



The iPod Touch – the industry is better with it than without it

kind. The convenience factor is fantastic and the hi-def audio downloads I've bought sound as good as anything I've heard.

Pre-requisites for all this are a TV with decent interfaces, a reasonable PC and, if you want easy control, an iPod touch or an iPad. We really are on the cusp of something great here, but in conclusion, I'd add the following: you don't need to spend a fortune. You do (of course) need great amplification and speakers, and the DAC is where it's at. Next step for me is to buy a more

sophisticated NAS (Netgear ReadyNAS) and a Bowers and Wilkins Zeppelin Air (to extend the sound into the dining room). And, if I ever have enough money, a top-level DAC.

While I'd never get rid of my vinyl, both the CDs and the CD player are heading for eBay before everyone else catches on!

Mark Smith, via email

HFC This is a pretty thorough breakdown of what it takes to introduce streaming to a system (although we have not included Apple TV in our streaming considerations up until now, mostly because they require a screen).

We agree with you that a 'post CD' world is in sight, as the new technology is more than capable of handling files of exceptional quality, via interfaces that are genuinely intuitive to use. All that is missing from the puzzle is a ready supply of lossless files to buy or stream over them.

At the moment, most streaming systems are still dependent on CDs being purchased and ripped to a hard drive. The results are more convenient, but still



The Arcam rDAC – the shortcut to streaming brilliance

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A9

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A6

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A5

"Easily-foreseeable these are accomplished beyond their price"
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SPENDOR

dependent on CD. Rest assured that we will be covering the developments that fill in the gaps.

Format agnostic

If you're into classical the SACD format is still a sensible investment. If like me, however, you're into everything *but* classical (from punk to Asian traditional music), then it's important not to discriminate between the various formats.

If I can purchase a used CD on Discogs.com for a few Euro's, I bite. If I see a CD in the shop for a price I like, or from Amazon, then I buy! I have a subscription for Bowers and Wilkins' Society of Sound which was only \$60 and I got to download the entire back catalogue! It's 24-bit and there's something for every audiophile, including fans of classical music.

My stereo system is built round a pair of used Jamo R909s. Each has its own balanced amp and a Weiss DAC2 connects with a Mac mini boasting 2,517 albums. I listen to the few multichannel discs I own on the other system, which is using a Bowers and Wilkins CM surround set-up.

Erwin Schepens, via email

HFC We can't help but agree that this is best attitude to take – even if you do seem to have dismissed vinyl from your format choices! The music is what matters and we feel that our cover strap 'Passion for sound' conveys this. If you find something you want to listen to – and thanks to sites like Amazon, the choice of material has never been greater – a good system should be able to make the best of it irrespective of format.

This is something that we look for in all the equipment we review and thanks to the ever-increasing flexibility of equipment, it is something that is easier to achieve at whatever price point you are buying equipment in.

SACD still has considerable classical clout



LETTER OF THE MONTH

Pioneer Spirit

PRIZE WINNER!



LIKE MY HAIRCUT AND CLOTHES (according to my kids) I'm stuck in the 1970s and just to prove it I've still got my Pioneer PL12D turntable, Rotel RX400A amp and Celestion Ditton 15XR speakers, all of which I still use on a regular basis.

I've replaced the drive belt a couple of times (you can still get them on the internet) and oiled it now and then (I've still got the plastic oil bottle that came with it). The turntable rumbles a bit (probably a dodgy earth) but its sound is good enough for the state of my listening ability. The power lead is a two-pronged affair that plugs straight into the back of the amp (Health and Safety would probably have forty fits if they saw it).

I had to teach my kids how to pull a record out of its sleeve without getting fingerprints over it and teeing up the cartridge arm to locate a track. They thought it was something out of the dark ages! The turntable came with a '45 adaptor so I could play all the ex-juke box 45s I bought without any 'middles'.

My vinyl collecting stopped when CD came out, but the turntable still plays my scratchy versions of eclectic stuff from Santana and Errol Garner, through to Van der Graff Generator and *Zadok the Priest*. Interestingly, my original Led Zeppelin vinyl album sounds so much better than the remastered *Mothership* version of recent years.

I thought I'd get 'with it' when CD arrived and bought a Rotel RCD 855 and the amp handles it ok, but every so often I raid the vinyl archives for some of 'Dad's classics'.

The amp is on its last legs, with light bulbs gone and intermittent signals to the speakers. In fact, the speakers have basically had it, so I'm looking to treat myself to some brand new kit that'll last another 30-odd years. Although by then, the music will probably be piped directly into the brain. Either that, or I'll be needing a hearing aid! ●

David Sussams, via email

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PRIZES
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A few months ago, we discovered a new reference point for non-moulded in-ear earphones; it was Shure's excellent £430 SE535. This flagship model from Shure's top range has all the hallmarks of a thoroughbred: it is well built; brilliantly engineered and confidently assured.

It's our view that the 535 is simply one of the best earphones you can buy. We loved the impressive isolation from the outside world and the wide and spacious soundstage that it delivers. Although it only weighs 30

grams, the SE535 packs three drivers, a crossover and a shock isolator into each enclosure. The rugged build and attention to detail ensures that they will last the course as well. So how would you like the chance to win a pair?

Thanks to our friends at Shure, one lucky winner will get to experience this awesome performance for themselves. We also have two runner-up prizes comprising the new SE215, complete with the Dynamic MicroDriver that Shure says guarantees a warm, detailed sound.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS To enter the Shure competition, you can either (a) text your answer to 87474 at any time between 26.05.11 and 22.06.11, or (b) enter online at www.futurecomps.co.uk/shure with your entry being received between 26.05.11 and 22.06.11. 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.

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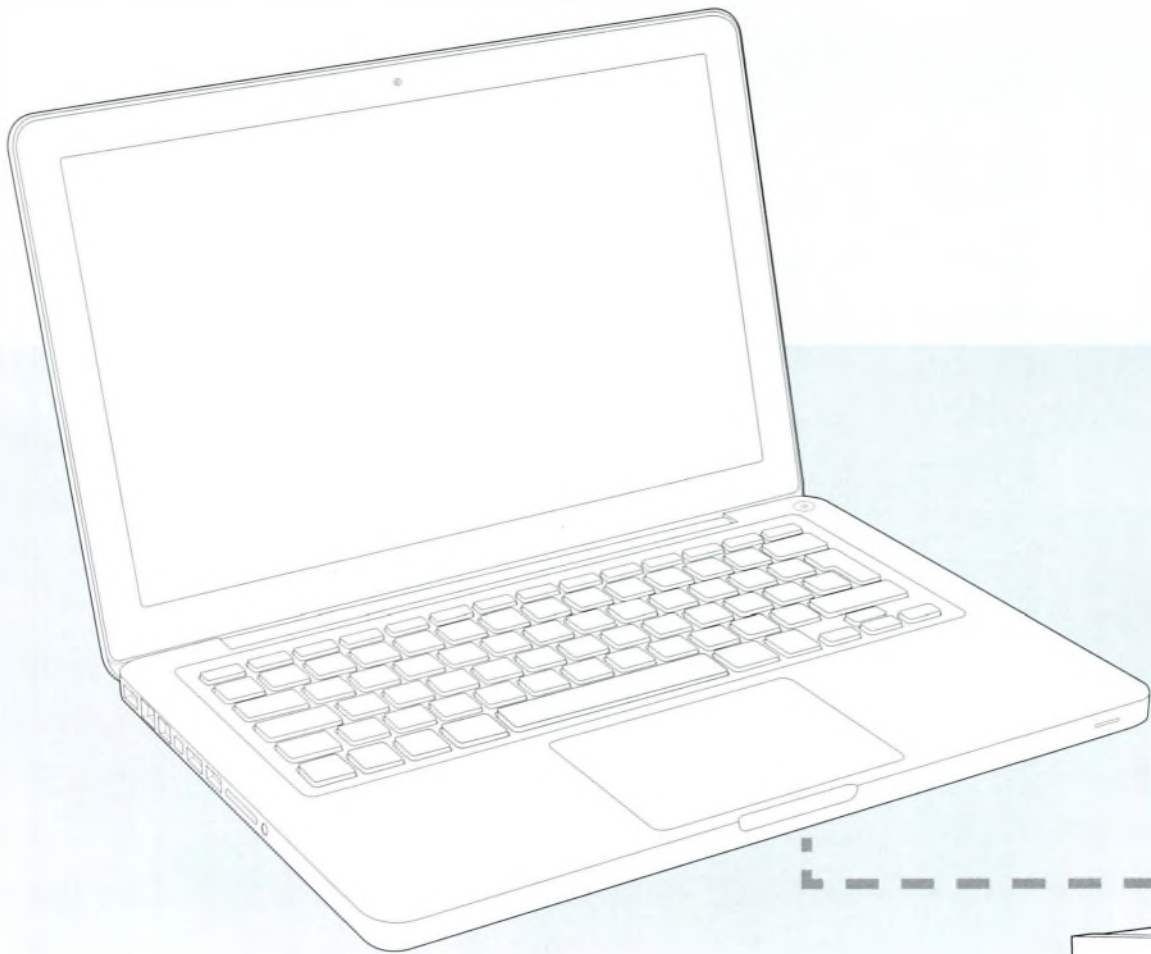
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Streaming

Your audio life will undergo radical, profound and positive changes once you introduce it to 'computer audio' says **Malcolm Steward**. In part one of this in-depth audiophile streaming guide, tech-savvy readers can learn how to get it right first time



Adopting new technology like computer audio (well 'networked audio' is probably a more accurate description) does not mean turning your back on your current sources and software. I still enjoy listening to my LP collection regularly – although I began to neglect compact disc after having started ripping discs to hard-disk storage. (I am still involved in the slow and rather laborious process of digitising my LPs.)

Regardless of whether your software strategy is one of augmentation or replacement, a network audio player in a system will provide simple access to your entire digitally stored music collection – wherever that happens to be located; you will no longer need to inhabit a lounge that looks like a CD warehouse.

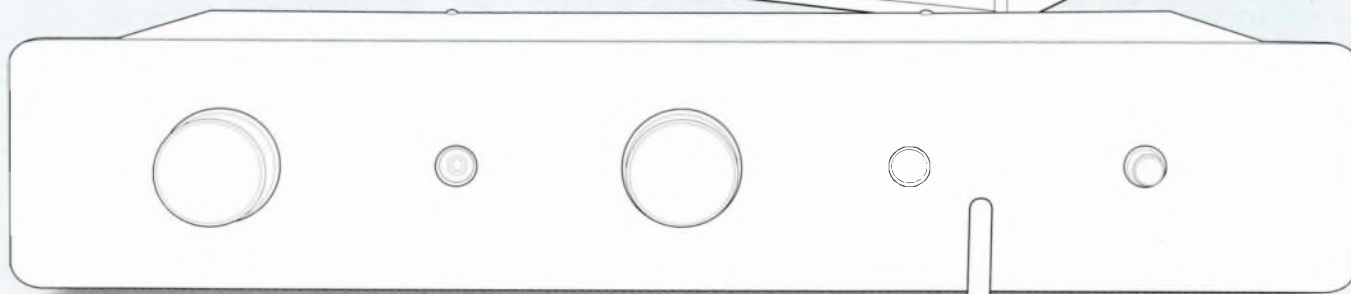
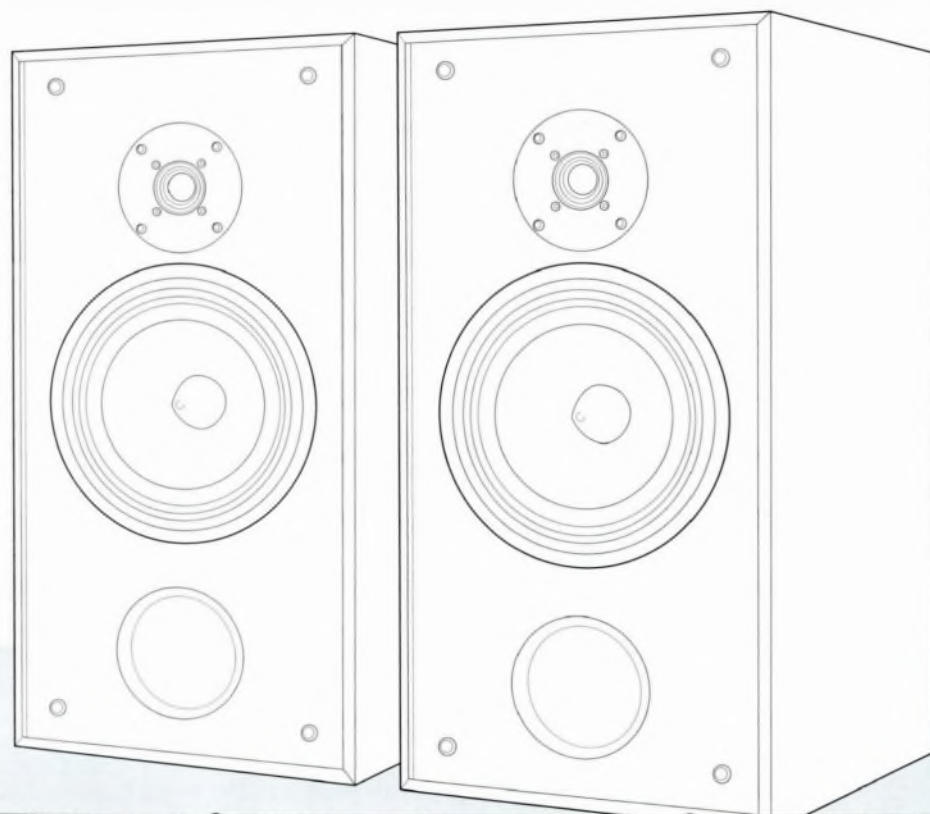
Another major bonus is that you can add true high-resolution format music to your collection without having to invest in any more discs, SACD or DVD-A

machinery. Networked audio, provided it is handled the right way, is a complete win-win situation: it represents the ultimate ease-of-delivery music process and its sound quality can be absolutely breath-taking.

All suggestions in this piece – for equipment, configurations and so on – are our personal recommendations. They are not meant to be absolute or unequivocal; they just work to the satisfaction of our colleagues and friends.



“Networked audio, provided it is handled the right way, is a complete win-win situation”





Large amounts of storage need not be expensive

Computer audio

Let us first make one thing abundantly clear: not everything that is labelled 'high-definition' or 'audiophile-grade' in computer audio truly is. Genuine high-definition audio begins with files that are greater resolution than 16-bit/44.1kHz and which have not been treated with any form of lossy compression.

It is safest to regard equipment that seeks to extract as much musical information as possible from CD and higher-resolution files as audiophile-grade; not the pretenders, for example, that use the words 'high-resolution' and MP3 in the same sentence.

MP3 and its Apple-flavoured equivalent are not suitable formats for serious listening: they simply provide highly compressed music

"FLAC employs lossless compression, does not throw away any music and the process is completely reversible."

and their popularity derives from the 'old days' when internet speeds and downloads were slow and hard-disk storage space was prohibitively expensive. On that note, I currently have one folder on a 2TB back-up hard disk (that cost less than £100) and contains 17,000 pieces of music in losslessly compressed format (FLAC). That folder is under 500GB in size: if you were to fill the rest of that disk in a like fashion, you would end up with about 70,000 uncompressed tracks. You could then play the contents of that disc for two hours every day and keep yourself amused for four years without hearing a single

track repeated! Nobody needs lossy compression nowadays, except for cramming their music onto portable players with pitiful storage capacity.

Best file format

To illustrate the effects of compression – lossy and lossless – we saved a typically ordinary album track, *Train* by Goldfrapp, in various formats. The file occupied over 53MB when it came off the CD as a WAV. It shrivelled to 12MB when compressed in the so-called high-res MP3 (320kbs) format.

One has to ask how anything can be called high-resolution, when more than 78 per cent of the original content has been thrown away. That is worse than listening to your hi-fi down a telephone connection... while you

are suffering from a cold. That, we contend, is why you should not entertain MP3 for serious listening and certainly not for archive purposes. Converting your CD collection to MP3 files

and subsequently disposing of the CDs, as we know some people have done, is utter madness.

The sensible way to archive files is to convert them to FLAC, which employs lossless compression and does not 'throw away' any music. It reduces the size of that 53MB song to around 33MB and the process is completely reversible: you can always get your original file back.

There is a little additional processor involvement in replaying FLACs, which may be audible on some high-end equipment – to a minimal degree – but you can reduce this with just a click in your software package. The file size difference between the two extremes is inconsequential: it amounts to just 2MB on our test track. Our reason for converting files to FLAC, in preference to WAV is that, to the best of our knowledge, only Naim Audio equipment can attach metadata to WAV files (and metadata is a fundamental requirement for a functional music library).

So for cross-platform compatibility, we store all music as fully tagged FLACs, having not yet come across any popular audiophile hardware that cannot play FLACs (except for the iPhone and that is hardly an audiophile component).

You can sometimes run into problems playing back files of greater-than-CD resolution (16-bit/44.1kHz). However, most equipment, nowadays, ought to be able to cope with 24-bit files up to 96kHz; this currently seems to be the *de facto* upper limit for most music vendors. That situation is not permanent, though: Linn Records already has 24-bit/192kHz recordings that you can download and other vendors are sure to follow suit.

When you buy a media player be sure you know what its upper limit is before you hand over your cash. Some specialist companies are

BASIC NETWORK STRUCTURE

Most networks begin with a router/ADSL modem supplied by the home's ISP (Internet Service Provider). Most of these are tacky, inexpensive boxes, including those from the 'big' ISPs and can be improved upon for relatively little expense. Their retail price – they are frequently advertised as being 'free' – usually indicates their true worth. The trick is to replace them with the fastest and most reliable devices available – that means GigaBit speed – and most people with experience in networked audio prefer single task devices to combination units.

My years of using Netgear equipment have instilled great confidence in the brand, in particular the metal enclosure components. They seem to be particularly robust when equipment puts them under extreme pressure and continue to route traffic without collisions and interruptions.

Furthermore, use decent-quality Cat5e/6 cables to string the network together, rather than using the cheapest Cat5 you can find.

already talking about producing 32-bit/384kHz recordings.

Getting started

Suppose you just want to clear some shelf space and re-vitalise your CD collection, what would be the best 'audiophile' way to do it? I use two methods: the first is to rip the CD on a purpose-built audiophile-grade hard-disk player, a Naim HDX SSD, which stores the bit-accurate rip on a remote NAS (Network Attached Storage) device in my office (HDX SSD only has a tiny solid-state disk to hold the software it needs to operate: it does not store any music internally). Otherwise, I rip the CD straight onto the NAS using its integral CD-reader using Exact Audio Copy or DBpoweramp software.

I rip the files as WAVs then convert them to FLAC, using



The Vortex box provides top-quality ripping

DBpoweramp Music Converter software and ensure that all the tagging is correct using the MP3 tag program to strip out any ID3 data.

Some players will not play a FLAC if they find an ID3 tag attached to it. It is not unlike pernickety optical disc players refusing to play CDs that do not adhere strictly to the letter of the Red Book standard. The files on the NAS, which are mirrored on a VortexBox Appliance connected to the same network, can then be played by any UPnP- or DLNA-enabled network player – from any manufacturer – in my music room, by the SqueezeBox in the family room or the Naim UnitiQute in my office.

Where to store music

As noted, I keep all my ripped and downloaded music on a Mini-ATX-based NAS and a VortexBox Appliance, along with back-up drives tucked away in my office and only connected to my music room and hi-fi apparatus through a length of Cat6 cable, a GigaBit router and a pair of GigaBit switches.

I have also used Qnap and other proprietary NAS units supplied as part of review set-ups. For optimum performance some manufacturers – Linn and Naim, for example – will recommend NAS devices that they consider operate to the best advantage with their electronics. It is worth considering this advice,

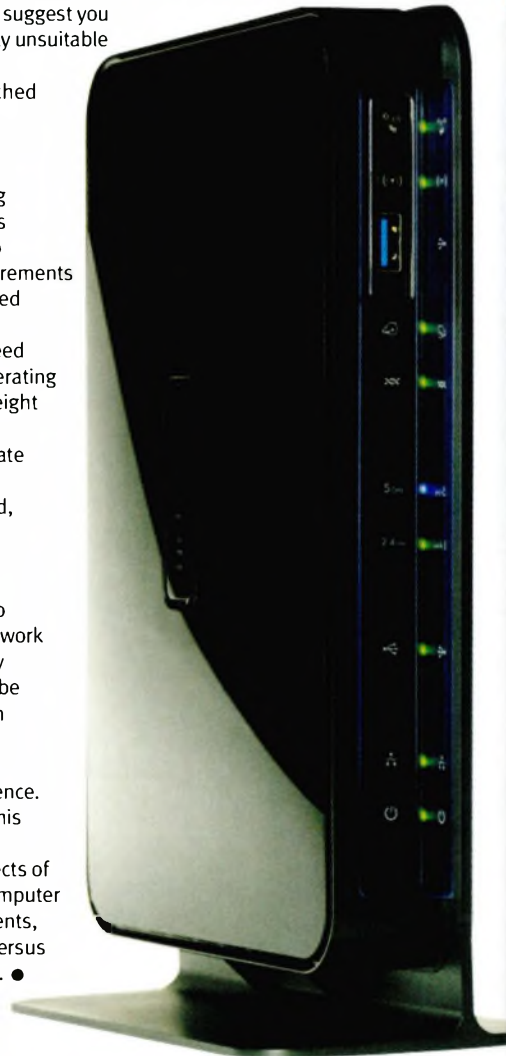
especially as manufacturers are extremely unlikely to suggest you use something wholly unsuitable with their products.

NAS (Network Attached Storage) devices are preferable to regular desktop or laptop computers for storing music because that is their only function so their processor requirements are minimal. They need little active cooling because they only need run a bare-bones operating system and a lightweight UPnP server.

Most will also operate in headless mode – without any keyboard, mouse, or monitor – further reducing the potential for noise being introduced into the system. Their network connectivity naturally means that they can be located far away from the hi-fi system, so further reducing the potential for interference.

In the next part of this article we will look in greater detail at aspects of networked audio, computer networking components, and consider wired versus wireless connectivity. ●

A high-quality router is essential



THE ITUNES ALTERNATIVE

Many people decide to set up their server-style hi-fi system using software with which they are familiar and with which they feel comfortable. While relatively few people have significant experience with UPnP or DLNA servers – and in truth, they are not in the least complicated from the user's perspective – most of the world's computer users have come across Apple's iTunes and have some experience with that.

However, being a music player rather than a server, it does not have the capabilities of true UPnP or DLNA software and its DRM (Digital Rights Management) music can cause problems. Some – and I include myself in that number – think that its audio performance is below par and variable. Although, being fair, it is improving with add-ons such as Amarra and Pure Music. I am also wary of its ripping abilities, having compared rips made using it to those made with DBpa and EAC on PCs. What's more, iTunes does not natively support FLAC files and its importing of WAV files could be much better.

One of the strengths to which it plays is Airplay, which enables you to play your iTunes library wirelessly through any Airplay-enabled device. You open iTunes on your computer or iPhone and select to play music from iTunes through an Airplay-enabled device or loudspeaker, such as the Marantz NA7004 network audio player. In truth, though, this is more a convenience, impress your friends feature than any outstanding step forward in audio performance.

NETWORK PLAYER OPTIONS

Budget:

The Squeezebox Touch (HFC 338) is a remarkably versatile device whose consistent performance seem hard to believe when you consider its budget price and tiny proportions. Your music computer or NAS has to run Squeezebox Server software, which is freely available and, more importantly, impressively reliable. It is also ideal if you began with iTunes, because it will integrate with an iTunes library. Its performance is sophisticated and it is none too embarrassed by being played through a high-end system, thanks to its presentation, which is vivid and musically cohesive.

Logitech SqueezeBox Touch; £259 or less
01753 870 900
logitech.com



Midrange:

The Marantz NA7004 (HFC 344) is one of the first network players to feature Apple's Airplay, which allows your iPod or iPhone to play an iTunes library through it to your system. It connects to your network through Ethernet cable and does not offer a wi-fi connection (which is no great loss). Compared to the Naim UnitiQute the Marantz wins out in terms of facilities and approaches it in terms of being musically engaging. That is not bad for a unit that costs only half the price of its competitor... even if it does save some of that money by not offering any amplification.

Marantz NA7004; £700
02890 279830
marantz.co.uk



High end:

The NDX by Naim Audio (HFC 345) is a truly high-end, no-expense-spared network music player that brings more to the party than just superb performance. The NDX also features a DAC based on Naim's multi HFC award-winning DA converter. This not only provides DAC facilities to the streamer, but also to any other digital sources, making the NDX both a streamer and a digital input expander for your amplifier. It is an expensive unit, but if it is bleeding-edge music performance you want it has few rivals – and some of these are even more expensive.

Naim Audio NDX; £2,995
01722 426 600
naimaudio.com



How we test

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



Hi-fi reviews

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

EXPERT TESTING

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

Listening

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

Measurement

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

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

Straightforward presentation

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

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

OUR AWARDS



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



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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 far exceeds that of any other hi-fi magazine



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

CARRYING OUT 'blind' listening tests removes any prejudices the listeners might have regarding either the brand or the specific model being auditioned. For loudspeakers, an acoustically transparent curtain is strung across the end of the listening room, while prior measurements and sighted listening helps determine the optimum locations for each model being tested.

SIGHTED LISTENING

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

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

found between one speaker and another (and indeed one listening seat and another), with the problem that there's a strong tendency to judge each speaker in the context of its predecessor. Hands-on work gives each speaker a chance to strut its stuff over the longer haul, under more relaxed circumstances and a far wider variety of sources, including radio and vinyl discs.

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

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

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

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

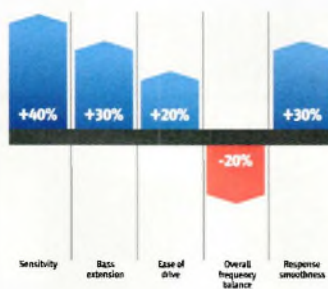
EASE OF DRIVE
Low impedance and sensitivity both make a loudspeaker theoretically harder to drive. Low impedance is especially important at low and midband frequencies

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

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

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



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

By feeding all the speakers under test at the same predetermined

THIS ISSUE'S BLIND PANEL

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



MIKE BLACKMORE
JOB: LAWYER (RETIRED)
ALTHOUGH NOW RETIRED, Mike's passion for music and its reproduction led him to helping found NAGfi (a hi-fi club in North-West Kent).



JOHN HOWES
JOB: VINTAGE AUDIOPHILE
A GLOBALLY RESPECTED expert in, and collector of, vintage hi-fi equipment, John is best known for the bi-annual Tonbridge Audiojumble.



KEITH TONGE
JOB: MARKETING MANAGER
KEITH HAS SPENT the last 14 years as marketing manager at PMC and this has involved visiting many of the world's leading studios and music-making facilities.

▶ TESTING EQUIPMENT USED

CD players:
Naim CDS 3/555PS
Rega valve Isis

Turntables:
Linn Sondek LP12 (modified),
Rega RB1000,
Soundsmith Strain Gauge (inc arm)

Amps:
Naim NAC552,
NAP500 pre/power

Tuner:
Magnum Dynalab MD106T

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

▶ TEST MUSIC USED

LAURIE ANDERSON:
STRANGE ANGELS



CAMBRIDGE SINGERS, RUTTER:
THERE IS SWEET MUSIC



MARI BOINE:
EALLIN'



DEFINITIVE VERDICTS

No other magazine offers an equivalent listening programme

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

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

TESTED THIS MONTH: UK FLOORSTANDERS
TURN OVER NOW!

Blind-listening Group test

COMPACT UK FLOORSTANDERS £1,300-£1,700

The battle for Britain's best small floorstander

Paul Messenger and his Blind-listening panel put six British floorstanders head-to-head to find out who makes Britain's most musical big-hitter

LOUDSPEAKER SELECTION has always been about achieving a compromise between performance and domestic acceptability. Our six models all score pretty highly on the home harmony front and the price variation isn't all that wide, so the leading questions must be about the relative performance each delivers in relation to each other and the group average.

While these might not be the least expensive compact floorstanders around, they do have certain key premium features in common. All come dressed in real-wood veneers; all come from well-respected British brands and all are, to the author's knowledge, actually made in Britain, and from mostly European ingredients.

Despite the reasonably tight overall price and size grouping, three pairings each offer closely competitive head-to-

heads. The Kudos X2 and Spondor A3 are the two smallest and least costly. Both are two-ways using small (130mm)

"All score pretty highly on the home harmony front and the price variation isn't wide."

port-loaded bass/mid drive units alongside soft-dome tweeters.

A little further up the price ladder sit the Neat Motive 1 and PMC GB1i, both similarly slim, but taller. The former adds an extra bass unit, while the latter includes a complex transmission line enclosure. The ProAc Studio 140 Mk2 and Rega RS7 are significantly larger in both bulk and driver size, and are, therefore, a little more costly too.



THE KUDOS X2 (£1,350) and the Spondor A3 (£1,295) are the least costly, with just two drive units each.

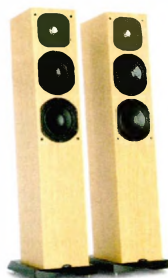
The Neat Motive 1 (£1,490) adds an extra drive unit, while the PMC GB1i (£1,525) has the more complex transmission line enclosure.

The ProAc Studio 140 Mk2 (£1,690) and the Rega RS7 (£1,685) are both significantly larger, in both main driver and enclosure sizes.

ON TEST



Kudos X2 (£1,350) p43
This attractive little floorstander comes dressed in real wood veneer and already fitted with a proper plinth, spaced away from a downward-firing port and ensuring extra physical stability. High-quality European drive units include a small bass/mid unit with a doped and flared paper cone, crossing over to a soft fabric-dome tweeter.



Neat Motive 1 (£1,490) p45
Slightly taller than its Motive 2 brother, this model adds an extra 130mm bass-only unit alongside a similar bass/mid driver. A sculpted plinth adds a modest backwards tilt (the better to time-align the drivers), while spikes keep the port off the floor. A key ingredient is the unusual 25mm inverted-dome titanium tweeter.



PMC GB1i (£1,525) p47
This super-slim floorstander takes full advantage of a small (130mm) diameter bass/mid driver, the back of which is loaded by a generous length transmission line. The whole enclosure is finished in an attractive selection of real wood veneers and is mounted on a plinth that improves the physical stability.



ProAc Studio 140 Mk2 (£1,690) p49
This two-way features twin 165mm bass/mid drivers with carbon-loaded polypropylene cones, port-loaded downwards through its base, which should ensure a muscular performance. If a little larger than the group average, it's still quite compact and features offset, mirror-imaged tweeters.



Rega RS7 (£1,685) p51
Very slim, due to its small bass/mid drive unit, the wood-veneered RS7 is somewhat taller and deeper than the group average, in order to accommodate a generous transmission line that loads a side-mounted 180mm bass-only driver. Neat outriggers secure the spikes and aid stability.



Spondor A3 (£1,295) p53
This very compact and attractively veneered floorstander's drive units have some similarities to those used in Spondor's successful SA1 miniature standmount, so for an extra £100, you get more bass output and don't need a stand. Amongst a number of design subtleties is a clever resistively damped port.



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Kudos X2 £1,350

The new X2 is the first model to bring the Kudos sound to the value-led consumer

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK
TYPE: Floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 12kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 166x780x206mm
FEATURES:
- Reflex-ported through base
 - Plinth spaced away from port
 - Paint or real wood veneer finish
 - Separate plinth enhances stability
 - Spikes secured by polymer thumbwheels
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Kudos
TELEPHONE: 0845 601 9390
WEBSITE: kudosaudio.com

Founded by ex-Neat personnel, Kudos might be a relative newcomer on the UK speaker scene, but its progress with the upmarket Cardea models has been both steady and impressive. Though far from cheap – the only components sourced from outside Europe is the terminal pair – the £1,350 X2 is the first to make the Kudos sound available at a rather more affordable price.

This very compact two-way floorstander has recently undergone a few changes. The drive units from Norwegian manufacturer SEAS remain the same as before, but the enclosures now come from respected Danish cabinet-maker Hornslet, while the crossover network now uses Mundorf resistors from Germany, and both these changes are claimed to improve the sound quality.

The small 150mm bass/mid driver has a doped-paper cone with a flared profile (95mm in diameter), while the tweeter uses a 25mm doped-fabric dome.

There's no denying the high class of the cabinetwork here, though English customers might well prefer one or other of six wood veneered options.

The enclosure is ported through its base and this is held apart from the plinth by spacers. The plinth itself, painted black, made from MDF and neatly shaped, usefully extends the footprint and accommodates a clever spike arrangement; nylon thumbwheels providing secure locking without risk of socket damage. Just one pair of terminals is fitted.

Sound quality

According to the blind-listening panel, the X2 is a bit of a mixed bag. On the one hand it's essentially a lively and entertaining communicator, with good timing and a degree of dynamic vigour that was quite surprising from something so compact. However, it was also criticised for a degree of coarseness through the

midband, and a slightly thumpy tendency down in the bass region. The X2 seemed to do rather better when we reviewed it back in *HFC 337*, but the reason for any apparent discrepancy seems to be simply that the competition turned out to be rather tougher this time around.

Lateral stereo images were very well formed, but the modest overall height led to a rather low-set soundstage that seemed a little lacking in height and air, especially when replaying our choral piece.

Kudos reckons that the recent minor changes to the network and enclosure have improved the sound quality. This may well be true – back-to-back comparisons were not available and there's no denying that our latest samples showed an improved crossover transition.

However, its rather recessed midband, coupled with the crossover discontinuity indicated in the measurements, did seem to create a degree of coloration, leading to some

lack of midband sweetness, delicacy and transparency.

This is still a good all-round loudspeaker by any normal standards and if it didn't win over the panel to same degree as our earlier samples had, its shortcomings didn't seem all that serious. While it might not have the sweetest midband around, its ability to provide unusually vigorous and enthusiastic dynamics from something so attractive and compact is arguably more than fair compensation.

TECH LABS

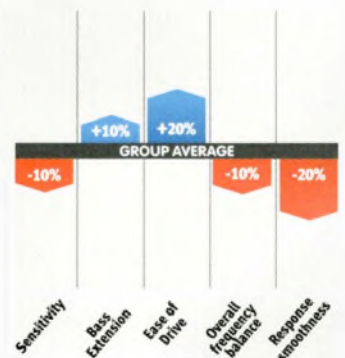
Kudos claims 86.5dB sensitivity for the X2, very close to the 87dB that our review samples gave under in-room far-field and real world conditions, a decent enough figure, albeit qualified by some frequency response unevenness and a rather restrained midband.

The amplifier load (impedance) looks easy enough to drive, staying comfortably above 6 ohm throughout, albeit with minor perturbations at 220Hz, 1.2kHz and 3.7kHz.

Best positioned well clear of walls, the port-tuning frequency at 44Hz is close to a major room mode, so the bass was marred by some 50Hz excess. However, this does ensure that bass extension is usefully maintained down to 24Hz -6dB.

Previous samples (*HFC 337*) showed a worrying peak and trough – a very obvious -6dB dip centred on 1.5kHz, following a minor peak around 1kHz. Our latest samples do show something similar, but it's more acceptable as a result.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

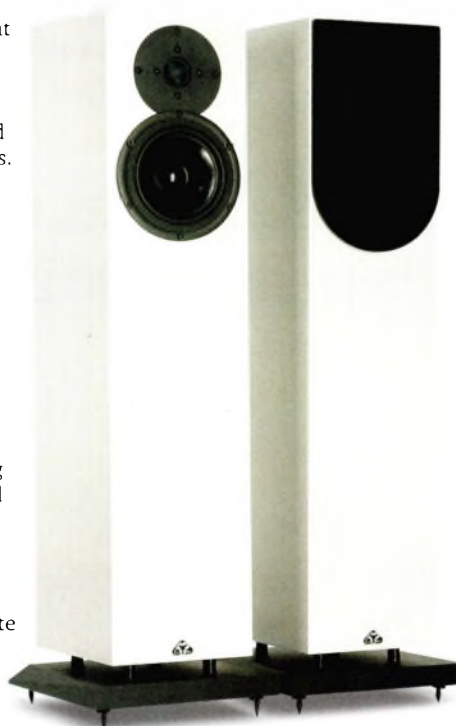


Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
PRACTICALITY ★★★★★
- LIKE:** Delivers a lively and involving sound
DISLIKE: Midband is restrained and could be smoother
WE SAY: This attractive speaker has a lively disposition, but its laid back midband could be smoother and cleaner

OVERALL



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Neat Motive 1 **£1,490**

Neat by both name and nature, this compact floorstander is physically, rather than sonically laid back

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
UK

TYPE:
Floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
14kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
160x925x200mm

FEATURES:
• Two-and-a-half-way
way configuration

• Tilted-back
enclosure for
time alignment

• Oak, maple, cherry
or rosenut wood
veneer finishes

• Port-loaded
through base
and plinth

• Concave titanium-
dome tweeter

DISTRIBUTOR:
Neat Acoustics

TELEPHONE:
01833 631021

WEBSITE:
neat.co.uk

A well-established operation, Neat's reputation was founded on a small, but very communicative standmount called the Petite. The product portfolio has expanded considerably since then; the four stereo pairs in the Motive range consisting of three ultra-compact floorstanders and a standmount.

Though still quite small by any standards, the two-and-a-half-way Motive 1 is the largest of these, a little taller than the two-way Motive 2, in order to make room for an extra bass-only driver beneath the main bass/mid driver. The twin 135mm drivers have 95mm cones, while the tweeter has an inverted 25mm titanium dome with integral-pleated surround. The price per pair has risen, but quite modestly from £1,200 to £1,490 since our original review more than five years ago (*HFC 276*).

The most obvious visual feature here is that the whole enclosure is tilted backwards a few degrees. This helps keep the visual intrusiveness to a minimum, while also assisting the time-alignment and directing the normal listening axis upwards towards a seated listener.

The speakers come already fitted with carefully shaped and fully spiked plinths – fortunately giving the unpacker plenty of warnings. The latter is presumably a precaution to ensure that the port, which exits through the enclosure base and plinth, is not accidentally blocked (though port-blocking bungs are provided, should this be preferred). The plinth also extends the enclosure footprint, significantly improving the overall physical stability.

The enclosure proper comes in a choice of oak, maple, cherry and rosenut wood veneers as standard, and sits on a shaped black MDF plinth. Signals are fed via two pairs of well-space terminals.

Sound quality

Despite its unquestionably superior neutrality, the panel as a whole didn't particularly warm to the Motive 1, a situation that defies simple explanation. There was some enthusiasm for the bass strength and weight, and for fine stereo imaging, but also criticism of a rather undernourished and reticent midband, resulting in a certain blandness in character, and also some spitchiness and sibilant exaggeration at the top end.

This is a very self-effacing loudspeaker, smooth and evenhanded, but also a little cool and thin-sounding overall. It's not exactly the last word in dynamic expression and excitement, but the basic dynamic range is very satisfactory. Some pinched and nasal midband coloration is audible, though it's not too severe.

The imaging is particularly interesting. Though not particularly transparent, it's generally satisfactory enough, with a wide soundstage and

little or no tendency to hang around the boxes. However, if considerable care is taken to adjust the positioning of both speakers, the sole person able to listen at the apex of an isosceles triangle (ie equidistant from both loudspeakers) will be rewarded by a considerable increase in soundstage precision and focus.

Although the competition does seem to have become rather tougher during the five years since its introduction, the Motive 1, with its superior smoothness and neutrality, remains an attractive and effective package.

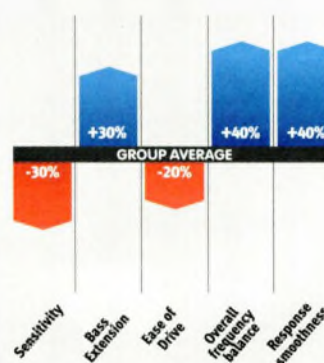
TECH LABS

Neat used to avoid measurement techniques when designing a loudspeaker. However, when the Motives were first introduced, the company admitted it had used measurements and that's reflected in one of the smoothest and most even far-field in-room averaged frequency response we've ever encountered, with the speakers positioned well clear of walls.

Indeed, the whole band above 60Hz holds within a tight +/-3dB window and shows a seamless transition through the midband-to-treble crossover region. Even the bass looks smoother and better extended than most, helped by a low tuning frequency of 26Hz.

However, it's not entirely immune from criticism. The sensitivity is a rather modest 86dB and the impedance drops to around 4 ohms at very low frequencies. A minor resonance is seen around 160Hz (presumably the internal vertical column), but happily the pair-match looks pretty good.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Floorstander has uncommon neutrality and smoothness

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Midband sounds dynamically rather undernourished

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: 'Leaning back' compact has a smooth, evenhanded and open sounding balance

PRACTICALITY



OVERALL



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PMC GB1i £1,525



Transmission line bass loading distinguishes this compact floorstander from most of the competition

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
UK

TYPE:
Floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
10.5kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
155x870x234mm

FEATURES:

- Advanced transmission line bass loading
- Shaped MDF plinth extends footprint
- Choice of three real wood veneers
- Large port at base front
- Twin terminal pairs for bi-wiring/-amping

DISTRIBUTOR:
PMC Ltd.

TELEPHONE:
08704 441045

WEBSITE:
pmc-speakers.com

Since its beginnings in the late 1980s, PMC has grown into a major player on the UK speaker scene, focusing on ProAudio customers and the more upmarket hi-fi sector with its ATL (advanced transmission line) speaker systems.

Although it's no larger in width and depth, the £1,525 per pair GB1i is a little taller than the other two-way models that use small bass/mid drivers. The reason has all to do with the transmission line bass loading technique, which squeezes a carefully damped 2.4m line into the enclosure volume behind the main driver, by folding it twice and terminating it with a large port at the front near the floor. Besides forming the acoustic loading, the vertical partitions that create the line also add beneficial stiffness to the enclosure.

The speaker has a solitary small 140mm cast frame bass/mid driver, with a 95mm doped, flared profile paper cone. This allows the enclosure to be kept fashionably slim, a point emphasised by its vertical edges. The enclosure proper comes fully veneered in cherry, oak or maple, while a neatly shaped, black-painted MDF plinth comes as part of the package, which increases the stability footprint and provides good accommodation for the floor-coupling spikes.

The tweeter has a 27mm 'Solonex' fabric dome and takes over above the 2kHz crossover frequency. Two pairs of terminals cater for bi-wiring or bi-amping if desired.

Sound quality

The GB1i is essentially a fine all-rounder, with the benefits of fine two-way coherence, as well as timing and good speed. It attracted particular praise for its bass reproduction and showed few signs of weakness right across the band.

The notes created a strong impression that the panelists gradually grew to like its sonic presentation more and more during the course of the programme. Bass weight, detail and control all attracted praise

and the listeners warmed to the combination of a slightly forward upper midrange, alongside some presence restraint that characterises this speaker.

The small main driver and good bass extension together inevitably restrict the power handling, especially when replaying vinyl (which tends to contain unwanted subsonic signals), but this seems unlikely to prove a practical limitation under most domestic circumstances, except perhaps for those with a taste for particularly heavy material and high-level replay.

Stereo images were well formed and portrayed with a generous soundstage and fine central focus, though height and depth both seem a trifle constrained.

Dynamic expression is unexceptional and one might have wished for a little more grip and drama, but the



actual dynamic range is very good and any box-related colorations seem very well controlled. The top end is also essentially sweet and well judged with good overall coherence, so the speaker as a whole delivers plenty of fine detail about the music and the musicianship.

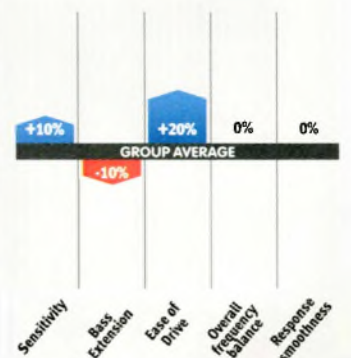
This pretty little speaker leaves little opportunity for criticism. The bottom end is definitely better than most of its size and while the midrange could perhaps be smoother, decent sensitivity and an easy load all help make a persuasive mixture.

TECH LABS

PMC is very conservative in claiming a relatively modest 87dB sensitivity rating, as our tests indicate that 88-89dB is closer to the far-field in-room reality. It's also a very respectable figure in view of the fact that the amplifier load stays comfortably above 6 ohms throughout, so this loudspeaker should be fundamentally easy-to-drive. Pair-matching was pretty good for our samples. The transmission line port was tuned to 42/48Hz (depending on sample) and a minor perturbation was seen around 150Hz.

Best sited well clear of walls, bass output is pretty well maintained down to 30Hz (-6dB) under far-field in-room conditions. The overall frequency balance could be a little smoother and fuller throughout the bass and lower midband, while the upper mid peaks up a little 600Hz - 1.3kHz. The presence zone is somewhat restrained, which is appropriate enough, above which a smooth treble shows a mild recovery.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** A fine all-round performer with superior bass delivery
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Could be smoother through the midrange
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Power handling is somewhat limited, but this floorstander has a delicate sound
- PRACTICALITY** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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ProAc Studio 140 Mk2 **£1,690**



Substantial floorstander's twin 165mm bass/mid drivers ensure a very muscular performance with superb headroom array

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK
TYPE: Floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 20kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 190x1040x280mm
FEATURES:
- Two-way with 2x165mm bass/mid drivers
 - Separate plinth extends stability footprint
 - High-quality real wood veneer finish
 - Crossover components and internal OFC cable
 - Mirror-image asymmetric tweeter location
- DISTRIBUTOR:** ProAc Loudspeakers
TELEPHONE: 01280 700147
WEBSITE: proac-loudspeakers.com

A long-established British speaker brand with roots back in the 1970s, ProAc has only made the occasional appearance on the *Hi-Fi Choice* review roster. That's mainly because the company has long been primarily export-oriented, with representation in more than 50 countries worldwide.

The three Studio models – two standmounts and this floorstander – are among ProAc's less costly models and although this Studio 140 Mk2 pricetag of £1,690 per pair is at the top end of our test group, the speakers themselves are as large as any of the others, as well as the heaviest in the group.

The dimensions are partly dictated by the twin 165mm drive units that operate in tandem right through the bass and midrange here. The Studio 140 Mk2, therefore, has to be significantly wider than the speakers based on smaller units, while the substantial driver area also requires a correspondingly generous enclosure volume.

While its size ensures a quite imposing presence, the Studio 140 Mk2 comes very nicely dressed, with a choice of black ash, mahogany, cherry or maple real wood veneer covering all faces. The sharp-edged enclosure sits on a similarly veneered plinth that usefully enhances the overall stability and spike fixing. The spikes are essential here, to avoid blocking the port that's fitted into the base and operates through the plinth.

Both bass/mid drivers have cast frames and carbon-loaded polypropylene cones 120mm in diameter, while the tweeter uses a 28mm fabric dome. Interestingly, the tweeters are offset from the centre line in order to 'spread' the baffle edge effect and the speakers themselves are 'mirror-imaged', so the speakers may be used with the tweeters offset 'inward' or 'outward' to preference.

Two pairs of terminals are mounted about halfway up the back panel and an optional grille

covers two-thirds of the front; unfortunately its removal leaves six very visible mounting lugs.

Sound quality

The Studio 140 Mk2 received a mixed response from the listening panel, perhaps reflecting the fact that it's rather different from the others assembled for this group test.

The constraints of a panel test include attempting to equalise the perceived volume for each successive presentation. That, in turn, means that the Studio 140 Mk2's advantages of high-sensitivity and loudness potential, and very superior headroom, are effectively negated.

This speaker might not have the smoothest or the sweetest midband around, but it is rather well-balanced overall, achieving a decent standard of general neutrality with fine warmth through the lower midband, though it did



sound a little too bright for some of our listeners.

Although it wasn't obvious at the sort of levels adopted for the blind tests, the extra headroom available with this model was clearly audible during subsequent hands-on listening as a superior freedom from strain.

This good-sized and good-looking speaker has plenty going for it, especially for those who like their music loud and/or heavy. The mid and top end might not be to everyone's taste, but the overall tonal balance is well judged.

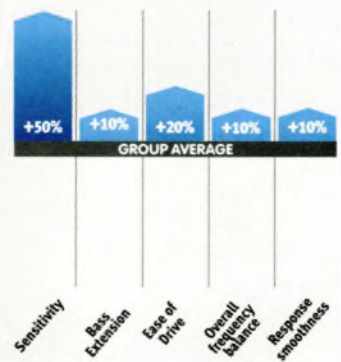
TECH LABS

ProAc claims a sensitivity of just 91dB (1W, 1m), which is a very conservative figure compared to the very high 94dB we found using our far-field in-room averaged technique. In fact, 91dB is closer to the true '1W' figure, as the 3dB discrepancy is partly explained by a load that's around 4 ohms through much of the bass and midband, and consequently doubles the power that's actually extracted for the same volume setting or voltage (most brands ignore the inevitable variations in impedance, using a 2.83V signal).

The response trend is impressively flat overall, though there's some unevenness and loss of energy through the upper midband and presence (900Hz – 3kHz), while the treble looks a shade strong.

Tuning the port to around 38Hz ensures decent bass extension, down to 23Hz (-6dB in-room). Minor resonances are seen around 180Hz and 800Hz, and the pair match was very close.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sensitivity and headroom encourages high listening levels
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Midrange could be sweeter and smoother
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Headroom and high sensitivity are an encouragement to play it loud
- PRACTICALITY** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Rega RS7 **£1,685**

Rega's RS7 combines several new developments, in both its tweeter design and its bass loading

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK
TYPE: Floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 17kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 246x988x346mm
FEATURES:
- Two-and-a-half-way design
 - Side-mounted transmission line bass
 - High-quality veneer or gloss-painted finish
 - Bass driver's 8-layer coil rolls off naturally
 - Tweeter dome rear is unobstructed
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Rega Research
TELEPHONE: 01702 333071
WEBSITE: rega.co.uk

The RS7 sits at the top end of Rega's loudspeaker range. First reviewed in these pages during 2009 (HFC 322), the price per pair has increased since then from £1,469 to £1,685 (partly thanks to VAT changes) for the regular cherry or black wood-veneered versions; high-gloss black or white are also available at extra cost.

The front view of the sharp-edged enclosure is exceptionally slim, but the RS7 is also unusually deep and quite tall. Fore'n'aft stability is inherently excellent, while moulded outriggers improve the lateral stability and provide reasonably secure spike fixing, though the thumbwheel lock-nuts unfortunately loosen rather readily.

The three drive units are configured as a two-and-a-half-way. The side-mounted 180mm bass-only driver with 130mm paper cone is loaded by a transmission line that exits next to the driver. This operates in parallel with a much smaller (130/90mm) front-mounted bass/mid driver, which sits above the 19mm fabric-dome tweeter in its own sealed enclosure, each bass driver helping reduce the fundamental resonance of the other.

By using an eight-layer voice coil, the bass driver has sufficient inductance to roll off naturally, without additional crossover components. The tweeter is also unusual, as 16mm of its central pole piece is drilled-out and a shaped cavity has been created in order to minimise reflections and allow the diaphragm to operate in effectively 'free air'.

The two speakers are mirror-imaged so that the pair may be used with bass drivers facing inwards or outwards. Twin terminal pairs are conveniently fitted close to the floor.

Sound quality

The RS7 does have its flaws and limitations, for sure, but its good imaging, fine musical

coherence and superior communication skills were more than sufficient to win over the panel, which voted this tall, slim but entirely invisible model 'best of the day' by a comfortable margin. Above all, it sounds busy and interesting, with a lot going on.

A major reason, one suspects, has much to do with the Rega's outstanding coherence and openness through the top half of the audio band – the upper midband and treble. It's truly exceptional here: no obvious colorations and impressive crossover integration together provide loads of musical information and fine communication.

Things are rather less happy through the lower half of the audio band. There was some disagreement, though, about the bass quality and although the majority approved of its weight and articulation, the one dissenter complained it could have been more agile with better definition. That said, it packs a decent punch, it has a fine dynamic range and sounds much less 'one

note' and resonant than the measurements tended to suggest. However, the upper bass and lower midband are rather too lean, so the overall sound balance lacks warmth and harmonic richness. This particularly affects the sonic character of 'cellos and trombones, for example, which sound a little 'weedy' in consequence, while male voices are a little too 'thin'.

The RS7 undoubtedly has its idiosyncrasies, but it also makes listening to music fun and that, surely, is what good hi-fi is trying to achieve.

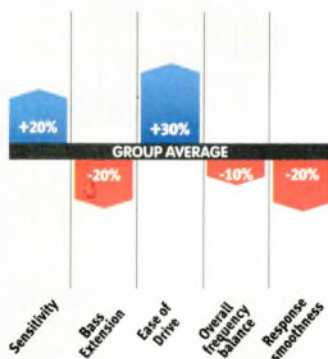
TECH LABS

The RS7's impedance looks easy enough to drive and its midband sensitivity is a useful 90dB, but the tonal balance could certainly have been smoother overall.

The bass here is rather too strong around our 50Hz room mode, presumably because the line is tuned to around 46Hz. Output then rolls off quite rapidly below 40Hz, though 30Hz is (just) within -6dB under our far-field in-room regime. More significantly perhaps, there's also some lack of relative output through the upper bass and lower midband (100-230Hz), irrespective of whether the bass drivers are facing inwards or outwards. The treble also rolls off significantly above 10kHz, though the broad midband and treble above 500Hz looks very well judged.

The pair-match looks very good and the main bass resonances are well damped, though additional minor resonances are visible at 160Hz, 550Hz, 1kHz and 1.5kHz.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lively and transparent with superior dynamic range
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks some upper bass warmth, while midband is strong
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Not the most neutral sound around, but thoroughly engaging with bags of detail
- PRACTICALITY** ★★★★★

OVERALL



- ANTHONY GALLO
ACOUSTICS
- ARCAM
- ATLAS Cables
- audiolab
- AUDIOVECTOR
- Bantaudio
- B&W**
- CHORD
- CHORD
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The only real hi-fi shop in Guildford

Spendor A3 £1,295

Spendor's new compact floorstander has much in common with the company's successful SA1 baby

DETAILS

ORIGIN:

UK

TYPE:
Floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
12.4kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
165x750x250mm

FEATURES:

- Two-way port-loaded floorstander
- 150mm bass/mid driver has ep38 cone
- Choice of four real wood veneers
- Foam damper for rear port
- 22mm wide-surround tweeter

DISTRIBUTOR:
Spendor Audio
Systems

TELEPHONE:
01323 843474

WEBSITE:
spendoraudio.com

Spendor's baby SA1 sub-miniature has already proved quite a hit, commercially and critically (Group Test Winner *HFC* 334), so it's hardly surprising that the company should use some of its elements as the basis for this very compact floorstander.

There's much more to it, of course, than simply transposing drivers and crossover network into a larger box. Although the tweeter is the same for both models – the unusual wide-surround unit that Spendor now favours for most of its models – and the bass/mid driver is built on the same chassis, there are substantial changes elsewhere.

The very compact, sharp-edged enclosure is set low, with the drivers comfortably below seated-ear height, but the optimum listening axis is deliberately arranged to fire slightly above the horizontal to compensate. The whole thing is attractively dressed in a choice of real wood veneers – black ash, cherry, light oak and walnut – and although the attached black MDF plinth doesn't increase the footprint, it is fitted with Spendor's metal discs that provide solid spike-fixing very near to the enclosure edge.

The bass/mid driver is a 150mm unit with a 90mm ep38 polymer cone and a wide surround. It operates up to a relatively high 4.2kHz before handing over to the unusual 22mm 'wide surround' tweeter with its 19mm dome diaphragm. The back panel accommodates a single pair of high-quality WBT terminals, plus a port and came with the latter fitted by light foam bungs that were intended to damp (rather than block) the port output (see *Tech Labs*).

Sound quality

Experiments carried out prior to the listening tests suggested that under our in-room conditions, the A3 did indeed work best with the light bungs

fitted into the rear ports. So it was this alignment that was adopted during the formal 'behind the curtain' presentations.

Because it tends to focus the attention primarily on the midband, somewhat at the expense of the frequency extremes, the A3 might be accused of some lack of ambition, or even a degree of underachievement. However, this is not necessarily such a bad thing. The midband is the most important part of the audio band by a substantial margin, especially when it comes to communicating the essence of the music and the A3's midband is impressively delicate and well founded, handling voices particularly well.

The speaker as a whole does, perhaps, sound a little too polite for its own good. Indeed, adjectives like 'polite' and 'nice' appeared more than once among the panelists' notes. While its essentially dry bass attracted general approval, there was rather less enthusiasm for a mild lack of sparkle at the

top end of the band. Space, air and stereo image focus are all good, however, and the sound demonstrates a welcome freedom from midband boxiness, but dynamics seem a little softened and lacking in 'punch'.

The A3 is certainly a very pleasant little speaker, delivering superior midband coherence and fine voice band reproduction. However, its ability to deliver an overall impression of scale, in both bandwidth and dynamic expression, seems rather modest.

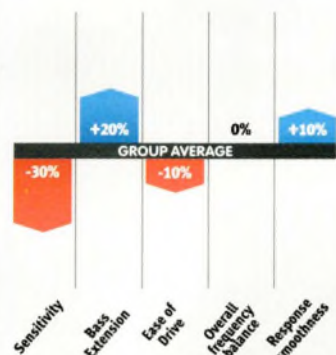
TECH LABS

Because the A3's drive units are rather similar to those used in the much smaller SA1, its measurements are also similar. Sensitivity is, therefore, a modest 85dB, while the much larger enclosure naturally increases the relative bass output, allowing the speaker to be used in free space without wall reinforcement.

The speaker's rear port comes fitted with a very small bung, allegedly to reduce and resistively damp the port's output. However, the impedance traces show a port resonance around 38Hz without the bung, while inserting the bung appears to create a sealed-box characteristic, with the driver/box resonance around 67Hz.

The overall frequency response looks better with the bungs in place, whereupon it holds within a very respectable +/-5dB right across the band. It's not the smoothest response – rather lean through the upper bass and a little too strong in the lower midband.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



PRACTICALITY



LIKE: Delicate midband with fine imaging and freedom from boxiness

DISLIKE: Sounds a little small in both bandwidth and expression

WE SAY: This compact speaker has a beautifully ordered midband with fine voice reproduction

OVERALL



Lab conclusions

Proving *HFC's* stance once again that measurements don't always correlate with subjective performance, our lab winners lose out in the overall test

TECH LABS

The sensitivities of the different models varied quite dramatically across this group, between 85dB (Spendor) and 94dB (ProAc). This large spread of no fewer than 9dB is largely explained by the different sizes of the bass/mid drive units, while also trying to take the impedance variations into account. Halving the impedance doubles the current drawn from the amplifier, which also corresponds to doubling the power demands and consumption. However, the situation is actually much less straightforward than the simple impedance trace implies. This is actually a complex 'modulus of







impedance' that normally shows considerable variations with frequency, and often conceals phase differences between voltage and current requirements. Even though the ProAc's relatively low impedance somewhat exaggerates our sensitivity rating, it'll still go louder than the rest and its load isn't extreme enough to give amplifier problems. One advantage these floorstanders possessed over the smaller stand-mounts we reviewed in *HFC 343* is that their larger enclosures delivered greater bass extension and that their ports tend to be tuned to somewhat lower frequencies. The port outputs are, therefore, less inclined to coincide with,

and exaggerate, a major mode in our listening room. The overall frequency responses of loudspeakers have steadily improved over the years and indeed all six of these speakers performed pretty well in this regard. However, the speakers that delivered the flatter and more even responses under far-field in-room averaged conditions weren't the ones that topped the listeners' preferences. These response measurements are clearly a very useful guide, especially in helping to establish the best room siting. But their importance should never be overstated, or allowed to become the sole arbiter of performance.



The floorstander differs from a stand-mount in a number of respects. On the plus side, their ports tend to be tuned to lower frequencies, giving greater bass extension and helping to avoid the more audible room modes. A down side is that a relatively tall and slim shape tends to create column resonances and these were invariably visible across our group in the impedance traces at around 170Hz.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	 Kudos X2	 Neat Motive 1	 PMC GB1i	 ProAc Studio 140 Mk2	 Rega RS7	 Spendor A3
Price	£1,350	£1,490	£1,525	£1,690	£1,685	£1,295
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Practicality	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★ A very compact speaker that delivers a surprisingly lively and entertaining sound, albeit with some coloration	★★★★★ This 'tilted backwards' compact has impressive bass weight and very superior neutrality, with fine imaging	★★★★★ A combination of transmission line bass and vigorous midrange expression makes for a rather superior all-rounder	★★★★★ This good-looking floorstander delivers a seriously muscular performance with great loudness potential	★★★★★ Innovative super-slim floorstander always sounds entertaining, with plenty of vigour and detail	★★★★★ Though modest in scale, this compact has a beautifully voiced midband with fine imaging

Key features

Size (WxHxD) (cms)	166x780x206	160x925x200	155x870x234	190x1,004x280	246x988x346	165x750x250
Driver Config	2-way	2.5-way	2-way	2-way	2.5-way	2-way
Main driver size(s)	1x150mm	2x135mm	1x140mm	2x165mm	1x125mm+1x180mm	1x150mm
Stand/floor?	Floor	Floor	Floor	Floor	Floor	Floor
Cabinet finish	Real wood veneer	Real wood veneer	Real wood veneer	Real wood veneer	High-gloss paint/wood veneer	Real wood veneer
Bi-wire?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

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

Sensitivity	87dB A	86dB P	89dB G	94dB G	90dB G	85dB P
Bass Extension	24Hz G	<20Hz G	28Hz A	24Hz G	30Hz A	22Hz G
Ease of Drive	+20% G	-20% P	+20% G	+20% G	+30% G	-10% A
Overall frqncy balance	-10% A	+40% G	0% A	+10% A	-10% A	0% A
Response smoothness	-20% A	+40% G	0% A	+10% A	-20% P	+10% A

Blind-listening verdicts

The verdict is in: three recommendations for Britain's best compact floorstander, with one overall winner. Any of our three models will make a fine choice, however

DURING THE FORMAL blind-listening test the speakers were driven from Naim electronics (CDS3/PS555, NAC552, NAP500), using Vertex AQ HiRez Moncayo speaker cables, Vertere Pulse signal cables and Naim and Phonosophie mains cables.

All six pairs were located in free space, well clear of walls. Every attempt was made to equalise the perceived loudness of each presentation – a tricky task in view of the substantial differences in both sensitivities and tonal balances. Six tracks across a broad range of music were played on each speaker in turn and each panelist recorded his impressions and awarded marks.

At the end of the day, we all compared notes, discussed our findings and agreed that the standards of sound quality had been rather impressive throughout. Nevertheless, we were gratified to find broad agreement on our favourites.

Topping the lists was the Rega RS7, a good-size floorstander with a very slim front view and a side-mounted bass driver. It always managed to sound

busy and entertaining, with bags of detail and generous dynamics.

As a very good all-rounder, the PMC GB1i came a clear second, a very good result considering it's both smaller and less costly than the Rega. This makes one wonder whether transmission line bass loading has an advantage, since both use this technique, though paper main driver cones are another common factor.

The ProAc came in third here, which is maybe a little unfair. The key feature of the Studio 140 Mk2 is its ability to play loud and even its tonal balance favours high sound levels, so it was hampered by the need to try and equalise the perceived loudness of all the models.

The Kudos, Neat and Spendor have plenty in common, though each has its own strengths and weaknesses. The larger and more costly Neat has extra bass weight and fine neutrality, the Kudos is notable for its lively disposition, while the Spendor delivers a superbly voiced midband that's very much in the company's tradition. ●

THE WINNER IS...

ALL BUT ONE OF OUR PANELISTS picked the RS7 as overall favourite, and even that dissenter placed it second on his list, so the Rega clearly emerged almost unanimously as group winner.

It's a trifle ironic that the RS7's frequency balance was arguably the least smooth and even of the group, but the Rega's other features – its innovative tweeter and bass driver, for example – provided more than ample compensation.

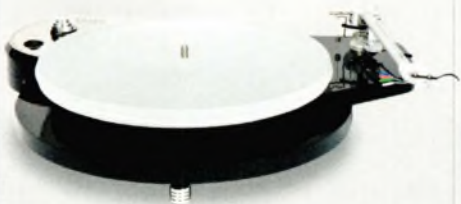
The fact that it's also one of the larger and more costly models may well have played a part, but it boasts a lively performance with plenty of detail alongside superior coherence and musical communication. The bottom line is that the RS7 always sounds busy and thoroughly engaging, whatever material it is fed.



For a complete system solution based around our blind-listening test favourites, look no further than this British-built power trio ...

TURNTABLE: Roksan Radius 5.2/Nima, £1,375

A stylish and shapely turntable that has undergone painstaking refinement over the years. The current Radius 5.2 is usually packaged with its metal/acrylic uni-pivot Nima tonearm. While not entirely free from coloration, it delivers a sound quality with notably superior rhythm and pace, alongside fine stereo imaging.



CD PLAYER: Rega Saturn, £898

This stylish top-loader has a recently developed CD drive mechanism that has more memory than most, the better to read the data accurately and uses a clever 'ball chuck' to grip the disc with minimal inertia. The result is a very clean and involving sound that is notably free from 'digital character', making an unusually attractive all-round package.



AMPLIFIER: Naim NAIT XS, £1,455

In some respects the NAIT XS can be seen as a 'stripped down' SUPERNAIT, lacking the digital input and DAC facilities, but offering similar future-proof upgradeability via external power supplies. Though somewhat less powerful on paper, it still has more than enough grunt for most applications and delivers a persuasive musical performance with plenty of sophistication.



Irresistible force

The latest single-ended Unison S6 offers audiophiles pure Class A operation and a honey-rich glow says a smitten *Jimmy Hughes*

Although solid-state amplifiers offer many practical benefits – smaller size for a given power output, cooler running, higher maximum power output and potentially lower noise – tube amplifiers promise a certain extra ‘something’ that many audiophiles seem to find irresistible.

But is it all imagination and hype? While tube amps might seem to hark

back to the golden era of high-fidelity, do they really offer any tangible benefits over a good transistor design? With its pure Class A output stage, the Unison Research S6 has all the right credentials. It undoubtedly talks the talk, but does it walk the walk?

Gutsy sound

Like most modern amplifiers, the S6 keeps things simple. It offers five

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Unison Research S6

ORIGIN: Italy

TYPE: Integrated valve amp

WEIGHT:
25kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
350x210x490mm

FEATURES:

- Pure Class A output stage
- Transformer coupled to the loudspeakers
- User adjustable bias
- Line level inputs only

DISTRIBUTOR:
UKD

TELEPHONE:
01573 652669

WEBSITE:
unisonresearch.com

unbalanced line inputs, a set of tape outputs and a single set of loudspeaker outputs. There's no built-in phono stage and no socket for headphones. The volume and input selector knobs have a nice solid feel and the amplifier comes with a handsome wood-clad remote control that looks like a late '80s mobile phone.

Bear in mind it's actual output is 'only' around 30-35 watts and obviously, much depends on things like room size and the volume levels you like to listen at, but ideally it needs reasonably sensitive speakers to avoid running out of steam during loud climaxes.

Six EL 34 output tubes are used (three per channel) along with a pair of ECC 82s. Each output tube features user-adjustable bias and



“Tube amplifiers promise a certain ‘something’ that many audiophiles seem to find irresistible.”

there’s a moving-coil meter to help you set the correct value. If you remove the output tubes and mix them up, you’ll need to check and reset bias again. It’s very easy to do this and once set, you shouldn’t have to adjust bias again – though it’s worth checking every now and again, just to make sure things haven’t drifted.

The S6 has a quoted output impedance of six ohms. Being a transformer-coupled amplifier, loudspeaker impedance-matching is more important with the S6 than it

would be with an equivalent transistor amplifier. With direct-coupled transistor designs, amplifier current-output doubles (in theory at least!) as loudspeaker impedance halves. To exploit this, some loudspeaker manufacturers produce speakers with a four-ohm impedance to squeeze more power (current) from the amplifier – basically it’s a means of increasing speaker efficiency.

However, being transformer-coupled, tube amplifiers don’t respond in a reciprocal manner and require matching; many offer a choice of four- and eight-ohm outputs, allowing you to match amplifier and loudspeakers with greater precision to maximise power transfer.

While manufacturers usually state the nominal impedance of their loudspeakers, the ‘correct’ impedance



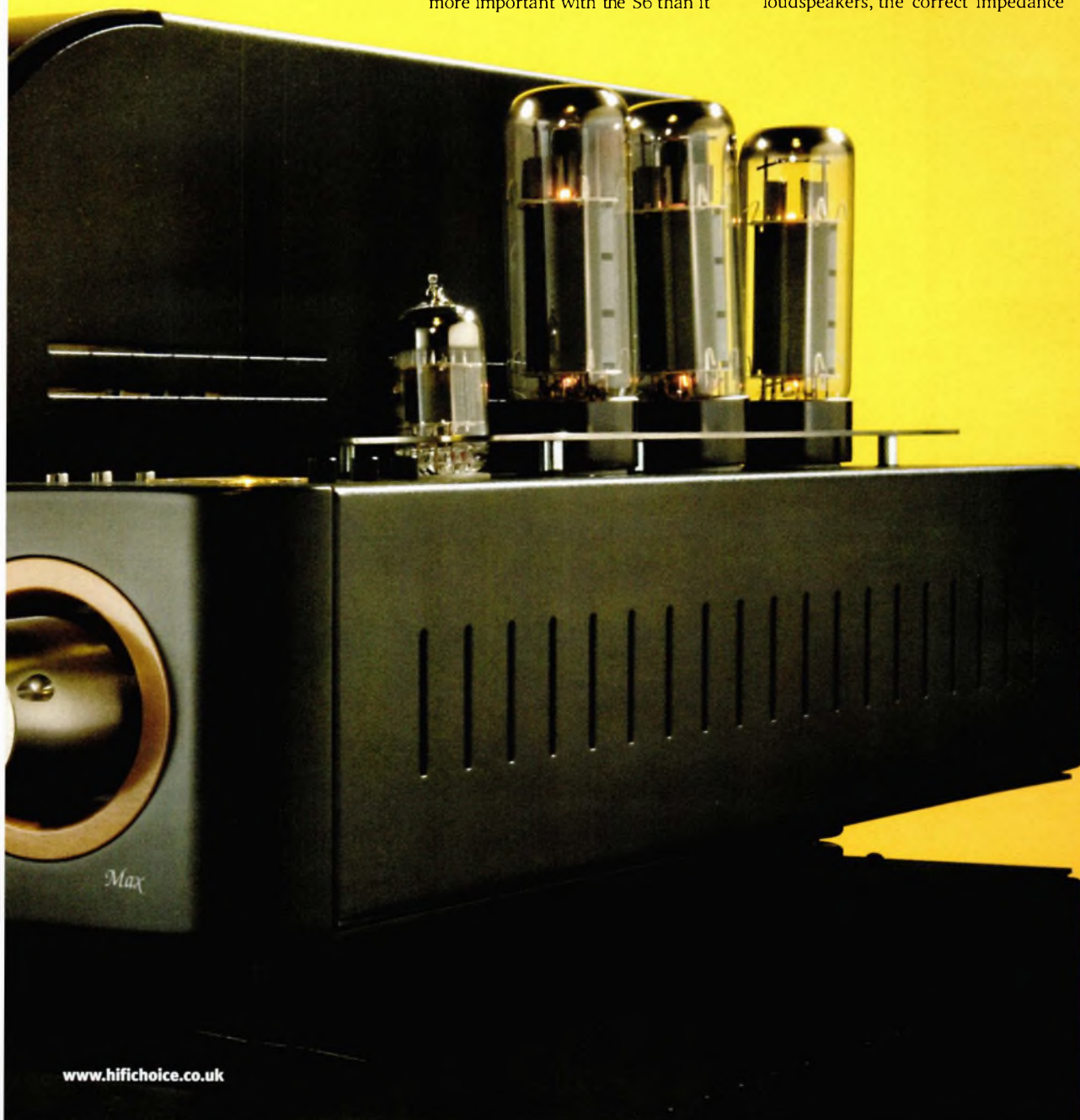
TALKING POINT

OF ALL THE many different types of output stage, pure Class A is regarded by many as the best-sounding. Unfortunately, pure Class A is also the most wasteful in terms of heat dissipation and power used; it’s very inefficient.

Pure Class A amplifiers are single-ended, rather than push-pull, so the output device is never switched off. This avoids the discontinuity between output devices that can lead to low-level distortion.

Many ‘Class A’ amplifiers are actually a combination of Class A and Class B – the idea being to operate the output stage in Pure Class A for low-level signals and Class A/B or B for higher level signals.

In this way, you hopefully obtain the benefits of Pure Class A without the drawbacks. However, many critical listeners feel that the sonic benefits of pure Class A cannot be replicated with such trickery. So, despite some drawbacks, pure Class A remains a favourite option.



Q&A...

WE SPOKE WITH S6 DESIGNER
PROFESSOR GIOVANNI SACCHETTI



HFC: *What sort of circuit changes/updates have you made to the new S6 and how does it compare to earlier versions of the amplifier?*

GS: Like its predecessor, the S6 is a Pure Class A single-ended ultralinear design with lowish negative feedback of about 8dB. In two specific areas, the new S6 differs from the old one: it has manual bias adjustment for the output valves and two separate circuits for the anode power supply.

Valve Grid Polarisation is achieved by 70 per cent manual adjustment and a 30 per cent automatic setting. This maximises safety – avoiding situations where uncorrected adjustment errors or electrical anomalies might cause damage to the amplifier.

Auto-biasing introduces a certain level of local feedback. Indeed, the cathode resistance (which creates the grid's negative voltage) is affected by the output current of the valve. In order to eliminate unwanted interactions, a high-value capacitor is often used to bypass the cathode resistance.

How do you use three EL 34s in a single-ended design?

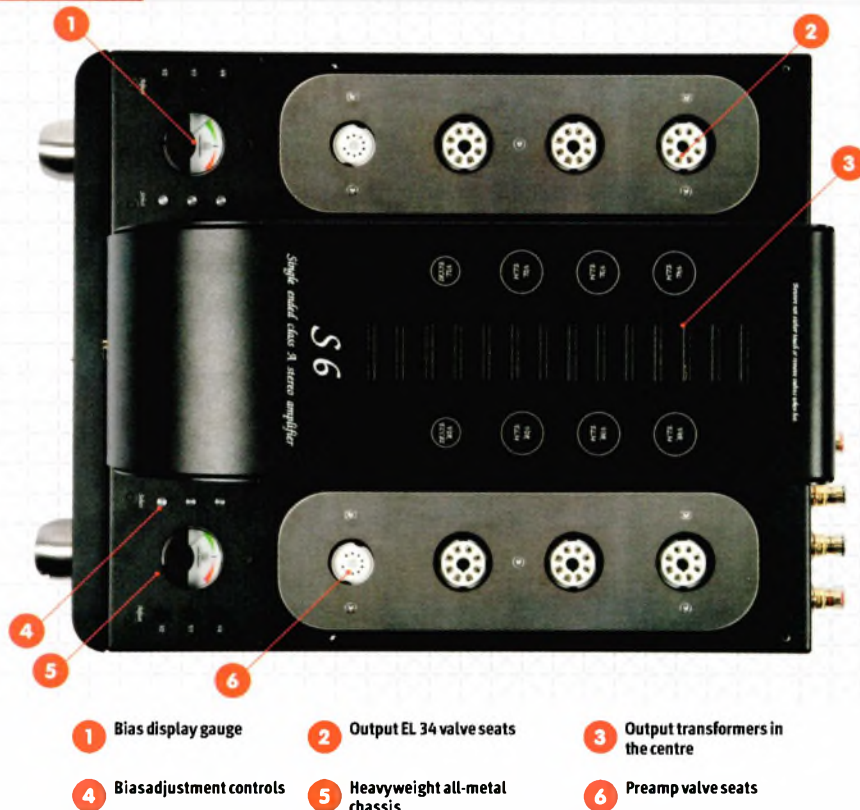
Every valve has its own sound – its own particular timbral character. EL34s were chosen for their ‘warm sound’, good dynamics and fine detail reproduction. By placing power valves in parallel, the positive characteristics of the single valve are accentuated, whilst overall distortion and output impedance are reduced, and output power is multiplied.

In our own view, three valves in parallel is an ideal compromise, allowing good power output (35 watts), together with excellent long-term reliability.

Anything unusual about the design of the output transformers used?

Modification consists of a double anode power supply circuit. In dual mono, no residual artefacts or noise from one channel can interfere with or disturb the other channel. The power supply is also doubled. This makes the S6 a true quasi dual-mono design.

HIDDEN TECH



match is essentially the one that gives the loudest sound. By providing an output impedance of six ohms, Unison Research offers a compromise setting that should work well with most loudspeakers – though low-efficiency types with an impedance of four ohms will probably benefit from a proper four-ohm tap.

Being pure Class A, the amplifier runs pretty hot. Naturally, the six EL 34s put out quite a bit of heat, but, being as they're not enclosed by casework, they ventilate naturally.

There's a stainless steel platform to radiate heat upwards, but the central section of the amplifier gets very warm during extended use, so don't leave a CD case there – it might have turned into a strange shape by the time you return!

Crucial influence

The S6 is solidly made, being built on a steel chassis and sporting a 2mm-thick alloy front panel with wooden inserts. Earlier incarnations of this amplifier had quite a bit of decorative wood to liven-up the visuals (and add a bit of damping?), but this new version is plainer-looking – albeit still very stylish in an understated sort of way.

While at £2,990 the S6 is not inexpensive, it offers good value given the quality of sound it produces. You could easily pay a lot more and not achieve anything like as good a sound – it's definitely an amplifier that punches above its weight. Speaking of which, at 25kg (55lbs) the S6 is a heavy beast. This is a good thing, as it indicates massive transformers. Not just the main power transformer, but the two output transformers that couple the loudspeakers. The latter have a crucial influence on sound quality.

Way back in the late-1960s, eliminating the output transformer was one of the main reasons given for preferring transistor amplifiers over valve types – direct-coupling gave you a sharper, more immediate sound. Much of the ‘valve sound’ (warmth, roundness, fullness, weight) is down to the fact that virtually all tube amps are transformer-coupled. Although having an output transformer adds an extra component, it also blocks RF interference and ‘protects’ the amplifier's output from the vicissitudes of the loudspeaker crossover. The downsides are things like added cost, possible peak level saturation and phase shift at frequency extremes.

CONNECTIONS



- 1** Speaker output with no 4/8-ohm selection
- 2** Mains socket directly behind transformers
- 3** Fixed-level tape output with no pre-out
- 4** Line level inputs

Crisp dynamics

The S6 produces a very rich smooth alluring sort of sound that we found immediately likeable. It delivers a big weighty sort of presentation that's full-bodied and solid. There's something 'right' about the combination of incisive clarity and rich pungent depth it offers.

On naturally miked recordings of acoustic music (classical, jazz), it recreates vocal and instrumental timbres in a manner that's wholly believable and 'real'-sounding.

For decades now, audiophiles have debated whether or not valves sound as 'accurate' as transistors. But, how do you judge accuracy? Unless present when the recording was being made and able to hear exactly how it sounded live, it's difficult to say with authority what is or isn't accurate. What you can say with greater certainty is whether or not

something sounds believable and authentic. Judged in these terms, the S6 delivers results that are very convincing and real-sounding.

As mentioned earlier, at just 35 watts, it's not massively powerful. But, it definitely punches well above its weight and (in the nicest sense) cons you into believing it has all the power you could ever need – and maybe even a bit to spare. Leastways it does when partnered with reasonably sensitive loudspeakers – say, those over 93dB/W. However, this is an illusion – if pushed too hard, the sound loses its dynamic clarity and transparency.

While the S6's tonal balance has a honey-rich glow and warmth, the sound is not 'soft' or lacking in detail. Indeed, it's often remarkably tactile and incisive, with crisp dynamics and 3D stereo imaging. At the same time, bass and treble extremes remain



IT'S OFTEN SAID that amplifier sound quality is all about the first watt. But, when you're considering buying a high-quality amplifier with limited power like the S6, it's essential to partner it with reasonably sensitive loudspeakers.

Why? Because every doubling of amplifier power produces just 3dB extra volume level. Therefore, subjectively you may not appreciate just how hard an amplifier has to work when driving a speaker with (say) 87dB or less sensitivity.

In the case of the Unison Research S6, its 35-watt output is not exactly miniscule. But speakers with around 93dB sensitivity are necessary to avoid the amplifier's saturation point. When the S6 is pushed, the sound tends to compress dynamically. There's some congestion and roughness/muddiness during difficult complex passages, though actual 'break-up' distortion is avoided.

beautifully balanced and integrated, so that the higher frequencies never 'lead' the midrange and bass. The bottom end is clean and firm – maybe not quite as deep and powerful as certain direct-coupled transistor designs, but solid and weighty when it counts and free from smearing and boominess.

If you push the amp hard, the bottom end seems to compress slightly and the sound loses dynamic separation. But you don't hear the sound break-up as such.

For such a hot-running amplifier, the S6 sounds pretty good from a cold standing-start. It does become a little freer and more mellifluous after (say) an hour or so, but it's very listenable from the off (our review sample had seen some action at a couple of hi-fi shows and was more or less fully run-in).

During those all-important few minutes when we first got the amp up and running, we had an immediate 'I like it' moment – being smitten with its combination of smooth, lush warmth and crisp incisive clarity. It definitely delivers that airy, three-dimensional quality Class A amps are famous for.

Absolutely gorgeous

If you're new to valves and wonder what all the fuss is about, Unison's Research's S6 would be the perfect introduction. It sounds absolutely gorgeous, delivering that sweet glowing richness that tubes are famous for, without loss of bite or immediacy. Indeed, it's the combination of silky smoothness and crisp immediacy that is so alluring.

Power output is limited, but the S6 is one of those tube amps that's very good at covering its tracks. Listening to it, you're rarely aware of its 'limitations'. It recreates the music with little sense of strain and sounds as though it has power to spare. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

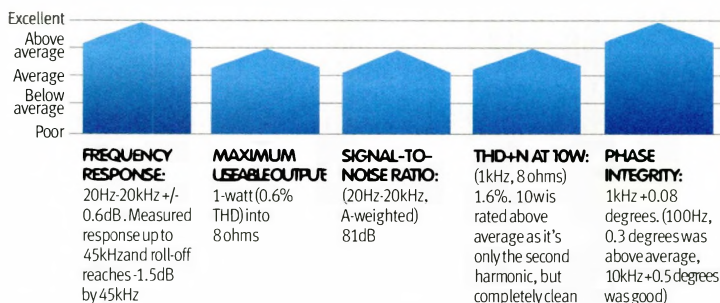
- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Rich, yet crisp, incisive sound – subjectively very powerful
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Runs hot – limited output power
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Creates a big spacious soundstage with ample depth and width. Clarity is excellent; sharp, open and detailed
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE





Tiny Temper

Die-hard LP12 fans have found a new haven in Well Tempered. **Jason Kennedy** looks at the entry-level Simplex, complete with silicone damping

There are some radical turntable designs in the glorious world of analogue audio, but very few comparable to a Well Tempered product. The Simplex was first developed in the early eighties and this new entry-level turntable is still the least expensive in the Well Tempered range.

The design, unlike all other turntables, doesn't have mechanical arm bearings; instead the arm pivots on a silicone-damped golf ball that hangs from a nylon filament thread.

Zero tolerance

The design was dreamt up by company founder William Firebaugh and was the result of research done

DETAILS

PRODUCT:

Well Tempered Simplex

ORIGIN:

China

TYPE:

Turntable and arm

WEIGHT:

6.6kg (wet)

DIMENSIONS:

(WxHxD)
150x380x380mm

FEATURES:

- Silicone-damped fluid-bearing tonearm

- Polyester drive belt

- Manual speed change 33/45

- Strobe disc and digital scales included

DISTRIBUTOR:

Pear Audio

TELEPHONE:

01665 830862

WEBSITE:

welltemperedlab.net

by test and measurement company B&K in the late seventies. It concluded that tonearms need to be damped in order to avoid resonance. A point also picked up by the team at Cranfield university who came up with the front-end damping trough of the Townshend Rock turntable.

Firebaugh decided to focus on the arm bearings and eventually came up with a means of eliminating traditional ball races and gimbals altogether, by suspending the arm and using a paddle in silicone fluid to control it. Since then he has simplified the design to the point where a golf ball acts as the anchor point for the armtube and provides a surface which the silicone fluid in a pot beneath can control, or damp by absorbing resonance induced by the cartridge.

The three elements on the arm: rest, arm support and silicone bath, can be raised and lowered to change VIA and all are independent, so you

can experiment with different degrees of damping by changing the bath height relative to the golf ball.

It looks like the ball is floating in the silicone, but it would sink if it were not supported by the nylon threads fixed to the post above, a single twist in this thread is all that exists in the way of anti-skating measures. You can easily see by now, why this design is called the Simplex.

The turntable itself is pretty straightforward as well, but incorporates some unusual features. It's a solid MDF plinth with a painted finish that sits on three squash balls and supports a servo-controlled motor in an anti-vibration mount, and speed change is via two small pulleys. Drive is achieved with a polyester thread; a very fine filament that has a knot in it – we are told that it's easy to make a new one if this one breaks. The platter is made from black acrylic and sits on a Teflon bearing that WT describes as 'zero tolerance' – it consists of a stainless spindle in a triangular shaft, aligned so that the motor pulls the spindle against two flat edges.

The back panel of the plinth has the on/off switch alongside a fine-speed adjusting screw – WT supplies a full-size plastic strobe disc with which to set this up and it doubles as a dust cover for the platter. The platter comes with a foam mat, the use of which is optional and we found that static attraction means it's inclined to come off when you remove the



WELL TEMPERED (and Dynavector) distributor John Burns recommends mounting cartridges with five nylon washers as a means of reducing the amount of resonance that's transmitted from the cartridge into the tonearm.

All you need are some nylon washers that have an internal diameter similar to that of a cartridge mounting bolt. Place one underneath the bolt head/cap, put it through the headshell and place another underneath so that the headshell is effectively sandwiched.

Finally, place a single washer on top of the cartridge, centrally at the back near to the output pins, so that there are spacers at three points between cartridge and headshell. Then do up the bolts.

This simple and inexpensive mod seems to create a smoother sound with most metal bodied cartridges in metal headshells.

record as is so often the case with felt mats.

There are further tonearm features that warrant a mention. It's a nine-inch aluminium arm that's damped with a specific grade of sand and more controversially the headshell does not move, nor allow movement of the cartridge mounting, so lateral tracking-alignment is fixed. This makes for easy set-up, but does have us wondering how precise alignment can be achieved given the variation in stylus-tip-to-mounting-hole-distance that you get with different

“This cleverly conceived turntable does what few others can, it draws you into the music.”

cartridges. It's worth noting that there is not an arm cable sprouting from the deck, just a pair of RCA phono sockets à la Pro-Ject.

Numbers game

The Simplex is professionally, rather than elaborately built. By comparison with the Michell Gyro SE, that we reviewed last month (*HFC 346*), it's rather on the plain side – there's a distinct absence of high-quality finishes and shiny brass weights. The Simplex is sensibly put together, however, and looks like it will last. But we get the impression that you are paying for

FEATURES



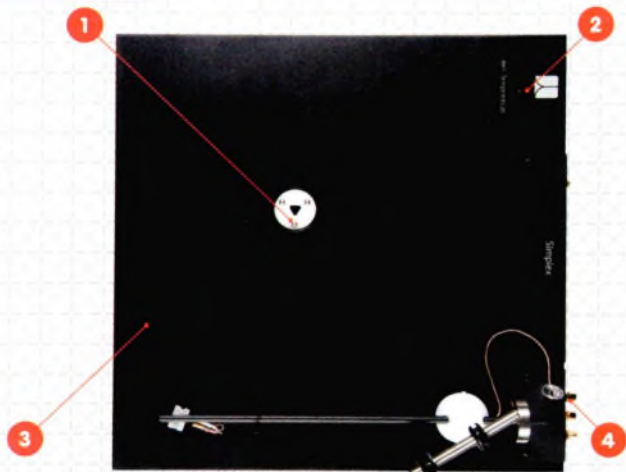
1 Tracking angle is fixed by non-adjustable headshell

2 Tonearm pivots on golf ball sitting in silicone bath

3 Arm wire can be unplugged to remove the arm

4 Tonearm is hung from this bracket on a nylon thread

HIDDEN TECH



- 1** Zero tolerance nylon bearing with triangular entry
- 2** Servo controlled motor in anti-vibration mount
- 3** MDF plinth sitting on three asymmetrically placed squash-ball feet
- 4** RCA phonooutput sockets and earth point

the design expertise and the resulting sound quality rather than pure engineering. There is also the fact that you get a unique tonearm, which is difficult to put a value on because it's not something you can buy on its own and fit to another turntable (for fairly obvious reasons), yet in engineering terms it's extremely simple.

What makes it expensive is the relatively small production runs required – the Rega arms which you find on turntables like the Michell have been around for 30 years, so unit costs are very low. This turntable has closer parallels with the Townshend Rock 7, it's a technologically advanced product that's made in small numbers for the more adventurous audiophile.

The turntable is easy to set up if you are careful with your silicone fluid (and if you aren't it can be cleaned up with lighter fluid) and straightforward to use. There is a finger lift supplied, but it's sonically preferable to select tracks by holding the armtube at the bearing end, which isn't as nerve-racking as you might imagine. WT supplies an electronic downforce gauge in the box and the arm comes with two counterweights that can be used singly or together.

Thrill power

Pear Audio distributes both WT and Dynavector, so it naturally offered us a Dyna cartridge to use on the Simplex. We opted for the DV-20X2L

(HFC 342), which sounds absolutely thrilling. Initially it comes across as being revealing and assured, if not weighty, but the quality of pace and dynamics means that it's easy to appreciate all the excitement and tension in the music.

Drums have a real kick to them and harmonics are particularly well-preserved, which gives background sounds a degree of palpability that's unusual. Low-level detail is also generally well-preserved, which fills out the musical picture and gives the key elements of a piece excellent depth of tone and solidity of image.

This solidity comes down to the calmness of presentation, combined with very impressive bass texture and timing, so bass guitars have plenty of nuance and pianos can produce a solidity of reverberation that other turntables fail to resolve.

Our calm and objective assessment of this turntable was going well until Tom Waits' bongo-fuelled *Trouble's Braids* fell under the stylus. It was then that it became difficult to sit



QUESTION TIME

WE SPOKE TO Well Tempered designer and founder William Firebaugh about the Simplex.

HFC: Why is there no means to adjust lateral tracking angle?

WF: Do you know what kind of distortion is produced when you have a tracking angle error? It results in second harmonic distortion. Most experts agree that an increase of the even harmonic of musical content is not injurious of musical quality, but rather, makes for a richer and more enjoyable musical experience.

On my blog, I have provided the means for anybody to make their own tracking-angle analyser out of a couple of pieces of cardboard. With that you can investigate the issue until you go insane!

Is this true of any cartridge or stylus shape?

It applies to any type of cartridge, to any arm length and to any geometry. When you look at a mathematical analysis of this problem it looks like something written by Einstein, so I decided to use a graphical approach, which simplified it greatly.

Normally as the arm traces the record there are two points with zero-tracking angle error. If those positions move laterally by 6mm, I'm willing to bet that nobody could tell the difference.

still. A situation further exacerbated by some classic ZZ Top. This explains why a WT-fronted system we encountered at CES earlier this year had such an engaging sound – it too was spinning the Texan trio.

The squash ball feet do a reasonable job of keeping resonance away from the cartridge, but moving the Simplex from a solid support to a Townshend Seismic Stand does tidy things up significantly. It reduces hash in the sound and allows a clearer perspective on the recording.

Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* developed even greater power and really started to chug. Removing the foam mat makes the turntable more lively and forward in the midrange; cymbals becoming more obvious as a result, but overall we preferred the slightly more relaxed sound with it on.

We're hooked

This cleverly conceived turntable does what few others can. It draws you into the music and holds you in its grip. So whether the tunes are upbeat and lively, or dark and mysterious, you feel like it's there in the room and that you're missing out if you don't pay attention. It doesn't have the bass grip of a Rock but it will give pretty well any other sub two-grand turntable a serious run for its money in the all important musicality stakes.

Some will be concerned about the inability to adjust tracking angle, but there's nothing in the sound to suggest that the resulting distortion that Firebaugh describes (see Q&A) undermines the listening experience.

It's far easier to hear why hard bitten Linn LP12 enthusiasts have gone over to its bigger brother: the Amadeus, as there's something pretty damn addictive about the Well Tempered sound. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Superb timing makes for an engaging sounding turntable
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Not as engineered as some alternatives. Fixed tracking is controversial
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: One of the most entertaining turntables in its price range
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



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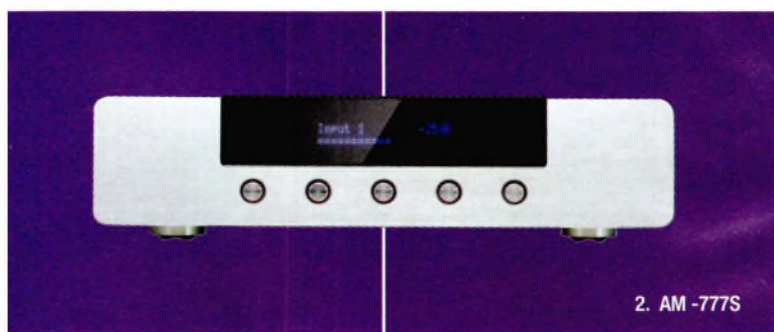
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Epic performer



The new Epic 5 looks more than a little like Epos models of old and as **Ed Selley** discovers, it's a return to form for the much-admired brand

Back in the early 1990's Epos did rather well out of its ES range of loudspeakers. Well thought out and well designed, the ES models were distinctively finished with a wood cabinet and black front panel. Nearly twenty years later the Epic 5, tested here, has more than a little of the ES models in its aesthetic. Like other examples of the current trend for revisiting past designs, the Epic 5 is very much of the moment, internally.

The largest of the Epic range, it's a 2.5-way floorstander with a pair of 6.5-inch polypropylene mid/bass drivers mated to a one-inch tweeter. The latter is the more unusual of the drivers as it is the first-ever soft-dome produced by Epos and is designed to mate high sensitivity with high-frequency response, as well as completing an all-black front panel and driver arrangement.

The cabinets are fitted with a large rear port (which is not supplied with any form of bung or tuning aid) to taper bass response, but seemed benign in behaviour. Epos says to keep the 5 at least 10cm from a rear wall, but we otherwise found them unfussy about placement. Sensitivity is quoted at an impressive 92dB/w, albeit into a four-ohm load. The Epic's proved an easy drive in use and can generate impressively anti-social sound levels without any signs of strain.

Audiophile panel

The front panel is also unusual. The Epic 5 ships with an 'audiophile' panel that is flush-fronted and has no provision for a grille. In the carton is a tool for removing it and fitting a (supplied) front panel that features a protective grille. We did all of our listening with the shipped 'audiophile' grille in place.

The flush panel helps make the Epic 5 one of the most stylish-looking

speakers we have seen recently. Standing slightly under a metre tall with the plinth fitted, the Epic 5 is well proportioned and sufficiently unobtrusive to blend into most environments. The wood veneer of the old ES has had to give way to a vinyl wrap, but the effect is good and the overall fit and finish is extremely impressive for a sub-£1,000 product.

Full frequency

Placed clear of rear walls (we found that 15 to 20 centimetres was ideal) and with a few degrees of toe-in, the 5 is extremely impressive. The overriding impression it presents is one of cohesiveness across the full

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Epic 5
ORIGIN:
UK/China
TYPE:
Floorstanding
loudspeaker
WEIGHT:
19.7kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
286x980x380mm
FEATURES:
• 2.5-way speaker
• Soft-dome tweeter
• 2x polypropylene
mid/bass drivers
• Interchangeable
front panels
DISTRIBUTOR:
Epos
TELEPHONE:
01442 260146
WEBSITE:
epos-acoustics.com

frequency spectrum with a very even response from top to bottom. The soft-dome tweeter works well and avoids any harshness or stridency even when pushed very hard.

The Epic manages to flatter poor recordings without losing detail on better ones, too.

Fantastic tonality

The speaker also shows a fantastic tonality with vocals and instruments. Plucked strings and piano keys are tangible and entirely believable with excellent decay. Vocals are clean and easy to follow. The soundstaging is also very strong with the Epic able to present even very complex arrangements with a believable sense of the positioning of the artists and the space they are performing in.

Given the size of the Epic 5, the bass on offer is not as deep as some similarly priced competition. But where the speaker excels is in the detail and texture that it gives to low frequencies; subtle detail that many speakers lose in the lower registers is easy to discern and there is no obvious overhang to low notes even during very hectic pieces, which further aids the sense of coherence.

Timing is a deeply subjective area, which people place different emphasis on, but it is fair to say the Epic is extremely good at it.

Entertaining

Above all, the Epic 5 never fails to sound involving and entertaining. This is a very easy speaker to live with and enjoy sonically and one of the most enjoyable sub-£1,000 designs we have seen in a while.

When you combine this with its good looks, excellent build quality and unfussy placement, the Epic 5 has to be considered a worthy spiritual successor to the ES models of old and we have no hesitation in recommending it. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Excellent aesthetics and lively, involving sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Bass not as deep as some of the competition

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A superb-sounding and well built speaker with very few vices

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL





The tuner of the future

Rotel's new RDG-1520 is a DAB/FM/Web tuner, DAC and network streamer in one. **Richard Black** gets excited about a new era of convergence

Here's a genuinely tricky one: what do you call a bit of hi-fi that plays most of your digital sources? A hub? Maybe. Rotel calls its new RDG-1520 (Rotel Digital Gateway) a FM/DAB tuner with internet radio, but that's pure modesty. For this convergence bit of tech is a tuner, streamer, iPod dock and DAC in one neat and very affordable (£795) box. It has been built in a similar vein to Marantz's NA-7004 streamer (HFC 344), but also adds wireless ethernet.

Come together

Whatever you call it, the RDG-1520 is living proof of hi-fi convergence – sources coming together in a single place and in a reasonably user-friendly way. Just exactly how user-friendly we'll come to in a minute, though it's worth mentioning at the outset that there is no one perfect solution, as people's expectations vary very widely. This unit has a simple text display and no video output.

▶ DETAILS

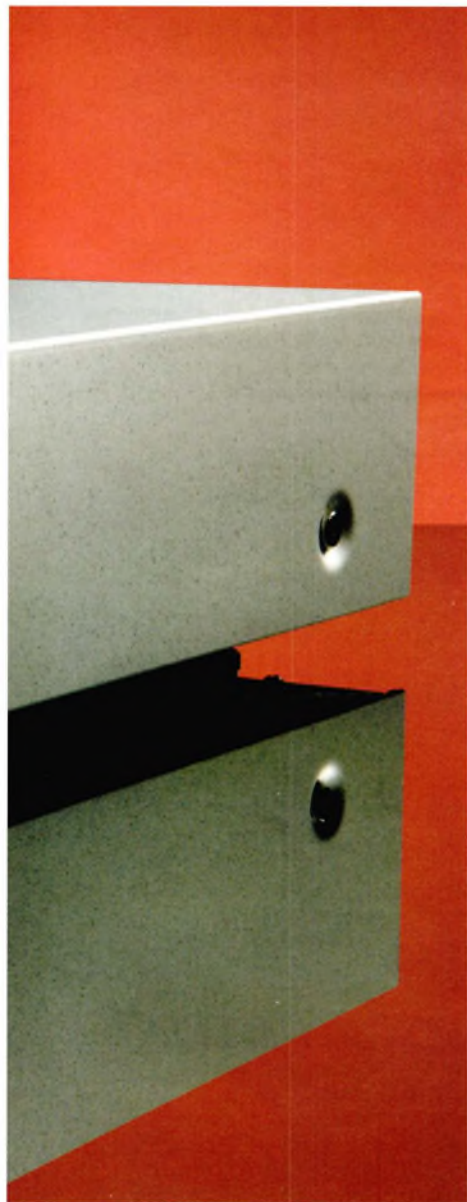
PRODUCT: Rotel RDG-1520
ORIGIN: Japan/China
TYPE: FM/DAB/internet tuner/streamer/iPod dock/DAC
WEIGHT: 4kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 431x89x300mm
FEATURES:
 • DAB/FM tuner
 • Internet radio (all usual formats)
 • Streamer (WAV up to 16-bit/96kHz, FLAC, MP3, WMA, AAC)
 • DAC (up to 24-bit/192kHz)
 • iPod or other digital media player dock (all usual formats including Apple Lossless)
DISTRIBUTOR: B&W Group
TELEPHONE: 01903 221500
WEBSITE: rotel.com

Musical networking

So the RDG-1520 gives you the choice of radio stations and formats. It connects to your home network either wirelessly or via an Ethernet cable, accessing the internet through your router and it's a complete breeze to set up – all you need to know is which router is yours (unless your house is remote, a few neighbours' routers are likely to show up on the set up list too) and what its access key is.

And since it's connected to the network, it might as well be able to play music from the computer(s). This it will do if you have a suitable UPnP (Universal Plug 'n' Play) server. In most cases, this is simply a bit of software, quite possibly part of your computer's basic system though separate UPnP software is available. The server needs to know where (in what folder) you keep your music, and the tracks are then searchable by the unit.

The good news at this point is that the Rotel has built-in support for uncompressed audio, right up to 96kHz sampling rate (though only



nothing like lossy compression), it does typically introduce some artefacts and also limits effective sampling rate to 48kHz.

Add to all this a couple of handy wired inputs, one an A-type USB socket on the front for music players (including the iPod/iPhone family) and the other a regular S/PDIF digital input (both flavours, electrical and optical) at the rear, capable of handling sampling rates up to 192kHz, and you'll see why Rotel is proud of this baby. There's not much it won't handle.

Internally there's surprisingly little going on – or at least, there's little enough to see. That's a function of the high levels of integration, with FM and DAB reception being handled by a single small circuit board, for instance. A large mains transformer fronts a conventional linear power supply, while the DAC is from Wolfson and is followed by analogue stages using good-quality through-hole components, including very good op-amp chips. Rotel has clearly taken some trouble here.

Connections are much as one would expect, including separate DAB and FM antenna sockets. However, as these both connect to a single circuit internally, it is possible to set the tuner to use one or the other of these sockets for both DAB and FM. This works well enough if you have very good signal strength on at least one of the systems. It's a little confusing to see what is patently a USB socket marked 'Ethernet' but this normally receives a wireless adaptor dongle. For wired Ethernet, a small separate adaptor is supplied.

As for the user interface, it's something of a matter of taste.



THIS UNIT illustrates a problem with computer-based audio that's not always appreciated by users: computers have a habit of processing audio without telling anyone. There are reasons for this, to do with guaranteed performance in 'worst case' scenarios, but the bottom line is that you can't always be sure you're getting bit-perfect audio from a computer; it may well have been resampled and/or adjusted in volume.

Both these things can be done well enough to be inaudible, but our experience suggests that default computer core processing doesn't necessarily achieve that. This is a subject we'll be keeping a close eye on.

We found it straightforward, though just occasionally it's not obvious which button one should press next. Operation is based on a simple menu structure, aided by the well-filled front panel (ditto remote) and the push/twist control. Track names and so on show up just fine and we do particularly appreciate that file/stream type and bitrate are displayed

Incidentally, we're sure that on a couple of occasions we heard momentary dropouts from both wireless and wired (iPod) sources, which seems odd and we hope is not typical!

Tuning in

In a way, the obvious place to start on the sound is with the 'traditional' tuner functions. At least that means

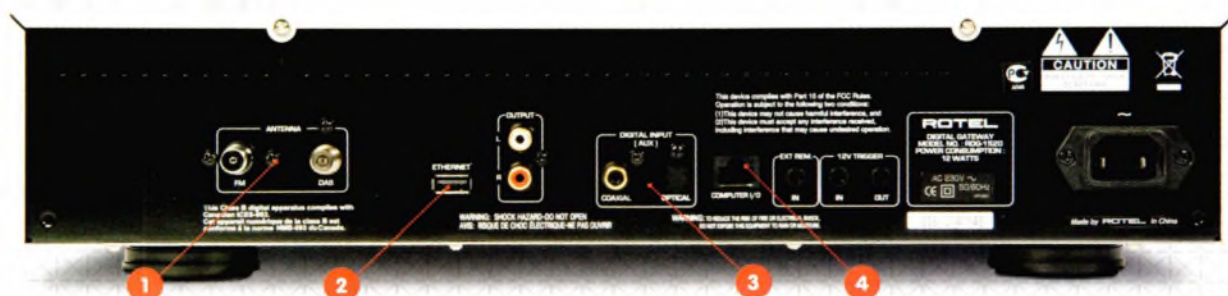
“Internet radio is really the bright new dawn in more ways than one here.”

we can get them out of the way quickly, which is just as well really. The FM performance is OK, but not great: there's reasonable clarity but everything seems a bit washed-out and grainy. By the standards of all-in-one DAB/FM tuner heads it's not bad, but if you want really class-leading FM you'll want an FM-only tuner, which will give better definition across the board. As for DAB, it's fine – it sounds like DAB usually does – what else can we say? As good as any, but the format itself limits performance far more than the replay kit.

Internet radio is really the bright new dawn in more ways than one

16 bit), in addition to all the usual lossy systems – MP3, AAC – WMA and lossless FLAC. In principle, this should mean bit-perfect transmission, but we were unable to achieve that; most computers will resample by default and although the quality loss isn't huge (certainly

CONNECTIONS



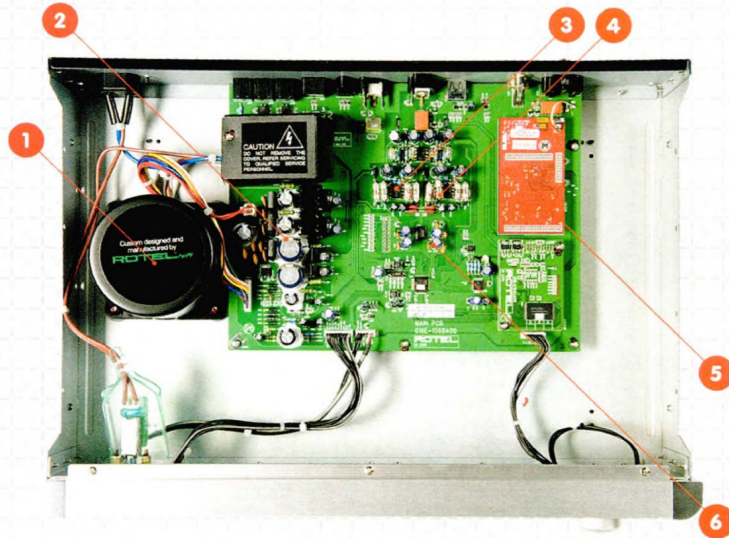
1 Antenna input selected by relay: unit can be set to tune both FM and DAB

2 USB socket accepts wired or wireless adaptor dongle

3 Digital inputs – but no digital output

4 For remote control, not digital data

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Encapsulated mains transformer
- 2 Linear power supply
- 3 Op-amps for analogue output
- 4 Through-hole passive components in analogue stage
- 5 FM and DAB reception board
- 6 Wolfson DAC chip

here. Ignoring the no-budget stations that put out something pathetic like 32kbps, results here can be very good indeed, certainly justifying taking a bit of trouble to decode and convert the bitstream as well as possible.

If you've explored internet radio on a computer, with typical attached computer speakers, you'll have little idea just how good some stations can sound. A product like the RDG-1520 is justifiable for any, but the most casual listening, giving as it does noticeably better resolution than lesser 'tuners'. We found BBC Radio 3, for instance, to embody many of the best characteristics of FM and DAB without the drawbacks of either, while some German-

language classical music stations were nearly up to full CD-quality.

It also has a feature we haven't explicitly mentioned yet: internet radio. Rapidly approaching the 20,000-station mark, this is perhaps the biggest free music source yet. It also has some quite decent quality, thanks to high-data rates and better codecs than are used on DAB. You can equally easily listen to mainstream stations from the UK and special-interest or mass-appeal stations from just about any country on the globe.

The potential problem with such a wide choice is navigating it, and Rotel must be commended on neatly integrating this radio (and its other internet-enabled models) with the

HOW IT COMPARES

JUST THREE ISSUES ago (HFC 344), we reviewed a broadly similar unit from Marantz, the NA7004 'network audio player'. Despite the different appellation, it does much the same things as the RDG-1520, including FM and DAB radio. Marantz seems a little more inclined towards Apple iThings, including AirPlay but excluding the wireless Ethernet that Rotel offers.

If there's one feature of the Marantz that we would have appreciated on the Rotel, then it's a USB input for connection to a computer for simple sound-card-type duty.

In terms of sound, the Rotel may be a little more solid and precise, though the Marantz has a digital output to feed an external DAC. In the end, though, both units may be limited as much by their sources as by their internal electronics.

easy searching provided via a home computer. Rotel's internet radio portal website allows you to register your RDG-1520 and store your choices against its serial number, thus creating a shortlist that's easily accessible via the unit. It's clever and effective, and we like it.

Listening to the stream

And, of course, music streaming from a local computer is full CD-quality if the tracks have been stored in such a format. In this case, the comparison between the RDG-1520 and a CD player is entirely fair and we tried it. Indeed we tried a couple of decent players of recent vintage. We wouldn't say that the player completely walked it, but its sound held up well. It has good strong bass, with excellent extension and a satisfying degree of impact, allied to neutral midrange and treble that's just occasionally a touch dry but again well extended.

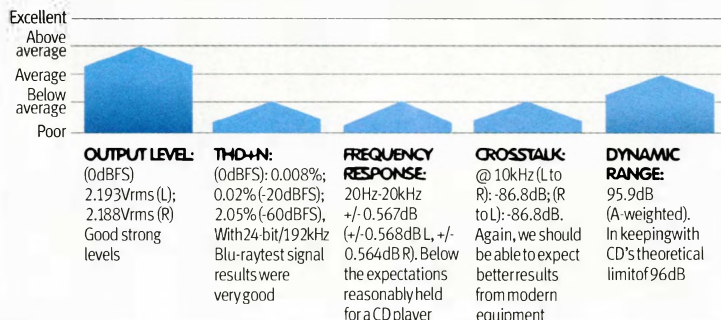
In terms of detail it's just a little behind the best, lacking a little precision and giving stereo images which are slightly compressed in both lateral and depth dimensions. It's a big advance on a lot of computer sound, just not quite the equal of good CD. If we could find a bit-perfect UPnP server, performance in this area might be noticeably better.

Digital inputs, including USB (as always, for an uncompressed file), provide the ultimate test of the RDG-1520's internal hardware and the sound takes another step up. It's still not quite in competition with the best CD players and DACs, but there's a solidity to the sound which is most gratifying.

Even if there is still some work to be done to bring sound up to the level of the best 'traditional' hi-fi separates, units like this show that digital convergence need not be something for the audiophile to fear. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



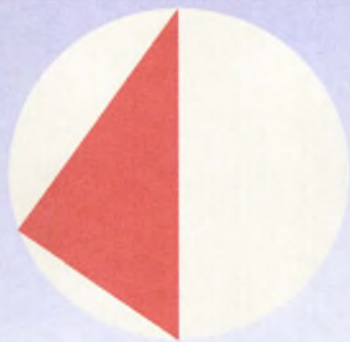
Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★☆ **LIKE:** Extremely versatile and easy to use; sound has plenty of life and detail
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★☆ **DISLIKE:** User interface could be better
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** You'll never be bored with this unit; there's not much it could add in terms of features and sound is satisfying
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL

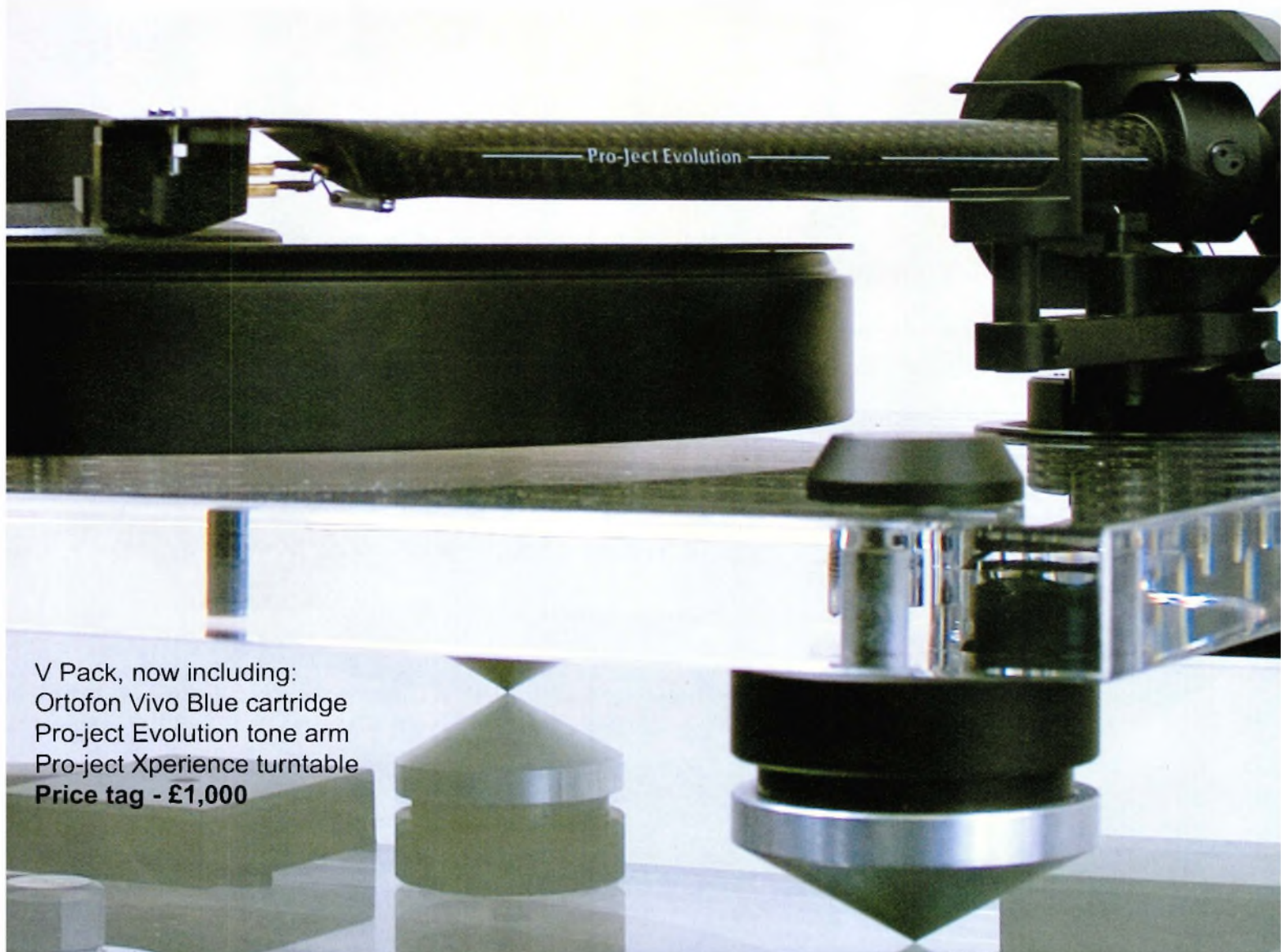




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Black cube is no square

Richard Black rattles his skull with the help of this analogue/digital input headphone amp; but are both inputs created equal?

Lehmann is a company that specialises in phono and headphone amplifiers. This is an unusual proposition in that it manages to be a headphone amplifier, a preamplifier and a DAC all at once. Admittedly, viewed as a preamp, it's a bit basic, because it features only one analogue input, and the DAC has only one input which is USB (when this is active, that is when it detects it is connected to a valid source, the analogue input is bypassed). So really this is an analogue/digital input headphone amp with a volume-controlled line output!

Heady power

Lehmann's idea of what constitutes a headphone amp is generous, with a full push-pull power amplifier output configuration. Of course, the power levels are lower than for an amp intended to drive speakers, but there are nevertheless four power transistors on heatsinks waiting to drive the load. And their ability to do that is impressive.

We obtained output powers of up to one-watt into low impedances and any kind of headphone, from 15ohms to 600ohms (which is pretty much

the full range for dynamics), stand to receive at least 100mW. We have to say that actually listening to any headphone when driven that hard is really not a good idea, but it's nice to know that at any sane level there's plenty of headroom.

Blue velvet

You may already have noticed from the photograph that there are two headphone sockets on the front of the unit, of which one disconnects the line output and the other doesn't. Next to them is the volume control, a traditional mechanical type from the Alps 'Blue Velvet' range. It's typical of the whole unit in being a high-quality component and the unit is powered from a generous internal toroidal mains transformer.

The phono sockets and USB input are a bit jammed-up at the rear and only labelled underneath the unit, but it's all easy enough to deal with. Flexibility is enhanced by a couple of little slide switches underneath the unit, which give gain adjustment in 10dB steps.

Pure and simple

Restricting ourselves to sensible listening levels, we tried this amp

with various headphones from Grado, Shure and Beyerdynamic, and found it an excellent and fearless performer. It's slightly less at home with the lowest impedances (as typified by in-ear phones), with which it can develop a trace of tonal coloration, but across the range it is quite beautifully detailed and unconstricted. It also does some very impressive things with bass; keeping it strong and precise but never accentuating it. Indeed, it's almost the perfect example of an iron fist in a velvet glove.

Treble is no less competent: sweet and open with minimal sibilance, though over-bright recordings are still going to sound that way, one of the undeniable drawbacks of headphones (plenty of recordings are just about acceptable on speakers, but simply sizzling on cans).

DAC to the test

All the above refers to the analogue input. We've mixed feelings about the digital input, though. It's good and indeed of its kind (using as it does a single, familiar, chip to receive and convert the digits) it's very good, but it's still not the equal of some of the very fine DACs that are around for £200-£300: we're thinking, of course, principally of the Cambridge DacMagic and the Arcam rDac. Either of those could be had for about the price difference between the basic Black Cube Linear and the USB version and both offer higher quality and more flexibility. In fact, either of those two could add a little resolution to this DAC and generally remove a veil or two between you and the music.

Of course, if simplicity is something you strive for and one USB input is all you need, it's much less of an issue and we can't deny that this is enjoyable via USB. Via line in, though, there's no question: it's a very fine headphone amp indeed. ●

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT: Lehmann Black Cube Linear USB

ORIGIN: Germany

TYPE: DAC pre/headphone amplifier

WEIGHT: 1.5kg

DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 110x45x280mm

FEATURES:

- USB input
- Sample rates up to 48kHz
- Phono input/output
- Two headphone outputs (6.3mm jack)
- Auto-selection of USB input when active
- Overall gain 0dB/10dB/20dB

DISTRIBUTOR: Henley Designs

TELEPHONE: 01235 511166

WEBSITE: lehmannaudio.com



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Superb control of any headphone |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: USB input is not the equal of the headphone amp |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WESAY: One of the finest headphone amps we've heard, capable of driving just about anything with supreme confidence |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL





Fade to grey

NAD's VISO Three is far removed from the grey boxes that the company is famous for. **Ed Selley** finds out if the house sound has made the jump

NAD has been at the forefront of entry-level hi-fi components for decades and still produces its famous battleship grey components at a variety of price points to suit most pockets.

More recently, we have seen a move towards more – dare we say it – stylish components with the Masters series at higher price points and an entry into more lifestyle components with the VISO series.

Following on from the DVD-based VISO Two and Five systems, the new

£750 VISO Three is the first two-channel audio member of the family.

It's a stereo receiver, comprising an internal CD mechanism able to play the usual span of CD-based formats plus an FM/AM internal tuner. Additionally, a front-mounted USB socket will replay audio from correctly formatted USB sticks

Supplied with the system, but separate to the casework, is an iPod dock that can be controlled from the remote (as well as curiously being supplied with a small one of its own). In markets with digital

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT:

NAD VISO Three

ORIGIN:

Canada/China

TYPE:

All-in-one hi-fi system

WEIGHT: 8.6kg

DIMENSIONS:

(WxHxD)
435x115x325mm

FEATURES:

- Internal CD drive supporting CD/WAV/MP3 and WMA

- FM/AM Internal tuner

- External iPod dock

- Optional DAB/DAB+ Module

- USB Input

- Additional line inputs

- 50-watt internal amplification

DISTRIBUTOR:

Armour Home Electronics

TELEPHONE:
01279 719953

WEBSITE:
nadelectronics.com

radio, the unit is available with the DB-2 DAB/DAB+ for an additional charge of £100.

Backed up by a 50-watt internal amplifier it's certainly up to the task of powering the majority of speakers that the VISO Three is likely to encounter. NAD has put some thought into the types of speaker systems likely to be used with the receiver and has fitted a subwoofer output to make connecting a sub, or satellite speaker systems relatively straightforward.

House style

Aesthetically, the VISO Three follows the house style of the other VISO components and this is no bad thing in our view. It's a handsome-looking piece of kit and manages to look more expensive than it actually is. The gridiron metal top-plate that curves over to form part of the front panel is a distinctive and handsome feature and helps the NAD to look smaller than it is, which is a useful attribute.

The fit and finish is generally good. We like the clear and easy-to-read display and the standard of the

HOW IT COMPARES

THE VISO Three is competitively priced given the specification and features. Similarly priced rivals we have tested from Yamaha and Harmon Kardon, in our systems *Blind-listening group test* (HFC 333), are half-width units that have their power outputs measured under less stringent conditions.

Arcam's Solo Neo tested in HFC 336 is a superior unit, but ought to be for £500 more than the VISO Three. If you can adjust to the interface, the NAD has few peers at the price.

handset is also somewhat fussy. We appreciate that the given the amount of functions that the unit has, the remote will be relatively complex but it is still far from intuitive, more of which later.

Minor gripes aside, the VISO Three has to be considered good value for money. This is a well-specified device and being able to add DAB functionality – rather than paying for it outright – is a useful feature. The feature set, coupled with the useful power output, makes the system a strong contender in the sub-£1,000 all-in-one category. An Ethernet-enabled version would be the icing on the cake – the big display makes

“The VISO Three impressed us with an involving sound that is easy to listen to.”

browsing off USB simple enough for us to believe that browsing a network would be easy to do as well.

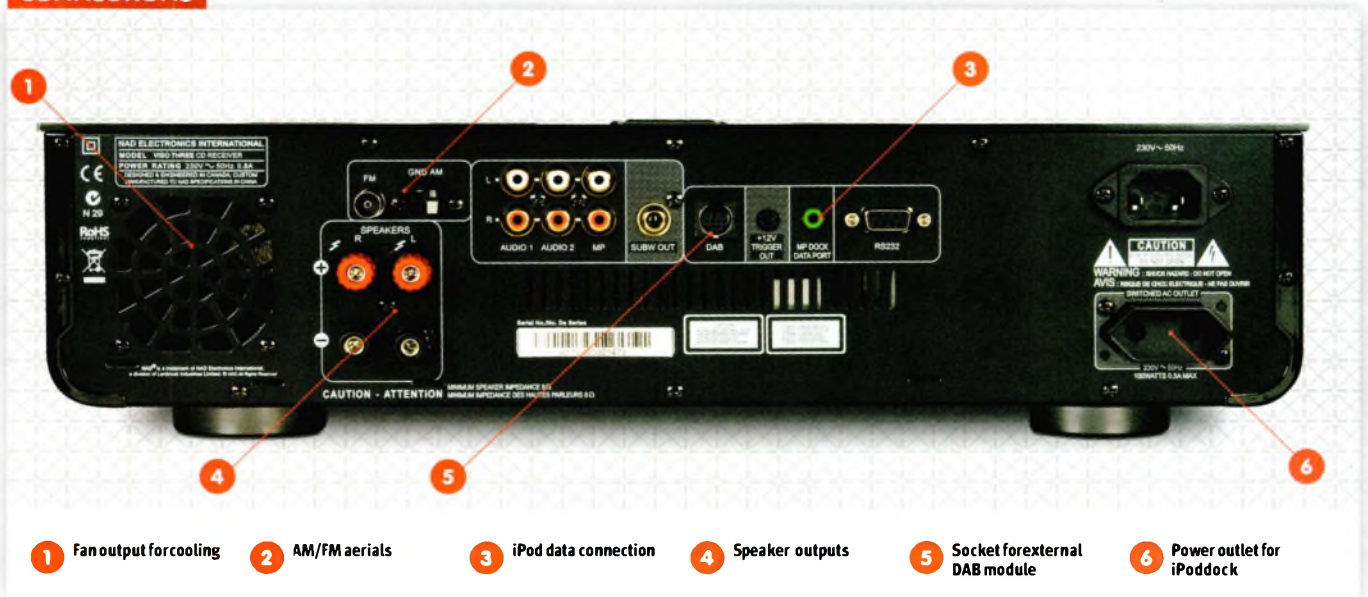
Balanced sound

We tested the VISO Three with Mordaunt Short Mezzo 1 and Audio Note AN-K loudspeakers. Listening to CD first of all reveals many likeable traits. The overall impression is one of the classic NAD balanced sound – no one part of the frequency spectrum is accentuated or pushed forward to the detriment of other parts and it's easy to listen to for prolonged periods. This can initially lead you

paintwork and panel gaps is extremely high, as well. We are less sold on the volume control, which is a rotary encoder-type with no start and stop point. This is useful with

very powerful pieces of equipment, but with the VISO Three, it means that it has to be rotated a fair distance to give an appreciable increase in volume. The remote

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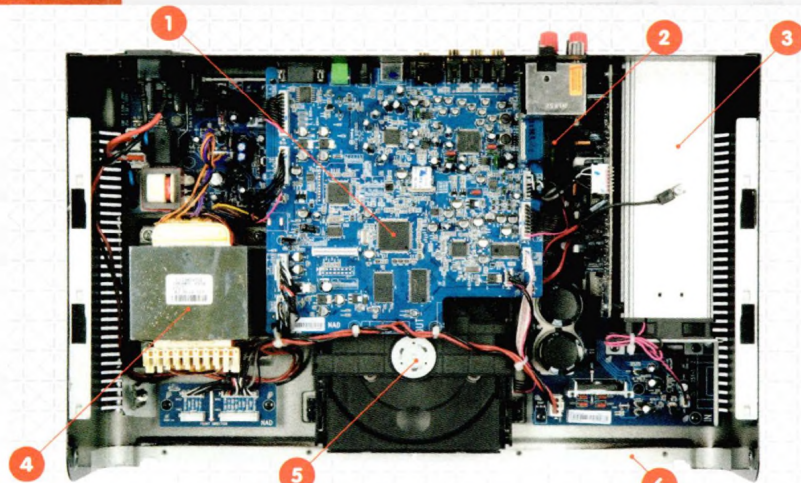
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HIDDEN TECH



- 1 ARM processor
- 2 Amp output stage
- 3 Cooling fan
- 4 E.I mains transformer
- 5 CD mechanism
- 6 Volume, display and headphone amp, all attached to front panel

interface. The dock needs power and a separate data connection to function and while all the cabling is supplied, the result is far from elegant. The menu interface and options for controlling the iPod seem almost wilfully counter-intuitive and we were particularly unimpressed with the fact that iPhone and iPod Touch models are only able to output audio via their iPod functions rather than by third-party services, such as Spotify or last.fm – both of which would give the NAD an element of ‘streaming on the cheap.’

Unflappable sound

The VISO Three impressed us generally, however, with an involving and detailed sound that is likeable and easy to listen to for long periods without ever becoming fatiguing or dull. The qualities of an engaging and unflappable sound are present and correct, and the fresh styling is a welcome departure from convention.

Where we are less convinced that the system is an unqualified success, is in the control and user interface. There are enough quirks, from the insensitive volume control to the truly clunky iPod interface for the NAD to never feel as integrated as the name might suggest.

Certainly, with the multiple connections for the iPod dock in place and the DAB module attached, the unit feels rather less like a cohesive all-in-one system and slightly more like an affiliation of the NAD parts bin in one (ish) box.

How much this will matter to you will largely come down to whether you intend to use the CD drive for the bulk of your listening or whether the iPod dock is going to be your primary source. If it is the former, the VISO Three is too strong a sonic performer to ignore. ●

to feel that the NAD is a little lacking in excitement, but more accurately the unit will not inject excitement into recordings where it is not present, although choosing more upfront speakers (see *Try it with these*, right) can change this.

We're particularly impressed with the soundstage the VISO Three presents; a believable three-dimensional space containing vocalists and instruments, whether that space be a tiny recording studio or open-air venue.

The internal tuner and external DAB module are both straightforward enough to tune to the stations we knew to be available in the area and the same neutral, but involving sound is present and the DAB section does a fine job of keeping more compressed stations listenable.

There was no DAB+ material to try the DAB module with, but the

degree of future-proofing it offers is appreciated. The DAB module itself is not the smallest going, but seemed unaffected by being hidden at the back of a rack out of sight.

A fine line

Reading tracks over USB is simple enough and the NAD is a flattering source for compressed material. Our test range of MP3s (that vary from 320kbps/bit affairs to samples that would embarrass a ringtone) were largely left listenable by the VISO Three and it treads a fine line between revealing the detail in better recordings without mercilessly destroying poorer ones.

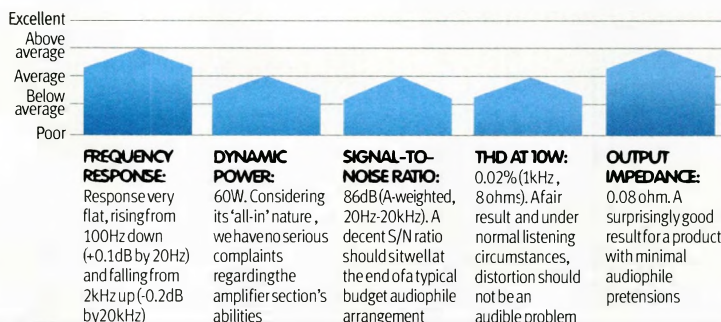
The iPod dock is less successful, however. Sonically, the dock is similar to most other analogue-output-style docks we have seen, but it is hindered by fussy connections and a truly frustrating control



THE OUTPUT of the VISO Three is sufficient for your choice of speakers to not be limited by sensitivity concerns. If you were looking to add a little excitement to proceedings, the Monitor Audio Bronze BX5's (HFC 345) would be an excellent place to start. If you wanted to keep the NAD's very even presentation intact, the Castle Knight 2, that picked up our sub £1,000 gong in the 2010 Awards (HFC 339), would also make for a very happy partnership.

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Strong sound quality and useful feature set
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Clunky interface and fussy connectivity
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A handsome unit with a very natural and likeable sound slightly let down by poor control interface
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Essential start-up

Pro-Ject has a new model to tempt those at the start of their vinyl journey, **Jason Kennedy** looks at the brand that started the vinyl renaissance

First there was the Debut, then came the Genie, then inflation kicked in and the decks hit or even broke the £200 barrier. So Pro-Ject built a new entry-level turntable called Essential for those who want to find out what the vinyl thing is all about. Pro-Ject has managed to make the Essential affordable by using more cost-effective materials for major parts like the plinth and platter and using a Unipivot version of its 8.6 tonearm. You can also choose from three colour options including black (£155) or red or white (both £170 each), so on paper at least it looks like great value.

The essentials

The Essential is naturally not an elaborate turntable, but it's European-built, fully set up and is virtually plug and play; all you need is a phono stage.

The plinth is a slab of particle board (supported on three compliant feet) and this houses the three key elements of a record player. The motor is a synchronous type with two pulleys for 33.3 and 45rpm, while the main bearing, on which the platter spins, is chromed-steel with a ball-bearing thrust pad and sintered bronze housing.

The unipivot arm is an unusual choice at this price point. Most cost several times the price of this

package, but they are intrinsically simple devices and presumably inexpensive to build in bulk. It has a one-piece headshell and armtube, and an eccentrically mounted counterweight, which eases the cartridge's job with warped records. The cartridge fitted is Ortofon's entry-level OM3E moving magnet.

Can it be done?

While you'd be hard pressed to find a sintered bronze bearing on other turntables in this price bracket, it is the smallest example of the type we've seen, but size isn't everything. The platter is, by necessity, vinyl-wrapped, which leaves a joint in its periphery, but this is an aesthetic, not practical issue.

The tonearm is not a true unipivot: it only pivots in two planes, but it's neatly put together and has a captive signal lead unlike most Pro-Jects.

On/off switching is on the side, next to the motor and dust is kept at bay with the supplied lid. We also like the simple, but effective down-force gauge supplied in the box. The only competition at this price comes from plastic turntables with extremely flimsy-looking arms, so one has to wonder if even Pro-Ject can build a useful player at this price.

Bass control

The Essential delivers a reasonably coherent and, with simpler records,

surprisingly robust rendition of the signal embedded in the groove. All the fundamentals are in place and while transparency isn't impressive, channel separation is on par for the money. Compression levels are a little high, however, and image scale (as well as high-frequency extension) is rather obviously curtailed.

On the plus side, image width is quite acceptable and the bass, while not exactly weighty, is not without its appeal. It manages to control the bass as well, even when placed on a standard equipment rack where speaker feedback will be getting through to it to some extent. Female voice seems to work well too, better than some male ones for no obvious reason, the latter often lacking a degree of clarity and precision.

The limits

It would seem that there is a limit even to what Pro-Ject can achieve when costs are cut to the bone, we wondered whether the cartridge is a limiting factor, but trying it on another turntable revealed that (while its treble is restricted) it's more than adequate.

We suggest you buy a Genie Mk 3, it looks better and delivers the sort of sound that will embarrass many digital sources. The Essential is a very affordable way to get into vinyl, but there are better alternatives from the Czech expert. ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT:

Pro-Ject Essential

ORIGIN:

Czech Republic

TYPE:

Turntable

WEIGHT:

4.5kg

DIMENSIONS:

(WxHxD)

415x112x335mm

FEATURES:

- Manual speed change 33/45
- Unipivot tonearm
- Ortofon OM3E cartridge
- Dust lid

DISTRIBUTOR:

Henley Designs

TELEPHONE:

01235 511166

WEBSITE:

project-audio.com

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★☆

LIKE: Nice colour range; good selection of extras in the box

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★☆

DISLIKE: Needs good isolation to perform well and that will cost more than the deck itself!

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★☆

FEATURES

★★★★☆

WE SAY: Spend a little extra and get the Genie Mk 3

OVERALL

★★★★☆

Power towers

Roth Audio has moved into loudspeakers. **Ed Selley** gets to grips with the flagship model from the new Oli range, complete with ribbon tweeter

Roth is a youngster in audio terms. From its founding in 2007, the company has produced a wide range of iPod ancillaries and lifestyle products, and has now moved into loudspeakers. The five-strong Oli range has two bookshelf speakers and three floorstanders, the largest of which, the £800 Oli 50, is tested here.

And 'large' is what will spring to mind on confronting the Oli 50 for the first time. We thought the Mission MX5 (HFC 341) was big, but the Oli 50 is larger still, standing at no less than 130cm tall once the spikes have been fitted. This means that they are going to dominate most rooms that they find themselves in and, like the MX5, we'd suggest seeing them in the flesh before ordering.

A lot of speaker

This is a lot of speaker for the asking price. The Oli 50 are a three-way design featuring no less than five drivers per speaker. Most unusual of these, especially at £800, is the 50mm ribbon tweeter which is mounted between the two 6.5-inch mid/bass drivers, which in turn differ from the bass drivers by the fitment of a metal phase plug.

The cabinet features Roth's 'DAL Tech' cabinet damping, said to reduce distortion from the drivers dissipating through the cabinet. In practice the cabinet seems to be well damped and fairly inert. Two large rear-mounted bass ports are fitted, but the speakers are not supplied with any form of tuning bung. As such, the Oli 50 tends to work best between 30 and 50cm out into the room. Roth claims a sensitivity of 92dB/w which seems a little high, but they are fairly efficient in practice.

Solid feel

The fit and finish of the Oli50 is satisfactory, if not remarkable for the

asking price and the cabinet feels solid. When the grille is removed the front panel is a bit utilitarian, as the grille also forms part of the leading edge of the cabinet, so there is a considerable indent when they are removed, complete with the mounting pins which are attached to the cabinet rather than the grille.

Smooth operator

In use the Oli 50 is interesting and in many ways extremely talented. The ribbon tweeter is well implemented for the price and provides a smooth and detailed top end to performances. This results in a naturalness to vocals that is very likeable.

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Roth Oli 50
ORIGIN:
UK/China
TYPE:
Floorstanding
loudspeaker
WEIGHT:
29kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
211x1,220x394mm
FEATURES:
• 3.5-way
floorstanding
speaker
• Ribbon tweeter
• 2x fiberglass
midrange drivers
• 2x fiberglass bass
drivers
DISTRIBUTOR:
Henley Designs
TELEPHONE:
01235 511166
WEBSITE:
rothaudio.co.uk

The integration with the conventional mid/bass drivers is also well placed and there is little sense of a handover from ribbon to conventional driver. This also gives the Oli 50 a real edge with acoustic and vocal pieces. Instruments and voices are placed in an easy to follow fashion and have a convincing attack and decay to them.

The low end of the Oli 50 is less convincing. When placed in free space, there is little room interaction, but across two different amplifiers (a 70-watt Electrocompaniet ECI3 and a 500-watt Musical Fidelity M6 500i), the actual tonality and detail of the bass remains a little lacking. There is no shortage of extension, but the effect is more of outright grunt than finesse.

Compared to the similarly priced Epos Epic 5 (see review on p65) that were tested at the same time, the Roth felt slower and less agile with fast-paced and more aggressive music. This is less pronounced on the bass produced by the same acoustic pieces. Here the Roth excels, which definitely strengthens the case for its use with this genre of music but, nevertheless, there are still some clear limits to its abilities.

Detailed and expressive

The Oli 50 is not a true all rounder or an unconditional recommendation. It is a detailed and expressive performer, and can capture the scale and detail of smaller recordings with uncanny accuracy and excellent soundstaging.

It is less capable with more propulsive music, though, where similarly priced competition can be more convincing. However, if you have the space to position them correctly and have more relaxed musical tastes, then the Oli 50 is well worth considering. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Excellent top-end detail and tonality

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Large size and the uneven bass response

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Interesting speaker with likable points, but not a true all rounder

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

OVERALL





Universally yours

Oppo's new universal supports CD/SACD, DVD-A, networked AV and 3D Blu-ray. But it's the sound quality that makes it so special, says **Martin Pipe**

Universal disc players have always been a distraction from CD-only machines.

They offer incredible value and with CD now in decline, the case for buying is growing.

Relative newcomer Oppo has launched a rather special unit with audiophiles firmly in mind. Its new BDP-95EU plays the usual SACD, DVD-A and legacy CDs, but it also offers cutting-edge 3D Blu-ray playback and will play content held on external drives or network

storage. It's connectivity compliment is something else. As an added bonus, HDCD-encoded CDs can also be enjoyed in all their 20-bit glory, as Oppo has paid a considerable amount of detail to optimising the sound quality of analogue audio.

The 7.1 outputs take advantage of an ESS 9018S multichannel Sabre32 Reference DAC; a separate DAC drives the dedicated stereo outputs. Unusually, these are available in both phono (unbalanced) and XLR (balanced) form.

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT: Oppo BDP-95EU

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Universal Blu-ray disc player

WEIGHT: 7kg

DIMENSIONS: WxHxD
430x98x311mm

FEATURES:
• DVD-A, SACD, CD, HDCD, FLAC, WAV Blu-ray (Dolby TrueHD/DTS Master Audio), Dolby Digital, DTS

• **VIDEO FORMATS:** Blu-ray (2D/3D), DVD, MPEG, MKV, DivX, MP4, AVC-HD

• **ESS Sabre32 Reference DAC**

DISTRIBUTOR: AV Aficionado

TELEPHONE: 0845 370 0054

WEBSITE: oppodigital.com

The jury's still out on the benefits of XLR, however, as far as home audio is concerned. Balanced is fine for studio applications, where interconnects may run to tens of metres. But for a metre (or less) between player and amplifier?

Fortunately, the BDP-95EU's XLRs have some domestic potential, especially if you have a separate AV system and hi-fi rig located some distance apart. So if you want to locate the unit with your AV gear, then that's fine because the player's stereo output can be routed to a suitable amp via XLRs of appropriate length.

The right connections

In connectivity terms, the BDP-95EU truly excels. Its two HDMI ports are useful if you have an older (pre HDMI 1.4) AV receiver, but want to enjoy 3D TV. Just connect one port to your amplification and the other to your display. A handful of mass-market players (notably Panasonic models) are similarly endowed and some of these also give you the Oppo's composite and component analogue video outputs. And while



it's true to say that the majority of Blu-ray players boast a USB port, or two, for playback of multimedia files stored on USB ports, it's very rare to see an eSATA port – to which can be connected an external hard drive (the BDP-95EU also

understands FAT/FAT32 and NTFS disk formats).

There's also an Ethernet port, for online content and networked multimedia – a Wi-Fi 'dongle' is also supplied. Both RS232 and infra-red ports are provided, should you envisage controlling the player from a touch-pad.

Both optical and coaxial versions of digital audio output will drive external DACs; for multi-channel hi-res audio, though, HDMI is essential. On which subject, SACD's DSD streams can be passed to compatible AV receivers across this connector – LPCM conversion can be engaged via an on screen menu if yours is DSD-ignorant.

Our only slight disappointment is that Oppo hasn't fitted some kind of digital audio input. A pity, considering all of the audiophile work that has been put into this player.

Built for sound

And there's plenty of such effort evident. Inside the player is a big toroidal transformer marked 'Custom designed and manufactured by Rotel'. Oppo informed us that the Japanese hi-fi manufacturer's role in the BDP-95EU's genesis extends to nothing more than the supply of this key component.

The transformer in question is associated with a linear power supply that caters exclusively to the analogue audio sections – everything else is energised by a switch-mode power supply that lives under a metal shield.

All analogue audio circuits, plus the DACs, are built onto a dedicated circuit board. We also noted the use of high-quality



OUR REVIEW SAMPLE was 'hacked' for multi-zone Blu-ray and multi-region DVD – a significant hardware mod, according to AV Aficionado – but a cheaper DVD multi-region-only model is also available from the company (£899). BDP-95EUs from other sources are, unless otherwise stated, single-region/zone. Fortunately, the lion's share of Blu-ray movies are currently region-free, but if you have a collection of Region 1 DVDs the mod is well worth having. Marvell's Qdeo processing, as specified here, is renowned for the excellent upscaling of standard-definition content to high-definition. Naturally, such silicon cannot add what was never there in the first place – but it should make the transition a little less obvious.

components here, such as audiophile-grade capacitors and LM4562 op-amps. Internal construction is indeed of an excellent standard – it's definitely on a par with all, but the most esoteric of Far-Eastern kit.

A key component of the main board is an Oppo-designed multi-function chip that looks after much of the player's activity. The other key element of the player is the Blu-ray/DVD/CD drive, which is also compatible with most rewritable/recordable CD and DVD formats. This component has a dedicated interface, rather than SATA.

Setting up the player is straightforward enough, courtesy of an initial 'wizard' and some nicely designed on screen menus. From here, various functions ranging from output resolution to subwoofer crossover frequency can be configured.

“Analogue inputs sing with anything you care to play on it – our modest expectations were surpassed.”

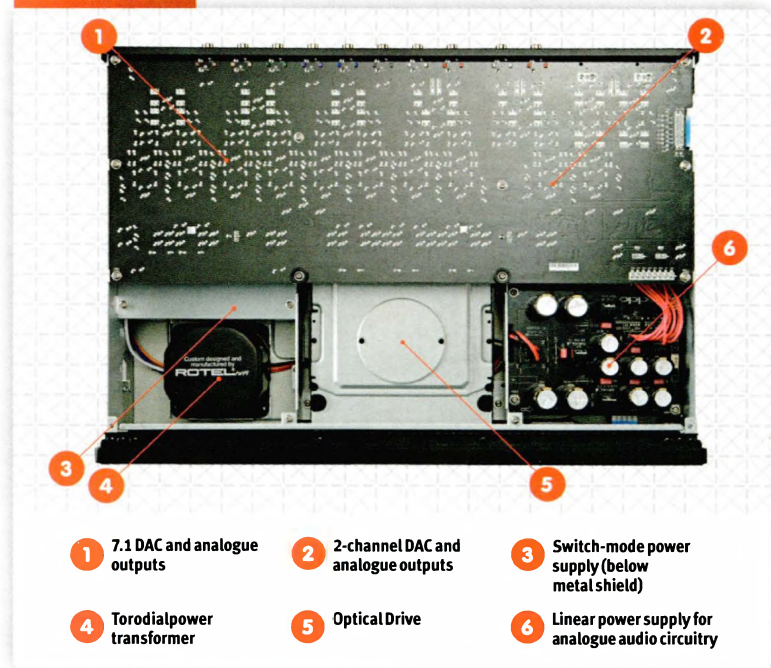
Regrettably, the noise sequencer, which is used as a level-adjustment aid, failed to work with either analogue or digital outputs. This isn't going to please anyone planning to drive power amps or active speakers directly from the multichannel outputs (the BDP-95EU's analogue outputs benefit from a volume control). One hopes that Oppo will address this with a firmware update – which can be

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Balanced stereo output
- 2 7.1 analogue outputs
- 3 Adjustable mains voltage
- 4 Ethernet connection for network Blu-ray
- 5 Component video output
- 6 USB and SATA connection for external drives
- 7 HDMI output
- 8 Digital outputs

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 7.1 DAC and analogue outputs
- 2 2-channel DAC and analogue outputs
- 3 Switch-mode power supply (below metal shield)
- 4 Toroidal power transformer
- 5 Optical Drive
- 6 Linear power supply for analogue audio circuitry

delivered to the player via the network connection.

Heart of the matter

Many dedicated Blu-ray players are restricted sonically. From their analogue outputs, you usually get a rather uninvolved and insipid performance. Little attention is usually paid here, as you're expected to rely on HDMI-interfaced amplification.

The Oppo universal, mercifully, is a very different animal. Simply put, those analogue inputs sing with anything you care to play on it – our modest expectations were surpassed. A spin of the Kraftwerk *Tour de France* CD proves that not only can this unit deal with copy-protected CDs, but the timing and pace of its musical delivery is impeccable. Germanic electronic rhythms are conveyed with foot-tapping involvement and the

album's strong use of stereo demonstrates that there are no vices in the soundstaging department.

Another joyful listening experience was The XX's debut album, again on CD. The guitarwork, male/female vocal partnership and low-frequency percussive samples of the track, *Islands*, hold your attention and won't let go. The track's sub-bass is articulately handled and free of the sagging that can mar cheap players; findings that were reinforced with various examples of electronic music we threw at the player.

We tried playing MP3 and FLAC content via network and USB, but could not get the player to even display the MP3 files. In fairness, supplier AV Aficionado confirmed that MP3 is indeed a no-go area for now. We could load a FLAC file via USB, but such content was unavailable via the network.

QUESTION TIME

WE SPOKE TO Dean Morris of AV Aficionado about the BDP-95EU

HFC: How did the multi-region and multi-zone capabilities come about? Such facilities are quite rare on Blu-ray players, after all.

DM: We source the players from Oppo UK (the official distributor), but the hardware modifications that allow region-free DVD and Blu-ray zone selection (a manual operation that involves pressing buttons on the handset when the player is on standby) are sourced from a third party unconnected to Oppo.

The mod consists of a dedicated circuit board fitted within the chassis, with suitable internal connections made to the player's circuitry. We install and test the mods ourselves – and will honour the two-year warranty.

Sonically, FLAC files retain much of the original CD's character.

Next, we move to hi-res audio – and one of our favourite SACDs, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. This one-time demo staple has an awful lot going on – and with the BDP-95EU we were able to pick out individual contributions, and marvel at how they were seamlessly assembled into something so complex, long before computerised-editing became the norm.

The multichannel mix makes great use of surround, especially on tracks like *On the Run* and this enveloping soundstage was done justice by the player (after we had taken steps to circumvent the aforementioned channel-balancing problem).

Switching to one of those rarest of things, a Blu-ray audio disc (Trondheim Solistene's recording of Britten's *Simple Symphony*), rewarded us with depth and clarity. Incidentally, there's a 'pure audio' mode that shuts off the front-panel display and video circuitry. Surprisingly, engaging it made little impact on the sound quality.

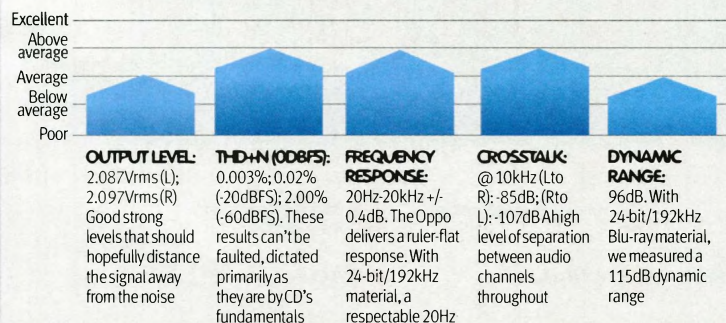
Minor flaws

Oppo must be congratulated for bringing us the BDP-95EU – the latest in a strong line of innovative disc-spinners. With CDs it doesn't quite match the involvement of a top-flight dedicated player, but it sure comes close – at a fraction of the price. Switch to well-recorded high-res material, though and the Oppo leaps ahead.

It's also an exceptional video player (see *Talking point*). There are one or two minor issues, notably relating to set up and multimedia playback – which, to be fair, is 'not unofficially supported' – and we hope that Oppo resolves them. But as it stands, the BDP-95 is one of the best universal players we've seen and represents excellent value for money. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Revealing, transparent and musically involving
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Has some annoying bugs. Is incompatible with MP3
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** If you have £1,000 to spend on a disc player, this should be shortlisted
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL





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Satin Black



★★★★★
HI-FI CHOICE MAGAZINE JUNE 2011

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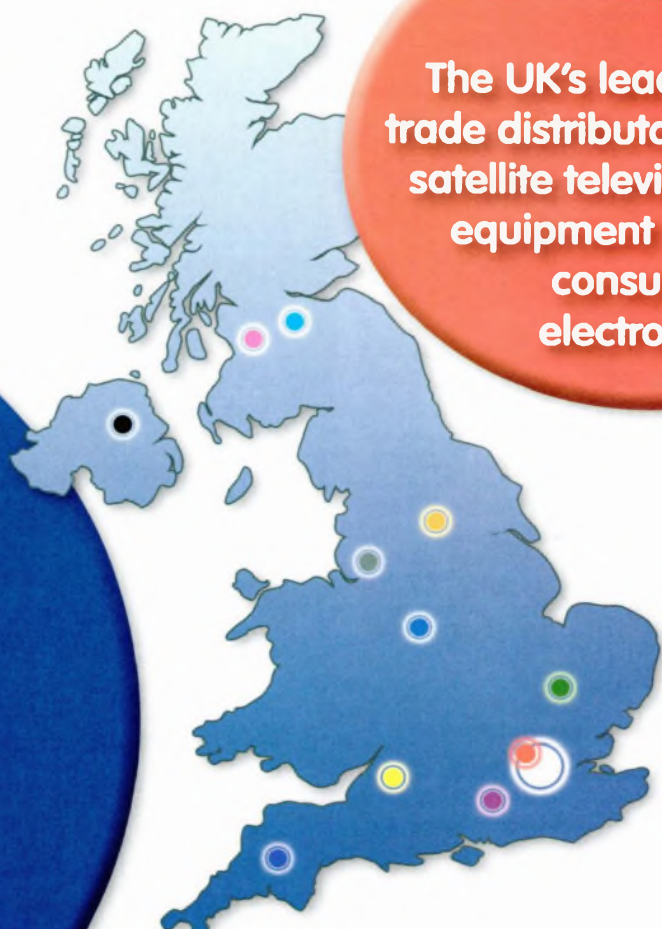
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1994

No 'maybe' about it – 1994 was definitely Britpop's year with classic albums by Oasis and Blur heralding a new era for pop. **Simon Berkovitch** returns to the year when indie went mainstream

Ever wondered why, unlike Scousers, there are no jokes about Mancunians? It's partially because of the city's peerless pop pedigree. From The Hollies' harmony-drenched '60s singles, through the melodic punk and post-punk of Buzzcocks and Joy Division, to the guitar classicism of The Smiths and dancefloor-friendly electronica of New Order in the '80s, the smart money was on Manchester delivering the goods again in the '90s. The smart money was indeed correct, but initially backing the wrong horse – The Stone Roses.

The so-called 'Madchester' movement may have set the wheels in motion but it took their spiritual heirs – Oasis – to repel the American boarders – bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam – and bring confident guitar-pop back to Britain. Bowl cuts, John Lennon sunglasses and dovetail parkas at the ready – welcome back to 1994, the year of Britpop.

It's arguable that Britpop was among the most conservative of the music available for consumption in 1994. The old guard of Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones and David Bowie all made album appearances this year – with Page and Plant's *No Quarter*, *Voodoo Lounge* and *Santa Monica 72* respectively – but none of these records could be considered career high points. Indeed, Bowie's retrospective offering pointed to one direction pop was looking for inspiration – backwards – an accusation that can be levelled at the Britpop movement.

Album releases the same year from Bristol's Portishead (*Dummy*) and Massive Attack (*Protection*) and The Prodigy's *Music for a Jilted Generation* were a more forward-looking template for pop music than, say,

the retro synthesisers and easy listening sensibilities of avant-garde indie darlings Stereolab (*Mars Audiac Quintet*) and that of Britpop itself. The most forward-thinking of the year was *Selected Ambient Works Volume II*, a seminal work from electronic musician Aphex Twin, that still sounds like a transmission from the future.

But, 1994 belongs to Britpop – the year of Oasis and southern rivals Blur – for a number of reasons – among them catchiness, familiarity and Britishness. It was music that, rightly or wrongly, unfurled the Union Flag in a way not seen since the halcyon days of the 1960s – days of flag wavers like The Who and The Kinks. This was music that harked back to your own formative pop moments, reinvented for a new generation of listeners – myself included.

From Madchester with love

Something of a rock revival had been in the air for a few years, but it took the events and bands of 1994 to bring an underground phenomenon overground. Rock classicism seems to be in many Mancunian musicians' blood. The Smiths – with the twin attack of Morrissey's lyrical dexterity and Johnny Marr's equally lyrical guitar prowess – fought a bold rear-guard action against the synth-drenched, bland chart fodder during the 1980s. Once the band split acrimoniously in the late 1980s, another local band was already attracting a devoted local following: The Stone Roses. Their 1989 debut album was a breath of fresh air on release: Byrdsian guitar jangle, psychedelia, Jimi Hendrix, Simon and Garfunkel – all of these kaleidoscopic '60s influences and more were coaxed out of the band by producer John

Leckie. Here was a producer with a classic rock pedigree, having worked on Pink Floyd's classic *Meddle* and recently overseen the psychedelic sounds of XTC's alter ego The Dukes of StratospHERE.

The Stone Roses made a feverishly anticipated reappearance in 1994 with five-years-in-the-making LP *The Second Coming*, but the musical content divided fans. Out went the anthemic '60s pop and indie dance grooves. In came the barely concealed spirit of Led Zeppelin – with lengthy Jimmy Page-informed guitar solos over *everything*. A messy dissolution followed, with the nadir being the band's infamous Reading Festival performance in 1996. But far away from enormous stadia and festivals, another Mancunian band was taking the irresistible combination of The Beatles, T-Rex, Slade and The Smiths to smaller venues around the UK, venues like The Duchess of York in Leeds (see *I swear I was there* right).

Oasis rising

Don't let the less than stellar later years dilute your memory – Oasis were a potent force in 1994. In two short years, the band transcended the UK's indie venues to stage two massive gigs at Knebworth in 1996. In between, tabloid-baiting antics ensued, recalling the heady days of pop misbehaviour of the likes of The Rolling Stones, The Who, The Sex Pistols and – most recently – The Stone Roses.

General rock and roll antics weren't the only retro aspects to Oasis' debut album, *Definitely Maybe*, released at the tail end of the year. Setting its stall out with ballsy opening track *Rock and Roll Star*, the album now deservedly sits high up in critics' polls of



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 though his love of vinyl and high-class hi-fi

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Were you 'there' for Britpop? And was it Oasis, Blur, Suede or Pulp for you? Let us know.

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classic debut albums. Musically, it may have transported many of you back to your youth and offered a welcome alternative to the chart fodder of the year. The Gallaghers were unashamedly in awe of The Beatles' songwriting abilities, but other pop nuggets were added to the mix: single *Cigarettes and Alcohol* cheekily appropriated the same bluesy chord progression that Marc Bolan 'borrowed' for T-Rex smash *Get It On*.

"If Pulp were a Northern collision of Kes, Alan Bennett and Roxy Music, Suede were more informed by the Bowie's *Thin White Duke* and *Performance* than the Small Faces and *Blow Up*."

Live Forever returned the guitar solo to the pop party, but was removed from the showy excess of the likes found on The Stone Roses' comeback album, released the same year. But best of all was Liam Gallagher's voice – part John Lennon, part John Lydon and definitely one of the most powerful in pop – no maybe about it. It's a voice that, on those early singles, recalled both the belt of Slade's Noddy Holder (another key Oasis songwriting inspiration) and white soul power of Spencer Davis Group's Steve Winwood. In short, '60s-informed British pop was back.

From Seymour to Blur

It's doubtful that the Gallagher brothers would have considered themselves part of any movement, seeing themselves as the individual saviours of British rock and roll, but there were enough bands cherry-picking inspiration from the UK's '60s template for the press to shoehorn these disparate groups into the Britpop movement. The chief rivals



I SWEAR I WAS THERE

Rewind to Oasis at the Duchess of York, Leeds, 1994

York is as pretty as a postcard picture but wasn't the best place for music-mad undergraduates to be in the early '90s. But it was in driving distance to Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester, and it was to the former destination that a car-full of us were speeding down the motorway on the strength of various music press reviews of this new Manchester band – Oasis – and the release of their debut single *Shakermaker*.

The queue to the Duchess of York snaked round the block. A soon-to-be-ubiquitous figure in the tabloids leaned out of an upstairs window. A decent party was already in full swing up there, late afternoon. Liam Gallagher, can of lager and cigarette on the go, chatted with friendliness and sky-high self-confidence to the crowd. I can't remember whether the phrase 'mad for it' was deployed, but let's assume it was for argument's sake. This wasn't the anonymity of stadium rock; this felt up-close and personal.

Like much of that time, memories are contained in flashes, rather than extended high-definition playback. I do remember that support act Whiteout – joint headliners at the start of the tour – didn't exactly live up to the incendiary promise of their name. They were an inauthentic take on the good-time music of '70s-vintage Faces – and about to be utterly blown off stage.

The venue was rammed to capacity; perhaps overcapacity. Unable to see properly through the throng near the back of the venue, my friends and I were standing on chairs crafted into the pub wall at the back of the gig. A whoop heralded the band's amble onto the stage. And then – bang! From the breakneck opening number *Rock and Roll Star* onwards there was a controlled detonation of the majority of *Definitely Maybe*, ending the gig with an attitude-heavy dismantling of The Beatles' *I Am The Walrus*. This gig was cool, classic and legendary – all the superlatives you need when you're 20 years old. And then Oasis were gone – fast-forwarding to *Live Forever* hysteria and a mega-gig at Knebworth in two years time.

I lost interest in the band after the second album, *What's The Story Morning Glory*, eager for new sounds. But in terms of an up-close lesson in how to <be> rock and roll, this gig remains unsurpassed.



to the Gallagher Brothers' northern swagger were the chief songwriters of the artists formerly known as Seymour: Blur.

In the rush to jump on the indie dance bandwagon as started by The Stone Roses and Happy Mondays at the tail end of the 1980s, Blur scored chart success with *There's No Other Way*, one of a number of unremarkable songs offering a variation on James Brown's *Funky Drummer* percussion breaks. After anonymous debut album *Leisure*, the band's change of direction on 1993's second album *Modern Life Is Rubbish* – with nods to defiantly English songwriting of both Ray Davies (The Kinks) and Syd Barrett (early Pink Floyd) – heralded a more confident, mature sound, but little expansion of its fan base. All change with 1994's *Parklife*, spawning some of the biggest hits of the year.

The elastic baseline of infectious *Girls and Boys* was the first off the blocks, but it's the album's title track that conjures up 1994 like no other. Drafting in actor Phil Daniels (star of 1979's movie *Quadrophenia* – another nod to The Who) was a pop masterstroke for a single that was part-novelty record, part Britpop anthem. Elsewhere, the most sophisticated songwriting of the melancholic *This is a Low* – based in part on the World Service's shipping forecast – pointed a way out of the Britpop cul-de-sac.

Second Division

Just like The Beatles and The Rolling Stones occupying the premier positions of '60s-vintage Britpop, the thrones occupied by Oasis and Blur had an ever-shifting second division of innovators, copyists and chancers at their feet. Among those that broke out of the confines of the indie charts to take their chances with the Top 40 were Oxford's Supergrass, York's Shed Seven and – best of all – Sheffield's Pulp.

Jarvis Cocker's ensemble had been an artistic concern since the late 1970s, but

the Britpop comet rightly dragged these pop eccentrics into its orbit. The following year certainly belonged to Pulp with the classic album *Different Class* and cerebral terrace stomp of Common People sealing the deal, but the arch lyricism of 1994's album *His 'n' Hers* and single *Do You Remember the First Time?* added a welcome intelligence to Britpop.

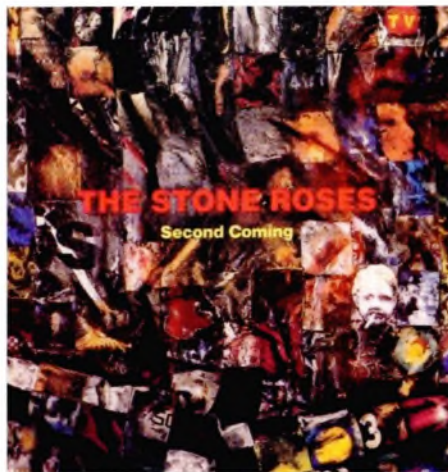
If Pulp were a Northern collision of Kes, Alan Bennett and Roxy Music, Suede were more informed by the Bowie's Thin White Duke and *Performance* than the Small Faces and *Blow Up*, evidenced on their ambitious second album, *Dog Man Star*. Sheltering under the Britpop umbrella by press association – specifically by now-defunct music magazine *Select* on its infamous 'Yanks Go Home' cover in 1993 – Suede nonetheless brought

glamour and invention to an otherwise sartorially high-street movement. Internal tensions imploded the original line up, featuring Johnny Marr fan, guitarist (now producer) Bernard Butler – an event mourned by fans.

Uncool Britannia

Blur and Oasis were definitely Britpop's Premier League. It's hard to imagine the lesser bands that came in their wake generating enough newsworthy behaviour to warrant coverage on the TV news when going head-to-head with singles *Country House* and *Roll With It* respectively in 1995. By this stage, Britpop was synonymous with the toe-curling media invention 'Cool Britannia', lumping New Labour in with the new pop. Rather than a rallying cry, it was a death knell: the crassness and laddishness that bubbled under the surface of the music of many of these bands now rose to the surface and into the mainstream.

Perhaps the biggest tombstone for the movement was the self-centred, self-important back-slapping of *1FI Friday* and the inexplicable rise of Chris Evans. To paraphrase Blur as we fire up the time machine, this was a low. ●



MEN BEHAVING BADLY

Five of the most rock and roll rock and rollers



THE STONE ROSES

Following hit singles on Silvertone, The Stone Roses' former record label re-releases *Sally Cinnamon* single without the band's consent. In retaliation, the band redecorate old label's offices with a Jackson Pollock-style paint job. Never mind the Pollocks. The Stone Roses end up in the dock.



THE ROLLING STONES

Bill Wyman takes a marathon slash on a petrol station forecourt: fined. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards are busted for drugs at Keef's Redlands pad in 1967: chokey. Brian Jones goes for a booze and pills-assisted swim: check-out time. The *Emotional Rescue* album: criminal.



THE WHO

Keith Moon drives a limo into a swimming pool on his 21st birthday, redesigning his teeth. Keith Moon nearly deafens band with explosives in drumkit live on American TV. Keith Moon dresses up as a Nazi for a night on the tiles. Basically, Keith Moon.



THE KINKS

There were onstage fights between drummer Mick Avory and guitarist Dave Davies aplenty. One '60s Cardiff gig led to Avory setting about Davies with a drum pedal, deciding against his cymbal stand that apparently, "would have decapitated him". Even temperamental guitarists aren't that expendable.



OASIS

Colourful language. Smashed hotel rooms. Sibling fights. Booze. Drugs. Divorces. Cancelled gigs. More booze. More drugs. Asking Chris Evans out for a fight during a gig. Oasis tick all the misbehaviour boxes. Fast forward to a messy split. It's amazing they were together for so long.

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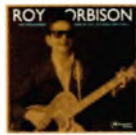


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Singles collection
1959-66

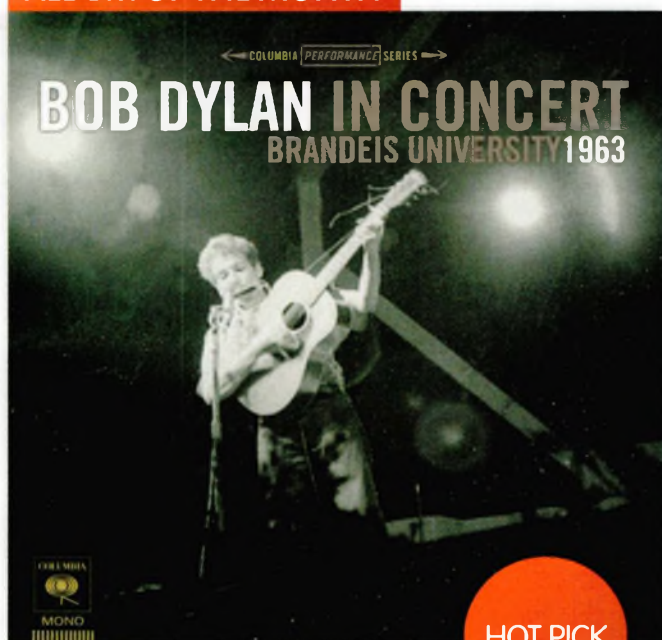


91 Marriner & the Academy
20th Century
Classics

Music reviews

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

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



HOT PICK

Bob Dylan

In Concert: Brandeis University 1963

columbiarecords.com

★★★★

Columbia Records

CD

ARCHIVE LIVE RECORDINGS made available long after the event are seldom a source of great revelation, let alone great music. All too often, they're simply an attempt to dredge something further out of a lucrative barrel, whose bottom has already been well and truly scraped. But there are exceptions and, occasionally, such long-unavailable recordings capture a snapshot of a special performer at a unique moment in time and expand our understanding of their artistry.

In recent years, Neil Young has released a number of early live recordings – and anything from Bob Dylan in his 1960s white-hot incandescence is almost certain to offer an insight into his step-changing impact on popular music.

This long-lost concert recording was made on the 10th of May, 1963 during a folk festival at a Jewish college in Massachusetts, and just before Dylan was about to become famous. But his 21-year-old aesthetic was already fully rounded and evolving with cataclysmic speed.

It's just acoustic guitar, harmonica and *that* voice, which was about to represent a generation. In terms of confidence, timing, stagecraft and sheer entertainment, it was already light years on from the tentative Woody Guthrieisms of the last Dylan archive release, *Live At The Gaslight* – recorded in Greenwich Village barely six months earlier in October 1962 and finally issued by Sony in 2005.

“Long-unavailable recordings capture a snapshot of a special performer.”

Few in the audience would have known who he was at that stage; his second studio album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* had not yet been issued and none of the songs he sang were commercially available at the time. But almost half-a-century on, this belated release reveals that Dylan delivered a performance that will never be forgotten.

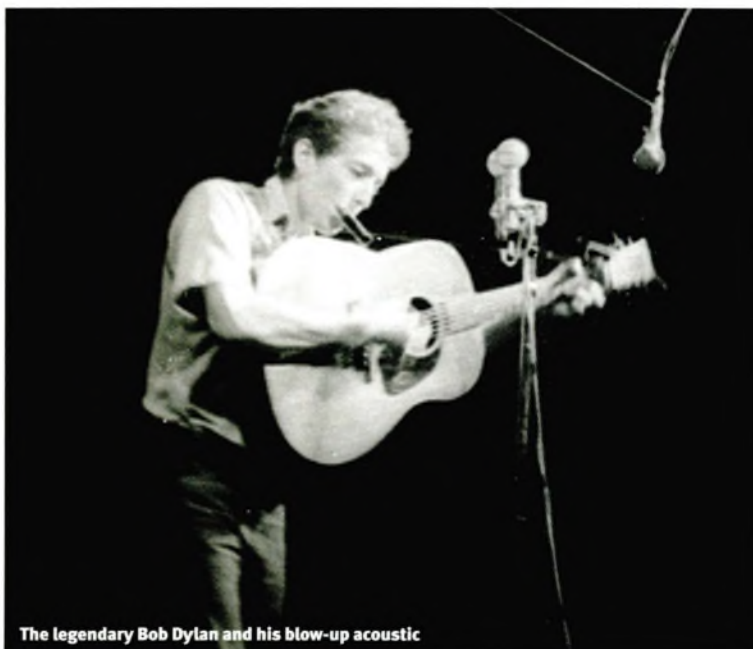
Taken from a reel-to-reel soundboard tape, found in the archives of the late music critic (and early Dylan champion) Ralph J. Gleason, the digital transfer of the two short sets superbly capture how Dylan establishes an intuitive rapport with his audience.

During the satirical *Talkin' John Birch Society Blues*, you

can hear peals of appreciative laughter as he delivers his mordant punchlines. At other times, such as when he's singing the coruscating *Masters of War*, he spits out arguably the angriest protest song he ever wrote. There are bursts of cheering, too, but the off-stage noises are never a distraction; they become an integral part of the performance, the exact opposite of dubbed-on TV show canned applause. What is particularly impressive is how deftly Dylan is able to switch moods and each time take the audience with him.

There's wit and humour on *Talkin' World War III Blues* and *Talkin' Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues*. But it's interspersed with searing, dramatic intensity, while *Bob Dylan's Dream* finds him opening up and offering a genuine glimpse into his youthful soul. A recording which reveals nothing less than genius in the making. **NW**

Standout tracks: Masters of War; Bob Dylan's Dream; Ballad of Hollis Brown



The legendary Bob Dylan and his blow-up acoustic



Pearl Jam
Vs and Vitalogy
sonymusic.com
★★★★★
4-CD

Sony

IT'S EASILY OVERLOOKED

that at the time grunge emerged out of Seattle in the early 1990s, Pearl Jam outsold Nirvana. Kurt Cobain then died, while Eddie Vedder lived, and rock's morbid obsession with living fast and dying young reduced Pearl Jam to silver medallists. It's a quite distorted view, as the remastering and repacking of their incendiary, but highly accessible second and third albums from 1993 and 1994 makes abundantly clear.

If you think grunge equals mud, think again. It's not that these recordings have been 'cleaned up' – rather that Pearl Jam were always smart enough to combine the enduring values of riff-laden stadium-rock with the angry, nerve-fraying ethos of grunge and never forgot the importance of songs, hooks and choruses.

Each of the three discs includes three previously unreleased out-takes and, on the third disc, is a previously unreleased 1994 live recording, from a tension-filled Boston concert a week after Cobain's death. **NW**
Standout tracks: Animal; Rearview Mirror; Last Exit; Not For You



HOT PICK

The Band
Music From Big Pink
mofi.com
★★★★★ Capitol/Mob Fidelity
SACD

MADE IN 1968 following a tour with Bob Dylan, The Band made its debut with an album named after the house they used to compose in. The song *In a Station* sounds like the basis of later songs by both Steely Dan and Joe Walsh, another is reminiscent of *Humble Pie* and Eric Clapton is said to have changed tack away from hard rock because of it.

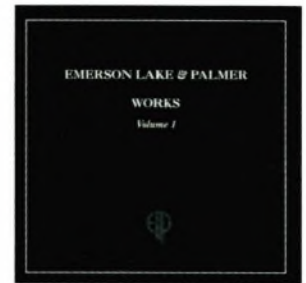
This Mofi (mobile fidelity) mastering makes the most of the original tape by reinforcing the bottom end and clarifying the musicianship and singing. You can fully appreciate the relaxed bass playing of Rick Danko and the interplay of organ and guitar that makes this album so interesting and even with Mofi's efforts, that doesn't diminish its appeal. **JK**
Standout tracks: In A Station; Caledonia Mission; The Weight



Billy Joel
Piano Man
mofi.com
★★★★★ Columbia/Mob Fidelity
SACD

PIANO MAN, the song from 1973, was and still is Joel's signature tune, the anthemic piece he ends nearly every concert with. Influenced by Elton John's *Tumbleweed Connection*, its wild west references being the most obvious link. His songwriting isn't quite as strong, but there's no getting away from the hooks in pieces like *Captain Jack*; this tune can get under your skin with very little exposure.

The sound created by producer Michael Stewart is resolutely commercial, so it sounds great on the radio, but rather obviously compressed in a wideband system. Even when Joel throws everything into the mix, it's still possible to make out what's going on and that's about as good as you'll get. **JK**
Standout tracks: Captain Jack; Piano Man



Emerson, Lake & Palmer
Works Volume 1
legacyrecordings.com
★★★★★ Sony Legacy
CD

RELEASED IN 1977 at the height of the punk revolution, ELP were working mostly apart. Yet each emerges as a serious composer determined to show there's more to pop than three thrashed chords.

If ELP were all too easily dismissed as pretentious in the fevered climate of '77, today it's far easier to appreciate their sonic audacity. Emerson's cleverly structured *Piano Concerto No 1* moves from pastoral beauty to thunderous fury. Lake's songs betray a wistful romanticism and Palmer's jazzy take on Bach is a *tour de force*. When they finally come together on *Fanfare For The Common Man*, they create a defining moment in orchestral rock. **NW**
Standout tracks: Piano Concerto No 1; Two-Part Invention In D Minor; Fanfare For The common Man

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

Canned Heat Boogie With Canned Heat purepleasurerecords.com



★★★★★ EMI/Pure Pleasure
180g

WHILE THE BRITISH are credited with taking the blues back to America in the sixties, they weren't the only aficionados of the

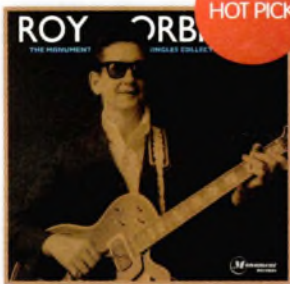
creed. LA-based Canned Heat was formed by two blues obsessives: Alan 'Blind Owl' Wilson (guitar, harmonica, vocals) and singer Bob 'The Bear' Hite in 1965.

Their second album was released three years later and contains the breakthrough hit *On The Road Again*. This is one of the strongest grooves-in-white blues, but not a straightforward one thanks to the tambura drone that gives it a hypnotic vibe. The ten tracks are a mix of straight covers and boogie-powered originals, while the final

track, Fried Hockey Boogie, is a workout in which the two guitarists and harp player get to show off their chops.

The sound is remarkably substantial for its vintage. It also features one of the fattest bass-guitar sounds of the sixties. The vocals have decent stereo and the soundstage is pretty rich. The guitar feedback at the end of one track still has a startling realism and must have sounded outrageous in the studio. **JK**
Standout tracks: On The Road Again; Fried Hockey Boogie





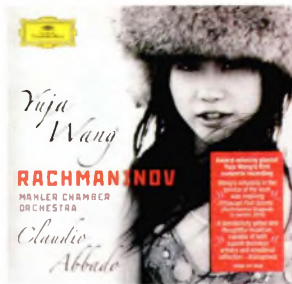
HOT PICK

Roy Orbison
The Monument
Singles Collection
1959-66
legacyrecordings.com
★★★★★ Sony Legacy
CD

IT'S FASCINATING how a batch of singles collected together more than 40 years later can sound so cohesive. Disc one compiles 20 'A-sides' by the Big O and yet, somehow, they sound like they were intended not only to be an album, but a concept album, no less.

Sony has done a fine job in showing how the natural warmth of ancient analogue sound can be enhanced by digital remastering. Equally impressive is the quality of the material: the songs and performances on the second disc of 'B-sides' contain no real throwaways and could easily have been hits. **NW**

Standout tracks: Oh Pretty Woman; It's Over; Only The Lonely; Love Hurts
Press; Chris Goodman at Outside



Rachmaninov
Rhapsody On A
Theme Of Paganini;
Piano Concerto No 2
deccaclassics.com
★★★★★ Deutsche Grammophon
CD

AS ANYONE WHO'S HEARD her stunning DG accounts of the Liszt and Chopin sonatas will know, Yuja Wang has a formidable technique and plays with plenty of attitude and personality.

The *Rhapsody* receives a fleet nimble performance, full of detail and panache. Wang has the sheer dexterity needed to project every note cleanly – the playing really dances and sings.

The *Concerto* is a deeper, more sombre, less virtuosic piece and she's able to project plenty of detail in the solo.

Abbado and the MCO provide crisp, imaginative support and DG's recording quality is detailed, transparent, natural, and well balanced. Applause is included at the end. **JH**
Standout tracks: 21-26



HOT PICK

Marriner & The Academy
20th Century Classics
deccaclassics.com
★★★★★ Decca
10 x CD

BACK IN THE SIXTIES and seventies, every new Argo LP released by Neville Marriner and the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields was a definite audiophile 'must-have'. The combination of brilliant incisive playing and outstanding sound quality proved irresistible and many Marriner/Academy Argo recordings became LP classics.

This boxed set gathers together ten discs released during this golden period and each is housed in a facsimile of the original LP sleeve.

Surprisingly, Marriner's famous Tippet disc is missing, but overall the analogue sound comes up as fresh as new paint, with a ripe trenchant string tone that demonstrates the engineering skills of the Argo (Decca) production team. **JH**
Standout track: Disc 9, track 11

HIGH-RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

The Unthanks

A Retrospective

bowers-wilkins.com/SocietyofSound

★★★★★

B&W Society of Sound

24-bit/44kHz



THE UNTHANKS are two folk-singing sisters from the North East. Their acapella singing heritage is

bolstered here by the accompaniment of a small band, whose influences are diverse and whose playing is minimalist and adventurous.

It is a bit Geordie-history-referential in places, nodding respectfully to Alex Glasgow's *When The Boat Comes In*, but that does no harm – better Alex Glasgow than Cheryl Cole.

The 24-bit recording presents the performances with great integrity and renders the sisters' voices with refreshing insight. If there is any justice, then this album will spark a folk-rock revival. **MS**

Standout tracks: Blue Bleezing Blind Drunk; Blue's Gaen Oot O'The Fashion

The Neil Cowley Trio

Radio Silence

naimlabel.com

★★★★★

The Naim Label

24-bit/48kHz stereo



THE START OF the first track on this album has to be the finest opener we have ever heard to an ostensibly 'jazz'

album. You feel like hollering "Neil Cowley kicks ass!" given the enthusiasm and energy with which the pianist launches into the riff that propels the first number, *Monoface*.

Throughout the album his playing has a wonderful, almost vocal quality. It often seems as though there is nothing mechanical intruding between his brain and the sounds emerging from his piano.

The open-sounding 24-bit recording simply reinforces the feeling that Cowley's ability to communicate is near transcendental and vividly showcases his unity and harmony with his bass player and drummer. **MS**
Standout tracks: Monoface; Gerald

BLU-RAY DVD

Francis Rossi Live At St Luke's London ear-music.net



★★★★★ earMusic
Blu-ray LPCM stereo

THIS IS THE CONCERT where the voice of Status Quo played the ten tracks of *One Step At A Time*, his second solo album, plus

another ten more, only one of which is a variant on a Quo original – *Caroline* (shuffle version). The rest are a mix of what might have been Quo numbers, with some original songs that have a more contemporary AOR feel.

The band features two Telecasters from Rossi's senior and junior, plus a Les Paul and, on occasion, a fourth guitar from the keyboard player. If they'd put their mind to it they could have done *Freebird!* For better or worse they avoid that particular classic and play

as if they'd not played together a great deal, as indeed was the case. Which is a pity, as some of the songs are pretty good and will undoubtedly appeal to Quo fans.

The sound, which unusually for a Blu-ray disc with its potential for multichannel flavours, comes only in the two-channel variety. It's live and direct but a little hard-edged – it could be cleaner and warmer, but possibly reflects the nature of the bare brick-walled former church where the performance took place. **JK**
Standout tracks: Electric Arena

Hi-fi's true Elite

Quad ownership is in reach for all thanks to the new, affordable Elite range. *Jimmy Hughes* auditions hi-fi royalty for the modern age

Quad is audio royalty, one of hi-fi's oldest and most iconic brands. Conservative in the best sense, Quad equipment is solid, stable, well-engineered and free from gimmicks. Its famous slogan "the closest approach to the original sound" reassures you that fidelity – nothing added, nothing taken away – counts above all else.

Quad's Elite is a keenly priced compact separates system that replaces the company's popular 99 series. The new kit features improved audiophile-grade components, superior power transformers and multi-layer circuit boards – designed using some of the most advanced software available.

The Elite line-up consists of a CD player, (or combined CD player and preamp), optional FM tuner, preamp, plus a choice of power amps – 80 watts stereo, or 150 watts monobloks. The beautifully finished 11L Classic compact two-way loudspeaker completes the set-up.

Each individual component is a separate self-contained entity, but crucially, the various Elite components work extremely well as a team – not least, because the whole system is wired together via dedicated Quadlink multi-pin interconnect cables.

This greatly simplifies connection, while providing balanced signal operation, which should improve sound quality. There's more: using Quadlink cables enables system control, which allows each individual component to communicate with the others.

As Quad supplies a full set of Quadlink cables with the Elite system, it makes sense (technically and economically) to use these rather than regular interconnects. Speakers connect via the usual 4mm/Spade connectors and bi-wiring is possible. With the stereo power amp, output is conservatively rated at 80 watts,

for those needing more, there's a monoblok version of the power amp delivering 150 watts. However, the basic stereo power amp sounds solid and powerful, creating an impression of weight and dynamics. It sounds as though there's power to spare – useful, given the 11L Classic's 87dB sensitivity.

The promotional material mentions that these new products deliver "classic Quad sound, while adding increased clarity and definition". Really? But we think we understand what they're getting at!

Tilt for beginners...

One link the new Elite system has with older classic Quad products is the unique Tilt tone control. This was introduced on the 44 preamp back in the late '70s – at a time when

"For those wanting something that looks good and delivers excellent sound."

tone controls were fast becoming deeply unfashionable. Many amplifiers had dispensed with tonal correction altogether, but Quad stuck to its guns.

However, rather than just providing conventional bass and treble adjustment, the company came up with a single control which it called Tilt. Turned clockwise, it boosts bass while cutting treble. Turned anti-clockwise, it lifts treble, while cutting back the bass. Think of it as a sort of lightness/darkness control.

Quad's reasoning is that 'bright' recordings are often deficient in bass, as well as having too much treble. Conversely, 'dull' recordings are often balanced away from the treble towards the lower frequencies. So, effective correction of these faults requires a two-pronged

COMPONENTS



1 ELITE PREAMP £850

Stereo preamp with four adjustable-sensitivity line inputs, phono (MM/MC) input and tape output. Tilt tone control gives bass/treble lift/cut, with high and low frequency filters and a switchable bass boost.



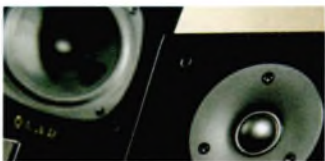
2 ELITE CDS COMPACT DISC PLAYER £800

Bespoke transport, with low-jitter master-clock and Crystal 24-bit/192kHz upsampling DAC. It has a single set of analogue outputs and an optical digital output. Multi-layer circuit boards used.



3 ELITE STEREO POWER AMP £700

Stereo power amp offering around 80 watts RMS output per channel. Single set of inputs and loudspeaker outputs. 150-watt monoblok version also available.



4 CLASSIC 11L LOUDSPEAKERS £380

Compact two-way design featuring a Kevlar-coned bass/mid driver with improved motor and a 25mm fabric-domed tweeter with unusual sunken wavefront surround. Bass/mid and tweeter crossovers kept physically separate. Two rear-facing ports.







LEFT: The Quad 11L loudspeaker is a third-generation two-way design
RIGHT: The classic heat-dissipating chassis remains unchanged
BELOW: The minimalist fascia of the stereo power amp

Two flavours

The Elite CD player is available in two flavours: the basic CDS (reviewed here), or the CDP, which can function as a CD player/digital preamp, with three digital inputs (coaxial or optical) and sets of fixed and variable analogue outputs – the latter for direct connection to a power amp.

Each Elite component has a very simple fascia plate, with buttons/controls kept to a minimum. You can access most of the important functions without the remote, but the latter is needed for things like the EQ (Tilt and Filter) controls. Presentation and build is of high quality, with thick cast-alloy casework.

Quad's 11L Classic loudspeaker is a compact third-generation two-way design that follows in the footsteps of the well-regarded 11L2, which launched in 2007. The new Classic version features an improved motor system for the Kevlar bass/mid driver, said to reduce cone breakup and distortion, while allowing the speaker to play louder.

There's a new 25mm fabric-dome tweeter with a slightly 'sunken' front that functions like a shallow horn or waveguide. Bass/mid and tweeter crossover networks are physically separate, with proper star-earthing to the terminals and drive units.

attack – a boost at one end, coupled with a cut at the other.

The amount of correction offered here is fairly modest. The tilt function has six settings (plus off) with a maximum of 3dB boost/cut with the control set to its most extreme. As a result, tonal balance corrections are fairly subtle. Another long-held Quad belief is that filtering is useful with recordings of lower quality.

Consequently, its Elite preamp offers high and low-frequency filters to curtail the response at frequency extremes in order to reduce things like hiss, scratches, and rumble. Additionally, the Elite preamp features an optional bass lift setting – to help bolster the limited deep-bass response of many small loudspeakers.

Bass cut and boost settings hinge at a frequency of 300Hz, delivering a lift of about 3dB at 60Hz, or a reduction of -4.5dB, around 30Hz. Again, these are fairly modest adjustments – unlike amplifiers from the '70s which often gave up to 12dB boost or cut. The HF filter rolls-off the highs gently from about 7kHz.





High-quality components are featured in the crossover.

The cabinets are made from two different types of material – a combination of high-density chipboard and fibreboard is used to break-up the common resonant modes that can lead to coloration and tonal balance shifts. Quad claims that this results in a solid, rigid, inert cabinet that has less 'signature' than cabinets made from pure MDF.

Make mine high gloss

A choice of finishes is available, including high-gloss piano black or cherry and these look gorgeous. However, for those wanting something simpler/cheaper, Quad offers a non-lacquered finish at a saving of about £50. Given that the high-gloss piano black/cherry models only cost around £380, the 11L Classics offer fabulous value.

We sampled the electronic components separately before listening to the system as a whole, and early impressions were very favourable. All three deliver a sound that is smooth, clean, natural and very open. Initially, a degree of tonal thinness was apparent, but this soon disappears with extended use as the units burnt-in.

The 11L loudspeakers sound crisp and detailed, with a lively top-end, and plenty of bite and immediacy. At the same time, the tonal balance strikes the ear as open and natural, with low coloration. The sound is nicely forward and crisp, but without any sense of emphasis that might create a 'peaky' sort of result.

Bass is very good for the size of cabinet and while (inevitably) the lowest frequencies are not reproduced with the fullness and weight of a big floorstander, the bass output is surprisingly good down to about 40Hz. Bass sounds clean and nimble, and very clean, with no smearing or overhang.

Clarity is very good and the sound never seems to 'crowd up', even during loud complex pieces of music. There's good portrayal of depth and ambience, creating a plausible soundstage that has width and space. Stereo imaging sounds clean and precise, with solid placement of instruments and voices.

Although the 11Ls measured sensitivity is only 'average' at about 87dB, subjectively the sound is surprisingly lively and dynamic. The music confidently projects out from the boxes and doesn't sound over-damped or 'held-back'. At the same time, there's good integration between mid-range and treble.

The tonal balance is crisp and forward, but not obviously 'toppy'. On classical music, the lack of coloration creates a result that sounds smooth and natural. Rock reproduces with speed and attack, and plenty of forward-momentum. Timing is good and the music always sounds coherent and integrated.

Speakers' corner

Quad recommends placing the speakers at least 0.5m from rear walls and 1m (or more) from side walls. Placing the speakers well



DISTRIBUTOR:
Quad
Electroacoustics Ltd
TELEPHONE:
01480 447700
WEBSITE:
quad-hifi.co.uk

away from walls should increase openness, but at the loss of bass output. Bass will increase as you move the speakers closer to rear and side walls, but watch out for loss of clarity/boominess if too close.

Using the bass lift feature on the preamp helps bolster the low frequencies, but (as so often with controls of this type) the effect produced tends to emphasise frequencies in the lower midrange. We experimented with bass lift, but eventually preferred results with it off. If you want a bit more grunt, consider adding a sub-woofer.

Operationally, the system is straightforward and pleasant to use, but one slight foible is the excessively swift default back to original settings as soon as a button is pressed. For example, when selecting a disc track, you need to press Play within a second or two – otherwise your selection will be forgotten.

The press-button volume control is a matter of taste too – we prefer a normal rotary analogue control – but the Quad system works well enough. Aside from these minor grumbles, the Elite is a pleasure to use – and a delight to listen to. It delivers a sound that is smooth and natural, yet dynamic and immediate.

For those wanting something that looks good and delivers excellent sound in a small, stylish package at an attractive price, Quad's Elite system is an enticing package. It's genuine hi-fi separates, but without the fuss and drama. It's simple to connect and set up, and easy-to-use. Best of all, it sounds superb! ●

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.



MALCOLM STEWART
EXPERTISE: COMPUTER AUDIO

WITH DECADES OF experience in audiophile journalism, Malcolm now combines his legendary status as an ex-editor and writer on all things hi-fi, with his unquestionable expertise on streaming, networking and computer audio.



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 I'm thinking of upgrading from my Castle Richmond speakers. Any recommendations to go with a Marantz PM66 and a CD63 Ki Sig? It has to be a standmount and can't be more than £1,000. *Ralph O'Connor, via email*

A We are guessing that you will reuse the stands that the Richmonds were on for the new speakers.

If this is the case, a whisker under budget is the £985 PMC DB1i. This is a firm favourite of ours (see our *Blind-listening Group Test* review in HFC 334). They are easy enough for the Marantz to drive and should show off their qualities without showing up their limitations at the same time.



Hit the buffers

Q I am considering purchasing a high-quality 24-bit/192kHz DAC in order to interface my hi-res computer audio with my hi-fi. I can then also use the DAC with other equipment as a bonus. Sound quality is paramount, above convenience.

The choice of suitable products varied at first glance, but after some investigation I am concerned about several issues which I feel narrows the field considerably. My primary concern is with regard to the issue of streaming. I currently use the optical output on the back of my computer, but I am aware that interrupting the data stream can occasionally cause skips (however small)

in the music. I understand that a buffer is needed at the DAC end in order to overcome this issue completely.

Are there any DACs (or streamers for that matter) currently on the market, that provide a buffer for the optical signal? I know that some DACs have asynchronous USB, which achieves something similar, but few of these support full 24-bit/192kHz (over USB) and isolation is less sure.

I have so far considered the Benchmark Audio DAC1 HDR (which only goes to 24-bit/96kHz on USB), although I am unsure if it is asynchronous. I am also intrigued by the Antelope Audio Zodiac Plus that you reviewed in HFC 345.

Which of these has better sound quality and is the Zodiac Gold better still? I realise that such products are not simply DACs, but are also preamps as well.

My research suggests that the above products offer superior audio quality and other facilities (and are therefore possibly better value)

than the £1,000 DAC price bracket (e.g. the Benchmark Audio DAC1 USB), which I would otherwise consider.



The Antelope Zodiac Plus is up to the task of buffering sources

I do primarily want to use the device as a DAC, rather than as a preamp, feeding into my existing hi-fi (via an AVI Laboratory pre). The Benchmark Audio products allow this, as the audio output can be fixed as well as variable. But do the Antelope Audio products have this facility?

The inclusion of a headphone socket in these products, as well as an analogue input, leads me to think that I could use such a device as my primary headphone amp and sell my old amp. Are the headphone amps in these devices up to the job? I would also appreciate your views on alternative products which you might be able to recommend (particularly with regard to the buffering issue), be they DACs (with or without preamp or headphone amp) or streamers.

Chris Lloyd, via email

A Most DACs that we have tested seem to have sufficient buffering to avoid drop-outs from any source they are connected to. In the course of normal use, we don't feel it is likely to be an issue. It is also worth noting that the Squeezebox Touch (HFC 338) can communicate with computers and NAS drives in such a way as to further reduce processor cycles, while offering a digital output.

We have never encountered dropouts with USB. We have only listened to the non-USB-equipped version of the Benchmark (HFC 341), but we do regard it very highly. We would say, however, that the Antelope

Zodiac Plus (HFC 345) is one of the very best and most flexible DACs we have tested recently. It is able to handle 24-bit/192kHz signals over all inputs and includes a headphone amp that we feel is more than up to the job of standing in for your existing unit. The volume control is digital and if you didn't want to use the Antelope as a preamp, it is transparent when switched out of the circuit.

Fine tuning

Q I have been an *Hi-Fi Choice* subscriber for a number of years and have been heavily influenced by your reviews.

At present, I am enjoying the following set up: a Linn LP12 with Ekos tonearm; Lyra Dorian cartridge and Lingo Mk 2 Trampolin. I use a Trichord Dino and Dino+ for my phono stage. My CD is a Leema Acoustics Antilla, amplification is a Leema Acoustics Tucana (with balanced option) and Monitor Audio PL100 speakers on MA stands. Cabling is The Chord Company Chameleon Silver Plus, balanced CD to amp and RCA Dino to amp with Rumour 4 bi-wire speaker cable. I also use an IsoTek Mini Sub G 11 and mains cables throughout.

All units are on good-quality shelving on wall supports. The CD player also sits on a Mission Isoplat. Listening is shared equally by vinyl and CD and consists mainly of blues, jazz, rock, Mozart and Tchaikovsky.

I now wish to fine tune this set-up and would welcome your suggestions regarding improving



The Arcam Solo Mini is still an all-in-one star

mains, supports and cables and whether upgrading to Antilla 3 by factory retro-fit would be worthwhile, as well as any arm change or re-wire. Would the Inspire re-build of the LP12 be cost-effective? I can manage a budget of up to £1,500.

Mike Thompson, via email

A In truth, this system sounds well balanced and seems to have had considerable effort applied to cabling and isolation already, and we are not sure if further updates will make any significant difference.

If you are able to use an equipment stand, the Magic Racks MR1 (HFC 345) might be a good place to start, as this offers extremely high levels of component isolation (although we would keep the Linn on a wall shelf). This would leave budget over for a tonearm rewire – the very talented Audio Origami (audioorigami.co.uk) will perform a rewire of the Ekos with Kondo wiring for £255.

We haven't heard the Inspire rebuild of the LP12, although we have heard good things about it. Were you looking for an excellent turntable upgrade, we would hold the budget in reserve and wait until you had the £1,850 required for the excellent Linn Uphorik phono stage (HFC 344). That would present a considerable step forward over the Trichord setup you currently have.

Multi-source joy

Q What can you recommend for circa £1,500, that will give me an amp, DAB/FM radio, floor-standing speakers and deck?

I'd like to keep CD capability, if possible and the total package must be able to link to the TV to get the TV/ DVD sound through the new speakers.

David Sussams, via email

A The best way of achieving this is to start with an all-in-one system and add turntable capability and speakers to suit. The standout product under £1,000 for this remains the Arcam Solo Mini (HFC 320) at £750 which now appears to be even less online.

This is an excellent CD, FM and DAB all-in-one with a fantastic-sounding internal amplifier. The amp is not the most powerful going, but the 25-watt output would be more than up to the task of driving the extremely talented Monitor Audio BX5 (HFC 345), a speaker efficient enough to work well on the output of the Solo Mini.

As the Solo Mini has four line inputs, adding a turntable like the excellent Edwards Audio TT1 (HFC 342) is no problem. This will require a phono stage to work correctly, but the £100 NAD PP3 (HFC 335) would keep you in budget and offers excellent performance. This would be a talented and enjoyable system, which still has additional inputs for TV and DVD, if you wanted to add them.

Setting the Benchmark

Q Thanks for all the information in *Help & Advice*, entitled 'Constant craving' (HFC 343). I have a quick question in response to your answer (of which I will most likely purchase a Benchmark DAC1).

As well as an Arcam CD37, I also have a DV135. My idea is to, perhaps, sell both the CD37 and C31 and use the DV135 as the transport, and the Benchmark as the preamp. I only use CD and DVD replay.

The funds (from selling both the CD37 and C31) could be used on future upgrades. My only reservation is, would the transport on the DV135 be up to the task?

Dave Walsh, via email



The Magic Racks MR1 is superb at isolating audio components



The Benchmark DAC1 is fairly unfussy about digital sources

A The Benchmark, like almost all modern DACs, is designed in such a way as to be far less dependent on the signal from a transport as some older DAC designs. Developments in re-clocking and the basic design of the DAC circuits themselves mean that the absolute quality of the digital signal is less important. Additionally, the measurements of the digital output of the DV135 are pretty good, so we cannot see there being significant differences in performance, apart from the DV135 being slightly slower to operate.

Got your number

Q Jimmy Hughes gave the number of someone who can repair and upgrade the TEAC T1 transport. Do you still have that number please?

In another old issue of *Hi-Fi Choice*, he also talked about a disc-cleaning fluid called ROR 1 and gave a contact number for it. As this number is now a spice warehouse, do you have any updated information?

Sid Scales, via email

A Jimmy Hughes replies: I have absolutely no idea who might be able to repair/upgrade TEAC T1 transports – you must be going back 15-20 years on this one! Could it have been someone like Trichord Research (trichordresearch.com)? They certainly know about CD player upgrades and (if not doing such work themselves) would probably be aware of those doing mechanical work to transports. Maybe they could help. It seems

the UK ROR distributor is Newpro on 01367 242411.

Dynamic disc-spinner

Q I want to replace my Cambridge Audio 640Cv2. I've been looking at external DACs, but I really want another one-box CD player for space and aesthetic reasons. I need it to be lively and upfront, to get the best from my Marantz PM-15 and if it did have digital inputs (in case I wanted to take the plunge into streaming at a later date) that would be ideal.

Including selling the Cambridge and having a really good look between the sofa cushions, I have a budget of up to £1,700 for something that is a genuine step forward over what is still a very good CD player.

Nabil Shah, via email

A Our preferred choice under these circumstances would be the £1,495 Leema Stream III that we reviewed with matching Pulse III amplifier in HFC 339. This is a great CD player, with excellent timing and the sort of upfront sound that you seem to be looking for. As well as the ability to play CDs, around the back are no less than four digital inputs including USB.

This makes the Leema one of the most flexible CD players we have encountered at any price and something that should fit the bill nicely. Your other choices are rather limited at the price and the next CD player that combines the type of sound you are looking for with the all-important digital input (singular in this case) is the impressive £2,200 Moon CD3.3.



The Leema Stream III is an uncommonly flexible CD player

THE HI-FI CHOICE GUIDE TO: OPTIMISING YOUR LPs



VINYL FANS WILL will know that a noisy record can be a frustrating listen. Fortunately, there are two different methods that can be employed to ensure you have a clean record collection.

The first is preventative and involves making sure that your vinyl stays clean. A record-cleaning brush, for example, is an essential accessory for clean records and a quick once-over before playing will never do any harm. Good anti-static brushes are available from various manufacturers from about £10 and up.

Stylus-cleaning fluid can also help keep records in good condition, as a clean stylus won't deposit tiny amounts of debris deep into the groove of the record it touches.

If your collection is already dirty, a record-cleaning machine will be a better investment. These start at £400 fully built (some are available cheaper as kits), but the improvements that they can bring to the playback of dirty vinyl are considerable.

Having restored your vinyl to immaculate condition, you may want to look into some clean record inner sleeves to keep them that way. Then sit back and enjoy some perfect, silent-vinyl playback. ●



NEW

- Cyrus launches its new streaming-compatible products. The range includes the Stream XP (the perfect basis for a new high performance system), Stream X (ideal for adding to a Cyrus system that already includes a DAC) and Streamline (a complete all-in-one music system)
- Monitor Audio introduces the Gold GX speaker range comprising both standmount and floorstanding models along with centre and rear effect speakers and an active subwoofer. GX uses technology from Monitor Audio's flagship Platinum series.
- Denon has added the DBP-2012UD to its range of Blu-ray players. This universal player will play SACD and DVD-Audio discs, as well as 3D Blu-ray discs, and is DLNA-certified for accessing content over your home network.



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- Enfield*** 020 8367 3132
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- Exeter*** 01392 218895
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- Guildford*** 01483 536666
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- Lancaster*** 01524 39657
- Leeds (Wetherby)*** 01937 586886
- Lincoln*** 01522 527397
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- Oxford*** 01865 241773
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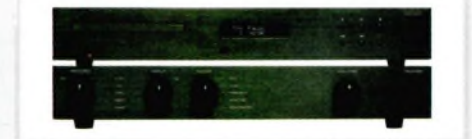
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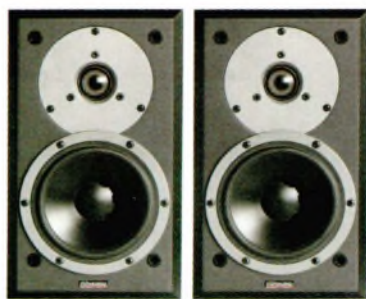
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Minitest

Need some pin-money speakers for the study, kitchen or garage? **Richard Black** is your guide

Cambridge Audio

S30

PRICE: £130 CONTACT: 08709 001000
WEBSITE: CAMBRIDGEAUDIO.COM

WE KNOW CAMBRIDGE as a manufacturer of electronics, with some tasty mid-range offerings; but speakers? We'd missed that one, principally because the available models are all deeply budget offerings and as such are unlikely to appear in our normal *Blind-listening Group Test*. In this environment, though, the S30 fits perfectly. It's on the larger side for a miniature at 160mm wide (the S20 is a little smaller) but still dinky enough and features the usual two drivers, the bass one being of woven-fibre construction with a central phase plug, while the tweeter has a soft dome. Internally there's a simple three-component crossover fed from bi-wireable (!) terminals, while acoustic damping is restricted to low-density foam on the cabinet walls. The speaker is quite deep and has a reflex port at the rear.

In a group of all-round high-achievers, this model made its mark as the most confident in the bass. There is a combination of extension, kick and tunefulness in the bass that comes as a surprise – obviously a pleasant one – from such a small enclosure and makes this a speaker well suited to material like rock. Of course, the lowest depths are still a touch on the light side, but most of the time this is well hidden and the bass that is present is of consistently high quality. The slight downside is detail, which we felt doesn't quite reach the highest standards achieved among these four, but it's still good and is accompanied by good imaging with decent depth. Midrange and treble tonality is very good and there's no sense of strain in handling dynamic extremes.

VERDICT AT ITS BEST WITH ENERGETIC, rhythmic music, this speaker is a lively performer with class-leading bass



Q Acoustics

2010

PRICE: £115 CONTACT: 01279 501111
WEBSITE: QACOUSTICS.CO.UK

Q ACOUSTICS IS A RECENTLY FORMED house brand of Armour Home Electronics, the home of QED, Goldring, Alphason and many others. The speakers are all at, or around the budget end of the market and are aimed equally at sound-only and video applications – though the centre speaker, for instance, is clearly a little more specific. This is the smallest bookshelf model and at 150mm wide, it's absolutely par for the course among current mini-speakers. It includes a paper-cone woofer, a soft-dome tweeter and a rear-mounted reflex port for which a foam bung is supplied (useful in near-wall siting). The crossover is quite sophisticated and uses good-quality components, while the inside is lightly damped with synthetic wool. Terminals are on the base and accessories available include dedicated stands and wall-mounting brackets.

This is quite simply a shockingly revealing loudspeaker. We can give a simple example to illustrate that: one of the recordings we used for audition was a very familiar one of solo piano. Despite its familiarity, we had never previously been aware of some noise from the pianist's stool, which this speaker showed up clearly for what it is. Similar insights attended various recordings and throughout we were deeply impressed by the amount of detail we were hearing. No, deep bass won't substitute from that of a good high-end floorstander and, at times, rhythm isn't necessarily the most convincing, but taken as a whole, however, this is a hell of a loudspeaker for its price.

VERDICT DESPITE MINOR LIMITATIONS in the bass, the sheer cleanliness of this speaker's sound is astonishing and gives fresh insights into familiar recordings



Roth Audio OLi10

PRICE: £100 CONTACT: 01753 682782
WEBSITE: ROTHAUDIO.CO.UK

ONE OF THE MOST obviously miniature of the speakers around, the OLi actually has the same overall width as the Q Acoustics 2010, but presents a narrower face to the world as the front panel is only 130mm across; the sides are tastefully bowed outwards. A 100mm bass driver with a woven cone and a phase plug is partnered by a small dome, apparently based on silk (bit of a luxury at this price), with a vestigial horn assisting it. There's the usual rear-mounted reflex port and the crossover is a second-order type. A little internal acoustic damping is provided by synthetic wool and wall-mounting brackets are supplied. We particularly liked the look of the maple veneer on our review sample. No effort at all is made to hide panel joins, indeed they are a positive visual feature.

Each of the speakers in this group had its particular area of excellence and for the OLi10 it turned out to be tonal balance. Once again, excepting the deep bass (we'd like the moon on a stick, but it's not happening any day soon), the balance is remarkably fine, even to an admirable degree and as a result favouring no one instrument or voice unduly over others. The narrow cabinet helps this remain true even some way off-axis. At the same time there is a really good kick to the bass which compensates well for the lack of real extension and makes lively music highly convincing. Detail is good, very good even, and imaging precise laterally, though we felt it lacks a little depth. We also enjoyed the dynamics, which once again transcend expectations and ebb and flow with little semblance or effort.

VERDICT **TONALLY, AN UNUSUALLY** even-handed loudspeaker which makes up for its lack of deep bass with very good upper-bass energy. Detailed and lively, too



Wharfedale Diamond 10.0

PRICE: £130 CONTACT: 01480 447700
WEBSITE: WHARFEDEALE.CO.UK



THE ORIGINAL DIAMOND appeared in the 1980s and this really is the 10th incarnation, though the name has come to denote the whole range. As tiny as ever, the 10.0 is the smallest and by a few millimetres the smallest of the speakers in this survey. It presents a smart face to the world, especially without the grille fitted, thanks to the polished-metal surround to both drivers against the piano-black front panel. A wide variety of veneers is available. Acoustic technology has not been ignored either and the bass unit is unusual at this price in using a Kevlar fabric weave, with a pattern which is intended to help break up resonance. The rubber roll surround on the cone is similarly patterned. The phase plug is actually a dust cap – that is, attached to the cone rather than to the magnet. At the rear of the speaker is the usual reflex port, plus a couple of screw threads for fixing to a wall mount.

We felt the sound of this speaker can sometimes seem a little dry, apparently a tonal effect due to very slight unevenness in the treble. That can seem disconcerting in quick comparisons, but on longer listening there's a great deal to admire here. In particular, rhythm is excellent with very good energy and life in the bass and effortless dynamics, making this a top choice for rock and suchlike. Voices are very well served and although detail doesn't come across as especially analytical, it's very easy to hear the distinct layers and strands in a piece of music. Imaging is very good, perhaps the best of the group for depth and very consistent laterally. Classical and other all-acoustic music can sometimes seem a little closer at first, but there's always plenty of space around and behind performers. ●

VERDICT **A STRIKINGLY ENERGETIC** and rhythmic speaker which also manages very good insight. Notably communicative with voices



All loudspeakers, of any size, style and price, are sensitive to positioning. It may seem perverse to spend what could easily be 50 per cent of the price on stands, but it wouldn't be money wasted.

If practical constraints decree shelf or desk mounting, or wall hanging, then experiment with lifting the speakers off the support surface (an inch or two can be quite audible), ditto spacing from the

back wall and damping the port to some extent (as offered by Q Acoustics). It's certainly clear from this group that high standards can be achieved from little speakers, so don't settle for mediocrity!

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VECTEUR I 4-2 integrated amp, 80 watts. Excellent condition, including remote and original power cable, (£1,200) £475. Can demo. **07748 652009 (Portsmouth).**

NAIM SXPS burndy cable for connecting power supply to CD player etc. Excellent condition, £250. **01933 405875 (Northamptonshire).**

MARANTZ CD10 CD player, boxed with remote. Datasheet available as PDF, £300. **07771 776877 (Herts).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY A5 CD V2.5. Box, manual, remote, valve output stage, optical and coaxial digital outputs,

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SONY SCD1 SACD/CD player, as new condition. £2,000 of Audiocom modifications including Ultralock, (£5,000) £1,850 ono. **01462 670786 or email jr812@hotmail.com (N Herts).**

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MARANTZ SA-7S1 CD/SACD. Owned from new. Stunning sound quality and build quality, (£5,199) £2,900.

01296 437314 or email Jez35@btinternet.com (Bucks).

ROKSAN Kandy LIII amp and CD £240 each, Rega P3 turntable £120. Epos M5 speakers £120. All boxed with manuals and in good condition. **01279465521 (Herts).**

NAIM Uniti amp/CD/FM/DAB all-in-one system. Immaculate condition with latest specification. Only 14 months old, with box and accessories, £1,600. **02380 738935 (Southampton).**

KIMBER KCAG interconnect 0.5m -14dB attenuation, (£438) £200. Kimber D-60 interconnect 1m, (£335) £190. Other items, filters mains cables etc, half price. **01902884694 (W Midlands).**

NAIM NAIT2 £400, Pioneer A300R Precision amp £200, Pioneer PDS505 Precision CD £200, Rogers Cadet 3 £300, Cambridge CD4SE £80. **07818026427 (Yorkshire).**

BRYSTON SST9B 5-channel power amplifier (silver)

Grado PS1000s for less than half price can't be bad



and Bryston SP2 preamp/processor (silver). Excellent condition £1,500 (each) or £2,500 less shipping, if purchased together. Grado S1000 headphones, immaculate condition. Brilliant-sounding and comparable to Stax Omega headphones. £750 less than half the new price. **00353 18373490 (Dublin).**

SONOS Z90 and c100 controller with cradle, booklet and install CD, fully working. Good intro for streamer, £220 including postage. **07736 773830 (Yorks).**

BOWERS & WILKINS 703 (cherry) '90s model, £2,900, Primare SPA21 surround amp £950. Other items also available, please call. Offers welcome. **01707 392743 or email scotk421@hotmail.co.uk (Herts).**

SONY BDP-S5000ES Blu-ray player, 3 weeks' old with UK dealer invoice, £495. **020 8951 3178 (London).**

CREEK 4140 integrated amp, Linn Index speakers plus stands (black ash), Arcam Alpha Plus CD player. £50 each item or £130 for all. **07900 273612 (W London).**

ARCAM FMJ CD17 (black) with user guide/remote, light use from new, can demonstrate, (£600) £350. Cash, no offers. **01606 79032 Tues-Fri, (Cheshire).**

ROTEL RA-05 amplifier (black), with remote, hardly used (£495) £200. Acoustic Energy Radiance 2, £625 as new, could

deliver by arrangement. TCI Viper interconnect 1-metre long, £27. **07979 151445 (W Sussex).**

MARTIN LOGAN SL3 electrostatics, (black), mint condition (£3,400) £1,150. Living Voice speaker cable 4.2m pair (£1,000) £300. Audio Synthesis Silverblue interconnects from £50. New and s/h vinyl from £3. **01453 519700 (Gloucs).**

WANTED: Revox 260S tuner, in very good cosmetic condition and fully functional. Would wish to have working demo in West Midlands/Warwickshire. Please contact with details and price. **01789842336 (W Midlands).**

BOWERS & WILKINS 803D (rosenut). 4 year's old, still under 5-year warranty. Excellent condition. Boxed and complete with all accessories, £3,700, no offers. Any trial welcome, prefer buyer to collect. **077255 78792, or email sme1203@tiscali.co.uk (W Midlands).**

GRADO PS1000 professional headphones. 1-year old, original packaging, inclusive 5m Grado extension, plus 3.5 mm to 6.3mm mini-jack adaptor cable, (£1,795) £1,495. **01179 688543 (Bristol).**

NAD T585 universal player in titanium, plays DVD, CD/SACD. In very good condition with remote and box, £130. **0121 7774318 (W Midlands).**

BUYING TIPS **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back-up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY**, speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

ARCAM FMJ integrated amplifier A32 £560.

Arcam DT81 digital radio tuner £350. Arcam T61 AM/FM tuner £130. All items purchased in 2003 and in excellent condition. **01752 340727 (Devon).**

NAKAMICHI LX5 cassette deck, fully documented with box. Offers invited. **01258 450928 (Dorset).**

ARCAM DIVA A85 amp (black), with fitted phono card. Complete with remote and handbook, £250. Audio Alchemy DE-V1-0 DAC convertor with Chord Company analogue and digital cables. Boxed with manual in excellent condition, £125. Linn Helix LS150 speakers (black ash), with matching spiked stands, £150. Linn K20 speaker cable, 4x4-metre, terminated, £90. All in very good condition, can demo, buyer collects. **07941 015908 (Dorset).**

VAN DEN HUL TeaTrack speaker cable, 11-metre pair £175, plus carriage. **01825 722936 (E Sussex).**

BOWERS & WILKINS 686 speakers, award-winners. Not used since run-in (£278) £95. **07716 139026 (N Ireland).**

LINN Majik CD player (black), 2.5 years old in superb condition. Boxed with manual, remote and power lead, £995. **01924 478157 or email rockhill-steve@zen.co.uk (W Yorks).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY A1000 Class A amp (black), beautiful condition with MM/MC phono stage and separate power supply. Buyer collects. **07941 174804 (Berkshire).**

MARANTZ PM66SE amp and CD50SE CD player, £140 the pair. Pro-Ject Debut II turntable with speed box and phono box £95. Aiwa A30 amp and R30 tuner, £50 pair. Technics 8022 Graphic £60. **01708457691 (Essex).**

SONY XA333ES CD/SACD player (black). Boxed with manual and remote. Can Demo £275. **01394 274350 (Suffolk).**

TOWNSHEND Mk1 stand, four shelves, black with

chrome columns. Seismic sink isolation built-in (£1,500) £350.

01772 315723 (Lancs).

ECA AUDIO Vistra pre and Lectern power amp. Previous award-winners, (£1,650) a bargain at £500. Rega Planar 3, RB300 with AT cart £190. **07729600847 (W Sussex).**

NAIM NAIT Si amplifier £395. Rega Apollo CD player £250. Both boxed in excellent condition. Very little use **07754 507519 (Derbyshire).**

KEF speakers, 05/3 Reference (mahogany), 104/2 £340. Reference (walnut) £200, 100 centre speaker £70. REL Storm Active Sub £150. All good condition with boxes. **07545 141104 (Devon).**

WANTED: Naim NATO2 tuner. Good price paid, must be in very good condition. **01246 232085 (Derbyshire).**

PRO-JECT Debut/phono SB (silver) turntable. £40. Buyer collects. **0208655 3539 or email adelesluce@hotmail.co.uk (Surrey).**

QUAD ELS 2805 new, unmarked, £2,950. Michell Synchro, Linn Basik arm, with cartridge £300, Audiolab 8000 C and P pre and power amp, £350. **01952 728 773 (Shropshire).**

QUAD ESL 63 speaker, excellent condition, with stands, total Quad rebuild in 2002, cost £1,400+ (receipt). Quad enthusiast upgraded to 2805s. No crackles/distortion etc. £1,095. **01296 770632 or 07881 658689 (Bucks).**

GRADO Professional Series PS1000 headphones in mint condition, brilliant-sounding headphones with deep bass. £850 including delivery. **003 5318 373490 (Eire).**

AUDIO INNOVATIONS S700 valve amp, 25w, boxed, vgc. £300. Marantz CD10 CD player, boxed with remote. Datasheet available as PDF. £300. **07771 776877 (Herts).**

KEF Reference 4 monitor speakers. Superb bass and near-electrostatic soundstaging make these involving speakers a bargain. New and pristine (£3,200) £1,700. **07841 011397 or 01132 843770 (Leeds).**

MARTINLOGAN Source electrostatic speakers in mint condition, as new £1,250. **02380 224003 (Southampton).**

GRADO SR125 Prestige Series headphones in mint condition with original box, purchased January 2010. Sale due to upgrade, £75. Also Grado storage case to protect your valuable cans £10. **01233 713250 (Kent).**

AV pre/power amplifier, 215w, class A. Super sound (black). Almost new, perfect, original boxes only £1,500. **0039 02 2150930 or email fedepenzo@hotmail.com; (Italy).**

BANG & OLUFSEN Beocenter 2600, two Beovox speakers £90. **01723 375222 (N Yorks).**

ARCAM T61 tuner (silver), boxed with remote. Rega Planet CD (black), boxed with remote. Bowers and Wilkins DM602S3, boxed. KEF Q3 speakers. Open to offers, buyer collects. **01977 695385 (W Yorks).**

PMC DB1i speakers. Purchased March 2010. Mint condition, book-matched walnut veneer, fabulous sound. Genuine reason for sale, £600. **01233 713250 (Kent).**

SUGDEN Mystro integrated amplifier. Purchased February 2011, lightly used. With box and can be posted. £895. **01782 785734 (Staffordshire).**

QUAD 44/405 amplifier. Serviced by Quad with little

use since. All leads and manuals. Marantz 63KI Sig CD player £75. **01162 833959 (Leics).**

ATLAS Hyper 2 speaker cable. 2x 8 metre runs. (£240) £120. Chord Carnival 4.5 metre runs (£54) £27. **07749 424206 (Ipswich).**

MONITOR AUDIO RX8 speakers (black). Boxed as new condition with 20 months warranty, £450. Cambridge 840A and 740C (silver). 840A £430 and 740C £320. **07765 275482 (Leeds).**

A.R.T speakers. Immaculate condition with boxes. (£1,000) £450. **07789 464739 (Warwickshire).**

LEAK stereo 30w amp. Connoisseur BD1 deck. Wharfedale Super Linton W30D speakers. Sensible offers for the lot or will split. Buyer collects. **07949 545560 (W Yorks).**

COUNTERPOINT SA-12 dual-channel hybrid power amplifier, 85 watts per channel into 8 ohms. Excellent sound with good clarity and drive ability. Great value at £275. **01923 855359 or email: wombat.jr@talktalk.net (Hertfordshire).**

LECTOR CDP 7TL, Italian valve player with separate PSU. Latest current spec model, mint. (£2,400)

£1,100. **0208473 9890 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 Audiocom modifications including Ultraclock £1,850. Now £5,000. Musical Fidelity V-DAC, as new £100.

01462 670786 or email: jr812@hotmail.com (N 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 (W 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).**

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Hi-Fi Choice

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.

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We've also included *techradar* listings where our reviews appear online.

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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

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The best in both magnetic and moving coil cartridges

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Badge-winning headphones for your personal listening pleasure

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For all your hi-fi wants, check our index of independent hi-fi dealerships



BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●



CD players

Any one of these fine players will make sweet music for years to come

www.techradar.com
SACD compatible
ELEC dig output
CD-RW compatible
OPT dig output
BAL analogue out
Headphone socket
CD text
Variable output
Issue number

Up to £1,000		Price	Comments								Issue number	
Badge	Product											
●	Advance Acoustic MCD-204	795	CD player with warm valve sound. Harmonically rich and inviting performance		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	342
●	Audiolab B200CD	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
●	Exposure 2010S2	710	Paired with the 2010S2 amp, this CD player is a fine performer with plenty of detail		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	344
●	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
●	Marantz KI Pearl Lite	750	Excellent sound, this CD player has also dropped in price from £920 to £750 since our review		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	344
●	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
●	Musical Fidelity M1 CDT	600	Reviewed in combination with the M1 DAC, this CD transport holds its own against the competition		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	346
●	Pro-Ject CD Box	300	This player belies both its size and its price with sounds worthy of a decent mid-range system		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	338
●	Rega Saturn	898	Strikingly full-voiced, the Saturn offers a sound that feels remarkably real		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	344
●	Roksan Kandy K2	899	State-of-the-art technology and precision engineering produces a fine CD performance		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	335

Above £1,000		Price	Comments								Issue number	
Badge	Product											
●	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
●	Primare CD32	2,200	Smart, slick and with balanced outputs, this CD player looks every bit the high-end part		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	344
●	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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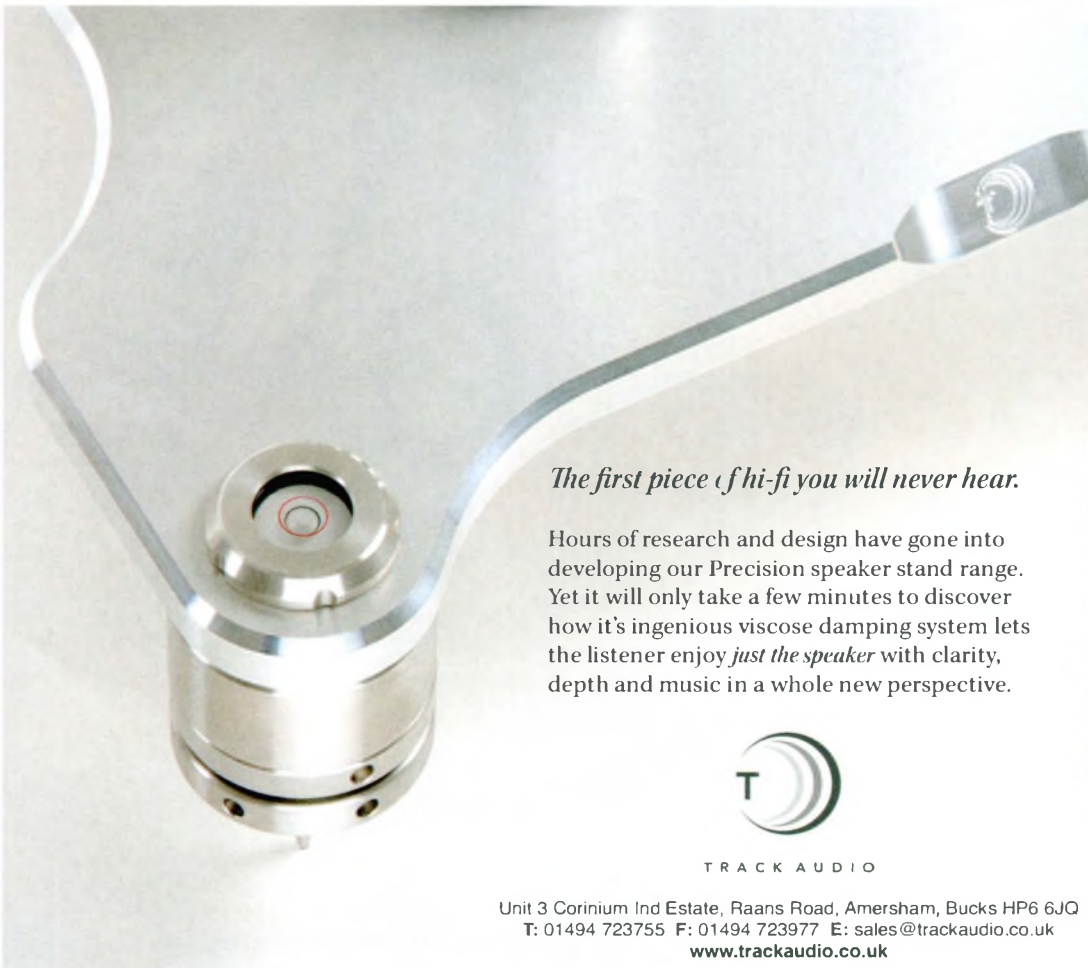
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Turntables

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Badge	Product	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	Speeds	Switchable speed change	Suspension subchassis	Supplied with arm	Supplied with cart	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	1,150	Excellent timing really propels a very good performance. Plenty of detail and insight, too		33/45	●	●	●	●	345
●	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 Xperience 2 Pack	775	Holds its own against all competition (arm included)		33/45	●	●	●	●	345
●	Pro-ject 6 Perspex	1,280	Plenty of detail and good rhythmic qualities (arm included)		33/45/78	●	●	●	●	338
●	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	1,750	Very well-defined bass; good detail; well judged rhythm and pace (reviewed with Excalibur arm)		33/45	●	●	●	●	345
●	Townshend RockV/Excalibur II	7,000	If you want to hear everything that's on a record then there's no better machine for the job		33/45	●	●	●	●	307

Phono cartridges

MM and MC recommendations



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Replaceable stylus	MM	MC	Issue number
●	Dynavector 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 2M Red	80	A little fussy about set up, but sound is admirably balanced and full of unforced detail	●	●	●	345
●	Ortofon Vivo Red	200	Never less than musically convincing, this all-in-one cartridge is remarkably capable	●	●	●	338
●	Ortofon Cadenza Red	750	There's much to admire in this cartridge's fine detail and unfussy presentation	●	●	●	330
●	Shure M97xE	82	A budget cartridge, but bass and midrange are to high-end standards and treble is just as assured	●	●	●	345

Phono stages

Make your turntable sing



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	MM phono input	MC phono input	Adj impedance	Adj gain	Issue number
●	Dynavector P-75 Mkl1	595	A stage that will put spring in the step of any decent cartridge you can throw at it	●	●	●	●	344
●	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
●	Primare R32	850	If you are into vinyl for the music, then this is one of the most revealing examples on the market	●	●	●	●	345
●	Pro-ject Tube Box SE II	435	The big picture is the most evident thing here, but the finer details are there, too	●	●	●	●	335

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

Our Product of the Year 2010. A winning combination of open and even-handed sound, handsome design and excellent build quality



Dr Feickert An. Woodpecker £2,995

A very flexible and well-thought-out deck that offers brilliant build quality and excellent bass. Able to work with a wide variety of arms, too



Clarity HDMI



Concept Audiocconnect



Connoisseur HDMI



Concept Speaker



Clarity Sub Woofer



Clarity Coaxial

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Monkey Cable ONLY specialises in making high class Audio Visual Cables. We do not make or sell anything else. So whatever your requirement, whichever range you choose, (Concept, Clarity or Connoisseur), rest assured your audio visual experience will be as pure as your equipment can deliver.

We know and understand the pleasure our customers take from their Home Entertainment systems and the satisfaction in getting the best from their equipment. It is with this passion that we have developed the Monkey Cable brand to deliver not only great cables but also great value.



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BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●

Radio tuners

Surf the airwaves with these carefully selected tuners



FM tuners

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Wavebands	Presets	RDS	Rot. tuning knob	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 Sensia	250	One of the smartest table radios around, offering wireless computer-sourced music		DAB, FM, Web	40	●	331
●	Roberts Revival	200	A handy way to get internet radio and media streaming throughout the house		DAB, FM, Web		●	344
●	Tivoli Networks+10	239	FM reception is excellent and a cut above everything else this radio has to offer		DAB, FM, Web	5	●	344
●	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	Electrostatic	Supra-aural	Open/Closed back	Circumaural	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			●			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							325
●	Grado PS1000	1,795	Offer excellent detail and effortless dynamics, but they can be heavy to wear after a while			●	●		500	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
●	Unique Melody Miracle	775	Great build and sound, the custom-moulded Miracles are one of our favourite in-ears							346

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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BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●

Amplifiers



Our pick of the best one-box amps out there

www.techradar.com
Line inputs
Phono input
Remote control
Headphone socket
Power output (watts)
Issue number

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					50	329
●	Cambridge Audio 840A v2	800	A chunky powerhouse with features aplenty, this amp offers detail and delicacy (silver finish)					120	327
●	Denon DCD-1510AE	900	Offers a taste of high-end excellence at an affordable price					70	335
●	Exposure 2010S2	752	Impressive amplifier with preamp output, the 2010S2 was a blind group test winner					75	344
●	Marantz KI Pearl Lite	750	Impressive performer with a well-filled phono-amp board and now down to £750 from £920					90	344
●	NAD C3226BEE	320	Unusually confident into awkward loads and very assured especially in bass. Treble a touch recessed	/603281				50	322
●	Rega Mira 3	460	Competent performer that makes an excellent system with the matching Saturn CD player					60	344

Above £1,000

●	Cayin Audio A-55T	1,460	Despite some minor shortcomings, this valve amp can be a very rewarding listen					40	346
●	Consonance Cyber 10 Sig	1,595	Gorgeous tube amp delivering high-end performance at a realistic price					11	345
●	Creek 5350 Evolution	1,075	One of the most attractive amps in its price range, with a sound that's immediately satisfying		MM/MC			120	334
●	Creek Destiny 2	1,600	Excellent tonal balance and gorgeous, effortless detail		opt			116	342
●	Cyrus 8xp d	1,550	Best heard in the context of a Cyrus system, this amp nevertheless has some great qualities					80	342
●	Electrocompaniet EC15	2,750	Big, characterful and beautifully built amp, with equally big and unforced sound					120	340
●	Emillé Ara	2,450	An extremely competent valve amp in its own right with a useful set of features					22	343
●	Icon Audio Stereo 60 Mk 3	1,700	An energetic valve amp that offers high power and delivers it with confidence					65	346
●	Leema Pulse III	1,495	Offers a clean, smooth sound and has an unusually wide array of inputs		MM/MC			70	342
◇	Luxman L550A-II	3,000	An accomplished all-rounder that's able to handle virtually any system		MC			20	335
●	Micromega IA-100	1,125	Fast and fluid performer that brings a touch of panache to its role		MM			100	332
●	Musical Fidelity M3I	1,000	Extremely engaging performer, this power amp boasts excellent sonics and solid build					70	337
●	Peachtree Audio iDecco	1,000	A well-equipped amp/DAC one-stop solution for iPod and digital audio users					40	344
●	Peachtree Audio Nova	1,099	This amp/DAC combi is a fine heart for a computerised desktop system					80	341
●	PrimaLuna Prologue Two	1,820	This valve amp has many fine qualities that will endear it to many audiophiles					30	346
●	Primare I32	2,200	Gorgeous sound, while the prospect of future upgrades is truly mouth-watering					120	344
●	Resolution Audio Cantata	3,995	This perfectly formed amplifier reveals that the language of music is easy to understand		opt			50	342
●	Roksan Caspian M2	1,600	This muscular-sounding amplifier is load tolerant and more powerful in practice					85	338
●	Unison Research Unico Nuovo	1,650	A truly successful marriage between tubes and solid-state amplification					100	339

Pre/power amplifiers

Separate boxes can bring clear advantages



www.techradar.com
Preamplifier
Power amplifier
Line inputs
Phono input
Remote control
Power output (watts)
Issue number

Up to £2,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Line inputs	Phono input	Remote control	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			opt	200	309
●	NAD C165BEE/C275BEE	1,550	An alternative to the usual integrated route and one that offers flexibility and fine sound			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/ 28 SST2	5,700	Preamp and power amp combo offers superb sound quality	/608649		opt	100	323	
●	Bryston BP26	3,670	Cracking preamp brings detailed results			opt	308		
●	Cayin SP-30S/SP-40M	3,346	Smooth clean sound quality, this combo is well-balanced and natural-sounding		MM		40	343	
●	Cyrus Stream XP	2,000	An easy to use streaming DAC/preamp with a great combination of sound quality and features				346		
●	Cyrus Mono X300	2,495	A power amp with a rare combination of speed and resolution				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				200	343	
●	Mark Levinson No. 326S	8,000	Excellent USB implementation, natural sound and solid build. Excellent performance levels				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				260	340	
●	Onkyo P-3000R/M-5000R	4,200	Superb sounding combination with excellent build, flexibility and connection options		MM		80	345	
●	Rotel RC158/RB1582	2,100	It looks high-end and it really sounds the part, too				200	336	
●	Trilogy 909/990	10,390	Extremely musical valve-based pairing with hybrid power and beautiful finish	/625226			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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Streamers/music servers



Streaming and music servers are opening up a new dimension in listening pleasure

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	Internal drive Wireless	iPod compatible USB	Balanced output	Digital output	Issue number
●	Linn Akurate	4,500	Fast album/track access and the extended playing times make this a winner		●	●	●	●	343
●	Marantz NA7004	720	Easy to use, the NA7004 makes getting into streaming simple and all for a great price, too			●	●	●	344
●	Naim UnitiQute	1,350	All-in-one streamer/player has excellent features and is easy to set up with strong performance		●	●	●	●	339
●	Naim NDX	2,995	The ideal combination of vivid performance and understated styling		●	●	●	●	345
●	Yamaha NP-S2000	1,429	Drop-dead gorgeous and it sounds appropriately sophisticated			●	●	●	346

SPECS KEY **WIRELESS** Able to receive files wirelessly **INTERNAL DRIVE** Fitted with its own hard drive **USB** USB Sockets fitted **INTERNET RADIO** Able to receive web radio **IPOD COMPATIBLE** Able to connect directly to an iPod **APPLE AIRPLAY** Able to function as an AirPlay receiver **BALANCED OUTPUT** Fitted with a balanced out **DIGITAL OUTPUT** Fitted with a digital output

DACs



Digital-to-analogue converters are back and the price has come right down

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	Coaxial input	Optical input	Sampling rate (kHz)	Headphone socket	Volume control	Issue number
●	Antelope Audio Zodiac Plus	1,895	Remarkable resolving capabilities and more inputs than the majority of DACs		●	●	192	●	●	345
●	Benchmark DAC1	950	Very clean sound with plenty of detail and also good rhythmic drive		●	●	192	●	●	341
●	Cambridge Audio DacMagic	230	Detail and imaging are very good and a decent feature count only adds to the appeal		●	●	96	●	●	331
●	Electrocompaniet PD1	1,250	Great sound and superb build, the PD1 allows you to access music on your computer hard drive		●	●	192	●	●	346
●	Furutech GT40	395	The perfect 'missing link' between analogue and the home computer			●	96	●	●	342
●	Lavry DA10	1,028	Can be ruthlessly revealing of deficiencies in once-admired recordings		●	●	96	●	●	341
●	Musical Fidelity M1 DAC	400	Tested with the M1 CDT CD transport, this DAC boasts excellent sound quality and features		●	●	192	●	●	346
●	Naim Audio DAC	1,950	Sounds meticulously detailed without detracting from the cogency and flow of the music		●	●	768	●	●	328
●	Rega DAC	498	A little stunner, combining genuinely high-end sound with a good feature set		●	●	44	●	●	346
●	PS Audio Digital Link III	899	A simple no-fuss product that just sounds great and at its price is something of a bargain		●	●	192	●	●	341

SPECS KEY **COAXIAL INPUTS** Fitted with a coaxial input **OPTICAL INPUTS** Fitted with an optical input **USB** Fitted with a USB input **WIRELESS** Able to receive material wirelessly **SAMPLING RATES** Maximum sampling rate of the DAC **BALANCED OUTPUTS** Fitted with a balanced output **HEADPHONE SOCKET** Can operate as a headphone amp **VOLUME CONTROL** Can be connected directly to an active speaker or power amp.

Cables



Cables really can make a difference, especially our top recommendations

Analogue interconnects

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	www.techradar.com	Stranded	Solid core	Copper	Digital cable type	Issue number
●	Black Rhodium Polar Illusion	250	A good all-rounder, with clear and purposeful bass and particularly fine treble		●	●	●		321
●	Chord Co. Indigo Plus	995	Costly, and high-class cable needs running in, but this is a finely detailed design overall	/608313	●	●	●		323
●	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		●	●	●		332

Digital interconnects

●	Atlas Mavros	285	By any reckoning this is a very revealing wire		●	●	●	E	336
●	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)

●	Black Rhodium Jive Bi-Wire	14	Bi-wire cable which is full of sonic virtues. It's highly practical, too		●	●	●		339
●	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
●	van den Hul The Teatrack	35	A bi-wire cable with a sound that's impeccably timed, neutral and full of detail		●	●	●		339
●	Wireworld Oasis 6	40	Excellent bass with tunefulness and wire 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.

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Stereo speakers

The most influential link in the chain



Up to £1,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Size: width, height, depth (cm)	Floorstander	Case of drive	Bass (from Hz)	Free-space	Close to wall	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 iQ50	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 BX5	500	Attractive and compact design with fast and engaging sound	21,5,86,8,24,8	●	A-	●	●	●	345
●	Monitor Audio Silver RS8	850	Bold, dynamic sound, it's an easy load that works well in larger rooms	90,18,27	●	A	33	●	●	276
●	Monitor Audio GS10	900	More neutral tonally than some recent MAs, the GS10 is easy to drive	20,36,27	●	A-	40	●	●	284
●	PMC DB1i	985	Could be more neutral, but a very effective musical communicator	15,5,29,23,4	●	A+	30	●	●	334
●	ProAc Tablette Ref Eight	704	Stunning standmount with electrostatic-like imagery. Its brother is even better!	15,27,23	●	A+	40	●	●	267
●	Q Acoustics 1010	110	Neatly styled miniature has limited bass and power handling, fine midband voicing	15,21,5,19,5	●	A	48	●	●	286
●	Q Acoustics 1020i	140	Outstanding value, t smooth well-balanced and lively sound makes a fine communicator	/516273 17,5,25,26,5	●	A+	60	●	●	318
●	Rega RS1	390	Clever close-to-wall speaker has a fine coherence and good communication skills	15,32,23,6	●	A	23	●	●	319
●	Russ Andrews SP-1	352	This tweaked Focal 705V RA has a sound that is immediate, engaging and, and great fun	19,2,31,5,24,8	●	A+	65	●	●	309
●	Spendor S3/SR	750	Lacks dynamic muscle and loudness potential, smooth neutrality and g bass extension	16,5,30,5,190	●	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 DC6T	820	Good-looking and compact floorstander with a beautifully judged overall balance	20,2,95,25,3	●	A	●	●	●	346
●	Teufel T500	568	Good value, solid build and an extended warranty	19,5x105x32,5	●	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 CMB	1,250	Exceptional looking speaker with a fine midrange and superior imaging	16,5,89,6,28	●	A	60	●	●	344
●	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
●	Dynaudio DM3/7	1,299	Sound has a fine overall balance and impressive bass weight	20,4,96,27,5	●	A	●	●	●	345
●	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	16,8,27	●	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	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	30,25,23,2	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
●	KudosX2	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	25,5,115,30	●	A	32	●	325
●	Magneplan Magneplanar 1.6	2,500	Great with acoustic and classical material, this dipole panel speaker has superb sound quality		48,165,5	●	A	43	●	329
●	Mission 796	1,300	Clean, open and detailed, smooth, relaxed loudspeaker does exactly what it says on the box	/594834	20,6,99,31,8	●	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		24,102,5,31,5	●	A	20	●	314
●	Pioneer S-2EX-W	5,200	This speaker offers superb midband neutrality and exceptional clarity	/587272	29,1,56,5,42,5	●	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
●	PMCFact.8	5,250	Beautiful styling, alongside a superb all round sound with a notably wide dynamic range		15,5,105,38	●	A	55	●	327
●	PMC IB2i	8,900	Delivers a top-class sound quality, fine imaging and exceptional dynamic grip	/617595	33,74,46,5	●	A	25	●	324
●	PSB Synchrony One	3,500	Slim and discreet floorstander that delivers superb sound quality and flexible bass	/516267	22,109,32,5	●	A	45	●	318
●	Revel F32	3,200	Meticulously balanced, tonally neutral design makes for a taut, well disciplined sound		22,105,39	●	A	20	●	256
●	Revolver Screen 3	2,799	Visually dramatic and very successful in delivering genuine high quality hi-fi sound		50,140,11	A		35	●	329
●	Roksan Caspian FR-5	2,475	Sharp-looking speaker sounds exceptionally open and lively without aggression		20,100,25	●	A	22	●	290
●	Sonus faber Luito Monitor	1,690	Subtly designed, elegant-sounding package, especially with good recordings	/603221	18,5,35,33,5	A-		55	●	322
●	Sonus faber Minima Vintage	2,490	Easy, graceful-sounding compact, a natural for acoustic material at moderate volume levels	/455417	20,33,27,5	A-		55	●	312
●	Sonus faber Cremona Audit.	3,350	Open, exciting and with surprisingly good bass, this is 'The Little Speaker That Could'		20,35,37	A		50	●	305
●	Spendor SA1	1,295	Very high-quality sub-miniature with notably superior sound		16,5,30,5,19	A		30	●	334
●	Spendor SP3/3R2	2,295	Lovely overall balance with fine voicing and transparency		27,54,5,32,5	A			●	343
●	Tannoy Definition DC8	2,500	Stylish-looking, this speaker is a fine communicator with clean, crisp and dynamic sound		27,47,26			55	●	343
●	Totem S1taf	1,695	This speaker delivers good scale with a fine midband		16x85x24,2	●	A		●	340
●	Triangle Genese Lyrr	3,300	A well-balanced speaker with generous sensitivity, fine imaging and good expressiveness		23,30,3,113,3	●	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	28,130,45	A		35	●	325
●	Wilson Benesch Curve	5,383	Much (but not all) of the ACT's performance in a much more compact and affordable package		23,91,37	●	A	28	●	254
●	Wharfedale Opus	1,500	Great material value and a solid, if bright and forward sound. Has great loudness potential		26,100,5,41	●	A	23	●	314
●	Yamaha Soavo 2	1,200	Cunningly crafted with a beautiful balance that always sounds lively, open and involving		22,38,35	A		28	●	296
●	Zu Essence	3,750	Realism and communication skills are more than compensation for balance shortcomings		30,5,125,30,5	●	A	25	●	327

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

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**

A fantastic combination of elegant design, well-thought out room-tuning features and superb sonic performance. A 2010 Product of the Year nominee

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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 Weighted	Shelf type	Issue number
●	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
●	Magic Racks MR1	600	At its best it's very effective and gives real isolation across the audio band	59			Rubber 344
	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 Fillable	Welded	Issue number
●	Atacama Duo 6	65	Maintains high standards in mid and treble, with excellent tonality and good detail		17,13	●	1 346
●	Custom Design FS104	190	Gets excellent results out of speakers small and large, and excels in fine detail and precise imaging			●	1 346
●	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
●	Quadraspire QV60	250	This stand helps maximise detail and tonal resolution			●	1 346
●	Soundstyle Z2	70	Bass can be a little imprecise, but there's plenty of detail on offer		17,13	●	1 346

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.



Atacama Duo 6 £65
This value-priced loudspeaker stand adds a hint of vibrancy to the sound and there's plenty of life and energy in the midrange and treble



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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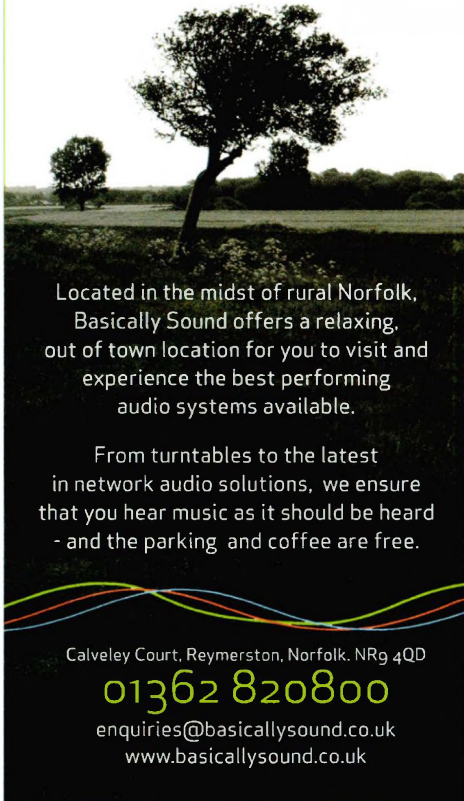
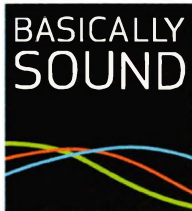
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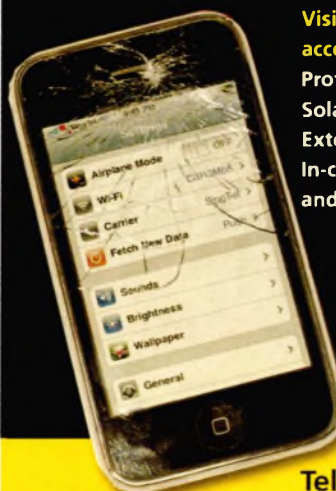
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Queen Colleen

Jason Kennedy reports on a female hi-fi evangelist, whose Classic Album Sundays event has hit the national press

Something strange is happening out in the wider world: regular folk are gathering together to listen to whole LPs on a decent-quality sound system whilst sitting in silence. These are not your usual hi-fi enthusiasts, but music lovers who are being subtly introduced to the joys of good-quality sound by a female evangelist.

Colleen Murphy, is a Boston-Irish-born DJ who is mad about vinyl and makes her living playing music in clubs and online with Ministry of Sound radio. She has one of the most impressive record collections we've encountered and to say that she's passionate about vinyl is something of an understatement – she loves the stuff.

What brought her to our attention is an event called Classic Album Sundays which is a monthly music session that she runs above a pub in Islington. It involves playing an entire classic album on vinyl, one side then the other, to a paying audience who are actively encouraged to turn off their phones, sit in silence and immerse themselves in the experience.

Colleen brings along a pretty decent system to do this with, most of which usually resides in her living room. It consists of a Technics SL-1100 turntable (chosen for its robustness as well as sound quality) and she has a Nottingham Analogue Spacedeck, with a Koetsu tonearm, Koetsu Urushi cartridge and Koetsu step-up transformer. This feeds a classic Mark Levinson ML-1 preamplifier and a Musical Fidelity A308 which is her 'gigging' power amp and at home there is a pair of Quad II valve amps driving Klipschorns. Even the speakers make the journey and they can hardly be called portable. This is one dedicated lady.

Classic Album Sundays

The idea for Classic Album Sundays came from a fellow DJ and friend Greg Wilson who mooted the idea on his blog. Greg suggested that people listen to the suggested album at the same time once a month but in their homes. Last October, Colleen took the idea a step further by putting the chosen album on in a room above the Hanbury Arms pub in Islington, London. The first event attracted 20 people, but now you need to book your place if you want to be one of the lucky 50 to get a seat. Every month, she gets suggestions for future classic

albums and these range "from Can to Wham", with bands like Pink Floyd and the Beatles coming up fairly often, alongside less obvious artists like Scott Walker and even Dudley Moore

Albums that have been played thus far include *Ziggy Stardust*, *Songs In the Key of Life*, *Hounds of Love* and most recently, Primal Scream's *Screamadelica*. If you want to find out what she will be playing next Google: Classic Album Sundays Facebook.

Colleen has recently been involved with an exhibition of art by Pink Floyd legend Syd Barrett. She was asked to play Barrett's *Madcap Laughs* album by the Idea Generation gallery for the private view. Rather than take her system to the gallery, she accepted an offer from Absolute Sounds who stepped in to help out with a Continuum Calibum(!) and Wilson Maxx-based set-up, the UK high-end distributor had heard about the Sunday events and offered to take the pressure off for the exhibition.

Absolute Sounds owner Ricardo Franassovici is very enthusiastic about the event, and Colleen herself: "it brings us closer to musicians, closer to the art world, I had to go with it because I thought it was a brilliant idea." *Madcap Laughs* was aired front-to-back to an audience that counted Damon Albarn among its number. Ricardo mentioned that, "I have always wanted to play (the whole of) Mahler 4 or Neil Young's *Harvest* at a hi-fi show but I've never had the balls to do it. I have to take my hat off to her." ●

Colleen Murphy: hi-fi's modern-day Wonderwoman

Madcap Laughs was aired front-to-back to an audience that counted Damon Albarn amongst its number



JASON KENNEDY

Ex-Hi-Fi Choice editor Jason is a regular contributor to the title and rivals Colleen with his love of vinyl and good systems

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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