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Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

www.hifichoice.co.uk

Issue No. 352

Awards 2011

£3.99

Naim + B&W's £2k gems

Our verdict on the new ND5 XS streamer and B&W's latest, the PM1

Amp champs

Sublime computer audio in our four-way amp test

2012's hi-fi is here

Whittlebury Hall show reveals the hottest new kit: full report on p16



System synergiser!

IsoTek's £600 mains conditioner will sweeten up *any* system says our expert, find out more inside...



COMPETITION WIN!

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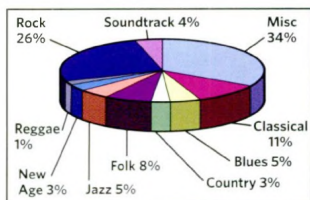
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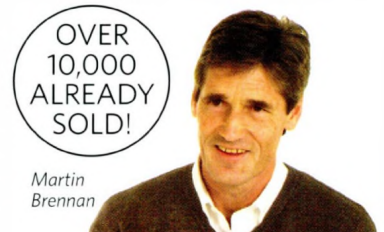
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Martin Brennan

The face behind the Brennan JB7

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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.



NIGEL WILLIAMSON
EXPERTISE: MUSIC

NIGEL has been writing for *The Times* for more than 25 years and has written for various titles including *Uncut*, *Billboard* and *Songlines*. A Mercury Music Prize judge for five years, Nigel has written books on Bob Dylan, Neil Young and the Blues.



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. **352** Awards 2011



The *Hi-Fi Choice* Awards are without equal in the hi-fi press. We painstakingly pour over 13 issues' worth of subjective reviews, technical data and *Blind-Listening Group Tests* to create a shortlist of award-worthy products. Then, in consultation with our panel of experts, over a number of weeks we calculate our list of winners. No other magazine's review process is as exhaustive as ours, so you can be confident that the products you'll discover on the following pages are of the upmost quality.

Elsewhere in the issue we have two classy scoops: the first in-depth review of Bowers and Wilkins' new PM1 standmount; plus the world's first review of Naim's new cut-price music streamer, the NDX5. We're also the first magazine to bring you all the news and product releases from this year's Whittlebury Hall show. We hope you enjoy it and thanks for sticking with the UK's only growing hi-fi mag.

Dan

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dan.george@futurenet.com

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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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Best Product
 2011-2012

HIGH-END AUDIO
 Nagra 300i

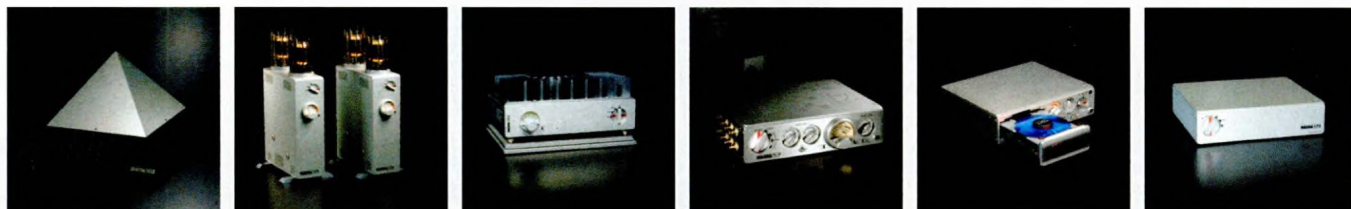
European High-End Audio 2011-2012 - Nagra 300i

Celebrating its 60th anniversary Swiss company Nagra, famous for its precision audio engineering, has introduced a hybrid tube amp that breathes new life into the classic 300B triode valve. With solid-state input and bias adjustment combined with a parallel pair of 300B direct-heated power triodes, the 300i amplifier offers a sweet 2x20W output - perfect for high sensitivity loudspeakers. This modern classic employs the finest custom-made transformers, matching the 300i to 16 through to 4ohm speaker designs. The amplifier's compact design is instantly recognisable as part of the Nagra family of high-end components - beautiful to behold, delicious to hear.



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Barns, Parley Green Lane, Hurn, Bournemouth, BH23 6BB*
Open: *Tuesday - Saturday. Closed Monday.*

glenrothes showroom

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01592 744 779

e-mail: glenrothes@jordanacoustics.co.uk

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

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.



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.

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.



geometry
series



*subject to conditions

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WORTH £899

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Bowers & Wilkins PM1 and Naim ND5 XS:

World's first review of the new entry-level ND5 streamer, plus the first in-depth test of Bowers & Wilkins' new PM1



National Audio Show 2011: in-depth report



The back page: the best accessories of 2011



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"The sound of the ND5 XS immediately makes one smile."

Malcolm Steward: Naim ND5 XS p48

TESTED THIS MONTH



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Audio Analogue Verdi Cento amplifier



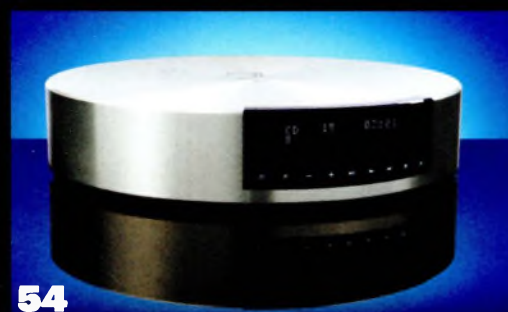
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Subscribe and get a Chord Co. interconnect worth £70! (p32)

Point of Reference

New Acoustic Energy Reference standmounts finally available more than eighteen months after their 2010 Bristol show unveiling

PRICE: £1,495-£1,995

AVAILABLE: NOW

CONTACT: 01285 654432

WEB: ACOUSTIC-ENERGY.CO.UK

Acoustic Energy can't be accused of rushing the launch of its new Reference series. We got our first look at the two models seen here at the Bristol show in 2010, but it is only now, almost eighteen months later, that the finished versions are ready to go on sale.

The Reference One and larger Reference Two take their inspiration from the original AE1 and AE2 designs from the 1980s. The technology that went into the originals has been systematically updated for the 21st

The result is wide bandwidth with exceptionally low colouration

Century. As such, where the originals made use of braced metal plates to ensure adequate damping, the new models use a rather more sophisticated proprietary laminate of MDF and a composite rubber layer to achieve the same damping with much-reduced internal reflections. This is coupled with internal bracing to, 'set new standards for acoustic integrity.'

The drivers used in the Reference series are said to be improved over the original designs. The 'Ring Radiator'

tweeter has been developed in conjunction with Vifa Audio in Denmark. The resulting unit boasts a higher specification motor and innovative copper-shortening rings to reduce distortion. Acoustic Energy says the result is wide bandwidth with exceptionally low colouration.

The main driver is a further development of the classic alloy cone with conical dust cap. This makes use of an oversize magnet and dual-wound alloy voice coils. This is then surrounded by a foam cone that

provides the low damping necessary to produce low bass and precision articulation. To obtain best results from this driver pairing, the crossovers use high-end components with very short signal paths and no resistors.

The £1,495 Reference One is a two-way standmount design, while the larger £1,995 Reference Two (also a standmount) uses a pair of mid/bass drivers. Both are finished in Macassar Ebony and are on sale now. Expect an exclusive review in *HFC* soon.

STAND UP

AS WITH MANY high-end standmounts we have seen recently, the Reference One and Reference Two are available with a dedicated speaker stand. The £295 Reference Stand is constructed from the same proprietary sandwich material used in the speaker cabinets. This should ensure a stable and inert platform with the same characteristics as the speakers themselves. They are an aesthetic match, too, with a slim panel of the Macassar veneer on the front.





twenty

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twenty-23



twenty-21



twenty-22



twenty-24

musicality(n.) the property of sounding like music

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In its Element

New flagship range from Totem incorporates radical technology

Totem has taken the wraps off its new Element range. A trio that includes the £5,600 Fire standmount, plus the £8,395 Earth, and the £12,125 Metal floorstanders.

All three models make use of an in-house designed woofer within a machined chassis, as opposed to the more common moulded or stamped designs. This completely immerses the voice coils in a localised magnetic field.

The cabinets have a number of key features. The bottom rear of each floorstander features a skid plate that is said to completely isolate the rest of the chassis from external vibration. This combines with a front 'claw' assembly, which allows for infinite rake and extra adjustability. The cabinets are trapezoidal in shape and have no parallel sides in order to avoid standing waves.

All models are available in Dusk (black) and Ice (white) finishes.



PRICE: £5,600-£12,125 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** +32 15 285 585
WEB: TOTEMACOUSTIC.COM

Potent Cocktail

X10 offers streaming storage and internet radio

Newcomer Cocktail Audio has launched the X10, a one-box system that incorporates up to two terabytes of internal storage. The X10 can rip material directly to the hard drive (including FLAC) and makes use of a database storage system to display the stored material on the 3.5-inch front panel TFT. This information can also be displayed on an iPhone or Android device via a free app.



PRICE: £370 (1TB) **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01732 765157 **WEB:** SELWYNAUDIO.COM



Grand design

AKG has unveiled its 'most luxurious earphones ever.' The company claims that its £1,000 K3003 is the world's smallest in-ear monitor. Each earpiece contains one dynamic- and two balanced-armature drivers. The positioning of the three drivers, says AKG, 'offers a sound experience similar to being centre stage at a live concert.' This is further enhanced by a series of adjustable mechanical filters that allows the owner to make adjustments to better suit their personal taste.

As befits a pair of earphones costing four figures, the K3003 is handmade in Austria and uses a single piece of stainless steel that is machined to match the body of the earpiece.

PRICE: £1,000
AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: +31 64 621 0196
WEB: UK.AKG.COM



Lucky 7

DALBY AUDIO DESIGN is a new UK-based outfit with a product range targeted squarely at the high end. Its D7LP preamplifier is no-compromise design, with its zero-feedback valve featuring a substantial external power supply. Thirteen valves are employed and of the three line inputs, one is a dedicated phono stage.

The construction is said to be extremely solid with the unit boasting 30mm dark mahogany panels and nine-carat-gold-plated panels on a solid-copper sub-chassis. The feet are carbon fibre with tri-ceramic ball-bearing de-coupling. All internal wiring is point-to-point and solid silver. A carbon finish is also available.

PRICE: £TBC
AVAILABLE: LATE AUTUMN
CONTACT: 07834 475626
WEB: DALBYAUDIODESIGN.CO.UK

Bowers & Wilkins



Engineered for the finest moments

PM1 There are times when only music matters. When you want to forget the world and simply lose yourself in sound. The PM1 was designed for these moments. Its carbon-braced tweeter, Kevlar bass/midrange driver and Matrix™ braced cabinet combine to make everything else seem insignificant. It might just be the most refined small speaker we've ever built. **Listen and you'll see.**

www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk/pm1

Type-R

New range of KEF speakers sits between XQ and Reference models

KEF has been busy of late. Not content with releasing the high-end Blade (see *HFC* 351), it has also unveiled the R Series. All models in the five-strong range of standmounts and floorstanders (supported by surround options), make use of a new version of the Uni-Q driver.

All the R models use a braced magnesium alloy cone and a vented tweeter derived from the Blade. This is partnered with a hybrid aluminium cone bass driver to make 'genuine audiophile standards of entertainment more affordable than ever before.'



PRICE: £600-£2,750 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01622 672 261 **WEB:** KEF.COM



Could it be Majik?

LINN has been updating its Majik range and has revived a longstanding classic. The Majik Isobarik makes use of an isobaric driver arrangement for extensive bass output from a relatively small enclosure. The drivers are downward-firing and Linn says that the Isobarik is capable of genuinely omnidirectional bass when sited correctly.

Upper frequencies are handled by Linn's '2k array', which presents a single-point source. The speakers are available in a range of real-wood veneers and high-gloss finishes.

Linn has also announced revisions to its Klimax range, including a new version of the Dynamik power supply and new audio board for the Klimax DS.

PRICE: £3,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0141 307 7777
WEB: LINN.CO.UK

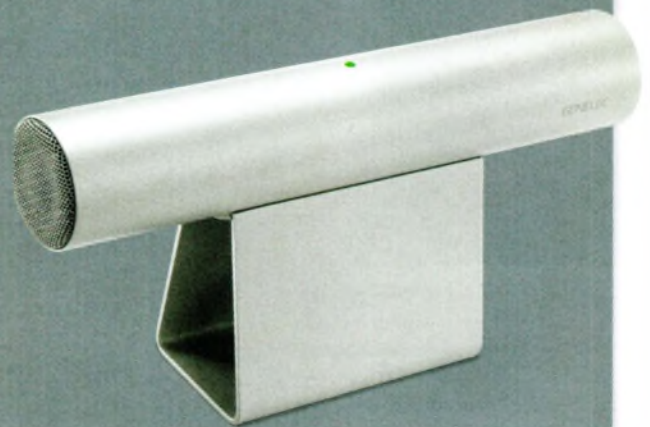
Take the tube

Limited edition tube loudspeaker from Genelec

Genelec has announced a limited edition portable loudspeaker. The 6000A is designed to be used with computers, televisions and portable audio players. It was designed by Harri Koskinen and is unusual in that it is equipped to benefit from being used next to a wall or in a corner.

The 6000A features a 10-watt internal amplifier, remote control and remote input sensing for convenience. Only 2,000 units are to be made and the first 1,000 are earmarked exclusively for the Japanese market, while the following 1,000 will be available on a first-come, first-served basis on the website.

PRICE: €450 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** +358 17 83 881 **WEB:** GENELEC.COM



NEWS IN BRIEF

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



•**PURE** has introduced 'listen later' to the £65 Classic Series II digital radio. The feature allows users to select a daily, weekly or one-off programme to record and listen to at a later date.

pure.com



•**KLIPSCH** has combined Apple AirPlay with its Tractrix horn technology in the £500 G17 network audio player. The Klipsch also works over wireless network and with Android Phones.

klipsch.com



•**SPENDOR** has updated its classic 3/5R loudspeaker. The £850 3/5R2 is said to feature improved bass response from a 140mm long-throw bass driver, paired with a 22mm-wide surround tweeter.

spendoraudio.com



•**REVO's** new £300 K2 offers DAB/DAB+ and FM reception, along with wireless streaming, iPod connectivity, internet radio and Last.FM playback all from a single source.

revo.co.uk

Force 10

Neat Loudspeakers unveils range-topping MF10

Neat has been updating its Ultimatum range, replacing its flagship MF9 with the new MF10.

The new speaker is visibly similar, but is said to feature substantial revisions to the cabinet bracing and acoustic damping – the cabinet itself is constructed from slow-growing Scandinavian birch ply.

The same all-new tweeter from the earlier Ultimatum models is employed, along with the latest version of the Neat 168mm drive unit. Four of which are employed in isobaric arrangement for sub-bass, while two other units are used for mid/bass output. All feature an aluminium phase plug for improved dispersion.

As well as the forward-firing drive units, the MF10 employs a pair of EMIT supertweeters on the top panel.

It's available in standard finishes for £15,245 and premium veneers for £17,080.



PRICE: £15,245-£17,080 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01833 631021 **WEB:** NEAT.CO.UK

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

Paul Heath, from Quadral UK retreats to his tropical paradise with four cool cuts



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DAVID MUNYON
MORE SONGS FOR PLANET EARTH

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JILL SCOTT
WHO IS JILL SCOTT? VOL. 1

Something totally different here, offering fat, funky melodies and that distinctive voice. She's a must-have and there's a whopping 18 tracks on there, too.



LEMON JELLY
LOST HORIZONS

Creative, diverse to some extent with other releases, inspirational and slightly trippy. The perfect set of tunes to drift off to, so let your worries pass you by. Just perfect.



LIVE IT

R SERIES

Nothing captures a moment or expresses a feeling like music. And the all-new R Series delivers a sound so pure you'll experience it on a whole new level. Stunningly fluent Uni-Q® driver arrays combine with potent bass drivers to deliver a rich, spacious and startling sound image with superb dynamics. The R Series incorporates technologies from KEF's flagship Blade loudspeakers. And makes audiophile standards of entertainment more accessible than ever. How will it move you?

www.kef.com

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INNOVATORS IN SOUND

SHOW REPORT

NATIONAL AUDIO SHOW 2011, WHITTLEBURY HALL



SHOW REPORT

National Audio Show

Ed Selley discovers the very latest audio trends from the National Audio Show in Whittlebury

Now in its third year, the National Audio Show at Whittlebury Hall is becoming a permanent fixture in the UK hi-fi show calendar.

Located within earshot of the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit, the show has a very strong emphasis on two-channel audio and while there were some notable absentees in terms of brands and distributors, there was still a wide variety of products on show and at various price points

There were also some impressive discounts to be had on the majority of equipment, and from

the perspective of anyone looking to replace a unit or upgrade, the show offered the opportunity to hear some more unusual products, which – if they appealed – could have been bought there and then.

Combined with a large open-plan area for smaller retailers to offer a variety of hi-fi-related stands, supports and accessories, there were also some interesting products on display – many for the first time.

1 AUDIO NOTE OTO AND MEISHU SIGNATURE
Audio Note's AN-E speakers

(placed right into the corners, which is their preferred positioning) were powered by a new special edition version of the Oto SE integrated amplifier. This uses the same complement of valves as the standard version, but features upgraded transformers and other selected internal components (the Meishu integrated has received similar treatment).

Also on display was a new range of tonearms, each of which looked like excellent value for money.
audionote.co.uk

2 CANOR

We featured Canor electronics in the *News* pages (*HFC 350*), but Whittlebury was the first chance we have had to see them in the flesh. First impressions are very positive. The pairing of TP106 integrated amplifier and CD2 VR CD player sounded

authoritative and in control. The fit and finish also looks top notch. Canor had also brought one of its valve-testing machines, which allow the manufacturer to test every output tube rigorously before installation.
canor-audio.com

3 ENSEMBLE

Swiss brand Ensemble has been out of the UK market for a few years but recently returned with a complete system, including the Dirondo CD player, Fuoco preamp, Evivo power amplifiers and Natura speakers. Together they formed a very happy partnership, with one of the most tonally accurate sounds in the show. The brand prides itself on using valves in hybrid arrangements with solid-state components in order to combine the strengths of both.
ensembleaudio.com

4 AUDEL

Audel is an Italian brand brought to the UK by Quadral. The speakers are built around laminated-birch sections, compressed and then curved

“The show has a very strong emphasis on two-channel audio.”



into shape. As well as the CG618 standmount (available now), Whittlebury had the 'exclusive' on a brand new Audel amplifier and speaker pairing.

The amplifier is an integrated design featuring two line inputs and 50 watts of Class D amplification. The speakers make use of a single full-range driver. Pricing is not yet confirmed, but is expected to be around £1,000 for the pair. audel.it

5 JORDAN ACOUSTICS

Jordan Acoustics took two separate rooms to show a wide variety of equipment. One room housed a very similar system to the one it demonstrated for us during a recent dealer visit (HFC348), with a McIntosh and Art pairing.

In a separate room was a combination of Marantz electronics and Wilson Benesch speakers. This was not a pairing we've run across before, but both brands were shown-off to good effect, with Marantz'

brand ambassador Ken Ishiwata on guru duties. jordanaacoustics.co.uk

6 KUDOS CARDEA SUPER 10

On display in one of the two Kudos rooms was the new Super 10 standmount. Kudos has been looking into producing a special version of the C10 monitor since launching its flagship Titan model, hence the Super 10 has now been developed.

It makes use of the SEAS Crescendo tweeter from the Titan and new Mundorf components in the crossover. All are hand-matched for further quality gains. Kudos expects a price of around £3,500, which while not cheap, was a fair reflection on its excellent performance. kudosaudio.com

7 LEEMA ELEMENTS STREAMER

Leema took a large room with systems set up on three walls to show off its different ranges.

The most interesting new product on display was a prototype streamer that will form part of the Elements range. Built in the same half-width casework as the rest of the range, the streamer is a 24-bit/192kHz-capable UPnP device that makes use of the same Quattro DAC as the CD player and D/A converter.

The unit will replay iPods and iPhones via USB and can even be controlled by the same using a third-party app. Leema hopes to have the unit ready by late autumn. leema-acoustics.com/

8 BURMESTER SERVER

Celebrating its return to the UK, Burmester also took a large room with three separate systems. The most important product on display was the new server, first seen at Munich.

The unit features entirely bespoke software, developed in conjunction with the original developers of iTunes. Storage is flexible and can be specified by the customer. One of the pre-ordered units has been requested with no less than

six terabytes of solid-state storage. Price is expected to be in the region of 25,000 euros. burmester.de

9 JOLIDA RETURNS

Another brand celebrating a return to the UK market is US-based Jolida. The full range of valve amplifiers and CD players is available and one of the more intriguing units was the diminutive FX10 integrated amplifier. This 10-watt design boasts four EL84 valves in a neat Perspex chassis at a very competitive price. The system on display was powered by the JD502BRC integrated with JD100 CD player and the duo produced a lively and entertaining sound with plenty of life and attack to it. jolida.com

10 ROKSAN CASPIAN M2 POWER AMPLIFIER

Henley Designs split its displays between a demonstration room and a much larger space where it had more static product on display. The Roksan Caspian range is completed by the M2 power amplifier. The 85-watt

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Did You Know

The stylish and intuitive **n-remote** is packed full of features including backlit keys, full colour screen and a motion sensing backlight to name but a few.





design features balanced and unbalanced connections into eight ohms.

Laurence Armstrong of Henley was an unabashed fan of the unit and was enthusiastic about the performance improvement the power amp had brought about in the demonstration room over the year before. We also felt that the performance into Audiovector speakers was impressive.

11 PRO-JECT STREAMER

Elsewhere in the Henley room was another 'world exclusive'. The Pro-Ject media streamer joins the impressive Box range of components and, in typical Pro-Ject fashion, offers impressive value for money.

The £600 unit is able to handle lossless and high-resolution formats over UPnP and display album art and artist details, via the full colour touchscreen. No dedicated iPhone control exists, as yet, but the resourceful souls at Henley have already found a

third party app that works. project-audio.com

12 VOIGT MEMORY CORNER HORNS

There were a number of high-end brands on show, but few items were as arresting in concept and execution as the Howes Acoustics Voigt Memory corner horns. Dating back to 1934, the latest iteration of the design features a Voxativ field coil speaker placed in a substantial enclosure.

Included in the basic asking price of £26,000 is the option of having the speaker supplied in your choice of colour and delivered and installed anywhere in the UK. Its performance with vocals was extremely impressive.

13 CAYIN 500MK

Audio Sanctum was using the same Cayin CD-17 CD player and XTZ 100.49 speakers that featured in our *Beautiful System* (HFC 350), but was making use of the £3,950 Cayin 500MK

integrated amplifier. This uses a quartet of distinctive-looking GU29 output valves for a healthy 75-watt output. Cayin is certainly busy at the moment; at the back of the room were prototype high-end units as well as an all-new (very striking looking) media server under development. cayin.com

14 STAX SR-009

Distributor Symmetry systems had a range of Stax electrostatic earspeakers on display with their distinctive exciters. The new £3,995 SR-009 is the flagship of the range and represents a clean sheet design, chief amongst which is an all-new electrostatic membrane. This uses 'super engineering plastics' to, it's said, perform at levels beyond that of preceding Stax models. The aluminium enclosures are

beautifully finished and the performance via the SRM 007 vacuum tube exciter (needed to develop the power for the electrostatic membranes) was absolutely spellbinding. stax.co.jp

15 HIFIMAN HEADPHONES

For those that feel that nearly four thousand pounds might be a little more than they want to spend on a pair of headphones, the Hifiman range offers very high levels of performance at more real-world pricing. Using an orthodynamic driver, the model range as a whole demonstrated an airy and spacious presentation with impressive reserves of bass and low end. Hifiman also produce a range of headphone amps designed to produce an output suitable for getting the best from the headphones. hifiman.us

SHOW REPORT

NATIONAL AUDIO SHOW 2011, WHITTLEBURY HALL



15 ICON AUDIO SPEAKERS

David Shaw of Icon was holding court in his very busy room, which thanks to the attendance and the fact it was also packed full of valves made for a considerably warm atmosphere.

Icon is having considerable success with its 'made for valves' loudspeakers. Using drivers developed for the purpose of high-sensitivity and including such esoteric materials as lamb's wool, Icon has been able to make designs that are more resistant to break up.

David is also working on a single-driver design that aims to avoid some of the limitations of other single-driver designs. iconaudio.com

16 TOTEM ELEMENT METAL

Newly arrived in the UK, the Totem Element Metal floorstanders were on demonstration with Simaudio electronics. Making use of some very clever technology, the Totem has considerable talents. The overall performance is extremely open and very detailed. Most impressive is the low-end surge from what is a relatively slender cabinet.

The Totem manage to pack a considerable punch in an elegant cabinet. We felt the partnership with the Simaudio electronics was a particularly effective one as well. totemacoustic.com

18 SIMAUDIO ANNIVERSARY PRODUCTS

Next door, Simaudio's UK distributor Renaissance had the Moon 750D and 600i Anniversary products on demonstration with ProAc K6 floorstanders. With their red chassis and chrome front panels, the Moon units looked absolutely stunning.

The fit and finish also looked good. Renaissance has paired its systems with ProAc and Totem to demonstrate that its product range of Simaudio, Black Ravioli supports and Studio Connections cables produces systems that simply require you to pair them with the speakers of your choice. simaudio.com

19 RAYSONIC CD128S

Near Simaudio, the new Raysonic CD128S was being given a world premiere. This valve-based CD player combines 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC

with digital inputs and pleasing styling for an impressive £1,850 asking price.

Also on display in the same room were Mark & Daniel loudspeakers. These impressive-sounding units are made from an 'artificial marble', originally designed for the surfaces of the McDonald's restaurant chain! raysonicaudio.com

20 PRIMARE CD22 AND A22

One of the most genuinely enjoyable sounds of the show came from the combination of the brand new Primare CD22 and A22 components, paired with Elac BS243 standmounts.

It is often the case that in the slightly trying environment of a hotel room, smaller loudspeakers can fare better and this certainly was the case here. This very keenly priced trio of units had a very engaging sound, which simply

encouraged you to sit and listen to them.

Hi-Fi Choice will be reviewing the duo exclusively in the next issue, so secure your copy now. primare.net

The National Audio Show still faces some stiff competition from other similar events to be considered the definitive UK show. Nonetheless it combines some unusual and esoteric products with more accessible and mainstream equipment.

The venue offers a large number of rooms with the possibility for further expansion in the future and some of the sounds we heard suggest that it isn't the sonic nightmare that some other hotel-based venues have been described as. It was also heartening to see how many products had their UK release here which suggests that the National Audio Show has some importance for the future. ●

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USB: the new high end?

As plaudits rain down on Classé's CP-800 preamp, **Richard Black** asks whether the days of one-box CD players are numbered

Classé's CP-800 digital-input preamp created quite a sensation with our reviewers in *HFC* 350 and 351, principally because its implementation of USB appears to trump the performance of even the finest stand-alone CD players. This is quite a turn-up given that USB has tended to be seen as a digital interface more about convenience than quality. What's going on?

Way back in *HFC* 318 this column investigated what was then (and still is) the commonest way of transferring digital audio streams using USB. In a nutshell, this involves the computer sending data and the DAC using some quite convoluted tricks to lock on to the data and derive a clock signal from it, more or less as is done in S/PDIF transmission, but with jitter some orders of magnitude worse. The fact is that it can be done surprisingly well and products like the Cambridge Audio DacMagic manage to get audio jitter down to just about the levels associated with a decent one-box player.

The big change in USB came with the introduction of what's called 'asynchronous' operation, a confusing bit of terminology if ever there was one because it actually involves effectively synchronising the sending and receiving devices at the two ends of the USB cable. The DAC takes charge of the data rate, requesting a chunk of data from time to time to keep its buffer charged up and enable a steady flow of bits to the actual digital-to-analogue conversion core.

Because the DAC now no longer needs to derive a clock from the incoming data, jitter is likely to be very much lower. Incidentally, the idea of controlling things from the DAC isn't new: a few upmarket DACs did this years ago, but since S/PDIF is intrinsically a one-way interface it was necessary to use either a matching transport or a modified one which had a second cable for sending clock signals back from the DAC.

Classé's ground-breaking preamp, the CP-800, is changing how we think about hi-fi

Sum of all parts

In a regular CD player, there is just the one clock which controls the disc transport in a similar way to the clock in an asynchronous USB DAC. Effectively, then, what Classé (and several others) have done is to bring USB up to parity with single-box CD replay. That being so, how can the CP-800 be so much better than a CD player?

It's possible that the CP-800 has even lower jitter than any one-box player, but that's nearly impossible to prove one way or the other because plenty of the latter have jitter so low it's barely measurable anyway. That means its contribution is likely to be well below -100dB and, therefore, almost certainly inaudible under any conditions.

But if jitter isn't the secret, there are plenty of other possible answers. Classé has evidently taken great trouble to reduce the effects of interference and noise right through the circuit, and maybe the result is even better than the finest CD players to date. Maybe not, though: again, we've seen plenty where it's impossible to see any signs of unwanted signals in the output. The actual DAC chip in the CP-800 is widely used, so we doubt that's the answer.

We all know that total performance is very much the sum of all the parts and if a digital player of any sort is to excel, then it needs to be very good in every area. At the same time, one needs to be careful with one's logic. If a USB-connected DAC sounds better than any comparable CD player, with the same material (and as we've said many times before, in day-to-day CD replay there's no loss of actual data), then clearly the USB interface has come of age. It isn't necessarily better than CD, though: it's simply that this particular implementation is the current best.

The model to trump it – and something will, in time – could equally well be USB, one-box, Ethernet-connected. What we think is really exciting is that after 30 years there's still progress.

Classé has taken great trouble to reduce the effects of interference and noise and maybe the result is even better than the finest CD players to date



RICHARD BLACK

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

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Does clever USB implementation mean high-end CD players are dead?

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The other innovator

Whether we like it or not, Apple is a powerful force for change in the industry, says **Ed Selley**

As part of the panel of judges that selects the *Hi-Fi Choice Awards* products, I am entirely happy that we have chosen worthy winners. It still seems worth pointing out though, that in the *Innovation* category we didn't give an award to one product that offers superb audio performance, including music-on-demand and internet radio services; can be used as a control interface for a number of other products and costs under £200. I speak, of course, of the iPod Touch and the rest of the Apple family.

There is no conspiracy here; we feel our *Innovation* award winner and the runners up are representative of more specific innovation in the area of hi-fi than the iPod Touch, which we reviewed in *HFC* 340. There is also the more contentious argument that many of the applications that make the iPod the clever multi-tasker that it is are from third-party developers and nothing to do with Apple. Nonetheless, it is a reflection of the progress of Apple that a product from a computer company was in contention for a hi-fi award at all.

Complex relationship

The industry's relationship with Apple is a complex one. On the one hand we have a simply bewildering range of products at almost every price point that offer iPod compatibility, or can make use of an app to be controlled by

The iPod Touch: an excellent sonic performer



one. The sheer tactility of the interface on the more recent products is something that has been influencing hi-fi manufacturers and leading to wholesale improvements in full-size hi-fi components. Touchscreens and clear interfaces predominate where forests of buttons used to bamboozle the unwary.

On the other hand, the sheer ubiquity of Apple in the portable market has pushed out a great many competitors and the locked-down nature of the product ties people in to the Apple brand in a way that means other products don't get a look in. I cannot be the only person who despairs slightly when I watch people pay more than the cost of a CD for a heavily compressed version of the same. I also suspect that at best, iTunes is tolerated rather than loved.

On balance, though, I think the industry is the better for Apple's involvement than without it. As mentioned earlier, the influence of the iPod Touch interface on other products has been considerable and entirely benign – it is unusual to review a product with a truly clunky interface these days. I also feel that standards such as AirPlay and its widespread take up by manufacturers is instrumental in welcoming new users to the fold. In the past, it was possible to buy products that, on reflection, didn't really work desperately well with equipment from other brands. Now, we can make recommendations about products in the knowledge that they will work correctly in any context. This is not exclusively down to Apple, but it has certainly helped the process along.

Above all, Apple has taken up the role of the Sony Walkman in the late '70s and '80s. In the same way that people pirated music from the radio for their Walkmans, many of these people are pirating music to the chagrin of the music industry. Many iPod users will treat themselves to no further items of hi-fi – indeed in the context of the iPod Touch, they might not listen to any music at all.

There will also be a percentage of people that want to take the experience of music further. They might buy nothing more elaborate than an iPod dock but equally, they might want to join us in the pursuit of hi-fi nirvana. Thanks to the consistency of the iPod dock connector and standards like AirPlay, they can use their existing hardware in their first system and at the same time gain an insight into the world beyond it. We need new blood to keep the pastime alive and that is the role of Apple as I see it.

The iPod Touch might have been denied an award this year, but the role it plays in this industry remains absolutely pivotal.

The influence of the iPod Touch interface on other products has been considerable and entirely benign – it is unusual to review a product with a truly clunky interface these days



ED SELLEY

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

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Strictly for the bats?

To extend high-frequency reproduction to 100kHz seems batty, but says *Jimmy Hughes*, Townshend's Super Tweeter is supersonic

The case for subwoofers is fairly easy to make. Most loudspeakers are limited in terms of size and this leads to restricted bass depth. Very few can reproduce frequencies much deeper than 30Hz (and many don't even get that far), so there's an obvious need for something to reproduce those lower octaves.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, virtually all modern speakers can reproduce high frequencies well beyond the range of human hearing – reckoned to be about 20kHz. Alas, few listeners the wrong side of 20 can hear as high as 20kHz. As for those of us the wrong side of 50 – well, we're lucky if we can hear up to 15kHz!

It gets worse. With most of us listening to music from CD, bandwidth is limited to about 19kHz. So, why invest in super tweeters that extend the upper frequencies out beyond 30kHz, when the recordings themselves have no high frequencies to exploit this and our ears can't hear that high anyway?

The logic of the above seems irrefutable. Yet regardless of such 'logic', Townshend Maximum Super Tweeters are capable of having a profound effect on sound quality – and not necessarily in ways you might expect or predict. They're Ribbon designs that behave like a subwoofer for the treble – influencing the sound in strange ways.

Now you might expect a set of super tweeters to increase sharpness and give the sound greater upper-frequency immediacy and impact. This it does, but – and here's where it gets a bit scary – you also notice improvements in apparent bass depth, along with increased lower-frequency tightness and control. Amazing!

Subjectively, it's akin to the way a good subwoofer makes the treble seem smoother and more 'airy', increasing the impression of 3D spacious depth and tonal richness. Although you're only bolstering the lowest frequencies, the improvement seems to come in the midband and treble areas.

In much the same way, a good super tweeter seems to give you a tighter, cleaner bass, with reduced boom and overhang. Yet, turn off your main speakers and listen only to what the super tweeter's are doing – the noises they're actually making – and it seems incredible that it could be making this sort of difference.

One of the key aspects of getting great results from a subwoofer is – don't have it up too loud. When you first get a sub, there's a tendency to adjust it so its contribution is 'obvious'. But paradoxically, subs produce their most profound effects when their presence is subliminal. You should only notice a sub when it's switched off.

It's exactly the same with a super tweeter; you need very little. Indeed, it's been our experience (going back more than twenty years) that the less you have, the more profound the overall effect on sound quality becomes. We always use our Townshend Super Tweeters with them set to '1', and often wish there was a lower setting.

Discretion pays

The question is – how and why do super tweeters (and subs) contribute so much, yet (apparently) seem to do so little? In our view, it's to do with being able to move air at sub-sonic and supersonic frequencies, making it easier for frequencies in the audible range to couple-better to the air.

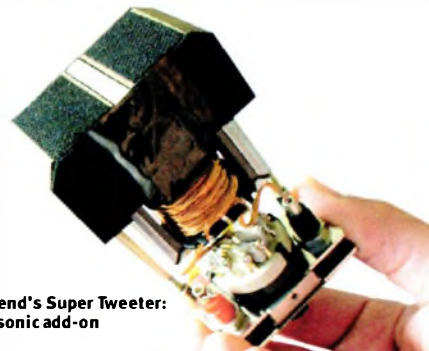
By setting the air in motion at extremely high or low frequencies, you help the drive units to move the air in the middle-frequency areas where the bulk of the sound is. Imagine a sharp blade trying to cut through something stiff. If you were to vibrate it at supersonic frequencies, it would cut more efficiently.

For this reason, you don't actually have to 'hear' the contribution made by your super tweeters to notice the effect they have on the overall sound. Indeed, if the contribution is too strong, the result is counter-productive – the sound becomes messy and harsh, with excessive high-frequency emphasis.

When a super tweeter seamlessly integrates, you get a focused quality of sound that has an innate clarity, while also displaying a spacious airy quality that creates holographic 3D 'out of the boxes' stereo imagery. Transients have increased attack, yet the treble itself is effortlessly smooth and open.

Given that most loudspeakers are more obviously deficient at the extreme low-frequency end of the spectrum, a good subwoofer probably gives you a bigger bang for your buck. But a super tweeter like Townshend's Maximum is likewise capable of adding an extra dimension that has to be heard to be believed. ●

Townshend Maximum Super Tweeters are capable of having a profound effect on sound quality – and not necessarily in ways you might expect or predict



Townshend's Super Tweeter: a supersonic add-on



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?

Should we all be using subwoofers and super tweeters? Do you agree with Jimmy? Email us now: hifichoice@futurenet.com

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Stag night

I noted your DAC *Blind Listening Group Test* (HFC 350) with interest, particularly your Lab Conclusions which now consider dynamic range at bit/sampling rates higher than that of CD. The group test does not consider the Antelope Audio Zodiac Plus DAC (HFC 345). I am aware of how highly you regard this DAC, as per the review and as per your response to my queries on your *Help & Advice* page (HFC 347). Might I ask how well your lab test results for this unit compare with those of the DAC group test, particularly with regard to dynamic range?

I currently listen to music from my computer, using a pair of AVI ADM9.1 speakers. This is an active solution, with an integrated DAC and pre, which I find has excellent sound quality and is superb value (despite the limitation of 24-bit/96kHz via the digital input). As noted in Malcolm Steward's excellent *Back Page* article (HFC 350), computer processor load definitely affects sound quality.

As I alluded to in my letter (HFC 347), I have also noticed this effect on the optical output of my PC. The effect of load is clearly audible during extended listening with the AVIs, when otherwise excellent sound reproduction can become slightly compromised. I suppose the best way to mitigate this problem is to use a dedicated media PC for listening to music, or to be careful about PC multi-tasking if the computer is used for many tasks at once.

May we please have more discussion on these types of computer-related issues in *Hi-Fi Choice* in the future? As hi-fi and computing converge, it is vital that the technical issues associated with PC audio reproduction are discussed and explained, in order to maximise sound quality.

I feel that these are exciting times for those with an interest in music and hi-fi. In hard disc based audio, we have a new 'dynamic' (and super convenient)



The Antelope Zodiac Plus would have put up a good fight in our recent group test

audio format that can evolve with computing technology as time progresses, rather than becoming antiquated. My only concern is that album artwork does not become a thing of the past. I still have plenty of vinyl too, and I love it!

Chris Lloyd, via email

HFC We will continue to explore all of the facets of computer audio over coming issues. At the moment, deciding on what is relevant to computer audio and what subjects might be better left to the dedicated computer magazines is a source of some debate and we will be forced to leave some of the more in-depth discussions on computer hardware to them.

Our feelings about the best way of alleviating the influence of the computer in audio systems is to make use of network clients via dedicated NAS drive which, as you say, is unlikely to suffer from issues arising from multi-tasking. This need not be expensive – the *Squeezebox Touch* that saw off all comers in the *streamer Blind Listening Group Test* (HFC 351) is still under £250 and would work admirably into a DAC like the Antelope or similar.

With regards to the measured performance of the Antelope with higher bit rates, it was tested before we had the means to run that exact test. James Waldron, our measurement guru who measured both the

Antelope and the DAC group test in HFC 350 is of the opinion that the Zodiac Plus would have placed towards the top end of the group, but the M2Tech Young DAC is probably still the undisputed champion in this regard.

Live long and prosper

I read Ed Selley's *Opinion* column *The test of time* (HFC 350) with interest. My first hi-fi set-up was a 'Comet special' in the mid '70s. After much saving, I managed to get my dream system in 1982 from my friendly dealer (Purkiss Hi-Fi, Hanley) which included a Linn LP12 turntable with LVX arm and Nytech amplification comprising a CP112 preamp, EX 102 active crossover and two CPA602 power amps feeding ARC 050 speakers.

I was warned (after I bought the amps) by various 'experts' that, while sounding superb, the Nytech equipment would be very unreliable. Sure enough, after only 28 years of continuous use, one of the channels on one of the power amps started to crackle. I considered binning the Nytech – the company went bust in the late '80s – but I made a last ditch effort to find someone who could repair the equipment by consulting Google. The result was that I found an engineer who has rebuilt both power amps (despite never having seen a Nytech before), and they now sound better than ever, all at a very reasonable cost.



Linn's LP12 is an industry survivor

The Linn has been the least reliable. Despite being regularly serviced by Linn and having every upgrade up to, but not including the Lingo it had two replacement motors, and a replacement Valhalla board. It's on its second Akito arm. When the second replacement motor stopped I almost threw it in the bin, but decided, as a last attempt, to fit an Origin Live replacement motor and power supply. The result is stunning!

My system is now performing superbly again. The message is, if you have some good-quality gear that is getting 'tired', you can get it restored at very reasonable cost compared to buying new as long as you're prepared to do some detective work!

Stuart Turner, via email

HFC Ed Selley replies "I had a feeling when I wrote that piece that someone would point out that one of the units I had selected hadn't been hugely reliable for them! The selection of the LP12 was not really made for its reliability – although I'm surprised yours has needed as much work as it has – but more for the fact that it has been in continuous production for the entire lifespan of Hi-Fi Choice. This is a considerable achievement and puts it in a very small category of products that have been on sale and in production for over thirty years.

There is no question that some products – amplifiers especially – from the early days of Hi-Fi Choice can still represent excellent value for money. As you point out, the internals of these pieces are not so mysterious as to defy service and repair by a competent engineer and the

construction methods of the time make for an easier repair job than some of the more modern designs. Hopefully you can look forward to another 28 years of listening from the Nytechs."

Remote viewing

Since CDs came on the scene I have had a number of different CD players. All of them had exactly the same problem – you could only read the display if you were close to the front of the CD player, ie when loading or unloading CDs.

My wife has a brilliant idea – why don't the manufacturers display at least the current track number being played on the remote as well. The technology is available and this would make it so much easier for armchair listening.

Derek Excell, via email

HFC The technology to do this has indeed been available for some time, but there are a few reasons why it hasn't been taken up. The first is that not all displays are equal in terms of legibility. Products such as the Simaudio range and the Audio Note CD Zero we tested in HFC 348 have large displays that are much easier to read than more 'normal' designs we have seen.

Secondly, the process of sending information to a remote,

while simple enough to do, adds to the complexity of a unit. Remotes need to become two-way devices and incorporate a display of some description to show the information received.

It may be that developments in streaming audio will deliver what you are looking for in a slightly different way. The rise in network streaming products has seen a similar rise in the use of control applications on the iPad and other handheld devices. This is not only able to show you the track number playing at the time, but also the title of the song and indeed extra information including album title, cover art and whether the song in question is part of a playlist.

To add to the appeal, the 'remote' is also capable of browsing the web or indeed shopping for more music when you aren't using it as such. We think that this is the most likely way forward in terms of additional feedback from source units.

Spotted history

I have just finished reading Adam Hartley's *Opinion* column regarding the emergence of Spotify (HFC 350). I must confess that I have found this an invaluable tool for finding new music. I have subscribed to the premium service, using the argument that it would reduce my



Audio Note displays are visible at a distance



A9
"Astragily clear transparent sound, agility and seamless integration"

What Hi-Fi?



A6
"Crystalline tonal sweet lines to it"

What Hi-Fi?

A5

"Endlessly listenable these are accomplished beyond their price"

What Hi-Fi Mar 11



SPENDOR

appetite for buying CDs to 'she, whom must be obeyed'. The performer links and artist radio options have brought me to artists that I would never have found otherwise.

The quality of the stream does seem to vary, but on the whole it is acceptable enough, providing you can pipe it through to a half-reasonable DAC. I initially started listening via some PC speakers with the free version (I soon got dissatisfied with that!), but progressed to piping the output from a laptop into a Firestone Bravo USB to S/PDIF converter, then via coax into my DAC. (Cyrus DAC-X+). This also opened the door for me to listen to the radio (both live and on demand) with the result that I was searching Spotify for even more artists.

I definitely think the future of music lies with the streaming of high-quality content over the internet by means of downloading to storage devices, as some will be happy not to physically 'own' a music library. That's not for me though, as browsing through a library on a computer monitor or some other display cannot replace the tactile experience of the LP sleeve, CD booklet, etc. But as a means to an end, to expand my musical horizons, I think it has got a lot going for it.

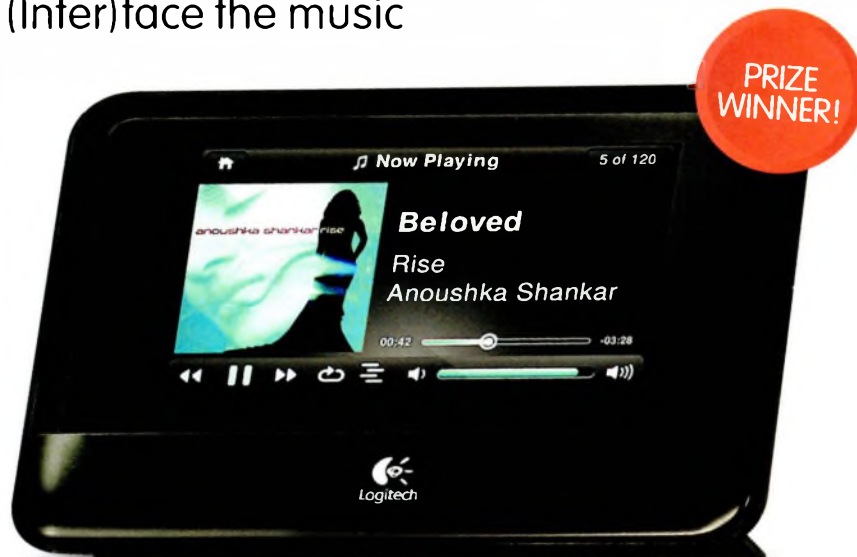
Derek Gooding, via email

HFC You are not the first person to note that using Spotify has actually resulted in buying more physical music. The removal of risk that the 'try before you buy' process allows, does mean that you can order something knowing what to expect. But the potential for an on-demand system to replace CD lives or dies on the quality of the internet connection. If the average line speed can simultaneously support lossless audio and general browsing and data requirements, the prospect of an unlimited library might start to tempt people away from physical media and into the cloud. Most of the HFC team is now firmly in the 'we love Spotify' camp and use it regularly.



LETTER OF THE MONTH

(Inter)face the music



I AM NOT too suprised to see that the Squeezebox Touch took on five other streamers that were more expensive in your *Blind-Listening Group Test* (HFC 351) and came out on top. The reason for this – as Richard Black made very clear – is that the interface of the Touch is simply in a different league to the competition from 'normal' hi-fi companies.

As the hi-fi industry looks towards an ever closer partnership with computers for music reproduction, many manufacturers are going to have to come to terms with the fact that, in regard to screen-driven interfaces, they are far behind some of the key players in the computer and tablet market. At the very least, they need to accept that a third-party control app is vital to the success of the unit.

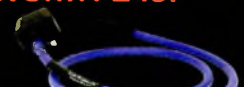
I suspect that Apple has spent more money on the iPad and iPad 2 than the hi-fi industry has spent in total on their media streamers. There is no sense trying to make a better control interface on a shoestring budget.

I also wonder if the next 'category-killing' product in the streaming audio sector might be a combination of the know-how of Logitech for menu control and plug-ins, and a more established audio company that can produce the digital-to-analogue section this interface so richly deserves.

Peter Howard, via email ●

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- B: Mauve**
- C: Yellow**

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Many of the products that we review offer excellent performance, but can lack a certain visual impact. Rather than offer its newest range of speakers in a wood-effect wrap, Triangle decided to make them available in black, white and the rather splendid red (see right). Not only do they look fantastic, these are some of the best finished loudspeakers that we have seen in the under £1,000 category.

More importantly, they sound amazing. This is a confident speaker with a very sweet and detailed top end, coupled with strong bass. It has a range of attributes that meant we had no hesitation in making it one of our sub-£1,000 Loudspeaker Award nominees. Thanks to the generosity of Triangle, one lucky winner will be able to discover this for themselves by winning this month's competition.



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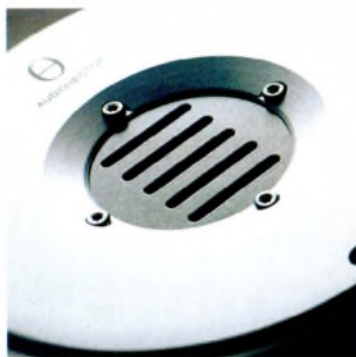
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EXPERT TESTING

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.

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

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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.



Small is beautiful



This latest model from Bowers & Wilkins is, says **Paul Messenger**, a beautifully styled and finished luxury miniature

Although the mainstream marketplace for hi-fi loudspeakers invariably tends to equate price with size and necessarily expects a costly loudspeaker to be a large loudspeaker, more sophisticated hi-fi customers are aware that this relationship is largely false.

It's certainly true that a small loudspeaker is bound to have certain limitations, especially in areas such as bass extension, loudness capability and power handling. However, such designs also have certain strengths that are often all too easily overlooked, over and beyond the obvious fact that for many customers, when it comes to loudspeakers (rather than, say, TV screens), small is, by definition, beautiful.

For example, the smaller the loudspeaker, the less the enclosure area available to radiate unwanted cabinet colorations. The fact that it has roughly the same dimensions as a human head is bound to assist voice reproduction and wide dispersion assists stereo imaging. And getting the bass/mid driver well off the floor with space all around it helps avoid the colorations caused by early reflections.

Matrix stiffening

Priced close to £2,000 per pair, the PM1 is precisely aimed at the established sector of luxury-finish mini-monitors, combining top-quality engineering within a beautifully designed and crafted physical package.

With an internal volume of around eight litres, it's actually somewhat larger than the 'classic' miniature, probably because the enclosure is so substantially built, including part-filling the insides with Bowers & Wilkins' proprietary Matrix stiffening.

The thick side panels are finished in a lovely high-gloss 'Mocha Gloss' veneer, with heavily chamfered edges that blend nicely into the textured – almost rubberised – matt black

front and the domed top, helping avoid edge-diffraction effects. The same textured black covers the other two surfaces, while the domed top provides support for the external tweeter's tapered metal rear-loading and mounting tube. Two detachable, magnetically held grilles are available: one for the front, the other for the tweeter, although neither was used during the auditioning.

Bowers & Wilkins has packed much of its latest technology into this bijou enclosure. The tweeter is particularly unusual (see below), but the 130mm bass/mid driver uses an interesting new central phase compensator and dust dome. This hemispherical polymer foam 'plug', attached to the 90mm Kevlar cone, not only supplies

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Bowers & Wilkins
PM1

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE:
Two-way compact
standmount

WEIGHT: 9.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
191x331x250mm

FEATURES:
• 25mm alloy dome
tweeter

• 130mm Kevlar cone
bass/mid driver

• Port on front

• Tube-loaded
external and
decoupled tweeter

• Partnering FS-PM1
stand has matching
veneer on pillars

• Optional grille
held by concealed
magnets

• Twin terminal pairs

• Double bungs
provide bass
tuning options

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the required acoustic characteristics, but also absorbs and damps resonances.

Two pairs of high-quality multi-way terminals permit bi-wiring or bi-amping and wire links are supplied for single wiring. These feed a very simple crossover with high-quality components.

The front panel has a 'flowport' – a port flared at each end and with a stippled surface to improve high-velocity flow. A clever two-piece foam bung is supplied, either to block or re-tune the port if desired.

Super tweeter

Because the diamond diaphragm used in the company's top models would be too costly for the PM1's intended price, the tweeter here

“Extended listening confirmed this speaker's wonderfully smooth and neutral delivery.”

has a traditional alloy dome. But it does benefit from an interesting innovation that helps move the performance of the metal dome rather closer to diamond than before.

This is a ring made from pitch-based carbon fibre threads, which has an exceptionally high Young's



The PM1's tweeter perched atop the cabinet utilises techniques developed for the latest diamond tweeters, including a simpler, but related neodymium magnet structure

Q&A...

WE SPOKE WITH MIKE GOUGH, SENIOR PRODUCT MANAGER, BOWERS & WILKINS



HFC: We understand that the PM1 was partly conceived to fill in the vacated Nautilus 805S slot, yet it's only about half the volume. Can you please explain this decision?

MG: If we had wanted to exactly fill the slot of the 805S, we would simply have continued to make it alongside the Diamond version. Small speakers are appreciated in many markets and, if you discount the ability to play extremely loud, there are lots of good reasons for imbuing them with top quality in other areas of performance. We would claim that the PM1 outperforms the 805S in many respects.

The PM1 has much in common with the CM1, which has numerous larger range-mates. Do you anticipate future, larger PM-series models?
We always anticipate. We just don't always execute!

Is the PM1 built in Worthing, or does it come from your Chinese factory?
It's built in our own factory in Zhuhai.

Bowers & Wilkins has always tried to hold the price of a model throughout its lifespan, but the Chinese dramatically jacked up the price of neodymium recently. Do you anticipate that will affect the PM1's price in the future?
No.

I know that the latest Diamond tweeters have very different motors to their predecessors. Have you applied similar techniques to the alloy dome used here?
Whereas these tweeters do not have the full quad magnet arrangement of the 800 Diamond models, there are still two. The second one is in the position normally used by a bucking magnet – on the back of the back plate. The two on the top of the top plate and centre pole are missing. The moving mass is not as high as with the diamond dome and the system sensitivity is not as high as some of the larger models, so there isn't the same need for higher magnetic energy.



THE CASE IN FAVOUR of small loudspeakers has led to a number of high-class 'mini-monitors' capable of rivalling the sound quality of 'full size' monitors in important respects and within certain limitations.

Arguably, the original mini-monitor was the Goodmans Maxim, but the most famous must be the BBC LS3/5a. Initially developed for the cramped space in outside broadcast trucks, it became quite a cult in the hi-fi world back in the mid-1970s and early examples still command high secondhand prices today.

Other classics include the Acoustic Energy AE1 and the Wilson Audio Tiny Tot (WATT). So Bowers & Wilkins' PM1 is just the latest in an illustrious line.

modulus. Applied around the dome's 'skirt', the resultant increase in stiffness moves the diaphragm's first break-up frequency from 30kHz to 40kHz – still well below the 70kHz found with diamond, but a worthwhile increase nonetheless.

The PM1 tweeter has also adopted a couple of techniques developed for the latest diamond tweeters, including a new surround rubber and a simpler, but related neodymium magnet structure.

The PM1 has a partnering stand (codenamed FS-PM1), which looks very attractive, lifts the speaker an appropriate 620mm from the floor, provides a very substantial mechanical foundation and also a means of concealing the cables leading from the speaker terminals to the floor.

At £400 per pair, it's much more costly than a typical universal stand, but that's not unusual for a stand dedicated to a particular model and, therefore, produced in relatively small quantities. Furthermore, it's beautifully designed, presented and finished.

The hefty black lacquer-finished base has a generous stability footprint, while the central pillar, decorated in the same Mocha Gloss veneer used on the speaker, has a couple of deep grooves on the front face to inhibit coherent reflections. Lockable spikes or softer semi-spherical feet provide floor coupling.

The stand comes, probably inevitably, flat-packed, so if the dealer can't be persuaded to carry out the assembly, it's best to set aside a couple of hours and make sure the electric screwdriver is fully charged (although an appropriate hex key is supplied, each stand uses a dozen bolts, so finding the right bit for the screwdriver is well worthwhile).

Assembly is straightforward enough, though a bit tricky and while the diagram is clear enough, a step-by-step guide would help avoid the occasional pitfall. The trickiest part is actually bolting the speaker to the top plate, for the obvious reason that the external tweeter and domed top prevent the speaker being turned upside down to facilitate this.

Unlike stand assembly, it only takes a few minutes to unpack a pair of standmounts, so initial listening was carried out using the Kudos S100 stands that are a regular reference. Blu-tacked to the top plate, the sound was frankly rather disappointing. Despite delivering a decent overall tonal balance when sited well clear of walls, the sound somehow lacked overall coherence and was weak in presence energy.

After a couple of exasperating days, the bullet was bit and the FS-PM1 stands were assembled. The results were mildly astonishing and unquestionably transforming. That the stand plays a significant role in the sound quality of a standmount speaker is pretty well known, but we were still surprised at how considerable and dramatic the difference was on this occasion. Although no longer in production, the Kudos S100 stand is an excellent example of a 'universal' stand, but in performance terms it was no match for using the PM1 on its intended stand.

Now the speaker was able to demonstrate its true class as a genuine mini-monitor. It has a beautifully smooth, even and neutral balance, as well as a clean and lively disposition. It also sounds exceptionally coherent and free from any boxiness, with fine spacious imaging, though the presence might have had tighter focus. Measurement confirmed an exceptional +/-2dB in-room averaged balance for all frequencies above 90Hz and +/-3dB above 40Hz.

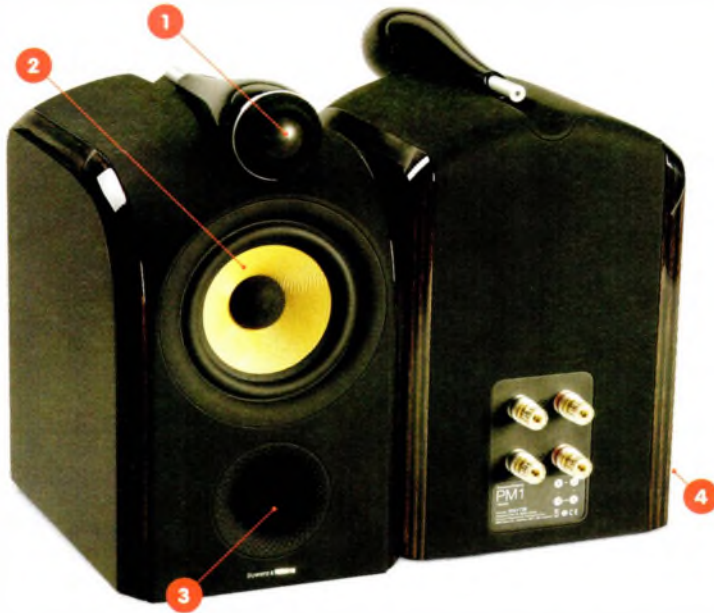
Bass alignment

One of its more impressive characteristics was the evenness of the bass alignment and here the modest size of this little speaker proved a positive advantage. Larger standmounts often show a tendency to mid-bass excess, due to the port output coinciding with a bass room mode.

The unobstructed port of the PM1 is actually tuned to 53Hz, bang on a major mode in our listening room, but because the speaker is relatively small this merely means that it delivers decently even bass down to



DETAILS



- 1** The tube-loaded tweeter is mounted externally and its 25mm alloy dome is stiffened by a carbon fibre thread
- 2** Bass and midrange are handled by a 130mm driver with a 90mm diameter Kevlar cone
- 3** Front port has 'flowport' dimples and clever bungs with removable centres provide bass tuning options
- 4** Cute enclosure has substantial Mocha Gloss veneered side-cheeks, carefully chamfered around the front edge

SYSTEM MATCHING

THE ESTABLISHED technique used to get reasonable bass extension from a small passive speaker like a mini-monitor is to go for a relatively low sensitivity, and low sensitivity requires more amplifier power to achieve the same level of loudness capability.

The Bowers & Wilkins PM1 is rated (rather conservatively, in our opinion) at a well-below-average sensitivity of 84dB, so it should be partnered with reasonably powerful amplification.

Bowers & Wilkins recommends 30-100 watts, which seems reasonable enough, though perhaps a 50 watt minimum might be more advisable. Certainly, low-powered valve amps are better avoided, though fortunately power handling is good.

and neutral delivery and its impressive freedom from colorations. All the benefits that a small loudspeaker automatically accrue are clearly evident here, but there's no avoiding the audibility of the downsides too, although that tends to depend, at least, to some extent on the material being reproduced.

Inevitably the lack of serious bass weight, authority and grip becomes apparent when the speaker is required to reproduce full-bore electric rock or dance material, or large-scale orchestral performances for that matter. However, acoustic sources and vocal material, including speech, were much more convincing, although dynamics themselves do lack a little vigour and enthusiasm, especially through the presence region. Because there's so little background 'hash' to interfere with the resolution of low-level information, the dynamic range is actually very wide.

A long evening spent playing a wide range of vinyl favourites proved highly enjoyable and if the PM1 got a bit out of its depth with live Grateful Dead recordings and more recent material from Massive Attack, its reproduction of Ry Cooder, Joni Mitchell and Tom Waits discs was quite delightful. It even coped manfully with the full-scale broadcast onslaught of the *Last Night of the Proms* (which did come as a surprise) and it also proved very capable of distinguishing the varying qualities of the different transmission media.

Ultimately, this is a small loudspeaker and, as such, will never match the sheer drama of the very best large loudspeakers across the full spectrum of music. However, its lack of visual intrusiveness, plus the fine imaging and superb neutrality and dynamic range are their own reward. ●

40Hz, even when its sited well clear of walls. This positioning gives the lowest coloration and the best stereo imaging under our far-field in-room conditions.

While room modes will always boost the in-room bass, their effects are unpredictable and vary from room to room. Blocking the ports completely with the foam bungs should give the best results if the

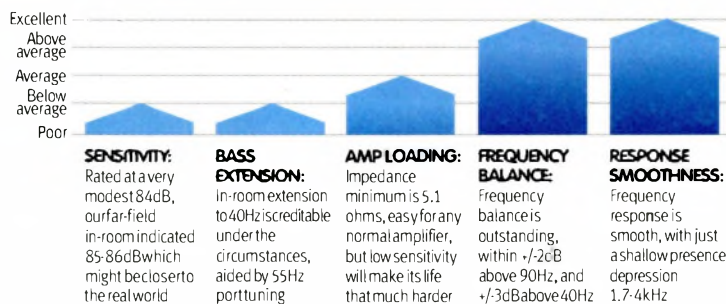
speaker is to be placed close to a wall. Removing the centre section from the bungs will reduce the port output and re-tune it to around 38Hz, a 'halfway house' condition that could prove useful depending on individual circumstances.

Music spectrum

Extended listening confirmed this speaker's wonderfully smooth

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Fine imaging; superb neutrality and dynamic range
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Limited bass weight and authority; some weakness in dynamic expression
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A very attractive loudspeaker, but does have some pitfalls
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Guildford Audio

Astintrew
ATC
Audio Research
Audiophile Base
Copland
Crystal Cable
Custom Design
Dan D'Agostino
Dartzeel
Dream Vision
EAT

Gamut
Grado
Heed Audio
Jadis
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Krell
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Martin Logan
Microomega

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Pragma
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PS Audio
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Electric tech



Want clean mains to power your hi-fi? IsoTek's range of passive mains conditioners promises you all that and more, says **Jimmy Hughes**

The quality of the mains supply directly influences the sound produced by your hi-fi. If your mains is contaminated with noise (and it is!), the sound will lack transparency and clarity, making the music seem congested and lacking in dynamics. The solution? Invest in a good mains conditioner. IsoTek offers a wide range of products, from the mighty £6k Super Titan (see *The Collection 2011*), to smaller more affordable solutions like the new EVO3 Solus at £595. This unit sits above the entry-level EVO3 Sirius mains bar and replaces IsoTek's GII Solus, which according to the company, offers higher specifications and improved performance, with no increase in cost.

No noise

The EVO3 Solus incorporates a Delta filter network to cancel common mode and differential noise. In addition, newly devised differential filtering is individually applied to all six mains outlets to prevent cross-contamination between components.

Noise on the mains supply is only one of the problems you're trying to tackle; there's also the risk of individual components themselves (power amplifiers, for example) generating their own noise and further contaminating the supply. So isolating all six mains

sockets is an important feature. Silver-plated oxygen-free copper cables are used internally, and the EVO3 Solus also protects your equipment from unexpected voltage surges and power spikes.

There's an IEC mains input and six 13-amp unswitched mains outlets – which (given a typical hi-fi set-up) should be sufficient for most user requirements. During use the unit runs cool and makes no mechanical/physical noise so far as we could tell and there are no annoying buzzes or humming sounds to speak of.

Modest price

Build quality is reassuringly solid. The casework is made from mild steel, with an aluminium front panel and cosmetically, the finish is good. Internally, the various components are mounted on a single printed circuit board which is resin-potted. While this helps keeps things like mechanical resonance in check, it also makes it virtually impossible see what components have been used, and prevents IsoTek's competitors from ascertaining the precise nature of its circuits!

Given the EVO3 Solus's relatively modest price, when compared to IsoTek's massive Super Titan model, the former offers very good value. Inevitably, of course, it's not as good

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
IsoTek EVO3 Solus
Origin:
UK

TYPE:
Mains conditioner

WEIGHT:
5kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
440 x 310 x 100mm

FEATURES:

- Six 13a mains outlet sockets
- Each socket individually isolated
- Silver-plated, oxygen-free copper cabling

- Cancels both common-mode and differential noise

- Protects against voltage spikes and power surges

DISTRIBUTOR:
Soundfoundations

TELEPHONE:
01962 852727

WEBSITE:
isoteksystems.com

as the bigger unit, but it provides more than a taste of its benefits at a fraction of the price. And, every little helps!

Transparent sound

In terms of sound quality, what can you expect from a mains conditioning unit like the EVO3 Solus? Well, as you purge the mains supply of noise, you will be better able to experience what your hi-fi system is capable of – you finally start hearing your equipment as it is meant to sound.

Obviously, much depends on the quality of the mains to begin with; the noisier it is, the bigger the improvement. The EVO3 Solus enables a cleaner more transparent sound, with increased depth and a wider dynamic range. The music sounds slightly sharper and more immediate, yet at the same time smoother and cleaner, with reduced high-frequency 'edge' and less congestion in complex, busy passages. Also, the quality of sound is more consistent from day to day, hour to hour. The sound will be good, regardless of when you listen, rather than sounding best (say) after midnight.

You're hooked

The EVO3 Solus is a simple effective means of upgrading the sound of your hi-fi; making it sound better and more consistent. You'll get the biggest and most noticeable benefit in situations where mains quality is noisy and contaminated. But, even if your mains supply is reasonably clean, you still hear an improvement. The fact that the EVO3 Solus reduces cross-contamination between components is one reason why.

Because mains purity is specific to each location, you need to try the EVO3 Solus in your own home to fully experience the benefits, once you've done so, we're convinced you'll be hooked! ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Simple, effective device that improves sound quality without fuss

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: No serious complaints

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Mains purity has a profound effect on sound quality. The EVO3 Solus will help your hi-fi deliver its full potential

FEATURES



OVERALL





La dolce vita



Audio Analogue has mixed valves and solid-state in the new hybrid Verdi Cento. **Ed Selley** finds out if it sounds more tube than transistor

Audio Analogue is Italian and makes no secret of the fact. If the elegant aesthetics and distinctive topology weren't a sufficient clue to the country of origin, then naming the product 'Verdi Cento' ought to leave you in no doubt. Italian composers and musical terms dominate the product names of the Audio Analogue line-up and 'Cento'

in this context denotes the power output – an honest 100 watts into eight ohms.

The £1,600 Verdi Cento sits towards the middle of the Audio Analogue integrated amplifier range, yet by the standards of some recent integrated designs that we have seen, it is very conventional. Five line inputs and a phono stage are fitted, along with a pre-out and fixed-level

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Audio Analogue
Verdi Cento

ORIGIN:
Italy

TYPE:
Hybrid integrated
amplifier

WEIGHT:
12.5kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
176 x 40 x 159mm

FEATURES:
• Valve preamplifier stage
• Five line inputs
• Tape output
• Pre-out
• Switchable moving-magnet and moving-coil phono stage

DISTRIBUTOR:
Audio Analogue

CONTACT:
+39 0572 520181

WEBSITE:
audioanalogue.net

tape output. All inputs are RCA phono, there are no XLR connections, let alone digital or USB inputs. This might seem a little antiquated, but this focuses the Verdi Cento as an amplifier rather than a hub and bodes well for the task in hand. There is also no shortage of DACs or CD players with digital inputs if you do happen to need them.

Valve-heater

The most distinctive aspect of the Verdi Cento is the use of a valve preamp mated to a more conventional solid-state power amplifier. This is something that Audio Analogue has been doing for some years and is intended to combine the naturalness and life that valves possess with the speaker-driving capability, and better measurements of a solid-state amplifier.

The Verdi Cento sports a pair of small ECC-type triodes, sat horizontally toward the centre of the chassis. Unusually, a valve-heater is

fitted with a dedicated secondary power supply to ensure optimal performance in what might otherwise be considered a fairly challenging environment for a pair of small-signal valves.

The power amp stage is impressively substantial for an amplifier at this price point. Audio Analogue describes the design as a 'bridged parallel'-type built around a National Semiconductor LM3886 power pack. As with the valve stage, a dedicated secondary power supply is fitted, taking power from the hefty toroidal transformer for the power amp for optimal performance. A pair of large internal heatsinks is also fitted for cooling purposes.

The overall impression of the Verdi Cento is that there is a considerable amount of performance engineering for the asking price, especially on a product assembled within the EU.

Channel balance

The internal phono stage is a welcome addition. Unusually, this supports both moving-magnet and moving-coil outputs and is a useful feature for any turntable user looking for a new amplifier at this price.

Switching between moving-magnet and moving-coil is done by physically lifting the lid and altering jumper settings which might be a little involved for those that prefer to leave the 'engine room' of their amp alone, but is presumably something a dealer could do before delivery.

Externally, there are some clues to where Audio Analogue has tried to claw some costs back, but none of them are too severe. The volume control is not a conventional 'pot',



THE VERDI CENTO makes for a fascinating comparison to the slightly more expensive Bel Canto C5i, that we reviewed last month (HFC 351).

The Bel Canto might be seen as the more forward-looking of the two designs; it is a Class D unit sporting digital inputs and a display. The Audio Analogue is an altogether larger and simpler affair.

What is interesting is that the Class D Bel Canto is an altogether warmer-sounding amp than the partly valve-based Audio Analogue. Both are fine-sounding amps, though, and they serve to highlight the breadth of choice as this price point.

but a large jog-dial that progressively illuminates a series of LEDs to show the volume level. This presumably helps channel balance and negates the need for a motorised control, but doesn't provide the 'feel' of a more conventional control. Input selection is also done by scrolling through the inputs rather than by discrete selection, which can be a pain if the inputs you are using are a distance apart.

The supplied remote is small, somewhat plasticky and by no means a thing of beauty, but it works

“Sounds extremely natural and believably real with the vast majority of recordings.”

well enough and will control a matching Audio Analogue CD player for anyone looking to buy a complete system.

Minor gripes about the tactility of the volume control aside, the fit and finish of the Verdi Cento is very good. The casework is solid and well finished and the 12.5kg mass is reassuringly hefty. There is no shortage of competition at this price point, but the impressive power output, solid build and the presence of a useful phono stage add up to pretty good value for money against similarly priced competition (see *How it Compares* boxout).

Toe-tapping

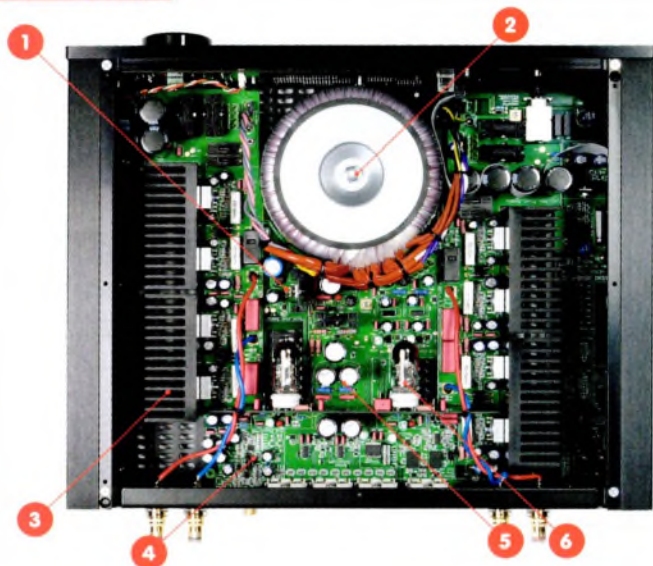
Left to run in for a day or two before we sat down to listen, the Verdi Cento springs a few surprises. The

CONNECTIONS



- 1** Three-way binding posts (right channel)
- 2** Three-way binding posts (left channel)
- 3** Phono stage
- 4** Line inputs
- 5** Tape and pre-out
- 6** Mains connection

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Valve-heater
- 2 Large mains transformer
- 3 Heatsink for power amp section
- 4 Phono stage
- 5 Valve power supply section
- 6 Valves in preamp stage



GIVEN THE VERDI Centro is entirely based around analogue inputs, partnering it with a DAC would make sense and the recent victor of our DAC Blind Listening Group Test (HFC 350), the extremely talented Electrocompaniet PD1, would also help give the amp a boost to its soundstage. The Quadral Aurum Altan VIII speakers (also HFC 350) would complement the Verdi Cento well and this trio would have the ability to match excellent pace and timing with considerable insight and good tonality.

terms of soundstage. The presentation can be slightly left/right and lacking space around the musicians. This doesn't translate into a loss of detail – indeed the amp is good in this regard – but does give some material a slightly compressed feel. It might be named for Verdi, but temperamentally the presentation is more suited to The Verve. The overall presentation is sufficiently appealing that we were prepared to overlook this and with some thoughtful system-matching would most likely eliminate these traits altogether.

Welcome addition

One final positive is that the phono stage shares the basic characteristics of the amp as a whole, and while not the quietest design we have ever heard, does a good job of working with a relatively low-output Dynavector design. The overall performance of the phono section suggests that it is no afterthought component and we found the overall performance very enjoyable.

Listening at a like-for-like volume level will generally require a higher volume setting, but the overall quality of the design is the easy equal of phono stages in the £200-£300 category and gives the amp a useful and worthwhile additional feature over many of its key competitors.

The Verdi Cento is a welcome addition to a keenly contested price point. In 2011, exactly what should be the constituent inputs on an integrated amplifier is somewhat open to debate. There will be those that would like digital inputs or other connectivity and who will find a row of phono plugs a little old fashioned. Others may find the slightly left/right presentation a little flat. But for anybody who has all of the digital inputs they need and who also uses vinyl, the Verdi Cento definitely deserves an audition. ●

subconscious expectation that surrounds any product with valves is that the presentation will be on the warm side with, perhaps, a little bloat in the bottom end. The Verdi Cento has neither of these characteristics. Indeed, the key traits tend toward the exact opposite.

This is one of the most dynamic amplifiers we have heard at the price point. It has an uncanny knack of latching on to any timing signature and usually setting the toes tapping at the same time. This is helped by a low-end output that is fast and tuneful and it manages both of these attributes without trading low-end weight. In fact, it takes a little time to discern the purpose and presence

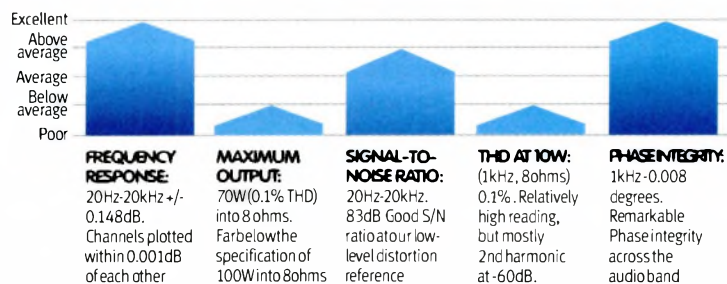
of the valves at all, but they do have one.

While the Verdi Cento has considerable rhythm and timing abilities, it also manages to sound very smooth and open at the top end as well. This composure and smoothness helps keep the amp listenable, even with poor-quality recordings at comparatively high volume levels.

Tonality with voices and instruments is also extremely good. The Verdi Cento generally sounds extremely natural and believably real with the vast majority of recordings and captures the decay of a plucked string or struck key in a thoroughly appealing way. The only area that the amp is less than exemplary in is

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Solid build; lively and vivid sound; good phonostage

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly compressed soundstage; quirky volume and input selection

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A capable and strong performing amplifier with many likeable features

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL





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SYSTEM

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The combination of the iO2 satellite speaker and Santorin 25 subwoofer are a genuine audiophile and aesthetic alternative to traditional loudspeakers; with the advantages of beautiful design, high quality full range reproduction and point source drive unit technology. The co-axial 130 mm mid/bass and 25 mm tweeter provide the benefits of Cabasse's Spatially Coherent System, as found in the flagship La Sphere speakers, in a more compact enclosure - faithful timbre reproduction, no artificial colouration and a soundstage with unrivalled realism and depth. The partnering Santorin 25, 250 watt subwoofer, with its 34 Hz low frequency extension, is available in gloss white or black to match the iO2; which can be specified in black pearl with light oak or wenge stands or white pearl with wenge. Complemented by shelf mounting and in-ceiling and in-wall variants, the iO2 is a truly compact audio and video loudspeaker system with perfect design integration and absolute high fidelity.

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Brio benchmark

Rega's new compact Brio-R amp uses a circuit design originally conceived in the late sixties.

Jason Kennedy examines the modern classic

The Brio-R is new in more ways than its remote handset, for a start it's a totally new circuit, albeit one that was originally conceived in the late sixties. Rega designer Terry Bateman discovered the circuit as a result of buying and reading a large collection of second-hand Wireless World magazines and noticing that the previous owner, engineer Mike Howell, had circled particular articles. These articles led him to a design which was published in 1970, but to Terry's knowledge never put into production.

Solid-state onions

The Brio-R uses modern Sanken Darlington output transistors, but it's the Class A stage that drives this final element that is different. It has more in common with valve amp design and, according to Terry, gives this Class AB amplifier the performance characteristics of the breed. This primary stage uses a single emitter – follower (or buffer) which reduces the load on the voltage amplifier and improves overall linearity. It's pretty technical stuff, but suffice to say that Terry knows his valve and solid-state onions better than most and used a classic Leak Stereo 20 valve amp as his benchmark, so we can't argue with that.

The Brio-R inhabits the same half-width casework as the Rega DAC (HFC 346) and is styled to match with aluminium push-buttons in its ABS fascia. It has four line inputs, a tape output and a moving-magnet phono stage. Confusingly, the latter is not indicated on the rear panel, but merely labelled Input 1, which leaves it vulnerable to abuse by line-level sources which will sound pretty distorted and could possibly damage the phono stage. It has an earth point, but this is underneath the case so doesn't give the game away.

Ferrous-free

The remote handset is an attractive lump with all the usual options, including Mute but not Power On/Off. Unlike the Rega DAC, the Brio-R has a conventional IEC mains inlet, so there is room to try aftermarket power leads. Power output is quoted at 50 watts into eight ohms and this rises to 73 watts when the impedance is halved. So it's no powerhouse, yet despite its Class A driver stage it does not run particularly hot.

Build quality is neat and solid, rather than particularly flashy; the only real concession to cost being the ABS front and rear panels. The main chassis is aluminium, so the whole thing is devoid of ferrous metals and that's a desirable quality at any price.

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Rega Brio-R
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Integrated amplifier
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 80x218x325mm
WEIGHT: 6kg
FEATURES:
 • Power output: 50w/8ohm, 73w/4ohm
 • Four line inputs
 • MM phono stage
 • Remote control
 • Colour options: black, silver
DISTRIBUTOR: Rega Research
TELEPHONE: 01702 333071
WEBSITE: rega.co.uk

Game-changing

While the Brio-R might be based on valve ideals, it does not have the classic mid/forward balance and slightly softened bandwidth extremes of the ilk, it does, however, reveal an uncanny amount of the character of everything it plays, which is a positive glass audio characteristic.

It also does the thing that all Rega products seem to excel at: it's a great communicator that delivers the message in the music. It's not the most powerful-sounding 50 watts we've encountered and if you want to crank up the volume you'll need high-sensitivity speakers. However, if you want to be drawn into the music then it's the best value tool for the job that we've heard since the Pioneer A400.

The phono stage is remarkably good for the money, too, we plugged in a Rega RP3 with Elys 2 cartridge and were instantly engaged by the texture and timing subtleties of the music. Again the forté is musicality not sound for its own sake. Bass could be more extended, for instance, but there are big differences between recordings which can be astonishing.

Giant-slaying

The Brio-R proves that you do not have to play loud to get the best out of your music, it is unusually transparent and totally engaging at sensible levels. We were quite taken aback by the degree to which it tells you what's going on in the mix and had to remind ourselves that it's a sub-£400 amplifier on more than one occasion. This amp is one of a rare breed of components that can be dropped into a highly revealing system and, speaker sensitivity allowing, actually enhance the results, thanks to its ability to reveal so many of the key musical details. Very few budget amps can do that. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Fights well above its weight in terms of timing and musicality
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** The lack of clear labelling on the phono input seems unwise
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Don't judge this book by its cover, just close your eyes and fly

OVERALL





XS all areas for just £2k

Naim introduces its 'entry-level' network audio player, but there is nothing 'entry-level', however, about its performance, says **Malcolm Steward**

The ND5 XS is Naim's second network audio player and its first to offer native streaming of 24-bit/192 kHz sources. It follows the lauded and more expensive (£2,995) NDX (HFC 345) that arrived in February, this year. It differs from its forerunner, though, in being built into the attractive, slim-line XS series case rather than the taller Classic series enclosure, but is similar in being performance upgradeable.

Upgrade options currently available include the XPS or PS 555 power supplies and the Naim DAC. We're told that a matching low-profile power supply will be available next year, as well.

In terms of technology, the ND5 XS draws significantly on the established and Naim DAC (HFC 328). It uses the same innovative SHARC 40-bit DSP-based buffering with fixed clocks technology, along with 16-times oversampling and Naim's proprietary low generated noise, digital filtering

algorithms. The ND5 XS's 16-times oversampling mode DAC is the Burr-Brown PCM1791A. This runs at a maximum sample rate of 768 kHz and can handle UPnP signals at up to 32-bit, floating-point, 192 kHz sample rates.

Naim's choice

Like its big brother, the NDX, the ND5 XS adds far more to a system than just streaming. It can also be a digital input expander through offering three S/PDIF digital inputs to support digital connection of computers, set top boxes and CD players. This can be regarded as a 'free' upgrade if your CD player will benefit from an external DAC and few will have on-board DACs anywhere near as sophisticated or as painstakingly implemented as that in the ND5 XS.

Furthermore, the player provides access to internet radio, supported by the vTuner. five-star, full service. This provides useful facilities and

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Naim ND5 XS

ORIGIN:
UK

TYPE:
Network audio player

WEIGHT:
6.5kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
430x70x310mm

FEATURES:
• Apple authenticated iPod connectivity

• Playback from USB memory sticks

• Streams 24-bit/192kHz sources natively

• Internet radio with V-tuner facility

• Optional FM/DAB radio module

DISTRIBUTOR:
Naim Audio

CONTACT:
01722 426600

WEBSITE:
naimaudio.com

organisational abilities including access to 'Naim's Choice' higher-quality radio streams, which include the 320kHz feeds from Radio Paradise and AVROKlassiek. There is also an optional FM/DAB module that lets users add terrestrial radio capabilities to the unit if they so wish.

The fascia of the unit is elegantly simple and features a single USB port, an OLED display and a matrix of nine control/navigation buttons. Naturally, though, these are not the sole means of controlling the device. It comes with a remote control handset and for iPod Touch, iPad, and iPhone users there is the free n-Stream app, which we consider the easiest way to select the source and music you want to hear.

The ND5 XS streams and plays WAV, FLAC, AIFF, AAC, WMA, Ogg Vorbis and MP3 files, either through its UPnP connectivity, or from a memory stick plugged into its USB port. The latter can also be used to connect an iPod or equivalent. Being Apple Authenticated, the ND5 XS will extract a pure digital signal from the iPod or iPhone to enable optimum performance from the device.

Finally, fans of classical music and progressive rock will be pleased to hear that the ND5 XS offers true gapless playback of all formats.

Fine adjustments

The build quality here is typical of Naim Audio: the company obsesses over little details that clearly strike competing manufacturers as too insignificant to concern themselves with. However, the cumulative effect



of all that fanatical attention to detail gives the ND5 XS a finesse that eludes its competitors. The sort of detail we're discussing here is outwardly inconsequential: for example, exactly where and how the cable ties are fitted to a wiring loom; or the length and orientation of a wire between circuit boards. In isolation, these probably makes the tiniest of tiny differences, but include another dozen similar fine adjustments and the cumulative difference becomes far more significant and the result easily discernible.

In order to keep noise levels to an absolute minimum, the ND5 XS features galvanic isolation between sections of the circuitry. The power supplies for each section of the signal path are also independent. Four separate secondary windings feed

“The way the ND5 XS makes music simply makes you feel good to be alive.”

four separate power supplies for complete isolation. These separate supplies provide part of the electrical isolation of the digital DSP section from the DAC chips and analogue circuits. The reservoir capacitors are larger than would typically be used to reduce the unregulated voltage noise and provide increased short-term current capability. Voltage supplies to many of the digital circuits are double- and, in some cases, triple-regulated to reduce noise further. When an external power supply is employed the supply

becomes quadruple-regulated. It also provides a significantly larger toroidal transformer and larger reservoir capacitors to increase the noise reduction.

Sound XS

We auditioned the ND5 XS mainly through a Naim SUPERNAIT integrated amplifier/Hi-Cap power supply combination and a pair of NEAT Acoustics Ultimatum XLS loudspeakers. The electronics were on Quadraspire Sunoko Vent supports; the speakers were on their own dedicated stands; while the loudspeaker cabling was TelluriumQ Ultra Black. It was also auditioned through an active, tri-amped, Naim DBL system.

The sound of the ND5 XS immediately makes one smile: the



NAIM EQUIPMENT focuses primarily on musical performance. That is the be-all-and-end-all of its products, even if in recent years the aesthetics and user convenience elements have been given greater consideration than before.

The appearance of Naim's electronics has moved on quite a way since the 'Chrome Bumper' and 'Olive' eras. In this respect, though, one still cannot expect the overt styling flair of, say, Yamaha and the NP-S2000, another fine-sounding, if not as comprehensively equipped streamer.

One can hardly also expect the low prices of a mainstream product such as the Marantz NA7004, which turns in a credible performance and an excellent array of facilities, including Apple Airplay, for around £600.

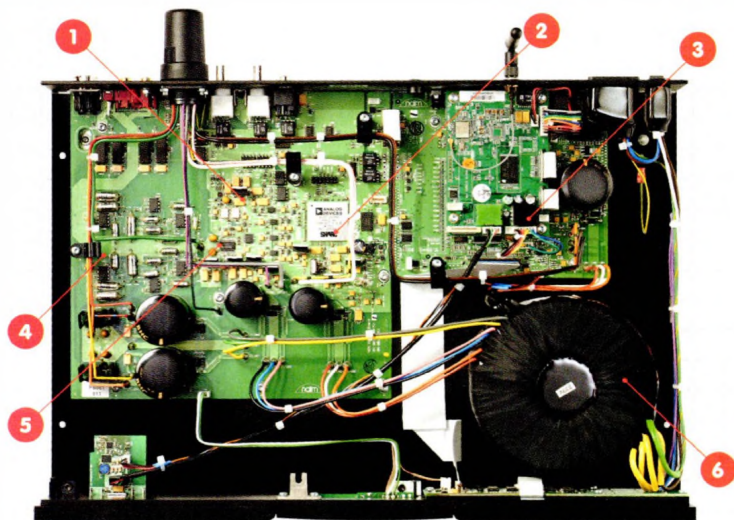
Regardless of its utilitarian build, the performance of the Naim tends to leave its fancier competitors very much in second place.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Ethernet connection
- 2 Wireless aerial
- 3 Connection for external PSU
- 4 Digital inputs
- 5 Digital output
- 6 Analogue outputs

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Low jitter clock
- 2 DSP
- 3 ARM9 uController
- 4 Analogue filter
- 5 DAC
- 6 Large toroidal transformer

SYSTEM BUILDING

NAIM EXPECTS the ND5 XS primarily to appear in systems that include other XS range components, as these are designed to be especially synergistic and do, in fact, work together exceedingly well. So you will probably find it being demonstrated by retailers with a CD5 XS CD player, NAIT XS or NAC152 XS/NAP155 XS amplifier, a FrainLite support system and, perhaps, the Ovator S400 loudspeakers in an all-Naim set-up. The CD5 XS can usefully benefit, of course, from the digital inputs on the ND5 XS.

The ND5 XS is not only designed to deliver its best performance in all-Naim XS systems: we found it worked well and sounded balanced and highly informative with a Creek 5350 amplifier and NEAT Petite SX speakers. It also worked flawlessly in a revealing, fully active system using Naim reference quality Classic components and DBL loudspeakers.

Cat Stevens' 1971 album, *Teaser and the Firecat*: the ND5 XS revealed both strikingly dramatic and subtle dynamic contrasts in the music that came as something of a delightful surprise. It should not have surprised anyone, however, after the Naim's spell-binding presentation of a 24-bit/96kHz vinyl rip of Art Pepper's 1957 album, *Meets the Rhythm Section*. This was a genuine 'musicians in the room with you' experience. The instrumental timbre was so credible and vivid, and the playing so vital and animated, there was no other way to describe the sheer realism that we experienced.

The final challenge was to see how well the ND5 XS fared with the *bête noire* of most music collections, country music... albeit the modern variety of artists such as Shawn Colvin. The portrayal of her voice, and those of other singers, was superb, and packed with expression and emotion.

Close to sublime

The performance of the ND5 XS is not far short of sublime and easily justifies its comparatively modest – in the scheme of things – price. It even holds its head high and exposes no weaknesses in the company of more expensive Classic components, which is high praise in itself.

Its ability to cope with 24-bit/192kHz streams future-proofs it for some considerable time and allows the lovers of hi-res to pursue their studio-master fix. The n-Stream app adds all the convenience to the package for which one could ask.

In an appropriate system, the way the ND5 XS makes music simply makes you feel good to be alive. It must be said that the £2,995 NDX has the edge over the ND5XS in sound quality terms, but most people will find that their performances are very close: there are certainly no glaring night and day differences. ●

presentation is more than just hi-fi, it is communication at its most intimate and telling. Rather than analyse the sound, one's instant reaction is to sit back, relax and simply enjoy the music. And that is regardless of whether one is listening to a baroque guitar quietly strumming the works of Fernando Sor or the challenging *musique concrète* of Edgard Varèse being played with vim and vigour by a full orchestra. Either way, the word finesse springs instantly to mind: the music sounds so natural and unforced with no 'mechanical' or 'electronic' overtones intruding on your enjoyment.

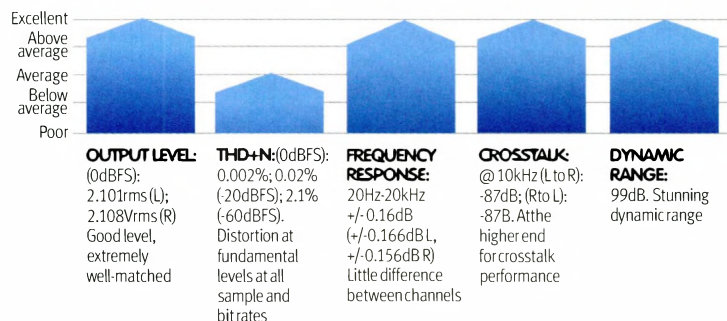
Similarly, the sound is clean, extended at both frequency extremes, and free from any obvious coloration or added emphasis. Instrumentation

and voices on the 24-bit/96kHz rip of the eponymous Buena Vista Social Club album are pure and gloriously expressive, with a characteristically persistent but relaxed, Cuban beat. The top end is open and clear while the low frequencies have impressive weight and are sufficiently crisply defined to be rhythmically genuinely propulsive. Piano, that most telling of instruments, has weight, definition and absolutely secure, stable pitch, along with excellent transients and note shape.

The system produced excellent sound-staging, exhibiting incredibly accurately focused stereo images on Cassandra Wilson's album, *Belly of the Sun*. The next surprise came when we played *Moonshadow* from

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



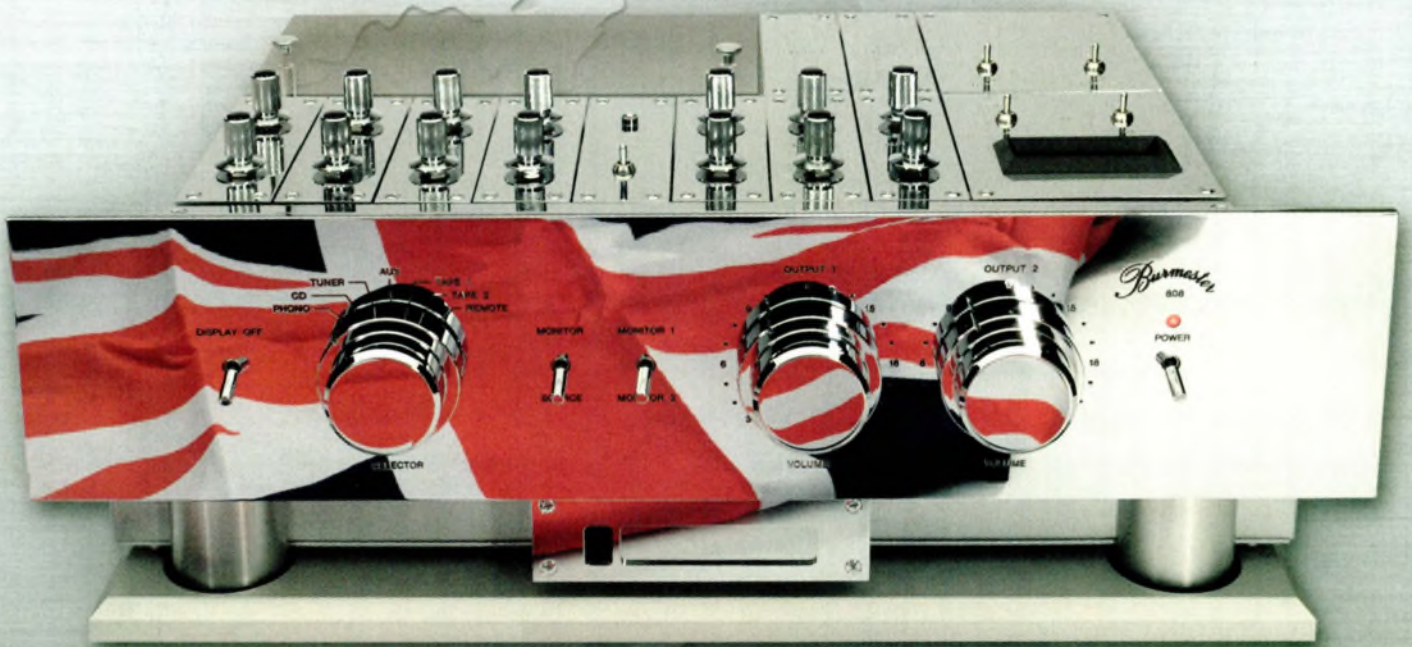
Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** We love the musical integrity and overall coherence of the design
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** There is honestly little to dislike in this competitive package
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A 'starter' product, its performance comes close to that of a reference-level streamer
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL





Burmester

RETURNING SOON TO THE CRADLE OF
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Making good

Pro-Ject's new Media Box S has been designed to get the best from mass-market compressed music files. **Jason Kennedy** fires up his iTunes

If you buy your music as a download from iTunes or similar it's supplied as a compressed MP3 or AAC file, sometimes heavily compressed. To the audio enthusiast such a purchase seems illogical, but it's still an approach that's steadily killing off CD.

Pro-Ject has decided to take the bull by the horns with its Media Box S, a digital file player that is restricted to compressed formats and thus is dedicated to doing the best it can to make them sound good. This tiny player is the first and most affordable in a new range of Pro-Ject media players and streamers, so how does it stand up?

Making more from less

At a mere 100mm wide this is the smallest source component we've come across, but despite that it has analogue and digital outputs and can play material stored on USB drives and SD cards (the same ones used in cameras). This seems odd but we've noticed that this format has its adherents in the more radical corners of the hi-fi globe, even if the majority of players currently available are for pro applications.

The Media Box S will play only three formats at up to 384kbps, so it can't cope with the more audiophile formats like WAV or FLAC, nor even Apple Lossless in its least compressed form. Pro-Ject's plan with this product was to make the most of the best-selling music formats by taking an audiophile approach to its design, so it has used the best DAC and output stage that it can find for the price, and spent the minimum on the casework and display. If you want to get a better result than you can with a laptop or iPod there is not a great deal of competition.

Keep guessing

The tiny box is not so much of an issue, a credit-card-size remote gets round its three-button limitations, but the size of the display, (25mm diagonal), is a bit of a challenge. The bright LED display is legible, but not very intuitive, a bit like the keys on the remote.

As you can attach a USB HD to the unit, which might have hundreds of albums on it, you need to have them well organised if you are to find individual tracks via the display.

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Pro-Ject Media Box S
ORIGIN: Czech
TYPE: Digital media player
WEIGHT: 0.55kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 103x36x103mm
FEATURES:
 • Audio formats: MP3, WMA, AAC
 • Data rate: 384kbps, VBR support
 • DAC: 24/96kHz upsampling
 • Digital output: S/PDIF coaxial
DISTRIBUTORS: Henley Designs
TELEPHONE: 01235 511166
WEBSITE: project-audio.com

Folder/album stepping can be done with the remote as can five track jumps, but it didn't always play the piece that we selected and reverted to the first song in the folder.

Touch trouncing

Once we had ripped a few tracks to MP3 and AAC (320kbps, VBR) and got to grips with the interface, this little unit proved highly entertaining and surprisingly revealing. The first discovery was just how immediate and vital it could make compressed material sound, it can also extract powerful bass and deliver remarkable spaciousness for something so affordable. It is notably more open and detailed than a Squeezebox Touch which sounds very soft and cuddly by comparison. It's also dramatically better than an iPod's analogue output, even with a Kimber interconnect.

We were also surprised at how much better music stored on an SD card sounded, compared to a USB thumbdrive, the latter is a little bit on the thin side while the SD card sound is subtle and nuanced with a lot more tonal depth.

Musical box

This little Box is clearly a well thought out device, it might have a rather small display, but when it comes to getting the most out of compressed material it does a remarkable job. We found ourselves enjoying music both old and new from an SD card and have to say that it has given us renewed faith in the potential of mass-market downloads.

Hooking up a Rega DAC provided further icing of the cake by improving stereo separation and timing, but on its own terms the Media Box S is remarkably musical. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Does a remarkable job with compressed media and accommodates SD cards

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Tiny display is a negative

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Delivers its brief of improving compressed music files with gusto

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL






In the round



Elipson's one-box Music Center MC1 is a striking piece of design. **Ed Selley** finds out if it has a well rounded sound to match its looks

 Our first introduction to the recently invigorated Elipson was via the remarkable looking Planet L speaker (*HFC 350*). Any manufacturer whose idea of a standmount speaker is a brightly coloured sphere the size of a bowling ball is unlikely to release its partnering electronics in an ordinary box and Elipson hasn't disappointed us.

The Music Center MC1 is, as the name suggests, an all-in-one system. It boasts a striking appearance, which comprises a disc-shaped chassis, roughly 80mm tall, and perfectly circular when viewed from above. Finished in brushed aluminium, this is a very smart-looking piece of kit and thankfully, like the Planet, the engineering within makes it more than simply a

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Elipson Music Center MC1

ORIGIN:
France/China

TYPE:
One-box streaming hi-fi system

WEIGHT:
3.8kg

DIMENSIONS:
WxHxD
330x78x330mm

FEATURES:
• CD replay with MP3 and WMA playback

• DAB/FM/AM internal tuner

• USB Input

• Wireless dongle

• Optional Kleer iPod connector

DISTRIBUTOR:
BBG

TELEPHONE:
01925 205605

WEBSITE:
elipson.com

visual statement. And while it isn't circular for the same reasons as the Planet is spherical, the Music Centre has been designed around the contents rather than the other way around.

ICEpower

Under the lid is a CD mechanism, DAB/+, FM/AM tuner and a 60-watt amplifier. It makes use of Bang & Olufsen's ICEpower Class D modules for the power section (see *Talking Point* opposite). These are increasingly highly regarded and bode well for performance.

Around the back (neatly concealed under the top plate so as not to spoil the lines) are two additional line inputs, an optical input and a USB socket. The latter is able to replay MP3 and WMA files via a stick, but is also supplied with a dongle that allows you to place the MC1 on a wireless network and replay files from an appropriately set up computer. A minor disappointment is



that the same dongle cannot be used to access internet radio services.

This is an impressive feature set for the £1,300 asking price, but the MC1 has one final party piece. An optional Klear wireless module is available that attaches to the bottom of an iPod, iPad or iPhone and allows for lossless audio streaming from the Apple device; the Klear technology has a bandwidth sufficient to allow for lossless audio to be transferred. With the module in the bottom of the Apple device, the volume control will also control the loudness of the Music Center, albeit in larger steps than via the dedicated remote.

The fit and finish is very impressive. The brushed aluminium is very smart and the front display, which also incorporates the inhaler mechanism for the CD and controls, is clear and easy to read. The speaker terminals are sturdy WBT-type connections that can handle even very substantial types of speaker cable without issue.

The controls on the front of the unit are a touch-panel-type connection and work extremely well. We are less sold on the remote, though, which is a slim affair that is rather button-heavy and doesn't feel as slick as the unit. Another minor control gripe is that, as with most devices that don't have a physical volume knob, it is hard to quickly make a large adjustment of volume.

Elipson is obviously keen to sell the MC1 and the Planet L as a package (indeed they are available as such) and there is much to be said for this combination in aesthetic terms (see *System Matching* p56), as the result is a world away from the stigma of black boxes and has



THE MC1 MAKES USE of Bang & Olufsen ICEpower Class D amplifiers. B&O has been involved in the project since 1999 and in that time the number of products we have seen that make use of the modules has increased considerably.

The key advantages of the ICEpower module are threefold. The first is energy efficiency – thanks to switch mode power supplies, ICEpower amplifiers are more efficient than conventional Class AB designs.

The second is that the modules themselves are relatively compact, which is useful in a product like the MC1.

Finally, the modules themselves are developing a reputation for excellent performance and high reliability – both the MC1 and the Bel Canto CSI (HFC 351) have greatly impressed us with their sound quality.

something of a 'world of tomorrow, today' in its appearance.

The useful power output of the MC1 does mean that choices of partnering speaker are pretty wide and not limited to the in-house type if the combined visuals are a bit much.

Ready to go

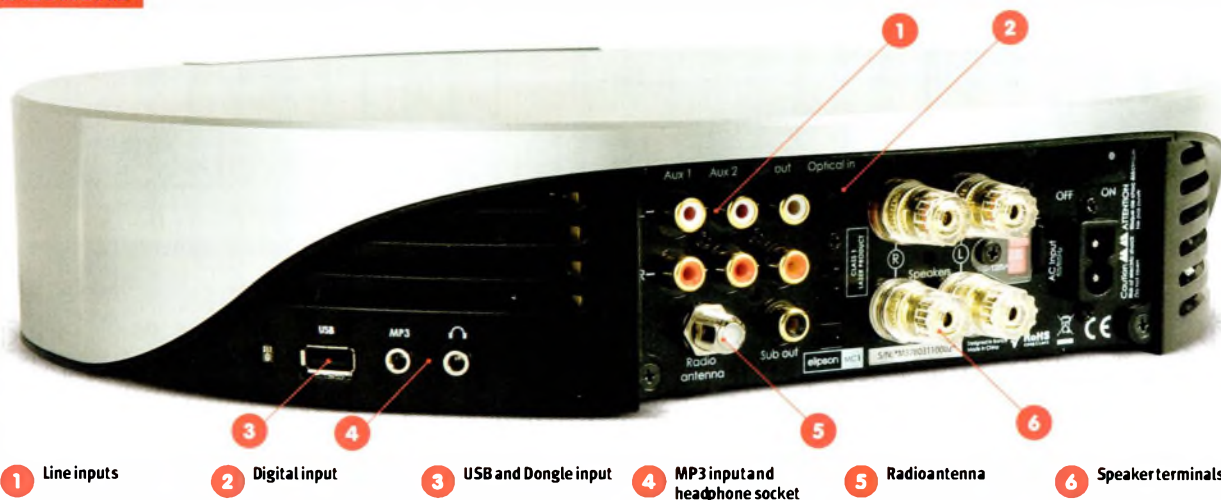
Once set up on a wireless network – a process that is fiddly rather than actively difficult – the MC1 is ready to go. We decided to start with CD and this revealed that the drive

“Positively encourages longer listening sessions due to the unfatiguing nature of the sound.”

mechanism is a little on the noisy side, making a distinctive 'chirrup' when the disc is loading and being audible when the disc is spinning – if you are close to the unit. This aside, first impressions are good. The MC1 is stylish, but there is substance to it, too.

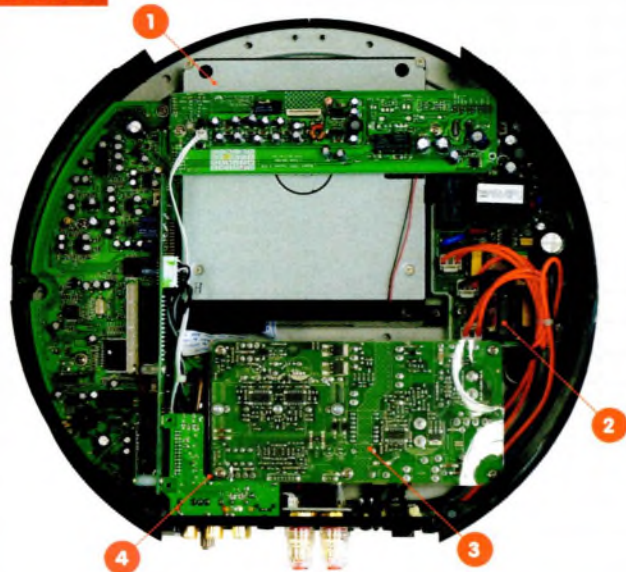
An assured performer and very even from top to bottom, there is no sense of any particular part of the frequency range being unnaturally boosted or held back. This can leave you initially thinking that the presentation is lacking excitement, but longer listening reveals that what you are hearing is, in fact, very honest and matter-of-fact. This positively encourages longer listening sessions due to the extremely unfatiguing nature of the sound.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Line inputs
- 2 Digital input
- 3 USB and Dongle input
- 4 MP3 input and headphone socket
- 5 Radio antenna
- 6 Speaker terminals

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 CD mechanism
- 2 Power supply
- 3 ICEpower module
- 4 Line input board



WE RETAINED the Planet L speakers we reviewed in *HFC 350* to try with the MC1. As a combination, the likeable features of both products combined to good effect. Imaging is excellent and the combination has excellent pace and timing, while avoiding sounding harsh or relentless. The MC1 is more than capable of driving larger and more expensive speakers than the Planet L and much of the review process for the MC1 was carried out with a pair of Neat Momentum 4's. That the Epsilon achieved good results with a pair of fairly insensitive £2,850 speakers is certainly testament to a well-sorted design.

The MC1 also has excellent detail retrieval and an impressive soundstage. Complex material is easy to follow and there is a real sense of the space the recording was made in. Timing and pace are also impressive and even very high-tempo music retains a sense of composure. Even pushing the unit towards the top end of its power output doesn't bring on any real harshness or stridency, which is an unusual and considerably impressive achievement.

Replaying lossless files from a laptop has the same very benign sonic qualities as the CD drive and is free of interruption or drop out. The MC1 is also

relatively forgiving of compressed material and remains listenable even with comparatively small files. The only downside we can see with the dongle is that it was not possible to make the Music Center communicate directly with a NAS drive, which means for anybody streaming audio, they will need to have a computer powered up all the time.

Impressive addition

The Klear iPod connector is an impressive addition. What we especially liked was that it will send the audio signal from an iPhone, even if you don't have the official iPod section open. This means that Spotify, Internet radio

and even the soundtrack from Catch Up TV will be happily reproduced. Not all of these services offer equally fantastic sound quality and it serves to remind you that TV services are ferociously compressed, but as with such files on the laptop, the MC1 will try and keep material listenable for as long as it can. This gives the unit some additional features it wouldn't otherwise have and keeps the iPhone to hand rather than stuck in a dock. You can also use the phone for other tasks, while it continues to stream material. Again, in use, we experienced no dropouts or interference.

The radio is probably the weakest area of a very strong product. Reception is satisfactory, but it proved hard to get a completely silent signal on FM and the DAB side was unable to locate some stations that a PURE Classic was able to receive in the same building. That said, it found the national stations easily enough and, if you intend to do the bulk of your listening via CD or digital media, the tuner would be perfectly satisfactory for incidental listening. Given how impressive reception is via the dongle, it does further emphasise how useful internet radio would have been under the circumstances.

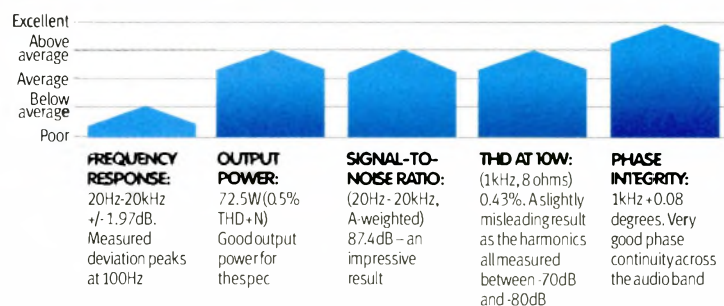
A star turn

The MC1 is something of a star. For £1,300 it offers an attractive aesthetic with a result that is in many ways close to the performance of separates costing a similar price – especially if divided over the range of features it offers. Above all, it feels cohesive and well thought out – functionality is simple enough to understand and everything works in a consistent way.

If you're searching for a product that looks smart enough to sit on display in the most elegant of rooms, while not compromising on the audio performance, Elipson has delivered the goods. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY: ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Excellent sonic performance and good feature set
- VALUE FOR MONEY: ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No internet radio and slightly noisy CD mechanism
- BUILD QUALITY: ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Combines a stylish appearance with excellent performance credentials
- FEATURES: ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Saturday 9:30am - 5:30pm
Sunday 10am - 5pm

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(Students receive a FREE pair of in-ear headphones worth £14.95)

How to get to the show:



By car: North, Take the M56 motorway to the City Centre South, Take the M6 motorway north towards Manchester and exit onto the M56



By train: Manchester Victoria Station is only a 5 minute walk. Piccadilly Station is only a 5 minute taxi ride or 10 minute walk.



There is easy parking in the NCP next to the hotel. Further car parking is available within a short distance away.



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Hi-Fi Choice
AWARDS
2011

INTRO

If you're thinking of buying hi-fi, or even upgrading your current set-up, our Awards pages will prove invaluable. In this very special section you'll find our experts' pick of the very best hi-fi components currently available, painstakingly plucked from each relevant product category by our esteemed panel.

We've rigorously filtered the top-scoring products from the last 13 issues to create a final list of award-winning components to suit a variety of pockets. For each category, you'll see two finalists and an overall winner, giving you an ideal trio to audition when the time comes to buy.

The Judging...

The process we undertake in judging which products make it into our *Awards* issue is exhaustive. All of the equipment is listened to and carefully considered and then we embark on an extensive consultation with a judging panel of exceptional experience: the *Hi-Fi Choice* reviewing team!

We've also checked the availability and pricing of each product, to ensure that you can still get hold of it in the coming months and that you know how much to pay. The result is an *Awards* edition for those who really care about quality and want a reliable buying reference for 2011/2012.

Many of our finalists have been high scorers from our unique six-way *Blind-listening Group Tests*, so this really is a best of the best guide to hi-fi. No other hi-fi magazine has an equivalent Awards with the same depth of testing, technical analysis and subjective listening.

In short, the *Hi-Fi Choice* Awards are the only ones you can really trust.



Dan George
Hi-Fi Choice's editor and
judging coordinator



Paul Messenger
Former *NFC* editor, UK's
leading speaker authority



Jimmy Hughes
Leading hi-fi authority with
40 years' experience



Ed Selley
Former industry insider and
digital technology specialist



Richard Black
Hi-Fi Choice's famous
technical consultant

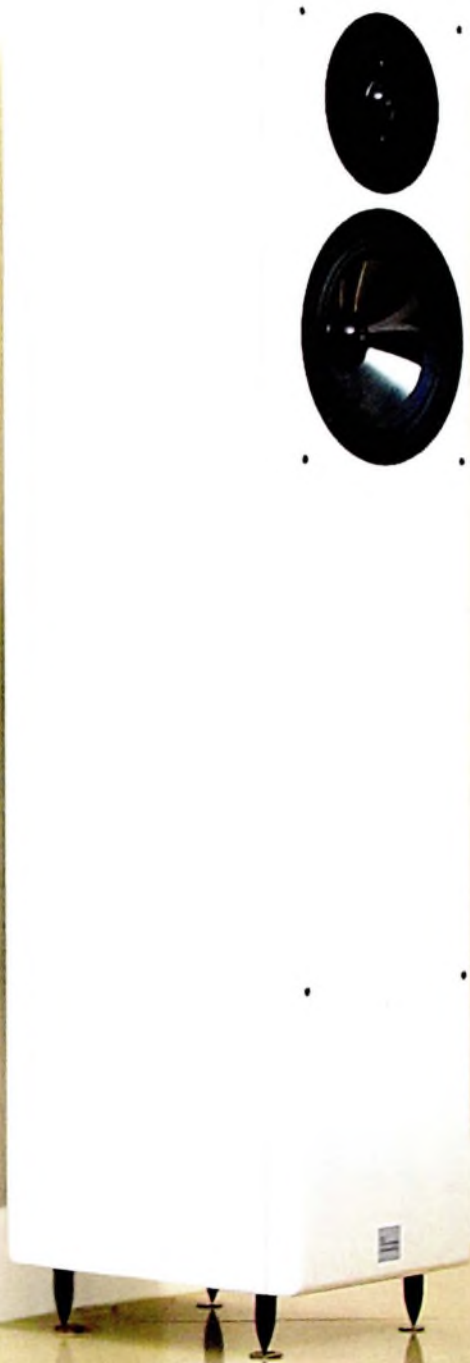


Jason Kennedy
Former *Hi-Fi Choice* editor
and major contributor



Malcolm Steward
Former *Hi-Fi Review* editor and
general audio expert

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Style & Performance

With over twenty years of experience and a multitude of patented technologies, Vienna Acoustic speakers are renowned for acoustic brilliance and superb build quality. The Bach Grand* are the result of painstaking technical research and passionate attention to detail.

This beautiful floor standing cabinet features a powerful 7 inch mid-bass driver with 'Twin Balanced Reflex' that combines a conventional rear port with a ground breaking airflow control port on the front cabinet, to deliver class-leading bass output and control. This complex front port system also combines a refined 1 inch triple stacked neodymium magnet silk dome tweeter, resulting in a sonic presentation of power and verve that belies the speakers' compact proportions.

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*Bach Grand priced from £1750 per pair depending on finish.

Tel: +44 (0)1480 270550
Email: sales@audyus.co.uk

www.va-speakers.co.uk

BEST CD PLAYER UP TO £1,000

Audiolab 8200CD



DETAILS

PRICE: £730
TYPE: CD player
TELEPHONE:
 01480 447700
WEBSITE:
 audiolab.co.uk

Audiolab has swept the boards in the sub-£1,000 category this year. While the 8200 amplifier harks back to the Audiolab of old, the 8200CD represents state-of-the-art thinking in almost every area. Combining a high-performance DAC with clever adjustable filters, gives the Audiolab a sound that is both accurate and highly involving. Add digital inputs, including hi-res USB and you have a worthy winner. Audiolab has also announced an update to the 8200CD (see our review next month).



Creek Evolution 2

DETAILS

PRICE: £680
TYPE: CD player
TELEPHONE:
 01442 260146
WEBSITE:
 creekaudio.com



Oppo BDP-95EU

DETAILS

PRICE: £899 (Region B); £999 (All regions)
TYPE: Universal player
TELEPHONE:
 0845 370 0054
WEBSITE:
 oppodigital.com



Digital Audio streaming

hi-fi and networked audio specialists from single systems to whole house solutions



New Akurate DS



New Klimax DS

LINN

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BEST CD PLAYER OVER £1,000

Shanling CD-T2000



DETAILS

PRICE: £1,895
TYPE: CD player
TELEPHONE:
 01257 473175
WEBSITE:
 shanling.com

Compared to some of the CD players we've tested, the CD-T2000 is very straightforward. It doesn't play SACD or have digital inputs, but what it does do is perform at the very highest levels of the format. It has a smooth, natural sound that allows you to hear material as the artist intended without embellishment or harshness. Add the battleship build and the stunning aesthetics, and you have a player that is a treat for the eyes and the ears. A superb combination and a definite badge winner.



Audio Analogue Maestro



DETAILS

PRICE: £2,250
TYPE: CD player
TELEPHONE:
 0039 0572 954513
WEBSITE:
 audioanalogue.com



Krell S-350A



DETAILS

PRICE: £2,752
TYPE: CD player
TELEPHONE:
 020 8971 3909
WEBSITE:
 krellonline.com



99 of a kind



Following on from the success of the GyroDec Odyssey, we are delighted to be introducing the new limited edition Gyro SEduction

Finished in the unique 'blue steel' and black finish, the Gyro SEduction combines many of the upgrades offered to the standard Gyro SE such as HR Power Supply, matching record clamp and black TechnoArm.

With only 99 units available world-wide, be quick to secure your unique opportunity to own this Gyro SE Super Deck.

For further information or to find your nearest stockist, contact



MICHELL ENGINEERING

Tel: 020 8953 0771 / E: info@michell-engineering.co.uk
www.michell-engineering.co.uk

BEST TURNTABLE UP TO £1,000

Rega RP3

For many people, Rega is still synonymous with cost-effective turntables. So when the new RP3 turned up, our expectations were understandably sky high. No problem there though, as the RP3 is capable of bringing pretty much any recording to life, with a sense of openness and pinpoint timing that will embarrass considerably more expensive decks. As if this wasn't enough, the superb build and handsome lines make this a sound-audition product for anyone shopping for a sub-£1,000 turntable.

DETAILS

PRICE: £475
 TYPE: Turntable and arm
 TELEPHONE: 01702 333071
 WEBSITE: rega.co.uk



Pro-Ject Xperience 2 Pack

DETAILS

PRICE: £775
 TYPE: Turntable and arm
 TELEPHONE: 01235 511166
 WEBSITE: project-audio.com



SRM Tech Athena

DETAILS

PRICE: £650
 TYPE: Turntable and arm
 TELEPHONE: 01767 313691
 WEBSITE: srm-tech.co.uk



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BEST TURNTABLE OVER £1,000

Michell Engineering Gyro SE

The evergreen Gyrodec saw off all-comers in our *Blind-Listening Group Test* (HFC 345). Although the Michell has been around for decades, the soundness of the design and continuous small improvements mean this is still the turntable to beat. We love the sheer musicality of the Michell, the tuneful and textured bass and the sense of entertainment it brings to all forms of music. We also love the looks and rock-solid build quality. The Gyrodec proves that age is no impediment to being an award winner.

DETAILS

PRICE: £1,808 (with arm)
TYPE: Turntable and arm
TELEPHONE: 020 8953 0771
WEBSITE: michell-engineering.co.uk



Pro-Ject RPM 10.1 Evolution

DETAILS

PRICE: £2,000
TYPE: Turntable and arm
TELEPHONE: 01235 511166
WEBSITE: project-audio.com



Well Tempered Simplex

DETAILS

PRICE: £1,495
TYPE: Turntable and arm
TELEPHONE: 01665 830862
WEBSITE: welltemperedlab.net





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BEST DIGITAL-TO-ANALOGUE CONVERTOR

Rega DAC

Rega has never made a DAC until now, but you'd be hard-pressed to notice, given how accomplished its first offering is. The Rega combines a useful set of inputs with fine build and a handsome appearance. It also sounds fantastic and won us over

with excellent timing and an accurate and engaging tonality. The result is a product that has all the detail retrieval and slam and impact you could ask for, but it's presented in a fabulously calm and inviting way. The best DAC of 2011.

DETAILS

PRICE: £498
TYPE: DAC
TELEPHONE: 01702 333071
WEBSITE: rega.co.uk



Electrocompaniet PD-1

DETAILS

PRICE: £1,250
TYPE: DAC
TELEPHONE: 020 8893 5835
WEBSITE: electrocompaniet.no



Matrix Mini-i

DETAILS

PRICE: £260
TYPE: DAC/head amp
TELEPHONE: 020 3384 6392
WEBSITE: matrixelectronics.net



'Fundamentally, this speaker just gets out of the way and lets the musical message through unobstructed. The hallmark of the very best loudspeakers is that they somehow manage to communicate the differences between different sources and even recordings, and in this regard the Ultimatum turns out to be a very good speaker indeed...

Qualitatively, the bass end is quite superb. Very few speakers can match its ability to deliver genuinely deep in-room bass without muddying things up with excessive and thumpy mid-bass. The bonus here is that the bass is also exceptionally agile and lively, and cabinet colouration is vanishingly low...

Over the long haul of several weeks, my respect for this speaker continued to grow. Few if any can match the way it combines the coherence and communication skills of a simple two-way with most of the advantages of a much larger design. The Ultimatum is an exceptional achievement in every respect.'
Hi Fi Choice

The ULTIMATUM XL6 is a multi-chamber, multi-facet loudspeaker system incorporating six drive units per enclosure. The visible drive units are mounted on sub-baffles, attached to the main enclosure via a polyethylene membrane.

The ULTIMATUM XL6 loudspeaker is floor-standing design which adheres to all the principles that have marked out the ULTIMATUM project and given it such enduring success.

The ultra-rigid birch-plywood enclosure, innovative baffle-decoupling technology, 'isobaric' bass loading and use of twin EMIT ribbon-type super-tweeters are employed here to deliver the ULTIMATUM promise of a lifetime of musical enjoyment.

The enclosure comprises six drive units, each optimised for its purpose. The Bass and Mid/Bass volumes are large to suit the tuning, while the HF cabinet is small to deliver a midrange and HF response with a very low Q-factor.

The main structure is damped 18mm Birch Plywood, whilst the drive unit baffles are constructed from a 45mm thick 'sandwich' of Birch Plywood, Polyethylene and MDF.

This provides a rigid non-resonant platform, which is ideal for optimal performance of the drive units.

The two hidden isobarically loaded Neat 168mm main drivers are flux optimised for purpose and use dust-caps for rigidity.

The main Mid/Bass driver is a special version of the Neat 168mm driver with an aluminium phase plug to aid dispersion and reduce dynamic compression.

The subwoofer is loaded by a wide range tuning. A sealed sub-cavity contains the main HF drive unit. A separate sub-cavity contains two EMIT type super-tweeter drive units.

Two bass-only drive units are located at the bottom of the cabinet, in isobaric configuration, with one unit on the bottom panel facing downward. Acting as a passive subwoofer, these units are linked together and both receive the same signal, in phase. There is a sealed cavity in between.

neat acoustics
loudspeakers shaped by music

www.neat.co.uk
The HF unit is a modified SEAS XT 51M0REX dome. Kevlar-reinforced aluminium cabinet and support.

Ultimately, it's neat.



BEST AMPLIFIER UP TO £1,000

Audiolab 8200A

The origins of the 8200A lie in the classic 8000A from the '80s and '90s. We loved the original and its successor proves equally enthralling. The 8200A combines neutrality and accuracy, with enough of a unique character to entertain. The midrange lucidity impressed us, while detail retrieval is simply superb. It also brings excellent pace and timing to all types of music. Couple that with a solid build, and a large number of inputs and outputs and you have a worthy award winner.

DETAILS

PRICE: £730
TYPE: Integrated
TELEPHONE:
01480 447700
WEBSITE:
audiolab.co.uk



Creek Evolution 2

DETAILS

PRICE: £680
TYPE: Integrated
TELEPHONE:
01442 260146
WEBSITE:
creekaudio.com



Rega Brio-R

DETAILS

PRICE: £398
TYPE: Integrated
TELEPHONE:
01702 333071
WEBSITE:
rega.co.uk



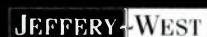
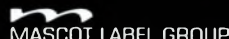


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BEST AMPLIFIER OVER £1,000

Onkyo P-3000R/M5000R

Onkyo might be more famous for its multichannel products, but this pairing is a potent reminder of what it's capable of with stereo. The P-3000R/M5000R combines an impressive feature set, including digital inputs with superb build and fantastic aesthetics – the VU meters are particularly eye-catching. Best of all, it's a truly fantastic amplifier, able to drive the most demanding speakers to any volume level; it combines a powerful and explicit sound with excellent tonality and naturalness.



DETAILS

PRICE: £1,700/£2,500
 TYPE: Pre/power
 TELEPHONE: 01628 473350
 WEBSITE: eu.onkyo.com



Bel Canto C5i

DETAILS

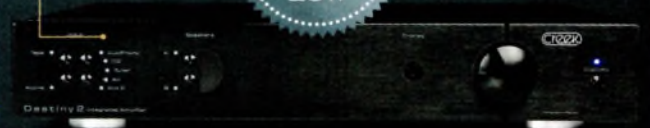
PRICE: £1,799
 TYPE: Integrated amp/DAC
 TELEPHONE: 01359 240687
 WEBSITE: belcantodesign.com



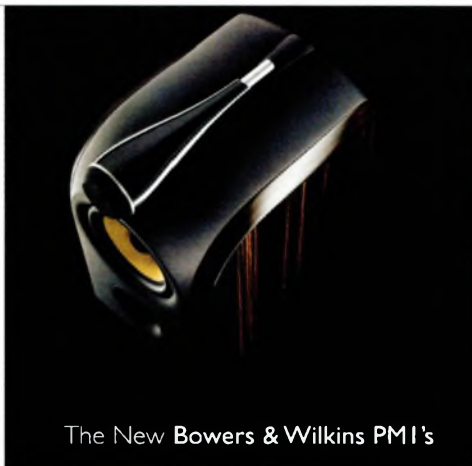
Creek Destiny 2

DETAILS

PRICE: £1,635
 TYPE: Integrated
 TELEPHONE: 01442 260146
 WEBSITE: creekaudio.com



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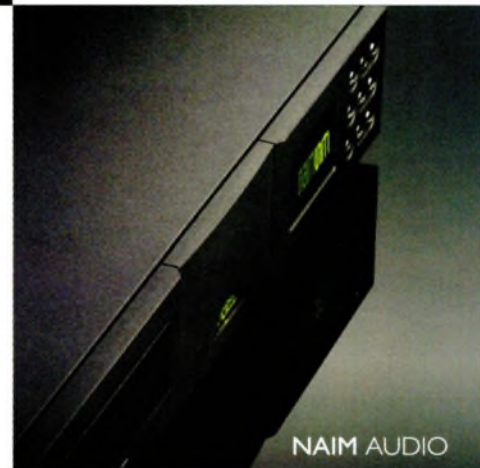
The New Bowers & Wilkins PM1's



REGA RP3



ARCAM CINEMA



NAIM AUDIO

LOUDSPEAKER UP TO £1,000

Epos Epic 5

The Epic 5 manages to get an awful lot right even before you connect it up. For starters, it's a very handsome and well-built speaker for the asking price and we love the clever interchangeable baffles. Once connected, the news just gets better. The Epic 5 combines excellent detail retrieval, accurate and appealing tonality, and a fast and tuneful low end. Above all, this is a speaker with an innate sense of pace and timing. Throw in good sensitivity and easy placement and you have a guaranteed award winner.



DETAILS

PRICE: £750
 TYPE: Floorstander
 TELEPHONE:
 01442 260146
 WEBSITE:
 epos-acoustics.com

**Hi-Fi Choice
 WINNER
 2011**

Triangle Color



DETAILS

PRICE: £899
 TYPE: Floorstander
 TELEPHONE:
 +33 323 753 820
 WEBSITE:
 triangle-fr.com/en

**Hi-Fi Choice
 FINALIST
 2011**

XTZ 99.26



DETAILS

PRICE: £670
 TYPE: Standmount
 TELEPHONE:
 01623 857707
 WEBSITE:
 xtz.se/uk

**Hi-Fi Choice
 FINALIST
 2011**

PLATINUM M

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HI-FI WORLD

"Real fidelity at an affordable price" - 5/5
PLATINUM M4

HOME CINEMA
BEST BUY

"Absolutely fantastic!"
CHROMIUM STYLE 5.1

hi-fines
HIGHLY
COMMENDED

"Tuneful bass ... Tweeter scintillates ... Impressively built and finished off for the price" - ORKAN VIII

WHAT HI-FI?
EDITOR'S CHOICE

"This brand will sweep you off your feet" *International Edition*

HiFiChoice

"Sweet and smooth" 4.5/5 - ALTAN VIII

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BEST LOUDSPEAKER OVER £1,000

Rega RS7

Winning a *Blind-Listening Group Test (HFC 347)* is always a considerable achievement. Winning against five dedicated speaker manufacturers (when your own product is part of a wider range of electronics) is remarkable, but this is what Rega has achieved with the RS7. Making use of a clever transmission-loaded side-firing bass driver, the RS7 demonstrates outstanding coherence and openness. As we noted at the time, it never fails to make listening fun and that's surely the whole point.



DETAILS

PRICE: £1,685
TYPE: Floorstander
TELEPHONE: 01702 333071
WEBSITE: rega.co.uk

**Hi-Fi Choice
WINNER
2011**

PMC GB1i



DETAILS

PRICE: £1,675
TYPE: Floorstander
TELEPHONE: 08704 441045
WEBSITE: pmc-speakers.com

**Hi-Fi Choice
FINALIST
2011**

Spendor SP2/3R2



DETAILS

PRICE: £2,295
TYPE: Standmount
TELEPHONE: 01323 843474
WEBSITE: spendoraudio.com

**Hi-Fi Choice
FINALIST
2011**

WHY pay more?

shown left:
CD-1001 CD Player
A-55T Integrated Amp

shown center:
100.49 Speakers
CD100 CD Player
Class A100 D3 Integrated Amp
AP100 Power Amp

shown right:
Proxima2 Speakers

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BEST HEADPHONE

AKG Q701 Quincy Jones Signature Edition

Any person with a track record like Quincy Jones was never going to put his name to any old product and the Q701 doesn't disappoint. The AKG is a perfect package of clever technology, excellent build and funky appearance. Sonically, the Q701 is a star and recordings are faithfully captured with incredible detail retrieval and a real sense of ambience. Quincy does it again!



DETAILS
PRICE: £500
TYPE: Dynamic headphone
TELEPHONE: 01707 278100
WEBSITE: akg.com



Klipsch Image X10i



DETAILS
PRICE: £229
TYPE: Ear-canal earphone
TELEPHONE: 08450 800 578
WEBSITE: klipsch.co.uk



Shure SE535



DETAILS
PRICE: £478
TYPE: Earphone
TELEPHONE: 01992 703058
WEBSITE: shure.co.uk



What do you listen to?

≈ COOL GALES

We're often asked this question. At Cool Gales, we're fortunate to be able to audition a huge range of high-end hi-fi gear, from the well-known "usual suspects" to obscure exotics, from components with eye-watering price tags to those that are eminently affordable, from classic vintage gear to the latest cutting edge.

Little wonder, then, that our customers frequently ask us to distil our experience, curious to know what exactly we fire up in the evening when we want to listen to music.

We've been utterly smitten by a recent addition to our portfolio, the Sonus Faber range. Visitors here are immediately drawn to the "oh, wow!" visual appeal of the Sonus Faber Futuras, shimmering creations of high-gloss wood and mirror-finish surfaces, quite possibly the most beautiful speakers ever created.

Ours are in the dazzling violin red finish (there's also a soft grey graphite), which Alan Sircom, editor of *Hi-Fi+*, described in a rave review in issue 79 as having "a glowing translucent lustre that will make you walk around and around the speakers, and not be disappointed, ever."

The sonics, astonishingly, more than live up to the appearance, lucid, beguiling, flawless. Alan again: "In a way, the best of all possible Sonus Faber worlds would be a loudspeaker that combines the small-speaker clarity of the Guarneri with the grace of the Amati and the bass energy and dynamics of the Stradivari. And, while all of these Homage loudspeakers remain in the catalogue, the Amati Futura is that best of all possible worlds. It combines the benefits of all three, and adds that uncanny sensuality and passion. This is a real game raiser!"

For those with smaller rooms, or, ahem, perhaps smaller wallets, the new Sonus Faber Guarneri Evolution standmounts have identical styling and sonics, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale.



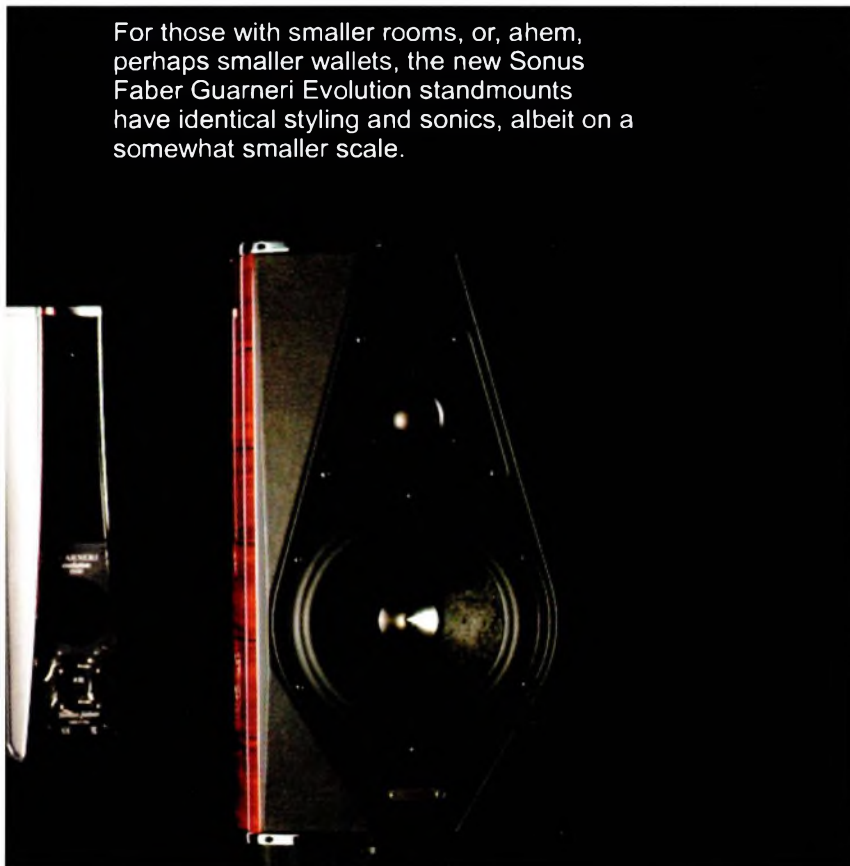
Indeed, Sonus Faber offer a wide range of models, from the Toy and Liuto right up to the Cremona and Homage collections, to match any music lover's room or budget. All you really need is a passion for beautiful sound.

What do *you* listen to? If your system beguiled at first, but now proves tiring over a evening's listening, why not give us a call? We can arrange for an audition either here at Cool Gales or in your home. For more information, reviews, and brochure downloads, visit www.coolgales.com/sonusfaber

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BEST STREAMER

Naim ND5 XS

Naim gave us a clear demonstration of its streaming talent with the formidable NDX. What we didn't expect is that it would take almost everything that makes the NDX great and squeeze it into a product that costs £1,600 less. The ND5 XS has a superlative performance with streamed media and is also a superb internet radio platform. And if that wasn't enough, the digital inputs and front functionality make it a true digital hub. All-in-all, a superb performer at a realistic price.

DETAILS

PRICE: £1,925
TYPE: Streamer
TELEPHONE: 01722 426600
WEBSITE: naimaudio.com



Linn Akurate DS

DETAILS

PRICE: £4,500
TYPE: Streamer
TELEPHONE: 0141 307 7777
WEBSITE: linn.co.uk



Logitech Squeezebox Touch

DETAILS

PRICE: £240
TYPE: Streamer
TELEPHONE: 01753 870900
WEBSITE: logitech.com



BEST INTERCONNECT

Peerless Sigma

Peerless is one of the smaller brands in the UK market, but if the Sigma is anything to go by, that's set to change. The cable is a no-nonsense design that combines good-quality materials and sound design practice. The result is a cable that produces finely detailed images with an even tonal balance. It also includes an open and clear treble and good control of the lower octaves. This is a superbly well-balanced performer, with good build at a competitive price. All the points necessary for a champion.



DETAILS

PRICE: £70 (one metre)
TYPE: Interconnect
TELEPHONE:
01923 200100
WEBSITE:
peerless-av.co.uk



Dynamique Tempest



DETAILS

PRICE: £165 (one metre)
TYPE: Interconnect
TELEPHONE:
07786 310910
WEBSITE:
dynamiqueaudio.com

QED Ref Audio Evolution



DETAILS

PRICE: £87 (one metre)
TYPE: Interconnect
TELEPHONE:
01279 501111
WEBSITE:
qed.co.uk

BEST SPEAKER CABLE

Kimber 4PR

The basic design and components of the 4PR date back decades: polythene-insulated connectors joined together in a special weave to reduce interference. While it might not be very radical, the 4PR won us over with a performance that combines detail, bass extension, superior imaging and sweetness to impressive effect. For sheer musical enjoyment, no other cable tested this year is on a par with the 4PR and for that reason it is our 2011 award winner.



DETAILS
 PRICE: £67 (2.5m pair)
 TYPE: Twisted cable
 TELEPHONE:
 0845 345 1550
 WEBSITE:
 kimber.com

Black Rhodium T90 Diva



DETAILS
 PRICE: £7.92 (per metre)
 TYPE: Twisted cable
 TELEPHONE:
 01332 342233
 WEBSITE:
 blackrhodium.co.uk

Wireworld Stream



DETAILS
 PRICE: £6 (per metre)
 TYPE: Circular cable
 TELEPHONE:
 020 8991 9200
 WEBSITE:
 wireworldcable.co.uk



Shanling CD-T2000

...brings SACD sound quality from regular CD!



SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



“ Like most Shanling products, the CD-T2000 offers ‘battleship’ build quality and a very high standard of finish. ”

“ If this product were manufactured in the USA, it would probably cost three or four times what Shanling is asking here and at just under £2,000, makes it a veritable bargain. ”

“ Via the CD-T2000, cymbals reproduce with a lovely breathy openness that sounds like good analogue. ”

“ It delivers a smooth, natural, well-balanced sound that lets you hear the music as it was originally recorded. ”

“ ...the thought of going back to something ‘inferior’ once the review period was over was just too depressing to contemplate. ”

Jimmy Hughes - Hi Fi Choice, October 2011

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BEST SUPPORT

Atacama Duo 6

The Duo is an all-new stand from Atacama and combines a smart aesthetic with some clever, real-world design touches. The smaller rear upright is fitted to allow for unobtrusive cable management, while the larger front upright can be mass-loaded. The Duo 6 sounds lively and involving and lends a vibrancy to loudspeakers that is hard not to like. All this, plus the solid build quality and a very reasonable asking price.



DETAILS

PRICE: £65
TYPE: Loudspeaker stand
TELEPHONE: 01455 283251
WEBSITE: atacama-audio.co.uk



Custom Design FS104 Signature



DETAILS

PRICE: £190
TYPE: Loudspeaker stand
TELEPHONE: 01912 624646
WEBSITE: customdesign.co.uk

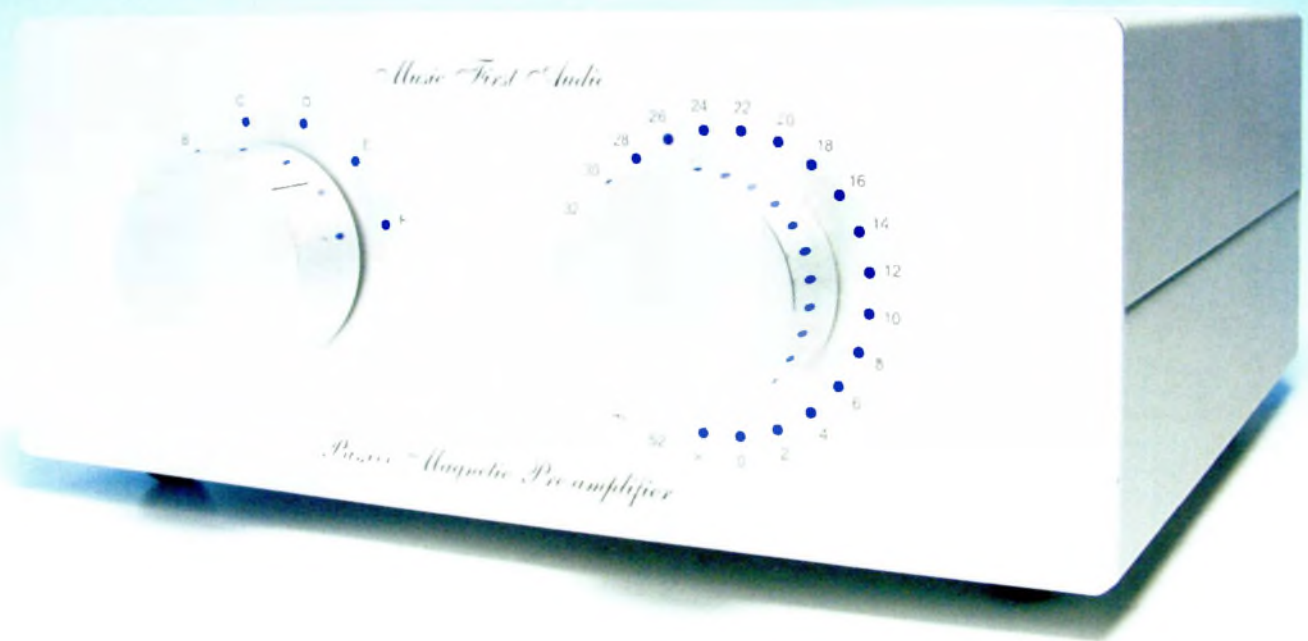
Quadraspire QV60



DETAILS

PRICE: £250
TYPE: Loudspeaker stand
TELEPHONE: 01179 863228
WEBSITE: quadraspire.co.uk

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BEST ACCESSORY

Shure M97xE

Vinyl replay need not be an expensive business. The reasonably priced Shure took on three other cost-effective cartridges and won the day. It's an impressive performer with exceptional detail, fine bass and a fantastically communicative midrange. The M97xE is also one of the highest-compliance cartridges we know of, and has an exceptional ability to track even well-worn records quietly and without causing further wear.



DETAILS

PRICE: £99
TYPE: Moving magnet cartridge
TELEPHONE: 01992 703058
WEBSITE: shure.co.uk



Lehmann Audio Rhinelander

DETAILS

PRICE: £425
TYPE: Headphone amp
TELEPHONE: 01235 511166
WEBSITE: lehmannaudio.com



Colorfly C4 Pro

DETAILS

PRICE: £550
TYPE: Media player
TELEPHONE: 07846 552032
WEBSITE: colorfly.eu



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BEST INNOVATION

Classé CP-800

The pace of technological change in the hi-fi industry at the moment is positively relentless, but even taking this into account the CP-800 is revolutionary. Here we have a fully equipped preamplifier with extensive analogue and digital connectivity. The reason why the CP-800 wins our innovation award, however, is the USB input. This circuitry manages the seemingly impossible feat of making a ripped copy of a CD (played via USB) sound better than the original. Welcome to the future.

DETAILS

PRICE: £4,450
TYPE: Preamplifier
TELEPHONE: 01903 221500
WEBSITE: classeaudio.com



M2Tech Young DAC

DETAILS

PRICE: £950
TYPE: DAC
TELEPHONE: 020 8815 5878
WEBSITE: m2tech.biz



Marantz NA7004

DETAILS

PRICE: £600
TYPE: Streamer
TELEPHONE: 02890 279830
WEBSITE: marantz.co.uk





Opera Grand Callas Loudspeakers

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- Hi Fi Choice



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European Turntable of the Year 2010/2011.

THORENS



Unison Research S6 Integrated Amplifier

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Unison Research Unico CDE Twin DAC

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BEST OF THE HIGH END

KEF Blade

A great high-end product should combine breath-taking performance with technical innovation and ground-breaking design. Out of all the loudspeakers we have tested over the last year, the KEF Blade best embodies these attributes. Based around the earlier Concept Blade, the production model shares the striking lines and incredibly clever 'Single Apparent Source' technology that creates an astoundingly cohesive soundstage from the multiple drivers.



Hi-Fi Choice
WINNER
2011

DETAILS

PRICE: £20,000
TYPE: Loudspeaker
TELEPHONE:
01622 672261
WEBSITE:
kef.co.uk

Krell Cipher

Krell is one of the defining high-end brands and the Cipher is a classic example of what it's capable of when pulling out all the stops. This is a technological showcase that is designed to extract the absolute maximum from both CD and SACD, including multichannel discs. No expense has been spared on the lavishly finished casework, the extensive power supply arrangements and the very sophisticated balanced DAC arrangement. The result is a superlative performer.



Hi-Fi Choice
WINNER
2011

DETAILS

PRICE: £12,000
TYPE: CD/SACD player
TELEPHONE:
020 8971 3909
WEBSITE:
krellonline.com

Onkyo P-3000R/M-5000R

The Onkyo pairing is the least expensive of our High End Award products, yet there is no doubt in our minds that they should be included. Incredible build quality, a feature set that makes them some of the most flexible components in their class and with a powerful sound, the Onkyo can tackle almost any speaker with any genre of music and never fail to sound in control and truly engrossing. This is a high-end champion at a real-world price point.



DETAILS

PRICE: £1,700/£2,500
TYPE: Pre/power amp
TELEPHONE:
01628 473350
WEBSITE:
eu.onkyo.com

Hi-Fi Choice
WINNER
2011

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

Audiolab 8200A

The Audiolab is a classic example of a product that delivers so much at the price point, it can be hard to make a convincing case to spend more money. For £730 the 8200A offers plentiful inputs and excellent build. More importantly, it offers a truly sparkling performance. The 8200A never fails to make listening enjoyable, with a fabulous, well-lit midband that gives superb insight into recordings. This considerable collection of attributes earns the 8200A a nomination.

DETAILS

PRICE: £730
TYPE: Integrated amplifier
TELEPHONE: 01480 447700
WEBSITE: audiolab.co.uk



Rega DAC

The phrase 'right first time' could have been coined for the Rega DAC. We have tested a great many DACs this year, but the Rega still stands out as a fabulous combination of features, build and performance. The DAC has many of the Rega 'house sound' characteristics and never fails to sound engaging. We found it very hard to fault and when a product that costs less than £500 has you asking if you really need anything more, you have a true star.

DETAILS

PRICE: £498
TYPE: DAC
TELEPHONE: 01702 333071
WEBSITE: rega.co.uk



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PRODUCT OF THE YEAR 2011

Classé

CP-800

When Classé delivered the CP-800 to HFC's offices, hopes were high. Classé boss Dave Nauber had already stated the unit was better with a mobile phone than any CD player and so the challenge was born. Two of our most experienced reviewers confirmed, independently of one another, that they preferred listening to music via the USB input over a variety of expensive, high-end CD players. This ground-breaking pairing will leave its mark in hi-fi history, or that we're certain.



DETAILS

PRICE: £4,450

TYPE: Preamplifier

TELEPHONE:
01903 221500

WEBSITE:
classeaudio.com



It's been a fascinating journey of discovery for us compiling this year's Awards issue. So many great products have come out of 2011 that products in some categories were almost impossible to separate. So, it's important to note that it would be a mistake to dismiss category 'finalists' in the stubborn pursuit of a 'winner'. Instead, we'd advocate trying to listen to as many products as possible in a given section, to discover what's right for you. If you can put the effort in before

making a purchase, the long-term satisfaction will far outweigh the initial auditioning legwork.

Many of our award winners this year were plucked from our unique *Blind-Listening Group Tests* – the most rigorous test regime in the hi-fi press, while some achieved such exceptional scores in their 'solo' reviews that they were certain to go through to our Awards shortlist. Then there were products that simply stood out from the crowd. Notable standouts include both

Audiolab's 8200 CD and amplifier, Logitech's Squeezebox Touch and Michell's Gyro SE turntable, but there could only be one winner...

Classé's CP-800 preamp has caused quite a stir in the HFC offices and has even had some reviewers checking their bank balances! For us it was a clear winner: a product that breaks the mould, creates a benchmark for sonic excellence and begins to question the value of expensive CD players. Top marks, then, to Classé on a job well done.

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Kingston* 020 8547 0717
Lancaster* 01524 39657
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Loughton* 020 8532 0770
Maidstone* 01622 686366
Manchester* 0161 839 8869
Norwich* 01603 767605
Nottingham* 0115 911 2121

Oxford* 01865 765961
Poole* 01202 671677
Portsmouth* 023 9266 3604
Preston* 01772 883958
Reading* 0118 959 7768
Sevenoaks 01732 459555
Sheffield* 0114 255 5861
Southampton* 023 8033 7770
Swansea* 01792 474608
Swindon* 01793 538222
Tunbridge Wells 01892 531543
Warrington* 01925 632179
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AUDIOLAB 8200CD • 8200A CD / AMPLIFIER
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CYRUS CD6 SE • 6 XP CD / AMPLIFIER
Some of the finest hi-fi in the world has just become more affordable. A great opportunity to buy this award-winning CD and amplifier.



ROKSAN CASPIAN M2 CD / AMPLIFIER
The M2 amp boasts 85wpc and five line inputs while the matching CD features a 24-bit DAC plus dedicated power supplies for the outputs.



LEEMA ANTILA IIS ECO / TUCANA II CD / AMPLIFIER
This high-end CD player and integrated amplifier combines power, detail and musicality with a comprehensive range of facilities.



MARANTZ CD6004 • FM6004 CD / AMPLIFIER
Replacing the award-winning CD6003 and FM6003, both products have been extensively reworked by the Marantz engineering team, under the direction of Brand Ambassador Ken Ishiwata.



YAMAHA CD-S300 • A-S500 CD / AMPLIFIER
With its high quality sound and features such as iPod and MP3/WMA compatibility, the CD-S300 is an ideal partner for the award-winning A-S500 integrated amplifier.



MARANTZ M-CR502DAB CD RECEIVER
Searching for a compact all-in-one music player that looks as great as it sounds? The hunt ends here with the Marantz M-CR502DAB CD Receiver.



DENON D-M38DAB CD RECEIVER
With its excellent design, first class build quality and fantastic audio performance, the Denon D-M38DAB is a first rate micro system and a worthy update to the award-winning range.



ARCAM SOLO MINI CD RECEIVER
Enjoy outstanding performance with this award-winning integrated CD, amplifier and DAB tuner system.



ARCAM FMJ T32 TUNER
Arcam's FMJ T32 Tuner makes the most of its state-of-the-art build quality to provide impressive sound playback via DAB, FM, AM and Sirius Satellite broadcasts.



AUDIOLAB 8200T TUNER
Designed to complement the Audiolab 8200 range, this well specified tuner is equipped with DAB, DAB+, FM and AM to offer a full range of radio listening pleasure.



REGA RPI TURNTABLE
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SPENDOR A-LINE
A3 • A5 • A6 • A9

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NEW



MONITOR AUDIO
GOLD GX

Monitor Audio's new Gold GX speakers use technology that has filtered down from their flagship Platinum PL range. The range comprises two standmounts, two floorstanders, two centre speakers, a pair of surround speakers and a single subwoofer.



NEW

KEF AUDIO
Q SERIES

Experiencing the Q Series is like hearing a system costing many times more. Key features include an all new Uni-Q array with advanced bass technologies



BOWERS & WILKINS
PMI

This luxury, compact loudspeaker is the latest in a long line of Bowers & Wilkins audiophile mini monitors. It offers an extremely high-quality audio performance and features several technological innovations including a new tweeter and groundbreaking cabinet design.



PMC
TWENTY RANGE

The twenty series is the next generation of elegant, handcrafted British loudspeakers that follow in the lineage of worldwide acclaimed PMC designs. The 4 models use PMC's innovative ATL™ technology, providing a supremely rich and detailed performance ideally suited to all styles and sizes of interior.

NEW

NEW



DENON DNP-720AE NETWORK AUDIO PLAYER

Enjoy internet radio and online digital content along with AirPlay support for streaming music from your iPad, iPhone or iPod touch.



MARANTZ M-CR603 CD NETWORK RECEIVER

Features CD playback, a DAB/DAB+/FM/AM tuner along with a USB connection and network capability via its ethernet port.



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Combines superb music performance, network audio capabilities along with an internal CD player and radio tuner.



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New ZonePlayer with built-in speakers - just add a Sonos Bridge to create a wireless hi-fi system. Available in black or white.



NEW



SONOS MULTIROOM PRODUCTS

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MARANTZ NA7004 NETWORK AUDIO PLAYER

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



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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 STEWARD

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.

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QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Q I am looking to add an iPod transport to my system to let my wife and children play their iPods through it. This will connect to the back of my Cambridge Audio 840C. Any suggestions?

Philip Mehr, via email



Digital output-equipped iPod transports start with the superbly capable PURE i-20 (HFC 342),

which is a very talented piece of equipment for the £80 asking price. Given you have a Cambridge Audio 840C, you might also want to consider the Cambridge Audio iD100, which we reviewed in HFC 350. The flat support of the iD100 may be handy, if you add an iPad later on.



Speak up

Q Two months ago I acquired an Accuphase DP-500 CD player and I found myself in hi-fi heaven. But to maintain this Nirvana, my elderly Mission 755 F speakers will have to go. I am, therefore, looking for replacements capable of highlighting the DP-500's superb tonality and timing.

My system currently comprises a Densen DM10 amp, Harmonic Technologies Magic Link Two cables, Wireworld Stratus 1.2 amp, Audio Agile cdp powerchords and stands on Solid Tech's Feets of Silence. Speaker cables are MIT's Terminator 2 bi-wire.

My listening room is 4.5 x 5m, carpeted and moderately furnished; music tastes range from Mahler to Metallica, with a good dollop of reggae, psychedelico-soul and jazz. I have a budget of approximately £4,500, so your expert advice would be highly appreciated.

R.R. de Buyzer, via email

This is a considerable amount of money to spend on what is the most subjective area of any system, so whatever recommendations we make, we advocate demonstrations with dealers and preferably with the equipment you have at home.

The Jamo R907: the open and honest wildcard



The DM10 produces 75 watts, which should be enough to handle most designs in this price point, but some of the least sensitive designs might be a poor match. With the wide variety of music that you listen to and the desire to play to the strengths of the electronics, we feel that there are two key candidates.

The PMC fact.8 was our 2010 Product of the Year and remains a superb performer. It is open, revealing and possessed of excellent tonality. We still think it is one of the finest speakers you can buy at the price point – slightly over budget, but nothing that a little negotiation wouldn't help with! The sensitivity and impedance of the PMC is well within the capabilities of the Densen as well.

The other suggestion is a bit more of a wildcard, but one that we also think is worthwhile. The Jamo R907 (HFC 317) is one of the most open and honest loudspeakers anywhere near the price. Your room is large enough to position them correctly and we feel there are few designs that are so open and revealing. The R907 is technically over budget, but a look around the European dealers suggests that there are examples to be had at the right price – if you can find a pair, we can think of few finer designs at the price.

Back to the lab

Q I have been reading the reviews of the latest generation of Audiolab separates with considerable interest. I am the owner of an original Audiolab system: an 8000CD; 8000T and an 8000P/8000C pre/power amplifier.

I have upgraded the speakers since buying the electronics with a pair of Bowers & Wilkins 704s. I listened to the first generation of 'new' Audiolab products and wasn't convinced, but my 8000CD is now beginning to stop reading discs, despite a thorough clean of the lens and assembly. As such I

am interested to know whether the new 8200CD is a worthy successor to the older unit and whether it will work well in this system or whether there are other candidates? I have a budget of up to £1,200 and the player needs to be proficient with all types of music.

Simon Hardaker, via email

A The original Audiolab 8000CD was a fine player and very highly rated in its day. The original 'new' Audiolab CD player was more laid back than the original and, in many ways, the 8200CD is still more refined than the original. We do think it is a closer match, however, and we think it is one of the very best CD players under £1,500 (see p61). The digital inputs including asynchronous USB are also extremely useful in terms of future-proofing the system. There is also the aesthetic consideration that the 8200CD will match up nicely to the rest of your equipment.

The 8200CD makes a strong case for itself, but it would also be worth considering the very talented Rega Saturn, which we tested as part of a Rega system in HFC 344. This is still a superbly musical player that rarely fails to be enjoyable with all types of music.

Another player which might press the right buttons is the Leema Stream III (HFC 335), which partners a full and exciting sound with digital inputs like the Audiolab. As ever, we would encourage you to secure a demonstration of any of the products you are considering buying before handing over your hard-earned cash.

No fuss analogue

Q I've been using a Rega P3 for many years, but recent upgrades to the rest of the system have got me considering a further step up. I have been a huge fan of the simplicity of the Rega. I like the unsuspended design and how well



The Gyrodec SE is easy to set up despite the suspension

it performs once placed on a wall shelf for a little isolation.

I am tempted by a Michell Gyrodec – not least because I love the looks – but the suspension is a concern to me. How easy is it to set up and keep in tune? Can it match the Rega for this? Are there other designs at this price point that are as hassle-free as the Rega is?

Matt Court, via email

A The Michell is a suspended deck, but setting it up is an exercise in good design. Follow the instructions and take your time and the Gyrodec is easier than some unsuspended decks to get going. More importantly, it sounds (and looks) fantastic once you have done so. We think the Gyrodec is still the pick of the pack at the price and is a 2011 Award Winner for this reason (see p67).

The other two turntables over £1,000 that we have commended are unsuspended designs. The Pro-Ject RPM10 is also an easy turntable to set up and has a powerful and engaging sound. It is not as upgradeable as the Michell, however, and it is also more expensive. The Well Tempered Simplex is a superb performer and also has no suspension, but it is not an easy unit to set up and is also not as upgradeable as the Michell. We would suggest talking to a Michell dealer and seeing if the Gyro is straightforward enough to replace the Rega.

Happy balance

Q I am putting together a new hi-fi system after years of portables and computer audio and I have chosen a Marantz NA7004 as my source – I really liked the feature count and the excellent sound. I have also secured myself a pair of PMC DB1s, ex-demo at an excellent price. So far so good, but now I am having trouble with the amp.

I first of all listened to the Marantz PM7004, as I liked the idea of a matching system. The problem was that the combination wasn't very exciting. It was controlled and smooth, but lacked the drive with more uptempo music. As a result, we then switched to an Exposure 2010S. This was much more lively, but lacked the control of the Marantz combination.

As such, I am looking for an amp that is a halfway house between these points. I would like a bit of pace and drive to it, but it also needs to have a smoothness that will flatter my less than audiophile recordings. I can spend up to £1,000 on something that bridges the gap between the Marantz and the Exposure.

Charles Hayhurst, via email

A This being the Awards issue, we would suggest trying the sub-£1,000 champ, the Audiolab 8200A. This is a very neutral amplifier that has strong timing and drive, but manages to avoid sounding harsh or fatiguing.

Another strong possibility that comes in fractionally over budget and would be an excellent choice is the £1,075 Creek 5350 Evolution (HFC 334). This balances a fantastic sense of timing and pace to a very sweet and refined sound. Creek seems to be on a bit of a roll at the moment and if the 5350 is too expensive, then the smaller £680 Evolution 2 (HFC 351) would also be a possibility.



The Audiolab 8200CD is, perhaps, the smartest buy under £1,000



The Unison Research S6 is powerful for a single-ended design

World in Unison

Q I am agonising over buying (or at the very least, demoing) the Unison Research S6 that you recently reviewed (HFC 347). I love the design (even more amazingly, so does my wife!) and it seemed to push all the right buttons for Jimmy Hughes in terms of sound.

The problem I have is that my speakers – Triangle Genese Lyr – are not going anywhere as they work brilliantly in the room and look fantastic. On the end of my current Unison Research Unico, they work very well. Will dropping to 35 watts cause me problems? If so, are there other valve amplifiers with a bit more oomph that will work with the Triangles?

I'm mainly a blues and soul fan and although I don't regard my listening levels as deafening, they are reasonably high. All thoughts appreciated.

Dan Johnson, via email

A The Triangle is a relatively sensitive speaker and the Unison seemed to have a lot more real-world power than the on-paper figures suggest, so we don't think you will have any particular problems partnering the two brands – we'd go so far as to say we think they'll sound good together. Very few other designs at any price combine single ended operation with an output much above single figures so the competition is hard to judge.

The only one that springs to mind is the Cayin A100T, that featured in the last Beautiful

Systems (HFC 351). This offers a 'triode' mode that is essentially single-ended operation and pumps out an impressive 50 watts whilst it does so. It is a handsome piece of equipment as well. Let us know which one you go for and how you get on.

Super dooper

Q I have been watching the progress of high-resolution downloads with some interest over the last year or so and I believe that there is enough material available to consider taking the plunge. I listen exclusively to classical music and as such, I also have a considerable collection of SACD discs that I do not want to part with.

I understand that ripping the DSD layer of SACD is not possible and that SACD-capable DAC and transport combinations are incredibly expensive. As such, are there SACD players with 192kHz digital inputs that can have a streamer attached to them? I can spend up to £4,000 on a unit, but I'd prefer to spend less if I could.

Stephen Mosley, via email

A This would be a good idea, but while we have tested many CD players with digital inputs, we

have not recently reviewed any SACD players so equipped. A look around the various units on sale at the moment suggests that Denon produces the DCD-2010 which has a digital input (bitrate unspecified) and Luxman produces some very attractive units that play SACD and have a digital input on the back. That seems to be the sum total of SACD players so equipped.

A more unconventional approach might be to consider our sub-£1,000 Award nominee, the Oppo BDP-95EU (HFC 347). This plays CD and SACD (not to mention DVD-Audio, Blu-ray and pretty much any other format you can think of), but will also stream files over network. Coming in at under £1,000, this would allow you to consider an external DAC if you wanted to boost the CD and streaming performance further if you wished.

Small wonders

Q I currently use a Cambridge Audio 740A and 740C with a pair of Mordaunt-Short 908 loudspeakers. I have recently moved house and I have to accept that the 908s are too large to work correctly in the room. As such, I need a new

pair of loudspeakers. In terms of size, standmount designs don't really save that much size when the stands are taken into account so I suspect that I am really looking for a pair of small floorstanders that don't have the side-firing drivers or rear bass ports that are causing trouble with the 908s.

I do like reasonable bass response, though, and listen at reasonable volume. I intend to spend up to £1,000 on this, but I could go a little higher if there is something more suitable.

Jonathan Gliddon, via email

A The good news is that there are some strong choices available to you. The £899 Triangle Color (HFC 345), in particular, has many likeable features including excellent bass response and a front port that meant we found them very easy to accommodate.

Our current pick of the crop, the Epos Epic 5 (HFC 347) is slightly larger and has a rear-mounted port, which might make them harder to place, but they are too good to ignore completely. Equally, the £720 Boston Acoustics A360, which we also tested in HFC 349, was very benign in placement terms, even if it is still rear ported.

The Triangle Color floorstander works well in small spaces



Oppo's BDP-95EU does SACD and streaming



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Minitest

Harness the power of your computer music with these handy amps says **Richard Black**



Firestone Audio

Big Joe III

PRICE: £340 CONTACT: 0845 345 1550
WEBSITE: FIRESTONE-AUDIO.COM

FIRESTONE AUDIO offers a comprehensive range of products in its 'Cute' series, including this digital power amplifier. The power amp part of it may not be strictly digital (it's Class D), but calling this a digital amp is still justified when three of the four inputs are digital. You get both electrical and optical S/PDIF, along with USB and a single analogue input on a stereo mini-jack socket. Hence despite the name implying that this is only a power amp, it's actually an integrated with an onboard DAC. Digital inputs handle up to 96kHz via S/PDIF, or 48kHz on USB. Output power before clip is about 15 watts. There's one unusual feature in that the volume control is digital which works fine, although we found that just occasionally the volume will waver between two adjacent steps – the solution is to tweak it minutely one way or the other.

Using analogue or digital inputs, this is a very assured-sounding little amp. It has real authority and very impressive control in the bass, making it sound every bit as 'real' as many of its full-size brethren. It also has some delightful insights in store and if its retrieval of detail is not as consistent as some of the best integrated amps can offer, it still manages more than creditably for its price and can occasionally give a real surprise, shining light on unfamiliar corners of a recording. A very easy amp to like.

VERDICT **IMPRESSIVE BASS** control and good performance higher up too, with plenty of detail and fundamentally engaging, musical sound from any source



KingRex T20U SE

PRICE: £280 CONTACT: 01782 621225
WEBSITE: KINGREX.CO.UK

A NEW BRAND TO US, this Taiwan-based manufacturer branched into hi-fi in 2006, specialising in devices ideal for computer-audio use, like this amplifier. Like all of its ilk it uses switching technology for the power stage, but in this case it's Class T (or Tripath), the configuration that caused such a stir a few years ago.

At the input side, KingRex offers a single analogue input (on good-quality phono sockets) and a USB digital input, with selection between the two being made by a small rear-mounted switch. That's an ergonomic inconvenience, compensated for, to some extent, by the volume control which has a very solid feel to it. Output power is on the low side but you can still do plenty with eight watts.

This SE version is upgraded over the basic T20U (£235) by having key op-amps replaced with very high-performance alternatives. A further optional upgrade is a linear power supply (£215).

Tripath technology is renowned for sounding sweet and transparent and on the basis of this unit we can see why. It's not the last word in impact or overt excitement and we found its frequency extremes a little understated, but it does have a beautifully limpid quality.

In large-scale works there's more than enough detail for critical listening, though we found the stereo image tends to collapse a little towards the centre – more so via the USB than the analogue input. Tonally there seems to be a slight lift in the upper midrange.

VERDICT **THE MAIN ATTRACTION** here is a degree of sweetness which soon makes one overlook any limitations in precision – and that's not bad for the price either!





NuForce Icon2

PRICE: £235 CONTACT: 0845 052 5259
WEBSITE: NUFORCE.COM

IT'S ONLY A COUPLE OF ISSUES since we enjoyed NuForce's full-size DAC-9 (HFC 333) and here's another DAC, albeit built into an amp. This is an unusually well-specified little amp, with two analogue inputs, one on phono sockets and one on a mini-jack, alongside a USB input that's capable of handling 24-bit/96kHz data. There's a line output and also a headphone output, the latter driven by a dedicated circuit.

Inputs are identified only by symbols, which means there's no need for text on the front of the unit; hence it can be mounted horizontally or, in the supplied 'shoe', vertically, saving even more desk space. Like the Firestone, it uses Ethernet-style RJ45 connectors for loudspeaker output, with supplied cables terminating in 4mm plugs for the speakers.

If there's one aspect of this amp's performance which struck us as being well out of its league in terms of price, it would be detail. There's a most impressive amount of that commodity, along with its usual companion, stereo imaging, and you can really hear way down into complex recordings with ease. We found tonality nicely neutral across the midrange, though treble can, at times, be a touch on the bright side and a little hard with it. This isn't a huge deal and with desktop speakers we were hardly aware of it, but with high-quality speakers it was noticeable. That apart, there's really very little to criticise and a lot to like.

VERDICT ★★★★★ **DETAIL AND IMAGING** make few, if any, concessions to full-size amps at twice the price and more; **solid and lively bass** and just a trace of treble excess at times

Pro-Ject Stereo Box S

PRICE: £199 CONTACT: 01235 511166
WEBSITE: PROJECT-AUDIO.COM

NOW WELL ESTABLISHED as one of the leading ranges of miniature audio, Pro-Ject's 'Box' series includes practically every kind of component and there are several amplifiers. This is its cheapest and simplest integrated amp, with just two line inputs, selected by a push-button on the front on the unit, or a press on the remote control. Volume, also remote-controllable of course, is adjusted with a motorised mechanical control, while the main power amp section is a switching type. At the rear of the unit, multi-function terminal posts connect to speaker cables, an impressive bit of shoe-horning but asking for trouble in the hands of careless users as the posts are just so close together. It's hard to see how one could ever attach stripped wires without serious risk of short-circuits. Output power before clip is quite generous at 18 watts.

Continuing a theme we've encountered in the past with some of the Box series, the sound is full of life and energy, highly committed and convincing. There's a real bounce to it and an impressive degree of attack, which makes the most of rhythmic music. Along with that, there's plenty of refinement to be found and detail, imaging and tonality need no apology. If one chooses to listen critically and analytically there's lot to enjoy, it's just that the sheer exuberance of the sound often makes one disinclined to bother – just sit back, or indeed dance around the room and enjoy! ●

VERDICT ★★★★★ **ENGAGINGLY ENERGETIC** amp with more than passable analytical skills too; **no digital input** but power is relatively generous for the breed



An obvious home for any of these amps would be a desktop system based around a computer, hence no doubt the USB input on three of them, but there are plenty of other situations where they could come

in handy. What you get out of them will depend on what you put in and any of the above are good enough to show up the drawbacks of low-bit-rate audio. Do yourself a favour and standardise

on lossless files or you'll kick yourself later! As for speakers, we see no sign that these amps will be any fussier than 'traditional' models and should be quite happy driving 4-ohm loads.

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B&W ASW4000 THX subwoofer (satin black), with 15-inch Rohacell driver and 450-watt amp. Not for the faint-hearted, this sub is big at 80kg, with an even bigger sound. Only £600. dazzert@hotmail.com **07847 501865 (West Yorks).**

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CYRUS 8-POWER £425 brushed black. Genuinely mint condition, original packaging with accessories and manual. Purchased in Feb 2010, price for collection, postage at extra cost. **07873 228770 or email grant-h74@hotmail.co.uk (Herts).**

ARCAM, CD93T black, £275. A85 amp black, £250. PMC TB2 + speakers, £275. Chord Indigo plus interconnects 1m, as new, £350. All equipment boxed with manuals. **02392 257626 or 07970 012450 or email richardsh@sky.com (Portsmouth).**

PRO-JECT Debut 3 SE with Clearaudio MM cartridge. As new condition and working perfectly. £150.00. **07722 248001 or email doug.taylor@**

virgin.net (Lincolnshire).
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AUDIO RESEARCH CD7 CD player, with power supply modification. As new condition with original packaging. (£8,000) £4,200. **01462 670786 or email jr812@hotmail.com (North Herts).**

CYRUS 8vs integrated amplifier, black, super condition £399. **0115 9288006 (Notts).**

STELLO CDT200 CD transport in silver, immaculate condition. AES/EBU, RCA, BNC, optical digital output. One owner. Original packaging, remote and mains lead. Rarely available. (£1,500) £525 ono. **07725 072878 (Leics).**

NAKAMICHI CA-7E control amplifier plus remote for sale. Mint, built-in phono stage (MC/MM). Excellent sound. Fully serviced July 2011 at B&W. £1,000ono. Buyer collects. **07908 870023 (Bucks).**

ARCAM FMJ A18 amplifier, black, excellent condition, Manual. (£600) £300. Arcam FMJ CD17 player, black, excellent condition, manual. (£600) £300. **01606 79032 (Mid Cheshire).**

SUGDEN Mystro integrated amplifier. Purchased in Feb 2011 and lightly used since. Complete with box and manual and can be posted, £800. **01782 785734 (Staffordshire).**

LEEMA ACOUSTICS Pyxis reference preamp in black. Fully balanced, internal DAC and phono stage with tone controls. Redundancy forces sale, £3,200. **01226 745529 (Barnsley).**

TEAC D-T1 multi DAC, VRDS T1 CD transport both boxed with manuals. V-8030 cassette deck with remote. Offers to collect. **01977 695385 (W.Yorks).**

WANTED: Full-width Technics CD player in silver. Please phone with details. **01777 838617 (Notts).**

CELESTION A1 speakers in black with stands, £290. Marantz CD63MkII in black, £100. QED Silver Anniversary, 2x4 metre biwire runs £35. **01159 894340 (Notts).**

ARCAMA85 integrated amp in excellent condition. MM/MC phono stage, box and manual, £195ono. Linn LP12 armboard in perfect condition £10 plus P&P. **07941 174804 (Heathrow).**

MIT AVT3 speaker cable, 2x3 metre pair, £160. MIT AVI interconnect 1m £70. Both mint and available as a set for £200. **0161 4323852 (Cheshire).**

ROKSAN Radius 5 turntable with Rega RB600 arm and Goldring GX22 cartridge, £750. Exposure 2010S CD player, £210. Both in superb condition. **01484 477426 (W.Yorks).**

AVI Biggatron standmount speakers (cherry). Good condition with Partington stands. Bowers & Wilkins 684 floorstanders (cherry). Excellent condition £550. **07982 794884 (Essex).**

ARCAM R-DAC. Only three months old, as new, boxed with all accessories, instruction booklet and receipt. £175 inc p&p. **01964 613177 or email dave.drew@talktalk.net (East Yorkshire).**

ROGUE AUDIO ST90 amplifier (£2,650) £1,095. New, only a few hours use. High-quality transparent power, includes upgrade Svetlana KT88s. **0208653 0778 or email johnkalli01@googlemail.com (London).**

SUGDEN CD Master £650, Sugden Headmaster headphone/preamp £400, Trichord Dino phono stage,

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!

Dino+ power supply and Dino power lead £250. All items are in excellent condition and come complete with boxes, packaging and instructions. **01305 263069 (West Dorset).**

ROKSAN Radius 5 turntable, clear acrylic £475. Clearaudio Nano phono stage £99. **07702014763 (Bristol).**

EUPHYA Alliance Symbiose 320 amplifier (French manufacture) includes separate power supply, 80 watts. Silver casing mixture of non-magnetic metal and Perspex. (£3,450) £1,250. **07805 199598 (W Sussex).**

CHORD Electronics DAC 64 for sale (black finish). Several years old, but very low actual usage; mint condition and looks absolutely brand new. Supplied in original box with manual. Buyer collects - £630. **07905 312191.**

CYRUS 8 XPD QX amplifier (black), light use after service, £1,100. PSX-R power supply (black) £275. Cyrus 8SE CD player (2009 model), barely used (black) £700. **07884 002911 or email ishmael386-inet@yahoo.co.uk (Halifax).**

NAIM NAC 202 preamp plus Naps power supply. Excellent condition. First owner. Boxed and including all accessories. Four years old. £1,200. **+0045 60910090 or email jafrikas@jubii.dk (Denmark).**

LINN LP12 (grooved rosewood) Lingo/Naim arm, excellent condition £1,000. **01554 891010 (Carmarthen).**

REGA RS1 speakers (black) £250, Partington Dreadnought speaker stands £130. **01452 385457 (Gloucs).**

NAIM CDSXS CD player, two years old in superb condition. Boxed with manual and remote, bargain at £895. **07914 985733 (Derbyshire).**

WANTED Sony JB930 or 940 minidisc deck. **01445 781498 (Northern Scotland).**

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MONTORAUDIO RS1 speakers, new condition, boxed £175. Rotel RT935 AM/FM tuner with Chord interconnect, £60. **01943 467859 (W Yorks).**

KIMBER D-60 Digital 1m coaxial interconnect, RCA plugs with case £180, Russ Andrews Superclamp Ultra (unwanted prize) £25, Genelec 1029A active monitors, hardly used. (£700) £295. **01902 884694. (Wolverhampton).**

PRIMARE i30 integrated amp and CD31 CD player (black). Good condition, supplied with manuals and remote (not boxed) and Atlas Navigator XLR interconnects. Sold as a pair, but would consider splitting. £1,500. **07748986963 (Hants).**

LINN Lingo 2, excellent condition £425. Linn Trampolin £90. Funk Achromat, turntable mat, 5mm (as new) £55. Linn felt mat £7. Will negotiate on p&p. **01582 867139 (Beds).**

LYNGDORF W210, pair of corner woofers in maple finish and excellent condition, £1,200.

01253 729944 or email lyngdorfw210@tesco.net (Lancashire).

ARCAM Alpha 7 FM/AM tuner, good condition with original box and handbook £30. **01252 548012 (Hants).**

ROKSAN Kandy LIII stereo integrated amplifier, 30 months old, hardly used and in perfect condition. Usual Roksan features 120 watts, phono stage, remote, rock-solid build etc. (£650) £295. **01896823388 (Northumberland).**

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APOGEE Stage full-range ribbon loudspeakers (anthracite grey) with new midrange units. Overall excellent condition, £800. **01825 841104 or email mark.hanna@virgin.net (East Sussex).**

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO Azur 340ASE amplifier (black),

with MP3 i/p Mission 750 speakers (black, limited edition) with stands (black) for £200. **07906 492335 or 0208643 2487 (London).**

ROCKPORT Technologies Merak loudspeaker and Sheritan II subwoofer. Ex-demo and brief use (black gloss), superbly built system (£2,600) £1,300. **08448 221115 or email mark.hanna@virgin.net (East Sussex).**

EXPOSURE 2010S CD player in silver. Excellent condition. £250. **01484 427426 (W.Yorkshire).**

BOWERS & WILKINS DM70 electrostatic speakers from 1969. Large bass units, one non-functional, would suit enthusiast to restore, £350. **07814 198334 (Cheshire).**

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BOWERS & WILKINS P4 speakers in good condition £130. Pioneer 737 DVD player in gold. Good condition with remote £20. **07900 662976 (Cambridgeshire).**

QUAD early portable amplifier made in 1938. Type 57 S.P Fidelity, may be a Peter Walker product. Offers over £350. **01634 817846 (Kent).**

TEAC VRDS 10, faulty, but repairable. Legendary build and great sound.

Cosmetically good, call for details, £85. **07704 833767 (Somerset).**

NAIM Uniti all-in-one unit in immaculate condition with box. Would consider part-exchange with Arcam Solo Neo. £1,500. **02380 0738935 (Hants).**

ROKSAN K2 amp. Owned from new (black), boxed with manual and remote control. £375. **02920 568165 or email barbragamester@btinternet.com. (Cardiff).**

REGA P3/RB300 tonearm, Rega Super Bias cartridge, Project Phono Box II USB. All for £250. **embt80@gmail.com 01555 759124 (South Lanarkshire).**

VAN DEN HUL Meridian interconnects. Pair, 900mm length, Neutrik phono connectors £31 plus p&p. Pair interconnects 600mm length, Neutrik phono connectors £28 plus p&p. **i.fraser587@btinternet.com 01582 573570 (Beds).**

REGA Kyte speakers (black). In good working order, but with some damage around rear terminals. £65. Wharfedale SW150 subwoofer (black), hardly used, £110. Offers welcome. **joshjefferyjeff@hotmail.com (London).**

SPECTRAL MIT interconnects MI330 1.5m x2 £210. Handmade

equipment support in oak, six-tier, offers. Audio Source, six-way conditioning block (£350) £210. All mint. **0115 9126424 (Notts).**

MARANTZ CD-63MkII CD turntable, Kenwood stereo cassette deck KX-5060S, Kenwood AV stereo receiver KR-V5570, pair of Castle Severn speakers. Suitable offers, will split if necessary. **01422 354995 or email b.d.heyhoe@talktalk.net (West Yorkshire).**

MARANTZ CD10 CD player, boxed with remote. Datasheet available as PDF. £300 **07771 776877 (Herts).**

KORD Tornado speakers, classic eight-inch mid-bass monitors. Bargain at £300, including Atacama SL stands. **07814 556915 (Oxfordshire).**

CYRUS CDXT SE+ transport. (black). Purchased new Dec 2010 (£1,550) £1,050. 2x Cyrus Smartpower Plus power amps (black). (£700) £275. **07970 096244 (Bucks).**

CRYSTAL CABLE Piccolo RCA interconnects 0.5m pair. Multi-award winning cables in immaculate condition. Very light use, complete with presentation box. £115 ono. **07725 072878 (Leics).**

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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.

Reviews you can trust

Hi-Fi Choice test results are the most reliable in the business. We employ the UK's most respected hi-fi journalists and use the most stringent techniques to ensure our ratings are the ones you can trust (see *How We Test* p38). All the equipment we rate most highly is contained within these pages, from CD and vinyl to the latest disc players, amplifiers, tuners and loudspeakers.

Reviews online

You can also read the full review for each of our

Buyer's Guide entries online. Simply type: techradar.com into your browser, then click *Reviews* menu, followed by *Audio visual* and then *Hi-fi and audio*.

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 Guide (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.

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Whether CD or SACD, we list the very best players for the job

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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

Up to £1,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	SACD compatible	ELEC dig output	CD-RW compatible	Opt dig output	Headphone socket	BAL analogue out	CD text	Variable output	Issue number
●	Advance Acoustic MCD-204	795	CD player with warm valve sound. Harmonically rich and inviting performance	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	342
●	Audiolab 8200CD	700	No SACD support, but excellent detail, neutrality and communication	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	340
●	Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD	400	Musical, precise, involving and with great energy at a superb price	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	340
●	Creek Evolution 2	680	Smart and desirable-looking player with lots of detail present in performance	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	350
●	Exposure 2010S2	710	Paired with the 2010S2 amp, this CD player is a fine performer with plenty of detail	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	344
●	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
●	Oppo BDP-95EU	999	This universal player is revealing, transparent and musically involving	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	347
●	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

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	SACD compatible	ELEC dig output	CD-RW compatible	Opt dig output	Headphone socket	BAL analogue out	CD text	Variable output	Issue number
●	AMR CD-777	3,195	Extremely natural and engaging sound that brings analogue to the digital world	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	332
●	Arcam CD37	1,300	Excellent detail and imaging, neutral tonality and above-average bass resolution	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	340
●	Audio Analogue Maestro	2,250	Boasts refined highs and good image quality with a fine sense of timing	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	348
●	Audio Note Zero CD/II	1,742	Reviewed as part of a system, this really is a CD player for those who don't like CD	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	348
●	Ayon CD-075	1,890	Open and fluent player; excellent pace with all kinds of music	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	351
●	Creek Destiny	1,400	This player presents the music and nothing but the music and is thoroughly recommended	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	328
●	Icon Audio CDX1 Signature	1,350	Has an open, vinyl sound with a very high listenability factor	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	341
●	KrellS-350A	2,695	Accomplished CD player with real breeding underpinning its excellent performance	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	341
●	Krell Cipher	12,255	Vivid, highly detailed sound – SACD has rarely sounded so good	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	350
●	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 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	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	348
●	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
●	Shanling CD-T2000	1,895	Great sound, good looks, superb build and unbeatable price	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	350
●	Unison Research Unico CDE	2,475	Has an engaging and musical sound with strong tonal realism	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	348

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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AWARD WINNING - The Mini-I has consistently been rated full marks for its sheer number and quality of features resulting in an outstanding price to performance ratio. The Mini-I has ranked 5/5 Star from HiFi Choice and won the Headphonista Outstanding Design 2010 award!

24/192KHz - The Mini-I supports up to 24-bit and 192KHz through its S/PDIF and BNC inputs. The maximum sample rate supported via USB is 24-bit/48 KHz.

LCD DISPLAY - A useful feature that displays the current active input, sample rate, volume level and track time information.

INPUTS/OUTPUTS - The Mini-I has it all with USB, BNC, Optical and digital Coaxial inputs. A single pair of phono (L/R RCA) and balanced (XLR) connectors provide the outputs.



REMOTE CONTROL - One of the very DACs to come with a remote control. Features on/off control, input selection, volume control and a mute button.

DAC/PRE-AMP/HEADPHONE AMP - The Mini-I does it all; you can use the DAC as a fixed line output or as a preamp with variable line out. The icing on the cake is the 6.3mm headphone jack.

MATRIX MINI-I DAC/PRE-AMP/HEADPHONE AMP

£259 inc UK shipping



Turntables



The best record players money can buy

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	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	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
●	Hanns 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	33/45	●	●	opt	opt	319
●	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 RPM 10.1 Evolution	2,000	This turntable is a good combination of high mass and effective suspension	33/45	●	●	●	●	348
●	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
●	Rega RP3	475	Turntable with the uncanny ability to get to the heart of the music	33/45	●	●	●	●	351
●	SRM Tech Arena	650	A welcome addition to the affordable end of the market, this is an engaging turntable	33/45	●	●	●	●	349
●	Townshend Rock 7	1,750	Very well-defined bass; good detail; well judged rhythm and pace (reviewed with Excalibur arm)	33/45	●	●	●	●	345
●	Well Tempered Simplex	1,495	Superb timing makes this one of the most entertaining turntables in its price range	33/45	●	●	●	●	347

Phono cartridges



MM and MC recommendations

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	MM	MC	Replaceable stylus	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 inputs	MC phono inputs	Adj impedance	Adj gain	Issue number
●	Dynavector P-75 MkII	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

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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	Signal Strength Meter	Rotary 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	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	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	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 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
●	Jamo wEAR In30	80	In-ear headphone sound is beguilingly musical and very detailed across the board							348
●	Klipsch Image X10i	229	Natural sound and fit; lightweight and unobtrusive in-ear headphones						10	342
●	Sennheiser CX880i	83	This in-ear headphone is excellent for the price and the results overall are most impressive							348
●	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

Up to £1,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Line inputs	Phono input	Remote control	Headphone socket	Power output (watts)	Issue number
●	AudioLab 8200A	730	Has detailed sound with good extension and unusually assured midrange	6				60	349
●	Cambridge Audio 840A v2	800	A chunky powerhouse with features aplenty, this amp offers detail and delicacy (silver finish)	8				120	327
●	Denon DCD-15 10AE	900	Offers a taste of high-end excellence at an affordable price	5	MM/MC			70	335
●	Exposure 2010S2	752	Impressive amplifier with preamp output, the 2010S2 was a blind group test winner	6				75	344
●	Marantz KI Pearl Lite	750	Impressive performer with a well-filled phono-amp board and now down to £750 from £920	5				90	344
●	NAD C3226BEE	320	Unusually confident into awkward loads and very assured especially in bass. Treble a touch recessed	7				50	322
●	Rega Mira 3	460	Competent performer that makes an excellent system with the matching Saturn CD player	5				60	344

Above £1,000

●	Audio Note iZero	1,548	A fine performer that provides a catalyst for the Zero system CD player and loudspeakers	4				8	348
●	Bel Canto C5i	1,799	This integrated amp/DAC produces a very energetic sound with plenty of detail	2	MM			60	351
●	Consonance Cyber 10 Sig	1,595	Gorgeous tube amp delivering high-end performance at a realistic price	5				11	345
●	Creek Destiny 2	1,600	Excellent tonal balance and gorgeous, effortless detail	6	opt			116	342
●	Cyrus 8xp d	1,550	Best heard in the context of a Cyrus system, this amp nevertheless has some great qualities	6				80	342
●	Electrocompaniet EC15 Mk II	2,750	Big, characterful and beautifully built amp, with equally big and unforced sound	6				120	349
●	Emillè Ara	2,450	An extremely competent valve amp in its own right with a useful set of features	2				22	343
●	Icon Audio Stereo 60 Mk 3	1,700	An energetic valve amp that offers high power and delivers it with confidence	4				65	346
●	Leema Pulse III	1,495	Offers a clean, smooth sound and has an unusually wide array of inputs	6	MM/MC			70	342
●	Moon 13.3	3,000	Lively and lifelike with a good sense of rhythm and generally good performance	4	opt			10	349
●	Pathos Ethos	3,250	A highly capable two-channel amp that offers great sound, plus a versatile equipment interface	6				100	348
●	Peachtree Audio iDecco	1,000	A well-equipped amp/DAC one-stop solution for iPod and digital audio users	2				40	344
●	Peachtree Audio Nova	1,099	This amp/DAC combi is a fine heart for a computerised desktop system	3				80	341
●	PrimaLuna Prologue Two	1,820	This valve amp has many fine qualities that will endear it to many audiophiles	4				30	346
●	Primare I32	2,200	Gorgeous sound, while the prospect of future upgrades is truly mouth-watering	3				120	344
●	Rega Elicit	1,595	A very good bass, while imaging and detail provide an involving and enjoyable listen	5	opt			80	349
●	Roksan Caspian M2	1,600	This muscular-sounding amplifier is load tolerant and more powerful in practice	6				85	338
●	Unison Research S6	2,990	This valve amp creates a big spacious soundstage with ample depth and width	5				35	347

Pre/power amplifiers

Separate boxes can bring clear advantages



Up to £2,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Preamp	Power amplifier	Line inputs	Phono input	Power output (watts)	Issue number
●	Cambridge Audio Azur 840E/840W	2,000	Enterprising technology delivers a pre/power combo that always sounds detailed and controlled					8 opt	200 309
●	NAD C165BEE/C275BEE	1,550	An alternative to the usual integrated route and one that offers flexibility and fine sound					6 MM/MC	130 336

Above £2,000

●	Audio Research DS450	7,000	Power amp features a very neutral transparent sound with lots of power and low-running temperature					2	450 337
●	Bryston BP16/ 2B SST2	5,700	Preamp and power amp combo offers superb sound quality					6 opt	100 323
●	Cayin SP-30S/SP-40M	3,346	Smooth clean sound quality, this combo is well-balanced and natural-sounding					4 MM	40 343
●	Classé Audio CP-800	4,450	A future-proof and well-built preamp with an excellent USB DAC and range of features					6	350
●	Cyrus Stream XP	2,000	An easy-to-use streaming DAC/preamp with a great combination of sound quality and features					5	346
●	Cyrus Mono X300	2,495	A power amp with a rare combination of speed and resolution					2	300 341
●	Linn Akurate Kontrol/2200	7,550	Reviewed as part of an entire system (streamer and speakers), this combo offers a crisp, open sound					2	200 343
●	Mark Levinson No. 326S	8,000	Excellent USB implementation, natural sound and solid build. Excellent performance levels					7	338
●	Musical Fidelity M6PRE/PRX	4,998	For those wanting a powerful high-end pre/power combo at a realistic price, this is a fantastic package					9	260 340
●	Onkyo P-3000R/M-5000R	4,200	Superb sounding combination with excellent build, flexibility and connection options					6 MM	80 345
●	Quad Elite Pre/Mono	1,500	Clear and well-focused bass, plus a sound with a high degree of simple honesty					6 MM/MC	150 349
●	Trilogy 909/990	10,390	Extremely musical valve-based pairing with hybrid power and beautiful finish					6	100 325

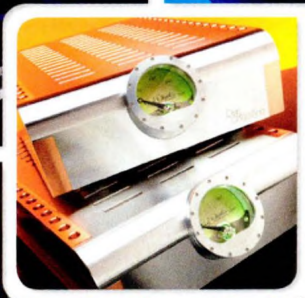
SPECS KEY **LINE INPUTS** Input sockets for source components with a line level output: CD players, DVD players, tape decks, tuners, phono stages etc. **PHONO INPUT** Input sockets and on-board phono stage for a cartridge. Either MM (moving magnet) or MC (moving coil), occasionally both. **REMOTE CONTROL**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

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Streamers/music servers

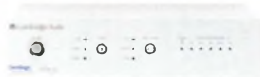


Streaming and music servers are opening up a new dimension in listening pleasure

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Internal drive Wireless	iPod compatible USB	Apple Airplay	Balanced output	Digital output	Issue number
●	Cambridge Audio Sonata MP30	400	A fully featured streamer that sounds remarkably open and works well wirelessly	●	●	●	●	●	349
●	Logitech Squeezebox Touch	240	Possibly the best user interface we've seen on any dedicated digital audio player	●	●	●	●	●	351
●	Marantz NA7004	600	Easy to use, the NA7004 makes getting into streaming simple and all for a great price, too	●	●	●	●	●	351
●	Rotel RDG-1520	795	A great product for those unaccustomed to internet-based audio	●	●	●	●	●	351
●	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 convertors are back and the price has come right down

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Coaxial input	Optical input	USB	Wireless	Headphone socket	Volume control	Issue number
●	Antelope Audio Zodiac Plus	1,895	Remarkable resolving capabilities and more inputs than the majority of DACs	●	●	●	●	●	●	345
●	Benchmark DAC1	950	Very clean sound with plenty of detail and also good rhythmic drive	●	●	●	●	●	●	341
●	Cambridge Audio DacMagic	230	Detail and imaging are very good and a decent feature count only adds to the appeal	●	●	●	●	●	●	331
●	Electrocompaniet PD1	1,250	Great sound and superb build, the PD1 allows you to access music on your computer hard drive	●	●	●	●	●	●	350
●	Furutech GT40	395	The perfect 'missing link' between analogue and the home computer	●	●	●	●	●	●	342
●	Matrix Mini-i	260	Agile, lively and detailed sound with clear and full-bodied bass	●	●	●	●	●	●	349
●	M2 Tech Young DAC	1,200	For affordable ultra-high resolution, this DAC has detailed sound and is full of life and vibrancy	●	●	●	●	●	●	350
●	NuForce DAC9	1,095	A very capable DAC with good input and output provision	●	●	●	●	●	●	350
●	Rega DAC	498	A little stunner, combining genuinely high-end sound with a good feature set	●	●	●	●	●	●	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	●	●	●	●	●	●	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				Stranded	Solid core	Copper	Silver	Digital cable type	Issue number
Badge	Product	Price	Comments						
●	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	●	●	●	●		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 4PR	65	Many high-end virtues at a budget price, including a well-judged bass and sweet extended treble	●	●	●	●		349
●	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 Stream	6	Packs a punch when needed and the detail is good	●	●	●	●		349

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

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Size: width, height, depth (cm)
 Floorstander
 Ease of drive
 Bass from (1/2)
 Free space
 Close to wall
 Issue number

Up to £1,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Size: width, height, depth (cm)	Floorstander	Ease of drive	Bass from (1/2)	Free space	Close to wall	Issue number
●	Acoustic Energy Radiance 1	600	Limited bass, power handling and dynamics, but exceptional mid-to-treble voicing	18.5,32,25		A	33	●	●	325
●	Acoustic Energy Neo V2	700	Lots of box, this speaker produces a coherent and engaging sound	20.3,120,30	●	A		●	●	348
●	Amphion Helium 410	600	Speaker combines exceptional clarity and timing with a solid build	13.2,25.9,22		A	60	●	●	351
●	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
●	Boston Acoustics A 360	720	A very cohesive and entertaining speaker with a wonderfully musical and tonally even performance	34.5,106,27.4	●	A		●	●	349
●	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
●	Cambridge Audio S30	130	At its best with energetic, rhythmic music, this bookshelf speaker has class-leading bass	16,22.6,23.5					●	347
●	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
●	EB Acoustics EB2	669	Excellent value speaker, its composite enclosure gives a very clean and neutral sound	22.5,45,30		A	64	●	●	341
●	Elipson Planet L	600	Well built and clever design, this is a fine-sounding speaker with many likeable qualities	40.5,42.3,42.8		A	48	●	●	350
●	Epos Epic 5	750	Excellent aesthetic and lively, involving sound, this is a superb performer	28.6,98,38		A		●	●	347
●	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	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 2010	115	The sheer cleanliness of this speaker's sound is astonishing	15,23.4,20.3					●	347
●	Q Acoustics 1020i	140	Outstanding value, t smooth well-balanced and lively sound makes a fine communicator	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
●	Roth Audio 0Li10	100	An even-handed bookshelf loudspeaker with very good upper-bass energy	15.3,19,9,17.8					●	347
●	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	19.5,105,32.5	●	A-		●	●	340
●	Triangle Color	899	Excellent build, with strong and evenhanded sonics	18.8,96.5,27.5	●	A		●	●	349
●	Wharfedale Diamond 10.0	130	A strikingly energetic bookshelf speaker that's notably communicative with voices	14.5,23.6,16.5					●	347
●	XTZ 99.26	670	Astonishing value for money, this is a very talented performer with well-recorded music	24.4,39.9,35.2					●	348

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	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
●	Audio Note Zero AZ-Two	1,294	A sensitive and immediate-sounding speaker and tested as part of the Zero system	25,90,30		A		●	●	348
●	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	16.5x96x28	●	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	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
●	DALI IKOM 7 MkII	1,669	With a wide dynamic range, this speaker offers high performance at a realistic price	20x117x36.4	●	A		●	●	348
●	Dynaudio DM3/7	1,299	Sound has a fine overall balance and impressive bass weight	20.4,96,27.5	●	A		●	●	345
●	Focal Chorus 826W LE	1,879	Focal has turbo-charged the 826 resulting in lots of energy, excitement and fine detail	28.2,103.8,37.5	●	A		●	●	330
●	Focal Electra 1027 Be	4,399	Outstanding mid and top with fine delicacy, low coloration, but lacks some bass grip and drive	26.5,111,35	●	A-	25	●	●	276
●	Free FS1	3,500	An elegant design with the minimum of wiring. Wireless with Sonos or Airport Express	16,87,27	●	ACT	35	●	●	301
●	Gamut Phi5	3,040	Lovely discreet floorstander has excellent sound and several very clever engineering touches	17,100,24	●		20	●	●	305
●	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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Stereo speakers (continued)

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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	30,25,2,23.2	●	A	26	●	●	317
●	Jamo R 907	6,600	Arguably the more 'chummy' of Jamo's dipole flagships, powerful bass and open midrange	44,118,9.7	●	A	30	●	●	317
●	KEF Blade	20,000	With its wide dynamics and good imaging, this is a stylish performer	36.3,159,54	●	A	40	●	●	351
●	Kudos X2	1,350	Attractive presentation alongside a lively sound makes for an involving experience	16.6,78,20.6	●		27	●	●	337
●	Linn Akurate 242	7,300	Wide, smooth high-frequency dispersion, with excellent sound	21,100,38	●			●	●	343
●	Magico V2	18,000	High pricing derives this speaker's superb painstaking engineering & impressive performance	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	20.6,99.8,31.8	●	A	25	●	●	321
●	Monopulse 42A	1,995	Oddball styling, fine bass-to-mid balance and dynamics and superb voice coherence	26,110,25	●	A	25	●	●	302
●	Monitor Audio Gold GX200	2,300	A stylish speaker free from boxiness with wide dynamic range	17,99,30	●	A	25	●	●	349
●	Mordaunt-Short Perf 6 LE	4,799	Striking moulded enclosure minimises coloration, overall balance is smooth, neutral and open	24,115,43	●	A	22	●	●	308
●	Neat Momentum 3i	1,790	Sounds bigger than it looks, with good coherence and an impressively wide dynamic range	22,38,27	●	A	23	●	●	302
●	Opera Callas	3,195	Technically innovative multi tweeter system, this is a grown up and articulate performer	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	291,56.5,42.5	●	A	37	●	●	320
●	PMC GB1i	1,525	Fine voice reproduction, overall agility and well-judged balance	15.5,87,23.4	●	A	40	●	●	347
●	PMC FB1i	2,100	A floorstander that boasts impressive bass extension and a smooth sweettop end	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
●	Quadral Aurum Altan VIII	1,570	This speaker has a warmth that belies its size and a very laid-back character	22.2,40.5,34.6	●	A	52	●	●	350
●	ProAc Studio 140 Mk2	1,690	Headroom and high sensitivity are an encouragement to play it loud	19,104,28	●	A		●	●	347
●	Rega RS7	1,685	Lively and transparent with superior dynamic range	24.6,98.8,34.6	●	A		●	●	347
●	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	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	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	27.5,4.5,32.5	●	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 Sttaf	1,695	This speaker delivers good scale with a fine midband	16,85,24.2	●	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	28,130,45		A	35	●	●	325
●	Wilson Benesch Curve	5,383	Much (but not all) of the ACT's performance in a much more compact and affordable package	23,91,37	●	A	28	●	●	254
●	Wharfedale Opus	1,500	Great material value and a solid, if bright and forward sound. Has great loudness potential	26,100.5,41	●	A	23	●	●	314
●	Yamaha Soavo 2	1,200	Cunningly crafted with a beautiful balance that always sounds lively, open and involving	22,38,35		A	28	●	●	296
●	Zu Essence	3,750	Realism and communication skills are more than compensation for balance shortcomings	30.5,125,30.5	●	A	25	●	●	327

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

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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 Welded	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
●	Pro-Ject Ground It	255	A very simply designed isolation base, with is very effective when reducing vibration		50,40	5	MDF 351
●	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 Seismic Sink	400	Pricey platform, that makes an obvious difference to any turntable's performance		50,40		Steel 351

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 Filled	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.

HFC TOP PICKS



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 Seismic Sink Platform £400

Made of steel, this platform makes any turntable immune to the effects of floor-borne vibration, as well as producing noticeable improvements to CD

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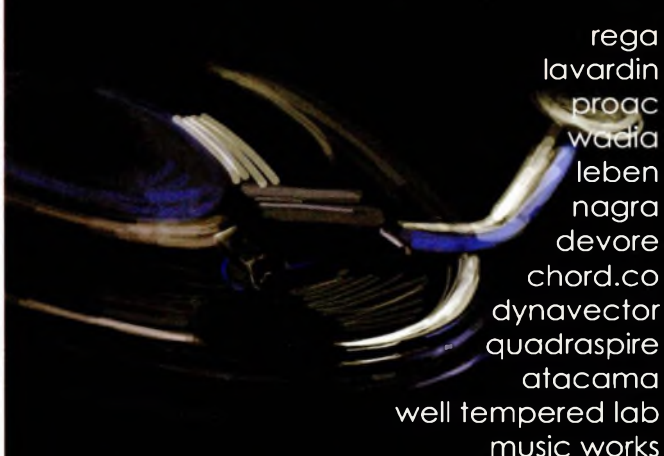
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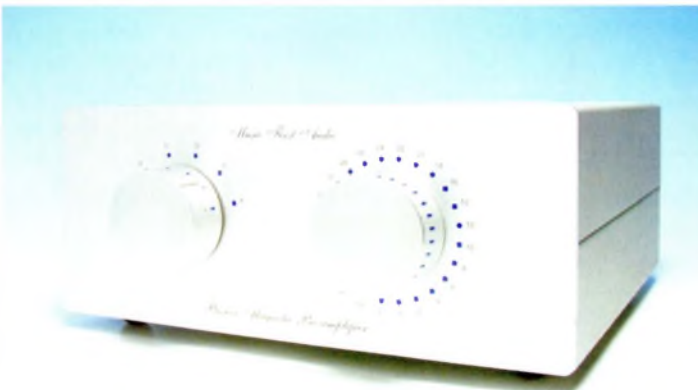
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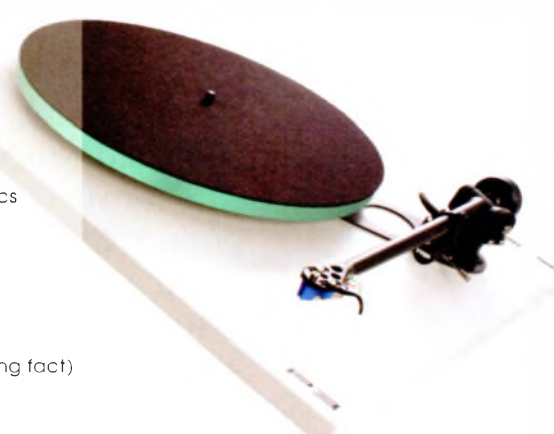
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2011's best accessories

Richard Black, HFC's Technical Consultant, looks back at the best accessories, gadgets and add-ons of 2011

In our monthly *Mini-Test* and from time to time in the rest of the magazine, we review more items under the broad heading of 'accessories' than any other category. That means that more of them missed out on our Awards, and some of them impressed us considerably. It's a comically varied bunch, but the following items do have one important thing in common: for a relatively small sum of money they can, in one way or another, enrich your musical life.

We'll start with a couple of items that are really full-on hi-fi components, though not aimed at any audiophile's main system. Bowers & Wilkins has made many fine speakers over the decades, but few have impressed us quite as much as the £400 MM-1 (HFC 342). It's a miniature model and at first looks a little expensive, but it conceals some clever electronics: not just an amplifier but also a DAC (USB input). With beautifully clear sound on offer, it's a computer-audio delight.

For the more style-conscious, the £395 Ferguson Hill FH007 (HFC 342) desktop horn speaker system is just achingly desirable and it sounds more than merely decent, too. Again active, it brings some real sonic excitement to the office or computer room.

Audio sources are getting smaller all the time and many non-audiophiles use their portable as a primary source and store all in one. If you're inclined that way, even the most doctrinaire anti-monopolist can hardly deny that £249 Apple's iPod Touch (HFC 340) does a mighty fine job. Touch-screen control, once experienced, is something few would wish to forego and juicy sound merely adds to the aesthetic and functional attractions.

And, of course, iPods are uniquely well supported in terms of docks and so on. The arrival of digitally interfaced docks has made the use of an iPod as a main source all the more appealing: one of the best is the £80 Pure I-20 (HFC 342), a great way of getting pure (sorry!) digits from the iPod, converting them in the I-20 or sending them on to your favourite DAC.

Don't forget vinyl

Let's not leave vinyl out in the cold. The £80 Ortofon 2M Red cartridge (HFC 345) is a fine little transducer, with loads of life and energy – the perfect thing for getting the most enjoyment out of treasured vinyl or new finds from the charity shop. As a moving-magnet design it is compatible with any amp with a phono input and it makes little concession to dearer moving-coil types.

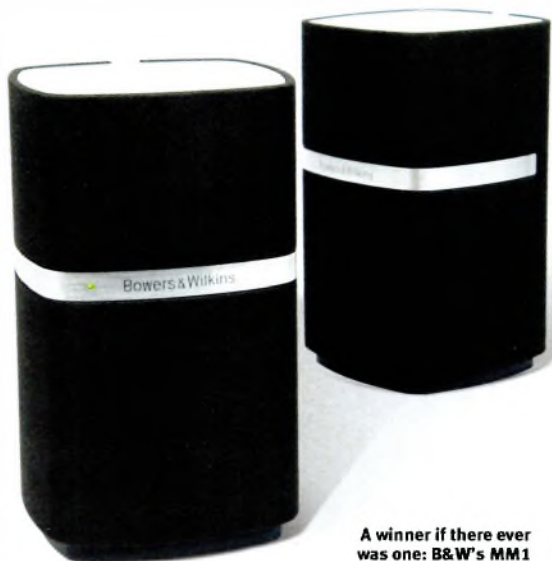
Vinyl is particularly susceptible to dirt, but experienced audiophiles know better than to let that put them off. Various specialist LP-cleaners exist and we were particularly impressed with the £80 Spin-clean (HFC 350). Requiring no power supply, taking up little space and quick and easy to use, it's just the thing. In the same issue, we also commended the £42 Caig Audio-Video Survival Kit, with its handy collection of potions and swabs for cleaning all kinds of electrical connections. And as anyone who's done it will confirm, cleaning corrosion from connectors reaps immediate and obvious benefits in terms of sound.

Some of the most useful accessories simply make a mundane task less of a chore, and in that category we would put the £40 iDAPT charger (HFC 341). As more and more devices (portable music players, phones, remote controls) become reliant on rechargeable batteries, the task of keeping track of the various chargers gets more tiresome. iDAPT charges practically anything and is a lot harder to lose than a nameless 'wall wart'.

Valve enthusiasts know only too well that valves can be fickle. A way of testing them is useful both for optimising performance and giving peace of mind. Moth's £299 Tube Imp (HFC 341) brings precise testing of valve parameters to the home user, safely and flexibly. It also handles most of the common audio valve types.

Finally, we've learned that Firestone Audio's range of miniature components is always worth a good listen and none more so than the £195 Cute Beyond headphone amp (HFC 344). Capable of driving practically any headphone, this device really helps get the most from your personal sounds and is devastatingly revealing. ●

A comically varied bunch, for a relatively small sum of money they can, in one way or another, enrich your musical life



A winner if there ever was one: B&W's MM1



RICHARD BLACK

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

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