



Headmasters

On test: top headphones from AKG, Audio Technica, Beyerdynamic and Sennheiser

Yamaha TC-800GL

The wedge-shaped wonder that kicked off the high-end tape craze



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

www.hifichoice.co.uk

Issue No. 355

February 2012

£3.99

Boxing clever

Can style systems make the hi-fi grade? We hear the best from Arcam, Aura, Cyrus, Elipson, Myryad and Rotel

Two's company

Jolida's hybrid integrated amp unites tubes and solid-state for a seriously special sound

The Chinese way

We visit the oriental hi-fi museum that's full of eastern promise

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top bits of kit tested, including Audiolab, Audiosmile, Grado, Guru and more...



Budget esoterica

TEAC's new CD-3000/AI-3000 CD player/amp combo offers high-end sonics for modest money



Cloudbusting

The sky's the limit for Apple's iTunes Match subscription music service

THERE'S ONLY ONE THING YOU WON'T FIND IN A **MAGICO** SPEAKER. COMPROMISE.

*'The smoothest, most detailed, least
mechanical-sounding speaker I've heard'*

Stereophile (Q5)

'This has to be the best speaker in the world'

Hi-Fi+ (Q5)

*'It sounds so much like the real thing it will take your
breath away'*

The Absolute Sound (Q5)

*'This speaker is wholly remarkable in just about
every sense'*

Hi-Fi Choice (Q5)

'Once heard, the Q3 experience is not easily forgotten'

Hi-Fi News (Q3)

Magico's extraordinary Q5 loudspeaker is rigorously designed to leave absolutely nothing to chance. Every detail of this meticulously engineered tour de force has been researched, analysed and deconstructed to ensure it delivers the purest, most natural sound possible – wonderfully expressive yet unerringly accurate.

Magico's supreme attention to detail ensures each speaker utilises the very best materials: machined entirely from aluminium and brass, the enclosure's combination of mass and stiffness forms the bedrock of the Q5's undiluted, distortion-free sound. The MBe-1 Beryllium dome tweeter reaches far beyond the bounds of human hearing, while the bass and midrange cones combine layers of Magico's proprietary Nano-Tec™ carbon fibre composite with a Rohacell core to push dynamic sound to the limits. The speaker's simple, elegant exterior belies the complexity of its construction – each pair of Q5s takes nearly a week to build.

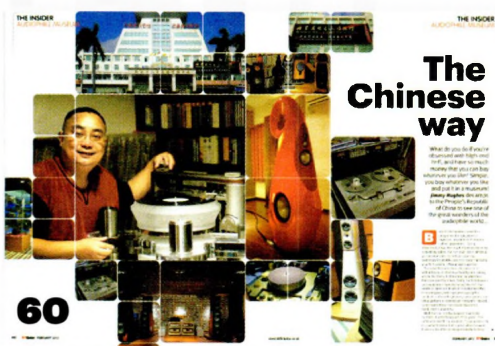
The result of this unstinting engineering excellence is unequivocal mastery across the entire audio spectrum; a complete absence of compromise that brings music to life with effortless, unbound realism. So, too, the Q5's new siblings: the smaller floorstanding Q3 and standmount Q1. Exceptional sound born from superior technology and engineering – Magico pushes the boundaries to deliver, perhaps, the finest loudspeakers ever made.



M
MAGICO

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BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS



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



RECOMMENDED:
Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance



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



Thirty years ago, if you'd asked me what the world's favourite hi-fi brand would be in the new millennium, I'd never have answered with the words 'Bang & Olufsen'. Nowadays though, that's a pretty realistic reply.

Certainly in terms of the average buyer, this marque is the epitome of high-end high fidelity. When next week's lottery winner collects his or her millions, it's odds on that they'll be at the B&O store faster than you can say 'rollover week'. Maybe only that new BMW 3-series convertible will show up on their credit card sooner, alongside an iPad 2 for every family member!

And why not? B&O make quality products; beautifully styled, superbly packaged and well-engineered, too. But still many in the 'real hi-fi' industry are strangely sniffy about the concept – for them, such a customer-led approach simply isn't credible. Indeed some purists openly scoff...

Thankfully though, times are changing. A number of specialist hi-fi makers have finally discovered they can sell to real people, and all they have to do is design their products around the needs of music listeners, not hi-fi hobbyists. The result is a new generation of compact single-box 'style systems' wearing brand names normally associated with serious separates.

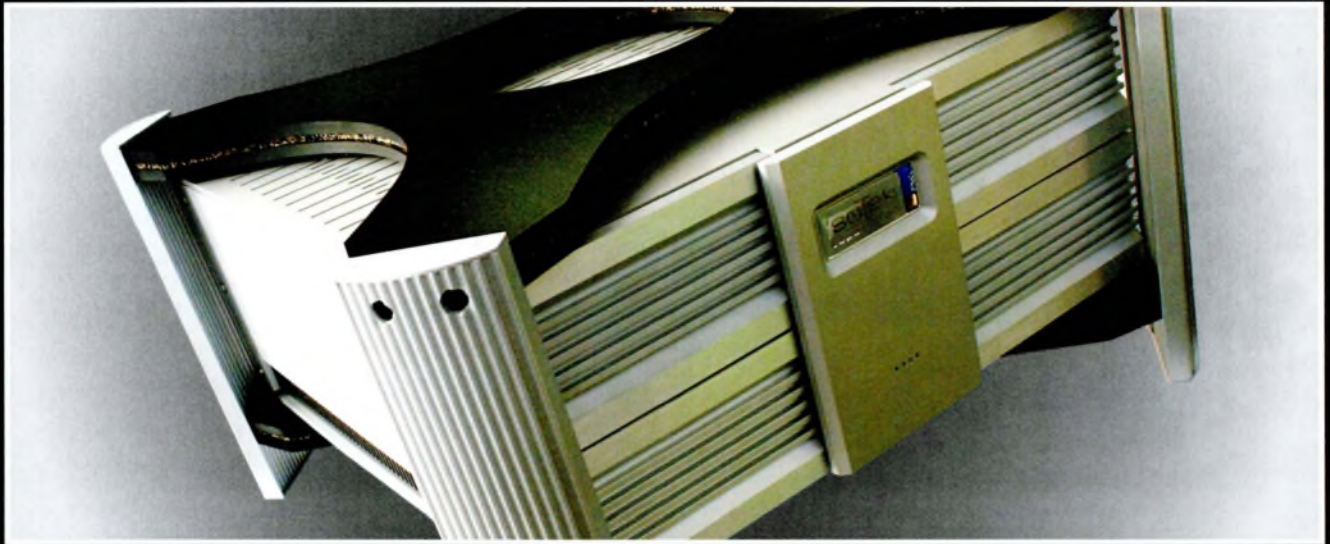
Some purists recoil in horror. "What a sell-out," they say! But surely hi-fi is about unlocking the beauty of music to as many people as possible? These new little boxes do just this. Turn to page 22 to find out how we got on with six of the best designs. Several offered surprisingly serious sonics as well as high style – so yes, you can almost have it all.

David Price Editor
david.price@hifichoice.co.uk



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IsoTek[®]

The arrival of Super Titan (30kg) heralds the start of a new high-end range of power optimisation components called Ultra Reference. It takes the Titan blueprint and enhances every element of its design to deliver a new benchmark in the field of mains conditioning for high-performance audio and AV systems. Visit www.jordanacoustics.co.uk for more details.

art
loudspeakers



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e-mail: bourne-mouth@jordanacoustics.co.uk

address: *Unit 2 - The Old Cart Building, Parley Court
Barns, Parley Green Lane, Hurn, Bournemouth, BH23 6BB*
Open: *Tuesday - Saturday. Closed Monday.*

website:

www.jordanacoustics.co.uk

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telephone:

01592 744 779

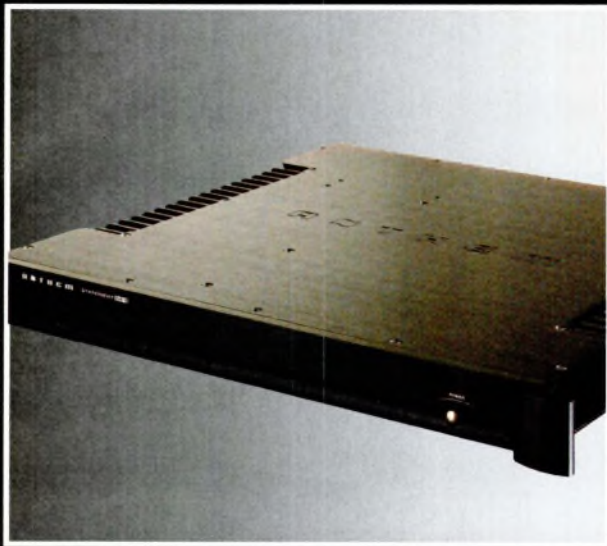
e-mail: glenrothes@jordanacoustics.co.uk

address: *20-22 Cadham Centre, Glenrothes
Fife, KY7 6RU*
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part exchange* ▶ large selection of used items ▶ home demonstrations*



Anthem, who are currently making massive waves in the high-end AV market, have developed a truly show stopping product in the Statement M1 monos. Resolution, speed, transparency and imaging are all truly World Class.

A N T H E M



A simple and elegantly unit that is an absolute breeze to operate. The colour screen is extremely clear and makes navigation very simple from any of the seven available input sources! As an all round digital solution, the CLiC delivers high performance and sheer convenience all-in-one.

MUSICAL FIDELITY



QUADRASPIRE
raising the performance



ADAM
PROFESSIONAL AUDIO



McIntosh
LEGENDARY PERFORMANCE

*subject to conditions

We are specialists in World Class Audio Systems

Focusing solely on the finest audio products available today, our portfolio has been chosen very carefully. We believe strongly in offering products that you want rather than just ones that we happen to have. Whether you prefer valve or solid-state, CD to vinyl, soft-dome or ribbon, Jordan Acoustics have 'cherry-picked' only the very best. Combine this with our vast experience and industry leading after-sales service and you've got yourself one of the finest high-end consultancies on the planet!

Building a true high-end system is not about collecting brands based on reviews. It is about finding a true synergy between components that sound magical together. That palpable reproduction, full of dynamics and realism just how the original artist intended. Fingers on frets, breathing of vocalists, the tautness of a drum skin... the devil is in the detail. **That's why we love great hi-fi and that's exactly why you should give us a call.**



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Never miss an issue – turn to p51 for our latest subs offer

Second coming

Claro's new Clarity Dual turntable offers super sound, fine finish and twin tonearm functionality.

David Price takes a sneak peak...

PRICE: £3,730
AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: 01423 799933
WEB: CLARO.CO.UK



Claro is, in our view, one of the best kept secrets of the turntable world. A small British manufacturer, it is better known *inside* the hi-fi industry for the excellence of its metalworking, which it subcontracts to other companies. The Clarity09 was Claro's first ever deck, which won many friends when it appeared several years ago. Since then the company has been working on a high-end version, the Clarity Dual. This new £3,720 machine also sports an optional high-end power supply for £1,920 extra.

The Dual is essentially a Clarity09 with extensive detail improvements, such as better arm-mounting arrangements, new adjustable feet, thicker 95mm platter, a superior anodised

It's essentially a Clarity09 with extensive detail improvements

finish, better motor mounting, a new ON/OFF switch and the option of a speed control box which filters mains power. There's also a revised main bearing and – significantly – two arm mounts, which explains the deck's new 'Dual' appellation. *Hi-Fi Choice* will be running an exclusive review soon...



SPOTLIGHT

WHEN TWO TONEARMS ARE BETTER THAN ONE...

The Clarity Dual's twin tonearm plates mean you can run two arms and cartridges at the same time (for example one conventional arm and one unipivot, and/or a moving-coil cartridge and a moving magnet), offering a different type of sound, should you wish. This feature was very popular with high-end turntables of the nineteen seventies, but seems to have fallen by the wayside since.

Virtual Reality?

FOLLOWING an article that recently appeared on an online music magazine (side-line.com), rumours are rife that some major labels plan to abandon the CD format completely by the end of 2012. It is claimed that CDs will only then exist as limited editions, with downloads taking over the lion's share of sales – via iTunes, Amazon and other portals. While the article insists on the veracity of its insider sources, EMI, Universal and Sony Music all declined to comment, so it's not an official position.

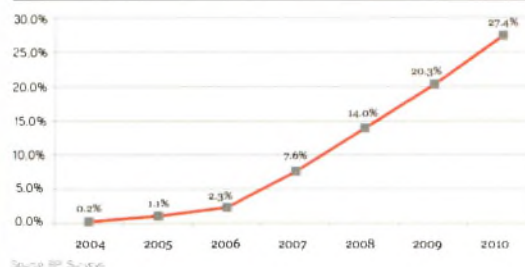
This story certainly fits in with the direction of travel for music sales, which is up for digital downloads and down for physical CDs. The British Phonographic Institute (bpi.co.uk) reports that music downloads are continuing to increase as a proportion of total sales income. However, it makes less sense when you remember that CDs still form over two-thirds of UK music sales.

The most recent industry survey (year ending 2010) shows that digital's share increased to 27.4 per cent of turnover, 7.1 per cent up from 2009, but the BPI notes that, "it is clear that physical format sales still account for the lion's share of industry revenue." UK singles sales on disc dropped 36.4 per cent from 2009 to 2010, whereas single downloads increased 23.1 per cent. The figures for albums are 19 per cent down on disc, 22.1 per cent up for downloads.

Since 2001, the total revenue for physical media has dropped from £1,232bn to £598m, whereas online has gone up from zero to £188bn. So while Sideline's article is an interesting talking point, right now reports of the silver disc's imminent demise are exaggerated.

The true picture is one of lower total sales, large drops in physical media sales, and a small but steady growth in online digital. Other small niches of digital show growth too, such as subscriptions from services such as Napster, eMusic and Spotify premium, which increased by 38 per cent to more than £16m. Vinyl is growing too – LP sales increased by 29.5 per cent to £3.5m. "This is clearly still a very small part of the albums market (less than one per cent), but is very much a sustainable niche market", says the BPI.

Digital's Share of Industry Revenues



T+A

Completely new and uncompromisingly audiophile
E-Series *balanced*



The MUSIC PLAYER *balanced* is simply THE audiophile music source. As well as featuring the latest generation of 192 / 24 kHz Streaming Client (LAN, WLAN, USB media storage devices, iPod including control system), a superb 32-bit double-mono DAC, an audiophile CD player, high-quality FM tuner and five digital SP/DIF inputs (coax at 192 kHz), it's fully balanced design offers the very best in audiophile performance right through to the XLR outputs.

The POWER PLANT *balanced* is the ideal integrated amplifier partner for any audiophile source. It's fully balanced design and T+A developed switching output stages deliver a lively and compelling sound capable of a massive 500 Watts. When partnered with the MUSIC PLAYER *balanced*, users will enjoy class-leading performance no matter how their music content is stored.

Hand built in Germany, the E-Series *balanced* from T+A is available in the UK now.

For more information or to arrange a demonstration, please contact:



acoustic brands ltd

Acoustic Brands Limited (ABL) Ltd.

Tel - 07917 431 280

Email - sales@acousticbrandslimited.com

Web - www.acousticbrandslimited.com

Freak Out

Premium quality conrad-johnson USB DAC just launched...

A digital-to-analogue convertor compatible with the operating systems on all modern MACs, PCs and Linux computers makes its debut from conrad-johnson.

The new HD3 (high-definition digital decoder) features an asynchronous data interface that, according to the manufacturer, virtually eliminates jitter.

Designed to compete with some of the very best audiophile-quality units on the market, the HD3 will decode up to 24-bit/96k music files. It can be connected to any available USB port on your computer and there's no need to install additional drivers before use, the company says.

Available directly from its UK distributor Audiofreaks, the HD3 is on sale now.



PRICE: £1,995 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 020 8948 4153 **WEB:** CONRAD-JOHNSON.COM



Metal machine music

WITH THE ONWARD MARCH of digital downloads, could this be one of the last mass market CD transports? Cyrus' new £750 CD Transport incorporates the latest version of the company's SE2 CD 'servo engine', which is claimed to be able to read more data 'right first time' from a CD than any other competing system. Despite being based on the popular X series CD XT SE2, the new and fully upgradeable CD transport costs less than half its price, the company says, and is designed to partner one of the matching range of Cyrus XPD DAC-enabled amplifiers, which allow you to connect up to five digital and six analogue devices, effectively giving a fully functional two-box system.

PRICE: £750 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01480 410900
WEB: CYRUSAUDIO.COM



This charming man

VERY SAD NEWS comes that SUPRA cables founder and CEO Tommy Jenving died last November, aged 66. An innovator, inventor and entrepreneur, Tommy is described by his peers as having a 'big heart and a sharp mind'.

A pleasant and popular guy with a high profile in the hi-fi industry, Tommy's philosophy was to make 'no-nonsense design' products using highest quality materials.

Tommy formed SUPRA Cables in 1976, effectively kick-starting a global cable revolution in product connectivity. Innovations included the 'first' dedicated speaker cable; the SUPRA Classic 2.5.

Tommy was also the recipient of numerous hi-fi awards, including the 2008 Arken Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Blue fun day

Another multi-media speaker joins the fray...

Blue Aura's new multi-media speaker fills the gap between computer speakers and home audio, it's claimed.

The WS30i is compatible with your iPod, TV or computer and includes an integral amplifier, plus all the cables necessary to hook it up to any digital audio source.

With 25W per channel and a claimed frequency range of 55Hz to 20kHz, the WS30i is available in black or white and includes a free desktop stand.

PRICE: £179 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01480 477738 **WEB:** BLUEAURA.CO.UK



CYRUS

Explore your music

The Cyrus streaming platform provides the perfect solution for all music lovers. This new range of streaming music players provide you with immediate access to all of your favourite tunes and albums, plus you can listen to literally thousands of different internet radio stations from across the world; all in true hi-fi quality.

Purchase a Cyrus streaming music player during August and September to receive a free NAS drive and network switch. These thoughtfully chosen products will release the full potential of the n-remote control so you will have a host of options in which to browse your music, all at the touch of a button. Music this convenient has never sounded so good.



free
NAS Drive
&
Accessories

Buy a Cyrus Stream XP, Stream X or Streamline during August and September 2011 and you will receive a free NAS drive and network switch. This package provides everything you need to play high quality music. Visit a retailer today!

- Lintone Audio 7-11 Park Lane, Tyne & Wear • Tel. 0191 4774167
- Fanthorpes 6 Hepworth Arcade, Hull • Tel. 01482 223096
- Moorgate Acoustics Ltd 184 Fitzwilliam Street, Sheffield • Tel. 0114 2756048
- Frank Harvey Hi Fi 163 Spon Street, Coventry • Tel. 02476 525200
- Nottingham Hi Fi Centre 116-122 Alferton Road, Nottingham • Tel. 0115 9786919
- Audiovation 4 Cross Church Street, Huddersfield • Tel. 01484 424000
- Vickers Hi Fi Ltd 8 Concorde Park, York • Tel. 01904 691600
- Bartletts Hi Fi 175-177 Holloway Road, London • Tel. 0207 6072148
- Sevenoaks (Holborn) 144 Grays Inn Road, London • Tel. 0207 8377540
- Sevenoaks (Sevenoaks) 109-113 London Road, Kent • Tel. 01732 459555
- Sevenoaks (Tunbridge Wells) 28/30 St Johns Road, Kent • Tel. 01892 531543
- Sevenoaks (Witham) 1 The Grove Centre, Essex • Tel. 01376 501733
- Southport Hi-Fi 8-10 Princes Street, Merseyside • Tel. 01704 536901



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.



Going for a spin

Take your SEAT for some in-car entertainment with a difference!

The vinyl revival continues apace with news of a special turntable that's surely *the* must-have accessory for the modern analogue-addicted motorist!

Originally popular in the mid-1950s, for drivers who couldn't bear to be parted from their precious record collections, the 'in-car phonograph' has been given a distinctly 21st Century makeover by car manufacturer SEAT...

The all-new Highway Hi-Fi replaces one of the passenger seats and has, says SEAT, 'undergone robust testing (on one of London's steepest speed bumps and oldest cobbled streets) to ensure that it's impossible to jolt the stylus off the record'.

A series of rails, linear bearings and damped shock absorbers ensures that every music journey is a smooth one, the company says. Not at your local SEAT dealer just yet...



Living colour

New Loewe tabletop hi-fi system just out...

Using a tabletop music system has never been easier, thanks to the launch of the new Soundbox from Loewe, the company says.

The Soundbox combines a slot-loading CD player, iPod/iPhone dock and FM radio in one easy-to-use unit. There's even a clock and alarm for bedroom use.

The soundbox features two full-range speakers and twin digital stereo amplifiers. A front-mounted display tracks information from CDs and docked devices, plus RDS data from FM radio stations.

Connectivity includes USB and line inputs, plus a headphone socket. Meanwhile, interchangeable top-mounted inlays allow you to customise the casework to suit your home decor from a wide choice of colours.



PRICE: £449 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 020 7368 1100
WEB: LOEWE-UK.COM

Correction to news item in HFC 354

In issue 354, we published a news piece about two mains conditioning products from ISOL-8 – the MiniSub Wave and MiniSub Axis [pictured] – which we mistakenly attributed to IsoTek. We wish to make it clear that IsoTek and ISOL-8 are entirely separate companies, and these products have no

connection whatsoever with IsoTek. Although IsoTek originated a component called the MiniSub in 2002, this has since been superseded by the EVO3 Aquarius. IsoTek's technologies can only be found in IsoTek products. We'd like to extend our apologies to both ISOL-8 and IsoTek for any inconvenience caused.



Stream come true

PRICE: FROM £3,530
AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: 0500 888 909
WEB: LINN.CO.UK

Linn's next generation digital streaming products have just been announced, offering greater connectivity and flexibility...

Linn has a brand new range of digital streaming products out for the new year. The new DSM systems, "make it easy to connect everything you listen to, getting you away from your computer and bringing music back to the heart of the home", the company says.

The range comprises the Majik DSM, Akurate DSM and Klimax DSM; all offer network music playback of FLAC, WAV, ALAC, MP3, WMA, AIFF, AAC and OGG audio formats with up to 24-bit/192 kHz native sample rate. There's also

a range of digital inputs to give upsampling DAC and preamplifier functionality.

The Klimax DSM and Akurate DSM also offer HDMI inputs to play back SACD and DVD-Audio discs digitally (although SACD content will be downsampled to 176.4kHz or 88.2kHz PCM, and multi-channel audio down-mixed to stereo). The entry-level Majik DSM doesn't have HDMI connectivity, but does sport a two-channel stereo 100W power amplifier built-in, effectively letting it work as a complete one-box system.

Linn's new DSM systems work on a standard home network, so users can run shared or separate music libraries, and everyone can choose music using their preferred application, whether it's iTunes or Linn's own Kinsky, which is an elegant and powerful front end. There's a choice of either black or silver finishes, and prices start at £3,535 for the Majik DSM.

For more information contact your local retailer by visiting Linn's new website, phoning their helpline or emailing helpline@linn.co.uk.



NEWS IN BRIEF

• **WESCS** Banjo headphones come in an eye-catching range of bright colours, sport 40mm driver units and luxuriously cushioned noise-reducing earpads fashioned from faux leather. There's an in-line mic for hands-free operation with a mobile phone. Weighing 115g, the lightweight design and adjustable headband is claimed to ensure comfort over long periods. Normally £69.99, they're currently £39.99 for a limited period only. iheadphones.co.uk.



• **BOSTON ACOUSTICS'** new SoundWare 'S' 5.1 home cinema speaker system sports five 130x130mm satellite speakers partnered with a 254mm ported subwoofer, rated at 200W. Price is £509.90, with an additional pair of speakers £139.90 extra. Click on bostona.eu.



• **MUSIC FIRST AUDIO** is having its first International Showcase in Amsterdam on January 28th and 29th, 2012 at the Radisson Blu hotel, Amsterdam, Holland. The company says it's an occasion for audiophiles to bring their own music, and even equipment, to test and compare with MF's well-respected range of transformer preamplifiers. "We only ask that prospective visitors contact us to let us know when they're coming so we can be sure we're ready", says spokesman Harry O'Sullivan. For more details call 01424 858261 or click on mfaudio.co.uk.

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Two's company

Question: when's a tube amplifier not a tube amplifier? Answer: when it's also solid-state. *David Price* meets Jolida's hybrid JD1501BRC...

Were the Jolida JD1501BRC ever to be dug up in some great excavation a thousand years from now, hi-fi archeologists would be able to date it very accurately as being 'early twenty-first century'. The identifying marks are all clearly visible. First, it's a hi-fi separate, not an all-in-one. Second,

it's of the minimalist school, stripped of features like tone controls and filters. And third, it uses both valves and solid-state devices inside.

All of which would tell our ancient audio expert that it came from a very specific moment in the 'early silicon period', where designers were experimenting with antiquated thermionic valves for reasons of

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Jolida JD1501BRC
ORIGIN: China/USA
TYPE: Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT: 15.8kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 430x330x115mm
FEATURES:

- Tube-buffered preamp section
- 100W power amp section
- RCA, XLR and 3.5mm minijack inputs
- ALPs volume control, large toroidal transformer

DISTRIBUTOR: Aired Audio Ltd
TELEPHONE: 01452 385573
WEBSITE: airedaudio.co.uk

sound quality. Were he, by some miracle, able to source the accompanying press release, he'd read that it, 'combines the best of two worlds, a tube preamp with a solid-state power amplifier... smooth silky sound with pace and bass'.

If this very issue of *Hi-Fi Choice* was dug up alongside it, he would quickly find out that – in my view – it does *not* give the best of both worlds. This is because the Jolida sounds neither like a great tube amp nor a top transistor one. Instead, it sounds like precisely what it is – a fusion of the two, which in turn has a completely different and distinctive sonic flavour.

The question then presents itself, is this 'third way' a worthwhile one? I'd say yes. Having experimented with endless permutations of solid-state preamps and tube power amps (and vice versa) over the years, it's definitely true that you can get an interesting sound by bringing the two



POWER



 **JOLIDA**
Stereo Tube Amplifier
Model JD1501BRC

SEL
INPUT
XLR
DVI
C
AUX

tribes together. In my view, Jolida's designer Michael Allen has got his priorities right. The thinking goes that you get the punchy speaker driving ability of solid-state (which is, of course, the bane of tube amps) with some of the sylph-like silkiness of a tube-buffered preamp.

Come together

And so to the detail. The £1,020 Jolida is a fairly sizeable bit of metal. Surprisingly, perhaps, its final assembly and testing is done in the United States, although first line production is in China. The amp has a whiff of the handmade about – it doesn't have the immaculate fit and finish you'd expect from a similarly priced Japanese-made Onkyo, for example. Move the volume control and there's a very slight scraping sound, almost as if the knob has been set too far back on the fascia. It's not a serious criticism, but you can tell the designer's attention has gone elsewhere...

Indeed, you don't have to be Colombo to find out, as one peek through the myriad cooling slots of the top casing shows an

enormous 500VA toroidal transformer, the sort of thing that could pass for an artillery round. I'd wager this takes up much of the weight, as the pressed steel-painted

This hybrid amplifier is a thoroughly modern music maker, with a light, open and airy sound...

casework isn't the thickest around. It's also a little more resonant than I'd like; compare that with the less bell-like alloy shell of the Cyrus 8 integrated, for example, and you'll see what I mean.

Under the hood, we see a pair of Tung Sol 12AX7A tubes working as buffers for the incoming signal, in a passive preamplifier section. The tubes are inexpensive and readily available for around £15 a pop. The company guarantees them for 1,000 hours or six months, and after they've reached the end of their natural life (and the amp's warranty period passed) then

owners might like to try 'rolling' them for something a bit more fancy. This is a big thing amongst tube aficionados, with many believing the expensive (or classic new old stock) ones sound better.

In my own experience of other valve preamps, this is very much the case. The designer Michael Allen says the Tung Sols are, "good for dark speakers and will give a bit more forward middle and high and a strong bass". His own taste is to use new old stock Phillip Miniwatts or Mullards.

A good-quality ALPS volume control is fitted, so Jolida have avoided the temptation to fit bargain-basement components throughout. Downstream is the power amp section, with a generously heatsinked IC power amp output stage putting out a claimed 100W RMS per channel into 8 ohms (see *In Sight* p18). Capacitors are genuine Wima and output chips are National Semiconductor LM3886, two per channel. The rear-mounted speaker sockets feel a little low rent, but everything is tidy and solid enough all the same.



Q&A...

DAVID PRICE SPEAKS TO JOLIDA'S FOUNDER MICHAEL ALLEN.



DP: How did Jolida start?

MA: We started as a family US corporation in 1983. The name is a combination of my cousin's mother's name 'Jo' and my mother's name 'Lida'. In 1983 our business was the design and sales of power transformers and vacuum tubes, both audio and commercial. In 1993, we morphed into the design and sales of vacuum tube amplifiers, hybrid amplifiers and CD players.

DP: Why did you do a hybrid amp?

MA: Three basic reasons. One, there is a segment of the population that wants an amp that provides an aggressive attack on their music which is not readily available in a full tube amp. Second, there is a segment of the population that will never buy a full tube amplifier for a number of assorted reasons. Third, we can produce a hybrid amp at lower price points than a full tube amp at the same power level.

DP: Are you a tube fan?

MA: Definitely! However, I think that solid-state amplifiers are a valid technology and can be extremely good. The cost of a good solid-state amp is usually greater than corresponding tube amps or even hybrid amps.

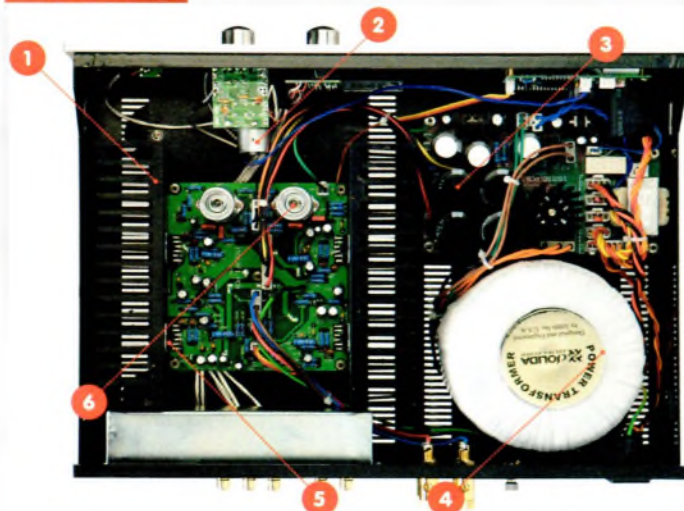
DP: Describe the JD1501's sound!

MA: Powerful, good attack, strong bass, an extended sound stage, and a smooth upper end. I think people who enjoy the attack of a solid-state amp would be satisfied with the 1501 and still enjoy some of the benefits that come with a clean smoother sound.

DP: What's your personal system?

MA: Von SWEIKERT VR 35 speakers, Clearaudio Innovation turntable with the Clearaudio Titanium cartridge, Custom made reel-to-reel tape deck from United Home Audio, Celtic Silver cables, and for the amp, JD 1000RC (full tube). Just put a pair of MBL 126 speakers into the mix for good results. I hear lots of alternative music like Godsmack, Gorillas, Dead Garden and Metallica (all on vinyl), but also like classical music, especially opera.

IN SIGHT



- 1 extensive heatsinking means amp doesn't get hot
- 2 motor-driven ALPS volume potentiometer
- 3 premium Wima power supply capacitors
- 4 chunky 500VA toroidal mains transformer
- 5 National LM3886 power amp module, two per channel
- 6 Tung Sol 12AX7A tubes buffer input in preamp section

ON TEST

Tube preamp stages have been employed in transistorised amps, CD players and outboard DACs for decades and not always to inject some additional 'colour'. So it is here, for while the JD1501 imparts an unusually extended even-order pattern of distortion harmonics these typically amount to just ~0.05% through the midrange up to 10W/80ohm and ~0.2% from 20W up to its limit of 100W/80ohm. Under dynamic, music-like conditions, it's possible to wrestle a full 150W/80ohm

and 175W/40ohm, but as there's a current limit of around 6.6A, this restricts power into very low impedances to just 80W/20ohm and 43W/10ohm.

So the Jolida is still best suited to moderately sensitive speakers that do not present an especially arduous load. That said, one of the benefits of its solid-state power amp is a low 0.03ohm output impedance, ensuring little modification of the overall amp/speaker system response with differences in speaker impedance.

Indeed, the JD1501's frequency response is consistently flat out to -0.4dB/20kHz before rolling off to a sensible -4.8dB at an ultrasonic 100kHz. Less sensible, arguably, is its subsonic bass boost amounting to +11dB at just 5Hz - fortunately the JD1501 has no phono stage or record warps could prove very dramatic! Neither is the amp especially quiet, its extended PSU noise dropping the A-wtd S/N ratio to 78dB (re. odBW), below average but not debilitating. Run-of-the-mill, it is not. **PM**



AT THE PRICE, the Jolida is very hard to fault. Rivals such as the Naim Nait 5i (£850) give a slightly tighter, tauter rendition of rhythms, yet it lacks the Jolida's power and general sense of openness and ease. Cambridge Audio's 840A v2 (£800) gives you a lot more power and facilities, but doesn't quite have the musical flow of the Jolida or the Naim. Both though, it must be noted, are more slickly built and finished.

The amp runs very cool, despite the tubes, which barely get warm.

The fascia is a quarter inch-thick slice of aluminium, with the bare minimum of controls. Switch the Jolida on and an illuminated ring around the volume control flashes for a few seconds, while the protection circuitry remains on. There are three RCA phono inputs, plus a front-mounted 3.5mm minijack and - unusually at this price - XLRs (which I used for this review). Round the back, there are also variable and fixed preamp outputs. The plastic remote wins no prizes, but does the job.

Sound quality

As previously suggested, there's nothing especially 'valve-like' about the Jolida JD1501BRC - you'd never confuse it for a vintage Quad II for example! Rather, it's a thoroughly modern music maker with a light, open and airy nature.

There's little that's remarkable about this amplifier's sound, which itself could be a remarkable thing, as at the £1,000 price point there are a lot of integrations which draw rather too much attention to the way they go about reproducing music, leaving

their grubby fingerprints at the scene of the crime. The Jolida, by contrast, simply gets on with the job in an uncomplicated and enjoyable way.

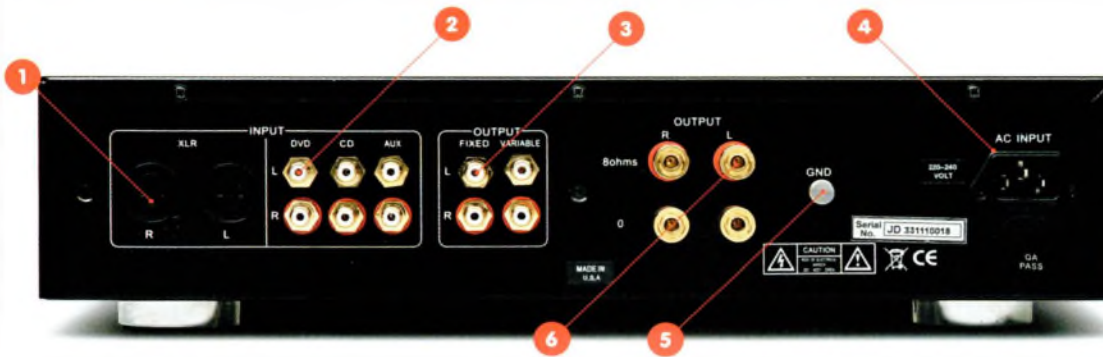
Kicking off with 4hero's *Give In*, and the 1501 set up a wide, expansive soundstage inside which all the elements of the mix flourished. Unlike some all solid-state designs, it doesn't search out individual musical strands and spit them out at you; instead the Jolida is subtle enough to encourage you to listen right into the recording.

I was struck by the large scale of the proceedings, and its zest and zip in the rhythm department - this amplifier doesn't sit around waiting to be asked to get up and boogie. Instead, it carried the song's fat bassline with aplomb, providing generous yet firm foundations for the rest of the musical event.

Across the midband, the Jolida was surprisingly civil - there was none of the nasty screeching some solid-state amplifiers offer up at high volumes, but then again neither was there any obvious sense of listening to an amplifier with tubes in it.

It would be misleading to talk about it being warm and full and fruity sounding, because the Jolida

CONNECTIONS



- 1 XLR inputs, unusual at this price and worth having
- 2 3 pairs RCA phono line inputs; 3.5mm minijack on fascia
- 3 fixed and variable line outputs give preamp flexibility
- 4 stock IEC mains in makes upgrading power leads easy
- 5 ground post, although no phono stage is fitted
- 6 standard speaker binding posts; nothing clever here!

instead has a largely even and uncoloured tonality. Possibly, there's just a smidgen of 'warm sunlight' being shone across the music, rather than the forensic bluey-white light that some rival all solid-state amps provide – but it's only subtle. This is an interesting facet of the Jolida's sound; there's a sense that the amplifier has been subtly voiced to add just the *slightest* euphony. This will surely give added showroom appeal – for example compared to the solid-state Cambridge 840A it will sound sweeter and more sensual to most people's ears, contrasting with the latter's apparently rather clinical tonality. In truth though, you could still argue that the 840A is ultimately the more accurate of the two...

Treble, for example, is clean and extended, with a good deal of bite – yet hi-hat cymbals are never gritty. Steely Dan's *Hey Nineteen* is a veritable audio assault course, with crashing dynamics and lots happening from bottom to top. I was very pleased with the Jolida's muscular bass. It's not going to beat a high-end solid-state power amp, but still it has some 'steel' to it, which gives bass guitar lines real authority. Yet it's not leaden, never slowing to a plod.

Further up and the Jolida bristles with detail, all set in a very wide soundstage. Individual instruments sit firmly in specific locations, and play in an unconstrained and tuneful way. Right up top the song's lovely cymbal work sparkles. True, in absolute terms, treble is slightly vague and diffuse, the amp failing to get right 'inside' every last shimmer of harmonics you hear in a hi hat crash. But considering its price this isn't so much a criticism as an observation; you need to spend hundreds of pounds more to get any useful improvement in refinement.

Impressively, the Jolida carried Donald Fagen's vocals really well. It never sounded nasal (which is a challenge with Fagen's slightly adenoidal tones), yet allowed the

plaintive, slightly world-weary vocal delivery to really hit home. There was an emotional immediacy there which is so often lost by amplifiers of this price. Meanwhile all those rhythmic contortions of the song were handled very skillfully, the JD1501 never falling over its feet when trying to keep up the pace and convey the music's lively dynamic inflections and accenting.

The Jolida succeeds because it offers a flavour that none of its rivals possess...

Moving to some classic jazz, and Herbie Hancock's *The Prisoner* worked beautifully. There's some powerful, expressive trumpet playing on this track which can have me heading for the listening room door on some occasions, but the Jolida never got harsh or uncouth. Ditto the saxophone and flute work, which remained resolutely civilised, the amp catching their syncopations nicely. All this time that big, powerful drum kit was pounding away with relentless energy, and again this amplifier kept a great grip on the proceedings, a testament to its speed and dexterity.

My favourite recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* showed the JD1501 to be a consummate professional, offering up as it did a wide recorded acoustic, inside which orchestral instruments could flourish. Again, its fine tonal quality announced itself, giving a really visceral, tangible quality to the massed strings. My only criticism here would be just a slight lack of very low-level detail and atmosphere to the proceedings, but this wasn't unexpected considering its price.

Likewise, more expensive designs do place instruments in space with greater accuracy – I found the Jolida a touch vague in its location of instruments within the recorded acoustic, preferring to throw out a large 'morass' of sound, rather than tightly defined pinpoints within. Yet again, however, the amp was excused boots because of its modest price.

Conclusion

A genuinely interesting amplifier, this one. The Jolida JD1501BRC succeeds not just because it's a fine sounding £1,000 integrated, but because it offers a subtle flavour that none of its rivals possess. It's not soft, low-powered and syrupy like some of the entry level tube amps at this price, yet nor does it have the matter of fact, mechanical heart of many solid-staters. Instead, it sounds like the good tube-transistor hybrid that it is – open, detailed and punchy, yet smooth and even, too. An interesting take on how to do a mid-price integrated amplifier then, it most certainly does *not* deserve to be buried without a trace! Try to hear it if you can. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

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

OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth, powerful, open sound with fine rhythm; excellent value for money
DISLIKE: So-so finish, resonant casework
WE SAY: Skillfully voiced integrated, with its own distinctively even, musical sound

How many CDs do you own but never play?



Comes with credit card size remote control

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

What's the point in owning hundreds of CDs worth thousands of pounds if you never listen to them? The problem with CDs is that it's quicker to make a cup of coffee than dip into a CD. Try timing how long it takes to pick a CD, load it in the CD player, play a snippet from a track or two, eject it and put it back where it came from. Then there is the problem of finding music. The print on a CD spine is tiny. What if the track is on a compilation CD? What if the CD is in the car? Then there is the clutter. You need to keep your CDs near the player or you won't play them. So you are forced to share your living space with literally hundreds of cheap plastic boxes.

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

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

It saves space and clutter and delivers near immediate access to an entire music collection. JB7 owners rediscover then fall in love with their music again simply because the Brennan makes it so accessible.

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

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

Key features

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



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

The Brennan JB7 is available in Cobalt Blue or Titanium Metallic



FULL MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

If you're not suitably impressed with your Brennan JB7 we'll collect it free of charge and refund you in full. *See copyright message on the Brennan website

The face behind Brennan

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

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

A word about copyright

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



Martin Brennan

ONLY AVAILABLE DIRECT. To order visit www.brennan.co.uk

brennan

How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most rigorous test and measurement regime in the business, here we explain why our verdicts are beyond compare

HOW WE TEST

THIS ISSUE'S BLIND PANEL

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

STEVE REICHERT
JOB: PR MANAGER
ARMOUR HOME ELEC.
WITH NEARLY FORTY years in the business, Armour's PR man is also the 'Golden Ears' for Q Acoustics and QED.



BRADLEY WALTERS
JOB: MANAGING
DIRECTOR OF HI-FI
RACKS LTD
BRADLEY IS A passionate enthusiast of live and recorded music and knows a thing or two about system set up.



TAMRIKO SAKVARELIDZE
JOB: RECORDING
PRODUCER
TAMRIKO'S SHARP hearing is used daily in teaching piano and in producing audio recordings.



Unrivalled group tests

Hi-Fi Choice is the only magazine to offer *Blind-Listening Group Tests*, backed up with an objective lab testing procedure

BLIND-LISTENING TESTS

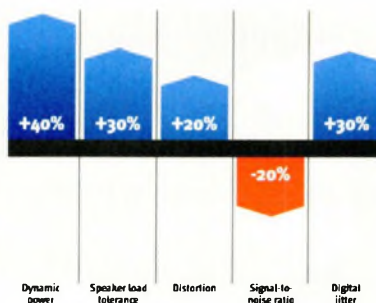
THIS CRUCIAL process, carefully controlled and yet sufficiently relaxed that our listeners do not feel that they're being tested, forms the heart of our Group Test review. Our panel of three listeners are not aware of the brand or price of the product they are listening to, but they are able to choose their own music selection and decide upon the initial listening level at the beginning of the first session.

This level is accurately matched from product to product throughout subsequent sessions so that subjective impressions of 'louder' or 'quieter' sounding separates helps inform us of their inherent character. Regular breaks keep our listeners refreshed while the sessions are

conducted with the minimum of distractions, playing the same programme through each system while they take notes of whatever pleases or bothers them. Our panel are encouraged to discuss their impressions after each session and the consensus, or otherwise, forms the basis of our reported Sound Quality section.

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

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



DYNAMIC POWER

A measure of power up to one per cent distortion under realistic, music-like conditions, using a brief (10msec) transient signal and a model Bohm speaker load.

SPEAKER LOAD TOLERANCE

This indicates how ably the amplifier maintains a given level of performance into progressively lower impedance and difficult speaker loads.

DISTORTION

Rather than quote a single figure for distortion at one frequency and level, this bar value represents a measure of distortion and its consistency across both the whole audio band and the amplifier's entire dynamic range.

S/N RATIO

This a direct representation of the amplifier's A-weighted Signal-to-Noise (S/N) ratio at 1watt output into an idealised Bohm load.

DIGITAL JITTER

Any uncertainty in the timing of the digital code produces digital jitter, which manifests as an insidious form of distortion during digital-to-analogue conversion. The lower the figure the better.



OUR GROUP TESTS

and Lead Review are subject to exhaustive lab testing by Paul Miller using the QC Suite Functional Testing Station (left). Paul has tested more hi-fi equipment than any reviewer in the world, so you know you're in safe hands. We don't publish pages of graphs, but we do understand the importance of transparency. So, readers may view full QC Suite test reports for our key reviews by clicking on the red download button on our website. www.hifichoice.co.uk

LISTENING SYSTEMS

Loudspeakers:

- ATC SCM20
- B&W 803S

Cables:

- Kimber and QED

Equipment supports:

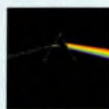
- Hi-Fi Racks and Custom Design

TEST MUSIC

BETTE MIDLER:
SLOW BOAT TO CHINA



PINK FLOYD:
DARK SIDE OF THE MOON



DVORAK:
CARNIVAL OVERTURE



RAYKHELSON:
JAZZ SUITE
(TOCCATA CLASSICS)



Blind-listening Group test

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS £1,200-£1,600

Boxing clever

Can single-box 'style systems' deliver fine sound alongside their beguiling looks?

Richard Black believes they can...

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS are getting ever more popular, and it's not hard to see why. Of course, dedicated gear-heads can never have too much equipment, but many others seemingly have no desire to live their lives surrounded by piles of electronics!

Fair enough, but no audiophile worth his salt will be in a hurry to throw quality to the wind in the name of saving a few square feet of hi-fi rack space.

What's really given the one-box phenomenon legs in recent years has been the fact that an increasing number of these little beauties demonstrably offer real sonic ability – while they may still not *quite* match traditional hi-fi separates, they're now, at least, in the same ball park.

Reasons for this range from the continuing miniaturisation of electronics, to the application of audiophile best practice in the design of these style systems. One thing that's made this possible is the rise in the quality of high-power integrated circuits; several of the units in this group use power ICs for their output, and

modern ones are an order of magnitude better than those of a few years ago in terms of distortion and noise.

Then there's the rise of switch-mode power supplies and switching power amps, used by some of the units on test here. While these don't necessarily save on space, they can help keep things compact by requiring much less heatsinking and thermal management.

The latest one-box systems no longer need any special pleading to compete

The upshot of all this is that the latest one-box systems no longer need any special pleading to compete with hi-fi separates. And as we become more accustomed to multiple digital sources (MP3 players of every kind, computers/streamers, set-top boxes, in addition to good old CD), the logic of using a single box as DAC and integrated amp looks ever more attractive. Read on to see how they do...



ON TEST



Arcam Solo Neo £1,400 p25
The latest version of Arcam's highly popular 'Solo' range is highly specified, with full streaming capabilities (wired and wireless) in addition to CD and DAB/FM radio. It can play music from most portables, although one feature it doesn't offer is digital interfacing to iPods. With plenty of analogue inputs, it's well-equipped to deal with legacy formats, too.



Aura Note Premier £1,495 p27
The smart, distinctive looks of this unit will surely appeal to the fashion-conscious, but there's a lot more to it than just a pretty face. The top-loading CD transport is a pleasure to use and quick, too. There's no streaming, but you can connect a computer via USB, while portables are also catered for. There's FM radio, and even AM too, but no DAB.



Cyrus Streamline £1,600 p29
Alone among this group, the Streamline has no CD transport, though you could easily connect any CD spinner to one of its several digital inputs. It doesn't have any analogue inputs either, but when it comes to modern sources it's well provided, with streaming and digital connectivity for portables, including the iPod range.



Elipson MC1 £1,300 p31
The highly distinctive MC1 offers a less unusual, but still impressive, list of features, including a slot-loading CD transport, DAB/FM radio and the usual USB/MP3 functionality. Connection to a computer relies on a wireless dongle, which is an ingenious solution. Power is provided by B&O's latest 'IcePower' modules.



Myryad Mi £1,295 p33
The long lived 'Music integrated' is kitted out with CD, DAB/FM radio and both analogue and digital inputs, but doesn't have either USB or streaming capabilities. Some internet connectivity is possible via an iPod/iPhone, using Myryad's 'M-Port', but in general computer connection relies on the computer having a digital output.



Rotel RCX-1500 £1,195 p35
In one particular respect, this unit stands out: it has the highest-powered amplifier by quite a margin. It also has plenty of input options, including full streaming capabilities, CD, DAB and FM radio and one each of analogue and digital inputs. It interfaces digitally to iPods and, of course, plays music from other brands of portables.

BLIND-LISTENING
ONE-BOX SYSTEMS **GROUPTEST**
£1,200-£1,600



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in every
sense



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Glenrothes	Jordan Acoustics	01592 744779	www.jordanacoustics.co.uk
Gloucester	HiFi Gear	01452 382222	www.hifigear.co.uk
Hastings	Adams & Jarrett	01424 432398	www.adamsandjarrett.com
New Malden	Unilet	0208 942 9567	www.unilet.net
Southampton	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	0238 033 7770	www.sevenoakssoundandvision.co.uk
York	Vickers Hi-Fi	01904 691600	www.vickers-hifi.co.uk

www.marantz.co.uk

because music matters



Arcam Solo Neo **£1,400**

Highly specified, with full streaming capabilities, the Neo is the latest in Arcam's popular Solo range

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK/China
TYPE: One-box system
WEIGHT: 7.8kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 430x79x350mm
FEATURES:
- Rated output 38W (8 ohms)
 - RS232/iRDock input
 - DAB/FM antenna input
 - USB-A input
 - Ethernet connection
 - Wi-fi connector
 - MP3 input and headphone output
 - Preamp output
 - Recording output
 - Optical digital output
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Arcam
TELEPHONE: 01223 203200
WEBSITE: arcam.co.uk

Bringing the Solo up to date with recent trends, Arcam's Neo is well-equipped with digital connectivity, including wired Ethernet, Wi-Fi and USB (for portable players, etc.). It doesn't digitally interface to iPods and other Apple products, but it can control them via Arcam's own optional irDock. It doesn't have S/PDIF inputs either, but does sport four handy line-level analogue inputs.

A CD transport is built in, and is quick and fuss-free to use. Both DAB and FM radio are supported, sharing a single RF input socket, which connects to a shared tuner/decoder.

There's also a number of internal modules and sub-boards inside; the main circuit board looks traditional with a linear power amplifier using a single power integrated circuit per channel, a chip we've come across in a few products recently.

The power supply is also linear, using a pair of toroidal transformers (large for the output stages, small for standby functions). The prominent external heatsink at the rear is something we haven't seen on Arcam products in quite a while. On the one hand it needs extra space, due to its prominence, on the other hand it serves to protect cables, so no harm done! Features include tone and balance controls alongside the various streaming functions, all very easy to use.

Sound quality

This unit divided opinion among the blind-listening panel, in some cases quite sharply, particularly in regard to the type of music playing. It got the best response on the Bette Midler number, which is superficially quite simple, but has a fair amount going on beneath the surface.

Harmonically though, the music presents few challenges and the Solo Neo seemed to react well to that, giving a very enjoyable rendition of a classic song.

By contrast, in Pink Floyd's world there was some lack of edge. One listener pointed out that there was particularly good integration between the various lines and instruments in this track, and we can see the point, but that's not really what the music is all about. We also have to agree that some of the bite of the track got lost along the way.

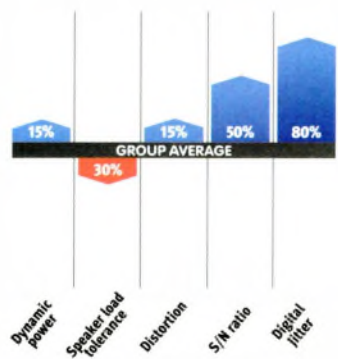
Similar considerations applied to the full-scale orchestral track, but in this case the integration was, perhaps, more to the point and the overall result was more convincing. One listener felt that there could have been more weight and grandeur in the sound.

Indeed, weight is in rather short supply, bass being extended but not subterranean. It has decent attack and is well-tuned, but ultimate heft is lacking. Treble is well-extended, but a touch closed-in.

ON TEST

Comfortably exceeding its specification, the Solo Neo delivered a full 60W/8ohm and 85W/4ohm with sufficient headroom to sustain 75W, 130W and 165W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads under dynamic, music-like, conditions. So this is no shrinking violet even if moderated by the 0.09ohm output impedance. Distortion increases very gently with level from 0.005% at 1W to 0.025% at 50W and with frequency up to 0.04% at 20kHz (10W/8ohm). The A-wtd S/N ratio is above average at 87.9dB (re. odBW) and the response extended out to -0.1dB/20kHz and -1.3dB/100kHz. The subsonic extension of -0.4dB/1Hz is extreme but does not promise exceptional bass. The CD section performs like a quality 'budget' Arcam model with a wide 107dB A-wtd S/N ratio, separation >80dB and distortion as low as 0.0007-0.002% across the board while jitter is state-of-the-art at just 120psec (close to the limit with 16-bit data). **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- OVERALL**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Neutral midrange and good integration make for pleasant long-term listening
- DISLIKE:** A little short of attack and bass weight; no digital inputs
- WE SAY:** Eminently suited to background music playing



THE A-SERIES. THE ART OF NATURAL SOUND.



Natural Dynamics...
These words depict in short what performance you can expect from the new A-Series: a sound experience that comes amazingly close to true natural sound.

A-series

Hi-Fi Choice



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION



A360 September 2011

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A25 August 2011



Aura Note Premier £1,495

With computer audio via USB, plus recording radio to MP3, this is a beautiful yet flexible package

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** Japan/Korea
TYPE: One-box system
WEIGHT: 7kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 278x84x278mm
FEATURES:
- Rated output 50W
 - 2 line inputs
 - FM and AM antenna inputs
 - Optical digital input
 - USB-B input
 - USB-A input
 - MP3 input
 - Speaker output
 - Preamp output
 - Headphone output
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Vivid Audio
TELEPHONE: 01403 282221
WEBSITE: auradesign.co.jp

This group includes a number of units that steer clear of the stereotypical black or silver box, but we found the Aura Note Premier the most smart and upmarket-looking. The one drawback of all that chrome is that the black labelling for the buttons can be hard to read, and you'll be more than usually glad of the remote control.

By far, the nicest operational feature here is the top-loading CD transport. You slide the glass cover across, remove the puck, pop a CD on the spindle, replace the puck and slide the cover back. The whole process takes no longer than a typical drawer transport and frankly feels so much nicer.

As well as the CD spinner, it also sports FM and AM radio (no DAB, but do we care?), digital inputs (optical and USB from a computer), two line-level analogue inputs, and an A-type USB socket for memory sticks and personal music players. You can connect an iPod here too, but you don't get digits off it. Instead, a stereo mini-jack next to the USB sockets connects to the iPod's analogue output.

Those last connectors are mounted on the right-hand side of the Note, next to the (6.3mm) headphone socket, which means that the narrow case is compromised by the need to leave a good few centimetres to

attach any accessories. One feature is unique: the ability to record radio broadcasts to a USB stick – only in MP3 quality, but still very useful.

Build internally is good; purists will be impressed to find a linear power supply (regular mains transformer) and a linear power output stage, so no switching electronics here!

Sound quality

While the general presentation of this unit is very likeable, with good integration between the various registers and plenty of rhythmic drive, it didn't quite have the sense of scale necessary to make the most of the larger recordings, especially those for full classical orchestra. It also divided opinion somewhat over the question of harshness in its sound. That may seem highly perverse, but reading between the lines of our listeners' notes, we can see a pattern.

In fact, bass and midrange are indeed smooth in a good way, but the higher treble regions do, at times, become a little coarse and, yes, even occasionally harsh.

The coarseness in the treble isn't enormously serious, of course, and taken in isolation this unit could well pass muster with the great majority of listeners, but in quick-fire comparisons all of our listeners spotted that aspect of its character. Still, for those who react more to the lower two-thirds of the audible

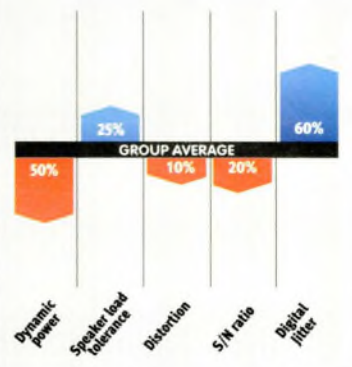
spectrum, it could be quite a winner. It has good bass extension which is never unduly prominent, but provides a solid underpinning for all kinds of music, and its midrange is unfussily clear and detailed. This sort of sound tends to be quite forgiving of lossy digital coding artefacts, so MP3 is well served – the radio tuner isn't bad either. With that proviso about treble noted, this is a very likeable unit.

ON TEST

Inspired by the Aura Note 'Completer' this evolved 'Premier' all-in-one player offers far better performance. Rated at 2x50W, it delivers 2x45W/8ohm and 2x55W/4ohm with sufficient reserve to support peaks of 75W/4ohm under dynamic conditions. Distortion is as low as 0.003% over the first 10W of its range, increasing to 0.1% from 20W to 40W. The frequency response is very extended: just -0.1dB/20kHz and -1.4dB/100kHz and with a -3dB subsonic roll-off of 6Hz.

Used as a CD player, the pre outs deliver a standard 2V at volume '60' with an A-wtd S/N ratio of 96.8dB and distortion at just 0.0006% through the midrange, increasing to a mere 0.0035% at 20kHz. Stereo separation is wide at >85dB. Jitter is impressively low at 195psec but, perhaps, the Premier's most unusual feature is its digital filter, almost eliminating the pre-ringing associated with the archetypal 'digital sound'. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Good bass; midrange smooth and beguiling, but always detailed
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Coarseness in the treble is more audible to some listeners
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Stunning style, great build and strong sound makes this a joy
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Cyrus Streamline **£1,600**

Well equipped for the brave new world of streamed music and other digital sources

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK
TYPE: One-box system
WEIGHT: 3.4kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 215x75x385mm
- FEATURES:**
- Rated output 30w (8 ohms)
 - Line input
 - 2 optical digital inputs
 - 3 electrical digital inputs
 - USB-A input
 - Ethernet connection
 - Wi-fi connector
 - Electrical digital output
 - Speaker output
 - Preamp output
 - Recording output
 - Headphone output
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Cyrus Audio
TELEPHONE: 01480 410900
WEBSITE: cyrusaudio.co.uk

We reviewed Cyrus's Stream X a few issues ago (*HFC 351*) in our first-ever *Blind-listening Group Test* of streaming music players. The Streamline effectively adds an integrated amplifier to the Stream X, and does so for just £200 extra.

To some, the amplifier may look like a cheapskate add-on; a single high-performance integrated circuit which includes a full 30W per channel power amplifier in a single package. Time was, when that kind of thing was death to real sound quality, but things have moved on and the data sheet on this device suggests a performance that most designers of 'serious' amplifiers wouldn't consider too shabby.

Unlike the other units here, this has no built-in CD transport. It does, however, have digital inputs, no less than five of them (two optical, three electrical), so you can use an external CD player through it. In the absence of analogue inputs, that's the only way you're going to interface any 'legacy' kit through the Streamline. There's always the option of adding an external ADC for those times you feel the need to drag out a cassette, but in terms of modern digital sources you won't be left wanting, as both wired and wireless Ethernet (Wi-Fi) are supported, as well as a single USB socket for connecting portable players, USB sticks and iThings.

Ethernet streaming brings with it access to the wonderful world of internet radio, podcasts and more, and Cyrus has got the user interface pretty well set up here. No, it's not up to the standards of the touch-screen Logitech Squeezebox, but is easy enough to navigate. The included n-remote is particularly nice to use.

Sound quality

Another unit which divided opinion, the Streamline is not at its best on the rhythmic front. The member of our listening panel who most highly values rhythms got off to a bad start with it and never really warmed to the sound. Even he, though, found the unaccompanied vocal track successful in portraying space, ambience and natural vocal tone.

The other two listeners were more impressed, one indeed rating this joint top of the group while the other was more guarded, but still almost entirely complimentary. The winning suit here is evidently precision of tonal quality and of spatial information. The former makes it easy to distinguish similar voices or instruments, while the latter gives very fine imaging.

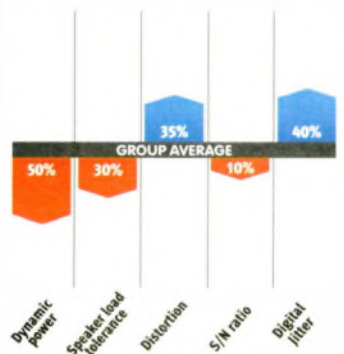
None of those who heard this unit felt it quite managed to achieve the insight into densely layered material of some others here, but it was notably strong at imaging, where it sounded particularly assured and natural.

ON TEST

Offering a decent digital performance (accepting all 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4 and 192kHz inputs), its maximum volume realises a 3.7V preamp output from a 230ohm source impedance. The 106.7dB A-wtd S/N ratio is wide and distortion as low as 0.0003% through the midrange over the top 20dB of its dynamic range. Distortion does increase to 0.015% at the high-frequency extremes but, interestingly, this is *only* over the same 20dB range. Low-level resolution is good to ±0.1dB over a 100dB range while jitter, though complex, is still creditable at 340psec.

The amp section delivers above specification, although 45W/8ohm and 63W/4ohm is still modest compared with others in our test. THD is low at 0.003% (1W/8ohm) but there's evidence of noise modulation at high frequencies. The A-wtd S/N ratio is 81dB (re. odBW) and the response extends from -0.15dB/20kHz to -10dB/80kHz with 192kHz inputs. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Detailed sound with clean and clear treble; plenty of digital inputs;
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Bass and low-midrange lack some impact, which can make sound uninvolved
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A practical and stylish way to access most digital sources
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Elipson MC1 **£1,300**

Striking style plus an impressive list of features make this stand out from the crowd

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** France/China
TYPE: One-box system
WEIGHT: 5kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 330x70x330mm
FEATURES:
- Rated output 60w (8 ohms)
 - Line input
 - Optical digital input
 - USB-A input
 - MP3 input
 - DAB/FM antenna input
 - Speaker output
 - Preamp output
- DISTRIBUTOR:** BBG
TELEPHONE: 01923 205600
WEBSITE: elipson.com

There's an obvious stylistic resemblance to a stack of vinyl LPs here, although the MC1 is physically a little bigger overall. By group standards, its feature set seems rather bare, but it still ticks plenty of boxes all the same. There are two line inputs, a USB socket (music players and so forth), a separate 'MP3' input on a stereo mini-jack, and a DAB/FM tuner input. Oh, and a CD transport, a slot-loader that's quite discreet.

Indeed the whole machine is very subtle until you turn it on, whereupon logos on the front panel light up and turn into touch-sensitive controls. They work well and make operating the unit just as much fun from the front panel as it is from the unremarkable remote.

A supplied USB dongle allows wireless connection to a computer; as per some rivals an Apple (iPod, etc.) wireless dongle is an option.

Despite the circular shape, most connections are at the back, opposite the CD transport and controls. The USB socket, MP3 input and headphone output (mini-jack again) are just to the side of the main control panel. Inside, the power amplifier is implemented as a switching circuit, and the power supply is also a switcher. This makes the unit quite light and also easy to cool.

Sound quality

Lots to like about this unit, our listeners agreed unanimously. Reservations that were expressed centred around its reproduction of the human voice, which seemed slightly impure at times – as one listener put it, with a slight 'halo' around the sound. Our most classically-minded listener was more analytical, fingering a slightly odd extreme treble as the culprit, though in that case the feeling was more of 'difference' rather than obvious 'wrongness' as such.

Voices are rich in high harmonics and easily show up top-octave anomalies, and one or two other instruments with plenty of treble extension seemed just a touch brighter than usual, but comments on this were mildly phrased.

Otherwise, the sound pleased everyone in just about every way. Particularly praiseworthy aspects include imaging and musical flow. Images were not only clearly defined, they were rock-steady and unaffected by musical dynamics, changing pitch or any of the other factors that sometimes cause instruments to wander across the soundstage. Fluidity was clearly helped by a very persuasive way with rhythm, not overtly driving, but rather subtly convincing.

Dynamics are similarly understated, but always truthful, and climaxes are remarkably clean.

Indeed we suspect this is a large part of the secret of the MC1's success. It is clear and detailed at any level, but its unusually confident and unsullied handling of climaxes and 'big moments' of every kind makes it just that little bit more like live music.

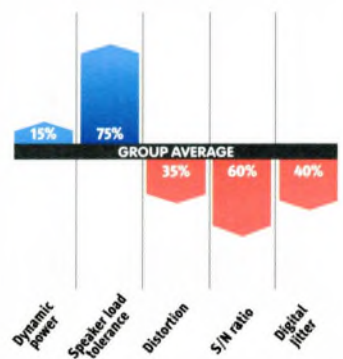
Only the radio section slightly disappointed, with FM sounding rather dull and lifeless – a common drawback of dual-mode FM/DAB tuner modules.

ON TEST

Based around a pair of B&O's 120W/4ohm Class D ICEPower modules, the MC1 delivers 75W/8ohm and 145W/4ohm at 1% THD under continuous and dynamic conditions. Into 2 and 10hm loads 280W and 480W is achievable, ensuring the MC1 will drive almost any speaker with gusto. Midrange distortion hovers between 0.002-0.004%, increasing to 0.16% at 20kHz. B&O has reduced the load sensitivity of its newer modules, the MC1's response now flat to within ±0.3dB/20kHz into 2, 4 and 8ohm.

Elipson's CD section is less impressive. The '0' volume setting realises 1.95V from the pre outs, although a broad swath of interference patterns – possibly from the adjacent Class D modulators – limits the A-wtd S/N ratio to a 15-bit standard of 90dB, distortion to ~0.045% over the top 40dB of its dynamic range and very high jitter with our specific J-test pattern. Ordinarily, jitter will be much lower. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Mi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Well balanced, with very good detail and excellent stereo imaging
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Highest treble not always entirely pure; CD transport seems unusually slow
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★
- FEATURES** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A sound that comfortably transcends expectations at the price

OVERALL



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Southend 01702 435255

Loud & Clear
Glasgow 0141 221 0221
Edinburgh 0131 555 3963

Moorgate Acoustics
Sheffield 0114 275 6048



Myryad Mi £1,295

Super user interface, neat packaging and great sound make this the star of the show

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK/China
TYPE: One-box system
WEIGHT: 5.6kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 350x87x330mm
FEATURES:
- Rated output 50w (8 ohms)
 - 3 line inputs
 - 2 optical digital inputs
 - DAB/FM antenna input
 - M-Port
 - Speaker output
 - Optical digital output
 - Recording output
 - MP3 input and headphone output
- DISTRIBUTOR:** ArmourHome Electronics
TELEPHONE: 01279 501111
WEBSITE: myryad.co.uk

The elder statesmen of the one-box system breed these days, the Myryad Mi has no way of connecting to a computer. It will, however, connect via its 'M-Port' to an iPod or iPhone Touch, which gives it some of the internet connectivity that some others lack.

You can, for instance, use services like Spotify via an iPhone. It's a mixed blessing; Apple products famously have a nice user interface, but you have to tie one up as a basic data-forwarding device when you could, with a fully Ethernet-enabled streamer, use that boring router box parked out of sight near your phone master socket.

And the Apple user interface isn't such a big attraction, when the one built into the Mi is so lovely. It's not a full touchscreen, but it's not far off: indeed, strictly it is a touchscreen but a rather limited one, with touch-sensitive, context-sensitive buttons at fixed positions. It lights up in colour and shows things in large type, including CD-TEXT information read off suitably coded CDs.

The large type of the display means you can read what's going on from across the room. The lack of USB is offset by the ability to read MP3 CD-ROMs. Three line inputs are provided, plus two digital (optical). Power amplifier and power supply are both switching designs.

Sound quality

The Mi quickly established itself as one of the definite successes of the listening session. Our panel immediately warmed to it from the outset and found no reason to change their mind. It has a convincingly direct presentation and a knack of getting stuck in to music that can easily fool you that you are listening to fancy hi-fi esoterica.

A few minor details give the game away, however. There isn't quite the sweet clarity in the treble, for instance, that the very finest kit can offer, but on the other hand we're not sure any of the rival one-box systems in this *Blind-Listening Group Test* could teach the Mi much in that department.

Stereo imaging is good, but possibly not the most precise in terms of depth, and maybe one could occasionally wish for slightly more inner detail in complex recordings, but as systems at this price go there are really no legitimate grounds for complaint.

Among other admirable qualities, the Mi happily blends smoothness with insight, steering well clear of harshness, but never afraid of music with real bite. This made it equally adept in the rather angular sounds of Pink Floyd and in the luscious classical orchestration of Dvorak. It has good bass extension with well-balanced weight, tunefulness

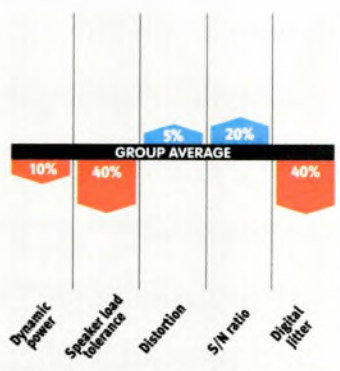


ON TEST

This is a genuinely 'digital' amplifier and Myryad's choice of D2A Class D modules ensures a reliable 60W/105W B/40hm power delivery with very little headroom under dynamic conditions – a feature of PWM amplification. The Mi is phase inverting on line (tape) out, but not through the power amp. Response is limited to just over 20kHz by the 48kHz sample rate, peaking slightly at +0.4dB into 8ohm but rolling gently away to -1.7dB into 40hm loads. It's designed to be 'flat' into 60hm. Midrange distortion is low for this technology at ~0.03% and the 85dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. odBW) remains competitive with analogue amps.

CD performance has been slightly refined since the Mi's launch in 2008, the A-wtd S/N now just over the 16-bit standard at 98.4dB and low-level linearity true to 20.1dB over a full 100dB dynamic range. Peak level THD is low at 0.0008% but jitter remains high at 1800psec. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

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★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

LIKE: Good bass and treble extension; fine lateral imaging

DISLIKE: Image depth a little limited; lacks computer connectivity

WESAY: Great with CD; useful connectivity to Apple portable devices

OVERALL





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Audio Emotion
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Audio Affair
www.audioaffair.co.uk

Stereonow
North London
www.stereonow.co.uk



Rotel RCX-1500 **£1,195**

Plenty of power, versatile input options and a traditional hi-fi look and feel

DETAILS

ORIGIN: Japan/China
TYPE: One-box system
WEIGHT: 8.1kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 391x144x343mm
FEATURES:

- Rated output 100W (8 ohms)
- Line input
- Electrical/optical digital input
- FM and DAB antenna inputs
- Ethernet (wired or wi-fi with adaptor)
- Speaker output
- Preamp output
- USB-A input and headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR: Bowers and Wilkins
TELEPHONE: 01903 221761
WEBSITE: rotel.com

Rotel has set out quite an attractive stall of internet-aware audio, and this is the most highly integrated system. Like all the others in this group, it includes a simple integrated amplifier, in this case adding both CD transport and Ethernet, as well as a USB socket for music storage devices. You have the choice of wired or wireless Ethernet, using a dongle which plugs into the socket on the rear marked 'Ethernet'. Physically a USB socket, the wired dongle turns that into the usual Ethernet-style connector, while the wireless one hooks up to your Wi-Fi. More traditional sources are not neglected, with both DAB and FM radio (on separate connectors, so you can use properly optimised aerials for both), and there's a lone line-level analogue input at the rear. There are also both flavours of digital input, though you can only feed one of them as the unit auto-selects whichever is receiving data. The USB socket is fully compatible with iPod/iPhone devices, rounding out the most comprehensive feature set in the group in types of input offered.

The user interface is typical Rotel, unafraid of multiple buttons on the front panel. The remote is well-designed too, though nothing flashy. An informative dot-matrix display gives you all the sources. A fairly bulky case is well filled with

electronics, including a switch-mode power supply and a linear transformer, the latter apparently feeding small-signal stages. The power amplifier section is also a switcher. In an impressive show of audiophile solidarity, Rotel has included some quite 'boutique' parts in the analogue electronics path.

Sound quality

Mostly well liked, this unit didn't quite attract the praise that attended the Elipson and Myryad units. It seemed most successful with simple music, struggling a little when asked to reproduce large-scale and complex musical structures.

There's some reluctance to sort out all the strands in complicated harmony, which shows up in some classical music particularly. One of our listening panel may have identified the nub of the matter with a comment on high harmonics, suggesting that they are a little unclear at times. Since we rely quite a lot on those to help us sort out multiple sound sources, it's likely that's the culprit.

Actual treble extension is very good, and with simple but treble-rich sounds like solo voice there's a pleasant sweetness and openness. Bass is also well-extended and has good attack, which makes the RCX-1500 convincing in the rhythm department. Occasionally it could do with a little more of that, but on the

whole it is very successful. Detail is good and images are clear, well-defined and stable.

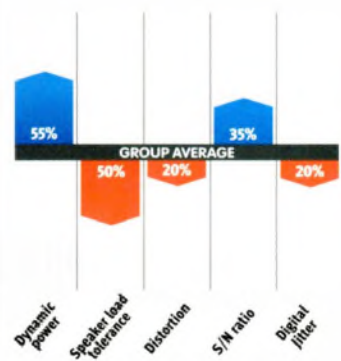
It's ironic that the best radio performance should come from one of the internet radio-enabled units, but it's good to have the option. After all, as is unfortunately the case, not everyone has unlimited high-speed broadband.

ON TEST

With B&O's 200W Class D ICEPower modules at its heart, Rotel's RCX-1500 looks to be the beefiest box in our test. In practice, while a little over 100W/8ohm and 200W/4ohm is achievable, the amp is actually less load-tolerant than the 75W Elipson, maintaining just 180W into 20hm and 90W into 10hm – a maximum current of 9.5A. Distortion, too, while low at 0.008% through the midrange, climbs close to 1% at 20kHz. Still, the A-wtd S/N is good at 86dB (re. odBW).

Used as a CD/preamp, the ICEPower modulators remain 'on' so you shouldn't advance the volume beyond '67'. This yields a 1V output, a 101.5dB A-wtd S/N and 900psec of jitter – creditable given the activity under the bonnet. Distortion, principally 2nd and 3rd harmonic, amounts to 0.01% through the mid and 0.05% at HF, the latter accompanied by a deal of noise modulation over the top 10dB of its dynamic range. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

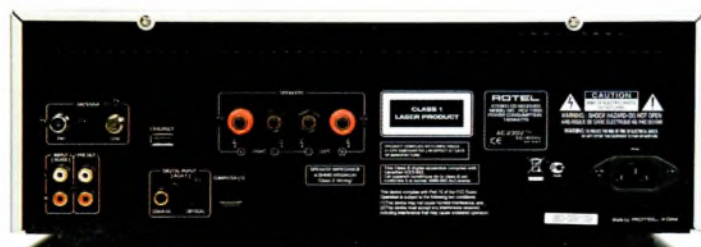
SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Good bass and treble extension; fine FM radio performance

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Occasionally seems a little shy dynamically

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Easy to use for those more familiar with traditional hi-fi; offers attention-grabbing sound

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



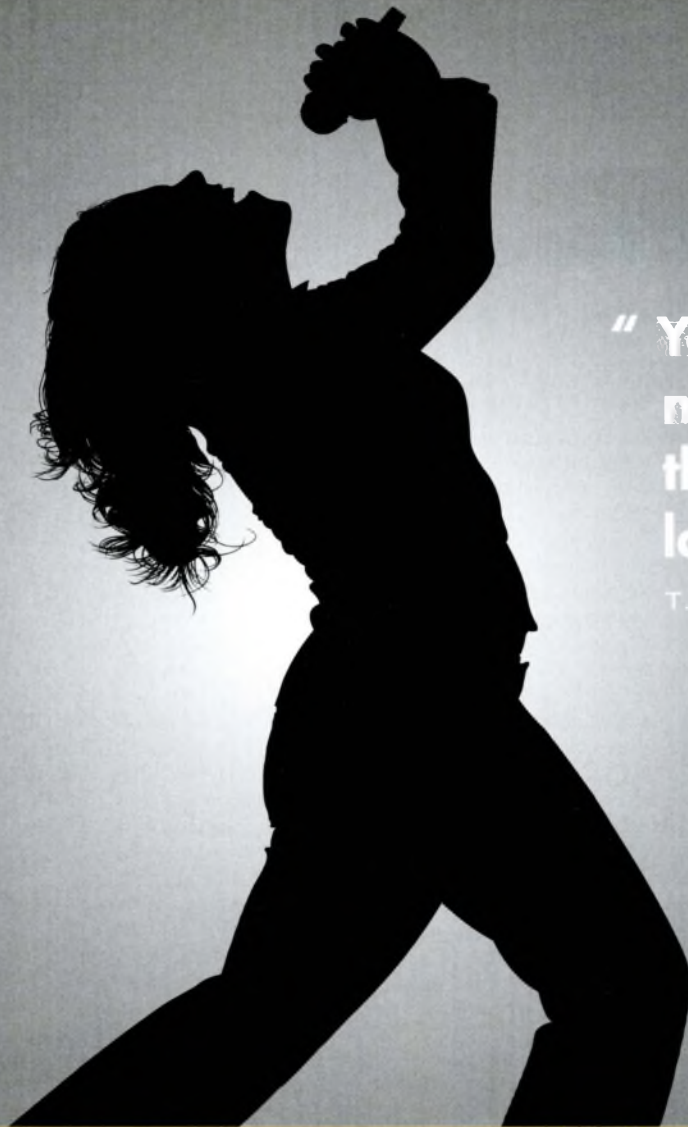
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run by professionals for professionals

Blind-listening verdicts

Richard Black is suitably impressed by the quality of this month's one-box system selection, but there can only be one winner...

More perhaps, than with items such as CD players, amplifiers and loudspeakers, purchasers are likely to be swayed by the feature counts of one-box systems. None of these units has everything (though the Rotel comes pretty close), and they all offer a different subset of the facilities one might look for in such a device. Only one (Cyrus) lacks a CD player, but that is perhaps the easiest role to fill. On the other hand, the systems devoid of streaming capabilities could easily be enhanced by the addition of a Logitech Squeezebox Touch, which via its digital output is eminently suited to upgrading quality

equipment like the Aura and Myryad systems, for example.

Similarly, there are ways around the lack of analogue or digital inputs on one or two other units, so in a sense the issue of features isn't *that* critical. That, then, leaves us looking mainly at sound quality...

We ended up with some similar scores across the group, but sonic differences still exist. For instance, the Arcam has plenty of subtlety and detail, but isn't as vibrant as it might be. This makes it less immediately exciting than some, though we certainly found it an eminently listenable piece of kit in the long run. The Aura is also quite civilised, though a touch of treble

coarseness detracts somewhat from the appeal of its strongly defined bass.

If anything, the Cyrus is even more detailed, at least in the way it throws out a stereo image. Again though, it could do with just a little more impact in the lower half of the spectrum. Elipson's MC1 brings some real punch and liveliness to the party, an apt term to use for a very 'foot-tapping' unit that also brings out plenty of detail. We did have a few reservations about its treble though, which could be cleaner. Finally, the Rotel is also a lively unit, perhaps a little shy of detail now and then, but well specified and significantly more powerful than the others when all is said and done...



We felt that the sound from the Myryad Mi was overall the most satisfying here. It has excellent extension both up and down, and a beautifully judged balance between detail and vigour. Above all else, this is the system that gets the pulse racing and keeps it there. It's a million miles from music centres of the 1970s and '80s, and amply proves the point that high levels of integration are no enemy of lively and satisfying sound.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	Arcam Solo Neo	Aura Note Premier	Cyrus Streamline	Elipson MC1	Myryad Mi	Rotel RCX-1500
Price	£1,400	£1,495	£1,600	£1,300	£1,295	£1,195
Sound	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Great for background music, but ultimately lacks some insight and bite	Visually striking with some good performance levels, plus a decent feature set	A practical way to access modern digital sources, with sophisticated sound to match	Stands out visually and sonically, with sound that comfortably transcends expectations	Does a very good job of playing CDs and adds useful connectivity to Apple portable devices	Comprehensively featured and easy to use, with attention-grabbing sound

Key features

CD included	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Radio included	DAB/FM	FM/AM	-	DAB/FM	DAB/FM	FM/AM
Analogue inputs	4	2	0	1	3	1
Digital inputs	Opt.	2 opt.	3 elec.	Opt.	2 opt.	Opt./elec.
Streaming	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Output power	38w	50w	30w	60w	50w	100w

STREAMER: Logitech Squeezebox Touch **£239**

This is simply the nicest way to access music stored on your computer or online. The touchscreen interface and well-thought-out menu structure make it a breeze to navigate. It's the perfect add-on for any digital kit that lacks streaming capabilities.



PHONO STAGE: Cambridge Audio Azur 640P **£100**

None of these systems includes a phono stage. Luckily, dedicated phono amps exist for exactly this situation, and this is one of our favourites. With either moving-magnet or moving-coil cartridges, it gets a great sound out of vinyl, despite its budget price.



LOUDSPEAKER: Tannoy Definition DC8 **£2,200**

One standmount that has impressed us is Tannoy's latest incarnation of its Dual Concentric design, using a tweeter mounted at the centre of a woofer to give the best possible spatial alignment of drive units. This gives communicative sound with great coherence.



Are You Buying Pre-Ruined

The Music Chain

Much is written about music and the musicians who entertain us, and we rightly exalt great musicians. But there is an interlinked chain of participants, two of which I believe are crucial to our music scene in today's world. For centuries the music chain was a very short one – composers or songwriters, musicians and listeners, and the judgement on quality was immediate. Recording technologies have changed all this exponentially.

Today, we listen to most of our music from a recording and this gives recording engineers the opportunity to avoid poor acoustics, duff notes and off days. This, of course, means the chain has grown to include the recording engineers, the music distribution system (retailers or downloads), hi-fi manufacturers, hi-fi sellers and the hi-fi purchasers, the latter being the listeners. I should start by saying that hi-fi has become an adulterated term that no longer has its original meaning because it's applied to much equipment that certainly should not be termed high-fidelity.

It's said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. However, I believe there are two particularly strong links that, if removed from the chain, would seriously damage the quality of recorded music. These are the audiophile, or hi-fi connoisseur, and the specialist hi-fi retailer, the latter in nearly all cases also being the former because it's their interest that has driven them into their particular business. These are the people who most appreciate how exciting and involving music can be and how it can deliver an emotional experience.

Hi-Fi Connoisseurs

So why is the hi-fi connoisseur so important to the music industry? By their nature, audiophiles are generally avid music lovers who enhance their enjoyment through listening to music at its very best

quality level, which means playing great recordings through hi-end hi-fi to achieve the most outstanding results. Without the audiophile, the main driver for quality would probably be removed from the chain. Let's be honest, over recent years the majority of music listeners now settle for MP3 convenience and, therefore, mediocre sound quality, that is 'pre-ruined' music. If the pendulum ever swings so far that all but a few listen to highly compressed formats such as MP3, music producers will not waste their resources on producing high quality recordings because it would be commercially unnecessary, even if their recording engineers wanted to achieve the best they could. After all, an MP3 or AAC file, the iTunes default format, downloaded at 128 kbps (the most popular download speed), is about one-eleventh the size of a full resolution CD track, 1411 kbps, so the quality is inevitably far inferior. Information is irretrievably lost and the full dynamic range is lacking. Using an iPod while jogging does not really raise a quality issue but playing low-resolution tracks through an iPod docking station that feeds into a decent hi-fi system, is a disaster area. It's rubbish quality made louder. Fortunately, there is still significant demand from audiophiles committed to sound quality to sustain the production of high quality recordings, but it would be a tragedy if there weren't. For example, most classical recordings downloaded as an MP3 or AAC file are a complete waste of time because there is so much information missing that they are reduced to just the essence of a tune.

Specialist Hi-Fi Retailers

Just as essential a link in the chain as the hi-fi connoisseur is the specialist hi-fi retailer and the two are rightly dependent on each other. Without the specialist retailer the hi-end hi-fi manufacturer would have to rely on the internet and hi-fi magazine reviewers to try and assess the relative merits and performance of their products against that of their competitors –

a notoriously unreliable decision making process. Specialist hi-fi retailers are constantly being offered new products for assessment and potential stocking and, as it is also their hobby as well as their livelihood, they are greatly interested in achieving the best performance and seeking out the most outstanding products and combinations. More than that though is their relationship with audiophiles for, if they are to stay in business, they must satisfy the most discerning customers in the industry. The reality is that audiophiles and specialist hi-fi retailers are essential to each other.

Future of Recorded Music

What are the future prospects of maintaining high quality music recordings? We must hope that audiophiles, or hi-fi connoisseurs, or perhaps most accurately described, music lovers, will continue to drive the demand for quality. But another important reason for hope within the mass-market is that there is no longer any overriding reason for MP3 and AAC to have such a following. These formats were designed to overcome very slow download speeds and expensive memory capacity. These are not significant factors for most people now. Full resolution, CD quality, downloads are already available and should become the norm as long as the general public can be made aware of the tremendous quality benefit. This has happened with HD TV so we know this awareness can grow rapidly. In the meantime, we must highly value hi-fi connoisseurs and specialist hi-fi retailers, of which the ones listed on this page represent the UK's finest. Specialist dealers know how to choose the products that combine as a superb system and how to get the best out of it by expert installation in the home. If there's a price premium over an internet purchase, it's probably a small one, but it's unquestionably worth the difference.

Music



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

OUR TOP 20 UK HI-FI DEALERS

SOUTH

Ashford, Kent

SOUNDCRAFT HI-FI
40 High Street.
t: 01233 624441
www.soundcraft-hifi.com

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
216 Moulsham Street.
t: 01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Colchester

NEW TECHNOLOGY UNLIMITED
33 Sir Isaac's Walk.
t: 01206 577682
www.newtechnologyunlimited.com

Kingston-upon-Thames

INFIDELITY
9 High Street,
Hampton Wick.
t: 020 8943 3530
www.infidelity.co.uk

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE
36 Queen Street.
t: 01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI
44a High Street.
t: 01268 779762
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
132/4 London Road.
t: 01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE
27 Bond Street.
t: 020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1

GRAHAMS HI-FI
190a New North Road.
t: 020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11

ORANGES & LEMONS
61/63 Webbs Road.
t: 020 7924 2043
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

SW20

O'BRIEN HI-FI
60 Durham Road.
t: 020 8946 1528
www.obrienhifi.com

SOUTH WEST

Bath

AUDIENCE
14 Broad Street.
t: 01225 333310
www.audience.org.uk

Exeter

GULLIFORD HI-FI
97 Sidwell Street.
t: 01392 491194
www.gullifordhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Banbury

OVERTURE
3 Church Lane.
t: 01295 272158
www.overture.co.uk

Birmingham

MUSIC MATTERS
363 Hagley Road, Edgbaston.
t: 0121 429 2811
www.musicmatters.co.uk

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY
163 Spon Street.
t: 024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Leicester

CYMBIOSIS
6 Hotel Street.
t: 0116 262 3754
www.cymbiosis.com

Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION
48/50 Maid Marian Way.
t: 0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

NORTH

Cheadle

THE AUDIO WORKS
14 Stockport Road.
t: 0161 428 7887
www.theaudioworks.co.uk

Chester

ACOUSTICA
17 Hoole Road.
t: 01244 344227
www.acoustica.co.uk

Hull

THE AUDIO ROOM
2 George Street, Hedon
t: 01482 891375
www.theaudiroom.co.uk

York

SOUND ORGANISATION
2 Gillygate.
t: 01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk

STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
SERVICE ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
FACILITIES ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
VERDICT ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Budget esoterica

TEAC's new CD player and amplifier give aspiring audiophiles a taste of the high end at less exotic prices, says *Jason Kennedy*...



TEAC often confuses me, as there's often little rhyme or reason to its UK product portfolio. On the one hand it has a range of basic two-channel audio products, including some modest little mini-components, and on the other it promotes breathtakingly expensive designer hi-fi under the Esoteric brand – with apparently not that much in-between!

Could you imagine, for example, Honda selling just 125cc scooters and its stunning NSX supercar? No, me neither... So, enter the new Distinction series, designed to bridge that gap and offering the hi-fi equivalent of a large executive automobile. It consists of two integrated amplifiers and two CD players, with the 3000 series reviewed here being the larger and more expensive.

The CD-3000 is one of a dwindling number of silver disc spinners that play SACDs and, more significantly perhaps in the age of the music file, it also has a USB input alongside a digital connection of the traditional variety. The USB is no mere input either. Plug it in to a live Mac and iTunes opens itself, then you can use the remote control to navigate through the tracks in your library.

It has the usual CD-type next/previous, play/pause functions, and is nice to use. Under the lid the big TEAC sports a pair of Cirrus Logic DACs, one for each channel, which run up to the now compulsory 24-bit/192kHz resolution.

On the front panel and the handset there is an upsampling button, which I kept on for the listening. The drawer action is nice, but there's no sign of the company's VRDS logo found in the Esoteric players; still, even cooking TEAC optical disc transports have a fine reputation.

The chassis is very similar in style and execution to the Esoteric

players that start at significantly higher prices. It uses anodised aluminium on both top and sides, as well as a good thick slab on the front. Build really is exemplary and this message is reinforced by the high-quality RCA phono sockets on the back panel that sit between balanced XLR outputs.

The remote handset operates both components, but you have to select each before being able to do so, as both have input select – this makes sense but takes a bit of getting used to. Likewise the volume and input controls are identical, and I accidentally changed input when hoping to change volume on more than one occasion. Like the separates, it has an aluminium face and the buttons are appealingly tactile – none of your rubbery plastic nonsense here!

There's a clean and natural balance that's attractively transparent and open

The matching AI-3000 is a brute of an integrated that weighs in at 32 kilos and is claimed to deliver up to 200W per side into 8 ohms. If appearance is any measure, then I don't doubt it; its bulk is such that it makes even the largest and most rotund Krell look like it's been on a nice sensible balanced diet. Regard those cooling fins on the sides for heaven's sake – one kilowatt public address amplifiers seem positively under cooled by comparison! So what gives? Is this just the Tokyo Electro Acoustic Company reminding us that it can make muscle amps at real world prices, or is there more to the AI-3000 than sheer bulk?

Well, the majority of the weight comes from a semi-toroidal

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
TEAC CD-3000
and AI-3000

Origin:
Japan/China

Type:
CD/SACD player and
integrated amplifier

Weight:
CD-3000 10.3kg,
AI-3000 31.3kg

DIMENSIONS:
CD-3000 (WxHxD)
435x116x371mm,
AI-3000 (WxHxD)
435x230x520mm

FEATURES:
• (CD-3000)
Analogue outputs:
RCA phono,
XLR balanced

• Digital inputs:
coaxial, USB

• DAC: Cirrus Logic
upsampling to
24-bit/192kHz

• (AI-3000)
Headphone output:
6.3mm jack

• Analogue inputs:
5x RCA phono,
2x XLR

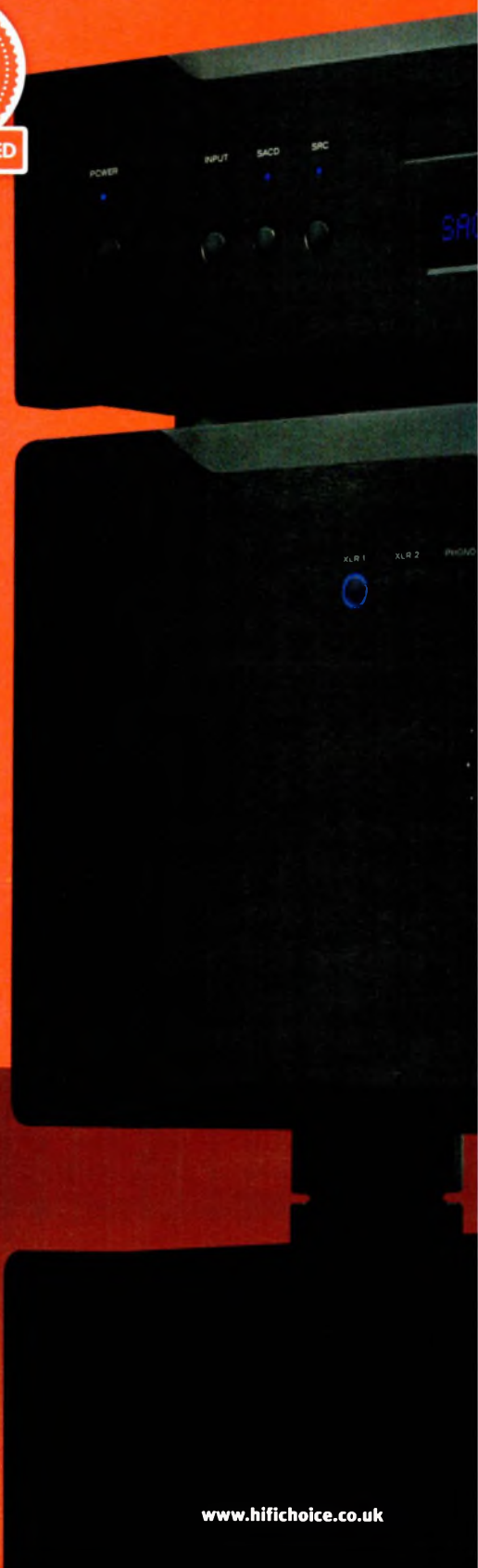
• Speaker outputs:
2 pairs

• Rated output: 300
watts/4 ohms

DISTRIBUTOR:
TEAC UK

TELEPHONE:
0845 1302511

WEBSITE:
teac.co.uk





Q&A...

JASON KENNEDY SPOKE WITH NEIL WELLS OF TEAC UK ABOUT ITS NEW DISTINCTION RANGE...



JK: *The AI-3000 doesn't sound like your average 300-watt amp; it's more like a Class A in character. Is this what you were aiming for?*

NW: Through consultation with the Esoteric design team, the brief was to create an amplifier that had enough power to drive the most demanding speaker loads, but with the finesse of a Class A design.

JK: *What type of circuit and output stage does it have? What's a 'semi-toroidal' transformer?*

NW: The circuit employed by the AI-3000 is push-pull: A semi-toroidal (or hum bucking, as it is sometimes called) transformer employs two 'C shape' magnets that face each other, rather than the single 'doughnut' magnet of standard toroidal transformers. This design reduces stray field emissions, which is essential within audio design.

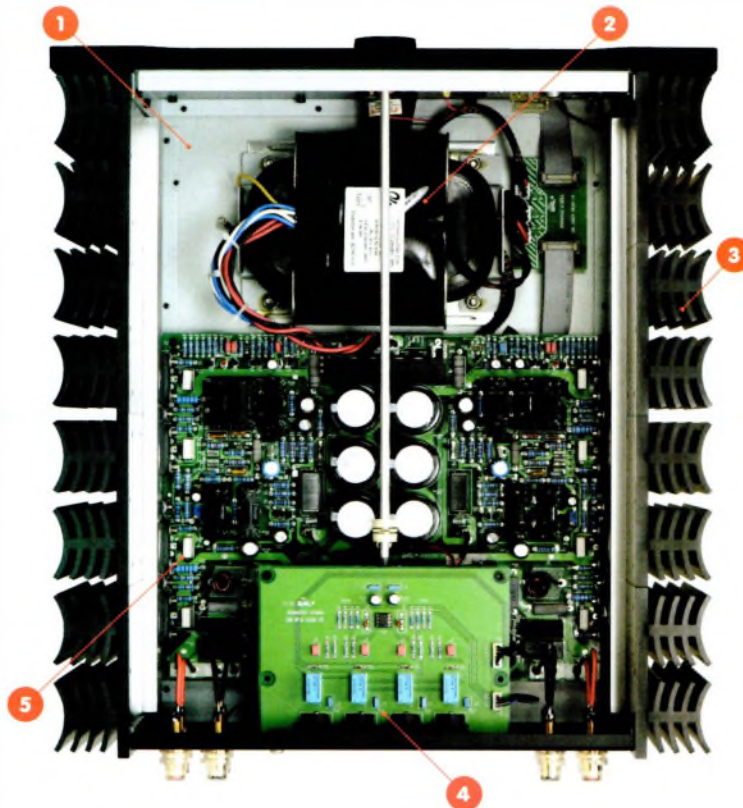
JK: *The heatsinks never seem to get very warm – is that because we're not playing loud enough? What's the inspiration for their distinctive look?*

NW: With the design being push/pull, the amplifier does not generate as much heat as Class A designs. For this product range, a new design team (in consultation with Esoteric) was given a free-reign to try new ideas. Through extensive R&D and with the ability to try new ideas, they found that this design of heatsink was the most efficient for the design.

JK: *Do either of these share components with Esoteric models?*

NW: Although no parts are shared with Esoteric products, the Esoteric team reviewed the design with specific input into the sonic character.

IN SIGHT: AI-3000



- 1 full aluminium housing screens from extraneous noise pick-up
- 2 massive 'semi-toroidal' power transformer
- 3 huge cooling fins for optimal running temperature
- 4 2 pairs of balanced audio inputs
- 5 4 output devices per channel deliver 300w claimed per side into 8 ohms



HI-FI IS LIKE FINE cuisine, very much an issue of national taste. For example, American audio is often high in fat and served in huge portions, whereas Japanese high end is meticulously well presented – some say it's smooth almost to the point of sounding bland.

The TEACs show this; they have a soft, subtle sound that headbangers used to spicier sources might think bland. Indeed, in some ways high-end Japanese solid-state is becoming increasingly tube-like, voiced to give a sweet and open sound. It's the opposite, say, of some Brit brands such as Naim, yet intriguingly both are strong at timing – proving that this elusive, but critical quality has little to do with tonal balance.

transformer of substantial proportions that sits behind the fascia of the amp – something that is very apparent when you try to lift the flipping thing. Mind you, those heatsinks are pretty meaty and there's an awful lot of them, eight per flank, and they do a very good job of keeping the amp cool. In fact, they hardly get hot at all, which kind of begs the question whether this amp needs so much cooling capacity in the first place? Oh, and there's further heatsinking on the PCBs within.

For an integrated amplifier, the AI-3000 has an impressive array of socketry. There are four single-ended line inputs, a phono input, preamp output sockets and a bypass input, which turns it into a power amp for use in multichannel set-ups. There are also two balanced inputs, although this is not a balanced amplifier as such. It has two pairs of speaker outputs, which can be used separately via front panel switches.

It feels a lovely thing to use – this is the sort of thing the Japanese do so well, making their foreign rivals look a bit wanting. The largely aluminium casework is of a standard that you find on boutique brands at

considerably higher prices. And rivals are rarely able to execute a front panel as well as TEAC; the blue rings that light up the active input and speaker output are redolent of a dashboard on a premium car. But one other light that would be useful is something on the volume control that lets you gauge the listening level when the room lighting is low.

Sound quality

Once I had managed to wrestle the IA-3000 out of its box and onto a Townshend Seismic Sink platform (it's too big to go in a rack), it was connected up to Bowers and Wilkins 802 Diamond loudspeakers and instructed to strut its stuff. This it does in a manner that is frankly at odds with its appearance; you'd expect copious power, grip and muscle, but what I got was more akin to a Class A sound that's open, relaxed and super-smooth.

Bass is surprisingly short on grip, considering the muscular power transformer, but still the TEAC works well with acoustic material and goes down low in a natural, easy and undemonstrative fashion. Ultimately then, the

CONNECTIONS



- 1 XLR socketry: compulsory fitment on Japanese high end
- 2 RCA phono inputs for non-balanced sources
- 3 S/PDIF digital inputs, de rigueur on Japanese preamps these days
- 4 2 pairs of chunky speaker binding posts for bi-wiring
- 5 IEC mains input; bundled power lead is well worth upgrading
- 6 chunky heatsinking barely gets hot, but looks the part!

whole presentation is on the soft side, which isn't such a bad thing with many crisp sounding modern loudspeakers I suppose, although headbangers should look elsewhere.

One highlight was its remarkably good sense of timing. It comes as quite a shock to discover that it's possible to make an amp that times without leaning on the leading edges, but this TEAC does just that. The lack of any grain also means that you can play at high levels with not the slightest hint of glare. It's a combination of skills that encourages extended listening because you hear more of the music and less of the hardware.

The CD-3000 has a similar inclination, but is a bit more assertive; its intrinsic character is relaxed but the bass has plenty of power and the timing is once again very encouraging. It does string tone well, which is uncommon for CD players even at this price, and presents lots of detail in a very clean and smooth fashion. It's a balance that works well with a more grippy amp such as the Leema Tucana II that I use as a reference; the combination of the relaxed TEAC sound and the powerful Leema amp results in an enthralling presentation. I really enjoyed the Rainer CD Live at the Performance Centre, where his acoustic guitar sounded vibrant and dynamic with lots of texture.

The fun continued when I hooked the CD-3000 up to an iMac running Audirvana Plus software. With a streamed input the character remains slightly soft, yet distinctly radiant with

great music, piano retaining much of its dynamic energy in the context of a refined, revealing soundstage.

At one point I accidentally pushed the previous track button rather too many times and ended up having Kraftwerk's remixes of Yello pumped out at a punishing level, but because the DAC and output stage are so clean it proved an energising experience that distracted me for longer than it should.

Combining the two components increases the relaxation factor, but also upgrades the timing of the music. Once you get used to the smoothness, it makes for a distinctly enjoyable experience. That's the joy of hi-fi; there's something for everyone.

Conclusion

While the amplifier in this pairing is a little soft in the bass for some tastes, its skills in the timing department make up for this. Like good Japanese high end, it has a clean and natural balance that's attractively transparent and open, and this is also true of the CD player. The latter, however, will be easier to accommodate in many UK systems, and fights above its weight when it comes to detail resolution and finesse.

Both units are very well put together for the asking price and will go a long way to re-establishing TEAC as a force to be reckoned with in the mid market. TEAC needed some serious new separates to bolster its UK range, and with these top Distinctions it now has them. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - CD-3000

- SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Relaxed, yet timely and revealing in a substantial case, with useful USB input
- VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not as much focus as some and possibly too laid-back for some tastes
- BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Svelte, sophisticated and clean sound, but yes sir, it can boogie!
- FEATURES ★★★★★



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - AI-3000

- SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lots of metal for your money; open, relaxed sound with fine tuning
- VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Loose lower bass; immense weight will please osteopaths only
- BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Vast integrated amplifier with superlative build and finish, allied to commendably soft, smooth and sweet sound
- FEATURES ★★★★★





Little wonder



Channa Vithana enjoys the musical delights of AudioSmile's diminutive Kensai standmount loudspeaker...

Most loudspeakers remain a disappointment to me, as so many manage to strangle the life out of music – there are only a precious few I've heard that truly satisfy in the music-making stakes. Fascinatingly, this isn't necessarily down to cost, as it's perfectly possible to spend £10,000 on a pair of speakers that have about as much emotion in them as a supermarket shopping list.

However, think of it from the manufacturer's point of view. What a quandary to be in – how do you satisfy the many and varied needs of the customer, the demands of the marketplace, the whims of style and the complex dynamics arising from differing internal environments, room sizes, building materials and music tastes? All things considered, who'd be a speaker maker?

With this in mind, you can immediately see what a brave move it was to launch a product such as the Kensai by AudioSmile. For the not inconsiderable sum of £1,999 (although at the time of writing the Kensai is available for a limited period at £1,503), you get a tiny box that caters very much for a niche audience, and is apparently rather poor value for money. However, it's the discipline of detail that tests whether a product like this passes muster, and the more you look, the more I found that this little loudspeaker impresses.

Overall build quality is very good – the fine cabinetry, made in Kent, is very well damped and non-resonant, whereas the detail work is excellent. For example, the driver fixings are thoughtfully selected to match the tweeter and mid/bass unit surrounds. Then we have a very attractive solid copper phase plug (remember the Jamo Concert 8?) fitted to the mid/bass driver which AudioSmile says, 'quickly removes heat from the voice coil for crisp, uncompressed dynamics'.

Just beneath the drivers is a small horizontal slot, which is where the Kensai is ported. AudioSmile have utilised aperiodic loading, which the company claims offers superior bass control in this application. Designer Simon Ashton says that, whereas a normal reflex port will act like an open box below its resonance – meaning the woofer will jump around excessively with such signals – "the narrow, but wide slot port gives a lower Q resonance, so it doesn't thump at a specific frequency like a lot of small speakers".

Drive unit complement is a 120mm magnesium coned bass/midrange driver and an isoplanar ribbon, offering an 'effective area equivalent to 2.5 times that of a conventional dome', according to AudioSmile. The Kensai is not bi-wireable, the company choosing to fit a single set of high-quality binding posts per speaker.

Currently available finishes are Beech and Walnut, with black or white leatherette neatly and continuously wrapped over the front baffle and rear panel. AudioSmile claim 83dB efficiency, so the Kensai is insensitive and requires a powerful transistor amplifier to produce serious levels.

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT: AudioSmile Kensai
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Standmount loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 5kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 150x250x200mm
FEATURES:
• Aperiodic loading
• Isoplanar ribbon tweeter
• Magnesium alloy coned mid/bass driver with solid copper phase plug
• 83dB sensitivity
DISTRIBUTOR: AudioSmile
TELEPHONE: 07952 478 193
WEBSITE: audiosmile.co.uk

Sound quality

Inspired by a good mid-price solid-state integrated amplifier (in the shape of Moon Audio's i-3) and a clean-sounding Densen B-420 CD player, the AudioSmile speaker works very well, snapping into the 'zone' after a relatively short running in period and quickly establishing itself as an excellent performer. Positioning is extremely straightforward, with 40 degrees toe-in for near-field monitoring and 20 degrees for general lounge or listening room use; thus deployed, this speaker sings.

I was soon struck by the excellent rhythmic timing, tuneful bass and wonderful vocal and instrumental timbre. Indeed, the overall intelligibility across a variety of musical genres came as a great surprise for such a small box. I very quickly learned not to underestimate this design because of its size, and even the price concealed its true abilities – this is a superb mini monitor capable of working with fine and expensive equipment.

I was struck by the excellent timing, tuneful bass and wonderful timbre...

For example, Depeche Mode's *Speak & Spell* album isn't as musically sophisticated as the band's later work, such as the critically acclaimed *Violator*, but there's an innate beauty to Vince Clarke's use of fluid, elegant synthesiser melodies and rhythms. The Kensai locks straight on to this aspect of the music, and everything flows superbly. Bass is wonderfully tuneful, midband clear and treble sweet. *New Life* sounds lovely with a



Q&A

CHANNA VITHANA SPOKE TO AUDIOSMILE'S SIMON ASHTON ABOUT THE KENSAI...



CV: What type of high-frequency unit does the Kensai use and why?

SA: The speaker employs an isoplanar ribbon unit. Although commonly classed as a ribbon, it is closer to the workings of an electrostatic. A Kaladex (high-tech plastic) diaphragm has what are essentially circuit board traces etched on it and these conduct the music signal. Strong magnets are then positioned across the front and back of the unit in a push-pull fashion.

Etching the conductive pattern on to the diaphragm, allows the magnetic field to be picked up from the most linear areas of magnetic field, unlike a traditional all-aluminium ribbon. The majority of standard ribbon tweeters actually have very high distortion and small surface area, which produces the typical shiny sound and necessary high crossover point resulting in poor driver integration.

The Kensai ribbon is quite the opposite, having the lowest distortion of any tweeter of which I'm aware, and a large surface area, allowing a low crossover point and good integration with the mid-woofer. This is why the Kensai can play all genres of music.

The original prototype Kensai was made using a high-quality, soft-dome tweeter, which sounded very nice for gentle music, but became confused with metal and rock. The isoplanar ribbon on the other hand, cut right to the heart of everything I threw at it.

CV: What type of mid/bass unit is used and why?

SA: The mid-woofer is a magnesium alloy unit, which was chosen for having the lowest distortion of all units I tested, while at the same time having excellent headroom and bass extension for such a small item. I generally don't like metal cone woofers because they exhibit a break-up peak which adds a hard edge to the presentation. The Kensai woofer is small and stiff enough that this peak is twice as far out-of-band as a typical six-inch driver, so the sound remains natural throughout the range.

IN SIGHT



- 1 front and rear baffles covered in leatherette
- 2 isoplanar ribbon tweeter gives spectacular highs
- 3 colour-matched driver mounting bolts a nice touch
- 4 magnesium-alloy cone chosen for low distortion
- 5 excellent quality woodwork, hand-crafted in Kent
- 6 mono-wirebinding posts; Audiosmile don't like bi-wiring

HOW IT COMPARES

THERE ARE very few miniature loudspeakers that are directly comparable to the Kensai, with Monitor Audio's £2,600 PL100 being its closest soulmate in design and performance terms. It, too, sports a ribbon tweeter and a metalised cone in its mid/bass unit, and a (real) leather-covered front baffle.

The PL100 is a little bigger and heavier (370x225x285mm, 13kg) than the Kensai, and sounds larger, fuller and fatter – albeit a tad slower and less rhythmically engaging. Think of the Kensai as a stripped-down, superlight version of the PL100 and you're pretty much there.

clear, pulsing musicality that I found truly immersive, those bubbling synthesiser melodies lifting my spirits and putting a big smile on my face.

During all this, I could not detect any harshness at my normal (highish) listening levels. While you'd never call this speaker 'warm' sounding, the Kensai remains even and integrated in a way that's totally at odds with most small loudspeakers. So often you can hear little speakers wheeze and then choke up as the music pushes hard, yet the Audiosmile remains cool until very high volume levels, when it simply begins to compress things slightly, sitting on dynamics. Superb as it is, it isn't not immune from the laws of physics.

Linn's recording of Handel's *Acis and Galatea* (2008), with the Dunedin Consort & Players, is expansive and delicate in equal measure. The vivid and open treble makes for a wonderful expression of space; violins, cellos, double bass, oboes, harpsichord and bassoon are well located, and this openness invited me further into the music, allowing a truly immersive listening experience. Timing is again spot on, everything gaining an effortless rhythmic flow – much like listening to real unamplified music played with instruments where transients are instantaneous. Again, timbre is excellent, giving a believable, tangible sense of instruments playing at a live event. This makes for a coherent sound canvas, which is extremely enjoyable to listen to over protracted periods.

Appetite for Destruction by Guns N' Roses proves no less enjoyable. Of

course, the Kensai will never provide stadium levels of output, but still goes loud cleanly and without protest. The rhythms, melodies and pounding beats are a joy with excellent timing and intricately reproduced rhythm guitars by Slash and Izzy Stradlin. Despite the high levels, these remain clearly intelligible within the bombast of bass, drums and vocals. Again, they don't deliver earth-shaking levels of bass, but what's there, is clean.

Conclusion

An unusual and interesting loudspeaker, the Audiosmile Kensai is not for everyone; users of larger rooms and/or lower powered amplifiers need not apply. Yet in the confined listening rooms of Britain 2012, this loudspeaker works surprisingly well with a light, bright and tight balance. Give it a quality source and a smooth, punchy amplifier and feel yourself grin. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Wonderful speed, musicality and timbre; spacious treble

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Bass limited; compresses at high volumes; needs smooth, powerful amp

BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



WE SAY: This small wonder is an essential audition if space is tight

OVERALL



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Pre- possession

Richard Black tests the preamp-equipped 8200CDQ player/DAC from Audiolab, and finds himself falling in love all over again...

Audiolab's 'basic' CD player, the 8200CD, already does a lot more than just play CDs, equipped as it is with a set of digital inputs including electrical, optical and USB. It also has a lot of internal electronics, with more-than-generous provision of multiple regulated power supplies being a major feature. Nevertheless, Audiolab's chief boffin, John Westlake, felt there was even more he could get into that unassuming chassis, and so the 'CDQ variant came to pass...

The difference implied by the Q is that this model also functions as a preamplifier. To the digital inputs it adds three line-level analogue inputs, and there is also, of course, a volume control. This makes sense, frankly, and indeed plenty of people who own a variable-output DAC are already living without a regular preamp at all. Three analogue inputs may not sound like much, but the five digital ones make this look a lot more like a very flexible device. With so many sources having a digital output, the ratio seems well-chosen.

► DETAILS

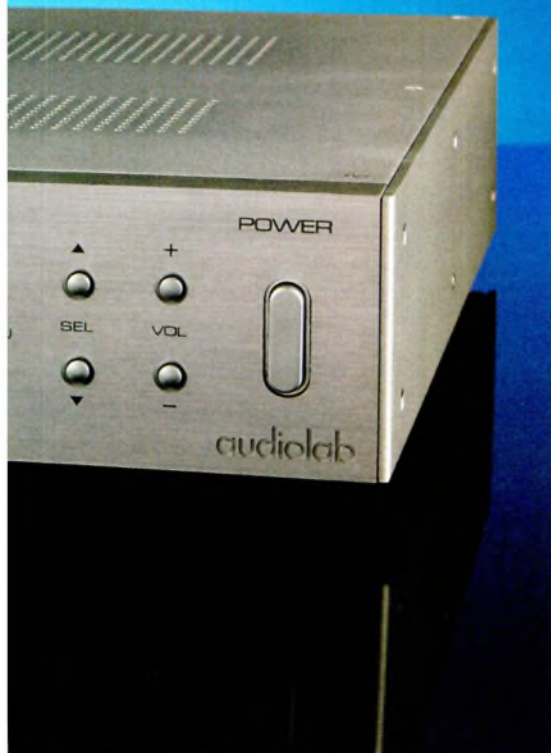
PRODUCT: Audiolab 8200CDQ
ORIGIN: UK/China
TYPE: CD player/DAC/preamp
WEIGHT: 7kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 445x80x305mm
FEATURES:

- Balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (phono) analogue outputs
- Electrical and optical digital outputs
- 2 each electrical and optical digital inputs (max 24-bit/192kHz)
- USB digital input (max. 24-bit/96kHz)
- Can control media player on PC/Mac via USB
- Analogue and digital gain control
- Adjustable input sensitivity

DISTRIBUTOR: IAG
TELEPHONE: 01480 447700
WEBSITE: audiolab.co.uk

There's always some kind of a twist with a John Westlake-designed product, and the one here I think is rather neat. With digital sources, you have a choice of digital or analogue preamplifier mode. The point about this is that the unit includes the necessary gubbins to alter gain in both the digital domain (that's built into the DAC chip anyway) and the analogue, the latter obviously necessary for processing analogue inputs, which aren't converted to digital within the unit. It probably wasn't very much work to implement this choice but it's an ingenious bit of lateral thinking and just one more thing to experiment with in the process of setting up the unit to your taste.

There's plenty more room for experimentation. A lot of this is provided by the multiple digital filters provided. Practically all CD players and DACs since the very earliest days have used digital filtering, otherwise known as upsampling and oversampling (there are subtle distinctions to be made, but in practical terms these are all much the same thing), to avoid the high distortion that can



'ringing' before and after the main impulse event. Arguments have raged over whether that ringing has any audible effects and, rather than prejudging the issue, designers have responded by offering various filter options that have no pre-ringing, or practically no ringing at all, the latter invariably with a frequency response that departs from the traditional ideal. The 8200CDQ takes things to a whole new level of filter tweakery, with seven choices that cover all the basics and more besides.

That's all accessed via the setup menu, which also includes options to set sensitivity for individual inputs, to set individual inputs to 'Home theatre mode' with fixed gain, and to switch off preamp functions entirely for use with an external preamp. There's also a rather arcane option to adjust 'DPLL Bandwidth', which is basically a way of dealing with dodgy digital inputs. Often found on professional kit, it's less common in domestic hi-fi but allows jitter performance to be optimised when digital sources are behaving well (which they can generally be assumed to be, on decent kit), while still giving the user some leeway to accommodate less punctilious equipment.

In keeping with the high-end aspirations of this unit, Audiolab has equipped it with balanced (XLR) outputs alongside the usual unbalanced ones. It's ready for high-end digital sources thanks to its high sample-rate compatibility – 24-bit/192kHz via S/PDIF and 24-bit/96kHz via USB. Like quite a few recent DACs, it makes use of asynchronous mode on USB to remove at a stroke the main source of jitter in that handy but slightly tricky interface, and its bi-directional data capability means you can control suitable media players on your PC or Mac from the 8200CDQ's remote handset. It's not quite full streaming ability, but it's halfway there.

Construction is to a high standard, with more power supplies than you can shake a stick at, high-quality analogue parts,

all-linear power supply and generous heatsinking. There's a Class-A headphone amplifier thrown in for good measure. I've just two, very minor gripes; the display is a little prosaic and the CD transport is a little wheezy on loading. Both do what they're paid to do, though, and at the price it would be mean to complain unduly.

Sound quality

These gripes would be more serious if the Audiolab was presented as a luxury lifestyle product, but instead the company has nailed its colours firmly to the 'sound quality first and last' mast. So it's only fair to judge it on these grounds, in which case I'm really not inclined to moan. There's just so much to like about the 8200CDQ, and precious little that I could imagine disappointing even the fussiest listener.

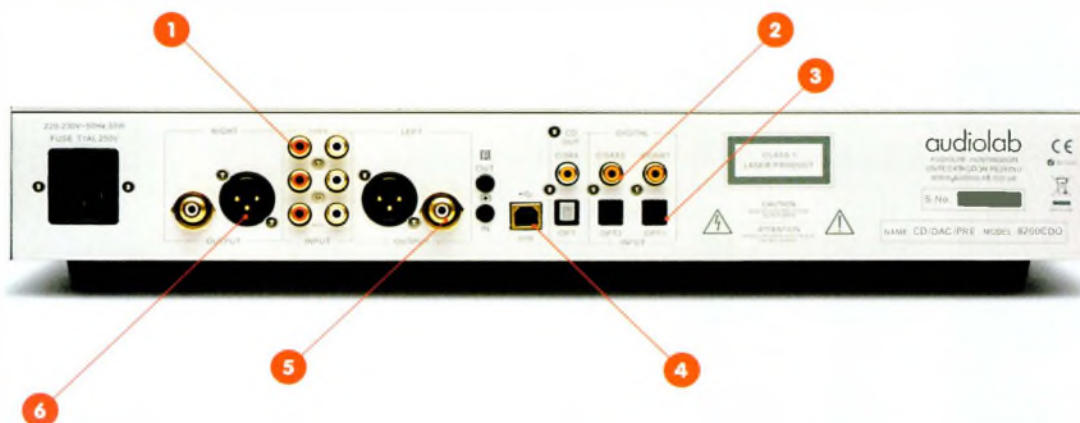
There's an utterly delightful solidity, stability and plausibility to the sound it creates

Most of all, using the unit in any mode, there's an utterly delightful solidity, stability and almost tactile plausibility to the sound it creates. This was something I found again and again, with recordings ranging from solo piano to glam rock to simple ballads. Using highly capable power amps and speakers – including examples of both costing several times as much as the CDQ – I never felt that the Audiolab was a significant limiting factor in the sound reproduction chain: indeed, it helped me identify minor character traits in power amps quite easily, which must say something for its high degree of honesty considering its modest retail price.

result from unfiltered D-A conversion. The distortion is ultrasonic so you (probably) can't hear it directly, but it can play merry hell with amplifiers and loudspeakers, causing audible distortion on the way.

Traditional digital filters aim for a flat response up to 20kHz and next-to-zero response above 24kHz, and they usually have an impulse response which exhibits

CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA phono analogue inputs
- 2 coaxial electrical digital inputs
- 3 TOSLINK optical digital inputs
- 4 asynchronous USB link to PC or Mac
- 5 RCA phono analogue outputs
- 6 XLR balanced outputs; no XLR inputs fitted

Q&A

DAVID PRICE TALKS TO AUDIOLAB DESIGNER JOHN WESTLAKE



DP: What type of DAC is used?

JW: The reference Sabre32 reference 32Bit DAC – ESS' top and most expensive DAC. Apart from the unique 32-bit Hyperstream DAC architecture and Time Domain Jitter Eliminator, from our perspective its advantage is its direct voltage output from the DAC array – no poor quality internal op-amps. In my early twenties I designed one of my very first commercial DACs - the Pink Triangle Da Capo. This was a discrete DAC with 2 DAC elements per channel – 4 DAC elements for a Stereo DAC. The ESS DAC takes this further with 1024 DAC elements for a Stereo DAC – that's 512 DAC elements per channel! Both the Dacapo and ESS's DAC's produce a true voltage output node.

This direct voltage output allows us to passively filter RF products from the digital to analogue conversion process before they can cause potential RF related intermodulation distortion products in the very sensitive front-end circuits of the analogue output stages. Simple passive filtering can only attenuate these RF products to a reduced level – we then use JFETs in the front-end of our Class A analogue stages which offer significant immunity to RF-demodulation. RF leakage from the digital conversion process is one of the main reasons we believe conventional digital designs tend to sound bright.

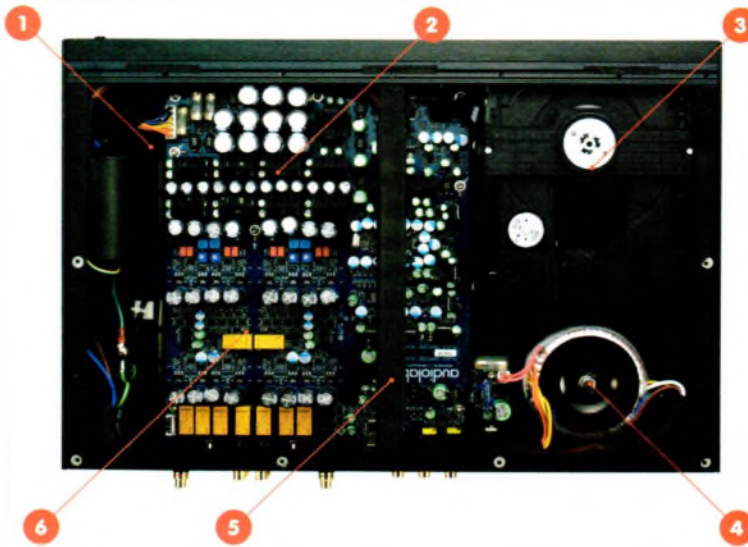
DP: Is the digital filter your own?

JW: Yes – the 'Optimal Spectrum' and (our favourite) 'Optimal Transient' type filters are direct descendants from our earlier R&D on FPGA based filter and modulator structures.

DP: What's the 8200CDQ's best bit?

JW: With over 30 power supply rails (close to 250,000µF of supply decoupling), discrete ultra low short term phase noise clock oscillator, discrete fully balanced Class A output stages, fully balanced analogue preamplifier signal path, and with all active gain stages operating in Class A – we're proud of it all!

IN SIGHT



- 1 quality pressed steel chassis forms stable shell for electronics
- 2 extensive power supply regulation an Audiolab hallmark
- 3 decent quality optical disc mechanism uses custom servo code
- 4 generously sized (for a CD player) toroidal power transformer
- 5 brace bars cuts sound degrading case resonance
- 6 comprehensive preamp section offers wide range of inputs



THE OPTION of adjusting gain in the analogue or digital domain is, as far as I know, unique to this product. In either case, the adjustment is made in 1dB steps and it's clear that the analogue control is not a traditional mechanical potentiometer.

In fact, Audiolab has employed a special-purpose integrated circuit, which adjusts gain precisely in response to digital control signals, though the audio itself is never digitised. The IC passes the audio through an internal amplifier circuit, of which the gain is adjusted by switching internal resistances.

In a sense this isn't particularly purist, and yet the performance of the chip is actually stunning. Digital gain adjustment should be even more pure in principle, though some commentators reckon that the less fiddling done to the data, the better.

I had particular fun with a few oratorio tracks; like grand opera, oratorio involves voices (solo and choral) alongside an orchestra, the whole lineup frequently comprising over one hundred performers. Keeping so many subtly individual sound sources in check without muzzling or homogenising them is clearly quite a feat, and the CDQ managed it consistently off CD, via digital inputs and analogue, too.

Every voice and instrument was clearly defined and precisely located within the overall sound picture, while at the same time I was made very much aware of the scale of the event and its wide dynamic variation.

At the other extreme, a recording I had only made a few days previously, of a very talented young jazz pianist, showed just why I had so enjoyed the recording sessions, with superbly lifelike attack, tone and dynamics bringing the instrument vividly to life.

I also happened to have multiple copies of a couple of rock CDs, so had some fun comparing the CDQ's internal transport with S/PDIF digital inputs and analogue inputs (fed from a dCS DAC). For sure, the similarities outweighed the differences, with some seriously moreish bass extension and, once again, outstanding imaging and solidity. I did hear slight variations between the inputs though, the S/PDIF seeming a touch less fluid, while the analogue input was perhaps just a shade warmer. Obviously, the CD transport and S/PDIF inputs are affected by the digital filter chosen, but with 'optimal

spectrum' engaged and a similar filter on the dCS I wasn't entirely sure I could have picked out the changes every time in a blind-listening test. It's that close.

Filter changes can have quite a marked effect, though it does depend on the music. I couldn't pretend to care too much for the 'optimal transient' flavours, but your mileage may vary: they are certainly direct and forthright. It's just that the sound seems more detailed, in the long term more involving, via 'optimal spectrum'.

As for analogue and digital modes for the preamp, I agree with Audiolab's comment that the former can seem a little warmer – but there's really very, very little in it. What's for sure is that this is one very capable piece of equipment and, for its capabilities, excellent value. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Beautifully involving sound; bass and treble extension beyond reproach

DISLIKE: Analogue inputs not always quite as pure and clear as digital

WE SAY: A highly attractive piece of equipment that does a lot and does it very, very well

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Stand and deliver

Castle's special Anniversary version of the Richmond promises more than previous incarnations, says **Ed Selley**

Castle has been making the Richmond speaker for almost as long as it has existed as a brand. Indeed, the design has survived the takeover of the company by International Audio Group, and weathered the arrival of the newer and highly regarded Knight 2 (HFC 338). Now Castle has launched an Anniversary version of the Richmond seen here

It's still recognisably a Richmond – the layout is a rear-ported two-way, with the main driver inverted over the tweeter. The cabinet is the same overall height at 280mm, but depth has increased to 235mm and the leading edge is now a gentle curve rather than the 90 degree edge of the older models.

The key differences are internal. 'Considerable effort has been spent on reducing internal vibration and interference', says Castle. Additional internal bracing has been added and Bitumen damping pads have been fitted for further deadening.

The drivers are updated versions of the units seen in the preceding Richmond 3. The mid/bass unit is now a 130mm carbon-weave unit, paired with a 19mm polyamide micro-fibre tweeter. According to Castle, these are paired via a crossover that has been tweaked to obtain better performance from the two drivers. Sensitivity is claimed to have been improved to 88dB/W, from the mediocre 86dB/W of the older models. This is a decent figure, but don't think your little single-ended tube amp will drive it – small Castles always need tickling with a reasonably powerful solid-state amplifier for best results.

As is the Castle tradition, fit and finish are very good at the price. At five kilos each, the speaker feels solid and well assembled, and the design still looks timeless. The lacewood veneer has a pleasing colour and a distinctive pattern, which leaves the Richmond Anniversary looking different from more conventional Castle speakers, but attractive nonetheless.

Given the traditional appearance, the decision to use conventional grille lugs rather than magnetic trim tabs seems logical enough, and the grilles themselves are attractive. Unlike previous Richmonds, the grille covers the entire front panel rather than 'missing' a corner to keep the badge visible, as per the older models. The Castle branding on the tweeter surround is a neat touch and arguably nicer than the large gold Castle badge on the speaker's front baffle.

Sound quality

Previous versions of the Richmond won many friends, thanks to an even and unfatiguing sound, and the Anniversary doesn't seek to change

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT: Castle Richmond Anniversary

ORIGIN: UK/China

TYPE: Two-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT: 5kg each

DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 165mm x 280mm x 235mm

FEATURES:

- 130mm carbon weave mid-bass driver
- 19mm Polyamide micro-fibre tweeter
- Bi-wirable
- Lacewood veneer cabinet

DISTRIBUTOR: Castle UK
TELEPHONE: 01480 447700
WEBSITE: castle.uk.com

this formula, but rather focuses on improving other aspects of the performance. So the smoothness remains, but the influence of the enclosure has been reduced further for a more open performance.

Tonality remains extremely good, and the speaker conveys voices and instruments with realism and precision. Placed roughly two metres apart and with a very slight toe in, the Richmond Anniversary also produces a very cohesive soundstage, with excellent placement of musicians and an impressive sense of the recording environment.

Less impressive is the bass – the Richmond is rear ported and placement too close to a back wall does make it more audible. Moving the speaker further out reduces this, but effectively diminishes bass extension. Bass is fast and relatively detailed, but there is little real impact to low notes. Of course, no speaker of such small dimensions is going to rattle your doors or windows, but there are other designs, including Castle's own Knight 2, that have a greater low-end wallop.

I found this lack of bass heft did mean that the best results with the Castle were relatively near-field in smaller rooms. In this context, its very open and even-handed performance and forgiving nature with poorer recordings make the Richmond a pleasure.

The latest revisions are a useful upgrade to an already very talented speaker and the excellent build and handsome appearance should also win it new friends. Its lack of low-end extension limits its use in larger rooms, and for those that need bass to be felt as well as heard, it won't suit. For everybody else, this is a talented and well thought-out speaker that warrants audition. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Smooth, detailed and refined sound. Excellent build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Limited bass extension and no port bungs

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A welcome update to a classic design that retains the key traits, while improving performance

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



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Heading west



Straight from Brooklyn, New York, comes the brand new Grado PS500 headphone. **Richard Black** lives the American dream...

By most standards, £700 is a lot of money to spend on a pair of headphones, yet the PS500 isn't actually Grado's top model – the PS1000 will make a £1,600-shaped hole in your wallet, whereas the GS1000 is a mere bagatelle at just £1,000. And it's not like Grado has a monopoly on the high-end headphone market, as there are numerous rivals from the likes of Sennheiser, Stax and so on...

Still, compared to the world's finest loudspeakers, some of which cost in excess of £50,000, this is still small change. Given that the very best headphones can, in some respects at least, equal the sonics of cost-no-object speakers, £700 spent on this Grado begins to look like better value.

Where then does all that money go? Well, just like phono cartridges, high-end headphones invariably wear the cost underneath the clothes. Your cash goes into superior materials and more sophisticated design, along with painstaking precision assembly and all the concomitant costs. And so it is with the PS500, which superficially resembles far more affordable Grados, but certainly doesn't sound the same to my ears.

Like the GS1000, this model uses mahogany for the earpiece housings, clad with aluminium to make a highly non-resonant composite. Inside, rare-earth magnets combine with gold wire and vented diaphragms.

Cablings is Grado's own, using multiple conductors – and incidentally I have consistently found Grado's headphone cables to transmit the lowest levels of mechanical noise from friction on clothing, and so on.

Few things detract from the pleasure of a fine headphone like a loud, low-frequency racket from such sources. My only gripe regarding build quality though, is the rather hard headband.

Like most Grado headphones, this one sits on the ears rather than resting on the head around them. This isn't everyone's idea of comfort, but while some listeners never get used to it, we have found that most actually do. It's also surprisingly easy to position the headphone correctly, indeed it's pretty hard to get this wrong, meaning the sound is consistent and well balanced every time you wear it.

Sound quality

Superb, in a word. The PS500 has excellent clarity across the midband and a simply glorious bass, while treble is very sweet. Good headphones can open

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Grado PS500
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Dynamic headphone
WEIGHT: 240g
FEATURES:
 • Supra-aural
 • Open-back
 • 32-ohm impedance
 • Vented diaphragm
 • Fixed cable, 175cm
 • 6.3mm jack plug
TELEPHONE: ArmourHome Ltd
TELEPHONE: 01279 501111
WEBSITE: gradolabs.com

up whole new vistas of sound and the Grado does just this. You can hear that much deeper into the mix and easily spot musical details that go unnoticed with other transducers. It makes for a wonderful listening experience.

I was struck by the fine treble quality. There's no question of any curtailment or lack of reach, yet it is completely devoid of harshness and the kind of sibilant excess that is the curse of so many budget designs. As a result, one might momentarily think it lacking, but its true quality soon comes to the fore. Meanwhile, the midband is almost entirely uncoloured. I felt that voices occasionally betray a hint of lower-midrange boost, but that's not necessarily an unpleasant thing.

Bass performance is generous, albeit perhaps not always entirely honest. Depending to some extent on the amplifier you use it seems to have a very slight lift which, in practice, fills out the music without colouring it excessively. It will add some showroom appeal.

Overall, the Grado PS500 comes pretty close to the pricier GS1000; maybe it doesn't have the latter's crystalline clarity, but it is impressively close. It also has most of the '1000's extension at the frequency extremes – that bass is majestic.

The fact that the PS500 seems relatively unfussed about amplifiers (it likes a decent one, but doesn't demand the absolute best) only adds to the considerable appeal of this very impressive product. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Beautifully detailed sound that's rich in frequency extremes

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Supra-aural construction may not be comfortable on all heads

BUILD QUALITY



PRACTICALITY



WE SAY: A classy transducer that's well balanced in every sense

OVERALL



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A.J. van den Hul

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Second coming



Guru's original QM10 was a true music maker, but never the greatest all-rounder. With this in mind, **Jason Kennedy** greets the new QM10two

As we discovered in *Hi-Fi Choice 317*, the original Guru QM10 was a little charmer; even sat next to far more expensive boxes it could carry a tune like few others. Still, it wasn't the world's most transparent two-way and when fed with serious amounts of power had a habit of going out to lunch. In short, what it needed was a beefed up drivetrain, the means by which it could move air more forcefully.

Well, the new QM10two arrives with precisely this. There's a new 20.5mm tweeter (up from 16mm) said to give greater power handling and more bandwidth to boot. This means that rice pudding skins are no longer safe; the quoted power handling has gone up from 60 to 150W. Interestingly the lower limit has also been reduced from 20 to 5W although it's only claimed to be a decibel more sensitive. The main mid/bass driver is still a 100mm unit, but now has what Guru calls a mineral fibre cone, rather than the coated paper found on the Mk1.

It still inhabits an unconventional cabinet that's wider than it is tall, but it now looks rather better thanks to its anodised aluminium

metalwork and lush piano lacquer finish, set over a largely MDF box. It makes for a relatively rigid and unresonant structure. Interestingly, rather than recommending Blu-tack or spikes, the QM10two has soft-foam feet. Guru says these avoid resonances created by the tensions that spikes induce in a cabinet.

As befitting a country famed for its furniture, the Swedish-built Guru is well made; more so than the first QM10, which wasn't quite as impressive in this regard as it might have been – its fit and finish are now much more in line with its price than its predecessor. Like a *Stihl* chainsaw, you're paying a premium for the Scandinavian design, build and style. I love the lacquered finish on both the black and white versions of the QM10two and the metalwork is superbly executed around the drivers, cable terminals and on top.

There's just the one pair of terminals and they only accept 4mm banana plugs, which keeps the back panel clean so that the speaker can be placed close-to-the-wall as recommended. Guru recommends placement across a damped wall with the loudspeakers toed in, so that you can just see the outer panels.

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Guru QM10two
ORIGIN: Sweden
TYPE: Standmount loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 6kg
DIMENSIONS: (HxWxD) 232x300x252mm
FEATURES:
 • Treble driver: 20.5mm soft dome tweeter
 • Bass driver: 102mm mineral fibre cone
 • Sensitivity: 87dB
 • Impedance: 5 ohms
DISTRIBUTOR: Tom Tom Audio
TELEPHONE: 01727 810047
WEBSITE: guruproaudio.com

Sound quality

The QM10 remains a musical rather than an analytical or visceral speaker. While power handling has increased to the point where it can be used in most rooms, it's still not designed to impress with gut-churning bass or skyscraping treble. Rather, it's exceptionally good at getting out of the way and letting the music do its stuff.

The balance is not as obviously transparent as many at the price, but there's a degree of coherence to the sound that makes it so easy to enjoy the recording; you can put hi-fi considerations to one side and relax. Nonetheless it's surprisingly revealing, exposing the changes that higher resolution material brings with ease. It's not bright and shiny, but refreshingly crisp and uncannily devoid of any sense of the mechanical. Near-wall placement often undermines imaging, but the QM10two throws up a well-scaled soundstage that completely obscures the loudspeakers themselves if you just close your eyes and listen.

That it manages to deliver decent bass extension as well from such a compact enclosure is very impressive, the proximity of the wall helps, and the fact that it's designed to be there means you don't lose out on acoustic space.

The key point about this latest iteration of the Guru QM10 is that it has managed to broaden its usability without losing its musical charm; this remains one of the most enjoyable and engaging little loudspeakers on the market. I

It has a direct line to the melody, as well as the overall emotion of the musical event. It opens a window on the soul of the creator – which is something that only the best equipment can deliver. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Sings like a songbird at sunrise, looks all sleek and Scandinavian

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Still won't blow your windows out, but at least it can now move air!

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Unerringly musical box with a keen sense of rhythm. Now better built and svelte-looking, too

FEATURES



OVERALL





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Every now and then manufacturers release Limited Edition models from their ranges. These editions usually represent some of the finest products they make and come collectors items. These are a few we sell.



SRM-600 Ltd. energiser

We had thought that these were no longer available, but STAX have released the last few to the UK after some were not taken up by other markets around the World. Stax have re-allocated them for the UK market and are fully factory issue and full warranty. The original UK allocation was sold in 2010 within a very short timeframe and we could have sold more, so we are particularly pleased to procure what we think is their best sounding, and value for money energiser.



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High End Cable have always appreciated the work Chris has put in on his cable design in particular his work with digital cable. Now this work has reached a pinnacle with the TRØN digital. These unique cables will be made in very few numbers by Chris himself. High End Cable are committed to stocking this cable but delivery can vary due to very limited production levels and each cable will be burned for 240 hours by us prior to shipping.

The TRØN digital cable is a very special product, and the first in the TOMBO compartment of Stereolab's stable of connection products. Designed by Chris Sommovigo and hand built to exacting specifications, TRØN is a truly limited production product

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hi-fi+

Product of the year 2008



X factor

For those wanting improved sound without breaking the bank, Musical Fidelity's mid-nineteen nineties tube buffer X10-D was a godsend, says *Jimmy Hughes*...

You're feeling sad because your hi-fi system suddenly isn't sounding so good these days. Cash is tight, so you're unable to splash out on a new amplifier, or bigger better loudspeakers. If only there was a simple, inexpensive component out there to revitalise your system's sound...

What you want is something that gives a real, tangible and immediate improvement, is dead easy to install, and not too pricey. Actually, make that downright cheap. A magic box, costing peanuts, no less. Could such a device ever really exist?

Well, yes. Launched in the mid-nineteen nineties, at the height of Britpop, Musical Fidelity's X10-D may not have had the popular appeal of Blur or Oasis, but it certainly did amazing things when you played them through it! Here was a pure Class A line stage containing a couple of tubes, intended to fit simply between your CD player and preamp.

By jingo, It worked! Sonically, adding an X10-D seemed to create a sense of space and depth, cleaning up the top-end, while improving focus and detail. It also produced about 1dB of gain, or thereabouts. There were no controls – not even an on/off switch – indeed it was recommended that you left the X10-D switched on all the time. In those carefree, pre-'carbon footprint' times, electricity was almost as cheap as air and so that's what we all did. Although the two tubes were enclosed in a fairly small unventilated case, very little heat was produced, because those glass bottles were extremely modest affairs, not quite 845s!

Of course, those favouring the 'less is more' approach to system building would doubtless frown on a device like the X10-D. After all, it represents an extra link in the chain – one, moreover, that strictly speaking shouldn't be necessary.

But, for those willing and able to put aside purist prejudices, the X10-D could and did inject a certain 'magic' into the sound. It seemed to make the music cleaner and better focused, with improved clarity and superior definition.

Rosy, glowing, tube warmth? No, not exactly. The X10-D operated in pure Class A and technically-speaking measured very well, having a wide bandwidth (10Hz to beyond 100kHz), a flat frequency response, and very low claimed distortion of 0.01 per cent or thereabouts.

While it subtly 'humanised' the sound, it did not add false warmth or richness. Somehow, it seemed to bring bass and treble extremes into equilibrium, creating a cleaner, more homogenous and better-balanced end result.

After adding an X10-D, the treble would still be incisive and detailed, but also smoother and better integrated. High frequencies sounded crisp and clear, but the ear was not assaulted by a welter of fast leading edges that created any sort of sonic imbalance.

So, if your hi-fi was prone to sounding 'toppy', resulting in a harsh fatiguing sound, adding an X10-D was most definitely a step in the right direction. While it couldn't work miracles, it often produced a worthwhile improvement.

The X10-D gave best results with transistorised electronics. It could be used with tubes, but solid state gear benefited more. Most users put it between their CD player and preamp, but it was also worth trying between preamp and power amp.

And the secret behind the X10-D's remarkable performance? Well, for starters it improved the impedance match between components. Its high input impedance meant an easier load for your CD player's output stage, after all.

The X10-D's low output impedance made it better able to 'drive' passively-coupled preamps. When

The X10-D delivered clearly audible benefits that were immediately apparent...

the signal goes straight to the volume control of an amplifier, such an arrangement can present a near short-circuit at low volume settings in some cases.

Tubes tend to deal better with RFI nasties and will thus clean-up any contamination. They're also less affected by any high-frequency 'hash' emanating from the analogue output stage of many CD players.

Whatever the explanation, all that most of us are concerned about is the end result. The X10-D was a hit because it delivered clearly audible benefits that were immediately apparent. Back then it was an inexpensive, fuss-free way to improve your hi-fi system – these days it's well worth a second-hand punt at around £50 on an auction website near you.

The X10-D was a familiar sight to nineties audiophiles, and remains great value today



THE INSIDER
AUDIOPHILE MUSEUM



The Chinese way

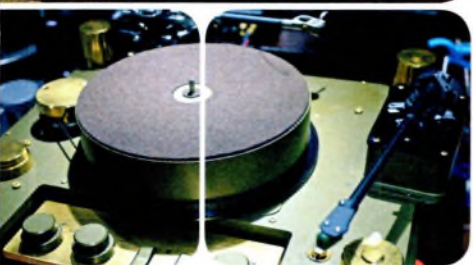
What do you do if you're obsessed with high-end hi-fi, and have so much money that you can buy whatever you like? Simple, you buy whatever you like and put it in a museum!

Jimmy Hughes decamps to the People's Republic of China to see one of the great wonders of the audiophile world...

Back in the nineteen seventies, people used to talk about a mythical, incurable hi-fi disease called 'upgradeitis'. Easily diagnosed, it was the result of getting bitten by something called 'the hi-fi bug'. Once afflicted, you became infected with an unerring, seemingly insatiable, desire to keep improving your hi-fi system, often at vast expense.

The seventies was an acute phase for it, with millions of otherwise healthy men falling victim. For them, hi-fi became an addiction that took over their lives. Sadly (for hi-fi dealers and equipment manufacturers) the hi-fi bug seems to have lost much of its addictive effect in recent years, with customers using the antibiotics of mobile phones, video games and other gadgets to develop an immunity. Indeed, some now believe the disease has been eradicated completely.

Well, here is conclusive proof that it still survives, in a far flung part of the globe. The sufferer is one Mr Li, resident of Guangzhou city in southern China. It all started when he went to visit some of his local specialist hi-fi shops, ▶





whereupon he struck up a rapport with one of the dealers. He duly ended up buying a good mid-level system.

There it might have ended, but within a week he was back looking to upgrade. No longer satisfied, he decided he wanted something better. Vastly better. It was to be the start of an incredible journey into the world of audio. Mr Li was hooked on high-end hi-fi and the rest – as they say – is history.

You got it bad, son!

Mr Li decided to sublimate his desire for hi-fi by opening a museum dedicated to high end. Being a wealthy and successful businessman, he had the funds to buy pretty much any kit he wanted. And just as importantly, as all collectors so deeply understand, he also had the space to house it.

His hi-fi museum is situated on the fifth floor of a hotel-type building in the town of Yang Jiang, Guangdong province. As you come out of the lift, you're greeted by a large glass case containing virtually every LS3-5a loudspeaker ever made – from Rogers, Spondor, Audiomaster, Goodmans, ProAc, and so on. Even veteran BBC studio types won't have seen so many of these things!

However, this is one of the few concessions the museum makes for things small. By its very nature, high end means big; lavish; heavy; extravagant. To mirror this, the museum celebrates products that take things to extremes. Hence the quantity of large loudspeakers from makers such as JBL, Altec, Klipsch, Martin Logan, and so on.

The museum combines static displays with something like eighteen working rooms (fifteen for high end and three for AV) each containing a fully-functional system – including a 3D home cinema set up. It's like visiting an audio fair and walking along a corridor with rooms containing various exhibitors.

Make it big, make it heavy

Mr Li has only been collecting hi-fi for a relatively short period of time, but already he's amassed an amazing array of kit. The

His museum contains the sort of hi-fi systems that for most of us represent a dream purchase...

emphasis tends to be on big heavy amplifiers and loudspeakers, though naturally there are source components, too – turntables, CD players, tuners, cassette decks and open reel tape recorders.

There's even some professional studio items, including a Studer mixing desk, plus Studer and Nagra tape decks. Among the myriad pairs of loudspeakers, I spied some enormous unbranded horn-loaded models that were clearly intended for PA or theatre use. It was a fascinating mix.

The equipment that's set up and working mostly dates from the past fifteen years, but the static display areas contain many earlier items going back to the 1950s. There's even a Victrola gramophone for playing shellac 78s! However, although quite comprehensive, the collection still has a few gaps.

Mr Li is well aware of this. Rome wasn't built in a day, and putting together a collection like this takes time. His life's ambition is simple; to collect every piece of high-end kit ever made. A tall order, but if he carries on buying at this sort of rate, he'll probably achieve his aim.

It would then be possible to have rooms dedicated to equipment from specific periods, thereby demonstrating the ways in which high-end has changed and progressed over the decades. This would be hugely educational, enabling many fascinating comparisons to be made.

Audio heaven on Earth

All told, I spent three days at the museum. Especially impressive was the room featuring Vivid Audio Giya loudspeakers in Ferrari red. These had amazing bite and presence, giving the music an impressive live feel. I also auditioned Mr Li's three home systems. Given the high-quality (and enormous cost)



of many items in the museum, you might well wonder what Mr Li chooses to listen to at home. His museum already contains the sort of hi-fi systems that (for most of us) represent a dream purchase – albeit, only after we'd won the lottery on a rollover week!

While there are a great many highly desirable items in the museum, naturally the kit Mr Li has in his home is even better! Awesome is a much over-used adjective. However, in the context of Mr Li's home hi-fi system, it barely seems adequate. What he's got represents audiophile paradise.

Realising that even the best equipment is compromised unless you have a good room, Mr Li has created three exclusive underground listening dens in the grounds of his house. One room is dedicated to classical music, another for rock and jazz, while the third caters for home cinema.

In Mr Li's home I saw products from some of the world's most expensive and exclusive hi-fi brands – Goldmund, FM Acoustics, Mark Levinson and Cello, to name but a few. Turntable duties were shared between a Clearaudio Statement (a mere £74,000) and a Thorens Reference.

Kharma Chameleon

The system in the classical room features the massive Dutch Kharma Exquisite Grand loudspeakers. Weighing in at 440kg and costing around £200,000, these massive floorstanders were bi-amped with Cello electronics. A Goldmund CD player was the source. This set up is, undoubtedly, the most expensive I've ever listened to.

Indeed, just one of the loudspeakers costs more than double my complete home system. Could such high prices possibly be justified? Fortunately, I wasn't disappointed

More than words



words
that count . . .



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Hi-Fi+ Issue 77 Mar 11 • Hi-Fi+ Best of the Best 2011

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A3



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Style & Performance

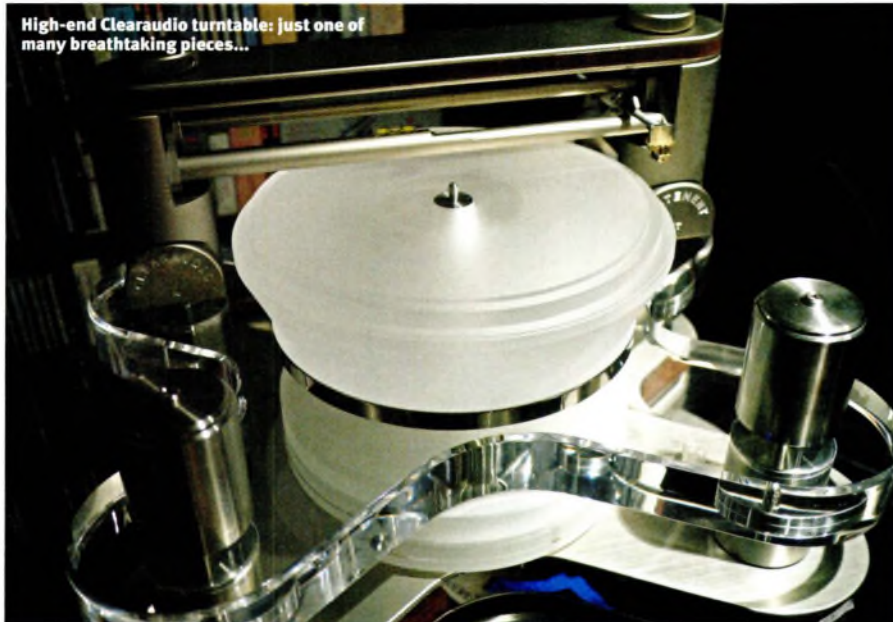
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High-end Clearaudio turntable: just one of many breathtaking pieces...

Having access to such a vast array of equipment, Mr Li likes to ring the changes. New gear seems to arrive on an almost daily basis – either for one of his three home systems, or to go into the museum.

He also has the luxury of a full-time audio technician whose job it is to keep everything running smoothly. In particular, the AV room requires quite a bit of tweaking, and was being worked on more or less constantly while I was there. So it's a full-time job to keep everything up to scratch.

After visiting Mr Li's home, you could be forgiven for thinking you'd suddenly died and gone to hi-fi heaven. It hardly seems possible that such a comprehensive array of gear could be owned by one man. If God has a hi-fi set up, we reckon it might look and sound something like this. ●

KHARMA EXQUISITE GRAND

Mr Li's current loudspeakers are Kharma Exquisite Grands; large floorstanders over six feet tall. They have a symmetrical layout of drive units, with paired drivers either side of a central tweeter to create a virtual point source.

The cabinets are immensely dense and very heavy, weighing around 440kg each. Kharma claim the Exquisite Grand is capable of producing a big sound with massive scale so that large choral and orchestral forces are recreated with ample presence. At the same time, the speakers can sound delicate and subtle.

Tonally, the Exquisite Grand is very smooth and integrated. It delivers a very neutral sort of balance – not in the least bit 'hi-fi'. At the same time there's a crisp immediacy that lets you know this is a speaker equal to whatever the music demands of it. Transients sound very abrupt, as though attack times were extremely fast.

MUSEUM

Entry to Mr Li's hi-fi museum is free, and all are welcome to come and listen. What's in it for Mr Li? Well, he sees the museum as a means of advertising the hardware products (kitchen knives and assorted products) made by his company, and getting people to visit Yang Jiang.

He hopes his museum will attract audiophiles from all around the world. And it's certainly worth taking the trouble to visit. For any red-blooded audiophile, what Mr Li has created is nothing less than the eighth wonder of the world. It's a fantastic advert for high-end audio.

At a time when interest in high end seems to be waning, Mr Li's museum is a powerful reminder of the glories of good hi-fi, and the difference listening to music superbly reproduced can make to the quality of your life. Those able to pay a visit won't be disappointed!

Audio Research Reference phono stage on the sub's bench – it wasn't being used! This system had a crisp immediate sound, and was impressively tactile and detailed.

Dynamic range was wide and it was possible to play music at realistic volume levels with no sense of strain. With the rooms being underground, we were able to listen as loudly as anyone might wish, with no chance of the neighbours being annoyed. Once the doors were closed, sound leakage was minimal.

Watching and listening to an hour or so of Madonna's *Sticky and Sweet* tour in the AV room was mind-blowing – better than being there live! Again, volume levels were high, but the system coped with every extreme.

Once the Madonna concert was rolling, we found it impossible to tear ourselves away, so intense and involving was the experience. Watching a DVD of this concert on a good widescreen TV a few days later only served to emphasise how amazing it had looked and sounded at Mr Li's place.

The DVD was certainly enjoyable, but you weren't drawn into the drama and tension of the concert anything like as much, you could really sense the atmosphere and drama. It was an immensely exciting and thrilling experience. That's why I had to stay till the end of the show!

Now, some audiophiles have a puny music collection, the size and cost of which is inversely proportional to size and cost of their hi-fi system. However, Mr Li's CD collection numbers around 20,000 discs, while his vinyl collection exceeds 50,000! Not bad for someone who only got into hi-fi a decade ago.

The walls of his listening rooms are hidden by shelves containing row after row of CDs from floor to ceiling. And, being totally dedicated to hi-fi, there's nothing in any of the rooms to detract from the experience of listening. No dining table, no TV set; just large comfortable armchairs and a small table for drinks.



Numerous exotic loudspeakers are to be found in the demo room.

with the end result. The music was reproduced with the utmost purity and refinement, sounding focused, yet effortlessly spacious and relaxed.

The soundstage was huge and musically the result was very natural and integrated. It was a powerful performance that was totally clean and crisply-defined. While there was nothing flashy about the presentation, there was power to spare, and there was that sense of solidity and control that marks out high-end gear.

Was it perfect? *Almost*. There was a slight upper bass emphasis on some tracks, but this was the only criticism I could make. Everything else about the sound was wonderful. Mr Li's audio technician is trying to eliminate this problem very soon.

The system in the Jazz room was quite different, but in many ways equally impressive. Speakers were by Venture, driven by FM Acoustics power amps and a Burmester preamp. Sources included a Goldmund Minnesis 38 CD turntable with Orpheus DAC, and an EMM Labs XD51 for SACD.

Turntable was Roksan's TMS with Artemis tonearm and an Ortofon pickup. The phono stage was from Goldmund. I also spied an

S3/5R² NEW

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

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

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Spendor 2011

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DAVID PRICE
EXPERTISE: EDITOR

DP HAS SPENT longer than he'd care to admit buying and upgrading his own hi-fi system, not to mention reviewing thousands of separates over the years.



ED SELLEY
EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

ES HAS SPENT the best part of a decade selling, developing and supporting products from some of the biggest names in audio. Enjoys blogging about his favourite tunes too...



TIM JARMAN
EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

TJ IS AN aerospace engineer by day and a hi-fi hobbyist by night. Refuses to own a mobile phone or anything made by Apple, but has a vast collection of vintage electronics instead.



PATRICK CLEASBY
EXPERTISE: TECH GEEK

PC WORKS as a top-level tech support man at the BBC, when not fiddling with new network music players. Having recently become a born-again vinyl junkie, he's largely responsible for the recent rise in second-hand record prices!

Spin trier

I have about £1,000 to spend on a CD player – I am not interested in streaming as I have a large CD collection and don't want to bother with computers, hard drives, etc.

I know that there are many on the market, from a number of makers such as Arcam, Cyrus and Musical Fidelity, which have received good magazine reviews. But I wonder if I could get a better deal by buying second-hand?

I have seen on eBay some machines from the nineties, which originally cost many thousands, now going for well under £1,000 and, frankly, they've got me interested! After all, the sort of build quality you get from some of these big

Japanese machines seems to put the new £1,000 CD players to shame and, to be honest, they look pretty cool, too.

For example, I saw a Sony CDP-X77ES, which cost £1,200 in 1990 (an old copy of *Hi-Fi Choice*, told me), which is probably over £2,000 in today's money. It is crowded inside with copper plating and special audiophile components. It went for about £500, which seems a bit of a giveaway to me. Is this going to sound as good – or even better than – a new one? Should I buy this instead of a recent machine and just spend the extra cash on CDs?

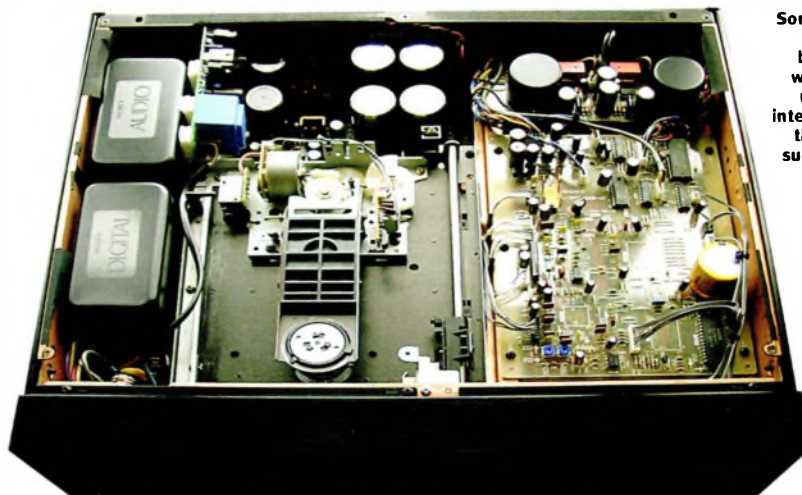
Nick Yates, via email

DP says Hi Nick – good question! First, as you say, on

the plus side your £1,000 would buy you a real tank of a classic CD spinner, the sort of thing you'd see with a Wadia name on it at £8,000 new today.

In addition to the Sony you mention, there's the TEAC VRDS 20 and 30, Denon DCD3560, JVC XL-Z1050 and many more – all fine machines from a time when CD was the thing to have and the Japanese were falling over one another to compete.

As for the sound quality, well that's a good point. The DACs of the nineties weren't as good, with higher distortion, while upsampling wasn't an option then. But other parts of these players, from the disc-drive mechanisms to the power supplies, were done to an extremely high standard.



Sony's 1989 CDP-X77ES is a classic Japanese battleship CD player, with a lovely sound to match that exquisite internal build. But when the laser gives up it's suddenly an expensive piece of junk...

www.hifichoice.co.uk



Snaps, crackles and pops are often easily eradicated by the simple expedient of a carbon-fibre record brush...

The result is that – in some respects, such as bass power and grip – these older high-end machines can beat modern, cheaper, new ones.

In terms of smoothness and overall focus though, the latest generation of players are a league ahead. The result is that you'll get a different sound, I suspect, rather than a comprehensively better or worse one.

So why not save yourself £500 and buy a used classic then? Well, the simple answer is, of course, that you're buying a box of old mechanical and electronic bits. While I love classic hi-fi and use it daily, you have to expect components to fail with age, and if you're not a wizard with a soldering iron, you may come to realise that classic hi-fi ownership isn't for you.

For example, the capacitors in the power supplies will be fading by now (which degrades the sound) and then, of course, they'll fail one day altogether. While replacing this sort of component isn't beyond the reach of a competent repair specialist (for example, ATW Technical Services, 020 8746 2600), what they can't do is to replace obsolete components.

Many older CD players are now being scrapped because the laser has gone, and there are no stocks of replacement ones left. Even machines using certain Philips lasers are ending up in landfill because they can't get new ones. So whether or not you should buy a secondhand

player ultimately becomes a question of finding out whether the laser it uses is still made.

The best way to check this is to click on web resources such as, <http://vasiltech.nm.ru/files/cd-players/CD-Player-DAC-Transport.htm> or www.dcaudio.pl/dac.htm. These will tell you the type of laser

used, then you can Google it to see if there are any vendors worldwide. If there are, then it's likely that specialists such as ATW could source one and fit it for you, along with giving your machine a general recalibration. This done, it would be practically as good as new. But look at your Sony 'X77ES'; it uses a Sony KSS280A, which is no longer available. Effectively then, this Sony could at any time become stunningly made, esoteric-looking scrap metal – when its laser fails. Lasers always do fail, some far sooner than others, so you've got to be prepared for the consequences...

Ultimately, buying any secondhand bit of hi-fi kit is a case of caveat emptor (buyer beware)! I've bought loads of used kit, and about 10 per cent of it fails within days of purchase, another 30 per cent within about a year, while the rest is reliable long term. That's poor odds, but then again it might just be a sign of over-enthusiasm or lack of common sense!

Best to think of a piece of used hi-fi like a used car. It will have an owner who may have cherished it and nurtured it better than his own family, or a monkey who keeps tampering with its insides (in a doomed attempt to tune it) or just neglects it and leaves it rotting in the damp!

If you do buy used, try to get a sense of the owner (did he buy it new?), how much it's been used and where (is he a smoker?), as well as checking, of course, that any important parts are still obtainable. That's why so many people, wisely in my view, buy

new. A nice fresh object with a 12-month warranty and no idiots owning it before you brings real piece of mind. DP

ES says Having little enthusiasm for fixing things, I would be less keen about going for a nigh on twenty-year old CD player. Many of the 'battleship' designs were ferociously complex and their spares situation is now marginal. Whereas running an older turntable is generally pretty simple – not least because so many designs are still in production, a dead mechanism in one of these players will result in you owning a paperweight.

I also feel that some of the reasonably priced digital products that we've seen in the last few months have been sensational. The casework of a Rega DAC, Audiolab CD8200 or Electrocompaniet PD-1 might not be able to stop small arms fire, but they are some of the best digital products I have used at any price and two of them are comfortably in your budget.

Pop music

I'm 82, but sadly not a hi-fi 'buff' in the technical sense. My key interest has always been the music itself, while my earliest hi-fi system included a Goldring Lenco GL78 turntable, an excellent little Norwegian radio with a phono jack and Decca Deram speakers!

A Denon DCD500 CD player came in 1987, whereafter I discovered *Hi-Fi Choice*, which reliably led me to a Rotel RC/RB850 amp and Celef Altus speakers (*Hi-Fi Choice* was my regular monthly magazine from then on).

The end result is my present system – the Rotel RHC/RHB-10 – keeping the RC850 for its phono jack –, Ortofon MC10 Super for the GL78 (which cannot be heard in operation!), van den Hul cables: The Source and The First, and finally my pride and joy – Cabasse Skiff speakers. After all, when someone in your review remarked "at last a real speaker", how could I resist them, even at £1,500 a pair?

In fact, I still think they were a real bargain. So, I won't be changing anything more at my age, or will I?



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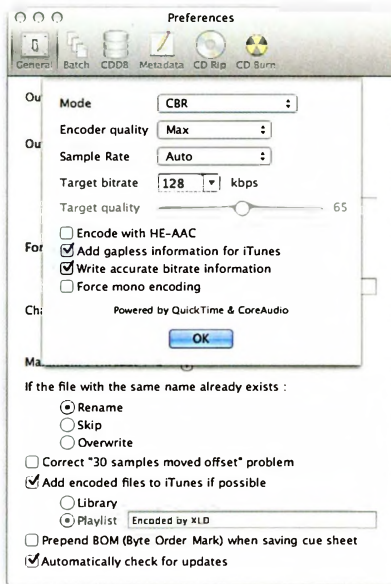
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A5

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SPENDOR



Apps like XLD let you write gapless information for iTunes, so you don't get spaces between album tracks which are supposed to segue into one another...

The point behind this story is that I recently came into a collection of vinyl that belonged to an old family friend which, along with my own collection, now totals over a thousand discs. The only trouble is, that despite including many highly desirable titles, they need a hell of a lot of cleaning.

I bought a Moth record-cleaner (£450 – ouch!), but it doesn't seem to be able to cut the mustard in removing the gunge properly. Perhaps, one of your experts could tell me what the 'gunge' – ticks, clicks and pops – actually is? What causes it and what's the best way to deal with it?

Also what is static? What can be done to remove it and how does the Milty Zerostat really do the business?

L.G Neville, via email

TJ says Assuming the 'clicking' noise isn't actually a permanent physical scratch into the surface of

the disc (which are usually visible, but sometimes surprisingly hard to spot), then the main cause of 'pops' is likely to be dirt trapped in the record grooves.

How well is your Moth record-cleaning machine working? Good RCMs dislocate dirt, then Hoover it up and away from the disc, others seem to simply move the dirt around in the groove.

Try finding a record dealer/shop with a Keith Monks machine, (which is a known – and excellent – quality) and arrange to have some of your discs cleaned there.

When you're sure that your record-cleaning process works, then any remaining clicks will be either the aforementioned groove damage or static.

If the clicks and pops occur in a different place every time you play the record, then they are static-related. A good way of dealing with this is by the use of a carbon-fibre brush (such as Goldring's Super Exstatic Brush at £15). Applying this firmly, as the record rotates on the platter, should counter the build-up of static electricity in the vinyl. Replacing the disc in a clean, new, anti-static sleeve will also help greatly (consider Goldring Exstatic Sleeves at about £20 per 25).

Actually, static will often disappear on its own if you leave the record in its sleeve for a few hours. Turntable manufacturers used to produce decks with alloy platters and carbon-loaded rubber mats to combat static; such things are out of fashion these days, but the GL78 has a lot of metal in it so you should be okay with that, providing that the earthing of the arm is up to scratch. We've found the Milty Zerostat does have some beneficial effect, but I find clean sleeves and a good

antistatic brush are the best, long-term solution.

Finally, cartridge choice can have a large effect of the subjective nuisance of background noise – often a simple moving-magnet cartridge with a well-fettled elliptical stylus gives the best results with poor discs, making sure it's precisely aligned in the headshell, of course.

It also helps to pick a high-quality phono stage with plenty of headroom, so that the noise spikes do not saturate the amplifiers, since the recovery period from such an event is comparatively long, making the clicks sound worse than they really are.

Slipped stream?

With the exploding market for new streamers, network players and USB DACs, I can't help wondering how all these units handle music tracks that blend into one another.

In the early days of MP3, a slight pause between tracks was inevitable. This is extremely important with classical and live recordings. I even have several discs with information between tracks (for example, Dream Theatre's Octavarium between tracks 3 and 4). In the latter case the information was discarded by the rip.

Is there a solution for this extreme case and, more importantly, how do media/network players and streamers handle these issues? Reading your reviews (where I assume you use reference tracks), it doesn't reveal if this is an issue or not.

Thomas Ronnow, Sweden.

PC says Hi Thomas – yes, gapless playback is, of course, essential to enjoy a wide range of music, from classic to dance mixes. In truth, the only sure-fire way to solve it completely is to use the likes of Exact Audio Codec (for the PC) or XLD (for Macs) to rip to single WAV or

FLAC files. CUE files providing the track splits to tell the player where one track has finished and the next has started.

Good streaming servers are able to interpret this at file level, and thus give you seamless playback. Of course, this is fussier than ripping separate tracks, but it's the only totally 'safe' solution to the problem, that works every time. If you don't want to do it this way, then you'll be happy to hear that these days, iTunes caters for smooth playback of track-split files too.

When you're ripping files to WAV or FLAC, the convention is to append the CD track pre-gap information to the start of the following track. The good news is that we are now at the point where PC (Cuetools) and Mac (XLD) tools are available to move album files from discrete to single files and back again, with no damage to musical (or data) integrity, providing you take care to understand how to do it properly.

So you can rip files in a standard way, then make a single gapless version with your own track splits in for playing seamlessly, then convert it back to single files should you wish.

Indeed, XLD can even write iTunes gapless information, when creating AAC, and has a clear warning that excluding pre-gap information from lossless rips makes them unusable for future Accurate Rip analysis.

So the issue is being addressed by various software players and rippers now, but solving can sometimes be fiddly enough to make you pull your vinyl LPs out and take twenty-one minute-sized chunks all over again!

Cambridge Audio NP30 – more and more people are wanting to play music through network streamers such as this...



ES says The practice of 'hiding' a track in the pre-read file of a disc has largely past now – the last I recall finding was 'I Choose Noise' by Hybrid, that hid a track before track one. I don't know of any software that will rip this material – the pre-read file generally isn't copied as it isn't required by a streamer. If you want this material, your only real option is to record the track in real time, convert it to the format of your choice and manually add it to the tracklist of the ripped album.

This isn't to say that streamed music is ruining the practice of 'easter eggs' on albums. It is much easier to experience the astonishing results of combining Radiohead's 'OK Computer' and 'In Rainbows', by alternating tracks from both with a streamer than it ever was with two CDs!

Boom bang-a-bang...

I really enjoyed reading the feature by Jimmy Hughes on the Cambridge P40 amplifier in HFC 353 and thank you for bringing back some wonderful memories.

I sold mine after a few repairs to a friend, who then used the efficient Celestion Ditton 66 loudspeakers, although the amplifier proved far more reliable.

I then upgraded to the P60, which internally was worlds apart, much better PCB, layout and wiring. Although, essentially the beautiful case design remained similar, mine was a semi-matt black, as well as the DC coupling!

I did manage to pop a few transistors, driving my KEF 104s, later upgraded to 104aBs at high volumes. And, yes, the rascal still managed to go DC with one B200 KEF driver smoking nicely and costing a fortune to be matched and replaced at KEF HQ.

Extra heatsinks to some of the To39 cased transistors, as well as some small decoupling capacitors, ensured long-term stability and no more problems.

The combination of the KEFs, Thorens deck and Shure V15 cartridge sounded glorious. The P60 was later sold and a Radford HD250 and SPA50 took pride of place, the KEFs modified and bi-amped by the Radfords.

I'd love to read further nostalgic reviews on the Cambridge range, including the gorgeous P110. How about it Mr. Hughes?

Andy Goloskof, via email

DP says Hi Andy – thanks for your missive, which explains why every classic Cambridge amp owner I've ever met has never been more than clutching distance from a soldering iron – I suppose nothing beats the sweet smell of Ersin Multicore in the morning, eh?

Anyway, good to hear you got great results with your Thorens front end, and do please tell us which ran hotter, your P60's To39 transistors or the EL34 valves in your Radford?

Sorry for teasing – Cambridge amps are an easy target (particularly if you've got a thermal imaging camera). As for the P110, Jimmy is at this very moment bidding for one on eBay for a future feature – no Jimmy, not the Nikon Coolpix version!

ES says Back when I was the technical support for Audio Partnership (parent company of Cambridge Audio), I used to receive quite a few inquiries from owners of some of the older designs. The general rule of thumb, contrary to DP's cruel, barbed words, seemed to be that P40s were almost entirely indestructible, P110s were pretty tough and only the P60 seemed a bit more fragile. They are pretty easy to work on and – as you note – are capable of a very entertaining sound.

DP says Well, I suppose that Captain Scarlet-like indestructibility is only because the last surviving P40s have had so many new components soldered in that there's little of the remaining amp left! Kind of like an old pitchfork with a new handle, shaft and tines? Just to be clear though readers, the modern Cambridge Audio kit is extremely reliable!

System addict

I have just read with great interest your turntable *Blind-listening Group Test* in HFC 354. Unfortunately, as the turntables selected (along with the additional phono stage, cartridge and support) are well out of my price zone, I'll just keep doing the lottery and keep my fingers crossed!

In the meantime, my more modest set-up still gives me great vinyl pleasure. I currently own a lovely mid-1980s Systemdek IIX turntable with a RB250 arm and Goldring 1042 MM cartridge. I have this teamed up with a recently acquired Creek Evo 2 amp and



Should an old nineteen-eighties Systemdek like this be able to beat an excellent modern budget deck?

Epos M22i speakers (the turntable is mounted on its own wall shelf).

I also bought the Creek MM Sequel 40 MM phono card, rather than go with a separate phono amp, but feel that I'm not getting quite as much out of the deck and amp that I could.

It seems a little bit laid-back to me and so I was wondering what external phono stage I should consider, which might offer a little bit more by way of dynamics and fireworks? I'm not saying that what I'm currently enjoying is poor, far from it, but I'm just looking for that little bit extra. Without spending an absolute fortune, can I improve things?

Incidentally, I have recently demoed the new Rega RP3 turntable through a Marantz integrated amp and, as nice as it is, it couldn't beat my Systemdek.

Dave Boden, via email

DP says The new RP3 is a fine deck, but frankly it's less sophisticated a design than your Systemdek, so there's no reason why it should be any better and plenty of reasons why it might be worse. For a start, the RP3 doesn't have any suspension to speak of, and thus requires very careful placement if it is to give of its best. Of course, that's not impossible, but you're talking a good wall-mounted shelf and, of course, you shouldn't play it with the dustcover on as this seems to impair the Rega's sound more than most. I love the Rega Planar 3/F3/RP3 series of decks, but you mustn't forget they're only budget designs and your Systemdek was a bit pricier.

That said, your Systemdek isn't beyond improvement either, and getting it professionally re set

up (find a friendly Linn dealer, although 'off topic' for them they should still be able to fettle it for you), with the emphasis on getting the platter totally level. A new belt would help too (about £15 online) and, of course, cleaning all the points that contact with the belt, such as the motor pulley, will work wonders.

For readers unfamiliar with this deck, it's a very reliable old thing, and should give years more service – you can still pick them up for as little as £50 for an old clunker if you're lucky, but prices are climbing and I've seen good ones now fetching upwards of £300. It's also interesting to note that the Systemdek company has recently restarted, by the sons of the founder Peter Dunlop. Derek and Ramsy's new website is at www.systemdek.co.uk.

Your own machine would respond to a better arm, or at least getting an Origin Live Structural Modification (£87) done to your RB250. It would also respond to a better cartridge in time, such as an Audio Technica AT-OC9/III (£470), although that's for a good while away as you'll need a better phono stage first, as you rightly identify.

My choice would be Icon Audio's PS2 MM (£440), which is an excellent tube design that will give you a bigger and more fuller bodied sound, making the music sound less thin and flat. It's cracking value and an excellent synergistic match for your relatively dry-sounding speakers.

Alternatively, the ANT Audio Kora 3T SE (£495) is a great choice, and would also stand you well for future upgrades. It has a full-bodied and rich sound like the Icon Audio, although slightly less so, but with a

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tighter bass and more low-level detail.

There's a slightly less euphoric feel to its presentation though, but it's still way more musical than almost all other budget transistor designs I've heard. You can specify MM or MC versions.

ES says *Happy to agree with DP on this one! Not only is the Systemdek a well-regarded piece of equipment, the indirect descendent of it, the Audio Note AN TT Two (HFC 353) represents one of the best vinyl packages I have heard. Some thoughtful updates to the Systemdek will yield better results than a complete new turntable.*

You could also consider trying to achieve some of the Audio Note magic by looking into its Arm One, which would fit perfectly on your Systemdek and is an outstandingly well-built and fine-sounding design, that will work with a huge range of cartridges.

Vinyl revival

Over the last few years it has been quite noticeable that vinyl is making a comeback and as a recent OAP, I am delighted to be able to buy new LPs again.

My current system includes five small black boxes from Cyrus and a pair of Spondor SA1 speakers (it sounds really good). I also have a fair collection of LPs that are stacked up in my loft with a Rega 3 (RB300 arm and Rega Super Bias cartridge), that hasn't been used since the arrival of the digital era. So I was really interested in your recent review in HFC 351, about the new Rega RP3 and the subsequent Recommendation badge that it received.

I also recently read a glowing review about Inspire Hi-Fi's Quest upgrade package for the Rega Turntable, so as I'm really keen to include vinyl in my system once again, should I go

for the brand new Rega RP3, or do I opt for the upgrade package from Inspire Hi-Fi?

In normal circumstances when buying new gear I would, of course, demo first and then decide, but in this case I must rely on advice from the experts. Price wise there is little difference, so your help will be most appreciated.

Mike Beattie, via email

DP says *The RP3 turntable is excellent, but while it's a significant upgrade to the old Planar 3, it's certainly not profound. You get a little more speed stability (not unwelcome) and a touch more low-level detail (nice to have), but it's not 'night and day'. Having been personally responsible for a glowing review of Inspire's Quest upgrade package, I can vouch for its efficacy.*

I'd say the differences it brings are greater than those between the old Planar and the new RP3. It felt to me like the stock Planar 3 had grown in stature and started to work out – the sound was appreciably bigger and more 'mature', with greater bass, a smoother treble and a midband that no longer sounded strained or 'pinched'.

Personally I'd go for this option, but you might like to get your arm modded by Origin Live first (see 'System Addict') as this makes the stock Rega far more listenable – then Inspire could always fit your newly upgraded arm as the Quest is built.

Finally, I would junk the Rega Super Bias cartridge. I'm a huge Rega fan, but frankly it's not the best thing they've done – to my ears it sounds thin and reedy and frigid. My choice would be an Audio Technica AT-F3/III



Marantz's long-lost CD52 was once a budget blockbuster, but how does it stack up against today's machines?

(£190), which again would suit the bigger, smoother and more full-bodied sound of your Quest-modded Planar.

Good luck with your own personal vinyl revival Mike; write in and let us know how you get on.

DAC's entertainment

My interest in hi-fi started 13 years ago, with a second-hand Marantz CD52 CD player and an old JVC JAS11G integrated amp and Celestion Ditton 110 speakers for £150 all in.

I thought it sounded absolutely stunning – the JVC was a superb sounding amp and the speakers had a smooth nature. Trouble is, although nice with soul music, things start to get lost very quickly with 1970s rock that I normally listen to. So I am now looking to upgrade everything, and my budget is around £700 per item, with each purchase done separately to build on the last. I am tempted to buy secondhand for a bargain, but would choose new kit if you recommended it.

Do you think my CD player is the weakest link? I was going to upgrade it first, but wonder if I should do things in reverse and the amp and speakers are older still? I don't have a car so it's a chore to go around hi-fi shops and I would rather buy online if I have to buy new, so would value your help greatly.

My music tastes are mostly classic seventies and eighties rock, but also some soul and pop, although I am not into modern, over-produced pop. Finally, my other amp is beginning to crackle when I use the selector switches – it is an old

Rogers Ravensbrook. What do you recommend I do?

Tony Anholt, via email

DP says *Hi Tony – well firstly, you should try spraying your Rogers amp's switchgear with contact cleaner. This works wonders in situations such as this, but you may even find just working the switches a lot (i.e. keep clicking it repeatedly) etches off the oxidation, which is likely the cause of your clicks.*

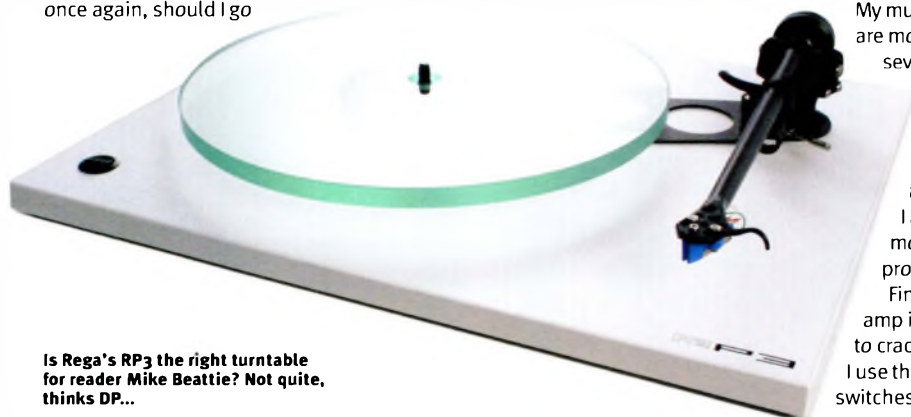
Back to your main system and it seems you have a bit of a mishmash, albeit a well-matched one – something of a happy coincidence given they're from different generations of hi-fi!

The Marantz is a good basic CD spinner, just as good as budget machines today, but with a slightly bass-light sound and a livelier upper mid than you'd get nowadays. Basically you have two choices here – replace the CD player completely or just buy a new DAC.

If your machine shows no signs of poor disc reading, I'd be tempted to do the latter, as there's a lot of choice in this field. Then, when the laser in your Marantz finally expires, you can send it to the great hi-fi shop in the sky and buy yourself, for example, a Cyrus Transport (£750), which should partner your new DAC brilliantly.

So... if you want to get a new DAC, consider the CEntrance DACmini USB – this is a great modern 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC, with a built-in headphone amp. If you want a new £700 CD player, I'd counsel a Cambridge Audio 840C, which would be a real step up from the Marantz, which a smoother, more expansive and detailed sound, and more atmosphere, too.

While your Marantz silver disc spinner is getting on a bit at some twenty years old, your JVC integrated amp is positively paleolithic. I dread to think about the condition of the capacitors in the power supply for example,



Is Rega's RP3 the right turntable for reader Mike Beattie? Not quite, thinks DP...

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Technics' SL1210 turntable is a classic turntable – not cheap rubbish as some people seem to think, says DP!

which are long past their best – a sort of audio equivalent of that salad cream you've had in the fridge for the past five years!

Anyway, it's a testament to this (once) great Japanese company's build quality that something that sold for £100 in the late nineteen seventies is still going. Frankly it's a no brainer – you've got to replace it. My thoughts would be around the Naim Nait 5i (£850) or the matching amp for the aforementioned Cambridge Audio, namely the Azur 840A (£800). The former is deeper, darker and richer sounding, the latter bigger and punchier, with a slightly more vivid upper midband.

But there's loads of choice; consider also the Cyrus 6 XP for around £650. This would give a thinner, drier sound to the Naim, but still very smooth and musical.

As for your speakers, frankly the best thing to do would be to go and audition your ideal source and/or amp combination, through a good pair of modern loudspeakers (such as KEF's Q700) and then come back to us for recommendations, as there are real synergy issues which can't be legislated for until we know what you've got.

Live and direct

Vinyl is my first love – for many years I've had a succession of high-quality disc spinners, including a

Thorens 125/SME3009, a Thorens TD160BC/SME IIS and then a Linn LP12/Rega RB300. Before that I went through almost everything around, from an old AR77XB with a Grado cartridge to a Garrard 401 and Acos Lustre arm. I am currently getting itchy feet and after reading a lot of magazines and skimming around on the internet I am beginning to think I might like a direct drive turntable.

I still can't quite believe I am saying this as everything I was taught in the old hi-fi mags I used to read back in the day said direct drive was rubbish. But I heard one in the National Audio Show a few months ago and I was quite surprised by what reached my ears.

Can you tell me if this is a silly preoccupation of mine, or if there is real merit in direct drives after all? If so, what should I aim to buy; I do realise there's not a lot of choice, especially at my sub-£1,000 budget I suspect it's going to be a lowly DJ deck!

David Hill, via email

DP says Whoohah there! "Lowly DJ deck"? I take it you are referring to the mighty Technics SL1200, which was the only direct drive I saw at Whittlebury. The SL1200's problem was that it was used for DJ applications, and thus came to be associated solely with this purpose. But it was never designed

as a DJ deck; the hi-fi version, the mid-seventies SL120, was sold without arm, but with an SME cutout, with the intention of fitting your own high-quality tonearm.

The SL1200's bundled tonearm is not bad, but can easily be bettered by fitting a Rega tonearm, for example. The reason the deck came to be ubiquitous in DJ applications was its sublime build quality; it was

almost indestructible, could be chucked in the back of a Transit van every night and then work just as well the next day. Frankly, you can't say that of most hi-fi turntables!

The SL1200/SL1210 was only recently deleted from Technics' model range, and until then sold for around £400 – amazing considering the quality of construction. Most people who'd never seen it assumed it was made of plastic, but it was a mixture of a cast-alloy top assembly with rubberised base.

The motor in it was Technics' second best-ever type, reputedly, the only better one being in the SP10/2 broadcast deck used in radio studios worldwide until the advent of CD. The torque from that motor is superb, and the quartz-lock reference rock-solid.

The result is a wonderfully tight, taut and stable sound – frankly it makes the LP12 sound a little vague and ponderous in the timing department, and this is all the more surprising considering that the LP12 measures very well on this score, and sounds great, too. But the stock SL1200 does not comprehensively beat the LP12 in every way – the latter has a far smoother tonality, a silkier treble and a more relaxed rhythmic flow. By contrast the Technics is all fireworks, crashes and bangs – great fun, but tiring.

We'll be running a feature on how to get the best from the

SL1200 in due course, but in the meantime you'd do well to consider the possibility of purchasing a good secondhand one. It's particularly suited to rock and dance music, although classical music sounds surprisingly special, thanks to its mastertape-like speed stability.

So don't dismiss the SL1200 series of decks; they're very special and doubtless future classics. The only issue when buying secondhand is not getting a battered one – because they withstand abuse so well they tend to disguise the indiscretions of their previous owners. So, like classic cars, search out that elusive one lady owner (preferably a nun) who listens to it only on Sundays, just the once after 'Songs of Praise'!

Radioactive

Is FM heading for the scrapheap? I only ask because I am rather fond of it. People call me a fuddy-duddy even though I am only in my mid-twenties and don't want to be associated with the pipe and slippers tendency, but I think it sounds better than DAB and streamed internet radio and is a bit more fun too.

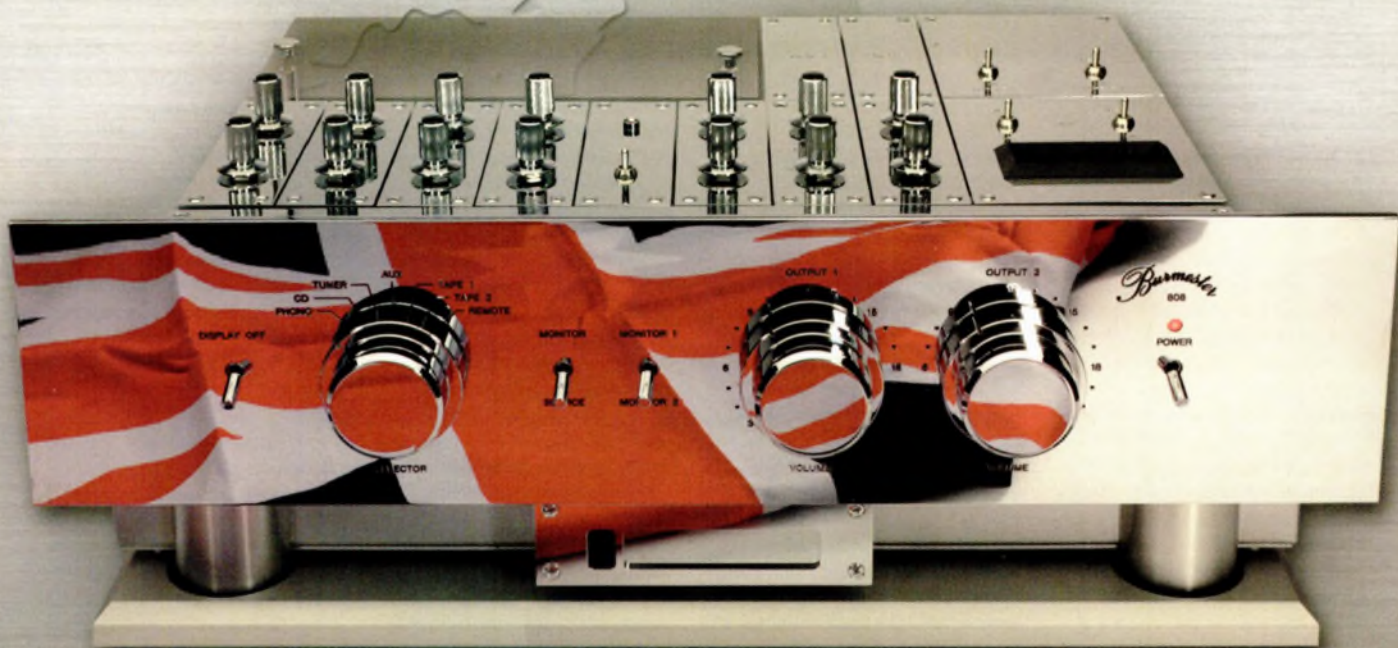
So I need to know if I'd be throwing dosh down the drain buying an FM tuner? I'm particularly into those chunky old Japanese designs from the seventies that you see on the likes of Vintage Knob. They're really cool and are enough to make you want to twiddle with those controls all day and night! But they're getting pricey, some of them, and so is it worth dropping a big chunk of change on one if they're going to be redundant in a year or two?

Guy Greggs, via email

DP says Reports of FM's demise have been greatly exaggerated. It's true that the last government

Is the end for FM nigh? The government has sent out mixed messages in the past, but it's looking like it's got a stay of execution, argues DP





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published a policy document in 2009 called Digital Britain, in which a 'digital radio upgrade' was to be put in effect by 2015. What followed was the Digital Economy Act of 2010, introduced by Lord Mandelson, which featured a raft of legislation on all aspects of life.

Fortunately for FM fans at least, the government itself was 'switched over' recently, and soon after the new regime took office the new minister responsible for broadcasting made the announcement that, "the last Government was committed to a digital radio switchover. What we're announcing today is a Digital Radio Action Plan... (Switchover) will be driven by the listener. There is no compulsion here, there is no date set when we will switch off FM, and nor is there indeed a necessity [to switch off FM]; if it comes to the point [in] 2015 where people are still listening to, particularly the BBC on FM, then that will continue."

As a result, the oft-mooted 'switchover' has been cancelled, or, at least, indefinitely postponed, and FM gets a stay of execution. This means you can access all those lovely sounding Radio 3 broadcasts by the time-honoured frequency modulation system, in a somewhat higher quality than the 96kbps you'd get via Digital Audio Broadcasting. You can also receive Magic FM on analogue too, although I'd politely suggest that sound quality is not a foremost priority of stations such as this – and that DAB won't sound appreciably worse.

Internet radio is, for me, a good compromise; it offers superior sound to DAB, but with the amazing choice too. For serious listening though, it's analogue all the way for me. I'd suggest you try to find a high-quality, late seventies all-analogue tuner to really get the benefit of the analogue transmissions – think along the lines of Pioneer's TX-7800 for around £200, plus a decent roof-mounted aerial if this is at all possible.

ES says I can realistically see FM surviving long enough; its replacement will be internet radio rather than another variant of DAB. Some of the online radio stations that I've been listening to over the last few months have knocked DAB into a cocked hat and provide a realistic alternative to FM. As soon as we crack getting it into cars, it seems the logical way forward.

LETTER OF THE MONTH



I'M SERIOUSLY IMPRESSED BY the quality of some of the hi-res downloads available on the net, from such websites as Linn Records and Society of Sound. After many years of talking about it, finally we have something that sounds better than CD! But still I am not sure if they truly outperform my turntable. It's a humble Michell TecnoDec with a Rega arm and Audio Technica cartridge, but it has a realistic nature to its sound that I still haven't got from 24-bit/96kHz FLAC, which sounds a bit dry and clinical by comparison. So I think that right now, digital still doesn't beat analogue (done well), even if it's studio quality downloads. In fact, I wonder if the vinyl LP will ever be truly bettered, considering it's taken us nearly thirty years to get a significant improvement over CD in the digital domain? ●

Tim Green, via email

DP says Compact Disc has had a few useful boosts during its lifetime, such as HDCD (remember that:) in the early nineties and then SACD (very nice!) a decade later, but it's only the recent advent of 24-bit/96kHz hi-res downloads that have pushed digital forward substantially, in a commercially viable way. And still these don't really better – to my ears at least – a well set up vinyl system. Very recently, we've seen a few 24/192 recordings seeping out on to the market, but they still do not sound dramatically superior to 24/96. To be fair though, it's still early days for digital. It took vinyl an awfully long time to get to the happy place it is now, and digital too has a way to go. Fascinatingly though, the better the two respective formats get, the closer they seem to sound; vinyl becomes ever clearer and cleaner, whereas digital gets sweeter and more musically lucid. Perhaps we can look forward to a day when we'll get the best of both worlds in one easy hit? Don't hold your breath, though...

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Reelin' in the years

HFC's new Editor **David Price** regales us with tales of his hi-fi journey, from the nineteen seventies to now...

Ah, the Space Race – an heroic age where mankind strived to put ever more spacecraft into orbit, and men on the moon. An epic era when technology itself was a thing of beauty...

As a wide-eyed little boy growing up in the nineteen seventies, a time when there seemed to be a rocket blasting off as regularly as an EasyJet Airbus takes off today, I was enraptured. Technology, I remember proudly pronouncing to a school playground friend, was my favourite subject. Fascinated by cars, trains, boats, planes, computers and electronics, it was all one great big field of dreams for a ten year old to play in.

In the seventies, technology announced itself to the world in no uncertain terms. In car design, we had a whole new generation of wedge-shaped supercars. Luminaries such as Giugiaro, Pininfarina and Bertone penned lines that looked like nothing before; the bulbous, organic styles of earlier automobiles were replaced by razor-sharp angles that announced mankind's command of form – bringing new shapes that could never occur in nature.

In electronics, machines were still formidable things that dominated domestic environments – rather than complemented them. Televisions were vast objects back then, even the increasingly popular transistorised variety. Computers too; I visited the Atomic Energy Research Establishment in 1979, and was bedazzled by the computer rooms with their vast tape drives spooling at high speed, flashing lights and the clattering of teleprinters. Those green monitor screens, attached to DEC consoles, were the stuff of science fiction as well as science fact.

These days, of course, such power is available from your Android smartphone, and comes with a twelve-month warranty as standard from your local Currys Digital, but back then you couldn't escape the bulk and physicality of it all. Instead of it fitting around your 'lifestyle', technology simply imposed its own on you!

Warm glow

For yours truly however, hi-fi was the ultimate expression of this, because it was part of my lived reality. A chance visit to a hi-fi shop in 1976, at a time in my young life when I'd just graduated from shoplifting lollipops from the local village store and was achingly ready for a new hobby, planted a seed. I walked in to see stacks of towering,

brushed aluminium-fronted boxes, festooned with buttons and switches, lit with the warm glow of their analogue meters. Even the Bee Gees blasting out didn't dissuade me – I remember being bowled over by rows of Wharfedale E-series speakers, their alloy drive unit trim rings glinting through their fishnet grilles. Hi-fi was, back then, more show than go – vast integrated amps with power meters flapping struggled to muster the same sort of power built into a B&W Zeppelin iPod dock of today. But frankly this didn't matter, as it was the shock and awe of these massive separates with their sparkly fascias and arrays of switchgear that fired up my imagination so.

Nowadays however, I find myself in a new kind of space race – the need to make a harmonious living environment in my own house. As a ten year old, apart from owning a Lotus Esprit (something I later did, then regretted!), my only real ambition in life was to make my living space resemble as closely as possible the shop window of the local Laskys. Now, I feel the opposite – hi-fi is something to be heard and not seen. Technology for its own sake is no longer something to celebrate – it's not about what it is, but what it does...

Interestingly, it seems the rest of world feels the same way too. Indeed, I think they cottoned on to this rather sooner than myself and the rest of the hi-fi industry. Even now in some audiophile circles, describing a bit of kit as a 'lifestyle' product is a put-down of epic proportions. Brands like B&O and Bose are ritually ridiculed, as we hi-fi purists walk on by with an air of superiority. But it's increasingly the case that these are the only audio stores on the high street. There's a message in there somewhere, methinks...

That's why I applaud the industry's embrace of 'style systems', 'one boxers' or 'all-in-ones'. Call them what you will, but they're a wholly good thing. Finally, after years of failing to read the commercial weather, mainstream hi-fi manufacturers are making lovely sounding, pretty looking systems that don't take over your living room. The buying public won't applaud us for this, they'll just wonder *what took us so long?* You and I, dear reader, can still have our fun with sexy separates in the meantime, while discerning casual buyers can experience a taste of the high life with quality one-box systems. Let's hope the market for them takes off!

I remember being bowled over by rows of Wharfedale E-series speakers, their alloy drive unit trims glinting through their fishnet grilles. Hi-fi was, back then, more show than go...



DAVID PRICE
Audiophile obsessive, record collector
and *Hi-Fi Choice* editor

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Will the rise of style systems usher in the end of the audiophile era? Tell us your thoughts: letters@hifichoice.co.uk

Impending process

Cables are a controversial subject: do they make a difference? **Richard Black** investigates one way in which they do...

The sad death in November of Tommy Jenving, founder and proprietor of Supra Cables, prompts us to reflect that in the thirty-five years since Supra was set up as just about the first specialist audiophile cable manufacturer, we have not fully figured out what it is about cables that makes them sound 'different'. Those inverted commas acknowledge that fact that, indeed, not all commentators accept that cables do sound different, within sensible bounds of design. Some say we are all kidding ourselves; some, that differences are due to the way equipment at either end of a cable reacts to the cable's electrical characteristics.

As usual, the truth is almost certainly somewhere in-between. From a scientific/engineering viewpoint, there have been many theories, hypotheses and outright guesses at what makes for a good cable, but one particular bit of electronics engineering is often dragged into the discussion without full explanation: impedance matching.

The whole concept of impedance matching is rather arcane and far from being intuitively obvious, even if you know a bit about electronics. Impedance means the relationship between voltage and current in a circuit. A simple resistor has a constant impedance, meaning that a higher voltage causes a higher current to flow through it. A capacitor or inductor has a frequency-dependent impedance. At DC, a cable has next to no impedance – you generally specify a cable so that current flows freely in it. A cable with a finite impedance sounds like a bad idea. Surely you would be losing energy every inch of the way in one of those?

It turns out though, that at very high frequencies a cable *does* have a finite impedance, and that means from one conductor to the other. Actually at DC the impedance from one conductor to the other should be infinite, or current is leaking across, and in most real cables that's effectively true. At radio frequencies, however, the series inductance (tendency of the cable's conductors to resist the flow of rapidly-alternating current) and shunt capacitance (tendency of the cable's insulator to allow a flow of rapidly-alternating current) interact to make it appear that there is a fixed resistance between the conductors.

Impedance matching

Unlike a real resistor, this impedance doesn't actually dissipate any energy. But funny things happen around it. Most importantly, if at least one of the ends of the cable is not terminated

in the same impedance, high-frequency alternating current doesn't simply travel down the cable and get absorbed by the load, as is the case at DC. Instead, it bounces back along the cable, giving an effect called 'ringing'. This does cause signal loss and all sorts of undesirable side effects, even damage to equipment.

I must stress though, that this only really applies at very high frequencies, where the wavelength of the signal is comparable to the length of the cable. For a cable one-metre long, that means a minimum of 50MHz (the frequency at which a quarter-wavelength equals the cable length). That's over two-thousand times the highest frequency we can hear. Hence the argument over whether it's significant, even slightly, in audio applications...

The funny thing is, however, that if you model a cable as simply one series inductance (plus a little resistance) and one shunt capacitance, and analyse its behaviour, the flattest frequency response is achieved when impedance is matched at at least one end. It's neither useful nor correct to go on about 'signal reflections' such as happen at radio frequencies, but even without invoking such things, impedance matching turns out to be valid at any frequency. That doesn't mean it's necessary though, as the degree of frequency response imperfection we're looking at without it may be tiny fractions of a dB. In addition, the output driving the cable 'sees' a purely resistive load, which is generally best for ensuring predictable behaviour.

In digital audio interfaces, where signal frequencies are certainly into the MHz range, impedance matching is standard practice, at least approximately. It's rare in analogue interfaces, not least because it assumes a load-driving ability beyond the reach of most line outputs, while in speaker cables it involves very high capacitance which is tricky to implement. All the same, it can be done and, while possibly overkill, allows one to say that one more 'i' has been dotted or another 't' crossed – always a nice feeling!



From a scientific viewpoint, there have been so many theories, hypotheses and outright guesses at what makes a good cable...



RICHARD BLACK

Prolific musician, talented recording engineer and experienced reviewer

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do cables soup up your sound, or just tie up your upgrading budget? What's your experience? letters@hifichoice.co.uk

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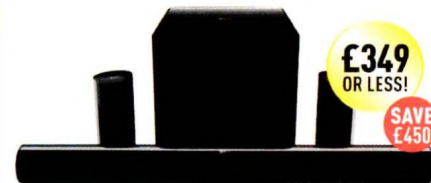
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Cheap and cheerful

The audiojumble is a weird world of audiophile wonder.

Tim Jarman proffers some advice on how to pick a bargain...

Everyone knows the traditional way to buy hi-fi. You read the reviews then go to the dealer. There, you listen carefully on the demo room's comfy sofa, gulp down the rich roast and nibble at the Hob Nobs, then finally make your choice, pay and go. This process is almost ideal, and works far more successfully than the buy-in-haste, regret-at-your-leisure model of online hi-fi shopping that so many are hellbent on following these days.

But still, there is another way. Actually, it's not really a realistic alternative to buying new through a good dealer – instead it's for those who either want something they don't make any more, or who are a bit short of cash, or indeed both! In this case, what you need to do is to make a pilgrimage to an audiojumble. For those who've never been, the audiojumble is just like a jumble sale or a car boot, except that all the stalls are piled high with old hi-fi gear [or junk, depending on your point of view –Ed.].

Whether this sounds like heaven or hell to you, every proper audiophile should go at least once, if nothing else it will make you feel not quite so bad the next time your local dealer induces you to use your 'flexible friend' more than you'd hoped! At the audiojumble, price structures are very different – for the cost of a starter cable at a dealer you can emerge covering under any number of dusty, smoke-encrusted 'classic' hi-fi separates, which may or may not work, depending on the cruel hand of fate...

Bargain hunting

Because audio equipment doesn't like getting wet, audiojumbles are usually held indoors, the provincial theatre or sports hall being the favoured types of venue. The really serious turn up early and pay a considerable premium to get first pick of the stuff, but for the beginner this is not recommended; instead I suggest that you bide your time and get in as early as you can on the cheaper 'late' rate.

The other thing the beginner shouldn't do is to take too much money; it is best to treat the first visit as a cultural introduction or a reconnaissance mission. Just look around and see how it all works, watch the deals being done and see what sells quickly and what doesn't. Remember that there are no auditions here; everything is 'sold as seen', so you need to learn how to tell the gems from the junk with little more than a glance.

This isn't as hard as it sounds, well cared for original examples still stand out, even in all the crowds and confusion that are an integral part of

the audiojumble experience. It's not that different to buying an old used car – if it looks like tat and smells like tat, then don't be surprised if it is tat!

Realistic expectations is also important. If you think you are going to bag an LP12 for a tenner or a nice Leak Stereo 20 for twenty quid then you will surely be disappointed, popular stuff is always well priced. But there are still a few real bargains to be had in this sphere. My advice is to go for solid, reliable, but forgotten models to start with, most of which will be between twenty and thirty years old, and Japanese.

Tuners are a great first audiojumble buy, there are always loads to choose from and as there is little to go wrong the chances of finding something useful are high. Also good to look out for are styli, blank media, documentation and records, all of which are usually sensibly priced.

More expensive items are best dealt with by taking the seller's telephone number and arranging a private viewing/audition after the show, at this level you really do need to be able to check that everything is working and above board.

My top tip is always look under the tables; this is where the real bargains lurk. Almost everything gets cheaper as the day draws to a close as the sellers start to think about loading all the unsold kit back into the car to take home again, so wait as long as you dare before putting your offer in, unless you've found something that you've been after for years and that will finally make your system (or life) complete! The more events you go to the easier it will get and by this stage your house will probably be full of junk, but don't worry, just get yourself a stall at the next audiojumble and sell it all to someone else!



The audiojumble experience is not that different to buying an old car – if it looks like tat and smells like tat, then don't be surprised if it is tat!



TIM JARMAN

Electronics engineer, classic kit collector and author of **Beocentral.com** and **Walkmancentral.com**

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Shaffled any bargains at the audiojumble? Why not tell us what you got?
letters@hifichoice.co.uk

Match making

Jimmy Hughes argues that there's more to getting a great system sound than sparkly bass, treble and midband...

No doubt about it. We all want better sound. That goes without saying. But what exactly do we mean by better? Louder, sharper, faster, cleaner, deeper? For many, better means having more of what they already have. But is that it?

Of course, getting your hi-fi to sound louder or sharper isn't in itself a bad thing. Trouble is, you get used to such 'improvements' very quickly. It's like travelling at high speed; exhilarating at first, but all too soon the sensation of speed vanishes. More worthwhile, in my view, are the sort of changes and improvements that grant you extra insight into the music. Sometimes you listen to a piece of music and everything suddenly makes sense, as you find you're able to follow the ebb and flow of the performance.

Good music usually has a narrative. A hi-fi system determines how readily you're able to discern this. A simple test of a hi-fi system's worth is whether or not it enables you to get inside a new and unfamiliar piece of music the first time you listen to it. If you have to play a new album a dozen or more times before it starts to make sense, either the music's very difficult, it's risible, or your hi-fi system isn't communicating. But what exactly is it that makes a hi-fi system communicate?

Having quality individual components is important, but not essential; we've all encountered hugely expensive systems that sounded disappointing – a group of talented all-stars failing to gel as a team. Working-well together is far more important. But it goes further than that. Your chosen system also needs to work well in your listening room. Sad to say, getting a great sound is partly down to luck – having the right items, correctly set-up, in a sympathetic room.

The penny drops

Curiously, whether or not a hi-fi system allows you to discern the narrative in music is not always immediately apparent when you first listen. It sort of creeps up on you. Often, a period of time is required before the penny drops. A day or two after you replaced your speaker cables, or installed that new mains conditioner, you suddenly notice the music casting a spell and drawing you in as never before. Is it imagination, or has there been a profound shift in performance? Sure, you thought you heard a worthwhile improvement in clarity and detail when you first made the change. But now you're hearing a difference that's deeper and more fundamental – something difficult to put into words.

Suddenly, the music seems to mean more. Rather than just a collection of sounds, you sense the connectedness of each individual instrument and voice. The performance coheres, resulting in something greater than the sum of the parts. Annoyingly, this ability to recreate the ebb and flow of the music is not determined by hi-fi things like floor-shaking bass, or brilliant scintillating highs. Nor is it related to how loud you're able to play things.

So, what is it that gives a hi-fi system the *X Factor*? Frankly, it's something of a mystery; frustratingly elusive to pin down. But usually it's a combination of several things...

An even balance between bass and treble extremes is a good starting point. Wide bandwidth may be desirable, but a fast extended top-end is not beneficial unless matched by equally capable low frequency performance. A natural unexaggerated tonal balance is advantageous. While a bright forward peaky sound is often exciting and superficially impressive, it risks tiring the ear. Accurate timing is essential in order to recreate rhythmic thrust and forward momentum. Last but not least; clarity. Can two or three voices sing out, yet retain their separation and individuality? Can you always hear subtle background instruments behind the leading instrument or voice, no matter how dominant the latter might be?

Being able to follow every subtle strand at all times is key to this. It means your ear can track each part of the music with much greater ease, thereby making the experience of listening comfortable and relaxing, as well as informative.



Being able to follow every subtle strand in the music at all times is key to a comfortable and relaxing listening experience...



JIMMY HUGHES
Classical music buff, sage audiophile and hi-fi reviewer of four decades standing

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
Does your system do what you bought it for? Tell us at: letters@hifichoice.co.uk

Après ski

Yamaha's TC-800GL 'ski-slope' cassette deck blazed a new trail for tape in the early 1970s, says *Tim Jarman...*

Were this the very first issue of *Hi-Fi Choice*, we'd no doubt be running an expensive high-end network music player on the front cover. Inside, there would be copious coverage of digital streaming solutions and hi-res downloads. Warp back thirty-seven years to when *Hi-Fi Choice* really did launch, and there was only going to be one cover star – the sexiest, sassiest product of the moment, Yamaha's TC-800GL cassette deck...

In 1974, 'Compact Cassette' was the word on everyone's lips, just as streamers are now. Indeed, there are interesting parallels; streamers have their origins in lowly compressed file formats (the very first Squeezebox primarily played MP3) and cassette had also hitherto been a lo-fi dictation medium, not originally purposed for audiophile use.

The Yamaha TC-800GL was at the vanguard of the new wave of decks that changed all this, bringing high style and fine sonics to the previously

overlooked little tape format. A stunning machine representing the spirit of the age, it was the perfect product for our very first issue.

The early nineteen seventies was a high time for Yamaha. A company very much on the ascendent, it had just launched an exotic new V-FET power amplifier (the B-1), loudspeakers using high-tech Beryllium drive units (NS-1000) and, of course, one of the best FM tuners ever made (CT-7000). The TC-800GL was emphatically *not* designed just to make up the numbers in the corporate product portfolio.

For styling, as was the vogue in the Japanese auto industry back then, Yamaha looked to Italy. For this project it hired industrial designer Mario Bellini, the chief design consultant to the office equipment manufacturer Olivetti, to come up with a bold new look for a cabinet to house the latest Japanese electronics. Like much of Bellini's work the TC-800GL's most noticeable feature was an inclined control panel, whose

purpose was to make the controls clear and usable, whether the machine was placed on a high shelf or a low table.

In colour, materials and detailing the deck looked more European than Japanese. Removing the usual plastic wood, chintzy anodised aluminium and fussy graphics, somehow elevated it above the Oriental norm. Interesting parallels can be drawn with Bellini's ET 55P adding machine for Olivetti, which shares basic cues, colours and

Yamaha's TC-800GL brought high style and fine sonics to the previously overlooked cassette format...

With its wedge profile and unusual slider controls, the TC-800GL was a bold design statement back in 1974





Cloudbusting

It's only months since the advent of Apple's Cloud and the Cupertino company has now extended the concept with iTunes Match. **Patrick Cleasby** signs up...



Apple, just in case you hadn't noticed, wants to be a key player in your music listening lifestyle.

Anyone with even a passing interest in consumer audio technology will have noticed by now that the late Steve Jobs' corporation has been getting progressively closer to being a 'one stop shop' for your music purchasing, storage and even (to a lesser extent) playing.

First we had the iPod, and the iTunes software that linked to it so seamlessly, then it was the iTunes Music Store which made – arguably for the first time – buying music online simple and safe. Then came, more recently, the iCloud which began to store lots of your digital lifestyle data on a virtual 'cloud'. This meant that whatever your Apple device, all your stuff was there for you effortlessly.

Well, meet iTunes Match – the logical result of living in the iCloud. Essentially, it's MobileMe for music lovers, giving you easy access to all your iTunes music across a variety of mobile machines, all managed for you by that great

digital music librarian in the sky (well, in truth this amounts to some clever software and a welter of massive data farms, likely located in the middle of a desert, somewhere)!

Make no mistake – while on the face of it iTunes Match is just another handy extra feature that your Apple device will possess – this is a step change in the development of music distribution and use. It's another example of the power of Steve Jobs' will over the US recording industry. Lest we forget, he dragged them (kicking and screaming in some cases) into using the internet to sell music – with customary Apple ease-of-use, of course. And then he persuaded them to drop the requirement for our downloaded tracks to use Digital Rights Management. Finally, he has got the American music industry on board with the central concept of iTunes Match.

Having been available in the US for a few months as a \$25 per person per year 'subscription' model, it's now here in the UK for £21.99. Unlike Spotify, you are not

subscribing to all the music you can eat, you are subscribing to all your own music, any time, any place, anywhere! I can just hear the sound of salespeople the world over gnashing away their teeth at the thought of charging people for what they've already got!

The point is, of course, that it's *much* more than that. You can allocate ten devices, five of which can be computers, to access shiny new, highish quality, DRM-free versions of your existing music collection (up to 25,000 tracks, not including iTunes purchases). This saves you endless faffing around transferring files across machines, bringing all your music to your fingertips, wherever you may be and whatever machine you're using.

Fascinatingly, Apple (and implicitly the Recording Industry Association of America) have adopted a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach to where all those tracks came from. So even if, let's say, some of your older MP3s came into your possession through certain file sharing sites which have subsequently been adjudged



to have been highly illegal (you know the ones!), Apple will replace them with kosher ones, presumably returning some cash to the beleaguered industry!

The downside is that currently what Apple are offering you is its 'iTunes Plus' quality from the iCloud. This means 256kbps AAC, which is very decent sound as compressed files go, but it's still a good way from CD-quality – frequency extremes are a little curtailed, stage depth slightly flattened, and there's a loss of atmosphere and low level detail. Even files in lower bitrates, or different formats, will be all 'levelled up' to 256kbps, which is good news. But there's still a question mark about Apple Lossless (ALAC); in late October Apple made this previously proprietary codec truly open source. This begs the question of where they're next going to back up the music industry's desire to scrap CD, move to lossless (and hopefully even 24-bit) internet sales...

Personally my iTunes library building effectively ceased five or so years ago; since then I have since been running up a FLAC version of it because of the superior sound possible and, of course, FLAC's good metadata handling. But for the purposes of this feature I revisited my iTunes collection, digging out a

terabyte of Apple Lossless, chopping it down to just shy of 25,000 tracks in order to 'stress test' the iTunes Match process. What I did not do is carefully prepare my metadata tags, as I knew they were in pretty good shape, being almost exclusively the result of 2004-era iTunes lossless rips from CD.

Others won't be so lucky and may have less complete tagging; in this case there are tools available online to help give better Matching. I can't stress enough how important it is to get your metadata as accurate as possible, because it speeds the iTunes Matching process. So if you've got loads of old MP3s of – shall we say – dubious parentage, then it's definitely a good idea to clean up the track names as best you can.

Getting going

For such a big thing, the iTunes Match process is ridiculously easy to initiate, with just one menu option to turn it on. This done, however, it takes a significant amount of time to process at the maximum library size – effectively a weekend. Saturday daytime is the library analysis time, Saturday night is the Match run, and Sunday is left for the fiddly process of dealing with exceptions. It attempts to bulk

upload your unmatched tracks, but appears to actually put the master version in the Cloud – so if you've got lots of big Apple Lossless files, it takes ages. (I do wonder whether this will one day mean we can get Lossless versions of tracks we only ever previously had in compressed format – that would be a gift to audiophiles). At this point, you also have to get familiar with the new iTunes column of iCloud Status – 'errors' can be forced to upload using group selects and context menus.

You are subscribing to your own music, any time, any place, anywhere...

The joy of iTunes Match is, of course, that depending on the quality of your metadata tags, if iTunes recognises your tracks and has them, Apple don't have to hold them separately for each customer, and neither does the customer have to upload them as part of the Match process. You simply get down the master 256kbps version from iTunes – and increasingly this will not have been created from a CD rip, but from a nice high-quality 24-bit master.

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by Jason Kennedy
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And now to testing the many ways in which iCloud music tracks can be downloaded. On a personal level, the new iTunes Match system has justified my decision not to spend all that extra money on a 64GB iPhone 4S – as my 16GB model now proudly boasts that it ‘contains’ 25,000 tracks! What it means is that once logged into the iTunes Music Store, and with the option set to display all Cloud tracks not just the ones on the device, any time I am on wi-fi I can download any of my albums at will – and they will remain on the device until it fills up, in which case the least recently used will drop off again.

In practice this works pretty much flawlessly. Tracks not yet downloaded have the Cloud logo next to them, and once you tap to download, the familiar Store download process kicks in – a little play button is surrounded by a rapidly-filling circular download progress icon. I downloaded the first three Thomas Dolby albums (all matched, not uploaded), fired up my Etymotic ER4i earphones with custom moulds and actually listened to an iPhone for one of the first times ever...

I was delighted with the results. While the device is brightly voiced, I listened to all three albums without getting fatigued and skipping, so the quality of the Matched files is very good. The one caveat is that the *Golden Age of Wireless* and *The Flat Earth* albums weren't remasters in my original, but sounded like the remasters in the iCloud version – as evidenced by the fact that *Astronauts and Heretics*, as yet unremastered, sounded way quieter. This will annoy some purists, but it can be dealt with by deleting the matched Cloud version, tagging differently and forcing an upload of the less compressed original versions.

Finally, to test how the uploads based on my own rips sound, I auditioned The Bathers' and

Sweet Deceit, the ornate obtuseness of Chris Thompson's baritone voice and the rococo arrangements were beautifully represented in the 256kbps version iTunes had made for me, with great percussion placements and a rich bass tone. The experience of finding all this conveniently accessible music enjoyable has continued during the weeks I have been using the system. Indeed it's proved very hard to fault in any meaningful way.

To all intents and purposes the iPad 2 functionality replicates the experience on the iPhone 4S – after all the memory, processing power and network support are almost identical; the iTunes Match switches in the Settings app certainly are. Not being a serious user of music on the device I was barely familiar with the new iOS5 Music app layout, but the very familiar and easy-to-use iTunes Music Store download system is again evident here, too. As with the iPhone, filling the 16GB iPad with music is an overnight job. Sound quality is also comparable.

What would really seal it for the audiophile would be the addition of lossless and true 24-bit support.

The third iOS platform that is fully integrated with the iCloud is the latest small black Apple TV. I run mine over 802.11n Airport in common with the other devices, and once logged into iTunes, the index of tracks loaded surprisingly quickly. While the few music videos of mine in the iCloud use the familiar 'start playing once some of the movie cache progress bar has filled' approach, iTunes Match tracks give the appearance of an almost immediate start once selected.

Finally, going back to the 'old school' approach of having an entire music library on your computer, what iTunes Match obviously offers (and much less laboriously than the ridiculously time-consuming process of transcoding an entire lossless library down to AAC yourself for mobile use) is the opportunity to download all your iCloud tracks to another computer, to have a compressed version of the entire library. You could even then keep all of that and not resubscribe, but why lose the convenience? Like broadband internet this is the sort of thing you won't miss until you're forced to live without it for a while.

Conclusion

If you subscribe to the iWay of life and are a music enthusiast, then iTunes Match is a no-brainer; the £21.99 subscription is a worthwhile one, and will continue to be year after year. What would really seal it for the audiophile community would be the addition of Apple Lossless and true 24-bit support. This would make iTunes Match a virtually compulsory purchase, and part of the gateway to 'hi-res' music that we've all been waiting for – someone needs to structure it and it may as well be Apple! Were this to happen, I for one would be on Cloud Nine.

Despite the occasional niggle with bulk processing and network performance then, I believe that iTunes Match is a great innovation. There's also the seductive promise of more to come, and it's reasonably priced enough to keep you subscribing for the ultimate mobile convenience. ●

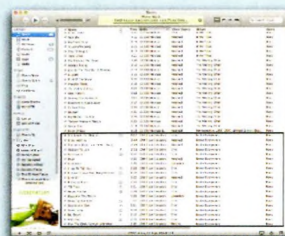
WALKTHROUGH...



Once iTunes has analysed your maximum size library for half a day, the match process begins...



If the process stops itself, pressing the 'Start' button resumes where it left off



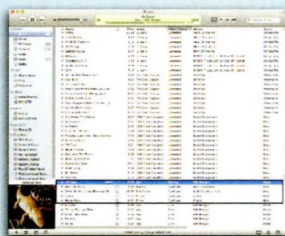
You'll get used to scrutinising the iCloud status column, watching it do its thing...



Note that only about 75 per cent of the library is actually in the iCloud at the first attempt...



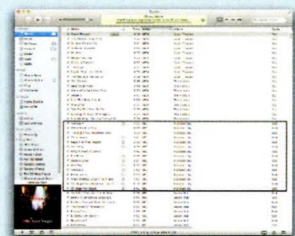
Not much luck with one of the test tracks, by The Bathers!



Sometimes unfathomable things happen, such as persistent waiting status and the odd duplicate...



After the main upload has finished, you can force uploads of tracks it had trouble identifying...



Almost done now after 25,000 tracks, only odds and ends remain!

1974



SIMON BERKOVITCH
 Music historian, record shop squatter and very popular at pub quizzes, Simon lives out his love of music though his high-end vinyl system.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
 What's your favourite year in music?
 Tell us at letters@hifichoice.co.uk

This musical moment still stands tall almost forty years down the line. From glam rock to deathless pop, it was a year that innovated as much as it delivered sensational music. **Simon Berkovitch** pulls on his silver platform shoes and steps back to 1974...

Remember a year populated by glam legends, prog rockers and Swedish pop superstars in the making? The year when *Hi-Fi Choice* was a gleam in its publisher's eye, just about to be unleashed on an unsuspecting world? Yes, it's 1974 this month, the moment when your humble music historian made his debut – although you'd never guess it from his byline picture, would you? [Sure, if you say so Simon! Ed.]

Vinyl snapshot

The music that soundtracked 1974 has certainly made a lasting impression on my own record collection. A much-played vinyl copy of David Bowie's classic *Diamond Dogs* shares creaking record shelf space with Kraftwerk's mighty *Autobahn* LP – original embossed sleeve and 'Spaceship' Vertigo label, naturally – along with other less well-known artists from the worlds of glam, krautrock, progressive rock, pop, disco and beyond. This vinyl snapshot is a testament to the longevity and quality of music that blasted out of tiny transistor radios during this year in music – from the daytime pop sounds of 'Wonderful Radio 1' to the nocturnal underground rumblings of the late great John Peel, filling listeners' ears with mutant sounds from around the world.

ABBA laid claim to the last, drunken dance at wedding receptions and small town nightclubs the land over with the deathless *Dancing Queen*...

Although many a serious music enthusiast's high-end listening room (or perhaps for many, 'bedroom at Mum and Dad's place' is more accurate) would have grooved to the sounds of artists like Tangerine Dream and

Peter Hammill (both million-selling *Fhaedra* and not-so-million-selling *The Silent Corner and the Empty Stage* hit the racks during this year), it's the singles charts that truly reflect the often eccentric tastes of the nation's record buyers. You'll find a roll call of the year's gold medallists elsewhere (see *Singles Club* opposite), but just one name is the yardstick by which pop success is forever measured: ABBA.

ABBA magic

Who'd have thought that the much-derided, proto-*X Factor*, *Eurovision Song Contest* would introduce the world to a group that was to dominate the UK's pop charts as far away as the early 1980s, even managing to defeat the hoards of punk rock that snuffed out many of the acts and genres popular in 1974? Appropriately for the Swedish boy-girl quartet, *Waterloo* won the 19th Eurovision, as the songwriting team of Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvåus was about to wage war on the British pop charts.

By the end of ABBA's run – 1981's underrated *The Visitors* LP; a break-up album to rival Fleetwood Mac's titanic *Rumours* LP for washing one's dirty linen in public – the group had managed an astonishing nine UK top ten singles, starred in their own film (1977's *ABBA: The Movie*) and laid claim

to the last, drunken dance at wedding receptions and small town nightclubs the land over with the deathless *Dancing Queen*.

Can you imagine this year's winner of *The X Factor*, Little Mix leaving such a legacy?



Errr no, I hope not! Apart from 'The Swedish Beatles', pop's other big event in 1974 is Glam rock, now more of a mainstream proposition since the explosion of the previous year after otherworldly David Bowie and 'Bopping Elf' Marc Bolan's ascent to stardom. The genre's second wave owes less to Ziggy Stardust and more to Alvin Stardust – the glam bandwagon had rolled into town and there was a scramble to climb aboard by, as one wag put it, 'bricklayers in eyeliner'. For the likes of Gary Glitter, The Sweet, Mud and the aforementioned Mr Stardust, glam was the last chance saloon to make it big. These acts had been on the scene since the 1960s with limited commercial success.

All the aforementioned acts scored massive hits in 1974 – and, dare I say it, some still sound great in 2011 – thanks to their huge radio-friendly sound (often thanks to the production and songwriting team of Chinn and Chapman) and even more memorable BBC *Top of the Pops* appearances. Who can forget leather-clad and ludicrously be-quiffed Alvin Stardust twirling his microphone stand

Three years after their success at the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest, ABBA hit the big screen

ABBA



THE MOVIE

DIRECTED BY LASSE HALLSTRÖM
 PRODUCTION POLAR MUSIC INTERNATIONAL
 AB & REG GRUNDY PRODUCTIONS PTY LTD.

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▣ SINGLES CLUB

1974's singles buyers had diverse and swiftly changing tastes; second-wave glam, Europop, soul, reggae, teenpop, easy listening and disco all reached the **toppermost of the poppermost** with a diverse 21 records hitting the top spot ...

The New Seekers *You Won't Find Another Fool Like Me*

Mud *Tiger Feet*

Suzi Quatro *Devil Gate Drive*

Alvin Stardust *Jealous Mind*

Paper Lace Billy, *Don't Be A Hero*

Terry Jacks *Seasons In The Sun*

ABBA *Waterloo*

The Rubettes *Sugar Baby Love*

Ray Stevens *The Streak*

Gary Glitter *Always Yours*

Charles Aznavour *She*

George McCrae *Rock Your Baby*

The Three Degrees *When Will I See You Again?*

The Osmonds *Love Me For A Reason*

Carl Douglas *Kung Fu Fighting*

John Denver *Annie's Song*

Sweet Sensation *Sad Sweet Dreamer*

Ken Boothe *Everything I Own*

David Essex *Gonna Make You A Star*

Barry White *You're The First, My Last, My Everything*

Mud *Lonely This Christmas*

▣ THE FUTURE IS CALLING

The new sound of Germany embraced new technology with searing vision – and helped navigate where pop was headed into the next decade and beyond.

It's with good reason that many so-called krautrock musicians (an umbrella term coined by an unimaginative British press) are revered in electronic circles – they were *true* innovators. Both Harmonia and Tangerine Dream are prime examples.

Harmonia was a supergroup of musicians from the legendary Neu! (brilliant guitarist Michael Rother) and the fiercely experimental Cluster (Dieter Möbius and Hans-Joachim Roedelius). Together, they fire up the drum machines – practically unheard of in 1974 – and embrace the power of melody on debut *Music Von Harmonia* and 1975's sublime follow-up *Deluxe*.

Similarly, the development of dance music is unthinkable without records like Tangerine Dream's *Phaedra*. A departure from the group's experimental rock roots, *Phaedra* still fizzes with invention – an exploration of the potential of looped patterns generated by sequencers and synthesisers. Say hello to the future of dance music!



into the cameras (*Jealous Mind*) or the probably-swiftly-sacked wardrobe person who let The Sweet's bassist Steve Priest appear in Nazi uniform (*Block Buster!*)? Fancy a trip down memory lane? There's nowhere to hide on YouTube nowadays...

Hysteric glamour

Second-wave glam was all about having fun and racking up quick hits, but more serious artistic statements were also being made this year by some of pop's sharpest minds. David Bowie's follow-up to 1973's Ziggy-slaying *Aladdin Sane* was a much darker, more claustrophobic proposition. The first clue that came from the lavish gatefold picturing a nightmarish half-Ziggy, half canine hybrid – not exactly *Starman* teen fodder. Bowie originally wanted to adapt George Orwell's landmark novel *1984* to music, but when refused permission by Orwell's estate, created his own dystopian future-world instead.

Arguably the bleakest entry to Bowie's astonishing body of work, *Diamond Dogs* may be one of his most diverse outings – pulling both funk and experimental German music into his orbit – but he retained his ear for a hit, as this album is also home to stone-classic *Rebel, Rebel*.

Despite splitting from Roxy Music the previous year, a restless creative spirit like Brian Eno wasn't going to rest on his laurels for long. Although venturing into more

esoteric realms, in collaboration with King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp on 1973's experimental *No Pussyfooting* album, his first 'pop' outing was the main event for many.

From unlikely combinations of musicians, instrumentation and working methods – part of his overall concept of 'Oblique Strategies', used to great effect in his production career – Eno's take on pop was an exciting mutant strain. 1974's resulting *Here Come The Warm Jets* is a classic, as full of great songs as it is audacious invention, demonstrating that – like Roxy Music and David Bowie – pop music doesn't just have to be intellectually barren, vapid entertainment.

Lumped in with progressive rock, there's nothing indulgent and hippified about Kraftwerk...

Tomorrow's World

While Eno was one of few blending the boundaries of experimental and popular music in the UK in 1974, there was an entire movement of innovative musicians in Germany in the process of dismantling and reassembling pop, adding some cutting-edge technology to the mix. It's no coincidence that Eno was to collaborate with some of these artists – Harmonia and Cluster – both in concert and on record – but it's Kraftwerk that made the biggest impression on British ears in the mid-1970s with the release of their astonishing *Autobahn* LP.

The title track still sounds like nothing on earth – it's a brilliant amalgam of teutonic Beach Boys harmonies and futuristic electronics, emulating the rhythms and sounds of the motorway. Its full twenty six minute incarnation, taking up the whole of the first side of the same-titled LP, was inevitably lumped in with progressive rock on its release, but there's nothing long-haired, indulgent and hippified about Kraftwerk. One look at their memorable appearance the BBC's popular science programme *Tomorrow's World* the following year (also on



YouTube) dispels that notion – four serious, clean-shaven, besuited, short-haired young men are seen casually unveiling the future of music with largely home-built synthesisers and electronic drum pads – Barclay James Harvest this is not!

Amazingly for a piece of electronic music, a three-minute version *Autobahn* was actually a minor hit on the UK charts the following year (number 11) – a considerable feat for musicians whose roots lay in Germany's *avant garde* music scene, but that catchy melody just cannot be denied. Kraftwerk were to go on to show that they were no novelty 'one hit wonder', now enjoying God-like status among enthusiasts of electronica.

Other records beaming out of Germany during this year in music – like Harmonia's inspired, drum machine-heavy debut *Musik Von Harmonia* and Tangerine Dream's synthesiser and sequencer-informed *Phaedra* – are also massively important releases (see *Electronically yours*), but it's Kraftwerk and *Autobahn* that not only unchained rock and roll from the shackles of the blues, electric guitars and conventional song structures, but also revealed that the future of music was bright; the future was electronic...

That it took British popular music until the early 1980s to catch up is a testament to Kraftwerk's pioneering vision. ●



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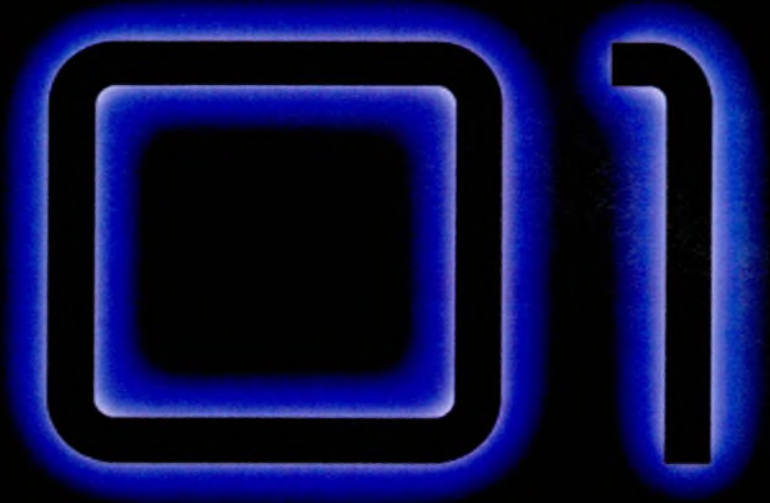


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Music reviews

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

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



Achtung Baby 20th Anniversary Edition

U2

mercuryrecords.co.uk

★★★★

Mercury

2-CD/Super deluxe 6-CD and 4-DVD/Vinyl box 4-LP

AS THE 1990S DAWNED U2 must have wondered if pop music fashion was about to pass them by, leaving them stranded as 1980s stadium heroes who would never top the defining genius of 1988's *The Joshua Tree*.

New upstart bands were lining up to displace them in the rock pantheon, from sources as far apart as 'Madchester' (the Stone Roses) and the grunge capital of Seattle (Nirvana). Also, the rise of rave and dance culture must have seemed disconcerting to Bono and his cohorts.

Their response was an ambitious one. Inspired by the momentous political changes at the time, as well as the shifting musical landscape, U2 decamped to a newly

reunited Berlin and set about reinventing themselves on their seventh album. The critics were suspicious of their motives and many dismissed the band's new sound as cynical posturing rather than a genuine makeover.

Two decades on, that interpretation seems faintly ludicrous. Today, *Achtung Baby* sounds bold, even audacious, the sound of a band learning how to dance and have fun – and acquiring a welcome post-modern sense of irony along the way, too.

Despite the political context of recording in Berlin, the songs were more personal than we'd heard before and although some of the subject matter was bleak, its straightforward honesty made U2 sound distinctly less

Achtung Baby finds the band looking to Europe rather than America.

portentous. Paradoxically, in attempting to curb their self-conscious desire to sound epic, U2 went and made one of the biggest albums of their career.

Bono described *Achtung Baby* as "the sound of four men chopping down the Joshua Tree". U2's stadium grandeur of the previous decade stood proudly in a tradition of American rock 'n' roll, filtered through Celtic fringery.

Achtung Baby finds the band looking to Europe rather than America. The sound has a more metallic, industrial edge and the beats clanged with a techno-twinge. This massive, bank-busting six CDs-plus-four-DVDs reissue also includes the follow-up album, 1993's *Zooropa*, which makes sense

as a sequel, swiftly recorded after the Zoo TV tour which accompanied *Achtung Baby*. The remixes by Paul Oakenfold and Apollo 440 sound somewhat dated, but will evoke nostalgic memories among those who holidayed in Ibiza at the time.

There's also some real buried treasure here. Highlights of the deluxe boxset include a fabulous acoustic version of the album's finest song, *One*, work-in-progress demos for the original album and a disc of previously unreleased rarities including several superb songs: *Heaven And Hell*, *Blow Your House Down* and *Oh Berlin*.

Forget the self-consecration and manipulation that never seems far away, where U2 are concerned, this is a welcome reminder that at their best, few bands over the last quarter of a century have rivalled them. **NW**
Standout tracks: One; Zoo Station; Until The End Of The World; Heaven and Hell





Rolling Stones Some Girls

universalmusic.com

★★★

Universal/A&M

2-CDs

RECORDED IN 1977/78

while Keith Richards faced a possible prison sentence over a drug bust, *Some Girls* contained the band's response to both disco (*Miss You*) and to punk (*Respectable*).

The result was not only the band's freshest-sounding set in years, it also gave them what remains the biggest-selling album of their career, a success based on the clever linkage between the Stones' past and a forward-looking sensibility that reflected the changing times.

Chuck Berry riffs are updated with an effective punk snarl and classic rock grooves are retooled with dancefloor funk. As with the recent *Exile On Main Street* expanded edition, many of the previously unreleased tracks from the 1978 sessions on the bonus disc have been tarted up with new vocals and overdubs. That it's hard to hear the join is testament to the enduring core values that remain at the heart of the Stones' sound. **NW**

Standout tracks: Miss You; Respectable; Beast Of Burden; Before They Make Me Run



Rimsky-Korsakov

Capriccio Espagnol; Overtures, May Night; Overture to The Tsar's Bride; The Maid of Pskov

naxos.com

★★★★★

Naxos

CD

FOLLOWING ON FROM his excellent *Scheherazade* on Naxos, Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony give us more Rimsky-Korsakov.

The main work is the popular Capriccio Espagnol, and this receives a broad, weighty performance that avoids excessive showiness.

Musically, the various overtures blend fantasy with red-blooded power and the disc culminates in a rousing account of the *Russian Easter Festival Overture*.

The sound has impressive richness and sonority, with natural balances. Overall the acoustic is spacious and rich, while bass is deep and powerful. **JH**

Standout track: 11 Svetliy prazdnik



Mahler

Symphony No 9
Valery Gergiev,
London Symphony Orch.

iso.co.uk

★★★★★

LSO Live

CD (hybrid SACD)

IN MANY WAYS this is an impressive Mahler 9. The orchestral playing is trenchant and powerful and the big climaxes have real presence. At just under 80 minutes, Gergiev's account is reasonably spacious, and for the most part he allows the music to unfold logically. Yet, for sheer involvement and intensity, the old Guilini Chicago recording (DG) still can't be beat!

The recording sounds good and while there's a lack of spaciousness due to the dry acoustics of the Barbican hall, this is less apparent than other recordings from LSO Live. Tonally, the SACD layer is more open and natural, but the CD layer sounds very good too. **JH**

Standout track: 1 Andante Comodo



Noel Gallagher

High Flying Birds

noelgallagher.com

★★★★

Sour Mash

CD

BROTHER LIAM may have delivered the first post-Oasis solo album since the band's acrimonious breakup, but songwriter-in-chief Noel clearly hasn't been twiddling his thumbs. His *High Flying Birds* project, basically comprised of him and various session musicians is a step back from Oasis's stadium sing-alongs with some acoustic balladry, strings and quite a lot of Noel's high tenor.

The arching choruses and big guitar chords may be taking a break, but the sound of the record isn't much different to standard Oasis fare. There's an analogue, real band feel and if it's a little more polished than in the past, that's to be expected from the calibre of the musicians. **JH**

Standout track: The Death Of You And Me; If I Had A Gun...

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

The Cars The Cars mofi.com



★★★★★ Elektra/Mobile Fidelity
180g vinyl

THIS DEBUT FROM Boston's most successful new wave combo was released in March 1978 and went platinum within

the year. It produced three top 50 hits in the US and two over here and the remaining tunes got plenty of airplay as well. So even if you think you haven't heard it, chances are you'll know several of the nine tracks.

Their style is catchy, but edgy enough to give it longevity and influences would seem to include Television and Elvis Costello, specifically the former's guitar and the latter's lyrics. Although there's plenty of synth, this is largely a classic line up with some

unusual additions such as the country style picking on *Best Friend's Girl*.

This MOFI pressing was half-speed mastered from the original analogue tapes and undoubtedly sounds richer than pressings from back in the day, though whether it has quite as much energy is hard to say.

The Cars was an auspicious debut from a pop perspective but it remains a strong album which should appeal to ears both old and new. **JK**

Standout tracks: Best Friend's Girl; Just What I Needed



Tom Waits

Bad As Me

anti.com/home

★★★★

Anti/Epitaph

CD

IN HIS LATER YEARS

American troubadour Tom Waits seems to have grown more cantankerous and out there. But his lost-weekend-in-a-junkyard sound seemed to have just about reached its apex on 2004's *Real Gone*.

For many, *Bad As Me*'s more approachable tunes and sound will come as a relief, with its requisite mix of 'bawlers and brawlers', but this time round Tom's eased off on the noise, giving the songs a bit more room to breathe.

Waits has never been one for the polished approach to audio. The sound of *Bad As Me* may be markedly cleaner than on anything since 1999's *Mule Variations*, but there's still plenty of pith to get your teeth into. **DO**

Standout tracks: Back In The Crowd; Bad As Me



Phil Spector

The Philles Album Collection

legacyrecordings.com

★★★★

Sony legacy

CD

SPECTOR'S IMPRISONMENT

in 2009 for murder, has cast a pall over his artistic achievements. Yet objectively, it can be argued that his behaviour outside the studio should not detract from his former glory. Six albums first released in the 1960s by his various girlgroups are presented here, with a disc of B-sides featuring his 'Wall Of Sound orchestra'.

The cavernous echo of Spector's mini-symphonies are cleverly remastered so that his trademark sound is given sharper definition. The problem is that for Spector the hit single and not the album was the art form, and so there's a high proportion of filler. **NW**
Standout tracks: Then He Kissed Me; He's A Rebel; Walking In The Rain; Baby I Love You



Whitesnake

Box O'Snakes The Sunburst Years 1972-82

emimusic.com

★★★★

EMI

11-CD box set

AFTER THE BREAK-UP of Deep Purple in 1976, singer David Coverdale set about putting together Whitesnake. In later years the band became predictable heavy metal MTV monsters, but in their first incarnation, Coverdale crafted a much smarter and surprisingly nuanced blues-rock crossover. Between 1978-82, the band issued a prolific set of albums that found Coverdale establishing himself as Robert Plant's closest rival.

From the cover of Bobby Bland's *Ain't No Love In The Heart Of The City* to *Fool For Your Loving*, the blues power cuts a potent swathe through the 92 tracks here. **NW**
Standout tracks: Ain't No Love In The Heart Of The City; Don't Break My Heart Again; Would I Lie To You

HIGH-RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

Thomas Dolby

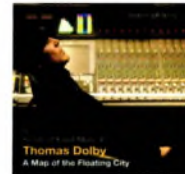
A Map Of The Floating City

Bowers & Wilkins

★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins

24-bit/48kHz



THOMAS DOLBY emerged from his synthesiser-filled back room to become a champion of electro rock and

an in-demand session musician/songwriter during the 1980s with tracks like *She Blinded Me with Science*. *A Map of...*, shows how this gifted musician has matured.

On this beautifully crafted 24-bit recording, Dolby's eclecticism, intellect and wry humour get a spectacular work-out; no more so than in *The Toad Lickers*, where he introduces bluegrass to techno.

The mix of instrumental textures, where acoustic meets electronic, is perfectly judged and sublimely portrayed. His vocals demonstrate the sheer finesse of this download. **MS**

Standout tracks: 17 Hills; To the Lifeboat

Zoey Van Goey

Propellor Versus Wings

linnrecords.com

★★★★

Chemikal Underground/Linn

24-bit/48kHz stereo



THIS, A second full-length album from the four-piece indie pop ensemble completely

fulfills the promise made by their album released in 2009, *The Cage Was Unlocked All Along*. Just as whimsical and surreal as that fine piece of work, it exudes increased confidence and poise both instrumentally and vocally.

The 24-bit/48kHz recording presents the music with all its genre-hopping energy intact, well-integrated instrumental detail and dynamic contrast. The presentation is animated, brisk and refreshingly natural. Similarly, it renders Kim Moore's delightfully winsome vocals with appropriate charm. **MS**

Standout tracks: You told the drunks I Knew Karate; Another Day, Another disaster

BLU-RAY DVD

Peter Gabriel New Blood Live eagle-rock.com



★★★★

Eagle Rock

Blu-ray LPCM stereo, Dolby Digital 5.1, DTS HD Master Audio

IN MARCH PETER GABRIEL took to the stage at the Hammersmith Apollo backed not by a rock band, but his New Blood Orchestra, a 46-

piece ensemble with not an electric instrument or drum kit in sight. They played 22 songs largely taken from Gabriel's back catalogue.

All the favourites are included, alongside covers of Paul Simon's *Boy In The Bubble* among a handful of covers. It was clearly a spectacular event which hit an emotional high with *Biko* about half way in and built up to a crescendo with a rousing rendition of *Solsbury Hill*.

John Metcalfe's arrangements shed new light on some very strong material,

making it sound fresh without undermining the appeal of the originals. Gabriel is not the strongest of singers, but his charisma is key to the event's emotional power, with backing from Marianne Gabriel and Ane Brun.

The event was filmed in 3D, but it works well enough in 2D, too. The sound lacks the transparency and imaging qualities of the high-res files from the studio, but makes up for it with wide dynamic range and plenty of atmosphere. **JK**
Standout tracks: Intruder; Biko; Solsbury Hill

HOT PICK

HOT PICK

Proper decorum

Deco Audio combines a distinctive range of brands and equipment to make its unique systems.

Ed Selley went along for a listen...

Deco Audio is an example of the increasingly scarce high street audio dealer. Founded by Peter Empson and Mark Orr in April 2010, a portion of the brand portfolio, including Marantz, Rega and Q Acoustics, is suited to inquiries off the street for a cost-effective and capable system in the time-honoured fashion.

Peter and Mark have a customer base that extends across a large swathe of the UK and Deco also stocks some very high-end equipment. Indeed, the Deco portfolio is one of the most comprehensive, both in terms of pricing and capability, than we've ever featured in *Dealer Systems*. Deco is also involved in the distribution and production of various types of electronics and accessories.

The Deco philosophy is extremely clear; Peter and Mark are keen advocates of low-output valve amplification and high-sensitivity speakers, employing paper drivers wherever possible. Where they differ from other dealers, is in the effort that goes into the complete system. Mark has years of experience in the field of rack and support design and Peter has devoted considerable time into developing his own cabling and electronics.

Both men feel strongly that simply selecting some electronics and loudspeakers is only half the story. To this end, all three systems they had prepared for me were 'complete', and included very deliberate choices of stands and cabling.



THE EXPERTS



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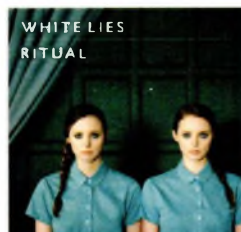
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NITIN SAWNEY
BEYOND SKIN
VINYL



JUNIP FIELDS
CD



WHITE LIES
RITUAL
VINYL

SYSTEM 1 - ANALOGUE ALCHEMY

Deco's smallest system might have been the least expensive, but is still a fully formed example of the complete system concept that Deco advocate. The key features are a carefully chosen front end, suitable valve amplification and relatively sensitive paper driver speakers, connected by specially chosen cabling, all supported on a dedicated rack.

Bigger brother

The source is a £500 Edwards Audio TT2 turntable. This is the bigger brother of the TT1 (tested in *HFC* 342) and the design is based on the evergreen Rega Planar line. Peter prefers the Edwards over even the latest Rega RP3 and partnered with the equally classic Goldring 1042, he feels that this combination very is hard to beat at the asking price.

The amplifier is a £1,065 Tsakiridis Aeolos. This challengingly titled design is an integrated amp from Tsakiridis Devices, which designs and builds its products in Greece. The line-only device uses a quartet of EL34 output valves for a power rating of 35 watts. The asking price seems incredibly low compared to the fit and finish of the Aeolos. The chromed top plate, solid controls and bulky transformers suggest something altogether more expensive.

As the Aeolos is line only, the output of the Edwards goes via a Croft RIAA phono stage. Croft has something of a cult following and continues to design and build its products entirely in the UK. The RIAA is designed to handle moving-magnet stages and, while not as pretty as the Tsakiridis, is still astonishing value at £500.

Partnering the electronics are Usher V604s. These £1,150 floorstanders combine sensitivity, sufficient to work well on 35 watts, and the paper drivers that Deco feel are vital to natural tonality. The large, well-finished design also represents strong value-for-money.

These components are then mounted on one of Mark's Something Solid equipment racks and wired together with Atlas cabling. The components are interesting and the full system philosophy is in place, but how does it sound?

Utterly unfazed

Sticking Nitin Sawney's *Beyond Skin* on the Edwards, the results are immediately and startlingly impressive. The performance is open, fast and utterly unfazed by the massive dynamic swings of the piece. There is none of softness or bloom that can characterise less-expensive valve systems and the relatively large Ushers have considerable low-end heft.

At the same time, vocals and instruments are not defeated or pushed back by this bass extension. On the contrary, they take centre stage and have a richness and vitality that is incredibly engaging. Combine this clout and delicacy and you have something that is incredibly engaging.

Even when the tempo is further increased with Fontan's *Winterwila*,

this system stays firmly in control and adds impeccable timing to an already considerable list of talents.

What is interesting, is how difficult it is to say with any authority which component is contributing what to the overall sound. The final result is so cohesive and 'right', that considerations as to who is the star of the show are somewhat irrelevant. These are all, undoubtedly, good components, but it is the result of combining them that makes this custom-built system truly special.

Were you to need a digital source as well, Peter feels that either the baby Consonance CD player, or one of Rega's all-star offerings would do well in this context and it is hard to argue with the reasoning for either.

- 1 GOLDRING 1042: CARTRIDGE
£265
- 2 EDWARDS AUDIO TT2: TURNTABLE
£600
- 3 CROFT RIAA: PHONO STAGE
£500
- 4 TSAKIRIDIS AEOLOS: INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
EL34 PUSH PULL, 35W
£1,065
- 5 SOMETHING SOLID EXR: EQUIPMENT SUPPORT
£350
- 6 USHER V-604: LOUDSPEAKER
£1,150
- ATLAS HYPER 2: SPEAKER CABLES, INCLUDING FITTED PLUGS 5M X2
£215
- EQUATOR ASTYMMETRICAL MKIII INTEGRA: INTERCONNECT
£75

TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE:
£4,220



SYSTEM 2 – NATURAL FIBRES

Extra funds mean this second system can allow Deco to embrace other technologies that they believe are vital to a great sound, namely single-ended amplification and digital sources that don't use filtering.

Substantial offering

Vinyl is still Paul and Mark's preferred medium though and system two features another turntable. Nottingham Analogue has a lower profile than some other British turntable manufacturers, but Paul and Mark rate the range very highly. The Ace Space is one of its smaller decks, but is still a very substantial offering for £1,230.

This is partnered with the brand new Rega RB303 tonearm, supplied on the RP3. Paul feels the £240 Rega is an absolute bargain and a happy partner for the Ace Space. Throw in an Audio Note IQ2, which I last encountered on the end of the Audio Note AN TT2 (HFC 353) and you have a capable, but still very reasonably priced front end.

This is joined by a Consonance CD2.2 Reference Linear CD player. Since

Consonance switched over to filterless designs, Deco has been an enthusiastic proponent of them and believes that they offer the best performance and system-matching for the price.

Amplification is courtesy of Amphion. Deco is the distributor of this distinctive range of British valve components and the powerplant for this system is the £3,500 300B Silver Knight. This is a single-ended 300B design and, as such, has an output of 8 watts. Again, as a line only design, a phono stage is required and this is another Audion unit, the £845 Premier phono.

To extract the maximum from those 8 watts, the speakers are Audio Note AZ-Twos. This small hemp driver floorstander appeared as part of the full Audio Note system in HFC 348, and its high-sensitivity makes it the perfect partner for the Audions. The pair used here differ from the standard AZ-Twos, in that they are mounted in a prototype cradle that will be launched under the Heretic brand name – more of which later. This cradle acts to isolate the speakers, while keeping them at a sensible height for listening.

As well as the speaker cradles, another Something Solid rack is used for the electronics and cabling is a combination of Atlas signal interconnects and Deco Audio power cabling and mains box.

Sense of realism

After about thirty seconds of listening, the output of this system is irrelevant. Once again, this is a sound that is the result of every component working perfectly with one another, rather than any one part dominating. Cinematic Orchestra's *Live at the Albert Hall*, has an extraordinary combination of heft and delicacy, with an incredible sense of realism.

Switching to CD keeps the same entirely benign qualities as the analogue front end. Junip's *Fields* is a rough and ready recording that this system handles admirably, without losing the incredible energy of the performance. This is an even-handed and immensely capable system, that will do justice to any genre, and proved extremely hard to drag myself away from.



- 1 CONSONANCE CD2.2 REFERENCE LINEAR: FILTERLESS CD PLAYER £1,595
 - 2 NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE ACE SPACE DECK: TURNTABLE £1,230
 - 3 REGA RB303: TONEARM £240
 - 4 AUDIO NOTE IQ2: MM CARTRIDGE £420
 - 5 AUDION PREMIER PHONO: PHONO STAGE £850
 - 6 AUDION SILVER NIGHT 300BSE ANNIVERSARY: INTEGRATED AMP (8W) £3,500
 - 7 AUDIO NOTE AZ2H: LOUDSPEAKER WITH HEMP CONES £1,250
 - HERETIC CRADLE SPEAKER SUPPORTS £1,250
 - SOMETHING SOLID XR: EQUIPMENT SUPPORT £650
 - ATLAS HYPER SYMMETRICAL: INTERCONNECT X2 £250 (EACH)
 - DECO AUDIO MAINS CABLE 1.5M X2 £90 (EACH)
 - DECO AUDIO MAINS 6-WAY DISTRIBUTION BLOCK £175
 - ATLAS HYPER 3: SPEAKER CABLES, INCLUDING FITTED PLUGS 5M X2 £265
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £11,195**

SYSTEM 3 – SHEER HERESY

What you see here is the logical conclusion of the Deco Audio philosophy. It incorporates the features of the two less expensive systems and adds one final flourish that Paul believes is vital for the best possible sound.

Greater control

Nottingham Analogue once again provides the vinyl front end in this system. In this instance, the larger Dais model is partnered with the 12-inch variant of the Ace Anna arm. The Dais can mount either 9-inch or 12-inch arms and Paul feels the longer arm offers greater control.

The partnering cartridge is another Audio Note design, but unlike the preceding IQ2, the Io1 is a low-output moving-coil device. Low output is the key phrase here, as the Io boasts an output of just 0.05mV, which is very low indeed. Normally, using an Io demands that a dedicated Audio Note step-up transformer is also employed to give the necessary increase in output.

This system employs a prototype phono stage, which will be produced under the in-house Heretic Audio brand name. This is able to provide the required levels of gain internally; a considerable accomplishment and Paul points out that it will work equally well with higher output devices.

This system makes the move to pre/power amplification and Audion provide the power section in the form of its Black Shadow monoblocks. Each uses a single 845 triode for an output in the region of 25 watts. They are partnered with a preamplifier from German brand Silvercore. The Preamp One uses transformers with different outputs for the volume control. This is Peter's preferred design for preamps and he feels the Silvercore offers superb performance at the price.

The digital front end is a combination of Audio Note's filterless DAC – in this case the 2.1 – with a belt drive transport from Japanese concern CEC. This considerable array of electronics is partnered with another pair of Audio Note speakers. The AN-E also uses a hemp main driver like the smaller AZ-Two, but this is mounted in a larger enclosure and uses higher quality wiring and components. Combined with Something solid racks and stands, Nordost and Heretic cabling, this is the fullest extension of the Deco philosophy.

Delicate detail

From the moment that the opening chords of Dead Can Dance's *Towards the Within* thunder through the Audio Notes, it is clear this is a very special system indeed. This is a system that can hit you in the chest with its bass extension and simultaneously reproduce the most delicate detail of any recording. It is unfazed by anything you can throw at it, and it finds the brilliance in any recording, analogue or digital.

All of the Deco systems don't conform to any valve stereotype, but this takes the entire valve rulebook and seemingly throws it away. It is staggeringly fast and, above all, it balances incredible insight and detail retrieval with a sound that is totally unfatiguing. Even presented with the torture test of *Ritual* by the White Lies, it simply rolls its sleeves up and finds the music hiding within the hash. This is an incredible system and a ringing endorsement of the Deco philosophy.



- 1 CEC TL3N: BELT-DRIVE CD TRANSPORT £3,000
 - 2 AUDIO NOTE DAC 2.1 BALANCED: DAC £4,645
 - 3 NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE DAIS: TURNTABLE £4,190
 - 4 NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE ACE ANNA 12": TONEARM £1,935
 - 5 AUDIO NOTE IO1: CARTRIDGE £2,580
 - 6 HERETIC PHONON: PHONO STAGE (PRE-PRODUCTION VERSION) £3,000
 - 7 SILVERCORE PREAMP ONE: TRANSFORMER VOLUME CONTROL, SILVER WIRED/WOUND £2,500
 - 8 AUDIO NOTE AN-E HE SPE: SPEAKERS £5,800
 - 9 SOMETHING SOLID XFII: SPEAKER STANDS £235
 - 10 HERETIC AUDIO PXR: EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS X2 £1,000 (EACH)
 - 11 AUDION BLACK SHADOW: MONOBLOCKS 845SE (25W) £7,000
 - HERETIC AUDIO SILVER 6-WAY MAINS DISTRIBUTION: (PRE-PRODUCTION ENCLOSURE) ALL SILVER STAR WIRED £1,000
 - NORDOST BRAHMA: MAINS CABLE £1,300
 - NORDOST VISHNU: MAINS CABLE £569
 - NORDOST BLUE HEAVEN: MAINS CABLE X2 £200 (EACH)
 - NORDOST VALHALLA: MAINS CABLE £2,500
 - HERETIC AUDIO SILVER SANCTUARY: SILVER/COTTON INTERCONNECTS X3 £800 (EACH)
 - HERETIC AUDIO SILVER SANCTUARY: SILVER/COTTON SPEAKER CABLE WITH TERMINATIONS 5M X2 £2,700
 - SOMETHING SOLID LITTLE LINKS X 9: UNDER SOME COMPONENTS £270
 - SOMETHING SOLID MISSING LINKS X 16: UNDER RACKS AND SPEAKERS £520
 - HERETIC AUDIO SILVER SANCTUARY DIGITAL: SILVER DIGITAL CABLE £350
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £48,894



Deco Audio is not alone in choosing valves and high-sensitivity speakers as its preferred route to great sound. Where Deco is more unusual is the different price levels it can create systems at and the level of attention

it puts into the ancillaries. A poor system can never be redeemed by stand and cabling choices, but equally, when the quality of the components is good, the difference in details is what makes this trio great.

All were brilliant, but it is system three that made the most profound impact. An astonishing all-rounder, that will do justice to the most diverse of material and makes listening fun, which is surely what it's all about.

Minitest

Headphones can offer excellent sound quality.
Richard Black tests four fine affordable examples...

Sennheiser HD238i

PRICE: £85

CONTACT: 01494 551551 WEBSITE: SENNHEISER.CO.UK

HAVING REVIEWED just about every full-size headphone that Sennheiser makes, I couldn't resist having a look at this model, which straddles the categories of mobile and home hi-fi headphone. It's quite small and light, though not a folding model, and includes controls for an iPhone and iPod. Despite that, there's no reason why you can't plug it into a proper hi-fi, and if the lead is a little short, then extensions aren't expensive. The lead is thin and easy to ignore, and almost entirely free of friction noise. The headphones themselves are comfortable thanks to well-padded vinyl-covered earpieces. They sit on the ears ('supra-aural') rather than around them, but most people find that okay.

On music without too much low-frequency content (a solo piano track, for example) this is a fine, balanced sounding headphone, but studio productions that go right down to the subsonic tend to sound thumpy, showing excessive bass. At the other end of the scale though, treble is quite unusual for a modern headphone – it being, if anything, just slightly on the mellow side. You can certainly hear what's going on, but high frequencies are not as prominent as you'd expect. With so many recent recordings being super-bright (especially in their MP3 versions) that's hardly a serious drawback, and maybe Sennheiser has deliberately voiced the HD238i with this in mind? Midrange is informative with very good detail on voices, making for an enjoyable listen.

VERDICT GOOD MIDBAND and pleasantly laid-back treble, but the low frequencies may prove to be too much for all but the most die-hard bass-freaks



AKG K540

PRICE: £100 CONTACT: 01707 278113
WEBSITE: AKG.COM



EXTERNALLY THIS IS A SIMPLE, traditional model with semi-open-back earpieces. The earpads are just large enough to surround the ears, although a little fiddling is needed to get them to sit just right. That's not so bad though, as it eliminated one of the commonest causes of inconsistency in headphone sound, and also makes them quite secure when moving around. The ingenious headband is adjustable up to the most elephantine head size and is very comfortable – the soft, velvet-covered earpads and fairly low mass also help make long-term listening a pain-free experience. A single lead is fitted, which is the one drawback of the design; it transmits mechanical noise like anything, its fabric covering making loud friction noises against any clothing, something I regard as a serious bind.

Despite that, if one takes the trouble to route the cable carefully, the sound from these headphones is strikingly fine. They are particularly good in the bass, which is extended and clear but well controlled too, only there when it needs to be and never exaggerated or sluggish. Treble is also well-extended, with just a touch of coloration in the presence region, which can at times interfere a little with detail. I can live with that though, as long as there is no excessive sibilance. Overall though, the sound is very honest, precise and involving, with good imaging, too.

VERDICT THIS HEADPHONE can justly claim to offer high-end sound, with only a touch of upper midband congestion giving away the price



Audio-Technica ATH-AD700

PRICE: £135 CONTACT: 0113 277 1441
WEBSITE: AUDIOTECHNICA.COM

HERE'S A LARGE, IMPOSING HEADPHONE, not the sort of thing you'd be tempted to wear out on the street, but it's very comfortable despite the considerable weight. AT's 'wing' design cleverly distributes the load on the top of the head, or rather just to the sides of the top, making for a headphone that you can forget you're wearing. The earcups are very large and easily clear the ears in all directions. AT makes much of the special materials used in this model's design, including magnesium alloy in the earpiece housings and titanium in the cable, the latter presumably for structural rather than electrical purposes. Actually the cable on this model is excellent, transmitting almost no noise. The open-back design gives almost no exclusion of external noise, of course.

Tonally, this is not the most neutral headphone I've ever heard. There is a slight lift in the treble, which boosts the level of vocal sibilants, that slight 'rasp' that is part of a violin's natural sound, and so on. It's noticeable right from the outset, but in the nature of purely tonal artefacts it reduces considerably in audibility as one listens for longer periods. As it does so, you become aware that there's a high level of detail coming out of these 'phones, with excellent imaging, including a plausible sensation of depth. Bass is a little shy at times, especially on climaxes, but the informative and detailed midrange can make one forgive a lot.

VERDICT **DESPITE A LITTLE SIBILANCE, this is a sophisticated performer with generous amounts of detail and a neutral midrange**



Beyerdynamic DT250

PRICE: £170 CONTACT: 01444 258258
WEBSITE: BEYERDYNAMIC.COM



PART OF BEYERDYNAMIC'S 'PROFESSIONAL' RANGE, the only significant 'pro' features I could spot are the detachable cable and the detailed list of spare parts in the instruction booklet. The impedance of this model is higher than most current domestic models, at 250 ohms, which means that the output level is a little limited with portable equipment. This is a closed-back model, giving a useful (though not vast) degree of isolation from the outside world and also, of course, reducing 'spill' from your head to others in the room. The earcups are a little hard and the headband quite tight, but despite that, I experienced no significant discomfort in long-term listening, once I'd learned the optimum positioning on the head.

Closed-back headphones are seldom as neutral as open-back models, but this one does very well. It has a touch of coloration in the upper midrange, but for a closed model it is very good. In fact, in simple music there's a delightful 'hear-through' quality to it and I found reproduction of piano to be some of the best I've heard. I also thoroughly enjoyed the bass, which may be just a shade over-prominent, but is so tight and persuasive that you don't think badly of it. While the cable is quite good at avoiding mechanical noise, I found there's quite a lot of noise from the earcups if you move your jaw, which can be distracting. ●

VERDICT **CLOSED-BACK CONSTRUCTION** gives useful isolation; the flipside is some midrange congestion. Strong and well-focused bass is a big plus, though



Headphones have made a real comeback, due no doubt to the rise in listening on the move, and also because affordable models can show even very good loudspeakers a thing or two.

All these models resolve heaps of detail that many speakers only dream about. That said, they will only achieve their very best if fed from a good quality dedicated headphone amplifier.

Do go easy with the level when listening on cans. It's easy to get carried away and while it's fun it's neither good for your hearing, or ultimately as informative as listening just a notch or two lower.

Hi-Fi Choice

Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, the UK's first and best free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

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FOR SALE

REGA S1 loudspeakers (piano black), latest model, hardly used, Something Solid XF4 stands. Mint condition (£720) £390. REL Britannia B3 subwoofer (rosenut veneer), immaculate condition (£1,300) £550. **07857 353606** or email: deakino4@btinternet.com (Surrey).

GAMUT L3 loudspeakers including stands (£4,400) £2,400, Audio Research Reference 3 preamp (£8,450) £4,400 or nearest price, Krell FBP 250-watt monoblocks £2,500. Photos and details. **07899 721899** or email: yatestherapy@googlemail.com (London).

SUMIKO Blue Pint special Evo III cartridge, only two hours use, £110 (no offers). **01277 219639** (Essex).

AVI Biggatron standmounts (cherry), good condition, Partington stands, Bowers and Wilkins 684 floorstanders (cherry), excellent condition £550. **07982 794884** (Essex).

DYNAUDIO Excite X12 loudspeakers (rosewood), full Russ Andrews upgrade, as new, boxed (can demo) £495 (including p&p). **01524 34627** (Lancashire).

CHORD COMPANY Epic Twin speaker cable, factory terminated, £85. **01986 895940** (Suffolk).

WANTED Pink Triangle Anniversary or upgraded (DC motor) PT Too. **01445 781498** (Scotland).

EXPOSURE F2010s CD player, £190. Roksan Radius 5, clear acrylic version with Rega RB600 tonearm and Goldring GX1022 cartridge, £700. **01484 427426** (West Yorks).

AVI Reference CD player S2000 MC, used as transport with Audiolab DAX, £550. van den Hul Wind speaker cable (5-metre pair) £120 buyer collects. **0208590 8530** (Essex).

NAIM Fraim. Consisting of a base and a standard shelf. Maple with silver upright.

Fabulous condition/like new. Only two years old. (£1,680) £1,100. Includes three floor spike protectors. Collection preferred.

020 8372 8376 or email: gigglesno1@hotmail.com (London).

TAG MCLAREN PA10 preamp (black). Excellent, near mint condition with low usage and original box. Includes MM/MC phono stage built in. (£850) £275. **07854658 281** (London).

SUGDEN A21al Mk2 integrated amp, Pure Class A without the pain of valves. Silky-smooth and bristling with detail. Eight months old, boxed as new, finished in graphite. £1,150. **07847 501865** or email: dazzert@hotmail.com (West Yorks).

ATACAMA Equinox, two hi-fi bases £50 (each) and one AV base £100. Graphite stand and anthracite glass in good condition. **01253 729944** or email: AtacamaStands@tesco.net (Lancashire).



Roksan Radius 5 with accessories for only £700

MONITOR AUDIO (bronze) BR5 speaker package, walnut finish, boxed with instructions and in good condition £650 (pick up only). **07534457859** (West Yorkshire).

SONY ST-S311 FM/AM tuner, mint condition (black). Owned from new with original box and instructions, AM loop aerial etc. upgraded power lead. £350. **01766 781211** (Porthmadog).

BOWERS & WILKINS 800 Matrix loudspeakers (black), mint condition with Krell bass alignment filter amp, Class A (£15,000 and £1,950) £1,850. Outstanding sound and dynamics. **03531 2014427** or email: booning4@hotmail.com **003531 2014427** (Ireland).

BERNING EA-230, the perfect valve power amplifier for electrostatic loudspeakers, VGC, very rare and sought after, with circuit diagram. £800, or exchange for DNM PA3 Delta S power amp. elsfan@yahoo.com

MARANTZ PM-11 S1 Premium Series reference integrated amplifier. Boxed and mint (£2,500) £1,295. Marantz SA-11 S1 Premium Series reference CD/SACD player. Boxed and mint. Both in perfect working order. (Cost £2,500) asking £849. **07858 201062** or email: fullswop@gmail.com (Northants).

SONY TC-K 611 Dolby cassette deck, three motors, power door, fully loaded three heads, adjustable bias etc. Hardly used, excellent condition (black) £49.

01766 781211 (Porthmadog). **SPENDOR** S8e speakers, purchased early 2006 (maple) and in superb condition, £900. Buyer collects. Original boxes, packing and instruction manual included. **01305 263069** (West Dorset).

PLINIUS integrated amplifier 9200 and CD-101 Anniversary Edition manufactured in 2010. Only 75 pairs in the world. 200 watts per channel into 8 ohms. CD-player with balanced XLR output. Both are used, but are in mint condition and still with limited warranty. (£8,400) £6,000. Buyer collects. Email: stmchan@gmail.com (Docklands, London).

ROTEL RA-05 amp and RCD-06 CD player with KEF IQ5 floorstanders. All in excellent condition. £200 each or £550 for the system. **01404891728** or Alanrussell@tiscali.co.uk (East Devon).

CYRUS 7.5 preamp, one Smartpower and PSX-R power supply (black). Good condition £600 ovno **07842 643684** (Tyne & Wear).

GALE 401 speaker, fully reconditioned by specialist

BUYING TIP **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!

with stands and boxes; £475. **01825 722936 (Sussex).**

CYRUS 6 XP amplifier in silver (2010 model). As new £595. **01323 440597 (Eastbourne).**

MARANTZ CD6002 CD player in mint condition, perfect working order with remote; £150. **02476467679 (West Midlands).**

PROAC Future One in ebony, £2,000. Krell KSA50S, boxed and mint open to offers. Linn Karik CD player boxed and mint £280. **07584 838673 (Wigan).**

VIENNA Schonberg Series speakers (silver) £1,800, Vienna Webern single speaker (silver) £250, Pioneer receiver VSX-AX5i-S £700, Pioneer DVD player DV-868AVI £300. **01522 868163 (Lincoln).**

CYRUS 8 XP d amp with digital inputs £1,050, PSX-R £250, CD8 SE (2009 version) £600. All are brushed black, unmarked, boxed, free p&p. **07884 002911 or email ishmael386-inet@yahoo.co.uk (Halifax).**

WHARFEDALE 10-6 floorstanders with spikes, instruction manual and boxes. Can be bi-wired. Purchased in 2010, only four hours use. £295 ono. **01278 789432 (Somerset).**

MELODY M380 valve power amp, mint condition, boxed. Two years old £850. Quad QC Twenty Four, new, boxed £475. Heed Quasar MC phono stage, mint £150. **07729 620621 (Worcs).**

BOWERS & WILKINS 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).**

KEF Reference 4 monitor speakers. Superb bass and near-electrostatic soundstaging make these involving speakers a bargain. New and pristine (£3,200) £950. **07506 749099 or 01132 843770 (Leeds).**

SUGDEN A21AL Mk2 integrated amp. Pure Class A without the pain of valves. Silky smooth and bristling

with detail. Eight months old, boxed as new finished in graphite. Reluctant sale £1,150 ono **dazzert@hotmail.com 07847 501865 (West Yorks).**

CYRUS 8-POWER £425 (brushed black). Genuinely mint condition, original packaging with accessories and manual. Purchased in 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. **07722 248001 or email doug.taylor@virgin.net (Lincolnshire).**

MARANTZ PM4001 integrated amplifier, mint condition, three years old, perfect working order, £125. Also Monitor Audio Bronze BR2 speakers, mint condition, three years old, perfect working order, £150 **024764 67679 or email johnclements45@sky.com (West Midlands).**

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. Mint, built-in phono stage (MC/MM). Excellent sound. Fully serviced July 2011 at B&W. £1,000 ono. 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).**

ARCAM A85 integrated amp in excellent condition. MM/MC phono stage, box and manual, £1950 ono. Linn LP12 armboard in perfect condition £10 plus P&P. **07941 174804 (Heathrow).**

MITAVT3 speaker cable, 2x3 metre pair, £160. MIT AVI interconnect 1m £70. Both mint and available as a set for £200. **0161 4323852 (Cheshire).**

ARCAM R-DAC. Only three months old, as new, boxed with all accessories, instruction booklet and receipt. £175 inc p&p. **01964 6131770 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. **020 8653 0778 or email johnkallio@googlemail.com (London).**

SUGDEN CD Master £650, Sugden Headmaster headphone/preamp £400, Trichord Dino phono stage, 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. **07702 014763 (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 aro arm, excellent condition £1,000. **01554 891010 (Carmarthen).**

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

NAIM CD5XS CD player, two years old in superb condition. Boxed with manual and remote, bargain at £895. **07914985733 (Derbyshire).**

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Hi-Fi Choice

Buyer's Guide

Welcome to the *Hi-Fi Choice Buyer's Guide* – a comprehensive listing of our favourite affordable audiophile hi-fi. Here you'll find our top-rated current products listed under easy-to-use categories, with the latest pricing and verdicts.

Reviews you can trust

Hi-Fi Choice strives to bring you accurate reviews done to exacting standards, from some of the UK's most respected hi-fi journalists. Painsstaking care is taken to ensure you can trust our ratings (see *How We Test*, p21).

The following pages detail the equipment we currently rate most highly, from disc players and streamers to turntables, amplifiers, tuners and loudspeakers.

How to use this guide

The *Hi-Fi Choice Buyer's Guide* is designed to help you shortlist components to audition at a dealer. We suggest you pick the ones that best suit your taste and budget, then consult our *Dealer Guide (Classified)* section to find specialist hi-fi retailers where you can hear them with your favourite music. Of course, reviews are important, but there's nothing like trying before you buy!

SOURCE COMPONENTS

108 CD players

Our favourite silver disc spinners currently on sale

111 Turntables

Premium quality record players you really must hear

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Top moving magnet and moving coil pickups listed

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Surf the airwaves with any one of these carefully selected tuners

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Badge-winning headphones for your personal listening pleasure

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The finest network hi-fi, from streaming clients to full-on servers

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The latest and greatest digital-to-analogue converters



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115 Stereo amplifiers

Our pick of the world's top one-box integrated amplifiers

115 Pre/power amps

For those applications where two boxes are better than one!



CABLES

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Cables can provide a useful tweak to your system; check out our choices

117 Speaker cables

Priced per metre, these are our favourites for connecting loudspeakers



LOUDSPEAKERS

119 Stereo speakers

These top transducers will allow your system to sing

STANDS & SUPPORTS

123 Equipment supports

The best equipment supports: sprung; solid; air-filled; glass; MDF and more...

123 Speaker stands

Stands come in all shapes, sizes and prices, so take your pick from our list



DEALER CLASSIFIED

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129 Dealer directory

For all your hi-fi wants, check our index of independent hi-fi dealerships



BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● | EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● | GROUP TEST WINNER = ● | BEST BUY = ●

CD players



Any one of these fine players will make sweet music for years to come

Up to £1,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	SACD compatible	ELEC dig output	OPT dig output	CD-RW compatible	BAL analogue out	Headphone socket	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	OPT dig output	CD-RW compatible	BAL analogue out	Headphone socket	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-07S	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
●	Krell S-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
●	Raysonic CD128S	1,850	A change from the usual CD player performance that emphasises the strengths of the valves	●	●				●		354
●	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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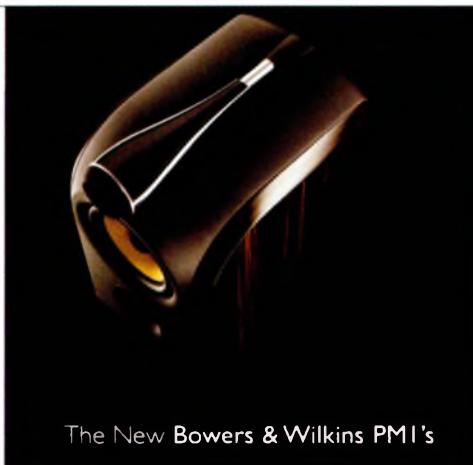


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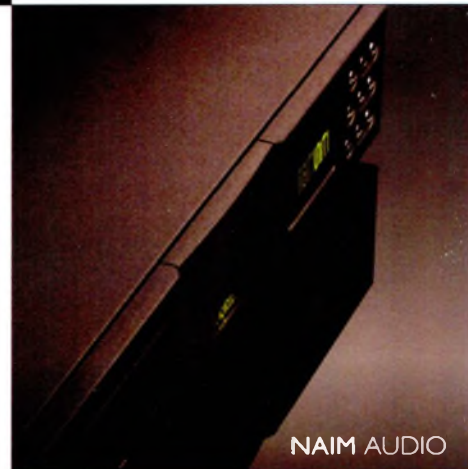
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Turntables

The best record players money can buy



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Switchable speed change Suspension subchassis Speeds	Supplied with arm Issue number	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-armed 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 Orbe SE	3,150	A fully suspended design that manages to do everything with ease	33/45	● ● ● ●	354
●	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
●	Roksan Xerxes.20plus	4,947	A classic design with superb control and spatial resolution to make an addictive sound	33/45	● ● ● ●	354
●	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	Replaceable stylus MM MC	Issue number
●	Dynavector DV-20X2L	499	Revealing and open sound from a well-built and easy-to-align MC cartridge	●	342
●	Dynavector Karat 17D3	699	One of the most thrilling-sounding cartridges on the market	●	334
●	Goldring Legacy	595	An MC cartridge better suited to the smoother-sounding turntable, it unearths a mountain of detail	●	328
●	 Grado Prestige Gold 1	150	Unusually assured 'presence' region is the basis of a beautifully musical and involving presentation	●	338
●	Ortofon 2M Red	80	A little fussy about set up, but sound is admirably balanced and full of unforced detail	●	345
●	Ortofon Vivo Red	200	Never less than musically convincing, this all-in-one cartridge is remarkably capable	●	338
●	Ortofon Cadenza Red	750	There's much to admire in this cartridge's fine detail and unfussy presentation	●	330
●	Shure M97xE	82	A budget cartridge, but bass and midrange are to high-end standards and treble is just as assured	●	345

Phono stages

Make your turntable sing



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	MM phono 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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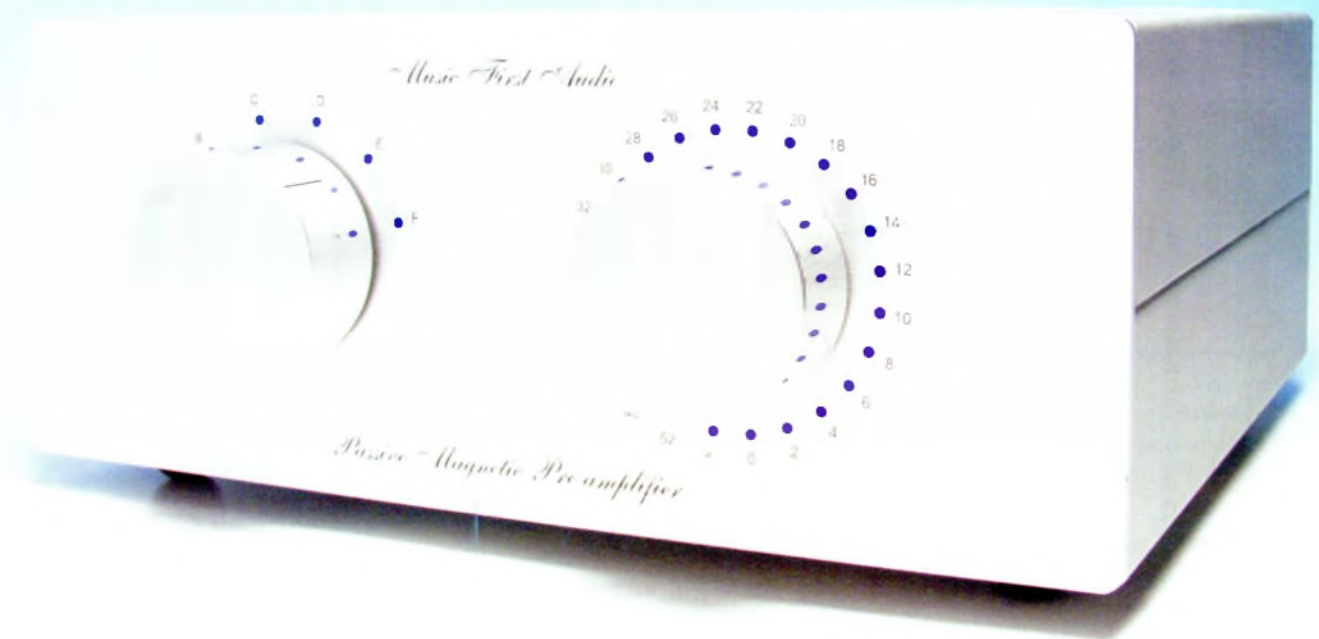
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BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●

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 B200A	730	Has detailed sound with good extension and unusually assured midrange	6				60	349
●	Cambridge Audio 840Av2	800	A chunky powerhouse with features aplenty, this amp offers detail and delicacy (silver finish)	8	●	●		120	327
●	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
●	NuForce Icon 2	235	Detail and imaging make few, if any, concessions to full-size amps at twice the price	2		●	●	24	352
●	Pro-Ject Stereo Box S	199	Engagingly energetic amp with more than passable analytical skills	2		●		18	352
●	Rega Brio-R	398	Fights well above its weight in terms of timing and musicality	4	MM	●		50	352

Above £1,000

●	Audio Analogue Verdi Cento	1,600	A capable and strong performer with many likeable features	5	MM/MC	●		70	352
●	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
●	Canor TP106VR+	3,950	A well thought-out amplifier that offers superb performance with real-world stability	4				55	354
●	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
●	Emillé 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 I3.3	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
●	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	Pre-amplifier	Line inputs	Phono input	Remote control	Power output (watts)	Issue number
●	Cambridge Audio Azur 840F/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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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



BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●

Streamers/music servers

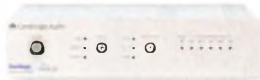


Streaming and music servers are opening up a new dimension in listening pleasure

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Internal drive Wireless	iPod compatible USB	Balanced output Apple Airplay	Digital output USB	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
●	Naim ND5 XS	1,925	A 'starter' product, its performance actually comes close to that of a reference-level streamer	●	●	●	●	35
●	Rotel RDG-1520	795	A great product for those unaccustomed to internet-based audio	●	●	●	●	351

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	Sampling rate (kHz)	Headphone socket	Balanced outputs	Volume control	Issue number
●	Antelope Audio Zodiac Plus	1,895	Remarkable resolving capabilities and more inputs than the majority of DACs	●	●	●	192	●	●	●	345
●	Benchmark DAC1	950	Very clean sound with plenty of detail and also good rhythmic drive	●	●	●	192	●	●	●	341
●	Cambridge Audio DacMagic	230	Detail and imaging are very good and a decent feature count only adds to the appeal	●	●	●	96	●	●	●	331
●	Electrocompaniet PD1	1,250	Great sound and superb build, the PD1 allows you to access music on your computer hard drive	●	●	●	192	●	●	●	350
●	Furutech GT40	395	The perfect 'missing link' between analogue and the home computer	●	●	●	96	●	●	●	342
●	Matrix Mini-i	260	Agile, lively and detailed sound with clear and full-bodied bass	●	●	●	192	●	●	●	349
●	M2 Tech Young DAC	1,200	For affordable ultra-high resolution, this DAC has detailed sound and is full of life and vibrancy	●	●	●	96	●	●	●	350
●	NuForce DAC9	1,095	A very capable DAC with good input and output provision	●	●	●	192	●	●	●	350
●	Rega DAC	498	A little stunner, combining genuinely high-end sound with a good feature set	●	●	●	44	●	●	●	346
●	TEAC UD-H01	299	This DAC has plenty to recommend it at a great price	●	●	●	192	●	●	●	354

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				Stranded	Solid core	Copper	Silver	Digital cable type	Issue number
●	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 (60cpe per metre)				Stranded	Solid core	Copper	Silver	Digital cable type	Issue number
●	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

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Size: width, height, depth (cm)
 Floorstander
 Ease of drive
 Bass room (Hz)
 Free space
 Close to wall
 Issue number

Up to £1,000

Model	Price	Comments	Size	Floorstander	Ease of drive	Bass room (Hz)	Free space	Close to wall	Issue number
● Acoustic Energy Radiance 1	600	Limited bass, power handling and dynamics, but exceptional mid-to-treble voicing	185,32,25		A	33	●	●	325
● Acoustic Energy Neo V2	700	Lots of box, this speaker produces a coherent and engaging sound	203,120,30	●	A		●	●	348
● Amphion Helium 410	600	Speaker combines exceptional clarity and timing with a solid build	13,25,9,22		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
● KEFiQ50	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
● Roth Audio oLi10	100	An even-handed bookshelf loudspeaker with very good upper-bass energy	15,3,19,9,17,8						347
● Spendor S3/5R2	850	A superb performer that takes the classic attributes of the design and adds further all-round ability	16,5,30,5,19					●	354
● 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 Reference 1	1,500	Fine mid-to-treble neutrality and coherence, plus wide dynamic range	19,31,28		A		●	●	354
● 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 CM8	1,250	Exceptional looking speaker with a fine midrange and superior imaging	16,5,96,6,28	●	A	60	●	●	344
● Bowers and Wilkins PM1	1,995	This standmount boasts fine imaging, superb neutrality and dynamic range	19,33,3,25		A	40	●	●	352
● 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
● Canton Vento 820	1,200	Really emphasises the benefits of the standmount, with great freedom from boxiness	22,36,31,5	●	A+		●	●	342
● DALI IKON 7 MkII	1,669	With a wide dynamic range, this speaker offers high performance at a realistic price	20,11,7,3,6,4	●	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 Phis	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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Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Size - width, height, depth (cm)	Floorstander	Ease of drive	Bass from (Hz)	Free space	Close to wall	Issue number
●	Guru QM1o	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
●	MAD 1920	1,350	Classic styling cues; fine bass alignment and a lively, if somewhat forward character	19,28,23	A	60	●	●	●	354
●	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
●	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	29,156,5,42,5	●	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 twenty.23	2,095	Attractively styled, with a smooth coherent balance and a dry, but clean bass	15,2,91,8,33	●	A	40	●	●	354
●	PMC FB1i	2,100	A floorstander that boasts impressive bass extension and a smooth sweet top end	20,100,30	●	A	20	●	●	329
●	PMC fact.8	5,250	Beautiful styling, alongside a superb all-round sound with a notably wide dynamic range	15,5,105,38	●	A	55	●	●	327
●	QuadralAurum Altan VIII	1,570	This speaker has a warmth that belies its size and a very laid-back character	22,240,5,34,6	●	A	52	●	●	350
●	ProAcStudio 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
●	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	27,54,5,32,5	A			●	●	343
●	Tannoy Definition DC8	2,500	Stylish-looking, this speaker is a fine communicator with clean, crisp and dynamic sound	27,47,26			55	●	●	343
●	Totem Sittaf	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).

HFC TOP PICKS



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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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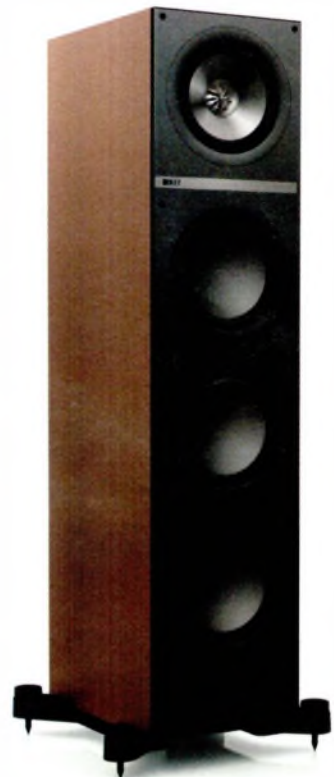
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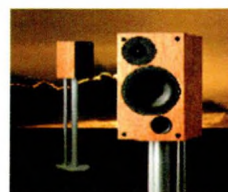
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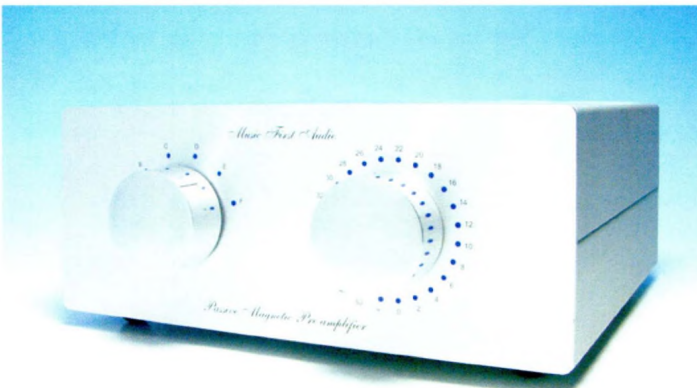
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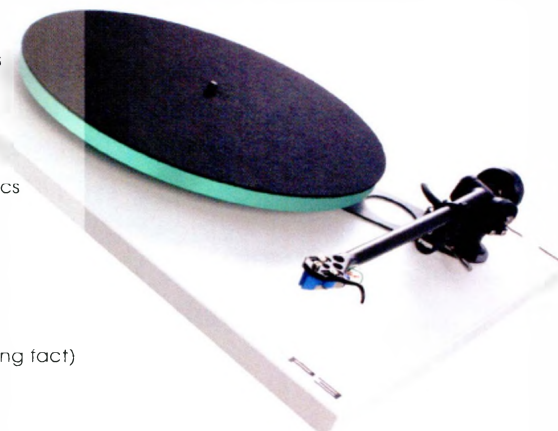
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WE HEAR...

ARCAM HAS A NEW RANGE OF rDAC-sized mini-separates in small alloy cases on the way... First we've had confirmed is the USB DAC/headphone amplifier – the prototype is expected to appear at the CES Show in Las Vegas in January, with the official launch in February at the Bristol show...

ONE MIGHTILY IMPRESSIVE mini-monitor we heard in our travels late last year is now just about to reach market – Raidho's new C1.1 costs a whopping £8,855 – but unlike so many high-end loudspeakers it sounds as special as its price tag...

A NEW HI-FI BRAND has just arrived in the UK, but be careful how you pronounce it. Schiit Audio (yes, really) is not a name to conjure with. Started by Yank industry veterans Jason Stoddard (formerly of Sumo) and Mike Moffat (Theta), the kit is strikingly styled and highly affordable. Distributed by Mark Dolbear of High End Workshop in the UK, it's pronounced as 'sheet'. Meanwhile, Jason and Mike are very much in on the joke it seems; "check out our Schiit", they say on their website...

A MOLE INSIDE Musical Fidelity reports sightings of a 'top secret super amp', said to drop 700W into 8-ohm loudspeakers. Price is said to be 'below £10k for a pair of these ultra performance power amps'. Expect it in the spring.

THE STREAMER that every impoverished audiophile is talking about right now is the Logitech Squeezebox Touch (HFC 351), a fine bit of kit, but still not quite there in terms of sonics. We hear Mains Cables R Us have an aftermarket power supply coming to replace the bundled switched mode.

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



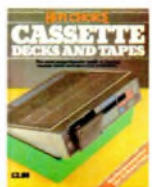
HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 224
FEBRUARY 2002

Ten years ago *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine was bidding a fond farewell to Jason Kennedy as editor after a marathon 172 issues. Alvin Gold and Paul Miller took the lid off a selection of stereo integrated amps with Arcam, Marantz and Sugden taking the honours. While the 'mother of all reviews' compared multichannel speaker systems with their stereo rivals. In the wider world, war started in Afghanistan as the allies invaded. Her Majesty the Queen had a fiftieth anniversary bash and The Flaming Lips' magnum opus *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* was released, alongside Peter Gabriel's *Up* and Coldplay's *A Rush of Blood to the Head*...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 103
FEBRUARY 1992

The European Union was founded, Nirvana's *Nevermind* made number one in the Billboard charts, and *HFC's* Editor Andy Benham explained how difficult it had been finding fifteen record players for the group test, due to the industry's preference for CD! Even though it was claimed to be the last time that a whole issue would be devoted to vinyl, earlier versions of both the Roksan Radius and Xerxes still won Recommended badges, proving turntables were far from obsolete. Practically every piece of hi-fi came in a black box, and we were just about to fall in love with floorstanding loudspeakers. On the tech front, MiniDisc and DCC were just about to wow us...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 29
FEBRUARY 1982

As Maggie Thatcher went to war, Freddie Laker's airline went bankrupt, and DeLorean cars went into receivership, the (then) quarterly *Hi-Fi Choice* presented a special issue on cassette decks and tapes. A threat to vinyl, cassettes were increasing in popularity as a quick and more efficient way to play – and record – music. After discussing the merits of the cassette against reel-to-reel tape decks, Best Buys included an Aiwa AD-3800 (£270), Hitachi D-2200M (£330) and the top-loading Sony TC-D5M (£295). Compact Disc was still the stuff of science fiction, but was just months away from being a commercial reality. The world was just about to change...

By day, Ian Marshall works in the sales department for Naim Audio, by night he's Attila from Legions of Crows, purveyors of a mixture of 'Necro Black Metal, Traditional Doom and Northern European Hymnodic music'!

The band have their new album out now, available for free download at 192kbps MP3. Called *Stab Me*, it's described as 'the sound of crushing infant skulls to the sledge hammer beat of a funeral march for the damned'. If you dare, here's the link...

<http://clawhammerpr.haulix.com/Media/View/3468>



BACKCHAT NEEDS YOU!
Got any hi-fi-related hearsay? Don't share it with your neighbour over the garden fence, send it to us instead! Do your audiophile duty by emailing news@hifichoice.co.uk.
Be seeing you!

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

Peter Empson and Mark Orr from Deco Audio select four of their favorite albums



MOUNTAIN GOATS
THE SUNSET TREE
Arguably one of the finest modern lyricists, it's John Darnielle at his most personal. Each track is a cleverly formed story in itself, filled with passion and intensity.



TALKING HEADS
THE NAME OF THIS BAND IS
Brimming with energy, this is one of those recordings that really benefits from being played at an appropriate volume level.



NATALIE MERCHANT
LEAVE YOUR SLEEP
Merchant sets poems for children to music – two full CDs worth with a stellar cast of musicians and a wide variety of musical styles. Sumptuous.



SCOTT WALKER
TILT
A dark, claustrophobic and foreboding album, *Tilt* is beautifully played. Great care was clearly taken with the recording. Listen in the dark late at night to get the full effect.



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Icon Stereo 40 MKIII

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→ From £1299



Icon PS1 Phono

"The Icon Audio relayed the sounds with great gusto, seemingly revelling in the rhythms... and engagingly uplifting sound... offers unbeatable value for money."



→ From £699



Icon Stereo 300 MKII

"Stupendously musical performer... got my speakers singing their hearts out... beautiful texturing, flowing organic rhythms."

→ From £1999



Icon PS3 Phono

"The Icon presented the vocal with a real focus, revealing the subtle nuances... well balanced, inviting and musical sound... mid range clarity and satisfying weight."

→ From £1399

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SOUND AND VISION



Jade 5 - Oct 2011

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