



Staged gains

Four of the best headphone amps tested: Creek Audio, Fidelity Audio, Icon Audio and Musical Fidelity

Retro

Marantz CD-73: The gold standard of first generation Compact Disc players



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

www.hifichoice.co.uk

Issue No. 356

£3.99

Power tower

Do premium integrated amplifiers punch above their weight? We test six top £1,500 models



Rega rocket

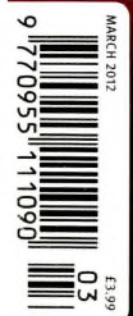
Rega's new Apollo-R CD player blasts past budget rivals

M power

Linn's latest Majik DSM system advances the digital streaming art

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top products tested: Claro, Focal, Kingrex Q Acoustics, and more...



Grand design

KEF's new Q700 floorstander offers an expansive, powerful sound for under £1,000



Watts up?

Explained: the dark art of matching amplifiers to loudspeakers



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

absolute sounds ltd
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www.absolutesounds.com info@absolutesounds.com





CES 2012 All the latest audio from Las Vegas!



Dealer Visit AngelSound Audio

Music reviews



The Who *Quadrophenia: The Director's Cut*

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!



Ever gambled in Las Vegas? That's precisely what the world's consumer electronics companies do, once a year in early January, when they show their new wares to a waiting world at CES.

It's an *amazing* spectacle. Large swathes of the town's already extensive capacity is eaten up by around 3,100

manufacturers, showing over 20,000 new products to more than 150,000 people.

Space aliens tasked to assess where the human race is on its technological learning curve, could cut out decades of covert observation, saucer flying, crop circle forming – and just check out CES!

Being the consumer electronics fest that it is, visitors should always prepare for dazzling new 3D TV action and lots of cool new car audio being launched. But there's hi-fi aplenty too, as this is where many of the world's major specialist manufacturers launch the new products which they hope will bring success in the coming year.

For them, it's vital to make an impression on the world's hi-fi press, and of course those thousands of international distributors who sleuth along the corridors of the Venetian and Mirage hotels, down on Las Vegas Strip. The great gamble is whether their product planning was right a couple of years back – did they correctly predict what the world now wants to buy?

Well, decide for yourself with our three-page show report on p90. And if you're not sure, then there's a second chance to see many of these new goodies at the forthcoming *Sound and Vision Show* in Bristol (Friday 24th to Sunday 26th February). This is a lot closer to home but no less rewarding – and like Vegas it's a dead cert that we'll be there!

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



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Bricasti Design

"The precision and sheer detail of the sound it delivers puts it right at the top table of high-end DACs. Don't expect magic, but you do get fireworks." *Alan Sircom - Hi-Fi+ Issue 84*

"It isn't often that a new name enters the audiophile arena with a product of such outstanding quality. However you look at it - construction, engineering, test bench performance, sound quality - the M1 hits the spot." *Ken Kessler - Hi-Fi News, June 2011*

ANTHEM



art loudspeakers



marantz



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01202 911 886

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

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

website:

www.jordanacoustics.co.uk

glenrothes showroom

telephone:

01592 744 779

e-mail: glenrothes@jordanacoustics.co.uk

address: *20-22 Cadham Centre, Glenrothes
Fife, KY7 6RU*
Open: *Monday - Friday. Closed Saturday.*

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



Celebrating its 60th anniversary, Swiss company Nagra, famous for its precision audio engineering, has introduced a hybrid tube amp that breathes new life into the classic 300B triode valve. Beautiful to behold and sublime to hear.

NAGRA



Capable of true-to-life sound reproduction that belies its diminutive size, the MXA60 is a full-blown McIntosh HiFi in-miniature. 75 Watt Amp/pre, CD/SACD Player, AM/FM Tuner and Loudspeakers (pair).

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*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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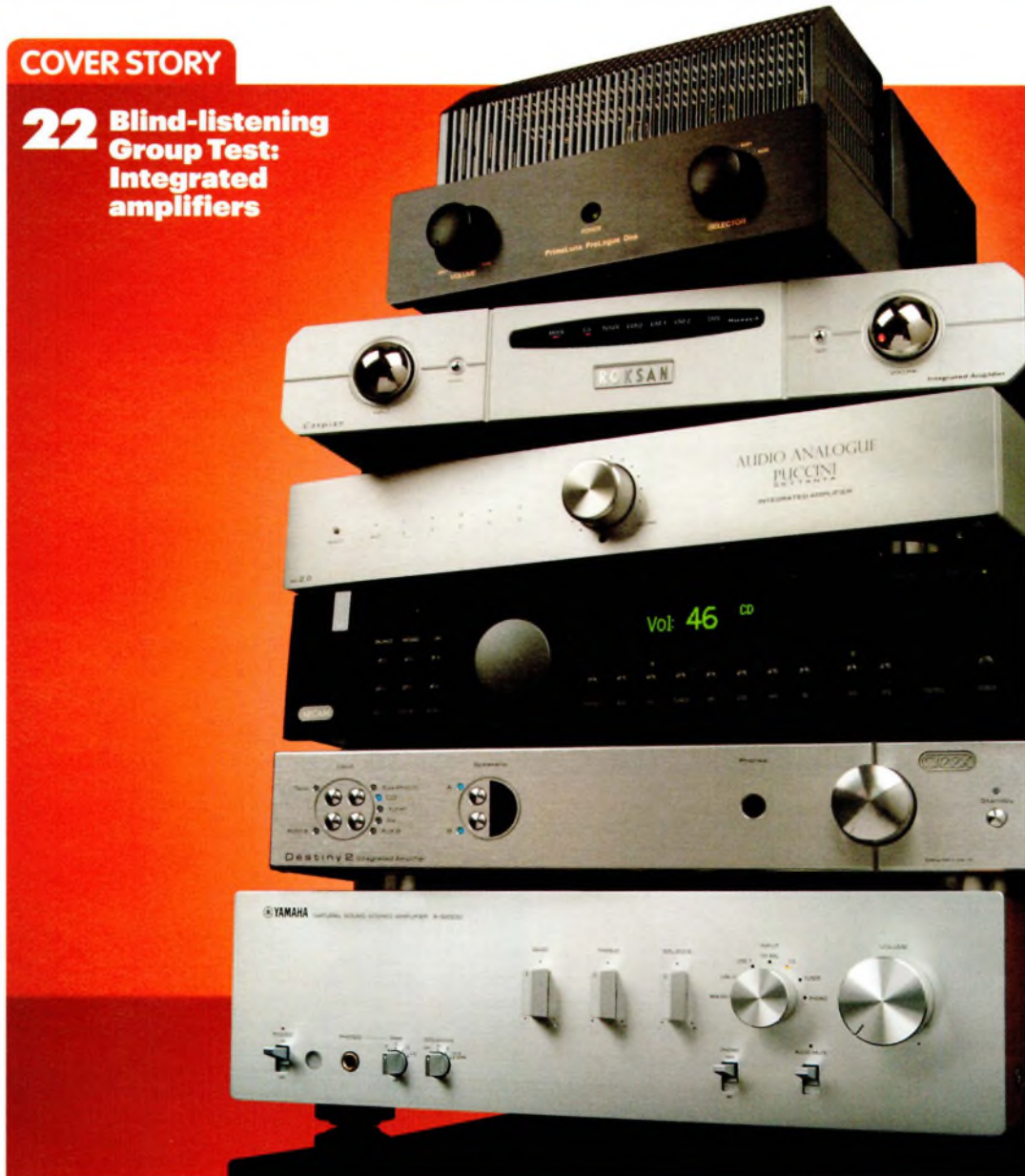
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"the Linn certainly has the edge in terms of transparency and resolution..."

Malcolm Steward: Linn Majik DSM integrated DS player, preamp, power amp **p44**

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Never miss an issue – turn to p39 for our latest subs offer

Audiofile

The latest hi-fi industry news...

School's out!

With its new Azur 851C CD player/DAC/preamp and 851A integrated amplifier, Cambridge Audio has unleashed its big guns on the likes of Audiolab, Cyrus and Naim, says **David Price**...

PRICE: £1,200 EACH
AVAILABLE: MARCH 2012
CONTACT: 44 (0)845 900 1230
WEB: CAMBRIDGEAUDIO.COM



There's a fight brewing at a hi-fi dealer near you! The Cambridge boys are back in town with their heavily revised mid-price contenders, riding their scooters straight on to the lawns of some of Britain's biggest hi-fi names. Will this be a civil English war, or are the claws out?

Well, looking at the specs of the Azur 851C shows Cambridge Audio is going straight for Audiolab's 8200CDQ CD player/DAC/preamp, whilst the Azur 851A amplifier is something for Naim's Nait 5i to think about, among others. Matthew Bramble's design team has been burning the midnight oil, and cranking up the company's computer...

The former features twin Analog Devices AD1955 chips – what Cambridge Audio call the 'Rolls Royce' of DACs, along with second generation proprietary audio upsampling (to 24-bit/384kHz). There's a 24/96 driverless USB input, which goes up to 24/192 using a free Cambridge Audio driver (available from the website).

Matthew Bramble's design team has been burning the midnight oil

The 'custom audio-only CD transport' upconverts Compact Disc from standard 16-bit to 24-bit, and there's a fully balanced digital input and output which allows the connection of the company's own iD100 iPad/iPhone dock, or other high-end digital source device. Factor in two unbalanced digital inputs (optical or coaxial for each), an 'audiophile-grade oversize' toroidal transformer, full digital preamp functionality and three selectable digital filters (linear/minimum/steep) – and it's a well-specified bit of kit.

The new Azur 851A Class XD amplifier is an evolution of the Douglas Self-designed circuit found in its 840A predecessor. It boasts 2x 120 watts RMS into 8 ohms, an 'oversized' toroid to provide power, plus a smaller toroidal transformer for the preamp section, twin balanced XLR inputs, five pairs of unbalanced stereo RCA inputs and a 'high-performance' integrated circuit volume control. There's also a handy customisable interface that lets you rename inputs, which is a nice touch, and the acoustically damped full-metal chassis with brushed aluminium front panel confers a sense of quality.

SPOTLIGHT

WHEN IS A CD PLAYER NOT A CD PLAYER?

...when it's a Cambridge Audio Azur 851C. "Think of the new 'C' more as a digital preamp with a CD drive fitted", says Cambridge Audio. This echoes the sentiments of a number of manufacturers we've spoken to recently, that the days of standalone CD players are numbered. The world is moving into multiple digital sources, and CD is only one of them...



Na na na...

ACCORDING TO the Performing Rights Society, which has just published data on the songs receiving the most airplay and live covers in the past decade, Kylie Minogue's *Can't Get You Out Of My Head* has been named the highest-played tune of the noughties. The track, which was a UK number one back in 2001, was the most ubiquitous song of the past ten years, says the PRS, which collects royalties for songwriters and composers.

Second came Britney Spears' 2004 single *Toxic*, ahead of Robbie Williams' *Angels* in third. Jamelia's *Superstar* was fourth, ahead of Liberty X's *Just A Little* in fifth. In total, the PRS says that the top five songs were played a staggering 875 million times during the last decade.

Can't Get You Out Of My Head was written by performer-turned-songwriter Cathy Dennis, and was reputedly turned down by S Club 7 and Sophie Ellis-Bextor before Kylie used it. Interestingly, *Toxic* was also Dennis' brainchild, while *Angels* was written by the renowned Guy Chambers. All the songs which made the top three won the coveted Ivor Novello Award for Most Popular Song in the year they were released, the PRS reveals.

WEB: PRSFORMUSIC.COM



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

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Tel - 07917 431 280

Email - sales@acousticbrandslimited.com

Web - www.acousticbrandslimited.com

Mpressive

Musical Fidelity's new power amp punches hard for its small size...

Musical Fidelity's M1 power amp is designed to match the company's CLiC universal music controller preamp and, following the form factor of the M series, is exactly the same small size. It delivers a claimed 60 watts per channel into 8 ohms, (120W into 4 ohms), while distortion is quoted at a low 0.05 percent. Phase integrity, frequency response and stereo separation are all said to be excellent. Like all the company's amplifiers it's designed to drive a wide range of loads.

The M1 power amp has one very useful feature, which is that at the push of a button it becomes a 100W monoblock, giving 200W transient peak capacity into 4 ohms. Coming in a whisker under £1,600, a pair of these makes an interesting alternative to a larger stereo power amplifier. Finish is in the usual choice of black or silver.

Watch out for a review of the new M1 power amplifier in the April 2012 edition of *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine.



PRICE: £799 AVAILABLE: NOW CONTACT: 020 8900 2866 WEB: MUSICALFIDELITY.COM



Twenty five years young

CELEBRATING A QUARTER CENTURY in business this year, Russ Andrews Accessories has launched Special Edition versions of its popular PowerBlock and Ultra PurifierBlock mains boxes – for the hi-fi enthusiast looking for the ultimate in clean power feeds, the company says.

The Special Editions are enhanced with the addition of Kimber Hyper-pure woven silver cabling for the connection of key components such as turntables, CD players and preamps.

The Special Edition Ultra PurifierBlock takes the features and performance benefits of the PowerBlock and adds the company's Ultra Purifier technology for mains noise filtration.

Russ is also offering a rewire service with Kimber silver cable to bring existing blocks up to the performance level of the anniversary editions.

Both products are available now, priced £899 and £1,149. Rewiring is £450. russandrews.com



Industrial action

METRUM ACOUSTICS' Octave (€700) is a two-box digital to analogue converter; one contains the DAC and the other the power supply. Interestingly, it is said to be a non-oversampling design with four industrial DACs per channel.

"After many years of experimentation we finally identified an extremely fast chip that's usable for 16 or 24-bit audio," says Metrum. "We subsequently attempted to design a DAC which would not be based on the regular AKM, Burr-Brown, TI, Crystal and Wolfson chips which are ubiquitous in consumer audio. We have also kept functionality and cosmetics simple to maintain an attractive price." For more information, click on istereos.co.uk

Golden jubilee

Audio-Technica celebrates 50 years with four new products

Audio Technica has just announced a new range of products, including an over-ear audiophile headphone (TH-W3000ANV), DJ headphone (ATH-PRO700MK2ANV), air-core moving-coil phono cartridge (AT50ANV), and Dual Magnet phono cartridge (AT150ANV) and titanium headshell (AT-TI15ANV).

Each features a distinctive 50th Anniversary Audio Technica logo and is supplied with a commemorative certificate.

PRICES: £279-£2,200 AVAILABLE: NOW CONTACT: 0113 277 1441 WEB: AUDIO-TECHNICA.COM



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BDP-93EU

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Pac it in!

The gadget that's claimed to turn your home computer into real hi-fi...

One of a range of four brand new 'r' series miniature components, Arcam's new rPAC is a compact combined USB DAC and headphone amplifier. It's USB-powered, so no standalone PSU is needed, and is designed to "dramatically improve" the audio performance of both PC (Win7, XP) and Apple Mac (OS X) computers.

Using a digital-to-analogue convertor chip that Arcam says is normally found in high-end hi-fi components, and proprietary audio circuitry, the rPAC takes audio files stored on a Mac or PC and converts them into what the company describes as "beautiful music with stunning clarity and precision", no less!

There's a choice of line level output, or variable via the headphone socket, so it can function as a mobile headphone amp or as a mini home hi-fi DAC.

The rPAC is constructed using a durable, precision cast aluminium case; having seen one at CES we can vouch for its superb quality of build and finish. For more details on the new rSeries, see the editor's show blog on the *Hi-Fi Choice* website (hifichoice.co.uk), or contact Arcam direct.



rPAC

PRICE: £150 AVAILABLE: NOW CONTACT: 01223 203200 WEB: ARCAM.CO.UK

High spirits

Focal launches its new Spirit One headphones

A lightweight closed-back circum-aural model, Focal's new Spirit One is designed to be sonically accurate, keep out most external sounds and be comfortable for long periods of time, such as on a transatlantic flight for example.

Headphone designers have to balance many parameters. Focal's R&D team believe that the majority of 'cans' on the market suffer from overblown bass and treble. The Spirit One, however, is balanced to deliver music as it sounded in the recording studio, the company claims.

Weighing only 225g, the drive units use neodymium magnets and lightweight 40mm mylar/titanium diaphragms.



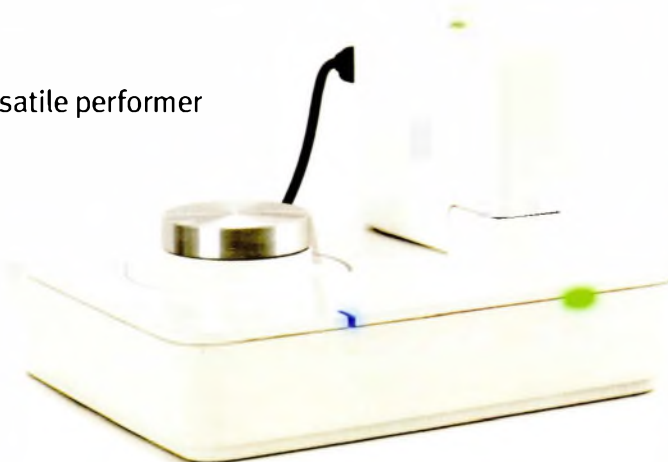
PRICE: £199 AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: 0845 660 2680
WEB: FOCAL-UK.COM

Air play'n

Novel new amplifier from Griffin Technology is a versatile performer

The 'Twenty from Griffin is an interesting new gadget that uses Apple's Airport Express to stream music in iTunes libraries via any AirPlay-enabled iOS device. It sports a "zero-configuration audio set-up", said to make it useable with any AirPlay-enabled app (such as Pandora, Spotify, last.fm, etc.). It sends music to the user's speakers via a 2.1 channel digital amplifier claimed to push out 20W per channel.

The new Twenty comes equipped with a power connection and mount for an Airport Express, and there's also support for a powered subwoofer with an automatic active crossover at 80Hz. Styling is in the conventional polycarbonate Apple white, to reflect its intended application.



PRICE: £TBC AVAILABLE: NOW CONTACT: 07738 290 458 WEB: GRIFFINTECHNOLOGY.COM/TWENTY

Q tip-off

New Q Acoustics 'flagship' floorstander arrives

Q Acoustics has announced the arrival of its 'flagship' model in its highly popular 2000i Series, the new 2050i two-way floorstander. The new transducer is said to boast "ultra-low, class-leading levels of distortion, a superfast transient response, extended bass and a wonderfully smooth and open treble".

Q Acoustics says that its design brief for the new 2050i model was to produce an elegant, stylish, beautifully finished, high-performance, floorstanding loudspeaker that also offered "astonishing value for money".

Every part of the speaker is said to be bespoke and optimised specifically for this new model, from the 25mm dome tweeter which incorporates a special multi-layered cone material (rather than treated fabric) with 'super-decoupling' from the loudspeaker's baffle as well as integral damping. The main drive units include a "state-of-the-art" new cone material, said to blend carbon fibre and ceramic coated paper for rigidity, lightness and low distortion. There's an "oversized" voice coil and larger magnet assemblies.

The new speaker includes traditional 'Graphite Black' and 'Walnut' finishes, and the 2050i is also available at extra cost in rather lavish Piano Gloss Black and Piano Gloss White hues too.

The predecessor to the 2050i was a highly capable yet affordable floorstander, so we look forward to reviewing this new Q Acoustics box very soon...

PRICE: £420-£550
AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: 01279 501111
WEB: QACOUSTICS.CO.UK



Blue pearl

GENEVASOUND'S new Model XS is a £179 Bluetooth-enabled hi-fi sound system built for travel, its compact clamshell containing an entire system of speakers, amplifiers, radio and alarm clock in a single rechargeable unit. The Swiss designed XS is finished in red/white or black faux leather, its case flipping open to reveal a piano lacquered cabinet inset with the brand's distinctive domed grille. Beneath this resides a discrete sound system of amplifiers, dual tweeters and woofer. The speakers comprise two 25mm tweeters and one 60mm woofer; individually chambered, they're driven by two 3W and one 6W digital amplifiers. As well as Bluetooth, there's FM radio and a 3.5mm mini-jack input. A digital clock with alarm is also featured, and there's a LED display of volume/mode/frequency and also its signature touch-sensitive 'Touchlight' controls. A rechargeable lithium battery provides over five hours of playing time.

PRICE: £179 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0843 2897195
WEB: SAV-DISTRIBUTION.CO.UK

Blind vision

BRISTOL PLAYS HOST TO the 2012 Sound and Vision show, from Friday 24th to Sunday 26th February, 10:00am - 5:00pm, at the Marriot Hotel, Lower Castle Street, Bristol BS1 3AD. Admission is £9 for adults, £6 for senior citizens (over 65) and £6 for students, who can claim a free pair of headphones worth £14.95 when producing valid Student ID. Also, accompanied children under 16 years old will get in free.

There are over 170 exhibitors showcasing some great new products. *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine will be in Room 330; come and see us, and you'll have the chance to participate in one of our famous blind listening tests. See if you can tell the difference between compressed audio, streamed lossless and music read off a digital disc! You'll also have a chance to chat to the team and bring us your hi-fi queries. Click on bristolshow.co.uk



•**ROBERTS** has two new radios, both with DAB and FM. The ChronoDAB (£70) offers 20 station presets and the option to wake-up to your choice of DAB/FM radio or buzzer. It's a classic design with large easy-to-read LCD display and multi-stage dimmer. It also includes a headphone socket. The new Sound 38 (£100) adds a CD player to the DAB/FM radio complement.
robertsradio.com

NEWS IN BRIEF

•**OYAIDE'S** Continental 5S USB cable, distributed in the UK by Black Rhodium, has been designed to deliver the best standards of analogue audio quality from digital sources. The 5S name describes the five design features including high conductive 5n pure silver conductor, copper shielding and low capacitance silk filament, 22awg PCOCC-A copper-stranded wire. Available now, prices start at £295 for 0.6m up to £590 for 3m lengths.
blackrhodium.co.uk.



“we defy anyone not to notice the improvement in performance when you switch from a free cable to a PowerKord™.”

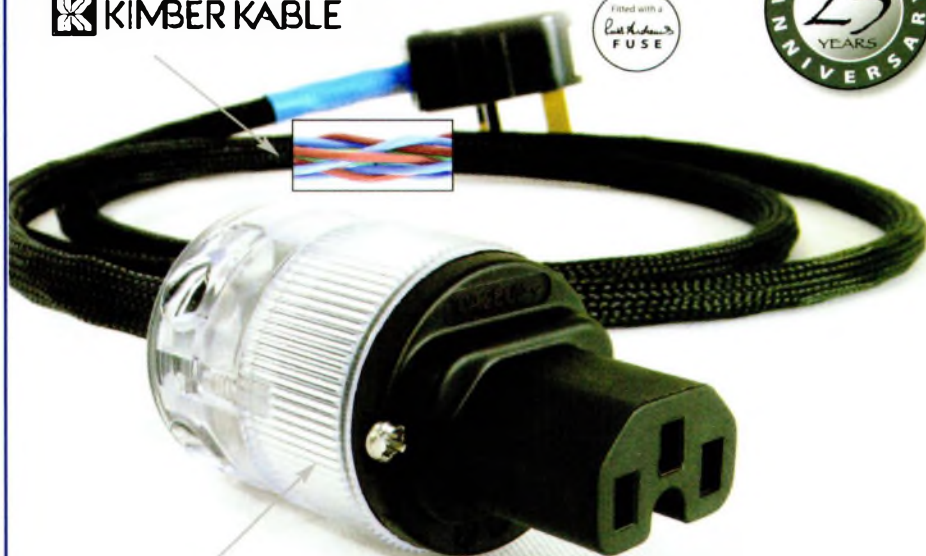
What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision magazine

WHAT HI-FI?
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High quality IEC connector by



The Classic PowerKord™
with WATTGATE™ 320i IEC

For 25 years our customers have been fitting our PowerKords™ to their Hi-Fi components. With “musicality built in” we believe that they offer the best way to get even better sound from your system.

“I’ve just attached a Classic PowerKord™ to my Marantz CD6000 and rather than bore you with superlatives about the improvements, I would simply like to say that I won’t be upgrading to a newer CD player for some time. Well done nice product.”

Mr C Donnelly, London

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Tip 1: Download your FREE guide!

Russ Andrews has decades of experience within the Hi-Fi industry and over that time he’s picked up lots of tips for improving the sound and picture quality of his systems, for little or no cost. We’d like to share some of that knowledge with you, so we’ve put together a guide for ‘50 tips to get the best from your Hi-Fi and Home Cinema’.

The guide is packed full of top tips for improving everything from your amplifier to a humble CD. **Most of the tips will cost you nothing and take very little effort to achieve.**

Available to download free of charge, get yours now simply by visiting:

www.russandrews.com/hfctoptips



**FREE
GUIDE**

50 TIPS TO GET
THE BEST
FROM YOUR
HI-FI &
HOME CINEMA



Space race



Can Rega's freshly relaunched half-sized CD spinner take off in adverse market conditions? **David Price** pilots the new Apollo-R...

Have you noticed that there's a kind of *fin de siècle* feel to CD at the moment? Remember the dying days of 1999, and how we all partied away merrily, happy to wave away a perfectly good decade to greet the next one, about which we knew nothing? That's where we are with digital audio right now, I'd say.

Compact Disc is a known quantity; it was designed as a high-quality mass music carrier by two of the greatest consumer electronics companies of the twentieth century (Philips and Sony), and performed its role superbly. Of course, some of us still preferred the sound of the ageing vinyl LP, but still CD did a sterling job of work to spread decent

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Rega Apollo-R
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: CD player
WEIGHT: 4.3kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 220x90x315mm
FEATURES:

- Wolfson WM8742 DAC
- enhanced digital power supplies
- optical and coaxial digital outputs
- improved user interface
- remote with amplifier functionality

DISTRIBUTOR: Rega Research
TELEPHONE: 01702 333071
WEBSITE: rega.co.uk

sound to the masses around the world, whatever your personal preferences are. It is now reaching the autumn of its life, with ever more music being sold online (or as people now say, somewhat simplistically, 'digitally')...

Where next then? I don't know about you, but I buy single downloads from the iTunes Music Store from time to time, as well as CDs for more serious album releases. For artists I'm collecting, I also buy the vinyl version (a surprisingly large number of new pop/rock releases still come out on this format). I have a good half terabyte of Apple Lossless music, and an iPod which I sometimes use on the move. I suspect many of us live like this, mixing our music formats without really thinking about it. So I don't think the demise of CD – and CD players – is imminent, but looking at the sales figures I'm afraid it's hardly a growth area anymore...



Gradually, we're getting to the strange position where the mass market CD player is reaching its 'last generation'. For sure, there will be disc transports on sale for years, especially at the high end, which hook up to a DAC (sales of which, it seems, are growing strongly). But the all-in-one silver disc spinner could soon be reaching its nadir. And it's into this environment that the new Rega Apollo-R materialises. Kind of like launching a gas-guzzling sports car in the middle of an oil crisis, it's hardly ideal birthing conditions.

That's why you won't see the likes of Sony doing this. Instead, it falls to smaller specialist manufacturers, of which Rega is a prime example. Here's a company that knows all about niches, having built a strong business selling turntables in a market whose conventional wisdom was that vinyl was dead. The marque went from strength to strength with ultra-specialist products, expertly tailored to a small, but loyal band of audiophiles around the world.

In this respect then, the new Apollo-R is vintage Rega, and so it is in others too.

The company has always been expert at squeezing a quart from a pint pot, and this pint-sized CD player is no exception. The casework of the original Apollo, which

As per previous Rega silver disc spinners, its front-loading transport is a joy to use...

replaced the Planet (its first ever silver disc spinner) has been shrunk to almost half size, giving the 'R a distinctive look and feel right out of the box. Its aesthetics have not attracted universal praise amongst visitors to my house, although I rather like its diminutive dimensions. Its custom made compact aluminium case is also a nice touch at the price, conferring a quality feel even if the finish isn't terribly swish. It's also available in black or silver finishes.

Certainly, as per previous Rega silver disc spinners, its front-loading transport is a joy to use, so much nicer than wobbly plastic

disc trays whirring out of the front fascia to greet you. It uses Rega's own software and servo control system, designed for reading the ones and noughts off the disc with greater accuracy than a standard proprietary CD transport, the company claims. It worked well enough, aside from a glitch when pause didn't hold on sometimes when using the track search.

I really like Rega's display – in a sea of blue it's nice to see a deep, warm red glowing out at you. Even the Rega name on the fascia lights up from behind the Perspex fascia. Only the front-mounted transport controls let the side down, feeling a little cruder than hoped. A dedicated display microprocessor is said to let the machine work faster, giving snappier responses to controls and faster table-of-contents reading.

Inside, the new Apollo-R's circuitry has also been improved by tightening the PCB layout, the company says. A British-sourced Wolfson WM8742 digital-to-analogue converter, the same integrated circuit found in the Rega DAC and many other budget and mid-price digital designs, is used for number-crunching duties. Technically it's capable of 32bit/192kHz resolution, but of course only gets into first gear with CD's 16/44 specification. Trivia fans will be interested to know that the DAC even plays pure DSD (and so is SACD-capable, although the Apollo-R mech is not). Rega says that the power supplies feeding the CD processor, optical block, laser diode amplifier and slicer have all been enhanced with those of the more expensive Isis CD player. The analogue output stage op-amp is said to have been tweaked for lower distortion, too.

Round the back, there's the usual RCA analogue line outputs and a digital output for driving the Rega DAC (or any others, for that matter). A dedicated CD mini system remote control is supplied which also gives control over Rega amplifiers; this is a real strong point as far as I'm concerned. I love its retro-futuristic styling and the tactile feel of its big rubberised keys – it's a welcome alternative to cheap British plastic remotes and chintzy Chinese metal ones.

Sound quality

If you've ever heard a Rega CD player, you'll instantly recognise the DNA in the Apollo R – indeed it's particularly reminiscent of the Planet, to my ears, which (lest we forget) cost a good deal more than the 'R back when it was on sale. Essentially, it's clean and crisp in the way you'd expect – for example – a Cyrus CD player to be, but it has a slight twist in that it's very fluid across the midband where the Cyrus goes for more grip in the bass. The Rega is also just a touch euphonic in its way too, somehow managing to distill out the emotional 'blood and guts' of the recording in a way few

Q&A...

DAVID PRICE SPEAKS TO REGA'S MD ROY GANDY...



DP: How would you describe Rega?

RG: Well, we're not a marketing company, we're an engineering company. Years ago we decided that what the people in Rega like doing is making things, rather than buying and selling. We've only succeeded by making our products substantially better than others. We don't even think ourselves as a hi-fi company - we could engineer anything in a niche market, medium volumes. We make hi-fi, but we just happen to do that, but we could make something else...

What's your role?

I'm not a huge strong leader like Linn's Ivor Tiefenbrun; I'm an engineer and I like designing things. It's the individuality of all the different people that allows this to happen. We just want to make nice things that we're happy with.

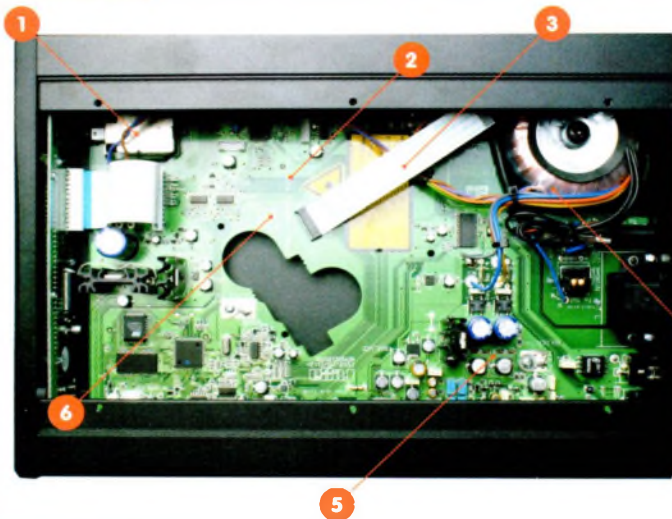
Did you design the Apollo-R?

No, it was a team effort, with Terry Bateman very much at the forefront. He's about as close to an eccentric genius as I've ever seen - his whole house is covered in valve amps and old radios! You'll see his signature inscribed on the circuitboard, and some comment (on this one, he's written 'EL84 Ultra Linear - Nice!') - it's become bit of cult thing. There really is a lot of him in the product.

What's special about the player?

Well the main concept for Rega CD players is the unique processor chip. Ten years ago, when the people providing transports for all the specialist manufacturers gave up, Terry found a venture capital supported chip manufacturing company who had foreseen that the Japanese would be pulling out of mass market CD players, and developed a chip. We ended up buying it, unfinished, but Terry being Terry, within two weeks he'd got it working. The new player uses this, plus more up to date Wolfson DACs and output amplifiers.

IN SIGHT



- 1 front power on/off switch mounted on main PCB
- 2 Terry Bateman PCB inscription: 'EL84 Ultra Linear - Nice!'
- 3 ribbon connector for top-mounted transport mech
- 4 generously sized toroidal power transformer
- 5 analogue output stage with Wolfson WM8742 DAC
- 6 PCB recess for transport mech for vibration isolation

ON TEST

The past six years have witnessed a steady evolution of digital replay technologies, much of it trickling down to ostensibly familiar CD players like Rega's Apollo-R. This same period has also witnessed an evolution in the performance of the Apollo itself, most markedly in the reduction in power supply-related jitter, down from 700psec to just 200psec in this new 'R' version. Crystal clock accuracy is often mistakenly correlated with jitter and the fact that the Apollo-R's clock has a

+240ppm error - high by the standards of contemporary players - with no deleterious impact on performance is proof of this.

The output level of the Apollo-R is unchanged at 2.15V, but the A-wtd S/N ratio has widened from 102.9dB in the original model to 106.5dB here - a reflection of the superior Wolfson DACs and analogue output stage fitted to the 'R'. Distortion is a little lower too, from 0.007% at peak output through midrange frequencies with the Apollo to a mere 0.0005% here.

This is a great result although, at lower digital signal levels, there's precious little difference in distortion between the old and new Apollo.

The Apollo-R has the very mildest bass roll-off of -0.2dB/20Hz and a similar -0.25dB shaving at 20kHz but these are less likely to exert a subjective impact than its moderate 550-600 output impedance will with, say, long or higher-than-average capacitance interconnects. Overall, Rega's refinements have clearly borne fruit in the Apollo-R. **PM**



IN TERMS OF ITS price, the new Apollo-R's greatest single rival is the Cambridge Audio Azur 740c. This features the excellent 24/384 upsampling technology used in the more expensive 840c, and it also sports good quality Wolfson 8740 DACs working in dual differential mode.

While being well made, the machine itself is far more conventional in look and feel to the Rega, with a normal front loading arrangement that's not as tactile as the Apollo-R's top loader. The Rega sounds slightly thinner tonally, but has a wonderful lucidity that the more detailed, but slightly cerebral, Cambridge lacks.

other rivals at anywhere near the price can, I feel.

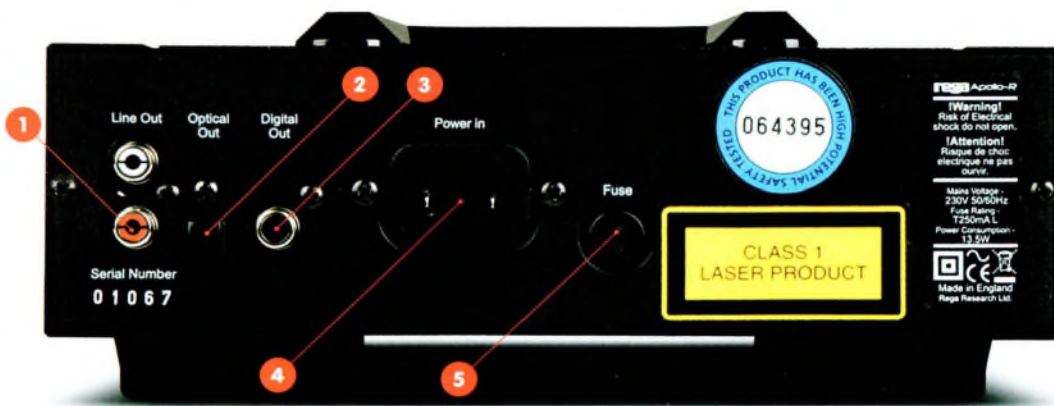
While possessed of a tonality that's by no stretch of the imagination warm and woolly - with lots of treble energy and a lively upper midband that really captures strummed steel string guitars particularly well, for example - the new Rega player nevertheless manages to give a smooth and musical rendition of whatever it's asked to play. This too, despite a relative paucity of very low-level detail - it's not forensically detailed in the way that a Yamaha CD-S1000 is, for example. Instead there's a lithe speed and attack to the proceedings, along with oodles of musicality and a truly lovely flow to the rhythms.

The good news is that you can play it a mediocre example of the recording engineer's art, such as Love's *Alone Again Or* and it sounds as musically arresting as when it's playing a brilliant, state-of-the-art modern recording such as 4hero's *Spirits in Transit*. Both get flattered with a slightly warm bass that's just a little soft around the edges, yet very fluid with it, plus a wide midband that pushes way past the loudspeaker

boundaries. Meanwhile there's quite a steely bite to the treble, which spells out the track's hi hat work in no uncertain terms, while rarely descending into harshness. Despite being largely smooth and well-rounded, this top end really gives the Apollo-R visceral impact, which I feel plays a part in the machine's rhythmic drive - especially on rock/pop music when there can be a lot of high-frequency persuasive content.

Cueing up Sade's *Your Love is King* for example, and I was instantly struck by the percussion going on alongside the drum kit work; the maracas were particularly well etched into the recorded acoustic, along with rim shots off the snare drum; this syncopated beautifully with Sade's doleful vocal phrasing. More was to come in *Hold On to Your Love*, where the bass guitar groove and the way it played off the drum kit was brilliantly carried; at the same time the rhythm guitar playing seemed unusually spotlighted, this set in front of a wonderful piano keyboard backing.

The overall effect was frankly unexpected, the little Rega really majoring on the rhythmic and

CONNECTIONS

- 1 RCA phono analogue audio outputs
- 2 TOSLINK optical digital output
- 3 RCA phono coaxial digital output
- 4 IEC mains input
- 5 fuse holder

microdynamic accenting that made the music really compelling and moreish. Again, I felt like the Rega was in some unfathomable sense acting as a plug-in in a digital sound processing software application, giving a heightened sense of the music's emotional impact – almost like sending half a bottle of wine southward and then turning the music on!

Fed with some 'prog rock' courtesy of Supertramp, and the unerringly melancholic *Gone Hollywood* from the *Breakfast in America* album came across with much of the emotional poignancy I get when listening to the original A&M LP. There's that same brooding calm that builds up to a breathtaking crescendo, the Rega sounding as fluid and lyrical in a way that I've simply never heard from another machine of this price.

It has that slightly sparkly, chintzy modern digital sound for sure – which the particular sound balance of this track exacerbates – but its ability to separate out different strands of the mix is better than I've heard in other players using this DAC. Indeed, some rival machines can have a sort of pristine 'sheen' to the music that's all surface and little substance, whereas the Rega seems able to push beyond all this to get right into the recording, especially in musical terms. Elsewhere I've heard £500 CD spinners seem a little too 'hi-fi' for my liking, but this couldn't be further from the truth with this unit.

In absolute terms, the little Apollo-R isn't perfect; cueing up UB40's *Burden of Shame* from their first album *Signing Off*, showed that while the Rega's bass was wonderfully fluid, ultimately it lacked weight compared to a good £1,000 machine. Likewise, the texture of the recording was less apparent via the Rega than my reference, the Apollo-

R being a joy to listen to, but majoring on the rhythm and dynamics of the music rather than the timbre. This track is a sumptuous sounding one, recorded in the glory days of analogue when they'd ironed out the hiss and noise, but still had the warmth.

In respect of tonality, the Rega made it sound just a little processed, almost as if the instruments had been genetically modified, or boiled to rid them of

What it does, it does with a passion, and what it doesn't do... you find yourself not caring!

some of their nutrients. This is to be expected at the price, though.

Likewise, while the Apollo-R throws out a beautiful wash of sound from left to right, bristling with confidence and attitude for one with such a modest position in hi-fi life, let's say it isn't the deepest sounding digital disc player I've heard. Instead, it likes to cluster images around the plane of the speakers, not having the ability to hang instruments behind, or particularly in front either. Again, this is an observation not a criticism, as frankly most £500 silver disc spinners aren't much good at imaging, let alone depth perspective.

Conclusion

There's a trick to doing a budget CD player; at this price you can't have it all, so its success depends on what the designer chooses to leave in and what he's left out. The Apollo-R has been very shrewdly voiced to make it an absolute hoot to listen to; there's a sense that it makes everything almost

more fun than it should be, the player falling over itself to please you like a happy puppy. In doing this, it gives up a bit of bass, a modicum of finesse in the upper midband and some depth perspective.

But still the overall effect is of something that's unremittingly *fun* to use; it's one of those rare hi-fi separates that you could enjoy in a system costing a £1,000 or even one hundred times that. What it does, it does with passion, and what it doesn't do – well it's so charming that somehow you find yourself not caring!

Overall then, it's about as good a reason to keep the faith with CD as I've heard recently; it's surprisingly well built and finished, really rather lovely to use with its smooth acting cantilevered disc lid and charming remote control, and it sounds loud and proud yet decently well mannered, too. With more character in one of its hex head casing bolts than a showroom full of similarly priced streamers, you might want to postpone throwing out your little silver discs just that little bit longer! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

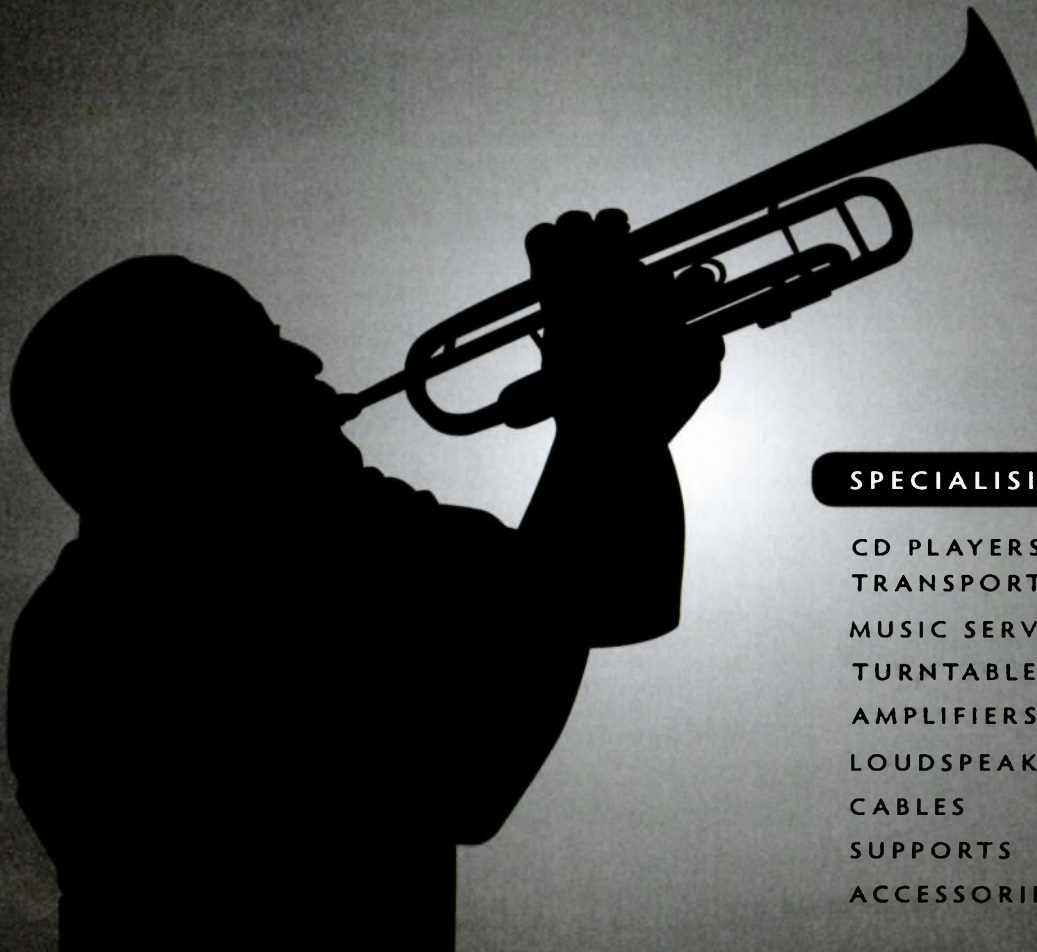
SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Unfailingly fun to listen to, it's fizzing with enthusiasm and verve.
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Nothing at the price, not even the remote!
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆	WESAY: Our favourite budget silver disc spinner right now, by a country mile
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
OVERALL ★★★★★	

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Early in the New Year, Guildford Audio and The Audio Warehouse will again be running their very successful yearly Hi-Fi Show in Reading.

Dates & Times to be announced on www.guildfordaudio.co.uk shortly.



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run by professionals for professionals

How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most rigorous test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

Unique 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

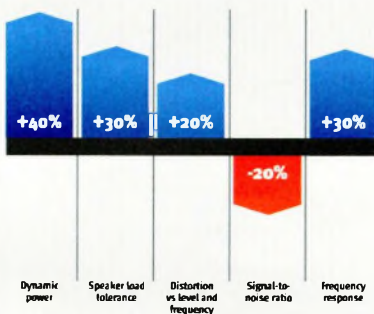
THIS CRUCIAL process, carefully controlled and yet sufficiently relaxed that our listeners do not feel that they're being tested, forms the heart of our Group Test review. Our panel of three listeners are not aware of the brand or price of the product they are listening to, but they are able to choose 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

In addition to measuring the amplifier's continuous power output, we also check on its delivery under dynamic, music-like conditions up to 1% distortion.

SPEAKER LOAD TOLERANCE

Not simply a measure of how much power is available into a standard 8ohm load but how the amplifier's output behaves into progressively lower and more difficult loads.

DISTORTION VS LEVEL AND FREQUENCY

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.

SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO

This a direct representation of the amplifier's A-weighted Signal-to-Noise (S/N) ratio at 1watt output into an idealised 8ohm load.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

We not only measure the 'flatness' of the amplifier's response from a subsonic 5Hz to an ultrasonic 100kHz but we also determine how well this response is maintained into different loudspeaker loads.



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

HOW WE TEST

THIS MONTH'S LISTENING PANEL



DAVID PRICE (LEFT) **JOURNALIST AND EDITOR**, DP has twenty years experience in the audio industry and is a devoted music fan.

JOHN BAMFORD (MIDDLE) **EDITOR OF THIS** very magazine for a number of years, JB has also worked for Pioneer GB and Meridian in senior roles.

ANDY WHITTLE (RIGHT) **AN ORIGINAL** blind listening panelist back in the eighties, AW has worked for everyone from Exposure to AudioNote.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

- Disc player:**
 - Cambridge Audio 751BD
- Loudspeakers:**
 - B&W DM802
- Cables:**
 - Furutech and QED
- Equipment supports:**
 - Quadraspire

TEST MUSIC

BUDDY RICH: WEST SIDESTORY MEDLEY



4HERO: COSMIC TREE



DANNY ELFMAN: IMPOSSIBLE MISSION



MOZART: PIANO CONCERTO NO. 20 K466



PATRICIA BARBER: BYE BYE BLACKBIRD



Blind-listening Group test

INTEGRATED AMPS £1,400-£1,650

Power tower

The latest generation of premium integrated amplifiers promise pre-power performance in a single box, but do they deliver? **David Price** is your guide...

IN THE UK AT LEAST, it all started with the original A&R Cambridge A60 back in the mid-nineteen seventies. Before this, integrated amplifiers were simply the thing you bought if you couldn't afford a separate preamplifier and power amplifier. They were very much the poor relation of pre-power combos, and almost an admission of audiophile defeat – signifying that whatever you were, you weren't serious about sonics. The A&R changed this, offering a 'high-end' sound in a single slimline box. Not only was it a rip-roaring success, but it planted a seed that's grown into one of hi-fi's key market sectors, the so-called 'super integrated'.

The designs you see here, from Arcam, Audio Analogue, Creek, Prima Luna, Roksan and Yamaha, represent distinctive variations on the theme. By spending over £1,000 or so, you're buying into a section of the market that's far more diverse than at £500, for example. As such, there's a choice of valve (Prima Luna) or solid-state, plus

a number of different variations on the solid-state theme – from delicately voiced British designs (Creek, Roksan) to Japanese battleships (Yamaha), and Italian style statements in-between (Audio Analogue). Finally there's a jack of all trades (courtesy of Arcam) to complete the group.

The group is so diverse that, alongside outright ability, there's a lot of personal taste at play...

This group is so diverse that, alongside outright ability, there's a lot of personal taste at play; the amplifiers here are tasked to do subtly different things, fit into different systems and designed to appeal to different buyers. So it's not just a case of what's best overall, you've also got to consider what best suits your personal proclivities – your sonic taste and the facilities and power you need. Here's what we found...



ON TEST



Arcam FMJ A38
£1,595 **p25**

The distant ancestor of the A&R Cambridge (ARCAM, geddit?) A60 integrated, this shows just how far the company has come in almost forty years. Sleekly styled, finely screwed together in the UK and voiced for a pleasing all-round audiophile sound, it's a class act alright...



Audio Analogue Puccini Sentanta V2 £1,400 **p27**

This Italian amplifier is an essay in minimalist audiophile style; it is a beautiful thing to have in your room, lending your surroundings an air of urbane sophistication with its stunning aesthetics and easy ergonomics. It's certainly no slouch sonically, either...



Creek Destiny 2
£1,635 **p29**

This brand is not the epitome of modern consumer electronics cool. Rather, the company has a reputation for sonic excellence, gained over many years, with the emphasis on sound per pound. The Destiny 2 is Creek's ultimate integrated, and has won many friends in its short lifetime so far.



Prima Luna ProLogue One
£1,390 **p34**

A tube amplifier in an otherwise transistor group, Prima Luna has a wide range of impressive valve products and the Dutch designed, Chinese made ProLogue One plays a key part. Low on power compared to others here, but should deliver the sort of fluid sound that gets valve fans hot under the collar.



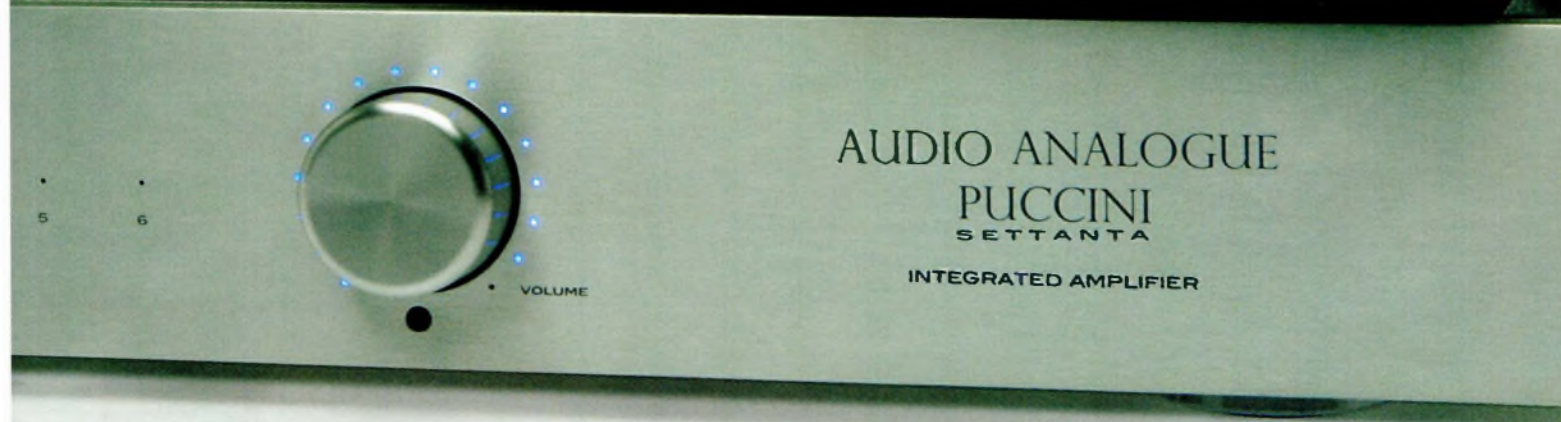
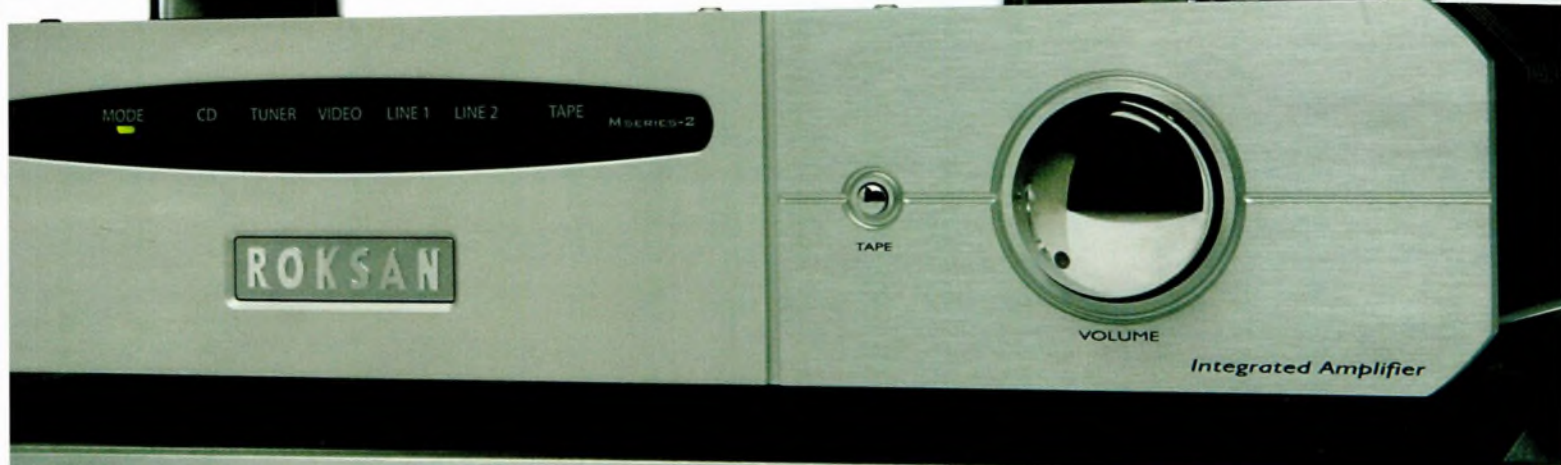
Roksan M2 Caspian
£1,649 **p33**

Always a brand to surprise, this veteran British company is famous for expertly voiced products with an unflinching big and bouncy sound that always gets into the groove. The M2 is a recent design, bundled with a surprisingly sophisticated LCD remote control.



Yamaha A-S2000
£1,532 **p35**

Very Japanese, this! Big, heavy and packing a monster power output, it's packed with facilities and visual drama. Indeed Yamaha have given it a studiedly retro look; it could almost have come straight out of their 1979 separates catalogue, such is its authentic old-skool style.



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Arcam FMJ A38 £1,595



Excellent value for money, this offers a wealth of connectivity and is a great all-rounder

DETAILS

ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: integrated amplifier
WEIGHT: 9.5kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 430x370x110mm
FEATURES:

- rated output 105W
- 5 line inputs
- optional phono stage
- 2 processor/tape loops
- 2 speaker outputs
- preamp output
- headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR: Arcam
TELEPHONE: 01223 203200
WEBSITE: arcam.co.uk

This is a lot of amplifier for the money, at least if you gauge it by the amount of facilities, inputs and outputs it has. The casework itself is of very good quality, being surprisingly unresonant pressed steel plus a classy aluminium alloy fascia, inside which is set a large vacuum fluorescent display, indicating source and volume settings. The front panel is festooned with buttons, from input switching to mute, balance, record output and display controls. There's also a 6.3mm headphone jack and switching for two pairs of speakers.

Round the back, there's a welter of socketry, including five pairs of RCA phono inputs (plus an additional pair and MM/MC switch if the optional phono stage is specified), plus two sets of monitor loops for tape recorders, home cinema processors, etc. There are also preamp outs and power amp in socketry (with a switch to defeat this), two pairs of loudspeaker binding posts and Arcam's remote control socketry. In short, the FMJ A38 wants for absolutely nothing, save perhaps a pair of balanced XLR inputs.

Under the hood, Arcam says there are "very short audio signal paths", a Burr-Brown volume control and op-amps, hermetically sealed reed relay input switching, four-layer printed circuit boards and audiophile grade Stargate and Rubicon

capacitors. The power amp section is discrete transistor instead of op-amps and there's a generously sized toroidal mains transformer.

Sound quality

We all found the Arcam consummately smooth, transparent and musical. AW liked its "tidy overall presentation, with a nice sense of energy" on the Buddy Rich track. At the same time, JB remarked that the musicians "sounded like they were having a good time", and this was even more obvious on the *Mission Impossible* track, where I noted that "you could really hear into the music". Its treble was clean, precise and well-etched, with a fine insight to the envelope of cymbals, for example.

We all thought the *Mission Impossible* track came over with a light, spry treble, and midband was good too; I liked the "powerful thump to percussion", highlighting the tom-tom drums as particularly intelligible. Bass was strong too; JB described the sound as "very wideband", but with a bit of "boom and tizz". I heard this as strongly defined frequency extremes, the Arcam covering these bases better than the Roksan, Prima Luna and Audio Analogue, for example.

The 4hero track made for "quite a plush sound" according to JB, and I agreed. AW remarked that here it

had "some endearing qualities through the mid, with sweet strings and a nice decay", although bass wasn't that extended so low down. What bass there was though was light and tight without any signs of breathlessness.

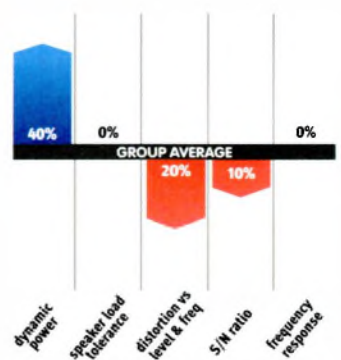
All in all, the Arcam was simply a very good all round amplifier, its major sin being that it didn't have the emotional purchase of the Roksan, but neither did any of the others. The depth of its ability was highlighted by its prowess with classical music.

ON TEST

This well-proven design is on a par with Yamaha's A-S2000 in the power stakes. Its massive 210W/350W dynamic power is higher than Yamaha's into 8/40ohm, but the A38 is less able to grapple with the toughest loads at 265W/85W into 2/10hm. In practice, both are capable of driving any likely speaker, but neither enjoy the raw 'grunt' of the Roksan. Distortion shows an increase from just 0.0003% through bass and midrange to 0.03% at very high treble frequencies (20kHz) – a trend witnessed with other Arcam amps – but remains impressively uniform with power output at 0.001-0.004% at 1kHz from 1W to 100W/8ohm.

Frequency response is flat and extended out to -1dB/100kHz, but shows a mild subsonic bass lift of +0.5dB/20Hz. The moderate 0.110hm output impedance is linked to a very mild loss of high treble into low loads, but the A-wtd S/N ratio is just fine at 85dB (re. odBW). **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** A welter of socketry and the performance is smooth and transparent

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Bass could have been better

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** An excellent all-rounder, this amp particularly impressed with its classical music ability

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Audio Analogue Puccini Settanta V2 **£1,400**

With its Italian looks and neat construction, this boasts an interesting and distinctive performance

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** Italy
- TYPE:** integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT:** 11.8kg
- DIMENSIONS:** (WxHxD) 84x445x405mm
- FEATURES:**
 - rated output 70w
 - 6 RCA line inputs
 - optional phono stage
 - 1 processor/tape loop
 - 1 speaker output
 - preamp output
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Audio Analogue
- TELEPHONE:** 0039 0572 954513
- WEBSITE:** audioanalogue.com

Italian to the core, this sharp-suited amplifier is immaculately finished in a handcrafted way that even the excellently turned out Yamaha can't match. The aluminium front, top plate and sides look a million dollars, whilst the single central volume control works as a self-centring electronic up/down switch, rather than a traditional rotary turning knob. Audio Analogue have really tried to produce a minimalist amp with a modern twist.

Round the back, there are six line inputs (including the optional built-in phono stage), plus mono line-level RCA outputs for a subwoofer and a pair of stereo line outs for a tape recorder. Inputs are relay switched by the single front panel push button (also on the remote), toggled through rather than having one button per input.

Internal construction is neat, with a combination of traditional and surface mount devices, and a large mains transformer with separate windings for each channel. Audio Analogue claims the passive component quality to be high.

Whilst the volume controller is a nice idea in principle, in practice it can be a little clumsier than is ideal, sometimes stopping you getting the *precise* listening level you want – particularly with sensitive loudspeakers. In practice then, this will be an issue for late

night listeners. The power switch is rear mounted, fiddly for those who don't leave their hi-fi on all the time.

Sound quality

An interesting and distinctive performer, the Buddy Rich track saw the Settanta delivering a confident bass and a smooth midband with lovely phrasing, I felt. JB agreed, adding that the "cymbals sizzled in a lifelike manner, and the amplifier sounded upbeat, with plenty of low-end grunt". I liked the "very nice lucid flow to the proceedings", and was particularly impressed by the well picked out backing piano cadences and infectious rhythms.

Tonally very agreeable, the deep grumbling bass of the *Mission Impossible* track filled the room, whilst I loved the "lovely creamy triangle sound and deep timpani." The amp conveyed the drama of it all with little sign of strain, I noted. AW agreed, praising it for its "nice depth, dark and moody tonality and bags of power on tap". JB remarked that the "amplifier sounded upbeat with plenty of low-end grunt".

The Patricia Barber track was "smouldering and smoky" I thought. JB and I agreed that here it almost felt like the tempo of the music had slowed, which really captured the jazz club ambience. Vocals were sublimely creamy and carried confidently, and I loved the piano

tone which was "rich and sonorous". There was a fine decay to cymbals, and AW praised it for its "good low-frequency separation on bass and piano" and "effortless presentation". The only downside was the slightly narrower soundstage than the Arcam, Creek and Roksan. What threw us was the classical piece, where the Italian suddenly underwhelmed us, just failing to convey the emotion of the piece.

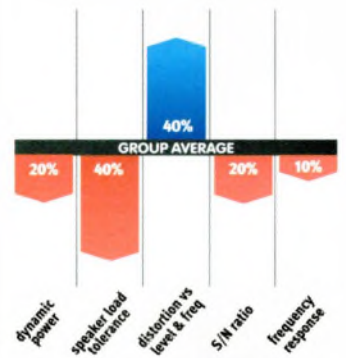
This was a curiously contrary result from an otherwise excellent contender, we all agreed.

ON TEST

While the Puccini's distortion is not quite as low as Audio Analogue's sparse specification might suggest, it does drop from ~0.22% to ~0.13% over the first 30 minutes of use, so a long warm-up period is clearly indicated. The amp is no rocking powerhouse but it does exceed its 70/125W spec. at 80/130W into 8/4ohm loads, increasing to 105W/175W under dynamic conditions. The maximum dynamic current of just 5.5A at 1% THD limits output to 60W and 30W into very low 2/10hm loads so tough speakers should be avoided.

Otherwise, while its distortion spectrum carries some very high-order harmonics, at least they do not vary with power output or, indeed, especially so with frequency. The increasing output impedance trend (0.09-0.25ohm, 20Hz-20kHz) may cause a further modification of treble response with some speakers, its default a minor -0.2dB/20kHz rolloff. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Exuberantly musical sound is always fun
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Isn't as convincing with classical music as with rock
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Interesting and distinctive performer, with a special charm of its very own
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Creek Destiny 2 **£1,635**

At first glance it looks the business, but does the performance match its looks?

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK/China
- TYPE:**
integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT:**
10kg
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
430x80x310mm
- FEATURES:**
- rated output 120W (8 ohms)
 - 4 RCA line inputs
 - 2 preamp output
 - 2 pairs of loudspeaker outputs
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Creek Audio
- TELEPHONE:**
01442 260146
- WEBSITE:**
creekaudio.com

Creek's top integrated amplifier, this is a solid and well-made product in the mid-price British idiom. That means extruded aluminium for the casework, a slimline brushed fascia, and an interesting control layout with a cluster of source and speaker buttons with associated LED indicators. A conventional volume control completes the front panel, and there's selectable active or passive preamp options with three gain settings, adjustable with a slider switch on the bottom of the case. Round the back, there are four unbalanced inputs, plus a tape loop and AV direct (going to the power amp), plus pre out and tape outputs, and there are two pairs of speaker outputs via chunky binding posts.

The power amp section uses an evolution of Creek's MOSFET power circuit. A magnetically shielded 300VA toroidal transformer with separate windings for high and low current analogue circuit requirements is fitted, with two low-loss Schottky diode bridge rectifiers to separate the main left and right channel power supplies.

There's an extra 50VA auxiliary toroidal mains transformer to power the microcontroller management circuitry. A motorised ALPS Blue Velvet potentiometer is used, and there's the option of an internally mounted MM phono board; for MC

use Creek recommend the use of an external phono stage.

Sound quality

This proved a really powerful performer, described by AW as "full on, bold and not for the faint hearted". He noted the "ballsy powerhouse sound" on the *Mission Impossible* theme, and I agreed, calling it "huge with great speed and weight, a sense of drama and loads of oomph". I was also impressed by the way it didn't get flustered on dynamic peaks. JB, however, felt that this translated to a rather mechanical and detached musical performance; we certainly agreed that although it was loud and proud, it wasn't as organic as the Roksan.

The Patricia Barber track had a slight sheen to her vocal, to my ears, sounding a tad brightly lit in the upper midband. It threw out lots of detail at the listener, and was "good on attack" according to AW, but also "quite showy". We agreed, feeling it was high resolution and hi-fi in its sound, but lacking the down-to-earth musicality of several others here. I loved its "strong, assertive piano work", but JB thought it was just going through the motions musically.

Treble was well-extended and open – up with the best in the group in my view, with superb filigree detailing. Bass was big; "a lot more going on down there than you'd like; but it seemed to suit" the 4hero song,

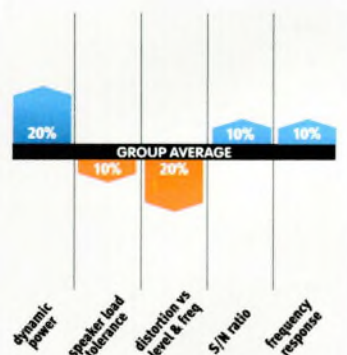
thought AW. I also liked its sense of unflusteredness on dynamic peaks; it wasn't fazed by the track's big Moog bassline. Vocals were located with commanding ease, and the Fender Rhodes keyboard work "carried very clearly", I remarked. But *still* we all agreed that the Creek just didn't quite gel musically. Indeed it was a tad "mechanical and synthetic; I didn't think it was very engaging", opined JB, and while I thought this was harsh, we all agreed it was understated in rhythmic terms, unlike the Roksan.

ON TEST

While residing at the top of Creek's amplifier tree, the Destiny 2 is neither as powerful, load tolerant or, indeed, quite as low-distortion as the Evolution 5350 model. In practice, power output is on a par with the original Destiny amp at 115W/8ohm but healthier into 4ohm at 180W even if a tighter 10.5A current limit restricts dynamic power to 200/110W into 2/1ohm loads. Bass and midrange distortion is uniformly low at ~0.01% over a full 1-100W bandwidth, only increasing to 0.045% at very high frequencies (20kHz). The A-wtd S/N ratio is also wider than average at 87dB (re. odBW).

Output impedance is low enough at 0.055-0.075ohm (20Hz-20kHz) and the response precisely matches Creek's -3dB specification from 1Hz to 30kHz. Only one oddity was observed with our sample – an anomalous increase in THD to 1% over the first 10W output into low impedance loads under dynamic conditions. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful performer and treble is impressive
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Occasionally the audio is a tad 'artificial' sounding
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A bit understated in rhythmic terms and sound is a matter of taste
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL





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www.soundcrafthifi.com

Cabasse



PrimaLuna ProLogue One **£1,390**

The only valve integrated in this month's test, the Prologue One is an impressive performer

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
Holland/China
- TYPE:**
integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT:**
17kg
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
280x190x395mm
- FEATURES:**
- rated output 35w (8 ohms)
 - 4 pairs RCA phono line inputs
 - 4 and 8 ohm tapped speaker outputs
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Pistol Music
- TELEPHONE:**
020 8971 3909
- WEBSITE:**
primaluna.nl

The product of Dutch design and Chinese manufacture, the ProLogue One certainly feels a cut above your average cheap and cheerful Shenzhen tube amp. It's an all-steel construction, well painted in metallic gunmetal grey, and there's a valve cage included which is recommended for those with pets and/or small children.

The overall level of finish is very good for a hand-assembled tube amplifier of this type; there's absolutely no sense that you're using the company's cheapest product at all. It's simplicity itself to operate, with two control knobs on the fascia (volume and input selection), plus a power on LED. Round the back it's very straightforward, too; there are four pairs of RCA phono inputs, plus 4 and 8 ohm loudspeaker taps (we used the 4 ohm) via WBT-style speaker binding posts.

Inside, the little PrimaLuna sports traditional point-to-point wiring done to a good standard, rather than stuffed circuit boards,

along with good-quality ceramic valve sockets. Four EL34A power tubes are used, along with two 12AX7 and two 12AU7 input tubes. A soft start circuit is fitted to prolong tube life, and there's said to be an adaptive auto-biasing circuit, so tubes don't need to be matched – useful for a budget valve amp of this type. A smallish frame-type power transformer supplies the juice.

Sound quality

Amazingly, not one of us noticed this was a tube amp; if anything the Roksan sounded more valvey than this! We praised its wide, warm, smooth and inoffensive sound, with a slightly less capacious soundstage than some others here, yet if anything on the Buddy Rich track JB felt the treble to be "a bit ragged". We enjoyed the powerful bass which JB thought was "more exuberant, lifelike and energetic" than most, although AW thought it a little lacking in ultimate weight.

This theme kept reoccurring; on the Patricia Barber song, the double bass had strong attack and I was impressed by the "deep menacing cello work" on the Mozart piece; there was no sign of this being a low output tube amp running out of puff at fairly high volumes in a largish listening room. AW thought it seemed to image more precisely than most other amps here, and I agreed, even if the soundstage wasn't quite as wide as some. Still, JB thought it spacious enough, and I remarked that it had a "big hi-fi sound".

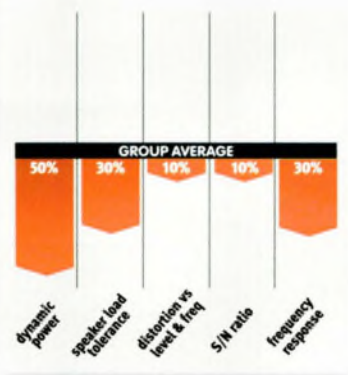
It was surprisingly detailed, too, with "nice detail on reverberation tails around piano and voice", according to JB; you could really hear into the recording. I agreed, finding the treble very clean.

ON TEST

Valve amps reveal their quality in how well both left and right channels are matched in output, response and distortion trends. Thanks to auto-biasing, perhaps, our ProLogue One proved very symmetrical indeed, offering 28W into 8/4ohm loads through its 8/4ohm taps at 1% distortion, increasing to 35W at 2% distortion at midrange frequencies. THD is lowest at low power (0.045%, 1W/8ohm), so while a full 55W is possible under dynamic conditions into low 2ohm loads, this amp is still better suited to sensitive and/or high impedance speakers.

The latter is arguably more important as this PrimaLuna has a high 4.5ohm output impedance. Not only is damping fairly negligible at LF but its response, notionally flat to ±0.5dB from 20Hz-20kHz, will vary more considerably according to the peaks and dips in speaker impedance. Otherwise the 85dB A-wtd S/N and mere -70dBV hum are impressive. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★☆☆
- LIKE:** Superb detail is enhanced by the addition of valves
- DISLIKE:** Overshadowed by some of its better rivals in the group
- WE SAY:** Accomplished performer, this amp boasted a big hi-fi sound

OVERALL



More than words



words
that count . . .



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A3



A5



A6



A9

SPENDOR

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The Spendor A-line



Roksan Caspian M2 £1,649

With its remarkable musicality, the Caspian certainly deserves the accolade of top position

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK
TYPE: integrated amplifier
WEIGHT: 13kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 432x130x80mm
FEATURES:
- rated output 85w (8 ohms)
 - 1 pair balanced XLR line inputs
 - 5 pairs RCA phono line inputs
 - 1 processor/tape loops
 - 1 speaker output
 - 2 preamp outputs
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Roksan
TELEPHONE: 01235 511166
WEBSITE: roksan.co.uk

Distinctly styled, Roksan products never seem to look fashionable, which gives them a certain timelessness that many will appreciate. To my eyes, the Caspian M2 integrated would certainly win no prizes at a beauty contest, but it's generally very well built for its price. I like its stainless steel casework, but wouldn't say the same about the lettering imprinted on it, which is rather reminiscent of the decals on a boy racer's first car!

Still, the amp is generally pleasing and logical to use, with two large fascia knobs providing volume control and input selection, plus a Mode button (to take it out of standby) and – unusually these days – a tape monitor button. The power switch is, quirkily, on the underside of the case. Round the back, there are five pairs of RCA phono inputs, one of which is switchable to balanced XLR operation – an increasingly useful feature. There's also a tape in/out loop, two preamp outputs and one preamp input, plus a subwoofer out. One single pair of speaker binding posts is provided. Roksan's full function remote control, complete with LC display, is a step up from the rest here.

Under the bonnet, the Roksan sports twin toroidal power transformers (a 60VA one for the preamp section and a 350VA main one), plus fan assisted heatsink cooling (which we

didn't manage to set-off during the test period, interestingly).

Sound quality

We found this amplifier to be “highly communicative and musically intelligible”; the Buddy Rich track suddenly had a great sense of purpose. AW commented that “phrasing flows well” and tonally it was more organic than any others here, with AW commenting that it's “quieter and cleaner sounding”. I certainly found it smooth, although I felt the high treble was a little more recessed than the Creek, for example. The sound was, I remarked, “less shiny, but far more full bodied, with a lovely tonal palette to the cellos on the *Mission Impossible theme*”.

In terms of soundstaging, JB thought it “narrower spatially” on the Mozart track than the Creek. I agreed that it wasn't as expansive, pulling things together more than a little in terms of lateral stereo imaging. Likewise, there was less apparent detail than the Creek in a hi-fi sense; the former sprayed it at the listener, whereas the Roksan was a little less forward, but far more natural and organic sounding. For example, AW commented that “there was much better diction to the vocals” on the 4hero track.

Dynamically, it was highly expressive, being the best in the group at carrying those little

inflections which make music so real. This, along with the excellent rhythms, made everything seem groovier. The Patricia Barber track was the most organic in feel, the amp capturing the smoky jazz club mood quite brilliantly. Indeed, the only downside was a slight lack of air and space to the proceedings, the lack of sparkle on piano harmonics, for example...

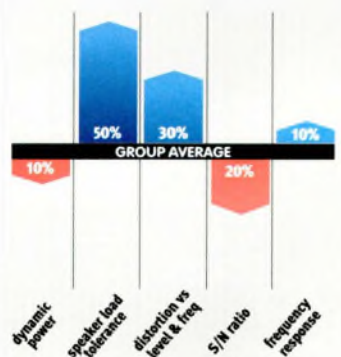
Overall though, the M2 integrated makes music in an exceptionally keen and effervescent way, that we all agreed was lovely to behold.

ON TEST

While the power output of Roksan's M-series integrated has not changed at 85W/125W into 8/4ohm, much else has been 'tweaked' in this M2 version. The dynamic output is now biased towards very low impedance loads with 310W and 350W into 2/10hm instead of 270W/290W (M1 series), although the output above 100W into 4/20hm loads is now only achieved at a higher 0.5-1.0% distortion. So this is a beefy rock 'n' roller!

The M2 also shows a reduction in distortion as it warms up, from 0.007% to 0.0025% over 30 minutes at 10W/8ohm. Versus frequency, distortion hovers around 0.002% through bass and midrange, but increases to 0.025% at 20kHz. Response rolls gently away from -0.3dB/20kHz to -5.9dB/100kHz, the output impedance has lifted slightly to 0.069ohm, while noise is also slightly higher, the A-wtd S/N now 83dB (re. odBW) through the balanced inputs. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** A highly communicative and expressive device
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not much, but it's no glamour puss
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Just plain lovely to listen to – even if not the best in every respect – this is definitely our pick of the pack.
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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WHAT HI-FI?
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Yamaha A-S2000 **£1,532**

With superb retro styling and Japanese battleship build, this is an impressive package...

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** Japan/China
TYPE: integrated amplifier
WEIGHT: 22.7kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 435x 138x465mm
FEATURES:
- rated output 105W (8 ohms)
 - 1 balanced XLR input
 - 4 RCA phono inputs
 - MM/MC phono stage
 - 1 processor/tape loops
 - 2 speaker outputs
 - preamp output
 - headphone output
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Yamaha UK
TELEPHONE: 0844 811 1116
WEBSITE: uk.yamaha.com

Unashamedly retro in styling, hi-fi buffs of a certain age will find themselves warped straight back to the nineteen seventies. Indeed it's so authentically detailed that it looks totally in keeping sat next to a classic Yamaha CT-7000 tuner from 1975! The large top plate is painted steel, the fascia sleek brushed aluminium and the sides are adorned in wood-effect side cheeks. The A-S2000 is a great piece of styling then, and different too, although it's not quite as exotic to the touch as it is to the eye; perfectly understandable considering the price.

The fascia manages to look sleek despite its profusion of controls; it's the only amp here to have bass and treble adjustment, for example, although this is defeatable. It has a slick feeling, detented volume knob and source selector, plus swappable speakers, muting and a 6.3mm headphone socket. The MM/MC phono stage (standard) is front panel selectable. There are also four pairs of balanced XLRs and a pair of tape in/outs – plus two pairs of speaker binding posts, all gold plated.

Yamaha says this integrated uses a fully balanced preamplifier section, and “an entirely new” floating and balanced power amp with signals routed symmetrically. Four large

capacity power supplies are fitted, plus fully discrete headphone and phono amplifiers, the latter with a dedicated MC head amp.

Sound quality

JB summed up the big A-S2000 in a sentence. “This is warm and smooth and sounds a bit closed in and inoffensive”, he said. For example, the Buddy Rich track had a nice brass tone, creamy triangles and plenty of detail, although it felt a touch lacking in life and sparkle. AW added that he thought Buddy had “lost interest and disappeared into the mix”, such was the amp's slightly dispassionate nature. I agreed; it seemed to do everything that was required usefully well, but not go the extra distance like the Roksan – and to a lesser extent the Prima Luna and Audio Analogue...

The Yamaha covered its footsteps cleverly though; there was always a good sense of musical flow. The only real weak point was its imaging; AW called it “double mono”, but I actually noted that it was more spacious than the Roksan from left to right.

Tonally it was fairly neutral, just a tad brighter than the slightly rich Roksan, although this manifested with a slight tizzy artifice to snare drums and other upper midband instruments. Bass was mild-mannered, but slightly warm all the same; JB

added that it was weightier than the Roksan. It appeared to have plenty of power, but sometimes wasn't desperate to deploy it; “slightly relaxed and sedate,” I wrote, “yet gets job done in the end”. AW agreed, saying it had lots of power but couldn't be bothered sometimes”. “Doesn't build sense of drama like some others”, retorted JB.

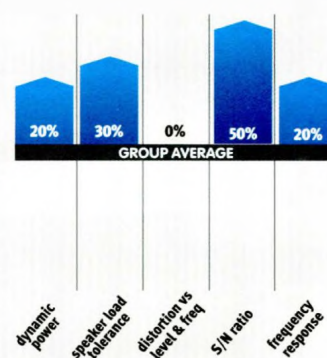
Overall then, the Yamaha came over as a competent but impressive amp, seemingly designed by committee to sound pleasant without truly inspiring anyone.

ON TEST

As assured as it is heavy, Yamaha's A-S2000 more than meets its specification with a solid 120W/210W 8/4ohm power output and sufficient headroom to accommodate clean peaks of 155W and 290W under dynamic conditions. With a current reserve of 13.5A, it will also deliver some 350W into low 20hm loads with – highly unusually – no progressive increase in distortion. Into a far easier 8ohm load, distortion lies at or below 0.01% over a full 100W range, increasing slightly to 0.025% at low bass and 0.05% at high treble frequencies.

Yamaha has typically engineered its amplifiers to yield a wide S/N ratio, but the A-S2000 is exceptional in this regard at 97dB (re. odBW), a full 12dB ‘wider’ than the average amp. Throwing the window open this wide, however, may not prove so pleasing in all systems especially as the '2000 also offers a very extended 5Hz-85kHz (-1dB) frequency response. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Decent sense of musical flow; spacious with a fairly neutral tone
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Sound is a little restrained
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Sleek styling and plenty of connections, although its impressive nature won't impress everyone
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

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Blind-listening verdicts

David Price puts the this month's group testing and listening into context. How do the contenders fare in the great scheme of things?

The state of the £1,500 'super integrated' amp market is a healthy one in 2012. None of the designs here had any serious flaw; they all measured well, were impressively built and finished and offered convincing sound quality, but there were still big differences...

The Creek, we found, was a very spry, crisp and dry sounding amplifier, but in the context of this review, with these ancillaries, it sounded a little cool and emotionally detached, which is why it didn't score higher – despite its highly redoubtable focus and resolution.

Next came the Yamaha and Prima Luna, ranked equal despite their

different natures. The former was a big, warm and smooth-sounding design, with just a touch of chrome plating across its upper midband. A very solid all rounder; only a slight emotional detachment stopped it ranking higher. Build and styling won it major plaudits, too, offering a swish user experience – the sort you'd expect from the most expensive integrations on sale.

It's amazing that our golden-eared panel(!) failed to spot the valve Prima Luna blind. Yes, it sounded sweet and smooth and open, but so did most other solid-staters. Despite its lowish power, it showed no signs of stress even at highish listening levels in a largish room. This shows that most

music listening only requires a few watts, and the Prima Luna stayed in its comfort zone with easy-to-drive speakers. The result was a polished and musical performance.

The Arcam's sophisticated and smooth sound was hard to fault, its only sins being those of omission – it didn't quite give the drama of the higher rated models. Still, when you factor build quality and facilities in, it's the best all-rounder in the group.

The Audio Analogue is obviously voiced to sing with rock, pop and jazz with Italian exuberance. It managed to make music fun, in a dramatic sense. Allied to beautiful styling and very fine finish, it's a peach of an integrated amp.



The Roksan was head and shoulders above the others here in its musical coherence; this amp is able to take any type of music, get right to its soul, and then beam this emotion right back out to you.

Although it scored very highly in most categories – power, pace, transients, clarity, focus, sound staging, etc. – its almost supernatural connection to the emotion of the performance had us all beguiled.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	Arcam FMJ-A38	Audio Analogue Puccini Settanta v2	Creek Destiny 2	Prima Luna ProLogue One	Roksan M2 Caspian	Yamaha A-S2000
Price	£1,595	£1,400	£1,635	£1,390	£1,649	£1,532
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	A smooth and polished, musical sound, with great build and feature count	Musically exuberant and engaging performer, with slick styling and a very high standard of finish	Clean, open and detailed, although lacked charm and warmth. Decent build and finish	Open, sweet and musical, this is an excellent first tube amp, but match carefully	Powerful, dramatic and emotionally committed performer of the highest order, this wins!	Strong all-rounder, with plenty of power, smooth sound and great build and finish

Key features

Line inputs	5	6	4	4	5	4
Phono input?	Optional	Optional	No	No	No	MM/MC
Headphone output	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Remote control	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Output power	105W	70W	120W	35W	85W	105W

CD PLAYER: Astin Trew AT3500 Plus **£1,495**

A wonderfully expansive sounding CD player, this will sing with any of the amplifiers here, but will be particularly helpful with the Creek – the AT's rich, warm tonal balance complements its clean precision. The well lit upper mid of the Yamaha should be flattered, too.



CD PLAYER: Cyrus CDBSE **£1,195**

This player has a slightly lighter, brighter and more neutral tonality, which will be great with the fruity sounding Roksan, although it will also be a fine choice with the Arcam, Audio Analogue and Yamaha. It's a very fast, lithe and musically communicative machine, far better than you'd expect at the price.



CD/SACD PLAYER: Marantz SA KI Pearl lite **£650**

If you're on a more limited budget, we'd plump for this without hesitation. As well as being a super sounding SACD spinner, it's a very capable CD player that's good enough to make any of these more expensive integrated amps sing. Its smooth, even and gently musical sound will work nicely with any of the contenders.



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FEATURE SYSTEM MATCHING



One key cause of bad sound is poor system matching between amplifiers and loudspeakers, opines

Tim Jarman...

Funny how audiophiles devote so much time and money to buying hi-fi systems – often fixating on exotic, glamorous looking separates and alluring audio accessories – without stopping to consider one of the most critical determining factors for sound quality – that of amplifier-speaker matching.

How many of us spend any real time contemplating the electrical match between our amplifiers and the loudspeakers we've chosen to partner them with?

Ironically though, this is absolutely key to getting a serious sound from your hi-fi system. You'll never get the best out of your amp if you're forcing it to huff and puff driving unsuitable speakers, and nor will you ever hear your loudspeakers sing with an amplifier that was chosen without regard to whether it could drive them properly.

It really is very hard to overstate the importance of this relationship between the two prime movers of your hi-fi system. One good analogy is that of trying to steer a car with sweaty hands sliding around a plasticky steering wheel. Another is trying to walk on sheet ice with shoes

better suited to ballet dancing. These are two 'interfaces' where the contact points are simply not right for one another – they can't work at anything near optimum efficiency – and consequently the job can't get done right. Ditto a mismatched stereo amplifier and loudspeakers – result: bad sound.

Speak no evil

To get the chemistry right between amplifier and speaker, you've first got to focus on the physics. This is of course because speakers make noise by moving air; they're transducers which convert electrical energy from your amp into a physical form. How much sound they produce (i.e. the amount of air they move), depends on a number of things...

First, the design of the loudspeaker. This is a subject so complex that you could write a book on it, and indeed many have! But in overall terms, designing a speaker is about weighing up factors such as sensitivity, bass extension and transient speed. The art is in the compromise between these considerations, and indeed the finest sounding ones are the most artful compromises!

Sensitivity is the amount of sound a speaker produces from a given amount of power. This is a function of the drive unit design and the cabinet loading type, and also the size of the cabinet. All these factors really must be considered by anyone who's purchasing a loudspeaker, or trying to match one to an existing amplifier.

Conventional drive units come in all sorts, some of which have powerful, efficient magnets and motor designs, and others which don't. From a buyer's viewpoint these aren't easy to tell apart, but one thing to look out for is the type of cone material used. This has a direct effect on sound; heavier materials like certain plastics or metals will need more amplifier power to move the same amount of air. By

You'll never get the best out of your amp if you're forcing it to huff and puff driving unsuitable speakers

contrast, paper is light so needs relatively little power; this was popular in the sixties when amplifiers were invariably low powered. These days, Kevlar (used in B&W speakers, for example) along with carbon fibre, glass fibre and aerogel, also make for speakers that convert power to sound efficiently.

A key factor determining speaker sensitivity is the type of cabinet loading used by the loudspeaker. This is chosen by the designer to get the sound characteristics he's trying to achieve with his chosen drive units. Most hi-fi speakers are reflex ported (i.e. with a hole or slot of some sort in the cabinet, known as a 'port'). Ports allow drive units to move air more easily, in general terms giving higher sound levels for each watt of power fed in.



Some designers however choose infinite baffle cabinets, where the speaker box is sealed to the outside world. This can give a tighter bass in some rooms, but tends to drink up more power. So as a very general rule, it's better to match lower powered amplifiers to reflex ported loudspeakers, whereas infinite baffle speakers will want a big powerful amp.

Another point to make at this stage is that, whatever the type of cabinet loading used in the speaker, the larger the internal volume of the cabinet is, the easier it can move air. That's why large loudspeakers – regardless of the type of magnets, motors and cone materials employed – tend to be more sensitive.

So it's fair to say that, all other things being equal, a large reflex ported loudspeaker with good modern drive units and light cones will produce higher sound levels for the same amount of power than a small, infinite baffle type with less efficient drivers. This is the key point to keep this in mind when choosing the right speakers for your amp, or vice versa.

This said, it's all very well buying a 'best buy' amp and a 'best buy' speaker, but it doesn't mean they'll necessarily work well together. It's not just the components themselves that make or break your system sound, it's how they interact. The secret's in the matching.



An interesting example of this came in this month's Blind Listening test. Here we had a range of amplifiers of differing power outputs, including a small valve amplifier in the shape of the Prima Luna ProLogue One, with a modest 35 watts or so. Because it was driving our B&W 802s, which are large, reflex ported speakers with a relatively high sensitivity, we didn't feel it to be underpowered. However, if we'd used far smaller speakers with a far lower sensitivity such as AudioSmile's Kensai (*HFC* 355), the poor PrimaLuna would have struggled to so much as make a squeak. Here it would have been at a real disadvantage to the more powerful transistor amps on test.

Sensitive types

So, before you even think of amplifier power as being a guide to how loud your system will go, you must consider loudspeaker sensitivity – it's just as important as your amplifier power output rating in determining the overall effect. The standard method of measuring speaker sensitivity is to state the sound pressure level that they generate (in units called dBA) at a distance of one metre from one watt of input power. Although it is seldom stated, the test frequency is a 1 kHz midband tone, which is assumed to be a fair frequency where the speaker is likely to be even. Taking our earlier example, the big B&W 802s produce 90dB with one watt of power, whereas the small AudioSmile Kensais produce only 83dB.

It's clear that the B&Ws are more sensitive than the AudioSmiles then, but just to confuse matters, all decibel (dB) scales are logarithmic, so small changes in the number actually reflect large subjective volume differences in the effect. That 7dB extra the B&Ws have will sound *dramatically* louder, which in turn means that small amplifiers suddenly come over all big, bold and confident. So the message is, amplifier power is only one side of a very two-sided coin; speaker sensitivity is just as key.

Here's where the *art* of system matching comes in. If you use valve amps, you'll likely need a speaker of at least 89dB or more sensitivity to get more than a squeak. So it will probably be a large, ported design. Conversely, if you want small loudspeakers in your house, then you're going to have to get yourself a big, powerful transistor amplifier of at least 60 watts per channel or more.

Effectively then, the more power your amp has, the less important issues of speaker sensitivity are, as one compensates for the other. That's why most people running modern transistor amplifiers of a medium power output can run most loudspeakers without undue trouble. But even these days, smaller amps in big rooms will still find it helpful to opt for

more efficient loudspeaker designs. A typical figure for an average loudspeaker is 86 to 88dBA/1w/1m, and this will go loud with an amplifier rated at around 25 watts or more. The big B&Ws at 90dB need around 15 watts, whereas Tannoy's top models, some of which better 100dBA/1w/1m will get a roar from just a few watts – even puny 5 watt single-ended triode tube amps will make a big noise!

Watts up?

There's more to amplifier power figures than meets the eye. Every hi-fi buyer has to suffer the ordeal of the numbers game – from cheap eighties stack systems to nasty nineties mini systems and fancy noughties car systems, the makers sell their wares by boasting '2 x 50W', '4 x 40W', or *whatever*. So how to decipher published power output figures, and how do they work in practice?

Well, they're a useful insight into what the amplifier's got inside it, especially when you read between the lines. Real hi-fi manufacturers will quote their amplifier power output into differing speaker impedances, the norm being 8 ohms. Remember though that this is just a 'line in the sand'; no speaker presents an 8ohm load to the amplifier at all times; as its impedance is constantly varying up and down with frequency. That's why it's useful to check the amount of power it puts into 4ohms, and even 2. Amps that have really well designed power supplies will deliver almost twice as much power into half the load, so 20 watts into 8ohms becomes 40 watts into 4ohms and 80 watts into 2ohms. Very few exist that do this, but the closer they get to this, the more the amp is able to drive 'real world' speakers, rather than just a steady-state test tone on the laboratory bench.

The other side of this is, of course, loudspeaker impedance. Most modern speakers have a quoted impedance of 8ohms, but as they play music some can go down a lot lower. An amplifier that puts out twice as much power into 4ohms as 8 is going to sound stronger and more stable, rather than weak kneed and limp. With a big transistor amplifier that (nearly) does this then, you don't have to worry about your speaker's quoted impedance so much – it isn't absolutely critical.

Conversely, using 8ohm loudspeakers with an amplifier which is specified for 4ohm speakers will result in a reduction in numerical power output, but this is seldom noticeable in practice, and remember that loudspeaker impedance varies greatly with frequency over the audio band anyway. But the situation is more critical with valve amplifiers due to the low power levels that can be achieved, even under ideal conditions. Typically a choice of

FEATURE SYSTEM MATCHING



loudspeaker terminals of different impedances are fitted (called 'taps'), and these should be used correctly.

Another thing to consider is the power rating of your speakers, although to be fair this isn't critical in practice. A loudspeaker rated at 150 watts like the KEF Q700 [see p60] does not imply that either you need a 150 watt amplifier to drive it or that it will fail if 151 watts are applied. It is, however, a good basic guideline which indicates the scale of amplifier which the manufacturers had in mind when designing the loudspeaker. So try and pick one which is, at least, within a factor of two of the power of your amplifier.

It is interesting to note that more loudspeakers are damaged by amplifiers which are not powerful enough, rather than too powerful, this is because when an amplifier runs out of puff it starts to generate a lot of distortion which passes straight through the loudspeaker's crossover filters and damages the tweeters. That's why KEF also quote a minimum amplifier power rating for the Q700, of 15 watts. Finally, remember that power rating does not give a direct indication of how much sound the loudspeaker will generate with a given amplifier; sensitivity is usually the better indication of that.

Rising damp

Now we've got the basics covered, here's another measurement that's useful for predicting how your amplifier and speaker partnership is going to sound – damping factor. It's the name given to the ratio between the

You've got a speaker that's matched to your amp in terms of power – is there anything else to consider?

loudspeaker impedance and the amplifier's output resistance. Think of it as how much the tail wags the dog. If the damping factor is too low the amplifier will not be able to position the loudspeaker cones accurately and the resonances of the loudspeaker will colour the sound – the speakers begin to affect the way the amp works electrically. Sometimes this leads to a pleasant increase in perceived warmth, but it can often dull the system's ability to communicate rhythm and timing and lead to boomy, 'one note' bass.

While valve amps can sound magical, their Achilles Heel is their poor damping factor, which is why amp-speaker matching is so critical here. The damping factor of valve amplifiers tends to be low – between 0.5 and 5 for many of the current models. There are all kinds of technical reasons for this, from their lack of strong negative feedback and the resistance of the wire in their output transformers.

Transistor amps can be constructed to give colossal damping factors; one reason that the popular Audiolab 8200A integrated works well with a wide range of loudspeakers is its high damping factor, which is over 50. Powerful transistor amplifiers with high damping factors are more able to give predictable results with 'peaky' loudspeakers, which exhibit large impedance changes across the audio band, whereas tube amps need more even-natured speakers to give of their best.

All this is related to the amplifier's output impedance – the higher this is, the greater the variation in system (amp and speaker) response will occur, reflecting swings in the loudspeaker's impedance curve. In some quarters, the subjective impact of the output impedance on perceived bass performance is less of an issue. Ultimately then, the only way you can really be sure your speaker is electrically well-matched to your amp is to listen to it, which underlines what we always say – get to know a good dealer and audition your desired kit with a range of music.



Cable talk

So, you've got the right amplifier/speaker combination – but is there anything else to consider? Well don't forget the pieces of wire connecting the two together. Because the impedance of hi-fi loudspeakers is low, it's important that the resistance of the loudspeaker cable should be as low as possible, because electrically the two are of course related. It's also vital to point out that dirty connections can sully your system sound, so periodically check that connections are clean and tight at both the amplifier and the loudspeaker. It's a good idea to unplug everything and remove any oxidation with contact cleaner regularly – for a truly sparkling sound ●



SPOTLIGHT

PUMPING UP THE VOLUME...

Back in the nineteen sixties, the issue of amplifier-speaker matching was so critical that buyers paid great attention to manufacturers' specifications to ensure good results. Loudspeakers of the day were very efficient, but had fairly low power handling due to driver technology.

By the seventies, the rise of transistors meant that amplifier power was increasing, and so was speaker power handling. Unfortunately, the fashionable Bextrene and Polypropylene cone materials of the day meant lower speaker sensitivity, meaning systems didn't in practice go much louder.

It's only recently that amplifiers have large amounts of power as standard, while speakers have also got more sensitive. That's why people are less aware of the relationship between the two, but it's still an important part of system matching. As ever, the answer is to listen for yourself!





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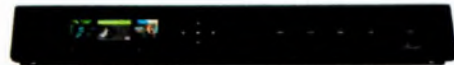
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In the January 2012 issue of Stereophile, Brian Damkroger writes a one page update on the Audience Adept Response aR12-TS power conditioner. Brian says - "Bottom line: The aR12-TS is the best power conditioner I've heard."

Latest News: Au24 PowerCord is The Absolute Sound Power Product of the year 2011.



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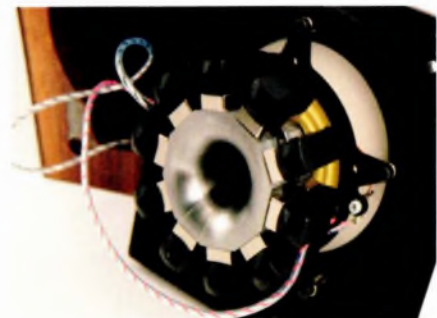


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Stream come true

From an early champion of networked music comes this punchy new digital music system. **Malcolm Steward** enjoys Linn's latest Majik DSM

Linn Products is one of the world's foremost manufacturers of networked audio components. Along with one-time contemporary from the days of analogue, Naim Audio, it sets the benchmark for high-end performance in this sector.

The Linn DS products are not aiming to compete with budget or convenience offerings such as the Sonos or SqueezeBox systems, but instead offer higher performance to enthusiastic, hard-core music lovers, at a higher price.

The new Linn Majik DSM is little different – in terms of physical components and construction – to the Majik DS-I (reviewed in *HFC* 332). The 'M' is still a network streaming, all-in-one device, that still plays internet radio, and still incorporates a comprehensively equipped 90 watts (into 4 ohms) Chakra integrated amplifier, Dynamik switched mode power supply, and a multiple-input DAC. So is it really a new product? Well, in these modern times, I reckon the answer is a definite yes. Differences are all readily noticeable, and attributable

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Linn Majik DSM
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: integrated DS player, preamp and power amp
WEIGHT: 4.9kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 381x80x355mm
FEATURES:

- supported file types: WAV, FLAC, MP3, AIFF, AAC, ALAC, OGG, WMA (except lossless)
- sampling rates: various, including 32k, 44.1k, 48k, 88.2k, 96k, 176.4k & 192k
- 2 electrical and 3 optical digital inputs (max 24-bit/192kHz)
- compatible with UPnP media servers

DISTRIBUTOR: Linn
TELEPHONE: 0141 307 7777
WEBSITE: linn.co.uk

to improvements to the software – the most vital and influential component in such products. The earlier DS-I did not sound as poised and polished as the new DSM. The £2,600 unit, which has the option of loudspeakers, sounds superior to the original and now seems far slicker and genuinely faster in comparison to its slightly ponderous forerunner.

Not only does the code appear to have been tidied up, but useful new functions have been introduced. 'NetAux', for example, will silence those Apple fan boys who think no one outside Cupertino can come up with innovative functions like AirPlay. Not so: NetAux functioned perfectly with my iPhone and iPad, and the rarely used low-res iTunes library on my distant desktop PC. Having selected the NetAux input, I could play music directly from iSources through the Majik system.

Linn has, since it began in the 1970s, based its manufacturing philosophy on maximum information retrieval, attempting to coax every atom of musical information from the source regardless of what piece of equipment was endeavouring to obtain it, be it the Sondek LP12



volume, it's a swish thing to use. And, yes, the Majik DSM does have an input ready and waiting for your record player!

Like its predecessor, when streaming internet radio, the sound quality is not as good as that from ripped CDs or genuine high-res recordings. Still, it is none too shoddy, and often surprisingly good. Indeed it remains a fantastic way to discover new music. I drove the DSM for the most part with a wired laptop PC because an expired router that had to be replaced mid-review demanded that I spend time getting the wired network working optimally, before I began messing with the wireless control functions. So my iPhone, iPad and various 'apps' were virtually ignored throughout the review once I had assured myself that they worked as expected. I strung the DSM off the Gigabit switch on the sub-network that serves my music-room, and fed it with rips and downloads from my primary NAS, which runs Illustrate's Asset UPnP software. This set-up facilitates easy comparisons because I can arrange any number of media players in my music room to connect to the same NAS and switch between them in seconds.

Sound quality

The review DSM came supplied with a pair of Majik 109, three-way, ported, bookshelf-style loudspeakers. The system did not relish being played too loudly, although it still managed healthy levels. I'd already switched the Majik 109s for a pair of PMC twenty 23s, but the unit had sounded graceless when pushed hard into these speakers. But that was the only occasion when its sound drew attention to itself – for the most part its transparency, clarity, and lack of obvious coloration were exemplary. I subsequently spent a day listening to a selection of speakers, including a pair of Focal 1008Bes, but settled on the NEAT Xli standmounts as the most agreeable and rewarding partners in my room.

There is only a thin line between magic and mediocrity in the world of networked audio, which tends to be a rather grey area; audio is nowhere near as black and white as it was in the nineteen seventies and eighties. The differences one hears are frequently subtle but still significant; being good enough nowadays simply is not good enough. Linn recognises that digital streaming products are not commodities and does not regard them as one would toasters or dishwashers. Hence the company is fastidious about their construction and implementation. It eschews technological gimmickry and focuses instead on the seemingly old-fashioned value of faithfulness to the musical performance.

The result? Linn's Majik DSM sounds quite excellent; its Ethernet connection and its UPnP capability being the undoubted stars of the show. The DSM does all the

I frequently gained further rewarding insights into even familiar music from the experience

famous tunes and timing stuff as one expects from Linn, but was not quite as musically persuasive as the pricier Naim SuperUniti, although it certainly had the edge in terms of transparency and resolution. Its presentation was ferociously precise and etched. It scavenged detail and information from every corner of a mix or arrangement. It displayed exceptional realism on the new 24-bit/192kHz NaimLabel rip of Antonio Forcione and Sabina Sciubba's *Meet Me in London*.

It was truly outstanding at disclosing harmonic texture in guitar recordings, which are a particular favourite of mine. Duke Robillard, for instance, is a technically brilliant player and insists upon selecting

record player, CD12 CD player, or, nowadays, its digital streaming products. Performance was always to the fore, while convenience had played a supporting role. But the Majik DSM seems to blend both rather seamlessly. With eleven remotely selectable inputs (six digital and five analogue), and gain settings of those inputs adjustable so users can switch from one to another with no alarming changes in

CONNECTIONS

- 1 rear-mounted master power switch is fiddly to access
- 2 2x coaxial digital inputs; 3x TOSLINK opticals to the right
- 3 line level analogue inputs via RCA phons
- 4 left and right loudspeaker outputs via binding posts
- 5 Ethernet input; no serious digital streamer uses Wi-Fi
- 6 IEC power socket lets you experiment with mains cables

Q&A

MALCOLM STEWARD SPEAKS WITH GILAD TIEFENBRUN, MD OF LINN PRODUCTS



MS: Is it the case with networked audio products that the software is the make or break factor?

GT: A digital stream player is much more than a network interface, DAC and power supply. Software and hardware are both important when it comes to audio quality, but they must work together in harmony and precision engineering is the key to getting the best from both.

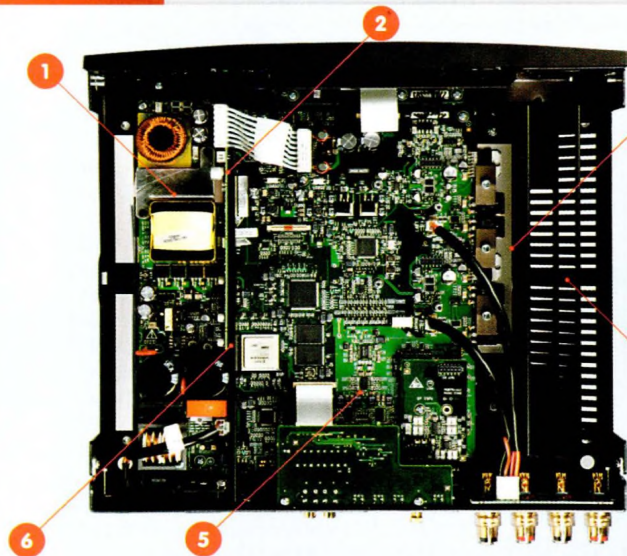
Is there much you can do, apart from in software, to make one's streaming product stand apart from the crowd?

Everything we make is designed in-house and from the ground-up. Rather than using the standard upsampling filters commonly provided by the DAC manufacturer, we replace this with our own custom-designed solution, which delivers the best audio performance. In addition, our streaming technology extends the benefits of our Linn-designed ultra low-jitter master clock all the way from the DAC to the media server. Being in control of every aspect of the electronic circuit design ensures we get the best possible sound from our products.

What else is unique about the Majik DSM?

As technology changes, Linn DS evolves. Over the last four years regular software updates have added new functionality to Linn DS, the latest being Songcast which lets you listen to any audio from your computer on your Linn system. Plus, with Songcast, anything you listen to on your Linn can be shared with another room, perfectly synchronised and without sacrificing quality. During this time we've also added internet radio, ALAC support, easy access to your iTunes library and BBC content and interoperability with Airplay. Linn's Kinsky control app continues to get new features and is now available for all Mac, iPad, iPhone and iPod Touch.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Linn's switch mode power supply provides the juice
- 2 shielding keeps noise from PSU away from audio circuitry
- 3 output devices need heatsinking to deliver 90W into 4 ohms
- 4 separate ventilated compartment helps heat dissipation
- 5 surface mount components allow smaller casework
- 6 front to back bracing gives cabinet rigidity and cuts resonance



THE LINN MAJIK DSM does not have a host of similar rivals. Only the Naim SuperUniti is in any way comparable. Both combine streaming with amplification, can be controlled with an iPad or iPhone, and both require a NAS device for storage of music.

Which sound you prefer will depend on your taste – choose the Naim if you like the way music flows with a great sense of rhythmic propulsion, or the Linn if you want matchless transparency and detail. The clarity, precision and resolution of the Majik DSM are beyond reproach.

particular guitars for particular recordings. The DSM clearly lets you hear why he does this, as well as making it simple to study his flawless playing technique. Put these two abilities together and it presents music in a way that is compelling.

Its presentation of the acoustic guitar is no less enthralling. You quickly realise why luthiers call the timber they use 'tonewoods', when you can hear the richness of tonal colour, sustain and resonances that acoustic instruments produce, especially as they age.

The finest demonstration of the spatial characteristics of the DSM came on the rip of Ramirez' *Misa Criolla*, featuring Jose Carreras. The placement of the tenor, choir and orchestra somehow scaled to fit my room perfectly, and the streamer created a credible impression of being in the wonderful acoustic of that Spanish church, the Santuario de la Bien Aparecida in Cantabria. It also presented the choir as a collection of individual voices the entire performance was truly magical; the kind that you could happily sit and enjoy for hours.

A similar realism was created with the 24/48 Naim Label live recording of cellist, Tim Hugh. His instrument, and the piano accompanying him, exhibited fulsome instrumental warmth and timbre on Faure's *Après un Reve*, complete with 'muted' coughing being clearly audible and locatable among the applauding audience. The Lasso from Bartok's *Rhapsody number 1* was perhaps the Majik's

most emotive performance here. Hugh's animated, impassioned playing was evident right from the outset; his determined breathing and his strident bowing betraying the physical energy he was putting into the performance.

Conclusion

This latest Linn Majik DSM has a very quiet noise floor, enabling you to hear soft piano notes decay gently into silence or the delicate breathing of a backing vocalist, for example. There was never any suspicion that digital hash was obscuring any low-level detail, which is the Achilles' heel of modern network players.

I could, and often did, listen to the Majik DSM all day, and frequently walked away feeling that I had gained further rewarding insights into even familiar music from the experience. For a compact little system that includes bundled speakers, it walks very tall. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Digs deeply into musical performances; a highly involving listen

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Not as rhythmically assertive as it could be

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A highly attractive proposition if you are looking for a stylish all-in-one streaming system

FEATURES



OVERALL



K2 Series by Roksan Audio

"In short, the K2 system delivers musical delicacy and drama in flawlessly balanced proportion... That it looks so polished and presentable is an added bonus."

- Hi-Fi Choice, January 2009



M2 Series by Roksan Audio

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- Hi-Fi Choice, November 2010 (Integrated Amplifier and CD Player)



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Going for the one

Townshend's new stripped-down, low-fat version of its high-end preamplifier is well worth a look, says **Jason Kennedy**

Just over a year ago I got to review two superb preamplifiers at the same time, one was the Mark Levinson No.326S and the other Townshend Audio's Glastonbury Pre. The former is an active, multi-function design while the Glastonbury is a passive autotransformer type that's not so different to the Allegri.

Both are explicitly revealing, but the passive unit had the edge in terms of absolute transparency, the problem is that it costs £8,900 which puts it out of reach for most

of us. It seems that I was not the only person to think this way, another suggested that it would be a great idea if Townshend could make an autotransformer preamp with the same intrinsic technology as the Glastonbury, but without the luxury casework, extra gain switching and remote control for a more approachable price. This idea appealed to Townshend and because that individual plays in the Allegri String Quartet, the new baby preamp didn't have far to look for a name!

The Allegri is a relatively small unit, it's only 127mm wide and 45mm

► DETAILS

PRODUCT: Townshend Audio Allegri
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: autotransformer preamplifier
WEIGHT: 1.5kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 127x45x305mm
FEATURES:
 • line inputs: 6x RCA phono
 • outputs: 2x RCA phono
 • 80% nickel mu-metal autotransformer
 • 24-position stepped attenuator
DISTRIBUTOR: Townshend Audio
TELEPHONE: 020 8979 3787
WEBSITE: townshendaudio.com

high but it's a similar length to a regular full-width component and has six line inputs on its compact back panel alongside two pairs of outputs. It's not the sexiest piece of casework I've seen at the price, but this should mean that you are paying for what's inside, rather than the fancy metalwork which often accounts for a disproportionately high part of the end price in this business.

The heart of the machine is a 24-tap autotransformer that offers -60dB of passive attenuation with +4dB of gain at the top of the range. In practice this means that the majority of the steps on the switched attenuator or volume knob, give a 2dB change in level, but this increases at the bottom of the range. The theory being that you need finer steps at higher levels, which works well so long as you don't partner it with a high-gain power amplifier and high-sensitivity speakers. In that situation you might need to commission a bespoke autotransformer so that there isn't too much gain in the system.

The Glastonbury Pre gets around this by having separate switches for

performance, Townshend's autotransformer has 80 per cent nickel mu-metal laminations and some mysterious wire. Rather than regular copper the Allegri uses something called Fractal-Wire for the transformer windings and signal leads within the case.

The company won't divulge precisely what this is because of its experiences of telling the world about the benefits of deep cryogenic treatment (DCT), an idea that spawned a thousand imitators. But I think it is safe to assume that DCT plays a part in the Fractal process. There are also Fractal-Wire interconnects available so that you can use the same conductor all the way from the source to the power amplifier.

Sound quality

My experience with the Glastonbury Pre made me wonder whether the Allegri with its relatively limited attenuation range would suit a variety of amps and speakers; I had trouble getting the level low enough with active ATC speakers at the time, but Townshend's modifications sorted that out.

Initially the Allegri was used in place of the preamp section of a Leema Tucana integrated, as this amp has a direct input that bypasses the volume control. The speakers at the end of the chain were Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamonds which are above average in sensitivity terms, so I wondered if I would be stuck at the bottom of the Allegri's range where the big attenuation steps are. I needn't have worried, this component combination meant that the stepped attenuator sat around the 10 o'clock position for most of the listening with the quieter recordings requiring a bit more crankage, but not past the midpoint.

The sound is considerably more effortless and relaxed than it is using the onboard volume control of the Tucana, but not in

such a way as to make the music dull and lifeless. Rather the Allegri's remarkable transparency and speed means you can listen at higher levels without discomfort and thus bathe in a powerful, assured sound that is totally grain-free.

I really got into Jaco Pastorius' bass playing on the Joni Mitchell live album *Shadows and Light*. He has never sounded better than with this band and this preamp did nothing to disguise the fact. Quite the opposite, it revealed his sinuous fretless playing and the way it works so well with the rest of the band. The preamp also exposes the natural reverb of the venue to good effect, which adds to the atmospheric power of the event.

I put the Allegri up against an active preamp in the form of ATC's CA 2, this is a rather more affordable unit with remote control and balanced inputs, but it was interesting to hear whether the passive unit lacked energy by comparison.

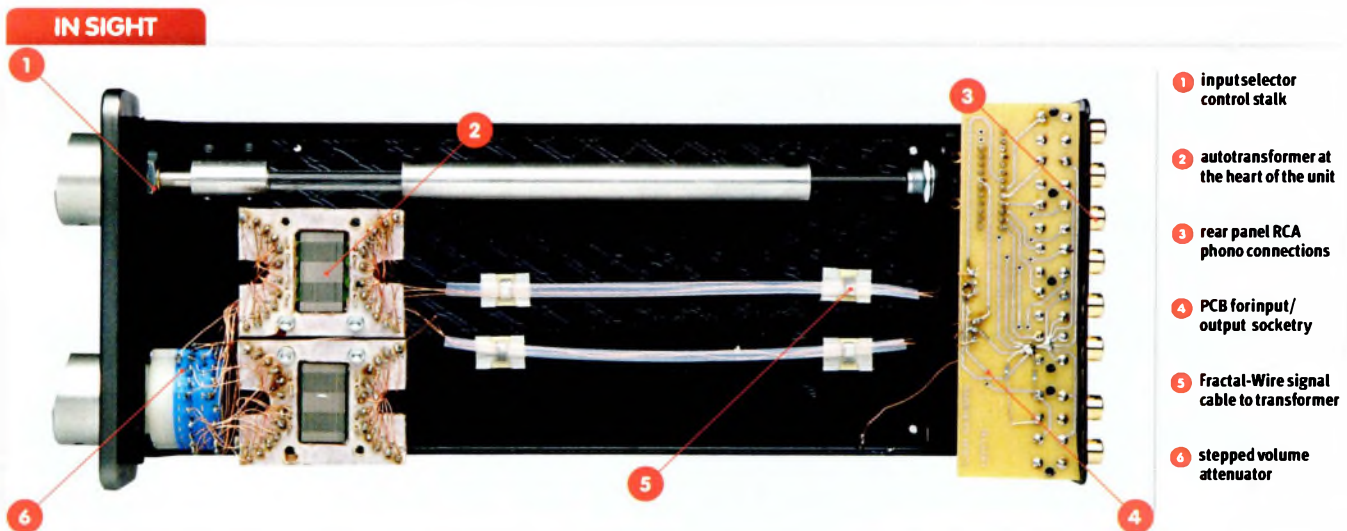
If you want to hear more of the nuance in your favourite recordings, then this is a bargain

It proved to be considerably more transparent and better integrated, but didn't have the same degree of power. Active preamps usually have more energy, and whether you put this down to the recording or to the presence of electrical power in the process is possibly a matter of taste. But that energy can mask fine detail and get in the way of timing, which makes the autotransformer's clear approach very appealing.

I have been using a TVC (transformer volume control – see *How It Compares*) from a little known company called AudioZone on and off for some time, and given that it was about the same

-10dB at the bottom of the range and an extra 6dB at the top. It also offers 1dB increments across the board, which makes for rather more subtle volume changes. But apart from this the autotransformer in both preamps is very similar, so the Allegri would seem to offer very good value despite its minimal stature and feature count.

As with any transformer the materials used in its construction are critical to



Q&A

JASON KENNEDY SPEAKS TO DESIGNER MAX TOWNSHEND



JK: What advantages does an autotransformer have over traditional passive preamps?

MT: It is lossless. A passive pot throws away power, its output gets weaker and weaker as you turn it down, whereas an autotransformer's output gets stronger and stronger as you turn it down. That is, the source impedance reduces as you reduce the level (increase attenuation), so its capacity to drive the load gets better and better. A passive pot is like an automatic car transmission where you've always got your foot on the accelerator and to slow it down you press the brakes harder and harder. You're throwing energy away, whereas with a TVC you gain energy.

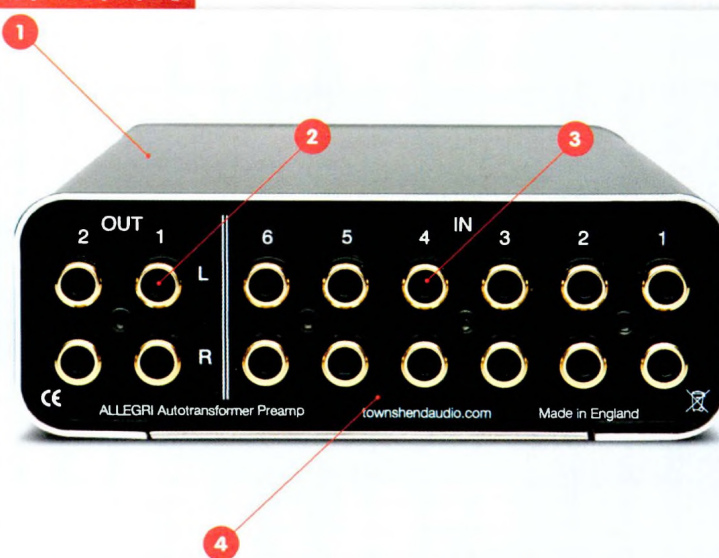
Would it work with high-output impedance sources such as valve CD players?

Yes, it is intrinsically suited to products that have this quality as it actually reduces output impedance as level is reduced. Let's say the source impedance is 100 ohms, when the attenuator is set to 0dB you've got 100 ohms source and 100 ohms output impedance. If you go to half output/volume the input impedance goes up and the output impedance goes down, so you get more drive from the controller. With the top two steps of the control the transformer is stepping up and then the sum works against you, but if you've got a half-decent source and a half-decent amplifier then it doesn't matter.

What other products do you have in the pipeline?

A more comprehensive version of the Allegri with 2dB steps and the 1dB interpolation and the -10dB settings from the Glastonbury, basically offering twice as many steps. It will be in a similar case, but one that can accommodate XLRs, so it will be the same height, but wider and will have the possibility of balanced operation. It will be around three to four grand and include remote volume control.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 decent quality casework confers sense of solidity
- 2 2 pairs of RCA phono outputs useful for bi-amping
- 3 6 pairs of RCA phono line level inputs give source flexibility
- 4 rearpanel sports gold plated phono socketry, but no XLR



THE ALLEGRI has many similarities to a transformer volume control (TVC), but there is a crucial difference between that and an autotransformer.

A TVC uses a regular transformer which has two coils of wire, a primary and a secondary. These wires are totally separate. There's no direct connection between the primary and the secondary, they're fully galvanically isolated. An autotransformer is just a primary without a secondary, it's a single coil of wire that has taps along its length to give different voltages, but there's no galvanic isolation. So when you're on 0dB the signal goes straight in and comes straight out; at lower levels the output is stepped down.

The advantage of a TVC is that it is a truly balanced volume control, but they are intrinsically more difficult to make and thus more expensive. An autotransformer preamp can be converted to balanced operation with the addition of a 1:1 transformer.

price when you could buy it, I decided to make a comparison with the Allegri.

I was surprised at how much difference there was; the Audio-Zone is nowhere near as relaxed and clean so it doesn't reveal as much detail. What's more it has a surprisingly thick mid/bass when used with the all-exposing ATC SCM150ASL active monitors.

The Allegri is considerably cleaner, tighter and faster and even extends further in the bass. That thickness can give the impression of more bass weight with some amp/speaker combinations (it does with the 802 Diamonds, for instance), but the ATCs reveal it to be an exaggeration of the truth that masks detail for the sake of a heavier sound.

The Allegri, like the Glastonbury Pre, seems to suit the big ATCs down to the ground. They are analytically revealing which can result in an grainy sound with some preamps and sources, but using the Audirvana player on my Mac, through a Resolution Audio Cantata DAC, resulted in an open, detailed and jumping sound with certain tunes.

I got distracted by hip hop for a while and had considerable trouble turning down the Missy Elliott in order to get back to the keyboard. There is something about hearing the extra layers of sounds and effects in a complex mix that makes this component very engaging.

Conclusion

The effortlessly revealing nature of the Allegri is quite understated and may not be to everyone's taste. Some will prefer the extra energy

you get with an active preamp, but if you want to hear more of the nuance and phrasing in your favourite records, whatever format they may be in, then this is something of a bargain.

I was constantly surprised at what it managed to unearth in familiar tracks and once I got the level right, the whole thing gelled with a musicality and realism that is hard to achieve at most prices.

It manages to combine finesse with analysis, yet keeps the musical message at the forefront. What's in the recording is, after all, what you hear more of. This plus the crucial lack of colouration and time-smear means that performances are as riveting as the day they were made.

As with other TVCs, you can't drop the Allegri into any old system and expect instant karma – it's a slow burn that builds up to an inferno as you play more and more music. If your system is revealing this will show you more of the music than anything near the price. Nuff said! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Smooth and even, yet with an ultra-high resolution sound |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Alas no balanced operation! |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★ | WE SAY: Super revealing, yet understated sounding preamplifier, doesn't look like high end gold, but certainly sounds the part |
| FEATURES
★★★★ | |

OVERALL



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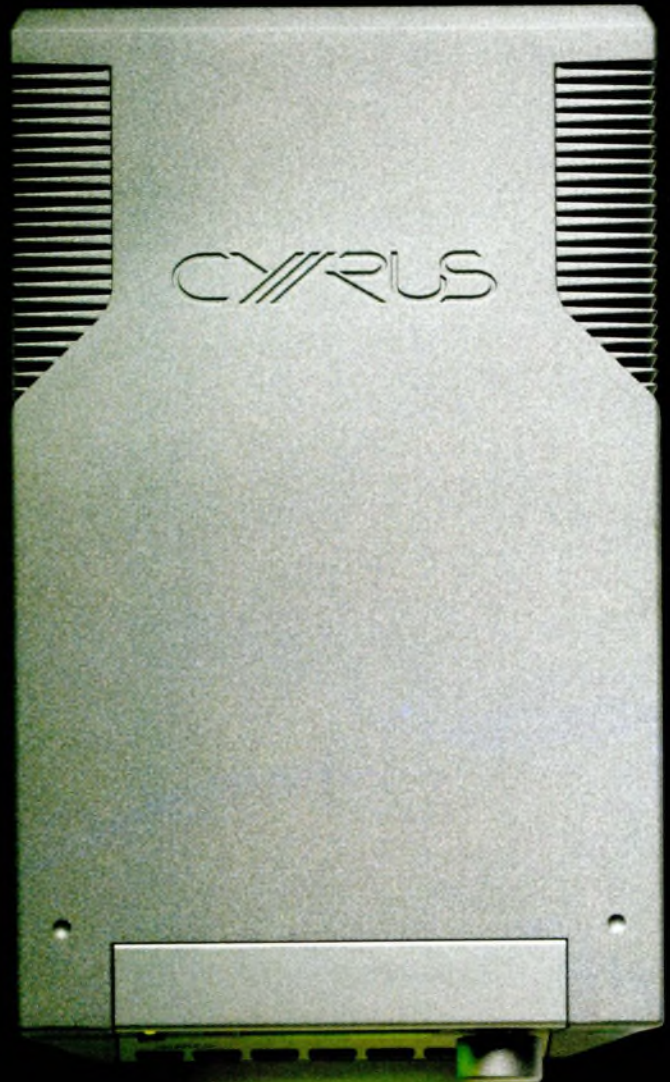
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The user interface is vitally important to us so we developed the n-remote, a state-of-the-art hand held controller so you can search through, and control, your library conveniently. From the n-remote you can search for network music files, view artwork on the colour screen, operate your other Cyrus components and even control your TV and DVD player. n-remote is a very powerful handset yet simplicity itself to use.

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Tiny dynamite

Q-Acoustics' new Q2010i loudspeaker provides prodigious sonic satisfaction at a very compact price, says **Jason Kennedy**

Once upon a time, when Compact Disc was the future of hi-fi as we knew it, £120 would buy you a very decent little loudspeaker – the likes of a Wharfedale Diamond or Mission 760, for example. Since then the talent at that end of the market has waned somewhat, and we've been less interested – as a magazine – to investigate. Well, this little Q-Acoustics box has rather rekindled our enthusiasm for ultra-budget boxes.

It doesn't have the material value of bygone classics – inflation hasn't been eclipsed – but it really is still uncannily musical and wide band for its price and size. This is probably because the design was created for Q-Acoustics by speaker *wunderkind* Karl Heinz Fink and voiced by Q himself, Steve Reichert – the very same fellows who honed previous award grabbing designs for the brand. They would do well to keep up their good work...

Energy management

The ubiquitous suffix in this speaker's name indicates that it's the second generation of this model; it remains a mere 234.5mm high (just over nine inches) and contains a 100mm main driver and a 25mm soft-dome tweeter, but the precise nature of these components has changed. The cone on the mid/bass unit used to be made of a mix of paper and mica, but this version swaps mica for carbon fibre. The tweeter is completely new in material, now silk rather than polyester, and more significantly in a mounting which is designed to decouple the driver from the cabinet. Given the amount of energy that the main driver pumps into the

baffle that holds the tweeter, this has got to be a good thing and it's something we've seen in a few high-end speakers, but it's unheard of in the entry-level arena.

Another distinguishing feature of the Q2010i is that the cable terminals are located underneath the cabinet; there is a cut out so that cables can be fed from behind to the single pair of inputs, and this makes for a very neat speaker, whichever way you look at it.

Given the diminutive stature and price of this speaker, it's inevitably no heavyweight, but it's a well put together little lump. The grilles are distinctly lightweight, but the radiused corners and ribbed front baffle give it an aesthetic charm that makes it even more domestically acceptable. The standard matt black finish is not overly inspiring, but for an extra £40 you can have a gloss black or white, which looks rather nice.

Sound quality

Small speakers have a natural advantage when it comes to

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Q Acoustics Q2010i
ORIGIN: UK/China
TYPE: standmount loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 3.5kg each
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 150x234.5x203mm
FEATURES:
• treble driver: isolated 25mm soft dome
• bass driver: 100mm paper/carbon fibre cone
• sensitivity: 86dB
• impedance: 6 ohms
DISTRIBUTOR: Q Acoustics
TELEPHONE: 01279 501111
WEBSITE: qacoustics.co.uk

expectations and small cheap ones an even greater advantage, so I attempted to compensate for this by using three grand reference speakers before switching to the Q2010i. It didn't work, as I was *still* blown away by the musical integrity and sheer entertainment they deliver. Irrespective of price, they are rollickingly good fun to listen to, and their sins are those of omission; they don't destroy the essential musical information inside every song along the way.

Rarely has the notion of diminishing returns been more graphically revealed than by this speaker, it is far better than it has any right to be. It times so well and are so coherent that you can forgive the absence of deep bass; low frequencies are heavier if you put the speakers close to a wall and stop the port with the supplied bung, but it's far more fun if you pull them half-a-metre into the room and let the soundstage expand.

Imaging could be more precise and dynamics are inevitably limited by big speaker standards, but in the context of its peers it's superb. Light, bright, open and easy to listen to, you have to keep reminding yourself of the price tag.

Conclusion

I was taken aback at how enjoyable this small speaker is. Surprisingly revealing with tuneful bass and remarkable power handling for its size, if you're putting your first system together it's a no brainer. It also looks like a very good idea for a second system. That anyone can build such a coherent, detailed and exciting speaker of this size is extraordinary, but it's the fact that they can do it for the price of two tanks of petrol that takes the biscuit. Hats off to them. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Stunning musicality and fun factor, alongside remarkable power handling

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: At this price, are you kidding?

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: QAcoustics has a great track record, but this beer budget standmount shows the brand is getting ever better

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



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Power to the people

Hi-fi sounding lethargic and congested? Isol-8 would like a quiet word, says *Jimmy Hughes*...

Isol-8's MiniSub Wave is a simple passive 'plug and play' mains conditioner that replaces the original MiniSub. While some advanced active devices (such as Isol-8's PowerStation) alter the frequency of the AC mains from the UK's 50Hz to something higher, this isn't possible with the MiniSub Wave – it's purely a mains-cleanser.

Passive inductive filtering is employed to lower mains noise without compromising current delivery. Although the MiniSub Wave is a lower-priced unit, Isol-8 claim its performance is not too far off their more expensive SubStation units. The MiniSub Wave is the basic model, with the MiniSub Axis a more expensive alternative at £999.

Common to both models is isolation between all six mains sockets. This helps reduce cross-contamination. It's not only noisy mains you're fighting against, but self-noise generated by the power supplies of the other equipment in use. With each socket isolated this problem should be reduced.

Some mains conditioners only deal with common-mode noise, but Isol-8's MiniSub Wave is designed to tackle both common and differential mode noise. The more expensive MiniSub Axis also deals with DC offset – something that can cause

mains transformer buzz, and limit currently delivery due to magnetic saturation. The MiniSub Wave has six standard 13a UK-type mains sockets. These feature a hinged protective cover to prevent dust from contaminating the pins, while keeping out tiny fingers! There are four 6amp sockets for low-current components, and two higher-current 10amp sockets for things like power amps.

The Isol-8 MiniSub Wave is housed in a steel box with CNC-milled front panel. Components are housed on two circuit boards, with PTFE insulated silver-plated copper wiring for connections between sockets and motherboard. The components are not 'potted' in resin, so you can see what's there. The front panel has a brushed surface which looks simple, but attractive. Internally, the circuits are neatly laid out with plenty of space between the different groups of components. During use, the MiniSub Wave does not get hot, nor could we hear any noise or buzzing sounds emanating from the casework.

Given good build quality and high-quality components, Isol-8's MiniSub Wave offers good material value. But, value must also take into account how big a difference the unit makes to the sound of your system. Suppose you hear no improvement; is there

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Isol-8 MiniSub Wave

ORIGIN:
UK

TYPE:
passive mains conditioner

WEIGHT:
6.5kg

FEATURES:

- upside-down mains sockets – help manage thick cables
- technology borrowed from Isol-8's more expensive conditioners
- CNC-milled front panel
- silver-plated PTFE insulated internal wiring
- Isolates each hi-fi component from its partners

DISTRIBUTOR:
Isol-8

TELEPHONE:
020 8856 0616

WEBSITE:
isol-8.co.uk

any point buying something like this? Actually, the answer is yes... Better sound quality aside, a MiniSub will protect your equipment from voltage spikes and power surges.

Sound Quality

The degree of improvement heard depends on how dirty your mains supply is, and how sensitive your equipment is to mains noise. Many find their hi-fi sounds different according to the time of day. Things often improve after midnight – as people switch off and retire for the night. On installing Isol-8's MiniSub Wave, I felt the music sounded cleaner. It was slightly better-focused and more immediate, with crisper transients and greater ambient depth. The upper treble definitely seemed smoother and cleaner, with less edge and reduced congestion. The improvement was definitely worthwhile, but a day or two later I felt things had moved to a different level. The music seemed to flow better, and was somehow more lucid and coherent. You could follow individual voices or instruments more easily.

It's as though you're suddenly hearing your equipment as it was meant to sound, without unwanted grunge getting in the way. The sound has increased clarity, so that fine detail tells more effortlessly. You should find you're able to play music at a slightly reduced volume setting for the same subjective loudness. Try listening with the MiniSub Wave connected, then take it out of circuit.

Conclusion

Because mains quality varies according to location, products like the Isol-8 MiniSub Wave really need to be auditioned in situ. Nevertheless I'm confident that most hi-fi enthusiasts will find this unit delivers very worthwhile benefits, even to those with fairly clean mains. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Improves your hi-fi, irrespective of mains quality

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Adding an Isol-8 MiniSub Wave should give you better sound quality and improved day-to-day consistency

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★



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Book marks

1970s book-a-like speakers? Focal have brought the idea back with this 2.0 desktop speaker system. **Malcolm Steward** authors a verdict...

The Focal XS BOOK is a powered system. Note that I say 'powered' and not 'active', because the design contains a passive crossover, and the right-hand unit houses a pair of 20-watt power amplifiers. No frequency division takes place before that amplification stage, so they're not quite the same sort of proposition as you'd get from a Linn/Naim six-pack/Isobarik PMS system, for example.

Instead, the crossover divides the full-range output from the amplifier, feeding frequencies lower than 3kHz to a Polyglass 10cm midrange unit, and anything above to a 19mm aluminium tweeter. The aluminium enclosure is vented and uses a complex, CAD modelled port to ensure superior air flow so as not to generate port noise and to maximise efficiency. As a result, the frequency response of the compact design is an impressive 50Hz to 22kHz claimed, and a maximum SPL of 96dB is also quoted by the manufacturer. As such, the Focal system should work with a wide range of lowish powered amplifiers.

The system is supplied with all the cabling most people will need; interconnects to attach the right-hand speaker to the source – amplifier, iPod or similar, and a further cable to couple the left- and right-hand speakers. This was just sufficient to span my dual-21-inch-flat-screen set-up, but could usefully be extended by a touch – just to make me one hundred per cent satisfied. The final cable is a figure-of-eight mains lead. I am told by a Focal representative that the design responds well to mains and interconnect cable upgrades, if you are prepared to make such tweaks on a system this inexpensive.

My only remark was that the on/off button-cum-volume control on the review system appeared to have been damaged in transit. Its operation wasn't consistent, and ultimately I left the speakers permanently switched on and used the volume and mute controls on the 'Qute as I would with a non-powered speaker.

Of course, you can use the XS BOOK as a regular small-room speaker, but I tested it solely in its role as a desktop monitor with my computer set-up feeding one input of my Naim UnitiQute, while its UPnP connection provided the second source feeding rips and downloads from my NAS drive. The speaker pleased me from the outset by sounding substantial rather than small and anaemic as desktop designs so frequently do.

Sound quality

The XS BOOK displayed a delightful lack of coloration. There was a naturalness about its presentation that was easy to appreciate and enjoy, particularly when listening to vocals and acoustic instrumentation. Furthermore, it exhibited a refined

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Focal XS BOOK
ORIGIN: China/France
TYPE: multimedia speaker system
WEIGHT: 5kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 114x281x200mm
FEATURES:
 • 2-way bass reflex speaker
 • Polyglass 100mm mid/bass unit
 • 2x 20W amplifier
 • RCA phono and 3.5mm minijack input
DISTRIBUTOR: Focal
TELEPHONE: 0845 660 2680
WEBSITE: focal.com

balance and near perfect voicing. Whoever was responsible for voicing this was clearly very much in tune with what I want from a desktop system. I suppose one might say that a shade more bass extension would have been appreciated, but the XS BOOK never sounded lean.

It presented *Massachusetts* from the Aaron Lewis album *Town Line* with faultless musical integrity and true emotional conviction. It further conveyed all the stirring power of his song, *Country Boy* with appropriate sentiment, as well as the potency of the straightforward but well measured arrangement, along with Lewis' poignant vocal delivery.

The Alison McGillivray 24-bit/96kHz album, *Geminiani* demonstrated that Focal has clearly translated its formula for studio desktop monitors into one suitable for speakers positioned on the domestic computer desktop.

The wealth of vivid tonal colour and dynamics combined with a soundstage of generous proportions leant an air of true credibility to the quartet's performance. The speaker definitely knew how to groove; it latched on to timing clues immediately and was rhythmically a thoroughly engaging design.

Conclusion

The XS BOOK was musically agnostic, and appeared equally sensitive and responsive to all disciplines. Its finest asset was its gift of communication regardless of the source: whether it was a 24/192 download, a CD rip, or a YouTube video, the emotional message came across clearly.

In truth, it was so many streets ahead of the typical desktop speaker that comparisons to equivalently priced products seemed redundant. Something to make you catch up on your book keeping, then... ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Surprisingly good build and finish; unexpectedly accomplished sonics

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Ultimately limited in power and scale

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Great little speaker system whose bookish styling makes them ideal for any music library!

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

OVERALL





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Royal salute

Kingrex's compact UD384 is a veritable aristocrat of affordable digital-to-analogue convertors, finds **Jason Kennedy**...

Contrary to its rather regal name, here's a very unassuming little box that hardly looks good value – on the face of it, at least. Just ten centimetres long and weighing about as much as an empty crisp packet, it's hardly a hi-fi pin up. But small in this instance means beautiful when it comes to sound, I found. And one major reason for this could be that it's a 32-bit/384kHz convertor, which is impressive for the size, but even more so for the price. This is by far the most affordable example of this rare breed on the market, the next one up – M2Tech's Young DAC – actually costs over three times the price.

Connectivity

Kingrex is a Taiwanese company that built its reputation with a Tripath-based amplifier called the T20. This proved the manufacturer knew its way around a switching amplifier circuit, and duly became something of a cult product on some hi-fi forums, with people chopping and changing power supplies for a more superior sound.

The UD384 continues the theme, with three alternative power supply options starting at £150 for the U-Power lithium Ion battery supply, that was included with our DAC, and working up to the PSU MkII at £220.

The UD384 itself is both a digital-to-analogue convertor and a USB to S/PDIF digital-to-digital convertor. This latter function is useful for anyone who has a serious DAC, which doesn't have a USB input, and the USB input here is of the asynchronous variety, something that's almost *de rigueur* now.

Its main drawback is the lack of alternative digital inputs – if you want to upgrade an existing CD player this DAC is not for you. Rather, it's designed to make the most of music files of the highest resolution at sample rates that traditional digital interfaces do not support. As yet you can't buy 384kHz music files, but there is a growing selection of 192kHz material available to download.

This is not an upsampling DAC either, you can do this with your computer if it helps, but that rarely seems to be the case in hardware.

The Kingrex is not high on features – alas there is no indication of incoming sample rate or lock light to tell you that the signal is coming through. Indeed all it has in the way of indication is a power-on light.

Build is good; the case is extruded aluminium that is anodised black and the RCA sockets are pretty chunky.

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Kingrex UD384
ORIGIN:
Taiwan
TYPE:
USB DAC
WEIGHT:
180g
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
93x23x80mm
FEATURES:
• bit/sample rate: 16-32-bit/
44.1-384kHz
• input:
asynchronous USB
• outputs: analogue
RCA, S/PDIF coax
• includes Windows
driver software
DISTRIBUTOR:
Item Audio
TELEPHONE:
01782 621225
WEBSITE:
kingrex.com

The only problem is the low weight of the DAC, which means you need very flexible interconnects or Blu-tack to hold it still.

Sound quality

This is a very impressive convertor, almost regardless of price. It is uncannily refined, open and revealing and these qualities make decent recordings sound very real and highly atmospheric. This is with CD rips too, nothing fancy, just plain 16-bit/44.1kHz. Nonetheless, you will be surprised at just how good this resolution can sound when carefully ripped. Few affordable CD players can approach this level of detail resolution. I'm not just talking about detail for its own sake either, some DACs can give you a mountain of minutiae but no music, this thing reveals the melody, the timbre and the energy and makes you want to listen.

If I had to pick a weakness it's a slight dryness in tonal terms, but this is in the context of a remarkably low grain, relaxed and effortless presentation that encourages high-level listening, because it's so clean. Adding the battery power supply further refines the result and increases dynamic range because noise levels are lower. To be frank, I've personally never heard anything under a grand that's so revealing.

Conclusion

A spectacular little convertor for the money, and one that proves just how good computer audio can be if you have a decent software player such as Audirvana Plus. It proves that USB is the interface to beat, and reveals just how much potential there is in music files rather than discs.

Don't think of the UD384 as a cheap accessory, think of it, instead, as the key to the hidden wealth in your music collection. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Unfeasibly revealing DAC for the price; asynchronous USB input

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** A little light for some cables, no S/PDIF in

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** The UD384 proves that small is indeed beautiful, this degree of transparency is rare at anywhere near its price

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL





Grand design



KEF's new Q700 floorstander is a large floorstanding loudspeaker for under £1,000.

Jason Kennedy tries it for size...

KEF celebrated its 50th anniversary last year and launched the R Series to commemorate the occasion. That range has yet to make it into production, but the new Q Series is out and about. So when the Q700 floorstander appeared on the reviewing horizon I jumped at the chance to see what the Kent-based company could do with a thousand pound budget...

The Q700 is the penultimate floorstander in a densely packed range that starts at £380 with the Q100 standmount and includes three floorstanders, and a number of home cinema models in its ranks. The Q700 appears to have a fearsome array of bass drivers, but only *one* of the shallow six-and-a-half inch units is actually connected to the crossover, the other two are auxiliary bass radiators (ABRs), that have a similar function to reflex ports in the overall design.

The absence of a traditional tweeter is explained by the Uni-Q main driver, which has a tweeter at its centre in a coaxial arrangement that KEF has been refining for sometime. This reached its apex in the stunning Blade model last year, which is KEF's flagship.

The Q Series replaces the Q Classic range, and where those models had polypropylene drive units, this one uses aluminium for both the dome and three cones.

The Uni-Q driver has seen a lot of change since the previous range, not least in a larger 25mm dome tweeter which is topped by a so-called 'tangerine waveguide' (derived from that developed for the Blade). It also has Z-flex surrounds that are totally unlike other driver surrounds because they aren't rolled, but rather have a crinkled appearance that makes for a much flatter surround that is said to improve dispersion.

The thinking is that a roll surround makes a barrier that stops certain frequencies from escaping evenly from the edge of the unit. The whole

idea with the Uni-Q is that dispersion and thus imaging is more even and coherent, because both mid and treble have the same acoustic centre, and evenness of dispersion is a key part of this. The bass driver has a large 50mm voice coil, which gives it the sort of power handling that even home cinema enthusiasts will have trouble pushing into distortion!

The Q700 is a substantial speaker, thanks to all those drive units, and a decent size of nearly a metre when its bolted to two outriggers that enlarge the footprint and enhance stability. They are cleverly designed so that the supplied spikes can be adjusted without having to lift the speaker at all, which with any floorstander is a blessing, let alone one that weighs over seventeen kilos.

The binding posts have had more attention than usual as well, there are two pairs for bi-wiring, but rather than connecting them with rods or links that disappear shortly after you remove them, there's an internal link. This consists of a nickel-coated connector that's brought into operation when a little knob is screwed into the cabinet; unscrew it

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
KEF Q700
ORIGIN:
UK/China
TYPE:
floorstanding
loudspeaker
WEIGHT:
17.2kg
DIMENSIONS:
(HxWxD) inc plinth:
325X967 X312mm
FEATURES:
• specified
sensitivity: 89dB
• nominal
impedance: 8 ohms
• drive units: mid
165mm, HF 25mm,
LF 165mm, all
aluminium
• ABR: 2x 165mm
aluminium
DISTRIBUTOR:
KEF Audio
TELEPHONE:
01622 672261
WEBSITE:
kef.com

and the two halves of the speaker can be driven discretely. The crossover behind these terminals is a first order type, and therefore pretty straightforward, which usually bodes well for timing and dynamics.

The cabinets are finished in a recycled wood-fibre based finish that's neither real veneer nor vinyl, but something between that's more ecologically sound than plastics. It looks pretty smart and comes in black oak, English cherry or European walnut shades. Inside, KEF has employed its labyrinth internal bracing in order to minimise cabinet resonance in the audio band.

Sound Quality

Listening commenced with the Q700s sitting about 60cm into the room, toed-in to face the listener. Power was supplied by a Leema Tucana integrated and signal by a NaimUniti. The result was a textured, gutsy sound from a chamber ensemble that had plenty of drama but slightly limited scale. The sound didn't escape from the boxes terribly well, and imaging lacked depth. The mid and top also sounded on the edgy

The speaker had a really strong, visceral groove; bass was not short of power...

side, so I tried a more sophisticated source in the form of my Resolution Audio Cantata, used as a DAC. This delivered a more open result that brought the lyrical flow of the music back to the room and revealed its innate charm.

Contemporary material in the form of Feist's album *Metals* revealed the speaker's prodigious bottom end, which is unusually powerful but not particularly sophisticated, while the midrange had a brightly lit quality which prompted me to finesse the positioning still more. Moving the KEFs so that they fired straight into the room with no toe-in helped to smooth them out, and also improved image scale a good deal. The better the recording, the bigger the resulting soundstage was, which suggests that this speaker is highly revealing of recording quality. Indeed, perhaps it's too revealing considering its price point; this speaker certainly doesn't suffer mediocre recordings, sources and/or amplifiers gladly...

With a 24-bit/48kHz download of Ethiopian pianist Samuel Yirga from



Q&A

JASON KENNEDY SPOKE TO BARRY DOCK, KEF'S PROJECT ENGINEER ON THE Q SERIES...



JK: Why the change from polypropylene to aluminium drivers?

BD: Aluminium diaphragms can be made thinner and lighter, with consequent sensitivity and extended bandwidth bonuses, but the large peak in the frequency response due to the first, albeit higher than with plastics/paper, resonant mode is well known. The inherent damping characteristics of polypropylene controls distortion due to resonant modes in the cone very well. But we were able to take advantage of the properties of aluminium once we designed the FEA-optimised elastomeric voice coil-to-neck joint, which effectively removes the peak at the top end of the frequency range.

What were your goals with this range – what were you trying to achieve relative to the range it replaced?

Our goals were more sensitivity, wider frequency response and better power handling with lower distortion. To accomplish this, we made massive steps in driver technology compared with the previous range. The aluminium cones with 'Z-flex' surrounds, the new 25mm tweeter, the huge 50mm voice coils in the woofers, all play their part.

It looks as if you have reduced cabinet costs so that you can spend more on driver technology. Is this the case?

That is an over-simplification, we certainly *did* spend more on the driver technology, but would point out that the cabinets have been optimised using our latest knowledge of the role of the cabinet construction.

The cabinets are designed in the UK using our laser doppler vibrometer and listening to try and identify problems. We identified that the baffle of the loudspeaker is the most important part of the cabinet construction in terms of the vibrational behaviour and consequently the Q series concentrates the material in this area – the thickness of the Q series baffle is 28mm increasing to 35mm where the Uni-Q driver is mounted. This is significantly thicker than other loudspeakers at this price point and this has a large effect on the control of the cabinet vibration.

IN SIGHT



- 1 recycled wood-fibre cabinets offer high levels of rigidity
- 2 labyrinth internal bracing minimises cabinet resonance
- 3 switchable internal biwiring link is an unusually nice touch
- 4 outriggers enlarge cabinet footprint and enhance stability
- 5 165mm aluminium coned auxiliary bass radiator; 1 of 2
- 6 50mm voice coil bass driver for high power handling
- 7 KEF's Uni-Q midband driver features inset 25mm tweeter



THE Q700 does not use a conventional reflex port, but neither is it an infinite baffle design. Instead, it has a pair of auxiliary bass radiators (ABRs). These are drive units devoid of the magnet and coil that form the motor system on normal units. Their job is to increase efficiency and augment the bass in the same way as a reflex port, but they do not suffer from pipe resonance or air turbulence and they do not allow energy from the back of the midrange unit, which is naturally reflected inside the cabinet, to escape. Barry Dock of KEF explained that this was the key reason for using ABRs in the Q-series floorstanders. In his words, "we found that in certain cases the port output contains significant degraded midrange information, both transmitted from the cabinet interior, and resulting from vibration of the port walls. Using ABRs is one way to tackle this issue."

B&W's Society of Sound, the speaker made the most of the texture in the double bass, and did similarly attractive things with the tone of the piano and saxophone. The quality of the recording was readily apparent too, being notably clearer and more lively than usual. The music had a really strong, visceral groove; bass could have been tighter perhaps, but was never short of power.

A Haydn piece from Norwegian hi-res label 2L also sounded vivacious and jaunty, even if it failed to quite achieve its full scale. But this piece is superbly recorded and certainly worked rather better in terms of musical engagement than classical material usually does.

Bass on this loudspeaker is unusually full and powerful given its modest price, but not quite as coherent as the superbly fluent upper ranges, at least with both the Leema Tucana and Naim Uniti driving them, both of which are usually good in this respect. Only one amplifier really seemed to gel when it came to timing across the band and that was a Rega Mira3. This little integrated has a very lively and upbeat sound that managed to deliver enough energy in the bass to give it the pace and dynamics available further up the band. It was the only one of four amps that managed this trick, but it was worth the effort because Joni Mitchell's live album *Shadows and Light* came alive in the listening room and you could finally forget the equipment and just enjoy the music.

Conclusion

The new KEF Q700 is loudspeaker is capable of seriously entertaining results with the right partnering equipment – in many respects it is exceptional at the price in terms of the power and physicality it offers. However, after an extensive search, I still found it unusually difficult to find an amplifier that suited it in all respects. The Rega has the energy it needs to enliven the bass, but proved a tad too ragged through the midband to be a comfortable listen. So while it's a most impressive overall performer, it may be tricky to optimise in 'real world' conditions.

Match it with a refined amplifier with serious bass grip, however, and you'll find this to be one of the finest standmounters at the price. As such, it would be a good idea to seek out an audition with your own amplifier if you possibly can. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Revealing mid and top with detail and clarity; powerful bass
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Needs a grippy transistor amp to keep everything under control
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Fine floorstander that offers great bang for your buck, but needs careful partnering
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Superb sound from computer audio – and Vivaces amongst 'the best of the best'

Not all 24/192kHz chips are born equal and dCS have taken time and care before offering the upgraded facility on the Debussy DAC and the Puccini U-Clock.

This means that dCS owners will be able to play some of the highest quality recordings, enjoying a greater sense of ease, space and naturalness.

The excellent dCS upgrade policy means that existing equipment that accepts 24/96kHz input can be fitted with the new circuit board, for a small charge. Upgrades for the Paganini and Scarlatti ranges will be available later.



The Debussy DAC – with RCA, BNC, AES and computer USB inputs

Some people are uncertain how to tackle computer-based audio so dCS have published a valuable guide that you can download from our web site under the '[Digital sources/dCS](#)' buttons. The guide is straightforward and comprehensive, covering both Mac and PC computers, the connections, the procedure and the software to use. We are also delighted to advise if you want any help.

If you've not heard high-resolution music what can you expect? In simple terms: more of everything.

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- Finer detail that brings out more emotion
- Greater scale to the performance
- More dynamics and excitement
- Sweeter treble and cleaner bass

All of these improvements stem from the greater amount of detail that is contained within the format.

Music can be downloaded from a growing number of sites and a web search will offer plenty of choice. We are very happy to help with advice on this developing area.

Our **Kawero Vivace** loudspeakers made a stunning début at the Heathrow show last year and wowed more listeners at Whittlebury Hall in September. Both times people returned to the room or stayed for long periods, awarding spontaneous 'best sound' comments such as: *'Just about the best system I have ever heard in 45 years of listening to hifi.'* Thank you Ray!

The magazine hifi+ reviewed the Vivaces and has now included them in their '**BEST OF THE BEST**', alongside B&W 802D and Sonus Faber Amati Futura, saying *'It's one of those speakers that gets under the listener's skin and you find yourself unable to listen to anything else.'*

The Vivace speakers catch people by surprise in many ways: the naturalness, scale and power from such compact, slim speakers. The secrets are how the speakers work with the room, using its natural ambience, and the way humans hear sound.

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Loudspeakers: Audio Physic, Focal, Gamut, Kawero, NEAT, Totem Cables: Chord Co., DNМ, Kubala Sosna, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, VertexAQ.
Mains: Vertex AQ Supports: Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi-Fi Racks, Leading Edge, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ Room acoustics: Leading Edge

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Ice cool



With its stunning styling and superlative build, you'd expect Schiit's new Bifrost DAC to be a lot more expensive, says **Tim Jarman**

As DACs go, the Schiit Bifrost is competitively priced for the facilities it offers. The basic model, which has coaxial and optical S/PDIF inputs, costs £319 and one with a USB (2.0) input as well is £419. Because the design is modular and upgradeable the USB unit can always be added later at a cost of £130 and Schiit claim that if the standards change then a new module will be offered to suit.

The DAC and analogue output unit itself are also interchangeable and the possibility exists that improved versions may be offered in the future. This is an excellent idea, as it doesn't relegate the DAC to the status of a digital paperweight as technology (invariably) progresses...

However, while the USB and DAC modules have been designed so that they can be exchanged by the user without the need for soldering, it is not particularly easy to do. There are lots of screws of differing lengths to deal with, and even with over twenty years of experience of repairing hi-fi equipment I found the cabinet fiddly to reassemble. If you're a relative novice, the unit really needs to go back to your dealer or distributor.

As well as the DAC (a Japanese 32-bit Asahi Kasei AKM4399), the Bifrost includes some clever clock

circuitry, which is claimed to be very accurate. All inputs can handle up to 24-bit/192kHz, which should cater for all today's basic needs. Other than a mains switch at the rear there is only one control, a source selector key which switches through the three input options in sequence. The chosen input is indicated by a bright white LED on the front panel, which I found to be distracting. If you prefer to listen in subdued lighting you may find yourself yearning for the soft red glow of the LEDs of years gone by!

Listening tests were conducted using a Cyrus CD8SE as the transport, and for the purposes of comparison a CEntrance DACmini was also on hand. The Bifrost is considerably cheaper than the CEntrance, yet it scores points straight away for its superlative build and finish, which are on another level completely. Also in the Bifrost's favour are the upgradeable modules, the onboard linear power supply and a proper power switch which shuts the whole thing down when not in use.

Sound quality

The Bifrost has an exuberant personality, one that gives music speed, energy and life. Bass is particularly noteworthy for its scale

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Schiit Bifrost
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: S/PDIF DAC
WEIGHT: 2.3kg
DIMENSION: (WxHxD) 228x56x171mm
FEATURES:
 • optical and coaxial inputs; USB optional
 • auto source select
 • RCA (line) analogue out
 • built-in linear power supply
 • upgradeable, plug-in USB and DAC modules
DISTRIBUTOR: High End Workshop
TELEPHONE: 01494 752171
WEBSITE: highendworkshop.co.uk

and power; you'd normally expect a far more anaemic bottom end for something that in basic form costs less than many interconnects. It's full and plump, conveying richness to the music in a way that price rivals can't.

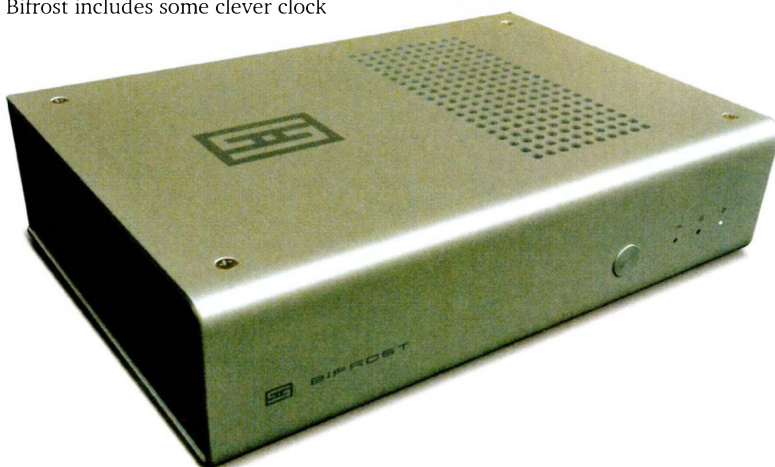
Midband is gripping, throwing out plenty of detail from Enya's *Amarantine*, but it's fair to say that the Schiit lacks the warmth and smoothness of, say, Arcam's similarly priced rDAC here. This gives great bite to the leading edges of plucked guitar strings on Crowded House's *Kare Kare*, for example, but again could grate through typically coarse budget loudspeakers.

For its very modest price, I felt the soundstaging to be strong, with the little Bifrost setting up a big, bold recorded acoustic with nicely carried stereo images within. Although compared to the pricier CEntrance, things did tend to coalesce around the loudspeakers, with two pools of sound around the edges of the cabinets. The overall effect was still very pleasant though, the Bifrost giving a feisty, gutsy rendition of whatever music you fed it.

Conclusion

It's hard to remember just how cheap this little box is, such is its *superb* build and finish. I kept disparaging its audio performance, then had to remind myself that it's actually about the third of the price that it looks! For £319, you get a big, bold, loud and proud sound that's a hoot to listen to. Trouble is, it's likely to be used with cheap ancillaries, and here it doesn't fit so well; ideally you need a smoother, more expensive system for it to give of its best.

Schiit's Bifrost is essentially a budget DAC with expensive tastes. Going forward, I'd love to try it with a smoother sounding, more expensive DAC module, which would make this product an unbeatable budget proposition, so how about it guys? ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Excellent build, neat appearance, modular concept, low-end warmth

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Forward upper midband, jovial user instructions!

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Supervalue, but needs smooth system for best sonic results

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL





All clear



It's big, it's black and it will set your bank balance back! Claro's new Clarity Dual turntable goes for a spin with *Jimmy Hughes...*

Two motors; two belts; two arms; massive platter – the new Claro Clarity Dual turntable is an imposing piece of kit. It has its roots in an earlier design – the fine Clarity 09 – but designer Peter Curran felt he could still do better, and offer the revised, improved 'flagship' model that you see here.

There are some turntable designers who've been known to utter pronouncements as if they were

some sort of mystical religious prophecies, but Peter is not one of them. Instead, he's a quiet, affable sort of fellow, and always willing to listen. Unsurprisingly then many of the revisions that grace the new Clarity Dual came about through comments made by users and reviewers. Some are fairly small (improvements to the finish, better adjustable feet, repositioned on/off switch) while others – such as the ability to take two tonearms, and the

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Claro Audio Clarity Dual (optional external power supply, Audio Origami PU7 12in arm)

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: turntable

WEIGHT: 18kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
445x80x305mm

FEATURES:

- 9.5cm thick Acetal platter weighing 9.2kg
- ability to accept two arms; can be used with 9in or 12in arms
- reverse-threaded record clamp
- optional external power supply
- twin motor drive

DISTRIBUTOR:
Claro Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE:
01423 867413

WEBSITE:
claro-audio.co.uk

new electronic power supply – are actually quite major.

Two AC motors are used, and these drive a small sub-platter via round belts. The massive 9.5cm thick platter is made from a plastics derivative called Acetal, and weighs around 9.2kg. The main bearing (improved over the original) is some 6cm long and 1.8cm in diameter. The plinth base is made from solid alloy, with a smart black-anodised finish. It's supported by three adjustable stainless-steel spiked feet. The Clarity Dual can be configured to work with one or two tonearms, and 9in or 12in arms can be accommodated depending on what is required.

The electronic power supply – designed by Charles Appleyard – is optional, but more or less essential if you're going to go between 33 and 45rpm on a regular basis. You can switch belt pulleys manually, but this is a bit impractical due the size and weight of the platter. While in my view not essential, the optional PSU also improves speed accuracy and thus ultimate sound quality, too.



Space age hi-fi

Claro Audio is a subdivision of Claro Precision Engineering – a company that specialises in the manufacture of accurately-made parts for the aerospace, medical, and the communications industries. They recently produced parts for the Galileo Satellite, and hold AS9100 Aerospace and ISO 9001:2000 certification. Confidentiality agreements mean that Peter Curran cannot name all those who use the company's services, but clients include Johnson & Johnson (medical), and ABSL Space Products. Needless to say, the quality of manufacture of this turntable is superlative.

Our review deck came fitted with an Audio Origami PU7 tonearm – the 12 inch version in gorgeous high-gloss black finish. The design is based on the old (and much loved) Syrinx PU3, with various improvements. It retails for £2,450, but there's also a standard 9 inch arm at £1,750.

The deck proved very straightforward to assemble, and I had ours up and running in less than two hours. Everything fits together logically, and any assembly uncertainties were answered by a quick look at the beautifully illustrated instruction booklet. In no time the deck was built, ready to play.

Sound quality

After a bit of fine-tuning to the cartridge and tonearm, it was soon sounding great. My cartridge was a Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue, and this sounded detailed and crisp, with great dynamics and attack. Tonal balance was lucid and open, with a nice creamy richness that was very beguiling.

Previously, I had been using and enjoying this cartridge fitted to the superb EAT Forte-S and Ikeda tonearm – a very tough act to follow. The Forte-S has an even bigger, heavier platter, and is quite a beast, but the Clarity Dual was not intimidated, and more than held its own!

Indeed, in terms of top-end cleanliness, the Claro was superior; one reason could be that the Audio Origami PU7 has fewer electrical 'breaks' in the signal chain from

cartridge pins to phono plugs – the Ikeda arm having a detachable headshell. This extra transparency was especially apparent on old bright-sounding discs.

Playing an LP of Stravinsky's *Petruchka* ballet (a rare version on the London label featuring the Israel Philharmonic conducted by Lorin Maazel), it was gratifying to hear how cleanly the Claro reproduced this somewhat brash and over-lit early stereo recording. Yet there was no loss of detail or dynamics – quite the reverse. This recording can sound a bit bright, with a thin 'spitty' sort of treble that becomes edgy and harsh during climaxes. But via the Clarity Dual, the sound was clean and well-controlled. The cartridge had no trouble tracking the grooves, and the reproduction remained clean – even at side-ends which were handled with consummate ease.

It makes you fall in love with vinyl all over again, compelling you to go through your collection

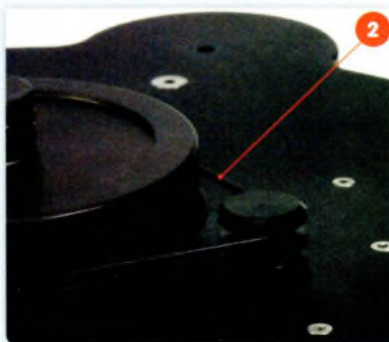
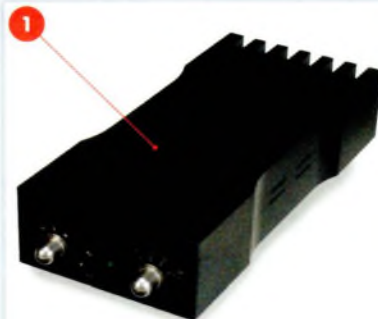
I found the Clarity Dual to have the same sort of solid unflappable weight of sound I so admired from the Forte-S; the same magnificent focus and precision. It sounded both relaxed and controlled, without lacking presence or immediacy. Regardless of the music played, the Claro combination was never once faded.

One LP that invariably gets an airing every time a new turntable arrives is Joe Sample's *Rainbow Seeker* from 1978. The Clarity Dual reproduced this album brilliantly, and fully revealed the layering of instruments in what can at times be a fairly complex mix. Bass sounded firm, deep, and powerful, while the highs were beautifully open and transparent. Once again, I noticed that effortless neutrality of the overall sound. True to its name, clarity was excellent, and Joe Sample's piano always remained audible regardless of what was happening elsewhere in the mix.

The Clarity Dual comes with a special record clamp featuring a left-handed (reversed) thread. This ensures the record is firmly held, and enhances the impression of focus and control. The use of a clamp has a strong influence on sound quality, though not everyone likes the difference such things make. Interestingly, I obtained some of my best results using the deck with a Ringmat, minus the clamp, however. Played this way, the sound had even more breadth and ease, and seemed freer still. The music was certainly a touch firmer with the clamp, but I did really take to the Ringmat without it. Either way results were always rock solid and totally assured.

Pitch stability proved excellent, and listening to critical material – solo piano, acoustic guitar – I might as well have been

DETAIL



- 1 optional external power supply costs £1,920
- 2 one of two motors driving inner platter via belt
- 3 the alloy plinth/base, before finishing
- 4 one of two detachable, bespoke arm mounts

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Q&A

JIMMY HUGHES TALKS TO CLARO'S PETER CURRAN.



JH: Why did you launch your new Clarity Dual deck?

PC: Well, it's an improved version of my original turntable design – the Clarity 09. Creating the Clarity 09 taught me a lot, and I have tried to bring the fruits of the insights gained into the new model. Although well-received, not every comment on the Clarity 09 was positive. Certain aspects of its design were improvable. In creating the Clarity Dual I tried to take into account the comments and suggestions made by users of the original Clarity 09 model. As a result, the Clarity Dual is the people's choice!

What comments, specifically?

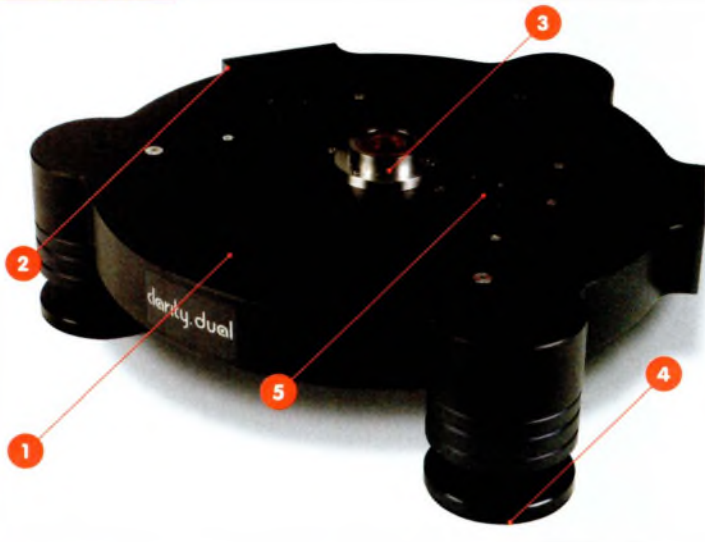
We fitted a three-pin mains socket rather than a fixed cable – so you can use a third-party mains cable. We also repositioned the mains input away from the arm mount to reduce the risk of interference. The on/off switch was repositioned on the left, rather than on the rear of the unit.

We've designed the deck to accept two tonearms. The second arm's fixing port can be capped, returning the deck to a single arm design. Both 9in and 12in arms are catered for, and we now have arm mounts made from Acetal for improved isolation. There's built-in height adjustment, allowing you to fine-tune VTA with arms that have a fixed height.

We've improved the design of the feet, and now have the spike pointing down – which sounds better. We're employing two AC motors, chosen for their quietness, to increase drive torque. Having them opposite one-another eliminates side-strain on the main bearing. Motor mounting has been improved too. The main bearing is machined to closer tolerances, and we've modified the design compared to the Clarity 09. Our new anodised plinth looks much better.

Last, but not least, the new electronic power supply improves sound quality considerably.

IN SIGHT



- 1 one piece aluminium alloy plinth gives solid base for platter
- 2 one of two tonearm mounting points; an unusual feature
- 3 18mm diameter bearing supports massive 9.2kg platter
- 4 three adjustable feet link to the plinth to provide isolation
- 5 one of two drive pulleys; twin motors for speed stability

HOW IT COMPARES

THE SONIC hallmark of the Claro Clarity Dual is an unmistakable firmness, and unflappable solidity – an impression that has its roots in the use of a big heavy platter, a good stiff power supply, and the use of two drive motors. Employing Acetal – a low-resonance material – for the platter helps, too. I compared the Claro to the impressive EAT Forte-S, and noted some fascinating differences.

While the Claro combination sounded even cleaner than the Forte-S, the latter was sometimes more 'holographic' in its soundstage depth perspective. Yet, at this level, differences are small. Both decks offered excellent pitch stability, and delivered a large, full, weighty sound that was smooth, open, and detailed. The Claro's platter starts-up more quickly, and its design permits the use of two tonearms. It takes up slightly less space, too.

playing CD, so secure was it. Surface noise and rumble were vanishingly low, and even old LPs reproduced with impressive clarity and a welcome lack of grunge.

It's important to point out that the supplied Audio Origami PU7 tonearm played an important part in all this, providing a solid platform that allowed the cartridge to perform at its best. The arm bearings feel silky-smooth, devoid of free-play; the 12 inch tube reduces tracing distortion. It's a lovely piece of work, and we hope to revisit it soon.

The power supply offers switchable speeds of 33 and 45rpm, with variable fine-tuning should the platter run slightly fast or slow. As previously mentioned, the platter is pretty massive, and a bit too heavy for easy speed change (by shifting the belts onto different pulleys), though this option is offered. If you only play the odd '45' such escapades might not be much of a chore. But having the external electronic power supply makes speed change much easier and faster. You also get even better sound quality resulting from the improved speed stability, although it's important to point out that the deck is basically as solid as a rock anyway. At £1,920, the PSU isn't cheap but justifies its price, just.

Conclusion

Claro's Clarity Duo turntable and Audio Origami PU7 are an impressive combination, delivering a solid sound that marries excellent clarity with subtlety and finesse. The nature of the design means the deck should need little maintenance, allowing it

to deliver top results without the need for constant tweaking.

Of course, careful alignment of the tonearm and cartridge will pay dividends. But other than levelling the deck, getting cartridge/arm geometry right, and making sure the various bolts are firmly tightened, there's not an awful lot more one can do. There's no suspension to adjust, and no cables to dress. This makes it a boon for those who don't like fiddling. Indeed it's a wonderfully fuss-free design that should provide a lifetime's listening pleasure.

It's a deck that makes you fall in love with the sound of vinyl all over again; compelling you to go through your collection picking out old favourites you haven't played in years. The option of twin arms is great for those who want to run two cartridges (a high end MC and a budget MM, for example) at the same time. Build is beautiful, too – the equal of the best of the rest at the price. It demands auditioning if you're in the market for a top turntable. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, clean, master-tape-like sound and versatile

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not cheap!

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Delivering superb sound quality with a luxury finish, this is one of the best high-end turntables we've heard. Expensive, but fine value nevertheless

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

S3/5R² NEW

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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 electronics engineer by day and a hi-fi enthusiast by night. Doesn't own a mobile phone, enjoys fixing and collecting all types of vintage hi-fi.



PATRICK CLEASBY
EXPERTISE: TECH GEEK

PC WORKS as a high-level tech support for the BBC, when not fiddling with the latest network music players and his newly discovered LP record collection.

Future sounds

I am all in quandary. What's going on with CD? All we hear now in the media are reports of its demise, but I find I can still buy them online easily and even in record shops, which don't seem to be feeling the pinch from downloads. Should I start considering investing in music downloads? What are the pros and cons over CD? Just when I've got used to using CDs then I hear they're on the way out, but I am not sure if this suits me and so do you think I'll be able to avoid downloads in future?

James Landau, via email

DP says Hi James - well first, it's true that CD sales are in the descent; as we said in the February edition's 'Audiophile' pages (HFC 355), the old silver beer mat has declined in sales, and at the same time downloads are increasing. However, this in no way suggests that CD is 'dead' and that downloads have taken over. It's just the early part of a trend that's gathering momentum, and the transition from CD to downloads ('or digital music', as the music industry likes to call it, somewhat misleadingly, as music on CD is of course digital, too) still has a long, long way to go.

Downloads do have real advantages over CD, in some cases, but certainly not all. As you'll know, CD came out thirty years ago almost this

month - and with it the 16bit/44.1kHz spec. At the time this was right on the ragged edge of what was possible with digital audio (digital audio had been around for long while, but never commercially, and rarely to this quality). Now, of course, this sort of digital specification is positively prehistoric - a sort of Morris Marina to today's Audi A4.

Hi-res downloads from the likes of B&W, Naim and Linn routinely run to 24/96, with a few going up to 24/192. What this means in practice is a far wider bandwidth - the music stretches far higher than 16/44's 22kHz, and it's far cleaner with it, because digital audio's problem area is taken far further away from the audio band.

The downside is, of course, that there are still relative few hi res downloads; many such as those from the iTunes Music Store, for example, are far

lower resolution than CD (being 256kbps compressed AAC files, if you're lucky)! The other point to remember is that it's still a little fiddly, in some cases, to set up a network music player; plugging in a CD player, slotting a disc in and pressing play can be a lot easier.

So, my suggestion is that you continue buying CDs, while beginning to think about investing in a good network music player (or 'streamer' as some call them). It's a far better time to do this than even a year ago, with the likes of the Logitech Squeezebox Touch making the technology easily accessible and also quite upgradable, for around £200. The Cambridge NP30 is also something of a star at around £400; better sound but with a clunkier user interface. If you want to get into serious hi-fi territory, then look to Linn or Naim solutions, at



Future sounds: Logitech's popular and versatile Squeezebox Touch is powering the streaming revolution

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"Outstanding tone and bass in 11"
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A5

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ten times the price. I'm still tempted to say, though, that it might be worth holding fire for a little while, as the market is in such a state of flux. If you absolutely do want and need a streamer now, then by all means go for it, but if not then it won't hurt to wait for forthcoming market developments.

TJ says Although the UK market for downloads is growing, I believe that CD is still the world's favourite way of buying music, so you can expect them to be around for a good while yet. There's no possibility of missing the boat with downloads, so you can choose to buy in whenever you want, there's no need to rush into things. Also remember that your CD collection will give 'a lifetime of listening pleasure' (or so Philips claimed when they first came out), so a good CD player will remain a useful asset for many decades.

Second-hand CDs are also a bargain, as unlike LPs or cassettes they don't wear out, a gentle wash under the kitchen tap and they play as well as a new one. I'm clearing some space on the shelf right now for when the downloaders start to turf them out in quantity!

ES says I have to admit that the only aspect of the decline of CD that upsets me is that the choice of good quality downloads remains limited. I personally cannot wait to be free of nasty, fragile plastic cases and discs that jump and skip from minute damage. There is no question that there are still developments that streamers need to make, but their time has come!

Singapore swing

I'm a regular reader from Singapore. I recently bought the Denon PMA 1510 amplifier based on your magazine's recommendation (HFC 335), to go with my system, which consists of a Marantz 5003 CD player, and Wharfedale Diamond 10.1 loudspeakers. I also use Chord Company speaker cable and van den Hul interconnects. I listen to vocal, pop and other music like David Foster, Chris Spheris, etc.

I find that low-level detail is missing and bass weight is



Singapore swing: Time for a CD player upgrade? Then an Audiolab 8200 might just be the answer...

light with the aforementioned combination. Could the missing details be caused by the CD player? I've thought of upgrading the CD player to an Audiolab 8200 or Marantz Pearl Lite?

More importantly can you recommend some floorstanding speaker that can sing well with the PMA1510? I can spare SG\$1,000 or slightly more for the speaker. Thank you in advance and I wish *Hi-Fi Choice* a fruitful year ahead!

Sng, via email

ES says There are a few things that can be done to boost performance here. Working on the current exchange rate, SG\$1,000 is a whisker over £500. As such, the natural candidate to consider would be the Monitor Audio BX5 I reviewed in HFC 345. This is a compact floorstander that has surprising low-end extension and detail. It is incredibly easy to drive and the Denon should partner up well.

With regards to your CD player, there are many possibilities that could work well. The Audiolab is one of the cleverest CD players on the market and it has superb performance and the bonus of digital inputs. The Pearl Lite is not so well equipped, but does have the bonus of SACD replay if that is useful to you. If you can live without an asynchronous USB input, I would be investing in the fabulous Rega DAC which is probably my favourite digital product under £1,000 and an absolute bargain.

Glass act

I have noticed that there are a lot of valve amplifiers currently on sale – far more for example than about ten years ago. Why



is this, and are they better? I am assuming they are, as you read so many features these days on the internet about people trading in their sometimes very high-end and respectable solid-state amplifiers for valves.

If this is the case, why didn't the world keep using valve amplifiers instead of giving them up in the nineteen sixties? Isn't this a case of the emperor's new clothes, with valves just being trendy all or a sudden?

Bob Bain, via email

DP says Good question(s). I think it's right to say that valves are back in fashion, and they're sufficiently affordable to give an interesting alternative to conventional transistor amplifiers. As such, sales are strong and it's true that they generally sound quite different. However, this isn't the whole

Isn't this a case of valves just being trendy all of a sudden?

story, because as every glass audio aficionado knows, valves seem to have their own characteristics; not just the generic type of valve used but even the manufacturer and date!

For this reason, a modern Sovtek ECC83 sounds quite a bit different to a classic 1965 Mullard example. Likewise, it's important not to get too deterministic about the subject; the all-valve Prima Luna ProLogue One (see p31)

Glass act: Valve amps are making a comeback, and can give solid-state rivals a run for their money...

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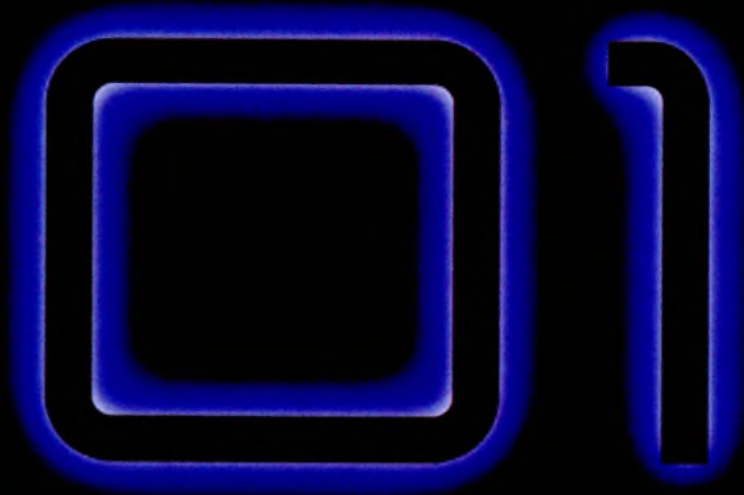


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in some ways sounded less valve-like than the Roksan Caspian M2 solid-stater!

So the message is that modern valve amps do generally sound smoother, warmer and sweeter, but not necessarily always and certainly not to the degree that they used to.

Whereas the classic Quad 22, one of the first valve amps I ever heard, was consummately sweet and syrupy – the audio equivalent of a bowl of hot liquid sugar – things have moved on in the fifty or so years since it was first designed. Modern valve amps can have a far more neutral, transparent and neutral sound, tighter bass, and stronger dynamics than the likes of the old Quad. Up against transistor amps, they will usually sound ever so slightly sweeter and

The number of new valve amps indicates we're in the middle of a fad

smoother, with the trade-off being a slight loss of low-level detail, as well as being obviously down on power. As we explain in our X&Y feature on p40, if you match the valve amp to an efficient, easy to drive pair of speakers, this becomes far less of an issue.

My feeling is that valve amps are great; in some ways superior to solid-state. But let me rephrase that; they can be great. As with solid-state, there are very good ones and very bad ones and it's too simplistic just to say it's going to be better (or worse) because it's an amplifier that glows in the dark. My advice is simply to go and listen for yourself, it at all possible with the speakers you currently use. See if the changes a valve amplifier makes to the sound are subjectively better or worse, to your ears and with your music.

Personally, I run both an excellent K5881-based valve power amp pushing out about 17 watts, and a modern full Class A Musical Fidelity AMS35i transistor amp, with about 35W. In my largish listening room with most speakers, the former is just punchy enough to give out high volumes without strain, and it gives a beautifully lucid, musical

sound. But feed it powerful rock music with lots of thumping bass and it begins to struggle; that's when the solid-stater gets switched on! This sounds less musically expressive and natural, but shows grace under pressure. When the day comes when I can get the best of both worlds in a single amp, I shall prize out my chequebook and serve a compulsory purchase order!

TJ says If you are considering a valve amplifier it pays to tread very carefully, even the best compare poorly against some very basic solid-state designs in a number of key areas (power output and damping factor, for example) with the worst being bad. The effect this can have is that, while they sound great with a few choice pieces of music, they can sound very unhappy with others, limiting the range of material that you can enjoy.

The number of new valve amplifiers coming on the market indicates that we're in the middle of a full-scale fad – all that glows is not gold! There are few barriers to enter the market as valve amplifiers (not necessarily good ones, mine) are easy to design – I did my first one as a school GCSE project in the 1980s long before such things were fashionable – so as ever ignore the sales patter and listen for yourself.

Lucky number Slevin

Hi David – Letters in HFC 355: I'm impressed! You championed the excellent and underrated Technics direct drive turntables! And you were cautiously critical of the LP12, at last someone says it as it is. I'm on your side, but as you are aware there has been a clique in the mag



Back to the future: The Sansui AU 317/II amplifier was a favourite with audiophiles many years back

contributors that have 'looked after' Linn and Naim for decades. And among the enthusiasts who bought into the spin you must be alert to the real possibility you will be called a heretic, but I say stand your ground and be sure to continue the way you've started.

A couple of Hi-Fi Choice writers won't be happy if you're honestly and accurately undermining the LP12, or anything Naim for that matter! But you're the new boss, so just tell them how it's going to be. The LP12 turntable does not have magical qualities. The role of the turntable is neutrality and isolation. It's the cartridge and phono stage that dictates the sound quality. The HFC archives has two decades of Paul Miller's tests to prove that. Regards to JK!
John Stevin, via email

DP says Hi John – I'm aware that Malcolm Steward, for example, has been a great champion of the Linn, and that's fine just as long as we present alternative opinions, such as the one I voiced in the last issue. I think we've now got to the stage where we should be saying 'each unto their own'. The LP12 is one of the best decks I've heard in several respects, but not in every respect; and indeed in some ways now it is off the pace.

The point is that you should go and listen for yourself and buy the turntable that works for you. I

don't think that fighting the battles of two decades ago is very useful anymore – we shouldn't be talking it terms of something being 'the best' bar none.

I'm very relaxed about everyone at Hi-Fi Choice holding differing opinions, just so long as they explain why, so readers can make up their own minds. The days of hi-fi 'cold war' propagandising are long gone, and good riddance!

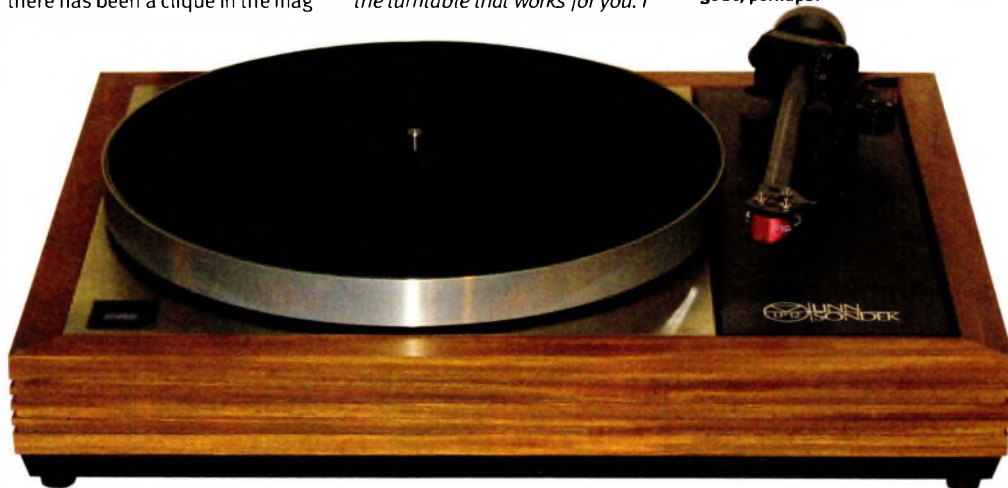
Back to the future

Hello! I have recently revisited my hi-fi since I first assembled it circa 1982, comprising a Thorens TD160 BC MkII/SME Mk 3009/S2 Improved, Sansui AU 317/II amplifier and a pair of Armstrong 602 speakers, all in good working order. Now, I am wanting to plan an upgrade, however to start the process, I'd appreciate if you could (a) direct me to where I can obtain a review of the speakers and (b) suggest some replacements.

Your views would also be greatly appreciated as to what would be economically alternative replacements for the remaining items, the only refurbishments I have undertaken have been the rewiring of the arm and also the loudspeaker crossovers, with noticeable improvement in depth, detail and stereo image. I also wish to replace the A&R Cambridge C77 to one from the Clearaudio range.

Leo Beirne, via email

Lucky number Slevin: The Linn Sondek LP12 turntable; a case of *chacun à son goût*, perhaps?



DP says First, the Armstrong 602 speakers were before both my and this magazine's time, so it's a tad tricky to source you a review. I would suggest Google would be a good first port of call, and if any readers can oblige then do write or email in.

The second part of your question is a lot easier, in one sense (but sadly) you don't specify a budget or a schedule. The thing is, if you're going to replace all your old components at the same time, it's right to tailor the speakers to the new amp. If not, maybe we should be looking at speakers which work better with your old, very modestly powered nineteen seventies Sansui?

The turntable's a tricky one – as it's basically a very good deck you've got there, especially if you got it serviced and expertly set up, which would be a fraction of the price of buying a replacement which was substantially better – £100 instead of £1,000.

The cartridge is, as you rightly identify, the real let down; your A&R C77 had a great life and bounce to it, but is crude in absolute terms, not least because of that spherical stylus which is a real blast from the past! Even with a brand new stylus, the cartridge would still sound way off the pace.

Why do you want a Clearaudio one? In my experience these are a little cold sounding. If you wish to keep your existing deck and arm, the Goldring G1040 would be ideal; being a moving magnet it will track well in your SME 3009/S2 (which was designed for MMs, not MCs), and will bring a far smoother and more powerful sound, with bags more refinement. You'll find it a pretty big upgrade, truth be told.

Trouble is, if you're going to replace your turntable after all, then you'd be better served with the very fine Audio Technica AT-F3/III moving coil. This has a cleaner, more detailed and more incisive sound, with great finesse to the treble too. But you'd have to mount this in a modern tonearm, such as the Rega RB351, which I'd suggest you bought to partner a Michell GyroDec SE turntable. This little lot would give you staggering high-resolution vinyl sounding, making your Thorens sound like a wooden spoon in porridge. So, decide whether you want to upgrade your source and then buy accordingly.

The Sansui was a very good amp in its day – a real favourite of reviewers – but it's getting on. I

suggest you need to spend around £800 at least, to really bring about a dramatic improvement. Think in terms of a Naim Nait 5i, but try to audition several price rivals such as the Cyrus 6 and Roksan K2. Again, there are real differences in subjective sound and it's very much an issue of personal taste.

This is also tied into your choice of loudspeakers, of course, and again there is so much to choose from. My instinct would be to recommend the QAcoustics 2050i as a good start point; these are excellent sounding £350 floor-standers with a large, musical and slightly warm sound.

Your A&R C77 is crude in absolute terms, because of that spherical stylus

They'd sing with any of the aforementioned amps and the Michell front end, and would be way better than the Armstrong speakers you're using now, thanks to modern drive units and the ever advancing art of loudspeaker design

Big Mouth strikes again

I have been an enthusiastic music, movie and high-end audio lover for more years than I'd like to count. Thus it makes me really sad and upset, that so many magazines seem to have such a clearly expressed need to brag about their superiority over their competitors. I really find this to be highly offensive. It seems to be most typical in the UK, but I have found this to be true also in both US and Norwegian magazines.



Holiday in the sun: Which portable to take to the beach? DP says Sony's NW-A845, but hang on, what about this classic solar-powered WF-F107 Walkman?



Big mouth strikes again: According to reader Werner Neurauter, magazines should blow their own trumpets less!

To quote from HFC 337, Oct. 2010, p30: "...unrivalled in the UK press... making the verdicts in *Hi-Fi Choice* the only ones you can really trust." Wow... talk about self confidence, or should I perhaps say arrogance? Your competitors aren't worthy of any trust?

In my experience, only those who are less than up to the task, are in need of such self-glorification. For those who really are that good, results tend to speak for themselves. My advice then would be, focus on practising the editorial skills, rather than praise them. If well executed, that should hold up more than enough. Otherwise, you just might scare my soulmates and myself away.

Werner Neurauter, via email

DP says Hi Werner – agreed!

You'll find this magazine more focused on results and less on spin from now on. Thanks for your input and we're always happy to hear your thoughts on the magazine.

Holiday in the sun

Given the inevitable grimness and misery of the British winter, I have decided to take off to a part of the world where shimmering blue seas lap sun-kissed sandy beaches (not Weston-Super-Mere then – Ed.)! I am planning to spend plenty of time reclining on one of those stretched-out deckchair type things, sipping cold beer and listening to some of my favourite summer sounds, some of which I haven't heard for twenty or so years. It's been a while since I took a proper holiday and so I'm doing it in style.

My question is – what's the best music portable? My friends are all telling me not to bother buying anything as I can just use my iPhone. Does this sound as good as a normal iPod (I have an

I just want to lie on the beach hearing my music in the best way

old 120GB Classic and a Nano), or should I look to buy something else? As a slick user interface isn't my first priority (the iPhone gives me that anyway), I am instead focusing on sound quality above all else. I just want to be able to lie by the pool or on the beach hearing my music in the best way.

Also, can you recommend a pair of matching headphones, as the supplied Apple ones are poor.

Dan Hannah, via email

DP says Hi Dan – well there's an interesting one! First, having tested copious amounts of music portables over the years, including all the iPods, I can safely say that they're not the best for sound.

As you know, they've all got great user-interfaces, are lovely to use and sync seamlessly with computers, but if it's sound quality that's paramount then they are ruled out immediately. I find they have quite a steely, hard sound and they're 'mechanical, too'; so much so that an Apple iPod Classic playing Apple Lossless actually sounds worse in many ways than a Sony NW-A845 playing 320kbps!

This is, I can only speculate, down to the analogue output stage, which has not been tuned by audiophiles – whereas Sony, with its company's legacy of expertise in

this area – are still able to voice its portables to make a nice noise.

Given that I would imagine you don't want to carry a whole 'man bag' full of gadgets and gizmos, I think we can rule out aftermarket battery-powered headphone amps. I've tried several and they undoubtedly do make the iPod sound more listenable, giving superior power output and a greater sense of ease. But the downside is, of course, you need a lead from the iPod to the amp, and then you have to plug your headphones into the amps.

So if you want a 'turn-key' portable that gives great sound then I'd suggest you consider HiSound's Studio. This is about as tweaky and eccentric a modern digital portable as you'll find, but it has truly excellent sound, and its micro SD card means you can buy a large dollop of aftermarket flash memory and fill it with FLAC or .WAV files.

Again, in my experience, these sound better than Apple Lossless. The HiSound has a formidable analogue output stage, with loads of power and level, and is very transparent and devoid of grain thanks to a fine Class A amp.

You'll struggle to find better, sonically. The downside is the stupidly small display and the general fiddliness of it. So if you want a less 'full-on solution', I'd suggest the aforementioned Sony; it now comes in 64GB variants, has a smoothish and even slightly warm sound, exquisite build and an excellent control layout. In truth it's what the iPod Nano could have been. Sadly Sony digital portables go largely unnoticed, it seems, in today's market – because Apple pretty much has things sewn up. But speak to anyone who's bought a Sony and prepare for fulsome praise.

Regarding headphones, you don't mention your budget, but assuming you don't want a big pair of hi-fi headphones (i.e. Sennheiser HD650) with a separate battery headphone amp (which you'd need if you had an iPod) – which would be cumbersome on the beach – then you're talking a compact pair of over-ear 'phones.

I have two favourites here. First, the Sennheiser FX100-11s are absolute stars for their £35 (approx) retail price. I can honestly say I've heard (some) worse at nearly twenty times their price,

such is their arresting clarity and wonderful musicality. There is so little to criticise with these that I'm loathe to recommend spending more; only the Jays v-Jays (about £40) does better, with a fraction more bass depth and grip, and a slightly silkier upper mid. Both these phones are lightweight, foldable, open-backed designs, with portable-friendly 3.5mm jack plugs and are easy electrical loads, so you won't hear your player running out of puff. Good luck and send us a postcard!

Noise annoys

Is it me or do a lot of modern CDs sound rubbish? I'm not just talking about X Factor-style chart pap, I mean the reissues and 'remasters' of classic rock albums, which came out maybe twenty or thirty years ago. Despite being digitally remastered, they sound quite bright, loud and hard. I've had this problem with a number of discs such as Prefab Sprout's Steve McQueen and ABC's *Lexicon of Love*, among many others.

Even my metal stuff, like Judas Priest's *Sheffield Steel* and Van Halen's 1984 sounds OTT in my system. Is this a peculiar quirk of the new 24bit/96kHz remastering? I though hi-res digital was supposed to sound smoother!

Darren Adison, via email

DP says Hi Darren, no it's not you. It's the black art of remastering, I'm afraid. If a record company decides to remaster

the back catalogue of one of its artists, you'd think that a hugely professional operation would swing into action. The original artist (if possible) would lock himself in the studio and painstakingly go through every last second of his classic album, making sure the thing sounds just right, in conjunction with the original producer and/or engineers. Those analogue tapes would be carefully played and

Despite being remastered, they sound quite bright, loud and hard

digitised, possibly simultaneously at 16/44.1 (for CD) and 24/96 (for subsequent hi-res) distribution.

Sadly, it just doesn't work like that at all; so much of the remastering is all smoke and mirrors. First, an important point to remember is that a great many analogue master tapes are decaying faster than the teeth of a chocolate-addicted child. Sadly, much of the recording done in the age of classic rock was done on unstable tape stock. The magnetic coating that carries the analogue music signal has, on many masters, literally started to fall off the mylar plastic tape base. It's not good news, but there is/was a fix. If the tape is baked then it's playable, once-only, before it all falls to bits. So many record

companies made copies of their classics in this way, to preserve the music, if not the actual physical piece of tape itself.

The result is that many 'remasters' will themselves be done from these copy masters – first generation copies. These will be lower in quality than the originals, of course, many of which no longer exist. To make matters worse, many remastering engineers decide to play around with the original mix, to 'correct' original 'flaws' done at the time.

Furthermore, at this stage, compression is often added. You'd think this meant that the mix would sound quieter, but it has the reverse effect. It quietsens the musical peaks, creating a far smaller difference between the quiet bits and the loud bits, and this is then 'normalised' to push the levels to just below the limit of digital clipping. That's why these sound 'loud'; it's the relentless assault of near-clipping-level music on your ears that rates.

So... a lot of people are now deliberately buying the non-remastered original versions of classic CDs. First, they were spooled straight off the original analogue master tapes, and second they haven't been compressed and normalised by some fancy computer programme in the studio. Okay, so while the analogue-to-digital converters of the day weren't so good, at least the transfer wasn't mucked around by well-meaning, but misguided studio bods trying to make it sound 'punchier'. Personally, in many cases (but not all), I deliberately seek out the original second-hand CDs of older albums, available on eBay or Amazon for pennies, instead of the fancy remasters.

Stand and deliver

I have just upgraded my Monitor Audio GR20 speakers to newer and bigger GS60s, and haven't got the improvement I expected. Indeed, if anything the system sounds worse!

I am running an Avid Diva turntable (with Rega RB250 tonearm and Audio Technica AT-OC9 MC cartridge), a new Meridian G-08 CD player and an ageing, but still very good Musical Fidelity A1001 integrated amp, with lower end Nordost speaker cable and interconnects.

This is an expensive system that I've invested a lot of time and cash



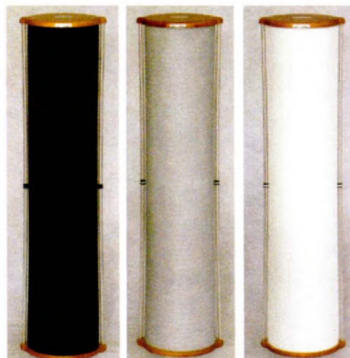
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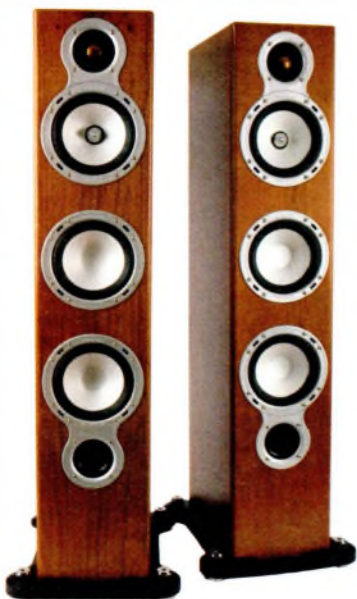
in, yet it doesn't seem to be gelling. The rhythms aren't as convincing as some other set-ups I've heard, although in some respects it sounds impressive. Please help!?

Colin Hurst, via email

DP says I am not sure that the extra resolution afforded by the new Monitor Audio GS60s is actually causing the problem. The reason I say this is... (dramatic pause) because your existing turntable and amplifier are already very, very good. So it's not like the GS60s are saying the rest of the system is rubbish.

This leads to me suspect that the problem is more likely to be down to the interaction with your listening room of the new speakers, which are pumping a good deal more bass into it than the GR20s did before. The fact that you've said that rhythms are plodding rather than tight and fluid suggests that the speakers are too big for the room – sadly you didn't specify its measurements.

I'd suggest you carried out some hi-fi 'first aid'. Move the speakers about 30-40cm further from the back or side walls and ensure they're spiked tightly to the carpet. Try to damp the room as much as you can with soft furnishings, and ensure your turntable is properly isolated. Also a small tighten of the cartridge mounting bolts may work wonders. If none of this works, then come back to us for some new speaker buying advice!



Stand and deliver: Correct placement of a big floorstander like the Monitor Audio GS60 is of paramount importance

LETTER OF THE MONTH

I HAVE BEEN GOING TO HI-FI SHOWS

since 1980 in Harrogate. More recently, I attended the Bristol show, latterly called *Sound and Vision*. I also go sometimes to one at the Park Inn Hotel near Heathrow airport – and in the past couple of years I have

gone to the National Audio Show near Silverstone, which has become a favourite. As you can probably tell, I really like them, and am now even contemplating going to an audio jumble after reading Tim Jarman's piece in *HFC* 355 – although it might be a bit hardcore for me!

Overall, the mix of equipment, the electric atmosphere and the people you can meet and chat with (from famous manufacturers and designers to hi-fi writers) is truly special in my opinion. But my only complaint, aside from the sometimes high prices of beverages at some of them (although this isn't exclusive to hi-fi shows of course), is the rubbish music that they always seem to use...

What is it about hi-fi shows that means it is compulsory to play *Jazz at the Pawnshop* in almost every room? I first heard that particular piece of grot at the Bristol show, circa 1987, and the wretched record was still being spun by a distressingly large number of exhibitors at the last National Audio Show! Don't they think we've all had enough by now? Ditto umpteen Sade discs and Dire Straits CDs; *Industrial Disease* is my all-time most hated song and it keeps popping up whenever I'm at a show. Dear *Hi-Fi Choice*, could you please wield any influence that you might have on the hi-fi industry in general to make show I never have to put up with these audiophile crimes against music again? ●

Ken Leonard, via email

DP says Err no, is the short answer. Sadly *Hi-Fi Choice*, while, of course, being Britain's foremost specialist audio title (oops – sorry Werner!), has absolutely no ability to get 'Jazz at the Pawnshop' banned from hi-shows! That doesn't in any way mean we're fans of the aforementioned recording – a quick canvass of our staff shows that no one owns the offending article (or at least dares to admit it in public), thankfully. And speaking for myself, I'd rather sit through Chris Rea's entire back catalogue than suffer JATPS for longer than it takes to say 'pap'. So we're with you in spirit, Ken, if not in body.

ES says For what it is worth, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy about music at hi-fi shows. When I used to exhibit, we often felt compelled to play it safe because while I want nothing more than to kick back, put 'The Sound of Violence' by Cassius on at 'proper' volume levels, it wouldn't appeal to all. As such we gravitated towards the least offensive – except of course at Scalford on March 4th!

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Show-manship

HFC's Editor **David Price** reflects on the advantages of hi-fi shows when it comes to getting the best from your kit



scar Wilde once wrote that, "discontent is the first step in the progress of a man or a nation", and he wasn't wrong.

Can any audiophile honestly say he's happy with his system? I know I can't, and it's not for the want of trying! I personally have never heard a hi-fi that sounds completely like live music – even if I've experienced occasional flashes of genius from some combinations of kit which seem to get it right in a way that others cannot. But it's this frustration that spurs us all on to do better, isn't it?

The fascinating thing is that money isn't the only answer – you can spend thousands of pounds on a hi-fi, or a fraction of that, and still miss the target spectacularly. I've heard just as many poorly matched high-end systems sound bad as I have cheap ones.

So, if ever you get the hi-fi blues, wondering if you can do better sonically for the money you've invested, where to go? I'd suggest you try a hi-fi show first, and then to your dealer. Fine as hi-fi retailers can be, you'll never hear so many systems back to back (or room to room) as in a show. And nor will you ever get such prime first hand experience of that darkest of the hi-fi arts, system set-up.

It's the set-up, stupid!

Hi-fi shows always have some industry figures – designers, company directors and/or brand ambassadors – who are frankly the best of the best in terms of setting up hi-fi systems. Just as well really, as the show conditions themselves are often the worst of the worst. Cramped hotel rooms, appallingly noisy mains and a racket coming from the room next door all conspire to give nightmarish listening conditions, yet some manufacturers prevail with brilliant sounding systems.

So whether you turn up to CES in Las Vegas as I just did, or Sound and Vision in Bristol which we'll be at in February, you'll see (and hear) these extremes. Some rooms will be superlatively fine sounding, others closer to the noise of a bag full of rusty spanners being shaken indiscriminately. Walk into any room you like, regard the hi-fi then close your eyes; does it sound as good as it should, or do we have the cacophonous racket of several premium priced bits of kit pitched in mortal combat with one another?

For this reason alone, it's a wonderfully levelling experience. You see those glossy pics,

read those precocious adverts and feel a crushing sense of emptiness and inadequacy because you can't own the last word in state of the art hi-fi fidelity equipment – and then go to a show to hear there's really more to life. Conversely, small and inconsequential budget products can take on a new majesty and swagger, having heard them kill the super-fi system next door. As the great Murray Walker used to say of Formula 1 racing, "anything can happen – and it usually does..."

Hi-fi reviewers realise of course, that the set-up can be just as important as the product, because we're old hands. It's not something you even think about; in the same way that Princess Kate's stylist has a supernatural sense of whether her bum looks big in this or that dress, so a good hi-fi show man can dial in the optimum toe in on a recalcitrant pair of floorstanders without a moment's thought.

So even if you're not particularly interested in buying, a hi-fi show is well worth a look around. Yes, I know, they can be a drag, traipsing around endless hotel rooms festooned with the same pictures on the wall. But you'll learn that the path of the righteous isn't just for those who splash serious amounts of cash; there's plenty for folk looking to hone their set-up skills. Almost every manufacturer will talk just as passionately about how they've got the room to sound right, as the sound of the products themselves – there's the moral of the story if ever you wanted one...

My visit to Vegas was a great experience, but I've had just as memorable ones in Bristol, Heathrow, Munich, Manchester and Whittlebury over the years. For a few quid, you can meet great people, hear fine hi-fi and gasp in awe and wonderment at the music (well, sometimes). See you at Bristol, then!



If you ever get the hi-fi blues, wondering if you can do better sonically for the money you've invested, then I'd suggest you try a show first, then go to a dealer!



DAVID PRICE

Committed audiophile, record collector and Hi-Fi Choice editor

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you have any hi-fi show memories that you'd like to share with us?

letters@hifichoice.co.uk

Big tent politics

Now in its fourth year, The Hi-fi Wigwam Show at Scalford Hall is an indispensable part of the show calendar, says **Ed Selley**

The hi-fi show has been a fixture of the audio landscape for decades in the UK and abroad. The general concept hasn't changed in a long while either – a disparate collection of manufacturers and distributors descends on a hotel and shows off their latest and greatest equipment. This is a vital part of the industry and I enjoy a good show as much as the next man. It never stopped me from thinking that there was something missing, though...

Shows today are almost entirely comprised of equipment that is available to buy here and now. This is logical enough – manufacturers are hardly going to expend undue effort on reminding you how good they *were*. Equally, the audio jumble scene is increasingly vibrant and entertaining, but they are by and large comprised of static product. Between these two points is a chasm where systems comprised of equipment both old and new exist – typical systems owned by the general public.

Hi-fi's and pork pies

This chasm began to show some sign of being filled four years ago when the first HiFi Wigwam Show took place in the bucolic surroundings of Scalford Hall near Melton Mowbray. The premise is simple – the show comprises entirely private exhibitors and their personal systems. Ensuing shows have worked to iron out the bugs and improve the whole experience. The fourth show will take place on March 6th, and I for one certainly hope that it will be the very best yet!

The appeal of the "bring your own hi-fi show" is considerable. The systems on display are not the result of commercial pragmatism, but are instead comprised of components selected by their owners to achieve the best possible results. There's no need to dispense with a piece of kit because it is no longer in production. As such Scalford sees modern equipment working in close partnership with equipment up to fifty years old. This isn't being done for novelty – the results are usually genuinely impressive.

Another bonus is that the systems on display are real world solutions to getting the best possible performance at a given budget in a given space.

In previous shows, systems have been assembled for a few hundred pounds, through to serious high-end setups with cabling arrangements that cost more than that. If you are wondering about how an approach to system building might work, the answer might be lurking in a room in Leicestershire. It's a veritable oasis of interest for the audiophile.

The final unique aspect of Scalford is the DIY section. Previous shows have featured some incredibly ambitious horn speakers, superb amplification and some innovative reworking of classic turntables. These are items that have no other outlet to be exhibited and they have had a strongly motivating effect on many people that have seen them to try something similar themselves.

The HiFi Wigwam Show has shown that the concept of the enthusiast hi-fi show is practical and achievable. What I would love to see going forward is for other organisations to see if they can achieve something similar. Hi-fi can often be perceived as a solitary pastime and the one thing these shows achieve, above everything else, is the creation of a real sense of community. I feel that this is vital to the continued relevance of high-quality audio to the wider public.

The organisational effort that goes into Scalford is considerable, but I am sure that replicating it is not beyond the scope of some suitably determined individuals. This is, after all, a country where every weekend sees shows, exhibitions and festivals the length and breadth of the UK; the ability is there.

In the meantime, I will be attending the HiFi Wigwam show on March 6th to fly the flag and report back for *Hi-Fi Choice*. So, if you are looking for a genuinely different hi-fi show experience, then I hope to see you there!

Hi-fi can often be perceived as a solitary pastime, and the one thing these shows achieve, above everything else, is the creation of a real sense of community...



ED SELLEY
Hi-Fi Choice staffer, ex-industry insider and all-round audio enthusiast

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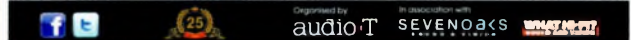
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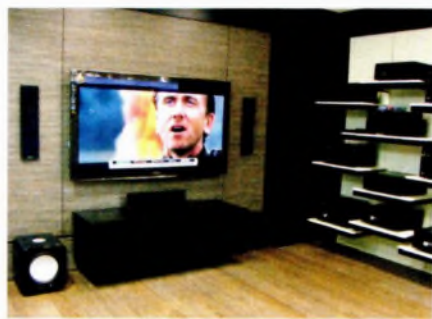
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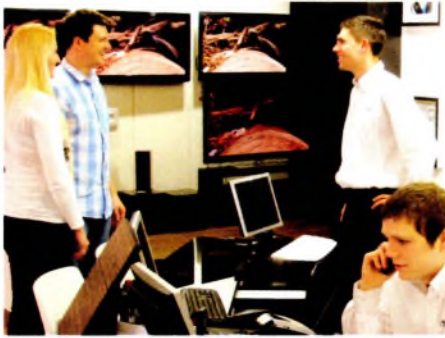
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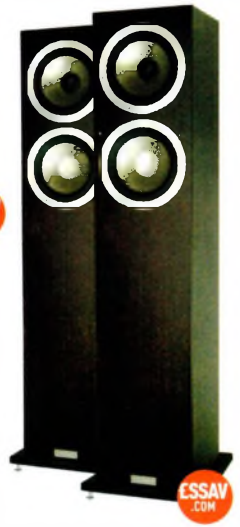
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Are you receiving?

Almost forgotten in the wider world of audiophilia, receivers had a great deal to offer, says **Tim Jarman**

During the Christmas holiday I've been re-reading piles of old hi-fi magazines and manufacturer's catalogues. Even though the pages are yellowing and covers falling off, it is a guilty pleasure that I really enjoy, partly as it reminds me how many types of equipment are not made any more, even though the basics (amps, turntables, loudspeakers, etc.) have survived for decades relatively unchanged.

It's not that I'm nostalgic. Some things I'm profoundly glad to see the back of, such as automatic record changers, 8-track cartridge recorders and anything quadraphonic, for example. These – in my view – contributed very little to the sum total of human happiness, indeed more than often it was quite the reverse!

Other products I miss, but can see why they came to an end, include domestic open reel tape recorders – which were always beautiful but never really practical to the great majority of listeners, let alone affordable. However, there's one item which seems to have disappeared for no real reason and it would be nice to see back – the hi-fi receiver. Remember them?

For those who have forgotten (or are too young to recall their heyday), a receiver is simply a tuner and an amplifier in one box. This makes perfect sense; why have two units when one will do? Of course there is a mantra that says that everything should be separate, but is that really necessary in this case? It is remarkable how little there is in a modern tuner; the excellent Micromega FM-10, for example, has most of its receiving section built onto a single circuitboard about the size of a CD jewel case. Power requirements are usually exceptionally modest, too; about 6 watts in the case of the FM-10, which should be easy to tap off the power supply section of any decent amplifier.

Given that many modern hi-fi units are made to a standard size, which takes no particular account of the volume of the contents, it shouldn't be too hard to shoehorn a decent FM section into a neat little stereo amplifier, yet it seldom (if ever) happens any more. It's all the more surprising given the current move to ever more compact, 'lifestyle' separates...

A hundred knobs

At the height of their powers, the Japanese seemed to delight in producing vast and powerful receivers, but the final generations

were seen in some ways as the poor relations, budget models for those who couldn't afford to buy essentially the same thing, but in two boxes.

As this view took hold the manufacturers eventually began to play up to it, restricting their receiver models to the bottom end of the ranges complete with miserable amplifiers and basic tuners with so-so performance and no preset stations. Again there was no sound technical reason for this, it just happened.

Oddly the receiver's last stand is in the audio-visual market, where the term 'AV receiver' is so common that just about everyone knows what to expect, a breezeblock-sized lump of oriental metal with a hundred knobs on the front and two hundred sockets on the back. Strangely, the radio section seems to be at its least useful here; who spends all day setting up twelve loudspeakers in their listening room and then thinks, "what would be nice now is a bit of The Archers on Radio 4"? On the other hand, what could be more civilised than warming up a decent record-playing system with a bit of Classic FM, before the needle hits the first piece of vinyl?

From a design and engineering point of view, it isn't at all hard to completely shut down the radio section of a receiver when it's not being used, so that it can in no way corrupt the amplifier in its work. As such, I can see no real technical objections to this plan.

Who knows? The receiver may yet make a comeback in the shape of the combined amplifier and digital streamer, as produced by Naim and a few others. Yet few of these yet offer an alternative to a full-sized amplifier however, which seems to be a missed opportunity. Such are the vagaries of fashion in audio – we may be looking back at network music players in years to come, amazed that they didn't, at this time, come built in to other boxes!



What could be more civilised than warming up a decent record-playing system with a bit of Classic FM, before the needle hits the first piece of vinyl?



TIM JARMAN

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

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Have you ever owned a classic receiver from hi-fi's heyday? Share your experiences at: letters@hifichoice.co.uk

To be or not to USB...

Jimmy Hughes considers whether USB cables can make a difference to performance. His test case: Chord Company's new SilverPlus

Audiophile USB cables; worth a punt or a complete waste of money? Having somewhat belatedly dipped a toe into the twilight world of computer audio with Classe's CP-800, the question of USB interconnect cables raised its ugly head. Could USB cable quality really influence the sound, or are any differences likely to be eliminated by Classe's re-clocking circuits?

I had briefly compared several OEM 1.5m USB cables with a 5m type, and found no audible difference to speak of. Wasn't really expecting one, to be honest. True, I was slightly concerned that a 5m cable might introduce losses that would worsen the sound compared to a 1.5m cable. But even that fear proved groundless...

Then I learned that The Chord Company had recently launched USB SilverPlus – an audiophile-grade USB cable, no less. This uses 26 AWG silver-plated, twisted-pair data conductors with dual-layer, high-frequency shielding, and high-speed low-loss gas-foamed polyethylene insulation. It's available in 0.75, 1.5, 3, and 5m lengths.

Anyway, I requested samples, and 1.5m and 5m cables duly arrived. The 1.5m Chord Company USB SilverPlus resulted in a very worthwhile improvement. Via my old OEM USB cable, certain recordings had seemed a tad aggressive at the top end, with a slight hint of congestion. They now sounded noticeably cleaner and smoother.

Using Chord's USB SilverPlus, the sound immediately became clearer, with a more relaxed/refined tonality, plus better rendition of fine detail. Considering the degree of signal 'cleansing' undertaken by the CP-800, it's remarkable that cable quality still influences the end result. Intrigued, I wondered if Chord's USB cable might deliver similar benefits in non-audio situations. We know that better cables improve picture quality in AV systems. But, could a superior USB cable improve the quality of a scanned digital image, for example? There was only one way to find out...

Using a high-quality 35mm dedicated film scanner, I made hi-res uncompressed scans with an OEM USB, then USB SilverPlus. I fervently hoped for a clear improvement, if only to demonstrate that cables make a real difference. But sadly, it wasn't to be. Even enlarged 200 per cent, both scans looked exactly the same. How disappointing...

Re-scanning

Actually, this lack of discernible difference mirrors my general experience with digital

imaging. Audiophiles claim to hear differences between various makes of hard drive and the cables used to connect them. Yet, when such devices are compared in the domain of digital imaging, image quality differences seem non-existent.

Different brands of memory card; card readers; interconnect cables? None seems to affect image quality one iota. Why? Well, the ear is extremely sensitive, and able to detect minuscule changes that the eye simply wouldn't register. But, more to the point, the quality of most monitor screens (and printers) simply isn't good enough.

You need an exceptional monitor (or printer) to recreate the impression of depth and dimensionality seen in a really good hand-printed image. Most screens flatter to deceive. A typical ink-jet printer introduces its own losses. It's like trying to get real high-end sound from a pair of tiny bookshelf speakers.

There the matter might've rested, but with one last throw of the dice, I decided to check the sizes of the two recently-scanned files. Amazingly, there was a *slight* difference; the image scanned with the Chord Company cable was a fraction larger; 54,919,168 bytes compared to 54,861,824 bytes for the OEM one.

I was so surprised by this, that I immediately rescanned both images. Once again, the file scanned using the USB SilverPlus was bigger. The larger file size would seem to indicate that the Chord Company cable had delivered slightly more information, though I could see no clear evidence of this with my eyes.

Naturally, I'm unhappy about that. I'd like such improvements to be visible as well as audible. But, maybe the difference is there? All you need is the necessary equipment (monitor/printing system) to reveal it. Why not? After all, forty-odd years ago, no one believed audio cables could sound different either...

The ear is highly sensitive, able to detect miniscule changes that the eye simply wouldn't register...



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

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you agree with Jimmy that USB cables actually make a difference?
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LIVING VOICE

Moments of pleasure

In an increasingly singular world, **Channa Vithana** discusses why albums are so important to both artist and listener

When Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley released their genre-defining singles during the nineteen fifties – let's say *Johnny B. Goode* and *Heartbreak Hotel* for example – these were manifestations of the emerging recording industry combining with rock'n'roll to produce great music, but not necessarily high art.

In the following decade, acts such as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones followed suit, doing cover versions of standards. But soon they grew restless and worked on writing their own songs instead of interpreting those of others, as well as improving their ability to play musical instruments in their own songs rather than interpreting the music of others. It was this step-change in song craft, both lyrically and musically, that allowed albums to take on a wholly new life as an artistic form. They became a mechanism for creativity, arguably giving birth to new genres of music, such as progressive rock.

Albums have since become inextricably linked with the growing confidence of a recording artist (and indeed their record label) – particularly works with a theme or concept that gives focus. How would we view the canon (and the bulging bank balances that followed) of Pink Floyd without the singularity of *Dark Side of The Moon*, or indeed Marvin Gaye minus the plaintive anti-war soul-hymns of *What's Going On*? Imagine if The Rolling Stones had never made *Exile on Main Street* – because they weren't on the run from the British press, the police and tax inspectors and thus didn't find themselves making dark, smouldering grooves in a villa in France?

These albums each have a unifying concept that is indelibly linked to the creative output that results – the artists engaged with the particular situations that arose during the creation of those works.

Beating around the Bush

Kate Bush is an artist I have followed from the beginning of her mainstream recording career. My personal favourite is *Hounds of Love*, an album led by singles such as *Running up that Hill*, *Cloudbusting* and, of course, the beautiful title track. To me it shows how an album can be so much more than the sum of its parts; despite those dazzling singles the album as a whole seems immensely powerful in an artistic sense.

Since its release in 1985, I have contemplated the continuing excellence

of *Hounds of Love* as a complete work. Kate Bush used atmospheric metaphors throughout in order to help shape the psychological scope of the album. It uses allegories of sky, trees and land in the first half and then personal existentialism expressed through the depth and threat of the oceans and water in the second part, in order to describe how the characters in the songs from the album are trying to reflect upon and understand their situations.

More recently Bush has released *Aerial* (2005), where she revisits external atmospheric metaphors to communicate internalised emotional resonance. With the release of her latest, *50 Words for Snow*, she has clearly used the weather once more. This makes for a creative coherence that not only gives context to individual songs, but added poignancy, too.

Hardly surprising then that she recently spoke out on the importance of albums in an interview with John Wilson on *Front Row*, BBC Radio 4 (22/11/2011). Kate said that she, "fears the death of the album as an art form... I love albums, why can't tracks (downloaded) exist hand-in-hand with albums? A collection of songs rather than a song or a track..."

Of course, singles have coexisted with albums for decades, but I fear that the digitalised, socially networked life that so many of us seem to lead now is making music another fast commodity, like food or photography. It's no surprise then that many people are coming to the appreciation of music in the same way that a goldfish nibbles at a speck of fish food; easy come, easy go.

I fear that the digitalised, socially networked life that so many of us seem to lead now is making music another fast commodity, like food or photography



CHANNA VITHANA
Architect, teacher and music collector

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Is downloaded music disposable like fast food? Tell us what you think at: letters@hifichoice.co.uk

New gold dream

In 1983, Marantz's CD-73 was the crowning height of the new digital audio revolution, and one of the most expensive Compact Disc players on sale, says **Tim Jarman...**

This machine is considered by some to be one of the greatest achievements in early Compact Disc design. Behind the famous Japanese name was, of course, the best European engineering, produced by Philips at the very height of its abilities, but there was more to the CD-73 than just some gold trim and a few more flashing lights.

Philips famously entered the CD market early in 1983, somewhat behind due to the 14-bit DAC which it had developed, thinking that format would also be 14-bit. Rather late in the day 16-bit encoding was decided on (mainly at the insistence of Sony), which had left Philips with a problem. The equally famous answer was ingenious; four times oversampling and a digital filter, both things which Sony's debut machine (the CDP-101) lacked, to restore the missing resolution.

In fact, the Philips trickery did more than restore – its 14-bit decoder convincingly outperformed Sony's rather basic 16-bit arrangement in several key areas and gave the early

Dutch machines a smooth and confident presentation that is still admired by many audiophiles today. As if to drive this advantage home, Philips also gave its machine (the neat little CD100) two DACs, one per channel, where as Sony had to share a single one between the two using by an analogue multiplexing system.

It is said that the public buy on numbers, and that the 16-bit Sony soon trumped the 14-bit Philips. However, judging by the numbers surviving of each type I'm not so sure, 14-bit Philips players are still relatively common, where as early Sonys are pretty thin on the ground now. This observation is probably distorted by the CD100 not only being cheaper than the CDP-101, but considerably more reliable too, an unexpected outcome given the usual Japanese prowess in this area.

As part of the massive Philips empire, Marantz was quick to get into CD and soon offered the CD-63, an essentially unchanged CD100 finished in its distinctive gold livery. This machine was well received, possibly as the rest of the Marantz

range was also pretty good around that time, and so the company was able to demonstrate it very effectively (unlike Philips, whose amplifier and loudspeaker ranges were moving into eclipse at this point).

Philips, in the meantime, were responding to new ranges of Japanese machines which, like the CDP-101, featured drawer-loading mechanisms, and so could be included in a stack of other equipment. Its very short-lived CD300, and the better known CD303 that followed it, both featured drawer

This machine is considered by some to be one of the greatest achievements in early Compact Disc design...

Like no other: Marantz's CD-73 was in a class of its own for sonics when launched back in 1983...



loading of sorts, but instead of there simply being a tray for the disc the whole deck came out under motor power, an impressive (if complicated) feat of engineering. Although these two larger machines used basically the same transport and chipset as the CD100, their internal layout was more accommodating and so the circuits could be finessed for maximum performance. The result was an imposing player whose ability to make CD acceptable even to those wedded to the sound of LP records, was quite remarkable.

Battleship build

Marantz held a more prestigious position in audio than Philips (who don't forget also produced things like light bulbs, batteries, toasters and vacuum cleaners during this period) and so it was inevitable that the new front loaders would also feature in its range. Its version of the CD300 was the CD-73, which although still lacking a track time display still looked striking. Subtlety was *not* the key, gold anodised metal combined with lots of buttons and blinking LEDs showed that European restraint had been well and truly parked, the CD-73 looked every bit the high-tech Japanese product (even though it was actually made in Belgium!).

Inside there were some changes; a greater proportion of Japanese parts and materials had been used for example, and the tethered signal lead was replaced by gold-plated RCA sockets – real luxury stuff by Philips standards! Connections were also provided for the remote control system that Marantz offered with its more expensive amplifiers, a change which required the mains filter to be moved into an extra box attached to the back panel, making it bulkier than it really should be.

Due to shortages within the Philips organisation, the error correction chip had, in some instances, to be substituted by a collection of parts from (amongst others) Sony and Toshiba. This modification is also occasionally seen in Philips machines, too, but it is most common in the Marantz models and the CD-73, in particular. All these changes meant that the CD-73 was 'the same but different' when compared directly to the Philips CD303 and most interestingly they sound different too.

Listening fun

Digital audio technology has been progressively refined since the days

of the CD-73, but even so a good one still has the power to surprise and delight. Philips 14-bit CD machines are well known for being smooth sounding, but the refined architecture of the CD-73 seems to take this to another level, treble is delicate and crisp, whereas bass is full-bodied and rich; there's none of the boom and tizz for which early CD players are typically criticised. All types of music seem to benefit, from solo female vocal to pounding rhythm tracks, although there is a certain softness of focus when comparisons are made directly to what is currently possible. The CD-73 does have the ability to make CD listening fun and addictive again, it could never be called dull or boring.

Pinning down what exactly it is that makes 'the Philips sound' in CD terms is difficult, but it may well be the way that percussion seems to lose its

The Marantz CD-73 makes CD listening fun and addictive again; it could never be called dull or boring...

harshness without losing its precision and timing. Low notes are also rounded and fulsome; by contrast early Japanese machines sound strangely tight and dry.

Hearing music via a Marantz CD-73 is all about having a good time, as it sounds far more romantic in its presentation than any modern player I can think of. The 'turntable-like' cliché may be well worn, but there's a reason for that – in this case it's totally true. Ironic then that one of the very first machines designed to replace high-end vinyl players ended up sounding so similar!

In the thirtieth anniversary year of Compact Disc – despite it being obsolete, outdated and outgunned by modern digital – the CD-73 remains a very special machine. It's surely one of the few silver disc spinners you can call 'classic', offering the smooth, sweet sound of first generation Philips machines with Marantz's memorable eighties styling.

GOING FOR GOLD

There are still plenty of CD-73s in circulation, but they tend to be expensive, up to £300 for a really good one is not uncommon. They have proved to be surprisingly long-lived, but as they approach their thirtieth birthday, some weaknesses are beginning to show. Cracked soldered joints and dried up small capacitors in the power supply are common, so a check here is a must if the machine is to be used seriously. There are two 100uF capacitors in a 'voltage doubler' circuit on this board, which are nearly always faulty, so replace them with new Panasonic 1050 rated ones if the originals are still fitted.

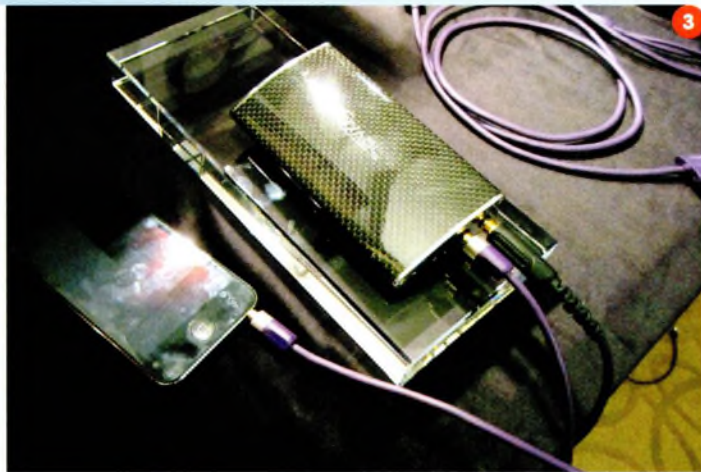
On the decoder and servo boards, the chip holders are now becoming temperamental, so replace them if the machine behaves oddly and is sensitive to movement and temperature. Also the reed relays which mute the output and select the de-emphasis mode can fail, loss of one channel is the usual symptom. Poor soldering everywhere is also an issue, missing green lights in the track display are nearly always caused by this.

Finally, if after a long period of disuse the machine is reluctant to play and gives up after spinning the disc slowly, try programming in a few track selections first – it tries for longer under these conditions, with is often enough to bring the lazy spindle motor back to life!



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Ever heard a first generation CD player? What do you think? Write and tell us at: letters@hifichoice.co.uk



SHOW REPORT

CES Las Vegas

Of all the world's hi-fi shows, there are few that can compare to the Consumer Electronics Show, reports **David Price**...

Love it or loathe, you can't ignore CES. It's no less than forty four years old this year, and swells ever bigger every show. While there's a lot of talk of recession in the west, don't forget that China is still growing at 8.9 per cent per year, and CES is a world event. This was surely one reason why it had a record number of more than 3,100 exhibitors across 1.861 million net square feet of exhibit space – it is vast! Not all of this was serious hi-fi of course; indeed this was but a mere appendage to the miles of 3D TVs, Blu-rays, tablet

computers, games consoles, 3D printers and car audio products. But still this was enough to make CES a serious hi-fi exposition, to match any other world show. With over 153,000 attendees, including more than 34,000 international attendees, there were plenty of visitors to the Mirage, Venetian and Flamingo hotels, where the serious audio action was. A total of over 20,000 new products were launched at the 2012 CES; only a small percentage were hi-fi related, but that still amounted to a considerable number. Here's my selection of the latest and greatest...

1 ARCAM

The popular British brand debuted this, its first high-end DAC in years, which sounded superb. It also showed a new range of exquisitely finished mini-separates, following on from its highly successful rDAC – including the drDock iPod/iPad dock, rBlink Bluetooth DAC, rPAC headphone amp and rLink DAC. arcam.co.uk

2 GOLDEN EAR

The quirkily named Golden Ear brand had this, its Aon 2 bookshelf speaker, on display. Retailing for \$800 per pair, it sports a ribbon tweeter, 6-inch cast bucket bass/mid driver and pyramidal construction. Overall quality of finish is excellent considering the low price. goldenear.com

3 ALPHA DESIGN LABS

The Furutech room was a veritable Aladdin's Cave of glistening interconnects, plugs and cables, as well as the Alpha Design Labs range of mini-separates. This Cruise headphone amp looked exquisite in its carbon-fibre clad casing, and sounded the part, too. Look out for a review soon. adl-av.com

CES is no less than forty four years old this year, and swells ever bigger every show...

4 PEACHTREE AUDIO

This dynamic young brand had a range of products, from the new flagship Grand Integrated to the new Nova 125 DAC/integrated amp (left), with 24-bit/192kHz asynchronous USB DAC and switchable preamp tube buffer (right). Although on static dem, the former looked superbly built and finished. No news about whether it will reach the UK, though... peachtreeaudio.com

5 DOME PHASE

This new Chinese brand had some fascinating solid-state amplifiers and loudspeakers; the Basalt 1 integrated (top) claims 150 watts into 8 ohms, twice that into 4. The speakers (bottom) use unique, patented dome coaxial drive units. domephase.com



6 IWAVE

Vast amounts of CES floor space was taken up by iPod accessories, some of which were far louder than the little gadget they were built for. Here, a typical American *Hi-Fi Choice* reader demonstrates a set of iWave headphones... iwaveaudio.com

7 MERIDIAN

The new 818 Reference Audio Core (left) is the company's new flagship front end, and sports digital preamplifier and integrated Sooloos functionality. Also new is the striking looking M6 digital active loudspeaker (right). meridian-audio.com

8 MARTINLOGAN

This American company has been very prolific of late, with a newly revamped range. The Montis, Ethos and Theos all employ the latest generation panels and superior low-frequency moving coil drivers. Build is excellent, prices surprisingly reasonable. martinlogan.com

9 QAT

This Beijing-based brand was demonstrating its MS5 music server (above), along with the new

matching 850 integrated amplifier (below). Featuring a clever combination volume control and source selector, ergonomics of the product are excellent, and the system sounded clean and open. qat-audio.com

10 DAVONE

A loudspeaker manufacturer with a difference, this, doing cleanly styled, quintessentially Danish-looking loudspeakers. This, the new flagship Graend, costs a cool €15,000 but looked as if it was worth every cent! davoneaudio.com

11 BLADELIIOUS

The new Embla network music player was on demonstration, and is a striking Swedish beauty I thought – although that large display isn't a touchscreen, despite looking like one. Prices start at £3,000, with the option of an internal hard-disk drive. bladeliious.com

12 MY AUDIO DESIGN

British-based My Audio Design shared a room with American Bob Carver audio, demonstrating the company's fine little My1920 speakers, similar in size to the BBC LS3/5as. Despite the very modest system used, I was surprised by the sound – which was smooth, open and musical. madengland.com

13 D'AGOSTINO

After three decades heading the mighty Krell brand, Dan D'Agostino now has his own range of electronics, with the intention of bringing the standards of the top watch, pen and automobile builders to hi-fi. The Momentum is the result; one of the most visually arresting yet aesthetically pleasing audio pieces I've seen. The level of craftsmanship is second to none, with sonics to match – sadly the price isn't exactly for everyone, however! dagostinoinc.com



14



16



19



15



18



20



21



17



22

14 LIGHT HARMONIC

Another striking looking new entry into the high-end DAC market was this \$15,000 DaVinci 384K. Offering 24/384, asynchronous USB (with native support for Mac and PC), touch sensitive controls and styling akin to a stealth bomber – it should prove popular with a certain type of buyer... lightharmonic.com

15 CAMBRIDGE AUDIO

The British budget brand's new DacMagic Plus (bottom) offers full 24/192 asynchronously via USB (Windows users will need to download a bespoke driver). The DacMagic 100 (top) is the DacMagic Plus minus the fancy upsampling. Also launched was the Magic Stream 6 network music player (see web show blog); this is effectively an NP30 with a DacMagic Plus. cambridgeaudio.com

16 RESOLUTION

Breathtaking industrial design made this pairing one of the most beautiful sights in the Venetian hotel. The latest £5,000 Resolution Audio Cantata Music Center (top) offers CD and streamed music playback, and the matching amplifier (below) is a Dennis Morecroft design, no less! resolutionaudio.com

17 MERRILL WILLIAMS

For me, the most interesting new turntable of the show was this Merrill Williams Real 101; designed by a Triumph Bonneville motorbike riding American audiophile, its plinth is thick rubber sandwiched between two layers of aluminium. Sound was consummately smooth and warm, harking back to the golden age of vinyl. realturntable.com

18 PATHOS

Expensive yes, but there's no denying the aesthetic excellence of the Italian Pathos Inpol Remix hybrid integrated amplifier. It sounded very nice, too, in an immaculately presented room that put most others to shame. pathosacoustics.com

19 FERRARI

After a brief dalliance with Meridian, Ferrari is back in the audio world, this time in partnership with Logic3, doing a wide range of headphones, in-ear phones and iPod docks. All styled beautifully, but we weren't able to listen. logic3.com

20 MONITOR AUDIO

The Brit speaker maker was showcasing its new GX Gold series of loudspeakers.

Replacing the GS range, they sport an excellent ribbon tweeter, as fitted to this GX100 standmounter. Build and finish are truly superb. monitoraudio.com

21 NAD

This evergreen popular brand showcased a range of new products including the svelte new \$2,000 M51 digital DAC preamp, and a chunky looking \$3,000 M3 power amplifier. nadelectronics.com

22 VINCENT

Here's one name that's had a patchy history in the UK; its German designed, Chinese built products are excellent, but the company has so far been unable to find the right distributor. The very fine looking new K-35 tube integrated costs just £1,800. vincent-tac.de ●

max

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midlandaudiox-change.co.uk



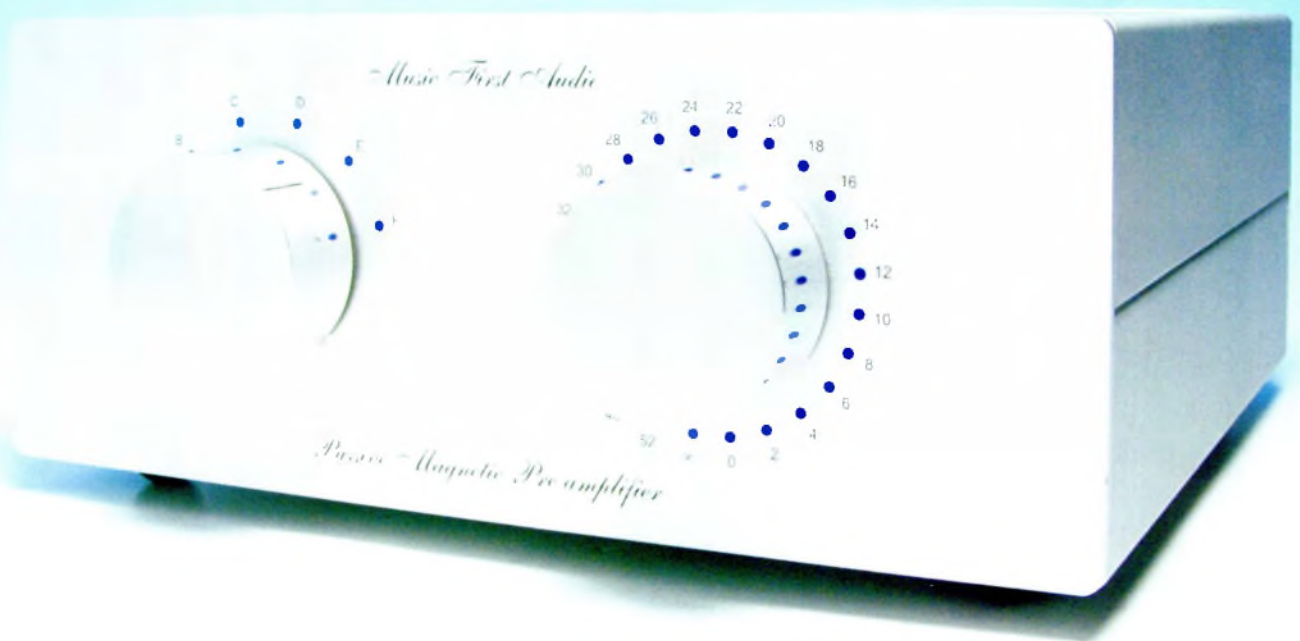
MAC3/03

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Conrad Johnson Le Contoure Wadia

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Were Here



**97 Chopin, Liszt,
Ravel**
Works for
Solo Piano



**97 The Rolling
Stones**
Through the
Past Darkly

Music reviews

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

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



Quadrophenia: The Director's Cut

The Who

universal.com

★★★★

5-CD box set

Universal/Polydor

PETE TOWNSHEND reckons 1973's rock opera *Quadrophenia* is the best album he ever wrote. Better than his first rock opera, 1969's *Tommy*. And better than *Who's Next*, the brilliant set that divided the Who's two famous 'operatic' excursions and which included such band milestones songs as *Baba O'Riley* and *Won't Get Fooled Again*.

Given the strength of Townshend's catalogue, it's a bold claim and his band mates have often been far less complimentary about *Quadrophenia* over the years, questioning both its vision and execution. So almost forty years on, who was right? Well, there are enough great songs – at least a dozen of them – to go a long way towards

justifying Townshend's claim. *Quadrophenia* may have fewer individual high spots than *Tommy*, but it has a greater overall consistency and a tighter, less convoluted plot, built around the storyline of a mod boy's rite of passage in the 1960s – basically the story of the Who's own first decade.

Being Townshend, of course he insisted on complicating things by giving the central character, Jimmy, four 'personalities' representing the four individual members of The Who. Each was then given a *leitmotif* and the four musical themes which run through the work lend an ambition, drama and coherence that justify the 'rock opera' tag. The result is that where *Quadrophenia* works, it does so

Quadrophenia is ripe for modern technology to remix it.

triumphantly. And where it fails, it does so bravely and courageously.

Because it was initially mixed for impact surround (quadraphonic) sound, *Quadrophenia* more than most classic albums is ripe for modern technology to remix it to the kind of levels of aural perfection that Townshend dreamed about but could not achieve in 1973.

The remastering here is crisp and uncluttered, although the clarity doesn't always show Keith Moon's drumming in the best light. In addition to the remastered original work, a further disc remixes eight of the tracks for 5.1 and raises questions of what Townshend might have achieved had digital been available to him at the time.

Two further discs overflow with 25 of Townshend's previously unreleased demos of the songs. For once, this bonus material offers a genuine insight into the work. Sung by Townshend rather than Daltrey, the material sounds more vulnerable and less bombastic than the finished band versions.

There are several songs that never made the final cut, suggesting that Townshend's main problem was in editing his overflowing creativity into eighty minutes of music. Indeed, it's easy to imagine how a quite different sounding work might have been fashioned out of these demos. Who can say it might not have been an even more impressive one? We shall never know. But that the question can be legitimately raised is in itself enough to justify this 'director's cut'. **NW**

Standout tracks: The Real Me; 5:15; Love Reign O'er Me; Punk And The Godfather





HOT PICK

Pink Floyd

Wish You Were Here

emi.com

★★★★★

EMI

5-CD 'Immersion' box set/2-CD edition

HOT ON THE HEELS

of the *Dark Side Of The Moon* 'immersion' box set, 1975's follow-up gets similarly expansive treatment – and to these ears *Wish You Were Here* sounds even more impressive than the Floyd's earlier behemoth. The original album is augmented by a plethora of out-takes (including Stefan Grappelli playing violin on a version of the title track), a 1974 Wembley Arena concert which includes a twenty minute work-in-progress, *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*.

The original album was recorded so exquisitely (and expensively) that only the most acute ears are likely to detect a noticeable improvement in the various remastered mixes, including 5.1, quad and Blu-ray.

If you're prepared to pay £100 for the books, coasters, a scarf and other trinkets, you can take your aural pick. Otherwise, the two disc set which includes the original album and out-takes and live material, may be a better option. **NW**

Standout tracks: Shine On You Crazy Diamond; Welcome To The Machine; Have A Cigar



Can

Tago Mago

spoonrecords.com

★★★★★

Spoon/Mute

2-CD expanded 40th anniversary edition

TAGO MAGO defined Krautrock. Arguably, it was the genre's highpoint, too. Its epic shedding of traditional pop/rock form and structure to create an hallucinatory hybrid of Stockhausen-inspired avant-gardism and acid-tinged, space jazz improvisation went on to influence not only other German bands such as Kraftwerk, but the likes of PiL and Radiohead.

Recorded in mono and with a CD of a live performance in Cologne, the sound quality is not the best. But it's a representation of how Can's studio-edited communal freak-outs readily translated into dramatic and unpredictable spontaneity in concert. **NW**
Standout track: Mushroom; Halleluwah; Aumgn



Leonard Cohen

The Complete Studio Albums Collection

columbia.com

★★★★★

Columbia

11-CD box set

"BOX SETS ARE FOR DEAD PEOPLE",

Ry Cooder once said. You can see what he meant: these complete career collections have an undeniable air of finality. But to listen in one stretch to his 11 studio albums recorded between 1967-2004 is to take a journey through the mind of one of the most insightful songwriter-poets in history.

On later albums Cohen developed a rich musical vocabulary and every producer throughout Cohen's career recognised that his sombre baritone had to take primacy. The exception is Phil Spector – and even the finest modern remastering cannot rescue him. **NW**

Standout track: So Long; Marianne; Bird On A Wire; Hallelujah; Everybody Knows; Tower of Song



Falla

Nights in the Garden of Spain, Javier

Perianes (piano),

Josep Pons (cond.)

harmoniamundi.com

★★★★★

Harmonia

CD

THIS WELL-FILLED disc contains Falla's popular *Nights In The Gardens Of Spain*, plus a selection of pieces for solo piano. The music is bristling with atmosphere, and soloist and conductor ensure we sense the languid heat and perfumed air as Falla's music evokes the sultry balm of an Iberian night.

Nights was recorded in Barbican Hall, the solo pieces were recorded at the Teldex studio in Berlin, and sound is beautifully sweet and ripe, with gorgeous depth and weight. Even the heaviest climaxes sound open and rich, without a hint of hardness or 'clang'. **JH**

Standout track: 9 Danza Lejana

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

Jamie Cullum Pointless Nostalgic purplepleasurerecords.com



★★★ Candid/Pure Pleasure

180g vinyl

2002's **POINTLESS NOSTALGIC** was Cullum's second album, but his first for the Candid label and the one that helped him pick up a

major label contract. This **Pure Pleasure** release is its first appearance on vinyl, two heavyweight slabs of the stuff in a gatefold sleeve.

It finds him following in the footsteps of Harry Connick Junior with covers of crooner favourites like *In The Wee Small Hours* and *It Ain't Necessarily So*, alongside lesser known standards including *Well, You Needn't*. He sings and plays these very effectively and the band behind him do a very slick job, but things get a lot more interesting

when he switches to more contemporary material. Unfortunately there isn't much of it, the title track is one of only two self-penned pieces, but its quality indicates the potential for success that his future held.

The mix places Cullum's dusky tones front and centre, which leaves the band sounding a little soft, but it's an open recording with lots of space and scale, pretty slick in fact. **JK**
Standout tracks: Pointless Nostalgic; High And Dry

HOT PICK



Chopin, Liszt, Ravel

Works for Solo Piano
Benjamin Grosvenor

deccaclassics.com

★★★★★

Decca

CD

GROSVENOR IS A MAJOR pianistic talent with an absolutely astounding technique and (what's more) a level of musical maturity way beyond his years. Comparisons have been made to the young Evgeny Kissin, and they're justified.

His digital dexterity is amazing, but more impressive is the way Grosvenor makes this oft-played music his own, without resorting to exaggeration or vulgar excess.

Dynamic range is impressive, and even the quietest passages sound full-bodied. Clarity is excellent – no doubt because the pianist has such exceptional control of his instrument, and was making an impressive sound in the studio. **JH**

Standout tracks: Chopin Scherzo 1



Kate Bush

50 Words For Snow

katebush.com

★★★★★

Fish People

CD

FOLLOWING DIRECTOR'S SCUT, which revisited her past, this is a whole new sound for Kent's most elusive chanteuse. The wintry theme, taking in tales of ghosts, cold love, snowflakes, the yeti and a randy snowman, extends to the music, which is consistently downbeat, sparse and constantly hovering on the doorstep between warm hearth and dark, snow-filled night.

The musical palette is used extremely sparingly, based around her crisp-sounding piano, with touches of percussion and some complementary wisps of electronica. Her voice wraps itself around these chilly tunes, warming them up just enough to coax some life into them. This album rewards the attention of a good system turned up loud. **DO**

Standout tracks: Snowflake; Misty; Among Angels



Etta James

The Dreamer

decca.com

★★★★★

Decca

CD

THE BLUES AND SOUL QUEEN who made her name with Chess Records' classic output of the sixties has announced that she's officially retiring for health reasons and that this will be her last album. For a seemingly frail woman of 73 it's a remarkably passionate record, packed with the kind of throaty shouts and suggestive grunts that she's known for, and arrangements that don't skimp on the grit. Highlights include the melancholy title track and a surprisingly funky cover of *Welcome To The Jungle*.

The band may be slick, but there's a low slung easy groove going on that Ms James is only too happy to run with, and between them they put just enough grit in the wheel to gain some blues traction. **DO**

Standout tracks: The Dreamer, Let Me Down Easy

BLU-RAY DVD

Deep Purple with Orch. Live at Montreux 2011

eagle-rock.com



★★★★★

Eagle Rock

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

MONTREUX IS NO LONGER the small jazz festival it was when Deep Purple wrote *Smoke On The Water* about a conflagratory incident

there – now it's big enough to cater for classic rock bands with full scale orchestras in tow. The band retains three of its original members in Ian Gillan, Roger Glover and a miraculously hirsute Ian Paice and they are ably abetted by relative newcomers Don Airey on keyboards and Steve Morse on guitar.

Given their vintage they make a pretty decent noise and the musicianship is hard to fault in terms of precision and energy. The Neu Philharmonie is the main source of the latter, as rocked

out as an orchestra gets and throws itself into the mix with a gusto that enlivens the whole event.

Purple sounds better than it looks these days especially on tracks like the keyboard workout *Lazy*, which has a fat juicy bottom end and a rip-roaring guitar violin duel. The sound conveys the scale of the event and the amount of power that a 'band' of this size can muster, albeit without the full dynamics. It's well balanced though and can be cranked to good effect. **JK**

Standout track: Lazy

HIGH-RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

Peter Gabriel

Half Blood

Bowers & Wilkins

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins

24-bit/48kHz



SINCE HIS DAYS leading Genesis, Gabriel has always had a penchant for drama and the theatrical. This

exclusive release for B&W shows that his earlier leanings have not deserted him. It features earlier compositions 're-imagined' with purely orchestral arrangements.

He selected the tracks for their suitability for orchestral instrumentation and his choices work particularly well with the rich assortment of textures available to them. The transparency of the recording allows all this variety and wide dynamic compass to emerge, with an outstanding combination of subtlety and sheer power. It is nothing less than pure theatre. **MS**

Standout tracks: San Jacinto; Intruder

The Rolling Stones

Through the Past Darkly

linnrecords.com

★★★★★

ABKCO Records

24-bit/88kHz and 24-bit/172kHz



THIS ALBUM, originally released in 1969, captures the Stones at their musical best – both in

terms of their songwriting and their performance. The stereo mix is rather primitive and typical of the day. Remember when assistants in record shops always asked whether you wanted the mono or stereo version of the album? (The wise always requested mono.)

This a remaster from original mono and stereo tapes, and the running order is that of the American release, not the UK version. It's available at two sampling rates: 88 and 172 kHz. I prefer the sound of the 88kHz because it more faithfully preserves the integrity of the music. **MS**

Standout tracks: Jumpin' Jack Flash; Street Fighting Man

HOT PICK

Heaven sent

A hi-fi dealer operating out of a house, how does that work? In the case of AngelSound Audio rather well, as **Ed Selley** discovers...

Founded in 2000, AngelSound Audio operates out of a smart suburban house in Hunton Bridge north of Watford and just within the confines of the M25. Owner Keith Cheal set up AngelSound as a business after he retired from manufacturing furniture.

In keeping with many independent dealers, AngelSound acts as an importer and distributor for a number of brands, as well as a retailer for others. Many of these brands are smaller Japanese companies producing some of the most interesting products in the industry. Keith freely admits that he has no preconceived ideas about what makes a great product. If it sounds good and works well in wider systems then it is welcome within the AngelSound portfolio. As such, low-output valve amplifiers sit side-by-side with powerful solid-state designs, while vinyl and digital receive equal bidding.

As AngelSound does without conventional premises, its clientele are from all over the UK. Keith is quick to point out what he feels are the limitations of using a house rather than a more conventional shop, but I feel that he is being unnecessarily hard on his demo room. Unlike many other dealers, listening to a system at AngelSound will give a very good idea of its behaviour in a UK home. Settling back into an exceptionally comfortable armchair it was time to listen to three different levels of the AngelSound portfolio.



THE EXPERTS



ANGELSOUND AUDIO
2 Hamilton Road, Hunton Bridge, Hertfordshire,
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SYSTEM 1 – SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Keith's first offering uses electronics distributed by AngelSound and mated with a pair of speakers from a more well-known brand. The result is a system you won't see anywhere else and one that features more than a few surprises. On paper at least, this system probably shouldn't work at all!

Exquisite build

The source is a £1,895 CD4SE from Japanese company Tri. This valve-output CD player is a three-quarter width unit and features exquisite build quality and a distinctive appearance, thanks to the red-lacquered clamshell lid. Internally, the Tri features a 192kHz capable Burr-Brown DAC, mated to an output featuring a single 6922 valve. The Tri oozes quality and touches like the bespoke remote control and slick transport mechanism bode well for satisfying ownership.

Partnering the Tri is the £1,200 A205 valve amplifier from fellow Japanese brand Almarro. Valve amplifiers at this price point are far from unusual, but design of the Almarro is rather less common. The A205 is a single-ended unit, with a pair of EL84 valves forming the output stage. Even when used in a conventional push-pull arrangement, EL84's rarely give more than 15 watts and used as they are in the A205, the output is realistically nearer 5 watts. The diminutive chassis features two line inputs, a volume control and that's your lot. The appearance is akin to a scale model of a valve amp, but the fit and finish is very solid and sturdy.

With this low output in mind, the choice of the £1,450 Totem Arro to partner the electronics seems crazy. The diminutive Canadian floorstander is a well-regarded and clever design, but with an impedance of 4 ohms and a sensitivity of 87dB/w, it wouldn't be an automatic choice to partner with a tiny single-ended valve amplifier. Does this unlikely trio deliver the goods?

Real world

Ten seconds of *Boots Met My Face* by Admiral Fallow is enough to have me mentally rewriting what I think I know about system

matching. There is not the slightest sense of strain at a perfectly respectable listening level and the system seems unfazed by complex and busy material. At the same time, the delicacy and insight that single ended designs so often possess is present in spades. The detail retrieval and tonality of this partnership is absolutely superb.

The Totems not only seem perfectly happy on the end of the Almarro, but retain their pinpoint timing and even response from top-to-bottom. An 85cm tall, slimline tower will never have truly seismic bass, but the Arro goes deeper than you might expect and does so with a speed and agility that aids the sense fluidity that this system possesses. If you listen solely to thunderous orchestral pieces or stadium rock, and do so in a hangar, you will probably need more power. For everybody else, the breadth of material that this partnership can handle and the volume levels it can generate, give it genuine real-world ability.

Whatever design aspects of these electronics are unusual; the results

are impressive. The system pulls off the effective double act of sounding lively, detailed and upbeat, but at the same time extremely unforced and natural. You could sit down in front of this system for hours and feel as fresh at the end of your listening session as you did at the start. It has an even handedness that is hard not to love.

- 1** ALMARRO A205 MK2 VALVE AMPLIFIER
£1,200
- 2** TOTEM ARRO LOUDSPEAKERS
£1,450
- 3** TRI TRV-4SE CD PLAYER
£1,895

TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE:
£4,545



SYSTEM 2 – THE FIRST WATT IS THE GREATEST

The second offering features a trio of brands that Keith sells rather than distributes, but it retains a sense of the unusual. Keith feels that this price point is a particular sweet spot for many brands at the moment but he believes that this system is greater than the sum of its parts.

Sense of occasion

Fronting this system is a £4,298 Copland CDA825. This Swedish-built player is rapidly becoming something of a favourite for dealer and beautiful system pieces. It combines a stunning appearance, impregnable build and superb performance. The rotating circular lid of the top-loading CD mechanism is almost certainly overkill, but there is an undoubted sense of occasion from using it.

Amplification is supplied by First Watt. When Nelson Pass of Pass Labs (more of which later) retired he continued to experiment with amplifiers. The First Watt range takes its name from the company philosophy, that the first watt of output is poor, so it really doesn't matter how many you follow it up with. The £3,505 J2 power amplifier is a 25-watt, class A, single-ended design built around JFET transistors. It is partnered with the diminutive £995 B1 'Input Buffer' – in reality a twin input passive preamp complete with separate left/right volume controls.

The electronics are partnered with the new £2,499 MartinLogan Electromotion.

This is the new entry-level model in the MartinLogan range and features the standard combination of electrostatic panel for upper and midrange frequencies, partnered with a conventional driver to reproduce bass. Where the Electromotion differs from the larger models is that the bass driver is passive and as such places greater demands on the amplifier.

Incredible composure

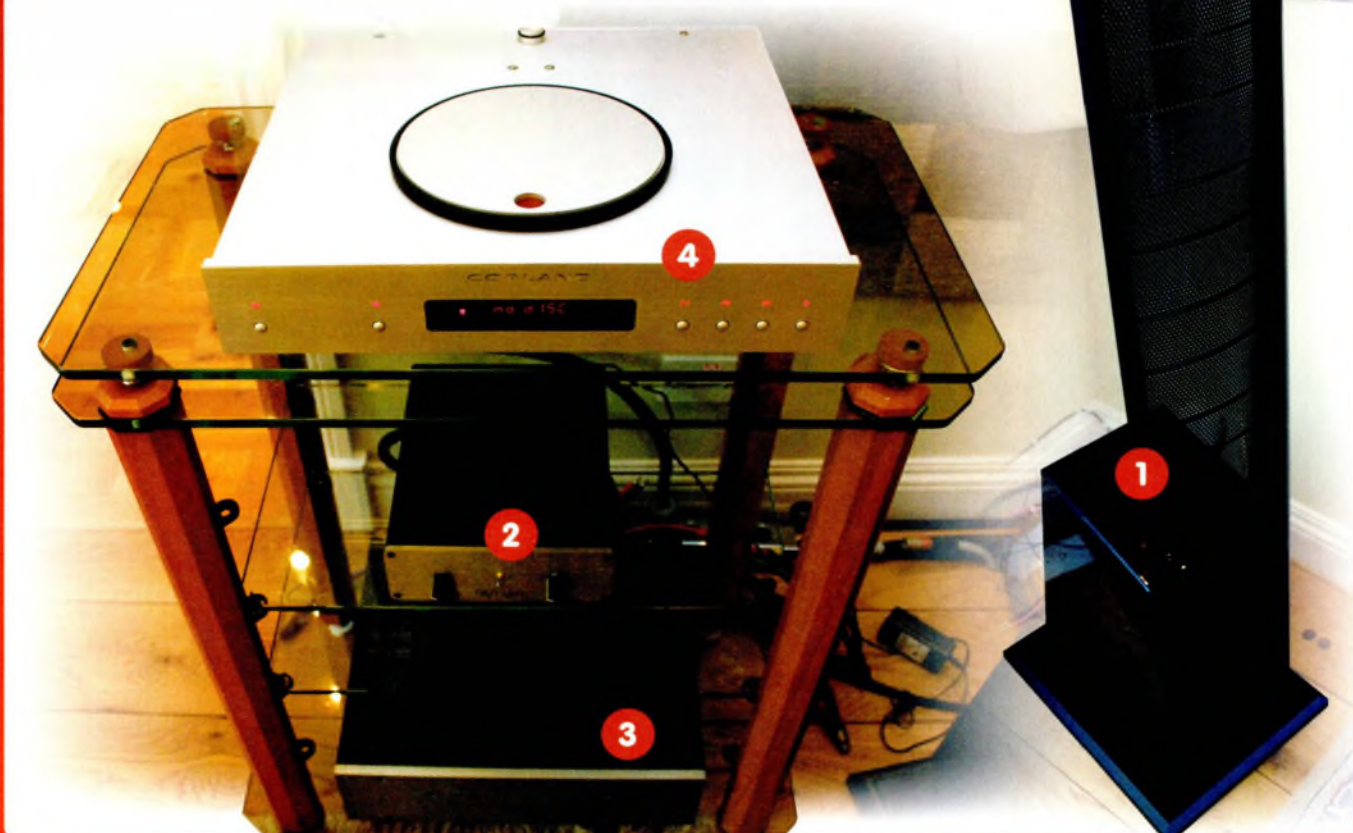
Only a short amount of time passes before it is clear that the First Watt duo is more than up to the challenge of driving the Electromotions correctly. The overriding impression of this system is the incredible composure with which it presents music. This should not be confused with it sounding dull or restrained. Simply put, there is no piece of music that this system doesn't have absolute control over. Imogen Heap's *Speak for Yourself*, complete with subterranean bass, is handled perfectly. The fabulous passion of Heap's vocals kept centre stage, while the complex and detailed accompanying music opens out behind it.

The MartinLogans are the real surprise of this system. The move to passive bass drivers goes completely unnoticed and they represent a real taste of what the brand is capable of at a relatively realistic price point. They are fast enough to not merely keep up with uptempo material, but to

really stay on top of it, which in turn gets toes tapping and heads nodding. At the same time, tonality is absolutely perfect and the trademark electrostatic soundstage is vast and open with instruments and voices placed beautifully within it. They seem absolutely at home on the end of the 25-watt J2 and nothing I threw at them revealed any signs of strain.

This is a big jump in price from the first system, but equally a big jump in ability. This is a genuine all-rounder that combines the delicacy and musicality of the first system with a room filling ability, an incredible sense of control and cohesion with real low-end impact. It was time to see what the big guns could do...

- 1 **MARTINLOGAN ELECTROMOTION LOUDSPEAKER**
£2,499
 - 2 **NELSON PASS B1 BUFFER/PREAMP**
£995
 - 3 **NELSON PASS FIRST WATT J2 POWER AMPLIFIER**
£3,505
 - 4 **COPLAND CDA-825 CD PLAYER**
£4,298
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE:**
£11,297



SYSTEM 3 – LAB WORK

Five times the price of the immensely talented second system, the final system is unashamedly high end, but watching Keith assemble it, there is no question that this is extremely sophisticated and beautifully built equipment. This does not represent the most expensive kit that AngelSound sells, but Keith feels that it offers a synergy that is hard to beat.

Beauty stakes

This system offers both vinyl and digital front ends. The digital source in this case is the £5,995 Luxman D-06 SACD player. Offering even more luxuriant build than the Copland, coupled with SACD replay, it is a superbly attractive unit.

It has to play second fiddle in the beauty stakes to the stunning £7,190 Basis Signature series turntable. Complete with matching Vector series tonearm, the Basis manages to combine immensely solid build, without looking like an oil rig or some other industrial platform. A £1,995 Benz Glider cartridge completes the analogue front end.

Amplification, from the phono stage to the power amps, is courtesy of Pass Labs. This is the company set up by Nelson Pass, now behind the First Watt range. Spread out over six boxes, the system makes use of the £7,695 XP20 two-box preamplifier, the £9,495 XP25, two box phono stage and finally a pair of the XA100.5 Class A monoblocks at £14,850. The sense of purpose that this sextet conveys is palpable. Their casework is simple, but beautifully assembled and the major controls move with a precision that I think is rare even in high-end hi-fi circles.

The speakers are provided by Verity Audio of Canada. The £24,995 Amadis is an unusual design with two discrete sections. An upper enclosure houses a 5-inch midrange driver and soft dome tweeter, while the larger lower section sports a 10-inch bass driver mounted in the rear of the cabinet. The speakers are relatively compact and subtle, but there is no doubting their superb build and attention to detail.

Very special

Putting one of my favourite records on the Basis – Kraftwerk's peerless *Minimum Maximum*, the first thing that grabs you is the total lack of background noise. The XP25 phono stage produces no hum and no hiss at all; music rises out of total silence.

And when it does rise, you are left in no doubt that this is a very special system indeed. In keeping with great high end, this is a system that can go effortlessly loud without the slightest sense of harshness or strain. The low end is seismic in impact, but it never overwhelms the incidental detail. Timing is pinpoint and the soundstage completely convincing.

Best of all is how forgiving the system is of poorer recordings. Give it *El Camino* by the Black Keys and it will extract the music, but manage to avoid revealing the limitations at the same time. Like the smaller systems, it is incredibly easy to listen to for long periods. Nothing is overblown or forced upon the listener. It is simply made as accessible as possible and left for us to enjoy. It isn't even that large – while the power amps were placed next to the speakers for the demonstration, this is not a system that would dominate a normal room if they were rack mounted. Herculean build, epic sound and a reasonable footprint – what more could you possibly want?

- 1 BASIS SIGNATURE SERIES TURNTABLE £7,190
 - 2 BASIS VECTOR TONEARM £3,695
 - 3 BENZ MICRO GULLWING CARTRIDGE £1,995
 - 4 PASS LABS XP-25 PHONO £9,495
 - 5 PASS LABS XP-20 PREAMP £7,695
 - 6 LUXMAN D-06 SACD PLAYER £5,995
 - 7 PASS LABS XA-100.5 MONOBLOCK AMPS £14,850
 - 8 VERITY AUDIO AMADIS SPEAKERS £24,995
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £75,910



AngelSound left me convinced that there is a clear argument for using a house as a dealership. Keith has assembled a unique collection of brands and is able to produce systems that are both incredibly musical and

easy to live with day in, day out. All the AngelSound systems sounded impressive, and as enjoyable at the end of the listening session as they did at the start. In many ways the first system was the most revelatory, once

you get past the initial surprise that it works at all, the presentation is lively, involving and genuinely engaging. Hi-fi should always be about the music and this system achieves that at a price tag that is positively terrestrial.

Minitest

Good headphones need serious headphone amplifiers. **Richard Black** tests four examples...

Creek OBH-11

PRICE: £150 CONTACT: 01442 260146
WEBSITE: CREEKAUDIO.COM

AN UNPRETENTIOUS LITTLE BOX this, it includes the obvious features of input (plus direct-connected line output), volume control and output. It comes with a universal-voltage power supply, and indeed on internal inspection we found that the circuitry has also changed significantly since we last saw one. Amplification is carried out by a single op-amp and a handful of discrete components, a combination which delivers plenty of power into any headphone load. Output impedance is not quite vanishing, which will give a slight frequency-response change with low-impedance headphones, compared with models like the Fidelity Audio and Musical Fidelity here – or indeed with high-impedance outputs on amps and CD players.

Not that frequency response was the first thing we thought of, on listening via this amp. We were more inclined to think about detail and imaging. It may not quite match the best of the best for insight, but it does have real skill at rooting out the inner details of any recording. All these are kept in their proper perspective without unnatural emphasis, and indeed the big picture is always very natural and easy to follow. Bass is tight and clear, with good extension and good attack. The OBH-11 is not quite as broadminded as some about headphones, and low-impedance in-ear models seemed less well suited, but all the on-head, hi-fi types we tried were well matched.

VERDICT EXCELLENT VALUE, with sound which in all areas is only just behind the very finest. Particularly gratifying when it comes to long-term listening



Fidelity Audio HPA-100

PRICE: £350 CONTACT: 01302 563124
WEBSITE: FIDELITYAUDIO.CO.UK



FIDELITY AUDIO IS ONE OF ANY NUMBER of companies offering aftermarket upgrades to respected kit from other manufacturers – uprated power supplies, fancier passive components, that kind of thing. It also offers a handful of its own complete products, including a DAC and two headphone amps. This is the simpler of the two: the HPA-200 has similar circuitry, but more generous power supply arrangements. It has a line input and a line output, the two connected directly together internally, a single headphone output jack and a volume control. The circuit comprises (for each channel) a high-performance op-amp, and a high-speed buffer between them, capable of driving any kind of headphone load with a bandwidth from DC to radio frequencies, it is claimed. The power supply is linear and well-regulated, and construction is just dandy.

We weren't surprised to find such straightforward engineering inside the case when we opened the unit after listening to it, for its performance has all the hallmarks of no-nonsense design. It has no discernible coloration and basically is a clean as a whistle. There's lots of detail and some lovely imaging, while noise is all but inaudible on any headphone and there's enough headroom on hand to blow your brains out. Maybe, just maybe, we found the slightest hint of treble congestion in the odd track. Trust me – long listening sessions with this unit will inspire not only respect, but genuine affection!

VERDICT FUSS-FREE, compatible with any headphone, and sonically almosteerily pure and unsullied. Such honesty may not be for all tastes, but we loved it



Icon Audio HP-8

PRICE: £550 CONTACT: 0116 244 0593
WEBSITE: ICONAUDIO.COM

VALVE HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS aren't that rare, but neither are they particularly thick on the ground. Even rarer, this one is a full-on transformer-coupled job. The business of coupling valves to low-impedance loads is always tricky, but with the small amount of power required by headphones it's often deemed acceptable to use the much simpler (and cheaper) method of direct coupling. Icon has gone the whole way, with two output transformers inside the box and a three-way selector switch to select transformer coupling for best matching to low, medium and high impedance headphones. Output is limited, but still more than adequate for maximum safe listening levels. There's a single input, a single output, and a fetching purplish-pink power indicator. Internal construction is point-to-point wired with high-power resistors.

This is hi-fi with character, attitude and personality. It could never be described as ultra-pure, but boy, can it rock! With every headphone we tried, there's a degree of energy to the sound that's hard to resist, and one has to resist the urge to get up and dance – never a very satisfactory experience under headphones! Sadly, there's also a downside, in that detail is not always as apparent as one might wish for. Complex symphonic textures are a bit generalised, and you'll struggle to identify all the intricacies of a well-produced rock track. In the end, I found it a enthralling and frustrating, all at the same time.

VERDICT SURE AS HECK KNOWS HOW TO KICK A RHYTHM, and can be spine-tinglingly exciting, but a lack of detail and insight can prove a frustration
★★★★



Musical Fidelity M1 HPA

PRICE: £500 CONTACT: 020 8900 2866
WEBSITE: MUSICALFIDELITY.COM



PHYSICALLY IMPOSING, this unit offers features that most headphone amps don't. There's a second output, which is always nice for communal listening, but there's also a preamp output (thoughtful!) and a digital input, from a USB socket (type B for connection to a computer). We particularly like that, as it turns this unit into a one-box solution for getting true hi-fi from a computer. Inside the case there's a Class A power amp, implemented with discrete power transistors no less, which can drive headphones of any impedance to skull-rattling levels! The DAC is a simple affair, using a familiar one-chip receiver/DAC circuit, while the power supply is a switch-mode type. Musical Fidelity makes much of the unit's low output impedance (about 10hm): one of the advantages of dedicated headphone amps is that they usually have a low output impedance giving a flat response into real headphones.

We particularly enjoyed the bass from this unit, which is slightly rolled off, but subjectively has excellent attack and definition. That kind of characteristic is more to do with upper bass anyway, and if there's a very slight loss in the very lowest octave it's hardly noticeable. Midrange has a lovely fluid quality to it, while treble is extended, open and beautifully clear. We felt the line input surpasses the USB, but in general this is a very capable and highly enjoyable box. It has excellent detail and enough rhythmic character to please the greatest number of people most of the time. ●

VERDICT REVEALING AND HONEST, and also very beguiling thanks to a lovely fluid midrange. USB input adds flexibility
★★★★



A good number of CD players, other source components and amplifiers include a headphone output, so why bother? Obviously the answer is going to be 'it sounds better', but there can be

more to it than just that. CD player (etc.) headphone outputs don't always have a volume control, and even if they do both those and the outputs on amps are generally fed via a fairly large resistor

which ensures levels are similar into any headphone. Dedicated amps often provide more volume, but go easy on that score – you've only got one set of ears from cradle to grave!

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FOR SALE

KRELL RFBP 250 watt monoblocks, Audio Research Reference 3 preamp. Gamut L3 speakers with stands, Transparent interconnects and speaker cables. For photos, details, prices: **07899 721899** or email: yatetherapy@googlemail.com (London).

CYRUS CD XT SE transport (black), with remote, £750. DACX (black), £750. Both in excellent condition and boxed with instructions. **01883 741843** (Surrey/Kent).

ROKSAN Xerxes (black ash finish) with XPS7 power supply. All excellent condition, new belt, TMS3 bearing, RMA £450. **07972 533063** or email: g200@gmx.com (Cumbria).

WANTED Complete fluid damper kit for SME series 1115 tonearm. **01382 644815** (Dundee).

LEAK Trough Line stereo valve tuner in steel case, with Stereo 30 Plus transistor amp in wooden case £80. Also Goldring

Lenco turntable £50. **01474 872863** (London).

TECHNICS SL1210 Mk2, very good condition, £249. Garrard 401 plus power supply £1,200. Can post items if needed. **0207499 8729** (London).

BOSENDORFER AC1 loudspeakers (black/ivory). Good condition. Boxed. £600. **01926 259022** or email: davidhardy18@talktalk.net (Warwickshire).

GRAHAM SLEE Novo headphone amplifier, hardly used, boxed with manual £130, Pioneer 505 precision CD player, boxed. **07818 658722** (Warwickshire).

BRINKMANN FEIN phono amp 2006, RCA outputs, volume control, separate power supply (black). Superb finish and build (£1,050) £275. **07411 388152** (Herts).

WANTED Marantz DR-17 digital recorder. **01395 576644** or email: jmichaelbrittain@yahoo.com (Devon).

WANTED Ultra High Power Amplifier Construction by Nick Sheldon (Babani Press, 1989). **0859 341984** or email: drzacharysmith64@yahoo.co.uk (Norfolk).

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,



For sale: bargain-priced Graham Slee Novo headphone amp

£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. **020 8590 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. **07854 658 281** (London).

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).

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 PA3DeltaS 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

BUYING TIPS **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back-up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY**, speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper dem and judge the seller as well as the goods!

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. **01404 891728 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 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. **02476 467679 (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. **07847 501865 or email: dazert@hotmail.com (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 **dazert@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 no. Linn LP12 armboard in perfect condition £10 plus P&P. **07941 174804 (Heathrow).**

MIT AVT3 speaker cable, 2x3 metre pair, £160. MIT AVI interconnect 1m £70. Both mint and available as a set

for £200. **0161 4323852 (Cheshire).**

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

ROGUE AUDIO ST90 amplifier (£2,650) £1,095. New, only a few hours use. High-quality transparent power, includes upgrade Svetlana KT88s. **020 8653 0778 or email johnkallio1@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. **07805199598 (W Sussex).**

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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. Painstaking 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

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Our favourite silver disc spinners currently on sale

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Badge-winning headphones for your personal listening pleasure

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For those applications where two boxes are better than one!



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The best equipment supports: sprung; solid; air-filled; glass; MDF and more...

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Stands come in all shapes, sizes and prices, so take your pick from our list



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BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●

CD players



Any one of these fine players will make sweet music for years to come

Up to £1,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	SACD compatible	ELEC dig output	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 8200CDQ	950	Boasts a beautifully involving sound; bass and treble extension beyond reproach	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	355
●	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 2 010S2	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
●	Shanling CD-T2000	1,895	Great sound, good looks, superb build and unbeatable price	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	350
●	TEAC CD-3000	1,499	Relaxed, yet timely and revealing, with useful USB input	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	355
●	Unison Research Unico CDE	2,475	Has an engaging and musical sound with strong tonal realism	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	348

SPEC 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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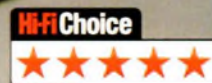
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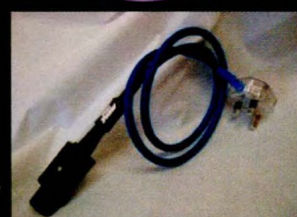
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Turntables

The best record players money can buy



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Speeds	Switchable speed change	Suspension subchassis	Supplied with arm	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
●	Hanss Acoustic T-30	3,600	The only multi-armbase deck in its price range, it boasts image stability and precise bass	33/45	●	opt	opt	331
●	Lumley Heliosphere	2,495	A distinctive-looking turntable with a unique sound and a performance that reflects your vinyl	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.2oplus	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	MM	MC	Replaceable styli	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

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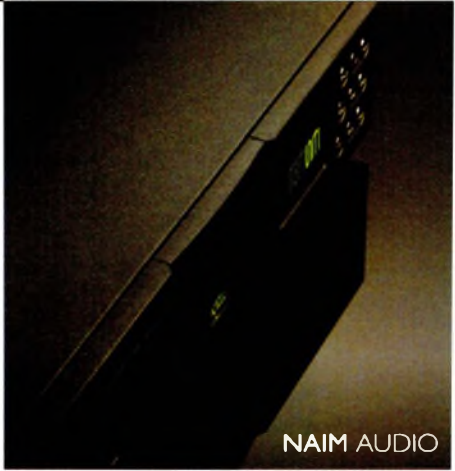
REGA RP3



ARCAM CINEMA



NAIM AUDIO



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Radio tuners

Surf the airwaves with these carefully selected tuners



FM tuners

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Wavebands	Presets	RDS	Signal strength meter	Rotary tuning knob	Issue number
●	Creek Audio Evolution	350	Sound is detailed, cohesive and extended both tonally and spatially – very classy	FM,AM	80	●	●	●	308
●	NAD C426	220	If you aren't already wedded to DAB, then this is a very attractive purchase	FM,AM	80	●	●	●	339
●	T+AT1210R	1,200	High-end looks are matched by the sound, which is detailed and sophisticated	FM	100	●	●	●	283

DAB/FM tuners

●	Arcam FMJ T32	600	A highly cost-effective way of optimising the airwaves. iPod functionality is a bonus	DAB,FM	100	●	●	●	319
●	Onkyo T-455DAB	400	Admirably free of grain or obvious tonal blemishes, this tuner achieves a high standard	DAB	40	●	●	●	298

DAB/FM portables

●	Monitor Audio Airstream 10	225	The range of features on this DAB/FM/Internet radio is certainly impressive	DAB,FM,Web	4	●	●	●	337
●	Pure Sensia	250	One of the smartest table radios around, offering wireless computer-sourced music	DAB,FM,Web	40	●	●	●	331
●	Roberts Revival	200	A handy way to get internet radio and media streaming throughout the house	DAB,FM,Web		●	●	●	344
●	Tivoli Networks+10	239	FM reception is excellent and a cut above everything else this radio has to offer	DAB,FM,Web	5	●	●	●	344
●	Vita Audio R1 MkII	160	Limited to DAB/FM and line inputs, but the sound quality is very good	DAB,FM,Web	10	●	●	●	337
●	Vita Audio R2i	300	Very smartly built with a sound that's full-bodied, neutral and detailed	DAB,FM	30	●	●	●	323

SPECS KEY **WAVEBANDS** Which bands are supported: FM, M – medium wave, L – long wave, DAB – digital audio broadcasting. **PRESETS** How many stations can be stored in memory. **RDS** Radio Data System – station names and program titles can be displayed among other facilities (FM only, DAB has more comprehensive display potential). **REMOTE CONTROL** For the couch potato. **SIGNAL STRENGTH METER** Useful for setting up an aerial. **ROTARY TUNING KNOB** An ergonomic alternative to buttons.

Headphones

Audiophile solutions for home and travel use



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Open (Closed back)	Supra-aural	Electrostatic	Circumaural	3.5mm jack adaptor	Weight (grams)	Issue number
●	AKG 540	100	Can justly claim to offer high-end sound, with only a touch of upper midband congestion giving away the price	●	●	●	●	●	230	355
●	Audio Technica ATH-W1000X	649	Fine advert for the virtues of closed-back headphones, with great bass and background noise reduction	●	●	●	●	●	350	334
●	Beyerdynamic DT250	170	Closed-back construction gives useful isolation. Strong and well-focused bass is a big plus	●	●	●	●	●		355
●	Beyerdynamic T1	880	A characterful, enjoyable music-maker with a detailed, weighty sound	●	●	●	●	●		331
●	Bowers and Wilkins P5	250	A superb headphone with B&W's sound and build quality sealing the deal	●	●	●	●	●	195	333
●	Grado PS500	700	Classy transducer that's well balanced in every sense	●	●	●	●	●	240	355
●	Grado PS1000	1,795	Offer excellent detail and effortless dynamics, but they can be heavy to wear after a while	●	●	●	●	●	500	329
●	Jamo wEAR In30	80	In-ear headphone sound is beguilingly musical and very detailed across the board	●	●	●	●	●		348
●	Klipsch Image X10i	229	Natural sound and fit; lightweight and unobtrusive in-ear headphones	●	●	●	●	●	10	342
●	Sennheiser CX880i	83	This in-ear headphone is excellent for the price and the results overall are most impressive	●	●	●	●	●		348
●	Sennheiser HD380	140	This model offers good sound and is a worthy alternative to in-ear monitors	●	●	●	●	●		327
●	Unique Melody Miracle	775	Great build and sound, the custom-moulded Miracles are one of our favourite in-ears	●	●	●	●	●		346

SPECS KEY **ELECTROSTATIC** Uses electrostatic film instead of more common cone or dome dynamics. **SUPRA-AURAL** Earpads sit on ear rather than around it. **CIRCUMAURAL** Earpads rest on the head around the ears. **OPEN BACK** Vented capsules let sound in and out. **CLOSED BACK** (●) Sealed capsules. **WEIGHT** In grams. **3.5MM JACK ADAPTOR** Allows connection to personal stereos, computers etc.

HFC TOP PICKS



Bowers & Wilkins P5 £250
The P5 is a no-brainer for iPhone users but this well built and attractive design should be able to win friends from outside the Apple camp as

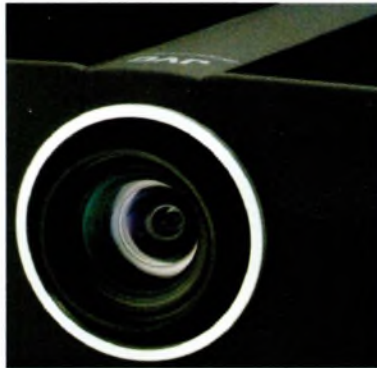


PURE Sensia £250
PURE's ground-breaking touch-screen DAB radio has changed the way we interact with radio forever and sets the standard for innovation



Beyerdynamic T1 £880
Our 2010 award winner is beautifully built and attractively designed, with a strong and engaging performance and remarkable detail

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Amplifiers



Our pick of the best one-box amps out there

Issue number
Power output (watts)
Headphone socket
Remote control
Phono input
Line inputs

Up to £1,000

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Line inputs	Phono input	Remote control	Headphone socket	Power output (watts)	Issue number
●	AudioLab 8200A	730	Has detailed sound with good extension and unusually assured midrange	6				60	349
●	Cambridge Audio 840A v2	800	A chunky powerhouse with features aplenty, this amp offers detail and delicacy (silver finish)	8	●	●		120	327
●	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
●	Jolida JD1501BRC	1,020	A skillfullyvoiced integrated, with its own distinctively even, musical sound	3		●	●	100	355
●	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
●	TEAC AI-3000	1,999	A vast integrated amp with superlative build and finish, allied to a commendably smooth and sweet sound	5		●	●	300	355

Pre/power amplifiers



Separate boxes can bring clear advantages

Issue number
Power output (watts)
Remote control
Phono input
Line inputs
Preamplifier

Up to £2,000

●	Cambridge Audio Azur 840E/840W	2,000	Enterprising technology delivers a pre/power combo that always sounds detailed and controlled	●	●	8	opt	●	200	309
●	NAD C165BEE/C275BEE	1,550	An alternative to the usual integrated route and one that offers flexibility and fine sound	●	●	6	MM/MC		130	336

Above £2,000

●	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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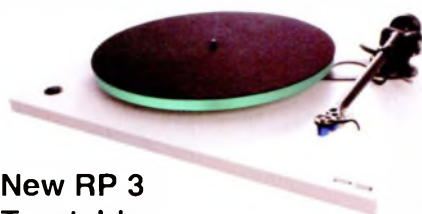
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Streamers/music servers



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

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Internal drive Wireless	iPod compatible USB	Apple AirPlay	Balanced output	Digital output	Issue number
●	Cambridge Audio Sonata MP30	400	A fully featured streamer that sounds remarkably open and works well wirelessly	●	●	●		●	349
●	Logitech Squeezebox Touch	240	Possibly the best user interface we've seen on any dedicated digital audio player	●	●	●		●	351
●	Marantz NA7004	600	Easy to use, the NA7004 makes getting into streaming simple and all for a great price, too		●	●	●	●	351
●	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
●	TEACUD-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

Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Stranded	Solid core	Copper	Silver	Digital cable type	Issue number
●	Black Rhodium Polar Illusion	250	A good all-rounder, with clear and purposeful bass and particularly fine treble	●		●			321
●	Chord Co. Indigo Plus	995	Costly, and high-class cable needs running in, but this is a finely detailed design overall		●				323
●	Peerless Sigma	70	A cable that belies its modest price with sound that's detailed, neutral and full bodied	●		●			343
●	QED Ref Audio Evolution	63	Tonally favours the bass, but overall detail and imaging are very good	●		●			343
●	QED Signature Audio S	190	Mellifluous and rounded, this cable is a great choice for lovers of the human voice			●	●		332

Digital interconnects

●	Atlas Mavros	285	By any reckoning this is a very revealing wire			●	●	E	336
●	van den Hul The Wave	65	The results this cable achieves are excellent and it scores highly for value			●	●	E	336

Speaker cables (price per metre)

●	Black Rhodium jive Bi-Wire	14	Bi-wire cable which is full of sonic virtues. It's highly practical, too			●			339
●	Kimber 4PR	65	Many high-end virtues at a budget price, including a well-judged bass and sweet extended treble		●				349
●	Monster MCX-15	5	Notable for its bass, perhaps a touch overdone at times but could be a good foil to small speakers	●		●			280
●	van den Hul The TeatracK	35	A bi-wire cable with a sound that's impeccably timed, neutral and full of detail			●	●		339
●	Wireworld Stream	6	Packs a punch when needed and the detail is good	●					349

SPECS KEY **STRANDED** Cable has a number of (usually) twisted strands to conduct the signal. **SOLID CORE** Cable has one or more individually insulated strands to conduct the signal. **COPPER** Material used to form the conducting element of the cable. **SILVER** Alternative material used to form the conducting element of the cable. **DIGITAL CABLE TYPE** E – electrical, O – optical. Cables are one metre length unless otherwise stated.

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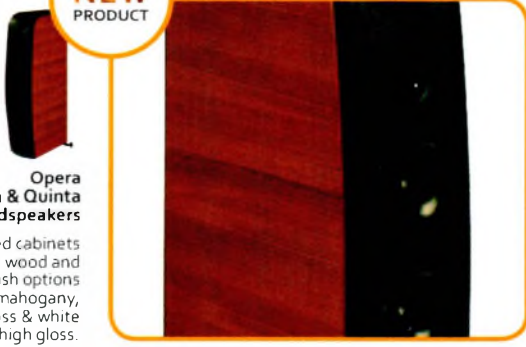
Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Size	Floorstander	Ease of drive	Bass from (Hz)	Free space	Close to wall	Issue number
●	Acoustic Energy Radiance 1	600	Limited bass, power handling and dynamics, but exceptional mid-to-treble voicing	18.5,32,25		A	33	●	●	325
●	Acoustic Energy Neo V2	700	Lots of box, this speaker produces a coherent and engaging sound	20.3,120,30	●	A		●	●	348
●	Amphion Helium 410	600	Speaker combines exceptional clarity and timing with a solid build	13.2,25,9,22		A	60	●	●	351
●	ATCSCM11	867	A very fine little speaker - 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 Richmond Anniversary	580	A welcome update to a classic design that retains the key traits, while improving performance	16.5,28,23.5		A+		●	●	355
●	EB Acoustics EB2	669	Excellent value speaker, its composite enclosure gives a very clean and neutral sound	22.5,45,30		A	64	●	●	341
●	Elipson Planet L	600	Well built and clever design, this is a fine-sounding speaker with many likeable qualities	40.5,42.3,42.8		A	48	●	●	350
●	Epos Epic 5	750	Excellent aesthetic and lively, involving sound, this is a superb performer	28.6,98,38		A		●	●	347
●	Focal Chorus 726V	950	Compact and realistically priced, the Chorus 726V is a good all-round performer	22,99,37.5	●	A	25	●	●	325
●	JBL Studio L880	700	Good value floorstander with neutrality, massive headroom and plenty of punch	22,99,37	●	A	25	●	●	275
●	KEF iQ50	599	Looks cute and very discreet, with spacious imaging, good balance and a sweet treble	17.5,81.5,26	●	A	23	●	●	315
●	Mission MX5	600	An engaging listen and worth an audition, if you have the room	25,99.5,39	●	A-		●	●	341
●	Monitor Audio BX5	500	Attractive and compact design with fast and engaging sound	21.5,86.8,24.8	●	A-		●	●	345
●	Monitor Audio Silver RS8	850	Bold, dynamic sound, it's an easy load that works well in larger rooms	90,18,27	●	A	33	●	●	276
●	Monitor Audio GS10	900	More neutral tonally than some recent MAs, the GS10 is easy to drive	20,36,27		A-	40	●	●	284
●	PMC DB1i	985	Could be more neutral, but a very effective musical communicator	15.5,29,23.4		A+	30	●	●	334
●	ProAc Tablette Ref Eight	704	Stunning standmount with electrostatic-like imagery. Its brother is even better!	15,27,23		A+	40	●	●	267
●	Q Acoustics 2010	115	The sheer cleanliness of this speaker's sound is astonishing	15,23.4,20.3						347
●	Q Acoustics 1020i	140	Outstanding value, its smooth well-balanced and lively sound makes a fine communicator	17.5,25,26.5		A+	60	●	●	318
●	Roth Audio oL10	100	An even-handed bookshelf loudspeaker with very good upper-bass energy	15.3,19.9,17.8						347
●	Spendor S3/SR2	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
●	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
●	Audiosmile Kensai	1,503	This speaker has wonderful speed, musicality and timbre; spacious treble	15,25,20		A		●	●	355
●	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	16.5x96x28	●	A	60	●	●	344
●	Bowers and Wilkins PM1	1,995	This standmount boasts fine imaging, superb neutrality and dynamic range	19x33x25		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	20x117x36.4	●	A		●	●	348
●	Dynaudio DM3/7	1,299	Sound has a fine overall balance and impressive bass weight	20.4,96,27.5	●	A		●	●	345
●	Focal Chorus 826W LE	1,879	Focal has turbo charged the 826 resulting in lots of energy, excitement and fine detail	28.2,103.8,37.5	●	A		●	●	330
●	Focal Electra 1027 Be	4,399	Outstanding mid and top with fine delicacy, low coloration, but lacks some bass grip and drive	26.5,111,35	●	A-	25	●	●	276
●	Free FS1	3,500	An elegant design with the minimum of wiring. Wireless with Sonos or Airport Express	16,87,27	●	ACT	35	●	●	301
●	Gamut 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 QM10TWO	1,795	Unerringly musical box with a keen sense of rhythm. Now better built and svelte-looking, too	23,2,30,25,2		A	-			355
●	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-tweeters system, this is a grown up and articulate performer	23,375,34			32			311
●	Opera Seconda	1,995	Fine styling and finish, plus very superior voicing, if a shade lacking in warmth	24,1025,315		A	20			314
●	Pioneer S-2EX-W	5,200	This speaker offers superb midband neutrality and exceptional clarity	29,1565,425		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
●	Quadral Aurum Altan VIII	1,570	This speaker has a warmth that belies its size and a very laid-back character	22,2,405,34,6		A	52			350
●	ProAc Studio 140 Mk2	1,690	Headroom and high sensitivity are an encouragement to play it loud	19,104,28		A				347
●	Rega RS7	1,685	Lively and transparent with superior dynamic range	24,6,988,34,6		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 Sttaf	1,695	This speaker delivers good scale with a fine midband	16,85,24,2		A				340
●	Triangle Genese Lyrr	3,300	A well-balanced speaker with generous sensitivity, fine imaging and good expressiveness	23,30,3,113,3		A	30			338
●	Teufel Ultima 800	2,498	Exceptional value for money due to direct sales and easy system-matching	22,98,37		A	42			335
●	Vivid Audio K1	14,495	With a subtle, fast and wide bandwidth, this speaker is one of the finest on the planet	28,130,45		A	35			325
●	Wilson Benesch Curve	5,383	Much (but not all) of the ACT's performance in a much more compact and affordable package	23,91,37		A	28			254
●	Wharfedale Opus	1,500	Great material value and a solid, if bright and forward sound. Has great loudness potential	26,100,5,41		A	23			314
●	Yamaha Soavo 2	1,200	Cunningly crafted with a beautiful balance that always sounds lively, open and involving	22,38,35		A	28			296
●	Zu Essence	3,750	Realism and communication skills are more than compensation for balance shortcomings	30,5,125,30,5		A	25			327

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

HFC TOP PICKS



Castle Knight 2 £400

The Knight 2 continues in the great Castle tradition of excellent finish and solid build and climbs to the top of the pile with excellent sonic performance



Focal Chorus 826W LE £1,879

Focal has taken the 826 and turbocharged it, keeping the virtues of the stock model but with increased energy, excitement and detail



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A fantastic combination of elegant design, well-thought out room-tuning features and superb sonic performance. A 2010 Product of the Year nominee

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BADGES KEY: RECOMMENDED = ● EDITOR'S CHOICE = ● GROUP TEST WINNER = ● BEST BUY = ●

Equipment supports

Hi-fi equipment supports come in all shapes and sizes



Badge	Product	Price	Comments	Top plate size (cm) Height (cm)	Number of shelves Welded	Shelf type	Issue number
●	Audiophile Base Std Supp†	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 Fillable	Welded	Issue number
●	Atacama Duo 6	65	Maintains high standards in mid and treble, with excellent tonality and good detail		17,13	●	1 346
●	Custom Design FS104	190	Gets excellent results out of speakers small and large, and excels in fine detail and precise imaging			●	1 346
●	Custom Design SQ404	220	Robust four-pillar design gives very low coloration and maximises performance	61	18,16,3	●	4 283
●	Partington Ansa 60	119	Elegant flat-packer 'disappears' sonically; restrained but neutral and coherent	62	18,15	●	4 232
●	Quadraspire QV60	250	This stand helps maximise detail and tonal resolution				1 346
●	Soundstyle Zz	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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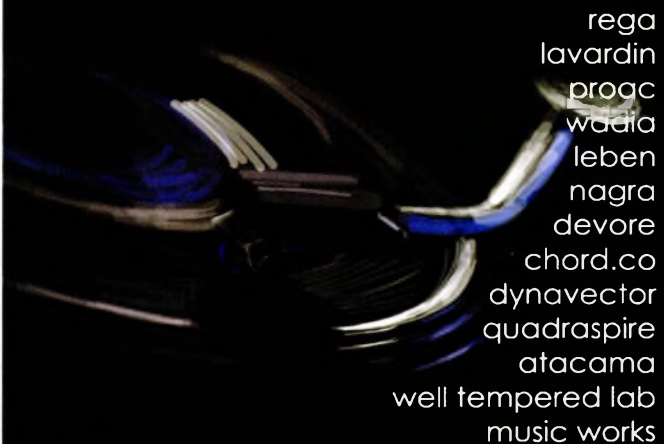
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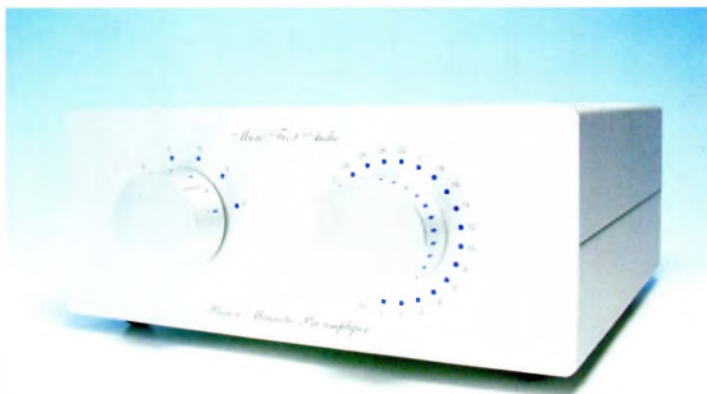
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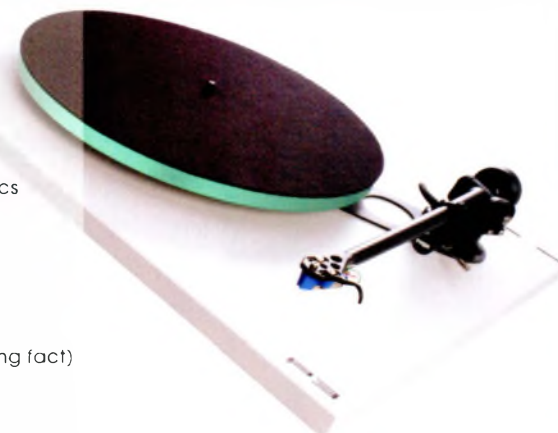
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WE HEAR...

AT CES, Cambridge Audio staff were confiding that – whilst the amount of consumer interest for streaming products is very high – sales are still low, industry-wide. They put this down to the confusion in buyers' minds about home networking; not a subject your average purchaser is exactly an expert in.

NAIM AUDIO will be showing "something new" at the Bristol Show, "but it's too early to tell", said our spy!

LYRA has several new moving coil cartridges coming out over the next twelve or so months, one of which looks set to replace the Titan i.

RUMOURS abound that Monitor Audio is set to launch new digital streaming products in the first half of 2012.

FIDELITY AUDIO has a bespoke Logitech Squeezebox Touch mods package, with a brand new high performance master clock and a dedicated power supply coming in the next couple of months...

LINN PRODUCTS are said to be meeting key OEM chip manufacturers to ensure interoperability between different brands of future digital streaming products. MD Gilad Tiefenbrun told us he thinks the industry needs common standards, to not confuse customers.

FOCAL will be demonstrating its Spirit One headphones and Chorus 800V series in a UK Special/Limited Edition for the very first time at the Bristol Sound and Vision show.

SPENDOR is rumoured to be launching a replacement for its evergreen S8e loudspeaker; the new A-series might just be on dem at the Bristol show!

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 225 MARCH 2002

Already a staple diet of the hi-fi enthusiast, *HFC* was celebrating 27 years of success in 2002. Editor Tim Bower brought back the latest info from CES in Las Vegas, including (don't laugh) more news of exciting new SACD/CD combi players.

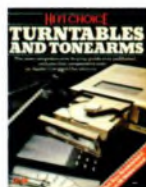
Interestingly, combis also formed the basis of the group test, with eight pre/power amps under inspection. It fell to Arcam, Marantz and Primare to take the honours, although prices varied from Arcam's £1,200 to Primare's £2,600. A bonus second group test featured designer speakers, while in the real world America invaded Afghanistan and the UK said goodbye to the Queen Mother, still a hi-fi enthusiast at 101!



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 104 MARCH 1992

Conflict reared its head in Bosnia, while Turkey was rocked by yet another earthquake. *Hi-Fi Choice* had a staggering twenty amplifiers on test. Technical bod Paul Miller opined that Akai, Dual, Marantz, Rotel, Sony and Technics were worthy of further investigation, while Dan Houston

dropped in on B&W's headquarters and got everyone excited with news of the speaker maestro's new Nautilus range, the brainchild of B&W's Lawrence Dickie. And finally, *HFC* turned the spotlight on subwoofers, a subject that's always controversial with the two-channel crowd. If you decided to buy one, then you could always listen to it while wearing a coveted *Hi-Fi Choice* sweatshirt, a snip at £15.



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 30 JULY 1982

Iran and Iraq were at loggerheads, while an encounter between Italy and Germany resulted in a World Cup victory for the latter. On the home front, *HFC* presented its *Turntables and Tonearms* special. 50-plus vinyl spinners were put to the test, including Pioneer's

innovative CD-style LP loader, the PL88F, which cost a staggering £300! In keeping with the more unusual ideas, reel-to-reel tape deck specialist Revox unveiled its B795 turntable with a parallel tracking gantry, that brought back memories of the mighty Bang & Olufsen Beogram 4000. Tonearm favourites for the *HFC* team included Audio Technica's AT 1100 (£160) and Linn's Basik LVX (£74).

Well, it had to happen sooner or later...

It was back in the late nineteen seventies that the last Thorens TD160 turntable modifications package went on sale. Well, a mere thirty five years later, a little bird tells us that Inspire Hi-Fi is finally launching another one, for the princely sum of £499. Rumour also has it that the company has a new mod kit for Linn's LP12 coming up – with a difference. £1,099 will transform your Sondek to take a 12 inch tonearm. "We believe no one has been brave enough to do this before", the source said. We hope to bring you the verdict on this very soon...

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

Keith Cheal from Angel Sound Audio selects four of his favorite albums



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SPEECHLESS
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ROSA PASSOS
ROSA
Can't understand a word of what she is saying, but she does it so well it genuinely doesn't matter.



CATFISH KEITH
JITTERBUG SWING
A fabulously talented musician, a beautiful recording and some great songwriting. Well worth a listen.

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.

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