

Lunar tunes

Simaudio's superb Moon 250i integrated amplifier shines its light...



Bose value

Affordable evergreen: the true story of Bose's legendary 901 loudspeaker



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 362

September 2012

£3.99

Totally wired

We test the best interconnects to transform your system!

Sweet stream

Sansui returns with its WLD+201L media player



Record breaker

How to design, build and maintain a computer music library...



Cooler shaker

JBL's punchy new 4312 E loudspeakers



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top products from Canton, Jelco, Ming Da and more!

Royal baby



Inspire Hi-Fi's Monarch Junior turntable tested



SEPTMBER 2012
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QUE SERA, SERA

“Every particle of this speaker bespeaks the best of high-end.” *Alan Sircom - Hi-fi +*

“The most musical effortless loudspeaker we’ve heard in years.”

Jason Kennedy - Hi-Fi Choice The Collection

Long established as a range of high-performance loudspeakers worthy of the names of the famous luthiers of Cremona, Sonus faber’s phenomenal Guarneri, Amati and Stradivari redefined in their time the way a speaker matches its sonic presence to its aesthetics.

The Family has now matured with the latest generation starting with the monumental changes born with Guarneri evolution, and now *Amati Futura* looks as much to impending developments as does to an illustrious past.

Both the aesthetic and technical values of Sonus faber have sired this speaker, starting with a restyling that respects the lute-shaped form of the series, while refining it for even better performance.

But Sonus faber learns as much from its own efforts as it does the great woodworkers of yore: *Amati Futura* is one of the first models to exploit the Herculean R&D effort that was invested in the company’s monumental flagship model, ‘The Sonus faber’, and refined it even further with the ground breaking *Aida*.

Like its recently-introduced siblings, *Amati Futura* represents what is possible, while respecting what has mattered.



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88 Retro Bose's classic 901 speakers revisited

Music reviews



95 Roxy Music *The Complete Studio Recordings*

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 spoken to a petrol-head about spark plugs? I'd imagine that's how the subject of interconnects appears to anyone unfamiliar with the secrets of the hi-fi world. To put it mildly, it's a geeky subject that's sure to clear a crowd in seconds!

Over the years, I have tried to remain impartial about audiophile cables. I've heard with my own ears the improvements that using good quality wires can make to a system's sound – even quite a humble one. Trouble is, I've seen with my own eyes the amount of hype surrounding the subject, and the way that magazines sometimes give the impression that wiring is almost more important than the kit itself. It isn't.

So we thought it was time to do something definitive. *Hi-Fi Choice* routinely runs *Blind Listening Group Tests*, and what better way to assess a range of best-selling interconnects? We ordered them up and in they came, in their fancy packaging and lurid livery. And just to mess things up, I threw a cheap patch lead into the group, the sort that comes free with a supermarket DVD player...

Of course, if these fancy cables couldn't beat a grotty old bit of wire under blind conditions, there would be chaos and mayhem across the hi-fi industry. Covering it up would be tricky too, as I don't have any formal power of arrest over the three listeners I'd invited!

So, if you want to find out whether expensive audiophile interconnects *really* make a useful difference to how a system sounds – and whether they're worth the extra over a freebie cable – then turn to page 22. Oh, and enjoy the rest of this issue too!

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



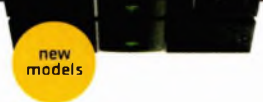
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new models

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This is the first time Naim has made such a major change to its power supplies in over 35 years. Introducing Naim's five new incredible DR power supply products...

Naim Loudspeakers

Naim loudspeakers have traditionally differed from the majority of competing designs while still faithfully maintaining the integrity of the musical performance.

Naim Equipment Support System

The reference Fraim and the new entry-level FraimLite cleverly operate on the principles of minimising microphony by decoupling individual shelving levels through various minimal contact interfaces.

Naim Accessories

Get the most from your Naim system with the affordable range of dedicated Naim cables and accessories.



Jordan Acoustics are specialists in *World Class Audio Systems*

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Audiofile: Marantz PM11S3



Year in music: 1989, The Stone Roses



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An excellent, elegant and largely self-effacing performer...

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AVAILABLE: AUGUST
CONTACT: 02890 279830
WEB: MARANTZ.CO.UK

First in Marantz's new flagship range of audiophile hi-fi separates is the elegant PM11-S3 integrated amplifier. Expect a streamer and SACD player too, says **David Price...**



It's always interesting to hear word of a new Marantz flagship, as news comes once in a blue moon. And when the products finally arrive, we often see the technology and styling cues trickling down into the company's more mainstream products not long after...

So, after several years since the arrival of the S2, and no less than eight since the original S1, please be upstanding for the PM-11S3 integrated amplifier. Said to combine "the very latest technologies and incorporating new ideas and thinking", it sports new Marantz HDAM-SA buffers. These are the company's own bespoke signal amplifiers built with discrete components, replacing what Marantz says are inferior op-amp solutions used in various rival products elsewhere.

The three-stage internal construction includes the preamplifier and a dual stage main-amplifier, plus an additional phono stage module. The chassis, along with the rear panel, is copper-plated to guarantee low impedance ground potential at any point for the best possible signal integrity. The circuitry is said to be symmetrical, with the shortest possible

signal paths. Special high-quality, high-purity copper speaker terminals are fitted, and a new power amp direct input. Juice comes courtesy of a very sizeable shielded toroidal transformer. Output power is quoted at 2x 100W into 8 ohms or 2x 200W into 4 ohms.

Marantz's Ken Ishiwata says that the new amplifier is, "the showcase of what the future will bring... a taste of the very best. Now in its third generation... (it is) now more sublime

Marantz's Ken Ishiwata says the new amplifier is the showcase of what the future will bring...

than ever". The new £3,599.90 PM-11S3 comes in a choice of black and gold. Later this year, a matching SA-11S3 SACD player will follow, and – interestingly – a high end network music streamer called the NA-11S1. Watch this space...

What we ear...

MUSICAL FIDELITY HAS ANNOUNCED TWO INTERESTING NEW PRODUCTS, SCHEDULED FOR RELEASE THIS AUTUMN. First is a high-end in-ear phone, released in September. The EB-50 is said to "achieve genuine studio monitor sound quality with that certain Musical Fidelity touch of lightness and musicality". It's an in-house design which has been in development for over a year. It sports a bespoke, non-resonant, mil-spec aluminium body.

This gives what is claimed to be ruler-flat frequency response, low distortion and high sensitivity (in the region of 100dB). The latter is particularly important given the variability of the headphone output stages in portables that the EB-50 is likely to be used with. Also, says the company, the high sensitivity means there is little inertia in the system. The product comes complete with multiple sets of eartips to ensure a perfect fit – noise isolation is claimed to be over 26dB.

The other new product, set for November release, is the M1S DAC. This is described as a digital/analogue preamplifier, DAC, headphone amp and analogue-to-digital convertor all in one, complete with Bluetooth apt-X and asynchronous USB up to 192kHz. "It is universal and does almost everything", says MF. It's basically an M1 DAC with added functionality, including two analogue inputs and four digital inputs (including coaxial, electrical and AES/EBU balanced). All digital inputs are reclocked and asynchronously upsampled to 24-bit/192kHz. The headphone stage is capable of 2 watts peak power, so should drive any type of headphone. For details, click on www.musicalfidelity.com.

Musical Fidelity's new M1S DAC [upper] and EB-50 in-ear phone [lower] are both out this autumn...



“The Truth, nothing more,
nothing less...”



“Ridiculously good in every
aspect of vinyl playback”
Diva IISP Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*, January 2011

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Hybrid power

A little-known name in audio introduces an interesting new tube/transistor phono stage...

Vinyl fans know that you can't always get what you want, as the format is amazingly capable, yet frustratingly flawed. One of the biggest headaches is getting that tiny signal from the moving coil cartridge (just a few millivolts) up to line-level (i.e. approximately 2V). The intriguingly named LongDog Audio's new phono stage claims to have the answer, with a clever – and unusual – hybrid of a single, super low noise Toshiba J-FET transistor combined with a triode valve in a cascode configuration. This gets around the need for complex circuitry or a transformer, which brings its own problems, says the company.

A quiet and stable power supply with active regulation is used,

along with individual power rails for the valve heaters. This comes via a custom designed toroidal transformer wound in the UK on an oversized core. A special single-stage equalisation section, using high tolerance parts that are then selected and matched to better than 0.1%, is used along with a high current, low impedance output stage, sporting a 5687 tube. This goes to the outside world via high quality sockets and PTFE insulated connecting cable. A thirty-second start up mute is featured, indicated by the flashing indicator on the power switch. Cartridge loading is achieved by the use of loading plugs from 10 ohm to 1000 ohm, and plugs can be provided for any required value.



PRICE: £1,950 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** MAINS-CABLES-R-US.CO.UK

My music

An affordable range of personal loudspeakers is launched

News reaches us that Musical Fidelity has started importing a new line of multimedia products. The new foxL v2 Bluetooth is said to be designed for the audio purist to bring smartphone and tablet music to life. It's described as a miniature audiophile portable music system that turns the palm of your hand into a personal auditorium, no less! The foxL v2 features two 25mm Linear Magnetic Drive woofers tuned to 100Hz, and a patented bass radiator said to extend bass by an octave. The protective rear grille doubles as a foldout speaker stand.



PRICES: £169 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 0208 900 2866 **WEB:** MUSICALFIDELITY.COM

Leading wedge design

THE NEW BANG & OLUFSEN BeoPlay A3 adds, says the company, a rich soundscape to the iPad experience. The motion sensor inside the £449 iPad dock knows what's up or down, and helps render the best possible listening experience. An omnidirectional two-inch woofer delivers bass all the way down to 60Hz, while half-inch tweeters are placed in the other corners.

The BeoPlay A3 decides which two of these to activate according to landscape or portrait orientation and is, says B&O, an ingeniously faceted wedge that allows you to fully enjoy all of the iPad's portable charms. Weighing just 1.5 kg, the battery keeps the tunes coming for five hours between charges.

bang-olufsen.com



Clear to hear

CLEARER AUDIO'S Copper-line Power Cable has been recently relaunched with some significant updates to its design, says the company. Features already include 6N Super Pure Copper (99.9999 percent) conductors, with a current rating of 26A to provide power transfer; CL3 (fire retardant) pure PVC insulation for performance and safety; and a 6N Super Pure Copper (99.9999 percent) Braid Shield and Dual-layer Copper Foil Shield. Now though, it's fitted with the same Super Suppressors seen on the more expensive Silver-line Power Cable. The results are clear to hear, say Clearer Audio, with a lower noise floor and improved clarity...

Despite significant increases in overall production costs, the new Copper-line Power Cable remains at the same price of £95 (1m) since its introduction in 2005. The hand-built cable comes complete with a 60-day money-back guarantee, and limited lifetime warranty.





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Web - www.avoke.co.uk

Pre position

New 32-bit USB DAC preamplifier launches in the UK

Perreaux has just released its new high-resolution audio preamplifier, the Audiant DP32. A fully balanced analogue preamp with onboard 32-bit/192kHz DAC and USB audio streaming, the Audiant DP32 is, says Perreaux, well-equipped to play today's high-resolution digital music.

"The DP32 raises the bar both for sound performance and musical enjoyment," says Martin van Rooyen, Perreaux managing director. "With ultra-low distortion and high dynamic range, the Audiant DP32 is ready to make your high-resolution music sound the best it ever has."

PRICE: £2,190 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01333 425 999 **WEB:** PERREAUX.COM

At the heart of the unit is ESS Technology's flagship 32-bit Sabre32 ES9018 digital-to-analogue converter. With six digital inputs (one AES/EBU, one asynchronous USB, two coaxial and two optical), the DP32 accepts all digital audio connections.

The fully balanced analogue preamp offers two buffered analogue inputs and accommodates both balanced XLR and single-ended cables. Equipped with what's claimed to be an intuitive and easy to use touch panel interface, the new DP32 is covered by a five year warranty and is available now.



Tube way barmy

Valve fans will surely love this new phono preamplifier from Canor...

Sound Foundations announces the Canor TP 206+, an all-valve stereo phono preamplifier. The TP 206+ lowers the entry level into the Canor range. It's a two box design, which ensures an excellent signal to noise ratio, and keeps the overall chassis size to a minimum, says Canor. The package consists of a separate power supply with "elaborate" anode power stabilisation circuitry to further decrease power supply-related noise.

For those wishing to use lower output moving coil cartridges, there's a built-in step-up transformer to get the signal levels up the point where it can be fed in to a line-level preamplifier.

PRICE: £1,600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01276 501 392
WEB: CANOR-AUDIO.COM



Spin doctors

Bluetooth connectivity enhances new speaker system

The Spinnaker speaker system from Edifier stands fifteen inches tall with an abstract shape that's designed to be visually striking, as well as a facilitator to enhance the audio performance. The shape projects sound towards the listener with a one-inch silk domed front facing tweeter, plus a three-inch midrange driver that's reinforced with a downward-firing four-inch subwoofer in each satellite.

The Spinnaker is Bluetooth-enabled, allowing audio connectivity to any Bluetooth device for versatile track navigation, play/mute and volume adjustment through the multi-functional dome-shaped remote control. An optical and auxiliary input port is also available for connectivity to other external multimedia devices simultaneously.

PRICES: £329.99 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01327 844880 **WEB:** EDIFIER-INTERNATIONAL.COM



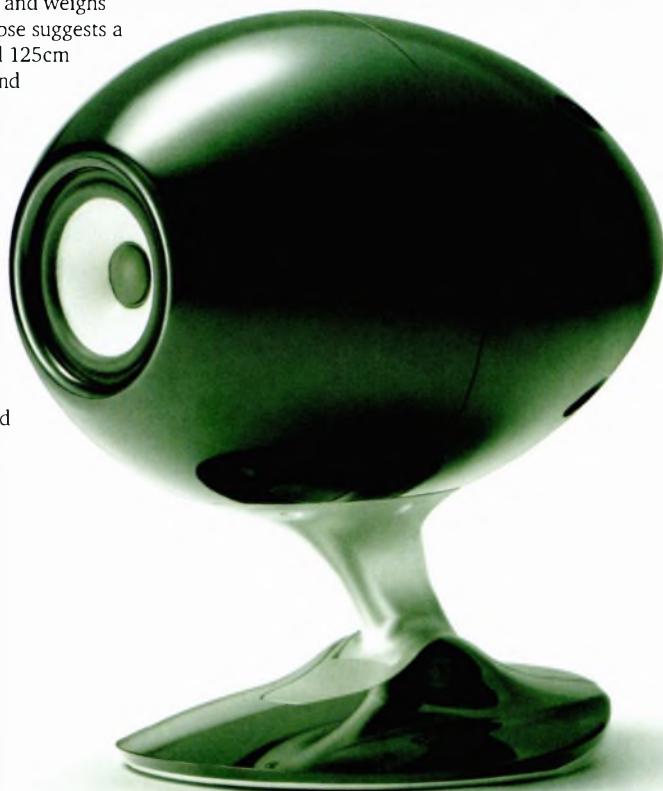
Sphere of music

Eclipse's latest loudspeaker continues the radical design theme...

The new Eclipse TD510zMK2 loudspeaker is, says the company, the first 5-series model to feature an integrated stand, as well as many of the key design elements of the Eclipse flagship, studio speaker, the TD712zMK2. Since developing the original 512 with Time Domain technology, Eclipse has been hard at work refining the series with special attention to precise angle adjustment, superior clarity and tight bass response.

Features include a 100mm diameter full-range fibreglass drive unit, 42Hz-22kHz (-10dB) frequency response, 84dB sensitivity, 25-50W output and 6 ohm impedance. On its stand, the speaker is 978mm high and weighs approximately 19.5kg. Eclipse suggests a distance of between 75 and 125cm between the loudspeaker and walls, as well as an angle adjustment of between 10-15 degrees.

According to the Japanese company, its new TD510zMK2 "recreates pure performance to reveal the very essence of the artists' passion and craft... the music should be reproduced just as it was created, with nothing added or reduced", no less!



PRICE: £3,840
AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: 020 7328 4499
WEB: ECLIPSE-TD.NET

Hi, Fidelio!

PHILIPS' new Fidelio DS6600 loudspeakers can unleash music stored on a computer for replay via a USB connection, or alternatively by a direct digital connection to an iPhone/iPod via the slide-out dock.

Philips Soundsphere technology means that the speakers feature a 25mm soft dome tweeter physically separated from the main speaker cabinet in a single, aluminium enclosure supported in free space by a rigid, sonically inert, arm.

The DS6600 is also bi-amped, with a 50W Class D amplifier and a high-quality digital crossover, to allow each driver to be powered independently. The £399 speakers use a 3.5mm audio jack to connect any other device. philips.com



NEWS IN BRIEF

•**IHEADPHONES** announces Future Sound Labs' new £60 FSL Zero Bluetooth headphones. These are, says the company, designed to combine sound quality and complete freedom of movement, with no wires to tangle up and tie you down...

There's one problem with most Bluetooth headphones, admits FSL. They tend to sound lightweight and compressed, with poor clarity, curtailed bass and a general lack of expression. So the company has Bluetooth circuitry incorporated within the headphones themselves, with easy-to-access control buttons positioned on each earcup, controlling key functions on the playback device. A high-quality microphone is also built in, for optimum convenience when taking or making phone calls. futuresoundlab.co.uk



•**LINN**, in partnership with Universal Music, plans to release Studio Master quality downloads of some of the best albums ever recorded.

Universal Music Group, which owns such iconic labels as Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Impulse! and Verve, became the first classical major in the UK to make its albums available in Studio Master quality.

Linn's commitment to high-quality recordings saw it named 'Label of the Year' by *Gramophone* magazine. Gilad Tiefenbrun, Linn's Managing Director, said, "We were the first to release music at Studio Master quality more than five years ago and we know there is a great appetite for high-quality digital music in the home. We welcome the move from Universal Music to partner with us in releasing its catalogue to aficionados who are tired of lesser quality downloads". linnrecords.com
umusic.com

CORRECTION: In our review of the Russ Andrews Ultrasocket in the August issue, we printed an incorrect telephone number for Russ Andrews. The correct number is 0845 345 1550.

Crystal Cable® has been trendsetting in creating and designing high-end audio components combining innovative technologies and a superb sound quality with an elegant and aesthetic look.

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by



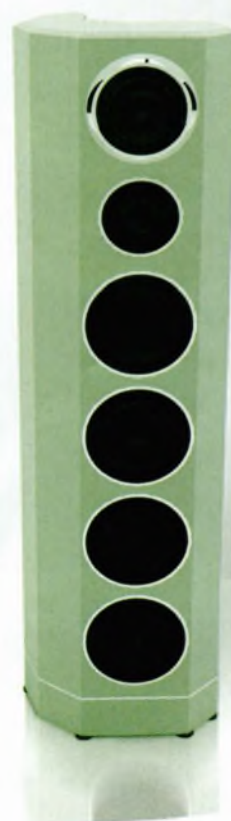
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For more information about the Arabesque loudspeaker range or Crystal Cable's comprehensive range of cable series please contact Absolute Sounds, +44 (0) 20 89 71 39 09, www.absolutesounds.com



Cooler shaker!



As big bangers go, there's nothing quite like a classic JBL monitor. **Malcolm Steward** swaggers to JBL's 4312E new loudspeakers...

In the genteel world of British hi-fi loudspeakers, it's fair to say that American companies such as JBL have traditionally been regarded with a slightly raised eyebrow. Like a square peg in a round hole, the product hasn't quite fitted the market – lacking the subtlety, finesse and physical compactness to really succeed. Indeed, some sections of the specialist hi-fi press have even been quite sniffy about the brand and its various products over the years. In a decorous tea drinking country, JBL has too often been dismissed for being a buzzy blend of coffee!

This is a tragedy, as it is to misunderstand what the company is about – which is building great, powerful, punchy products which suit the international pro market down to the ground. Indeed, JBL's heritage is in the world of rock music monitoring; it provided the PA system for The Who when they played Madison Square Gardens in New York about a decade ago. Designer Paul Bente was there, and told me over a beer that the brief from Pete Townshend was simple and straightforward, "I want speakers that will put out 130dB consistently and without any problems"...

From where I sat, it appeared that Bente and JBL had met that brief admirably. The PA was impressive when support act, Robert Plant played, but when The Who took the stage the FOH engineers found hitherto unexplored sound levels – which they usually seem to discover when the support leaves the stage – at around the same moment as they usually find a more respectable balance. The sound of the band was awe-inspiring: terrifyingly loud but as clean as a very clean whistle...

This is the back-story to the JBL brand, but it hasn't rested on its laurels since then, of course.

It has a modern, balanced range of products that extend far beyond the big box, wide-baffle form it became famous for in the late nineteen sixties and seventies.

The thing is, a lot of people still remember those big bangers with great affection. Indeed, the last JBL studio monitor I had the pleasure of playing with some twenty or more years ago, was the legendary 4310. That was a three-way of similar proportions to this big box you see before you, and also a heavyweight. This has prompted JBL to re-release some of its 43xx-series, for a whole new generation of music fans (and indeed some of the oldies, craving for their misspent youth!)

So, let's welcome the new 4312E to 2012. People don't routinely wear flares and kaftans anymore [well, not in the *Hi-Fi Choice* office – Ed.], and nor do we see many speakers shaped like this. The 'E' breaks so many rules of hi-fi best practice that it's almost not worth pointing them out – unfashionable drive unit cone materials, level controls, wide front baffle, boxy cabinets, thin walls. Until only fairly recently it would have been criticised for being a three-way, too – with its complex assemblage of 300mm pulp cone woofer, 125mm pulp cone midrange, and a 25mm aluminium/magnesium alloy dome tweeter. In true nineteen seventies style, if the sound balance of these is wrong, you just tweak the treble or midband level pads!

The various drivers sit, not terribly rigidly it must be noted, in 19mm particle board cabinets. While undeniably big, they lack the sense of solidity you'd normally expect from a £350 Monitor Audio standmounter. If Brussels ever decided to start making rules about speaker design, these JBLs would be the first to be banned.

For this reason alone, it's hard not to love the 4312Es – they're bad boys and they know it, yet care not a jot. Everything about them, from their

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
JBL 4312E
loudspeakers
£1,899.99

ORIGIN:
USA

TYPE:
heritage studio
monitor

WEIGHT:
17.8 kg

DIMENSIONS:
(W x H x D mm): 597
x 362 x 300 mm

DISTRIBUTOR:
Harman UK

TELEPHONE:
01707 27 8113

WEBSITE:
uk.jbl.com

basic topography to the crackle black cabinet finish and the rather *gauche* JBL logo on each side of the cabinet, will annoy the hell out of a certain sort of person. Forget *bijou* waterfront apartments, these speakers wouldn't look at all out of place if you put them on top of a beer crate, parked on stage at your local gig pub, as some spotty tribute band thrashes out Blue Oyster Cult covers. Everything about the style is redolent of JBL's classic 1968 4320 Control Monitor, which is what makes them so cool, Dude...

Sound quality

There's more to the 4312E than just attitude though. What really appeals to me about this loudspeaker is its extreme sensitivity. I have always appreciated easy-to-drive speakers, and I have no doubt that the JBLs quoted 93dB sensitivity [see *On Test*]

Forget *bijou* waterfront apartments, these speakers wouldn't look out of place on top of a beer crate...

will guarantee that even the owner of a low wattage valve amplifier will be able to extract realistic sound pressure levels from them. There is, however, a price to be paid for this ease of drive, and that can be heard, by those sensitive to the flatness of the frequency response, when you play full-range music through the 4312E. Even so, one cannot expect truly realistic sound from a three-way of this size. Even with a twelve-inch

Positively postmodern: the back panel of what looks like a classic JBL, but CE marked and with binding posts!



Q&A

MALCOLM STEWARD SPOKE TO JBL MARKETING MANAGER, MARK HOCKEY...



MS: Of all the new loudspeakers I've seen over the past couple of years, this is one of the most striking. What inspired JBL to come up with something as boldly retro styled as this?

MH: If you go back in history to around 1968, you find the 4320. This was, of course, the original JBL studio monitor, and one that changed everything in the recording market. This is where the concept of loudspeakers such as the 4312 originates. The 4312 and its brothers pay proper homage to those ground-breaking originals and still use the trademark white coned woofer and suchlike. It's important to note, however, that although the drive units might look identical to those originals, they have been updated with modern technology and materials. Even so, we do realise that loudspeakers such as the 4312 are not going to appeal to a wide audience. So we are not planning to sell thousands of pairs in the United Kingdom, but if you are looking for a studio type monitor or just a speaker that is lots of fun to live with, then they might well suit you.

In many ways, they certainly look and feel like a relic! How does JBL know that people will want to buy such self-consciously old skool loudspeakers such as this?

This is a heritage product and JBL wants people to know that the technology is still valid and available. The speakers do not fit into any of the company's contemporary ranges but every month we receive emails from people saying that they love the look of the 43xx models and wondering if we still make them. We are under no illusions here. We know that the 4312 is not going to be a runaway best seller in typical hi-fi volumes, but we are certain that the design will continue selling in smaller numbers, probably as long as we can make it. We're happy with that situation. It is, perhaps surprisingly you might think, already selling very well in Japan. Heritage goes down exceedingly well over there, it seems.

LAB REPORT



- 1 aluminium alloy dome tweeter
- 2 front mounted reflex port
- 3 midband and treble level controls
- 4 pulp coned midrange driver
- 5 loudspeaker binding posts
- 6 pulp coned bass driver

ON TEST

JBL specifies a high 93dB sensitivity for the 4312E, which is substantiated by our measured pink noise figure of 92.5dB. Such high sensitivity is typically achieved by lowering the impedance presented to the amplifier and/or curtailing bass response, but in both the respects the 4312E happily exceeds expectations. Although the 4.2 ohms minimum modulus indicates a 4 ohms nominal rating rather than JBL's specified 6

ohms, the 4312E is still not a difficult load to drive. Its EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance), which also takes into account impedance phase angle, hits a minimum of 2.7 ohms at 97Hz, which is higher than many modern speaker designs. And bass extension (47Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz, diffraction corrected) is as good or better than achieved by many modern medium-sized floorstanding designs. Distortion performance is

excellent too, the 0.1% THD figure recorded at 90dB SPL at 100Hz confirming the efficacy of JBL's Differential Drive technology. Where the wheels come off is in on-axis frequency response, where 200Hz-20kHz error figures of ±16.8dB and ±17.7dB respectively for the review pair are huge, principally due to suppressed and erratic treble output that dies above 15kHz. So, tonally balanced it is not! KH

woofer, it cannot move enough air to sound like a real band or orchestra playing. At best it is going to be a reduced scale facsimile – albeit it a loud one – when you consider that many bass guitarists use eight times as many 12-inch speakers in the cabinets in their back-line alone!

I began auditioning the 4312Es on the end of my regular system because I am intimately acquainted with its performance, and I know my Naim NAP250 power amplifiers are not bothered by loudspeakers with low impedance loads. I also drove the speakers with a Naim HDX-SSD/DAC/XPS player combination and a SUPERNAIT with TelluriumQ Ultra Black loudspeaker cables.

At the outset I was disappointed when I began listening to mostly rock-based material. For example, the presentation of *The Crane Wife 3* from Marianne Faithfull's album *Easy Come, Easy Go* seemed shouty and unrefined. Vocally there was little persuasion, and Faithfull sounded as though she was simply going through the motions and not trying to communicate with the listener. The outstanding bass work on *Sing Me Back Home* did not display its usual visceral impact, sounding rather wan. Her voice also sounded phoney and coloured, and more nasal than usual. It was

obvious that the speakers weren't really communicating with me – the presentation was somehow distant and bland. And from a hi-fi perspective, I was also disappointed with the lack of definition and dimension to the stereo soundstage.

Given that these are sizeable boxes, I duly set about moving them around my room – perhaps they were never going to work in the positions reserved for my usual reference loudspeakers,

Everything sounded big, fast, energetic and full of beans. Fun – yes, strictly accurate – no!

which are tall, modern column-type NEAT floorstanders. Half an hour or so of heaving and wheezing finally paid off, as the penny dropped that the big JBLs obviously did not appreciate being in near-free-space – they wanted to be back against a rear wall instead. And in my room they seemed to prefer being used horizontally, with quite a bit of toe-in. In this configuration I supported each cabinet with a pair of chunky stands for optimal rigidity and safety. So, lesson one, be sure to experiment

with positioning for the best possible sonic results...

The sound changed instantly from being unmusical and unappealing to being far cleaner, less coloured and decidedly invigorating. All the hi-fi aspects improved dramatically, with the soundstage and images snapping into far better focus and resolution.

The hard hitting dynamics of Speed Caravan's *Kalashnik Love* did not have their usual brutal attack, but sounded smeared and imprecise in the starting position, but when wall-reinforced the crisply defined notes of Mehdi Haddab's oud became evident, and indeed a joy to hear.

I then played that venerable audiophile favourite, Ernest Ranglin's *King Tubby Meets the Rockers* from the album *Below the Bassline*. This, with its thumping bass guitar arrangement, worked better than some of the more subtle music. Everything sounded big, fast, energetic and full of beans. Fun – yes, strictly accurate – no! The jazz guitar instrumentals of John McLaughlin, Bill Frisell and especially Joe Pass all seemed to tick all the correct boxes to elicit a thoroughly delightful performance from the speakers. They also fared well with *All or Nothing at All* from John Coltrane's album *Ballads*, delivering a very well balanced performance along with credible subtlety and appreciable *chiaroscuro*. There might have been a hint of coloration evident, but the drums,

bass, piano and saxophone were all comfortably locked tight into the same groove.

The JBLs saved their finest performance for the George Harrison home-studio-recorded album *Early Takes Volume 1*, however. Here they were truly persuasive and easily managed to convince me of Harrison's songwriting and guitar playing prowess. And I have to say that I have never had much respect

Like Marmite, you will love them or loathe them, with both emotions being unusually heartfelt...

for the man until I heard this album, and the 4312Es seemed near perfectly suited for replaying these enchanting demo tracks. With a certain sort of music and recording, these speakers just 'click' and start to sound far more than the sum of their parts. Unsurprisingly perhaps, it tends to be rock or jazz – this is certainly not a design that screams, "play a gentle violin concerto through me, mother!"

Indeed, the more tracks I played, the more this proved correct. For example, with the Free song *Oh I Wept*, the drum kit completely dominated the proceedings with the speaker in free space. This was far



HISTORY
JBL HAS A LONG AND FASCINATING HISTORY with loudspeakers. The company began during World War 2 under the control of James B Lansing. It produced, and continues to do so, loudspeakers for sound reinforcement (such as the truly enormous-for-its-day Grateful Dead "Wall of Sound" PA system), cinema, studio, automotive, and domestic use. The company has long been associated with some of the finest minds in loudspeaker engineering, such as the legendary Floyd Toole. It has owned magnificent production facilities – the famous over-half-million square foot Northridge plant in California. JBL now forms part of the Harman empire.

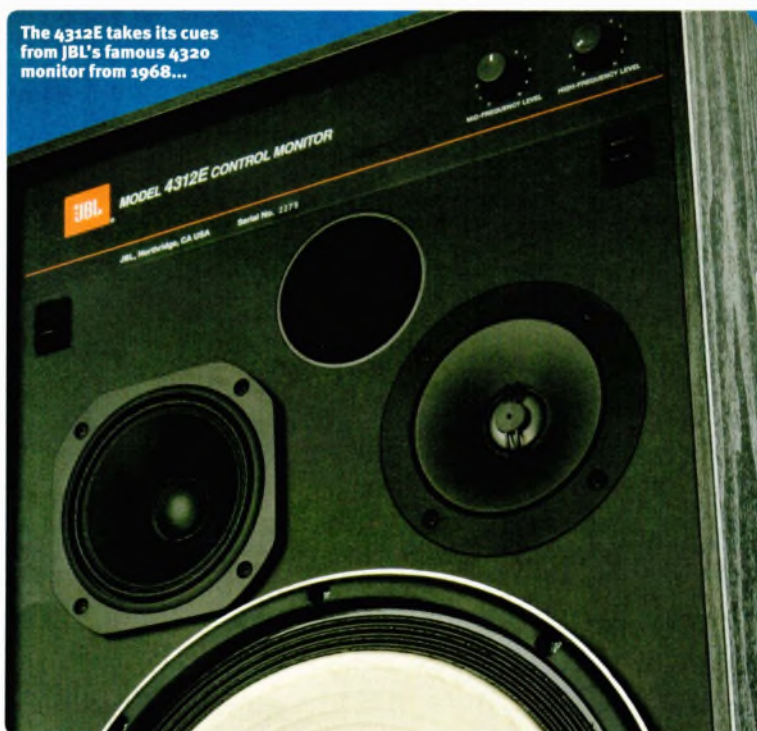
The original 4320 books shelf monitor took off in the late 1960s, with the arrival of many independent studios with restricted space in their control rooms. It was used as a near-field monitor parked on the control bridge of studio mixing desks, so its proximity to the engineer and its reduced interaction with the room acoustics meant that its fidelity was not a huge issue. It was compared more to the popular, but inaccurate monitor it replaced – the Altec 604 – than with any notion of accuracy or fidelity. The original design brief came from a studio owner who wanted monitors small enough to allow him to accommodate a monitor in the control room. The Altec 604 was too large for the job, so the 4320 ousted it from the role. The 4320 mimicked the presentation of the Altec 604, and so ruled the day. So you can forget any notions you've ever had about studio professionals selecting monitors on the basis of musical neutrality!

from ideal in this context, but perfect for anyone who wanted to learn the nuances of the drum part of this song. In the back-to-the-wall position the kit, while still prominent, assumed a more natural perspective while still being suitably dynamic. At the outset the 4312Es seemed eager to swing between performance extremes according to the music being played. But it's fair to say that once repositioned to gain some wall reinforcement, they settled down and became far more consistent and their sound much more palatable.

It's unfair to review a loudspeaker like this and criticise it for its lack of forensic precision and unerring neutrality. That was never going to happen. So my only criticism of them is their lack of composure at very high levels – this is closer to home as some buyers will want to blast them. While I was able to achieve sound levels that in most neighbourhoods would result in an Anti Social Behaviour Order, at the top of this range they did start to betray their cabinet construction quality, and sound less together than a similarly priced modern design. For most, generally sane people in the UK however, this shouldn't be too much of a concern...

Conclusion

It is indisputable that JBL's new 4312Es will never be all things to all men. Like Marmite you will love them or loathe them, with both emotions being unusually heartfelt, I suspect! But if they put a smile on your face, expect it quickly to become a permanent fixture. Speakers don't have to be accurate, providing they are fun. They are monitors, so do tend to highlight elements in recordings that you might prefer not to hear so emphatically. But they're also a good old-fashioned unreconstructed hoot to listen to. Just don't upset your neighbours! ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LUKE: Riotously fun sound; high sensitivity; über-cool retro styling
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Coloration; stereo imaging; lack of finesse; need careful positioning
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: A charismatic speaker for listeners of a similar disposition!
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	
OVERALL ★★★★★	

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How we test

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

HOW WE TEST

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

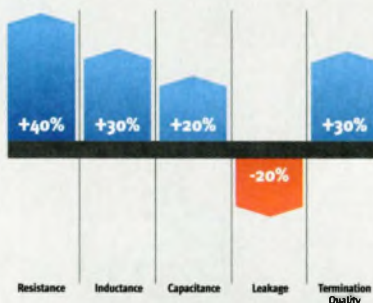
THIS CRUCIAL PROCESS IS VERY CAREFULLY CONTROLLED, so that we get reliable and consistent results in an easy, relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Our listeners must not feel they're being tested, despite being unaware of the brand or price of the products they are auditioning.

The session begins by setting the volume level to an agreed point, one that all three panelists are comfortable with, yet that is high enough to make differences easily discernible. Then the choice of music is agreed – it needs to be familiar, but also well recorded and of sufficient variety to give meaningful listening comparisons. The chosen selection of music is played, and then

the panelists are encouraged to discuss their impressions of the sound of the product. This is then repeated, and periodically the panel goes back to audition earlier products, for reference purposes. Regular breaks keep the listeners refreshed. The consensus, or otherwise, forms the basis of our reported Sound Quality section. At the end of the session, there's a final debrief when panelists discuss their findings.

It's an exhaustive process, but done this way an evaluation free of prejudices based on brand, price or appearance is made, while the different sensitivities of the listeners help round out the analysis and make it more widely applicable.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



SERIES RESISTANCE (1M LOOP)

Measured in mohm, this indicates the degree the cable resists the flow of direct current. High resistance may degrade treble quality in poorly earthed systems and aggravate dielectric absorption [see Leakage].

SERIES INDUCTANCE (1M LOOP)

Series inductance is measured in μH (thousandths of a Henry). This contributes to a cable's high frequency impedance and, with high capacitance, can make it more sensitive to any circulating RF noise.

PARALLEL CAPACITANCE (1M LENGTH)

Measured in pF (UK billionths of a Farad), parallel capacitance is a measure of the impedance between signal and return conductors at very high frequencies. Higher capacitance cables often exhibit poorer leakage.

LEAKAGE (1M LENGTH)

Leakage is measured as the DC resistance between unterminated signal and return conductors. Expressed in Mohm (millions of ohms), a low leakage figure either means a tight signal/return geometry or poor insulation.

TERMINATION QUALITY

A subjective estimation of the RCA quality and integrity of the cable's termination. Poor soldering, excessive flux and inadequate strain relief contribute to a low score.



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 likely 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.

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THIS MONTH'S LISTENING PANEL



PHILIP SWIFT (LEFT)

A MOVER AND SHAKER in the British hi-fi industry, in the nineteen seventies Philip founded Lecson, then set up Audiolab in the eighties before becoming MD at Spondor Audio Systems a few years ago.

MARK MANWARING-WRIGHT

ELECTRONICS ENGINEER AND HI-FI BUFF Mark recently gave up a sensible job in the real world to bring Ming Da tube amplifiers to the great British public. Displays a wide-eyed love of his craft, bless!

SIMON POPE (RIGHT)

MUSICIAN, RECORDING ENGINEER and then hi-fi magazine editor, Simon had yet another career change latterly to join the world of public relations. Has an ear for a tune and an eye for a shirt.

▶ REFERENCE SYSTEM

Disc player:

- Oppo BDP-95 (Audiocom modified)

Amplification:

- Musical Fidelity AMS35i

Loudspeakers:

- Quad 989

▶ TEST MUSIC

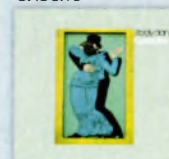
MAHLER
SYMPHONY NO. 5 (DG)
VIENNA PHILHARMONIC



MARVIN GAYE
WHAT'S GOING ON:
WHAT'S GOING ON



STEELY DAN
BABYLON SISTERS:
GAUCHO



Group test

INTERCONNECTS £150-£233

Totally wired

Audiophile interconnects – voodoo science, black magic or just plain old common sense? **David Price** finds out, as he compares a unique 12-way blind listening test...

I'VE BEEN A HI-FI WRITER FOR A GOOD FEW YEARS NOW. For this reason, it's only natural that I've almost lost the will to live when faced with the launch of yet another piece of plastic-coated copper wire with audiophile pretensions!

My position, since I first heard the difference for myself some thirty years ago, is that cables (be they interconnects or of the loudspeaker variety) *do* make a difference. My problem is that I think that it's sometimes overstated to the point of silliness, by manufacturers and reviewers alike. Forget Shakespeare – the purplest of prose that's ever come from a pen (or keyboard) is surely that from a cable company's press release, with a new bit of wire to sell!

What better then, than a nice *Hi-Fi Choice Blind Listening Group Test* to scythe the wheat from the chaff? Oh, and just for good measure – just to really raise the stakes – I elected to throw in a wild card. Yes, beside eleven carefully selected interconnects, most of which I personally know to be of

good (or better) quality, I would chuck in an OEM lead – the sort of thing that comes bundled with your average £30 supermarket DVD player!

The beauty of the blind format listening test is that it's great in precisely this situation. The listening panel expected they'd be listening to £150-£250 interconnects, not something that costs pennies from a bulk supplier...

The panel heard tangible differences between cables, although not as vast as with loudspeakers...

Reassuringly, the panel heard real, tangible differences – although not as vast as that between, say, my recent standmount loudspeaker supertest. So it's good to know that this industry isn't suffering from some sort of collective mass hysteria. Still, a good few added their own flavour to the music – as always it's useful to try them in your own system first if you can.



ON TEST



OEM (bundled) RCA lead
£free p25

Cheap and nasty, something any self-respecting audiophile wouldn't be seen dead with!



Atlas Hyper Pseudo Balanced
£233 p25

Popular premium-priced interconnect from the Scottish cable specialists.



Audioquest King Cobra
£215 p27

Beautifully finished product from a US brand normally associated with the high end.



Black Rhodium Symphony Stereo
£195 p27

From a very popular British affordable cable name comes this fine mid-price design.



Furutech ADL Alpha Line Plus
£210 p29

Immaculately built and finished interconnect from a relatively new Japanese brand.



Mark Grant G2000HD
£195 p29

This little British specialist manufacturer is rapidly winning friends and influencing people!



My Audio Design MyOx
£160 p31

This comes from an eccentric but talented young British speaker company.



Oyaide PA-02
£150 p31

The second of two Japanese designs here, this comes beautifully presented.



QED Signature Audio S
£171 p33

From one of Britain's biggest brands, this luxuriously finished wire promises much.



Tellurium Q Blue
£205 p33

This enigmatic Brit brand is fairly new to the UK cable scene, but is making many friends.



van den Hul The Sea 3T
£195 p35

A brand new design from the Dutch cable masters, we expect it to make a splash!



WireWorld Equinox
£220 p35

Well known abroad, this US cable specialist is finally making a name for itself here.





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www.trackaudio.co.uk

Track Audio

OEM bundled cable

Can a standard, bundled cable compete with the other more expensive designs?

PRICE: £FREE

There's nothing fancy about this – it's the sort of interconnect that comes bundled with cheap CD players, tuners and streamers. Gold plated phono plugs are its only concession to audiophile best practice, and the cable feels cheap and flimsy.

Sound quality

The first few bars of Steely Dan's *Babylon Sisters* didn't sound too bad. I noticed no particular grimacing on the faces of the panelists, who of course remained blissfully(?) unaware of what they were listening to. But after a few minutes and a switch to the Mahler piece, I began to discern a certain twitchiness, however...

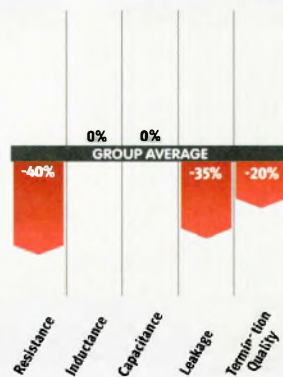
The panel's considered verdict was that this cable sounded reasonably crisp and open in its way, with a fair smattering of detail. It wasn't overly horrible to listen to, with everything fairly tidy and neat. But beyond that, things began to go sour. One listener thought it rhythmically vague and uninvolved, another said it was coarse across the midband, noting how fierce the brass sounded in the Mahler. And yet, despite this brightness, the low level midband detail was poor – violins sounded a little cloudy and lightweight.

Orchestral crescendos were the worst, the whole soundstage getting lighter, coarser and descending into something of a muddle. There seemed to be a pretty direct correlation between what was asked of the cable, and what it was (un)able to do. It sounded mediocre, but absolutely nothing more.

ON TEST

Freebie patch cords can vary substantially in performance, loop resistance fundamentally determined by the thickness of the central strand(s) and coverage of the peripheral braid. Almost all such interconnects are simple coaxial types. Our sample presented a 290mohm loop resistance and moderate 115pF capacitance and 0.6µH inductance. The 20Mohm leakage is a reflection of the basic quality dielectric. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Atlas Hyper Balanced

The first proper audiophile cable comes from a respected Scottish brand...

PRICE: £233 DISTRIBUTOR: ATLAS CABLES
TELEPHONE: 01563 572666 WEBSITE: ATLASCABLES.COM

One of the more expensive designs here, this features a Teflon outer, holding forty eight concentric strands of highly pure oxygen-free conductors. Overall build quality of the cable was good, although not quite the best here, and it came well packaged.

In absolute terms, the Atlas was just a touch too 'well lit' across the midband for the panelists, who all agreed it was the sort of cable you'd deploy to pep up an overly smooth or dull sounding system – rather than being strictly neutral. A fine cable then, and one of the more charismatic performers here.

Sound quality

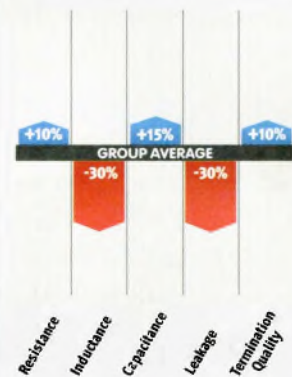
If ever there was a night and day difference in sound quality, moving from the OEM to the Atlas was it. Pretty much every aspect of the performance improved, on all types of music tried. Moreover, it wasn't just a superficial improvement – the sort of that makes it sound more 'hi-fi' – but an out and out musical one too.

The Atlas sounded large and powerful with the Mahler, commanding the music rather than being swayed by it. One panelist remarked that it was brighter, yet smoother than the OEM. It allowed the music's tonality to ring out, without descending into coarseness. The pattern continued with other tracks, where this interconnect showed a very pleasing depth and dimensionality. Excitement was its hallmark; the listeners felt it wasn't the most detailed of the group, or the most refined and/or neutral, but it was always fun to listen to.

ON TEST

'Hyper Symmetrical' in the context of this Atlas interconnect refers to the matched signal and return cores, each a dense bundle of 48x6N OCC copper strands insulated in a heavy PTFE dielectric. The result is a 80mohm loop resistance and low 85pF capacitance (but slightly above-average 0.9µH inductance). The 31Mohm parallel resistance suggests some slight leakage but termination is by crimping, not soldering. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★☆☆☆☆ **LIKE:** Errm... it's free!
DISLIKE: Thin sound, prone to coarseness; muddled midband on crescendos; poor detail

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★☆☆☆☆ **WESAY:** Build quality and sonic performance that only its mother could love, but then again it's not expensive!

FINISH ★☆☆☆☆

OVERALL ★★☆☆☆



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Big, bold, powerful and musical nature; decent build

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks the last few percent of detail, depth and finesse that some others here have

FINISH ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Classy, high-quality interconnect with an enjoyable sound

OVERALL ★★★★★



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UPGRADES

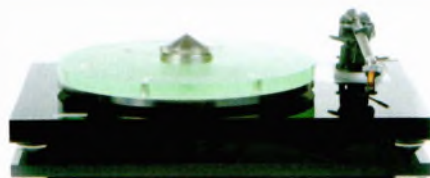
for Rega
Turntables

- For:**
- excellent midband focus
 - super bass grip
 - fine speed stability
 - enhanced dynamics
 - fit and finish
- Against:**
- nothing

vivid
UPGRADES

for Linn LP12
Turntables

- For:**
- silky, spacious midband
 - superior grip and focus
 - enhanced dynamics
 - fit and finish
- Against:**
- nothing



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Audioquest King Cobra

An immaculately presented interconnect from an iconic high end brand...

PRICE: £215 DISTRIBUTOR: AUDIOQUEST
TELEPHONE: 01249 848873 WEBSITE: AUDIOQUEST.COM

This is one of the most lavishly presented cables here, and looks and feels highly impressive. Another copper stranded design, it sports a polyethylene air tube insulation system, and the connectors are 'cold welded' rather than soldered.

Sound quality

Right from the off, this proved one of the most distinctive sounding cables in the group, in an unexpected and surprising way. At first listen, the panel felt the Audioquest to be highly impressive. It sounded live and direct in a way that few of the other cables managed; it seemed to rip into Steely Dan, giving a punchy rendition with a seriously impactful bass. Tonally it was smoother and warmer than most, and it appeared to have lots of fine detail across the midband, too...

However, as listening progressed it seemed to be introducing an element of compression to things; quieter parts sounded louder and more impressive – bringing the vocals forward on *Babylon Sisters*, for example. Yet the cable seemed to sit on orchestral crescendos slightly, lacking final dynamic impact. This certainly made for an interesting listen, picking out filigree detail better than many

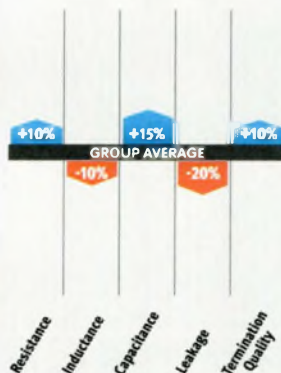
and giving a sense of purpose to music that might otherwise meander along. One panelist pointed out that this cable was "never unpleasant" to listen to, just not particularly neutral.

This is precisely the sort of cable that needs a careful audition; it'll work wonders in some systems, but not in others.

ON TEST

A modern take on the solid-core theme, King Cobra employs four copper conductors, three loosely jacketed in individual polyethylene 'tubes' (one for signal, two for return), while the fourth core acts as a drain wire for the conductive PVC and foil screen. Termination is by crimping rather than soldering. The combination results in a moderate 80mohm resistance, low 85pF capacitance but slightly higher 0.7µH inductance. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Black Rhodium Symphony Stereo

How does this popular British cable brand fare against such stiff competition?

PRICE: £195 DISTRIBUTOR: BLACK RHODIUM
TELEPHONE: 01332 342233 WEBSITE: BLACKRHODIUM.CO.UK

An English designed and built cable, it uses silver-plated copper in a two-core braided screened configuration. Low-loss PTFE inner insulation is used, as with many designs here. Although not badly presented, the Symphony wins no special prizes for build.

sense of the cable imposing itself on the music – for better or for worse. Instead, it just seemed to let what the musicians were doing percolate through to the listener.

Tonally smoother and warmer than some, this won't suit all tastes, but its organic musicality will surely win it many friends.

Sound quality

Whereas many cables here gave interesting and/or exciting performances, the Black Rhodium was initially rather underwhelming. But as the session progressed, the panel came to really value this aspect of its performance.

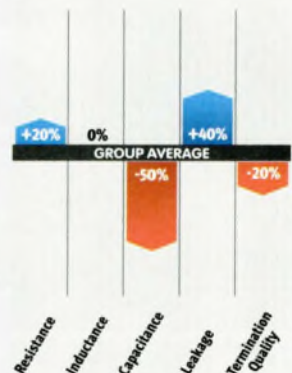
Indeed, "in a calm, gentle way, this is one of the most revealing wires here", said one panelist. Another agreed, "you can hear what's going on better than almost all the others here – from the gong on the Mahler piece to the rhythm guitar of Steely Dan". The plaudits continued, as the panel enjoyed the cable's particularly easy and smooth lyrical flow.

Tonally it was described as a little shiny in the treble, but quite warm lower down. Midband was fairly open, and it just seemed to lock the rhythms together in a beguiling way that few others here managed. Unlike the Audioquest for example, there was very little

ON TEST

Never tug on this cable (grip the barrel only) for the Symphony's gold-plated plug is not securely clamped to its purple jacket. Otherwise it's a great cable – a symmetrical design with matching signal/return cores employing silver-plated strands and a superior PTFE dielectric, although the 210pF capacitance is a little above the norm. The braided screen is terminated at the destination-end of the cable only. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, punchy sound; strong, confident bass; good musicality

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Subtlesens eof dynamic compression; lack of neutrality

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Impressively built and presented cable with attractive sound, but not for all...

FINISH ★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lovely 'easy' manner to the way it makes music; warmish tonality handy for brighter systems

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not as well built or finished as some others here

FINISH ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A lovely, smooth, charming listen

OVERALL
★★★★★



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Furutech ADL Alpha Line Plus

One of the more affordable products from a respected high end name...

PRICE: £210 DISTRIBUTOR: SOUND FOUNDATIONS
TELEPHONE: 01276 501 392 WEBSITE: ADL-AV.COM

This Japanese cable sports copper conductors with 'special grade' polyethylene foam insulation, running via two twisted cores with cotton filler, wrapped with resonance suppressing unwoven tape. Build quality is excellent and finish commensurate.

Sound quality

After the Black Rhodium, this was quite a contrast. Whereas the last cable had been rather smooth and seductive, this had firecracker dynamics, lightning reflexes and a stark openness to its sound that impressed but didn't always please. It certainly did not sugar the musical pill – which will be what some want from cables, and others don't.

One panelist praised its "fabulous top end, which started fast and finished fast". The ripple of the solo trumpet in the Mahler piece was easy to hear, as was the rhythm guitar work on Steely Dan, whereas a good few other cables subsumed them into the mix. Vocals were cohesive and precise, and the Furutech gave a decent account of the music's rhythmic flow, even if it wasn't as funky and the Black Rhodium or Mark Grant, for example.

Some slight congestion was noted on complex orchestral crescendos, although generally

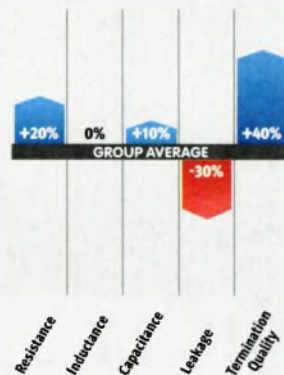
the spry, crisp and dry Furutech held things together fairly well. There was some brightness too, the rasp of the Mahler trumpets could turn to stridency in some more upfront systems.

Although in the final analysis a tad analytical, everyone on the panel respected the Furutech's big, fresh detailed, open sound.

ON TEST

Key to the performance of all Furutech cables is its cryogenic treatment of conductors and plugs. This version has a symmetrical geometry with a pair of 30x0.18mm stranded conductors, insulated with a high density polyethylene, and packed in a cotton filler. The loop resistance of the 'alpha conductors' is a low 60mohm, but the close packing results in a moderate 40Mohm leakage. Build and solder quality is excellent. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, open, crisp, detailed sound; superb build and finish

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly stark tonality won't suit all

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A powerful performer, this slickly presented cable will suit those craving a super-clean, spacious sound

FINISH
★★★★★

OVERALL



Mark Grant G2000HD

This obscure British built cable faces tough competition, but...

PRICE: £195 DISTRIBUTOR: MARK GRANT CABLES
TELEPHONE: 01482 887717 WEBSITE: MARKGRANTCABLES.CO.UK



Described as a "high purity copper cable", this is a solid-core design surrounded by gas-injected dielectric insulation and dual layer shielding using copper braiding and a translucent PVC outer jacket. Build is solid, if not quite in the Furutech class.

Black Rhodium, yet lacked their relative vices too.

Its strong dynamics, midband clarity and commanding, yet tuneful bass were all positives. The only criticism was an ever-so-slightly veiled treble that lacked the sparkle of the Furutech, for example. Overall though, this cable was a star.

Sound quality

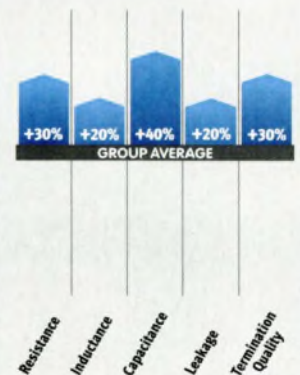
The opening few bars of the Mahler piece had eyebrows raising, Roger Moore-style. Here was a cable that seemed to dissolve away and let the music do the talking. Panelists' attention wasn't drawn to any one single aspect of this cable's performance, rather it was its ability *not* to perform – and to delegate things to the musicians themselves – that surprised everyone so much.

One listener reported that it had, "a majestic sound – this is what we should be hearing". Another commented that, "weirdly, that to me sounded more like I was sitting in front of an orchestra". The third, not wishing to editorialise, simply praised it for the headroom it showed on the Mahler, and called it "natural sounding". Indeed, the general picture was of a very organic sound, but without the starkness of, say, the Furutech. It also had even better musical flow than the Atlas or

ON TEST

Fitted with WBT's fancy 0110 locale copper plugs, the underlying cable is a standard unsymmetrical coaxial type with a solid signal conductor, separated from its return braid and screen by a foamed dielectric. The sheer density of copper suppresses the loop resistance down to 45mohm (1m loop), while the geometry holds parallel capacitance to just 52pF. Build quality is good and the WBTs are a 'must have' for many audiophiles. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Superbly open and natural sound that doesn't editorialise

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** A teensy bit veiled at the very top

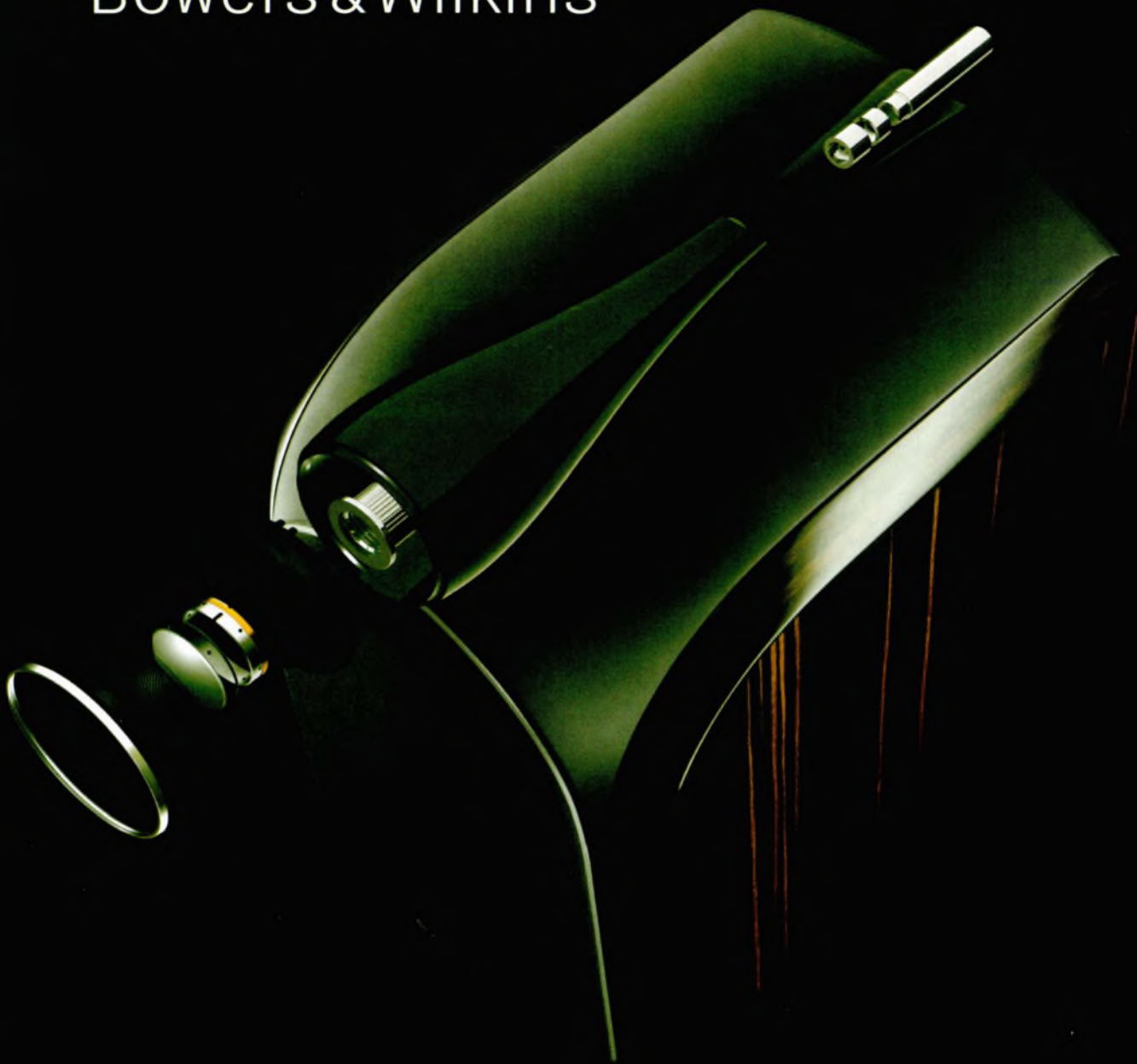
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A mysterious brand perhaps, but its unalloyed musicality is plain for all to hear. An essential audition!

FINISH
★★★★★

OVERALL



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www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk/pm1

My Audio Design MyOx

An eccentric British brand, this cable is designed to appeal to audiophiles...

PRICE: £160 DISTRIBUTOR: MYAUDIODESIGN
TELEPHONE: 0207 839 8880 WEBSITE: MADENGLAND.COM

The unusually entitled MyOx features carefully designed coaxial copper Litz core cables which are insulated with two layers of special PVC, shielded with aluminium foil. An ultra thin Teflon outer is fitted. Build quality is decent at the price.

Sound quality

Were you to take the key positives of the Mark Grant cable, then drop them down a shirt size or two to reflect the MyOx's considerably lower price, then you'd get the sort of sound we heard here. Essentially it's a very musical cable – but it loses some of the organic nature of the Mark Grant and Black Rhodium designs, along with a good deal of their treble finesse.

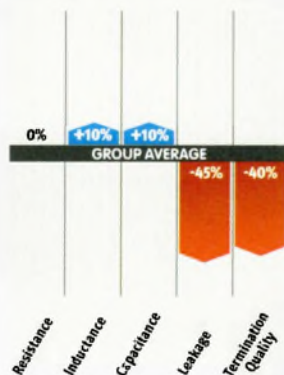
In its place, the MAD has an obviously more forward and summary midband which just goes in and gets the job done, no questions asked. There's a bit less refinement and little more 'noise' between the notes, but still the panel felt that all the music auditioned bounced along with heady aplomb. Indeed, the Ox's bass won universal praise, for being big and firm and fun – "rather nice", one listener called it. Rhythms were fun, with explicit dynamic accenting that got us into the groove.

However, treble wasn't liked as much – trumpets on the Mahler piece were a tad shrill and cymbals on Steely Dan lacked finesse. Also, soundstaging wasn't quite up to the general standards of the group. Still, considering its very reasonable price, this cable represents a fine budget buy.

ON TEST

At its heart, 'My Ox' is a traditional unsymmetrical coaxial interconnect with a 0.65mm multistrand signal conductor plus braid-and-foil screen. Soldering quality is below that expected for the price and there's no strain relief for those chunky Cardas plugs – a heatshrink 'clamp' should be the minimum here. The bulk parameters – 105pF capacitance, 84mohm loop resistance and 0.4µH inductance are all straight-down-the-line. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★☆

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FINISH
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Powerful, musical sound that captures the spirit of a performance very capably...

DISLIKE: Treble a little less finessed than many others here, but it is much cheaper...

WE SAY: Fine value cable, well worth a listen

Oyaide PA-02

Another fairly new name to the UK, this Japanese brand has plenty to offer...

PRICE: £150 DISTRIBUTOR: BLACK RHODIUM
TELEPHONE: 01332 342233 WEBSITE: OYAIDE.COM

Specially treated copper wire is used, allied to a halogen-free outer sheath developed specifically for audio applications. Formed polypropylene was chosen for the dielectric material, and a gold-plated brace plug is fitted. Build is superb at the price.

If there's one failing, it proved to be the soundstage, which the panelists felt to hang around the area of the loudspeakers a little too much, lacking a positive centre image. But even this wasn't particularly prominent – overall the Oyaide proved a very reasonable jack of all trades and master of none.

Sound quality

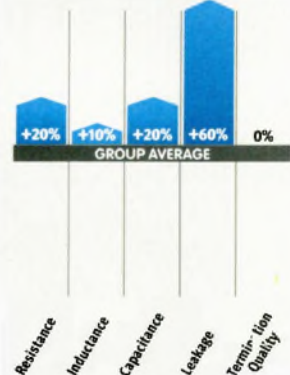
This reminded the panelists of the Furutech, only less so! It proved rather Japanese in its big 'hi-fi' sound, although it was milder and less conspicuously so compared to its compatriot. The listeners reported that it was quite well balanced, detailed and generally "not a bad cable".

Sonically speaking then, the Oyaide garnered faint praise. It was applauded for its fairly wide soundstage and decent depth. Whilst its tonal balance was less warm than the Black Rhodium and Mark Grant, it was acceptably smooth and didn't transgress into sibilance. Rhythmically it wasn't bad, capturing the meat saw-style bow work of the cellists of the Vienna Philharmonic nicely, whereas some others did not. It impressed with the clarity of its low level detailing, such as the backing Fender Rhodes keyboard work in the Steely Dan song. But still it didn't quite set the world alight...

ON TEST

Featuring PCOCC-A conductors, the PA-02 has a symmetrical geometry with a twisted signal/return pair, these insulated in polypropylene and surrounded by a braided copper screen. The return conductor and screen are terminated at both ends of the cable, potentially reducing directionality and helping reduce the loop resistance to a low 48mohm. Capacitance is also low at 80pF, inductance moderate and solder quality average. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FINISH
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Competent all round sound; excellent build and finish

DISLIKE: Nothing to get excited about, performance-wise...

WE SAY: Decent across-the-board contender that's very good value for money



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QED Signature Audio S

From one of the longest established and most iconic names in interconnects...

PRICE: £171 DISTRIBUTOR: ARMOUR HOME
TELEPHONE: 01279 501111 WEBSITE: QED.CO.UK

One of relatively few silver-plated copper designs here, it uses three conductors with a dual layer electrostatic screen, inside a foamed polyethylene dielectric. Rhodium plated, aluminium shelled RCA plugs complete what is a very well made cable.

Overall, this cable seemed to be voiced for a 'love at first listen'-type showroom experience. Trouble is, when you take it home and meet its mother – metaphorically speaking – the QED impresses less. A fine upgrade on cooking cables, but others here proffer more authentic musical charms.

Sound quality

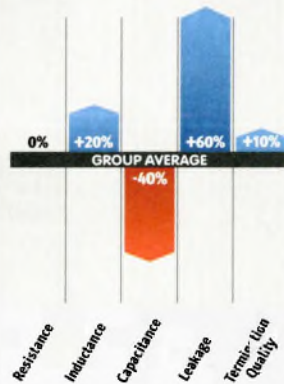
The listening panel soon twigged that this had its very own sonic signature, which was generally praised for its immediate, engaging nature, plus a strong bass and explicit midband. Instruments seemed to jump out of the mix more easily than with most cables here, almost as if a spotlight had been shone on them.

The panelists enjoyed its full bass and spacious midband – the way it conveyed Donald Fagen's lead vocals was impressive. "Quite upfront, I liked it", said one. Another commented on the full-bodied sound of the orchestra, and its rich instrumental timbre. But the panelists became increasingly aware of its distinctive voicing. That well lit midband, slight lack of depth perspective and a certain lack of rhythmic fluidity gave it a more processed sound than the best here, which in turn made it less easy to get lost in the music.

ON TEST

What QED refers to as a 'tri-parallel conductor geometry' is a coaxial-type construction with three twisted conductors for signal and two braided screens, the innermost acting as return. The multistranded conductors use silver-plated 5N OF copper with a foamed polyethylene dielectric conferring minimal leakage (>350Mohm), a low 87mohm resistance and 0.35µH inductance. Soldering is slightly heavy but build is otherwise excellent. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Tellurium Q Blue

A recent arrival to the British cable scene, this mid-price wire promises much...

PRICE: £205 DISTRIBUTOR: TELLURIUM Q
TELEPHONE: 01458 251997 WEBSITE: TELLURIUMQ.COM

Here is one bashful manufacturer that doesn't like to boast what's in its cables.

There is no marketing information on what materials are used. This is surely no great loss, and there's too much hyperbole on the subject of wires! Construction is decent.

punchy attack of – say – the Atlas, still the Tellurium Q manages to make an emotional event take place before you.

This throws the listener off the scent of its slightly opaque midband and subtly veiled top end. Thanks to its super musicality, the Blue covers its few failings very well indeed.

Sound quality

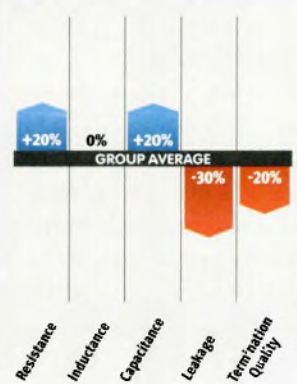
This is one of the most distinctive sounding designs here – which will be a good or a bad thing depending on your point of view. It's an usually warm and cossetting performer, delivering quite a romantic sound that seems to home in on the aspects of the recording that centre around emotion.

The Mahler piece came over differently to almost all the others here. Only the Mark Grant and Black Rhodium caught the 'feel' of this live recording as well as the Tellurium Q. The listeners enjoyed the expansive and fulsome soundstage, with its large bass and capacious, slightly hazy midband. It's pretty much the antithesis of the Japanese cables, inasmuch as it sweetens and softens things tonally, but does so while retaining a limpet-like grip on the music's inner rhythm. So while drums on *Babylon Sisters*, for example, don't have the

ON TEST

Removing the heatshrink branding from one end of this 'Blue' cable reveals a basic unsymmetrical coaxial geometry with an insulated multistrand signal core and peripheral braid as screen and return. Termination (soldering) quality was below the standard expected at this price. Capacitance (80pF) and loop resistance (51mohm) are usefully low, but the moderate 50Mohm leakage may be a by-product of soldering flux. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Bright, open, accessible sound has showroom appeal; classy build quality
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not the most neutral, or musical here
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Decent all-round design, but faces serious competition at its price...
FINISH ★★★★★

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Supple, sensual and musical like few others here
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Subdued treble, hazy midband
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A real character cable, those craving an organic sound will love it. But for an all-rounder, best look elsewhere
FINISH ★★★★★

OVERALL





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van den Hul The Sea 3T



This nautically themed Dutch cable makes quite a splash...

PRICE: £195 **DISTRIBUTOR:** HENLEY DESIGNS LTD
TELEPHONE: 01235 511166 **WEBSITE:** VANDENHUL.COM

Silver plated copper and vdH's 3T material form the single core conductor, surrounded by a layer of Linear Structured Carbon. The screen is a combination of silver-plated copper braid and 3T, sleeved by vdH's Hulliflex. Build is superb.

Overall, the van den Hul was an extremely strong performer at the price in most areas, yet as with so many cables here it wasn't universally perfect. It seemed a little more music-dependent than it should ideally have been. Another case of try before you buy – of course all should be but this even more so!

Sound quality

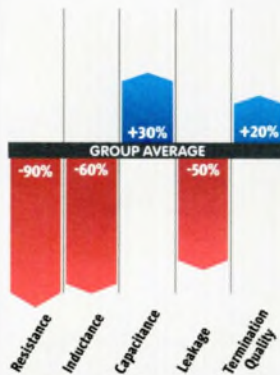
If the Tellurium Q was soft, downy and cossetting, the vdH was precisely the opposite. It came over as very bracing, with a starkness that reminds one of a stiff North Sea breeze! However, it was cleaner and much less full of silt than the aforementioned body of water – throwing out a vast, open soundstage inside which instruments sat remarkably securely with amazing focus.

Rhythmically it impressed too, giving a decent turn of speed to Steely Dan, for example, and making Marvin Gaye really get it going on. There seemed to be loads of space between the notes, which made for a very enjoyable listen. But further discussion had one panelist reporting a little confusion on the Mahler crescendos, while another said he'd heard a slight sustain on loud classical orchestral passages, which slightly affected The Sea's rhythmic coherence.

ON TEST

Some 18 years ago, VdH's initial 'hybrid' cables employed carbon conductors but incurred a high ~400ohm loop resistance. The Sea interconnect also employs a single signal conductor of moderate 70hm resistance (enough to aggravate a hum loop in some systems), while the silver-plated copper screen offers <80mohm. Capacitance is very low at 60pF but the 13Mohm parallel resistance suggests some slight leakage. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



WireWorld Equinox 6



This US cable company is looking to reach out across the pond...

PRICE: £220 **DISTRIBUTOR:** WIREWORLD UK
TELEPHONE: 020 8991 9200 **WEBSITE:** WIREWORLDCABLE.CO.UK

Purple Prose of the Year award goes to WireWorld for its trademarked verbiage describing this cable. Basically it's a three-conductor silver-plated copper cable with 'Composilex' contacts and snazzy 'Silver Tube' phono plugs – all decently screwed together.

speakers and shouting just a touch too much.

Despite this, at the very top the panel felt it was a just a touch subdued. This made it marginally less enjoyable in terms of reproducing the recorded acoustic. Overall though, a very solid effort that's well up the rankings.

Sound quality

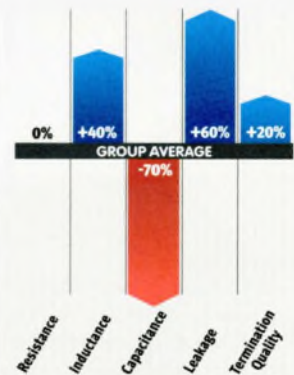
One of the less characterful in the group, this cable impressed the panel by not creating too much of a diversion from the music itself. It allowed much of the pomp and splendour of the Mahler to shine through, with a powerful and reassured presentation that revelled at conveying the rasping brass and shimmering strings.

One panelist reported it as "handling everything well", another described it as a "good all-rounder", the last one saying it "projected the music better than most" with a particularly good timbre to the trumpets on the classical piece. However, although it was considerably more neutral than most here – thanks to its general lack of coloration and fairly unimpeded rhythms – it was hardly Switzerland in its dealings with some of the brighter orchestral tones. Trumpets could become a little lively on orchestral peaks, the music reaching out of the

ON TEST

If awards were dished out for buzz words, this Equinox 6 would win hands down. The 'DNA Helix' construction appears to be based around three insulated conductors (two for signal, one for return) that are each composed of four multistranded layers. Loop resistance is moderate at 100mohm, while its very low 0.25µH series inductance is traded for a higher-than-average 300pF capacitance. Build quality is good. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Exceptionally powerful, open and spacious sound; excellent build quality

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Timing not as natural as some; tonally a little stark

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Highly impressive performer, well worth auditioning

FINISH ★★★★★

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sonically a fine all-rounder, good at most things, hard to dislike

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Subdued at the very top, yet a touch lively in the upper mid

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A much liked interconnect that will please many; well worth an audition!

FINISH ★★★★★

OVERALL



More than words



words
that count . . .



'Amazingly clean and transparent sound, agility and seamless integration.'

What Hi-Fi Jun 10 • What Hi-Fi Award Winner 2010

'Excellently engineered and finished, the Spendor A9 is a fine loudspeaker with a thoroughly modern appearance and sound quality, with class leading bass power, extension, attack and speed. Representing good value and overall performance, the A9 deserves HIFICRITIC recommendation.' **Hi-Fi Critic Awards Recommended 2010**

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'Spendor's new A9 is one impressive loudspeaker.'

Hi-Fi World Mar 11



A3



A5



A6



A9

SPENDOR

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The Spendor A-line

Listening test verdict

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









The panel loved the silky cohesion of the Black Rhodium, but the Mark Grant improved on it further still, with an expansive and open yet beguiling sound. It simply got to the soul of the music better than any other cable here. A very worthy winner, then.







If there was ever any doubt in my mind that spending £200 on an audiophile cable was worth it, then this test dispelled it – the premium wires usefully improved the sound.

They produced a wider, more spacious soundstage plus better rhythms and dynamics. The Atlas, Audioquest and QED gave an upfront and punchy performance, the Furutech and Oyaide

a cleaner and crisper one. The Wireworld and vdH had the best of both. The MAD, Tellurium Q and Black Rhodium were more organic in nature, perfect for more upfront systems.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	 OEM (bundled) RCA lead	 Atlas Hyper Pseudo Balanced	 Audioquest King Cobra	 Black Rhodium Symphony Stereo	 Furutech ADL Alpha Line Plus	 Mark Grant G2000HD
Price	£0	£233	£215	£195	£210	£195
Sound	★☆☆☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★☆☆☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Finish	★☆☆☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Construction	Great value, but only because it's free! Hard sound, best avoided	Convincing performer with enjoyable power, punch and rhythms	Delivers a pleasingly full and forceful sound, but not strictly neutral	Charmingly smooth and musical sound, although build not quite the best	Ultra crisp and clear sound, but a bit dry; superlative build	Beautifully lyrical sound allied to super detailing and depth
copper	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
silver-plated copper	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
carbon hybrid	No	No	No	No	No	No

Make/model	 My Audio Design MyOx	 Oyaide PA-02	 QED Signature Audio S	 Tellurium Q Blue	 van den Hul The Sea 3T	 WireWorld Equinox
Price	£160	£150	£171	£205	£195	£220
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Finish	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Construction	Enjoyably musical. Less polished than pricer rivals, but great value	Glass-clear sound with oodles of detail, but too stark for some tastes	Big, fun and fresh sounding cable that's fine value for money	Ultra musical cable with euphonic presentation that many will love	Super spacious, glass-clear sound, but possibly too spry for some?	Highly balanced and even sounding design that many will love
copper	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
silver-plated copper	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
carbon hybrid	No	No	No	No	Yes	No

BUYING ADVICE

Many years ago, when hi-fi was in its infancy, one mark of a good amplifier was its wide selection of tone controls and filters. In the nineteen eighties, these began to disappear, not least because modern music sources like CD were far cleaner than scratchy old vinyl and hissy tape. So today's separates systems have almost no way of tuning the sound except cables, which have effectively become twenty first century tone controls. They have a more subtle effect, but they do still make a real difference to the character of the music, as this test showed. Our listeners all heard the same things, but the emphasis they placed on what they heard was affected by their personal taste. That's why it's important for any potential purchaser to audition the cables in their own system if possible. Many manufacturers and/or dealers will let you do this, if you ask them.

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Record breaker

Ever get the feeling that it's time to digitise your discs and move to a virtual music collection? **Malcolm Steward** explains how to design, build and maintain your very own networked music library...



Whether you're a vinyl fan or a CD man, there's never been a better time to assemble your very own digital music library.

You can digitise your CD collection, and/or start downloading hi-res music from a growing range of excellent music portals from the likes of Linn, B&W and Naim – not to mention direct from the recording artists themselves.

To do this, you'll need a hard drive attached to your home computer network, or a bespoke storage solution such as the VortexBox, tested overleaf. Either way, you can then play out your music collection via a network music player (or streamer, as they're often called) and control it via your smartphone or tablet computer, which can function as a glorified remote control.

In recent months, *Hi-Fi Choice* has given a great deal of coverage to using and tweaking the streamer side of things, but what about your storage solution? In this feature, we're delving deep into the subject of how to rip, name and file your digitised CDs...

The Ripper

It all begins with the rip – which means converting your songs to a computer file-based format and storing them on a computer hard drive of some description. The most common way is to keep your music files on a networked attached storage device (NAS), which is just a mini computer devoted to file storage that can be accessed by other devices attached to the local network.

You can rip your CDs using your computer, running special ripping software or indeed

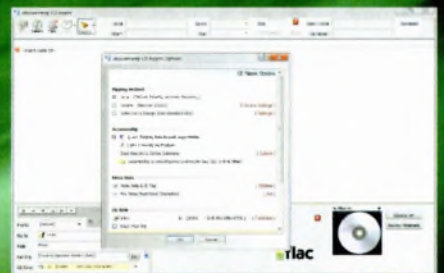
plain common-or-garden iTunes, or leave the task to a dedicated ripper such as the previously mentioned VortexBox. The ripping software will automatically access Internet music databases to acquire the metadata (which is the information about the album, artist, etc.) and album artwork.

Choosing how you're going to rip your CDs and in what format is an important moment, and is worth thinking about properly. Your ripping choice boils down to using a computer or a bespoke hi-fi device with ripping capabilities such as Olive's HD series, Naim's HDX/UnitiServe, or Meridian's Sooloos. The latter are often the simplest way to get started setting up a library, but I think it's best to use a computer. There is nothing complicated about the process and setting up ripping and networked audio with a NAS drive is, I contend, easier than setting up an audiophile turntable, tonearm and cartridge system! In my own set-up I use one of my NAS computers with a portable CD-ROM drive attached as a ripper. This NAS is 'headless' most of the time; when acting as a server it sounds better with no monitor or peripherals connected, but when it is being used for ripping, I temporarily attach a monitor, keyboard and mouse along with a Plextor USB CD-ROM drive.

There is a variety of ripping software available for the Windows PC. Sorry Mac fans, but Windows has this field nearly all to itself. The best rippers are the open-source, free, Exact Audio Copy and the commercial, but inexpensive dBpoweramp CD ripper, of which the latter is by far the easiest to configure and use. Neither is especially fast in operation, but ripping speed and ripping quality tend to

be exclusive. Both programs can reference the AccurateRip database to ensure their rips are valid. Many people will be tempted to use iTunes as both a ripper and a library. I would advise against this because I do not think it is especially good in either role, and not all network players will access the proprietary iTunes library.

All that I have encountered, however, can communicate with and will retrieve music from a UPnP (Universal Plug and Play) server – which is effectively a little bit of software that sits between your NAS drive and the streamer, letting the two talk to one another. The Logitech SqueezeBox is the exception here, but you can point its proprietary server software at a UPnP/DLNA directory structure and it should work fine. My preferred UPnP/DLNA compatible server system is Illustrate's Asset. This can be downloaded from www.dbpoweramp.com/asset-upnp-dlna.htm – as a trial, and thirty days later it should be uninstalled and I would then suggest you replace it with the fully-feature Premium Registered version, costing a reasonable \$26.



High quality music ripping software such as dBpoweramp is freely downloadable from the Internet...

Format wars

Okay, so you've chosen your storage device, ripping software and server. The next consideration is the format in which you will save your files. As far as the majority of hi-res file vendors are concerned, FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) files rule the roost for the serious listener. FLAC files are compressed so are smaller than raw WAV or AIFF files, but no musical information is discarded in the reduction process. FLAC is an archive standard recognised by the broadcast industry in that you can, should you wish, decode the encoded file and it will be restored to its original state.

Some people claim to hear a difference between FLAC and WAV files, but I have yet to detect anything significant, and only Naim Audio, in my experience, seems able to attach metadata to WAVs – the ability to store useful metadata is, of course, another great thing about FLAC. For me, this codec remains consistently superior in its ability to handle metadata and sounds superb – even on the most revealing systems. The trick seems to be to encode at the lowest compression ratio in order to minimise the work the decoding device has to do.

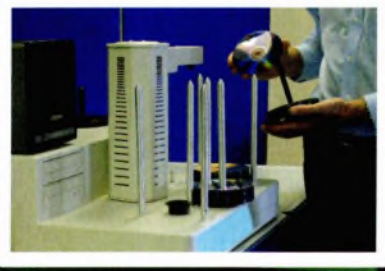
If you want albums to listen to on your phone or portable player, it is probably also worth encoding them to a lossy compressed format. Okay, you lose fidelity but you do not consume huge swathes of storage, which is still an important consideration on a phone or portable. And anyway, just how much can you hear through those cheap'n'nasty earbuds? If you need to use compression, you are probably better off saving your files in the superior sounding AAC format rather than the ubiquitous MP3, which is almost prehistoric. Aim for 192kbps VBR at the absolute minimum, 320kbps is best (or least worst)!



SPARE US THE RIPPER!

Let's face it, ripping a few hundred or few thousand CDs can take an awfully long time, and it is not exactly an enthralling pursuit, especially if you plan to perform the task on a laptop. Russ Andrews has invested in specialised automated machinery and launched a ripping service, which will, for a nominal fee, transfer your CDs to hard disk, gather the necessary metadata and artwork, and then ship them back to you with the hard disk or on DVDs. The customer can specify to what format the CDs are ripped: WAV, AIFF, MP3, WMA, FLAC, AAC, and whether multiple copies are needed in different formats; for example, FLAC for the hi-fi system and MP3 for use on a portable music player.

The company can send customers a secure packing case and empty spindles capable of holding up to 500 CDs. The original CDs are returned to the customer in the secure case, along with the hard drive containing the ripped files. The process costs 50p per disc with £50 for the collection and delivery service if you do not arrange your own. It's a great way of making your digital music library happen a lot faster than it otherwise might!



FEATURE

BUILDING A DIGITAL MUSIC LIBRARY

Shelf life

As anyone who's ever visited a record library, [or indeed Jimmy Hughes' house – *Ed.*] will know, in the olden days people had rack upon rack of music lined up around their living or working space. Depending on how organised you were, finding it was straightforward – just look along the spines of the cases or sleeves until you locate the one with the name of the artist you want and then spin that disc. You'd cue the turntable's pick-up arm over to the track you wanted, or key in the track number on the CD player, and out would come your music.

When your music is computer file-based, you need a little more forethought however, but this pays dividends as when your music is properly labelled it becomes locatable in an instant. The secret is in how you tag your metadata, missus! Put simply, this is data about the data that is contained within the music file. The metadata includes such valuable information as the name of the artist, album, disc and track number, composer, date of release, and so on. It can also reference or include album artwork. Normally, when you rip your CDs to file format, the ripping software adds some metadata (song name, artist, etc.), but it's often far from comprehensive and/or accurate. As your music streaming device uses all this information to allow you to access and interact with your library, it's key to make your metadata as solid as possible.

That's why it's useful to edit the metadata, to make sure it's correct. A program such as Mp3tag is handy on those occasions when the data cannot be found or is incorrect, or when you might prefer to enter the data manually. Although the name of the program might suggest Mp3tag is only suitable for MP3 tags – and that is not the tag type used by the superior FLAC files, which use Vorbis Comments, for example – it is far more versatile

Here's a pukka alternative to playing out your music off your computer through multimedia loudspeakers via iTunes...

and, I think, easily the best currently available. Furthermore, it is freely downloadable from www.mp3tag.de/en/download.html. The program author merely asks that you make a donation if you appreciate the software. Being able to edit your metadata is well worth the donation because it is those entries and not the file/directory structure you use on your computer that determines how your library will appear on your player or control device.

Many network music players use mundane graphical interfaces – predominantly text displays – to show information about the songs stored or playing. This is all that some people, myself included, feel is necessary, but some fancy ones such as the Meridian Sooloos use highly immersive video technology that allows you to scroll through your virtual album artwork and metadata on screen. This is very pretty,

but arguably less important these days given the use of iPad apps to do the same thing, remotely. Either way, without correct metadata, you'll find it harder to locate your music, and/or cross-reference it to other tracks.

Cataloguing your newly ripped music sometimes isn't quite as straightforward as you might think. Most people and programs arrange their music into folders/directories in the form Artist\Album, thinking that that will guarantee or impose order. It will, as far as the computer/NAS filing system is concerned, but the renderer/player completely ignores this structure and instead reads the metadata attached to every file. You could, therefore, place a Joni Mitchell album in your Jimi Hendrix folder/directory and your player would still locate it and place it correctly in your library listing with all your other Joni Mitchell albums even though it might seem lost to you!

And finally

Ah yes, just as points mean prizes, so computers mean crashes! It's going to happen folks, so no matter what format you use for storing your file-based media, or what type of hyper-expensive, enterprise-grade hard disks you employ, *always* keep up-to-date back-up copies. It's never a question of if a hard disk will fail, it is a question of *when*. Remember the 3-2-1- rule, which tells you to keep 3 back-ups in two locations, one of which is off-site – at your parents' home, say, but not in their basement if they live close to a river because that would be begging for disaster! If you imagine three back-ups of each disk seems excessive, just contemplate all the re-ripping and re-downloading you would have to do to replicate your entire music collection. Doesn't bear thinking about, does it?

So, there you have it. Take one CD collection, digitise into a music file format such as FLAC via a good piece of ripping software like dBpoweramp, onto a hard drive. Check and maintain your metadata for accuracy, and pipe it out to a network streamer via server software such as Asset. Control it via an iPad, smartphone or suchlike, and you're digital music collection is up and running – and sounding great. It's the pukka hi-fi alternative to playing out your music off your computer through multimedia speakers via iTunes, which is likely what your friends are still doing. Invite them round why don't you, they'll soon hear the difference! ●



Mp3tag is easily the best metadata editor around right now, and helps you manage your music collection in a way that really takes advantage of the computer format...

APPLIANCE OF SCIENCE



Another way of getting a digital music library going with less fuss is by investing in a purpose-built ripper/hard drive such as the **VortexBox Music Appliance**. The genuine article is only available from www.VortexBox.co.uk and uses components specifically selected for their musical performance. It starts at a very reasonable £365, can be had in a variety of storage capacities from 500GB to 4 Terabytes in single disk format or up to 6TB – around 18,000 CDs' worth – if you sacrifice its CD drive for a second hard disk.

The Appliance arrives with its Linux-based operating system and software installed. Most users will simply take it out of its box, connect it to their network and begin feeding it with CDs that it will start ripping and cataloguing without any user intervention. You may connect a screen, mouse, and keyboard if you want to have a play with it but that is not necessary: the device will happily run 'headless'. You can have a look at the device – and do some configuration – using an http interface with a network attached computer of any variety. You can, for example, set it up this way to communicate with your Squeezebox or Sonos system.

If you are a geeky sort like me, you might even 'vape' the hard disk and install Windows OS and software. This means that ripping CDs will require user intervention but that is something that I can happily tolerate: I am not a fan of Linux, and much prefer Windows 7 and its, I consider, much slicker software. Mine just runs a UPnP/DLNA server (Illustrate's Asset) for the vast majority of network players and Logitech's Media Server for Squeezebox clients, and, naturally, a copy of dBpoweramp CD ripper and MP3tag.

Music emerges flawlessly and cogently with no evidence of constriction or audible limitations. Pitch accuracy, dynamics, detail and timing information are all precise. This commodity-priced ripping NAS delivers a thoroughly commendable audiophile performance. If you install a program such as Media Monkey (under the Windows OS) you'll find the VortexBox will also work well as a music server in conjunction with a USB DAC. The VortexBox is very quiet in operation, so noise should not be a concern, but you should be aware that it uses a switched mode power supply. This can easily be replaced by a regulated linear type available starting from about £100 from suppliers such as Item Audio or Russ Andrews Accessories.

The VortexBox Appliance ticks nearly every box; it's a well-equipped NAS; it rips more than acceptably; it is as compact as anyone could wish; it is energy efficient; and it only costs beer money. If you want to investigate file-based music stored on NAS, there cannot be a much better way to do the job.

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Lunar tunes



Channa Vithana beams with praise for Simaudio's out-of-this-world Moon 250i integrated amplifier...

Whilst any audiophile worth his spikes can easily name famous American, Japanese, German and Italian brands, there's less of a chance that he or she could come up with something from Canada. Okay, Oracle – at a push – but how many of you are familiar with Simaudio?

This is the company that makes the Moon range of hi-fi separates, and to look at its product portfolio – well, you'd almost think it had been doing it for a while. There's a wide range of handsomely styled, neatly packaged

CD players and DACs, preamps, power amps and integrations, and even some tasty looking phono stages, too. Surprising as this might be, the fact that the company has been around since 1980 is all the more intriguing. Trouble is, in the UK, the brand is only a relatively recent arrival and, of course, – in our overcrowded market – has an uphill struggle for recognition...

Still, the marque has a loyal fan base here, who'd characterise the company's products as well built, confidence-inspiring hi-fi separates that all have a real 'boogie factor' to

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Simaudio Moon 250i

ORIGIN: Canada

TYPE: integrated amplifier

WEIGHT:
10kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
430x87x330mm

FEATURES:
• 50W (8ohm)
and 100W (4ohm)
(claimed)

• up to 5W Class A
(claimed)

• 5 line inputs

• front mounted
mini-jack input

• frequency
response: 10Hz-
100kHz (claimed)

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the way they make music. This latest £1,600 Moon 250i integrated amplifier is no exception, I found. It sports the company's trademark beautifully crafted bespoke aluminium casework, and a thick steel top plate that doesn't resonate to the touch – no rattly tin boxes here! Indeed if you run your fingers across the finely crafted grooves of the aluminium side cheeks and across to the sturdy rear sockets you will feel an immediate pride of ownership which is more high-end than mid-price. This may seem an overstatement, but at this price point there are a few amplifiers that are not so well built all round, and do not inspire such confidence in their long-lasting construction quality.

Through the grilles of the top plate you can see the large 350VA toroidal transformer, which contributes to the unit's not inconsiderable 10kg weight. This over-sized device, Simaudio says, makes for a very stiff power supply that allows the 250i to double its output power from 50W into 8ohms, to 100W into 4ohms (claimed). At the lower end of its operating range – up to 5W – Simaudio says the amp works in full



Japanese brand Esoteric, whose equivalently performing amplifiers cost thousands of pounds more. Indeed, everything about this Canadian-built product operates with well-oiled precision, from the push-button controls to the to the weighty movement of the volume knob. Indeed, even compared to the company's products of just five or so years ago things have improved, which is really saying something.

In terms of facilities, the Moon is pretty spartan – unlike price rivals from Cyrus, Cambridge Audio, etc., there's no onboard DAC and/or signal processing. This is a traditional, two-channel, source-direct analogue stereo amplifier very much in the old school. This may be a problem for some, but I'd point out that there's a lot to be said for keeping things simple and/or in separate boxes. For many years, hi-fi best practice was to split things up (preamps and power amps, CD transports and DACs, etc.), and now suddenly every now product seems crammed with vast amounts of noise-emitting digital circuitry!

My only quibble with this amplifier is the standard remote control, which is somewhat plasticky and doesn't exude the sort of class that the hewn-from-solid remotes that Moon offer on the higher end models.

Sound quality

The Moon i250 was carefully run in, and set up on a high-quality Audiophile BetaBase equipment rack. Playing Talk Talk's *Happiness is Easy*, the little Simaudio demonstrated what I have really liked about its predecessors, such as the i3, which is the consummate ease with which it communicates the many musical nuances, intricacies and microdynamics within the performance. This means that every strand of the recording came over in a cohesive and effortless way, with no one element lagging behind, artificially slowing down the music. In terms of the time domain, the Moon is excellent at its price.

I found the 250i managed to enhance and deepen the sound compared to most similarly priced integrations I've tried,

without destroying the fine timing balance of the music, so that there was no undue emphasis on one single part of the playing. Instead, all its essential ingredients – from the acoustic bass, piano and electric guitar to those distinctive vocals by Mark Hollis – came over powerfully yet in a very well balanced way. This Moon is a big-hearted, quite exuberant performer, with a clean and forthright nature. And here the recording of the *Colour of Spring* LP didn't sound compressed (as it can on occasion) and if it were played via an Arcam FMJ integrated for instance, the sound would be initially smoother but the music would also sound more cloying or shut-in, whereas the Moon was able to convey it in a more free-flowing structure to allow dynamic swings to occur without the loss of fine textured detail.

The pattern continued when I spun up the new *Mid Air* LP by Paul Buchanan. The amplifier delivered a strong, highly resolved sound, with lovely textural layering.

The Simaudio Moon 250i is an excellent, elegant and self-effacing performer...

The way that individual strands in the mix, such as piano and voice, were conveyed was highly satisfying – nothing shouted out too much, yet everything was there to be heard and enjoyed. Again, stage depth impressed me along with the space inside the recorded acoustic – the Moon pushed out the stereo image confidently into my listening room, yet hung less important elements in the mix back nicely. Again, I loved the delicately textured sound to vocals and piano. The overall performance seemed to combine the dynamic robustness of a good transistor amplifier with much of the midrange musicality of a decent tube design.

I then listened to *Savage* by the Eurythmics on the 2005 CD version – my favourite production by Annie Lennox and Dave Stewart. This can sound somewhat

Class A mode, to give a purer sound, then switches into AB above this, for more efficient heat dissipation. The circuit layout is an essay in tidiness, with a large printed circuit board using pure copper tracings and gold plating for optimum signal transfer. It is very cleanly ordered and laid out, and if Moon wanted to, they could do a 'Klyne' (a high-end American brand) and show the innards through a clear top plate without any issue at all!

I do like the quality of finish, which reminds me of the exquisitely made

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

CHANNA VITHANA SPEAKS TO SIMAUDIO'S JEAN POULIN AND DOMINIQUE POUPART...



CV: Why did Simaudio change the rounded end designs as seen on the i3/i5 models to the more regular straight-sided design typified by the 250i?

DP: This shape was limiting the internal space available to expand technologies for future models. We had wonderful success for near a decade with that rounded end design with the four cylindrical legs near the corners. When we designed the i-1 (ancestor of 250i) we wanted a lean and modern look at an attractive price that would suit more people. We did not want to cut anything inside that would compromise the sound quality, so the goal was to achieve a design that can be built more efficiently in our own factory. Of course, we proudly do everything here in Canada!

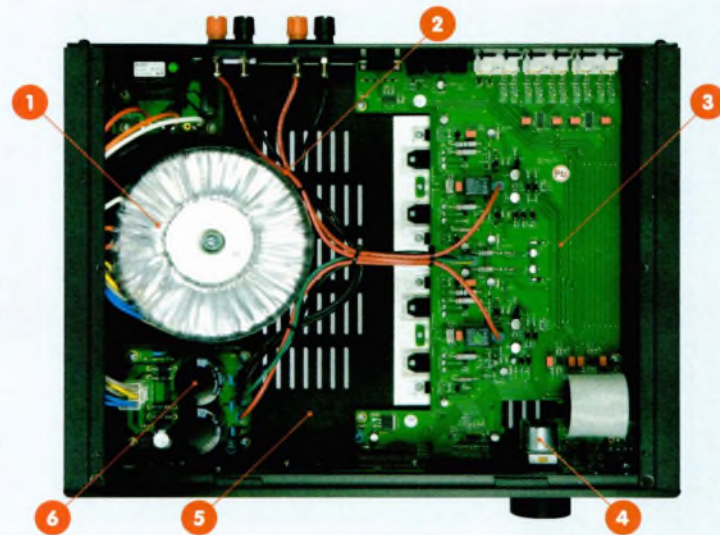
How is the casework constructed?

JP: It's made almost entirely of aluminium. The bottom panel acts as an internal heatsink for heat dissipation. The side panels and anodised front panel are also made aluminium, the exception being the top cover, which is thick satin-coated steel that adds more weight to the unit. Having different materials with different densities are good to get different behaviour under vibrations. The end result is a very sturdy chassis that is not prone to vibration.

How do you achieve the doubling of power as impedance halves?

DP: We do not 'cheap out' on our power supply! The main limitation that prevents an amp from doubling its power is the power supply regulation. You need to design accordingly the transformer and choose the rectifiers and capacitors not just to have enough power or VA, but also take into account global regulation. You could have current, but if the voltage drops while current is drawn you are not going to make it. And you could start a debate on sound quality if rail voltage varies too much. As we always say, this is one thing that we will never compromise in Moon products!

IN SIGHT



- 1 large toroidal power transformer
- 2 high quality internal wiring
- 3 cleanly laid out PCB
- 4 good quality volume pot
- 5 steel-topped aluminium casework
- 6 chunky power supply capacitors

HOW IT COMPARES

AT £1,600, THE MOON faces stiff price-related competition from British integrated designs like the Naim Nait XS (60W/Bohm), Roksan Caspian M2 (85W/Bohm) and Cyrus 8a (70W/Bohm). However, the Moon feels better built than these already finely crafted designs – although it has less on-paper power than the claimed outputs of its competitors, it still offers fine speaker driving ability. Where Moon designs of the past have always pulled ahead is in timing, and it is no different here, as it sounds more effortless than the others. The 250i is also able to express the textured instrumental and vocal delivery of, say, the Naim and Roksan, but with the detail of the Cyrus. It's only in flexibility that the Moon falls behind – the Naim can be upgraded with different power supplies, while the Cyrus has DAC options. The Roksan has XLR, preamplifier and subwoofer outputs, and can be upgraded with a partnering M2 power amplifier sold separately.

compressed and lack dynamics, especially via the remastered version. Its lack of crisply recorded acoustic instruments, plus its deep, pulsating electronica makes for a tricky recording to reproduce. However the Moon rendered Savage with consummate ease and effortlessness, revealing the dynamics and structure of the recording well. Its scale and precision belied the remastered CD format's many foibles. But the wee Moon integrated didn't artificially smooth over the recording, thus removing its soul. Rather, it was truthful in a way that was very convincing – Annie Lennox's amazing vocals panned back and forth on the track *Beethoven (I Love to Listen To)* with amazing speed, but there was also a delicacy that allowed me to appreciate her singing. This was all set nicely above the track's wash of synthesiser backing, with its deep intricate layering. Behind this, the pounding rhythms remained clear and intact, showing just how good the Moon's timing is.

This subtle mix of grip and delicacy, power and poise, also made classical music a joy. Listening to Mozart's *Apollo Et Hyacinthus*, the harpsichord was exquisitely reproduced (proving a credit to the recording engineer), and properly proportioned within the many layers of orchestration and vocals. In absolute terms, it lacked just that last degree of depth and power that pricier amplifiers can give, but still there was little sensation that you were listening to a mid-priced product as the amp covered its tracks so ably. The general musical fluency of the 250i was such that I could enjoy the music as a whole,

yet listen in to individual aspects of the performance with ease. It proved able to cope with all the complexity and dynamism that a modern classical recording via CD can allow.

Conclusion

Surely, one of the best kept secrets of the British hi-fi market, the Simaudio Moon 250i is an excellent, elegant and self-effacing performer. It's pretty much peerless at its price in terms of its build and finish, and offers a lively yet polished performance that will trouble its finest UK and Italian-made rivals, which also do this sort of thing rather well.

Its only weakness – and indeed many may regard this as a strength – is that it doesn't come with an onboard DAC, digital processing, USB connectivity, etc. For those who want this sort of product, there are other worthy choices available. But if you're in the market for a classic, unreconstructed integrated stereo amplifier, the beautiful Moon 250i is an essential audition. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, engaging yet subtle sound; build
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks flexibility of the latest DAC-equipped integrations; plastic remote
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Supersonics make this an important player in the sub-£2,000 amplifier market
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL





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Back to the future

The iconic Sansui brand is back in Britain, with a range of new entry-level separates. **Patrick Cleasby** tries its network music player...

For those of a certain age, there's something reassuring about seeing the Sansui brand back. Okay, so the company behind it isn't quite the same as that which brought as those great budget separates – such as the SR222/2 turntable and the AU-317 integrated amplifier some thirty five years ago. But still, the name is redolent of reassuringly fine sounding, crisply styled affordable audiophile fare. Sansui's mission statement always was, 'the best quality hi-fi for lowest possible price', and that used to be bang on.

If you're going to relaunch a separates brand in 2012, then one thing it needs is a streamer. Just a couple of years back, they were as rare as hens' teeth, but now they're *de rigueur*. Every month one arrives, promising ever greater sonics, functionality and/or value. And so it is with Sansui – the catchily named [que? *Ed.*] WLD+201L is a networked head unit for streaming music from the uPnP server of your choice. We have seen excellent contributions in this mould from Cambridge Audio, Marantz and Pioneer, before we get to the exotica.

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Sansui WLD+201L
ORIGIN:
UK/China
TYPE:
streamer
WEIGHT:
4.5kg
Dimensions:
(WxHxD)
430x90x284mm
FEATURES:

- TOSLINK output
- free Libretto iPhone control app
- front mounted USB port
- supported file types - WAV, FLAC (up to 24/48), AAC/AAC+, MP3, Real-Audio, WMA (DRM)
- vTuner Internet radio
- DAB/DAB+ tuner
- FM tuner

DISTRIBUTOR:
Sansui UK
TELEPHONE:
0845 6435064
WEBSITE:
sansui.co.uk

On the streaming side of things, there are capable micro systems which actually share the same Frontier Silicon brain with this standalone unit, but the WLD's power supply and components have been specced up. The idea should be that a nice full-size unit like this should outstrip the little Squeezebox Touches that so many of us have had to rely on until the hi-fi streamer explosion. But bafflingly, the Sansui's chipset doesn't allow for 24-bit/96kHz FLAC playback – its maximum is 24/48 – a format in which very few releases actually see the light of day. For hi-fi magazine reading audiophiles, the lack of hi-res FLAC will be a *serious* drawback, whereas of course the great unwashed with their 96kbps MP3s won't care...

As with its other 201 range stablemates (there's an integrated amp and matching CD), the WLD+201L looks very handsome, and there's the option of either silver or black finishes. In either, the unit looks eerily redolent of Sansui products of the early eighties – even if the idea of a streamer would have been incomprehensible back then! Equally sci-fi would have been the



for those who wish to listen to radio there is a combined coax for DAB/FM use (effectively then, this unit is a tuner, too). First deciding to evaluate the 201 in Wi-Fi mode, I found that it was light enough work to actually enter my WEP key via the front panel controls. It was also very easy to navigate to Radio 4 on Internet radio – quality on the analogue outs proved listenable for speech radio. Powering the device on and off does put some clicks through the outputs, though.

The display on the unit is grey on black monochrome, much like a Reciva (a Frontier Silicon competitor) radio module, and is not much bigger than an old-school iPod screen. It sits in a wider expanse of black for consistency with the sister units and has a slightly retro feel to it in these days of flashy coloured OLEDs. The brushed aluminium front panel is attractive, the control wheel is nicely weighted but the skip and mode buttons feel cheap, and the physical sound of pressing them isn't consistent. This is a minor quibble; better news was the fitment of a Burr-Brown PCM1794 digital convertor chipset.

The other notable presence on the front panel is the rapidly-becoming-ubiquitous USB port for direct attached music drives. I did a battery of standard tests to assess how shrewd Sansui are being, compared with the competition, and they acquitted themselves quite well. However, plugging the iPhone in produced the depressing message, 'USB Device not supported'. One would expect FAT32 formatted devices to function correctly and they do, but previous competitors have sometimes failed to be able to bus power a suitable drive. The 201 has no problem spinning up a Western Digital Passport drive (if not a Lacie Rugged) full of FLAC. Regrettably, as previously mentioned, hi-res music above 24/48 is not downsampled. Attempts to play some 24/88.2 resulted in a few seconds of inaudible flailing, then a message on the front panel saying 'decode error' – the same thing happens with networked hi-res. Ho hum...

Using the Libretto app to control the unit proved fine, but a progress/finger skip bar would be appreciated – FF and Rewind doesn't seem to be supported by the 201 for FLAC playback at all, which is a shame. It's also an iPhone app blown up 2x on an iPad, so a full iPad app would likely bring

For those of a certain age, there's something reassuring about seeing the Sansui name back...

usability improvements – scrolling a large collection is tedious on Libretto with the shortlist on screen having to request a refill from the server every fifteen records or so as you page down. Not much use if you have thousands of them like me! In use, the app was rock-solid, much more so than some other manufacturers' apps (I'm looking at you, Onkyo)!

Sound quality

Having discovered that the Logitech Media Server in uPnP mode seems to produce the best sound, network player testing was started on Wi-Fi using LMS serving 16/44.1 FLAC, via the analogue line outputs of the player. Thankfully the Pink Floyd gapless playback test was passed with flying colours, and a very revealing session of 16/44.1 FLAC *Dark Side Cf The Moon* listening followed. It almost felt like listening to hi-res, as I could dig into the music and notice the subtleties – the joys of original masters with some digital headroom...

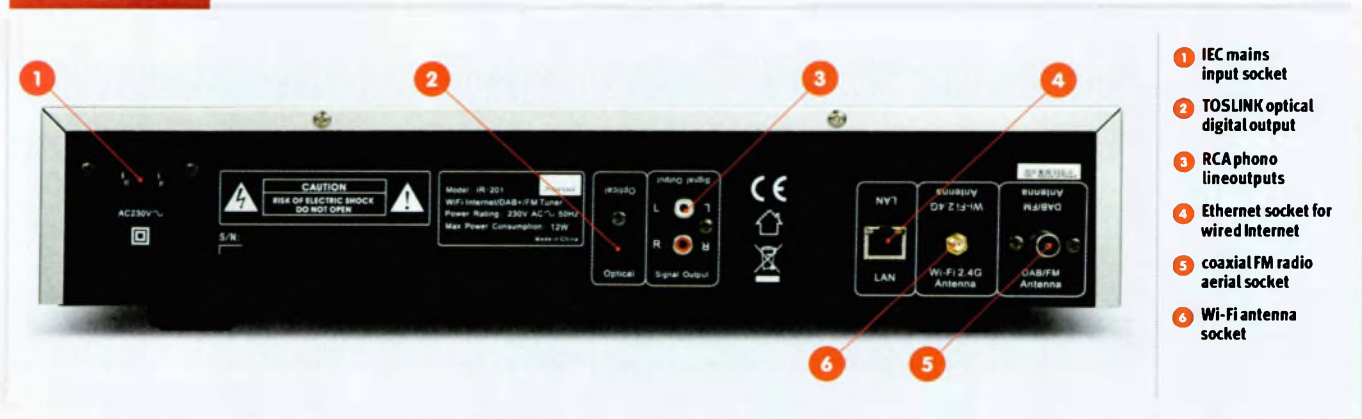
The machine also seems to react reasonably well to compressed modern dance music, although bass can tend towards the gloopy, threatening to overpower *Strict Machine* by Goldfrapp, and lending a sense of the tonal balance being awry to The Chemical Brothers' *Star Guitar*, which was quite an abrasive listen. Maybe Sansui have indeed tuned this one for the bass-loving kids, or to complement bass-light budget speakers?

notion of a bespoke Apple iPhone app. Sansui's free Libretto (developed by Frontier Silicon) is the swishest way to control the unit, although a wireless remote is supplied.

Powering up

The Sansui doesn't need much to get it going – plug in a decent IEC power lead, Ethernet lead and the analogue phono or optical digital interconnects of your choice, and away you go. For those who do not heed the Wi-Fi naysayers, there is also a mini-coax Wi-Fi antenna to screw on, and

CONNECTIONS



- 1 IEC mains input socket
- 2 Toslink optical digital output
- 3 RCA phono line outputs
- 4 Ethernet socket for wired internet
- 5 coaxial FM radio aerial socket
- 6 Wi-Fi antenna socket

Q&A

PATRICK CLEASBY SPEAKS TO PAUL MITCHELL, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF SANSUI UK...



PC: I am old enough to remember the Sansui brand from my youth – how would you describe the positioning of the newly relaunched brand to the young and unfamiliar?

PM: Sansui UK aims to return to the core aims of the original founder Kosaku Kikuchi, who always aimed to make the best possible hi-fi for the best possible price. We will never skimp on quality of components, but we will always be competitive in terms of price. We see Sansui being the first hi-fi for a whole new generation of buyers, as well as rekindling some emotion and a reason to buy Sansui again for those who remember it from the old days.

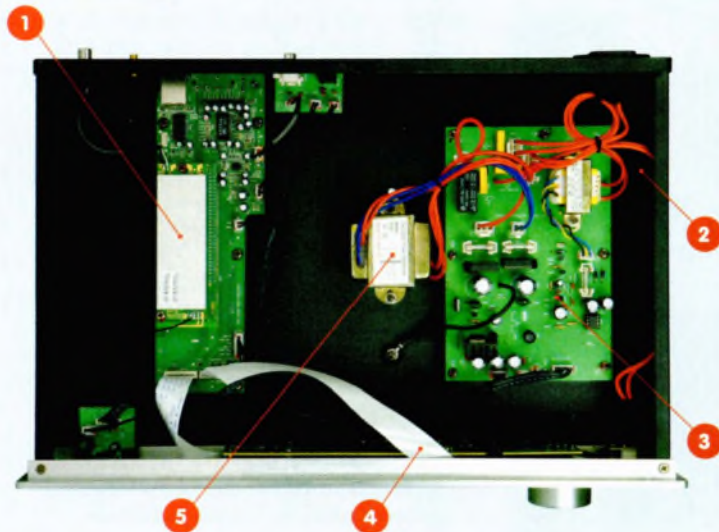
The market for stereo streamers is getting very crowded – what makes your offering distinctive?

This market will continue to grow for sure. We see our difference being our platform in as much as we have DLNA technology in the systems and are further developing the control apps to negate the need for Airplay and also all our streamers will include FM and DAB/DAB+ tuners as well. We also have worked hard on an easy-to-navigate menu system, and all our players have Ethernet and Wi-Fi connectivity, with WPS 'push button' security to do away with fiddling around, trying to input a WEP key.

In the middle of 2012, it seems a little unusual to have a streamer capped at 24/48 resolution, given the new wave of hi-res music files available now. So why is this?

It is a limitation of the capability of the Frontier Silicon module. It was designed to offer 1.5mbits per second to allow for 16-bit PCM at 44.1kHz. Seeing as we anticipate that the majority of users will use this product to stream music they've downloaded or to playback CDs they've ripped, there is no real need for 24/96 as there's so little content available at present. But we are working with Frontier Silicon on a next generation module that will deliver higher quality for the launch of Q1, 2013.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Frontier Silicon chipset does streaming duties
- 2 thin pressed steel case is what you'd expect at the price
- 3 mainpower supply board sports second transformer
- 4 ribbon cable connects main PCB to fascia display/controls
- 5 medium sized frame-type transformer supplies the juice

HOW IT COMPARES

AS A HI-RES DIGITAL MUSIC enthusiast, I can't help feeling that the 24/48 capability of the Sansui is betwixt and between usefulness. Hi-res playback might be in the minority, but the majority of it is in the 24/96 format, or increasingly 24/192 from HDTracks. So although the Sansui beats the Cambridge Audio NP30 and the Pioneer N-50 on price, their more future-looking sample rate specs (24/96 and 24/192 respectively) will surely be more appealing?

Equally, it's quite apparent from Mr. Mitchell's comments that he has no plans to get on the Airplay bandwagon with Pioneer at present. Then we have the requirement for gapless playback – if a cheaper Squeezebox Touch can achieve it, then the Sansui should, too – and indeed it does. So that's a definite tick of an important box there!

Of course, the crux of everything is quality audio performance, and the Sansui's more than adequate here, although the lack of any Apple Airplay or iPod friendliness could well be a demerit for some.

Moving on to 24-bit material, and the Sansui began to shine when confronted with the spectral 24/44.1 HDCD rip of Emmylou Harris' *Wrecking Ball* on *Where Will I Be?*. Unfortunately this was also the point at which I determined that 24/44.1 seemed to push my 802.11n network (in 802.11g compatible mode for the benefit of the 201) into stuttering, so I reverted to cabled operation to see what was going on. It wasn't a vast improvement, but a reboot to the network got things going again in both modes nicely.

Deciding to test the 24-bit capabilities to the maximum possible bitrates, I elected to use the very dynamic 24/48 PCM *Thick As A Brick 2*, found on the bonus DVD from Ian Anderson's latest album, as a tester. Having put this on the Passport drive in WAV, FLAC, LAME V0 MP3 and 256kbps VBR AAC forms, it was rapidly established from the stuttering that followed that either the 201 or the Passport's disk speed could not cope with the uncompressed WAV bitrate. The 24/48 FLAC however sounded superb on *Adrift and Dumfounded* – with clear bells imaging in the intro, a rock-solid and deep plodding *ersatz* Tull bassline, and a very exciting overall presentation. 24/48 done right can be a high-resolution solution. The AAC version kept all but the excitement, whereas the MP3 version sounded dull and flat, losing most of the placement at the same time, unsurprisingly...

A switch back to a Logitech Squeezebox Touch revealed that nearly all of the test material (with the possible exception of the bass

on the Goldfrapp track) was preferable playing from the Sansui. Particularly in analogue mode, its Burr-Brown DACs really showed their mettle. It's obvious that Sansui has voiced the 201L well in this respect; being an entry-level product I suspect many buyers won't have the budget for extra DACs when purchasing this.

Conclusion

Impressive then, but not without vices. Sansui's new WLD+201L is a worthy heir to the fine reputation of the marque in terms of style and sonics – the decent audio performance does nothing to besmirch the marque's reputation. But there are some refinements in its media and system operations which could be smoothed out, the lack of hi-res FLAC playback being a sore point, and iPod connectivity would have been nice too. It will be interesting to see if Sansui beefs up what's patently a beginner's range into some lovely mid-price products. So far, the starting position is good. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Styling, smooth sonics via analogue output, gapless playback, name!

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: No hi-res FLAC yet, no bespoke iPad app, no direct iPod connectivity

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: Interestingly styled, pleasing and practical – this is a welcome new contender

FEATURES



OVERALL





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Da business!

Packing 70 watts from chunky KT90 tubes, Ming Da's new MC-368-BSE promises a big bang for your buck. Does it deliver, asks **Tim Jarman?**

Modern valve amps come in two basic flavours – new school and old school. The former quietly use a number of transistors and other semiconductor devices to stabilise the operation of the valves, giving reliability and relative ease of use. The latter run very similar circuits to those designed many decades ago, and offer good old unreconstructed valve virtues – and vices. Other than two silicon rectifiers and the main amplifier circuit, the Ming Da you see here uses valves only – and lots of them!

Weighing around 33kg, it's a veritable behemoth, and comes undeniably well finished with acres of matt black metal – if Sansui had done a valve amplifier in the late nineteen seventies it would probably have looked just like this. The simple front panel is dominated by two circular output meters, next to a simple source selector for four line level inputs and a volume control, which is motorised and, therefore, can be operated remotely. Round the side, one finds the 'triode' or 'ultralinear' mode selector for the output stage; it can be operated

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Ming Da MC368-BSE
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: integrated amplifier
WEIGHT:
33kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
460x210x370mm
FEATURES:
• four line level inputs
• switchable ultralinear/triode operating mode
• illuminated output meters
DISTRIBUTOR:
Ming Da Valve Audio
TELEPHONE:
01684 293111
WEBSITE:
mingda.co.uk

while the amplifier is in use so it's easy to choose which setting sounds better for you. Round the back are the four sets of RCA phono inputs and 4mm binding posts for 4 or 8 ohm loudspeakers. The owner's manual, despite being nicely produced, is poorly translated and almost unreadable, sadly...

The Jinvina-branded tube complement consists of two KT90s, a 6SN7 and an ECC83 per channel. This little lot is good for a claimed 70 watts, a strong score for a valve amp. One hears good and bad things about Chinese valves, but the KT90s in the Ming Da appear to be of high quality and are completely free of the familiar purple and blue internal glow (indicating an imperfect vacuum) that afflicts many modern valves. They have heat-proof ceramic bases too – another good sign.

The 6SN7s are less of a success, however, and have distinctive pear-shaped envelopes which don't support the electrode structures properly. This unfortunately makes them very microphonic – tap the glass gently and the same sound comes clearly out of your loudspeakers! The original 6SN7s



The MC368's circuit is simple, using a small amount of voltage feedback taken from the 8 ohm loudspeaker terminal to improve the amplifier's driving ability and flatten its frequency response. The output meters also show the voltage at this point, but their VU-calibrated scales give little idea of what is actually going on, and the manual gives no guidance on how to interpret the readings that they give. The output valves run fixed bias for which there are four preset adjustments inside. This is a high-end technique which makes the best use of both the valves and the output transformers, but it would have been more useful to make these adjustments accessible and to use the meters to show their correct operating point, since keeping them on-tune as the valves age is important for optimising sound quality and valve life. Again this aspect of the amplifier is undocumented – another oversight I think.

The circuit is assembled using the point-to-point method; there are no printed circuit boards other than a small one for the remote control receiver. Assembly is immaculately neat and the components appear to be of good quality, but in my view they are not anchored to the chassis in enough places to make everything sufficiently rigid. The cathode resistors of the output valves, for example, resonate at what looks like a mid-bass frequency energetically when tapped with a screwdriver. When the effect of mechanical resonance is taken so seriously in the design of things like equipment supports and cables, I rather think that Ming Da should consider adding a few tag strips or turret pillars (as used in many classic valve amplifiers) to firm things up a bit. Also, a few high-energy connections in the power supply are inadequately supported – this should be promptly remedied in the interests of long term reliability.

Sound quality

In buying a valve amplifier such as this, you implicitly accept a whole range of compromises in return for one thing; a velvety, silky-smooth midrange that brings both vocal and instrument textures out to the fore. So this was the first thing I listened out for. Using *Fascination* by Everything But The Girl as a test track, the amp proved easily capable of creating a highly enjoyable musical experience. Both Tracey Thorn's vocals, and the delightful tenor saxophone solo that pulls this track together, hung in the air in the music room in a most convincing manner.

If you're looking for a big, versatile valve integrated around the £2,000 mark, then this is one to audition

Also displayed by this track was its fine imaging ability; there was a solid centre presence with another pool of sound around each loudspeaker which left me with the impression that I could have got up and walked around the band. Another valve amplifier staple, the big bassline, was clearly audible too, and with the simpler musical styles this proved a bonus since it offsets the vivid midrange nicely and stops the sound becoming dry and sterile.

Working through some more jazz favourites showed the MC368-BSE to be a fine performer with a useful amount of power reserve, it can certainly play loudly for extended periods without getting hot and bothered. The sound hangs together well too, until you get into the realms of anti-social noise levels when the low notes begin to fall apart, presumably as the effects of microphony or the output transformers becoming saturated.

made in the forties and fifties were short and stubby deliberately to avoid this problem. Rival Icon Audio amplifiers come fitted with 6SN7s that take this form (strictly speaking this valve is a 6SN7GT – GT for 'glass tubular'). Were the amplifier mine I would upgrade these valves promptly, as it's so easy and cheap to do.

CONNECTIONS



1 RCA line level phono inputs; no balanced XLR

2 choice of 4 or 8 ohm taps from output transformers

3 standard IEC input; power switch on fascia

Q&A

TIM JARMAN SPEAKS TO MING DA'S UK IMPORTER MARK MANWARING-WRIGHT



TJ: What musical tastes do you think the buyer of this valve amplifier will likely have?

MMW: We really believe that they have no preference to the music played. However, triode mode seems to suit some classical music better, and the ultralinear mode tends to veer toward the rock end of the spectrum. So, take your pick, as unusually this amplifier does both!

Many tube fans say that there are ever more high powered valve amplifiers around these days – have you spotted this trend?

I think the market has produced some inefficient speakers; I believe that efficient speakers will become more prevalent, as they are easier to drive, with less cost required to make an amplifier that can perform properly. The MC368-BSE gives 70 watts, which is plenty to drive most speakers in Ultralinear mode or 40 watts in Triode mode for efficient speakers, but with the purer triode sound!

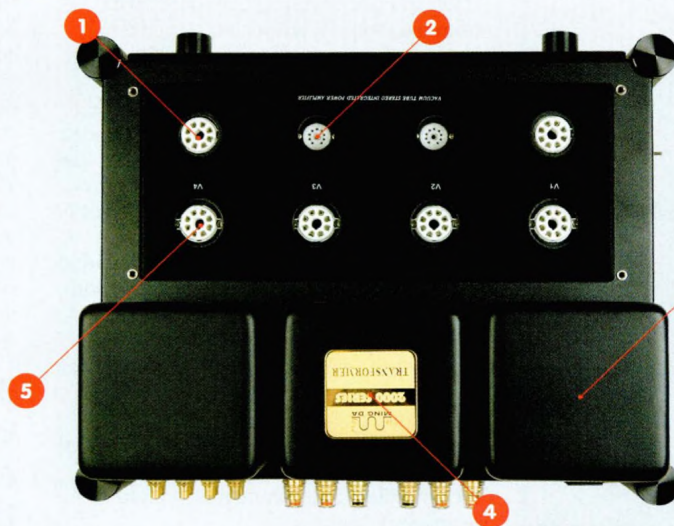
Ming Da has been awarded 'China Famous Brand' status in its home market – what's that all about?

This is the official statement we received from Ming Da: "The China International Nameplate Development Association and Association of Promotion of Joint Development of Famous Enterprises in China grant the awards. Because our products are CCC certified we have received many other awards and our products have had no complaints for more than five years. Therefore we are granted the China Famous Brand."

Aside from amplifiers, are there any other Ming Da products available in the UK?

We're already marketing the Ming Da CD200 valve-equipped CD player. We are, of course, happy to offer anything from the Ming Da range that customers may require, along with our standard twenty-four month warranty and support, including the brand new MDAP-06 media player with digital output and top-end DAC, plus analogue valve amplification.

IN SIGHT



- 1 6SN7 input valve; 1 of 2
- 2 ECC83 input valve; 1 of 2
- 3 output transformer; 1 of 2
- 4 mains transformer; single
- 5 KT90 output valve; 1 of 4



THE KT90 output valves used in this amplifier are a recent design intended specially for hi-fi audio. They are a development of the earlier KT88 which was commonly used in public address and guitar amplifiers, where maximum power output was considered to be more important than absolute sound quality.

It was noticed with some classic designs, for example the Quad II, that the smaller KT66 gave a sweeter sound for it, too, was originally intended as an output valve for high-quality audio. Recently an even more powerful valve, the KT120, has been introduced, so the days of the weak and breathless valve amplifier may well be over!

The biggest commercial rival to the Ming Da is surely the Icon Audio Stereo 300B/II. Very similarly priced at £2,200, it's another big tube integrated, but touting 300B bottles. These have many fans, and offer a uniquely creamy and gutsy sound – which describes the Icon Audio perfectly. It's arguably a little more musical and grippy, too.

This effect was particularly noted with *Green Onions* from Booker T & The MGs; it was easy to tell when the organ part that underpins this track lost its tonal purity and became clearly distorted; the midrange was still singing away as sweetly as ever, but down at the bottom end the amplifier didn't have much more to give. And even at this level, the power meters weren't doing much!

Indeed, with all types of music the '368 gives more bass than one might expect. Of course, many will consider this to be as much a part of the valve experience as a ruddy orange glow or a simple frequency response error! This only became a problem with music where the low notes also contained timing information, when the Ming Da tended to smear things together into a single layer of boom.

Fast-paced electronica such as Depeche Mode's *Everything Counts* was in many ways presented as vivid and dynamic, but to access this needed concentration on my part to pull aside the heavy curtains of bass which were doing their best to obscure much of the detail. Top end performance is on the whole clean and tidy, as one would expect with such a simple circuit there is no grit or glare. My only observation is that the very top of the treble range seems to have been rolled off a little early; the effect being that cymbals 'hiss' instead of 'crash' sometimes.

Most of my listening was done in ultralinear mode, switching to triode mode did tame the bass, but took some life and pace out of my reference system. In other, brighter and more rigorous sounding set-ups,

it will prove a useful palliative; it certainly did in editor DP's system! It's a handy feature, and widens the appeal of the product.

Conclusion

If you're looking for a big, versatile valve integrated at around the £2,000 mark, then this is one to audition. Despite quite a decent amount of output power, it still has a quintessentially 'old school' valve sound – soft, smooth and sumptuous. This contrasts with the latest Prima Luna ProLogue Premium (*HFC 358*) for example, which is surely its nearest rival and is an altogether lighter, brighter and sharper tool.

So, if you and/or your system seek this sort of sound, then this amp is definitely one to audition; it does everything a valve amplifier should do, and aside from a few detail points is well made and decently finished. At £1,955 it's expensive but still compares quite well with its tubular rivals from Icon Audio and PrimaLuna, too. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Lucid midrange, good level of power, smooth presentation
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Lack of bass grip, microphonic 6SN7 valves
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Interesting valve amplifier that offers a classically warm and inviting sound
FEATURES ★★★★★	

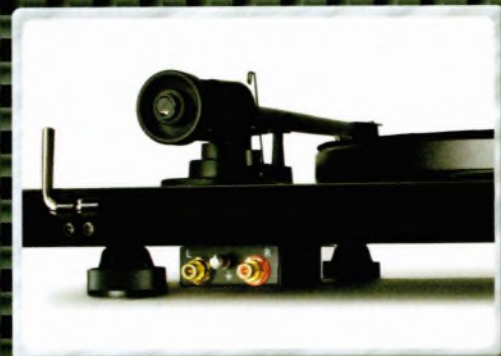
OVERALL



The Carbon Age



Introducing the new Debut Carbon from Pro-Ject Audio Systems. The Debut record player is an icon of the entry-level audiophile market, and this latest incarnation elevates the model to a new level of audio quality.



Debut Carbon

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Combining cutting edge technology with audiophile sound quality, the NDX represents the next generation of hi-fi. This versatile digital player allows you to stream your network-stored audio and internet radio via a wired or wireless connection. A front-panel USB socket is provided for playback from USB and Apple devices, plus there's an on-board DAC with three high-resolution S/PDIF inputs. An optional FM/DAB tuner is also available, and performance can be upgraded by the addition of an external power supply or DAC.

The NDX is compatible with high-resolution 24bit/192kHz streams and key file formats including WAV, FLAC, Apple Lossless and AIFF. Gapless playback and M3U playlists are also supported. It will integrate with your existing amplifier through any analogue or digital input and Naim's n-Stream control app for iPad and iPhone will take over full system control, placing your system firmly in the 21st century.



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The NDX will be on demonstration this spring at our 'The Future of Hi-Fi' retailer events. Find out more and register to attend at www.naimaudio.com/future-of-hi-fi



Plus point

Extra functionality and better sound? That'll be the new Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus, says **Jason Kennedy...**

When Cambridge Audio introduced the original DacMagic digital-to-analogue convertor, it included a USB input for the small coterie of computer audio enthusiasts that existed four years ago, a time when this particular strand of our hobby was in its infancy. Now that this side of the game is rapidly on the ascendent, there's a clear need to stay ahead of the competition. A USB input now needs to be able to accept sample rates beyond 48kHz...

Around the time that the DacMagic Plus was launched, I reviewed a very impressive convertor from Kingrex called UD384, that made the original DM sound a little long in the tooth. It wasn't long after mentioning this 384kHz product to the guys at Cambridge Audio that they let me know that their new DAC does the same thing. In this fast moving sector it's only natural that a young,

technologically driven company would be among those at the leading edge. But why on earth would you want a 24-bit/384kHz convertor? There is no material available at this sample rate and if upsampling CD players are anything to go by, it's not necessarily a good thing to do for its own sake.

Cambridge Audio's Matt Bramble told me that '384kHz' in this context relates to the upsampled output rate at the DACs, rather than incoming data rate. The advantage of upsampling, he says, is that as the data-rate is higher the analogue reconstruction/anti-aliasing filter can also be placed higher, which allows for a less stringent filter, a brick-wall roll-off is not required and the designer has a lot more flexibility of choice. This in turn allows the company to choose to use a linear phase Bessel topology with much better time domain performance.

DETAILS

- PRODUCT:** Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus
ORIGIN: UK/China
TYPE: digital-to-analogue convertor
WEIGHT: 1.2kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 215x52x191mm
FEATURES:
- digital inputs: 2x coax or optical S/PDIF, USB
 - digital outputs: coax or optical S/PDIF
 - analogue outputs: RCA phono, XLR
 - D/A converters: Dual Wolfson WM8740 24bit DACs
 - digital filter: Analog Devices ADSP21261 DSP
 - upsampling to 24-bit/384kHz
 - digital input word widths supported: 16-24-bit
 - digital input sampling frequencies supported: 32kHz, 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 176.4kHz S/PDIF only, 192kHz
 - audio output upsampling: fixed 24-bit/384kHz
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Cambridge Audio
TELEPHONE: 0870 900 1000
WEBSITE: cambridgeaudio.com

It's precisely this that warrants the dizzy rate at which the DAC does its number crunching, not the usual supposed benefits of an extended frequency response.

The similarities between the DacMagic Plus and its predecessor are limited to the shape of the case and the name, pretty much everything else has changed. The Plus is not only a DAC, it's also a digital preamp and headphone amp, with a volume control for both its RCA and XLR outputs and the quarter inch jack on the front. The convertor chip at its heart is a Wolfson WM8740, a 24-bit/384kHz device and there are two of them being run in dual differential mode – each channel has its own convertor to keep crosstalk to a minimum. It uses a processor called ATF2, a second gen adaptive time filtering system that is designed to reduce jitter in the 32-bit, Analog Devices DSP-based upsampling process. This was chosen because it delivers greater linearity with 24-bit material, the company says.

The now-obligatory USB input accepts up to 24/96 in standard or profile 1 mode as supplied, but with the aid of a downloaded driver for Windows and a brief scan of the manual you can change this to profile 2, which accepts 24/192 and nearly all sample rates between that and 44.1kHz, only 176.4kHz is omitted (on USB but not S/PDIF). Traditional digital audio sources can be hooked up to two S/PDIF inputs and digital



ONE OF THE NEW DACMAGIC PLUS' nearest direct competitors is TEAC's UD-H01, which does most of the same things as the Cambridge in a nicer case with a traditional volume pot, but doesn't have the Bluetooth option, of course. This is also a very fine convertor and has many of the same qualities – in fact with regular 16/44 material I was hard pressed to say which was better. But with higher res files however, the TEAC has a slight edge in terms of musical engagement.

On the other hand, the DacMagic Plus is clearly more revealing than the Firestone iLoveTW, adding decent dynamics and three dimensional imaging to that convertor's sense of spaciousness. The Cambridge Audio is better grounded, by which I mean that it doesn't create an ethereal soundstage whatever you put into it, but reflects the nature of the recording with a high degree of precision.

The only cloud on the DacMagic's horizon is the highly reviewed Rega DAC. This little box has superior dynamics, timing and tonality, but significantly for some is a couple of hundred pounds more expensive.

signals can be extracted via optical and coaxial outputs, the final rear panel socket is a USB A for the BT100 Bluetooth receiver.

This £70 optional extra consists of a small antenna on a rather stiff cable, which uses Apt-X technology to deliver better sound quality than standard Bluetooth, a feature that is increasingly common on smartphones and tablets and a standard feature of recent Apple Macs (OS 10.6 onwards). It brings Airplay-like ease of use and requires no driver installation and minimal set-up, even a hi-fi reviewer is able to get it going from the comfort of the couch [wow – that easy? Ed.] The DM's power supply is a plug-top type of the larger-than-usual variety and the DAC comes with the choice of stick-on feet or a shoe that allows it to sit on end to save shelf space.

The volume control on the DacMagic Plus is an electronic type, which tells you when it's reached max with a flash of the source light. You can bypass the volume altogether and use it as a line out device, usefully. Its only practical shortfall is that although there are optical and coax connections for the S/PDIF inputs, you cannot use both simultaneously, so in practice there aren't very many inputs given that this is a digital preamplifier. One little 'Easter egg' is that being fully asynchronous, the DacMagic Plus will play 176.4kHz material, it's just that Cambridge Audio has omitted to fit an LED on the front to indicate that particular sample rate.

Sound quality

This is a superb little digital convertor that fights well above its weight in both sonic and practical respects. It works with long USB leads, which is useful as my

desktop iMac sounds rather better than the Macbook laptop, and it's easy to set up and get going. More importantly it delivers a soundstage that puts musicians in the room with excellent presence and three dimensional solidity, which all contributes to a strong sense of realism with decent recordings like Samuel Yirga's *Habasha Sessions*.

This piano-led, brass-backed music sounded truly beguiling in the DacMagic Plus' hands, it has a strong grip on the bass notes which gives the instruments a solid grounding as well as the ability to let the mid and

The Cambridge Audio DacMagic has an open and revealing character that is strong on timing

high notes reach out to define the recording venue in depth, width and height. This is a 24/48 recording, so it has a bit more to give than CD.

The DacMagic Plus is a subtle and nuanced convertor, it pulls out contrast and dynamics well and projects voices with clarity and precision, thanks to an open style of presentation. I played some of the Alban Berg Beethoven *String Quartet's (No. 12 in E flat)* and was carried away by the ebb and flow of the piece, there might just be something in this classical music after all!

I used this piece to contrast the USB input with the BT100 Bluetooth connection. The latter is output at a lower level for some reason, but is pretty impressive for a wireless connection, it's not quite as dynamic or three-dimensional as the wired link, but has plenty of soul, at least it does when you spin Joss Stone doing her best Janice Joplin impression.

By absolute standards, this DAC could possibly be sweeter sounding. Compared to a similarly priced Arcam rDAC, it's pretty similar in its light and bright sound, but shelling out £150 extra buys an altogether richer and warmer sounding Rega DAC. Trouble is, the Rega doesn't do anything above 48kHz via USB, currently. As a preamplifier, it produces a relatively small scale version of events compared to dedicated preamps, so one suspects that the volume control is really there for the headphone user in the first instance. Overall though, the DacMagic Plus punches well above its weight sonically.

Conclusion

Of course, the original Cambridge Audio DacMagic was a very popular convertor, and this newer Plus is a significant upgrade on it in all the important sonic respects. It has an open and revealing character that is strong on timing, and even more so if you select the minimum phase filter. It works well with CD players and well sorted computer sources. As such it's an essential comparison point for products at this price and comes highly recommended. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Open, revealing and well timed, with high bitrate USB

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Not as many usable digital inputs as appears to be the case

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Very fine budget DAC that should turn many music lovers on to computer audio...

FEATURES



OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA phono line outputs
- 2 ground switch
- 3 12V DC power input socket
- 4 USB digital input
- 5 coaxial electrical digital input
- 6 TOSLINK optical digital input
- 7 balanced XLR audio outputs

High life



Sennheiser's new HD 700 is a premium priced product for serious headphone enthusiasts.

Tim Jarman hears how the other half listen...

The market for luxury headphones seems to be thriving at the moment.

There's a good deal of glitzy tat, but look behind this and there are some seriously impressive models to choose from too. You can't talk about decent headphones for very long without mentioning Sennheiser, which always seems to turn out a decent product – indeed even its entry-level models at around £30 take a fair bit of beating. Against this, the new HD 700 costs a sobering £600, a price where it needs to be considered as an integral part of your system rather than an occasionally used accessory!

The construction of the HD 700 is interesting; it's a circumaural design which makes use of various acoustically transparent materials on both sides of each transducer diaphragm. To begin with, reverse sides are ported which is not that unusual, but in addition the cavity that the earcups form is also open to the air, thanks to some large areas of fine pitch gauze visible on the outside and a cloth layer on the inside. Generous padding ensures a good seal so that this arrangement works correctly and, as ever with Sennheiser designs, the HD 700 is comfortable to wear.

As one would expect, the quality of materials and finish is impeccable, but I do wonder how much of the appearance has been influenced by functional considerations and how much is simply styling? That the HD 700 has a striking appearance is beyond doubt, but how much of it actually contributes to the overall sound quality is debatable...

One feature which I *did* appreciate was the cable, which has a very nice braided cloth covering instead of the usual plastic, even the plug is bespoke, although its bulk may cause problems with equipment where the socket is recessed. Should it become damaged, as with many Sennheiser products

the cable can easily be replaced by the user, which is a nice feature.

While on the subject of the plug, it's worth noting that it's a ¼ inch type, and no adaptor is provided to reduce this down to the 3.5mm size, which is the standard for portable equipment. I see this more as a statement of intent rather than an oversight; using headphones of this quality with an MP3 player or a mobile 'phone would be like connecting a pair of Tannoy Westminsters to a midi system, a complete waste of equipment!

Sound quality

The HD700 also has an impedance of 150 ohms which suits amplifiers which can provide plenty of signal better than those which are more limited in scale, the headphone socket of any decent integrated amp should be more than good enough, but for my tests I used a Musical Fidelity M1 HPA headphone amplifier with a Cyrus CD8 SE CD player as the source,



DETAILS

PRODUCT: Sennheiser HD 700
ORIGIN: Germany/Ireland
TYPE: open-back headphone
WEIGHT: 273g (without cable)
FEATURES:

- 3m braided replaceable cable
- replaceable ear pads

DISTRIBUTOR: Sennheiser
TELEPHONE: 01494 551551
WEBSITE: sennheiser.com

connected together using Chord Company Calypso interconnects.

This combo made the HD 700 sound very special, and any thoughts that £600 is a lot of money to pay for a pair of headphones soon faded... Unlike the Beyerdynamic T 70 that I tested last month, the tonality is instantly familiar so you feel right at home as soon as you put the 700 on. Only the slightly jingly treble and the exaggerated imaging give the game away that you aren't, in fact, sitting in front of an ultra capable but invisible pair of loudspeakers.

This impression is given in the main by the incredible spaciousness that the HD 700 manages to create; even with its delightfully rich basslines it never makes the music sound claustrophobic or spatially constrained. Many headphone users choose to listen this way so that they can enjoy high levels without being a nuisance to others, but I felt that the HD 700 gave its best when playing at the lower end of the volume scale, where its rendering of fine detail was quite astonishing.

This headphone will play loud too, but unusually in a review I found myself exploring the limits of detail rather than the threshold of pain, although to do this a decent amplifier and source are, of course, also essential. The only drawback that I could identify was that the cable seemed to have an odd ability to tie itself into knots without any external help, and was difficult to properly straighten. There was also quite a lot of sound leakage, so listening really has to be done in private to avoid annoying people which rather defeats the point of using headphones in the first place.

So, if your headphone budget can stretch to a giddy £600, then I'd strongly recommend that you give the Sennheiser HD 700 a try. Given a decent source and amp it will really show its true value. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Smooth, balanced tonality; very spacious sound; super build
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Fiddly lead tangles easily!
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A very expensive headphone, yet its sound quality more than justifies the high price. Well worth an audition...
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





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Going live



Watch out Rega, because Origin Live's new Alliance is gunning for your budget tonearms! **Neville Roberts** locks and loads...

The Alliance is the new entry-level tonearm from Origin Live, and has been built for both performance and affordability, but uses the same design philosophy of the entire range, at the top of which is its £4,595 Enterprise.

Origin Live arms are very well made and, as with all its other arms, the Alliance uses superior build materials, such as aircraft alloys in the armtube instead of soft cast aluminium. Although these are expensive to use and finish, the company says that this choice is justified by the improvement in sonic performance that comes as a result.

The design philosophy of the Alliance is derived from the company's popular Silver tonearm, which uses a single piece armtube made from high-grade aircraft alloy. It also features specially-designed bearings and housings. The latter are a 1mm round pin resting in a circular cup similar to a 'knife-edge' design internally and, although low-cost, they are of high quality and devoid of play. However, the bearing housings are carefully dimensioned to allow a loose fit, which may initially seem rather odd. However, this enables the arm to effectively float, rather than being rigidly coupled to the deck.

The solid counterweight fits over the rear stub, and has a rubber O-ring internally to provide a friction fit. Tracking force is adjusted by sliding the counterweight along the rear stub, until the required force is attained. Bias is provided by a little weight attached to the arm via a thin nylon thread, which passes through a wire loop fixed to the arm support

and the bias is adjusted by sliding a cylinder clamp along a bar attached to the rear of the arm.

The Alliance is internally wired with high-grade Litz and externally fitted with a standard-grade cable and terminated with RCA plugs to connect to your phono preamp. A separate blue earth wire is fitted to connect to the earth terminal on the phono preamplifier.

At the cartridge end, the Litz wires exit the arm tube through some foam damping and there is an additional fifth wire that connects to an earth screw just behind the headshell. The Litz wires are terminated with gold-plated cartridge clips.

The arm is fixed to the armboard via a standard Rega single-hole mounting that allows for easy adjustment of the vertical tracking angle (VTA) of the cartridge. It will fit all Rega armboard cutouts, whether designed for the old-style threaded base or the new 3-point mounting. The VTA adjustment is made by loosening the large clamping nut underneath the armboard, then turning the VTA adjuster ring above the armboard and finally retightening the locking nut.

The arm itself is very well finished – at the price – in black and silver, and all the necessary accessories are supplied, including an Allen key for fitting the bias wire and clamp, a cartridge alignment gauge

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Origin Live Alliance
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: tonearm
WEIGHT: 570g
FEATURES: • Rega single fixing with integral headshell and interconnect cable
DISTRIBUTOR: Origin Live
TELEPHONE: 02380 578877
WEBSITE: originlive.com

and detailed installation instructions. This arm is the standard 9-inch in length, but a 12-inch version is available for £400 extra.

As a budget design, I was very keen to compare this with upgraded Rega RB250/300 arms. The Alliance is entirely designed by Origin Live and costs considerably less than a fully-upgraded Rega – the upgrades to a Rega alone cost around £320.

Sound quality

Partnered with my Lyra Clavis DC cartridge, the Alliance wasted no time in impressing me. Orchestras had an easy fullness and I was sure that a couple of extra musicians had somehow slipped into the orchestra since I last played the records! Crisp, clear detail was evident at the top end with no harshness, so tracking was good. Bass was well-controlled, which demonstrated a good arm/cartridge match (the arm has an effective mass of 12g). On many of my recordings, I had the impression that I was hearing more from my records than I had been accustomed to when using similarly-priced RB250 clones in the past.

If you have a little extra money to spend (which is always a possibility, given the low cost of an Alliance arm), I would consider the arm cable upgrade that Origin Live can provide. As an alternative, Origin Live can install a Cardas connector in the base of the arm to use with separate tonearm cables.

Conclusion

The new Origin Live Alliance is an interesting product. For years the only budget tonearm in town was a Rega, or a variation thereof. But sonically this represents a big step up – in my opinion it is streets ahead of even an upgraded RB251. If you're thinking of upgrading your budget tonearm, this should be at the very top of your shopping list. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Very open, even and musical sound; superior midband fluidity to Rega

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

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** An excellent performer that should put the cat amongst the pigeons in the budget tonearm market!

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



UK DISTRIBUTOR

Mark Manwaring-White Ming Da Valve Audio UK

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The WEB site is: www.mingda.co.uk
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Never stop the action

Direct drives are back in vogue, with Inspire's bold and unorthodox Monarch Junior high-end turntable.

Tim Jarman is enslaved by its rhythm...

The term direct drive is of course a descriptive one, denoting a particular mechanical arrangement of spinning a turntable platter. But if you're a hi-fi fan of a certain age, then the phrase is pregnant with signification.

It harks back to a particular place on hi-fi's evolutionary path when turntables were king, and belt drives were regarded as sonically superior by the British hi-fi cognoscenti. Japanese manufacturers however, had other ideas – and pushed

the system heavily from the mid-nineteen seventies onwards. Generally, direct drives measured better in terms of speed stability, but golden eared hi-fi writers (in this country at least) said belt drives still sounded superior...

Well, like the great valve versus transistor debate, the score was never really settled. But certainly the mass market decided that it liked direct drives more – they were generally more secure sounding, slicker and less fiddly to use. The technology was refined until – by the time CD

replaced mainstream turntables in the early eighties – almost every deck on sale was direct driven and quartz-locked.

The high-end turntable market, which was pretty much the only bit left after CD had its wicked way with mainstream music buyers, sailed on with belt drives. And some very nice ones we got too, from Avids to Linns, Michells to Roksans, SMEs to Systemdeks. The wisdom of the day was always that rubber bands yielded a smoother, more organic sound – and this went unchallenged until only very recently.

Whereas once direct drives pretty much dominated the market, by the beginning of this decade, the only one still on sale was Technics' SL-1200/1210. It had soldiered on not by audiophile demand, but because it was an amazingly well built (at the price) and robust deck that was ideal for the club and pro audio market. Recently though, it ceased production, but a small piece of it lives on in this, the Inspire Monarch Junior – the motor, to be precise. This, it's fair to say, was always the jewel in the SL-1200's crown.

As this deck's name suggests, it's actually a simpler, cheaper version of Inspire's well received Monarch model. It comes either as a £2,500 standalone motor unit, or as the complete package you see here with Inspire's own X200 mk2 tonearm for £2,999.



The company can recommend, or indeed fit, the cartridge for you. This of course makes for a nice 'plug and play' solution for those who don't want to mess about mixing and matching components.

Up and away

Setting up the Monarch Junior is easy because it comes largely pre-assembled, all one has to do is to fit the platter and mat, the counterweight for the arm and then connect the wiring. The counterweight is a bit fiddly because it lacks a screw thread and a calibrated scale for adjustment, instead one has to use the supplied tracking force gauge to balance the arm and then nip up a small grub screw on the weight using an Allen key. A small green slider in the arm base is then set to apply the necessary anti-skating bias and that's all that is necessary to get the basic deck up and running.

The motor is powered by an offboard power supply which feeds the Technics SL-1210 motor. These units are refurbished – Inspire

reconditions them by replacing some of the small electrolytic capacitors and fitting a different crystal. At the same time the bearing is cleaned and lubricated and this work, in addition to the superlative reputation for reliability that Technics motors already have, should ensure years of trouble-free service.

Since only the motor part of the SL-1210 is used, Inspire has had to come up with its own user interface to control the speed, and this takes the unusual form of a fairly large joystick at the rear of the plinth. It can move in four directions and these cause the platter to start and stop at either 33 or 45 RPM. Red and a green LED indicators show the speed, but since neither the joystick nor the indicators are labelled with their operation is confusing at first – I found myself frantically waggling the stick about like a newcomer to Pac Man to begin with!

Originally of course, the platter would have had a strobe ring to indicate the speed, and to confirm that it is correct, but Inspire has machined this away, even though the drive circuit for the strobe lamp is still present in the motor. To me this seems a shame, especially as in the case of the review sample the very edge of the dot pattern was still visible and the exposed metal had not been re-anodised, meaning that finger marks were easy to make and hard to remove. Another mod to the platter is the addition of extra mass underneath in the form of a substantial aluminium insert, while the original rubber mat is replaced by a special one. A stainless steel record weight is supplied, too.

In the other corner of the beautifully finished solid birch ply plinth is the tonearm, which is Inspire's own Rega-based X200 mk2 design. The main changes are the 12-inch armtube, new wiring and improved bearings. 12-inch arms are, of course, very fashionable at the moment, but normally if you wanted a decent direct drive turntable to attach one to you'd be looking at spending mega money on a broadcast deck like a Technics SP-10. This is where the monarch Junior really starts to make some sense, if you want to enjoy direct drive and experiment with 12-inch arms then I can't think of an easier or more practical way of doing it.

The supplied cartridge with our Monarch Junior was an Ortofon 2M Black. Although not part of the package as such, Inspire's Bob Isherwood says it's a popular

combination, which is why we requested it. This top-end moving magnet design has much to recommend it – although some listeners insist on nothing other than a moving coil cartridge, I found the 2M to be an excellent choice, not least because it doesn't require a particularly fancy phono stage to get good results, and that you can replace the stylus easily should it become worn or get broken. One disadvantage of decks with 12-inch arms is that they are always necessarily large, and even though Inspire suggests that this isn't really a problem with the Monarch Junior, my advice would be to measure up first because it is pretty chunky. The solid plinth with only a small amount of damping in each of its three conical feet mandates a proper support too; orange boxes and creaky old sideboards will not do!

Sound quality

For those who have not experienced a serious direct drive turntable before, the overall effect combines the solid timing and pace that you would expect from Compact Disc with the smoothness and resolution for which LPs are still potentially the

The overall effect combines the solid timing and pace you'd expect from CD with the smoothness and resolution of LP...

best source. And so it was with this new Inspire turntable. For example, Kate Bush's intriguing album *Never for Ever* showed the deck's intoxicating combination of precision and pace. Deeply struck and sustained piano notes give some belt drive turntables a hard time because of the gentle low rate speed instability from which they seem to suffer to a greater or lesser extent. The effect isn't always obvious but it can de-focus the music and produce disorientating pitch changes. But the Monarch Junior wasn't troubled by such worries, and played tracks like *Egypt* with a combination of beautiful timing with water-clear presentation. The solidity which surrounded each note was deeply satisfying with only the odd click and pop to remind me that the source was an LP.

Pace is another matter, and for this I cued up a favourite turntable workout track, *Like to Get to Know*

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Inspire Hi-Fi
Monarch Junior

ORIGIN:
UK/Japan

TYPE:
direct drive
turntable

WEIGHT:
9.2kg (deck),
1.7kg (PSU)

DIMENSIONS:
(WxD xH) 500x395x
150mm (inc. X200
mk2 tonearm)

FEATURES:
• quartz-locked
direct drive, 12"
tonearm mounting

• external power
supply

DISTRIBUTOR:
Inspire Hi-Fi

TELEPHONE:
01246 472222

WEBSITE:
inspirehifi.com



Q&A

ROBERT ISHERWOOD OF INSPIRE
HI-FI SPEAKS TO TIM JARMAN...



TJ: What do you consider to be the main advantages of direct drive?

RI: Due to the politics within the British audio business in the nineteen seventies and early eighties, and some vigorous marketing by some belt drive manufacturers, direct drive was never in with a chance here, which was a serious mistake in terms of the customer getting a fair choice without being brainwashed by adverts! The truth is now out though, and most people are prepared to see through what happened and are able to make a more informed decision. A direct drive turntable is defiantly different to a belt driven turntable – it is more stable and rarely, if ever, goes out in terms of timing. Listen to a violin, piano or female vocal on even the best belt drive, and then listen to the same with a good direct drive and you can hear the notes and voice with true timing – belt drive will never be able to give absolute pitch and timing!

Why was the Technics SL1210 motor chosen as the basis for the Monarch range?

It is well documented that the 1210 series of direct drive motors has been well ahead of the direct drive competition for many years. We knew that to manufacture the parts similar to what was in a 1210 would cost many thousands of pounds, which would in turn make the cost of a full Monarch turntable nearer to £6-7,000.

Are turntables which can accept 12-inch tonearms becoming a popular choice with domestic turntable buyers, these days?

When I go into our demonstration room next door to our workshop, I am able to listen to a whole range of turntables, some with 9-inch arms and some with 12-inch arms. If I want to listen to music for my own pleasure I automatically go to one of our turntables with a 12-inch arm. We have proved that a turntable capable of taking a 12-inch arm need not be overly large in terms of its footprint – indeed the Monarch and Monarch Junior sits with room to spare on modern standard size hi-fi racks.



DIRECT RIVALS are few and far between. If you want quartz-locked direct drive turntable then the obvious one is of course a low mileage Technics SL-1200, perhaps fitted with your choice of 9 inch arm. This is a well known and well respected package, which features brilliant Japanese build quality, as well as a predictable and stable sonic character. If you can take the "DJ jibes from your friends then this is a viable option, which comes with the advantage of easy resale if you feel the need for a change.

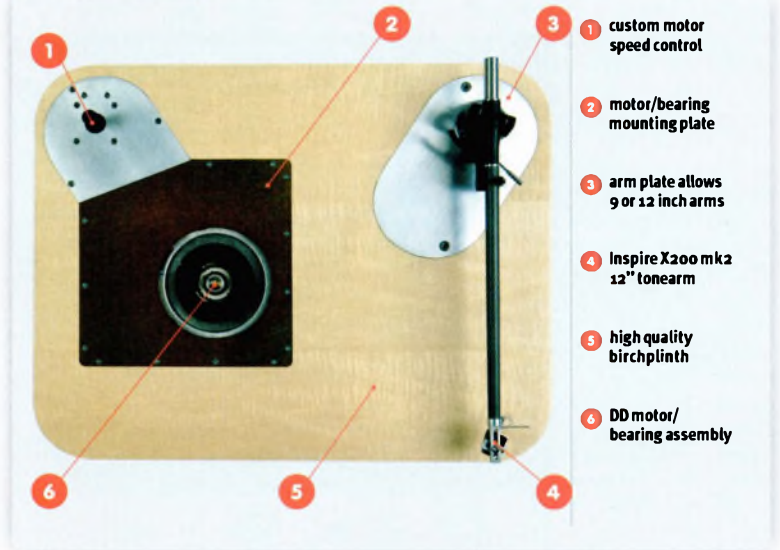
If it's a brand new direct drive turntable you want, then Brinkmann's Bardo (£4,495) is an excellent alternative, using the company's bespoke low torque motor system. Price-wise though, this is more of a rival to Inspire's (senior) Monarch turntable (£3,970)...

Rival belt drive turntables at the price include some excellent designs from Avid, Linn, Michell, Nottingham Analogue, Rega and Roksan. These decks all have their distinct sonic flavours, which some love and others can take or leave – in this case it's worth finding a good dealer and auditioning them with the tonearm and/or cartridge of your choice. Either way, none of the aforementioned sound quite as tight and taut as the Monarch Junior.

Offboard power supply boasts an oversized power transformer...



IN SIGHT



- 1 custom motor speed control
- 2 motor/bearing mounting plate
- 3 arm plate allows 9 or 12 inch arms
- 4 Inspire X200 mk2 12" tonearm
- 5 high quality birchplinth
- 6 DD motor/bearing assembly

You Well by Howard Jones from his *12" Album*. This contains numerous stops and starts which only a few machines which I've tried can truly communicate. With this song, again the Junior proved well above the belt drive norm. Results were very impressive, with a cleanly rendered, finely etched presentation that was explicit yet never veered towards harshness. The Monarch Junior also proffered a real punch which even the likes of Michell's very fine Orbe (belt drive) turntable lack.

The Inspire X200 mk2 tonearm was a very nice partner. The purpose of a 12-inch armtube is, of course, to reduce distortion-causing tracking errors which occur particularly near the centre of a record, and in this respect the pickup performed well. Even well-worn LPs seemed to gain a new lease of life with this arm, conferring upon the deck a sure-footed sound that's rare outside the pro audio/broadcast environment. It was a lovely combination, when you factor in the precise, metronomic timing of the Monarch Junior, with its ability to sail through choppy recordings with ease.

It cannot hope to match the geometric perfection of a decent tangential tonearm, but then the X200 arm is but a mere fraction of the price of such designs.

In absolute terms, the Monarch Junior isn't the most expensive sounding deck around; the soundstage is explicit and sure, but not the most spacious left to right or back to front. Other more expensive designs do better – including the Monarch Senior – but it's still very good at the price. Tonally it's pretty neutral, far more so than the rather brightly lit Technics SL-1200, but again a good high-end belt drive shows how a silkier and sweeter sound is possible from the LP format – even if, perhaps, such decks are actually slightly euphonic, gilding the lily so to speak.

Conclusion

Inspire's new Monarch Junior is an excellent new deck, offering a desirably different sound to its price rivals. Its grip, clarity, speed, poise and musicality are hard to beat, at or near the price. The result is a fascinating product that many will love. And as a package with the X200 tonearm, it makes even better sense. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LUKE: Ultra tight, clear, punchy sound; fine build; great value package

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: You'll be spending all your pocket money on vinyl again!

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Excellent affordable audiophile turntable package with a feisty, fun sound

FEATURES



OVERALL



SME

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- Play from USB Hard-Drives
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- S/PDIF Digital Out
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- Built-In Internet Radio Platform
- Play Digitally from Apple Devices
- Solid, Vibration-Free Construction
- Apple Authenticated

Play



Dock Box S Digital

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- Built-In 24-bit/192kHz DAC
- Gold-Plated RCA Analogue-Out
- S/PDIF Digital Output
- Apple Authenticated



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THIS MONTH:



CHANNA VITHANA
EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

CV GOT LOST in music when he was young and has never recovered. With a background in design and architecture, he's been a published journalist for nearly a decade.



ED SELLEY
EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

FOR THE BEST PART of ten years, ES was developing and supporting products from some of the biggest names in hi-fi. Enjoys blogging about his favourite tunes too.



TIM JARMAN
EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

ELECTRONICS BOFFIN Tim drives a 1959 Beetle and maintains the best B&O resource on the Internet. When he's not rebuilding classic kit, he enjoys scouring audiojumbles.



DAVID PRICE
EXPERTISE: EDITOR

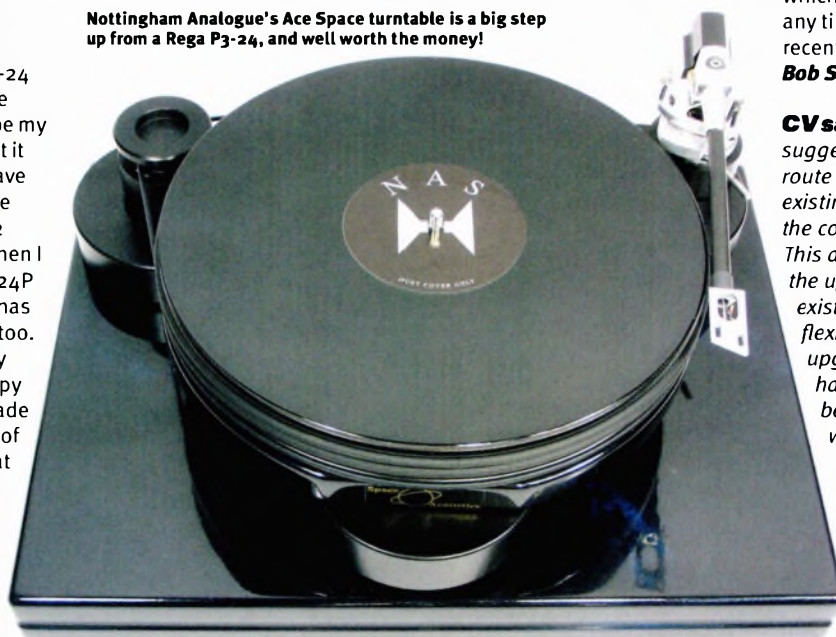
DP HAS SPENT much longer than he'd care to admit buying and upgrading his own hi-fi system, not to mention reviewing thousands of separates over the years.

Back to black

I have recently got back into vinyl after buying a Rega P3-24 turntable with TT-PSU. At the time I assumed this would be my final turntable purchase, but it was such an eye-opener I have since upgraded the cartridge from Elys 2 to Goldring 1022 (another big step up), and then I managed to find a Quad QC24P at a bargain price, and that has been a great improvement, too. I am thoroughly enjoying my vinyl and although very happy with the sound – each upgrade has revealed so much more of the potential from the format – I am now keen to see just how much more I can get from it...

I am thinking about upgrading the deck and arm and this time I do want them to be my final purchases – so would really appreciate some advice. Realistic budgets are £600 to £900 for the tonearm and £1,500 or so for the turntable – if you think this is a sensible budget split? With arms I have been looking at Audiomods, Audio Origami, Origin Live and Inspire, but I assume it will be difficult or impossible to audition these as some are built to order or upgrades to an existing arm. So I would be grateful for any information you have on their respective characteristics or any other arms you think really should be considered.

Nottingham Analogue's Ace Space turntable is a big step up from a Rega P3-24, and well worth the money!



On the turntable front I have always been interested in the Michell GyroDec, but also Nottingham Analogue or possibly Origin Live – at least these can be auditioned, but I would still be grateful for any other recommendations.

Budget decrees that I will have to do this in stages, so the realistic scenario is either a significant arm upgrade (suitable for the eventual turntable upgrade) on my current P3-24, or upgrading the turntable and using my RB301 until funds allow the eventual arm upgrade. As there may be a reasonable gap between

upgrades, which would offer the best balance and bang for bucks to begin with?

Finally, the one area I probably will revisit once the turntable and arm are settled is the cartridge – not because I am unhappy with it, but because I am interested to see what could be achieved now that I have a good phono stage, and when I have a deck and arm that could do a better cartridge justice. What type of pickup, and what brand, do you think would be a sensible budget to match the sort of deck and arm proposed and what cartridges do you recommend buying?

I am most interested in a musical and involving sound. I do like detail, but definitely not a cold or analytical presentation, nor a woolly or overblown one either.

I am enjoying my vinyl and keen to see just how much more I can get from it...

The rest of the system is a Primare i30 and Sendor A5 loudspeakers, neither of which are likely to be upgraded any time soon as they were recent additions.

Bob Smythe

CV says: Hi Bob, I would suggest that your most sensible route is the upgrade of your existing Rega arm with one of the companies you mention. This allows you to assess clearly the upgrade made with your existing P3-24, and gives you flexibility with a turntable upgrade later. Then when you have funds, upgrading to a better turntable can be done with your tuned Rega arm.

However, for a more sustainable option (and frugal too, where you do not lose out on your initial outlay for the P3-24) would be to indeed modify your P3-24 itself for better performance. Rega offer upgrades in the form of the TT-PSU power supply, and a relatively low-cost Turntable Wall Bracket for better isolation (essential, I think), an upgrade belt option, and possibly, the 24v High Performance Synchronous motor upgrade (check with Rega or your Rega dealer as Rega's website is not absolutely clear as to whether it can be fitted specifically to the P3-24). Other companies who can also upgrade your P3-24 include ISOkinetik and Inspire, both of which have variety of worthwhile platter and/or power supply options.

Rega response

I have enjoyed hi-fi and listening to music for forty years. During that time I have bought and sold equipment from many different manufacturers. Their service and back up has all ways been good or exceptional, especially customer service from Quad and SME. But recently I have bought two items made by Rega, on the basis of good reviews from the press and were purchased new online. The amplifier, in particular, has caused me some concern regarding safety and I have written to Rega directly, asking for clarification.

Despite two letters being sent it has failed to acknowledge my letters in any way.

A. Worock

DP says: *I passed this on to Rega, and Roy Gandy duly called me to explain he'd contacted Mr Worock and addressed his concerns, which weren't warranted. It's useful to point out here that in my twenty years in the hi-fi business, I've not heard a bad word about this company!*

Reel life

Hello David – we once spoke about my ReVox B-215 tape recorder, and since then I've purchased another one but, unfortunately, it has proven to be troublesome. Indeed I've had nothing but trouble, in that the 'Reverse' button won't work, the tape-recorder has chewed

Things are going from bad to worse, and I can't afford to lose more tapes...

three cassette tapes (which is rather unpleasant considering the difficulty in replacing them) and I only inserted the tapes on different occasions when the machine came back from being repaired.

When it isn't chewing up tapes the music is coming through the speakers broken up, notes are clear from one speaker, but either missing or sounding crackly from the other. The sound is also fading and breaking up and at other times, but not often enough, appears to be 'normal'. Things are only going to become worse, and I can't afford to lose more tapes, so I was hoping you might be able to suggest what the trouble is, might be, or recommend someone who can do a proper repair on the tape deck? May I thank you in advance.

Des Diamond

DP says: *Sorry to hear about your errant ReVox, Des. For a diagnosis I'll refer you to Tim Jarman who is far more familiar with a tape deck's oily bits than I. Meanwhile, the man to effect the necessary repairs is Alex Nikitin of A.N.T. Audio. Alex is a charming man who is a master of his craft, and I'm sure he could restore one or both your decks to better-than-new spec. I think it's reasonable to point*

out, however, that he's not the same as that bloke down the road with a soldering iron and a screwdriver, so don't expect major surgery on your ReVox to be cheap. His email is info@ant-audio.co.uk.

TJ says: *Like many expensive decks the B-215 uses a dual capstan drive. In my view these were marginal when new and only get worse with age, the tape damage that you are experiencing and the intermittent loss of one channel are both due to the tape not running true across the head. These comments apply to all dual capstan recorders (not just the ReVox) which are generally a nuisance; I have converted a number of them to single capstan operation and found that it transforms both stability and reliability.*

The B-215 is a complex and fickle beast at the best of times, so unless you are really committed to this model I'd recommend trying something simpler, such as the Sony TC-K611 or the B&O Beocord 5000 (later drawer-type model), both of which are cheap and plentiful at the moment. When well set up, both of these should easily equal the ReVox and being single capstan designs neither are potential tape munchers! However, if you choose to persist with the B-215, then Alex is definitely your man...

ES says: *The RB301/303 doesn't have the classic 'Rega mount' which means that some decks are less accommodating than they are of the older RB300. Two decks that can take the RB301 without incident are the Michell GyroDec and Nottingham Analogue Ace Space. Both work well with the Rega, but equally can accept more impressive arms as well. Which of them to choose would be a tricky one to decide and would probably require a demonstration.*

Even though I own a Gyro, I believe at the basic level with the Rega, the Ace Space offers higher performance, but the Gyro offers a greater upgrade path. With the Quad QC24P in place, which seems unflustered by low outputs, I would make a beeline for the Dynavector DV20X2 when your budget allows for it.

DP says: *A deck of the calibre of the Michell or Notts Analogue will give a dramatic improvement on the Rega P3. Expect a far more open and expansive sound, grippier bass and more sparkling treble. Better still, there will be a sense of musicians playing together, yet separately – you'll be able to focus on individual parts much better. The Michell is famous for its super-expansive soundstage and lovely tonal purity, the Notts Analogue is tighter, tauter and more engaging. As ever, try to find a dealer who will dem the two, so you can choose for yourself.*

Channa and Ed are right to recommend that you mod your Rega arm; get this done first then buy the new turntable, and fit the Rega arm to it. At a later date you can consider the purchase of an SME 309 (taut and detailee), Funk FX-R (musically exuberant), Origin Live Zephyr (creamy and open) or Audio Origami PU7 (a lot of al.). Come back to us for cartridge recommendations later – it depends on your choice of arm and turntable.

Boom bang a bang

I followed your advice and upgraded to a Sugden A21 SE, which did solve a lot of my quest for more warmth, detail and clarity. You recommended that I wrote again for speaker advice if needed, so here it comes. Suggestions from your fellow panelists are, of course, also welcome!



B&O Beocord 5000 cassette deck:
TJ reckons it will show ReVox's exotic B-215 a clean pair of pinch rollers!

My system comprises of a Krell SA-350A (just upgraded from an Audiolab 8200 CDQ and it was a big improvement on what I am after soundwise), Wadia 170i iPod dock, Sugden A21 SE, van den Hul The First Ultimate interconnect, QED Signature 75 digital interconnect, various power cables including Russ Andrews Silencer block, Tellurium Q Black loudspeaker cable, and Bowers & Wilkins 703 loudspeakers.

The system now sounds much more involving, but I still have issues with 'bass bloom', where the speaker interacts too much with the room mode and I almost feel the couch shaking from vibrations. Overall, it also has way too much bass, even at medium listening levels, and only sounds good with some CDs/songs that have limited, or very controlled bass that do not go too far down. The midband also is repressed and sound closed in. To hear the midband detail properly I have to increase the volume and then, of course, get even more 'nasty' bass.

I think the sound has okay treble, even too much at times. So, it has too much bass and way little midband. It also sounds closed in and I want more open, more detail, possibly slighter warmer (or maybe more midband) sound. I still want a lot of detail (a lot!), but more clarity/ warmth/midband, rather than only the high treble and bass that I have now. I also want more involvement and detail at lower listening levels. Even my Shure in-ear headphones sound better than my normal system, so I need help! Or possibly listening to in-ear headphones has changed the sound that I am after?

My listening room is 10x7x3 metres and is a converted wharf, but I had similar sound issues in previous flats. I listen primarily to electronic music like Depeche Mode and Pet Shop boys, but also Jesus & Mary Chain, Stone Roses and similar.

I thought I would like MartinLogan speakers, but think the room may be too small for them as I need to have the speakers close to the rear wall, around 20-30 cm. I was also thinking that maybe I should listen to speakers without a reflex port, as maybe it is that I hear and dislike? Or maybe I should go back to standmounted more monitor-like speakers, as the last speaker I had and liked was the Epos M12/ES11 (but in a

smaller room). To make it more complex the speakers need to be around 30cm from the rear wall, they cannot be 50cm away as is often recommended.

Can you please provide me with a suggested list of speakers to audition? Ideally they should look like 'normal' classical speakers and examples on my shortlist are: PMC GB1i, FB1i or TB2i (or possibly twenty.22 or twenty.23, but I prefer the style of its 'I' series).

MartinLogan Electromotion ESL, Spendor A6 or A9, AE, Epos, Triangle Color, Audio Note. Any suggestions on these or other speakers welcome. I would also consider buying second-hand like a MartinLogan Source or Aeon i. Budget is flexible, between say £2,000 and £3,000.

I also have 10 to 15 fantastic SACDs from Depeche Mode and think it is a shame I have never heard them with a proper SACD player. I have an old Pioneer DVD-575A that plays SACD, but it does not sound as good as the CD player. Are there any new, or used, relatively cheap SACD or universal players up to say £500 that would make these SACDs sing better, or close to playing the CD layer on the Krell? If not, what do you think I need to aim for? If it also supports Blu-ray that would be an advantage.

In addition, if you have any other improvement suggestions after upgrading my speakers, that would also be welcome, as I am not sure if I should looking for other interconnects, or a Sugden IA4, for example...?

Paul Bjernklo

CV says: Hi Paul, your Sugden is a truly wonderful amplifier and one of the best I have heard at any price – keep it, don't upgrade! It has superb resolution and offers a distinctive alternative to most transistor

Jason thing

Hi Jason! I was wondering what your thoughts are on your former reference, the Resolution Audio Opus 21, compared to CD player shoot-out winner, the Audio Analogue Maestro?

Tony Guerrero

JK says: Hi Tony – the Opus 21 was a very special CD player. In musical, dynamic and naturalness terms, very few

disc spinners have come close. If it's the sort of sound you like, then the Maestro is very good, especially for the price, hence the accolade in the group test. But it's not quite as coherent and expressive as the Opus was, however you can buy a new one, which is quite handy!

Tony Guerrero wants to know how Audio Analogue's Maestro stacks up against his guru's reference silver disc spinner...



and valve amplifiers. However, it obviously works better with higher sensitivity loudspeakers (like your 703s), as it has a lowly power output of around just 20W (real world figures).

I would suggest auditioning a loudspeaker with similar sensitivity to your B&Ws with approximately 90dB as a good bet, and (1) you might try the Waterfall Victoria (either the EVO or the original, which I use as a midrange reference – it works a treat with the Sugden), as these have a wonderfully clear, dimensional sound quality free from jaggy bass, and they time really well. (2) Piega from Switzerland do beautifully crafted aluminium enclosures for their loudspeakers, some of which include ribbons and also 90dB sensitivity – models such as the Smart 3, Premium 3 and Coax 30 all have this specification and, in my experience, time beautifully

Paul Bjernklo's Sugden A21 sounds blooming bassy... HFC suggests a cure

with excellent bass tunefulness (no bloai). (3) You could keep your B&Ws and audition a supertweeter from Townshend as these (ironically) improve bass tunefulness and (4) site the loudspeakers on a low-cost pair of concrete paving slabs to create a 'floating floor' support to minimise vibrations. (5) Replace the cables with a coherent set of wires from one manufacturer, such as Kimber (Russ Andrews), Tellurium Q or Chord Co. (6) Full book shelves, curtains, soft furnishings and rugs/carpets strategically placed can all help to minimise boom.

ES says: If you are going to keep the Sugden, the main issue with some (but not all) of the speakers you mention is the relative lack of sensitivity. Selecting a pair of speakers better suited to the power output of the Sugden is likely to result in a more balanced sound. The good news is that after



a period of speakers seemingly becoming less sensitive than ever, this seems to be reversing at the moment.

With this in mind, the speaker that springs to mind after a very happy period spent with it is the WLM Diva Monitor, that came to my attention when they were paired with a pair of Abbingdon Music Research units for a recent Beautiful System feature.

This is a very sensitive two-way standmount that is ideal for the situation you describe. Firstly it is front-ported, which will help it work well relatively close to a wall. Secondly, unlike the vast majority of speakers on sale, the crossover output is adjustable, which would allow you to tweak them in situ to get the midrange you've been looking for.

Speaker designers will be turning a whiter shade of pale when they read this

Were I looking for a SACD player at the sort of price you are talking about, I'd be looking for an early Marantz SA-15, which crops up at the £500-550 mark from time to time and is a very lovely SACD player, indeed.

DP says: Before you try Channa and Ed's sage recommendations above, I suggest you see if you can get the B&Ws working a little better. Get them as far out from the back walls as you can. If the bolt heads on your speaker drive units are exposed, then get an allen key and tighten them up as tautly as you reasonably can. Make sure the speakers are sitting level, and securely, on the floor – as Channa says, paving slabs are a good bet, or even sand-loaded MDF boxes, but there's an easier alternative which you should try first. Place them both on large sorbothane feet such as FoculPods; this will decouple them from the floor, which I suspect is causing a lot of your boom in the first place. It's a simple and inexpensive trick that I first came across in the apartment of a friend living in Tokyo. He has a smallish place in a tightly packed building, but likes to play his Steely Dan LPs loud. By decoupling his large floorstanders from the floor,

he removed a large amount of room boom, giving a very pure and explicit midband.

Finally, loudspeaker designers will all be turning a whiter shade of pale when they read what I'm about to say – boom can be effectively countered by stuffing bungs (I've used old socks in the past, but neatly sculpted home-made foam pieces are preferable) in the bass ports. Trouble is, this can cause problems in the lower midband, so only do this gingerly and consider it as the last resort, a sort of tweaky 'nuclear option'! Try some room and speaker tuning first, then contact us if you're still having room boom woes.

Streams come few

I was wondering when we are going to get a full review of the Electrocompaniet EMP2 Blu-ray multiformat player that I have been looking for to replace my Arcam DV 137?

In addition to my love of vinyl (I used to work in the industry for some years as an engineer in a pressing plant until CD made me redundant) I have a huge collection of SACDs and DVD-As, so this player looks promising as not only does it have 7.1 analogue outputs – which is a must for me as I don't believe in receivers except for home cinema, and use three times line level Cyrus 8vs amps to four Spondor SP2/3Rs and Spondor centre – but it also converts DSD over the DACs direct without conversion to PCM.

Come on gentlemen, stop mucking about with all those streamers and asynchronous DACs and do a review for a poor old subscriber like me who stills loves his SACDs and outmoded DVD-As?

John R Walsh

DP says: I've checked with our resident hi-fi historian Tim Jarman and after some head scratching he remembered that the aforementioned 'SACDs' and 'DVD-As' were quaint, optical-disc based music storage media used in the pre-Virtual period, back in the old days when – can you fathom it – people used to buy music on 'things'!

Anyway, given that there are still some folk who insist on such eccentric behaviour, we've decided to make enquiries about the

Electrocompaniet product to which John refers. Another less tongue-in-cheek point to add is that anyone else interested in a worthy replacement to their DVD player, wanting a nearly-as-obsolete Blu-ray machine, might usefully investigate the very impressive Oppo BDP-95, which has superb, jitter-free audio and excellent pictures. But only if you first remember to go to a physical media retail outlet and purchase one of those shiny 'things' – then slot it in!

TJ says: Whoa there DP! Remember that the overwhelming majority of 'virtual' downloads are low-res tat from iTunes and the like. That means that the bulk of music listeners are going backwards in quality from CD rather than forwards, but this is what dominates the market.

Like SACD (a bold failure it has to be said) the future of hi-res in its current form is by no means assured, so a good CD/SACD player should remain a key asset in any serious hi-fi system. SACD hardware, in particular, is likely to become scarce in the next few years, so if you enjoy the sound of DSD then investing in a fresh machine while you still can isn't a bad idea.

DP says: Just tugging your transistors, Tim! Of course discs still have a lot to offer. Intriguingly though, the DVD-A format is of course reappearing as hi-res downloads, and now some are even talking about DSD (i.e. SACD) downloads, too.

Radio gaga

It's good to have confirmation that we are likely to be able to listen to FM radio in our cars beyond 2015, but I remain to be convinced of its superiority for hi-fi listening at home. Of course, DAB has been dogged by the widespread dumbing-down to low bitrates, but David Price's suggestion in the February 2012 issue that Radio 3 is restricted to 96kbps is wrong. Radio 3's DAB broadcasts

use 192kbps virtually all the time, and drop to 160kbps only when there is a test match commentary to be accommodated. Classic FM broadcasts at 128kbps.

But don't let this distract us from the shortcomings of FM stereo. To begin with, the stereo separation is significantly frequency-dependent, being reduced at the frequency extremes. Speaking of which, we might remind ourselves of the rapid roll-off above 15kHz to filter out the 19kHz pilot tone. The signal-to-noise ratio is affected by the signal strength, but even at its best it falls well short of DAB's S/N ratio. At its worst it can exhibit quite a distracting hiss in the background, along with other sources of interference.

Although this is all well known, the view that FM is superior to DAB still persists. But rather less extensively documented is the dynamic range compression applied by Radio 3 to most FM transmissions, other than evening live concerts (including evening Promenade concerts, but NOT necessarily daytime Proms). I analysed two identical clips of the same broadcast, one from FM and one from DAB, and found that the dynamic range on FM was some 6 to 8dB less than on DAB...

You can hear the effect of dynamic range compression (DRC). When an acoustic musical instrument is played more forcefully, it is not only the loudness that changes, the tone also changes. This is especially true of the piano. Strike a note hard and the sound is both loud and clangy, but when you play it gently, the hammer rebounds more slowly off the strings and, in consequence, the felt has time to damp some of the higher harmonics, resulting in a smoother, more velvety tone. If you then take 6 or 8 dB out of the dynamic range of a recording, you change the relationship between volume and tone quality

What to replace an ageing Arcam DV137 DVD-universal player with, wonders reader John R Walsh? Whatever it is, he doesn't want a streamer!



in a way that was not intended by the musicians. Furthermore, the residual crackle from an original 78rpm record can be well suppressed in the DAB broadcast, but raised to the level of being intrusive on FM. Once you're aware of DRC, there's no going back.

Classic FM provided the most extreme example for me some years ago when they compressed a recording of Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata to such an extent that melody and accompaniment were at the same level in the slow second movement. The third movement sounded as though some highly inappropriate pop music techniques had been applied, mangling the music beyond recognition. The pianist was Emil Gilels, and I happened to have to hand his recording of that sonata. He must have turned in his grave. I wrote to complain, but was simply told that the compression was applied at the FM transmitter, and there was nothing anyone could do – other than to reject their FM broadcasts as a source of high-fidelity sound.

In 2009 Tony Brown, of BBC Digital Information, confirmed my findings: "We do not use range compression for Radio 3 on DAB radio. DRC if selected gives a suggested setting and a few DAB sets even offer twice the figure if you select it. If DRC is not mentioned, then DAB sets don't apply it. So for DAB sets with DRC if the switch is set to 'off', DRC was never applied in the first place. DRC is a DAB term, and there is a small amount of audio range compression on FM. So small though, that quite a few listeners don't realise we apply it. The reason this is done is that it makes car radio and portable sets better able to cope with noisy surroundings, as there is no DRC equivalent with FM."

Direct comparison of DAB and FM is difficult because you cannot set each source to the same level, but the time delay between the sources does at least allow you to listen for a sudden fortissimo section on FM and then switch quickly to DAB to hear it repeated with the original wide dynamic range. I would suggest that this is now the definitive argument for rejecting Radio 3's FM broadcasts in favour of the digital format.

Mike Thompson

DP says: *Hi Mike – thanks for your detailed and comprehensive letter. I was talking about DAB running 96kbps in general terms, not specifically Radio 3, which – as you rightly point out – runs up to the dizzy heights of 192kbps in MPEG-1 Audio Layer 2 coding! My point was, of course, that – whatever the particular bitrate of a DAB broadcast, it's still roughly 1,000kbps less than that of CD. And lest we forget, people were beginning to want more from Compact Disc by the late eighties, twenty five years ago. So it's not like the listening public is being battered down by the relentless march of new and better digital technologies, is it?*

While I note your interesting point that BBC Radio 3 on DAB is not level-compressed at the transmitter, unlike FM, I'd respectfully suggest that you're missing the bigger picture. Obviously compression on audiophile programme material is a bad thing, but DAB's MP2 codec still mangles the signal up in a profound manner which FM intrinsically does not. The processing involved, as I'm sure you'll know, involves slicing the music up into a number of frequency sub-bands and then 'guestimating' what is and what isn't audible, then chopping out all the data that isn't – allegedly – discernible by the human ear. Obviously this is an arbitrary process, which let's just say isn't done with the purity of the signal in mind! The object is, lest we forget, to reduce the file size of the piece of music down to a proscribed limit.

To make matters worse, the MP2 codec dates back to 1989, and thus precedes MP3, MP4 (i.e. AAC) and other formats like Sony's ATRAC by a good long way. It hails from the digital

Sons of pioneers

I have been studying reviews about the current crop of network streamers available, including your positive review of the Pioneer N-50 in the June issue. I have a Pioneer VSX-919AH AV receiver, which is just over two years old. I acquired this originally, together with a decent 5:1 speaker system to improve the inferior sound on my TV.

However, I have since added a Synology DS211j NAS drive (DLNS certified) on which I have roughly 40GB of music, ripped from CD using iTunes.

I am using the NAS drive, which is in another room, with the aid of Netgear homeplugs and my Sky wireless router to listen to music on my iPad2 (with decent headphones), courtesy of the Synology DS Audio apps. This works well, but, being a fan of classical music, I would like to upgrade to a hard-wired setup. So it seems the Pioneer N-50

equivalent of the period in history when human beings were wearing bear skins and hitting each other over the head with dinosaur bones. For that reason, even if you accept that its data reduction processing is an inevitable thing, DAB still stumbles by using the oldest system in town. Some other countries use DAB+, which uses the far newer HE-AAC v2 codec, which is optimised for lower bitrates, and promises better sound. Sadly, this doesn't look likely to reach this country, even if most new DAB receivers seem to have the hardware functionality built-in...

As far as I'm concerned, DAB is radio's most flawed flight

is the piece of kit I need. The question is would it connect to my existing Pioneer AV receiver?

At the moment, I am using the Digital Audio Out (Optical) terminal on the TV, running the cable to the Digital Audio In terminal on the AV receiver, which also has two unused Digital Audio Coaxial (in) terminals, assignable, and one unused Optical (in) assignable. Is there anything I should be aware of before making a final choice? Any comments would be greatly appreciated.

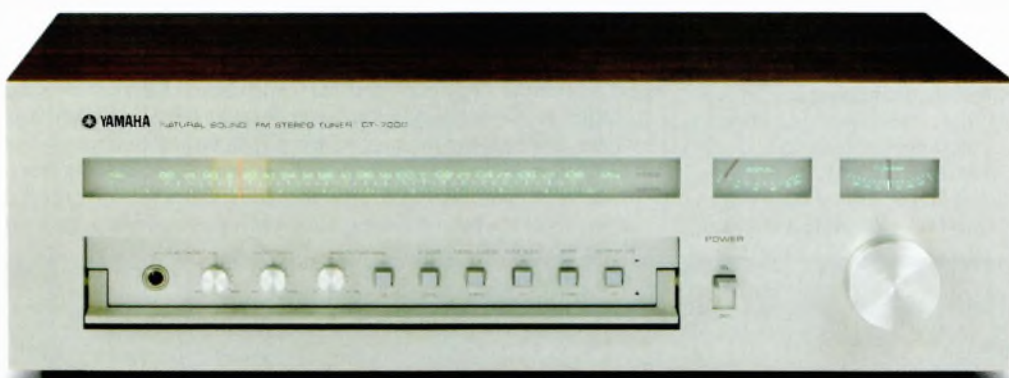
GW Bush

ES says: *You're correct to identify the excellent Pioneer N-50 network music player as a suitable partner to your Pioneer VSX-919AH. It would connect to one of the receiver's analogue inputs, of which it has several. This is likely to result in a better performance than the digital section of your ageing machine.*

of fancy of recent years, with the government and BBC also culpable, although of course it's becoming ever less relevant as more and more people simply stream their radio via the Internet. I'd be fascinated to hear what other readers think.

ES says: *Like David, I'm not a fan of DAB. The UK jumped too soon and embraced a codec that was obsolete when introduced. The good news is that we don't have to wait for the government to see the error of its ways.*

Analogue tuners are holed below the waterline, says Mike Thomson, because of level compression on FM. But what of all that MP2 signal processing on DAB, asks DP?



Since I have had Internet radio, I can list the amount of time I've listened to DAB in minutes.

Sell out?

I have just read Ed Selley's review of Dealer Systems – The Sound Gallery. Three excellent systems, no doubt, but no mention of mains/speaker/interconnect cables. Not a cable in sight in system 3! Did he really listen to it? I have just taken out a digital subscription to your otherwise excellent magazine...

Tony Thomas

ES says: Hi Tony, no conspiracies here. Unlike the first two systems I listened to at The Sound Gallery, which were both in the main demonstration room and assembled for the day, the third system is a permanent resident of the entrance area and as such is dressed and installed to the standards that Ronnie and Co. would be looking to achieve if it were being placed in a domestic setting.

I don't generally mention cabling or supports in the context of the dealer systems. The reasons for this are threefold. The first is that cabling is not always upgraded or changed at the same time people change electronics, so adding to the system cost is often inappropriate. The second is that for a number of people, cabling in particular is not an area they are convinced of the benefits. Working on the principle that all the dealers I've visited are more than capable of advising those who wish to consider cable upgrades. There's also the consideration that the space in the article is finite, and is therefore perhaps best devoted to the system's electronics.

DP says: Hi Tony – whilst cables are of course important in the great scheme of hi-fi things, it's important to underline that they have a supporting role, rather than a starring one, in our regular Dealer Systems feature.

If you have Cable Deficit Disorder, then I suggest you turn to this month's Blind Listening Group Test – this will soon cure it!

LETTER OF THE MONTH

PRIZE
WINNER!

I REDISCOVERED MUSICA COUPLE OF YEARS AGO

when I started listening via Spotify using some Logitech speakers. And then with my love of music rekindled I quickly upgraded to Bowers and Wilkins MM-1 multimedia computer speakers. At this stage I downloaded files from the Society of Sound and also used the Linn download service. Finally, earlier this year I purchased my first proper hi-fi equipment, in the shape of an Audiolab M-DAC, Grado PS500 headphones and a Furutech GT2 USB lead). Now, for the time being, I feel my journey is complete!

I am writing to make the point that this journey would not have started without Spotify, and to belittle such forms of digital music for physical forms misses the point of how the service can be used. Spotify has introduced me to some great music and I have got the bug for music again. Many albums I have listened to I have purchased so I can have the best sound quality for my system.

I also buy music on a quality/price basis. As more albums become available as downloads, the silly prices being asked for SACD, DVD-Audio and audiophile vinyl are just too high. My hope is that the downloads available encompass more styles of music and reach out to more people. So for now I will buy downloads when available, and CDs to rip when not, because to me it does not matter how the music gets to me. Surely it is more about discovering, and then enjoying, new music – than the characteristics of one format or another?

Paul Kilvington

DP says: You make an interesting point, Paul, which has got me thinking. If I look back at my formative years as a music (and then a hi-fi) fan, everything was intertwined. My first ever record purchase (Donna Summer's I Feel Love) came on a seven inch slice of vinyl in a paper sleeve. I loved the music, and then when I got a half decent hi-fi, I loved the sound too. By association, I came to treasure the vinyl single itself, as it was part of the 'rite' of enjoying the music. I think this experience is shared by many music fans of a certain age – the format is/was part and parcel of the fun of enjoying the music.

For this reason, I can see why some people struggle with the idea of Spotify. I can see how it's great as a gentle introduction to new music, rather like a bespoke radio station. But many still feel it's removed the need to use physical music media at all, and that something has been lost along the way. For example, I personally couldn't imagine coming to the majesty of Peter Gabriel's first solo album without that beautiful turquoise blue album sleeve, shot by Storm Thorgerson, in its full twelve inch cardboard glory.

Still, as Jimmy Hughes said in his column recently, the logic of this is that you end up being a slave to your music collection; it plays you rather than you it. Ultimately then, I guess it's a case of 'different strokes for different folks', whatever makes you happy. As you rightly say, the music is key.



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The Music Chain

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

Today, we listen to most of our music from a recording and this gives recording engineers the opportunity to avoid poor acoustics, duff notes and off days. This, of course, means the chain has grown to include the recording engineers, the music distribution system (retailers or downloads), hi-fi manufacturers, hi-fi sellers and the hi-fi purchasers, the latter being the listeners.

I should start by saying that hi-fi has become an adulterated term that no longer has its original meaning because it's applied to much equipment that certainly should not be termed high-fidelity.

It's said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. However, I believe there are two particularly strong links that, if removed from the chain, would seriously damage the quality of recorded music. These are the audiophile, or hi-fi connoisseur, and the specialist hi-fi

retailer, the latter in nearly all cases also being the former because it's their interest that has driven them into their particular business. These are the people who most appreciate how exciting and involving music can be and how it can deliver an emotional experience.

Hi-Fi Connoisseurs

So why is the hi-fi connoisseur so important to the music industry? By their nature, audiophiles are generally avid music lovers who enhance their enjoyment through listening to music at its very best quality level, which means playing great recordings through hi-end hi-fi to achieve the most outstanding results. Without the audiophile, the main driver for quality would probably be removed from the chain. Let's be honest, over

recent years the majority of music listeners now settle for MP3 convenience and, therefore, mediocre sound quality, that is 'pre-ruined' music. If the pendulum ever swings so far that all but a few listen to highly compressed formats such as MP3, music producers will not waste their resources on producing high quality recordings because it would be commercially unnecessary, even if their recording engineers wanted to achieve the best they could. After all, an MP3 or AAC file, the iTunes default format, downloaded at 128 kbps (the most popular download speed), is about one-eleventh the size of a full resolution CD track, 1411 kbps, so the quality is inevitably far inferior. Information is irretrievably lost and the full dynamic

range is lacking. Using an iPod while jogging does not really raise a quality issue but playing low-resolution tracks through an iPod docking station that feeds into a decent hi-fi system, is a disaster area. It's rubbish quality made louder. Fortunately, there is still significant demand from audiophiles committed to sound quality to sustain the production of high quality recordings, but it would be a tragedy if there weren't. For example, most classical recordings downloaded as an MP3 or AAC file are a complete waste of time because there is so much information missing that they are reduced to just the essence of a tune.

Specialist Hi-Fi Retailers

Just as essential a link in the chain as the hi-fi connoisseur is the specialist hi-fi retailer and the two are rightly dependent on each other. Without the specialist retailer the hi-end hi-fi manufacturer would have to rely on the internet and hi-fi magazine reviewers to try and assess the relative merits and performance of their products against that of their competitors – a notoriously unreliable decision making process. Specialist hi-fi retailers are constantly being offered new products for assessment and potential stocking and, as it is also their hobby as well as their livelihood, they are greatly interested in achieving the best performance and seeking out the most outstanding products and combinations. More than that though is their relationship with audiophiles for, if they are to stay in business, they must satisfy the most discerning customers in the industry. The reality is that audiophiles and specialist hi-fi retailers are essential to each other.



UK Hi-Fi Dealers near you



Future of Recorded Music

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



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OUR TOP 20 UK HI-FI DEALERS

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40 High Street.
t: 01233 624441
www.soundcrafthifi.com

Chelmsford

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

Kingston-upon-Thames

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

Maidenhead

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

Rayleigh, Essex

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

Southend-on-Sea

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

LONDON

Ealing

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

N1

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

SW11

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

SW20

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

SOUTH WEST

Bath

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

Exeter

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

MIDLANDS

Banbury

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

Birmingham

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

Coventry

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

Leicester

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

Nottingham

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

NORTH

Cheadle

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

Chester

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

Hull

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

York

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

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

Going for the one

Is modern hi-fi better than it has ever been, or is it simply less flawed, muses **David Price**...?

Well here's something I never thought I'd say – the England football team has inspired this month's missive!

At the time of writing, dear reader, I've just witnessed something quite unusual on my television screen – the spectacle of our (if you're English) much-derided first eleven play against the French and not disgrace themselves, taking the match to a 1:1 draw.

As I write this, it is Monday 11th June, 2012; the first week of the European football championships. The airwaves are fizzing with comment, from Radio 5 Live and TalkSport, to the BBC and Sky sports editors doing pieces to camera from Donetsk. Normally, after such an important tournament game, the commentariat would have either talked England up to being a shoe-in to win the next World Cup, or have embarked on the ritual process of self-flagellation that involves uttering phrases such as, "we was rubbish" and "sack the manager". Today, however, there's been a surprisingly level-headed verdict on what was an uncharacteristically balanced performance.

At this point, I'll ask non-football fans to bear with me – because there are great similarities with hi-fi in what I'm about to say. England – I think it's fair to note – have in recent years been heroic failures. We've had what's generally regarded to be a team of very gifted players, able to win at the highest international club level. Trouble is, no matter how highly paid the fancy foreign manager has been, put these individuals together and the result is always disappointment. Occasional flashes of genius, allied to lots of mediocrity and some out-and-out clowning around.

Very recently, the great Fabio Capello – a redoubtable figure full of flair and pomp (like only Italians can be) – stepped down as manager and one Mr Roy Hodgson took over. Reasonable Roy, I think it's fair to say, is no mercurial Italian, but he has been able to get the England team to play for him in an impressively disciplined and orderly way.

Statistically, this is precisely how teams win tournaments. It's not by *Rcy cf the Rovers*-style derring-do around the opposition's goal area, it's by more solid, structured defensive play than your rivals can muster. Unromantic yes, boring yes, but it gets results in the end.

These days, I'm beginning to think this approach holds in hi-fi, too. So many products appear to be conceived to be free from solecisms of design or sonics. There's far less of a perceived need for electronics and loudspeakers alike to have any real character –

instead it's all about eliminating the quirks, foibles and failings of a product. Surely the marketers believe that's what gets results?

Take Quad's 11L loudspeaker, for example. In a recent group test I found it almost impossible to warm to, yet it was also very difficult to dislike. My only real objection was that it was bland and innocuous – something that music itself, of course, is not! Ditto Sennheiser's HD650 headphone, which proved super-solid in its own way, yet was still largely devoid of charm and had no flashes of genius in any aspect of its performance. And recently, precisely the same point could be made of the sonic performance of Apple's iPod touch. In last month's *Blind-listening Group Test*, it sounded utterly banal, yet had no obvious flaws either sonically or technically.

I fear that in so many respects these days, we live in a world of studied competence, where you win by not failing. Or rather – as is likely in the case of my national football team – you don't lose so badly by not underperforming quite so much!

When I first got into hi-fi proper in the late seventies, things were different. Flagship loudspeakers of the day were weird and wonderful things – from mammoth-sized, flouncy-sounding KEF 104abs to madcap Sonab OA5s. Top turntables ranged from the sumptuous Linn LP12 to the dry-as-a-bone JBE. Premium amplification went from Naim's razor-sharp NAC32.5/NAP250 to the rounded, romantic Audio Research D40.

Today's high end hi-fi market still offers a decent menu of flavours, but the mainstream is far more uniform, regimented and stylised than it ever used to be. Big selling products, after all, get to be so by offending the least amount of people, I suppose?

So it's important for reviewers to explain new products in these terms. Is this just another solid performer that might scrape through to the quarter finals because of its relative lack of vices? Or is it going down in a blaze of glory in the ninety first minute of the final, thanks to some silly gift to the opposition? And more importantly, I think it's essential for readers to decide which approach is best for them personally.

Off duty, when I'm spending my own money, I tend to go for more characterful designs, craving brilliant but flawed kit that I end up loving and loathing in equal measure. I guess that with this approach, were I ever to become England manager, we'd probably end up being sundered by Germany during another wretched penalty shoot-out!

In so many respects these days, we live in a world of studied competence, where you win by not failing...



DAVID PRICE
Audiophile, record collector and
Hi-Fi Choice Editor

Feel the noize

How to make amplifiers behave in a linear way?

There's more than one way to do it, reckons **Richard Black...**

In order to amplify a signal, you need what is called an 'active component' – a transistor or a valve, basically, which has three or more terminals and produces an output that is in some definable way related to the input. For example, a bipolar transistor has three terminals – called base, emitter and collector. In simple terms, a small current flowing from the base to the emitter causes a bigger current to flow from collector to emitter. (This assumes various things about static voltage conditions and so on, but bear with me for now!) We don't usually think directly in terms of currents in designing amplifying circuits, but in day-to-day terms, it turns out that a small change in voltage between base and emitter also causes a bigger change of voltage between collector and emitter. That's a basic definition of amplification.

The trouble is that, in general, the current-to-current relationship isn't strictly linear, and the voltage-to-voltage one even less – in fact, the latter is really very curvy. This means that as you put a varying signal in, the top of the waveform will not be amplified by the same amount as the bottom, so clearly you'll get distortion. There is no known basic amplifying device which is truly linear under any simple conditions. At best, the output is only an approximation to a constant multiplication of the input.

This is due to the fundamental physics of the way these things work. Ironically, the bipolar transistor is both the most predictable and the most non-linear of the standard amplifying devices: it has what's technically called an 'exponential' relationship between input and output which is very accurate, but not exactly useful for linear amplification. At the other end of the scale, some valves have a relationship which is very much closer to linear but isn't governed by a simple mathematical equation.

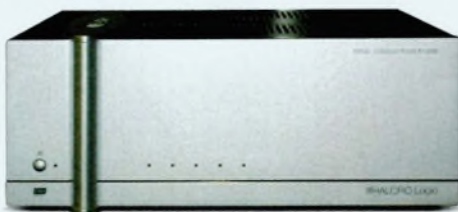
That would appear to make valves the better choice. Indeed, if you are going to be ultra-purist about the subject of feedback, they are. Feedback means reducing the gain of an amplifier (either a single amplifying device – 'local feedback' – or a whole circuit – 'global feedback') in such a way as to trade gain for linearity. There are all sorts of ways of doing this, but in the vast majority of the world's amplifiers there is plenty of feedback going on. Most designers regard it as a tool as basic as the components themselves, but there's a hardcore within the audio world that would rather live without it, claiming that it has adverse effects on musical dynamics.

There is one particularly interesting example of feedback known as 'degeneration', which is a specific way of reducing the gain of a single amplifying stage without actually taking a signal from one part of the circuit and feeding it back to another. All the same, in a sense it does involve just that, depending on how you view the circuit. This technique is used very widely in transistor amplifiers, especially small-signal circuits, and can very easily make highly linear circuits without any global feedback. It's really only with (some) valves, though, that you can get away entirely without it...

There's another trick that, again, is mostly used in small-signal circuits to improve linearity, and it's very simple: don't use all the available signal-handling range of the amplifying device. If you take only part of a curved line, it will tend to look straighter, and using only part of an amplifying device's operating range yields lower distortion than using all of it (this, of course, is why large-signal distortion is almost invariably higher than small-signal). Again, this is most applicable to valves, which operate at voltages in the 100V-plus range. If you've only looking for an output swing of 3 or 4 volts peak-to-peak, you're evidently only using a small part of the possible output range. There have been highly-regarded preamps in the past which used high-voltage transistors similarly.

All sorts of other tricks can be used, too. 'Bootstrapping' is a popular one, where the circuit is arranged so that the primary amplifying device sees almost constant voltage and/or current conditions even as the input and output signal voltage change. This involves a little extra circuit complexity, again something that purists will eschew where possible, but can give useful results. The Halcro amplifiers of a few years ago used a combination of bootstrapping and feedback to achieve levels of distortion previously unheard of.

Does distortion really matter so very much? There's no *quick* answer to that, but anecdotal evidence suggests that we often seem to like just a tiny bit of it. Maybe zero feedback is not such a daft philosophy!



Does distortion really matter so much? Anecdotal evidence suggests that we often seem to like just a tiny bit of it...



RICHARD BLACK
Prolific musician, recording engineer and reviewer

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Controls freak

Hi-fi shouldn't just be good to listen to, it should be nice to use too, says **Tim Jarman...**

A few months ago I had a bit of a moan about how ugly I think some modern hi-fi equipment has become. I'm glad to say that since then a few really nicely designed pieces of equipment have appeared, in particular some valve amplifiers from VTL and Copland, where all the working parts have been put back in their proper place – inside the cabinet. I can take no credit for this of course, but it is reassuring to discover that it seems that I am not completely alone in my views!

Expanding on the theme of design, I think that another shortcoming of the current generation of models is the user interface, the knobs and buttons that you use every day. Some of the equipment which I have reviewed recently has been awkward, difficult or downright unpleasant to use, which is quite a needless state of affairs given the work that has been done on ergonomics by the automotive industry (and others) over the past few decades. Looking back over the things that I've tested recently the nicest one to operate was probably a mid-seventies Pioneer SA-8500 integrated amplifier. While it didn't sound that great, the arrangement of controls struck the perfect balance between being under-equipped and over complicated and the feel and weighting of each switch and knob was just about perfect, I could tell at a glance what the settings were, so there were no nasty surprises when the needle was lowered onto the vinyl.

I find the current arrangement of a rotary control (or perhaps a pair of up/down keys) that works in conjunction with a small 'menu'-type display and a button to shift between modes unsatisfactory in most cases. The problem is that once you enter one function all the others disappear, for example if you use the knob to select a source you cannot alter the volume without shifting modes first – hardly ideal.

Being able only to access the functions in a predetermined order is also frustrating, with the latest designs there are often so many, yet there is seldom a way to remove those which you seldom (if ever) use. Having to struggle down through layers of menus in search of a particular function is another thing that's only started to become an issue recently, but it's now a fairly routine operation, as is the 'one mistake and you're back at the start' penalty for pressing the wrong key when you finally find the thing you are looking for – it's almost moved me to violence at times! People like to see information presented in a parallel manner, not in one

arbitrary step at a time, yet this type of interface makes that impossible. An emerging alternative is the colour touchscreen, but I find this lacking in appeal, too. Beyond the idea of controlling the equipment with something that looks like the children's section of a restaurant menu (complete with sticky finger marks!), I find these devices so be oddly detached from their function. Like the dead-eyed stare of a glamour model, I get the impression that it's all a bit cold in there, with no 'soul' inside...

It would be nice to be able to get away from a world of clicky little buttons and sticky touchscreens, but for much of audio I regret that the time may have passed and that there may soon be a whole generation of listeners who will never experience the joy of altering the volume level of their system with a beautifully slick rotary switched attenuator like the one on the Pioneer SA-8500. Spinning through the FM band with a flywheel-assisted manually tuned tuner is another mechanical pleasure that isn't catered for with modern equipment, but if you ever get the chance to have a go with something like a Naim NAT02 or a Yamaha CT-7000, then I'd highly recommend it – choosing what to listen to next will never be the same again!

There is still one area left for those who appreciate fine mechanical things though – the turntable. Fair enough, most of them are still ergonomic disaster areas, with randomly placed and unlabelled controls which require greatly contrasting levels of force to operate but in a way that doesn't really matter. Swinging the arm over to line up with the start of the track you wish to hear is so much more 'human' than scrolling down a list, as is the delicacy that is required to lower the stylus into the groove so that the music starts silently rather than with a crash and a bang. Computers may be on the verge of taking a lot of the fun out of hi-fi, but while the humble turntable continues to thrive there is still hope, that's something I'm grateful for every time I put a record on.



Computers may be on the verge of taking the fun out of hi-fi, but while the humble turntable continues to thrive, there's still hope...



TIM JARMAN
Electronics engineer, vintage kit collector
and classic audio expert

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Low end theory

Bass, how low can you go? **Channa Vithana** gets a different kind of subterranean homesick blues!

For me, bass reproduced via one's home hi-fi system is very simple – there are two interlinked capacities, bass extension and bass tunefulness. This may seem an oversimplification, but as usual doing things simply or clearly or using less for a purer, more distilled result can be very difficult to achieve.

Take a typically rectangular six-sided modern loudspeaker for example; it will invariably include a port of some sort, usually in the rear or front baffle (one of the six sides) that helps it to 'breathe' more freely, and in the case of smaller sized designs allows more bass extension for its relatively smaller physical geometry. This is much like a turbocharger fitted to a smaller engine in a car – and like some of these automotive designs the hi-fi loudspeaker can also suffer 'lag' or slow response until the required extension can actually happen. Unlike the turbo lag on an old Saab 99 for example, this won't take several seconds but still the slightly delayed response may alter the enjoyment of the music's timing, if you're sensitive to this phenomena.

What happens is that more bass is produced giving better extension, but the slowing down of transient response in the music can alter time domain coherence, so it doesn't sound as free flowing, natural or convincing as it should. This is because the drive units have to cope with the frequencies they need to reproduce, along with the demands that the port dictates in order to attain an even sounding response from treble to mid to bass. Good loudspeaker design by competent loudspeaker designers takes all of this into account. However, what is sometimes mistaken for good bass is merely its extension or how deep/low it goes, rather than how tuneful it is meant to be, or is actually being reproduced...

I have heard the cringeworthy boasts of a minority of pro and domestic manufacturers and their PR people at studios, shows and dealerships claiming ever lower frequency capability and measurement for their designs, somewhat akin to the 'my engine's bigger than yours'-type of discussion, as if this were the only benchmark for bass! I disagree – bass extension is important, as without it the music would lack drive and sound hollow and soulless, but surely you also need bass tunefulness in order to really enjoy your music?

I am not alone in this kind of thinking, as some time ago when I met Peter Bartlett, the MD of Cyrus, he too agreed with me that good bass is not just about extension, rather how

tuneful it is. And to this end I cannot find myself enjoying the amazing bass playing of the two late greats Bernard Edwards (Chic) and Cliff Burton (Metallica), without being able to follow the wonderful and somewhat otherworldly phrasing of notes expressed from their bass guitars.

Well-designed infinite baffle or closed-box loudspeakers that don't have ports can sound wonderfully tuneful with bass, where the low frequencies are not just deep or one-note, and when designed well they time superbly with the midrange and treble frequencies. One such example is a pair of largish Monitor Audio R852MD standmount loudspeakers that I own. While not perfect, especially with badly remastered CDs, these old speakers can show many a higher priced modern design a thing or two in terms of boogie, tunefulness and clarity.

Not many infinite baffle/closed-box designs are made these days, because of their relative inefficiency – which never looks good on a showroom spec sheet. However, I have found that bass tunefulness can still be readily and noticeably improved with ported loudspeakers. Fascinatingly for example, when Bowers and Wilkins changed to the Diamond tweeters for its high-end 800 series a few years back, I discerned that the switch to the new high-frequency driver (and crossover) allowed the bass to time so much better than before. It let these fantastic 800 series products off the leash – they suddenly came over as much more musically cohesive, letting their talents be appreciated like never before.

So if you think that your loudspeakers' bass lags behind, why not audition a pair of supertweeters to use with them (Townshend is one example)? Aside from a subtly changed tonality, you might find the music times better and the bass is more tuneful. Think 'quality not quantity' in terms of bass, especially within a domestic-sized living room, where the maxim of 'less is more' is definitely not a bore!



Bass extension is important, as without it the music would lack drive sounding hollow and soulless – but surely you also need tunefulness to really enjoy your music?



CHANNA VITHANA
Reviewer, design aficionado and music lover

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The search for real music

Jason Kennedy discovers that the Swiss make more than just strong cheese and cuckoo clocks...

At the recent Munich High End show, which is without doubt the best show in Europe and a veritable cornucopia of audiophile exotica, there is one thing that's in relatively short supply – good music. It is the great irony of hi-fi appreciation that the music chosen to demonstrate equipment is rarely of significant artistic merit. Instead, you hear the same anodyne stuff in room after room. This makes it much easier to get round the show and report on all the new kit because you are not waylaid by something that engages the ear, but it still doesn't really send out the right message...

However all is not lost, and several demonstrations at the event had the gall to play what I consider to be entertaining music, among them was MAD (My Audio Design) whose proprietor Timothy Jung had Hendrix on at suitable volume, and Voxativ who had managed to borrow a Revox tape machine and a tape of Joss Stone and Jeff Beck to go with it. Cheating perhaps, but it was good music and sounded spectacular. My overall winner in the music department, however, was Juerg Schopper and Swissonor. Schopper restores Thorens turntables and has an enviable collection of rare and less scarce vinyl, a good portion of which he had lugged to the top floor of the MOC exhibition centre...

The album that made me sit down and listen was JJ Cale's *Naturally*, a white label test pressing no less, which sounded as warm and juicy as you could want, and not something I've ever encountered at a show before. I then noticed that Schopper had a white label of ZZ Top's *Fandango!* in his box, which he told me was a gift from the band's singer and guitar player Billy Gibbons for whom he had restored a turntable. He put on *Blue Jean Blues*, a slow lament with some of the sweetest guitar work that the band has committed to tape and it sounded sublime. If there weren't far too many other rooms to check out I could have stayed there all day.

The system consisted of a fully revamped 1959 Thorens TD 124 turntable with two arms (the one in use was a Thorens with an Ortofon SPU – the retro audio nut's cartridge of choice). The rest of the kit was made by fellow Swiss

music lovers Swissonor, whose modular tube amplifier the AM system provided phono stage, preamp and push-pull tetrode power amp in one chassis.

This was driving the company's B.A.C.H. (bass adjustable coaxial horn) 12 speaker with a 12-inch bass driver, whose rearward output is amplified by a Tractrix horn and has adjustable output at low, mid and high frequencies. The latter being delivered by a co-planar horn tweeter sitting in front of the bass driver. A high sensitivity system, Swissonor specifies 97dB, that was clearly well suited to the 10 watt amplifier. Not a cheap system it has to be said, but few of those at this celebration of the high end are. Yet its superlative tonal qualities and dynamic sensitivity made it stand out from the crowd – that and those great records, of course!

Schopper had some of his Thorens collection on display in the room, an array which included an 808 stereo portable record player from the nineteen sixties, alongside a very rare prototype tangential tonearm mounted on a TD 121. But the *pièce de résistance* had to be the 1964 TD 224 studio record changer, a turntable with a mechanical system for removing and replacing records to provide continuous play. It sounds complicated, but the TD 224 is no Heath Robinson affair, having only two arms perched to the left of the turntable which can lift and replace the vinyl with an expanding collet through the centre hole. Those Swiss gnomes were cunning chaps in their time.

If you have a Thorens turntable that needs some TLC or a classic that you'd like turned into a giant slayer, then Juerg Schopper is your man. He ain't cheap of course, but the results are genuinely diverting.



It is the great irony of hi-fi appreciation that the music chosen to demonstrate equipment is rarely of significant artistic merit...



JASON KENNEDY
Former *Hi-Fi Choice* editor and veteran hi-fi scribbler

Bose value

Despite being something of a controversial brand amongst audiophiles, Bose has an illustrious hi-fi history – as its 901 speaker shows, says **James Michael Hughes...**

For yours truly, there's no small amount of irony that the most famous loudspeaker to have ever emanated from the Bose is something like the 901. You see, on the surface of it, things don't fit. Bose is world-renowned for its mainstream, mass market music machines that, frankly, everyone you've ever met seems to think are 'good' or 'nice'. But the 901, the company's iconic and classic design, is either regarded as genius or heresy – if ever there was a Marmite speaker, this is it!

Before anyone says anything bad about Bose 901s, let's all agree on one thing – they've lasted. Any speaker in more or less constant production since 1968 has to have something going for it. Alas, opinions have always been divided. Indeed, one of the earliest US reviews actually prompted a lawsuit from Bose – so vitriolic was the criticism!

There are plenty of audiophiles who feel the 901 was/is a bit of a joke; a deeply flawed loudspeaker not worthy of consideration. Yet much in-depth research preceded the creation of the 901. The design itself is very interesting, and one that elegantly tackles a number of key loudspeaker problems. For starters, there's no passive crossover. And each drive unit covers the full audio spectrum, so the sound is very cohesive and coherent, and the load presented to the amplifier is not a complex one. If the 'ideal' loudspeaker has but a single drive unit, the 901 achieves that goal. Well, sort of...

Actually, no fewer than *nine* drivers are employed; arrayed so that eight point backwards, and one faces the listener. The result is a mix of direct

and reflected sound; the nine drivers behaving like one. As with many innovative designs, the 901 was born out of frustration. Inventor Armar G Bose was dissatisfied with most of the speakers being made at that time, and wanted to do things differently. He was trying to get away from highly-directional propagation, in favour of something delivering a broader more encompassing soundfield. His ideal was a 'pulsating sphere', but this was impractical.

So after much experimentation and research, the 901 was created. With all those drive units, excellent coupling to the air is achieved. Moreover, each driver is comparatively under-driven. As a result, the 901 offers good dynamic headroom and low distortion. Despite the relatively small enclosure, it produces decent LF extension. And given a powerful enough amplifier, high sound pressure levels are possible. Any downsides? Well, having the low frequencies squirt in several directions can lead to bass boom in certain rooms. It makes the 901 unpredictable – trick or treat! Imaging was another concern...

All things considered

But how is it possible to achieve a full-range sound from what is essentially a collection of midrange drive units? With an active equaliser that boosts bass and treble extremes, my dear Watson! The equaliser goes in the preamp's tape loop, or between pre and power amp. However, with both bass and treble extremes being boosted, a heavy burden falls on the power amp. This was an issue with the original version of the 901, which was significantly

less-efficient than the subsequent revised models. So, for best results, you really needed a big powerful amplifier. High wattage power amps were rare in the late nineteen sixties and early seventies, with less than 30W being the norm. Sadly, this wasn't nearly enough for the original power-hungry Bose 901.

That's why the subsequent 901/III featured Bose's new HVC (Helical Voice Coil) drive unit. Purpose-designed, it was significantly more sensitive than the original driver used. So less power was needed. But for many, the main 901 *caveat* was the way the speaker imaged. The precise, tightly defined stereo that listeners of the period craved wasn't delivered. The 901 was out of step with the times. In all probability, the 901 would have been more enthusiastically accepted had it

A very familiar picture to audiophiles of a certain age, the Bose 901 was once a staple of the high end loudspeaker scene...



appeared during the fifties – in the pre-stereo era when most people had just a single loudspeaker. The direct/reflective approach creates a sense of spread, imparting a feeling of spacious depth and width that benefits mono, because it eliminates the 'cramped' feel you often get with a single speaker.

Alas, once stereo took hold, priorities changed. Achieving bold vivid stereo became the aim of most listeners – and manufacturers. Directional speakers highlighted channel separation; game-over! Listeners in thrall to the miracle of stereo sound wanted to hear pin-point left/centre/right positional detail. Because direct/reflecting designs did not deliver this, they were judged harshly. But that's not to say a pair of 901s can't image – they can. But you don't experience the almost laser-like precision possible with directional speakers. For many, that was the 901's undoing...

Work placement

The 901 has always been unusually sensitive to room placement. With a direct/reflecting loudspeaker, positioning is always more critical. Spatial depth and width are heavily influenced by closeness to walls. Think of each 901 as a source of light rather than sound, and you'll perhaps get a better idea of what's happening as you move the speakers in relation to walls and corners. Sitting fairly close-up lets you hear more of the front-facing driver, resulting in a better-defined stereo soundstage. How much of the sound radiating from the rear you hear is determined by placement. With the speakers too far from walls and corners, much of the rear energy is lost. Too close to a wall, and the sound fails to blossom. But, at the optimum distance, you experience added space and depth. Some early 901 listeners were unhappy not to hear a solidly-focused central image. Playing a recording of solo piano, the instrument might easily sound over-wide and diffuse.

A solid central image was very important to listeners in the nineteen sixties, because many would only recently have 'gone stereo', having previously listened to a single speaker in mono. Bose produced a



The rear of the 901 lets slip its unconventional design; this speaker needs painstakingly careful positioning in the room...

matching centre speaker (no longer available) to improve matters. But even with this, the direct/reflecting 901 still created a broad spread of sound, rather something tightly-focused. Time to 'fess up, then. In the late seventies, I actually owned a pair of 901s. Although deeply unfashionable, I felt they were among the most interesting and capable speakers on the market. Still do! I was attracted by the coherence and integration of the sound, and the sense of breadth and depth the 901s seemed to create. The results were impressively holographic and decently dimensional.

The music sounded crisp and immediate, with plenty of brilliance and impact. The highs were open and clear; maybe not as extended as speakers with a separate tweeter, but sharp and detailed. Bass was quite deep; all you could ask for, given the compact (320x533x330mm) size of the enclosures. Strictly between ourselves, I even felt my 901s imaged

A classic worth seeking out, if you fancy a walk on the wild side...

quite well. I used mine in a smallish room, and sat quite close. The sound they produced was big; remarkably so, given such small cabinets. With an amplifier of sufficient output, they could play loud too, yet sounded great at low levels. Friends thought my 901s sounded great too – that is, after they'd got over their sceptical 'what on earth made you buy a pair of those?' initial reaction. Many were surprised, given the 901's reputation!

I eventually replaced my 901s with Linn Isobariks – also a direct/reflecting design. But I never forgot my torrid liaison with Bose 901s.

THE RIVALS

The late nineteen sixties was a transitional period for hi-fi. Mono had given way to stereo, valves were being edged out by transistors, and big speakers were losing ground to smaller boxes. Being compact, the 901 met the needs of those wanting to go stereo, but unable to house two big enclosures. But it was very power-hungry by the standards of the day, and needed a big amplifier.

At launch, in its native US market, the original 901 would have been up against established designs like the Acoustic Research AR 3a, and would subsequently have been trading blows with models like AR's LST. In the UK, it was pitted against the bigger Tannoy and Wharfedale models. Yet the Bose 901 was sufficiently individual to lie beyond comparison with these contemporaries. Being a compact direct/reflecting design, it was different. It was only when the Swedish Sonab loudspeaker arrived in the early nineteen seventies – an interesting 'omni' design that soon gained a committed following – that it finally found a true spiritual adversary.

My 901s were type IIIs. I liked these more than the type IV, which had a different equaliser that made use of ICs rather than discrete components. I felt the 901/IV sounded slightly harsh compared to the III.

Buying Bose

Back in the nineteen seventies, the 901 was priced well beyond reach of most audiophiles, but at just under £1,700 new they're more affordable now. The manufacturer claims to have made some 350 improvements over the 1968 originals in latest type VI. The cabinets have been given a cosmetic makeover; rounded contours replace the squared-off appearance of earlier versions.

Bose's 901 is surely an audio classic, well worth seeking out if you fancy a walk on the wild side. Take time to set them up properly and position for optimum results, and your efforts will be amply repaid. ●

1989

Unpack those flares, baggy tops and sun hats because The Stone Roses are back! And to celebrate, **Simon Berkovitch** heads back to 1989 and revisits the band's debut album – a ray of sunshine peeking through a grey pop landscape...



With The Stone Roses on the front cover of the *New Musical Express*, and massive concerts announced for a summer that has seen a feverish scramble for tickets by devoted fans old and new, you could be forgiven for thinking that we've fallen back in time to the late nineteen eighties. And for the purposes of this *Year In Music*, celebrating one of the greatest debut albums, we surely have!

Back in 1989, the youthful Mancunian quartet of charismatic singer Ian Brown, guitar hero John Squire and the fantastic rhythm section of bassist Mani and drummer Reni – collectively The Stone Roses – had an astonishing, eponymous sixties-influenced debut album under their belt, one that now makes a default appearance on critics' 'Greatest Albums of all Time' lists. It didn't instantly achieve this status, though. On its initial release in April '89, the album was strictly an underground concern. Fast forward a few months and the band had single-handedly invented so-called 'Indie dance'



what passed for popular music was largely a travesty. Bland warblings from Australian actors from popular daytime soaps rubbed shoulders with vile *Stars on 45*-style desecrations of classic sixties singles by an inane cartoon rabbit called Jive Bunny.

The Stone Roses had an astonishing 1960s-influenced debut album under their belt, one that makes an appearance on every critic's 'Greatest Albums' list...

with classic single *Fool's Gold*, stormed TV institution *Top of the Pops* and executed legendary performances at 'one off' events at unlikely venues like Blackpool Tower's Empress Ballroom. By the end of the year, to many, The Stone Roses really were what they audaciously claimed to be – the greatest rock and roll band in the world.

Jive Bunny's days are numbered

In 1989, rock music certainly needed them. One look at the year's number one singles [see *I Heart 1989* opposite] illustrates that

Underground dance music was peeking its head over the parapet however, with the commercial strains of Italian House anthem *Ride on Time* by Black Box, the biggest-selling single of the year. But, the generally dreary state of musical affairs is summed up by the Christmas Number One – a revamp of 1984's *Do They Know It's Christmas?*. The intentions behind this particular vinyl outing may be laudable, but, boy does the music suck...

The album charts also offered little refuge. 1989 was the year of such diabolical long



THE THIRD COMING

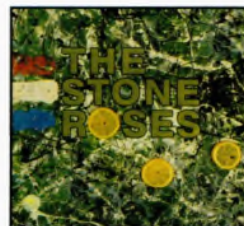
What the world was waiting for, or so it seemed in 1989! This iconic image is one of 70 photographs of The Stone Roses featuring in an exhibition by renowned music photographer Kevin Cummins in conjunction with Sonus, with never-before-seen pictures charting the band's musical journey from their first ever performance at The Moonlight Club. Check out <http://blog.sonos.com> for more information.



I HEART 1989

Having a beating heart in the title of a pop song certainly seems to have helped your ascent to the top of the singles charts this year. As did being blond, Australian and having Stock/Aitken/Waterman write your material. Failing that, being a thumbs-up cartoon bunny with a dreadful line in megamix 45s did the trick. 1989 wasn't pop's finest hour...

- Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan *Especially For You*
- Marc Almond and Gene Pitney *Something's Gotten Hold of my Heart*
- Simple Minds *Belfast Child*
- Jason Donovan *Too Many Broken Hearts*
- Madonna *Like a Prayer*
- Bangles *Eternal Flame*
- Kylie Minogue *Hand on your Heart*
- The Christians, Holly Johnson, Paul McCartney, Gerry Marsden and Stock Aitken Waterman *Ferry 'Cross the Mersey*
- Jason Donovan *Sealed with a Kiss*
- Soul II Soul featuring Caron Wheeler *Back to Life (However Do You Want Me)*
- Sonia *You'll Never Stop Me Loving You*
- Jive Bunny and the Mastemixers *Swing the Mood* and *That's What I Like*
- Black Box *Ride On Time*
- Lisa Stansfield *All Around the World*



JOHN LECKIE

From tape-op for John Lennon to Producer of the Year in 2002, the producer of The Stone Roses' debut album is a legend in his own right...

The selection of John Leckie as producer on The Stone Roses' classic debut album in 1989 was no accident: the quartet had done their homework. Leckie's CV reads like a *Who's Who* of psychedelic and progressive rock.

Starting out as a Tape-Operator and Balance Engineer, Leckie worked with three Beatles – John Lennon, George Harrison and Paul McCartney – on solo projects, as well as Syd Barrett and Pink Floyd. New Wave production included work for Simple Minds, Magazine, Public Image Limited, XTC and Bill Nelson (ex-Be Bop Deluxe).

It was Leckie's production work on XTC's psychedelic side project *The Dukes of Stratosphere* in the mid-80s that caught the ear of The Stone Roses – leading to a fabulous collaboration on their debut album.



players as Simply Red's *A New Flame*, Holly Johnson's *Blast!* and Chris Rea's none-more-aptly-titled *Road to Hell*. Some solace comes from LPs such as New Order's brilliant *Technique* – ecstatic with Ibiza's hedonistic beats – and The Jesus and Mary Chain's drum machine-heavy *Automatic*. But the prevailing conservative mood is perhaps best summed up by a selection of some of 1989's BRIT Award winners: Phil Collins (British male solo artist), Fairground Attraction (British single with the inappropriately titled *Perfect*) and Cliff Richard (Outstanding contribution). It wasn't quite a vintage year, then...

Simply put, mainstream British music had been neutered – and was evidently no longer the soundtrack to youth. No wonder that The Stone Roses were – as their classic 1989 single, the 'double A side' with *Fool's Gold* has it, what the world was waiting for!

This Is The One

Formed in the early 1980s by Ian Brown and John Squire, the band's line up finally solidified around the dynamic rhythm section of Mani and Reni. The pre-Mani and Reni single *So Young/Tell Me* in 1985 was a rough and ready affair, but the chiming guitars of 1987's limited edition *Sally Cinnamon* pointed to the psychedelic pop direction that the band was to take for 1989's eponymous album.

The new direction was unveiled in 1988 with the driving *Elephant Stone* single, produced by New Order's bassist Peter Hook.

THE STONE ROSES



ELEPHANT STONE

It took a change of producer, however, to really breathe life into the brace of timeless pop songs that comprise *The Stone Roses*; an album that still has fans and journalists alike misty eyed. The influences of The Byrds, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, psychedelic rock and The Smiths – even Simon and Garfunkel – are all present and correct over its eleven tracks, but if ever an album is much more than the sum of its parts, then – to coin another big Roses' tune – *This Is the One*.

The Stone Roses was much more than a collection of undeniably brilliant pop songs, as it offered a port of entry to another, more colourful world. From The Rolling Stones to The Clash to The Libertines, the greatest groups have always had a 'last gang in town' quality to them – it's more than just the music. And, for a generation of teenagers – my generation of teenagers – The Stone Roses offered an alternative to the grey late-nineteen eighties – both musically and sartorially they were clad in psychedelic hues.

The Stone Roses offered a port of entry to another, more colourful, world...

Although the subsequent (hideously named) 'Madchester' scene can't be mentioned without a nod to the baggy clothing (reflecting the necessarily loose-fitting garments of the club scene) of bands like The Charlatans, Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses themselves, fixing these bands in a certain place and time, the music on The Stone Roses' debut album definitely transcends mere fashion.

Producing a classic

The contribution of producer John Leckie [see previous page] cannot be underestimated. Although the songs that made up the band's debut album had been demoed in various shapes and forms for a number of years, it was Leckie's expertise and pedigree that enabled them to shine, giving them subtle, trippy touches and pop sparkle. From the initial bass rumble of confident opener *I Wanna Be Adored* to the euphoric closer – complete with funky jam – of the equally cockily titled *I Am The Resurrection*, the album was one soaring anthem after another.

Like Lennon/McCartney, Jagger/Richard and Strummer/Jones before them, with effortless sounding pop gems like *Waterfall*, *She Bangs the Drums*, *Made of Stone* and (*Song For My*) *Sugar Spun Sister* definitively nailed on vinyl, it was obvious that that the songwriting team of Squire and Brown was aiming sky-high. As Ian Brown put it in the NME at the end of the year, "we're the most important group in the world, because we've got the best songs and we haven't begun to show our potential yet". Unfortunately, despite 1990 having considerable peaks, one particular trough seemed to stall the group's untapped potential – at least of this golden pop incarnation.



808 STATE PACIFIC

Like 1966 with psychedelia or 1975 with punk, 1989 was a year when the groundwork was done to produce a new flavour of pop music that would go on to be highly influential in the great scheme of things. The moment in question here was the release of 808 State's *Pacific*, when house music melded into ambient...

While Stock, Aitken and Waterman were providing the mainstream chart fodder of the day, 1989 saw a buzzing underground UK dance scene spinning house music, much of it coming from Chicago and Detroit. Countless DJs and musicians were making their own music using newly affordable digital samplers, splicing together classic 1970s rare groove and squelchy early-eighties analogue synthesiser sounds.

808 State were surely the greatest exponents of the art, at this time. A collection of Manchester DJs, record shop owners and hip-hop artists, they had formed in 1987 to make records that became popular on the dance scene. 1989's *Pacific* was their breakthrough tune however, going viral around European clubs throughout the autumn before its release. A blissed mix of chirping bird sounds, washes of synthesiser, frenetic Roland TR808 drum patterns and dreamy saxophone noodling, it became an anthem for the rave generation, and a blueprint for ambient house. DP

Woodstock for the Baggy generation

The following year is a series of highs and lows for a band at its creative peak. Single *One Love* mines a similar groove to its predecessor, pointing to more of a groove-based direction, peaking at number four in the UK chart. That summer, nearly 30,000 fans – including this (then) teenage writer – coalesce in Cheshire for the Spike Island gig, hailed as "Woodstock for the Baggy generation" by press at the time. The band's confidence is stratospheric: they turn down a support slot with The Rolling Stones, with Brown cheekily informing Q magazine, "they should be bloody supporting us."

Unfortunately, a drawn-out legal battle to escape a contract with their label, Silverstone Records, ensures that no new music is heard from the band until 1994's *The Second Coming*. This was a far more traditional, Led Zeppelin-inspired affair, and it's arguable the mysterious X-factor of what made 1989's debut so special had been lost along the way.

You may not have given *The Stone Roses* a spin in a while. Perhaps it's like *Revolver* or *Astral Weeks* or *Blonde on Blonde* or *The Dark Side of the Moon* or *Exile on Main St.* or... well, choose your own classic that languishes, gathering dust in your collection because you feel you're too familiar with it.

Even better, you may never have heard this gem. Either way, dig it out, slap it on and be reminded of why thousands of fans are near-delirious at The Stone Roses' return for mega-gigs this summer, the guitar pop nirvana of 1989's debut long player. For an album so infused with sixties psychedelic influences, it still sounds remarkably fresh. ●

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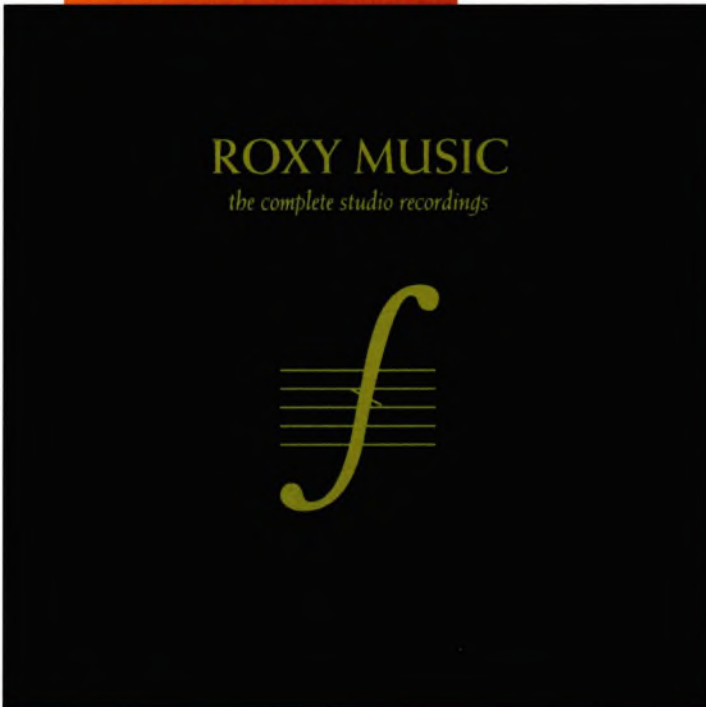


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Easy Takes Vol. 1

Music reviews

The latest music releases...

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



Roxy Music

The Complete Studio Recordings 1972-82

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★★★★★

10 CD box set

Virgin

WHEN ROXY MUSIC emerged in 1972, concept albums were all the rage. Bryan Ferry, Brian Eno, guitarist Phil Manzanera, saxophonist Andy McKay and drummer Paul Thompson took the notion one step further. The entire band was a concept – a deliciously fetishised projection of rock 'n' roll glamour, trashy but smart, *avant-garde* but arch, sardonic yet oddly romantic, futuristic but retro at the same time.

In short, Roxy Music were Britain's first *bona fide* postmodern rock group. As exotic fashionistas, they were briefly lumped in with the glam-rock crowd. But Roxy had a more serious intent, to synthesise their influences – described by Manzanera as "everything from King Curtis to the Velvet Underground to systems music to

1950s rock 'n' roll" – into something intoxicatingly new, cosmopolitan and iconoclastic that was pop-art as much as showbiz.

The 1996 box set *The Thrill Of It All* did a decent job in compressing the highlights of eight studio LPs and the live set *Viva!* into a four-CD guided tour. Now we get the entire *oeuvre* plus singles and remixes crisply remastered (minus the 1976 live album *Viva!*) across ten discs. Along the way they lost Eno and at times he was missed, as Ferry's stylised croon and cocksure arrogance threatened to dilute their original purpose. But from the edgy, avant-pop of their self-titled debut to the lushly sculpted textures of their 1982 swansong *Avalon*, it's still an unrivalled body of work that thrills the listener with an originality so startling that Roxy Music remain

Britain's first bona-fide, postmodern rock group was lumped in with the glam-rock crowd...

one of the few bands in rock music who have never been successfully imitated, let alone surpassed.

If you have a spare ten hours to play the collected works chronologically, the trajectory of Roxy's rise, decline and late rally over a ten-year career makes for fascinating listening. Successful bands today would make perhaps three albums over that period. Roxy Music made eight – and that included a three-year break-up in the middle! The first two albums, *Roxy Music* (1972) and *For Your Pleasure* (1973) still sound iconoclastic, with Eno's rudimentary tape loops and found sounds lending a genuinely experimental bent to Ferry's left-of-centre songs.

By the third album, *Stranded* (1973), Ferry was developing his besuited lounge-lizard image, but the crooning was kept in check, the songwriting was still strong and Manzanera and McKay ensured the music remained adventurous, if less experimental. *Country Life* (1974) was even better, and remains arguably the band's finest hour.

Siren (1975) found Ferry's ego running rampant, although there was something deliciously louche about him cruising the singles bars on the lead single, *Love Is The Drug*.

After a long hiatus, the comeback *Manifesto* (1979) and its follow-up *Flesh & Blood* (1980) were over-smooth exercises in disco-pop, the band now seemingly reduced to little more than Ferry's backing group. The flashes of old were still there on *Angel Eyes* and *Over You*, but covers such as *In The Midnight Hours* suggested their best was behind them. They rallied to produce the elegant, elegiac brilliance of *Avalon* (1982). And then they were gone, all in the space of ten years. Amazing really. **NW**





The Beach Boys

That's Why God Made the Radio

capitolrecords.com

★★★★☆

Capitol

CD

WHO NEEDS A NEW BEACH BOYS ALBUM

in 2012? You might be surprised. Against all expectations, the superannuated 'boys' have delivered one of their best in a very, very long time, with an album that could sit beside *Holland* or *Friends* as a flawed post-*Pet Sounds* classic. Yes, there's cheesiness – Mike Love's insistence that he's still 'Cruising the town, digging the scene' seems bizarre, but surely he must know this? Okay, maybe not, but there are genuinely classic moments, too, particularly the wordless opener *Think About The Days*, and closer *Summer's Gone*.

The sound is classic BBs, rich and analogue, with those trademark snare cracks, tack pianos and sound effects all wheeled on for one last wave. They were always at their best when they were imbuing the endless surfin' safari with a hint of melancholy, an acknowledgement that the ideal wasn't real. And that's exactly what they've done here, raging – not too hard – against the dying California sunlight. Classic hi-fi, really. **DO**



Blur

Blur 21: The Box

emimusic.com

★★★★★

EMI

18 CDs plus 3 DVDs and vinyl

THE LEGACY OF BRITPOP has been disappointingly slight. From superstars such as Oasis to journeymen like Shed Seven, few of its exponents retain any significance in the 21st century. The exception is Blur and, in particular, the group's endlessly creative singer and songwriter, Damon Albarn. This comprehensive collection of seven studio albums plus B-sides, and 65 previously unreleased tracks shows why Albarn has endured, while his rivals have not.

The first five albums have been digitally remastered. They still fizz engagingly, but sound less brash and brittle. While Oasis were already repeating themselves, Blur never did and the band's sixth and seventh releases find Albarn flowering thrillingly into Britain's most inventive pop star since David Bowie. **NW**



Todd Rundgren

Utopia: Live at the Hammersmith Odeon '75

floatingworldrecords.co.uk

★★★★☆

Floating World

CD

BACK IN THE MID-1970S

Rundgren was much admired by the kind of earnest young men who bought triple concept albums by Yes and ELP. One of the last of prog-rock's wunderkinds, the 'cult of Todd' was at its peak when he arrived in Britain in 1975 for a series of acclaimed concerts.

The Hammersmith show was recorded for broadcast on Radio One and now gets its first official release. The sound is less ambitious than Rundgren's studio work, the prog curlicues and extended noodling scaled back in favour of shorter pieces and a more song-based approach. But the high energy of the performance still packs a potent punch and the then unknown Luther Vandross contributes impressive backing vocal. **NW**



Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

Mustt Mustt

realworldrecords.com

★★★★★

Real world

CD

AFTER MAKING HIS DEBUT

before a non-Asian audience at the WOMAD festival in the late 1980s, Peter Gabriel suggested that the great Pakistani singer of the devotional Sufi vocal style known as qawwali should make a fusion album with the *avant garde* American producer Michael Brook. The result was *Mustt Mustt*, which appeared on Gabriel's own label in 1990.

You don't have to understand the foreign tongues to appreciate the ecstatic quality of Nusrat's voice, as he chops up words and phrases in long, flowing lines. As a bonus, the reissue includes Massive Attack's famous trip-hop remix of the title track, which became the first record sung in Urdu to make the British charts. **NW**

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

Keb' Mo' Suitcase

purepleasurerecords.com



★★★★☆ Epic/Pure Pleasure

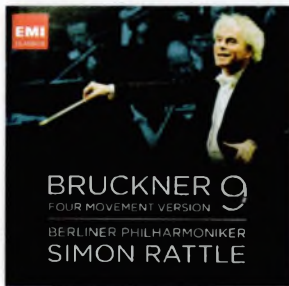
180g vinyl

KEB' MO' STANDS ACCUSED of serial apostrophe abuse, but the name is more memorable than Kevin Moore. Mo' is a talented singer and guitar player

who's older than he appears and released his debut at the age of 43. This 2006 release saw a reunion with producer John Porter and is likely the reason why this album sounds so lavish – few blues albums are as deeply luxurious. This state of affairs is often accompanied by excess smoothness, but there's enough definition and air to maintain a sense of vitality. That said, it will suit dry systems better than relaxed ones and has the sort of sound that will make friends in hi-fi demo circles.

The music is inclined toward the easier side as well, but Keb' maintains a good balance between energy and sweetness. You don't get the impression that he has suffered to the extent that earlier bluesmen did but that may just be because he has made his peace with the past. This is one of those albums that it pays not to listen too hard to, it weaves its magic on a subliminal level thanks to its easy warmth and the innate charm of the man. A nice slow burn. **JK**





Bruckner

Symphony No 9
Berlin Phil (conductor
Simon Rattle)

emiclassics.com

★★★★★

EMI

CD

BRUCKNER LEFT HIS mighty 9th Symphony unfinished, but this new completion of the finale (the result of twenty years' work) is probably as good as we're ever likely to get – albeit, not in the Mahler 10/Elgar 3 class. The new music is strange, suggesting a landscape both haunted and fragmented – as though Bruckner's mind was in the process of disintegration.

EMI's recording is full-bodied and sonorous, if a shade blowsy in the work's towering brass-dominated climaxes. The sound has atmosphere and a wide dynamic range, but there's a slight lack of depth and tonal richness. On a single CD, it's a must for those intrigued by the thought of hearing Bruckner's unfinished finale. **JMH**



Rachmaninov/ Rubenstein

Piano Concerto
No 3/No 4
Joseph Moog (piano)

onyxclassics.com

★★★★★

Onyx

CD

THE MAIN WORK here is Rachmaninov's popular 3rd Concerto, and Joseph Moog has all the technique necessary to play the hugely demanding solo part. His playing is lucid and effortlessly detailed, but poetic and imaginative, too, and the performance slowly builds to a powerful climax. Rubenstein's 4th Concerto is a big tuneful work in the Grand Manner, and Moog's account is excellent.

The Onyx recording sounds open, clean and very well-balanced, with plenty of detail to delight the ear. The orchestral sound is not especially rich or lush, with clarity and transparency being the aim. This is not altogether a disadvantage – though some may prefer a warmer, more opulent approach. **JMH**



Betty Wright and The Roots

Betty Wright: The Movie

s-curve.com

★★★★★

S-curve

CD

OLD STARS don't seem to fade away these days, and Betty *Clean Up Woman* Wright is a case in point. But rather than recreating her classic moments, she's teamed up with forward-thinking hip hop/nu soul crew The Roots and a full band to deliver a retro-inflected base on which to hang her deliciously effective voice. Soft and emotive one minute, declamatory and searing the next, hers is a beautifully flexible instrument that needs to be heard.

The Roots made their name by effectively recreating the old school grooves on which so many rap tracks are based and they fit very neatly with one of the classic voices. From the funkily flanged guitar groove of *Real Woman* to the roaring rock of *Grapes On A Vine*, Miss Wright is always in control. **DO**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

George Harrison Easy Takes Volume 1

linnrecords.com

★★★★★

Universal through
Linn Records

24-bit/96kHz



I MANAGED TO GROW UP without liking a single Beatles tune. Strangely though, I still like most of these

tracks for their masterly songwriting and their straightforward demo-style presentation. George Harrison communicated so directly through these home-studio recordings and *My Sweet Lord*, for example, comes across as an absolute masterpiece given this acoustic, singer/songwriter treatment.

The recording communicates Harrison's mastery of his art and the sound of this download is to die for. The acoustic and electric guitars are rich in texture, and sound vibrant and close. The 24-bit/96kHz recording takes the listener all the way into the studio and the atmosphere the youthful Harrison created. **MS**

John Coltrane

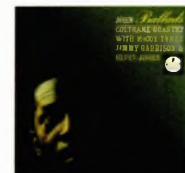
Ballads

linnrecords.com

★★★★★

Linn Records

24-bit/96kHz



THIS DISC is an absolute delight.

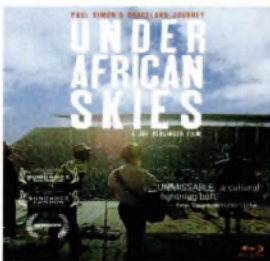
Originally recorded back in 1961, it has the magical immediacy of

many stand-out jazz recordings of that era. Naturally warm, dynamic, intimate and communicative, it's difficult to fault, especially in 24-bit/96kHz format, which takes you closer to the unusually restrained, vocal tone of 'Trane's tenor sax...

This album sees Coltrane play in an almost easy-listening style. Some suggest this recording saw him getting back at critics who deemed his more exuberant, searching playing 'anti-jazz'. While I prefer his more vigorous work, there is no doubt that he was a *virtuoso*. As close to perfection as you can get! **MS**

BLU-RAY DVD

Paul Simon Under African skies sonymusic.com



★★★★★

Sony

Dolby Digital 5.1, LPCM 2.0, 5.1
THIS IS THE DOCUMENTARY of *Graceland*, the album that became a career milestone (and major headache) for Paul Simon. The problem was that Simon made it in

South Africa at a time when the UN had declared a cultural boycott on that country. Harry Belafonte told Simon to seek the approval of the ANC, but realising that they would be against it he went ahead all the same and the results can be said to be worth the trouble.

This documentary is a form of catharsis for Simon, he goes back to South Africa to see the musicians with whom he made the album and to talk to Dali Tambo, son of Oliver who was involved in the backlash at the time.



Having this fundamental divide at its core makes *Under African Skies* much more than a 'making of', it shows history being made and reveals that the musicians Simon worked with were the real stars of the show. The brilliant bass playing of Bakithi Kumalo, the accordion of Forere Motloheloa, and the voices of Ladysmith Black Mambazo made *Graceland* the success it was. The fact that so few of them were officially credited is possibly more heinous than the circumstances of the recording. **JK**

Double Deutsch

Can this cute German combo qualify as a Beautiful System? After many hours listening to T+A's Music Receiver and Canton's Karat 720.2 loudspeakers, **Ed Selley** says *ja...*

Beautiful Systems is generally the preserve of the separates system, understandably perhaps. Sometimes these components are smaller than you might expect, or go about their roles differently to the norm, but usually they comprise multiple boxes – and often large ones. With this in mind, this system looks to fall at the first hurdle. Can an all-in-one box with a pair of compact standmount speakers really be considered beautiful?

Well, the case for this £3,410 pairing is pretty strong. Here's a system that is beautifully built and packed with clever design touches. It has pretty much every feature you might reasonably expect, plus a few more besides. Using it is logical to a fault. More important than the appearance and functionality, it provides a great deal of listening pleasure. If that isn't beautiful, what is?

Single life

The rest of this system in the £3,690 E Series music receiver from T+A Elektroakustik. This well-established German brand has recently returned

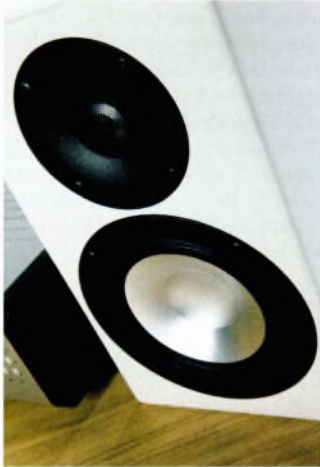
Here's a system that's beautifully built and packed with clever design touches...

to the UK with a range of distinctive and technologically impressive components. The Music Receiver is an all-in-one that combines the best bits of the E-Series Music Player and 'PowerPlant' (amplifier to you and me) in one single chassis.



DISTRIBUTOR:
Acoustic Brands Ltd.
Computers Unlimited
TELEPHONE:
07917 431 280
020 8200 8282
WEBSITE:
taelektroakustik.de
canton.de

COMPONENTS



1 T+A E-SERIES MUSIC RECEIVER £2,690

Combines the key attributes of the standalone amp and source components in the E-Series range. Features CD and streaming capabilities, iPod connectivity, an AM/FM tuner and digital inputs mated to a 94W internal amplifier.

2 CANTON KARAT 720.2 LOUSPEAKERS £750

The smallest member of the Karat range is a two-way standmount making use of a proprietary 150mm aluminium mid bass driver with a 25mm manganese alloy tweeter. There's a choice of three finishes.





LEFT: Canton's moderately priced, but highly impressive sounding Karat 720.2 standmount loudspeaker...

The result is one product able to play CDs, stream audio wirelessly or via Ethernet, receive Internet radio and FM broadcasts, connect five external sources digitally and access music from a hard drive or iPod. Any of this array of source material can then be played back via the internal amplifier, rated at (a Germanically exact) 94 watts into eight ohms.

Of course, it is possible to assemble a system of individually components that might do all of this for slightly less than the E-Series, but that is to miss the point of it entirely. With the T+A, all of this functionality is assembled in a single chassis, controlled by one remote and in need of only a single mains plug.

A very handsome chassis it is too. German car design might be going through one of its 'distinctive' phases but the E-Series pairs simple lines with high quality materials for an excellent overall effect. The large display is extremely easy to read, and the front panel controls feel solid which given that there are no less than twenty two of them is probably just as well. Editor DP and I were chatting before the unit turned up and he feels the aesthetic is akin to a twenty first century version of the Braun audio systems of the nineteen sixties. I'm more of the opinion that the design is more in keeping with Bosch products that eschew menus where possible for controls that do one thing and one thing alone.

Higher profile

This system uses another German brand for transducers – Canton has a slightly higher profile in the UK, and is Germany's largest speaker manufacturer. Its enormous product line-up includes everything from imposing floorstanders to diminutive sub/sat packages. The £750 Karat 720.2 standmount is the smallest member of the Karat range, and sits below the flagship Vento series.

Often when I receive components for *Beautiful Systems* or reviews, the price can leave me a bit surprised but nothing I can recall recently has generated the incredulity the Canton did on learning (and extensively rechecking) the price. Saying these speakers are well built is an understatement akin to saying Angelina Jolie is only moderately attractive or that Sebastian Vettel is just slightly handy behind the wheel. The finish is perfect and they are assembled to a standard that is sometimes absent on product ten times their price.

The 720.2 is a compact, but relatively deep design and mounts



a pair of trademark Canton aluminium drivers. Mid/bass duties are handled by a six inch dish while treble comes courtesy of a 25mm aluminium manganese alloy tweeter. Bass is augmented by a single relatively large rear port. Bi-wiring seems to be an activity that the Germans treat with some suspicion, so like a number of other such speakers I've seen over the years, the Karat is fitted with a single pair of substantial terminals. The low 85dB sensitivity is no problem for the amp, and the speaker proved fuss-free in placement terms.

As a pairing then, there is much to like. This is a compact, handsome, comprehensively specified and exactly assembled system. It is easy to accommodate, should blend seamlessly into a number of environments and last a long time once you have done so. Where this system really earns a place in our pantheon is how these admirable physical attributes are mated with a truly engrossing sound.

Sounding out

My first listen was on disc, via the CD drive of the E Series, with lossless FLAC to follow via Ethernet later. Yello's *Baby* went straight on to the system and quickly began to reveal a distinctive and likeable character. Yet this is not a warm or cossetting sound. There is no bloom to the midrange or syrupy bass, and this isn't something to just stick on in the background while you see to other tasks. Equally however, there is nothing hard or mechanical about this performance; *Jungle Bill* proved rich, full and detailed, with infectious speed and

agility. Perhaps the core of the E Series is the potent offering of two 32-bit DACs in a dual mono arrangement. It offers up a combination of excellent detail retrieval, expansive soundstaging and believable tonality, yet at the same time it's completely free of the fatiguing harshness that so often characterises digital.

The Canton speakers are a happy partner in this sonic balance. Like the E Series, the Karat 720.2 is an exceptionally fast and clean performer. The all-metal driver complement shows none of the potential downsides of their type – they could hardly be described as soft but there is no harshness even when you really open the taps. Instead, they are incredibly communicative and involving. For a small speaker, they have a surprising amount of low end heft too.

As a combination, the slightly dark tonality of the T+A combines with the explicit performance of the Cantons, for an overall balance that is pretty much spot on. Indeed, it's a fine example of the synergy that careful component matching can achieve. This is a system that excels at extracting detail and presenting it with every nuance intact, but managing the neat trick of keeping everything listenable.

Switch to the Ethernet port and the system comes into its own. There isn't some magical jump in performance with CD quality material – the DAC is extremely even handed in this regard, but still the experience is much improved. All of a sudden, there's no need to interrupt the listening session for



YOU MIGHT THINK that an all-in-one system wouldn't see much benefit from tweaking and set-up but this is not the case. A number of small but worthwhile measures gave a useful overall performance boost.

First up were the speaker stands. My usual Atacamas were a little low for the relatively small Cantons, so substituting a pair of suitably mass loaded Soundstyle Z2 stands raised the tweeters and opened up the performance.

The T+A makes less demands on cabling than a full separates system, but benefited from two runs of Atlas Hyper 3 monowired speaker cable. This is regarded as a very neutral performer, and complimented the system well.

Mains cabling can be usefully upgraded, and because this is a one-box it's far cheaper to do than with several separates. An Atlas EOS power lead smoothed the sound and cleaned it up too, bringing superior low level detail.

As per hi-fi best practice, a wired connection between streamer and the router was used.

anything other than your own frailties. High resolution audio naturally pulls even more from the electronics, and provided some stellar moments. *The Face of Mount Molehill* by the Neil Cowley trio proved compellingly real. Voices and instruments were rich and detailed, with all the sense of the space that the album is performed in. The sheer vitality of the performance from these three comparatively small boxes is a tonic to anybody looking for serious sound in a confined space.

Put the legwork in with your files and server and the T+A will reward you with a self explanatory interface and a clear, legible display. The latter in particular is everything you could want (and at the same time so rarely get) in a display. It is clear, easy to read at a distance, scrolls at a perfect speed and has all of the information you could realistically want to see at a glance. T+A are working on iPad control at the moment (it will be a complete system control rather than a simple UPnP remote) but I didn't miss it during listening.

Overall then, here's a lively, insightful and endlessly entertaining combination. The more time I spent in its company, the less I tried to quantify the performance – it simply sounds right. The little T+A in particular is a potent demonstration that if an all-in-one system is approached with engineering rigour, it is able to compete with similarly priced hi-fi separates. For anybody looking to move gracefully from CDs to streaming, but who doesn't relish extra boxes, this diminutive duo is hard to beat. ●

Minitest

The latest crop of portable radios are altogether more versatile devices, finds **Richard Black...**

Pure Contour

PRICE: £200 CONTACT: 0845 148 9001
WEBSITE: PURE.COM

I SUPPOSE IT'S LARGELY A SIGN OF THE TIMES, that Pure markets this as an iPod dock that also receives radio, rather than a radio with an iPod dock added. The dock is particularly natty, for sure – built as it is on to a retractable sub-assembly that pops out when you give the display/control panel a sharp prod. Assorted video sockets at the back carry signals to a TV if you need your cover art displayed more prominently, but while there is of course a headphone socket, the audio from this device is generally expected to be played over the internal speakers, and a pair of these, 3.5 inches in diameter, are mounted sufficiently far apart to give a semblance of stereo. All the usual DAB, FM and Internet radio features are offered, plus the option to stream audio from your computer network. Internet radio is routed via Pure's 'The Lounge', which adds options of sorting stations and so on.

This is certainly a very satisfying radio to listen to. Like quite a few table models both current and past, it has been balanced for a listening position that's not directly in front, and up close it sounds distinctly bright, unpleasantly so. Just a couple of metres away, on or off-axis, the balance improves considerably however. One is much better able to appreciate the decent bass and really very creditable integration between bass and midrange. The touch-responsive controls and remote are both pleasant to use; overall this is a very easy radio to like.

VERDICT THE COMPREHENSIVE FEATURE set is complemented by a sound that's solid, surprisingly powerful and respectably close to stereo.
★★★★★



Revo K2

PRICE: £300 CONTACT: 01555 666161
WEBSITE: REVO.CO.UK

THE TOWER FORMAT IS STRIKING and, when you think about it, very sensible – gets quite a lot of audio hardware into a very small space on a busy desk or kitchen counter. Just over 10cm square, the K2 does need a little room each side for the sound to get out, while bass comes out of a single reflex port at the rear. Features include FM, DAB and Internet radio, and also an iPod dock, which in a particularly natty touch is motorised and pops out at the front when required. There's a line input (on mini-jack) and the possibility to stream music from a local computer network, but the eye-opener is the connectivity offered at the rear of the unit, which includes a video output, audio output on proper phono sockets, a digital (optical) output and a wired LAN socket. Controls are mostly on the top of the unit and the supplied remote works well.

The sound of this unit seemed a little unimpressive at first listening, but quickly grew on everyone who heard it. There's a surprising degree of detail present across the band and bass, while hardly seismic, is well presented with good impact. Treble is admirably consistent with listening angle, though the minute separation between the speakers means that stereo imaging is minimal unless there are reflecting surfaces suitably placed to give a little more effective separation. Overall, the effect is of clean and well-balanced sound that's as good as one could reasonably expect from such a unit.

VERDICT CLEAN STYLING, GOOD ERGONOMICS AND FINE SOUND, allied to a strong feature count make this well worth considering.
★★★★★

Roberts Stream 83i

PRICE: £150 CONTACT: 01709 571722
WEBSITE: ROBERTSRADIO.CO.UK

ROBERTS MAY BE KING OF THE RETRO RADIO, but apart from the outline shape and the handle there's not much old-school about this model. However, it may be that Roberts expects its clientele to include plenty of folks not used to such modernisms as Internet radio, and accordingly the user manual is unusually clear and detailed. On power-up the sequence of events on the display is remarkably similar to that of the Revo K2, and it looks as if the two units share some software. Other similarities include generous provision of socketry, though in this case the line output is via a mini-jack socket. There are two USB sockets provided, the one at the rear being for updates, while that at the front allows one to plug in portable music players and memory sticks. Once again, one can stream music off a local network as well as accessing all the variations on Internet radio – podcasts, last.fm and so on.

The two front-mounted speakers are just about far enough apart to give some sense of stereo, but the problem with this radio is tonal. Somehow, no matter how one positions the radio, the treble never seems quite right. It's really the upper midrange or 'presence' region that's at fault, with a suck-out that affects both music and speech. Bass isn't bad but again doesn't quite seem to find a happy medium between lower-mid punch and convincing make-believe for the lowest notes. As a result, detail is never better than middling. All in all this is not Roberts' finest hour.

VERDICT WELL SPECIFIED FOR ITS MODEST PRICE, but sonically and stylistically so-so. Not Roberts' best ever radio!



Tivoli Networks

PRICE: £598 CONTACT: 0800 047 0487
WEBSITE: TIVOLIAUDIO.CO.UK

THIS IS A HORSE OF A RATHER DIFFERENT COLOUR. Most obviously, it comes as a proper stereo set-up. The electronics are built into the left loudspeaker, while the right one is connected via a respectably robust cable, captive at one end. If you can't think of anything sensible to do with the second speaker you can switch the left one to mono and simply do without the right one. The cabinets are well built and each includes a single full-range driver and a rear-mounted port.

Features are a decent set, including both wireless and wired Ethernet, a USB socket for music players and line inputs, unhelpfully mounted on the base. There's a subwoofer output too. You'll almost certainly want the remote for most controls, as these are on the rear of the cabinet, meaning you can't possibly see both them and the display at once. That's annoying, so I'd have to rate this unit worst of the bunch for ergonomics. Menu operations aren't well thought-out, the remote lacks some obvious buttons (like 'back one step') and is stiff to operate, and the display is so-so for a product at this price.

Still the high price is justified when you start listening. Its combination of balance, clarity, detail and musicality is self-recommending, and the availability of genuine stereo imaging just increases the gap between it and cheaper models. It's just a shame it won't stream AAC stations. Otherwise, clearly a sonic winner. ●

VERDICT ITS SOUND IS CLOSER TO REAL HI-FI THAN OTHERS HERE, but the ergonomics are poor and the price is very steep.



If these four prove one thing, it's that computer audio has become an everyday phenomenon, as much at home in the kitchen or on the patio as in the office. Internet radio is one of the most

attractive developments of recent years (some of us have been waiting decades for the opportunity to hear special-interest radio stations from abroad!) and you can now enjoy it anywhere within

range of your network hub. Sound from these units can be surprisingly good, but don't neglect obvious things like giving them a little space in which to work if you want to hear them at their best.

Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

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FOR SALE

ARCAM CD37 CD/SACD player (black), excellent condition, boxed £800: **07753271812 (Notts).**

LINN LP12 Valhalla turntable, excellent £400, Gale GS401 (chrome) loudspeaker and stands £375: **01543 371517 (W Midlands).**

REGA Planar 2 turntable, mint condition, perfect working order £100: **01304 360230 (Kent).**

ODYSSEY II 2x 6m speaker cables £135: **01258 840063 (Dorset).**

NAD C515BEE CD player, remote, boxed, NAD C315BEE integrated amp, remote, boxed. Buyer collects: **01977 695385 (Pontefract).**

YAMAHA NS 1000M speakers, CA2010 amp, CT 1010 tuner, Nakamichi 480 cassette deck, Thorens TD 160 MK 2, SME 3009/S2 original manuals, used for 10 weeks: **07960753086 or email: stephenlyddon@onetel.com (London).**

TECHNICS SL1210 Mk2 £249, Garrard 401 plus power supply £1,200. Both in very good condition: **0207 499 8729 (London).**

TRILOGY valve amplifiers; pre and power amps 901 and 948. Excellent condition but no boxes. The pair £3,000 ono: **02087714344 or email: mikes162@gmail.com (South London).**

AUDIOLAB 8000 CD, preamp, 2x monoblocs, Arcam T32 tuner (all silver), Monitor Audio RS1 with Atacama stands (both black), stunning sound, mint condition, 3yrs old, hardly used £2,000: **07900 910098 (Suffolk).**

WADIA 971 Transport (black). Few hours' use £6,500. Conrad Johnson ART MKII preamp, along with two sets of Cryogenic valves £4,000. No time wasters please! Photos available on request: **0118 9760756 or email: peter.fay@e2s.com (Berkshire)**

NUFORCE P9 preamp, 2 years old, (Silver),

remote control, excellent condition. owned from new, a truly amazing solid-state preamp. (£2,200) £1,000 ono: **01296437314 (Aylesbury, Bucks).**

VAN DEN HUL 5 metre Integration Hybrid XLR to XLR interconnect. (£750) £300: **01296437314 (London).**

SONY WMD6 professional walkman, inc ECM909 microphone. Offers in the region of £250: **01296 437314 (London).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY AMS35i, pure Class A integrated amplifier (black), boxed and mint, only 18 months old with 5 year guarantee, reluctant sale (£6,000) £4,500 ono: **01303 863424 (Kent).**

ARCAM rDAC kw and wireless dongle, hardly used. Superb sound either via USB, S/PDIF, optical or wirelessly, £350. Also battery psu and charger £30 for upgrade: **07793749178 or email: david@veniceinfosite.com (London).**



Arcam rDAC kw: neat digital convertor with wireless functionality

APOLLO Mezzo Soprano A/V Rack: 3 clear 12mm glass shelves, Piano Black supports 138mm & 183mm. £150. Buyer Collects: **01243 673696 or email: m_l_parsons@yahoo.co.uk (Hampshire).**

SUGDEN Mystro integrated amp, lightly used, boxed. Can be posted, £650: **01782 785734 (Staffordshire)**

VAN DEN HUL The Waterfall RCA interconnect 0.8m £60, Chord Company Carnival Silver Screen speaker cable, 2x 4m lengths, terminated £30, Chord Company Chorus 2 RCA 1m £50, Chameleon Silver plus 1m and 0.5m, all boxed £40 each: **0121 602 8349 (W Midlands).**

REGA Couple and Linn Black high-quality interconnect cables, both as new £30: **0121 602 8349 (W Midlands).**

KIMBER Select ks1030 1m pair £600, Kimber Monocle-xl 8ft pair speaker cable £500, original packaging: **01772 314151 or email: jamesmckendrick@btinternet.com (Preston).**

ACOUSTIC REALITY AR1001 Mono Blocks, Class D power amps, 1,000w. Silver, excellent condition £825 (pair), Cyrus Pre Vs2 preamp (brushed black), excellent condition, boxed and original accessories. £350: **01223 890607 or email: m.overall@btinternet.com (Cambridge).**

TECHNICS SL7 parallel tracker classic turntable with sounds to shame any a modern deck. Pristine condition, hardly used and full working order £225: **07793749178 or email: david@veniceinfosite.com (London).**

CYRUS 1 m and 50cm interconnects, RCA, used but like new and boxed. £70 and £55 resp. delivered: **0115 9288006 or email: Rolfjordan@gmail.com (Notts).**

ORIGIN LIVE Conqueror Mk3c tonearm, one year old, latest version, boxed, immaculate, genuine reason for sale, might p/ex for less expensive model, £2,000: **01323 728118 or email: alanchamberlain1@hotmail.com (East Sussex).**

JUNGSON JA 88D amplifier Class A, new, excellent condition £900, but any reasonable offer considered: **07986124147 (Suffolk).**

MISSION Cyrus 2 amp (grey), Mission Cyrus PSX (black), Mission DAC 5 convertor. All in good condition, all leads and connections. Sensible offers please to: **01555 759124 or email: embt80@gmail.com (South Lanarkshire).**

ARCAM CD 36 boxed, immaculate, as new with unused remote, audition welcome, buyer collects £550: **01329 668149 (Hants).**

BUYING TIPS BUYING SECOND-HAND can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back-up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

MICHELL GyroDec SE, with RB300 arm in excellent condition £800 ono. Might consider part exchange: **01482 651963** or email: **jazzevan@hotmail.com (Hull).**

SONY Walkman Pro WM-6DC, a real classic, VGC £200, Firestone Audio Fubar USB DAC, plus Power Supply as new £100, HRT Streamer II USB DAC 24-bit/96kHz, brand new £100. Email: **reisvictor25@gmail.com. (London).**

PMC SCM7 standmount speakers. 6 months old, excellent sound, little use, mint boxed (£610) £475: **07733428736** or email: **gill@gillbears.plus.com (West Yorkshire).**

ARCAM system: A90 pre-power (2 x 90w); Pro 90 power, 192 CD player (all black), Chord Co. Chamelion silver interconnects, 3 pairs, Odyssey speaker cables for B1 amping, 4 pairs, Monitor Audio gold GS20 speakers (walnut), new and boxed, (£5,000) £1,500: **0121 602 8349 (W Midlands).**

AUDIO-TECHNICA AT-OC9 MK3, moving coil cartridge, less than 10 hours use. Bought in Japan. No mounting kit, just cartridge and box £300 ono: **07517 147056** or email: **jameshollis@mac.com (London).**

LYNGDORF Millennium Mk4 reference amplifier, Excellent condition £3,950: **01743 344 136** or email: **denis_james@yahoo.com (Shropshire).**

SPENDOR SP2/3 speakers (rosewood), together with very heavy cast AE stands. Superb condition, all boxes included £650 ono: **0115 875070** or email: **rolfyjordan@gmail.com. (Nottingham).**

RUSS ANDREWS Super purifier filter with hubble port plug for use with power purifier, super ultra purifier blocks (£386) £195 (including p&p), Yellow 6-way extension lead (3m) superclamp £85, Kimber KGAG 14dB CD interconnect (£515) £385: **01902 884694 (W Midlands).**

ARCAM Solo Neo amp/CD/FM/DAB (16 months guarantee) £775, Arcam Solo £450, Quad L-Series

subwoofer £250.

023 8073 8935 or email: **golg3385@hotmail.co.uk (Southampton).**

WANTED Maxell or TDK metal cassette tapes (new or little used): **01395 576644** or email: **jmichealbrittain@yahoo.com (Devon).**

NAIM Uniti, 3 months old, can demo. Buyer collects £2,000: **07971 920 347 (Glasgow).**

MONITOR AUDIO RS1 loudspeakers, hardly used, mint condition, boxed £160: **01943 467859 (W Yorkshire).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY AI CD Pro, immaculate condition with original box, manual, receipt and remote (£1,500) £650: **07814468747 (London).**

MERIDIAN 501 preamp (MC), 557 power amp, great condition. Will demo £1,000 the pair. Will split (501 - £225, 557 - £850). Buyer collects: **07868480165 (N. Somerset).**

ESL 57 audio speakers with dedicated stands, excellent condition (£1,800) £1,050: **01453 544242 (Glos.).**

KRELL FBI integrated amp, 2006, box, manual, remote (black) 300/600 watts (£15,000) £6,000. Buyer collects, Nordost Valhalla XLR interconnect 0.6m (£1,965) £650, Kimber Select 3038, silver speaker cable 2.5, pair (£5,700) £1,700: **07411 388152 (Herts).**

JOHN SHEARNE Phase 6 reference preamp (with MM phono board), plus 2x Phase 3 reference stereo power amps, excellent condition £595: **01202 515474** or email: **johnlangley17@talktalk.net (Dorset).**

NAIM NAP500 power amp, Naim preamp NAC 552, Naim power supply NAPS 555, Naim CD X2, Stageline - SMC phono stage, plus 6-way distribution lead, 2 Naim Fraim shelf units (black), B&W speakers Nautilus 802D (Rosenut). (£40,000) £18,000. Pro-Ject turntable RPM10 with Ortofon Kontrapunkt B cartridge and Perspex turntable (£2,000) £750, Naim Audio amp NAP110, Naim HiCap 110, NAC 42 (all £300): **07515 862222** or email: **edge@badedge.com (Sunbury on Thames).**

CYRUS PreVS2 preamp (brushed black), excellent condition, boxed £350: **02476 440058 (Coventry).**

TRICHORD Dino 2+ NCP5U + top Trichord power cord, pristine, £525. Abbingdon Music Research IC-777 high-quality interconnect, brand new, £130. Funk Achromat turntable mat, 5mm, unmarked, £35. Orbis Blues Collection, complete, including magazine and binders £100. Negotiate on p+p. **01582867139** or email: **mikethompson48@hotmail.com (Bedfordshire).**

NAIM NAIT 5i integrated amp, perfect sound and condition, plus remote with box £430. Collection preferred: **07792241875** or **0117 909 0033** or email: **yyy777yyb@hotmail.fr (Bristol).**

ACOUSTIC ENERGY Linear One speakers (piano black), easy amp load, mint, boxed, manual, £75, Pure DAX-701 ES digital tuner (silver), mint, boxed, manual £50: **07941474804 (Slough, Berks).**

PRO-JECT Debut 111 turntable (black) with Ortofon OM 5E cartridge, little used, very good condition, £120. Sony TC-K611S stereo cassette deck with 3 heads, Dolby S, excellent condition £50: **01303 863 424 (Kent).**

NORDOST Blue Heaven interconnects, 1 metre,

RCA connectors, 2 pairs, boxed (£125 per pair). £60 per pair or £100 for both. Chord Prodac Pro Digital, 1 metre, boxed (£85) £40. QED reference HDMI, 1 metre (£80) £40: **07870 159725** or email: **johnsidebottom@hotmail.co.uk (Somerset).**

NORDOST Flatline Blue Heavens speaker cables - banana plugs one end, other unterminated. Stereo pairs 1 x 4.5m (cost £1,030) and 1 x 2.5m (cost £630). Unused/new. Bargain at £550 ono. **01945 463077** or email: **deregle1@aol.com (Wisbech).**

SOMETHING SOLID speaker stands. Fully welded construction (black). 63cm high, mass filled, spiked feet. Photo available. Ring for other dimensions. VGC £50: **01582 423791 (Beds).**

NAD C315BEE amplifier, 40W, 6 line inputs, plus matching C515BEE CD player, Titanium, remotes, boxed, £100 each. Both for £200 and free NAD 4225 tuner. Gale silver monitor bookshelf speakers, (black ash), boxed, mint £40: **01706 345418** or email: **hfc@rodtheobald.force9.co.uk (London).**

AUDIOLAB 8000P power amp (silver) and 8000C preamp (black), perfect sound and condition, £495 the pair:

07816 758688 (NE London).

MARANTZ PM6004 integrated amp, 2 months old, (£310) £175; Quad 11L (Birdseye maple), excellent condition £150: **07733428736** or email: **gill@gillbears.plus.com (West Yorkshire).**

NAD 5320 CD Players x2; NAD Amplifier 302; NAD tuner C422; Heco bookshelf speakers. £100 or will separate: **01491 628000** or email: **brian@bspmedia.com (Oxon).**

QED Signature Audio XT, 1 metre, new, boxed £95; Signature Silver Spiral 1metre £75: **01639774144** or email: **alwyn.mackie@ntlworld.com (London).**

TIVOLI Model One radio, designed by Henry Kloss, (maple/Hunter Green), with original box and instructions, brand new £65: **07970 142144** or **01745 833183 (Denbighshire).**

NAIM CDX2 CD player, exceptional condition, complete with all packaging, £1,650; Naim NAC 282 preamp, complete with Naim NAPSC, exceptional condition, complete with all packaging £2,395; Naim NAP 200 power amp, complete with all packaging £1,150; Focal Electra 1027 Be speakers in exceptional condition, complete with all packaging £2,200: **07866 423572** or email: **adrian.ford@btinternet.com (Devon).**

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Perfect 10 award “The most addictive product I’ve heard”
AUDIO 10 (USA)

“For me Origin Live in the analogue sector is the discovery of the year! ...”
IMAGE HI FI (Germany)



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Encounter MK3C

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Ed Selley brings you our pick of this month's top hi-fi websites...



DESIGN, BUILD, LISTEN

designbuildlisten.com

DIY Audio comes in varying degrees of complexity and with different starting points. At, perhaps, the 'simplest' level (and when I use this term, I do so in the understanding that even this is likely to be beyond me!), you can modify existing equipment. There then exist complete kits where you assemble a product from a pack that contains all the key components. Finally, the most skilled individuals can set out to build their dream product from scratch.

Design, Build, Listen is a useful resource for all three of these DIY 'categories'. The New Zealand-based site has a selection of complete kits (including the impressive



looking Wand tonearm) but also supplies components that will be of use to both those modifying existing equipment, such as tube dampers and turntable platters, and also for people looking to build from scratch, such as chassis plates, casework and other more structural items that you can use to base your custom design around. The site has an excellent frequently asked question section and ships internationally.

FIND HD MUSIC

findhdmusic.com

One of the more persistent criticisms of the state of the high-resolution music market is that it can be extremely hard to hunt down examples of music that appeal to your particular tastes. Each high-resolution site exists in isolation and there is no equivalent of Amazon to tie their offerings together.

Find HD music is intended to fill a similar role to the Hifi Hunter site I featured last month. It acts as a search engine, where you can hunt down legal 24-bit digital downloads of your favourite artists. It has genre and keyword searches that allow for a fairly refined process. Equally importantly, you can remove certain sites and categories from the search if you know their offerings are not available in this country or you

aren't happy with how the site operates. I was delighted to discover high-resolution material that I previously had no idea existed, including *Black Devil Disco Club* and the brand new album from Hot Chip. The search parameters aren't perfect and it isn't the best looking site around, but if you are looking to extend your high-resolution collection, it is definitely worth checking out.



ROOM MODE/STANDING WAVE CALCULATOR

marktaw.com

The single largest variable that affects the performance of your hi-fi system is the room it is placed in. Putting the legwork into sorting the behaviour of your room isn't very glamorous, but can reap huge dividends in the overall quality of your system. This site is designed to allow you to find information about the behaviour of the room, specifically room modes and standing waves which can have a profound effect on your sonics.

Taking care to not mix your metric and your imperial measurements, you can enter the dimensions of your room and the elevation (normally available online) and the calculator will return data of axial, tangential and oblique room modes. This data can seem a little daunting at first, but the site will also link you to other articles that break the data down and gives hints and tips on what matters and how to deal with it. The site is not able to take into account the construction of the room (as there will be a small, but measurable variance depending on the materials used), but if you are experiencing poor room performance, then this is a fine place to start dealing with it!



FRENCH VINTAGE HI-FI

frenchvintagehifi.com

Sites giving information about classic British, American and Japanese hi-fi are not too difficult to find in this day and age. Once you venture off the beaten track though, it can become harder to find out information about some other European brands. I first found the French Vintage Hi-Fi site when I was researching about Elipson's Planet L loudspeaker last year (*HFC 350*).

Run by a Frenchman now resident in Australia, the site has valuable information about the plethora of French hi-fi equipment released over the last few decades – some of which I was completely unaware of before reading about it here. Equally usefully, it is entirely in English, which makes for an easier point of reference than would be the case if my schoolboy French was being called into use. As well as information on older material, the author seems to visit a great many shows and provides some interesting show reports from those he visits. There is also a music section discussing some of the issues affecting high-resolution audio and some entertaining interviews as well. Now all I have to do is find the German equivalent! ●





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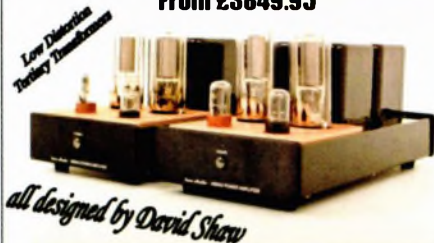
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Jelco SA series



In case you didn't know, Jelco is one of the largest original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) of tonearms in the world. The company has built an enviable reputation in the business by providing customised arms for turntable manufacturers which do not have the extensive manufacturing capacity or expertise to make their own. To drop a few names, Jelco has supplied the likes of Acoustic Research, Koetsu, Grado Labs, Audioquest, Pro-Ject, Ortofon, Ariston and ISOKinetik...

The model for which the company is most famous is the SA-250 S-shaped arm. This has a removable headshell, although it has two close relatives which are also well worth mentioning. There's the slightly cheaper SA-250ST straight arm with a fixed headshell and the pricier SA-750D oil-damped tonearm with removable headshell [pictured]. All have the ability to set the VTA accurately by loosening a retaining screw that holds the tonearm vertical tube in place and then sliding the tonearm bearing assembly as required.

All SA series arms are mid-mass designs, and so tend to suit lower compliance cartridges. For review purposes, I used a Lyra Clavis DC moving coil and the Jelco arms all performed very well with it. They are supplied with full-size paper templates for fitting, and the 750D also has a Perspex measuring guide. My reference turntable is the ISOKinetik Modular One with a removable armboard, and for review purposes the company supplied me with ready-made armboards which made swapping them simple.

The choice between the straight or S-shaped version of the Jelco SA-250 will depend on personal preference. The straight arm, having a non-removable headshell, seems more rigid and this will suit some cartridges better. However, if it is important to you to be able to swap cartridges around, then the S-shape variant with the removable headshell will be the one for you.

Sound quality

I have used the SA-250 on a number of occasions and always found it to be a fine performer. Once again, my Lyra Clavis DC snuggled up nicely to its old friend and reproduced a wide range of musical genres with ease and faithfulness. There were no nasty artefacts jumping out at you, which indicated that the arm and cartridge were well matched.

It's a fine result then, but what of the £100 more expensive SA-750D – is it worth the extra? Well, you certainly notice the beautiful finish on all parts of the arm. After installation, the final job is to unscrew the knurled cap on the top of the bearing and then apply some of the supplied damping oil into the exposed cup. This can give an element of control to the arm by damping out any unwanted arm resonances and reigning in any excessive behaviour from cartridges.

This gave an altogether more sophisticated performance in most respects when compared with its lower-cost cousins. Bass was far punchier and better controlled with the 750D, likely down to the use of damping oil in the bearing. The music seemed to flow through the arm into the phono stage with nothing standing in its path. Like an experienced jockey riding a thoroughbred horse, the Jelco was in control of the cartridge at all times and the bass, midrange and treble were always in balance with one another. The mark of a great arm is its ability to have little effect on sound quality and this was certainly my experience with the SA-750D. It was simply standing back and waving the music on from cartridge to amplifier.

Overall, the cooking £350 SA-250 is an excellent budget do-it-all design, very well made at the price, but not completely blameless. The £25 cheaper SA-250ST gives a slightly tauter sound, so is better value. But the £450 SA-750D stands way out in front in terms of performance and value. **NR**



► DETAILS

PRICE: £325 (SA-250ST), £350 (SA-250), £450 (SA-750D)

CONTACT: 0208 241 8890

WEBSITE: CABEZON.EU

OUR VERDICT



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HI-FI CHOICE
June 2012



HI-FI WORLD
July 2012



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David Brook, Mains Cables R Us - Huddersfield. www.mains-cables-r-us.co.uk

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Sam Lowe, Phase 3 - Southampton. www.phase3southampton.co.uk

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Derek Rapkin, H.G. Rapkin - Northampton - www.hgrapkin.co.uk

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Steve, Rayleigh Hi-Fi - Chelmsford. www.rayleighhifi.com

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Russ Andrews Mini Zap plugs

New from Russ Andrews are the Mini Zap plugs, designed to absorb and dissipate radio frequency interference (RFI) and electromagnetic interference (EMI) spikes that are often caused by mobile phone and wireless networks. The MiniZap technology comprises miniature non-ferrite high-frequency RFI suppressors, which have been adjusted for audio applications. Russ Andrews claims that these Mini Zap plugs have the effect of reducing the impact of RFI and EMI spikes on the audio bandwidth, without affecting the audio frequencies themselves.

The Mini Zaps are effectively blanking plugs that plug directly into unused output sockets on the amplifier or source components. Russ Andrews also makes shorting plugs called 'Shorties', that plug into unused inputs to simply short signals to earth. However, unlike Shorties, Mini Zaps are connected to unused outputs as they don't have any effect on the audio signals.

Sound quality

As with most hi-fi audio preamplifiers, my preamp is fitted with two sets of outputs that are wired as two parallel pairs. Testing is therefore a simple matter of inserting and removing the Mini Zaps while playing a piece of music and seeing if there are any audible differences. While playing some Vivaldi violin concertos, I found a noticeable improvement with the Mini Zaps in place. In particular, the violins sounded sweeter. Music flowed more effortlessly and everything just sounded easier.

Mini Zaps are also available micro-sized, fitting directly into Russ Andrews Kimber analogue interconnects. They're surprisingly effective sonically, but too expensive. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE: £133.20
CONTACT:
01539 707300
WEBSITE:
RUSSANDREWS.COM

OUR VERDICT



Arcam rPac

The look and feel of Arcam's rPac is lovely, not least because it closely resembles the 'design language' of Apple's computers (just like a MacBook Pro it's made of finely finished aluminium). Features include a type-B USB socket at the back, along with RCA phono outputs. The front has a 3.5mm headphone mini-jack socket, and the top two volume buttons. A single central LED glows red when the unit is powered, green when it's got a digital signal. Inside the Arcam is a Texas Instruments PCM5102 digital convertor chip, capable of running at 24-bit/96kHz resolution. It sports asynchronous USB, so the rFAC clocks the computer's digital audio output, for best performance. The dinky unit measures 100x62x25mm and weighs 300g.

Sound quality

On audition, the new rFAC proved a dramatic upgrade for any stock computer audio sound system, giving a cleaner and crisper sound to hi-res and standard CD-quality music alike. Playing the Moody Blues' *Nights in White Satin* at 24/96 revealed a very wide soundstage with loads of space inside. It gave a super-crisp rendition of vocals, and the instrumentation on the track came over very finely etched. Ditto with cooking 16-bit Red Book CD; Claudia Brucken's vocals in Propaganda's *p:Machinery* had a lovely icy quality to them, but still sounded emotionally impactful. Contrast this to the stock Mac sound system, where they were just cold and edgy.

Overall, the Arcam rFAC has a very clean and crisp sound then, although in absolute terms just a little tonally dry and bass-light. It's cracking value at £150, given its mix of performance and quality. **PC**



DETAILS

PRICE: £150
CONTACT:
01223 203200
WEBSITE:
ARCAM.CO.UK

OUR VERDICT





High End Cable
 www.highendcable.co.uk
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Tombo Tron and Black Cat Silverstar 75 digital cables from the master



Audience has conducted considerable research into the electrical characteristics of phono cables and has concluded that a single cable cannot possibly serve as an optimal tone arm to phono stage interface. The different internal electrical characteristics of phono cartridges make choosing a cable designed to preserve and enhance those characteristics an all important issue. By choosing the wrong cable you can lose precious low level detail information that is essential to the overall sonic presentation. For these reasons, Audience offers vinyl lovers a choice of three impedance-matched phono cables. Each model is designed to carefully optimize the electrical characteristics of the cartridge to the cable and to preserve signal flow to the phono stage without detrimental influences as follows:

Low Z – for moving coil cartridges with internal resistance up to 30 ohms.

High Z – for moving coil cartridges with internal resistance between 30 and 100 ohms.

MM – for all cartridges with internal resistance above 100 ohms which includes high output moving coil cartridges rated at 47k ohms and most moving magnet or moving iron models.

These impedance matched tone arm cables are stocked in the UK in 1.25m lengths. Up to 2.5m available.

Prices from £399.00



For all the complete Audience range including the much desired power conditioners please call 01775 761880 or visit the website

Hi End Cable Auric Illuminator

The Auric Illuminator from High End Cable is a treatment and cleaner for optical discs. It is specifically designed for CDs, DVDs and SACDs. The treatment kit includes a large bottle of a clear treatment gel, a pack of non-abrasive disposable polishing cloths, a marker template and a Staedtler Lumocolor permanent marker, referred to as the Auric Illuminator Pen!

The Illuminator is described as an 'optical disc playback resolution enhancement' and essentially involves a two-stage process.



The first stage is to reduce the amount of ambient light entering the disc and reaching the optical path of the player's laser system. The second stage is to clean and treat both surfaces of the disc to remove static electricity. On the playing surface, this will also enhance the optical transparency by reducing reflection and refraction.

To treat a disc, the centre is filled in with the marker using the template supplied and the outer rim of the disc is also blacked out with the marker. Then, the disc is treated on both sides with one drop of the gel spread on the surface and finally buffed with the supplied cloth.

In use

The result is that treated discs seemed less harsh at the top end, generally quieter, smoother and easier to listen to than prior to the treatment.

It may seem a little pricey for a CD treatment, but when you consider that the large bottle will treat a considerable number of discs – probably your entire collection – it is not bad value, and it definitely works! **NR**



► DETAILS

PRICE: £49.95

CONTACT:
01775 761880

WEBSITE:
HIGHENDCABLE.
CO.UK

OUR VERDICT



Agora Acoustics MagicHexa

A recent visit to a guy who has built a rather good USB DAC (CAD DAC 1543) saw him putting rubbery feet under the DAC, his Mac Mini and a portable hard drive. These turned out to be MagicHexa feet from Korean company Agora Acoustics, soft visco-elastic polymer pucks 76mm in diameter and 23mm high.

Their purpose is isolation and damping of whatever you care to place on top of them up to a maximum of 12kg per puck – so loudspeakers are also an option. They consist of two honeycomb matrices with a skin between them that presumably acts as a heatsink for all the energy they absorb. Claimed to be immune to the effects of temperature and pressure, they can be used under a component's existing feet or directly on the chassis.

In use

I tried them under a number of components that were already quite well isolated by a Townshend Seismic Stand with glass shelves, however I am suspicious of glass as a support surface and the MagicHexa reinforced this feeling. Two pucks under a Heed DT CD transport clearly improved the resolution of note decay and had a very positive effect on both vitality and dynamics. Two under the Heed DA DAC was even more impressive, opening up the soundstage and calming and refining the sound.

They remove sonic hash, leaving a cleaner, more finely detailed result. The stiffer chassis of my Cantata DAC proved less easy to upgrade to the same extent, but still sounded cleaner and revealed extra layers of low level detail. I didn't have enough pucks to do a pair of speakers, so placed them between one Vivid Audio G2 and the carpet which also had a cleaning effect, I think another set is required! A big result for a little price, then. **JK**



► DETAILS

PRICE: £60 (PACK
OF FOUR)

WEBSITE:
ANGELSOUNDAUDIO.
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OUR VERDICT





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EDITOR'S
CHOICE



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(note: iPod Touch not included)

PATHOS

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Cowon Z2 16GB portable player

Korean company Cowon have long had a reputation for being an 'audiophile' portable player provider for the inveterate iPod avoiders. We recently featured an cheaper one in our *Blind Listening Group Test (HFC 361)* and its results were so-so (though better than an iPod Touch!), but much hope has been pinned to the new Z2 range.

The Z2 is a direct Touch-competitor, in that it has a 3.7 inch screen, a predominantly touch interface and an app-based operation. The pricing is also in the same area. It is slightly heavy at 116 grams, but has a feeling of solidity. There are 8GB and 32GB options, too, but one of the most appealing features is the provision of a MicroSD slot – which means at current Amazon prices you can add an extra 32GB for around £15. (Or take the total up to 96GB – the base 32GB and a pricey 64GB if you're feeling flush...).

Video users will be enthused by the provision of a micro HDMI port (cable available separately), which is purported to allow full 1080p, and MKV compatibility is nice to have, too. Also a big deal is Cowon's move into the Android-powered space. The interface – while a bit fussy – is fairly usable. Unfortunately, it is not possible to experience the joys of Spotify and alternate music players like Songbird until Cowon get on the Google-accredited list. What was once called the Android Marketplace is now Google Play, but they're not playing with Cowon just yet...

The unit is supplied with a minimum of accessories: mains wall wart, Blackberry-type micro-USB lead and passable iAudio (i.e. Cowon) earbuds with pads. A full mains charge is the recommended first action. The device itself is appealing in black – it feels a lot like the under-inspiring, but similarly Android-aspirated Philips GoGear Connect 3 (*HFC 361*), but exceeds it in many ways – not least that the native Music application plays FLAC right out of the box. It is also remarkably easy to hook the Z2 up to your Wi-Fi for Internet app use.

Although most Mac users may be buying the competition it is just about possible to load the Z2 from a Mac via USB. The device's native file system is NTFS, so read-only to a stock Mac, but third-party NTFS write enablers are available. Once on the device its media scan rapidly takes over and seems reliable.

The review sample was supplied at the advertised 2.33 firmware level, but to test the update procedure I took it up to the recently released 4.33 which went without a hitch. The driver for that particular upgrade is that it adds an app called MediaShare which is an appealing three-mode app to work as any of the three tiers of a UPnP system (server, renderer or controller). Unfortunately, although it could see Twonky and UPnP Logitech Media Server on my QNAP it seemed to fall over on scanning the large collection. Asset fared slightly better, but it feels like more development is needed.



Sound quality

The main event for us is FLAC player performance and the stock player is quite easy to use and attractive. The sound with the EQ switched out is neutral but unexciting. For the media player crowd much of the regard for Cowon's audio is due to its BBE EQ and DSP effects and some of them are usable. As a benchmark I played Kate Bush's *The Sensual World* out flat through the headphone out into my main setup and was surprised to find its presentation was at the higher end of our media player expectations, with good imaging and separation, and reasonable bass extension. The lack of gapless playback may be of concern to many...

If the intention was to provide a viable iPod Touch competitor I think that Cowon has more than hit the mark here. It is only to be wished that Cowon achieve Google certification so that the full joy of third-party app use can be enjoyed. **PC**



► DETAILS

PRICE: £219
WEBSITE:
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OUR VERDICT



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Analogue Innovation

Sole Mk.VI subchassis for Linn Sondek LP12

The venerable Linn Sondek LP12 was first introduced back in 1973 and it is still going strong today. Inevitably, for a turntable with such a long history, it has undergone many upgrades through the years. Key improvements in the design include the introduction of the Valhalla crystal-controlled motor power supply in 1982 and then in 1987, the armboard material was changed to a melamine laminated MDF. The list of improvements has continued to grow to the present day which means that the LP12 need never be out of date.

However, many of these upgrades come with a hefty price tag. Given that one upgrade alone can double the cost of a basic LP12 Majik (just under £2,500 with arm), I was very excited to hear about Analogue Innovation which specialises in one such upgrade, namely the Sole subchassis and armboard.

Early in 2008, Analogue Innovation noted that the LP12 subchassis was of a simple pressed steel construction and felt that significant improvements could be made to the sound by replacing this with a more elegant design. So it set about designing and building a prototype subchassis called The Sole, based on the constrained layer principle as a means of improving the rigidity, dimensional accuracy, uniformity and acoustic properties of the standard Linn chassis. This turned out to be a great success with improvements in focus, soundstage, imaging and dynamics. All this was achieved without changing the well-known and loved LP12 musicality. The design has undergone a number of iterations since then, culminating with the recent launch of the Sole Mk.VI.

The new Mk.VI still adheres to the original design principles of the earlier models – the constrained layer being MDF sandwiched between two pieces of structural aluminium. The MDF absorbs vibrations when flexing and one piece of aluminium laminate will be in tension and the other in compression, making for a very rigid construction. The black anodised aluminium that laminates the top and bottom of the MDF is attached

using a special bonding process. The same material is used for the subchassis and for the armboard, which is attached to the subchassis by three screws. These screws fasten to three threaded inserts that are bonded into the underside of the armboard, so no screws show on the top of armboard.

The Sole is a beautifully engineered upgrade made from top quality materials and accurately cut and routed using CNC machinery. The black anodised finish is superb and the whole assembly oozes quality.

The armboard is supplied pre-drilled for the arm and is very easy to fit, although Analogue Innovation can fit the Sole to the customer's LP12 if required. For Rega arms, the underside has three pre-drilled indents for the 3-hole fixing and, if necessary, the customer just has to drill them out if they want to use it with a Rega 3-hole mounting arm. This armboard will also support Linn and the Audio Origami PU7 arms. Armboards for Naim or SME arms are also available.

For this review, the Sole was installed in a standard LP12 fitted with a Valhalla power supply and stock Rega RB300 arm – a classic combination. I fitted my Lyra Clavis DC cartridge, which works well with the RB300 arm and was ready to audition the Sole.

Sound quality

The first thing I noticed was that the Sole had significantly tightened up the LP12's bass response. The loose bass had been replaced with a taut and crisp punch that was extremely well extended into the sub-audible region. On further listening, it was clear that the LP12 now sounded more musical, with reduced colouration and improved image placement in both width and depth. The overall impression was a crisp and much more organic performance with better involvement with the music – fantastic!

In conclusion, this upgrade is surely as good as it gets and is extremely cost-effective, when you consider the costs of the alternatives. I would certainly highly recommend it. **NR**



► DETAILS

PRICE: £625
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OUR VERDICT



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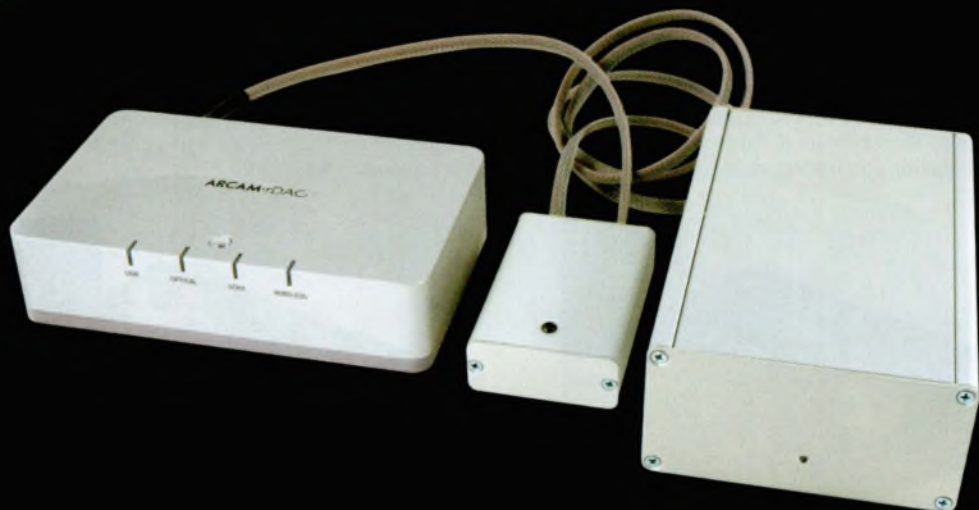


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FiiO E17 Headphone amp/DAC

Chinese manufacturer FiiO has been knocking out affordable headphone amps designed to improve the sound of your portable for a while now, but its latest offering, the E17, created a bit of a buzz and a lot of anticipation on its announcement. Demand also appears to be outstripping supply, so what is all the fuss about?

The main draw (apart from the insanely affordable price) is that as well as being a very able headphone amp, the E17 adds extremely flexible DAC capabilities to the party. The clues are in the accessories – included are a mini USB cable, a 3.5mm to phono coax digital adapter and a 3.5mm to TOSLINK optical digital adapter, (as well as a soft case and two silicone bands for creating a back-to-back DAC/DAP combo).

The device itself is smaller than your average iPod Classic, attractively styled and seems well built for the money – this is such a good value proposition it is hard to resist! But there has been no skimping on the DAC chip itself which is a very acceptable Wolfson WM8740.

The small LED is tasteful and useful, although 44.1K and 88.2K are indicated as 48K and 96K respectively. The menu includes options for EQ, gain and defeating USB charging. As well as 3.5mm digital and analogue inputs, there is a FiiO proprietary dock connector port for use with its docks and other amps, suggesting this is the way to go for attaching active speakers. For this mode there is a line out bypass switch to restrict operation to DAC only.

A brief manual in slightly mangled English confirms the various modes of operation – including FiiO's optional L3 high quality 30-pin to analogue 3.5mm connection lead (£6.99) for use with iPods specifically – a short 3.5mm to 3.5mm for generic DAP use is included in the package. While the USB DAC tops out at 24-bit/96kHz, the S/PDIF capability is 24/192.

Unfortunately the E17 cannot be used with the Camera Connection kit trick for hi-res digital output from the iPad – it attempts to draw too much current from the Apple device. Using a powered USB hub can mitigate this – giving 16/44.1 capability (and a very untidy set-up), but on current versions of iOS higher resolutions are hampered by a bug which gives crackly audio.

Sound quality

One of the main intended uses of the E17 is USB listening to a laptop via headphones – for testing purposes I used Stephen Booth's *Decibel* as a player for its auto sample rate switching ability. The results demonstrated one of the most appealing aspects of the E17's sonic signature – it is one for the analogue lovers, with a very smooth, warm legato sound that somehow manages to still convey punch and detail. It made a very decent fist of trying to render something musically listenable from the compressed mush of Rush's new *Clockwork Angels* album, which despite its sonic limitations is still a very fine record. Hi-res material like the 24/96 *Get Up, Stand Up* from Marley's *Legend* was incredibly expansive and detailed – a joy!

Moving onto analogue-in headphone amp use, partnered with the Cowon Z2, the E17 managed to make huge improvements to the player's native sound and imaging capabilities. One of the FiiO's great advantages is that issues of the player's ability to drive your headphones of choice goes away, and the overall result is much more satisfying listen.

That so much is possible using such a tiny device is a modern miracle, and at such a keen price there is no need to look elsewhere if you want a 'Swiss army knife' type of solution. Only consider other options such as the excellent Arcam rPac, if the sound is not to your taste, or you only really need a dedicated DAC. **PC**



DETAILS

PRICE: £100
CONTACT:
0131 443 8545
WEBSITE:
ADVANCEDMP3
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OUR VERDICT



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M&A TVA10 PWR	£500
MELOS MAT 180 PWR	£1195

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CJ PREMIER 18LS PRE	£1750
NU FORCE P9 PRE	£1500
SHANLING A2000 INT	£500
COPLAND CTA 502 PWR	£950
CALYX AUDIO CLASS D INT	£1750
NU FORCE PRE 8S PRE	£975
NU FORCE PRE 8 PRE	£750
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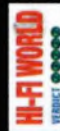
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QiTunesAir for QNAP NAS

QNAP NAS units are used by many audiophiles to give them RAID protection for their valuable libraries, and for their embedded Twonky and Squeezebox server apps. They have historically included a temperamental version of a DAAP/Firefly-type iTunes server which wasn't worth bothering with..

A quick read through the small print for the latest 3.7.1 QNAP firmware upgrade gave the promise of Apple 'Remote' controlling the QNAP without the need for iTunes – directly piping the results out to iDevices using Airplay.

What the new firmware brings with it is QiTunesAir, in the form of a standard QNAP QPKG which can just be added in the appropriate part of 'Application Services' in the QNAP admin client. This supersedes and deactivates the old iTunes server install. You additionally need to go through the usual code-based pairing you would do between an iTunes library and a device using the Apple 'Remote' app.

Once switched on the app runs a memory-hungry system process as it scans your tunes. While it was filling up to the 50,000 track level, the library could be seen in iTunes just like any DAAP-enabled library – some success was also had in accessing it from the iPad via 'Remote'.

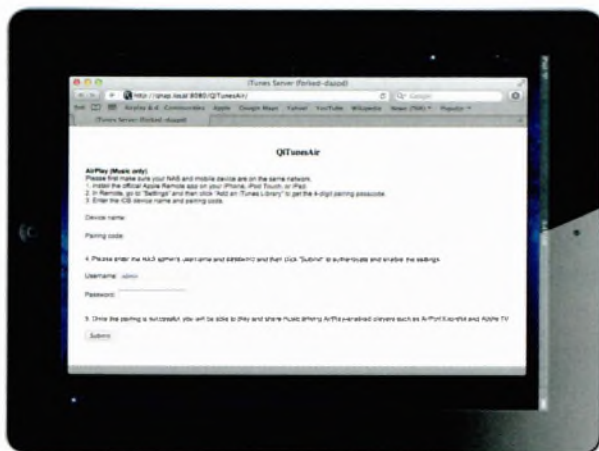
Regrettably the early v1.0 nature of this plug-in means it appears to be ill-suited to large libraries – once the scan was complete the server could not be contacted by any Apple-based means. Very interesting then, but some more work is needed on this great idea! **PC**

▶ **DETAILS**
PRICE: FREE
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OUR VERDICT



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PICTURE COURTESY OF APPLE

Plex for iPad and iPhone

Plex has been developing for a number of years now as *the* go-to desktop app if you're looking to attach a Mac Mini, PC or Linux box to an AV setup – both as the onscreen presentation client and as the media organising server. Frustratingly, it is *still* not all there yet as far as dealing with FLAC is concerned, particularly now that the client and the server have been separated for the iPad-centric world.

The affordable 'Plex' app (also available for Android and Windows Phone 7) hooks up to the free-to-install Plex Media Server (also available in PC and Linux) over your network. Frustratingly while PMS offers itself to other DLNA clients (PS3, etc.), the Plex client does not reciprocate by readily spotting other DLNA servers it could make use of, so though cross-platform, we're drifting towards the proprietary territory of the likes of Logitech.

But if you have compressed audio on a computer and want to be able to serve up a little video besides, Plex is an unfussy and well-organised control mechanism, (in both the client and in PMS, which adds and broadcasts useful metadata like photos and biogs). The iPad is not the be-all and end-all for playout, since media can be thrown to Airplay as ever.

In practice, Plex works efficiently and streams music reliably via Airplay and uPnP. Music playing is not the primary string to its bow, but the Plex ecosystem is worth the very modest price of admission all the same. **PC**

▶ **DETAILS**
PRICE: £2.99
WEBSITE:
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OUR VERDICT



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PICTURE COURTESY OF APPLE

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Hi-Fi Choice ISSN 0959-1115, is published monthly 12 times per year by MyHobbyStore Ltd. c/o USK&M Media Dist. Serv. Corp. at 28 Tower Square 5th Fl., Flatbush, NY 11201. Periodicals Postage paid at Flatbush, NY. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Hi-Fi Choice c/o Express Mag. P.O. Box 2200, Flatbush, NY 11201-0220.



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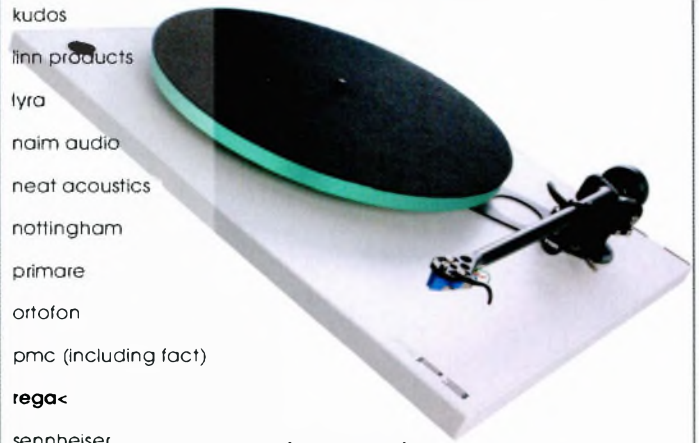
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WE HEAR THAT EPIPHANY ACOUSTICS HAS A BRAND NEW USB DAC COMING. Costing £99.99, the E-DAC is a 24-bit converter said to be "perfectly suited for high end computer audio". It comes in a small brushed aluminium enclosure. Designed by NwAvGuy, it's based on the TE7022L UAC1 engine and ES9023 DAC chip, running up to 24/96.

HERE'S SOMETHING WE'VE NOT COME ACROSS BEFORE - A STREAMING PREAMPLIFIER. Naim Audio's new NAC-N172 XS is a network-connected preamp. All it needs is a power supply (or active speakers) to make a full system. Given the prevailing trend in hi-fi is that less is more, we think it's a clever idea. Along with UPnP streaming, your £1,650 buys you Internet radio (with the option of FM/DAB), plus digital playback from iPod/MP3/USB and five S/PDIF inputs.

CHANGE IS AFOOT IN THE BRITISH MUSIC BIZ. News comes that the number of albums sold in the UK fell by almost seven million from the same period a year earlier, according to the BPI. Although rising, digital downloads weren't able to make up for the drop in sales of CD albums. They were up 17.3%, with sales of singles up by 6% overall. The singles market did better then, with 93.6 million singles sold in the first half of 2012, up from 88 million in 2011.

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 232
SEPTEMBER 2002
Time for a round-up of equipment supports and speaker stands with Paul Messenger heaping praise on the Naim Frim and Partington designs respectively. The mighty B&W was the subject of an industry profile, with David Vivian summing up the company's success as "brain power". An exclusive review of the B&W Signature 805 was all the confirmation needed. Affordable high-end systems rounded off a particularly colourful issue and no doubt 'colourful' aptly described the archaeologists language when their remote controlled robot broke open a hitherto sealed door inside the Great Pyramid of Giza only to be confronted by yet another door!



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 110
SEPTEMBER 1992
Twenty years ago (it seems like yesterday), pulses were quickening in the HFC offices due to the arrival of an early production sample of Philips new Digital Compact Cassette (DCC) player, the chunky looking DCC-900. Paul Miller found plenty to wax lyrical about - eight pages worth, in fact - and summed up this 'new' kid on the hi-fi block as "offering very much more than the sound of cheap CD". Naim Audio was under the spotlight this month with some discussion on the great analogue vs. digital debate, while in the world at large, America conducted its last nuclear test in Nevada, and the Italian Lira was forced out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 62
SEPTEMBER 1988
A 34 amplifier group test adorned the pages of this month's issue, including seven reprint reviews (sneaky, eh?), but then there were 162 pages to fill back in the day when magazines were king! Jason Kennedy continued his quest for the perfect in-car cassette player by constructing a mock up car in his living room and clamping an aerial to the sideboard; no doubt safer than trying to make notes about sound quality while driving! No Heath Robinson-type aerial set up was needed however, when NASA relaunched the space shuttle; the tranquility of outer space being a far cry from the noisy militant protests against the IMF in West Berlin.

The hi-fi industry should never forget its links with the music world,

so it's nice to hear that Grado Labs, purveyors of fine headphones and pickup cartridges, has asked violinist Francesca Dardani to act as its ambassador to the London 2012 Festival. She'll be performing in the Aldeburgh World Orchestra which comprises young musicians from thirty countries, and has been brought together for the Olympic games. The orchestra will perform a series of concerts as part of the London 2012 Festival, including a Proms performance at the Royal Albert Hall. She'll be keeping a record of her experiences - you can follow her online at: www.facebook.com/Francesca.Dardani.violin.



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DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month Cyrus Audio's MD **Peter Bartlett** chooses four of his favourite albums...



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KEN KESSLER, HI-FI NEWS
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