



Power play

Buying a £500 integrated amplifier?
We hear six of the latest and greatest

New life

Retro: Pioneer's PL-12D,
the deck that put Japanese
turntables on the map



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

www.hifichoice.co.uk

Issue No. **364**

November 2012

£3.99

Stream baby

Linn's cute new Kiko
style system tested

Club culture

Technics' iconic SL-1200 turntable:
40th anniversary special



Short story

Monitor Audio's super
GX50 mini monitor

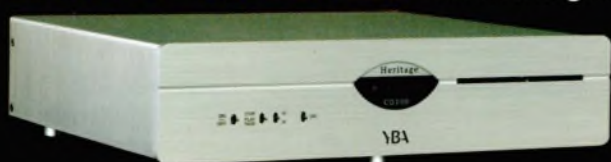


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top products from Arcam,
Grado, Heed, Kimber, Rega,
Renaissance, Sonos and more...

Disc driver

YBA Heritage 100 CD player



Snow patrol

Q Acoustics'
crisp new 2050i
loudspeaker



A LEGEND IS REBORN

WILSON
AUDIO

'THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING'

Alan Sircom – Editor, Hi-Fi+ (issue 67)

'A COMPELLING, EXHILARATING EXPERIENCE'

José Victor Henriques – Editor, Hi-Fi Clube (October 2009)

'THE PERFECT LOUDSPEAKER'

Floorstanding Loudspeaker of the Year – Hi-Fi+ Awards 2009 (issue 68)



There comes a moment in every product sphere when a truly iconic product is created. In the case of high-performance speakers, that product was the original Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy.

Now David A. Wilson has reengineered the speakers that defined audio excellence for a generation. The Sasha W/P boasts the same uncompromising approach to design as its illustrious predecessor but with newly devised innovations such as the resonance minimising material that has been specially created for the cabinets, a revised motor/magnet assembly to bring new dimensions to the bass and a redesigned crossover that dramatically increases midrange clarity.

The result is a loudspeaker with holographic imaging, free-breathing dynamics and unrestricted sonic detail. A speaker that takes sound onto a new and rarefied plane. A speaker for people who don't know the meaning of ordinary.

The new Sasha W/P joins Wilson Audio's other extraordinary designs, including the Duetto – probably the best 'bookshelf' speaker in the world – the compact floorstanding Sophia 2, the imposing MAXX 3 and the peerless Alexandria 2. Speakers without compromise, brought to you by Absolute Sounds: premier importer of the world's finest hi-fi.

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Club culture Happy birthday, Technics SL-1200!



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Deep Purple *Machine Head*



When you think of a top turntable, which one springs to mind? For many *Hi-Fi Choice* readers, I'd guess the familiar form of a Linn Sondek LP12 might pop up from the recesses of their grey matter. Or perhaps the sleek expanse of a Rega Planar?

Contrarians might go for a Roksan Xerxes, Garrard 401 or Michell GyroDec – all worthy machines – but how many of you would conjure up a mental picture of a Technics SL-1200?

Contrast that to the general public. Ask ten vinyl-aware people (not those of the “do they still make them?” variety), and I'd guess that nine would utter the word “Technics”. True, they may not quite remember the model number – but the point still stands...

The SL-1200-series succeeded not through extravagant marketing (Technics practically forgot about it, several times during its production life), but through sheer ability. Those in the know knew it was special, and that was all they needed to know. Sadly, most audiophiles spurned or even scorned it, thinking it a DJ deck for poseurs not purists. They could not have been more wrong.

This month, the mighty Technics is forty years young. Amazing to think it, but the '1200 first hit the shops in October 1972 and went on to break records – of the sales variety, being the longest turntable in continuous production and the best selling. Indeed, it was only recently that its maker finally pulled the plug.

That's why we're running our special tribute in this issue. You can read all about this beautifully engineered cultural icon on page 40. Enjoy!

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

BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS



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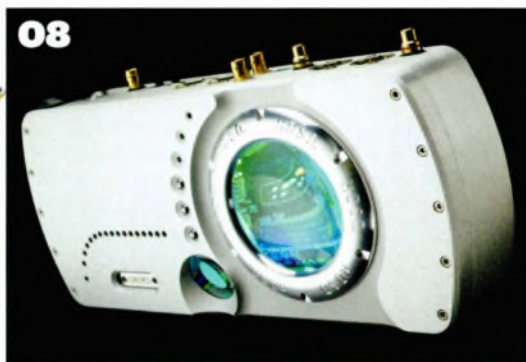
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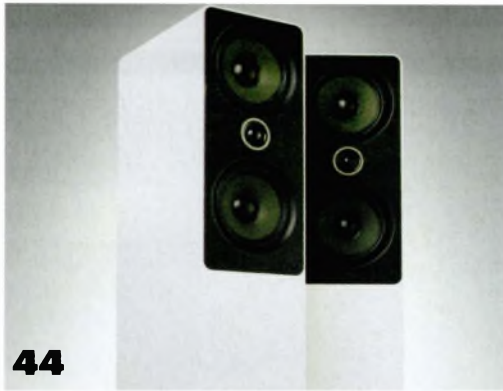
7 pages of the latest and greatest gadgets, gizmos, cables, supports and accessories



90 **THE HUMAN LEAGUE DARE**



Audiofile: Chord Electronics QBD 76 HDS DAC **Year in music:** The Human League, 1981



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Q Acoustics 2050i loudspeaker

"A loudspeaker that allows the listener to enjoy the music's true *joie de vivre*..."

Malcolm Steward: Q Acoustics 2050i loudspeaker p44

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GROUP TEST

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Audiofile

The latest industry news

Source direct

One of Britain's best DACs just got better, gaining Direct Stream Digital support along the way, says *David Price*...

PRICE: £4,995
AVAILABLE: NOW
CONTACT: 01622 721444
WEB: CHORDELECTRONICS.CO.UK

One of the most curious hi-fi phenomena of recent years has been the renaissance of DSD, the digital coding system originally seen in SACD some thirteen years ago. While few people held particular affection for SACD discs, many loved its smooth sound – which offered something a little different to the PCM coding system found in both CD, DVD-Audio and latterly 24-bit/96kHz hi-res downloads. Some say it's more musical, natural and organic sounding, a sort of digital equivalent of the vinyl listening experience. The DSD fanclub is active on the Internet, with several download sites, but there has been practically nothing to play the files on, until now.

Meet the new Chord QBD 76 HDSD, sporting DSD-over-USB playback, opening up the world of high-resolution DSD music without having to buy SACD discs. The new DAC now has a 192kHz PCM and DSD-capable HD USB input, which uses a special high-speed data connector for computer use. The existing USB input can be utilised for CD-quality playback, giving the option for two simultaneous USB connections for hi-res and standard-definition playback.

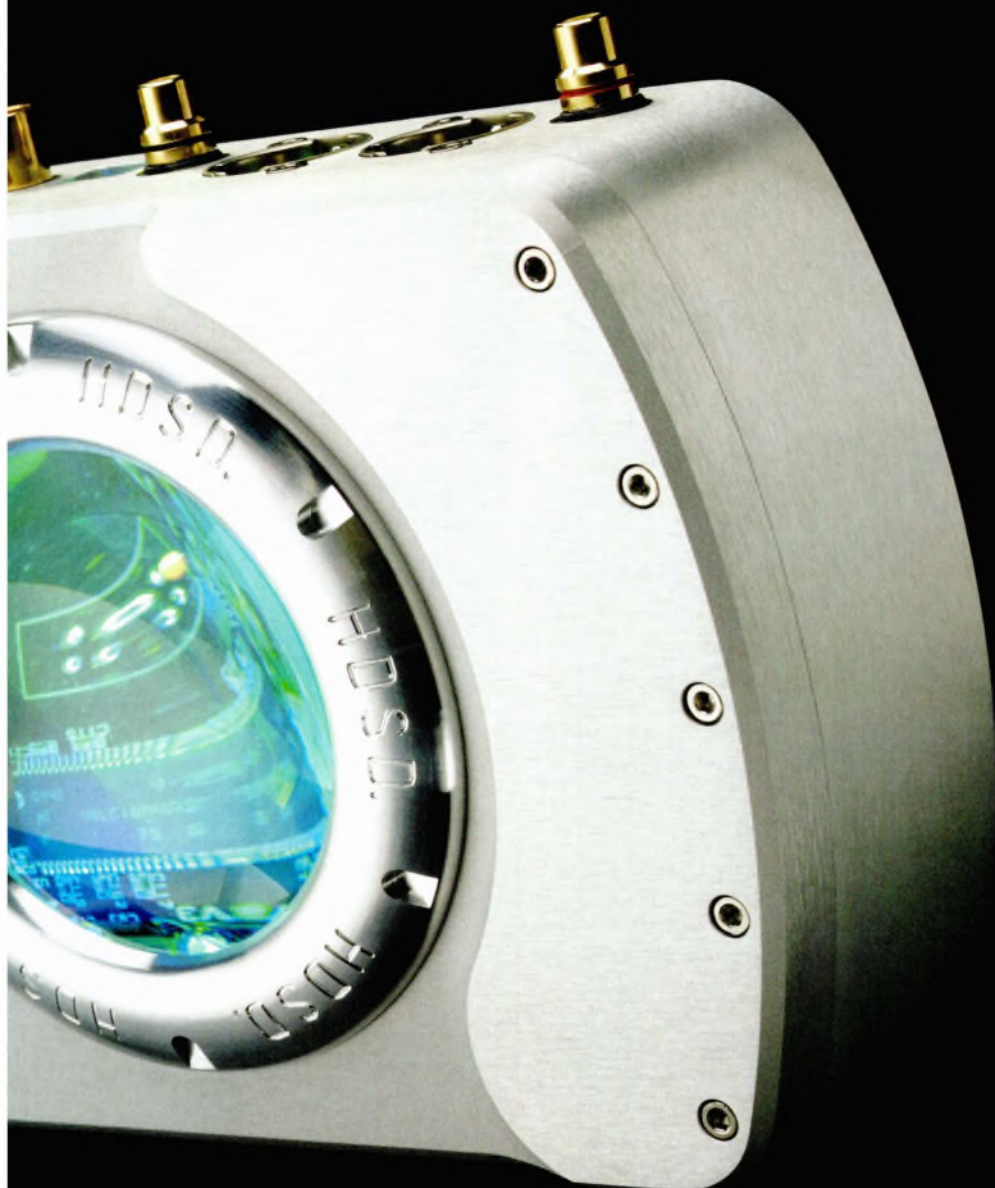
The QBD76 was always a special product, with its bespoke decoding algorithm courtesy of Robert Watts,

stored in the latest field-programmable gate array devices (FPGA), now with 1.25 million gates. The FPGA handles the switching of S/PDIF inputs, all digital S/PDIF decoding, digital PLL, RAM buffer controller, WTA filtering, and the 5th generation Pulse Array DAC. The new HD USB input uses its own separate FPGA and features asynchronous USB technology, isolating the digital clocks from the computer. Each sample rate clock is generated discretely using highly accurate crystal oscillators for optimum performance and claimed ultra-low jitter.

Owners of Chord Electronics' Red Reference (MkIII) and Red Standard CD players, plus the existing QBD76 HD DAC can now upgrade their kit to get DSD over USB compatibility for £1,440. The process includes installing the special DSD electronic components, installing the software, labour, testing and shipping.



The Direct Stream Digital fanclub is active on the Internet, but there has been practically nothing to play the files on, until now...



Going mobile

PROOF POSITIVE THAT THE WORLD IS CURRENTLY IN LOVE WITH MUSIC ON THE MOVE, now even one of hi-fi's most prestigious loudspeaker brands is getting in on the act! MartinLogan has launched its new Mikros 70 in-ear phones, claiming they give users a private MartinLogan listening room wherever they go...

Designed by the same team that has penned some of the world's most iconic electrostatics, they're said to deliver "realism, richness, and purity of sound that MartinLogan's discerning customers have come to expect", no less. They're also said to offer superb ambient noise isolation, with a figure of 97.8 percent quoted.

The body is constructed from black anodised aluminum, and sealed with metallic hyperblack end caps. They sport a 90-degree gold-plated plug, tangle-reducing cable slider, and simple yet durable black rubberised cord that dampens and isolates noise transmitted through contact and movement. Also included with each headphone is a compact carrying pouch. The package includes various ear tips (three sizes of bulb tips and two sizes of flange tips) for a snug fit.

There are in-line remote/microphone controls for volume, play/pause, track selection, and voice control on compatible Apple devices. The remote and microphone also function with a variety of smart phones, digital media players, and similar devices with a standard 3.5mm 4-conductor socket, the maker says.

Price is £149.90 and it's on sale now. For more details, contact Absolute Sounds, MartinLogan's exclusive UK distributor, on 020 8971 3909 or click on www.absolutesounds.com.



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Diva IISP Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*, January 2011

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Back to black

New direct drive turntable from Audio-Technica

Audio-Technica's new AT-LP1240USB turntable offers a host of features that, says the company, caters to the demands of both hi-fi connoisseurs and club DJs.

A direct-drive 16-pole, three phase motor ensures consistency of speed and quiet operation at 33-1/3, 45 or 78 RPM. An S-shaped tonearm includes adjustable tracking force, bias adjustment and a removable universal cartridge mount.

The gloss black and silver design is certainly a nod to that of now discontinued Technics SL-1200, but it differs in having a built-in switchable phono preamplifier that attaches to a line level amplifier input directly. It also sports a USB output, meaning it can be linked to a computer without the need for special drivers.

The new deck is therefore very handy for transferring records to digital music files that can be played back on portable MP3 players including Apple's iPod, iPhone, iPad, in the car or at home. (PC and Mac compatible software is included).



PRICE: £500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 0113 277 1441 **WEB:** AUDIOTECHNICASHOP.COM

Cocooned

New home/portable iDevices with AirPlay from Denon

Cocoon Home and Cocoon Portable, are two new streaming speaker docks which are compatible with every mobile device using Apple iOS, Android or Windows via Denon's App. AirPlay technology makes it possible to stream music wirelessly throughout the house, to multiple Cocoons simultaneously while using iTunes.

A two-way speaker system, a large acoustic chamber, Denon Dual Layer Cones, bass ports and Denon amplification all work in combination with advanced DSP technology to deliver fine sound, says Denon, while the iPhone, iPad or iPod Touch is docked. Internet radio is included and it supports a wide range of audio formats (MP3/ WMA/WAV/ FLAC/LPCM) and can access and play music that is stored on

any PC, Mac or NAS drive that is connected to the network. Available in black or white (home), and all black (portable) the latter's rechargeable battery gives a claimed five hours playback.



PRICES: £499 EACH **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 02890 279830 **WEB:** DENON.CO.UK

Monitor this

MUSICAL FIDELITY has launched its new EB-50 in-ear monitors (IEM). Using the company's audio design expertise, the £149.99 EB-50 is said to offer the same level of performance as its high-end audio products. Characteristics include a claimed ruler-flat frequency response, excellent dynamic range and a deep, clear and fast bass. Build quality is said to be "extraordinary" – the drivers use neodymium magnets encased in a multi-layer, anti-resonant material to eradicate resonance. These are then housed in a mil-spec aluminium body. The cable incorporates an in-line mic/mute control so that users with smartphones can take calls whilst listening to their music, and is terminated with a gold-plated 3.5mm right-angled stereo mini jack plug. Look out for a review soon. For more details, see musicalfidelity.com.



On the rack

THOMAS AUDIO SUPPORT SYSTEMS has just announced the launch of a new system support called 'Magic Rack 2' (MR2). It works on the same principle as the company's MR1 rack, in that it utilises neoprene rubber to support the components. For the new MR2, TASS has manufactured the shelves from silver birch ply, coated in acrylic, while the MDF spacers have been replaced with carbon fibre tubes. The result, says the company, is an improved sound stage, a tightening up of the bass and more detail. Hand made in Dorking, Surrey, a three-shelf rack costs £900 (£300 per shelf), or custom racks can be built to order if required. magic-racks.co.uk





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www.cyrusaudio.com

Super 8

Naim's new flagship loudspeaker is the result of five years research...

The new Naim Ovator S-800 loudspeaker is said to be the product of five years of research into Naim's Balanced Mode Radiator (BMR), says the company, as it introduces a radical new flat-panel bass unit, designed to deliver a sound quality more consistent with the speakers's partnering Naim BMRs.

The S-800 has been designed for the audiophile with a larger than average room, and one who appreciates music played with a natural sense of scale and dynamics, Naim says. It is available either in passive or active configuration, the latter from December 2012. With this variant, each driver is connected to a different amplifier and an electronic crossover sits between preamplifier and matching power amplifiers.

In passive form, with its crossover built into the diecast aluminium plinth, the new speaker can be used conventionally, and is available from January of next year.

PRICE: £TBA **AVAILABLE:** DECEMBER **CONTACT:** 01722 426673 **WEB:** NAIMAUDIO.COM



Ear and now

Denon launches a wide range of new headphones...

Denon has revealed details of its revamped headphone range, comprising eight models in four distinct lifestyle groups which come with associated apps for iOS and Android.

The 'Music Maniac' range is for the traditional audiophile with a focus on acoustic purity and audio quality.

'Urban Raver' models are targeted at younger music enthusiasts and contemporary music. 'Globe Cruiser' phones are designed with the needs of the frequent traveller in mind, while 'Exercise Freak' headphones are for the sports enthusiast. See the company's website for details...

PRICE: £TBA **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 02890 279830 **WEB:** DENON.CO.UK



Revo-lution

First sub-£100 colour touchscreen DAB/DAB+ radio

PiXiS follows in the footsteps of, and shares many family similarities with, Revo's AXiS hybrid digital radio. It delivers high-quality audio performance and features an icon driven colour touchscreen interface, says the company. PiXiS also supports DAB/DAB+ Slideshow, a new feature that allows images to be broadcast alongside the standard digital audio transmissions, providing a colourful and informative backdrop to DAB radio broadcasts. Content includes 'Now Playing' screens, news headlines, weather information and traffic updates.

PiXiS is the latest venture between Revo Technologies and Frontier Silicon, and is designed around the latter's recently introduced Venice 8.1 DAB module, running a 3.5 inch colour touchscreen TFT display, 2.7 inch custom speaker driver and 3W Class D amplifier. It is available in three finishes – satin white, satin black and satin silver.



PRICE: £99.95 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01555 66 61 61 **WEB:** REVO.CO.UK

Twin peaks

Two new floorstanders in Quad's L Classic speaker range

Quad's 23L Classic and 25L Classic are the latest additions to the company's L Classic loudspeaker series. Faithfully continuing the philosophy of Quad's founder Peter Walker, the two new models aim to produce 'the closest approach to the original sound', using Quad's down-firing auxiliary bass radiator (ABR) technology. This approach provides extended and, says Quad, virtually uncoloured low bass response.

The 23L is a three-way design, measuring up just below the one-metre mark and housing a 25mm fabric dome tweeter, while a 125mm woven Kevlar cone handles midrange duties and an identically sized driver looks after mid/bass. The 25L uses the same tweeter, but incorporates a brace of 125mm drivers to deliver midrange, as well as a pair of 165mm bass drivers to deliver lower frequencies.

The new speakers are available in four finishes: non-lacquered cherry or piano black, while the lacquered versions come in cherry or piano black.

PRICE: £1,300-£1,750

AVAILABLE: NOW

CONTACT: 01480 452561

WEB: QUAD-HIFI.CO.UK



NEWS IN BRIEF

•ISOTEK'S NEW GENESIS (£12,995) is the world's first dual-cell mains sinewave generator for audio and AV systems, the company says. Unlike existing mains regenerators, it builds a completely new sinewave within two identical, independent generation cells. An extremely low distortion, synchronous sinewave generator creates a fully optimised signal inside each cell, which is amplified by a 300W generation engine running in Class A/B and fed to a high-quality output transformer with copper foil between the primary and secondary output, thus preventing distortion and noise passing through the unit.

Keith Martin, IsoTek's founder and managing director, said, "we looked at existing regeneration systems and thought we can build something better; six years of extensive R&D later and this is the result. No other device delivers such ultra-low levels of distortion with such unerring consistency, and sound quality is remarkable". isoteksystems.com



•BLUE AURA has introduced the v30 amp and speaker system (£279), comprising an amplifier with two audio processing valves and a pair of two-way bass reflex stereo speakers. Whatever audio source you run through the v30, the result is heightened, uncompromising quality every time, says Blue Aura. "Created from the ground up for those who demand more from their digital docks, the v30 shuns the transistor designs of lesser options and the low-quality audio they eke out, using instead valve technology to bring the warmth back into your audio world."

blueaura.co.uk



•CORRECTION: In the September issue we ran an incorrect picture for the Eclipse TD510ZMK2 loudspeaker news item. Watch out for a full review soon!

The Ovale

CRYSTAL ACOUSTICS' new £39.95 Ovale portable wireless stereo speaker is a compact Bluetooth receiver designed to get the most from your music collection, the company says. Unlike some wireless products, the Ovale's Sturdy design makes it truly portable. It has a handy speakerphone function, letting you make and receive hands-free phone calls. The compact, ruggedly designed Ovale is also compatible with AVRCP commands: it can wirelessly control the play, pause, next and previous commands of any connected Bluetooth device. Meanwhile, a passive radiator speaker driver allows the Ovale to create an impressively deep and powerful bass performance for a wireless

speaker of this size, says Crystal Acoustics. A large-capacity rechargeable battery gives eight hours of non-stop portable use. And with its sleek, low-weight construction and soft rubber finish, it is designed to be very easy to carry around.

crystallaudiovideo.com



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Perfect way



For those who'd rather listen to music rather than obsess over how it's played, Linn has a new solution in its Kiko DSM. **Malcolm Steward** gets connected...

This is an interesting departure from Linn's very well-established, specialist audiophile path. The £2,500 package comes in a box emblazoned with the understated logo 'Just listen', inside which there's an elegant little aluminium-clad, digital streamer/preamplifier, a pair of bespoke active loudspeakers, appropriately wired but rather bulky loudspeaker cables with Neutrik Speakon connectors, a mains lead, and a remote control handset.

Its somewhat aerodynamic look distances the unit from the boxy Majik-DSI, Linn's combined streamer and integrated amplifier, along with the more expensive Akurate and Klimax streamer separates, as does its output arrangement – the Kiko uses four discrete onboard amplifiers and an electronic crossover to power its speakers actively, with one amp serving each speaker drive unit.

The loudspeaker cables supplied ensure everything is connected correctly, as the Kiko isn't configured like your usual small 'style system' – it's a specific type of active design with discrete channels of high and low frequencies on both left and right channel outputs. That's why you won't find conventional speaker binding posts around the back. Kiko is effectively a closed system that binds the user to the supplied loudspeakers then – hooking up a different pair of boxes isn't possible.

The bundled loudspeakers are drilled to allow them to be hung easily off screws in the wall. Fair enough, as I guess some customers Linn hopes to appeal to might be buying the Kiko not as a primary hi-fi system, but as a secondary music source for living spaces where its size and style count as much as sonics?

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Linn Kiko DSM
ORIGIN:
UK
TYPE:
all-in-one system
WEIGHT:
player 2.4kg
speaker 3.08kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxDmm)
player:
280x75x 270mm
speaker:
146x260x187mm
DISTRIBUTOR:
Linn
TELEPHONE:
0141 307 7777
WEBSITE:
linn.co.uk

You can orient the system unit both horizontally and vertically. If you opt for the latter, be sure to stand it up on its left hand edge (seen as you face it from the front). Tilt it to the right and you'll soon discover where the power switch is – as I did just before everything suddenly went eerily quiet. I am sure Linn could have recessed that switch somehow! Anyway, when you reorient the unit, the decidedly minimal front panel display neatly reconfigures itself to suit whichever layout you have chosen. There is no problem with the front panel controls, because there aren't any! Control is performed with the remote handset but, like most players that offer network streaming, a computer-style interface is infinitely preferable here: I used an Apple iPad running Linn's superb Kinsky app.

In fact, the remote control would be the first thing I would discard if I bought a Kiko. The iPad/Kinsky pairing does a much better job than the remote handset, and I say this as one that does not particularly like the iPad. If one has a music library, one needs to be able to peruse its contents quickly and thoroughly, and frankly the iPad or the screen on a laptop computer is a superior way to do this.

Unlike most style systems, the wee Linn had me won over near instantly when I discovered that it would happily play hi-res music off my NAS drives, all the way up to 24-bit/192kHz files, many of which, unsurprisingly, come from Linn Records! It did not pull the trick that some do and flash up the dreaded 'unrecognised file type' message when I tried to play anything above CD resolution. Hurrah! It will also play low-resolution stuff, if you have a library of MP3 files or an iTunes collection available, which I suspect most of its target audience will have secreted away on the home computer's hard disk. Nonetheless, it is rewarding to see genuine high definition capability on an avowedly mainstream product, where the term 'hi res' is often wrongly taken to mean 320kbps MP3!

While Linn insists that a wired connection

to your music library is preferable if you care about sound quality, the Kiko can also access any iTunes library you may have on your PC, Mac, or NAS using wireless and the Airplay or Songcast facility.

The Kiko is an interesting departure from Linn's well-established, specialist audiophile path...

As well as the network music player facilities one expects on any modern streaming device, including connection to a UPnP source and Internet radio, Spotify and the like, the Kiko makes its DAC available to other sources with a digital output, and also has an analogue connection (so you can continue to listen to your vinyl LPs, provided you have a phono preamp with a line-level output).

In addition, it offers HDMI inputs and an HDMI output, so it will integrate with a suitably equipped TV, and assorted Blu-ray players and games consoles. Its claim to be 'a digital hub', a term that is frequently bandied about without due consideration, seems entirely appropriate and justified in this instance. Many so-called hubs offer only audio connections, which

in these genuinely multimedia days seems positively antique. The new Kiko isn't, and it shows...

Sound quality

I auditioned the little Linn in what I regarded as representing something like a typical style system setting, albeit a very uncool and scruffy one – my office desktop – where it was connected through a network switch to my music sub-network with a length of decidedly audiophile Meicord unshielded Cat6 cable. I placed the Kiko player beneath one of my monitors in the centre of my desktop and put the speakers left and right, angled toward my seat. Nothing complex or high-end was done



Q&A

MALCOLM STEWARD SPOKE TO LINN MD, GILAD TIEFENBRUN ABOUT THE KIKO SYSTEM...



MS: How did you perceive the challenges the company faced launching the design?

GT: The challenge we set ourselves was to make a system that people will be happy to have anywhere in their home. For many people, Kiko will be used as a second system; in the study, kitchen or bedroom.

What sort of person was the product's target customer?

For most, Kiko will be their first foray into hi-fi. There are huge numbers of audiophiles out there who stream music from their computers and the Internet on a near-constant basis, but whose experience is limited by the poor inbuilt sound of the computer, and cheaply-made, mass-produced speakers. Kiko will free their music from their computers, and surprise them with what's possible.

For these people, music is social – they listen to music mainly in the open areas of their home where they spend most of their living time. We've made Kiko colourful, small and flexible on positioning so that it will fit with the way they listen at home.

So Kiko is hi-fi not lifestyle, but it's hi-fi designed to encourage the vast numbers of audiophiles out there to try something better, to take that first step into precision-engineered sound, but without having to sacrifice features or change the way you live.

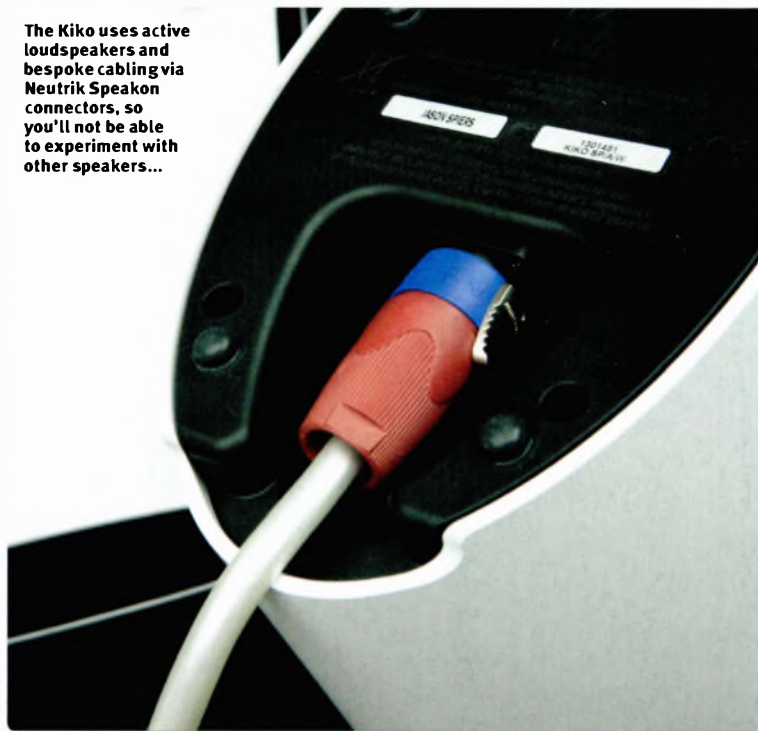
Why did you go for proper active operation with the Kiko?

Because we want it to sound the best it possibly can, so that audiophiles (any music lover, not just an expert), will be surprised that such a compact system makes such a good sound.

Does the arrival of the Kiko herald the demise of the original audiophile-style DS products?

Kiko is the newest in our range of Linn DSM Systems that we launched last October. We continue to enhance our separates too, and have recently launched a new Klimax DS and upgraded Klimax Solo and Twin power amplifiers.

The Kiko uses active loudspeakers and bespoke cabling via Neutrik Speakon connectors, so you'll not be able to experiment with other speakers...



in this set up, which aimed to be as minimalist as I could manage. This is apart from using the Meicord cable of course, which I use to feed my resident Naim UnitiQute, anyway. I also checked the Linn headphone output with my reference Focal Spirit One headphones. This output quickly revealed the Kiko's lineage – there was that transparent, sometimes religiously revealing Linn DS character. Indeed, the unit's presentation sounded, perhaps, a little too honest and open for Neil Young's album *Le Noise*, on which the production is, at best, raw or questionable depending on your own personal standpoint...

I was immediately impressed by the quality of the bass, which seemed powerful, in proportion, tuneful and well controlled on *Mi Declaración* from the album *Lagrimas Mexicanas* by Bill Frisell and Vinicius Cantuária. It also displayed a wonderfully rich, near palpable texture. I immediately switched to a 24/96 rip of the eponymous Jaco Pastorius album to ensure that the low frequencies were as agile as they were muscular. Indeed they were, as the notes tripped out of its little loudspeakers in deft response to Jaco's adroit fingerwork. The note shape accurately portrayed the way his fretting hand was stopping and modulating the strings on his growling 1962 fretless Fender Jazz, a thing described the legendary Bass of Doom!

The system demonstrated peerless (for a small system) coherence and integrity on *Memphis In The Meantime* from the John Hiatt album *Bring The Family*, knitting together the band's players' own individual contributions into a fearsome, relentless groove. Those little loudspeakers conveyed the might and timing agility of the drummer and his interplay with the bass player with a surprising degree of authority and drive, something I'd not expected.

It frees music from people's computers, surprising them with what's possible...

The Kiko also gained communicative ability as the volume level rose. In short, the louder it played, the more lucid the performance became. I had anticipated the sound becoming increasingly ragged as I advanced the volume from '50' (backgroundly) to '80' (rockin' comfortably), but the opposite was true – the Linn appeared to *thrive* on volts. In fact, the louder I played it, the more comfortable it sounded, and I soon found it particularly relished John Hiatt – of all eras!

The recreation of instrumental texture fared well, whether the Kiko was, in the above instance, delineating the Telecaster twang from the bass, drums and other



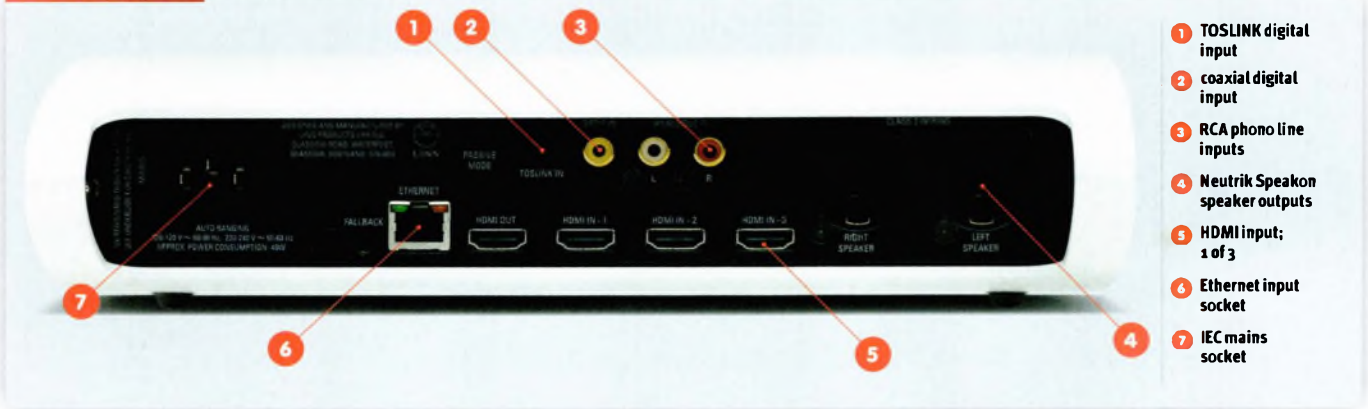
HOW IT COMPARES

I CHOSE TO COMPARE THE LINN KIKO SYSTEM to its similarly-priced rival, the Naim UnitiQute and Neat Iota loudspeakers, which currently form my desktop system. I controlled both using an Apple iPad, even though the Naim has a passable front panel display that shows you track details... meaning that its remote (unlike that of the Kiko) struck me as having a worthwhile purpose other than being a remote volume control.

In terms of desktop real estate occupied by both systems, it was a fairly equal match, but in terms of aesthetics – which looked smartest on my desk – I felt the Linn was the winner. I could honestly live with the performance of either system.

Ultimately, however, I loved the Linn's remarkable transparency and precision, yet felt more comfortable with the slightly more 'analogue' sound of the Naim. With its HDMI inputs though, the Linn is ahead in terms of connectivity – if you are a more modern person than me, and like acquiring your music from sources other than a UPnP server!

CONNECTIONS



guitars on *Warming Up To The Ice Age*, or separating the various orchestral layers of Maurice Ravel and the Utah Symphony Orchestra's rendering of Varèse' *Amérique*. It accomplished both these tasks with the utmost ease, showing commendable dexterity with the latter. It rendered the abrasive power of the bass with equal deftness to its handling of the most delicate percussion elements. It further impressed with its realistic recreation of the wide, deep and commanding soundstage of the Varèse.

The Linn system was equally inspiring when conveying the London Chamber Orchestra's playing of Dave Heath's minimalist work *The Frontier*, capturing the music's rhythmic forcefulness and aggression, especially the percussive playing of

the basses. Whenever Heath conducted this work he insisted that all the players stand rather than sit, as they are normally accustomed, to add an edge to their playing, and it was evident in the Kiko's lucid, vivid representation of this magnificent musical work.

The Linn gave the revealing and finely detailed portrayal of *The Man Who Loved Beer* and *All Smiles And Mariachi* from the superbly recorded Lambchop album *How I Quit Smoking*, just as I had expected. (Lambchop's albums are beautifully crafted, musically rewarding and a true delight to the ear.) It also proved just as delightfully engaging and communicative as it was scrupulously detailed. Believe me, there was little that escaped this system's painstaking scrutiny of the music, and the emotion of the performance.

Further to examining the hi-fi bona fides of the Kiko system, I pillaged my NAS for examples of exceptional female vocal prowess. Alison Krauss and her album *Paper Airplane* soon came up and this conveniently served also to check the dynamic contrast capabilities of the system, as on the bluegrass banjo work on *Dust Bowl Children*. The Kiko portrayed Krauss' voice sublimely and conveyed all its persuasive properties with the same aplomb. It rendered voices positioned further down the harmony stack with a lovely clarity, showing how they contributed to the overall structure and feel of the music in *Lie Awake*, for example.

One outstanding characteristic of the sound of the system was the way it handled transient signals – for example, the start of a note on a banjo or rim shot on a snare drum. Such sounds have startlingly fast rise times and capturing their note shapes seems to be a fundamental strength of active systems with their speed and responsiveness.



SHAPESHIFTING

LINN HAS TRIED TO MAKE THE KIKO FIT PEOPLES' LIVES, rather than the other way around. The main unit is very compact – certainly not the size you'd associate with traditional hi-fi separates. And it comes in a modish range of colours – 'Back To Black', 'White Lines', 'Silver Hammer', 'Champagne Supernova', 'Baby Blue' and 'Blue Monday'.

Inside the petite metal box that is the Kiko, there's a network music streamer, plus a preamp and DAC of good quality, and real flexibility. Indeed, it will hook up to most modern music and/or movie sources, from a Blu-ray player and/or PlayStation, via the three HDMI sockets, and/or the TOSLink and coaxial digital inputs.

For 'legacy' format users, there's also a 3.5mm minijack input for iPods or suchlike, plus one pair of RCA phono sockets for a tape deck or turntable, too. All in all, the Kiko packs lots of connectivity into a surprisingly small space.

Overall though, the unit's *coup de grace* is the expressive and alluring properties it affords music. Detailed and revealing, as the high-end Linn DS range tends to be, it makes any song compelling and involving to hear. Jaco Pastorius' harmonically rich *Portrait of Tracy*, for example, was spellbinding and a true pleasure to listen to.

Conclusion

Linn's little Kiko all-in-one system isn't exclusively a hi-fi design, inasmuch as it's not strictly aimed at specialist buyers. Yet in hi-fi terms, it's a genuine success. Of course, you can get superior sound by assiduous mixing and matching of other bits of (usually large and cumbersome) kit, maybe for less money. Yet that's to miss the point completely – the Linn Kiko is still bags of fun to listen to, and sacrifices little in absolute hi-fi terms.

Despite its diminutive dimensions, this compact system packs emotional power and punch, getting right to the heart of the musical matter. And of course it's a lovely thing to behold, and indeed to spend your leisure time with. All too often, that's a pleasure specialist separates buyers simply never know. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Classic Linn DS sound quality in a small but perfectly formed package

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Active speakers with bespoke connections make it a closed system

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Brilliant twenty first century one-box system, say no more!

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★



THE WAND[®]
UNIPIVOT TONEARM

Musical magic!



TNT -Audio Review

"The Wand certainly pulled something wonderful out of the hi-fi hat.... It sounds completely out of its price class, letting you get lost in music. I loved the way it let the rhythms flow."
HiFi Choice #363

"...gives a wonderful musical experience from top to bottom and a sound stage that is so real and believable. All the LPs I tried sounded good, the combination seemed to level the playing field making all music a pleasure."
TNT-Audio Review July 2012



"...the low end is a real strength of The Wand as it captures bass lines expertly and never seems to run out of puff or feel that it was lacking authority. I would say that it is almost impossible not to fall for The Wand's charms. It captures the innate essence of a good unipivot and adds in a healthy dose of the strengths of conventionally pivoted arms."
HiFi World January 2012



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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...

Unique group tests

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

BLIND-LISTENING TESTS

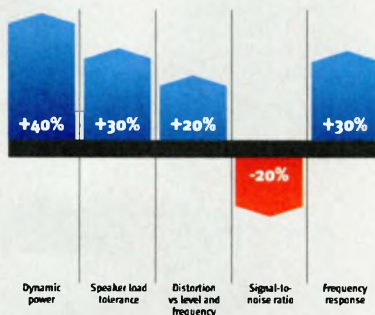
THIS CRUCIAL process, carefully controlled and yet sufficiently relaxed that our listeners do not feel that they're being tested, forms the heart of our Group Test review. Our panel of three listeners are not aware of the brand or price of the product they are listening to, but they are able to choose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

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

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

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

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



DYNAMIC POWER

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

SPEAKER LOAD TOLERANCE

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

DISTORTION VS LEVEL AND FREQUENCY

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

SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO

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

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

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



OUR GROUP TESTS

and Lead Review are subject to exhaustive lab testing by Paul Miller using the QC Suite Functional Testing Station (left). Paul has 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. www.hifichoice.co.uk

HOW WE TEST

THIS MONTH'S LISTENING PANEL



DAVID BROOK (LEFT)
WHEN NOT RUNNING HIS SUCCESSFUL Mains Cables R Us accessories company, DB is a devoted music fan.

DOUG GRAHAM (MIDDLE)
PASSIONATE ABOUT MUSIC, DG is lucky enough to live out his hobby in his day job, as a director at Naim Audio.

NEVILLE ROBERTS (RIGHT)
DOCTOR OF PHYSICS, orchid fan and vinyl junkie NR writes for this magazine, in addition to his many other activities!

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Disc player:

- Oppo BDP-95 (Audiocom modified)

Loudspeakers:

- Quad ESL-989

Cables:

- Black Rhodium and Missing Link

Equipment supports:

- Quadraspire

TEST MUSIC

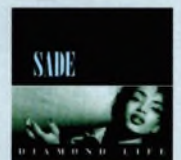
JIM WHITE:
NO SUCH PLACE –
HEY YOU GOING MY WAY?



VCMG
SSSS – LOWLY



SADE
DIAMOND LIFE –
SMOOTH OPERATOR



VIVALDI
CONCERTOS FOR
TWO VIOLINS –
VICTORIA MULLOVA
VENICE BAROQUE
ORCHESTRA



Blind-listening Group test

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS £330-£729

Power playing

It's not easy being a mid-price integrated amplifier – balancing decent sound, flexibility and style on a budget. *David Price* tries six of the latest models...

AS ALL COUNTRY CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL KNOW, IT'S NOT EASY RESIDING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD, AS YOU GET RUN OVER BY CARS ON BOTH SIDES. That, I'm sorry to say, is the plight of today's affordable amplifier. Who'd be one? To your left, all those exotic style systems that make you look outmoded, even if they can't quite match your sonics. To your right, the big super-integrateds, with their cool looks and hot sound. What sort of customer will come for you?

Welcome to the world of utilitarian hi-fi! The audiophile equivalent of a minimum wage worker doesn't get the glamour of those higher up life's luxury ladder. Yet they're still so important to so many people. Without affordable amps, folk who crave decent sound and value would have to get their soldering irons out, or buy second-hand. The chintzy world of style systems isn't for them, they just want to get closer to their music without dropping the best part of a month's salary on a Saturday.

Such buyers aren't so fussy about notions of audiophile purism – tone controls and loudness buttons don't offend their sensibilities as they would more snobby buyers going for pricier products. That's why a good few here have made serious concessions to convenience, rather than follow the 'source direct' mantra. Others sport all sorts of nice little bonuses, USB inputs to phono stages, too.

Even at this price, some brands try to give you a taste of high end hi-fi...

Yet in their midst of this clutch of commonsensical commodities, there are a couple of purist pretenders, promising decent sonics as well as substance. Even at this price, some brands attempt to deliver a taste of higher end hi-fi sound. Can you really have it all? Read on to find out...

ON TEST



Audiolab 8200a
£729 p25

The archetypal mid-price integrated, this is descendent of the mega-selling 8000a, sans tone controls and with a far lower price – in real terms – than its ancestor. It's very well finished by group standards, and pushes out a decent number of watts.



Cambridge Audio 651A
£449 p27

One of the least expensive in the group, this is the company's mid-fielder in the range, and sports a wide variety of features, many of which are festooned on the fascia. No audiophile minimalism here! Decent build and healthy power output complete the picture.



Cyrus 6a
£699 p29

In a group full of big bruisers, this is the svelte, dainty one. Diminutive in dimensions, it offers only a modest power output – but the box is lovely and there's just enough room inside for some upgrade options. Feature count is as sparse as the styling, though.



Myryad Z240
£695 p31

Fresh out of the box, quite literally! This mid-price amplifier previously occupied the casework of the Z142; the Z240 is a major – and successful – restyle. It's a cool looking customer, with a modest feature count and no small amount of style.



NAD C 356BEE
£615 p33

A black behemoth bruiser? That'll be the NAD, then. One of the most expensive here, it's also one of the chunkiest, and sports a power output that's almost enough to cause an outage at times of high demand. It looks like it's part of the National Grid, too.



Yamaha A-S500
£330 p35

The cheapest amplifier in the test by a fair way, the Yamaha is still very much a load-bearing member and isn't just here for the beer. Indeed, it actually proved the most powerful on test, is very nicely finished and sports a feature count longer than Team GB's medal tally...





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ROKSAN

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Audiolab 8200a £729

Blessed with good looks, fine build and an iconic brand name, this amplifier gets off to a good start in life...

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK/China
- SIZE: (WxHxD)**
445x74x335mm
- WEIGHT:**
7.4kg
- FEATURES:**
- record out selector
 - preamp output
 - remote control
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
IAG
- TELEPHONE:**
01480 447700
- WEBSITE:**
audiolab.co.uk

Any hi-fi buff who hasn't heard of Audiolab frankly isn't one. The name goes back to the mid-eighties, when the original 8000a proved a tremendous success with fairly well healed, hi-fi loving families. It was refined enough for Dad's classical music, yet could pump out serious amounts of power for young Gary's parties, without going bang when the folks went out for the weekend.

The brand saw a change of ownership about a decade ago, and now the products are made in China. Very well made, as it turns out, as the casework is even better finished than Huntington-era Audiolab, and there's no cause for complaint with the styling.

The 8200a was and is essentially the 'audiophile Audiolab', by virtue of not having any tone controls (unlike the switchable bass and treble of the original 8000a). It still has a record out selector for its six inputs – despite the fact that mainstream hi-fi manufacturers pretend that no one records anything anymore, it's a very handy feature for some. It's also got a clever front panel control that lets you operate the amp in integrated, pre or power mode. A high quality motorised ALPS volume control is fitted, along with a 6.3mm fascia headphone socket. Round the back, there are bi-wirable speaker terminals.

Sound quality

Like several of the other amplifiers here, the Audiolab sported a distinct 'house sound', one which I also discerned reviewing the partnering tuner in last month's group test. 'Spry, crisp and dry' just about sums it up, lacking as it does any desire to warm or embellish the sound. Instead, you get a matter-of-fact presentation, one that some regard as nothing less than essential for premium hi-fi separates, while others would prefer the bitter pill that is their music collection sweetened just a touch!

The Audiolab sounded reasonably at home on the Vivaldi piece, with a balanced overall presentation, a clean and finely etched midband and a decent rhythmic flow to the music. Still, it wasn't exactly rousing, the panel felt. Instead, the Audiolab seemed to proceed at its own pace, in its own way, getting on with the job in a slightly joyless manner.

Moving to the pounding electronica of Vince Clarke and Martin Gore, and this amp sounded a little diffuse. Bass wasn't as strong as even the far cheaper Yamaha – it was adequate but nothing more. Rhythms were reasonable, but nothing special. The panelists described it as less harsh than some amps here, though.

On the Jim White track, one listener remarked that, "I thought someone had placed a cloak over the

speaker", such was the general lack of midband detail. The opening rain sound effect on the track was particularly muted. On the Sade track, another listener remarked that her voice sounded wispy, while the soundstage depth was poor and the weight of the bass guitar insufficient.

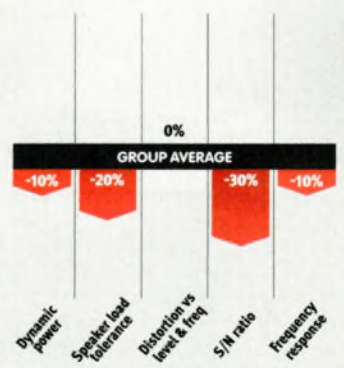
Across a range of source material, the 8200a sounded a little processed and slightly underpowered. Unlike the company's superb matching CD player, there was little to really pull you into the music. Which is a shame really...

ON TEST

This latest variation on Audiolab's longstanding 8000-series theme is gutsy, but with limits. Its 60W rating is readily exceeded in practice at 2x78W/8ohm and 2x118W/4ohm, increasing to 108W, 194W and 300W into 8, 4 and 2ohm under dynamic conditions. Protection circuitry is on a hair trigger, limiting the 8200A to just 36W/1ohm and the maximum current to 12A which makes it less 'beefy' than the '85W' Yamaha, for example.

Neither has Audiolab pursued low distortion for the sake of it – ~0.002% through bass and midrange over a 1-60W range is perfectly low enough, even if this does increase closer to 0.05% at the highest frequencies (20kHz). There's evidence of PSU noise stretching into the audio range, although the 86dB A-wtd S/N ratio is adequate, and also a very slight subsonic bass lift of +0.1dB. The high treble is gently tailored, reaching -0.3dB/20kHz. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Beautiful build, iconic styling, flexibility
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Matter of fact sound not to all tastes
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A very swish package at the price, with plenty of facilities and a lovely feel in use – but sonically off the pace in this company
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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NuNu Distribution Ltd





Cambridge Audio 651A £449

A true everyman's amplifier, this comes festooned with facilities, but what about the sound?

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK/China
- SIZE:**
120x430x350mm
- WEIGHT:**
8.4kg
- FEATURES:**
- tone controls
 - tone defeat
 - USB input
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Cambridge Audio
- TELEPHONE:**
0870 900 1000
- WEBSITE:**
cambridgeaudio.com



once upon a time, around forty years ago, every single integrated amp then made aspired to be like this one. Cleanly styled, blessed with a serious amount of power and gilded with umpteen different fascia knobs, buttons and switches, this is the sort of thing that would have caught the attention of your dinner party guests. These days however, possessing so many facilities isn't fashionable – trendy audiophiles believe 'less is more', so they tell us...

So Cambridge Audio's decision to give this everything from bass and treble controls to switchable speaker sets gives away the fact that the amp is aimed at general users, rather than self-conscious audiophiles. In truth, your average Cyrus buyer would be sniffy about having an amp with as many buttons as his microwave oven. Still, the 651A is easy to use, has a modest feeling of quality (although it's no Audiolab), and is loaded with inputs – a grand total of six including USB.

This latter feature is increasingly *de rigueur* on modern integrated amps, but it's unusual to see it on something so inexpensive. It won't get the hi-res crowd in a spin however, it's only 16-bit/48kHz resolution. Five analogue inputs, one of which is a front panel 3.5mm minijack, complete the busy picture.

Sound quality

Although one of the cheaper amps in the group, the panelists were quite effusive about this, ranking it fairly close to the top overall. Their enthusiasm for it didn't come from any special character however, but from its overall lack of vices. There are few designs at or near this price, they felt, that have such a well-rounded performance.

For example, the Vivaldi track had plenty of drive and life – the 651A brought the listener's attention to the phrasing of the violins, which made for a pacy rendition. Tonally it was fairly even – although lacking the subterranean lows of the Yamaha, it still went in and did the job down below. There was no sense of it being breathless or simply overwhelmed by the programme material it was asked to reproduce.

VCMG duly sounded impressive. Big, fruity and punchy – when the groove kicked in the Cambridge was ready to run with it. One panelist commended it for its fine image location, and it was liked for its decent stage depth too. On the downside though, it was a tad more metallic sounding than the NAD or Myryad – tonally a little closer to the Audiolab than perhaps it might ideally be.

This caused one listener to describe its rendition of Sade Adu's voice as "papery"; while the Cambridge never

grated it didn't quite get beyond the surface of the music sometimes. Jim White confirmed this, the panel unanimously thinking his voice came over slightly meekly.

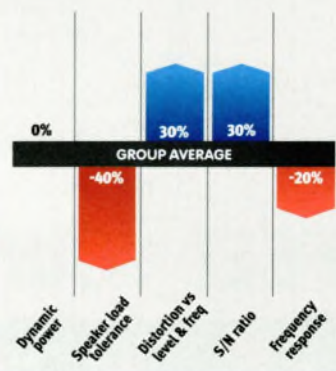
With a fine performance on classical and electronic, yet less impressive where vocals were heard, one panelist thought it was a little more "music dependent" than some here. Indeed, it was felt that the 651A worked best on simple, unchallenging material, where it sounded very good indeed. A super performance at the price, then.

ON TEST

In keeping with Cambridge Audio's conservative specification, this '2x75W' amplifier actually delivers 2x90W and 2x140W into 8/4ohm loads with a dynamic capability of 116W/203W, respectively. Power into lower impedance loads is limited by protection (not unlike the Audio 8200A), but its low 0.05ohm source impedance means the system response will also remain relatively immune to swings in speaker impedance. Under ideal circumstances, the response is flat to within -0.3dB from 20Hz-20kHz and stretches out to -1.8dB/100kHz.

Distortion is very low at 0.001% from 1W all the way up to 80W/8ohm. Of course, distortion increases at higher frequencies and into lower impedance loads, but a figure of 0.0065% for 20kHz/10W is still very low indeed. Finally, the 651A also offers a huge 96dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. odBW) making it the widest 'window' in our test. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Relaxed, smooth, even sound; features; value for money
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Can sound muddled on more complex music
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent affordable integrated amplifier, with an endearing character
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



DENON



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MUSIC MANIAC

Be moved by our Music Maniac Over-Ear headphones; elegant and sophisticated with a sound quality to match.

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FEEL IT



Cyrus 6a £699

Classic Cyrus good looks allied to a wide range of facilities make this a promising package...

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK
- SIZE:**
73x215x360mm
- WEIGHT:**
4kg
- FEATURES:**
- twin toroidal transformers
 - upgradeable with DAC and power amp options
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Cyrus
- TELEPHONE:**
01480 410900
- WEBSITE:**
cyrusaudio.co.uk



Here's another amplifier that's evolved from an early eighties antecedent.

The original Mission Cyrus amplifiers introduced the winning formula of fine sound in a small box, and the mid-nineties Cyrus 3 refined the package with the lovely alloy casework you see here. Now several generations further on, the 6a is a swish package indeed.

Let's be honest here, it is defined by its size. That means that inside, the amp is more crammed than a tube to the Olympic park on Men's 100m final day. Cooling is done courtesy of the side-mounted heatsinks, and even the Cyrus' modest 40W get them very hot. At normal listening levels this amp runs warm, but at party volumes you'll need to keep it well ventilated.

The upsides are of course its lovely looks, spouse-friendliness and the fact that it makes your listening room look rather larger than if you had the Yamaha sitting in the same place! Certainly there's no trade-off in terms of facilities, with six user-configurable analogue inputs and bi-wirable speaker outlets; those enclosed speaker sockets are a pain though; most users will have to re-terminate their speaker cables with Cyrus-specific plugs. As per company tradition, the amp can be returned to base for various DAC and power amp upgrades.

Sound quality

This was an interesting performer, obviously a capable one but which didn't resoundingly impress at first. Whereas the NAD started to win friends and influence people the moment it was switched on, the Cyrus proved a more subtle pleasure.

Starting with the Vivaldi piece, and the panelists all felt it an enjoyable listen. The music sauntered along at a fair gait, with lots happening and the general sense that it had a beginning, a middle and an end. Tonal quality was very good, being decently strong in the bass – albeit rather lighter than the NAD and Yamaha, for example – and nicely smooth in the midband without sounding recessed. There was a slight emphasis on the upper midband, if we're being really picky, but generally it proved far more even than most here.

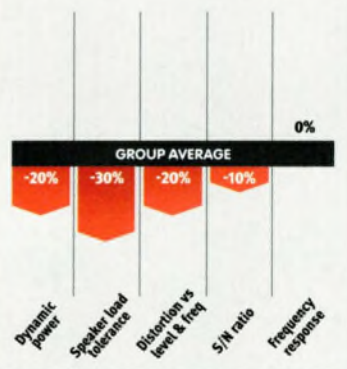
Moving to Sade's *Smooth Operator*, and Ms Adu's vocals sounded delicate and sensitive, whereas it had been anaemic with many others here. The backing band flowed along very nicely, without serving up anything remarkable. "Lots of detail, and a nice listen", opined one panelist. There was a slight feeling of the high treble being curtailed somewhat – the 6a didn't have the incision in the recorded acoustic of some. But still most thought it had a very natural tonal balance.

ON TEST

While the Cyrus 'brick' form factor is instantly recognisable, its amplifiers have limited heatsinking for sustained, high power use. The rear of the 6A, for example, exceeds 55 degrees C after just 15mins at 10W/8ohm, so adequate ventilation is a must. Duty considered, the 6A is capable of 2x50W/8ohm and 2x68W/4ohm with sufficient dynamic headroom to accommodate peaks of 89W, 162W and 270W into 8, 4, and 2ohm loads (output is limited to 255W/1ohm). Clearly, this is a very capable '40W' amp.

The 6A has also been engineered with a hugely extended bass response that's essentially flat to just 1Hz. High treble is subtly tailored at -0.2dB/20kHz and while the A-wtd S/N ratio of 88.3dB (re. odBW) may not be in the Cambridge/Yamaha league, it's still wide enough. Distortion is very low at -0.0005% through bass and midrange, increasing to 0.03% at 20kHz. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Very friendly, accessible, natural sound; upgrade path; styling and packaging
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Can run hot; lack of absolute power
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** A very fine buying proposition, with great sonics, lovely looks and flexibility, too
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



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ND5 XS Network Player

Combining cutting edge technology with audiophile sound quality, the ND5 XS represents the next generation of hi-fi. This slimline 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 ND5 XS is compatible with high-resolution 32bit/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.



> Find out more about Naim's digital products at www.naimaudio.com/future-of-hi-fi



world class sound...



Myryad Z240 £695

The dark horse of the test, does this attractive new integrated have much to offer?

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK/China
- SIZE: (WxHxD)**
436x78x316mm
- WEIGHT:**
6.7kg
- FEATURES:**
- 6 analogue inputs
 - Myryad My-Link
 - preamp output
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Armour Home Electronics
- TELEPHONE:**
01279 501111
- WEBSITE:**
myryad.co.uk

This hi-fi brand isn't as immediately recognisable as Audiolab or Cyrus say, but still has fine design provenance. Audio engineering work has traditionally been done by seasoned professionals like Chris Evans (no, not *that* one), co-founder of A&R Cambridge (*nee* Arcam) and latterly of NAD. So despite being relatively unknown in the great audiophile firmament, there's a real pedigree behind the name.

The Z240 replaces the Z142, an entry-level (as far as the Myryad brand is concerned) integrated amplifier that garnered a lot of positive press when it first emerged some years ago. Inside, there are some circuit changes which have resulted in a higher power output than before, but more obvious is the fact that the amplifier has been subject to a successful cosmetic makeover outside.

In use it feels a classy package, again not quite as well screwed together as the Audiolab, but still very pleasing all the same. The original fascia styling was liked by all who set eyes upon it. The '240 is generally quite well appointed, with the usual wide selection of analogue inputs, preamp outputs, although there's no fancy stuff like USB inputs or bi-wirable speaker terminals – this is an integrated in the classic mould.

Sound quality

One of the least characterful amplifiers in the group, some will like the smoothness of this design, others think it's a tad nondescript and not something they should be pointing their purses at.

Kicking off with the Vivaldi, and there was mild praise for this amplifier, but nothing more. It set up a decently open and spacious recorded acoustic, conveyed a satisfying amount of detail and generally did nothing to offend the listeners. The midband was thought a little recessed – several members of the panel commented on this. But overall, it was a pleasant yet unremarkable experience.

Moving to the electronica of VCMG, and this amplifier never sounded harsh – unlike several others here. It's a pretty full-on recording with lots of midband energy, but the Z240 sashayed through the song without upsetting anyone. Stereo imaging was thought a little on the poor side though, even compared to the budget Yamaha. "Overall, a bit flat and boring", pronounced one listener...

On the Jim White track, it was obvious it was lacking midband detail. There was less of a feel of rain in the opening few phrases of the song, and things seemed a bit vague. Indeed, the mix was so recessed it almost sounded leaden and heavy

in our reference system. Its greatest sin was to fail to give any sort of emotional purchase to the music, a feat that cheaper designs such as the NAD did in spades. There was little sense of the song having a trajectory, instead it just meandered.

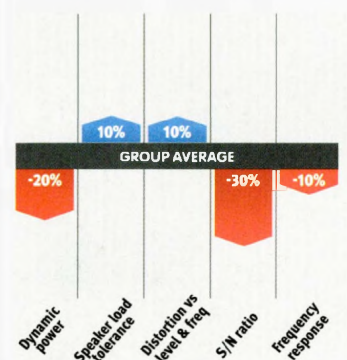
This was done in a thoroughly pleasing way, but the Myryad is so relaxed that some will find it dull. Factor in some looseness in the bass, and this isn't going to set dance floors alight. A safe sounding amplifier then, which didn't do anything particularly well.

ON TEST

This new amplifier is evidently a polished version of Myryad's longstanding Z142 circuit, and the similarity shows. The Z240 matches the Z142's power output at 2x65W/8ohm and 2x97W/4ohm, but offers more power under dynamic conditions, the old amp's 213W/222W performance now raised to 235W/285W into 2/10ohm via the Z240. Distortion increases gently with output from 0.002% at 1W to 0.004% at 10W and 0.01% at 60W, but is far more consistent with frequency (just 0.006% at 10W/20kHz) than most of its contemporaries here.

The response is subtly tailored in the low bass (-0.5dB/5Hz) and the high treble (-0.25dB/20kHz to -4.3dB/100kHz), while the low 0.023ohm output impedance helps minimise any variations in the overall amp/speaker system response. There's no change from the Z142's S/N ratio – still 86dB (re. odBW), slightly below average today. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Attractive styling; smooth, friendly sound; decent build
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not the most enthralling listen here
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A genuinely nice, capable integrated amplifier, but fails to sparkle sonically or in terms of value
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



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Percorsi Sonori 2012, 27-28 October 2012
Best Western Hotel, Terni, Italy



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music first audio



NAD C356BEE £615

Big, black and something of a bruiser, this popular integrated follows NAD's traditional formula...

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK/China
- SIZE: (WxHxD)**
435x130x337mm
- WEIGHT:**
8.7kg
- FEATURES:**
- 3.5mm input
 - switchable speakers
 - NAD MDC slot
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Armour Home Electronics
- TELEPHONE:**
01279 501111
- WEBSITE:**
nadelectronics.com

The NAD story starts in the nineteen seventies, when a rather dour looking, British designed, Taiwanese made amplifier (the 3030) started raising audiophile eyebrows. Then the cheaper, neater 3020 hit the UK market for just £59 circa 1979 and the rest – as they say – is history. The amp was stupidly good sounding for the money, even if it was no oil painting as far as styling went. Since then NAD has repeated the formula, over and over again. As such, this latest C 356BEE is absolutely nothing to get excited about – it doesn't innovate or offer fancy fripperies, it just gets on with the quiet business of being a NAD.

That means lots of power plus the company's proprietary 'soft clipping' circuit; this removes some of the dangerous distortion when the amp is close to clipping, and has surely saved thousands of student speakers – my own included, back in the day!

There's a wide range of facilities – six inputs plus a proper tape monitor, tone controls and switchable speaker sets. A 3.5mm minijack front panel input is fitted, plus a 6.3mm headphone out. Inside, there's an expansion slot to take NAD's special modular phono stage or USB DAC – a nice touch. Build is solid but finish hardly plush. NAD fans will like it this way, some others may object to its lack of luxury.

Sound quality

Some group tests contain a 'Eureka' moment, when what came before suddenly seems a step beneath what's just started playing. And so it proved with the NAD, which didn't just improve on the Audiolab, Cambridge Audio, Myryad and Yamaha, it transcended them!

The first bar of the first phrase of the Vivaldi was all that was required to tell we were on to something good, as a lovely rich, full bodied string tone emerged from the speakers, set within a clearly delineated, very spacious and deep soundstage. "If you talk about something punching above its weight, that would be it", added one panel member.

The pattern continued with Sade, who moved from sounding a tad anaemic with the Myryad to a powerful, emotionally arresting performer with a wonderfully sweet voice. Set behind her was a super-tight rhythm section, pushing the song along instead of just coasting.

Unsurprisingly, it was special with electronic music, too. We heard VCMG suddenly sounding vast and powerful, as if we'd been transported to some live rave somewhere back in the nineteen nineties. The panel loved the great groove the amp got the music into, and the way it was bristling with detail across the midband, but never tonally harsh.

Even the NAD shone on image placement, with Jim White sounding commanding yet bristling with spacial detail. His voice was also superbly carried with fine texturing. "Beginning to hear some of the things I love about valve amps", one panelist said.

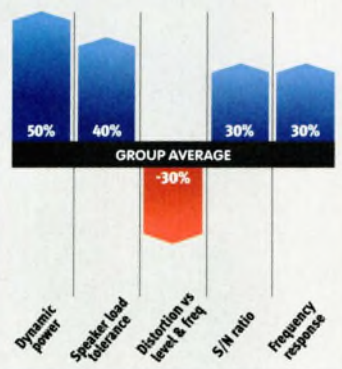
The only criticism here was that compared to the pricier Cyrus, the NAD sounded just a touch processed, lacking the latter's sheer tonal naturalness. This was but a mere trifle however, as overall the NAD still proved a superb performer.

ON TEST

If there's one thing you can almost guarantee from any NAD amplifier then that is oodles of dynamic power. So while the C 356BEE already betters its 2x80W specification (interestingly, it's rated at the same power into 8 and 40hm loads) at 2x115W, under dynamic, music-like conditions it'll deliver a whopping 190W, 335W and 540W (16.4A) into 8, 4 and 20hm loads. This is why the C 356BEE sounds louder than its contemporaries here even if its maximum current rating is less than that of the Yamaha A-5500.

Distortion increases slightly more readily with power (0.0003% to 0.01% over an 80W range), and particularly with decreasing load (0.005% at 60W/80hm to 0.03% at 60W/40hm) than typical, but the nature of the distortion itself is not especially invasive. Finally, the A-wtd S/N ratio is very wide at 95.6dB and the response powerfully extended into the high treble (-1dB/100kHz). **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

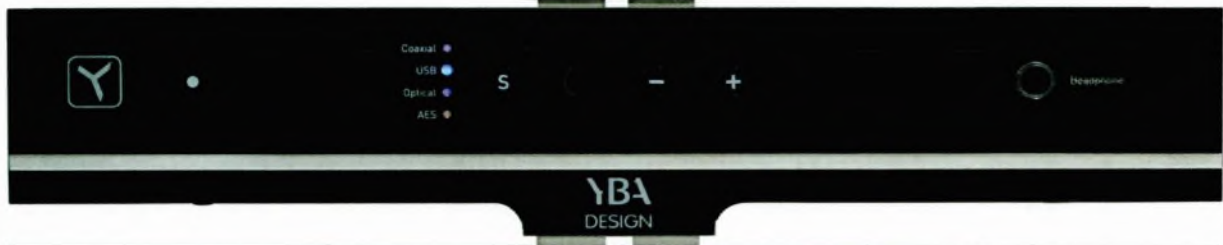
OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Vast power, great drive, fulsome bass; musicality; featurecount
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not everyone will love the NAD-tastic styling and finish...
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Highly impressive integrated that's highly musical yet versatile, too
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



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Yamaha A-S500 £330

If all you need is everything – for almost no money, this chunky integrated could be for you...

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
Japan/China
- WEIGHT:**
10.3kg
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
435x 151x387mm
- FEATURES:**
- 2 speaker outputs
 - preamp output
 - variable loudness
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Yamaha UK
- TELEPHONE:**
0844 811 1116
- WEBSITE:**
uk.yamaha.com

There's no mystery to Yamaha's formula – take one rather chunky power amplifier circuit, stick it in a big box with lots of facilities and sell it for rather less than anyone would expect. Meet the A-S500, then. We reviewed its more expensive A-S2000 big brother back in March, and it's a case of *deja vu* all over again. Indeed, despite being many hundreds of pounds cheaper, it seems to have lost relatively few watts and even fewer knobs. Only the latter's lovely wood-cheeked styling has gone...

Despite being the cheapest in this group by a country mile, the Yamaha appears – on the surface at least – to give little away. The quality of its casework is way better than the Cambridge Audio for example, and only the Audiolab and Cyrus better it comprehensively. The knobs move with a precision feel; there's little sense at all that you're sitting in hi-fi's cheap seats. Factor in that feature-festooned fascia, and you wonder in there's any money left to put anything inside the box.

A full complement of seven inputs is offered, including one for an iPod dock. Switchable speaker sets and a record out selector are included, and there's even a variable loudness control – a real blast from Yamaha's past. Best left alone, with the Pure Direct button deployed, we found.

Sound quality

An interesting one, this – an object lesson in competent and affordable solid-state amplification, you might say. Having reviewed the A-S2000, there's definitely a house sound to Yamaha's current range of products. Expect a big-hearted, powerful nature that's a little – but never too – upfront, and you have the measure of the A-S500...

Beginning with the Vivaldi track, it was obvious from the word go that this amp is no shrinking violet. It attacked it as it might, say, New Order's *Blue Monday* – which is to say in a thumping, disco fashion. Trouble is, that wasn't *quite* what was called for at all times.

One panelist commended the Yamaha for its drive and gusto, as it really gave a sense of body to the orchestra. "You could feel the intent there", he said. Timing was also generally applauded, this amplifier's force of personality pushing the music along.

Tonally, it proved a little hard. The A-S500 has a big, fulsome bass but across the mid and treble the panel felt it sounded 'chrome plated', and that really showed on the electronica of VCMG. Once again, the listeners were impressed by the purposeful bottom end, and they liked its grippy detail too, the amp giving a highly visceral feel to that synthesised bass line.

Everything was crisply etched and explicit, nothing was left to the imagination, no matter what sort of music you played.

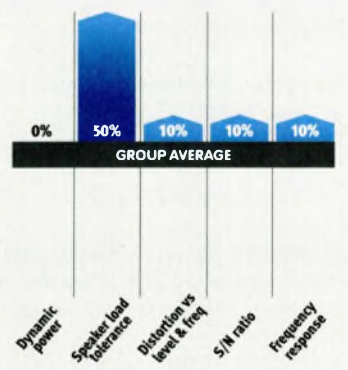
In a way, that was its problem, as the Yamaha lacked subtlety. Some commented on the way there was plenty of detail on the Jim White piece, but still things sounded too processed. The sultry vocals of the Sade track confirmed this; they didn't sound as organic as the other amps here. Imaging was thought a little weak, too. Overall then, a decent performer for the money.

ON TEST

Tested in 'Pure Direct' mode with the (rear) impedance selector set to 'Low', the Yamaha A-S500 only just achieves its 2x85W/8ohm spec. but its performance into 4ohm is improved to 2x126W. Under dynamic conditions the power increases still further, up to a full 360W into 10hm (or a maximum current rating of 19A). So the A-S500 is no wallflower when it comes to dancing with difficult loudspeakers!

Distortion, too, is well managed with a low 0.0007% from 1-20W, increasing to 0.004% by 70W/8ohm through the midband and by a factor of 10x at the highest audio frequencies (20kHz). The amp's output impedance is low at 0.03ohm, but there's just a hint of treble roll-off in its response into lower impedance loads: -0.06dB/20kHz into 8ohm becomes -0.25dB/20kHz into 2ohm. Gain is high (a Yamaha trait) at +43.3dB, but the S/N ratio remains very wide indeed at 93.5dB (re. 0dBW). **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Vast feature count; oodles of power; fine build; great value
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** A tad artificial sounding in this exalted company!
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Brilliant value entry level integrated, with serious speaker driving ability
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



Just Listen To Our Clients Before You Listen To Us.

Dear Brian and Trevor,

All I can say is "wow" - my re-born LP12 is now installed, and I'm sitting in my office at home listening with a glass of wine. Well, I say "I" but actually I mean "we" because my ears tell me that Ella Fitzgerald is actually in the room with me! I knew I'd really be able to understand the difference when I got it back to the room and amp/speakers I've heard it on before, and indeed it's better by some significant margin. I can hear everything on this recording, and an already beautiful voice is now sublime. What a great experience from House of Linn. I can't imagine I'll ever want to visit a high-street hi-fi "dealer" again after this - from beginning to end, superb advice, service and workmanship, in a fantastically relaxed environment. Once again, thanks for taking me through the options for "my Dad's old record player", if you haven't guessed, I'm very pleased with the result of your work. (Incidentally feel absolutely free to quote me as a reference!)

Best regards, Adam. Derbyshire.

Hello Brian and Trevor,

To let you know our system is sounding great, better than ever. Anyone out there with Linn problems should seek out your assistance. Without your knowledge the whole system may have been boxed and forgotten, so thanks again for your help. Best wishes, Mark and Alex. Liverpool.

Hi Brian and Trevor,

Re: House of Linn.....wonderful! Just to let you know, not only is everything working well but it blows our old gear into the weeds. I was quite attached to my old Cyrus Amp however all I can say is...Cyrus R.I.P. Long Live Linn! We would both like to say Thank You....for the Brian and Trevor experience and kind hospitality whilst we were having our Linn LP12 upgraded and now the great addition of the Majik DSi.....never has our music sounded so good and involving. Sincerely, both of you were so attentive and knowledgeablewe'll be back, Take Care, Bob and Margaret. Ormskirk.

Hi Brian and Trevor,

Many thanks for your time and hospitality. What an improvement: not only more of everything (and more clearly) but a significantly more realistic portrayal of the interaction between the musicians/instruments, which makes greater sense of the music overall. I'm struck by the difference and it's still improving. Once again, what a pleasure to deal with you and will be in touch when circumstances next dictate. Best regards, Bob. Skelmersdale.

Hi Brian and Trevor,

Many thanks for an excellent day on Saturday and for providing refreshments etc. It was most certainly worth the drive to Manchester and I will be in contact later this week to confirm the order for the Klimax DS. Thanks once again for your help and advice. Best regards, Alan. London.

Hi Trevor and Brian,

Thanks for this and thanks again for the installation. I am very pleased - the Klimax DS sounds fabulous - it's hard to know what it's going to sound like in your own home until you get in there but I have to say that it's wonderful and I can't imagine not having it which after just a couple of days intense listening is saying something! All the best, Will. London.

Dear Brian and Trevor,

The improvement of my system is HUGE. Will recommend you to my friends and I would probably do business with you in the future, for example for a Linn DS, brand new or approved used of higher level. Have a nice summer and long hours of music listening :) Best regards, Steve. Gloucestershire.

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Blind-listening verdicts

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

With the brilliance of its new DAC and the polish of its CD-playing stablemate, no one was expecting a mediocre showing from Audiolab. But sadly that's precisely what we got – the 8200a is a highly impressive object in terms of build and finish, but power it up and you get an unemotional, matter of fact sound. It did make more sense with classical, but still didn't beguile.

The Myrrad Z240 was another surprise, being a tad underwhelming from a brand that normally performs very strongly in *Hi-Fi Choice* Blind Tests. It is warmer and sweeter than the Audiolab, but lacks power, grip and focus all the same.

The Yamaha A-S500 had a similarly clinical style to the Audiolab, but scored better overall because its slightly richer tonality, substantially more powerful output stage and low, low price. It's also superbly made considering its cost to buy, and has a no-nonsense sort of feel. Many people wanting decent quality music playback will simply never feel the need to spend more. And why not?

Well actually, the Cambridge Audio 651A is one good reason. Despite its so-so styling and finish, as soon as you power it up you are reminded that a well designed yet affordable solid-state amplifier has an awful lot to offer. It's a little dry and hazy by the

standards of the best here, but still makes music fun, and is a pleasure to listen to. As such it's great value.

And so to the NAD C 356BEE. The more these plastic-fronted, dark charcoal coloured boxes change, the more they stay the same! There's never been a NAD to win in the style stakes, but they're deadpan and purposeful. Build is never lavish, but what's under the hood doesn't ever let things down. And the 356 isn't any different – it's a big, powerful sounding beastie that has a rich tonality, a wide soundstage and oodles of dynamic wallop. From Purcell to the Pet Shop Boys, it makes music magic. And who can say fairer than that?



A close call this month, but while the Cyrus 6a lacked a bit of bottom end – and lots of outright power – to the NAD, it still made things sound organic. The music lit out of the loudspeakers, without the amplifier drawing attention away from it. The panel all agreed this was most satisfying, and so the Cyrus duly gets the gong. A top showing, but don't dismiss the NAD.

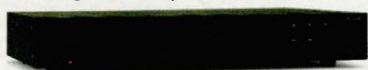
RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	Audiolab 8200a	Cambridge Audio 651A	Cyrus 6a	Myrrad Z240	NAD C 356BEE	Yamaha A-S500
Price	£729	£449	£699	£695	£615	£330
Sound	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Features	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Key features	Beautifully built and finished machine, but the beauty is only skin deep – sounds clinical	Fine value mid-price workhorse with lots of features and a nice, smooth, open sound	Limited on power and can run hot, but fine finish, sleek styling and sweet sonics highly impressive	Nicely styled and decently built, but sonically underwhelming with little passion	Certainly no oil painting, but you get power and music aplenty from this big bruiser	Great build and finish, oodles of watts and a low, low price will win this many friends
phono stage	no	no	no	no	no	yes
USB input	no	yes	no	no	no	no
headphone socket	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes
A-B speaker output	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes
remote control	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

TRY WITH THESE

CD PLAYER: Audiolab 8200CD **£799**

A perfect visual match for the 8200A amplifier of course, but owners of other amps should seriously consider this too, thanks to its excellent sound quality that is smooth yet detailed and incisive beyond its price class. Think of it as a high end player in a budget box, and you're not far off...



STANDMOUNT SPEAKER: Monitor Audio RX2 **£480**

Many people assume you can't buy a decent speaker for under £500, but they haven't heard this. Beautifully engineered, carefully voiced and delightfully finished, the RX2 is musically thrilling yet civilised and couth too – proving you can have it all, if you know where to look.



FLOORSTANDING SPEAKER: Q Acoustics 2050i **£420**

Budget floorstanders are normally the poor relations of standmounters – after all, that long cabinet costs lots of money, forcing cheaper drivers on you, and it's hard to reign in too. But worry not, as this big box defies the speaker laws of gravity. Super smooth, delicately detailed yet able to really rock – this is a rare hi-fi bargain.

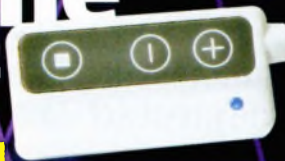


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Club culture



David Price celebrates the fortieth anniversary of Technics' iconic SL-1200 turntable...

It's hard to really understand just how important turntables used to be – four decades ago, they were the world's only serious music source. Unless you had a special aptitude for threading open reel tapes into NAB spools or going up on the roof to fit a serious FM aerial, it would be a record player that satisfied your music playback needs.

In the UK, the market was dominated by British, Swiss and German designs – Garrard and BSR supplied cheap, mass market idler drive turntables that tracked at ominously high forces, Lenco and Dual made better finessed belt drive designs that cost lots more money. But the Japanese were beginning to make inroads – first, the broadcast transcription market took a sharp intake of breath when the Technics SL-10 motor unit arrived in 1970. Unlike the rather industrial Garrard 401 of the day, here was a very slick design sporting a more modern way to spin a platter – direct drive. This system conferred many benefits; lower rumble than idler drives and superior speed stability to belts. As hindsight has taut us, they were also superbly reliable, too.

Direct line

However, the real fun started in October 1972, when Matsushita introduced the Technics SL-1200. Whereas the SP had been for the pro audio market, the SL was unashamedly a domestic deck. It too sported direct drive, in arguably the first 'domestic' implementation. It featured variable speed of plus or minus six

percent, which corresponds to one semi-tone. The idea of this was simply to make it easier for musicians to play along to recordings more easily. Correspondingly, it had a stroboscope set into the rim of the platter, allowing the user to set the correct speed. At the time, that was less radical than its direct drive system; countless rival turntables had variable speed. In a curious case of happenstance however, this went on to have a huge bearing on the deck's future success.

The hi-fi press was awash with articles about the SL-1200; the SP-10 was of more academic interest, as unlike the '1200 it wasn't aimed at (or priced for) the home user. The measured performance of the '1200 was nigh-on spectacular, Technics claiming 0.025 percent WRMS wow and flutter, and a rumble figure of -78dB – it wasn't just special for the day, it's still almost state of the art *now*, with only very few other decks coming close. As such, the company used these vital statistics to market the SL-1200, with no small degree of success.

In the UK, this coincided with the rise of subjective reviewing in hi-fi magazines. A number of British companies, led by young firebrand Ivor Tiefenbrun, argued eruditely in the press that there was more to turntable sound than measured performance. He was right, of course, but the fact that almost all British decks couldn't hold a candle to the laboratory prowess of the SL-1200, didn't hurt.

The sound quality is excellent, plus the solidity of the build means it can stand up to some pretty rough handling...

The Technics inspired a new wave of Japanese direct drives, from the likes of Sony and Pioneer, that hit a remarkably high technical bar, and the specification war raged in earnest.

The SL-1200 was more than just a great motor in a bad deck. The plinth itself was a clever mix of materials – plastic, rubber and aluminium alloy – in a sandwich construction. It was heavy, acoustically inert, and sat on vibration-absorbing feet. The motor system was beautifully implemented as well, of course, with a high torque (0.14Nm) design driving a relatively light platter, with a frequency generator governor. Overall, build was way above average, and along with the variable pitch, this was another aspect that would go on to shape its future...

The original SL-1200 created a big stir and won many friends, but by the late seventies it was looking a little tired. Every Nipponese brand had a high end direct drive, and almost all were quartz locked by now. The latter was a handy feature, but made relatively little difference to the absolute speed stability of a decent direct drive. But the market was such that Technics had to respond in 1979, with an updated 1200, sporting this very feature.

THE REMIXER



"I have four SL-1200s, two for upstairs and two for down. A silver pair and a black pair. I've been using them for years since I originally upgraded my SL-BD2s. As a DJ once you buy a pair of 1200s you never look back, there isn't really another deck that gives you that vinyl control."

Marc Mac, 4hero
www.4hero.co.uk

FEATURE

TECHNICS SL-1200 40TH ANNIVERSARY

BUYING

As they say in the classic car world, condition is everything – so try to buy an immaculate one if you possibly can. There are plenty of SL-1200s in existence, so it's best to be picky and wait for a minter. This deck – more than almost any other – could well have had a hard life on the nightclub circuit. So there's plenty of scope for used examples to get hammered. Trouble is, they hide their wear well, so if the deck has any scrapes on it, it may well have been working for a living. Of course, that doesn't mean it's unusable, as the superb build means SL-1200s stand abuse better than most other decks. But be prepared to get it serviced – happily, vast amounts of parts are still available from countless specialists, if needed...

The third and final factor in the making of the SL-1200 – its metamorphosis from a high quality hi-fi design to a vinyl icon for generations – was the SL-1200mk2. This was a deft piece of footwork from Technics; it incorporated quartz lock and its variable pitch control changed from being two rotating 'trim pots' to one large, easy-to-use slider. It gave direct, easy, linear control of the deck's variable pitch function, and when rested in the centre detent, switched in the quartz speed lock circuitry. Unlike any other direct drive on the market, the 1200/2 made a virtue out of variable pitch and quartz lock, combining the two to produce a uniquely easy to use device.

DJ culture

The design of the SL-1200mk2 read like a disc jockey's Christmas wish-list. Thanks to that torque motor and relatively light aluminium platter, the deck could spin up to 33.33RPM in a claimed 0.7 seconds, a fraction of any rival British belt drive. It lacked sprung suspension – which so often went out of tune – but was still built like a battleship, weighing in at 12.5kg, and able to absorb lots of vibration before succumbing to acoustic feedback. Then there was the aforementioned speed control slider, which effectively gave plus/minus 10 beats per minute, and the quartz lock – plus its superlative build quality.

Musician Marc Mac from 4hero believes that, even if it wasn't originally built for club use, it was nevertheless ideal. "Of all the turntables claiming to be 'the' deck for the DJ, the SL-1200

TIMELINE

1972	SL-1200
1979	SL-1200/2
1989	SL-1200/3
1995	SL-1200LTD
1997	SL-1200/3D
2000	SL-1200/3D black
2002	SL-1200/5G
2003	SL-1200LTD
2004	SL-DZ1200 (CD player)
2007	SL-1200/6

was the only one that actually lived up to expectations. The build is incredible, the pitch control and robust platter assembly was a winner for the DJ market", he says.

The SL-1200 even came with quite a clubbable tonearm, too. Pure nineteen seventies in origin, it was an S-shaped stainless steel affair with scant attention paid to resonance reduction. The bearing housing is of good quality though, and it is more robust than many British audiophile tonearms – again, this makes it particularly suitable for slip-cueing by DJs. The detachable headshell was standard issue SME back in the day, but remains handy for swapping cartridges quickly and easily now. The arm also sported easily adjustable VTA, done by means of a thumbwheel, ideal for those changing cartridges and/or turntable mats.

From the advent of the mk2 onwards, the SL-1200 drifted slowly away from mainstream audiophile applications. While the stock tonearm was improved by the fitment of a better headshell, arm leads and cartridge tag wires, it was no SME killer. This, plus the fact that it isn't easily removable, meant that ever more audiophiles looked elsewhere.

In the UK, this meant British decks such as the Rega Planar 3, Systemdek II and Ariston RD80, and then up to superdecks such as the Linn LP12, Michell GyroDec and latterly Roksan Xerxes.

By the early nineteen eighties, our native turntable market had very little time for either the Technics, or direct drives in general. But just as hi-fi didn't miss the SL-1200, so it didn't miss hi-fi – and went on to sell in industrial quantities to the world's DJs, studios and nightclubs.

Sounding off

British hi-fi magazines of the day always argued that direct drives weren't musical – which is ironic to anyone who's ever heard a good one. Compared to its price rival of the day, the Rega Planar 3 – itself a very fine turntable – the SL-1200 sounded profoundly more involving and visceral to listen to. Bass grip was outstanding, and there's an amazing sense of force and direction to the

music, almost as if it's speeded up – it isn't, as one glance at the strobe will show! The downside is that it lacks subtlety, delicacy and smoothness; there's no denying that the upper midband is a little too 'well lit' for some tastes, especially those used to listening to super-smooth Brit belt drives.

Sadly though, any British audiophiles who heard SL-1200s in the nineteen eighties and nineties, invariably heard them in nightclubs.



Here, they'd be tracking hard-sounding moving-magnet cartridges, highly likely to be the unlovely Stanton 500A (with its groove-smashing spherical stylus), and going through poor phono preamps and mixing desks, then amplified by harsh Class B-biased transistor amplification driving shouty horn PA speakers.

Even in these conditions, you could still hear that wonderfully controlled and powerful sound, along with a brilliant bass that started and stopped seemingly at the speed of light. Indeed, Heaven 17's Martyn Ware, who has used them in this heated environment many times, points out that, "the sound quality is excellent and the speed variation is consistent – plus the solidity of the build means it can

stand up to some pretty rough handling". Still, the sound of a Technics at full tilt in a club was hardly the sort of experience to make hi-fi nuts re-evaluate what they regarded sneeringly, as 'just' a DJ deck...

Mk2 models were sold in Europe, the US and Japan with different model numbers, depending on their finish. The SL-1200 was silver and the 1210 matt black. Confusingly in Japan, the SL-1200 later came in a choice of



finish. The mk3 arrived in Japan 1989 – a minor upgrade with gold RCA phonos. The rest of the world saw the SL-1200LTD in 1995, which added gold plating to some of the metal parts and a gloss-black finish. An early example of 'bling hi-fi' when the deck was becoming an international phenomenon on the club scene, it didn't win many friends in the UK hi-fi press, sadly. This didn't stop it selling out its 10,000 production run quickly, however.

More Japanese market tweaks arrived in 1997, when the mk4 appeared with several more useful changes; the captive phono and ground leads were changed to sockets (allowing the use of higher quality cables), and a 78RPM speed was added. This didn't reach the wider world however, although the Mk5 did. In 2002,

it added a slightly wider range of tonearm bias adjustment and a white LED target light, less likely to burn out with protracted use. There were also small changes to the lid. The latest and greatest SL-1200 was surely the Mk6, released in Japan in 2008, which had improved tonearm mounting, LC-OFC arm wiring and improved plinth damping.

Run out groove

By the latter part of the last decade, the SL-1200 was undergoing something of an audiophile resurgence. Turntable fans, some of whom had run some expensive specialist decks, began experimenting with what was possible with the humble Techie. It was found that a change of mat made a large improvement, as the bell-like platter could be damped better. Arms were rewired, carbon-fibre headshells fitted and superior damping feet, too. Over and above this, a few hobbyists began pulling the arms out of their decks and fitting high-end hi-fi designs, everything from Rega RB300s to SME Series Vs. The low price of decks in the UK, less than £500 new, made this all the more popular.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, just when it looked like there was an SL-1200 revival going on in the hi-fi market, Technics announced it was ceasing production of the deck, with the following gloomy press release...

"Panasonic has confirmed that it ceased the production of its Technics-branded analogue turntables this autumn. After more than thirty five years as a leading manufacturer of analogue turntables, Panasonic has regretfully taken the decision to leave this market. We are sure that retailers and consumers will understand that our product range has to reflect the accelerating transformation of the entire audio market from analogue to digital. In addition, the number of component suppliers serving the analogue market has dwindled in recent years and we brought forward the decision to leave the market rather than risk being unable to fulfil future orders because of a lack of parts. Employees who have been working on the analogue turntable range have been redeployed elsewhere – many of them continuing to work in Panasonic's Audio Video Business Unit."

Nowadays, most club DJs use computers rather than CD players or turntables, so it was understandable that the deck's main market was disappearing a few years back. But ironically it was just beginning to be reborn as a hi-fi deck, coming home to the very purpose it was originally intended. The SL-1200 is now a very popular second-hand purchase, and many hi-fi tweekers fit expensive and/or elaborate tonearms and cartridges, as well as taking part in the growing modification scene.

There's now a wide range of aftermarket power supplies, plinths, main bearings, mats, feet and even clock chips for the speed control circuitry available. Indeed, Inspire Hi-Fi has started a new range of decks using SL-1200 motors, control circuitry and platters in its own plinths, effectively giving the deck a 'body transplant'. And very good they sound too... "You owe it to yourself to listen to one – you will be amazed", says MD Robert Isherwood.

THE MODIFIER

"This deck is very special. Direct drive is simple to use, and when fighting against the digital age, a lot of consumers demand this. It's clinical in its use, perfect in its execution. Such is the quality of the motor system, with its tremendous torque, that it lent itself to the the audiophile marketplace. Listen to female vocals or piano on even the best belt drive and then again on a good directdrive – it sells itself. They have ridden roughshod through the hype of the 1980s belt drive hysteria."

Robert Isherwood,
Inspire Hi-Fi
inspirehi-fi.co.uk



Back to life

After forty years, the Technics SL-1200 looks almost as impressive as it must have done back in 1972. At the time, it was virtually the stuff of science fiction. These days it's pretty conventional technologically, but universally recognised as a superbly well made turntable, and indeed the only vinyl spinner that's 'jumped the shark' to become a cultural icon – think vinyl, think Technics! Indeed, for some folk, the two are one and the same, and no other turntable could ever make that claim. For this reason, the SL-1200 deserves its own unique place, not just in hi-fi's 'sound gallery', but in the great pantheon of twentieth century technology. Interest in the deck will surely remain high – like classic Mini cars, the Pulsar Time Computer watch and the Apple iPod, it has already secured its place in history. ●

THE PRODUCER

"There's something special about the 12 inch vinyl format that CD never replicated – the care and attention that we at Heaven 17 take in mastering 12 inch vinyl has meant more of a visceral and warm quality in the playback. To be honest I still prefer the sound of 12 inch vinyl to any digital audio format – it simply sounds better when played through a PA system – that's why many DJ's still use vinyl decks, especially Technics."

Martyn Ware,
Heaven 17
[right]
heaven17.com





Snow patrol



Q Acoustics' ice-cool 2050i floorstanding loudspeaker sounds as pure as it looks. **Malcolm Steward** takes it for a drive...

The new Q Acoustics 2050i is certainly a fine-looking loudspeaker, especially in its metre-tall, white gloss lacquer enclosure. Indeed, I would certainly be inclined to pay the £130 premium for the Piano Gloss White finish over the standard black or walnut vinyl, both of which are rather mundane. At a total price of £550 in this guise, the 2050i still seems a genuine bargain.

Another aesthetic nicety is the concealment of the fixings attaching the drive units to the enclosure. It is, some might consider, a minor feature but I think it's one that is noteworthy and certainly worthwhile.

Surely however, the key feature of this big budget box is that it was designed by the world-famous Fink Audio Consulting, a company that has been behind some of the most highly respected loudspeakers in modern times, from several premium brands, most recently Naim Audio.

Founder Karl-Heinz Fink told me that the Q Acoustics range enjoys technical features that usually only appear on far more expensive speakers. For example, the drive units feature optimised magnet systems with aluminium compensation rings to minimise the inductance variations over their voice coil excursion.

The 2050i is a big floorstanding design that offers an amplifier-friendly (quoted) 6 ohm impedance and 92dB sensitivity, which promises to make it particularly easy to drive to high listening levels with lower powered amplifiers, such as valve or Class A designs. The drive unit array housed within the cabinet consists of the new, decoupled from the baffle, 25mm dome tweeter flanked by a pair of 165mm, coated paper bass-midrange drivers integrated with a crossover network revised from that of the preceding 2050 model. According to Q Acoustics, the carbon-fibre/ceramic coated cones

now used deliver lower distortion and a cleaner, more open sound than the paper/mica mix of the original 2050 cones.

Cabinet construction incorporates an integral spiked steel plinth along with steel bracing designed to add rigidity to the structure and prevent enclosure panel flap. The box is reflex-ported and a foam bung is supplied to reduce air-flow through the port if the user wants to position the loudspeaker closer to a rear wall. I used the speaker around a metre clear of the rear and side walls without any modification to its air-flow, and aligned it to fire down the long dimension of my room.

'It's a speaker that is so good it allows the listener to enjoy the true *joie de vivre* of music,' said a Q Acoustics' spokesman. Sadly, I felt little in the way of *joie* when it came to connecting the 2050is to my amplifiers – the connection block is sited on the base of the enclosure, not the rear, making plugging in inflexible or bulky loudspeaker cables tricky. In fact, the idea is most inconvenient from everything but an aesthetic point of view! The speaker is bi-wirable so you might need to thread two cables under each enclosure. Be careful when manoeuvring the speaker however; at 21kg the 35-litre enclosure is no lightweight.

Sound quality

There was nothing lightweight about the sound of the 2050i when I started listening to it through a Naim SuperNAIT and TelluriumQ Ultra Black speaker cables with a Naim HDX-SSD and DAC/XPS front end, however. I began with the Agnes Obel album *Philharmonics*. Overall the presentation was decidedly appealing with good dynamics, texture and a fine stereo image, even if the depth perspective felt a mite curtailed. My only other criticism was that transients on some piano notes seemed a little 'soft'.

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Q Acoustics 2050i
ORIGIN:
UK/Germany/China
TYPE:
Q Acoustics 2050i:
2-way reflex ported
loudspeaker
WEIGHT:
21kg (each
enclosure)
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD):
270x1006x321mm
FEATURES:
• drive units:
bass 2x 165mm;
1x treble 25mm
• quoted nominal
impedance: 6 Ω
(minimum 4 Ω)
• quoted sensitivity:
92dB
• quoted frequency
response: 44Hz –
22kHz (±3dB)
• recommended
amplifier power:
25-150W
• crossover
frequency: 2.6kHz
DISTRIBUTOR:
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I detected that slight – and benign – sense of muting again on John McLaughlin's guitar on *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* from the album *My Goal's Beyond*. Although the 2050i deftly portrayed the dynamics of his playing and the variety of tone he extracted from his acoustic guitar, it seemed as though some notes did not want to ring out from the instrument with the same vibrancy as others.

At this juncture I decided to check the location and security of the spikes in the floor stand; I've had such inconsistencies before when all the spikes were not in identical contact with the floor beneath. With the spikes identically located, readjusted and firmly tightened, I recommenced listening with George Harrison's 24-bit/96kHz *Early Takes* album and the home-studio-recorded song *All Things Must Pass*. Here, the 2050i finally discovered the music's spirit, and let the music's animation and vitality express itself joyfully; the

A loudspeaker that allows the listener to enjoy the music's true *joie de vivre*...

consistency of the presentation now restored, Harrison's acoustic guitar exhibited a wholly natural vibrant character and the bass guitar remained delightfully tuneful and crisply defined throughout the song.

The 2050i relished the Colin Davis and London Symphony recording of Verdi's *Requiem*. It portrayed a completely natural sense of dynamics and tonal colour to the orchestra and choir, along with a credible recreation of the recording venue and space evident in the stereo sound stage. The *Tuba Mirum* movement further demonstrated how well this loudspeaker could give a telling



left: concealed speaker binding posts look tidy, but are fiddly

right: high quality drivers integrate superbly for seamless sound

Q&A...

MALCOLM STEWARD SPOKE TO KARL-HEINZ FINK OF FINK AUDIO CONSULTING ABOUT THE 2050i...



MS: The 2050i still uses paper cone drivers?

KHF: When we changed from the 2050 to the 2050i, by modifying the material used to dope the paper, we found that gave the biggest gain in performance without any change in the measurement. The same thing happened on the tweeter – we could not really do a lot on measurements, so we tested a lot of different fabrics and we used the one that we thought integrated best with the woofer.

How about the mounting of that particular unit?

We found that very important also was the decoupling of the tweeter with the rubber ring you can see. The isolation reduces interaction between cabinet vibrations and the tweeter and improves signal to noise to give a better focus. In the cabinet we use a different kind of damping material (a sort of felt instead of the typical Polyesterwool). It damps internal modes quite well and it reduces the cabinet coloration.

What equipment (amp/source) was used with the 2050i when you were fine-tuning its voicing??

A lot of our music comes from a hard drive. We use a Mac mini with SSD-Drive and Pure Music as software. There is also Amarra and Audirvana on the machine – but so far, Pure Music has the leading edge. The DA-converter with USB link is a Phonosophie DAC1, connected via an Audioquest Diamond USB Cable. CD player is a Marantz KI-Pearl, vinyl comes from a EMT 950 direct drive with homemade preamplifier boards and we still use an open reel tape machine (Studer A80 MK.I). The preamplifier is a Naim NAC252 with Supercap power supply, power amplifier is a Naim NAP300. Cables are mainly coming from Charismatech. In addition we use Naim Hi-Lines, Power-Lines and some homemade interconnects as well. This might look like a strange combination, but it is our anchor during voicing and we don't change it very often.



I FOUND that the 2050i gave a fine performance firing down the longest dimension of my room, used in free space, standing well clear of the rear wall and comfortably clear of the side walls.

I would encourage users to experiment with a small degree of toe-in to fine-tune and focus the image placement of the speaker, and to adjust its tonal presentation. I have seen this described as 'polite' and 'reserved', but I suspect this criticism is due to less than ideal partnering equipment and poor speaker set-up – especially toe-in.

Aim to orient the loudspeakers to create a soundstage that sits between and behind them, but not necessarily constricted by them laterally: it is fine for the image to extend beyond the boundaries of the loudspeaker enclosures. Ideally, performers should not appear to be further forward than a line drawn, say, about two or three feet between the left and right speakers, although I have no objection to vocalists stepping forward a pace or two, just so long as they stay behind the speakers.

IN SIGHT



recreation of the weighty texture of instrumental sound, especially brass and percussion. It also portrayed the wide range of dynamic contrasts within the recording brilliantly.

Moving on to Andrew Davis and the BBC Symphony Orchestra's fine rendering of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, the Q demonstrated how rhythmically brisk and assertive it could be, driving the music forward convincingly and simultaneously involving listeners in the work without any apparent effort. Again, tonal colouring seemed flawless, rendering brass in particular with a mesmerising blend of might and natural subtlety.

However, the 2050i was perhaps at its most impressive playing the simple Eddie Vedder recording *Ukulele Songs*, where it gave appreciable insight into both his voice and the distinctive tonality and note shape envelope of the ukulele.

This new transducer surprised me with its competence and balance, particularly when you take into account its modest retail price. I honestly didn't expect this capable a performance from such an inexpensive speaker, in particular a floorstander.

The piece of music I think I enjoyed the most was *St. Thomas*, a Sonny Rollins' 24/96 rip from his 1956 album, *Saxophone Colossus*. The music was so vividly colourful and had such energy, life and dynamic contrast that listening came close to being a sublime experience. The refined presentation of Rollins' sax

was exquisite and the loudspeaker conveyed the rasping abruptness of its timbre wonderfully, effectively plastering a Cheshire Cat smile right across my face.

Similarly, the 2050i demonstrated superb control and detail playing a 16/44 rip of Anna Calvi's eponymous album. *On I'll Be Your Man*, it delivered the pounding bass and stinging twang of her Telecaster with authority and grip, while detailing her breathy voice with admirable control and dexterity.

Conclusion

The Q Acoustics 2050i proved itself as a magnificent budget loudspeaker, one voiced to be both revealing and musically satisfying. There really is little more for which one could legitimately ask at this very low price. The only thing to say is pay the extra for the lacquered version, if you possibly can. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Very easy on the eye, partnering amplifier and ear, superb lacquer finish, skilfully engineered

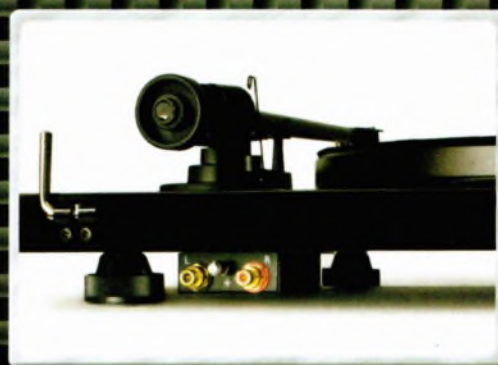
DISLIKE: Fiddly cable connectors, finish on non-lacquered versions

WE SAY: Brilliant budget box that plays music with naturalness and ease

The Carbon Age



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Vive la difference

When chic French design meets Chinese manufacturing, you get YBA's Heritage 100 CD player. *Savoir faire* Jason Kennedy listens in!

At the High End show in Munich this spring, Creek's former press relations manager (among other things) Jacki Pugh was to be found on the YBA stand with a business card giving her title as CEO. Not a bad career move you have to say. The French company sold a significant shareholding stake to Shanling in 2009 and relaunched with no fewer than twenty seven products made up of four ranges.

These start with the Design series of compact components then work up through Heritage, Passion and Signature ranges. The company's original founder and designer, Yves Bernard André remains as the creative force behind the new YBA, but manufacturing of all but the Signature models is now at Shanling's plant in China.

The YBA CD100 is the CD player in the three-strong Heritage range, this also includes an integrated amplifier

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT:
CD player
ORIGIN:
France/China
TYPE:
CD player
WEIGHT:
5.7kg
DIMENSIONS:
(HxWxD)
118x430x372mm
FEATURES:
• digital inputs:
coax, USB
• digital output: coax
• analogue outputs:
RCA phono,
XLR balanced
• D/A converter:
Wolfson WM8740
24/192
• input sampling rate:
44.1, 192 kHz/24 Bit
• output level: 2V single
ended, 4V balanced
(quoted)
DISTRIBUTOR:
Zepher Audio
TELEPHONE:
0845 519 8823
WEBSITE:
zepheraudio.co.uk

called A100 (£1,300) and a 'Media Streamer' dubbed MP100 at £1,500.

The new CD100 is a rather nicely executed player, showing the sort of design flair that we've come to expect from French companies. The CD player, as an object, is so familiar these days that it's never easy to be pleasantly surprised by the design, ergonomics and/or style of one of these devices, but the YBA managed this nevertheless. Manufacturers often underestimate the importance of these facets of the overall design, but should never do this...

The Heritage 100 is distinguished by a slick slot drive and novel toggle switch controls – they take a little bit of familiarisation but are nice to use. After a while you also realise that the stop switch initiates eject, which is handy as that word is missing from the front panel! Unboxing the player you also notice that it has three feet and that two are tipped with rubber and the third with metal, suggesting that thought has gone into resonance tuning – YBA has a reputation for taking such matters seriously.

converter. The actual chipset is Wolfson's popular WM8740, which is capable of handling signal up to 24-bit/192kHz, and you can choose to upsample to this point or not via the front panel and remote handset. The latter is a particularly attractive example of its ilk, albeit one that doesn't have an obvious 'firing end', in other words it takes a while to realise which end to point at the player. It's a system remote with quite a few keys that don't relate to the player but most of those that you do want, including eject. The only option I missed was display dimming or defeat, the orange on black display is very clear but when the lights are low it would be nice to be able to calm it.

Yves Bernard André has always stuck to basic principles with his designs, and one of the core ones is symmetrical operation, also known as balanced operation. Many products feature XLR output sockets but it's usually only the more expensive ones that actually contain balanced circuitry to go with this. It is for example almost *de rigueur* in high end circles to incorporate this approach, although not everyone agrees that it's beneficial. It should reduce noise in the circuit and is used in pro audio because there are often very long cable runs. However I have heard many fabulous audio components that are devoid of XLR connections or balanced circuits, so it's by no means essential for good sound.

Sound quality

This is a full-bodied and unerringly powerful sounding player, thanks to solid control of low frequencies allied to a little Gallic *je ne sais quoi*. There have been many charming French CD players over the years, from the likes of Micromega, Helios and Cairn to name a few, and this YBA also has an undoubted appeal that goes beyond that which you might be able to measure in the lab. It translates into an ability to engage the listener, to make you pay attention and become involved with the music. It's a quality that's not obvious when making simple AB comparisons, but one that doesn't take long to notice when playing familiar

music. With the CD100 you want to hear the end of the track because it's more than just good presentation – it's good timing, dynamics and musical drive too. This was apparent fairly soon after I slipped Antonio Forcione's *A Meeting In London* in the slot. It wasn't as subtle as the 192kHz music file that I usually use, but it had a sense of purpose that is rare with computer audio.

Putting on another track that was burned from a hi-res download, Samuel Yirga's *Habasha Sessions*, revealed a strong sense of the body of the instruments, double bass in particular was physically palpable and it was clearly 'walking' in a way that had not previously been apparent. The YBA also has a feeling of directness, of being definite which probably stems from the power and precision of the bass. An orchestral piece lacked some of its finer details, the frills if you like, but it drew me in without trying and before I knew it five minutes had

This is a full bodied and unerringly powerful sounding player, with a little Gallic *je ne sais quoi*

evaporated. This is a good sign, one that attention is being diverted from the sound to the music, something you might hope that all good systems could do, but don't!

Its imaging is also very strong when there is something to work with in the material, sometimes it seems not to have as much scale or depth as it might do, but switch to another piece and the room is full of sound. This is a differentiation that suggests considerable transparency to the music, as the music isn't being artificially augmented. The gusto that it brings to the musical experience is also rather inspiring, Dave Holland and Pepe Habichui's flamenco work fills the room with atmosphere and musical thrills, it's not hard to hear why several companies at the last CES show used it for demonstrations. The sense of immediacy was unusually good with this track as well

The CD100 has both single-ended and fully balanced analogue outputs, the latter being a rare feature at this price point. Whether it's of real use will depend on your set up but should you want to have the player over a few metres away from the amplifier it will be a bonus. There are also both coaxial and USB digital inputs so you can hook up your PC and stream hi-res formats via the player's digital to analogue

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

JASON KENNEDY SPOKE TO JACKI PUGH ABOUT THE YBA BRAND AND WORKING IN CHINA...



JK: What was your position at Creek?

JP: I was responsible for the company's Sales & Marketing.

What's it like going from Creek in England to YBA in China?

Different! At Creek I was working very closely with Mike Creek on a daily basis, whereas at YBA I do not have close contact and therefore have to rely more on my personal knowledge and assessment of situations.

Is there a big difference between British and Chinese operations?

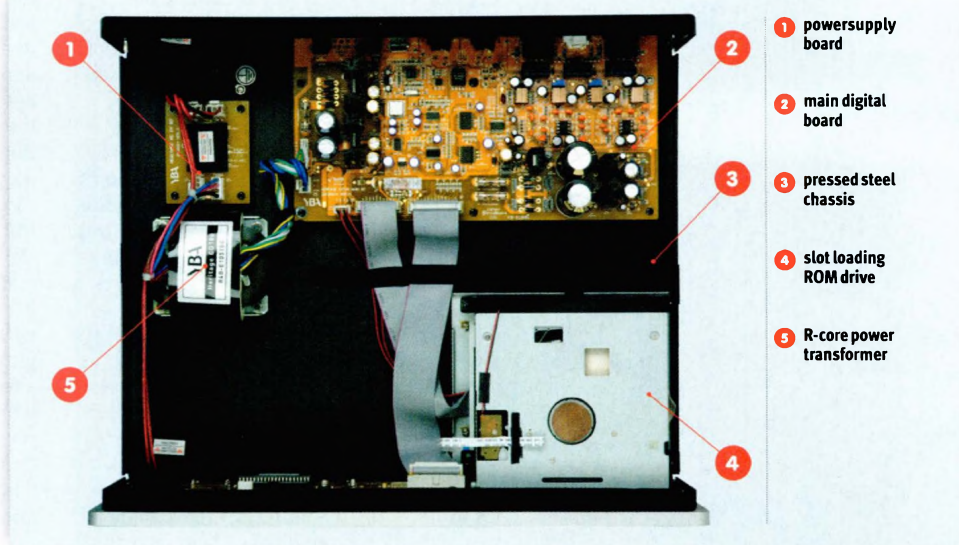
Yes. The British are more passionate whereas the Chinese are more methodical. With passion, of course comes emotion and protection. The Chinese have systems they work by and if something goes wrong, they follow a very clear and definite path to correct it. That is quite gratifying and I am happy I can lend the emotional side to that process.

Why bring so many new products to market simultaneously? Isn't this a little confusing for customers and dealers alike?

Before I joined YBA they actually had a stable of no less than twenty seven products, and while not seen internationally, they were selling to the Asian market. My first job was to take those products and decide which market they would best respond to and how they would be presented. The top of the line Signature products remained as they had always been, however the Passion and Design ranges were significantly reduced. The Heritage range is entirely new.

YBA always had a good level of interest in the past from distribution markets. We therefore took the decision to release the full product line-up in Munich this year, but in a way to make it easy for international markets to accept in these less than favourable economic times. By running four distinctly separate ranges we believed that some markets would respond better to certain range and, therefore, each market could find its own way to build a YBA following.

IN SIGHT



- 1 powersupply board
- 2 main digital board
- 3 pressed steel chassis
- 4 slot loading ROM drive
- 5 R-core power transformer



THE CD100 HAS A SIMILAR CHARACTER to Rega's Apollo-R, inasmuch as it can draw you into the music and make you forget about your worries and cares. It's more dynamic and definite than the Rega and probably a little bit more refined. It would be worth putting up against the best machines with prices up to £1,500. For example, the recent Cambridge Audio 851C at £1,195 has more features and a better USB DAC, but it would be a close call when it comes to core silver disc spinning skills. It's fair to say that the YBA has a little more character, which will work better with some systems than others, while the Cambridge's solid neutrality is more honest and revealing.

One of the most solid contenders at this price point is Naim's CD5i, which eschews niceties like digital inputs in favour of maximum CD sound quality. It too has the power to engage and this combined with the brand's strength in the market is very hard to beat at the price if sound quality is your sole criterion.

and it is this important quality that is the root of its ability to engage.

As with every modern silver disc spinner these days, the Heritage 100 CD player also sports a USB input. Hooking this up my iMac delivered a more sophisticated and revealing version of events to the spinning disc even with regular, Red Book material. This means that the atmosphere crackles with electricity on *Keith Don't Go* for instance, making it that much more palpably live and exciting. True, the image could have a little bit more precision, but there's still no getting away from the thrill power. The *Habasha Sessions* file sounded calmer but no less vital, with the bassline remaining as definite as ever and providing the music with its own distinctive swing. Throughout the duration of the audition period, I kept coming back to the pace that this machine displays. It's a clear strongpoint, and is something you notice even more with lively music like Cornelius' *Fit Song*, a track that reveals all of its dynamic energy thanks to that fast, powerful bottom end.

I compared the USB performance with a Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus and found that the standalone converter with its twin Wolfson WM8740s gives greater low level resolution in the context of a marginally more neutral tonal balance. Still, the YBA came pretty close in terms of imaging and timing however, which is a good result given how much more the casework and transport must cost.

Going back to silver disc, and I was struck by the extra muscle it brings to the sound. It might not have the

finesse of a computer file, but surely makes up for it with a real sense of energy and power that combines to make fine detail seem less essential.

Conclusion

Something of an important juncture for the brand, YBA's new Heritage series just *had* to be very strong across the board, lest its reputation suffer. The new Heritage 100 CD player shows that its quality and performance is as high as ever. Nice to use, impressively styled and well engineered inside, it's also well specified with a decent USB input for your computer audio entertainment.

In the final analysis though, it's more than matters of aesthetics and ergonomics – key to this machine's appeal is its real ability to hook you into the music and keep you listening with a smile on your visage. After all, that's why you got into this hi-fi malarkey in the first place, isn't it? If you want to relive the joy of musical enthrallment then it's a top notch device for the purpose. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Engaging, musical sound; original styling and ergonomics; USB input |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Lack of source switching on unit |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: A most enjoyable, tactile and satisfying sounding new silver disc spinner; deserves to succeed |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL





Naim's Uniti range and Ovator S-400 speakers are now available in selected Sevenoaks stores nationwide.

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design for sound

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£249

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RCD-12	£499	RT-11	£279	RT-12	£649

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CYRUS CD6 SE2 • 6A CD PLAYER / AMPLIFIER
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ROKSAN CASPIAN M2 CD / AMPLIFIER
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SANSUI SAP20 IV • CDD20 IV CD / AMPLIFIER
Sansui returns to the UK with a wide range of hi-fi components including this CD player and 40W integrated amplifier. Available in silver and black finishes.



NAIMUNITI 2 ALL-IN-ONE NETWORK SYSTEM
The new and improved NaimUniti 2 now has a 70W per channel amplifier; whilst also boasting a whole new CD player section with a new and improved tray and transport and a new DAC.



DENON CEOL PICCOLO CD NETWORK SYSTEM
Features CD playback and Internet radio along with a USB connection and network capability via its ethernet port or wirelessly.



ARCAM SOLO NEO CD NETWORK SYSTEM
Combines superb music performance, network audio capabilities along with an internal CD player and tuner.



PROJECT DEBUT CARBON TURNTABLE
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REGA RPI TURNTABLE
Excellent build quality, reliability and ease of use combine to make the RPI a product that will offer a lifetime of musical enjoyment.



PROJECT XPRESSION III TURNTABLE
Features an improved, carbon-fibre tonearm, superior isolation feet and comes supplied complete with a factory-fitted and aligned 'Ortofon 2M Red' cartridge.

SPENDOR A-LINE
A3 • A5 • A6 • A9

These high performance, floorstanding speakers combine smart styling with natural veneer finishes. Each model benefits from important advances in Spendor's drive unit technology, cabinet design and crossover engineering.



MONITOR AUDIO GOLD GX

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



KEF AUDIO R SERIES / LS50

Both the new R Series and EISA award-winning LS50 use trickle-down technology from the company's flagship Blade speakers. The R Series comprises standmount, floor-standing, centre, surround and subwoofer models.

BOWERS & WILKINS PMI

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



PMC TWENTY RANGE

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TANNOY REVOLUTION DC6 T

Award-winning compact, floorstanding speakers featuring Tannoy's unique Dual Concentric™ drive unit along with luxurious real wood finish trapezoidal cabinets.



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PIONEER N-50 MUSIC STREAMER

Audiophile Network player supporting AirPlay® and DLNA wireless technologies, allowing you to stream music wirelessly from your iTunes libraries or iOS devices.



SANSUI WLD+201L MUSIC STREAMER

Network Audio Player featuring DLNA wireless technology, DAB+/FM tuner and remote control via iPad, iPhone or iPod Touch with Sansui 'Libretto' control app.



MARANTZ NA7004 MUSIC STREAMER

This AirPlay® compatible player lets you connect to all your favourite music, whether it's from your PC, external hard disc or as an FM / DAB radio station broadcast or even on the other side of the world via Internet Radio.



ROTEL RT-12 MUSIC STREAMER

The RT-12 is an FM and DAB+ preset radio tuner and much more besides. By incorporating network capabilities, the RT-12 access thousands of internet radio broadcasts and play audio files stored on UPnP servers such as Windows computers.



CYRUS STREAM X2 MUSIC STREAMER

The Stream X2 is based on the Stream XP, but without the preamp section. This model is the perfect source to add to a Cyrus system that already includes a DAC. Supplied with the stylish and intuitive n-remote control.

Q ACOUSTICS 2050i SPEAKERS

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2020i SPEAKERS

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- drDOCK DIGITAL DOCK FOR IPAD / IPHONE / IPOD £199
- rPAC USB DAC / HEADPHONE AMP £149
- rLINK OPTICAL / COAXIAL DAC £149
- rBLINK BLUETOOTH DAC £149



AUDIOLAB M-DAC

Award-winning DAC featuring a USB input with asynchronous data processing along with two coaxial and optical digital inputs. High-res 24-bit/192kHz music files can be played via its coaxial input.



SONOS • THE WIRELESS HI-FI SYSTEM

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Easy pieces

Malcolm Steward goes wireless with the sleek new Sonos Bridge/Connect/Play:3 and SUB wireless music system...

Sonos has enjoyed truly phenomenal success in its short life. While most audio companies who are doing well have a turnover of a few million pounds, Sonos is in an entirely different league and its figures are massively larger. For example, the company recently raised \$135million to enable it to 'stay ahead' in the ultra competitive streaming business. It has clearly been doing something very right since it was established in 2000.

The Sonos system is definitely the easiest networked home audio system to set up that I have ever encountered. I set up the £39 Bridge, £279 Connect, and two £259 Play:3 units, and the £599 SUB in around ten minutes after I had run the Sonos set-up disk on a PC connected to the network, and downloaded the control app to my iPad 2. It was even more straightforward than plain sailing, and I did not encounter a single glitch. The lengthiest part of the entire operation was waiting for

▣ DETAILS

PRODUCT: Sonos Play 3 system
ORIGIN: UK/China

TYPE: Sonos system and wireless sub

FEATURES:
• audio formats supported: MP3, WMA, AAC (MPEG4), iTunes Plus, Ogg Vorbis, Audible (format 4), Apple Lossless, FLAC, WAV and AIF

• native support for 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 32kHz, 24kHz, 22kHz, 16kHz, 11kHz and 8kHz sample rates

• music services supported include: AUPEO!, classical.com, Deezer, iheartradio, Juke, Last.fm, MOG, Pandora, Rhapsody, SiriusXM, Spotify

DISTRIBUTOR: Computers Unlimited
TELEPHONE: 020 82 00 82 82
WEBSITE: unlimited.com/cu/

the system to index the 23,000 tracks on my Vortexbox hard disk server. If this is the level of convenience Sonos offers, then it's easy to understand why the company is so successful.

For example, when setting up the various units I connected them to the Sonos Bridge through my existing router using Cat 5 cable. Once the devices were up and running I pulled the cables out of them and they switched to wireless operation automatically, with no fuss at all – no reboots or power-cycling needed. It was a veritable palaver-free process! In less time that it took me to unbox the equipment I had networked music playing in three separate locations in my house.

The only glitch I encountered at this early stage was the refusal of the system to handle a 24-bit/48kHz recording. However, while this might be a problem for the hardened audiophile, I cannot see it being a major obstacle for what I expect to be the typical Sonos Play:3 buyer. Anyone content to listen to music from a single-enclosure music system that is not much bigger than one of

my regular desktop speakers is hardly likely to have a music collection full of 24-bit FLACs. I guess the majority of users will most likely have a number of – at best – 256kbps MP3s or AACs on a computer somewhere feeding a PLAY:3 or PLAY:5 in the kitchen and bedroom, and not be an intense audio freak. Anyone in that situation could put all his MP3s in a discrete folder away from his FLACs and point the Sonos Music Library to it alone – a problem easily solved, then...

The newest Sonos release will, I dare say, appeal strongly to such folks. It is a subwoofer, but probably the most unusual you will have likely come across. To begin with, the £599 SUB is a wireless design and there is not a drive unit to be seen on it or from the outside. Secreted away inside the strangely shaped resinous cabinet – it looks not unlike a thick letter O with squared off corners – is a pair of Class D amplifiers driving two bass units arranged in a force-cancelling arrangement – “positioned face-to-face for deeper, richer sound and zero cabinet buzz or rattle”, it says here...

However, software volume adjustment is laughable, and the control varies from ‘too much’ to ‘still more than one wants’ and back the other way to ‘far too much for any sentient being to contemplate’. And do not even think about putting the SUB in any location that provides low frequency reinforcement – Sonos suggests the SUB is not sensitive about placement and that you can use it “even lying flat under a couch”. No-one under thirty will have the faintest idea of what is wrong here. But just rarely one encounters music that does not require the generation of Stygian low frequencies... and the SUB definitely struck me as being a tad too generous in that respect.

I tested the Sonos system in two configurations: one, using the two PLAY:3 units grouped to perform as stereo loudspeakers in my dining room and, secondly, using the CONNECT unit to feed music to my preamplifier in my primary system in my music room. I used the SUB in the same location as the two PLAY:3 units.

Sonos describes the PLAY:3 as, “the smaller [than the PLAY:5], sexier, tuck in the corner and blow out the roof, all-in-one player”, no less! Suffice to say, this statement did not fuel my expectations of a unit blessed with enormous subtlety...

The company further describes the £259 PLAY:3s as using “3 state-of-the-art digital amplifiers individually coupled with 3 speakers to deliver great sound to any room. The wireless music system provides pure, clean sound that is perfect for bringing room filling music to a kitchen, bedroom, office, or just about any room in your home. A bass radiator produces powerful low notes while two mid-range drivers and one tweeter fill out the sound”. The way that description is phrased suggests that the system is not aiming to be the last word in high fidelity, it simply aims to provide music in a variety of rooms in as fuss-free and flexible a manner as possible. I wondered, for instance, if the sole purpose of midrange drivers and tweeters really was merely to ‘fill out the sound’?

Setting up the units and system is delightfully easy, and just involves running one (provided) piece of software on a network-attached computer and configuring the various components – for example, telling the software in which room the component is installed. Once the equipment is fully installed it can have its wired connection to the network removed and it should thereafter operate wirelessly. The system subsequently plays your standard-definition (16-bit/44.1kHz) music library from a computer or NAS that is on the network, and will also connect to and play Internet radio or services such as Spotify or Last.fm – provided your network has an Internet connection and you are subscribed to the service, of course.

Net gains

The Sonos system does not *truly* have any obvious like-for-like competition because of its unique operating structure. This proprietary mesh wireless network, known as Sonosnet, uses MIMO (Multiple-Input

and Multiple-Output) technology to provide a more robust, reliable network than regular Wi-Fi, and to ensure that all the components remain in touch with each other. During my time with the system I noticed very few drop-outs while playing music.

The system ultimately appears to be aimed at providing multi-room installations without the inconvenience of having CEDIA types ripping up one's floorboards, drilling holes in the walls and such disturbances. It represents the ultimate in convenient DIY distributed audio for everyone, even those who are not especially technically capable. As I noted earlier, Sonos is truly one system whose installation could be entrusted to your computer illiterate grandmother, there is no need, for example, to know what hex keys and SSID are, nor to enter any passwords and suchlike. One simply follows the instructions on the installation wizard screen and presses a button or two on each component that starts the process of the component connecting itself automatically to the control software.

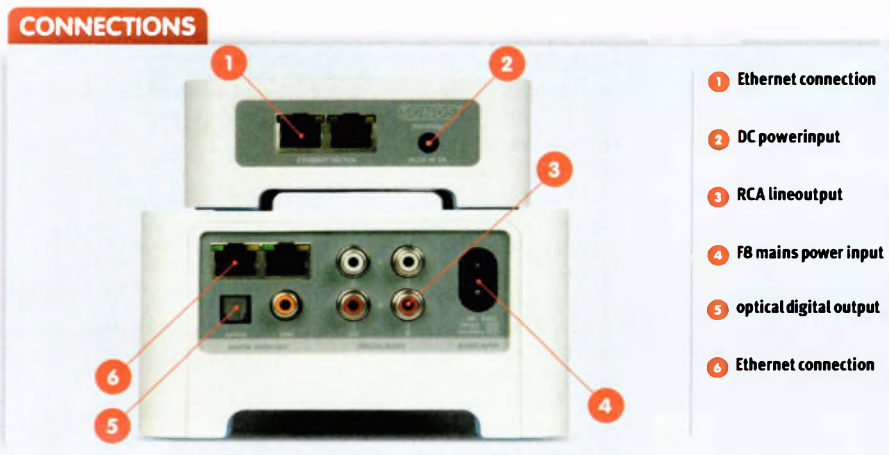
The Sonos represents the ultimate in convenient, DIY-distributed audio for everyone...

The main rival to the Sonos system, in cost terms, would be the Squeezebox players, even though unlike the Sonos, they are simply Wi-Fi network players that one adds to an existing hi-fi system not all-in-ones like the £279 PLAY:3, and £349 PLAY:5 models. In terms of pure sonics I think the Squeezebox has greater audiophile potential – especially players such as the Touch when tweaked as detailed in Hi-Fi Choice – but the Sonos system is a *damn* sight easier to set up, particularly if one is not knowledgeable about computers and networking.

In terms of all-in-one rivals to the PLAY:3 and PLAY:5, one has to look towards considerably more expensive but truly audiophile options such as the Linn Kiko DS and Naim Uniti family with regular loudspeakers. These offer far superior performance but do demand that the user better understands the concepts of control software and networking configuration. Another option might be style-type systems from the likes of Bose or Denon.

Sound quality

I auditioned the Sonos CONNECT unit through a Naim SuperNAIT and NEAT Petite loudspeakers with rips and downloads from my Vortexbox. The only thing I truly found perplexing was that I could not listen to music of above CD resolution. However, even though I had to listen to Thelonious Monk at 16-bit/44kHz the experience was nonetheless enjoyable, if not quite as



Q&A

MALCOLM STEWARD SPOKE TO TOM LODGE, EMEA PR MANAGER ABOUT THE SONOS...



MS: Have any customers yet expressed interest in listening to better than CD resolution files?

TL: We're really proud of the audio quality available on Sonos, and we already have many services that offer excellent quality streams such as Qobuz with a FLAC option, however we don't see a demand for higher bitrates from our customers so it's not something we're likely to add in the near future.

Are we ever likely to see an integrated Sonos music storage device?

We're focused on making it easy for people to enjoy their music, whether that's from their existing music collection or via music streaming services. The number and quality of great music streaming services available means we're seeing little demand for integrated storage in the Sonos player itself and we expect this trend to continue.

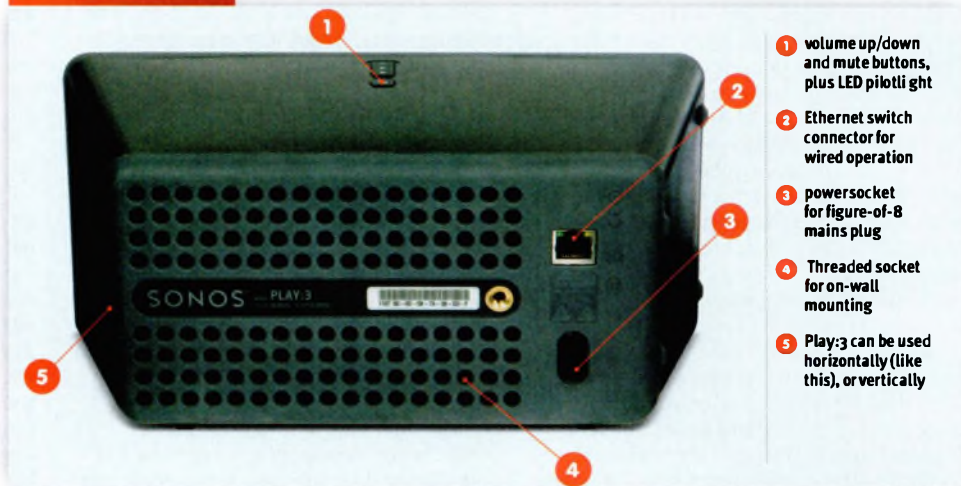
What do you consider the best upgrade for the Sonos owner?

It depends on your set-up. If you've just bought your first Sonos player then the best upgrade is to bring music to the next room – whether that's your bedroom, kitchen or study. If you want to go big with the sound, then getting a pair of PLAY:3s paired with the SUB really steps it up. It's amazing the depth of sound you get when you add the SUB, but be warned, your neighbours might not love you for it!

Who is Sonos's primary competitor?

Of course, there are a number of great companies making music, and offering the customer various different ways to share it, buy it and listen to it. But our focus is crystal clear – we are giving our customers access to all the music on earth from any source to any room in hi-fi sound over rock-solid Wi-Fi. Sonos is super easy to set-up, control and expand. So the best way for us to stay ahead is to constantly improve that experience for our customers, balancing software and hardware to create innovative products that deliver on this promise.

CONNECTIONS



THE SONOS SYSTEM truly seems to be without any like-for-like competitors. There are certainly inexpensive network audio players such as the Logitech Squeezebox that can rival the CONNECT, but there does not appear to be any rival to the PLAY:3 or PLAY:5. And there is certainly no rival to the SUB.

One could certainly construct tiny network player systems, but you would be hard pushed to produce anything as comprehensive or inexpensive. The smallest I could easily imagine would be the system sitting on my desktop as I write: a Naim UnitiQue and a pair of Neat lola speakers. But that set-up, despite its superior performance, will set you back over £2,000.

The superbly-styled Linn Kiko (p16) will also relieve you of £2,500. Both these options offer 24-bit/192kHz playback capability, but what if that is not necessary for you? Less costly gear is available in the shape of the Cocktail Audio X10 hard-disk player-cum-streamer: with its optional speakers and Wi-Fi dongle that still costs around £200 more than the PLAY:3.

fulfilling or thrilling as hi-res Monk – at 24-bit/96kHz or above – through my regular system can be. The presentation was not truly audiophile but it was fundamentally musically communicative, and the CONNECT thankfully still conveyed Monk's dexterous use of dynamics in his exciting playing.

The system was also demonstrative with the Larry Carlton and Robben Ford album *Live in Tokyo*. Here the system convinced with its rhythmic energy, Carlton sounding more animated than when I heard him play live earlier that week at the *Jazz at Vienne* festival. The Sonos CONNECT had no trouble with the contributions of either the drummer or bass player, whose playing came across with weight and authority. Once again, dynamics were convincingly conveyed – just as when I played a selection of Debussy piano works by Francois-Joel Thiollier. The Sonos also conveyed the vibrant tonality and texture of the instrument. It rendered the sound of the piano particularly well with a blend of subtlety and authority.

Similarly, the CONNECT fared well with vocals giving near persuasive portrayals of artists as diverse as Marianne Faithfull and Jose Carreras. The insight was not as profound as that delivered by a superior audiophile-level streamer but that is to be expected given the sizeable difference in price between say, the Sonos CONNECT and the Naim NDS. Regardless, Carreras really did sound fully committed to Ramirez' *Misa Criolla*, and Ms. Faithfull appeared appropriately impassioned during her virtuoso performance of *Sing Me Back Home* on the album *Easy Come, Easy Go*.

In truth, the CONNECT-based

set-up provides the only level-playing-field comparison one can make here. The PLAY units cannot hope to compete with the likes of the powerful Naim SuperNAIT and any appropriate Neat loudspeakers you could mention. While the PLAY:3 might not impress in audiophile terms, two of them grouped in stereo with the SUB were fun, and sounded thoroughly robust and engaging playing The Monkees' *Greatest Hits* on MP3 in my kitchen!

I am not so sure about the audiophile qualities of the SUB, however. It was too ferocious and coloured when used in open space in my dining room. However, my teenage and twenty three-year-old sons both approved of its bone-shaking, droning influence, so I guess that the music you enjoy and your age will influence your opinion of the device!

Conclusion

I came away impressed by this Sonos system considering its modest price, although I'd have liked 24/96 hi-res. Specialist hi-fi manufacturers should learn from its ease of operation. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★☆	LIKE: Decent sound; ease of use and set-up
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Will not play 24-bit files, which is restrictive; the SUB is too OTT to be useful
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Ridiculously easy to install and nicely priced, this is an impressive option for general users
FEATURES ★★★★☆	

OVERALL



WHAT HI*FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2011

SPEAKER PACKAGES

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Q ACOUSTICS 2000i 5.1 PACK



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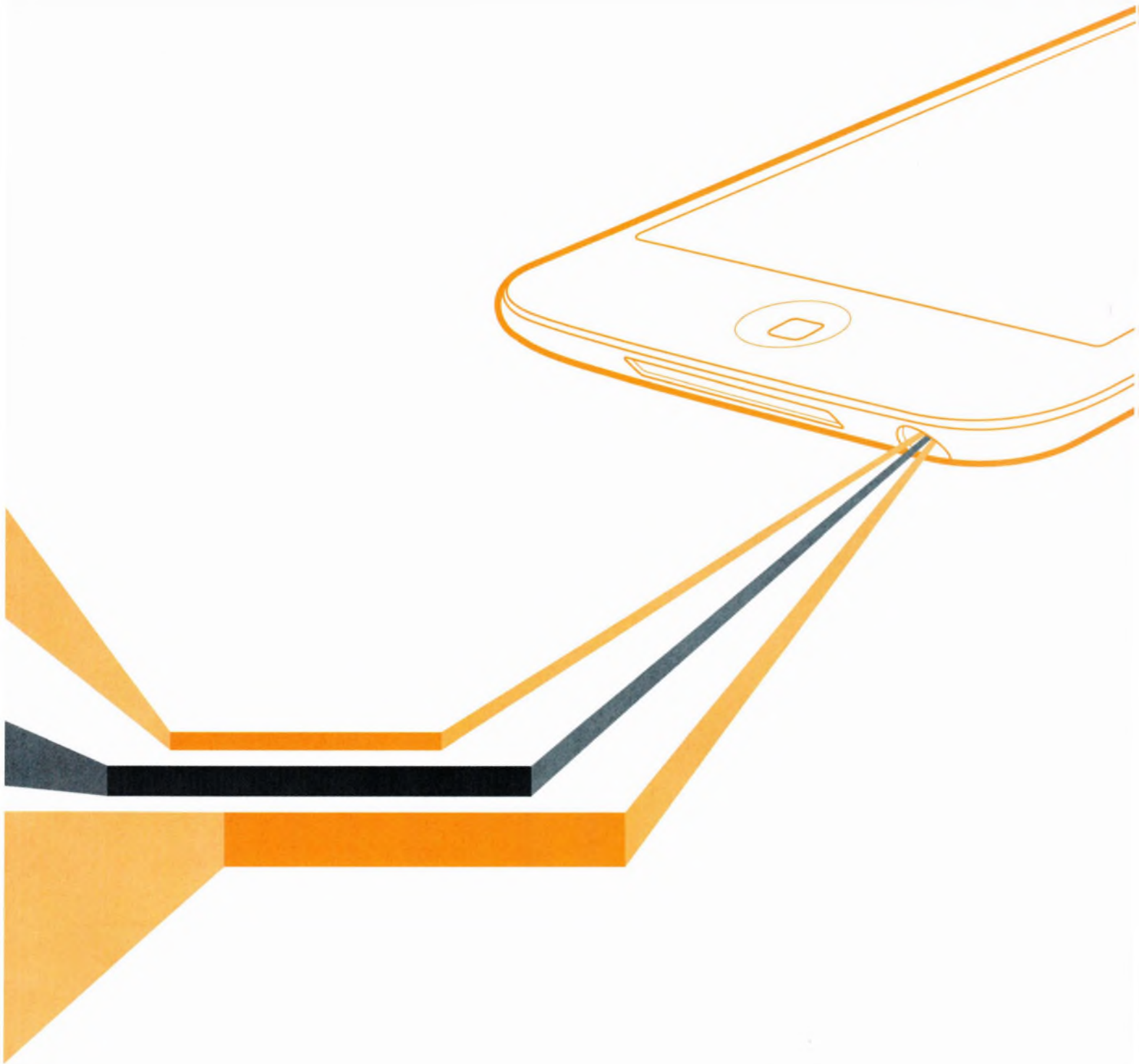
More than

alright,

jack.

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It's a little-known fact that the headphone jack output of your iDevice can give better audio quality than the docking connector. The headphone jack is designed and built for audio output, while the connector is more a jack of all trades - compromised by handling the power supply and charging alongside the music's delicate analogue and digital signals.

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..... Put simply, D-Fi brings the music.

PULSE

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Short story

Once upon a time, there was a dashing, small standmount loudspeaker that went on to make friends with many listeners, says *Tim Jarman...*

On one hand, most speaker manufacturers would have you believe that they, uniquely, make the very best speakers in the whole wide world. On the other, golden-eared hi-fi hacks counter by saying there's no such thing, and never will be – for this or that technical reason. And caught in the crossfire is the poor old buying public, which is forced to go out and find a speaker that's right for them in the real world...

The advent of high powered computer design software has made it a lot easier to design a loudspeaker with good, wholesome performance parameters – an even frequency response, decent sensitivity, good bass extension, etc. – but in practice this hasn't necessarily made speakers sound any better. True, there's possibly slightly less sonic diversity than, say, thirty years ago, but still vast differences remain. These are far more pronounced than with CD players, for example. So once again it's up for buyers to audition the models they're interested in, and let their ears make the decision.

Using this criterion, I predict that Monitor Audio's GX50 standmounter will sell like hot cakes. As you'll see, it has a very clean yet amenable sound that shares a lot with its considerably more expensive older brother, the PL100. The latter I use personally as a reviewing reference. The Platinum Series PL100 is an excellent and luxuriously finished design that does most things well and I think represents the sort of loudspeaker that many listeners with moderately-sized listening rooms would probably like to own at some stage. The only trouble is that they're quite expensive at £2,600, so the Gold Series GX model is a more accessible alternative – the GX50 is similar size and scale to the PL100 but costs 'just' £950.

Straight away you can see where some of the savings have been made.

You have to do without the mile-deep shine in the polished woodwork, the hand-finished leather on the baffles and the gleaming jewellery on the connection panel for example, but even though the materials and finishes of the GX50 are rather more basic they are still applied well and accurately assembled. The diecast aluminium mounting plate for the terminals is a nice touch at this price point, even if the supplied links for joining the bi-wirable posts together look a bit home-made compared to the Platinum-series ones.

Some very worthwhile aspects of the Platinum series models do make it into the Gold models though, such as the ribbon tweeter, the rifled bass port at the rear, the internal bracing and the long studs which brace the front and back panels together. In the GX50, the drive units are held in place by these studs and in the case of the review sample they had begun to come loose, evidenced by some odd noises when the loudspeakers were being worked hard. Remedying this was easy though, since a suitable



► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Monitor Audio GX50

ORIGIN:
UK/China

TYPE:
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
7.5 kg

DIMENSIONS:
(HxWxD)
300X170X270mm

FEATURES:
• 5" aluminium cone
woofer

• 2" cloth dome
tweeter

• rear bass port,
bi-wirable

• matching stands
available

DISTRIBUTOR:
Monitor Audio

TELEPHONE:
01268 740580

WEBSITE:
monitoraudio.com

Allen key is supplied with the stands. On the subject of the stands, these should be given serious consideration if you are tempted to buy a pair of GX50s. They too are pleasingly styled, well finished and represent fair value at £350. The loudspeakers sit on four rubber pads on the top, which from an audio point of view is perfectly adequate; however the loudspeakers can easily be knocked off the rather small 'tables' so if your listening room is shared with other less careful family members, this is something to be wary of. The stands come cleverly flat-packed so self-assembly is required, it's not hard but if you've been beaten in the past by an Ikea Billy bookcase it may be best to ask your dealer to do it for you. The stands include channels and holes to run the cables through; this is a nice touch and helps enormously to keep things neat and tidy. Duly mounted on their stands, the GX50s certainly do look the part, being discreetly expensive looking without seeming at all flashy.

Small loudspeakers tend not to be particularly sensitive, and the GX50 is no exception at a quoted 86dB/w/m. This means that you'll need a transistor amplifier with a reasonable amount of urge to drive them properly, low powered valve designs will flounder here, I would think.

The smooth but finessed treble is seriously special at this price level...

Something like the Cyrus 6a should do it and this amplifier, like the loudspeakers, also isn't too big if space is at a premium. For my listening tests I used my reference Arcam FMJ A38 which has enough power to drive practically anything without getting hot and bothered, but even with this I noticed that I was pushing the volume control up a little further than usual to get satisfying results. The source was the fine Cyrus CD8 SE2 CD player, with Chord Co. Calypso interconnects and Odyssey 2 speaker cables to round things off.

Sound quality

There are two sorts of small loudspeaker, those which accept the limitations of size and just try to do what is practical reasonably well, and those from which the designers have attempted to squeeze every last drop of bass, often by the extreme use of



Q&A

TIM JARMAN SPEAKS TO MONITOR AUDIO'S TECHNICAL DIRECTOR DEAN HARTLEY...



TJ: How does the GX50 fit into the Monitor Audio Gold Series range?

KH: It's the smallest at £950 and then comes the GX100 at £1,250 followed by the GX200 at £2,300 and finally the largest and most expensive model is the GX300 at £3,000. There are also two home cinema centre loudspeakers, the GXC150 and the more expensive GXC350. Also for home cinema, the GX-FX side/rear channel loudspeaker can be configured to work in monopole or dipole modes remotely. Finally the GXW-15 subwoofer boasts a 15" driver and a built-in 650W amplifier. They all come in a choice of high gloss black or white, bubinga, dark walnut or natural oak. You can even have ebony if you like, but it's more expensive...

Which important technologies have been used in the GX50?

A version of the ribbon tweeter introduced first in the Platinum series is key. The speaker also has the rifled port called Hive2 (high velocity) that also made its first appearance in Platinum. The GX drivers are C-CAM of course, strengthened by RST (Rigid Surface Technology) ribs. Similar in principle, Platinum uses C-CAM with RDT (Rigid Diaphragm Technology) to add rigidity without adding mass.

Where are the GX series loudspeakers produced?

Final assembly is completed in Monitor Audio's dedicated production facility in China. They build only for Monitor Audio and have British technicians on the staff.

Do you have any tips on placement to get the best results from these small loudspeakers?

With a design like the GX50 it's worth placing them a little towards boundaries and towed-in about five-to-ten degrees. Try them about eighteen to twenty-four inches away from the rear wall as a starting point, and then move them closer in. It's well worth experimenting. Also, for a fuller and more rounded bass, you can always try a mass loaded loudspeaker stand.



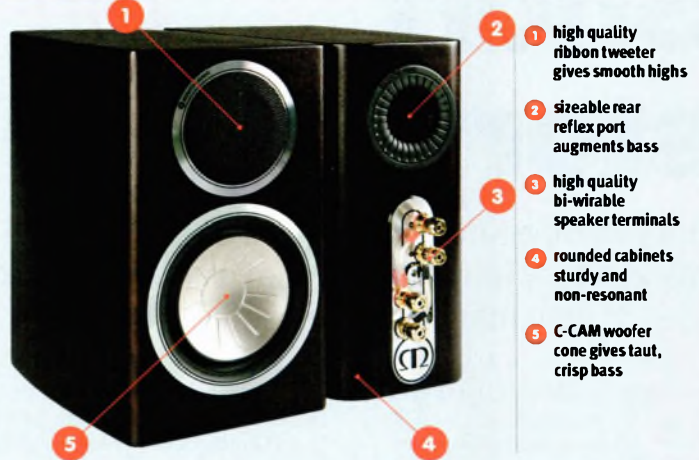
THERE'S A DECENT RANGE of good quality standmount speakers at around the £1,000 price point, and each speaker offers quite a different sound.

For example, on one hand you've got the innocuous looking Spendor S3/5R (£850) which has a wonderfully even, smooth and subtle sound that's great for classical or acoustic jazz. Trouble is, its very cultured sound doesn't exactly flatter powerful rock or dance music. It's certainly not for headbangers, then!

On the other hand, the likes of PMC's Twenty.21 (£1,375) is a rocker with attitude, giving a powerful and dynamic presentation that sparkles with modern music. Feed it powerful seventies rock or modern electronic dance, and it announces its presence in no uncertain terms, and captures the spirit of the music brilliantly. It does, however, lack the Spendor's smooth, easy-listening manner.

The Monitor Audio GX50 falls rather between these two stalls, giving a more precise and incisive performance than both, yet is not as organic as the Spendor, nor as punchy as the PMC. That's why many will like it, as a pretty neutral and open communicator of what's in the music, with little added or taken away...

IN SIGHT



- 1 high quality ribbon tweeter gives smooth highs
- 2 sizeable rear reflex port augments bass
- 3 high quality bi-wirable speaker terminals
- 4 rounded cabinets sturdy and non-resonant
- 5 C-CAM woofer cone gives taut, crisp bass

porting, in an attempt to make them sound bigger than the really are. I favour the former type and the GX50 fits perfectly into this category.

This does mean that you have to go without large, rumbling bass lines but at least what is there is detailed and tuneful, there's no one-note boom which has spoiled many a promising box. For corner placement Monitor Audio supply foam rubber bungs for the rear-facing reflex ports, but since I had the loudspeakers reasonably well out into the room I did not feel it necessary to use them. The GX50s gave the impression of being generally well balanced.

The stands locate the loudspeakers well height-wise, which is just as well since the ribbon tweeters are quite directional; on-axis they produce plenty of nice sparkling treble that's pleasingly free of rough edges – something that frankly you can't say of all the GX50's price rivals. The smooth but finessed high frequency performance is seriously special at this price level. The upper harmonics of the chiming digital synthesiser sounds and hi-hat cymbals on Scritti Politti's *Perfect Way*, for example, beamed out of the mix in an exceptionally crisp and even manner, one that really helped the mood of the music. Never did the track sound harsh, yet it positively beamed with energy and atmosphere – a feat that the metal or silk dome tweeters of many rivals simply cannot manage.

I also loved the easy, walk-around stereo imaging which requires very little concentration to enjoy – the GX50 does this exceptionally well. First-class imaging made Bruce Springsteen's *Racing In The Streets* the brooding and richly atmospheric recording that it is. Along with that bright, open, atmospheric treble, the

expansive soundstaging makes for a gripping listening experience. It's as if the GX50 opens up a wide window into the music that lets you peer through effortlessly to take in the magnificent view. Again, many price rivals simply give a smaller aperture, one that's variously foggier, fuzzier and more opaque...

Overall, this little loudspeaker is a lovely thing to listen to at the price, with searching yet sophisticated sound. Personally, I did feel it needed a little more bass in my system and room, however. For example, Rod Stewart's *The Motown Song* lost a little too much body. So as with any loudspeaker then, proper experimentation with room positioning is called for to get the best out from it, and you should always get an audition before buying.

Conclusion

Monitor Audio's little GX50 speaker is a potent performer, majoring on insight, clarity and soundstaging. It opens up recordings in a way that few price rivals can. Partner it with a good source and it will surely do big things for you! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
LIKE: Smooth and polished treble; excellent imaging
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
DISLIKE: Directional top end; slight lack of body
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
WESAY: Excellent sound allied to very fine build means the GX50 has much to recommend it.

FEATURES

- ★★★★★

OVERALL

- ★★★★★



**New amplifier –
New loudspeaker –
New system power supply –
and a superb turntable**

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All these speakers use rear-firing drive units, designed to couple with the room to maintain full power and tonal balance as frequency rises and cone radiating area shrinks. The result is full-bodied, natural-sounding speakers that create a huge stage but seem to 'disappear'.

What is your source? CD? Vinyl? Streaming?

Actually, we say it's your mains – that is what you listen to, that's what comes out of your loudspeakers.

Everybody, everywhere is afflicted with RF pollution that modulates the music signal to produce glare and hardness, stifles detail and jumbles timing.

The **Aletheia** PSU1 and PSU2 build on the **VERTEX AQ** technology that cleans the mains *without limiting current supply*.

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We'll be debuting at a UK public show not one but two **SPIRAL GROOVE** turntables, the SG1.1 and the SG2, side by side for comparison, each fitted with the Spiral Groove Centroid arm.

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CD: Accustic Arts, Bel Canto, dCS, Gamut, Resolution Audio, Vertex AQ dac-1. Vinyl: Aesthetix, Clearaudio, Graham, Spiral Groove, Transfiguration.
Tuners: Magnum Dynalab Amplifiers: Accustic Arts, Aesthetix, Bel Canto, CAT, Gamut, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, VTL.
Loudspeakers: Audio Physic, Gamut, Kawero - Vivace/ Chiara, NEAT, Totem. Cables: Chord Co., DNM, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, VertexAQ.
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The ADL GT40 ...



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Three series

The third incarnation of Origin Live's popular Silver tonearm is out at last. Cue **Neville Roberts** for a scoop review...

Don't underestimate the importance of humble products like this. Turntable fans love upgrading their tonearms and cartridges, but few have the funds to reach up to the rarefied climes of SME, Graham, *et al.* The new Origin Live Silver is a far more practical proposition however, offering as it does a taste of the high end at a far more affordable price.

This Silver Mk3A is the successor to Origin Live's successful Silver Mk3C (I'm afraid the subtleties of the company's nomenclature eludes me!) and has a number of significant design changes. In particular, the Mk3A is built entirely from Origin Live's own parts. The previous Silver Mk3C made use of a Rega manufactured base, but this has been dispensed with and replaced with their own materials and bearings. The decoupling of the bearings from the base has also been improved, which the manufacturer claims will result in greater transparency. In addition, the external arm cable has been significantly upgraded and is now fitted with their Linear Flow 2 hardwired interconnect cable.

The Origin Live Silver tonearm is an improvement on the Onyx arm as it makes use of a much more expensive two-piece armtube construction that is claimed to reduce the energy reflection from the counterweight into the armtube by dissipating it through the bearings.

Installation

My first impressions were not unexpected. Stemming from my past experience of Origin Live

tonearms, I anticipated a finely finished and well-made tonearm and the new Silver didn't disappoint. Its sleek black and silver finish will sit comfortably on most turntables. Everything required is supplied in the box, including an alignment gauge, owner's manual and an allen key for aligning and fitting the bias counterweight support and lift lever.

Fitting the arm to my turntable was easy, as I can fit different arm supports and I have one with a 25mm hole suitable for Rega arms, which I used for the Silver. The arm has a built-in VTA (Vertical Tracking Angle) adjuster in the form of a threaded ring that sits on top of the armboard and, once set, the arm is locked in place with a large nut fitted to the underside. I set it to a nominal mid position and then installed my reference Lyra Clavis DC moving coil cartridge. Tracking force is set by sliding the counterweight along the rear stub. This weight has an internal 'O' ring which makes it quite a secure fit onto the stub, but I had no difficulty in setting the cartridge force to the specified 1.8g using my digital stylus balance. I am pleased to report that, fitted with my medium compliance cartridge, the Silver resonated at a satisfactory 10-12Hz.

Sound quality

First on the deck was a piece with full orchestra and piano in the form of Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 3*, and the Silver delivered a masterful performance.



DETAILS

PRODUCT: Silver Mk3A
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: tonearm
WEIGHT: 570g
FEATURES:
• Rega single fixing with integral headshell and interconnect cable
• A 12" version is available for an extra £400
DISTRIBUTOR: Origin Live
TELEPHONE: 02380 578877
WEBSITE: originlive.com

I was struck by the excellent image placement and clarity of not only the piano, but also the entire orchestra. The piano was perfectly positioned in front of the orchestra, which itself was spread evenly across the sound stage. Piano sounded completely believable, indeed all the instruments were clearly identifiable and in their correct location. The excitement of the performance was convincingly conveyed and, if you closed your eyes, you could picture Andre Previn dancing around on the podium.

Next, I slipped on an LP from the two LP set of *The Concerts in China* by Jean-Michel Jarre (Polydor PODV 3). Once again, the excitement of the performance was caught and the overall clarity of the recording was something I hadn't previously experienced with this recording.

Don't Misunderstand by Thelma Houston demonstrated excellent stereo imaging coupled with finely proportioned positioning of the singer out. This was also apparent with a lovely recording of Vivaldi's Opus 3 concertos, *L'Estro Armonico* performed by The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, directed by Neville Marriner. Compelling listening, it enticed me to play all twelve concertos [that explains a lot - Ed.]. Everything was there in spectacular clarity, even down to the occasional rumble of a lorry driving past in the background...

Conclusion

An outstanding tonearm at the price, the £675 Silver 3A doesn't better super-arms like SME's Series V, but is still a big step up from a stock Rega. Indeed, it offers a far more musically involving sound, one that's less flat and more insightful. It takes you firmly out of the unlovely budget tonearm world, with its two-dimensionality and mechanical music making, into something far more rarefied and exotic. Well worth a try. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Fine image placement and clarity; convincing musicality; detail
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Smooth finish on VTA ring makes it difficult to adjust
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Hard to fault at the price, this bespoke tonearm represents excellent value for money
FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL





Classic rock



Renaissance Amplification's new RAP-02/RA-02 pre-power has a traditional approach to music making, says **Jason Kennedy...**

It's going back a while now, I know, but there once was a time when any self-respecting hi-fi specialist simply would never so much as countenance an integrated amplifier. Hard to believe now of course, in today's world of sleek one-box style systems with audiophile aspirations, but to have a separate preamplifier and power amplification was the mark of a serious hi-fi man. Better still, if you had separate monoblock power amplifiers, instead of a single stereo design, you had really come of age.

To wit, the aesthetic design of this new pre-power bespeaks purposefulness, an unreconstructed nineteen-eighties sort of way. Some may think it a little dour in today's bling-infused world, but it's certainly businesslike and many will like it for this. Indeed, the lack of visual frills suggest that the money has been spent *inside* the box, where it counts – rather than on fripperies and fineries outside.

Clearly Integrated Engineering Solutions (IES), which makes Renaissance Amplification has its heart in the right place,

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Renaissance Amplification RAP-02, RA-02

TYPE: preamplifier, mono power amp

ORIGIN: UK

WEIGHT:
RAP-02 8.5kg
RA-02 11.5kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD) RAP-02 455x70x320mm
RA-02 455x70x350mm

FEATURES:

- (RAP-02) line inputs: 4x RCA phono
- analogue outputs: RCA phono
- MOSFET Class A circuit
- switched attenuator volume control
- (RA-02) output: 50 watts/8 ohms
- MOSFET Class AB circuit
- (RAP-02/RA-02) WBT connectors
- (RAP-02/RA-02) zero overall feedback

DISTRIBUTOR:
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as the company specialises in data cable management systems, but was originally formed with the intention of building high end amplifiers. The first Renaissance was a valve power amplifier which incorporates output transformers that benefit from the engineering skills of founder Chris Jennings, a man who knows a thing or two about transformers. The slow burn success of the 22 watt RA-01 as it is known, encouraged the company to expand its range and it now incorporates a transport and DAC alongside pre and power amps of valve and transistor persuasion.

The RAP-02 preamplifier and RA-02 monoblock power amp are the entry level components in the Renaissance range. Clean black boxes in the trad full width, slimline style, the sport machined and anodised aluminium fascias, and feel nice and sturdy.

The RAP-02 is a line preamp, that is it doesn't offer a phono stage for your turntable, neither for that matter is there a tape loop – which despite the absence of analogue recording equipment on the market is still a very common feature. Instead it has four inputs and one pair of outputs on high-quality WBT



indistinguishable in low light. They feel rather different, of course, although the volume pot is a high-quality stepped attenuator type, so it also clicks. This is a 24-way switch that absorbs the lion's share of the parts budget after the chassis, and not something you usually find on products under a thousand pounds. Although my sample was also remote-free, Renaissance Audio said it will be supplying handsets for the RAP-02 when it reaches market, by the time you read this.

The name RA-02 might ring a bell, it was used by Rotel for an integrated some time ago. *This* RA-02 however, is a rather different beast, a 50 watt monoblock power amplifier that's based on a zero negative feedback circuit and uses multiple MOSFET output devices. A Class AB circuit, it takes the uncommon approach of being biased toward the Class B end of the spectrum because its maker likes the consistency of behaviour in the crossover region.

The most controversial thing about this power amp is that it is proud to have an AC-coupled output. This is not something many companies shout about because DC coupling, where the signal path is devoid of capacitors, is considered by many to be superior, but as you'll see in the Questions and Answers section overleaf, Renaissance Audio has its reasons for choosing this route...

The internal electronics are laid out on a single-sided FR4 circuit board with double thickness, 2oz copper tracks. The circuit layout is based on the company's experience working at RF frequencies where unwanted interactions can be disastrous. The MOSFETs are attached to a heatsink on the back of the amplifier, which doesn't get overly hot presumably because of the aforementioned bias, but also because there is plenty of sinking for the power output. Speaker terminals are high-quality WBT multi-way binding posts and signal input is via RCA phono sockets only. Again, an earthing point is fitted although I didn't find the need to use it. The overall feel of these amplifiers is one of quality and precision.

Sound quality

Renaissance describes its amplifiers as understated both in appearance and sound, and this is hard to disagree with when you put them in a revealing system and press 'play'. I used Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamond speakers because they are both efficient and revealing, 50W solid-state amps generally require something that won't tax them too hard in the power requirement stakes if you're to get a result. Source was my trusty Resolution Audio Cantata, used as both a CD player and USB DAC, but when connected up to the RA/P-02s the result was not the

There's a lot to enjoy in the quality that these amplifiers bring to both instruments and voices

most transparent I've encountered, although very neutral and even-handed. This allows good levels of detail to emerge from the quieter parts of the mix and for voices to reveal real depth of character. This was apparent with the first piece played, Laura Marling, whose recordings have an intimacy that is easy to appreciate with these amplifiers. The monoblocks have a bit more bass grumble than the Valvet 50W Class A amps I usually use, but not the transparency or dynamics those are capable of, understandable considering the price differential.

They respond to large scale pieces with ease, delivering the acoustic depth of *La Folia* and the charged atmosphere of *Nils Lofgren Live* – there is however, a slight sense of grain that veils fine detail especially at high frequencies. Timing is very good, and it's easy to shut your eyes and let the music transport you, especially where the recording and performance are strong. This is definitely the case with Corea, Clarke and White's *Forever*, a jazz trio that grew out of *Return to Forever*, and these amps let you revel in the superb musicianship of Chick

phono sockets. The only frill, if you can call it that, is an earth point presumably to combat hum should it arise in the system.

The chassis is in a decently heavy gauge steel given the asking price, but Renaissance admits that there is a lot of space inside the box. It points out that the active circuitry is deliberately compact and that the 'modest' power supply is placed as far away as possible in order to keep interfering transformer fields away from the signal.

Front panel controls are pared to the bone, with volume and input select virtually

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

JASON KENNEDY SPOKE TO RENAISSANCE DIRECTOR SEAN REDSHAW ABOUT THE 02 SERIES...



JK: Why is the active circuit deliberately compact and mounted on the vertical rear panel?

SR: To some extent, the answer is that there is no great need to do anything more elaborate. We could make it much smaller, if necessary. Printed circuit boards were a wonderful invention for reducing production costs but they are far from a perfect solution. In principle, the shorter you can keep PCB tracks, the better. As well as reducing unwanted resistance, inductance and capacitance, it also helps to reduce loop areas and thus minimise EMC problems like pick up of stray fields. I guess the current jargon is 'keeping signal paths short'. If you are bothered by issues such as crosstalk, the best plan is not to have signal carrying tracks from one channel running close to sensitive tracks from the other channel for any further than is absolutely necessary.

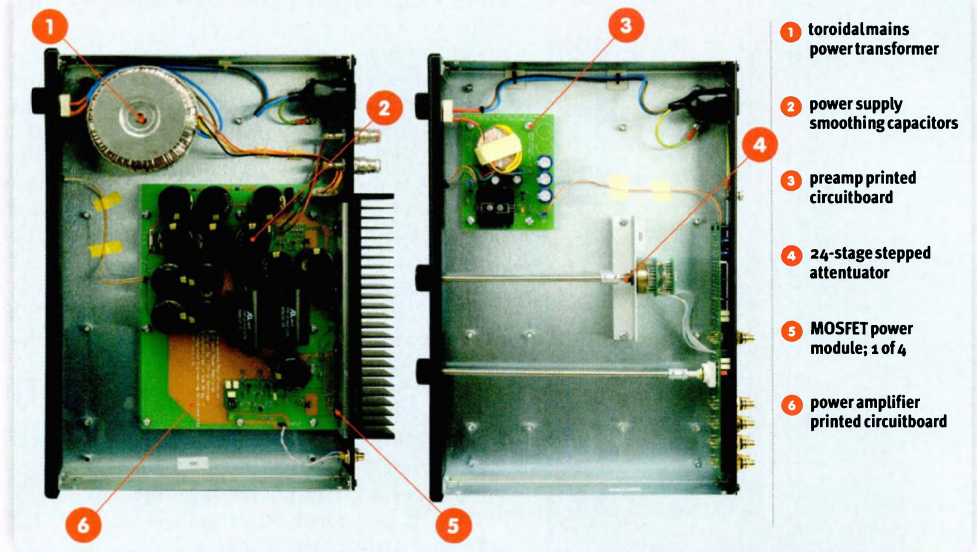
Why have you gone against the grain with an AC coupled output?

It is a consequential part of an effective solution based on the idea of rugged simplicity. In musical terms, this particular circuit works well and as a technical solution, it sidesteps one or two potential issues. We do not go out of our way to break rules, but we are always prepared to look at things afresh and tackle challenges with an open mind (always guided by the laws of physics). We have a more powerful and more accurate amplifier with multiple supplies and DC coupled output, but this is necessarily a more complex beast. I have no problem with you expressing surprise publicly at the AC coupling, but please understand that we are not making any special claims for it.

What does IES do when it's not building amplifiers?

We are world leaders in the narrow field of data cable measurement, so that is an important part of our business. That is the area where we have our own products and sell to manufacturers and certification bodies around the world.

IN SIGHT



- 1 toroidal mains power transformer
- 2 power supply smoothing capacitors
- 3 preamp printed circuitboard
- 4 24-stage stepped attenuator
- 5 MOSFET power module; 1 of 4
- 6 power amplifier printed circuitboard



THE RENAISSANCE AMPS don't offer much competition when it comes to features, but they offer an appealing variation on the musicality theme that doesn't seem to depend on subtle tonal shifts.

The RAP-02 is not quite in the same features league as ATC's pricier CA2 (£1,265), nor is it as nicely finished. The area it really competes in is musicality, as the ATC is also slightly stronger in terms of tonal rendition and dynamics.

The RA-02 monoblocks are the stronger half of the system, however they too are up against some stiff competition from stereo power amps such as Naim's NAP 200 (£1,750), which is more powerful and musically coherent. There is also a well established monoblock in the form of the Quad Elite Mono at £650, an amp that warranted recommendation in Richard Black's group test (HFC 349). Sonically the RA-02 may hold its own against such stalwarts, but when it comes to residual value it has a job to do.

Corea and Stanley Clarke, and it's easy to forget that there are electronics between you and the source. It's a clever trick, given that these are neither the most dynamic nor revealing amplifiers – clearly the company's foundation in valve designs has taught it plenty about what really counts where musical enjoyment is concerned...

To separate the qualities of the preamplifier and power amps, I substituted a Townshend Allegri passive controller for the RAP-02, which revealed the power amps to be the stronger parts of the system. The Allegri is extremely good and £850 more than the Renaissance, so an improvement was expected, and it increased my opinion of the monoblocks no end. The only thing this combo couldn't do so well was pace. White Denim's *At the Farm* (from the album *D*) didn't have so much vitality, but with more refined music there is a lot to enjoy in the quality that the power amps bring to both instruments and voices. On Antonio Forcione's *Take 5*, the two acoustic guitars are given very distinct tonal characters and even the recording treatment is revealed very effectively.

Conclusion

An interesting trio of amplifiers which bridge the gap between affordable and high end audio in their own, enjoyable way. Stylistically, these Renaissance amplifiers don't quite capture the *zeitgeist*, but many will like them for this. What's certain is that they're well screwed together and neatly finished. Down to business, and

this combo is impressive, there is no getting away from the fact that the RAP/RA-02 pairing are very musical and engaging. They may not quite have the last word in transparency or dynamics, but when it comes to musical flow and communication they are remarkably strong. They put the music before the sound – a classical approach and just as it should be! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT-RAP-02

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Uncannily musical and fluent preamplifier; clean styling, fine build |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Lacks visual drama; needs more inputs; lacks incision of some rivals |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: Interesting preamp with an engaging and endearing sound |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - RA-02

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Revealing and musical monoblocks; nicely built |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Lack power at the price |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: An open sounding and effortlessly musical monoblock that is well worth auditioning |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL





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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, Ed was developing and supporting products from some of the biggest names in audio. 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 faulty review kit, he enjoys scouring audiojumbles.



PATRICK CLEASBY
EXPERTISE: TECH GEEK

PATRICK WORKS in a high-level technical support role in the broadcast industry, when not fiddling with his new iPad and his rapidly expanding eighties LP record collection.

Classical gas

Would my eight-year old Quad 99 system (CDP CD player, preamp and 909 power amp, linked to a pair of Spondor S3E speakers on Atacama SE6 stands and a ProAc ER1 sub) benefit from some changes to the interconnects?

I'm currently using the supplied Quadlink cables for the 99 units and the speaker cabling is van den Hul The Wind. I listen almost exclusively to classical music, particularly large orchestral and opera, and find the sound from the system on the hard, bright, sibilant side. It's great for small scale stuff like string quartets, but bring in a voice and I have to hit the tone controls!

Would replacing the Quadlink cables with some RCA interconnects (perhaps the Mark Grant G2000HD reviewed in your September edition) or the VDHS with some Kimber BTCs make a difference? Or am I looking at going for different speakers?

Keith Gregory

DP says: Hi Keith, yes, on an obvious level, the excellent Mark Grant G2000HD interconnect should give you a lovely, creamy, smooth sound – just as it did in our recent Blind Listening Group Test. But if there's an underlying malaise in your system that's causing the problem, then take heed of the comprehensive advice proffered from my colleague Channa...

CV says: On first impression, your problem seems to be

somewhat peculiar as the combination of Quad 99s (with the 909) and Spondor S3E + van den Hul shouldn't sound hard, bright, etc. Quite the opposite should be occurring due to each component in this system normally being smoother than most.

Firstly, experiment with positioning your loudspeakers to attain good imaging angled between about 45 degrees (max.) inwards and then degrees outwards to a maximum of straight ahead 90 degrees to the rear wall, so that voices are located in the centre of your hearing (and if possible inside your head, just like headphone listening). This will help to give a smoother or more even sound.

You should also experiment with the placement of the S3es in terms of their rear horizontal slot port – trying closer or further away from the rear walls (and side walls also) for better spatial and low-frequency tunefulness. Then when happier with the position of the S3es, you should look at the bi-wire connections on the back and replace the supplied brass bridging-plates with short runs of cables matching your main loudspeaker cable, as this usually sounds better.

Clean all metal signal contact points on loudspeaker binding-posts, interconnect cables and sockets to the amps/CD

Mark Grant's G2000HD interconnect should work wonders to warm up a cool sounding Quad system...

player with isopropyl alcohol, or a product such as Kontak or DeoxIT by Caig labs. Make sure all the fittings/fixings are on securely. If you're still not convinced, have the S3es checked by a Spondor dealer for a possible fault, or damage. Also do these steps with the ProAc subwoofer and if in doubt get a ProAc dealer to reinstall it for you. The ER One has two inputs, one with a Neutrik-type Speakon



socket or phono – if appropriate, check if either makes a difference and also factor in any future subwoofer interconnect cable upgrade, if necessary. Try the system without the sub!

Then, try to look at your listening room in terms of reverberation. If your space is square or boxy and has hard, reflective floors and right-angled walls, then this can cause ringing distortions which trap certain frequencies. If this is the case, then you can alleviate these by using a good thick 'shag-pile' rug and soft furnishings and/or full bookshelves with unevenly spaced books/CDs where the spines are unequally placed back and forth within the shelves, as these help create textured walls that assist with the breakup of standing

Having the Quad components further apart can minimise interference...

waves. Sometimes a rug or full bookshelf located on an opposite wall to a reflective wall surface can also minimise these. All this will help even out the bright, hard sound.

The standard Quad cable is a special connection between Quad components, but is annoying in that it won't allow for more space between them, being somewhat inadequate in length. For this reason, you often see Quad 99 systems connected this way with individual components stacked upon each other. Having the Quad components further apart can improve matters (as with most hi-fi separates) because you minimise possible interference with the internal power supplies and other mains/electrical/signal routes. You can contact Quad to see if you can get the system components checked and serviced, and ask them if they can supply you with a longer lead.

Ivor complaint!

Good to hear Ivor Tiefenbrun from Linn making a few comments in your October 2012 issue! The article entitled *Laser visionary* was enjoyable, in particular a couple of points Ivor made.

Linn ran an advert on the launch of CD, claiming that CD would soon pass because of limited scope and lifespan, and now Ivor is stating that he and Linn were correct in this statement. Really? CD existed in a powerhouse fashion for what must surely be approaching somewhere near thirty years, and it still exists. If Ivor got a headache and was told by his doctor that it would soon pass, then I do not think he'd be too happy accepting a thirty year wait! It sounds to me like Ivor wished it would pass, and is now trying to state that he was correct, even though the facts make his claim laughable...

He cheers me up even more by stating that, there was a lost generation of music lovers because of CD. He clearly didn't like CD, or the quality of sound/music and believes the young were deprived of the proper way to appreciate music because of this. He then went on to support CD and make a line of very expensive CD players to play them on. Expensive hi-fi! Now that's the way to encourage the young/lost/deprived generation back in to the hobby, eh?

Finally, Ivor is stating that high-quality streaming is the

Linn's Ivor Tiefenbrun is an outspoken critic of ye olde Compact Disc, but reader Neil Porter isn't convinced...

thing that is bringing the 'lost generation', now presumably an older generation, back into appreciating the finer things of life. Well, have you seen the price of some Linn's products in this area? Very expensive!

They may be very good, but hardly what 99 percent of the 'lost generation' is going to be able to buy in order to make them musically spin with unrivalled joy. Ah well, it made me smile, while listening to Spotify on a bog standard laptop, with a Logitech soundbar speaker hooked over the top of it. Whatever you do, don't tell Ivor. He may feel the need to put me a visit to put me straight!

Neil Porter

CV says: I agree – why would a manufacturer dismiss a format's apparent failings and then produce it anyway? However, to be fair to Linn, it was not the only one who was dismissive of CD. I remember reading the missives from Naim Audio's late founder Julian Vereker who was less than complimentary about OEM CD transports from Philips prior to 'Naimification'. Naim also wrote its own software code and manufactured a special manual swing-out CD loading drawer/top-loading system, and until recently abandoned digital outputs on its CD players, all in an attempt to create better sound.

Ironically, considering its dismissal of the format, I think Linn made some good CD players – slightly more affordable (at £2,000 approx. new) than the very expensive but beautifully designed Sondek CD12 (about £12,000 new) was the Ikemi,

with balanced output and in black (to match the nicely crafted loading drawer).

To its credit Linn did also abandon CD player manufacturing some years ago, yet continue to support and produce (mostly) classical music hybrid SACD/CD releases, as well as hi-res downloads.

ES says: You can disagree with aspects of Ivor's missive, but in a wider context I think most of his thoughts have validity. Streaming need not cost you Linn money to realise the benefits that it offers. We can argue about the lifespan of CD (my thoughts are that as a dominant format 1987-2007 is about right, so actually lower than Ivor's estimate), but the realistic issue in 2012 is that it is on the decline and we need to keep an eye on what the future holds. The decision that Linn took to stop CD player production altogether was an extreme one and not relevant to that of many other companies, but it was a decision that made national news and invited us to start thinking about what we wanted to happen next.

DP says: Well, I thought it was good knockabout stuff from an old master of the art. Reading Ivor's comments reminded me that passions used to run very high in the hi-fi world, and Mr T. was part of the fun. Aside from the, erm, 'trenchant' way Ivor made his case in last month's feature, I actually think he was mostly correct. If you're used to a good vinyl system, then CD simply isn't musically convincing – it's processed, foil-wrapped cheese compared to the real stuff that's only just transmogrified from cow's milk! Hires offers the potential to improve on this, and is beginning so to do. Ironically, one of the most musical CD spinners I ever heard was Linn's own CD12, which was a beautiful listen. Sadly, as you point out, Neil, it cost a flipping fortune – when I found out it cost £12,000 I learned to love vinyl just that little bit extra!

You don't mention mains cables, and this leads me to suggest not only experimenting with different types, but to also have the mains itself checked for proper earthing by a qualified electrician, as badly earthed/unearthed mains can ruin the sound of a good hi-fi system similar to the way you describe (this is essential for anyone, especially if they have recently moved house). Once satisfied with the mains, then try the Quads with the standard phono compared with the Quad connection and if your particular CDP has variable volume control try it directly into the 909 (be careful with that volume control!) and see if this sounds better direct than with the 99 preamplifier, though you may not be able to use the sub in this configuration.

Finally, make sure none of the mains/interconnect or loudspeaker cables touch each other, and that they are smoothly, evenly spaced out from each other, as touching/coiled/bent cables can also be deleterious to good sound quality. I think you should try these above investigative steps first before looking at new interconnects and loudspeakers.

Computer world

One of the sources feeding my Naim SuperNAIT is a Windows netbook computer playing WAV files on a 1Tb hard disc connected via USB 2. While I am happy with the audio quality of this arrangement I would like to have the convenience of being able to control the system wirelessly using a tablet.

I have considered and listened to both the Naim ND5 XS and the Pioneer N-50, which in itself was quite a revealing comparison, but as I am not looking for a wireless connection other than to a tablet, this seems to be a somewhat extravagant approach. Can you please advise on other options that are available?

John Brown

MS says: One of your options would be to use a streamer such as the Naim UnitiQute, ND5 XS, Pioneer N50 or the Marantz NA7004, and install a UPnP server on your computer: I would recommend Illustrate's Asset: it is certainly the best UPnP server



I have come across. Throw away the USB lead and USB to S/PDIF convertor, if that is what you are using to connect your computer to your SuperNAIT. Or did you mean your 1TB drive is USB and connected to your netbook via USB? If that is the case then okay, use unshielded Cat5e or Cat6 Ethernet cable to connect everything else to your Wi-Fi-enabled router. Then use an app on an iPad or an iPhone to control the streamer wirelessly and the job is done.

Naim's n-Stream app is free as are the equivalent offerings from Pioneer and Marantz. You'll find the iPhone and iPad are better served for apps than the likes of Android and Windows-powered devices. I loathe Apple hardware, but I have learned to live with it for the sake of controlling my music easily.

ES says: If you are solely looking for tablet control, you could dip a toe in the water by paring a Squeezebox Touch with the new Google Nexus Tablet (a pairing cheaper than buying an iPad on its own). You could experiment with this (quite conceivably using the digital inputs on the SUPERNAIT) and see if the control method appeals. If it does (and I suspect it will), you could then look at a more expensive streaming solution – most of which can still be controlled by the Nexus Tablet.

Want to know more about MiniDisc? Click on what is surely the best online resource a format could have – www.minidisc.org

PC says: You don't say what player software you are currently using on the netbook, or how large your collection is. You need a solution which will not overpower this limited device. Personally, with my ingrained preference for Squeeze I would be inclined to at least try using the free SqueezePlayer running on the PC alongside a Logitech Media Server on the same machine, with tablet control supplied by iPeng HD running on an iPad. Apart from the iPad, this would cost you about a fiver to try.

The alternative would appear to be JRiver Media Centre controlled by MyRiver. If either of these stretches the current set-up too much, it may be time to consider a NAS with audio output capability, such as a RipNAS.

Cold porridge

I am writing to you in the hope you can help. Regardless of what you read or hear about the so-called cushy life of serving prisoners, there are things that we can't have – MP3 players, iPods, iPads, etc.

The one thing we are allowed is the very short-lived MiniDisc player. Alas after ten years of Sony calling time on its mini wonder, they are very much prized by prisoners. It's such a shame that Sony retired this product, as the MiniDisc is the perfect format in which to transfer a large collection of CDs (in my case 180 in six boxes) taking up a lot of space in a small cell and over the seven years that I have been inside, my family has spent a small fortune on CDs and audio cassettes.

Lost in space

Dear David – I've been trying to email you regarding Mordaunt Short MS10 and MS15 loudspeakers from 1987-88, as I have purchased a pair of each at a hi-fi sale (both in fantastic working order) in Sydney, Australia with original serial numbers and cones. They sound very good and have been well looked after, which for 200 (Aus) dollars I consider a real bargain. I would, therefore, be most grateful if you could advise me regarding specs or any other info regarding the above speakers.

I'm retired now and at 67 enjoy hi-fi as a hobby. My system is a Rotel RC03 preamp and RB03 power amp, with a Denon turntable DP 3011, Stanton 681EEE stylus and RCD02 CD player, CD6002 and CDR1000 recorder. Thank you for your advice and best wishes to all at Hi-Fi Choice.

Lionel Cusack, Australia

DP says: I ran a pair of original Mordaunt Short MS10s with an NVA AP30 integrated amplifier in the late eighties, driven by a Linn LP12/Lttok/Super SD900. I bought the MS10s because I'd run out of money, having spent a great deal on the source; the MS10s only cost £70 or so, as I remember. I still remember that system with great affection – it was extremely musical.

The MS10s were, of course, the company's bottom model, a small ported design not much bigger than a BBC LS3/5a.

I had mine Blu-Tacked to the window ledges, with cut-up sponges (i.e. home made foam bungs) shoved in the ports. I seem to remember that the power rating was about 50W RMS, and they had Ferrofluid cooled cloth dome tweeters – the company's titanium domes appeared further up the range, on the MS25Ti!

Sensitivity was relatively good for such small boxes, around 88dB/1w, I recall. The cabinets were very thin vinyl coated chipboard (or similar), built was only so-so. But this didn't seem to matter, and they sung like canaries when given a good source.

ES says: Most of the legacy information on these products was lost over the course of the upheaval at MS in the late nineteen nineties, so you might want to contact the good folks at Lockwood Audio (www.lockwoodaudio.co.uk/) who look after the pre-1999 Mordaunt Short designs and might have some of the information required.



Mordaunt Short Aviano 1 – today's direct descendant of Lionel's long, lost, much loved MS10 mk1...

After reading the excellent article *Music non-stop?* by Channa Vithana on p85 of the July issue (HFC 360), I realised that it's a format I know very little about.

As I don't own a MiniDisc, but having been lent one to try out was very impressed by it, do you have any archive features explaining the format in more detail? I'd also like to contact Sony and tell them that market is still there with the prison population at just over 85,000! A run of one million units would make it a worthwhile retooling...

Hi-Fi Choice is a great read and there is always something to drool over. Having been a cinema projectionist for almost forty years, I was well aware that cinema

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07 Dec: [Service manuals](#) Jimma Phink kindly sends in service manuals for the Kenwood KMD-67 (R) (see MD) and Sony MDS-JB920 MDS-JB920 MDS-638 MZ-DH10P MZ-870 MZ-871 MZ-4715 MZ-8810 MZ-N5200 MZ-8701 MZ-BV10 and MZ-BV10.

09 Jul: [Sony in End MiniDisc](#) Wellman Productions Many sources are reporting today that Sony will cease MiniDisc production in September. The format has had a great 19 year run during which Sony added over 22 mil. on devices. Bookshelf HiFi systems and black MD media will continue to be produced for another year.

08 Jun: [Sony DCR-208 User Manual](#) Philippe Bergheud kindly sends along the Sony DCR-208 (digital still-image recorder) user operation manual (in French and English). This was in industrial lab equipment that uses MD DATA Minidisks for storage.

10 Apr: [TASCAM UPGRADES MINIDISC COMBO TO MD-CD/MKII](#) Was going to post this in the News section, but find I don't have permission to post there. So, here it is: here's a new MD deck! (Well, if not new, at least upgraded.)

<http://catalogs.infocomm.com/AVC/CTL1642/index.cfm?manufacturer=tascam&prod=546>

08 Mar: [Panasonic SC-M20 manual](#) Gerd Reichardt kindly sends in his scan of the English Panasonic SC-M20 manual.

01 Mar: [Sony HX-M200 reborn for \\$395 from Sony](#) A reader kindly points out that 3 refurbished Sony HX-M200 portable MD recorders with full warranty are available from Sony.

Site Overview
(The content on one huge page)
Frame - Vertical, Horizontal

What are MiniDiscs?
FAQs: Complete, MDLP, Hi-MD, Newbie, Non-MD, Editability, Audio Quality

Techniques
Direct Access, Tutorial, Non-MD, ATRAC, MD Disc, Parents, History, Research Data

Equipment
Equipment Browser
Accessories Browser
Uploading, Recorders
File comparison
User reported archives

Malware Lists
Main C-MDL archive
MD mailing & other lists
Malware Sites

Discussion Boards:
MiniDisc Community's Forum
MDCentral: MDRebates
T-Station: Reborn,OMA (free)

Purchasing (Reasons)
Price, Equipment, Blank, Pre-recorded, accessories, Used, Browse, Buy, Ebay.

Hi-MD
[Announcement](#) (opens)
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Press and Journal Coverage
General, Praise, Myths, Media, Marketing, Politics, Disaster, Historical, Technical

Operations and Service Manuals

Hacking
Service Mode, Tapes & Filing, Construction, Repairs

Code Lists & Shortcuts
[Tasks & Tips](#) (old)

Links
Theory and Reference, Compression, Politics, Batteries, Competition, Home, Data, Training, Commerce, Repair, MD7, Hacking, DSP, Non-Standard.

Future

Feedback

Acknowledgements

Mobile MD News
(by your PDN)



sound was always at the forefront of developing sound technology. I'm very old school – having missed out on the latest digital projection – and recall when going to the pictures was an event. Just memories now, alas. Let's hope the MiniDisc doesn't become a memory too!

Brian White, HMP Maidstone

PC says: I loved the format in its day (in fact I recorded a well-regarded live album for Boo Hewerdine on an MZR-30 about ten years ago, and there are

www.minidisc.org: an amazing resource for what is a loveable format

other examples of MD-sourced live albums!), but the sad fact is my Sony machines haven't seen action in a long time as the format was rapidly eclipsed by affordable uncompressed hard disk recording and portable DAPs in the early noughties.

Fond memories of holidays listening to digital B-side compilations in the late nineties remind me that MD felt a lot more like the joy of making a tape than the playlising of the last ten years does. You need to get a friend to scour the Oxfams of the shires for you, for all their redundant MD paraphernalia!

CV says: Thanks for your positive feedback on my column. I would suggest getting someone to do a search online to see if they can buy out-of-print editions of HFC with MiniDisc features and reviews – this is fairly easy to do when you type in MiniDisc and Hi-Fi Choice into a search engine like Google – there are some interesting technical articles on MiniDisc, including at least one authored by Paul Miller.

You can also get printouts from websites that feature MiniDisc

if you don't have Internet access and see if old brochures can be attained from dealerships and/or from the sales department at manufacturers, as these tend to have good quality photography and should have specific technical info, too. Sites like amazon.co.uk still seem to sell blank and pre-recorded MiniDiscs, and there are also some secondhand players on sale.

DP says: I was an early convert to the Internet, and one site I used to frequent just a little too often in the mid-nineties was www.minidisc.org. It's an amazing resource for what I still think is a very loveable format. If you have Internet access, this is the answer to your prayers; if not then get a friend to print out every single page!

Supersonics

I noted John R Walsh's letter *Streams come true* in the September 2012 edition (HFC 362) with interest. I too have a fair number of DVD-As, and SACDs, and despite the suggestion that the formats are obsolete, there is a healthy number of new SACD releases. I buy from a US website – accousticsounds.com – and recent remastered releases which I've purchased on SACD include all five Doors albums (available in hybrid multichannel SACD and vinyl), to all five of Norah Jones's albums (ditto SACD and Vinyl).

I was also interested in the Electrocompaniet player. I downloaded its owners manual from the website, and as I read through it, a sense of *dèjà vu* came over me. Because I was also contemplating buying the Oppo BDP-95EU, I had previously downloaded its user manual. The two documents are virtually identical, the specification is identical, and physically they are very similar; display panels and buttons are slightly different, and the physical locations of some

external connections different, but I would have thought that they are identical. The prices, however, are very different: the Oppo is around £1,000 with multi-region, the Electrocompaniet around £2,000.

Maybe the Electrocompaniet has substantially upgraded components, such as power supply, better components, etc., much like Russ Andrews' £600 or so electrical component upgrade for the Oppo, but without a great deal more detail the price looks excessive. I purchased the Oppo, and am very pleased with it.

Like John, I have an Arcam player, the DV139, but it has nothing like the Oppo's (and Electrocompaniet's) audio options over HDMI, although its 5.1 analogue output is great. A review of both Electrocompaniet and Oppo would be interesting...

Mike Buller

ES says: It is worth pointing out that there are several iterations of the Oppo platform – Oppo itself makes two players that share front end processing but have completely different audio decoding. In the current climate I think we need to accept that any company of less than multi-national size is going to have to buy in its Blu-ray platform and tweak it to requirements.

Hard times

My system consists of a Naim DAC, Musical Fidelity A1 FBP preamp, Musical Fidelity 550k monoblock power amps, Acoustic Energy Reference 2 speakers and Nordost Red Dawn interconnects.

I've started the transition to hard disk music by feeding my Naim DAC via a Vortexbox, Squeezebox Duet and optical cable. The sound is good, but not as good when compared to my Musical Fidelity A3 Transport, via Black Rhodium Opera DCT++ interconnect (BNC).

The music seems to lose some transparency which may be due

Will a Naim NDX streamer give better sound than a Naim DAC driven by an ND5XS? Probably not, we say!

to the Wi-Fi and optical cable, so can you suggest some better solutions? I'm considering using a decent USB cable (suggestions!) via a Musical Fidelity V-Link 192, as it's meant to offer asynchronous transfer, as well as a galvanically isolated S/PDIF connection. What do you think?

I would also like to know if a dedicated steamer product like the Naim NDX would offer significantly better performance than the above, as it would only be used to retrieve data off the HDD and feed the DAC?

Mike Green

MS says: Something such as a Linn DS or Naim ND5 XS streamer will definitely outperform your Squeezebox Duet and optical connection, even if it is 'only' – as you say – retrieving data off your VortexBox. Believe me, retrieving data is something that is easy to do but is certainly not easy to do well. Optical connections are not the best at this level of the game and I prefer BNC to BNC leads for communication with my Naim DAC. They are demonstrably superior. Forget all that asynchronous USB stuff as well: the Naim DAC has no USB input, for good reason. USB is only an issue if you are using a laptop computer as your player, which is not a great idea.

I take it you have not modified the Vortexbox and that it is still operating as a UPnP server, as it should be? In short, a dedicated UPnP streamer connected with high quality Ethernet cable (try Meicora) is definitely the way to go. Forget USB and wireless for the immediate future if you want the best sound quality.

ES says: I am not completely convinced that the NDX will be a significant step forward over the existing Naim DAC, but there would be no harm in trying – if you are keeping the DAC.

The ND5XS might be a better bet as it contains much of the same functionality and would save you £1,000. Using a wired network will definitely aid stability and is highly likely to improve matters sonically as well.

What does it all mean?

Listening to different hi-fis, each reflecting individual preferences and purchasing choice, I have been thinking about the recreation of the original recording and the difference in sound reproduction. Why do some CDs sound heavy with bass? Is it the recording studio or the production team? Imitating the equipment of the recording studios would provide similar sounds, but would of course require multiple systems to accommodate multiple CDs and is clearly not practical. The studio clearly has an impression on sound reproduction.

Several musicians wanted the skill of Sir George Martin and Abbey Road...

Several musicians wanted the skill of Sir George Martin and ambience of Abbey Road Studios after the success of The Beatles. Sea Sick Steve's early music sounds, for example, more Bluesy and raw compared to his later polished releases.

I read reviews declaring certain equipment as neutral, clinical or warm sounding, some are recommended for classical music or female vocal, etc. Then I read that Ken Ishiwata tweaked the Marantz product for the British market. What is the British market? How does the manufacturer reveal the original intended sound when there are so many parameters to take into consideration?

When Compact Discs were digitally remastered, they were tweaked noticeably, with an increase in volume levels. Are digital downloads tweaked to enhance the original sound? Most of us are unable to buy a complete system of choice from a retailer due to limited stock and we are dependent on your reliable, high quality reviews!

Steve Brunson

DP says: I take your point, Steve. Hi-fi has the possibility

of disappearing up its own phono socket, to put it politely. The whole pursuit is based on the attainment of some sort of supposed perfection. But this itself is tortuously hard to define, simply because the sound of music – not even across genres but across recordings – is so different. There are hundreds of recordings of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, for example, but even they – supposedly with the same instruments (although that in itself is another subject!) – rarely sound similar, let alone alike.

This comes down to a whole host of factors, from the concert venue, the ambient temperature, the size of the audience, the particular instruments used, etc., to the recording chain – analogue tape, hard disk, etc. Then there's the mastering too!

Just to boggle the mind still further, there's also that traditional attack line of classical music diehards, criticising hi-fi reviewers for using rock and/or electronic music (which itself is dependent on the reply chain for its sound) to evaluate equipment. How can you talk about 'the closest approach to the original sound' when there is – strictly speaking – no acoustic origin?

So, before we all disappear in a puff of logic, I'd say this. When evaluating equipment, use the hi-fi magazines as a primary research tool, to get a flavour on what's available, and a general sense of a product's abilities. Then find a dealer and listen to some shortlisted kit using music you are familiar with, and ideally that you have heard live – that should at least give you a clue!

Table talk

We can all agree that the main purpose of reviews is to inform and guide purchasing choices. So it logically follows that the reader must be told what the reviewer is comparing to the item being reviewed.

I should hope you agree that conclusions like "tightening up the sound", "gained extra high frequency precision", "does improve detail, just not to the extent of more sophisticated options", "making individual lines within the music easier to follow", etc., are not useful unless we know the comparator.

You may have twigged that all the above quotes are from Richard Black's reviews for isolation platforms (*Minitest* October, HFC 363). Why can't he say what he was using as a comparator?

I think it is quite likely that his conclusions would differ if that were an Ikea coffee table, a Townsend Seismic Sink, or a two-foot high slab of granite.

Roger Perry

DP says: Richard tells us he was using an IKEA Lack coffee table as a starting point. This is a very good basic design, made from simple, cheap MDF with a light wood veneer. It's not the best sounding thing around, but is representative of the sort of thing that many people use. As well as looking neat, it costs a trifling £8 – and so it's excellent value, compared to dumping your kit on the floor!

As Richard found, all the sub-tables tested made a difference in sound, some a profound and useful one, others not. I'd certainly recommend everyone to investigate upgrading their system supports.



Audiophile Base 01 sub-table: a brilliant upgrade over a standard coffee table!

Squeezed out again

You published my last letter – *Squeezed Out* – October 2012 (HFC 363) and I found your replies most interesting. I remembered why I bought the squeezebox in preference to a Sonos-based system. It is simply a question of price.

For a Sonos set up you need the Sonos 'player' itself, plus a handheld controller, plus a separate device if you need wireless transmission. The cost of all that adds up to quite a bit more than a Squeezebox – which

for about £200 has the lot – wireless (or hard wired Ethernet) and control, without paying for a separate handset. All assuming you don't have an iPad. And so it is a very cost-effective introduction to streaming. The fact that the Squeezebox handles hi-res files is a bit of a red herring as most music is still CD-resolution.

But your replies got me thinking about the power supply. And so I invested in the linear PSU from Mr Brooks (mains-cables-r-us.co.uk) plus a decent power lead.



I had always been sceptical about the benefits to be had from such devices. But I remain quite staggered by the resulting improvement. The sound is on a different level – in line with your reviews. I spoke several times with David at MCRU, who is one of the most down-to-earth and helpful suppliers of hi-fi kit I have ever encountered [crikey, that's laying on a bit thick, eh David? Ed.]. Would I return to the Wall Wart that comes with the Squeezebox? Not a chance...

As it happens, while I whinged about stability of server software, all has been stable with my Squeezebox over the last couple of months – but thank you for your comments on the use of the tuned SSOTS package.

As an aside, one of the key benefits for me of the Squeezebox (but also a feature of the Sonos, I believe) is the access to a trillion internet radio stations. I am now looking forward to reading your review of the Sonos in a future edition.

Michael Olney

DP says: *Don't look too long, Michael, as you should have found it by now in this issue!*

Diamond geezer

Dear Malcolm, thanks for the review of the Well Tempered turntable. What honesty! Plonkers do spout crap about cartridge alignment. I too have heard little difference. Also different types of oil make no difference! 3-in-1 is for sewing machines, I feel. Next, they will be telling us different types of polish will make my Lenco music centre better. You are a diamond, or is that a gem!

Anon

MS says: *And thank you for your appreciation. I have the greatest respect for pragmatic design, like that of William Firebaugh of Well Tempered and Bob Crump of TG Audio. It often brings far greater rewards than one might expect. But I am not entirely certain I agree with you about oils however, even though we both seem to be in complete accord about cartridge alignment paranoia!*

LETTER OF THE MONTH

LINN'S IVOR TIEFENBRUN'S

comments on CD cannot be allowed to pass without some rational counter-argument. For him to claim: "We lost a generation of music lovers through CD" is so obviously wrong, it's laughable. Music sales actually went up after the launch of Compact Disc – there is a major difference between music lovers and people who are hi-fi enthusiasts.

It can also be argued that CD actually increased the number of people buying music. And how did it do that? Convenience. Not having to faff about with vertical tracking, levelling an LP deck, turning an LP over when one side had finished, trying to cue the right track, and so on...

So, contrary to Ivor's comments, CD actually encouraged people to buy music – just as the iPod has done. The quality may not be as good – but perhaps it will encourage people who love music to improve their systems now that they have more access to it.

Finally, I'm not sure how Ivor can say he wants more people to be involved in music when his own company's products are way above the price most people would consider paying. Perhaps, this is a case of 'people in glass houses?' eh Ivor?

Michael Thomas

DP says: *Well, it was always going to happen – the Ivor Tiefenbrun backlash, that is! Last month Mr T said some pretty damning things about Compact Disc, not least that it wasn't musical and created a last generation of listeners with nothing truly top quality available to listen to, and/or buy. I have to say that I think he was absolutely correct. I felt very strongly, circa 1990, that my beloved vinyl LP was being forcibly taken away from me, and no one was offering me anything better. Instead – as is the case with so many politicians/governments/multinationals, etc., then and now – they were giving me an inferior product, telling me I was stupid if I didn't agree, and charging me more for the privilege. To my ears, the vinyl LP still reigns supreme in the musicality stakes, offering an quality of sound that simply isn't possible even from hi-res digital, let alone 16-bit Red Book. So, in this respect, I think Ivor's comments were absolutely correct...*

However, that doesn't mean CD is the scourge of modern civilisation, as it is often portrayed by analogue-loving stick-in-the-muds. The little silver Frisbee can be made to sound very nice in its slightly digital way. I have heard a number of decent CD transport/DAC combinations really working magic with those ones and noughts, pitted into the silver surface. For example, I recently experienced a top Esoteric CD spinner hooked up to a Chord Electronics DAC 64, and was absolutely beguiled. On a wider level, even when not inside an exotic player of some description, the 16-bit disc can be far more effective at storing music for Joe Public than vinyl. My friends and family wouldn't be able to get as good a sound from vinyl as they can from their CD players – because they're not willing to commit time and/or money to get a decently set-up, high performance record player. For them, as you suggest, CD is a very positive thing...

Now though, some say it has reached the final curtain and it's time for us all to move on. Or is it? In a way it's still very nice to pop a disc in a machine and press play, and get sound out – instead of having to set up a computer network first, wired or wireless. So the format survives – impure, imperfect sound and all – for now... ●



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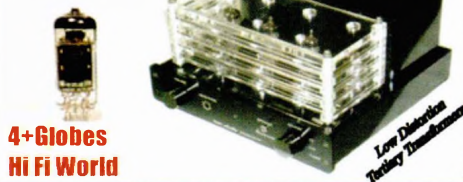


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Laser visions

Patrick Cleasby fondly recalls his very first CD purchases, and ponders their longevity in the virtual age...

Do you remember the first CDs you bought? I do – one day in late 1985 I purchased a copy of *The Nightfly* from Laskys, *Signals* and *Songs*

From *The Big Chair* from a hi-fi shop in Gateshead, and *Dire Straits, Flesh + Blood* and *The Wall* from Virgin in Newcastle.

So that's me pegged as a nineteen eighties guy then, but the point is I still have those discs twenty seven years later, and they still sound as good as the day they were bought, if not quite "perfect forever". And in many cases, despite multiple remasterings they are the sought-after 'go-to' versions for the discerning audiophile.

From that point onwards, I proceeded to fill out all those legacy artists' catalogues and many more besides, but for a couple of years I was surrounded by people who were in the 'it'll never catch on' camp. By 1987 I was working in the Durham branch of Virgin on Saturdays, Rush's back catalogue was released in one (expensive) day, and despite the fleeting ascendancy of the humble pre-recorded Compact Cassette, the battle seemed won!

However, many were still sceptical that some obscure catalogue items would ever materialise – there was a guy who used to come in every Saturday to ask "Is Everyone Knows This Is Nowhere out on CD yet?" I wonder if he's now discovered the 24-bit/192kHz version from *Archives, Volume One* Blu-rays in his dotage?

The real marker along the way for me was the painful phase when new CD releases did not hit the street 'day and date' with the vinyl and cassette – sometimes there was a delay of months waiting for albums like Joni Mitchell's *Dog Eat Dog*, Jackson Browne's *Lives in the Balance* and Talk Talk's *The Colour of Spring* to drop in the new digital format. In those cases I managed to avoid double analogue/digital dipping...

Why does this all spring nostalgically to mind? Because my latest dabblings with HDTracks and Qobuz gave me that 'day and date' feeling – I tend to buy in clusters of three and, in the space of a month, I leapt from the usual kind of for-the-sake-of-it legacy purchase (Bob Marley *Legend*, Lionel Richie *Can't Slow Down* and Rod Stewart's *Gasoline Alley* – we could be back in 1985 again) to a set of three new albums available in 24/96 FLAC, before I could think of trying to find a CD store.

Take a bow *Storm Corrosion* by Steven Wilson, *Clockwork Angels* by Rush and *Rhythm and Repose* by Glen Hansard. My taste hasn't improved that much, but by happenstance I could round up the stuff from

the top of my shopping list in my preferred format once again. Shortly afterwards Hot Chip's excellent new album appeared on French site Qobuz in 24/44.1 form...

Will this situation reoccur in the short term? Probably not – we're not all the way there yet, and once again I feel doubtful that I'll ever see *El Rayo X* in a new format, if for no other reason that the tapes have had an extra twenty five years in which to decay or get lost. But essentially high-resolution music is yet to have, and may never have its '1987' moment – the step-change when it really goes mainstream.

This is never likely to happen until someone in the UK has the gumption to emulate or even improve on the US-constrained HDTracks or the France-constrained Qobuz. Both also supply lossless 16/44.1 tracks, and the world-leading UK industry doesn't – apart from some paltry efforts from 7digital. I have heard some mutterings that there are interested parties, but nothing has emerged from the woodwork yet. I even made some enquiries myself six years ago before my broadcast television work intervened, and at the time the UK majors wanted to keep audiophile possibilities to themselves. Barring a few hard-to-find 24/96 DVDs in expensive limited vinyl editions, nothing much seems to have come of it.

So will I be able to dig out the sleeves of my 2012 purchases when I'm 73 and reminisce? Regrettably not – but just like most CDs they'll sound just as good as they did when they were bought – as long as I haven't lost the data or my hearing. Data can be backed up – hearing preservation is a trickier matter – but by 2037 of course, I will be watching a holographic Ambisonic presentation of Rush rather than listening to stereo at all...



The real marker for me was when new CD releases did not hit the street 'day and date' with the vinyl and cassette...



PATRICK CLEASBY
Works for the BBC, is a fan of network music and vinyl

Fourth dimension

Richard Black remembers the long lost sound system that is Ambisonics...

After all the fuss about multichannel audio a few years ago, we seem to have settled back into stereo. It isn't perfect, but is capable of creating astonishingly lifelike images when well done, and it's not desperately critical with regards to layout of loudspeakers and listeners. And, of course, it doesn't require ridiculous numbers of boxes to do the job.

But surround sound has been with us as a concept for several decades, and one particular implementation continues to attract attention. A couple of recent papers in the *Journal of the Audio Engineering Society* mention it, and I chanced upon an article (undated, but recent) on the BBC's website mentioning the Beeb's renewed investigations of it. Of course, I refer to Ambisonics, the scheme invented by the late Michael Gerzon, audio boffin extraordinaire, with Peter Fellgett and others, back in the nineteen seventies.

In the barest outline, Ambisonics is the logical extension of Blumlein stereo to three dimensions. Blumlein's concept relies on intensity (loudness) differences between two loudspeakers to create 'virtual' sound sources at any position on a line between, and to some extent beyond, the loudspeakers. It's basically a one-dimensional system. Yes, we all know that a good stereo system gives an impression of depth, but that's strictly a bit of a trick, relying on our learned expectations of the relation between direct and diffuse sound to convince us that we are hearing what is strictly not there. To give depth you need a third loudspeaker, suitably placed, and to complete the three-dimensional image with height you need a fourth.

An Ambisonic recording system uses an array of four directional microphones, just as Blumlein stereo uses two, 'coincident' – that is, as close to each other as is practically possible. A regular tetrahedral arrangement is used, where the angle between any two microphone elements is the same. By analogy with stereo, one might think that a tetrahedral array of loudspeakers would be needed to reproduce the sound field captured in this way, and indeed that can work well. However, it's not the only way...

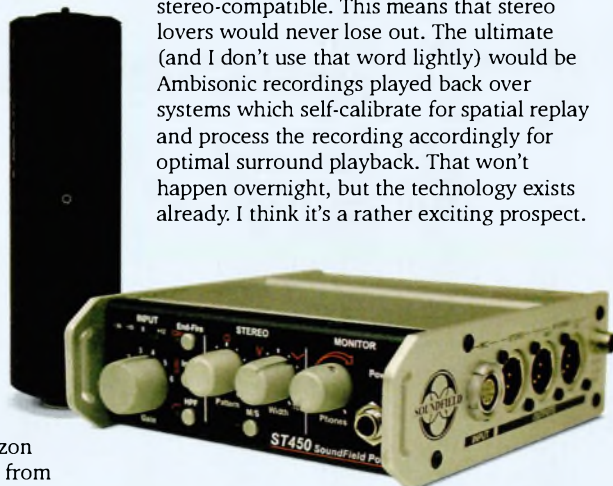
One of the many clever things Gerzon did with Ambisonics was to include, from the very outset, ways of manipulating the

signals captured by the microphones for compatibility with all sorts of loudspeaker setups. For a start, the regular output from the Ambisonics recording system (generally implemented as a microphone array and a box of signal-processing electronics) is not, in fact, the raw output from each microphone capsule, but a four-channel signal including a mono signal and three directional signals, one for each dimension. So the system is obviously mono-compatible. It's simple enough to derive a pair of signals corresponding to regular stereo, too, and this is always available. That's a one-way transform: in other words, once you've rejected two channels-worth of directional information you can't get it back.

There are ways of encoding some, though not all, of an Ambisonic recording's surround information into two channels, and this was done on LPs and on FM radio using 'UHJ', one of a rather confusing number of Ambisonics-based schemes (and it does occur to me that the proliferation of these, and their bewildering nomenclature, may be part of the reason why Ambisonics has never quite caught on). We could perfectly well do the same on CD and download tracks, and a few are available. But now that so much audio is made, stored and played on or from a computer, with no physical limit to the number of tracks, there's an obvious alternative.

Indeed, Ambisonic recordings can be downloaded from various sites, and software-based Ambisonic decoders are available. It would be good if this were to spread more widely because, unlike all other surround systems, Ambisonics is invariably stereo-compatible. This means that stereo lovers would never lose out. The ultimate (and I don't use that word lightly) would be Ambisonic recordings played back over systems which self-calibrate for spatial replay and process the recording accordingly for optimal surround playback. That won't happen overnight, but the technology exists already. I think it's a rather exciting prospect.

We all know that a good stereo sound system gives an impression of depth, but that's strictly a bit of a trick...



RICHARD BLACK
Prolific musician, recording engineer and reviewer

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Forever changes

Times change, and system sound with it. **Jimmy Hughes** remembers his system through the ages...

If you've owned various hi-fi systems over the years, and upgraded, you can't help but wonder if things have progressed. Of course, it's hopefully been one massive improvement following another. But 'improvements' can be double-edged; better in some respects, worse in others.

In the past thirty or so years I've made plenty of changes. However, having had the same loudspeakers for over twenty years – Impulse H1 horns – there's been a thread of consistency these past two decades. Despite this, things sound very different today compared to (say) ten or fifteen years back.

I'm enjoying a far more immediate and focused sort of sound – one with greater dynamics and attack. At the same time, things are tonally natural and unexaggerated, with better clarity and more fine detail. Many recordings that used to disappoint technically, no longer do so.

Indeed, some that initially seemed underwhelming, now sound so impressive I can't imagine how or why they could ever have seemed poor. So, what's made the difference? Well, a few years ago, I augmented my H1s with the horn-loaded, high-frequency drivers from a pair of Klipsch Heresy IIIs. This turned the H1 in to a full-range horn. The original H1 tweeter was a conventional inverted dome type, so adding horn-loaded HF drivers has made the upper frequencies more immediate and incisive. This was a pretty significant change, but it wasn't really pivotal. And that's the problem.

Hi-fi is very much a team sport. So when I look at the changes and upgrades made in (say) the last ten or so years, it's clear that progress largely boils down to a series of small, but significant victories rather than a single decisive knockout blow. There's been no magic bullet that suddenly transformed base metal into gold.

Recent things making a worthwhile difference include the Classe CP-800 preamp, IsoTek's mains conditioner, and FAB's support platforms. But realistically, each of these simply made a good team even better. None would have worked their magic unless the fundamentals were right.

But, what constitutes progress? In my case, a key difference is the volume level I now listen at. Compared with a few years back, I definitely listen at lower levels for the same subjective impression of loudness. Because the sound has crisper focus and better delineation, the music projects more powerfully, and seems louder. Transients have stronger attack, and dynamic contrasts are greater. The increased immediacy makes the music more involving and engaging.

This leads to some interesting side effects. Perhaps the main one is reduced sensitivity to faults and limitations in source material.

With the passing years, my hi-fi definitely seems to have become much less dependent on the absolute quality of the recordings played. During the nineteen eighties, the equipment I used was far more critical of flaws, yet paradoxically the sound then was nothing like as dynamic and detailed as I achieve now.

This smacks of alchemy. How is it possible for a hi-fi system to produce a more dynamic and immediate sound, with noticeably crisper high frequencies, while at the same time not exposing things like tape hiss or rough edged high frequencies?

There are several explanations, and playback volume is a key ingredient. If the sound is better-focused and clearer, you can listen at lower volume levels for the same subjective impression of loudness. The perceived volume seems much the same, but in real terms it's lower. So, tape hiss and LP surface noise are less apparent.

If you understand the ear's logarithmic sensitivity to loudness, you'll appreciate how and why volume levels are critical. Because background noise always falls on the steeper part of the ear's sensitivity curve, a small reduction in volume subjectively affects the ear's perception of noise far more than the music.

Also, because you're playing slightly quieter, you're using less power. Components like power amps and loudspeaker drivers/cabinets are under less stress, resulting in a sound that's cleaner and more transparent. So, whenever I alter my hi-fi, I try to evaluate whether or not the changes give the music greater presence and immediacy. You should be able to enjoy a much wider range of material without recording quality determining your enjoyment.

Listen to live acoustic (unamplified) music, and notice the open natural tonal quality allied to crisp transient attack and a smooth even decay. That's the goal we're aiming for. Good live sound has a very effortless quality, yet there's plenty of bite when this is called for.

Alas, there's no magic fix when it comes to making a hi-fi system deliver this sort of result. It's a combination of factors – and perhaps a bit of luck, too; having a room that's sympathetic to the equipment being used helps hugely.

Inevitably, the absolute quality of the equipment itself plays a big part. But often it is things like cables and accessories that make the vital difference that allows your hi-fi system to punch above its weight.

With the passing years, my hi-fi definitely seems to have become much less dependent on the absolute quality of the recordings played



JIMMY HUGHES
Classical music buff, sage audiophile
and hi-fi reviewer

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Style counsel

Channa Vithana mourns the disregard that hi-fi has traditionally had for sound aesthetics in design...

You might have heard about Arne Jacobsen – he created, amongst other designs, the famous ‘Egg’ and ‘3107’ chairs (popularised in elegantly formed plywood). To me they are just two wonderfully expressive examples of Danish design that epitomise clean, orderly yet strangely emotive creations from that part of Scandinavia.

There is usually an understated quality to the products from these northerly, chilly parts of Europe, and it can even stretch to the UK – as when I came across a hidden treasure at 55 Sloane Street in London, the home of the Danish Embassy. I was invited to a book launch there and was surprised to see that it was extended with a fantastic interior and rooftop courtyard (and other elements) by Jacobsen during the period of his passing away, where it was later completed by others. Even a semi-Jacobsen design such as 55 Sloane Street, had an elegance that saw its modernity – delicate layers of wrapped metal and glass grafted ever so harmoniously within and around the grander, older parts of the brick-built Embassy showing that sensitivity in design doesn’t mean the creator(s) loses the identity of what they have crafted.

When it comes to hi-fi, and you discuss high-quality audio to a non-believer, it is likely that they usually think of or mention Bang & Olufsen, who apart from being Danish create exactly the type of designs that Jacobsen did – which embody sleek style that is ironically rich in materials, yet elegant in the simplicity of operation. It is this distinction that separates good Scandinavian design from being incorrectly labelled as ‘modernist’ and, therefore, perceived as sterile and cold by those who don’t like modern designs (or who haven’t been exposed to modernism’s deeper, more sanguine facets).

Consequently, these designs cannot be labelled ‘brutalist’ in a way that, say, Naim Audio’s fantastic sounding NAP 250 power amplifier was derided by those who thought the Naim sound was monochromatic. I never did, but I wonder how much of that assumption was based upon how the sharply turned-out sleeved-casework was designed and the negative psychological effect it might have had on an anti-modern, non-Naim believer?

At least here in the UK, Naim, Linn and Cyrus too made high-quality designs that were distinctive and relatively compact during the eighties and nineties – whereas comparatively in America, the power amplifier typology was

somewhat different. Huge boxes festooned with lights, multiple knobs and/or large power meters were (and in some cases, still are) the order of the day.

Ayre is a delightful exception in that their products look generally hewn from solid in appearance, and lacking unnecessary lights, etc. A couple of good examples are the MX-R and VX-R power amplifiers, replete with elegant, solid casework and fine design details that reflect light rather nicely and are not too shouty in their countenance.

You really can’t get any simpler than a power amplifier when it comes to design – yet so many companies get it wrong by trying too hard to please in the showroom. While I really like the design of Ayre’s MX-R, for me it is Densen’s B-330 power amplifier that remains my favourite.

I first came to know about Densen through their DM-10 integrated amplifier, because it really surprised me – here was a beautifully designed component that was also getting good reviews in the hi-fi press at the time and was regularly described as being charismatic and engagingly musical. This peaked my interest, as usually in the hi-fi press if a product looked good, how dare it sound good too! Such was the backlash against B&O, for instance. Fortunately nowadays it’s okay or even ‘cool’ for a member of the hi-fi press to profess their delight at a B&O product without being lynched!

In terms of design the DM-10 wasn’t perfect because the two large cylindrical gold-coloured knobs, though elegantly proportioned, were somewhat bling, though later Densen designs swapped the gold for less ostentatious silver, which worked much better. However, it wasn’t until I saw the B-330 (and its B-350 mono counterpart) that I thought, yes, the design was finally complete.

What sets the B-330 apart is the deft use of aerofoil type heatsinks, carefully integrated into the main casework. Here these heatsinks are ever so elegant, delicate even, yet purposeful in a way that many power amplifiers with their gargantuan fins protruding sideways from their casework are not. Finished in ‘Albino’ silver and with just the single red light at the front and no externally visible screws or fixings at the top and front. Being a well-designed zero-feedback power amplifier (like the Ayre designs) it also sounds super in a free-flowing, effortless manner. Oh, and I can safely say this today without being burnt at the stake for being a heretic, hopefully...

You really can't get any simpler than a power amplifier when it comes to design, yet so many companies get it wrong...



CHANNA VITHANA
Reviewer, design aficionado and music fan

Okay, computer

Jason Kennedy goes back to his Apple Mac Mini to hear the latest CAD digital-to-analogue convertor...

A couple of months back I mentioned a rather impressive new DAC from a start-up called CAD or Computer Audio Design. This 'hair-shirt' convertor only has a USB input, on a pair of single ended outputs and a captive mains lead. Oh, and it comes in an acrylic case. Remind you of anything? DNM came to my mind – it also used acrylic boxes and appeared to go out of its way to make the products difficult to use in the name of sound quality. But this hobby needs purists, and CAD's maker Scott Berry is among them.

I now have a production sample of the 1543 DAC as it's called, and have been having a bit of trouble with it. Specifically, it has proved difficult to get the sound quality that was demonstrated with the prototype. This sort of thing often comes down to compromises required to productionise a component, but the issue here is more about the source. Scott bought his fully tricked out Mac Mini to demo the original, but I don't have anything quite that hot and as this is clearly a revealing convertor it is telling me as much in pretty obvious terms.

Scott has been giving me a few tips however, and these seem to help, one is to keep the music data on a separate drive to the computer so that the CPU is not having to fetch data and run the player software from the same drive. With a solid-state SSD hard drive like the one on my Macbook Air (MBA) I didn't expect this to make much difference, I was wrong. A spinning HDD on a short lead sounds quite obviously better.

According to theory, at least, you should not connect the external drive to the same bus as the output to the DAC (that is the universal serial bus) because the USB connections are prone to interaction. However the MBA has only one alternative to USB for data and that's Apple's Thunderbolt connection, a system for which the only drives available are excessively expensive. Fortunately Apple has made a Thunderbolt to Firewire adaptor available now and one will be with me soon.

In the meantime, I tested the theory by comparing Firewire with USB on my desktop iMac, but to be frank the difference was not all that big. It's greater if you pull the data from the iMac's HDD, which adds a crisping effect to high notes that while appealing with some material is less natural than the result using a separate drive, in this case a WD Passport Studio which takes its power from the computer connection.

In the past, contests between MBA and iMac have fallen in favour of the desktop, this presumably because of its greater processing power, yet the CAD 1543 gives the opposite result where the same player software and Passport drive is used with both computers. The laptop delivers greater transparency and dynamics which makes live material sound extremely lifelike and tangible.

There is one other factor that I've introduced that has helped to bring the results closer to those with Scott's Mac Mini and that's a new USB cable from Vertere. I have been using the Vertere D-Fi as my reference USB connection for six months or so and it has always proved entertaining and revealing, but this DAC offers a very clear window onto events and all the stops had to be pulled out. Luckily Vertere had hit on the idea of running the voltage line of the USB connection in a totally separate wire and this makes a distinct improvement to the overall sound.

It is not the first USB cable to do this, the WireWorld Silver Starlight takes the same approach, but it doesn't have the vitality and openness of what Vertere is calling D-Fi Double D. This has got me quite a lot closer to the limits of the CAD 1543's capabilities, there is still work to be done and it may be necessary to look at alternative computer hardware. Even the possibility of a PC has been mooted, heaven forbid! But at the moment I'm exploring the outer reaches of my music file collection with renewed enthusiasm, and that people is what it's really all about.



I've been using the Vertere D-Fi as my reference USB connection for six months or so and it has always been entertaining and revealing...



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

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New life

Pioneer's PL-12D was the deck that put Japanese turntables on the map, taking belt drive to the masses in the process. *Tim Jarman* tells its story...

The humble Pioneer PL-12D, launched in 1973 is a small turntable with a big reputation. For those who don't know, this model is said to have effectively put paid to the British mass market turntable industry. Indeed some even say that its influence went further still, making the Swiss turntable manufacturer Lenco's products unviable too, leading inevitably to that organisation's collapse.

How could this have happened? The British market for record players in the late nineteen sixties was dominated by two names, BSR and Garrard. During these times a turntable was usually supplied as a chassis-only device intended for mounting into a cabinet, either a radiogram or a portable, by a second manufacturer who also marketed the completed machine.

BSR and Garrard produced huge numbers of such decks, both for the home market and for export. As the focus shifted from radiograms to separate hi-fi components, the British manufacturers simply repackaged their existing designs into slim wooden plinths with clear plastic covers on the top. Little work was done underneath, except for in some cases removing the (then popular) automatic record change functions in favour of 'single play' operation – it was feared that autochangers damaged records, something which the new breed of audiophiles could not countenance.

The Pioneer PL-12D was not the *first* Japanese turntable to be imported into Britain, but it was one of the first to really make an impact. Previous Japanese offerings had either been very exotic or rather

lacklustre, while the two big British names were still mostly making crude rim-drive models which in overall principle were scarcely different from what they'd been producing ten years previously.

A typical example was the Garrard SP25. This was a 'single play' unit with a stubby centre spindle and an arm which featured a removable headshell and an adjustable counterweight. Operation was clunky, yet one of these, in a plinth and ready to run, cost under £40. Until the arrival of the Pioneer, it was amazingly popular...

The first modern budget belt drive turntable with mass appeal put Pioneer on the map, back in 1973...

Drive time

The key distinguishing feature of the new PL-12D – which was only slightly more expensive than the Garrards and BSRs of the day – was that it was belt driven. This gave quiet and consistent motion to the platter in a way that rim drives couldn't, and although it had been done before, belt drive had been traditionally been the preserve of better machines. The belt drove an attractive LP-sized spun alloy platter which was fitted with a heavy rubber mat. Contrast this to the more basic British decks



with their smaller pressed platters, which could not be made quite so accurately, and Pioneer's PL-12D had yet another advantage...

Then there was the tonearm, an attractive 'S-shaped' device, beautifully finished and fitted with an adjustable counterweight and an anti-skating device. Operation of the arm was completely manual, when the record ended the stylus just sat in the run-out groove, but strangely enough this is what audiophiles wanted. Manual operation said that you knew what you were doing and that your chosen cartridge was far too sensitive and delicate to be handled by clumsy mechanisms!

What finally made the Pioneer a performance bargain was that it worked so well with Shure's M75ED moving magnet cartridge. The old British heavyweight arms never really seemed to gel with this elliptical tipped device, but the lightweight arm on the Pioneer seemed to match perfectly, the two together are a classic combination.

The PL-12D was far from being the only model that Pioneer offered around this time. By the middle of the decade, nine different turntables made up the range, some scarcely different (for example, the PL-12S was essentially the same thing but included an automatic stop device) while others were considerably more sophisticated with direct drive DC motors. It was the PL-12D that the audio community took to its heart however, so much so that the model that succeeded it, the PL-112, was disliked in some quarters for not being as good, the lack of any suspended chassis being one reason.

Smooth operator

Returning to the PL-12D today, I still find it to be an attractive, well proportioned machine. The shining 'S-shaped' tonearm still reeks of nineteen seventies cool and although the controls and trim are a bit plasticky, it's nice to use, with a precision feel. The arm is easy to set up and to give the deck the best possible chance I fitted an Ortofon 2M Bronze cartridge for my listening tests. Doing this reveals another great feature; a small button which can be raised to a position just below the stylus and whose markings show the correct longitudinal position for the cartridge. This device removes the need for stylus protractors and other such equipment, while at the same time giving a good degree of

confidence that everything is lined up properly. The switch for the motor is linked to the cueing device and so operation is very simple: start the platter, swing the arm over, drop the needle and you're away...

The motor is a four-pole synchronous type, which means that the speed is locked to the mains frequency and cannot be adjusted. Because of this, the manufacturers tended to centre the tolerances so that the decks run a little fast, the euphoric sound that this generates being broadly preferable to the turgid results that come from running too slow. This PL-12D is no exception and runs a slightly ahead of itself, something listeners today would notice very readily due to the unerringly perfect pitch of CD. The sound of the PL-12D is bright and lively, it is an assured and confident performer, and even though certain

A simple record player that gives a surprisingly good sound...

aspects are limited (absolute timing accuracy for example) I soon forgot that I was listening to a budget turntable that was forty years old.

Cueing up the (then) contemporary *Rumours* by Fleetwood Mac, and the way that the PL-12 was able to produce clean and sparkling treble complemented the recording very well. Indeed I was amazed by how such a simple device was able to extract so much information from the record grooves and how detail and texture were all laid out in such a way as to be easy to interpret. Take the twanging guitar chords in *Gold Dust Woman* for example, so easily blunted if the arm and cartridge are not working well together. Here though it's all so effortless and delicate, from a low-cost design!

If I had to be critical, I'd observe that there wasn't always as much coherent space around the instruments and performers as I know to be possible and that the soundstage was constricted into the space between the loudspeakers, but overall the results were excellent – good enough, in fact, to challenge today's budget turntables and to not necessarily come off second best. An advantage over what is currently

BUYING

These are simple decks with no electronic content so there isn't a great deal to go wrong. The motor has an oil hole which is accessible under the platter, but bear in mind that this addresses the top bearing only; by now the bottom bearing will be pretty dry too and this can only be accessed by dismantling the motor.

The arm's radial bearings can be adjusted to take up any play – provided the surfaces are not damaged this will restore good performance. The springs which support the deck should be filled with foam rubber, but this will have probably disintegrated by now leaving the whole assembly underdamped. Workable replacements can be made by cutting up a sponge; this repair can really tighten up the sound!

The Shure M75 pick-up cartridge, if fitted, is worth hanging on to. A new stylus also contains all the suspension parts so fitting one should make the whole cartridge as good as new.

available comes in the shape of the spring-mounted chassis, which means that placement is not so critical and that specialist furniture is not necessarily essential.

Final cut

The Pioneer PL-12D was a worthy competitor to the British and European decks which it supposedly supplanted all those years ago. It quickly became outmoded a few years later, as direct drive became more affordable, but deserved the success it enjoyed during its brief years of popularity.

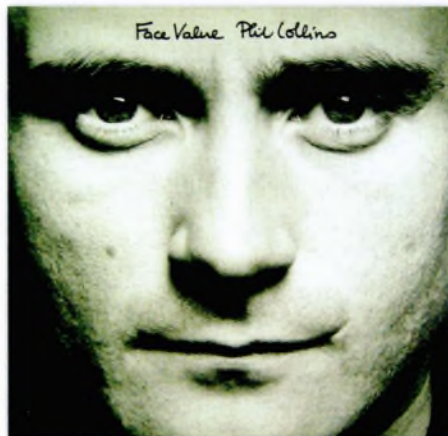
Today they are not difficult to track down or expensive to acquire and the simple construction means that reliability and ease of overhaul are also strong points. It makes sense both as a vintage artefact and as a working record player that you'll actually want to use, making it just as much of a bargain now as it was back then. Even in 2012, if you want a simple, cheap, reliable record player that will give a surprisingly enjoyable hi-fi sound, the Pioneer PL-12D is great choice. Pick one up for pennies and be amazed! ●

1981

Sexy synthesisers and lopsided haircuts are the order of the day in 1981, as **Simon Berkovitch** revisits one of pop's classic albums: The Human League's *Dare*...

Have you also recently experienced an Alex Drake moment in the year of the London 2012 Olympics? *Chariots of Fire* is back on the big screen; former athlete Daley Thompson is back in the adverts and the news; the Tories are back in power and bankers' greed is souring newspaper headlines – not forgetting the lack of cash in your own wallet. You'd be forgiven for feeling like you'd undergone a time-slip similar to *Ashes to Ashes*' very own crime-busting heroine Alex and tumbled back in time to the early nineteen eighties.

For this issue's *Year in music*, we've parked the metaphorical Ford Cortina (complete with state-of-the-art four speaker Pioneer car stereo, naturally) in 1981. This was a



The original Human League had split after two critically acclaimed but commercially unsuccessful albums – *Reproduction* and *Travelogue*...

transitional year that saw the supergroups of the Seventies – Led Zeppelin, Wings and Yes – disintegrate like vampires in the bright light of the new decade. Meanwhile, Phil Collins emerged from the shadows of former Prog rockers Genesis to embark on a terrifyingly successful solo career with debut *Face Value*...

Best of both worlds

By 1981 punk had risen, fallen and mutated into embryonic indie strains. Some punks, like Adam and the Ants with this year's big selling *Prince Charming* LP, embraced the dayglo possibilities of pop. Some post-punk artists – like Cabaret Voltaire and New Order, who had risen from the ashes of cult group Joy Division – embraced the potential of the synthesiser, drum machine and the opulent production techniques of both Kraftwerk and disco-maestro Giorgio Moroder.

Cannily, cult Sheffield-based synthesists The Human League had the vision to do both, becoming poster *Boys and Girls* for 1981's most memorable musical movement – Synthpop – with their world-beating album *Dare*, an album viewed both then and now as a pop classic.

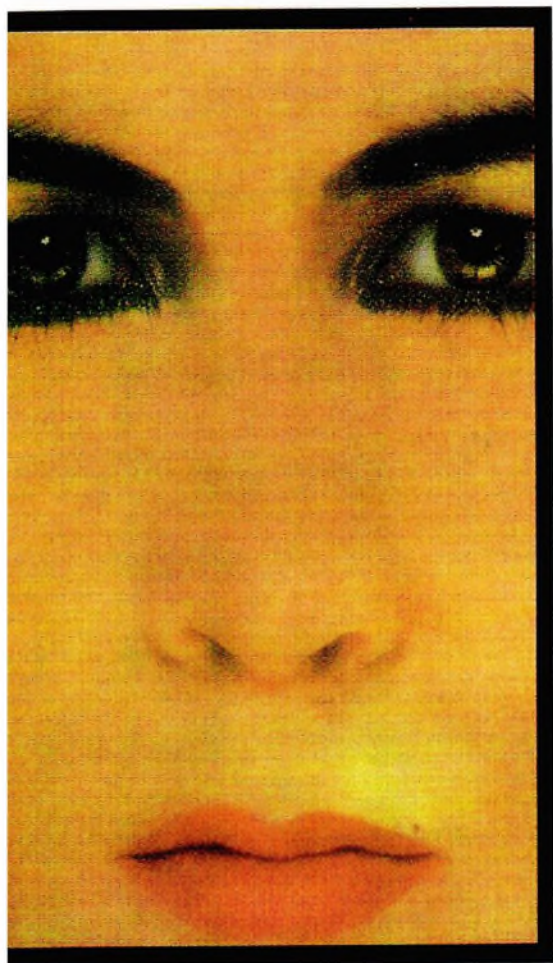
The Human League: Mark II

The Human League's evolution from arty, *avant-garde* synthesiser quartet to *bona fide* pop stars with number one singles and albums to their name was not without its casualties. The original League – Oakey, synthesiser players Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh and 'Director of Visuals' (slides and lighting) Philip Adrian Wright – had split after two critically acclaimed but commercially unsuccessful albums – *Reproduction* (1979) and *Travelogue* (1980).

THE HUMAN LEAGUE
DARE

The greatest pop album of its age, the airbrushed perfection of *Dare* caught the zeitgeist perfectly...

IN AGUE



JEALOUS GUY

a tribute

ROXY MUSIC

▶ DON'T YOU WANT ME

From sexy Synthpop – Soft Cell and The Human League – to records that chill your blood – *Grandma and Shaddap You Face*... meet the motley mix of number one singles in 1981...

St Winifred's School Choir
There's No-one Quite Like Grandma
John Lennon *Imagine* and *Woman*
Joe Dolce Music Theatre
Shaddap You Face
Roxy Music *Jealous Guy*
Shakin' Stevens *This Ole House* and *Green Door*
Bucks Fizz *Making Your Mind Up*
Adam and the Ants *Stand and Deliver* and *Prince Charming*
Smokey Robinson *Being With You*
Michael Jackson
One Day In Your Life
The Specials *Ghost Town*
Aneka *Japanese Boy*
Soft Cell *Tainted Love*
Dave Stewart and Barbara Gaskin
It's My Party
The Police *Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic*
Queen and David Bowie
Under Pressure
Julio Iglesias *Begin the Beguine*
The Human League
Don't You Want Me?

▶ THE GOLDEN HOUR OF THE FUTURE

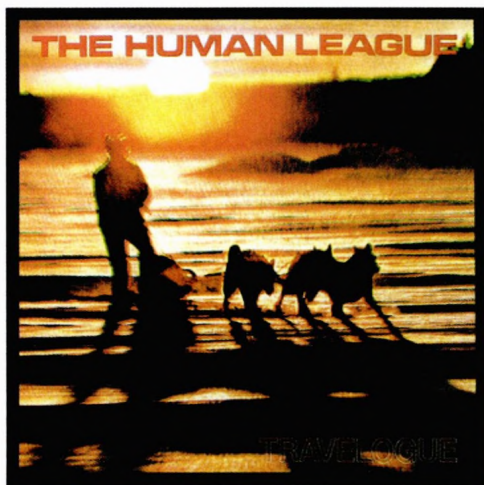
Welcome to The Future: The Human League's former life...

Demos from The Future – the legendary group that predates The Human League and included Industrial outfit Clock DVA's Adi Newton in their ranks – eventually saw the light of day in 2002.

Finally emerging on producer Richard X's *Block Melody* imprint, fittingly – as he had released an brilliant hybrid of the League's *Being Boiled* and RnB act TLC's *No Scrubs* as a bootleg 7 inch the previous year – the compilation CD features both 1977 recordings from The Future and the embryonic League with Oakey. It includes an homage to dystopian author J. G. Ballard – *4JG* – itself homage to Roxy Music's tribute to Humphrey Bogart. *2HB* – on the group's 1972 debut album.

If any further confirmation was required that Richard X was the rightful heir to The Human League's Synthpop crown, the producer scored a UK number one single with pop act Sugarbabes, with an inspired mash-up of Gary Numan's *Are Friends Electric?* and Adina Howard's *Freak Like Me* the same year.

THE YEAR IN MUSIC: 1981



The squelchy, experimental *Travelogue* was the last Human League mk 1 album to surface...

David Bowie had declared the League “the future of pop music”, after catching the band supporting proto-Goths Siouxsie and the Banshees in 1978, but their Futurist thunder had arguably been stolen by Gary Numan’s seminal Synthpop classic *Are Friends Electric?* The smart money was now on Heaven 17 – the pop group that Ware and Marsh had formed with Glenn Gregory, their first choice of vocalist for legendary pre-Human League group The Future (see *The Golden Hour of The Future*) before Oakey joined, *Being Boiled* was written and the band changed its name to The Human League.

Practically nobody would have predicted that Abba fan Oakey’s inspired decision to draft in two teenage dancers he spotted voguing in a Sheffield nightclub – Susan Ann Sulley and Joanne Catherall – and promote Wright to increased synthesiser responsibilities would lead to the genesis of one of the greatest-ever pop albums...

The sound of the crowd

Chart success had always eluded the first incarnation of The Human League, but the introduction of veteran producer Martin Rushent and new songwriter

1981 stirred up the musical firmament, the synthesiser revolution even prompting a change of sound for Queen!



partner Jo Callis (ex-The Rezillos) into the fold was to decisively turn this situation around. Sessions at Rushent’s tech-heavy Genetic Studios first yielded the persuasive pop of *The Sound of the Crowd*, reaching number 12 on the UK singles’ chart.

For Oakey and co, it was goodbye to marginal happenings on the BBC’s science programme *Tomorrow’s World* and regional TV appearances on Factory Records’ supremo Tony Wilson’s *So It Goes*, and hello to *Top of the Pops* appearances.

1981’s catchy subsequent singles, *Love Action (I Believe In Love)* and *Open Your Heart* peaked even higher (number three and number six respectively), paving the way for the album that has surely come to represent the apex of the Synthpop movement: *Dare*.

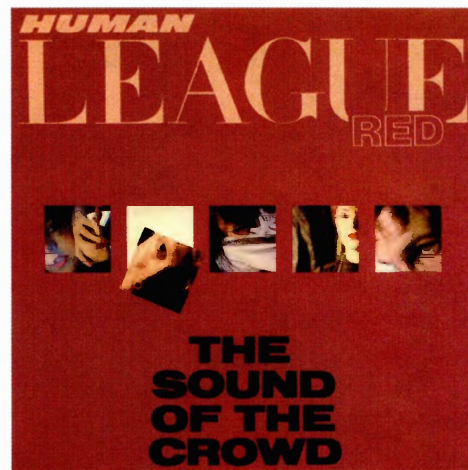
***Dare* is surely the album that has come to represent the very apex of the Synthpop movement...**

Synthesisers + vocals only

1980’s *Travelogue* may have sported the disclaimer ‘Synthesisers + vocals only’: a poke in the eye to bands like Queen who had previously – and dourly – made a point of stating ‘No synthesisers!’ on the sleeve of their debut album; ironic in the face of the previous year’s synth-drenched soundtrack to Bank Holiday mainstay *Flash Gordon*. But *Dare* was the genuine realisation of this manifesto. Eventually going triple-platinum, *Dare* was released in October and spent four weeks at the pole position in the British album charts.

Although four deathless singles can be found within its stylish, *Vogue*-inspired gatefold sleeve, the album also allows for more esoteric diversions. The Human League cover jazz composer Roy Budd’s brilliant main theme to Mike Hodges’ gritty 1971 UK gangster flick *Get Carter* and dish up a near-perfect union of Glitter Band drums and Kraftwerk synths on *Seconds*, a meditation on the 1963 Kennedy assassination. Indeed, although totally musically rooted in the emerging technology – producer Rushent had commented that without the recent emergence of the electronic Linn Drum, singles like simply would not have been possible – *Dare* is as wide-eyed at the past as it is coolly in awe of the future.

Album opener *The Things That Dreams Are Made Of* namechecks both The Ramones and Norman Pitkin – ‘Norman Wisdom, Johnny, Joey, Dee Dee,



Like every great pop album, *Dare* spawned a welter of catchy-as-hell singles, stamping itself on the UK top 40

good times’ – while it effortlessly reinvents pop music, leaving a template for artists as diverse as Madonna and the Pet Shop Boys to follow.

Don't you want me?

The massive, immediate success of the album prompted the decision to cull a fourth single from *Dare* – a track that amazingly in retrospect Phil Oakey had previously considered to be filler. Happily for wedding receptions and karaoke bars the world over, the singer acquiesced and the timeless tune was unleashed on the festive market in December. Accompanied by an unforgettable and stylised narrative-form promotional video – still an art in its infancy – the single was the much-coveted Christmas number one, and sold by the bucketload. The following July, the song even infiltrated – then dominated – the Billboard Hot 100 in the United States.

From cult indie Sheffield singles act to global pop phenomenon shifting warehouse loads of glossy Virgin LPs, the road for The Human League now pointed in an increasingly commercial direction, with mixed results. But, as the group’s 2005 *Synth City* shows clearly demonstrated – including the first live performances of *Dare* – it is 1981’s ludicrously rich musical pickings on which their considerable reputation rests. ●

More than words



words
that count . . .



'It just sounds like music, like people, like a band having fun. I love the A6's. They're GRRRRREAT!' **Hi-Fi+ Issue 63 Feb 09**

'As at home with Ice T as they are with Mahler. These are brilliant speakers for the money.' **What Hi-Fi Feb 09**

'These Spondors are true must-hear hi-fi.' **What Hi-Fi Awards 2009**

'For those who want the truth.' **Hi-Fi World Mar 09**

'The A6's are stunning.' **What Hi-Fi Feb 09**



A3



A5



A6



A9

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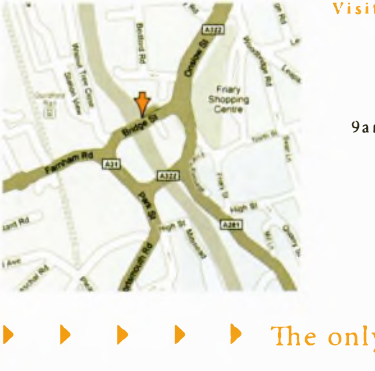
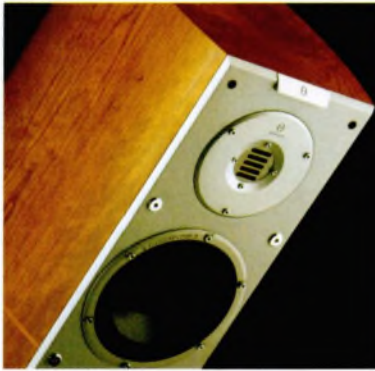
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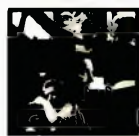
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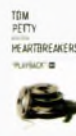
▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ The only real hi-fi shop in Guildford



96 Josephine
Portrait



96 Karajan 60
The Complete 1960s
Recordings on DG



97 Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers
Playback

Music reviews

The latest music releases...

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



Deep Purple Machine Head

emimusic.com

★★★★

5 CD box set

EMI

DEEP PURPLE have arguably never received full credit for their part in the extraordinary flowering of British rock music in the early 1970s, which spawned heavy metal and a host of related sub-genres.

While Led Zeppelin received most of the critical plaudits and Black Sabbath cornered the notoriety, Purple have been allotted third place in this trinity of ear-bleeding, volt-blasting British riffdom.

The recent death of Jon Lord from cancer at the age of 71 led to something of a reappraisal of Purple's role and the process continues apace with this fortieth anniversary deluxe five-disc expanded edition of the group's 1972 chart-topper.

Purple's sixth studio album, was their crowning glory – perhaps because it emerged from adversity.

First, singer Ian Gillan contracted hepatitis. Then when the group arrived in December 1971 to record the album at the Montreux Casino in Switzerland, the venue was promptly burnt down during a concert by Frank Zappa when a member of the audience fired a flare into the building's roof!

Purple were forced to set up an *ad hoc* studio in the town's Grand Hotel, with cables running through bathrooms and across balconies and mattresses providing the sound insulation. The conditions were so arduous that they gave up listening to playbacks and simply played until they intuitively felt they had the right take. The result was not only a triumph, but the biggest-selling album of Deep Purple's career.

The near-disaster was also the direct inspiration for Deep Purple's

Purple set up an *ad hoc* studio with mattresses providing the sound insulation

best-known song and one of the most famous riffs in rock music. The memorable chord progression came from guitarist Ritchie Blackmore, the title *Smoke On The Water* was provided by bass player Roger Glover and the lyrics were penned a few days later by Gillan to describe the band's experience watching the burning down of the casino.

The other six tracks from the original 1972 vinyl release roar tempestuously, with monumental riffs, Gillan wailing like a man possessed and the solos by Blackmore on guitar and Lord on organ kept scorchingly short and to the point.

There's only one track from the sessions that didn't make the

album, the slow and bluesy B-side *When A Blind Man Cries*. So how are eight songs spread out to fill five discs? Simply by presenting them in as many knob-tweakingly different variations as possible. There's a 2012 remastering of the original album, a remix created on the 25th anniversary in 1997 by Glover, remastered stereo versions of the Quad SQ mix and surround sound 5:1 mixes, plus a live 1972 concert, which at least offers a couple of additional non-*Machine Head* songs.

Only the most committed audiophile could want so many versions, yet there are significant differences. The quad mixes contain several alternate guitar solos to the stereo mix and the channel separation is also markedly different. Glover's 1997 remixes from the original multitracks impressively reveal unfamiliar nuances, while the in-concert versions (mixed at Abbey Road Studios from the soundboard recording) fizz with fiery energy. **NW**





Josephine Portrait

arkrecordings.com
★★★★★

Ark Recordings

JOSEPHINE ONIYAMA from Manchester (via her Liberian mother and Jamaican father) has the pipes and the songs to produce a record that sounds both intriguingly modern and reassuringly old at the same time. Her rich, smoky contralto has echoes of emotive sixties siren Odetta or gospel colossus Mahalia Jackson, but the lyrics are all modern day and the tunes, some of them in association with English oddball Ed Harcourt take all sorts of interesting twists and turns.

Though she clearly falls into the folk/soul singer-songwriter camp, and fans of everyone from Joni Mitchell to Tracy Chapman will find much to admire, there are quirky arrangements aplenty. From the harmonium-led dirge of *When We Were Trespassers* through the Doors-meets-Smiths bounce of *What A Day*, the Afrobeat echoes of Pepper Shaker and the deliciously haunting piano and viola accompaniment to *House Of Mirrors*, this is a gorgeous record that rewards multiple plays. **DO**



Karajan 60

The Complete 1960s Recordings on DG

deutschegrammophon.com

★★★★★ Deutsche Grammophon
CD box set

BIG BOXES are all the rage these days, but few match this sumptuous offering which brings together all Herbert von Karajan 1960s recordings. Each disc comes in its own mini LP sleeve, just like the original vinyl, making this a collector's dream. There are even some previously unreleased recordings, as well as hard-to-find material and the famous Beethoven and Brahms symphony cycles. All that's missing are the operas Karajan recorded for DG during this period.

The vintage stereo recordings have been expertly remastered using DG's original-image-bit-processing. DG's engineering was far more purist at this time, so there's none of the multi-miking effects found in their later seventies and eighties productions. **JMH**

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

The Doors The Doors analogueproductions.com



★★★★★ Analogue
200g vinyl x2

1967 WAS A GOOD YEAR for new acts, but few debuts achieved the success of The Doors. This Analogue Productions reissue has gone to town on the original



Sounds of the '30s

Ravel, Stravinsky, Weill, de Sabata
Stefano Bollani (Piano)

deccaclassics.com

★★★★★ Decca
CD

THE PIECES HERE tend to support the view of the 1930s as a hedonistic time full of vibrant colour and daring experimentation; a period that saw many serious composers attempting to fuse classical music with jazz. Ravel's brilliant *Piano Concerto* is a superb example, as is Stravinsky's sardonic *Tango*. But the most intriguing is the 27-minute suite from Victor de Sabata's opulent ballet *1001 Nights* – a real rarity.

The performances are spirited and crisp, yet quite sensitive and atmospheric too. The recordings sound clear, with plenty of detail, and immediacy. Balances are a touch forward, but not in an unpleasant way, and the sound has lots of brilliance and bite. **JMH**



Van Morrison

Born to Sing: No Plan B

bluenote.com

★★★★★ Blue Note
CD

ONE THING ABOUT VAN, he's always unpredictable. Just when he seemed to be firmly settled into his 'grumpiest man in rock' image, he goes and releases his most uplifting vehicle in ages. The lyrics might range against corporate greed and the global elite, but he actually seems to be enjoying himself even while he's complaining about 'phony pseudo jazz' (*Going Down To Monte Carlo*) and 'all kinds of shite' (*Educating Archie*).

While all too often with Van there appeared to be little chemistry between him and the session musicians he employs, he can occasionally produce magic. Playing with a six-piece band there's a live in the studio feel and he's on fine form vocally too, delivering the lyrics with power and nuance aplenty. **DO**

is hearing *Light My Fire* in such vibrant, expansive and richly detailed form. There's so much more on this tune than you remember, it's like hearing it for the first time. It completely washes away the years and reveals that it's an incredible song with fabulous organ playing and recording.

Morrison may have become the legend, but would we ever have heard him without Manzarek? AP is to be congratulated for doing such a superb job in rejuvenating this classic. **JK**



The Kinks

The Kinks at the BBC

universalmusic.com

★★★★★

Universal

5 CD plus DVD

THIS GENEROUSLY

proportioned set presents an intriguing and frequently vibrant 'alternative history' of the Kinks, via the numerous sessions they did for the BBC over a period of thirty years between 1964 and 94.

The 130-plus tracks chart the band's flowering from early peddlers of raw RnB through Ray Davies' emergence as a songwriter blessed with a unique and eccentrically English sensibility, plus quaint-sounding period interviews and intros from the Beeb's vaults.

Audio quality is pretty terrible on a couple of the sessions, but this frustration is balanced by the energetic proto-punk feel of many of the early sessions, which sound more spontaneous and less refined than the studio versions. **NW**



Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers

Playback

universalmusic.com

★★★★★

Universal

6 CD box set

MOST WILL PROBABLY

struggle to name any members of the Heartbreakers – but what emerges from these 92 tracks chronicling Petty's career from his 1976 debut until the mid-1990s is that he's at his best in a band context, rather than solo or jamming with his other celebrity friends. Listening to these career highlights is like being given a primer in all that was best about late 20th century American rock 'n' roll.

Southern rock and blues roots, punk energy, folksy neo-country, great pop tunes, jangling guitars and touches of funk, indie and grunge are capped by Petty's simple, but sharp story-telling.

Petty channels mainstream influences into an unblinking and idealised vision of what a dream rock 'n' roll band ought to sound like. **NW**



BB King

Ladies and Gentlemen...

Mr BB King

universalmusic.com

★★★★★

Universal

10 CD box set

CAREER RETROSPECTIVES

don't come much more lovingly assembled than this. 194 tracks from the first recordings made by the monarch of blues guitar in 1949 to *One Kind Favour*, which won him a Grammy in 2009. Add a 72-page hardback book and it's hard to imagine how King's journey from down-home sharecropping obscurity to globe-trotting blues royalty could have been better showcased.

Hardcore electric blues workouts in his inimitable 'talking' guitar style mingle with 1950s RnB cuts, string-laden soul and forays into jazz, jump and jive. The previously unreleased live material from a 1970 Carnegie Hall concert finds him at the top of his game and collaborations with the Stones, U2 and Elton John *et al* illustrate how much contemporary rock music is in his debt. **NW**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

trioVD

Maze

naimlabel.com/artist-triovd.aspx

★★★★★

The Naim Label

24-bit/48kHz



WHEN THE NAIM LABEL started, one of the earliest discs it released was a CD of very left-field

free-form, music by a band of three Americans who called themselves Earwax Control. The music was, shall we say, a mite challenging and it did not become one of Naim's best selling discs, but I still have a well-played copy.

The label has however, found itself another crazed threesome, trioVD, whose improvisational music seems to know no boundaries, definitions, or limits to the genres from which it pillages. This recording allows listeners easy access to what exactly the trio's drums, saxophone and guitar are doing, as they weave some truly fascinating and engaging musical fabrics. It is challenging and all the better for that. **MS**

Bob Marley

Legend

linnrecords.com/recording-legend.aspx

★★★★★

Universal through Linn

24-bit/96kHz



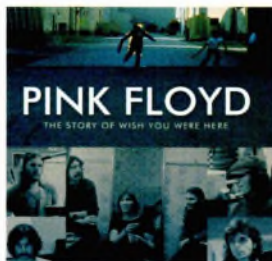
A COMPILATION ALBUM getting a full 24bit/96kHz release? Well, there are some

artists for whom exceptions can be made, and Bob Marley is certainly one of that very small number, along with his 25 million selling album, *Legend*. Some of the music might seem rather maudlin or 'tame' with hindsight, but there is no denying the social significance of this collection.

The recording usefully reveals the subtle intricacies in Marley's outwardly simple compositions and highlights the importance of the syncopation in the timing. It further gives great insight into the Wailers' instrumentation and the way it is being played, along with the incredible atmosphere on *No Woman, No Cry*. **MS**

BLU-RAY DVD

Pink Floyd The Making Of Wish You Were Here eaglerock.com



★★★★★

Eagle Rock Ent.

Stereo LPCM & DTS-HD Master

DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

was never going to be easy, but Pink Floyd found inspiration by remembering their missing acid casualty founder Syd Barrett. This documentary

includes interviews with all four members, including the late Rick Wright (in 2001), and they tell a story of near break-up because of the sudden success followed by a difficult process of composition at Abbey Road Studios where Roger Waters and David Gilmour played out their differences.

It includes footage of both of these musicians playing the title track in their studios today, Gilmour inevitably sounds the best because of his prowess on guitar but Waters' strength of feeling gives his take the edge.

The theme of the album was absence, primarily that of Barrett, but in practice the band felt that they themselves had been so changed by *Dark Side* as to be emotionally absent during the recording. It nonetheless remains one of the great albums of the era and it's fascinating to learn about the details of its creation.

The sound is very good when you hear the acoustic takes on old numbers, but this doesn't make up a great deal of the disc, and you will have to go back to the album for the full effect. **JK**

The white room

What happens when you choose a system based on a single finish? It works a treat – providing you pick the right units, says **Ed Selley**...

What you see here is a departure from a 'normal' *Beautiful System*. Usually it's a combination of components from one supplier that we know will work together in perfect harmony. This month's rig pulls together products from three different companies on the strength of

a single theme – white. Why so? Well, it's a very room-friendly colour (if of course it can be called one). Whereas black stamps its presence in your domestic space, and silver stands out, white is airy, open and innocuous. It also highlights the form of the product too, showing its curves, planes and edges. Hi-fi has come a long way from the sea of

black boxes, but a white finish is still something of a rarity. To an extent then, what was available in this finish partly determined what the system was going to be. But with some careful research and judicious decision making, we got the balance right...

Round about

Thankfully, the choice of white turntables includes a genuine superstar. The new Rega RP6 is unmistakably descended from the original Planar, but every component has been through continuous evolution to reach this point. The basics: unsprung chassis, glass platter and unreasonably talented tonearm, are all still very much in place. At the same time,



COMPONENTS



**1 HEED OBELISK S1 AND X2
POWER SUPPLY £1,290/£780**

The partnership of Richard Hay and Heed has been very fruitful and the latest offering is a 35wpc integrated, using non-DC coupled technology. One of the inputs can be modified to either act as a DAC or MM phono stage. The 2x power supply raises the output to 55 watts and separates the power supply to the preamp.



**2 REGA RP6 (EXACT CARTRIDGE)
£1,000**

The latest member of the evergreen Rega turntable line-up, the RP6 is a one-stop shop of vinyl excellence. The deck comes with RB303 tonearm, external DC power supply and can (as is the case here) be supplied with Rega's Exact MM cartridge. White is the order of the day, but a variety of finishes are available.



**3 MY AUDIO DESIGN 1920S
£1,350**

This diminutive two-way is one of the smaller models in the MAD range, but still makes use of the company's proprietary cabinet damping technology and bespoke drivers. The 1920s is now newly available in a range of smart lacquer finishes, including the all-important white, but wood finishes are also available.





LEFT: My Audio Design 1920s speaker boasts superb bespoke drive units...

RIGHT: The Rega RP6 with its Exact cartridge...

BELOW: Heed Audio amplifier and matching Obelisk X2 power supply

Small wonders

Loudspeakers come courtesy of quirky British brand My Audio Design. The 1920s is one of the more affordable models in the company line up and is its take on the classic two-way, LS3/5a-sized standmount. Relatively small at a mere 280mm in height, the MAD makes use of a 145mm mid bass driver paired with a 22mm soft dome tweeter.

The cabinet features MAD's proprietary Dynamic Resonance Control technology to keep resonance to a minimum, and helps to make each speaker feel very substantial indeed. As well as more traditional wood finishes, MAD has now released the 1920s in a range of piano lacquers. All three products in this system are well finished, but the lacquer on the MAD takes the prize for the best of the bunch. It is superb.

Stacked together, this *really* is a beautiful system. The white finish gives a wonderfully minimalist appearance, but because all three units feature black detailing at various parts of their design,



the DC power supply and the bracing between arm and bearing are all new for the 21st century, and extract more performance than ever before from the basic design. With the Exact cartridge factory fitted, the RP6 is a joy to set up – I think I've had more trouble with most network streamers. More importantly, for the purposes of this system, it can be had in a sumptuous gloss white finish.

Partnering the Rega is a new arrival from Anglo/Hungarian manufacturer Heed Audio. The Obelisk Si MkII is the latest design by Richard Hay. On paper, the Obelisk doesn't initially set the pulse racing. This half-width design boasts five line inputs and a power output of 35 watts – sufficient, but hardly earth shattering. The Obelisk Si is more interesting than the naked numbers suggest though.

For starters, it is a non-DC coupled design. Like valve amplifiers this tends to mean that a Heed Watt has a bit more poke than you might

expect. There is also more to the five line inputs than at first appears. Input one can be configured to be a DAC or – ideal for our purposes here – a MM phono stage thanks to optional cards.

The Heed has another party trick in the shape of the matching Obelisk X2 power supply, an identically sized chassis that provides a dual mono power supply for the amplifier. Connected via the umbilical cable, this ups the power output of the amp to a more muscular 50 watts. The mains socket of the amp stays in use to exclusively power the preamp section. Although the division of components is a little unusual, the two boxes in a sense equate to a pre and power amplifier. The result is a handsome pairing, well equipped to work with the Rega and just as importantly, available in an attractive white hue alongside the more conventional black finish.



there is even a cohesive secondary colour as well. I've seen single brand systems that fail to look as elegant as this trio does. The Rega is light and elegant, the Heeds collectively only take up a single shelf and the 1920s is encouragingly compact, too. So they all look like they belong together, but are they an equally successful sonic partnering?

Sounding out

I will confess to a slight trepidation during the assembly period for this system. All the components are undoubtedly talented, but selecting a complete system on the basis of finish and expecting it to work sonically is asking a lot. Well, they all lived happily ever after; when the three units are this good, not only do they work together, the result is greater than the sum of its parts.

As I'm not (and never will be) a Cream fan, I selected *To Lose My Life* by the White Lies as a suitably themed introduction for this system! This potent collection of soaring vocals, driving beats and infectious riffs is hindered by a very 'dark' recording that has a somewhat overemphasised lower end. But the good news is that our white trio cut deftly through the darkness to reveal the musicality of the album in all its glory.

Harry McVeigh's vocals in *From the Stars* are visceral, full and rich, and held perfectly between and in front of the pounding drums. Any doubts I might have had that 50 watts of Heed amplification might not be sufficient to do justice to a big recording are swiftly put to bed.

This system proved almost peerless with vocals and instruments – be it a piccolo or a kettledrum, the tonality was spot on and entirely believable. There is definitely something to Heed's claim that the Obelisk Si has some similarities to valve amps, in that there is exceptional midrange lucidity, but the bass and upper registers have none of the softness that can sometimes creep into valve systems. On the contrary, treble in particular manages the elegant balancing act of extracting considerable detail without ever tipping over into harshness or stridency. A nineteen fifites recording of Ella Fitzgerald singing Irving Berlin has the fizz and excitement it needs, but never oversteps the mark as the relatively primitive recording reaches its limits. The very benign behaviour of the Rega also helps keep even rough and ready recordings listenable.

The timing proved impressive, too. The influence of the RP6 can be felt the moment that the tempo starts to climb. There is a sense of energy and propulsive force that gives performances life and vitality, which is hard not to love. It isn't boisterous or forced, but is instead absolutely effortless and feels exceptionally natural in practice. The immense live recording of Kraftwerk's *Tour du France* on the *Minimum Maximum* boxset is as fast and fleet as the cyclists they portray. The fizz of the live audience and the vastness of the space it was recorded in are immediately perceived.

That this is the case from a pair of loudspeakers that are less than 300mm high is a powerful commendation of the MAD 1920s.



DISTRIBUTOR:
Rega
Heed Audio
My Audio Design
TELEPHONE:
01702 603360
01242 547663
0208 123 9789
WEBSITE:
rega.co.uk
heedaudio.co.uk
madengland.com

There are naturally limits to the absolute scale a speaker this size can reproduce, but they are far less obvious than you might expect, as the 1920s grip with extraordinary tenacity. The bleak electronica of Circlesquare's *Pre Earthquake Anthems* has seismic bass that rises from nowhere and vanishes just as quickly. The MAD rises to the challenge admirably and captures the essence of the material with genuine drive and conviction.

They are sensitive enough to ensure that the output of the Heed is always sufficient to secure a decent listening level and faithfully replicate the Obelisk's exceptional tonality. MAD's claims that the 1920s can double as a monitor seem rather less fanciful when you realise the faithfulness that they reproduce the efforts of source and amp.

What started as an intriguing style concept soon proved itself to be rather more than a mere artistic flourish. If, for aesthetic reasons, you wanted an all-white system, then this is unquestionably a very attractive collection of units. But its beauty is more than skin-deep. Its looks are matched by its sonic ability, and then some. From turntable to amp to loudspeakers, it is beautifully built. Oh, and if exclusively vinyl front end doesn't appeal, then Heed's DAC module for the Obelisk, to say nothing of the separate and equally white Obelisk DA DAC, offers some interesting upgrade options.

We wanted to know if we could make a beautiful system based on a theme. Not only have we succeeded in doing so, we've made one that sounds the business as well. ●

Minitest

Jason Kennedy doesn't believe the hype, but he knows a good interconnect when he hears it...

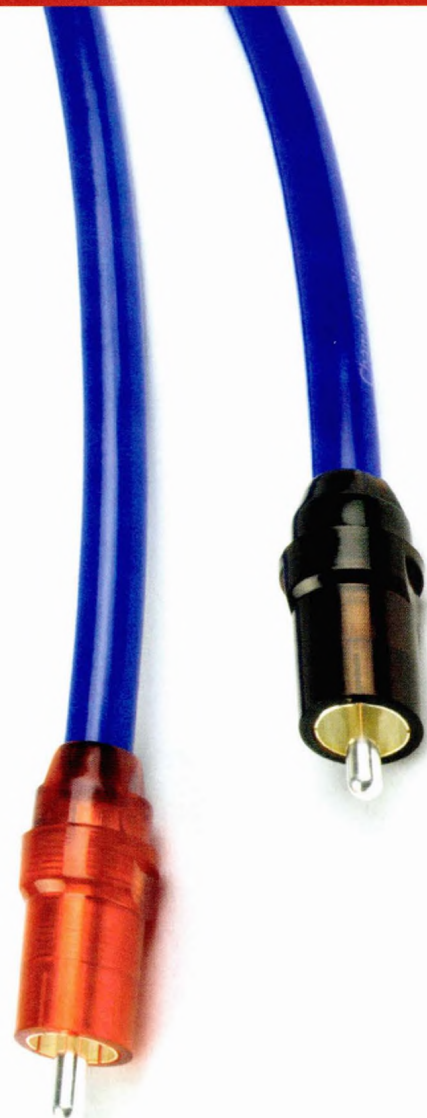
Audioquest Big Sur

PRICE: £85 CONTACT: 01249 848873
WEBSITE: AUDIOQUEST.COM

BIG SUR sits near the bottom of Audioquest's 15-strong analogue interconnect range, that's not including five tonearm cables and four for subwoofers. The phrase baffled by choice comes to mind, however AQ helps you out with fiscal incrementation, and the key points for Big Sur are the use of individually insulated strands of copper that are extruded for maximum surface smoothness. The dielectric is foamed polyethylene and topology is asymmetric, offering lower impedance for the ground which is said to reduce noise. AQ also uses a proprietary system to keep RFI at bay, but it's not clear how this works. The RCA phono plugs are unusually small and cold welded to the cable without solder, which probably means crimped, the plugs themselves are made from 'purple copper' that is stamped rather than machined.

All of which seems to benefit Big Sur, which delivered a big, juicy sound with nice timing and good levels of vitality. It has excellent harmonic resolution, but doesn't let this impede the sense of attack thanks to very clean leading-edge definition. Dynamics are also well served with an orchestral piece taking on its full imperial majesty, thanks to well-defined soundstage depth and precise temporal meter. Big Sur proved to be one of the two best interconnects in this group, it invites you into the music and keeps you interested in what's to come, in a word it's involving. Given the lowish price, it is excellent value.

VERDICT DESPITE THE BARRAGE of marketing hype, Audioquest clearly knows how to make a great cable at a sensible price



Chord Company ChameleonPlus

PRICE: £135 CONTACT: 01980 625700
WEBSITE: CHORD.CO.UK

CHAMELEONPLUS sits midway up Chord Company's range of analogue interconnects and has been in the catalogue for some time. What makes it appropriate for this group is the introduction of the VEE Plug. This stands for vibration eliminating enclosure, which consists of a translucent ABS case in place of the usual metal body found on RCA phonos. Its benefits seemed pretty impressive when I heard an A/B dem at the Bristol show last year and Chord Co. is not alone in seeking to minimise the metal content of its terminations, it's a principle that was first espoused by DNM and which has spawned some very low metal designs such as the Eichmann Bullet plug. Under the ABS is a silver-plated pin and collar that terminates multiple strands of silver-plated copper conductors, these are arranged with a single signal path and a dual return path and have PTFE insulation and two layers of shielding.

In action ChameleonPlus has a spacious and well-defined sound that is strong on leading edges, which means that the attack of instruments is always clearly defined. It is also appealingly nimble, but this is partly because the sound is not as strong in the bass as some of the competition. Its character will give less than agile sounding systems a bit of get up and go by injecting life and energy into the midband, but those looking for a more relaxed experience might find it a little too upfront.

VERDICT THE VEE PLUG has enhanced this cable's sense of pace, so those looking for leading edge detail will find it hard to resist



Russ Andrews CC-1

PRICE: £123 CONTACT: 0845 345 1550
WEBSITE: RUSSANDREWS.COM

RUSS ANDREWS ACCESSORIES has had a long association with Kimber Kables, but that significant range does not contain a woven analogue interconnect that's shielded. The reason being that in most applications interconnects do not need to be shielded. However, as anyone who has dabbled with step-transformers or valve amplifiers will know, there are occasions when shielding can be a godsend.

Spotting a gap in the market, the ever resourceful Russ decided to build a shielded interconnect using Kimber Kable. CC-1 is a coaxial cable that's 'similar to that used in the Cadence cable' says Russ, which is a Kimber interconnect developed for subwoofers and based on the design principles of the high end Select cables. CC-1 is terminated with Kimber Ultraplate RCA phono plugs and carries direction indication bands over its braided jacket.

In the system CC-1 has a clean, calm sound that's solid in the bass with good image width and decent timing, it's a little dry by the highest standards in this group but usefully precise. It's not all that different to the Chord Co. Chameleon in that leading edges are well defined, but there could be more depth to the sound of individual notes. It's capable of majestic dynamics with the right music and those who enjoy the snap of a snare drum or the shine of a cymbal will find much to like. A good cable for leavening a thick or slow system, and undoubtedly a useful one for those beset with hum.

VERDICT NOT AS IMPRESSIVE as the Kimber range it's so similar too, but useful in applications where shielding is required
★★★★★



WireWorld Oasis 6

PRICE: £130 CONTACT: 020 8991 9200
WEBSITE: WIREWORLDCABLE.CO.UK

WIREWORLD'S analogue interconnect range runs to nine models of which Oasis 6 is one of the more affordable. It nonetheless incorporates the same quad configuration DNA Helix topology that you find in the top model. This name refers to a flat array of six individually insulated silver-plated OFC conductors that are twisted in an approximation of a DNA helix with signal and return conductors back to back. These ribbons are encased in conventionally shaped tubular jackets with high-density polyethylene insulation, plus a technology that WireWorld calls Composilex, but as it's a proprietary material no details are divulged. What differentiates Oasis 6 from the models below it is the fitment of silver-plated RCA phono plugs.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that this is a remarkably good interconnect, the best it has to be said, of this particular bunch. It has excellent imaging skills, plenty of body and remarkable rhythmic coherence. Low frequencies are deep and strong, which helps to produce solid soundstaging and real dynamic impact when it's called for. All of which usually means sluggish timing but that's not the case, it has a fine sense of pace that precisely reflects the pace of the material. A feat it achieves by separating the different elements in the mix so that you can hear what each is contributing. This is a revealing, engaging and remarkably coherent interconnect, maybe there is something in the spiel after all! ●

VERDICT IMPRESSIVE HIGH RESOLUTION cable for the money with excellent imaging, tonal and timing skills
★★★★★



Cables are as important as the main components in a hi-fi system, this means that proportionately more needs to be spent on these critical links in a budget system than in a high end one.

If you've not heard the difference a decent cable can make to any system this might seem surprising, but for fairly sound scientific reasons they make a difference that's worth paying for. The

£100/1m pair price point chosen for this group represents an approximate half-way stage up the ladder of diminishing returns in the cable world and the best of this bunch would do any system proud.

For sale / Wanted

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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Small wonder – the Aurex Micro System

FOR SALE

AUDIOLAB 8000 CD player (silver), excellent condition, boxed, unused, remote control. £250. **01483 271238 (Surrey).**

AUREX Micro System 15 (HFC 360), £300 including carriage, Marantz PM7001 amplifier, boxed, unused £185, JVC Q17 Direct drive £350, Sony TCK 611S cassette £45. **01708 457691 (Essex).**

QUAD 12L speakers [Birdseye Maple], excellent condition, complete with 2m Chord Rumour bi-wire speaker cables £195. **07986987380 (London).**

QUAD 67 CD player, remote control, instructions, boxed, immaculate condition. Recent service by Quad. Can dem £399. **0116 2812074 or 07890 884997 (London).**

ASH DESIGN Cosmic 4 AV rack (Rosewood), 4 glass shelves, double width unit. Isolation spikes and isolated shelves. (£500) £170. **001273 309708 or email: pbnokes@hotmail.co.uk (East Sussex).**

CYRUS Pre Vs2 preamp (silver), £350 ono, Cyrus PSX-R power supply (silver), excellent upgrade for preamp, £250 ono, or £500 the pair. **01889 575655 or email: derrick@forsters2.plus.com (Staffordshire).**

NAIM equipment (all Olive) series: 2x 250 monoblocks, £800 each, Naim NAC 52 preamp/supercap/SNAIC £1,800, Naim Hi-Cap £300, NAXO crossover £250. All boxed. **07968 735053 or email: d.mckeith@btinternet.com (Highland).**

TOM EVANS AUDIO MicroGroove Plus phono preamp, very good condition, set up for low output MC cartridge (1000hm R, 0.2microvolt). (£850) £475 o.v.n.o. **07725525001 or email: alan.strudwick@googlemail.com (South Wales).**

USHER Dancer Mini 2 Diamond (walnut), immaculate condition, current model, boxed, manuals, will demo

(£3,700) £2,450, Chord Odyssey 4 bi-wire, 4m pr speaker cables (£435) £150. Buyer collects. **01428 605002 or email: rogersanders@lineone.net (SW Surrey).**

SPENDOR S5e loudspeakers (cherry), 4 years old, very good condition, with boxes. £420. Buyer collects. **001268 774416 (Essex).**

VERTEX AQ pair of Moncayo speaker cables, 6m banana plugs £700, 2x Roraima mains leads in copper, £150 each, 2x Roraima mains cables, 1m (silver), £200 each. Buyer to collect. **007860 155521 (Middlesex).**

NAIM Nait 01 with Napst, both fitted with Russ Andrews small wooden cones. Both tuner and power supply as new, £800. **0117 9500429 or email: ron.watt@sky.com (Bristol).**

ATC SCM7 speakers, 6 months old, excellent condition, boxed, as new, fine sound (£610) £475. **07733 428736 (West Yorkshire).**

FOCAL Profile 908 standmount speakers (in Classic) with matching, dedicated S908 stands. Scratch on one side of speaker, but brand new grilles. Sonically perfect, Best Buy, HFC December 2005 (£1,600) £555. **01494 521359 or 07772 711432 (Bucks).**

VPI M16.5 Record Cleaner, mint condition, unused £450 ono, Cables for sale: Audience AU 24 1.5m, RCA Interconnect £525, Audience AU24 Powercord 3m £795, Nordost Heimdall Speaker Wire 2m bi-wire pair £550, RCA 0.6m X 2 £280 each, Isotek Power Cord Premium mains cable 1.5m X6 £50 each, XLO Type 1.1 Signature RCA £300, XLO HTP1 RCA 1m £35, XLO HT Pro Digital interconnect 1m £35, Furukawa FV video RCA 1m £40, Furukawa FD audio RCA 1m £35, Kimber Powerkord mains x 3 £40, Cyrus bi-wire speaker cable 2.5m £30, Tiffany CX-7B RCA 1m £30, Signal 7080 RCA interconnect 2 x 1m £30, Signal 7081 RCA interconnect 1x 1m RCA set £25, 1x 1m RCA single £15, 1x 2.1m RCA set £35. **01825 841104 or email: mark.hanna (London).**

TECHNICS SL1210 Mk2; Garrard 401 with plinth, no arm; Garrard power supply. All items in good condition, will accept sensible offers. **07910312910 (sat & sun only) (London).**

OPERA Super Pavarotti speakers, real wood mahogany, excellent condition £175, QED XT400 X tube speaker cable, 2x 5m (as new) £75, Sumiko Blue Point No2, cartridge, 100 hours £45. **07800606892 or email: schandler@dopaq.co.uk (Worcestershire).**

WORLD AUDIO DESIGN K5881 valve power amplifier, mint condition, can email photos £375. **01424 446282/07972 341692 (East Sussex).**

ROGERS MLS4a speakers, Black Serial no; 5777, Good condition £200, Pink Triangle Export Rega RB300 arm, owned since new, black, great condition, nearly new bearing £600. Dynavector 10x5 £150 2yr. **07547897476 or email: paulginestri@hotmail.co.uk (East Sussex).**

MICHELL GyroDec SE, OEM RB300 tonearm, excellent condition, beautiful sound. £800 ono. Protective cover and instructions included. Buyer collects. **07831 410479 or email: glenn.moore@mac.com (Kent).**

MONITOR AUDIO Gold GX 300 speakers (piano black lacquer), boxes, in pristine condition. Purchased just after their launch last year (£3,000), now £1,999. Buyer collects. **01249 892896 (Chippenham).**

OLIVE 03 music server, 18 months old, original

BUYING TIPS **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might 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!

packaging, excellent £400. Located North Yorks. **01642 680122** or email: steverobin@mac.com (North Yorks).

YAMAHA NS1000 Monitor Speakers. Only few hours use, pair in perfect condition, clamps replaced with new Gold Posts. Rare Edition £1,200. Nordost Flatline Blue Heaven speaker cables, banana plugs one end, other unterminated. Stereo pairs 1x 4.5m (£1,030) and 1x 2.5m (£630). Unused/new. Bargain at £550, ono the lot. **01945 463077** or email: deregle1@aol.com (London).

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).

ARCAM RDACKw and wireless dongle, hardly used. Superb sound, either via USB, S/PDIF, optical or wirelessly, £380. Also battery PSU and charger £30: **07793749178** or email: david@veniceinfosite.com (London).

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 many a modern deck. Pristine condition, hardly used and full working order £225:

07793749178 or email: david@veniceinfosite.com (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: **01303 863424** (Kent).

CYRUS 1m 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).

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 WM6DC, 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 SCM 7 standmount speakers. 6 months old, excellent sound, little use, mint boxed (£610) £475: **07733428736** or email: gill@gillbrears.plus.com (West Yorkshire).

TECHNICS SL1210 Mk2 £249, Garrard 401 plus power supply £1,200. Both

in very good condition: **0207 499 8729** (London).

ARCAM system: A90 pre-power (2 x 90w); Pro 90 power, 192 CD player (all black), Chord Co. Chameleon silver interconnects, 3 pairs, Odyssey speaker cables for bi-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: **01515 8755070** 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 with boxes £595: **01202 515474** or email: johnlangley17@talktalk.net (Dorset).

NAIM NAP 500 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 (Rosentut). (£40,000) £18,000. Pro-Ject turntable RPM10 with Ortofon Kontrapunkt B cartridge and Perspex turntable (£2,000) £750, Naim Audio amp NAP 110, Naim HiCap 110, NAC 42 (all £300): **07515 862222** or email: edge@badedge.com (Sunbury on Thames).

NORDOST Blue Heaven interconnects, 1m RCA connectors, 2 pairs, boxed (£125 per pair). £60 per pair or £100 for both. Chord ProDAC Pro Digital, 1m, boxed (£85) £40. QED reference HDML, 1m (£80) £40. **07870 159725** or email: johnsidebottom@hotmail.co.uk (Somerset).

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Ed Selley brings you our pick of this month's top hi-fi websites...



WORLD MUSIC NETWORK

worldmusic.net

Despite me being an increasingly big fan of world music – especially some of the North African guitarists – I am not afraid to say that I'm a newcomer to the genre as whole. As such, picking my way through its different flavours can be a challenging business. The World Music Network is a site dedicated to making the business of learning about new artists a little bit easier.

The site is informative and well laid out with plenty of information about artists and live music events. The site's name isn't a misnomer either – there is everything from classic *Runo song* from Finland (rather good) to Belizean Drum and Flute (less so). Many of these genres have samplers available to allow you to listen to the various different artists and see what you like (many of these are also on Spotify).

At the moment there are no lossless downloads available, which is a shame, but there is plenty of CD and MP3 material as well as some very keenly priced 180g vinyl from a number of different artists. If you like what you hear, membership qualifies for a number of complementary albums.



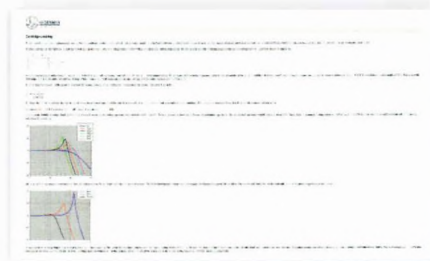
CARTRIDGE LOADING CALCULATOR

hagtech.com/loading.html

In my recent review of the Avid Pellar phono stage (HFC 363), I noted it makes use of external 'plug loading' for capacitance. As it turned out, the plugs I was supplied with were pretty much spot on, but I was reminded that this is an area where I have little experience. When calculating the loading you not only need to take into account the cartridge, but the tonearm and interconnect as well. Happily, as with so many things in life, the Internet can lend a hand...

This site describes itself as 'rather straightforward', but it will require a reasonable understanding of the behaviour of your cartridge and ancillaries to get the best from it. Instead of telling you what

loading is ideal, the calculator will tell you the results of different loading on the overall bandwidth of the system. What sets this calculator apart from similar sites I've seen is the fact that it has multiple calculations that will allow you to reach your end results in a logical fashion. It also walks a very neat line between the technical and understandable in explaining what the results mean, and what the effects will be on your system, helping you get the best from your vinyl.



MAGNATUNE

magnatune.com

Magnatune is another site that offers a range of lossless downloads, but one where there are some subtle and interesting differences to the business model. The overall effect is a hybrid between music on-demand services like Spotify and Lastfm, and online stores like Bleep and HD Tracks.

Instead of albums being individually priced, Magnatune has a membership fee payable in three month, annual and unlimited periods. Once you have joined, you can then download as much of the content as you like in a variety of formats.

Because Magnatune is a direct partnership with the artist, it is also possible to license the material the site offers for use in public broadcast, TV adverts and films. The licenses vary in price depending on what you want to do with the music, but this makes the site potentially very useful for anyone looking to legally add music to their handiwork. Although Magnatune is based in the US and charges in dollars, it works legally and seamlessly from the UK without requiring proxy servers or other subterfuge!

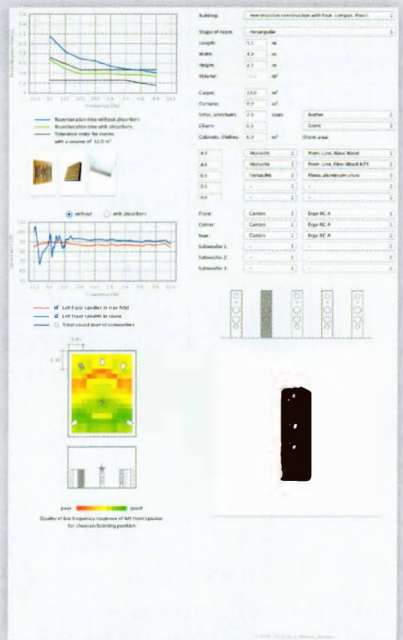


SPEAKER PLACEMENT CALCULATOR

hunecke.de

Positioning loudspeakers correctly is vital to the performance of a system and there is rarely any alternative to some trial and error fiddling with them to see what works best. This site is an interesting attempt to bring a little bit of scientific rigour to the procedure and has proved useful in the past when I have been confronted with a speaker for review that really isn't 'dialling in' to my listening space.

This calculator is one of the most thorough I have seen for any aspect of hi-fi. You will need to supply a considerable amount of data about the room including dimensions, the furnishings (whether your chairs are leather or fabric) and then information on the speakers themselves. The list of speakers for which the calibrator works isn't huge, but if you find something on the list with the same basic makeup as your own speakers, you can use the calculator to make educated guesses on where you might start experimenting with placement. Once the numbers have been crunched, you will be shown an overhead of the room with colours showing its resonant performance as you move the speakers and listening position around. ●



Drop into one of our **Top 20**

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.



STAR QUALITIES

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



OUR TOP 20 UK HI-FI DEALERS

SOUTH

Ashford, Kent
SOUNDCRAFT HI-FI
40 High Street.
t: 01233 624441
www.soundcrafthi-fi.com

Chelmsford, Essex
RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
216 Moulsham Street.
t: 01245 265245
www.rayleighhi-fi.com

E. Grinstead, W. Sussex
AUDIO DESIGNS
26 High Street.
t: 01342 328065
www.audiodesigns.co.uk

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

Norwich, Norfolk
MARTINS HI-FI
85-91 Ber Street.
t: 01603 627134
www.martinshifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex
RAYLEIGH HI-FI
44a High Street.
t: 01268 779762
www.rayleighhi-fi.com

Southend-on-Sea, Essex
RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
132/4 London Road.
t: 01702 435255
www.rayleighhi-fi.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.oandlhi-fi.co.uk

SW20

O'BRIEN HI-FI
60 Durham Road.
t: 020 8946 1528
www.obrienhi-fi.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.gullifordhi-fi.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.



available
white now

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Cinema
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Network
Installation

Bryston
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HiFi Racks
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Okki Nokki
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Products of the Year 2010



Jan 2011

Hi Fi World

Cable of the Year 2010

01458 251997



Arcam drDock

Not to worry, it's easy to get confused by the nomenclature of this new iPod dock. It follows the rDock, which was Arcam's first strike out into the iDevice ecosystem, and then the direct digital output-equipped irDock which replaced it. The new drDock is an altogether more sophisticated design, this time being physically large enough to support the bulky iPad in its various incarnations.

As you might expect, it adds a range of features, including a shiny new built-in DAC plus optical and electrical digital outputs, alongside HDMI – usefully. Of course, it also charges your iWhatsit and lets you synchronise it with the mothership via USB.

As with all other rDevices, this new Arcam is an essay in how to create a small slice of hi-fi perfection. While this might sound a fawning, it's no understatement to say that the black anodised, aluminium hewn drDock feels a cost-no-object product. And there aren't many £199 bits of kit you can say that about. From the rubber base underneath to the gold-plated socketry behind, the price could easily have an extra nought on the end, if only it came in a stucco aluminium flight case with a fancy brand-name emblazoned...

Its 415g weight confers a good degree of stability. Although this was never an issue with iPods, the large 'Pad variety has meant 'shaky dock syndrome', where a poor little piece of plastic, purposed for a couple-of-hundred-gramme music portable now covers under the weight of a tablet computer with more power than a nineteen eighties Space Shuttle. It means that the drDock is man enough for the task of iPad support, making easy work of the gadget's lovely touchscreen when placed upon the Arcam.

And so to existential matters. The drDock's purpose is to transform what's normally a very so-so sound from your iPod's analogue output stage. It does this by feeding out the digital datastream of the portable and converting it to analogue via its own internal high quality Burr Brown DAC. Alternatively, the Arcam will pipe out the digital stream via its digital outputs, in a form your DAC or AV Receiver can accept, for conversion to analogue further down the listening chain. It's an avowedly hi-fi product then, about which cynics might point out that those using iPods aren't interested in sonics, anyway. The voracity of this point will of course ultimately decide the drDock's fate!

Sound quality

There's little point in bothering with this if you're running files any worse than 128kbps AAC, and below 256kbps AAC there's only a marginal difference. But fire the drDock up with a WAV, Apple Lossless or top bitrate (320kbps) AAC file and there was an appreciable improvement in sound from an iPod Classic. On Leftfield's *Not Forgotten*, there was a wider and more open soundstage, fuller bass

and smoother treble. It's as if the Arcam had subtly filtered the sound, stripping it of its sandy, grainy, coarseness and restoring it to the state of silkiness that it should have had all along.

Whatever you play through it, treble becomes a tad softer and less invasive, yet it sounds slightly less blurred too. Midband opens up and out, letting the music ease out of the speakers rather than sit there, crammed in. Bass takes on a positive role in the musical proceedings, pushing the song along in a way it hadn't before. Whereas previously I'd heard a regular booming noise, now the low notes had form, direction and tonal accuracy.

Factor in a handy remote control which is compact yet easy to use and comprehensively specified, and the drDock is a very nice package – but so it should be considering that it is more expensive than an iPod touch! While I liked the built-in DAC, it's not as good as the rDAC digital-to-analogue convertor, so its direct digital output will reward you sonically still further. A great product that's pricey yet purposeful. **ES**



► DETAILS

PRICE: £199
WEBSITE:
ARCAM.CO.UK

OUR VERDICT



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ON TEST

B&W MT-60D ■ Sony KDL-46HX753
■ Onkyo TX-NR515 ■ LG SP820



Audio Origami Linn Valhalla Power Supply Upgrade

A major improvement to the Linn LP12 turntable took place in 1982 when the company introduced the Valhalla crystal-controlled motor power supply. This is the circuitboard that regenerates the 50Hz waveform used to power the turntable motor.

At the heart of the Valhalla is a very low noise crystal oscillator, which produces a highly accurate square wave at an exact frequency. As the LP12 motor runs at its quietest when driven with a clean sinusoidal waveform, a precision filter is employed in the Valhalla to remove harmonics from the square wave, leaving a pure sine wave. The motor needs to be driven by two phases at ninety degrees with respect to one another, and this is achieved by a phase-shift network after the filter. The two resulting waveforms drive an amplifier circuit, the outputs of which drive the two motor windings.

Some early boards have been known to fail, so now Audio Origami is offering an 'audiophile' version of this board using new, higher rated and better quality components in key areas of the circuit. The result is a fully serviced printed circuit board that will give many years of service and ensure the best performance from your Valhalla LP12.

Sound quality

In use, I found that there was more torque delivered when the upgraded Valhalla was fitted, which would indicate cleaner and more precise drive currents being delivered to the motor. Although these boards are used in the Linn LP12, they can also be used in most other turntables with similar motors. A great value upgrade. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE: £99 OR
£55 (TO UPGRADE
OWN BOARD)

WEBSITE:
AUDIOORIGAMI.
CO.UK

OUR VERDICT



Mark Grant Cables Brush Strip Plates

Sometimes, you come across such a good idea that you wonder why you hadn't heard of it before! One of the necessary evils of hi-fi is the inevitable trail of cables that usually end up getting tangled with the vacuum cleaner unless tidied away neatly. The best solution of course, is to have them buried within a wall or secured inside some plastic trunking, but then you still have the problem of an unsightly exit from the wall or trunking.

The brush strip plates are a high-quality British-made product, available in two sizes to fit both single and double standard wall boxes. These wall boxes can be the recessed type, in which case the plates are screwed flat on the wall. Alternatively, they can be boxes mounted on the surface of a wall or skirting board with plastic trunking



feeding into them and the plates fitted on top. The cables exit through the front opening of the plates which are obscured with two brush strips that meet in the middle.

Both sizes are available with either white brush strips or black strips. In my opinion, the latter can look neater if you have a profusion of black cables coming out of the wall. The central brush strip area has dimensions of 50mm wide x 47mm high for the single-width plate and 100mm wide x 47mm high for the double-width plate. There is plenty of space for several cables and connectors to pass through, such as DVI, HDMI, Scart and power cables, as well as speaker cables and interconnects. A perfect solution! **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE: SINGLE
£6 DOUBLE £9

CONTACT:
01482 887717

WEBSITE:
MARKGRANT
CABLES.CO.UK

OUR VERDICT





COME AND SEE US IN SYNDICATE ROOMS 18 AND 21!

kudos

kudosaudio.com

Mains Cables R Us Ultimate MkII

This flagship wire is available with a wide choice of plugs, the stock lead coming fitted the superlative Furutech FI-1363 Rhodium mains plug and FI-50 rhodium IEC. These use carbon fibre, with rhodium plated pins, cryo treatment and demagnetization using Furutech's own patented process. European versions get equivalent FI-50 Schukos. Standard length is 1.2 metres, although other lengths are available. The cable itself is made in Japan from ultra pure ohno continuous cast copper, said to have virtually no impurities and to be – effectively – single grain. This is then heavily shielded. Overall construction quality is excellent, although not quite up there with some other Japanese 'boutique' high end cables.

Sound quality

One of the very best mains power leads I have heard, in sonic terms this compared very favourably to my reference Furutech Alpha PS-950, which is considerably more expensive. The MCRUs lead offers a wonderfully open and smooth presentation, making a Musical Fidelity AMS35i sound altogether more fluid across the midband, and more expressive in the bass. One criticism of this amplifier is its slightly mechanical presentation to rhythms, but this quality receded with this power lead, I felt. Although not quite matching top tube amplification, there was far less of a sense of rhythmic inhibition. The cable brought appreciable gains in hi-fi terms too, with superior filigree detailing to classical music and a sweeter, smoother yet more sparkling treble. Highly commended then, the only caveat being that you need a top notch system to benefit from it – £500 amps need not apply. Although not the best value cable ever, its superb performance certainly warrants its high price. **DP**



DETAILS
PRICE: £775
CONTACT:
07908 056978
WEBSITE:
MAINS-CABLES-
R-US.CO.UK

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

Sage Audio Visual Speaker stands and racks

A new face in the loudspeaker stand and equipment rack market is Sage Audio Visual. Based in the Cotswolds, the company specialises in hand-crafted units. Noting that the majority of existing equipment supports are produced using modern designs, the company aims its products at hi-fi enthusiasts who live in traditionally furnished homes, and its range is inspired from the wrought iron work so often found in country cottages and period properties.

The speaker stands that are available in two heights – 30cm and 50cm. The modular equipment racks are supplied in three sizes of 15cm, 25cm and 35cm heights, with a choice



of glass or oak-veneered shelves. The supporting frame comes with a choice of a twist or weave finish on the solid-steel, black powder-coated uprights. The bottom plate is fitted with adjustable steel spikes and the top plate can be supplied with or without top spikes.

The rack shelves can either be rigidly mounted onto the steel frame, or remain floating using heavy duty isolation fixings. These fixings use rubber bushes that have been sourced from the high performance motorcycle industry and will support the heaviest of audio equipment.

These are beautifully-made units that are solid and heavy. Attention to detail in the construction is exemplified by the curved edges on the glass shelves and the oiled oak veneer on the wooden shelves.

The company can also offer a bespoke service for any customers who may wish to change colour, sizes or style. **NR**



DETAILS
PRICE: £210 FOR
SPKR STANDS
£175 FOR RACKS
CONTACT:
0800 612 3548
WEBSITE: SAGE
AUDIOVISUAL
.COM

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

TWIST

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HI-FI CHOICE
June 2012



"A classy, high quality cable, providing top quality sound reproduction over all formats and sources."

HI-FI WORLD
July 2012



Thoroughly Recommended

"I have been using twist speaker cable in my valve based system and it's a sonic bargain! Performance versus price is at either end of a very long scale, thoroughly recommended!"

David Brook, Mains Cables R Us - Huddersfield. www.mains-cables-r-us.co.uk

Incredible Balanced and Insightful Listen

"Twist: Again incredible balanced and insightful listen at and above it's price point, never bright and aggressive, always well timed and well spaced - able to allow the emotion and colours of the music through without having to break the bank..."

Sam Lowe, Phase 3 - Southampton. www.phase3southampton.co.uk

Very Popular with Customers

"We will now use this on our install and budget system as it is proving very popular with customers we have auditioned it to. An excellent cable at an affordable price."

Derek Rapkin, H.G. Rapkin - Northampton - www.hgrapkin.co.uk

Punches Well Above its Weight

"This is a good quality cable which punches well above its weight for its price and delivers a good quality sound. The high frequencies are crisp and the low level frequencies are delivered on a strong level."

Steve, Rayleigh Hi-Fi - Chelmsford. www.rayleighhifi.com

Find out more about Twist, read the reviews and testimonials in full and find out where to buy on our website, by calling our factory or by scanning the QR code on your smartphone.



Black Rhodium

www.blackrhodium.co.uk
sales@blackrhodium.co.uk
+44 (0)1332 342233

Audiophile BetaBase Equipment Rack

Since launching its Base platform in 1993, Audiophile Furniture has produced some of the most elegantly designed affordable equipment racks for hi-fi separates, and it continues to do so with the new BetaBase, which forms part of its Traditional range. With its angled and profiled platforms (600mm at widest and 490mm at narrowest depth), which have machined-out openings at the rear that the company opines are for acoustic purposes, the BetaBase cuts a striking dash that will set off most standard width separates superbly.

The 18mm platforms, which currently come in light or dark oak finishes, are made out of sustainably sourced MDF and HDF formulated, says the company, to exact quantities of each material for better sound quality. The polyester epoxy black powder-coated tubular uprights (spacer rods) are made from aircraft-grade 2014A (HE15) aluminium due to its good machining characteristics and lightweight, yet high strength supportive capabilities.

The BetaBase is modular and comes as a starter pack, which has the first level with spikes, or feet and top caps for £289. Further levels are also priced at £289, while the uprights can be ordered in 130, 155, 205, 255 and 305mm heights, depending on equipment dimensions.

Sound quality

In direct comparison to a high-quality solid wood – but non-hi-fi – support, the Audiophile BetaBase dramatically outperformed the sturdy furniture-grade table with superior timing. Bass lines to The Carpenters' *Yesterday Once More* snapped into focus with a wonderful lyrical flow to the music. Karen Carpenter's peerless vocals expanded and spread wide into the listening room, gaining extra depth and layering, so that the phrasing of her singing parts became effortless and more convincing.

The same was also true of the improvement in the recorded acoustic when I listened to *It's My Life* by Talk Talk, where low frequencies were wonderfully enunciated with texture, depth and drive. Vocals by Mark Hollis were also well extended.

In another direct comparison, this time with a proper hi-fi table in the form of a matching four-tier Quadraspire Sunoko-Vent equipment rack, the contrast was truly fascinating, as I wasn't expecting a massive difference. The Quadraspire supported a leaner, more linear delivery with a touch more spatiality to vocals and instruments, which was well evident when playing

Love is a Stranger and the title track from *Sweet Dreams* by the Eurythmics. Indeed this was the same with the Carpenters. However, the BetaBase countered with deeper low-frequency articulation to basslines and drum tracks. Indeed, it was when I tested the BetaBase with the 1965 Elgar *Cello Concert in E minor Op.85* (played sublimely by Jacqueline Du Pré) that it really came into its own, giving a deeper, richer and more fluid rendition of the piece, with the cello itself sounding finely textured and the orchestration flowing deeply and effortlessly.

The Audiophile BetaBase is a highly attractive, high-quality hi-fi support. Compared to ordinary furniture tables, it transforms the listening experience, bringing strong, textured bass, clean, detailed midrange and smooth, open treble to your music. **CV**



► DETAILS

PRICE: £289
PER SHELF

CONTACT:
0845 6436299

WEBSITE:
NUNUDISTRIBUTION.CO.UK

OUR VERDICT





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 Quantum QRT
 Raidho Acoustics
 Revelation Audio Labs
 Purist Audio Design
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Equipment

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 Bel Canto
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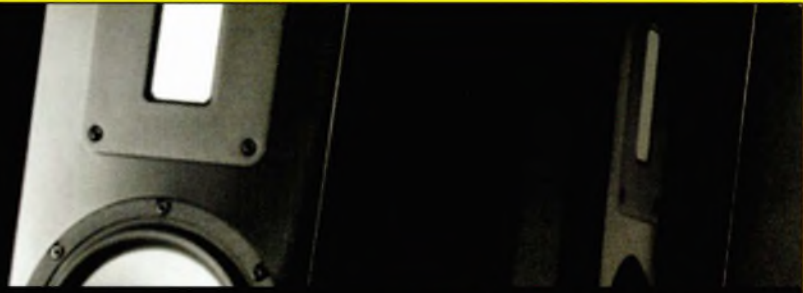
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Russ Andrews Mains Zapperator

The Zapperator is a little 'wall-wart' plug containing a dissipative filter that absorbs mains noise across medium to high frequencies. The development of the Zapperator range of products came as a result of the work that Russ Andrews undertook in the 1990s, looking at the effect of radio frequency interference (RFI) on the mains supply and the resulting audible 'smothering' of detail in audio signals.

Russ Andrews has found the Zapperators to be particularly useful in houses with wireless computer networks (these operate in the gigahertz range) and also in houses that use 'Ethernet-over-mains' computer networking, because they are designed to reduce the noise pollution that is generated by these home network systems. Mains Zapperators are designed to specifically absorb and dissipate RFI which is injected into the mains supply. This RFI can come from our own networks and also those of our neighbours. Needless to say, Zapperators do not interfere in any way with the normal operation of the home networks; they simply absorb the RFI produced by them.

In use

This filter is simply plugged into a standard, unused mains socket close to your audio system to create a 'quiet area' around it. Zapperators can also be used throughout a home next to potential sources of noise, such as a computer situated in another room.

It is an easy job to test such a device as it can be plugged in and unplugged at will. With the Zapperator, the music seems more lifelike and real. The edginess associated with strings becomes subtly more musical, mellow and effortless. **NR**



▶ DETAILS

PRICE: £90
CONTACT:
01539 797300
WEBSITE:
RUSSANDREWS.
COM

OUR VERDICT



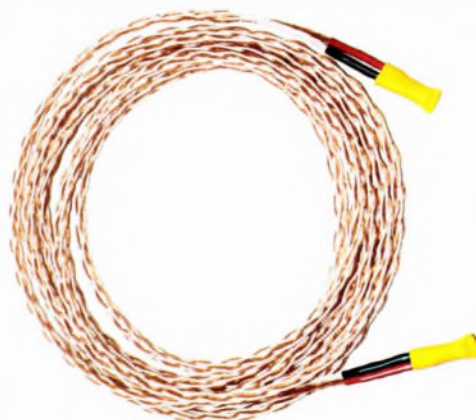
Russ Andrews Kimber 4TC speaker cable

The Kimber 4TC cable from Russ Andrews is one of the most popular in its range. The company states that Kimber's distinctive RFI-cancelling cable weave, together with its VariStrand technology, gives an even frequency balance across the audio spectrum and beyond. VariStrand technology uses seven strands of different diameters of copper in each of the wires, it's said. High-frequency signals travel along the surface of a conductor (the so-called Skin Effect), so Kimber uses several strands of copper in each insulated wire to increase the surface area.

The 4TC cable consists of eight Teflon-covered wires (four clear and four white) containing Kimber's Hyper-pure copper conductors. The cable can be supplied with the ends simply cut and stripped for you to use with your own connectors (as with the review sample) or, at an additional cost, fitted with banana plugs or spade connectors. As with all high-quality cables, these are directional, so the sleeving on each end is printed with an arrow. On a loudspeaker cable, the arrow should point towards your loudspeakers.

Sound quality

During extensive listening tests with these cables, I found bass to be super-tight and punchy, with a smooth and easy top end, which was highly engaging and emotional. Listening to Bach's *B Minor Mass*, all the members of the choir were clearly heard as individuals, rather than a 'choral mush', as it were. In my opinion, these cables are excellent value and offer super sound. **NR**



▶ DETAILS

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2.5M
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Grado GR8 earphones

The high end earphone market is increasingly big business, and as more people spend out on tablets and smartphones and spend ever more time listening 'buttoned up', the likelihood is that it will grow larger yet. More widely recognised for its full size designs, Grado has now thrown its hand into the ring with a three-strong lineup, of which the £300 GR8 tested here is the middle model.

By the standards of in-ear monitors, the GR8 is relatively small and discrete. Each earpiece is a small teardrop-shaped enclosure that features a moving armature driver assembly making use of a single relatively large driver to reproduce the frequency, rather than multiple units seen in many other designs. The result is a subtle looking device with only the very smart blue paint finish to suggest this is a £300 pair of earphones. Build quality is good, too, although for the price a carrying pouch might have been nice. No provision seems available for custom moulds, but I found the supplied buds to be comfortable and effective at keeping outside noise at bay.

Sound quality

Sonically, the Grado is an interesting performer, and one that is subtly different to many of its rivals. The moving armature design results in an earphone that has exceptional coherence across the bulk of the frequency range. Bass doesn't have the same extension and sheer grunt that some rivals possess and equally the top end isn't as pronounced as some others, but few I have tried can touch the Grado for timing and midrange detail.

Play complex music and the GR8 unravels the performance with wonderful incision. It's probably not *the* earphone of choice for the out and out bass fiend, but for midrange ability it sure takes some beating. **ES**



DETAILS

PRICE: £300
CONTACT:
01279 501111
WEBSITE:
GRADO.CO.UK

OUR VERDICT



Revo Heritage G2 Shadow Edition

Picture the scene. You have an all-singing and dancing network streaming system and you want to make use of those files in another room on a one box unit. The only problem is that you also need DAB, FM and an iPod dock. To further complicate matters it also needs to look like a classic radio. Impossible? Thanks to Revo, it is anything but!

The Heritage G2 is, as the name suggests, a design that harks back to the classic transistor shape of the sixties and seventies. A brushed metal and wood version is available, but the Shadow edition tested here sports a very cool all-black finish. Don't be fooled by the retro appearance, however, as this is a seriously clever radio. As well as all the features listed above, the Heritage G2 has Internet radio, Lastfm access and a very slick iPhone control app as well. Setup is straightforward and the Revo should be up and running out of the box in less than ten minutes.

Sound quality

With only a single three inch driver, the Revo is not the highest of high fidelity and lacks bass extension. Used in a kitchen or similar space, it has a room-filling sound with excellent detail and a pleasantly warm tonal balance. It also sounds extremely consistent across a variety of inputs and file types and, thanks to the iPhone app, it is an absolute joy to control. The Internet radio stations are particularly extensive and the Heritage is very effective used in this manner.

Although expensive, this is a well thought out and clever piece of audio equipment that matches appealing vintage looks with state-of-the-art functionality. **ES**



DETAILS

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Twonky Beam for iOS

Following on from last month's Twonky 7 catch up, the iOS reincarnation of Twonky Beam has arrived. Beam previously had a short-lived existence as a mainly Firefox-based plug-in for desktops, giving Logitech Media Server-type computer control for Twonky servers and compatible renderers.

The rethink is designed to take advantage of Twonky's drive to get (video) content providers to attach 'Beam' buttons to their web-based content. Accordingly, the tablet app is essentially a browser presentation of the providers who are on board – with context-sensitive control panels and server navigation which give us what we really want...

Which is a free DLNA controller! Unsurprisingly Beam can still control a music-only Twonky library in your own home – and actually does an admirable job of controlling a Squeezebox where the LMS server is running in the nascent uPnP compatibility mode. It's not as pretty as iPeng HD, or as navigable as PlugPlayer, but it is free. There are currently still a few bugs though – irritatingly the last item added to a playlist tends to play a preceding item, meaning you can't always get to what you want without restarting from scratch.

It seemed churlish not to essay the video throwing option. I tried it with a factory fresh version 3 Apple TV, which worked seamlessly. Those running HDMI-based AV setups may well be tempted to try this route to getting audio into their systems if expectations are not beyond CD resolution, although FLAC doesn't work at all yet. **PC**

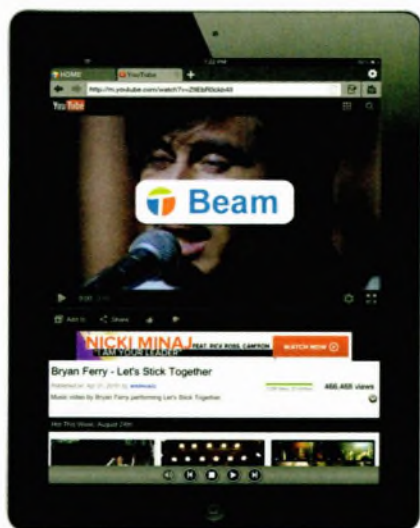
▶ **DETAILS**

PRICE: £FREE
WEBSITE:
TWONKY.COM

OUR VERDICT



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Tag 1.0b5 for OSX

I have reviewed Tag before, but as Stephen Booth prepares to launch the version 1.0 product from the Mac Application Store (hopefully ready by the time of reading), I took the last beta through its paces. All the release version adds over the beta is correct ReplayGain calculation for MP4s.

The addition of RG calculation is a masterstroke – particularly as Mr. Booth plays fast and loose with its specs and allows calculation right up to 24-bit/192kHz FLAC – Scott Brown's xACT has a much straighter bat and tops out at the RG specified maximum 24/48. Now HDTracks files which are just as compressed as the new CDs can be balanced out against the more lovingly mastered ones on playback...

The need for running Jaikoz (in Java) for album art and automatic album tagging is also reduced, as Tag has added Discogs and MusicBrainz lookups, and additional manual artwork handling is a needed addition to the original Tag 0.4.1 functionality.

Invererate 0.4.1 users such as myself may regret the demise of the freeform Tag editing 'Advanced' panel. The addition of several new MPEG formats meant that access to Tag names has had to be restricted. The sort-related tags are hived off to a new panel, and artwork has its own panel which can denote front, back and in between art separately – a joy!

A great 1.0 level release – the addition of 'folder as disc' AccurateRip checking as per XLD would make it a one-stop shop for metadata cleanup. I have made the suggestion. **PC**

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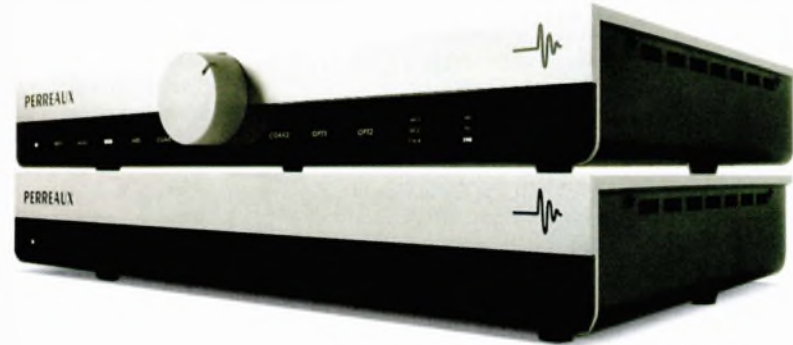
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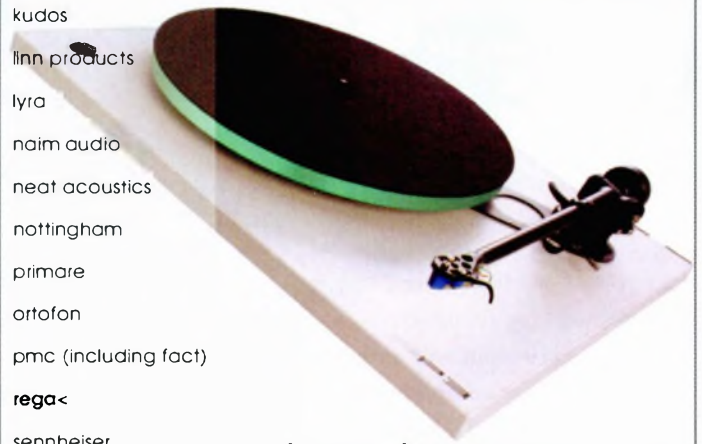
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WE HEAR...

CHORD ELECTRONICS HAS BEEN BUSY working on a three-strong new-look Chordette range, to be called the MX Series. It includes the IX streamer, QX 24-bit DAC and the SX amplifier, based on the existing Index, QuteHD and Scamp respectively. Word is that they have new styling with squared-off edges and a new rack called the Coupé Carry. Prices have dropped but the kit continues to be made in Kent.

CYRUS AUDIO IS SAID TO BE WORKING ON a brand new control app for iPad, supposedly "very sophisticated". Our spies say it gives owners of the company's streamers visibility over their networked music and extensive streamer system and web radio control. Compatible with iOS 5 and above, the official launch is going to be at the end of September.

STOP PRESS: Sad news comes of the untimely death of Paul Masson, of Audiophile Partnership. A highly popular character in the hi-fi industry, he will be sorely missed. Full obituary in the next issue...

ANGLE AND CURVE'S NEW MARK-II is a distinctive looking headphone with 40mm drivers and a fitted microphone, designed to work with any mobile device with a 3.5mm input, including all smartphones. The British designed product is on sale now for £59.95. See www.angleandcurve.com.



DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month HFC's own **Tim Jarman** chooses four of his favourite albums...



AL STEWART
YEAR OF THE CAT
Beautifully performed, complex and intelligent songs and a great cover to look at while it's playing! His follow-up album 'Time Passages' is a favourite of mine, too...

KATE BUSH
THE DREAMING
This isn't an easy album to get into and I'll confess to not liking it much at first, but now it gets better with every listen. The title track is amazing.

SAIDE
DIAMOND LIFE
A great album. It has to be the cassette version though, with 'Smooth Operator' continuing on into 'Snakebite' - the LP, CD and MD don't have this!

YMO
YELLOW MAGIC ORCHESTRA
Their first album (Japanese version) is a bit odd in places, but the rhythms are infectious and I was hooked after only one listen.

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 234
NOVEMBER 2002
'Massive Interconnect Cable Test' said the roundel on the cover of this issue. Inside, the HFC team stimulated the debate that still rages to this day among audiophiles: does a particular make/price of cable make a difference to sound quality? Elsewhere, there were early indications that the CD was doomed, thanks to DVD-Audio, SACD and MP3! Scientist Will Rees opined that the future was 'blue laser' and its ability to squeeze the entire Library of Congress archive onto a disc the size of a coin! Meanwhile, the Miss World contest was moved from Nigeria to London due to rioting, while security measures across the globe went into overdrive one year on from 9/11.



HI-FI CHOICE: THE COLLECTION
NOVEMBER 1992
Time again for HFC's annual look at everything high end. *The Collection*, published every twelve months, concentrated on the hi-fi that 'dreams are made of' with 120 pages of mouth-watering goodies, including a £10,955 Krell system, a £9,000 Audio Note valve preamp and £4,000 B&W Silver Signature loudspeakers. Editor Andy Benham tried to put these prices into context by comparing a £1,400 cartridge to drinking three pints of beer a night for one whole year, or making two-and-a-half visits a week to a Chinese restaurant! Hopefully no high end kit was lost in the Windsor Castle fire, which prompted the Queen to call the year her *annus horribilis*.



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 64
NOVEMBER 1988
Along with its 194 bumper-packed pages, the November issue of HFC included a free Decca classics CD. "Do look after the disc", warned editor John Bamford, "its rarity value could well make it a collector's item in years to come". If readers were wondering what to play their free gift on, then there was plenty of choice in this month's CD player review section including, for the well-heeled, Paul Messenger's assessment of a new luxury car built in digital system. Mind you, a sign of things to come in the 'digital' domain was the first computer 'worm' to be distributed via the Internet, resulting in the first ever conviction under the 1986 *Computer Fraud and Abuse Act*.

As this month's feature shows, the Technics SL-1200 turntable is often loved by DJs and loathed by audiophiles.

Many of the latter simply have never seen the deck in the flesh however, let alone heard it. With a brilliant direct drive motor system, machined alloy top-plate and solid rubber base, it's a sturdy bit of kit. Still, one weakness is vibration isolation, due to its lack of a suspension.

So here's an interesting new solution - a bespoke real wood outer plinth costing just £289. The turntable's stock feet are removed, then it just slots in, resting on four internal sorbothane mounts. The plinth itself also has sorbothane feet. For more details of this interesting new upgrade, click on www.inspirehifi.co.uk.



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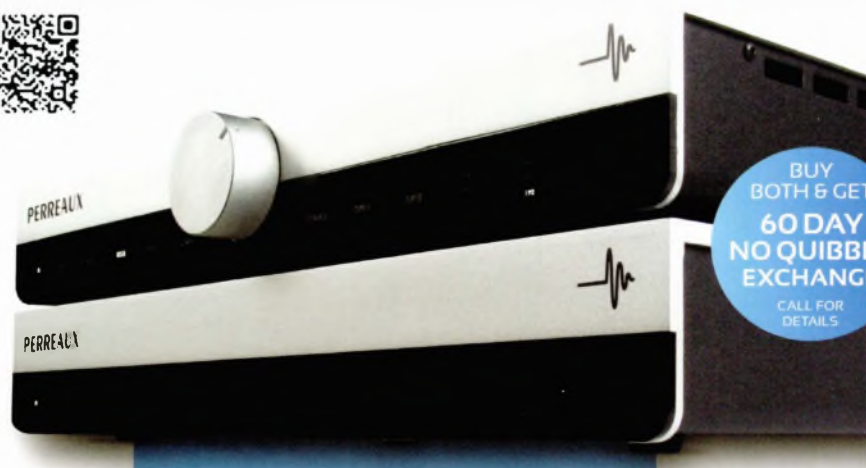


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