

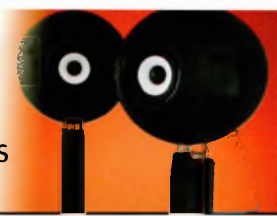


# Beat this

Micromega's funky new MyDAC digital-to-analogue convertor

# Rising sun

Fujitsu Ten's dazzling Eclipse TD510ZMk2 floorstanding speakers



# Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 367

January 2013

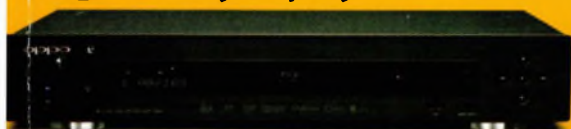
£3.99

## Box clever

with KEF's new R300 bookshelf beauties!

## Super sonics

Why Oppo's BDP-103EU Blu-ray is a great way to play CD too



## 30

top products tested from Creek, Leema Acoustics, Marantz, Musical Fidelity, YBA and more

## Groove riders

Six budget phono stages get the *Blind Listening Group Test* treatment...

## DAC Attack!

Arcam, Audioquest, Beresford and Pro-Ject digital convertors tested



## Tree-riffic

Acoustic Solid's Solid 111 turntable

JANUARY 2013  
9 770955 111090  
01  
£3.99

# ROCK STEADY...



**K**rell, creator of so many firsts, can be credited with the concept of the true high-end integrated amp. Its KAV-300i revolutionised the way audiophiles treated a single-chassis solution to their amplification needs. The secret? Incorporating all of Krell's expertise in a no-compromise, yet compact enclosure.

**T**he S-550i respects this long-standing tradition, building on the acclaimed S-300i and upping the power to a massive 275W per channel. With balanced and single-ended operation, an iPod dock and circuit details derived from the flagship Phantom, the S-550i is pure Krell. And that means power; musical authority and the ability to, well, rock. Hard.



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**Phono stage Blind Test** Six designs up to £500



**56**

**Marantz CD/PM6004** CD player/amplifier

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**Joni Mitchell** *The Studio Albums 1968-1979*

### BADGES EXPLAINED

▶ OUR AWARDS



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



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



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



I'm a great believer that there's a time and place for everything. Windsurfing, paragliding and abseiling can all wait for the summer months as far as I'm concerned, when the weather's warmer, the daylight longer and the radio airwaves are less crowded

with 'Christmas with Cliff Richard' records...

Instead, the festive season in which we find ourselves is the perfect time for kicking back and relaxing with your hi-fi. Suddenly you remember precisely *why* you spent an arm-and-a-leg on that tasty new power amp sitting in the corner, merrily spinning the dials of your electricity meter. It may be lashing seven bells of hell outside, but inside it's lovely!

At this time of year, I find vinyl goes down particularly well. My spies in retail tell me the format's continuing to go great guns, with ever more people treating themselves to turntables. Thing is, very few amplifiers these days have phono inputs, so you'll need a phono stage. That's why this month, we're blind-testing six of the best budget designs. Check out our findings on p22 – suffice to say the three best in the test really are very nice to listen to, capturing the format's charm and magic brilliantly.

Still, whether you're analogue addicted or digital-dependent – disc-based or air streaming – this issue is packed with great bits of kit, some of which could just conceivably end up in your Christmas stocking. You'll find a veritable winter wonderland of premium products inside. Have yourself a wonderful winterval!

**David Price** Editor

david.price@hifichoice.co.uk



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## Jordan Acoustics are specialists in World Class Audio Systems

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**Never miss an issue – turn to p38 for our latest subs offer**

# Audiofile

The latest industry news

## Supercharge

It isn't everyday that Quad updates its electrostatic loudspeakers, so the new ESL-2812 and 2912 are important products, says **David Price**...

**PRICE:** £6,500–£8,000  
**AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 01480 447700  
**WEB:** QUAD-HIFI.CO.UK

**A**s its name suggests, Quad's first ELS-57 electrostatic loudspeaker appeared in 1957, just one year after the Morris 1000 motor car made its debut on British roads. But the iconic Quad speaker has endured rather better, with relatively little change over the intervening fifty five years, showing the inherent rightness of the superb original design...

Unlike conventional moving coil loudspeakers, electrostatics are effectively panels of Mylar film held between two electrically conductive grids. They're able to move very large amounts of air relative to the tiny deflection of the film, which is very light and linear in operation. The advantages of this include superb transient speed and low distortion, as well as the complete absence of the many problems that conventional speakers suffer from. It makes for a very open, clean and subtle sound, especially across the midband.

Over the years, Quad has refined the panels and the enclosures into which they're set, the last change coming in 2005 with the ESL-2805 and ESL-2905 receiving substantially more rigid housings among other technical refinements.

And now, the new '12 series Quads continue to refine the technology. As per their predecessors, they sport

four and six electrostatic panels in the ESL-2812 and 2912 respectively. Quad says the two inner panels utilise concentric rings of electrodes to deliver pinpoint imaging from an ideal point source, for superior stereo imagery. All panels are held within a high-mass structure of tensioned aluminium extrusions coupled to stainless steel supports.

The new speakers also have an improved power supply on a new two-layer printed circuit board, which ensures optimum insulation and distance between contacts and a symmetrical layout for the components. This new layout also gives an improvement in cable dressing, and new components are fitted, including Vishay metal film resistors and Murata audio-grade capacitors, the company says.

Improved stators are fitted, along with better insulation material which Quad claims makes for improved efficiency and higher power handling – welcome news as its previous generation electrostatic speakers weren't particularly strong in this respect. Visual indication of overload (and the tripping of the protection circuitry) is now provided, usefully. The new ESLs are slightly taller, narrower and less deep than their predecessors, and a new net cloth has been specified to cover the

elements, delivering superior audio transparency, Quad says.

The new ESL-2812s and 2912s are out now, and well worth auditioning if you're looking for loudspeakers that do things differently.



These new Quads are well worth auditioning if you're looking for speakers that do things differently...

## Two's company

**A DECADE AGO, THE JAPANESE WERE ABANDONING TWO CHANNEL FASTER THAN YOU COULD SAY 'SUSHI'.**

Lest we forget, multichannel was the way ahead – apparently – and we were all going to have between six and eight loudspeakers in our listening room, whereupon we'd be transported to hitherto unknown audio delights... Ermm, how's that working out for you guys now?

Home cinema is, of course, a fine and noble pursuit, but it never managed to usurp two-channel in the hearts and minds of music lovers. How so? Well you don't need more speakers than your local multiplex movie theatre to get a truly immersive audio experience – anyone with a decently set-up stereo will have this, even from a relatively modest outlay. Also, the prospect of having no room to move in your living room, lest you accidentally fall over your subwoofer, meant that multi-speaker systems didn't appeal to all.

Now in 2013, stereo's experiencing something of a renaissance, and a number of Japanese marques have 'come back' to two-channel. Pioneer's new models show just how seriously they're taking it, with some great new affordable electronics. The new £500 PD-50-K Super Audio CD player features Rigid Under Base technology, an aluminium front panel and twin transformers, along with short audio signal paths. It uses a Hi-bit DSP technology, and there's a iPod/iPhone/iPad connection via a front USB port which plays MP3, MPEG-4, AAC, WMA and DSD files.

Partnering this silver disc spinner is the new £800 A-70-K amplifier. 'Extensively tuned by several of the world's leading sound technicians', it has AIR Studios' seal of approval, no less. A Class D design boasting 90W RMS per channel, it boasts 'high-grade' components, a rigid under-base and a 32-bit/192kHz ESS SABRE32 Audio DAC. Twin power transformers are provided for power amplifier and the preamp, each shielded separately. Watch out for a review soon!



# Little wonder

Arcam's new entry-level integrated is a versatile performer...



**A**rcam is confident that its new A19 integrated amplifier will delight music lovers of all generations, boasting, it says, exceptional transparency and detail with ultra-low level distortion. The amp's power supply is designed to

be able to supply two of Arcam's popular r-Series products. This allows the A19 to become a digital hub for a whole range of digital connection upgrades that includes both wireless Bluetooth devices and USB sources. Other features include a low noise

moving magnet phono stage, audiophile-grade passive components, six line level inputs, Burr-Brown volume control, a decent quality headphone amplifier stage and a claimed output power of 50W RMS per channel (8 ohms).

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

# Straight up

A new improved tonearm from Clearaudio



**H**igh-end distributor Audio Reference UK is pleased to announce the release of the new Universal tonearm from Clearaudio Electronic GmbH.

Available in both 9 and 12 inch versions, Clearaudio has kept the tonearm's mass low by way of a new lightweight design featuring a one-piece headshell. The three-piece arm tube is made from ultra-rigid, yet light carbon-fibre which, the manufacturer says, minimises arm tube resonance and combines high rigidity with low effective mass, giving an excellent performance with a wide range of cartridges.

The addition of high precision ball-race bearings in both horizontal and vertical planes provides, says Clearaudio, low friction and minimises bearing noise, which contributes to correct cartridge tracking. The azimuth is adjustable, for a more accurate vertical orientation of the stylus in the record groove, while the screw adjustment of the interchangeable counterweights allows the tracking force to be set quickly and accurately for almost any cartridge on the market. An optional VTA lifter allows for fine-tuning of vertical tracking angle, even during playback.

**PRICES:** 9" £3,380; 12" £3,600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01252 702705 **WEB:** CLEARAUDIO.DE

# Mains man

**DISCOVERY IS ISOTEK'S NEW ENTRY-LEVEL RANGE** of mains power products. It consists of the EVO3 Polaris six-way mains conditioning block (£250, pictured below), EVO3 Mini Mira mains conditioning device for TVs and projectors (£195) and the EVO3 Premier high-performance power cable (£80).

The Polaris incorporates delta filter topology to ensure filtration of both Common Mode and Differential Mode mains noise, delivering power to six outlets – each one independently isolated to prevent cross-contamination. and 13,500A of protection safeguarding valuable equipment. Mini Mira is a mains filtration device for TVs and projectors, while the Premier is the company's most affordable power cable with premium-quality materials. [isoteksystems.com](http://isoteksystems.com)



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*HiFi Choice, review of M25, Oct. 2012 edition*



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Diva IISP Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*, January 2011

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# Afjordable audio

New integrated amplifier with a built-in DAC from Norway...



**E**lectrocompaniet is launching a new integrated amplifier with a built-in DAC in its Prelude range. The amplifier is based on the popular PI 2 amplifier boasting 2x 100 watts. You can connect up to five digital sources

to the PI 2D and get away with fewer boxes and cables, the company says.

With its 24-bit/192kHz DAC, the PD 2D offers five digital inputs: two coaxial, two TOSLink and one USB. Analogue sources can be connected by one balanced XLR

input and four single-ended RCA inputs. In the development of PI 2D, the focus has been to maintain the operating principles and sound quality of the Classic line amplifiers, while making them at a more affordable price point.

**PRICE:** £2,600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 020 8893 5835 **WEB:** ELECTROCOMPANIET.NO

## Making a CEntrance

New widget streams music with dual digital inputs

**T**he CEntrance HiFi-M8 portable DAC is a new audiophile-grade headphone amplifier that streams music from dual digital inputs. Pronounced 'Hi-Fi-Mate', it streams USB digital audio from smartphones, laptops and other digital sources, creating the ultimate playback system for on-the-go listeners. The HiFi-M8 is great for use either at home or on-the-go. Its internal

Lithium-Polymer rechargeable battery offers hours of listening enjoyment for today's mobile users, while its audiophile headphone amplifier supports in-ear and over-the-ear headphones. "We are confident that its unbeatable combination of features, sound quality, and convenience will win the hearts of many audio enthusiasts", says the founder of CEntrance.



**PRICE:** £700 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** +1 847 581 0500 **WEB:** CENTRANCE.COM

## Legendary racks

New modular rack system enhances hi-fi performance

**R**CJ Audio's new range of hi-fi support equipment incorporates a built-in damping system, employed to remove vibrations that inevitably emanate from equipment. Additionally, the supports are also designed to fit the range of Hush Isolation Platforms. Each is named after the guardian mountains of Wasdale; Red Pike,



Yewbarrow, Pillar, Great Gable and the mighty Scafell, and are available in 2, 3 or 4 shelf options with a variety of finishes including Oak, Cherry, European Walnut and Birds Eye Maple veneers with solid wood framework and surrounds. Granite, Slate, Engineered Stone and Valchromat inserts available in lieu of veneered finish. Shelf sizes vary.

**PRICE:** FROM £1,750 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** RJCAUDIO.CO.UK

# Cardinal in

## Wilson Benesch announces new flagship loudspeaker

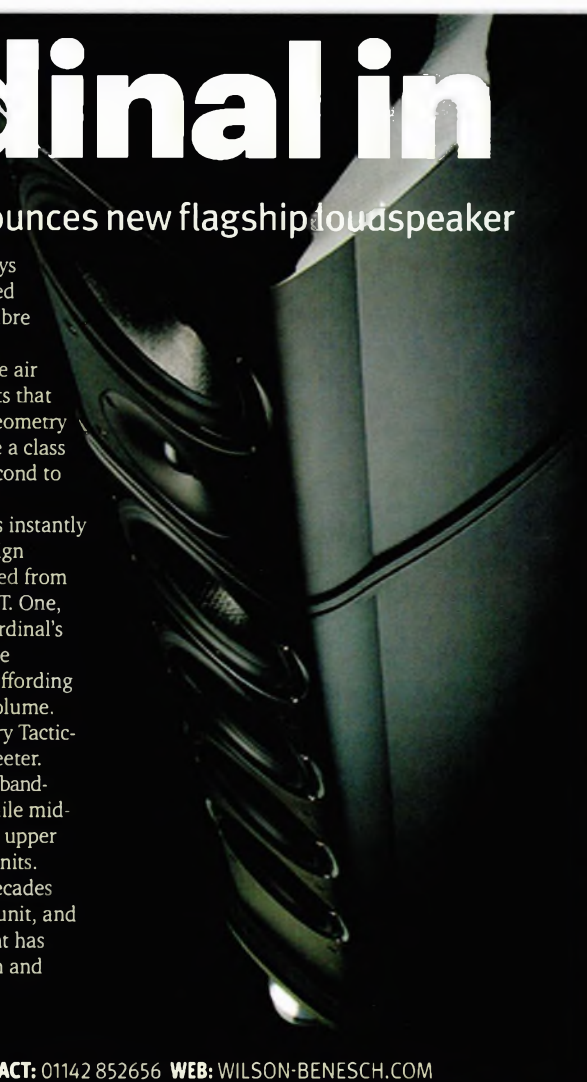
**T**he Cardinal loudspeaker is, says the company, its most advanced loudspeaker to date. Carbon fibre based, advanced composite systems enable a shell structure with a massive air volume and it is these curved elements that give the cabinet a complex internal geometry to counter standing waves and ensure a class leading signal to noise ratio that is second to none, says the company.

The Cardinal's form and geometry is instantly recognisable as a Wilson Benesch design incorporating accents that have evolved from many predecessors including the A.C.T. One, The Bishop and The Chimera. The Cardinal's footprint is more than twice that of the Chimera, standing 12-inches higher, affording the Cardinal a 65 percent larger air volume.

The Cardinal is fitted with proprietary Tactic-II Drive units and the Semisphere Tweeter. Eighteen drive units in total deliver wide bandwidth sound from 25Hz to 35kHz, while mid-range frequencies are handled by two upper and lower mid-range Tactic-II Drive Units.

The Cardinal is the summation of decades of work in the fields of cabinet, drive unit, and material innovation. This development has been evolutionary, building upon each and every success, says the company.

**PRICE:** £TBA **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01142 852656 **WEB:** WILSON-BENESCH.COM



## NEWS IN BRIEF

• **THE LATEST HEADPHONES** from British brand Snug are licensed to use the iconic 'I Love New York' logo, which is owned by New York State, and make, says Snug, an eye-catching fashion statement, while also delivering a thoroughly ear-pleasing sound!

Originally designed by Milton Glaser to spearhead an advertising campaign to promote tourism in the mid-1970s, the trademarked 'I Love New York' design has become one of the world's most instantly recognisable logos. As the only official licensee for headphones, Snug's headphones are of course completely unique, sporting an image loved and worn by millions of people around the world.

The 'I Love New York' Headphones include easily adjustable padded headband and soft ear cushions to ensure the perfect balance between lightweight comfort and a secure fit against the listener's ears. According to Snug, a premium-grade 40mm driver in each earpiece ensures crisp treble and expressive midrange.

Available in four colours, Midnight Black, Classic White, Concrete Grey, and Candy Pink, they are distributed exclusively by iHeadphones with an RRP of £40.

[iheadphones.co.uk](http://iheadphones.co.uk)



• **ROBERTS' LATEST SOUND SYSTEM**, the SOUND 70 (£130) is housed in a neat cube design, with two wooden speakers and remote, allowing you to listen to your music anyway you like. It features DAB/FM, 20 station presets, an iPod docking station, CD and aux in for other MP3 players and Smartphones. [robertsradio.co.uk](http://robertsradio.co.uk)



## Ultra sound

**LOVERS OF EXOTICA** might like to know that Chord Electronics has upgraded its Reference Series power amplifiers to MkII status. The updated monoblock models, the SPM 6000 and SPM 14000, have, says the company, been extensively revised to include numerous engineering refinements to increase their sonic performance, flexibility and lifespan.

On the outside, the new MkII models sport a new

front-panel design and rear connector plate, featuring new British-designed, heavy-duty, gold-plated insulated speaker terminals. The new rear connector plate also enables third-party power connectors to be used. New lighting further complements the design.

On the inside, the refinements are abundant and include a new power-control and sequencing board for simpler operation, refinements to the filter

components to ensure greater high-speed performance and overall stability. Driver circuitry improvements have also been implemented, say Chord, giving a faster overall response and considerably improved high-frequency response.

The Reference Series amplifiers are said to boast Chord Electronics' design know-how, and are the largest amplifiers the company has ever made. The SPM 6000MkII (650W) is £13,950, while the SPM 1400MkII (700W) is £24,480.

[chordelectronics.co.uk](http://chordelectronics.co.uk)





# 2050i

## Towering Performance. Rewarded.



"The music was so vividly colourful and had such energy, life and dynamic contrast that listening came close to being a sublime experience."



HI-FI CHOICE  
NOVEMBER 2012

"Agile, taut and beautifully spacious sound – great dynamic ability; well built. Great value for money."



WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION  
APRIL 2012



Q Acoustics 2000i 5.1 Cinema Pack



Q Acoustics 2020i



Q Acoustics 2050i

### Q Acoustics - An award winning heritage

A collage of award logos for Q Acoustics products, including:

- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2008: BEST SPEAKER PACKAGE UNDER £700 Q ACOUSTICS 1010i 5.1
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2009: STEREO SPEAKERS BEST STEREO SPEAKERS UP TO £150 Q ACOUSTICS 1010i
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2009: PRODUCT OF THE YEAR UPSCALE PACKAGES Q ACOUSTICS 1000i CINEMA PACK
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2010: SUPERTEST WINNER Q Acoustics 2010i SUPERTEST
- hi-fi WORLD AWARDS 2010: Q Acoustics 2020i March 2010
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2011: STEREO SPEAKERS & SUBWOOFERS BEST STEREO SPEAKER UP TO £200 Q ACOUSTICS 2020i
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2011: PRODUCT OF THE YEAR Q ACOUSTICS 1010i
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2011: SPEAKER PACKAGES BEST TRADITIONAL PACKAGE UP TO £700 Q ACOUSTICS 2000i 5.1 PACK
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2011: Q Acoustics 2000i 5.1 pack November 2011
- BEST BUY FORUMS: Q Acoustics 7000 series January 2012
- HOME CINEMA AWARDS 2011: Q Acoustics 7000 series
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2011: Q Acoustics 2020i November 2011
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2011: Q Acoustics 2010i January 2012
- HI-FI CHOICE: Q Acoustics 1010i 5 Star Recommended Hi-Fi Choice March 2012
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- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2006: SPEAKER PACKAGES BEST TRADITIONAL PACKAGE UNDER £700 Q ACOUSTICS 1010i 5.1
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2007: "...it really is hard to find fault..." Q Acoustics 1010i Awards 2007
- hi-fi WORLD: Q Acoustics 1050 November 2008
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2007: SPEAKER PACKAGES BEST TRADITIONAL PACKAGE UNDER £700 Q ACOUSTICS 1010i 5.1
- WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2007: Q Acoustics 1050 Awards 2008
- HI-FI CHOICE GOLD: Q Acoustics 1050 Awards 2008
- BEST BUY HI-FI CHOICE: Q Acoustics 1050 September 2008
- hi-fi WORLD: Q Acoustics 1020 August 2006
- HI-FI CHOICE GOLD: Q Acoustics 1010 Awards 2007







# Image conscious

Looking for a high quality standmount speaker with soundstaging to fly for? KEF's R300 is it, says **Adam Smith...**

**T**here can often be a sense of reticence amongst the buying public when it comes to flagship products. Much as many like to admire a statement product every now and then, I get the impression that there can occasionally be a sense of "why bother – very few people can afford it?". Yet I can't help thinking that this is missing the point somewhat...

In the car industry, for example, it's often said that what appears on today's Mercedes S-Class will adorn the average family saloon in five years' time. This is *precisely* where the flagship comes in, testing the water for new technologies that will be made more affordable and available on models to come.

Of course, some companies are better at it than others, and KEF has shown a real return to form recently. Although it has been past masters of the art with loudspeakers like the original 107, which spawned a whole wealth of new designs (and a few imitators), it has been really pushing the boat out over the past few years. First came the behemoth that was the mighty Muon and this was swiftly followed by the slim and elegant Blade. Although the £20,000 price tag of the latter is indeed out of the reach of a good majority of us, its technologies worked their way straight into a new range called the 'R series'...

Comprising no less than nine models, the R Series occupies the upper middle ground for KEF, slotting in above the Q Series, but below the Reference Models, and ranging in price from £600 to just under £3,000. This is a hotly contested area, so KEF really had to pull out all the stops to ensure that its new babies wowed the public suitably. With a line-up consisting of two standmounters, three floorstanders, two home cinema centre channel units, one surround sound dipole design and a matching

subwoofer, the company really does seem to have encompassed most potential listeners – to say nothing of most listening rooms thanks to finishes in Rosewood and Walnut veneer, plus Gloss Black and a rather swanky Gloss White.

The R300 under consideration here is the larger of the two standmounting designs and sports a bigger cabinet than its smaller R100 brother, plus an additional bass driver to add a bit more low end impact. The main driver is where the lineage from the Blade can immediately be seen, being made up by a 125mm aluminium coned midrange driver with a centrally located 25mm aluminium dome tweeter, in KEF's trademark Uni-Q point-source configuration. Crossover between the two units is at a respectably high 2.8kHz and the tweeter features the recently developed 'Tangerine' waveguide to aid in the dispersal of its output.

Below the Uni-Q driver sits a 165mm bass driver with aluminium cone and aluminium-wired voice coil; both items ensuring low weight and good responsiveness. The driver appears smaller than one might first think due to the silver trim ring around it, which covers up the roll surround of the unit. This is an unusual step but one that is not just for aesthetic reasons. Although the roll surround of a drive unit obviously performs an essential function in the structural integrity and operation of the driver, it can be something of a pain, adding unwanted artefacts, vibrational maladies and out-of-phase information to the movement of the main cone. A cover such as that used on the R300 minimises the latter, so should allow a more pure bass spectrum with lower distortion.

Finish of the R300s is very good, although I personally would prefer a little more gloss and depth of grain to the wood finish – it looks a little

## ▶ DETAILS

**PRODUCT:**  
KEF R300  
**ORIGIN:**  
UK/China  
**TYPE:**  
standmount  
loudspeaker  
**WEIGHT:**  
12 kg  
**DIMENSIONS:**  
(WxHxD mm):  
210x385x345mm  
**FEATURES**  
• specified  
sensitivity: 88dB  
• specified  
impedance: 8 Ohm  
• 25mm aluminium  
dome tweeter and  
125 aluminium  
midrange unit  
• 165mm aluminium  
coned bass driver  
**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
KEF Audio  
**TELEPHONE:**  
01622 672261  
**WEBSITE:**  
kef.com

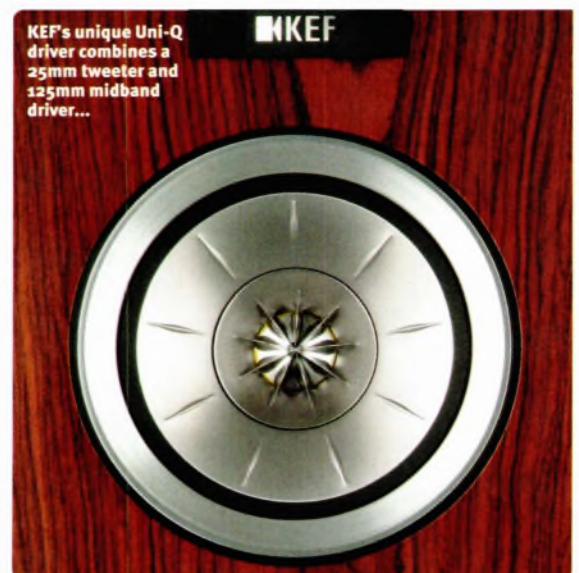
plasticky to my eyes. The cabinet itself however is solid and well made, from the neat driver trims at the front to the smooth flare of the port at the rear. Twin sets of terminals are provided for bi-wiring or bi-amping the Uni-Q driver and the bass unit separately, and the links are built into the speaker – twist a knob between each pair of positive and negative terminals anticlockwise and they are disconnected, twist clockwise and they reconnect. The system is simple and very clever, and does away with the necessity for separate jumper links, although do check they really are disconnected if you're thinking of bi-amping, so as not to send your amplifiers up in smoke – there is no visual indication of their state!

**I was incredibly impressed by the sheer scale of the R300's performance**

Finally, mention has to be made of the multi-lingual handbook which appears to contain some good and useful information regarding speaker use, positioning and troubleshooting. Unfortunately as this is all written in a succession of bizarre hieroglyphics, the pictures range from amusingly strange to completely indecipherable!

## Sound quality

With the R300s well run in, I made sure that they were securely perched on the top of a pair of mass loaded Atacama SL600 stands and fed them with my Naim SuperNait amplifier using both CD and vinyl sources, the former courtesy of a Naim CD5XS/



## Q&A

Jack Oclee-Brown  
Research Engineer, KEF



**AS: What's the ethos behind the design of the KEF R Series?**

**JOB:** Reference is always the top loudspeaker 'range' but we developed the R Series with the aim to make the range a Junior Reference; to bring close to Reference series performance into a price range that is within the reach of most enthusiasts.

**How has the Blade helped in this development?**

The R-series Uni-Q is a midrange-only design and we had previously only used this type of Uni-Q in the Reference series, the Muon and the Blade. When the Uni-Q is midrange-only the cone excursion is very small and it is much easier to design the midrange so that it acts merely as a waveguide for the tweeter and there is no interaction with the sound from it.

**What about the tweeter in the centre?**

This also shares a great deal of technology with the Blade and Reference series. The dome is reinforced by a specially shaped former which is attached to the dome in two places, creating a rigid structure at the dome edge and meaning that the dome breakup frequency is very high. It was designed using our modelling tools and because the performance is derived from the geometry, rather than the materials, we can use it throughout our product range.

**How does the boss drive unit complete the design?**

The R300 uses a 6.5inch driver for frequencies below 350Hz. It is rare to have a truly three-way standmount loudspeaker, but it is a key to getting the lowest possible midrange distortion. The LF drivers on the R-series range use a unique diaphragm design based around an aluminium dish. Additionally, we used Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) to calculate the airflow through the port and were able to find a flare shape which worked much more effectively when the speaker is played loud.

### IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm aluminium Uni-Q dome tweeter
- 2 125mm aluminium Uni-Q mid driver
- 3 rear mounted reflex port
- 4 KEF biwireable speaker terminals
- 5 wood veneered MDF cabinet
- 6 165mm aluminium bass driver

### ON TEST

KEF claims 88dB sensitivity for the R300 but our pink noise figure of 86.9dB suggests that 87dB is more realistic. Although the nominal impedance is 8 ohms, KEF's quoted minimum modulus of 3.2 ohms – we measured 3.1 ohms at 164Hz – suggests that a 4 ohm rating is more appropriate. Impedance phase angles are large at low frequencies, with the result that the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation

resistance) falls to a challenging 1.4 ohms at 39Hz although the dip to a less demanding 2.1 ohms at 121Hz may be more relevant. Frequency response errors were tightly controlled at  $\pm 2.6$ dB and  $\pm 3.2$ dB respectively for the review pair, 200Hz-20kHz, but the response trend is not entirely flat, a distinct presence band depression being interrupted by a hump in output centred on 5kHz. Pair matching over the same

frequency range was a fine  $\pm 0.9$ dB. Payback for the moderate sensitivity comes with diffraction-corrected bass extension of 39Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz – a good for a compact cabinet – and ultrasonic extension is maintained to above 40kHz. Total harmonic distortion at 100Hz was just 0.7% and the cumulative spectral decay waterfall evinces fast initial energy decay with only a sprinkling of low-level resonances in the treble. KH

Flatcap XS combination and the analogue from a Michell GyroDec turntable, with SME309 arm and Ortofon Cadenza Red cartridge, the latter through an Anatek MC1 phono stage. From the very beginning of my listening session, I was impressed by the sheer scale of the R300s' performance and the magnificent sense of authority that they imparted onto the music. They really do offer a larger-than-life take on things, particularly given their compact cabinet size, and have impressive low end heft. Unfortunately it didn't take too much for me to conclude that the heft was a bit too, well, hefty. My listening room isn't too small and usually happily plays host to some transmission line-loaded PMC floorstanders, but these little standmounters were upsetting the bass modes in the room far more than the PMCs ever do.

I remembered this is a quirk I have experienced with KEFs before however, so I went rummaging in the box for a pair of foam bungs to limit port output. Even better, KEF's latest bungs come in two parts, so you can choose to block the port completely with them, or remove the very central portion and to leave a foam cylinder that limits the port action but does not curtail it completely. Listening with the full bung inserted left me with the impression that the whole speaker's performance seemed strangled, so I settled

on the halfway house option, moved them a little further into the room and away from the side walls and sat back down again – much better...

Finely tuned in this way, the R300s really came alive. Bass was now still very fulsome, but much better controlled and superbly tuneful. All too often, tuning for impressive bass weight can leave detail and taut rhythmicity behind in the wings but I was pleased to hear that the R300s do not suffer from this in any way.

The solo fretless bass guitar from the alternative version of Paul Simon's *Diamonds*

**These loudspeakers have a sophistication and clarity that others at the price struggle to match...**

on *the Soles of her Shoes*, taken from the 25th anniversary version of the *Graceland* CD, was magnificently rendered, with real pace, depth and form to the performance. There was no sense of overhang, wallow or cabinet artefacts and each note was distinctly audible within the song as it was played. Even better were the vocals, though – Paul Simon was absolutely

rock-solid in the centre of the loudspeakers, and his performance was vivid, emotive and superbly three dimensional.

The result is that the wee R300s image very well indeed and set up a capacious soundstage across the width of my listening room; a soundstage that was so secure and sculpted and made instrument placement easy. A perfect example was when I slipped an old reviewing favourite in the form of the Eagles' *Hell Freezes Over* onto the turntable – the way in which the R300s spread Messrs. Henley, Schmit, Frey, Walsh and Felder across the end of the room was quite uncanny, and they projected them forward at me by just the right amount. This is tricky to get right – if a loudspeaker pushes things back off into the distance too much it can be like listening down a tunnel, but equally too much forward projection can make you feel like you're being shouted at by an irate Sergeant-Major! The KEFs judged everything beautifully, putting the action right where it needed to be. They gently pushed backing instruments away to the end of my listening room, while layering the main action expertly in front of them.

At all times there was also a highly pleasing sense of coherence across the midband and treble that allowed singers and musicians to express themselves well with no hint of any uncertainty or muddle slipping through the net. Acoustic instruments

such as guitars, cellos and double basses had a lovely sense of woody richness and depth to them and yet the KEFs stepped smartly into their 1980s pink leg warmers and white Ray-Bans when I hit them with some electronica courtesy of *Don't You Want Me?* from the League Unlimited Orchestra's *Love and Dancing* album. The synthesiser bass notes were taut and snappy; and the R300s slipped into a natural and ebullient groove with almost disdainful ease.

A further aspect I enjoyed greatly about the R300s was their treble. Much has been said about the alleged shortcomings of metal dome tweeters over the years, some of it quite unfairly in my opinion, but the fact is that the £1,000 price point is still an area of the market where it is occasionally possible to hear necessary compromises being made, and the tweeter is not an uncommon source of these.

In the R series, however, KEF has had no such issues and the R300s are as sweet and smooth, yet as blissfully detailed, as I have heard from anything at the price. Where some designs can impress with their clarity but then start to become aggressive when provoked, I never found the R300s lost their sense of composure, even when faced with a less than couth recording. Violin strings soared without screeching, cymbals rang out without any splashiness and some high-pitched operatic activity courtesy of *The*



**THE £1,000 PRICE POINT IS AN INTERESTING ONE**, as many of the R300s' obvious rivals retail either side of this. B&W field the CM5 at £800 and Monitor Audio offer the GX100 at £1,250, with PMC coming in with both the TB2i and Twenty.215 at closer to £1,400. It would also be highly unwise not to consider the Mowgan Audio Aesus at around £800 and the Vienna Acoustics Haydn Grand edging up towards £900.

All of these models are highly capable in their own right with the GX100s and TB2is offering more verve and excitement and the Mowgans and Viennas being rather more smooth and relaxing. The B&Ws sit perfectly in the middle as a very capable all-rounder and are the KEFs' most obvious rivals in general character. The R300s certainly dig deeper but require more careful positioning and setup in order to hear them at their best – the CM5s are more forgiving in this respect. As to the PMC Twenty.215, I would say that these are the most capable of giving the KEFs something to worry about sonically, and they also have a better finish. That said, the 40% price difference over the KEFs is difficult to overlook.

*Magic Flute* had me grinning from ear to ear with its intensity. Even popping a few dodgy old car boot sale vinyl purchases onto the turntable failed to upset the R300s' composure. They certainly did nothing to mask clicks, pops and groove damage, but made sure that it never intruded on the music itself. Their underlying character is vivacious and musical and they made sure that absolutely nothing stepped in the way of this.

## Conclusion

I must confess to always having something of a soft spot for KEF loudspeakers, despite the fact that one or two in the past have teetered precariously on the edge of being a little forward for my tastes at times. These new R300s are far from this however, being highly dynamic and forthright. The DNA of the mighty Blade is easy to pick out as these loudspeakers have a sophistication and clarity that others at the price struggle to match.

I also feel that the Uni-Q driver has well and truly come of age in the R Series, not only in terms of its integration between treble and midrange, but also its smooth character and capacious imaging abilities. It would have been easy for KEF to pay less attention to the accompanying bass driver but they have not done so. While users do need to take a reasonable amount of care in terms of positioning the R300s, making judicious use of the port tuning bungs in order to optimise their interaction with their listening environment, the rewards are plentiful.

The intelligently engineered KEF R300 standmounters face some worthy competition at their price point, but sure hold their own as technically accomplished, musically satisfying modern loudspeakers. Certainly worth an audition, then! ●



The top Uni-Q array is paired up to this 165mm bass driver...

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>SOUND QUALITY</b><br>★★★★★   | <b>LIKE:</b> Superb imaging and soundstaging; sweet treble                                   |
| <b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b><br>★★★★★ | <b>DISLIKE:</b> Bass can be overblown; need taut, powerful transistor amp; mysterious manual |
| <b>BUILD QUALITY</b><br>★★★★★   | <b>WE SAY:</b> Highly capable standmounter with a superbly spacious sound                    |
| <b>EASE OF DRIVE</b><br>★★★★★   |  |

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

## HOW WE TEST

## Unique group tests

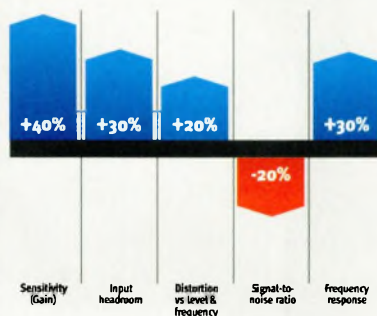
Hi-Fi Choice is the only magazine to offer *Blind-Listening Group Tests*, backed up with an objective lab testing procedure

### BLIND-LISTENING TESTS

**THIS CRUCIAL PROCESS IS VERY CAREFULLY CONTROLLED**, so that we get reliable and consistent results in an easy, relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Our listeners must not feel they're being tested, despite being unaware of the brand or price of the products they are auditioning. All products are thoroughly run-in and warmed up. The session begins by setting the volume level to an agreed point, one that all three panelists are comfortable with, yet that is high enough to make differences easily discernible. Then the choice of music is agreed – it needs to be familiar, but also well recorded and of sufficient variety to give meaningful listening comparisons. The chosen

selection of music is played, and then the panelists are encouraged to discuss their impressions of the sound of the product. This is then repeated, and periodically the panel goes back to audition earlier products, for reference purposes. Regular breaks keep the listeners refreshed. The consensus, or otherwise, forms the basis of our reported Sound Quality section. At the end of the session, there's a final debrief when panelists discuss their findings. It's an exhaustive process, but done this way an evaluation free of prejudices based on brand, price or appearance is made, while the different sensitivities of the listeners help round out the analysis and make it more widely applicable.

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE



#### SENSITIVITY (GAIN)

The gain or 'amplification factor' of the phono stage is the ratio of input to output signal level, typically 40-50dB (x100-x320) for MM and 60-70dB (x1000-x3120) for MC.

#### INPUT HEADROOM

Depending on the design of the phono stage's RIAA eq stage(s), there will be a limit to the maximum signal level permissible at its input before clipping (overload) occurs. A high output MM may generate several tens of mV under peak tracking conditions which must be accommodated.

#### DISTORTION VS LEVEL & FREQUENCY

Rather than quote a single figure for distortion at one frequency and level, this value represents a measure of the distortion trend across the full 20Hz-20kHz frequency range and from 10mV to the phono stage's max output.

#### SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO

This is a representation of the phono stage's A-weighted Signal-to-Noise (S/N) ratio, measured in 3rd-octave bands from 20Hz-20kHz relative to its output with a 5mV (MM) and 500µV (MC) input. The wider the better.

#### FREQUENCY RESPONSE

This is a measure the 'flatness' of the phono stage's RIAA frequency response from 20Hz (low bass) to 20kHz and beyond (extreme treble).



#### OUR GROUP TESTS

and Lead Review are subject to exhaustive lab testing by Paul Miller using the QC Suite Functional Testing Station (left). Paul has tested more hi-fi equipment than any reviewer in the world, so you know you're in safe hands.

We don't publish pages of graphs, but we do understand the importance of transparency. So, readers may view full QC Suite test reports for our key reviews by clicking on the red download button on our website. [www.hifichoice.co.uk](http://www.hifichoice.co.uk)

## THIS MONTH'S LISTENING PANEL



**TOURAJ MOGHADDAM** (LEFT) **FAMOUS FOR HIS WORK** at Roksan since the 1980s, Touraj is now captain of the Vertere ship, brimming with enthusiasm for his new project.

**COLIN WONFOR** (MIDDLE) **HAVING MADE A GREAT NAME** for himself with his fine sounding Inca Tech amplifiers several decades back, Colin is now back designing for Tellurium Q.

**DAVID PRICE** (RIGHT) **HI-FI CHOICE EDITOR** David finds himself back on the couch this month, as part of the listening panel. Oh, and he's also tea-boy – one lump or two, guys?

### REFERENCE SYSTEM

- Turntable:
  - Rega RP6
- Amplification:
  - Rega Brio-R
- Loudspeakers:
  - Q Acoustics 2050i
- Equipment supports:
  - Quadraspire

### TEST MUSIC

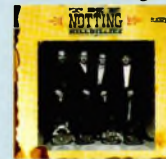
**STEELY DAN**  
**KATY LIED**  
*Black Friday*

**HERBIE HANCOCK**  
**MAIDEN VOYAGE**  
*Maiden Voyage*



**NOTTINGHILLBILLIES**  
**MISSING...**  
*Rairoad Worksong*

**DANDY WARHOLS**  
**13 TALES**  
**BOHEMIAN LIKE YOU**



# Blind-listening Group test

PHONO STAGES £150-£500

## Stage craft

The vinyl revival continues apace, but amplifiers with built-in phono stages are still a rarity. **Ed Selley** profiles six fine budget designs to add a little analogue bliss...

**ONCE UPON A TIME**, the phono stage barely existed as a concept. As vinyl was effectively the only game in town, when you bought an amplifier, moving coil – or at least moving magnet – compatibility came as standard. But as digital established itself, fewer people needed internal phono stages and canny manufacturers took the opportunity to save a chunk of change by removing them...

Now, with vinyl firmly back in the spotlight, the external phono stage is an essential accessory for getting your turntable working with a line-only amplifier. This has the added benefit of allowing you to fine tune the overall sound of your analogue, with an extra link in the chain. This makes for a more flexible decision-making process and should make getting the sound you want easier. It also gives you the chance to upgrade an old amplifier that may have a phono stage built in, but which is sonically below par. For any vinylista, they're important little things to have.

The six stages tested here are the first step up from the entry level designs you might have bought with a starter turntable, and these models are able to partner turntables up to and over the £1,000 mark – we centred our tests around the very fine £1,000 Rega RP6 with moving magnet Exact cartridge.

### With vinyl back in the spotlight, the external phono stage is the essential accessory

Spanning £150 to £500, this is an interesting price point for phono stage design, where minimalist models rub shoulders with more lavishly specified and flexible offerings, and this sextet reflects this variation. Two of the group are moving magnet only, while the other four can also handle lower output moving coil cartridges. Will this simplicity pay sonic dividends? Read on to find out...

### ON TEST



#### Creek OBH-15 Mk2

**£300 p25**  
This evolution of the long running OBH-15 comes from a fine pedigree of external phono stages, and supports moving magnet and moving coil cartridges. Unlike some of the other designs, the Creek has adjustable gain settings via dip switches on the underside.



#### Heed Audio Questar MM

**£300 p27**  
The minimalist Heed is available in two distinct versions for moving magnet and moving coil cartridges. There are no controls or any form of adjustment and the Heed relies on passive/active RIAA equalisation and a dual mono circuit to deliver the goods.



#### Icon Audio PS2

**£500 p29**  
The only valve-based design in the group, the Icon is also the largest. With point-to-point wiring and not an IC in sight, this is the most traditional of all the models in the test. As one of the two designs to only support moving magnet, does this greater focus pay dividends?



#### Leema Acoustics Essentials Phono

**£495 p31**  
The tiny Leema is the smallest model in the test but offers support for moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, and claims to incorporate technology from the mighty £3,500 Agena phono stage – maybe good things really do come in small packages?



#### Lehmann Black Cube Statement

**£350 p33**  
The most minimalist of all of the designs here, the Lehmann is an evolution of the original Black Cube and offers moving magnet and moving coil support via an unusual 'in one end and out of the other' design intended to keep signal paths to an absolute minimum.



#### Thorens MM-005

**£150 p35**  
Comfortably the least expensive design in the group, the Thorens gives nothing away in features to more expensive designs and feels similar in finish and appearance. Does this mean that the little Swiss box is all the phono stage you'll ever need?



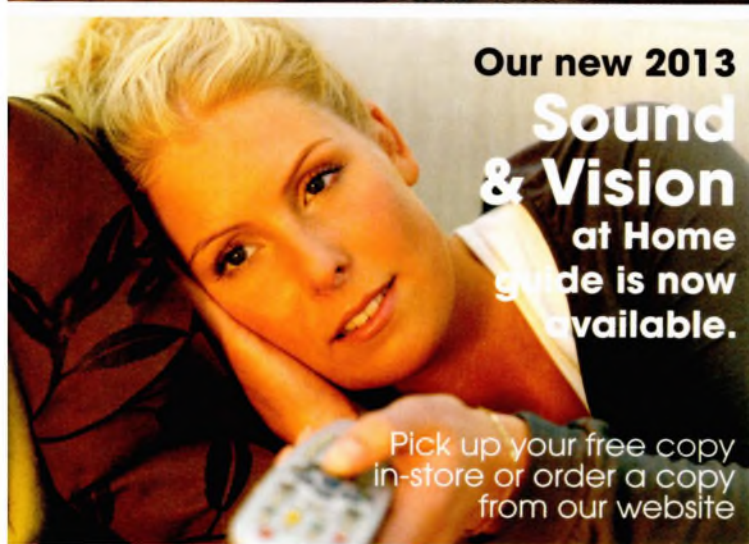
Lehmann Audio  
Statement MB1  
High-Resolution MM  
MM Mount  
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Left-Handed  
Output  
Right  
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Input  
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OBH-15 Mk2 Phono Pre-Amp  
THORENS  
MM-005  
Power  
MM  
MC

ESSENTIALS HIGH-RESOLUTION PHONO STAGE  
A

Heed

Icon Audio PS2 Pure Valve Phono Stage  
Mono  
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# audio-T

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\*Subject to status, ask in-store for details. Not all brands are available in every shop so please check our website before travelling.

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# Creek OBH-15 Mk2 £300



Latest in a long line of OBH phono stages, this little Creek proves a lot of product for the money...

## DETAILS

**ORIGIN:**  
UK/China  
**SIZE (WxHxD):**  
100x63x150mm  
**WEIGHT:**  
720g  
**FEATURES:**  
• MM/MC  
• adjustable loading  
**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
Creek Audio  
**TELEPHONE:**  
01442 260146  
**WEBSITE:**  
creekaudio.com

**T**he new OBH-15 Mk2 is an update of the earlier OBH-15 model, and is the latest in a long line of popular affordable budget designs from this highly respected company. It offers adjustable gain and capacitance settings, unlike a number of others here, making the Creek one of the best specified phono stages in the group. This means it's possible to get a correct electrical match for a wide range of phono cartridges – an impressive boast considering its low price.

The gain and load settings for moving magnet and moving coil cartridges are controlled by a row of dip switches on the underside. These are very fiddly to change but shouldn't require regular attention. Build is reassuringly solid and you have a choice of silver or black finishes. The OBH-Uni wall wart power supply wasn't completely silent in use, but quiets down after the unit has been on for a few minutes.

Front and rear panels are neat, with controls limited to a power button and connections totalling separate MM and MC inputs and a single output, all over RCA, plus a ground post.

## Sound quality

The Creek didn't make itself any enemies on our listening panel, but didn't win their hearts either. The general consensus was that it managed to do most things rather well, but failed to deliver a knockout blow in any aspect of performance to put it at the head of the group. Understandable of course, given its modest price...

The panel was generally highly complimentary about its timing and cohesion, as it manages to generate a fairly lively performance overall. The jazz-rock of Steely Dan's *Black Friday* clipped along with real enthusiasm and verve, even if the soft jazz strains of Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage* did have a slightly nasal tonal quality.

Soundstaging and separation received positive comment, and the panel liked the space the Creek generated, which gave instruments and vocals the sort of scale that they needed to shine. The sense of front-to-back soundstage was less marked however, and this 'wide but shallow' effect was remarked upon by two members of the panel.

The soundstage was helped by the Creek's relatively low noise level, which if not quite best in the group was certainly towards the top.

Bass response was thought to be "tubby" by one listener, but was still well liked. The consensus overall was that although the Creek doesn't want for bass response, the low end is lacking in the fine detail resolution that makes a performance genuinely convincing. The impact was there but there were others in the test that could also do this with more finesse.

With the Notting Hillbillies' *Railroad Worksong*, the Creek put in a most convincing performance,

suggesting that people with collections stretching to the more audiophile end of the spectrum, might find the Creek a more assured performer. With rougher recordings, this box is less forgiving.

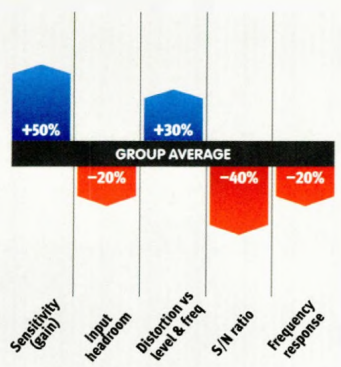
This phono stage didn't quite blow the panel away, but neither did it raise any heckles. Give it a decent source and record and it will make a very nice noise indeed. And of course when you take into account the useful functionality it offers, and that low price, it really did rather well overall. Recommended.

## ON TEST

The most versatile phono stage in our test is also the most 'improved', compared to my lab data for the Mk1 OBH-15 (from 2008). The MM/MC gain is now divided into two steps, amounting to +41dB/+50.5dB and +61dB/+70.5dB respectively, while the input headroom has been increased from just 20mV to a more practical, if still not overly-generous, 55mV and 5.2mV in the default MM/MC settings. The RIAA response has also been boosted with a high treble lift amounting to +0.5dB/20kHz and +7.3dB/100kHz plus an IEC roll-off option of -3dB/20Hz (-12dB/5Hz) to counteract 'cone wobble' with reflex-loaded loudspeakers.

Big gains are also realised in both noise and distortion performance. THD is within 0.006-0.007% right across the 20Hz-20kHz spectrum while the A-wtd S/N has increased to 78dB (MM re. 5mV) and 76dB (MC, low gain, re. 500µV). Steer clear of high output MMs and it'll sing. **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Cohesive and spacious sound; great facilities, low price  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly lumpy bass; subtly nasal midband  
**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Well made, fine sounding and generously specified, it's a great budget buy  
**FEATURES** ★★★★★

### OVERALL



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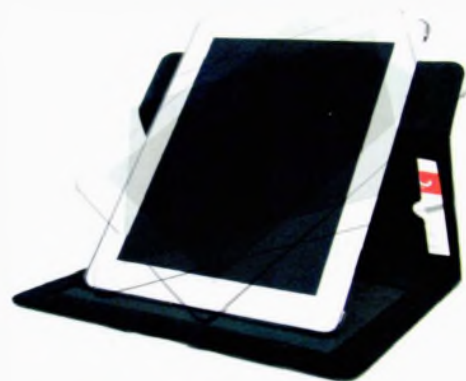


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## Heed Audio Questar MM £300

This Hungarian phono stage is decidedly minimalist, so does less mean better?

### DETAILS

**ORIGIN:** Hungary  
**SIZE:** (WxHxD) 95x72x250mm  
**WEIGHT:** 1.25kg  
**FEATURES:**  
• MM only  
• fixed loading  
**DISTRIBUTOR:** Heed Audio  
**TELEPHONE:** +36 1 294 7401  
**WEBSITE:** heedaudio.hu

This is one of the less pricey phono stage in the group, and also by far the most minimalist. The circuit is a simplified version of the one fitted to the more expensive Quasar phono stage, and is moving magnet only. A matching moving coil version is also available that makes use of the other half of the Quasar internals. The result is a design completely devoid of dip switches, multiple inputs or even a power button. The sole concession to convenience on this featureless black box is a single blue LED!

The Heed makes use of an external wall-wart type power supply, but prospective owners would do well to remember that unlike the other external PSUs here, the Questar has a very large (pretty much as large as the chassis itself) transformer block halfway up the cord. Fit and finish of the Heed is solid enough, although as a black box with one LED on it, it is fair to say that it lacks the visual flourishes of some of the competition.

### Sound quality

In the context of the test system, the Heed didn't entirely convince the panel that the minimalist approach is the one to favour. The Questar has some admirable performance attributes, but these didn't come together to form the all-rounder that our listeners were looking for.

In use, the Questar proved rather quiet, and there was a very low noise floor across the test records played. This impressively silent background gave the recordings a pleasing canvas to work from, but its overall presentation failed to excite the panel. The listeners universally felt that it lacked a degree of emotion and life that some of the other designs had. It's possible to argue that this is an example of a piece of equipment putting very little of itself into the performance, but this can be done without a losing the sense of engagement as well.

The other main criticism was levelled at the soundstage and stereo image. The Heed produces a very focused 'wedge' of sound that sits between the speakers rather than extending beyond it and this gave *Maiden Voyage* a limited and constrained performance overall. This affected the sense of separation and panning from one speaker to another, and there was a collective feeling that the Questar is not especially adept at timing, and didn't have the enthusiasm and get-up-and-go that defined the best in test.

The news isn't all bad though, with the Heed's tonality both faithful to the recording and rather likeable. This gives the Questar a delicacy that is impressive at the relatively low asking price, and given the small soundstage would suggest that the Heed favours smaller scale pieces.

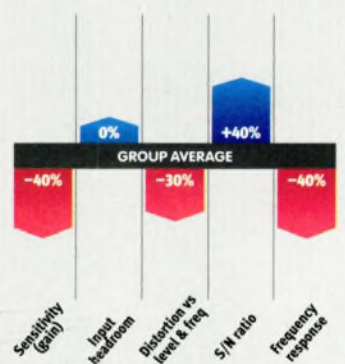
### ON TEST

This is the only solid-state phono stage in this month's group to offer a single (+41.7dB) gain setting, suitable for MMs and perhaps the highest output MCs. A separate model, the Questar MC, is rated at +64dB gain for standard MCs.

Otherwise, the Questar MM is not without some character, the most obvious of which is its response which does not meet its  $\pm 0.3\text{dB}$  specification but offers, instead, a broad  $-0.25\text{dB}$  trough through the presence band married to an equally broad  $+1.1\text{dB}$  boost through lower midrange and bass. This will most certainly add 'warmth' to the most lean-sounding of LP spinners.

Distortion is highest, though not 'high', at  $0.2\%/20\text{Hz}$ , falling to  $\sim 0.01\%$  through mid and treble. Noise is low too, the Questar yielding a wide  $84\text{dB S/N}$  ratio (re.  $5\text{mV}$ ). Maximum output is slightly above average at  $6.5\text{V}$  but the maximum input is a little weaker at  $58\text{mV PM}$ .

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Good tonality; low noise floor; competitive price  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks timing and cohesion; few facilities to speak of!  
**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A decent design alright, but failed to really shine in a group with some stars in...  
**FEATURES** ★★★★★

#### OVERALL





## Silver<sup>RX</sup>1

"Everything you play through it sounds vital and engaging, subtle and detailed, polished and poised. It simply didn't sound anything like a budget box."



Hi-Fi Choice June 2012



# Icon Audio PS2 £500



The only valve design in the group,  
this glows with sumptuous analogue sound...

### DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK/China
- SIZE: (WxHxD)** 270x70x140mm
- WEIGHT:** 2.5kg
- FEATURES:**
  - MM only
  - fixed loading
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Icon Audio
- TELEPHONE:** 0116 244 0593
- WEBSITE:** iconaudio.com

**I**con Audio has been producing a sizeable range of valve-based audio equipment for some years now, and the PS2 is one of the smallest phono stages the company makes. Built around traditional Icon Audio principles of point-to-point wiring throughout, with no PCBs anywhere in the design, its trio of valves comprise a pair of ECC83s, with a single ECC81 mounted on the right hand side of the chassis in the fashionable ringed valve guards. The PS2 is also the only stage here to accept an IEC mains plug directly in the back, so although it is larger than some of the other designs here, it doesn't need space for any external power supplies.

Visually, aside from the unusual purple LED on the front panel, the Icon is not that exciting to look at. The chassis feels reasonably well assembled, but lacks some of the neat flourishes that some of the competition has. The PS2, like the Heed, only supports moving magnet cartridges, but unlike the Heed the design does offer a degree of future proofing, as Icon also produces a step up transformer that boosts the signal from a moving coil cartridge to a level suitable for the PS2. This product is also the only phono stage here to offer a mono mode.

### Sound quality

The Herbie Hancock and Notting Hillbillies tracks put this phono stage right up at the top of the group, the Icon Audio lending them a gloriously effortless quality that was hard not to like. Indeed one particular panelist was absolutely smitten, smiling and nodding emphatically where previously he had kept his own counsel! However, the panel did feel that like some other stages, the performance of the PS2 is dependent on the material being played.

Much of this stems from the rosy tonality with voices and instruments that manages to be both lively and believably real, but at the same time avoids tripping over into grain or harshness. The Icon also attracted positive comments from all three listeners about the size and realism of the performance. With the highly expensive *Maiden Voyage*, this space to breathe went a long way to getting the best from a record that many of the other stages left sounding rather thin.

The faster, heavier outpourings of Steely Dan did show up the main weaknesses of the Icon however. The bass response is slightly plump, which means that faster material can sound a little plodding, and there's a lack of fine detail to the bottom end that lends low notes a slightly monotone quality. As a result,

the Icon doesn't have an exceptional sense of timing, and this means that anyone with a collection of more uptempo material would do well to be careful in their system matching.

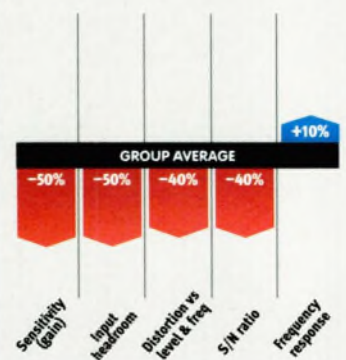
The other criticism raised by the panel was that the Icon is noisier than some of its more conventional competition. This is apparent both in the noise floor and the amount of surface noise that the PS2 picks up. These gripes aside, the Icon does some things better than anything else here. One of the most expensive designs, but worth it.

### ON TEST

As the only all-tube phono stage in our test, the PS2 makes for an interesting alternative. Icon Audio rates the gain at  $\times 200$  (+46dB) but in practice it's almost exactly +50dB, making the PS2 a little over-sensitive for MMs and under-sensitive for MCs. It's just perfect for high-output MCs however! Distortion is low (0.03-0.4%, 20Hz-20kHz) but increases gently with input and output level, the increased margins offered by its ECC83/81 triodes delivering a full 12V output at 1% THD and permitting a maximum input of 40mV – again, the latter better suited to high output MCs.

The PS2's bass response is solidly extended down to 5Hz (-0.5dB) so any arm/cartridge resonances will be duly transmitted. The output impedance is high, however, at 720ohm through mid and treble, increasing to a whopping 4.3kohm at 20Hz. Some impact on perceived bass might be expected. **PM**

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Engaging, natural sound and excellent soundstaging; purple power LED!
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slow bass
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Brilliant with vocals and acoustic instruments, but not quite for all tastes and music types
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

#### OVERALL





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# Leema Acoustics Essentials Phono £495



This tiny box of tricks offers an impressive spec, but can it deliver sonic fireworks?

## DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**  
UK
- SIZE: (WxHxD)**  
110x48x100mm
- WEIGHT:**  
1kg
- FEATURES:**  
• MM and MC  
• fixed loading
- DISTRIBUTOR:**  
Leema Acoustics
- TELEPHONE:**  
01938 559021
- WEBSITE:**  
leema-acoustics.com

**L**eema Acoustics is best known for its range of hefty amplifiers and distinctive multi-DAC CD players, but the Welsh wizards also produce the superb Agena phono stage, and good news for those of us shopping at a more terrestrial price point is that Leema says it has incorporated large amounts of Agena thinking into the Essentials phono stage seen here. This is surprising as the Agena is a *great* deal more expensive than the Essentials. It is also impressive that Leema can fit much of anything into this tiny box. In a test of diminutive product this is small, measuring roughly 100mm wide by 40mm high and 100mm deep. It is beautifully finished though, with casework that combines excellent detailing and impressive solidity – albeit partly undermined by the unattractive wall-wart power supply...

The little Leema supports both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, and can be switched between the two settings via two rather hard-to-adjust rear panel switches. There are no other controls and no loading adjustments, and the only front panel feature beyond the name is a single blue LED. Black and silver finishes are available.

## Sound quality

The panel was universally enthusiastic about this product, and found much to like about its music making ability. The most significant aspect is that more than any other phono stage here, the Essentials put in a consistently strong performance with all types of music.

Much of this seems to be down to the handling of the frequency extremes. The Leema has an open, airy and well-extended top end that gives recordings space to breathe. At the low end, this stage consistently had the best bass in the group. It combines impressive low-end heft with the sort of fine details that make the reproduction of a piece more convincing. This in turn means the Leema has a sense of timing and control that makes it easy to listen to, if not quite an effortless rhythm king.

In terms of tonality, it proved equally effective, and panelists were again impressed at how even-handed it was, along with the impressive sense of decay it gave to certain notes. The low noise floor and impressive microdynamics were also remarked upon, and while the soundstage wasn't felt to be the best in the group, it was consistently good. Listeners also liked the way that the Leema can flatter and work with poorer recordings without smoothing off or reducing the dynamics of better pieces. Given that not all vinyl is 'audiophile', this is a useful attribute.

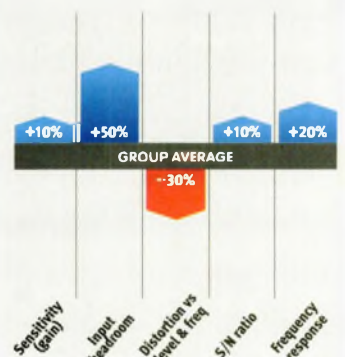
Criticisms on the other hand were slight. Reading across the notes and comments, there's a sense that the Essentials might be a *little* too civilised for its own good, and that every now and again, it could do with being a bit more effusive and

## ON TEST

This phono stage demonstrates the trade-offs between gain, noise and input headroom facing both the designer and enthusiast consumer. Leema has opted for a low-ish +35.5dB MM gain (requiring 16.8mV from your pick-up to deliver 1V from its output) but the input overload is close to 100mV and the overall A-wtd S/N ratio 81dB (re. 5mV input). The MC input offers a more compatible +62dB gain (810µV from your MC for 1V out) and impressive A-wtd S/N of 77dB (re. 500µV) but with a lower – relatively speaking – 4.6mV input overload margin.

Distortion increases through the bass region from 0.007% at 20Hz to 0.018% at 200Hz, holding true to 0.02% up to 20kHz, as per Leema's specification. Channel separation is 77dB (20Hz-20kHz). In 'flat' mode where the response is ±1dB/10Hz-100kHz, the Essentials still shows a gently rising treble through the presence region and beyond. **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Highly even-handed, detailed and appealing sound
- DISLIKE:** Dip switches hard to use; ugly PSU
- WESAY:** Extremely well thought out and consistently capable design that sings across a wide variety of music

### OVERALL



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Group test, Hi Fi News & Record Review January 2012



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# Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement £350

Designs don't get much simpler than this, but does the performance justify the price?

## DETAILS

**ORIGIN:**  
Germany  
**SIZE:** (WxHxD)  
103x45x108mm  
**WEIGHT:**  
200g  
**FEATURES:**  
• MM or MC  
• fixed loading  
**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
Henley Designs  
**TELEPHONE:**  
01235 511166  
**WEBSITE:**  
lehmannaudio.de

**L**ehmannaudio is nothing if not straightforward when it comes to naming products. The Black Cube – while not technically a cube – is a pretty direct description of its £350 phono stage. An evolution of the original Black Cube, launched nearly twenty years ago, the Black Cube Statement is one of the cheaper phono stages in the group and supports both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges.

The most unusual feature of the Black Cube Statement is that, unlike any of the other designs here, the inputs and outputs are on either side of the unit allowing for a 'straight through' arrangement. Used with sufficiently short interconnects, it would be possible to have it suspended between the turntable and amplifier, as it's light enough to avoid putting undue strain on them.

Switching between moving magnet and moving coil operation is via a pair of dip switches on the underside of the unit and, as with most of the rest of the group, the Black Cube Statement uses a wall wart-type power supply to keep the size of the chassis down to a minimum. Build quality is reasonably substantial and the careful use of non-magnetic materials throughout suggests that considerable attention to detail has been lavished on the design.



## Sound quality

This was unfortunately, the one phono stage that the panel failed to really warm to during its performance. The most consistent aspect of the performance was that it does come across as very matter of fact sounding with most material. This means that it is somewhat unforgiving of poorer recordings, and can leave people feeling it's emotionally uninvolved. What is unusual about this, is that the comments on the timing are generally positive and it seems that the Black Cube Statement is a fairly accurate and agile performer, just not one that seemed to light a fire under any of the listeners.

Some of the lack of enthusiasm might be attributable to the tonality of the phono stage, which was felt to be a tad hard and unforgiving. This allows for impressive detail extraction, but the listeners felt that it could be wearing to listen to for long periods. As with some of the other designs here, it was at its best when given the high quality Notting Hillbillies recording, but even here there is a sense that the Lehmannaudio is rather upfront and prone to over emphasising parts of the performance.

This lack of involvement is hard to pin down, especially when many aspects of the performance seem quite favourable, but it seems that the hard presentation, coupled with the revealing nature of the product and a fairly narrow and focused soundstage means that the Black Cube Statement feels more like it's beaming music at you rather than letting it happen. In an overly relaxed system this might be a welcome dose of energy, but it would be something you would want to

demo carefully before purchasing. One area in which the panel were more fulsome in their praise was in its quiet performance, low noise floor and an impressive resistance to surface noise on records.

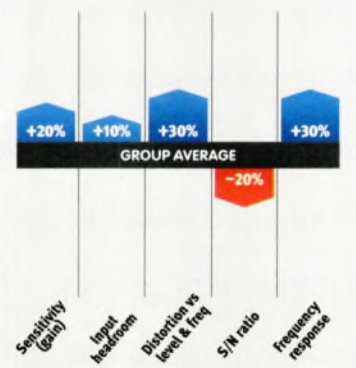
Overall, the Black Cube Statement is not without some impressive attributes, and the specification is competitive for the price. The competition in the test is fierce however, and the Lehmannaudio doesn't seem to be able to find the magic spark of engagement that the best in group managed to provide.

## ON TEST

Lehmannaudio's entry-level Black Cube phono stage offers what is generally considered the 'default' +40dB MM/+60dB MC gain settings at +40.6dB and +61.1dB respectively, with slightly limited input margins of 59mV and 5.7mV. Relative to standard 5mV and 500µV inputs, the Statement's A-wtd S/N ratio works out to a perfectly useable 80dB/70dB (or 85.0dB/74.4dB re. odBV, MM/MC).

Maximum output is 6.3V from a low 450ohm source impedance, although the subsonic filter (falling to a sensible -3dB/8Hz) also causes a rise in impedance to 500ohm at 50Hz and 2.2kohm at 20Hz which may impact slightly on subjective bass performance. Treble response is flat to 20kHz and rolls off gently to -1.7dB/100kHz. THD is held very low indeed at just 0.0004% through the midrange to 0.004% in the high treble. Stereo separation is good to 80dB (20Hz-20kHz). **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★☆

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★☆

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★☆

**LIKE:** Reasonably detailed and energetic sound with decent enough timing

**DISLIKE:** Fatiguing over longer listens; lacks musical engagement

**WE SAY:** Solid design with respectable sound but not an all rounder

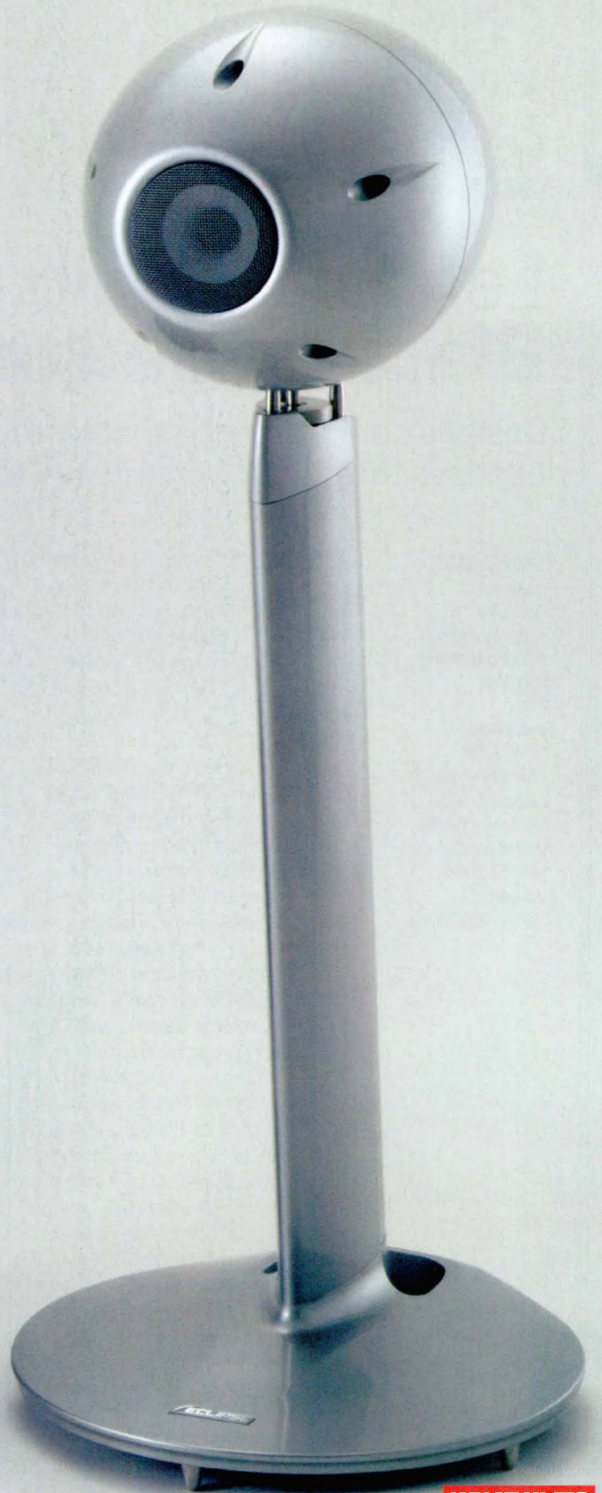
#### OVERALL

★★★★☆

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August 2012 for TD5102MK2





# Thorens MM-005 £150

By far the least expensive model in the test, can the wee Thorens keep up with the rest?

## DETAILS

**ORIGIN:** Germany  
**SIZE:** (WxHxD) 115x55x130mm  
**WEIGHT:** 1kg  
**FEATURES:**  
• MM or MC  
• adjustable loading  
**DISTRIBUTOR:** UKD  
**TELEPHONE:** 01753 652669  
**WEBSITE:** ukd.co.uk

One of the elder statesmen of analogue, Thorens has been producing turntables for decades. This the more expensive of two small external phono stages that the company produces, and offers moving magnet and moving coil support. Curiously, there is then a sizeable gap to the rather more sophisticated TEP 302...

Out of the box, there's very little in the facilities and construction of the MM-005 that suggests that it is the cheapest model in the test. The all-metal chassis feels substantial, and the connections and even the external PSU all feel impressively robust. It can't quite match the elegance and solidity of the Leema or Creek, but it gives nothing away to the Heed or Lehmannaudio.

The Thorens is low on controls. Switching between MM and MC is done via a quartet of dip switches on the underside, but otherwise there's only a running light to indicate the unit is powered. We encountered compatibility issues with both our samples of the MM-005 and the Rega RP6 turntable; it didn't like its arm earthing arrangements, so a Michell GyroDec/Roksan Tabriz was substituted for subsequent listening.

## Sound quality

Perhaps the most impressive single aspect of the Thorens' performance is that it didn't sound the cheapest. Whilst it wasn't a giant killer either, still it fared rather well sonically considering that very low price.

The tonality of the MM-005 was especially impressive given its lowly status in the group. Voices and instruments, especially with the Herbie Hancock and Notting Hillbillies tracks, proved rich without being overblown, and detailed without being analytical. This allowed the Thorens to come over as more relaxing and enjoyable than the more matter-of-fact Heed or Lehmannaudio designs.

This easy-going nature did mean that when the Thorens was asked to step up the pace, it didn't have quite the same sense of drive and attack that the best in the group could offer. Steely Dan sounded somewhat laid back and a little soft. Timing was fairly competent, but the Thorens simply wasn't able to step-up a gear with more uptempo music. The Thorens managed to extract a fair amount of detail from low-end material, but this detail seemed to come at the expense of absolute bass depth and impact, making the '005 come across as over polite. Conversely, treble was a happy balance of good detail retrieval without crossing over into being overly explicit.

If there are areas where the Thorens does give ground to some of the more expensive models, it's in terms of the soundstaging and background noise levels. The MM-005 has a relatively wide soundstage, but it lacks a little front-to-back depth, and the placement of performers is not as assured as the

best in test. There is also a noticeably higher noise floor than some of the other models here, which reduces the sense of definition and clarity.

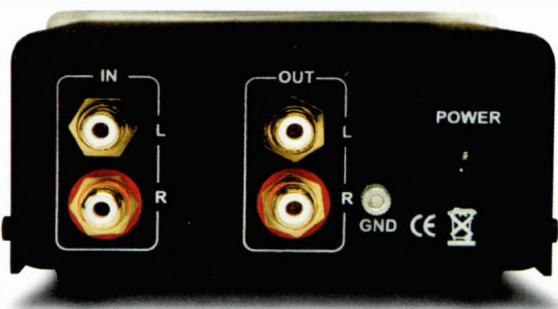
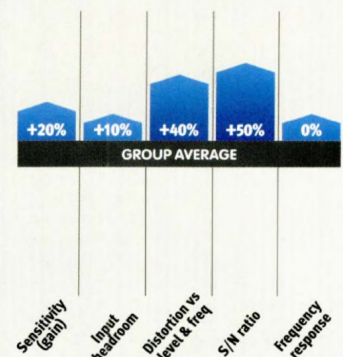
Despite these limitations, the Thorens does a good job of punching above its weight. The ability to handle both types of cartridges is useful, while the overall fit and finish doesn't give away much to the more expensive models. When pushed, the slight softness and higher noise floor point to where savings have been made, but if your budget is tight, you could do a lot worse at £150.

## ON TEST

This is a very well-balanced design with gain and distortion characteristics not dissimilar to the Lehmann but with an extended and slightly 'bright' response (+1.2dB/20kHz to +9dB/100kHz) that bears comparison with the Leema and Creek. The choice of +39.8dB MM and +58.1dB MC gain settings are on the money while Thorens has also engineered sufficient headroom to accommodate 62mV and 7.5mV into MM and MC stages, respectively. This is more generous for MCs than MMs, in practice.

Nevertheless, the MM-005 has other very positive attributes. Not least is the lowest distortion of the group, reaching a mere 0.0002% through the midrange (at least a 1000x lower than the output of most MMs at 5cm/sec). Stereo separation is >75dB and noise is low too, the A-wtd S/N ratio the best in our group at 87dB for MMs (re. 5mV) but a little weaker at 68dB for MCs (re. 500µV). **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

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

**LIKE:** Smooth, detailed and inviting sound  
**DISLIKE:** Slightly soft bass performance; higher noise than some  
**WE SAY:** Gives away less than you might expect to the more expensive models; great value for money starter stage

### OVERALL

★★★★★

# Group test verdict

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

None of the models in this test are devoid of redeeming features, but there are some with much greater strengths than others. The Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement offers compelling timing and strong detail retrieval, but did not manage to generate the sense of involvement needed to win over the panel, and its rather utilitarian appearance didn't appeal.

The Heed Questar offers faithful tonality and low noise levels, but the limited features and narrow soundstage detracted from the overall performance. The lack of support for moving coil also hinders its future upgrade potential.

Thorens' MM-005 puts up a valiant performance considering it is roughly half the price of the next cheapest here. It manages to sound engaging and natural with most music and considering that it offers moving coil support as well, it has to be considered something of a bargain, but if you have more money to spend, there is more performance to be had...

The Creek OBH-15 Mk2 demonstrates this, with more flexible set-up options and a sound that manages to please a great many people. Its less than forgiving behaviour with poorer quality recordings needs to be taken into account, but it's a great little product and worthy of recommendation.

What the Icon Audio PS2 does well, it does with sufficient assurance to warrant its premium price tag in this test. If you're after genuinely enjoyable tonality and a wide and expansive soundstage, the Icon delivers the very best here. But, when you pick up the pace and ask for a bit more low-end clout, it can't deliver the same levels of performance that it does at the top end. If you aren't a rocker, this simply won't matter, and the Icon Audio will have much to offer you. Its support for moving magnet cartridges only is a bit of a limitation, but you can always add an Icon step-up transformer at a later date for a useful upgrade process. Overall, a great way to play vinyl.



**WINNER**  
 Leema's Essentials Phono is our winner, because it gives a wonderfully inviting and invigorating performance across a wide variety of music. It keeps pace with the Icon for top end tonality and soundstaging, but pairs it with a tight, fast and deep bass response. Throw in the solid build and beautiful appearance and it's a worthy champion of this phono stage test.

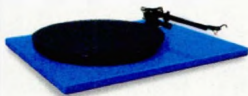
## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	 Creek OBH-15Mk2	 Heed Audio Questar MM	 Icon Audio PS2	 Leema Acoustics Essentials Phono	 Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement	 Thorens MM-005
Price	£300	£300	£500	£495	£350	£150
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Key features	A great value, nicely packaged and versatile budget phono stage – an excellent entry-level box	Capable, well built and finished product but didn't quite seduce the panel with its sound	Wonderfully expansive and creamy sound will appeal to tube fans, but music-dependent	Brilliant all-rounder with loads of speed, detail and musicality; great build and finish	Nicely built budget box with a good pedigree, but cerebral sound didn't appeal to the panel	Great value budget box that's surprisingly well made, with a clean, smooth sound
moving magnet input	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
moving coil input	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes
variable loading	yes	no	no	yes	yes	no
mono switch	no	no	yes	no	no	no
offboard power supply	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes

## TRY WITH THESE

### TURNTABLE: Rega RP6 £798

The beautifully finished RP6 gives a very mature sound, one that's easily good enough to flatter the best phono stage here, and its fine tonearm will take a good mid-price moving coil cartridge too.



### AMPLIFIER: Cyrus 6a £699

If you're looking to build a fine quality vinyl system, this mid-price integrated amplifier delivers an organic and satisfying sound. Smooth, fluid, dynamic and lyrical – it really makes music fun.



### LOUDSPEAKERS: Boston Acoustics M25 £595

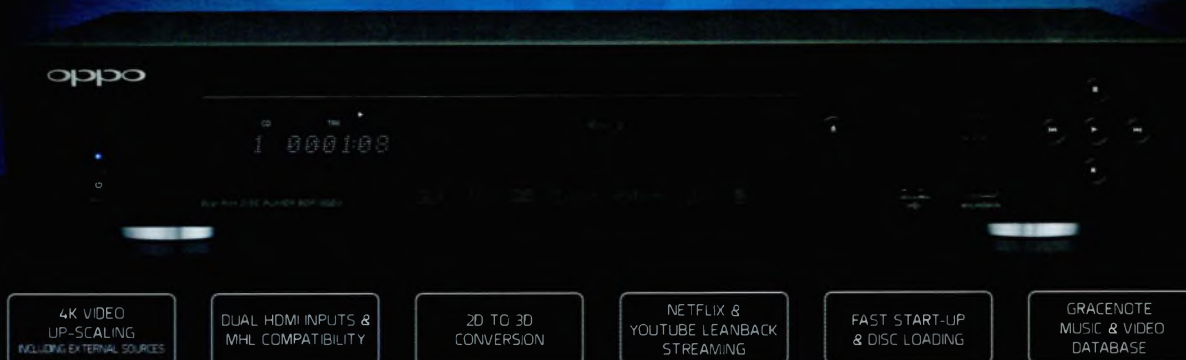
Vinylistas don't go for the sort of sound that could slice the top off a car, so unsurprisingly the consummately smooth and even M25 would work a treat. Civilised yet musical, we love it!



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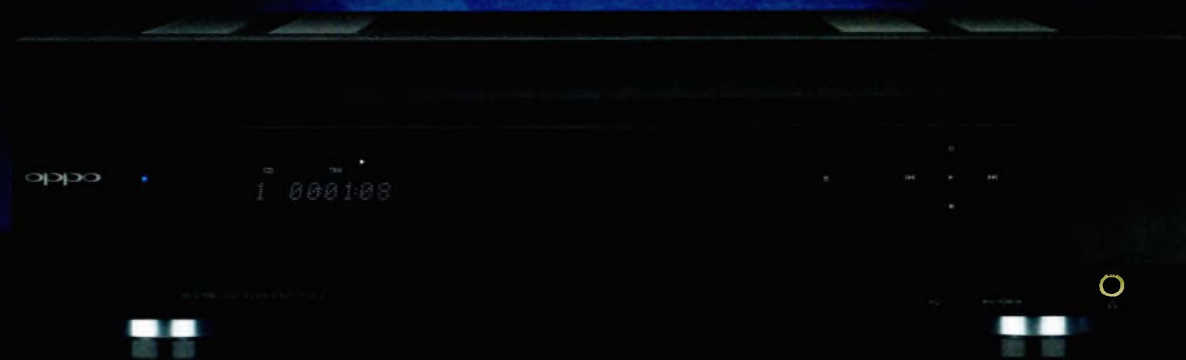
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# Dale time

Wharfedale is a loudspeaker manufacturer with a redoubtable history behind it. *Jason Kennedy* tells its tale...

**T**here are very few loudspeaker marques that are as well known as Wharfedale; unsurprising perhaps as the company is celebrating its eightieth year. Given the transient nature of consumer electronics, and the constantly changing tastes and buying patterns of consumers, that's a remarkable claim to fame.

It was of course a very different world in which the company founder Gilbert Briggs lived when he started the Wharfedale Wireless Works in 1932. In so many respects it would have been unrecognisable to any denizen of 2012, but there was one stark similarity. The country was in the grip of the great depression, the textile industry that Gilbert had spent the first twenty eight years of his working life in was in decline, and money was too tight to mention...

Against this backdrop was the golden age of the wireless – radio sets were all the rage and the industry that supplied electronics and loudspeakers was growing prodigiously. Brands such as Goodmans, Celestion and Tannoy, among a great many others that no longer exist, were becoming established and Briggs was a budding hi-fi enthusiast before the term had been coined.

## The right stuff

Gilbert's interest in sound quality had been sparked at an early age when he would lie in bed at boarding school listening to the music teacher practising on the piano. He developed a fascination with pianos in

The original 1960s Dentons epitomised Wharfedale design; well made, neatly styled and fine sounding...



particular and went through no less than forty different models in his lifetime in a quest to find the perfect instrument. He also started to build his own loudspeakers while still in the rag trade, and eventually set up a small business under his wife's name. This started on the kitchen table, but moved to a premises in Bradford where he would spend his lunch hours building drivers. A distraction that led to him being sacked, his comment at the time was, "I can truthfully say that nobody has ever received a more valuable kick in the pants". Given the dire economic situation and his forty two years of age, he must have had a good sense of humour!

Briggs got his first break when his drive units won second and first place in a competition run

## As well as running Wharfedale, Gilbert Briggs was a keen writer on the subject of audio and loudspeakers

by the Bradford Radio Society, this was a blind test affair with single drivers pitted against one another. The speaker that won the competition was the Wharfedale Bronze, and it caught the attention of a local business which gave the company its first order.

As well as running Wharfedale, Briggs was a keen writer on the subject of audio and loudspeakers. He got his impetus in this field when a shop owner said that there was a lot of demand for books on loudspeakers and suggested that Briggs write one. Before he knew it, his own salesman had taken an order for seventy



Wharfedale founder Gilbert Briggs (right) shown outside the speaker works at Idle, Bradford in the 1950s...

two copies, so Briggs was obliged to knuckle down and write it.

At this point, the great man duly noted that, "I soon discovered that I had no talent for writing"! Fortunately this wasn't a view shared by the great many customers for his first book, which was entitled *Loudspeakers: The Why & How of Good Reproduction*. Thanks to a non-technical and easy-to-read style, the book proved a remarkable success and eventually sold 90,000 copies. This led to more books and a total of twenty one titles were published over the next two decades.

## Driving forward

The first Wharfedale products were the Bronze and Silver drivers. The former was an eight inch full range unit with a built-in transformer, one inch voice coil and a paper cone; it was rated at 2.5 watts. The Silver Superpower on the other hand could handle 5-6 watts and had a ten inch chassis. The first 'cabinet speaker' rather than separate driver was the Nubian in 1938, this had a Bronze unit and a distinctive grille that featured a stylised W logo. An indication of Briggs' quest for quality was the introduction of diecast chassis in 1936 for the range-topping



Portland and Golden drivers, a move which was credited with improving transparency and reducing unwanted resonance.

After the war, Wharfedale moved its production facility to Idle near Bradford, and duly introduced the W.10/CS loudspeaker. This was based on the aforementioned designs, and described in the literature as being only produced in small numbers and not available for export – it was a ‘Special Edition’ as we’d call it today. This 10.25 inch driver was incorporated into Wharfedale’s first two-way, the ‘Twin Speakers’ Corner Cabinet where it acted as the tweeter, providing treble up to a claimed 18kHz with a 12.5inch W12/CS for the bass, CS indicating cloth surround. This was an impressive frequency response for a speaker of its day. This product was housed in a solid mahogany cabinet with a tapped choke volume control, and cost the princely sum of £48.10 shillings in 1947!

It’s interesting to note that Gilbert took his speakers home so that his daughters could help in assessing them, being in his fifties at the time he valued their young ears. The reference they used was a marble enclosure built into the room, which according to one of his daughters was never bettered. This appreciation for inert materials led to Wharfedale developing sand-filled speaker baffles for models like the three-speaker system in 1953, this three-way had a forward facing W.15/CS bass driver and upward facing mid and treble drivers and was thus an early foray into omni-directional design. That was a corner unit, the free standing variation introduced in 1955 called FS/three-way had a similar driver array and was the model used for the highly successful live versus recorded demonstrations that Briggs performed with Peter Walker of Quad in concert halls like the Royal Festival Hall.

Raymond Cooke, later of KEF, joined the firm in 1955 and started experimenting with foam surrounds. One interesting development was the SFB/3, an open baffle speaker which was in part a response to the Quad ESL and had a similar shape, Gilbert wrote extensive instructions on how to place them in the room because of increased room interaction caused by its dipole nature.

#### WHARFEDALE OWNERSHIP

- 1932** Gilbert Briggs starts the company
- 1958** Bought by the Rank Organisation
- 1982** Rank sells to Peter Newman
- 1984** Bought by Vallance family
- 1987** Sold to a consortium of investors; becomes Wharfedale PLC, merges with Fane Acoustic and Cambridge Audio prior to becoming Verity Group
- 1993** Cambridge Audio founder Stan Curtis heads management buyout which ultimately leads to the brands becoming part of IAG



Happy families: By the end of the 1960s, the company was a household name – Wharfedale was becoming one of Britain’s most successful loudspeaker brands...

#### The modern world

With the introduction of stereo in the late nineteen fifties, companies such as Wharfedale suddenly started to look rather more lucrative to the business world at large. Indeed it was at this stage that Briggs sold his company to the Rank Organisation. It happened in 1958, although the deal wasn’t made public until the following year. In the process he persuaded Rank to provide a pension fund for the company employees, something that Wharfedale had not been able to afford on its own. He remained with the company until 1964 when he was replaced by John Balls, formally of ICI. Suddenly, Wharfedale had moved into the modern era.

The loudspeakers that were the genus of such favourites as the Airedale, Dovedale and Linton, started out with the rather less evocative names of W2, W3 and W4. In 1959, this naming system indicated the two, three and four-way nature of the designs. The W4 went on to become the Airedale in 1961, which introduced roll surround drivers and ceramic magnets for the first time.

In 1965 Wharfedale brought in industrial designer Robert Gutmann who ushered in the distinctive style of the company’s speakers that is epitomised in models like the Linton.

He also redesigned the W logo which remained the same until 1980. The Linton, which went on to be enormously popular, was a reflex design with a neoprene roll surround eight inch woofer and three inch polyester domed tweeter.

In 1967 Wharfedale launched its first separates electronics, the System 20 amplifier and tuner, also designed by Gutmann, a matching turntable made by Thorens (TD124) was supplied in a matching veneered cabinet. Later in the same year Rank bought Wharfedale’s competitor Leak and decided to market it as the premium

brand thus, relegating Wharfedale to the more affordable end of the market. The fact that the Leak name is no longer used indicates that this was perhaps not such a bad thing for the Briggs’ company in the long run...

In 1969, the latest incarnation of the W2, the Dovedale III – which was a three way with one a inch tweeter, five inch mid and 12inch bass driver – was released, Geoffrey Horn’s review in the *Gramophone* described it as “an impressive example of what can be done by further

Wharfedale’s Ego was the ultimate Rank-era box, a massive late seventies monster that went loud with very little power. Gone, but not forgotten!



## FEATURE THE WHARFEDAILE STORY



Wharfedale's Diamond set the company on a new course, championing a small speaker's virtues of speed and imaging. This is the 9th incarnation, Diamond 9.1...

work with a well-tried principles". The Denton, which Wharfedale recently revived for its anniversary, was first produced at this time alongside the Rosedale, Super Linton and Melton models. It epitomised what Wharfedale became synonymous for during the nineteen sixties and seventies – high quality, middle market products with a fair smattering of high technology and a goodly amount of style.

### Laser visions

In the nineteen seventies, the company became heavily involved with research into laser holography. This allowed Wharfedale's engineering team, led by Peter Fryer (now with Bowers & Wilkins), to be able to study the dynamic behaviour of speaker cones in motion for the first time, and this led to the XP (for 'extra power') range released in 1974. These were revisions of existing designs, and as such were named Denton 2XP for example. They were enormously successful at the time, with Wharfedale becoming a staple brand for great sounding, affordable, stylish speakers. The company then built on

The dinky Diamond put Wharfedale back on the map, and was the first of the super mini designs of the modern era...

this with the E-series, a high end range of ultra-efficient boomboxes that were great fun with the rock and disco music of the day.

By the early-nineteen eighties, the company's hitherto highly popular range of high value, affordable budget boxes was beginning to look a little dated. Wharfedale pushed hard with its budget 'Laser' and higher end 'Total Sound Recall' designs, but it was the new Diamond, launched in 1982, that really caught the zeitgeist. Eighties speakers were moving away fast from the

formula of large boxes and lots of drive units – something Wharfedale had hitherto excelled in. The new sub £80 mini-monitor, sporting a tiny 5.2litre cabinet built on a rigid steel frame, used the treble and midrange range drivers from Wharfedale's flagship TSR102 floorstander with just two components, plus a resistor to balance the tweeter, in the crossover. The small loudspeaker not only put Wharfedale back on the map, but was the first of the super mini designs of the modern era. Indeed, it epitomised what eighties speaker buyers were looking for – a combination of great timing and remarkable imaging from a small, simple box. Since then, the Diamond series has been regularly refreshed, and is now in its tenth incarnation.

### Today's Wharfedale

Like so many loudspeaker brands, the company now makes its products in China. The Far East has become a centre of excellence for mainstream speaker manufacturing, and the company is able to achieve high standards of construction. Now under the ownership of Taiwan-based International Group, Wharfedale employs an English Director of Design, Peter Comeau, who has had an illustrious career with Heybrook and Mission, to name but two of his previous employers. His penchant for clean, fast, smooth and musical sounding speakers shines out through Wharfedale's current output. So, with high-quality design and manufacture, the latest technology and production materials, Wharfedale's continued success seems assured. ●

For more information, see David Briggs' excellent book, *A Pair of Wharfedales*, published by IMP.



Today's Wharfedale loudspeakers are made in a modern factory in southern China. Almost everything, from cables to screws, is made in house...

## DESIGN MATTERS

### Peter Comeau

Designer, Wharfedale

Today Wharfedale is owned by IAG and based in Shenzhen, China. Its speakers are designed by Peter Comeau, and I caught up with him to find out what it's like to be working with such a legendary brand...

### ***JK: Can you give us a brief resume of your hi-fi career to date please?***

PC: It's complicated! Briefly, after managing a hi-fi shop in the 1970s, I wrote for hi-fi mags like *Hi-Fi Answers* and *Hi-Fi For Pleasure* until I started Heybrook Hi-Fi in 1978. I designed all the Heybrook speakers up until I sold it fifteen years later.

I then returned to magazine reviewing, then did a brief stint as a consultant to NXT and then joined Mission in 1999.

### ***Had you much experience of Wharfedale speakers before you started working for them?***

Funnily enough the first pair of speakers I built for myself were Wharfedale Unit 5s. I had plenty of experience after that selling Wharfedales when I worked in retail and reviewing them for magazines later.

### ***Do you feel like the ghost of Gilbert Briggs keeps an eye on you?***

I really hope he's peering over my shoulder and liking what I'm designing. I certainly do my best to keep true to his edicts so succinctly laid out in his books.

### ***What's it like working on such a quintessentially British brand in China?***

It's great! IAG has resources and manufacturing facilities that any designer and speaker builder would relish.

### ***Wharfedale was a highly innovative company in its heyday, are you doing any work that could see it pioneering new technologies in the future?***

Well I've just developed the new Slot Loaded Distributed Port for Diamond 100 and the composite cones used in Jade drivers, so, yes! We're always trying to improve performance through innovation and the application of modern technology and materials.

### ***Do you know what has happened to the Leak brand (also owned by IAG)?***

I can say it will make a reappearance before too long. I just can't say when!

### ***Does IAG produce everything in house in the original Wireless Works style or does it outsource some elements?***

About the only thing we don't build are capacitors and resistors. Everything else is in-house, even the cables and screws! So we're a proper, across-the-board, manufacturer.



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A member of the Canon Group, Cabasse is based in Brest, Brittany where its proximity to the ocean inspires its team; whether they be music lovers, musicians, cinema buffs, sailors or landlovers who love the open spaces, to share their genuine passion for the emotions of live sound.

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# Special Ops



**Patrick Cleasby** finds Oppo's BDP-103EU to be a surprisingly usable audio player, despite being purposed for Blu-ray spinning...

It's been quite some time since all the major manufacturers were releasing universal players regularly (and we were constantly reviewing them). The main factors which lead to their gradual decline are the twin prongs of the failure of SACD and DVD-Audio to take a hold in the marketplace, and the muted success of the Blu-ray disc in a world that has already started to move away from disc-based media...

But there's still a sizable majority of us who own a few hundred examples of these ailing formats, and as the age of our original players drifts towards the decade mark, there has to be a concern that they won't last forever. Thus it is a joy to me that players like this entry-level model from Oppo are still being launched, and indeed are still improving upon

the original idea. The fact that it is also a Blu-ray player (and more) is just a bonus, and nice to have if the few sporadic attempts to produce Blu-ray audio discs as a natural successor to DVD-Audio ever snowball into a concerted wave.

Oppo is a Chinese company that was formed in 2004, and these players are now its main *raison d'être*. The appeal of its universal players to the hi-res community and DVD obsessives kickstarted a fierce fanbase, and Blu-ray being a similarly high end AV early adopter territory can't have helped but expand it. This new BDP-103EU (£499) is the junior representative of a two-machine range that has just been released and forms the third generation of Oppo's Blu-ray spinners. Its bigger brother the BDP-105EU (£995) is essentially the same machine with a much beefed-up analogue audio section.

## ► DETAILS

**PRODUCT:**  
Oppo BDP-103EU  
**ORIGIN:**  
China  
**TYPE:**  
universal Blu-ray player  
**WEIGHT:**  
4.9kg  
**DIMENSIONS :**  
(WxHxD)  
430x311x79mm  
**FEATURES:**  
• 4k video upscaling  
• Roku Streaming Stick support  
• network streaming  
• CD, HDCD, SACD, and DVD-A support  
**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
Oppo BD Ltd UK  
**TELEPHONE:**  
0845 0609395  
(+44 1603 402240 internationally)  
**WEBSITE:**  
oppo-bluray.co.uk

## Now featuring...

Of course time hasn't stood still in the six years or so since Blu-ray struggled to be born, and the addition of 3D into the mix has driven further developments to the HDMI standard predominantly on the video side. Barely had 3D arrived, and the consumer electronics fair exhibitor stats began to tell us that 4K (digital cinema strength) video is what we should be looking at next. True to form, the BDP-103EU caters for both the latest in 3D (including 2D conversion) and 4K up-res (although there's nothing to really watch it on yet). It also has outputs and the ability to take front and back HDMI inputs to afford other kit the benefit of its video processing capabilities. Regrettably however, there are no analogue video outs meaning that any telly watching from the Oppo has to be done on an HDMI-compatible TV.

Still, video isn't the main reason we are here – should you be interested in that, then may I refer you to our fine sister magazine, *Home Cinema Choice*? In these pages, let us concern ourselves with the question of whether the BDF-103EU can prove itself a useful substitute for the more simple surround audio universals of yesteryear? Certainly one factor in its favour is the provision of the old school analogue surround outputs, which means that those of us who held onto pre-HDMI era AV amps can still enjoy hi-res surround. This is a

MHL (Mobile High definition Link) key and a wireless adapter. These tip you off to the other recent additions to the Oppo's skills – of course in a networked world streaming playback (including FLAC) under the same covers is great to see, and a glance at the included and exhaustive backlit remote reveals a 'Netflix' button, which indicates that the overall video proposition is well rounded, with the Roku stick bringing iPlayer capabilities. Simple networked firmware upgrades are always a bonus too, and work seamlessly. There is also Gracenote CDDB-type lookup for onscreen CD, DVD and Blu-ray cover art display, which works remarkably well.

The onscreen setup process is clear and intuitive, and so it is on to a cursory (music) video appraisal. David Gilmour's *Remember That Night* Blu-ray may not be the most exemplary video presentation, but it sounds fantastic and looks better than I have seen it before. A flick through the iconic openings of *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* are similarly pin-sharp and musically rich.

### Sound quality

For audio playback I initially tried *I Feel My Stuff* from Byrne and Eno through the coaxial digital connection, using the Oppo effectively as a CD transport. I found it highly effective, with soundstage open and the high frequencies were lively. I then quickly essayed a stereo SACD in the shape of Propaganda's *Frozen Faces*, which for me necessitated the analogue outputs. I was instantly impressed, finding the player could deliver a warm, full, enveloping sound, even with the fairly processed strains of this eighties recording. There was a great sense of the soundstage, and the bass drop before the chorus was truly deep and impressive. It's not always the case that an SACD player's analogue outputs better a direct digital CD connection, so it shows the Oppo has fine digital convertors and a strong analogue output stage built-in. This isn't something that can be said for every Blu-ray player on sale...

Rooting around in the menus I was delighted to find that there is an HDCD on and off switch – why would you have it off! Once 'on', I played my HDCD remaster of Roxy Music's *Manifesto* title track, once again via analogue and I was impressed by how refined and detailed a sound this universal player was able to muster. Drums had a pleasing thickness, and Tibbs' bass a real presence – a switch back to digital confirmed that it gave an inferior presentation – like turning off the 'realness' of the sound. This finding prompted me to return to the non-HDCD Byrne and Eno disc and this time found that through the analogue hook up the burbling bass of *I Feel My Stuff* gave a more satisfactory rendition – another victory for its internal digital convertors.

Reaching for my 24-bit/192kHz DVD-Audio stereo discs, and I gave R.E.M.'s *Documenta* spin. Here I wasn't so impressed by the quality of reproduction of this great

**I was instantly impressed, finding the player could deliver a warm, full and enveloping sound....**

disc, which sounded a little less impactful than hoped, the Oppo erring a little towards the clinical side. More standard fare like the 24/48 stereo on Porcupine Tree's *Stupid Dream* seemed less prone to this anomaly, sounding clean and dynamic. I have the suspicion, as often used to happen, that the 24/192 DVD-Audio implementation isn't the machine's strongest suit.

For reassurance, I delved into the Network menu and its audio streaming capabilities. It had picked up all the UPnP servers on my network, and was also offering them up as SMB/CIFS shared folders (requiring authentication). The Rendering system is reasonably responsive even when up against large libraries, and playing the same version of *Document* from its FLAC rips revealed

very important feature, as so many manufacturers are all too willing to throw backwards audio compatibility to the wind, and just move on to the new thing. The full 7.1 capability is a little over the top for many, but some will find it nice to have all the same – if we can ever figure out how best to use those additional two speakers! There are also optical and coaxial digital outputs. For the SACD-loving HDMI AV amp crowd, pure DSD can be optionally sent down HDMI. This is something of a niche facility, but then SACD devotees will doubtless think it the most important inclusion Oppo could possibly make...

Unbox the machine, and you get an interesting Oppo 'bag for life' enveloping the black slab of a unit, and a black box of cables (IEC and HDMI 1.4) and a couple of widgets – an optional Roku Streaming Stick

### CONNECTIONS



## Q&A

Henry Feilden

Managing Director, Oppo UK



**PC:** *Oppo has almost de facto become the universal player supplier of choice. As you add functionality like 4K up-res and music streaming, how difficult does it get to preserve audiophile performance?*

**HF:** The additional new features really relate to the main chipset's capabilities. The analogue output section is almost a separate standalone part of the player, in that it has its own power supply arrangement, and only needs the basic signals from the main decoder. The analogue section can directly process signals like DSD from SACD. So if a user selects DSD out for SACD, DSD is sent from HDMI and to the analogue board. Our engineers went to great lengths to engineer the best possible analogue section, keeping in mind the rather important issue of the price, of course...

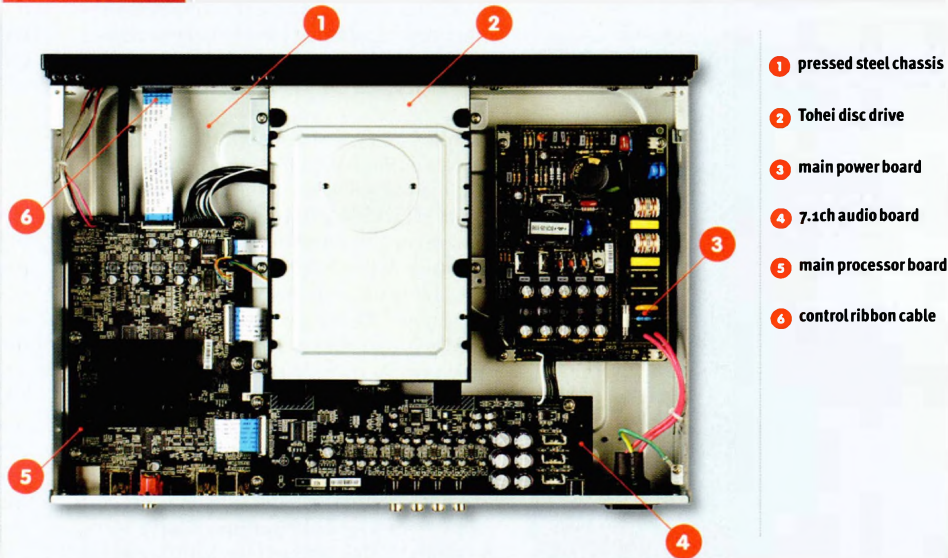
### How hi-res do you see the audio side of things going?

To make use of high resolution audio you need all parts of the system to be capable of extended resolution. We currently support 24-bit/192kHz in many forms, including some interesting formats like high resolution WAV HRx files from Reference Recordings and hi-res DVD-ROMs by M.A. Recordings. I wonder if this kind of resolution is as far as mainstream equipment will go? Unfortunately nowadays people seem satisfied with low resolution music from smart phones, etc...

### Is the BDP-103EU intended as the entry level player for people trying this stuff out, and the BDP-105EU as the one for exacting audiophiles?

The BDP-103EU is aimed at the 'HDMI customer'. In other words the user who has the player connected directly to a TV or an AV amplifier via HDMI. However, the BDP-103EU does have a very decent 7.1 analogue audio section to allow customers with older non-HD audio amps to take advantage of the new HD audio formats. It's fair to say that the '105EU is aimed more at audiophiles.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 pressed steel chassis
- 2 Tohei disc drive
- 3 main power board
- 4 7.1ch audio board
- 5 main processor board
- 6 control ribbon cable



**OPPO SHARES THE TRUE UNIVERSAL PLAYER MARKET** with a few other manufacturers including Denon, Marantz and Yamaha, but the Marantz UD7007 and the Denon DBT-3313 cost twice as much as the BDP-103EU, and don't even have the analogue surround audio outputs. The Yamaha BD-A1020 would be a closer price match but still lacks the analogue outputs, sadly.

For most potential purchasers, the BDP-103EU's main competition on the audiophile front is likely to arrive from its bigger brother, the BDP-105EU, although of course only if you can afford to double your budget. What you get for your money are better converters (2 ESS Sabre ES9018, one for the stereo outs, one for the surrounds), a beefier toroidal power supply, separate analogue stereo phono and balanced outputs and the addition of an asynchronous USB DAC input, as well as optical and coaxial digital inputs. It's a powerful package, but so is the '105!

that the player is capable of making what it should of the hi-res beef of *Finest Worksong*. All the required dynamics were back in place, and I really enjoyed it. It's a great CD, HDCD, SACD and network player then, but DVD-A didn't see the Oppo shining quite so bright.

Being in the network menus, I also sampled a variety of movie types found in my library. Original low-res files made for early iPods played, but looked and sounded thin on the big screen. More typical recent Handbrake rips for iPad type viewing were much more the ticket, whether Divx AVI's or MKVs with embedded Dolby Digital 5.1. Even quite chunky standard definition MPEG transport streams played well, although the high definition variety from the BBC came up as an unknown format.

While on the BBC it was worth trying the Roku Streaming Stick. It takes a little while to fire up, taking over the onscreen display with its bouncing Roku logo. But once connected to wireless (the connection appears to be separate from the wired connection of the main machine) the portal into iPlayer is simple to navigate. The 'standard definition' fare can look a little overly digitally processed on the big screen, but if you search for the high definition content it can look close to the real thing and continues to be streamable without interruption on my network. I just wonder why Oppo cannot regionalise the UK players and replace some of the redundant US-specific stuff it offers natively with a native iPlayer client? It would be nice if the company did...

## Conclusion

As the sun sets on the digital disc player as a breed, it's reassuring to see that some companies are still trying hard. In the new BDP-103EU, Oppo is offering awful lot of player at a relatively reasonable price. This machine is a gifted multi-tasker, with surprisingly strong audio playback capability offered as standard, considering this is hardly its key purpose in life. My only criticism would be of its relatively modest construction quality – it does feel built to a price, and the ergonomics of the machine mean it's not the most satisfying to use.

Still, it is very hard to begrudge its plain looks when there's so much going on under the covers, and for those of us in need of those analogue outputs it's a rare treat. Whether you go for the '103EU or its bigger brother will primarily depend upon your budget, although the analogue playback ability is already impressive enough in this cheaper player. ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Everything all in one place, with networking too; decent CD, HDCD and SACD sound; price

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Full resolution stereo DVD-A not so hot; not a great looker!

#### BUILD QUALITY



#### FEATURES



**WE SAY:** Great value silver disc spinner that covers all the bases convincingly

#### OVERALL



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world class sound...



# Solid heir

Straight into the sub-£1,000 turntable fray comes Acoustic Solid's Solid 111, seeking to usurp established favourites, says *Tim Jarman...*

**A**nd so the German hi-fi invasion continues! Not content with taking over the UK market for all but the most basic of cars and motorcycles (did you know that BMW currently produce the top selling two-wheeler in this country?) Europe's great industrial capital is now taking on audio. This also comes at a time when their rivals in Japan are beginning to lose interest in this sector altogether.

Despite the high-tech reputation of German industry, the turntable seems

to be a real area of interest, with models now available at most price points. Acoustic Solid has a large range, and the Solid 111 reviewed here is one of the company's most accessible offerings, retailing at £995 complete and ready to run with an arm, cartridge and all the necessary cables – just add an amplifier, a pair of speakers and of course, records! It's also available without the tonearm and cartridge for £850, should you prefer to choose your own.

The turntable industry as a whole seems to have given up

on the idea that a disc spinner should be sleek, slim and domestically unobtrusive, and so most of the current crop are self consciously bulky and have all their working parts on show – a fashionable look which today's buyers seem to demand.

The Solid 111 fits directly into this mould, and ticks all the necessary boxes with a big plinth on tall cylindrical pillars, a thick oversize platter and a separate motor housing and speed control unit. Aside from the soft silicone feet of the motor and the stretchy feeling string-type drive belt, there is no damping or springing anywhere in this structure, so dedicated hi-fi furniture is also called for if the best performance is to be extracted from decks like this, orange boxes or the old sideboard will definitely *not* do.

Acoustic Solid offers a dust cover as an option, which effectively answers one of my main moans about modern turntable design – unless you are prepared to do all your listening completely naked and sitting in a fully tiled room, the stylus is bound to get covered in fluff sooner or later due to the dust in the air.

## ▣ DETAILS

**PRODUCT:**  
Acoustic Solid  
Solid 111

**ORIGIN:**  
Germany

**TYPE:**  
belt drive turntable

**WEIGHT:**  
13kg (approx.)

**DIMENSIONS:**  
450x190x340mm

**FEATURES:**  
• separate plinth and motor unit  
• AC synchronous motor with microprocessor control unit  
• Rega RB100 tonearm and Nagoka MP100 MM cartridge included

**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
BD audio

**TELEPHONE:**  
01684 560853

**WEBSITE:**  
bd-audio.co.uk



ball pressed into the steel shaft, also runs smoothly and silently. A nicely turned fitting is also used for the arm base, which includes a simple adjustment for VTA. This particular model came fitted with a Rega RB100 tonearm, which is a fairly well-known quantity in audio circles and needs no particular introduction, although of course others can be fitted as well.

Compared to the high standard of finish evident on the main part of the deck, the supplementary parts came as a bit of a disappointment. The motor housing, also turned from aluminium, was assembled in a wonky fashion in this particular example, with both top and bottom being noticeably crooked, a real shame.

Worse was to come with the control unit, which is housed in a simple two-piece enclosure of folded steel. Bare tact-type switches marked only with a stick-on legend are disappointing when you're spending nearly a grand, and the DC input connector was of an unsuitable type which could cause problems if it were to be connected or disconnected while the AC adaptor (which has no mains switch fitted) was plugged in, indeed some of the chrome plating of this part had already been burned away suggesting that this problem is a very real one. It is also *not* good practice that the output cable to the motor is only retained by a knot inside, a proper strain-relief bushing should have been used! Both these points should be addressed by the manufacturer immediately in the interests of safe and reliable operation. British brands like Michell and Rega do far better here...

The control unit proved tricky to use, too. It has four keys, one to start and stop the motor, one to choose between 33 and 45 RPM and two more which increment the speed up and down. A red/green LED indicator shows green for 33 RPM and red for 45, although you have to work this out for yourself, as it is not labelled. On start-up and when changing speeds, the indicator flashes alternately between green and red to warn that the speed may not yet be stable

but as there is no feedback between the platter and the control system this function is enabled only by a timer and can only be used as a guide. However the timings are generous so in practice it's pretty reliable. The incremental keys, although useful, seem to have no reset function and retain their setting after the machine has been switched off. A strobe ring or test record is therefore essential for setting the two speeds accurately, I found.

Setting up is otherwise straightforward since the deck is supplied fully assembled. The supplied cartridge is a Japanese-made Nagoka MP100, a classic in itself, which could easily and cheaply be improved by the user by substituting the JN-P100 conical stylus for one of the various elliptical ones that Nagoka offer (JN-P110 or JN-P150, for example). Of course the tonearm must be adjusted before use, something which I always do using a test record. While doing this I noted that the cartridge tracks securely

**There was a deep soundstage between the speakers and fine insight into the detail...**

at weights which are far lower than are required to effectively overcome the friction of the rather stiff radial bearings in the arm, an odd effect which I've not encountered before. The nature of the construction of this model means that a grounding cable to the phono stage is not required and hum levels were impressively low.

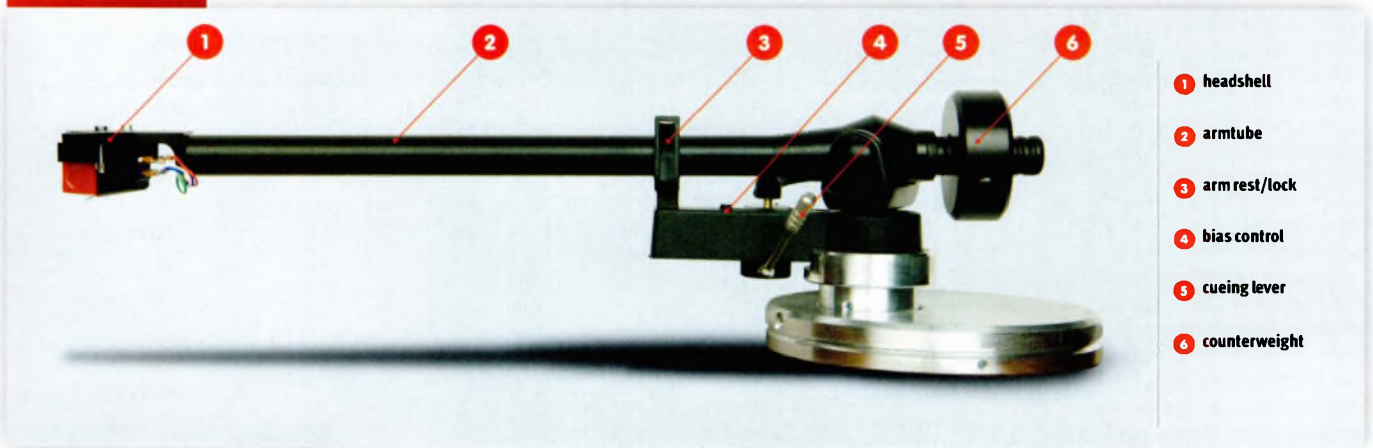
#### Sound quality

My reference system for the listening tests consisted of a Cambridge Audio Azur 651P phono stage, a Cyrus 6A amplifier and a pair of Monitor audio PL100 loudspeakers, a representative setup for a turntable at this level. In discussing the tonality of any turntable package, the cartridge plays a big part, so it was no surprise that the MP-100

I'd thoroughly recommend giving this option a try, in my view a turntable (any turntable) isn't complete unless it has a lid.

German engineering is renowned for its precision and the first impressions of the Solid 111 are good. As a machinist (in another life) I was very impressed by how true the solid aluminium platter runs, indicating that the lathe work that produced it was of the highest order. The bearing, whose thrust surface consists of a ceramic

#### IN SIGHT



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## Q&A

Jack Durrant  
BD Audio



### What do you consider to be the main strengths of the Solid 111 turntable?

The level of performance, build and sound quality in comparison to its competition, especially considering the price. The bearing design is an excellent example of this. The Solid 111 also has the ability to carry an arm and cartridge well above its own price point.

### Do you have any special tips on setting up and placement to get the very best results?

A sturdy and relatively level surface is required, the turntable has adjustable feet for levelling and due to its design can be up and running in under five minutes. Purchased as a package, the turntable arrives almost completely setup and ready to use. Simply site and level the deck, position motor and attach the belt and you are ready to go.

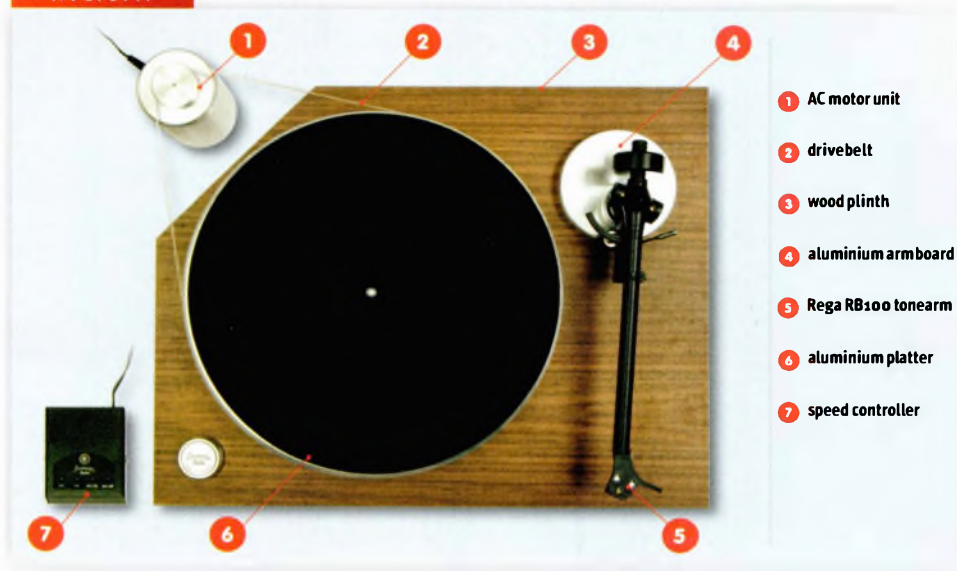
### If the owner wished to improve upon the supplied cartridge, which models would you recommend they audition? Is there any particular brand that suits especially well?

We recommend the Ortofon range of 2M moving magnet cartridges, the 2M Black working beautifully with the deck. Ortofon, being the Japanese distributor for Acoustic Solid, work extremely well together. We've also had excellent results running the Rondo moving coil range if budget will allow...

### In the past few decades, the British have had the affordable hi-fi separates market to themselves, but now Germany is once again becoming a real player on many levels. Why do you think this is?

Speaking from the perspective of Acoustic Solid, nothingshort of perfection is allowed to leave the workshop. The care taken over the production and inspection of internal parts and underside faces are testament to this, with even those parts that will never be seen being produced to stunning levels of finish, an attention to detail that is repeated with each part and piece produced.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 AC motor unit
- 2 drivebelt
- 3 wood plinth
- 4 aluminium armboard
- 5 Rega RB100 tonearm
- 6 aluminium platter
- 7 speed controller



**IN PREVIOUS GENERATIONS** of turntables, the design aim was to make the rotation of the motor perfectly smooth and consistent and then couple it as directly as possible to a light weight, responsive platter, either directly or via a stiff flat belt. A servo controlled motor was generally required to make this technique work, adding cost and complexity.

The latest models take a different approach and rely instead on mass in the platter to smooth out any irregularities in the drive through inertia. Weak coupling to the motor by thin, compliant belts helps to make this scheme more effective, you can watch the energy being stored up in the platter as the motor and belt labour to get it up to speed.

This architecture effectively damps out any high rate wow, although very low rate speed instability remains a problem with some designs. This deck performed well in practice, however.

fitted to the 111 gives a bright and airy sound which is easy on the ear. Some harshness was detected in the high treble, which is of course to be expected with a conical stylus. Replacing it with an elliptical one will resolve this nicely.

Of more interest is how the turntable mechanics themselves perform and here too the news is good. Of course no belt drive turntable can rival the pitch stability of a good direct drive (or CDs, with which we are now all familiar) but the Solid 111 puts up a fair fight and does better in disguising the inevitable low rate speed wander than some of its contemporaries – for example the Thorens TD 2015 that I tried a few months ago.

The opening notes of Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 (*New World*) come through as solid with only the slightest impression of wateriness. There's a deep sound-stage within the bounds of the loudspeakers, and fine insight into the detail. String texture as the bow is drawn across is brought into fine focus, and this can make even unfamiliar musical styles immediately captivating. The presentation is very matter of fact, and so isn't as warm and embracing as some that I've heard, suggesting that everything is sufficiently rigid where it matters.

The setup as delivered seems to be more orientated to high energy rock and pop than it is for relaxing orchestral pieces, and so the next record onto the platter represented a change in pace: *Trans Europe Express* by Kraftwerk, whose second side runs together into an almost

single piece of music. The jagged, hard-edged electronic percussion lost none of its bite with the Acoustic Solid, and the music remained pretty brisk and packed with energy. *Metal On Metal* should never be a relaxing listen (and ideally should be played somewhere near the threshold of pain – neighbours allowing!) but some turntables try to smooth it over. Not the Solid 111 though, as bite was razor sharp and the beat unrelenting – lovely! It should be noted that a different cartridge and a better mat (the supplied synthetic felt item is a bit utilitarian) will change the sound colour of this deck, but the solid speed stability – the great strength of this design – will remain regardless.

## Conclusion

With a few niggles addressed, the Acoustic Solid Solid 111 would become a compelling package – but isn't quite there yet. Competition is tough, but it's still worth auditioning. ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Mechanical parts generally very well built and finished; detailed, stable sound

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



#### BUILD QUALITY



#### FEATURES



**DISLIKE:** Poor design and finish of speed control unit; other minor niggles

**WE SAY:** Greatness beckons if a few small issues are addressed

#### OVERALL





The receiver is reasonably well equipped and includes features such as a remote control handset, and push-button fascia controls – only four – beneath its discreet display panel. All these buttons have different functions when the RDS AM/FM tuner input is selected. From left to right the buttons are – when a source other than tuner is selected – Source, Function, Volume down, and Volume up. To the far left of these controls, underneath the YBA logo, is the final button, which controls power

on/off. This minimalist approach makes operating the WA202 a breeze, even the multi-function nature of the controls is something that can be quickly worked out without recourse to the instruction booklet.

Other inputs include RCA phonos for CD, video, aux and iPod, with a USB power connection for charging the iPod either with a YBA dock or the original white USB lead supplied with the iPod. The fifth pair of phonos is the pre-out connection, which is suggested for users wanting to connect a separate power amplifier, subwoofer, or active loudspeakers.

### Sound quality

I regularly find I have trouble listening to amplification that is overly transparent, because aspects of its presentation distract me and I wind up listening to individual facets of a performance, rather than the music as a complete entity itself. Somehow the scrupulously see-through sound of the WA202 generally managed to avoid this distraction, even though it possesses outstanding transparency and openness, especially for such a relatively inexpensive – £849 – device. The receiver displayed a revealing, fastidious character that deftly uncovered the finest of details and nuances while also disclosing the flow of the music along with any emotional luggage it happened to be carrying.

I offered the YBA all the help I could by partnering it with components known and respected for their musicality. Naim Audio's HDX-SSD hard disk server and n-DAC convertor powered with an XPS2 power supply as a front-end wired to the WA202 with an Atlas Equator III interconnect, and Neat Acoustics Petite loudspeakers, singled-wired to the receiver with TelluriumQ Ultra Black speaker cables.

Even with such musical partnering equipment there were recordings where the hi-fi characteristics tried to dominate the proceedings. Take, for example, the Anna Calvi track *Rider To The Sea* from her eponymous debut album, where, before the

amplifier had fully warmed through, I felt as though my head was inside the pick-up covers of her Fender Telecaster, so graphic and fiercely vivid was the metallic tonal colour the receiver delivered. It was not unlike viewing a painting by Kandinsky, while standing with your face pressed against the canvas, giving your brain one of those 'too much information' events.

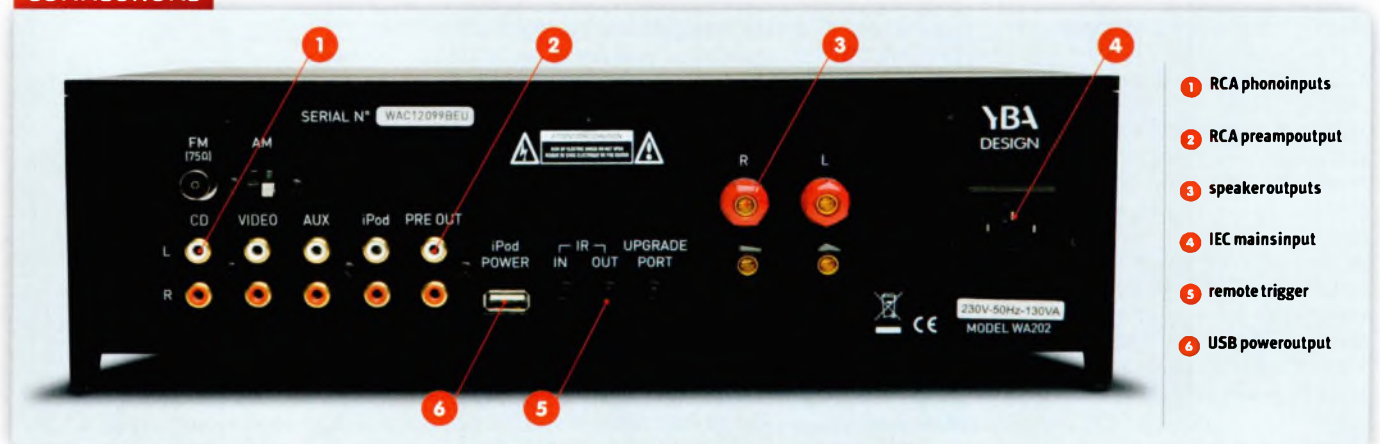
The not wholly warmed receiver also seemed a trifle uneasy with my 24-bit/96kHz rip of Jaco Pastorius playing *Portrait of Tracy*, where the succulent tonal colour of the abundant harmonics he played seemed almost to be battling with the overall progress of the composition. Again I had the feeling of practically being inside his bass guitar. This sense disappeared subsequently when I played the track *Donna Lee*, where a proper sense of perspective was restored; partially thanks to the introduction of a percussion element, an 'external' instrument to discourage my

### The WA202 possesses outstanding transparency and openness for such a relatively inexpensive device

attention from focussing solely on the sound of Pastorius' seductive, de-fretted, 1962 Fender Jazz Bass Of Doom!

Other jazz artists' music fared far more successfully with the YBA, especially once fully up to operating temperature. Guitarist Joe Pass and saxophonist Art Pepper both wrought spellbinding performances from the WA202. The 24/96 rip of the Pepper album *Meets The Rhythm Section* won the highest praise by managing to sound nothing at all like a recording. The WA202 rendered each instrument in such a believable, lifelike manner and conjured so accurate a soundstage that it was child's-play to suspend your disbelief and imagine that you were in the studio with the band in 1957 and luxuriating in

### CONNECTIONS



## Q&A

Jackie Pugh  
CEO, YBA



**MS:** Is the recently launched Design series fulfilling its aims of bringing new customers to the established YBA marque?

**JP:** Yes, it is most definitely bringing new customers to YBA – on several fronts. One, of course, is the price which is truly remarkable given the features the range has to offer. Secondly, the design itself coupled with the exceptional build quality has proven to be a big plus, and attracts a broader audience where looks are so important. It is, for example, having a much larger appeal than I ever imagined to the interior design world! But most importantly is the way it performs. It has a sonic signature which is very 'YBA', albeit not as dramatic as the larger ranges such as the Passion series. It is extremely satisfying to see the look of what is best described as genuine surprise when people start to listen.

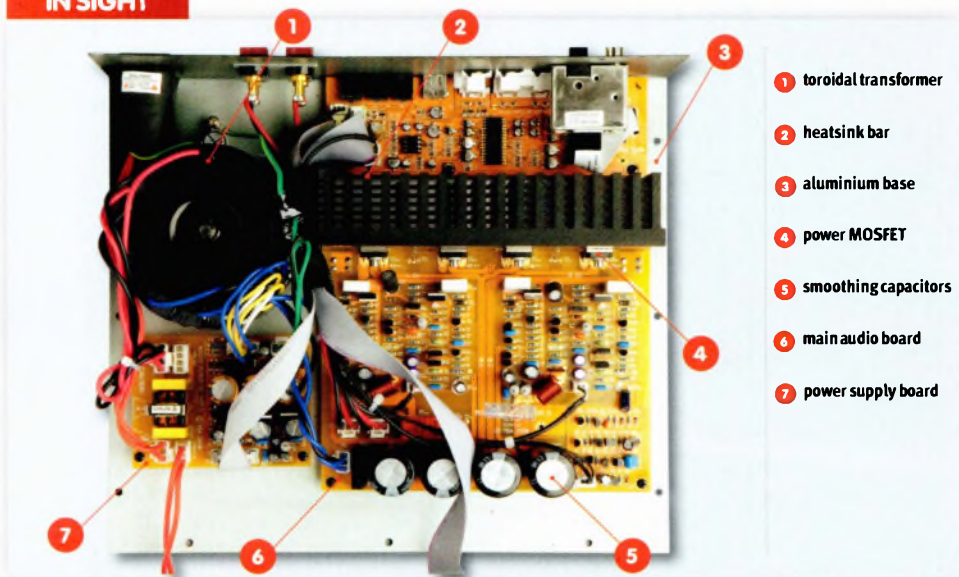
**MS:** Are there any plans to expand the range as a whole?

**JP:** There are plans to introduce some further Design products, but they are still in the early development stage and I expect they may be shown at the late spring Munich show for the first time, certainly no earlier.

**MS:** Given the different proclivities of the North American market, is the WA202 receiver as popular in the United States market as I imagine it would be?

**JP:** Since the release of the new YBA products in Munich in May of this year, an almost entirely new international distribution network has been put in place. As a consequence, while sales are beginning to flow now it is still too early to say which is the best market for which product. Certainly the US has traditionally been a strong market for receivers, and the enquiry level from that country is growing fast, but this is not only for the WA202. We have found that there is an equal amount of interest in the WM202 CD player and the WD202 digital-to-analogue convertor. Indeed, in some markets, the DAC is attracting the greater interest, we have found.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 toroidal transformer
- 2 heatsink bar
- 3 aluminium base
- 4 power MOSFET
- 5 smoothing capacitors
- 6 main audio board
- 7 power supply board



**THE INCREASING DEMAND for YBA products ultimately forced Yves-Bernard Andre to consider the involvement of a major manufacturing company in order to secure his company's future. This would provide increased financial capabilities and the manufacturing capacity to satisfy the ever growing demand, while retaining the French heritage and design parameters.**

In 2009, China high end audio manufacturer Shanling, acquired a significant shareholding in YBA. Already manufacturing for some of the best known and well-respected UK and European companies, Shanling had built an enviable reputation for its quality of product. YBA was relaunched in 2011 under the aegis of new CEO, Jackie Pugh, who had most recently been involved with brands Creek and Epos, respectively. She is now working alongside Yves-Bernard Andre to position YBA as a market leader in the high-end hi-fi world.

those glorious, colourful musical textures, especially Philly Joe Jones whipping up a dynamic but subtle storm on his drum kit.

On the subject of tonal balance, it must be said that the WA202 was exemplarily well organised in this respect. Its bass was tight, dry and tuneful – powerful but never bloated or fat – and rich in texture and tonal colour. Midband and treble were wholly complementary, being clean, vibrant, and capable of revealing vivid tonal colour when it was present. This honesty was counterpointed by a dynamic compass that seemed entirely genuine and as far from being 'voiced for movies' as one could ever imagine.

The sound of percussion, for example, was totally credible – it sounded like percussion rather than gun-fire. This abundant honesty and candour served the human voice exceptionally well, presenting singers such as Alison Krauss sounding absolutely natural and wonderfully expressive. Listening to her perform on *Forget About It* and *Paper Airplane*, you could be in no doubt about her vocal prowess nor the passion with which she conveyed those songs. Both qualities were lavishly evident, especially the ability she has to lift her voice from a mere whisper to a melodious Blue-Grass roar.

I found the YBA WA202 to be equally compelling with Agnes Obel's *Riverside* from the album *Philharmonia*, presenting her voice as simultaneously delicate yet capable of stunning power, and

her piano as persuasively genuine in terms of pitch stability, tone, note-shape and dynamics. These elements combined to imbue the track with an authentic sense of reality, and a performance that would satisfy most listeners. But the YBA's fastidious nature added a host of detail and nuance to enchant further the truly pernicky and hard to please. This bonus material was reassuringly well integrated with the music's natural progression, and not distracting or defocusing in the least.

### Conclusion

YBA's new WA202 receiver is noteworthy for its temporal acuity, excellent timing and speed, and austere – clean but not clinical – tonality and forthright but unexaggerated dynamics. Put together, this is a great recipe for an exuberantly music presentation. Factor in decent build and a fine feature count, and it's a charmer. ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**LIKE:** Musically communicative; decent build and features

**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**DISLIKE:** Needs partnering with good ancillaries for best sound

**BUILD QUALITY**



**WESAY:** An interesting, characterful product with a rewarding sound at a very reasonable price

**FEATURES**



**OVERALL**



# MUSICAL FIDELITY

## M1 CLiC | UNIVERSAL MUSIC CONTROLLER

The M1 CLiC is a universal music controller for digital and analogue sources.



### Simple control of the music you love

Network streamed music, wired or wireless connectivity, 2x USB, iPod interface, Internet radio, 3x digital & 3x analogue inputs, variable and fixed outputs.



# Fourth dimension

Marantz's CD/PM6004 combo attempts to offer great sound, build, features and value too. Can you really have it all, asks **Ed Selley**?

**U**nlike a number of the large Japanese house brands, Marantz never abandoned the entry level two channel category during the lean years of the last decade, where we were all supposed to trade in stereo systems for multichannel. The company has continued to produce a full range of stereo components, and the £300 apiece 6004 series seen here are the least expensive-but-one in its portfolio.

Not that you'd automatically assume these are budget components when you extract them from the boxes. The current Marantz design aesthetic is a handsome one, and the overall impression combined with blue LEDs and symmetrical controls is of a very pleasant piece of industrial design.

The specifications are impressive as well. The PM6004 is a 45 watt

integrated with three line inputs, two tape loops and a moving magnet phono stage. The matching CD6004 is able to read MP3 and WMA encoded discs, as well as standard CD, and is also fitted with a USB input able to read memory sticks and iDevices. This is all driven by a large but easy to use remote handset.

If this all sounds a little familiar, there's a reason for this. These days, Marantz is part of the larger D&M group that includes sister brand Denon, whose 720AE components impressed me recently. Coming from the same umbrella organisation, the Marantz pairing is similar in many ways, but intriguingly different in others...

The PM6004 makes use of a completely discrete output stage with Marantz's proprietary Current feedback system, which reduces the amount of more sonically damaging negative feedback that the amplifier

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT:**  
Marantz CD6004  
and PM6004

**ORIGIN:**  
Japan

**TYPE:**  
CD player and  
integrated amp

**WEIGHT:**  
CD6004: 7kg  
PM6004: 7.5kg

**DIMENSIONS:**  
(WxD xH)  
CD6004  
440x106x339mm  
PM6004  
440x105x366mm

**FEATURES:**  
CD6004  
• chipset Crystal  
CS4398  
• formats, CD, CD-R,  
CD-RW, MP3, WMA  
• iPod compatible  
PM6004  
• quoted power output  
(8/4 ohm RMS)  
45W/60W  
• quoted frequency  
response  
10Hz - 70kHz  
• quoted signal to noise  
ratio: 87 dB  
• line in puts 3  
• MM phono stage  
• 2x tape loops

**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
Marantz UK

**TELEPHONE:**  
01753 680868

**WEBSITE:**  
marantz.co.uk

needs to use. There is no direct equivalent to Denon's Active High Current System and the Marantz approach has resulted in an amp that – on paper at least – is less powerful, but in the real world this is unlikely to reveal itself into the sort of loads that the amplifier will generally be asked to drive.

The CD6004 front end features are almost completely identical to the matching Denon DCD-720AE, and this is no bad thing. The display is clear and easy to read and the additional USB connectivity is always useful. Internally however, the Marantz is very different. The company has historically used Crystal chipsets for its players, while Denon prefers Burr-Brown. As such, the CD6004 makes use of a CS4398 chipset for decoding duties. This is mated to the long-standing Marantz HDAM system in place of more conventional op-amps.

Detailing and finish are of a high standard, as well. The build is solid with careful attention given to the panel gaps and control action. The PM6004 has to give ground slightly to the quality of the knobs on the rival Denon unit, but all the controls are pleasurable enough to use. The speaker terminals are not quite as robust as the ones fitted to the Sansui SAP-201V, but still up to the job of housing most loudspeaker cable you are likely to use, and you get two separate sets of outputs.

The CD mechanism is quiet, smooth and quick to read discs, and the

overall effect you get from using the 6004s for any length of time is that these are very grown-up bits of equipment. The remote is logically laid out – and more attractive than the Denon units – and works from all angles and most sane ranges.

The only problem that the Marantz units have is mirrored with the Denon's as well. The specifications are good, but the absence of digital inputs on either product is an increasingly problematic omission, as more and more of the competition is fitted with them. I am always happy to see a phono stage as standard equipment on amplifiers, but realistically, for many users, this is not something they will find as useful as an optical or USB connection.

### Sound quality

Connected to a pair of My Audio Design 1920s standmount loudspeakers, the 6004 pairing initially continued the theme of being 'the same but different' to the Denons. The longer I listened to them though, the more it became clear that the Marantz units do have a personality of their own, and this begins to manifest itself in small, but interesting ways. Any fear that badge engineering is the order of the day at D&M is quickly dispelled.

Give the 6004's Depeche Mode's *Playing the Angel* and this combo manages to reproduce the heavyweight bass lines with calm aplomb, but more immediately attention grabbing is the detail and tone to the midrange and treble. The 6004s manage to combine excellent detail retrieval with a very definite sweetness that is extremely likeable. This staves off any hardening of the top end, until you are

playing the 6004s very loudly indeed, and even once you start to approach the limits of the amplifier's performance, it does so relatively gracefully.

This comes into its own when you select a more rough and ready recording. Ian Brown's *Solarized* is fantastically enjoyable but a bit lacking in dynamic range. The 6004s cannot undo all of this compression, but they can negate a great deal of it and the result is an impressively forgiving partnership. Equally, superior recordings are flattered, but given the space they need to shine, so the result is not simply smoothing the hard edges off and robbing pieces of their detail...

Separating the partnership to examine the amplifier and CD player separately reveals that it is the CD6004 that seems to be largely responsible for this midrange sweetness. The difference in performance between the Marantz and the Denon DCD-720AE is quite significant. The Marantz manages to sound as natural as the Denon, but at the same time has a greater sense of life and energy. Voices and instruments simply manage to sound more real. This overall sonic balance is replicated with USB and Apple devices as well and even compressed material manages to sound very good.

Conversely, the PM6004 is slightly softer than its Denon equivalent. This isn't hugely pronounced, but where the PMA-720AE will seize uptempo material and impart an extra sense of drive and energy, the Marantz is slightly more considered. It still times comparatively well, but the overall behaviour is smoother and warmer. Bass is detailed and rich, but there is not the same

level of absolute impact that the Denon or indeed the larger Onkyo A-9050 can muster through the same speakers. The soundstage is excellent, however. The Marantz creates a rock solid three-dimensional image that places performers logically within the space. The ability of the amp to run relatively loud before hardening up also means that the PM6004 doesn't struggle with larger scale pieces and even a full size orchestra is replicated with conviction.

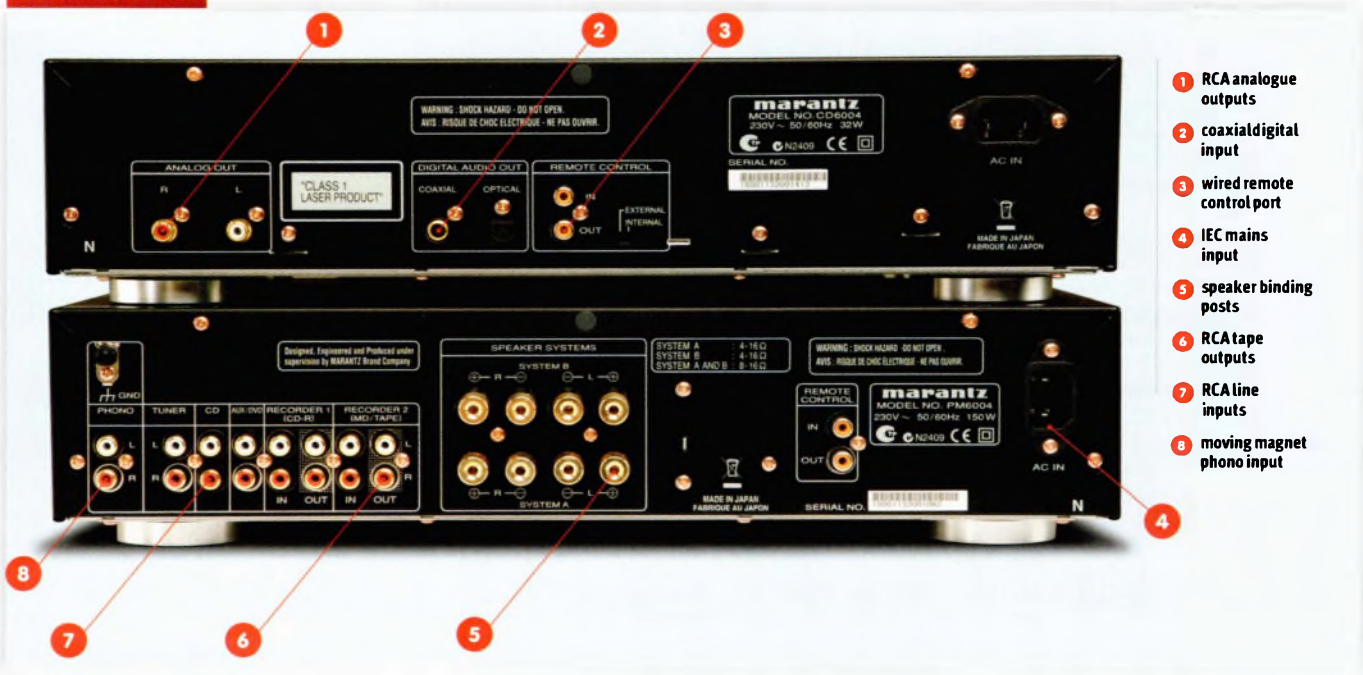
One feature that does seem to be very similar to its Denon sibling is the phono stage. This mimics the overall tone of the amplifier, but is extremely good

## The Marantz is able to find the superb timing and tonal richness that vinyl can demonstrate...

at extracting the detail and vitality that vinyl excels at. With a Rega RP6 connected, the Marantz is able to find the superb timing and tonal richness that this deck can demonstrate. The noise floor is decently low and the overall volume that the amplifier can achieve isn't far removed from the standard line inputs.

The result is two units that individually have much to commend them at the price point. The sound has the Marantz trademarks of rich tonality, and considerable detail. It is impressive that the company's sonic DNA is able to make itself felt at this low price and if you find it to your liking, at least you can be sure to have a sizeable upgrade path in front of you.

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA analogue outputs
- 2 coaxial/digital input
- 3 wired remote control port
- 4 IEC mains input
- 5 speaker binding posts
- 6 RCA tape outputs
- 7 RCA line inputs
- 8 moving magnet phono input

## Q&A

**Oliver Kriete**

Product Manager, Marantz Europe



**ES: Are there separate design philosophies for the Marantz and Denon brands, and is it easy to keep distinct brand identities?**

**OK:** The product design for both brands is separate. Different engineers work for each brand to keep their own identity, which is essential in order to follow the different brand and audio philosophies. Just two examples for Marantz are the current feedback topology in the amplifier and the HDAM (Hyper Dynamic Amplifier Modules) in the CD player. Further sound tuning for all Marantz is done in our well know listening room in Europe.

**How easy was it to design and build an amplifier output stage from discrete components at this relatively low price point?**

It is always a challenge, as you have to deal with cost restrictions and can't just take what you would like to use. But many years of experience helps to design a product using the right mix of components to achieve the target. However with every new product it starts from the beginning, as certain parts might be discontinued or the manufacturer of parts has changed, and by that the characteristic and influence to the sound as well. But this keeps it interesting!

**There is a strong system synergy with this pairing. Were they designed from the outset as a pair, or as two standalone units that just so happen to work well together?**

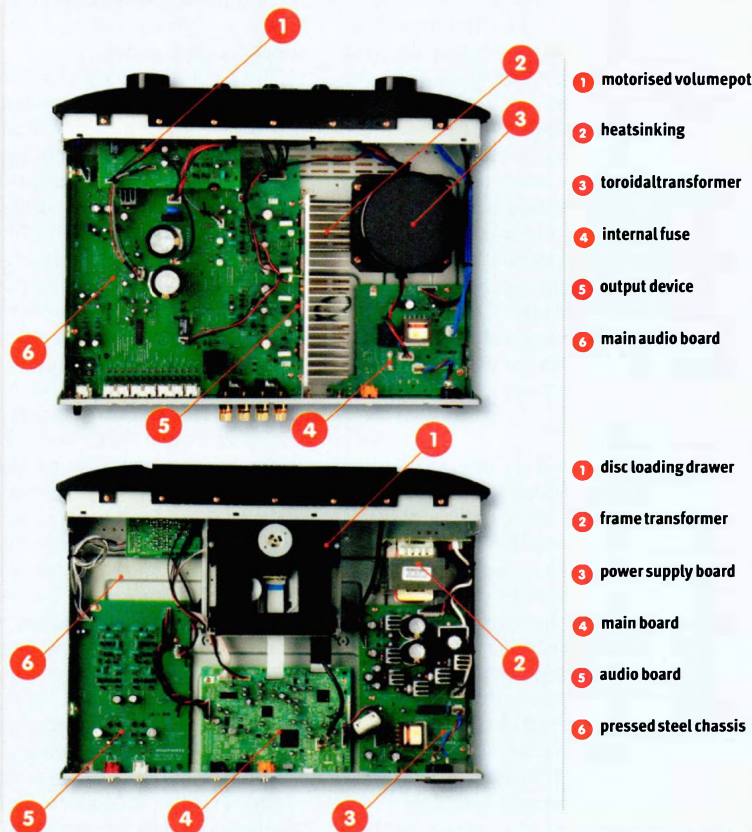
When we start the development we of course, right from the beginning, have a look to the system. This is because we know that a great many of our customers follow the system approach. That's not only because of the aesthetic match, but of because the sound as well. However, when we start the sound evaluation and tuning, we first look at each component individually, using the predecessor and our reference set to evaluate the audio quality. After that we give it another evaluation round to match the system. By that we can guarantee that each single unit performs well in any system, but as a set it is a perfect match.



**OUTSIDE OF THE D&M stable, there is no shortage of competition for the 6004s to contend with. The good news for Marantz is that sonically, the partnership of amp and CD player is a very strong one and arguably greater than the sum of its parts. As a pairing, the 6004s are exceptional value, and although NAD and Cambridge Audio in particular both produce some strong products, the synergy of the Marantz duo pushes them towards the top of the pack.**

The biggest weakness to the 6004s is that they have no digital inputs. The Sansui SAP-201V at the same price is an engaging listen and has a superb spec sheet, and would partner well with the CD6004. Alternatively, pairing the PM6004 with the Arcam rDAC would give you a computer audio friendly system. If you are mixing and matching with another digital source though, the Denon PMA-720AE is too good to ignore for £50 more.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 motorised volume pot
  - 2 heatsinking
  - 3 toroidal transformer
  - 4 internal fuse
  - 5 output device
  - 6 main audio board
- 
- 1 disc loading drawer
  - 2 frame transformer
  - 3 power supply board
  - 4 main board
  - 5 audio board
  - 6 pressed steel chassis

As a partnership the results are very appealing. The two components play to each other's strengths and manage to sound greater than the sum of their parts. This synergy isn't at the expense of individual performance (often 'synergy' can be a result of one piece of equipment masking the flaws of the other), but there is still a sense that this pairing can achieve more together than they can as individual units.

This is a both a blessing and a curse. If you happen to be looking for a new amp and CD player at the price point, the 6004s are capable of superb results. If you're looking for

a streamer or DAC-based system, the PM6004 on its own faces stiffer competition, though. Denon's own PMA-720AE is £50 more expensive, but has a sense of drive and timing that's hard not to like. At the same price, the Sansui SAP-201V with its digital inputs and lively sense of timing is also something to consider.

## Conclusion

Overall, Marantz's CD6004 is the best sub-£500 CD player I've heard in quite a while. And if you want a fine affordable integrated amplifier to partner it, then this duo takes quite some beating. ●

**Hi-Fi Choice** MARANTZ PM6004

**OUR VERDICT**

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

**LIKE:** Detailed and involving performance; impressive specification

**DISLIKE:** Slightly relaxed presentation; why no digital input in 2013?

**WE SAY:** Accomplished performer that offers impressive performance with decent features

**OVERALL** ★★★★★

**Hi-Fi Choice** MARANTZ CD6004

**OUR VERDICT**

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

**LIKE:** Really cohesive natural sound; useful extra features

**DISLIKE:** Auto standby slightly irritating!

**WE SAY:** Exceptionally capable silver disc spinner that offers excellent performance and good build quality

**OVERALL** ★★★★★



# M2 SERIES



## *Technology, Design & Emotion*

The multi-award winning Caspian M2 Series of high-fidelity electronics from Roksan Audio are an engineering marvel. The Integrated Amplifier has been meticulously designed to ensure it uncovers even the most delicate detail and presents it majestically. The CD Player's decoupled laser mechanism, super precision master clock and multiple independent circuits create a seamless, harmonic musical experience that is second to none. The more recent addition of a two-channel stereo power amplifier completes the much-desired system by adding further control and musicality.

# ROKSAN

Roksan Audio is exclusively distributed in the UK by Henley Designs Ltd.  
Telephone: 01235 511 166 | Email: [info@henleydesigns.co.uk](mailto:info@henleydesigns.co.uk) | Web: [www.henleydesigns.co.uk](http://www.henleydesigns.co.uk)



# My way

Micromega's MyDAC digital convertor is so cute and curvy that it could have come from Apple, but how does it sound? **Jason Kennedy** listens in...

**I**f the MyDAC is anything to go by, then Micromega has taken a long hard look at the market and decided that if it's going to appeal to the world at large – those that like good sound but aren't hard bitten hi-fi enthusiasts – it needs to come up with a new, more far reaching game plan.

As such, the new MyDAC is the first in a radical range of Micromega My products, which will eventually include an amplifier, MM/MC phono stage, headphone amp and wireless streamer. I imagine that they will all inhabit the 15x14cm casework seen here, which is quite unlike anything you'll have seen from the company before. Indeed the nod to Apple products is about as blatant as you can get with curved corners

and white finish. Given the success of that company in the computer audio field among others, it seems like a pretty savvy idea.

However, the positive impression is slightly let down by the light weight of the casework. An ABS moulding, it isn't *quite* in the Apple league in terms of finish, it has to be said. Unsurprising perhaps, as very few [if any! *Ed.*] companies in the high quality audio world produce anything near the unit numbers that are required to make such a result economically viable.

It's also important to note that, to its very great credit, Micromega also builds the MyDAC in France. This of course makes it inherently more expensive than Chinese products. Fortunately for the audio industry however, Apple doesn't make a

## ► DETAILS

**PRODUCT:** Micromega MyDAC  
**ORIGIN:** France  
**TYPE:** digital-to-analogue convertor  
**WEIGHT:** 300g  
**DIMENSIONS:** (WxHxD) 140x135x150mm  
**FEATURES:**  
 • digital inputs: coaxial, optical, asynchronous USB  
 • S/PDIF sampling range: 32 – 192kHz  
 • USB sampling range: 44.1 – 192kHz  
 • output level: 2V rms  
 • colours: white, black  
**DISTRIBUTOR:** Absolute Sounds  
**TELEPHONE:** 020 8971 3900  
**WEBSITE:** micromega-hifi.com

standalone DAC, but if it did the chances are that it would include many of the features seen in the new MyDAC.

One of the most unusual is an onboard power supply, which must be a switching type because of the unit's low 300g weight. This supply makes it extremely energy-efficient, using less than 500mW in standby, and only two and a half watts when in use. It is described as being extremely fast and low noise, which needs to be the case if results are to be up to par. As Linn and Chord Electronics, among others, have proved, switching power supplies can be good if their potential for creating noise is addressed. While most compact DACs have wall-wart power supplies, the majority opt for linear types, but one obvious competitor, Arcam's rDAC has a switcher as well.

The key feature from a sound quality perspective is the inclusion of an asynchronous USB input, this approach to keeping computer jitter out of audio circuitry is slowly becoming the norm but is still rare at this low price. The MyDAC runs a 24-bit/192kHz convertor, but doesn't specify which chip. Getting a 192kHz sample rate out of a Windows machine requires a driver that can be downloaded from micromega-hifi.com. Macs can drive it without any assistance. Happily you don't need

**HOW IT COMPARES**

I HAD A COUPLE OF THE MYDAC'S direct competitors to hand so was able to establish quite precisely what its pros and cons are in the general scheme of things. The £299 Arcam rDAC came first, this is a rather nicer unit thanks to the cast metal case and rubber base that is also pitched at the Apple aficionado. It doesn't go to the full 192kHz of the MyDAC, but does have the option of adding wireless operation with the addition of a dongle. Sonically the rDAC is more grounded and definite than the newcomer, it is not quite as spirited nor musically fluent but makes up for this with greater depth of tone and stronger dynamics.

A rather better equipped, slightly more expensive alternative is the £350 Cambridge DacMagic Plus, this has onboard volume control, headphone output and alternative filter settings, there is even the option of adding a Bluetooth dongle. Its USB input is not asynchronous, yet this doesn't stop it turning in a rather better performance than the MyDAC in terms of image solidity and timing. This lets it produce a more palpably real version of events, one that is highly involving as well.

a Windows driver for up to 96kHz and this is presumably why there is a switch for class 1.0 (96kHz) or class 2.0 (192kHz) operation.

Inputs exist for coax or optical S/PDIF connections to traditional audio components, and switching between them is achieved with the sideways rotator in the front panel; this also selects standby.

**Sound quality**

I started the listening by hooking the MyDAC up to a Mac Mini. Well, it just seemed like the right thing to do, if you know what I mean! I used Vertere D-Fi USB cable to make the link, and used Audirvana Plus software on the Mac. The initial result was clean, detailed and precise, but a little short on substance; it wasn't grainy but had a dryness to it that lacked tonal appeal and rhythmic drive. It had been on for twenty four hours or so. but I decided to let it burn in for a few more days to see if that would help; fortunately it did, even though this thing runs cool as aforementioned...

When I came back to it, a lot of the sense of dryness had gone, and it had been replaced with a genuine fluidity that while still a little lacking in gravitas, was not short on musicality. Indeed it had become decidedly engaging to listen to. Imaging proved a strongpoint with Gillian Welch's voice being projected very clearly into the room between the speakers with David Rawlins' guitar placed firmly to one side. It has the sort of balance that lets in a lot of light, it's very open and a little on the sparkly side. Some might consider it bright, but in the context of a neutral system this serves to highlight the zing of new guitar strings or the brilliance of a fine piano's high notes. This was more apparent with higher resolution

material where there's less of a real barrier to the natural roll-off of high frequency content. I particularly enjoyed Fleetwood Mac's *Oh Daddy* in 24/96 guise, where the cymbal work took on a stronger role without overpowering the real charm of the song's vocals.

I also hooked the MyDAC up to a Naim UnitiServe to assess its S/PDIF input. This generally seems to deliver a better result than the Mac, and this proved the case here too. It elicited a bit more weight from the convertor which made for more relaxed listening. I have, however, heard more palpable results from similarly priced convertors, and found that the best at the price delivered a better sense

**A very engaging DAC, it has the fleetness of foot that serves the spirit of music...**

of timing, but there's no getting away from the fact that this is a very engaging DAC. It has a fleetness of foot that serves the spirit of music very effectively. It's also good at creating a well-defined image, presumably a result of its lovely, open and clean treble.

It worked rather well with an integrated valve amplifier that I had on hand – the Linear Audio Research IA-30 – which is a push-pull amp with a typically smooth and natural top end and revealing midband. For run-in purposes I put on a live recording of Captain Beefheart and couldn't help being dragged to the listening seat by the Magic Band's irresistible groove. This recording usually sounds pretty ragged, but the Micromega managed to deliver all the energy and funk of the

performance without highlighting its crude nature which made for an awful lot of fun.

The Micromega's lightweight construction may not have anything to do with this aspect of its sound, but when compared to its various rival metal boxed DACs it's hard not to wonder. I didn't go so far as to put any extra damping weight on top of the case for fear of marking it, but it would be interesting to see what this does.

**Conclusion**

Micromega's new MyDAC is a distinctive digital convertor. Its lightweight construction and free and airy sound won't be to all tastes, but it has a musical fluency and ability to communicate that is simply impossible to resist with a good tune. And you have to give Micromega full marks for making it in its home country, rather than on the other side of the world. Of course, this may not make it as cheap as possible but it's a politically astute move, and of course better for the environment with all that shipping saved. A welcome new addition to a very competitive market, it's well worth a listen. ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

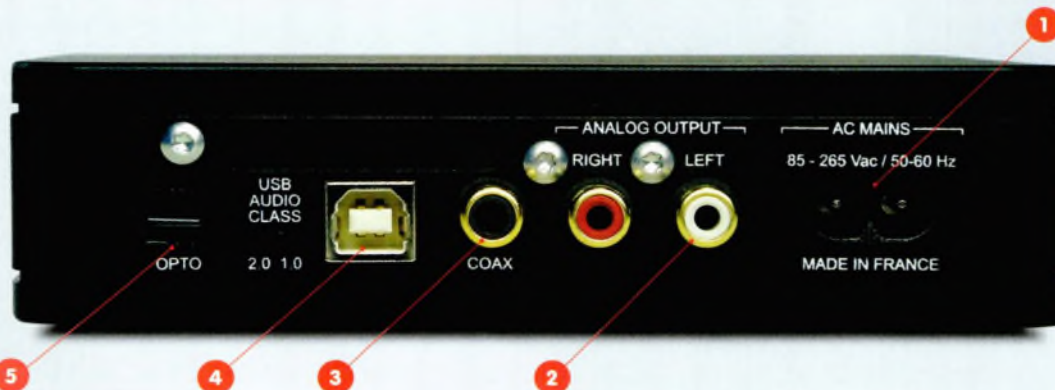
**OUR VERDICT**

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Open, fluent and musical sound with strong imaging and plenty of sparkle
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly light in both the build and tonal senses
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A distinctive design for those who crave the music's *joie de vivre*
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

**OVERALL**



**CONNECTIONS**



- 1 IEC mains input
- 2 RCA phono outputs
- 3 coaxial digital in
- 4 USB digital in
- 5 digital optical input

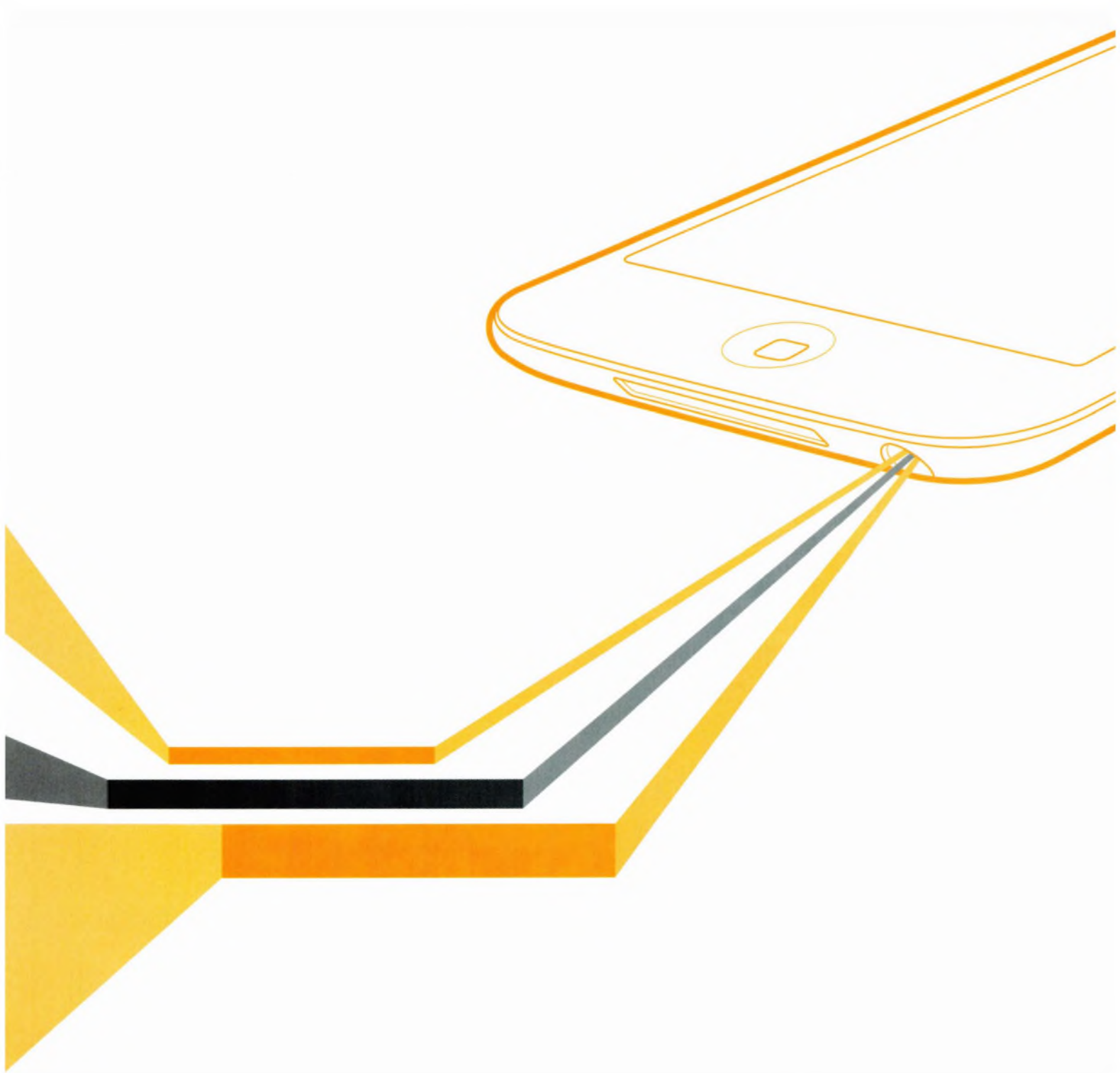
More than

alright,

jack.

iPod, iPad, iPhone, iMac are trademarks of Apple Inc., registered in the US and other countries.





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.

Armed with this knowledge, you are ready to maximise your equipment's potential, **with** the convenience of just one cable. Now, from the strong bloodline of all the Pulse cables, Vertere brings you D-Fi.

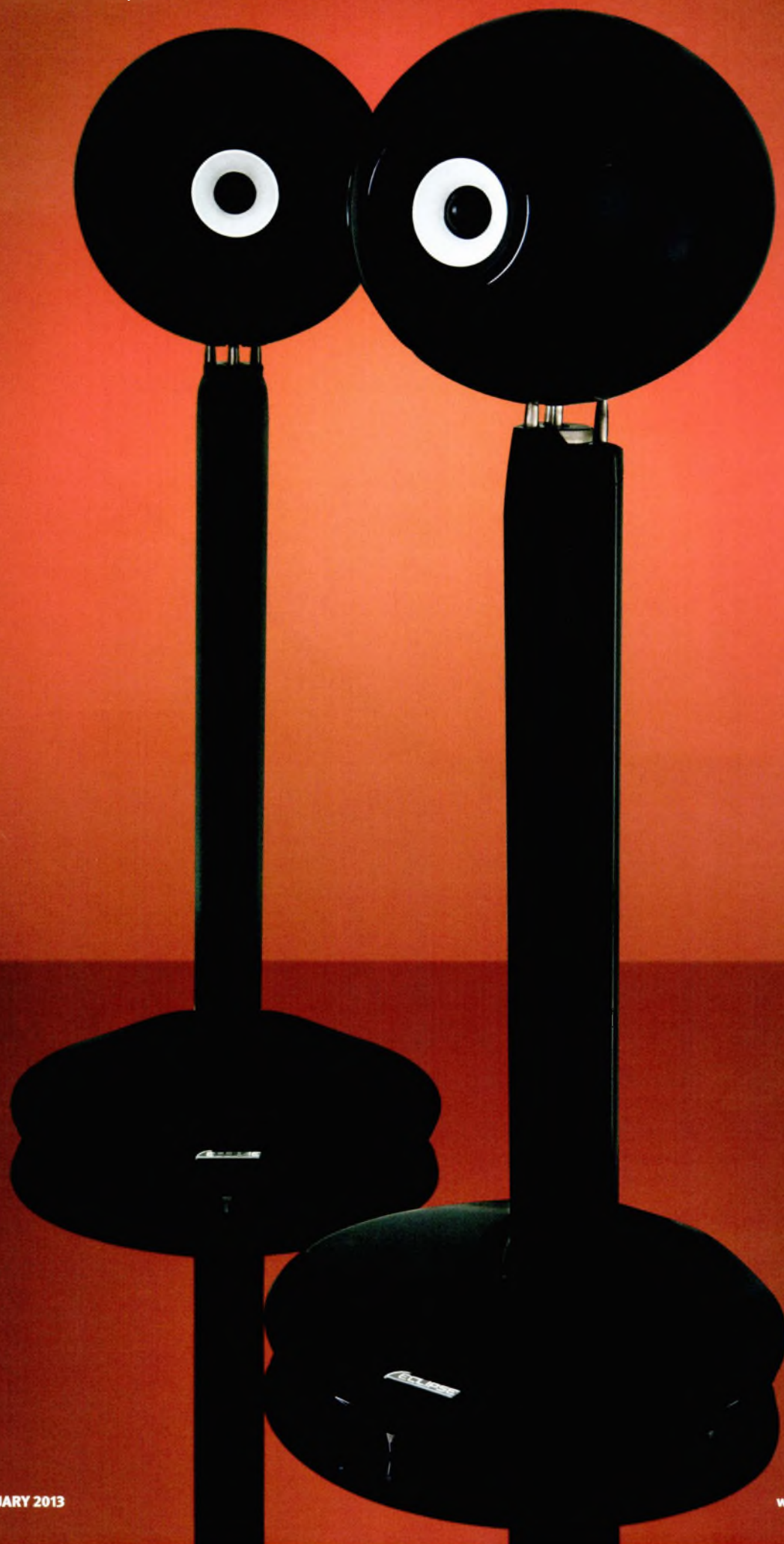
Specifically and correctly engineered, D-Fi gives you breathtaking performance from headphones, mobile devices, home computers and AV systems.

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

PULSE

D-Fi

Total Connectivity



# The civil surface



Eschewing basic boxes for smooth spheres, Eclipse's TD510ZMK2 loudspeakers deliver a special sort of sound, says **David Price...**

**J**ust as the ascent of man has fashioned human beings as bipeds – with a matching complement of arms, eyes and ears – so hi-fi's own version of natural selection has led to about ninety nine percent of all loudspeakers being moving coil drivers housed in a wooden box. This is because such an arrangement is well suited to the circumstances that speakers are generally used in, and cheap to make, too. But just as humans have design flaws, so too do box loudspeakers...

Modern measurements show that such enclosures make great resonance traps, and also do bad things to musical timing. That's why Eclipse TD loudspeakers are all egg shaped. This prolate spheroid form is the most effective at making the sound of a speaker cabinet disappear, says the company. And it not only gives a cleaner and more transparent tonality, but works wonders with transients, too. Indeed, the latter is mission-critical for Eclipse TD – 'TD' stands for 'Time Domain', and producing a phase-coherent speaker that captures the blistering transient speed of real music is the company's avowed goal.

## Middle management

To this end, the TD510ZMK2's enclosure is made from steel, zinc, aluminium and composites. No two radial surfaces are in the same plane, which reduces the potential for resonance and time-smear. Set into this is a single 'full-range' 100mm fibreglass-coned driver, which gives a poor (quoted) frequency response of 42Hz-22kHz at -10dB. Indeed, my own ears suggest that using the more conventional -3dB points, it's closer to 150Hz-12kHz – which by normal hi-fi standards is highly limited.

This will be hi-fi heresy to many readers, as a wide frequency response is surely one of the prime directives of speaker design. But it

gives us a clue as to what the Eclipse TD designers are trying to achieve, as design is always a trade-off between one set of objectives and another. Most engineers aim for the middle ground, making something with a decently wide frequency response, that times pretty well and sounds reasonably engaging. However, Eclipse TD has deliberately *not* done this. Instead, its designs are configured to optimise performance in the time domain, rather than the frequency domain – this is absolutely key to understanding this product.

The smallish drive unit comes carefully mounted inside the enclosure, using a floating 'diffusion stay' mechanism which decouples it from the outside world. This is sealed to the cabinet in an air-tight way to eliminate the transmission of unwanted vibrations. The drive unit itself sports a high-flux density magnet, onto which a high mass, conical anchor weight is placed, said to 'ground' the drive-unit ensuring an ideal pistonic movement.

Part-and-parcel of the overall package is the 'all-point' contact

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT:**  
Eclipse TD510ZMK2  
**ORIGIN:** Japan  
**TYPE:** floorstanding loudspeaker  
**WEIGHT:**  
19.5kg  
**DIMENSIONS:**  
(WxHxD)  
384 x 978 x 393mm  
**FEATURES:**  
• 100mm fibre glass full range driver  
• steel, zinc, aluminium and composite cabinet  
• stands with angle adjustment  
• 6 ohm quoted impedance  
• 50w quoted power handling  
**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
Eclipse TD  
**TELEPHONE:**  
020 7328 4499  
**WEBSITE:**  
eclipse-td.net

stand, which uses three steel legs mounted in the top of the column in combination with a specially machined, locking ring. It gives a very tight, all-of-a-piece feel, yet allows for fine angle adjustment from -10 to 15 degrees. Setting the angle correctly is essential to get the best from the speaker. The stand itself is hewn from extruded and diecast aluminium, chosen for its low mass and low resonance, which is filled with high-density, irregular sized kiln-dried sand. This gives a very 'dead' feel when you rap it with your knuckles. Finally, the base has five 20m bullet-shaped spikes for secure floor coupling. Overall fit and finish of the speakers and stands is superlative, in the way only a high-end Japanese manufacturer can do it.

## Sound quality

Okay, it's cards on the table time. Just as a single, small drive unit in a compact, infinite baffle enclosure is never going to light up the frequency extremes, nor is it going to produce high levels of sound from a puny amount of power. Quite the reverse, in fact – Eclipse TD claims a

**It delivers an auditory experience the like of which one almost never hears...**

sensitivity figure of 84dB/W/1m for the 510Z, which is very low. In practice this speaker needs a powerful transistor amplifier of at least 50W per side, and even then don't expect it to fill big rooms with swathes of floor shaking sound...



## Q&A

Kiyosei Shibata

TD Project Engineer



**DP: Why does the Eclipse TD series of speakers use the distinctive 'egg-shaped' cabinet?**

**KS:** There are four reasons to use an egg design. First, it is one of the physically strongest shapes in nature. Second, it enhances the strength of the cabinet, and suppresses resonances inside it. Thirdly, it eliminates internal standing waves, and fourthly it suppresses reflections and diffractions from the baffle. The only disadvantage is that moulding the shape is relatively difficult and expensive to make and work with.

**What materials go into the cabinet, and why have you chosen them?**

We employ a dense, high-specific-gravity compound based on ABS resin, which is ideal for complex mouldings, and is also self-damping, so it thoroughly eliminates the speaker's cabinet resonances.

**Why was a single, full-range driver chosen, instead of two units or a dual-concentric-type drive unit?**

We believe that a single full-range driver is the best way to reproduce the waveform accurately. Multi-way drivers cannot avoid their inherent problems, such as the time differences between separately mounted drive units and phase changes caused by the crossover.

**Why was a glass-fibre cone chosen for the single drive unit?**

Because this gets closest to the ideal characteristics for a driver, balancing the physical properties of high rigidity and lightweight with moderate internal loss.

**What in your view does the speaker do especially well?**

It gives staggering levels of clarity, speed and space reproduction, that do not exist in multi-way speaker systems. It's the pure sound of the music, without the cabinet and drivers contributing their own colourations and distortions. The major compromise is that the maximum sound pressure level available is not as high as some.



WHATEVER TYPE OF MUSIC YOU CHOOSE, this wee speaker does something special with it. For example, Coldplay's *Speed of Sound* isn't a favourite track of mine, what with its affected, whiny falsetto vocals and cheesy keyboard riffery, but the 510Zs pulled me in like a tractor beam. Against my better judgement, I just couldn't help being moved by the song's poignancy and pathos. The music appeared to slow down, open up and let me walk around inside the mix, focusing on every last cymbal hit, guitar strum and keyboard strike. Once again, I was completely transfixed, unable to do anything but listen in awe.

A Deutsche Grammophon recording of Beethoven's *Pastoral*, with its lush, massed orchestration and soaring scale, was pure unalloyed joy. The speakers locked on to the subtle, satisfying phrasing of the Berliner Philharmoniker, and the lovely, spacious recorded acoustic. Although these speakers are designed to excel at timing, one of the fringe benefits of the single-driver design is superb image placement, and the TD510ZMK2s proved superlative in this respect. They can hang rock-solid stereo images in mid air like ghosts in a Hammer House of Horror movie.

This Eclipse TD speaker was furthest from its comfort zone with the rich, fruity jazz tones of Lonnie Smith's *Think* – a late sixties Blue Note recording with a big, fat Hammond organ sound. Here, the 510 seemed just a little lost, failing to convey the vast physicality of this classic keyboard. But still it managed to boogie...

### IN SIGHT



- 1 dense ABS resin material used for speaker enclosures
- 2 100mm full range fibre glass coned drive unit
- 3 specially machined locking ring mates stand to speaker
- 4 rigid base mates to floor tightly for high stability
- 5 sand-filled, diecast aluminium stand supports speaker

However, properly positioned, aligned, angled and aspirated, the Eclipse TD510ZMK2 is capable of something special. It delivers an auditory experience the like of which one almost never hears – for better and for worse. If you want a speaker to rock you physically, or beguile you with its sugary sweet sonics, then best turn the page now!

On a superficial level, as soon as you set ears on this speaker, you'll be disappointed. The reassuring, familiar upper bass 'thrum' of a box cabinet is gone. This – the audio equivalent of a thick pre-packaged supermarket bread that fills you up but doesn't actually nourish – is nowhere to be heard. Instead, listening to the Eclipse TDs is like switching to a gluten-free diet, there's less stodge to swell the sound but as soon as you're used to it, it's hard to go back. There's a menu of other delights to feast upon...

Cue up electronica like Plant Life's *When She Smiles*, and from the very first strike of the snare drum you're in another world. The speed with which the stick hits the skin is blistering, and the way the drum sound decays is mesmeric. Instead of just fading out into a grey gloom, it lingers and sustains. Meanwhile the next beat is being struck, and you're gripped. The backing synth pads kick in and they seem eerily separate from the drums in time and space, and the vocals hover metres above the rest of the soundstage. The keyboards start and suddenly the song is gliding along in an ethereal, other-worldly

way. The Eclipse TDs give a profoundly different listening experience, where the music's rhythms become the mainstay, and from this all else follows...

The result is quite transfixing, but still not for all, I'd suggest. The bassline is a lighter than it should be – even if it does stop, start and play tunes with amazing fluency. Hi hat cymbals lack the extension you'd hear from a decent dome tweeter, and are nor is it as sweet and subtle.

### Conclusion

The Eclipse TD510ZMK2 is not a consummate all rounder, as it does too many things in a distinctly underwhelming way. Still, it is uniquely able to chart a course direct to the heart of the music, giving you a unique window into its (and even your) very soul. If this, above all else, is what you crave, then it is an absolutely essential audition. ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY<br>★★★★★   | <b>LIKE:</b> Breathtaking transients; superlative timing; great dynamics; detailing; soundstaging                          |
| VALUE FOR MONEY<br>★★★★★ | <b>DISLIKE:</b> Limited frequency extremes; hard to drive  |
| BUILD QUALITY<br>★★★★★   | <b>WESAY:</b> You'll either love it or hate it, but you owe it to yourself to hear it – brilliant but not beyond reproach! |
| EASE OF DRIVE<br>★★★★★   |  |

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## THIS MONTH:



**DAVID PRICE**  
**EXPERTISE:** EDITOR

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



**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 PRO

**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.

**DP says:** *Interesting suggestion Trevor. Indeed, some tweaky types even say you can wet clean records by dunking a record brush in an isopropyl alcohol/distilled water solution, putting the record on the turntable platter, spinning it manually and washing the record that way. After which, they'd suggest that you 'wet-play' it to let the stylus pick up the gunk. Maybe it's an extreme method, but the point is that there are umpteen ways of cleaning records, and it doesn't have to involve fancy £1,000 record cleaning machines...*

## Clean machines

I was particularly interested in your recent review of manual record cleaning devices (*Minitest HFC* December 2012) and the Knosti Disco Antistat in particular, because I have been using this method of cleaning many second-hand records for about eighteen months now. Previously I had my records cleaned at a record shop using a Keith Monks machine, but unfortunately that facility is no longer available to me.

I found, as you did, that the Disco Cleaner works pretty well straight out of the box, but I did have some reservations about the cleaning liquid supplied. Partly on its constituents – did it really evaporate without any residue? And also the idea of re-using it multiple times, especially when relying on the supplied filter, which I thought looked a bit crude and I therefore wondered just how effective it was at removing all the micro-particles of dirt.

As I'm sure you are aware, there are many suggested alternative record cleaning liquids/mixtures on the Internet, and after some considerable research I settled on 400ml distilled/ionised water plus 40ml (10 percent) Isopropyl alcohol plus 4ml (one percent) of a pure lab-grade detergent, without any additives, so that it fully dissolved in the water and does not leave any residue.

I use Liqui-Nox from Cole-Parmer, which is available on line in one litre bottles. This formulation appears to work

just as well as the original liquid, leaves no residue and is cheap enough to discard after each cleaning session of say – six to eight records. This not only removes the chore of filtering, but also my concerns about any residual dirt. Another improvement that I discovered, also on the Internet, was to buy a second Disco cleaner and to use one as the 'cleaning bath' (as before) and the other one as a 'rinsing bath' – using a mixture of just distilled/ionised water with about five percent IPA.

Provided you shake off as much of the cleaning mixture before putting the disc into the rinsing machine – to minimise cross contamination – I have found that this two-step approach delivers records that are as quiet as those I had previously cleaned by the legendary Keith Monks machine.

Given that the Disco is available on line for about £30 – the total

cost of the two machines and some bottles of the various cleaning liquid items, as described above, means you can get up and running for a total initial outlay of about £85 – which when you compare the cost and the end result, with the various electric powered/vacuum pump machines, represents extremely good value for money.

I have cleaned about one hundred LPs now, using the 'two bath' method (both for myself and some friends) and we have never been disappointed with the results, provided of course there is no actual physical damage to the disc, which alas no amount of cleaning can put right! By the way my assessment of surface noise after cleaning – or rather lack of – is always via a Roksan Xerxes Cognoscenti with Artemiz Arm fitted with a EMT/Tubaphon TU2 moving coil cartridge.

**Trevor Williams**

**The Disco Antistat record cleaning machine. Trevor Williams thinks it's even better when doubled up and used with special cleaning solution...**



## Record cleaning doesn't have to involve fancy £1,000 machines

*The double-Disco idea sounds a good compromise between the somewhat crude 'wet-playing' approach and an expensive professional machine. I'd be interested in any other views...*

## Big generator

The article on p87 of the December issue reminded me of the time that I lived in a detached house amongst a remote Spanish community in the mountains near Alcoy, Valencia. At the time I had a Rega turntable, Sansui (soon to be replaced by a Marantz) amplifier and tuner, and a Marantz CD player – as well as a much missed pair of Allison speakers.

For the first eighteen months we used a 3kw petrol generator for lighting, the washing machine and occasionally television, but I never did trust my hi-fi with it. Eventually a dedicated 230v mains supply was installed and, apart from the month of August and a few summer evenings, we were the only residents and consequently the only house running off the entire system. I could play music as loud as my eardrums permitted!

The novelty was playing the intro to Chris Rea's *Auberge*, where the footsteps pan across the room



# The ADL GT40 ...



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at a very high level and watching the fur on our four cats' backs rise before they jumped off the sofa and made a rapid exit through the open door or window.

I was receiving hi-fi magazines by mail, including *Hi-Fi Choice*, and there was a lot being made of the importance of having a clean mains supply, so I was interested to put the hi-fi on and listen, sometimes without anything playing. With my neighbours either at home or away I never noticed any difference and never heard any noticeable 'clicks' or other interference when people were using their fridges, washing machines, drills, pumps, etc.

By the way, what's happening to our DAB broadcasts? A few years ago I read that the transmissions in the UK were being changed in some way, making all current domestic receivers useless?

**Richard Bond**

**DP says:** Better be careful what you say in this febrile, scandal-ridden climate, Richard. Admitting to playing Chris Rea to any defenceless animal could see you facing cruelty charges – and that goes for humans too!

As far as mains conditioners are concerned, half the world thinks they're a complete rip off, and the other fifty percent believe them to be the saviour of humankind. The point is of course, it depends on your mains in the first place. Those people lucky enough to have clean power AC supplies will likely not feel any benefit (indeed it could be the reverse) with mains products, whereas people in noisy mains environments will love them, as they can make a massive improvement.

Either way, I am of the firm view that petrol generators should not be used to power delicate and expensive hi-fi equipment, unless your name is Tim Jarman and you're tweaky enough to be able to repair the damage

you've done to your precious kit afterwards!

As for Digital Audio Broadcasting, the latest audience research from RAJAR (Radio Joint Audience Research) released a few months back shows that on average, 89 percent of the population tune into radio each week, and that digital platforms are used by 46 percent of us – rising 13 percent year on year. This, of course, includes Internet radio/BBC iPlayer; DAB alone is up eight percent year on year. Listening my mobile phones is up 24 percent. From this we can conclude that DAB is soldiering on reasonably well, but it's hardly earth-shattering and looks like it's being eclipsed by mobile phone/Internet.

I have always thought that so-called 'digital radio' is a good thing, but 'Digital Radio' (which is shorthand for DAB) isn't. Of course, DAB uses the antique MP2 audio codec, giving very poor sound, and its error correction is extremely mediocre. Sadly the BBC put all its eggs in the DAB basket too early, and is now tied to a technically poor system that's light years behind DAB+ (which has a more modern AAC-based codec and better error correction, and is catching on abroa).

Still, all this will ultimately be irrelevant, as mobile phones will take over what DAB portables do now, and Internet radio via streamers will make hi-fi DAB tuners redundant. Best of all though is, of course, good old FM. Get a decent twig, a classic tuner (prices start at £50 for a well used Creek CAS3140) and you'll be in hi-fi heaven!

### Raiding the piggy bank

Dear Patrick, thank you for your informative review of the QNAP TS-469 which was very interesting; I would find the extra power and text display useful when compared to my NAS, the ReadyNAS Duo,

### Downsizing

I have an Audiolab 8200CD Compact Disc player, Rega Brio R amplifier and B&W CDM7 loudspeakers, all coupled with Chord Company cables. I am keen to upgrade and would like to end up with possibly the Cambridge Audio 851 amplifier and CD combination with, perhaps, a pair of KEF LS50 loudspeakers. My first question is what would be the better purchase; the 851A amplifier or the 851CD player? Would I gain anything with the 851CD or would I be better to purchase the amplifier? And secondly, would the KEF loudspeakers work well with this combination? I am restricted for room and really need a smaller pair of speakers.

**David Ching, New Zealand**

**ES says:** I've been using the 851s as part of my reviewing equipment for a month or two now and they are extremely impressive. If I was choosing one of them, taking into account that you already have the Audiolab 8200CD, I would

plump for the amp over the CD in this case. I've not yet heard the LS50, but everyone seems extremely excited by it and nothing in the specs suggests that the very neutral 851A won't be able to drive it well.

**DP says:** I agree with Ed. Actually the Brio R is a superb little amp, and in some ways I think the 851A would actually have a hard time keeping up with the infectious musicality of the little Rega. However, any new small speakers you buy are likely going to need serious wallop plus slightly more transparency, and the Rega cannot give this. The Brio R is best married to largish, efficient floorstanders like the Q Acoustics 2050i, whereas the 851A has oodles of grunt and will take the KEFs by the scruff of the neck and really exercise them. Also consider KEF R300s, and Monitor Audio GX100s.

**Cambridge Audio's 851A amplifier is a real upgrade over Rega's fine little Brio R – especially in the power department...**



which plays faultlessly but takes an age to do anything else.

My set-up is the Squeezebox Touch which I find excellent in all departments, with a Teddypardo DAC, ATC pre and power amps, plus old but loved JPW Sonata speakers with a REL T5 for extra body. Happily I am pleased with the sound it all makes.

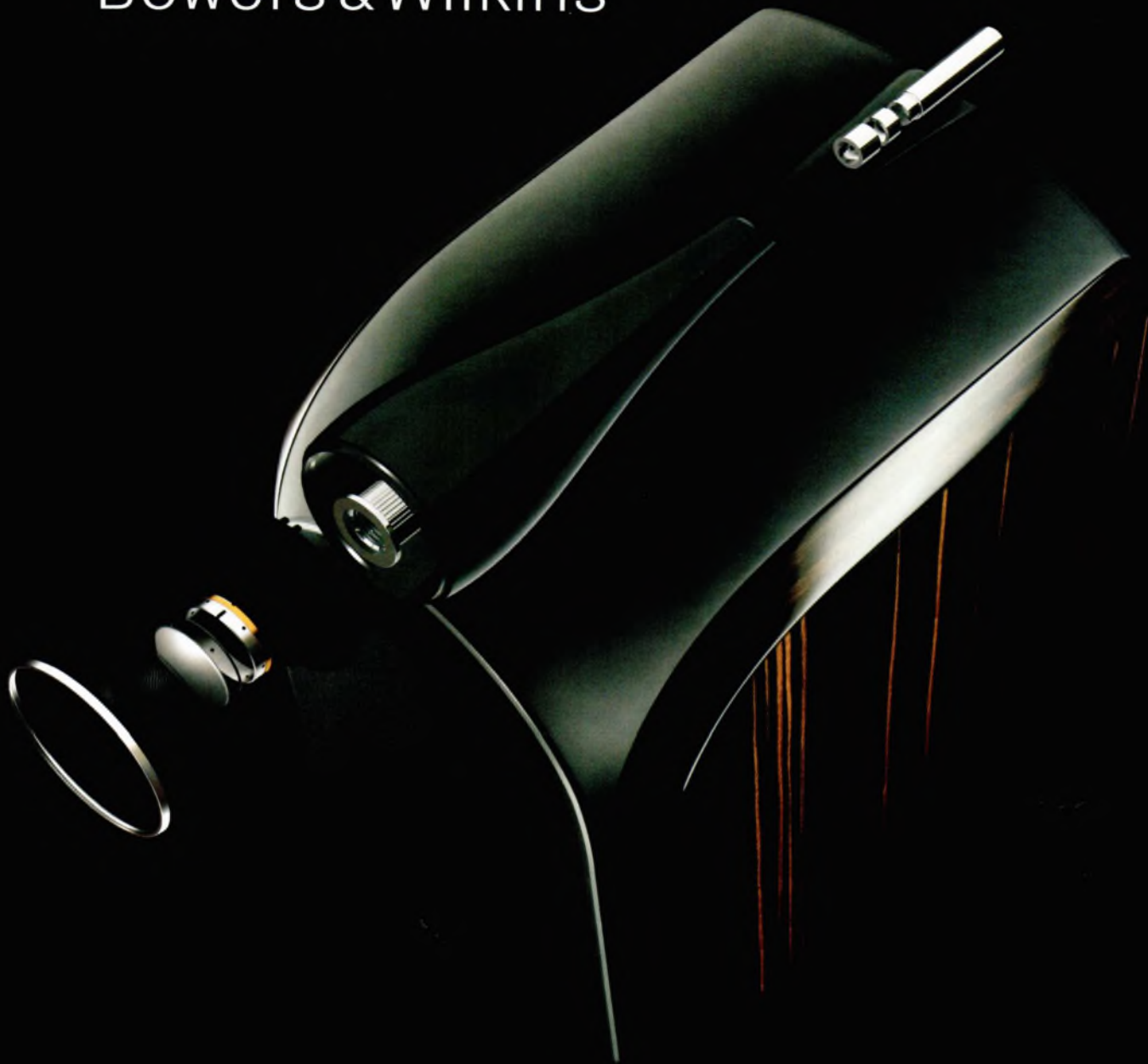
My question is that if I wanted to change the NAS, could I do it without too much fuss? It has two

one terabyte drives in RAID-1. If I removed these drives and placed them into, say the TS-469, would it then somehow just work, or would there be problems which would need attention? I am making an assumption here that the drives would be compatible in the first place.

**What's to become of Digital Audio Broadcasting, asks Richard Bond? It's crawling along in the slow lane, as Internet radio zooms past, says DP...**



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**QNAP TS-469:** reader Peter Davies wants to set up some serious storage and wonders if this is the right buy?

Oh, and thank you for the excellent magazine, which I look forward to each month.

**Peter Davies**

**PC says:** *It's a pleasure Peter, it sounds like you would benefit from the performance bump the TS-469 would bring. Regrettably the jump from Netgear to QNAP means you could not simply drop the drives across. My recommendation would be to buy a cheap USB 1TB drive, spend the time on making sure you have a robust disk-to-disk backup (always a good idea before migrations), buy two more matching 1TB SATA drives (as long as the originals are QNAP compatible models – check online) and then set up another mirrored 1TB in the QNAP to copy the backup on to.*

*Once happy your library was replicated in QNAP mode, I would then throw the old drives into the two vacant TS-469 slots and expand the RAID volume to 2TB mirrored. If brave, you could go straight to restoring the backup to 4TB raw in RAID-5 mode – unless you want to go to 8, 12 or 16TB raw! Sounds like overkill in your case!*

### Let it be?

I wonder if it would be possible to run a feature on the new Beatles box set vinyl release? Not so much to just state that they exist and how much they cost, but to look into the whole business of the release.

For example, this release is in stereo, but many people will chew your leg off and go on about the merits of mono. So, just how should people go about listening to The Beatles? Is it worth holding off for the forthcoming mono recordings due in 2013, or perhaps just plump for the stereo or perhaps to go for both and get the best (or worst) depending on preference, of both worlds?

The new release also states that it has been seriously prepared by top class engineers, etc., but

## What is the ideal way to listen to a mono release in the modern world?

I think I am correct in stating that some of the LPs are remixes from 1986 by George Martin. It could be just me, but that seems a little dishonest bearing in mind what is being claimed in the blurb?

In addition, some of the music will be in mono. Mono, in a stereo release. I guess when the mono release is here, some of that may be in stereo. What does all this actually mean, I wonder? I know what you are thinking, just be quiet and listen to the music, enjoy it and let it be. Well, do you want to know a secret, I can't because it costs a fair bit of cash and I would like to know the ins and outs of it from an expert before going ahead with the purchase.

In addition to this, what is the ideal way to actually listen to a mono release in the modern

world? I know that might sound strange, but I have heard differing answers to that question.

I remember going out to a record shop over thirty years ago and buying a record. Going back home and playing it and not being overly concerned about what it was being played on, and not at all worried about the quality of the pressing. Simpler times to be sure and maybe more enjoyable, and carefree. It all seems much more complicated now. Of course I could just be crazy, I suppose!

**Neil Porter**

**TJ says:** *This is a very interesting question. To enjoy an absolutely authentic listening experience you would have to use a horrible little box record player of the Dansette type with a rigid crystal cartridge that will chew up the records in no time, but given the cost which the Beatles releases are likely to be this just isn't a sensible option.*

*Mono and stereo LPs used to be recorded in a different way to each other, stereo requires that the two sides of the 'V' shaped groove each carry one of the channels and a stereo cartridge must therefore be compliant in these directions. Playing a stereo record with a cartridge designed only for the earlier mono LPs would soon destroy the recording.*

*These days I suspect that any new 'mono' LP would use the 'stereo' recording method, but would simply have the same information present on each channel. It would, therefore, still require a stereo cartridge to play it without damage. This all means that the only way to listen to either version of these expensive records is via a decent stereo hi-fi system, but you can always swing the balance control right over to one side if having the sound coming out of two loudspeakers annoys you!*

**DP says:** *This isn't a very helpful repost for you Neil, but for my money the original pressings of the Beatles albums on LP are the only ones that really do it – mono or stereo. The eighties Beatles CDs are awful, stripping all the emotion and atmosphere out – even if you could hear the piano stool squeak, as they boasted at the time. (If you had a decent turntable, then you could hear it on LP, too!) The remasters are better, I think, but absolutely*

*nothing special if you've grown up listening to an all-analogue Fab Four. The hi-res is nice, but again just doesn't swing like the vinyl. As the forthcoming vinyl box set is supposed to use these 24/192 digital masters, I don't think it's going to really change much. Now a pure analogue one, that would really be a thing to hear! Who knows, maybe such a record might be possible. We need EMI to license the vinyl pressing rights to the likes of Linn or Naim, as that would really guarantee a sonic treat! Time to start up a campaign? Anyway, as for the new official release, we'll be covering it as soon as it's out...*

### Dream stream

Like, I am sure, a considerable number of your readers, I must take issue with the views of Dr Mace (HFC December 2012: letter, *Yesterday and today*).

I too have returned to hi-fi after an enforced absence of more than five years and I too have been hooked on quality music since the mid-nineteen sixties. By way of establishing credentials I would have you note that a long list of equipment that I have owned included Linn Isobariks, Naim 250 Hi Cap, etc., IMF Monitors, AE1's Leak Sandwich speakers, Thorens 160, Mitchell GyroDec, Audiolab amps and even, going back a long way, Garrard SP25, Goldring Lenco and so on. I think Dr Mace has taken a throwaway remark by his dealer and perhaps a little prejudice, and combined them to draw unsubstantiated conclusion...

There is undoubtedly a great deal of excellent hi-fi of vintage design, but to dismiss 'streaming' and digital music and suggest that unless thick cable is used in place of ribbons, is nonsense. I am writing this while listening to Apple lossless files (iMac) through a cheap (£20) digital cable run to a Cyrus XPD/Power Supply and thence to PMC 21s. The sound is fantastic. I suggest that the Cyrus amp is at least as good, if not better, than my old Naim (albeit a twenty year old model). The speakers outperform any I have owned and the source is second only to a quality turntable.

Unfortunately my record collection has to sit at work as is, while my CD collection takes up a whole room. However, I can

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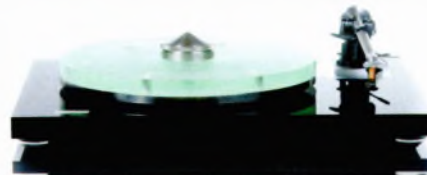
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access all this music at the touch of a few keys from a two terabyte disc, which takes up approximately 4x4x2 inches under the computer. By all means carry on with large separates, heavy cables, chunky sources and taking ten minutes to find the music you want. I will continue to pull up the track I want in seconds and be on my second glass of wine before you have got the CD out of its sleeve!

**Andy Andrews**

**ES says:** Welcome to the future! The more I travel around dealers for the dealer visits, the more convinced I become. Good digital is good digital and the convenience of streaming and space I'm saving means I'm unlikely to turn back from digital.

**DP says:** Yep, music can sound very good via computer, especially hi-res. Even the simple expedient of a decent USB cable and a good DAC such as Audiolab's M DAC, can give superb sound via a good software player like Audirvana. Enjoy it, why don't you?

### Rip it up!

I have approximately 1,000 CDs that have been stored inside a piece of furniture for many years and hardly see the light of day. This is mainly due to the inconvenience of trying to sift through the lot in order to find what I'm looking for, or fancy listening to. Like many

## I'd like to know what the best options are for ripping and storing CDs?

people, I have gone down the iPod route for its portability (and will probably remain so for that reason). However, I do happen to have some decent hi-fi equipment afforded to me by my audiophile Dad, and would like to use that system more. Also, relinquishing some of the room space is also desirable (and maybe even selling the CDs).

I would like to know, therefore, what the best options are for ripping and storing these CDs to be played through my existing Cyrus CD6 and 7 set-up? How would I best get this music into a 'unit' that would integrate with this separate system? I have read about Brennan and Cocktail Audio, but are there

other options that could transfer music as quickly and manage the tracks? Is the CD6 capable of doing the 'ripping' and the 7 transferring the data onto a connected hard drive (of some sort), or am I looking at something completely different?

I appreciate that the 160GB iPod Classic is a possibility that could satisfy both uses, but that unit seems fairly old now!

**Paul Ash**

**MS says:** Sorry, but ripping CDs needs more than a CD player to perform the task: It requires a computer fitted with a CD/DVD drive and appropriate software at least. You might look at the Vortexbox Appliance ripping NAS ([www.vortexbox.co.uk](http://www.vortexbox.co.uk)), which will rip your CDs, store the rips on its internal hard disk, sort out the metadata, and then act as a DLNA/UPnP server to serve them up to a streamer such as the Marantz NA7004. It will perform all these functions straight out of its packaging. Provided you have a broadband Internet connection to look up metadata information, but I will assume that you already have such. This is a very economical set-up and would be the lowest cost combination that I would recommend.

Rip to FLAC for use in your hi-fi and re-rip or convert to AAC for your iPod. Using a program such as dBpoweramp Music Converter on your PC is the quickest and least troublesome way to effect the conversion. Also, do learn to be patient: ripping CDs is not a speedy process if you want the best, error-free results. The drive I use for ripping will work at 52x speed but I set it never to exceed 2x. Do it right first time and you should never need to do the job

### Paws for thought

I have watched with interest the resurgence in cat-related content in *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine, so wanted to add this. My two mogs – Tilly and Buster – are both partial to a night spent on the sofa with me playing my music. They do, however, feel inclined to editorialise about my choice of programme material. I am an eighties guy and they seem to love the Pet Shop Boys, are quite partial to The Smiths' later albums, but start meowing if my Mrs ever slips on a bit of Simply Red. Proof positive, as if we needed it, that cats have better taste than many of their human

counterparts! And as I've upgraded over the past decade, they've spent ever more time present at my late evening listening sessions; obviously they couldn't stand the sound of cheap CD either!

**Andrew Beck**

**DP says:** Hi Andrew – for audiophiles looking to buy their furry friends a Christmas present, then how's about this turntable scratch pad from [www.suck.uk.com/](http://www.suck.uk.com/)!



Does your cat take his or her natural frustrations out on the cloth grilles of your £7,000 Quad electrostatics? Here's a handy way to divert its attention, with a turntable scratch pad! Just so long as it doesn't start on your Linn...

again. And treat yourself to a large USB disk drive so that you can back-up all the music you have stored on the Vortexbox.

**ES says:** The most painless method of ripping CDs is to use your computer. If it is connected to the Internet, you will be able to choose your format, and ensure that your album and track titles are correct and album art is present. Free software exists but something like dBpoweramp is going to produce the most

consistent results. You could rip to Apple Lossless and use a 160gb iPod, but working on an album size of 350-500 meg you aren't going to get everything on at the same time.

For me, the logical choice would be a streamer that can read the material you have diligently ripped. Given the dimensions of the Cyrus, perhaps the best bet is something like the Cambridge Audio NP30 which has similar dimensions. The Cyrus own brand alternatives are rather



**Brennan's JB7 is a handy little hard disk drive music machine, but it's rather limited in scope and sonics, and not really the right thing to build an audiophile digital music system around, thinks PC...**

pricier and require either a DAC or a power amp to function correctly. This is not to say that the Brennan or Cocktail don't have their uses but they are ultimately far less flexible than ripping your material centrally and having it available to use as you wish going forward.

**PC says:** Call me and I'll take some of that silver disc collection off your hands! For volume rips and serious hi-fi listening I would suggest something more robust than either the Brennan for ripping or the iPod for playback – you need to do some listening tests and determine if you're going to want FLAC or uncompressed rips.

Consider bulk ripping services like the example mentioned in Malcom's recent article on getting into network music, but I would recommend doing it yourself and I would always suggest a RipNAS which is an excellent slot-fed AccurateRip ripper as well as a fine Squeezebox and Asst-based music server (including a FLAC option for combined uncompressed/metadata action – although many would still advocate AIFF or WAV).

You need a CD data ripper – the days of playing out from the likes of a CD 6 to a recorder are long gone. For Cyrus 7-based playback you could experiment with a Squeezebox Touch or direct computer connections via an asynchronous USB DAC for confidence before migrating to the likes of a Cyrus Stream XP!



How to store 1,000 CDs? Paul Ash has currently got them on his iPod, so time to get a proper streaming system, then!

Picture courtesy of Apple

## LETTER OF THE MONTH

### I AM TRYING TO START A CAMPAIGN TO TRY AND GET RECORD LABELS AND ONLINE RETAILERS TO MAKE HIGH DEFINITION DOWNLOADS AVAILABLE.

My petition is at [www.change.org/petitions/record-labels-release-high-definition-music-downloads](http://www.change.org/petitions/record-labels-release-high-definition-music-downloads).

I honestly think that if it got the backing of the major magazines and specialist retailers, then the whole issue would get a good deal more attention.

Is there chance you could spread the word among your writers, dealers and manufacturers, to try and get support for the subject and raise its profile? Signing the petition would be good too. And hey, if you want to do a special campaign in your magazine, I've got no problems with that!

I know that it would be nice to get Compact Discs that aren't totally compressed, but I just think, might as well go the whole hog and call for hi-res. I can't believe that the industry is just stagnating and, in terms of sound quality and downloads, has managed to go backwards. It has been thirty years since CD was introduced, we deserve better. If everyone just sits back and does or says nothing, things will never change.

**Mike G**

**DP says:** Good for you, Mike. On sober reflection, you're quite right to say that we've not seriously been offered the chance to upgrade from our 16-bit/44.1kHz digital discs since Philips and Sony released the Compact Disc format back in 1982. Yes, there was SACD, but lovely as it is, it has never been more than a niche format, simply because major music retailers refused to stock it. This was even in the boom years of music sales some ten years ago, so don't hold your breath for the remaining high street music resellers to come to the rescue now!

What we need – as you rightly state – is the option to buy large amounts of music, including decent new releases, on hi-res 24/96 (minimum). Indeed I am sure a number of readers of this magazine wouldn't be too upset if they came with 24/192 or DSD options, either (personally I'd go for the latter). That, I feel, would both push music sales en masse, and also hi-fi equipment sales. Were Apple to ever deign to include hi-res in their iPod range, it might even prove a nice feature to spur users of old kit into buying new.

Still, this rather reminds me of the grim loneliness of living in Brighton back in the late eighties, and tugging around the 'record shops' trying to buy new music on vinyl. "There's no demand for it, mate!", the sales assistant would reply. Well what did they think I was asking for – jelly babies? My point is that the download sites won't offer hi-res because there's supposedly no demand, and there's no demand because download sites won't offer a hi-res option. It's your classic catch-22. So that's why I applaud your ingenuity, Mike – there's nothing like just getting on and doing it.

So everyone, why not click on this e-petition, and tell your friends about it too? There's nothing to lose and everything to gain. Meanwhile, 'respect due' to variously Linn Records, Naim Label and B&W's Society of Sound. I'd implore audiophiles to support these music portals with their custom; if you visit them you may be shocked to find that the ground rules for 'hi-fi music' have changed, and it's no longer dull 'Jazz at the Pawnshop'-type stuff. Quite the reverse, even Huey Morgan is on Naim now!

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# Compact Disc's skyfall

At this time of year, the software sales figures come out.

**David Price** predicts nothing but doom and gloom for CD...

**W**ho'd want to be a CD retailer now? Wherever I look, I see signs of its imminent demise. High Street shops which once had the little silver Frisbee stacked sky-high like Tribbles on the Starship Enterprise – are now increasingly Compact Disc-free zones. Or at least they retain merely a vestigial presence, like cassette tape head cleaners did in your local Dixons, circa 2005. In their place, DVDs and Blu-ray have taken over, but even these have question marks over their longevity hanging about their head, what with the rush online...

One physical format that can't dematerialise in front of your very eyes, only to be replaced by a stream of digital bits barrelling down a telephone line, is vinyl. In my local audio visual software emporium in Bristol (something we once called a 'record shop'), I've noticed a resurgence in, ermm, records. Since I was last in there, a largish corner of the store has suddenly gone back to the future – or forward to the past? – and reinstated its LP racks. Every time I go in, I find myself blinking in disbelief – it was some twenty years ago that they disappeared to make room for CD, and now they're back, with CD vacating!

Where are vinyl's naysayers now? Their silence is wonderful to hear. It's amazing how the national narrative on the Long Playing record has moved from 'old hat' to 'cool old skool'. Everyone seems to be in on the secret – from the cashier at the local supermarket to a fourteen year kid with a seven inch single – that vinyl sounds better, don't you know? And now, all the things about it that made the world abandon twelve inch black plastic are suddenly evidence of its charming retro quirkiness. When Sir Francis Bacon said that, "there is no excellent beauty that hath no some strangeness in its proportion", he was probably talking about the Pet Shop Boys first LP...

Compact Disc however, has yet to be reappraised thus. No style-savvy fashion guru, rock star or movie mogul has pronounced on the intrinsic loveliness of aluminium pits pressed into polycarbonate. Peter York hasn't piped up with a paean of praise for the digipak, or shared his fond memories of the jewelcase. Ageing yuppie types are not yet surfacing on '100 Best Bits of The Eighties' cable TV shows, sharing anecdotes of snorting cocaine off a Sade CD. Over on Channel Five, Quentin Wilson has yet to point his camera inside the boot of a Flame Red BMW 635CSI and nostalgically point out its Blaupunkt CD changer.

This new year, I fear, will likely see a major change in our relationship with the first mass produced digital disc. As we enter 2013, it's still a pretty normal sight, but I predict that within twelve months, it will be a lot less so. No, I'm not saying that it's game over just yet – but CD is ascending the stairway to format heaven in a manner that vinyl simply never did. Twenty years ago, the LP record was being dragged kicking and screaming towards the way out, but its detractors never quite managed to expel it. Indeed it came back down to earth and rejoined the kingdom of men, on account of it satisfying a need that no other format could – but is there anything that CD can do that digital downloads can't do better?

When this question was asked of vinyl (relative to CD) sometime in the early nineties, the answer was a resounding 'yes' – it had super sound, gorgeous gatefold sleeves and both chic and geek appeal. Pose that question to Compact Disc however, and sadly answer comes there none. The only reason to hang on to CD is its ease of use. As Patrick Cleasby recently (re)discovered in his review of Naim's new CD5si CD player last month, something with just an analogue output and a space to insert a disc is a refreshingly simple user experience! No network encryption keys, Ethernet cables, reboots or server software installs – just plug it in and play! But can you think of any more reasons for CD to be cheerful? I know I can't.

Indeed, the gloom looks likely to set in even more. Early in the new year, we'll get the latest music software sales figures from the British Phonographic Institute. In 2010, they showed a slight downturn in Compact Disc sales, and then twelve months later in January 2011, CD music sales dropped by a serious 13%. The numbers for 2012 will be a lot greater still I fear. But the key moment I'd suggest will be 2014, when it wouldn't be beyond the realms of possibility for total digital (online) sales to exceed those of physical discs.

When this happens, things will never be the same again. It will be a landmark moment for the ailing eighties format, a time when the media narrative shifts and people begin to think of CD as being 'dead' (even though of course it still has a good few years of life left in it). A headline figure such as this will tip the balance from slow decline to final descent into oblivion. From sky-high sales success to obsolete, legacy format in just three decades – how the mighty fall!

From sky-high sales success to obsolete, legacy format in just three decades – how the mighty fall!

DAVID PRICE  
Hi-Fi Choice editor





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# Intranet explorer

Domestic digital devotee **Malcolm Steward** has some advice for those unwilling or unable to break out the Cat 5...

I regularly thank the Lord for my mains supply, which is superb and only seems to have one failing – it often disappears without warning. I suppose that is the price one has to pay for living where I do, in the near back of beyond. The other day my wife and I sat in our office, both merrily typing away and listening to the tones of Bill Frisell's guitar drifting mellifluously through my Neat Iotas when, without any warning, the room lights went out and the music ceased abruptly before both our computers ground to a black-screened halt.

"Oh bother!" we exclaimed [are you sure that was what you said? *Ed.*] indignantly before asking each other if we had, "seen a letter about the mains being cut off?" At this point, we realised this was not a 'scheduled outage', and that somebody somewhere had just pulled the wrong plug and plunged our corner of Hampshire back into the pre-Industrial Revolution age. Five minutes later the illumination of the office and the whirring of a host of computer fans signalled that juice was once more on the loose. (And there's a blast from the past, for any London inhabitants who followed the nineteen eighties pub-rock scene. Juice On The Loose – what a superb band that was! I wonder if they're still playing the stale ale and crisps circuit?)

Anyway, back to the important issue of my 240 Volts AC mains! Because there is no industry within miles of where I live, the supply is unpolluted and the earth plane is pretty much fixed at 0 Volts and free of noise. In fact, the only pollution I ever suffer at my house/office is crud breaking through onto the WiFi section of my computer networks from my neighbours. That is not a problem because I only use WiFi for control, to allow my iPad or iPhone to communicate with my UPnP server or with a network audio player. Music is always routed through Ethernet cables.

Cables are almost *always* a good thing. In fact, they are beyond criticism until they obstruct the safe passage of older members of the household, e.g. me. Our youngest son wanted to connect his X-box 360 Live or whatever the damn thing is called to the Internet and, having looked at the price of a Microsoft wireless adaptor, which seemed the ideal solution for getting the Internet into our TV room at the back of our house, and promptly suffering a mild cardiac incident, I went to the cable store known as my summer house. There I found a 25-metre length of Cat 5 that would comfortably conjoin the

X-box and the router in my hall. The only trouble was that that cable crossed the path of anyone leaving the office and going to the music room, going to answer the front door, or going to the kitchen for a cup of tea. Or going to the downstairs loo. As these are all activities we perform many times a day, I have to say 'hooray' for good old Gaffa tape!

I tolerated this troublesome, scruffy arrangement until I became so frustrated with it that I began to search Amazon for an alternative solution to my woes. The price of that proprietary Microsoft gadget still filled me with incandescent rage so, on the advice of a visiting friend who had also nearly gone arse over tip thanks to the cable, I looked at an Ethernet over mains 'solution'. For just £19 plus VAT I acquired a pair of 85 Mbps Devolo Homeplug adaptors from Amazon. I ordered them in a mood of "I suppose I ought to try the things," and two days after that weekend the postie rang my doorbell with the package. Literally five minutes later I had the X-Box communicating with the outside world. My son was home that day and gave his on-line gaming activities an extraordinary work-out: I sat waiting for complaints of latency – my son always converses with his friends on-line while playing – but none was heard. He was merrily chatting, fragging zombies while stealing cars and listening to gangsta soundtracks, as one does when one is fifteen and part of some ersatz LA crime syndicate.

If Ethernet over mains at a maximum rate of 85Mbps can handle demanding, bandwidth-gobbling, gaming video and audio along with concurrent telephony it seems fair to assume that straight audio – even hi-res – should fare just as well. In truth, it does. Okay, an Ethernet cable is superior but the 'over the mains' performance – in my home at least – is none too shabby in my experience. So my advice is now if you cannot run Ethernet cable, do not fanny about with WiFi, try a homeplug system... especially if your mains is free from gremlins.

if you cannot run Ethernet cable, do not fanny about with WiFi, try a homeplug Ethernet over the mains system...



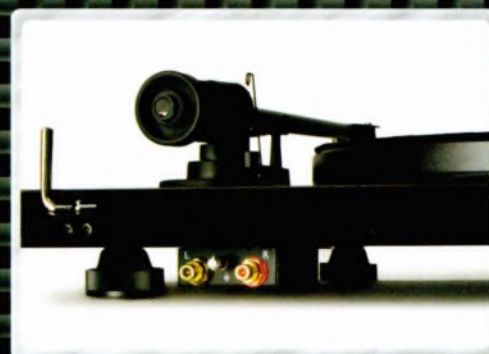
MALCOLM STEWARD  
classical music buff



# The Carbon Age



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



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# New addition

Don't let yourself get beguiled by telephone number price tags, says the very parsimonious **Tim Jarman...**

**H**i-fi, it seems, has always been a straightforward numbers game. It makes sense in a way; comparing equipment by the almost mythical and highly subjective attribute of sound quality becomes increasingly difficult when more than a few pieces of equipment are to be judged against one another, so a scheme with the logical rigour of numbers is very appealing. Quantities such as power output, harmonic distortion, speed stability and frequency response can be debated at length with ease (especially if one ignores how many different and incompatible methods the industry has for measuring all of these parameters). Over the course of an evening and a good few rounds of drinks, the model which is 'the best' can eventually be agreed upon.

The problem with using performance figures as the basis for this numerical scheme is that the manufacturers soon cotton on and develop their products to the point that the numbers become meaningless. Arguing the relative virtues of amplifiers on the basis of output power seems trite now that you can have almost any figure that you want, for example. Similarly comparing digital sources in terms of flatness of response across the audio band is an equally unsatisfactory method of picking a winner. However, there is now a much simpler parameter in widespread use, one that supposedly helps us to separate the great from the merely very good – price. More and more, it seems that the Recommended Retail Price (or whatever it is called these days) is the most important figure of merit for any piece of hi-fi gear. And oddly, bigger seems to be better. Each price point seems to have its own level of implied status and prestige, and the higher the manufacturer pushes his models up the scale, the more highly they become regarded.

The rest of the electronics industry has been remarkably effective in resisting the forces of inflation, the fact that a family-sized colour TV set has cost around £400 from 1967 (when they were first introduced) to today is an incredible achievement, but it is one that the audio sector seems to be unable to replicate. Is modern equipment more complex and sophisticated now than it used to be? I don't think so! You only need to compare a full house Technics SP-10 turntable with anything you can

buy today if you want an example – in terms of technology, materials, intricacy and finish there is no competition. The cost of a reasonable suite of separate components seems to be around £1,000 a slice these days, not so long ago this would have bought you the whole shooting match, plus a big stack of records, CDs or tapes to play on it.

One reason that hi-fi is so expensive today is that compared to twenty or thirty years ago the volume of sales is now pretty small. This leaves the manufacturer a lower number of units to spread their fixed costs over, making each unit proportionally more expensive; even a budget-priced plastic music centre would cost serious high-end money if you only planned to make five of them. The cost of a piece of equipment is therefore proportional to the materials and technology used to construct it, and inversely proportional to the expected number of sales. This process is self-reinforcing; the market for expensive equipment is naturally small and things which sell only in small numbers are expensive to produce.

It takes a bold and adventurous manufacturer to break this circle, but the history of audio has a few good examples of high performing products that were offered surprisingly cheaply and went on to sell strongly, the NAD 3020 amplifier, the Sony D-50 CD player (which was actually sold at a loss in Japan to begin with) and the QED Digit Bitstream DAC being but three fine examples...

So my advice is to try and forget about prices when considering your next new system or upgrade, it isn't a consistent method of comparing audio equipment in today's diverse market. By all means set an upper limit but don't dismiss things that fall way below this as "too cheap so it can't possibly be any good", it may just be that the model in question is produced very efficiently or sells in large enough numbers to generate some decent economies of scale. Concentrate instead on factors like real world functionality and performance, and then choose whichever model meets your needs, is the nicest to operate and that you enjoyed the most in the auditions. The most expensive isn't always the best and saving a few pounds on hardware leaves you able to buy into the most universal upgrade of all – more music to listen to.

The most expensive isn't always the best, and saving a few pounds on hardware lets you buy into the best upgrade of all – music...



**TIM JARMAN**  
electronics engineer



## Listening to Music – the Benefits

There have been many studies carried out over the years that have shown remarkable benefits for mankind through listening to music. It is an activity that is intrinsic to all cultures and is one of the few that involves using the whole brain. Listening to music is now often used for various therapeutic purposes because it is believed to improve memory and intelligence, improve physical development and coordination, reduce stress and blood pressure, and even reduce levels of pain.

However, music can also be irritating if it's too loud or distorted, or if it distracts from other activities we are involved in. Most of the studies have been carried out using a reasonably good quality of musical reproduction. Quite remarkably, many people today and probably a majority of teens and late teens, are listening to a considerably lower quality level of music than their peers back in the 1970's. Back then a basic hi-fi system, often consisting of just a turntable, amplifier and a pair of speakers, was a 'must have'. Students going off to university would make it a priority to set themselves up with a decent hi-fi system – and the quality was, in retrospect, surprisingly good.

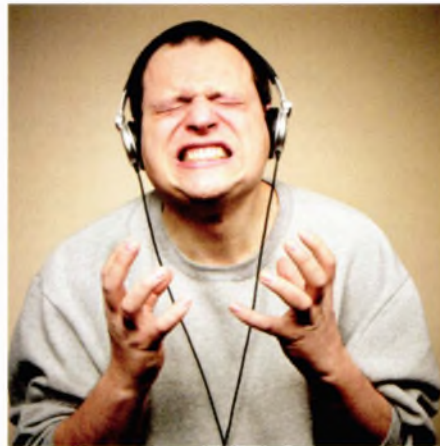


## Quality vs Quantity

How different it is today where advances in technology have driven the desire for convenience and quantity at the considerable expense of quality. For many young people especially, the iPod, MP3 player or mobile telephone, connected to a pair of in-ear headphones, is their primary source of listening to music. The problem with this is that low-grade reproduced music is not going to deliver any significant beneficial outcomes for the listener. Probably the opposite will be true.

# Style over substance?

**Have advances in technology driven the desire for convenience and quantity at the expense of quality?**



Low-grade music in this context is the result of two main factors, a) the delivery system (the hardware) and b) the source material (the 'music'). Although the amplification section of the mobile device is a technological wonder, it's not hi-fi! Nor are in-ear headphones. They can't hold a candle to the stereo-typical system from the 1970's. As far as the source material is concerned, it's being over-generous to call it music if it's a typical MP3 or AAC (the iTunes default format) download. These are both highly compressed formats with the most

popular download speed of 128 kbps being 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, for example, an iPod docking station that feeds into a decent hi-fi system, is a disaster area. It is very poor quality made louder and this even affects the type of music listened to. 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, all the complexities of the music are lost, and the recordings are reduced to just the essence of a tune.

## Future of Recorded Music

If convenience has trumped quality for many people, we must ask what the future prospects are of maintaining high quality music recordings. Fortunately audiophiles, or hi-fi connoisseurs, or perhaps most accurately described, music lovers, continue to drive the demand for quality because there are some wonderful hi-end systems available and being sold today. 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 pre-broadband and expensive memory capacity. These are not significant factors for most people now. Even iPods, if loaded with full resolution tracks, can deliver acceptable results through a good system. The trade-off is a smaller selection of stored music. 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.



## Audiophiles and Hi-Fi Connoisseurs

Hi-fi connoisseurs and audiophiles are very important to the music industry. By their nature, they 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 them, the main driver for quality would probably be removed from the music industry.



## Specialist Dealers

Specialist hi-fi retailers also come into this category because it's their interest that has driven them into their particular business. These specialist retailers also perform another very important function because, without them, hi-fi manufacturers would have to rely on the internet and hi-fi magazine reviewers to try and assess the relative merits of different brands for potential customers – 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 combinations. More than that though is their relationship with audiophiles and hi-fi connoisseurs 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 (and the ones listed on this page represent the UK's finest) are essential to each other.

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. They also appreciate how exciting and involving music can be and how it can deliver a powerful emotional experience. If there's a price premium over an internet purchase by choosing a specialist dealer, it's probably a small one, but it's unquestionably worth the difference.

Listed below is our selection of **THE BEST HI-FI DEALERS IN THE UK.**

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

## Our Top 20 UK Hi-Fi Dealers

### SOUTH

**Ashford, Kent**  
**SOUNDCRAFT HI-FI**  
 40 High Street.  
 t: 01233 624441  
[www.soundcraftthifi.com](http://www.soundcraftthifi.com)

**Chelmsford**  
**RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION**  
 216 Moulsham Street.  
 t: 01245 265245  
[www.rayleighhifi.com](http://www.rayleighhifi.com)

**E. Grinstead**  
**AUDIO DESIGNS**  
 26 High Street.  
 t: 01342 328065  
[www.audiodesigns.co.uk](http://www.audiodesigns.co.uk)

**Kingston-upon-Thames**  
**INFIDELITY**  
 9 High Street,  
 Hampton Wick.  
 t: 020 8943 3530  
[www.infidelity.co.uk](http://www.infidelity.co.uk)

**Maidenhead**  
**AUDIO VENUE**  
 36 Queen Street.  
 t: 01628 633995  
[www.audiovenue.com](http://www.audiovenue.com)

**Norwich**  
**MARTINS HI-FI**  
 85-91 Ber Street.  
 t: 01603 627134  
[www.martinshifi.co.uk](http://www.martinshifi.co.uk)

**Rayleigh**  
**RAYLEIGH HI-FI**  
 44a High Street.  
 t: 01268 779762  
[www.rayleighhifi.com](http://www.rayleighhifi.com)

**Southend-on-Sea**  
**RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION**  
 132/4 London Road.  
 t: 01702 435255  
[www.rayleighhifi.com](http://www.rayleighhifi.com)

### LONDON

**Ealing**  
**AUDIO VENUE**  
 27 Bond Street.  
 t: 020 8567 8703  
[www.audiovenue.com](http://www.audiovenue.com)

**N1**  
**GRAHAMS HI-FI**  
 190a New North Road.  
 t: 020 7226 5500  
[www.grahams.co.uk](http://www.grahams.co.uk)

**SW11**  
**ORANGES & LEMONS**  
 61/63 Webbs Road.  
 t: 020 7924 2043  
[www.oandlhifi.co.uk](http://www.oandlhifi.co.uk)

**W20**  
**O'BRIEN HI-FI**  
 60 Durham Road.  
 t: 020 8946 1528  
[www.obrienhifi.com](http://www.obrienhifi.com)

**SOUTH WEST**  
**Bath**  
**AUDIENCE**  
 14 Broad Street.  
 t: 01225 333310  
[www.audience.org.uk](http://www.audience.org.uk)

**Exeter**  
**GULLIFORD HI-FI**  
 97 Sidwell Street.  
 t: 01392 491194  
[www.gullifordhifi.co.uk](http://www.gullifordhifi.co.uk)

**MIDLANDS**  
**Banbury**  
**OVERTURE**  
 3 Church Lane.  
 t: 01295 272158  
[www.overture.co.uk](http://www.overture.co.uk)

### Birmingham

**MUSIC MATTERS**  
 363 Hagley Road,  
 Edgbaston.  
 t: 0121 429 2811  
[www.musicmatters.co.uk](http://www.musicmatters.co.uk)

**Coventry**  
**FRANK HARVEY**  
 163 Spon Street.  
 t: 024 7652 5200  
[www.frankharvey.co.uk](http://www.frankharvey.co.uk)

**Leicester**  
**CYMBIOSIS**  
 6 Hotel Street.  
 t: 0116 262 3754  
[www.cymbiosis.com](http://www.cymbiosis.com)

**Nottingham**  
**CASTLE SOUND & VISION**  
 48/50 Maid Marian Way.  
 t: 0115 9584404  
[www.castlesoundvision.com](http://www.castlesoundvision.com)

**NORTH**  
**Cheadle**  
**THE AUDIO WORKS**  
 14 Stockport Road.  
 t: 0161 428 7887  
[www.theaudioworks.co.uk](http://www.theaudioworks.co.uk)

**Chester**  
**ACOUSTICA**  
 17 Hoole Road.  
 t: 01244 344227  
[www.acoustica.co.uk](http://www.acoustica.co.uk)

**Hull**  
**THE AUDIO ROOM**  
 Savile Street, Hull  
 t: 01482 891375  
[www.theaudiroom.co.uk](http://www.theaudiroom.co.uk)

**York**  
**SOUND ORGANISATION**  
 2 Gillygate.  
 t: 01904 627108  
[www.soundorg.co.uk](http://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.



## STAR QUALITIES

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

# Modern art

Of all hi-fi's grand designs, there are few that can compare to Lecson's AC1/AP1 pre-power amplifier combo, says *Tim Jarman...*

**I** can think of few hi-fi styling exercises that better deserve the description of 'timeless' than the Lecson AC1 and AP1 preamplifier and power amplifier combination. In pictures, the decade from which these designs originate is difficult to discern, and even with the units available to examine directly the task does not become especially straightforward. Styled by Alan Boothroyd (who would later go on to design the casework for Acorn's BBC Microcomputer, and then style Meridian hi-fi) and designed by Bob Stuart (also latterly of Meridian), the AC1 and AP1 went on sale late in 1974, a time at which almost all hi-fi was large, clumsy and unattractive.

The AC1 preamplifier really is a styling masterpiece, contrasting black pinstriped acrylic with colour-coded sliding controls to make a strikingly original look. Some of the themes are similar to those employed in B&O's Beomaster 6000 4channel which appeared at around the same time, but otherwise there was nothing else quite like it, making it a well deserved recipient of a British Design Council award in 1974. You can see elements of the Lecson design in the appearance of Meridian products well into the nineteen nineties, in particular the lined black surfaces and the intelligent, restrained use of colour.

Making the power amplifier a separate unit of course allowed the preamplifier to be made especially compact – it is just over 360mm wide, 265mm deep and a mere 40mm high. Rather than just producing a second, larger box to house the power stages, Lecson instead used a vertical finned aluminium tower

with all the connections concealed at the bottom. While the AC1 remained unaltered throughout the production run, various power amplifiers were offered over the years, including the original AP1 (35 watts) and AP2 (70 watts) and latterly the AP1X (70 watts) and the AP3 (100 watts). Even though they were intended to be used together both the pre and power amplifiers could be used with

other manufacturer's equipment (with special cables and adaptors) since both included their own built-in power supply sections. When assembled together as a system the chosen power amplifier was fed via a switched mains outlet at the rear of the AC1, so both came on together when the AC1 was turned on, allowing the power amplifier to be hidden away if desired.

To produce such an original piece of work was always going to be a difficult task for a small company. Both units presented packaging problems and the task of getting the



**Boothroyd-Stuart: the early years! One of the most striking looking hi-fi amplifiers ever, is it not?**

sliding action of the AC1's controls to operate the circuits inside was far from straightforward. A large Japanese company could have simply commissioned appropriate slide switches to be made but this would not have been a practical proposition for Lecson, so instead sliding magnets which operated reed switches beneath were employed. To allow this simple arrangement to operate the many circuits which a stereo preamplifier naturally contains, switching FETs (field effect transistors) were employed in the signal path, at a time when electronic signal routing was at its infancy in consumer products. Clever as it was, these two design elements created considerable production problems and made the AC1 both difficult and time consuming to manufacture.

The power amplifiers had their problems too, and both the AP1 and the AP2 soon earned a reputation for unreliability (although the AP1X and AP3 largely addressed these problems later on). The result was inevitable; Lecson went bust *just* as the AC1 and AP1 went on sale and although the company was revived soon afterwards and eventually sold the system in reasonable numbers the production, reliability and financial problems never really went away. A matching tuner was offered in 1976 (a previous model which was pictured in the owner's manual of earlier examples of the system was never produced), but the compact dimensions of the casework lead to technical problems and limited performance. As the nineteen seventies drew to a close time was finally called on the brave design, which even by then still looked striking and modern.

Looking beneath the glitz and glamour what does one find? Electronic signal routing aside, the AC1 is a fairly conventional transistorised preamplifier of the period, although there are a few novel features. As an example, all the source selection takes place before any amplification or buffering, so all inputs bar the tape loop (called AUX2) when used in 'monitor' mode have to pass through the phono stage. This is achieved by reducing the gain of the stage to around unity and removing the RIAA characteristic when the tuner or cassette inputs are selected, but this arrangement still poses technical problems and when working with a MM-type cartridge poor overload performance was also

noted. Comprehensive filters and a mono switch were included, but this whole block of circuitry could be bypassed by selecting the 'cancel' option on the rumble filter switch, a function similar to the 'source direct' function on a modern amplifier.

Provisions were also made for Quadraphonic listening with switch positions on the mode selector for four-channel and four speaker stereo operation, although to use these functions it was necessary to connect an external adaptor which seems to have not been produced. The AC1 could not have coped with discrete four channel recordings such as were found on CD4 records and Quadraphonic 8-Track tapes either, limiting its usefulness – only matrix (SQ) and synthesized 'ambiophonic' operation would have been possible. Connections were also provided for a wired remote volume control

A desirable  
asset for those  
with enhanced  
aesthetic senses!

and source/monitor switch, but again no suitable equipment seems to have been offered to implement these functions.

To pack everything in, the AC1 required a double-sided printed circuit board, which in early examples proved to be a source of unreliability due to the rivets used to interconnect the two sides. The AP1 power amplifier is also conventional in its electronic design; it is a DC-coupled design using bipolar transistors. Two pairs of loudspeakers can be connected and there is a concealed switch as the bottom to select which pair is in use, but only thin cables can be used as there is little room around the connection panel.

### Sound quality

Given the poor overload performance of the AC1 it's wise to use attenuators in the interconnect cables if a modern source like a CD player is used, suitable values are given in the original owner's manual. In view of the fragility of the AP1, loudspeakers which represent an easy load are also strongly recommended – bombproof the Lecson isn't. DIN cable adaptors for the inputs are necessary, along with short pigtailed of thinner wire for the

loudspeaker cables that will fit into the bottom of the AP1. The AC1/AP1 combo gives a reasonably strong and confident performance with dry, well defined bass – as one would expect from a DC-coupled design.

At moderate listening levels everything hangs together well, with notable freedom from rough edges or harshness. Imaging performance is fair with a good broad spread, although the detail within this seems a little on the diffuse side to my ear. The sound gives the impression of being reasonably uncoloured, but despite being an essentially competent performer the Lecsons do seem to suffer from a tonal greyness about the midband and a lack of sparkle in the treble, a trait which took the sheen and drama away from Sade's album *Diamond Life*.

Not all music was affected by this characteristic though, the recent Kate Bush album *Director's Cut* was a very pleasant experience, being presented as smooth and well scaled with plenty of subtle sonic details to explore. Both the AC1 and the AP1 proved good companions as I wound my way through the new lyrics of *Flower Cf The Mountain*, in some ways it could show a few modern solid-state designs a thing or two about how to make music enjoyable. A few operational quirks were noted during the listening tests, such as some crosstalk between the various inputs and a few odd habits of the signal routing circuits when the power is switched off. It proved wise to reduce the volume to zero and stop the external sources before closing down the AC1; these traits suggest that there was still some development work on the circuitry which had remained uncompleted!

### Conclusion

Many Lecson owners will surely have bought primarily for the looks. Indeed simpler and cheaper units of the period exceed the performance of the AC1 and AP1, with none of the potential heartaches. Yet the Lecsons remain a desirable asset for those with enhanced aesthetic sensibilities. I've seen AC1 units priced from £100 upwards with the various power amplifiers costing perhaps a little more, but you'd be lucky to completely avoid at least a few technical issues at any price level. Running these will require some commitment then, even if they are a sight for sore eyes! ●



# Watts going on

Two of the biggest names in the business combine to produce an awesomely powerful system. **Ed Selley** is blown off his feet...

**S**ome of our recent *Beautiful Systems* have been rather *bijou*. All-in-one systems and half-width electronics have been partnered with rather lovely standmount speakers to make elegant and highly desirable set-ups indeed. Every now and again however, there's a certain pleasure in thinking a little bit bigger...

How much bigger? I'll talk about the components that make up this system in due course, but the most arresting headline about the equipment you see here is that it develops 700 watts into eight ohms. Seven *hundred* watts! Take a moment to let that figure sink in. Anything I receive for review with more than 100 watts will generally be described as powerful, 200 watts is pretty

serious and 300 will inevitably be on the receiving end of a weapon analogy or two. This system has more than double that, so has *Beautiful Systems* gone nuclear?

## Jaw-dropping

As the maker of the M8700M power amps that feature this jaw-dropping power output, Musical Fidelity would argue that there is





**COMPONENTS**



**1 MUSICAL FIDELITY M8700M AND M1HPA** £7,998/£499

Combining the most powerful amps in the M Series with the simplest preamps might seem like a curious decision, but in practice the result is a very capable one. As well as offering great performance as a headphone amp, the M1HPA is a high-quality single input preamp and allows full control over the mighty M8700M monoblocks.



**2 MUSICAL FIDELITY M6DAC AND MICDT** £2,000/£600

The M6DAC features twin 24-bit/192kHz Burr-Brown DACs and, as well as a comprehensive fitment of conventional digital inputs, is fully compatible with Bluetooth, meaning you can stream files directly from your phone and laptop. It is a happy partner for another member of the M1 series the M1CDT, a dedicated CD transport.



**3 BOWERS & WILKINS 802D** £11,995

Second largest member of the 800 series, the 802D shares the same separate plinth and construction style as the flagship 800. With a diamond tweeter, massive inert cabinet and prodigious power handling ability, the 802D is the perfect recipient of 700 watts of Musical Fidelity amplification.



Michaelson is keen to demonstrate that the M Series is designed to work together as a whole, so here the M8s are combined with a product from the other end of the M series – the M1HPA. This is a headphone amplifier, but with an RCA line input and matching pre-out, it is also an extremely high quality single input preamplifier. With a large volume knob as the only major control on the front, the HPA is simplicity itself.

With only one input, you might think that the HPA might be a little limiting as a preamp, but this will depend on what you choose to connect to it. If you elect for the brand new Musical Fidelity M6DAC, you can attach six digital sources which then feed as a single output to the HPA. This 24-bit/192kHz-capable design apes the M8700M's in that each channel is a separate mono arrangement with its own DAC and power supply. While not as visually imposing as the power amps, this is still a serious kit.

It is not, however, a piece of hairshirt minimalism. Nestling alongside the normal inputs is a Bluetooth module. While it can't match the 192kHz-capable wizardry of the rest of the connections, it will allow the system to replay music from a Bluetooth device in the same room after a quick pairing. The simple expedient of being able to quickly and easily stream something to your system is much underrated and gives this system a spot of real world connectivity.

nothing remotely over the top about its latest offering. The thinking goes that having sufficient power on demand to meet any dynamic peak is absolutely vital in accurately recreating a musical performance. The M8700M is simply the latest evolution of this thinking. Designed to offer a goodly chunk of the performance of the flagship Titan at less than half of the price and a smaller form factor (although I would hesitate about banding around the word 'compact' when referring to two hefty monoblocks at 30kg apiece), the '700M is effectively a method of driving any speaker to any volume level that it is capable of generating.

There is an equally mighty M8 preamplifier in the range, but Musical Fidelity supremo Antony



**ABOVE:** Musical Fidelity's M1CDT CD player (left) and M1HPA preamplifier

**LEFT:** Bowers & Wilkins' exceptional sounding 802Ds

**BELOW:** The brand new Musical Fidelity M6DAC digital converter

Bluetooth isn't the only source for this particular system though. Once again the levels of the M Series are combined and the DAC is joined by the M1CDT. This dedicated CD transport might seem slightly anachronistic in a world of streaming and computer audio, but having spent some time in the company of one last year, it still makes a great deal of sense for anyone easing themselves into the future a little more gradually.

### Perfect partner

So how might you go about partnering this combination of ferocious power, clever technology and real world user friendliness? In Bowers & Wilkins' 802D conveniently





enough, there exists a speaker that embodies almost exactly the same set of values. The 800 Series has undergone a gradual, but thorough evolution since it was launched over a decade ago and while this present generation might look superficially similar to the original one, very little remains the same. One aspect that hasn't changed though is that the 800s thrive on power.

Since the demise of the slightly bonkers, but loveable 801, the 802D is the second largest model in the 800 range and features a pair of eight inch Rohacell bass drivers, the trademark six inch woven Kevlar mid, while the whole ensemble is topped off with the Bower & Wilkins diamond tweeter – a device sufficiently complex that my head starts to hurt every time I try and read the white paper. All this is then wrapped in a devilishly sophisticated cocktail of materials to form the cabinet and wrapped in a gorgeous (cherry in this case) wood veneer.

As this system collectively weighs as much as a small car, I went to visit it, rather than the other way around. The attractive surroundings of AudioVenue in Ealing served as my listening room for the day and even if I'm not as familiar with their listening area as I am my own, I think the extra space gave this system a better chance to strut its stuff, so many thanks to Saj Afzal and his team for the use of the room.

### Palpable feeling

So what does a system with such a gargantuan power output sound like in practice? Firstly, dispel any notions that you might have that this is a PA system in a sharp suit. This system is capable of exceptional

insight and delicacy when required, but this is underpinned with an ability to reproduce dynamics in a way that virtually nothing else even remotely domesticated can. Even when it is playing at the sort of volumes where bass is a palpable feeling exerted on your internal organs it still feels absolutely and utterly effortless.

A frequent benchmark of a system is its ability to reproduce a full-sized orchestra. This system feels like it could reproduce a stadium full of orchestras and still have something left in reserve. As the closest thing I had to a stadium full of orchestras is the music from the London Olympics opening ceremony, I spent a little time with that. The weight and impact to the drumming in *And I Will Kiss* is simply staggering. Once you recover from how visceral it is, you realise that this is unquestionably still hi-fi. The detail is superb and the placement of performers pin-sharp. The speed that everything starts and stops is about as good as it gets and the manner in which huge waves of sound rise from absolute silence is incredibly compelling.

Calming things down and moving on to the wonderful melting pot of Dead Can Dance's *Spiritchaser*, the effect the system has on *Song of the Stars* is equally impressive. This is a far smaller and less ferocious piece than before and there is not a trace of the bombast that there was. Instead, the performance is opened into a beautifully vivid and entirely believable soundstage. The tonality is rich and vivid without crossing into being overblown. Switch to the paired back minimalism of Seasick Steve's *Walking Man* and all that remains is this tonality, soundstage



**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
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Musical Fidelity  
Audio Venue

**TELEPHONE:**  
0800 232 1513  
020 8900 2866  
020 8567 8703

**WEBSITE:**  
bowers-wilkins.co.uk  
musicalfidelity.com  
audiovenue.com

and detail. Every trace of the huge output required to make larger pieces work correctly fades from the performance. In a way, this is an even more disarming ability than the ability to work at a virtually unlimited volume – it just seems so counterintuitive that something so large and powerful can be so discreet when required.

Trying to analyse what is doing what is largely pointless, but there is a sense that the M6DAC is responsible for more of this system's behaviour than you might at first credit. The effortless sense of space, careful placement of performers and unflinching natural tonality seem to get their start in life from the DAC's very assured presentation. That the interface between the DAC and those mighty amplifiers is a £600 headphone amplifier never seems even remotely incongruous once you start listening to it.

The 802Ds are extraordinary in this context as well. They never show any signs of losing their composure, even when the room is being moved to its foundations and their exceptional separation and top-end detail makes for a spellbinding listen.

The result is a system remarkably free of vice or defects and with a party trick that never fails to astonish. You can listen to this ensemble for hours with a 'normal' piece of music from any location – including your mobile phone if you are so minded – and it is simply an incredibly well sorted piece of high-end audio. Then, every once in a while, when you have a recording that needs a little bit more scale to work correctly, this system can deliver in a way that so few others do. Absolute power undoubtedly corrupts, but it sure is fun! ●

# Winter warmers

“It’s Chrisst-mas!” **Simon Berkovitch** offers up some cool music old and new that’s still as festive as a crafty post port-and-cheeseboard nap in front of the telly, while waiting for the boozed-up family arguments to kick off...

**Y**our festive soundtrack doesn’t have to be a predictable mixture of tinselly Glam, sentimental tat from ex-Beatles or the million versions of that bloody Band Aid record...

## 1963 and 1972: A Christmas Gift For You

*A Christmas Gift For You* is the ultimate Phil Spector ‘Wall of Sound’ record; that unmistakable, colossal-sounding production – as heard on classic Sixties gems such as The Ronettes’ *Be My Baby* and Ike and Tina Turner’s *River Deep, Mountain High* – with sleigh bells on.

Ironically, for an album whose grooves are overflowing with seasonal joy, *A Christmas Gift For You* from *Philles Records* (the LP’s



## Only the hardest of hearts can’t be melted by The Ronettes’ glorious interpretations of *Frosty The Snowman* and *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*...

original title) was released on the same day that the United States went into collective shock – the day of President JFK’s assassination. Only the hardest of hearts can’t be melted by The Ronettes’ glorious interpretations of *Frosty The Snowman* and *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus* and The Crystals’ spirited renditions of *Santa Claus Is Coming To Town* and *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

The spectacular vocals on these none-more-Christmassy cuts are cherries on the top of superb performances teased from an army of killer session musicians – The Wrecking Crew – that included arranger Jack Nitzsche (future mastermind of the soundtracks to *Performance* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*) and drummer Hal Blaine (percussion genius on The

Beach Boys’ revered *Pet Sounds* LP) in its ranks. Spector was aiming for something timeless with his dense, revolutionary production sound, describing the Wall of Sound as “a Wagnerian approach to rock ‘n’ roll... little symphonies for the kids,” elevating the humble pop 45 to a miniature artwork.

It certainly achieves its aim here. The whole cast – including Darlene Love and Bob B. Soxx & The Blue Jeans and Spector himself come together to close the record with an epic, emotional reading of *Silent Night*. And the end result is possibly the only Christmas album that is timeless enough for you to play on the beach in the height of summer – appropriately, this is The Beach Boys’ resident genius songwriter Brian Wilson’s favourite-ever album.



# Know It's Christmas?



Not everybody's glass of mulled wine, but Band Aid's *Do They Know It's Christmas?* sold an amazing 3.69 million copies! Its Peter Blake cover sleeve has now become iconic...



## ❑ XMAS WITH SIMON

Alternative? Definitely. Obscure? Not wilfully. Here's your humble scribe's festive fifteen...

- The Sonics *Don't Believe in Christmas*
- Big Star *Jesus Christ*
- Earl Brutus *Single Seater Xmas*
- Elvis Presley *Santa Claus is Back in Town*
- The Beatles *Christmas Time Is Here Again*
- St Etienne *I Was Born on Xmas Day*
- Findlay Brown *Last Christmas*
- The Pogues *Fairytale of New York*
- Gruff Rhys *Slashed Wrists This Christmas*
- Osmiroid *Christmas Eve Eve Skinful*
- Family *Winter*
- Foreigner *Cold as Ice*
- Arcade Fire *Jingle Bell Rock*
- The Wailers *She's Coming Home*
- The Fall *Xmas With Simon*



## ❑ TOP OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE

A dozen UK number one Christmas singles, crackers and turkeys. And so much Band Aid you're going to feel completely plastered...

- Dickie Valentine *Christmas Alphabet* (1955)
- Harry Belafonte *Mary's Boy Child* (1957)
- Slade *Merry Xmas Everybody* (1973)
- Mud *Lonely This Christmas* (1974)
- Johnny Mathis *When A Child Is Born (Soleado)* (1976)
- Boney M *Mary's Boy Child/Oh My Lord* (1978)
- Band Aid *Do They Know It's Christmas?* (1984)
- Shakin' Stevens *Merry Christmas Everyone* (1985)
- Cliff Richard *Mistletoe and Wine* (1988)
- Band Aid II *Do They Know It's Christmas?* (1989)
- Cliff Richard *Saviour's Day* (1990)
- Band Aid 20 *Do They Know It's Christmas?* (2004)

# THE YEAR IN MUSIC: CHRISTMAS SPECIAL



Xmas goes post-punk with ZE Records' long-lost 1981 long player *A Christmas Record*...

The album enjoyed a new lease of life when re-released by Apple Records in 1972 as *A Christmas Gift For You From Phil Spector*, The Beatles connection having been made when Spector undertook production duties for the group's 1970 swansong album *Let It Be*. The cover shows Spector dressed as Santa, sporting a cool red 'Back to Mono' badge; a nod to simpler times from the chaos of the Seventies?

The march of time cannot dim the brilliance of the songs that make up *A Christmas Gift For You*. But, what about its creator? Found guilty of murder in 2009 and potentially facing a life stretch, unfortunately one can't help but think that a festive present from Phil Spector would now be about as welcome under the tree as a *Jim'll Fix It* badge!

## 1981: A Christmas Record

Lesser known, but by no means less festive, ZE Records' 1981 long-player *A Christmas Record* proved that even Post-punk No Wavers like to deck the (dance) halls and throw a tinsel-heavy party.

The ZE label was home to an eclectic roster of Punk Funk, No Wave and Art Rock, so to hear artists like Nona Hendryx, Cristina, The

...and if you can't find the original ZE Records vinyl outing, there's always this silver disc reissue!



Waitresses and Was (Not Was) getting into the Christmas spirit was as unexpected as it was cool. Partially recorded in hipsterville Brooklyn, *A Christmas Record* was all-original material from artists as diverse as the danceable – but no less arty – Material, contributing the bouncy *It's A Holiday*, and intense synth punks Suicide, adding the bleak mid-winter *Hey Lord* to the mix. This art experiment of an album even paid off commercially: The Waitresses' *Christmas Wrapping* made the UK singles charts in 1982 and still graces some of the less cheesy Christmas compilations.

Says label co-founder Michel Esteban in his LP liner notes, "I found it hard to imagine John Cale and Lou Reed sitting around a Christmas tree exchanging gifts with Nico

## For other-wordly strangeness, nothing compares to David Bowie's encounter with king of croon Bing Crosby

and tucking into a turkey dinner." Us too. Originally released on white vinyl (naturally) in the UK, *A Christmas Record* was revised in 1982 as a Special Edition and made the digital leap in 2004 with the release of *ZE Xmas Record Reloaded 2004*. But the original's the one to ask Santa for...

### 1977/1982:

## Peace on Earth/Little Drummer Boy

Forget Ziggy, Aladdin Sane and The Man Who Fell To Earth. For sheer other-worldly strangeness, nothing compares to David Bowie's Yuletide encounter with all-American king of croon Bing Crosby.

Filmed for Crosby's 1977 US TV special *Bing Crosby's Merrie Olde Christmas*, the former Laughing Gnome rocks up chez Bing as if it's the most normal thing in the world, looking his most soberly attired of the decade (although he still looks totally alien in the context of Bing's cardigan-friendly world). After a bit of weird small talk, the unlikely pair launch into a version of festive staple *Little Drummer Boy* – a version that suddenly becomes strangely moving when the counterpoint – *Peace on Earth*, specially written for this duet – kicks in. But don't just take our word for it; check this odd but oddly satisfying version out on YouTube.

*Peace on Earth/Little Drummer Boy* was recorded before the broadcast, but officially seeped out into the straight world in 1982 after a bootleg did the rounds that also included a version of the art rock classic *Heroes*, also included in the *Olde Christmas Special*. Bing's not on that one, sadly. Weirdly, the single did extremely well in the charts, selling by the bucketload, despite it being stylistically totally at odds with Bowie's output at the time, which was still pushing the boundaries of art-rock. The Thin White Duke's festive duet was one of the best selling records of its type, yet one of the least expected.



(above) Dave and Bing did a corker of a Christmas song in 1977; (below) the Beatles Xmas flexis are legendary

## 1970: From Then To You

Between 1963 and 1969, The Beatles' fans received a special festive treat from their most topped idols. Seven exclusive 7" flexidiscs were sent out to all official fans, one a year, until the band's eventual break up. Often jokey affairs with plenty of sketches and chatter from the lads, the 1967 offering – *Christmas Time is Here Again!* – is pick of the Christmas pops.

Nestled in a suitably psychedelic sleeve designed by Ringo, John and his son Julian, the 7" flexidisc is an eccentric radio programme fleshed out by quirky songs and madcap quiz shows, the title tune weaving its way between the various sections: think sharing an eggnog with Spike Milligan and Viv Stanshall. A longer version of the flexi's main song, *Christmas Time (Is Here Again)* escaped from the archives in 1995 and was included on *The Beatles Anthology*.

The seven flexis were collected together for an album in 1970 – again, Beatles fan club only – but have never appeared officially in any form since, ending up as prized booty by diehard Beatlemaniacs. The compilation album itself is as rare as an argument-free Boxing Day. You won't find them on iTunes either, but you may be able to find them elsewhere on the Internet... seek and ye shall find! Have yourself a Fab little Christmas! ●



# Shanling CD-T2000

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FEATURES



OVERALL



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

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

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

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

**Jimmy Hughes - Hi Fi Choice, October 2011**

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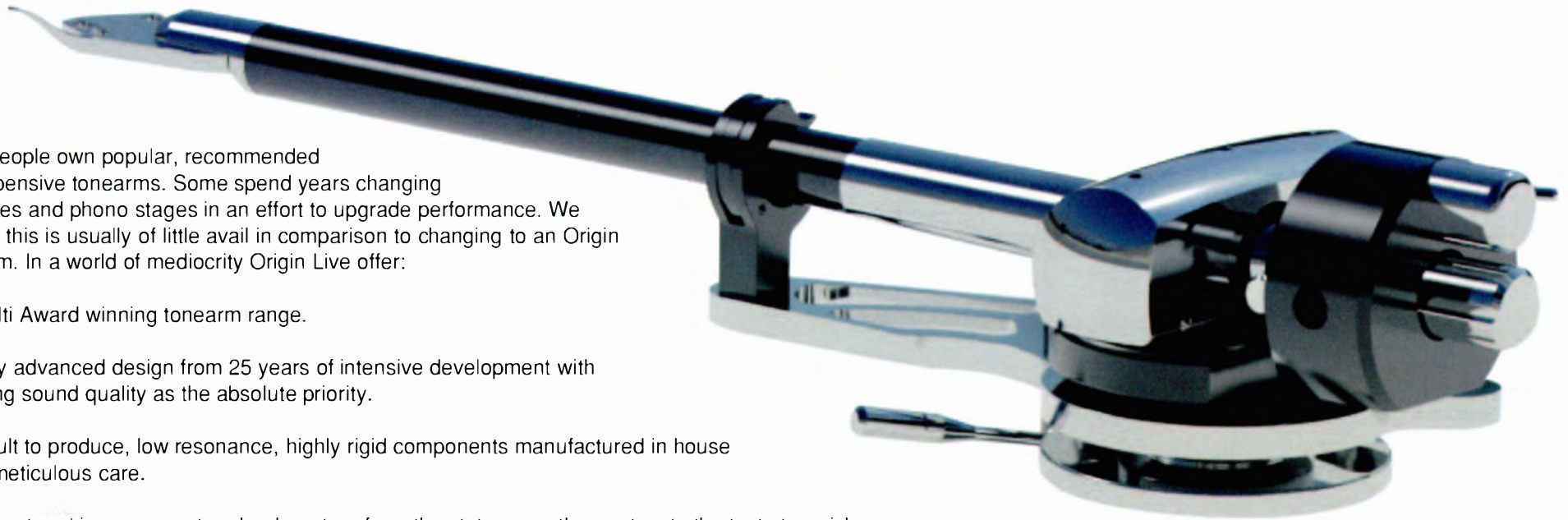
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**96 The Jam**  
The Gift



**97 Rachmaninov**  
Symphony No 2



**97 Peter Gabriel**  
Live in Athens 1987

# Music reviews

The latest music releases...

## ALBUM OF THE MONTH



### Joni Mitchell

The Studio Albums 1968-1979

rhino.co.uk

★★★★★

Warners/Rhino

10 CD box set

**WITH CURRENT HIGH-FLYING SONGBIRDS** such as KT Tunstall, Laura Marling and Joanna Newsom citing her as a seminal influence, Joni Mitchell's seminal sway on contemporary female songwriting is as strong today as it ever was. Like Bob Dylan, she has become the benchmark by which all who have followed in her wake are judged.

Read the reviews of any aspiring new female singer-songwriter in the rock press, and you will not get more than a sentence or two before Mitchell's name is tossed into the debate. You simply cannot write about female songwriting without reference to Mitchell's extraordinarily consistent and classy body of work, which defined, refined and redefined the genre several times over.

This welcome collection doesn't clutter her legacy with the customary rag-bag of demos, outtakes and other sundry bits of fluff which the reissues market has now decreed to be obligatory. Mitchell's art needs no such padding and this collection is exactly what it says it is – her first ten studio albums recorded over a twelve-year period, presented as we first heard them in neat wallets with the original artwork in an ergonomically-friendly slim-line box.

As such, it's an essential artefact in any house of culture, as indispensable as the complete works of Shakespeare, a set of Jane Austen and the collected oeuvres of Dylan and the Beatles. If you don't already own the albums, or your old vinyl copies are too scuffed and warped to play,

This collection doesn't clutter her legacy with the rag-bag of demos and sundry bits of fluff

then you owe it to yourself to order this special set now.

Consistency of quality may characterise Mitchell's work, but at the same time she never stood still and the artistic growth and musical development across the 105 tracks on these ten albums is breathtaking. Her early efforts such as *Song To A Seagull* (1968) and *Clouds* (1969) showcase a voice of fragile purity accompanied by acoustic guitar, often with strange tunings, which give her songs an ethereal quality. *Ladies Of The Canyon* (1970) and *Blue* (1971) are musically more developed with splashes of piano, but still in the introspective and confessional template which she invented – and which, incidentally, differentiate her

from Dylan, who of course hardly ever sung about himself.

For *The Roses* (1972) is more expansive, both musically and lyrically – *Judgement Of The Moon And Stars*, for example, was inspired by the story of Beethoven's deafness. *Court And Spark* (1974) is a step change, chic, cosmopolitan and sassy, with a full band sound and a jazz-rock ambience. But her experimentation had only just started. *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* (1975), *Hejira* (1976) and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (1977) constitute a visionary trilogy which took her jazz fusions to another level, her sinuous voice floating over some startlingly innovative rhythms and textures, her lyrics dense and full of wry and acidic social commentary.

The box ends with *Mingus* (1979), an inventive collaboration with jazz bassist Charles Mingus that explored further new territory. Mitchell's artistry remains bold and undimmed. Songwriting genius in every sense. **NW**

**Joni Mitchell:**  
"an extraordinarily consistent and classy body of work"...



HOT PICK



## The Jam

The Gift

polydor.co.uk

★★★★★

UMC/Polydor

4 CDs

### THE JAM'S FAREWELL

1982 album is probably one of the least loved in Paul Weller's catalogue – but listening to *The Gift* again thirty years on, it becomes clear that any ranking at the time must have been coloured by the animosity generated over the band's break-up. Led by the chart-topping single *Town Called Malice*, the 11 tracks on the original release constitute an immaculate set of songs, evidenced by the fact that Weller still plays half of them on stage to this day.

For once, the expanded four-disc approach genuinely adds value and much of the additional material signposts the more soulful direction Weller would take with the Style Council. The ten additional singles and B-sides could have made a fine album in their own right, while the live disc from the Jam's final tour is a riot, the DVD is excellent and the disc of demos offer real insight into Weller's *modus operandi*. **NW**



## Jethro Tull

Thick As A Brick

emimusic.com

★★★★★

EMI

2 CD expanded edition

### TULL'S IAN ANDERSON

didn't think much of the pretentious concept albums that dominated the rock scene in the early 1970s – so when the group released its fifth album in '72, he included one insanely long 44 minute track, purported to be based on an epic poem by an eight-year-old boy named Gerald Bostock.

Despite the preposterous send-up, TAAB paradoxically includes some of the most potent music of the band's career, the long title track breaking down into digestible chunks that range dynamically from acoustic guitar/flute folkiness to crunching rock heft, prog curlicues, classical allusions and a tinge of jazz fusion. Apart from the original, this reissue offers three additional mixes, although it's hard to discern any major differences. **NW**



## Eric Clapton

Slowhand

polydor.co.uk

★★★★★

UMC/Polydor

4 CD deluxe box set

### AFTER THE TEMPESTUOUS

1960s with Cream and Blind Faith, Clapton spent the 1970s trying to escape his past. He sought anonymity playing with Delaney & Bonnie and then hid in Derek and the Dominos before re-emerging to make a string of mellow solo albums. Ranging over a roots-based melange of blues, jazz, rock, reggae and country, the finest of these was 1977's *Slowhand*.

Further covers of songs by John Martyn and Don Williams mingle with a handful of Clapton originals and this deluxe package is augmented by four out-takes and a 14 track live recording from Hammersmith Odeon in 1977, including old favourites such as *Badge* and *Layla*, the raw blues power of which will thrill those who find the mellowed-out studio Clapton a little tame for their tastes. **NW**



## Chopin

The Preludes Op 28  
Nocturnes; Mazurkas;  
Scherzo.

Maurizio Pollini (piano)

deutsche Grammophon.com

★★★★★ Deutsch Grammophon

8 CDs

**ALAS, POLLINI** is competing against his younger self in this work; the legendary recording he made for DG back in 1975, probably the finest performance of the Preludes ever committed to disc. The new version has its moments, but frankly it lacks the panache and idiomatic rightness of his earlier account.

Technically, the modern recording is superior, delivering a more immediate piano sound. But there's a touch of 'clang' at times. The older recording reproduces more cleanly and comfortably. No wonder - Pollini's dexterity and control was incomparable at that point in his life, delivering the lyrics with power and nuance aplenty. **JMH**

## AUDIOPHILE VINYL

**Al Green** Explores Your Mind purepleasure.com



★★★★★

Hi Records/PP

180g vinyl

**AL GREEN EXPLORES YOUR MIND** was the soul singer's eighth album and spawned the hit *Sha-La-La (Make Me Happy)*, but the real gem was *Take Me To The*

*River*. This was not a hit until Talking Heads covered it four years later in 1978, they did a pretty good job but the original is in another league. When you have a voice with this much soul accompanied by the Memphis horns, the Hi Records house band and Willie Mitchell at the controls, a good song is raised to another level.

By the standards of 1974, this is a pretty slick record and with the more romantic tunes it can become almost too smooth. Still, there's no escaping the sense

of electrical charge that it delivers. There's an understatement to Green's delivery that suggests tremendous power that's just aching to let loose. This gives his music an edge that few soul singers have managed to approach, and makes *Explores Your Mind* essential listening.

This pressing is very clean and effortless, so you can turn it up and bathe in the glorious tone of the Hammond organ and brass section beneath that silken voice. **JK**



**Rachmaninov**  
Symphony No 2  
Philharmonia Orchestra  
Yevgeny Svetlanov

icartists.co.uk

★★★★★

ICA

CD

**THIS IS A LIVE PERFORMANCE**

from London's Royal Festival Hall, recorded back in 1993 by the BBC, and it catches Svetlanov at his most inspired and persuasive. The featured performance is very cohesive, as though cut from a single piece of cloth. Svetlanov's tempi are quite slow (the performance lasts just over 63 minutes), but he keeps things moving while bringing out lots of hidden detail...

The recording is a touch bright and forward, but not too dry considering it's the RFH. The brass are well caught, though sometimes, the strings seem a tad backward. But, clarity is good and overall the balance is fine. The disc ends with a surprisingly rough and ready account of Bernstein's *Candide* overture. **JMH**



**Beth Orton**  
Sugaring Time

anti.com

★★★★★

Anti Records

CD

**IT'S BEEN SIX YEARS** since the rave generation's 'comedown queen' chilled her last, but in the meantime Ms Orton's hit her forties, had a baby, and beefed up her guitar chops with lessons from the late Bert Jansch, no less. The sequencers and synths have gone, replaced by an altogether more stripped down yet homely vibe, with some very nice guitar pickery, harmonium and real strings. The wistful, quietly insistent tone of her voice remains, though perhaps it's a bit less mannered more, with a bit more emotion showing through.

It's a beautifully crafted record and star turns include backing vocals from Laura Viers and guitar from regular Tom Waits shotgun Marc Ribot on a collection of modern folk songs that never forget that catchy melodies need a little groove to make them swing. **DO**



**Bjork**  
Bastards

onelittleindian.co.uk

★★★★★

One Little Indian

CD

**AS IF THE LATEST ALBUM**

from Iceland's biggest export (second only to volcanic ash) wasn't *outré* enough, Miss Gudmundsdottir has released an album of remixes by such not-so-easy listening stalwarts as Matthew Herbert and Death Grips. This is no empty navel-gazing exercise though, but offers fresh perspectives on music that is sometimes beautiful, but always interesting.

*Crystalline* gets an Arabic makeover from Syrian hipster Omar Souleyman, while Glasgow DJ Hudson Mohawke pulls the delicate tinklings of *Virus* to pieces, only to reassemble them as a cascading electronic anthem. Elsewhere, *Moon* acquires a new dance rhythm from the Slips and *Dark Matter* gets even spookier after treatment from sound artist Alva Noto. **DO**

## HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

**Peter Gabriel**  
Live in Athens 1987

bowers-wilkins.co.uk

★★★★★

B&W Society of Sound

24-bit/48kHz



**PETER GABRIEL** never seemed able to shake off the nonsense of progressive rock until the 1986 release

of his 'pop' album, *So*. That album, which Gabriel was touring in 1987, is what's celebrated here. The recording was extracted from the 25-year-old analogue multitrack tapes of the Athens concert, which were time-code synchronised to the cameras filming the gigs: this proved extremely useful when the tapes were transferred to 48kHz digital two-track stereo.

This vibrantly detailed recording reveals Gabriel and his team to be true craftsmen, and much of his songwriting is much better than I'd hitherto imagined. All this from a man who used to dress as a sunflower! **MS**

### Barb Jung

Stockport to Memphis

naimlabel.com

★★★★★

The Naim Label

24-bit/44.1kHz



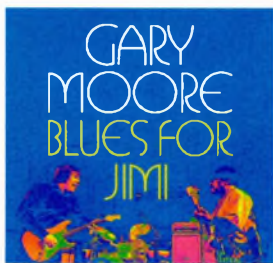
**ON THIS EVIDENCE,** Barb Jung clearly grew up loving 1960s RnB and soul. On previous

albums I felt she overworked her voice in the fashion of an audiophile-style jazz diva, and in so doing distanced herself from any passion in the music. Thankfully she resists that temptation here and the emotion in the songs like *Change Is Gonna Come* and *Way Down In The Hole* escapes uncathed.

Jung, admits to being a 'Marmite' performer, but with RnB she's found a really persuasive direction that demands the passionate delivery she commands here. The exquisite recording does full justice to her performance and to the outstanding musical arrangements. **MS**

### BLU-RAY DVD

**Gary Moore** Blues For Jimi eagle-rock.com



★★★★★

Eagle Vision

PCM stereo/DTS-HD Master Audio

**AT THE 2007 LAUNCH** of his *Live At Monterey* DVD, Gary Moore played a dozen Hendrix classics to a small audience. He was joined by drummer Darrin Mooney (Primal

Scream) and bassist Dave Bronze (Eric Clapton) for the majority of the gig, but on three numbers two original Hendrix alumni, bassist Billy Cox and drummer Mitch Mitchell, took their place. These two never played together when Hendrix was alive, but at the time they were touring – which probably explains why they're able to deliver the goods despite only meeting Moore the night before...

The Irishman clearly knew and loved Hendrix's playing, bringing real fire and soul to the

performance. Cox and Mitchell bring a poise that the main band can't quite match. Now that Moore and Mitchell have both gone to the great gig in the sky, this is a fitting reminder of their talents, the guitar playing in particular proving that he was as close a match for the master that we've seen on this side of the Atlantic.

Sound quality is good, clean and powerful if a little shut-in, but the balance suits high volume levels and you can always hear what's going on. **JK**

# Minitest

Budget DACs come in all shapes and sizes, as **Richard Black** discovers...

## Arcam rPAC

PRICE: £150 CONTACT: 01223 203200  
WEBSITE: ARCAM.CO.UK

**JUST SLIGHTLY BIGGER** than a pack of playing cards, the rPAC only slightly lessens its possible appeal as an on-the-road computer audio upgrade by weighing a surprising amount. That's entirely due to its handsome diecast case, which protects innards built on to a single circuit board. There are just three sockets at the rear of the unit – left and right phone out, and a USB socket (full size, not mini). Power is derived from the USB line, which might cause some mixed feelings. Obviously that makes for great simplicity, but isn't computer-sourced power terribly dirty? The answer is that it may well be, but techniques for filtering dirty power are hardly obscure and indeed are really *de rigueur* in these days of interference-with-everything. There's a headphone mini-jack at the front, and volume control buttons (which don't operate on the line output) are on the top of the box.

Sonically, the rPAC bears all the hallmarks of its heritage, with a classic Arcam sound that's short on unnecessary display, but long on effortless detail and simple honesty. In a complex mix it's easy to hear everything that's going on, while simpler sound sources are clear, open and highly communicative. Reproduction of solo piano is particularly good, with just enough attack on notes to sound realistic without becoming 'twangy'. Voices are free of unnatural sibilance and bass instruments have impressive weight and extension. If there's a weakness it's the slightest hint, now and then, of dryness in the treble. Headphones are driven with assurance to higher levels than I would ever want to listen at.

**VERDICT** SIMPLE BUT FLEXIBLE thanks to separate line and headphone outputs, with sound that's energetic, uncoloured and full of detail.

★★★★★



## Audioquest Dragonfly

PRICE: £215 CONTACT: 0031 165 54 1404  
WEBSITE: AUDIOQUEST.COM

**HI-FI DOESN'T COME** much more minimalist than this.

The Dragonfly is basically a USB dongle, all of 5cm long, which effectively turns a USB socket into a 3.5mm mini-jack, that being the sole audio output connection. The name doesn't seem to make much sense until you plug the unit in, at which point an illuminated dragonfly image appears, its colour indicating the sampling rate in operation. Such is the utility of modern miniaturised electronics that this tiny device contains an upmarket DAC chip and the necessary parts to make it all run in 'asynchronous' mode, meaning that the Dragonfly tells the computer when to send data – the best system for ensuring reliable data transfer without massive jitter. Power obviously comes via the USB socket, and while (as mentioned above) we accept it can be cleaned up there seems to have been a miscalculation in that full-level signals actually clip slightly: the internal supply doesn't quite support a full 2V out. Set computer output levels a crack below maximum and all is well.

Small it might be, but the Dragonfly does indeed manage impressive audiophile feats. Not the least of these is a treble which simply soars, as open and extended as one could hope for and really hardly losing out at all to much dearer reference DACs. At the other extreme, bass is also well extended, though it doesn't always seem quite as tangible as some DACs can manage. Midrange is uncoloured and full of detail, with stereo imaging that is as precise in terms of depth as it is in width – which is to say, very. All in all, a level of performance one hardly expects from budget audio. All these comments apply equally whether the unit drives a line input or a pair of headphones.

**VERDICT** GENUINELY AUDIOPHILE performance from a component you could lose in a jacket pocket. A slight lack of bass body is really the only criticism we could find.

★★★★★

## Beresford Bushmaster TC-7530DC

PRICE: £150 CONTACT: 07917 896868  
WEBSITE: BERESFORD.ME

**BERESFORD WAS ONE OF THE ORIGINAL** pioneers of budget DACs, in the UK at least, the products gaining an impressive following mostly on the back of enthusiastic recommendation in the online forums. Sales are still direct online, but you can tell the brand has 'arrived' from the fact that go-faster accessories are now available from several sources. The 7530 is unusual these days in being an S/PDIF-only device, though if you want to use it with USB you can find suitable USB-S/PDIF converters for not much money. There are two each of electrical and optical inputs, selected manually or automatically. A headphone socket (quarter-inch jack) is provided along with a proper rotary volume control which doesn't affect the line outputs. Available volume is earsplitting even with high-impedance headphones, but if you ever go mad and advance the volume past about two o'clock you'll get distortion into any load, a strange oversight. Line output level is the usual 2V.

Standards in budget DACs just now are astonishingly high, and Beresford has plainly not been left behind. The sound from this model is admirably civilised with very fine levels of detail, but it's also prepared to get down and dirty when needed. A bit of vintage Led Zeppelin proved the point very well, with a totally authentic feel but also plenty of information about how the track was put together, if you're inclined to listen analytically to such earthy music. Conversely, sundry audiophile and classical tracks provided evidence of very good extension at both frequency extremes and really solid, stable stereo images. Just now and then the treble can become a little indefinite when things are really busy (orchestral violins playing high and loud, say), but otherwise the sound stands up very well to the strong competition.

**VERDICT** LACKS A USB INPUT, but the detailed and musically committed sound makes for a convincing upgrade to many digital output devices from CD to set-top boxes.

★★★★★



## Pro-Ject DAC Box S USB

PRICE: £150 CONTACT: 01235 511116  
WEBSITE: BOX-DESIGNS.COM



**IT'S WRILY AMUSING** to find that one of Pro-Ject's Box Design series is in fact rather large by the standards of this field, the range having been seen as almost inconceivably tiny for most of its existence. It makes up for it by being rather well equipped, with input sockets for USB and both flavours of S/PDIF. Intelligently, the unit scans all three when first turned on and locks to whatever is active – you can of course subsequently switch manually between them. Unlike the other USB DACs in this group, a separate external power supply is included, but despite that output is below the usual 2V standard at 1V. Of course, you only need to turn up the volume a bit to compensate: most modern amps have plenty of spare gain. There's no headphone output.

Using any of the three inputs, this is a lively little device. It's at its best with high-energy music, where it makes the most of a danceable beat or a vertiginous bit of instrumental virtuosity – it just loved some exceptionally fast solo piano music. But unlike many examples of energetic hi-fi, it doesn't seem to sacrifice detail in its quest for excitement and it's always possible to hear what's going on behind the main melody. It may not quite have the insight of the best DACs in the mid-price sector, but it's really only in the densest passages that one becomes aware of any limitation. Imaging perhaps lacks a little depth, but again it's nothing serious. Treble is extended and bass has good body: in the midrange there's an occasional feeling of prominence to the 'presence' region, but it's not slight or bothersome.

**VERDICT** UPBEAT AND RHYTHMICALLY assured, this versatile DAC is consistent across sources and brings plenty of resolution to the party as well as toe-tapping essentials.

★★★★★



**Cables make a difference to DACs.** Probably most critical is a decent digital cable, especially if you are using S/PDIF. A poor quality cable may simply cause the interface to shut down. That said,

modern DACs seem generally to have good jitter rejection, so the differences between decent digital interconnects may turn out to be small. Analogue interconnects show the typical subtle

but often persuasive differences. Siting can still make a difference due not least to magnetic hum pickup from mains transformers, so don't be too blasé about DAC positioning.

# 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.

These pages are a must-read if you're thinking about buying used kit, or if you have hi-fi you want to sell. It's free to place an advertisement – simply submit your ad of up to 30 words, remembering to include your email, phone number and county.

The simplest way to send your ad is via email to: [letters@hi-fichoice.co.uk](mailto:letters@hi-fichoice.co.uk) or mail: **Reader Classified, Hi-Fi Choice, My Hobby Store Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, Kent BR6 6BG.**

Please note that this service is open to private advertisers only.

## FOR SALE

**MICHELL** GyroDec SE, with RB300 arm in excellent condition £800 ono. Might consider part exchange: **01482 651963** or email: [jazzevan@hotmail.com](mailto:jazzevan@hotmail.com) (Hull).

**B&O** Beogram 8000 with MMC 20CL cartridge £225, B&O P30 speakers £125, all good working order, buyer collects: **01302 772495** or email: [adrian.petch@btinternet.com](mailto:adrian.petch@btinternet.com) (North Lincolnshire).

**HARBETH** P3ESR speakers and a pair of dedicated stands. All in mint condition (maple natural wood veneer), boxes, packing and instruction manuals included, £1,300, buyer to collect: **01305263069** (West Dorset).

**CHORD** G3200E balanced preamp, 2007 (silver) with Integra legs and brick remote control. 2x XLR, 5x RCA inputs, for demo. £2,195: **0208 655 8674** or email: [jbandgz@aol.com](mailto:jbandgz@aol.com) (Surrey).

**ARUM** Cantus Volla loudspeakers (maple),

hardly used, as new condition, complete with stands and boxes, can demo. £1,400: **07736339194** or email: [j.boswell@rbht.nhs.uk](mailto:j.boswell@rbht.nhs.uk). (Bromley).

**REGA** RS3 speakers (black ash) £500, DALI Lektor 1 speakers (oak) £150, Cyrus FM7.5 tuner (silver) £100, Grado SR80i headphones £75, Sennheiser RS180 headphones £100, All in VGC: **01427 617038** or email: [stuartb63@btinternet.com](mailto:stuartb63@btinternet.com) (Lincoln).

**KUDOS** Cardea C2 (sycamore) c/w original boxes, still current model (£2,000) £1,200. Any audition or viewing welcome, ono: **07823 778355** or email: [julianmince@aol.com](mailto:julianmince@aol.com) (Norfolk).

**SUGDEN** A21 (pure Class A), serviced by amplabs, superb £220, Epos ES11 (black) £125, B&W DM4 speakers £85, Wanted: Sony STR 6120 amp: **07818026427** or email: [anwarak98@gmail.com](mailto:anwarak98@gmail.com) (West Yorkshire).

**TRICHORD** Diablo phono amp, upgraded, mint £450, Black Rhodium Super mains cable £50, QED Optical Cinemax AV leads 10m, never used £40: **077541 85437** (Lancs).

**PIONEER** PDS505 CD player, hardly used, in storage, £150: **07818658722** (Warwickshire).

**NYTECH** CTA 252 XD Series II receiver, full working condition, good with minor cosmetics £200: **01538 755833** (Staffs).

**ROGERS** LS3/5A speakers (black) £525, Pink Triangle LPT turntable, Rega arm, AT cartridge £325 (both collect only), QED Disc Master phono stage £40 (inc postage), JVC CD1770 cassette deck, exceptional condition £50: **01708 457691** (Essex).

**CYRUS** 7.5 preamp, Cyrus Smart power, Cyrus PSX power supply (black), good condition, £450: **078962 72406** Tyne and Wear).



Cyrus Pre VS2 preamp at a bargain price!

**NAIM** speaker cable NAC5 terminated with banana plugs 2x 8.5m (£304) £150: **07749 424206** (Suffolk).

**KIMBER** Monocle X speaker cables, terminated with WBT Nextgen 0610AG (silver) slant bananas, beautiful sound, Kimber flight case, mint, (£2,400) £1,100: **0151 608 4481** (Merseyside).

**ROKSAN** GM2 integrated amp (black), as new condition, supplied with box and original accessories £1,200, buyer collects: **07522 797090** or email: [stephenadolphus@yahoo.com](mailto:stephenadolphus@yahoo.com) (West Sussex).

**FURUTECH** FP202 banana plugs, 24 carat gold-plated locking plugs. Originally £128 for 8, now £38 or £19 for 4: **0798 1025698** or email: [Chrisandelizabeth2001@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:Chrisandelizabeth2001@yahoo.co.uk). (Bristol).

**VAN DEN HUL** Meridian stereo pair interconnect 900mm length, Neutrik phono connectors £37 (plus p&p), van den Hul pair interconnects 600mm length, Neutrik phono connectors £32 (plus p&p): **01582 573570** or email: [i.fraser587@btinternet.com](mailto:i.fraser587@btinternet.com) (Bedfordshire).

**HI-FI CHOICE** magazine from Sept 1992 (20 years). Email [davidkconstant@gmail.com](mailto:davidkconstant@gmail.com) (London).

**ARAGON** Stage one, (silver) £500 of upgrades, Aragon 2007 power amp 7ch 200w to 8 ohms, (silver) £500

of upgrades, excellent condition, original boxes. £2,500. **01885410517** (Worcester).

**TRICHORD** Dino Mk2 phono amp, Dino+NC power supply, Trichord high-performance power lead, all excellent, unmarked and lightly used, less than 3 years old, £400. **01582867139** or email: [mikethompson48@hotmail.com](mailto:mikethompson48@hotmail.com) (Bedfordshire).

**PRO-JECT** RPM 1.3 Genie (red) turntable, excellent condition, box and manual, buyer collects, £160. **01933626185** or email: [royrolfe@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:royrolfe@hotmail.co.uk) (Northamptonshire).

**TECHNICS** SL1210 Mk2 (no cartridge) £249, Garrard 401 with plinth, no arm £699, Garrard 401/301 power supply £299. Can post if needed. **0207 499 8729** (London).

**VTL** 100 mono compact monoblocks, mint forage, sensible offers, ATC CA2 pre ex con £350, NVA mm phonostage, ex con. £150. **01822 860 432** (Devon).

**NUFORCE** DAC 9 D/A convertor, (silver finish), very high resolution, will drive power amp directly and has an excellent built in headphone preamp. (£1,199) £650. **01296 437314** (Bucks).

**B&W** CDM1 NT standmount speakers (cherry), excellent condition, boxed (£750) £350: **01702 520063** (Essex).

**BUYING TIPS** **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back-up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

**ATC** SCM7 loudspeakers (black ash), mint condition, boxed with manuals, (£610) £475. **07733 428736** or email: **gill@gillbrears.plus.com** (Huddersfield).

**RUSS ANDREWS** Classic Powerkord with IsoTek 24ct gold Wattgate £75. **01484 427426** (WYorks).

**PMC** GB1i floorstanding loudspeakers, (black) excellent sound, mint and boxed £800. **01474 352164** (Kent).

**FOCAL** Spirit One headphones, high quality closed-back design, (HFC 5-star rating) £90, Atlas Equator Mk3 and Linn (black) high quality interconnect cables, both as new £30 each. **07971136711** (W.Yorks).

**WANTED** mounting plate for Rega RB300 arm to Thorens 160s turntable. Trade or private. **01772 687748** (Lancashire).

**NAIM** CD3.5 CD player, new remote and CD securing puck, original packaging. Comes with interconnects VGC. **0740 2599050** (Northamptonshire).

**KRYSTAL KABLES** audiophile silver mains lead, fitted with silver-plated mains plug and IEC (£95) £39, Russ Andrews Yello Powerkord (performance between Powermax and Classic Powerkord), fantastic upgrade (£50) £25, Sound style XS105 4-tiersilver hi-fi rack, made under the Revolver badge, fantastic upgrade, slight cosmetic damage (£150) £35. **07981 025698** or email: **chrisandelizabeth2001@yahoo.co.uk** (Bristol).

**TRANSPARENT** Reference speaker cable 10 ft (£6,000) £975, Nordost SPM Reference speaker cable 17ft, bi-wire, both ends factory terminated £1,200, Nordost SPM Reference balanced interconnect 1m, boxed as new £450. Email: **booning4@hotmail.com** (Co Wicklow).

**QUAD** 77 series CD player, tuner and integrated amplifier (carbon), plus remote controller and two Quadlink cables, excellent, boxed (1 original, 2 elite boxes), including manuals £750 ono. **07791619099** or

email: **mikekkafas@hotmail.co.uk** (NW London).

**IMF** TLS50 transmission line speakers (teak), full working order and in very good condition including grilles £100, Epos ES22 speakers (Dark Cherry), 2 1/2 way small floorstanders, fabulous sounding speakers in very good condition including grilles. Buyer collects £450. **02920702134** or email: **garth.jones72@btinternet.com** (Cardiff).

**TOM EVANS AUDIO** MicroGroove plus phono preamp, superb sound, very good condition, set up for low output MC cartridge (100 ohm R, 0.2 microvolt). (£850) £475 ovno. **07725 525001** or email: **alan.strudwick@googlemail.com** (South Wales).

**NAIM** CDX-2, excellent condition and wonderful sound, includes original packing, SNAIC, lead, puck and manual £1,200. One owner, purchased new March 2009, collection preferred. **01252 312 663** or email: **atj.harding@googlemail.com** (Hampshire).

**CYRUS** system: Pre VS2 £300, Dac X £635, CD 8X £475, 8 Power £705, PSX-Rs x2 @ £250 each, Cyrus 781 speakers, plus Nextel stands £320, Apollo 4-tier stand £75 ono on all, as a whole or parts; Valve system: Orange valve preamp £175, Audio Innovations power amp £750, Ayon CD 1 £600, LSA 1 speakers £600, Music Tools Entasis h50 speaker stands £450 ono on all, as a whole or parts, Vitus SP102 Phono Stage £12,000 ono, superb performer/ unmatched; cables for sale: Audience AU 24e 1.5m RCA interconnect £525, Audience AU24 Powercord 3m £795, Nordost Heimdall speaker wire 2m bi-wire pair £550, Nordost Heimdall RCA 0.6m X 2 £280 each, IsoTek Power Cord Premium mains cable 1.5m X 5 £50 each, XLO HT Pro Digital interconnect 1m £35, Furukawa FV video RCA 1m £40, Cyrus bi-wire speaker cable 2.5m £30, Tiffany CX-7B RCA 1m £30, Signal 7080 RCA interconnect 2x 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@virgin.net** (Lewes).

**AUDIOLAB** 8000 CD player (silver), 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 £45. **01708 457691** (Essex).

**QUAD** 12L speakers (Birdseye Maple), excellent condition, complete with 2m Chord Rumour bi-wire speaker cables £195. **07986987380** (Northants).

**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).

**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: **rogersaunders@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).

**OPERA** Super Pavarotti speakers (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** ML54a speakers, Black Serial no; 5777, Good condition £200, Pink Triangle Export Rega RB300 arm, owned since new (black), 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).

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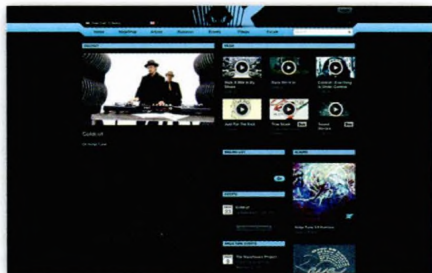
Ed Selley brings you our pick of this month's top hi-fi websites...

## NINJA TUNE

### ninjatune.net

Ninja Tune is a British record label set up in 1990 by Matt Black and Jonathon More, who at that point were almost certainly more famous for being the constituent parts of Coldcut, the electronic music act. Initially looking for greater artistic freedom than the labels of the day were prepared to offer, Ninja Tune has blossomed into one of the most varied and interesting portfolios of artists in the UK.

The good news for any would-be fan is that the website is a bit of a gem. It acts in the dual role of promotional board for the artist and an online shop for its products. Each artist has a page listing any upcoming tours and performers, together with a biography and clips and videos of their work. If you like what you hear you can then buy from Ninja Tune direct. The good news is that the site is covering all of the bases when it comes to formats. CD is readily available but you can download material in WAV and MP3 as well. Normally I go for a download to try it out but I'm afraid that the lure of the new Fink live album on double vinyl was just too strong!



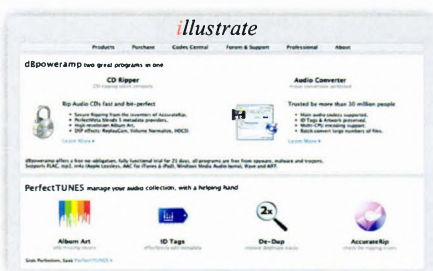
## DBPOWERAMP

### dbpoweramp.com

In a world where it is possible to secure a wide variety of free software for ripping CDs to various formats, it might seem counterintuitive for me to recommend one that charges you for the privilege. The ripping offered by dBpoweramp is a cut above that offered by the free rippers though and there is another facet to this program that is invaluable.

The 'killer ap' of dBpoweramp is the 'AccurateRip' feature that will make multiple passes over a disc and compare the total results before discarding any errors that it finds to create a completely error-free rip in the format of your choice. This is especially useful for damaged discs, but the obsessive among us who worry that the version of

a disc they ripped for immortality might not be completely perfect can use this and stop worrying! Bundled with the ripper is a very useful format conversion tool that can convert pretty much any audio format to any other which is periodically useful. Add in a superb tagging and artwork system and you have a software bundle well worth paying out for – especially when the price is a one-off \$38.



## HIFI FOR SALE

### hififorsale.com

Hifi for Sale has actually been in existence for a very long time, but until the relatively recent site update had been looking a little long in the tooth. Now the site has been given the online equivalent of a good clean and a lick of paint, and is well worth checking out if you are buying or selling audio equipment.

The site is free to advertise on and there is a wide variety of material for sale at any one time. The recent updates have been very useful as it is now much easier for sellers to add pictures to their sales (giving a rather better idea of what you are buying) and the site is now divided between private and trade sellers. I have carried out a few transactions on Hifi for Sale in the past and would regard it as slightly more civilised than eBay and probably a better environment for selling more expensive gear. Don't lose your wits completely though – the site is still part of the Internet and as such, make sure you have a good handle on who you are dealing with. As ever – if it looks too good to be true, it almost inevitably is!



## AUDIO NOTE KITS

### audionotekits.com

Audio Note is no stranger to the high end – its £675,000 demonstration system at the Top Audio Show in Milan was a fairly eloquent demonstration of this! It is unusual among high end companies in that it is possible to buy a number of its models as complete kits for self assembly. This offers the very tempting prospect of being able to secure yourself a slice of valve exotica at a more affordable price point than might otherwise be the case. A wide range of DACs, integrated, pre and power amps, phono stages and speakers are available and some designs are unique to the kit site and have no 'ready built' equivalent.

Unlike a number of DIY offerings, the kits contain all of the components that you need to build the unit and extensive instructions are also supplied. As the kits are Audio Note products, there are plenty of options to include materials from the more exciting ends of the periodic table. Please note that the main website with the majority of information is US-based and priced in dollars. In the UK, the kits are sold by Hifi Collective and its site is linked off the main one. ●





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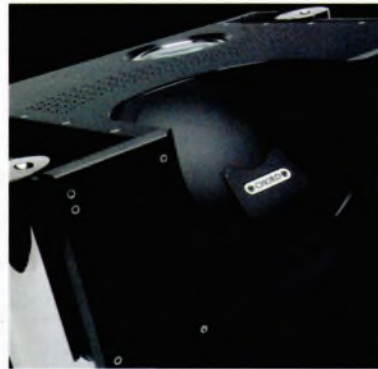
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# icon Audio

## Our NEW Stereo 60 MK IIIm KT120

### 80+80 Watts pure valve power



*designed by David Shaw*



### World Class Valve Amplifiers From Leicester

**LDT Low Distortion  
Tertiary Transformers**

#### Big, Bold and Bullet Proof!

As a company run by Hi Fi enthusiasts our heart and soul goes in to all our products. We regularly evaluate our amplifiers to ensure they are the best of their kind. Whilst we do not make changes for change sake, if we can make a significant improvement to the sound quality and reliability we will do so.

The new MK III version of the Stereo 60 now comes with several improvements in sound and performance, and build quality. This is our biggest integrated amplifier. It is ideal for someone wanting a very dynamic fast sound. It has a big power supply, big output transformers, and uses the excellent new KT120, and comes with many features. The new super strong KT120 has caused a storm in the hi fi world, with 50% more power than the KT88. It enabled us to improve the sonics, power, distortion and reliability. An excellent alternative to a fast modern transistor amplifier, the ST60III will deliver the finest detail of modern recordings in a more vivid way and present jazz and rock music without harshness or tizz.

**Two Amplifiers in One. The importance of Triode** The triode sound is preferred by many hi fi fans, although the power is lower in the ST60 is still ample for all but the most demanding levels. Ignored or neglected in the past we gave equal priority to the triode function so the full quality is maintained. With our UL/Triode switch you can change from 80 watts to 40 watts of pure triode sound at the flick of a switch.

**New Pure Power Amplifier 60 IIIpm** made by popular request, a pure power amplifier version of similar looks and identical specification. This matches virtually any high quality valve or transistor pre amplifier. It may even be driven directly from a single source already having variable output.

**Now with "Easy Bias" Meter** We think of our amplifiers as musical instruments. Like a piano needs occasional tuning, big amplifiers need the bias checking. This way you can be sure of 100% performance all of the time. Simple with our "easy bias" meter, if the pointer is in the "black" it's correct! Also useful to check if your valves are worn or faulty. Long term performance is important to us and this useful aid will take the guesswork out of maintaining your amplifier.

**Attractive Valve cover** Most valve amplifier covers look as though they were done as a cost saving after thought, and don't exactly enhance the look of the amplifier. They are rarely seen in advertisements. We think that something you will use every day should look attractive. That's why we use 18 pieces of laser cut Perspex assembled with a further 20 precision components. See picture on our website.

Our new series of "Low Distortion Tertiary" output transformers are the best we have ever made, enabling us to reduce global feedback by about 40%. All our amplifiers are designed and finished in Leicester. Warranty and service is done by the engineers that designed them so you can be sure of long term performance. We incorporate a "standby" switch in order to protect those precious rathodes from damage until they have warmed up. All of our amplifiers are hand made using "point to point" soldering without using printed circuit boards. We are convinced this sounds better. It allows for very easy servicing, upgrades and modifications. Remote controlled volume included for fine tuning your listening. High quality components are used throughout including an "ALPS" volume control, silver plated PTFE audio cable SGB capacitors audiophile resistors. Loudspeakers of nominal impedance between 3 ohms and 12 ohms may be used with virtually no reduction in power or quality. A choke regulated power supply adds a richness to the sound quality that silicon devices alone are unable to do. Recording and playback are catered for by the "Tape Monitor". Also useful for Home Cinema applications. In short we have created an amplifier of excellent flexibility and quality which retains the qualities traditional of traditional design and performance. Bespoke upgrades available including silver/copper capacitors, valves and design.

From £2,199 (inc UK VAT) Integrated. Power Amplifier only from £1,999. Upgradeable See also our and other award winning amplifiers on our website

# icon Audio



## Our New LA5tx

### A Superb Transformer Coupled Pre-amplifier



*designed by David Shaw*

## World Class Valve Amplifiers From Leicester

Shown with upgraded Treasure CV181s

### Sometimes less is more!

Our LA4 line pre-amplifier has an enviable reputation for being the ideal match for both valve power amplifiers and for adding warmth and musicality to well known transistor power amplifiers. As such it has often been recommended by several magazines where owners of big transistor amplifiers have not been getting all the performance they thought their amplifier capable of. But we have been asked if we could do even better?

We are delighted to announce the release of our new LA5tx our first transformer coupled pre-amplifier. In recent times there has been a lot of interest in the use of transformers as a pre-amplifier. But a pure transformer pre-amplifier can have the problem of providing a "difficult load" for the source, in other words you never get "something for nothing"! And the results will depend purely on the ability of the source unit to drive the transformer, which will be variable

Our LA5tx uses a very simple high quality valve circuit to drive the transformer. This way the source unit is always looking into an easy high impedance load. And the transformer has a low impedance output enabling it to drive any type of power amplifier load, balanced or unbalanced, regardless of load conditions. In other words completely buffered with all the advantages of a conventional pre-amplifier and pure transformer.

Needless to say a lot of effort has gone into the design of our audio transformer. Obviously it demands the finest copper and best type of iron laminations, but the method of winding and ratios used play a vital part in getting the correct sonic signature. Hundreds of hours were spent listening and many prototypes were made before we could say it has the "David Shaw" sonic signature.

The Result: A golden sound like no other, warmth and detail presented in a very focussed way that reveals the sound stage in uncanny detail. Totally without harshness or any mechanical quality. It has the ability for listening for long periods without fatigue or boredom. Guaranteed to work well with virtually any high quality power amplifier, Valve, transistor or hybrid.

For such a pre-amplifier the very best quality of power is demanded. This is supplied by a substantial power transformer. The current is then conditioned and regulated by a valve rectifier and two large chokes for silky smooth power.

Our four cornerstones are **Quality Performance** and **Value**. And in the future, **Service** when you need it. In this age of "built in obsolescence" it may be unfashionable to talk about repairs and spares but our commitment to future service means you should be able to enjoy your amplifier for at least 20 years.

All of our amplifiers are designed and finished in Leicester they are commissioned and serviced by the people that designed them so you can be sure of our quality control and long term performance. All our amplifiers are hand made using "point to point" soldering without using printed circuit boards. We are convinced this sounds better. It also allows for easy servicing, upgrades and modifications. Remote controlled volume is useful for fine tuning your listening level to match your taste. High quality components are used throughout including an "ALPS" volume control, silver plated PTFE audio cable SCR capacitors and audiophile resistors. A valve rectifier with choke regulated power supply adds a richness to the sound quality that silicon devices alone are unable to do. Tape and other methods of recording and playback are catered for by the "Tape Monitor". Also useful for Home Cinema applications.

From £2,499.95 (inc 20%VAT) Upgradeable. See our other award winning amplifiers on our website

# Box-Design by Pro-Ject

*Where performance meets convenience*

Whether you want to add an iPod or computer music library to your existing Hi-Fi setup, or you're starting a main or secondary system from scratch, Box Design by Pro-Ject Audio Systems is a fantastic way for all music lovers to bring more high-quality audio into their lives. Every Box Design product combines premium build-quality and exceptional sound with a small size and an attractive price.

## Stream



### Stream Box DS

The Stream Box DS is one of the most affordable Streaming Clients available with high-end specifications.

- Stream 24-bit/192kHz HD Music
- Wi-Fi or Ethernet Connectivity
- Play from USB Hard-Drives
- Gold-Plated RCA Analogue Out
- S/PDIF Digital Out
- UPnP and DLNA Compliant
- Built-In Internet Radio Platform
- Play Digitally from Apple Devices
- Solid, Vibration-Free Construction
- Apple Authenticated

## Play



### Dock Box S Digital

- Take Pure Digital Feed from any Docked Device.
- Built-In 24-bit/192kHz DAC
- Gold-Plated RCA Analogue-Out
- S/PDIF Digital Output
- Apple Authenticated



### Tuner Box S

- Low-Noise FM Tuner
- Manual or Automatic Tuning
- High-Contrast Display



### DAC Box S USB

- High-Quality D/A Converter
- S/PDIF, Toslink & USB Inputs
- 24-bit/96kHz TI Chip

## Listen



### Speaker Box 5

- Two-Way Bookshelf Speaker
- Bass-Reflex System
- Three High-Gloss Finishes
- Magnetically Shielded
- Easy Placement Within a Room



### Stereo Box S

- Integrated Amplifier
- 30 Watts Per-Channel
- Great for Desktop Systems



### Head Box S

- One Headphone Socket
- Rotary Volume Control
- Low-Noise Semi-Conductors

## Expand

### NOW AVAILABLE

Box Design have just announced a new series of high-end power cables and distribution blocks at surprisingly affordable prices.

The Connect-It Power series is available now through most Pro-Ject dealers.



Box Design by Pro-Ject Audio Systems is distributed in the UK by Henley Designs Ltd.  
[www.henleydesigns.co.uk](http://www.henleydesigns.co.uk) | Tel: 01235 511 166 | [sales@henleydesigns.co.uk](mailto:sales@henleydesigns.co.uk)

## GIK Acoustics 244 Bass Traps

**T**he domestic living room is not the ideal acoustic environment for listening to hi-fi systems, due to resonances that can be caused by the room. Indeed, some of us may have toyed with the idea of sticking egg boxes to ceilings and walls, but perhaps this is not the most acceptable domestic solution! Enter GIK Acoustics' 244 Bass Traps!

These traps are acoustic energy absorbers that dampen low frequency sound energy. Their purpose is to achieve a flatter low frequency room response by reducing low end resonances in rooms. Although commonly used in recording studios and mastering rooms, these traps have been created with the home listening environment in mind.

GIK Acoustics note that studio engineers often assume that inaccurate bass levels are due to their monitors, when in actual fact an unbalanced sound may stem from the audio characteristics of a particular room. By installing the 244 Bass Traps, GIK claim that, as well as improving overall clarity, you will have a much more accurate low end perception and be able to hear the bass properly. The design of the traps allows them to be used in multiple quantities to absorb as much bass as possible without over absorbing the high end.

The trap is a very well made, professionally manufactured velocity broadband bass trap with a two-frame system allowing sound to be absorbed from the sides, while maintaining a crisp, sharp and neat edge on the frame. It has a built-in air gap that not only increases low end absorption, but also allows the panel to hang flush on the wall using the supplied wire hanging support on the back. They can also stand vertically on the floor or can be used in conjunction with ash wood or wire stands, available as an optional extra (£42).

As the 244 Traps are entirely passive devices, they require no connections or power supply and can be placed at appropriate locations in the listening room. The traps are 600mm wide by 1,200mm tall and 118mm deep, but can be custom sized to fit your own particular specifications. They come in a wide range of colours and fabrics to harmonise with virtually any domestic environment. The nine standard colours are Off-white, Brilliant White, Black, Glass (Pink-Grey), Argyll (Mint), Sand, Lead, Pitlochry (Red) and Galilee (Blue).

GIK quote the performance of its traps in Sabins, rather than using the NRC (Noise Reduction Coefficient). NRC is a measure of the energy absorption calculated as an average of the absorptions at several frequencies and doesn't really measure much below about 125Hz. Sabins, on the other hand, are a measure of absorption at a specified frequency multiplied by the surface area and are, therefore, more useful as a measure of bass trap performance. One metric Sabin is defined as one square metre of material absorbing 100 percent of the sound energy that strikes it or, to put it another way, a one square metre hole in the outside wall of your listening room. GIK, therefore, measure the performance of its panels over a range of frequencies down to 50Hz and the details are available on its website.

### In use

Since the traps are very easy to move around, conducting 'before and after' tests were simple. Starting off with some Bach organ music, the difference with the traps in the room was instantly apparent. The tendency for bass-boom when I sat at the back of my listening room was significantly reduced and the sound was noticeably much more even when I moved around the room. The bass was far more musical and tuneful and the individual notes were more easily discerned. Moving to some techno music with a very pronounced bass line, the effect of the traps was even more dramatic – they do a wonderful job at taming an overly-excited room. Furthermore, the overall balance with a full orchestra was far more natural with the traps in place.

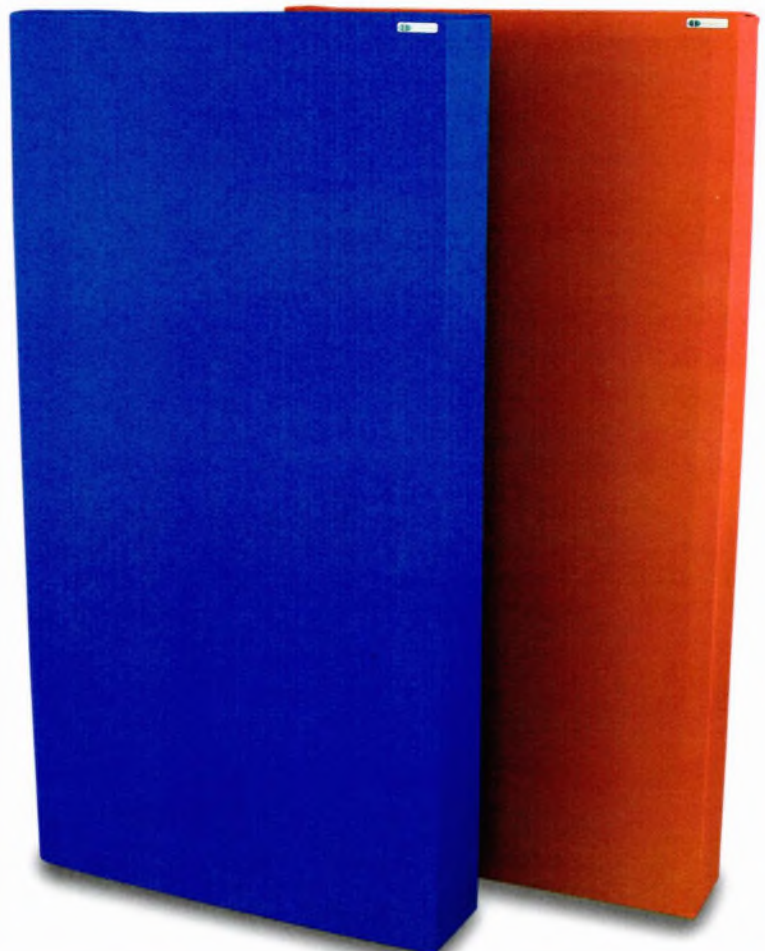
As my friend (who has a square listening room) put it; these traps stop your room from humming along with the music. In my opinion, these traps are beautifully made, work really well, represent excellent value for money and are therefore highly recommended. **NR**

### DETAILS

**PRICE:** £134  
PER PAIR

**CONTACT:**  
020 7558 8976  
**WEBSITE:**  
GIKACOUSTICS.  
CO.UK

### OUR VERDICT



Why do  
show visitors  
consistently say:  
"One of the best  
sounds at the  
show?"

## Don't buy another thing yet! ... new toys won't fix a system with fundamental faults

**FUNDAMENTAL FAULTS? – system damage that bleeds away performance from basically good components .**

**In 17 years we've heard many hundreds of customers' music systems and we'd say 90% were below par. How is yours? Honestly?**

Dirty alternating mains flowing through transformers produces huge amounts of **VIBRATION** over a wide spectrum right into the ultra-sonic. Of course loudspeakers designed to vibrate air also generate unwanted energy.

Then, to share the damage around, we connect all these vibrating boxes together with expensive metal cables! – excellent conductors of electrical *and* mechanical energy.

### Why does this matter?

– simply because most electronic components are partially **MICROPHONIC**. Vibrate them and they generate small electrical signals. *Blend all these signals from the whole system with the music and the damage is massive:*

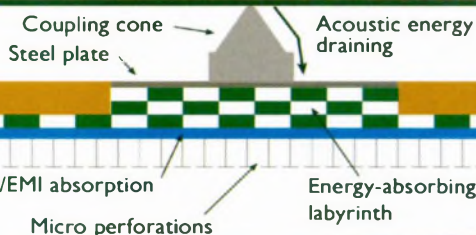
- a hard, edgy treble
- muddled timing
- loose bass
- poor imaging
- limited soundstage
- distortion

Does your system sound worse when you turn up the volume – and sound flat when it's quiet? These are all symptoms of a system **DEGRADED BY VIBRATION**. A system should never sound "too loud" if the amplifier is capable.

### What can I do about it?

The answer is to 'drain' this damaging energy out of the system through platforms from **LEADINGEDGE** and block its transfer using **VERTEX AQ** cables. The improvements in performance are from good to dramatic!

Base of CD player, preamp etc



Cross-section of LeadingEdge platform.

The steel cone 'drains' damaging acoustic energy into the labyrinth.

### Draining energy? – sounds like Black Magic!

Furniture-quality LeadingEdge platforms incorporate VertexAQ techniques developed over 12 years from aircraft industry technology. Some Vertex concepts are so significant that they are now feeding back into current Defence equipment designs.

### What changes can I expect?

As funds allow, adding Vertex cables and mains filters and LeadingEdge platforms will **TRANSFORM YOUR SYSTEM:**

- greater openness/separation
- smoother and sweeter treble
- increased dynamic range
- complex music times better
- tighter, deeper, faster bass

### Is it expensive?

Proven many times over: *money spent on Vertex/LE components brings greater improvements to the whole system than the same amount given to upgrade one major 'box'.*

**We worry.** Visitors to our shows consistently praise the sound but do they think it's beyond their reach? Do they think it's entirely due to the main 'boxes'?

*Of course, it's the VertexAQ and LeadingEdge system-wide treatment, removing vibration and RFI and EMI pollution – with mains filters starting around £360.*

The main components are different every time, from modest to exotic, but the sound remains 'one of the best'.

Read more on our web site under **Essentials**.

**Customers say** we make some of the best sounds at shows and in our studio they have ever heard, so you know we can do the same in your home. Our advice takes account of your best components and guides you where change is needed, in stages you can afford.

You avoid expensive mistakes, enjoy music and save money in the long run.

**Just listen and you'll know**

CD: Accoustic Arts, Bel Canto, dCS, Gamut, Resolution Audio, Vertex AQ dac-1. Vinyl: Aesthetix, Clearaudio, Graham, Spiral Groove, Transfiguration. Tuners: Magnum Dynalab. Amplifiers: Accoustic Arts, Aesthetix, Bel Canto, CAT, Gamut, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, VTL. Loudspeakers: Avalon, Gamut, Kawero!, NEAT, Totem. Cables: Chord Co., DNM, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, VertexAQ. Mains: Vertex AQ. Supports: Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi-Fi Racks, LeadingEdge, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ

[www.rightnote.co.uk](http://www.rightnote.co.uk)

01225 874728 or lo-call: 0845 230 7570



## Analogue Studio Stainless Steel Record Stabiliser Clamp

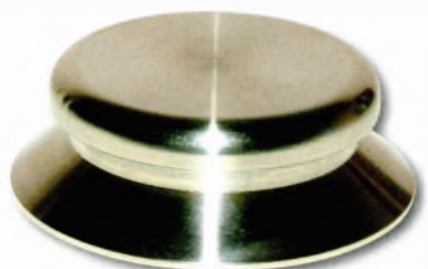
**T**his turntable clamp/weight supplied by Analogue Seduction is designed to keep records flat during playback and prevent slipping. Even if your record looks flat and you use a good turntable mat, adding a clamp/weight will effectively reduce the possibility of sudden speed changes caused by the record slipping on the turntable while playing.

This beautifully made clamp is 70mm in diameter, 25mm high and weighs in at 450 grams. It's made from stainless steel and is finished with a thin, black velvety felt covering on the underside where it sits on the record.

Apart from preventing slipping while playing, the clamp helps with a number of other issues. It increases the mass of the rotating system which can help to reduce flutter. As it applies a force to the centre of the record, it can help with the playing of warped records. Furthermore, by coupling the record more tightly to the rotating platter, it can help dampen internal resonances of the record and thereby reduce sonic coloration.

### Sound quality

I could certainly hear improvements with the clamp in use during playing. I found that, with a record sitting directly on my acrylic turntable platter, there was a noticeable improvement in imaging and slight cleaning up of the top end. The music sounded more natural and flowed slightly better. All-in-all then, this reasonably priced clamp is certainly worth the money and does indeed offer sonic improvements. **NR**



#### ► DETAILS

**PRICE:** FROM £40

**CONTACT:** 01733 350878

**WEBSITE:** ANALOGUE SEDUCTION.NET

#### OUR VERDICT



## Fidelity Audio SPower HC voltage regulator

**I**f you are an inveterate tweeker like me, you may well consider performing little upgrades on your equipment. You may also wish to replace those noisy switched-mode 'wall wart' power supplies, such as those supplied with Logitech Squeezeboxes, with a nice linear power supply. If you do, you'll be very interested in using a top quality voltage regulator, such as this.

Entry-level separates and high end components alike often have cheap OEM regulators fitted. These are inherently very noisy, and the standard regulators corrupt the delicate circuits with high noise levels and slow reaction time. The Fidelity Audio SPower regulator addresses these fundamental problems, featuring a stable high speed low noise voltage delivery.

This top-quality device is a drop-in replacement for the 3-pin TO-220 package usually designated 78xx (for a positive voltage regulator) or 79xx (for a negative voltage regulator). It is available in a wide range of positive or negative voltages from 3.3V to 24V.

### In use

I have used one of these regulators in the linear power supply that I built to replace the switched-mode power supply on my Logitech Squeezebox Touch and, therefore, required the +5V device. This can easily accommodate the 3A required by the Touch when bolted to a suitable heatsink, I found.

With the Spower regulator fitted, the Touch managed to extract more detail from the music. In particular, I could hear the bowing action on the strings of a double-bass more clearly – the sound was altogether more refined. It made a surprising improvement to this humble device, so comes highly recommended for tweeky, soldering iron owning types! **NR**



#### ► DETAILS

**PRICE:** £42  
**CONTACT:** 01302 563124

**WEBSITE:** FIDELITYAUDIO.CO.UK

#### OUR VERDICT



# WELCOME TO THE NORTH EAST

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## NEW STOCK IN THIS MONTH...

Thorens TD2030, excellent boxed	750	NAIM NAC202 with Nabs, excellent boxed	1650	NAIM XPS Power supply, Olive with Bunchy	995	Re: Strain 3, near mint in cherry	243
Electrovoice panel EDS, near mint boxed	999	Rega R5150, excellent with bakelite remote	999	Castle Howard 3 in 1 unit	399	Erre Audio H1A1, as new	999
Musical Fidelity M1 M4.5 Transport and DAC	1799	Sangean SR8, excellent boxed	599	Linn Pucko 7, near excellent	143	Rega Eon 3, Monoblocks, excellent boxed	599
QUAD 22L, excellent boxed	299	Avion RD11E, excellent	Call	QUAD 34000/FMA/Rack all boxed excellent	699	Rega Saturn, excellent boxed	543
Quad A123, ex demo in box, SAVE!	1199	Avi S2000M1, for condition	345	Audio-Analogue Pakistan, excellent boxed	271	Monitor Audio GX300, ex demo	1599
Gamma Acoustics Rhythm Ref Line 211, integrated	Call	NAIM CDS, excellent boxed	399	Monitor Audio RRS, ex demo	243	Linn IK100, vgc boxed	199
Avi S2100MC, for condition	299	Kel Kit 24, vgc boxed	199	Audio Research S22 Preamp, excellent	1199	Avon H15, for condition back boxed	199
AVC200M11, Marquis, excellent	499	Agam A20, vgc boxed in box	243	NAIM NAIT 5, excellent boxed	399	Electrovoice EMD100, near mint boxed	1073
Quad A121, ex demo in box, SAVE!	699	NAIM NAC722, in box, vgc	299	Rusan Caspian M2 CD Player, ex display	1299	Rega JM Lab B16VW, ex demo	999

Analogue	Amplifiers	Digital	Loudspeakers
Audio Technica AT1100 tonearm, excellent..... 199	Arcam P80 Power amplifier..... 399	Accuphase DP800/DC801 Transport/DAC, WOW!..... 11499	AVI ADM5, ex demo nr mint..... 849
Boulder MIS11/MIS01 Phono Stage, vgc..... 1499	Arcam Alpha 8P, excellent boxed..... 199	AMR CD777 ex demo..... Call	B&W DM 70 Continental fair cosmetics fully working..... Offers
Clearaudio Unity tonearm, brand new..... 999	Audio Analogue Bellini/Donzetti PrePower..... 499	Arcam CD72, remote..... 149	Castle Harlequin, cherry finish vgc reduced..... 249
Clearaudio Concept, mint boxed ex demo..... 875	Audio Innovations S200 Preamp/Phono..... 299	Arcam CD73 excellent from..... 179	DIM Audio SOK v5, near mint boxed..... 299
Dais & Symx PUJ Audio Ongami serviced, good order..... 399	Audio Research Ref 610 Monoblocks, vgc boxed..... 1799	Arcam Alpha 7, great condition..... 79	Focal 800v, excellent boxed..... 349
DFP DSP50S Phono Stage, bespoke psu, ex, boxed..... 79	Audio Research Ref 210 Monoblocks, as new boxed..... 9900	Arcam Alpha 8, excellent condition boxed..... 149	IPL S3TL Transmission Line Floorstander vgc bargain..... 299
Dual CS505 excellent starter deck..... 1299	Audio Research VS110 with KT120s vgc boxed..... 1749	Arcam CD192, excellent..... 399	KEF XQ5 Floorstanders, excellent..... 599
EAR E34P Deluxe ex demo..... 799	Audio Research VS115, vgc boxed..... 2999	Arcam CD82 excellent boxed..... 399	Kel QCS6, excellent in walnut..... 249
Garrard 301, vgc..... 299	Ayre Acoustics AX7e Integrated amplifier, ex boxed..... 1299	Arcam CD82 excellent boxed..... 399	KEF XQ5 Floorstanders, excellent..... 599
Graco Cartridges, various ex display..... Call	Bead P35mk2 Power Amplifier vgc..... 799	Arcam CD82 excellent boxed..... 399	Kudos C2, new style excellent in Maple, ex demo..... Call
Haddock 228 tonearm, excellent boxed..... 349	Chord CPM3300 Integrated, excellent boxed reduced..... 2999	Arcam CD82 excellent boxed..... 399	Linn AV5140 Aktiv, with x-overs, vgc boxed..... 399
Inspire Monarch, nr, original 12x10 P-atter, 12" arm..... Call	C-ord SPM650 Poweramp, excellent boxed..... 1749	Arcam CD82 excellent boxed..... 399	Linn AV5120 Aktiv, centre, with x-overs, vgc boxed..... 399
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## Russ Andrews Jumbo Cone Feet



There are two schools of thought when it comes to equipment supports. One says it's best to isolate equipment from the surroundings, and the other claims it is preferable to rigidly couple the equipment to the surroundings. Russ Andrews' Cone Feet fall into the latter category.

They come in four sizes: Mini, Small, Big and Jumbo. The maker recommends using the largest size practical for a particular item of equipment. They are supplied in packs of three for the obvious reason that when equipment is supported on three points, no rocking can occur, even if one point is higher or lower than the others.

The cone feet can be glued or bolted to metal-cased equipment or screwed to wooden cased speakers. They are supplied with 4mm fixings with options for wood thread and bolt options. They will work satisfactorily pointing down or alternatively they can be used freestanding and pointing up, whichever is most convenient.

### In use

The theory is that vibrational energy generated by your system, such as CD transport mechanisms and the like, can have an adverse effect on sound reproduction. To help minimise this, the wooden cone feet couple the equipment to which they are fitted to the rack that it sits on, thus channelling this energy away from it and into the floor. I found the sound became cleaner, more dynamic and musical. At the price, they represent a great value upgrade. **NR**



### DETAILS

**PRICE:** £31 FOR A BOX OF 3  
**CONTACT:** 01539 797300  
**WEBSITE:** RUSSANDREWS.COM

### OUR VERDICT



## Audience Conductor speaker cables with Z plugs

These loudspeaker cables are described as 'high performance-to-price ratio, entry-level audio cables'. The Conductor line is designed for low eddy-current resistance, which the maker says is one of the most important qualities in high-resolution audio cables, no less...

Audience's design philosophy is one of simplicity. The gold-plated Z plugs are physically held in place with heatshrink sleeving. You should not be put off by this as they are very robust and work extremely well in practice. The focus has clearly been on maintaining the quality of the important parts of the cable, rather than on cosmetic enhancements. These speaker cables are slightly thicker than their interconnect counterparts, which is what you'd expect as they have to handle higher currents.

### Sound quality

Speaker cables, like interconnects, tend to need burning-in for at least ten hours continuously before they start to perform at their best. After this period, I tested the cables with a wide variety of musical genres, and the result was a real surprise – I was not expecting to hear such a clear improvement over my existing, similarly priced wires. The Audience Conductors have a real musical quality to them. Orchestral performances have a great sense of realism and solo instruments have enhanced presence. I heard fine detail, finesse, subtlety and space, all of which was totally conspicuous no matter what type of programme material was chosen.

Overall, Audience has a real winner with its Conductor loudspeaker cables. Although expensive, they're still really rather good value for money, and so are definitely worth auditioning. **NR**



### DETAILS

**PRICE:** £374 FOR 3M PAIR  
**CONTACT:** 01775 761880  
**WEBSITE:** HIGHENDCABLE.CO.UK

### OUR VERDICT





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 Call Dave Jackson on 01775 761880

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**New Conductor 'e' RCA / XLR Interconnects and matching Speaker cables**

## Black Rhodium Rhodium plugs



**T**here's only one thing better than plugs and sockets, and that's plugs and sockets. Introducing an extra break point between your source and preamp, or power amp and speakers, can only end in tears, as it degrades the sound because a direct connection is cut. Ideally, you'd want a straight-through, hard-wired electrical signal path.

Trouble is, you can't live without plugs and sockets – they're a necessary evil, as it's impractical to permanently hard-wire your system. So the trick is to get the very best connectors you can. What to look for? Well resistance to oxidation is a key factor, as crud will plate itself over the connections and degrade the sound.

Gold plating is a good solution here, as in its purest form it doesn't oxidise, but tweaky types have found that it's not necessarily the best sounding. Rhodium plating is the new gold; lots of audiophiles prefer it sonically.

Black Rhodium's Rhodium banana plug is surprisingly modestly priced, but wins no prizes for style. The plug assembly itself is wide enough to take decently chunky speaker cable, although you might have to trim some fatter ones down at the very end. There's a locking screw and a flexible plastic shroud that fits over the end – fitting is a doddle.

### In use

Okay, so they're not the most rugged of designs; hi-fi reviewers who yank speaker cables in and out five times a day best look elsewhere. But for normal human beings they're a perfectly fine – and the important thing is they sound superb. Way better than the stock gold-plated plugs my speaker cable comes with, they give a lovely, fluid, open performance with a nice sparkling top and solid, lithe bass. As such, they're top value and come highly recommended. **ES**



### DETAILS

**PRICE:** £15 EACH

**CONTACT:**  
01332 342233

**WEBSITE:**  
BLACKRHODIUM  
.COM

### OUR VERDICT



## Pure Sensia 200D

**T**he original Pure Sensia was a *Hi-Fi Choice* Award winner, and one of the first combination DAB and Internet radios. The innovative graphics interface and unusual styling also attracted attention. This is an evolution of the original Sensia and adds some new functionality.

Describing the 200D as a 'digital radio' is roughly the same as describing a Saturn 5 rocket as a 'large firework', technically accurate but rather underplaying the technology involved. As well as DAB, the 200D has FM, Internet radio, UPnP media streaming, access to Pure's bespoke 'Lounge' on demand service and the ability to record radio material. Not enough? You can also browse Facebook and Twitter while you do so! This is accessed via a full colour touchscreen and power comes courtesy of a 30W amplifier with DSP tuning.

### In use

The touchscreen is slightly over sensitive at times, and lacking in sensitivity in others which can make searching for stations annoying. Setup is straightforward, and once parked on your home network the 200D is an assured performer as a radio. Speech is generally clear, and the unit has no trouble filling a reasonable size room with sound. Bass isn't subterranean but underpins music with reasonable authority. The main drawback is its streaming client section. Despite allocating a big chunk of my bandwidth to the Pure, I couldn't completely eradicate dropouts with 16/44.1kHz FLAC, and in this regard the 200D is inferior to the Revo Heritage and Sonos units. As a radio though, it's a nice listening companion. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRICE:** £300

**WEBSITE:**  
PURE.COM

### OUR VERDICT



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## Sound Dead Steel Isoplatmat



**T**urntable mats *can* really make a difference, although often it is fairly minor, and out of proportion to the money spent. One that we've found particularly effective, however, is this. It is designed specifically to improve the resonant Mazak (an inexpensive type of aluminium alloy) platters such as those fitted to the Technics SL-1200, or many other classic direct and belt drive designs from the nineteen seventies and eighties.

Available in a choice of 285 and 295mm diameters (so it can fit the Technics and Linn platters), it's made from a trademarked material called Sonphonon, which is a sandwich of steel with a very effective polymer damping compound between. The thicknesses of the steel discs is in a special ratio to reduce resonance still further. The finished article is then balanced and black powder coated. Thickness is 2.3mm, so it won't interfere with VIA too much, although it is, of course, worth resetting properly if your arm offers this.

### In use

It works! Tap it and it's almost as if the vibration disappears into a black hole, it's so dead. Indeed, place the mat on anything resonant, rap it with your knuckle and listen in amazement as it stops clanging! Put it on a Technics SL-1200, and it brings a noticeably smoother upper midband, removing that chromium-plated 'sheen' the deck adds to strings and female voices. The music also gains more organic rhythmic flow, the mat adding slightly to the flywheel effect, I suspect. Overall, it's a brilliant upgrade considering the modest price – one of the very best aftermarket platter mats. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRICE:** £90  
**CONTACT:**  
0191 250 0900  
**WEBSITE:**  
SOUNDDEAD  
STEEL.COM

### OUR VERDICT



## thinksound TS02+ in-ear phones

**A**nother day, another set of in-ear phones to review. But hang on, these are actually quite interesting. An 8mm design with iPod-compatible microphone built-in, the TS02+ comes in a choice of Silver Cherry or Black Chocolate, but the unusual bit is that it has a wood housing. Wood is a very good material, when used well, as it's light and fairly non-resonant – that's why they make speakers with it. Into the wood outer shell is set an aluminium baffle. Total weight is 12g, making the pair of 'phones very easy to wear. The PVC-free, Kevlar reinforced cables are quiet on the move, and four sets of Comply T-200 series ear fittings are supplied (in a nice cotton carrying pouch), one of which should fit your shell-likes.

### Sound quality

Claimed frequency response is said to be 20Hz to 20kHz, but on audition the TS02 didn't seem anywhere near as extended as this, with a slightly rolled off treble that's a lot less lively than rival Sennheisers, for example. However, that's not to say it didn't sound good – indeed I was very pleasantly surprised with its smoothness and subtlety. Unlike so many plastic or metal bodied rivals, its wood enclosures confer a very finessed, resonance-free sound.

Moreover, changing tracks from the thin strains of Abba's *Eagle* to De La Soul's *A Roller Skating Jam Named "Saturdays"* showed the dramatic difference in recording quality in no uncertain terms. So many rivals would suppress this, but the TS02 is so clean and detailed that it celebrated the power and punch of the latter track. A genuinely impressive product, then. **ES**



### DETAILS

**PRICE:** £60  
(APPROX).  
**WEBSITE:**  
THINKSOUND.  
COM

### OUR VERDICT



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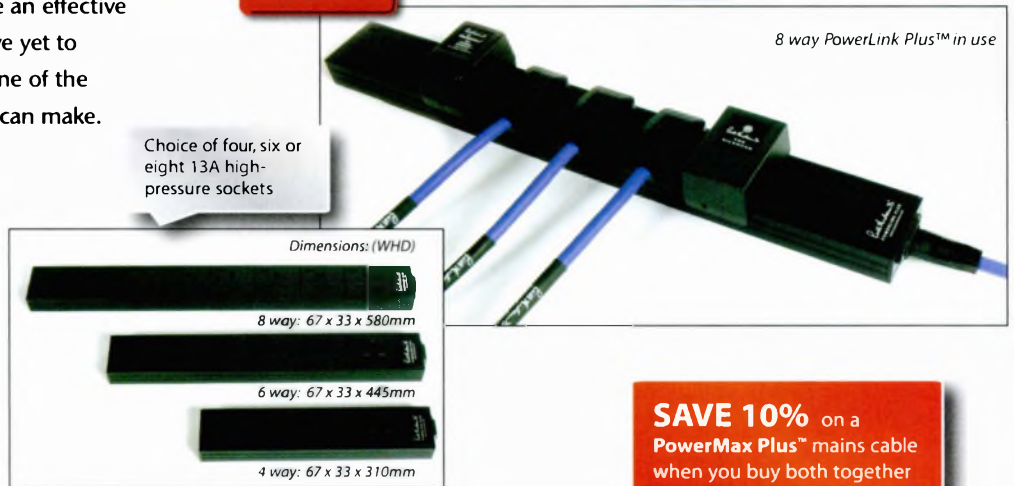
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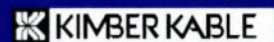
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## ORB Hi-end CRE-2 Cartridge Energiser

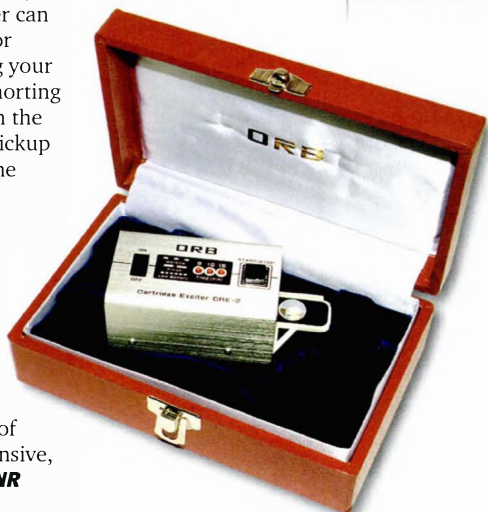
**T**his interesting little device warms up the cartridge's cantilever suspension by exciting the stylus with a gentle 800Hz sine wave. The theory behind this is that your cartridge performs at its best after a warm-up period of about fifteen minutes, as some vinyl addicts will attest. This device carries out this function, eliminating the requirement to play a record for that period of time and thus reducing wear of your prized long playing records.

I must confess that I do find that the sound from my audio system does improve after the first side or so of record playing. I had attributed this to my valves warming up (as I often use an all-valve system), but it may well be due to the cartridge warming up too. To use the CRE-2, place the stylus on the silver mirrored platform and press the Start button. Indicator LEDs show the remaining time from fifteen minutes in five minute steps.

### In use

To test this device out, I first warmed up my system without playing a record for half an hour. I then listened to a track on a record and compared this to playing the same track after running my cartridge on the CRE-2 for the prescribed time period (with the volume at minimum, of course!). I then re-listened to the same track and I could detect a slight overall improvement in terms of ease and general musicality...

The Energiser can also be used for demagnetising your cartridge by shorting out the pins on the back of your pickup before using the device. I tried this out and can say that there was an improvement in clarity, and especially an audible tightening up of the bass. Expensive, but effective. **NR**



### ► DETAILS

**PRICE:** £288  
**CONTACT:**  
01733 350878  
**WEBSITE:**  
ANALOGUE  
SEDUCTION.NET

### OUR VERDICT



## ISOkinetic ISOdek DAB1/DAB2 isolation platforms



**T**he DAB1 is made from a single sheet of 15mm black acrylic fitted with double-sided Delrin and absorbothane feet. Delrin is a hard acetal resin and absorbothane is extremely good at absorbing vibrations with excellent anti-slip properties. The only disadvantage is that it tends to stick firmly to any smooth surface, making it difficult to move the platform. However, this can be overcome by fitting to the exposed surface a disc of black paper, which adheres to the absorbothane but not the table!

The DAB2 adds another 15mm thick acrylic shelf underneath the top shelf, milled top and bottom to the two shelves. The inherent surface tackiness of the absorbothane effectively holds the two shelves together nicely. The resultant platform is beautifully made, very solid and weighs in at around 6.5kg.

### In use

Firstly, the DAB1 was placed under my CD player and I perceived a noticeable improvement in the midrange, with the music flowing more easily. I then listened to the same pieces of music with the DAB2 in place and there were further improvements to be heard, particularly with the dynamic range. During a natural pause in the music when everything went quiet, the silence was almost palpable. Overall, the sound felt more realistic and natural. Similar improvements, though not quite as great, were heard when the platforms were used under my amplifiers.

These are extremely well-made units releasing real sonic improvements; they're fine value for money. **NR**

### ► DETAILS

**PRICE:** DAB1  
£145, DAB2 £235  
**CONTACT:**  
0208 241 8890  
**WEBSITE:**  
ISOKINETIC.  
CO.UK

### OUR VERDICT





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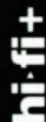
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## Songbird.me for iOS and Android

**W**e have reviewed the desktop player version of Songbird before, but the iOS implementation of its 'social' mobile app has now appeared.

So it has termed the old player 'Songbird Classic', while 'Songbird.me' is a very different kettle of fish, and not an audio playback application at all.

Ironically, despite having registered at Songbird's site to be notified of the Apple version's arrival, my first sighting of the tablet iteration came about through a new link from within Facebook appearing alongside the existing one for Spotify.

But from there the version 1.0 Songbird.me was straightforward to install, and easy to dive into. Much like its web application ([www.songbird.me](http://www.songbird.me)) the presentation is of a set of tiles with links to web information, legitimate and otherwise, on all kinds on music acts, big and small. You can add your own photos and receive push notifications about your favourite artists. The acts featured are driven by currency, or (if you're logged in), the contents of your local Apple music library.

As such it comes across like a video-enabled version of iConcertCal or Songkick on steroids, and is a music-obsessive's dream. The current implementation seems a little rudimentary, but given how the youth of today consume their music culture I can see Songbird.me gaining traction in that sector of the marketplace. It may leave those of us at the more mature end of the spectrum a little bemused... **PC**

**DETAILS**  
**PRICE:** £FREE  
**WEBSITE:**  
GETSONGBIRD.COM

**OUR VERDICT**



**DOWNLOAD**



Picture courtesy of Apple

## Podcasts for iOS

**A**s Apple prepares to unveil its streamlined iTunes 11 for desktops, there have also been some changes in its iPad implementation of store and playback applications. iOS 6 brought with it an in-built invitation to download a variety of complementary Apple applications and the new Podcasts app is one of them.

Podcasts can tend to feel a little 2005 nowadays, but there remains much out there that's worth seeking out, and for the UK-based there is still mileage in considering podcasts proper as an alternative to the BBC's own iPlayer-related app offerings. The divorce of podcasts from their previous homes in iPad 'Music' and 'Video' apps has resulted in perhaps one of the last overtly skeuomorphic app designs now Scott Forstall has been sidelined at Apple. In this case the much-reviled real-life emulation trend has resulted in a rather pointless radio tumbler dial analogue for podcast genre selection, but it does work and toggles simply between audio and video podcasts.

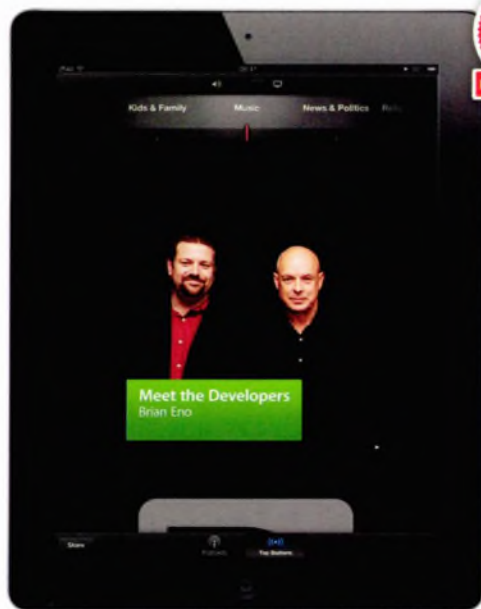
If you can get past the crowbarred-in cutesiness, this app is actually a useful – if just a tad too US-centric – way of perusing what the podcast world currently has to offer. You can still link to the familiar Store if you want to, but subscriptions can be set up and conveniently maintained without going anywhere near it, and you can get social with preprepared links into mail, messages, Twitter and Facebook. Do feel free to advertise your taste in ephemeral entertainment to the world! **PC**

**DETAILS**  
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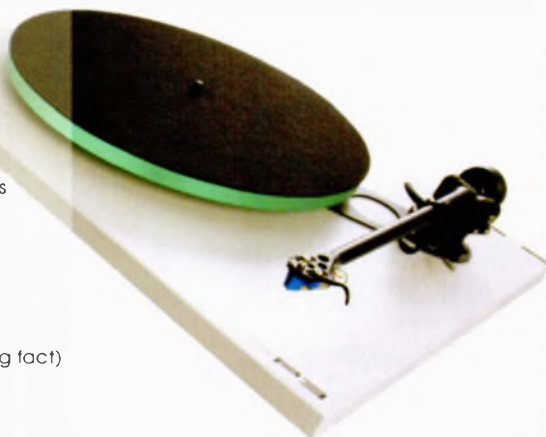
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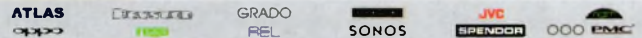
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ANOTHER BRAND WE ENCOUNTERED AT CES, that has finally arrived here, is the American company Parasound. The Z Custom Series is said to be a premium desktop system, its separate components measuring just over 200mm wide and under 50mm high. The line up consists of the Zamp v.3 power amp, a Zpre2 preamp and a Zcd CD player with a Zdac following in December. For more information call 0843 289 7195. Watch for a review next month....

WHARFEDALE'S DIAMOND SPEAKER RANGE has just been refreshed. The new Diamond 100 series is said to use a new profile of Wharfedale's Woven Kevlar cone, based on the research originally carried out for the high-end Jade range. The treble unit has a sheer fabric dome and advanced ferrite magnet system, surrounded by a carefully crafted wave guide.

The crossover was developed using Wharfedale's latest 'Virtual Speaker' software. Rectilinear cabinet shapes were chosen to maximise the internal volume and provide the deepest, most extended bass response, and a special Slot-Loaded Distributed Port is featured for tight bass response. Prices start at £229 for the compact Diamond 121 two-way standmounter, and go up to £999 for the 3-way Diamond 159 floorstander. For details, click on [www.wharfedale.co.uk](http://www.wharfedale.co.uk).

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 237 JANUARY 2003

'Supersonic SACD' adorned the cover of the 'finest hi-fi magazine in the world': Musical Fidelity's Tri-Vista player with valves and a price tag of £4,000. Ten years on, it's sadly a bit of a dinosaur! This month's group test was DVD players for which editor Tim Bower made no apology even if their very presence raised a few eyebrows amongst the dedicated audiophile fraternity. Some good marques though, including Cyrus, Denon, Primare and Roksan. January 2003 also marked the first day in the Gregorian Calendar, although if the prophecies surrounding the last day of the Aztec calendar have come true, you won't be reading this page in 2013 anyway!



HI-FI CHOICE: ISSUE 114 JANUARY 1993

Twenty years ago it was the first ever review of Sony's MiniDisc portable recorder that excited the editorial team and no doubt some of the readers. Reviewer Jason Kennedy's first impressions weren't particularly inspiring... "a bit bland and undynamic with limited bandwidth", he opined, although he generally felt it was an improvement over cassette tape! Comments from the Tokyo Audio Fair were equally unimpressive "The problem with MD is that it is compatible with nothing", snorted Dan Houston. In the real world the Czech Republic was dissolved, riots erupted in Bombay and the European Economic community eliminated trade barriers.



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 66 JANUARY 1989

"We've said it before, and no doubt we'll say it again; choosing loudspeakers is like choosing a pair of shoes", said HFC Editor John Bamford. Interesting analogy, particularly if you'd ever bothered to examine the footwear worn by numerous anorak audiophiles at hi-fi shows around the UK. Yes, buying new shoes are definitely *not* on their list of priorities, but speakers definitely *are* and twenty five years ago, HFC proved it with an amazing thirty-strong group test. Elsewhere in the world, the Soviet Union announced its complete withdrawal from Afghanistan (lessons to be learnt there, then), while George H W Bush succeeds Ronald Regan as the 41st President of the United States.

Isn't it odd how everyday objects, discarded by one generation, have a habit of coming back for the next?

The Compact Cassette is a case in point - it spent most of the last decade in the bargain bin, only to resurge, phoenix-like, from the ashes of analogue. And now it's icier than January in Blackpool in the coolness stakes!

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This month **Jacki Pugh** of YBA chooses four of her favourite albums...



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This is such a great blues rock album dating back to 1989! Constantly played with the title track being one of the best, this surely is one of her finest albums...



KEITH URBAN THE STORY SO FAR

New to my collection, there's not one track I don't love. Keith's guitar playing along with his lovely lyrics and great voice make this absolutely essential listening.



NINA SIMONE HERE COMES THE SUN

Nina's version of *Angel of the Morning* is gorgeous. It's an old album - I love the comment that it may be played on any modern phonograph!



OSCAR PETERSON WE GET REQUESTS

A long time favourite, this is a great mix of standards, originals and pop tunes of the day. He's such a master of the piano and I never tire of hearing this album.

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