



DAC delight

Six affordable digital-to-analogue convertors get the Blind Listening Group Test treatment

Z stars

Parasound's dazzling compact CD player, pre- and power amp combo



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **368**

February 2013

£3.99

Super charge!

Pioneer's SACD-playing PD-50 and powerful A-70 integrated amp...



White haus

T+A's Cala one-box streaming system



33

products tested from Audiolab, Cambridge Audio, MartinLogan and many more...

DEALER VISIT: HiFi Lounge suggests three super systems!

Going for gold

GoldenEar's scorching Aon 3 standmount speaker

Hot bottles

Ariand's PRO845SE integrated valve amp



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Europe: All hail hi-fi's newest superstar.
– **What Hi-Fi?**

Great what you can achieve for 250 Euro in sound & flexibility ... at this price invest in two, one for home, one to go... – **einsnull**

Australia: The reason you would buy the DragonFly is simple - it is the smallest and most portable solution on offer, with this level of sound quality.
– **Wicked Digital**

Asia: DragonFly is small but it's a revolutionary product that will change our way of listening to music. All future USB DAC products will be categorized as before and after the DragonFly.
– **Good Review**

North America: AudioQuest's \$249 DragonFly USB DAC is brilliant in every respect: form factor, cool factor, versatility, value, and sound quality. I can't think of a product that makes high-end sound more accessible to more people. Want better sound? Here, plug this into your computer. Done. – **The Absolute Sound**

The AudioQuest DragonFly is certainly the coolest product I've used in recent memory ... I know of no other product that performs this well for so little money. – **Computer Audiophile**



audioquest



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Bit perfection Six DACs tested



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Reel to real 50 years of the Compact Cassette

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Marianne Faithfull *Broken English*

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!



You only have to look at Britain's busy roads to see that black cars are all the rage right now. A decade ago it was silver, and ten years before that red was the hottest hue on the block. And just as fashions change in vehicles, so other consumer goods transform before our very eyes too...

In hi-fi, DACs are suddenly the magic of the moment. Remember back in the late nineteen eighties – when Margaret Thatcher bestrode the British political scene and Simply Red was a permanent part of the pop landscape? It was then that the trend for separate digital-to-analogue converters took hold. Supposedly an easy way to upgrade your CD player, the likes of Arcam's Black Box sold in droves. Then suddenly, they seemed to fall from popularity, and ten years later you could barely find a single such product.

Now though, buoyed by the rise of computer audio and Blu-ray players, the boot's on the other foot and these number crunching boxes are all the rage again. How long this phenomenon will last will be interesting to gauge, but right now there's a plethora of excellent products out there – as this month's Blind Listening Group Test (p22) shows...

Any middle-aged CD player or mass market Blu-ray player can be transformed by the addition of this type of aftermarket DAC, while popular streaming solutions such as the Squeezebox are also dramatically upgraded too. For once then, don't be afraid to follow fashion. Rather, go forth and do some auditioning, then be amazed! Happy New Year, one and all.

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



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3 EVO Sirius
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4 EVO3 Syncro
sophisticated power cable - £995.00
20% deposit, then £66.33/month x 12*

5 EVO3 Super Titan ultimate
high-current power conditioner - £7,995.00
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6 EVO3 Genesis ultimate
high-end power conditioner - £11,995.00
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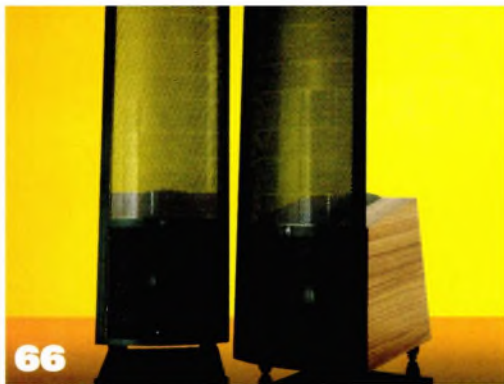


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MartinLogan Montis loudspeaker

"It makes so many conventional speakers sound fake, flawed and flatulent..."

David Price: MartinLogan Montis loudspeaker p66

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Energy rush

Acoustic Energy is going back to basics, with some design cues from its classic monitors of yesteryear. But the new 3-series is still as modern as tomorrow, says **David Price...**

PRICE: £425–£999

AVAILABLE: NOW

CONTACT: 01285 654432

WEB: ACOUSTIC-ENERGY.CO.UK

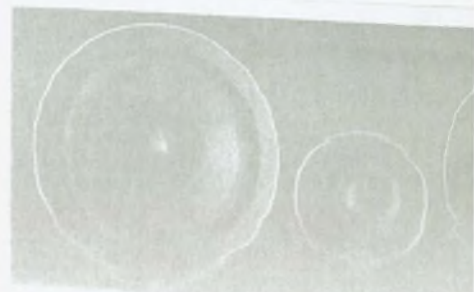
Acoustic Energy has always had an impressive range of budget loudspeakers, but with the new 3-series, it looks like the company has surpassed itself. Early samples shown to this magazine show superb build quality (for the price), striking gloss paint finishes and intelligent engineering.

Developed at the company's Cirencester head office, the new 3-Series is the first range in a new portfolio of loudspeakers that is said to mark a return to Acoustic Energy's engineering roots and pro studio heritage. Majoring on accuracy, detail and dynamics, many of the 3-Series technologies hark back to the famous AE1 monitor of twenty one years ago, the company says. This includes the return of those renowned spun aluminium cones, hard anodised on both sides to create a ceramic layer/aluminium sandwich with exceptional stiffness.

A new soft dome tweeter, plus what is described as 'phase perfect' crossovers, and extremely high power handling due to a special motor cooling design are claimed for the new range. The new crossovers have been developed through extensive auditioning, and the company says, use high quality

components throughout and are capable of delivering high current with minimum distortion. Each model is reflex loaded with a front mounted slot-port, said to significantly reduce port turbulence. Usefully, front porting allows even the largest models to be placed closer to back walls than rear-ported designs, and positioning the slot at the base of the baffle affords greater room-coupling support for ultra-low frequency reproduction.

Constructed with braced heavy-weight fibreboard, the larger models in the range feature a gentle rearward slope on the baffle. This time aligns the drivers for greater coherence between HF and LF output, resulting in a more natural and integrated sound throughout, it is claimed. Cosmetically the new speakers incorporate contemporary cabinet architecture, multi-textured surface treatments and sophisticated trim executions. The main cabinet panels are finished in high-gloss lacquered paint with both the piano black and gloss white options complemented by a matt rubberised surface on the baffles. Look out for an exclusive review of the brand new Acoustic Energy 301 in next month's *Hi-Fi Choice!*



With its new 3-series loudspeakers, it looks like Acoustic Energy has surpassed itself...



Brand in the hand

IT'S NOT THE HARDEST THING IN THE WORLD TO IMAGINE A LIFE OF MEGA CORPORATIONS BATTLING ONE ANOTHER in what's an effectively a land grab for the new frontier. Just as giant multinational companies have endeavoured to move across national boundaries in search of more market share, so they're now out to get as much of cyberspace for themselves as is possible...

In the entertainment industry, this has resulted in a number of giant companies moving in on what you might think are unlikely areas. Pepsi is the latest to carve itself a slice of the cyber pie, so to speak, with hints that it is launching a record label-services division. Speaking to Billboard, PepsiCo's global chief marketing officer Frank Cooper said that he wants his company to play "a greater role in distributing content", no less.

As well as hinting at the possibility of becoming a record label, the soft drinks giant is also said to be expanding its music activities with various collaborations with big name artists, with Beyonce acting as representative for the brand in some creative projects, for example. As the Internet implants itself ever further on people's daily lives, expect more and more tie-ups between large corporations and the music industry. It was ever thus the way of course, but never to such an extent as now. Will the day soon come when your media player is compelled to flash advertisements for products endorsed by the artist you're playing? Maybe then we will see a mass migration back to vinyl and cassette!



Beyonce is one of a number of recording artists acting as creative representatives of companies outside the music business...

Mission possible

New affordable speaker series covers all the bases...

Mission has announced a new mid-price speaker range – the SX Series includes two standmount speakers, three floorstanders, and two centre loudspeakers.

The SX1 (£699) and SX2 (£849) form the standmount offerings, while the SX3 (£1,499), SX4 (£1,799), and SX5 (£1,999) make up a trio of floorstanding options.

Mission has, it says, designed a wide bandwidth bass/midrange driver that reproduces all frequencies from 30Hz to 4kHz via the SX MC driver, a metal/fibre cone composite. The driver is housed in a cast-aluminium shell that is securely mounted on the diecast front baffle. Additionally, Mission sets this diecast chassis into a multilayer cabinet sub-baffle

with a system that securely clamps the driver to both – ensuring the desired mechanical stability is achieved.

A range of cabinet finishes is available, including some handsome piano lacquer options.



PRICE: £699-£1,999 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01480 447700 **WEB:** MISSION.CO.UK

In tune

Sansui launches its new DR-201V DAB/FM tuner...



The newly resurgent Sansui brand is launching a standalone DAB/FM tuner to complement its recent range of hi-fi components, enabling radio lovers to enjoy the best of digital and analogue radio stations from their audio system.

The £225 black or silver DR-201V is a full-size audio component styled, says Sansui, to integrate into customers' existing 201 series hi-fi systems or as an add-on for any other system. Its ability to receive DAB, DAB+ and FM signals provides the user with a large selection of radio stations to choose from and ten favourite stations can be saved in the preset memory. Using the supplied

remote control to find a station is simple, even from a distance, thanks to the large two-line dot matrix VFD display.

The company has designed into the DR-201V a range of connectivity options to simplify integration into as many systems as possible. Stereo RCA sockets provide the analogue outputs and the tuner may also be connected into a digital-based system, such as the matching Sansui SAP-201V DAC equipped integrated amplifier, via optical or coaxial digital outputs. For custom installation situations, the DR-201V is also equipped with a RS232 connection for remote control.

PRICE: £225 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01235 511166 **WEB:** SANSUI.CO.UK

New look

TANGENT HAS LAUNCHED A NEW DAB2GO DAB+/FM TABLE TOP RADIO offering listeners, says the company, the versatility of a table-top radio for listening to your favourite stations inside the home, as well portable benefits while outside. An easy-to-read LCD display shows the signal strength, scrolling text support, mains/battery status and station name, in addition to the current radio programme and selected source.

The DAB2go also features five station presets, clock with dual alarm and snooze button, optional battery power, carry handle and large easy-to-operate buttons for on/off/volume and station tuning/select. It has good connectivity too, via an auxiliary input for connecting your iPod or smartphone, headphone input, record output for connecting to an amplifier and a USB charge socket for charging devices. It is priced at £99 and comes in a choice of six colours. tangent-audio.com



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nothing less...”



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aspect of vinyl playback”
Diva IISP Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*, January 2011

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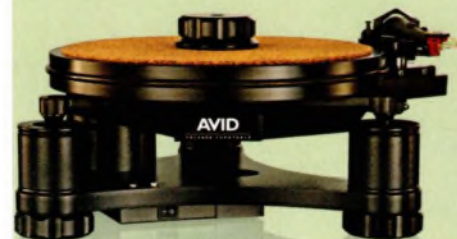
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T+A

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The new CRITERION series is in many ways a culmination of our 30 years experience designing loudspeakers, developing many unique techniques and technologies along the way. Designed to offer an extremely clean yet powerful bass response, we have created a long transmission line double low bass system, which not only produces a deep response but also reproduces the subtle notes just as well.

Combined with the D'Appolito mid/treble arrangement, which allows our dedicated midrange and Waveguide high-frequency drivers to deliver a wide dispersion, accurate spatial imaging and a wealth of detail, the overall performance is an effortless harmonious tonal balance. We are very proud of this new CRITERION range and we think you might like them too.

Hand built in Germany, the CRITERION TCD 310 S from T+A is available in the UK now.

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Better by design

Meridian upgrades the performance of its most advanced hi-fi products



Meridian has announced new performance upgrades to its 808 Signature Reference Compact Disc Player and 861 Reference Digital Surround Controller. The latest edition 808 includes improved technology and

components that, says Meridian, enhances audio quality in a number of areas.

The latest 861 Reference Digital Surround Controller includes new features such as the ability to manage centre-channel height imaging in conjunction

with the new DSP7200HC loudspeaker. The latter also includes DSP developments, plus what Meridian calls innovative music modes and the aforementioned height imaging system for home cinema applications.

PRICE: £POA **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01480 445678 **WEB:** MERIDIAN-AUDIO.COM

Blue tonic

Novel portable Bluetooth speaker range launched

New consumer electronics brand i-box unveils the first in a new range of accessories for the tablet and smartphone generation – the Twist is a portable speaker offering wireless Bluetooth convenience and a five-year warranty as standard.

The Twist's unusual shape and tactile mat black finish give it an air of distinction alongside other portable

speakers, it's claimed. Its light weight and compact dimensions mean you can take it practically everywhere you and your Bluetooth gear go – from the desk, to the kitchen, even the sun lounger. An illuminated panel provides the necessary controls, while pairing it with any Bluetooth-compatible device like your iPad, iPhone, Android device or PC is, says i-box, an absolute cinch.



PRICE: £70 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01234 263700 **WEB:** IBOXSTYLE.COM

Tubular steal

Valve hybrid headphone amplifier offers top value for money

The Canor TP10 is described as a reference-standard valve hybrid headphone amplifier that uses a 12AT7 input valve feeding a Class-A output stage incorporating Burr-Brown amps and polypropylene capacitors.

The circuitboards feature patented CMT (Canor Milling Technology), while the volume control is mounted in

precision bearings and connected to an audiophile-quality ALPS blue potentiometer. Housed in a resonance-damped chassis with a 10mm thick aluminium front panel, the TP10 has gold-plated input and output connectors, and can drive dynamic headphones from 30 ohms to 300 ohms. It's available in a choice of black or silver finishes, now.



PRICE: £850 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01276 501 392 **WEB:** CANOR-AUDIO.COM

Power Chord

Chord Electronics grows its reference range...



Chord Electronics has expanded its Reference line range with the addition of a network music player, the DSX1000. Available in a £7,500 standard finish and £7,830 nickel-plated, the new DSX1000 is a high-performance digital network streamer that boasts Chord's proprietary DAC technology at its heart.

The latest-generation Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) architecture found inside the DSX1000 gives it a significant sonic advantage over ordinary network players with off-the-shelf DAC chips, says Chord.

The DSX1000 features UPnP/DLNA access and control and is capable of transforming the

sound of MP3, WMA, WAV, AAC, ALAC and FLAC files, with 24-bit/192kHz support where available. Key features include an inbuilt analogue volume control circuit and line-level analogue outputs, which feature both balanced XLR and RCA phono connections. It also has a full-colour 3.5-inch TFT front-panel display showing album artwork, set up options, etc.

The unit can also be enjoyed using many of the UPnP apps for the iPhone, iPad and Android devices. Chord Electronics is also offering a custom version of SongBook for the DSX1000, which will be available to download from iTunes soon. An Android version may also be available later on.

PRICE: £7,500-£7,830 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01622 721444 **WEB:** CHORDELECTRONICS.CO.UK

Making a Living

AUDIO PRO'S latest addition to its Living wireless speaker range is a single stereo speaker with modern Scandinavian style, in a slim leather-covered design. The LV1 uses wireless technology to transmit audio as a peer-to-peer system or as part of a larger Audio Pro Living home network. Available in red, white or black leather finishes, the LV1 is priced at £350.

Living LV1 is the smallest speaker in the Living series – an award-winning lifestyle multiroom audio solution based on wireless technology to distribute audio content throughout the home. It's the perfect speaker to either start or expand an existing system as it is easy to place anywhere thanks to its slim and unobtrusive design, says Audio Pro.

With its built-in digital amplifier, wireless receiver, DSP (Digital Signal Processing) and digital filters, the LV1 delivers stereo sound from a single box using Audio Pro's 'Embracing Sound' technology.

A complete speaker system in one box, LV1 is ready to use in the Audio Pro unique network with full CD-quality. This means you can play FLAC or Apple Lossless files without any compression and you

can add as many speakers as you like within range of the transmitter. It's claimed to be easy to use, as you just plug the USB transmitter into your computer and power up the speaker and you are ready to listen to your music. The transmitter can be connected to any audio device with a sound output, such as PC/Mac, iPod/iPhone/iPad dock, cell phone or radio. The included remote control allows the user to set all volume levels throughout the home – the master volume of all zones together or the individual zone volume. For details, see audioprodirect.co.uk



NEWS IN BRIEF

• **THE NEW JBL ONBEAT MICRO** is a compact speaker dock for the iPhone 5, iPod touch 5th generation and iPod nano 7th generation. It boasts a serious audio punch, thanks to two full-range transducers and built-in digital signal processing to deliver, says JBL, dynamic, space-filling sound.

With the new Lightning docking connector built in, this speaker dock lets you enjoy your music without wires or adapters, and even has a USB port for compatibility with other devices. Compact and portable, the JBL OnBeat Micro can bring the noise from ceiling to floor for up to five hours when it's using batteries and allows you to charge your device when using AC power. Priced at £70, for more details, click on jbl.com.



• **THE NEW AKG K551 HEADPHONE**

offers a combination of AKG reference class sound quality and a new-look closed-back design. The street version of the award-winning K550s, the K551 features cushioned ear cups housing 50mm drivers in a full over-ear design, so music lovers can immerse themselves in sound without disturbing others.

The over-the-ear headphones are extremely lightweight and come in two new finishes (black/silver with silver cable and white/silver with blue cable). For further convenience, they fold flat for easy storage at home or in a briefcase or backpack, and feature a microphone line in, so that calls can be made and received on the move.

A 3.5mm jack is supplied for use with an iPhone, iPad, iPod, Android smartphone or other portable music devices, while a 6.3mm jack is provided for use with a home audio/video receiver. harman.com



ROCK STEADY...



Krell, 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.

The 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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AIR apparent



say that golden-eared engineers in the prestigious recording studio are let loose on the voicing in a bid to produce a less parochial sound.

Past perfect

Although strikingly modern in some senses – both the A-70 amplifier and matching PD-50 SACD player come equipped with all the latest USB connectivity and DAC functionality – I can't help getting the sense of (as a recent US president once said) "deja vu all over again" when I look at them. Indeed, if you got into your DeLorean time machine and warped back twenty years, you'd be able to buy a product that was aesthetically and ergonomically indistinguishable to the PD-50 and A-70 of today. So in one sense at least, these are quite conservative products, more so even than the previous generation of Pioneers, such as the A-A9mk2.

Still, if you're in the market for a well presented, feature festooned £800 integrated amplifier of the compulsory (in Japan) 435mm

A special UK-tuned design, Pioneer's new A-70 amplifier offers Eastern promise with British voicing. **David Price** partners it to the new PD-50 SACD spinner...

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Pioneer PD-50/A-70
ORIGIN: Japan
TYPE: CD player and integrated amp
WEIGHT:
PD-50; 7.8kg
A-70; 17.1kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
PD-50:
435x130x329mm
A-70:
435x141.5x361.5mm

FEATURES:

- A-70; SACD/CD, phono (MM/MC), Aux, Network, Digital Coaxial Input, Recorder, Tuner, Power Amp Direct In, USB, SR in
 - ESS SABRE32 192 kHz/32-bit Audio DAC
 - quoted power: 65W RMS (8 ohms) per channel
 - PD-50; plays CD, CD-R, CD-RW, SACD, DVD-R, DVD-RW (Audio only)
 - twin Asahi Kasei 192kHz 32-bit AKM4480 DACs
 - formats: DSD, MP3, WMA, AAC, MPEG-4
 - Sound Retriever, Pure Audio mode, Auto Level Control
 - 1x digital optical out, 1x digital coaxial out, 1x analogue out, 1x USB in
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Pioneer GB
TELEPHONE:
01753789789
WEBSITE:
pioneer.eu/uk

Is there is such as thing as a national sound? I'd say yes. Japanese audiophiles tend to go for a light, spry, lively presentation with an obviously informative midband. Bass can often be quite strong and muscular too, and treble sparkles with filigree detail and bite. We British, on the other hand, go for a tonally warmer, rounder and smoother sound – one that's arguably less impressive in

a 'hi-fi' sense at least. There's rather a wide gulf between the two tribes.

For this reason, Pioneer was one of the first oriental manufacturers to tune things for occidental ears. As far back as the late nineteen eighties, its A400 integrated got special tweaking and duly sold by the shedload. More recently, the company has farmed out the fettling to London-based AIR Studios, and the A-70 tested here is the latest product of this. Suffice to



width, replete with chunky metal knobs and sumptuous brushed aluminium fascia, then you've just found one. I was surprised by the super quality and feel of the A-70. There is absolutely nothing to criticise, aside from its formulaic styling. Take every feature yet dreamed up, and a couple more, stick it on the front panel and faster than you can say "Kawasaki", you have your product! It's so well finished it makes the already fine offerings from Denon and Marantz look a little iffy, and Onkyo won't be too pleased either. Along with the usual balance and tone controls, mute and source direct switches, you get loudspeaker switching and a plethora of inputs – including 24-bit/192kHz-capable USB ESS Sabre DAC and a MM/MC phono cartridge input.

One point of deviance from the norm is its Class D power amplifier design. There's a school of thought that asserts the breed as a whole is unmusical and artificial sounding, although my experience tells me it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it. It's perfectly possible to produce a bad, conventional Class AB design, whereas there are some Class Ds that are really rather musically convincing. Whatever the sonic

merits, there's no disputing the low power consumption and cool running of this efficient mode of operation – in a world where the government is forcing our electricity bills upwards to subsidise 'green energy', Class D makes sense. Claimed output power is 65W per channel into 8 ohms, and I had no reason to doubt this. Twin EI power transformers are fitted, one each for the power amp and preamp sections, each shielded in separate blocks.

Silver lining

Surprisingly perhaps, Pioneer's PD-50 is an SACD player. Here in Britain, Super Audio Compact Disc never really went anywhere special, even if it won a few faithful friends trying. In Japan however, the format had a far finer flourish in its younger days, which is why Japanese manufacturers persist with the technology. Of course, in the UK companies such as Linn still press up (some very fine) SACDs, so it's still a handy feature to have – and as anyone who's ever heard the format will testify, it can sound really rather nice...

This new Pioneer disc spinner slavishly follows the template set by so many of its forbears, inasmuch as it too is a 435mm box with a centrally mounted drawer loading drive and a vacuum fluorescent display (shame it's not OLED, considering Pioneer's prowess with this technology). The display is dimmable, and there's the option of a Pure Direct mode, which cuts off the digital output driver chip and the display, for better sound through the analogue outputs – worth having, I found. An Auto Level Control equalises the volume differences between tracks, and Sound Retriever is claimed to improve compressed audio files – an optimistic boast I'd say!

While the unit is slickly finished and confers a sense of quality, the disc loading drawer – so often a weak point of budget silver disc spinners – feels a little cheaper than it should. It's light plastic and not the smoothest in operation. A slot loader such as that on its Rotel RCD-12 rival would feel nicer to use – it's an opportunity missed. Another gripe is the speed of disc loading – this is something that's always afflicted SACD-based machines and feels tiresomely slow compared to standard CD, let alone networked music...

Working on the popular theory that the CD player is dead, and that all such devices are now just DACs with optical disc drives fitted, the PD-50 duly gets both a front-mounted USB input (which plays MP3, MPEG-4, AAC, WMA and even DSD files off a USB memory stick), and a rear-mounted coaxial digital input. Inside, the unit sports a rigid base and twin power transformers separately shielded from the audio circuitry. Onboard Hi-bit32 Audio Signal Processing is said to upsample the digital datastream for better sound. Overall, this is a pretty strong package at the price.

Sound quality

Despite the UK tuning, there's still a distinctively Japanese feel to this Pioneer combination; you'd never mistake it for a relatively warm, smooth Cyrus CD and amplifier, for example. Rather, the sound is bristling with detail, with great emphasis put on the way notes begin and end; there's a sense of everything being very finely etched and carefully rendered. It gives a wide, bright, airy view on the recorded acoustic, like the brilliant white light of a crisp, Tokyo autumn morning.

This makes the combo a highly satisfying listen; you can feel the Pioneers are putting in the hours on your behalf, reaching deep into the recording to serve up a peppy, rhythmic sound. Sade's *Your Love is King*, for example, gets its impact from the subtle rhythmic phrasing of the percussion, along with Ms Adu's impassioned vocal intonation. It's a song that's so easy for budget separates to get lost in translation, but impressively this silver disc player and integrated amp combination keep things together.

At the same time however, there's little in the way of romance. These Pioneers deliver the music in a rather matter-of-fact way, one that majors on the physicality of the rhythm section, rather than going out of their way to impart the smoky, seductive ambience of the music which you'll hear from more capable – and usually more expensive – performers. This song is, in the general scheme of things, smooth and warm, yet this combo doesn't really tell you this as clearly as it should.

I first tried the two separates connected digitally via a high quality coaxial digital interconnect, but I soon found that moving to the analogue outputs of the PD-50 player, with Pure Direct mode switched on, gave a more musically satisfying sound, with a slightly deeper, fuller bass too. You'd never call this combo bass-light, but neither does it immerse you in low frequencies that seemingly drop down to the very centre of the earth itself. Australia can relax, then. The A-70 certainly didn't sound breathless when called upon to reproduce the sledgehammer bassline on Beatmasters' *Rok Da House*, but then again, driven by the PD-50, I've heard more commanding subterranean sounds from other integrated amplifiers with lower rated power output.

The electronic noodling of Visioneers' *Come Play the Milky Night* was pure pleasure, the Pioneer combo setting up a truly capacious soundstage, inside which all the various elements of the mix sat happily, playing along independently of one another convincingly. There wasn't the sense of instruments just falling out of the air, seemingly from nowhere, which you get with truly high end hi-fi, but considering their modest prices, the Pioneers did a commendably impressive job. Once again, attention was drawn to the midband's hypnotic drum pattern – the interplay

Q&A

Geoff Loveday

Pioneer Product Executive



DP: Given the decline of SACD, why didn't you just make a CD player?

GL: As a high resolution disc based audio format, we wanted to include SACD for those users who have already adopted the format. Also, an SACD playback technology was necessary in order to support DSD files, another playback format we wanted to incorporate into this new range of players.

Where is the PD-50's SACD transport mechanism sourced? What power supply arrangement does it have?

The drive mechanism is made by Pioneer, and we also developed the pickup area ourselves too. The PD-50 uses an EI type power supply. It has two transformers, one for the digital circuit and one for the analogue circuit. An EI type was chosen to give the best possible sound quality whilst also enabling us to maintain an extremely competitive price point.

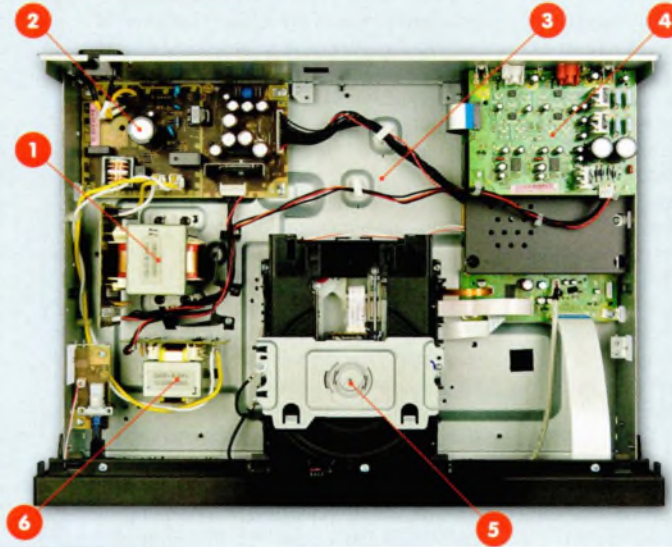
Why did you choose Class D for the A-70 amplifier, rather than AB which many people believe sounds better?

We believe the continued honing and development of our Class D amplifier platform offers significant performance benefits in several key areas such as power output, transient delivery and overall sound performance. Class D amps allow flexible circuit layout and patterning to realise optimal design within the constraints of amplifier construction. Multiple Pioneer-original parts are used to support effective operation. Dual EI power supply transformers within separate shielded cases, one for the power amplifier section and one for the preamp, are used. Many hours were put in during the sound tuning process at Air Studios. With their professional input we feel we were able to extract the best possible performance from the amp.

The A-70's MM/MC phono input sounds surprisingly good - why?

It's a hybrid of op-amp and discrete circuit design. In voicing it, we pay as much attention to the analogue inputs as we do to the digital ones.

LAB REPORT - PD-50



- 1 frame transformer, analogue section
- 2 power supply board
- 3 pressed steel chassis
- 4 analogue output board
- 5 CD/SACD drive mechanism
- 6 frame transformer, digital section

ON TEST

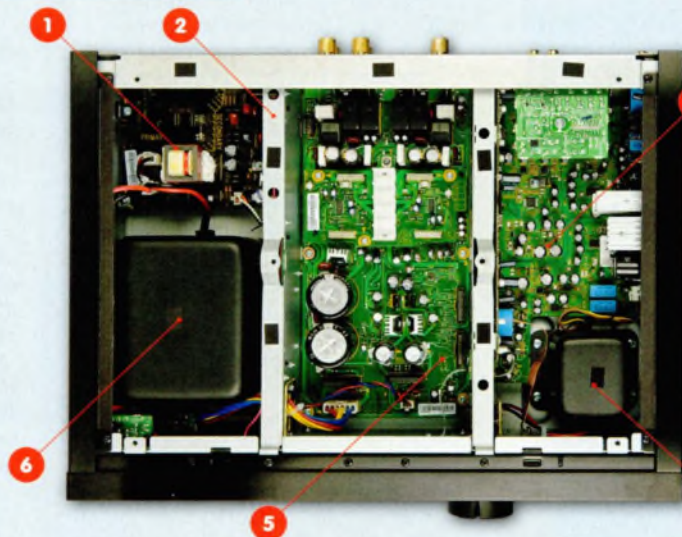
Pioneer's new flagship CD/SACD player/DAC boasts a few novel features, not least in its preserving much of SACD's potential 100kHz+ bandwidth by *not* downsampling to LPCM. In practice, its SACD response stretches out to -1.3dB/40kHz, -9.0dB/60kHz down to -23dB/80kHz while appearing just a little flatter and more extended with 24-bit/192kHz digital inputs at -0.4dB/40kHz, -4.8dB/60kHz and -20dB/

90kHz. Both CD and SACD media enjoy about a dB extra S/N (107.5dB vs. 106.5dB) over those S/PDIF digital inputs while jitter is lowest at 160psec via SACD. The jitter spectra are less 'tidy' via S/PDIF, regardless of sample rate, even though the cumulative total is still innocuous at ~175psec.

Some of the more basic specs, including its 2.07V maximum output, moderate 440ohm source impedance, better-than-100dB stereo separation

and low distortion (0.0004% through bass and midrange, rising to 0.007% at 20kHz) are all perfectly 'average' these days. Pioneer's choice of digital filter for CD and digital inputs is more revealing, however, for this appears to be a minimum phase FIR type that trades a freedom from pre-ringing and acausal distortions for extra post-ringing and some slight HF phase distortion. This, possibly, will exert the biggest subjective impact. **PM**

LAB REPORT - A-70



- 1 standby power supply board
- 2 chassis bracing bar
- 3 preamplifier board
- 4 EI transformer for preamp section
- 5 power amplifier board
- 6 EI transformer for power amp section

ON TEST

This latest Class D amplifier consumes 25W when idle (11W in standby) but just 170W at its rated 2x65W/80hm power output. This amounts to a 76% efficiency - high by Class A/B standards but below the ~90% target aimed for by the coolest of Class Ds. In practice, optimum efficiency is only achieved at maximum output which, in this case, is rather closer to 2x82W/80hm and 2x135W/40hm where the figure

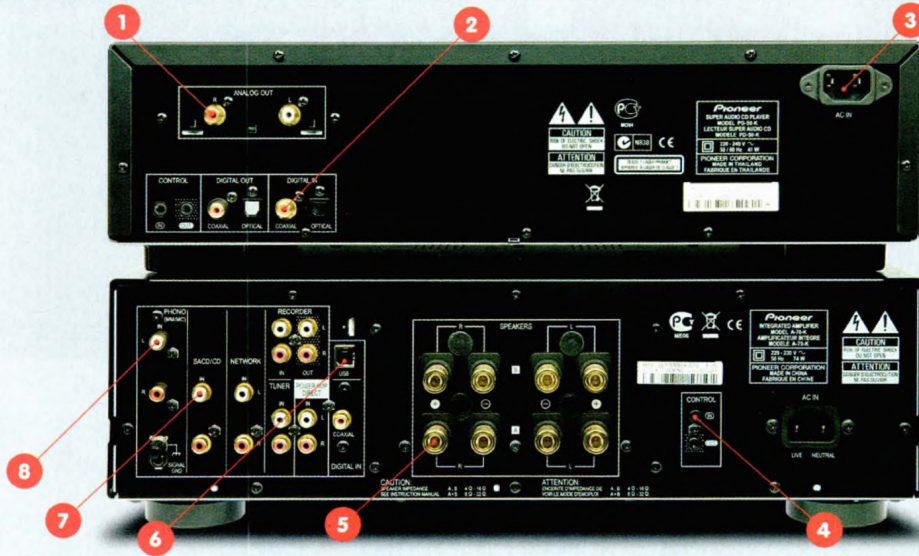
improves to over 80%. Unlike many other Class D amplifiers, Pioneer's A-70 offers even higher output under dynamic or music-like conditions, reaching 100W, 190W and 320W into 8, 4 and low 20hm loads at <1% THD.

And while we're on the subject, distortion is generally well maintained at 0.0007-0.017% from 1W to 65W through bass and midrange but, thanks to the inductive output filter that's a feature of almost

all Class D amps, it's typically ~50x higher at higher (20kHz) frequencies.

Unlike some newer single-ended Class D amplifiers, the A-70's frequency response is still influenced by the speaker load. Pioneer has 'tuned' the amp's filter resonance (+17dB/48kHz unloaded) to yield a slight treble lift of +0.5dB/20kHz and +1.3dB/35kHz into 80hm but with a gently rolled-off treble (-1.2dB/20kHz) into a lower 40hm load. **PM**

CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA phono outputs
- 2 coaxial digital input
- 3 IEC power socket
- 4 control bus sockets
- 5 speaker binding post
- 6 USB digital input
- 7 SACD analogue input
- 8 phono analogue input

between the electronic bass drum, snares and hi hats – along with the strummed minor chords of the electric guitar. Bass plodded along manfully, underpinning the song very nicely.

Taken in isolation, I found the PD-50 had a slightly mechanical sound via CD. Make no mistake, it was pleasingly precise, and offered a focused perspective on any recording presented, along with a beautifully rendered upper midband and treble the like of which you simply couldn't get from humble old 16-bit until recently. But like some other upsampling CD players, what

The A-70 amplifier impressed greatly – fed with a decent digital source it really sang...

it gained on the swings it lost on the roundabouts – the midband lacked emotional intensity, instead coming over as rather cerebral and detached. It managed to make poignantly sad vocal lines sound a tad dispassionate, stripping songs of their emotional purchase. Although never nasty to listen to, the PD50 is not a rocker when spinning Compact Discs, even if it did really pull ahead on SACD [see boxout].

The A-70 amplifier impressed me greatly. It was never in any way apologetic for its Class D design; fed with a high end digital source it really sang. It was able to exert very tight control over the Q Acoustics 2050i speakers used to partner it, and even did a sturdy job of driving

the high end Martin Logan Montis! While I'd never seriously recommend this as a combination, the point is that the Pioneer amplifier proved unfazed by the tasks set it.

Tonally, it's fractionally warmer than its PD-50 brother; you'd hardly call it opulent but still it was able to accurately communicate the tonal character of sources it was fed by. It was also able to make a decent stab at the music's rhythms, and get feet tapping. Whereas it had majored on the midband with its matching CD player, a high end digital disc spinner had it making a very nice noise from bottom to top. The bass filled out convincingly; its soundstage widened still further and gained real depth. Via the PD-50 on CD, things had congealed just a little much around the plane of the loudspeakers.

I was impressed by its crisp sounding internal DAC, which proved decently musical and good enough for iDevice duties, but it can't be seriously recommended as a replacement for a decent mid-price design such as an Audiolab M-DAC for example, which is a step or three up the digital ladder. However, I was most surprised by the built-in phono stage. Again, it's no substitute for a top notch £500 design, but still it sounded really rather nice being fed by a Lyra Delos moving coil cartridge. Impressively noise-free, it delivered a sugary rendition of Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage*, bristling with detail and atmosphere. Generally smooth, musical and delicate with some lovely out-of-box imaging, it was light years ahead of the poor examples fitted to so many other Japanese integrated amplifiers.



WITH SACD, the PD-50 sounded appreciably better than Compact Disc. This subtle sounding silver disc player gained a new found sense of purpose with Art of Noise's Moments In Love. The soundstage increased in height, the bass filled out and there was a slight smoothing of the upper mid, whilst treble sweetened and got more subtle still. Interestingly though, it wasn't just the hi-fi aspects that improved, the music began to flow rather a lot better. It gained a sense of rhythmic urgency, which allied to extra clarity, detail and smoothness, made for a lovely listen.

It was almost as if the PD-50 was waiting for SACD to really show what it could do. It's not ever thus the way – I've reviewed several Sony SACD players in the past which have only sounded slightly superior on their Super Audio layer. If you have a sizeable SACD collection then, the PD-50 suddenly comes into the running as a highly recommendable machine rather than just a competent partner for the A-70.

Conclusion

These generously specified and well made Pioneers proved most reliable and enjoyable throughout the audition period. Of the two, the A-70 amplifier is the stronger, with a large, smooth and sumptuous sound. The matching PD-50 silver disc spinner is capable too, but only really rocks with SACD, where it sings like a bird. Recommended, both. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

VERDICT - PD-50

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Fine build; wide range of facilities; wonderfully clean and musical SACD sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slow disc access; CD sound a little cerebral
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Very strong performer at the price that makes great sense for SACD fans especially
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

VERDICT - A-70

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Power; facilities; big, spacious, smooth sound; impressive phono stage
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Conservative styling
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent all round affordable integrated amplifier with a bright and breezy sound, fine build and bagsof facilities
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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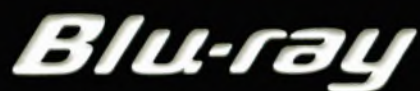
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Hi-Fi Choice employs the most rigorous test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

Unique group tests

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

BLIND-LISTENING TESTS

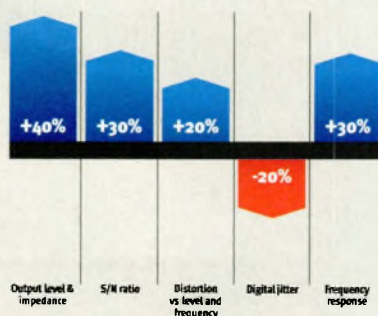
THIS CRUCIAL process, carefully controlled and yet sufficiently relaxed that our listeners do not feel that they're being tested, forms the heart of our Group Test review. Our panel of three listeners are not aware of the brand or price of the product they are listening to, but they are able to choose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

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

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

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

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



OUTPUT LEVEL & IMPEDANCE

The typical output level of a DAC is 2V but its ability to deliver this level at all frequencies through long cables or into all amplifiers is indicated by its output impedance.

SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO

This a direct representation of the DAC's A-weighted Signal-to-Noise (S/N) ratio, measured in 3rd-octave bands from 20Hz-20kHz relative to its maximum output.

DISTORTION VS LEVEL AND FREQUENCY

Rather than quote a single figure for distortion at one frequency and level, this value represents a measure of the distortion trend across both the entire audio band and over a full 100dB of the DAC's dynamic range.

DIGITAL JITTER

Jitter is caused by an uncertainty in the timing of digital audio data as it is recovered and processed by the DAC. Once converted to analogue audio at the output, jitter manifests as a very particular form of distortion.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

This is a measure the 'flatness' of the DAC's frequency response up to 20kHz with 44.1kHz/48kHz digital inputs and to 40kHz with hi-res 96kHz/192kHz sources.



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.

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HOW WE TEST

THIS MONTH'S LISTENING PANEL



MIKE CREEK (LEFT) **GIFTED ENGINEER** Mike will forgive us for saying he's been in the industry for many years, and is custodian of Creek and Epos.

ROBERT ISHERWOOD (MIDDLE) **MANAGING DIRECTOR** of Inspire Hi-Fi, Bob has built up an impressive company making turntables this past decade.

DAVID PRICE (RIGHT) **HI-FI CHOICE** editor DP again completes this month's listening panel, lending a well tuned ear to the test day proceedings.

▶ REFERENCE SYSTEM

- Disc player:**
- Oppo BDP-103 (Audiocom modified)
- Amplification:**
- Cambridge Audio 851A
- Loudspeakers:**
- Q Acoustics 2050i
- Equipment supports:**
- Quadraspire

▶ TEST MUSIC

NITIN SAWHNEY
DAYS OF FIRE
London Undersound

ELEANOR MCEVOY
YOLA
The Rain Falls



KRAFTWERK
COMPUTERWELT
Computerwelt

MOZART
REQUIEM



Blind-listening Group test

DACS £300-£1,500

Bit perfection

The choice of affordable digital converters is wide and growing ever larger. **Ed Selley** puts six contenders through their paces...

FOR A CATEGORY THAT WAS ALL BUT EXTINCT ten years ago, the DAC has come roaring back from the abyss and there is a wider choice of models than ever before. Not only has the quantity increased, the functionality has too.

At one end of the spectrum, there are minimalist designs with a small number of inputs and no frilleries. At the other, DACs sport multiple inputs, preamps, headphone sockets and adjustable filters. This is all well and good, but does all of this trickery have an effect on sound quality or does minimalism pay dividends?

The rise of computer audio is largely responsible for the DAC's return to prominence, and five of our six test subjects are fitted with a USB connection to allow for easy connection to a PC or Mac. Even here there are variations – all of the USB inputs are able to receive a 24-bit, 192kHz signal for high resolution audio, but some use dedicated drivers.

For the purposes of this comparative blind group test, the six DACs were primarily used with a programme of cooking 16-bit, 44.1kHz CD audio (surely their main use, still), but extra listening was also conducted with high resolution material, as was measurement. Although many of these DACs are fitted with an XLR output, the

The DAC has come roaring back from the abyss, and there is a wider choice than ever

listening with the panel was carried out unbalanced in the interests of fairness.

This group proved most interesting, as the relatively wide spread of prices made for unexpected surprises, and a good deal of variation variously in terms of build quality, flexibility and sound quality. Customers are spoiled for choice, which is surely a good thing!

ON TEST



Audiolab M-DAC
£600 **p25**

With a wide spread of inputs, including an asynchronous USB plus a preamp, headphone socket and wide variety of digital filters, the Audiolab is lavishly specced. Designed by John Westlake, the pedigree of this little box is considerable



Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus
£300 **p27**

The least expensive DAC in the test is still one of the best specified, with async USB, volume control and headphone amp. Internally, the proprietary upsampling circuit and adjustable filters allow it to compete with pricier models



Chord Electronics Chordette Qute HD
£990 **p29**

This little aluminium nugget is one of the more expensive DACs here and also one of the simplest in feature terms. Appearances can be deceptive though, as the Chord makes use of technology trickled down from the bigger Chord DACs



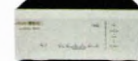
Cyrus DAC X+
£1,500 **p31**

The only member of the test to forgo a USB input, the Cyrus is also the most expensive unit here. Can the traditionally strong showing of the brand in the digital domain make up the difference and justify the asking price?



Heed Audio Dactilus 3
£515 **p33**

Typically minimalist in keeping with the rest of the offerings from Heed, the Dactilus 3 is still fitted with an async USB as well as more conventional S/PDIF and optical inputs. Is this the antidote to the more complicated DACs in the test?



Musical Fidelity M1 DAC
£400 **p35**

Competitively priced and with an impressive complement of inputs, including USB and the only AES input of the group, the Musical Fidelity is one of the older models here. Does it still cut the mustard against younger opposition?



Cambridge Audio

DacMagic Plus
Upsampling DAC

UPSAMPLING

-40 -30 -20 -10 dB
USB +3dB
24bit/96.0kHz

M-DAC

audiolab

UPSAMPLING
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AT 192kHz

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KRUS

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Sample Rate: 48k

INPUT

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GETTING TO THE SHOW

BY TRAIN: Temple Meads Station is a short distance from the Marriott.

BY CAR: From the M4 take J19 (M32 - Bristol). Follow signs for City Centre and RAC signs to the Show. For those using satellite navigation systems the hotel post code is BS1 3AD.

Easy local parking in Cabot Circus car park and Broadmead and Bond Street NCPs.

The Cabot Circus Car Park has over 2500 spaces. It is easily accessible from the end of the M32 off Newfoundland Street.



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SOUND AND VISION





Audiolab M-DAC £600

Does this award-winning DAC prevail against the latest and the greatest?

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK/China
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
250x59x252mm
- WEIGHT:**
4.95kg
- FEATURES:**
- ESS Sabre DAC
 - switchable digital filtering
 - USB input
 - headphone output
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
IAG
- TELEPHONE:**
01480 447700
- WEBSITE:**
audiolab.co.uk

The original incarnation of Audiolab produced some extremely highly regarded digital audio products and encouragingly, its current owner, International Audio Group, has been determined to keep this reputation intact. The 8200CD has been a firm favourite of *Hi-Fi Choice* since 2010 and we have been equally keen on the M-DAC – effectively the business end of the 8200CD less the CD mechanism.

It is built around the ESS Sabre DAC chip and features adjustable digital filters for fine tuning the sound to your own personal tastes. A useful spread of digital inputs and outputs are provided, two coaxial, two optical and an asynchronous USB, as well as matching digital outputs and a choice of balanced and unbalanced analogue outputs.

The M-DAC is also fitted with a volume control, making it a digital preamp rather than straight line level DAC. The volume control can easily be set to max and bypassed if you don't need it, but its fitment means that the Audiolab could replace two units rather than one in an all-digital system. Usefully, balanced XLR outputs are fitted, too, and there's a 6.3mm headphone socket making this extremely flexible. For the price, build is absolutely superb, with finely finished aluminium alloy throughout the casework, and a highly informative display.

Sound quality

Although placed first in alphabetical order, the M-DAC actually went last in the listening test. This meant that after the other five DACs had strutted their stuff, the M-DAC still blew through the panel like a dose of audio smelling salts.

It managed to walk the fine line between sounding lively and energetic without tipping over into becoming bright or fatiguing, and all three members of the panel felt it would be easy to listen to for long periods. It also managed to do very well across all four pieces of music, which was something that proved surprisingly unusual on the day.

The Audiolab has excellent timing and dynamics that can find the beat to any piece of music and let it flow without forcing it. Its bass also came in for very positive comment. The M-DAC has plenty of punch, but not at the expense of detail or agility.

The soundstage was also felt to be well judged. The Audiolab produced a performance that was large when it needed to be, but shrunk very convincingly as the music did. The result was easy to follow and entirely believable. There were no gaps or other oddities that further aided the sense of realism the M-DAC brought to music. It was a wonderfully mature and even performer, across all digital inputs and types of music.

The most enthusiastic comments were reserved for the tonality



however. With the wide variety of vocals on offer ranging from Eleanor McEvoy through to a massed choir in Mozart's *Requiem*, the Audiolab sounded rich, real and entirely believable. The result of this wide ranging ability was that the panel simply felt M-DAC was more musical than the competition.

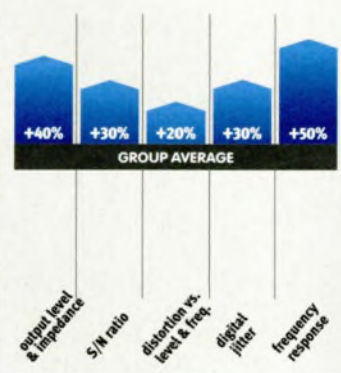
Superb build, a vast feature set and winning sonics mean that this remains the class of the field. Unsurprisingly, it's also *Hi-Fi Choice's* DAC Award 2012 winner!

ON TEST

Audiolab's award-winning M-DAC offers an astonishingly good technical performance and flexibility for the price, with near-identical figures for both S/PDIF and the asynchronous USB 1.0 inputs up to 24-bit/96kHz (to 192kHz via S/PDIF). The balanced XLRs provide a maximum 4.5V output from a vanishingly low 0.25ohm source impedance (this 'pre' will drive very long interconnects) with distortion just ~0.0009% at all frequencies at 0dBfs. This drops as low as 0.0008% between -10dBfs to -30dBfs.

Jitter is vanishingly low at 20psec all inputs/all rates while the S/N is as wide as the best of them here at 114dB (S/PDIF and USB). The response, time domain behaviour and stopband rejection is entirely determined by the choice of digital filter, with 'Optimal Spectrum' the flattest (-1.2dB/80kHz) and 'Slow' the more rolled-off but enjoying the least time-domain/phase distortion. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Lively, powerful and lifelike sound; excellent feature set; superb build
- DISLIKE:** Absolutely nothing at the price
- WE SAY:** An entirely convincing DAC that offers superb sound and flexibility

OVERALL



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NuNu Distribution Ltd





Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus £300

The least expensive model in the test, can it show its pricier rivals a thing or two?

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK/China
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
215x52x191mm
- WEIGHT:**
1.2kg
- FEATURES:**
- Wolfson WM8740 DAC
 - switchable digital filtering
 - USB input
 - headphone output
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Cambridge Audio
- TELEPHONE:**
0870 900 1000
- WEBSITE:**
cambridgeaudio.com

The original DacMagic was one of the early products in the current DAC renaissance and claimed a fair few expensive scalps in its time. The replacement DacMagic Plus is a considered rework of the original, and adds various extra features.

Like the Audiolab, the DacMagic can be used as a digital preamplifier and the volume can also be switched out of the circuit to allow the little Cambridge Audio to be used as a line level-only device. This means that like the Audiolab, the DacMagic has a headphone socket that makes use of the same control.

The DacMagic employs Cambridge Audio's proprietary ATF upsampling, which will upsample any input to 24-bit/384kHz via a bespoke circuit. This is partnered with a pair of Wolfson WM8740s for decoding and output is available via both RCA and XLR connections.

Three digital inputs are provided. The DacMagic does not have separate optical and coaxial connections – two inputs can be either or. The third input is USB that supports 96kHz natively and 192kHz support is available via a driver.

Overall build feels impressively substantial for £300, but the lack of volume display is an annoyance, and the volume control action isn't as easy as it perhaps might be. Still, it's a lot of product at the price.

Sound quality

The panel consistently liked the open and spacious sound that the DacMagic possessed across the test music. However, although it was entirely convincing with Nitin Sawhney's *Days of Fire*, it was slightly less happy with the Mozart piece where it sounded somewhat thinner and less cohesive than some of the other DACs.

Part of this seems to be down to the bass performance. The thoughts of the panel varied a little, but their general perception was that the DacMagic doesn't lack for absolute bass depth but it is a bit more recessed in the upper bass area where certain instrumental frequencies are, and this leads to it sounding a little less full than some of the other models here. The panel also felt that the timing, while precise, didn't have the same sense of life and excitement that some of the other DACs seemed to have.

The other area where the DacMagic Plus attracted some criticism was the lack of involvement. The panel felt that the performance was lacking in a degree of fulfilment and emotional involvement compared to some of the (admittedly far more expensive) other DACs here. But equally, the Cambridge Audio was praised for its complete lack of harshness, and its unfatiguing sound. The listeners felt this would be an easy product to listen to for long periods of time.



Overall, the sound was regarded as smooth and consistent yet unremarkable across all digital inputs. It was enjoyable but not exceptionally so, yet never caused offence. Given its lowly price, this is surely a great achievement.

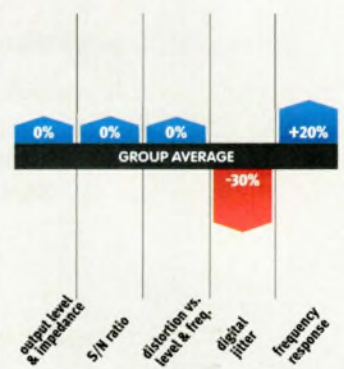
The wee Cambridge Audio does commendably well across the board then. The ability to act as a digital preamp and headphone amp is welcome, as is the wide variety of inputs, the decent build and fine sound. It's churlish to expect any more at this affordable price point.

ON TEST

This is the only DAC in our group that offers identical S/PDIF and (Class 2) USB performance with media right up to 24-bit/192kHz. Its balanced outputs offer a full 4.1V from a low 46ohm source impedance while the A-wtd S/N ratio amounts to an impressive 111.7dB. Distortion is lowest at -10dBFS (just 0.00015% through bass and midrange), increasing very slightly to 0.0006% at its peak output where the analogue stage is under most strain.

Of the three digital filters, it's the middle (minimum phase) option that is the most distinctive, eliminating any pre-ringing, and therefore any acausal distortion, but increasing post-ringing and high frequency phase distortions. The frequency responses are unchanged with 44.1/48k media (-0.25dB/20kHz). Jitter improves with sample rate from 550psec at 44.1/48k to a low 90psec with 96kHz digital inputs. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- OVERALL**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Fine feature set; spacious sound
- DISLIKE:** Slight lack of emotional involvement; sluggish volume control
- WE SAY:** Very capable performer with some useful features, and it's excellent value for money too

M2 SERIES



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2012

STEREO AMPLIFIERS
BEST STEREO AMP £1500+
ROKSAN CASPIAN M2

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2012

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Chord Electronics Chordette Qute HD £990

This little box of tricks packs some unique technology, but does it deliver the sonic goods?

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
UK

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
160x70x40mm

WEIGHT:
0.4kg

FEATURES:

- 4-element pulse array DAC
- 384kHz-capable
- USB input with DSD support
- BNC electrical input

DISTRIBUTOR:
Chord Electronics

TELEPHONE:
01622 721444

WEBSITE:
chordelectronics.
co.uk

With DACs back on the radar for a wider audience, Chord has been using its expertise and applying it to more affordable products, and the Qute HD (part of the tiny Chordette Gem range) is the smallest unit here by a fair margin.

The Qute HD has two features that are unique to the group, and indeed most other DACs on the market. The first is that the S/PDIF input is able to handle frequencies up to 24-bit/384kHz, which is higher than anything else here. The second is that that USB input of the Chord, in addition to being fully 24/192kHz capable, can additionally handle DSD – the native format of SACD. These are interesting features, but will be academic to most people; there are no truly commercially available 24/384 recordings around (it's hard enough finding 24/96!), and DSD is very much a niche pursuit at the moment.

The news isn't all good though – the Chord (along with the Heed) has the smallest number of digital inputs in the group and the coaxial fitting is a BNC socket that will require an adaptor to work with a normal RCA cable. Input selection is automatic, so the Chord has no controls of any kind on the unit. Build quality is superb – as you might expect from something hewn from a block of aluminium and should you fancy, it's available in a variety of colours.

Sound quality

Despite its clever design, the Chord never really brought all of its technical wizardry to bear, and failed to really inspire the panel during listening across a range of sources and music. The general consensus is that the Chord is technically accomplished in a number of areas, but doesn't quite bring them all together in a musically convincing whole.

The most commented issue of the Chord's performance was that it sounds rather 'small scale'. Although matched to the same level as the other DACs in the test, it still seemed somewhat confined and 'shut in'. With the Mozart, this left the piece lacking in the scale and space required to do it justice. The presentation was repeatedly described as accurate, but rather uninvolved – what was being produced was undoubtedly an accurate facsimile of the disc, but seemingly devoid of the spark of life needed to make you engage with it.

The other criticism raised by the panel was the tonal balance, which was perceived to be fractionally forward. The consensus was that the Qute HD would be less satisfying to listen to for long periods than some of the other designs here, certainly in the reference system. By the same token, the Chord received some praise for its handling of vocals with both Eleanor McEvoy and Nitin Sawhney,

so this lightness has some advantages depending on the situation.

The Chord was an agile performer across the various pieces of music, and the soundstage was cohesive, the effect both side to side and front to back came over as convincing.

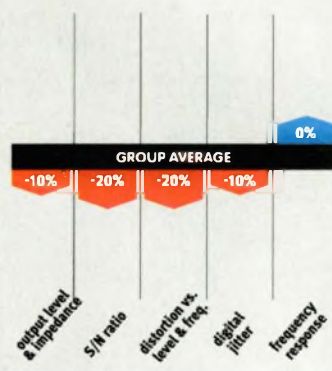
This is a very cleverly engineered design and clearly done in a unique way, but the little Chord Qute HD doesn't manage to translate this into a class leading sonic performance. We'd still recommend you audition it if you can, as it may work better in the context of your own system.

ON TEST

Via S/PDIF, the QuteHD offers a high 3V maximum output, a low 65ohm source impedance, wide 111dB A-wtd S/N ratio and low 0.0007% distortion through its midrange. Distortion increases slightly at higher frequencies (an analogue rather than digital function) reaching 0.017% at 20kHz. The analogue stage is under less stress at lower outputs, so distortion falls to 0.002% at 20kHz/-20dBFS.

Jitter is very low at 110pssec for all sample rates from 44.1kHz-192kHz via S/PDIF but is slightly higher at 135pssec via USB. Indeed, its USB performance is identical to that via S/PDIF except for its S/N which falls back to a '16-bit' 96dB. Low-level resolution is influenced, so S/PDIF is good to ±0.2dB over a 100dB range, USB ±1dB. Otherwise, its response is exceptionally flat (within ±0.01dB) with 44.1/48kHz media and drops by just -0.3dB/45kHz and -4.5dB/90kHz with 96kHz and 192kHz media. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Impressive spec; superb build; detailed, clean sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Sounds somewhat small scale and uninvolved
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Very clever DAC that doesn't quite deliver on its technical promise in this context
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



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DALI EPICON 8



"Danish loudspeaker brand DALI is no stranger to the high-end and this latest addition to the EPICON range is appropriately 'epic'"

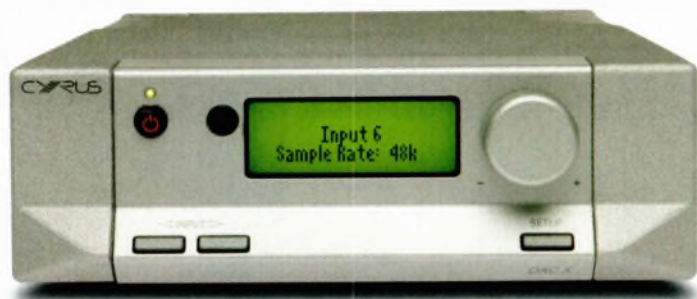
"Its sound is equally impressive, at once bold and intimate, its broad soundstage peppered with musical detail, filling the largest of rooms with ease."

EISA Committee 2012



IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

www.dali-speakers.com



Cyrus Audio **DAC X+ £1,500**

Can this, the most expensive DAC in the test, warrant its premium price?

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
215x73x360mm
- WEIGHT:**
3.8kg
- FEATURES:**
- "proprietary DAC"
 - switchable digital filtering
 - balanced XLR outs
 - PSX-R option
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Cyrus
- TELEPHONE:**
01480 410900
- WEBSITE:**
cyrusaudio.co.uk

Cyrus now produces a complete range of products ranging from the stock DAC X+ seen here to the full blown Stream XP, effectively a digital streaming preamplifier. These products can be combined in various pairings to suit most requirements.

It is an unusual test where a Cyrus product is the largest model present, but such is the nature of DAC design that this is the case here! The DAC X+ comes in the standard Cyrus half-width casework and is roughly the same height and width as the Musical Fidelity but rather deeper. And like the Musical Fidelity, the Cyrus has a conventional IEC mains input on the rear and doesn't need an external PSU. You can add an external PSU in the form of the PSX-R which should improve performance.

The Cyrus is the most expensive model here which makes a key omission from the spec sheet all the more unusual. The Cyrus is the only DAC in the test to have no USB connection of any type. There are no less than six digital inputs – two optical and four coaxial, but direct connection to a computer can't be achieved unless it is fitted with one of these connections. This need not be the end of the world – there are plenty of USB/S/PDIF converters on the market – but this will further raise the price of the Cyrus over the other models in the test.

Sound quality

The Cyrus managed to go before the panel and avoid putting anyone's backs up, but equally failed to inspire much in the way of impassioned praise. Perhaps most problematically, as the most expensive DAC in the group, it failed to really stand out from the other, significantly less expensive competition.

The panel generally felt that the Cyrus was usefully detailed, open and expressive without stepping over into harshness or brightness and this meant it was consistently even-handed across the four test pieces. With the Mozart in particular, the Cyrus was open and attracted positive comment. But listeners felt that the presentation of the DAC X+ was quite pronounced around the left and right of the soundstage, with less solidity in the middle than some.

Timing was felt to be good, and the Kraftwerk piece, in particular, was lively and agile. Like a number of other DACs in the test, bass was felt to be somewhat lightweight and there isn't the impact that some of the competition possesses. This, coupled with the smooth top end did mean that the panel felt that the Cyrus would be an easy DAC to live with day to day, if not the most exciting one.

The most consistent accusation levelled at the DAC X+ was a lack of dynamics and slightly constrained performance, which meant that the



Cyrus never exactly lets rip in the way that some of the others do. When combined with the softer bass response, the Cyrus doesn't have the drive of the best in test.

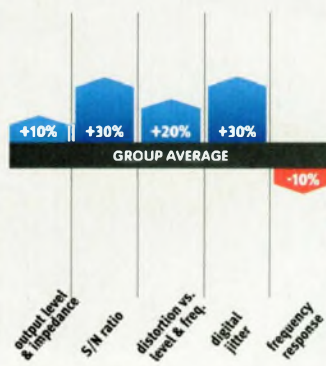
This is a beautiful DAC, skilfully built and finished, it offers a large number of digital inputs (albeit not USB) and PSX-R power supply upgradability. It has a mature, refined, detailed and civilised sound too. Trouble is, in this company it didn't shine out and this is the problem for the premium priced Cyrus – competition is tough.

ON TEST

This is a very high performance DAC limited only by the lack of a USB input. The pairs of balanced outputs offer a whopping 4.7V maximum output from a usefully low 450ohm source impedance while distortion is held to a low 0.001% and the A-wtd S/N ratio a wide 114dB. At lower digital levels, where more of the musical 'action' takes place, distortion falls to 0.00011-0.0003% (20Hz-20kHz/-30dBfs). At even lower levels, linearity is good to ±0.2dB/-100dBfs.

Cyrus has engineered a slight high treble lift to the DAC X+'s response, amounting to +0.3dB/20kHz with 44.1kHz/48kHz media and +0.6dB/34kHz with 96kHz media, neither of which changes with selection of 'slow' or 'fast' digital filter. Jitter is vanishingly low at ~10psec/all rates. One final point, while drawing only 11W in operation, the DAC X+'s consumption barely drops to 10W (rather than 41W) in 'standby' mode. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
 ★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
 ★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
 ★★★★★
- FEATURES**
 ★★★★★
- LIKE:** Even-handed and forgiving sound; great build and finish; wide range of inputs
- DISLIKE:** Unusually, no USB input; expensive
- WE SAY:** Finely built DAC with pleasing sonics, but lacks spark and looks expensive here

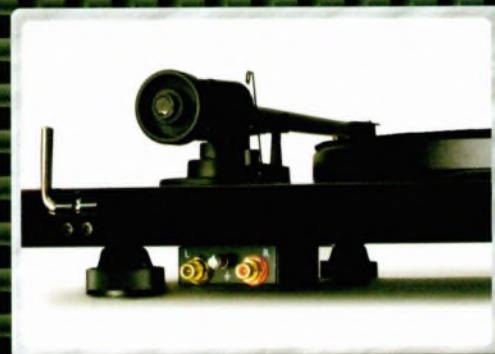
OVERALL



The Carbon Age



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Email : info@henleydesigns.co.uk
Web : www.henleydesigns.co.uk





Heed Audio Dactilus 3 £515



Stylistically, a typical example of Heed minimalism, but how does it sound?

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** Hungary
- DIMENSIONS:** (WxHxD) 95x72x250mm
- WEIGHT:** 972g
- FEATURES:**
 - Wolfson WM8727 DAC
 - external PSU option
 - USB input
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Heed Audio
- TELEPHONE:** 01452 858269
- WEBSITE:** heedaudio.co.uk

The Anglo-Hungarian concern has been producing DACs for some years now and the Dactilus 3 has evolved from the original Dactilus. Not a great deal has changed, so what's new? Well, the biggest difference is the addition of a USB input. This is an asynchronous 24-bit/192kHz-capable design which means that the Heed is fully capable of working as part of a computer audio system should you want it to. Otherwise the Dactilus 3 is as minimalist as its predecessors. The input count is a grand total of one S/PDIF, one TOSLINK and the USB input. The latter two inputs share a board input as the USB is auto selecting. Switching between the coaxial and optical/USB connection is done by means of a rear panel switch.

Like the Cyrus, the Heed can be upgraded at a later date with an external power supply (the Q-PSU). This is built in identical casework to the Dactilus and replaces the rather bulky external unit supplied with the Dactilus 3. This gives the Dactilus 3 a useful degree of 'stretch' when you buy it, but it's still hardly the most versatile here!

Sound quality

The Heed managed to win over the listening panel, and the performance across all four pieces of music was generally strong. The most consistent area of praise that comes out from the listening notes is the sense of life and vitality that the Heed brought to the performance. That this vitality doesn't seem to have come at the expense of long term listenability is a further benefit.

The Heed managed a strong showing across all four pieces of music, but was at its best with the Eleanor McEvoy and Mozart pieces. The combination of detail and tonal colour that the Heed brought to voices and instruments was favourably received and this lends the Heed a liveliness that some of the other DACs couldn't match. Add an impressively cohesive and agile sense of timing, and the Heed starts to move towards the top of the pack.

The good news doesn't end there either. The soundstage wasn't perceived to be the biggest in the test but the placement of instruments and performers within it was assured and consistent, with an impressive sense of front to back depth as well. Bass response was also felt to be good with a pleasing combination of weight and detail that added bite to the Heed's performance.

Criticisms on the other hand were fairly limited. Two of the listeners felt that the Heed lost something in the separation of voices and instruments and this means that it isn't quite as open or revealing as the Audiolab.

Overall though this is a strong showing from the Dactilus 3 and there is much to like about the way this DAC goes about its business. If you are looking for a DAC which

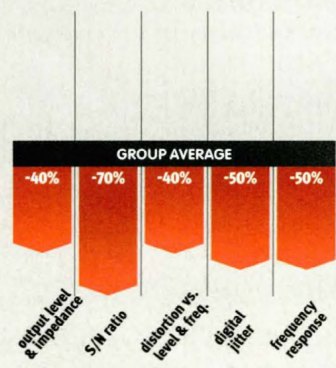
majors on a lively and lifelike sound, this is definitely a product to consider. Add in the ability to upgrade it at a later date with the external PSU and the result is more appealing still.

However, the very limited number of available inputs cannot go unremarked upon – if you're running Blu-ray players, Sky boxes, etc., then you'll likely find it a deal breaker. Neither is it the most aesthetically pleasing device here! So if it's a purist hi-fi DAC you seek, then do spare a thought for Heed's latest Dactilus 3.

ON TEST

By current standards, the Dactilus 3 returns a very modest set of results – enough to ensure it'll sound 'different'. Output is above average at 2.3V but the source impedance slightly high at 555ohm. Via both USB and S/PDIF, the A-wtd S/N, and low-level resolution, is some way off its 16-bit/97dB specification at just 84dB (closer to 14-bit) while distortion is comparatively high at 0.06% (3kHz/odBFs). The digital filter – almost no filter at all – is very close to Audiolab's 'Slow Rolloff' option in its behaviour (see p25), trading reduced phase and acausal distortions for a very limited rejection of digital aliasing (just -7.5dB at 26kHz with 48kHz audio) and a rolled-off treble response (-5.1dB/20kHz with 44.1kHz/media). While these effects are most obvious with 44kHz/48kHz digital inputs, the benefits certainly start to outweigh the drawbacks with higher-rate 96kHz/192kHz media. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lively and inviting sound, upgradeable
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Limited number of inputs, doesn't feel as solid as some of the competition
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Combines a very likeable sound with some useful future upgrade possibilities
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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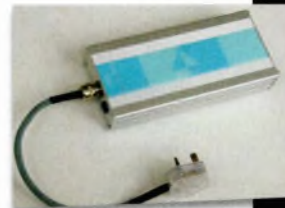
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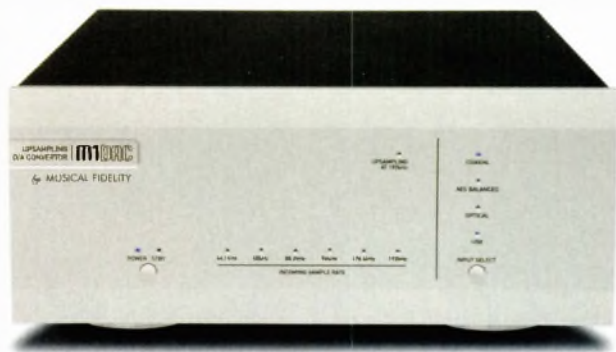


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Musical Fidelity **M1 DAC** £400



One of the older models in the test, can this still show the competition a thing or two?

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
 UK/Taiwan
- DIMENSIONS:**
 (WxHxD)
 220x100x300mm
- WEIGHT:**
 3.4kg
- FEATURES:**
- Burr Brown DSD1796 DACs
 - built-in PSU
 - USB input
 - balanced XLR outputs
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
 Musical Fidelity
- TELEPHONE:**
 0208 900 2866
- WEBSITE:**
 musicalfidelity.com

This compact aluminium box has now been on sale for no less than two years, which feels an absolute eternity in the wonderful world of digital convertors – which seems to change by the day. It's also notable for being the only model in the test to have a matching CD transport, and very nice it is too...

The specification is still entirely competitive however. As well as a USB input able to handle files up to 24-bit/192kHz, the Musical Fidelity M1 DAC has a coaxial and optical input (selectable separately) and – unique to the group – an AES digital input. This is the ideal match for the M1 CDT transport, but could come in handy depending on what your sources are. These are joined by balanced and unbalanced analogue connections, making it a very flexible bit of kit considering its (in the context of this group) very modest retail price.

Like the Cyrus, the M1 DAC has no external power supply to accommodate, which is another bonus, although unlike the DAC X+, it is not upgradable with an external box. Considering its price, the build quality is absolutely superb, close to that of the Audiolab M-DAC, no less. It's also consummately easy to use, with a logical control layout and handy LED input and sampling rate indicators to tell you precisely what it is doing, and where!

Sound quality

The Musical Fidelity attracted very positive comment from the listening panel and showed a number of appealing traits. Like the Heed, the M1 DAC was felt to be a lively and musical performer across the four test pieces, and the listeners were particularly fulsome in their praise of the handling of voices and instruments. The Musical Fidelity manages to find detail and texture with vocals that many of the other DACs didn't, while managing to keep them a cohesive part of the performance. The handling of the piano was also felt to be among the best here. Although a little lighter and brighter than the M-DAC for example, the silky tonal balance was easy to listen to for long periods.

The soundstage was also felt to be extremely cohesive and convincing. The overall size of the performance that the M1 DAC created wasn't the largest here but it was rich, detailed and had commendable front-to-back depth. This proved especially beneficial to the Mozart piece, where the Musical Fidelity put in one of the strongest performances in the test – the combination of the capability with voices and instruments and the cohesive soundstage being used to great effect.

Timing was perceived to be competent, but not as lively as the Audiolab or the Heed. The impression it gives is sufficiently



agile to keep pace with fast music, but less inclined than some here to get feet tapping. This might relate to the bass response of the M1, which was felt to be good rather than great. Bass such as there is was well defined and full of detail, but it doesn't go as loud as some of the models here.

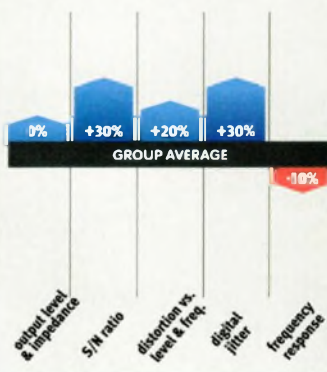
Musical Fidelity's M1 DAC gets an awful lot right and considering that it is one of the least expensive DACs in the test, this is a real achievement. Factor in fine build and functionality, and it's an essential audition.

ON TEST

In keeping with earlier MF DACs, the M1 enjoys the very lowest levels of jitter – just 35psec with 24-bit/48kHz and 24-bit/96kHz data and a mere 14psec with 24-bit/48kHz data over USB using default Windows drivers. Importantly, MF also achieves the same 114dB A-wtd S/N ratio with both S/PDIF and USB inputs, the 3.9V balanced output offered through a low 450ohm source impedance. Its response shows the mildest treble lift of +0.1dB with 44.1kHz/48kHz inputs before rolling gently away beyond 30kHz with 96kHz and 192kHz inputs (–3dB/43kHz with 96kHz/192kHz –12dB/70kHz with 192kHz only).

Distortion is comprised almost uniformly of 2nd-4th harmonics (many DACs show stronger 3rd, 5th and 7th) and amounts to just 0.0007-0.003% over the 20Hz-20kHz range at peak output. Low-level resolution is good to within ±0.2dB over a 100dB dynamic range. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
 ★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
 ★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
 ★★★★★
- FEATURES**
 ★★★★★
- LIKE:** Silky vibrant sound; fine build; Cracking value
- DISLIKE:** Limited bass response, not quite as emotionally involving as the best
- WE SAY:** Sophisticated and seductive sounding, this is a super buy

OVERALL





virtuoso style



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Blind-listening verdicts

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

This was an interesting test, one that threw up a few surprises. The first is that, on the day at least, the most expensive DACs weren't really able to demonstrate any clear superiority over the cheaper models. The Chord and Cyrus both have some extremely fine features, but neither of them managed to inspire the listening panel in terms of their musical performance. With some considered system matching, both are capable of fine results but there were cheaper DACs here that managed to generate a greater level of excitement.

The Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus managed to acquit itself well

given that it is the cheapest DAC here. The comprehensive feature set and lively and open performance are extremely impressive and only the limited bass response and slightly constrained performance on classical music count against it. For the £300 asking price there is a lot to like.

The decidedly minimalist Heed is a slightly tougher sell with its rather limited feature set and spartan casework, but sonically this is a fine DAC with a genuine sense of life and vitality to it. It is remarkably even-handed across a wide variety of music and has the option of being upgradable at a later date. If you can get by with only a limited

choice of inputs, it is certainly worth your attention. Go hear it!

The Musical Fidelity M1 DAC managed to enthuse the panel as much as the Heed did. This is another lively and entertaining performer and one that is excellent with voices and instruments. The Musical Fidelity places ahead of the Heed by virtue of its lower price and more flexible choice of inputs. Given that the M1 DAC is the second cheapest DAC in the test, it is a genuinely impressive performer and one that should fit well into a variety of systems or indeed partner up with the other members of the M1 range. A strong showing all round, but one not quite sufficient to win...



WINNER
Audiolab's M-DAC heads this test. Sonically, it was the unequivocal favourite of the listening panel with a near perfect blend of timing, tonality and soundstage that made the best of the different types of music. Combine this with the best feature set in the group, attractive aesthetics and solid build and you have a worthy group test winner.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	Audiolab M-DAC	Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus	Chord Electronics Chordette Quite HD	Cyrus Audio DAC X+	Heed Audio Dactilus 3	Musical Fidelity M1 DAC
Price	£600	£300	£990	£1,500	£515	£400
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Key features	Just brilliant all round. Great build, facilities, flexibility and wonderful sound at the price, too	An absolutely fabulous performance given its price, and there's a host of handy features as well	Gorgeous styling and build allied to interesting engineering, but matter of fact sound didn't seduce	A very fine DAC, with excellent build and finish, but struggles to justify price in this group	Don't be fooled by the oddball styling, this is a surprisingly capable performer at the price	No spring chicken but really super sound that's refined and open; cracking value!
coaxial digital input	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
optical digital input	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
USB digital input	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
RCA line outputs	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
XLR balanced outputs	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes

TRY WITH THESE

CD TRANSPORT: Cyrus Transport £600

If you need a Red Book CD source, then this is a fine choice that saves you buying a CD player with a built-in DAC which of course you don't need! Great build, slick slot-loading drive and fine sound make this a great partner for any of the above DACs...



DVD PLAYER: Oppo BDP-95EU £900

Here's a brilliant Blu-ray spinner that also plays CD, SACD, DVD-Audio and a host of other audio formats. It's got a great, low-jitter disc transport built in, but its internal DACs are not so hot. What better candidate then to go with one of these digital converters?



STREAMER: Pioneer N50 £450

One of the best budget network music players to be launched over the past year, it could still do with a digital converter that sounds a bit more passionate and musically engaging than the stock item. As such, any of these DACs will significantly upgrade its sound.



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Reel to reel



Fifty years after its introduction, just how does Compact Cassette stack up in the great scheme of music format things? **David Price** decides...

Yes, it really is that old. It was no less than half a century ago that a little 'cassette' of magnetic tape was unleashed on an unsuspecting public – from an unsuspecting manufacturer. For it is fair to say that when Philips introduced the Compact Cassette in 1963, it had absolutely *no* idea of the success that was to greet it. So amazing was this little format that it totally transcended its intended role in life, and became the music carrier for an entire generation.

Of course, magnetic tape wasn't a new thing, and nor was the idea of fitting it in a cassette of some sort – RCA's tape cartridge of 1958 was proof of this. But the Philips variant was small enough to be truly portable, and had a number of features built-in which aided durability and ease of use. In 1962 the concept was unveiled, and it finally appeared the next year at the Berlin Radio Show.

Designed ostensibly as a dictation medium, one of the reasons the format caught on was surely because Sony pressured Philips to license it for free, to other manufacturers. This it did, rather than keeping it a closed system available only on Philips products. Five years after its launch, there were no less than eighty five manufacturers making Compact Cassette machines, with some two-and-a-half million pieces sold. The format caught on quickly in the

US, but Japan was its major market; the country had a natural love of miniaturised gadgets, not least due to its cramped living conditions.

Compact Cassette's initial success was based around portables. With quarter inch tape running at 1 7/8 inches per second, its very limited frequency response (early on, it struggled to reach 10kHz) was never going to be able to claim sound quality as a strength. Furthermore, the cassette shells themselves – inside which the two miniature spools of mylar tape coated in Ferric oxide tape run – weren't exactly precision affairs, and this didn't help speed stability. Nor was it destined for stereo; early cassettes had just two monaural audio tracks 0.15 inches wide, one per direction of tape travel. Rather, cassette settled down and got on with the job of being cheap and cheerful, resigned to be the poor audio relation of open reel tape...

One for all

It's hard to understand the social importance of the cassette during the nineteen sixties. Right at the time of a huge explosion in pop culture and popular music, it was ideally placed to capture the sounds of its generation, relatively inexpensively and easily. A great tool for recording 'the hit parade' from the radio, cassette recorders found their ways into millions of teenage bedrooms. No longer did teenagers have to buy music, they could 'tape it' and then listen when they wanted. Furthermore, they could make compilation tapes of their music, no longer at the mercy of what the radio programme planners wanted to play. But this was just the start of it...

Although not originally intended for music use, that's precisely what most people who bought into the format did with it. For this reason, manufacturers and music companies alike soon began to develop the format. Pre-recorded music cassettes originally launched in late 1965 in Europe, and in 1966 in the US, but they were regarded as

superfluous by many for a long time – most folk bought cassette decks to record music from somewhere else, after all. It was only after the introduction of Dolby B noise reduction in 1968 that its audio fortunes began to change.

Because of the slow tape speed, cassette was hissy. But the new Dolby system – a development of a technology introduced in the professional sphere in 1966 – made the lo-fi format take a step up. It was possible to play Dolby encoded pre-recorded tapes on standard machines with relatively little change in sound, while a new generation of hi-fi machines appeared with the system fitted, offering up to 10dB of noise reduction. By the mid-nineteen seventies, Dolby B encoding was standard on all pre-recorded tapes.

When Philips introduced the Compact Cassette in 1963, it had absolutely no idea of the success that was to greet it...

By this time, moves were afoot to really push the Compact Cassette into the hi-fi realm. Stereo was booming, and it sucked in the cassette and catapulted it forward – in the process, it far outgrew its intended application. Chromium dioxide tape formulations were the other side of the coin; coating the tape with this superior magnetic compound allowed more information to be stored, giving about 5dB lower noise and superior high frequency response. State of the art machines such as Yamaha's TC-800GL and Nakamichi's 600 were able to stretch up to 15kHz now, easily the match of FM radio. Suddenly, cassette was coming of age – and indeed the very first ever 1975 issue of *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine was entirely devoted to these new machines!

Still, in a hi-fi sense, Compact Cassette was seen as very much the poor relation to the vinyl



Full metal jacket: 1980 model-year high end decks like this Pioneer CTF-950 boasted Type IV metal tape compatibility, for improved dynamic range...

TIMELINE

year	the first...
1963	Philips EL 3300 portable Microcassette
1969	Olympus Croz tape
1970	BASF Chromium Dioxid Dolby B deck
1971	Advent 201 3-head deck
1973	Nakamichi 1000 FerriChrome tape
1974	Sony FeCr Elcaset deck
1976	Sony EL-5 personal Portastudio metal tape
1979	Sony Stowaway auto-reverse
	Teac Studio 144 Dolby C deck
	Scotch Metafine DCC deck
1980	Nakamichi Dragon
1981	NAD6150C
1992	Philips



For many tape heads, Nakamichi machines were the Holy Grail of Compact Cassette. Although undeniably fine, their superiority was sometimes just a tad overstated by the hi-fi magazines of the time...



LP. While there were a few excellent machines around by 1975, they were expensive and the vast majority of affordable decks were mediocre. Open reel enthusiasts, who viewed themselves as the serious side of tape users, ridiculed the format. Development continued apace however, and by the late seventies the Japanese were serving up some very decent sounding decks – Sony, Aiwa, Akai, JVC and Pioneer all did excellent budget fare.

Coming of age

1979 was the watershed year for Compact Cassette, for several reasons. First, and least importantly in the great scheme of things, metal tape arrived. This was a new formulation that was able to be magnetised to greater levels than previously, providing a special recording head was used. It gave an improved signal-to-noise ratio, increased headroom and a wider frequency response – the first metal tape-compatible machines, such as the Sony TC-K81, were claiming 20Hz-19kHz +/- 3dB, better than similarly priced reel-to-reel machines. It was a real boost to the format, finally dispelling the idea that cassette was a lo-fi phenomenon.

Although metal tape was important in the hi-fi world, of far greater significance in the great scheme of things was the launch of the Sony Stowaway (soon to be renamed 'Walkman'). Here we had Sony – one of the format's greatest supporters – making a bespoke personal audio product. True, there were a few high quality 'pro' portables around before the Sony, but this really laid down the blueprint for the portable audio boom of the next three decades. Without the Stowaway, the iPod would not have been possible and arguably Apple Computer would never have become the force it is today.

The Walkman became the cultural icon of the nineteen eighties, along with the microcomputer and Filofax. As is so often with

iconic consumer electronics objects, there was nothing radical about the constituent parts – the tape transport had appeared before on other Sony machines, for example – it was the clever packaging of the machine with stereo playback and some neat portable headphones that captured people's imagination. And unlike the iPod, Sony Walkmans were made by Sony staff in Sony factories, with Sony-designed parts – it was the company's finest hour.

The third, and perhaps most obscure moment was the TEAC Model 144 Portastudio. This was a Compact Cassette-based 4-track recording device which launched a thousand – or possibly a hundred thousand – pop bands. Practically every single indie, pop and rock band of the first half of the nineteen eighties laid down a 'demo tape' on one of these. Essentially a cassette deck that recorded four tracks onto two stereo tracks (i.e. the maximum possible on a bi-directional cassette), it was a tremendously popular creative tool and let musicians get access to rudimentary studio recording techniques, in their home, for a relatively low outlay. In 1967, EMI Abbey Road had four-track, and by 1979, so did your bedroom.

In 1978, Compact Cassette was a lowish-fi medium of limited appeal, but by 1980 it had become hi-fi, an essential mobile music source and also a wonderful creative tool for making music from scratch. It had suddenly become – as cultural theorists will doubtless one day proclaim – a democratising tool for music, an enabling agent that put vastly more people in touch with music, and let them use it in far more creative ways. Now with added audiophile and creative credibility, the format finally hit top gear and became ubiquitous in ways never imagined in 1963.

Because it was so cheap and affordable, it became a favourite of musicians and independent record labels. In the UK, the burgeoning indie rock scene of the early eighties used cassette as its common currency. Music magazines started spinning up their own compilations; New Musical Express's C81 was a seminal collection of great new music. Bands laid down demo tapes on cassette, and soon magazines started giving them away for free as cover mounts. November 1981 even saw the launch of *SFX*, a cassette with an accompanying mag – the multimedia era was upon us, years before the advent of the PC.

SOUND AND VISION

What set Compact Cassette apart from rival music formats, including LP, was its amazing flexibility. By the early 1970s music fans were making their own mix tapes, and subsequently the arrival of the TEAC Portastudio let musicians produce their own demo tapes too. Meanwhile, in the nascent microcomputer world, cassette was being used for data storage, and others even used it to sync to slide projectors. By the late seventies the format had also established itself as a legitimate prerecorded music carrier, and attempts were made to improve its sound with the use of Chrome tape and Dolby noise reduction. But it didn't stop there, as some spun up music magazines on cassette – *SFX* (pictured right) was one early attempt in 1981; any nostalgic New Romantics should scour eBay now!



FEATURE COMPACT CASSETTE 50TH ANNIVERSARY



Sony's last ever cassette deck was designed for high speed dubbing, something that music fans just couldn't get enough of. The craze took off from the late-1980s onwards...

New gold dreams

Cassette sales peaked in 1988, overtaking vinyl to become the most popular prerecorded music carrier in history. This was, of course, on top of blank cassette sales, which had been high for the best part of ten years. By this time, every well known brand and a great many obscure ones had their own portable Walkman clones, and every new car had a built in cassette deck. At the high end, companies such as Jaguar were employing premium Japanese marques such as Clarion to do bespoke car audio systems, and very fine they sounded too.

By the late eighties, the cassette was the most ubiquitous audio format in history. Friends were all now sharing music with 'mix tapes'; many romances ritually began with the giving of one – from boy to girl, or girl to boy. For practically every eighties and nineties pop band, the door to the A&R man's office was opened by the unsolicited submission of their demo tape, complete with hand-written track names and a phone – and possibly even a fax – number inside. The hi-fi industry responded with high speed dubbing decks, able to copy your favourite tapes at twice the speed, sadly often at only half the sound quality!

Cassette even made its presence felt in the nineteen eighties microcomputer boom. In a series of unintended consequences that would have left even Philips' greatest product planners baffled, the little dictation medium

ended up – for a short period of time – as the world's favourite data storage medium. Microcomputer software games were sold on cassette, and cassettes were used to store people's own programs and data, on a raft of computers from the original Commodore PET to the Sinclair ZX Spectrum. Even the very first IBM Personal Computers had cassette tape drive compatibility!

By the late 1980s, the Compact Cassette was the most popular, and most ubiquitous, audio format in history...

By the time any great format is at its peak however, you can bet your house on the fact that the product planners have got its replacement lined up. And so it was with Compact Cassette. Within the space of a few weeks in late 1992, Philips – who'd given us the format in the first place – and Sony, who'd popularised the format for all the world to enjoy – launched their own intended replacements...

Digital Compact Cassette (DCC) from Philips was a somewhat odd halfway house between the past and the future; it was backwards compatible in the sense that the new DCC decks could play back the old analogue cassettes, but would also record and play in compressed digital – essentially in a format very similar to compressed MP3. Sony's MiniDisc of course shared nothing in common with cassette, aside from a desire to become a mass market music carrier; it was a more technologically advanced recordable random-access disk, playing compressed digital audio. Despite the assault from these new formats, it was arguably really only MP3 – and computer audio – that truly finished off Compact Cassette. By the turn of the new millennium, the format was pretty much extinct, accounting for only 4 percent of all new music sold, although companies such as Sony, Pioneer and TEAC continued to make new cassette decks for a number of years after this. The world was moving to playing back

A regular sight in the 1970s, TDK blank cassettes made many a magic mix-tape!

THE BEST CASSETTE DECK IN THE WORLD...

Now there's a question! In its early years, most people simply didn't care – Compact Cassette, after all, wasn't to be taken seriously as a sound source. It was fun, cheap and easy, and that was all there was to it. But by the mid nineteen seventies, a number of Japanese manufacturers were beginning to get really rather serious about the little tape cassette. Chromium dioxide tape, plus Dolby B noise reduction had given it a fighting chance of sounding good, and suddenly Nakamichi had a 3-head, dual capstan deck in the shape of the mighty 1000...

Several other manufacturers stepped up to the plate; Sony's TC-177SD was an equally impressive 3-header, and Pioneer's superb CTF-1000 followed with a similar spec, better build and a front loading design. Aiwa's AD-6700 and then Sony's TC-228SD joined in, superbly built and with frequency response, signal-to-noise ratio and wow and flutter figures to rival decent smaller open reels, which cost a hell of a lot more. Ferrichrome tape helped the high frequencies, and then Metal tape arrived to give far higher signal levels; a good design like Sony's 1981 TCK-81 could push +6dB without distorting.

For most folk, the ultimate was a Nakamichi of some description, not least because the mighty Dragon cost about six times as much as a Linn Sondek and came with the option of gold plating – it was a true super-fi design! The more mortal ZX-9 was in truth a better sounding deck, and the CR-7e that followed it was cleaner and crisper still, giving amazing results even with cheap tape. But don't forget

the Sony WM-D6C Walkman Professional (pictured left), a small portable that ran the Naks very close.

Some even say better, and it cost just £200 new in the mid 1980s. By this time, cassette could sound absolutely superb.



music on computers, and/or computerised devices, and poor old tape-based serial access formats suddenly seemed horribly old hat.

In 2011 the revised Oxford English Dictionary announced it would be removing the words "cassette tape" from its Concise version, and we'd reached the end of an era. Still, even today, blank cassettes are still being produced by some companies, and there's a vast amount of new old stock tapes still on sale, often at prices far lower than during the format's glory days.

Although now supposedly dead and buried, Compact Cassette still slowly spools along, proving a cheap and easy music carrier for those untroubled by the latest digital music developments. Long may it be before tape end!

SPIN OFFS

1964 STEREO 8

The '8-track' was the slightly bonkers creation of a consortium including Bill Lear (of Lear Jet fame), Ampex, Ford Motor Co. and RCA Victor. Not one of them had a clue what they were doing; it seemed, as it was a nasty, fiddly and fussy lo-fi format...

1969 MICROCASSETTE

Looking like something out of a Roger Moore-era James Bond movie, this used the same width tape as cassette, but thinner and running half the speed. Sonics weren't its strong point, but it had Cold War chic appeal – add an exploding pen for best effect!

1976 ELCASET

Worthy attempt to make something better than cassette. It had wider, half-inch tape running at twice the speed of cassette – the result being open reel-like sound with cassette convenience. Sadly, as with SACD years later, no one cared!

1992 DIGITAL COMPACT CASSETTE

Cassette creator Philips decided it needed a replacement for its venerable format and this was born, basically the same thing but with highly compressed digital encoding and backwards compatibility. The world ignored it in droves!



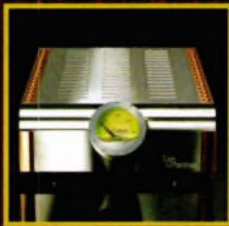


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Single file



Ariand's PRO845SE tube amplifier promises Single Ended Triode sweetness at a price that won't turn the milk sour, says **Tim Jarman...**

Deciding to buy a valve amplifier is just the start of it. After that, you'll need to choose the configuration and the type of valves that you would like from a range of topologies and electrode configurations. A push-pull amplifier with pentodes or beam tetrodes is a good beginner's choice and a decent general-purpose option which does most things reasonably well, but when things get serious there is only

one type of amplifier that the valve-heads really want: the single-ended triode.

Until recently, single-ended triode (SET) amplifiers were typically expensive and pretty gutless. Available valves such as the PX4, the 300B and the 2A3 were only good for a couple of watts in this configuration, and with modern sources capable of wide dynamic ranges this isn't really enough. Enthusiasts would talk in hushed

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Ariand PRO845SE

ORIGIN:
China

TYPE:
integrated amplifier

WEIGHT:
29 kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
410x170x320mm

FEATURES:
• 3 inputs (line)
• option for 211 or 845 output valves
• remote volume control
• built-in bias meter

DISTRIBUTOR:
Audusa

TELEPHONE:
0208 241 9826

WEBSITE:
audusa.co.uk

tones of transmitter and modulator valves which could make usable amounts of power in SET amplifiers, but both the valves and the high voltage transformers needed to support them were rare and very costly – until recently. Now that production of the 211 and the 845 triode has resumed in China, a whole range of new amplifier models has appeared to make use of them, such as the Ariand PRO845SE seen here.

The name gives a clue that this design is intended to use the 845 triode. However, 211s (which look similar but have different characteristics) can also be specified, although since changes have to be made to the amplifier to accommodate them, 845s cannot be tried later. With 211s fitted, the '845SE sells for an accessible £1,450 and is rated at 25 watts per channel. The importer wisely de-rates this to 18 watts where the amount of distortion produced is more in line with hi-fi expectations.

The PRO845SE is built along dual-mono lines and has a completely

performance to a fairly moderate level. After this comes a double triode 6SN7 driver valve for each channel, and then the 211s, which if you've not seen them before are *big*. All the valves are of current Chinese manufacture and appear to be of good quality, being both reasonably non-microphonic and free from any odd coloured internal glows. A cover for the output valves is available as an optional extra; this should be regarded as essential, the accidental breakage of one of the 211s would expose DC voltages which are high enough to be lethal.

Also on the subject of being careful, the 211s have thoriated tungsten filaments running through their distinctive black carbon anodes, so one must not switch the amplifier back on too soon after turning it off, as this can wreck the emissive surface. Just like the Icon Audio MB845s I reviewed in *HFC* 366, this amplifier is *not* a toy.

Despite its low price the Ariand is well presented and is finished to a high standard in high-gloss black. All the transformers are marked as 'audio frequency', but the three at the back are part of the power supply; only the two adjacent to the 211s are used in the signal path. To me, the only thing that detracts is the wooden fascia, blame the Italians if you may for such structurally superfluous arboreal appendages, but curvy bits of wood screwed to a boxy amplifier chassis have never been to my taste. However, judging by how popular this particular styling motif has become I may well be in a single figure minority and must say that the woodwork of the PRO845SE is done exceptionally well, and the controls which reside upon it are accurately fitted and clearly labelled.

Since it has a passive volume control stage and a source selector for up to three line level sources (CD, DAC, tuner, tape, phono stage, etc.), the Ariand is of course an integrated amplifier. The specification is a little basic in that there's no line level output for recording from and no headphone socket, although you do get

a motorised remote volume control. I found the amplifier's gain to be a little too high, and with a combination of a source with an above average output (more than 2V RMS), a 'loud' recording such as a modern 'digitally remastered' CD and sensitive loudspeakers (more than 90dB/w/m) you may find that it is difficult to set the volume control accurately for quiet listening. There is no fear of overload of course, but it would be nice if the adjustment were easier. In-line attenuators of the Rothwell type are one simple answer, if this aspect of the design becomes a problem.

Sound quality

Outputs are provided for 4 or 8 ohm loudspeakers, and I measured the amplifier's output impedance at these points to be just under 5 ohms and just over 9 ohms respectively – high figures which result from the absence of feedback, and which mean that for most practical loudspeaker loads the damping factor is unlikely to be more than unity. In addition, loudspeaker matching

The sound stage went well beyond the loudspeakers, making for a very interesting listening experience

becomes a question of trial and error since the overall system's tonality will vary greatly as the loudspeaker and amplifier impedances interact. The effect can be reduced by only using the 4 ohm output, where better control may be had at the cost of a small loss of volume.

It was the 4 ohm outputs that I used to connect the Ariand to my reference pair of Monitor Audio PL100 loudspeakers. I used Chord Company Odyssey 2 cables, but the choice is less important with amplifiers like this which have high output impedance. Given a choice, I'd favour cables with wide conductor spacing over those which are simply very thick. The source used was a Cyrus CD8 SE2 via Chord Calypso interconnects.

Switching the PRO845SE on results in a brief burst of hum from the loudspeakers as the big valves come to life, but even once things have settled down there is still a quiet buzz in the background. This is inevitable with directly heated valves like the 211, a pair of 'hum' controls (one for each channel) located on the top plate allow the effect to be minimised by careful adjustment.

Another adjustment located here sets the fixed bias level in conjunction with a large liquid crystal numerical display. This is very straightforward since the target values are printed onto the surrounding metalwork, a small switch sets which channel the display is connected to and the background is illuminated in vivid blue while the adjustments are being made. ▶

separate power supply for each output stage. A 5U4G valve rectifier is fitted, but as is almost always the case this powers the preamp stage only; there are plenty of big silicon diodes hidden underneath to run the high power sections! Despite the care taken to separate the output stages, the two channels do share the 12AX7 (ECC83) preamplifier valve, limiting the crosstalk

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Chulan Weeresinghe

Audusa



TJ: Could you explain the background of Ariand for those readers who are unfamiliar with the brand?

CW: Ariand is brand name owned by the Chinese company Yarland, and we decided to use the Ariand name for the UK market.

What differences in performance are there between the versions of this amplifier fitted with the 211 valves and with the 845s?

The 211 and 845 are similar sounding, yet different, if that makes any sense. The 845 is a better known tube, yet the 211 has its merits. In the final analysis, it all depends on your personal tastes and of course synergy with the rest of the equipment. Both amps are rated at 18 watts and drive 88db sensitivity loudspeakers, very loud.

Do you feel that the low price of the PRO-845SE is a help or a hindrance in today's hi-fi market?

We have always adopted a cost-plus based pricing policy, and products that are priced below market expectations run the risk of being dismissed as not good enough by audiophiles.

Can you recommend a loudspeaker which works particularly well with this amplifier?

It is a matter of synergy between components and buyer preferences, so we do not recommend any particular make or model and there are plenty to choose from. I have a failing for speakers from the 1970s, unfortunately in many an instance these loudspeakers are poorly matched to electronics and give poor results. For example, the famous JBL L300 Summits, a bargain in the UK, connect to a quality valve amp and a half decent vinyl source, and that should change your mind. After all, most recordings of that era were monitored using the L300, not forgetting the L100. The older Spondors, like the BC1 is worth a listen, and many an audiophile has rediscovered this speaker. How about the B&W DM2, AR 2AX, Tannoy Berkley and Cheviot, many would say the sound is coloured, which leads us to the can of worms known as 'accurate'!



IN A SINGLE-ENDED amplifier there is only one output device per channel, which normally equates to one big valve. Some have a number of small valves connected in parallel, but as they all receive the same signal and drive into the same load they are still single-ended. Using a single output device is non-ideal in many ways, as it demands inefficient class-A biasing and makes great demands on the design of the output transformer, yet some love them because they are completely immune to 'crossover distortion' which is present in some amplifiers where complementary output devices are employed.

Crossover distortion occurs when one of the devices 'hands over' the task of supplying power to the load to the other, something that can happen at up to 20,000 times every second. Transistor amplifiers get around this problem by the use of copious negative feedback which smoothes over the transition, but this is not always possible with valves due to the phase shifts which occur in the output transformer.

Once you have taken one measure that eliminates the need for global negative feedback, you might as well make another, so most single-ended valve amplifiers use triodes for their natural characteristics of linearity and low distortion. This is called Single Ended Triode (SET) operation. Admirers love them for what they see as a transparent and uncomplicated sound which results from the exceptionally simple signal path but measurements can reveal problems such as low power, high distortion and frequency response anomalies.

IN SIGHT



- 1 output transformer, 1 of 2
- 2 power transformer, 1 of 2
- 3 5U4G rectifier valve for preamp
- 4 12AX7 preamplifier valve, 1 of 2
- 5 double triode 6SN7 driver valve
- 6 liquid crystal status display
- 7 211 power output valve, 1 of 2

There is no need for a 'power on indicator' with a 211 amplifier, the valves light up with a fiery yellow glow which is bright enough to cue up a record by!

I set out with a lively performance of the overture from Rossini's *La gazza ladra*, and in line with my expectations found the Ariand to be brisk and flexible performer. In my particular setup it was tonally surprisingly bright and the information about the percussion was copious. The piece climaxes in a riot of sound which the PRO845SE did well to unravel, but I did feel that at least part of the lowest register was not being presented in full measure as in combination with the PL100s the Ariand is a little bass-light.

The volume level which could be achieved without the onset of too much raggedness was more than ample for serious listening in a normal domestic setting, but perhaps not quite enough if you are a regular party person. Still, you could always buy a cheap but gutsy transistor amplifier for those occasions!

Another treat was in store with Grieg's *Morning Mood*, the creamy smooth woodwind opening being completely transparent and life-like. Not being overly power limited allowed the amplifier to render the build up into swirling strings complete with its soaring dynamics and sense of scale. Imaging had that extra sense of width that valve amplifiers often exhibit, the sound stage went well beyond the loudspeakers, making for a most interesting and enjoyable listening experience.

I closed the session with Billy Bragg's *Tank Park Salute*, to see how the Ariand handled vocals. Bragg's voice was a little more strident that it appears through other systems, but the track's wilting melancholy remained undaunted as the haunting lyrics were lifted well clear of the simple, bleak instrumentation. It is with music like this that the SET amplifier, with its ability to conjure up detail that others may appear to miss, can be used to perhaps its best advantage.

Conclusion

My observations of Ariand's PRO845SE are as a result of the engineering techniques used when making an amplifier such as this, rather than any particular failings of the design – which is very good. So, if you want a valve amplifier then you may as well buy a proper one with a distinctively different sound. For the money this hard to beat. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Incredible value for money, genuine single-ended triode sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Potentially tricky loudspeaker matching

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: For the money it's hard to think of any real argument against this amplifier if it's a SET you're after...

FEATURES



OVERALL





Kudos

kudosaudio.com



Sweetness and lite

Jason Kennedy enjoys a compact Parasound separates system you can treat yourself to, without ruining your musical appetite...

In case you hadn't noticed it, the hi-fi business is in a quandary. The traditional enthusiast who's prepared to spend time and money in seeking out great components with which to build a dream system is, if not a dying breed then an ageing one. The new music lover with money in his or her pocket wants relatively inexpensive hardware that integrates with their iTunes libraries or mobile devices and doesn't take up a great deal of domestic real estate. Alas, this is a state of affairs that the majority

of hi-fi manufacturers have failed to address and as a result times have become pretty tough.

Things are even more advanced in this respect in America, where they do everything before us, including abandoning 'proper' audio hardware, and this maybe why a company like Parasound which used to make muscle amps has taken to building the Z series?

On the company website this range has a Z-shaped building block in the Lego style to indicate that the Z series consists of multiple compact

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Parasound Z System: Zcd CD/MP3 player, Zpre2 preamplifier, Zamp v.3 power amp

ORIGIN: US/China

TYPE: CD/MP3 player, preamp, power amp

DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD)
Zcd/Zpre2/Zamp v.3: 242x51x254mm each

WEIGHT:
Zcd: 3kg, Zpre2: 2.1kg, Zamp: 3.2kg

FEATURES: (Zcd)
• outputs: digital (TOSLINK, S/PDIF), analogue (RCA phono)
• inputs: USB, analogue (Zpre2 and Zamp v.3)
• inputs/outputs: analogue (RCA phono)

DISTRIBUTOR: S-AV Distribution

TELEPHONE: 01303 814850

WEBSITE: parasound.com

components that can be integrated in any fashion you like. The Z series components gathered here are silver versions of a larger black Z range that have rack-mount 'ears'. There are nine black Z components including a phono stage with USB out, a zone preamp and some really leftfield things like a cooling fan and a speaker selector!

For the silver series, Parasound has started with the Zcd CD and MP3 disc spinner, Zpre2 preamp and Zamp v.3 power amp, all at £400 apiece. In case the pictures don't reveal as much these are tiny components, each one is 240mm wide and a mere 51mm high, you can combine two side-by-side in a pro audio rack. This and the unusual nature of some of the black series components indicates their multiroom orientation.

For the European market, Parasound has decided to promote the range as a desktop system, something to connect to your PC and a compact pair of speakers for a serious listening experience without the usual bulk. At present it has one serious limitation in this application, no USB



input for a PC, in fact no digital input at all save for a USB that you can use with a stick/flash drive containing MP3s and even that proved difficult to use (see below). A solution is due in the form of the Zdac, but that wasn't available at the time of review, which is a pity as it's a pivotal component given the apparent profile of the series. Suffice to say that we'll be reviewing one as soon as we can...

There are a lot of other features however, the Zpre2 has four line inputs and as many for composite video, which is another nod to the multiroom inclination of the system, a state of affairs backed up by the presence of an RS232 socket and the ability to run from four IR codes to control four independent zones. All of which prompted me to wonder how the music is supposed to be distributed, as the Zpre2's only outputs are two pairs of RCA phonos, one at fixed output. Where most multi-room systems use CAT5 cable with RJ45 connectors to distribute a digital signal, this sends an analogue one to the power amp in each zone which has a loop out for another power amp. The Zamp v.3 has the ability to receive and send IR signals back to the pre and attached CD player via the analogue interconnect.

The Zcd has a slot drive that's a little

possessive about discs, it only leaves a CD protruding for seven seconds before swallowing it up and going straight into play, rendering the eject button on the remote pretty pointless. It does have a video output, rear panel minijack input and both fixed and variable output, among other features, so that wee back panel is plenty dense!

The Zpre 2 has a headphone output, a motor driven analogue volume control and record outputs for video and audio. The Zamp v.3 is a 45 watt power amp (90 watt bridged) with a toroidal transformer, headphone out and analogue outputs for daisy chaining, oh and it's Class AB not D, so quite an achievement given the size, I'd say. Contrast that to the Pioneer A-70 integrated reviewed on p16, which is the size of the back of a bus and uses Class D operation!

Sound quality

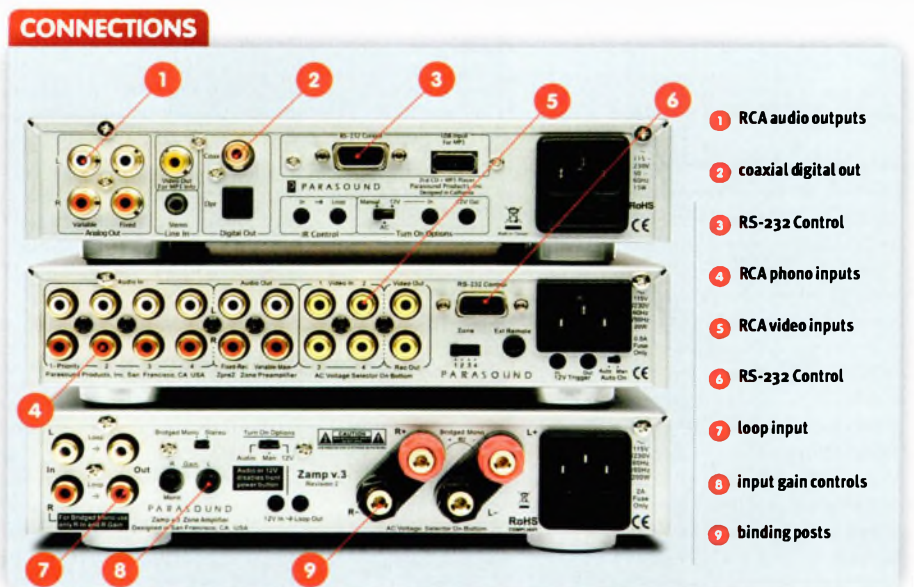
I asked Richard Schram at Parasond US which speakers he recommends, and it turned out that I didn't have any of those mentioned (see Q&A), so I stuck with the Bowers & Wilkins Diamond 802s. Overkill perhaps, but they're certainly an easy and efficient load that doesn't make life too difficult for partnering amplifiers.

They actually proved a pretty good match if, perhaps, a little too revealing for the Zcd, which is not the most refined of components. It's not brash but could be more open, vital and detailed. Fortunately, that doesn't really get in the way of its ability to play music in an entertaining fashion as timing is adequate and, without comparison with similarly priced full-width players, is easily up to the task of reminding me of how much Don van Vliet of Captain Beefheart desperately wanted to sound like Howlin' Wolf! It's a feisty, fun performer – but isn't exactly as suave as Roger Moore.

It was interesting to see that the Zcd's manual suggest a hierarchy of quality for the different connections on the player, its variable output being the least good, fixed output better and digital output best. Obviously this manual was written in the context of a system with a DAC in it as the Zpre is analogue only. It's most probably true though, I compared the player's variable output straight into the power amp against the fixed output going via the preamp and the latter route proved considerably more precise and definite, revealing more detail in the music. When I've made this comparison in the past, the result is often the opposite, but that was usually with more expensive kit and decent volume controls are rarely found in budget CD players.

The amplifiers are both cute and capable of delivering an engaging musical experience

I got the best results when using the amplifiers with a third party source and DAC playing streamed material. The components in question were more expensive than the Zcd, but proved that the amps are not a serious barrier to rather compelling results. Under these circumstances, the sound was refined, dynamic and detailed, in fact full of vigour and life. The power on offer limits levels to the relatively sensible arena, but the quality of that power delivers plenty of snap in the bass and scale to the imaging, I played Funkadelic's superb *America Eats Its Young* at almost appropriate levels and came away having appreciated both the quality of playing and the perspicacity of the songwriting of that talented band.



Q&A

Richard Schram
Parasound



JK: What's the maximum interconnect length that you can use between preamp and power amp?

RS: As interconnect length increases there is an increased chance for external noise to be picked up in the cable. Balanced lines will cancel more externally-caused noise. Longer cables also have higher resistance so the volume could be slightly attenuated as the length increases, but unlikely to be noticeable. Bob MacDonald in our technical department has installed lengths as long as 20-30 metres with no real problems.

The preamp only has one pair of variable outputs, do you need to daisy chain power amps to use them in multiple rooms?

Typically the power amps in multi-room installations remain in a central location, where they are often mounted in an equipment rack which is located out of sight, perhaps in a closet. Most preamps have only one pair of variable output jacks. Having Loop Out jacks on our power amplifiers makes it more convenient to connect multiple power amps.

Why no digital inputs or USB for PCs on the CD player?

If you could see inside the player you'd see there is very little real estate. If we made it a full size player we would probably have included these. I do urge you to listen to our new Zdac with some truly unique technology in it.

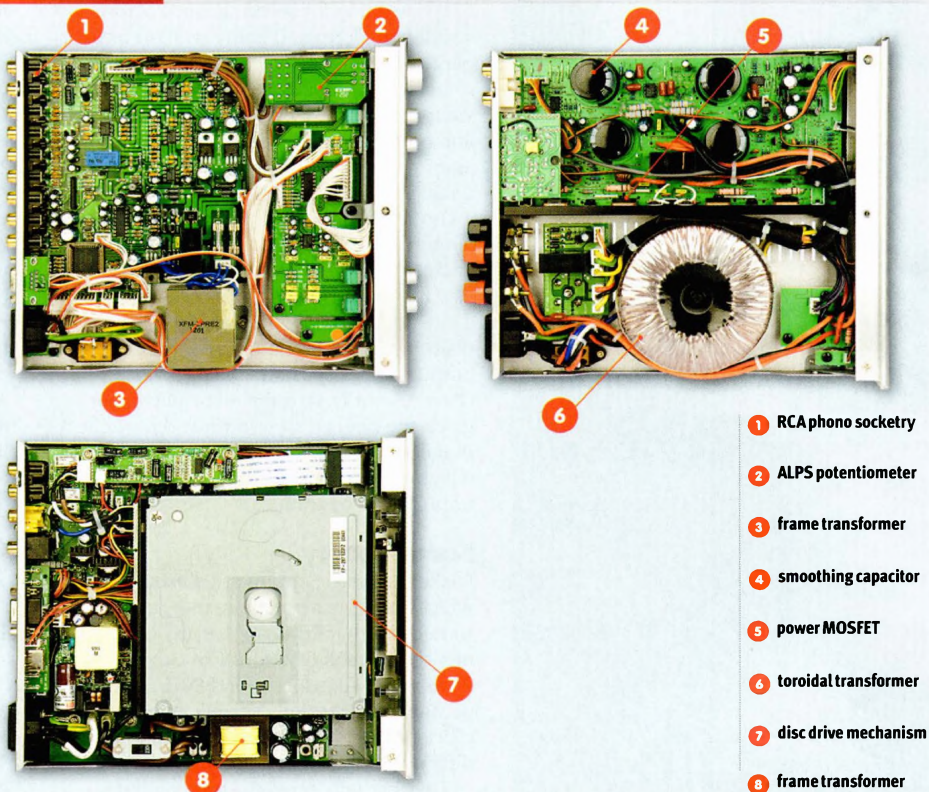
How can the RS232 connections be used to make the system more flexible?

The RS232 is intended for use with a whole-house controller that has keypads in each room or interfaces with an iPhone or iPad. This will be of less consequence to the music enthusiast who doesn't care about whole-house audio.

Which speakers do you recommend, to match the units?

UK brands such as Epos, Harbeth, PMC and Wharfedale, to name a few. The KEF LS50s have had a great success with a Parasound Zcd/Zpre2/Zamp v.3 combination, even in very large spaces.

IN SIGHT



- 1 RCA phono socketry
- 2 ALPS potentiometer
- 3 frame transformer
- 4 smoothing capacitor
- 5 power MOSFET
- 6 toroidal transformer
- 7 disc drive mechanism
- 8 frame transformer



THIS LITTLE SYSTEM is designed to sound good but take up minimal space. Its most obvious competitor in this arena is Pro-Ject, whose Box DS series also includes a very compact CD player, pre and power amps, even monoblocks and start at £299 apiece. They don't have all the multi-room features on offer with the Parasound, but are likely to be all the more sonically competitive for that reason.

The other kid on this particular block is TEAC, its now well established Ho1 series has a classy amp that is a bit more nimble than the Zamp, if not quite as solidly built, but it comes in superbly finished casework and is only £250 at a certain well known high street retailer. There is also an attractive matching DAC and iPod dock but no CD player.

I got carried away with this system to be honest, and revelled in the hall acoustics and genius of Frank Zappa and his band at a Hammersmith Odeon concert in 1979. The sheer atmosphere of the event brings it to life in the hands of these amps. You could do the same with an £800 integrated, but if you want a compact solution that also delivers the goods, the Parasounds might have an inroad into a side of the audio business that isn't well served.

As mentioned, I had some difficulty playing MP3 from a USB drive, but found some info on the Parasound site which suggested that only certain drives are totally compatible. As it turned out, re-formatting a generic drive to FAT 32 did the trick and I was able to enjoy some music this way, it sounded slightly cleaner but less substantial than CD, which is not surprising given the limitations of MP3. It does give you a taste of file streaming potential however, and is a useful feature.

Conclusion

It's hard to see this system making great inroads on the multi-room scene however, with brands like Sonos breaking through with its wireless system. The DIY install market is not going to be wanting to send metres of interconnect

around the home. And the pros will stick to better established methods like CAT5 for signal distribution. The Z series CD player looks the part but is the weakest link.

The amplifiers on the other hand are both cute and capable of resolving plenty of detail and delivering an engaging, even exciting musical experience in the context of loudspeakers that don't have a taxing load. The power spec sounds about right, which is pretty remarkable for such a compact unit, and when the Zdac comes along Parasound will have a system that should tempt both desktop audio warriors and those looking for something that's both compact and ballsy. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★☆ | LIKE: Very impressive amplifiers for the size |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: CD player is not in the same league, and USB flash drive use is distinctly limited |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: Amps are revealing, but you're paying for features which might be superfluous |
| FEATURES
★★★★☆ | |

OVERALL



The Legacy Lives On



Sansui

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In December 1944, Mr Khosaku Kikuchi opened the original Sansui Electrical Plant. By 1965 the company were famed as one of the finest Hi-Fi companies worldwide, thanks in part to their phenomenal AU-111 valve-based integrated amplifier.

Now, in 2012, Sansui are back in the UK with a range of Hi-Fi separates that stay true to Mr Kikuchi's original principles of strength, simplicity, quality and affordability. The SAP-201V Integrated Amplifier, WLD-201 Network Audio Player and CDD-201V CD Player are available through a network of selected retailers across the UK. To find your local dealer, visit www.henleydesigns.co.uk.

Sansui is distributed in the UK by Henley Designs Ltd.

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Deceptive bends

There's more to these American standmount speakers than meets the eye. **Jason Kennedy** finds out what's under the stocking...

The Aon 3 is the larger of two very similar standmounts, there are also two floorstanders called Triton which employ the same techniques as are found here but with more/bigger drive units. The Aon's all-over grille cloth disguises the fact that this speaker has four drive units per channel, two are admittedly passive radiators (so not connected to the crossover or amplifier) but it's still two more than most compact standmounts. And the driven units are not off the shelf types either, both being designed by Golden Ear to work in a design that shows some true out-of-the-box thinking. The seven inch mid/bass unit has a cast basket and multi-vented phase plug, while the tweeter is a ribbon type, or as GE puts it, a high velocity folded ribbon (HVFR). It's similar to the Heil Air Motion design seen on some very high end speakers, and is a key factor in the overall sound of this speaker.

Ribbon tweeters don't have a piston motion like domes, but rather pressurise the air by vibrating it, there have been some famous examples over the years including the very long ones in Apogee panels and a relatively small one in the Townshend Supertweeter. As a rule they are not found in speakers at this sort of price point because dome tweeters are far more affordable and available off the shelf.

The bass/mid driver has a cast chassis, but GE doesn't volunteer what this casting is made of, it is designed for maximum air-flow and the cone shape itself has been optimised for the range it has to deliver. The crossover point isn't given, but the overall spec is a response that goes from 38Hz to 35kHz, the latter reflecting one of the advantages of ribbon tweeters and their suitability for super tweetering purposes. The phase plug in the driver's centre has vanes on it

that are designed to be more effective at stopping sounds 'from across the apex of the cone' from interfering with each other, that is sounds near the centre of the driver.

There is a flat fronted, eight inch passive radiator on either flank of this speaker and these are designed to extend bass at low frequencies in much the same way as a reflex port, but without some of the drawbacks of that approach. GE says that they perform like a transmission line in that they increase sensitivity and bass extension but with more control than a port. It's an approach I've encountered before but rarely to the extent found here...

The cabinet is a truncated pyramid which has a number of benefits, firstly it minimises parallel internal surfaces which kills off standing waves, and secondly it places minimal baffle area around the tweeter which improves dispersion.



▣ DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Golden Ear Aon 3

Origin:
USA/China

Type:
standmount
loudspeaker

Weight:
6.4kg

Dimensions:
(WxHxD)
355 x 228 x 279mm

FEATURES:
• HF drive unit:
35x27mm folded
ribbon

• bass/mid drive
unit: 178mm cone

• quoted sensitivity:
90dB

• quoted nominal
impedance: 8 ohms

• finish: grille cloth
plus polished black
base and cap

IMPORTED BY:
Karma AV

TELEPHONE:
01423 358 846

WEBSITE:
goldenear.com

This cabinet shape should also be good for stiffness as well, but the area of the drive units, especially on the sides, will obviously have an effect here.

Connections consist of one pair of multi-way terminals and while this would appear to be a classic standmount it comes with a small bracket for wall mounting, should you be inclined to locate it thus.

The Aon 3 is a lot of drive unit technology for the money, especially considering the company's American origins, but you don't have to look hard to see how they have managed to keep costs down. I'm talking about the all-over grille cloth, this is a lot less expensive than a veneer and does detract from the speakers appeal. However when you consider how much of its surface is made up of drivers it would be covered in framed grilles anyway and only the hardcore user would appreciate a wood finish with grilles off.

The Aon 3 is extremely even-handed, there is minimal coloration whatever the music

Sound quality

Setting up this speaker took a little longer than usual, and I put this down to those passive radiators and the way that they interact with the room. I used a Custom Design FS104 stand which puts the speaker 60cm plus spikes off the ground; Golden Ear recommends 30 inch stands (76cm), which seems pretty high, and placing the speakers wide and pointing straight at the listening seat. I established the same approach independently, the tweeter sounds so clean that there is no danger of glare with this arrangement.

I hooked the Aons up to a Leema Tucana amplifier using Townshend Isolda cable. Initially I tried some Valvet 50 watt class A monoblocks, but they either don't have quite enough grip to get the Aons jumping or the combination of two very clean, smooth components was a little short on energy; the more powerful and slightly less sophisticated Leema was a good match.

This speaker has an unusual style of presentation. At first it seems a bit thick sounding, a little cosy and lacking in transparency, but after a short while you get used to this and start hearing an awful lot of musical detail. This is a reflection of the ribbon tweeter, it is very smooth

Q&A

Sandy Gross
Golden Ear founder



JK: What do the vanes on the woofer's phase plug achieve?

SG: They make it more effective in preventing sounds from across the apex of the cone from meeting and interfering with each other. They do a better job than a standard phase plug and are more effective at breaking up or mixing up the waves.

Why use a ribbon rather than a dome tweeter?

The tweeter that we are using we call a High Velocity Folded Ribbon. Domes, relatively speaking, have a considerable amount of distortion above 8-10 kHz because of breakup modes in the dome. You hear it as a ringing or sibilance that adds a certain artificial brightness or sibilance. I call it the 'Hi Fi Zing'! Our tweeter is super extended and very low in distortion, but silky smooth at the same time.

Am I right in thinking that the passive drivers operate like ABRs, if so why have two?

The passive drivers do act as ABRs, but are tuned to approximate the loading of a transmission line. We use two in order to both increase the surface area, as well as to radiate the low frequencies in two different physical spots around each speaker. This couples them to different modes in the room and smooths out response. Having more surface area both couples better to the room as well as means that the radiators move less, which results in lower distortion.

How do you recommend these speakers are set up?

I recommend 30 inch high stands. If you use shorter stands, I would suggest putting something under the front of the speaker to tilt it back. Also, I like the speakers toed in facing directly at the listener, and placed fairly far apart, an equilateral triangle or even further. This is personal, but it is what I personally prefer not just with our speakers but with most others including my reference Quads.



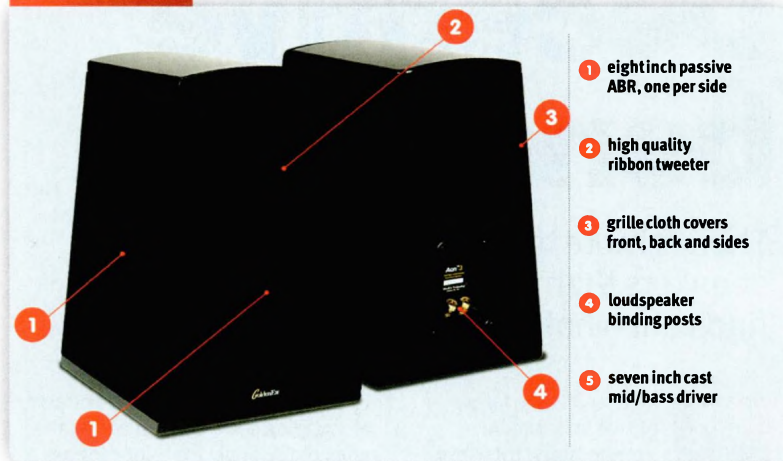
THE SLIGHTLY VEILED balance of Golden Ear's Aon 3 is at odds with the norm found in speakers at this price, the treble is in a higher class than one usually encounters, but the lack of obvious immediacy makes it rather different.

The strongest standmount competition comes from PMC's DB1i, which also uses a variation on transmission line loading, albeit a more conventional one and has a very open, expansive presentation with fine timing skills for its £985 asking price.

If you can stretch the budget a little more, £1,295 will buy you a classic British standmount in the pleasant shape of the Spendor SA1, which is extremely low in coloration and thus very revealing if not quite as much fun as the GE, perhaps...

Another approach would be to go for a floorstander which saves the price of a stand and usually offers greater bass extension to boot. The Bowers & Wilkins 683 is a lot of well finished loudspeaker for the £999 price and has power and dynamics that few standmounts can match. It may not be quite as refined as the GE through the treble, but makes up for this with wider bandwidth, and a revealing midband.

IN SIGHT



- 1 eight inch passive ABR, one per side
- 2 high quality ribbon tweeter
- 3 grille cloth covers front, back and sides
- 4 loudspeaker binding posts
- 5 seven inch cast mid/bass driver

compared to dome types and it's only when you realise that this smoothness is bringing so much of the recording's finer elements do you start to appreciate just how coarse many domes can be by comparison.

The other unusual quality is an absence of boxiness. This is presumably because of the passive drivers on both sides which not only make the bass smoother and more revealing, but reduce the usual sense of cabinet that reflex-loaded designs often exhibit. Tonally, the Aon 3 is extremely even-handed, there is minimal coloration whatever the music, and this lets you hear right into the mix with no sense of undue emphasis. It really shows up the way that all but the best tweeters have a slight edge that adds a form of definition which doesn't belong to the music.

This driver is also likely to be the key element when it comes to the Aon 3's exceptional imaging capabilities. What strikes you primarily is the scale of the image, the ease with which it extends to either side of the speakers as well as behind and above them. Presumably those passive drivers help here and I am guessing that it's details like the vanes on the woofer's phase plug and the nature of dispersion from the tweeter that are the source of this capability. With recordings that have reverb on them you are made fully aware of its extent. Whether it be purist audiophile fodder or Cornelius's *Sensuous*, the way that sound creates depth and space is made very clear and in an entirely natural sounding fashion.

What has been sacrificed to achieve this you might ask? Well, firstly there's not the immediacy that you get with a more conventional speaker, timing is good and detail in

plentiful supply but it's a relaxed presentation that won't suit all tastes. Bass is also not as extended as the best at this price, that truncated pyramid shape cannot have a massive volume and those ABRs give the bass a natural rather than boxy slam, which is probably more accurate and even than normal but doesn't shake the furniture as much as some.

Conclusion

The Golden Ear Aon 3 is a remarkably capable speaker, whose finesse at high frequencies brings great smoothness to the treble. On the other hand it might seem a bit too silky for some, but give it a little time and you'll start to hear more of the music and the way it's put together and forget about its presentation. That is certainly what happened to me, as I began to enjoy the texture it reveals across the band, something that gives depth to voices that is very enticing. Then there's the tone of Chris Squire's bass on *Long Distance Runaround* and the articulation of the playing. All in this unusual standmount is hugely entertaining, revealing and excellent value for money. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| PERFORMANCE
★★★★★ | LIKE: Very revealing with excellent imaging and very little coloration |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★☆ | DISLIKE: Not the prettiest speaker around nor the most immediate |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: The presentation is a bit different but this is an even handed loudspeaker that's very easy to enjoy |
| EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL



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January 2013


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TD510ZMK2
August 2012

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Jim Anderson, recording engineer with 9 Grammy Awards and 25 nominations for his recordings, Chairman of Audio Engineering Society 2008 - 2009.





One on one

Tim Jarman finds himself beguiled by T+A's compact new single-box streaming music system...

Even though modern audio products seem to be becoming more derivative, I don't think I've seen anything quite like the T+A Cala receiver before. There's nothing new about receivers of course – combining a tuner with an amplifier is simply commonsense and I've written in the past about my surprise that there aren't more of them. However, to take this format and combine a very traditional implementation with all the latest facilities like the Cala does, has resulted in a fascinating product whose rigorously logical concept will I'm sure appeal to many.

As well as being a capable amplifier (55 watts into 4 ohms is the claimed output) and an FM RDS tuner, the

Cala can also act as a gateway to a computer-based music collection (including MP3, AAC, FLAC and WAV files) via a wired or a wireless DLNA network, and through the same link gives access to Internet radio stations. It also has a Bluetooth receiver (built to the A2DP standard) for direct access to the content held on portable devices and a USB connection for the addition of a local drive or an iPod. Two analogue sources can also be catered for (such as CD player, tape deck or a turntable and suitable phono stage, so the Cala can form the centrepiece of quite a comprehensive audio system.

What is really interesting is what has been left out, there's no DAB tuner for example (hurrah!) – who needs it when you have access to

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT:
T+A Cala
ORIGIN:
Germany/China
TYPE:
FM/DLNA/
Bluetooth receiver
WEIGHT:
4 kg
DIMENSIONS:
(HxWxD)
9.5 x 30 x 21 cm
FEATURES:
• 55 watt amplifier
• FM RDS tuner
• UPnP streaming client
• A2DP Bluetooth interface
• remote control with supplied IR handset or Apple iPad application
DISTRIBUTOR:
Avoke Ltd
TELEPHONE:
07876 246956
WEBSITE:
avoke.co.uk

Internet radio for the widest programme choice and normal FM for the best sound quality? There are also no S/PDIF digital inputs for a CD transport or another digital source, since it is presumed that all digital content will be coming over the network connection.

This all makes good sense, why load up the chassis with connections and modes which will never be used? The designers haven't stopped there though. There are no controls on the unit itself, so everything has to be done remotely, either with the supplied handset or with an iPad application which you can download.

This however seems less logical to me. Imagine how annoying it would be if you wanted to switch the music off or to reduce the volume in order to answer the telephone or to receive guests, only to find that whatever you normally use to control the Cala was not to hand! Maybe they could put a concealed on/mute/off switch on the next version? There's also no headphone socket and no analogue output other than that for the loudspeakers, so you can't use the Cala with an external amplifier or to record from.

Setting up the network is as baffling as they always are, but once all the big numbers are typed in access is pretty straightforward if your server is DLNA compatible. The FM tuner is a single chip type similar to that used in mobile 'phones and can be connected to an outdoor antenna through an "F" type connector on the rear panel.

Styling is both striking and modern and as you would expect from T+A, and the finish is flawless. The main cabinet is formed by an aluminium extrusion with the front panel and the top surface finished in polished acrylic. The electrical screening properties of the thick aluminium are claimed to be very good, but the black plastic attracts (and shows) dust to an alarming degree – if the set were mine I think I'd use the slot underneath to keep a duster in, although it will also hold a copy of the Radio Times (if you let it stick out of the back a little), not that the designers would have had either of these applications in mind I'm sure!

Even though it is small, the Cala's powerful amplifier should drive most loudspeakers with ease, but for those who want a really neat installation T+A offer a matching model called the CS Mini. Inside each tiny cabinet are a 100mm bass driver and a 25mm cloth dome tweeter, along with a forward facing bass reflex port. Together the Cala and the CS Minis are supplied complete and ready to run except for loudspeaker cables; I used a Chord Company Odyssey 2 set for my listening tests.

Sound quality

I thought I'd check out the loudspeakers first by connecting them to my Cyrus 6A amplifier and CD8SE 2 CD player. The results were not great, with far too much uncontrolled bass which quickly smothered the rest of the music. Initially they gave the same results with the Cala too, but I eventually discovered a menu where these and a few other T+A loudspeaker models can be selected by name, and by doing this and changing the 'LF Shape' setting from its default 'Bass extd' to 'Full range' brought

about a transformation. They'll never sound like full-sized loudspeakers of course, but given how small the cabinets are the sound is impressive once all the settings are correctly entered – make sure that you do this if you decide to buy a Cala. The sound can also be corrected for where the speakers are placed (free/wall/corner/ shelf etc) which is useful, each mode giving roughly appropriate results for the relevant position.

Plugging the CD8SE 2 into the Cala showed that the amplifier is highly capable and doesn't suffer from typical problems of cheaper Class D implementations – jagged treble and high background noise. Tonally the main impression is one of warmth with a notable presence dip and an obvious bass lift, but overall the results are very pleasant indeed with the cloth tweeters filling in the

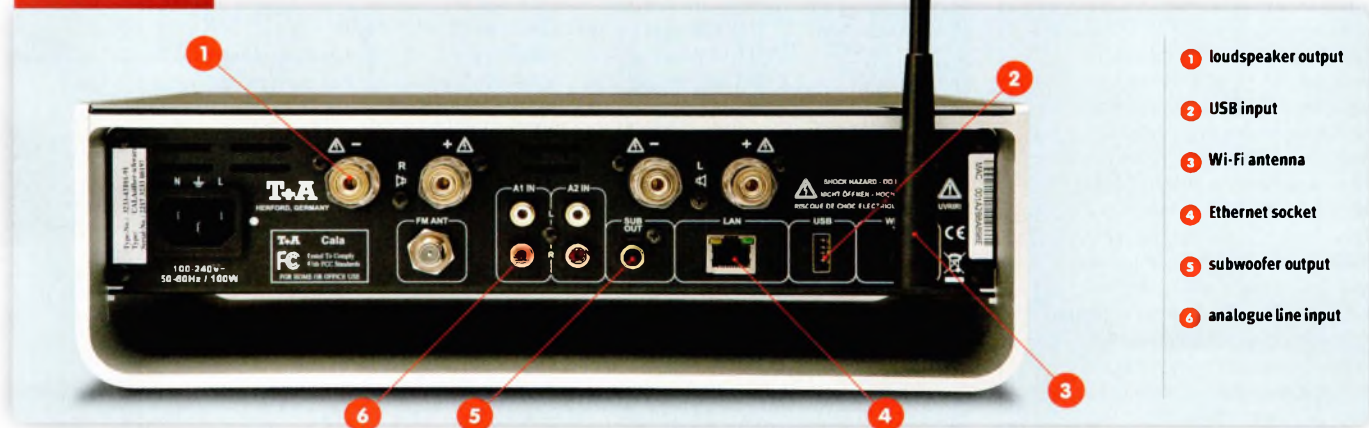
Styling is both striking and modern, and as you would expect from T+A, the finish is flawless...

top end with sweet, relaxed treble. Basia Trzetrzelewska's soaring vocals in the track *Brave New Hope* (from the album of the same name) were reproduced with a fine sense of scale, rising from the rest of the mix and leaving the warm (but slightly muddled) bass line behind. The Cala and the CS Minis are not a challenging listen; instead they give the type of presentation that it is very easy just to sink into.

Raising the volume predictably showed that the loudspeakers begin to break up at the bottom end long before the amplifier runs out of puff, substituting a pair of Monitor Audio PL100s showed that there was plenty of drive available if you want to make a lot of noise with the little box. I thought that the Cala would be too relaxed for the likes of *Nasty* by Janet Jackson (from the album *Control*), but even though its easygoing sonic signature was definitely there the track was still performed with energy and pace, the endless transients

Technically, the Cala uses a bridged Class D amplifier powered by a switch mode power supply to provide the muscle. All signal processing is done in the digital domain with 24-bit resolution, so the output of the tuner and the two analogue inputs are digitised before they enter the amplifier circuit. The sensitivities of these two inputs can be set in the menus to equalise the volume setting for all the sources. A large VF matrix display on the front of the unit shows all the menu functions as well as a large readout of what is playing.

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Andy Naphine

T+A UK press representative



1J: What does T+A stand for? How long has the company been involved in hi-fi? Is it a specialist manufacturer?

PC: Yes, T+A (Theory and Application) is one of Germany's largest specialist audio brands and is committed to developing, manufacturing and distributing audio products of the highest standard possible. Based in Herford in Eastern Westphalia (near Hanover) since 1978, T+A develops and produces all of its products in house. These include amplifiers, preamplifiers, CD players, network music players, turntables and even loudspeakers.

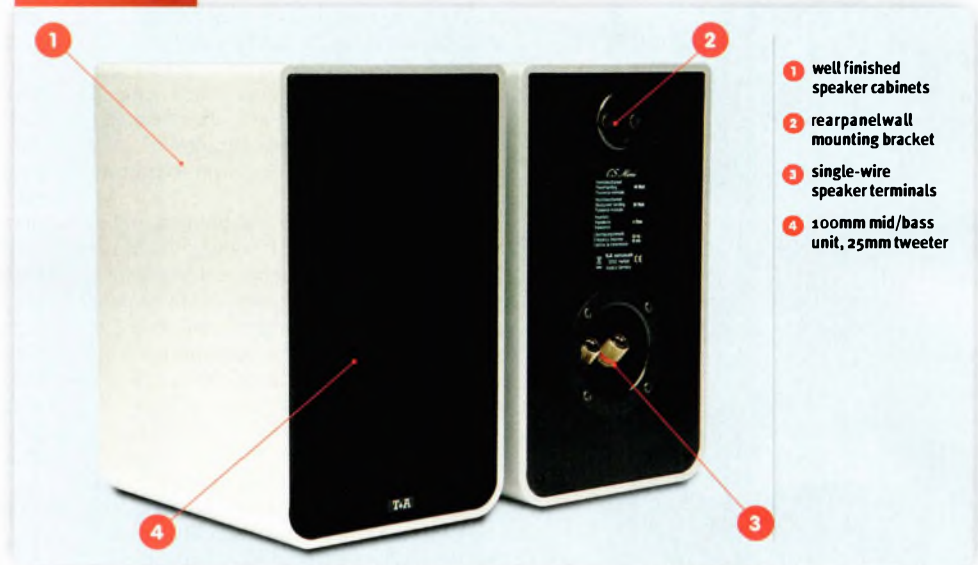
To which types of customer do you think the Cala system will appeal? Who was it designed for?

Being network-based and iPad app controlled, the Cala will of course certainly appeal to those who keep their music in the digital domain. However, don't be fooled by its diminutive size, as it packs a real punch and will give many full-sized separates systems a run for their money in terms of sound quality! It's also extremely well specified with wireless LAN, FM and Internet radio, Bluetooth and two analogue auxiliary inputs.

Are the supplied loudspeakers the only ones the system was designed for, or is it good to go with other designs? If so, can you recommend some?

Although T+A package Cala with the CS Mini speakers as an option, the company openly admits that it is capable of driving significantly larger and more demanding speakers. There are others within the T+A range that are certainly worth auditioning, such as the new Pulsar range, and I have even had it driving the high-end Criterion TCD 410 R standmount speakers without any issues. However, due to the subjective nature of speaker choice, I would always recommend auditioning a range of speakers to get the right match for your environment and taste.

IN SIGHT



HOW IT COMPARES

THE T+A CALA may look basic when it comes to what it can play and what you can connect it to, but now that many listeners choose to centralise their music resources on computers it could well be that it offers the perfect package. If you choose to go down this route then you already have a way to import and store CDs so a local player isn't really necessary.

Equally, why struggle with the problems of DAB reception when Internet radio is at hand? What computers and the Internet seemingly cannot replicate is the sound of a good analogue source like LP records and the performance of the FM radio network, so offering easy access to these makes the Cala a compelling hi-fi product.

Combination units are nothing new, and vintage fans will no doubt remember the Hitachi Opus 1 music centre of the late 1980s, which had a Compact Disc player where one would expect to find a turntable. This model soon found public acceptance and sold strongly, perhaps the same happy future awaits the new Cala?

don't seem to trouble the Class D amplifier or the cloth tweeters that much. In the final analysis I found the focus to be ever so slightly soft, but digitally transferring both albums to a USB drive and connecting this directly helped a lot in this respect. Clearly there is a benefit to avoiding two self-cancelling stages of data conversion. Ditto the network streaming side, which brought about a substantial improvement over the line inputs.

I was keen to try the tuner section as well, since many other modern FM stages are compromised by being part of a software-controlled combined FM/DAB front end. Using a roof-mounted omni directional antenna I found the Cala capable of surprisingly good FM reception and to be adequately sensitive, although an attempt with the supplied indoor FM aerial was less successful.

There is clearly a 'high blend' system in operation which makes FM sound very muddled when signal levels are low, but once the signal strength meter is over about three quarters on the scale things open up really nicely and the results are notably superior to low-rate Internet broadcasts and DAB. BBC Radio 4 showed a solid soundstage and clear vocal presentation with only a small amount of sibilance present, normally with female presenters.

In contrast to the other sources, I was aware of a presence lift which made the sound seem starker and less luxurious, but nevertheless I considered the results very good. BBC Radio 3's classical output was also handled well, and clearly

demonstrated why the BBC says that you won't necessarily benefit from their increased resolution Internet broadcasts of this station if you have a decent FM receiver already.

Conclusion

T+A's new Cala system performs admirably, even though it is perhaps not as versatile as a keen audiophile might like. Only the confusing and cheap looking plastic remote control unit detracts, but T+A can offer a nicer looking metal one as an accessory. I'd also liked to have seen a 'standby' indicator on the front panel as it is currently not possible to tell that the unit is powered unless it is actually playing.

At £1,490 for the main unit and an extra £600 for the loudspeakers the Cala isn't cheap, but then as everybody knows quality always costs a little bit extra. As a compact and unobtrusive way to get your digital music collection out into the room the Cala certainly deserves a strong recommendation. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Modern concept, excellent build, strong sonic performance

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: No on-board controls or standby indicator; no digital ins

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Excellent single box system that neatly combines FM radio and streaming sources

FEATURES



OVERALL



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5.1 SPEAKER PACKAGE




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Q ACOUSTICS 2020i
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DENON DNP-720AE
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QACOUSTICS
2050i / 2020i

The 2050i floorstanders combines excellent build quality with extended bass, clarity, refinement and dynamic ability. While the compact 2020i combines open mid-range, astonishing transient response with exceptional high frequency clarity.



MONITOR AUDIO
GOLD GX

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

KEF AUDIO
R SERIES / LS50

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

BOWERS & WILKINS
PM1

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



TANNOY
REVOLUTION DC6T SE

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PMC
TWENTY RANGE

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DENON DNP-720AE **MUSIC STREAMER**

Enjoy a wide variety of internet radio and on-line digital content. The DNP-720AE also supports AirPlay® so that you can stream music from any compatible device.



MARANTZ NA7004 **MUSIC STREAMER**

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

PIONEER N-50 **MUSIC STREAMER**

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



ROTEL RT-12 **MUSIC STREAMER**

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

SANSUI WLD+201L **MUSIC STREAMER**

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



CYRUS STREAMLINE 2
MUSIC STREAMING SYSTEM

Based upon the same platform as the Stream XP2 but it comes complete with a high performance built-in stereo power amplifier.



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- rPAC USB DAC / HEADPHONE AMP
- rLINK OPTICAL / COAXIAL DAC
- rBLINK BLUETOOTH DAC



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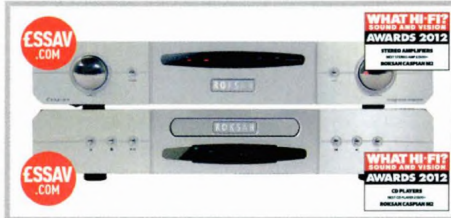
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MARANTZ CD6004 • PM6004 CD / AMPLIFIER
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ROKSAN CASPIAN M2 CD / AMPLIFIER
 The M2 amp boasts 85wpc and five line inputs while the matching CD features a 24-bit DAC plus dedicated power supplies for the outputs.



SANSUI SAP201V • CDD201V CD / AMPLIFIER
 Sansui returns to the UK with a wide range of hi-fi components including this CD player and 40W integrated amplifier. Available in silver and black finishes.



NAIM SUPERUNITI MUSIC STREAMER
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Really Special



Pro-Ject has launched its most sophisticated phono stage yet. **Ed Selley** thinks tweekers have found their new best friend...

Pro-Ject has been expanding its product range prodigiously of late, and moving into categories beyond its trademark turntables and accessories. The company hasn't forgotten its roots though, and part of the new RS range of electronics is the Phono Box RS seen here.

The RS series is Pro-ject's flagship range of electronics, and you get the sense after unpacking the Phono Box RS that they have really gone to town on the feature set for this one. This is the best specified phono stages I have ever seen for under £1,000 and not for the first time on encountering a Pro-Ject product, I'm left wondering how they have done it for the price.

It's effectively a moving magnet and moving coil-capable phono stage with adjustable loading and gain settings. This bald description barely does justice to the flexibility of the RS though. Input impedance is fully adjustable via the front panel knob, which effectively allows infinite adjustment, and there are additional front panel settings for mute and gain.

The most unusual feature of the RS is that it has switchable curves for RIAA (an industry default) and the older Decca. This is an approximation of the recording curve used by European record labels up until the

mid nineteen fifties (and arguably useful for some material released rather later than that), and can greatly benefit some older recordings. Around the back, you can adjust the input capacitance and decide between using RCA or XLR connections.

Yes, you read that correctly! Pro-Ject has built a fully balanced phono stage for £600. There is a certain irony that a phono stage is one of the most suitable pieces of audio equipment to build balanced and yet examples of this are really rather rare...

The RS is the most cost-effective example I've seen, and if you can fit your tonearm with a suitable cable, you should see a worthwhile reduction in your noise floor. The only slightly annoying aspect is that the RS won't allow you to input RCA and output over XLR or vice versa, which is a bit of shame. Fit and finish is excellent though. It's all metal and the chassis is extremely substantial. Overall this feels like a very special piece of equipment and the only component that feels anything less than rock-solid is the power supply, but it is completely silent in use

Sound quality

Sonically the RS is an impressive performer. This is an exceptionally quiet design, even over RCA, and

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Pro-ject Phono Box RS

ORIGIN:
Czech Republic

TYPE:
phono stage

WEIGHT:
2kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
22x72x194mm

FEATURES:

- MC and MM-capable
- fully balanced double mono design
- fully passive RIAA and DECCA equalisation
- unique continuously variable input impedance loading
- RCA and XLR in and out

DISTRIBUTOR:
Henley Designs

TELEPHONE:
01235 511166

WEBSITE:
henleydesigns.co.uk

the gain settings should be sufficient for even the feeblest of cartridges. The overall sonic balance of the Pro-Ject is commendably neutral, but it's able to accurately reproduce the behaviour of the turntable connected to it. The performance from a Rega RP6 was explicit and featured the exceptional timing that the deck is renowned for, while the feed from a Michell GyroDec had the trademark exceptional soundstage and more three-dimensional bass.

The overall effect is that the Pro-Ject is extremely faithful to the source and the record. Detail extraction is excellent and there is a genuine sense of depth and realism to recordings. This transparency will highlight some of the flaws in less pristine records, but considering how good the RS can be with good recordings, this is relatively benign. Bass response is good too and the RS can generally produce deep and detailed bass with no trace of bloat or artificial blossom.

Compared to the identically priced Avid Pellar, the Pro-Ject is slightly less rhythmically engaging, but it is still capable of getting the head nodding with uptempo material. The Decca curve setting has a subtle, but worthwhile effect on older records with a slight increase in low end bass response and reduction in top end tizz.

Overall, a serious bit of kit for the asking price, and there is no question that Pro-Ject has pulled out all the stops to produce something special. If you use multiple cartridges, the extremely flexible settings will allow you to get the best out of them and if you can go balanced, there is absolutely nothing that can match it for value. It also manages to feel special to use in a way that very few pieces of equipment under £1,000 can do. If the rest of the RS range is as capable as this, I can't wait to get my hands on them. ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Open and engaging sound, solid build and excellent features

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Powersupply feels less solid, no RCA to XLR conversion

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A staggeringly accomplished design that sets a new standard at the price

FEATURES



OVERALL





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Three of a kind



Patrick Cleasby samples Apple's latest iPod music portables, in the seductive shapes of the new Shuffle, Nano and Touch...

As ever, Apple chose the lead-in to the festive season to reboot its iPod line up and gave us the opportunity to sample more or less the full set. The big surprise is that in this post-hard disk world, the iPod Classic has still not been obsoleted – the 160GB model is still available. But no less pleasing is news of the new earbuds, addressing one of the biggest objections to the iPod package as a whole. The existing bundled ones weren't very good, but now Apple has re-engineered the design and the new 'EarPods' are supplied with all but the humble Shuffle. Another worthy piece of news is the change to Apple's new 'Lightning' connector (see *Lightning Strikes*).

Shuffle

This hasn't changed much since its inception six years ago, and is the only one to retain the old-school Apple earbuds. The original charging and connection station has been replaced by a simple USB to custom 3.5mm jack lead, just the size of its tiny control wheel. There's a claimed fifteen hours of battery life, and a button so that the Pod's voiceover function can tell you track details and how much juice remains.

I loaded a 2GB (£40) Shuffle up with a 256kbps AAC from Afro-Celt Sound System's first album and the

old school 'phones had a hard job doing justice to the complex percussion and deep bass of *Whirl-Y-Reel 1*. Replacing them with the new 'phones from the higher models immediately proved the EarPods are more natural and comfortable, and do more with that bass, maybe *too* much. Detail and finesse was also a little wanting, but they're still a decent way to stay brand-loyal with the ubiquitous white 'phones look. For me, moving to my trusty Etymotic Er4is gave the desired tonal balance and fidelity, showing this new Shuffle to have an appealing sound signature after all.

Nano

This has had a troubled life, going through several transmogrifications to arrive at this latest regrowth from the almost Shuffle-proportioned predecessor. What's admirable about the new Nano (16GB, £129) is the way it both apes the look and feel of a mini Touch, and harks back to the rounded sides profile of the second generation machine. In short, it feels more like a true Nano in the hand than the single-season wearable model did. Other benefits are that while it retains FM Radio and Nike+ capability, it also restores video playback too, if you're into that.

It's appealing on the audio front, too – the Etymotics could be difficult to drive to decent listening levels on some of the loudness-controlled older Pods, but a pass through

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Apple iPod Shuffle, Nano and Touch
ORIGIN: US/China
TYPE: digital audio portable
DISTRIBUTOR: Apple
TELEPHONE: 0800 048 0408
WEBSITE: apple.com

Bombay Bicycle Club's *Dust On the Ground* proved it capable of revealing the instrumental nuance within the maelstrom of compressed band action, at sufficient volume. A check back to the Afro Celts revealed that the Nano is louder than the Shuffle, but regrettably also showed it to be a less subtle bass maker than its wee sibling. The pimped up bass was reminiscent of what the EarPods themselves were doing to the Shuffle's sound. This prompted a switch to Ga Ga's *Bad Romance* to see how the Nano coped with that epic production. The result was a little uninspiring, feeling plasticky and rhythmically leaden. The touchscreen interface feels like the previous Nano's iOS, expanded to a 2x3 icon screen, rather than the constrained single app pages of before. It lacks a Wi-Fi basis for app upgradeability and is, therefore, just pretending to be a mini Touch-alike.



APPLE'S NEW CONNECTOR isn't backwards-compatible, making redundant those original docks. But in truth the old 30-pin connector introduced with the 3G iPod back in 2002 has been with us for ten years now, more than a lifetime in this market. Lightning is an appealingly compact design which scores over mini- and micro-USB in that it can be inserted either way up. Now all we have to do is either spring for the cumbersome over-priced adaptor for our docking devices, or wait for the aftermarket to catch up. With all the major flavours of iDevice now having this interface, it shouldn't take long for them to get there. The switch is not going to make Apple popular with all this extra expense, but unfortunately the change is one that really feels timely and necessary.

Touch

The new five app row deep touchscreen echoes the iPhone 5, but other than the amazing lightness of the machine, little else does. It doesn't feel as robust as either its phone brother or its mirror backed antecedents. This new (£329, 64GB) model appears to be losing its familiar iPod feel with the chi-chi colour-themed wrist strap and insubstantial palm presence. Its edges are not bound as well either – the chamfered front edge of the back's metal soon takes nicks.

The Touch has had a speed bump which puts it close to the iPhone 4S for games playing and other app usage. For the music fan the Music app is a good way to pull tunes from iTunes match over Wi-Fi, negating the need for computer hook up other than for charging. The sound is very good on this new model, although its voicing is a little on the bassy side of the tracks. Still, an impressive thing. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Touch still excels for sheer functionality; the Shuffle and Nano receive useful reworks

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Perceived build isn't as high, maybe because of lightweight?

FEATURES ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Fine, worthy, easy-to-use products, but competition gets tougher...

OVERALL



PICTURES COURTESY OF APPLE



Panel games



MartinLogan's Montis doesn't just play at being one of the best loudspeakers around – it is, says **David Price**...

What's the best speaker in the world? Well, that's a trick question. Of course there *isn't* one. I've heard a number of high end designs – from the B&W 801D to the Focal Grand Utopia – extensively, indeed some have even moved in to my front room as references. I've done active, passive, ribbon, NXT, moving coil and electrostatic. I've played with metal coned drive units, glass fibre, aerogel, Kevlar, paper, carbon fibre and many others – and still can't say which is best. However, one thought that keeps coming into my mind is that in some respects there's *nothing* quite like an electrostatic...

I mean that in a good and a bad way. They do some things sublimely, yet always seem to trip at the final hurdle. Frequency extremes aren't exactly a comfort zone for 'stats, especially the bass; those stretched film panels just can't shift the same volume of air as a large cone being shaken by a powerful magnet. Recognising this, MartinLogan believes in adding a moving coil bass driver to its electrostatics, to give the best of both worlds.

You get the low distortion and linearity and excellent transient speed of an electrostatic panel (thanks to the lightness of the film compared to big, cumbersome cones), along with the prodigious air moving ability of a moving coil driver. But trying to mate the two technologies is about as easy as getting two depressed pandas to procreate in a zoo, *sans* bamboo. Trouble is, they're so different (the drive unit systems, not the pandas). One is very light and fast but doesn't move air so well, the other is big and fat but a bit slow on the transient front. Achieving any sort of happy working compromise is a feat of true Herculean proportions, so unsurprisingly it's so rarely done. Happily, MartinLogan is really rather good at it.

The Montis is one of the company's premier hybrids, and sports a 1,118x287mm panel, underneath which is a 256mm moving coil bass unit set inside its own enclosure – overall it makes for a striking looking speaker measuring 1,505x322x457mm and weighing 26.3kg.

While the speaker is big, it's not massively heavy because plastic film – which comprises much of it – is a darn sight lighter than a brace of metal backed, magnet packed, conventional drivers. The crossover between the panel and the bass box happens at 340Hz, which is usefully out of the area of the audio band where the ear is most sensitive. The bass unit itself is actively powered, via a 24-bit DSP crossover. Output power is said to be 200W, and the company claims a sensitivity of 91dB. I'd say this is realistic; for part of the listening I used a tube power amp of 17W and it showed no signs of stress.

Sound quality

The experience of listening to a top loudspeaker such as this is, in some ways, oddly underwhelming. The

DETAILS

- PRODUCT:** MartinLogan Montis
ORIGIN: US/Canada
TYPE: floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 26.3kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 1,505x322x457mm
FEATURES:
- XStat CLS electrostatic high frequency driver
 - 254mm cast basket, high excursion, aluminium coned bass driver
 - crossover frequency: 340Hz
 - quoted frequency response: 29–23,000Hz ±3dB
 - quoted sensitivity: 91dB
 - quoted impedance 4 Ohms
 - recommended amplifier power: 20–500W

DISTRIBUTOR: Absolute Sounds
TELEPHONE: 020 89713909
WEBSITE: absolutesounds.com

sound is very special alright, and satisfies across a whole number of levels. But it's only when you go back to practically *any* other loudspeaker ever made that you realise just how uniquely talented it actually is!

Correctly set up, the Montis is, essentially devoid of *any* significant sonic flaw. That means that, as soon as you put a piece of music on, it's the music you start listening to, and not the speaker. This makes for a very relaxing, enjoyable, involving experience. Unlike conventional speakers – such as B&W's 801, for example – it's not something that puts a rocket up you the second the needle hits the groove. It's not going to give you a visceral thrill – the sonic equivalent of being strapped onto the

The Montis makes so many conventional speakers sound fake, flawed and flatulent...

back of a missile and fired. Rather, the charms of the Montis are subtler.

Cue up the breezy jazz pop strains of Corduroy's *10:28 from Shibuya*, and some other high end speakers I could name would dazzle you with their sparkling treble, subterranean bass, and sheer physical impact. But you don't get that with the Montis, rather best think of it as an open, outstretched hand, ushering you into the mix. Because it's so neutral, it presents an open window through which you fascinatedly peer.

It does go very loud, it's just that it doesn't sound like it because there's so little stress and strain. Instead a spin of the volume knob clockwise



Q&A

Devin Zell

Product manager, MartinLogan



DP: Why has MartinLogan based its business around electrostatic speakers?

DZ: Electrostatic speakers are captivating. They are capable of an extraordinary performance with compelling clarity and pin-point three-dimensional 'sound staging'.

What benefits, and drawbacks, do electrostatic panels have?

Electrostatic panels are ideal for reproducing sounds above 200 Hz. They offer clarity and resolution, ideal dispersion characteristics to minimise room interactions, and they are capable of sounding almost effortless when reproducing complex musical passages. However, both the size and the power requirements of deep bass frequencies are best served by traditional cone woofers. As a result and with few exceptions, every MartinLogan electrostatic speaker is a hybrid design – an electrostatic transducer matched with a cone woofer.

What frequency does the panel crossover to the bass unit, and why was this chosen?

The Montis crossover is positioned at 340 Hertz. This frequency was chosen because it offered seamless blending between Montis' unique electrostatic panel and 10-inch woofer.

How far from the wall would you suggest the Montis is placed?

At minimum, two to three feet from the wall behind the speaker and the same for the side walls. MartinLogan electrostatics are true dipoles. The out-of-phase back wave is an integral part of creating the three-dimensional sound stage for which our speakers are known – and for ideal performance you want the back wave to be delayed a bit. If placed less than two feet from the wall behind the speaker, the back wave will arrive too quickly. Too close to a side wall the reflection from this wall will bounce back to the listener, arriving too quickly, so some distance is required so that the controlled dispersion can minimise this reflection.



THE MONTIS IS UNUSUAL IN OFFERING 10dB of bass trim at under 100Hz, via a rear panel mounted knob. This is a brilliant feature, and makes tuning the speakers to your room easier than your average £500 floorstander in respect of the lower bass. Upper bass of course can only be balanced by experimenting with the distance between the speaker and the rear wall. Being a true dipole (radiating sound all around) this isn't just important for balancing the bass, but is mission-critical for the overall imaging and soundstaging. In my listening room, the Montis worked surprisingly close to a back wall, better than most other electrostatic designs I have tried.

The issue of toe-in is also vital. I found I needed about 6 degrees in my room; careful adjustment is important as the speakers suddenly seem to snap into focus, giving a wonderfully solid and bold central image when they're angled correctly. When not toed-in properly, they simply give a big, Phil Spector-like 'wall of sound' which is pleasing but not at all accurate. It's fair to say that, in smaller UK-sized listening rooms when you're listening just a little closer up than is ideal, the Montis is rather more directional than you'd expect from a panel speaker – there's definitely a sweet spot.

There's also the issue of height adjustment; the speakers have adjustable rear feet, and experimenting with these yields great rewards, especially in the treble, which opens up when the height is just right. Properly fettled, the music pours out into the room in a totally natural way.



simply brings you further into the recording, moving you closer up. Bass isn't digitally retouched, the midband doesn't get a makeover and the treble is left untainted by the clanging of a metal dome creaking in and out at high speed. Instead, it's like all the huffing and puffing of a box loudspeaker has been removed, leaving a pristine wall of sound in its place...

With Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, it renders the sound of a real orchestra inside a real concert hall, making the music wonderfully immersive and expansive yet delicate and detailed, too. Move back to a box speaker, and your brain instantly hones in on the chuffing of its bass ports, and those awkward moments across the midband as the crossovers play merry hell with phase coherence. The Montis makes so many conventional speakers sound fake, flawed and flatulent.

It's only when you play loud, raucous rock music that the Montis discreetly announces its presence. Yes, you still get that walk-around soundstaging – something that gives the lie to the claim that anyone really needs a centre and/or rear speaker(s) to get surround. Yes, you still get that lovely, seamless wash of sound from bottom to top, without the sound of a single sonic contortion from the drive units. But no, you don't quite get the slap round the chops that a big pair of Vivids, B&Ws or Tannoys would deliver. The opening bars of The Smiths' *Headmaster Ritual* tell the story

of a lovely, couth, classy speaker that just can't quite rock out with the best of them. Still, as panel speakers go, it's a revelation!

Conclusion

The beauty of the MartinLogan Montis is its absence of vice. Contrary to what some ageing punk rockers might believe, that doesn't make it boring – the true and upstanding performance, unsullied by deviant behaviour of its mechanical bits, means you simply get closer to the music. No bad thing, surely?

If you're looking for a 'character speaker' then this isn't it. If you want a big box to make everything sound loud and proud, larger than life and better than the original recording, then move on. Instead, the Montis gives an altogether more rarefied pleasure, the satisfaction of having something that takes you right into the recording, in all its beauty. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Open, even, musical sound; excellent texture; superb height and scale; great detail and finesse

VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



DISLIKE: Lacks visceral impact of big boxes; needs careful set-up
WE SAY: Beautiful high end loudspeaker with a charmingly special sound

OVERALL





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Dielectric: Polyethylene Air-Tubes
Jacket: Green/grey/black braid
Terminations: Cold-Welded Direct Silver Plated Pure OCC Copper
Noise-Dissipation System: Carbon-Based 3-Layer



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Gauge: 15 AWG
Dielectric: Nitrogen-Injected foamed PE
Jacket: Coffee/black braid
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Noise-Dissipation System: Carbon-Based Noise-Dissipation and Cross-Talk-Dissipation Systems



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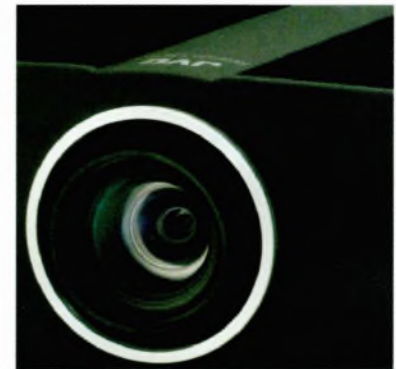
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THIS MONTH:



CHANNA VITHANA
EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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



ED SELLEY
EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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



JIMMY HUGHES
EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

ANYONE WITH A record collection as large as Jimmy's can't be all bad. Oh, and he's reviewed a breathtaking number of products over the years, and is still standing!



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.

The white stuff

Please can you help? I have a problem with my current speakers and the main issue I have is that She Who Must Be Obeyed doesn't like the look of them in our 'Swedish look' living room. The loudspeakers in question are some old Ruark Swordsman units and the problem is the Walnut finish just doesn't go with our white, minimalist design house.

The other problem is they are having to sit on a wall cabinet (speaker stands are also out). I don't think they are working well in this role. So I've decided that

The walnut finish just doesn't go with our minimalist design house...

this might be the impetus to start looking for some new speakers which are acceptable style-wise (I didn't have these issues before I was married!) and which work better on a shelf or cabinet.

Funds permitting next year I was also planning on a new amp (also to be decided), so I'm fairly flexible and would ultimately want a speaker and amp combination that work well together. Budget wise I was hoping to get away with £2,000 or thereabouts for the amp and speakers, but I can go a bit higher if that's required. Style-wise the preferred finish for the speakers would be white, but I could

perhaps get away with black; certainly wood finish is out! Size for the speakers around 12 to 14 inches high is probably about as large as SWMBO will allow me to go...

So that's the style requirements out of the way, now the sound. I'm sure that smallish/shelf speakers have moved on a lot in the last twenty years, but what I'd like is a pair of speakers that can fill our living room (9m x 5.5m). Speakers which give a clear sound (though not too clinical), but have decent, controlled bass.

I listen to a lot of prog rock, but between us we've got quite wide tastes including Led Zeppelin, Joni Mitchell, Air, classical and even some pop so the speakers (and

amp) need to be able to cope with quite varied music styles.

I was looking at some MAD 1920S, but they aren't cheap and I wondering what you can suggest at the lower priced end of the market? Certainly, if I can get away with spending nearer the £700-800 mark then that won't be a bad thing. In eager anticipation...

Steve Mace

DP says: *Hi Steve – if you can stretch to the MyAudioDesign My1920S, then I was seriously recommend you so to do. These are absolutely superb as small speakers go – especially the pricier S version. They're refined way beyond their price point, yet really rock with the right amp.*

MAD for it: *MyAudioDesign's My1920S is a superb small speaker that just happens to be available in a gloss white finish, if this wood veneer isn't to your taste...*



Speaking of which, I'd suggest you start off with the Cyrus 8 as a reference. This is a compact design that Her Indoors (sorry, I've just been watching an old Minder DVD) will approve of, yet it's very musically engaging and has just enough grunt to drive the My1920s. Hear this with the MADs, then compare it to rival amps such as the Cambridge Audio 851A and Naim Nait 51.

As a general rule, by the way, I find it's always best to find a speaker you're truly happy with, and which works right in your room, then choose an amp for it. Speaker/room interaction is critical, but amplifier/speaker interaction is also key, and the importance of this is often understated. So (you know what this is leading up to), go and find a decent dealer and get auditioning now!

ES says: *You need a pair of Elipson Planet Ls! Available in white (and black and red), they are supplied with a special shelf mount and work well in confined spaces like shelves. They are beautifully built, sound rather excellent and are about as far removed from the conventional box speaker as you can imagine. The Elipson is a pretty easy drive and something like the Rega Brio R should have the measure of them giving you large amounts of budget to spend on music.*

CV says: *I would suggest you look at the following floorstanding loudspeakers for both musical and design/finish requirements – they are all well made and sound good at their respective price-points.*

One: Q Acoustics 2050i (£500 approx.), if you can possibly get away with floorstanders. These are available in gloss black and gloss white;

Two: Audiovector K13 in matte white (£1,300), which can then be further upgraded in stages to higher-end iterations with better cabinet and drive-units, etc.;

Three: KEF R500 (£1,500 approx.) in gloss white or gloss black. Depending on which

Easy like Sunday morning

I would like to more musical, less hard working sound for my budget system, which currently consists of a NAD C542 CD player, Cambridge Audio A340SE amplifier and Wharfedale Diamond 9.1 speakers (improved with internal cable) standing on Atacama Nexus 71 stands. The wires are SUPRA EFF-ISL interconnect, SUPRA Quadrax bi-wires, and Pointe (designed and made in Hungary) mains.

This system is basically good. The sound is detailed enough and the vocals are believable but little bit hard and raw. I would like to listen to a smoother yet full of life, less hard working, but easier to listen to and more enjoyable sound! I think there are two different ways to realise my idea. To purchase a bigger and better amplifier, like the NAD C356, (this amplifier is familiar to the CD player), or buy more sophisticated sounding loudspeakers with higher sensitivity, like the Castle Knight 2. Or, can you offer a third way?

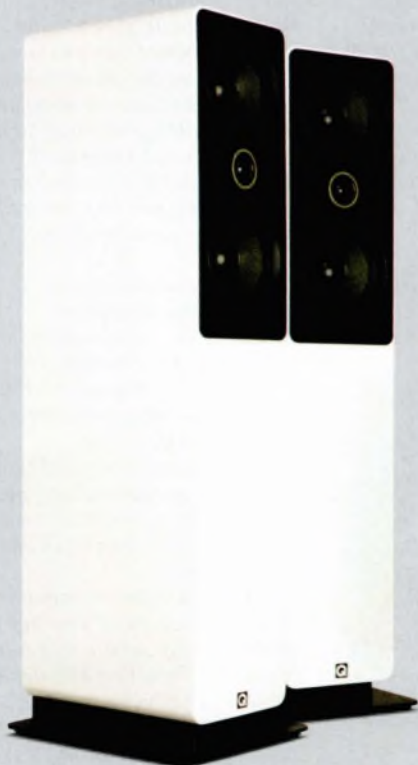
I mainly listen to pop music. The most important part of the music for me is the vocal, because of the fairly intimate and touching female voices cause me highly impressive

musical enjoyment! My favourite is the unique and brilliant Ellie Goulding, but I love the affected voice of Charlotte Gainsbourg too, or particularly qualified voice of Edita Gruberova from the classical side of music. I also listen to other mainstream music, like Ed Sheeran, Kasabian, Placebo, A Tribe Called Quest (and Q-Tip), Chase & Status and many dubstep/drum'n'bass remixes of Ellie's songs!.

Attilo Goldán, Hungary

DP says: *Thanks for your letter Attila, and I think you're already heading in the right direction. First, the Cambridge Audio A340SE amp is the first thing that needs upgrading, and you're right to say the NAD C356 will help out here. Compared to your Cambridge, this amp wears a big pair of boots and will kick out a much bigger and stronger sound. Likewise, for a bigger, easier sound, you're going to have to change your speakers too at some stage – Wharfedale Diamonds aren't the obvious choice for an 'easy' nature! Step up Q Acoustics 2050i floorstanders, which will work a treat with the NAD and give you just what you're looking for.*

Attila wants a 'less hard working' sound, but currently runs Wharfedale Diamond speakers. The big, efficient Q Acoustics 2050i floorstanders are the obvious replacements then, we say...

**Less is more**

As a long time subscriber and enthusiast, I thought I'd like to share with you what I believe to be the best sounding portable in Britain! Source is courtesy of a Sony Walkman Pro cassette player, leading out via Vertere d-fi cable to an Epiphany Acoustics portable headphone amp. I then lead out from there with the great B&W P5 cans which have had the cable upgraded from Vertere again.

Naturally I record my own stuff from a great vinyl system into a Nakamichi DR10 tape deck. Wow! Sorry digi fans, but this blows you all away for sound, if not for portability. It does create a talking point in the cafe bars though!

Graham Patterson

CV says: *If Nakamichi did a pull-out car radio (they did excellent fixed ones) then you could take that to the Café Bar also, in true Eighties style along with a brick 'mobile' and (fake) crocodile-skin Filofax. I wish I could do that!*

Computer says no!

What a clown this guy Patrick Cleasby must be! Okay, CDs could be better, but does he not consider the fact that not everybody has got a bloody computer, and in my location I couldn't download even if I wanted to?

Doug, Australia

PC says: *I write from the point of view of someone living in a country where the government has a stated aim of making broadband Internet available to as close to everyone as possible. Device-wise we will soon be in an environment where we won't need a computer per se, or even need to be at home to download lossless audio – our kids carry around more connected computing power in their pocket than we had on our desktop ten years ago. CDs are soon to be a thing of the past, and when there's no record shops anymore, how are you going to buy the second-hand ones from Amazon? Here's hoping your infrastructure improves...*

model you choose you will have about £500-£1,500 left over from your £2,000 budget to spend on a suitable amplifier that will work synergistically with them – try to audition both amplifier and loudspeaker at the same time, preferably with your current source also.

Desperately seeking Selley!

Dear Ed, I am writing to ask if you can resolve some confusion I have, after reading your recent review of the Denon PMA-720AE amp (HFC December 2012). You stated the quoted power output as 50 watts per channel, and as I was interested in possibly purchasing the amp, I looked it up on the web. One retailer quotes the output at 85 watts, while another states that a new model is due (pre-order available).

Subsequently in your review of the Onkyo A-9050 (HFC Awards issue 2012), power output is given as 75 watts per channel and is, you state, almost identical to the Denon. What concerns me before purchase is whether this is an updated model, although no MKII or improved text is attached (how would you differentiate)?

I should also mention that I shall be connecting the amp to a Thorens TD125 MKII turntable, SME 3009 S2 tonearm and Grado Prestige Gold cartridge. Also, I am putting together a small vinyl system, so could you recommend some standmount speakers circa £400, that would be worth auditioning with the aforementioned equipment?

Gary Robinson

ES says: *The power figure I quote, unless absolutely unable to do otherwise, is the one into 8 ohms. This is where the 50 watt figure comes from and in use, I didn't find the Denon wanting for power at all. In your position, the excellent phono stage in the PMA-720AE and the quality of the musical performance means that for a small vinyl system it is really a short list of one.*

The Onkyo is a fine amp, but it has features that are of no real use to you and the phono stage is not as good. It is possible that the replacement Denon might be better yet, but I wouldn't feel short changed with the current one.

JMH says: The output power of an amplifier can be expressed in a number of ways. The most rigorous would be – both channels driven for a rated distortion level (say, 0.1 percent or less) over a frequency range from 20Hz to 20kHz into a load impedance of 8 ohms. However, should the impedance drop to 4 ohms, power output will usually increase due to higher current being drawn.

In a perfect world, the output would double. But only the biggest and best amplifiers are able to double their output (current delivery) with each halving of impedance.

In the case of the Denon PMA 720AE amplifier, the specifications claim an output of 50 watts into 8 Ohms, with both channels driven, from 20Hz to 20kHz, and a distortion level of 0.07 percent. If the load

Hi-Fi Choice's annual Awards issue lists a large number of best-in-class kit, with a host of worthy winners. But do try to hear hi-fi before you buy it, don't just go on recommendations, says DP...

impedance drops to 4 ohms, the claimed output jumps to 85 watts. However, look closer and you'll see this output is labelled Dynamic Power, and the test frequency is now 1kHz – not 20Hz to 20kHz! So while the basic output is 50 watts, the amplifier can deliver more power for short periods into a lower impedance over a restricted bandwidth.

DP says: And the final comment to add is that loudness (which is surely the object of all this) depends largely not just on the power of the amp but the sensitivity of the speakers. Get some that are 3dB more sensitive (i.e. 91dB instead of 88dB) and you'll get a very noticeable hike in volume levels, from the same amount of power. Power and speaker sensitivity both have to factored into the equation, and it amazes me how many people obsess over the former and forget the latter! The trick is to find a fine sounding amplifier, rather than an exceptionally powerful one, and match it to a good pair of efficient loudspeakers.

Vinyl demand

I recently bought an old mini system, amazingly cheap from eBay. It's a well preserved example of the mid-nineties TEAC Reference 500, with CD player, MiniDisc player, amp, tuner and cassette deck (that's not working currently). My loudspeakers are B&W CDM1. To this I added my old turntable, a Dual CS505-5, which I pulled down from the attic after twenty years of non-use, and it still works! However, having got used to this, I now want to upgrade, starting with the turntable!

The next turntable I want to be my last and I am prepared to spend up to a grand. I want electronic speed selection. I don't know whether to go for MM or MC. I have considered the Michell GyroDec SE, Pro-ject RPM4, Origin Live turntable kit, Thorens 166, Rega RP6. Any advice would be appreciated for a less knowledgeable enthusiast.

Rupert Watling

DP says: The Gyro SE would be my choice here, with a basic Rega RB251 arm to get you started, plus an Audio Technica AT95E MM cartridge. This is a little over your budget, but the point is that if you opt for this then you've spent the bulk of your money on a deck that you're unlikely ever to want to change again. The Michell, despite being thirty two years old, has been regularly updated and the brilliance of its original design is undimmed. Rather like Concorde, basically it was right first time.

The Gyro will provide a stable (and beautiful) platform for your tonearm, which can later be tweaked by companies such as Origin Live or Funk Firm, or indeed you can upgrade it outright to the likes of an SME Series IV, which works superbly on the Michell platform, when funds permit. I'd say you should stick with a budget MM cartridge until you're ready to change amp and/or phono stage – get back to us for more advice then.

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Onkyo's punchy sounding A-9050 integrated amplifier

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Awards – the comeback

Hi David, I just thought I would send a thank you email in response to your decision to award me *Letter of the Month* in the HFC Awards 2012 issue, and to also thank you for your player suggestions – I shall try and source both the Acoustic Arts and Aston Trew players for audition.

At the time of writing I hadn't really thought too much about the 'expectations' point or angle, but as I read your reply it certainly did reiterate the fact that while a product may receive rave reviews, awards and accolades it still has to be taken within context, and as you poignantly noted, as good as a £600 product may be, it will still 'struggle' to match/out do a £2,500 product; yes it may equal it in certain aspects or in some instances offer a difference but in overall terms it won't outdo it.

Another aspect your reply indirectly highlighted was how important the role of auditioning products can be, and in turn, how a very good or indeed poor dealer is in ensuring that we purchase the 'right' products, especially those who allow home auditions, for as we know, rarely can a dealer replicate your entire system, nor

can any demo room replicate your own room acoustics, but above all from a personal perspective what it cemented was 'your own ears have it!'

On a completely different note may I commend both you and your team on those products granted awards? I was interested and indeed pleased to see that the awards appeared to be granted on actual merit (not that I'm suggesting that previous award winners haven't), and have been appraised on their performance as opposed to simply price.

I'm sure it would be easy to award a £10,000 product the top award over say a £1,200, or indeed a £600 product. However, I noticed that this certainly isn't the case, nor should it be, although I'm sure reader perspective both financially and logically also comes into play.

Dave

DP says: Thanks for that, Dave. The Awards issue is always a tricky one, as it has to weigh up a whole host of factors, not just outright ability. Obviously, in a magazine such as this, which is devoted to affordable audiophile equipment, not just audiophile kit per se, price is a major

consideration. The great thing is that there are some products on the market which are superb outright, and just happen to be affordable – many of these ended up with a gong in our Awards issue! The other side of this is that a number of brilliant products ended up as runners up, simply because of price and/or value considerations. I felt this understated their excellence, but there you go – only one product can win in each category...

The main point to take from all this is that, by all means use our Awards winners as starting points on your quest for hi-fi perfection, but expect to find others that might still be a little more suitable for you. Not everyone has the same taste, room or system, which is why it's important to get out to a good dealer and audition for yourself if you possibly can.

Never as good as the first time

For a number of reasons, not least coming into some money a couple of years back, my interest in hi-fi has been rekindled. I used to be nuts about it in the eighties, and after a long and laborious process of upgrading (sadly step by step,

Is it just me, or is streaming the 'Emperor's New Clothes'?

back then) I ended up with a top Linn/Naim system – with an LP12/Ittok/Karma vinyl front end as its crowning glory.

This I have used with great happiness for the past twenty or so years, stopping only to upgrade the cartridge to a Lyra Titan a few summers back. I've also added a Linn Sondek CD12; this was done about a decade ago and I still love it. Anyway, I am now looking at another upgrade opportunity, and am working my way through a range of amps and speakers at local dealers, while wishing to retain the turntable.

My point is this. I've heard lots of people – including your good selves – banging on about streaming. And indeed some of the dealers I've visited have been giving it the hard sell too, saying I've "just got to" get a decent streaming system for hi-res.

Trouble is, even when I've heard these – and I've tried mid-range Linn and Naim streamers, I've been a little underwhelmed. The problem is not that they're bad (they're not), it's that they're not as amazing as I had hoped – and been led to believe by various people in magazines and forums, etc. It's true that I do like listening to hi-res Kate Bush and REM, but it's no appreciable improvement on my vinyl, and if I am honest it probably doesn't really come a close second. Is it just me, or is streaming just a case of the 'Emperor's New Clothes'?

Rob Daniels

JMH says: If it's any consolation, Rob, I have similar sorts of feelings about many of the hi-res offerings out there. They're good, but (often it seems) not massively better than good old 44.1kHz 16-bit CD.

Actually, much depends on your hi-fi system, and how well-balanced it is. Does it highlight what's right with your sources, or what's wrong? If it makes the most of CD's virtues, while not emphasising its failings and limitations, then the difference between CD and something technically better can indeed seem fairly small in subjective terms. DSD downloads promise the ultimate in sound quality. And, having experienced DSD via Chord's QBD76, I was able to hear much more of an improvement. Alas, the amount of material available to download in pure DSD is fairly limited, and the file sizes are huge.

Speaking personally, I'm not sure if I actually want a higher-res format that really trounces CD for sound quality. Of course,

Cambridge Audio's Azur B51C is a great CD player at the price, although competition from the likes of Audiolab and Naim is fierce at its price point...

it would be exciting. But, as the owner of a sizeable collection of silver discs, I wouldn't want to see them rendered obsolete overnight! So, I'm very pleased to discover that, burning CDs to my computer hard drive, then playing them back via a USB through Classe's CP-800 preamp, delivers a sizeable sonic improvement compared to playing the actual disc through a high-end CD player.

ES says: Streaming audio has been built up in some circles to such an extent that all it can do is disappoint when you finally hear it! Part of the problem is that digital is digital, if you already own a good CD player, nothing streaming can do in performance terms is going to really redefine audio for you. I am a convert to the streaming cause but sonically I believe that it isn't automatically superior to CD. Hi-res in particular remains very hit and miss.

One aspect of streaming that a dealer visit won't necessarily show however, is the effect of using a streamer day to day. While I make no undeliverable promises for sound quality, I can confidently state that using a streamer is a vastly superior experience. Anything with a well sorted tablet app is so vastly superior to picking through the barely legible spines of a CD rack. We shouldn't be afraid to embrace convenience where there is no trade off in performance.

CV says: If you like listening to vinyl, then there is no need for anything less right now – stop worrying about the status anxiety of digital/streaming/downloads – eventually these types of 'hi-fi' will get better as the technology matures, or more likely and

inevitably, will be replaced with something 'better' – so until the miracle happens, and assuming you have lots of music already, then enjoy the music on CD and vinyl. If you do decide to stop playing CDs I will gladly take your Linn off you, for free!

Little wonder

My ten year old daughter wants an MP3 player but we don't want her to be sat with earphones in all the time, so would prefer to buy her a proper hi-fi for her bedroom. It needs to be a good quality one that will last her for at least three or four years before she gets an iPod. Can you recommend a good product for her please?

Emmy

ES says: You don't specify a budget but something that springs to mind as a very good fit for this is the Cocktail Audio X10 which can store music and only needs a pair of speakers to work as a system. Something like the Q Acoustics 2010i would be ideal. The resulting system would be easily able to meet your requirements and hopefully keep going for rather longer than the three to four years you are asking for.

CV says: You don't mention the budget for the hi-fi – so I will provide a few lower-cost system options to look at. Please make sure you audition a system before buying, preferably at a good hi-fi dealership and with your daughter too if it isn't a surprise present...

Option one: Pro-Ject Box system consisting of CD Box S at £299 and Stereo Box S integrated amplifier at £199 with a choice of Triangle Color loudspeakers (£499 approx.) or Monitor Audio BX2 (£250 approx.). The Pro-Ject amplifiers are a cooler left-field choice (not the normal-but-good Rotel or NAD or Marantz at those prices) and although



low-powered at a specified 30 watts they are really good, and the CD player can be upgraded later with a separate DAC for improved performance, and connectivity with a computer/iPod, etc., when required. The Triangle Color is rated at 90dB so should be fine when driven by the diminutive Pro-Ject, and they come in a range of bright colours. The BX2 are also rated at 90dB so should pose no difficulties with drive either, yet they are more traditionally attired – however, both the Triangle and Monitor Audio do good timing and offer expressive, vibrant sound quality and will work nicely with the high-quality smooth sound of the Pro-Jects...

Should you have more funds then try the pre and power amplifier versions of the Pro-Ject Box series to see if they offer better performance. Pro-Ject also does a Design Box in a range of colours that can smartly house these components for about £50. If you would then wish to add a turntable, then Pro-Ject do a large range to choose from, some of which include built-in phonostages. I haven't heard the Pro-Ject loudspeakers so can't comment on those.

Option two: If you have more funds try an all Rega system comprising the Brio R integrated amplifier and Apollo R CD player in matching half-width casework – both go for around £500 each and are individually and collectively excellent at the price. You could then mate these with a matching Rega loudspeaker such as the RS1 at about £450, which I think have a wonderfully linear sound quality that goes so well with the rich, exuberant Rega electronics.

Like option one you can add one of Rega's brilliant turntables such as the RP1 (£220 approx.) or RP3 (£550 approx.) both of which come with good cartridges and will work superbly with the very good in-built phonostage in the Brio R. If you prefer a more substantial sound, then I would suggest looking at a Rega floorstanding model, but these will cost more.

A veteran writes

Although I have bought and listened to hi-fi for sixty years, I still welcome a more expert opinion. The item that has me a little puzzled is a new CD player. Which

should I buy? I listen to Classical, Country, Scottish/Irish, almost anything but jazz and pop, and do not need extra facilities. The list includes the Audiolab 8000CD, Cambridge Azur 851C; Naim CD5 Si or CD5 XS. I suppose it would be ridiculous paying £1,000 more for the latter, bearing in mind my requirements?

My proposed system would include a Naim ND5 XS (including FM/DAB), an existing JVC cassette deck, and a Luxman L505U amplifier (with phono stage, two speaker outputs and power meters). I have considered buying a Marantz PM11-S3, by the way. Also, I run Lowther Accolade 2011 and Monitor Audio RX6 loudspeakers. I would appreciate your comments, on CD, and the whole proposed system.

Robert Grant

ES says: For the musical requirements you list, I'd be looking at the Audiolab and Cambridge, but equally I'd be questioning why you need both a CD and a very expensive streamer. Most CD players sit and gather dust in a well sorted streaming system, and if you wanted to dabble in streaming, both of these CD players offer digital inputs that would give a performance boost to a budget streamer for experimenting.

DP says: Hi Robert, yes I too am a little baffled by the CD-plus-streamer approach, but given you're sure that's what you want, I'd suggest the Naim CD5 XS, for a couple of reasons. It's an excellent machine in its own right, with a really musical nature. Also, it's a similar sonic

Transcription time

I'm investigating how to transfer my collection of LPs to computer, so I can play them out via a music streamer, and/or burn CDs from the car (mine still has a CD changer, I've only just graduated from cars with cassette decks)! I do not want to compromise on the quality, as I only want to do this once.

My system comprises a Michell Orbe/SME V/Ortfon Kontrapunkt B vinyl front end, Chord amplification and Epos ES23 loudspeakers with a Marantz CD17 KI CD player. Would you recommend buying a new professional quality sound card? What sort of resolution should I record at? All help and advice you may have is welcomed.

Stephen Mitchell

DP says: The first choice is over resolution – I'd suggest you aim for the best currently achievable and invest in a top notch 24-bit/192kHz analogue-to-digital convertor. The Benchmark ADC1 is a

USB-compatible design that should give you superb sound recordings in WAV format. Just plug your phono stage output into its analogue line inputs, and the Benchmark into the USB input of your computer. Then set it as an input device on your computer, and install a decent audio recording application such as Soundforge's Audacity. You'll then be able to store your .WAV recordings, and downsample them to 16/44 for car use; you could also transcode them to FLAC and add metadata for streaming use. Simple!



The final cut? Stephen Mitchell wonders how to transpose vinyl LPs into top quality hi res digital?

cup of tea to the ND5, so won't sound unduly brighter or darker when you switch between them. What you don't want is a situation in which you have a variety of sources, all of which sound rather different to one another tonally. It will grate and you'll be back at the keyboard asking for more advice within minutes, I suspect! All the players you list are excellent, but the key criterion here is to get the most appropriate one for your system and your music tastes.

Staged gains

Please could you help me with my system? I've recently upgraded my Systemdek turntable, Linn Basik arm and Nagaoka MP11 Boron cartridge to a Rega RP6. My amp is an old eighties Rotel RA820BX integrated, driving an ancient pair of Mordaunt Short Pageant loudspeakers. I want to ditch the Rotel as it hasn't got the guts to drive the Pageants. I'm fond of the speakers and don't really want to change them to more sensitive units as they fit my room nicely.

Unusually perhaps, Robert Grant wants a CD player to match his Naim ND5 streamer (above). Consider a Naim CD5 (below)...



So how much should I budget for a new amp? I listen to rock, jazz and classical music and like a deep but fast bass and want a large soundstage and excellent instrumental separation. Budget is up to £1,000, more if needed.

Peter Little

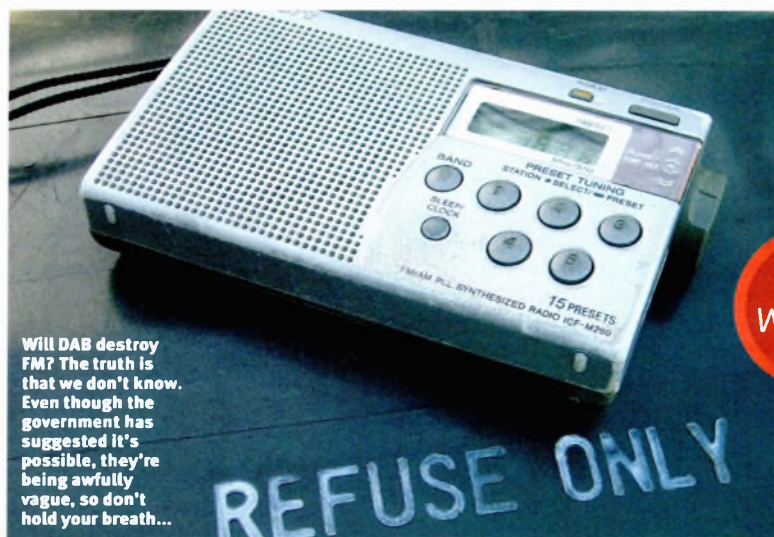
DP says: Hi Peter – excellent though the Rega is, there are some here who might be wondering if it was more of a side-grade rather than an upgrade. The Systemdek, given a decent and modern arm (and the Linn Basik is a little lacking in these respects) is likely as good as or even better than the already very fine Rega. But I digress.

The other eye-opener is your use of Mordaunt Short Pageant speakers. These, if memory serves, are mid-to-late nineteen seventies designs, and to be frank aren't exactly cutting edge. True, they are good, and will sound smooth with a nice warm sound, but please do consider changing them if absolute fidelity is your criterion. By modern standards, they're diffuse, blurred and opaque, as well as boomy.

So, on to your amplifier. Your Rotel was a one-time rival to the NAD3020, and was good in its day (albeit not quite as fine as the NAD in my view). Now though, a wonderful world awaits you – again things have moved along since your Rotel was made. Any modern amp of over around £350 will make the 820 sound thin, anaemic and rather hazy. Also, expect a stronger and more grippy bass, and a smoother and more incisive treble. Rega's Brio R (£500) is a great first point – go and audition this and see if it's barking up the right tree. The Brio is a wonderfully bubbly and musical performer, and I suspect you'll love it.

Next up the audition ladder is the Cyrus 6a (£700). This was a recent group test winner, and will what the Rega does, but with added detail and subtlety; brilliant as the Rega is, it's not the world's most sophisticated sounding box of bits, and the 6a will add more depth and detail. This will really gel with your Mordaunt Shorts, I feel. Once you've heard these two, you'll be better placed to plan any future upgrades. Good luck!

LETTER OF THE MONTH



Will DAB destroy FM? The truth is that we don't know. Even though the government has suggested it's possible, they're being awfully vague, so don't hold your breath...

PRIZE WINNER!

I AM A REGULAR READER OF HI-FI CHOICE MAGAZINE, AND ON PAGE 73 OF ISSUE 367

correspondent Richard Bond asks in his final paragraph, "what's happening to DAB broadcasts"? David Price's reply ends with, "best of all though is good old FM". I couldn't agree more, but I heard that just before the last general election the government rushed through a lot of legislation...

One piece of this was a bill to turn off FM transmissions, although there's no need to do this as they have no other use for the FM frequencies, and aren't selling them off, as they did with analogue TV. Since then I have continued to enjoy FM radio through my hi-fi and hope to continue doing so. Are you aware of this legislation?

David Littler

DP says: My understanding is that the Digital Economy Act 2010 (which was the follow up to the government's Digital Britain white paper of 2009, that initially made the suggestion that FM was for the chop), laid down a requirement for the UK to prepare for a switchover from FM to DAB. However, this in itself doesn't mean there will be a switchover. I'm an interested follower of the labyrinthine movements of government, and so it didn't come as a complete surprise to hear reports soon after the last election that ministers were considering delaying the switchover to DAB until 2017 at the earliest. Indeed, the way it was worded sounded like an attempt to kick it further into the long grass...

Then, on 2 July 2012, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport created a Memorandum of Understanding with broadcasters about a three-stage, three-phase plan toward FM switch-off, and part of this includes the stipulation the DAB has to have the same coverage as FM. This, some say, will be extremely expensive (some estimates put it upwards of £1 billion for new broadcast infrastructure), and as such it is unlikely the government will wish to spend money on this when there's a general election looming and tax cuts suddenly seem more important. I believe a decision will be made later this year, but I would be surprised if the government goes ahead and switches off FM anytime soon. I rather suspect they'll run it concurrently with DAB as now, maybe until everyone gives up on DAB as the Internet and media players take over...

The final arbiter of this is the cost to the customer of course – if it's a relatively easy and inexpensive transition, then it would be more likely. But as of 2013, most radio listening is done in cars, the vast majority of which don't receive DAB. Indeed, it's only just being offered as an option on new cars now, so it would take at least one car product lifecycle (six years) for it to become anywhere near ubiquitous. This means that if FM was switched off before this, huge numbers of people would be inconvenienced. As I've said before, I think ultimately apps on smartphones are likely to supercede FM, not DAB. We shall see...

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Fast forward?

Pioneer's versatile new SACD player and amplifier are lovely says **David Price**, but are they the future of hi-fi?

It's a paradox, considering Japan is one of the most futuristic places in many respects (Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner* could be set in a lightly reimagined dystopian nineteen eighties Tokyo, after all), but the Land of the Rising Sun is a great respecter of tradition. This enigmatic country that has been so important in the Asia-Pacific region in the past forty or so years, is keenly aware of its heritage, and indeed that of other countries...

Having lived there for a good part of my younger life, I think it's not too cheeky of me to comment that the Japanese really seem happiest when they're reinventing things, rather than coming up with the idea in the very first place. If you don't believe me, then go and see for yourself how much better the Tokyo underground runs compared to the London original upon which it is based. Or see how Nissan took the Austin 7 motor car and made it cheaper and better, then sold it back to us, dealing our own indigenous auto industry a mortal blow in the process...

That's why Japanese hi-fi is generally so unerringly conservative. True, it has had all sorts of weird, wacky and wonderful distractions (V-FET output devices, Elcaset, Stereo AM radio, etc.), but generally there's a formula to which their giant electronics manufacturers stick doggedly. Of course, it's wrong to tar all of them with the same shoddy brush. Whilst the difference between brands might not seem so explicit here, the various companies have strong, proud and distinct identities – the differences between, say, a Honda and a Toyota car are very clearly understood in their home country. Interestingly however, it is these subtle variations on the same, very well understood themes (such as the four door saloon car) that show the respective corporate cultures...

In consumer electronics, precisely the same situation holds. The big Japanese giants wrestle with each other to give different variations on identical themes, few of which are ever questioned or challenged. It's all about making products in a pre-existing market segment just that little bit better. It doesn't matter whether you're Sony or Onkyo or anybody else, the prize is the best selling product which somehow is always changing, yet forever the same.

This was all too apparent to me reviewing the new Pioneer PD-50 SACD spinner and A-70 amp. They're so Japanese in the way they approach the challenge of giving good quality sound in the mid-price hi-fi sector. So much

so that the likes of Kenwood were doing ostensibly the same sort of products some twenty five years ago. There seems to be a rule somewhere in the Japanese constitution that decrees that if a bit of kit isn't 435mm wide, and doesn't not have a brushed aluminium fascia and chunky control knobs, it isn't allowed to be offered for sale.

True, there's a digital input here, a USB DAC there, but the basic recipe is spookily familiar – aesthetically, ergonomically and in engineering terms. It's almost like nothing's changed, and the Japanese hi-fi industry is stuck permanently on 'repeat'. I have to say, I'd have been less surprised by the slavish devotion to past designs if it was any other company except Pioneer. But it was indeed Pioneer we're talking about here – the very same one that since its inception in 1938 has been at the forefront of electronics engineering – and has played a critical role in the development of LaserDisc, Digital Versatile Disc and Plasma TV technology. Not only this, historically it has pushed aggressively in the 'markets of the moment', from cassette tape decks in the nineteen seventies to in-car-entertainment in the nineties. Yet now we see it churning out high quality but highly conservative fare now.

You could – at a push – say that the A-70 integrated amplifier's use of Class D output devices is unusual, until you realise Sony tried it thirty five years ago (just after it gave up on its wacky V-FETs) and of course Onkyo has been pushing the technology for the best part of ten years, and making a very decent stab at it too. And the PD-50's dual disc capability, inasmuch as it plays SACD and well as CD, might seem a little left field in the UK, but for Pioneer's home market is as mainstream as fitting an on/off switch. So nothing to see there either – please move on folks!

I enjoyed my time with this Pioneer combo, but couldn't help thinking just how dated the concept is, and got the feeling that hi-fi is going nowhere fast. What we need as an industry, is a renewed focus on how these hi-fi separates are packaged. Do we really need to present them as we currently do? I am not sure if today's new generation of networked up, format-averse music lovers actually 'get' products like the aforementioned Pioneers anymore. They're the answer to a question that was asked many years ago, but these days surely fewer people concern themselves with boxy hi-fi separates? These Pioneers personify the problem, but actually it's industry-wide. Hi-fi needs to get out into the brave new music world.

The Pioneers personify the problem, but it is actually industry-wide. Hi-fi needs to get out into the brave new music world...

DAVID PRICE
Hi-Fi Choice editor



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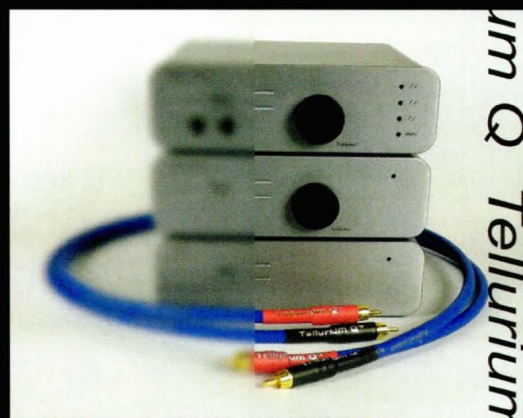
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A vinyl affair

Jason Kennedy gets lost in sound at an all-analogue vinyl mastering studio with a difference...

There is no doubt that vinyl has once again established itself as the format of choice among both the hi-fi cognoscenti (that's you and me) and the music-appreciating world at large. It has effectively skipped a generation and is now making a comeback such as no-one could have predicted ten years ago. Now even eighteen to thirty year olds appreciate the scale and style of vinyl and love its sound. I guess if you have been brought up with MP3 it must seem like the absolute sound, even on a budget turntable.

Not only is there a vast array of new albums and even singles being pressed in the black stuff, but there are avalanches of reissues. I receive several emails a day telling me about the latest pressings of often very obscure music. To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of vinyl's death were clearly an exaggeration.

I visited a new mastering studio in Kings Cross recently where I met Darrel Sheinman who has built the ultimate homage to vinyl's supremacy. This studio is dedicated to making the most purist and beautiful sounding vinyl masters possible. He has installed a vintage Scully lathe and equally ancient electronics for equalisation and amplification – that is amplification to drive the cutting head on the lathe, which is rather more specialist gear than most of us have at home.

Sheinman isn't a music business professional, or at least he wasn't until now, but he has a great love of good quality vinyl and holds labels like Blue Note in very high regard. His own label is called Gearbox and one function of the studio is to produce masters of jazz material both old and new. He has been raiding the BBC archives to find interesting music to release and has dug up plenty that has never been released in any form. One such is an album by the Jazz Couriers called *Tippin' Live in Morecambe* 1959. This would be the Morecambe near the Lake District which today is a sleepy seaside town with a statue of Eric and a rather nice new pavillion. Listening to Tubby Hayes, Ronnie Scott *et al* blasting out the title track it might well have been New York village, I never realised that British jazz was this hot. Darrel explained that he'd selected this album because of the performance not the sound, and while the latter is not in the front league it's certainly good enough to enjoy the energy and verve of the band.

The monitoring system in the Gearbox studio is not your standard affair either, it largely consists of Audio Note equipment with a balanced input Tomei Kensai power amplifier driving AN-E LX hamp loudspeakers. This is a



single-ended triode amp, a beast that hasn't been used in a studio since before the war yet its 211 output tubes could drive the system sufficiently to cope with the highly damped nature of the studio. There is both an Audio Note TT-2 turntable that's suspended on cables from the ceiling and an EMT 948 studio turntable to test the pressings with, the latter has an onboard phono stage while the TT-2 feeds an M6 Phono preamp.

The killer source however is the Studer C37, a fifty two year old tape machine restored in Switzerland and, according to Darrel, as good as it gets. It certainly made that impression on me when playing a new recording of the Simon Spillet Quartet that Gearbox will be releasing in the new year. It has dynamics, power and perfect timing with the cleanest treble you will hear. Neither vinyl acetates nor the digital master when played via a Mac Mini and CAD 1543 DAC could get near it, but tape is a fabulous medium when it's done this well.

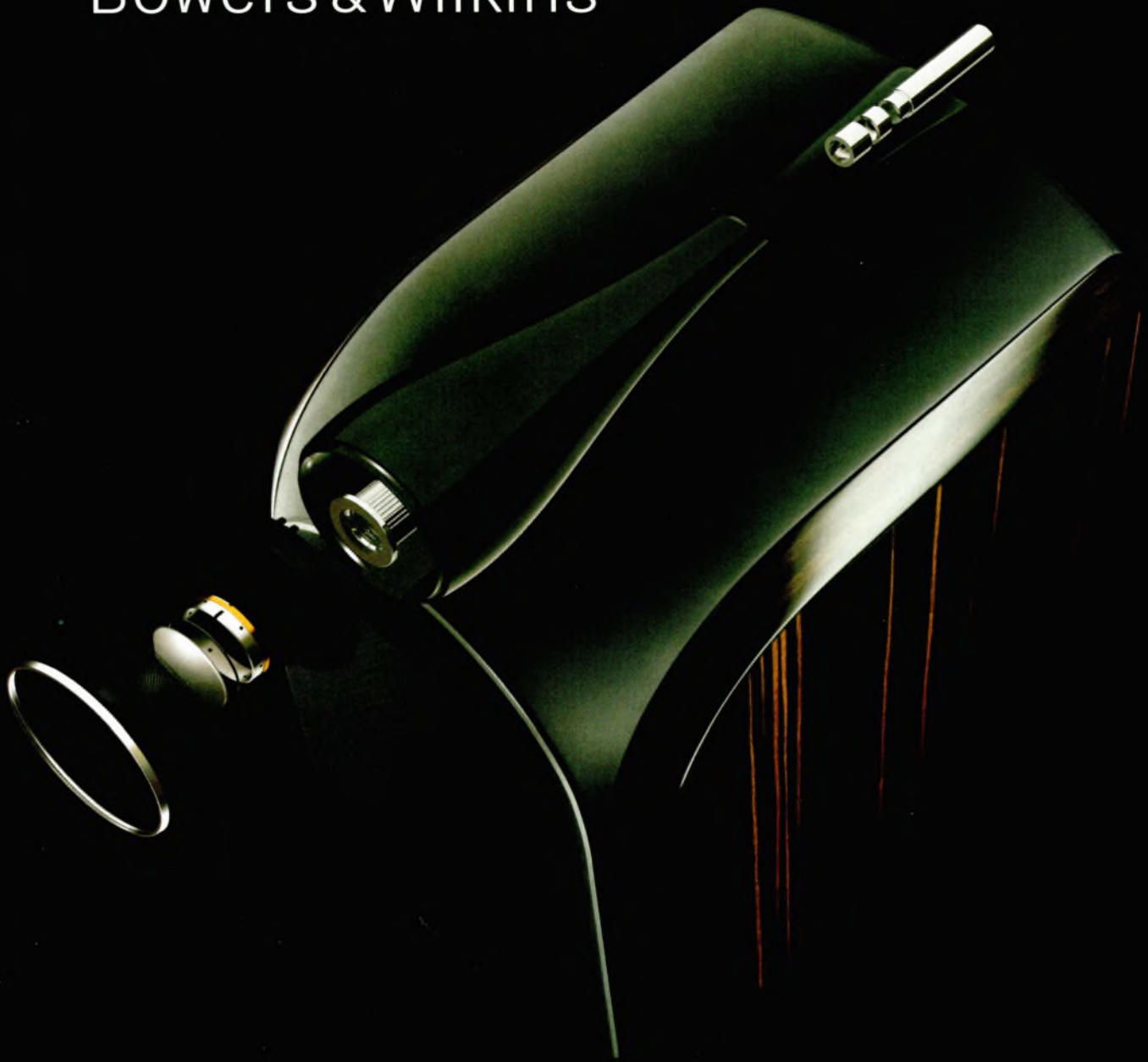
The Gearbox studio is a rare thing in the pro audio world, a mastering facility that's totally analogue from beginning to end. Darrel is making it available to engineers from across the musical world and they inevitably need some form of compression, his quest therefore is to find such a device that doesn't undermine the purist nature of the facility. With people committing this sort of money and passion to the creation of great vinyl the future for the ultimate audio format looks very rosy indeed.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of vinyl's death were clearly an exaggeration...

JASON KENNEDY
audiophile writer



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Soul mining

Tim Jarman reckons early Compact Discs are a treasure trove of music worth looting. Off to the charity shop, then...

When I read that music is disappearing from the high street, it brings to mind a similar situation in the mid-nineteen nineties when LP records became unfashionable and were therefore difficult to buy – hard though that is to imagine now. The enterprising turntable owner was not concerned, realising that even though traditional music outlets didn't want to stock records, the charity shops still had plenty.

Fast forward to today and the situation is much the same, except this time it is with Compact Disc. Buying used records was always a gamble as they retain the scars of their previous lives – too much exposure to a worn stylus or an unforgiving cartridge and they're ruined. So there was always a chance that when you played them the sound would be unbearably gritty and noisy.

CDs on the other hand are a great second-hand buy, as they can take a lot of punishment before they refuse to play properly, and up to this point the original Philips claim of 'Perfect Sound Forever' holds true. A quick swish under the tap to get rid of the dirt and finger marks, and there you go, it might as well be a new one. One tip is to hold each potential purchase up to the light and see if there are any big gaps in the reflective coating, as evidenced by pinpricks of light coming through – a few tiny dots are both inevitable (and tolerable, if your player is up to scratch) but large areas can wipe out whole tracks. Even the cases are more durable than dog-eared old LP sleeves, and can be easily replaced if terminally scratched, split or broken. Another advantage is that CDs aren't widely considered to be collectable yet, so they are all the same price, usually just a pound or two, unlike records which are becoming expensive for anything decent or interesting looking.

Dredging through audio's recent past like this recalls the almost forgotten scandal of some CDs that became unplayable, due to corrosion of the reflective aluminium layer caused by imperfect sealing of the disc's edges. Some were recalled and replaced in the mid-nineteen nineties, but there are still a few lurking on the charity shop shelves. What else is there to avoid in the charity shop bargain bins? Something that you will learn very quickly is that the world is full of dreadful music that you would never want to listen to. There's teen-orientated pop from the last fifteen years or so (hardly the genre's most creative period), cheap compilations, magazine giveaways and the dross produced by TV talent shows prevails. But don't despair, look for long enough and you will find treasure!

My preference is for the very earliest CD issues, which surprisingly turn up reasonably frequently despite now being over a quarter of a century old.

As well as looking at the release date of the recording, you can recognise early CDs through the generic record label graphics printed on the disc, the prominent use of the now irrelevant AAD/ADD/DDD coding and the extensive standard description of the benefits of the Compact Disc format which was often given its own page in the booklet; all features which had largely disappeared by CD's second decade of life!

These early discs came from a time when a Compact Disc was a luxury product aimed at the discerning listener, not the universal format playable on equipment of a wide range of abilities that it became later. There was no question of mixing the sound for 'average' systems, the only machines available were intended for 'hi-fi' use so care was taken and dynamic range preserved.

Listening to these old recordings today, after years of digital remastering and dull sounding downloads, is like opening the curtains to a bright and sunny morning after weeks of clouds and rain – especially if you use one of the punchy multibit players of the era too. Something else which makes early Compact Discs interesting is that they go against the modern mindset where music is freely obtainable and disposable – back in the mid-nineteen eighties you may have had to wait a long time before your favourite artists released their material on the new digital format and even then the discs themselves would have been very expensive – enough to make you think carefully before buying and then to look after and listen to each one with pride. This alone makes them special.



These early discs came from a time when CD was a luxury product aimed at the discerning listener

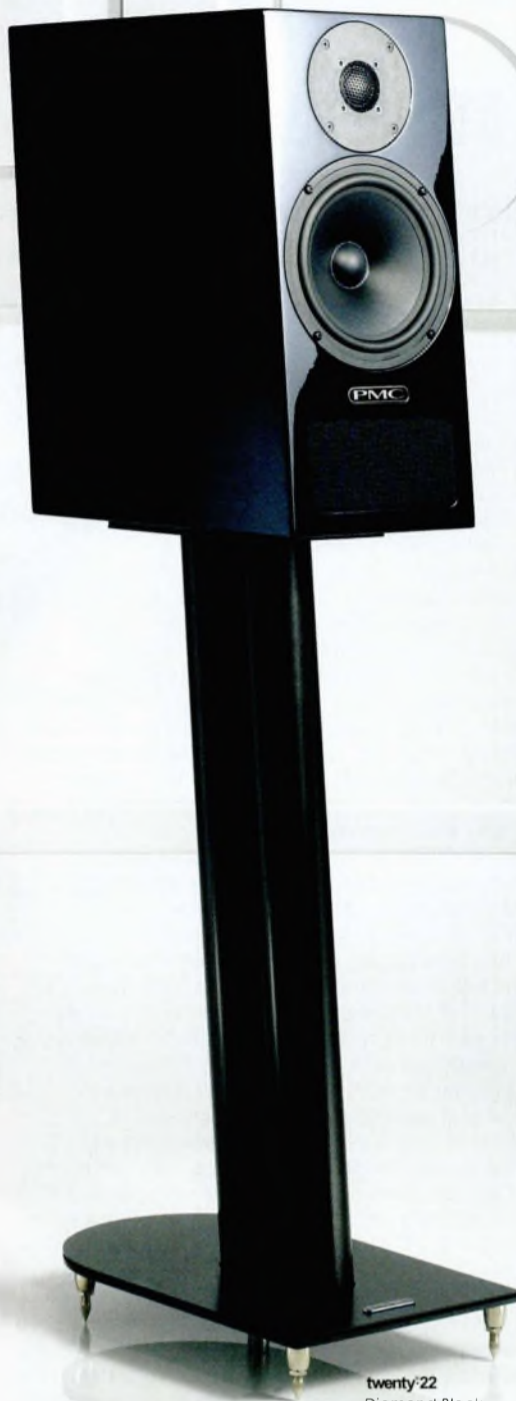
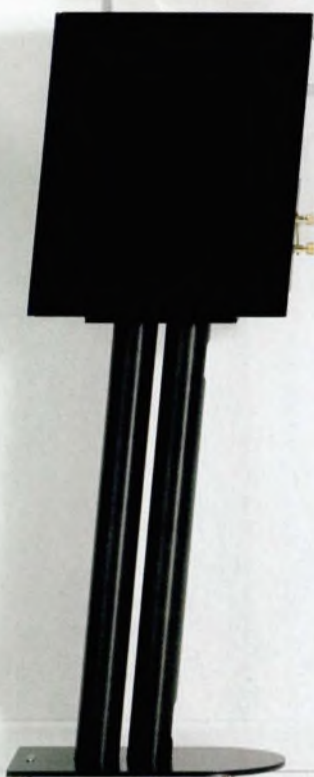


TIM JARMAN
electronics engineer

Sharing the sounds

Downloads. You either love 'em or hate 'em, but there's a lot of potential for good sound from the Internet says **Richard Black...**

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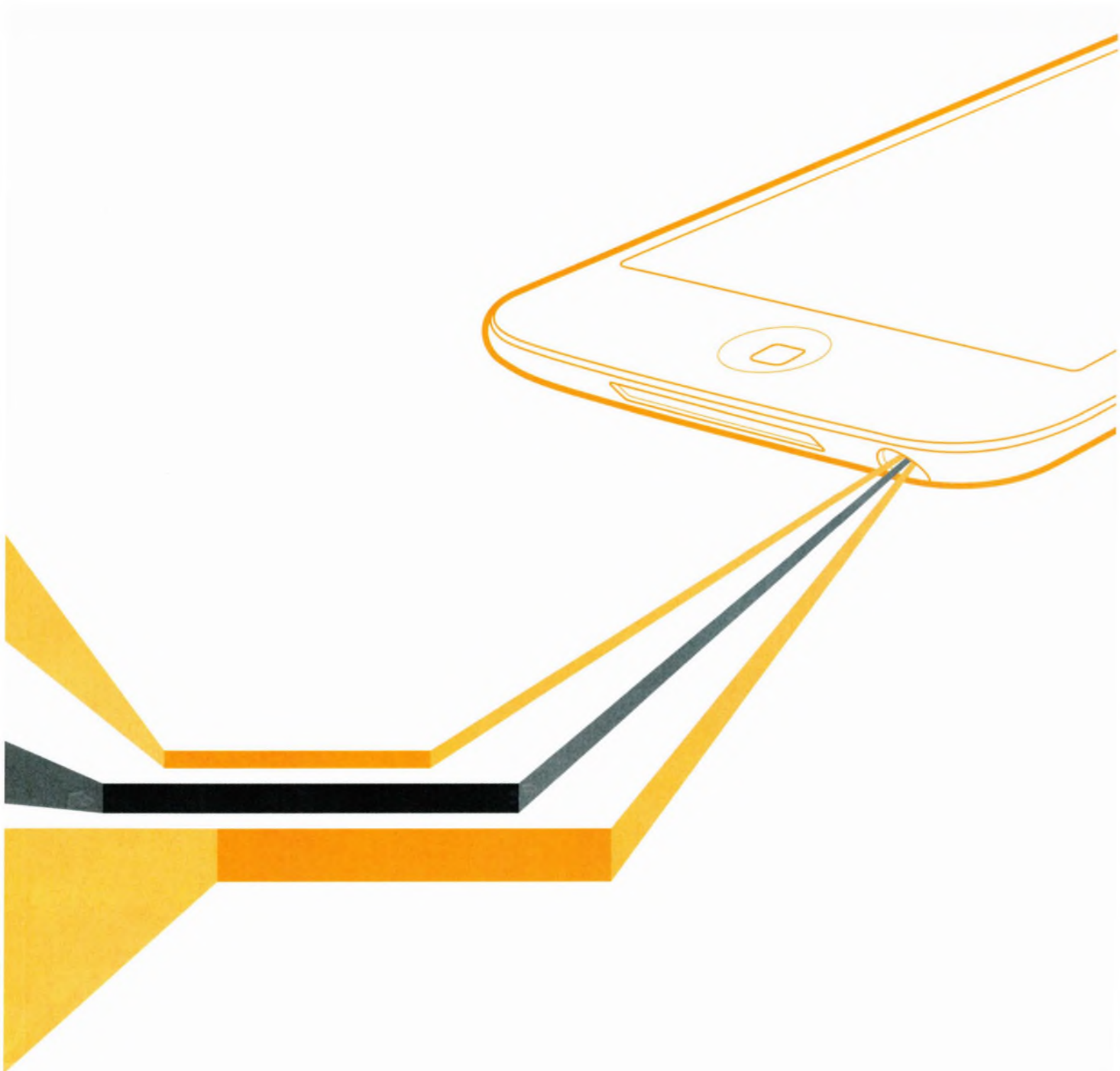
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More than



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

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Shine on

The Systemdek was one of the most popular turntables of the eighties. We've all forgotten about it now, but it's still a glowing performer, says **Jason Kennedy...**

Back in the day when CD players were all the rage with the public at large, we connoisseurs of great sound continued to bang on about the superiority of turntables and fought what seemed a hopeless battle against the silver disc.

It seems that this heroic fight was not in vain, because now vinyl has been recognised as the finest format to ever take solid form, and the hippest kids are all breezily buying seven inch singles...

They can't, of course, afford decent turntables to play them on, because such things have become pretty expensive, but in its day the much underrated £200 Systemdek IIX turntable would have fitted the bill – and I loved it!

The first Dunlop Systemdek, made by Peter Dunlop in Troon, was a fairly ambitious design with a steel base and aluminium plinth that contained an undamped three point spring suspension which supported an aluminium subchassis. The platter was aluminium (possibly mazak), had belt drive from a high torque motor and sat on a substantial 10mm bearing. Priced at around £200, it was a close rival for the Linn Sondek LP12, which was rapidly becoming the turntable to have in the hearts and minds of the British hi-fi press.

Dunlop subsequently produced a rather more affordable turntable called the Systemdek II that was circular in shape with an outrigger for the armboard and a suspended subchassis with a glass platter. There

was also the option of a concave aluminium plinth which nearly doubled the price but did at least come with a clamp.

One drawback with the II however, was that adjusting the suspension was a fiddly affair that had to be done from underneath the chassis, a point that was remedied in the later IIX model. I don't know whether it was a desire to go down this route that led to the more conventional shape of the new turntable, or the fact that it arrived at a time when the Linn LP12 had to all intents and purposes taken over the top end of the turntable market.

The Systemdek IIX looks fairly similar to an LP12 of the same era, albeit with a pear-shaped armboard and the on/off switch placed on the

A classic British belt drive deck from the 1980s, the Systemdek II shows how less can sometimes be more!



front of the plinth, stylistically it had contrasting veneer stripes on its sides rather than the grooves found on the sides of the LP12's plinth.

The IIX was also fully suspended design with three suspension points that could be adjusted from the top of the plinth without removing the platter, in theory you could adjust it while it was spinning and if very careful even while it was playing. It also hung the subchassis from the springs rather than trying to balance it on them *a la* LP12, and this made it considerably easier to set-up than most of its ilk. It had a real wood veneered plinth/chassis and an MDF armboard that sat on a pressed steel subchassis with an aluminium brace for improved stiffness.

The main bearing was an oil pump type and the motor a 24-pole AC synchronous design that powered a subplatter via a flat rubber belt. Speed change was manual on the standard model but an electronic version IIXE also existed with a heavier platter for greater speed stability. The platter on the standard version was 10mm glass and 12mm on the electronic, this being topped by a high density lambswool mat.

Systemdek (as the company became known) originally supplied a range of OEM tonearms on the IIX, but latterly moved over to Regas, either the RB250 or RB300 and it was this second arm that I had on my IIX. One of the early proponents of this fine turntable was Peter Qvortrup at Audio Innovations (now Audio Note) who loved its excellent tonal and dynamic capabilities. When armed with one of the Goldring 1000 series moving magnet cartridges this sub-£350 front end could blow much of the competition into the weeds when hooked up to a good valve system with Snell speakers on the end. It didn't have the cache of more expensive and better known turntables in those days, and that gave it a cult appeal which when combined with its remarkably coherent, subtle and revealing sound made it very popular.

Sound quality

On one occasion, circumstances had led to me living in someone else's house, in a room that wasn't big enough for a turntable. So I had to make do with a CD player. But having bought a new vinyl album, I decided to unpack my Systemdek and have a blast. The sound was a revelation, almost a born-again

experience! This reminded me just what a joyous sounding turntable the IIX was, thanks to its well designed suspension that worked on almost any surface. It had a vitality that brought music of all varieties to life.

The Systemdek was essentially very good at digging out detail and presenting it in a vivacious, musically engaging fashion, qualities which were enhanced by the use of an acrylic platter in place of the glass one. I think that Audio Innovations started making these because it liked their sound on the Voyd turntable. It didn't take Systemdek long to cotton on and offer an AP (acrylic platter) version themselves. This was on the later version of the IIX called 900, it had a rectangular aluminium armboard and a split-phase motor which increased torque. This resulted in a marked improvement in sound

This deck is strangely overlooked because of the current fashion for rim and direct drive designs...

quality and better speed stability under load. The IIXE/900AP was the same design with an electronic power supply and acrylic platter, its higher £358 price was reflected in better measured and sonic result.

Hi-Fi Choice reviewed the IIXE/900AP and the IIX/900 with a Rega RB250 in the same issue (103, 1992). Reviewer Alvin Gold described the more affordable turntable thus, "In a nutshell, sound quality is excellent. It would be putting it too strongly to suggest that the Systemdek has an overt character but it does, nevertheless, manage to convey a consistent impression of self assurance and of being able to extract a wealth of fine details off the disc." At the time it cost £200 *sans* arm and unsurprisingly won itself a Best Buy (as a point of reference, the Linn Basik LP12 in the same issue cost £736).

The IIX/900 is undervalued today – a clean looking example without arm didn't sell for its £100 starting price on eBay recently. The same site also had a IIX for £89, again without arm, and a IIXE with Linn Basik arm and A&R P77 cartridge for £380. It's amazing what a literally basic arm

BUYING

The IIX is a pretty simple turntable, easy to set up and suitable for a wide variety of tonearms. The electronic versions do appear to have issues however, the TTD3 board on the IIXE being cited as problematic, and one should establish that they are working properly before parting with the readies. The plastic lids are also easily scratched and second-hand ones are hard to come by on their own, however the Audio Note lids are presumably the same size as the TT One and Two turntables are based on the IIX design. AN would also be a source for acrylic platters which make a very worthwhile upgrade. Belts naturally have a limited lifespan but can still be found quite easily but other than that there is little to go wrong with them and very little that couldn't be fixed by a competent engineer.

and vintage cartridge will do for perceived value! There was also an original model II for £95 but the best deal I've found was an original, but not working Transcription on Audiogon for a mere \$50.

Conclusion

These days, the Systemdek is strangely overlooked because of the current fashion for rim and direct drive designs like Garrards and Technics respectively, but a good belt driven turntable like the IIX can more than hold its own with such decks in many respects. Indeed it would be very interesting to put this turntable up against the front runners today – I suspect that it could outgun most sub-£1,000 options and some at twice that price. It trades off bass extension against dynamics and probably isn't quite as stable in timing terms as the best in this regard, but its sheer musicality still shines through.

The IIX/900AP design lives on today as the Audio Note TT One, this has an extra belt pulley for more even drive but is essentially very similar, it costs £950 without an arm. Alternatively you can buy the new, latest, greatest Systemdek 3D from the same people that made the IIX, this is however a more serious proposition with prices starting at £6,000. It's a great deck, don't you forget about it! ●

Lounge wizards

Launching a new dealership might be seen as brave, but **Ed Selley** thinks HiFi Lounge has got what it takes...

Most hi-fi dealers that participate in our Dealer Visit article can trace their history back at least ten years and in many cases even further. It is unusual to find dealers newer than this and brand new ventures are rarer still. When you throw in the pervading gloom about the economy, the opportunity to meet someone taking the plunge and starting a new dealership was too good to pass up.

Paul Clarke and his dealership HiFi Lounge is that man and venture. Open a little over a month at the time I visited, Paul who formally ran his own printing company, decided to open HiFi Lounge earlier in the year. The ability to start afresh throws up some interesting contrasts and also similarities between HiFi Lounge and more established retailers. Unconvinced by the benefits of a high street location, HiFi Lounge instead makes use of an attractive converted Granary in the Bedfordshire village of Dunton.

For his choice of brands, Paul has selected a small number of companies that meet his key criteria of achieving the balance of a lively and involving sound that enthral but never steps over into

becoming fatiguing or bright. With this brief clearly defined, I asked Paul to assemble his three systems and settled back to listen to the results...



THE EXPERTS



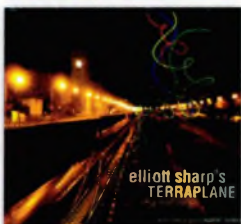
HIFI LOUNGE

4 The Granary Buildings, Millow Hall Farm,
Millow, Dunton, Bedfordshire, SG18 8RH
01767 448121, hifilounge.co.uk

heedaudio.vo.uk/
rega.co.uk/
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CASSIUS
AU RÊVE
VINYL



ELLIOT
SHARPE'S
TERRAPLANE
SKY ROAD
SONGS
HI-RES FLAC



IMOGEN HEAP
ELLIPSE
CD

SYSTEM 1 – TAKE HEED

The first system was set up in the ground floor demo room and combines long standing affordable superheroes Rega, with the newly resurgent Heed Audio to create a very flexible and affordable system with some useful upgrade possibilities. Nestling amongst the 'conventional' hi-fi is piece of more mainstream equipment that further alters what this system can do.

Fantastically natural

The Heed Obelisk si and x2 Power Supply featured in the recent 'White Room' piece (*HFC 364*), and won me over with a fantastically natural and unforced performance that imposed very little of itself onto the music and rarely sounded anything less than very involving. With the x2 boosting the power output to 50 watts, it has the ability to work with a very realistic variety of loudspeakers.

Heed also makes some very accomplished digital, but Paul has found the happiest partner to be Rega's entry-level digital offerings. The Apollo R CD player is one of *Hi-Fi Choice's* favourite sub-£1,000 disc spinners, and using it with the equally accomplished Rega DAC both boosts performance and offers a range of digital inputs.

Rega also provides the speakers, in this case a former *Hi-Fi Choice* Award Winner – the RS7 floor-stander. This unconventional design, complete with side firing seven inch driver, completes the compact aesthetic.

Well, almost! Tucked alongside is a Sonos Connect. This little device is effectively a head unit for the incredibly slick and rather clever Sonos system and provides both analogue and digital outputs to allow you to stream audio to your system. The result is attractive, compact and rather clever, but how does it sound?

Depth and detail

Rather good as it happens. Starting with CD, Imogen Heap's *Ellipse* has a fabulously rich tone to the vocals and paired back instruments of Little Bird. There is real depth and detail to the performance but nothing is forced at the listener. The system simply opens the performance into a rich and detailed soundstage and allows

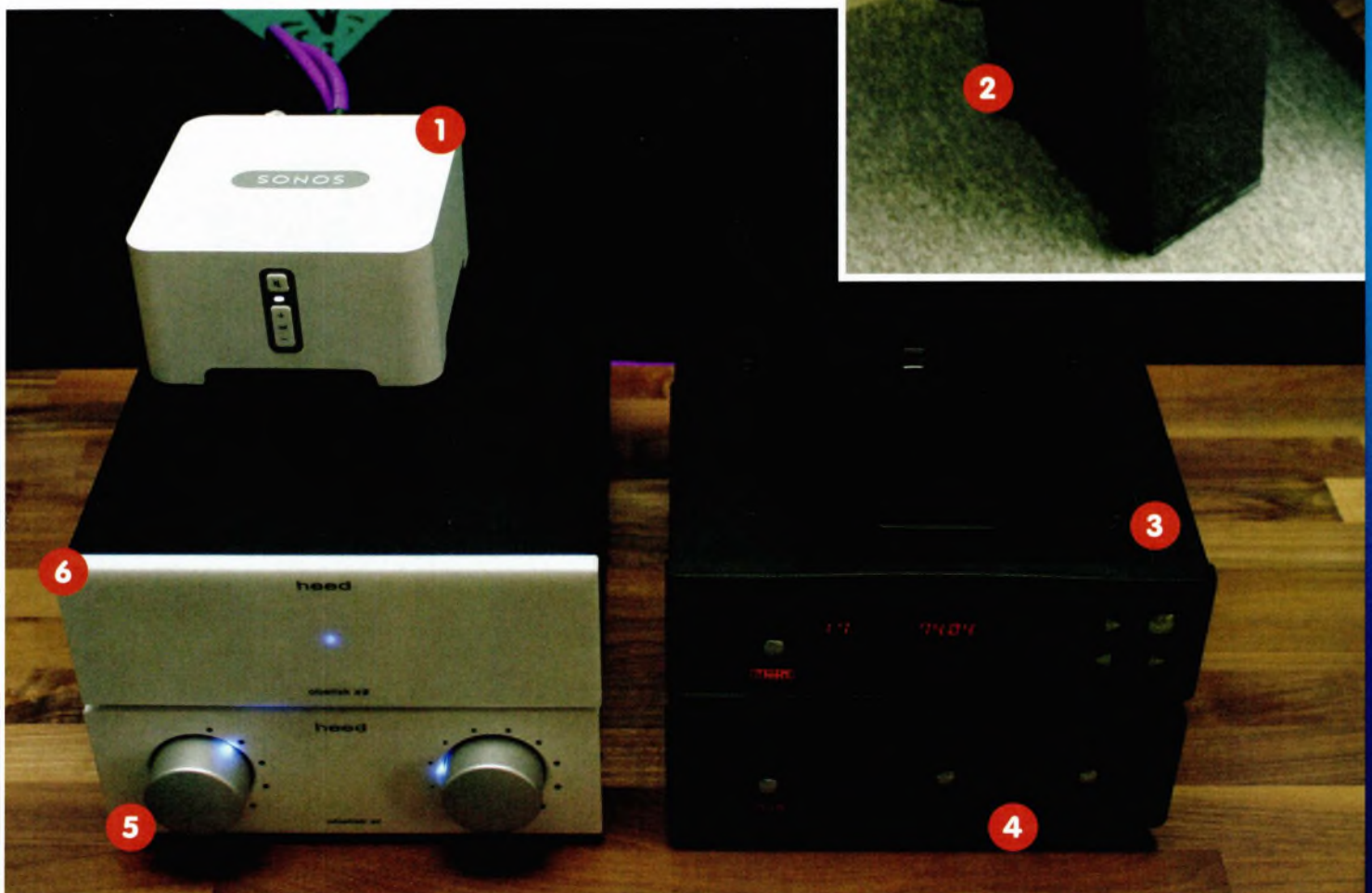
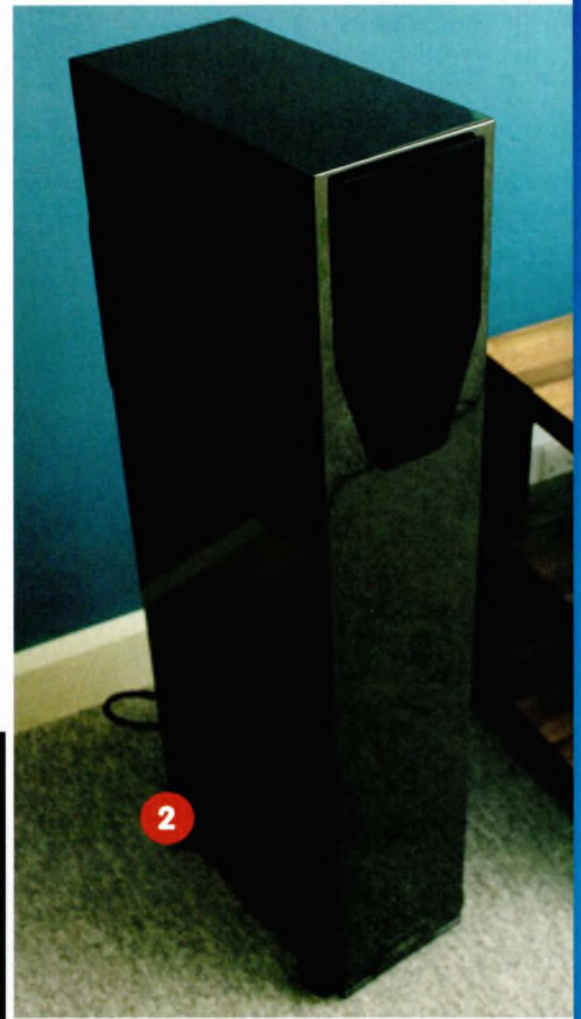
you to make your own judgements. Timing is pin-sharp and lends performances agility that really only becomes noticeable if you listen to something less accomplished. This deftness is not achieved at the expense of depth and Heap's electronic rumblings are reproduced with commendable grunt.

Connected to the Rega DAC, the Sonos adds nothing of itself sonically – it is simply a tool to allow access to your stored music. The interface that it brings with it is truly excellent however. Browsing your library via iPad and queuing up your choices is so wonderfully intuitive, you'll be idly wondering if there is space for your CDs in the attic. Give the system the raw but wonderful *Hollywood Nights* by Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet band, and the passion and intensity of the recording are effortlessly captured. Nothing I played on the system during my

time with it saw it wrong footed.

What really appeals about this system is how flexible it is. If the headline price is more than you might be looking to pay, you could get going with the Sonos, the Obelisk si on its own and the RS7s for a great deal less and still receive much of the benefit of this singular arrangement. You could add other components as and when you had the inclination to do so, or venture into the world of vinyl safe in the knowledge that the Obelisk internal phono is a bit of a corker as well. This is a very happy combination of flexibility and ability.

- 1 SONOS CONNECT £279
 - 2 REGA - RS7 LOUDSPEAKERS £1,838
 - 3 REGA APOLLO R CD PLAYER £548
 - 4 REGA DAC £498
 - 5 HEED OBELISK SI INTEGRATED AMP £1,290
 - 6 HEED X2 POWER SUPPLY £730
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £5,183**



SYSTEM 2 – TWENTY TWENTY VISION

The second system was located in the larger demo room upstairs, and introduced some of the other brands in the HiFi Lounge portfolio. One part of dealer visits that I always enjoy is seeing items that I am familiar with partnered in systems with equipment that I have not seen before. This naturally applies double when the results are excellent.

Knockout punch

The familiar bit in this instance comes from the Naim duo of NDX network streamer and SuperNait integrated. This pairing is the knockout punch of many Naim dealers as it offers a huge amount of ability and considerable real world flexibility in a sensibly priced, well finished and relatively compact pair of boxes. Paul is a relatively recent convert to the Salisbury brand, but feels that this pairing is a very happy one.

In the case of PMC though, Paul has been a fan for rather longer and in the twenty series he feels he has the perfect partner for the Naim units. The twenty series continue the developments begun with the fact range. The PMC trademarks are all present and correct namely a transmission line for improved bass response and the sort of general build quality required to withstand a sleep deprived sound engineer. These

qualities are paired with a general aesthetic that suggests they are domestic speakers with a professional heritage rather than professional speakers with a thin veneer of domestic acceptability. The twenty.24 is the largest member of the range and mates a transmission line loaded 6.5 inch mid/bass driver to a specially adapted SEAS tweeter.

The final element of this system is the Rega RP6 turntable and matching Fono MM phono stage. Another item first introduced to me in the 'white system', the RP6 is a phenomenal piece of equipment that matches exceptional performance with an easy to use, fit and forget ability that is something of a Rega hallmark with turntables. How does all of this hang together as a system though?

Innate grasp

In the past I have heard PMC and Naim combinations and come away with reservations. The results could be seen as too much of a good thing with impact and detail to die for, but a slightly relentless quality that made long term listening less fun. This system buries those memories and shows what a little bit of evolution from both brands can achieve.

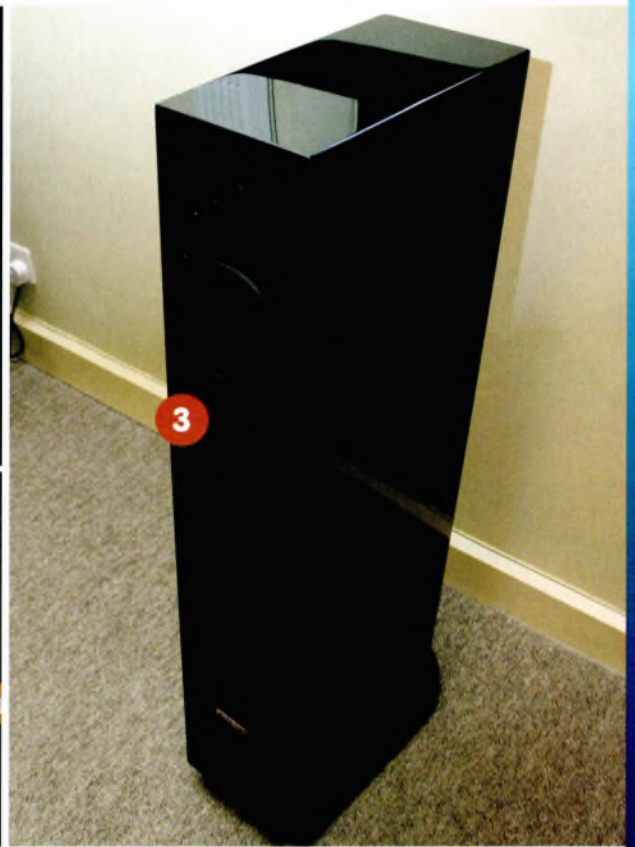
Selecting the 24-bit/88.2kHz recording of Elliot Sharpe's Terraplane *Sky Road Songs*,

the positive qualities of both the Naim's and the PMC remain intact. This is a system with an innate grasp of musicality and timing and combines this with the trademark PMC bass response, felt as much in the thorax as it is heard in the ears. The difference is though that there is a tonal sweetness and smoothness that presents *Banking Blues* with a sense of life that is extremely likeable.

The results with the RP6 as the front end are equally impressive. The new live album by Fink Wheels *Turn Beneath My Feet* has a truly wonderful soundstage-packed full of the details that make a live album great – and this system reproduces it perfectly. The warmth of the performance is slightly surprising. It is never overbearing but it adds the quality required to make a long listening session become a really long one.

This is another flexible, technically accomplished and beguilingly musical system that is greater than the sum of its (already great) parts.

- 1 NAIM NDX STREAMER £3,050
 - 2 NAIM SUPERNAIT INTEGRATED AMP £2,825
 - 3 PMC TWENTY.24 LOUDSPEAKERS £3,100
 - 4 REGA RP6/EXACT £998
- REGA FONO MM PHONO STAGE (NOT PICTURED) £198
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £10,171**



SYSTEM 3 – SIZE MATTERS

The final system is pretty much Paul's sonic philosophy made flesh (well, metal at least). I had already seen his soft spot for PMC, but system three combines that with his favourite electronics to realise the philosophy in full. As a final treat, the system features a 'special guest' in the form of a vinyl front end not due to go on sale for a few months yet...

Full suite

Bryston has been distributed by PMC for many years and the similarities between the brands are inarguable. With its twenty five year amplifier warranty, Bryston equipment is designed to shrug off the sort of abuse that would turn rivals into a puddle of molten metal. What you see here is a full suite of Bryston equipment, which given it uses the fearsome SP3 AV processor as a preamp, could just as easily function in multi-channel if you wanted.

Partnering this ensemble is a pair of PMCs which unlike the twenty.24's are rather more visibly derived from pro audio. The MB2i is a notionally a 'standmount' speaker in that it needs stands but forget any idea of space saving. The wood veneer adds a touch of civility, but like a bouncer in a designer suit, you are still minded that this system can still handle anything you throw at it.

It is easy to miss the 'special guest' among all the heatsinks and braced drives, but the Rega RP8 represents the most radical departure from the company's established turntable designs yet seen. The RP8 makes use of a skeletal plinth, the first in the company's history. With an all new RB808 tonearm and offered with the equally innovative Apheta cartridge for a highly competitive price, this is going to be a very important product and this system represents a wonderful chance to get a listen ahead of time.

Staggeringly visceral

The most significant and altogether astonishing aspect of this system is the redefinition of scale. It doesn't make anything appear larger than it should, but when confronted with a large recording it responds so effortlessly to the challenge that the vast majority of other systems will sound like a facsimile by comparison. When given its head, the result is staggeringly visceral. Part of this is down to the bass. It rises from nowhere and is sufficiently deep and clean to defy easy description. It would dominate if it wasn't so incredibly controlled and fast. Paul's demonstration of Massive Attack's *Teardrop* is a spellbinding lesson in cohesion and control.

Unleash the Rega RP8 and the results are simply fabulous. It seemed like as good a time as any to extract my copy of *Au Réve* by Cassius and the results didn't disappoint. *The Sound of Violence* is just that, a room-filling, spine tingling seven minutes of music that has you wanting to stand up and go nuts. It would be wrong to describe this as a PA system – it is far too civilised and musical for that – but there is something about the raw timing and energy that brings to mind the live event rather than sitting in your listening room. Change genre completely and play some Duke Ellington and the spontaneous, live nature of the performance remains. The bass is still present to underpin everything but it shrinks perfectly to suit.

This is a masterclass of musicality that never fails to raise a smile, and that of course is what serious hi-fi systems are all about!

- 1 PMC MB2i LOUDSPEAKERS £13,400
 - 2 REGA IOS REFERENCE PHONO STAGE £3,998
 - 3 REGA RP8/APHETA £2,198
 - 4 BRYSTON BDP-1 MEDIA PLAYER £2,350
 - 5 BRYSTON BDA-1 DAC £2,350
 - 6 BRYSTON 7B SST2 MONO BLOCKS X2 £4,925 EACH
 - 7 BRYSTON SP3 PROCESSOR £9,995
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £44,141



Starting afresh in this industry is never easy, but HiFi Lounge looks to be making the right moves. Most importantly, the brands Paul has chosen represent an excellent framework of equipment that supports a wide range of formats and budgets.

It is one thing to have the equipment and quite another to create compelling systems with them but Hi-Fi Lounge is already achieving some fantastic results. All three systems are extremely flexible and in the case of systems one and two, impressively

compact. Best of all, they do this while producing a sound that is unfailingly likeable and genuinely musical. System three is rather less compact, but the sheer scale and punch it delivers makes music an event and the effect is fantastically addictive.

New forces

We summon the ghosts of New Years past and weave an alternate timeline through rock's back pages, from cult heroes to colossi of rock. **Simon Berkovitch** cues up a killer soundtrack to kick the winter blues into touch...

With the pine needles swept away, festive hangovers burnt into frontal lobes and turkey definitely off the menu, the start of a new year has rarely seemed the most rock'n'roll month in the calendar. Yet appearances can be deceptive, as our investigation into the first month of the musical year reveals it yields an embarrassment of riches from rock legends and artists and cult heroes alike. Dreading that return to work? Don't! The cure to the post-holiday blues lies in your record collection, albums from rock's golden eras waiting to be reappraised and rediscovered – and hopefully a few new future favourites, too....

release for their second long-player with a more depressing reality. *White Heat/White Light* limped into stores during January 1968, as the Velvets' record company, Verve, had zero expectations of the album's success. The LP barely dented the US charts at the time, but fast-forward to the 21st century and this particular masterpiece couldn't be held in higher regard...

Compare the release of *Meet The Beatles* with January 1969's similarly positioned launch of the *Yellow Submarine* soundtrack album. While not necessarily a high point in The Beatles' recording career – although there are some killer late-Psych standouts

New bad boys on the block The Rolling Stones and The Doors were also unleashed on the record buying public during the quiet release schedule post-Christmas...

Meet The Beatles

It's hard to think of a time when the Fab Four weren't omnipresent – especially as the release of The Beatles in Stereo vinyl box set on 180g vinyl has recently set audiophiles hearts a-flutter – but US audiences were offered the polite invitation to *Meet The Beatles* back in early 1964. Beatlemania was a mere few months from detonation, but few would have anticipated the excitement about to sweep the globe from the Rock 'n' Roll fare comprising this early outing for the group.

All future legends have to start somewhere, and The Beatles weren't alone in this regard. New bad boys on the block The Rolling Stones (*The Rolling Stones No2*; 1965) and The Doors (*The Doors*; 1967) were also unleashed on the record buying public during the relatively quiet release schedule post-Christmas, arguably to maximise their impact. The Velvet Underground – perhaps the ultimate cult group – faced a January

such as *It's All Too Much* – from this late 1960s vantage point, the world's biggest group had three motion pictures under their belt – *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *Help* (1965) and the aforementioned cartoon classic (1968) – and countless hit recordings under their belts – as well as a history of making the first month of the year memorable for Beatlemaniacs.

Top of the Pops

Arguably one of the most important contributions to the development of the music video that was to dominate the 1980s and beyond, the innovative and disorientating promotional film to psychedelic career-high *Strawberry Fields Forever* was shot at the end of January 1967 and showcased The Beatles at the peak of their audio-visual powers. The band selected a similarly memorable way in which to bid goodnight to live performance. The band's



Hitting the UK top spot on the 30th January 1971, and not budging for five weeks, George Harrison's *My Sweet Lord* was a great solo success for the youngest Beatle. It was re-released in January 2002, soon after his tragic death, and reached No.1 again...

▷ **SINGLE MINDED**

From *Glad All Over* to *Brass in Pocket*: 17 years of January number ones – and thankfully only a handful that you need to press the 'skip' button on your remote for...

- 1964: Dave Clark Five *Glad All Over*
- 1965: The Moody Blues *Go Now*
- 1966: Spencer Davis Group *Keep on Running*
- 1967: The Monkees *I'm A Believer*
- 1968: Love Affair *Everlasting Love*
- 1969: Fleetwood Mac *Albatross*
- 1970: Edison Lighthouse *Love Grows*
- 1971: George Harrison *My Sweet Lord*
- 1972: The New Seekers *I'd Like To Teach The World To Sing*
- 1973: The Sweet *Blockbuster*
- 1974: Mud *Tiger Feet*
- 1975: Status Quo *Down Down*
- 1976: Abba *Mamma Mia*
- 1977: David Soul *Don't Give Up On Us*
- 1978: Althia and Donna *Up Town Top Ranking*
- 1979: Blondie *Heart of Glass*
- 1980: The Pretenders *Brass In Pocket*



▷ **BRING YOUR DAUGHTER TO THE SLAUGHTER**

In the blue corner, the Peter Pan of Pop. In the red corner, some exceptionally long hair, axe heroics and a curious RSVP. Only on Planet Pop...

Heavy Metal at number one in the singles charts? WTF? This was the unlikely turn of events in late 1990 when Iron Maiden went head to head with none other than Sir Cliff Richard for the festive number one – a battle which the inkies gleefully likened to one of good versus evil.

Maiden's single *Bring Your Daughter To The Slaughter* was in direct competition with the pious one's cloying *Saviour's Day* for the 1990 Christmas Number One. The Living Doll may have won that particular battle, but the metallers won the war: their single was not released until the week after Christmas... and promptly hit the top slot of the singles charts in January 1991.

Just like Frankie Goes To Hollywood's controversial single *Relax* in 1984, a BBC ban on the single did nothing but add to its notoriety, propelling it to chart domination. To date, it is Iron Maiden's only number one UK single, also topping the Finnish charts!



US audiences were invited to *Meet the Beatles* in January 1964, many new year releases followed...

infamous rooftop concert – as seen in the 1970 *Let It Be* documentary – took place atop their Savile Row Apple headquarters on 30 January, 1969. To paraphrase one of 1964's most influential January releases, the times they had a-changed, and The Beatles were just months away from splitting up for good.

The rise of The Beatles and other Beat groups that clambered through the hole they trepanned in the public consciousness can also be attributed to the rise of the dedicated TV music programme. Resolutely aimed at the record-buying teenager with disposable cash – a post-war first – it's fitting that the most legendary of these TV shows – the long running *Top of the Pops* (first aired on 1st January, 1964) and *Shindig!* (debuted on 8th January, 1966, with performances from Mod faves The Kinks and The Who) – burst onto the scene at the start of the year, offering a glimpse of a brighter world of pop in the darkness of winter.

In 1990, MTV's *Unplugged* joined this exclusive club of TV programmes that churned out memorable performances, many now stuck in YouTube's delicious amber.

The nineteen seventies was a pageant of classic January releases. Pink Floyd gigged *Dark Side of the Moon* at the start of 1972, and from then on the stage was set... The Thin White Duke released *Station to Station* in 1976...



Cult heroes and Kings

By the late-1960s, pop had mutated into rock, and it's the release of Led Zeppelin's debut album (January 1969) that's the biggest clue to how much of nineteen seventies music was going to develop – loudly and with plenty of money chucked in its direction. Critically acclaimed albums from rock royalty such as Bob Dylan – *Blood on the Tracks* (1975) and the following year's *Desire* – and David Bowie – *Station to Station* (1976) and *Low* (1977) – were admittedly major January releases, but like The Velvet Underground's *White Light/White Heat* before them, future cult records crept unassumingly into the dawn light of each new year.

The decade was ushered in by ex-Pink Floyd leader Syd Barrett's incomparable collection of beguiling songs, *The Madcap Laughs* on 3rd January, 1970. Other similarly timed cult records such as ex-Mamas and the Papas

Elvis Presley's 1974 Aloha From Hawaii Via Satellite TV special was broadcast simultaneously to a staggering 40 countries

songwriter John Phillips's burned-out *John, The Wolf King of L.A.* (1970), King Crimson escapees McDonald and Giles' eponymous one-off (1971), Annette Peacock's out-there avant-jazz scorcher *I'm The One* (1972; unavailable on CD until 2010) and Roxy synthesist Eno's pop debut *Here Come The Warm Jets* (1974) were long-beloved by record collectors and finally given the wider audiences they deserved with the steady rise of magazines like *Mejjo*.

Cult records aside, two massive New Year events during the nineteen seventies signified how massive popular music had now become. Elvis Presley's 1974 *Aloha From Hawaii Via Satellite* TV special was broadcast simultaneously to a staggering forty countries, confirming that – despite the fast-evolving musical landscape – for many The King had yet to lose his crown.

In the concert halls, three 1975 Led Zeppelin concerts at Madison Square Gardens, New York, sold out in a record three hours; bombastic shows that made the heavy blues rock of 1969's debut gentile in comparison.

No less significant was a January 1972 gig featuring *The Dark Side of the Moon* in Brighton, in which Pink Floyd performed the whole of its future multi-million selling album live – a full year away from its release, too; an event unimaginable in the Internet age of copyright paranoia.

What's the buzz, cock?

As Led Zeppelin had ushered in a template for heavier music at the beginning of 1969, an EP broadside from Manchester quartet Buzzcocks in 1977 took inspiration from the



(above) Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* was a major January release back in 1975; (below) ex-Ultravox frontman John Foxx went solo to release his seminal electro tome *Metamatic*, in the first month of 1980

Sex Pistols and birthed the UK's DIY punk (and post-punk) movements, coming out the same month as The Ramones' breakneck *Leave Home* LP.

The endless possibilities of post-punk, with many embracing the synthesiser instead of the electric guitar as the chosen instrument of expression, are echoed in one of the first releases of the next decade – ex-Ultravox leader John Foxx's seminal *Metamatic* (1980); a record that still glimmers with future-shock some thirty two years later.

It's a long, winding road from the raunchy rock 'n' roll of *Meet The Beatles* to the glacial synth mantras of *Metamatic*, but all the artists included here made resolutions to embrace the new, releasing records and staging concerts that made New Year one of exciting possibilities for popular music.

And it's with excitement that we park the TARDIS in the lock up and bid farewell to our time-travelling *Year in Music* series. Next issue, in the great January tradition of out with the old and in with the new, *Hi-Fi Choice* will draw back the curtains on a series of musical genre primers to help you expand your record collection, aiming to take it into exciting, uncharted waters.

Welcome to the new year ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to *Sound Affects*... ●

WELCOME TO THE NORTH EAST



ANATEK RESEARCH
APOLLO
ATACAMA
AV INTERNATIONAL
CHORD COMPANY
CHORD ELECTRONICS
CLEARAUDIO
DYNAVECTOR
EAR YOSHINO
GOLDRING
GRAHAM ENGINEERING
GRAHAM SLEE
G F HADCOCK
ISOTEK
KOETSU
KUDOS AUDIO
MARTIN LOGAN
LYRA
MAGNEPLANAR
MELODY
MICHELL ENGINEERING
MONITOR AUDIO

NAD
NAIM AUDIO
NORDOST
NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE
OPERA
ORTOFON
PATHOS ACOUSTICS
PROJECT
PS AUDIO
PURESOUND
REGA
REVOLVER
ROKSAN
SME
STAX
SUGDEN AUDIO
TEAC ESOTERIC
TRANSFIGURATION
TRICHORD RESEARCH
UNISON RESEARCH
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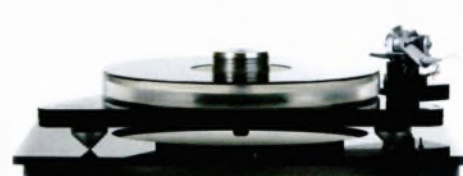
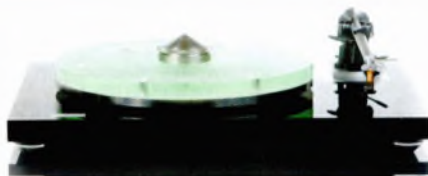
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ALBUM OF THE MONTH

MARIANNE FAITHFULL BROKEN ENGLISH



Marianne Faithfull Broken English

universalmusic.com

★★★★★

Universal

2 CD deluxe edition

BY THE MID-1970S, Marianne Faithfull's career and health were in ruins. The impossibly beautiful convent girl who had been the wistful consort of Mick Jagger and the poster girl for 'swinging London' had been replaced by a haggard-looking drug addict and a life of bleak degradation. The results of addiction and severe bouts of laryngitis and other illnesses caused by living destitute on the streets had also ravaged her voice irreparably, cracking its pitch and destroying its once pure tone.

Somehow out of this adversity, she fashioned 1979's *Broken English*, not only a remarkable comeback and the finest album of her career but a record that still stands as one of the most potent, spirited, coruscatingly honest and victorious artistic statements in

the history of female pop. Turning the destruction of her vocal chords to advantage, her 'new' voice had a lived-in, whiskey-soaked and nicotine-stained patina that lent the songs extraordinary depths of character and meaning.

Only a handful of them were her own compositions – and yet the album seemed like an autobiography of the most searing kind. *Guilt* appeared to describe her Catholic upbringing and subsequent addiction. *What's The Hurry?* was about the junkie's endless quest to 'score'. Shel Silverstein's wonderful *Ballad Of Lucy Jordan* shows us the woman Faithfull fears she might have become if her life had taken a different turn, while the savage psycho-sexual jealousy and four letter-worded fury of *Why'd Ya Do*

If ever an album captured the sound of an artist breaking free, that record is *Broken English*

It? (based on a lyric by the poet Heathcote Williams), retains the power to disturb, thrill and shock in equal measure.

The original album was given an experimental post-punk/new-wave sound, with Steve Winwood's keyboards and synthesisers to the fore, alongside Faithfull's roaring, spitting vocals of experience and betrayal. The combination worked brilliantly and sounds as startlingly original today as it did back then. But the expanded edition also offers us an earlier version of the album, which has remained in the Island vaults for thirty four years.

Minus Winwood, the 'lost' recordings reveal a more mainstream, guitar-led rock sound. It's striking enough in its way, if only because Faithfull's unique,

damaged presence remains undimmed. But it emphasises the brilliance of the original decision to rework the record, for the audaciousness of Faithfull's vocal persona with its wild, almost feral undertow demanded a sonic approach with an equally graphic edge.

The electronic-tinged rhythms work nowhere better than on her sneering, mocking rendition of John Lennon's *Working Class Hero*, an improbable cover on the surface but a song that perfectly fits the album's Amazonian spirit, and on the title track itself, inspired by the Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang.

An extra bonus is Derek Jarman's shortfilm made at the time to accompany three of the songs (*Witches Song/Lucy Jordan/Broken English*) and which uncannily captures the seething turmoil of the world Faithfull's songs inhabit. If ever an album captured the sound of an artist breaking free from the shackles of convention and raising two fingers to the ties that bind, that record is *Broken English*. **NW**





Massive Attack

Blue Lines

emimusic.com

★★★★★

EMI

Double CD (standard and hi-res version)

WITH THEIR FIRST ALBUM

in 1991, Bristol's Massive Attack pretty much invented trip hop, the bass-heavy blend of rap, dub, electronic dance music and soul coming out of the wild west that would also be refined by Tricky and Portishead. Theirs was a particularly dark take on the genre, with skittering snare beats and looming, threatening deep bass lines, leavened only by some beautiful vocals from the likes of reggae great Horace Andy and soul diva Shara Nelson.

From the pulsing Billy Cobham sample (*Stratus*, in case you were wondering) that opens *Safe From Harm* to the synth-heavy *Hymn Of The Big Wheel*, the album packs in a feast of inventive beats and hummable tunes of which number one single and genre classic *Unfinished Sympathy* is just a highlight. Their later work would often focus too heavily on psychotic urban gloom, but here there's more than enough bounce to the slow, spliffed-up tempos to keep heads a-nodding and feet a-tapping. **DO**



The Blue Nile

A Walk Across The Rooftops

virginrecords.com

★★★★★

Virgin

2 CD expanded edition

GLASGOW'S BLUE NILE

have released only four albums of peerless art-pop in almost thirty years. Led by Paul Buchanan's dark, rapturous voice, the group's 1984 debut managed to sound both sparse and yet lush at the same time. The follow-up, 1989's *Hats* also gets the expanded reissue treatment at the same time.

The synths of the period were deployed with such rare grace that the album has an unusually elegant and timeless quality. That said, the brittleness of the original recording benefits considerably from warm and sympathetic remastering. Among the bonus material, the previously unreleased *St Catherine's Day* is as beautiful as anything they ever recorded. **NW**



Smashing Pumpkins

Mellon Collie & The Infinite Sadness

emimusic.com

★★★★★

EMI

5 CDs plus DVD box set

RELEASED IN 1995, the third album from Billy Corgan's American alt-rockers was their most ambitious and fully-realised effort. A thrilling post-grunge manifesto of full-on rockers and tender ballads with the trad bass-drums-guitar line-up augmented with piano, strings and electronic textures.

It's arguable whether a double album of twenty eight songs clocking in at two hours long really needed the expanded 'deluxe' reissue treatment - and the 64 'new' tracks including demos, alternate takes and unreleased songs make for daunting listening. But the crisply remastered original album remains a classic and American alt-rock has seldom sounded so alternative - or so versatile. **NW**



The Bee Gees

Mythology

warnerbrosrecords.com

★★★★★

Reprise

4 CD box set

THE RECENT DEATH OF

ROBIN GIBB, which leaves Barry as the only surviving Bee Gee, is an obvious excuse to repack an over-familiar catalogue all over again. But at least the four-disc set *Mythology* makes an attempt to present the material in a semi-original format by devoting one disc apiece to Barry, Robin, Maurice and youngest brother Andy (never actually a member of the group), each featuring songs on which they took the lead.

The Andy Gibb solo material from the 1980s hasn't dated well and the disc devoted to Maurice merely highlights that his two brothers had all the best songs. From the early hits such as *Massachusetts* and *I've Got To Get A Message To You To Jive Talkin'* and *Stayin' Alive*, everything you want is on the first two discs. **NW**

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

Nina Simone Forbidden Fruit purepleasure.com



★★★★★

Colpix/PP

2x 180g vinyl

THIS 1961 ALBUM finds Simone with Al Shackman on guitar, Chris White on bass and Bob Hamilton on bass, but these are fairly minor characters

in a production that's dominated by one of the most expressive and honest voices ever. She mixes blues, jazz and soul on material that though not self-penned is made her own by the depth of feeling she brings to even the lightest of tunes. Simone's strength was her intelligence and musical capability, few have ever matched her in this respect.

Pure Pleasure has added 11 cuts from the same period to the original ten with probably the same backing band. These include a fine

version of *Porgy I's Your Woman Now* and a great upbeat spiritual *Lonesome Valley*. The core album is excellent in parts with a beautiful *Just Say I Love Him* and the funky title track. The strong character of the recording reflects its vintage, but this can't compete with the character of the singer.

While not the strongest title in the catalogue *Forbidden Fruit* sounds good for its vintage and has plenty to enjoy for newcomers and aficionado alike. **JK**



HOT PICK

Villa Lobos

Floresta Do Amazonas
Anna Korondi (Soprano)
Sao Paulo Choir and
Symphony Orchestra

bis.se

★★★★★

BIS

CD

FLORESTA DO AMAZONAS

is a vast fresco-like symphony for soprano soloist, choir, and large orchestra. It dates from the late 1950s, and was originally conceived as a movie score. Villa Lobos composed the music first, and was dismayed when told it would need to be cut and re-arranged to fit the film. As a result, it was not used. The music is celebratory and wide ranging in mood, with a broad expansive quality that creates the impression of sweeping vistas and vast open spaces.

The performance here is evocatively idiomatic, and the BIS SACD recording sounds pungent and open, with a wide dynamic range and excellent clarity. **JMH**



Schumann and Brahms

Symphonic Studies and
Paganini Variations
Alexander Romanovsky

deccaclassics.com

★★★★★

Decca

CD

PIANIST ALEXANDER ROMANOVSKY

gives a sensitively imaginative account of Schumann's *Symphonic Studies*. He includes the five posthumous etudes that Schumann deleted when the work was first published. Brahms' Paganini variations are made of sterner stuff, and call for excellent technique. He's fully equal to the demands of the music, but finds much hidden poetry that others miss.

The recording sounds crisp and clear, with the piano placed fairly close in a warm, but not too lively acoustic. Clarity is excellent, and the 'decay' of long held notes is well conveyed – note, for example, the rich sonorous opening of the Schumann. **JMH**



HOT PICK

The Dubliners

50 Years

properdistribution.com

★★★★★

One Little Indian

3 CDs

THE NAME REMAINS THE SAME

but the line-up of Ireland's most famous folk flame-keepers has changed quite a few times over the years. Marking their half-century this three-CD set cherry picks the best from their beginnings in 1962 through definitive versions of folk classics from *The Black Velvet Band* to *Carrickfergus* and much more.

The late Ronnie Drew may have been the most distinctive, but he wasn't the boys' only vocalist, and there's a good selection from Luke Kelly and Paddy Reilly, as well as some gorgeous instrumental passages. It's a rollicking run through history and lifestyle with a skip in the step, a shout on the lips and a tear in the eye. Others have tried to take folk in different directions (Planxty, Moving Hearts) but The Dubliners always kept it real. **DO**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

Mark Knopfler

Privateering

linnrecords.com

★★★★★

Universal/Linn

24-bit/96kHz



I CANNOT FIGURE OUT why a guitarist-producer and songwriter from Northumberland sings with

the intonation of an American backwoodsman, but at least Mark Knopfler OBE has managed to shed the artistically questionable trappings of Dire Straits, the one-great-album-band he fronted until 1995. His subsequent work with the Notting Hillbillies and Chet Atkins betrayed his deep affection for American roots music, to which his individual, claw-hammer-finger-picking playing style is ideally suited.

All twenty tracks merit their inclusion and the natural perspective of the 24/96 recording is quite sublime, being detailed and dynamic. The insight that it offers into Knopfler's playing and songwriting is quite wonderful. **MS**

Mumford & Sons

Babel

linnrecords.com

★★★★★

Universal/Linn

24-bit/48kHz



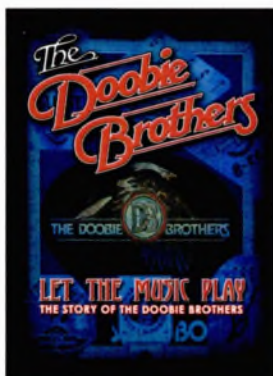
MUMFORD & SONS plugged into a winning formula among the fairweather festival goers

with their first album, *Sigh No More* and the band is excellent at creating this sort of not-exactly-taxing, banjo-fuelled, middle of the road sing-along smoothies.

The 24-bit download is probably wasting 20 of its bits on this recording, which is dynamically a little monochromatic. That having been said, it has a crystalline quality that would definitely benefit from a bit more nuance, *chiaroscuro* and emotion in the music. If the music seems designed to be played in the background, it doesn't necessarily need the hi-res treatment. **MS**

BLU-RAY DVD

The Doobie Brothers Let The Music Play eagle-rock.com



★★★★★

Eagle Vision

DTS HD Master, LPCM stereo

THE DOOBIE BROTHERS started out as a "meat and potatoes" rock band that went on to conquer America and then the world thanks to their ability to adapt, both to changes in musical tastes and changes in line-up. This documentary tells the story of the Doobies' ascent to fame and how at the peak of their success frontman and songwriter Tom Johnston left to be replaced by Michael McDonald, who ushered in a completely new sound.

Rarely has a band survived such a dramatic transition of personnel and style, but the

McDonald era brought their biggest sales. They were helped on their way by Ted Templeman who produced *Toulouse Street* and worked on all their great albums. The band split in '82, but a benefit concert drew so much attention that they were inspired to reunite and carry on the fight.

The bonus 48 minutes of live footage sounds remarkably good in places. It gives you some idea of what made the Doobies so popular, while also reminding you just how incredible McDonald's voice was back in the day. **JK**

Minitest

Budget portable recorders now offer a surprisingly professional standard, says **Richard Black**...

Marantz PMD661 MkII

PRICE: £475
WEBSITE: MARANTZ.CO.UK

MARANTZ HAS BEEN A LONG-STANDING PLAYER in the portable recording market and this relatively bulky machine is a high-specification device with professional features including good-quality XLR inputs and quarter-inch headphone sockets. 48V phantom powering is available on the XLRs, which can be set to accept microphone- or line-level inputs: a further mini-jack socket accepts line-level signals only. There's even a digital input (phono socket) and proper line outputs, also on phonos. Storage is to SDHC memory cards. Internal mics are included, of course. The buttons are large and easy to use, ditto the display, with menu-driven control easy enough to operate. Power is from an external 5V supply, (not included) or 4 AA batteries, good for up to eight hours. A simple wired remote is an optional extra.

The internal mics are decent if not world-shaking. They're a little bright and not amazingly detailed, but give fair stereo. However, with an external microphone (or line-level source), this recorder is simply shockingly good. The inputs are incredibly quiet, sufficiently so for good performance with ultra-low-output ribbon microphones, and with any kind of input there's the kind of detail, extension and musical liquidity for which one used to pay thousands of pounds. Measured performance confirms the subjective impression – it's simply beyond sensible criticism. The fact that one could easily justify buying this as a home hi-fi recorder means that field recording is almost just an extra. It's a superb bit of kit however you look at it

VERDICT HANDSOMELY JUSTIFIES the price, with performance which in every way simply screams 'class'



Olympus LS100

PRICE: £379
WEBSITE: OLYMPUS.CO.UK

IT'S NOT THAT MANY YEARS since I first tested an Olympus music-quality recorder – the company's previous audio devices had been strictly speech-oriented devices with fully automatic gain control and very low bitrate storage. More recently, though, the brand has been offering full linear PCM recorders with decent microphones and flexible features, and this is the current range-topper. It's billed as a 'multitrack' recorder and while that's strictly true it won't actually record more than two tracks (stereo) at one time: rather, you can build up an 8-track mix by successive monitoring and overdubbing. The internal mics are claimed to be good for 140dB, which is about what you get half an inch from a snare drum, while both line and mic sources are catered for, the latter on both mini-jack and combination XLR/jack sockets, the former on a mini-jack only. Record level can be adjusted separately for each channel, an unusual feature in such recorders. The full-colour display is excellent, but the control system is a little fussy and takes some getting used to.

Using the internal mics, the sound from this recorder is notably clear and open. The frequency balance is just a touch bright, making vocal consonants a little more prominent than they should be, but it's quite a mild effect and the precision in the sound makes up for it quite convincingly. Stereo imaging is also very good, and noise is as low as any (this being in the context of a group where performance in that regard is generally impressive). Noise on the external inputs is low if not quite as outstanding as the Marantz achieves, while performance with line-level inputs is good though, if one is really fussy, not the clearest.

VERDICT AS A 'POINT AND GO' RECORDER this is only let down by fussy ergonomics. Otherwise, great sound and very flexible in use



Sony PCM-M10

PRICE: £199
WEBSITE: SONY.CO.UK

THE HERITAGE HERE, OF COURSE, IS PEERLESS, so is this the 'Walkman Pro' for our times? It feels encouraging, a convenient handful in a part-metal case, with a sensible size display that's easy to read: just one small complaint, which is that like all LCDs, it needs lighting to be legible. The backlight by default stays on for a few seconds only and if you are more than a metre or so away and/or the ambient lighting is low, you can't see the meters. The built-in mics are complemented by separate mini-jack sockets for line and mic inputs, while further sockets provide headphone/line output and remote control facility (wired remote included). Unusually for such a recorder, the memory socket is for either Memory Stick Micro or micro-SD cards, which are available these days up to the 32GB SDHC maximum. 4GB built-in memory is included as well. Input level adjustment is a rotary control on the side and is very easy to use.

Small and relatively cheap it may be, but the PCM-M10 has some of the best internal mics I've come across, tonally at least. In a frustrating trade-off, they do lack some of the clarity of those in the Olympus recorder, but they have a lovely basic sound to them that lacks the all-too-common brightness and brittleness of many budget microphones. Stereo imaging is decent rather than stunning, but many users will be happy enough to sacrifice a little of that for the greater naturalness. Assessed via the input sockets, performance is similarly impressive, with noise at the mic input barely worse than in the Marantz recorder.

VERDICT



ANOTHER VERY FINE RECORDING MACHINE with grips almost entirely limited to the user interface



TASCAM DR-40

PRICE: £190
WEBSITE: TASCAM.COM

NONE OF THESE RECORDERS offers everything one might wish for, and the omissions in this case are perhaps surprising. There isn't a single mini-jack input, for a start. Apart from the internal mics, all you have is a pair of dual-purpose XLR/jack sockets. But adaptors exist and cables can be made up, so no real hardship. Another surprise is the lack of power socket (you can use batteries, as always, of course), but in this case that's misleading because the DR-40 can be powered via the USB socket. Given USB power adaptors are sold for peanuts for phone-charging and other trivial jobs, that's arguably quite smart. Beyond that, you get mic capsules that swivel for variable stereo pickup, multi-track capability (overdubbing only), and phantom powering on those input XLRs, impressive at this price. The display and operation are okay, though the machine can be a little fiddly.

The mics are really rather good, just a touch sibilant but not seriously so and with good performance at both frequency extremes. Making them adjustable proves a good point in the DR-40's favour, as it allows for more precise image formation in a broader range of situations. Noise from those mics seems just a little higher in level than with the other recorders in this group, but is still perfectly acceptable for most tasks. External mics and line-level sources are well treated, though again noise (with mic input) isn't quite leading-edge, and the sound has just a trace of congestion at times. Even so, by the standards of digital portables (MD, DAT) from a few years ago, the sound is mighty fine.

VERDICT



MOVEABLE MIC CAPSULES add flexibility to what is already an impressive performer at the price



When I first encountered a solid-state portable recorder, the Edirol R-09, I was taken aback by its abilities. All four of these recorders however, can comfortably beat it in every way, and

one could use any of them to make recordings which would stand comparison with many commercial offerings. All of them feature a camera tripod thread in the base, and using it

and any kind of stand to lift the recorder well clear of the floor will make a huge difference. Beyond that, just make sure to set levels sensibly and turn off high cut, low cut and any limiter functions.

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 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

TRANSPARENT Music Link balanced XLR, 1m, stereo pair interconnects £250, Nordost Solar Wind 2.5m and 3.5m (doubled) speaker cables £150, excellent condition: **01457 871622 (Lancs).**

LINN Sondek LP12 turntable with Linn Ittok LV11 tonearm and MC cartridge. Open to Offers. Photos available: **Email: philipmitchello2@02.co.uk (N Ireland).**

NAD Viso Two one-box system. Comprises CD player, DVD player, FM/AM tuner and 50W amp. Excellent condition, boxed. £275: **01926 259022 or email: davidhardy18@talktalk.net (Warwick).**

RUSS ANDREWS Classic Powerkord with 24ct high quality Wattgate £70: **01484427426 (Yorkshire).**

LOWTHER Accolade 2011 (Birch wood) £2,200, 8 ohm, 100w, DX2/DX45 (veneered) £3,540, excellent, engineers test result, Monitor Audio RX6

8 ohm 125w, (Rosent) (£800) £500. Can demo: **01661 823606 or email: grant.darras@gmail.com (Newcastle Upon Tyne).**

ROKSAN M2 integrated amp, as new, boxed, supplied with all original accessories, superb, £1,100: **07787 574784 or email: stephen.adolphus@gmail.com (West Sussex).**

AURUM Cantus Volla loudspeakers. Figured maple finish. Hardly used. As new condition. Complete with stands and boxes. Can dem. £1,400: **07736339194 or email: j.boswell@rbht.nhs.uk (Bromley).**

ACOUSTIC ENERGY Radiance 1 speakers, great condition, well loved and cared for, £230: **07902 303181 or email: chris.skinner10@gmail.com (Herts).**

TECHNICS SL1210 Mk2 (no cartridge) £249, Garrard 401 with plinth, no arm £699, Garrard 401/301 power supply £299: **0207 499 8729 (London).**

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 (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: **01305 263069 (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 (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. (Bromley).**



Acoustic Energy Radiance 1 loudspeakers, a snip at £230!

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 (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 (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 (West Yorkshire).**

TRICHORD Diablo phono amp, upgraded, mint £450, Black Rhodium Super mains cable £50, QED Optical CinemaxAV 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: **01780 457691 (Essex).**

CYRUS 7.5 preamp, Cyrus Smart power, Cyrus PSX power supply (black), good condition, £450: **078962 72406 Tyne and Wear).**

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 0610 AG (silver) slant bananas, beautiful sound, Kimber flight case, mint, (£2,400) £1,100: **0151 608 4481 (Merseyside).**

FURUTECH FP202 banana plugs, 24 carat gold-plated locking plugs. Originally £128 for 8, now £38 or £19 for 4: **07981025698 or email: 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.frasers87@btinternet.com (Bedfordshire).**

HI-FI CHOICE magazine from Sept 1992 (20 years). Email davidkconstant@gmail.com (London).

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!

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 (Bedfordshire).**

PRO-JECT RPM 1.3 Genie (red) turntable, excellent condition, box and manual, buyer collects, £160. **01933626185 or email: 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. **0207499 8729 (London).**

VTL 100 mono compact monoblocks, mint for age, sensible offers, ATC CA2 pre ex con £350, NVA mm phonostage, ex con. £150. **01822 860 432 (Devon).**

NUFORCE DAC 9 D/A converter, (silver finish), very high resolution, will drive power amp directly and has an excellent built in headphone preamp. (£1,199) £650. **01296437314 (Bucks).**

B&W CDM1 NT standmount speakers (cherry), excellent condition, boxed (£750) £350. **01702 520063 (Essex).**

ATC SCM7 loudspeakers (black ash), mint condition, boxed with manuals, (£610) £475. **07733 428736 or email: gill@gillbreaks.plus.com (Huddersfield).**

RUSS ANDREWS Classic Powerkord with IsoTek 24ct gold Wattgate £75. **01484 427426 (W Yorks).**

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-tier silver 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: gareth.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, 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: rogerssaunders@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).**

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HiFi News & Record Review Ultimate HiFi 2011 awards



ARIAND FV34B, 40w per channel. Pictured is the 2011 MK IV model, available with remote. FV34B MK III model review HFN Feb 2011 Issue, ask for copy.



NorthStar Essensio DAC ask for copy review



Northstar Essensio Plus, Group test winner June 2012. Ask for copy review

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Ed Selley brings you our pick of this month's top hi-fi websites...



ARCHIVE.ORG

archive.org

Kindly recommended to me by Colin Wonfor of Tellurium Q, describing Archive.org as a download site for old music is to do it a huge disservice. The site is intended to be a repository for human knowledge in the same way that the ancient Library of Alexandria was – hopefully without the sacking, looting and losing to history this time. The site has now archived over ten Petabytes of data for future generations.

Of course the site is in Web Choice because a good quantity of the material here is music and music you'll find nowhere else. Although the site has a number of albums tucked away (some of which were originally recorded on wax cylinder), it is the live recordings that are the most interesting. The site has literally thousands of acts recorded at venues both large and small. I was delighted to find a perfectly listenable example of a set from French techno legend Laurent Garnier that I remembered first hearing as a teenager. This is not a hi-fi site – it is a rare occurrence to find a file much over 128kpbs MP3 in size – but it is a fantastic opportunity to find recordings otherwise lost to history.



DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

deutschegrammophon.com

As one of the major classical music labels, Deutsche Grammophon should be well known to anyone with even a passing interest in the genre. They have accrued a phenomenal catalogue of material that covers everything from Early Modern to the latest experimental releases. The good news for streaming audio fans is that an ever increasing amount of this catalogue is available as lossless FLAC.

For classical music, the availability of material as a download from the outset is very important for one simple reason – tagging. Software that can apply artist and album details to the entire Michael Jackson catalogue without breaking sweat is frequently foxed by classical music.

The two albums I've purchased from this site have arrived perfectly tagged and arranged. Even though the price of the CD isn't significantly higher than the download (proving again that this is a fine time to be an audiophile), the removal of the tagging issues alone, make the download worthwhile. The site is also beautifully laid out and has a very logical download manager. It would be lovely to see them offer more high resolution audio, but I have rarely been anything other than impressed by the quality of 44.1kHz releases from DG, so there is no rush.



PITCHFORK

pitchfork.com

If you aren't quite ready to exist entirely on a diet of classical music, Pitchfork would be worth checking out. This is a site dedicated to covering the full width of 'alternative' music, ranging from material that even the broadest minded individual might initially believe to be an explosion in a computer factory, through to material that will receive some coverage on less specialised sites.

The site includes reviews, details of gigs and concerts and other news. The reviews, in particular, are refreshingly candid. If the staff doesn't like something, they will be sure to make this abundantly clear rather than dressing this up behind faint praise.

Where Pitchfork really comes into its own is in the plugin with Spotify. If you are a regular Spotify user, you can add the Pitchfork 'app' to the home screen of your Spotify account. You can then browse the reviews that appear on Pitchfork and click straight through to listen to the album in order to see if you like what it is about.



HIFI DO

hifido.co.jp

Over the years, many of the finest pieces of Japanese high end have been available solely for home market consumption. If you want to secure an example of it, you will realistically need to import an example from Japan proper. This is not an easy task. Japanese is not a language you dip into and the whole business can be frighteningly complex.

Hifi Do is a Japanese chain of stores that operates a website that acts as an online shop and catalogue for the network of shops that they operate across Japan. You can search for items by brand or category and, at the time of writing, there were at least three incredibly covetable items for sale, all of which were at competitive price.

While HiFi Do is one of the simpler ways of securing Japanese exotica, please go in with your eyes open. Anything with a plug on it will require a 100v input and video equipment will be resolutely NTSC. Do your homework and make sure that you can get the piece of equipment up and running in your system because returns are likely to be tricky. If you are looking for something a bit special though, this is a great place to start the search.



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The New Stereo 40 MK III KT88m

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designed by David Shaw

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wound transformers*

Superbly engineered. Very versatile 40w+40w UL or 20w+20w Triode

Whilst our flagship models rightly get superb praise from reviewers worldwide for their performance and value, we never lose focus on our more affordable products and regularly update them when the opportunity arises. Such is the case with our Stereo 40. Our original brief over 10 years ago to make the best possible EL34/KT88 valve amplifier for a reasonable price still holds true. Our latest Stereo 40 MK IIIm incorporates several improvements. Now with a meter which allows a very simple way to check that the output valves are operating at their optimum value and best performance. This will also tell you when a valve is due for replacement or when it is failing. Something other designs don't do. The Stereo 40 is almost unique in its ability to use a very wide range of valves including 6L6, 5881, EL34, 6CA7, KT66, KT77, 6550, KT88. Now made very easy to change if you like "tube rolling".

In our quest to make the best amplifier in its class we also include all the features we think a good amplifier should have including Triode or Ultralinear operation, remote control, a record loop, a warm up/standby facility, valve rectifier, Low Distortion Tertiary output transformers and many more features.

There are also things we don't include like printed circuit boards and transistors both of which we feel degrade the performance of valve amplifiers.

Obviously the overriding priority is the sound quality which must come from good engineering which we believe to be far ahead of the Stereo 40's modest price.

We guarantee you will not be disappointed!

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. 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 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 and long life. 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 audiophile resistors. Power Amplifier operation is possible by selecting a lower "gain" on the rear of the amplifier (this is done without attenuation which would lose quality). Loudspeakers of nominal impedance between 3 ohms and 10 ohms may be used with virtually no reduction in power or quality. 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.

In short we have created an amplifier of excellent flexibility and quality which retains the qualities of traditional design and performance.

All our amplifiers are made in kit form in our own factory and hand finished in Leicester UK. No one else makes amplifiers for us. We do not make amplifiers for anyone else.

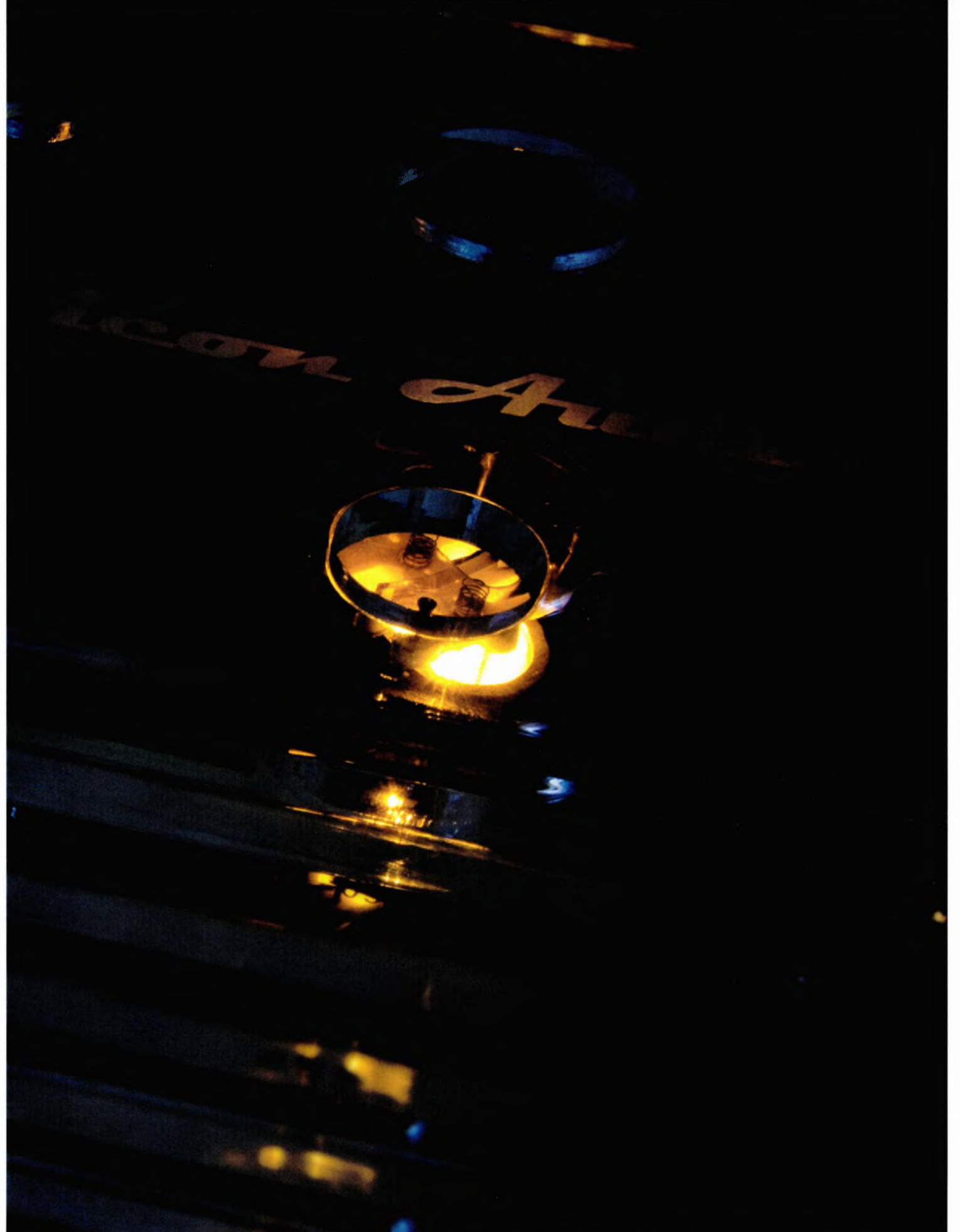
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Isobluehifi The wallshelf

UK specialist furniture manufacturer Isobluehifi has developed a new Wallshelf for source components. The company is owned by Phonography High Fidelity Limited, which has many years of experience as a British audio dealer. All products are tested to ensure that everything performs well sonically and looks good visually. In particular, as a turntable specialist, the manufacturer is keen to ensure that the Isobluehifi range of equipment supports are suited to both analogue and digital sources.

The Wallshelf is entirely British-made and its visual appearance complements the distinctive design of the company's modular Hi-Fi Table. Available in nine different finishes, it features an adjustable isolating platform which enables the support surface to be levelled precisely. In addition, a cable management system has been built into the wall plate of the Wallshelf itself. It has been designed with turntable enthusiasts in mind, but it is equally well suited for CD players, digital streamers and preamplifiers.

The Wallshelf is superbly made and utilises high quality real-wood veneers that have been individually applied by hand to the stained and treated MDF components. There are five standard veneers in the '60 Series' to choose from: Cherry, Natural Oak, Black Ash, Natural Ash and Mahogany. In addition, there are four 'Special Branch' superior finishes available in Cherry, Maple, Pippy Oak and Walnut that also feature solid wood edge-lipping. However, as the veneer is hand-fitted, other finishes can be accommodated, possibly at no additional cost, depending on the type of wood veneer chosen!

The Wallshelf is supplied flat-packed in a well-packaged box that contains all the fittings, Allen keys and instructions required for installation. The unit itself consists of a support wooden shelf that is fastened to the wall with the supplied central bolt and wall screws. If you are worried about the ability of the Wallshelf to support your precious and weighty turntable – fear not! The central 12mm diameter bolt that screws to a depth of about 65mm into the wall protrudes by 120mm from the wall and passes through a hole in the wooden wall plate, fitting well into the under-shelf bracket. This, coupled with the three other wall screws, means the shelf can easily accommodate equipment weighing over 20kg in weight.

Fitting inside a recess in the main shelf sits the adjustable inner shelf in a matching veneer. The veneer of the inner shelf is hand-cut from the same piece of veneer that is used on the main shelf, so the grain is a perfect match across the entire top surface. Now that's what I call attention to detail!

The inner shelf is adjusted to be perfectly level by means of four spikes – one in each corner – that are rotated from the underside of the shelf using an Allen key. The tips of the spikes have been carefully rounded to ensure that they don't dig into the wooden inner shelf that rests on top of them without detriment to the desirable isolation properties that are essential for an audio equipment support. Once the shelf is level, the spikes are each fixed in position using a locking nut. At the rear of the fixed shelf, there are two cut-outs to accommodate cables that will run down the back of the wall. A matching wooden cable cover to fit over cables descending from the shelf will be available shortly.

Sound quality

Isoblue has designed the Wallshelf to ensure that it doesn't just look good, but also has all the sonic properties necessary to meet the requirements of the demanding audiophile. The choice of materials and the supporting infrastructure have all been designed to maximise the sonic performance of the Wallshelf and the company plans to investigate the use of the acoustic and aesthetic properties of other materials in the future. But for now, if you're looking for a wooden shelf unit that looks good, sounds great and oozes quality, then look no further! **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE: £374 (60 SERIES), £475 (SPECIAL BRANCH)

CONTACT: 0208 123 6777

WEBSITE: ISOBLUEHIFI.COM

OUR VERDICT





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TANNOY®

tannoy.com

Origin live Linear Flow 2 external tonearm cable

The Linear Flow 2 external tonearm cable from Origin Live is usually supplied hardwired to the Origin Live range of tonearms. However, it is now available fitted with a 5-pin DIN female plug as an upgrade for existing tonearms that have a DIN connection. The cables are shielded and suitable for balanced and single-ended (unbalanced) systems. The phono plugs are high quality WBT-0102 Cu and have pure copper signal conductors which are gold-plated (the DIN plug also has gold-plated sockets). The cable itself is one metre long and comes with a separate blue earth lead, terminated in a gold-plated fork connector for connecting to the earth terminal on phono preamps.

Sound quality

For the purposes of this review, I fitted a 'standard' external tonearm cable that I could easily swap for the Linear Flow 2 cable. Both were supplied new and I ran them in for over ten hours each before assessing and comparing their performance. Cables should be run-in for one hundred hours or more, the greatest improvements can be heard after ten hours or so.

It never ceases to amaze me how an interconnect cable can contribute to sound quality. Swapping from the standard to the Linear Flow 2 caused instruments to snap sharply into focus and become more clearly defined within the sound stage. The overall sound was fuller and more real with a better dynamic range. In particular, the top end sounded more elegant and refined when the Linear Flow 2 cable was installed. Yes, it's expensive, but this comes very highly recommended. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE: £390
CONTACT:
02380 578877
WEBSITE:
ORIGINLIVE.
COM

OUR VERDICT



Oriton SC-35 Support Cones



The Oriton SC-35 equipment support cones incorporate an innovative design concept for which a patent application is currently being made. Inside each device is an outer cone which in turn supports an inner cone that is damped from the outer cone by a viscous-elastic coupler. The inner cone remains in contact with the outer cone and acts as a drain to remove any vibrations that may be generated from within the equipment sitting on them.

The 'castle' tips of the cone are designed to point upwards and lift the equipment so that the original feet are clear of the base. As the cones are free to be located anywhere under the equipment, they can be placed where they will produce the greatest sonic benefits and this is found out by trial and error.

In my opinion, three cones are preferable for each item of hi-fi as this eliminates any chance of the equipment rocking on an uneven surface, but four cones may be required for supporting larger equipment in order to avoid flexing. When using three cones, one should initially be placed directly under the transformer of the equipment and then the other two should be positioned for optimal stability – if possible forming an equilateral triangle.

In use

With the cones under my turntable, the bass was tighter and the transition from soft to loud passages was appreciably faster. I even found similar improvements when used with my Leak Trough-line valve tuner. These innovative cones certainly offer noticeable improvements in musicality, clarity and dynamics when used with a wide range of equipment, and therefore come highly recommended. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE: £201
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OUR VERDICT



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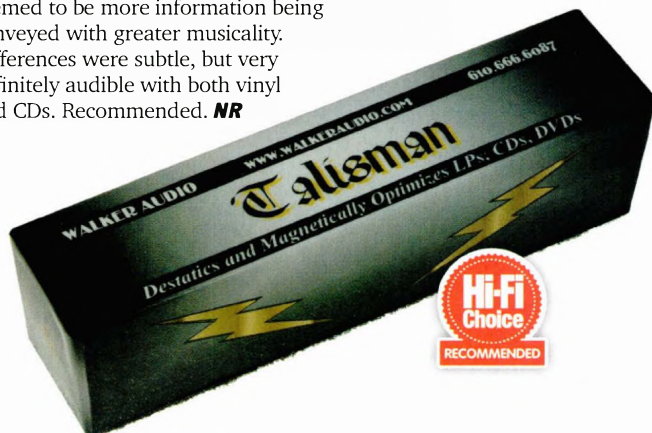
Walker Audio Talisman Magnetic Anti-Static Optimiser

Magnetic fields and static electricity can greatly affect audio and video playback equipment and source material. The Talisman Magnetic Anti-Static Optimiser from Walker Audio is designed to temporarily dissipate magnetic fields and static electricity on the disc. It is claimed that this will allow the phono cartridge or laser reader to transmit a purer and more accurate signal. It can be used to treat LPs, CDs, SACDs, DVDs, HD-DVDs and Blu-ray discs, as well as treating audio and video cables while they are *in situ*!

The Talisman Optimiser is a purely passive device which requires no batteries or power cords and never needs recharging. Detailed instructions are included with the product. Basically, a CD or LP is treated by touching the edge of the disc with one hand while holding the Optimiser in the other hand and sweeping it over the surface of the disc at about three quarters of an inch above the surface, taking care not to allow the Optimiser to touch the surface. This should be done before playing the LP or before inserting the CD into your player.

In use

Whatever it does and however it does it, I did find that it certainly works in practice! There were fairly consistent and reproducible improvements when the Optimiser was used. In particular, there was greater clarity through the midrange, especially with the string section of an orchestra. With CDs, there was a noticeable improvement in low-level musical detail resulting from a lower noise floor. After treatment, there seemed to be more information being conveyed with greater musicality. Differences were subtle, but very definitely audible with both vinyl and CDs. Recommended. **NR**



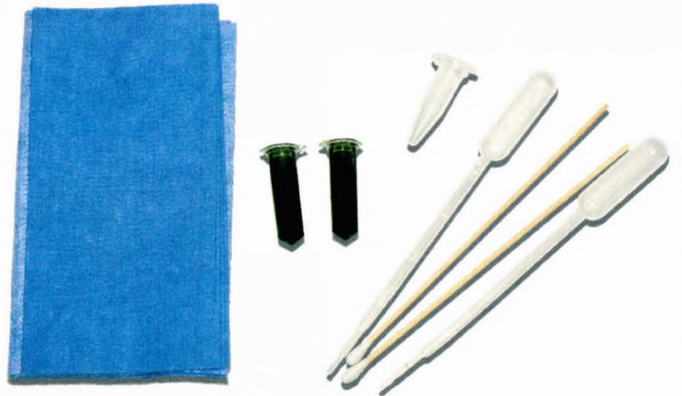
DETAILS

PRICE: £200
CONTACT:
01733 350878
WEBSITE:
ANALOGUE
SEDUCTION.NET

OUR VERDICT



Audio Origami Booster Bearing Oil



The use of good quality oil in the central bearing of a turntable is essential to ensure smooth operation and quiet running. In use, the oil becomes contaminated with dirt which, combined with natural evaporation, will degrade the performance of your turntable.

Audio Origami has recently released this very high quality new bearing oil that has added PTFE particles, which are considered to have the lowest coefficient of static and dynamic friction of any solid. The oil itself is a synthetic oil that works with standard and inverted type bearings. It also contains additives that provide additional protection in both the high and low stress areas of your bearing.

The oil is supplied in two 1.8ml containers which should last you for many years, given that only ten to twenty drops of oil are required to fill most high-tolerance bearings. Before adding the new oil, it is important to first remove the old oil and any dirt. To this end, each kit includes two extra-long wooden cleaning pads and some lint-free cloths for cleaning out the old oil as well as any dirt from the bearing, prior to refilling with the new. Once clean, the new oil is inserted into the bearing using one of the two calibrated plastic droppers supplied for the purpose. The bearing needs to be completely full of oil when the spindle is inserted. Suitably installed, I found that this oil makes a good turntable better, with a subtly smoother and more musical sound. It's not a huge upgrade, but well worth it at the price, especially if your current bearing oil is as old as fossils! **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE: £15
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OUR VERDICT



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Audio Suspension ASU-100 equipment shelf

A new kid on the block is Audio Suspension, which specialises in the creation of very elegant hi-fi support systems aimed at the audiophile market. The company's debut product is a wall mount shelf, the ASU-100, which has been manufactured from a high-grade acrylic material. It has been designed to complement the aesthetic beauty of turntables new and old, as well as providing a carefully engineered, low-resonance platform for sensitive audio equipment.

Audio Suspension was formed by a long-serving professional DJ/audio engineer who has extensive turntable experience and a passion for vinyl. He was looking to deliver an elegant solution for a turntable support that will maximise the sound quality of vinyl without compromising on style, and the result is this unique wall mount support shelf that has been designed to isolate turntables and other audio system components from unwanted resonances and minimise their disruptive effect on sound quality.

Audio Suspension also offers a bespoke design service if required. Shelves can be made in custom sizes and colours to order, offering consumers a tailor-made support for their turntables, as well as for larger, heavier hi-fi equipment.

Hand-made in Sussex, the new ASU-100 is the first product in this new range and is built from high-grade 20mm acrylic material. Audio Suspension has found this material to be particularly non-resonant and it is therefore, ideally suited for damping the unwanted effects of resonance and of knocks and thumps. The company maintains that, unlike traditional support materials such as glass and steel, the acrylic used in the ASU-100 does not add to a system's sonic presentation. This allows the full musical potential of supported equipment to shine through and brings greater transparency to recordings, while at the same time improving control and dynamics.

The maker also mentions that the ASU-100 should help tighten up low frequencies, offering additional control over the lower octaves and introducing greater neutrality throughout the entire frequency spectrum. The standard shelf supports items up to 25kg (dependent on fixings) and is suitable for equipment with dimensions up to 470x420mm.

The ASU-100 has been designed to be securely anchored to internal walls, using two high-quality polished-chrome shelf supports that have been faced with silicone-rubber to ensure a high level of damping at the connection points. Two front-mounted adjustable 1.5mm steel-wire cables offer further support and scope for levelling. They are secured to the wall by polished-chrome Posi-Lock supports and the shelf incorporates a cut-out on the right-hand side at the rear for cables and is nicely finished-off at the front with the Audio Suspension logo engraved on the underside.

In use

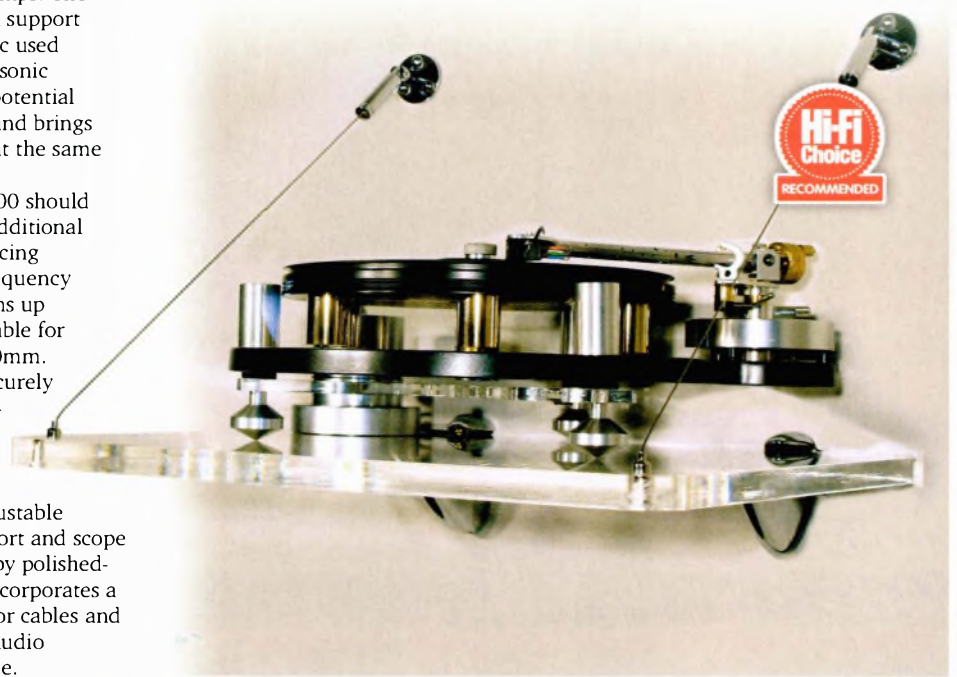
First impressions were extremely favourable as the components are beautifully finished and ooze quality. Fitting the ASU-100 is straightforward and comprehensive instructions are included. A full-size wall mounting template is also provided, along with screws, wall plugs, lovely chromed screw-head covers and even a spirit level to calibrate the shelf once it has been fitted to the wall. I found it quite useful having a photograph of the finished shelf in front of me to assist in identifying all the components during assembly. The clips at the front of the shelf have been designed to clamp the cable automatically when inserted, thus facilitating assembly.

One of the features I particularly liked about this design was that it is secured to the wall with ten modest-sized screws, rather than a couple of large wall-bolts, as is the case with other manufacturer's shelves that I have seen. This means that it should be able to be fitted securely to most interior walls using standard DIY tools. The installed unit is one of refinement, while at the same time being strong and sturdy – rather like the sound it confers upon any hi-fi equipment placed upon it. Turntables in particular gain from this sturdy, low vibration base, with greater dynamics and superior rhythms. Given the amount of quality engineering that has clearly gone into the design of this shelf, I consider it to represent excellent value for money and it will provide a solid base for turntables and other audio equipment. **NR**

DETAILS

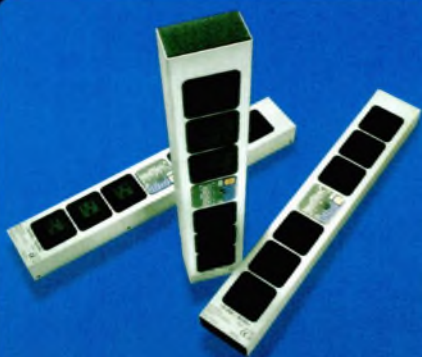
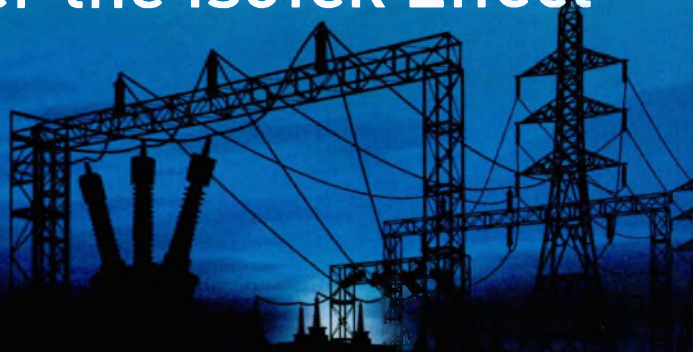
PRICE: £250
CONTACT:
01273 640251
WEBSITE:
AUDIO
SUSPENSION.
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OUR VERDICT



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Russ Andrews Shorties noise- reducing phono plugs



Russ Andrews Shorties are shorting plugs that can be fitted to any unused inputs on your amplifier, CD or DVD player in order to reduce the amount of interference entering your system. Unused interconnect input sockets effectively act as aerials for radio frequency interference (RFI) which pollutes your audio and video signals. An unused input makes an excellent aerial as it is a 'floating' wire that is disconnected at both ends – the input selector switch end and the input socket end.

Shorties are a very effective and low-cost solution to this problem. By plugging in a Shortie to an unused input, the floating wire is shorted to earth and hence any RFI is also shorted down to earth. Shorties can be used on any analogue and digital inputs to prevent any such interference. Russ Andrews claim that, as a result, you will get reduced distortion and lower background noise, as well as releasing more detail from your music and improving TV pictures.

Note that they must *not* be connected to unused outputs as they will effectively connect your audio output signal to earth. Although this will make your system extremely quiet and eliminate noise, it would also eliminate any music from your system as well!

In use

I have been using these for some time now and I can confirm that they really do work. In particular, the annoying pulsing buzz produced by mobile phones in the vicinity of my audio system was noticeably reduced after fitting the Shorties. A must for any system, and fine value too! **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE: £14.50
(BOX OF SIX
PAIRS)

CONTACT:
01539 797300

WEBSITE:
RUSSANDREWS.
COM

OUR VERDICT



Aves Jazz DAB/FM radio

Here's a new name in the UK. Aves is the brand name of Tunbow Electrical, a Hong Kong-based technology manufacturer that's been around for two decades. It's said to have 3,500 employees and has sold 140 million products around the world, so it's no spring chicken, then! The Jazz is one of a range of DAB radios, and is nothing that you'd not expect to see some five years ago – the only difference being its low, low price. Of course, it's got the latest DAB chipset inside, which means it plays DAB+ in countries thus equipped (not the UK, alas), and it's less power-hungry than earlier Digital Radios. Unlike earlier variations on the theme, it's a DAB portable that you don't have to run off an electricity substation!

In use

The radio is decently screwed together, and nicely finished in sleek gloss black – perfect for a portable, not! It's easily scratchable just like old iPods, and shows fingerprints nicely. Still, keep it indoors and away from greasy paws and it looks smart and clean, if not exactly a style statement. A power adaptor is supplied, or you can use four C type batteries for around eight hours of cordless listening. It sports FM as well as DAB, and pulls in signals well enough from its supplied telescopic aerial, even in my poorish reception area. The button layout is good, the backlit LCD display (128x64 pixels) crisp and the Jazz sounds about as good as you've a right to expect from a £60 radio. That three inch speaker isn't brilliant, but is clean enough to make listening a painless experience. It goes decently loud with 2.5W RMS, so it'll make more than a squeak outside in the garden. Measuring 210x80x139mm, and weighing 733g, it doesn't hurt to move it around either – although it's hardly in the Walkman class. A good, solid radio at a nice price. **ES**



DETAILS

PRICE: £60

WEBSITE:
AVESDIGITAL.
CO.UK

OUR VERDICT



Emporiumhifi

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Technics SL-1200 wood plinth kit



An anyone who's taken an interest in the Technics SL-1200-series turntable will know that it's the analogue gift that keeps on giving. Sadly now only available secondhand – as Technics recently discontinued them after nearly four decades of production – if you find a good used example you enter a brave new world of magical tweaking potential. Relatively inexpensively, the deck can be transformed from a good sounding record player with a bright punchy sound, into something altogether deeper, darker and more three dimensional...

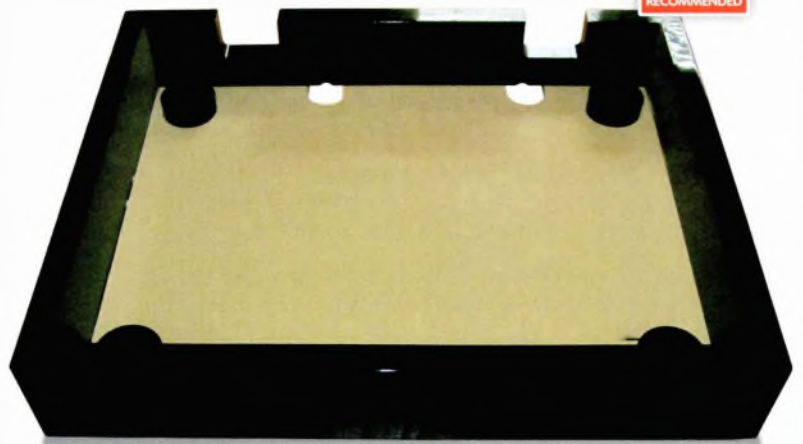
First of all, for price of a few beers at your local hostelry, you can substitute the platter mat for a superior aftermarket design and suddenly you're in a world of sweetness and smoothness you'd not previously thought possible. Also, change the stock headshell for a stiffer one, and upgrade the cartridge tags and the deck just keeps on improving. Then there are the myriad power supply upgrades, bearing mods and all kinds of other things too – even detaching the dustcover has a most useful effect!

There's also the radical surgery option – pull the stock S-shaped arm out and install a decent aftermarket design – from Rega's RB251 at one end of the price scale to SME's 309 at the other – and things *seriously* improve. Dynamics, clarity, speed, depth and detail all leap forward. This humble disco deck can relatively easily and inexpensively be transformed to the status of hi-fi giant killer...

Interestingly though, very few individuals ever single out the Technics' plinth for improvement. This is perhaps understandable, as it's a wonderfully sturdy affair, sporting a big, chunky cast aluminium top-plate (painted to look like plastic, but far from it!), and an acoustically damped rubber base. While it does a surprisingly good job of keeping mechanical noise out of the system, of course it doesn't have any suspension – save the stock plastic and rubber feet.

So, enter the Inspire Hi-Fi solid wood plinth, which provides an additional level of isolation. First, the wood further damps the vibration coming from the loudspeakers (and being wood of course it has a different resonant frequency to the Technics' own plinth), and second it decouples the SL-1200 from the outside world twice. There's 'Sorbo Pod' suspension (i.e. sorbothane rubber feet) between the deck and the plinth, and more Sorbo Pods between the plinth and your turntable shelf.

Because the plinth has been made-to-measure for the deck, fitting it is simply a case of removing the Technics' stock feet (not nice things, about the cheapest bits on it, truth be told), placing the Sorbo Pods inside the Inspire plinth (which locate onto the MDF baseboard) and gently dropping the deck down inside it. This is a very simple thing to do, and can be done in the space of about fifteen minutes. Obviously, remember to secure the arm and cartridge on its rest (I used Sellotape) to



prevent disaster happening and your stylus going south. This done, the SL-1200 sits snug as-a-bug-in-a-rug inside its new plinth, and very attractive it looks too. While the standard option of solid woods include Maple, Cherry, Walnut and Light American Oak (all built to a very good standard), if you ask Inspire nice enough they may be able to do a special finish for a small price premium. A black gloss variant gives a very 'stock' feel, making the deck look like the piece of studio equipment it was surely destined to be.

Sound quality

How then does it sound? Better, in a word. The deck assumes just a little bit more stability, solidity and smoothness – and this is something it doesn't especially lack in stock plinthed form. Music just ebbs and flows that little bit more effortlessly, the deck being even less bothered by the cruel outside world (in vibration terms) that it previously was. Tonally, it's fractionally darker and deeper, with that trademark brightly lit upper midband just toning itself down a touch. Rhythmically, there's really no difference, it's just that with an ever so slightly lower noise floor, the ear has to work less hard to enjoy the nuances of the music.

This is certainly not one of those 'night and day' transformations for the SL-1200 – in the sense that dropping an SME 309 into it is – but it's still a very real and worthwhile upgrade, bringing everything just that little bit more into focus, and imbuing the music with a slightly more organic feel. It's the sort of mod that, once you've done it, you really won't want to go back to running your deck 'naked'. It's great value for money as is, but I wonder if Inspire will offer an optional higher quality baseboard – the stock MDF affair is absolutely fine – but what about carbon fibre? That's the trouble with Technics tweaking, once you've got the habit, you just can't kick it! **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE: £287
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OUR VERDICT



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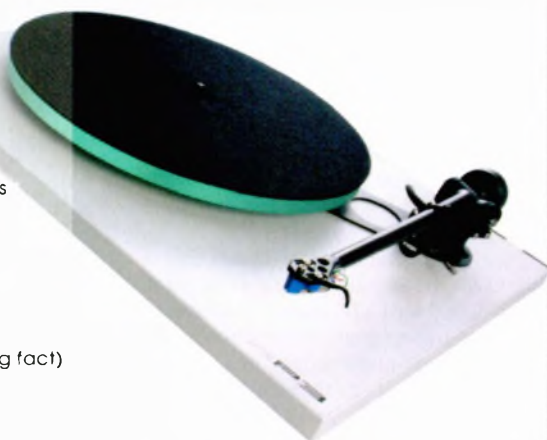


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iTunes 11 for OSX and Windows

Extra functionality has been repeatedly added to iTunes over the twelve years of the application's life, adding considerable complexity. Love it or loathe it, most of us rely on it for interfacing media to our iDevices, for purchasing media from Apple's vast store, and for pushing playback out by Airplay if so inclined. There are even expensive audiophile applications which piggyback on to iTunes, such as Amarra, which have mostly ridden the application's various changes.

One could argue that the addition of iCloud functionality pushed the incrementally-built app over the edge a year ago, and the redevelopment we are now looking at is much needed. Certainly the fact that the 'About' dialogue now proudly trumpets '64-bit' suggests that no matter how similar some of the functionality seems to prior versions, under the covers a technical refresh should deliver significant performance increases on modern hardware.

As trailed and at first look, iTunes 11 seems really revolutionary in its albums interface (and looks great on a Retina display), but the fact is, if you are a stuck-in-the-mud like me you can turn it back to a fair semblance of what it looked like before. Much like the default treatment of the finder from Lion onwards, the handy status bar we are used to seeing at the bottom of the screen is set to hidden by default, and once you restore this and the sidebar using the View menu, and click 'Songs' you will feel much more at home. However, there are things that are genuinely missing such as Coverflow, and the extent of your prior use of them will dictate whether you will join the detractors. Of greatest pain to me was the loss of the updatable album art tile at the bottom left, although this functionality persists in the tiny art of the playback window.

New functionality includes a significant redesign of the Mini-Player and the replacement of the iTunes DJ functionality with the 'Up Next' dynamic queuing system in the playback window. Neither of these were of much use to me, and as an album

listener not a playlister, the much-derided reductions in playlist flexibility (juggled playlists transferring to devices have gone) are not a concern either.

What seemed appealing were the reported enhancements to iCloud functionality. What this amounts to is prior purchases being directly playable from the iCloud. As I like to have my tracks locally I was hoping the actual iTunes Match process would be improved, but as I switched from a first year using the US service to an inaugural reload on the UK shopfront I was seriously disappointed.

We are still restricted to libraries of 25,000 non-iTunes purchased tracks, and maybe my collection filleting was less assiduous than last year – it took me a week of repeated attempts at the match process to realise that sundry radio record MP2 tracks were probably upsetting it – a lossless-only starting point fixed the issue.

Many continue to love iTunes and can't see what the problem is with this reboot – the naysayers are predominantly those who miss some of those absent features. However iTunes 11.0.1 has just arrived and has dealt with some of these issues, most notably reinstating 'Detect Duplicates'.

Personally, I regret that despite all the whizz-bang graphical and user experience changes, there has been no real expansion to the resolution of the formats sold and supported, and the size of iTunes Match libraries permitted. But as a 'no change' change goes, this one is fairly significant and perhaps the new 64-bit chassis will allow future coachwork developments which may give us more satisfaction. Fingers crossed... **PC**

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www.myhobbystore.com

Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd.



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Hi-Fi Choice, ISSN 0959-1139, is published monthly 12 times per year by mytimemedia Ltd, c/o AVTech Media Ltd, 150 Green Street, Orpington, Kent, SE8 5JY, UK. Registered in England. Postage paid at Plattsburgh, NY, POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Hi-Fi Choice c/o Express Mag, P.O. Box 216, Plattsburgh, NY 12901-0216.



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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.

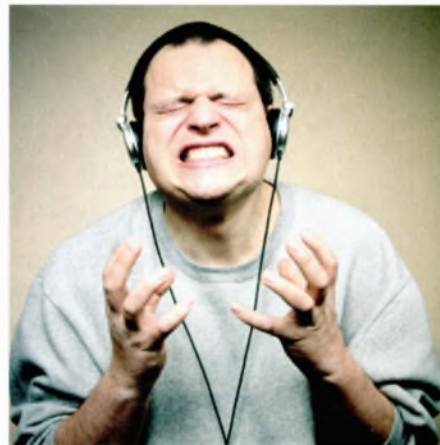


Quality vs Quantity

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.**

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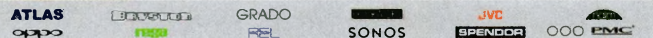
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WE HEAR...

IT WAS ALWAYS GOING TO BE A WRENCH FOR TOURAJ MOGHADDAM to split from Roksan, but he's now immersed in his new project, Vertere. The company has already made a name for itself with a super sounding range of cables, but news comes of a forthcoming tonearm. Said to be on display at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in early January 2013, the New Vertere Reference Tonearm is rumoured to be bolted to an Air Force One turntable. Knowing Touraj as we do, it should sound supersonic!

BACKCHAT'S EXTENSIVE NETWORK OF HI-FI SPIES TELL US that the valve revival is continuing in earnest. One UK retailer confessed that it's stopped selling transistor amplifiers altogether, and indeed says it's going great guns in selling the little thermionic tubes themselves. Who'd have thought it in 2013?

FOLLOWING THE SEMINAL 'WHITE ROOM' BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM FEATURE in *Hi-Fi Choice* recently, it seems white is the new black. Hit TV series *The Only Way is Essex* has caught on to the trend, its stars driving pearl metallic motors, and white stilettos are now *de rigeur* thanks to the likes of Kim Kardashian and Kate Middleton. Now though the craze has soared to new heights with the news from the ASDA press office that it's selling white tellies. So that's official, then...

THE BRISTOL SOUND AND VISION SHOW IS ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS of the UK audiophile's calendar. Held from Friday 22nd to Sunday 24th February 2013, it's a friendly and easily accessible event, held at the Marriott City Centre Hotel in Bristol. We'll be there, in Room 430 - come and hear our great high resolution audio dem!

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 238 FEBRUARY 2003

Audiophiles were finally beginning to take seriously all the fuss being made over a 'dirty mains supply'. Hundreds of pounds were being spent on fancy conditioners and filters. So much cash in fact, that longtime *HFC* scribe Richard Black was commissioned to write a glossy four-pager on the sonic advantages of spring cleaning your power supply, with the Best Buy award going to Russ Andrews' £245 Silencer Block. There was also some 'spring cleaning' to be done in dictator Saddam Hussein's government according to the Americans, while troops surrounded Heathrow airport to combat alleged enemy missiles and the London congestion charge was unveiled.



HI-FI CHOICE: ISSUE 115 FEBRUARY 1993

Ceiling-mounted Bowers & Wilkins loudspeakers were the preferred choice of this month's audiophile celebrity, Stirling Moss, while a slew of custom-made budget separates systems were the order of the day for reviewer Alvin Gold. Having only just boxed up the systems, a lorry load of turntables turned up on Alvin's doorstep, but there were some pretty cool designs including the amazing looking Romance from Audiomeca (£1,199) and what *HFC* described as a "true, lunatic, fringed turntable"; the £2,495 Ariadne from Maplenoll. In the world at large, a truck bomb exploded beneath the World Trade Center in New York, while the Jamie Bulger case dominated UK headlines.



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 67 FEBRUARY 1989

An in-depth feature on fine-tuning your turntable cartridge accompanied an *HFC* cover-mounted gift; the Elite Alignment Gauge. Cracking piece of kit this, and although the instructions may have seemed daunting to begin with, you can bet it kept readers burning the midnight oil for months on end. Actually this issue turned out to be a turntable special, with a 30-strong group test and a cartridge special with 20 models reviewed. On the news front, Sky Television launches in Europe, Los Angeles City Council bans the sale and possession of semi-automatic firearms, a \$3 million bounty is placed on the head of author Salman Rushdie, and world leaders attended the funeral of Japan's Emperor Hirohito.

Ever wanted a 'top of the range coat with a sound system built-in'?

Yes, of course you have, even if you hadn't realised it yet. Meet the C.VOX, a £65 bespoke jacket with built-in headphones, speakers and iDevice control system! The coat is said to be "a world first", something we don't doubt, and is completely machine washable. Even its built-in loudspeakers have been designed to withstand the ravages of Daz - it's bound to sound good, then...

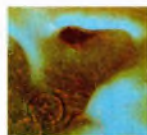
Retailer Debenhams is touting it as some sort of anti-theft apparel. "It's the perfect, safety-conscious way to conceal gadgets whilst still being able to freely use them in public - it's the must have item for any commuter", says Paul Baldwin, Head of Menswear Buying. He doesn't explain why any tech-taking toe-rags wouldn't just purloin the coat as well. If you've just got to own this essential fashion accessory, find out more at www.debenhams.com.



BACKCHAT NEEDS YOU!
Got any hi-fi hearsay? Do your audiophile duty by emailing news@hifichoice.co.uk

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month **Touraj Moghaddam** of Vertere chooses four of his favourite albums...



PINK FLOYD MEDDLE

Echoes - a journey through shades of 'Light', 'Mystery', 'Dark' and back to 'Light' again. And side one is Rock, Psychedelic, Blues, Jazz, you name it. And with Floyd style!



THELONIOUS MONK APRIL IN PARIS/LIVE

My first encounter of Monk was in 1977. He brought a different dimension to my musical enjoyment. Jackie-ing begins with a drum solo and then just takes off.



MOZART THE MAGIC FLUTE

This opera is very special to me. The harmony, feeling and power of Lucia Popp singing in the Nr.14 Aria still gives me goosebumps, every time!



VANGELIS CHINA

A truly remarkable journey into a perfect harmonic marriage of East and West with, Electronica, Jazz... This must have been the basis of the *Blade Runners* soundtrack.



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Denton - living the legacy...

Wharfedale's 80th Anniversary Limited Edition



Award 2012



November 2012



Best Bookshelf Speaker

Britain's most famous loudspeaker brand is 80 years old this year. To celebrate, Wharfedale is reviving one of its most popular models of the past – the Denton.

Introduced in 1967, the Denton exemplified Wharfedale's twin edicts of quality and value, balancing fine craftsmanship, natural sound quality and affordability inside a compact loudspeaker that was bought in its millions right across the globe.

The Denton 80th Anniversary Edition remains true to its illustrious namesake whilst making the most of modern materials and manufacturing techniques to deliver a speaker that is fully equipped for the 21st Century.

