



Terrific Tweaks

Cartridge alignment tools, Vox headphones, USB DAC, static neutraliser plus more...

RIP MD

RETRO: we celebrate the life and times of Sony's MiniDisc



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 370

April 2013

£3.99

CD fights back!

DEALER VISIT: three dream systems!

Six players prove the silver disc still has clout



Sansui combo

Sensational amp & network streamer from retro brand

38 products on test from Audiolab, Cyrus & Denon to Yamaha...



Classic Creek

EXCLUSIVE: Stunning Evolution 50A integrated amplifier from UK icon

Music reviews

“Head-banging’s not obligatory, but you might enjoy the music more if you give it a go” p100



Tiny Critter, Huge Buzz!



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AudioQuest also offers truly exceptional cables which carry the subtlety and nuance of your favorite music from all your sources:



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**

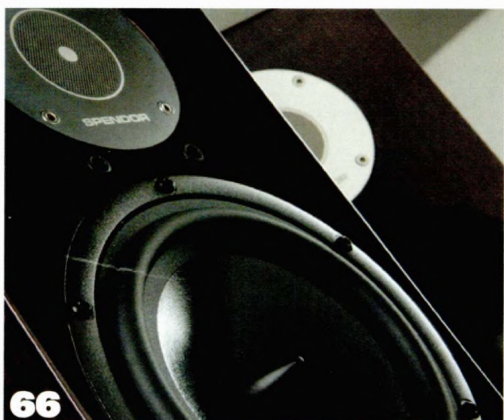


audioquest



54

Parasond ZDAC



66

Choice Exotica Sendor D7

Music reviews



99

Stephen Stills Carry On

BADGES EXPLAINED

▶ OUR AWARDS



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



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



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



I am a firm believer in the urban folklore that says that life's lessons are often repeated until they are learned. I'm not talking about big, painful lessons that are harshly repeated until I take from them what I am supposed to. I'm taking about the sort of thing such as the curious turn of events that brought about

my return to the hi-fi world and the editorial pages of my favourite magazine.

It's rather more years than I care to mention since I first joined the editorial team at *Hi-Fi Choice*, before getting the home cinema bug and hastily jumping ship to join the brave new world of flatscreens and surround sound in the early years of the new millennium.

My stints on *Home Entertainment* and *What Home Cinema* magazines nurtured a keen eye for quality images, but my enjoyment of great sound remains a passion. From the first time I heard a 'proper' hi-fi, I was hooked. My grandad had purchased an entire demo system from one of the stands while visiting the Heathrow Hi-Fi Show in the mid-seventies, complete with Wharfedale speakers, Leak amp and Goldring turntable. I can't recall the exact models that made up this amazing sounding hi-fi, but I can recall my awe, and also my nan's fury at his extravagant purchase. Her annoyance subsided as soon as she heard her favourite artists perform as if they were in her own living room, and I know she played more records than my grandad in the end. You see it's the connection we feel when music is heard through a great system that is so alluring, and be assured this is one lesson I'm looking forward to learning all over again. It's good to be back!

Lee Dunkley Editor



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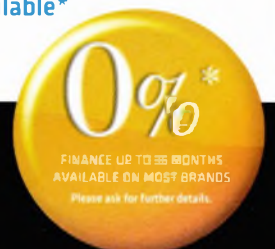
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Hi-Fi Choice Contents

hifichoice.co.uk Issue No. **370** April 2013

NEWS & OPINION

8 Audiofile

The latest developments in the hi-fi world

71 Letters

Say your piece on audiophile matters

79 Opinion

The *Hi-Fi Choice* team wax lyrical

99 Music reviews

The best new releases reviewed

124 Back chat

Assorted hi-fi hearsay!

READER SERVICES

76 Reader classifieds

Buy and sell your kit for FREE here

130 Next issue

What to look out for next month...

FEATURES

40 Design matters

Vertere's Touraj Moghaddam reveals all

94 Sound Affects

The hallucinatory world of acid folk!

111 Choice Extras

Seven pages of essential gadgets, gizmos, cables, supports and accessories



COVER STORY

22 Six stunning CD spinners face off!



Audiofile: Naim DAC-V1/NAP 100



Sound Affects: Get freaky to acid folk music



Spondor D7 loudspeaker

"In the D7 Spondor has surpassed itself, offering all that's good in sonic terms."

David Price: **Spondor D7** loudspeaker **p66**

TESTED THIS MONTH



44 **Ophidian Audio** Solo loudspeaker



16 **Creek Evolution 50A**
Integrated amplifier



50 **Sansui** SAP 201V and WLD+201LV combo

REVIEWS

Kit testing

16 **Creek**

Evolution 50A integrated amplifier

44 **Ophidian Audio**

Solo loudspeaker

50 **Sansui**

SAP 201V amp and WLD+201LV streamer

54 **Parasound**

Zdac digital-to-analogue converter

58 **Linear Audio Research**

IA-30 integrated valve amplifier

62 **Astell & Kern**

AK100 portable music player

65 **Guru Audio**

Junior loudspeaker

66 **Spondor**

D7 loudspeaker (Exotica)

88 **Sony**

MiniDisc (Retro)

GROUP TEST

CD PLAYERS

£460-£850

25 **Audiolab**

8200CD

27 **Cyrus**

CD 6 SE2

29 **Denon**

DCD-151OAE

31 **Pioneer**

PD-50

33 **Roksan**

Kandy K2

35 **Yamaha**

CD-S700



54 **Linear Audio Research** IA-30



62 **Astell & Kern** AK100 portable music player

MINI TEST

Cartridge alignment

104 **Dr Feickert Analogue**

Protractor NG

104 **Mobile Fidelity**

Sound Lab Geo Disc

105 **Avid Rega**

Arm Alignment Protractor

105 **Pro-Ject**

Align-IT

Never miss an issue – turn to p102 for our latest subs offer!

New music

Naim's new DAC-V1/NAP 100 DAC/preamp and power amplifier combo seems a match made in heaven for computer audiophiles, says **David Price**...

PRICE: DAC-V1 £1,250; NAP 100 £650

AVAILABLE: NOW

CONTACT: 01722 426600

WEB: NAIMAUDIO.COM





Together the pair appears to be a highly attractive package, looking like a 21st century 42/110 combo



Reflecting the current drive towards computer-based music playback, Naim Audio has just launched a brand new asynchronous USB-capable digital-to-analogue convertor. The DAC-V1 sits below the Naim DAC in the Salisbury company's range and comes in a half-size case, but is certainly no poor relation in terms of its features and flexibility.

The preamp section sports an attractive OLED display, a digitally controlled analogue volume control and a single-ended Class-A headphone amplifier with front panel quarter inch headphone output. Galvanic isolation is used between digital and analogue sections, and there's a linear power supply with 210VA transformer and windings for digital, DAC and analogue stages. There's also full DAC functionality, including a high-speed asynchronous USB input up to 24bit/384kHz, and five S/PDIF inputs working up to 24bit/192kHz resolution. Naim says this zero jitter design uses its custom-designed digital filtering, implemented on a SHARC ADSP21489 DSP chip with 16 times oversampling – *à la* its Naim DAC bigger brother. A Burr-Brown PCM1791A DAC chip is

fitted, as per the company's NDX and SuperUniti products.

Partnering the DAC-V1 is the NAP 100 power amplifier, claimed to deliver 50W RMS per channel into 8ohms, and twice that into half the load, via a classic dual mono discrete transistor circuit design. Audiophile-grade selected components are used, and there's a linear power supply using a large toroidal transformer, which likely explains its current driving ability.

Like the DAC-V1, it sports a non-magnetic low-resonance aluminium chassis and sleeve and is designed and built in Britain. Naim says that the compact design of the DAC-V1 is suited to being positioned near a computer on a desk or work station, as well as matching the company's existing products. It's said to work especially well on a Naim Frain rack. Together the pair appears to be a highly attractive package, looking like a sort of 21st century 42/110 combo. Certainly the compact form factor and classic display may attract a slightly different sort of customer to the marque. We're running an exclusive review of both in the May 2013 issue of *Hi-Fi Choice*, miss it at your peril!

Let's (not) get physical!

THE TECTONIC PLATES OF THE MUSIC WORLD ARE SHIFTING. Sometimes it's too slow to see, but all it takes is a glance back a few years, and you can gauge how much things have changed. To the tally of this country's high street recession casualties – from Woolworths to Jessops – you can now add HMV.

Receivers Deloitte announced some 66 HMV stores will close over the coming months. However, this isn't the end of the HMV brand, and the administrators are attempting to secure HMV's future as a going concern.

There are many who will wonder if this is possible. The tide of history seems now unstoppable and anything connected to physical retail spaces and physical media (ie Compact Discs, etc) appears to be highly challenged. As if we needed further proof of the death of physical media, MiniDisc has now gone to hi-fi heaven. News reaches us that Sony has ceased production of all MD players, meaning that what was once the centrepiece of the company's product portfolio has now joined Elcaset and DAT in the history books. While it's going to take another decade or so for Compact Disc to go the same way, the day will surely come.

All of which begs the question, where next for retailing? If we're all forsaking shops for the convenience of online purchasing, how can traditional retail spaces survive? People still feel the need for such places – but only for sampling wares, which they later buy online. For this reason, rumour has it that some shoe shops in the US are now charging an admission fee. Customers go in, try the shoes on, then buy them cheaper on the internet. While purchasing patterns are changing, people still seem to want to try before they buy – it's just we don't seem prepared to pay for it. Perhaps in future, hi-fi dealers should market themselves as 'consultancies', charging for advice then giving a 'low price promise' so customers won't buy cheaper online? Could this be the way ahead, in today's (im)material world?



Sadly MiniDisc has followed Woolworths and Jessops into the history books

The big 3-0h

Cyrus celebrates its 30th with the Anniversary Series

Cyrus Audio has chosen to celebrate its 30 years in the industry with the release of its limited edition Anniversary Series. The exclusive package of flagship components is based on the X Series range and has been fine-tuned by technical director Peter Bartlett.

The range comprises the CD XT SE₂ CD player, Stream X₂ network music player, DAC XP+ DAC with preamp, a pair of Mono X 300 power amps and two PSX-R power supplies.

Full details of the spec of this stunning system are too lengthy to go into here, so we'll cover just some of the highlights.

For the CD XT SE₂ CD player, Cyrus has updated the AC and DC power filtering

alongside the motor control stage filtering elements. The Stream X₂ boasts new power supply filtering, while the chassis has been given an overhaul to minimise resonance and micophony. The DAC XP+ preamp has got new DAC chips upgraded to 32-bit resolution running in full balanced operation and a series of power supply enhancements. The Mono X 300 becomes Cyrus's most powerful amplifier to date, thanks to its 300W of open imaging and finally, the PSX-R power supply offers new AC and DC power filtering.

The Anniversary System is available in limited numbers as a complete set-up and is bundled with specially produced cabling and matching Hark II equipment support.

PRICE: £17,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01480 435577 **WEB:** CYRUSAUDIO.COM



One for all

Olive reveals details of Wi-Fi music player

Delivering the high-end music server market to the masses, Olive has announced details of what it's calling the world's first all-in-one high-definition music player. With its unique circular, touchscreen design, the Olive One will play music files including MP3, FLAC, ALAC, WAV, AIFF and iTunes tracks as well as supporting streaming services from the likes of Spotify, Pandora and YouTube.

The One is hooked up to your speakers and then joins a Wi-Fi network at the touch of a button. Olive claims it will automatically recognise all of the music on your network, so you can enjoy it in a matter of "minutes".

PRICE: £349 **AVAILABLE:** JUNE **WEB:** OLIVE.US

Powered by Olive's newly designed One Music Operating System, the One is designed to learn your taste in music in order to integrate with social networks and, because of its open source foundation, apps and additional features are expected to become available over time.

The One features a 7in touchscreen LCD panel and two 32W (into 8ohm) channels of amplification. It will be available with an option of a 1TB or 2TB hard drive and can be controlled by iOS or Android smartphones. Stackable speakers are just one of the many enhancements Olive has planned for future release. As always, watch this space...

Blue two (th)

PIONEER HAS UNVEILED a brace of versatile Bluetooth speakers, able to pair with any Bluetooth-packing device and stream music from anywhere around the home.

The XW-BTS3-K/W is the better-equipped of the pair, with its wooden casing and integrated iPod/iPhone dock. Pioneer claims it provides powerful, deep bass from an integrated bass reflex port and rich acoustics from dual 3in speakers. The unit delivers 30W total system power and is available with a black or white finish, video output and remote control.

The smaller XW-BTS1-K/W integrates two 2in speakers alongside a built-in bass reflex port and delivers 10W total system power and is also available in black or white. The XW-BTS3-KW costs £99.99 and the XW-BTS1K/W costs £69.99. Both are available now. pioneer.co.uk



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Diva IISP Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*, January 2011

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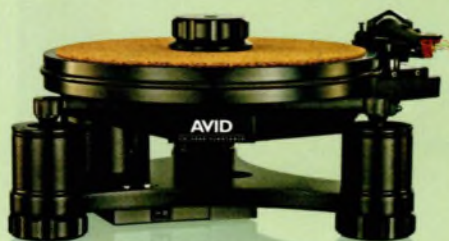
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*'It sounds so much like the real thing it will take your
breath away'*

The Absolute Sound (Q5)

*'This speaker is wholly remarkable in just about
every sense'*

Hi-Fi Choice (Q5)

'Once heard, the Q3 experience is not easily forgotten'

Hi-Fi News (Q3)

Magico's extraordinary Q5 loudspeaker is rigorously designed to leave absolutely nothing to chance. Every detail of this meticulously engineered tour de force has been researched, analysed and deconstructed to ensure it delivers the purest, most natural sound possible – wonderfully expressive yet unerringly accurate.

Magico's supreme attention to detail ensures each speaker utilises the very best materials: machined entirely from aluminium and brass, the enclosure's combination of mass and stiffness forms the bedrock of the Q5's undiluted, distortion-free sound. The MBe-1 Beryllium dome tweeter reaches far beyond the bounds of human hearing, while the bass and midrange cones combine layers of Magico's proprietary Nano-Tec™ carbon fibre composite with a Rohacell core to push dynamic sound to the limits. The speaker's simple, elegant exterior belies the complexity of its construction – each pair of Q5s takes nearly a week to build.

The result of this unstinting engineering excellence is unequivocal mastery across the entire audio spectrum; a complete absence of compromise that brings music to life with effortless, unbound realism. So, too, the Q5's new siblings: the smaller floorstanding Q3 and standmount Q1. Exceptional sound born from superior technology and engineering – Magico pushes the boundaries to deliver, perhaps, the finest loudspeakers ever made.



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Minnie the Minx

Cambridge Audio unveils Bluetooth speakers

Cambridge Audio's latest offering for streaming music from phones, tablets or PCs comes in the attractive form of the Minx Air 100 and 200. The sleek speakers utilise Apple's wireless AirPlay system to connect to iPhones, iPads, iPods or computers running iTunes, but aren't limited to Apple kit, as they can hook up with any Bluetooth-packing devices. Additional music channels are supported in the shape of Spotify, BBC iPlayer Radio, YouTube and Last.fm.

Under the hood, the Minx Air packs 24-bit Digital Signal Processing developed by Waves

Audio. The speakers themselves offer 100W of power (Minx Air 100) from a cabinet 35cm wide, or 200W in a 45cm unit for larger rooms (Minx Air 200).

Connections include analogue stereo inputs so that you can hook up your TV or Blu-ray player to use the Minx Air as a soundbar and there is an Ethernet socket for plug-and-play connection without Bluetooth.

The speakers are finished with a scratch-resistant, high-gloss lacquer and the cabinet is acoustically dampened to eliminate vibration and distortion, even at loud volumes.



PRICE: £329.95/£429.95 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** CAMBRIDGE-AUDIO.COM

World music

Swiss design puts global music at your fingertips

Meet the WorldRadio, from Geneva, which as the name suggests is designed to deliver broadcasts from around the globe to your home. Designed in Switzerland, it boasts both FM and DAB/DAB+ tuners and is also able to stream internet radio and digital music libraries from any Bluetooth-enabled device.

Sonic chops include a 3in full-range driver and frequency range of 70Hz to 20kHz (-3dB). The radio also has a colour LCD panel, dials for volume and menu control, a digital clock with alarm and a rechargeable battery offering a claimed five hours of playback. The Geneva WorldRadio is available in a choice of red, black or silver finishes.



PRICE: £269 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** UK.GENEVALAB.CH

Street beats

Cresyn unveils headphones with latest 'street-style'

Headphone newcomer Cresyn has unleashed its latest street-style folding headphones in the UK. The CS-HP500s feature large 38mm drives to supply a wide bandwidth sound that's both detailed and dynamic enough to deliver all musical styles with engaging energy. We're assured that bass is deep and punchy, while the high frequencies are extended to ensure

that every aspect of a recording is delivered with crisp clarity.

The headphones come equipped with premium-quality ear pads to provide a cosy fit and effective noise isolation. The CS-HP500s are available in a choice of white and black finishes – although there is also the option of black with a 'central red accent' at the back of each earpiece.

PRICE: £29.99 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01656 790030 **WEB:** IHEADPHONES.CO.UK





French fancy

Audio streamer for digital music and internet radio

French manufacturer Atoll Electronique has become the latest brand to jump onto the streamer bandwagon with the release of two new products, the ST100 and ST200. Constructed with a 1.5mm steel chassis and available in a choice of black or silver finishes, the attractive units come equipped with a vTuner offering the pick of 15,000 internet radio stations from around the world.

Like all streamers, the ST100 and ST200 link onto a Wi-Fi network and can read pretty much every audio format available (FLAC/WAV 176.7kHz and 192kHz/24-bits, ALAC, AIFF MP3) as well as displaying information and cover images of whatever music is playing on its 3.5in colour screen.

Connections include coaxial (24-bits/192kHz) and optical SPDIF (also 24-bits/192kHz), a pair of USBs (24-bits/96kHz) – one on the front and

another on the rear – alongside analogue inputs, a Wi-Fi antenna and a RJ45 network link. Outputs, meanwhile, comprise a pair of analogues, coaxial, optical and, of course, headphones. Under the hood the more expensive ST200 boasts a Burr-Brown PCM1792 converter, while the ST100 opts for a more bogstandard PCM1796 option.

Audio specifications include: symmetrical output stages with discrete components polarised in Class A, analogue volume control (with commutated resistors) with possible by-pass and a transformer specifically dedicated to audio stages (3.6VA for the ST100, compared with 5VA for the ST200).

A remote control is bundled with the streamer and there is a free app planned for future download, so that users will be able to control the ST100 or ST200 using their iPhone or Android smartphone.

PRICE: £1,595 (ST100) £1,795 (ST200) **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ATOLL-ELECTRONIQUE.COM/UK

Mobile disco

DAMSON HAS UNVEILED the Oyster, a wireless speaker system that the company is describing as its most ambitious release to date. Taking the British company's trademark blend of rugged build and stylish design, the Oyster is claimed to take audio to new heights.

The wireless speaker utilises a complex driver array alongside highly sophisticated digital signal processing and incorporates a pair of front-facing 10W midrange drivers combined with two 1.5in 10W side-firing tweeters and a rear passive radiator.

With portable dimensions of just 230 x 100 x 116mm, the Oyster has clearly been designed to be taken out and about, and it's built-in Lithium-ion rechargeable battery is claimed to offer 12 hours of continuous wireless music.

Connection comes via Bluetooth, meaning that you'll need to have your phone, laptop or tablet within about 10m of the speaker in order to be able to pipe out your sounds. Operation is simple thanks to the Oyster's top-mounted buttons and there's a built-



in microphone for hands-free calls – just what you need from a speaker! The Oyster comes with a protective case, choice of finishes and is available to buy in late March for £179.99. uk.damsonaudio.com

NEWS IN BRIEF

• **THE CHORUS 700 SERIES IS THE** latest range of speakers from Focal and features what Gérard Chrétien (Focal's MD) calls "a design for the post crisis market". Stepping away from the statement-look of previous series, the 700s are a shift towards a more classic design with longevity in mind.

The 700s use Focal's polyglass bass and mid-bass units to deliver acceleration and control of the bass and an open, explicit mid-range. Meanwhile, Focal's unique AlMg HF tweeter delivers what the company describes as a "sweet and clean treble, enabling great vocal intelligibility even in these days of compressed and complicated music mixes."

The Chorus 700 Series comprises the bookshelf 705 and the 726 floorstanders, and are available in a choice of walnut, rosewood or a new high gloss black finish, called Black Style. Prices are £400 for the 705s in walnut and rosewood (£460 for Black Style) and £1,200 for the 726s (£1,300 for Black Style). The Chorus 700 Series is available to buy this month. focal.com/en/



• **MERIDIAN HAS ANNOUNCED** details of its new Explorer USB DAC. As the name suggests, the pocket-sized DAC connects to a PC's USB port to provide a high-resolution substitute for sound cards so that audio files – from MP3 to ALAC – sound their best.

Explorer is a fully asynchronous USB audio class 2 DAC with premium parts including high-quality filter capacitors and a six-layer PC board and it's hand assembled at Meridian's Cambridge factory. Engineered from the same DNA as Meridian's 800 Series Reference products, the Explorer has 24bit/192kHz native conversion capability and separate low-jitter crystal oscillators for 44k and 48k based sample rates. It has an optical digital output as well as a headphone amp (with volume control) and 3.5mm line out. The Explorer is available to buy now for £250.

meridian-audio.com/en/

www.thinksound.com



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thinksound™ began with a simple goal; to create incredible sounding headphones with the smallest eco-footprint possible. The headphones are only created using the finest natural woods, to reproduce sound as it is intended to be heard.

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exceptional sound, naturally.

Evolution of the species

Proof positive that affordable audio isn't standing still comes from Creek's brand new Evolution 50A integrated amplifier, says *David Price*...

Everything changes, but it stays the same, right? Well mostly, yes. Warp back 30 years and then, as now, you'd find a brace of highly competent amplifiers from the likes of NAD, (Mission) Cyrus and Creek selling for the price of a week in the Algarve. At the time, they stood in sharp contrast to the mainstream integrations from the likes of Sony, Pioneer and Akai, which were festooned with knobs and built like the proverbial outdoor restroom.

British amplifiers eschewed the fripperies and fanciness of the Japanese for good old fashioned audio engineering. The value they added was high-quality passive componentry and simple circuit design with the minimum of distractions from the task of getting the signal from one end of the amp to the other. And Creek was king of this sort of thing. Its CAS4140 (the tone control-less 4040) was a lovely listen, and one of the best amps this side of the altogether pricier pre-powers on offer at the time. It had a warm but grippy, detailed and musical sound that offered enormous bang for your buck.

Three full decades later, this new Evolution 50A attempts to provide the same sort of sonic seriousness, but with a whole lot more going on. In the eighties, having things such as alphanumeric displays, remote controls, electronic switching and backlit fascia buttons were barely possible – and even if they were they'd be seen as some sort of tacit admission of audiophile defeat (you'd sold out, just like the Japanese). Nowadays though, it would appear that you can have it all – or can you?

The modest sum of £700 buys you this amplifier – which in monetary terms is not too dissimilar, accounting for the ravages of inflation, to Creek's classic budget amplifiers of yore. And it's more than

'just' an integrated – its modular design means there's a range of three (40, 48, 54dB MM or MC) Creek plug-in Sequel Phono modules that can be fitted to the Evolution 50A. There's also the optional Ambit FM/AM tuner module (£100), and even an optional plug-in infra red sensor (£25) that allows the amplifier to be hid away and yet still be operated via the remote control. Creek says there will be a plug-in DAC board coming fairly soon, too.

The product itself is decently finished for £700, although it lacks the glamour and chi-chi form factor of its Cyrus 6a rival. You get the standard issue Brit-fi black steel

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Creek Evolution 50A

ORIGIN:
UK/China

TYPE:
Integrated amplifier

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD):
430 x 60 x 280mm

WEIGHT:
7.5kg

FEATURES:

- Claimed power output: 55W into 8ohms
- Inputs: 4x RCA phono; 1x balanced XLR
- Plug-in Sequel phono stage
- Optional plug-in FM/AM tuner module
- Optional IR sensor for remote operation bass unit

DISTRIBUTOR:
Creek Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE:
01442 260146

WEBSITE:
creekaudio.com

casework and chunky (black or silver) aluminium fascia. Those backlit buttons are a nice touch and work well, in conjunction with a rather suave OLED (Organic Light Emitting Diode) display, defeatable and with adjustable brightness. Overall, the package works well.

As you'd expect from a marque that takes sound seriously, inside there's a muscular 200W toroidal mains transformer with separate windings for both high and low current analogue, plus digital circuitry. Smaller, parallel power supply smoothing capacitors are used, as opposed to single larger ones – Creek says this helps to produce a very powerful sound from such a relatively small amplifier. Unusually perhaps, the David Gamble Class AB design is all-discrete and uses a high-end bipolar transistor power amplifier circuit featuring a pair of 15A Sanken STD-03 power transistors. This is claimed to produce very high output current and low output impedance.

The preamplifier section is based on a Japan Radio Corp module and offers a choice of unbalanced or balanced inputs – it is very rare to see XLR connections on an integrated amplifier at this modest price – with



multiple RCA input options plus volume, balance and tone controls, and can be bypassed completely should you have a DAC with a digital volume control and be that way inclined. Sadly Creek doesn't make an FM tuner anymore, but should you feel the need, that Ambit radio board effectively turns it into a receiver for just a few pounds more, and Mike Creek claims this is more than just an afterthought. A system remote control also comes supplied.

Sound quality

With a claimed output power of just 55W (into 8ohms), this isn't going to burn a Krell-sized hole in your loudspeaker voice coils. But don't let that dissuade you, as amplifier power is only half of the equation in the quest for 'loudness', and these days there are plenty of efficient speakers (90dB sensitivity or more) that will make a big noise with a relatively small number of watts. For the purposes of the review, most listening was with Spendor's excellent D7 (tested on page 66); an easy load for the Creek that went plenty loud enough.

When it had warmed through for a good few days, the new Evolution 50A proved refined way beyond its price tag. Even the excellent £750 Cyrus 6a, recent winner of *Hi-Fi Choice's* mid-price amp group test, struggles in its company, and that's really saying something. Here we have something that is very clean and open – in a way a

good transistor amplifier should be – but which doesn't fall into the trap of being overly analytical or matter-of-fact sounding. It's easy to make a decent transistor amplifier, but hard to make a really decent one – and that's what Creek has done.

For example, Groove Armada's *Whatever, Whenever* showed how it could be both surprisingly transparent, bubbling with detail and finesse, yet also unerringly musical and rhythmic. The amp took control of the track's big, fat bass guitar pattern, giving a really tactile feel to the low frequencies without ever sounding

The Creek Evolution 50A showed its innate musicality, setting up a wide and deep soundstage

overblown or under damped. Further up the frequency band, the Creek served up a full, expansive midband which you could really listen in to – indeed you could unpeel it like an onion, should you so wish. I found myself fixing on to the backing synth string sound, and from that I could delve right down into the electronic backing and rhythms with ease.

One really nice aspect to the Creek's sound was its stability; it didn't sound fazed in the least when called upon to deal with the prog

rock histrionics of Caravan's *Nine Feet Underground*. This is a busy track with lots of guitar noodling, frenetic stick work and a lovely, bouncy bassline – all topped off with an edgy sounding electric organ. The Evo 50A set everything in the recorded acoustic beautifully, each strand of the mix playing along by itself untroubled by whatever was going on beside or opposite.

As well as staying scrupulously in control, it managed to slot everything together in a wonderfully rewarding way. Rhythmically it was really strong – not quite up with the best tube amps, of course – but it really got into the groove and captured the wonderfully loose and floaty feel of this early seventies Canterbury classic.

Tonally you wouldn't call this amplifier bright – it lacks that 'spot-lit' upper midband that afflicts so many similarly priced amplifiers. I recently reviewed Pioneer's impressive A-70, and while I really enjoyed my time with it, there was definitely a sense that it shouldn't be partnered with forward sources and speakers. The Creek seems altogether better balanced, with a wonderfully seamless, all-of-a-piece feel that doesn't have you trying to compensate for its peculiarities; it's the sort of amp you could slot into a bright budget system and still retain your sanity. Not that it's tonally dull – rather it is because this amplifier is genuinely neutral. For example, Linton Kwesi Johnson's *In Dub* is a wonderfully



Q&A

Mike Creek

Creek Audio Limited



DP: What extra functions does the Evo 50A offer over its predecessor?

MC: A balanced input via the preamp or power amp direct, serial bus and remote operation of other Evolution 50 products, plus a software update path. It also has bypassable tone and balance controls, an optional FM/AM radio module and the new display.

Have you paid special attention to any particular part of the circuitry?

This is the first time Creek has used Sanken STD-03 thermal tracking power transistors. They allow the idle current to track very quickly with temperature changes and together with high open loop gain, low output impedance and high-peak output current the amp sounds more powerful than its 50W spec suggests. The amp also uses Creek's favoured low-impedance, multi-capacitor techniques, combined with a high current toroidal mains transformer. The preamp uses a Japan Radio Corp integrated device, which has excellent performance and relatively low cost.

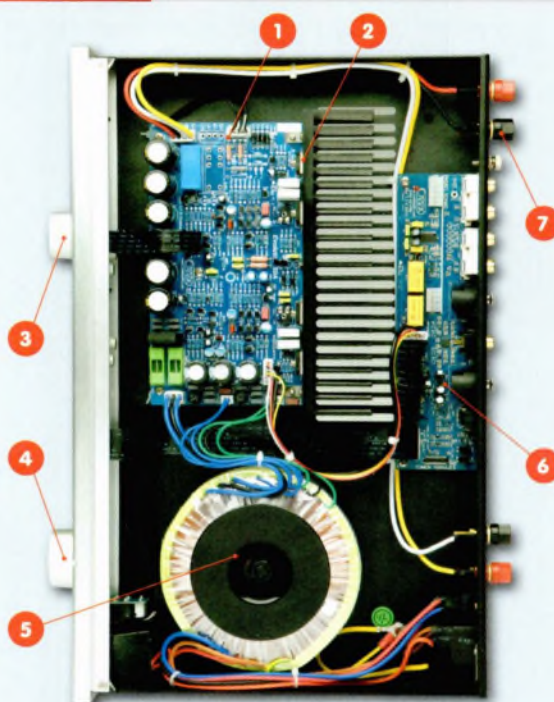
Have you had to make any concessions to convenience?

We have not compromised the performance of this amp in anyway to save cost or to add new technology. The tone controls are not an addition; they are a gift from JRC as they are bundled with their excellent volume/preamp chip. In or out of circuit, the distortion remains the same. But there are bound to be subtle changes, due to the additional circuitry, so the user can choose to switch them off completely for the most transparent performance.

Is it a discrete design or MOSFET?

It's a discrete transistor using bi-polar Darlington power transistors, with built-in thermal feedback sensors. Normally, in a Class AB design, a thermal sensor is fitted to the heatsink, which is far from the hottest part of the transistor it's trying to control. This can cause a lag in response, meaning the bias may not always be correct. These transistors achieve very good performance and are virtually unburnstable.

IN SIGHT



- 1 PSU regulation and power amp board
- 2 Sanken output devices with thermal compensation
- 3 Rotary encoder for input and function selection
- 4 Rotary encoder for volume and balance
- 5 Large 200VA toroidal power transformer
- 6 Pre-amplifier and input selection board
- 7 Single sets of switched 4mm speaker outlets

ON TEST

As Creek's Evolution line continues to well, evolve so does its performance. This Evolution 50A will replace the Evolution 2, and although it's rated at a slightly lower 55W/8ohm it still delivers a full 2x64W/8ohm and 2x100W/4ohm with momentary increases to 85W, 155W, 245W and 295W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic, music like conditions. The output impedance is almost a flat 0.04ohm from 20Hz-20kHz so the

amp/speaker system response will not vary significantly with swings in speaker impedance. The native response of the amplifier, however, has a gentle treble roll-off amounting to a mere -0.2dB/20kHz out to -3.8dB/100kHz into 8ohm.

This is also the first Creek amp to feature balanced inputs and, in a fully balanced system, the A-wtd S/N ratio amounts to 89dB (re. 0dBW), hum and noise just -80dBV (0.1mV). Right up

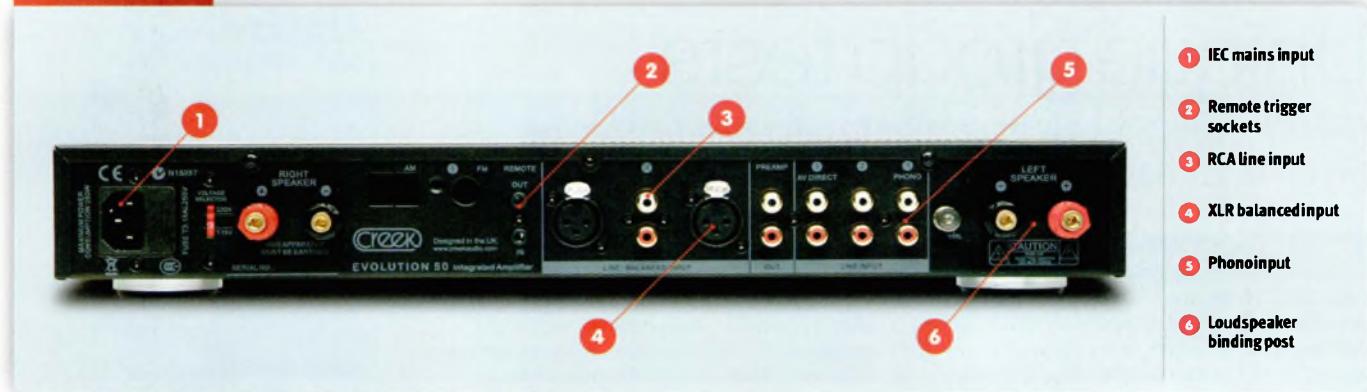
until clipping, the 50A's distortion is very consistent from 0.003 at 1W to 0.002% at the rated 50W through bass and midrange, though there's almost inevitably an increase at high frequencies, reaching 0.035% at 20kHz/10W. Thanks to the digitally governed volume control, channel balance is a tight ±0.01dB at 1W output (re. 500mV in) while stereo separation is 170dB through the midrange and 60dB at 20kHz. **PM**

bouncy bit of early eighties reggae but wins no prizes in the smoothness stakes – Des 'O Connor wouldn't like it – but the Creek makes the most of it without dwelling on the recording's brightness. Conversely, cue up *Solsbury Hill* from Peter Gabriel and that fairly muddy sounding seventies rock masterpiece doesn't hide its light under a bushel, the Creek being just searching enough to really pull the recording out.

Such delicacy of touch and lack of intrinsic colouration is a rare thing to have in an amplifier of this price, and takes you beyond

the position where you're always making excuses. It was happy as Larry driving the £3,500 Spendor speakers and took a step up and tried even harder when stuck on the end of an £7,000 dCS Debussy DAC. Yet feed it the balanced output from a £600 Audiolab M-DAC a pair of £400 Acoustic Energy 301 speakers and it's almost as much fun. Likewise, this amp's innate balance makes it a joy with a wide range of music; there's no sense of its failings flattering one type of programme material over another. From Mozart to Morrissey, it's game.



CONNECTIONS

- 1 IEC mains input
- 2 Remote trigger sockets
- 3 RCA line input
- 4 XLR balanced input
- 5 Phono input
- 6 Loudspeaker binding post

One sign of an excellent amplifier is how agnostic it is to the music it is asked to play. The Creek didn't care one jot about whether it was drilling out classic heavy rock, and mooching along to the seductive strains of Donald Byrd's *Streetlady*. This is a beautiful slice of early 1970s rare groove/jazz funk, released on Blue Note records (that says it all). The Evolution 50A showed its innate musicality, setting up a wide and deep soundstage (just as you'd expect from a classic analogue recording) and locating all the instruments within, with a high level of precision. It was controlled alright, but not controlling, and allowed the music to breathe a natural and organic way. This is a great strength of the Cyrus

other amplifiers costing up to twice its price, it is mortal like the rest of us. In absolute terms, the Evolution 50A lacks some bass heft; low frequencies are decently strong and nicely taut, but there's no sense that any sort of iron fist is in action. At high levels and on crescendos, when things get really complex and there's a lot of things being asked of the amplifier's power transistors and supply, you begin to hear its fallibility. Genesis' *The Squonk* impressed with its vivid low-level detailing, but when Phil Collins got going with his pan rolls and vocal contortions, you could sometimes catch the Evolution 50A blinking. Nothing nasty or dramatic mind you, just a subtle loosening and lightening of bass, reminding one

Here we have something that is very clean and open, which doesn't fall into the trap of being overly analytical or matter-of-fact sounding

6a, but the Creek proved just as capable and offered up a little extra detail and a brighter, more airy soundstage to boot.

Why then would you ever need to spend more than its £700 asking price if it's so blameless in the great scheme of amplifier things? Well, of course it's not a universal panacea and while it will trouble a number of

that's it's only a 50 watter after all. Likewise, transparent as the Evolution 50A is considering its modest retail price, it can't quite project the magnificent recorded acoustics that you get from some top-notch classical recordings.

An Esoteric SACD of Mozart's fantastic *Piano Concerto No.20* (Curzon, English Chamber Orchestra) was an arresting listen, the Creek showing immaculate breeding by remaining so subtle and composed, but there was a slightly diffuse feel to the placement of individual instruments, and a sense of middle right at the back of the concert hall – there was less atmosphere to the proceedings than you'd expect from a truly top-flight amplifier. This recording in particular is one of the best I've heard, so it's a tough test for any amp, let alone one as modestly priced as the Creek.

The OLED display and backlit buttons make this a beauty



IN THE RED corner is the £800 Pioneer A70 – a typically Japanese design, it is festooned with knobs and buttons, most useful of which is the USB digital input. It's so solid that a Challenger tank would drive around rather than over it, and the finish is better than some 100 grand sports cars. Sonically it's big and strong with lots of power. While the Evo 50A can't compete with all this, ultimately it is a more satisfying listen. Tonally it is more neutral, it has more finesse and subtle low-level detailing, and strings rhythms together in a more organic, believable way.

In the blue corner is the £750 Cyrus 6a, which sits on the opposite extreme. By comparison, the Creek is much more powerful and physical sounding, the 6a offering less grunt and an obviously weaker bass. It's also just a little more diffuse across the midband, lacking the incision and transparency of the Creek. But the Cyrus is more musical in the way it goes about things; every song seems to have a fraction more rhythmic urgency. There's not much in it, and the extra bass power the Creek has often more than compensates. Ultimately, though, either of these two offerings will have your toes tapping!

In the everyday scheme of things, however, these aren't seriously going to put you off the Creek, as its general quality of sound is so high for a sub-£1,000 amplifier. Moreover, it hides its tracks brilliantly, so even when you're pushing it a little too hard, asking a touch too much from it, it displays grace under pressure. Pretty much any sort of music you play comes out in a satisfyingly rhythmic way, with oodles of detail and surprising finesse.

Conclusion

One of the very best sounding amplifiers on sale at or near its price, the Creek Evolution 50A also offers analogue radio and (later) DAC options, plus the full smash of facilities from tone controls to a rather handy push-on mute function from the volume control. Build is decent, finish is fine and that OLED display is nice to have, too. Indeed, it seems like Creek has methodically gone round and engineered out anything that reviewers like me might object to. Sonically superb, impressively specified and decently screwed together, there's nothing not to like here. As such, it should be right at the top of your audition list. That's progress for you! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Detailed, musical sound; reasonably powerful; flexible; well made
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing at all given the price
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** The class of the affordable integrated amplifier field, this new Creek deserves to succeed
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



How we test

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

Unique group tests

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

BLIND-LISTENING TESTS

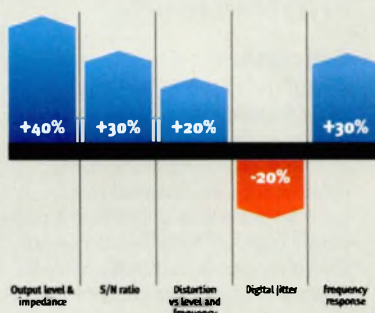
THIS CRUCIAL process, carefully controlled and yet sufficiently relaxed that our listeners do not feel that they're being tested, forms the heart of our Group Test review. Our panel of three listeners is not aware of the brand or price of the product they are listening to, but they are able to choose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

DIGITAL JITTER

Jitter is any uncertainty in the timing of digital audio data as it's recovered by the CD transport and processed by the player's DAC. Once converted to analogue audio, jitter manifests as a very particular form of distortion.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

A measure of the 'flatness' of the player's frequency response from 20Hz (low bass) to 20kHz (extreme treble) – the practical limits imposed by CD's specification



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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THIS MONTH'S LISTENING PANEL



KEITH MARTIN (LEFT): **POWER PURIFICATION** evangelist Keith is passionate about his company IsoTek, and proved to have a very keen ear, too.

KEITH TONGUE (MIDDLE): **PMC PRODUCT** manager Keith kept everyone amused during the group test by drawing pictures of the sound, rather than writing notes!

WU ZHANG (RIGHT): **GIFTED PIANO** player Wu normally prefers bashing the ivories (well, a Korg SP200) to hi-fi listening, but her ears proved a genuine asset here...

REFERENCE SYSTEM

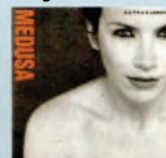
- Amplification:**
- Musical Fidelity M6-500
- Loudspeakers:**
- Spendor D7
- Equipment supports:**
- Quadraspire

TEST MUSIC

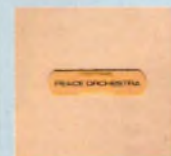
PETER GABRIEL
PETER GABRIEL:
Salsbury Hill



ANNIE LENNOX
MEDUSA: *Don't Let it Bring You Down*



PEACE ORCHESTRA
PEACE ORCHESTRA:
Marakesh



AIR
MOON SAIARI:
All I Need



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Group**test**

CD PLAYERS £460-£850

Shine on

Some say that Compact Disc's laser light is starting to fade, but *David Price* isn't so sure. We test six affordable silver disc spinners to find out...

POPULAR WISDOM HAS it that the humble Compact Disc player – born back in 1982 – is on its last legs, and about to be replaced on the nation's equipment racks with something that sports an Ethernet socket instead of a disc transport. Given the decline of the 'physical' music retailing market – HMV's recent woes being a prime example – and the rise of downloads, it's an alluring theory.

Okay, so the theory may be broadly speaking true – but as the mass music market migrates away from silver discs to digital distribution, CD fans can still take heart. There is now some serious counter-insurgent action going on among a number of specialist hi-fi companies, that have either launched a series of new players recently, or have subtly upgraded their existing ones. The best news of all is that much of this is happening at the more affordable end of the market.

This test features six of the best sub-£850 designs, three of which are recent arrivals. In addition to your normal disc

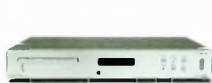
playing functionality, we see digital inputs appearing now. Indeed, it's almost a badge of modernity, with only the oldest here (the Roksan) not offering some concession to hipness. It underlines the fact that CD players are effectively now becoming DACs with transports in, rather than the other way around. Some models sport USB connectivity too – either front panel memory stick connectivity as in

Hi-fi companies, have launched a series of new players or have upgraded their existing ones

the case of the Yamaha or rear panel connections to use the CD player to play off hi-res files from a computer, as per the Audiolab.

Compact Disc players are changing alright, fighting to keep up with the times. But are they good enough to delay their date with destiny? Read on to find out...

ON TEST



Audiolab B200CD
£800 **p25**

Originally launched way back in 2011, this Audiolab has just had an upgrade to its power supply and display, combined with a sleek new brushed aluminium finish. Its John Westlake-designed electronics should make it a redoubtable performer too, so its rivals should be worried!



Cyrus CD 6 SE2
£750 **p27**

The company's entry-level disc spinner sports its bespoke Servo Evolution mechanism, slot-loading transport and fully upgradable electronics under the hood, all in that lovely half-width metal box casing. It's certainly a very persuasive package for the money, but how does it sound?



Denon DCD-1510AE
£850 **p29**

The first of the SACD-capable machines in this test, this chunky Denon is one of the oldest here but certainly doesn't look it. Its finish is superb and the machine works in a very sleek way. Its 'battleship' build is also very alluring, but can it keep up with the others in the sonic stakes?



Pioneer PD-50
£460 **p31**

The newbie of the group, this came out last autumn and is a model of modernity. There's DAC functionality, USB connectivity and all manner of other enticing features. Despite the low price, it's still immaculately finished, so it presents a very attractive purchasing proposition.



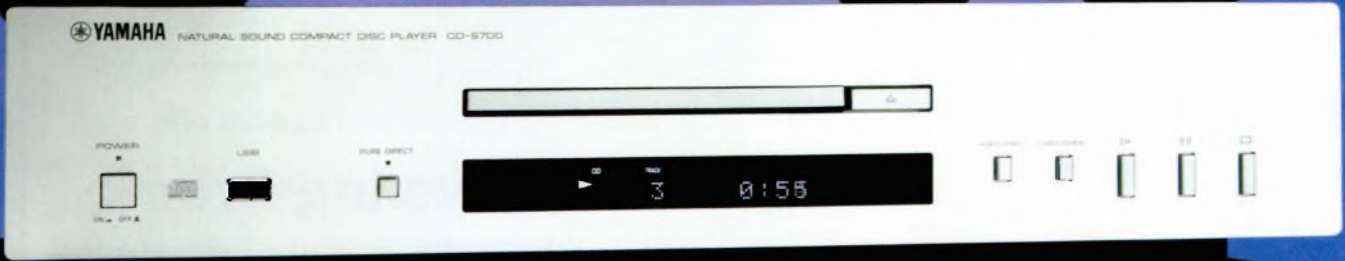
Roksan Kandy K2
£795 **p33**

Designed by the multi-talented Touraj Moghaddam, this Roksan disc spinner has proved itself to be a justifiably popular player over the past few years. But by 2013 standards it looks dated, feels less swish to use than the others on test here and lacks DAC functionality. Can it still do the business?



Yamaha CD-S700
£460 **p35**

A modest, unprepossessing and highly affordable machine, this Yamaha nevertheless won universal praise from the panel for its gorgeous looks, excellent build and lovely feel. It's full of features too, being a relatively modern machine. So far so good, but the real question is, how does it sound?



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Audiolab 8200CD £800



It's been on sale for two years, but the 8200CD appears to have the looks, features and sound to impress...

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK/China
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
445x75x330mm
- WEIGHT:**
9kg
- FEATURES:**
- ESS Technology Sabre 32-bit 9018DAC
 - 2 x optical digital input
 - USB input
 - Balanced XLR outputs
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Audiolab
- TELEPHONE:**
01480 447700
- WEBSITE:**
audiolab.co.uk

This player was the first of Audiolab's latest range of electronics and caused a few eyebrows to be raised when it first hit the high street. It sports a sleek brushed aluminium fascia, which looks classier than the previous painted metal finish, and some serious audio engineering, courtesy of digital whizz John Westlake.

At its heart is the respected Sabre 32-bit DAC from ESS Technology, a bespoke design of digital filter with four settings and a precision clocked CD transport. The player has recently been upgraded with an improved power supply and an OLED display, plus improved digital filter options. For the purposes of this test, the best sounding one (in the review system) was selected – in this case the Optimal Transient filter.

It can be used as a standalone digital-to-analogue convertor and there's a selection of optical and coaxial digital inputs, plus the increasingly useful USB socket for playing music files from your computer. There's even media player (Windows Media Player or iTunes) controllability via the bundled remote. The 8200CD sports balanced XLR outputs in addition to RCA phonos, underlining its overall quality feel; operationally it's little short of excellent and the finish is such that it seems worth every penny of its selling price.

Sound quality

This player left a lasting impression, right from the off. It proved to be powerful, musical and extremely detailed, unlocking layer upon layer of information about the recording that all the others here – with the singular exception of the Roksan – simply missed. It was like the jump from CD to SACD in some ways; the sound was transformed in a quite profound, eyebrow-raising way.

Kicking off with the Peace Orchestra track, the 8200CD gave a wonderful texture to the keyboards, and a great feel to the electronic percussion track, which fizzed with energy. Yet all of this detail and insight didn't come at the expense of musicality, because the Audiolab had that rare ability to fillet the recording then put it all back together again in an unerringly authentic and natural way. The result was that you could listen right in to all its fine detail, yet the overall listening experience was entirely natural.

One panelist immediately opined that this had to be the best of the group, applauding it for the superb decay to the instruments on the Annie Lennox track, and the lovely natural way it all came together. Another suggested it might sound dry, but then backtracked, saying it was just extremely neutral. This is fair comment as it's not quite as warm as the Roksan, for example, but in no way would you call it

clinical or cerebral as the Japanese machines can sometimes be.

The 8200CD was also applauded for its vast, three-dimensional soundstage, which was obvious no matter what music was played. This was, however, particularly evident on the Peter Gabriel track, which blossomed into the room in a way it never would again.

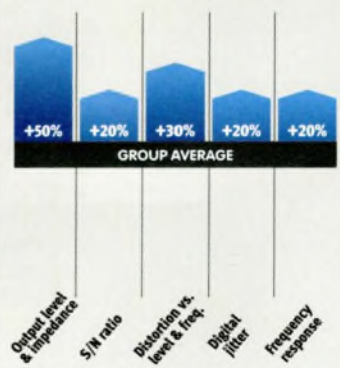
The panelists enthused over the clean styling, excellent build and easy ergonomics and were delighted that it sounded superb, too.

ON TEST

This is one of two players in our test that offers digital inputs as well as outputs (the Pioneer PD-50 being the other) but it's the only player equipped with balanced XLR analogue outputs. This confers certain benefits, not least the higher 4.1V output – double that from the RCAs – and a commensurately wide 112dB A-wtd S/N ratio. Add to this the fabulously low 100mΩ output impedance and the 8200CD will drive very long lengths of balanced cable.

Distortion is not only very low at 0.0003% over the top 10-20dB of its dynamic range, but is also very consistent with frequency which, from a subjective standpoint, is usually a 'good thing'. Indeed, high frequency distortion is the lowest of the pack here while jitter is absolutely at rock-bottom for 16-bit audio at 116psec. Stereo separation is 110dB from 20Hz-20kHz, while the response is flat to -0.17dB/20kHz. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Excellent build quality and finish; DAC functionality; superbly clean and open sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Absolutely nothing at the price
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Clean styling, supreme sound and great features make this the best player by far
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



The Game Changer

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Q Acoustics is proud to introduce the new Concept 20 Loudspeaker.

The Concept 20 is a truly remarkable new loudspeaker which delivers a level of sonic performance previously only available to audiophiles able to invest in high-end models.

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The result is nothing short of sensational.

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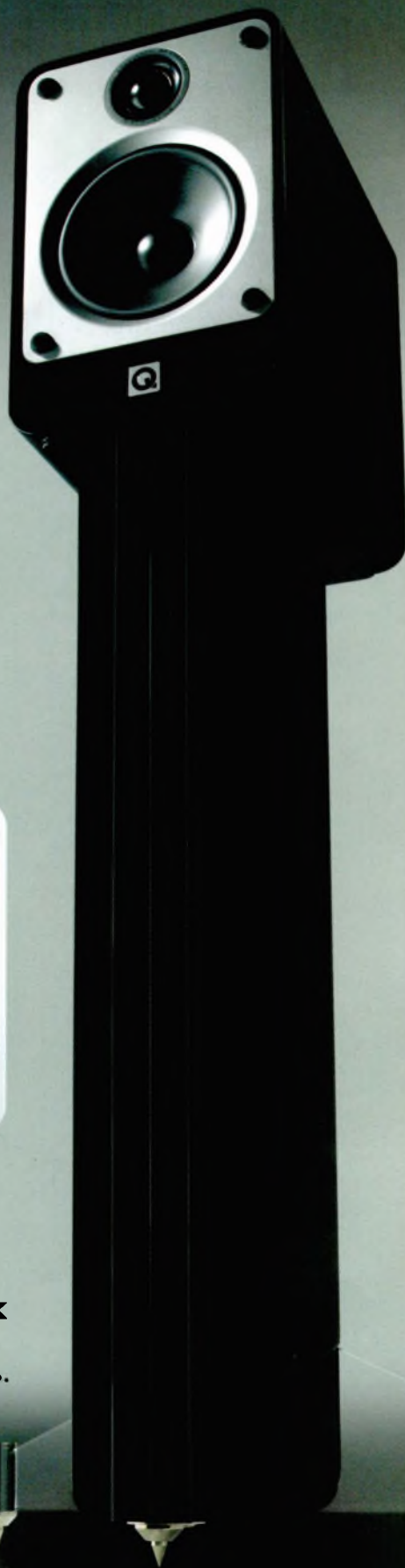
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Cyrus CD 6 SE2 £750



Its distinctive looks make it look like a predecessor, but under the hood this is a thoroughly modern CD player

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
UK
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
215x78x360mm
- WEIGHT:**
4.5kg
- FEATURES:**
- Diecast alloy casework
 - Factory upgradable to CD 8 SE2 or XT SE2 specification
 - Optical digital audio out
 - MC-Bus remote connections
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Cyrus
- TELEPHONE:**
01480 410 900
- WEBSITE:**
cyrusaudio.com

The original form factor and case of this Cyrus dates back to the late nineties CD3, but the finish has been changed with a sparkle silver (or black) paint finish – done to very high standards. Inside though, it's thoroughly modern with the company's bespoke Servo Evolution mechanism allied to a slot loading system, which some people love and others don't!

The SE mech is designed to read discs in the best way for audio, rather than being simply a reheated DVD-ROM design, which appears in many CD players. It also sports separate power supplies for the analogue and digital circuitry and multiple stages of power regulation.

The aluminium diecast casework is non-magnetic and claimed to minimise resonance. It certainly feels nice and confers the unit with a sense of class that others lack.

Round the back, there's Cyrus's MC-Bus control. Like other Cyrus designs, this machine is upgradable to CD 8 SE2 or XT SE2 spec should you wish, another nice touch. The small backlit liquid crystal display is discreet, yet still easily readable.

The only criticism is of the disc loading mechanism, which takes a bit of practice to get used to. Some users reported occasional disc reading issues on early machines, but this CD 6 SE2 proved a model of good behaviour in our tests.

Sound quality

Compared with the Denon, Pioneer and Yamaha, the Cyrus was a better sounding player. The Annie Lennox track set up a huge groove, with more sense of the listener being able to hear into the mix than most machines here. It was as if the player was going the extra mile with her vocal phrasing, really ramming home the emotional poignancy of the song.

This worked across the entire frequency range; the Peace Orchestra track had a very supple bass, while cymbals had lots of air and space. The music lolloped along in an engaging way, spotlighting the track's rhythm. One panelist applauded its life and sparkle, "huge separation" and general joie de vivre. Another remarked that it would be, "a great party player, fun for discos".

While the CD 6 SE2 was applauded for its attention grabbing sound, the panel felt this player had a slightly uneven tonality. You'd never call the player harsh, but it had a well lit upper midband and treble that made the Annie Lennox track sound a bit too upfront for some tastes. It was if – as one panelist remarked – the sound balance had been "tilted" to emphasise the midband, at the expense of the bass which was thought to "roll off a bit early". The same pattern showed with the other tracks; the Peace Orchestra proving a fun listen but it didn't rock the rafters in the way that, for example,

the Audiolab did. The tonality of the player was unusual, because the music itself came over as quite refined, yet the upper ranges were more prominent than some here.

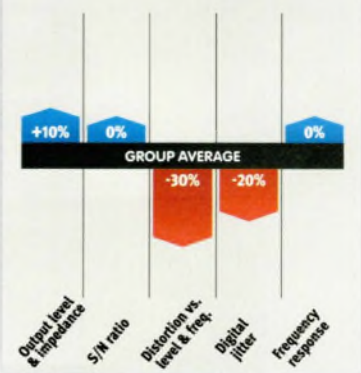
Overall, a sparkly sounding machine that will suit listeners who love its expansive and explicit, yet musical, midband. The packaging of the Cyrus is excellent, conferring a high quality feel. The slot loading mechanism isn't everyone's taste, but we found disc access to be swift and easy. Well worth an audition, then.

ON TEST

Looking back over my test data for the CD 6 SE from 2009, this latest 'SE2' variant would appear to be based on the same DAC and analogue building blocks and offers a near-identical performance. With one very important difference – while the CD 6 SE was all but hamstrung by a high 2970psec jitter, this CD 6 SE2 has this reduced to 250psec. Otherwise the CD 6 SE2 offers the same 2.14V maximum output from the same low 460hm source impedance with the same 108dB A-wtd S/N ratio.

The pattern of distortion is unchanged too, from a low 0.0003% through the midrange to a higher 0.05% at 20kHz dominated by a 3rd harmonic. At lower signal levels there's also a swell of ultrasonic (requantisation) noise above 60kHz – another hallmark of the CD 6 and CD 8 series of CD players. Finally, I did encounter some problems with the mech reading CDs containing 40+ tracks. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Fine build quality and finish; upgradability; immersive sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly light bass compared with others in the group
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Enjoyable music maker with interesting presentation
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Denon DCD-1510AE £850

This quintessentially Japanese deck looks better than rivals costing ten times its price, but how does it sound?

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
Japan/China
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
434x135x331mm
- WEIGHT:**
8kg
- FEATURES:**
- CD and SACD playback
 - 32-bit/192kHz-compatible DAC
 - Front panel USB input
 - Coax and optical digital outputs
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
Denon UK
- TELEPHONE:**
02890 279830
- WEBSITE:**
denon.com

This Denon is another one of the players in the group that sports a USB input that plays MP3 or WMA (Windows Media Audio) files, and music from iPods or other portables. The disc drive plays CDs of course, and like the other Japanese machine here – the Pioneer – there's SACD playback too.

As is the way with machines from the land of the rising sun, there's a welter of other facilities, including a pitch control (+/-1.2% in 0.1% increments) and a dimmable display, all accessible via the supplied remote control. In use, the machine feels very swish indeed.

Under the bonnet, the player sports a 32-bit/192kHz DAC from AKM, and there is Denon's Advanced AL32 Processing upsampling. A special master clock is said to suppress jitter, and the power supply section has separate rails for digital and analogue circuitry. Short signal paths are used, to protect signal purity.

Denon's bespoke disc drive mechanism is fitted, which includes a very classy damped disc drawer, and the casework sports 'Precision Direct Mechanical Ground Construction' to thoroughly suppress vibration. A low power consumption in standby mode of just 0.1W is claimed. Surprisingly for a Japanese machine, there's no balanced XLR outputs, but RCA phono outs are, of course, standard.

Sound quality

Here was a machine that did the job competently, but didn't really shine in this company. It was nicely refined generally, with a good, open tonality that didn't descend into glare and hardness even on the forward Annie Lennox track, complete with its nineties era-defining compressed 'digital' sound.

It gave out a fair sprinkling of detail, allowing the sound of steel string guitars to shine out of the mix on *Solsbury Hill*, and carried vocals well in a clear and easy manner. The panelists felt there was some flatness to the sound with the Denon refusing to go the extra mile to really connect the listener to the music.

It was also criticised for its bass, which was a little light and rather detached from the midband – one panelist said it was like listening to two players in one, with the bassline on the Peace Orchestra track being "on a different page". It was also remarked that on the Peter Gabriel song, the bass "was not really there at all". Rhythmically this made for a quite sluggish listen.

While the Yamaha was also criticised for being rhythmically pedestrian, the listeners felt it at least sounded "all of a piece", while the Denon sounded disjointed. Nor was its imaging particularly special, as both the Annie Lennox and Peter Gabriel tracks appeared shrunken in scale compared with the Audiolab,

and didn't show any great precision in the imaging inside the recorded acoustic, either.

Overall then, the DCD-1510AE came across as a nicely finished, intelligently specified machine that was missing a sense of passion with music, quite at odds with the Audiolab, Cyrus and Roksan.

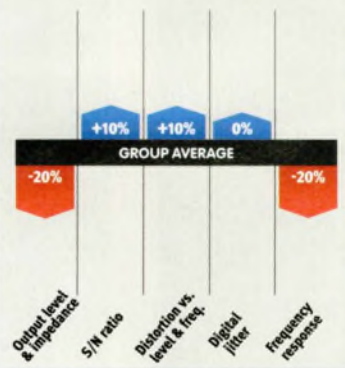
No panelist took against it, but nor did they think it had any particularly redeeming features. Unless SACD playback is a priority for you, the DCD-1510AE isn't the most inspiring CD player proposition here.

ON TEST

Denon's digital filter, teamed with a '32-bit/192kHz' DAC topology and custom master clock has clear benefits. The filter trades reduced ringing in the time domain for a slightly premature treble roll-off, beginning at ~18kHz and reaching -2.0dB at 20kHz. In contrast with similar regimes, the rejection of aliasing images is still very good (-95.5dB by 24.1kHz) while the A-wtd S/N ratio remains state-of-the-art for 16-bit CD at 109.3dB.

Jitter is near the measurable limit for 16-bit data at ~120psec with CD and ~10psec for SACD and the latter is not limited by downsampling to LPCM so its response runs smoothly out to -0.9dB/20kHz, -2.9dB/40kHz, -6.5dB/60kHz and -23dB/100kHz. Distortion is very low at ~0.0005% through bass and midrange for CD and SACD at 0dBfs, increasing to just 0.001% for CD at 20kHz and 0.075% for SACD as its THD is joined by rising levels of requantisation noise. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Excellent build and finish; SACD playback; impressive feature count
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Sound lacks passion and conviction
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Competent but undistinguished sounding machine that has little to entice apart from SACD playback
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Objects of Desire



TAD – Reference One Stand Mount Speakers



TAD – C2000 Pre Amplifier/DAC



TAD – M4300/M2500 Power Amplifier

TAD – Evolution One Speakers



TAD – D600 CD Player/DAC Streamer

GXAUDIO



Pioneer PD-50 £460



Another Japanese player with more than just SACD up its sleeve, but how will the panel react to its charms?

DETAILS

ORIGIN: Japan/Korea
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 435x130x329mm
WEIGHT: 7.8kg
FEATURES:
• SACD and CD playback
• Plays PCM, DSD, MP3, WMA, AAC, MPEG-4
• Pure Direct listening mode
• USB input
DISTRIBUTOR: Pioneer UK
TELEPHONE: 0870 6001539
WEBSITE: pioneer.co.uk

This being a Japanese-made player, it's no surprise to find it's Super Audio CD compatible.

Although SACD is in the twilight of its years as a format, it retains a strong following in Japan, so it makes sense to include it, plus there is still a number of excellent, small labels releasing the discs.

The player is quintessentially Japanese in other ways, being built as if hewn from solid granite with a swish finish and plenty of features.

There's a Pure Direct mode, which cuts off the digital output driver chip and the display, for better sound through the analogue outputs and an Auto Level Control equalises the volume differences between tracks. Sound Retriever is claimed to improve compressed audio files.

Inside, the unit sports a rigid base and twin power transformers separately shielded from the audio circuitry. Onboard Hi-bit32 Audio Signal Processing upsamples the digital datastream for better sound, Pioneer says. The built-in DAC sports a front-mounted USB input, which plays MP3, MPEG-4, AAC, WMA and DSD files off a memory stick or iDevice, and there's a rear-mounted coaxial digital input, too. While the casework is excellent, the plasticky disc tray lets the side down just a touch, but the supplied remote is better than many of the plastic affairs found elsewhere here.

Sound quality

The Pioneer sounded very Japanese – in a good and a bad way. It proved extremely sure footed, one panelist complementing it on a “natural, competent” sound. There was a sense of solidity here that was missing from the Yamaha, Denon and Cyrus; the Peter Gabriel track seemed to acquire an extra octave of bass compared with the Cyrus, but from where we just didn't know. The Annie Lennox song underlined the sure-footedness, with what the panelists called less “tilt” to the sound. They felt the Pioneer was more matter of fact in its presentation. Instead of editorialising things it served up what was on the disc in a thorough, unmediated way.

This fine sense of control to the proceedings made it easy to hear subtle detail on the Peter Gabriel track, for example. But even though its lows were strong and firm, they weren't the most supple in the group. This made for a slightly mechanical rhythmic feel. It wasn't exactly plodding but it lacked the exuberant – euphoric even – feel of the Cyrus, Roksan and Audiolab.

The Pioneer was always going through the motions; admittedly it was very thorough, but it never really let its hair down and partied. It also sounded a tad clinical across the midband; soundstaging was wide and well articulated alright, but there was little sense of the music

being natural and organic. Indeed, one listener remarked on a slightly edgy feel to Lennox's vocals, indicating a hint of brightness.

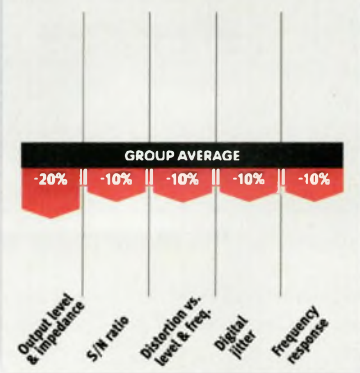
With SACD it moved up a gear, but with regular CD it didn't shine quite so well. It didn't do badly, but the panel felt it was solid rather than stunning, across a wide range of music. Overall, it did well considering its lower price, but many will feel that spending a few hundred pounds more on one of the others here rewards the listener more than they might expect.

ON TEST

Pioneer's new flagship player/DAC preserves much of SACD's 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 enjoy about a dB extra S/N (107.5dB vs. 106.5dB) over the S/PDIF digital inputs while jitter is lowest at 160psec via SACD.

The digital filter trades a freedom from pre-ringing and early distortions for extra post ringing and some slight HF phase distortion. Other specifications, including its 2.07V maximum output, moderate 4400ohm 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. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Festooned with features; excellent finish; SACD playback; stable, solid sound

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Plasticky disc tray; slightly pedestrian presentation

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Great value budget SACD and silver disc spinner

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Audio T	Tunbridge Wells	audiot.co.uk
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English Audio	Hereford	englishaudio.co.uk
Glasgow Audio	Glasgow	glasgowaudio.com
Guildford Audio	Guildford	guildfordaudio.co.uk
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Roksan Kandy K2 £795



Roksan made its name with high-end turntables, but can it do the business with CD players? Let's find out...

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** UK
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 432x102x380mm
WEIGHT: 9kg
FEATURES:
 • 24/192 upsampling DAC
 • Balanced XLR and RCA phono line outputs
 • Coax and optical digital outputs
DISTRIBUTOR: Henley Designs
TELEPHONE: 01235 511166
WEBSITE: henleydesigns.co.uk

The Kandy K2, has now been on the market for a good four years. It boasts a relatively minimalist design, inasmuch as there are no digital inputs, no USB connectivity and no SACD playback – in today's world that makes it look rather conservative, dated even. Still, you could always argue it's a dedicated audiophile machine that eschews fripperies for serious sound.

One undeniably nice feature is the programmable, learning remote control while those all important balanced XLR outputs are present and correct on the back of the player, in addition to standard RCAs of course.

The panel didn't take to the styling of the Roksan, feeling it to be too quirky for many tastes. But it's obvious that a lot of attention to detail has been lavished on the player under the hood. There's a specially isolated transport mechanism to stop vibration reaching the disc reading laser, and seven separate power supply rails off a special toroidal mains transformer to give clean power to different sections of the circuitry.

There's an upgraded master clock, and a high quality 24-bit/192kHz DAC fitted. Roksan says the internal layout of the circuitboards has been revised to further improve sound.

Sound quality

From the first bar of Annie Lennox's *Don't Let it Bring You Down* eyebrows began to raise. The Audiolab had made such a profound impression that the panel were thinking it was a *fait accompli*, and that the 8200CD was already the winner by a country mile. Not so, as the Kandy K2 delivered a powerful rendition, tugging on the heartstrings just as much as the Audiolab, possibly more. "I found it very cohesive, there's no part of the music that's out of kilter", opined one listener. And so the pattern followed, as it strung every piece of music together in a wonderfully lucid and musically captivating way.

The Peter Gabriel track revealed a beguiling shuffling percussion, while the flute hovered over the mix with an independence of spirit and depth of tone that even the Audiolab couldn't quite match. Instruments just seemed to play together beautifully, yet were immediately identifiable in isolation. This is the sort of natural sound you'd expect from a company that makes some of the best turntables in the world, is it not? On the Peace Orchestra track, there was loads of insight into the mix, with a rich tonal palette – indeed the Audiolab sounded just a little cooler and greyer by comparison. Imaging was superb,

and the way vocals were carried across all the music seemed somehow more romantic.

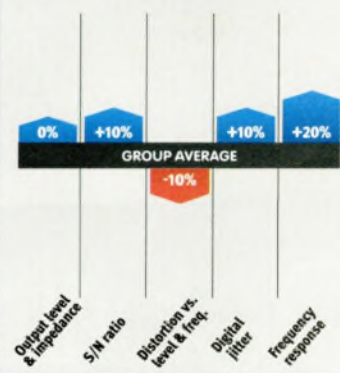
The Kandy K2 is sweeter and more rounded than the Audiolab, and some will see this as a lack of detail and insight, which is why it didn't shine across the board as well as its rival. "If I was going to have a player in my system I'd have this", said one panelist, while another insisted the Audiolab was the more capable analytical tool to tell what's happening in the recording. Either way, it's an essential audition.

ON TEST

Roksan's longstanding K2 CD player still enjoys a wide 109.5dB S/N ratio, minimal 120psec jitter and distortion as low as 0.0007% over the top 20dB of its dynamic range (0.001% at maximum output). Even at 20kHz, THD is held to 0.0017% while any ultrasonic noise is well suppressed. The integral digital filter offers a full 99dB rejection of aliasing images while Roksan's own analogue filter stage gently rolls its response off to an inaudible -0.3dB/20kHz.

The player offers a healthy 2.24V maximum output from a usefully low 970hm source impedance, so the K2 may not prove as interconnect-fussy as, for example, the Yamaha CD-S700. Moreover, Roksan's board layout ensures stereo separation is a full 100dB+ from 20Hz-20kHz with a L/R channel balance that's better than 0.01dB. The wide S/N also assists its low-level resolution with errors of just 0.1dB over a full 100dB range. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Beautiful, natural musical sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Iffy finish; questionable styling; few facilities; clunky disc tray
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Analogue addicts will love it, but it's hardly the best all rounder
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

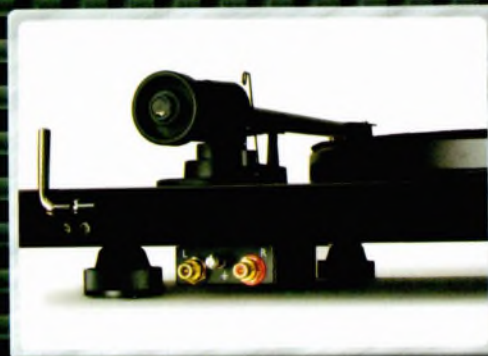
OVERALL



The Carbon Age



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 **Pro-Ject**
AUDIO SYSTEMS



Yamaha CD-S700 £460

A couple of years ago Yamaha produced a range of great affordable CD players, but will the trend continue here?

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
Japan/China
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
435x96x300mm
WEIGHT:
6.2kg
FEATURES:
• 24/192
upsampling DAC
• Front panel USB
digital input
• Coax and optical
digital outputs
• Supplied remote
control
DISTRIBUTOR:
Yamaha UK
TELEPHONE:
0844 811116
WEBSITE:
yamaha.com

The CD-S700 is the mid-priced silver disc spinning model in Yamaha's range, its more expensive CD-S1000 coming in just over our group test's price limit.

It's still immaculately well presented, though, and bristling with facilities that include a front-mounted USB socket that plays MP3 and WMA music files. A Pure Direct mode switch, meanwhile, bypasses some of the circuitry and turns the display off, which is claimed to give better sound.

Under the hood the CD-S700 sports Yamaha's exclusive Loading Mechanism, with its beautifully finished and silky smooth operating disc drawer. A differential Burr Brown digital-to-analogue convertor is also fitted, along with a high-quality power transformer, which is well isolated from the main circuit boards.

As with most Japanese-designed electronics, the unit itself is built on a steel chassis with a thick, chunky aluminium fascia plate.

Round the back, standard digital and analogue outputs are fitted – at this price you're asking a bit too much for balanced XLRs!

Overall the Yamaha CD-S700 feels very nice indeed, with slick disc loading and no sense of costs being cut (at least on the outside), unlike the Pioneer offering with its rather plasticky disc drawer.

Sound quality

Here was a machine that sounded as clean as its elegant, uncomplicated styling. Right from the off, the panel felt it was even and well balanced, with a decent soundstage, a reasonable bass response, a usefully refined (if not exactly sparkling treble) and a midband that threw out lots of detail. Indeed, it was such a solid all rounder that it was quite hard to score.

The Annie Lennox song showed a nice rhythmic gait, solid dynamics and inoffensive tonality. One listener likened it to a cold pint of Fosters on a summer's day – refreshing and pleasant, but hardly life changing.

If this was its salvation, then this niceness was also its undoing. *Solsbury Hill* saw Peter Gabriel going through the motions – suddenly it wasn't that beautiful, poignant, affecting rock classic.

"Pleasant but not anything special", said one panelist. Another criticised it for sounding congealed and staid. "You could put this into most systems and it wouldn't sound too risqué, but it's not for me", a panelist opined.

There was definitely the sense that it had been voiced so as not to offend; although vocals were nice and direct, it seemed as if the high treble was being lopped off somewhat, and the bass was just a bit more anaemic than some. The Peace Orchestra track had everyone sitting there contemplating their

own mortality. It wasn't exactly as if everyone was on the edge of the sofa, praising the newness of life.

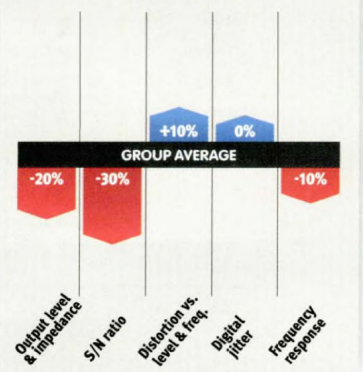
This was still the panel's favourite in terms of styling and finish – one panellist couldn't stop stroking it. And it didn't disgrace itself sonically either, offering a very good all round sound that didn't have any real weaknesses, unlike several other more expensive machines here. Trouble is, its strengths weren't too conspicuous either – it's a true middle-of-the-road machine, in both a good and a bad way.

ON TEST

Tested in 'Pure Direct' mode, this new Yamaha player offers a typical 2.26V maximum output with wide 106.9dB S/N ratio, although the 6000hm source impedance is arguably a little high. Distortion, on the other hand, is very low indeed at just 0.00025% through the bass and midrange at max output, rising to a mere 0.0007% at 20kHz. Low-level resolution is very good, with errors of just ± 0.1 dB at 1kHz and ± 0.3 dB at 20kHz over a 100dB dynamic range.

The integral digital filter is a standard FIR type but not especially vigorous judging by the 79dB suppression of aliasing images ($\times 100$ dB is more common). The player's response shows a mild treble lift – unusual these days – although at $+0.08$ dB/10kHz and $+0.17$ dB/20kHz the CD-S700 is still unlikely to sound 'bright'. Jitter, meanwhile, is very well suppressed at just 120psec (near the 16-bit test limit). **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★☆ **LIKE:** Superb styling and build; USB connectivity; cohesive, even sound; reasonably priced

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Sound lacks insight or extension; bass can be anaemic

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Great all round budget package, but limited sonically

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



Listening test verdict

David Price gives some context to this month's superb six and ranks those beautiful silver disc spinners according to the fine-tuned ears of the listening panel

CD is in a good place if the standards of this group is anything to go by. All players here sounded decent, and some were superb. Broadly, they divided along country of origin lines, with the Japanese players looking and feeling nice, but not excelling sonically. The Brit pack did much better in the sound quality stakes, and two were rather impressive in the build and finish department, too.

The Denon did least well with regular CDs. It was competent and didn't offend, but there's little to take from its so-so sonics and relatively high price.

The Yamaha was better. Its sound was more even and balanced, even

if it lacked musical insight and bass and treble extension. The listeners felt it hid its shortcomings, giving a more linear performance that was easy on the ear. Considering it's one of the cheapest here it did very well indeed.

Pioneer's PD-50 ranked highly, with a solid sound that didn't give any clue to the machine's low price. It didn't sparkle but it was still a dependable design and, of course, comes peppered with facilities. At the price, it's excellent value – only the plasticky disc tray disappoints.

The Cyrus CD 6 SE2 was expansive, musical and gave an exuberantly enthusiastic sound across all types of music. Its attention-grabbing sonic

performance was a panel pleaser, but the bass was considered a little too light – almost as if the sound had been tailored to lock in on the machine's excellent midband.

Roksan's Kandy K2 was a superlative music maker, with a wonderfully cohesive, organic, natural character – it's definitely a little warmer and more rounded than some here, yet proved amazingly dynamic and expressive. Vinyl users scored it above the Audiolab, but everyone agreed it didn't quite have that last degree of detail of the latter. Factor in its clunky disc loader, questionable styling and lack of facilities, and it couldn't quite make the top spot. Very impressive though!



The Audiolab 8200CD takes the top spot – a brilliant performer across a wide variety of programme material. Amazingly incisive and open, yet powerfully dynamic and musically communicative, it ticks all boxes. Factor in the superb build and finish, and vast array of features, and it's a mightily distinguished and tremendously worthy winner!

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Make/model	Audiolab 8200CD	Cyrus CD 6 SE2	Denon DCD-1510AE	Pioneer PD-50	Roksan Kandy K2	Yamaha CD-S700
Price	£800	£750	£850	£460	£795	£460
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
Build	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Features	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
Key features	Clean styling, supreme sound and great features make this the best player in the test by far	With its immersive sound this is an enjoyable music maker with interesting presentation	Competent but undistinguished sound and there's little to entice apart from SACD playback	Festooned with features this is a fantastic value budget SACD and silver disc spinner	Analogue addicts will undoubtedly love it, but this is hardly the best all rounder on test today	Great all round budget package, but limited sonically and bass can be anaemic
SACD	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
USB input	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
DAC input	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
RCA out	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
XLR out	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

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LOUDSPEAKER Acoustic Energy 301 £400

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CYRUS CD8 SE2 • 6A CD PLAYER / AMPLIFIER
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AUDIOLAB 8200CD • 8200A CD / AMPLIFIER
The award-winning 8200CD features a wealth of digital inputs that will keep it playing all your music regardless of how it may be stored.



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



ARCAM FMJ CD17 • A19 CD / AMPLIFIER
Replacing the acclaimed A18, Arcam's A19 integrated amplifier delivers 50W per channel and includes 7 analogue inputs, a MM phono input and is the perfect partner for the CD17 CD player.



MARANTZ CD6004 • PM6004 CD / AMPLIFIER
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ROKSAN KANDY K2 CD / AMPLIFIER
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NAIM SUPERUNITI MUSIC STREAMER
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PIONEER XC-HM81 CD / NETWORK SYSTEM
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ARCAM SOLO NEO CD / NETWORK SYSTEM
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KEF AUDIO
R SERIES / LS50

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TWENTY RANGE

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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**

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SEVENOAKS
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Design matters

Vertere's Touraj Moghaddam is a man on a mission to make the world sound better. In an exclusive interview, he tells **David Price** how and why...

Touraj Moghaddam is one of hi-fi's great characters – not just for his affable, charming manner, but for his passion and expertise. As soon as you meet him, it's hard not to be bowled over by his wide-eyed sense of wonder. Despite having played a leading part in the successful British hi-fi company Roksan for over a quarter of a century, he retains an infectious enthusiasm for the appliance of science in making things sound better. Now fronting his new company Vertere, Touraj is still beguiled by the process of designing products, and indeed the philosophy of hi-fi in general.

DP: Is your hi-fi world analogue or a digital?

TM: Vinyl is a media that as soon as you improve something makes your record collection new again. The unfortunate thing about analogue is you can't get to the original recording made at the studio – it's always a copy – but you can continually improve it.

It has a very long heritage, it started many decades ago, and people have been perfecting it for a long time. There are advantages in systems where you are refining it constantly, sometimes these can outperform new, novel ideas. Look at the early days of CD, it was a real disaster – very good marketing but no substance behind it, but today Compact Disc is not that bad.

The advantage you've got with digital is that there isn't any reason why you can't have at home what you have in the studio. With analogue it's impossible, unless you nick the tape! That's the only way, because as soon as you start copying it, it's gone. With digital, the same thing happens, although people think it's just a matter of numbers, it isn't.

In a way, a digital signal is no different to an analogue signal, it may have constant amplitude but it has infinite frequency – you're still dealing with a waveform with all sorts of anomalies that come in.

With analogue, although you'll never get to the mastertape, you have the advantage that your starting point is better than with digital. Most of the errors are either background noise or self-induced by the signal – it's like you're driving fast down a winding road, though you might cut the corners, overall you've got the right turns at the right points.

With digital you've got to digitise the signal and this process has its overshoots, undershoots and errors, but this time it is not related to the signal causing the machine to do something wrong. Therefore, the things that you do wrong may bear no resemblance to the road, then you would go off the road and come back on, go in the wrong direction and come back on the road – so you're pretty muddy! It's a simple analogy but highlights the point that the nature of your defects is quite important.

DP: So you're saying an analogue system predisposes itself to working, providing you



Whether designing hi-fi or just kicking back and relaxing, Touraj Moghaddam is never far from a stack of vinyl!



Music is never far from the centre of things; Touraj spends long hours listening...



HIS STORY

Touraj Moghaddam started Roksan with fellow Imperial College graduate Tufan Hashemi on 9 August, 1985. He'd previously owned a Linn LP12 turntable, but felt there was something wrong with its sound. While an engineering post-graduate working on a wind turbine project in his fifth year of research at Imperial, he decided to re-engineer the turntable to work in the way he wanted – and ended up with a radically different design. Instead of using a sprung, suspended subchassis it used a novel plinth design and motor installation that allowed a very firm control of the platter speed. He showed the deck to friends, one of whom was Roger Macer at Sound Organisation, who famously said, "are you serious about making this, because if you are – as soon as you've got one, I want to know."

Touraj duly took the deck into full production, and Roksan grew very quickly, challenging the (then) hegemony of the Linn Sondek by offering a more focused, precise sound. Christened the Xerxes, it was named after a Persian king. In 1991, the TMS statement turntable was launched, and Roksan launched a range of loudspeakers using a novel sprung tweeter mounting. Amplifiers and compact disc players followed, and the company has a very wide range of products. As this month's group test shows, they're still very accomplished!



keep pretty close to the signal. The errors in the analogue system are sympathetic errors, which don't really detract as far as the human auditory system is concerned, from the music?

TM: Sure. Analogue may not exactly give you the dynamics and the amplitude that is there, but it's still working and the errors that are there are related to the music. When CD first came out, they found that despite the fact that the noise floor is so much below an analogue noise floor, but because it's random it causes psycho-acoustic effects that are unpleasant. So the solution was to dump normal noise on top of this to bury it, to dither it so that you're not disturbed as much as you were before! It still is there, that non-linear noise, and it may be that this non-linear noise is what causes some of the unpleasantness of digital. So in the digital domain, you've already put the seal of approval to normal analogue noise!

Music is an art form, which probably communicates feeling more than any other. And because of that, just having numbers at the other end, isn't enough. Because how these numbers are related to the final analogue waveform, that's crucial. You still have that barrier of how is this translated from that media to this media, and the more 'brains' you've got in the system, the more problems you actually introduce. Most DACs are processors, they're computers doing many things and there are issues that may not be immediately visible buried within your clocks and your data.

DP: It's a fascinating point because there are still a lot of people who think 'bits are bits'...

TM: Absolutely, there's nothing wrong with getting all the bits at the other end, but it needs to be correctly translated at the end! And how it's translated. Take jitter for example – there are so many different types, it encompasses millions of things. It's like saying "there are corruptions", but what kind of corruptions? You can have clock jitter, data jitter, power supply jitter – but how do you know exactly where it's coming from and how to deal with it? I mean,

The weakest link is very important. If you don't design in that way, you can throw money and time away...

you've got CD players for example, which have orders of magnitude less jitter, but they don't necessarily sound better. I'd be sitting there thinking, "wait a minute, I've sorted out all this jitter, but it doesn't sound better!"

DP: I've often wondered why transports don't sound the same, and why jitter alone doesn't account for those sonic differences...

TM: If you take a transport and make it lower jitter without affecting other things, it will

probably sound better. But even like-for-like, we have had systems where we tie down the jitter to a certain point but you're not doing certain things with the machine and you find that it's not actually making things sound any better. Then for the same amount of effort and energy and money you put that in some other areas of the machine, and you can make it sound better. What I mean is that jitter is not the be all and end all.

DP: Because jitter is an aggregate term of digital errors...

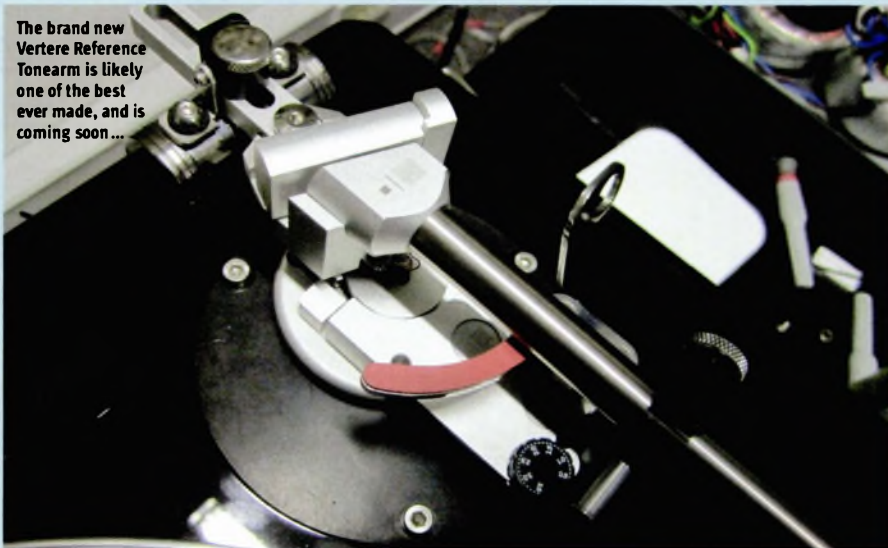
TM: Yes, you need to know which errors – not just that it has jitter. The point is you've got to find the weakest link. With jitter you've got a multitude of sources that this thing can come from – and there's no point in addressing one source if you ignore another. So you think, "do I need to address something that's not necessarily the weakest link?" You should go back and address the other things first, and get them all up to the same level.

DP: Going back to your car driving down a winding road example, you're saying that it's not just about having a powerful engine? You're saying that jitter in a way is absolutely valid but it's only one aspect of a whole system...

TM: Exactly. In the way it works, a CD player isn't that dissimilar to a record player, although your starting points are different – with a record ▶

FEATURE VERTERE INTERVIEW

The brand new Vertere Reference Tonearm is likely one of the best ever made, and is coming soon...



player you're measuring the groove, and the stylus knows where the groove is, so you can – by indexing back to the stylus – measure that groove quite accurately. With a CD player, because there's no physical contact with the media, you need a servo system to track that data, and this has a huge bearing on things. As you're servo-ing, all your power supplies are changing – you can see all the modulations that come on to the power supply, the noises that are generated. Then you have to look at,

There's no point in having an aircraft where the wings are strong, but the fuselage collapses every time you fly!

for example, the lens, which needs to be light, so it gets barbecued by external vibrations! You have to then isolate the transport. Some of these considerations may have an effect on jitter, but not necessarily on the way we measure it now. You look at a clock, for example – where is this relative to the D/A converter and the servo controller IC, because all these things are locking on to a clock. And here, even if you can't measure the jitter accurately, they may still have an effect on the sound.

Our ears are our monitoring system, our measuring machine – and our ultimate one is our 'ear meter'. A head of a nut or a bolt on a Formula 1 car being rough or polished may have an effect on lap time, but I can guarantee if you roughen all the nuts on my car it wouldn't make any difference! It's a totally different level to what the other one is working at. So you then come back and say this is the thing we all use at home, and what is important here?

DP: So the art of doing digital well is to get everything to a certain level, rather than push too hard on one aspect and forget others?

TM: For sure. The weakest link is very important. If you don't do it that way, you can throw money and time away. It's a chain, you

want every link welded the same, shaped the same, marked the same. It will always break on one link, but you want to go to an extent when you're almost breaking all the links. There's no point in having an aircraft where the wings are so strong but the fuselage collapses every time you fly!

When you look at vinyl replay, I was almost certain that the weakest link was the tonearm. With my new arm we went all out and yeah, it was a weak link – a bigger one than I thought it was. But you don't know that until you go all out. That gives you the platform for all the other possibilities. The motor on a turntable is another weak link, by far the weakest...

DP: It always amuses me how turntable manufacturers make a big deal about various aspects of their lovely new designs, and then you find it's running a cheap little motor found on 100s of others! Direct drive seems an interesting way to go, is it the answer?

TM: Well it's a motor! If you can design a direct drive motor beautifully, one that's so noiseless, why can't you put it outside? Don't couple it – there'll be less noise! Then have the belt, you have a lower frequency, you can filter more things out. You can argue that the belt can have a varying tension and whatever, but then the Xerxes addressed that 25 years ago – you had the motor on a bearing and it would take up any undulations on the belt, and it would keep a constant tension. So why stick the motor on the platter again? The motor is the culprit – it's where you get the music and all the crap that goes with it! And unfortunately if you switch it off you get no music!

DP: And funnily on a digital disc system it's the same principle in a way, isn't it? The motor and the servo together...

TM: Sure, absolutely. They get you the information, but what they need to do to get the information is what screws up everything. That's what you've to look out for – the weakest links! Only then can you get the balance right.

VERTERE

The story started about six years ago, when Touraj Moghaddam started doubting the cables he'd been using as a reference. He'd previously thought that while interconnects change the tonality of the music, they didn't have a profound effect on the signal. Experimentation led him to the realisation he was wrong. The 'very high quality' microphone cable he'd always used didn't seem right. "Maybe we need to look at this, maybe this is a weak link", he remembers saying.

He then "looked at what is already being addressed and what is not being addressed" with cables, and came up with his own specification which he got made. "The first time I put them in my own system I was shocked by how weak this link actually was", he says. Touraj then set about tailoring his hand-made cable for a variety of applications – from tonearm wiring to preamplifier cables, to speaker leads. He took into consideration everything from impedance to noise floor, and started making some by hand to give to "close hi-fi friends". They proved very popular so he decided to design some that could be machine made; the Pulse B, Pulse R, Pulse C and Pulse X were doing "80 percent" of what the originals did, which gave "really good" results.

Vertere isn't a cable company *per se*. Touraj says there is a lot of great hi-fi manufacturers

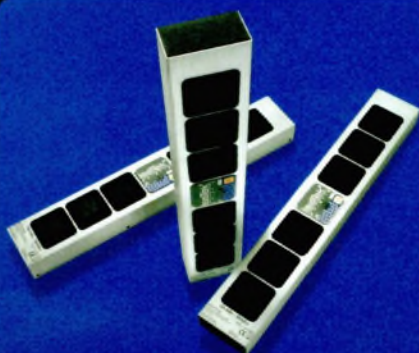
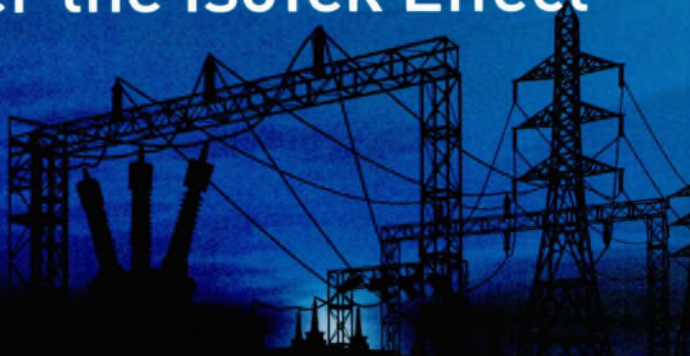


out there, doing some really fine products. For this reason he doesn't feel the need to launch a wide range of products simply for the sake of it. Rather, he seems to be interested in gaps in the market, spaces where he believes things aren't being done as well as they could be. For this reason he's now working on a high-end tonearm – possible the best and most expensive ever made. The Vertere Reference Tonearm sports a titanium armtube and headshell, aluminium bearing assembly cover and stainless counterweight (with tungsten carbide insert). The bearing system is novel and the arm sports an inbuilt cueing light. Price is said to be over £20,000, so don't expect to retro-fit one to your Rega!



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New kid on the block

As newcomer Ophidian Audio unleashes its incredibly heavy Solo loudspeaker, **Malcolm Steward** promises not to give it too easy a ride...

According to Wikipedia, an Ophidian is “a snake-like spirit from Middle-Eastern mythology. They were said to come to a person as they woke up and steal their memories, especially the memories of what had happened to them while they were in the world ruled by Morpheus.” Quite what this has to do with two-way loudspeaker design I don’t know. I couldn’t see a single serpentine influence anywhere in the Ophidian Solo I received for review.

The Ophidian Solo is, as the figures clearly reveal, a compact bookshelf loudspeaker, and one that is quite seriously weighty. I have always been fond of weighty bookshelf, or more correctly standmount, loudspeakers as the weight generally signals robust drive units housed in well-considered, albeit compact, cabinetry.

The Solo is, I feel, a particularly fine-looking loudspeaker, too. It looks far more elegant than one would expect for the first loudspeaker from a new company. Fundamental to that company’s stated belief is that all three constituent elements – drive units, crossover, and cabinet, should be held in equal regard such that “there is no weak link in the chain”.

Ophidian boasts that its cabinet design is ground-breaking and unique, and I admit that the Solo cabinet is certainly very different to most that I have come across. Its distinctive wood/aluminium construction put me in mind of the Boston Lynnfield 300L I reviewed back in 1993 – another heavyweight ‘bookshelf’ design, albeit technically a very different offering to the Solo. The Solo cabinet is built in the UK – which is fairly unusual in itself nowadays – and features a highly distinctive loading arrangement on the front of the bass-midrange driver that ensures that “distortion products continue to be filtered as volume is increased leading to cleaner sound at all output levels.”

The designer described its operation thus: “The driver is mounted to the rear of the baffle in a shallow locating recess the width of the unit. Directly in front is a recess the width of the driver suspension, which forms the first chamber. The output then travels through a smaller aperture and out through the grill. Essentially the filter effect is determined by a combination of the volume of air within the first chamber, area across the first chamber and final aperture and their respective lengths. As the chamber width is limited by driver diameter an electrical crossover is still needed to produce a steep enough low pass.”

My query is how the loudspeaker decides whether what it perceives to be distortion should – or not – be filtered: obviously if the driver is generating it then it ought not be there, but if it is part of the recording then it should be left alone.

The Solo delivered an image of Ellington’s piano that had weight and muscular authority

This query came up during the listening sessions when we auditioned the speaker using the Zakk Wylde album *Book Cf Shadows* where Mr Wylde’s Marshall stack is cranked up to 11. I am positive the distortion is intended to be heard here, but the Solo didn’t seem to agree and appeared to be trying to polish the sound, which wasn’t really the desired effect.

Ophidian Audio says “High output, low distortion drive units maximise dynamic range and capture the full energy of every recording.” That ought to be every recording except Zakk Wylde’s *Book cf Shadows*, because the Solo did not generate the contrast and chiaroscuro I or other listeners would expect.

► DETAILS

PRODUCT: Ophidian Audio Solo
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Standmount loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 9kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 224x303x240mm
FEATURES:
• 46Hz - 30kHz claimed freq resp
• Nominal impedance 8ohms
• Average efficiency 86dB
• Crossover frequency: 1.9kHz
• Recommended amplifier power: 30-60w
TELEPHONE: 0151 6325180
WEBSITE: ophidianaudio.co.uk

The Solo is described as port-loaded but I could not find the usual accoutrements that accompany ported speakers: there was, for example, no length of plastic tubing exiting the rear panel. However, as I was starting to discover with the Solo, all was not as one might expect.

Gareth James, the designer told me how the loading worked: “The port begins as two separate ducts on the inside front edges of the cabinet. The ports travel to the back, merge into one and vent through the front aperture above the tweeter. This long port system is dictated by the main drive unit’s characteristics.”

I set up the Solo 30cm from the rear wall and at least 2m from the side walls on 24in Atacama stands with the enclosures sitting on Valhalla Technology VT15 elastomer pads. I wired the speakers to a Naim Supernait/Hi-Cap amplifier combination using Atlas Mavros speaker cable.

Sound quality

The Solo seemed to exhibit a real affection for modern jazz. On Al Di Meola’s *Elegant Gypsy* it articulated the blinding speed of his guitar picking brilliantly. It also conveyed the percussion playing with equal dexterity. Furthermore, it handled



Q&A

Gareth Jones
Ophidian Audio



MS: I saw no dealer list on the Ophidian Audio website, why?

GJ: Ophidian Audio currently deals directly with its customers as I feel this offers the customer greater value for money, not to mention direct support.

How did the company come about?

After university I was pursuing work in several areas of AV including live sound and installation work. While I enjoyed this, the design of loudspeakers had always been my main interest so I kept designing in my spare time both pro-audio/live sound products and hi-fi.

I suspect that the Solo was not your first design?

I'm not sure if it's possible to quantify how many designs I've worked through over the past few years as some were unique and many more variations on a theme. Solo certainly wasn't the first complete design, though.

Is the Solo the first of many Ophidian loudspeakers that we can expect to see?

When I had made the decision to concentrate on hi-fi, I eventually produced a first prototype of what was originally planned to be the debut Ophidian loudspeaker (still yet to see the light of day). This prototype was rather more complex in terms of cabinet build than Solo and is 'on the shelf' for now – but elements from that design influenced Solo.

Looking to the future, there are several other products in the pipeline, the first of which will be a lower-priced stereo pair to complement Solo. Centre speaker versions of both, as well as matched subwoofers are also in the works so that full surround systems can be constructed.

How many people are there on the Ophidian payroll?

Currently, Ophidian is just myself although I take a lot of help and advice from my friends and family!

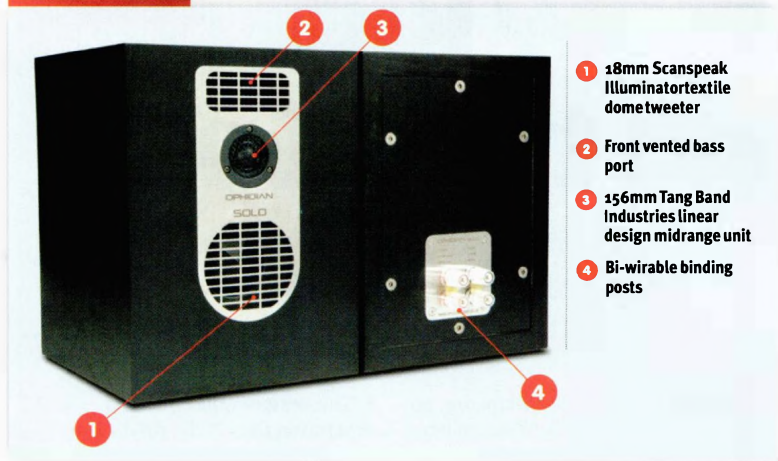


THE OPHIDIAN SOLO might be a stand mounting two-way but that doesn't mean that you can take little care about the system in which it is installed.

I found, for example, that it gave a superior performance with a ridiculously expensive – in comparison – £23,000 valve amplifier set-up than it did with the regular, staple, integrated – the sub-£3,000 Naim Supernait and Hi-Cap that I would normally use with such loudspeakers.

The fact that the Solo could highlight such differences in the performance of amplifiers as dramatically as it did suggests that care with partnering equipment is mandatory. It rather reinforces the long-held premise that what is upstream of the loudspeaker is considerably more significant than the loudspeaker itself, but it is what comes at the front end that truly matters.

IN SIGHT



- 1 18mm Scanspeak Illuminator textile dome tweeter
- 2 Front vented bass port
- 3 156mm Tang Band Industries linear design midrange unit
- 4 Bi-wirable binding posts

bass authoritatively even though it was not particularly extended or powerful in the low frequencies.

A favourite jazz album, *Art Pepper – Meets The Rhythm Section* and the track *You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To* fared slightly less well. The portrayal was fundamentally fine, but the Solo seemed to miss some of the air around the saxophone, and the drum sound seemed a bit closed in. This 96kHz rip from the 1957 vinyl is unusually and vividly open with an energetic and effusive presentation, but the Solo didn't convey this as well as expected. Importantly, though, Pepper's playing still grooved and the interplay between him and the band was clearly apparent; the music cohered and communicated, but the sound was not quite as compelling as it can be. This problem abated when I introduced different amplification.

The Solo also appeared to revel in other acoustic-based music and gave a thoroughly welcome, detailed, vivid, and musically informative portrayal of Vivid Curve's *Live At Edgefield*: it presented the electro-acoustic guitar with all its abrupt leading-edge attack and tonal colour, presented the percussion with appropriate verve and detail, and conveyed the didgeridoo with true adroitness, highlighting the range of colour, texture and overtones the player elicited from the instrument and truly brought its droning timbre to life. The Solo showed quite magnificently on this live recording, conveying all the energy of the event and it rendered its portrayal thoroughly compellingly.

The 16/44 rip of the Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong's *Duke's Place – The Great Reunion* also clearly demonstrated that the Solo knew how to swing. It could also cast a

soundstage well outside the confines of the placement of its cabinets and created a real sensation of immersion in the music. It delivered an image of Ellington's piano that had true weight and muscular authority. It also generated a vivid impression of Satchmo's expressive voice and singular phrasing, which gave the recording an added authenticity.

Conclusion

I took the opportunity to listen to the Solo on the end of the Audio Research Reference DAC and Reference 75 power amplifier combination through a pair of TelluriumQ Ultra Black speaker cables. The Solo loved this £8,495 power amplifier and appeared to be a far more accommodating partner to it than it was to the significantly less expensive Naim Supernait/Hi-Cap integrated design. In fact, all the criticism I had expressed disappeared with the tubed behemoth, which elicited a performance that combined the best of high-end and the finest musicality, even with the troublesome Zakk Wyld selection. Snake-like entities obviously prefer high-end valves it seems! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



BUILD QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



LIKE: Fine high-end performance especially with transparent valve amplification

DISLIKE: It took a lot of messing about to extract the finest performance

WE SAY: Once suitably partnered the Solo gave an excellent performance

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Sansational!

Sansui is back with a range of affordable kit, the cornerstone of which is the SAP 201V amplifier. **Ed Selley** tries it with the WLD+201LX streamer...

Sansui was one of the major Japanese audio brands of the sixties and seventies, and produced some extremely impressive and innovative designs during that time. Now it has returned with a three-strong range of audio components and a lifestyle system. The SAP-201V is the integrated amplifier of the range and is yours for £300, and can be matched with the CDD-201 CD player or the more technically interesting WLD+201LX network streamer at £350. We reviewed an early production sample several months back, but before you here is the very latest version.

For the asking price, this is an impressively specified pairing. As well as a claimed power output of 40W into 8ohms, the SAP 201V is fitted with three line inputs, a tape loop, a moving magnet phono stage and digital inputs. Additionally you also get a headphone amplifier and full remote control. This is an unusually lavish fitment at or anywhere near the price. The digital inputs in particular are a welcome addition and are capable of receiving high resolution audio.

The WLD+201LX network streamer works over wired and wireless networks, and also makes a positive first impression. As well as UPnP

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Sansui SAV201V
TYPE: Amplifier
WEIGHT:
6.3kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
430x80x283 mm
PRODUCT:
Sansui WLD+201LX
TYPE: Streamer
WEIGHT:
6.3kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
430x80x283 mm
DISTRIBUTOR:
Henley Designs
TELEPHONE:
0871 2886926
WEBSITE:
sansui.co.uk

streaming it will replay audio over USB and offers internet radio via vTuner as well as an internal DAB and FM tuner. Sansui has put considerable thought into making the unit simple to use as it reasons (quite correctly) that it is likely to be the first streamer a customer might own. As such, the setup wizard is brilliantly logical – I went from opening the box to streaming a song in less than three minutes – and a FLAC ripping program is also provided with the unit, as is a free iOS remote program.

The news isn't all good though. While the amplifier can handle a high-resolution signal the streamer is limited to 24/48kHz. Sansui argues with some justification that the bulk of material the unit is likely to play is going to be CD rips but the competition is hotting up and many rivals now offer support up to 24/96kHz. The good news is the unit doesn't make horrible noises when a hi-res file is selected by mistake.

The Sansuis are of all metal construction and actually feel very



The Sansui WLD+201LX (top) and SAP 201V: thankfully beauty is more than skin deep

doesn't feel as quite as substantial as offerings from Denon or Marantz.

The streamer is supplied with a full-sized 'system driving' remote that will control other models in the range. This is good news because the amplifier remote is horrible. More and more units are being supplied with 'credit card' sized handsets but at 8cm tall by 3.5cm wide, the Sansui unit is smaller than that. The buttons have a nasty habit of sticking and sensitivity is indifferent. The good news is that the system remote is available as a cost option but it does rather detract from the amp as it's the most common point of contact.

Sound quality

With the duo connected to a pair of my Audio Design 1920s the initial impressions suggest that (perhaps thankfully) beauty is more than skin deep in this instance. There is much to like about the Sansuis and a slightly politically incorrect saying about ugly people having to try harder to please might hold some water here. Starting with a 16/44.1kHz rip of Gary Jules's *Trading Snakeoil for Wolfickets* reveals the pairing to have an open and natural presentation that manages to sound believably real and extremely likeable.

Much of this is down to the impressive tonality that the duo seems to possess. Voices are loaded with detail and tricky instruments like clarinets and flutes manage to sound right, which is something that can be a challenge for pairings that cost rather more than this. Substitute a more expensive streamer in place of the WLD+201LX and there is a sense that the Sansui has slightly lightweight bass and doesn't have quite the same 'etched' detail that more sophisticated

products can offer, but equally it never sounds harsh or fatiguing and it is never less than musical. I preferred the performance of the streamer doing its own decoding to hooking up over the digital connection, but the differences were small.

In use, the WLD+201LX is impressively stable and hassle free. I mainly used it over wireless and experienced no dropouts or interference. The data buffer in the unit seems fairly small, however, so any interference with the server can cause an interruption if it is made to momentarily drop the stream. The app is slightly clunky

Pleasantly 'no nonsense' in build and operation, and the decision to offer a streaming option is a good one

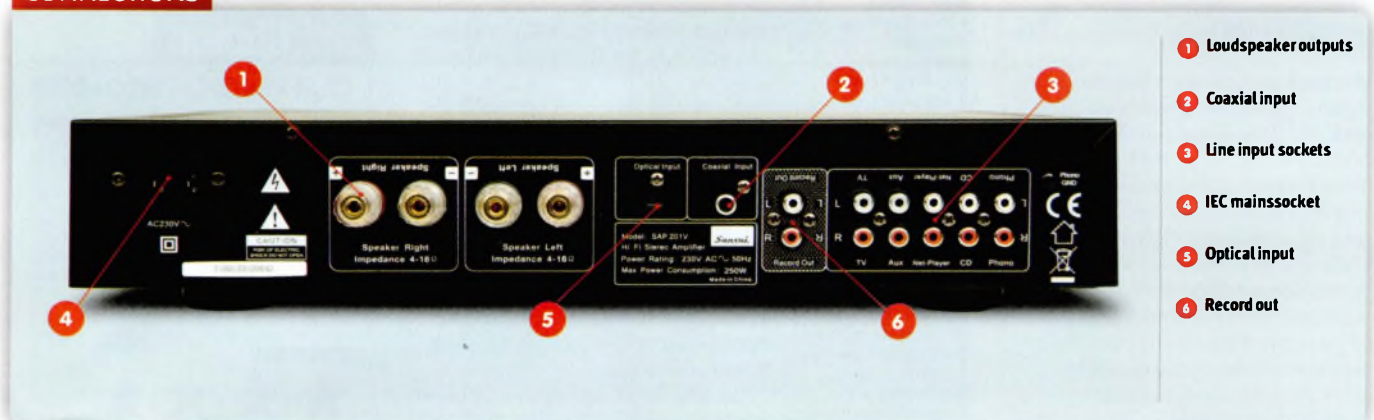
as well. There doesn't seem to be any jump to a letter function and going back 'out' of an album file means you go back to the top of the album list. Sadly, the Sansui doesn't seem to be compatible with some of the universal UPnP remotes that offer a slightly slicker experience. The ripping software is very good, however, considering it is a freebie. It is fast, has a good data look up and produced perfectly listenable rips.

The amp is similarly benign. There is a slight sibilance to the very top end, but nothing too severe and the overall balance of the Sansui is encouragingly smooth even with relatively poor recordings.

Switch to something more up-tempo like the eponymously titled album from Django Django and the Sansui reveals an impressive sense of timing. It is a lively and upbeat

sturdy, but it would take a fair stretch of the imagination to call them pretty. The fronts are dominated by large displays that can't be switched off and, in the case of the amplifier in particular the amount of information shown isn't especially useful. Because the design of the two units is so different, they don't feel like they are supposed to be partnered. The controls certainly feel solid enough, but the pairing

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Paul Mitchell

MD, Sansui UK



ES: The Sansui brand has been dormant in the UK for some time now. Do you feel it still has a cache or does this represent starting with a clean slate?

PM: The brand seems certainly to still have cache and there has been a good response from both dealers and customers alike. However, in reality Sansui UK is a new business and very much a British company that has rights to the brand in this market. The design and specification of all the new models are from the UK business, no one else. In this regard the brand is very much working from a clean slate.

Does the company have any additional products planned for the near future?

The next products will be a DAB/FM tuner and also a full-size digital-to-analogue converter.

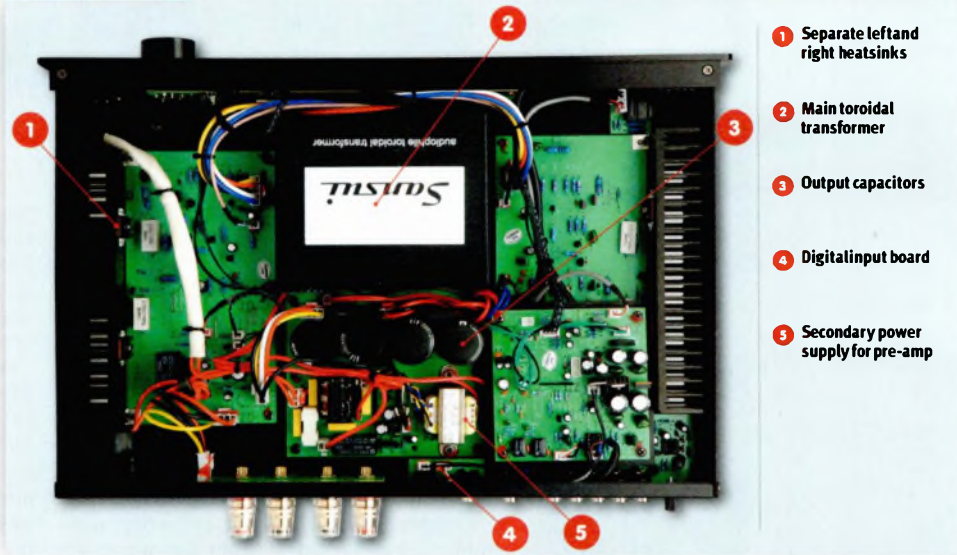
Does the company feel that the future of digital playback is a dedicated streamer or does the digital input on the amplifier point more towards a feeling that there may be other options?

Obviously there is a number of ways for a customer to stream digital music and the barriers to entry in this market are being lowered all the time. We designed our amplifier to offer an entry-level solution with digital connections to allow consumers to take advantage of many of these new digital music devices at the entry price point. We also designed it to work specifically with our own network streamer via digital connection.

Are there any speakers that the company feels work especially well with Sansui electronics?

We have tested many different brands and types of speaker with our amplifier and many have performed very well when tested. However, I think speaker performance varies so much depending on the specific application and is very much a matter of personal preference and therefore we prefer to leave it to the customer to decide what sounds the best for them at their budget.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Separate left and right heatsinks
- 2 Main toroidal transformer
- 3 Output capacitors
- 4 Digital input board
- 5 Secondary power supply for pre-amp



THIS SANSUI PAIR is a worthy comparison with the Denon 720 series and Marantz 6004s, which have been reviewed recently. Priced exactly between the two, the decision to offer a network player at this price point and fit the amplifier with digital inputs makes the 201s the more flexible system here. Compared with a straight CD player, the limited high res support of the WLD-201LX is less significant. The Sansui can't match the aesthetics of the D&M cousins and the PMA-720AE amplifier offers superior audio performance. Other competition comes from the NADC316BEE which undercuts the Sansui amp but loses this advantage when partnered with the pricier C446 streamer. Cambridge Audio offers the more keenly priced 351A amp and NP30 streamer but these suffer from even more of a design mismatch than the Sansuis as they are different sizes. The Sansuis have plenty of competition but they are a competitively priced and capable duo.

performer that can usually get a head nodding. Bass is not the most seismic on offer but I would always plump for an amp able to keep up with lively material over one that hits harder but does so half a beat after it was supposed to.

Conclusion

The 40W figure for the amplifier seems believable and the Sansui should have enough headroom for most listeners provided that your speakers are reasonably sensitive. Push it to very high levels and there is a hardening of the sound but nothing too severe and overall the Sansui does a commendable job of keeping things civilised when seriously provoked.

The digital inputs on the amplifier are a pleasant surprise, too. They have the same basic tonal balance as the analogue inputs and connection is both seamless and consistent. In a perfect world, a USB input might have been a more useful addition than the coaxial one supplied, but there are undoubtedly limits to what you can achieve for £300 – and you can also buy a converter if you really need to.

The phono stage is a little less convincing. It produced a reasonable enough level but sounded a little soft with a Rega RP6 connected to it. As a method of doing some incidental listening it is adequate, but the relatively plentiful nature of the analogue inputs means that you would be able to make use of a better-quality external phono stage if you wanted to.

The SAP 201V and WLD+201X are a welcome addition to the ranks of

budget hi-fi. They are pleasantly 'no nonsense' in both build and operation and I think that the decision to offer a streaming option at this price point is a good one. The competition is intense and many brands offer rather greater aesthetic appeal than the slightly frumpy Sansui, but the balance of sonics and features should win this system many friends ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT- SAP 201V

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Excellent feature set; lively and detailed sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: It's not a looker; awful remote control; slight top end sibilance
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A strong addition to the budget amplifier ranks that offers impressive performance and a useful feature list
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT- WLD+201X

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Smooth; enjoyable sound; easy to set up
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Limited high res support; slightly clunky smartphone app
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: An easy to use and enjoyable sounding network player that offers a straightforward intro to network audio
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





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Big hitter

If components can punch above their weight the Zdac is a Cassius Clay among DA converters as **Malcolm Steward** discovers

To most audiophiles, the Parasound Zdac would seem to be aimed primarily at the high-end desktop listener and at those who want to extract hi-resolution music from their computers: Parasound is an American company and it seems that folks in that country tend to be more fond of the Computer and DAC approach than we are in the UK. We tend to prefer fully networked music, channelling tunes from a remote computer or NAS to UPnP players in our systems rather than transporting it to our listening rooms on our laptop computers then squirting it into a DAC through a USB cable.

Parasound noted that it employed the talents of "acclaimed Danish digital experts Holm Acoustics," (the

company that helped it with its critically acclaimed Halo CD1 premium CD player), to assist with the Zdac. That seems a remarkably honest admission for a company from the land where the 'not invented here syndrome' originated.

The 24/192 Zdac is part of the Z range of Parasound's half rack-space components that includes two-channel power amplifiers, an FM/AM tuner, a stereo pre-amplifier with video, a CD player, a phono pre-amplifier, a local area cooling fan – for cooling your rack-mounted gear – and a five-way speaker selector. The compact units, according to the manufacturer, are "Perfect for an office, bedroom, restaurant, bar or anywhere outstanding sound quality and compact size are needed."

▣ DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Parasound Zdac
ORIGIN:
Taiwan
TYPE:
Up-sampling digital-to-analogue converter and class A headphone amplifier
WEIGHT:
2.3kg
DIMENSIONS:
(HxWxD)
51 x 220 x 254 mm
FEATURES:
• Asynchronous USB
• Optical and coaxial inputs
• Class A headphone amplifier
• Balanced and unbalanced line-level audio outputs
DISTRIBUTOR:
S-AV Distribution
TELEPHONE:
0843 2897195
WEBSITE:
parasound.com

The specifications of the Zdac look impressive – highly impressive given its competitive price – and its features help it stand out alongside its burgeoning competition. It comes in two finishes – silver and black, with only the latter coloured units being available with rack-mount options. The 24-bit/192kHz capable design features an asynchronous USB, optical and coaxial input along with a class A headphone amplifier, and balanced and unbalanced line-level audio outputs. The design can run straight into a power amplifier if you so wish – provided your digital source component offers volume control. All round that is a commendable amount of features squeezed into a compact enclosure.

We were supplied with the silver – non-rack-mount– version of the Zdac and having only removed it from its packing one could immediately detect reasons why pride of ownership featured highly on the maker's list of objectives. To begin, the slim, tidy-looking aluminium unit weighs in at a robust 2.3kg – that is 5lb in old money – suggesting that no one has scrimped on the power supply design. The



Zdac is unusual in not coming with a tuppence-ha'ppeny, plug-top or laptop style switched mode power supply, which appears to be the accepted norm these days. I say this and admit that there is nothing wrong with switched mode supplies *per se* except that the vast majority are designed for shavers and mobile phones rather than audio applications. The Zdac uses a regular IEC-type power cable to feed its internal linear regulated power supply, whose transformer accounts for the vast majority of the weight of the unit.

Another sign that sound quality is a priority with this design is the connection section of the instruction manual wherein Parasound advises using a 75ohm digital cable terminated in a BNC connector – in preference to a phono plug-BNC adaptor – if the source is BNC-equipped to avoid introducing signal reflections causing jitter. All the inputs, though, feature jitter reduction and are re-clocked and upsampled to 422kHz/24-bit, assures Parasound.

Sound quality

I listened to the Zdac two ways: first I tried it in the American guise, connecting it to my lap-top and then to my Naim multiple amplifier Neat XL10 reference system in my music room, and then I did the more British thing and connected it to the digital output of my desktop UPnP player and auditioned it with a selection of headphones.

In terms of audio outputs, the Zdac offers two varieties: balanced through XLR and unbalanced through phonos. Both connections are simultaneously live so you could use one to feed your main hi-fi and the other to connect a multi-room controller if you so desired. There is, of course, also the headphone output through a front-panel 3.5mm jack, which features a volume control.

I began my listening by connecting the Zdac to my Windows 7 laptop opting not to use the USB cable that was supplied in the box, but the 3.5m Atlas Element USB that I had recently reviewed and had quickly grown to appreciate for its balanced and invigorating performance.

It swiftly became apparent that the Zdac benefitted from a warm up, sounding more detailed and robust as the first few albums played to their conclusion. Track by track the presentation of the Zdac became sweeter, fuller and more detailed... and more musically rewarding, most importantly. So I left the Zdac to warm up thoroughly and came back to it after it had been powered up and playing for a few days: the changes in its 'voice' were both remarkable and profound.

I recommended listening with a selection of rips from various albums by the extraordinarily tasteful guitarist, Bill Frisell. Frisell is a great user of the space between notes and is the complete antithesis to the 'shredder'-style plank spankers that look upon the likes of Eddie Van Halen as heroes. Frisell creates hypnotic melodies using, for example, spartan lead lines played over repetitive Echoplexed loops.

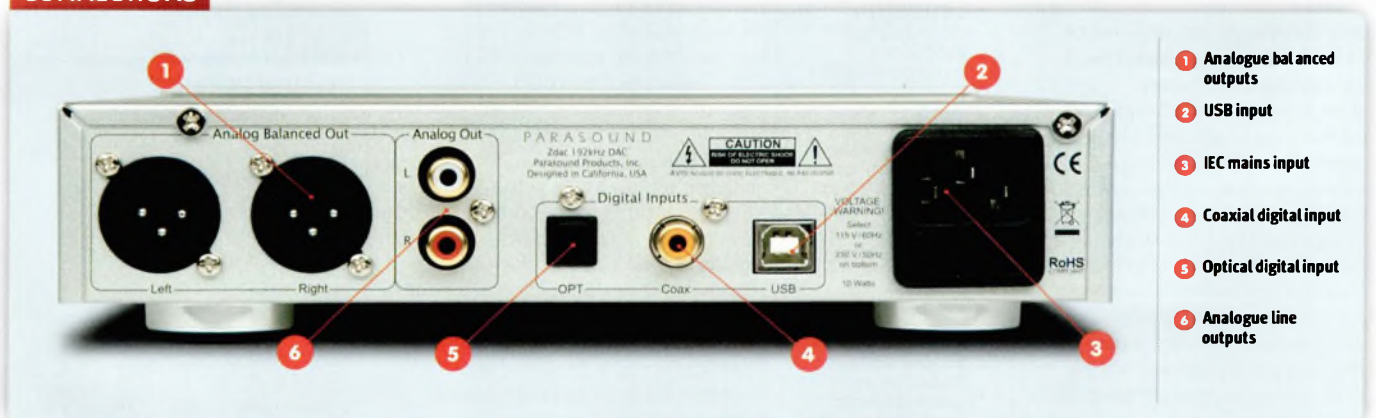
After having enjoyed another 24-hours worth of warm up voltage, the Zdac seemed happier than it was the day before and its performance advanced another stage, its sound becoming fuller, more powerful and cohesive. It became more believable and closer to reality: it was more analogue. In fact, the Zdac began to creep closer toward my £2,000+ reference Naim DAC (£5,000 if

The Zdac emphasised those elements within the playing that were of musical importance

you include its power supply), which is no mean feat for something that only costs £499. My fears of the Parasound Zdac sounding like a custom-install product were rapidly being allayed. It appeared to have a sound that smacked of true class.

Listening to the agreeable tones of Bill Frisell's guitar playing *Mi Declaración* from his album with Vinicius Cantuária, *Lagrimas Mexicanas*, I was impressed initially by the power and control the Zdac demonstrated in the low frequencies. It did not have the ruthlessly tight grip or propulsive power of my Naim but it was none too far off, and did not sound at all lightweight nor bloated and soft, a trap which I have heard many other DACs fall into. It was also forthcoming about the detailing, tone and timbre of all the instrumentation featured – both strung and percussive. More importantly, the Zdac made the track coherent and emphasised those elements within the playing that were of musical importance.

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Richard Schram

Parasound managing director



MS: Who do you see as the primary customer for the Zdac?

RS: Nearly every audio enthusiast and music lover are potential customers. First, the serious audio enthusiast wanting to upgrade from his present DAC. Second the enthusiast who is buying his first DAC. Third, people using a PC or Mac as their primary source component. Fourth, people with multi-room systems: ie, Sonos has excellent wireless capability but the DACs built into its Connect are a weak link. A Sonos with a Zdac + Zamp v.3 power amp sounds amazingly lifelike. Also, the audio enthusiast who owns an excellent DAC and wants to see if the less expensive Zdac sounds better.

Was avoiding the switched diode power supply purely a sound quality consideration?

Yes... and no. We avoided the ubiquitous wall wart power adapter (most are switch mode power supplies) because these are crude compared with the quality and substance of power supplies we are accustomed to building.

We avoided a switch mode built-in power supply to avoid any possibility of EMC interference with the high frequency to which the digital data is reclocked and upsampled in the Zdac. Parasound customers equate our brand with substance and long product life. We wouldn't let them down.

Was the Zdac deliberately voiced to have a charmingly sweet but very dynamic character?

Truth: it wasn't voiced at all and we had no target sound. The charmingly sweet and dynamic quality is a concise way of saying how undigital the Zdac sounds? That is the result of inspired design and years of experience. Parts were selected based on their performance in other models. We know how a product will sound when known parts are used in circuits which are the best possible, PCB layout is optimum and assembly is impeccable.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Headphone amplifier stage
- 2 IEC mainspower input
- 3 RCA single-ended output stage
- 4 WeiKang toroidal power supply transformer

HOW IT COMPARES

THE COMPETITIVELY PRICED Zdac faces a host of sub-£500 rivals – Furutech's ADL GT40, the Cambridge Audio DacMagic, the Arcam rDAC and the CEntrance DACmini, a USB DAC/headphone amplifier, which was perhaps the closest level-playing-field competitor. I used it with its supplied PSU not any third-party addition for my comparisons.

If you want a DAC/headphone amp that you can upgrade, you need to look at the CEntrance DACmini, which you can pimp to the max with the Red Wine Audio Black Lightning LFP battery supply. However, the stock version of the Zdac is a shockingly capable performer and it is price competitive with the untweaked DACmini. I would be content to have either of them on my desktop as there is not a massive difference in their capabilities.

The Zdac is gloriously analogue sounding and that is a particularly alluring facility, especially at its ridiculously low price, which could be doubled and it would still remain one hell of a bargain.

The real surprise with the Zdac was its performance as a headphone amplifier. Used driving my Focal Spirit Ones and taking a digital input from my Naim UnitiQute, the Zdac gave a performance that was thoroughly entertaining – it was neutral, detailed, dynamic, rhythmically responsive and great fun. It also had a seemingly genuine full-range quality, not leaving me with the usual cheated feeling I have after a headphone listening session.

Conclusion

Listening to a rip of the Emeli Sande album *Our Version of Events* (Special Edition), with tracks including *Read All About It (Part III)* and *Clown*, her impassioned voice and equally committed piano playing were movingly conveyed. Even with a singer of Sande's class it takes more than a sterling performance to prevent me from discarding the headphones as soon as I can. The Zdac, however, had me flicking through my library looking for yet another track to play. I finally stopped on *Just As Was Told* by Lift To Experience from their album *The Texas-Jerusalem Crossroads*, which is about as far as music finds it possible to get from piano-tinkling soulful Scottish chanteuses. It was quite entrancingly left-field.

I even ventured into the classical corner of my library and sat and enjoyed a little Tchaikovsky – the relaxing *Allegro Tranquillo (Dreams of a Winter Journey)* from his first Symphony. I appreciated the way the Zdac scavenged a wealth of detail from the music (a 24-bit download) without making its scrupulous

investigation appear anything but totally natural. It did not retrieve this information in such a way as to detract from the natural ebb and flow of the composition but rather the detailing augmented it.

I also visited the jazz section – encouraged by the revealing performance the Zdac offered – and found myself playing the 24-bit/96kHz rip of *Y Tú Qué Has Hecho?* from the eponymous Buena Vista Social Club album. This proved to be an absolute delight with the Zdac revelling in the timbre, tone and texture, and dynamics of the guitars, percussion, brass and voices available to it. As with the classical track that preceded it, the entire presentation appeared utterly natural and rich in both musical and aesthetic terms. The pleasure and enjoyment of the musicians was blatantly obvious throughout: it was abundantly clear that a thoroughly good time was being had by everyone concerned – on both sides of the microphones ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY



★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY



★★★★★

FEATURES



★★★★★

OVERALL



★★★★★

LIKE: Persuasive, musically empathetic performance

DISLIKE: It would be better if the USB input were on the front

WE SAY: A musical performance that leaves little to be desired and its price is an absolute steal



LS50 | 50th Anniversary Model

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"This is a cracking little speaker of which KEF's design engineers must be most proud. Sweetly voiced yet highly revealing of source quality, it surprises and delights in equal measure. And boy does it sound big, defying its compact dimensions."

- Hi-Fi News July 2012

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Eastern block

The Poles are coming and this time they're armed with vacuum tubes but as Jason Kennedy discovers this might not be such a bad thing

If you visited the Whittlebury show last year you will have come across one of the most outrageous-looking loudspeakers to appear on this market for quite a while. That was the Universum three-way horn made by Auto-Tech in Poland. It consists of a huge GRP midrange horn with a downward firing bass horn on one side and a horn loaded tweeter above. In the red and yellow paint job at the show, a pair of them looked pretty otherworldly. Speaking to the distributor Greg Drygala at G-Point Audio it seems that this, while not exactly the tip of the iceberg, is just one example of what he likes to call artisan-built Polish audio equipment.

He has a number of brands in his portfolio including Linear Audio Research, which is represented here by its most affordable amplifier, the valve-powered IA-30. This is made by a chap by the name of Eugeniusz Czyzewski who has spent a lot of time working on the professional audio scene in Poland, but decided to build amplifiers for himself and others to use at home. He started things off with a substantial and rather unusual-looking 845 triode monoblock called NAZCA.

The more down to earth IA-30 looks like a lot of amplifier for the money. It weighs that way as well at 15kg and build quality is of a higher standard than many Chinese amplifiers in this price range.

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Linear Audio
Research IA-30

ORIGIN:
Poland

TYPE:
Integrated valve
amplifier

WEIGHT:
15kg

**DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD):**
150 x 430 x 290mm

**ANALOGUE
INPUTS:**
5x RCA phono line

**ANALOGUE
OUTPUTS:**
RCA phono fixed,
Headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR:
G Point Audio

TELEPHONE:
01435 865540

WEBSITE:
gpoint-audio.com

For a start it's a fully dual mono amplifier right down to the mains transformers, it has EL34 pentodes arranged in classic ultralinear or push-pull style for the output stage. It also has that rare beast in a valve integrated, an active preamplifier stage. This consists of a pair of E80CC triodes each of which is powered by a separate power supply. The mains transformers are shared by pre and power stages. The next two valves in the circuit are ECC83 triodes at the input stage of the power amp. Parts are of a high quality too, it has Siemens triodes for small signals, Russian Tung-Sol EL34 pentodes and Vishay resistors alongside an ALPs Blue Velvet volume pot. It would seem that the IA-30 has been built to last.

Line only inputs consist of five pairs of RCA phono sockets of the gold-plated persuasion, there is also a fixed output pair for tape recorders, if such things still exist. The speaker outputs are chunky gold-plated types that accept spades, plugs and bare wire. The casework is well put together and finished with aluminium feet and some lovely VU



The control knobs for input and volume are in stainless steel which is a quality touch, the input one also functioning as an on/off switch. As with many valve amps it doesn't have luxuries like remote control (although this is an optional extra), but there is headphone output on the back panel that cuts out the speaker outputs when in use and thus gives you the full power of the amp. The output is rated at 30W per channel into speakers with a load between 6 and 8ohms, there are no 4/8ohm output taps of the sort that are sometimes found on valve amps.

Sound quality

I put the IA-30 into my regular system with Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamond speakers at one end and the Resolution Audio Cantata CD player/DAC at the other, cables are Townshend Audio throughout. Despite/ because of their size, 802 Diamond speakers are surprisingly easy to drive and better suited to amps like this than you might imagine but they do need a bit of power, happily this was on offer from the I.A.R. There was plenty of welly on Ben Harper's *Roses for My Friends* for instance, that and a strong sense of presence from the singer himself. I liked the degree of grip that the amp delivered, it's not a transistor-style rock-solid bottom end but is arguably more musical than the bass that most such designs deliver. In many ways it's closer to the sound of live acoustic instruments, which rarely make your sternum vibrate. A live kick drum will do this of course and you need some serious current to recreate that, but it doesn't often make it onto the record. This amp is powerful for its type but it's not about shaking the floor, it specialises in fluency and clarity, qualities that easily offset limits in absolute power, unless you're a head banger of course.

It's naturally good on tone, especially voices and even voices shouting out from the audience during Stanley Clarke's solo in *La Canción de Sophia* (Forever – Corea, Clarke & White). But the double bass

playing is what steals the show. It has both weight and speed and a harmonic richness that you have to pay rather more for with solid-state amps.

Next I put a version of Crosby, Stills and Nash's *Guinnevere* on and the harmonies blew me away, you cannot beat valves for getting voices spot on and those voices were of course incredible at their peak. It's enough to turn the most hard hearted into a romantic fool!

I also had Acoustic Energy's brand new standmount, the AE 301, to hand so decided to find out how well the LAR coped with a less sensitive, albeit less revealing, speaker. The answer is, surprisingly well. It allowed the speakers to disappear and leave the soundstage to the musicians, which on this occasion were Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band in live and raucous form. The rough edges were a little smoothed but the music chugged very effectively and you could turn it up without fear of aural

I got lost in one album for much too long, relishing the realism of saxophone and percussion

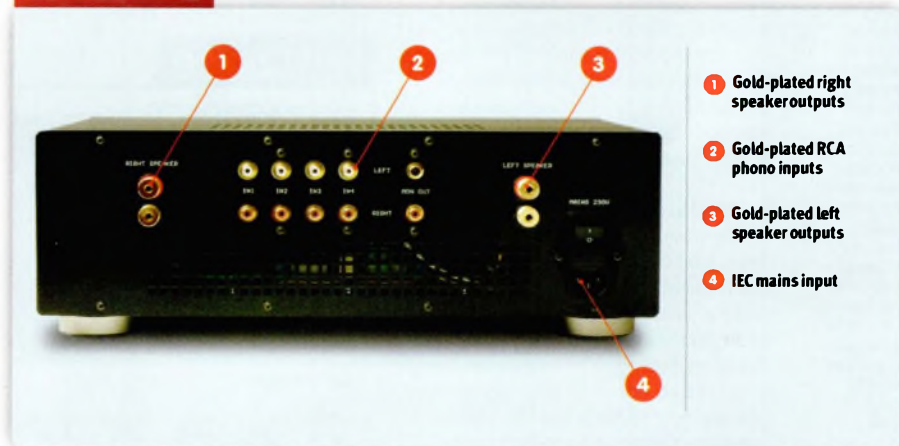
abrasion. The way that pentodes behave when they run out of steam is very forgiving and one of the main reasons for their popularity in guitar amps. It's a distortion, but of a distinctly euphonic variety.

The other quality that the two-way speaker emphasised was timing. Valve amps are not often cited for their capabilities in this area but this one is taut enough to be spot on. It's a more fluent, relaxed style of temporal definition than you get with a good transistor design but one that serves the music well.

This combined with convincing instrument tone is a serious distraction if you need to get stuff done. I got lost in one album for far too long, relishing the realism of saxophone and percussion, not to mention the weight of the bass guitar. It may be due to a lack of absolute linearity in tonal balance but you also seem to hear a lot of detail that is usually not so apparent, things like low-level reverb and quieter elements that flesh out the sound and bring the music to life. My notes are full of references to the sound of instruments and voices – all offer up extra timbral depth and character. This is as much to do with the euphonic sound of valves as it is with transparency, but in many ways the technology puts back what the recording and production processes remove. And they do it so naturally that it enhances the music. This is why people love triodes but pentodes are more even handed, their glasses are only faintly rose-tinted and only those looking for sofa-shoving sound pressure levels can fail to be charmed by the subtle way they bring out the best in the music.

meters on the front panel, these intersect the brushed-aluminium fascia plate in very stylish fashion. The meters don't show how much power is being output but how much power is coming in – the signal strength – which is a very unusual feature. The thinking behind it is related to LAR's forthcoming phono stage, which will have adjustable voltage amplification so that you can get just the right amount of gain, – these meters will then be very useful.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Gold-plated right speaker outputs
- 2 Gold-plated RCA phono inputs
- 3 Gold-plated left speaker outputs
- 4 IEC mains input

Q&A

Eugeniusz Czyzewski

Linear Audio Research designer



JK: You must have a lot of experience with transistor amps, why do you choose to make valve amps?

EC: The choice of valve or transistor is similar to matching components. They all are there for a reason. Synergy comes from know-how, not from choosing the most expensive parts the market offers. This is why we have lots of fully loaded amps offering a mediocre performance for their cost and also a few truly mind-blowing ones which are priced modestly. I prefer to be in the latter camp. I like valves, but my customers keep saying that my vacuum tube-based amps don't sound typically 'valvey'. The same had been said about my solid-state designs, that they are neither cold or thin. That's good – it means the job was done right.

Which speakers do you use for product evaluation?

I am using different ones, as my amplification is dedicated to different products. These are always box speakers, as most customers use them, they include both bookshelf and floorstanding types. Efficiency varies from 84dB to 94dB usually. Among British brands Spendor, Harbeth, ProAc and Castle are my favorites. But also Tannoys, KEFs and B&Ws sometimes appear to help. I am trying to pick up those that seem to be the natural match due to the price, but I know that some of my customers are using four or five times more expensive speakers and still claim to be very happy with the results.

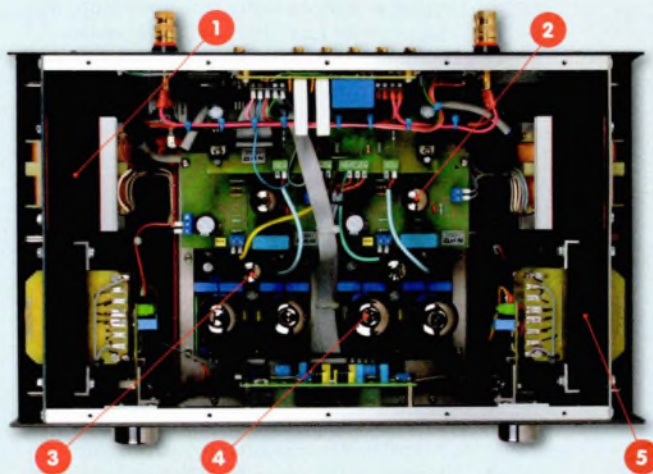
Why include VU meters on the IA-30?

The VU meters display the signal level of the input. This will become more useful soon when the third incarnation of our LAR RIAA phono stage is launched. It is going to have adjustable voltage amplification and the VU meters will make it easy to set up. This is the project I am working on now.

How much of the power is Class A?

The amplifier supplies 20 percent of its power in Class A continuously, which means that in normal home use it works in Class A all the time.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Main transformer
- 2 EBOCC preamp stage valves
- 3 ECC83 driver valves
- 4 EL34 output tubes
- 5 Output transformer



THE EL34 IS a classic pentode valve but there are not many examples on the market. In our last valve amp group test (issue 346) we tested six integrated models many offered remote control but none had EL34s. Our favourite in that group was the Primaluna Prologue 2 (£1,820) which runs KT88 output tubes and delivers a notional 40W, it's not remote controllable and has four inputs. Our other favourites were the Cayin A-55T (£1,460) a switchable triode/ultralinear design that also offers 40W in the latter mode and has remote but again only four inputs. The final contender is Icon Audio's Stereo 60 Mk3 (recently upgraded to M status at £2,200) which runs KT120s for an 80W output in ultralinear mode. None of the above have two main transformers nor the full enclosure of tubes found on the LAR and looking at our results from that issue I would not expect any but the Icon to offer a similar degree of power and resolution.

I also like the way the IA-30 fashions such well rounded images, with Jim White's *Drill A Hole* voice literally leaping into the room but not at the expense of the rest of the band, which remains as easy to follow as ever. This means that when you put on something that's out of your comfort zone it's not so difficult to appreciate its essence, I speak of Beethoven's String Quartets, which I often enjoy but am rarely fully engaged with in the way I am with more contemporary tunes.

This stunning amp manages to show you what's good about the music, it allows the musical message to get past the less familiar language of the composition. This is a very good thing if you want to broaden your horizons, but it's also useful if you want to get more out of familiar pieces of music.

A good transistor amp will give you more low-end grip as a result of more power, greater precision of imaging plus a more definite sense of timing, but it will have to be a very good one if it's to deliver this degree of communication without sounding grainy or etched. Such things do exist but not at this price, or very near it.

Conclusion

There is something about push-pull amps that makes it easier to understand what's going on in a piece of music, they don't have the incredible transparency of triodes nor the edge definition of transistors but they tread a line that arguably gives you the best of both worlds. This is not quite as even handed as a good

transistor design but not to an extent that is often noticeable, it also differentiates recordings extremely well, so it's easy to hear how each was made and what effects have been added in the production process.

You need reasonably sensitive speakers with a relatively benign load to get top-notch results at decent levels but you don't need the 90dB plus efficiency that is required with single-ended amps. The Linear Audio Research is a well thought-out and properly built example of the breed, there are cheaper alternatives but none to my knowledge that are dual mono and have active preamp stages. Eugeniusz Czyzewski may have an unpronounceable name, but his time in the rough and tumble world of studio and stage electronics has taught him a thing or two about what makes a robust and great sounding valve amplifier. If this is what the Poles are capable of the Chinese better up their game! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Nicely put together; internals built to last; music that's hard to put down; superb value

DISLIKE: A phono stage would have been nice as would a remote

WE SAY: This amp has a degree of musical insight that is rare at any price



Hear it exactly as elb



Book a demonstration
www.pmc-speakers.com/dealers

"...we've found we can really rely on them."
- Craig Potter, elbow



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ELBOW
TIPON





Moving picture

Ever wanted the ultimate music portable? Astell & Kern reckons its AK100 fits the bill. **David Price** hits the road for a test drive...

For the existence of this, product we need to thank Sony. The 1979 launch of its Stowaway, soon renamed 'Walkman', is the moment when the world first got a small, high-quality portable music machine. Beam forward some five years and the next piece in the jigsaw popped up – it was Sony again with the WM-6 Walkman Professional, which brought even better sonics at a premium price. Without this, surely no one would have defined the market for the Astell & Kern AK100?

Soon after the Walkie Pro got pensioned off, Apple's iPod arrived and the rest – as they say – is history. For music lovers, the ultimate variant of this is, of course, the Classic, which gives vast amounts of storage and a superlative finish allied to true ease of use. Were it not for its mediocre sound, this would have been the natural heir to the Sony Walkman

Pro. Sensing this gap in the market, South Korean consumer electronics company iriver recently decided to make a reference digital portable aimed at audiophiles. Astell & Kern is effectively iriver's premium brand, like Lexus is to Toyota.

In the hand, the AK100 feels every bit a high end product – the 59 x 79 x 14mm, 122g unit is beautifully finished, seemingly hewn from a block of solid aluminium, which is then brushed on the front, and backed with a glass plate. The classy feel is further augmented by an excellent 320 x 240-pixel colour QVGA touchscreen.

I particularly like the sense that there's been no attempt to follow Apple. If you look at any number of other devices, you'd be forgiven for thinking their designers have had at least one eye on the Cupertino company – but the AK100 looks and feels almost like the brand never

existed. Personally, I love Apple and think it's a master of the art, but still feel we've had quite enough Apple-alike designs, thank you very much. One interesting point is the volume control, which is (shock horror) a thumbwheel protruding from the case. It doesn't look pretty, but it works intuitively, more so than even an iPod Classic.

Inside the box, Astell & Kern makes a big deal about the unit having a 24-bit, 192kHz Wolfson WM8740 DAC. This is no bad thing, but not in itself a game changer – indeed, earlier incarnations of the iPod Classic had Wolfson DACs, and not even this could save them from having an edgy sound. In the sonic stakes, it's not what you do, but the way that you do it. For the sound to truly succeed, power supplies and grounding, signal routing, the analogue output stage and internal noise suppression all have a vital part to play and the DAC is but one piece of the jigsaw.

The unit plays 44.1, 48, 88.2, 176.4, and 192kHz sampling frequencies at a bit depth of 16- and 24-bits. File formats supported include AIFF, WAV, OGG, FLAC and – with the latest firmware update installed – ALAC. This is all very encouraging, but something that really wins the unit kudos are its twin micro SD card slots. Two 32GB

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Astell & Kern AK100

Origin:
USA/South Korea

Type:
Digital portable
music player

Weight:
122g

Dimensions:
(WxHxD)
59 x 79 x 14mm

FEATURES:
• 320 x 240 IPS
colour QVGA
touchscreen.

• Wolfson
WM8740 DAC
• 32GB memory,
expandable to
96GB via Micro SD

• 16- 24-bit playback
at 44.1, 48, 88.2,
176.4, and 192 kHz

• AIFF, WAV, OGG,
FLAC and ALAC
support

DISTRIBUTOR:
Air Audio

TELEPHONE:
01491 629629

WEBSITE:
airaudio.co.uk



HOW IT COMPARES

APPLE'S IPOD CLASSIC (160GB, £179) is the only machine that comes anywhere close to competing with the A&K. And on the face of it, it does great. It has 128GB more storage as standard, a better screen, easier navigation and superior software integration – there's no denying it's a fantastic package. But look closer and you see there's no expansion slots for extra memory, no FLAC playback and its firmware transcodes everything to 16/44.1kHz resolution, even if you manage to upload higher quality files on to it. Sound is far harsher and more edgy via its analogue outputs, too – so suddenly the AK100 looks worth the extra investment for the audiophile.

cards can be inserted at once, which along with the built-in 32GB gives a very useful 96GB of storage. This is enough for most people to store their entire music collections in FLAC form, or even uncompressed. Once again, this makes me sigh when I think of Apple and its 'closed' system – the AK100 shows what a great system it is.

Moving files to and from the unit is as easy as using a memory stick, a case of 'drag and drop' via the USB to micro-USB Type 2 lead provided. Some will say the iTunes interface is an altogether superior way of managing your music, and they'd be right, but again it's closed and doesn't handle a range of popular formats – like FLAC for example – so you might as well just get down to operating system-level and do the file moving yourself. Hi-res file devotees, who likely have all sorts of files all over a number of storage devices will agree, I'm sure.

The AK100 puts out a claimed 1.5V RMS via its 3.5mm analogue output – which is a little lower than the line output of most CD players, but is still ample for most preamps. There's also optical digital input and outputs via the (dual purpose) 3.5mm minijacks – the unit can be used as a DAC/headphone amp should you so wish.

Astell & Kern claims a jitter level of 90ps and a frequency response of 10Hz to 20kHz (plus/minus 0.02dB) with 24/48kHz files; it doesn't specify data for higher sampling frequencies.

The integral battery is a 2,000mAh Li-Polymer type giving a claimed running time of 16 hours, which I found to be realistic under testing. It takes around five hours to fully charge. The unit works with both Mac OS and Windows 2000/XP/Vista and 7 operating systems.

Sound quality

The AK100 doesn't sound that dissimilar to other well-engineered digital audio players fitted with Wolfson DACs. This means there's a light, bright, open, musical sound that never descends into hardness or rancour. At standard 16/44 resolution, Madonna's *Holiday* proved great fun with a fine sense of rhythmic bounce. It was fast and tight yet supple and involving, the AK100 proving able to convey the synthesiser stabs and modulating bass synth with alacrity. La Ciccone's vocals were direct and expressive too,

A fine sense of scale to recorded acoustics proves surprisingly three dimensional

that slightly nasal whine proving fun to listen to, with no sense of strain.

Moving to Donald Byrd's *You and the Music* showed that the AK100 could do acoustic jazz fusion justice. Although you'd never call it dull or understated, it had a natural enough sound not to interfere with the lovely trumpet work, nor did the strings grate. There was a fine sense of scale to the recorded acoustic, which proved surprisingly three dimensional for a portable. You'd never call the bass exceptionally powerful, but it was always nicely fluid and organic with bass guitar sounding like it was being played by a human, not a machine. Importantly, the AK100 lacked the grain of rival machines such as Apple's iPod Classic – indeed I was able to listen at high volumes for hours, not something you'd want to do with the iPod!

Moving up to what Astell and Kern calls 'Master Quality Sound' (ie hi-res), and Wings' *Band on the Run*

at 24/96 came across in a super clean and open fashion, the player really letting the listener 'in' to the recording in a way the stock 16/44 CD cannot.

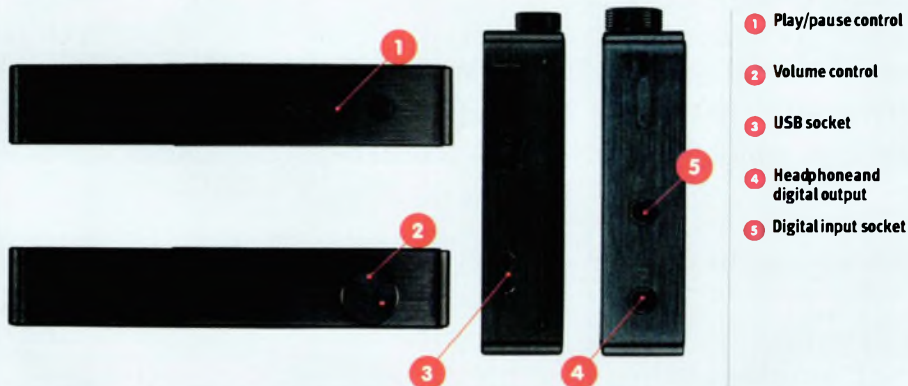
Midband proved highly detailed, and vocals assumed a creaminess that really justifies running hi-res. Bob Marley at 24/88.2 was a joy, the sound having a master tape-like solidity, and the unit's fine analogue output stage showing just how even and open it can really be, given the right recording. Via the digital optical out to an Audiolab M-DAC, things improved further still. Although on 16/44 it's not quite the match of a top CD transport, it's certainly no poor relation, and with hi-res the AK100 came into its own, serving up an extremely open and musical sound – unexpected given its lowly status in the hi-fi food chain.

Although I found the AK100's analogue output drove a range of headphones with ease, it's worth pointing out that its built-in amp isn't quite the beefiest around. Owners of cans which present a really difficult load might want to insert a decent headphone stage – such as Musical Fidelity's M1 HPA – in between them and the player. My only other criticism is that its navigation isn't quite as intuitive as Apple's iPod range, but then again what is?

Conclusion

The Astell & Kern AK100 is the best sounding digital portable I've heard to date. At last there's a machine that actually meets audiophile standards – either via its analogue outputs or working as a digital transport driving an offboard DAC. Overall it is an excellent package then, providing a reliable, effective way of taking digital music out and about. Not since the late lamented Sony Walkman Pro has it been possible to enjoy serious sound on the move ●

IN SIGHT



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

PERFORMANCE



LIKE: Finesound via analogue out; digital output; great build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Not quite enough drive for the hardest headphones; high price

BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



WE SAY: Brilliant high-end portable music source; one of a kind!

OVERALL



Box Design by Pro-Ject



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The DAC Box DS allows you to bring your digital music to life. Whether you have a network streaming device, a CD Player or a computer loaded with your downloaded music; this innovative DAC can take it all and transport it to your hi-fi system with optimum fidelity.

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Box Design

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Junior high



An attempt to bring more music lovers into the fold, Guru's new Junior should win many friends, says **Jason Kennedy...**

There are far too many two-way loudspeakers on the market, yet somehow Swedish company Guru Audio has managed to carve itself a niche. It did this primarily with the QM10, now QM10two, a decidedly different two-way with a squat round cornered cabinet and a style all of its own. The QM10two is a charmer, but a relatively expensive one at £1,795, so Guru has decided to broaden its market by building a smaller and more affordable speaker dubbed Junior.

In many respects it's a QM10two without the expensive bits, the main one being the cabinet, which is made in the Far East rather than Scandinavia. The drive units are very similar, in fact the tweeter is the same as a QM10two and the main driver comes from the first iteration of the QM10 with a more basic cone.

Junior is a very stylish speaker, the piano black sample shown is perhaps the most conservative finish, it looks very slick but I prefer the combination of silver grey aluminium around the drivers and a walnut wood veneer on the carcass. That anodised metal skin is also on the back panel where there's a single pair of 4mm plug sockets, which makes for a flush rear end.

This helps when siting the speaker in the recommended position on or very near the wall. The slot port means that this speaker is eminently suited to wall mounting, Guru even suggests putting it on a bookshelf. The aim is very clearly to make a speaker that everyone can accommodate.

Unlike most speaker makers, Guru is not into spikes and Blu-Tack, rather it fits foam pucks to the underside of its speakers so that the supporting surface is

not energised by vibrations from the cabinet. The Junior, therefore, requires a stand with a top plate that's nearly as big as its 18x23cm footprint, Guru is producing one for the purpose.

Sound quality

The preferred position for Junior is against the wall and toed in just enough so that you can see the outside flank of each speaker from the listening position. Guru recommends not only a bit of damping on the inside of each speaker, curtains for instance, but also that you put a coffee table in front of the listening seat to rest your feet on. That's my kind of set-up instruction!

And this is my kind of speaker, relaxed, revealing and musically irresistible. Junior is not the most explicit of speakers at its price point, but it's certainly one of the most enjoyable, this is because it is very nicely balanced and extremely coherent. Timing is spot-on and that always draws you into the music whatever variety that might be. I got carried away with Frank Zappa's *Apostrophe* album where the playing is superb and the songwriting rather

► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Guru Audio Junior

ORIGIN:
Sweden

TYPE:
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
4kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
180x290x230mm

FEATURES:

- Quoted sensitivity 87dB (@2.83V, 1m)
- Quoted nominal impedance: 6 ohms
- Enclosure material: MDF/aluminium
- HF driver: 20.5mm soft dome
- LF driver: 102mm coated paper cone
- Finish: black lacquer, white lacquer, oiled walnut

DISTRIBUTOR:
The Sound Practice

TELEPHONE:
01727 858589

WEBSITE:
guruaudio.co.uk

more colourful than usual. Both these factors are abundantly clear with this speaker, in fact it seems to excel with fast and dense material, or at least that was my initial thought, but further listening made it apparent that it excels at putting the music ahead of the sound.

This is the same skill that you find in the QM10two, so it shouldn't be a surprise but it's a rare quality, one that only a few brands seem to have mastered, Rega comes to mind. Junior does not, however, sound like a Rega speaker; its wall positioning means that it reaches far lower in the bass than most compact speakers, let alone Rega's slightly lean variety.

I was consistently impressed with the extension and smoothness of the lower registers. There is a tendency with this pursuit of ours to listen to tracks rather than albums, to play the well-known pieces in order to appraise a component. But Junior is having none of that, if an album is worth listening to you won't be happy just playing the standout tracks because you need to hear the next one and the one after that. This musical focus means that this speaker is not as analytical as some, but it's highly revealing of character in the playing and recording, every album sounds different and every musician reveals his or her skill.

Whether you love Miles's trumpet or Jimi's guitar, you will discover precisely what makes them unique with this remarkable speaker. It will appeal to music lovers more than audiophiles for this reason, it does imaging surprisingly well for a wall mount and bass extension is also strong, but it's not really about that. It's about the emotional communication that only music can achieve, it focuses on what counts so well that a good album is hard to put down. So banish your playlists and listen to your classic albums as they were intended to be heard! ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Well balanced, very coherent and uncannily musical

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Needs a bit more power than average

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: Musically engaging thanks to excellent timing, good bandwidth and a clean revealing balance

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL





Seventh Heaven



There's more to Spendor's soberly styled D7 speaker than meets the eye. **David Price** guides you through its many talents...

The 'S' series was for a long time Spendor's modern mainstay. These were nice, gently musical, smooth boxes, that sounded rather unlike the KEFs and Focals of this world. You wouldn't find the fine detail etched on your cranium, nor was the midrange intense enough to make your nostrils flare.

In my view, the challenge for the new D-series is to retain much of the flagship's precision and insight, but put it together in a more exciting package. I think the company has succeeded. There's something about the way the D7 goes about its business that makes the music magic. But here's the clincher – it does so in an unerringly Spendor way. By this I mean it doesn't do its stuff by wild colourations or showy voicing, it works in a subtle, nuanced and transparent way.

I sense that Spendor has strived to get every aspect of this loudspeaker right. There are no ribbon tweeters, 'high-tech' cone materials and wacky cabinet profiles here. Rather, the D7 is about subtle, intelligent finessing of conventional loudspeaker design.

Superficially its cabinetry is conventional, although Spendor uses its 'dynamic damping' method to control natural cabinet resonances, with special polymers to convert vibration into heat at key points inside the box. The drive units are effectively decoupled from the cabinet, which is asymmetrically braced to eliminate internal acoustic standing waves, the company says. The latest Spendor linear flow port system incorporates a twin Venturi (aerodynamically profiled) baffle to promote airflow speed from the cabinet base. These also integrate the floor spike mounting into the structure of the enclosure for extra rigidity, and a machined steel stabiliser plate is fitted and provided a very secure mounting on my thickly carpeted concrete floor.

Like many mid-sized floorstanders, the D7 is a 2.5-way design, sporting a bespoke Spendor mid/bass driver built on a pressure diecast magnesium alloy chassis. The cone uses a new formulation of Spendor's 'engineering polymer' called EP77, which is said to have a high degree of natural internal damping combined with high rigidity. This is further complemented by a lower bass driver using a Kevlar cone, with an unsaturated copolymer compound used for the surround.

The 'Linear Pressure Zone' tweeter dome is built onto a stainless steel front plate that houses a damped acoustic chamber immediately before the dome itself. This combines with a 'suspended' phase correcting screen immediately in front of the centre of



► DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Spendor D7
ORIGIN: US/UK
TYPE: Floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT:
21kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
950x192x320mm
FEATURES:
• Spendor linear flow, twin Venturi port
• 22mm linear phase hybrid soft dome
• 18cm EP77 polymer coned mid/bass driver
• 18cm rigid Kevlar composite coned woofer
DISTRIBUTOR:
Spendor Audio Systems
TELEPHONE:
01323 843474
WEBSITE:
spendoraudio.com

the dome to equalise signal path length across its surface and create a symmetrical pressure environment. This way, the dome can operate in a completely balanced linear mode, so all parts of it are behaving in a very similar manner thanks to the 'air damping' system. A precision woven polyamide membrane is used.

Sound quality

In my listening room I find that infinite baffle speakers sound happiest. So I was mightily surprised with the new Spendor D7, which seemed totally at home just centimetres from a rear wall. There wasn't so much as a hint of low frequency sloppiness, the bass staying taut, supple and decently

In the D7 Spendor has surpassed itself, offering all that's good in sonic terms

extended. This was the most endearing thing about this speaker – its ability to work well in real world conditions, without any fuss.

The second thing that impressed was its sensitivity, which seems higher than a caffeine addict giving up smoking – the D7s don't quite attain Tannoy Westminster loudness levels per single watt of power, but are obviously louder than most. This makes them great for lowish powered Class A transistor and tube amplifiers alike. Spendor's claim of 90dB/1w/1m doesn't seem optimistic, and it's a nice boast to be able to make. The speaker shouldn't tax most amplifiers – only those that worship at the church of the single-ended triode will want more.

Sensitive speakers generally have a light, easy, fast air about them, and this one is no exception. Cue up the Flaming Lips' *Symphony 3000-21*, and the D7 sounds faster than any other Spendor I've ever heard, racing along capturing all the music's transients and microdynamics. Yet it doesn't seem in the least bit harsh, forward or edgy. Many 'fast' speakers achieve the sensation of speed through a little extra 'zing' across the upper mid and treble, but not so here. Instead, the D7 gave a smooth, fluid, supple sound – devoid of any signs of drive units fighting with one another, or breaking up and distorting. It was a lovely, cohesive, all-of-a-piece sort of performance.

While it retains that smooth Spendor signature sound, the D7 is

Q&A

Philip Swift

MD, Spendor Audio Systems



DP: What was it that prompted the choice of a 2.5-way design?

PS: A 2.5-way system offers increased power handling and the opportunity to share the low frequency load between two drivers. When two complementary drivers operate in the same acoustic enclosure the sound you hear takes on wonderful coherence because both drivers move in total harmony.

Why did you opt for the EP77 cone material instead of – say – Kevlar?

Our new EP77 polymer has the perfect balance of mechanical and acoustic parameters. It has vanishingly low breakup and resonant modes and it creates a stable stiff cone piston for excellent low-frequency performance.

Why did you choose Kevlar for the bass driver cone?

Our implementation creates an incredibly rigid cone for ultimate bass precision, and it does not generate out-of-band 'noise' which introduces subtle midband colouration.

What prompted you to develop that pressure plate for the tweeter?

Our front plate incorporates a phase correcting micro foil to equalise soundwave path lengths across the diaphragm surface, simultaneously it creates a symmetrical pressure environment so the tweeter operates in a balanced linear mode. We choose a hybrid wide-surround dome over a ribbon because ribbons suffer from unacceptably poor vertical dispersion. And when you combine a ribbon with a moving coil driver there is always an audible and disconcerting discontinuity as sound crosses between the drivers.

Is this the best all-round speaker Spendor has ever made?

Yes. It is rivalled only by our Classic SP100R2, which substitutes absolute resolution, transparency, agility and modern style with a rich and charming personality and an original 1970's look. Many audiophiles rate the SP100R2 as one of the finest loudspeakers of all time.

HOW IT COMPARES

THE CLOSEST RIVAL for Spendor's new D7 is surely Monitor Audio's GX300, at £3,000. This is a mightily impressive 3-way box, with a sublime finish that worries even the beautifully turned out D7.

In terms of styling the Monitor Audio is also extremely impressive, not that the D7 looks like something only its mother could love!

Build quality is excellent, making life very hard for the D7, especially as it costs £500 more.

Sonically, here the two pull apart a bit more. Although both designs set out to be versatile, medium sized premium floorstanders that are purposed to cover all the bases well, the Spendor is a little smoother, sweeter and warmer sounding. By contrast, the Monitor Audio is just that bit more transparent, drier and more incisive. Thanks to its superb ribbon tweeter and ceramic aluminium/magnesium coned drivers, the GX300 shines a bright, white halogen light on the recording, whereas the D7 is fractionally gentler and less stark. This means the Monitor Audio tends to bring the listener's attention to the quality of the recording more than the Spendor.

It also makes the GX300 sparkle with classical and electronic music, although it could be said to be a little analytical with rock and jazz.

The D7, however, is a little more even-handed, and seems less concerned with the recording quality and the genre, preferring just to get into the music's groove and have a good time. Both speakers are undoubtedly superb, class-leading designs that will win many friends, but if you're in the market for either, it would be wise to hear the other first.

IN SIGHT



- 1 22mm linear phase hybrid soft dome tweeter
- 2 180mm EP77 polymer coned mid/bass driver
- 3 180mm rigid Kevlar composite coned woofer
- 4 recessed single-wire binding posts

still able to ruthlessly render a music signal without compressing it. Spendor speakers aren't traditionally coloured, but are always more sweet than sour. The new D7 is a tad more neutral than its predecessors, and the result is improved insight, with superior low-level detailing that lets you hear right into a mix. Indeed, the D7 pulls off the clever trick of sounding smooth without hiding everything under a sea of marshmallowy bass. This made it a joy with hard, thumping techno music; Felix's *Don't You Want Me* was great fun. This design manages to string rhythms together better than any Spendor since the late great, S8e – and that's saying something.

Moving to some cool jazz of Sonar Kollektiv Orchestra's *Universal Love*, the D7 showed its ability to get into the groove. It's not one of nature's most showy music makers, rather it does surprisingly little to interfere with what it's asked to play. All you need is a gentle rhythm present and the Spendor goes looking for it. And once it's locked on, it remains fluid. This track also showcased the excellence of the treble too; it's not quite up with the best ribbons in terms of delicacy or extension, but the new tweeter comes close all the same, and integrates beautifully with the midband and bass.

If there is a criticism of the D7 it has to be the imaging. It's not bad, it's just that it doesn't match the D7's excellence in other areas.

Ultimately though, choosing a speaker is all about getting the sound

that's right for you, and for me the transparency, delicacy of touch and overall musicality – allied to that tidy, well-behaved bass and smooth treble – seals the deal.

Conclusion

I am a Spendor fan, so I understand what it is that the company is trying to do, but sometimes its speakers are just a little too genteel. In the D7 however, I think Spendor has surpassed itself, offering all that's good about the marque in sonic terms and adding power, punch and precision. The result is a speaker that's lovely to listen to, no matter what you throw at it. It doesn't editorialise, works well in realistically sized British rooms, is a friend to your amplifier and even looks the part, too. If you're after a great all-round, affordable, high-end loudspeaker then here it is, and it's possibly Spendor's best box yet ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Wonderfully open and smooth speaker that's great fun to listen to; excellent build and finish |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Lacks bass and treble extension and soundstage size of rivals |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WESAY: A superb floorstander, one of Spendor's best ever boxes |
| EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL





PA 3000 HV - High Voltage integrated amplifier The new standard for amplifiers



HV = High Voltage - a revolutionary concept applied to a new range of High End audio electronics from T+A. The PA 3000 HV integrated amplifier is the first product in the series - a powerhouse with a continuous output of 500 Watts per channel. Designed to achieve the tonal characteristic similar to valve amplification yet with the power to drive practically any loudspeaker, the PA 3000 HV is a Class-A design with an output stage driven at a voltage of ± 160 Volts - twice as high as usual - producing an extremely linear high-voltage performance curve. With virtually no overall feedback required, the net result is a system with tremendous dynamic qualities.



A major development of the HV Series is the casework; solid aluminium is used throughout to avoid unwanted magnetic fields within the circuit. When combined with a large number of top-quality symmetrical Balanced / RCA inputs and large rhodium-plated speaker terminals, the PA 3000 HV is a non-compromise integrated amplifier for the demanding audiophile lover of two-channel music reproduction of the highest possible quality.

Hand built in Germany, the PA 3000 HV from T+A is available in the UK now.

For more information or to arrange a demonstration, please contact:

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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.



PATRICK CLEASBY
EXPERTISE: TECH GEEK

PATRICK WORKS IN a high level technical support role in the broadcast industry, when not fiddling with his networked music collection and a rapidly expanding shelf of vinyl LPs.



TIM JARMAN
EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

ELECTRONICS BOFFIN TIM drives a 1959 Beetle and maintains the best B&O resource on the internet. When he's not rebuilding faulty review kit, he enjoys scouring audiojumbles.



DAVID PRICE
EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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.

➤ Rock me Amadeus!

David – you may remember that I accosted you at the end of the Bristol Hi-Fi show last year to ask your advice on an arm and cartridge to partner an Orbe. I took it, although it proved to be quite a quest from there.

The easiest part was the Kora 3T. Alex Nikitin was brilliant and could not have been more helpful. I found a dealer to obtain the Audio Origami arm and Lyra Delos cartridge, though that took months as the cartridge was out of stock. Not that the delay mattered as the biggest issue was obtaining the new armboard from Michell. I have read many comments on forums lauding

What could be holding back my system in terms of 'rockability'?

Michell's customer service. Sadly my experience was different. It was awful, and it took months and multiple phone calls before I finally got the new armboard.

In mid-August, the Orbe finally got to spin its first disc – *Graceland*. Stunning! The clarity and sheer presence of the vocals on *Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes* was breathtaking. Generally, the clarity of everything from vocals, cymbals, drumbeats, bass lines and especially acoustic guitar is extraordinary. The 'in the room'

feeling with some vocal/acoustic tracks is brilliant. However, I do find the Orbe a little unconvincing on rock. If I play *Brothers in Arms* for example, the more sedate tracks are stunning, beautiful even, but the famous go-to tracks of *Money for Nothing* and *Walk of Life* just weren't as exciting as they should have been, almost like the parts don't hang together.

Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* was the same. It's good, but it just doesn't rock me as I thought it would. Having said that, Buddy Holly sounds fantastic – it was a revelation hearing how some of those tracks should really sound on great vinyl on a great turntable! Now I'm confused why that works so well and other rock doesn't.

I'm not sure whether it is the rest of my system (though I don't think my amp and speakers are a

problem on the rocking front), or maybe the room is just too small to get a convincing soundstage on a big sound (I was a little disappointed with orchestral as well – although I'm almost certain that is due to too small a room). System: Orbe, Kora 3T Ltd Ed, AO arm, Lyra Delos cartridge; Naim Nait 3; Dynaudio Audience 6os; Naim speaker cable. The weakest link is the Chord Chrysalis interconnect from Kora to amp.

I intend to upgrade the rest of my system when I can, starting with the amp, but this is the reason for not upgrading the interconnect – I don't want to shell out for an expensive RCA-DIN now, and then buy a non-Naim amp rendering it useless.

What could be holding back my system in terms of 'rockability'? Also, I'd be grateful for any advice

Dave Rose reckons his Michell Orbe isn't 'rocky' enough – we show how he can get it back into the groove



on what range I might start looking in for amps (and suitable interconnects). After 12 happy years with my Nait 3, my attention naturally turns to the SuperNait. Would that be a potential good partner, or would I be doing the Orbe a disservice – should I be looking at a step up in budget?

Finally, many thanks for your demo at the Bristol show, comparing the digital formats. I haven't been to the show for a few years as I'd stopped enjoying it (it had become so noisy I felt I could no longer hear the music or kit). Your demo was really enjoyable and informative: you played the track, the room was quiet, and one could actually listen to it, and then compare the subtle and not so subtle differences between the sources, and discuss it afterwards. Brilliant!

Dave Rose

DP: Hi Dave – it's true to say that the Orbe isn't as innately 'rocky' as – for example – a Technics SL1200, which will make everything sound like it's that last sell-out live gig and the PA is turned up to 11. The Michell is a more refined machine than this, yet in no way would you call it boring. So if it's not getting your toes tapping I'd suggest some courses of action.

First, make sure it's in tune. Ensure the deck is sitting on a 100% level surface, and then make sure the height adjusters are all set to an equal height – in both cases a spirit level is essential. This will result in you having an even bounce on the springs, and only then can they do their job properly.

Next, carefully hold the height adjusters so they're fixed in the right place and turn the outer springs so the end bits are all pointing towards the central spindle of the platter – all three need to face inwards to the centre.

Next, make sure the arm cable is carefully dressed and isn't touching anything (such as your equipment table or rear wall), as this will wreck the sound. Another point is to ensure the dustcover is removed, this too spoils things

and makes a huge difference when taken out of play. On the tonearm, make sure the cartridge bolts are done up as tightly as you can possibly manage without cracking the cartridge body. Finally ensure the belt is clean and so are the surfaces it touches. These latter points go for any turntable.

Okay, you should notice quite an improvement already, so do you still need to upgrade? If so, I think you're looking at changing your interconnects, next. You need a nice, open, crisp sort of cable, rather than something of the warm and woolly variety, and to that end I'd counsel a vdH The Sea 3T. This is like a bright autumn morning, and won't cloud or dull your sound like your Chrysalis is doing, I suspect. If you want something just a little warmer, sweeter and more euphonic, then it's got to be Mark Grant G2000HD. After you've done this, then come back to us for more advice; I'll probably be thinking in terms of the Naim SuperNait, but let's see how you get on first...

CV: I used to have a Nait 3 with a pair of Dynaudio Audience 50 standmounts and this was a great combination at low to medium volume levels. However, once you have sorted your vinyl front end I would suggest you compare your Nait 3 to a SuperNait and hear what the improvements are, and whether this is the sound you are after. If you are not convinced, but still want to upgrade your Nait 3 I can highly recommend a Sim Audio Moon 250i integrated at about £1,600 approx. However, if you really like the SuperNait, then try and track down a good used pair of Allae floorstanders – I think the Allae was one of the best loudspeakers Naim made, even though it was relatively affordable in comparison to its more upmarket versions (about £2,000 new), I preferred it.

The Allae is very musical, and I have heard it with the SuperNait and it's an excellent combination with great synergy – the Nait 3 or SuperNait with Allae would be an improvement over the Naim and Dynaudio set up you have. The Naim NAC A5 (I am presuming that's what you are using) is a strange product in that it isn't the best loudspeaker cable by any stretch of the imagination, but it works well in a Naim system, and this is how I heard the SuperNait

➤ Rule Britannia?

After 40 years of living in New York, I decided to move to London. I brought over a good deal of audio with me and visited a number of audio shops throughout London. I am writing to share some of the responses I received.

[1] Upon hearing that I wanted to bring my own cables to a shop to demo equipment and that they were American Transparent Audio, I was told "In Britain you'd be better served to employ British cables." To which I replied "the bulk of my gear is from the States, except for the speakers." I described the size of my listening room in London, musical tastes and audio gear and he suggested the SA-1s with their matching stands. I liked them so much that I ordered a pair in the UK.

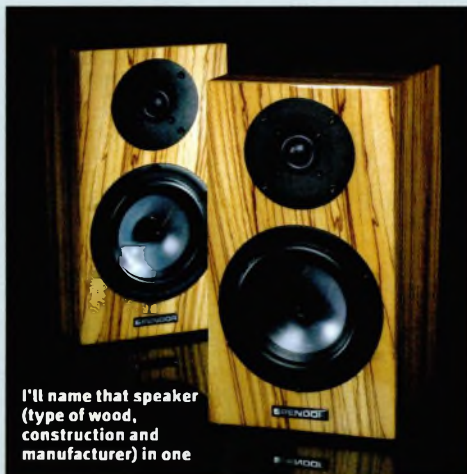
[2] Another shop I visited was eager to convert me from digital to vinyl, forsaking my digital collection (measured in terabytes). I pressed this shop representative on why he was being so insistent. His response "true audiophiles listen to vinyl and only vinyl." I asked him why the store carried digital equipment if they felt that way, and he remarked "we carry digital equipment for the masses but not those with true discernment."

[3] I visited a store where one of the salespeople told me that upon hearing a speaker he could discern the wood of the cabinet, the construction and the country of origin.

I read magazines from the US and here, and find it disconcerting how veiled assumptions are made about the quality of gear from the Colonies. I understand the need to bolster one's respective country's industry and have no problem with this, but the lengths to which this takes place is troubling. It is as if the stock response to queries is a chorus of Linn/Naim/Audiolab/Cyrus/Rega.

I enjoy listening to music and auditioning gear. Don't even get me started on the overpriced 'streamers' and the jargon that's being disseminated by audio manufacturers, whose knowledge is at best 'suspect'.

David Blumenstein



I'll name that speaker (type of wood, construction and manufacturer) in one

DP: Hi David, I see you're obviously unaware that physics in the US works differently this side of the pond, which clearly and logically explains why British cables sound better with British gear, and in the British weather! I hope that's cleared that one up for you, and you now realise that the dealer wasn't talking errant nonsense at all...

On your second point, I'd tend to agree with the dealer, as I've not heard 24/192 digital come even close to a top turntable/arm/cartridge combination. However, I would never presume to tell others to scrap their music collections. It's different strokes for different folks, and if you're happy with your system, good for you! On your third point, I'd love to have been there with you when your salesman did his little speech – comedygold, was it not?

I agree that in the past, the UK hi-fi press has sometimes been blinkered. But I fear it's for a similar reason that the vast majority of Americans don't own a passport; for most of you there's plenty to do at home without ever venturing beyond your

The salesperson said that just by hearing a speaker he could tell the wood, the construction and the country of origin

borders. We have a very strong audio industry here, and its products tend to tally well with British tastes – sonically, stylistically and ergonomically. Having lived in Japan for many years, and seen some amazing stuff we never got in Europe, it saddens me how we sometimes think we're the centre of the world. Enjoy your time here, don't forget to buy an umbrella and avoid black pudding!

CV: I would like to look at the most ridiculous issue of your letter; the fellow at the dealership who could discern the origin of the wood of a loudspeaker just by listening to it. There are some very good people in hi-fi who have deep intrinsic knowledge of the typology of what they are designing or selling. For example, audio engineer and brand ambassador for Marantz, Ken Ishiwata knows, through experience, the 'sound' of individual components so that a certain combination in an integrated amplifier circuit, for example, will yield a particular sound.

Likewise AJ van den Hul has stated that when he makes bespoke MC cartridges he can calibrate/tune them according to the person's musical tastes and type of sound by the choice of wire/magnet etc. Again, this comes through years of dedicated experience which has a definable output – that of the end sound or performance by the designer/engineer as heard by the lucky customer.

I've met some amazing people at hi-fi dealerships – people who really know what they are talking about – and they would never stoop to offending a potential customer through in-jokes, half truths and silliness over a manufacturer, product or region.

and Allae combination. When I used the Nait 3 and Dynaudio Audience 50s I had an original set of Chord Co. Odyssey cables (now called Odyssey Installation for the unshielded variety) with Naim plugs at the amplifier end and bananas to the loudspeaker (set up by the dealer) in preference to NAC A5.

➤ Laser love

I was reading your review of the Rega Apollo-R in the March 2012 issue. In it you speculate on the future of CD, and what will replace it. I know you've never really been a fan of the little silver discs, due to their limited sampling rate – if only SACD had come out when CDs had – and potentially harsh sound, but you seemed almost sympathetic to their cause, comparing them to the state of the vinyl market when CDs threatened to take over.

Now, one year on, and the decline of CD is even more pronounced, with downloads everywhere, and not much else. Maybe your prognosis is right, in that only the collectors of albums will still buy, as we like physical media, and also a little booklet of lyrics to read, etc. Now all of us have permanent access to the internet to read the lyrics to a song online – especially as the computer can be making a racket! This applies less with tablets and smartphones, but have you tried typing on them?!

Anyway, I suspect the future of CDs and CD players will be as backups for ripping media players. The CD will be purchased, ripped to the HDD, then carefully stored away (not sold; that would be illegal) for a rainy day, such as when the HDD dies. CD players will possibly evolve into these media players, that will handle downloads (of all types) and these may even merge into preamps, making hi-fi actually easier to understand for the masses.

There is too much confusion and this switches people off. Too many numbers – 24/96, matching amps to speakers that may be presenting a capacitive load instead of a resistive load, so do you use ohms or microfarads? And there are also too many types of media; vinyl (only for audiophiles), CD (for audiophiles who don't like the ritual of playing an LP), tape (dead) and downloads (too many standards, file types, quality settings etc).

In other words, arrghh! And the average music fan just goes and buys the latest Adele track from iTunes and doesn't worry too much if he loses it – because music isn't valued any more. A golden age of music has passed, and it's now just throwaway, like yesterday's newspapers. A real shame.

I learned *Tubular Bells*, *Dark Side Of The Moon* and *Autobahn*, both sides of them, every note and phrase, and those albums will always be with me. What of

Only collectors of albums will still buy, as we like physical media

today's music? Who will remember and treasure it? Maybe it really doesn't matter – to me it does, and I can't (and won't) change.

John Malcolm

DP: Nice sentiments John, and good for you! I think 'ye olde Compact Disc' (as I used to call it) will soldier on for a good while yet, and will likely linger particularly



As we move into a brave new world of digital downloads, will people really mourn the death of the digital disc?

long in some markets (such as rock reissues), whereas in pop it's virtually extinct already. Interesting what you said about CD players evolving into media players; we're already seeing this with the Naim UnitiLite, and I wonder why we're not getting more such products – a combined Audiolab 8200CDPN (CD preamp network player) perchance? You can have that idea for free, boys...

PC: Now iTunes is moving to the iCloud-based model nothing need be lost – it knows what you have bought and you either stream it from the cloud or re-download it. I am sure that ultimately the Mastered for iTunes programme will result in access to marvellous

24/96 versions of the classics in our libraries – maybe for a small upgrade premium as per the step up to iTunes Plus. At that point we will have little need for CDs.

As DP says the UnitiLite is already the acme of the hybridisation you suggest should be coming, and no matter what you think of tablets, Naim's web-integrated pseudo sleeve note control software is genuinely innovative.

If audiophiles can get their heads around the arcane manipulations needed to set up their turntables and their cabling, why should streaming digital represent too many layers of complexity for any of us? Figure it out, evaluate whether you like it (if you do it properly, you will), and those

➤ I got them silver disc blues

Congratulations for the great magazine! I am trying to search for a CD player that has an internal DAC with USB and optical out. I have seen the Audiolab 8200CD and Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite have these things, plus a nice audio quality. Some reviews say nice stuff about the Marantz, but more about the versatility than about audio quality itself. Is the SACD really worth having?

I've also seen a lot of praise for the Audiolab 8200CD; its incredible DAC capabilities and overall sound quality. There is no SACD option, but does it really deliver better sonic and audio quality?

I like crispy sound, but not too mechanical like my current Rotel RCD-1520 (I use B&W 804 floorstanders speakers). I'd like to have something more natural, but without losing detail and resolution. Also, I want rich and deep bass. So which option brings me more overall audio quality? And, does SACD make the difference when comparing to a normal CD really worth buying?

Patrick, Germany

DP: Hi Patrick, okay, you're talking about coffee and tea here. The Audiolab 8200CD is a superb CD player (in fact if you turn to page 25 you'll see that it's just won this month's group test) and has a very clean, crisp, incisive sound – but it's very musical too in a mastertape-like way.

The Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite, meanwhile, is a little looser, sweeter, more romantic perhaps, but doesn't have the fine detail and grip. Actually, you might very well prefer this option, which is why I'd suggest you hear both at a dealer if you can.

As for the SACD functionality, this is always a nice option to have, but only if you have a meaningful SACD collection, or intend to buy everything Linn Records has on its back catalogue!

There's little doubting the fact that SACD definitely sounds better – it is smoother, more open, more delicate and finessed. But the real question is where can you buy them these days?

Audiolab 8200CD – a brilliant silver disc spinner, providing you don't have to have SACD, of course...



album classics you mention will remain just as enjoyable, both for you, and the youth who will rediscover them many decades hence. Have faith, all is not lost!

➤ Keep it clean

I enjoyed Richard Black's article in the March issue, but would like to add a word of caution. I use Deoxit to clean the connectors in my system, which include DIN connectors on my Nytech amps. The first time I used Deoxit, I reconnected everything and on powering up was rewarded by a loud crack through the speakers. Luckily, there was no damage, but I believe that I had left some Deoxit liquid in one of the DIN connectors, which by their design have some hard to get at niches and had a short circuit.

As a result, I now only use Deoxit on non-DIN connectors, (phono, aerial etc), and after using it, I leave time to enable excess fluid to evaporate (overnight is good). For DIN connectors, I rely on the old method of unplugging and plugging up a few times. If you do use contact cleaners of this type, be careful!

Also, when discussing speaker maintenance, Richard omitted to mention ensuring that the speaker fixing screws are tight. I use ARC 050 speakers that were supplied with a small double-ended box spanner, and instructions to ensure periodically that the fixing bolts are tight.

These speakers are held in by hexagon-headed bolts that screw into substantial nuts behind the baffle and can safely be tightened up. Some speakers only have wood screws into the baffle, so some care needs to be taken not to overtighten, and strip the threads. Nevertheless, it is important to ensure that the speaker fixings are tightened up periodically to preserve the seal between speaker and baffle, and that the speakers are held tight onto the baffle. Thanks for a great magazine!

Stuart Turner



TJ: It is unlikely that the noises you heard were as the result of Deoxit fluid remaining in the connectors (the insulation paths formed by DIN connectors are actually quite long) but your experience does underline that it is important to follow the maker's instructions

when using any contact cleaners. These usually are to apply the product sparingly and to wait until it is evaporated before re-applying the power.

Tightening loudspeakers onto their baffles is another area where care is needed, where foam seals are employed it is sometimes best to avoid disturbing anything as the foam takes a 'set' and lacks the resilience to re-adapt if anything is moved. If you go down the tightening route, address the screws in opposing pairs (as

It is important to follow instructions when using any contact cleaners

one tightens down an aluminium cylinder head in vehicle terms) rather than simply going round in a circle to avoid distorting the driver's basket and putting the voice coil off-centre. Finally, only use a tool that fits perfectly, slips invariably seem to end up causing a gouged cabinet (if you're lucky) or a torn cone (if you're not).

➤ DAB's the way to do it

Since buying an Arcam T32 DAB/FM tuner, I have been impressed with the quality, of the DAB broadcasts, and find it difficult to understand the criticism of digital broadcasting. There are differences, but we do have two different systems at work here, and those who say that FM is better should bear in mind that since roughly 1969 the BBC has used a primitive digital system to carry its services up the country!

Since we hi-fi fans are in the minority, the government will turn off FM when enough people have

bought digital portable radios. In the past, many radiograms and lower-priced audio units were fitted with FM units, but the quality left much to be desired. And so it will be in the future. To think that the government will take notice of a small group of people who think that they alone can dictate the future of broadcasting in this country, is silly. Besides, with the growth of downloading, perhaps radio broadcasts through the ether will one day be regarded as passé?

Cliff Millward

DP: Hi Cliff, all salient points. Ultimately it's not what the golden eared cognoscenti think, it's about the cost/benefit to the government to change to DAB. And by that I mean cost and benefit in both monetary and political terms.

PC: Remember the seventies, when VHF was the new sexy? It took a while to get the masses using it. My hunch is that for the home internet radio will replace FM over time. The issue of radio on the move is tougher to crack – with mobile data still expensive, and mass transit coverage very spotty and low bandwidth. Thus when FM is gone, in-car DAB will be a boon. But a serious listen does show its inadequacy, and the online AAC at 320kbps 'HD' experiments of BBC Radio 3 are highlighting the way to go. Who's to say that domestic and backbone bandwidth growth won't allow lossless streaming in the near future? One thing's sure – the future is digital whether we like it or not – as the naff advertising on the BBC right now makes clear.

➤ Hum bug

I have a 2007 vintage PC with integrated soundcard. I used to have it hooked up very satisfactorily to a Yamaha tuner, but recently there is a substantial hum. The PC also has a line out to the desktop speakers, which work fine. The aux-in line to the tuner works perfectly for my iPod, and

The Arcam FMJ T32 DAB tuner has made Cliff Millward become a fan of Digital Radio. Wonders never cease

➤ Cable talk

Regarding your recent cable test, it would have been more illuminating if you'd included some cables at all price ranges. What I am keen to know is how much better is a £200 cable than a £30, £50 or £100 alternative? I don't think anyone would be surprised that £200 cables beat freebie cables hands down. But what about less expensive premium cables? I suspect that there is little difference between them and the overpriced cables you reviewed, which is why they weren't included. My guess is that you wouldn't want to upset your advertisers.

Luke Mullin

DP: Hi Luke – the trouble is that if we compared all cables at all price ranges, we'd be spreading ourselves too thinly. And generally, the cheaper cables would have done worse, and got lower marks – even if they were excellent at their price points, which is a tad unfair I think. So we decided instead to lock on to the £200 price point, which is about the maximum that most sane human beings would ever want spend.

I know a lot of people are cynical about cables and the advertising that goes into hi-fi magazines, but cable companies don't get special treatment. Me dropping that freebie cable into the group disproves your point, as it was a blind test and if it had done well, it's not as if we'd have been able to stage a cover up to avoid embarrassment to our advertisers, is it? Or maybe I could kidnap the panel members, or hold their families hostage so they didn't go public and spill the beans that the freebie cable had beaten the expensive ones? Placing the freebie cable into the mix was a gamble I took because I knew that [a] all cables don't sound the same, contrary to the views of some forum keyboard warriors, and [b] that all the cables we were blind testing were at least half decent and so shouldn't have disgraced themselves. And indeed so they didn't.



PRIZE
WINNER!

LETTER OF THE MONTH

the tuner yield is fine on all other channels (receiver, phono). I have also tried ensuring the RCA cable is not being interfered with by mains cables, to no avail. I tried turning the desktop speakers off, but that didn't help. The problem must be with the PC, but the soundcard still works for the desktop speakers. Do you have any ideas?

Robin Bencard

PC: As ever in IT diagnostics, it is worth trying to track back and establish what OS or other software changes you've made to the system recently that could have provoked the change. One of the few things I used to like about Windows was its System Restore ability, so see if you have a system checkpoint from just before the noise started. It is probably worth investigating whether there is separate driver software for the soundcard, which you could try reinstalling.

Music tech-loving PC runners of my acquaintance always used to fully reinstall their systems every six months to get rid of system conflict gremlins. Finally, consider buying a system that just works, like a Mac Mini. I'm 12 years free of these kind of shenanigans – no looking back!

TJ: Presumably by 'tuner' you mean 'receiver' (eg it is also an amplifier?). If so what you have is a hum loop caused by the currents flowing in the various earths in the system. In the good old days the advice used to be to disconnect one of the earths so that there was only one connection for the whole system, but this is a bit risky given the dodgy build of some modern gear (computer power supplies in particular).

A 1:1 isolating transformer in each signal connection between the computer and the Yammy is the safest way to go. As hum loops are more of a problem with disco and pro-audio gear than hi-fi, I would try asking for advice in a shop that deals with this area of the market first. You may end up with a big lump of RCA-XLR adaptors as a result, but it should get the job done safely.



Japan: better food and more disposable income to spend on hi-fi, damn them!

TURNING JAPANESE

Hi David – I enjoyed your article about Japanese engineering mindset. For 15 years I worked for a Japanese engineering company, and was frequently told that the nail that sticks up is hammered down. Young engineers always deferred to the senior man who in my experience stayed with the same idea to protect his salaryman position. Having said that, in my opinion the Japanese are some of the best production engineers in the world. Look at the reviews for Japanese equipment, always the fit and finish is commented on.

One of the joys of visiting Tokyo and Osaka was walking around the electronic districts and viewing the roadside stalls selling every accessory under the sun. The shops full of equipment never seen here. The selection of crazy tone arms and to my amazement old Quad valve amps refurbished and shrinkwrapped to protect them. At that time we were throwing them into the scrap bin during the Linn, Naim madness period when hi-fi was dominated by strong personalities. When I asked why this type of equipment was not imported to the UK the answer was that the UK was a low-wage economy and we were obsessed with buying houses. Some truth there, I fancy!

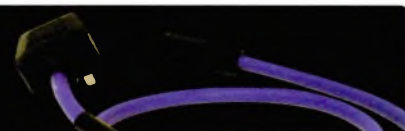
Pat Rickwood

DP: Hi Pat – while there are many similarities between the UK and Japan, there are big differences too. For most of Japan's post-war history, there's been an acute housing shortage. The volcanic terrain is not well suited to building cities on. This means there's a scarcity of habitable land, plus twice as many people as in the UK. The result is crazy property prices. For this reason, many younger people live at home with their parents, and thus have lots of disposable income.

In the UK, it seems like we're all permanently poor – so there's less money for vital necessities like hi-fi! So for me, Japan is hi-fi heaven – there's an awful lot of it, old and new, from budget to high end. Oh, and the Japanese appreciate good quality in pretty much every walk of life. I loved living there, but the hi-fi was only part of it. Find a good sashimi restaurant and all thoughts of spending your savings on a Lyra moving coil soon fade!

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VAN DEN HULL Meridian Interconnects. Pair interconnects 900mm length, Neutrik phono connectors £37 + p&p. Pair interconnects 600mm length, Neutrik phono connectors £32 + p&p: **01582 573 570 or email: i.fraser587@btinternet.com (Luton).**

REGA Planet 2000 CD player (silver), owned from new, VGC £190, Linn (Black) high quality analogue interconnect cable (as new) £30: **07581 195 784 (W Yorks).**

FIRESTONE Fubar! I/O USB DAC/ADC (black/silver) with Chord Co Silver Plus (0.9m) USB cable. Full working order £85: **0117 9500 429 or email: ron.watt@sky.com (Bristol).**

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QED Genesis Silver Spiral bi-wire cable 6 m x 2. Good condition. Terminated with banana plugs on speaker side, banana/BFA plugs on amp side. (£800) £300 ono: **07927 143 348 or email: creativeeh@googlemail.com (Surrey).**

MARANTZ PM 11-S2 integrated amp with phono, (silver), only 8 months old, in superb condition complete with remote, manual and original box (£3,500), now £1,250 ono: **01303 863 424 (Kent).**

ATC SCM11 speakers (Cherry), (£1,000) £480; Roksan Kandy K2 CD (£899) £450; K2 Amplifier £450; Leema Xero, (Cherry), (£700) £350; all boxed, 30 months old: **07583 640 342 (Nottingham).**

CYRUS CDXT (silver), original box, instruction manual and remote. High quality CD transport to partner any external DAC. VGC £330: **01422 885 440 or email: n.taylor154@btinternet.com. (W Yorks).**

PIONEER PD-S707 Stable Platter CD player, in mint condition with remote. Optical Digital Out for use as a transport, *Hi-Fi Choice* recommended. £150 including delivery: **Email jk78610@yahoo.com (France).**

AYRE ACOUSTICS AX7c integrated amplifier, three years light use. Unmarked condition including remote. This is a current production model (£2,500) £1,150: **07785 465 137 or email: how.750@gmail.com. (Lincolnshire).**

LINN Ikemi CD player, Immaculate condition, boxed with remote and manuals. £800 **07870 159 725 or email: johnsidebottom@hotmail.co.uk (Somerset).**

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 871 622 (Lancs).**

LINN Sondek LP12 turntable with Linn Ittok LV11 tone arm and MC cartridge. Open to Offers. Photos available: **Email: philipmitchello2@oe.co.uk (N Ireland).**

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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!

excellent, engineer's test result, Monitor Audio RX6 8 ohm 125w, (Rosenut) (£800) £500. Can demo:

01661 823 606 or email: grant.darras@gmail.com (Newcastle Upon Tyne).

ROKSAN M2 integrated amp, as new, boxed, supplied with all original accessories, superb, £1,100: **07787574784 or email: stephen.adolphus@gmail.com (West Sussex).**

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ACOUSTIC ENERGY Radiance 1 speakers, great condition, well loved and cared for, £230: **07902 303 181 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 4998 729 (London).**

B&O Beogram 8000 with MMC 20CL cartridge £225, B&O P30 speakers £125, all good working order, buyer collects: **01302 772 495 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 263 069 (West Dorset).**

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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 617 038 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 778 355 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: **0781 8026 427 or email: anwarak98@gmail.com (West Yorkshire).**

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PIONEER PDS505 CD player, hardly used, in storage, £150: **0781 8658 722 (Warwickshire).**

NYTECH CTA 252 XD Series II receiver, full working condition, good with minor cosmetics £200: **01538 755 833 (Staffs).**

ROGERS LS3/5A speakers (black) £525, Pink Triangle LPT turntable, Rega arm, AT cartridge £325 (both collect only), QED Disc Master phono stage £40 (inc postage), JVC CD1770 cassette deck, exceptional condition £50: **01708 457 691 (Essex).**

CYRUS 7.5 preamp, Cyrus Smart power, Cyrus PSX power supply (black), good condition, £450: **0789 6272 406 (Tyne and Wear).**

NAIM speaker cable NAC5 terminated with banana plugs 2x 8.5m (£304) £150: **0774 9424 206 (Suffolk).**

KIMBER Monocle X speaker cables, terminated with WBT Nextgen 0610AG (silver) slant bananas, beautiful sound, Kimber flight case, mint, (£2,400) £1,100: **0151 6084481 (Merseyside).**

FURUTECH FP202 banana plugs, 24 carat gold-plated locking plugs. Originally £128 for 8, now £38 or £19 for 4: **0798 1025 698 or email: Chrisandelizabeth2001@yahoo.co.uk. (Bristol).**

HI-FI CHOICE magazine from Sept 1992 (20 years). Email: **davidkconstant@gmail.com (London).**

ARAGON Stage one, (silver) £500 of upgrades, Aragon 2007 power amp 7ch 200w to 8 ohms, (silver) £500 of upgrades, VGC, original boxes. £2,500. **01885 410 517 (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. **01582 867 139 or email: mikethompson48@hotmail.com (Bedfordshire).**

PRO-JECT RPM 1.3 Genie (red) turntable, VGC, box and manual, buyer collects, £160. **01933 626 185 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: **0207 4998 729 (London).**

VTL 100 mono compact monoblocks, mint for age, sensible offers, ATC CA2 pre ex con £350, NVA mm phono stage, 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. **01296 437 314 (Bucks).**

B&W CDM1 NT standmount speakers (cherry), VGC, boxed (£750) £350:

01702 520 063 (Essex).

ATC SCM7 loudspeakers (blackash), mint condition, boxed with manuals, (£610) £475. **07733 428 736 or email: gill@gillbrears.plus.com (Huddersfield).**

RUSS ANDREWS Classic Powerkord with IsoTek 24ct gold Wattgate £75. **01484427 426 (W Yorks).**

PMC GB1i floorstanding loudspeakers, (black) excellent sound, mint and boxed £800. **01474 352 164 (Kent).**

FOCAL Spirit One headphones, high quality closed-back design, (HFC5-star rating) £90, Atlas Equator Mk3 and Linn (black) high-quality interconnect cables, both as new £30 each. **07971 136 711 (W.Yorks).**

WANTED mounting plate for Rega RB300 arm to Thorens 160s turntable. Trade or private. **01772 687 748 (Lancashire).**

NAIM CD3.5 CD player, new remote and CD securing puck, original packaging+interconnects VGC. **0740 2599 050 (Northamptonshire).**

KRYSTAL KABLES audiophile silver mains lead, fitted with silver-plated mains plug and IEC (£95) £39, Russ Andrews Yello 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 025 698 or email: chrisandelizabeth2001@yahoo.co.uk (Bristol).**

TRANSPARENT Reference speaker cable 10ft (£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), remote and two Quadlink cables, VGC, boxed (1 original, 2 elite boxes) + manuals £750 ono. **07791 619 099 or email: mikkekafas@hotmail.co.uk (NW London).**

IMF TL50 transmission line speakers (teak), full working order and VGC including grilles £100, Epos ES22 speakers (Dark Cherry), 2 1/2 way small floorstanders, fabulous sounding speakers VGC including grilles. Buyer collects £450. **0292 0702 134 or email: gareth.jones2@btinternet.com (Cardiff).**

TOM EVANS AUDIO MicroGroove plus phono preamp, superb sound, VGC, set up for low output MC cartridge (100ohm R, 0.2µ). (£850) £475 ono. **07725 525 001 or email: alan.strudwick@googlemail.com (South Wales).**

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Octave

Hifi Choice call it the 8th Wonder...

It offers a direct line to the soul of the music. *Jason Kennedy*

HiFi Critic say it's a Game Changing DAC...

Such high sound quality - Irrespective of price. *Martin Colloms*

6 Moons give it a full blown Blue-Moon...

Blue Moons are bestowed only on components of rare excellence. *Srajan Ebaen*

The chief engineer at Metrum Acoustics is an audiophile whose previous incarnation was spent designing systems and transducers for nondestructive ultrasonic investigations. Whilst designing an industrial high speed data acquisition system, an extremely fast chip capable of 16 or 24 bit audio with sampling rates up to 15 MEGAHERTZ was discovered. He tried it in his audio system and the results were outstanding.

No digital filters nor oversampling

The sound was 'real', not forced and without 'THAT digital veil' present in digital audio, more like a fine tuned turntable without the pops and crackles, the Holy Grail had been discovered and Metrum Acoustics was born.

Sounds like a finely tuned turntable

Metrum Acoustics is unique, it's the only digital audio company able to offer a real alternative because its not dependent upon the regular AKM, Burr Brown, TI, Crystal or Wolfson chips required for digital audio and used by all, which is why competitors DACs sound digital and alike.

Uses 8 extremely fast dac chips

In addition no digital filters nor oversampling is used and therefore pre or post ringing associated with oversampling dacs is entirely eliminated. Octave parallels 4 of these expensive dac chips per channel in a 2 box system. One contains a 15V power supply (PSU) and the other the dac itself.

Instead of charging an appropriately high price (justified), it was decided to offer it without frills at a lower price, initially ex-factory, to a wider audience of music lovers.

It punches well above its weight

The Octave was eventually sent to critics for review. All were flabbergasted and all agree that it punches well above its weight, and up to 10 times its price. It is now available in the UK. We invite you to audition this unique product in your own system at home for 30 days. If you don't like it return it and we'll give your money back, no quibble!!

Customers Comments:

- Hi John, Now the unit has started to truly warm up, it is a decidedly impressive product! The fact that it does not use digital filtering or oversampling is a great example of less being very much more. My previous DAC was an XXXXdax, and the Octave trounces it. Craig
- John, The Metrum is very very good. It sounded 'right' from first switching on. It has a lovely sound, very neutral and natural. Voices are particularly good. I have been listening to CDs for hours at a time, with no trace of fatigue. Many thanks, Bob
- Hi John, Just to say this Octave DAC is fantastic it blows the XXXXac 5 away but don't tell anyone because they will put the price up. Thanks for your great service All the best Giles
- Hi John, Wow how good is the Metrum?! I've had a XXXX202 and XXXXvb in my system over the last few months and the Metrum sounds better than both of them. I hope word spreads about just how good this DAC is. Regards, James

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Back to the future

Who'd have thought when I first got involved in *Hi-Fi Choice* things would evolve in the way they have says **Lee Dunkley...**

Sometimes it's difficult to see the shifting sands of time slowly eroding and reshaping the world around us. You're not often aware of the changes that are subtly happening around you, but a quick look through the *Hi-Fi Choice* back issues archive to my short time on the mag in the very late nineties/early noughties is a clear indicator to just how different the world of hi-fi was back then.

There's nothing quite like visiting an old friend to make the passing of time seem like little more than a blink of an eye since you last met, but in actual fact a decade (and then some) has passed since my first time at *Choice*, and pretty much everything and everyone has moved on. It was spring 1999 when I first put in an appearance on the *Hi-Fi Choice* team as an enthusiastic and wide-eyed staff writer who couldn't believe his luck in landing the job. I had previously worked for the Consumers' Association at its research lab, testing virtually everything that fell under the AV umbrella for its well-known subscription-based monthly consumer title – which as I was often heard saying, “if Dixons sell it, we've probably tested it”. Here I developed a considerable speciality as a 'listener' participating in blind listening tests alongside a selection of other panellists that included musicians and professional sound recording engineers.

Passion for hi-fi

I had always been a keen hi-fi fan, and built my own separates-based hi-fi system by reading and researching reviews from a collection of hi-fi magazines. So as a twenty-something, a job that involved listening to excerpts of music carefully chosen to test a component's sonic performance capabilities – while sitting alongside such respected professionals – felt like the greatest job in the world. My only qualification was a keen ear and a passion for sound quality.

As we moved towards the end of one millennium and into another, there was little indication of the milestones that were about to reshape the hi-fi industry, and more specifically the way we access and listen to music. In 2000 CD was the undisputed king of the music format. Sliver disc hi-resolution audio formats from DVD-Audio and Super Audio CD were eagerly waiting in the wings; ready to stimulate our ears with high-resolution stereo sounds and multi-channel music using six discrete audio channels. For a moment the future of music and hi-fi appeared to be all about 'better-than-CD'

quality audio with a discernable step up the ladder in sound quality – it was pretty much billed as the audio equivalent to the leap from standard-definition to the high-definition TV broadcasts that viewers are so enthusiastically getting to grips with now.

We had already seen the Digital Compact Cassette and MiniDisc pop up in the earlier nineties, but both formats were generally perceived to offer inferior sound quality to CD. Their slow to catch-on start suggested there wasn't much of a future for compressed-audio music formats, even for portable music, and solid-state music along with some company called Napster was shrouded in such huge copyright issues that MP3 music looked destined to remain in the shadows for a considerable time to come.

The times they are a-changing

The idea of downloading music files in 2001 seemed like an alien concept, and the likelihood of music lovers giving up physical media for a virtual music file seemed (frankly) preposterous. The launch of the first Apple iPod in October that year changed the way many people listen to music forever. Pretty much every hi-fi manufacturer has adapted to music lovers that have come to expect instant downloads, high-capacity storage devices for all their digital music, and wireless connectivity to stream files to an audio system. Computer audio has become such a major source for the majority of consumers that digital-to-analogue convertors (DACs), all but extinct 10 years ago, have made a massive comeback. Many are even fitted with a USB connection to allow easy connection to a PC or Mac and ensure that the best quality signal gets to your hi-fi.

Hi-fi has changed enormously in such a relatively short space of time and the industry is one of the few I can think of that has so enthusiastically responded and successfully adapted to consumer demands. Sure, there has been a number of rather significant casualties along the way, and the high street doesn't look anywhere near like the same place it did 10 or so years ago. Music listening and the way we purchase and connect to it around our homes is continuously evolving, and the hi-fi industry has adapted and responded to the fast-paced marketplace with ever more desirable products designed to excite and meet the needs of price- and sound-conscious UK consumers.

It's a great time to be into hi-fi, and I look forward to experiencing first hand the exciting developments that are waiting to happen next.

A decade has passed since my first time at *Choice*, and pretty much everything has moved on



LEE DUNKLEY
Hi-Fi Choice editor

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An important life lesson

Great sounding systems don't have to cost the earth says **David Price**, and are demonstrably better for you than lentils...

Despite being an undergraduate in the eighties – when it was the height of fashion to plead poverty, look like someone from *The Young Ones* and not eat for months at a time – I was not averse to creature comforts, truth be told...

Along with an old Triumph sports car, a swish new Honda motorbike and a fully upgraded 32K BBC Microcomputer (yes really), I lived the high life with a hi-fi system that was the envy of my student friends. You see, I'd taken a 'gap year' (it wasn't called that then), which had enabled me to graft for the best part of 12 months, whereas most of my contemporaries had barely managed a paper round for an Easter weekend or two.

Finding myself

Instead of going to find myself in India (I'd be more likely to find myself in Virgin Records), I duly blew all my loot on a succession of luxury goods, which I *seriously* enjoyed having. Spiritual enlightenment was all well and good, but owning the latest 4AD vinyl boxset was in my view altogether better. And of every single solitary thing I owned – with the possible exception of my pointy 'Beatle boots' and army surplus 'Echo and the Bunnymen' overcoat, my gorgeous Linn sound system was king.

I loved it with a passion. My friends and I would lock ourselves inside our student house for days, running the gamut of our Smiths/Bowie/Roxy Music records. I adored the sound it made, and the moments it gave us. I was proud to call it my own.

Trouble is, what to do when the long student vacations came? Every summer in Bristol I'd vow to stay in town, but then got increasingly lonely as all my friends went back home – it felt like being in a seaside town in winter, just not quite right. So I'd invariably slog back to my folks' house in Oxford by August, to catch up with my old friends there. This presented one of life's horrible hi-fi dilemmas, however...

As someone who accorded listening to music the same seriousness as breathing (sleeping and eating were poor seconds, back then), how could I possibly survive without my prized hi-fi when I was out of town, staying in my parents' abode? Trouble was, I didn't want to heave my system back with me – what with all that packing and unpacking, and Linn Sondek suspension that (at that time) would famously go out of tune if there was so much as a draft blowing across its top-plate.

The solution I came up with was to put together a second system to last me the length

of my student summer holiday, leaving my beloved high-end system in Bristol for the duration of the vacation. I suddenly had an excuse to assemble a 'classic system' for the price of a wet weekend in Glastonbury.

And so I came upon a well preserved Rega Planar 2 turntable (old style, complete with wood trim, very nice!) and R100 cartridge for a song. I picked up a dog-eared old Nytech receiver for not much more, so all I needed now was a cheapo pair of speakers. A quick scan of *Exchange and Mart* (where else?) revealed a pair of decade-old KEF Codas going for the price of a few pints at the student union bar, not too far down the road.

Having lived on lentils for the best part of a year to afford my state-of-the-art Linn system, I was naturally very doubtful that this random assemblage of half-decent components would impress me – what with my lofty, fancy hi-fi ways. Indeed, in a sense I rather hoped it wouldn't, as it would reaffirm my notion – contrary to the strongly held beliefs of my nearest and dearest – that I hadn't wasted all my money on my prized set-up.

Imagine my surprise then, when my new second system sounded stunning? No, I hadn't been at the Strongbow; bass was rich and full, midband crisp and musical, and the treble beautifully sweet – thanks in no small part to the faded glory that was the Rega (nee Supex) moving coil cartridge. I sat transfixed, in awe and the sumptuous, soothing loveliness of it all. This sure as hell beat a day spent marching around Bristol with a placard shouting, "No ifs, no buts, no education cuts!"

Learning my lesson

Then, I got this horrible feeling, when the grim realisation set in that my second system – assembled for the princely sum of £150 (that's approximately 200 bags of lentils, in student currency) sounded far better than my first system ever had (which would fill a football pitch full of the aforementioned poor-people's protein provider).

Returning to my main system some weeks later, things were never quite the same again. I twigged that a modestly priced set of components that work synergistically can do something really special – and that you don't have to throw money around to get great sound. My Linn system still sounded divine, but I'd learned that rave reviews and cash alone aren't the sole determinants of serious sonics. Decades after stopping eating lentils, I still soberly remember this lesson!

Rave reviews and cash alone aren't the sole determinants of serious sonics

DAVID PRICE
Hi-Fi Choice writer



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Way out West

Extreme show reporter **Jason Kennedy** brings news of the latest trends in digital music from the city that never sleeps...

CES, or the consumer electronics show in Las Vegas, is the biggest of its kind in the world, and comes crammed full of the latest TVs, cameras and electronic gadgets. It also has a 'speciality audio' sector where companies in our business get to display and demonstrate their latest work. This year many of them released products designed for file playing and streaming, in fact the latter category might have actually outpaced new loudspeakers, which is quite a feat given the rate at which those appear...

On the DAC front there seems to be a growing enthusiasm for Direct Stream Digital, the unique recording format created some 15 years ago for SACD. Players for that disc type are fairly thin on the ground but you can now buy DSD downloads in .dff and .dsf formats that can be played back by software players like Audirvana Plus and JRiver, both of which were much in evidence at CES. Resolution Audio has a 2.0 DAC board for its Cantata Music Centre, which allows the playback of such files but what the company showed was a Cantata running as a UPnP streamer. That is streaming material from a NAS drive, the first example of a DAC that's made this evolutionary leap to my knowledge. DSD was created by Sony – which although it no longer makes serious players – does make serious speakers and it was using five of its AR2 floorstanders with Pass Labs amps to demonstrate the format's considerable multichannel capabilities.

Keep it flexible

Bryston meanwhile, has taken a different tack with its BDP-2 player. This is a digital source that can stream via UPnP or play material stored on a USB device, what makes it different is that you can add a hard drive to make it a standalone media server. Giving this flexibility means you can have any size and quality of drive you fancy and upgrade it whenever suits, that's flexibility!

Wadia delivered the sexiest piece of kit at the show in the form of its Intuition DAC/amplifier. This looks radical because sister company Sonus faber did the styling and it might well sound the same because the same company had a hand in the sound. But the technology is as bleeding edge as one would hope from the brand. The converter is a 32/384 ESS Sabre DAC with native DSD playback and it has an ADC for analogue inputs plus a 350W Class D amplifier. Price will be around \$7,500 over there.

At the sensible end of the spectrum, the ever industrious Arcam has been making its products Wi-fi friendly and delivered the rBlink Bluetooth

receiver and DAC (£185) that uses the latest chipset to produce what MD Charlie Brennan describes as a pretty impressive result given the 320kbps limitation of the format. The popular rDAC has been replaced with a remote control version with six inputs called irDAC (£400) and for iPad/iPhone users there is the airDAC Airplay receiver/converter (also £400).

Arcam's competition on this front comes from Pro-Ject whose Box range arguably kicked off the compact component frenzy. The range is already substantial, but has now been bolstered by additions at every level. For the file player there is Stream Box DSA, which is a 60W amplifier and streamer combined with digital and analogue inputs, it will run off Ethernet, Wi-fi and USB. In the next range up is the Streambox RS in an aluminium case with a balanced circuit and valve output stage, this is a single purpose Box that can be app controlled in the analogue domain if you have the appropriate Wi-Fi Box receiver.

The best digitally sourced system was in the dCS room... it was certainly one that lived up to the hype...

Resolution Audio's Cantata can playback DSD downloads in .dff and .dsf formats



Do believe the hype

The best sounding digitally sourced system I heard at the event was in the dCS room, which had the flagship Vivaldi front end consisting of a CD/SACD transport, upsampler, master clock and DAC. The amps were D'Agostino Momentum monoblocks and the speakers Wilson Audio Alexia. Quite a high falutin' system it has to be said, but it was certainly one that lived up to the hype. It boasted an extremely realistic, close-your-eyes-and-you're-there sound, of the sort you rarely encounter at a show. This was achieved with the aid of a recording by Peter McGrath of Wilson Audio, which would give any system a head start, but I also heard a plain old CD in the same set-up and have to say that it wasn't a big step down even with a non 'phile commercial recording. The disc played was *Hymns to What is Left* by Greg Brown, which not only sounds great but can make a po-faced, golden-eared audience laugh. When you're that far out west it don't get much better than that!



JASON KENNEDY
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Caught in the net

Malcolm Steward expounds on the joys of running your music collection off an array of networked computer hard disk drives...

Trouble-free networked music. Yes, you did read that correctly: truly digital music can exist without any problems, provided you set it up carefully in the first instance...

The first and most important thing to do is to back-up your library and then make sure that your back-up functions reliably. If you can't listen to your music from that back-up it is no more than a waste of hard-disk space and the time you spent producing it. As I sit writing this I am listening to a back-up of my music playing through UPnP software installed on a back-up machine directed to a secondary back-up drive that is acting as its 'library'.

Minimise the pain

Rest assured that the hard disk storing your music library will fail: it's not a question of if, more a question of when. By having a back-up system in place from day one you are doing all you can to minimise the pain you will have to endure when that drive decides to brick itself.

In my set-up, my main library is kept on a hard disk on my primary network-attached storage device. This is copied to my secondary NAS, and both of these are subsequently copied to external USB drives that are regularly checked by connecting their contents to a discrete NAS and listening to the results by making my desktop streamer access the NAS on which the back-up then appears.

If all that sounds complicated, believe me it's not. And it is infinitely preferable to waking up and discovering that some mishap on the mains during the night has vaped my primary NAS and trashed all the music stored on it – which currently amounts to comfortably more than 25,000 tracks. I do not relish having to rip and/or download all of that lot again... not for the sake of just buying a couple of not-overly-expensive external USB drives that have to be switched on when I add music to my collection.

My experience has shown that not all USB drives are as reliable as one would wish, but I have had no problems over recent years with Hitachi external disks (AKA the former IBM DeskStar models, whose reliability once earned them the nickname DeathStars, although I never had any troubles with them). My preferred online reseller, scan.co.uk, is currently selling a 2-Terabyte USB3 external drive for just £68 including VAT, while it has 4TB versions at around £150 each, which should accommodate most collections with room to spare.

On that topic, always buy twice as much storage space as you currently need or you

think you are going to need. One reason this is a wise idea, for example, is that a Windows hard disk will not defragment if there is not sufficient spare capacity on the disk to allow the process to take place – I think Microsoft recommends 25 percent space be left spare, which means you will only get around 750GB of usable storage from a 1TB disk. Still on that topic, do not try to buy hard disks at the cheapest price. That is very much a false economy – you should spend a little more and buy drives that have been designed for and tested running 24/7.

You get what you pay for

I have a shelf in my office piled high with 'bargain' drives that have bricked for no apparent obvious reason, yet the 'ridiculously expensive' enterprise-grade drives I once put in my office server are still going strong way past their 'best-by' date. The fact that they employ SCSI 68-pin cabling dates them to the early 1990s. They really should have died around 1995 but are still running flawlessly 20 years after I first installed them. Of course, I do not regard them as infallible, I just think that I have been unusually lucky with them.

In order to safeguard my library – and to preserve the integrity of signals travelling to and from it, I ensure that my music network is kept entirely separate from my general network: my streamers all connect to a Gigabit switch in my music room and that connects to an identical switch in my office that houses my NAS drives. The Ethernet connecting these 'ends' of the network connects to the internet through my main router but occupies a different address space to the rest of my network so it does not truly connect with any of the other equipment in my home or office. As a result of this configuration, and for the benefit of security, all my NAS drives enjoy two layers of Network Address Translation separating them initially from the nefarious script-kiddies of the outside world.

Yes... truly digital music can exist without any problems, provided you set it up properly in the first place...

External hard drives don't cost a lot and their value is nothing compared with the hassle of losing your music



MALCOLM STEWARD
Reviewer and music fan



Listening to Music – the Benefits

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

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

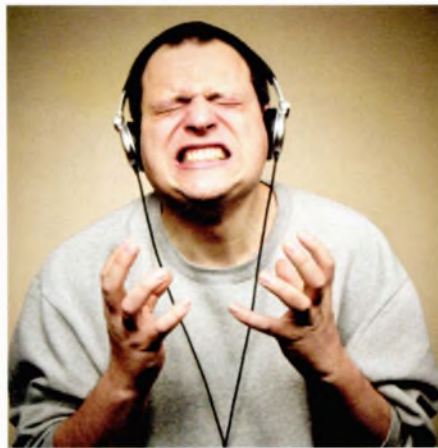


Quality vs Quantity

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

Style over substance?

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



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

popular download speed of 128 kbps being about one-eleventh the size of a full resolution CD track (1411 kbps), so the quality is inevitably far inferior. Information is irretrievably lost and the full dynamic range is lacking. Using an iPod while jogging does not really raise a quality issue but playing low-resolution tracks through, for example, an iPod docking station that feeds into a decent hi-fi system, is a disaster area. It is very poor quality made louder and this even affects the type of music listened to. For example, most classical recordings downloaded as an MP3 or

AAC file are a complete waste of time because there is so much information missing, all the complexities of the music are lost, and the recordings are reduced to just the essence of a tune.

Future of Recorded Music

If convenience has trumped quality for many people, we must ask what the future prospects are of maintaining high quality music recordings. Fortunately audiophiles, or hi-fi connoisseurs, or perhaps most accurately described, music lovers, continue to drive the demand for quality because there are some wonderful hi-end systems available and being sold today. Another important reason for hope within the mass-market is that there is no longer any over-riding reason for MP3 and AAC to have such a following. These formats were designed to overcome very slow download speeds pre-broadband and expensive memory capacity. These are not significant factors for most people now. Even iPods, if loaded with full resolution tracks, can deliver acceptable results through a good system. The trade-off is a smaller selection of stored music. Full resolution audio streaming, as well as CD quality downloads, are already available and will become the norm as the wider public becomes aware of the tremendous quality benefit.



Audiophiles and Hi-Fi Connoisseurs

Hi-fi connoisseurs and audiophiles are very important to the music industry. By their nature, they are generally avid music lovers who enhance their enjoyment through listening to music at its very best quality level, which means playing great recordings through hi-end hi-fi to achieve the most outstanding results. Without them, the main driver for quality would probably be removed from the music industry.



Specialist Dealers

Specialist hi-fi retailers also come into this category because it's their interest that has driven them into their particular business. These specialist retailers also perform another very important function because, without them, hi-fi manufacturers would have to rely on the internet and hi-fi magazine reviewers to try and assess the relative merits of different brands for potential customers – a notoriously unreliable decision making process. Specialist hi-fi retailers are constantly being offered new products for assessment and potential stocking and, as it is also their hobby as well as their livelihood, they are greatly interested in achieving the best performance and seeking out the most outstanding combinations. More than that though is their relationship with audiophiles and hi-fi connoisseurs for, if they are to stay in business, they must satisfy the most discerning customers in the industry. The reality is that audiophiles and specialist hi-fi retailers (and the ones listed on this page represent the UK's finest) are essential to each other.

Specialist dealers know how to choose the products that combine as a superb

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

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

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

Our Top 20 UK Hi-Fi Dealers

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SOUNDCRAFT HI-FI
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www.soundcraftthifi.com

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

E. Grinstead
AUDIO DESIGNS
 26 High Street.
 t: 01342 328065
www.audiodesigns.co.uk

Kingston-upon-Thames
INFIDELITY
 9 High Street,
 Hampton Wick.
 t: 020 8943 3530
www.infidelity.co.uk

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

Norwich
MARTINS HI-FI
 85-91 Ber Street.
 t: 01603 627134
www.martinshifi.co.uk

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

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

LONDON

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

N1
GRAHAMS HI-FI
 190a New North Road.
 t: 020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11
ORANGES & LEMONS
 61/63 Webbs Road.
 t: 020 7924 2043
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

W20
O'BRIEN HI-FI
 60 Durham Road.
 t: 020 8946 1528
www.obrienhifi.com

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

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

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

Birmingham

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

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

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www.cymbiosis.com

Nottingham
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 t: 0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

NORTH
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 t: 0161 428 7887
www.theaudioworks.co.uk

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

Hull
THE AUDIO ROOM
 Savile Street, Hull
 t: 01482 891375
www.theaudiroom.co.uk

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

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



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 FACILITIES ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
 VERDICT ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Mini adventure

As news comes that Sony is ceasing MiniDisc player production, **David Price** recalls the rise and fall of the once futuristic format...

Somewhere up there in hi-fi heaven, tucked away in a cobweb-covered cupboard, sits a MiniDisc machine whirring away. You'd have to squeeze past some dusty Sony Elcaset decks, a Sanyo nicotene-stained Stereo 8 machine and a brace of old Philips cassette recorders to find it, but there it will be – glinting in the ethereal light forever more.

It's amazing to think that MD is over 20 years old, but then again just use one and you realise how anachronistic it feels now. If we want to digitally copy our CDs these days, we feed them into our computer, whereupon an application opens up and chews through the digits at around ten times the speed of a real-time recording. With MiniDisc (until the end of its life), real-time was all you got, but it still seemed a wonderfully slick bit of technology.

Then there was 'MD Text', the amazing feature that let you label your discs. Some people spent hours scrolling through the buttons on those chunky remote controls, titling not just the album name but the songs and artists too. Didn't they have anything else better to do? As a major concession, the likes of Sony began fitting computer keyboard sockets, so you could type in the track titles even faster. It seemed like the stuff of science fiction – if Jules

Verne had been around in the late nineties, he'd doubtless be beguiled by it. After all, what's the point of time travel if your Manic Street Preachers album is correctly labelled?

As for the sound, well it wasn't very good for a very large part of MD's life. The early machines were just plain dreadful – imagine a CD playing out through a kazoo. Unsurprisingly, not a lot of people bought them in the UK, even if the portables (an optimistic term for the very first example of the breed, the Sony MZ-1) were big in Japan (literally). The hi-fi press reviewed swathes of them, predictably reporting they didn't sound as good as rival Digital Compact Cassette decks, even if they loved their futuristic 'random access' orientation.

The ATRAC fightback

In 1996 Sony launched a new range of MiniDisc machines sporting something called ATRAC 3.5. Yes, it sounds like another arcane acronym, but in this instance it really meant something. Back when the company's engineers actually had time to work on audio products, some white coated Japanese boffins had switched on their calculators and devised a music coding algorithm that sounded half decent.

Previous incarnations of Sony's Adaptive Transform Acoustic Coding

had – in the process of squishing about 650MB of audio data from a CD down to 140MB for MD – managed to adapt the music into something altogether less satisfying. MiniDisc had previously been a sort of foggy facsimile of what it was supposed to represent, but finally ATRAC 3.5 managed to join the dots in the right places and make things sound vaguely like music.

In today's terms, you'd be talking along the lines of 320kbps AAC, which is very respectable if you're not getting too deep into the auditory experience. The surface of the sound is pretty much identical to that of an uncompressed CD – maybe even ever so slightly tonally warmer – it's just when you listen 'into' the recording attentively that you start to find things are a little blurred, diffuse and phasey. Dynamics suffer slightly, and there's a sense of some missing low-level detail and air.

Because ATRAC (like MP3, AAC and WMA) is compressed, it has to effectively manipulate the music to fit a finite (and limited) storage space, so if the music is very simple there's far less sense of compression. For example, a gentle solo classic guitar recording will get less apparent processing than a crescendo from a recording of *The William Tell Overture*.

Sony's 1998 MDS-JA3000ES was one of the best-looking hi-fi MiniDisc machines, from the glory days before MP3 killed off the format





Changing fortunes

By the time ATRAC 3.5 was introduced the idea that MiniDisc sounded bad had become set in audiophile minds. So it took a long time for the message to get through that the format had finally become listenable. The company launched a couple of tasty ES-series machines, such as the MDS-JA30ES and '50ES, which boasted beautiful build, high-quality DACs and 20-bit analogue-to-digital converters, for those recording from the line or microphone inputs. Suddenly MiniDisc offered better specs than Compact Disc.

The ES machines were expensive of course, weighing in at between £600 and £1,000 in the mid nineties. What Sony needed was a machine that gave similar sonics but at a far more affordable price – and in 1996 this finally arrived in the shape of the MDS-JE500. This was a diminutive, slimline machine selling for 'just' £300, and offered hitherto unknown sound from MD thanks to its (then) brand new CXD2650R ATRAC 4.0 chip. If version 3.5 was a significant advance, then 4.0 was the giant leap forward; suddenly MiniDisc sounded warm, musical and far less processed than it ever had before. I remember Sony marketing men being genuinely excitedly about it, which wasn't the tone usually expected from such a big company with so many projects on the go at any one time.

Sony's portable players also improved dramatically and the company introduced a range of really rather competent car MiniDisc head units, which finally began to push the format forward in the UK. At last, the sound was right, the products were right and the prices too. In its native Japan, where MiniDisc had been enthusiastically adopted as a mobile music source for the country's many millions of train-travelling rush hour commuters, the format had become ubiquitous by around 1994. In the UK, however, very few people really knew about as late as 1997. The

MDS-JE500, and the decks that followed it (the '510, etc.) really began to push the format out into the public at large. Sony started selling more prerecorded MiniDiscs – you could finally walk into a major music store and buy them off-the-shelf.

Sony followed up with more high-end machines, such as the MDS-JA5000ES which sported a further refinement of ATRAC 4.0 (ATRAC DSP Type-R), and gave

Suddenly MiniDisc sounded warm, musical and far less processed than it ever had before

excellent sound (few would be able to identify it as MiniDisc, if listening blind). It produced an even wider range of portables, compact midi-sized machines and increased its integration with computers – in Japan Sony actually sold a VAIO PC with a MiniDisc drive built in. And then a range of affordable audiophile machines, such as the MDS-JB900QS arrived, offering styling and finish similar to top ES machines for under £300. By 1999, there had never been a better time to invest in the format.

Three is the magic number

Sadly though, consumers didn't see it like this. MiniDisc was now a mature, professional format selling into a market that was actually quite ephemeral and fashion-driven. MP3 had been quietly rising in people's collective consciousness, and when it became clear to the world that you could a) play your music on your computers, b) download it for free from Napster and c) buy tiny little players – far smaller and lighter than an MD portable – MiniDisc didn't stand a chance. The rise of the Diamond Multimedia Rio and players

THE FACTS

Work on MiniDisc began in 1986 and brought together various different technologies and patents. The 2.5in square 140MB disc held a CD's worth of music, compressed by a factor of five by Sony's Adaptive Transform Acoustic Coding system (ATRAC). The disc itself was a variation on conventional magneto-optical recording, in which data is recorded using a semiconductor laser at high power together with a magnetic head. Launched in 1992, the ATRAC compression system improved immensely over the years. Version 1.0 was noisy, with obvious compression and lossy artefacts. ATRAC 2 greatly improved on this, taking away strange whistles and chirps, but was hardly a nice listen. ATRAC 3.5 added an input width of 20-bits, and was the first truly listenable incarnation of the codec. ATRAC 4 did processing entirely at 24-bit resolution with an input width of 20-bits. ATRAC 4.5 arrived on the high-end MDS-JA50ES, and then came ATRAC DSP Type-R, offering a cleaner treble. Hi-MD followed in 2004 with 1GB of storage, offering up lossless linear PCM at last.

from Creative Labs, Samsung and Philips dealt MiniDisc a mortal injury.

Sony fought back with Hi-MD, doing precisely what it should have done five years earlier, which was to use a high-density disc capable of storing far more music, and recording uncompressed too. Hi-MD was a brilliant little format, backwards compatible with MD (it would record and play in standard MD format) yet capable of real 'CD-quality' sound.

Sadly though, the world wasn't listening. The arrival of the Apple iPod in 2003 drove a stake through Sony's format, skewering it until there was no more life left. It was game over for the format, and its creator decided that profit lay in other areas, and the ascent of the Sony PlayStation began. Now, in 2013 Sony has made its last ever MiniDisc machine – some are surprised that it lasted this long, but that's a testament to its popularity in Japan. The discs stay in production, but it's only a matter of time before they too ascend to hi-fi heaven ●

Home comforts

Acoustic Arts took the decision to move out of a high street store to a more domestic setting. **Ed Selley** finds the change of location has done little to affect its sonic touch...

For over 20 years Acoustic Arts was a 'normal' hi-fi dealer. Based in a high street location in Watford, Anthony Scott and family built up an interesting portfolio of equipment and established a loyal following with a significant group of customers.

In the early years of this century, the often reported limitations of the high street began to make themselves felt. Parking for customers was limited and the increasing rates on the premises did not really help to justify maintaining the location. As a result Anthony took the decision to relocate Acoustic Arts to a new location. Having looked at a variety of options, he realised that the most logical one was to actually base the business out of his own house.

As a result, the portfolio has been slimmed down to a range of equipment that fits better into the smaller floorspace of the house and that Anthony is really enthusiastic about. The driving force behind all Acoustic Arts systems is an easy going musicality that encourages really long-term listening over pin-you-to-your-seat dynamics that can prove somewhat wearing over longer exposure. To help him achieve this, Anthony has some unusual brand combinations at his disposal and also acts as a distributor for a range of speakers that would feature heavily in the day's listening. It was time to see what Acoustic Arts could do.



THE EXPERT



ACOUSTIC ARTS
48 Crawley Close, Slip End, Bedfordshire, LU1 4BT
01582 485316

densen.dk
martinlogan.com
lector-audio.com
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francoserblin.it
audioresearch.com
metronome-technologie.com



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MACHINES OF
LOVE AND GRACE
CD



**CINEMATIC
ORCHESTRA**
IN MOTION #1
CD



BLACK KEYS
EL CAMINO
CD

SYSTEM 1 – SIMPLY ECSTATIC

The first system was an eloquent demonstration of the Acoustic Arts philosophy of putting brands in combinations that are not often seen elsewhere to good effect. This is a system that combines two well-known brands into an ensemble that is compact, flexible, rather handsome and capable of a seriously impressive sonic performance.

Sleek Boxes

The electronics are supplied in their entirety by Danish artisans Densen. Acoustic Arts has been an enthusiastic supporter of these sleek boxes for decades. The trio you see here are toward the lower end of the range, but all come in the trademark Densen minimalist casework complete with edges you could slice bread on.

The source is the B420XS CD player, which is a relatively new arrival to the range and combines some trademark features of Densen CD players of old like the Class A output stage and partners it with new decoding hardware. This is underpinned by a hefty and heavily regulated mains transformer.

This is partnered with the B200+ Preamp and B310+ power amplifier. The B200+ can accommodate the B420XS and another three line inputs plus two 'tape' sources. This can then be sent to no less than four power amps via multiple pre-outs. In this instance, only one power amp is needed as the 80watt output of the B310+ is all that is needed.

This is because the matching speakers are the MartinLogan ElectroMotion and as the smallest member of the MartinLogan range is possessed of 91dB/w sensitivity and only fitted for single wiring, there is neither the ability nor need to connect more power amps. The ElectroMotion has proved decent in other systems I've heard it in but how does it function in company with the svelte Scandinavians?

Sheer Agility

Reaching for my CD of Martha Tilston's *Machines of Love and Grace* – a disc that has stood up magnificently to heavy use of late – and some of the key behavioural traits of the system swiftly make themselves felt in short order. The drive, grip and sheer agility of the

Densens combine with the effortless cohesion and magnificent soundstage of the MartinLogans to produce a performance that is hugely impressive and different to any implementation I've heard from MartinLogans before.

The most arresting aspect of the system's performance is how fast and clean it is. *Stags Bellow*, the opening track of the album, is hardly a rocker but the slightly off beat bass and layered guitar require a fleetness of foot to avoid sounding confused. This system balances the required agility without pushing on to becoming relentless. The effect is wonderfully refined without ever being dull.

The tonality is equally impressive. The spellbinding *Manhatta* from the Cinematic Orchestra's *In Motion #1* gives the massed strings of the piece real body and texture and presents them as a collection of multiple instruments rather than a single body of sound. The positioning is pinpoint

and entirely believable as well. A flute solo later in the piece is slightly off centre, identifiably part of the woodwind section, and these little touches help bring the realism and life to performances.

The result is exceptionally likeable and a pairing that more than justifies the faith that Anthony has in it. This is also a very easy system to accommodate. You should be able to find the space for three elegant slabs of Danish design and the equally elegant MartinLogans in even the most minimalist of rooms and once you have done so you can enjoy a sonic performance that is a perfect combination of both brands. This was going to take some beating.

- 1 DENSEN B420XS CD PLAYER £1,850
 - 2 DENSEN B200+ PREAMP £1,400
 - 3 DENSEN B310+ POWER AMPLIFIER £1,450
 - 4 MARTIN LOGAN ELECTROMOTION LOUDSPEAKER £2,500
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £7,200



SYSTEM 2 – ENTER THE ACCORDIO

For the second system, Anthony moved to valve components. While he has no innate preference for vacuum tube designs, he's found systems that fulfil his sonic requirements seem to make use of more valve components than solid state ones. To this end, the electronics of system two are valve-based while the speakers are courtesy of an industry legend.

Point to point

This is another CD-based system and the digital front end is from Lector. This Italian-based company produces a small range of electronics including the Digidrive CD Transport and Digicode DAC used here. This pairing is an interesting combination of the very sophisticated and more retro. The pairing is fully balanced and makes use of a 24/192-capable chipset but from DAC chip onwards, the Digicode makes use of point-to-point wiring and four valves in the output stage.

Amplification comes courtesy of a VTL IT 85 integrated amplifier. The smallest member of the VTL range and the only integrated amp it produces, the IT 85 uses a quartet of EL34 valves for a usefully real world power output of 60watts. When you consider the remote, number of inputs and handsome design, this is a valve amp demanding few sacrifices from its owner. It also allows a wide choice of speakers.

And it is the speakers where this system is especially interesting. As a parallel business to Acoustic Arts, Anthony distributes Franco Serblin speakers in the UK and the smaller of the two models, the Accordio is used here. Serblin is best known as the original designer of Sonus Faber and the Accordio is at once familiar and arrestingly different.

The Accordio is a two way standmount speaker that uses a 150mm paper driver and a large 29mm silk dome tweeter. The cabinet is asymmetrical and features non parallel surfaces that help to reduce cabinet colouration. At first glance, the cabinet looks fairly small but the entire volume is a working chamber for the driver as the crossover is built into the matching stand. Most unusual of all, the front panels have the recommended amount of toe-in built into the speaker so the cabinets face directly forward and toe-in from there.

Immediately arresting

Returning to the same Martha Tilston track as I used with system one, the differences in presentation were apparent but what was more surprising was how many aspects of the performance stayed the same despite the radically different nature of the system – proof that Anthony's system matching transcends the equipment used.

The part of the performance that is most immediately arresting is the bass. The

Accordio is a relatively small driver and if you own something with a transmission line, it isn't going to vibrate your internal organs in the same way, but the bass it produces is remarkably deep, impressively agile and absolutely jam-packed full of detail. This detail is present throughout the frequency range, but I can see why it appeals so much to Anthony. Because the performance is so unforced, you only fully appreciate just how much information it is that the system supplies when you start to listen to something else.

The electronics facilitate this by being impressively transparent and possessed of that air and space that valves find so much easier to achieve than solid state. The quality of the performance with voices in particular is truly exceptional, but it never feels bloomy or sluggish. When you consider the exceptional finish of the speakers in particular and the usefully small footprint, this is a system that can fit happily into a normal domestic environment unobtrusively right up until the moment you sit back and listen to it. Proof, if it were needed, that great hi-fi need not take over a room.

- 1 VTL IT 85 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER £5,100
 - 2 LECTOR DIGIDRIVE CD TRANSPORT/DIGICODE DAC £5,350
 - 3 FRANCO SERBLIN ACCORDIO STANDMOUNT SPEAKERS £6,900
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £17,350**



SYSTEM 3 – EXHAUSTIVE RESEARCH

The final system of the day represents the culmination of the Acoustic Arts philosophy and takes the elements of system two and improves them further. These aren't incremental improvements either – the jump in price is considerable, but so is the gain in performance.

Ultimate expression

A key arrival in the makeup of this system is Acoustic Research, which supplies amplification and decoding. The Reference 5 preamp and Reference 75 power amp are part of the Reference line of Audio Research components and the ultimate expression of the company philosophy. Both products are valve-based, but like the VTL are sufficiently powerful and well specified to have no trouble replacing a solid-state device if you wanted. With six inputs and three outputs supported, there isn't much this duo can't handle.

Digital-to-analogue conversion is also handled by Audio Research. The DAC 8 is 'only' a range component but shares the same impervious build and extensive connectivity as the larger units, including for the first time a 24/192kHz-capable USB input. In the context of this system, the source is CD again in the shape of a Metronome T3A transport. Metronome is in competition with a select number of brands to be considered the best in the

world at digital reproduction, but few of its rivals can touch it for visual elegance.

While not as striking as the larger Kallista, the T3A is still a gorgeous piece of design.

Partnering the electronics masterclass is the big brother of the Accordio, the Ktéma Proscenium. Almost every aspect of this sizeable floorstander is impressively radical and incorporates a number of unique design features. As well as a similarly oversized tweeter, the front panel mounts a pair of 4in drivers. These are strictly for midrange and are underpinned by a pair of 9in drivers, which are mounted internally and work against the curved rear panel. The result is an extraordinary looking loudspeaker and one that is beautifully finished. This system looks a million dollars but how does it sound?

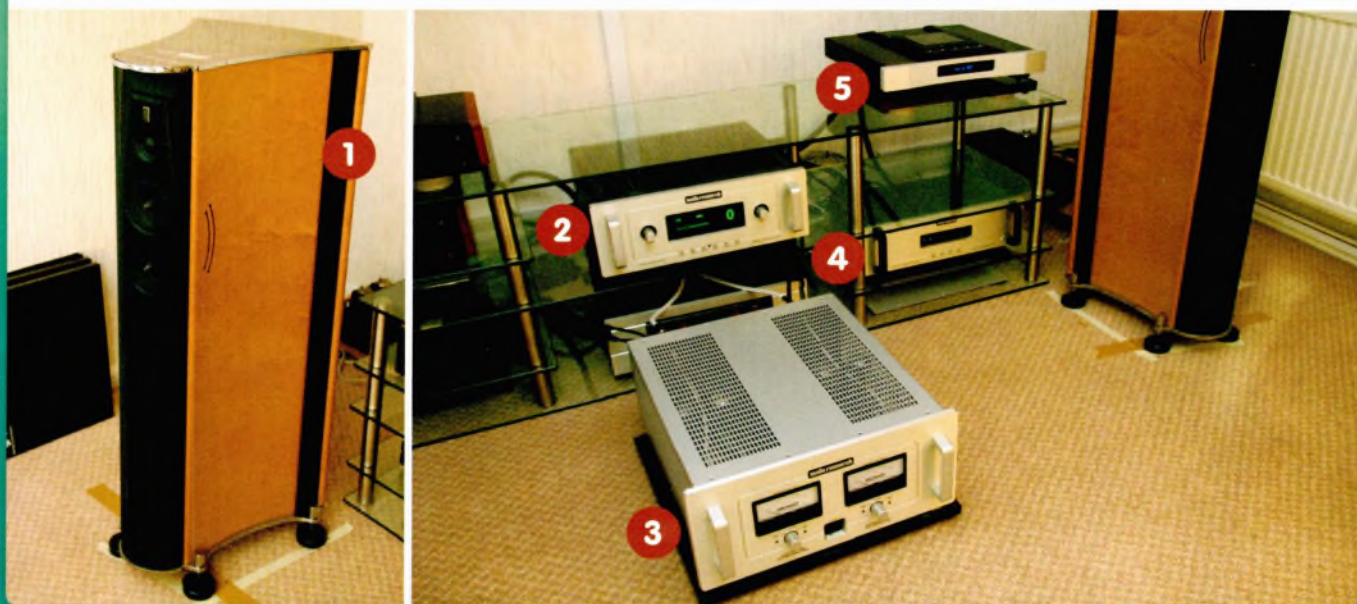
Genuine representation

It takes a few bars of the Cinematic Orchestra to establish that this is a system that has an innate grasp of musicality that goes beyond detail retrieval and frequency response – although both are seriously impressive in their own right. The way this system handles the orchestra of *Manhatta* is absolutely spellbinding. The sense of scale that the smaller systems manage to convey with acceptable realism is suddenly a genuine representation of what this body of instruments can achieve.

It's also impressive that this sense of scale and weight is not bought at the expense of the agility and timing that the smaller systems have. Switching to the more rough and ready *El Camino* by the Black Keys shows it can rock too. The recording won't win any prizes, but the Audio Research gear performs a neat balancing act of getting the music across while flattering the rougher edges. The bite and drive that makes this such an entertaining record is captured perfectly and the 'involuntary air guitar' test was passed with ease. This is a system that you could enjoy the most bipolar music collection on without finding yourself leaving anything to gather dust.

Nothing I threw at the ensemble seemed to faze it and I could have devoted an entire evening to really get to know it. It might cost a significant amount of money, but the build and aesthetics start to justify the cost even before you turn it on and once it starts to play you're left in no doubt that it's a world-class system ●

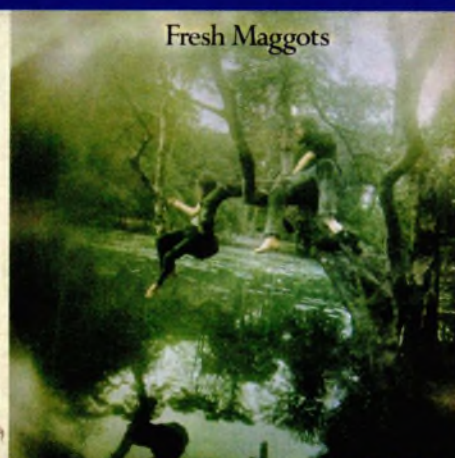
- 1 FRANCO SERBLIN KTÉMA PROSCENIUM LOUDSPEAKER £24,950
 - 2 AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE 5 PREAMP £11,900
 - 3 AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE 75 POWER AMP £8,500
 - 4 AUDIO REFERENCE DAC 8 £4,968
 - 5 METRONOME T3A TRANSPORT £8,800
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £59,118



Acoustic Arts is clearly a business with unique attributes. Anthony's years of experience allows him to choose systems that ignore accepted combinations in the pursuit of the performance he's looking for. The confidence to choose what he knows will

deliver the sound he is after over more normal partnerships reaped dividends. It is also an endorsement of basing a dealership from a domestic property. I left Acoustic Arts knowing that any of these systems could be transferred to my own lounge and deliver the same

excellent performance that they did in Anthony's demo room because their characteristics are so similar. When you consider the outlay involved with system three, that's a level of reassurance that could make the difference in deciding to go with a system or not.



Acid Folk

For our second genre primer, **Simon Berkovitch** investigates the hallucinatory world of late-1960s and mid-1970s psychedelic folk – whose reverberations can still be heard today

The psychedelic folk experiments that had purists up in arms in the 1960s and 1970s didn't really have a name at the time. The term 'acid folk' became more widely used in the 21st century to retrospectively describe a curious branch on folk music's tree – an attempt to shoehorn a collection of disparate musical experimenters together. Is it even accurate to call this often-trippy hybrid folk music? Perhaps, perhaps not... The beauty of this sub-genre is that it almost defies categorisation. For example, for the purposes of this primer we're only touching on the work of UK artists; many would argue that acid folk casts its net globally. Loosely put, any bands that have taken the Anglo-Gaelic folk revival template – think Bert Jansch, John Renbourn and the none-more inspired pairing of Davey Graham

and Shirley Collins – or the folk rock template – step forward Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span – and added some of psychedelia's flourishes – exotic instrumentation, acidic lead guitar, head-spinning production flourishes, often embarrassing lyrics – from the late-1960s to mid-1970s are fair game for the tag. Folk purism is abandoned. The possibilities of rock music are incorporated. As one 1970s compilation put it: *Electric Muse: The story of folk into rock* and as another retrospective nails it: *Gather in the mushrooms...* Bands operating around the end of the sixties and dawn of the seventies – such as Trees and Mr Fox – may have leafed through the dusty shelves of Cecil Sharp House for song inspiration, but their arrangements are firmly in the realm of rock music – heavy electric guitars, amplified violin and

psychedelic production. Singer-songwriters such as Nick Drake and Simon Finn – at the opposite ends of the performance spectrum, but equally intense in their own way – are arguably within the acid folk canon, as are artists like John Martyn and Traffic, whose 1970s albums see new technology snuggling up next to acoustic instrumentation. Similarly, a band like the terrifying and ultra-pagan Comus is as acid folk as it comes – as is the soundtrack to 1973's eerie classic British film *The Wicker Man*. This is the essence of acid folk: weird, eerie mock-traditional music whose legacy continues to inspire today's musicians worldwide. Ultimately, the definition of this genre is as loose as the music it attempts to corral – its boundaries are elastic; its influences eclectic. It's time for you and your record collection to dip into those same curative waters...



A major influence on contemporary artists as diverse as Johnny Marr and Joanna Newsom

Roy Harper

The man who unwittingly invented progressive folk...

Following his dalliances with both independent (Strike) and major (CBS) labels, legendary – so-called eccentric – singer-songwriter Roy Harper found a much more sympathetic home on EMI's progressive rock subsidiary Harvest.

His first album for the label, 1970's *Flat Baroque and Berserk*, was largely an acoustic affair, but the following year's *Stormcock*, (his fifth album) was when Harper truly

arrived as an artist. Within the four lengthy, exploratory cuts on *Stormcock*, a whole new hybrid was born: progressive folk.

The album features both Jimmy Page on guitar (uncredited on the mammoth acoustic guitar duel of *The Same Old Rock*) and the epic orchestral arrangements of David Bedford (*Me and My Woman*), adding additional colour to Harper's already accomplished songwriting.

Stormcock is a sophisticated work that has definitely weathered the winds of time. It's also an album that is only comparable to itself. A major influence on contemporary artists as diverse as The Smiths' Johnny Marr and Joanna Newsom, *Stormcock* was played in its entirety at London's Royal Festival Hall – with guests Jimmy Page and The Bedford Strings – as part of Harper's 70th birthday celebrations back in 2011.



Wildly original compositions are bedfellows with more traditional folk songs

Trees

Took Fairport Convention's sound in a heavier direction

Of all the artists that pawed over the map that folk rock pioneers Fairport Convention left for fellow travellers in the shape of 1969's milestone recording *Liege and Lief*, it was Trees that followed its trails to more psychedelic climes.

The band's two albums for CBS, both released in 1970 – *The Garden of Jane Delawney* and *On the Shore* – made little impact at the time, but they are both held in

considerable regard by 21st century genre enthusiasts – as well as record collectors, who pay high prices for original LPs.

Fronted by the shrill-voiced Celia Humphris, a series of wildly original compositions are bedfellows with adaptations of more traditional folk songs – albeit arranged in a heavier, more acidic, rock guitar style (courtesy of Barry Clarke) than the likes of Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention.

Second album *On the Shore* sports a memorable tinted cover by design studio Hipgnosis, responsible for some of the most iconic Pink Floyd sleeves: a ghostly child dressed in Victorian clothes is stuck in photographic amber, while arcs of just-thrown water lie frozen, mid-air. It's the quintessential acid folk image. The original Trees line-up disbanded after recording *On the Shore* and a second incarnation formed, but split in 1973.



Had a direct effect on the formation of Led Zeppelin

The Incredible String Band

The poster boys of the acid folk movement

Formed in Scotland in 1966 as a trio of Robin Williamson, Mike Heron – the group's core line-up before splitting in 1974 – and Clive Palmer – who departed after their debut album, before resurfacing in the early 1970s with C.O.B. (Clive's Own Band) – the group deployed a wide arsenal of traditional instruments from around the world, integrating them into their spiritual, countercultural compositions. The Incredible String Band may just have invented World Music, but we can't blame them for some of the atrocities that subsequently came to pass under that oft-maligned moniker.

Second album *The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion* was an exotic duo affair that

showcased Heron and Williamson's multi-instrumental chops as well as their deft songwriting skills. By now underground darlings, the pair delivered their masterpiece *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* – a multi-layered record that had a direct effect on the formation of Led Zeppelin (Robert Plant is on record as having "followed the instructions" heard on this fantastic album).

All of The Incredible String Band's albums are worth investigating, although the group takes a more conventional approach as the years roll by. 1968 was arguably the group's creative zenith, also being the year in which their ambitious double LP *Wee Tam and the Big Hugs* was released.



Once heard, these songs are never forgotten

Simon Finn

One of the movement's most sought-after albums

With a name like Mushroom, Vic Keary's Chalk Farm-based record label unambiguously set out its stall. Home to fantastic groups like Magic Carpet and Second Hand, the independent also had its own acid folk troubadour in the shape of Simon Finn.

His debut album – 1970's *Pass the Distance* – has an exceptionally heavy reputation. Unheard for decades and unknown to most (largely due to it being withdrawn practically on release due to cover copyright issues), the album was spoken about in hushed tones amongst collectors.

The eventual 21st century re-release (and subsequent reappraisal) in 2007 revealed Simon Finn to be an extraordinary songwriter

and unique – often harrowing – performer. Songs like *Big White Car* and album centrepiece *Jerusalem* are delivered in a super-intense manner – once heard, these songs are never forgotten.

Much of the album's reputation lies in the strange arrangements, too, reminiscent of the fractured logic of Syd Barrett's 1970 debut, *The Madcap Laughs*. With contributions from one David Toop, weird instruments collide, songs pan and drift off in unexpected directions... in short, the experience of *Pass the Distance* is a beautifully unsettling one. More recently, Finn has performed with Blur's Graham Coxon, Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Anthony and the Johnsons.

▶ ACID FOLK SHOPPING LIST

In addition to the four artists and albums profiled, your record collection will benefit from the addition of these acid folk classics. You should be able to track them down to buy on CD from Amazon



Comus
Song To Comus
Compilation of the band's two albums, plus some unreleased bonus tracks. Originally released back in 2005.



The Incredible String Band
The 5,000 Spirits of the Layers of the Onion
Released in July 1967, this was ISB's second studio album. The trio was reduced to a duo when Clive Palmer left in 1966.



John Martyn
Inside Out
Martyn's fifth solo album (seventh if you include the ones made with his wife, Beverley) was released in 1973.



Pentangle
Basket of Light
Reached number five in the UK album charts thanks to hit single *Light Flight*, which was the theme to a TV drama.



Trees
The Garden of Jane Delawney
Featured tracks that sounded like reworkings of folk classics, although they were all originals.



Paul Giovanni & Magnet
The Wicker Man
The soundtrack to the seminal movie wasn't released until 1998 – as a mono recording and then in 2002 in stereo.



Fresh Maggots
Fresh Maggots
Their only album was released in 1971 and pressings were promptly stopped soon after, due to lacklustre reviews.



Mr Fox
Join Us In Our Game
Released back in 2004, this album is a collection of the first two albums from the band (1970's *Mr Fox* and 1971's *Gypsy*).



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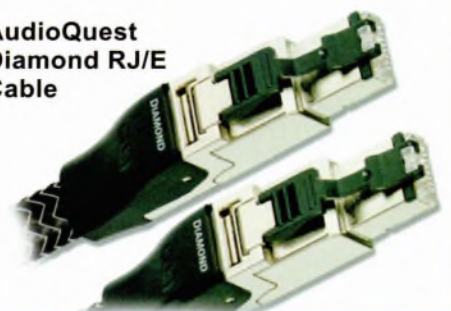
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100 Laura Mvula
Sing To The Moon



101 Sibelius
The Seven Symphonies

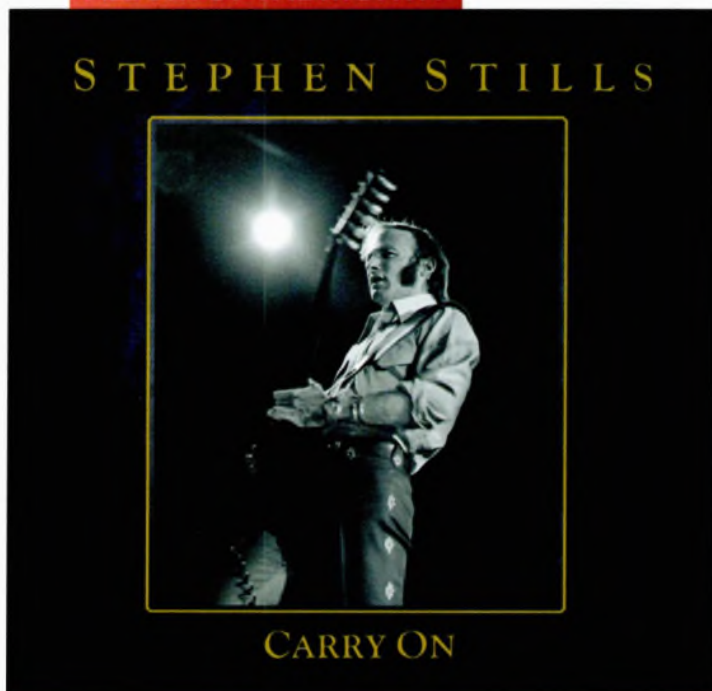


101 Trichotomy
Fact Finding Mission

Musicreviews

The latest music releases...

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



Stephen Stills

Carry On

rhino.co.uk

★★★★★

Rhino

Four CD box set

THERE IS SOMETIMES a curse to youthful genius. Some artists can burn so brightly at such a young age that they spend the rest of their careers struggling to live up to their early triumphs. A handful sustain their creative cutting edge into middle and old age. But most do not. For a decade and more at the start of his career, Stephen Stills was blessed with a rare musical genius, the evidence of which is present in abundance on this overdue career retrospective.

In Buffalo Springfield he led the only band to challenge the Byrds as America's answer to the Beatles. In Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young he was part of the biggest-selling US band of the early-1970s and his colleagues dubbed him 'Captain Many Hands' for his tendency to insist

on playing every instrument. He wrote some of the greatest songs of the age, had the voice of a fallen angel and played guitar like a demon. And all before he turned 30; it seemed there was nothing Stills couldn't do.

Yet by the 1980s he had run out of steam. Later years were spent sounding like a tribute act to his younger, greater self and decades passed between albums. The songs had simply dried up. But as *Carry On* amply proves, while his mojo was working, there were few who could match him.

The chronological arrangement of these four discs emphasises the rich fruit of the early years and the barrenness that followed. By the start of disc four, we're still in Stills' 1970s heyday as 'Captain Many Hands' runs the gamut of

The discs emphasise the rich fruit of the early years and the barrenness that seemed to follow

folk, rock, blues, jazz, country and Latin. Songs such as *For What It's Worth*, *Bluebird*, *Rock 'n' Roll Woman* and *Special Care* zing with the immaculate pop songcraft that made Buffalo Springfield the only serious rival to the Byrds as America's answer to the floppy-haired Brit invasion.

The soaring harmonies and acoustic guitars of CSN on *Helplessly Hoping*, *You Don't Have To Cry* and *Suite: Judy Blue Eyes* sound as fresh and warm as they did when they were recorded in 1969. Songs such as *Love The*

One You're With, *Change Partners* and *Go Back Home* from his first two solo albums from 1971-72 are testament to the prolific inspiration that was flooding out of him at the time.

All could have graced a CSN album but Stills simply had far more great songs than they could ever use. Equally, *It Doesn't Matter*, *Johnny's Garden* and *Colorado* from the 1972 *Manassas* album are country-rock masterpieces. *Treetop Flyer* from 1991 is a rare flash of the old brilliance, but the last two decades are skated over in little more than half a dozen tracks. Unsurprisingly, most of the previously unreleased material – including *No-Name Jam*, a thrilling 1970 guitar duel with Hendrix – also dates from the glory years. But what tarnished glory it was. **NW**



Stephen Stills, you'll note the many hands are hidden from view



Laura Mvula
Sing To The Moon
rcarecords.com
★★★★★

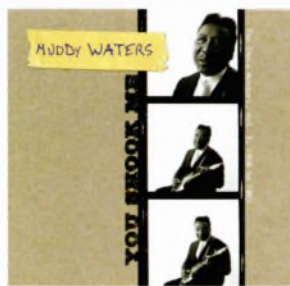
RCA

UNTIL RECENTLY LAURA

Mvula was a music graduate working as a receptionist for the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. That was before she started creating her own uniquely textured songs, which sound like Nina Simone singing the Beach Boys as produced by Björk in a gospel church.

She uses her own multilayered vocal harmonies to construct elaborate soundscapes like in *She*, which is a hymn to quiet persistence that floats by on a bed of gently tinkling celeste-style keyboard and emphatic choral accompaniment, and *Green Garden*, which grooves along with infectious handclaps and escalating vocal surges.

Supported by strings, piano and percussion with hints of brass and synths, her songs are just quirky enough to be compelling and boast enough melodic hooks and harmonic intelligence to be entrancing. Her voice has a rich, warm timbre eschewing pyrotechnics in favour of directness. It's a beautiful debut, and she's likely to get very big, very soon. **DO**



Muddy Waters
You Shook Me -
The Chess Masters
1958-63

purepleasurerecords.com

★★★★★

Universal

2 CDs

BY 1958, WATERS had already defined the sound of electric blues. In his mid-40s, he was in his pomp and ready to adapt to the changing market, which required him to cut full-length albums rather than singles. It was also the moment when the Rolling Stones among others were about to take up Waters' legacy and the set includes 1962's *You Need Love*, the template for Led Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love*.

The core of this collection is his first two great custom-made LPs: *Muddy Waters Sings Bill Broonzy* and *Muddy Waters At Newport*. What impresses most is the visceral power of what were mostly single-tracked analogue recordings, their heft impressively boosted by sympathetic remastering. **NW**

Jamiroquai
Emergency On Planet Earth



Jamiroquai
Emergency On
Planet Earth

sonymusic.com

★★★★★

Sony

2 CDs deluxe edition

WHEN COCKY LONDONER

Jason Kay arrived on the scene 20 years ago, British music was rushing down the Britpop cul de sac. While every other band was referencing the Beatles and Kinks, Kay's Jamiroquai looked to the funk of Stax and Motown. Singing in a voice similar to Stevie Wonder's, Kay trumped all the Britpop hopefuls with the biggest-selling album of 1993.

Jamiroquai's fat horns, loose-limbed rhythms and Kay's bubbling presence have not dated one whit. Songs about illegal wars, pillaging the environment and Third World debt still sound as relevant as ever – and you can dance to them, too. Sharp remastering and some exuberant live recordings from Glastonbury back in 1993 complete the package. **NW**



Shuggie Otis
Inspiration Information/
Wings Of Love

epicrecords.com

★★★★★

Nascente Demon

2 CDs

NOW REGARDED AS one of the great 'lost' artists, Otis made his debut as a 16-year-old guitarist/singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist wunderkind in 1970. At the time his records made little impact, but today he can be seen as the missing link between Sly Stone and Prince.

If some of the material here has a familiar ring, it's because at least half a dozen tracks have been sampled by contemporary R'n'B hitmakers from OutKast to Beyoncé. And that's the amazing thing about Otis – there's little on this album that locates it in the 1970s. Playing every instrument himself, he sounds like a visionary prototype for the kind of music which the likes of Prince, D'Angelo, De la Soul and Jamiroquai would one day make. **NW**

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

The Dirty Dozen Brass Band What's Going On purepleasurerecords.com



★★★★★ Shout! Factory/
Pure Pleasure Records

vinyl

THIS REWORKING OF Marvin Gaye's masterpiece was made a year after hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and reflects on

the way that so many of its poorest inhabitants were treated in the aftermath. The Dirty Dozen recruited some strong voices to make the most of Gaye's lyrics, which are twisted to be more appropriate, although they don't need much adjusting.

Chuck D turns in a powerful version of the title track, there's a fine version of *What's Happening Brother* by Betty LaVette and Ivan Neville brings his deep soul to bear on *God Is Love*. Side two has contributions from G Love on *Mercy Mercy Me* and

on *Inner City Blues (Makes Me Want to Holler)*, Gang Starr's Guru channels the frustration that so many felt at the time.

The sound is muscular and driven with plenty of bass on both vocal and instrumental tracks, which balances out the energy from the brass. This album would kick ass on a horn system, but fills a lot of space with more conventional speakers. It's not overly polished but has a modern, natural feel and there's good use of reverb to add depth to proceedings. **JK**



Mahler
Symphony No 9
deutsche Grammophon.com
★★★★★ **Gustavo Dudamel**
2 CDs

ON THE EVIDENCE of this live recording, the LAPO is in great shape; disciplined and well-tuned, with a rich burnished tone that sounds very European. Dudamel's pacing of this demanding work is unerring, and his performance sounds cohesive. Tempi are broad without dragging and Mahler's dynamics are scrupulously observed. Clarity is excellent, because the sound is exceptionally clean and natural and the orchestra is very precisely balanced.

Tonally, the sound is sonorous and warm, with wide dynamic range and plenty of contrast. Climaxes expand impressively, and audience noise is low. If you think of Dudamel and the LAPO as a slick and superficial combination, lacking in musical depth, hear this and think again. **JMH**



Sibelius
The Seven Symphonies; Tapiola, Finlandia, etc
emiclassics.com
★★★★★ **Paavo Berglund**
4 CDs

PAAVO BERGLUND RECORDED the seven Sibelius symphonies no less than three times and his Bournemouth set was the first, and best. The various LPs came out between 1972 and 1975, and were eagerly purchased by Sibelius lovers! Curiously, EMI never issued these recordings on CD and licensed them to a budget label called Disky.

For this reissue, the original tapes have been remastered, and the sound is noticeably crisper and more dynamic than the old Disky transfers. The performances have plenty of swagger and the players excel themselves, playing with great passion and commitment. The recordings were Demonstration Standard in their day, and still sound well. What a pity Berglund's Bournemouth recording of the Kullervo symphony isn't included. **JMH**



Billy Bragg
Tooth & Nail
anti.com
★★★★★ **Anti-Records**
CD

FOR HIS FIRST all-new album in five years the Bard of Barking does what he always does very well indeed, a little older, and just possibly a little wiser. There's the wry comedy of *Handyman Blues* ("That screwdriver business just gets me confused") and *Your Name On My Tongue* proves he can still craft a sublime love song. But it's all a bit quieter and a bit more reflective than his past efforts, the sound of a man taking stock and considering the state of himself (*Chasing Rainbows*) and the nation (*There Will Be A Reckoning*).

Tooth and Nail has more of a country slant than his usual solo efforts, and the small band combination of room-mike acoustics, good tunes and good vibes create a record that invites you to sit down and hang around a while in the company of a master of popular song. **DO**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS

Max Raptor

Portraits

naimlabel.com

★★★★★

Naim Label

24-bit/48kHz



THIS FOUR-PIECE guitar band is described as "the visceral claws of Great British rock 'n' roll frantically disembowelling

American alt-rock with a partisan punk attitude." That pretty well sums up their energetic, angst-fuelled approach, well served by the dynamic subtlety of this 24-bit recording. It works effectively to highlight the delightful cleverness of the lyrics, which bolster the anthemic quality of the robust compositions, and clearly reveal how the guitar lines are structured in the process.

The moshpit is not the only place where this music can be appreciated – it's intelligent and lyrically resonant music that you can enjoy in your armchair: head-banging's not obligatory, but you might enjoy the music more if you give it a go. **MS**

Trichotomy

Fact Finding Mission

naimlabel.com

★★★★★

Naim Label

24-bit/48kHz

HOT PICK



HAILING FROM AUSTRALIA, this jazz piano trio has been augmented by collaborators for its third album for Naimand

sounds all the better for it.

Fact Finding Mission opens with the upbeat, and infectiously melodic, *Strom*, which rather sets the mood for the rest of the compositions on this collection. The catchy second tune, *The Blank Canvas Part 1*, introduces guitarist James Muller whose delightful, dexterous playing enhances the album's sense of journey and progress. Since Miles Davis recorded *Blitches Brew*, jazz has constantly evolved into many shapes, and Trichotomy is the early 21st Century's version of the likes of Bill Evans and Oscar Peterson. **MS**

BLU-RAY DVD

Various Produced By George Martin eagle-rock.com



★★★★★ **Eagle Vision**

LPCM stereo

THIS DOCUMENTARY IS excellent viewing for anyone interested in the development of pop music production. Martin started at Parlophone in 1950

producing comedy records with Peter Sellers and the Goons, but in 1962 Brian Epstein played him a tape of the Beatles. He thought their music was "rubbish" but agreed to an audition and was won over by their charisma. The early songs were recorded at breakneck pace – two in three hours – as both were so busy. Things went well until *Let It Be* when Lennon decided he "didn't want all this production crap" and handed the tapes to Phil Spector so that he could "over produce" them as, Martin put it.

When the Beatles finally broke up he felt liberated and made good money producing in America, Jeff Beck and the Mahavishnu Orchestra, building the first Air studio in London then another in Montserrat where the Police, Stevie Wonder and Dire Straits recorded. Extras include producers Rick Rubin, T-Bone Burnett and Ken Scott talking about Martin's legacy but it's the main documentary that reveals just how formative an influence Martin was on the fab four, and therefore popular music in general. **JK**

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Dr Feickert Analogue Protractor NG

PRICE: £139.99 CONTACT: 01733 350878
WEBSITE: ANALOGUESEDUCTION.NET

THE PROTRACTOR DESIGNED by Dr Feickert Analogue and distributed in the UK by Analogue Seduction is a high-end tool that allows for cartridge alignment using either the Baerwald, Löfgren or Stevenson models.

The instructions provided are excellent and some 'quick instructions' are provided on the gauge itself. All the necessary tools are supplied along with the gauge, including an Allen key for assembly. A nice touch is the inclusion of an illuminated key ring that incorporates a high-brightness LED to help with viewing the stylus.

After deciding on the desired mathematical model, the gauge is adjusted to set the pin above the centre of the tonearm pivot and the cartridge overhang is set by moving the cartridge in the headshell so the stylus can be placed on the crosshairs of the chosen geometry (B, L or S) conveniently labelled 'Step 1'. Then the arm is moved to the first null point at Step 2 grating to line up the cartridge. The second null point at the Step 3 position is then used to check that all is well. The procedure is then repeated if necessary to make any final adjustments.

The whole process is really easy and very accurate. It may seem a lot to pay for a gauge, but this is a high-end product and is likely to be a relatively small investment in proportion to your turntable and cartridge, plus your record collection! The ability to try all three models and choose the best one by ear is a real bonus.

VERDICT THIS IS AN EXCELLENT quality gauge that allows alignment against all three of the mathematical models and for that reason it's highly recommended



Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab Geo-Disc

PRICE: £44.95 CONTACT: 01539 797300
WEBSITE: RUSSANDREWS.COM

THE MOBILE FIDELITY SOUND LAB GEO-DISC alignment gauge, which is available from Russ Andrews, is a 12in black disk that fits on the turntable platter like an LP. The gauge has a sight line in the form of a raised ridge, which is aimed at the centre of the tonearm pivot. It also includes a recess into which the stylus tip is placed to enable the cartridge to be aligned properly against the printed alignment grid.

The Geo-Disc is based upon the Baerwald calculations and therefore minimises distortion at the weighted tracking error peaks and this is accomplished by locating two 'zero-error' points. The first point is found about one third of the way into the recording area and the second is a short distance out from the innermost part of the groove.

Baerwald found that these zero points are fixed, regardless of the length of the tonearm and this gauge therefore facilitates the setting up of the optimum cartridge overhang and offset angle by aligning the cartridge at these two points.

The Geo-Disc is simple to use and very accurate. Just fit the disc onto your platter, line up a moulded ridge so that it points at the centre of the tonearm pivot, move the tonearm and adjust the cartridge overhang so that the stylus tip can rest in the recess and align the cartridge using the grating printed around the recess. As a final check, the shaft of the stylus is sighted against a second moulded ridge to ensure it is correctly aligned. The end result should minimise excessive sibilance and can improve imaging.

VERDICT ACCURATE AND EXTREMELY simple to use this is a reasonably priced gauge that does a great job with the minimum of fuss



Avid Rega Arm Alignment Protractor

PRICE: £30.00 SME/LINN/REGA GAUGES AND £26 UNIVERSAL GAUGE CONTACT: 01480 869900 WEBSITE: AVIDHIFI.CO.UK

THE AVID ALIGNMENT PROTRACTOR is a sheet of mirrored acrylic into which the calibration markings have been engraved. Together with Cranfield University, Avid has developed a computer program to help with its tonearm design and as part of the development work it looked at all of the various techniques for determining the correct alignment.

The results of all of this analysis led them to the conclusion that it is basic tracking error distortion that needs to be minimised and they concluded that, in practice, the Stevenson calculations offered the best solution. Avid has specific gauges for SME, Linn and Rega arms and the actual protractor on test here is the Rega gauge.

The two points of the required cartridge alignment are performed at the null points of the arc described by the stylus as it moves across the record when playing. These points are determined by the Stevenson calculations, as previously mentioned, and the mirrored surface of the protractor is designed to assist in accurately lining up the cartridge with the calibration markings.

Full instructions are printed on the gauge itself and by following these instructions I was able to align my cartridge very easily.

Although the setup process is similar to that used with printed paper protractors, the mirrored gauge is considerably easier to use. Furthermore, it has the additional benefit that you can utilise the mirror to adjust the azimuth of the cartridge by twisting the arm or headshell until the stylus is perpendicular to the surface of the mirror itself.

VERDICT THIS IS AN excellent value gauge which is both easy to use, won't break the bank and, most important of all, results in noticeable sonic benefits



Pro-Ject Align-IT

PRICE: £105 CONTACT: 01235 511166
WEBSITE: HENLEYDESIGNS.CO.UK

THE PRO-JECT ALIGN-IT is available in the UK from Henley Designs and is designed for use with setting up Pro-Ject and other manufacturers' tonearms. It is suitable for tonearms between 8in (203mm) and 12in (305mm) effective length.

There is no mention of the calculations used in the design of the gauge, but following some research I think that it may be based on the Stevenson method, although I have not been able to corroborate this.

The instructions supplied with the gauge are reasonably clear and are accompanied with a helpful diagram to show what marks are used with tonearms of different mounting distances from the spindle. The calibration of the cartridge is essentially a three-stage process. Firstly, the Align-IT gauge needs to be adjusted so that it is set up for the length of the tonearm. Next, the cartridge overhang and alignment is set against the gauge calibration markings. Finally, the cartridge azimuth is adjusted (if the tonearm or headshell allows for this) by placing the stylus on the mirror area of the gauge and twisting the arm or headshell until the stylus is perpendicular to the surface of the mirror or the bottom edge of the cartridge is parallel to the mirror.

The gauge is really well made and gives the user confidence in the precision of the whole setting-up process. The gauge has markings for specific Pro-Ject turntables and is, therefore, the gauge of choice for use with these. However, these marks can also guide the user to set up other makes of tonearm, so it is quite a versatile product.

VERDICT A BEAUTIFULLY ENGINEERED alignment gauge that is perfect for use on Pro-Ject and other manufacturers' tonearms



There are many calculation models for alignment and each has its merits. The Baerwald method minimises and equalises distortion at three weighted tracking error peaks and results in

moderate distortion between the inner and outer grooves. Löfgren B calculations minimise distortion between the inner and outer grooves for the lowest average RMS distortion across the record at the

expense of slightly higher distortion close to the inner and outer grooves. The Stevenson method is optimised for lower distortion on the inner groove at the expense of increased distortion.

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Ed Selley brings you our pick of this month's top hi-fi websites...



TROJAN RECORDS

trojanrecords.com

For over 40 years Trojan Records has been the sound of Jamaica and has a back catalogue that includes pretty much every artist of note to hail from the island. Although the logo is an ancient helmet of the Homeric period, the label actually takes its name from the Leyland Trojan trucks that used to transport over-sized sound systems around the island.

Trojan has taken to selling much of its catalogue direct from its online shop (a section of parent company Universal's online shop, but one carefully cultivated to look like the rest of the Trojan site). Sadly at the moment, there is not much in the way of download material available and what is there is mostly in MP3, but the pricing for CDs is exceptionally competitive (usually not much more than a fiver) and even the big vinyl boxsets are very affordable. The other big advantage of the site is that it is possible to listen to a considerable amount of the music for sale before handing over your hard earned. The older recordings are best thought of as 'rough and ready' but for musicality they take some beating.



WATFORD VALVES

watfordvalves.com

If you are a valve amp owner, you may reach the point where you need to replace time-expired valves. Equally, you may feel the need to fit higher-quality valves than the amp is currently fitted with. The online market for valves has blossomed in recent years, but it can be hard to distinguish between high-quality retailers and less scrupulous individuals passing off bog-standard valves as something more exotic.

Watford Valves is a good place to start looking if you don't have a local supplier you can trust. Originally set up as a test and measurement facility it has become one of the UK's largest valve retailers. It offers a wide variety of valves that are both new production and more exotic new old stock

(NOS) designs. Brands on offer include Mullard, Telefunken and Brimar and there's a wide choice of signal and power valves.

Most of the catalogue is directed at musicians using valve amp heads on guitar amps and similar, so anyone seeking big output triodes may need to look elsewhere but for more 'stock' applications, this is an invaluable resource and although you might find valves cheaper elsewhere, they won't come with the pedigree that these ones do.



FOOBAR 2000

foobar2000.org

Using a PC as source equipment for a hi-fi system is increasingly common, but many of the default music players are rather limited. Windows Media Player has made some progress but won't play FLAC and iTunes seems intent on turning into a sort of online bazaar rather than a dedicated audio player.

foobar2000 is a free audio player that supports a huge number of formats natively and those migrating from Windows or OSX players will find their libraries play without modification. Another very useful feature is that it supports ASIO output via USB. This allows a suitably equipped USB DAC to connect directly to the player and avoid having to reproduce the other sounds that a computer will generally create during day-to-day use. This allows for a better-quality transfer and permits high-res files to be streamed without interference. The platform can be customised to perform multiple functions, so although it can appear a bit daunting to start with, it is well worth putting the time in.



LOCKWOOD AUDIO

lockwoodaudio.co.uk

With audicjumbles and online sales going from strength to strength, the market for vintage hi-fi is increasing both in size and popularity. As with classic cars, there are some brands such as Quad and Nagra where spares for something that is as much as 50 years old are as readily available as parts for something that was released a mere five weeks ago. The problem is that there are now so many brands where this is simply not the case.

For many highly regarded pieces of vintage equipment, component failure is a serious problem and can spell the end of the life of a beloved piece of kit. Happily, some companies are moving into this void to organise spares to breath new life into old products.

Lockwood Audio has been around for decades and was originally responsible for supplying a series of Tannoy driver-based broadcast monitors for the BBC. It has now refocused its approach and also acts as a supplier of parts for a number of classic British brands.

If you own older speakers from Epos, Mordaunt-Short, TDL or pretty much any model from Tannoy, Lockwood should be your first port of call and the main depository for these parts should something go wrong. It has a vast amount of experience with these brands and for vintage Tannoy in particular, and provides an invaluable resource for keeping your vintage big banger going for a few more years yet ●





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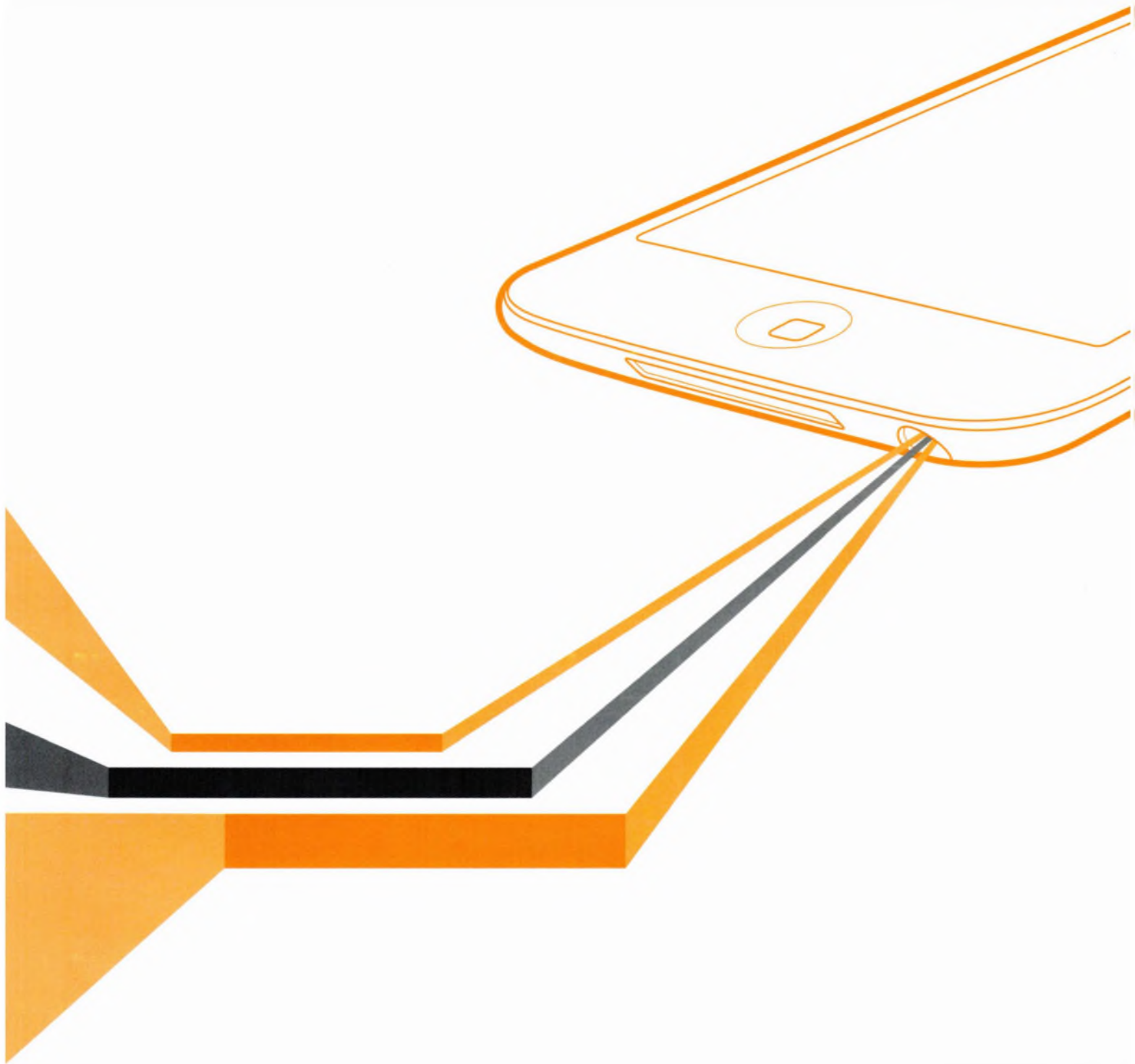
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It's a little-known fact that the headphone jack output of your iDevice can give better audio quality than the docking connector. The headphone jack is designed and built for audio output, while the connector is more a jack of all trades - compromised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

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Vox amPhones Twin

Vox is one of those iconic names, without which our lives would all have been just that little less full. Not many people know or care, but its amplifiers powered the amazing sounds of the sixties for so many iconic bands, their richness of tone and grace under pressure giving bands a distinctive sonic patina.

Originally a British company, Vox has been owned by Korg for over 20 years, and it is now branching out into headphones. It's an interesting move, inasmuch as it's got a company that's already a bit tasty at doing the groundwork (a fellow Japanese brand, Audio-Technica), while Vox takes on the duty of doing the final voicing. Anyone that knows anything about things that go on your head and make a noise will know that Audio-Technica knows its stuff when it comes to headphones, so this coming together could well prove to be a famous partnership.

Iconic brand

The new Vox amPhones are powered, active designs that come in four varieties, each said to recreate the iconic sound, design and characteristics of the brand's best-known amps. There's the classic AC30 (giving a Vox AC30-type sound), Lead (delivering "a heavy British crunch lead sound"), Bass ("a wide range sound") and Twin ("the clean sound of a classic US-made amp").

Our review sample was of the Twin, which came reasonably well screwed together, although at this price non-powered phones from the likes of Beyer and Sennheiser frankly outclass what is a fairly plasticky-feeling product. They certainly don't seem to have the durability of one of those aforementioned classic amplifiers – although to be fair they're not designed to be 'pro' phones.

When unpacked, you'll have to unscrew the right hand earcup outer cover, to gain access to the battery compartment, whereupon you slot in two AAA cells (supplied). Then you're up and running.

When the phones are switched on and a line source is plugged in via the 3.5mm minijack, you can adjust the volume and distortion levels. The internal amplifier has "a new reactor circuit" that's said to be based on the Valve Reactor technology featured in Vox amps. If you're averse to this sort of signal processing derring do, then you can of course turn everything off and listen like conventional passive headphones. The obvious point to make here though is that if that's what you want, what are you doing buying these in the first place!

Build quality isn't the greatest. My pair had a imperfect fitting battery cover, and the first thing that happened when I picked them up was an earpad cushion fell off. Another gripe was the lack of a 3.5mm minijack plug adaptor, which comes with virtually every headphone these days – why not these? Nor was a 3.5mm to 3.5mm minijack lead supplied, for connecting to an iPod or suchlike; thumbs down here too.

Sound quality

A slightly disheartening start then, but as soon as I set ears on them in passive mode I was impressed. In short, they

sounded far better than I'd expected, with a straightforward, crisp, musical nature that didn't obstruct the flow of the sound and left you to get on and enjoy whatever you'd chosen to play through them. Indeed, I was genuinely surprised by the speed and openness of the sound. Admittedly it's not the last word in refinement, and certainly seemed voiced for rock and pop, but pretty much everything I played sounded enjoyable and involving.

Ride's *Chelsea Girl* is a suitably grungy slice of guitar pop that powers along regardless and the Vox phones lapped it up. Although the track is a bit of a dirge, these cans cut through the murk to revel in the frenetically strummed guitars and bashed snare drums. I was actually quite surprised how clean they sounded, with only just a hint of brightness towards the upper registers and a nice, fulsome bass that lended everything some extra heft.

Moving to more polished, produced modern pop like Mark Ronson's *Bang Bang Bang*, and the Vox phones were able to show the vastly different production values and recording quality, but didn't obsess on such details, preferring instead to jump into the fray and wig out to the powerful bassline and the song's mighty break beats. Again, in passive mode these phones didn't distort, descend into muddle or show any signs of distress even at highish volume levels.

Invoking the effects processing obviously changed this, and not for the better in my view. Maybe I'm just an old fogey, but while active operation was 'interesting', it didn't really float my boat – I'll just let the song's producer decide how much fuzz that lead vocal needs, is that's alright with you? Still, whatever I threw at these, from classic *Band on the Run*-era Wings to 80s power pop in the shape of ABC, these headphones just bounced along enjoying themselves.

Overall then, in active mode, the results were too variable and the effects a tad too dramatic for sensitive souls such as us audiophiles – but as a standard headphone the Vox Twin was surprisingly good. They're closest in spirit to the Grado SR60i, which is surely no bad thing, inasmuch as they dive into the music headfirst and have a rollockingly good time. If the effects option, and/or that iconic name, is important to you then, I'd suggest you give them serious consideration. **DP**

► DETAILS

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VOXAMPS.COM

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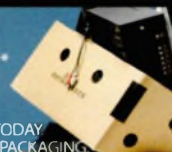
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Orb Sakura DeStat charge eliminator

Orb audio products, which are available in the UK from Analogue Seduction, produces a range of audio accessories that capitalise on both the industrial and machining skills and expertise from its Japanese parent company, JAI Limited.

This a handheld static neutraliser – traditional static eliminator guns typically use a piezo-electric element to generate a high voltage when you point the device at the record and squeeze the trigger. The Sakura performs this task more elegantly by generating ions by means of a high voltage generator safely housed within the device. It also has a small fan that blows a gentle ion wind onto your record, thus eliminating static charges that can often be heard as clicks, especially on dry weather days. It's powered by four standard AA batteries.

In use

An application for a few seconds is all that is required to neutralise static charges on a record. The manufacturer recommends the device should only be operated for up to 20 seconds, then rested for a minute before using again. I must say the Sakura works very well, although finding an elusive dry day to test the device was more challenging!

In use, there is a faint smell of ozone, which is the tell-tale sign that a stream of ions is being produced. In addition to its use with LPs, the Sakura can be used with CD, DVD and Blu-ray discs, as well as with musical instruments, decks, amplifiers, headphones, speakers and power supplies, to eliminate static charge. A great product then, just a little expensive. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE: £289

CONTACT:
01733 350878

WEBSITE:
ANALOGUE
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OUR VERDICT



Deflex Audio Foculpods

Foculpods, Polipods and Superpods are three sizes of plastic feet that can be placed under any type of audio equipment to ensure isolation from vibrations. They are made from sorbothane, which is extremely good at absorbing vibrations and has superb anti-slip properties. This means that the feet do not require any additional fixing to the equipment as they adhere to almost any smooth surface.

The three sizes of feet will suit a variety of hi-fi equipment. The Superpods are chunky feet that will easily accommodate weightier equipment, such as valve amps and the like. Polipods appear to be ideal for turntables, while Foculpods will suit smaller items like DACs and headphone amplifiers.

Sorbothane feels sticky to the touch, and therefore fluff and dust will tend to stick to the feet if there is any in the vicinity. However, they can be easily washed in a mild detergent to return them to pristine condition if necessary. If the feet are placed between two clean and smooth surfaces, such as acrylic plastic, then they will adhere strongly to them, which means that it takes quite a tug to remove them after a few days! On the other hand, this is a very desirable feature for feet since, once you have everything perfectly positioned, they will tend to stay put.

In use

Considering their modest price, these feet produced a huge improvement in sound. Image placement was considerably better, and low-level detail seemed to come alive. Treble smoothed and sweetened slightly and bass seemed both more fulsome and more tuneful. Marvellous value for money! **NR**



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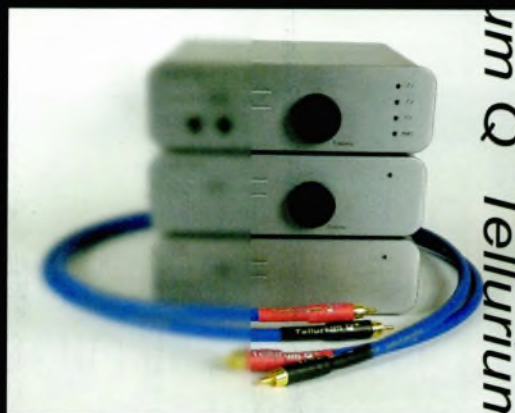
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Origin Live Aladdin moving iron cartridge

When the founder of Origin Live, Mark Baker, decided to introduce a cartridge into his range of turntables and tonearms, he approached Peter Lederman of Soundsmith in the USA about producing a special model made to Mark's exacting specifications. The end result was a cartridge designed around the Soundsmith Carmen cartridge, which is a moving iron design.

Moving iron cartridges, like moving magnet designs, utilise a static coil and can have a higher impedance than moving coil designs. This means that a standard moving magnet phono preamp can be used without the need for step-up transformers. Furthermore, with moving iron cartridges, both the magnet and the coils are stationary and a small piece of iron is attached to the cantilever, which moves within the fixed magnetic field and therefore produces a signal within the fixed coils. This means that there is a very low moving mass (Origin Live claims it is lower than that of most moving coils), which should offer excellent tracking ability.

Aladdin's cave

Externally, the Aladdin is housed in a flecked blue composition body, specified by Origin Live. It is finished off with a gold-coloured bar that runs across the front and sides of the body and is tapped underneath the mounting block to take the cartridge mounting screws. This provides a secure mounting for the cartridge and the composition body should also help damp resonances – highly desirable qualities. Moving onto the stylus, it is a good quality, nude elliptical single piece diamond stylus, which is fitted to an aluminium alloy cantilever.

The cartridge requires a 47kohm load and a load capacitance of 100-200 pF, which is typical for moving magnet/iron designs. It has a quoted stereo channel difference (balance) of < 1.8dB, which seems a bit pessimistic by modern standards. Quoted frequency response is 20-20,000Hz, \pm 2.5dB, and a channel separation at 1kHz of >24dB. It's a medium compliance cartridge with a figure of 22 μ m/mN. The cartridge itself weighs 10.5g and requires a tracking force of 1.4g. I found it tracked well and there was no break-up during crescendos.

I had no trouble fitting the Aladdin to my RB1000 tonearm and, after careful setting up of the cartridge, I was ready to audition. Given the quoted channel balance figure, I paid particular attention to getting the azimuth alignment spot-on and I am pleased to report that I had no issues at all with channel imbalance with this cartridge.

Sound quality

First on the turntable was my copy of JS Bach *Partitas* by Trevor Pinnock (Archiv 415 493-1) on harpsichord. The performance was fast and engaging, without the harpsichord being too 'in your face'. Perhaps the harpsichord was a little more recessed within the sound

stage than I was used to with this recording, but it was nevertheless a very enjoyable listen.

Moving on to something rather more rousing, and my recording of Khachaturian's *Spartacus* with the composer conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on Decca SXL 6000 certainly didn't pull any punches! The performance was big, full and powerful. The drums resonated with commanding authority and you could almost visualise chariots racing around in your living room. Brass instruments were commanding, but not over-bright. Some of the detail in the percussion did not seem as pronounced as I had heard with other cartridges, but the strings were very clear without ever being harsh.

For a change of style, I moved onto a recently acquired copy of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* in Jazz as performed by the Raymond Fol Big Band (Philips 842.125 1965 stereo recording in pristine condition). The allegros were reproduced with great excitement and energy and all the largos and adagios with smoothness and a captivating musicality – nice! Overall then, I found the Origin Live Aladdin to be a cartridge that feels comfortable across a wide range of musical styles. Some may find it a little on the smooth side, but others will fall in love with its easy and effortless performance. As such, the cartridge will partner well with bright systems and, at the price, it does represent great value for money and is certainly worth auditioning. **NR**



DETAILS
PRICE: £495
CONTACT:
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OUR VERDICT
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AudioQuest Dragonfly DAC

First Furutech and now AudioQuest, the cable makers are getting the electronics bug. AQ's Dragonfly is the smallest digital-to-analogue convertor I've set eyes on. It could easily be confused with a USB stick, yet it's a 24-bit/96kHz asynchronous device that has onboard analogue volume control – features that you usually expect to have to pay considerably more for.

The Dragonfly was designed by AQ with input from Mr asynchronous himself, Gordon Rankin of Wavelength Audio, a company that makes high-end DACs. But his expertise has been used to produce a convertor for people looking to improve sound quality with a laptop and a pair of headphones, hence the 3.5mm mini-jack analogue output but it's clearly good enough to be used in a proper system. The volume control feature means that you can even plug it straight into a power amp. With iTunes, for instance, you can use the volume bar to adjust the analogue output of the convertor.

The Dragonfly can convert signals at up to 96kHz, but while some software players automatically change sample rate to match the native rate of the music being played some don't. iTunes is one of the latter and AQ recommends leaving it set at 44.1kHz in those instances.

The Dragonfly logo on the convertor changes colour to indicate the rate at which it's working, so you can at least tell what's going on, provided of course you can remember which colour means which rate.

It has a 24-bit ESS Sabre convertor chip, but the key to its potential is the asynchronous operation, this means that the clocking is done by the DAC not the computer and is a sure fire means of reducing jitter. Two onboard clocks are designed to minimise the amount of processing that the convertor has to do for the benefit of the analogue output. This can deliver a maximum of 2V, as much as full-size audio components and is thus more than sufficient for long cable runs or low sensitivity headphones.

Sound quality

Using the Dragonfly with software players apart from iTunes introduces a bit of confusion over precisely where it is that the volume should be adjusted. Personally, I prefer a player called Decibel, which was developed by a company that has strong ties with AudioQuest, but the two are not quite so straightforward when it comes to level control.

AQ recommends that you use Decibel's device volume and leave the digital volume at max, however this approach sounds considerably worse than the alternative, eg max device volume and reduced digital volume. As I discovered a few months ago the dithering volume controls on many software players are actually very good despite their bit-reducing nature. This was abundantly clear with the Dragonfly which, sounded rather flat and hard with its own control, but open, three-dimensional and excellent with it turned to max.

I used an AudioQuest Big Sur interconnect, a £75

cable, and enjoyed some very entertaining results. The Dragonfly is extremely clean, which can make it sound soft, but also means you can turn up the volume without fear of digital glare. It also takes the edginess away from lower-quality formats like low bit-rate MP3 and makes them more palatable in a revealing system.

Next to a Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus it is not as open nor obviously transparent, but the AQ is more relaxed and produces rather more convincing soundstages. Timing is the only area where the DM+ has a clear advantage. It also delivers powerful results with decent material, Laura Marling's *Alpha Shallows* (from *I Speak Because I Can*) provoked a strong emotional response thanks to the way the singer is placed in the room in such a tangible fashion.

This neat little DAC does a superb job with both hi- and low-res files, it's onboard volume control is not great, but that's not a big deal in a system context where it can deliver the three-dimensional drama of a good recording in a very realistic fashion. And while it's not a headphone amp in the traditional sense it effectively functions like a rather good and extremely portable example of one. **JK**

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Dynavector DV-20X2H moving coil cartridge

Moving coil cartridges are lovely things, but they can be a challenge when it comes to amplification. Many have very low outputs, which make them difficult to accommodate unless you have an extremely quiet, high gain phono stage. This is a requirement that often equates to expensive, and in the case of valve equipment usually means you need a step-up transformer as well, and they can set you back as much as a phono stage.

To achieve a higher output an MC cartridge needs to have more coil windings and/or stronger magnets, but it's usually achieved with the former because the magnets are already as strong as they get. Dynavector has a history of building low- and high-output versions of its MCs and has developed its own coil-winding machine in order to use extremely fine and thus light wire. The drawback with extra coil turns is increased mass, which is why some of the best MCs have such low output, but the other side of this coin is the difficulty of getting sufficient signal to noise with a very small signal.

Dynavector offers two versions of its 20X2 moving coil, low- and high-output variants. The 20X2H (high) produces 2.8mV which is considerably more than the 0.3mV of the low output model and it can be used with a moving magnet phono stage. It also likes a high-load impedance so can work with the 47kohm of a moving magnet input.

Into the groove

It has an aluminium body that contains neodymium magnets, Dynavector's flux damping and softened magnetism techniques. These are designed to minimise fluctuations in the flux or magnetic density in the gap between coils and magnets and are used throughout the company's range. The groove tracing part consists of a micro-ridge stylus on a 6mm aluminium cantilever, the system is designed to track at between 1.8 and 2.2g, the response trace that came in the box was made at 2g, so I went with that.

First up, the DV-20X2H was installed in a Rega RP6 turntable with its RB303 tonearm. The cartridge's 9.2g weight proves to be a little high for the standard Rega counterweight, but by combining dynamic and spring downforce it's possible to get it to 2g without the weight hanging off the stub. If you were to use this arm and cartridge combo long term I'd recommend the higher mass Rega counterweight.

Sound quality

I would certainly recommend this combo, the excellent timing and pace of the Rega is nicely balanced by the Dynavector's full and rich sound – so much so that this aspect of it did not become apparent until I tried it on a different turntable. I used a Trilogy 907 phono stage, which worked best at its minimum gain setting, the one usually reserved for MM cartridges. The result was top-notch light entertainment from one album to the

next thanks to plentiful levels of detail, rich bass and a very high degree of musical engagement.

It focuses on the sound of the instruments, and the way they are played, and that includes voice. Bass is particularly well served because the RP6 is slightly lean and the DV-20X2H a little full, as a result I noticed aspects of bass playing that do not usually make themselves heard.

Moving the Dynavector over to an SME 20/3 did not, to be honest, result in the sort of improvements I have come to expect, the turntable is very quiet, assured and powerful but perhaps a bit too much so for this cartridge. Which surprised me because I have had great results with the DV-20X2L on this deck. The H delivered plenty of body and weight with solid stereo imaging and it was now possible to better appreciate the way that the musicians were playing. For instance on Patricia Barber's *Modern Cool* album, guitarist John McLean is clearly channelling Alan Holdsworth, something that was less obvious on the RP6.

However, moving over to the DV-20X2L on the SME, things are greatly improved in the low-level resolution and melody departments, so much so that I would encourage anyone with a decent MC stage to opt for that model if they have a stately rather than spritely turntable. However Rega owners will be hard pressed to find a better moving coil cartridge at this price, even if they do have an MC stage so it's a clear case of making a good match between turntable and cartridge. Mentioning this variation to the distributor surprised him and he suggested that the considerably greater run-in that the L has had might be a factor. Overall then, a very fine cartridge, well worth shelling out for! **JK**

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Atacama Audio Elite Eco 6.0 equipment rack

The Atacama Audio Elite Eco 6.0 is a bit different from the usual veneered wood audio equipment racks in that it is made from a carbon-treated bamboo resin composite material. But just because they are made from bamboo, don't be fooled into thinking that the end result is something that would look at home with wicker furniture or on which you may wish to grow runner beans! Indeed, these specialist single component width modular Hi-fi equipment supports are beautifully finished and solidly made with a nice wood grain throughout. The bamboo has clearly been cut in such a way as to show off the unique grain structure of this type of wood.

Eco-friendly

The high-density carbonised bamboo has been designed to give significant sonic qualities when compared with traditional hardwood and veneered supports. The manufacturer states that it features a unique micro growth pore structure offering both vibration absorbing and sound dampening properties. Each module is cut, finished and hand polished at the UK-based Atacama factory. The end result is a range of modules that assemble into a modern and stylish shelving unit for audio equipment. Another quoted benefit is that the bamboo used in manufacture is ecologically sustainable. As bamboo is essentially a grass, it is one of the fastest growing plants on the planet and, when harvested, it will continue to grow allowing a new crop every five to seven years. Because of this rapid growth pattern, bamboo absorbs high levels of carbon dioxide gas, allowing the process (from growth to manufacture and shipping) to be effectively carbon-neutral. Finally, it is 'panda friendly' too, as the type of bamboo used is not a food source for endangered animals.

The price shown is for a typical support unit consisting of a base module and one of each of the three available shelf height panels, which gives four support shelves. The unit is, therefore, user-configurable and the final price is dependent on the number and choice of the selected modules. It should be noted that the dimensions of each of the amply proportioned module shelves are critical to their performance as they have been 'sonically tuned' as it were, so custom dimensions are not available as an option. The rear of each module tapers in for easy corner positioning, should this be desired. The powercord isolation cable management loop located at the rear of each module is designed to keep mains leads together and away from sensitive signal cables. The feet of each module are finished off with height-adjustable metal spikes designed to locate into metal cups that are neatly fitted into the top surface of the shelves. The base module also has the adjustable metal spikes for interfacing with the floor.

The standard finish of the units is a mid light-coloured wood so they should 'panda' to all tastes [groan - *Ed.*], however, they can also be finished off in Light Oak and Dark Oak finishes for an additional cost of £20 per

module. These other finishes still use the bamboo material of the original standard finish units, so will retain all of the sonic benefits.

In use

The modules locate together very firmly and the whole assembly is rigid and robust. Due to the weight of the individual modules, two-person assembly is advised, although I found that you can put it together on your own by following the simple instructions provided. The size of the unit means that it can comfortably accommodate the largest of audio items and turntables on each shelf. The spikes on the floor provide additional stability, but if you prefer not to spike through your carpet they can, of course, be fitted on top of spike cups that are widely available. The cable management loop at the rear is large enough to allow UK 13A mains plugs to be passed through them if necessary, although there is a slot at the back to permit cables to be inserted directly.

This equipment rack provided an excellent platform for hi-fi separates. There was both a good degree of isolation from vibrations, and a speedy throughput of them – it didn't store resonances which degrade sound. Instead it proved stable, secure and sonically neutral, and you can't ask for more than that. In summary, these are extremely well-made units that are sonically well designed. They will blend in well with most domestic settings and are highly user-configurable and therefore very much to be recommended. **NR**



DETAILS

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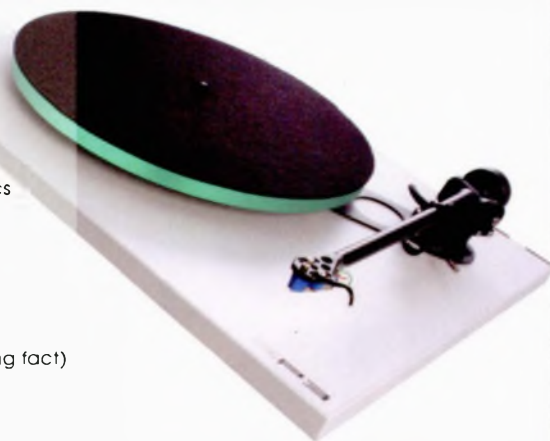


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Spin Play for iPad

In the earliest dawn of apps on the iPhone I recall attempting to get access to the US-based magazine *Spin*'s nascent offering from the original US store and failing. So I was rather intrigued to come across where it has ended up some five years later.

I have long thought that the very nineties concept of magazines with cover mounted CDs ought to be being replaced with something a little more up to date, and Spin Play represents precisely where we're heading.

What it offers is an à la carte or subscription-based model for downloading *Spin*'s monthly issues via Newsstand – and thankfully it is open to UK purchasers. Single issues are £1.49 but a year's subscription is just £5.49.

For this you get what appears to be a slightly cut down version of the print magazine which is both very readable and easy to navigate. The real selling point is that along with that you get a playlist of related tracks and videos to stream, which is equivalent to the contents of two or three of those cover mounted CDs mentioned earlier.

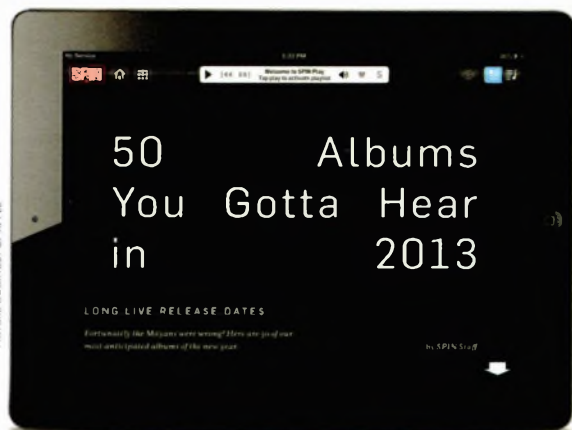
Unfortunately, there are a few bugbears. For starters, the app doesn't flip to portrait orientation mode when you turn the iPad round. Secondly, and perhaps more annoyingly, the app takes full control of the audio output of the iPad on launch, meaning that you can't listen to your own music and simply read the magazine. Having said that, if your preference for a music discovery experience is for something a bit more curated and thought out than the free association of the Discover Music app (reviewed last month), Spin Play might be worth a look. It all depends if you're interested in its US-centric selection, which skews towards the trendy twentysomething indie and electronica favoured by Lena Dunham of *Girls* fame... **PC**

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OUR VERDICT



PICTURE COURTESY OF APPLE

MTV News for iOS, Android and Nokia

Having spent some time with Spin Play, I decided to take a gander at other similar offerings from across the pond. Frustratingly, by far the most appealing offering is the MTV Music Meter, which is only available to our American chums. It skips the editorial beyond simple biogs and moves instead onto simply presented audition tracks, with links to iTunes and Songkick-powered gig listings. The recommendations engine is a bit skew whiff - I never thought I'd see Lucy Rose and Bombay Bicycle Club listed alongside Diamond Head and the Tygers Of Pang Tang! (All associated with the upcoming UK band Bastille if you're interested).

The UK news app is a flatter affair that only serves to amplify the feeling that MTV is less about music these days and more about its awful constructed reality shows. The actual textual news is the most music-related, but in the video section you will struggle to find anything that isn't about TV or film. Unfortunately these clips are also prefaced by irritating little ads like the shocking one in which Rob Lowe bangs on about California, so the urge to watch withers.

There are also attractive enough galleries, and the obligatory opportunities to echo MTV's thoughts via Twitter and Facebook but this is already beginning to feel old hat when the real power of social data should be shown via recommendations engines like the US Music Meter. It is to be hoped that MTV moves to bring that over here soon so we can learn about all those exciting new acts – at the moment I recognise about one name per genre! **PC**

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OUR VERDICT



PICTURE COURTESY OF APPLE

WE HEAR...

CHORD ELECTRONICS'S NEW DSX 1000 streamer has its UK debut at this year's Bristol Sound & Vision show, along with the first showing of the company's brand new SPM1200 MkII power amp; for more information, click on www.chordelectronics.co.uk.

LEEMA'S NEW LIBRA DAC comes in the same casework as the Tucana and Antila, and has three coaxial and three optical inputs, plus two I2S and two XLR ins. Leema's M1 USB module provides a connection for computer audio replay from Windows and Macintosh machines. Full galvanic isolation is used, and Leema's new fully balanced Quattro Infinity dual-mono DAC modules with selectable output filter bandwidth are fitted. There's also Bluetooth, too.

AFTER UNVEILING ITS lovely bronze/black Anniversary Series system to the press recently, word on the street is that Cyrus Audio has a new "product with a twist" coming later this year. The company was keeping mum about the specifics, but apparently it's of interest to iPod/iPad users. Got to be a dock or a DAC then, hasn't it?

COMPUTER AUDIO DESIGN'S new CAD 1543 USB-only "super DAC" is described as "an intentionally analogue-sounding digital-to-analogue convertor that plays CD rips better than a CD player!" For more details, see www.computeraudiodesign.com.

MCINTOSH HAS A NEW D100 DAC/PREAMP, costing £3,000. Sporting five digital inputs and variable and fixed audio outputs, it shares the classic fascia look of other McIntosh components in a smaller form factor of just under 4in in height. It has an eight-channel, 32-bit, 192kHz D/A convertor and a built-in headphone amplifier.

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 190 MAY 1999

The first ever *Hi-Fi Choice* our ed worked on gave up seven badge winners in a 13-way (unlucky for some) loudspeaker Mega Test. Mixing standmount and floor standing models in what was termed the 'broad middle' price point ranging £400 to £1,000. Lab tests supported by era-defining "how it compares" graphs came from our very own group ed, Paul Miller.

DVD had taken the UK by storm and was revolutionising movie watching at home, but what about DVD player's credentials when spinning silver music discs? Pioneer was indeed king of the Super Test with Best Buy accolades given to two of its models for their panache with music.



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 200 MARCH 2000

A new millennium and a 200th issue saw *Hi-Fi Choice* move from Dennis Publishing to a new home at Future Publishing. This landmark edition celebrated 25 years of *Hi-Fi Choice* since its launch back in 1976 when it started in its original and diminutive A5 format. Then ed, Jason Kennedy, provided a thorough insight into hi-fi of the last 25 years and how it had changed during the time of the mag – which even then was a mighty long time in publishing.

CD was proclaimed "if not the greatest contribution to hi-fi, certainly the most significant creation of the past 25 years in the hi-fi world." Lee Dunkley found enlightenment in a pair of Ruark Solus loudspeakers.



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 203 JUNE 2000

Style systems was the name of the Mega Test in this month, which attempted to discover whether mainstream music systems really were a case of style over substance. In hi-fi terms the conclusion was pretty much as anticipated, but with a few exceptions from the pure hi-fi makers that had accidentally strayed into the 'systems' marketplace.

At the other end of the hi-fi spectrum a lavish clutch of speaker cables was given the Super Test treatment with a broad spread of prices to cater for all pocket sizes. And Lee Dunkley says farewell for the time being with yet another Ruark speaker review in the form of the Prelude R.

Back in the seventies, the hi-fi world was awash with headphones – or so it seemed. Then, suddenly the breed almost fell off the map. But nowadays, however, history seems to be repeating itself, and personal listening is all the rage again.

Likely inspired by portables such as Apple's iPod and iPad, Furutech has a new range of Alpha Design Labs-branded headphones and widgets, including the X1 DAC / headphone amp, H118 headphones and iHP-35 headphone cables.

The phone-sized X1 digital convertor/amp has inputs that support iOS and Android operating systems up to 16-bit/48kHz and USB up to 24/192 USB. The H118 are the first headphones from the Furutech stable, and promise comfort combined with true audiophile performance for £225. The matching iHP-35 series headphone cables are said to be engineered using Furutech's Pure Transmission technology. They feature silver-plated alpha OCC conductors treated with Furutech's Alpha process (which includes deep cryogenic treatment and demagnetising). The company says that versions will be available for upgrading the leads supplied with many leading brand headphones. For more details, see www.furutech.com.

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DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month, Astin Trew MD **Michael Osborne** chooses four of his favourite albums...



THE VELVET UNDERGROUND & NICO ANDY WARHOL

Having an older hippy sister in 1967, this receptive 12-year old was subjected to a lot of music that did not get played on the 'wireless'!



BERT JANSCH BERT JANSCH

This debut knocked me out – I bought the album and my first guitar in 1968. I was in good company; Paul Simon and Jimmy Page were under his spell as well.



THE BEATLES ABBEY ROAD

I did not go for the 'mop tops' until their hair was long and they were splitting up, then fell in love with side two of *Abbey Road*. It's pure yet inventive pop.



ART PEPPER LIVING LEGEND

...and suddenly jazz music made sense to me! Not the greatest of recordings, but the music is great. Rushed out and bought it in 1976, never looked back again...

HIFI CHOICE ADVERTISERS INDEX

ABSOLUTE SOUNDS	12
ANALOGUE SEDUCTION	122
AUDIO EMOTION	131
AUDIOQUEST	2
AUDIOVECTOR	49
AUDIOVISUAL ONLINE	112
AVID HIFI	11
BASICALLY SOUND	122
BD AUDIO	116
BILLY VEE	24
BILLY VEE	24
CARBON AGE	34
CREATIVE AUDIO	84
EPIPHANY ACOUSTICS	122
FREQUENCY TELECOM	15
FURUTECH	118
FUTURE SHOP	97
GURU	106
GX AUDIO	30
HEED	32
HIFI SOUND	82
IAG	132
ICON AUDIO	76,77
INSPIRE HIFI	98
INSPIRE HIFI	120
ISOTEK	43
ISTEREOS	78
JORDAN ACOUSTICS	4,5
KJ WEST ONE	53
LUXURIE	57
M2	47
MAINS CABLES R US	97
OPPO	28
PJ HIFI	70
PMC	80
PRO-JECT	64
Q-ACOUSTICS	26
RAYLEIGH	86,87
RUSS ANDREWS	61
SAMBA	114
SENSUI	21
SEVENOAKS SOUND AND VISION	37,38,39
SIGNALS	122
T + A	69
TELLURIUM Q	114
TEN AUDIO	110

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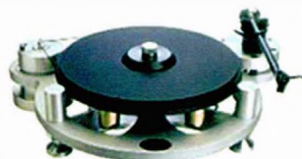
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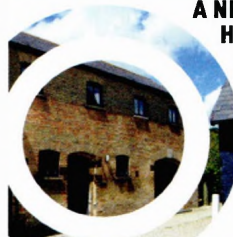
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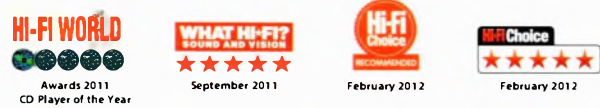
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