

Bryston B135

EXCLUSIVE: Integrated amp from Canadian powerhouse p16



Head music

New Momentums put Sennheiser back on track



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **372**

June 2013

Needle talk

Six affordable vinyl spinners to get you back in the groove

DEALER VISIT:
three hi-fi setups of desire!

RETRO:

We celebrate Quad's seriously special ESL-57 electrostatic

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products on test from Atoll and Cyrus through to Pro-Ject and Rega...



Fostex at home

Flagship HP-A8 headphone amp and 32-bit DAC from pro audio brand

Great Danes

New Audiovector X3 Super floorstander - style, sound and price



"The Truth, nothing more,
nothing less..."



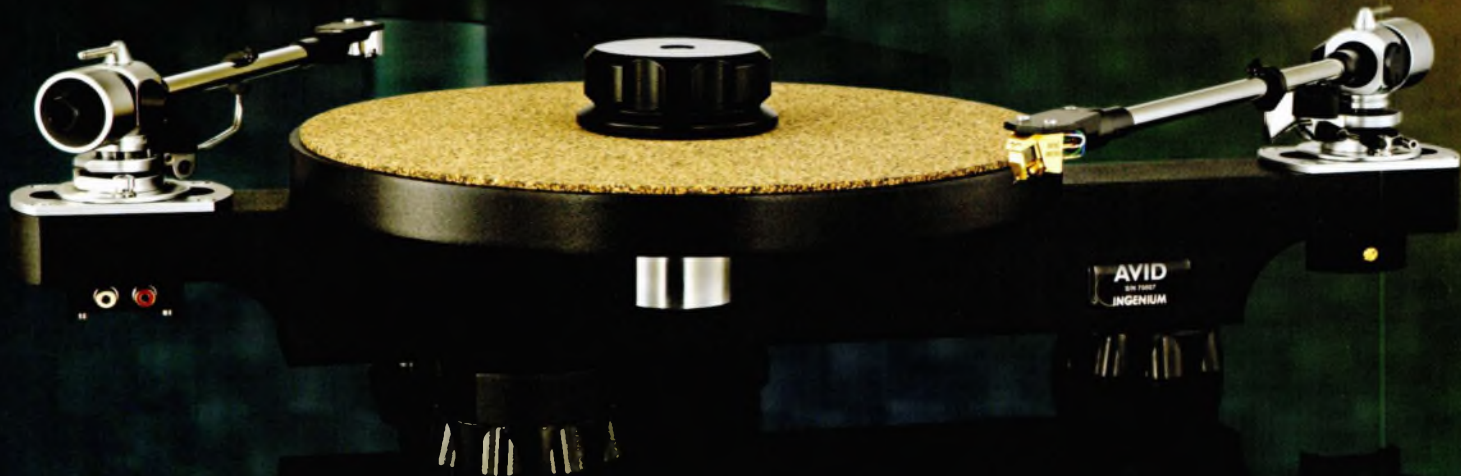
"This level of performance,
convenience and style makes for
an award winning product."

Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio Magazine, January 2013



"Oozes quality in both
construction and sound"

Paul Rigby, Hi Fi World, March 2013



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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!



The way we listen to music has changed considerably in recent years, and even more so the devices we play our music on. Today, we have the promise of high-resolution music downloads and streamed audio, as CD players fall by the wayside and 'physical' digital media formats head on up to join the growing ranks of defunct music formats in hi-fi heaven.

CD is 30 years old, yet despite its age the silver disc is not (I would bet) the format that triggered the start of our hi-fi habits. I imagine that, like me, many *Hi-Fi Choice* readers first got hooked on turntables after hearing a record played on a decent deck. It sounds rather antiquated, I know, but the satisfaction achieved from selecting an album, placing it on a player and lining up the tonearm is a ritualistic process that saw many evenings (and even some days) lost in this repetitive process, simply listening and enjoying the music.

When Compact Disc first arrived, many music lovers complained about the lack of tangibility users felt for the format, and indeed the clinical sound of the music contained on the disc. It simply wasn't the same as holding an LP in your hands; poring over the artwork or the lyrics and sleeve notes.

Turntables are being made in larger numbers than just a few years ago, with new models and lower price points being added all the time. Vinyl revival is gathering apace, as the six starter decks in this month's group test clearly shows, starting on page 22. Whether you're a newbie that's unfamiliar with the format or looking to dust off your old vinyl collection and get back into the groove, there's something for everyone...

Lee Dunkley Editor



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Fostex HP-A8 DAC/headphone amp/DSD file player

“A monster designed to rattle your door hinges and flap your flares.”

David Price: Musical Fidelity M6500i integrated amplifier p64

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Bryston B135 SST² integrated amp

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

Precision Drive

Tannoy's latest loudspeakers combine renowned dual driver technology and luxury looks, they are aptly named Precision...

PRICE: £899-£2,399 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01236 420199 **WEB:** TANNOY.CO.UK

CONTEMPORARY CABINET

DESIGN, high gloss and wood veneer finishes demonstrate the luxury feel of the new Precision range of loudspeakers from Tannoy, right down to the smooth aluminium driver trims and gold-plated binding posts. With 85 years of loudspeaker design experience, Tannoy's latest hi-fi range is based on a new 6in version of the maker's Dual Concentric driver with WideBand tweeter technology. This innovative point-source driver delivers exceptional accuracy with extremely low colouration to ensure the Precision loudspeakers deliver the heart and soul of music, claim Tannoy. The culmination of over 50 years of development and refinement of Tannoy's point source DC driver concept, each unit features the latest 1in titanium dome, HF driver with the signature Tulip Waveguide.

The cabinets use flat front and rear baffles, coupled with curved side panels. The crossover is crafted to integrate the new 6in DC driver and matching bass units, and uses high-spec components throughout that are hard-wired rather than mounted onto a PCB.

The two floorstanding models have custom-made stabilising plinths and a Mass Loading Cavity (MLC), which can be filled or part filled with dry mineral aggregate or dedicated loudspeaker ballast materials to further tighten bass performance. The





COMMENT

STUDIO SOUNDS WILL KILL MP3S

This contentious headline appeared in a short *Metro* newspaper interview on March 7, with the boss of Linn, Gilad Tiefenbrun (pictured below). He hit a raw nerve with a number of readers when he opined the music industry is turning towards 24-bit recordings that can be streamed through a PC or stereo: "I think the time of trading quality for convenience is over," he said.

"The prospect of having 10,000 songs in your pocket really appealed, but this required music to be compressed," he noted, before adding: "This is when the music really started to suffer. But now MP3 players have hundreds of megabytes of space, so compressing files and losing quality should no longer be an issue."

Surprised by the backlash, Gilad promptly took to Linn Products' blog page to expand on the interview: "It's not like I predicted the demise of the toaster, suggesting we leave bread out in the sun to toast instead, or that the internet would be replaced by an elaborate network of paper cups attached by string," he said.

"I am not denying that there are powerful forces holding music back. Since 2007, iPods have had a maximum capacity of 160GB: enough for 40,000 watered-down songs. In Apple's own words, that amounts to a lifetime's entertainment. But remember, that is a lifetime of low-quality entertainment. Now, I don't know about you, but I have strong feelings about my own lifetime, and I feel I deserve more. Apple could easily increase the capacity of their iPods, but six years of silence on this matter suggests they are not that bothered," he continues, before adding: "It seems the death of MP3 is hardly a prediction at all. It's already dying. High-quality music is on its way and it will arrive sooner than you think."

Over the years in these pages, we've always argued in favour of the importance of quality over convenience, and while we love the functionality of the iPod as much as the next man, there's no denying the validity of Gilad's argument. The poor quality of MP3 is impossible to ignore and the chances that it will be usurped by a superior format grow by the day. The only question we're left with is when this will happen. Now that's a point for discussion... ▶

Tannoy's latest hi-fi range is based on a new 6in version of the maker's Dual Concentric driver with WideBand tweeter technology

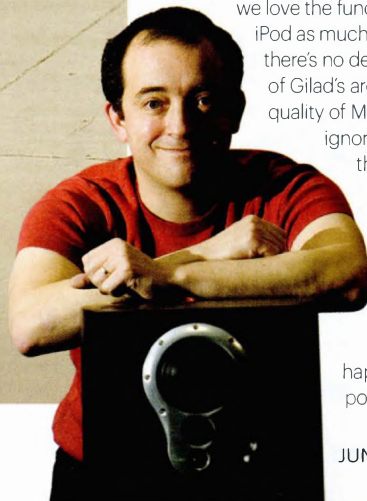
new plinth design offers top-access adjustment of the floor-coupling spikes to make levelling adjustments easy. Tannoy's signature fifth terminal connection allows users to earth the driver chassis to the amp ground to reduce RF interference.

Three models make up the Precision range, and the flagship is the deep 6.4 floorstander (pictured). It combines the new 6in driver with a matching bass driver and the large cabinet volume is loaded with a pair of auxiliary bass radiators, which Tannoy claims offer higher efficiency and deeper, tighter LF reproduction.

The Precision 6.2 floorstander has the same footprint and front profile as the 6.4, but is more compact and discreet. It has a rear-ported cabinet using the same driver technology as the 6.4, while the 6.1 is a compact standmount, ported cabinet.

The range accommodates multi-channel systems with the Precision 6C centre to match with any of the other speakers in the range for surround sound synergy.

Prices start at £899 for the Precision 6.1, £1,699 for the 6.2, and £2,199 for the 6.4. You'll need to add an extra £200 for high gloss finishes.



Linn adds Sneaky DSM

Music streaming gets a little Sneaky

PRICE: £1,750 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0500 888 909 **WEB:** LINN.CO.UK



ADDING TO THE Scottish brand's DS network media products, comes the Sneaky DSM. The compact Sneaky DSM is a versatile, all-purpose streamer with built-in Class D amplification offering a claimed two channels of power at 33W RMS – just add a pair of speakers.

The setup wizard aims to simplify installation and provide easy access to your music whether it's stored on a PC, Mac, smartphone or tablet, and supports music stored in FLAC, Apple Lossless (ALAC), WAV, MP3, WMA (except lossless), AIFF, AAC and OGG file formats. The Kinsky

control app allows content to be accessed and controlled by your smartphone, tablet or laptop, and plays computer audio from iTunes, YouTube, Spotify, BBC iPlayer, Netflix, etc via Linn's Songcast app.

As well as an Ethernet port, the Sneaky DSM also has six inputs: 1x RCA analogue, 1x coaxial digital audio, 3x HDMI and 1x digital optical. Output is handled by an HDMI port plus two four-pole Neutrik Speakon speaker connectors. The Sneaky DSM is available now in a choice of black, silver or white finishes.



IN BRIEF

WOOD YOU BELIEVE IT?

● Thinksound, the US headphone manufacturer, announces the UK release of the ms01 in-ear monitor. Costing £115, the new model is billed as a high-definition earphone with eco-friendly wooden housing and packaging. Voiced by audio engineer and Thinksound CEO, Aaron Fournier, the ms01 in-ear monitor claims a transparently precise sound from its acoustically enhanced, 8mm drivers.

The ultra-lightweight wooden housings are made from renewable resources and gunmetal-finished aluminium baffles, and come with four sets of flexible silicon ear fittings. Like all Thinksound products, the packing and accessories are all as eco-friendly as possible. On sale now. **THINKSOUND.COM**



Three is a magic number

PRICE: £3,995 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01285 654432
WEB: ACOUSTIC-ENERGY.CO.UK

Acoustic Energy is expanding its Reference Series loudspeaker range with a new third model aptly named the Reference Three. The Reference Series is claimed by the manufacturer to be its most accurate and insightful loudspeakers series to date. The newly bolstered range draws on the original AE5 design that was part of one of the first Acoustic Energy speaker series back in the late eighties.

The new flagship boasts the same heavyweight self-damping cabinet within a cabinet as the existing two models in the Reference Series range, but in a luxury floorstanding model. Driver technology includes a customised Dual Ring Radiator tweeter set in a DXT lens, and AE's signature alloy driver with conical dust cap. Additionally, Acoustic Energy claims that the Reference Three crossover uses high-end components and that the board is isolated from the cabinet with an elastomeric damping material.

Finished in a Macassar Ebony veneer, Acoustic Energy proudly state that a total of nine layers of high-gloss lacquer are applied to each speaker to give them a sumptuous standout luxury finish. Each layer is hand rubbed before the next layer is applied to reveal a high-gloss, stylish finish that really brings out the natural colour and texture of the wood





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Financial Times

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Onkyo gets into headphones

Hi-fi and AV brand joins music on the move ranks

PRICE: £149-£179 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 08712 001996 **WEB:** ONKYOCO.UK

ONKYO IS PROBABLY best known to *Hi-Fi Choice* readers for its range of hi-fi and AV components, but the Japanese manufacturer has now introduced a range of headphones to attract the growing number of wearers to the brand.

The ES-HF300 and ES-FC300 kickstart the range and cost £179 and £149 respectively. They feature two wide-range 40mm titanium drivers and unique ported bass sub-chambers, Onkyo claims these folding on-ear headphones 'offer clarity and deep muscular sound, that will bring listeners closer to a genuine hi-fi performance'.

The ES-HF300 come with a 6m oxygen-free copper cable encased in clear elastomer, offering improved conductivity while keeping cable touch noise to a minimum. Gold-plated MMCX connectors and a mini-stereo plug are also fitted.

The ES-FC300 comes in three finishes: black with red cable, all white and all violet. It has an elastomer cable with a flattened cross-section to reduce tangles. Both cables will be available separately as upgrade or replacement options.

Two aluminium in-ear models are scheduled for release in the coming months. Watch this space!



The birth of a new icon

PRICE: £2,000 PER PAIR **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 0116 244 0593 **WEB:** ICONAUDIO.COM

Icon Audio knows a thing or two about valve amplification. Based in Leicester and designed by the company's founder, David Shaw, the new MB30SE is the maker's newest model.

The Class A design is aimed specifically at plugging the gap between the low-powered single-ended amplifiers and expensive transmitter valve types, Icon Audio claims.

The KT120 output valve was chosen for its sound quality and power delivery, and the MB30SE design incorporates a bespoke Icon Audio LDT (Low Distortion Tertiary) transformer with the aim of providing the KT120 output valve

the ability to produce a wide bandwidth, natural dynamics and fine detail, says its maker. The specification sheet claims it produces 16W in triode mode and 27W in ultra-linear mode, making it more widely compatible with less sensitive speakers. Adjustable input sensitivity adds to the flexibility enabling use with either passive or active preamplifiers.

The front panel mounted bias meter should provide easy checking and

adjustment of the amplifier and an indication of output power.

All components are billed as fully serviceable and replaceable and are fitted with gold-plated input and speaker terminals. The MB30SE is available to buy now, costing around £2,000 per pair.



STOP PRESS



THE HI-FI SHOW 2013

● We are proud to announce that our sister publication, *Hi-Fi News*, is set to reinstate the *Hi-Fi News Show* this autumn. After an absence of seven years, the show is set to return in an appropriately luxurious location. 'The Hi-Fi Show 2013' is a speciality high-end audio event that's set to run from Friday 25th to Saturday 26th October in the Beaumont Estate in Windsor, Berkshire.

"We're delighted by the response and early support we've had to The Hi-Fi Show" said event organiser and editor of *Hi-Fi News*, Paul Miller. "Our primary venue was sold out before we'd even gone public with the news. We've just signed-up a second conference venue, adjacent to the first, nearly doubling the number of exhibition suites.

"We have a clear vision for this event with the aim that our visitors are treated to a series of memorable high-end audio experiences. Each suite will feature examples of the very best that the high-end can offer with presentations and demonstrations by a mix of famous designers, recording engineers and audio personalities in every large room."

Because of the exclusivity of the show, ticketing will be managed by online and postal booking and on-the-day entries only made available if space allows. The Hi-Fi Show details, including a list of exhibitors, presentations and competitions, will be on the *Hi-Fi News* website along with info on single and two-day passes. HIFINEWS.CO.UK/SHOW

CORRECTION

● In the Marantz Milestone news story last issue we gave an incorrect price to the NA-11S1 on page 14. The correct price for this model is £3,499.

Stream engine

Hi-fi quality music streaming from any Bluetooth device

PRICE: £160 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ARCAM.CO.UK

AUDIO VIA SHORT-RANGE Bluetooth connectivity has something of a poor reputation when it comes to sound quality, but hi-fi brand Arcam looks set to challenge preconceptions. We first heard the newly introduced rBlink upgrade accessory being demoed at the Sound & Vision Bristol Show at the end of February. It's billed as a high-performance Bluetooth Streaming Micro-DAC, and is the latest model to come from the Cambridge-based maker's expanding range of rSeries products.

The new compact device streams music from any Bluetooth-enabled phone, laptop or tablet device it's paired to; digitally re-clocks and de-jitters it before output via a hi-fi grade DAC to a stereo amplifier or coaxial digital output to higher-end DAC or AV receiver, says Arcam.

Using new-generation Bluetooth CSR Blue Core 7 chipset technology, which offers low noise and distortion, its maker claims the rBlink makes a streaming DAC that can deliver seriously good hi-fi sound over Bluetooth.

Support for apt-X is also provided for streaming from compatible devices.



Sonos raises the bar

PRICE: £600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 0808 234 6596
WEB: SONOS.COM

It's unlikely that you'll have missed the Sonos advertisements on the TV recently promoting the company's new Playbar as 'the soundbar for music lovers'. Any *Hi-Fi Choice* reader with a flat screen TV will know that the quality of the sound has been sacrificed to achieve the thinness of the display, and soundbars like the Sonos are likely to score big with those looking to upgrade the sound on TVs that aren't already connected to a hi-fi system.

The company is already known for its range of wireless music systems, and the new Playbar is the latest addition to the range. The all-in-one model can be placed on a TV stand or wall-mounted above or below a screen, and wired connectivity comes via a single digital optical input and two Ethernet ports.

Internally it's fitted with nine individually amplified speakers; six mid/bass units and three tweeters, and it can be expanded

to a 5.1 surround sound set up with the addition of a pair of Sonos' Play:3s wireless speakers or a Sonos Sub, if required.

As well as the promise of upgrading the sound from your TV screen, it can additionally play and control any audio you have stored on your computer or iPhone, iPad, iPod touch or Android device, as well as accessing music streaming services, internet radio stations and podcasts via the Sonos Controller app

IN BRIEF

LINN UNVEILS KANDID MC

◆ Linn claims its Kandid is the new 'reference standard' moving coil cartridge, costing £2,960. Following in the footsteps of its Akiva cartridge, the Kandid has been developed to reduce resonances, lower distortions and increase output.

Designed to partner Linn's Ekos SE tonearm, the most obvious change is the removal of the front housing as a potential source of resonance in the cartridge, along with a plastic yoke screw to eliminate any magnetic interference and reduce the overall weight. The angle of the mechanical body and the tracking angle of the cantilever have been moved from 23° to 20°, and it uses the finest nude diamond, micro-ridge stylus.

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Simply the best?

Malcolm Steward listens to the Bryston B135 SST² to assess the validity of the claim that it's the ultimate integrated amplifier





► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bryston B135 SST²

ORIGIN
Canada

TYPE
Integrated stereo amplifier

WEIGHT
13.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
300 x 95 x 210mm

FEATURES

- Optional integral DAC or internal MM phono stage
- Three low-noise power transformers: two for the analogue circuits, one for digital
- Separate ground paths for digital and analogue
- Pre-out/main in connections

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WEBSITE
bryston.co.uk

Take a look at Bryston's website and you'll see the B135 SST² boldly described as "without question one of the most sonically transparent and reliable audio products available." That is a very brave claim by a copywriter who is obviously supremely confident, or who has not heard of the competition.

The B135 (as we'll call it from here on) has the options of having a "broadcast-quality moving magnet phono stage" and an on-board DAC with 8x over-sampling performance fitted. I can't imagine many people paying £4,900 and then wanting to use it with a moving magnet cartridge. The integral DAC add-on, however, might be a more popular option, especially with audiophiles keen to de-clutter their homes. The amplifier, as standard, also proffers a dedicated output to feed a set of headphones through the front panel 6.35mm headphone jack and digitally controlled analogue volume dial.

The Bryston has an impressive appearance and certainly looks built to last a lifetime or two. It has a decidedly muscular façade, enviable

The Bryston's sound is unexpectedly warm despite its incisive detailing

constructional quality, and comes with the company's reassuring 20-year guarantee. It is, in fact, quite reserved in its appearance. The loudspeaker terminals, for example, will easily accommodate 4mm thick strands of cable, but do not look like the cleats which one would attach hawsers from a ship to a quayside.

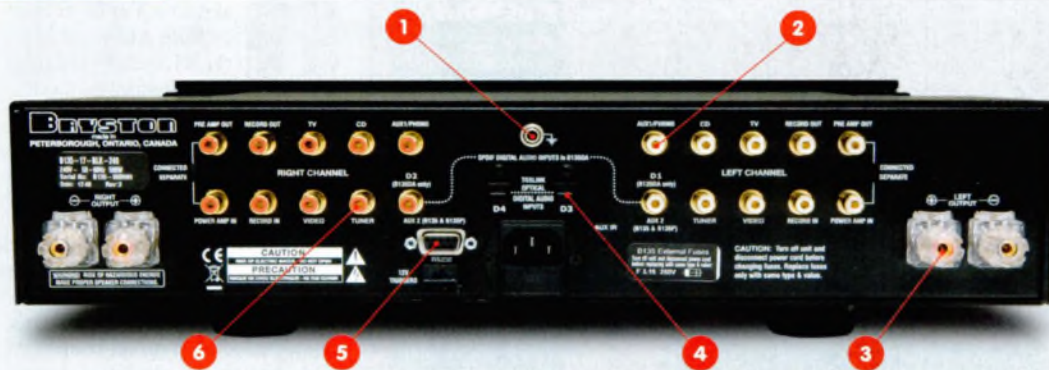
I'll be listening to the Bryston through my reference two-way, the Neat Petite SX but then switch after an hour or two to my full-range reference speakers, the mighty, 88dB-sensitivity, Neat Ultimatum XL10s, which, with their isobaric bass loading, are a far more capable design but just as easy a load for an amplifier to drive, even though each of the XL10 enclosures houses nine drivers. Both the Neat designs have a nominal 6ohms impedance.

Sound quality

Using my Naim HDX-SSD and Naim DAC/XPS2 source, playing Bill Frisell's *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* demonstrates the B135's smoothly balanced overall presentation and its capability for



CONNECTIONS



- 1 Earth connection
- 2 Aux 1/phono input (left channel)
- 3 Loudspeaker terminals (left channel)
- 4 Optical input 3
- 5 RS232 port
- 6 Tuner (line) input (right channel)

frequently startling transients, evident on drum strikes and robustly plucked guitar, which also exploit the Bryston's deft leading edge attack and its crisp note-shape definition.

Frisell's *Blues For Los Angeles* further showcases the B135's dexterity with tonal colour, displaying the wealth of character that can be extracted from a Fender Telecaster.

Call Me Rose and *Five Fifty-One* from Bruce Cockburn's *Small Source of Comfort* show the Bryston's sound to be unexpectedly generous and warm despite its incisive detailing. There is

Ideal for listeners who want a taste of a muscular high-end amplifier system

no outstanding bass extension but the music lacks no sense of weight or tonal completeness, even when listening through the Neat Petite SXs.

Listening to the 24/96 rip of the Buena Vista Social Club, the band's involvement and joy in the music comes across powerfully in its angular approach to the timing and rhythms. The cerebral insight is still there, but it's presented with swagger and fun. On that subject, the Bryston is a remarkably clear-sounding amplifier, free from noise and low-level 'hash' that tend to mask and blur subtlety.

It is equally informative in terms of stereo imagery. It creates a rock solid, truly three-dimensional soundstage on Cassandra Wilson's *You Gotta Move*, which is no easy task with speakers that like to be close to a rear wall as the Petite SX do. The stage stretches well outside the confines of the speaker enclosures.

Keith Jarrett and Jan Garbarek's *Luminessence* ably demonstrates that the B135 is a genuine powerhouse, maintaining the tone and texture of the instrumentation regardless of the

playback level and shows no signs of strain, even when the saxophone explores its dynamic extremes. The amplifier doesn't muster its power in any obvious manner: it simply refuses to sound strained or under any sort of duress when playing complex, multi-layered music, and it continues to sound as though it contains an engine blessed with masses of torque. It handles delicacy and drama with equal aplomb, favouring neither and sounding as though it is in complete control, no matter how demanding or delicate the signal being fed to it.

Switching to the Neat Ultimatum XL10s, which are far superior to their junior stablemates – with far deeper bass and superior stereo imagery – my respect for the Bryston's sense of control grows even more. Its pace, rhythm and timing acuity seem to take a distinct leap forward playing Bill Frisell's fusion. It is especially notable on Frisell and Vinicius Cantuária's *Lágrimas Mexicanas*, where the percussion takes on a more forceful character and assumes a far more persuasive role in the music.

Switching to the far less subtle, 16/44 rip of Alicia Keys' *Girl On Fire*, the Bryston demonstrates its sheer power with the track's percussion reaching truly threatening levels underpinned by Stygian bass and Keys' full-tilt, processed vocals, which impress despite being far from natural.

HOW IT COMPARES

The Bryston cries out to be compared with the ultra-capable, 85WPC, £2,825, Naim Supernait and the £1,195 Hi-Cap power supply.

Using the analogue inputs, the Supernait has a more persuasive groove. Voices sound more human, organic and expressive, as well. They seem to gel with the guitars and band more fluidly, too. The whole presentation seems more natural and evocative and the playing more spirited.

However, the Bryston is clearly ahead in terms of stereo imagery precision and instrument separation. While being the clear winner in hi-fi terms it doesn't rival the Naim at capturing the music's timing and more emotional elements.

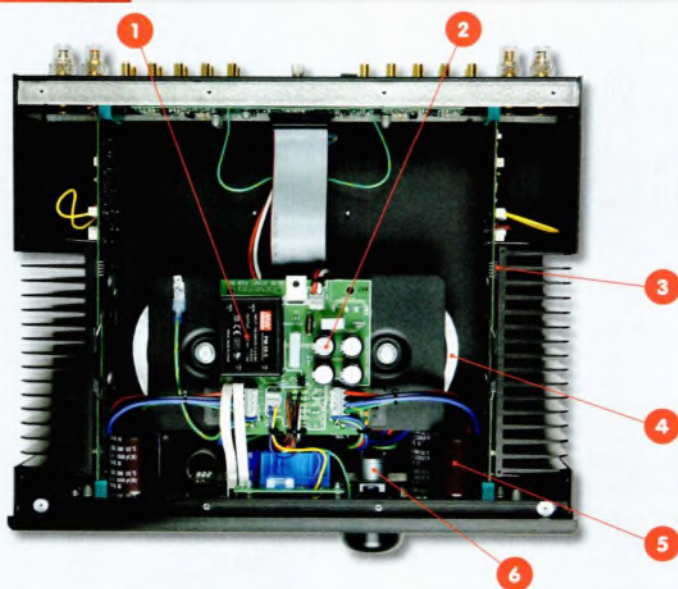
Built to last, the Bryston looks as muscular as it sounds

The B135 demonstrates similar control, subtlety and restraint with the dramatic mix of Anna Calvi's *Suzanne And I* ably conveying Calvi's intense vocalising and her unique Telecaster stylings along with the forceful percussion interjections. The propulsive drive of the music is hard to ignore: moving one's feet appears to be obligatory. Somehow, though, the illusion is not 100 percent convincing. This is not an academic judgement but far more a guttural decision: the music has drive but it doesn't feel wholeheartedly like the Edwards/Rodger's groove...

The Bryston certainly comes from the American high-end camp – even though it hails from Canada – and can generate highly credible images of instruments and performers in an acoustic – or electronic – space. It casts these images in a truly believable arc that extends behind and laterally beyond the physical locations of the loudspeakers, which can be an alluring capability, even though I consider staging to be an academic rather than an emotional consideration. The problem with this approach is that real music is far more than notes appearing one after another in space. There needs to be a sense of the accord between the musicians playing, and their individual timing and phrasing to generate the emotional impact the composer intended. Listen, for example, to guitarist Leo Kottke play *A Virtuoso Is His Own Reward* to



IN SIGHT



- 1 Standby AC/DC converter
- 2 AC mains filter components
- 3 Power transistors bolted to heatsink
- 4 Toroidal power transformer
- 5 Main PSU filter capacitors
- 6 Motorised volume control

Q&A

James Tanner

Bryston VP sales and marketing



MS: Why does the add-on DAC not offer USB connectivity, given its popularity in North America?

JT: The B135 does not have the USB input as we offer it in the BDA-2 DAC. Asynchronous USB seems to provide the best performance and we felt it was better to offer it in our much more versatile Bryston BDA-2 DAC as opposed to offering it as an add-on option in the B135.

Isn't that contrary to your fewer boxes philosophy of getting people to buy integrateds rather than pre/powers?

The Bryston B135 integrated is a no-compromise design in that it is not built to a price point. The preamp section is the same as our separate BP-17 preamp and the power amplifier section is the same as our 2.5B-SST² power amp. So you're not giving up performance with the B135 – it's more a matter of packaging, features and cosmetics.

Given that, why not offer a USB connection on the B135?

The B135 internal DAC is limited to 96/24-bit resolution and has 2 Optical and 2 Coaxial digital inputs available. Most digital sources provide for one of these two digital outputs. Many of our customers these days have multiple digital sources so for those requiring higher resolution (192/32-bit) and/or more choices for their digital sources we offer a separate product called the Bryston BDA-2. This is a very versatile 8-input DAC with 192/24-bit capability. We may consider the addition of an internal USB module for the B135 going forward as we are developing a separate USB product now, which could be fitted to our new SP-3 surround processor as well as the B135, but we have found that our market segment typically wants multiple high-resolution inputs – a configuration commonly found on outboard DAC solutions such as our flagship BDA-2.

ON TEST

Don't be misled by the B135's slim bodywork, as this is a very capable amp. Rated at a nominal 135W/8ohm, it actually delivers 2x170W/8ohm and 2x275W/4ohm at 1% THD (clipping). The big power supply also has plenty of headroom, allowing the B135 to support 220W, 410W and 665W into 8, 4 and low 2ohm loads under dynamic, music-like conditions. Bryston has put a ceiling on the B135's maximum current of 21.1A (or

445W/1ohm), but the amp remains very tolerant of difficult loudspeakers. Distortion is low and admirably independent of power output, hovering between 0.001-0.002% from 1-135W through midrange frequencies. There's an almost inevitable increase in THD at higher frequencies, but more so on the left than right channel in our sample (0.028% versus 0.0035% L/R at 20kHz). The left and right channels

are otherwise very well matched, offering the same 0.025-0.095ohm output impedance (20Hz-20kHz) and extended response from 5Hz-20kHz (±0.1dB), rolling off thereafter to -4.1dB/1ookHz.

So far, so Bryston. All except the S/N ratio which, at 77dB (re. 0dBW) is 10-20dB 'noisier' than the brand average. As this is a white noise, and not hum, the subjective impact is likely to be a far smoother sound. **PM**

appreciate the importance of phrasing and to realise how secondary hi-fi considerations are to enjoying, understanding and appreciating music. The Bryston tries hard to cover the requirements of both camps – the hi-fi and the musical, and while it's consistent in the first respect, it doesn't always succeed in forging an emotional link between listener and music.

On Los Lobos' *Angels With Dirty Faces* the amplifier perfectly captures the dynamics and rhythm, but doesn't quite grasp the timing – in particular the subtle relationship between the drums, bass guitar and accordion.

However, with the LSO playing Ravel's *Pavane Pour Une Infant Defunte*, where demonstrative timing is not as crucial to the music's impact, the B135 gives a significantly better account of itself. And with Mahler's *Symphony Number 8*, where the listener wants to appreciate the magnificent sound of the choir and the accompanying orchestra, it fares well and conveys both the choral and orchestral might with authority. Its ability to create a convincing acoustic environment is also remarkable.

Conclusion

The B135 STT² is, without doubt, a fine integrated amplifier, but it is certainly not the ultimate amplifier for everyone – it might be ideal for listeners who want an integrated taste of a muscular high-end amplifier system. It's versatile in providing digital inputs, although there's no Asynchronous USB input.

Given its outstanding stereo performance, I think it's probably better suited to classical and audiophile material where the cosmetics of the music assume far greater importance ●

Ni-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Vivid stereo performance coupled to great sense of power
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not assertive enough in timing or conveying tonal colour and expression
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A muscular but refined sound from this high-end amp with great stereo imagery
- 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

This month's turntable group is supported by rigorous listening tests, backed up with objective lab testing

TURNTABLE GROUP TEST

THIS MONTH'S GROUP test is a special one. Instead of the usual Blind Listening Panel with a group auditioning at one particular time, we extended the evaluation period over a week. Each turntable was auditioned, firstly with a Ortofon 2M Red moving magnet cartridge as it gives a reliable and consistent guide to the deck's absolute sonic ability. Then the supplied cartridge was auditioned (where applicable), to gauge the ability of the overall package. Given that these are starter decks, many buyers will never stray from using the supplied cartridge. All cartridges were aligned by a Mobile Fidelity GeoDisc and set to the manufacturer's recommended tracking weight.

With both the reference cartridge and the supplied design, the decks were compared in sequence, and referred back to, in order to further clarify any findings. While obvious differences were heard between the two cartridges, they weren't large enough to impact the overall results – having a good cartridge wasn't enough to lift a poor turntable any further up the rankings. A range of music was used as it gives a far better insight into the deck's intrinsic sound quality than just staying with one or two genres, as well as highlighting any technical failings such as pitch stability or rumble. Finally, all decks were level-matched with one another to ensure consistency.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Absolute speed error at 33.3rpm

+10

Peak Wow & Flutter

+40

Rumble (through groove)

0

Rumble (through bearing)

+50

Tonearm resonances

+10

KEY: ■ Group average

■ % below average

■ % above average

ABSOLUTE SPEED ERROR

Most decks will run very slightly fast or slow although this is rarely directly audible unless the shift in pitch reaches about 3% (around half a semitone).

PEAK WOW & FLUTTER

Wow represents low-rate variations in speed stability (typically <10Hz), while flutter is caused by higher-rate fluctuations in speed (typically 10-100Hz).

RUMBLE (THROUGH GROOVE)

Rumble is a determination of the turntable's signal-to-noise ratio (see our amplifier group tests), measured here through the record groove itself.

RUMBLE (THROUGH BEARING)

The inherent rumble – the mechanical noise – of a turntable's bearing is measured via a 'rumble coupler'. The very best TT's offer around -75dB.

TONEARM RESONANCES

Tonearms are not infinitely rigid, but bend and twist very slightly in response to vibrations from the pick-up and environment. This is a measure of their resilience.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Phono stage:

- Creek OBH-15 mkII

Amplifier:

- Creek Evolution 50A

Loudspeakers:

- Spendor D7

Cables:

- Black Rhodium

- Missing Link

Equipment supports:

- Quadraspire

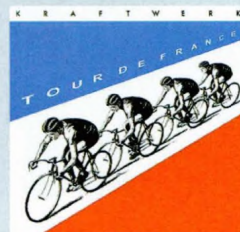
TEST MUSIC

REM

Near Wild Heaven
Out of Time



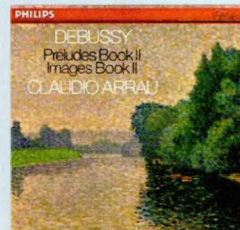
Kraftwerk
Tour De France Étape 3
Tour De France



Herbie Hancock
Maiden Voyage
Maiden Voyage



Debussy
The Sunken Cathedral
Preludes



OUR GROUP TESTS

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

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

CONVERT ORDINARY TO EXTRAORDINARY



DAC-V1 Digital to Analogue Converter

Using our unique digital signal processing technology, the DAC-V1 can transform your computer into a **high-resolution** music hub. It can also unleash the sound of digital sources like your TV, games console and hard disk player/server too. Listen directly through headphones or add our matching NAP 100 power amplifier and speakers to create a compact high-end hi-fi system.

If, like us, you really care about music, the new DAC-V1 is for you.

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Group**test**

TURNTABLES £235-£500

Record makers

With a wealth of recent new models, there's never been a better time to invest in a starter turntable, says **David Price**

UNTIL RECENTLY BUDGET turntables had been sadly overlooked, as all the vinyl action was in the high priced sector with a procession of sexy superdecks. In the past year, though, a number of entry-level designs have popped up, catering both for born again vinyl junkies and newbies who know nothing about the format. Suddenly, there's real choice available to prospective purchasers, both from established specialist companies to purveyors of DJ decks available at surprisingly low prices. In between all this, there are simple, unashamed, convenience-based turntables – remember them?

Into the first category slot the Pro-Ject Genie, Edwards Audio Apprentice and Rega RP1. These models are from further up the companies' respective ranges, that have been cost-cut in terms of components then loaded with basic moving magnet cartridges that come pre-fitted, balanced and aligned. Effectively, you're taking best hi-fi practice and doing it on the cheap.

The second category sees the Lenco and Audio Technica, which are ostensibly DJ decks sporting quartz-locked direct drives rather than belts. These are packed with features, the latter even having a built-in phono stage and USB output

A number of entry level designs have popped up for vinyl junkies and newbies

for recording vinyl. They are both OEM sourced from China and lack purist hi-fi kudos; those S-shaped tonearms were last fashionable when T Rex was in the charts.

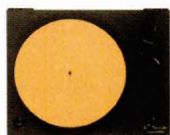
Finally the Thorens carves its own niche; a fully automatic turntable with few concessions to hi-fi best practice apart from its slick German build. It is designed for people that aren't vinyl junkies, don't like fiddling with their tracking angle and just want to play records. Whatever next! ▶

ON TEST



Audio Technica AT-LP1240-USB
£500 **p25**

The most expensive deck in the group is the most feature-packed (with a phono stage and USB output) and one of the best built. An interesting direct drive DJ deck from a famous name, it should be good.



Edwards Audio Apprentice TT mk2
£300 **p27**

Lightly reworked Rega RP1 (certainly no bad thing), this sports some special tweaking to squeeze even more performance from what's already a very purposeful package. The question is, does it succeed in its goal?



Lenco L-3807
£250 **p29**

The classic brand is back, although the new generation of Lencos holds no commonality to the great sixties decks. This is a good value direct drive with DJ features, but does it cut it in hi-fi land?



Pro-Ject RPM 1.3 Genie
£225 **p31**

From a champion of affordable turntables this striking package, offers a fine tonearm, decoupled motor and bundled cartridge that belongs in a league above this one. It should, therefore, be a formidable contender.



Rega RP1
£230 **p33**

Some 40 years making affordable turntables has given Rega one of the best reputations around, and the RP1 shows that, despite its familiar styling, thought has gone into its design, but how does it sound?



Thorens TD-158
£295 **p35**

From arguably the most famous and illustrious brand of all here, this is Thorens' cheapest (and most cheerful) turntable and is unashamedly aimed at vinyl newbies wanting convenience above all else.



Lenco
QUARTZ L-3807
DIRECT DRIVE TURNTABLE

DUST LIGHT

PITCH ADJ.

- +
PITCH BEND

M2 SERIES



Technology, Design & Emotion

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

ROKSAN

Roksan Audio is exclusively distributed in the UK by Henley Designs Ltd.

Telephone: 01235 511 166 | Email: info@henleydesigns.co.uk | Web: www.henleydesigns.co.uk



Audio-Technica AT-LP1240-USB £500

If you want everything bar the kitchen sink from your turntable, this USB output-equipped deck beckons

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Turntable
- ORIGIN**
Japan/China
- TYPE**
Quartz-locked direct drive
- WEIGHT**
12.5kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
450 x 167 x 353mm
- FEATURES**
 - 33, 45 and 78rpm
 - Platter rim stroboscope
 - Stylus target light
 - Phono preamp with USB output
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Henley Designs
- TELEPHONE**
01235 511166
- WEBSITE**
henleydesigns.co.uk

The most expensive deck in the group, the big Audio Technica is direct driven with the speed controlled by a quartz-referenced servo system, giving very low speed error. It is styled like a DJ deck and aspires to a bit of club culture, even if most will likely end up in a bedroom. It sports a USB output; this turntable has a built-in phono preamplifier and computer connectivity, making it ideal for archiving your vinyl – in conjunction with the supplied PC and Mac-compatible Audacity software. Eagle-eyed readers will notice the visual similarity to the late, lamented Technics SL1200, which was one of the best built turntables around. The Audio Technica doesn't quite match it, but is still far more rugged than the other vinyl-spinners here, giving the impression that it's hewn from a solid block of granite rather than medium density fibreboard. The tonearm isn't quite up to the standards of the Rega or Pro-Ject however; it's decent enough, but is made from stainless steel as opposed to the lighter aluminium of its rivals. Uniquely

here, it offers 33, 45 and 78rpm speeds, with adjustable pitch referenced to a stroboscope. There's also a removable stylus target light. No cartridge was supplied, so I'm using an Ortofon 2M Red.

Sound quality

In many ways an accomplished performer, this Audio Technica takes the music by the scruff of the neck and goes for it. It's a very clean sounding design that endeavours to give the whole picture of what's on the disc, warts and all. Kicking off with REM's *Near Wild Heaven*, this means a strong, firm and supple bass that boogies along with real zeal. At the same time, bass drums stop and start better than any of the other decks, with no sense of overhang or blur. Midband is highly informative, letting these multi-tracked Rickenbacker guitars ring like train bells and the song's lovely vocal harmonies shine out. Everything is tight and taut, and this extends to a very clean treble, which makes up in speed what it lacks in subtlety.

Moving to the Kraftwerk track, and the Audio Technica deck works its magic, pulling the listener into the action with lots of space and detail, although it begins to show a slight lack of subtlety, which I don't hear in the Pro-Ject and Rega. There's a sense that this deck steamrollers everything, whether it needs to or not. As a result, everything you play through the Audio Technica sounds dramatic and impactful regardless of the recording – even the louche jazz strains of Herbie Hancock sound forward and forced, the deck failing to really cut back and relax, which is just what it needs to do.

The Debussy piece is both good and bad. On the plus side, the Audio

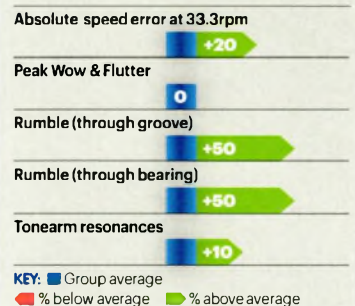


ON TEST

Equipped with a very 'torquey' 16-pole, 3-phase brushless DC motor the AT-LP1240's cast alloy platter is up to speed within one second and brakes to a halt almost instantly. Speed accuracy is superb with a mere $\pm 0.012\%$ error in the default pitch position, although there is a discrete wow at $\pm 5\text{Hz}$ amounting to 0.05% (peak weighted). Flutter is more substantial with shoulders at $\pm 13\text{Hz}$ followed by a broad, noise-like uncertainty that extends across $\pm 60\text{Hz}$.

Hum pickup is very low indeed (-62dB below MM output at 5cm/sec) just as the rubber-damped platter is free of obvious ringing modes. Some mechanical noise breaks clear at 13Hz (causing the flutter), but the DIN B-weighted rumble measured directly through the motor spindle is just -70.4dB – clearly superior to the noisier Lenco direct drive also tested here. The arm has low friction and limited bearing play. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Technica has a clean and stable sound, and seems utterly unflappable, however loud the music plays. But still there is a sense that it is acting as a 'digital effects processor', failing to give the wonderfully fulsome sound of the real acoustic instrument. As it turns out, other decks here manage to come over as more natural. So, if it's fireworks and thunder that you like, this is a great and riveting listen, but subtlety seekers might look to one of the better belt drives here. Overall then, the Audio Technica is a very decent deck for the money, especially if its myriad facilities appeal to you, but it's not necessarily for everyone. ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Punchy, crisp, musical sound; fine build; feature count
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Rather lacking the sonic subtlety of the best of the rest
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Fantastic all-round budget turntable package
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



Raidho acoustics

At Raidho Acoustics we are pleased that our visions are shared and appreciated by the leading Hifi experts of the world, who seems to love the Raidho speakers too.

Since so many fine words have been written to describe the experience you'll get from a Raidho loudspeaker, we will write no more.

If reading about the Raidho sound is not enough, please contact your Raidho dealer who will be glad to arrange an demonstration.

Find dealer list at www.raidho.dk

Sound^{of the} real^{thing}

Jonathan Valin (TAS blog)



RAIDHO C1.1
August 2012

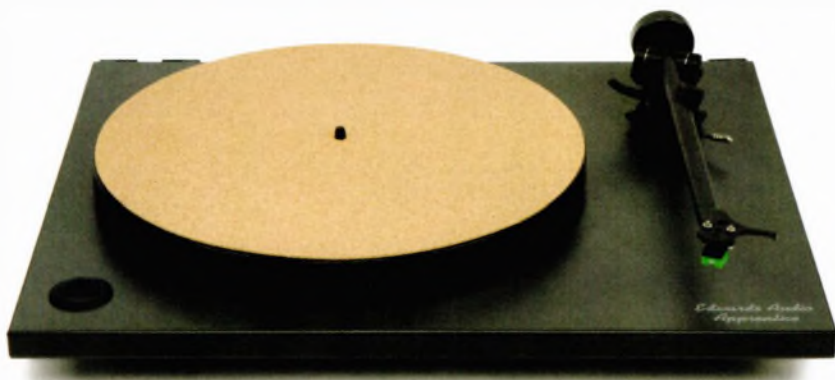


RAIDHO C1.1
November 2012



RAIDHO C1.1
and
RAIDHO C4.1
March 2013

www.raidho.dk



Edwards Audio Apprentice TT mk2 £300

An interesting new contender, this is an audiophile hot-rodged version of the highly respected Rega RP1

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Turntable
- ORIGIN**
UK
- TYPE**
Belt drive
- WEIGHT**
4.2kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
450 x 120 x 360mm
- FEATURES**
 - 33 and 45rpm
 - Phenolic resin platter
 - Rega RB101 tonearm
 - Audio Technica MM supplied
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Talk Electronics
- TELEPHONE**
01491 572523
- WEBSITE**
talkelectronics.com

Maybe it works for Alan Sugar and the BBC, but calling something the Apprentice isn't exactly a licence for bar room bragging rights! Still, look beyond the name and you find what is obviously a slightly reworked Rega RP1 – which as you will soon discover is no bad thing at all. Edwards Audio has performed various minor but strategic mods, such as a different platter mat and a tighter drive belt. Indeed, the deck is stripped down and the bearing changed to a custom-made white ceramic version, and immersed in synthetic oil. It also sports a cork mat and comes supplied with an Audio Technica AT-95E moving magnet cartridge, which is a very good £30 design.

All this results in a deck that, unlike the all original RP1, gets up to speed quickly and without spinning its pulley – however it has negative consequences too, such as more noise transmission and poorer speed stability [see On Test].

The dark grey paint finish to the top isn't the most attractive either; most

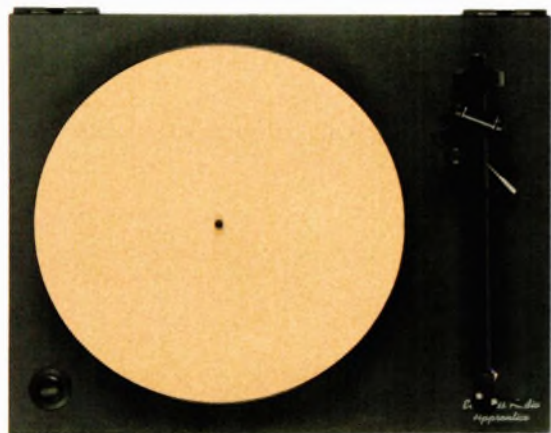
will prefer the stock Rega hues, even if the new mat gives some visual interest. These points aside, the deck feels absolutely as per the Rega RP1 reviewed here, which is to say decent but by no means substantial. The same Rega RB101 arm is fitted, which is one of the very best in the test.

Sound quality

There's no denying the closeness to the Rega RP1 review found overleaf, which means the Apprentice has a clean and even sound, one that's not especially coloured or obviously flawed. Indeed, in its way, it's a very mature listen, letting you get on with the process of enjoying the music – despite a motor hum that can become intrusive at high volumes. Just as the measurements suggest, the Rega is actually better in this respect, but still the Edwards Audio turntable manages to sound better than the RP1 in some respects.

Whereas the Rega can tend to be just a little tonally dry, this disc spinner is fractionally warmer and more fulsome sounding – bass is just a touch stronger while retaining the original deck's sense of suppleness and musicality. Across the midband and on most types of music, the Edwards sounds fractionally more couth. For example, vocals on the REM song have a slightly more direct feeling about them, without in any way being brighter or more forward. Indeed, by the admittedly modest standards of the group, this turntable proves to be one of the most detailed and insightful.

Along with the aforementioned motor hum, the Edwards turntable isn't quite as speed-stable as the Rega or Pro-Ject offerings. Although not a clear and present problem, some piano notes on the Debussy piece

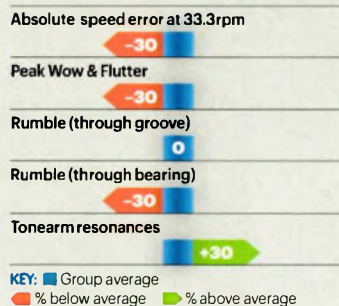


ON TEST

While clearly based on the Rega RP1 platform, differences attributable to Edwards Audio's modifications are measurable. The new ceramic ball used in the bearing may account for the absence of ~200Hz noise registered through the RP1, but the overall through-bearing rumble is slightly worse at -64.7dB versus -65.2dB (RP1).

The most critical difference seems to be linked to Edwards Audio's use of a tighter, less compliant drive belt. While the RP1 slips when getting up to speed at 45rpm, the Apprentice TT mk2 does not. However, this is probably a conscious trade-off on Rega's part because the tighter belt also transmits the synchronous motor's cogging noise very effectively through to the platter. The absolute speed error is now slightly higher at +0.6%, but wow is increased to 0.11% while there are now two substantial ±100Hz flutter sidebands (0.09%) absent in the RP1. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



come over just a touch cracked; it subjectively affects certain types of instruments more than others. The Herbie Hancock jazz track is fun, this deck showing its fine sense of rhythmic progression – even if it lacks the bubbly enthusiasm of the Pro-Ject and Audio Technica turntables. The real skill of the Apprentice is the midband insight and fine depth perspective, although it is no slouch at the frequency extremes, either. Overall this is generally a fine performer with a consummately musical sound, but it is a shame that the motor hum is a little too obvious, and occasionally speed stability issues rear their heads. Close, but no cigar. ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Open, musical sound; excellent arm and cartridge
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Intrusive motor noise and speed stability issues
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** An excellent budget deck with some useful mods and enjoyable sound
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL





Real Wood Headphones

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.

The ts02+mic, made with real wood, creates a more natural resonance and unparalleled acoustics. Featuring an in-ear 8mm high-definition driver with integrated microphone and call control, the ts02+mic headphones produce a deep, precise bass, a warm midrange, and crisp, clear highs.

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Lenco

L-3807 £250

The return of a classic name is always something to be celebrated, but is this a deck worthy of wearing it?

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Turntable
- ORIGIN**
Switzerland/China
- TYPE**
Quartz-locked direct drive
- WEIGHT**
11.8kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
455 x 158 x 356mm
- FEATURES**
 - 33 and 45rpm
 - Platter rim stroboscope
 - +/- 8% speed control
 - Stylus target light
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Lenco UK
- TELEPHONE**
n/a
- WEBSITE**
lencouk.com

Those buyers at which this turntable is squarely aimed at probably won't fully appreciate the significance of its brand name. For audiophiles of a certain age, the word Lenco is pregnant with meaning – it conjures up an era of precision turntables from way back in the sixties, when such things were pretty thin on the ground! Now the name is back in the UK, and it is nice to see it where it should be, adorning turntables, although there is no connection whatsoever with the GL-series of decks of 50 years ago in engineering terms. Indeed the L-3807, like the Audio Technica tested over the page, is Chinese OEM sourced.

It is a quartz-lock direct driven affair complete with pop-up target light and platter edge stroboscope; speed can be varied by eight percent up or down, and there's a central detent on the speed control slider to lock it at the correct rate of knots. The tonearm is a pretty generic S-shaped stainless steel affair, and by the standards of the group is really rather bad – with large amounts of play from the main

bearing. An 'SME'-type detachable headshell is fitted, making cartridge changing easy. In use it's reasonably slick, and when switching on you're spared the squeaking sounds of budget belt drive decks trying to spin up the platter from standstill that you get from the Rega, for example – the Lenco platter starts swiftly and silently. An unidentified OEM MM cartridge is fitted.

Sound quality

Like the other direct drive turntable in this round up, the Lenco fizzes with energy and power no matter what you give it to play. Trouble is, the other of side of all this brio is a distinct lack of sophistication and a rather forward, edgy presentation that you simply don't get from the likes of the Rega, for example. This deck also seems to focus on the surface imperfections of the vinyl too, indicating that it isn't the best tracker in the world.

REM's *Near Wild Heaven* is a lot of fun to listen to, sounding almost diametrically opposed to the mellow, mellifluous Thorens, for example. You immediately focus on the bass guitar and bass drum, and the interplay between these and the snare drum; timing is nice and confident, and the deck seems to be far less swayed by what it is playing than some here. There is a good deal of detail too, with lots of texture to the guitars, although vocals sound a touch pinched and hard. Cymbals have oodles of bite, but seem a bit unnatural and bright.

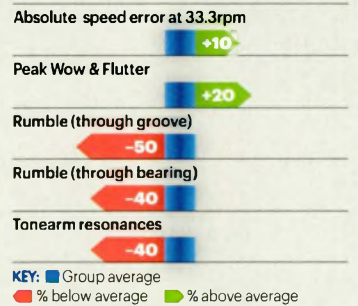
Moving to the Herbie Hancock track, the pattern continues. There is lots of bass energy, and plenty of treble too – and although the song bounces along nicely, things sound hard and overly aggressive. This is

ON TEST

Secured by two captive lugs into the motor plate, the directly-driven platter is up to speed within two seconds and comes to a stop even quicker. Motor noise, however, is conducted through the spindle with equal efficiency leaving the L-3807 with a relatively poor DIN-B rumble of -64.4dB (falling only slightly to -64.6dB when measured through the vinyl groove). Spectral analysis reveals a cluster of resonant peaks breaking through between 100-200Hz. Hum-related breakthrough is very low indeed, however.

Speed accuracy is good at +0.03% in the default pitch position and while peak wow is lower than most in the test at 0.05%, flutter sidebands raise the total W&F to 0.13%. The S-shaped tonearm in our sample is insecurely clamped into the bearing assembly while the gimbal itself still exhibits a fair degree of play. Friction is still a moderate -30mg in both planes. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



fine in small measures, but leaves me yearning for the subtlety of the Rega or Pro-Ject. Even on the Kraftwerk track, which really appreciates a purposeful sounding deck, I find myself yearning for more refinement – across a number of areas, from its flat soundstaging to the poor image location, this deck seems to be spoiling my enjoyment of the music in a way that several others don't. The final touch is the Debussy piece, which has the piano sounding brittle and clipped, rather than the rich, resonant instrument it should be. Overall, a very mixed bag; the deck itself seems decent but the tonearm does it no favours.



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★☆
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★☆
- FEATURES**
★★★★☆
- LIKE:** Solid build; crisp sound and smooth operation
- DISLIKE:** Lacks real musical insight; has a poor tonearm
- WE SAY:** Attractively priced budget turntable that's fair value for money

OVERALL



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Pro-Ject RPM 1.3 Genie £235



From the latter day master of cheap and cheerful vinyl spinners comes this very distinctive, high value offering

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Turntable
- ORIGIN**
Czech Republic/
Slovakia
- TYPE**
Belt drive
- WEIGHT**
3.3kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
380 x 115 x 350mm
- FEATURES**
- 33 and 45rpm
 - Skeletal chassis
 - Decoupled motor
 - Ortofon 2M Red MM supplied
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Henley Designs
- TELEPHONE**
01235 511166
- WEBSITE**
henleydesigns.co.uk

There's one problem with non-suspended decks, which is that the plinth works as a sound absorption board, capturing the vibration from the speakers and sending it through the platter and into the stylus. A good way of avoiding this is to go with a skeletal design such as the Genie, which has a smaller surface area and is thus less prone to airborne disturbance. Another nice feature is that the motor sits separately from the main chassis, meaning it's only the belt that contacts the platter directly – which should cut down noise dramatically, which is just as well because the supplied motor isn't the quietest I've ever come across.

In other respects, the Pro-Ject is a conventional belt-drive deck with a decent Pro-Ject 8.6 S-shaped aluminium tonearm – although the bundled Ortofon 2M Red cartridge is a nice touch, and unexpected at this price point. It's decently built at the price, although the MDF chassis has a lightness to it that won't satisfy buyers of the Audio Technica. Still

you get the feeling that – as per the Rega – costs have been cut very intelligently. Setting up is a fiddlier process than some, and you have to take care to get the motor nicely centred in its recess, making sure it doesn't touch the deck's chassis. The arm feels nice and the supplied cartridge is pre-fitted and well aligned, which makes life easier.

Sound quality

This latest Genie proves a very decent performer at the price, and although not exceptional in any one way, it doesn't have any obvious weak points that drag it below the group standard. This is in marked contrast to some others here! Basically it's a bright, crisp, spry sounding deck, giving a surprisingly stable sound that doesn't punish piano music – always a great test of a turntable's speed accuracy. The Debussy piece shows that the deck can keep its cool with testy programme material, giving a nicely musical sound even on high modulated pieces where the Lenco, for example, seems to lose the plot.

Moving to some modern electronics in the shape of Kraftwerk, and again the Genie magically makes for the rhythmic heart of the music, pushing the groove along with aplomb. Compared with pricier reference decks such as the Rega RP3, there is quite a lot of bass missing, this Pro-Ject seems to dwell more on the midband where it is most comfortable, but what low end it does reveal is clean and taut with absolutely no slurring or unwanted overhang. It is a confident and assured performance, the Genie keeping to what it does best.

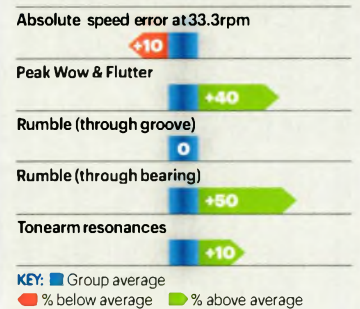
REM's *Near Wild Heaven* is plenty of fun too, the deck sets up an open and quite wide soundstage – a feat

ON TEST

Judged by overall technical prowess, the RPM 1.3 Genie is the best 'all-rounder' in this month's test. The inverted bearing with its ball and sintered bronze housing delivers the lowest levels of rumble at -70dB (DIN B-weighted) with no significant mechanical resonances polluting its low frequency performance. Flutter is very low indeed at 0.02% and wow limited to a ±4Hz component at just 0.05% (peak weighted). This, and the mere +0.05% absolute speed error from the synchronous motor and peripheral belt drive, ensure the Genie is the most stable LP spinner here despite lacking the stop/start precision of the A-T.

The partnering 8.6s tonearm is suited to high-ish compliance MMs (like the superior Ortofon 2M Red included here), its single-piece S-shaped tube and headshell offering good resonant behaviour while the bearings combine limited play with low friction. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



that many budget CD players wouldn't pull off – inside which is a wealth of detail. Those ringing Rickenbacker guitars sound nicely crunchy and real but don't ever fall into distortion, while vocals are smooth and direct. There is a sense of a musical event, something that not every deck here delivers. Moving to some mellow jazz from Herbie Hancock, and it is only here that the Genie doesn't seduce quite so much. It is a nice enough listen, but the lack of bass makes the track feel a little lightweight, and the lack of subtlety up top makes cymbals a little coarser than the Rega. Overall though, a very strong performance given its price. ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Expansive, musical sound; fine tonearm and superb cartridge
- DISLIKE:** Rather fiddly to set up
- WESAY:** Excellent starter deck, especially if you're the type that likes to tweak

OVERALL



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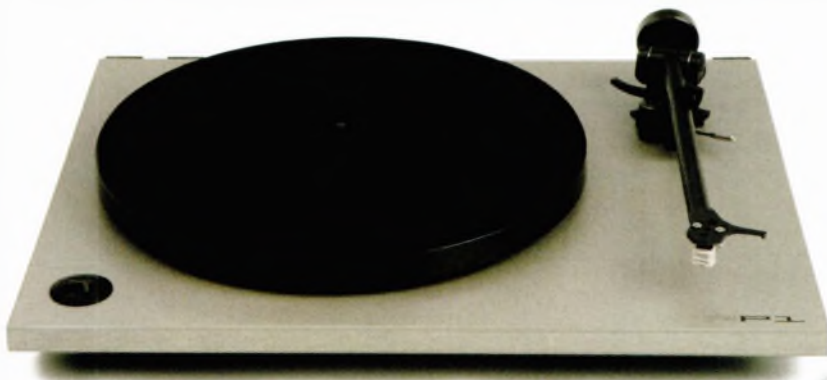
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Rega RP1 £230



With 40 years in the business, Rega knows a thing or two about making great affordable disc spinners

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Turntable
- ORIGIN**
UK
- TYPE**
Belt drive
- WEIGHT**
4.2kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
450 x 120 x 360mm
- FEATURES**
 - 33 and 45rpm
 - Phenolic resin platter
 - Rega RB101 tonearm
 - Rega Carbon MM supplied
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Rega Research
- TELEPHONE**
n/a
- WEBSITE**
rega.co.uk

If you were to distil down the essential elements of what makes up the perfect budget turntable, this is pretty much what you'd end up with. The RP1 is simplicity itself, but don't think for a minute that no thought has gone into the design. Basically, it's a slab of MDF, nicely painted and finished, with a hole drilled in the middle for the main bearing. The AC synchronous motor also bolts in from underneath, and there's the fine Rega RB101 tonearm affixed on the other side. This is, of course, the blueprint for the more expensive Rega designs, but money has been saved simply by doing things a little less fastidiously. Still, the Rega feels well finished and nicely screwed together by the standards of the rest of the group, which isn't necessarily saying much!

As per the classic Rega mould, speed selection is done by moving the belt on the two-step pulley. It's cheap and highly effective, but many won't like the faffing around – and it feels crude compared with the likes of the Thorens or Audio Technica offerings. The turntable comes fitted with a

pre-aligned Rega Carbon cartridge, so set-up is incredibly easy. It's not quite as 'plug and play' as the Thorens, but it's not far off, and much less fussy than the Pro-Ject. The deck sports a black felt mat as standard, and there's the option of a number of racier hues for this – and the deck itself.

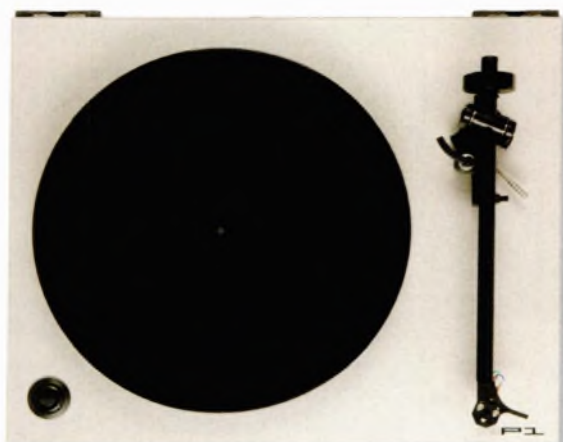
Sound quality

Despite being very much a budget offering, the RP1 sounds distinctively Rega – which can only be a good thing. Compared with all others in this group, there is more of a sense of what is actually going on in the record group, rather than what the turntable is turning the original recording into.

This package is well able to impart the power and grip of the bass guitar in the REM track, for example, carrying the phrasing far better than any deck here except the Audio Technica. It is also exceptionally good rhythmically, giving a sense of musical flow and progression to the song where others like the Thorens sound a touch floaty and unstructured.

Its midband is sufficiently neutral for the listener to really hear into the recorded acoustic, and this makes for better depth perspective than any of the other decks here, even if the left-to-right soundstage isn't quite as expansive as the Pro-Ject. Tonally the baby Rega doesn't stray too far from the company's 'house sound', which is to say quite lean yet smooth – Kraftwerk's *Tour de France* isn't quite as sumptuous as it sounds on the Genie, but still sounds nicely balanced and even, too.

Moving on to the rock of REM and the RP1 feels in its element, giving a crisp, dry, stable sound without any nasties that certain other decks here are guilty of. Really rather detailed, it

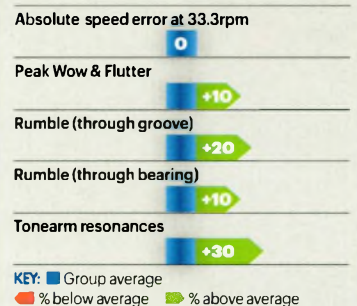


ON TEST

Despite trading a lighter plastic platter for the RP3's glass version, the entry-level RP1 offers a very similar speed stability and rumble performance. Absolute speed is fractionally fast here at +0.18% (inaudible, but a feature of all Regas) while peak wow matches the RP3 at 0.09%. Flutter is very low and rumble – measured through the groove – is only a dB behind its bigger brother at -68.3dB. The RP1's bearing, however, is not so quiet, registering -65dB (DIN-B wtd) thanks to some breakthrough around 200Hz.

The new Rega RB101 tonearm is similar to the RB303 in performance terms with an 11g effective mass and rigid tube, seemingly uncompromised by the plastic headshell, offering a well-defined main resonance at 150Hz followed by other models at 400-960Hz at lower amplitude. Play is minimal and friction <10mg in both planes. It's the best arm in this month's test. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



carries the vocals very sensitively, and really catches the mood of the music well. Its bass is excellent by the standards of the group; not as strong as the Audio Technica, perhaps, but supple and tuneful. It shows the deck's fine timing off to great effect, just as it should be. It is only on the Herbie Hancock track that its lack of warmth or romance makes the song seem just a tad too matter of fact. Still, it doesn't throw out vast tracts of detail that most others here have simply glossed over. Overall, the Rega RP1 is the most complete performer here – it's not quite as warm or wide as the Pro-Ject Genie, but it still turns out to be a real class act.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Smooth, pacey sound; decent finish; excellent arm; nice cartridge
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Overall it feels a lot cheaper than the Rega RP2
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A fantastic starter turntable package, Rega hasn't lost its touch
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



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Thorens TD 158 £295

With one of the best names in the biz, good things are expected from this fully automatic, entry-level Thorens

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Turntable
- ORIGIN**
Germany
- TYPE**
Belt drive
- WEIGHT**
4.5kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
440 x 120 x 360mm
- FEATURES**
- 33 and 45rpm
 - Electronic motor control
 - Acrylic dustcover
 - Dual DN 251SE MM supplied
- DISTRIBUTOR**
UKD
- TELEPHONE**
01753 652669
- WEBSITE**
ukd.co.uk

Described rather quaintly as, “a complete and comfortable record player”, there’s no hiding who this entry-level Thorens is aimed at – it’s a simple, fully automatic, ‘plug and play’ device without any other frills or fripperies. Unlike the Pro-Ject, there’s no need to get down and dirty with the set-up; allen keys are not required. Just about the most technical thing you’re required to do is to pull off the stylus guard, unwind the little piece of wire clamping the arm to its rest and put the dustcover on. If you can’t handle that little lot, then you’d best run back into the arms of your CD player!

The deck has flying leads coming out of the back that go to the amplifier phono input, and there’s a small power socket into which the supplied ‘wall wart’ power supply plugs. The arm comes preset at the correct tracking weight for the supplied Dual DN 251S cartridge, which gives a clue as to the possible origin of the deck, as it rather looks like a budget Dual. An electronically controlled belt drive design, it feels

insubstantial and the arm plastic; the Thorens TP 17 tonearm doesn’t do the package any favours and is rudimentary, without even offering adjustable anti-skate. Still, despite feeling like it’s spent too much time at Weight Watchers, the deck itself works slickly – you’d hardly call it special, but there’s nothing untoward; the motor isn’t especially noisy and the damped cueing works effectively, as does the end-of-side auto-stop.

Sound quality

In the flesh, the TD-158 feels so cheap that you’d barely call it hi-fi. Nor does it measure terribly well either, which rather has me expecting it to perform poorly – but it doesn’t. It is very obviously built down to a price, but still it seems to be quite effective, taken in isolation. Across a raft of criteria, the Thorens is sub-par, yet still the end result is higher than the sum of the parts, and it musters a respectably listenable performance.

Despite its rather woolly, opaque sound, it proves reasonably pleasant to hear. Once you’ve accepted that the deck is very limited at the frequency extremes, with almost nothing in the way of bass and a vanishing high treble, then the midband is enjoyably musical. This is doubtless aided by the Ortofon-sourced Dual cartridge which has a famously smooth and relaxed sound, meaning it’s able to excuse a multitude of sins that the turntable itself commits.

The Kraftwerk track is imprecise and leaves the listener in the dark about what is really going on in the mix, yet it still sounds natural in a way that budget digital doesn’t.

The Debussy piece shows the deck’s ability to find the melody in the music, but still imaging is weak, depth perspective poor and there is



ON TEST

The only auto-changer in our group does trade some performance for convenience. Rumble is below average at -64.7dB (DIN-B weighted) measured through the spindle, but the lightweight mat still provides sufficient isolation for this to improve to -67.1dB when measured through the LP groove. As supplied, the TD 158’s speed accuracy is -0.2% slow but this will not be audible especially in the light of its relatively poor drift and wow spread over ±20Hz and amounting to a peak figure of 0.18%.

The tonearm counterweight and sidethrust are fixed for the supplied Ortofon MM pickup and its effective mass suitably low to accommodate the high compliance cartridge. The bearings are not especially robust and the lightweight arm tube has its first bending mode below 100Hz with other resonances between 320-410Hz in the lower midrange. Not Thorens’ finest. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Absolute speed error at 33.3rpm

-10

Peak Wow & Flutter

-40

Rumble (through groove)

-20

Rumble (through bearing)

-30

Tonearm resonances

-20

KEY: ■ Group average
■ % below average ■ % above average

precious little sense of air or space to the recording. Despite the poor wow and flutter measurements, its speed stability isn’t particularly intrusive – it just gives a fluffy quality to the sound. It is most obviously in distress with the REM track; the heavy, energetic rock taxes it too much and things descend into a dirge, showing splashy treble, poor midband focus and weak bass. Treble is far too indistinct, but still nicely smooth – thanks in no small part to a wise choice of cartridge. Overall then, this turntable is fine for the simplest of vinyl spinning tasks and commendably easy to set up, but serious hi-fi fans really should look elsewhere.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

LIKE: Slick operation; smooth, soft sound; good cartridge, easy to set up

DISLIKE: Plastic tonearm; sound lacks detail and insight

WE SAY: Pleasing little automatic deck, if that’s all you need

OVERALL

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

★★★★☆

Group test verdict

The verdicts are all in and disc jockey **David Price** has the unenviable job of ranking this month's stunning vinyl spinner sextet...

THE LENCO L-3807 is modestly competent, spinning up to speed quickly and giving reasonable stability. Trouble is, the tonearm isn't worthy of the name 'hi-fi'; it's too plasticky and the bearing tolerances are big enough to drive a truck through. The result is a lacklustre sound – a shame for a great name.

Thorens' TD-158 is slick to use, but again the arm lets it down, seeming closer to the sort of thing fitted to a seventies music centre than a hi-fi deck. Despite this, it sounds better than expected and has a decent bundled cartridge, so it's not all bad.

In fourth place is the Edwards Audio Apprentice TT mk2, which in some respects is the best sounding here, with a deep soundstage and smooth tonality, but there are real speed stability issues. The belt feels a bit too tight, and this throws too much noise into the system, giving an annoying hum and flutter.

Audio Technica's AT-LP1240-USB is a mixed bag. It shows that spending an extra £200 or so buys a better finished product. It's got a very handy USB output, which if not exactly transcription-standard is good for general use. Sonically it's not as good

as its price suggests; it is punchy but lacks real finesse.

The Pro-Ject RPM 1.3 Genie is a quite brilliant package, with few weaknesses and a fine bundled moving magnet cartridge. The sound is spacious, warm and pacy with plenty of detail and energy. The major problem is that it's a bit fiddly to set-up if you're not used to turntables. If you are, then it's no problem and the deck also has more adjustments than most others here, making it great for tweaking. A great value deck, that doesn't quite get the top spot.



WINNER

The sleek looking Rega RP1 wins as it's the most complete package; nothing is particularly outstanding and it feels a little flimsy, yet it all works seamlessly well together. With a smooth, musical and engaging sound, it's a great path towards analogue addiction.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Make/model	Audio Technica AT-LP1240-USB	Edwards Audio Apprentice TT mk2	Lenco L-3807	Pro-Ject RPM 1.3 Genie	Rega RP1	Thorens TD-158
Price	£500	£300	£250	£235	£230	£295
Sound	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Key features	Snazzy build, decent sound and useful facilities make this a great all-round turntable package	Smooth sound, but some issues make this an excellent budget deck struggling to get out	An attractively styled and decently priced budget deck that represents fair value for money	An excellent starter turntable with satisfyingly expansive, smooth sound and fine build	Great all-round starter turntable package that shows Rega hasn't lost its magic touch	A rather mediocre tonearm spoils what's otherwise a pleasing little automatic deck

Key features	Audio Technica AT-LP1240-USB	Edwards Audio Apprentice TT mk2	Lenco L-3807	Pro-Ject RPM 1.3 Genie	Rega RP1	Thorens TD-158
Cartridge	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
USB	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
78rpm	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Belt drive	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Direct drive	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No

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RECORD CLEANER: Goldring Super Exstatic £18

If you like to keep your records spruce, you'll have to contend with dust, much of which is aggravated by static. This is a great remedy, cleaning discs without harming them and reducing their static charge. It's a high-quality product that lasts decades, well worth the money.

CARTRIDGE: Ortofon 2M Red £80

Several decks come with quality cartridges, but the Lenco and Audio Technica will need a decent pickup such as this. The 2M Red has a crisp and open sound, and its decent elliptical stylus profile means that it won't recut your records as you play them, and needle replacement is affordable, too.



PHONO STAGE: Pro-Ject Phono Box MM £50

This wee Pro-Ject phono preamplifier does what it says on the tin, giving a clean, open and musical sound. True, you could get more detail and smoothness elsewhere, but you'd have to spend hundreds more, so it's worth investigating this if your amp doesn't have an MM input.





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SOUND & VISION

Mini **magic**

Cyrus is celebrating 30 years of building half width hi-fi components in its own very unique way and, as **Ed Selley** discovers, the company still has some bold ideas

Huntingdon in Cambridgeshire is a nucleus of British hi-fi brands with a number of major names operating from its surroundings or hailing from there originally. The thinking goes that this is down to graduates from Cambridge deciding to make hi-fi their chosen industry and staying in the surrounding area to realise them. One of these companies is Cyrus which invited *Hi-Fi Choice* along to visit its factory and development facility.

Cyrus is one of the younger companies operating in the area, but young is a relative term in this industry and it is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Their history has been more varied than some of the

other brands and has seen Cyrus owned or operating in partnership with many brands over the years. Originally the electronics wing of Mission, it was part of the expansion of this organisation to become the larger Verity Group. Verity was an altogether more diverse operation than a straight hi-fi company and as it pursued engineering projects that had wider applications than home audio (perhaps the best known of these was the NXT sound panel system that originally started life as a noise cancelling bulkhead in helicopters that was intended to try and delay the onset of fatigue in the pilots). As the focus on these technologies increased, many of the audio brands in the group were sold off. Cyrus was the last to be sold and as a newly independent concern it moved to the current premises under the control of Peter Bartlett and Simon Freethy.

Peter was initially the Chief Executive of the company but has assumed the role of head of engineering and product development while Simon who was initially the finance officer (a role that underplays the experience and genuine enthusiasm he has for Cyrus and the wider world of audio) has assumed overall control. The company that they head up is in many ways outwardly conventional but goes about development and manufacture of their components in a way that is subtly different to a number of other brands.

Spot the difference

The first is that for a company that manufactures its equipment onsite, the building that Cyrus occupies is surprisingly compact – in fact like the electronics it produces, it is relatively narrow but deep. Furthermore, the number of staff employed is surprisingly low at just 35. This is down to a decision that Cyrus has taken in terms of offering the most bang for your buck.

Peter feels that many smaller manufacturing concerns in the UK run into problems when they try and make use of the latest technologies in both the manufacturing processes and specific to the industry. All too often they spend an unhealthy percentage of their total assets on a piece of machinery that will need to be run until worn smooth to ever justify the investment. To this end Cyrus has taken the decision to use as much innovative technology as possible, but rather than desperately trying to invest in these technologies, components that Cyrus wants to have assembled using technology it couldn't justify possessing in-house is handled by a

group of subcontractors. These subcontracted components are then collated for final assembly at Cyrus HQ.

This approach gives Cyrus impressive flexibility and Peter has developed a relationship with the contractors that he feels is as efficient as trying to make use of more exotic processes in-house. Liaising with these contractors across the UK is relatively simple and given that other clients include the defence and medical industries, component quality and design flexibility more than meet the requirements Cyrus has of them.

The most distant of these contractors is ironically responsible for the most defining aspect of Cyrus components. The half-width aluminium die cast chassis that all Cyrus components are built in comes from a supplier in Scandinavia. The use of the same basic chassis for every component gives Cyrus useful economies of scale and a template that all components are designed around. When I asked Peter if he ever felt that the half width chassis was a hindrance to design he responded that it is such a fixed reference point for the engineers that there is very little they can't attempt within it.

This construction process means that the manufacturing floor of the Cyrus is a point where the different components from their points of origin are assembled. When I visited, Peter was experimenting with a different production process where instead of a line method where each employee performs a single assembly process, they instead oversee

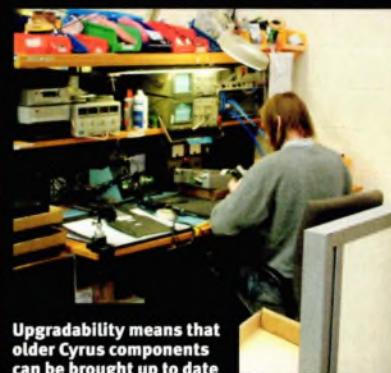


Cyrus is currently experimenting with employees building complete units rather than working on a line

NEW TRICKS

Tucked behind the production line is the service department. As well as having the ability to repair virtually anything from the Cyrus back catalogue, it also performs a series of upgrades on Cyrus products. These upgrades mean older units can be brought up to the latest spec by their original buyers or by new owners who have bought secondhand.

The huge advantage of the Cyrus chassis is the basic structure doesn't change; only items like the rear panels. This keeps resale values impressively strong and means that equipment that might otherwise be in danger of becoming obsolete is only a process away from becoming the latest version. This upgradability is very important to Cyrus and engenders considerable customer loyalty. What is even more impressive is that Cyrus offers refurbishment of products that date back to the beginning of its 30 year history. A Cyrus 1 given the refurbishment treatment is something that Peter feels is able to offer exceptional performance for the total outlay that it might cost you.



Upgradability means that older Cyrus components can be brought up to date



No one understands Cyrus better than its technical director, Peter Bartlett

the construction of a complete device. The thinking is that the person has more invested in the component they are building that way.

This is part of a pursuit of component reliability that Peter and Cyrus as a whole pursue with an almost evangelical zeal. At the end of the production line, two testing stations are used to put every component through a fully computerised functionality and stability test. The test is fully automated and makes use of the MC Bus and RS232 connections to put every component through exactly the same process without variation or error. Behind this is a row of racking where soak

testing is performed. When you also consider that completed boards and components from external contractors are tested before they arrive at Cyrus, you realise how seriously the company is pursuing reliability. These extended bench tests are hugely impressive and it is interesting to see the combination

The good news is that these design decisions are not at the expense of performance

of human assembly and mechanical testing combined as efficiently as they are here.

This attention to detail continues to the packaging. The common chassis allows for common packaging and anyone who has ever unboxed a Cyrus unit will be familiar with the exceptionally robust expanded foam holders that the company has developed for maximum protection. The use of an inner and outer carton means that the box you receive as a customer should be completely free of transit stickers as well as any marks or scratches.

This rigorous approach to product design and construction leaves Cyrus quietly confident about the future. The company has always taken a distinctive path in terms of component design and this approach looks to be reaping rewards in the increasingly fragmented market. Cyrus went to the effort of developing its own CD servo a few years ago and this means that

it has complete control over it. Although the long term trend for CD sales is downwards, as many manufacturers lose their suppliers, Cyrus will be able to offer customers sticking with the silver disc a solution when others have fallen by the wayside.

Life beyond CD

At the same time, the company isn't pinning its hopes on being the sole supplier of a fringe technology. The last few years have seen Cyrus move to an all-digital portfolio and CD is only part of this. Peter and Simon both feel strongly that it isn't for them to decide how a customer serves a digital file to their equipment so flexibility has become a watchword for product design. As well as the recently updated range of Universal Plug and Play streamers, digital inputs are now available on integrated amplifiers and the preamps. Indeed the boundary between what Cyrus considers a preamp and a DAC is rather blurred.

With this in mind, I asked if the logical casualty of this approach was the analogue inputs and whether Cyrus had considered removing them and switching to products that only featured digital inputs. Peter revealed that this has been considered, but as it stands, it is seen as a step further than is currently required. With Cyrus working hard to expand its sales abroad and many countries being less enthusiastic about certain digital technologies than the UK, they are being kept on products for the foreseeable future. The decision to retain the analogue connections means that



The packaging is produced inhouse as part of the company's drive to minimise product damage



the more anachronistic among us can still use our turntables with Cyrus equipment.

This is not to say that the company's outlook is conservative. One thing that has become clear over the last few years and that was confirmed while I visited is that Cyrus has moved from simply making conventional components that were smaller than the competition to developing products that are intended to combine into systems that are subtly different to other companies. By building preamp functionality into DAC's and streamers as well as conventional preamps, Cyrus is using its small form factor to its advantage. Combining these integral preamp units with the power amps from the range creates extremely compact and capable systems that pack enormous functionality into a small amount of space. Cyrus will quite happily sell you a preamp but equally, you can now create more streamlined systems that don't require them. My last experience of this with a *Beautiful System* comprising a Stream XP and a pair of the X300 monos (HFC357) was an impressive demonstration of a system with



Components are tested before final assembly as well as after

almost unlimited headroom that occupied a space barely larger than a single component from some of Cyrus' competitors.

The good news is that these design decisions are not being bought at the expense of performance. Some time spent in the company of the Cyrus Anniversary system (see boxout) demonstrated that the sonic ability that Peter and his team is extracting from the latest crop of designs is absolutely top notch

Cyrus exudes a calm confidence that suggests it has much more to deliver

and the performance of Cyrus components in for reviews suggests that greater flexibility is not coming at the expense of any compromise in performance. The decision by other manufacturers to start looking at smaller form factors has also helped Cyrus equipment seem more 'normal' in appearance while at the same time ensuring that the experience they have in making the best use of the smaller spaces available keeps them competitive.

So what does the future hold? Peter was somewhat guarded about what the company is up to and the engineering floor was off limits during the visit but there were enough prototypes sat in Peter's office to suggest that the company is extremely busy at the moment. The other encouraging indicator for existing customers is that the evolution of the components to become the 30th Anniversary system has thrown up a variety of interesting feedback that could be used in future products and potentially find their way into upgrades available to existing customers (see boxout). The company exudes a calm confidence that suggests that the famous 'singing shoebox' has much more to deliver yet. As an industry, we still don't know exactly what sort of form, post CD systems will take but Cyrus has a plan that puts it in a strong position to offer the equipment that future customers need ●

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

The visit finished up with some time in the company of the Anniversary System. A limited number of these £17,000 systems will be built and they will only be sold as complete sets. The system is comprised of the top line Cyrus components but as well as the unique (and absolutely stunning) finish, the components that make up this system have all been carefully reviewed by Peter and the team to see what performance improvements can be made from them. These changes have taken some interesting forms. While the DAC XP has been upgraded by fitting state of the art 32-bit chipsets, the Stream X2 UPnP streamer saw a surprising improvement in performance thanks to improved mass in the chassis.

The result of these detailed improvements is a system that manages to feel worth every pound of the considerable asking price. Using the Stream X2 into the DAC XP + to stream a variety of material via the new Cadence app (reviewed, page 113) was a deeply impressive experience. Partnered with a pair of Vienna Acoustics KISS speakers, the Anniversary system has traits I recognise from the time I spent with the Stream XP and Mono X300, but the overall effect is slightly more natural and effortless. Nothing I chose from the wide variety of material on the server seemed to faze it and the resulting performance is enthralling even when the relatively lofty price point of this system is taken into account.

Switching to CD showed that the Anniversary system is equally happy with physical media. The CD XT SE2 transport has been the recipient of new power filtering over the stock model and it achieves the single most important aim of any CD transport - complete imperceptibility. The performance with redbook CD and streamed CD quality media is absolutely consistent and this bodes particularly well for any other digital source you might connect to the system.

Almost as important as the performance is the physical appearance of the system as a whole. The deep gloss finish is something you really have to see in the flesh to appreciate and the effect of the components on the ever appealing Hark Rack is something that has a presence that is rarely found on systems even at this asking price. Select owners are going to have an object that is immensely desirable and offers sound quality that should keep them happy for years to come.



Box Design
by Pro-Ject



DAC Box DS

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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- 24bit/192kHz asynchronous USB streaming
- Display readout shows incoming bit depth
- 8 times oversampling design
- 2 selectable filter settings
- Premium Components

Box Design

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Every Box Design product combines premium build-quality and exceptional sound with a small size and an attractive price...

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Trés bien!

Combining musicality with a delicate sound seems to be a particular strength of French designers as **Malcolm Steward** discovers

Two French brothers, Stéphane and Emmanuel Dubreuil, founded Atoll Electronique in 1997 to produce true high-end audio for cash-conscious audiophiles. It might be more semantically correct to say the brothers' aim was to deliver high-end performance at a price that is more mainstream than high end. The five-input IN100SE integrated amplifier and CD100SE CD player certainly seem to fit that bill.

There is nothing especially high end about the appearance of the units. Both have a rather simplistic, utilitarian feel and aesthetic: there is no evidence of the boutique chic

touches that single out the products of some high-end manufacturers. For instance, the elements with which users interface – the amplifier switching and motorised Alps volume control, and the CD player transport drawer – are quite mundane. The feel of these units is decidedly down to earth, not that there is anything wrong with that: it has proved a great success for NAD, after all.

The IN100SE (Second Edition) integrated amplifier delivers 100W per channel into 8ohm speakers and 140W into 4ohm loads through a MOSFET output stage, which should capably power the sort of loudspeakers that most 'budget'

audiophiles will use – ie not ridiculously demanding models. The unit comes with a swish-looking remote control, as does the CD player.

The CD100SE is housed in an identically sized and equally unspectacular enclosure to that of the IN100SE amplifier and also features a thick aluminium fascia, which unfortunately serves to emphasise how lightweight and flimsy the plastic disc loader appears. The internal build quality of both units seems very tidy although the wiring of the amplifier is a little economical.

Another inch or two of cable would not have broken the bank. Nor should it affect the performance adversely. One feature that I wasn't expecting to find was the digital and USB inputs on the rear, affording access to the onboard Burr Brown PCM1796 24-bit/96k up-sampling DAC. You need an optional internal card (£129) to facilitate this feature, which could be useful for someone starting out in computer audio and keen to save purchasing a DAC when their CD100SE already has a capable and respectable one to offer. To switch DAC inputs, you simply put the player

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Atoll CD100SE/
IN100SE

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
CD player/
integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
7kg/10kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 90 x 280mm/
440 x 90 x 270mm

FEATURES
• Power: 100WPC
into 8ohms,
140WPC into 4ohms
• 3 digital external
inputs to DAC
• 5 line-level inputs
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output of a Logitech Squeezebox Touch feeding a Naim DAC-V1 and running off my music network.

I have high expectations for these Atoll components, having recently enjoyed the exquisite sounding, French-designed but Chinese-built YBA Design models. The performance of the IN100SE amplifier is a delight with its illuminating power emerging on all manner of music, especially its facility for uncovering important subtleties hiding at the back of mixes.

For the first couple of days the combination seems bass-shy and over-eager in the mid and treble bands. These undesirable characteristics thankfully diminish as the electronics warm through, however: I left them powered up and playing in a spare room for about a week before undertaking any critical listening.

Listening to the wonderful Nashville-recorded, minimalist Lambchop album *Is A Woman*, the bass seems a little wayward as though the amplifier is failing in the grip department in the lower frequencies. All else, though, seems fine, and Kurt Wagner's voice is as expressive as ever. Bass occasionally sounds rather full and overblown and the music lacks a degree of rhythmic urgency: even with a Naim component, noted for its temporal acuity and get-up-and-go, up front. The music sounds a little pedestrian rather than spirited.

John McLaughlin's *Devotion* fares better with all its rhythmic drive staying intact. This may have been due to the astringent leading edges of McLaughlin's guitar pushing the beat. The same is true of Joseph Arthur's *Travel As Equals* with its insistent acoustic guitar and heavy bass drum strikes imparting relentless drive.

Britten's *War Requiem* shows that the amplifier handles the classical repertoire respectfully and can provide a vivid soundstage and cope admirably with choral music,

rendering voices dramatically and with technical aplomb. Instruments sound distinctly natural as do dynamics and dynamic contrast, both of which show appropriate scale.

Were I forced to choose, I think I would prefer to use the IN100SE mostly for classical and acoustic music even though it fares very successfully with Alt. Country, particularly relishing Steve Earle's album, *Copperhead Road*, where it is as rhythmically assertive as one could wish and demonstrates impeccable instrumental separation and fitting musical coherence. In fact the

A delight with its illuminating power emerging on all manner of music

IN100SE is thoroughly entertaining on this album and its presentation provides great fun.

Using the CD100SE CD player playing through its analogue output, the Vivid Curve CD *Live at Edgefield* offers a mid-band and high frequency that are a lot clearer than the lower frequencies where the all-important didgeridoo resides. Vocal, guitar and percussion fare very well, being rendered very naturally and realistically. Rhythmically, things are also good: the music has a lively spring in its step.

I'm not so sure about The Dust Junkys' *Done and Dusted*, though. The music's aggression seems to exacerbate a tonal mid-forwardness and lend songs a belligerent edge. The player sounds far better balanced outputting a digital signal through the exceptional Naim DAC-V1: the musical aggression remains, but the vicious tonality abates with the 'sting' replaced by more natural leading edge attack and vivid dynamics. ▶

into standby and then select the required input using the buttons (PREV and NEXT) beneath the small panel to the right of the drawer.

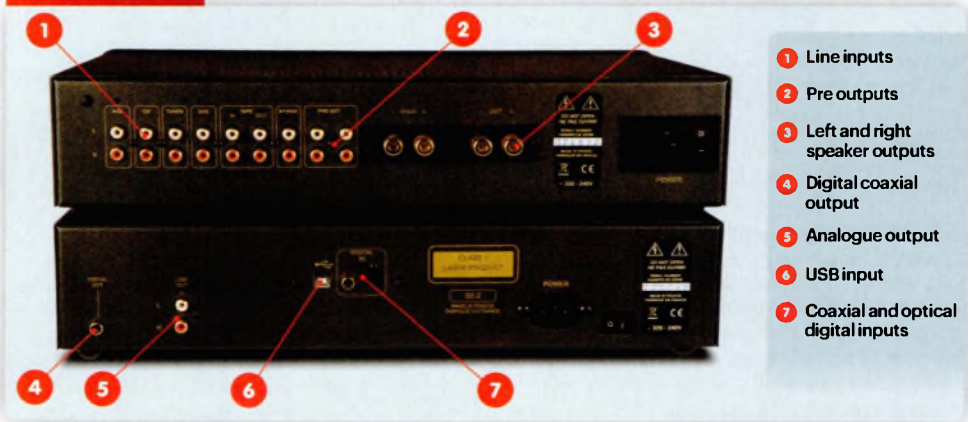
Both units include substantial power supplies. The IN100SE has a dual-mono power supply even though the amplifier technically is not a dual mono design. The manufacturer states "Dual mono design: two 330VA transformers and 40000uF capacitors in the PSU provides much enhanced stereo imaging and drastically reduced intermodulation distortion." The CD player has discrete transformers for its analogue and digital halves.

Sound Quality

To audition the Atoll combination I'm using a pair of effortlessly musical, £1,200 Neat Petite SX loudspeakers on Epos ST15 stands wired with Atlas Mavros speaker cables. Both the CD player and amplifier are supported by individual Quadraspire Sunoko Vent tables and the interconnects between them are Atlas Equator IIIs. Naturally, I'll be using other line-level inputs as well as the CD connection to test the IN100SE, predominantly the USB

The CD100SE and IN100SE: high-end audio for the more cash-conscious audiophile

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Line inputs
- 2 Pre outputs
- 3 Left and right speaker outputs
- 4 Digital coaxial output
- 5 Analogue output
- 6 USB input
- 7 Coaxial and optical digital inputs

Q&A

David Benson

Product development manager



MS: What other Atoll kit should we be getting excited about?

DB: Atoll Electronic produces a new streamer model, the hi-res ST-200. Retailing at £1,795 it provides all the facilities expected from a modern streamer along with genuine 'gapless' capability for the uninterrupted playback of consecutive audio tracks. (Think classical and *Dark Side Of The Moon*).

Offering both wi-fi and RJ45 Ethernet connectivity it provides access to internet radio through the VTuner system, giving users the choice of around 15,000 stations. It also allows any files on the user's network to be played.

Which audio formats does the ST-200 support?

The formats it reads include: FLAC and WAV at up to 176.4kHz and 192kHz/24-bits, ALAC, AIFF and MP3. It displays all the metadata that is available with the files - including cover art - through its 3.5in QVGA TFT front-panel screen.

And what about connectivity?

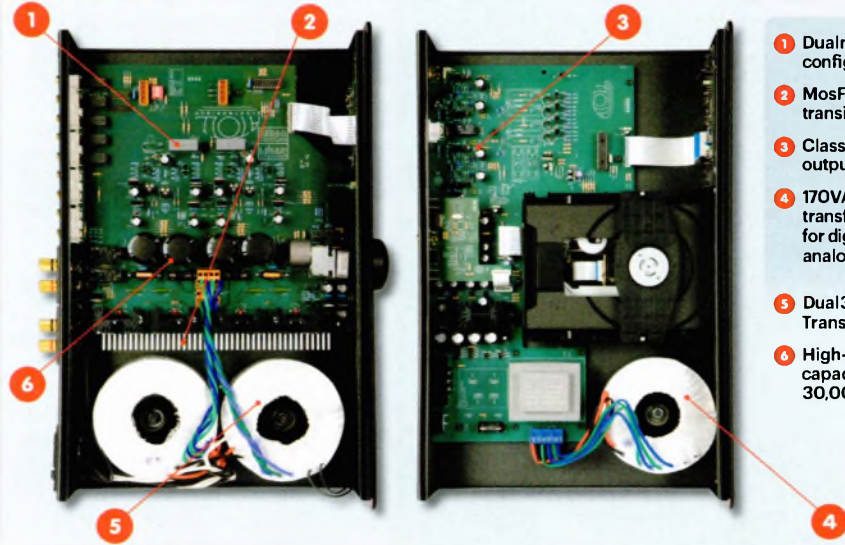
It features four digital inputs - USB (A) at 24/192kHz and USB (B) 24/96kHz, alongside coaxial and optical SPDIF reaching 24/192kHz into a Burr Brown PCM1792 converter, along with a pair of analogue connections. Outputs include analogue RCA, digital coaxial and optical, and a headphone connection on the fascia panel.

Has the ST-200 been designed with any other Atoll products in mind?

The ST-200, naturally, provides aesthetic matching for the rest of the Atoll reference products and is available in similarly proportioned and fashioned case-work with a heavy Aluminium fascia in both black and silver finishes.

The unit also features discrete, audiophile components, such as MKT capacitors, providing symmetrical Class A output stages, along with power transformers specifically dedicated to the audio electronics. It is supplied with a remote control handset, but is also operable through a free, downloadable Apple or Android App.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Dualmono configuration
- 2 MosFet output transistors
- 3 Class A output stages
- 4 170VA +15VA transformers for digital and analogue circuits
- 5 Dual330VA Transformers
- 6 High-end capacitance 30,000uF

In fact the CD100SE acting as a digital transport cleans up the whole picture, especially the bass playing through the new Naim DAC-V1, which suggests the onboard DAC - which is open for use by other sources (through coaxial, optical and USB connections) - isn't exceptional nor outstandingly transparent.

Instrumentation is far better described - with much more detailed information - through the DAC-V1: for instance, it is easier to hear the didgeridoo-player intoning "Timothy Leary" through his instrument on the track *Legend Cf The Mind*, ingeniously managing to modulate the droning bass accompaniment

The sound has vitality and is engagingly sprightly. It's inviting and encourages the listener to continue enjoying the music. It is also excellent at revealing tonal colour and texture: especially on rich acoustic instruments such as the guitar and didgeridoo. The sound is musical, wonderfully descriptive and brilliantly gradated in terms of dynamics. The timing also seems finely judged - probably thanks to the guitar's assertive leading edges and the rest of the instrument's well-defined note shape. Vocals, too, are particularly expressive and impassioned, and also explicitly rendered.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this combination is truly competitive at its just sub-£2,000 price. It competes, both as a provider of an excellent stereo performance and as a conveyor of music: remember that each is a very different quality and can be mutually exclusive. The combination works perfectly fine,

providing convincing portrayals of music with the Neat Petites but if you are looking for a more emphatic stereo performance I would consider speakers designed for free-space operation. Given the power delivery and transparency of the IN100SE you should have no problem finding something suitable around £1,000 ●



There is, I feel, a remarkable similarity in the approach and sound of this Atoll combination and that of the YBA Design range. Both are French, although the YBA Design series is built in China. Both feature an enormously detailed and transparent presentation along with the musical qualities we British find so appealing. If you prefer to stay with British design, I would suggest comparing the 100SE models with the Naim 5i series and Roksan Kandy equivalents. Each of these marques has an open, informative sound, but also an engaging musicality that appeals to the musically inclined British ear.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - IN100SE

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** A strikingly powerful and agile sound that is extremely open and transparent
- DISLIKE:** Needs careful matching with the loudspeakers.
- WESAY:** Nicely built with a revealing sound that is strong on transparency

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - CD100SE

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Like the amp, sound is transparent and vividly open
- DISLIKE:** Its DAC is shareable and okay but it is not the best
- WESAY:** An ideal match to the amp; best as a transport to a DAC with complementary voicing

OVERALL



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Cool Concepts

Q Acoustics' new Concept 20 takes an already good small standmount speaker and makes it great, reckons **David Price**

Q Acoustics is on a mission. Not content with making fine starter speakers, the company is now looking to expand its purview upwards to the middle-market. But rather than doing clean-sheet designs with no shared parts, its new Concept series takes the raw ingredients of the current 2000i series and builds them better. That's the thinking behind this new Concept 20, and it's either risky or clever depending on how you look at it. Competition is a lot tougher at £350 than at the £165 price point of the 2020i – upon which this is based – so it's going to have to be lot better. But if it is, it's a very cost-effective way of getting the extra performance.

They bounce along, throwing out detail and energy, making them fun to listen to

The brand has highly respected people doing the design and voicing. Step forward Herr Karl-Heinz Fink, German speaker boffin extraordinaire. Last year, Karl-Heinz locked himself away in his laboratory, alongside Steve Reichert from Armour Home Electronics (Q Acoustics' parent company), and duly re-engineered the 2020i. The idea was to make the same thing without any of the compromises necessary in a £165 speaker. After much twiddling of oscilloscopes and syringing of ears, they found the cabinet was the weak point – and so a new one was born.

The 2020 woodwork wasn't bad, but no box can ever be good enough, so laser spectrometry was used to come up with a more advanced, lower resonance design. It's quite an innovative design, as basically it's a box within a box, separated by a resonance cancelling gel glue

between the inner and outer structures, both of which are 10mm thick. This magic goo converts vibration into heat, and wool felt is used in the braced inner chamber. The claim is that this means a drop of 6dB in the radiated power through the box across the midband, and 10dB at high and low frequencies. The drive units remain unchanged, aside from the woofer having a slightly different material mix in the cone. Steve Reichert told me that Herr Fink insisted that the existing 25mm soft polyester dome tweeter and 125mm treated paper mid/bass unit were more than up to the job; it was the less-than-ideal way they were mounted on the 2020i that stopped their ability from shining through. But when he heard them in the new cabinet, he was extremely impressed.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics
Concept 20

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
5.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
260 x 280 x 170mm

FEATURES
• 25mm soft dome
tweeter
• 125mm mid/
bass driver
• Quoted amplifier
power 25-75W

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home
Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

Basically the Concept 20s are a box inside a box separated by a resonance cancelling gel



The result is a compact, but weighty box, with the drive units mounted in a conventional reflex-loaded way, crossing over at 2.9kHz – the crossover is heavily modified due to the quieter cabinet. The company claims it has a sensitivity of 88dB/1W/1m, which isn't earth shattering, but certainly not poor for the small box that it is. A nominal impedance of 6ohms is quoted, so it's not too hard a load and amplifiers of around 25W minimum should be able to get it to produce more than a squeak. I'm trying it with the excellent 60W Creek Evolution 50A.

Along with a higher standard of finish to the cabinets, Q Acoustics has designed a matching speaker stand. It shares the 'Gelcore' construction of the Concept 20, and is very sturdy and well made. It's £199 for the pair, which isn't everyone's idea of value for money, but they are an excellent aesthetic and sonic match.

To bung or not

The first question facing any new Q Acoustics Concept 20 owner is "to bung or not to bung?", by which I mean you've got to see whether they sound better with or without their supplied foam cylinders. They impede the flow of air through the reflex port, and take the lower midband/upper bass down a notch or two – but also make the sound a little less easy and more constrained. Basically, there's no right answer here, aside from suck it and see; I find the sound best with the bungs out and the speakers about 30cm from the rear walls.

This done, get ready for a prodigious leap in quality over the 2020is. These boxes sound similar in the sense of belonging to the same family, but they're far more polished, punchy and poised. Herbie Hancock's *Future Shock* shows a highly animated performance, the speakers really get into the groove of the song and pound it out at you. Even on the overmodulated guitar solo they don't descend into harshness. Instead, they bounce along, throwing out loads of detail and energy, making them real fun to listen to. Bass proves nicely extended considering their size, too.

Tonally, they're certainly on the warm side, even with the bungs in. Indeed, they're the most congenial sounding small speaker I've heard for a long time. By this I mean you find yourself immersed in the middle of a vast stereo soundstage with no rough edges and a big, fat bass that just seems to pick out the bass drum in the mix to give things that little extra punch. Even with the relatively

Q&A

Karl Heinz Fink

Q Acoustics design engineer



DP: Why is the new Concept 20 based closely on the 2020?

KHF: Like a 'concept car' it started life as an experiment to see what sonic improvements could be achieved and how much that would cost. Had we started from a blank sheet of paper, the project would have taken much longer, cost a lot more and also we would not have had a clear 'before and after' result for us to judge the viability of future designs.

What is special about the cabinet?

It uses a gel material, which is a kind of glue that never gets hard – it takes a good week before the cabinet is stiff enough for shipping. It has extremely high internal loss. The Gelcore is the key in the production, but we are using a more scientific way to design the cabinets. Only the combination of the panels, the Gelcore and the braces at the right position gives the best performance.

What materials are used in the tweeter dome and woofer cone?

The dome uses a Japanese Polyester material with additional coating and the woofer is made from paper with a few extra ingredients to get the sound character we wanted. Paper is a wonderful material for cones. It sounds good, is available in very many versions and can be changed easily to fit the sound signature you are looking for.

How would you describe the sound of the Concept 20?

Exceptionally open and accurate. In fact we are confident it can legitimately be said to deliver the performance of a 'high end' loudspeaker, but at a modest price.

What sort of customer would you say the speaker is aimed at?

Any listener who wants to give a little time to themselves so they can really enjoy their music. If they do choose the Concept 20, because it is a genuine high end product it will deliver greater insight, detail and sheer musical enjoyment than anyone thought would be possible at this price level.

IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm coated soft dome tweeter
- 2 Optional port bungs are included
- 3 Rigid aluminium terminal plate
- 4 Carbon fibre/ceramic coated paper cone 125mm bass/mid driver

neutral Naim DAC-V1/NAP 100 DAC/preamp and power amp combo driving them, The Police's *Message in a Bottle* (at 24/88 via Audirvana) is as fruity as ripe Spanish tomato. Bass isn't the tightest I've heard – you'll get tauter from Monitor Audio's RX1 for example – instead the Concept 20 makes a direct line for the song's groove and pushes it along like it's in a hurry to get home. It is great fun to hear Stewart Copeland's manic stickwork delivered so meaningfully, and these speakers really catch the dynamic accenting of the song.

It's curious to think that the Concept 20s use the same tweeters as the 2020s; the latter isn't bad but these new speakers are both far lighter and more open sounding up top, and less harsh, too. Hi hat cymbals are beautifully resolved (for a speaker of this price), and The Who's *Pinball Wizard* with its frenetic hacking of hats and rides is great fun. The speakers also bring the snares out brilliantly, and factoring in that wonderfully propulsive bass line, lots of fun is had. It takes Keith Moon's drumming to show that – in the final analysis and at very high levels – the Concept 20s sit on dynamics a touch. This isn't a criticism, as you wouldn't expect anything else at £350, but it comes as a reminder that I'm not listening to a £750 box.

The midband isn't the most clinically neutral either, rather it lends a very pleasant warmth to everything it touches, and is nicely coherent in the way it integrates the two drivers. This makes for an arresting rendition of the Teardrop Explodes' *The Great Dominions*. Mr Cope sounds a touch more nasal than through the RX1, but his voice is still carried in a very lucid and believable way, pushing out far in

front of the plane of the speakers without ever grating. It is also very nicely placed in space; these have really solid imaging. And once again, the Concept 20s really go into the electric guitar playing, signposting how it gives the song rhythm when there are no other pointers aside from the vocal phrasing. Overall then, a really lovely listen.

Conclusion

If you're after high levels of accuracy and analysis, then you're not going to get them from any £350 loudspeaker, and the Q Acoustics Concept 20 doesn't change this. However, on its own terms, it's a great success – being riotously good fun to listen to, romping along to the groove of the music with the energy of a puppy that's just jumped over the garden gate. Better still, it does all this while not committing any cardinal sins – the music never assaults you or wears you down. As such this new speaker is an important addition to the budget speaker market, offering a warmer and more emotive sound than was previously available at the price ●



HOW IT COMPARES

This is a tough segment of the budget speaker market – the Monitor Audio RX1 (£425) and Acoustic Energy 301 (£425) are both clenching their fists, spoiling for a fight. The RX1 is quintessential budget Monitor, which means well balanced, clean and detailed. By comparison the Q sounds fatter, fuller and warmer. It has a more searching and better defined treble and midband, which really comes into its own with classical music. The Q gives more of the 'gist' of the music, less detail, more feeling. The AE has this too – it's very open and crisp and revealing thanks to its metal drive units, and a bit of a hard-nut when it comes to making music at high levels.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Wonderfully energetic, sumptuous, musical sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Not the most forensically revealing at the price

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: A really impressive step-up for Q Acoustics, more of the same please

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL





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Tubular belle

David Price finds Canor's brand new TP134 valve-powered integrated amplifier an effortless yet engaging aural experience

Valve amplifiers are a perennial problem. If they were bad, worthless or just plain evil, then things would be fine as you could ignore them. Trouble is, at their very best tube amps are magnificent and transcendent works of wonder, which leaves you puzzling why anyone ever bothered to go to the effort of inventing the transistor. The other trouble, however, is that they're very rarely at their best! The nub of

the problem is that they're so variable in terms of build quality and sonics – and so speaker-sensitive – that it's impossible to make generalisations about their merits, or lack thereof.

Thanks to their use of output transformers, the breed is invariably big and heavy. This makes them an unattractive manufacturing proposition for most companies, leaving only relatively small specialists to do the business – ones with far less mechanised production

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Canor TP134

ORIGIN
Slovakia

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
22.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 170 x 390mm

FEATURES
• 4 x 12AT7 (ECC81) input valves
• 4 x EL34 power valves
• Quoted power: 2 x 35 RMS into 8ohms
• LED digital volume display

DISTRIBUTOR
Canor

TELEPHONE
01276 501392

WEBSITE
canor-audio.com

processes, and the skills to hand wire large parts of the product. A number have popped up over recent years, most commonly in countries where labour is a little less expensive than it can be here in the UK, basically where they're cost-effective to make. That, of course, has mostly meant China up to now, but we're also seeing little pockets elsewhere too – such as Slovakia where Canor is based.

The TP134 you see here is a serious attempt by a niche manufacturer to produce an affordable, decent sounding design – one which showcases the benefits of the thermionic valve without the pitfalls. It's an EL34 pentode-based integrated amplifier that's said to work in full Class A mode up to about 10W, going on to deliver a quoted 35W per side. Four smaller 12AT7 (ECC81) tubes take care of the input stage driving duties. The company has attempted to refine the build process rather more than many Chinese designs, with custom-milled printed circuitboards claimed to give the sonic purity of wire-to-wire connections, but on a mass production scale.



than a little effort into the user experience. Instead of a fascia full of clumsy, ill fitting knobs and buttons, the TP134 has a single controller, which turns the unit on and off with a long, firm push, selects source sequentially with a short push and also rotates left or right to work as a conventional volume control. This is done in conjunction with an attractive orange LED display showing level in -dB, and a cluster of source LEDs around it. And just to make things even more swish, the amplifier has a soft-start feature; which means that the glass bottles get gently powered up on switch on, during which time a segment of the main display pulses slowly. The overall user experience is really rather nice then, and the sturdy, well-finished casework only improves the mood further.

don't mean it is tonally mid-forward; nowhere on the frequency spectrum could this amplifier ever be accused of such recklessness. Rather, it just seems to draw the listener further into the middle octaves of the music, whereupon he or she encounters a world of wonder. Female vocals seem to have a magical directness and delicacy, snare drums feel like they're being played especially for you and pianos and strings drip with vast swathes of sparkling, honey-sweet harmonics, giving them a gloriously ethereal quality.

It sets up a big, fat, thumping groove with stonking bass and fat snare sound

Above this, ride cymbals ring like bells in the night...

This isn't strictly speaking accurate, of course, yet it induces the same sort of wide-eyed glee in the listener as really being there at a live gig. And suddenly you find yourself attracted to more rarefied musical pleasures, that have hitherto left you cold. Talking Heads' *Naive Melody* provides a great showcase for the subtlety of the Canor. It sets up a big, fat, thumping groove with a stonking bass drum and fat snare sound, and in front of this is a huge playground where the amplifier is able to have selfish fun. It is great at conveying the scratchy rhythm guitar and squelchy analogue synths of Chris Franz and Tina Weymouth, while David Byrne's vocals came over as a kind of deranged Bryan Ferry, giving the track a distinctly haunting, ghostly feel. Here you really appreciate Canor's choice of EL34 output tube; it's an old favourite in guitar amps and not by accident. It has a fulsome and ballsy presentation – compared with many

The sturdy, but stylish fascia is home to a single control knob

Indeed, right through the amplifier we see signs of Canor trying to 'civilise' the breed; everything from locating the valves inside a standard-sized, well-ventilated case (which is a far safer alternative to having the glassware exposed, especially if you have children or pets roaming around the place) to the fitment of a relay attenuator rather than a bog-standard volume pot (giving 1dB increments and 63dB minimum attenuation, with just 0.05dB channel matching error). The power supply has had some thought put into it too, with primary and secondary windings separated by double-shielded grounded copper foil to lower noise. The tube anode voltage is filtered by high-value capacitors, and additional tube shielding is used inside to give a claimed 6dB improvement in crosstalk. The output transformers have several bifilar windings lined up in sections to maximise power bandwidth, and in the signal path Canor uses only high-quality Mundorf polypropylene capacitors.

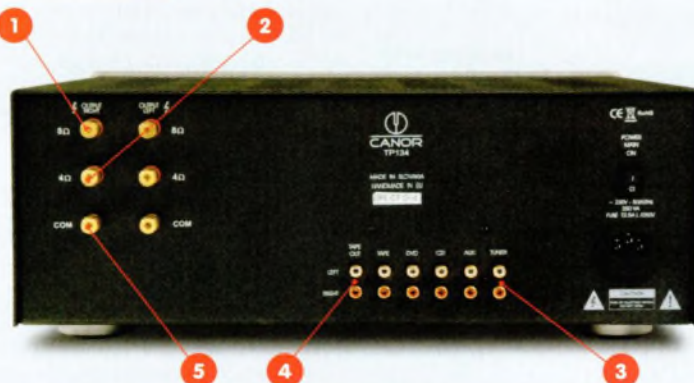
Just as Canor has fought hard to modernise things from a construction point of view, it has also put more

Sound quality

Since the EL34 first surfaced in the early fifties, it has proved a popular power valve – first in famous hi-fi products like Leak's TL25 and Stereo 60, and more recently in a wide range of modern guitar amps. So the warm, expansive sound of the TP134 is easily recognisable, although for better and for worse this Canor sounds like no contemporary solid-state design – or anywhere near it! It serves up a larger-than-life sound with a thick, crunchy bass and a full, well-upholstered midband that's rich and bold, plus a sugary but not terribly spacious treble. In short, this whole amplifier is like one gigantic effects unit (which is, of course, why axe-wielding rockers love their EL34 guitar amps), but I mean this in a very positive sense.

For example, cue up some slick, slack modern soul such as 4hero's *Our Own Place* and you're greeted by a vast 'wall of sound' inside which the midband assumes an almost supernatural importance. By this I

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Bohm speaker output
- 2 4ohm speaker output
- 3 RCA phono input socket
- 4 RCA tape input socket
- 5 Common speaker output

Q&A

Zdenek Brezovjak
Chief Engineer & Co-owner, Canor



DP: Why did Canor choose to make a tube amplifier rather than opting for a solid-state one?

ZB: We chose this direction nearly 20 years ago, when we put the TP101 integrated tube amplifier into series production. Even though we had manufactured a few solid-state amps, we decided to produce just tube amps in the long run, as we preferred the sound.

Why did Canor choose to do a conventional 'cased' amplifier with an elaborate control system?

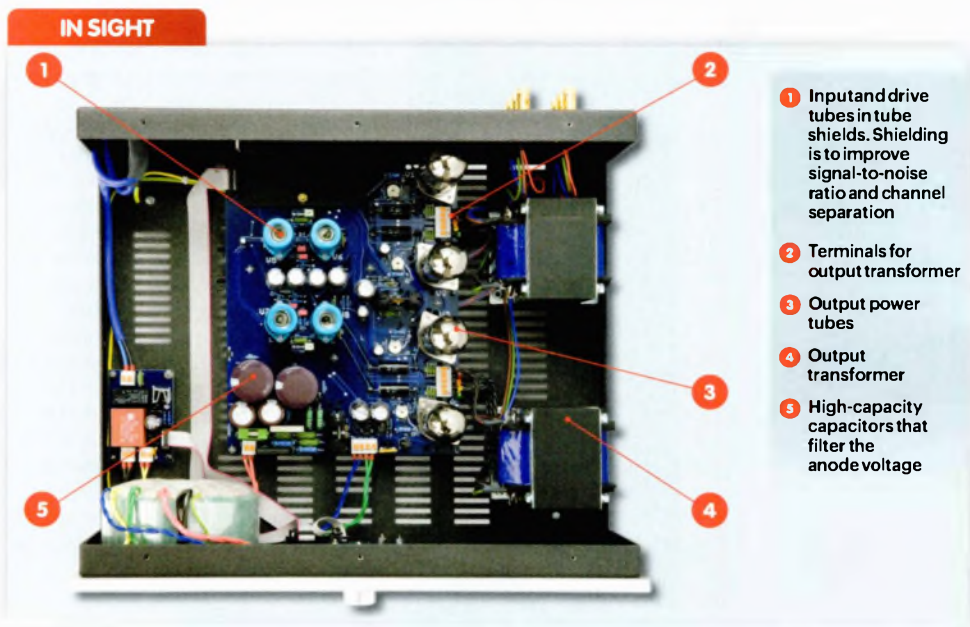
A 'cased' amp was a rational decision to get the design CE certified; each amp should have a tube cover due to safety regulations. Our philosophy is to design circuits with short signal paths, so we placed the switchover relays of the inputs right next to the input terminals, and the volume control attenuator there, too. So signals are not being carried to the front panel by long shielded conductors in our tube gear (contrary to other brands), even though it sometimes feels that our solution is rather arduous to make!

Why was it that you opted for the EL34 tube, specifically?

It's a high-power tube we are fond of using. Each tube type – but also each brand of the same tube type – has its own characteristic sound. It informs the final sound of the amplifier, which we like. Canor has been using only fixed bias as it is the only way to reach the best possible sonic performance. Auto-biasing is preferable by customers in case of tube replacement, but this solution cannot result in maximum sonic performance of a given circuit. The output transformers are designed and wound up by ourselves.

How would you characterise the sound of the amplifier?

It's very transparent with a very good tonal quality, and rendition of acoustic instruments, but sweet too. It joins a growing range of Canor products that include a high-quality all-tube phono stage and tube DAC with built-in CD player option.



IN SIGHT

- 1 Input and drive tubes in tube shields. Shielding is to improve signal-to-noise ratio and channel separation
- 2 Terminals for output transformer
- 3 Output power tubes
- 4 Output transformer
- 5 High-capacity capacitors that filter the anode voltage

HOW IT COMPARES

A good comparison at this price is the Icon Audio Stereo 300B/II (£2,200). Hear one back-to-back with the Canor if you can, and see if you get on with the Icon's big, fat, flouncy 300B sound better than the more energetic, direct EL34s found in the TP134. There's more power in the latter, and the amp feels a lot swisher and more modern too, as well as having the benefit of its hot bottles being safely hidden under the hood. Ensure you try any valve amp with your own speakers – which should have a 89dB/1W/1M sensitivity at the least, as tube amps exert much less grip on speakers than solid-state amps, and this can affect the overall sound greatly.

other valves it seems eager to rush into the music and piledrive it out at you in an unerringly musical way. And happily, the TP134's output transformers are up to the job, too.

In absolute terms, bass is a little loose and lumpy, although it soldiers on to surprisingly high levels via the relatively easily driven Sendor D7 loudspeakers I'm using for the review. Give the TP134 a sterner speaker load though and even via the 4ohm tap it starts huffing and puffing, reminding you it isn't a 100W solid-stater after all. Even with benign boxes, at high volumes EL34s tend to compress things – albeit euphonically – and this begins to happen just as my roof starts parting company with the listening room walls. Again, this is something that you won't get with a chunky transistor amplifier, even if the sound hardens up.

With its lack of clinical transparency, classical music should be where the Canor stumbles and falls, but surprisingly it doesn't. It's quite true to say that it doesn't have that glass-clear midband that you get from the likes of the Musical Fidelity A6 500i – things sound a bit thick and soupy by comparison – but still somehow it works some 'juju' magic and has me enraptured with a DG recording of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*. The TP134 doesn't quite get the very first few nanoseconds of a note, and is prone to delay or even slur its decay subtly, but it is still so good at communicating the essential rhythm and subtle dynamic phrasing of an instrument that you just don't care. Not only this, it strings everything together into one large

magical morass of sound that is wonderful to behold. Its sins of omission and obfuscation are plain then, but still this heroic tubular belle charms your very socks off, and its faults just don't seem to matter.

Conclusion

Whatever music you throw at it, from the crashing power chords of Nick Lowe's *So It Goes* to the minimalist soundscapes of Kraftwerk's *Tour de France Etape 3*, this amp provides a larger-than-life sound. Often more surreal than real, it is still never less than blissful to listen to. But let's be clear, not every listener will like its coloured and ever-so-slightly tubby, compressed nature – or its soundstaging where everything gets pumped up to twice its natural size and fired out at you. One to audition then, in some ways a great buy at the price which will bring you a musical life less ordinary – providing, of course, you like it like that. If not, buy a super-neutral solid-stater ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Engaging, immersivesound; warm tonality |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Not the most transparent or neutral sound we've heard! |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: Tubes without tears – a really nicely packaged modern music maker |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

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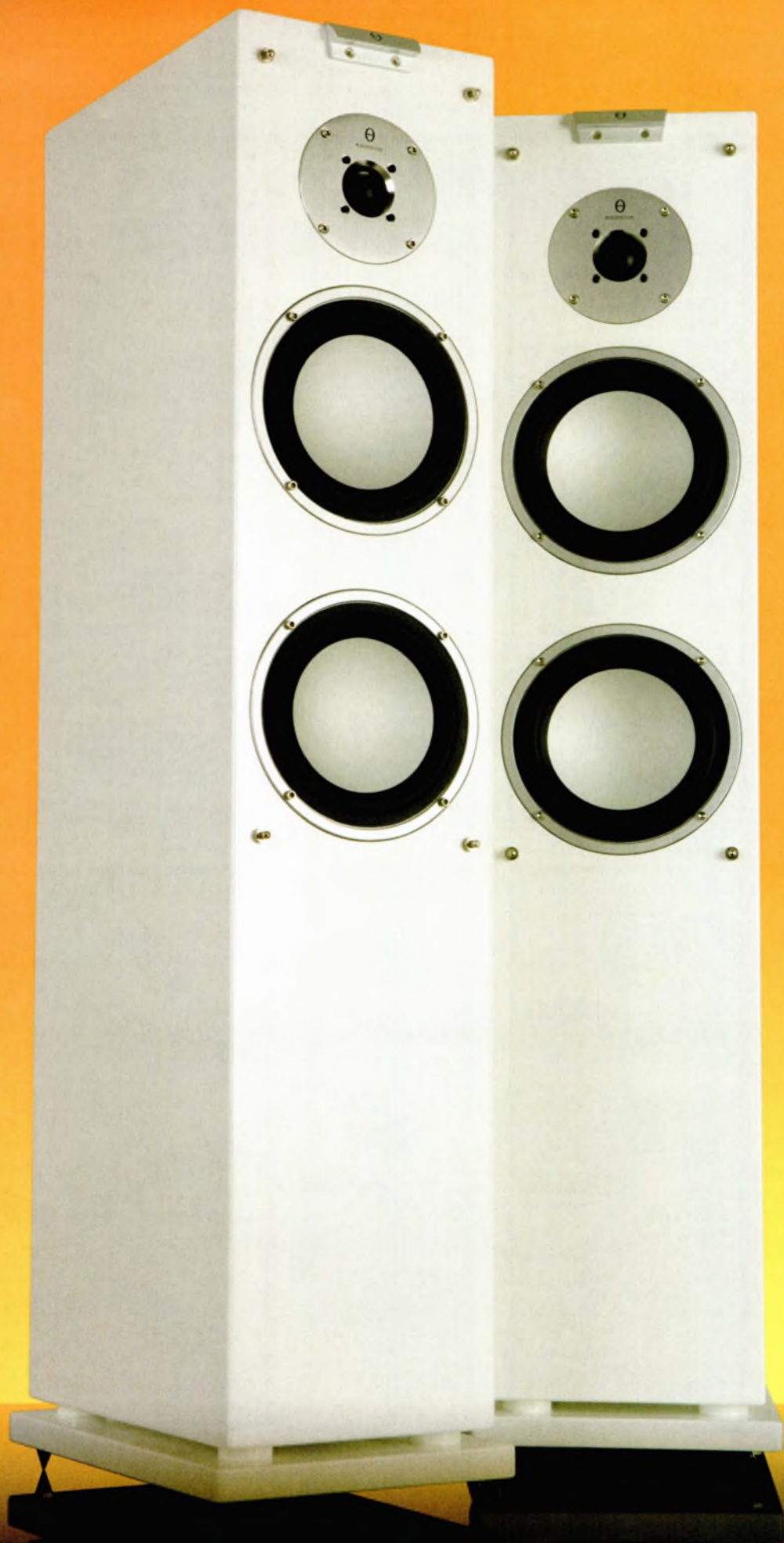
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Three times a speaker

This looks like a lot of very shiny speaker for the money, **Jason Kennedy** finds out if it can deliver on the promise.

Denmark appears to have more speaker companies than you can shake an MDF stick at, more than we do in the UK and that's saying something. So it's possible to overlook some of them, to think of them as just another Danish speaker brand. But looking at Audiovector's website it seems that the company – started by Ole Klifoth in 1980 – has as much character as any of them and pretty good form in terms of previous models. It does some quite unusual things apart from merely building

You get the benefit of nigh-on 30 years of experience in loudspeaker design

speakers, for instance this is the first time I've heard of an upgrade programme for discontinued models. It's called IUC (individual upgrade concept) and is a promise that Audiovector will bring old models (those that are less than 10 years old) up to the most advanced standard available and refinish the cabinet in the process.

The latest additions to Audiovector's range are two X3 models, the Super tested here and the Signature, which has a different tweeter and offers greater treble extension as well as slightly greater power handling and sensitivity. The X3 Super is the least expensive Audiovector floorstander and for my money one of the best looking thanks to its high-gloss piano finish and matching plinth. I suspect that matching plinths will become the colour-matched bumpers of the audio world in due course. The box bears the legend 'designed in Denmark' which is another way of saying made somewhere else – a place where manufacturing is cheaper. This, one

suspects, is the reason why the X3 is the most affordable floorstander.

It appears to be very well made; you don't, for instance, have to bolt the plinth on yourself as is often the case and general fit and finish is first class. There are single wire terminals sensibly placed low down on the cabinet with gold-plated three-way binding posts. The rear-firing reflex port is flush and solid and the supplied spikes are attractive bright finished cones, a shape that means they are tricky to do up, however.

The front of the box looks very smart thanks to the metal faceplate on the soft dome tweeter, many loudspeakers at this price have plastic face plates. This element is probably cosmetic but the low compression concept (LCC) behind the silk and fibre dome driver is a key to its capabilities as we will see. The bass and mid/bass drivers are the first aluminium cones to feature in Audiovector's range, they have sandwich construction with an 'airy glue' core and metal and paper skins – an approach that gives very high stiffness with relatively low mass compared with a conventional cone. Behind the cone is a moulded magnesium chassis that's very open to avoid mechanical compression, these drivers are also described as LCC types which Audiovector describes as "allowing the membrane to move freely under all conditions". Sensitivity is quoted at a decent 90dB, which means you don't need a powerhouse to drive them, but this is in the context of an impedance that's said to be 4 to 6ohms so the figure is not quite as generous as it would be for an 8ohm load.

Sound quality

Audiovector recommends setting the X3 Super up with a small toe-in toward the listener, in my room and system I find that this produces a

distinctly forward upper mid/treble and after a bit of experimentation I discover that having them parallel to one another and the side walls gives the best results. Arranged thus the soundstage is both wide and deep, impressively so in fact. Bach's *Violin Concerto in A minor* is delivered in full-bodied form that spreads out both sideways and back from the speakers in convincing fashion. With Laura Marling's vocal-led performance you can fully appreciate the close mic intimacy of the recording on Blackberry Stone, that and the way that a cello is placed behind and to the left of the singer is extremely well executed. The forwardness of the mid is still apparent in high detail levels and a good rendering of texture but it's kept under control. This is in the context of very clean source and amplifiers in a well-damped room, they may be less easy to tame in a harder sounding room with more energetic ancillaries.

The X3 Super has excellent dynamic range and power handling, put on a piece with a big difference between quiet and loud parts and you get the full effect. In my case it's Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer*, which has very little in the way of limiting on the singer's voice. The result is alarming if you happen to have the system up a little high in the first place, you can ▶

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiovector
X3 Super

ORIGIN
Denmark/China

TYPE
2.5-way loudspeaker

WEIGHT
16kg

DIMENSIONS (WxD)
200 x 1000 x 335mm

FEATURES

- 25mm silk/fibre dome HF driver
- 170mm aluminium mid/bass driver
- 90dB quoted sensitivity
- 4-6ohm quoted nominal impedance

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs Ltd

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
audiovector.com

With dynamic range and bass to spare, the X3 Super will also make a fantastic speaker for home cinemas



Q&A

Ole Klifoth

Audiovector CEO and chief engineer



JK: This is your first metal driver model, why the change?

OK: I had the chance of getting a really good open aluminium/magnesium chassis with a restricted choice of membranes. As always, I was looking for a cone that is light, stiff and dead. The aluminium/paper sandwich membrane is just that and does not suffer from high Q peaks.

This is a very well finished speaker for the price, have you been able to produce it without cutting corners?

We build all our speakers in Denmark – except the X3 series, which is built in a factory in China that specialises in building speakers. It builds MartinLogan, JBL and many others. This is the corner we have cut. We have set up the control systems ourselves to make sure we get the quality we want.

In the X3 Super and Signature you have two speakers that appear to be very similar, are they?

Yes and no: same cabinet, same bass drivers, but with a better crossover and a much better tweeter in the Signature version. Which also uses the vibration controlled speaker fixing method of the si3 series.

What have you done to the X3 Super to control the cabinet?

The cabinet is made from 19mm HDF with bracing. In general the technology is similar to our M3/Mi3 series. This way of executing a cabinet (rectangular, braced, lined with damping material) is different and a lot less expensive than the solutions used in the Si3's (no parallel planes, much smaller need for damping material, different material thicknesses, etc). This is another reason for the low price.

Are there any appropriately priced amps that you have found which are a good match for this speaker?

We always use Naim Audio and Exposure. The smallest models from these companies are doing great with the X3s. Any good amp basically. Some people are using X3s with tube amplifiers, which is not the most cost-effective solution, but it sounds great.



HOW IT COMPARES

There are lots of good loudspeakers available for £1,000 and each has its pros and cons. The Tannoy D6T SE (£999) is a strong all-rounder. It has bags of energy and similar high levels of dynamic range and detail to the Audiovector. It doesn't have the same low-end grunt, but is a hard act to beat at the price. For more refined mid and treble listen to the Monitor Audio Silver RX8 (£900), it's not as well controlled in the bass, but delivers plenty of scale. Bowers & Wilkins' 683 (£999) offers both power and resolution in a speaker that may not match the X3 Super's dynamics but has more finesse.

The key to this speaker's appeal lies in the bass, which is unusually strong

hear the mic and the tape compress but it's astonishing how much range there is on this vintage recording. The Audiovectors deliver it all without any sign of compression on their part, the presentation being totally calm under fire. This is where the LCC technology comes into its own and it makes this speaker seem like particularly good value if you enjoy the full drama of music that has been recorded without limiting or restraint. This is a state of affairs that's rather more common with classical than popular material.

The other key to this speaker's appeal lies in the bass, which is unusually strong even for a decent sized floorstander. This becomes apparent with pretty much everything I play, from the drums and bass on

Fleetwood Mac's *Dreams* to the take off of a rocket on Skylab's #1, the track is rather aptly named *River cf Bass*. That's what you get even with modest amplifier power (50W, Class A). The X3 Super will make a fine home cinema speaker, you won't need a subwoofer if you have five or even three of these, you'll just need a well anchored chair!

The only area that I find them rather lacking is in timing, they have a lot of detail, but don't gel when it comes to involving the listener in the experience. I was interested to see Ole Klifoth mentioning Naim and Exposure amps as being what was used for R&D because both are strong in this respect, so perhaps that's the key to getting the best result. I am using Townshend and Valvet amps that prove themselves to be very good communicators in all respects, although they don't have a particular bent with regard to rhythm and timing. The front end, however, is Naim's Unitiserve.

Conclusion

The Audiovector X3 Super is a lot of very attractive loudspeaker for the money, fabrication may be far eastern but you get the benefit of nigh-on 30 years of experience in loudspeaker design from a company with a strong track record. Every loudspeaker is a compromise and in this instance musicality and upper midrange smoothness have taken a back seat to power handling, bass extension and imaging. However I have no doubt that the right choice of amplifier will offset the musicality side of the equation quite significantly. I also suspect that the aforementioned forwardness will appeal to many listeners too, it's just not up my alley. The fact that you get so much dynamic range and low-end welly without needing a powerhouse amp is particularly appealing ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Impressive dynamic range and bass power allied to strong imaging

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Not quite as musically involving as the best at the price

BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



WE SAY: If you enjoy power, weight and good looks this is a hard act to beat

OVERALL



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Card Player

Patrick Cleasby figures out SD card-based DSD playback with the Fostex HP-A8 which is a 32-bit DAC and headphone amp

Fostex may not be at the forefront of your mind as a hi-fi manufacturer. In the UK, if it is on your radar at all it should be from the perspective of an eighties-vintage musician familiar with its revolutionarily cheap four-track cassette recorder of the period. The nineties/noughties audio professionals should be familiar with the robust and successful range of portable DAT and magneto optical and hard-disk recorders.

As a high-end audio manufacturer it should be no surprise that it is capable of appealing to the discerning audiophile. The recent debut of both this headphone amp-cum-DAC and its intended partner, the equally expensive TH900 headphones, has had the headphone enthusiast crowd in particular salivating. The cost of entry is significant – buying the pair won't leave much change from £3k.

This may not be enough to daunt headphone fans, particularly when you throw in the DSD factor. It is also a gorgeously well-finished piece of kit – in a Cyrus-like and sized shoe box form factor with an attractive black glass front panel. In an interesting move, Fostex has included a limited file-based DSD playback capability – one specific format of DSD file called DSF is supported, but only by dropping files on an SD card into the SDHC slot, which is weirdly situated on the rear of the machine like an afterthought. There is the dangled prospect of computer streaming DSD at some time in the future via a firmware upgrade using the same SD card mechanism.

One way or another then, this machine is likely to become the John The Baptist' of home-based DSD playback. There are already streaming DSD DAC options, but home-cooked

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
Fostex HP-A8

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
32-bit DAC/headphone amplifier and DSD file player

WEIGHT
3.75kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
213 x 78 x 314mm

FEATURES
• AES-EBU input
• 2 x headphone outputs
• Analogue phono and digital optical/coaxial inputs and outputs
• SDHC card slot for DSF DSD and future upgrades

DISTRIBUTOR
SCV London

TELEPHONE
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files (home recording and SACD archiving) aside there are limited opportunities to obtain such media. Whereas hi-res PCM is breaking into serious mainstream back catalogue and new release territory, downloadable DSD is still at the 'audiophile recordings only' stage. Personally I am resistant to the balance being corrected for rock and pop music as then we're straight back into the format wars territory that killed DVD-Audio and SACD. But if you want to experiment with your own file conversions to and from the various file formats (including DSF) there is a free converter from Korg called AudioGate.

If you are interested in trying DSD files, the most proactive presence in the market is Blue Coast Records. The DSF format is preferred because it is capable of holding metadata as ID3 tags and Fostex's choice of this format suggests that the intention behind this design is perhaps more consumer than pro-focused.

The HP-A8 offers the now *de rigueur* asynchronous Class 2 USB support – meaning it functions driverlessly with Mac OSX, and is also capable of interfacing natively at the shared internal processing bit depth of 32-bits, courtesy of the Asahi Kasei AK4399 DAC chip used, (this is relevant if you are applying any DSD or other processing on the computer

The HP-A8 is beautifully finished and has that familiar Cyrus-like shoe box form factor

side – one for the pros there really). Windows comes a poor second as it requires drivers and isn't capable of the 32-bit link – being pegged at a 24-bit maximum. The Fostex also has pro AES-EBU input as well as the usual consumer digital options and even has an analogue input for those headphone listeners with analogue sources – inputs are selectable from the front panel using the remote.

Sound quality

The Mac hookup is indeed a thing of joy and convenience – I'm using Decibel on a 10.8.3 Macbook Pro, and the sample rate switching is automatic and immediately indicated on the Fostex's OLED display. To make optimum use of that 32-bit processing it is still necessary to check Audio MIDI Setup app, however, as with this player there is a nasty tendency to slip back to 16-bit default in that OSX utility app when restarting. The difference in fidelity stepping up to 32-bits is marginal, but with high-resolution sources it is well worth the switch up.

The use of those high-resolution sources is what it's all about with this incredibly refined converter – having just completed some 802.11n wi-fi streaming listening, direct comparisons can be made. Although I am already close to being convinced serious listening should be done by direct connection, the D-A of HP-A8 from a USB source pushes me over the edge, the comparative results are skewed so far in the HP-A8's favour.

The spellbinding go-to 24-192 sampler of the moment is the positively vinyl-like HDTracks version of Joni Mitchell's *Ladies of the Canyon* – gaining the ultimate compliment that in starting with *Morning Morgantown* you just want to listen to all of what is a stunning flat transfer of a brilliant album. Reach *The Circle Game* and the subtle supporting

voices are closely gathered around Joni in the centre of the stereo picture. People talk about wanting to attain master tape sound – this is it. I am tempted to whip out my vinyl, but I don't think it can even compete with the pristine digital. Another day, another head to head...

Moving onto the more rockist end of the spectrum the inevitable 24-96 *Tom Sawyer* from Rush is capable of bringing new light to an over-enjoyed classic. Not in the tonality – which once again seems like a straight passing through to the listener of what is intended from the tape, there is absolutely no colouration – moving towards the last chorus the drumming of Peart and bass of Lee just has great musical swing and vivacity – not what everyone expects from these techno-flash automata. Visiting the newer *Clockwork Angels* in the same format – while the recording is less

I am tempted to whip out my vinyl, but I don't think it can even compete

fine – the HP-A8 still renders an incredibly detailed picture of all that compressed congestion.

In a similar vein, the 24-48 of Porcupine Tree's *4 Chords That Made A Million* also impress with the impeccable placement and reality of its tabla intro – and again when the whole band crunches in, there is that swing – well-engineered modern rock made to sound as good as it is possible to. What was recorded is precisely what you hear.

Which in the case of some new titles is unfortunate – stepping down to the 24/44.1 of Johnny Marr's more recent album, *The Messenger*, it's plain that the HP-A8 cannot work miracles. This great album still sounds like it

already needs a more sympathetic remastering and it's only a few months old.

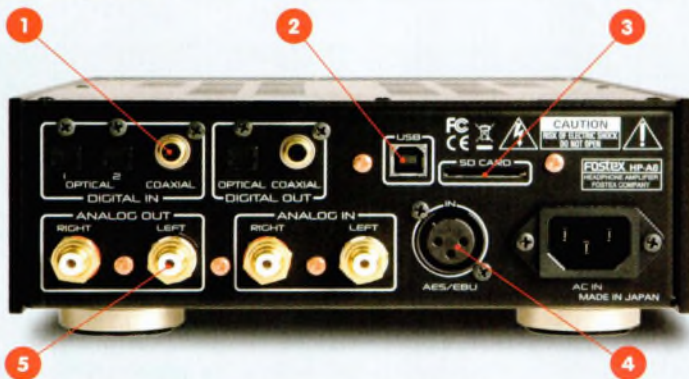
Moving over to headphone listening proves the subtle ascetic Japanese sound remains identical. Detailed level and digital filtering options are also available using the remote to customise the sound and levels to your own 'phones and preferences.

Blue Coast Records sample files are the obvious choice to try to make use of the DSF DSD (and it seems only DSF DSD – why no FLAC?) SD card possibilities. The format requirements appear quite stringent – FAT32 formatting is necessary. It is just about possible to play the DSF tracks using the front panel, but you'll need the remote and even then navigation is primitive. The audible results on material like the solo violin improvisations is obviously intended to demonstrate the realism of a native DSD recording and it does sound amazingly naturalistic. It would be great to hear some transfers of the familiar mainstream SACD material, though, to really get the measure of this playback option compared with the old-school spinning disc method.

Conclusion

If you can afford the serious money necessary, there is no doubt that the HP-A8 is a mighty handsome and great-sounding way of listening to your computer-based files and other digital audio sources. But there are many equally capable devices, and so whether it's really worth it will depend on your desire for the highest of PCM resolutions, 32-bit processing, preference for headphone listening with this kind of genteel sound and finally whether you're gagging to try the DSD file trick. You'll also have to forget about network streaming capability – although you could, of course, feed a PCM-based streamer into its digital inputs ●

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Coaxial input
- 2 Class 2 USB input
- 3 SDHC card slot
- 4 Pro AES/EBU input
- 5 Analogue output (left channel)

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** It has a greatly refined and neutral sound

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** It may still be a little early to commit to a limited DSD file implementation

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

WE SAY: One for the headphones crowd and DSD enthusiasts or early adopters

OVERALL





Element High Speed USB



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*HiFi Choice,
May 2013*

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Black magic

If you seek a serious sounding entry-level phono stage, look no further than Edwards Audio's Apprentice MM says **David Price**

 ver the past five years of so, we've seen more phono stages launched than there are actual LP records in existence. Okay, I'm exaggerating for effect here, but you get my drift – there's been a procession of the things, one which seems to get longer by the day. To that, we can now add this – the Apprentice MM from Talk Electronics sub-brand Edwards Audio.

This little unit is, however, a touch more interesting than many, because most phono stages seem to be pitched around or beyond the £1,000 mark. The Apprentice however sells for the princely sum of £89.95, which means it's almost in a gang of one at this price – there are no others around aside from the NAD PP2i (£95) and the Cambridge Audio 651P (£120).

The Edwards Audio is an essay in minimalism. First, it is very small – measuring just 114.5mm long it's one-quarter the width of your average amplifier. For me, this is a good thing – phono stages should be heard and not seen, and if they are pretty enough to give pride of place in your equipment rack the manufacturer has obviously spent far too much time on styling and not enough on the all-important component quality.

Its circuitry fills up its casing's interior space like five people in a Mini – which means the power supply has to sit elsewhere. That's why it's a separate, and quite large, DC regulated, single-rail, switched-mode

design built into a plug. The electronics in the Apprentice are closely derived from the Edwards Audio MM1, using similar circuit topology with passive treble and active bass equalisation. A second stage amplifier buffers the equalisation network and ensure a low output impedance.

The 1kg casing itself is obviously built down to a price, but is well built down to that price. Instead of an extrusion, a bent steel 'U' provides a safe place for the circuitry to sit, and this is topped off with a 3mm black acrylic front panel complete with red power LED inset. Round the back, as well as DC in and ground terminals, you get one pair of RCA phono inputs, and one pair of line-level outputs. The sockets are gold-plated and the whole unit is done to a surprisingly high standard considering the lowly price.

Sound quality

The press release claims "a near silent noise floor" and says it provides "40dB of gain"; my ears told me that both assertions are broadly correct. I'd prepared myself for the decidedly unpleasant and onerous task of reviewing a cheap phono stage but from the first bars of Cafe Jacques' cover of *There Ain't No Love In The Heart of the City*, I'm really rather taken aback. The Apprentice MM certainly doesn't seem a newcomer, either to the art of amplifying small signals or manifesting them in a

musical way. Indeed, the wee thing proves very crisp, clean and open – with absolutely none of the nasties I'd feared I'd hear!

Tonally, it's textbook solid-state, but in a good way – which is to say that it is even and doesn't accentuate the bass, midband or treble. The upper mid and treble is decently lit, but it isn't harsh in the way some rival designs can be. Paired to a Goldring G1042 moving magnet cartridge on an Audio Technica AT-LP1240USB turntable, the Edwards Audio phono box reaches into the recording and brings it to life. The old Cafe Jacques song can sound quite dirge-like, but this phono stage excavates deep into the mix and mines loads of detail – all the instruments sit tidily in the recorded acoustic, projecting out of the speakers boldly. Vocals are delicate and expressive, yet never grate on the ear.

Next I fed this phono stage with some classic jazz funk from Freeez, and *Southern Freeez* comes across as another unexpected delight. Rhythmically it is more subtle than many, and while it manages to capture the funky bass guitar playing and powerful, machine-gun hi-hat and snare work, it also signposts those all-important spaces between with great alacrity. This brings out the lovely floaty rhythm of the song, something that some phono preamps that have an extra zero on the end of their price tag struggle to even come close to matching.

Fast but certainly not furious, sharp but not grating, punchy yet not bruising – this is a great budget phono stage, that gives you a real window into the recording that's totally unexpected at this price. Built as well as it needs to be, it is very quiet in use and lets all that music in your record grooves flow forth with tremendous elan. A big surprise from such a small box then, and highly recommended accordingly ●



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Edwards Audio
Apprentice MM

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Phonostage

WEIGHT
1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
114.5 x 47.5 x 160mm

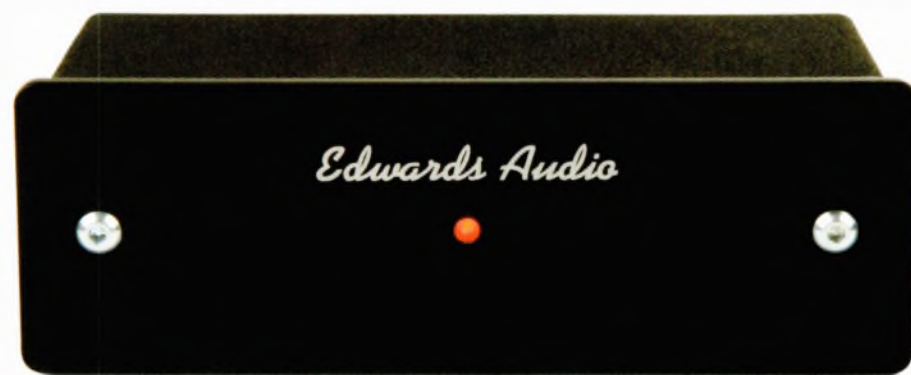
FEATURES
● Shortsignal paths
● Switched mode
power supply
● Quoted input
loading MM: 47K
with 150pF
● Quoted S/N ratio
(MM, 5mV, A Wtd):
-83dB

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Talk Electronics

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WEBSITE
talkelectronics.com

Forget about how it looks, stick it out of sight and be amazed by how good it sounds



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Super clean and musical sound – and refined too; fine build

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing that we can think of at the price

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A superb entry-level phono stage that's well worth auditioning

FACILITIES
★★★★★

OVERALL





Power to the people!

David Price has fun with Musical Fidelity's latest premium solid-state integrated amplifier, the speaker shaking M6500i

If Musical Fidelity supremo Antony Michaelson had only three fingers left, I'd guess that two of them would be on the steering wheel of his Maserati, and the other would be pointed aloft in the direction of Krell. He's a man on a mission to offer the super clean, high-end solid-state sound the illustrious US brand is famous for, but at more affordable prices. Which is why his range has always had a number of very big and powerful integrated amps.

No surprise then that the M6500i exists. It's one range below the AMS series, which sports relatively low power and runs in pure Class A mode. The M6500i is the alter ego – the headbanging, mega-powered monster designed to rattle your door hinges and flap your flares. It's a spiritual successor to the A1000 and kW500, not backward in coming forward – an amplifier for which loudspeakers hold no fear. The question isn't how loud it can drive any big box, but how loud can you listen?

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity
M6500i

ORIGIN
UK/Taiwan

TYPE
Integrated
amplifier

WEIGHT
30kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 160 x 460mm

FEATURES

- LED digital volume display
- Fully balanced operation
- Tape monitor switching
- Quoted power: 500W RMS per channel into 8ohms

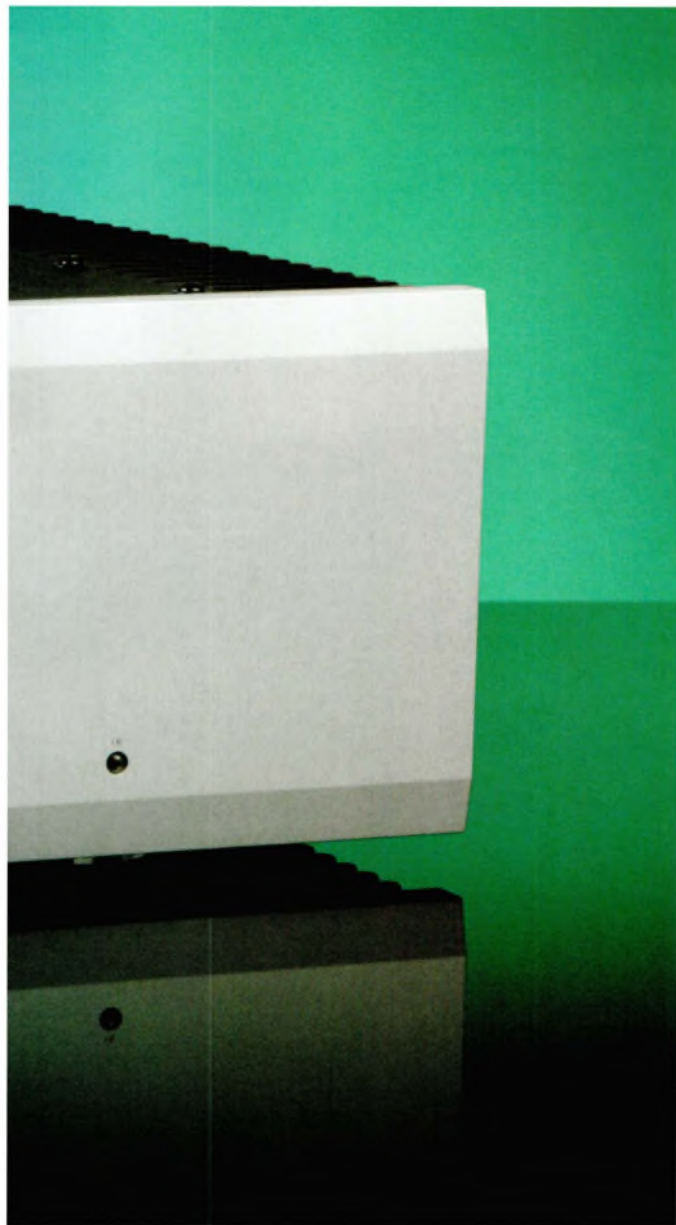
DISTRIBUTOR
Musical Fidelity

TELEPHONE
0208 9002866

WEBSITE
musicalfidelity.com

As such, its claimed 500W RMS per channel into 8ohms should be sufficient for anyone. If it isn't, I'd suggest you have psychological issues. However, sensible sorts may ask themselves, "why bother with 500W when most people make do with 50W?" And they may have a point as sound pressure levels aren't purely a function of amp power, they're also down to loudspeaker sensitivity. Many audiophiles get reasonable volumes from 20W tube amplifiers with 90dB sensitivity speakers, of course. But the M6500i's grunt gives you the ability to drive any speaker at any level, and it will not be anywhere near its limit until the police have come round.

So this amplifier is a piece of work alright. It's a sizeable object and inside is laid out like a preamplifier with twin fully balanced bridge operating Class AB power amplifiers, using 12 discrete bipolar transistors per side. These are said to give 200 amps peak-to-peak, so this amp will also weld things should you so wish! The result is very low claimed distortion levels of around 0.008% at 1kHz and 0.015% at 20kHz. The heatsinking is extensive, as you'd



Sound quality

It's been a while since I've listened to a high-power Musical Fidelity amplifier, the last being the kW500 some five years ago, which managed to blow the soot out of my chimney and finally stir my Yamaha NS1000M speakers into life, but I found it a touch too unsubtle for my delicate sensibilities. Worried that this might be the case again, I nervously unpack the M6500i, only to find myself really rather beguiled by it. Yes, it's a big banger alright – with oodles of oomph here, there and everywhere, but it is so much more than just this.

Essentially, it reveals itself to be a very well designed modern solid-state amplifier, with the inevitable sonic hallmark that transistors give, but nevertheless it's transparent and open enough to let you really enjoy all that power and punch. This means it's more than just a thug in a dinner jacket; the M6500i has breeding and it comes across in a variety of different types of music. For example, a vinyl copy of Manfred Mann's *Davy's on the Road Again* can be quite a thin and reedy listen through the wrong sort of transistor amplifier; vocals are a little edgy and acerbic and the guitars can screech. But the Musical Fidelity proves tonally quite svelte; you'd never accuse it of sugar coating the signal, or adding a fine curtain of velvet either, but it positively refuses to screech or shout.

Instead, the amplifier shows itself to have a really rather incisive yet subtle midband, way better than most other solid-state amplifiers. It is detailed and paints things in super-fine brushstrokes, very deftly.

It makes The Who's *Won't Get Fooled Again* enormous fun to listen to; this is a high energy recording with a lot going on and some powerful, crashing, crescendos which the amplifier conveys most forcefully (as you'd expect, with the power it has on

tap). But unlike many muscle amplifiers, it doesn't throw the baby out with the bath water, and reduce everything to a sort of hi-fi weight lifting contest. Yes, it demonstrates itself to be super-strong, but there is real subtlety here, too. I love the way it picks through all the strands in the mix and lets them go their own way. Having this great level of control can be dangerous, of course, with some amplifiers strangling all of the life out of the music as they rigorously deconstruct the mix, but the Musical Fidelity doesn't do this. Instead it lets everything play together in a eminently enjoyable way.

Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Variations* is an old prog favourite of mine, fusing some pretty funky rock motifs with a

The M6500i has genuine breeding and it comes across in a variety of music

classical standard from Paganini and some great cello playing from his brother Julian. The M6500i is very well able to communicate the richness of this recording; I love the fruitiness of the Moog synthesiser, the rawness of the strings and the visceral body and power of the piano. Bass guitar is fun too, this amplifier reminding you of its obvious brawn in the low frequencies – nothing is too much trouble – without overstating its case. By this I mean that yes, it has oceans of low-end power which is seemingly limitless, yet this amplifier doesn't flood your room with thunderous lows just because it can. Once again, this signifies a deftness of touch that's really satisfying.

Feed it some cool jazz in the shape of Herbie Hancock's *The Prisoner*, and it again does a great job. While it can never match the 'being there' sense

expect, and is separate between left and right power amp sections, so one side of the amp could get hotter than the other when playing The Beatles! Each power amp has its own separate, large, toroidal transformer, too.

The preamplifier section has five inputs, one of which is balanced, and the auxiliary input can be switched to integrate home theatre set-ups. These are directly connected to the main preamp circuitboard rather than using wire connections, so ultra-short signal paths are maintained. The preamp also has its own separate winding from the power supply. A digital volume control is used, with laser-trimmed substrate resistors for accurate tracking down to very low listening levels. This is tied in with a red LED display on the front panel.

Overall finish is excellent; the volume control has a smooth and linear action and the aluminium knob moves precisely on the extruded military-grade aluminium fascia. The switches are small but work crisply and have LEDs to denote the source used. The casework is done to a very good standard, and high-quality socketry is evident round the back.

Overall finish (both inside and out) is quite exceptional

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Loudspeaker binding posts
- 2 RCA phono CD input
- 3 RCA phono preamp output
- 4 IEC mains input
- 5 RCA phono tuner input
- 6 XLR balanced input

Q&A

Antony Michaelson
Musical Fidelity



DP: How does the M6500i fit in the Musical Fidelity line-up?

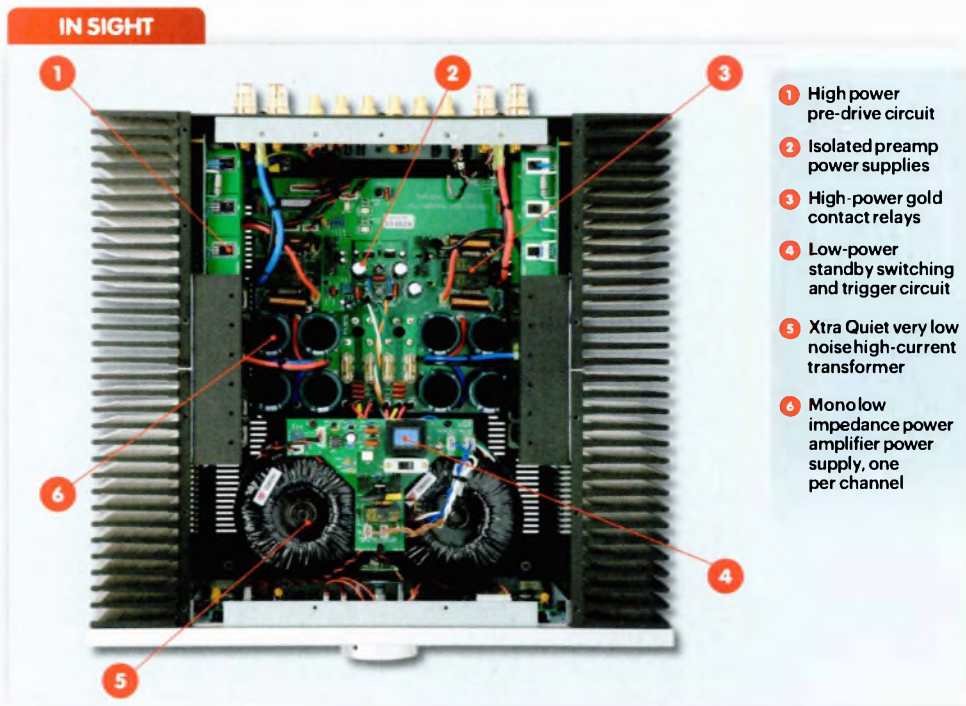
AM: The M6 Series is a destination range. By this, we mean they are pretty well as good as the best. Each product in the range performs so well that it is hard to get anything better. Just look at the M8 Series to see how extreme we had to be to make a worthwhile improvement to the M6s, and you will get the idea.

What is the guiding philosophy behind the product?

In hi-fi, as in most other things, there is no correct way of doing things. Measurements can show something is perfect, but there is always the subjective experience to act as a counter-balance. Our early products were firmly positioned in the subjective camp, but with over 30 years experience, we see the argument for objective measures of performance. The Class A AMS Series all measure very well, but do not deliver huge power. They cannot deliver true dynamic range. But they sound convincing and that is what hi-fi is for. The M6 and M8 ranges are designed with the same fanatical care and attention, but objectively deliver a proper, unclipped, full dynamic range.

Why would you buy a M6500i?

Because it can drive anything. All Musical Fidelity products are designed to be completely neutral and faithful to the music. They do not favour any style of music. Their aim is to reproduce a recording as accurately as possible – nothing more and nothing less.



- 1 High power pre-drive circuit
- 2 Isolated preamp power supplies
- 3 High-power gold contact relays
- 4 Low-power standby switching and trigger circuit
- 5 Xtra Quiet very low noise high-current transformer
- 6 Monolow impedance power amplifier power supply, one per channel

HOW IT COMPARES

There's little to directly compare the M6500i with, as it's a massively powerful solid-state amp at a realistic price. If you're looking for something that gives a distinctly different sound, Musical Fidelity's AMS35i full Class A is ideal, but it's a lot more expensive. Sugden's big IA-4 integrated gives much of the insight of the 35i, but only costs £4,000. Another full Class A design, it's revealing and detailed, but a little bright especially with modern loudspeakers. If you want more smoothness, Canor's TP234 (approx £4,500) is a high performance tube amp with a gutsy sound. It's more syrupy than the Sugden, but by tube standards is still super-detailed.

that its more expensive AMS35i big brother manages, in terms of communicating the timbral richness of a flute, for example, it still has a good go.

So, in absolute terms instruments do get the sense that there's a white light being shone on them, albeit not too brightly to give you nightmares. Contrast that with the pure Class A AMS35i which has a slightly warmer colouration, and your average tube amp which is rosier still. There's another thing the M6500i gives away too – it lacks the effortless rhythmic gait of certain other designs. That's not to say it's in any way frigid sounding, as generally speaking the big Musical Fidelity rocks along at a fair old pace, making music very enjoyably. It's just it doesn't have the effortless rhythmic fluidity of the AMS series, or the splendid, almost super natural timing of the best valve amps.

You heard it here first then! The M6500i is a mere mortal, doing some things very well, and others just well. I adore the space and solidity of the stereo imaging that this amplifier is capable of, and its aforementioned timbral detail and midband insight. It also gets top marks for its couth overall tonal balance and restraint in the bass, despite having massive reserves of effortless power to summon up if called upon so to do. It has an enjoyable musicality and the ability to let you focus on the music, and not the recording or indeed itself. But if you're more inclined to the classical valve sound and/or Class A

sound, you better start saving your pennies for the likes of Musical Fidelity's AMS35i, or go the whole hog with Icon Audio 845 monoblocks. Both are sweeter, with the former being more neutral and the latter more romantic.

Conclusion

This is a really impressive, highly likeable amplifier. It brings excellent all-round sound together with bags of power in a very neat case, at a very reasonable price indeed. There's very little I can think of at or near the money that does so much, so well, in such a self-effacing and effortless way. Think of this as a budget 'superfi' amplifier giving you a sound that's within spitting distance of the very best in the world, at about a tenth of the price – it brings absolute power to the people, and a price that won't quite corrupt you! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Punchy, assured, sound; vast power will drive any speaker |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Not as romantic or sweet as some tube or Class A solid-state rivals |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: Great do-it-all powerhouse; for many audiophiles this will be the ultimate amp |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

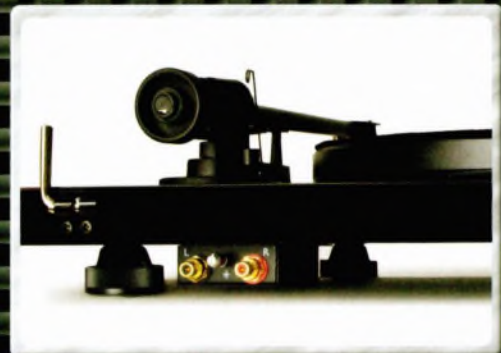
OVERALL



The Carbon Age



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THIS MONTH:



ED SELLEY
EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

FOR THE BEST part of 10 years, Ed was developing and supporting products from some of the biggest names in audio. He enjoys blogging about his favourite tunes too.



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.

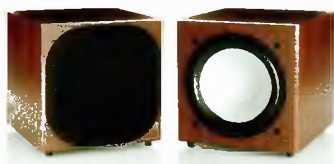
Mini match up

I am looking for some speakers to match my Arcam Solo Mini. I am currently using a pair of Monitor Audio Bronze B1s with 2m QED Silver Anniversary XT bi-wire cable, bi-wired with QED Airlouc plugs. The system is used in the kitchen and the speakers are sat on Blu Tac on thick oak shelves (9in deep) at ear height when I'm standing up, on the narrower wall of a 6 x 4m room.

The problem I've got is lack of substantial bass. I would like to improve this with the purchase of better speakers. I am limited by the fact that the speakers cannot be any deeper than 9in and must not be too tall as it will not be accepted by Her Lordship. I think the room is seriously affecting the sound as it has a tiled floor and is full of reflective cupboards etc. The sound is very bright as you'd expect and a little lacking in bass. I have a budget of £200-£400 (enough for a second system Her Lordship tells me) and would prefer something that is not too ugly looking.

I listen to all sorts of music such as Led Zep, Butthole Surfers, Electro, Folk, choral and classical so require a good all-rounder. My budget can be increased if it is going to make a huge difference to the overall sound and I may not be able to audition. I hope you can help me with this as online forums are giving me a headache.

Stephen Lowther



Monitor Audio's BXW10 can provide an ideal bass boost

DP: One option is to try a subwoofer like a Monitor Audio BXW10 which goes for around £400 – this could be hidden behind a sofa and is designed to work with your BX1. If you can get away with a larger loudspeaker, try to audition a pair of QAcoustics 2050i floorstanders (they vary in price – so shop around if possible), as these are high-quality yet low-cost designs, they are good all-rounders and will have decent bass tunefulness and powerful extension at the price. Measuring about 321mm in depth they are over your 9in requirement, but they come in a range of attractive finishes that should dissipate such worries of girth when located in your room. But before that you should try a good large rug with a fairly deep pile to tame the brightness of your tiled floor and if possible, fill your cupboards with books/CDs/other items, and if they have doors, leave them open to minimise the reflectivity when you are listening to music. The carpet or rug will help in absorption while less reflective cupboards

and wall surfaces (maximising texture through uneven sized books, etc and if complete with doors, having the doors open) will help to minimise flutter echoes and standing waves, thereby controlling those horrible 'ringing' distortions that are typical in a very reflective room with parallel walls and shiny surfaces.

ES: Given your size restrictions, Stephen, it might be difficult to get a worthwhile improvement in bass performance by changing to another small loudspeaker. Acoustic Energy 301s would be worth investigating, but they're not exactly floorshakers in the low frequency department. How about keeping your existing speakers and adding a subwoofer? Hopefully, the sub can be placed so it isn't too visible, thus placating Her Lordship, while giving you the bass heft you're seeking. Something like REL's T5 would be a good starting point.

Box of delights?

I have a Vortexbox that I use to rip music and then play through a Squeezebox Touch. The Vortexbox is fanless and silent unless ripping, it has low power consumption, was cheap and just works. I use iPeng and my iPhone to control the Squeezebox. I've noticed that iPeng can control the Vortexbox directly and so I have the facility to play directly from the Vortexbox outputting via USB to a DAC. The iPeng app lets me listen to internet

radio, including iPlayer and listen again services.

Currently I don't have a DAC and so have not tested this facility but my question is – what is the Squeezebox adding? I hardly ever use the Squeezebox touchscreen, controlling from my phone instead. Given current second-hand values of Squeezebox Touch I could sell the Squeezebox and have more left over for a DAC – I intend to buy one anyway, but could now afford a better one. If I was to invest in some wireless DACs I could quickly and easily set up a multi-room system. I seem to be just appreciating the usability and value of the Vortexbox – given its large range and number of customisable options it appears

I could sell the Squeezebox and have more left over for a DAC

to make other streamers from other manufactures appear very expensive in comparison.

Are there other benefits that I will only appreciate once they are gone? Do streamers in general offer other benefits over a Vortexbox and DAC of equivalent value. (All streaming solutions require a NAS drive or computer). I'm sure I must be missing something here particularly in relation to how the information is pulled/requested/pushed, am I? Are these issues compensated by the error correction possible via USB, as opposed to through an optical or coax digital connection?

John Cunningham

PC: John, in short I don't believe you're missing anything – but



Is John Cunningham's Squeezebox Touch surplus to requirements?



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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.

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you won't answer your final points about data throughput or error correction until you have selected a DAC which works with Vortexbox and used your ears to decide. From looking at its forum it appears asynchronous DAC connection is possible so the signs are good that you could achieve a high-quality output. My one caveat is that as yet I have not tried Vortexbox, so I can't vouch for how well iPeng can control it, but as an iPeng lover myself, if that gives you all you need and you don't touch your Touch, I think you have answered all your own questions! Do get a DAC to test with first, though.

Multi-room is the one thing that Squeezeboxes excel at – if you were to decide you have no need for that, it sounds like you have no further need for Squeeze. But while getting out of Squeezeboxes while they retain some value may be a good call (considers own position), at least they physically decouple server and ploadout – do we really want to have mini computers everywhere?

ES: Not all Vortexboxes are silent; just how well behaved they are depends on what they used to be. As you point out though, if your box is quiet and you are happy with the aesthetics, you are absolutely right that you can connect it directly to a DAC and bypass the Squeezebox altogether. You've no shortage of choice in this regard either. As to what the Squeezebox is adding? If your Vortexbox is a bit noisy, it keeps it out of the listening environment. For many people (and I count myself as one of them), it also keeps computers separate from hi-fi. Certain functions like internet radio are also frequently easier to access via a streamer as well.

▣ **Analogue add-ons**
I have recently refurbished my aged Rega P3 turntable. The tonearm has been modified by Origin Live (with the structural upgrade and external rewire) and I have a borrowed Elys 2 cartridge fitted. A Graham Slee Gram Amp 2SE phono stage is installed between the deck and Cyrus 8/PSX-R amplifier and my Dynaudio Excite X12 loudspeakers. My question is, with a couple of hundred pounds, do I buy an Exact Cartridge or another recommended by yourselves, or should I keep the Elys 2 (available at modest cost) and buy the Slee power supply? I

▣ Silver dream machine

I currently have a predominantly Roksan-based set up, comprising of a Radius 5 turntable, a Kandy K2 integrated along with K2 loudspeakers. My CD player is a 15-year old Marantz CD63 mkII Kl Signature, which although working well I feel is now at the age where a replacement is due. I will have around £800 to spend towards a replacement, obviously I have considered the Kandy K2 CD player, but have also thought about the Audiolab 8200CD, despite some not so good reviews about disc reading.

I am also wondering about upgrading my current Rega Fono stage, which although I consider better than the onboard of the K2 amp, is probably limiting my playback quality. I would have around £400 max for this purchase. I have looked at the Lehmann Black Cube, but at £400 is this a little rich for my system? The cartridge I am using is the Ortofon 2M Blue, again I have thought about a moving coil cartridge, but have always been put off by the replacement costs as well as having to change my phono stage at the same time as the Rega is MM only. I listen to classic rock and prog mainly on vinyl. Any suggestions?!

Graham Veitch



It might be old, but the Roksan K2 still comes up trumps

am happy with the sound so far, but wonder if a modest investment will give greater benefits?

David Heddon

DP: Hi David – in a nutshell, yes it will. With the Rega P3 and Elys 2, going into the Graham Slee and Cyrus 8, I can imagine your system sounds just a smidgeon on the dry side. Nice and clean and crisp yes, but not exactly shimmering with texture and warmth. So, in your position – with only a moving magnet input on the phono preamp, I'd suggest you invest in a Goldring G1042 MM cartridge for around £230. I am a huge Rega fan, but for me its phono cartridges are always just a touch too dry and analytical for many analogue addicts' tastes. The Goldring by contrast is a chunky, fruity and musical sounding pick-up – more so than most – with a big bass, which I think would be a great synergistic match. This done, you're on course for a very nice sounding system.

ES: There's much to be said for the Goldring and it is a fine cartridge but, quite by accident, I have been using a Rega RP6 with a Nagaoka MP150 and the results have been stellar. There really are some stunning moving magnets out there at the moment.

▣ Pleasant problem

I have a pleasant dilemma. I have a budget of around £1,000 (around €1,200 as I live in Ireland, but I do go over to the UK) and would like to upgrade my hi-fi. The system is a basic Rega RP3 turntable with Grado Silver Prestige cartridge, Marantz PM7001 amplifier (with

in-built phono stage), a NAD CD515BEE CD player and a pair of Mission 762 speakers. The turntable is eight months old, the amp and CD player were bought about five years ago and the speakers date from 1990.

The CD player needs either replacement or repair. The disc carrier is the problem; it has a mind of its own. I press the eject button, the disc carrier pops out and then goes back in all by itself. I have to physically catch the carrier and hold it while putting a CD on it.

So with my budget I need a new CD player. I was also wondering what improvements I could make to my turntable, too. Should I get a Rega Elys 2 cartridge as well? And if I had more money, should I replace the amplifier and speakers? I play a lot of vinyl (a mixture of new, second-hand and family heirlooms), but the CD player's antics are killing my love of the rest of my music collection. Please help!

Paul Kelly



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DP: Hi Paul, I think it's high time you spent a bit of cash to get your system back on track. Buy an Audiolab 8200CD (£799) and you'll have one of the best silver disc sources available for sensible money, and it also functions as a DAC for future use, should you ever wish to get into streaming or computer audio. It will sound dramatically better to your NAD, right across the board, with a wonderfully musical and detailed sound. Failing this, the Rega Apollo-R is a peachy machine for just £550, and a perfect match for your RP3.

ES: It is hard to argue with the Audiolab at the asking price, but if you were looking for a capable cartridge, you would be remiss not to look at the Dynavecator 10x5 which is a sensational cartridge for the money.

▶ Platter matters
I read your mini test on the turntable mats and have a question about it. I have a Michell GyroDec turntable with an SME V arm. I have many regular LPs, but also some 180g/200g vinyl, which are thicker than the regular ones.

It is very hard to adjust the height of the arm each time when you change from one kind to another of these LPs. So I think, if I make my height adjustment according to the heavy vinyl and had a mat

which I can put only under the lighter ones to compensate the difference, that would be fine. Can you recommend me mats to solve this problem please?

Haluk Ozumerzifon

DP: The easy answer is the Origin Live Platter Mat, which is just 1.5mm thick and is an excellent upgrade to virtually any stock mat or 'naked' platter such as the Gyro's. It's £40. It will make your vinyl sound so good you'll want to keep it on, even when you're playing your audiophile vinyl too! When using it, always remember to use a record clamp or weight – either Michell's own clamp or the Bren 1 should do the job nicely.

▶ Punch drunk

I want your advice regarding a cartridge for my Audio Note TT One turntable with Rega 250 tonearm and Clearaudio internal wiring. My system comprises a Naim Nait XS amp, CD5x CD player, Fraimlite support and NAC A5 cable, plus Neat Motive 2 loudspeakers, Clearaudio Smart Phono phono stage, Chord Cobra 2 RCA-DIN interlink, and also a Rega P7 with Dynavecator 10x5 cartridge. Oh, and my room acoustics are good! I also use a Sumiko Blackbird cartridge with the Audio Note deck, and although I like the speedy sound, it lacks bass slam with the Sumiko. My VTA is set negative as Sumiko suggested. My Rega P7 with Dynavecator 10X5 cart has a fuller balance.

The Dynavecator DV-20X is a great replacement for the 10X5

▶ Cable talking

Please can you answer the following question regarding the appropriate level of money to spend on cables when assembling a hi-fi system?

There seems to be two quite different schools of thought as regards to an appropriate level of funds to assign to cables.

First is to spend no more than 10 percent of the hardware budget on cables. As a result, if you have a system comprising of a CD player, amplifier and speakers each costing £1,000, spend no more than £300 on interconnects and speaker cable or you are wasting money that could go on better hardware.

The second theory is that there is no limit to how much to spend on cables as better, more expensive designs preserve the signal they are passing along to each hardware component. Hence if you want to hear more of what your Compact Disc player is reading off a CD, then the use of a better interconnect cable will preserve the signal more faithfully, allowing a better sound. This rule also, therefore, applies to better, more expensive speaker cable.

Both theories have merit in that the first 10 percent rule could be valid if the difference between costlier cables may be so small that indeed it may not be a cost-effective way of spending hi-fi upgrade funds.

The second 'cost no object' approach, however, does seem logical as regards to preserving the audio signal. It also makes sense not to upgrade hardware if cheap inferior cables have been used that only allowed the user to hear a fraction of the performance that their current kit is capable of. So which is right? And should the 10 percent rule be more like 50 percent? I would be grateful for any advice regarding this subject and thank you in advance for your reply.

Mike Farrow

DP: Hi Mike – interesting question! As with everything in life, not just hi-fi, I don't think it's quite as simple as boiling it down to hard-and-fast rules. Above these, the best rule is



It's important to try and find the right cables to suit your kit

that of *digitus manus primus* (that's 'thumb' to me and you), which means 'suck it and see'. Now, I know that's not a very useful answer to anyone with a fixed budget and a blank sheet of paper putting together a new hi-fi system, so let me expound...

In theory, you need the best possible wires; if not then you'll never hear what your system is really doing. And indeed it is amazing how good a £3,000 system can sound with another £10,000 of cables. Trouble is, a £10,000 system with £3,000 is

There seems to be two schools of thought on buying cables

likely to sound better still – and is, therefore, the best way to spend your money, given that you have £13,000. Ideally, the ultimate set-up would be that £10,000 system with £10,000 of cables, but we're getting a bit off piste now in budget terms, aren't we?

So, what percentage should you spend on cables? Speaking very, very generally, it is fair to say that up to around £2,000 total system price, you should keep to around 20 percent or under. From about £2,000 to £10,000, I'd be thinking in terms of 30 or 40 percent, and after this it can go as high as 50. But each cable upgrade shouldn't be done arbitrarily (ie "I have a £2,000 system so I must spend £400"), but on a case-by-case basis. Find a good dealer, borrow some cables, and see what they can do for you. Use the cables to 'tune' your system to smooth things out or deliver extra detail as required – don't just march in waving your credit card and think that spending x or y pounds will do the job!

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Sennheiser's RS120 is a top wire-free headphone option

Both are running through the Clearaudio phono stage. So, can you recommend a cartridge under €500 to give me more bass punch?

Robin Liebrechts, Netherlands

DP: Hi Robin – this doesn't surprise me, as I find Sumikos a little too 'spry, crisp and dry' for many tastes – they're certainly on the analytical side when many vinylistas want precisely the reverse. As you correctly identify, Dynavectors are not this way – they're quite old school in the sense that they focus more on tonal warmth and musicality, rather than out-and-out detail. As such, I'd recommend the DV20X2 (High Output). It's just a €100 or so over budget but I think it should really hit the spot.

ES: I'm a big Dynavector fan as well so I'm unlikely to disagree with those choices, but when I tested the Audio Note AN-TT Two, I found it formed a very happy partnership with the Clearaudio Virtuoso. This is over budget but there are other members in the range and it seems likely that they will work well with a phono stage from the same brand. The other upgrade worth considering with any Audio Note turntable is one of its new tonearms which are superstars at sensible money.

Colours fly...

While I found the recent review of the Astell & Kern AK100 (HFC April 2013 issue) to be well up to David Price's usual standard I did note in the conclusion, "at last there's a machine that actually meets audiophile standards", and, "not since the Sony Walkman Pro has it been possible to enjoy serious sound on the move" to be a tad incorrect. Perhaps our David is unaware of the delightful Colorfly

Midband malaise?

I have the MartinLogan Montis loudspeakers, which you reviewed a few months back. They are wonderful speakers but they do have one (for me) significant flaw, which is that they are very poor on piano. The higher notes are brilliant but the middle and bass notes sound like a cheap electric piano. I'm using a Devialet amp so I don't think it's my amp!

Hans Glockner

DP: I think you may have answered your own question, Hans. While I think the Devialet is an amazing product in some senses, I find it has a slightly shiny sound across the midband and especially in terms of resolving the texture of strings, brass and piano. If you compare it with high-quality tube amps such as the Icon Audio 845s, or even full Class A solid-staters like Musical Fidelity's AMS50, you might find it lacking in timbral richness. The effect isn't dramatic, but I'm afraid that matter-of-fact sounding speakers such as the MartinLogans will show this up all too eagerly.

Also, the Logans have a pretty dry, clinical bass and the Devialet's low end also sounds this way too; together the two may well be a less than happy match. I do find MartinLogans rather amplifier-

sensitive, not just in the obvious sense of getting the right electrical match, but in terms of system synergy, too. Experience teaches me they tend to do best with tube power amps, and are worst with the more analytical end of solid-state. Time for a bit of experimentation on your part then! Careful siting might improve the bass, and a change of cabling may well help, too – see if you can borrow some Tellurium Q Graphite from a good dealer to try, it may restore some much needed body.

TJ: I agree with David. The Devialet brings to my mind those big Hitachi MOSFET amps of the early eighties, which yielded amazing measured performance, yet this did not always translate into a rewarding listening experience in practice. The key here is going to be partnering, and I suggest that a loudspeaker with a more relaxed and luxurious sound than the MartinLogans would suit your amplifier better.



MartinLogans might not be the best match for a Devialet amp

C4 Pro that I have been enjoying for well over a year?

Alan Strudwick

DP: Thanks for the tip-off, I shall call one in and let you know how I get on with it. Meanwhile, I stand by my rave review of the Astell & Kern, which is a cracking portable from an audiophile point of view!

TJ: When they do one that can match Sony's TC-D5 Pro II portable (The Walkman Pro's less well known big brother) then perhaps these new machines will have come of age. I'm not holding my breath though...

Wireless world

I am older, but still enjoy my music, and am currently using a good separates system at a middle of the road price. I am concerned that if I move to an apartment or similar accommodation, that my listening could be impaired. Could you recommend one or two good wireless headphones that will mostly relate well to my present

listening experience, please? The price I would leave to you, as it is not too important.

David Carr

DP: My choice would be the Sennheiser RS120, which is a good, well-made wireless headphone, and gives a clean and detailed sound over a range within 100m. However, it is important to point out that it won't approach the fidelity of a top wired design such as Sennheiser's HD650, so if you find yourself able to live with wired headphones do try these.

TJ: The trouble with wireless headphones is that they waste many of the good qualities of your amplifier since it only drives the transmitter circuit; the actual legwork gets done instead by the tiny amplifiers inside the headphones themselves. Therefore, I find it a better compromise to put up with the nuisance of occasionally getting tangled up in the cable in return for what are usually superior

results. However, if you really need wireless then have a look at Sony's MDR-DS6500, which is a pretty decent design that looks like good value at around £200, benchmark these against similar offerings from Sennheiser and AKG.

Perfect partners?

What are your thoughts on partnering the Arcam FMJ-A19 with Q Acoustic 2050i speakers? The source would be the original Rega Apollo CD player. You say to avoid the Arcam with speakers that are boomy in the bass and my concern is that the two together could be overkill. I listened to this combination in my local Richer Sounds and while the sound was big and immensely rich, it was difficult to judge the base response as the listening room was too small. My room is medium. I note from your previous issue that you recommend the Creek Evolution 50A with the Q Acoustics, but the rich tonality of the Arcam really appeals.

David Whatley



Arcam's FMJ-A19 makes a great partner for Q Acoustics speakers

DP: You're not in such a bad predicament here, as either the Creek or the Arcam are absolutely superb for the money, so you'll end up happy either way. But you're right to note that the 2050s have a big warm sound, and so does the A19; the missing part of the equation is your room. Sadly you don't specify its exact dimensions, but if it is "medium" then you should just about get away with it if you use the supplied foam bungs, and carefully spike the speakers to the floor, at least 30cm from the rear wall. Ideally though, see if you can find a good dealer who will lend you both amps, so you can do a home demo – there's no better way than hearing it for yourself.

✉ Fight the power

Anyone interested in high-fidelity sound reproduction in the home should think very carefully before installing any Power Line Telecommunications device (*HFC Letters* March 2013). As a Radio Amateur I am only too aware of the appalling levels of RF interference that these devices cause. In my case, a couple of people in my block are using PLT adaptors and the loud 'hash' is audible from Medium Wave all the way up to VHF Band 2 and beyond! To send computer data over unscreened mains cables that could be many hundreds of feet in length, acting as the perfect radio antenna, is just asking for trouble.

The Radio Society of Great Britain (RSGB), which represents licensed Radio Amateurs in the UK, has launched the 'Spectrum Defence Fund' to finance legal action urging OFCOM to enforce the EU EMC regulations against the big telecom firms, many of whose products do not comply. For the cleanest RF environment, stick to screened cables, not noisy wireless systems!

Jonathon Kempster, MIPS

DP: It's important to realise that noise – any noise – is the enemy of hi-fi and the more you do to eliminate it, the better. In individual instances PLT devices might be a handy solution to a problem, but generally I don't think it's the way to go for audiophiles.



Dealers can give far more insight than buying online

LETTER OF THE MONTH

PRIZE WINNER!

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL DEALER!

It is a truth generally acknowledged that a single man in search of good hi-fi must be in pursuit of a good hi-fi dealer (with apologies to Jane Austen). This orthodoxy has lasted my entire hi-fi buying career but now appears under threat in the light of the fate of Jessops on the high street. The disappearance of the local hi-fi dealer would be an even greater tragedy for the hi-fi buying public than the retail sector. The complex nature of the synergies required for harmony between man and music systems do not lend themselves to simple online shopping. This has been reinforced by my experiences with Audio T in Preston. Once I had fallen for the charms of a Naim UnitiQute, I was able to take my speakers along to the dealer to confirm my initial seduction. The demo lasted far longer than was required, because I was enjoying it so much. No pressure from the dealer, just tea! It would take a brass neck to try and source the kit from somewhere else after that. The price was competitive, but would've been an expensive mistake if they didn't work well with my speakers.

My only interest in this or any other dealership is that I want them to be there to feed my hi-fi habit. Any discounts offered by online buying would be wiped out by one repair or one bad buying decision. I'll buy my music online but I'll carry on using my local dealer, because I really don't want to lose them!

Alan Gillies

DP: Music to my auditory organs, Alan! Out here on the 'hi-fi frontline', life is full of matching, synergy and interoperability issues. Reading a rave review of a product and then buying online just doesn't account for all this. Who knows, you might get lucky and find your new 5-star product a perfect fit, but you may well easily not. Hi-fi dealers are uniquely placed to give you that 'field' experience, putting you in front of several bits of kit, only one of which may suit your tastes and system, and you don't know which until you've tried. We can do our best to help you with advice through the pages of this magazine, but once again, it is no substitute for using your ears on the sofa of your friendly local dealer!

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Teenage kicks

It wasn't so long ago that **Lee Dunkley** was hanging out with the cool kids in his local record shop deciding whether to buy Blondie or Boney M, but are those days really over?

My introduction to listening to music and collecting it was a habitual one. Each day after school my first task on walking though the front door, regardless of the note left on the kitchen table detailing chores, was to place a black vinyl disc on the turntable platter, lower the tonearm onto the spinning disc, and turn up the volume. This was most definitely the best part of the school day.

Unlike most teenage kids growing up in my area around the end of the seventies and early eighties, I'd save the money I earned from my paper round and Saturday morning job so that I could take the bus later that afternoon to the nearest town with a record store, and purchase one of the latest singles.

There wasn't always one particular record that I'd be setting out to buy. There were usually several tracks on my mind and I preferred to walk around the record store scanning the racks full of chart singles and albums looking at the sleeve artwork to see what caught my eye, or which of the 45s they still had left in stock late on a busy Saturday afternoon.

I have vivid memories of walking away with Blondie's *Heart of Glass* on one of my very first aimless record store visits, and I like to think that was a pretty great start to

Purchases that arrive in the post don't fill me with the sense of excitement

building my music collection. Saving up to buy an LP took several weeks and required even more deliberation about which album I should purchase, owing to the considerable financial outlay, which really did seem like a small fortune at the time.

I grew up in rural north Northants, where the nearest main town had a rather successful small independent record store called Revolver Records. I have a vague recollection that there were several other stores by the same name located in similarly sized towns across the neighbouring area, but unsurprisingly none of these stores exist anymore. I remember the exact location of the store that I used to go to on my plentiful Saturday trips, and the coloured carrier bags that they supplied to hold your music purchase were almost as collectable as the contents contained inside. The bags displayed the shop's funky revolver logo and seemingly added a sense of kudos to your music purchase, so much more than simply buying it from Woolies.

It's true that a visit to Revolver Records was regularly an intimidating experience; queues that often stretched from

the counter to the door, and if you asked the staff for something they considered uncool you were likely to be treated with a scoff of disdain and smirks from the people that waited patiently behind. Even so, the store was top of the shops for me every Saturday afternoon in the early eighties, and a regular haunt for many local music fans.

With the advent of the internet and online retailing, music fans do not need to feel self-conscious about music purchases and we can browse freely without being judged on our questionable musical tastes from the comfort of our homes. But something tangible has been lost in buying music online, and purchases that arrive in the post don't fill me with the sense of excitement and anticipation that I had when I spent most of the afternoon browsing around the record store before making a decision.

Gone but not forgotten

The loss of music retail rivals Virgin and Tower Records (plus a significant number of non-music retail chains) has seen UK high streets change beyond all recognition in recent years. Although I only ever purchased my music from HMV stores in the nineties and the first few years of the noughties, it was a sad day for all music fans when it was announced that we would lose the music retail institution from UK high streets forever, leaving many music fans without a local record shop at all.

Like many other high street retailers, the music retailer, which opened its first store on London's Oxford Street in 1921, was hit by the financial crisis that had seen a decline in sales of music and DVD purchases since 2007. But it seems all may not be lost just yet, as a few months after announcing the closure of many of its high street stores, a rescue plan has been unveiled for the remaining 132 HMV stores. The deal, which is believed to be worth around £50m comes from Hilco, which already owns HMV stores in Canada, with plans to concentrate its energies on music as well as DVD and the games sector.

As Joni Mitchell once sang; 'you don't know what you got til it's gone...' I hope the plan is successful, and I for one will be making sure I support my nearest record store at every opportunity ●



Back from the dead? HMV looks like it will still have a place on the high street





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Little audio dynamite?

High-end integrated amplifiers seem to have completely usurped budget pre-power amp combinations in our affections. **David Price** wonders why

Last month I reviewed Naim Audio's new DAC-V1/NAP 100 DAC/preamplifier and power amplifier combination. It proved a most pleasant experience, and I came away having a great deal of respect for this dinky £2,000 twosome. One thing that stuck in the back of my mind was its visual similarity to a combo I'd used many years ago – the Naim NAC42.5/NAP 110. Like the new pre-power, this was a half-width combination that you could stand on top of one another or side by side – and either which way, it oozed style and class.

Those of you of a certain age might remember it. Back in the day, it was most people's idea of their first 'serious' step into 'superfi'. For a great many years leading up to the eighties there was a prevailing notion that owning a separate preamp and power amplifier was the only serious way to go. Of course, integrated amplifiers existed back then, but they were always seen as something of a flawed compromise. Ownership of a 42/110, however, showed you were a fully paid-up member of the audiophile community, even if you couldn't quite reach the stratospheric levels of NAC 32s and NAP 250s.

This was the entry-level pre-power from a company famous for doing serious solid-state electronics, and I don't think there's a single integrated amplifier that would have

It's now very radical to even think of producing a £650 power amplifier

beaten it in a fair fight, circa 1980, at the time of its launch. But then, just a few years later, the same company produced the Naim Nait integrated. At £253 in 1984, it was about half the price of the company's cheapest pre-power, but it was gobsmackingly good. True, it had stupidly low amounts of power and this was inexcusable in the eighties when speakers all seemed to be small, power-hungry mini-monitors. But if you found a speaker it could drive, the results were (little) audio dynamite!

The Nait sparked a trend for minimalist, high performance integrated amps. Exposure came up with the X. Myst followed suit with the TMA 3, NVA's AP30 was another contender – a beautifully sweet sounding solid-state design that attempted to beat the entry-level pre and power amplifiers of the day. Then, last but not least was the Inca Tech Claymore, really ugly but possessed of more power than all of the rest.

By the late eighties, we had a whole crop of 'super integrateds' from specialist British manufacturers, many of which sounded brilliant and made it hard to justify buying

a lower-end pre-power combination like the 42/110. The distant descendants of these live on today. Naim's Nait 5 XS is an excellent example, with loads of power and punch, yet real delicacy and finesse, too. In almost every respect it's better than the original Nait – maybe only the

oldie's unreconstructed raw musicality betters it. Creek and Roksan have similar products, like the Evolution 50A and Kandy K2. Both of these are remarkably capable. So good in fact that you wonder why you'd buy a budget pre-power combination. And that's precisely what has happened, because what once used to be called 'super integrateds' have cleaned up in this middle market sector. So much so that it's now a very radical thing indeed to even think of producing a £650 power amp such as the NAP 100. This is because most people will simply pay £1,000 and get a preamp (and more) thrown in – and expect it to sound better.

Here's the catch

Still, you don't get something for nothing. The logic behind using separate pre and power amps was always for better sound – you've got better electrical isolation between the two and of course individual power supplies, too. That's as important now as it ever was. Somehow though, because the ascent of the integrated has happened so comprehensively now, people seem to forget such things. We're moving into a culture where more and more manufacturers aren't just pretending that a single integrated amplifier is all you will ever need, they're loading them up with ever more functionality.

That shows a real sea change. One of the major narratives around that first wave of eighties super-integrateds was minimalism. The Nait didn't have a balance control, but instead a silly one-channel trim pot. The Myst barely had any inputs, and the NVA didn't even have a front mounted on-off switch – you were supposed to leave it on all the time. Now people seem to have forgotten that all these extras cost money – which leaves less for the amplifier itself. So don't forget that when buying amplifiers of the integrated or pre-power variety, less can often mean more! ●



Naim's dinky combo got David thinking about other half-width models of old...







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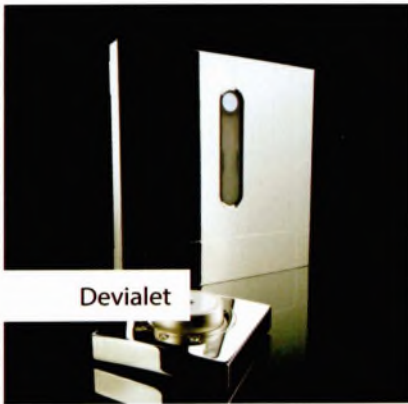
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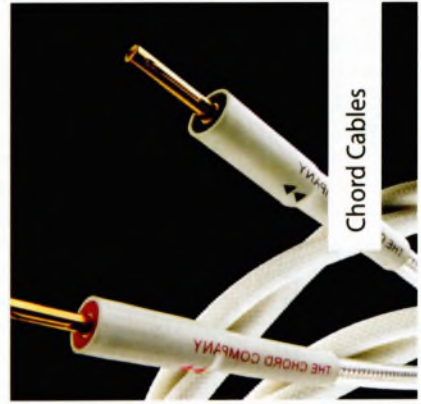
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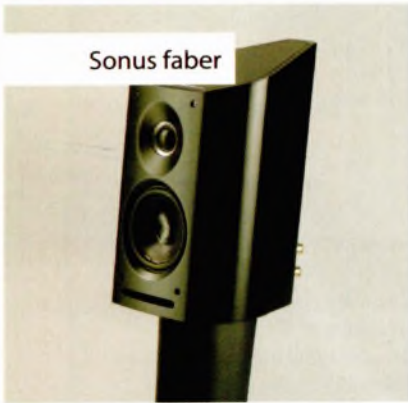
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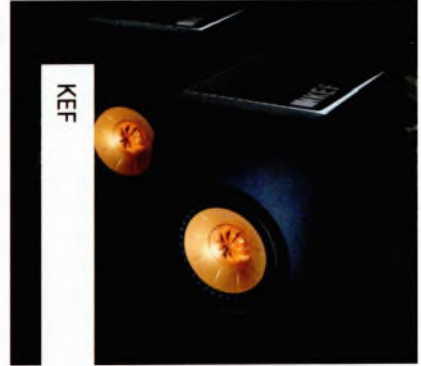
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Going back to basics

It's been a while... Last time we heard from **David Vivian** he was crafting our *Beautiful System* pages, so what did he opt for when he put together his own perfect system?

When my stint as author of this magazine's *Beautiful Systems* features ended a few years back, it was a kind of relief. Month in, month out I'd gorge myself on aspirational audio I could never hope to own while trying to convince my fellow flat dwellers that truly extended bass is a rare and beautiful thing they should consider themselves fortunate to experience. While it was a privilege and fun to celebrate the sonic gifts of systems that seldom dipped below £30k, it was never possible to unequivocally justify the expense. Would I buy a super system if I won the lottery? Yeah, why not? Would I scrimp and save every last penny to reach the summit of some notional Mount Olympus of hi-fi perfection? Absolutely not.

The lesson was brought home on the odd occasion we'd throw an affordable, 'real world' combo with components from the likes of Cyrus, Arcam or Rega into the mix. Yes, that 'nth degree' of subtlety, refinement, poise, control, slam or whatever shade of high-end colouring floats your boat suddenly seemed more elusive than the Higgs Boson. But good old musical communication? Not a problem. In fact, in this (vital) respect, the simple systems with friendly price tags were frequently as good, if not better, than the lounge-dominating, five-figure behemoths.

So what did I do when the fancy packaging was, for the final time, reunited with its precious cargo and sent back to its makers? I could have played the sensible punter, armed myself with a sensible budget,

I'm embarrassed to tell you how little I paid for the Arcam Alpha CD player

leafed-back to one of those real world *Beautiful Systems* in the surefire knowledge that it would be no less pleasurable than it had been before. But no. I still had a few bits and pieces lying around – some interesting cables, my trusty four-tier Atacama equipment rack and, best of all, a pair of 24in Slate Audio slate speaker stands (the best speaker stands ever made), mixed with a curious desire to return to what were my hi-fi salad days: the early nineties. This, I had to concede, wasn't the same as trying to extract, with cool-browed reasoning, the maximum musical enjoyment from the minimum financial commitment. Even compensating for the inevitable rosey tint, my memory could be selling me a false dream.

But if it was, at least it wasn't going to cost me an arm and a leg. At the time, the nearest place to me with

anything remotely 'hi-fi' going on hosted a marvellous shop where you could buy or exchange kit from hi-fi's 'golden age'. And so I did. Trying to summon a veteran reviewer's instinct for what would work with what, I set about putting together a classic budget-lite retro system that, when teamed with my collection of ancillaries and an inveterate tinkerer's will power, would deliver the musical goods for what, by *Beautiful System* standards, would be mere pennies.

Poundstretcher

I'm embarrassed to tell you how little I paid for the Arcam Alpha CD player (original model), Pioneer A-400X integrated amp and Epos ES11 speakers (bi-wire version), but I remember there being change from 100 notes. And they were all in very good nick. Why those particular components? Well, I always liked the robust, fleshy, slightly dark sound of Arcam's early 16-bit CD spinners (squeaky clean and clinical they're not). And as a serial A-400X owner from years gone by – culminating in a Tom Evans supercharged GTE which, crazily, I gave to my best friend who then ran off with my wife – I just had to have another, even if the X sounds a little safer, softer and warmer than the extraordinarily transparent original. The Epos ES11s were another must have, their reputation for being ridiculously musical and, on the right stands, possessing almost holographic imaging capabilities having stood the test of time to a remarkable degree.

And how does it sound? Pretty miraculous, really. That thing about ES11s only working properly on their own dedicated open-frame metal stands? Poppycock. On the super-heavyweight Slates they simply disappear. The synergy between the Arcam and Pioneer is pretty special, too: they're pulling in the same, admittedly somewhat mellifluous, direction but with none of the slight brittleness and edge some modern kit brings to the party. It doesn't go very loud or all that deep. It isn't obviously fast or forensically detailed. But it plays music engagingly. When all is said and done, that's all that matters ●

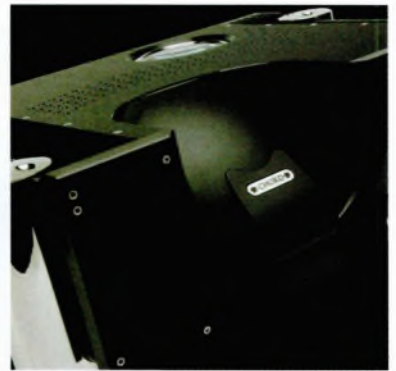


Sometimes a well-matched setup can be as good as a super costly one



DAVID VIVIAN
Hi-fi and car writer

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- ARCAM
- ATLAS Cables
- audiolab
- AUDIOVECTOR
- Baird audio
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Shiver me timbers!

Forget Captain Jack Sparrow and Captain Pugwash, there's a new pirate in town. But **Richard Stevenson** is more interested in hi-res music than rum or swashbuckling...

I have become a pirate. While I am not unfamiliar with flouncing around wearing nothing but a frilly shirt and a parrot, this time it's for real. I have spent the last 20 years fighting the good fight against music piracy and written countless articles suggesting hanging, drawing and quartering for copyright offenders. My moral standpoint would make Mary Whitehouse look like a campaigner for social liberalism. But I have succumbed. I have downloaded an album via a link in a newsgroup. For free. That thump was me falling from grace.

So why this change of heart to a life of roguish behaviour and a predilection for saying "Arrr!" before ordering a pint? Two reasons; necessity and *cogito nullo crimen*. That is, I do not believe I have committed a crime, yer honour.

Necessity because if you live in the UK then legitimate access to high-resolution audio files is woefully lacking. Yes the likes of Linn and B&W have brought us a plethora of diddly-diddly hi-fi muzak in hi-res, but it's not exactly mainstream stuff. Go to US vendors like HDtracks and you will find a good back catalogue of classic artists in 96/24, 176/24 and 192/24 and even a reasonable selection of new material in 44kHz/24. Yet precious little of it is available if you are looking to purchase from a UK IP address. This, says the pop-up blocking the check-out, is

All I have done is replicate data I already own for my own personal use

due to licensing issues in your region. These are the very same licensing issues that ensured the Pandora music service was prohibited access by European IP addresses after only a year of being available as a beta in the UK. Interestingly, Pandora's unique method of suggesting new music based on analysing the genomic structure of your favourite tracks was directly responsible for me spending a fortune on new CDs that year. Oh the irony.

Specifically HDtracks blocked my attempted purchase of The Eagles' *Hotel California* in 192/24. Yet after some searching of torrent and usenet groups I found it readily available. So, running the risk of having Sussex Constabulary prepping to keel haul a confessing pirate around the police social club minibus, I admit I acquired this hi-res album by nefarious means.

But have I committed copyright theft at all? I have purchased *Hotel California* at least three times already. Once on vinyl, once on CD and once on DVD-A. In fact it is the DVD-A stereo master at 192/24 that is widely available to download as an iso disk image file. All I have actually

done is replicated data I already own for my own personal use. If the law says that this is copyright theft, then I would argue that ripping your own CDs to iTunes and then syncing them to an iPod is actually copyright theft, but twice over.

Even if I didn't own the DVD-A, would downloading a 192/24 version be copyright infringement if I had already purchased the vinyl or the CD? If the different format is the issue then surely syncing your lossless ripped CDs to iCloud and then streaming back in 256kbps is copyright theft as you are receiving content in a format you didn't already own? Perhaps the real question is whether you actually own your digital media at all?

Die Hard with a vengeance

Bruce Willis was allegedly miffed by this very issue last year and was reported to be considering a legal case against Apple as iTunes' T&Cs prohibited him from leaving his extensive iTunes library to his kids in his will. Last month a federal judge in the US shut down and fined a website that enabled the sale of pre-owned digital music files. ReDigi, which provided a platform to buy and sell pre-owned iTunes tracks, was declared unlawful despite ensuring sold-on tracks could no longer be accessed by the original owner. It's a complicated case, but further underlines the precedent that you cannot sell-on or even pass-on your legitimately purchased iTunes digital media. Could Apple's huge net deposit of tax dollars into the US economy have anything to do with the outcome of this case, I wonder?

Against this high-profile madness, it is surely no surprise that the pirate music market absolutely dwarfs the legal online music business. Is it any wonder that subscription content services like Spotify, Steam (for PC games) and Sky are so popular? A considerable part of their appeal, and perhaps even their business model, is that they are so much easier than searching for and downloading content illegally.

Call me old fashioned, but I still want to buy and own my music in the highest quality available and Spotify fails spectacularly on both counts. Until that changes it's a pirate's life for me, me hearties! ●



Hotel California, which Richard now owns in four formats, but does he really own it at all?



RICHARD STEVENSON
Hi-fi writer, pirate and bass head

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the attitudes or opinions of Hi-Fi Choice or AVTech Media Ltd



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.

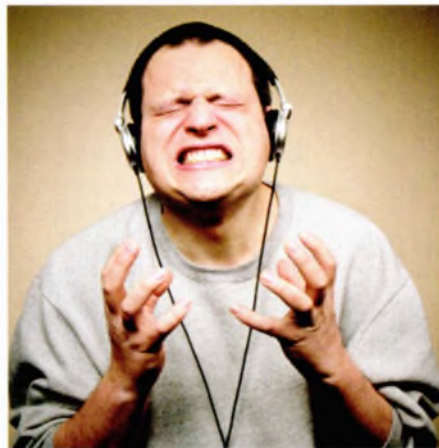


Quality vs Quantity

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
 40 High Street.
 t: 01233 624441
 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

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RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
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SW11
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O'BRIEN HI-FI
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MIDLANDS
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 t: 01295 272158
 www.overture.co.uk

Birmingham

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 Edgbaston.
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 www.musicmatters.co.uk

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

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 www.acoustica.co.uk

Hull
THE AUDIO ROOM
 Savile Street, Hull
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 VERDICT ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Listening panel

One of the most iconic British loudspeaker designs has just celebrated its 55th birthday. **David Price** remembers Quad's seriously special ESL-57 electrostatic.

Quad is famous for its very own style and sound. It has been responsible for a number of highly successful amplifiers – especially the Quad II valve power amps and the 303/405 solid-staters – but the product that epitomises the marque is the ESL-57 'Electrostatic' loudspeaker.

Founded by Peter J Walker in 1936, the Acoustical Manufacturing Co. Ltd. was forced to move from London to Huntingdon in the middle of World War II when its original factory was bombed. After the war, it transitioned its original line of public address equipment into hi-fi, and renamed itself QUAD, short for Quality Unit Amplifier Domestic. As well as launching valve pre- and power amplifiers, the company introduced its first loudspeaker in 1950 – the CR corner ribbon. This was an interesting hybrid design using a Goodmans Axiom 150 cone mid/bass unit and an electromagnetic ribbon loudspeaker, designed by Acoustical, for the higher frequencies.

Walker must have been struck by the problems integrating the two different drivers – as much as a problem today

as it was 60 years ago – because soon he began work on the ESL-57 full range electrostatic. This speaker is fascinating to look at today, because rather like the original Mini or Concorde, its form is a result of its function – there's nothing superfluous or 'designed' about it.

A design for life

The 57 is essentially a large wooden frame into which three panels are screwed, each panel being an electrostatic transducer, that itself is a frame inside which a treated polyethylene terephthalate (commonly called Mylar) film is stretched. The film has a mildly electrically conductive paste and sits between two stators, both of which receive a very high voltage that effectively 'shakes' the film, producing the sound as the charge varies. The ESL uses a single treble-panel sitting between and slightly behind two bass panels, one either side. Behind these, at the bottom of the back of the frame, is the transformer. This arrangement gives it that striking planar shape, and all it's got on top of that is a grille covering to keep curious fingers out!

Launched in 1957, the new Quad Electrostatic wasn't the very first electrostatic, but it was undoubtedly the most successful, mass-production one. It was quickly adopted by the BBC, whose engineers were bowled over by its transparency and speed. Quite right too, as it almost uniquely had the advantages of being a pure electrostatic, without the pitfalls of conventional box loudspeakers. Because that Mylar film was so light, the sound that was produced had excellent transients and very low colouration. This was further aided by the lack of a conventional cabinet with its horrid box-like artefacts – that meant a wonderfully linear bass down to about 45Hz with no boom.

Indeed, listening to a Quad ESL-57 is fascinating. Even now it is surely the purest expression of the electrostatic ideal. In the intervening 55 years Quad hasn't dramatically improved on it – rather it has evolved to be more room and user-friendly, but still the ESL-57's purposefulness shines through. A good, tip-top condition Quad offers incredible insight into the music, allied to the ability to serve it up in such a linear

way. The best way of describing it is as a wide open window through which you can peer. It's not one of those 'character speakers', like a classic JBL or B&W – rather it just lets the music waft around you in a polite, genteel, matter-of-fact, but nevertheless, engrossing way.

Tuning out the flaws

Like all loudspeakers the Quad is a flawed product, but interestingly most of its flaws are far easier for the human brain to tune out than most. Its performance at the frequency extremes shows why about 99.9% of all speaker makers choose boomy boxes with chaotic moving coil transducers; both bass and treble are limited. The bass – such as it is – is actually very good, being tuneful and taut and supple and fluid. It's just that there isn't very much of it, and as soon

Robertson-Aikman. By using four instead of two, the speaker is able to move an awful lot more air, in a decidedly more relaxed way.

Still, for all its faults, what the ESL does, it does brilliantly. Find the sweet spot in the room and the soundstage snaps into focus in a way that virtually no other loudspeaker manages. Suddenly the whole music grows in stature to engulf you, and you feel so close to it that you can see the whites of the musicians' eyes. Everything is so open and effortless, and the result is a marvellously entertaining listen. It's these core competencies of transparency, openness and insight that the Quad Electrostatic does so well, and these in turn mean that the brain has to work much less hard than when listening via most box speakers – whose constant booming, banging and clanging cause fatigue

Listening to a Quad ESL-57 is fascinating. It is surely the purest expression of the electrostatic ideal

as you start playing bass-driven rock music (which hadn't even been invented when Peter Walker was designing this speaker!) it shows its discomfort. It's not bad, it's just it sounds weak and a little asthmatic when played at higher listening levels. Treble is poor too – what there is of it is nice and crisp and even, but it's just that there isn't much to behold. I've seen the treble quoted as going up to 17kHz, but frankly there's not much to get excited about over around 11kHz. This strips some recordings of a sense of air, and is why adding a supertweeter is a brilliant upgrade.

The other real problem with the speaker is one of sound pressure level; it doesn't generate much in the way of one! When powered by a big transistor amplifier – again which didn't really exist at the time of its introduction – the speaker has a tendency to break up, or at least sit on dynamic transients, at quite modest listening levels. Pushed really hard, it will start arcing, the stators ionising the air and sparking through the Mylar film. This will soon kill the panels, and despite Quad later fitting protection circuitry, it was one of the reasons that the Beeb moved to other monitor speaker solutions. It is also the main reason why many ESL-57 aficionados used stacked pairs, famously such as SME's late Alastair

and distract the listener from the musical performance. The wonderful, all-of-a-piece sensation of a well-sited pair of ESL-57s is a joy to hear, yet is sadly something most audiophiles will never experience.

Why not? Well, the biggest obstacle to owning a pair of Quads isn't necessarily price, it's having a room that's big enough to really get the best from them. They radiate sound both forwards and backwards, which is why you've got to move them well out into the room, away from the back wall, which reflects the rear waves. This done, they can breathe – imaging better and delivering higher volumes more effortlessly, and you you'll also find the midband cleans up

BUYING AND RESTORING

You hear stories of people picking up Quad ESL-57s in junk shops for a song, the proprietors thinking them to be old radiators. In a way they are, it's just that they push around sound rather than heat! Prices vary hugely, but for a half-decent, well-preserved pair with sequential serial numbers, you're starting at about £500. For this money there should be nothing wrong with them as such, aside from age, wear and tear. An old Quad won't be giving its sonic best and should you really get interested in what it can do, you'll need to get the panels rebuilt and the electronics serviced. The best place I've encountered is One Thing Audio (www.onethingaudio.net), which can refurbish and/or upgrade every part of the speaker. Prices range from around £150 up to £1,500 depending on the work you require to be done. Fully modded Quad ESL-57s are one of the best loudspeakers I have ever heard, with dazzling clarity, speed and rhythm, and even the bass is stronger!

a treat, too. They're a particularly tricky load to drive too, so weak kneed single-ended triode tube amps need not apply!

Conclusion

Later Quad ESL-series speakers brought much improved power handling, better low bass and high treble performance, and a slightly cleaner, tighter sound – but there's still something very compelling about the original ESL-57. A really well-preserved or meticulously rebuilt pair will provide a wonderfully cohesive sound that is musically communicative in a way that practically every other loudspeaker I've heard isn't.

It brings you so close to the music, and is able to do so in such an effortless and matter-of-fact way, that you just can't stop listening. Of course, it is also a design classic in its own right, and is surely one of the 20th century's most special products – not just for what it used to do, but for what it can still do today. A great classic loudspeaker, so make sure you hear one, one day ●

Early adopters of the ESL-57 had to wait for rock and roll to be invented



The Brady Bunch

Doug Brady HiFi makes use of over 50 years of experience to produce some truly unique systems. *Ed Selley* is sitting comfortably and preparing to be blown away

Founded over 50 years ago Doug Brady HiFi has become a mainstay of hi-fi dealers in the North West of England. Originally operating out of premises in central Liverpool, the business moved to its current location in Warrington in the eighties and has been there ever since.

The considerable amount of time that Doug Brady HiFi has been trading has resulted in a brand portfolio that's an interesting combination of the well known and the unusual. Perennial favourites like Naim, Rega and Pro-Ject rub shoulders with Harbeth, Renaissance Audio and Magnepan – more of which later.

The philosophy in terms of product is almost as simple as things that work and things that don't, rather than imprinting a single system type across the brands it offers.

Like a number of UK dealers, Doug Brady HiFi has found itself offering more and more streaming products and DACs while CD sales have begun to tail off. Pleasingly, vinyl remains a strong area of demand and the store offers an interesting portfolio of analogue products.

With this in mind, aided by Tony Sallis of NuNu distribution, three systems have been prepared to demonstrate the width of the Doug Brady HiFi product portfolio and the different front ends available. Armed with some of my favourite music and a cup of coffee, I settle down for a listen...

THE EXPERTS



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naimaudio.com



ADMIRAL FALLOW
BOOTS MET MY FACE
CD



RAY CHARLES
GENIUS LOVES COMPANY
LP



MUSE
THE 2ND LAW
HI-RES FLAC

SYSTEM 1 – RENAISSANCE FARE

The first system is perhaps the most conventional in that it's fronted by a CD player, but this is still a decidedly unusual combination of brands that you are unlikely to find anywhere else. Furthermore, they haven't been assembled for novelty, this is a very talented ensemble. The CD player fronting the system is the Sonneteer Byron. Sonneteer enjoys a slightly lower profile than some of the other British Audio brands, but looking at the Byron, it is not easy to explain why. Your £1,200 buys you a well-finished and very handsome CD player that makes use of a bitstream DAC in preference to some of the more recent innovations in this field – Sonneteer seemingly preferring the results from the older design.

Partnering the Byron are three boxes of amplification from another low-profile British brand. Renaissance audio has an interesting mix of solid state and valve amplification on offer and the O2 series units here are at the more affordable end of the range. The combination of RAP-02 preamp and a pair of RA-02 monoblocks results in a lot of amplifier for the money and the 50W of amplification should be enough for most requirements.

As the speakers in this instance are Harbeth's Super HL5, 50W should be more than sufficient for this easy going descendent of the classic BBC monitor speaker. The dimensions of the HL5 are best thought of as retro – this is very much a standmount not a bookshelf and uses a custom-built 8in driver with an unusual combination of 25mm tweeter and 20mm supertweeter. The result is a system in the best tradition of British audio, understated, unconcerned by the technology of the moment and promising much. So how does it sound?

Richly rewarded

The budget systems that dealers assemble for this piece can often suffer from the anticipation of what is to come, like an *hors d'oeuvres* for bigger and better things. In this instance though, the faith that both the Doug Brady team and Tony have in this ensemble is richly rewarded. From the opening bars of Admiral Fallow's *Squealing Pigs*,



the fundamental 'rightness' of the performance is apparent. Louis Abbot's vocals are wonderfully rich and vivid and the system effortlessly generates a large and believable soundstage that gives performances a sense of realism that is incredibly difficult not to like.

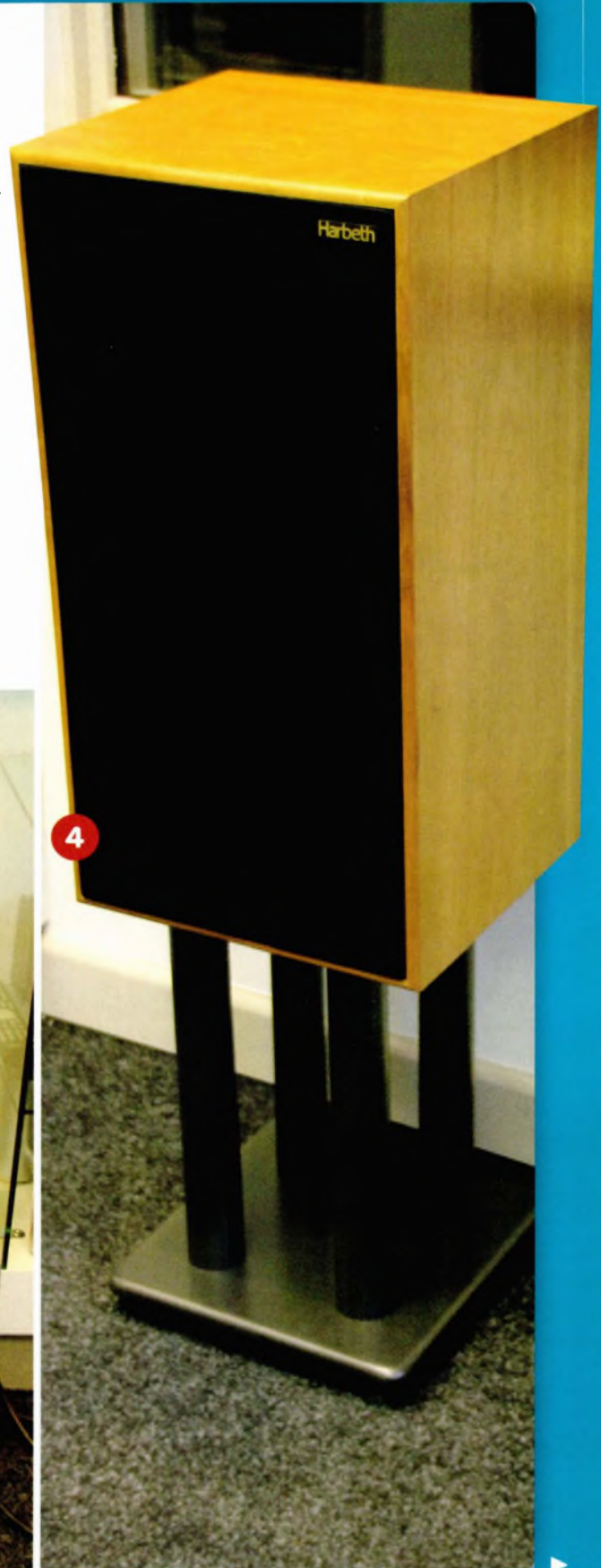
Trick and treat

Perhaps the neatest trick the system pulls off is that at no stage during listening does it ever sound forced or strained and I've no idea what you'd have to do to make it sound harsh or forward, but none of this is achieved by rolling off top-end detail or creating a smooth or bloomy sound. The top end of the Harbeth's is in reality exceptionally detailed and impressively incisive, but the civility of the partnering electronics feeds them a signal that is exactly what they need to excel. At the other end of the frequency spectrum, the Harbeth's demonstrate there really is

little substitute for driver area when it comes to the reproduction of believable, clean bass response.

The result is a system that is detailed, insightful and rewarding, but wonderfully easy to listen to for long periods of time. It seems entirely unfazed by any genre of music I throw at it and while not an unreasonable sum of money, has to be considered exceptional value for the sheer levels of performance that it offers. The footprint is also entirely sensible and the way it is bolted together suggests it will be producing enjoyable sound for years to come. If this is the opening effort, I can't wait to see what's going to happen further up the portfolio.

- 1 SONNETEER BYRON CD PLAYER £1,200
 - 2 RENAISSANCE RAP 02 PREAMP £1,000
 - 3 RENAISSANCE RA2 MONO BLOCKS £1,700 PER PAIR
 - 4 HARBETH SUPER HLS £2,599
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £6,499**



SYSTEM 2 - CONSULT THE ORACLE

For the middle system, we decided to go entirely analogue. The Doug Brady HiFi turntable lineup is considerable and includes mainstays from Michell, Rega and SME, but we're opting to showcase another turntable which is slightly less well known, but has much to offer.

Oracle Audio is perhaps best known for the various iterations of the fabulous Delphi turntable, but the Canadian-based company also builds the more affordable Paris turntable seen here. Supplied with a carefully upgraded Pro-Ject carbon arm and matching Paris Cartridge, the Oracle turns up as a 'turnkey' solution, already set up and ready to go. While not as visually spectacular as the Delphi, the Paris oozes quality and feels impressively substantial. Partnered with another of Renaissance Audio's offerings, the RP-01 phono stage, the result is an understated, but capable vinyl front end.

Belles of the ball

Amplification is supplied by another of the NuNu brands, Belles. One of the lesser known of the US audio brands, Belles produces a distinctive range of amps. The pairing for this system is the A22 Preamp and A150 power amplifier, which are typical of the distinctive way that Belles products are designed. The preamp is a valve hybrid with a brace of 12AU7 tubes helping the

signal while the A150 makes use of JFETS at the input section and boasts 125W output.

Every single one of those 125W is going to come in handy because the speakers benefit from a bit of driving. Magnepan is another North American brand with some distinctive technologies to its name. Instead of using conventional drivers, Magnepan makes use of Electro Planar technology that drives an ultra-thin membrane across its entire radiating area. This means that Magnepans are a bit larger than conventional speakers - a 'bit larger' meaning that the MG1.7 seen here is getting on for two metres tall. The technology is interesting but what can this North American trio achieve?

Absolutely captivating

From the moment that the Paris Cartridge hits the groove of The Cinematic Orchestra's *Live at the Albert Hall*, it is clear that this is a system that does scale on a level that very few systems at any price can compete with. The sense of the space around Fontella Bass as she sings *All That You Give* is absolutely incredible and the shimmering response of the audience around her is all encompassing and absolutely captivating.

Most surprising is the bass response. The MG1.7 is only rated down to 40Hz, but there seems to be no roll off at all down to this point and the result is that the system never feels short of low-end heft. There is

also impressive detail and cohesion to low notes that suggest both source and amplification are extracting every nuance of the performance. The noise floor is also very low, which allows for fine detail to be heard without needing to overemphasise any part of the frequency response.

The effect is both commendably and impressively effortless. With Ray Charles' *Genius Loves Company* I have to stop making notes and simply revel in an exceptionally vibrant and compelling performance. This unforced musicality is really what this system is all about. If you can accommodate and place the Magnepans, the rest of the system is incredibly undemanding. The turntable doesn't require any fiddling with protractors or stylus gauges to get up and running and as a combination of deck, arm and cartridge it delivers impressive performance. The Renaissance phono stage and Belles pre/power are impressively compact, beautifully assembled and deliver the power and cohesion required to make this system sing. If you are looking for a world-class vinyl system, this is a fabulous place to start looking.

- 1 ORACLE PARIS TURNTABLE £4,750
 - 2 RENAISSANCE PHONO STAGE £1,995
 - 3 BELLES A22 PREAMP £2,500
 - 4 BELLES 150V2 £2,300
 - 5 MAGNEPLANAR MG1.7 £2,500
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £14,045**



SYSTEM 3 – EXHAUSTIVE RESEARCH

The final system is another coming together of the well known and the less common. It also marks a move back to a digital front-end although in this case, thanks to the presence of a DAC, it allows for hi-res to be used as well as CD.

The DAC in question is the latest offering from AstinTrew. The Concord range of products represents a move upmarket for the brand and the technology is impressive. The Concord is fitted with a selection of electrical digital inputs as standard, but can be ordered with a choice of asynchronous USB or Firewire connections. The most unusual feature is that there is a pair of valves in the RCA output stage, but the XLR stage is exclusively solid state. Partnering the Concord is Chord Electronics' fabulously tactile Blu transport, which offers superb performance and a wonderfully high-end user experience.

Hell's Belles

Amplification is again supplied by Belles. The VT-01 preamp and SA100 power amp are cosmetically similar to the smaller units of system two and, like the A22 preamp, the VT-01 is a hybrid tube design and the layout of the SA100 is recognisably in keeping with the smaller power amplifier, but the size and component quality all take a further step forward. By the standards of American high end, these are still relatively compact units. Power output in this system drops to 100W, but this is unlikely to be a problem for the speakers involved.

At 91dB/W sensitivity, the Kudos Titan is nowhere near as power dependent as the Magnepan of system two. The flagship of the Kudos range is an innovative speaker. It looks like a relatively conventional floorstander, but divides into two separate sections. The top half contains a tweeter and a 220mm mid bass driver while the lower section admirably handles the bass, thanks to a pair of 220mm drivers mounted in an isobaric arrangement. The omens are good for a knock-out performance but can this system match the class of its less expensive brethren?

Beautifully arranged

The most interesting aspect of this system's performance is that like the other two systems, it walks an impressive line between truly exceptional detail retrieval and a complete avoidance of harshness or

forwardness. With the stunningly beautiful *Machines of Love and Grace* by Martha Tilston the performance is stunningly real and beautifully arranged. The way this system goes about reproducing vocals is out of this world. Nothing is unnaturally large or reproduced to the detriment of other parts of the mix but at no time is it ever less than unequivocally real.

Equally impressive is the bass. The isobaric arrangement of the Kudos Titans respond superbly to a set of electronics that clearly have no trouble in producing superbly deep and tight bass. When a Naim NDX is rustled up as a means of sending some high-resolution digital audio to the AstinTrew, the electronic rumbling of Muse's *Madness* is tight, fast and – when necessary – positively subterranean. There is not the slightest sense of bloat or overhang to the low-end and it appears to integrate superbly well with the upper registers.

This system might be comfortably more expensive than the two previous offerings, but it goes an awfully long way to justifying the increase in price. It boasts phenomenal

tonality and impact and can provide forensic levels of detail without losing sight of the presentation as a whole. It is an impressive demonstration of the Doug Brady HiFi approach to making music and one that deserves seeking out ●

- 1 CHORD BLU TRANSPORT £6,840
 - 2 ASTINTREW CONCORD DAC 1 £4,100
 - 3 BELLES VT01 PREAMP £4,500
 - 4 BELLES SA100 POWER AMP £4,500
 - 5 KUDOS TITAN LOUDSPEAKERS £12,950
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £32,890



One of the most enjoyable aspects of my visit is experiencing such an impressive combination of familiar and unfamiliar electronics into systems that are all capable beyond the sum of their already talented parts. The experience of the team and the confidence they have to go

with what works over a perceived flavour of the month bodes well for the long term pride of ownership that a really great system can provide.

It's also good to see that all three major formats are being well provided for and that moving into streaming need not

have any adverse effect on a dealer's ability to showcase other formats. With this in mind, it's vinyl front end and planar speakers in system two that leaves the greatest impression. As a demonstration of effortless scale, I suspect it will take some beating.

Al Pacino stars as the legendary producer in HBO's *Phil Spector*, which will be on Sky Atlantic HD in June



Phil Spector

Phil Spector has been called a madman and a control freak but his best recordings have stood the test of time. **Simon Berkovitch** and sixties collector **JT Rathbone** find out why

You've heard the stories; mad producer pulls gun on singer at session, reclusive genius keeps wife virtual prisoner in mansion, recording pioneer goes berserk on drink and drugs cocktail and so on... to his infamous murder trial.

While it's difficult to escape these events, it's the records he produced – notably between 1962 and 1970 – that built his formidable reputation that concern us here.

And what records! From the opening piano motif of *He's A Rebel* to the dramatic, ominous ending of *River Deep – Mountain High*, Spector pushed the boundaries of pop music. He knew it could be high art, and with full sweeping orchestral arrangements, infectiously melodic songs and an unbeatable team of session musicians known as the

Wrecking Crew, he proved it again and again on his self-styled 'pocket symphonies'.

This 'Wall of Sound', as it was dubbed, demanded, powerful vocalists. From Tina Turner to The Ronettes, Spector certainly had a good ear for them. And, perhaps more significantly, he possessed the personality and ego to overshadow any of the artists he worked with, becoming in effect the first celebrity producer in the process.

This attitude often bordered on contempt for the artists concerned. When he wanted to produce a quick master of The Crystals' *He's A Rebel* for instance, he turned to session singer Darlene Love and her backing singers, The Blossoms, instead. It was their only number one, but the real Crystals were not amused.

Even more frustrating for some of his artists was a tendency to leave perfectly good

finished tracks languishing in the vaults. As the two later LP volumes of *Rare Masters* attested, many of these were no mere throwaways – The Ronettes' tracks in particular certainly being worthy of release.

But after his self-imposed two-year exile from the music business in 1966, Spector never fully regained his status. Unfortunately, not only was Phil losing his Midas touch, he was also losing touch with a rapidly changing music scene. This, combined with increasingly erratic, often frightening behaviour, helped nurture his pariah image, and although critically acclaimed albums with John Lennon, Dion, Leonard Cohen and even The Ramones kept his name alive, the game was up by the mid-1980s.

Here are four varied artists from different times who brought out the best in him.



Spector's jealousy over the singer brought out the worst of his controlling personality

The Ronettes

The girl band to beat all girl bands

Estelle and Veronica 'Ronnie' Bennett, and their first cousin Nedra Kelly, had cut a handful of flop singles before they met Phil Spector in early 1963. After a couple of false starts, sparks began to fly romantically and musically between Spector and Ronnie.

In the summer of that year, the deathless *Be My Baby* became their first official Philles release. Featuring one of the most instantly recognisable drum intros in popular music,

not to mention the young Miss Bennett's astounding voice, it tore up the US charts and soon followed suit worldwide.

Phil and Ronnie's relationship almost appeared too cute to be true – the producer co-writing heart-on-sleeve love songs for his muse to sing back to him. The next four singles, including the oft-covered *Baby, I Love You* and the sublime *Walking In The Rain* all sold respectably. But Spector's

jealousy over the singer brought out the worst of his controlling personality. His refusal to issue many of the girls' finished masters, and reluctance to allow Ronnie to enter the studio conspired to prematurely curtail The Ronettes' promising career.

Their last 45, the excellent *I Can Hear Music* (co-written but not produced by Spector) bombed on release in late 1966 and the group officially split a few months later.



The stripped-down sound complements the material's confessional nature

John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band

Lennon turned to Spector for *Instant Karma* after The Beatles split

Spector made no secret of his desire to record The Beatles. So when he was handed the tape from the group's ill-fated *Let It Be* album as an audition, he jumped at the chance. Of course, the group imploded before any real collaboration could occur.

Lennon opted to go it alone with Spector and the powerful *Instant Karma* 45, with Phil at the helm emerged in 1970, just before the producer embarked on his Beatles

remixes. Heavily reverbed drums and piano, plus the singer's trademark vocal echo, are already in place, and four of his subsequent solo LPs would employ Spector's talents – the first two of which are arguably the best of both artists' post-1960s work.

Critically acclaimed as Lennon's finest solo album, 1970s *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* is sonically unique in both Lennon and Spector's catalogues owing to its stark,

stripped-down sound, perfectly complementing the material's soul-searching, confessional nature. The *Imagine* LP sweetened the pill production-wise, but Lennon sounds even more bitter in places.

Strictly speaking, these albums were both co-productions. When Spector was finally given full reign on the bloated *Rock 'n' Roll* LP all hell broke loose, torpedoing both their working and personal relationship.



It was Tina's distinctive voice he was after

Ike & Tina Turner

One of the most dynamic musical duos of the time

By 1966, with Spector apparently bored of The Ronettes, he struck an alliance with one of America's most dynamic musical duos. The result was the record that would represent the pinnacle of his 1960s' work: *River Deep – Mountain High*.

Although they'd been performing since the late fifties, it was the former Anna Mae Bullock's searing lead vocal on 1961's *A Fool in Love* that first brought Ike and Tina Turner to wider attention, going on to sell over a million copies in the US and paving the way for a staggering run of singles.

James Brown's legendary act aside, there was nothing that could touch the Ike & Tina Turner Review on the live circuit, and the

group racked up 365 nights a year, wowing audiences with their powerful stage show.

Ike was positively tyrannical in the studio, and Spector was apparently reluctant to back horns with him. Besides which, it was Tina's distinctive voice he was after and the tracks he produced under the duo's name featured his own musicians, while Ike was relegated to arranging album tracks.

River Deep was arguably Spector's most ambitious recording to date; a great wailing wall of sound. But when the single struggled to just 88 in the charts, he was disgusted and disillusioned. After a couple more Ike & Tina 45s he disbanded Phyllis and retired from music for two years.



He took most of the tracks at a near funereal pace

Dion

The doo-wopper got a helping hand from Spector

Dion DiMucci was on his fourth or fifth incarnation as a recording artist by the time of the *Born to Be with You* sessions with Spector in 1975. After first tasting fame in 1957 fronting blue-eyed doo-woppers Dion And The Belmonts, he cut some sharp solo singles in the early sixties, big hits *The Wanderer* and *Ruby Baby* among them.

Despite further strong releases, falling sales and a long-term drug habit curtailed his winning streak a few years later. But in 1968, he settled into a more introspective, singer-songwriter style and begun to cut records for Warner Brothers.

Five years later, DiMucci was informed Phil Spector was interested in working with him.

The producer felt an affinity with Dion: both were originally from the south Bronx and had enjoyed success young at around the same time – what could possibly go wrong?

Well, aside from the fact that Spector's studio drinking had escalated with often frustrating results, by the mid-70s, he was in his 'monolithic' period – as on his recently produced LP for Cher – he took most of the tracks at a near funereal pace. Coupled with the often-bombastic arrangements or weird mixes, the songs take on a unique feel.

There were some fine moments, but both parties initially disowned the album, which flopped on its eventual release. Time and critical reappraisal have been kinder.

► PHIL SPECTOR SHOPPING LIST

In addition to the four artists and albums profiled, your record collection will benefit from the following eight Phil Spector classics. All are available to buy from online stores at the time of writing.



The Crystals

He's A Rebel

Spector perfected his sound on this Phyllis LP debut, although Darlene Love's vocal on the title track was an early sign of his Machiavellian tendencies.



Various Artists

A Christmas Gift To You

The godfather of all seasonal albums, Spector's bright, almost kitsch productions perfectly encapsulate the yuletide experience on vinyl like no other record.



The Righteous Brothers

The Very Best of The Righteous Brothers - Unchained Melody

Blue-eyed soul at its finest. All of Spector's essential productions are here, perfectly capturing the duo's rich voices.



George Harrison

All Things Must Pass

Recorded almost at the same time as Lennon's *Plastic Ono Band*, Harrison's debut won commercially, but was no match for polish or strength of composition.



Various Artists

Wall of Sound: The Very Best of Phil Spector 61-66

Pretty much a perfect guide for beginners, packed with some of the era's most sublime and innovative pop moments, many of them huge hits.



Various Artists

Phil Spector Presents The Phyllis Album Collection

For the more curious punter, this reasonably priced seven-CD boxset collects most of the early LPs and throws into the mix a disc of rare B-sides.



Various Artists

Phil Spector: A Wall of Soundlikes

Imitation is apparently the sincerest form of flattery, and even Phil himself might have blushed on hearing the best of this selection.



The Beach Boys

Pet Sounds

Spector's brightest pupil, Brian Wilson, employs the Wrecking Crew for a masterclass in soundscape creation on this collection; a homage to his musical hero.

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Analogue

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**101 The Rolling
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Crossfire Hurricane

Musicreviews

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ALBUM
OF THE
MONTH

Look out Messrs
Mills, Stipe and
Buck, stardom
is sneaking up
behind you...



REM Green

★★★★★

Two CD expanded anniversary reissue **Rhino**

MICHAEL STIPE AND his band (guitarist Peter Buck, bassist Mick Mills and drummer Bill Berry) from Athens, Georgia spent most of the 1980s as indie cult favourites playing college campuses. REM were alternative, even 'underground', their uncompromising artistic vision and musical and lyrical brilliance a world removed from the vacuous fad and fashion of the commercial mainstream around them.

Yet by the end of the decade, stardom had snuck up and, almost unnoticed, REM had become part of the stadium-filling big time. Their fifth studio album, 1987's *Document*, spawned their first true hit in *The One I Love* and a major label deal followed when Warner signed them for a sum in the region of \$10 million.

It was a critical moment in REM's career and a number of hardcore fans denounced the move as a sell-out. Could they retain their creative integrity now that they were inside the belly of the corporate beast, or would they be chewed up and spat out by the insatiable demands of the hit-making machine?

Their answer was emphatic. Recorded in Memphis, on its release in 1988 *Green* managed to square the circle brilliantly and – as its buzzword title made clear – the band's social consciousness remained undimmed. Stuffed with great pop songs and yet brimming with enigmatic mystery, the record somehow managed not only to sound more accessible than

Could they retain their creative integrity now that they were inside the belly of the corporate beast?

anything REM had done before but also exuded an experimental cutting-edge at the same time.

If there's any criticism to be made of *Green* it is perhaps that the band tried a little too hard to reassure hardcore fans that they had not joined the mainstream and overdid the experimentalism to prove that they were still part of the alternative.

The guitars are bigger, brasher and louder on *Get Up* and *Turn You Inside Out* and there's an unashamedly bubblegum feel to *Stand* and *Pop Song 89*. But *You Are The Everything*, *The Wrong Child* and *Hairshirt* are minor-key masterpieces of acoustic introspection and there's a seething, radical political punch to *Orange Crush* and *World Leader Pretend*. Some critics – including R.E.M.'s own Mike Mills – have argued that the record is stylistically scattershot and lacking in cohesion. A fairer judgement would surely be that it is the sheer eclecticism of *Green* that marks it out as a classic album and crisp, digital remastering emphasises the sonic diversity.

The bonus live disc, recorded at the penultimate show of the arena-sized 130-date *Green* world tour includes almost every song from the album plus earlier fan favourites *It's The End Of The World As We Know It* and *The One I Love* as well as fascinating work-in-progress versions of *Low* and *Belong*, which they were road-testing prior to recording them on the hugely successful 1991 follow-up *Out Of Time*. **NW**



Bob Marley & The Wailers

Kaya

★★★★★

Two CD expanded edition

Island



BY THE TIME Kaya appeared in 1978, Marley had become a spokesman for the dispossessed with his fierce, politically charged anthems. But he was about to return to Jamaica to headline the One Love Peace Concert at which he triumphantly united the island's warring political factions – and Kaya reflected the changing mood with a set of mostly

Marley had become a spokesman for the dispossessed with his fierce anthems

gentle songs about love, unity, reconciliation and redemption.

Marley had seldom sounded so playful as on the simple, romantic charm of *Is This Love*, *Easy Skanking* and *Sun Is Shining*. He returned to more incendiary themes on *Uprising*, so that Kaya today has the poignancy of a love letter delivered during a lull in the battle. The bonus disc features a previously unreleased 1978 concert and the insurrectionary mood is back with brooding versions of *War*, *Get Up Stand Up* and *Exodus*. **NW**



KT Tunstall Invisible Empire/ Crescent Moon

★★★★★

CD

Virgin

THE ROCKIN' SUZI Quatro fan of KT Tunstall's early albums has been well and truly put out to pasture and her fourth collection sees her in a much more reflective mood.

Quiet songs with sparse, mostly acoustic arrangements and more than a hint of Americana roots, these songs find her leaning closer to Rickie Lee Jones' later work. Recorded with alt-country legend Howe Gelb at the controls, the mood tends towards the melancholic, but with an ethereal, dreamy atmosphere throughout. These aren't campfire singalongs, more tunes to contemplate big desert skies to. **DO**



The Stranglers

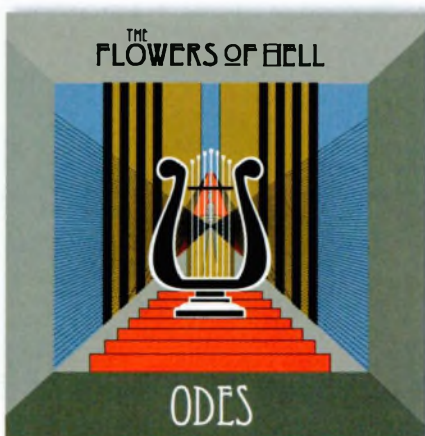
The Old Testament
- The UA Studio
Recordings 1977-82

★★★★★

5 CD box set

EMI

ALTHOUGH THEY WORE the T-shirts and adopted the attitude, the songwriting prowess and musical proficiency of The Stranglers meant they never really fit in with the primitive three-chord-thrashing of punk rock. Almost 100 tracks arranged chronologically chart their prolific first six years, from the studied menace of *Peaches* and *No More Heroes* to the, radio-friendly pop of *Duchess* and *Golden Brown*. What emerges is a band characterised by high-class musicianship whose early desire to shock swiftly gave way to the time-honoured values of great songcraft. **NW**



The Flowers Of Hell

Odes

CD

Optical Sounds

ORCHESTRAL ARRANGEMENTS OF songs by the likes of Lou Reed (*Walk On The Wild Side*, *Run Run Run*), Stereolab (*Super Electric*), Bob Dylan (*Mr Tambourine Man*) and Joy Division (*Atmosphere*). Participation by members of My Bloody Valentine, Spiritualized, Death In Vegas, Laurie Anderson and the Fugs. What could go wrong? Fortunately, not a lot, and this exquisite collection, the first album of covers by the Toronto and London-based collective, is every bit as beautiful and entrancing as you could imagine. **DO**

★★★★★

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Hot Tuna Burgers

180g vinyl

Sony Music/Speakers Corner



HOT PICK

HOT TUNA, ORIGINALLY called Hot Sh*t, was formed by Jefferson Airplane's Jack Casady and Jorma Kaukonen

as a side project. Their first album was as fine an example of white country blues as was recorded in the seventies. By the time this third album was released, Hot Tuna had expanded to include Sammy Piazza and Papa John Creach, it also features organ and guest vocals from David Crosby

on one track. *Burgers* is largely acoustic but not to the extent of their debut, it nevertheless has some great playing and fine tunes, especially when they turn the mic off and stick to their instruments as this is when the tight but loose style makes its mark. The sound is a shade compressed, but has a richness that only true analogue recordings and purist remasters can deliver. Speakers Corner has done an excellent job bringing out the tonal juiciness of the original. I particularly like the fuzz bass sound that's on several tracks as well as some genuinely hot guitar playing from a band that knew its licks better than most and has remained a live act to contend with ever since. **JK**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



Ben Howard Every Kingdom



24-bit/44.1kHz **Island Records via Linn Records**

BRIT AWARDS WINNER – British Male Solo Artist and British Breakthrough Act – Ben Howard's debut is released here in 24-bit/44.1kHz format. The Brit Awards have zero credibility with most music fans and Ben Howard is nothing exceptional or in any way truly outstanding: he seems to be an average folkie with a pleasant enough voice and workmanlike ability on the guitar. What perhaps lifts him out of the mainstream mire, though, is his songwriting ability. **MS**

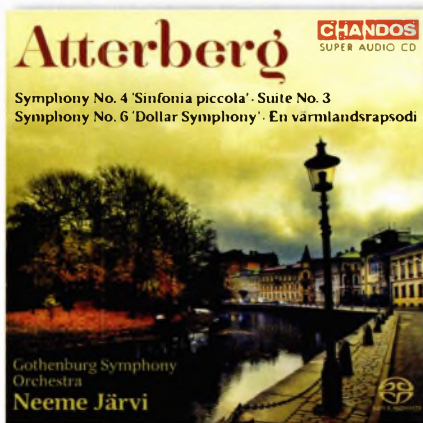


Creole Choir of Cuba Santiman



24-bit/48kHz **B&W Society of Sound Music:57**

THE MAN WHO recorded this magnificent performance had the choir arranged in a large circle, with all the vocalists facing in towards each other with a microphone apiece. The result is a dynamic and vivid soundstage that perfectly suits these evocative and beautiful performances. Percussion was overdubbed except the congas, which needed to be live to provide rhythmic propulsion, and were carefully isolated from the singers. **MS**



Atterberg

Symphonies 4 and 6, etc
Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra
Neeme Jarvi

SACD

Chandos CHSA 5116

THIS IS THE first release in a series devoted to the music of Kurt Atterberg. The two symphonies here are tuneful, colourful, well-crafted pieces that are musically interesting and full of substance. The 6th symphony won a competition, and netted Atterberg a small fortune! Jarvi's performances are crisp and persuasive; his tempi are fast, but the music doesn't sound rushed. The Chandos SACD recording is detailed and sonorous, with good depth, a wide dynamic range, and some impressively deep bass. **JH**



Rachmaninov Complete works for Piano and Orchestra.

Valentina Lisitsa LSO
Michael Francis



CD

Decca 478 4890

THESE ARE POWERHOUSE

performances of the four concertos and Paganini Rhapsody; vivid – exciting – passionate. Lisitsa has a commanding technique, and she is equal to Rachmaninov's demands, technically. While her playing could not be described as lush, there's poetry too, and plenty of imagination, despite the fast speeds and forceful execution. The Decca recording is excellent; clear, forward, and very vivid, allowing lots of subtle detail to be heard. The heavy brass sounds very immediate, but the piano is always well-balanced and clear. An impressive achievement! **JH**

HOT PICK

BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

The Rolling Stones

Crossfire Hurricane eagle-rock.com

HOT PICK



THIS TWO HOUR plus disc is based on recent unfiled interviews with the band. It brings together familiar footage with some rare material that is not always the best quality, but does shed new light on an illustrious career. You don't often see Ronnie Wood era Stones from the seventies, nor some of the outlandish garb Mick wore in the eighties. The sound is hugely variable, but that's not the point; this is a comprehensive study of a musical phenomenon that appears to be almost invincible. **JK**

Nature's Dragonfly



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Hi-Fi Choice

Issue No. 372 June 2013

PASSION FOR SOUND

Needle talk

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setups of
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LINN system, Majik amplifier, Genki CD, Pekin Tuner, Katan Speakers, Pioneer PDR609 CD player/recorder, speaker stands. £1,400 ono: **01406 365 078** or email **katherine1954@btinternet.com**.

PIONEER A300R precision stereo power amplifier (modified by Tom Evans). This is a very rare piece of Tom Evans hardware. Has been modified by Tom himself to run as a stereo power amplifier. It is an amazing piece of kit with stunning sound and will drive virtually all speakers to very high levels. The conversion process, it cannot be reconverted to an integrated amp so you are going to have to use a preamp with it. It is in perfect working order but case does have some surface scratches. £350 ono: **07725 525 001** or email: **alan.strudwick@googlemail.com (South Wales)**.

TURNTABLE power supply for Garrard 301/401 Thorens etc. Regenerative mains supply, clone of Loricraft PSU II, £349 no offers. Can post if needed: **0207 499 8729**.

YAMAHA A-S2000 amplifier and Yamaha CD-S2000

SACD-CD player both boxed and mint. Light use. Can deliver UK mainland. £1,400 for the pair: **01423 866 670 (weekends only)**.

NAD 304 304 amp £40. Mission 760i speakers £35. Aiwa ADF700 cassette deck £25. Heybrook open frame speaker stands £35: **01691 610 589**.

WANTED: pair of Linn Ican speakers must be in perfect working order, in very good/excellent condition. Top price paid if condition good. Any wood finish. Will collect: **07754 507 519**.

MANA ACOUSTICS six tier equipment rack £350. One turntable table with reference level £250. Two power supply tables £50 each. Buyer collects: **07860 155 521 (West Drayton)**.

VITA AUDIO R4i CD, DAB/FM compact stereo system, iPod dock, 80W output with subwoofer. Excellent condition. Black gloss and boxed. Was £600 will accept £395: **01634 255 168 (Kent)**.

KENWOOD Integrated amplifier KA 3020SE, Technics CD player SL-PS670A. KEFCoda 7 speakers. Maker's boxes. Good condition, can demo. Some cables. Instruction manuals. Buyer to collect. £300 ono: **01493 444 203 (Great Yarmouth)**.

DENON AVR4308 (Premium Silver) mint condition and boxed £500. Atacama 4 Tier Glass stand (used) £75: **01909 731 413** or email **nwhelpdale@btinternet.com (North Notts)**.

HOVLAND Sapphire power amp. Just re-tubed, serviced etc. Boxed and VGC. £2,500: **01772 314 151** or email: **jamesmckendrick@btinternet.com (Preston)**.

YAMAHA A500 amplifier, Marantz 6004 CD, NAD C545 BEE CD, NAD C426 tuner AM/FM, Quad 2L2 stand mount speakers, Wharfedale 9-1 speakers. Buyer to collect please: **01977 695 385 (West Yorkshire)**.

SONY Hi-MD MZ-RH1 Walkman £249. Unused, boxed. 5 Hi-MD discs, 1GB unused. £50. Russ Andrews Power Pak 3 for Naim preamps etc. £129. Fidelity Research FR T5 phono

cartridge transformer £450. Boxed: **02392 453 382 (Hants)**.

GRADO Reference RS2 headphones (£500) with latest Grado carrying case thrown in, £210. Sennheiser HD650 headphones (£350), £180. Rega Ear headphone amplifier in black (£148), £75. All light use, VGC and in original packaging: **07772 711 432** or email: **orichard.schofield@kcl.ac.uk (Bucks)**.

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.frasers87@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)**.

DALI Royal Menuet II bookshelf speakers, boxed with manual, bi-wireable, (Cherry), excellent condition £195: **01326 374 797 (Cornwall)**.

QUAD 33 and 303 amps, FM3 tuner, unused since full

Quad service, supporting paperwork, boxed £350: **01825 722 936 (Lewes)**.

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-A1 amp with separate power supply £100: **01132 933 478 (W Yorks)**.

QED Genesis Silver Spiral bi-wire cable 6 m x2. 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**

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: **07785465 1370r** 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 SolarWind 2.5m and 3.5m (doubled) speaker cables £150, great condition: **01457 871 622 (Lancs)**.

LINN Sondek LP12 turntable with Linn Ittok LV11 tone arm and MC cartridge. Open to Offers. Photos available: Email: **philipmitchell02@02.co.uk (N Ireland)**.

NAD Viso Two one-box system. Comprises CD player, DVD player, FM/AM tuner and 50Wamp. Excellent condition, boxed. £275: **01926 259 022** or email: **davidhardy18@talktalk.net (Warwick)**.

RUSS ANDREWS Classic Powerkord with 24ct high quality Wattgate £70: **01484 427 426 (Yorkshire)**.

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Ed Selley casts his expert eye over his pick of the best hi-fi websites



MERGE RECORDS

mergerecords.com/store/

Merge is an independent American label that has adopted the direct sales approach that has become increasingly common over the last few years. Its portfolio is a fascinating snapshot of some well-known and less well-known American artists, and anyone with an interest in the Midwest singer/songwriter genre would do well to check them out – the newly released *Miracle Temple* by Mount Moriah is a fine example of the Midwest sound.

Like many smaller labels, Merge has cottoned on to the advantages of selling lossless audio direct from its website and virtually every album available in the store has a FLAC (and MP3) option. An impressively large number of albums are also available on vinyl as well, although any physical media is going to have to ship from the US, so immediate gratification is not on the cards (some material is available in the UK, too). Unlike many of the US music sites, Merge recognises the existence of the rest of planet Earth so no subterfuge with proxy servers is needed to actually buy things from the site, which is a huge plus.



CENTRAL AUDIO

centralaudio.co.uk/

Although a lot of used hi-fi equipment still migrates to eBay to find new owners, other sites have sprung up to make secondhand kit available. As the limitations that eBay has introduced make the sale of expensive items increasingly costly, these sites have become more viable options. Online classifieds and forums have taken up some of the slack, but there is also a third way.

Central Audio is essentially an online dealership trading exclusively in used items. Founded by Tony Prutton in 1997, it has been around for an impressively long time and always has some interesting equipment on the (frequently updated) database. If you are a Naim or Linn owner in particular looking for a piece of upgrade equipment,

this is a site that is well worth checking out as there is usually some competitively priced units – including at the time of writing, a very desirable and increasingly sought after Linn CD12. For non-flat eartheners an interesting range of other kit is also on offer. While many of the items are fairly high end and priced accordingly, there are also some impressively priced entry-level purchases.



THE ROAD TO AUDIO HELL

audionote.co.uk/articles/art_audio_hell.shtml

This is a bit of a break from the usual sites that feature on *Web Choice*. It isn't going to broaden your music collection, sell you the next hi-fi upgrade, give you a database of useful information or even offer you a piece of hi-fi furniture. It is also the best part of 20 years old. Despite all of these limitations, it is well worth reading if only to try and keep a sense of perspective on why we are in this hobby in the first place.

Are you on the Road to Audio Hell? was originally published in 1994 and has since found a home on the Audio Note website. As a personal and magazine disclaimer, the philosophy it contains is not an absolute and should not be regarded as the 'one true way' but it does raise some questions about how people view their system and how they go about auditioning equipment that are worth reading and honestly asking yourself. If your listening has condensed down to a series of 'reference' recordings and you are leaving large sections of your collection alone because of their poor quality, you need to have a read and see if there is a better way.

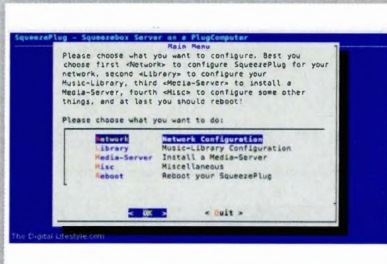


RASPBERRY PI UPNP SERVER

thedigitallifestyle.com/w/index.php/2012/06/06/making-a-upnp-media-server-with-a-raspberry-pi/

Most DIY projects that exist in the hi-fi sphere are relatively conventional in nature. If you want to build an amplifier or a pair of speakers, there is a large choice of designs out there that come in varying degrees of complexity. Digital kits are a bit less common, but there are still some interesting things that you can build if you want. What you see here isn't directly related to your hi-fi system, but it could be extremely useful – and less dependent on your skills with a soldering iron.

The Raspberry Pi is an ultra stripped back Linux-based computer that has been designed with a view to helping schoolchildren take their first steps into programming. The 'Model B' version (yours for a dizzying £26) can be programmed via SD card to perform a number of simple tasks. This fascinating website shows you everything you need to know to be able to adapt it to control a hard drive full of music and become a simple UPnP server for a network audio system. The advantages of doing this beyond saving yourself some money and giving you a sense of fulfilment is that you can configure the homebrew server to work with the exact operating system that you need to work best with your system.



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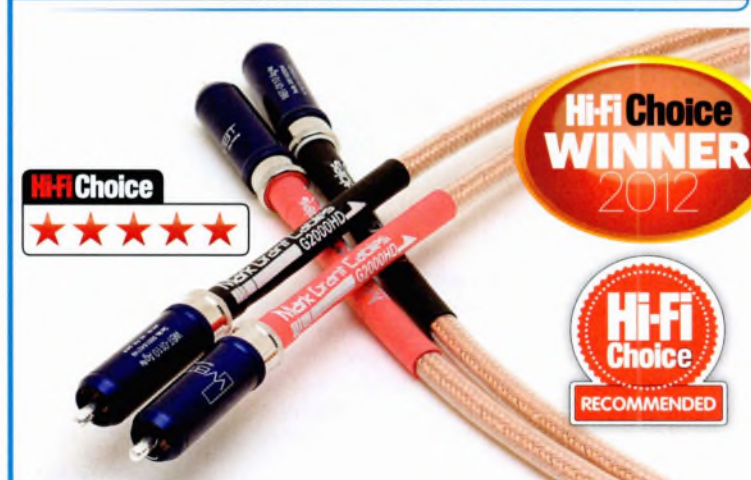
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Pro-Ject

Tube Box DS phono stage

LIKE TRIBBLES, PRO-JECT'S

budget accessory boxes seem to breed at an exponential rate – and now they're evolving too. The latest DS range of widgets are beautifully styled, making them an obvious step-up from the 'cheap and cheerful' originals. This new Tube Box DS has an altogether slicker look than the SE that it is based on, plus lots of other refinements, too.

For just £425, you get a hugely versatile phono stage. It's crammed with jumper switches for input impedance and capacitance, complete with a fascia-mounted input impedance adjuster for low output MC cartridges. Indeed, you can configure it for pretty much any pick-up around, and there aren't many similarly priced rivals you can say that about – Trichord's well-established Dino comes close, or the more expensive (£700) Musical Fidelity M1ViNL with which I'm making listening comparisons.

Bring the noise

There's also a switchable subsonic filter (20Hz, 18dB/octave), which some will use and others won't. Record warps cause very low frequency noise, which the amp is forced to amplify along with the music signal – you can see this manifested as 'cone flap' in your loudspeakers, where you see the cones moving slowly on lead-in or run-out grooves, and yet there's no music coming out. The Tube Box DS eliminates this and is a boon for tube power amp users, as the last thing their overworked output transformers need is the job of amplifying subsonic noise! Some purists will argue the filter is audible further up the audio band, so it's worth trying it in your system, switched in and out.

The phono stage offers a choice of moving magnet and moving coil operation, with switchable gain of 40 and 50dB for MM and a single setting of 60dB for MC. The input stage of the Tube Box DS uses surface mount devices, whereas the output section sports two ECC-83 (12AX7A) tubes to buffer it. These



are decent-quality bottles with gold pins, but you can substitute your own preferred brand of ECC-83 should you wish – something that tweekers will be doing seconds after they've got it out of the box. For the purposes of this review I'm keeping things completely stock. The box itself is nicely small (103 x 72 x 156mm) and weighs 1.1kg without the supplied wall-wart 18V DC power supply. Again, there's room for tweekers to carry out their own experiment with upgraded PSUs, which opens up all sorts of interesting possibilities...

If it's done well at this price, a hybrid design such as the Tube Box DS has an advantage over rival all-transistor phono stages, as it should give a slightly smoother and sweeter sound. Given that it's likely to be used in a budget system, this could be a good thing. As it transpires, the Pro-Ject is cleaner and more neutral than expected, and nowhere near as 'warm' and euphonic as, say, Icon Audio's all-tube PS2 (£500) which did ever so well in a recent phono stage group test. It's still nicely smooth, but won't give every record you play that sepia glow – if this is what you're after our advice is to look elsewhere!

Feed it some clean, punchy rock such as David Bowie's *Fashion*, and the Tube Box shows itself to be a very accomplished performer with a wide soundstage (albeit not terribly deep)

and lots of detail within. Dynamic contrasts are strong, and you certainly get a great sense of the music's rhythm. It's not quite as nuanced as the aforementioned Icon Audio offering, but is certainly more musically expressive than the Musical Fidelity M1ViNL, which seems a little flat by comparison.

Clean up your act

Tonally there's only the slightest hint of tubes being involved – hi-hats on Genesis's *Mad Man Moon* are just a little more silky than the M1ViNL, but there is little in it. Nor is there the big, warm bass of the Icon Audio; the Pro-Ject is much closer to the clean, almost clinical Musical Fidelity here. But there is less grain than the latter, which is already pretty well behaved – the tube output section gently brushes off rough edges of a recording without restyling it too much.

Overall, here's an excellent product at the price, one that gives a taste of tubes without the noise and input gain issues – while retaining the low noise of solid-state. The pricier Icon Audio PS2 is more entertaining to listen to, but it has problems of its own, which the Pro-Ject Tube Box DS side steps. As such it's a decent bit of kit and well worth auditioning, preferably with the cartridge you intend to use it with. **DP**

DETAILS

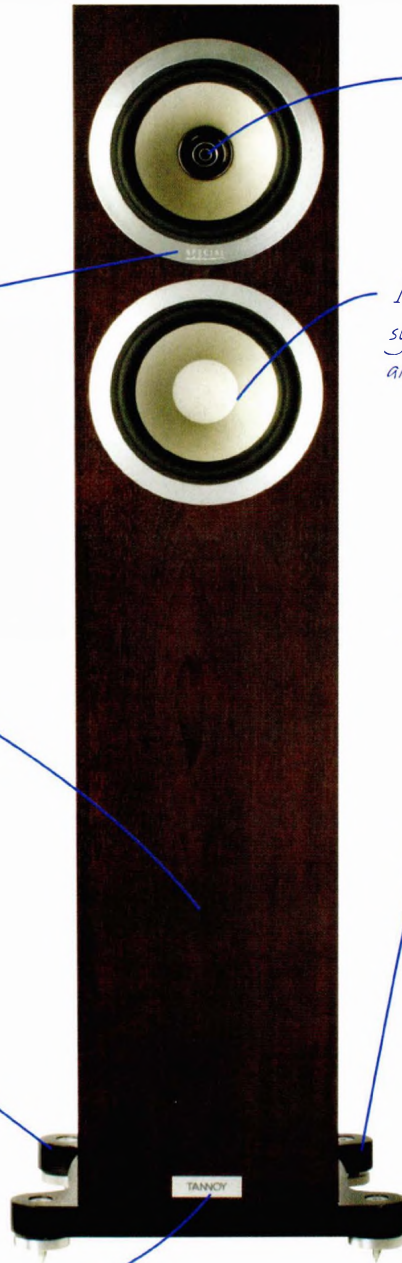
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OUR VERDICT



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TANNOY

tannoy.com

Mains Cables R Us

Oak Cone Feet

OAK CONE FEET provide an excellent alternative to the feet that come supplied on audio equipment and help to reduce resonances and micro vibration in your equipment. The feet reviewed here are manufactured in the UK by Mains Cables R Us of Huddersfield. Although they are sold individually, they are usually supplied as a set of three in order to prevent the equipment from rocking, which can occur when four feet are used.

These feet have no threaded holes because the manufacturer prefers to secure them with a small piece of adhesive putty as it is considered that this gives the best sonic performance. In my experience, only a tiny piece of the blue variant of said putty that I had to hand is required to hold a foot securely. It is important that the feet are placed underneath the case itself and are

not fitted underneath the existing feet. I prefer to remove the existing feet completely and this is quite easy to do in most cases as they are usually just screwed into the case.

Made to measure

The feet are available in a choice of two sizes: 30mm diameter and 35mm high for the large foot and 14mm diameter and 10mm high for the small foot, which will suit most audio equipment. I find the overall depth of the large feet particularly useful as these ones are deep enough to allow the existing feet to be left in situ with the oak feet fitted alongside.

They will lift the equipment high enough for the existing feet to be clear of the base. The small ones, meanwhile, are perfect for power supplies and preamps, etc.

Oak cone feet can be used under pretty much any piece of audio



equipment as they can clean up the sound by channelling away through the supporting base or rack any vibrations that are generated by the equipment. I find them to be particularly useful with valve-based equipment, CD players and turntables, where I notice a generally cleaner sound and improved dynamics. All of which makes them an excellent value upgrade. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£2.50/£3.50
CONTACT
07908 056978
WEBSITE
mains-cables-r-us.co.uk

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Music Angel Europe

Friendz portable stereo speaker

MP3 PORTABLE MUSIC players and the players that are built into smartphones are primarily designed for driving earphones for music on the move, but there are times when you don't want to be wired up to your device to listen to your tunes. For these occasions, Music Angel Europe has released its Friendz compact stereo loudspeaker with a built-in digital amplifier and rechargeable battery.

It is compatible with all smart phones, tablets and laptops via the 3.5mm stereo headphone socket. The Friendz is available instore from Waitrose or online from websites like mobilefun.co.uk and Amazon.

The Friendz – measuring 75 x 50 x 52mm and weighing just 150g – come in a choice of seven colours (black, blue, silver, green, pink, orange and red). The unit is charged via its mini-USB socket connected to

any standard PC/Mac USB socket or a USB charger and this takes between one and three hours to fully charge. A full charge offers a remarkable claimed 120 hours playback time.

The internal amplifier provides 3W + 3W RMS, a load impedance of 4ohms and a frequency response of 150-18KHz (±3dB).

The sturdy aluminium case incorporates soft feet enabling it to be placed on any surface without scratching. The volume is controlled by the source equipment and several units can be daisy-chained together in

order to provide increased volume for partying on the move.

Speaker's corner

Hi-fi this isn't, but then nor is MP3 for that matter! Nevertheless, it produces a decent sound for such a small unit, especially when slightly raised from the desk or table. It is one of the better made portable speaker devices at the price and will keep young ears entertained. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
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OUR VERDICT

★★★★★





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Cyrus

Cadence app

NOW THAT ALL the major manufacturers are moving to streamers as the core of their product lines it has become increasingly important for them to be able to offer tablet control applications specifically tailored for them. In many cases if they don't, someone else will, particularly if their interface is documented or can be reverse engineered.

Nearly all streaming devices are UPnP (Universal Plug 'n' Play) compatible so in theory it is possible to use a generic control layer app like PlugPlayer, but universal is never quite as universal as it should be. As soon as you move into the area of channel switching, and internet radio control a manufacturer really needs to have its own app, compatible with its own (or bought in) silicon. It should be possible to operate the device entirely without an old-school remote control, and ideally without touching it at all.

Major saving

If your Cyrus Streamer is a v2 product with firmware at the 3.0 level this represents an effective saving of £200 over buying one of Cyrus' streamers with its nRemote. As ever, the iPad version of the new Cadence control app has arrived ahead of consideration of Android or other tablet operating systems. It's simply a comment on the ubiquity of the Apple tablets, large and small. It also debuted on the iPad rather than smaller iOS devices like the iPhone and the iPod touch, but these are following on. This is great news as the interface is simple enough that it will be usable on the 4in screen, in the same way that Onkyo and Sansui apps are.

Cadence is a free app from the iTunes store and is still at a relatively immature version 1.1, but for an app at that stage it is reasonably fully featured. The visual feel of the app screen is appealingly Cyrus-like, particularly as the background mimics the brushed metal top surface of the current generation Streamline range, with



its Cyrus logo and vented waistline. I'm personally less convinced by the purple icon and splash screen, but each to their own.

For the purpose of this test I'll be plumbing a Cyrus Streamline2 into my network via my habitual cheat of running an Ethernet cable from an Airport Express on my Apple-based 802.11n network. Happily the Streamline is immediately picked up on the first run of the app, and accordingly all of my music serving sources are immediately available to be played out via the Streamline. As ever, artist access via the front panel is laborious with a large collection, so the app is a boon. Favourites of up to 250 items can also be configured.

As the Streamline is a 24/192 capable device I leap straight to some of my HDTracks favourites and they are served out via my Heath Robinson network very satisfactorily from a Synology server. Long list loading from the Synology seems more responsive than it does via Twonky from a QNAP, some twiddling with the Twonky compatibility options seems in order here. It doesn't want to play with a QNAP Logitech Media Server installation in UPnP mode.

Input switching includes all of the Streamline's possible modes from USB and iPod to its plethora of digital inputs, and once again you can make favourites of your habitual choices.

There does seem to be some minor bugs around the radio icon display. Use of the onscreen forward and back buttons switches you up and down the BBC radio bands. If, for example, you start on Radio 4 it keeps on displaying that icon while playing out the other channels (until you come back in again via 'Now Playing') in which case it updates itself. Other than this minor foible, the interface is very usable.

In terms of actual audio playback the

combined Streamline/Cadence system is very robust – radio channels continue to play out seamlessly while you bounce around the menus, and even when the app crashes (as it does momentarily when switching my UPnP Browse mode to album/artist for the first time) the audio playback endures and control is picked up on relaunch without any sound blips.

If you do have any technical lock up issues, as I experience with some very long lists, there is a simple settings menu that allows you to force disconnection from the server, although if you get to this stage the best option is to also do a complete power out reset on the Streamline and start again from scratch.

Looking to the future

It is to be hoped that Cyrus will lend an eye to some of the concepts in the more mature (v3.0) n-Stream from Naim – things like a more UK-tailored focus on the radio station presentation including Naim's foregrounding of the BBC's tentative and temporary 'HD' offerings, and particularly a UK (BBC really) targeting for the podcast provision. The icing on the cake would be a similar 'virtual sleeve-note' Rovi-type offering. But this a solid debut as one would expect from Cyrus. **PC**

DETAILS

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OUR VERDICT



Tellurium Q[®]

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Kai Ekholm, Inner-magazines.com 2012

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Steve Dickenson, Hi Fi Plus 2010

"The Iridium mines details other amplifiers only dream about"

Noel Keywood, Editor, HiFi World 2012

"A certain magic when it comes to absolute sound quality"

Jimmy Hughes, Hi Fi Choice 2012

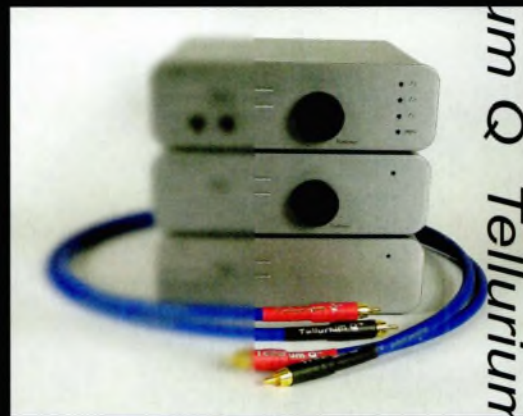
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Paul Rigby, HiFi World 2012



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Roth

OLi POWA-5

THE SPEAKER DOCK market is a rapidly evolving one, and where previously connections consisted of iPhone-compatible sockets and line inputs, wireless connectivity is now the name of the game. Most brands, however, cling to the notion of the single-box speaker, using digital signal processing to overcome the imaging limitations of a device that separates its drivers by inches. As good as some of these units are, they can't deliver the kind of stereo imaging that separate speakers can.

The OLi POWA-5 represents a refreshing attempt to revive the maligned bookshelf speaker. The MP3 generation might not want a separate amp and speaker, but they may be persuaded by the acoustic benefits of a pair of tethered active studio monitors so long as the price is reasonable and all their connection needs are taken care of.

Well connected

So, as well as offering Bluetooth connectivity, the rear of one of the OLi POWA-5s is more cluttered than Sir Chris Hoy's medal cabinet. It boasts two optical inputs, stereo phonos, a 3.5mm line input, subwoofer output and dual USB inputs, both of which can charge an iPod or similar. These are complemented by a power switch, AC input and gold speaker terminals for hooking up to its passive partner. Clearly, the OLi POWA-5 isn't intended to be used solely with wirelessly streamed compressed music, its raft of inputs means it can be used with all manner of kit.

The speakers are substantial by speaker dock standards, measuring 27cm high and 20cm deep. What with a recommended 20cm breathing space required at the rear for the bass port, their size may prove off putting for anyone with a spatially compromised environment.

The dimensions house decently sized drivers in the form of a 5in Kevlar woofer and 1in soft-dome tweeter per speaker, plus an 80W Class D amplifier in one. The speakers have a nominal impedance of 4ohms, will respond to



frequencies from 60Hz to 20KHz and have a dynamic range of 87dB. They have a two-way crossover and a plug-less 3m speaker cable is supplied.

In gloss black, the OLi POWA-5s look as splendid as a Steinway, while gloss white and in-ye-face red versions are also available. The aesthetic appeal is marred slightly by the presence of a protruding plastic volume knob and LED status light on the front of the powered speaker. More comprehensive control is provided by a palm-sized handset, allowing you to select the input, operate playback of a connected Roth iPod dock, and separately adjust the volume, bass and treble. A bass and treble reset button is also included.

Wi-fi woes

Connecting an iPhone and MacBook Pro via Bluetooth is simple and reliable, subject to occasional interference clicks and the minor hassle of having to re-connect sometimes after changing sources. But the wireless streaming of MP3 rips of high-quality CDs highlights the foibles of compressed music and their suitability for playback on quality hi-fi. From Broken Bells and The Killers to Britten and Vaughn Williams, playing back over Bluetooth requires a hefty volume level and tweaking of bass and treble levels to extract the best from each recording.

It doesn't help that Roth has not adopted the latest apt-X incarnation of Bluetooth, which provides greater frequency response. Standard

Bluetooth doesn't have as much dynamic range and attenuates frequencies above 14kHz, which is often telling in classical music.

Amplifying compressed audio doesn't mask the gaps in the sound, it highlights them throughout the dynamic range and makes listening unengaging. Using a 3.5mm line-in improves matters marginally, as do wirelessly streamed FLAC versions.

The aural quality and impact simply isn't commensurate with the size and presence of the monitors and it becomes tiring straining to hear details you expect to be there.

Switch to a CD deck connected by phonos and it's a different story. Everything comes to life, with greater warmth and clarity. You can hear the rasp of Hilary Hahn's bow on her violin strings in *The Lark Ascending* and the harmonics of the wind and strings effortlessly blend with the percussion in the *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. The shrillness of Danger Mouse's vocals in *Your Head Is On Fire* (Broken Bells) on MP3 suddenly makes sense, able to breathe as the higher frequencies are no longer flattened out. The Killers' *Day and Age* shows how good the OLi POWA-5s tonal balance is with a high bit-rate source, and how easily they fill a small or medium-sized room.

Overall, the OLi POWA-5 needs a reasonably high-quality transport to deliver a highly rewarding sonic experience. Compressed audio simply doesn't do it justice. **AJ**

DETAILS

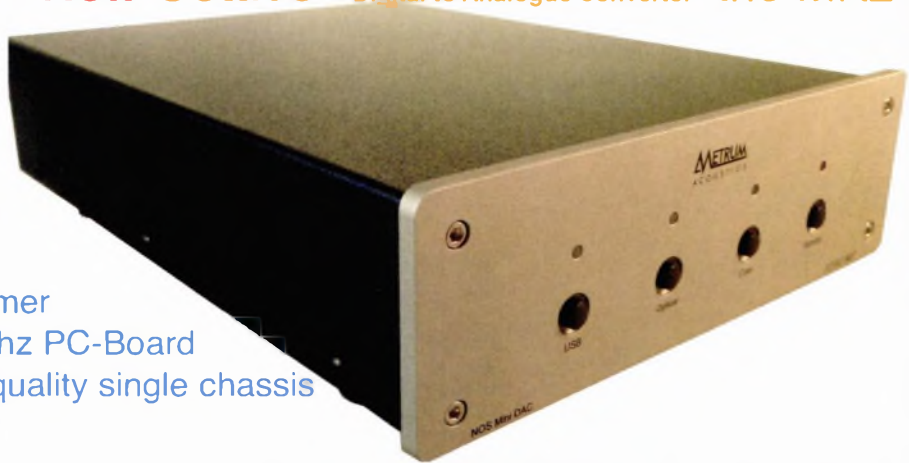
PRICE
£250

CONTACT
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WEBSITE
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OUR VERDICT

★★★★★



WHAT'S NEW!!

- 24/192 USB
- Large Toroidal transformer
- Hex's 6-Layer 24/192Khz PC-Board
- 'Family - Identity' high quality single chassis

The Best in class has got Better.

Since being discovered a little more than a year ago by music enthusiasts, Metrum Acoustics has sold thousands of dacs, mostly via word of mouth. Customers comments have been overwhelming besides for 2 points: the casework and USB, or lack of it.

During this time Octave's big brother, the Hex, was launched to push the sound envelope further. To do this a new 6-layer PC board was developed with NOS 24/192Khz capability including improved data buffering, USB and AES optional inputs.

NOS (Non Over-Sampling) ULTRA High-Speed DAC's

Rather than develop an inferior DAC, we decided to use Hex's outstanding DAC board in the Octave Mk2 in a 4 dac per channel configuration (Hex uses 8 dac/channel). This also allowed us to include a 3rd input - USB

USB was the most requested option. There are many excellent USB to co-ax convertors so when it was decided to offer USB, we had to make it better than what was/is available. With the Hex we use the excellent MTech2 module but instead of using its standard usb PSU, we feed it power from Hex's 15V PSU.

This improves performance considerably. 6Moons, the on-line magazine, thought the Hex so good, it subjected it to an *unheard of 3 reviewer test*. All reviewers were unanimous and gave the Hex the highest accolade they could, the very rare Blue moon award.

Hex £163 USB option compares with \$600 Audiophileo, etal

They thought the USB was at least equal to units costing \$600, including Audiophileo, which when you add cables is considerable, compared to its £163 price option.

With Octave MK2 we could not take the power from USB for cost reasons. To improve upon the std PSU a huge reservoir was designed to store clean filtered power from USB. In addition further electronics galvanically isolate data to bring the sound as close to the Hex as possible. Like the Hex the USB will be an option, including a retrofit option

Other than the lack of USB the other criticism of Octave Mk1 was its casing. Its 2 box aluminum case did not have the best fit and two boxes were not always welcomed. A large single toroidal transformer is now employed in a single high quality case, resembling its bigger sibling, the Hex.

These changes will not affect costs greatly and in some

cases its better. Eg. Octave MK1 with a decent 24/96 USB to Co-Ax convertor cost £969. The new improved Octave MK2 with 24/192 USB option is less: £919.

Designed to annihilate £2000+ DACs and then we decided to sell it for under 1000€

We deliberately designed the Octave to annihilate £2000+ DACs and then decided to sell it for under a 1000€. We had to reduce the distribution chain in order to achieve this so more music lovers can have access to this kind of quality. All Metrum dacs use NOS Ultra high speed chipsets exclusive to Metrum (not Ti, Wolfson, Burr Brown, etc.). Its the only way to achieve an analogue-like sound similar to a high quality LP player *which is unique indeed*.

Absolutely No Risk

Try the Octave2 at your leisure in your own system for **30 days**, If you don't like it return it for a **full refund - no quibble**

6 MOONS: HEX: THE DAC WHICH THUS FAR CAME CLOSEST TO THE FULL IMMERSION I FEEL WHEN LISTENING TO VINYL AND ACTUALLY MANY TIMES EXCEEDED IT. FREDERIC BEUDOT

HIFI CRITIC A VERY TRUTHFUL AND ARTICULATE SOUND, WHICH IS PARTICULARLY EVIDENT ON PIANO. MARTIN COLLUMS.

HIFI CHOICE: IF IT WERE 10 TIMES ITS PRICE, IT'LL STILL BE GOOD VALUE. JASON KENNEDY

THE OCTAVE HAS SUPERB RHYTHM AND PACE. TNT MAGAZINE

A TRULY OUTSTANDING DAC. BOUGHT ONE JUST TO SEE WHAT THE FUSS IS ALL ABOUT. IT IS ONE OF THE BEST... FORUM DCS AND WILSON SOPHIA

THE OCTAVE IS FAST, EXCEPTIONALLY TRANSPARENT AND THOROUGHLY ENGAGING. JOHN DARKO



Metrum Acoustics Hex: Designed to compete at £5000+ level from £2499

Metrum Acoustics Octave Mk2: Designed to compete at £2000+ level from £799

Metrum Acoustics Octave MK1 Ltd stocks: Forerunner to the MK2 from £599

Metrum Acoustic DACs substantially improve sound from PC, Macs, CD, DAB, TV ,etc

Black Rhodium Twirl loudspeaker cable

BLACK RHODIUM IS a brand that does a wide range of very good budget and mid-price cables – so it's always interesting when a new one appears. Twirl costs £13.50 per metre, but adds £100 per pair for the company's premium-quality Rhodium-plated Z plugs. Those wanting a cheaper option can specify gold banana plugs and save themselves £50 in the process.

Twirl is essentially a quality copper cable with 50 0.25mm² (13 gauge) tinned conductors, insulated in GPC silicone rubber. This gives a total outside core diameter of 5.0mm, making for a nicely compact and malleable cable.

The cable is twisted along its length, so as to prevent it from acting as an aerial for unwanted radio frequency interference, the company says. Another feature is that the positive and negative cores

are connected in opposite directions in an attempt to lower the noise floor. For the outer insulation, Black Rhodium has chosen silicon rubber insulation because it's not very microphonic, and has a resonance damping effect.

Going the distance

With a claimed low impedance, Twirl is said to be suitable for long cable runs, giving lower loss than many others. Although not one of the many 'designer' cables around, it is purposefully presented, well made and sturdily terminated.

Black Rhodium cables tend to have a smooth, even, musical sound that tonally errs towards warm. Whereas others throw detail at you, Twirl is more subtle than that, proving altogether more beguiling to listen to – and a fine partner to systems with bright sources or speakers that need



DETAILS

PRICE
£131

CONTACT
01332 342233

WEBSITE
blackrhodium.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



taming. That's not to say it is dull, it's just that Twirl doesn't machine-gun you with loads of upper mid and treble energy, preferring to keep everything in proper proportion. Yet despite this, it's still a very fast sounding cable – it keeps a vice-like grip on the bass, which seems able to start and stop as fast as an LED. This makes it enormous fun to listen to, yet never fatiguing. Factor in a nice, crisp, airy treble and it is sure to prove very popular indeed. **DP**

Blue Horizon Promat turntable mat

THE THEORY BEHIND this replacement turntable mat is that its granular rubber, cork and leather construction creates a chaotic structure that suppresses resonance in the vinyl, thus reducing a key source of distortion in vinyl playback. It's designed to replace felt and rubber mats on most types of platter, even acrylic types where a mat is not usually required.

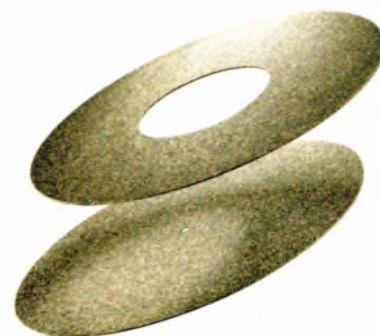
It also comes in two parts, one with a label-sized central hole and another with a more traditional centre spindle hole. The idea is that you can use both to raise regular 120g vinyl to the same height as 180g vinyl with only the one mat underneath it. This avoids the variations in vertical tracking angle (VTA) that the differing thicknesses make hard to avoid – you can set the VTA for one or the other but you don't want to have to keep changing it.

I start out using the single layer on a Rega RP3 glass plattered turntable in place of the standard felt mat and am pleasantly surprised by the way in which it adds bass weight, power and pace to the result. It's not a massive change, but a worthwhile one that seems to be the result of greater definition. This makes for more precise leading edges, so kick drums have more impact and bass guitars more grip.

Making a difference

The same switch on a Rega RP6 yields much the same change except that it is possible to hear more of the acoustic around female voice and high frequencies are subtly but appealingly sweeter, I also get the impression that timing might be vastly improved, too.

The next LP, ZZ Top's *Degüello* makes this rather more clear. It's



presumably because the bass is better defined. I also like the way the Telecaster has more bite and the vocal effects have considerably more definition. Using the second mat to adjust VTA doesn't make much sense on the Rega turntables because arm height is fixed, but on an SME Model 20/3 it is easy to appreciate the tonal evenness one can achieve with different weights of vinyl. This is a decent mat that brings subtle, but, worthwhile improvements to turntables with glass platters and probably metal and acrylic ones too. **JK**

DETAILS

PRICE
£65

WEBSITE
bluehorizonideas.com

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Sennheiser

Momentum headphones

SENNHEISER'S VAST RANGE of headphones and earphones work on the simple principle of offering a model and style to fit every taste, but until recently there was one small omission to this huge choice. Sennheiser models have generally been rather businesslike in their appearance – its offerings can look a little prosaic and simply releasing them in some interesting colours hasn't disguised this.

Into this empty space comes the Momentum, seeking to redress the balance. Part of the wired range, the Momentum is a closed-back, over ear model with a detachable cord. It is also the best piece of industrial design I can remember Sennheiser turning out in years.

Neat balance

The design manages to walk a neat balance between retro and modern. There is a number of retro touches. The leather-coated headband and slightly deeper than normal rucking on the earpads are all nods to the past. At the same time, the minimalist metal frame that makes up the lower section of the headband (allowing the two enclosures to slide up and down for unlimited adjustment) is much more timeless.

Other features are unashamedly modern. The all-metal inline remote and microphone is fantastic to hold and use and the clever hinged jack socket that gives you a choice of how the cable exits the socket is also a lovely touch (for non Apple devotes a standard lead is supplied). To keep them shiny, Sennheiser supplies a carry case, too. The result is a great piece of industrial design. It is also very well built.

Everything feels solid and substantial but as the whole ensemble only weighs 190g and offers a wider range of adjustment; the result is very comfortable and easy to wear long term. The only minor gripe is that the cable between the enclosures is loose for a section and might snag on the move, but in fairness it would have been hard to secure it.



Behind the styling, the Momentum makes use of a pair of relatively conventional 40mm dynamic drivers. This is a reasonably large model for a headphone such as this, but not unduly so and the size isn't so large you feel conspicuous wearing them. The closed-back design keeps most outside noise at bay, but as there is no noise cancelling you will experience some leakage.

Quantum leap

This leakage shouldn't prove too much of a struggle though, as you are likely to be enjoying the performance of the Momentum too much to care. Sennheiser has managed to take a quantum leap forward in industrial design without forgetting the things that it already does very well and the Momentum has a sonic balance that is neutral and impressively refined without ever being flat or boring.

Much of this ability stems from the bass and how it integrates with the rest of the frequency spectrum. The headphones have impressive low-end heft, but never dominate the performance, leaving the exceptional detail retrieval clearly apparent. The Momentum is able to find incidental parts of performances and weave them into a cohesive soundstage that manages to extend considerably beyond the confines of the small

enclosure. Even with large scale music, it stays entirely believable.

The result is a slightly matter of fact performer – the Sennheiser will not flatter poor or highly compressed recordings or noisy headphone outputs, but given a signal of any quality the result is entirely believable and extremely enjoyable. The Momentum is sufficiently agile that the timing and energy it has with upbeat music is preserved and you will find that – whether you are in public or not – this will often get your head nodding in sympathy. The only real complaint about the Sennheiser's performance is that this is not an especially sensitive design and some portable devices may struggle to produce high volume levels with it.

Overall though, this is a fantastic product from Sennheiser and one that should win it some new friends. The Momentum is a superb piece of industrial design that balances design flair with a musical and satisfying performance that is more than up to the task of listening at home as well as on the move. It isn't cheap and there is no shortage of competition but the Momentum is a cut above most of its 'lifestyle' brethren. If you want to look smart without compromising on sound quality, you really need to give it an audition. **ES**

DETAILS

PRICE
£260
WEBSITE
sennheiser.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



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Ecosse Cables

Nu-Diva interconnect cable

DIFFERENT CONDUCTORS

HAVE different sound – silver is shiny but very pure and detailed, copper sounds a little coarser, but often tonally less well lit. Silver-plated copper is a fine-working compromise, giving the best of both worlds, and that's why it's so popular. It's used here in the Nu-Diva too – silver-plated Ultra Hi Purity-OFC is employed in Ecosse's twisted pair topology rope-lay construction. An air-foamed polyethylene dielectric is featured, with a dual screen consisting of a conductive polymer tube surrounded by a close-lapped silver plated braid. A cotton fibre filler is used to damp microphony within the cable's structure, along with a soft PVC outer jacket. Finally, this is all deep-cryogenically treated.

The cable sports the company's patented MACH1 silver-plated

all-copper RCA plugs. Lead-free Supersolder and passive organic flux are used to make the connections permanent. Overall, the Ecosse feels a classy product for the money, and is very inert if you tap it with a fingernail. The only remark is that the finish on the outer parts of the phono sockets isn't quite perfect – this won't affect the sonic performance, and is quite acceptable at the price, especially if the sound impresses...

Delivering the goods

And so it does! The Nu-Diva delivers a spacious and subtle sound, one that you'd expect more from £200 cables than those closer to half the price. A massive step up from budget designs, it gets right into the recording and throws out oodles of detail, but in an impressively composed and svelte way. Rhythmically it is strong, proving well able to convey the music's attack



transients in a suitably speedy fashion, and it's also surprisingly good at dynamic accenting, too. This gives great results right across the music world, from rock to classical. With the latter, I enjoy the depth perspective of the Ecosse, which refuses to cram everything together around the plane of the speakers as some price rivals do. A genuinely impressive mid-price interconnect, this cable is well worth giving an audition to in a wide range of systems. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£140/0.5m
WEBSITE
ecossecables.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Russ Andrews

HG cleaning cloths



IT IS AMAZING how some metal surfaces oxidise, especially if they have not been moved or rubbed for some time. We've all witnessed the blackening of copper surfaces due to surface oxidation and silver is notorious for tarnishing. Even gold surfaces can get contaminated and all of this can spell bad news for us audiophiles as copper, silver and gold are all used on mains and speaker connectors, as well as in interconnect cable plugs and sockets.

These HG cleaning cloths come in a choice of three flavours to cater for copper, silver and gold. Russ Andrews has found these cloths to be really effective for cleaning surface contaminants from mains plugs or from interconnect or speaker cables.

These specially impregnated cloths are made from a high-quality textile material and the generous size of the cloth will prevent the object that's



being cleaned from being touched with bare fingers, thereby avoiding the rapid re-oxidation that can result from fingerprints.

Clean up your act

Being an impregnated cloth, a little extra rubbing is all that is required for removing stubborn marks and restoring the mirror finish to high-quality connectors.

In use, I find that they all work a treat, with the silver and gold cloths being the most effective. The copper cloth is also suitable for use on brass, making it ideal for use with mains

plugs. However, a little more elbow grease is required with brass connectors and plugs than with the other finishes to get any tarnish removed effectively.

Incidentally, while you are cleaning the prongs of a mains plug, don't forget to take the cover off the plug and clean the internal fuse and clips as well! This is also true for equipment fuses located on the rear panel of some equipment.

The only downside of these cloths is that I have to keep them hidden from my wife, who wants to use them on her jewellery! **NR**

DETAILS

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01539 797300
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OUR VERDICT



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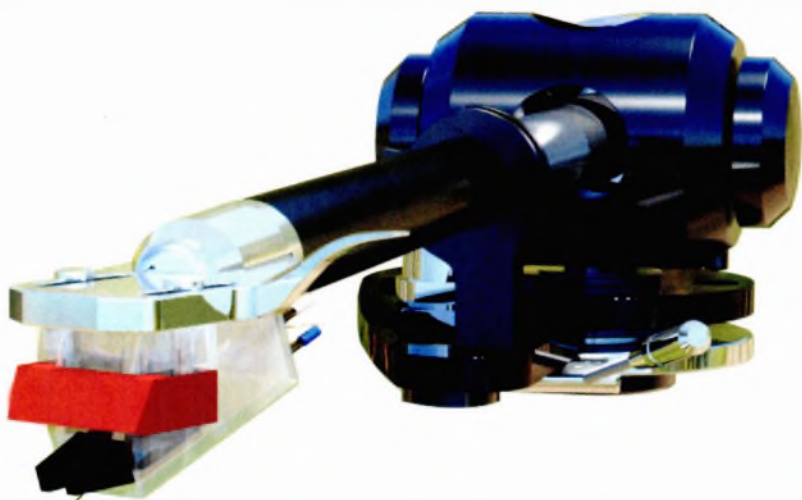
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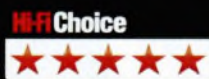
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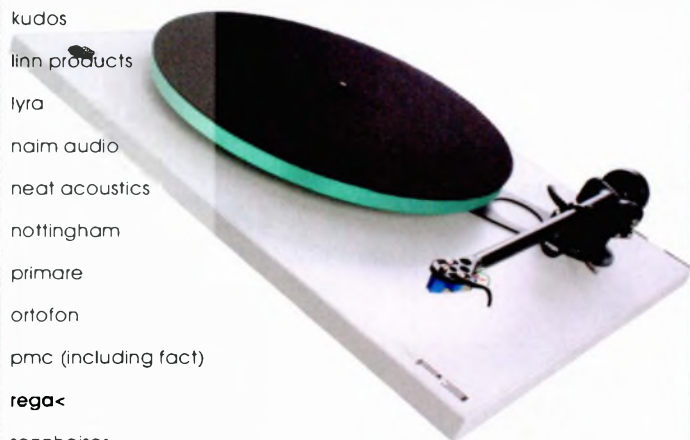


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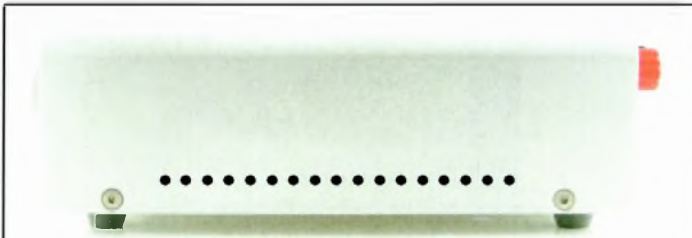
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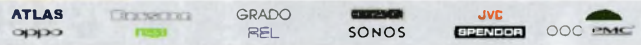
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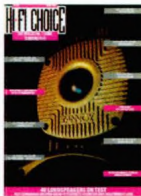
WE HEAR...

WHO SAID IT WOULD NEVER CATCH ON? Just 15 years ago we had a music industry marching the manufacturers of MP3 players to the doors of the courts, trying to sue them for loss of earnings. Now, news comes that the total number of digital singles sold in Britain reached one billion on Monday 8th April, 2013. Since digital music downloads started nine years ago, sales have gone from half a million a week to over three million – up six percent year on year.

IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE ORIGIN LIVE MADE A NEW TURNTABLE... But the company has just announced a total range revamp. "After making a number of new discoveries, the time has come for these to be included in what we are calling MK3 turntables", says Mark Baker. The new decks are claimed to have "significant performance improvements", thanks to new acrylic platter material, a new bearing hub designed for faster energy transmission, a lower friction bearing, an improved power supply and new belt material. Prices start from £999 for the Aurora MK3 and go up to £4,770 for the Sovereign MK3.

WE ARE HAPPY TO REPORT THAT THERE'S LIFE IN THE OLD DOG YET! Music downloads may be going stellar, but Compact Disc has received a stay of execution on the British high street. News comes that 132 HMV stores and nine Fopp outlets in the UK have been saved, with Hilco announcing the acquisition last month. This means 2,500 jobs saved and the continued presence of little silver discs on the high street! HMV has relaunched its website with the strapline, "we are entertainment", saying that a new website and "a fresh approach to our stores are all in the works".

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 59
JUNE 1988
"If you're planning to spend several hundred pounds on a new pair of loudspeakers, it makes sense to take as much care over the decision as you would in buying a pair of shoes," we sagely advised, before going on to

put 40 through their paces. Best Buys included Wharfedale's Delta 30, Goodmans' Maxim 2, Infinity's RS2000, Musical Fidelity's MC2, Rotel's RL850 II, Sony's APM10ES and Tannoy's Eclipse. Meanwhile, the news pages included a new product from Sony that married together the technology of the CD and the Walkman. The Discman, as it was imaginatively called, was designed to primarily play 3in discs, with regular CDs left sticking out of its portable chassis and stopping if touched – a snip at just £300.

Elsewhere Jockey Lester Piggot was stripped of his OBE, following his spell in prison for tax evasion. Wembley stadium hosted a concert celebrating Nelson Mandela's birthday – he would be freed two years later. And in the US, a NASA scientist gave evidence about the discovery of a man-made problem called global warming...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 167
JUNE 1997
The first DVD player to arrive on UK shores, Thomson's DTH-D1000, was greeted with open arms by Alan Sircom and Paul Miller who assessed DVD's potential as the hi-fi format of the future. Alan noted: "There is so

much potential in DVD that it would be a shame if audiophiles missed out on the audible delights it promises." Meanwhile, Paul got the deck in the lab aiming to test it like a CD player, only to discover that it wouldn't read his CD-R test discs.

Over in the news pages there was much excitement as Danish amplifier denizen Densen launched something called a website. Apparently it allowed readers to see pictures of products and even contact the company using something called email. Sadly, this fad never really caught on.

Meanwhile in the wider world, the House of Commons voted for a ban on handguns, the UK prepared to hand the sovereignty of Hong Kong over to the People's Republic of China and a book about a wizard called Harry Potter (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*) was published for the first time. It tanked and was never heard of again.

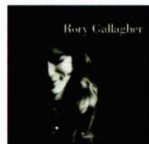


DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month **Chris Green** from Sound Foundations chooses four of his favourite long players...



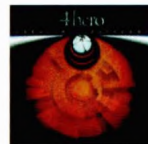
YEAH YEAH YEAHS
FEVER TO TELL
Their first studio album beats all their other work hands down. It might be a little raw, and sound quality isn't up to that much, but the music shines through.



RORY GALLAGHER
RORY GALLAGHER
I've always been a Thin Lizzy fan, but had never heard of this album until I stumbled across it on late-night radio thinking it was Phil Lynott playing guitar.



ANTHONY AND THE JOHNSONS
I AM A BIRD NOW
An odd choice, as I only like three of the tracks. *Fistful Of Love* alone warrants inclusion and *Hope There's Someone* is another masterpiece.



4HERO
CREATING PATTERNS
I simply had to include some 4Hero. This album is less drum & bass-orientated and much more jazzy, so it had to be the one. I love the bassline on *Twelve Tribes!*

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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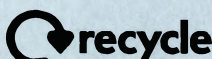
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