

Minitest

Four LP test records to fine tune your turntable

Musical Fidelity

EXCLUSIVE: bijou V90-DAC goes under the spotlight. See Extras p109



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **374**

August 2013

Music masters

Audiolab's compact Q-DAC & M-PWR combo!



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Headphones for music on the move



M-PWR

audiolab

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Fruit of the loom

Six speaker & interconnect cables to upgrade your hi-fi



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.

Discover more online: naimaudio.com/dac-v1

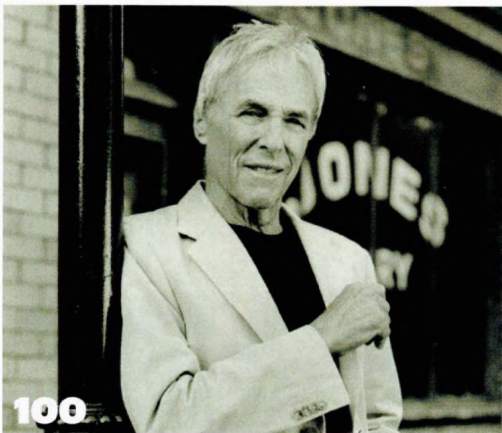




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Burt Bacharach

BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS



EDITOR'S CHOICE:
Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding 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 eagle-eyed among you will have noticed that the *Hi-Fi Choice* website has undergone a bit of a revamp recently. It's a work in progress, so I hope you'll bear with us while we tweak the design, upload more content and update the look and feel of the site for an improved user experience. Take a look at hifichoice.co.uk and tell us what you think.

We're not really social media junkies at *Hi-Fi Choice*, but we've gone global and can now be found on Twitter: @HiFiChoiceMag. We've added a Twitter feed and 'follow us' link to our website so that you can become a part of the grapevine and get the latest hi-fi news, events and tweets from the industry and fellow enthusiasts. It's a brave new world full of knowledge and support about your favourite hi-fi topics. Come and join in.

For those who prefer more traditional methods of communication, you can still write to us with all your hi-fi woes and conundrums at: letters@hifichoice.co.uk or via snail mail to: *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine, AVTech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, Kent BR6 6BG. Our team of experts is standing by eagerly waiting to answer your cries for help.

Don't forget our writing competition and the chance to become a *Hi-Fi Choice* reviewer. Just tell us about your great-sounding hi-fi system or your favourite stereo separate in no more than 1,000 words and provide us with a picture or two by way of illustration. The best reviews will appear in a future issue of *Hi-Fi Choice* and authors will be contacted about contributing to the mag.

Finally, look out for our Facebook page that will be reinstated soon.

Lee Dunkley Editor



HADLOW HOUSE, 9 HIGH STREET, GREEN STREET GREEN, ORPINGTON, KENT BR6 6BG

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“The fun comes as standard, whatever the resolution”

David Price: Linn Akurate DSM streamer/DAC/preamplifier p64

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

Cool classics

PRICE: £300 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01702 601410 **WEB:** RUARKAUDIO.COM

Ruark Audio's new MR1s blend hi-fi heritage with modern practicality

MANY HI-FI ENTHUSIASTS will know Ruark Audio for its high-end speaker background. The Essex manufacturer, which had a range of acclaimed speaker models, took the brave decision to diversify away from traditional speaker manufacturing in 2004 and move into the world of DAB after identifying what it considered was a gap in the market for better-sounding radios and small audio systems. The R1 tabletop radio was launched in 2006.

The MR1 active speaker system in some ways sees Ruark Audio going slightly back to its roots

COMMENT

THE PRICE OF PERFECT SOUND



There's no denying it, this passion of ours certainly isn't cheap. Many of us have spent hundreds, if not thousands of pounds hunting down the best combination of interconnects, shiny boxes and speakers in pursuit of premium sound. But how far would you be willing to go for the perfect sounding record? £10? £20? £150? How about £2,500? Yep, you read that right, two and half grand of your hard-earned cash.

Audiophile Pete Hutchison is something of a perfectionist when it comes to record collecting. Like many of us, he started off buying folk, rock, jazz, punk and techno before discovering the joys of classical recordings. Because he runs indie record label Peacefrog, he has better connections than most and so has been able to turn to his label's distributor for some assistance. The good news, however, is that Pete isn't keeping his findings to himself. You see, EMI holds the rights to some astonishing classical recordings and Pete's on a mission to make them available to the rest of us. He is now in the process of making some 80 recordings from classical music's golden era available and re-issue them himself via his new Electric Recording Company label.

Ordinarily, throwing together reissues is a pretty cheap and simple process, but in order to try and replicate precisely the original sound of the recordings, Pete is using the exact equipment that they were recorded on back in the fifties. This has led to some serious detective work with Lyra produced valve-powered tape machines being tracked down from as far afield as Nigeria and lathe vinyl cutters being discovered in (of all places) a council estate in Cheshunt. In all Pete reckons he spent well over £10,000 buying the kit and then three times that to get it up and running again. The result is one of the most expensive vinyl boxsets ever produced. If you're ever lucky enough to get to hear this stunning collection of Mozart's Parisian work (over seven discs), you'll hear all the blood, sweat and money Pete has poured into them and might just consider saving some of yours to make them your own.

THEELECTRICRECORDINGCO.COM ▶

The form factor of the MR1 active speaker system looks remarkably similar to the R1, and very much follows in the brand's established style. Fashioned to compliment the R-Series, the neatly proportioned MR1s are made from hand-crafted cabinets and come finished in Rich Walnut veneer, Soft White and Soft Black finishes.

The introduction of the MR1 active speaker system in some ways sees Ruark Audio going slightly back to its roots, says the company. The MR1's speaker drivers are designed using the latest CAD software to yield the best performance from the compact design and use rare earth neodymium magnets for better driver control, Ruark claims. Both the 75mm main driver and 20mm tweeter are married together using select audio-grade crossover components and driven by a linear Class A-B stereo amplifier. The result is a system with natural

dynamics and a frequency response that would usually only be associated with larger speaker systems, claims the manufacturer.

There's Ruark's own BackPack rechargeable battery pack, which enables the MR1 to be transportable, but there's no suggestion of the battery life duration. The rear panel of the control unit has outputs for the other (left-hand) speaker and a subwoofer to enable an active sub to be connected. Adding further to the MR1's versatility is the switchable line-in input with attenuation switch, allowing audio devices (including a turntable or television screen) to be connected and enjoyed.

The MR1 features apt-X audio coding technology partnered with Bluetooth so compatible iOS and Android devices can stream music stored on phones or tablets.

The MR1 is available in stores now and costs £300.

Denon commits to stereo

New flagship combo tops hi-fi range

PRICE: £1,200 - £1,800 **AVAILABLE:** NOW AND OCTOBER
CONTACT: 02890 279830 **WEB:** DENON.CO.UK

EMPHASISING ITS COMMITMENT and dedication to two-channel hi-fi, Denon announced the introduction of several new hi-fi components at the D+M group European conference in June. A new flagship stereo duo comes in the form of the PMA-2020AE integrated amplifier, with remodelled UHC-MOS Single Push-Pull circuitry, twin transformers and 160W per channel, and the DCD-2020AE CD/SACD player, with a new DAC master clock design as well as a front USB port and rear USB-B asynchronous mode 192/24 input, and twin transformers handling separate digital and analogue circuitry. The components are available in a silver finish and cost £1,800 each.

Moving down the range is the more affordable new 15 series with the PMA-1520 integrated amp and DCD-1520AE CD/SACD hi-fi models set to go on sale in October. They are likely to feature selected technology advances found on the flagship models, and are expected to cost £1,200 each. Full details will be available soon.



IN BRIEF

BASS ADDICTS

● British consumer electronics brand, i-box, is adding to its product armoury with the introduction of Bass Addicts in-ear headphones. Aimed at satisfying the need for proper bass at a proper price, says the makers, the new model joins the Flats, introduced earlier this year, and are designed to deliver noise isolation without shutting you off from the outside world. The metal-bodied buds come with a flat tangle-conquering cable and three sizes of silicone tips, as well as a carrying case. The i-box Bass Addicts come with a five-year guarantee and are on sale now costing £30.

IBOXSTYLE.COM



Bluetooth radio joins Jongo

PRICE: £170 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 0845 1489001 **WEB:** PURE.COM

DAB radio specialist, Pure, has released the Evoke F4 digital and internet radio, compatible with its Jongo multi-room music speaker system. Based around the company's Evoke Flow model, the new F4 is housed in real wood casing and follows in the brand's classic radio styling. It uses Class-D amplification and its own further-refined audio digital signal processing sound profiling, which significantly increases detail

retrieval, focus and resolution, claims the manufacturer

Like the Jongo models, the Evoke F4 can access the Pure Music subscription service (£5 per month) and forms part of a multi-room music system, with access to 15-million music tracks. Content from your phone can be streamed wirelessly to the Evoke F4 via the Pure connect app for iOS and Android devices, or via Bluetooth from other apps

Key features include recording live internet and digital radio broadcasts to a USB memory stick, instant and timed recordings, touch-sensitive controls, easy to read OLED display, multiple alarms, iPod/MP3 player input and a headphone socket. Furthermore, you can add an additional speaker to convert the F4 into a stereo unit and/or add a rechargeable battery pack offering up to 12 hours charge, costing £35 each

“The Truth, nothing more,
nothing less...”



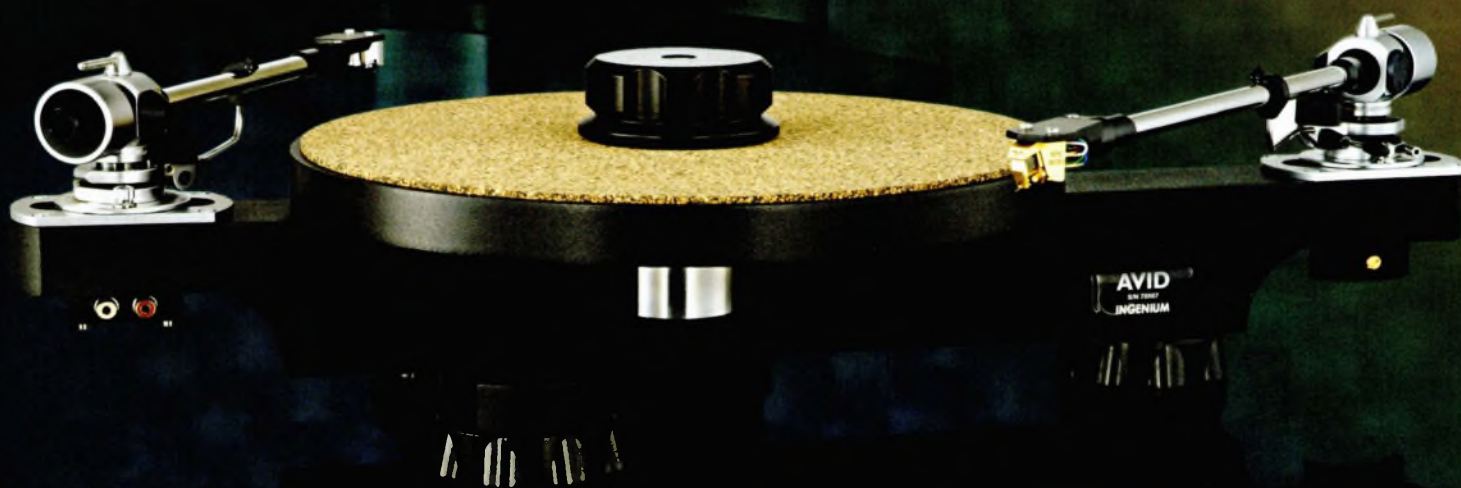
“This level of performance,
convenience and style makes for
an award winning product.”

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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Bose unveils mini speaker and earphones

The US manufacturer releases two new options for listening to music on the move

PRICE: £170 - £260 **AVAILABLE:** SUMMER
CONTACT: 0800 0859021 **WEB:** BOSE.CO.UK



BOSE HAS ANNOUNCED two new portable audio products, the QuietComfort 20 noise cancelling in-ear phones and the SoundLink Mini Bluetooth speaker system.

The QC20s are its first in-ear noise-cancelling headphones, utilising two tiny microphones in each earbud and a digital processing chip in the control module. There's an Aware mode so listeners can hear what's going on around them and the company's TriPort technology and proprietary active equalisation to create deep lows and more natural, lifelike sound. You get 16 hours of noise cancelling from the rechargeable battery, and the QC20s fit with Android, Windows and Blackberry mobile phones. A QC20i version is available for iPhone, iPad and iPods. Both models will cost £260 when they go on sale this summer.

The SoundLink Mini Speaker is a handheld speaker using Bluetooth A2DP technology to stream music from portable devices. It comes with a charging cradle and rechargeable battery for a claimed seven hours of listening. It's available to preorder now for £170.

IN BRIEF

PIVOT POWER

● Pivot Power is a flexible electrical power strip. The adjustable main distribution board can be bent and twisted into multiple configurations, allowing you to save space. It's ideal for anyone fed up of trying to fit their misshaped and larger-sized main plugs or wall-warts, supplied with a growing number of devices, that aren't really suited to traditional inline electrical strips and make it difficult to utilise plug socket space well.

The surge-protected, flexible distribution board bends into circular, semi-circular and zig-zag shapes, and has five outlet pods that can be manipulated so large power bricks don't hog the space. It costs £30. **REZZYBOX.COM**



Krell gets connected

PRICE: £2,500 - £3,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW AND AUGUST
CONTACT: 020 89713909 **WEB:** ABSOLUTESOUNDS.COM

US high-end hi-fi and home cinema manufacturer, Krell, has unveiled its wi-fi-enabled Connect, a high-resolution audio streaming device. From FLAC to WAV, Ogg, MP3 and WMA files, the Connect is equipped to be able to play up to 24/192 audio, plus internet radio, the company says.

The Connect will be available in two forms: digital only, or with a built-in digital-to-analogue converter module. The DAC-equipped Connect, out next month, will sport a state-of-the-art 32-bit ESS Sabre chipset with discrete, direct-coupled analogue

circuitry outputting via RCA or balanced audio outputs, say its makers. The currently available digital-only version has both coaxial and Toslink optical outputs. Both versions sport a built-in 3.5in QVGA LCD screen providing access to networked music libraries, and iOS and Android apps are available offering full control from anywhere in the home, says Krell.

Bill McKiegan, Krell's president told us: "We wanted to offer our exacting customers a streaming audio product that lived up to our high standards. From the

Krell-tuned DAC to the easy-to-use interface, the Connect is the pinnacle of network streaming audio gear."

Additional features include gapless playback, which means live concert albums, for example, can be played as a seamless, uninterrupted experience. Internet radio will get the same conversion as the high-resolution files (on DAC-equipped models), we're told.

The Krell Connect without onboard DAC is available now, and costs £2,500. The onboard DAC version, costing £3,500, will be available from August.



SET YOUR MUSIC FREE


MARTIN LOGAN

*'Seduces the listener with realism and a sense of scale...
The Summit X will own your heart from its first notes'*
Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News (November 2009)

*'Reference-grade performance that you'd struggle to match
at double the price'*
Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi+ (Issue 66)

*'The Summit X is just too addictive to live without. I'm putting
my money where my mouth is and buying the review pair as
my new reference loudspeakers'*
Howard Knepper, SoundStage! (September 2009)

Nothing brings music to life like
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makes ordinary speakers seem hopelessly
constrained.

26 years of electrostatic evolution has led to MartinLogan's latest creation: the mighty Summit X. Key to the new speaker's extraordinary performance are its advanced XStat™ electrostatic panel and perfectly integrated Controlled Dispersion Powered Force™ woofer section, effortlessly extending bass response to subterranean depths.

Yet the Summit X never sounds heavy. On the contrary, its performance is extraordinarily fast and open, painting an image that dances boldly before the listener, fully scaled and unconstrained, a sound that's natural, effortless and startlingly real.

The pinnacle of MartinLogan's hybrid electrostatic technology, the Summit X joins an extensive range of speakers encompassing freestanding, on-wall and in-wall models, from affordable hybrid designs and standalone subwoofers to the awesome CLX – the best full-range electrostatic speaker money can buy.

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M2 SERIES



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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

Dali Kubik Free speakers

Flexible active wireless speaker system with apt-X Bluetooth

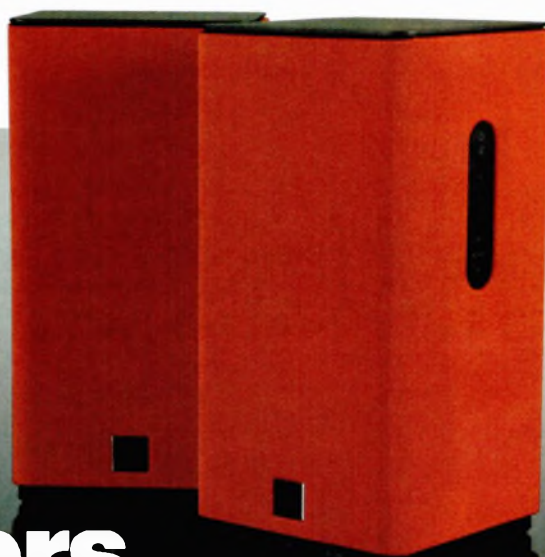
PRICE: £700 - £1,000 **AVAILABLE:** AUTUMN
CONTACT: 0845 6443537 **WEB:** DALI-UK.CO.UK

WE FIRST SAW Dali's Kubik Free active loudspeakers unveiled at the ISE Show in Amsterdam earlier this year. At that time there was no firm indication of when we'd get a launch date, but we have since learnt that it will finally be available this autumn.

The distinctive-looking speaker system currently comes finished in black, white and red, but other colours may be introduced. It's a wireless active speaker system, combining one active speaker and one passive model, called the Kubik Free Xtra. A subwoofer can be added, meaning the Kubik can be configured as a 2.1 system, or as a 2.0 (stereo), or even used as just a single wireless speaker.

As a two-way active speaker it sports 5in wood fibre cone bass driver with a 25mm soft dome tweeter powered by a claimed 100W digital amplifier. The Kubik connects to apt-X Bluetooth-enabled devices to stream music, but there's also a digital optical input for wired audio sources from the likes of a TV, for example, as well as a standard RCA stereo connection and a 3.5mm stereo jack input. Finally, there's a USB input for charging connected portables while playing back from a PC, iPhone and iPad.

Prices for a pair (one active, one passive) are £1,000, with the active Kubik Free available on its own for around £700.



IN BRIEF



MONSTER ADDS NEW IN-EAR HEADPHONES

● Monster is expanding its Inspiration family of over-ear headphones with the introduction of an Inspiration In-Ear model, offering the latest proprietary technologies and sonic innovations to generate the company's signature Pure Monster Sound. Founder and head of Monster, Noel Lee, the audio engineer behind the sound of Beats by Dr Dre headphones, said: "With the Inspiration In-Ear model, we're offering much lighter designs that are ideal for business travellers and the style-conscious person looking for a lighter, great-sounding headphone option." He added: "Inspiration headphones come with ControlTalk Universal cables and the most comfortable form-fitting ear hook ever designed for the in-ear category." Available in titanium and white finish, the Inspiration In-Ear headphones are out now for £150. **MONSTERCABLE.COM/HEADPHONES/**

MING DA DYNASTY

● Ming Da Valve Audio UK announced the arrival of the new Octet EL34-based valve amplifier at the Bristol Hi-Fi Show in February. Since then the Dynasty series has been expanded with the Duet 300, an 8W, 300B, single-ended integrated amplifier model, as well as the Cadenza-Grande, which claims 100W per channel from TungSol output valves. Prices start from £1,650 and all come with a two-year warranty. **MINGDA.CO.UK**

Prepare to be Excite-d

PRICE: FROM £750 **AVAILABLE:** AUTUMN
CONTACT: 01353 721089 **WEB:** DYNAUDIO.COM

Danish loudspeaker specialist, Dynaudio, unveils the Excite Series speaker range with four new models to, erm, excite hi-fi and home cinema enthusiasts. The slender-looking series incorporates a range of models that include the X14 standmount, X24 centre channel, and the X34 and X38 floorstanding speaker models - all featuring technology and materials developed and built in-house by Dynaudio in Skanderborg, Denmark.

The tweeter drive units are constructed of a specially coated fabric dome, while the lower-frequency woofers

utilise light aluminium wire voice coils and MSP (Magnesium Silicate Polymer) cones. A tuned acoustical phase response is said to improve imaging and staging, and thanks to a higher general impedance the Excites are amplifier-friendly designs, the maker tells us.

Finished with Satin White or Satin Black lacquers and in more traditional Walnut or Rosewood veneers, the Excite series will start from £750 for a pair of the X14 standmounts. Full price details for the other models in the series are yet to be announced.



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MUSIC & VIDEO
DATABASE

COAXIAL
& OPTICAL
DIGITAL INPUTS

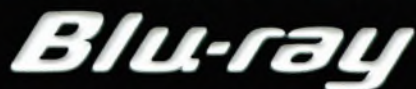
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DO YOU THINK you've got what it takes to write for your favourite hi-fi magazine? We're always on the look out for new writers to join our enthusiastic and well-informed community of reviewers who share a passion for sound. Tell us about your great-sounding hi-fi system or favourite stereo separate in no more than 1,000 words and provide a picture or two by way of illustration. The best reviews will appear in *Hi-Fi Choice* in a few months time and authors contacted about contributing to the mag.

Email your review, along with images, to us at letters@hifichoice.co.uk or post it to *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine, AVTech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, Kent BR6 6BG. Don't forget to provide us with your address and telephone contact number. The closing date for the competition is August 1, 2013. The best entries will be published in a few months time and the winners will be offered the opportunity to join the *Hi-Fi Choice* community. Good luck, now get writing...



REVIEWS



Jumping Jack

Arcam's latest FMJ A5p is one affordable integrated amplifier that likes to party. David Price dusts down his glad rags...

On the faded moment back in 1994, when Alan Cautledge produced the first issue of *Hi-Fi Choice*, we were asked to take these magnificent glassware were something and largely popular A5p amplifiers. We were told that the bright idea to make the review A5p, as well as the standard review, is to produce a more 'strong language', with a more 'enthusiastic' and 'passionate' approach. The review was to be a 'party piece' and to be 'fun'. It was to be a 'party piece' and to be 'fun'. It was to be a 'party piece' and to be 'fun'.

DETAILS

- ARCAM FMJ A5P
- CLASSIFICATION
- PRICE
- FEATURES
- PROS
- CONS
- CONNECTIONS
- RECOMMENDATIONS
- TESTED BY
- DATE

PHOTO SHOTS

Photo 1: The Arcam FMJ A5p integrated amplifier. Photo 2: The Arcam FMJ A5p integrated amplifier. Photo 3: The Arcam FMJ A5p integrated amplifier.

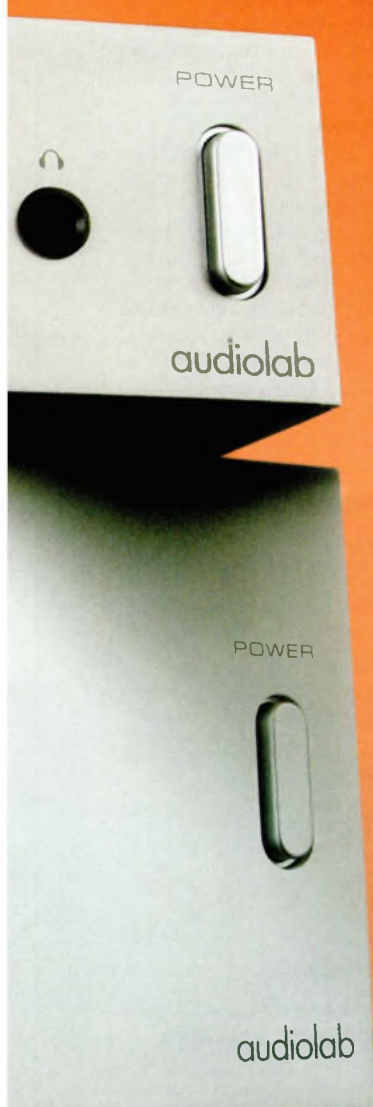


www.hifichoice.co.uk

Space savers

The latest stereo separates to shout, 'less is more' are Audiolab's Q-DAC DAC/preamplifier and M-PWR power amplifier. **David Price** listens in



**DETAILS**

PRODUCT
Audiolab Q-DAC

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
DAC/preamp

WEIGHT
3kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
247 x 60 x 236mm

FEATURES

- ESS Sabre 9016 DAC
- Switchable digital filtering
- 1x coaxial, 1x optical, 1x USB input
- Headphone output
- 32-192kHz (96kHz max. via optical)

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab M-PWR

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Power amplifier

WEIGHT
4.7kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
247 x 114 x 252mm

FEATURES

- Class AB operation
- Quoted power output: 40W RMS per channel
- 2x RCA phono inputs
- 2x balanced XLR inputs

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

Sometime in the late seventies, the auto industry decided that the sportscar was dead, and the result was a decade of uniformly uninteresting 'hot hatchbacks'. But then suddenly Mazda's MX5 roadster arrived in 1989 and changed everything – from then on niche cars took off and the world never looked back. In a sense, 2011's M-DAC was Audiolab's 'MX5 moment' – just as Mazda turned the staid 323 back to front and chopped the roof off, so it took the 'sensible-shoes' 8200CD, pulled out the disc drive and crammed it into cute aluminium casework. The result was unashamedly audiophile in its orientation, rather than just being a trendy-looking box designed to match modern lifestyles!

The Q-DAC and M-PWR, the next in Audiolab's I.AB series, hope to build on this success. The former is a 'low calorie' M-DAC, with much of the same good stuff under the hood, but cost-cut to reach a selling price of £400. The M-PWR is the matching power amp for Audiolab DACs of both Q and M variety, and something we were promised some 20 months ago when the M-DAC originally came out. It retails for £500, and together with either of its DAC partners makes for a full digital decoding and amplifying system – just add a digital source of optical disc or computer variety, and you're away.

Lest we forget, the M-DAC is a thing of loveliness. It won this magazine's coveted product of the year award last year, and was selling like heated sweet baked desserts even before we'd got the first review sample. It's built around the respected, latest generation 32-bit ESS Sabre DAC chip, which runs at up to 24/192 resolution and sports seven adjustable digital filter settings for fine tuning the sound to your own personal tastes. It has a useful spread of digital inputs and outputs – including two coaxial, two optical and an asynchronous USB in, as well as matching digital outputs and a choice of balanced and unbalanced analogue outputs. The new Q-DAC you see here strips all this down to a single coaxial, optical and USB input, and loses the balanced XLR outputs, but pretty much everything else is retained.

This means there's still a volume control, although it's now done by slightly fiddly up/down buttons rather than the old-fashioned, and easier to use, volume knob. There's also a front panel mounted 6.3mm headphone socket, with the

accompanying built-in amplifier, naturally. But another key difference is the display, which is still a nice OLED screen, but smaller. One nice touch is that it can be configured to show CD track and timing information via the settings menu, when being driven by a CD transport.

One major downside is that the remote control has upped and left, so volume setting can only be done by the fiddly fascia mounted buttons – this makes the Q-DAC feel quite a different beast to use. Also, the ESS Sabre DAC chip is the lower-spec 9016, rather than the M's 9018, although Audiolab claims this makes only a fractional subjective difference in sonic terms. Like the M-DAC, triple cascaded jitter attenuation stages ensure that jitter is kept to a minimum, and there's the same high-current, high-linearity Class A analogue output stage, the company says. Also like the M-DAC, the Q has a separate off-board switched mode PSU; Audiolab says that having a switching power supply in such close proximity would be a designer's nightmare because of the interference caused.

The new M-PWR is a compact Class AB stereo power amplifier designed to

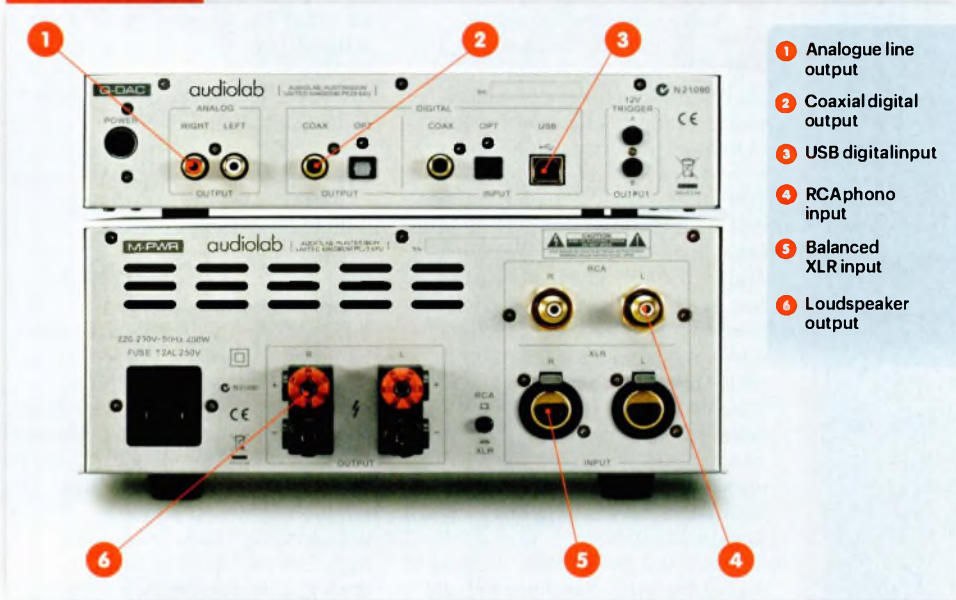
There is no sense of strain or brittleness that sometimes comes from CD

partner the other Audiolab mini components, but the company points out that it will, of course, work with a whole plethora of products – from computers to preamps – just so long as they have a volume control. It sports both single-ended RCA and balanced XLR inputs, and is claimed to output 40W RMS per channel into 8ohms (see Lab Tests). In use, it gives out plenty of power even for standmounters of average sensitivity, such as the Q Acoustics Concept 20s that I use. I also try out the Q Acoustics 2050i floorstanders, which are an ideal partner both electrically and sonically.

Sound quality

Yes, the Q-DAC does sound very close to the pricier M-DAC, when running unbalanced RCA phono connections of course; indeed you'd be hard pressed to tell the difference through any sensibly priced speaker, with only a very slight softening of midband focus and a marginal diminution of depth perspective. The M only really ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Analogue line output
- 2 Coaxial digital output
- 3 USB digital input
- 4 RCA phono input
- 5 Balanced XLR input
- 6 Loudspeaker output

pulls ahead noticeably when you're using balanced interconnects, which of course the Q can't do. Both DACs prove to be excellent partners for the dinky little M-PWR, turning in a very detailed, open and musically enjoyable performance at the price.

What you get is a clean and slightly tonally dry sound, one that's unmistakably solid-state in origin, yet still impressively open and musical. Kicking off with a TEAC CD transport via the coaxial in, I'm encouraged by the sound offered by what's effectively a £900 DAC/amplifier

It sounds even and all-of-a-piece, injecting adrenaline into proceedings

combination. Saint Etienne's *Hug My Soul* shows a wonderful buoyancy, this classic slice of electronic pop bouncing out of the speakers with an infectiously rhythmic gait. Basslines are fast and snappy, percussion captivating and the Audiolab combo seems to really be enjoying itself – as indeed am I!

Next I move to altogether richer and louchier programme material – Isaac Hayes' *Soulsville* is a fat, thick slice of rare groove and this wee duo lets me know all about it. Suddenly – thanks to this far superior early seventies recording – there is warmth, air and space. The recorded acoustic drops way back far behind the plane of the speakers, giving a beautifully immersive quality to the music. Hayes' distinctive voice – as rich as

Bailey's Irish Cream and no less addictive – is a delight, and there is no sense of strain or brittleness that sometimes comes from Compact Disc. Things move along slowly but grippingly, capturing the plaintive feel of the song. All this makes me want more, so it's time to turn the tap full open and go for some 24/192 hi-res via the USB input.

REM's *Texarkana* proves a delight. Here's a track that's packed with ringing Rickenbacker guitars, and via 16-bit it can grate just a touch too much. But a hi-res FLAC rip of the superb DVD-A disc, played off a MacBook Pro, is delightfully smooth and open. Once again, this combo shows its innate smoothness; it doesn't shout at you and nor does it try to grab your attention by turning in an unsubtle, edgy, showy sort of performance. Instead I get four minutes of the sweet sound of Messrs Stipe, Buck, Berry and Mills enjoying themselves massively – again with Mike Mills' beautiful vocals floating ethereally out of the speakers, yards in front of the band. This Audiolab combo sounds even and all-of-a-piece, injecting adrenaline into the proceedings without hurrying it along too much. Treble is crisp, midband open and bass is taut and tight. Indeed, given the modest price, there's nothing you can seriously criticise – perhaps the M-PWR's death perspective is a little curtailed, but you have to remind yourself of the amp's modest pricing.

Only when the volume really goes north does the M-PWR show any signs of mortality; by and large it

keeps itself very much in the shadows, happily making music whenever it is tasked so to do. But Herbie Hancock's *Rockit* at 24/88.2, played at very high levels sees the little Audiolab move towards the edge of its performance envelope, proving unable to serve up the crashing dynamics that this jazz/funk/electro classic demands. There is no sign of strain, it's just the amp can't go the extra yard with those very loudest transients. This is expected at its modest price, of course – and in practice you'll be able to run it as a grown-up power amp unless you have a listening room the size of a tennis court, or have roadied for Motörhead in your earlier life.

Conclusion

Audiolab's new Q-DAC/M-PWR is a cracking little combination. It looks lovely in its own way, is really well screwed together and finished, and comes packed with handy features and plenty of power for the job in hand. The USB DAC implementation is excellent, meaning it's an ideal partner for anyone serious about hi-res computer audio. Best of all is the sound, which gives nothing away to anything else at the price and betters many costing more ●

HOW IT COMPARES

There's no direct rival for this combo on a price basis, but in terms of size, ergonomics and functionality there's a striking parallel – the Naim DAC-V1 DAC (£1,250) and NAP 100 power amplifier (£650) (May 2013 issue). While the NAP 100 costs only £150 more, the DAC-V1 is a pricier affair – but functionality is pretty close. Sonically the Naim combo is better, with more detail, subtlety, musicality and a slightly sweeter, darker tonal balance. Although the quoted power ratings of the two amps are similar, the Naim shows more grace under pressure. You'd never know there was a £1,000 price cap between these dynamic duos – and that is the beauty of the Audiolab.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - Q-DAC

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Great sonics, fine feature set, super build
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Fiddly volume control
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Brilliant little budget audiophile DAC preamp – you can't ask for more really
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - M-PWR

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Crisp, clean, open, musical sound; nice size
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Great pint-sized power amp, an ideal match for the Q or M-DAC
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



Q&A

Peter Comeau

Director of acoustic design, IAG

**DP: What were the overall aims of the Q-DAC and M-PWR?**

PC: M-DAC has been a huge success for Audiolab, thanks to its innovative qualities and we felt we could offer the majority of the performance in a more cost-effective form by removing some of the 'luxury' items. The form factor of M-DAC looks neat when shelf-mounted, and we thought that customers would like a power amplifier in the same form factor to make a complete mini system by just adding speakers.

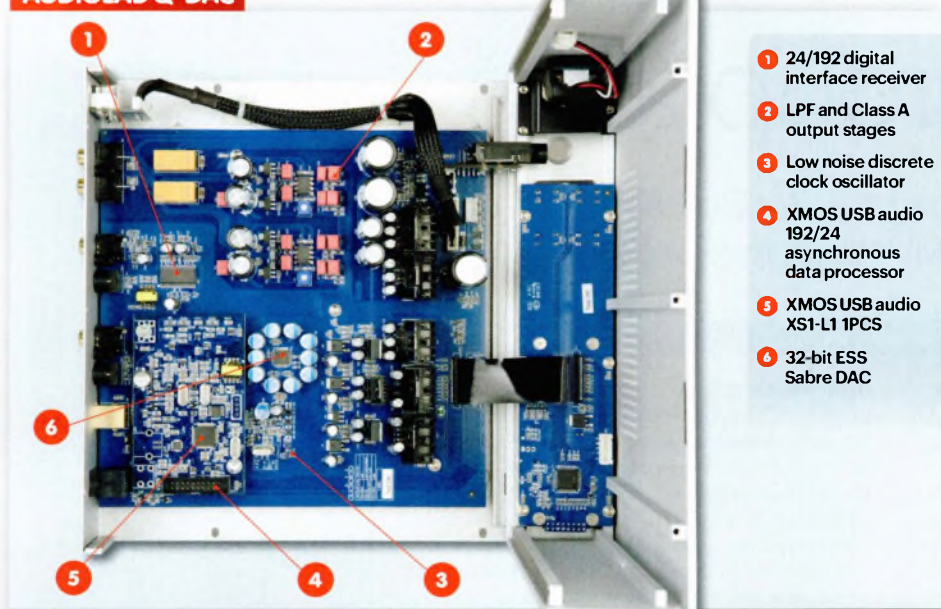
How does the Q-DAC differ from the M-DAC?

In terms of circuitry they share most of the same design configuration, the only saving here being a slightly more cost-effective version of the Sabre 32 DAC – 9016 instead of 9018. There's no difference in functionality here and only the most subtle change in the performance.

What are the special features of the M-PWR design?

M-PWR is a Class AB design. We do not feel, at this cost, that Class D designs offer anything special. It uses modular IC power output devices, specially chosen for their excellent signal-to-noise ratio, extremely low distortion and noise floor, as well as strong output capabilities with up to 10A of transient current delivery into low impedance loads. Thus we can be sure that M-PWR will drive a variety of loudspeakers without loss of performance into all loads. We designed a special toroidal transformer for M-PWR, which offers low magnetic leakage and a high power output (up to 200W) so that the power supply has plenty of reserve for music transients. Although we only rate M-PWR as 40W continuous into 8ohms, the combination of a high-reserve power supply and the high-current modular IC power devices we have chosen allows peak outputs of up to 135W. Circuit layout was carefully designed to minimise noise and crosstalk and to reveal the high-performance capability of the output devices. All capacitors have been chosen for acoustic transparency.

AUDIOLAB Q-DAC



- 1 24/192 digital interface receiver
- 2 LPF and Class A output stages
- 3 Low noise discrete clock oscillator
- 4 XMOS USB audio 192/24 asynchronous data processor
- 5 XMOS USB audio XS1-L1 1PCS
- 6 32-bit ESS Sabre DAC

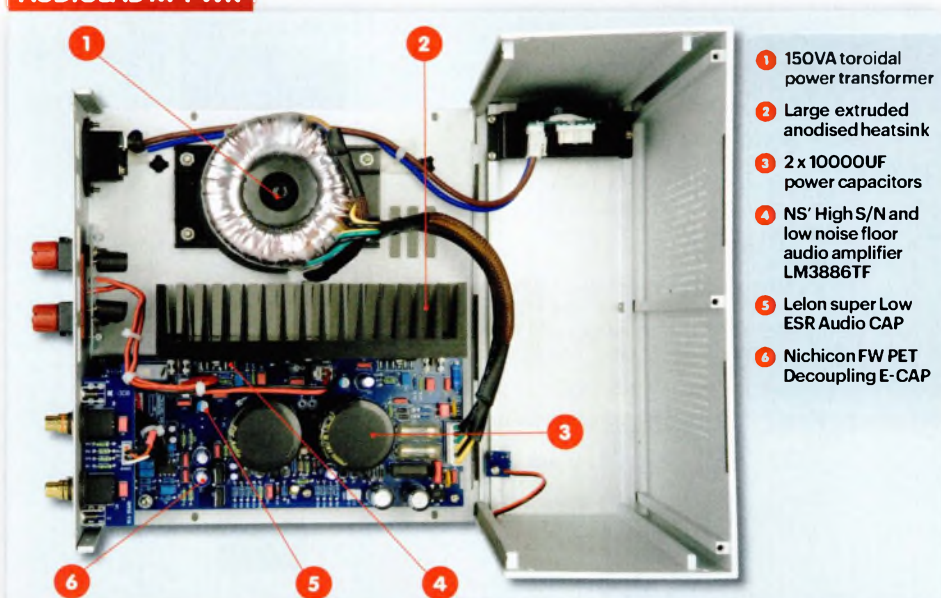
ON TEST

All seven digital filters offered by the M-DAC are duplicated in this Q-DAC. The Optimal and Sharp filters are conventional FIR types, the impulses showing both pre and post-ringing (the former least subjectively desirable), but with Optimal cutting-off slightly early beyond 19kHz to reach -3.4dB/20kHz and achieve a

superior rejection of alias distortions (-92dB vs. -83dB). The other five filters are optimised for transient performance and show little or no pre-ringing at the expense of poorer HF extension and poorer rejection of alias distortions. The Optimal Transient, Transient XD and DD filters are preferred with 96kHz+ media.

Distortion is slightly higher, but not high via the Q-DAC at 0.001% (0dBFS) to just 0.0003% (-30dBFS), but jitter remains spectacularly low at -10psec despite showing noise-like artefacts. The Q-DAC lacks the M-DAC's XLR outs and has a lower 110dB A-wtd S/N ratio but the drive-anything 0.5ohm source impedance is retained. PM

AUDIOLAB M-PWR



- 1 150VA toroidal power transformer
- 2 Large extruded anodised heatsink
- 3 2 x 10000UF power capacitors
- 4 NS' High S/N and low noise floor audio amplifier LM3886TF
- 5 Lelon super Low ESR Audio CAP
- 6 Nichicon FW PET Decoupling E-CAP

ON TEST

Rated at 2x 40W/8ohm, Audiolab's little M-PWR just tips the scales at 2x 47W/8ohm and 2x 63W/4ohm. The power supply is not over-sized, but is sufficient to maintain short-term peaks of 65W and 110W into 8/4ohm loads at <1% THD, but this falls away to 91W and 50W into low 2/1ohm loads (equivalent to a maximum current of

just 7A). As a result, the M-PWR is best suited to sensitive and relatively 'easy-to-drive' loudspeakers.

Distortion is broadly unaffected by power output, typically 0.003% from 1-40W, but inevitably increases slightly with frequency to 0.025% at 20kHz. The output impedance is flat at 0.034ohm up to 5kHz, increasing

to 0.06ohm at 20kHz (0.35ohm at 100kHz). There's also some variation in high-frequency response with tough speaker loads, but the trend is ostensibly very flat and extended, with -1dB points at 2Hz and 90kHz. There's some slight residual hum, but the A-wtd S/N (balanced inputs) is wide enough at 89dB (re. 0dBW). PM

How we test

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

Unique group tests

Hi-Fi Choice is the only mag to offer Blind-Listening Group Tests backed up with objective lab testing

CABLE LOOMS GROUP TEST

THIS CRUCIAL PROCESS is very carefully controlled so that we get reliable and consistent results in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Our listeners must not feel that they're being tested, despite being unaware of the brand or price of the products they are auditioning.

The session begins by setting the volume level to an agreed point, one that all three panelists feel comfortable with, yet that is high enough to make differences easily discernible. Then the choice of music is agreed – it needs to be familiar, but also well recorded and of sufficient variety to give meaningful listening comparisons. The chosen selection of music is played, and then the panelists are encouraged

to discuss their impressions of the sound of the product. This is then repeated, and periodically the panel goes back to audition earlier products, for reference purposes. Regular breaks keep the listeners refreshed. The consensus, or otherwise then forms the basis of our reported Sound Quality section.

At the end of the session, there's a final debrief when panelists discuss their findings.

It's an exhaustive process, but done this way evaluation that is free from prejudices based on brand, price or appearance is made, while the different sensitivities of the listeners help to round out the analysis in order to make it more widely applicable.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Resistance

+40

Capacitance

+30

Inductance

+20

Power loss

-20

KEY: ■ Group average

■ % below average ■ % above average

RESISTANCE/POWER LOSS (1M LOOP)

Specified in mohm (thousandths of an ohm) this is a measure of how a cable 'resists' the flow of direct current. High resistance in a speaker cable may impair loudspeaker damping and contributes to a (typically small) power loss.

PARALLEL CAPACITANCE (1M LENGTH)

Measured in pF (UK billionths of a Farad), parallel capacitance is a measure of the impedance between signal and return conductors at very high frequencies. Higher capacitance cables often exhibit poorer leakage.

SERIES INDUCTANCE (1M LOOP)

Series inductance is measured in μ H (thousandths of a Henry). This contributes to a cable's high frequency impedance and, with high capacitance, can make it more sensitive to any circulating RF noise.

LEAKAGE

Leakage is measured as the DC resistance between unterminated signal and return conductors. Expressed in Mohm (millions of Ohms), a low leakage figure either means a tight signal/return geometry or poor insulation.

THIS MONTH'S LISTENING PANEL



MICHAEL OSBORN (LEFT) **ASTIN TREW SUPREMO** Michael is a gent with a fine ear and a taste for smooth sounds, as this test proves in no uncertain terms!

LEE DUNKLEY (MIDDLE) **HI-FI CHOICE EDITOR** Lee has sat in on a good many blind-listening tests before, so spending a day on the sofa came as no surprise.

STEVE REICHART (RIGHT) **EX ARCAM SALES** manager Steve is now happily ensconced at Armour, where he's involved with Q Acoustics among other projects.

TEST MUSIC



ULLA MEINECKE
*Die Tänzerin,
Die Tänzerin Und
Ihre Sc*



EMELI SANDÉ
*Mountains
Our Version Of
Events*



PAUL SIMON
*Diamonds of the
Soles of Her Shoes
Graceland*



**ALLEGRI STRING
QUARTET**
*Beethoven Quartet
in C minor,
Opus 16, No.4*



OUR GROUP TESTS and In-depth Reviews 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

The Legacy Lives On



Sansui

Sound thinking.

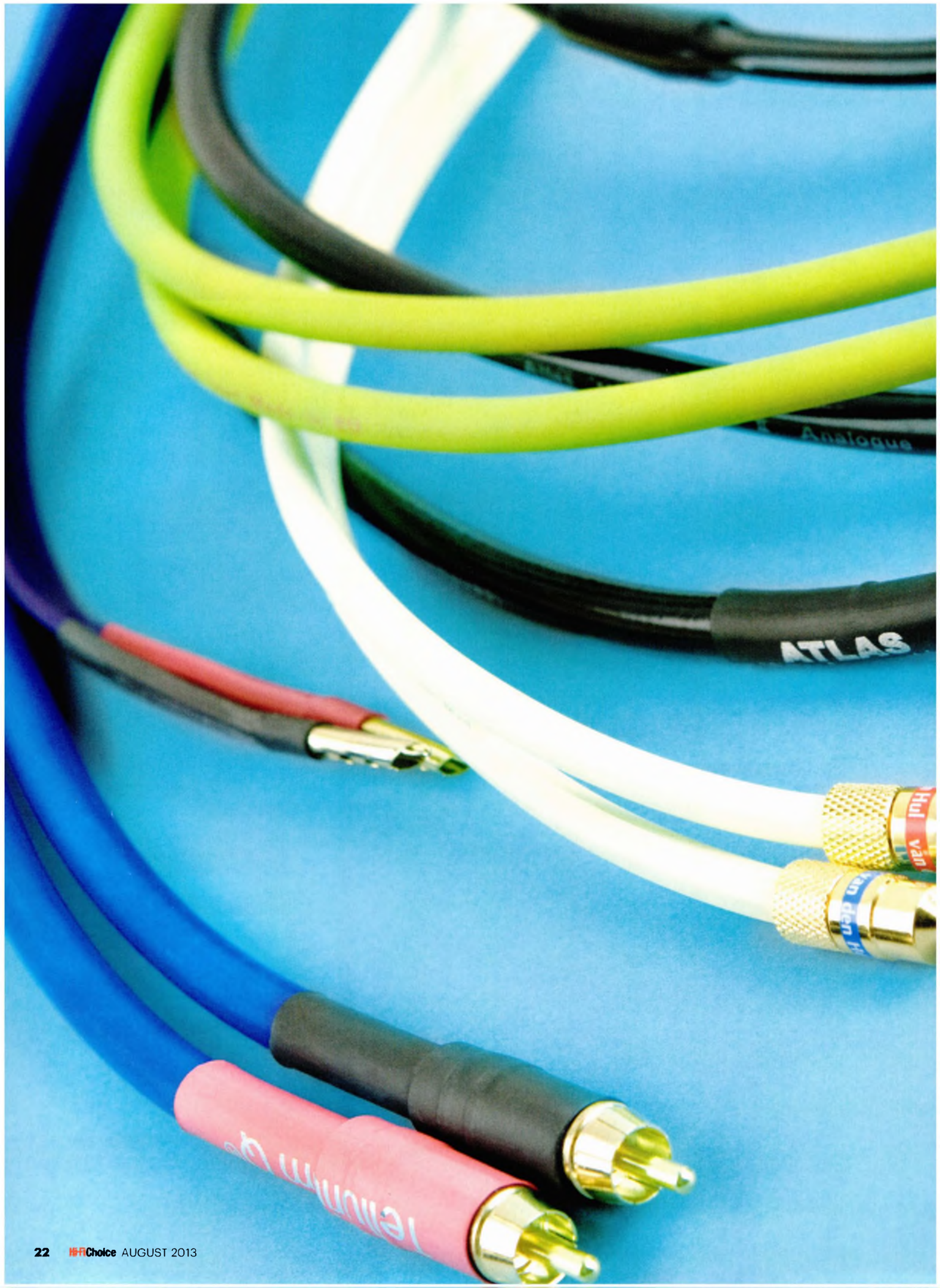
Stunning Hi-Fi from £199

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

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Sansui is distributed in the UK by Henley Designs Ltd.

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Group test

CABLE LOOMS £297-£460

Fruit of the looms

Six interconnect and speaker cable combos get the blind listening treatment; **David Price** is your host

THE MERITS OF hi-fi cables – both interconnects and loudspeaker cables – is the source of heated debate among hi-fi enthusiasts, prospective buyers, online forum frequenters and indeed hi-fi magazines. Despite all the chatter, people remain confused, and so their systems are often a mishmash of leads from all sorts of sources. The basic *modus operandi* as far as buying cables is simply ‘suck it and see’.

Yet things don't exist in a vacuum, and for this reason cable makers always recommend that buyers should purchase ‘looms’ –

interconnect and speaker cables from the same source, ideally matched to work together. Cue howls of cynical laughter and a chorus of, “they would say that, wouldn't they?” from many audiophiles! Well yes, they would, but aside from the obvious commercial benefits to cable makers – when you get punters to purchase more of your products in one go – there is some hard sense behind this idea.

House music

As with other types of hardware, cable makers have their own

particular house sound. Naturally, each one swears that theirs is the best, but let's put that aside for one moment. If you like – or seek – a certain sort of sound or result from your precious hi-fi system, then logically it is best achieved by a one-manufacturer approach, as there are fewer variables down your cabling chain to diminish the effect.

Prices quoted are for a 1m length of the interconnect with standard gold RCA phono plugs, and for a stereo pair of monowire 3m speaker cables with standard banana plugs.

ON TEST



Atlas Hyper Asymmetrical/Hyper 2.0 £378 **p25**

A respected Scottish brand known for its propulsive musical sound, this reasonably priced cable loom will appeal to those on the more rocky side of music listening.



Black Rhodium Prelude +/Salsa £460 **p27**

Based in the North Midlands, this cable company has made a name for itself from its sweet, smooth and open sound, which is a little less challenging than some



Chord Company Chameleon VEE 3/Odyssey 2 £365 **p29**

Established for some 30 years now, offering high-quality cables in no-nonsense packaging, which serve up an even and open sound with a variety of systems



Ecosse Nu Diva/ES2.3 £340 **p31**

Another Scottish cable contender based near Glasgow, its wares are proving increasingly popular with those seeking a neutral, yet involving sort of sound



Tellurium Q Blue/Blue £297 **p33**

This Somerset brand is relatively new on the scene, but has quickly made a respectable name for itself with its smooth sound, one that won't etch itself on your cranium!



Van den Hul The Wave/CS-122 Hybrid £310 **p35**

Van den Hul emanates from the Netherlands, and has a fine name for making everything from moving coil phono cartridges to medical equipment, plus, of course, cables



THE hi-fi SHOW

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best that the high-end can offer with scheduled presentations and demonstrations by a mix of famous designers, recording engineers and audio personalities. Our other suites will offer interactive demonstrations of the best headphones and headphone amplifiers, heavyweight vinyl and hi-res digital media plus the very highest quality accessories available.

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Atlas Hyper Asymmetrical/ Hyper 2.0 **£378**

From this well-liked Scottish cable brand comes this attractive, well made, affordable loom

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cable loom

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES

- Interconnect: copper conductor with polyethylene dielectric
- Speaker cable: copper conductor with Teflon dielectric
- Prices: interconnect **£158/1m**, speaker cable **£20 per metre** unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Atlas

TELEPHONE
01563 572666

WEBSITE
atlasables.com



One of the great debates about hi-fi cables is which conductor material to use. Atlas is avowedly a fan of copper, arguing that silver-plated copper or silver is too bright. To this end, the Hyper Asymmetrical interconnect's central conductor is made from 80 strands of OCC of 99.9997% purity, insulated by low-loss foamed polyethylene dielectric. The return conductor is a two-layer braid made from a total of 272 strands of oxygen-free copper to provide rejection of RFI. These are covered by a soft PVC sleeve in a gloss black finish and terminated with attractive Atlas non-compressing RCA plugs. The manufacturer claims an impedance of 75ohms.

The matching Hyper 2.0 loudspeaker cables are made with 6N pure OCC conductors and Teflon dielectrics; the 2mm² version tested here is said to be the one that suits most systems, although a pricier 3mm² version is available for those seeking the maximum bass power, the company says. There is also a bi-wire version, although for the purposes of this test we stuck to mono-wiring.

These came terminated with decent banana plugs, and both pairs of the Atlas cables generally have a good, high-quality feel to them with good-looking packaging.

Sound quality

Here is an interesting combination, and certainly one of the most distinctive in both a good and a bad way. First, there is no mistaking this cable loom, as it gets right into the musical fray and pounds out the beats, signposting the rhythmic starts and stops in great big, bold brushstrokes. It leaves you in absolutely no doubt where and when to tap your toes, and gives you a ringside seat on the musical event. However, as with many close-up views of things, it can be a little intense and indeed uncomfortable. The Atlas loom is never particularly tonally harsh, it's just it has a relentlessly pacey and pushy sound that isn't really amenable to stretching back and relaxing into the swing of things – you could say it's more punk rock than easy listening.

This makes for a distinctive listen, but one that you won't want for all occasions. The Beethoven piece is one such example of something the Atlas doesn't really suit. Unlike the vdH combo, which seemingly drops the soundstage to the back of beyond, these cables push everything in your face, and it is as if the music has been remastered to sound more intense. Some might like this, but it just doesn't suit here, as it lacks the finesse and delicacy you'd expect from a pretty pricey set of cables.

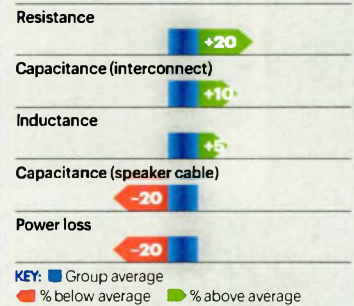
On the other hand, the fact that this combo injects energy and power and drama into the music, makes it loads of fun on bouncy, upbeat music such as the Paul Simon track – its pressing

ON TEST

Thanks in part to its conventional coaxial geometry, the Atlas Asymmetrical is specified to offer a 75ohm characteristic impedance which, while largely irrelevant at low (audio) frequencies, does suggest the same design will be ideally suited as a digital S/PDIF interconnect. The capacitance is slightly lower than Atlas suggests at 63pF/m, a figure shared by the partnering Hyper 2.0 speaker cable, but the 1m loop resistance is fractionally higher, albeit lower than average, at 56mohm.

The 65-strand speaker cable offers a 2mm² conductor cross-section, sufficient for a 'medium' 16.8mohm/m loop resistance or a power loss of a mere 0.018dB/m. Should you be tempted by the thicker 3mm² version of Atlas' Hyper then this gauge offers a lower 12mohm/m loop resistance, a fractionally higher 0.55µH/m loop inductance and lower 56pF/m capacitance. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



sense of rhythm just makes you want to keep listening. Ditto the Emeli Sandé song, which does well overall as long as you forgive the Atlas twosome for its slightly forward, yet nasal vocals and general edge to percussion. One panelist commented that this combo is "trying too hard" to impress, and that sums it up well. Factor in a slightly detached bass, and this cable will not be for all, interesting and feisty though it is.

In summary, this is an interesting and distinct cable loom – one which some will instinctively 'get' and like, whereas others will find a little too coloured for the sorts of music and/or sound that they like ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Really gets into the rhythm and parties!

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Indistinct detail-wise, and lacks the incision of some others here

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Great music maker, but not the best all rounder here

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

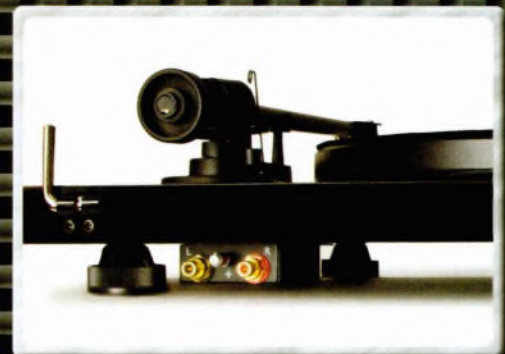
★★★★★



The Carbon Age



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Debut Carbon

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Web : www.henleydesigns.co.uk





Black Rhodium Prelude +/Salsa **£460**



And now to a popular English cable name that makes a wide variety of affordable audiophile wires

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cable loom
ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES

- **Interconnect:** silver-plated copper conductors with PTFE jacket
- **Speaker cable:** silver-plated copper conductors with PTFE jacket
- **Prices:** interconnect £100/1m, speaker cable £24.95 per metre unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Black Rhodium
TELEPHONE
01332 342233

WEBSITE
blackrhodium.co.uk

Unlike the Atlas products on test, these Black Rhodiums use silver-plated copper as a conductor, which it is claimed give the best of both worlds – the musicality of copper and the clarity of silver. The Prelude interconnect is the cheapest wire here, and uses 19 x 0.25mm² stranded silver-plated copper conductors. The inner insulation is PTFE with a special conducting layer between insulation and screen to prevent microphonic noise. Careful control of the direction of the wiring is taken during the production process, and it is terminated with Black Rhodium's gold-plated RCA phono plug. The cables are also twisted together to reduce Radio Frequency Interference.

Salsa is a two-core speaker cable with a low-impedance, high cross-section conductor wire and silicone rubber insulation. Again, silver-plated copper conductors are used, and care is taken with cable directionality. The sheath is a smooth affair that's easier to handle than some of the other speaker cables here. This latest Salsa cable now has 1.2mm-thick insulation

of the individual conductors, up to 0.8mm, to reduce the transient phase distortion, Black Rhodium says. The cables are terminated with gold or rhodium-plated Z plugs.

Sound quality

This set of cables scores well, with the panel praising it for the decent imaging, including the fine placement of instruments within the musical mix of the Beethoven piece, and a decent – if not spectacular – rhythmic flow. Whereas some other cable looms here sound a little stilted and mechanical, generally the Black Rhodium wires are thought to be inoffensive and unobtrusive, not intervening in the musical flow too much. They don't give an overtly punchy and propulsive presentation – in the way that the Atlas cables do, for example – but nor do they slur things and make the music a chore to listen to.

The Paul Simon track shows these cables up as having a good sense of space in the treble – tonally they are a little more airy and extended than the Atlas and Tellurium Q for example, meaning that on duller-sounding systems they will fit well. The midband is decently crisp and detailed, and there is a good sense of what is going on in the mix across the midband. However, the panellists do find the bass a little plodding in some respects. One notes that they are “strangely not foot tapping”, and laments the lack of absolute control on display by other cables, such as the van den Huls for example.

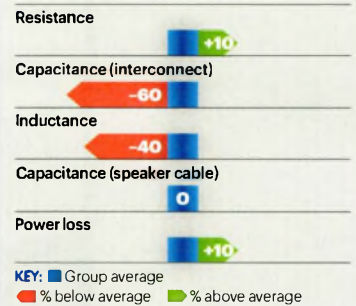
Clean enough to throw out good amounts of detail and atmosphere, and rhythmically good enough to catch the vocal phrasing on the Emeli Sandé track adroitly, there are few objections raised about this cable loom. Never unpleasant to listen to,

ON TEST

Graham Nalty's Prelude interconnect cable has been available for a few years and while ostensibly identical, this new '+' version clocked-up some revised numbers on the lab bench. Specifically, while always exhibiting a higher-than-average 480pF/m parallel capacitance, this new sample also had a surprisingly high 0.85µH inductance, much as Nalty's cables had in the past when ferromagnetic rhodium was part of their DNA. The net effect here is to bring down the cable's resonant frequency (to 7.9MHz) while also mitigating against long interconnect cable runs (preamp depending).

Black Rhodium's Salsa speaker cable is also another tried-and-tested model, and this sample measured identically to those of a few years ago. Salsa's combination of low 52pF/m capacitance and 11.6mohm/m loop resistance makes it a good all-round choice for runs up to and beyond 5m. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



the panellists think that the Black Rhodium wires will suit 'lively' systems down to the ground. Only the low end robs them of a higher marking, and again in systems where there's not too much bottom-end clout – especially with bass-light standmounters, for example – the listeners believe that these will work particularly well.

Overall then, a jolly good showing for a sensibly voiced, fine all-round cable loom. It's something of a good jack of all trades, but the listening panel finds it to be master of none. So if you're seeking a distinctive or even charismatic sound, then you'll want to look elsewhere ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Nicely smooth and open, musical sound |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Not quite the most engrossing or exciting here |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WESAY: Fine, honest, neutral-sounding cable loom that will suit many user's taste |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL



Objects of Desire



TAD - D600 CD Player / DAC Streamer



Oracle - Delphi CD2500 MK IV



TAD - Reference One Speakers



Cabasse - L'Ocean Speaker



Oracle - Delphi Mk VI Turntable



Chord Company Chameleon VEE 3/ Odyssey 2 £365

All the way from Salisbury comes this strong selling cable loom combo, but how does it fare?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cable loom

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper conductors with FEP insulation

- Speaker cable: silver-plated copper conductors with PVC jacket

- Prices: interconnect £135/1m, speaker cable £25 per metre unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Chord Company

TELEPHONE
01980 625700

WEBSITE
chord.co.uk

Another silver-plated copper interconnect, the Chameleon VEE 3 uses Chord Company's established Chameleon SilverPlus cable, although the conductors have been reconfigured into a single-signal and dual-return configuration. The multi-stranded silver-plated OFC conductors get FEP insulation and, to reduce microphony, a cotton-fibre conductor wrap is employed. A high-density braid and foil-shielding combination is said to minimise signal loss, and these are surrounded by soft PVC and protected by a hard PVC casing. Chord's custom VEE 3 RCA plugs are fitted, with silver-plating applied to the contact areas, and the centre pin is insulated with PTFE.

Odyssey 2 is the latest incarnation of a very long-lived mid-price speaker cable, and uses two 12 AWG 19-strand, silver-plated, oxygen-free copper conductors in a twisted-pair configuration. PTFE is used to insulate these – the manufacturer says this gives the most neutral-tonal characteristics with silver-plated copper conductors. They're clearly labelled and the jacket is strong PVC

for protection, and the overall diameter is 8mm. Chord 24-karat gold-plated banana plugs are fitted to the review samples.

Sound quality

After the slightly euphonic and rather fluid-sounding Tellurium Qs, it is a case of 'all change' with the Chord Company combo. Indeed, it rather moves the performance back to the more matter-of-fact style of the Black Rhodiums, the difference being that it takes the analytical approach a few steps further. The result is a conspicuously 'hi-fi' sounding cable loom, one which the panelists generally agree is a bit shinier tonally, and even a little stark across the upper midband – one person thinks. Despite this, the listeners agree that it is a tad opaque and lacking in insight, making for a rather dispassionate and uninvolved listen.

The Paul Simon track is a case in point; these cables seem superficially quite busy, with lots going on and plenty of elements thrown out of the mix. But the more you listen, the harder it proves to connect to the music. The Chords are certainly a lot less rhythmically inviting than the Tellurium Qs, and far less so than the vdH cables we will subsequently try. Simon has a lovely, lilting vocal style on this song, but the Chords don't quite get it, preferring instead to deconstruct the track taking the romance out of the proceedings.

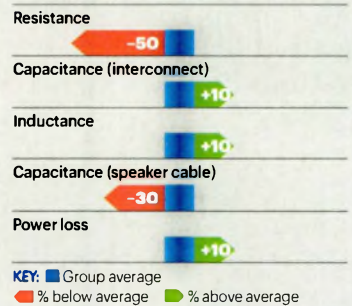
The Emile Sandé piece again seems to be going through the motions, with the cables serving up what one panelist rather mysteriously describes as "a seventies sound", by which I think he means it is quite showy, but not organically musical. Another points to a surprising lack of enjoyment, saying the Allegri String

ON TEST

Chord describes the Chameleon VEE 3's screen as 'fully-floating' which suggests it's unterminated – a feature also reflected in the moderate 170mohm 1m loop resistance of the signal and return conductors. If the peripheral braid was connected, the loop resistance would likely be lower. However, capacitance and inductance are both very low at 70pF/0.25µH while the >300Mohm leakage suggests good dielectric stability.

The partnering Odyssey 2's insulation has a slightly poorer 10Mohm leakage just as its parallel capacitance is the highest of the group here at 89pF/1m – both slightly unusual for a PTFE dielectric. However, even at 445pF for the 5m set employed here, Odyssey 2 will not trip-up any amplifiers. The 12-gauge signal and return conductors offer a low 57mohm resistance over a 5m loop, representing a minimal power loss of 0.0124dB/m. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Quartet might as well be in the other room for all the emotional impact it makes. Obviously then, the cables aren't working terribly well in the review system, with none of the panelists really plumping for the sort of sound on offer.

In my experience over the years, I have found that Chord Company cables are capable of very fine results, so we may have system synergy issues here, or it could simply be the case that they don't quite suit the very individual tastes of the listening panel. As such, prospective purchasers will still do well to audition these in their own systems, they may get very different results ● ►

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Very well constructed and presented

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Not the most musical of combinations with our system; opaque sound

BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



WE SAY: Not a success in this system, but may be in others!

OVERALL





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Ecosse

Nu Diva/ES2.3 **£340**



This well-established company has made many friends over the years, so how will this cable combo go down?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cable loom
ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
• Interconnect: silver-plated copper conductors with PVC jacket
• Speaker cable: silver-plated copper conductors with PVC jacket
• Prices: interconnect £180/1m, speaker cable £16.20 per metre unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Ecosse Cables

TELEPHONE
01563 551758

WEBSITE
ecossecables.co.uk

The clue's in the name, this company's from Scotland! The Nu Diva is described on Ecosse's website as using silver-plated copper cable, and twisted-pair topology, rope-lay construction, however our tests found otherwise (see *On Test* box out). An air-foamed polyethylene dielectric is fitted, and there's a dual screen consisting of a conductive polymer tube surrounded by a close-lapped, silver-plated braid. To reduce microphony there's a cotton-fibre filler, which along with the soft PVC outer jacket damps the structure. The cable is deep-cryogenically treated, and is sold with the Ecosse's patented MACH1Ag non-compressing, conjugate bracket, hard silver-plated copper RCA plugs. Our sample has two of its plugs screwed too tight to fit on the CD and amp phono sockets, so some adjustment is necessary.

Each ES2.3 loudspeaker cable consists of two runs (send and return) of 400-strand, 'ultra fine copper' conductors, just 0.07mm in diameter, in seven concentric bundles per conductor. These get what is described as "low dielectric loss"

polypropylene insulation, and cotton damping, while soft PVC sheathing is used to reduce microphony. Aside from the phono plug glitch on the Nu Diva, the cables appear to be very well made and finished.

Sound quality

After the unabashedly get-up-and-go brio of the Atlas, it is an anticlimax to move to the Ecosse, but not an altogether unpleasant one. The more the panel listens, the more they feel it has real strengths that grow and grow. Certainly these wouldn't set the showroom sales floor alight, but the basic, self-effacing musicality of this cable loom makes for a satisfying long-term listening experience.

The Emeli Sandé track shows the Ecosse's unfussed, unhurried nature, but while it doesn't go out of its way to supercharge the music, it does open up nicely and let much of what is on the recording flood out.

The panel talks of "decent, foot-tapping rhythms", "a fine sense of flow" and of "a good bit of the track's emotion coming out", and this sums up this cable loom handsomely.

Although not sonic fireworks, the Paul Simon track is just plain fun to hear, these wires really beginning to give a sense of the purpose and emotional purchase of the music, rather than turning it into something more showy or hurried. Indeed, it's the sort of cable that will really reward a smooth, open system and someone who likes to listen to fine, mature music late at night, such is its sense of quiet contemplation.

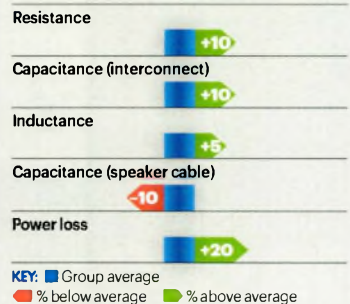
Tonally it is very good, too – if not as sweet as the vdH and Tellurium Q – and the higher and lower frequency extremes impress. Bass is thought to keep good time with the music, while the midband is nicely detailed and

ON TEST

Although Ecosse's website describes its Nu Diva interconnect as using a 'twisted-pair topology', inspection reveals it to be a coaxial design with a multi-stranded silver-plated copper signal core surrounded by a dense braid acting as both screen and return. The figures reflect this with capacitance (67pF/m), inductance (0.3µH/m) and loop resistance (64mohm) all perfectly 'average' for this familiar geometry.

Neither does the ES2.3 loudspeaker cable offer any great surprises. Now in production for over a decade, this cable uses a twisted pair of 3mm² conductors insulated in a hard polypropylene. The loop resistance is necessarily low at just 11mohm/m (or 55mohm for our 5m set) for a power loss of 0.0119dB/m. Ecosse has gone to great lengths to exclude air from around the ultra-fine copper strands, using heatshrink tubing between the cable and 4mm plugs. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



shows a fine string tone on the Beethoven recording. There is a good bit of air and space up top, and it certainly isn't as nasal or as forced as the Atlas. The major gripe is the soundstaging – it is decently wide, but a little flat, with one panelist saying there is little sense of the main violin of the Allegri String Quartet standing out from the accompanying instruments.

Overall, we find the Ecosse cable loom to be a very commendable cable combination, with a flowing and communicative sound that makes you want to keep listening. It's devoid of anything that anyone will find objectionable, so will win friends ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Pleasantly open, even and subtly musical sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Lacks ultimate transparency and grip; sticky plug!
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Enjoyable, subtle sounding cable loom that's well worth auditioning
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Box Design
by Pro-Ject



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Tellurium Q Blue/Blue £297



From the west – yes, but not wild in any sense, this brand specialises in smooth, subtle sounding cables

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cable loom

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
• Interconnect:
unspecified
material
• Speaker cable:
unspecified
material
• Prices:
interconnect
£180/1m, speaker
cable £16.50 per
metre unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Tellurium Q

TELEPHONE
01458 251997

WEBSITE
telluriumq.com

Something of an enigmatic company, the recently launched Tellurium Q is only a few years old, and has made a name for itself with its distinctively smooth and – some would say – creamy-sounding range of power leads, interconnects and speaker cables. Its technical director is Colin Wonfor, whose range of excellent-sounding Inca Tech and Magnum amplifiers in the eighties and nineties will bring back memories for more seasoned audiophile campaigners. Fittingly, the company is now making amplification, too.

Unlike the other manufacturers in the group test, Tellurium Q refuses to provide any product details and so doesn't specify any materials used. Suffice to say that its 'Blue' products are the entry-point to a range that goes up to some stratospherically priced stuff, and that the interconnect cables and speaker cables are designed for one another specifically. It has recently been revised, and the company is claiming great things for it. In terms of the build and finish, it is to a high standard, but looks unremarkable; many will applaud

these two for their sober appearance and general lack of 'bling', which can surely only be a good thing!

Sound quality

If the Black Rhodiums are relatively nondescript sonically, not interfering too much and generally getting on with the job, the Tellurium Q cable loom is altogether more characterful, albeit in a nice way. The Emeli Sandé track shows these cables to be more fluid and mellifluous than the Black Rhodiums, the Blues obviously letting the phrasing and intonation of her vocals come out more to the fore. There is a greater sense of musical involvement, more of a feeling of 'being there' and the music tugging on the emotional heartstrings. The musical map is much more explicit, the song having a sense of direction and starting off in one place and taking you somewhere else. It just comes over as a more emotional sort of cable combination.

The Beethoven piece flags it up as having a more organic sound – not just in its rhythm, but in its tonality. Panelists talk in terms of it being a little more open, yet not quite as bright and topky as the upper midband of the Black Rhodium, Atlas and Chord. It throws out a fair deal of detail and the listeners all comment on the good tone of the violins, which are sinewy yet not screechy. They talk in terms of it having a far deeper, less brightly etched midband, one which appears to dissolve back into the speakers a bit more and seems less caught within their boundaries – although we later find that these cables can't quite match the excellent van den Huls in terms of realistic stage depth.

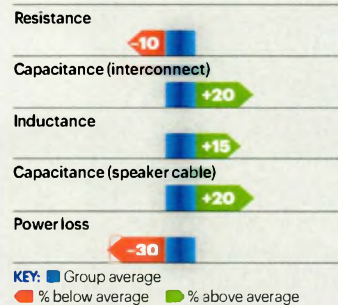
The high frequencies don't seem quite as explicit as many of the cables

ON TEST

Our measurements certainly indicate that Tellurium Q's Blue interconnect has changed from samples tested last year. We can only assume the 'Patent Pending' has been updated accordingly. This year's version appears to use a slightly reduced conductor (copper) cross-section as the loop resistance has increased from 51mohm to 86mohm. However, suggesting the geometry has also changed, both capacitance (50pF/m) and inductance (just 0.21µH/m) have both usefully been reduced. In fact Tellurium Q Blue has both the lowest capacitance and inductance of the group.

The flat, parallel-geometry speaker cable necessarily has a far higher inductance at 0.96µH/m while the limited cross-sectional conductor area delivers the second highest loop resistance of the group at 24mohm/m. The power loss of 0.026dB/m, while not high, is twice that of all but the Atlas. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



here – the Tellurium Q loom doesn't beam information out to you as much as some. The Paul Simon track sounds smoother and silkier than many, and this works all the way down into the bass, which is much fuller. Sadly though, it is looser; in the reference system it seems just a little slow on the uptake, lacking the pin-point precision of some.

Overall, an excellent cable loom in its distinctive way – and one that the panel feels to be one of the most – but not the most – musically satisfying of all those tested. Still, it's a rather characterful listen, which some will love and others won't, so as always try before you buy ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Satisfyingly musical and smooth sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Not the last word in insight or low-level detail
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Generally a highly enjoyable cable to listen to, well worth trying out
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



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C-1.1



C-1.1



C-1.1
C-4.1



C-1.1



D-1



C-1.1
D-1

Van den Hul The Wave/ CS-122 Hybrid **£310**



From Holland comes this long-established cable specialist, with an impressive pairing

DETAILS

PRODUCT

Cable loom

ORIGIN

Netherlands

TYPE

Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper with Hulliflex jacket
- Speaker cable: silver-plated copper and carbon hybrid speaker cable with Hulliflex jacket
- Prices: interconnect £130/1m, speaker cable £20 per metre unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR

Flamingo Audio

TELEPHONE

07833 955014

WEBSITE

vandenhul.com

From a company that has made itself a great name for the fine moving coil cartridges it makes, comes a vast range of interconnects and speaker cables. The Wave is towards the more affordable end of this, and is another silver-plated, copper cable featuring a “massive” 0.9mm central conductor of oxygen-free copper. A specially foamed dielectric insulation material is said to minimise high frequency signal attenuation. The outer and inner layer are made of the same material as the central conductor, which is described as a “triple shield” that is said to aid interference suppression. As with all van den Hul cables, it is covered in the company’s own ‘Hulliflex’ cable jacket, which is claimed to be both environmentally friendly and contain no halogens.

The CS-122 Hybrid is an updated version of one of vdH’s classic speaker cables, and sports two conductors made of 147 strands of 0.16mm diameter, high-purity, matched-crystal oxygen-free copper with a very dense pure-silver coating, alongside a carbon saturated layer that is said to

improve the sound. The cable jacket is also made of Hulliflex and is described as “a very attractive matt cream colour”. During the debrief one of our panelists counters: “it looks like something you see in a hospital”!

Sound quality

From the opening bars of the Beethoven piece, it is obvious that what we are dealing with here is special. For the first time in the test, the sound hangs back from the speakers and dissolves into the room, rather than appearing to come from two points in space – which is what happens to a greater or lesser extent with the other looms. Indeed, the transparency of these cables is superb, but it isn’t transparency at the expense of musicality, as the vdH loom also has a wonderfully mellifluous quality to it that sees the music ebbing and flowing in a seductive and arresting manner.

The Paul Simon track is proof positive of the way these cables are able to let the singer’s real intentions flood out – every vocal inflection is carried beautifully, giving a mesmeric quality to the music. Sure, all the detail is there, but the bigger picture isn’t lost in the process of rendering it.

The first track is startlingly different to most of the other cable looms, in the way the decay on the voice seems to hang on, rather than ‘falling off a cliff’ with most of the others. The vocals are expressive and dynamic, and this is set over a backing that suddenly takes on an urgent, snappy quality to it – when previously the musicians seem to just be going through the motions. It is amazing how the same beats sound so different, as if they’ve been set free.

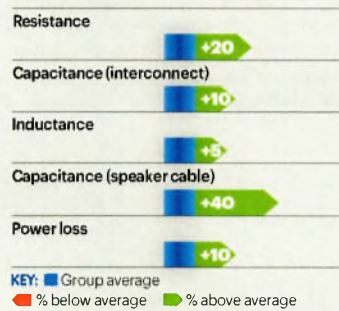
Soundstage width isn’t as good as some here though; this is where the

ON TEST

In common with the Atlas Asymmetric interconnect, vdH’s The Wave is also a 75ohm coaxial type and so lends itself to both ‘analogue’ and ‘digital’ (S/PDIF) duties. This common geometry is reflected in the similarly low inductance and capacitance of the two interconnects although vdH’s greater conductor area lends it a very slightly lower 45mohm/m loop resistance.

vdH’s partnering CS-122 speaker cable, now in ‘Hybrid’ guise with mixed metal and carbon conductors is a very different beast from the original CS-122 that I tested for *Hi-Fi Choice* over 21 years ago. The spaced, figure-of-eight geometry means the 1.0µm/m series inductance is unchanged, but the improved dielectric means capacitance is half what it was at just 17pF/m. Resistance has also been cut by a factor of nearly 3x at 11.4mohm/m, further improving the achievable amp/speaker damping factor. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



vdH falls slightly short; it isn’t constrained or shut in, just not quite as expansive as – say – the Tellurium Q. That said, depth perspective is brilliant, “The first cable I’m hearing with front-to-back dimensionality,” says one panelist. Tonally it is pretty even – maybe just a touch on the dark and velvety side, but certainly not as sepia-tinged as the Tellurium Q.

The overall effect is of an absolutely stellar cable combination and one that’s an essential audition for anyone that’s in the market for such a thing. The great thing is that it’s not really all that characterful, it’s just very unobtrusive and lets the music’s true flavour come flooding out ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Very musical, engaging sound; open and detailed

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Slightly constrained stage width

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Superb value cable loom, one that’s an essential audition

FEATURES



OVERALL



Group test verdict

Opinions have been discussed and the final verdicts are in from our listening panel, and now it's down to **David Price** to unravel the final results...

THE LEAST POPULAR cable loom is the Chord Company's. In the context of the review system it simply doesn't shine, turning in a musically uninvolved performance. It is reasonably open, but seems a touch unforgiving on harder-sounding tracks. If nothing else, this shows the importance of synergy, as the brand is a popular one with many friends.

The Atlas loom comes next; here there are some strong positives, but some negatives too – there is no mistaking its energy and verve, these cables pushing the song along with verve and brio. But it isn't the most


transparent combination here by a long chalk, sounding a little congested and lacking in subtlety.

The Ecosse is the first of the cable looms that the panel really liked, praising it for its genuine openness, gentle musicality and affable nature. Indeed, one panelist put this up in second place, so enthusiastic is he about it. It's a great, general purpose performer, which is well worth giving an audition to.

The same can be said of Black Rhodium's cable combination, which again doesn't swing one way or the other too much; it gives an enjoyable,

open and spacious sound without exactly burning down the house, so to speak. It has just a touch more smoothness than the Ecosse in our system, hence its higher ranking.

Tellurium Q's loom is generally very well liked, with a spacious sound and musical gait that gets into the rhythms and works on communicating the emotion of the song. The trade-off is that it is a little indistinct in terms of its low-level detail resolution – you'd never call it forensic – and isn't a patch on the winner, which elicits strong, unanimous praise.



WINNER

The moment the van den Hul cable loom comes on, the panelists give a collective sigh of relief. Music has a lilting flow and a sense of purpose that isn't evident elsewhere. Comprehensively the best here, this cable loom comes heartily recommended.



Make/model

Atlas
Hyper Asymmetrical/
Hyper2.0

Black Rhodium
Prelude +/Sala

Chord Company
Chameleon VEE 3/
Odyssey 2

Ecosse
Nu Diva/ES2.3

Tellurium Q
Blue/Blue

Van den Hul
The Wave/
CS-122 Hybrid

Price	£378	£460	£365	£340	£297	£310
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

Snappy rhythms make for a fun listen, but it lacks finesse or transparency

Nice, easy, open sound with decent detail and smoothness

Doesn't hit the spot in the review system, with a slightly cool, opaque sound

Fine sounding, musical loom with good levels of detail and grip

Smooth, soft, downy sort of sound allied to pleasing musicality

Grippy, fast and exciting sound, but with excellent transparency, too

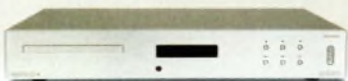
Key features

Copper	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Silver/copper	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Silver	No	No	No	No	No	No
Cop/sil/carbon	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Multi core	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

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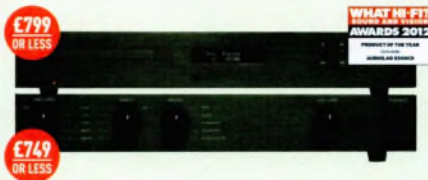
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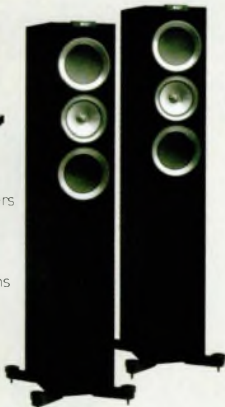
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MUSIC & MOVEMENT

The headphone market has exploded in recent years and now transcends hi-fi. **Ed Selley** examines the phenomenon

As I write this, I'm listening to a pair of headphones that will appear in a future review in *Hi-Fi Choice*. Within reach are another two pairs and in the house as a whole I'd be surprised if there were less than ten pairs in total. In case you are awaking from a lengthy coma or you have been prospecting in the Kalahari for a few years, headphones are big business. Furthermore, they aren't simply big business judged within the standards of two-channel hi-fi – headphones are among the fastest-growing categories in consumer electronics as a whole.

In bald numbers, this translates to the arresting statistic that almost 12 million pairs of headphones (which for the purpose of the article is interchangeable with 'earphone') will be sold in the UK this year according to GFK data shown at – you've guessed it – a recent headphone launch. What is more important still is that there is not simply growth at the inexpensive end of the market, but across almost all price points

and with particular emphasis on models that are over £100. There is nothing else that is going to get anywhere near those figures and with the news from other categories still looking fairly gloomy, it comes as no surprise to find that brands both new and better known in other product categories are piling in to try and take advantage of the resulting bonanza.

A bit of history...

So how did we get to this situation? Headphones have after all been around in one form or another for nearly a century and have been a regular part of hi-fi for at least 40 years without showing any signs of becoming the massive category they are currently. The answer seems to lie in a combination of developments in other technology, changes to our lifestyles and that most intangible ingredient of all – fashion. Together, they have catapulted the headphone from supporting accessory to audio prime mover.

The effect that other devices have had on headphones seems peculiar given we have had access to portable music in one form or another for decades without seeing the same jump in headphone sales. What has changed is the nature of the devices in question.

The number of devices that make use of headphones has exploded in recent years. Where you might once have thought about buying some home headphones or upgrade the ones that came with your Walkman, you now have the possibility of using headphones with tablets, smartphones, laptops and gaming devices to say nothing of your hi-fi or portable audio player. The pool of potential customers that might buy headphones has greatly increased. Not only has the number of potential customers increased, the number of places that headphones are available has grown as well as a number of retailers that have taken to headphones as a useful way of increasing their takings – particularly when the rather slim margins of some mobile devices are taken into account.

THE HIP HOP CONNECTION

One of the most distinctive parts of the headphone boom is the involvement of the 'celebrity' brands. This began in 2008 with the partnership of Monster – a brand already making inroads into the headphone business – with Andre 'Dr Dre' Young. The impact was almost immediate and Beats by Dre became one of the dominant brands in the headphone industry – so much so that in 2012, the company parted ways with Monster and now operates alone.

What followed has been a deluge of endorsed headphones. In no particular order, Curtis '50 Cent' Jackson, Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges and RZA from the Wu Tang Clan have all released headphones that they endorse – although none have associated themselves as closely with the process as is the case in the Beats by Dre line-up. Outside of the rap industry, the estate responsible for the Bob Marley name has been involved in the release of the 'House of Marley' line of headphones and earphones and having parted ways with Dr Dre, Monster has released a number of limited edition tie ins with artists like Daft Punk during the release of the *Tron Legacy* movie.

These tie ins have met with varying degrees of critical and commercial success and there appears to be considerable variation in the quality of the offerings from these brands, but the effect that they have had on the growth of the category is beyond dispute and their more design-led approach has resulted in greater efforts on the part of more established manufacturers that we have all benefitted from.



Beats: the cans of choice for hipsters



Lady Gaga gets in on the act



House of Marley's Jamaica themed headphones

Many of these potential customers will be driven into the open arms of headphone manufacturers because the headphones that their device was supplied with – when they are supplied at all – are to put it bluntly, rubbish. The original main offender was Apple which supplied millions of pairs of earphones that were at once startlingly uncomfortable and had the frequency extension of a doorbell chime (although its latest offerings are, in all fairness, rather good). Customers are all but commanded to go and buy something better. This explains a jump in sales of affordable models, but less as to why the sales of more expensive models has also risen.

As a subset of headphones, the effect of the boom on earphones has been even more profound. As earphones have always been about use on the move, the market for high-end 'in ear monitors' was best thought of as *bijou* and was effectively catered for almost exclusively by pro and semi-pro offerings from companies like Etymotic and Shure. As the growth in headphones has largely been driven by mobile devices, the boom in high-end earphones has been considerable. The choice of models in the £150-£250 point has exploded with a combination of existing manufacturers widening their ranges and new products

A pair of headphones is as much a part of some people's outfits as their other accessories

from 'known brands' and new arrivals joining the ranks. Earphones have also seen a considerable rise in the maximum price that people are prepared to pay for them. Ten years ago, spending over £200 on earphones was something that precious few people did outside of the pro arena. Fast forward to the present and models over £500 are far from unusual and some models are rather more than that. By dint of their small size, earphones are generally less showy than their full-size counterparts and this often means people (myself included) are happier to wear them out and about.

Music on the move

The reason for the increase in sales of more expensive models is that we ought to be thinking of headphones as our main speakers rather than an accessory. When I commuted daily, I had to confront the awkward realisation that I listened to a pair of earphones for considerably more time a day than I did my main hi-fi speakers. We spend our lives on the move and for many of us, this is the main (or even only) time we can actually enjoy listening to music. If this is the case, it makes perfect sense to treat headphones as your main speakers and budget accordingly.

Spending more money seems less alien to non hi-fi people too, because the price of their other ancillaries has risen. Just 20 years ago when listening to a cheap portable cassette player with the speed stability of a child's pinwheel or a portable CD player that skipped the moment it moved a nanometre, it made little sense to spend big money on headphones for it. Fast forward to today and with people comfortably spending £300 on a smartphone and more still on a tablet, it makes rather more sense to spend a reasonable sum on a pair of headphones to partner with them. Although a great deal of the music being listened to is compressed, the quality difference between a reasonable quality compressed file and a cassette of old is not going to be significant and in the case of all but the most sophisticated personal cassette players, probably comes down in favour of the smartphone.

Dedicated follower of fashion

As such, the ingredients are present to drive the growth of headphones to higher levels than might have been the case, but it is the last part of the recipe that is the most intangible – fashion. Headphones (and here I do mean actual over-ear designs) are currently cool in a way that most of hi-fi (with the possible exception of vinyl) isn't. Much of this has to do with the rise of the celebrity-endorsed models (the hip hop community especially – who knew that rap artists were such a mine of engineering talent?), but also a wider sense that a pair of headphones is as much a part of some people's outfits as their other accessories. The effect on growth is self-reinforcing. The celebrity-endorsed brands saw the patterns of growth and their arrival brought wider awareness to headphones growing the market still further.

To this end, headphones are probably the most aesthetically interesting category of hi-fi right now with companies making effort in terms of design and, more importantly, taking risks that they might not with other components. This applies to longstanding brands as much as it does newcomers.

Sennheiser products are rarely anything other than deeply impressive, but the new Momentum is capable and covetable as they reach out for new customers. AKG likewise broke new ground with the Quincy Jones series of headphones that combined all of their considerable sonic experience with a really striking appearance – wearing a green pair is a very definite style statement. By the same token, some headphone brands have the advantage of already making a very definitive style statement. Grado and Stax in particular have nailed retro chic without lifting a finger in design terms or compromising their principles.

Of course, companies that do make an effort in design are generally rewarded for doing so. The most important change in the requirements from the latest crop of



The growth in portables has been key to headphones' popularity

THE TECHNOLOGY ANGLE

Although the principles by which headphones work haven't really changed of late, they have benefited from some changes and adaptations to the technology. The first for users on the move is the developments in Bluetooth technology. The benefits of being able to remove the cable between source and head are considerable for anybody on the move and newer formats such as apt-X can handle a lossless signal without compression. As Bluetooth is an open standard, the rate of technical development is impressive and innovations such as greater energy efficiency are likely to improve the format further – while ensuring that wherever possible backwards compatibility is built into the system as well.

The second aspect of external technology that has benefitted headphones is the dominance of Apple in the MP3, phone and tablet categories. This has meant that manufacturers have had the confidence to develop models that make use of the Apple remote protocol. This means that junking the supplied earbuds doesn't mean giving up on the ability to skip tracks and in the case of the iPhone making and receiving calls. The increasing challenge from Android (that doesn't have such an overarching protocol) means that this may be something that suffers going forward, though.

Whether the interest in the headphone market allows for more technical innovation to continue is hard to say. As it stands, although there are many new brands joining the party at the moment we haven't seen anything truly revolutionary hit the market, but if growth continues at this pace, who knows what we might see?

consumers is for headphones that are adapted for use on the move. This does not necessarily mean that the headphone that results is smaller than a home design, but touches like earpads that fold flat and suitable carrying cases are key to producing designs that are as happy being used on the move as they are at home. This is an area where some brands have been more effective than others and one that the new arrival of brands have often managed to do better than more established companies. This hybrid is perhaps the main innovation of the headphone boom – larger than the portable of old and often fitted with features such as an inline remote and Bluetooth (see *The Technology Angle* boxout), the design some brands hope is the gateway for customers to take an interest in their other products.

One thing leads to another

Is this a realistic expectation or just a pipedream, though? Some brands have clearly made the move into headphones as much to keep their name in people's minds should they decide to look into home audio. This is perfectly logical, but as yet it is hard to work out if people are considering upgrading their home electronics on the strength of their headphones let alone if they are going to stay brand loyal when they do so. There are areas where this seems more plausible than others. I don't see it being too much of a stretch to imagine that Focal and Bowers & Wilkins offerings in the headphone market leading to sales of some of their less expensive offerings – if not their flagship

Some brands have moved into headphones to keep their name in people's minds

products. The association that a consumer might make between the MartinLogan Mikros and the company's rather more expensive speaker models is a little harder to see in the same light. Even with the impressive sales figures in the sector, some brands are going to do better than others in terms of reaching a new demographic.

Introducing your brand name to a wider category of people is unlikely to be harmful though, provided that the product is actually any good of course. The rise of computer audio is keeping hi-fi at least partly relevant with new consumers, but it remains to be seen if the headphone boom will feed more new blood into the industry. By the same token, it wouldn't take too many of the

12-million customers buying headphones, to decide to take things further for the home hi-fi market to benefit. At the very least, the average headphone consumer appears to be rather younger than the average home hi-fi one so at the very least, time is on the side of the optimists.

Of course, the most interesting aspect of the headphone boom is what the effect of celebrity interest in other aspects of hi-fi might be. Computer audio in particular has some of the same natural growth potential that headphones have shown, but currently – and perhaps regrettably – no member of the rap fraternity has shown their talent for making the most of high-resolution digital. The idea of the streamer becoming the next cool object could be something to behold, but fashion is a fickle thing and we may be waiting forever to achieve it. In the meantime, if nothing else there has never been a better time to show off your taste in music by strapping some cans on and getting out into the world – you are the new cool ●

Rapper 50 Cent's Sync by 50 headphones boast apt-X encoding





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The only way is Essex

Rega's latest integrated is a powerful beast that looks a bit brutal but it has a fun side too, as **Jason Kennedy** discovers

Two years ago Southend's finest manufacturer of audio equipment introduced the Brio-R amplifier, a half-width device that proved you can build an extremely entertaining amplifier for a sensible price in the UK. That component was based on a power amplifier that Rega's designer Terry Bateman had created in an attempt to emulate the rightly much-vaunted qualities of the Leak Stereo 20 valve amplifier. Being a solid-state design it didn't sound like the Stereo 20 I used to use, but it had much of its musicality, which is the essence of a good amplifier.

At this year's Bristol Show Rega introduced a bigger version of this design called Elicit-R, the suffix in both cases indicating the presence of remote control – a relatively new thing to Rega amps. This full-width design has a bigger power amplifier with a specified output of 105W into 80hms. This is produced by an emulated Class A driver stage built around a complementary pair of Darlington transistors, the output devices themselves are Class A/B as is usually the case. The preamp circuit is a discrete FET-based design that Bateman feels has a particular synergy with the power amplifier, it's

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega Elicit-R
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
13kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 82 x 340mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output:
105W/80hms, 162W/40hms
• Line inputs: 5x
RCA, direct, record,
MM phono input
• Outputs: 2x
record, pre-amp
• Solaris system
remote
DISTRIBUTOR
Rega Research
TELEPHONE
01702 333071
WEBSITE
rega.co.uk

what he calls a “synergistic feeling (that) goes back to the very early days of playing with audio circuits!”

The Elicit-R is built into a very sturdy steel case with heatsinking flanking either side, it's not the prettiest of amplifiers to be frank, but feels like it's built to last. It also has a wide selection of in and output socketry on the back panel, these include a line or moving magnet phono input, if you don't have a turntable it functions as a line input, a lower noise input according to the spec. There are four other line inputs, a record input and two record outputs – for use with a headphone amp perhaps – preamp out and a direct input that bypasses the preamp. This is useful if you want to incorporate the Elicit-R into a home cinema set-up or simply use it as a power amp.

The front panel confused me by having a button next to the input indicators that appeared to do nothing, then I discovered that if you press the button then rotate the knob it does what you want, press it again to return to volume control. The volume control itself is a stepped attenuator type that offers one decibel steps, a usefully fine graduation that can also be controlled by the remote handset. This in marked contrast to the Brio-R where it's very difficult to

Sound quality

The Elicit-R takes a while to fully warm up, it feels warm to the touch after 30 minutes, but doesn't really start sounding its best until it's been working for another half an hour. Initially it sounds a little bit forward and edgy, but this calms down with use and you can crank it without restraint. It's a powerful amplifier with lots of low-end grip for an integrated at this price, it's not the smoothest around but Regas never are, rather it defines leading edges with precision and verve. If you enjoy transients it's a highly entertaining amp, and I do like a bit of definition in that department. It's what reveals the precise tempo of the music and shows exactly how members of a band are interacting, how what each one plays meshes with the rest of the group. This is easy to do if there's only two or three people playing mellow stuff, the sort of stuff you hear in many a hi-fi demo, but once things begin to get busy, components that are weak in this department begin to come unstuck. Not so the Elicit-R, which remains clear cut under pretty much all circumstances.

I particularly like the way it reveals the power in bass instruments such as the cello in the Alban Berg Quartet, not the most weighty instrument admittedly, but one that underpins the menace in the Beethoven pieces being played. You get all of the texture but not as much of the tonal richness of the instrument as you might with some alternatives. This is not a particularly dry-sounding amp but neither is it particularly fluid, rather it communicates the essence of the composition in a clearly paced and revealing manner. It does so with more finesse than a Brio-R and more power too, but both share the same innate musicality and both are capable of sweeping you up in the

music and carrying your mind to another place. A place where the imagination is sparked and you can begin to understand what the person that made that music is trying to say.

Imaging is quite distinctive on the Elicit-R, for the most part the image is thrown forward of the speakers which is the opposite to what I usually experience, it doesn't stop the system producing 3D images, but does limit their depth quite obviously. I tried bypassing the preamp section by using the direct input to the power amp, controlling volume with the Resolution Audio Cantata DAC and considerably more depth was revealed, as indeed was space in general. Which suggests that this is a

Detail is not in short supply and there is musical thrill power in abundance

preamp-related characteristic. Some recordings deliver large amounts of space with a standard line input. With the recent Naim Label release Kairos 4tet, it conveys the space in the studio with ease and places the band in the room such that it sounds strong, dynamic and alive. A powerful experience that proves the Elicit-R can deliver the imaging goods when the source is replete with it. Another title from the same label's recent 24/192 high-definition remasters – Laurence Hobgood's *When the Heart Dances* – is less visceral and somewhat easier listening as a result, what it does convey is the quality of musicianship and of composition by delivering music that is hard to ignore for all the right reasons.

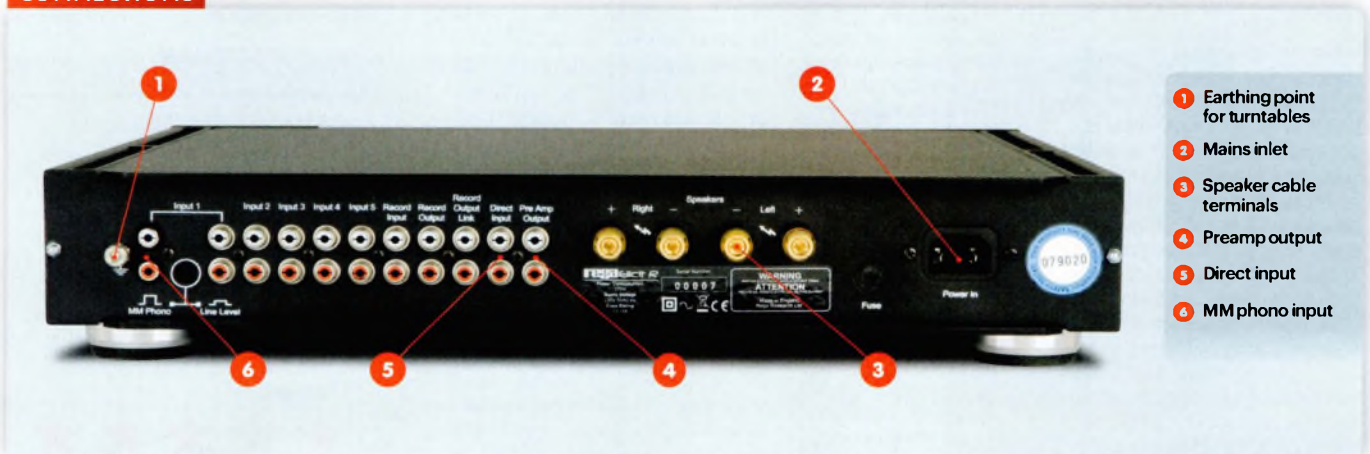
I use the Elicit-R with two speakers, the Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamond and PMC's twenty.22 standmount. ▶

make small volume changes with the remote. The handset is Rega's new Solaris design, a fully festooned system remote that rather confusingly has two sets of input buttons, alongside numerous other CD/DAC related functions and some rather cryptically marked buttons for that added air of mystery.

Once you have realised which buttons operate the amp it's really very straightforward. Most of the time volume is the only important control, but mute, direct and mono come in useful as well.

The looks might not suit all tastes, but the Rega is built to last

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Earthing point for turntables
- 2 Mains inlet
- 3 Speaker cable terminals
- 4 Preamp output
- 5 Direct input
- 6 MM phono input

Q&A

Terry Bateman

Rega head of electronic engineering



JK: What's different between this and previous Rega designs?

TB: The Elicit II had its roots in the Elex, and the reason for using the Brio-r 'type' power amp circuit was twofold; one, the good sonic qualities of the circuit and the second, the fact it's a production-friendly circuit more suited to the Elicit II.

What are the origins of the Elicit-R?

The original 'blueprint' amplifier was made some time ago and I had it in the workshop for a few years before I suggested using it in the Brio-R. The cost of the circuit in the Brio-R is only minor where I replaced high-performance voltage references with simpler devices and simplified the power supply. There were some other minor changes where I used less exotic transistors in the 'front end' and not pushing the performance by using a higher grade of coupling/decoupling capacitors etc.

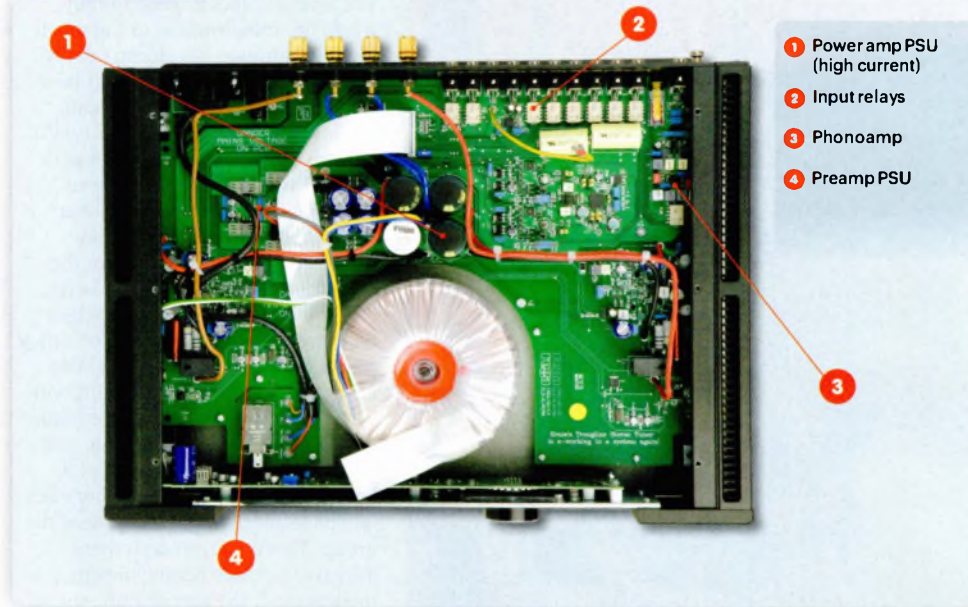
If this is the blueprint why did the Brio-R come first?

It was a simple case of what was needed first, and that was a replacement for the Brio 3. The Brio-R power amp is nearer the original Brio 3 circuit, whereas the Elicit-R is nearer the original Elex/Elicit circuit so the Brio-R circuit had to earn its stripes before we could look at using it in the Elicit-R or similar. But seeing as I'd already done the Stereo 20 comparison using the 'blueprint design' and felt it was good, I was in no doubt about its capability.

What about the preamp stage?

I feel there is synergy between the Brio-R 'type' power amp circuit and the discrete FET-based preamp circuit used in the Brio-R and Elicit-R. This feeling goes back to the very early days of playing with audio circuits (I was about 13!) and some circuits just worked better together – it's hard to quantify! Maybe at the age of 13 I was unaffected by the 'theoretical' electronics of the circuit and I was going by sheer instinct? Now I can take some of the instinct and the theoretical electronics and design a product like the Elicit-R, which I was not able to do at 13.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Power amp PSU (high current)
- 2 Input relays
- 3 Phonoamp
- 4 Preamp PSU

The bigger 802s show off the amp's low-end power and extension a treat, when Keith Jarrett's foot taps the stage at the beginning of *Pt VII* on his *Testament* live album you can tell it's a big platform. Thankfully he stops fairly soon and concentrates on the keys to totally engaging effect. The piano itself sounds as solid and precise in its character as one expects of a concert grand, a rigid yet reverberant instrument with serious mass. When a pianist of Jarrett's calibre is in the zone a system like this can deliver a totally enthralling result.

The PMC is a more sensibly priced speaker for the amp (£1,970), but provides a similarly gripping sound that while lower on finesse and bass extension does the all important job of showing the character of the music, the way it was played and recorded as well as that most critical quality; timing. You know exactly when things happen, when the stick hits the snare and the plectrum strikes the string, you may not get the full spatial picture nor the quietest of low-level sounds, but detail is not in short supply and there is musical thrill power in abundance.

Conclusion

In some respects the finish on the Elicit's metalwork reflects its tonal balance, not super slick but solid, reliable and honest. This is a fast and agile amplifier that doesn't go out of its way to smooth over the cracks in a performance or recording, as a result some might find its presentation a little stark, but far more will revel in the clarity and transient precision of

A fast and agile amp that doesn't go out of its way to smooth over the cracks

the sound. It has plenty of driving power and plenty of in – and outputs – allied to a finely graduated volume control and comprehensively equipped remote handset.

I thoroughly enjoy using it and exploring my music collection to discover more of the variety and charm within it. This is precisely what it is designed to do, after all. If you want a luxurious sound or one with inky black silences in the background there are alternatives that will suit your tastes much better, but if you want to get to grips with what your favourite artists are really saying on your favourite tracks then this will get you far closer than most options at this price point ●



HOW IT COMPARES

When it comes to hardcore British integrated amplifiers the name to beat is Naim, at this price it has the Nait XS (£1,525), which has six line inputs and the potential for power supply upgrades but a relatively low 60W per channel rating. I would expect the Nait XS to sound more fluid and smooth than the Elicit-R, but to lack its transparency and low end grip. Roksan's Caspian M2 (£1,695) is an 85W design that's extremely natural and tuneful and will appeal to many music lovers, it also looks nicer than the Rega. Finally, there's Arcam's A38. It lacks the timing precision of the alternatives above, but does offer lots of features, great build and plenty of power.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: First class timing; plenty of power; massive musicality

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Finish is a little prosaic; lacks image depth

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A revealing, precisely timed and musically sophisticated amplifier with plenty of power and socketry

FEATURES



OVERALL



TAD

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A little treat

If good things really do come in small packages **Ed Selley** ought to find this Naim and Neat partnership very good indeed

Some audio companies have a distinctively symbiotic relationship that extends beyond commercial concerns. Naim Audio was for many years a company that designed products intended to partner those from Linn (and to this day, one or two members of the product line-up continue to do so), and even though this partnership has grown apart, these relationships haven't ended completely.

Linn might not be the main partner these days, but there are still some brands where there is a certain synergy with the Salisbury concern. Durham-based Neat Loudspeakers

produces a considerable variety of very talented loudspeakers that all have one thing in common. While they work beautifully with many electronics brands, when partnered with Naim electronics, the result is frequently greater than the sum of its parts. As a result, when Naim announced the Naim UnitiQute 2 at the recent Munich Show, it seemed logical to partner Naim's smallest system with Neat's smallest speaker to see whether the relationship works in miniature.

The UnitiQute 2 is very much a chip off the original block and keeps the half-width casework of the previous design and sticks with having no

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim UnitiQute 2/
Neat Iota

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
All-in-one
streaming system/
standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
5.6kg /3kg each

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
207 x 87 x 314mm
200 x 130 x 165mm

FEATURES
● 32/192-capable
UPnP client
● 30W internal amp
● 50mm ribbon
tweeter
● 100mm mid-bass
driver

DISTRIBUTOR
Naim/Neat

TELEPHONE
01722 426600
01833 631021

WEBSITE
naimaudio.com
neat.co.uk

physical controls on the unit at all. Indeed the only physical change is around the back where the RS232 connection for software updates has been replaced with a mini USB port. Internally though, the changes are much more extensive. The UnitiQute 2 is now capable of handling 32/192 files like the rest of the Uniti family and the revised tuner module now supports DAB+ for buyers fortunate enough to live in a country with a suitable network. The digital board has also been revised to a four-layer design with improved circuit paths and ground planes. There wasn't a great deal wrong with the original UnitiQute and its successor seems to reflect this.

This also holds true with the operating software. The review sample showed up with v3.21 on board that allows for up to five Naim UPnP devices to be synced to play the same music in a form of multi-room control. Naim has also implemented the very tricky facility of being able to search within tracks. Apparently, the only people who had requested the latter facility were hi-fi journalists and speaking as one, I'm delighted to have

stations) and a USB connection, the Naim comes with four digital and a single analogue input as well as a digital output and an analogue preout, which has looked like a more interesting connection ever since the identically sized NAP100 power amp was released. Were the moon on a stick being chased, it would have been perfect to have Apple AirPlay as well, but it is hard to think of anything else missing. The onboard power stays put at 30W, which is enough for most speakers you are likely to partner with it.

As well as mastering scale, this is a system with wonderful finesse and agility

In the case of the Neat Iota, 30W should be sufficient for all but a barn conversion. Neat's baby has already been reviewed here and the disdain it seems to have for the laws of physics has duly been noted. Neat has managed to make a speaker that will sit on a sheet of A4 paper that sounds far larger than it has any right to. The combination of 100mm mid bass driver with 50mm ribbon tweeter is a new departure for Neat, but the performance has proved entirely convincing. More importantly though, does the Naim/Neat partnership hold true when the smallest offerings from the two companies are combined? Both components are built to the standard expected, but how do they sound when put together?

Sound quality

Once the UnitiQute is up and running on a network – a process that's so straightforward as to take less than ten minutes for even a UPnP rookie – this diminutive duo shows considerable initial promise. The most

important aspect of performance it manages from the off is that it never sounds like a small system. With Calexico's *Epic*, there is the space, depth and impact to make the recording sound convincing. There is no shortage of volume either. There might only be 30W on tap, but Naim appears to put its watts through a bullworker in Salisbury and the UnitiQute 2 never feels short of power. Pushed to truly antisocial levels, it can harden up a little but this will be generating levels that are rather higher than I expect this system is normally going to be asked to produce.

The more you listen, the more it becomes clear that as well as mastering scale, this is a system with wonderful finesse and agility. The UnitiQute 2 is possessed of the key attributes of Naim products; superb timing and an ability to start and stop that makes rival electronics seem slightly slow and ponderous. When combined with a speaker that is equally fleet of foot the results are extremely compelling. There is a sense of life and energy to the performance that is a cut above what you might expect from a compact system. The Neats have a tonal sweetness that means that the slightly dark presentation of the Naim is well complemented and works to the benefit of the system as a whole.

This means that this duo has a mastery of voices and instruments that is at times simply grin inducing. The performance of Ray LaMontagne's *Three More Days* is simply sublime. LaMontagne's voice is locked centre stage while brass rasps and guitars snarl around, but behind him. The performance is absolutely captivating and it achieves the most important goal of any system – after 30 seconds, you actually stop analysing the performance and simply sit back and enjoy it. Across a huge

it on board. Format support remains the same as before, but as the UnitiQute handles everything short of WMA lossless, you shouldn't find yourself too constrained.

The other vital statistics of the UnitiQute 2 are kept from the older model. The UnitiQute 2 has onboard UPnP streaming, analogue, digital and internet radio (provided by the superb vTuner service and featuring the 'Naim Choice' handpicked radio

They may look small, but the sound is anything but

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Speaker terminals
- 2 Connection for wireless aerial
- 3 Mini USB connection for software updates
- 4 Ethernet connection for wired network
- 5 Digital inputs
- 6 Analogue inputs

Q&A

Steve Harris

PR for Naim and Neat



ES: Given the close relationship between Naim and Neat, was the Iota designed with the UnitiQute in mind as partnering equipment?

SH: I think it would be fair to say that Bob at Neat looked at the growth of high-quality all-in-one systems and decided a very small speaker delivering music would be a useful match for quite a few people.

With the new multi-room features on the UnitiQute 2 is this a nod that this system is as much about being the second system of an existing Naim owner as it is the first step for a new one?

Strangely it's more of a nod to potential customers feeling that it would be nice to be able to use their systems for the odd party.

In the beginning it was certainly true that UnitiQutes were being purchased primarily by Naim owners, but that isn't the case today.

Uniti and 'Qutes are bringing a lot of new users to the Naim fold.

Naim has gone to the effort of developing a new DAB/FM module for the UnitiQute 2. With the continuing process of internet radio, can you see a time when this is no longer a required feature?

Rather like CD usage, DAB and FM usage varies considerably from country to country. Given this, I think it will be quite a while until DAB/FM isn't a standard feature. But, of course, markets can change quickly, so never say never!

What would be the upgrade path for any customer choosing this system as their first Naim/Neat combo?

With tongue firmly in cheek I'd say the answer is a second UnitiQute and another pair of Iotas. Alternatively, the answer is it depends on the current use of the system.

The UnitiQute is capable of driving one of the new Motive SX floorstanders and the Iota – albeit small – is very capable of allowing the improvement in performance of a SuperUniti to shine through. Either way it's an easy upgrade.



The Iota breaks every law of physics by producing a huge sound

variety of music, this system has listening pleasure down to an art.

Against this innate musicality, criticisms are slight to say the least. The Iota manages to subvert the laws of physics and produce more bass than it has any right to, but the small dimensions mean this duo is never going to rattle your internal organs. What bass there is has speed, accuracy and reasonable detail, but it can't plumb the depths larger speakers can. The other aspect of the performance that needs to be taken into account is that the louder you can play this pairing, the better it gets. At low levels it can sound a little soft and restrained, but as soon as the volume starts to rise, it really comes into its own. This is fine, but it is something to bear in mind if you have neighbours that like peace and quiet.

These gripes are largely irrelevant when you spend any time with the UnitiQute 2, though. I was also responsible for the review of the original UnitiQute in 2009 and my only real criticism was that as a concept, the world might not have been ready for a product that was entirely dependent on network audio. Four years down the line and, although the Qute remains a tricky thing to explain to a potential customer as an abstract, any time spent with it has most people utterly convinced. The n-stream app has been honed and refined over the years (and is now free rather than a slightly ambitious £25 as it was originally) and if you have an iPad, your remote will gather dust as the interface Naim has developed is now top notch. The choice of inputs and facilities Naim has chosen to fit give

the UnitiQute 2 a real-world ability that takes some beating at the price.

Conclusion

Combined with the Neats, the result is superb either as a starting point for both brands or as an exceptionally capable second system. The UnitiQute 2 will park itself on your network, collate your digital sources and can be controlled between levels of Angry Birds. It is almost viceless to live with and adding the Neats does nothing to change this. The Iota is compact, unfussed about placement and capable of results far beyond anything their size suggest possible. As well as being easy to live with, this system delivers musical enjoyment in a way systems that cost multiples more struggle to achieve. These are the entry-level products from Naim and Neat, but the synergy is all present and correct and they go about making music in a way that is utterly convincing. They combine real-world ability with emotional talent and you can't really ask for more than that ●



Perhaps the closest competitor to the UnitiQute 2 is the Cyrus Streamline, which has similar functionality in a similarly compact package. The internal amp of the Streamline would not struggle with the Iota, but whether the same synergy between the two products would be present in the same way that it is here is open to debate, but the Iota is sufficiently talented that the result is unlikely to be anything other than pretty listenable. Where the Naim has the advantage is the UnitiQute 2 has an analogue input as well as digital and also manages to mount a larger screen, albeit at the expense of physical controls – which the Cyrus has a full suite of.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Superb musicality, extensive features and fine build
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Limits to bass extension, sounds restrained at low levels
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: A winning combination of practicality, performance and genuine musicality
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

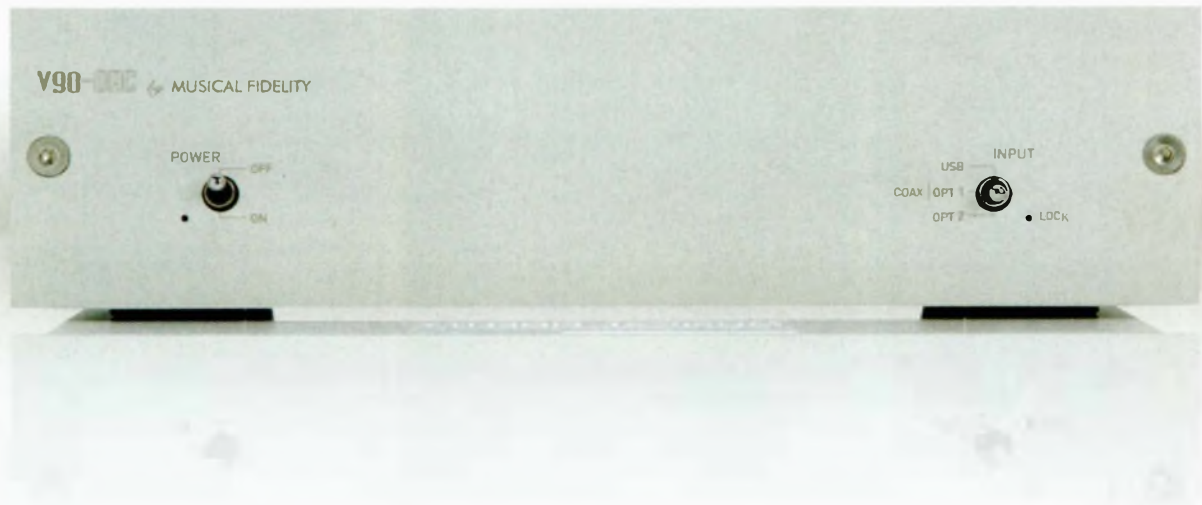
OVERALL



MUSICAL FIDELITY

V90-DAC | DIGITAL ANALOGUE CONVERTER

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The V90-DAC is the perfect way to upgrade the performance of a wide range of equipment. Housed in a solid yet discreet case, it unites sleek design and technical excellence to offer unrivalled musical enjoyment.



REVIEWS SVS ULTRA TOWER
FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER **£2,200**



Twin towers

When SVS calls a speaker a Tower, it really isn't joking **Ed Selley** reaches new heights as he scales the enormous Ultra Tower.

SVS is a relative newcomer in the UK but it is a major player in the US speaker market with its extensive range of subwoofers, some of which offer truly organ-displacing performance. The company has now launched a range of stereo and surround loudspeakers of which the Ultra Tower is the flagship.

The SVS is a relatively unusual design. As well as the forward-firing drivers, the Ultra Tower also mounts a pair of side-firing 203mm bass drivers in the bottom of the cabinet. These five drivers are controlled by a 3.5-way crossover, which makes the Ultra Tower one of the more complex speakers available at the price.

Given the expertise that SVS has in the field of subwoofers, it is a bit of a surprise that it hasn't made the tower as part of a 2.1 configuration but equally, its pedigree with large drivers

The performance is more nuanced than simply being a wall of sound

is considerable. The 203mm drivers are mounted in an opposed layout that is intended to give a sense of omni directionality. They also give the SVS a claimed low-end roll off of 28Hz, which is impressively deep.

The Ultra Towers have an unusual profile. The cabinet is considerably deeper at the base than the top and even allowing for the size of the bass driver, the bottom is extremely large. The rear panel is sloped rather than stepped and the result is a speaker with fairly considerable volume. There is a single large bass port on the rear, which is supplied with the largest foam bung I've ever seen.

It is a cliché to attribute aspects of design to national stereotypes, but the Ultra Tower could only be American. Standing well over a metre tall, they are unashamedly enormous and the large base means that they have a considerable footprint. The gloss

black finish is probably the more domestically friendly of the finishes available (black oak is also an option) but doesn't do much to reduce the perceived size of the SVS. In a UK lounge, the SVS is going to dominate and even with port bungs, it's going to need some space to breathe. With the side-firing drivers, the SVS also benefits from being away from side walls as well as the rear one.

The good news is that the partnering electronics don't need to be as large. The SVS has a claimed sensitivity of 88dB/W, which means that it shouldn't be too tricky a load for an amplifier. That said, with five drivers a side, a reasonable amount of current will help. The impedance is a benign 80ohms throughout and in use it doesn't seem to show any nasty characteristics. The build quality is impressive, too. The cabinets feel extremely solid to the touch and the lacquering is carried out to a very high standard. The SVS finds itself going up against some daintier competition and the finish is a matter of taste, but it does feel like a lot of speaker for the money.

Sound quality

It would be natural to assume that the Tower might be as imposing sonically as it is physically, but the reality is actually rather surprising. There is certainly no shortage of scale to the presentation, but the performance is more nuanced than simply being a wall of sound.

The good news is that all of the different drivers firing in different directions come together to form an impressively seamless whole. There is no perceptible handover at any part of the frequency response and the tonality is consistent across the different driver materials. The other area that is immediately noticeable is the bass response. This never overpowers any other part of the performance, but has exceptional depth and clarity. There are very few speakers anywhere near the price point that can match the SVS for low-end extension.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
SVS Ultra Tower

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
35.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
345 x 1,125 x
406mm

FEATURES
● 8in woofers:
aluminum shorting
● 3.5in wide-flared
rear-firing port
● 1in tweeter:
aluminum dome
● 6.5in midrange
drivers: composite
glass-fiber cone

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma AV

TELEPHONE
01423 358846

WEBSITE
karma-av.co.uk

This means that the Ultra Tower has the ability to give scale to instruments that can be a real challenge for smaller speakers. A grand piano manages to be the room-filling device it actually is and the double bass has an impressive impact to it. For fans of large-scale classical music, the SVS is one of the most affordable speakers that can do some justice to a full orchestra. The soundstage is big and extremely easy to follow with placement of performers and instruments arranged in an entirely believable fashion. The soundstage also manages the neat trick of being vast when required, but smaller and more intimate when needed. It never sounds small but neither is everything presented in an oversized way.

The tonality is convincing as well. The SVS can occasionally lack a little fine detail, but the overall presentation is believable and very hard to provoke into any form of harshness or aggression. This makes it easy to listen to for long periods – there is no shortage of dynamics, but the performance is suitably refined that they seem to be a natural progression of how the SVS works. Listening to the wonderfully rich and emotional *Black Pudding* by Mark Lanegan and Duke Garwood, the SVS is absolutely in its element and produces a performance that is fantastically composed and involving. ▶

Size matters, and you'll need a lot of space to fit these beauties in



Q&A

Gary Yacoubian

President & managing partner SVS



ES: Was there any thought about making the Ultra Tower smaller and intended for use in partnership with a sub in a 2.1 system?

GY: There are no plans for changes to the Ultra speaker series. If someone were heart-set on a 2.1 system featuring Ultra series performance, I would suggest pairing an SVS subwoofer with the Ultra Bookshelves. The Ultra Towers were designed to provide a complete experience in a two-channel setup and would not require or benefit from a subwoofer for most listeners.

Given that we're a little more pressed for space in the UK, can we expect a smaller floorstander?

We are developing an affordable full-range speaker series to deliver outstanding performance at a lower price point than the Ultra series, which includes a floorstander with a much smaller height and footprint. The Ultra Series was meant to perform on par or better than speakers costing three and four times as much, regardless of size, but we understand not everyone can fully utilise such a robust, high-output speaker. Space and price-conscious audio enthusiasts will definitely appreciate the dimensions, dynamics and soundstage of our new floorstanders. No word on a launch date yet, but our engineering team is very excited about the early results.

In the course of development, has SVS encountered any electronics it feels work especially well with the Ultra Towers?

The Ultra Towers were designed to work well with pretty much any electronics, from a high-quality AV receiver to the highest-end separate components. They are extremely revealing, so will show the shortcomings of source material and, of course, source components but they are forgiving as well. I think they did quite well with the Primare gear we connected them to at the Bristol HiFi show, and I've seen them acquit themselves well with even higher-end gear than that. But there's no 'price of admission' as most quality gear works well with the Ultra Towers.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Composite glass fibre cone
- 2 Aluminium tweeter
- 3 Large rear bassport
- 4 Gold-plated binding posts
- 5 Aluminium bass drivers
- 6 Sloped rear panel helps reduce standing waves

HOW IT COMPARES

The SVS makes for an interesting comparison with the Sonus faber Venere. In terms of performance, the SVS is a little easier to drive than the Italian, has low-end extension that the Sonus faber can't match and the soundstage is slightly superior. The Sonus faber hits back with a slightly better fine detail retrieval and a greater sense of immediacy to the performance. Ultimately, if you have the space and are looking for a speaker that can do justice to an orchestra, the SVS wins out. The Sonus faber, despite the refined looks, is much happier to get its groove on with faster, more up-tempo music. Both are very fine speakers, though.

Some speakers might be able to find nuances that the SVS misses, but the 'bigger picture' is captured with impressive assurance.

The only real weakness to the performance is when the SVS is asked to pick up the pace a little. The speakers never sound slow and there is no overhang or boom to the bass, which suggests that the opposed bass drivers achieve the designed aim. The problem is that the Ultra Tower never sounds as lively as some of the competition at the same price. It would be fair to argue that the liveliness of some rival designs achieve is at the expense of bass depth where the SVS excels, but with John Grant's *Pale Green Ghosts*, the SVS is slightly matter of fact where you really want to it to groove a bit more. Of course, excitement is a subjective area and something that could be mollified by choosing more exciting electronics, but equally many people will find that refinement and accuracy that the SVS possesses to be exactly what they are looking for.

The biggest decision that anyone will have to make with the Ultra Tower is whether they can actually accommodate them. The SVS is big and uncompromising and while they're fairly unfussy in terms of placement, they will benefit from being given a bit of space. There is no

getting around the fact that visually they are hardly subtle looking.

Conclusion

If you can fit them in your listening room, these are speakers that warrant attention. The SVS is capable of giving scale and cohesion to performances that other speakers can struggle with and their control and integration is extremely impressive. There are some rivals that can find a little bit more fine detail and equally some others that can sound a little more fleet of foot with up-tempo music. For many people though, the way this gentle giant goes about making music is something that they will find extremely compelling ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



LIKE: Controlled sound, plenty of scale and dynamics

DISLIKE: Huge size and lack of excitement with some material

WESAY: If you have the space, this is a formidable performer with some very likeable characteristics

OVERALL





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Head of the family?

Fostex has an impressive selection of headphones, but how does this mid-range offering fare? **Patrick Cleasby** finds out

Fostex has impressed the headphone-loving crowd with its HP-A8 headphone amp (reviewed in the June 2013 issue) and its intended partner, the gorgeous-looking TH900 cans. But that pairing has an all-in price tag around the £3,000 mark, split right down the middle, so how do we bring that imposing total spend down?

An easy answer is to consider the TH900's little brother – the incredibly similar TH600, yours for a much more reasonable £829. Just why do these apparent TH900 clones cost about two thirds as much?

Amusingly, while the packaging for the TH600s is not underdone, every aspect of the same for the TH900s is

just that little bit more luxe, from the box quality to the richness of the moulded foam they are seated in! The only difference in what you get, (in fact the only accessory), which is the wooden headphone stand that comes with the TH900s. So essentially the TH600 package is just a pair of robustly built, super comfy-looking headphones and a lovely long braided cable with a shiny 1/4in jack attached. There is a chunky plastic guard where the cable splits, just like with the TH900.

From a design perspective, while the form is for all practical purposes identical to that of the TH900, the difference is all in the finish (and accordingly the materials). The deep

lustrous cherry birch finish of the TH900s closed backs is replaced by a sober matt black simulacrum. This means if you can rock the air traffic controller look of the TH600s out and about (I wouldn't dare) at least you are far less likely to get mugged by the posh headphone cognoscenti.

But in every important aspect these headphones seem the same – the same 'protein leather' pads, the same BIODYNA (bio-cellulose with inorganic other stuff) diaphragm, the same documented specs. But do they sound the same?

Sound quality

Slipping the headphones on, they feel every bit as comfortable as the TH900s. The head size adjustment mechanism seems solid, and you soon forget you have them on. The specs are such that the only stuff it really feels decent to play on them is hi-res digital (I exaggerate, but only just). All material cited here is from my 24/192 HDTracks Versions, unless explicitly mentioned otherwise, and tests are all done on both the Fostex HP-A8 and the Astell & Kern AK100 (with precarious 1/4in to 3.5mm adapter), but they feel relatively interchangeable as both are neutral to a fault.

Inevitably the first temptation is to have a blast of *Random Access Memories* (24/88.2) from Daft Punk.

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Fostex TH600
- ORIGIN**
Japan
- TYPE**
Closed Dynamic, 50mm neodymium magnet headphones
- WEIGHT**
370g
- FEATURES**
 - Impedance: 25ohm
 - Sensitivity: 94 dB/mW
 - Maximum Input: 1,800 mW
 - Frequency reproduction: 5-45kHz
- DISTRIBUTOR**
SCV London
- TELEPHONE**
0208 4181470
- WEBSITE**
scvlondon.co.uk



IN SIGHT

- 1 Ear pads made from 'Idemitsu Grancuir' material
- 2 50mm driver units with 1 tesla magnetic circuit
- 3 3m Y-type cable

What you're really looking for here is the subdued band beneath Giorgio's initial speech on *Giorgio By Moroder* to still have a realistic sense of ambience, and particularly looking for full bass tone in that lounge jazz. (You'll be needing that for later...). When the fusion extemporising kicks you want to feel the detailed crispness of those funky hi-hat moves JR is putting on, against that outrageous bass guitar wrestling with itself, and still get the whole as a cogent piece of music. The deep bass extension the Fostex's are capable of achieves this with ease.

The TH600s acquit themselves especially well here – admittedly, the whole album can start to get a bit wearing at full pelt on the TH900/HP-A8 combination, but the TH600s presentation is so discreet that I immediately feel there is a qualitative difference in the voicings of the two sets of headphones, and in this instance it's the cheaper model of the pair that comes out on top.

Moving on to the full 24/192 experience, I opt to sample the eighties-isms of Jackson Browne's *Anything Can Happen* from the fantastic *World In Motion*. This album is difficult to render palatable, but the TH600 listen here is a very enjoyable

experience, with a clear ability to pluck out the disparate real percussion elements in the detailed mix, each by their discrete stereo location. Once again that deep bass ability gives the underpinning bass stabs a solid resonance, but here the more upfront TH900s do a far more convincing job. The move to real voices rather than roboticisms of Daft

There is a qualitative difference in the voicings of the two sets of headphones

Punk also reveals that both sets of the Fostex have tremendous mid-range clarity – Jackson's voice just sits over the busy mix.

A great test of headphones in either a subtle or a 'kitchen sink' production, is whether you can 'sense' instruments buried deep in the mix – the kind of thing that only headphone listening can give you. In the former category lies the deeply buried cowbell in Carly Simon's *You're So Vain* – ostensibly not a cluttered mix, but in reality there is tons going on.

In the latter category there is also a near inaudible cowbell in the

gloriously overwrought *I Was Right, You Were Wrong* from Black's second (real) album *Comedy* (regrettably 16/44.1 only).

In both cases the tiny cowbells are indubitably present and correct, but there is just the hint that the TH900s are better at presenting the separate 'layers' of a mix, enabling you to pick out exactly what is going on, precisely what was committed to tape. That having been said, the TH600s are no slouch, but there is just that little bit more life in the senior partner's sound picture.

The final tester proves this quite conclusively. The best ever presentation of *Hotel California* in HDTracks recent hi-res 'boxset' just blows you away on the TH900s – once you start listening you just don't want it to stop. The clinical, uncoloured tonality of the TH600s either needs a more gussied up source than the staid stability of the HP-A8 or the AK100 in order to generate genuine excitement, or you need to be happy to listen to the most neutral reproduction one could wish for. While there is much to admire with the TH600s, the TH900s just give you the spark of life that is necessary to really enjoy the grit of the hi-res *La Grange* by ZZ Top!

Conclusion

If I were splashing out for top flight cans I would definitely be considering the TH600s. A look at and a listen to the TH900s can sway your attention, but imagine damaging that gorgeous wood finish? The TH600s are such a more practical solution – different sounding, yes, so you must audition with your own ears, but in every other regard the equal of the premium equivalent. Above all, if moderately understated neutrality is your thing, (and it is becoming an attractive alternative to all the balls-out bassiness in the market), these are definitely worth a listen ●



Don't be put off by the drab looks, the sound of the TH600s has to be heard

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Surprisingly, more neutral than the Fostex TH900s
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: They're drab looking compared with their big brother
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: If you don't feel the need to make the TH900 'statement' these are a fine sounding alternative
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL
★★★★★

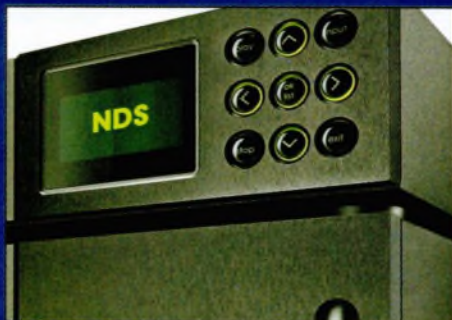
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Where technology & good music meet



Raise the bar

The Sonos Playbar upgrades your TV's sound and adds neat music streaming features. Could **Lee Dunkley** be hooked?

You're unlikely to have missed the ubiquitous ads for the Sonos Playbar. Its the newest addition to the game-changing speaker range from the wire-free multi-room manufacturer that has almost single-handedly revolutionised the way in which many of us access and enjoy music around the home with its Play:3 and Play:5 active speaker range. The Playbar strays from the brand's hi-fi roots a little, and is aimed more towards TV and home cinema markets, but any audiophile with a super-thin flatscreen TV will know that a soundbar is a mandatory addition to any new set if you're serious about sound quality, and the Sonos Playbar makes a welcome newcomer to the booming market.

Wide load

The 90cm-wide unit is possibly better suited to larger flatscreen TVs, but sits neatly on a table-top (upright or on its back) or mounted beneath the screen on a wall. The cabinet houses a speaker array comprising six mid-range and three tweeter speakers – two of which face out of the side of the Playbar – driven by individual digital amplifiers. It can be connected wirelessly to the brand's other speakers and subwoofer using the 5GHz or 2.4GHz band, depending on which model you're partnering it with. Sonos keeps its specs secret, and there are no details or information on the claimed power output of the unit, but suffice to say it goes loud!

Previous Sonos models have all been locked into accessing music libraries from a computer and music

streamed from services such as Spotify or Last.fm, with no provision for connecting an external equipment. The Playbar is the first to connect to an external source, and is a convenient way to upgrade your TV's speakers via the optical digital input. There's no HDMI, however, so check that your TV or partnering equipment is compatible before you buy.

Installation is straightforward. Simply connect the Playbar to a network via Ethernet connection, hook it up to the TV's optical output and download the Sonos app to your iOS or Android device. There's no dedicated remote as your tablet or smart phone takes full control via the Sonos Controller app, although it does allow you to use a TV's existing remote controller to adjust the Playbar's volume level.

The Sonos Controller app is very well thought out, and seamlessly integrates the contents of your music library, TV sound and streaming music services – including internet radio – in an intuitive and quickly accessible way, as well as providing access to other Sonos zones within your home network.

Sound quality

As a soundbar aimed at home cinema you'll find Dolby Digital on board, but no DTS decoding – which could prove a considerable stumbling block for installations utilising a Blu-ray player. As a hi-fi magazine though, we're interested in how the Playbar sounds as an upgrade to a TV's built-in speakers and as a music system from networked and streaming music sources. I'm pleased to say that the

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Soundbar

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
3.0 wireless soundbar with music streaming

WEIGHT
5.4kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
900 x 85 x 140mm

FEATURES

- Six mid-range drivers
- 3 tweeter drivers
- Optical digital input
- Free Sonos Controller app
- 2 x Ethernet ports

DISTRIBUTOR
Sonos

TELEPHONE
0808 2346596

WEBSITE
sonos.com

Playbar doesn't disappoint the reputation Sonos has earned with its Play:3 and Play:5 speaker models. The very first listen impresses with a rich and expansive soundstage that is a considerable improvement over TV speakers built into my Samsung set. Even with no subwoofer attached, the Playbar's mid-sized speakers extend to produce a decent amount of bass support, and upper frequencies have an open and airy presentation that's pleasantly detailed to give TV drama an added sense of clarity and atmosphere that is often veiled when listening via the TV's speakers.

The Playbar is less impressive as a music system, but this should be taken in the context that if you're reading this magazine then you already own a main hi-fi system. There's plenty of energy on tap with respectable bass, and smooth levels of detail. But the Playbar isn't the most musical sounding of speaker systems we've heard, and its lack of dynamics and sound with compressed audio material is unlikely to excite or engage audiophiles.

So then, the Playbar makes a significant sonic upgrade to a TV's built-in speakers and can easily be expanded to a full 5.1 system, at a price. Networked music enthusiasts will be drawn to its streaming capabilities and smooth app integration, but audio enthusiasts should look to more traditional speaker systems ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★☆

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★☆

LIKE: TV sound; simple setup and integration with TV and music sources

DISLIKE: Music sound is unsatisfying and the price is rather high

WESAY: Effective add-on to existing Sonos system, but expensive

OVERALL

★★★★☆

Upright or on its side, the Sonos is one of the better-looking soundbars





The sound of little Italy

A Sonus faber for less than a grand? The Venere 1.5 is offering just that and **Ed Selley** finds out if it delivers the goods

Sonus faber is unashamedly high-end. The name alone brings to mind exotic symphonies of wood, leather and chrome that bisect science and art and frequently come with price tags to suit. When supercar manufacturer Pagani announced a tie in with Sonus faber for the sound system of the new Huayra, the combination was as logical as a dab of sour cream to a portion of caviar.

What happens though when a company that's so associated with the use of exquisite materials makes an affordable speaker? Does the result still feel like a Sonus faber or does

The Sonus faber is possessed of an exceptional balance of detail and clarity

something have to give? The Venere 1.5 is yours for £950 and while I won't pretend this is an amount you'd find stuffed behind the sofa, it is still a fairly terrestrial figure in the big scheme of things. So does it work?

The Venere 1.5 is the smaller of two standmounts in the Venere range and the least expensive. The 1.5 is a two way design with the same 29mm soft dome tweeter seen in the rest of the range mated with a 150mm mid bass driver that makes use of the same 'Curv' technology as the other Venere's. Like the rest of the range, the 1.5 has a sloped top panel that means that the Venere is smaller than the bald specifications might suggest as only the narrow section at the rear is actually 40cm tall. A single small slot port at the front of the cabinet augments bass performance while around the back, impressively sturdy terminals should allow for the connection of pretty much any cable that takes your fancy.

Finished in white lacquer (black is also available and a wood finish is an option for £250), the Venere 1.5 provokes many of the same thoughts that the 2.5 did when it passed through as part of the recent *Beautiful Systems* piece. The Venere could be delivered in blank boxes with no visible branding (in fact from a seated position, no logos are visible anyway) and it would still feel like a fairly special piece of design. The shape is elegant and the contrast between white and black makes for distinctive, but cohesive-looking speakers. The Venere looks slightly more modern than some of its pricier brethren, but this is a speaker that will comfortably sit in most domestic environments. Build quality is excellent and the 1.5 feels impressively solid, although the main driver doesn't have quite the same immaculate finish as the rest of the speaker.

The review pair is supplied with the matching Venere stand, which adds £350 to the total price. I'm in two minds about the stand as a value proposition. There are a number of designs for the same price that are rather more massy, but the dedicated stand looks and feels a good match for the speaker and adds a degree of lean to the stance in keeping with other Sonus faber designs. The top plate comes with the wherewithal to attach the 1.5 to it via screws, but your x-ray vision will need to be in top form to do this easily.

Sound quality

Initially I connect the 1.5s to a Naim SuperNait integrated amp and ND5 XS streamer with XP5 XS power supply. While probably not the first choice of most Venere customers, the results are impressive. Some aspects of the performance are recognisable from the larger 2.5, mainly the treble performance. The Sonus faber is possessed of an exceptional balance

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sonus faber
Venere 1.5

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6kg (each)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
206 x 394 x 300mm

FEATURES
• HF drive unit:
29mm high-
definition pre-coated
fabric dome with
no ferrofluid
• Bass/mid-drive
unit: 1x 150mm
driver - mid woofer
free compression
basket design and
Curv cone
• Quoted nominal
impedance: 6ohms
• Choice of black
and white lacquers
and optional wood
finish

DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds

TELEPHONE
020 89713909

WEBSITE
sonusfaber.com

of detail and clarity, but even with less than stellar recordings it never tips over to harshness or aggression. This allows the Veneres to snarl their way through Kasabian's *Velociraptor* and capture the fury of the music without giving in to the less than stellar recording quality.

Give them something well recorded, though, like the 24/96 FLAC of Mark Knopfler's *Privateering* and the Venere rewards with a performance that is exceptionally open, involving and utterly believable. There are speakers at the price that can manage more superficial excitement, but the balance the Veneres have means you can listen to them for hours at a time without fatigue, which is the hallmark of a speaker you want to live with long term. As a relatively small speaker, there are limits to the scale that the Venere can achieve, but the performance never seems curtailed. The massed instruments of the Cinematic Orchestra in *Manhatta* are given the space they need and sensing their placement relative to one another is a breeze.

The other instantly noticeable and very likeable aspect of the Venere's performance is the agility that it possesses. The work that has gone into the midbass driver has resulted in a speaker that is able to stay on top ▶



Q&A

Paolo Tezzon
R&D manager



ES: The styling of the Venere range is much more contemporary than some other Sonus faber models – is this deliberate?

PT: It is a deliberate choice. Venere was designed to catch the interest of new customers, so we knew we had to create a more universal and easy to understand object that can fit well in contemporary environments. We started with Sonus faber's recognised design language and simplified it without losing our identity.

Sonus faber designs have tended towards being rear ported, what was the thinking behind changing to front porting on the Veneres?

It was our intention to make the Venere line a little more 'user friendly' than other Sonus faber speakers, and front-mounted reflex ports allow the end user to place the speakers closer to the back wall than is possible with rear-facing ports. It is also a choice linked to the sonic character we wanted to deliver with the Venere speakers: we wanted them to sound vibrant and entertaining, with superbly engaging bass, and a front-reflex design better allows us to achieve this kind of sound.

With a choice of black and white lacquers available, are other colours or limited edition finishes also under consideration?

There is also a more traditional walnut wood veneer finish available across the entire Venere line.

During the development of the range, did Sonus faber find any electronics that you felt were a specifically good match for the Venere's characteristics?

During the development of Venere, we used almost every amp available from the Fine Sounds Group (of which Sonus faber is a part), from relatively low-power, affordable models to more expensive, high-power designs. Like all good speakers, the Veneres require partners of a suitably high quality to sound their best, but equally, these are not difficult speakers to drive and relatively modest amps can deliver excellent results.

IN SIGHT



- 1 29mm silk dome tweeter
- 2 Biwirable three way speaker terminals
- 3 150mm 'Curv' mid bass driver

of material pretty much regardless of speed and ferocity. The Venere keeps the same clean and ordered presentation even as the tempo rises and never loses the sense of control and cohesion that it displays with more relaxed material.

Some of this more rapid and bass-driven material does show up a slight weakness in the Venere shared with some other speakers of this size. The absolute bass extension of the Sonus faber is pretty good for a relatively compact speaker, but there is a genuine sense that it has been achieved at the expense of some of the lower midrange energy, which can seem slightly recessed by comparison. This is never pronounced enough to really detract from the enjoyment of the performance, but it is something with material that is dependent on this part of the frequency response.

Substituting an Audio Analogue Verdi Cento integrated amplifier for the SuperNait yields a bigger surprise than I was expecting in that although the presentation of the two amplifiers is very different, the overall presentation of the Venere is not affected to anything like the degree that I originally anticipated. The slightly fuller presentation of the Audio Analogue is reflected in the performance to an extent, but the way that the Venere goes about making music is not seriously altered. Connecting a studiously neutral Cambridge Audio 851A yields similar results.

This is an interesting ability and means that the Venere really needs to be auditioned with reasonable thoroughness to ensure that you like what you hear. It would not be right to say that this is a source-agnostic

speaker – it is certainly revealing enough to show up limitations in partnering equipment – but it has a very definite presentation that is not easily 'tuned' further up the signal path. If you like what it does, it will go about doing it without being unduly affected by the rest of the system around it.

Conclusion

After some time in the company of the baby Sonus faber, I have to say that I like what it does. This is a speaker that manages to look and feel special in a way that we expect a Sonus faber should, but more importantly delivers a performance that has long-term listening pleasure down to a fine art. It isn't perfect – the matching stand is expensive and there are speakers at the same price point with slightly more even low-end response, but neither of these issues are the end of the world. The Venere 1.5 delivers on the basic promise. This is a speaker with a real-world price tag that delivers a little slice of the magic the Sonus faber marque is capable of ●

HOW IT COMPARES

The Venere 1.5 would've made an interesting addition to the recent standmount group test (May 2013) of speakers at this price point. The smooth, detailed and distinctive presentation would have stood it in good stead against the competition and few of those six speakers can match the Venere's controlled, but detailed top end and forgiving manner with poorer recordings. Perhaps, the closest match is fellow Italian, Opera's Mezza which has some of the same engaging control and impressive soundstaging. The Opera is not as handsome as the Venere and neither does it feel as solidly built, but it is £100 cheaper and less choosy about stands.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Detailed, refined sound, elegant looks and solid build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Stand is pricey, slight lack of lower midrange

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: An affordable way into Sonus faber ownership that delivers much of what it is so well regarded for

EASE OF USE



OVERALL



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It's a kind of magic

Here's a box that streams music, plays radio and connects to almost anything you can think of. **David Price** is moved by its trickery

First out of the streaming starting blocks, Linn Products beat the rest of the specialist hi-fi industry to network music players by a mile. While its rivals were still squeezing out extra fractions of a percentage point of sound quality from their £10K 16-bit silver disc spinners, Linn's 2007 Klimax DS offered full 24/192 replay from a computer hard drive. Six years down the line, and the new Akurate DSM is effectively a more affordable version, but with a host of

extra features. It's a neat, seamless, all-of-a-piece package – just add PC, router, power amp and speakers and you're set for serious quality sound.

Effectively a streaming DAC preamplifier, the multi-talented Akurate DSM plays digital music over a standard Ethernet network, but it also adds digital conversion and control functionality. This makes it both a digital music source and hub for other sources. As with all other network music players these days, it also streams internet radio, podcasts

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Linn Akurate DSM

ORIGIN
Scotland

TYPE
Streamer/DAC/
preamplifier

WEIGHT
5.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
381 x 80 x 355mm

FEATURES
• Music streaming
up to 24/192
• DAC functionality
via S/PDIF and
Toslink
• Analogue line in
via balanced XLR,
RCA phono and
3.5mm minijack
• HDMI pass
through

DISTRIBUTOR
Linn Products
TELEPHONE
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WEBSITE
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and 'listen again' broadcasts, but there are a few interesting extras, too. And it plays pretty much any format worth its salt up to 24-bit, 192kHz resolution if the music file permits it.

Wolfson DACs are used, although Linn uses its own upsampling system, meaning that the upsampling filters in the DAC are bypassed. This in turn is said to keep electrical noise from the upsampling process in the digital circuitry, rather than in the sensitive analogue part. Linn's Dynamik switched mode power supply is fitted. The company says that signal paths have been reduced to a minimum by providing separate volume controls for analogue and digital sources. Analogue sources follow a pure analogue path through a conventional high-quality analogue volume control.

As a preamplifier, it accepts 14 different inputs, including balanced XLR, RCA phono, HDMI, S/PDIF and Toslink digital, plus a front panel 3.5mm analogue input for a music portable. A moving coil or moving magnet phono stage can be configured too, the only obvious omission to its input roster being USB. About this, Linn's Gilad



Tiefenbrun says, "we take a network-centric view of the system, so we believe the best place to plug in your USB key is the computer, which is then accessed across the network by any DS in the home".

The Akurate is very well made and its silver painted metal casework confers a feeling of quality. The fascia sports a dot-matrix blue alphanumeric display, which tells you all you need to know about what you're playing.

Beautifully made in robust silver metal casework with a nifty blue dot matrix display, what's not to like?

The latest Akurate DSM boasts Linn's excellent Kinsky control application. It is very easy to use, and comes in PC, Mac, iPhone and iPad flavours. Before you get the Akurate going, you'll need to download it from www.linn.co.uk/software.

Should you so wish, there's also a fab little app called Songcast, which sends all the music normally coming out of your computer to the Linn DS system; it's great for YouTube or movie watching, or even iTunes use.

Although setting up the Akurate isn't quite as easy as plugging in a CD player, it's not far off. First, you plug it into your router via the rear panel Ethernet connection, then you plug your computer (and Network Attached Storage too, if it's not already connected) into the router, too. Next, power up the Linn and run the Wizard app, with the Akurate on the network. After switch on, you'll get a little blue dot on the display for a few seconds, then the Linn logo; then the set-up software will play a 'test track' through the Akurate to confirm it's found it on the network.

Then it's just a case of installing and running the Kinsky software. Playing music on your computer is as easy as dragging and dropping the file you want to play into the 'now playing' area of Kinsky. There are all sorts of options for playlisting, internet radio, podcasts, and so on. All of this is mirrored on the Kinsky app for iPhone/iPad or Android too, so you don't actually have to even go near your computer. In my opinion, the best Kinsky experience is via iPad, with your music computer out of the line of sight – it becomes a virtual music jukebox the like of which none of us could have dreamed of ten years ago. As you get more used to Kinsky, the Akurate becomes something of a 'fit and forget' item – and you focus on downloading and/or ripping, and managing, your hi-res music library.

Sound quality

There's no mistaking a Linn product. The company has a knack of producing unerringly gripping-sounding designs. The Akurate DSM is no exception, able to magic up an uncannily 'live' sounding performance from a stream of digital ones and noughts. Even at cooking 16-bit resolution, this box of tricks is able to eke out more 'music' than many hi-res players running 24/192. And when you do crank up the quality of the source files being played, things get more detailed and focused, but not more enjoyable – the fun comes as standard, whatever the resolution.

A great way to show this is to feed it a rip of a really low-fi song like Motörhead's eponymous album title track. Whereas most rival designs – even the really great ones – start filleting the recording up, reducing it to individual tracks and telling you how badly recorded they are – the Akurate prefers to present the song as a homogenous whole and have fun with the rhythms and dynamics (which are present in every recording, no matter how bad). As such,

It's transparent enough to render everything it plays with great fidelity

listening to Motörhead on the Linn becomes a far more emotional experience than it otherwise might be; you can really feel the energy of the performance from all those years ago. And unlike other streamers, you're not simply sat there wondering why it was recorded in a cave!

Switch to better produced, eighties rock and The Chameleons' *Paper Tigers* comes over with all the power you could wish for, the Akurate showing just how much scale and

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Gilad Tiefenbrun
MD, Linn Products



DP: What does the 'M' update to the Linn DS range bring?

GT: Our DSM players give customers the ability to connect other sources to their system by analogue, digital or HDMI and enjoy improved performance from these, for example their TV, Blu-ray player, games console etc. This also gives them the ability to share these sources across the network and listen to them in other rooms. As with all players in the DS family, anything you listen to on your computer can be Songcast to your DS, such as YouTube content, Spotify, Netflix etc and are also compatible with Airplay.

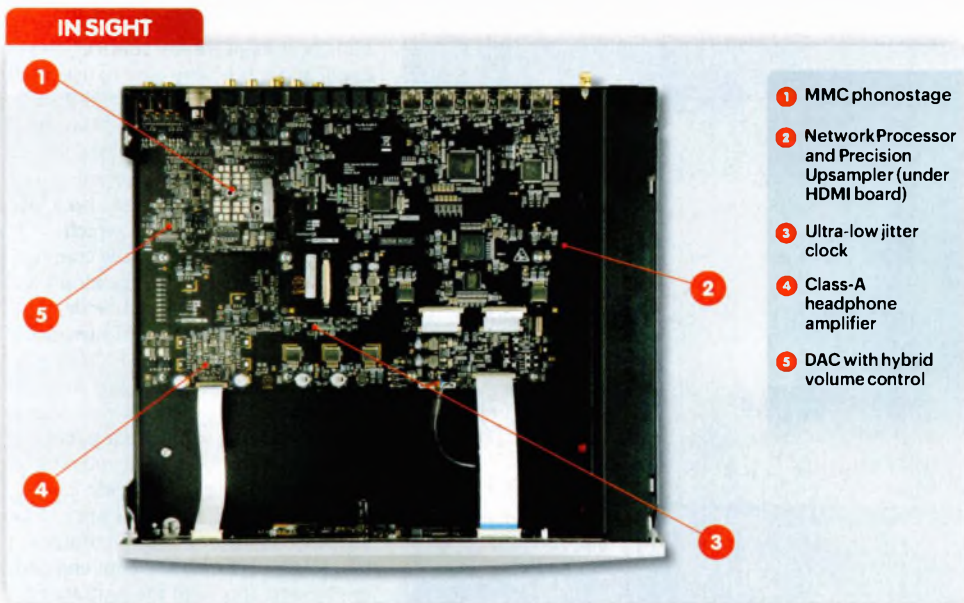
Which network platform does it use, and why?

All our DS family is based on Linn's own in-house digital streaming platform, which we designed to be optimised for music quality. Crucially, we've taken a giant leap forward by mastering the clock and pulling data over the network to drastically reduce the jitter in the DAC process and eliminate the distortion inherent in push-based streaming; just about every product out there has data pushed at it by third party streaming engines, in much the same way as the CD player front-end works, whereas we have moved on.

Being in control of our own DS platform allows us to optimise placement of the components on the PCB to minimise noise. It also means we can update our players directly over the internet with new levels of performance and functionality as soon as they become available.

How do you see the future of digital streaming going?

In the past the hi-fi product was tied to the media – you needed to buy a tuner for radio, a CD player for CD – but today a Linn DS player handles every type of digital media. We are adding Studio Master content to LinnRecords.com at an accelerating rate. With increasing engagement from the major record labels in 24-bit downloads, we are at the beginning of the next phase in digital streaming, which holds enormous promise for audiophiles.



IN SIGHT

- 1 MMC phono stage
- 2 Network Processor and Precision Upsampler (under HDMI board)
- 3 Ultra-low jitter clock
- 4 Class-A headphone amplifier
- 5 DAC with hybrid volume control



HOW IT COMPARES

The Akurate DSM doesn't quite have an immediate price rival, although there's a wide range of streaming DACs. One of the best is Marantz's NA-11S1, which at £3,499 is cheaper but offers both network music playing and digital conversion up to 24/192 resolution. When playing hi-res PCM it is excellent, with a glass-clear sound, excellent stage depth and a fine sense of the texture of instruments and voices. Where the Akurate romps ahead is its sense of musicality; it sounds bouncier and more supple, with a real sense of passion invested in the music that it plays. It isn't quite as forensic as the Marantz, but it is full of musical exuberance that the latter lacks.

reach it has. Suddenly the soundstage dissolves right out of the speakers, and drops back enormously. Inside this, cascading layers of heavily processed guitar ring around, and in front there's a massive vocal presence. So sure, the Linn can do all the 'hi-fi stuff', but just as with the heavy metal track, strangely enough your focus isn't on all this. Again, it's the emotional purchase of the track – its ability to get right into your soul and stir it up a bit – that counts. This is a powerful, moody track from a great album, and the Akurate just makes me want to listen more.

Anyone who's heard the Linn for more than a minute or two will twig that it's a great rock machine; its instinctive feel for capturing the spirit and attitude of the music is such that you'd almost think it was roading for Lynyrd Skynyrd in an earlier life. But switch over to soul and it's off again! A hi-res of Isaac Hayes' *Bumpy's Lament* sees this box of tricks dive in headfirst, really working on the syncopation between the drummer and bass player, and obviously enjoying the way the strings flirt with the brass, too. Once again, timing is the top priority, but the excellence of the recording means the Akurate is able to convey the textural richness of the violins and give the flute a lovely, natural, breathy quality. It really is a treat for sore ears.

Indeed this holds whatever type of music you're listening to, as the Linn is transparent enough to render everything it plays with great fidelity, without emphasising or indeed advertising its openness. Some rivals are also amazingly detailed, but manage to sound stark and over

analytical, whereas the Akurate never does. Classical music is also a great pleasure, as a hi-res David Chesky recording shows – the brass is raw and raspy and the strings super sinewy, but there's never a sense that you are listening to the recording, as the music's natural emotional purchase just pushes on through. Although this machine is excellent at hi-fi basics such as soundstaging and image precision, in the end it's really all about the music as far as the Akurate is concerned.

Conclusion

A stellar sonic performance, allied to a vast range of facilities and excellent build, software support and easy set-up means Linn's latest Akurate DSM just about ticks every box on the page. There are some excellent rival streaming DAC preamplifiers out there, but none seem to manage the natural yet emotionally affecting sound of this. So if you're in the market for a high-end do-it-all digital device, you really must hear it ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Wonderfully engaging, musical sound; great functionality; fine software

VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



DISLIKE: Some users may want a USB input
WE SAY: State of the art streamer and digital hub; expensive, but great in every respect

OVERALL



ANTHONY GALLO
ACOUSTICS

ARCAM

ATLAS Cables

audiolab

AUDIOVECTOR

Bardaudio

B&W

Blackpoint

CHORD

CHORD

CR20K

CRESTRON

CYRUS

DALI

DENON

epos

EXPOSURE

GENELEC

Goldring

GRADO

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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.



JIMMY HUGHES

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Anyone with a record collection that's as large as Jimmy's can't be all bad. Throw in the fact that he's reviewed a breathtaking number of products over the years and Jimmy is the man.



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.



ANDREW SIMPSON

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Andrew's been passionate about hi-fi since he was a wee nipper. When not obsessing over his next upgrade, he can usually be found under the bonnet of his '73 MG Midget.

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➤ I need alternatives

Hello – I am thinking of buying the Cambridge Audio Azur 651 amplifier and CD player. Are there any real alternatives at that budget?

Diogo Albergaria, Portugal

DP: You should also consider Marantz's fine little CD5004 (£229) and matching PM5004 (£260) – which are both a little cheaper, but no less musical. They're a great synergistic pair, with a bouncy and enjoyable, yet clean and detailed, sound – and should be easily available in Portugal. The Cambridges are very strong at the price, so do try an A-B dem if you can get one.

➤ Pick a card

My current main system centres on a Naim SuperUniti and Quad ESL67s with several sources, including Rega RP1 and Quad 77CD and several PCs. Most of my listening is LP, CD and HD FLAC files held on a ReadyNAS hard drive.

Please ask your reviewers to sit down with all your test gear and listen to and test

Cambridge Audio's 651A is a great amp for the asking price

some computer soundcards through expensive hi-fi equipment. I have spent hours working out the best way to rip LPs (and some tapes) in HD, so I don't have to keep wearing out my favourite LPs.

Is there any benefit in going up to 24/192 sampling for LPs? Can experienced reviewers with thousands of pounds of equipment really hear the difference over 24/96? How do your reviewers rate these cards and by how much is the hi-fi specification degraded when used inside a PC?

Michael Tartaglia-Kershaw

DP: Having a lot of experience of reviewing soundcards in the earlier years of 'computer audio', I think I can safely say that – regardless of the quality of the DAC chip fitted, the best place for a computer soundcard is outside the computer, not in. If you take an AM radio and put it close to a PC, you'll likely hear the most awful cacophony, as the very high speed processing going on emits lots of radio frequency

interference (RFI). This is a bad thing, and something that hi-fi manufacturers do their best to minimise from the digital source products. This means that the electrically noisy environs of a PC, complete with cheap switched mode power supplies and multiple sources of RFI, are just about the worst place in the world to put an audio source.

For this very reason, the good Lord invented USB DACs. These take the audio signal out of the computer and pipe it to a box, which is a good way from the source of all that noise. Still, there are issues with noise transmission down the USB cable, but a well designed DAC can deal with this better than any soundcard! So, I'd suggest you invest in a USB DAC, and not take your soundcards too seriously as an audio source; even if they have the best DAC chips in the world fitted, they're hamstrung by their physical proximity to all that RFI. Alternatively, you could invest in a network music streamer.

As for your LP question – it's always best to go up to 192kHz sampling frequency if you possibly can; sampling

frequencies can't get too high in my opinion, and the next giant leap forward will doubtless be 32-bit, 384kHz. Still, 24/192 is the best you'll get currently, so use it if you can. Generally, a 24/192 file will sound just that little bit smoother, more spacious and natural than the same at 24/96, although it has to be said both are far better than 16/44.1, which CD uses. Again, it's a good idea to invest in a USB analogue-

Is there any benefit in going up to 24/192 sampling for LPs?

to-digital convertor, to keep the noise away from the convertor electronics for good measure.

PC: The USB DAC principle outlined by DP also applies in the choice of ADC's – the HRT Line Streamer is a great little device to achieve quality vinyl rips through asynchronous USB to 24/96.

➤ Where next?

I've changed most of my system, but have I done the right thing? The Naim CD5i is the same, now ten years old. I have changed the Musical Fidelity X-A1 amp for a Cyrus 6a amp, and changed the Triangle Zephyr French floorstanders for Monitor Audio Bronze BX5 and Cardas Crosslink interconnects and speaker cables for Chord Chameleon and interconnects and Chord





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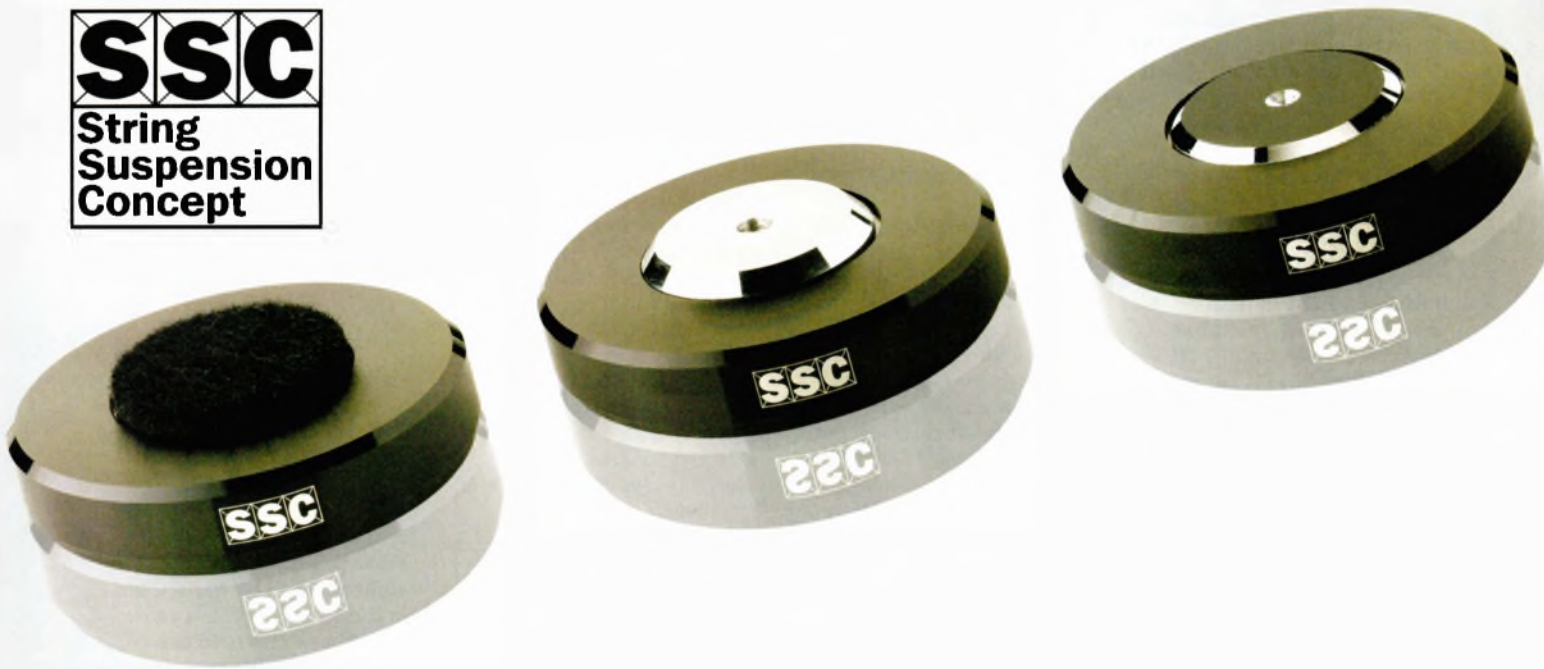
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➤ Mini adventures

I love mini speakers, always have done, always will. That's not because of any esoteric engineering reason about 'phase coherence' and 'pinpoint imaging' as you reviewers would talk in terms of, but because they're all I can reasonably fit in my very modest-sized listening room! For all sorts of reasons best kept to myself, this isn't going to expand at all in the next few years, so I remain reliant on getting a great sound from a small box.

When I say remain, perhaps this is a little disingenuous as I am not sure I've got the very best possible from the breed. After having run a pair of Videoton Minimaxes for years, I moved to running Mission 780SE speakers, which I am shocked to remind myself were purchased nearly 20 years ago in the mid nineties. Actually I have set them up really well on Partington Dreadnought speaker stands and am running Flatline cable, aspirated by a NAD 3130 (remember that?) and an ageing Meridian MCD Pro CD player – which actually sounds rather good!

My question is simply this – which modern mini monitor in the region of £1,000 to £2,000 sounds best for my system, and do I keep my ugly, but effective stands or do they go to the tip as they're as old hat as me? Please let me know as soon as you can!

Peter Debenham

DP: Peter, I – like you – rather covet good small speakers, especially because there aren't that many around. The Missions you mention were particularly fine in their own special way, sounding musical and bouncy and able to fill a



MAD's My1920S speakers could be the perfect answer to Peter's woes

room with a very nice noise. However, in absolute terms they were loose and a bit opaque sounding, so you'd certainly hear a huge improvement with a decent modern set of mini monitors. The first pair I'd implore you to listen to is the My Audio Design My1920S – which is one of the most natural, smooth, musical designs around at anywhere near its price point. It's a sort of latter day BBC LS3/5a, but a whole lot more enjoyable to listen to, with more air and space across the midband and treble, too. The only issue is that you might still find it a little soft in the bass, especially with your rather loose and licentious NAD 3130 – you really do need to invest in a better amplifier such as a Creek Evolution 50A (£750) as soon as you can.

Anyway, if the MAD speakers aren't quite your cup of tea, then the next step is to audition the AudioSmile Kensai, which are slightly smaller, a good few hundred pounds more expensive and even more incisive and intricate, thanks in no small part to a fine ribbon tweeter. Either of these two speakers would demand a better amp, so do think about this too as soon as you can afford it.

➤ Hidden treasures

I am looking to upgrade and replace my current system with something that is fully integrated, of manageable size, yet of good quality and easy to operate. The key features should be HD audio, multi-room capability via wireless speakers, music server, use of same wireless speakers for surround sound TV, control via iPad, iPhone and Android phones. I would like a robust, high-quality make with a reputation for reliable and durable units.

From what I have read, I am considering a Cambridge Audio Stream Magic 6 with a LIV Zen+ to store all CDs in FLAC format. I guess I'll still need an amp to drive this and a variety of speakers for the TV/hi-fi room, kitchen and upstairs. It would be nice to be able to move one speaker into the garden (just outside the house) in the summer, but this would mean the range for the signal would have to pass through several thick walls and about 20m in distance. What amp(s) and speakers would you recommend? Would a Sonos system be an easier option to configure and troubleshoot without losing too much quality? I was thinking about spending £1,500 to £2,500.

Richard

ES: In terms of moving speakers around and sending to multiple rooms, the Sonos system is hard to beat. The limitation of no high res is offset by the ease of overall control and the PLAY speakers (although needing mains power) are easy to place outside. ▶

Company Rumour 2 speaker cable. The sound is smoother, I think due to the Monitor Audios. Should I be thinking of one day buying a Naim CD5Si or UnitiLite?

Julian Bedford

DP: The difference between a Naim CD5i and CD5Si is not vast; the latest machine is of course better, but it's not going to change your life and if you're going to upgrade, then you'd need to spend a good deal more to get an appreciable improvement. As you rightly identify the new amp and speakers have given more finesse and refinement, which is for the good, but where do you want to go from here, and why would you be thinking of getting a UnitiLite? The latter again would only be a 'side-grade' at best, bringing a little more grip and dynamics

over the Cyrus amp at the expense perhaps of a little openness and detail – again the difference isn't profound. Please write back and let us know what your aims are, your precise budget and musical tastes.

PC: I love the sound of both the CD5Si and the Unitis and I think

you would get a further boost in smoothness by getting either involved. Of course the latter gets you into whole new areas of deciding how best to serve out your music, frequently discussed in these pages. For me the real benefit would be becoming able to listen to hi-res digital. It's the new analogue!



Is Naim's UnitiLite the ideal replacement for an ageing Naim CD player-based system?



▶ Vinyl demand

I am on the verge of buying my first turntable in some 40 years! In around 1985, I discarded my Dual CS504 – which was not a bad deck – in disgust, for a shiny new Yamaha CDX3 CD player and never looked back. Since then I've upgraded my CD machine around five times, and currently run a Naim CDX2 with which I am very happy, but now I feel I need to get back into vinyl.

The discs coming out now seem to be of far better quality than the last lot I have in the early eighties, many of which I had to return for reasons of poor pressing quality, assorted snap, crackles and pops and the fact that the local record shop I bought them from was in the habit of selling its used 'dem stock' discs as new. When I got them home to find they'd been hammered by a Garrard SP25, with a blunt needle tracking at around five grammes, I would curse and swear more than your average builder who's just dropped a brick on his toe!

So, is it true that new vinyl releases are now better than the bad old days, and if so what sort of kit do I need to buy? My budget is basically whatever it takes to get a sound up to the level of my Naim CDX2 digital disc player. My amp is a Sugden IA4 Masterclass integrated and I am running the new Spendor D7s on your recommendation.

Lu Chien

JMH: It's strange how many people want to return to vinyl – despite having jumped ship and converted to CD decades earlier. It's certainly true that many of today's LPs are better cut and pressed compared with those of

(say) 30 or 40 years ago. Having said that, playing vintage vinyl on a good modern turntable can be a revelation. Compared with how things sounded at the time, you now seem to get far more music from the grooves, while things like surface noise are much less irksome. In the early seventies, LPs got thinner (partly due to huge increases in price of oil due to conflict in the Middle East), whereas modern LPs are much heavier – typically around 120g – and pressed on virgin vinyl. While it's always possible a 'new' LP bought today will have been played, there's much less chance of that compared with years ago. You have a

Are new vinyl releases now better than the bad old days?

considerable number of good turntables to choose from. Depending on your budget, consider Avid, Rega, Origin Live, Thorens, Townshend Rock, to name just a few. Selecting a good arm and cartridge is important too. Your amplifier's phono stage is for MM cartridges, so a step-up transformer or preamp will be needed for low-output MC pickups.

AS: I'd say that in general the quality of today's vinyl is better, simply because it's produced in smaller quantities, which allows the overall quality control to be higher. That said, I've recently

bought a number of new pressings that haven't sounded as good as the eighties lightweight versions that they've replaced. I think it comes down to the quality of the reissues and the masters they're pressed from, so don't write off your old vinyl without hearing it on a decent modern deck first.

So what to go for? There are plenty of top-flight turntables around for sensible money. At the top end of the 'entry level' list you can choose from non-suspended designs such as Rega's RP6 or a Michell TecnoDec, I'd recommend auditioning Funk Firm's Little Super Deck alongside these. You'll also have to budget for a cartridge, and as your amp has a decent moving-magnet phono stage built in, I'd suggest you go for one of Ortofon's 2M models or a high output moving-coil type such as Benz Micro's MC Silver. Both of these offer superb dynamics, which should give your CDX2 a run for its money.

Moving up to a suspended deck will take your vinyl to the next level, and Michell's GyroDec is the place to start. You may need to partner this with a separate phono stage to really get the best out of it, so I'd start with a simpler set-up to see if you're still in love with the black stuff. If you are you can always upgrade further down the line.

DP: Today's audiophile pressings aren't universally better than the original records from which they came. The trouble is that there's no universal badge of quality and just because you've bought a

▶ Audio quest

I've recently purchased an Audiolab 8200CDQ CD player/preamp, with two Audiolab 8200P power amps connected via Chord Chameleon interconnects. I am struggling to pick the right loudspeakers for my 4m² room. So far, I have tried Monitor Audio GX200, B&W CM8s and 9s, and Mission SX3s – all of which I find too bright and a bit boomy in the bass. My budget is between £2,000 and £3,000 and I like a mixture of music, including rock and more modern stuff such as Massive Attack.

Peter Westley

AS: Finding a speaker that can control Massive Attack's bass is always a challenge! If you're experiencing boom effects you may want to try pulling your speakers further out into the room. Removing soft furnishings also helps.

I've found Audiovector's speakers less fussy than most in terms of room positioning, they don't have the tendency to boom like other rearported designs, although you still may find their treble a little hot for your liking.

For a smoother top end combined with controlled bass I'd suggest auditioning Neat's Elite SX which, thanks to its down-firing port, is also less fussy about positioning or prone to boom. PMC's FB1i will certainly bring your rock music to life. ATC's SCM40 should deliver further bass control and I'm sure your amps could drive them, but you may find the treble a bit too revealing.

Peter Westley is desperately seeking speakers to partner Audiolab's fine 8200CDQ CD player/preamp



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shiny new 180g vinyl album for £30 doesn't guarantee you superior sound. The main issue is which generation of master tapes the record is cut. Take Neil Young's classic *Harvest* album, for example; it was recorded and pressed in the seventies, and the first-generation master tapes would have been used to press the original LPs. Any re-release of this would have to have been remastered, either from the originals or the first copy masters. As the originals are likely to have deteriorated by now, the chances are that your audiophile pressing will have come from a second, third or even later generation set of

Audiophile vinyl is often and sadly a case of sucking it and seeing

tapes. So, no matter how good your vinyl pressing is, it's come from a recording of a recording.

The problem is that there's usually no way to tell, and this isn't the sort of information the record companies bandy around – so buying an audiophile repress is a bit of a gamble. Here, friends and specialist forums come in handy, but there's no substitute for your own ears. So if, for example, one repressing of the The Byrds' classic sixties album *5th Dimension* sounds good, it is likely the same care will have been taken with the other titles in the series. Audiophile vinyl is often – and sadly – a case of sucking it and seeing. Even if it's done well, it's rarely better – at best it's often just different – to the originals. While the same painstaking care may not have been taken with the first-generation originals, you can at least be sure they've come from early generation masters. That's why I favour these – the first pressing from the original country of release – rather than a reissue. Of course, the aforesaid disc may be a bit dog-eared by now.

Letter of the month

▶ Indian Exposure

Your integrated amplifier group test winner (last issue), the Exposure 3010 S2, is well-deserving of that award in every respect. I bought this amplifier a year ago, and am glad that I did. The characteristics of its sound quality have been very accurately identified by the test bench. I have been fortunate to have the revealing and detailed, Dali Ikon 6 loudspeaker, and though most people find this pairing rather clinical, I think it provides a precise manifestation of the 'garbage in, garbage out' principle. With high-quality recordings, this pair is an audiophile's dream. You get immense detail, precise imaging, clear instrument segregation. But with poor recordings, you are punished for

the crime of poor choice!

This said, I sometimes feel that, in terms of absolute musicality, the Ikon 6 maxes out just as the 3010S2 gets warmed up. I now want to test its limits and give it the match it deserves. I would be grateful and find it very helpful to learn from the experts at *Hi-Fi Choice*, about the associated loudspeakers and cables used, specifically during this group test. And, if possible, considered suggestions on the best speaker and cable partners for this beautiful amplifier based on the assessment of its sonic characteristics, which I completely agree with.

Aashish Mahindru, New Delhi, India

DP Hello Aashish, and thanks for your comments on the Exposure 3010S2. Glad to hear that you agree with the listening panel's findings, and that your amp is getting even better with age – like a fine wine! The loudspeakers we used are the Spendor D7 (£3,495 in the UK), which are a high-ish end floorstander, but perfectly capable of working well with the 3010S2 – indeed they made a joyous combination. The loudspeaker cables are Black Rhodium Tango, which have a smooth and fairly uncharismatic nature, and this combination made for a nice, open-sounding reference system.

You Dalis are fine speakers, but the Spondors are, of course, a league above in price and performance, bringing a more subtle, three dimensional presentation to the music. They're well worth auditioning if you get the chance.



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Level the playing field

If you really want to get the best sound from your system – especially when you crank up the volume – it's wise to equalise your levels, advises **Tim Jarman**

When performing a blind listening test, one of the most important things to do to ensure fair play is to equalise the levels at which each item plays so that they all give the same subjective sound volume. This is not simply a case of needless scientific rigour exercised for the sake of it, but a vital step to avoid the problem of music sounding clearer the louder it is played; if you don't go to the trouble of getting all the levels the same then the piece of equipment in the test that produces the loudest sound will normally be picked out as the best. This effect has a number of causes, not least of which is the non-linearity of the ear. Our hearing only gives a 'flat' response at fairly high sound pressure levels, quieter sounds are perceived with a presence lift (or a cut at both the upper and lower frequency extremes if you prefer), which is good for making speech intelligible but also has the unfortunate side effect of making quiet music sound dull and bland. In the seventies and eighties this problem was addressed by adding a 'loudness' or 'contour' function to amplifiers, which boosted both the bass and the treble at low (mechanical) settings of the volume control. This gives a pleasing effect and works reasonably well as long as the source input levels were roughly correct and the loudspeakers had a characteristic that matched the law of

Think about the sensitivity next time that you audition a loudspeaker

the control, but if either of these things were wrong the result was normally boom and tizz, something that every true audiophile rightly abhors. During the nineties, loudness controls morphed into the 'Mega Bass' functions that one sees fitted to budget audio systems, sold largely to those who equate more bass with higher quality (whether it contains any musical information or not). They are rarely seen in 'proper' hi-fi these days, despite the science behind them being fundamentally sound.

The basic psychoacoustic effects remain though, and are too good a marketing opportunity to simply ignore. Nowadays, we have high-sensitivity loudspeakers instead, where the designer has ensured that the maximum amount of sound is produced for the smallest possible input signal. Roughly speaking, a small or medium-sized loudspeaker rated at above 89dB/1W can be considered to be a high-sensitivity design, with models rated above 92dB/1W being exceptional. It is difficult to resist their allure, all that sound with the volume knob up just a crack so they must be good – right? Not necessarily. The design

of a passive loudspeaker involves many compromises and since any attempt to flatten the frequency or phase response, tame the impedance curve or make the load they present to the amplifier less reactive (all 'good things' in general terms) normally results in lower sensitivity, any commercially aware designer is wise to limit how many dBs they shave off the unit's bottom line in pursuit of these more abstract perfections. The paradox is that in most cases we don't really need sensitive loudspeakers; very powerful amplifiers have never been easier to construct. For a solid state model, 75W to 100W is commonplace (such things would have been exotic range-toppers 30 years ago) and you don't need anything like 92dB/1W to make lots of noise at home with that. As low as 82dB/1W will still leave power to spare, the only side effects being that you have to turn the volume knob round further and your electricity bill will be almost immeasurably higher come the end of the quarter. The rewards can be far-reaching though; fewer matching problems, a more consistent sound, the possibility of improved imaging, lower distortion; the list goes on.

Power to the people

The re-appearance of low-power valve amplifiers on the audio scene has also helped to make the low sensitivity/high accuracy loudspeaker a rarity, if you only have a handful of useful watts to play with before the harmonic distortion hits double figures then you aren't going to choose a model which uses up most of them just to achieve 'background' listening levels. Given the prominence of valves in the present market, this tends to undermine the progress which has been made in the solid state arena, where plenty of power is now available from moderately priced, sweet sounding and reliable equipment. Think about sensitivity the next time you audition a loudspeaker, and how important it really is. Equalise the levels before you start to make your decision and the results may well surprise you ●



If you're going to pump up the volume (to 11) it's wise to get the levels set first



TIM JARMAN
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Synergy looms large

Hi-Fi Choice's latest interconnect blind listening test has got cable guy **David Price** taking the effect of hi-fi wires far more seriously than ever before

Lest we forget, there was once a time when people didn't believe audio interconnect and loudspeaker cables made any difference. Back in the seventies – a period which by today's standards might be regarded as something akin to the Dark Ages, for a whole number of reasons – it was the general view that “a wire is a wire is a wire”.

Indeed, that might even be overstating the interest that people had in the effect that cables made, as – before the advent of the American Monster Cable and its little English brother QED 79-strand – I don't think anyone so much as thought about the subject. It was common practice to wire your hi-fi system with what was called ‘bell wire’, which was literally the cheapest run of electrically conductive string you could find at your local Tandy store to get your front door bell to indicate the presence of the postman.

The great cable debate started in the UK in around 1980, with audio journalists imploring bemused readers to invest the princely sum of 79p for every metre of cable they needed to link their amplifier to their loudspeakers – for that was how much QED 79-strand cost. It was seen as a ludicrous amount back then, but still those who took the plunge seemed to hear a difference. Since then, hi-fi hacks have spent ever more time talking about the effect that wires have on the sound of a hi-fi system.

Even from my miles off-axis vantage point, I could hear big differences

Indeed it proved no less interesting than the first. Whereas the one I did last year was of 12 different one metre interconnects, this was with six interconnects and their matching loudspeaker cables from the same manufacturer. I've often taken claims by cable makers that a one-make ‘loom’ is the only way to go, with a finger-full of sodium chloride, but as it transpired we heard some pretty marked differences, probably more pronounced than when listening just to interconnects.

It's not even as if I was on the listening panel! I've had that pleasure and privilege several times of late, but for both cable tests, I was the man with his hands on the controls. This meant cueing up the tracks, swapping cables and generally gofering to make the test work, while Messrs Osborn, Dunkley and Reichert languished on my couch and hearing what I was hearing in a far more direct way. But even located far stage left, from my miles-off-axis vantage point, I could hear differences.

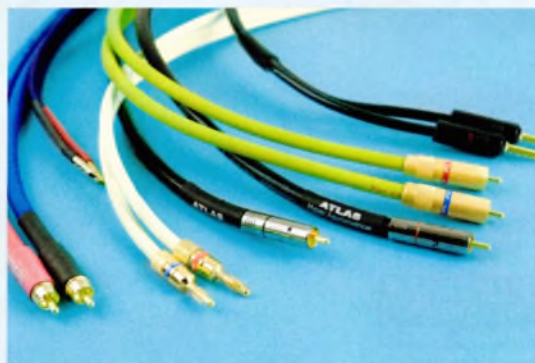
Fascinatingly, these weren't simply a case of one cable loom sounding brighter than another. Rather, the whole of the sound changed, from loom to loom, in a way that was so fundamental it has me wondering how on earth it could be so. For example, the

Allegri String Quartet piece we used went through all sorts of contortions while running different cable looms. On the Atlas loom for example, the Allegri bods were assaulting the listening panel, beaming in space in one single plane towards the sofa, whereas the van den Hul wires practically dissolved the speakers out of the room and let the stringed instruments hover over quite a considerable depth, in front of and behind the boxes.

Contrasting styles

Then there was the sense that the music really gelled together rhythmically on cable looms such as the van den Hul and Tellurium Q. It felt like Paul Simon's *Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes* was being played by a passionate group of people with the better cable looms, whereas others made them seem like they were earning £2 an hour and contemplating a career change to work at Sainsbury's stacking fruit! The effect really was so profound that it underlined just how important it must be for manufacturers developing new products, voicing a new loudspeaker design for example.

All this month's listening panelists came away agreeing that given a fixed system of source, amplification and loudspeakers, the wires that connect them have a profound effect on the sound that comes out of the end. This begs the question, how much to spend? The point is that the choice of hardware itself also has a great effect – indeed I'd say it is bigger still – so we shouldn't get obsessed by the world of wires. But suffice to say that remember to factor them into your upgrade plans and/or system buying choices in the first instance, and use your dealer to afford you the same opportunity of listening to a range of cable looms before you make any sort of serious buying choice. It's bonkers to bracket the cables off from the kit that they connect, think about the whole and go forth and let your ears decide which is right for you ●



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Room for improvement

How much of a difference does where you position your hi-fi make to the characteristics of its sound? After moving house, **David Vivian** has made a timely discovery

A long time ago in a bar far, far away, I interviewed loudspeaker designer Robin Marshall. We talked about his work for Monitor Audio and Epos and his then current design ideas for the Infinity brand. I asked him what his all-time favourite speaker was. Perhaps surprisingly, and with no hesitation, he nominated the Spendor BC1. But throughout our chat there was an over-arching rider whenever the subject of how a speaker sounded was broached. The question was essentially unanswerable in anything other than an abstract sense because one crucial variable was missing: the room in which it was played. The prime determinant of the sound – more than the drive units, the crossover (if it had one, his Epos ES11 design famously didn't), the containing enclosure or panel, its coupling to the floor via feet, spikes or a stand – was the room itself. A

A friend suggested that the house itself might be acting as a giant subwoofer

At the time, I gave the scenario a bit of editorial slack owing to the lateness in the day and the exaggeration that comes with a comfortable sufficiency of red wine. Last week, sober as a judge, I realised there was no exaggeration. Not a speck, not a scintilla. The speakers I thought I knew like the back of my hand suddenly and disconcertingly sounded alien to my ears. In a blind listening test, I'd have been reaching for clichés like chalk and cheese or night and day.

Changing rooms

As occasionally happens, I hadn't just changed listening room, but listening house. And, with no exaggeration whatsoever, my modest little retro-lite system sounded staggeringly different. Better? I honestly don't know. I'm still trying to work it out. But there's no shortage of clues as to what might have caused the sonic sea change.

My previous listening room was somewhat odd. Originally a 70-year-old loft conversion in an Edwardian terrace, the ceiling and all the walls bar one had been clad with wood panelling, presumably to match the not entirely snug-fitting floorboards. Although roughly 15ft long by 12ft wide, part of the none-too-elevated ceiling was heavily canted on one side by the eve of the roof and, thanks to various indents and incursions, no two walls carried the same dimension. In other words, it was basically asymmetric and so a pretty miserable place

for standing waves to propagate.

As a result, every speaker I had in for review exhibited a wonderfully smooth and even bass with hardly any doubling or cancellation effects. Slightly more perturbing, though great from a pure listening perspective, every speaker also seemed to exhibit significantly greater bass extension than its spec indicated should be the case. Even factoring in the contribution of my dreadnought-class Slate Audio stands for the smaller speakers this was something of a head scratcher until a friend seasoned in the science of room acoustics suggested that, given the slightly gappy floorboards and the alignment of the rooms below over two storeys, the house itself might be acting as a giant subwoofer and giving the falling bottom octave a lift.

How good was that? Well, it was damn great and the envy of pretty much everyone who came to listen. Other aspects of the sound weren't quite so impressive. Because of the low, canted roof imaging suffered. Musicians and instruments never quite snapped into focus and the soundstage lacked height. There was a subtle blurring of detail, too. The room was imposing its character on the system for better and for worse. I guess I adjusted to its idiosyncrasies over the years and began to believe that's how the system sounded.

But of course, as Marshall mooted that day, there is no speaker or system 'sound' out of context. My new listening room, upstairs in a seventies-build detached house, is much more conventional: slightly smaller and almost perfectly L-shaped. It has plasterboard-covered cavity walls, a uniformly high dappled ceiling (ugh), thick carpets and fitted wardrobes. I've got the speakers firing down the longer length like it says in all the best books. Bizarrely, the system is now everything it wasn't in the old room with pinpoint imaging, a warmer, more convincing tonal balance and so much more detail you'd swear the CD player or amp (or both) had been replaced. It sounds more couth, more sophisticated, more 'hi-fi'. That bottom octave has escaped without trace, though, and it's taken some of the excitement with it. I will miss them dearly ●




Your room can have a huge affect on your system's sound



DAVID VIVIAN
Hi-Fi and car writer

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First time, first love

In an effort to rekindle a long-forgotten love affair, **Richard Stevenson** digs out an old flame from yesteryear to see how it compares with today's hot young things

Fire up the Gyro" would have been just as good a catch phrase for eighties detective Gene Hunt in the BBC TV series *Ashes to Ashes*.

While the actual phrase of "Fire up the Quattro" referred to his iconic motor, the eighties for me were defined by my turntable, a Michell Gyrodec. In my early 20s at the time, I went into a hi-fi dealer with the budget and the desire for a Michell Syncro. One listen to the Gyro and I knew I had to save up some more money.

I ended up with a bronze Gyrodec with the original Gyropower PSU, a Rega RB300, Shure VST-V cartridge and Moth phono stage with its matching wood-fronted PSU. Having upgraded from a Technics direct-drive turntable, the system was as stunning aurally as it was visually. Thus my love of music and hi-fi was born.

Then CD came along and pretty soon all new music I bought was on CD. I replaced a lot of my favourite vinyl on silver disc and played fewer and fewer records. Ten years ago I moved house and managed to lose the stylus of the VST-V, despite putting it in a really safe place. It took me two years to bother replacing the cartridge with a Sumiko BluePoint Evo and the now-deceased Moth phono stage with a Trichord Dino. I still didn't use it, though. The Gyro languished at the back of the room, a piece of hi-fi *objet d'art* much like the Edison cylinder player that once

The vintage Gyro sounded infinitely better than any of the digital systems

came, and then latterly went, with a girlfriend. Damn, she was beautiful, and the girlfriend wasn't too bad looking either.

Fast forward a decade and Adam Smith, writer on our sister publication *Hi-Fi News* convinced me that a Gyro needs love and attention (well new belts, springs and oil) and a dedicated isolation shelf. I duly sorted these out and, blimey, what a difference in sound. Music from my vinyl collection came alive. Maybe I was overcome with nostalgia. Was a misty sentiment and connection with the past clouding my judgement? I lured in some independent adjudicators with free beer and ran A/B comparison with some serious digital audio hardware. Well A/B/C/D.

The Gyro faced stiff competition from another love of my life, the Sony SCD1 (£4,500), as well as a new fancy, a Parasound CD1 (£5,000), plus an Oppo BDP-105EU universal player (£1,000) and a custom-built music PC (£1,200) feeding 96/24 and 192/24 material to a Metrum Hex NOS DAC (£2,700). Some four hours later, the five independent judges concluded unanimously that the eighties-vintage Gyro, in its near original state with old AC



motor, sounded infinitely better than any of the four digital systems.

So taken were two of them with this revelation, that they went off to buy turntables. They also demanded all their old vinyl back, having previously bequeathed me their record collections when they moved to CD. D'oh!

One thing leads to another...

Then the Munich High End show in May this year saw the largest number of new turntables on display for at least two decades. The gorgeous and often outrageous engineering, the simplicity, the elegance and the fabulously engaging sound was truly heady. It was a festival for the eyes and ears and, at some point over a Weiss Bier, Adam Smith suggested I speak to Michel about bringing the old girl bang up to date with a factory service, new DC motor and PSU. Good idea. Yet by the time I got home and again revelled in the communicative and thrilling nature of the vinyl sound, I convinced myself that getting the old Quattro serviced simply wasn't going to cut it. What I really needed was a new Audi RS4, or to put it another way, Michell Orbe.

I have an Orbe on order, the full version with the cover, of course. I'll port the RB300, Evo and Dino across until finances recover. I have also started purchasing new music on vinyl. Laura Marling's *Once I Was An Eagle* was the first new LP record I have bought for at least 20 years.

With great reverence I opened the gate-fold cover, cautiously handled the record and took in the feel and the aromas. As the Evo's naked stylus touched down on the vinyl there was a horrendous thump and screech every 1.8 seconds. The brand new, heavyweight record had a pressing fault with a partially grooveless bald patch across the first track. Ah, that's why we moved to CD, then ●

Michell's Orbe is the new love in Richard's life



RICHARD STEVENSON
Hi-fi writer and vinyl enthusiast

Minitest

Four of the best LP test records are put through their paces. **Neville Roberts** fine tunes his turntable

Image Hi-Fi

Vinyl Essentials Test LP

PRICE: £55 CONTACT: 020 89006801
WEBSITE: ROKSAN.CO.UK

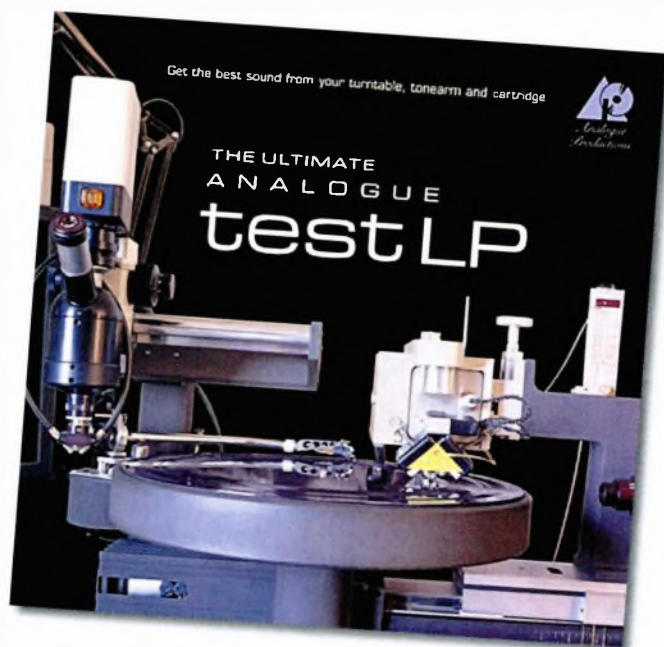


THIS RECORD HAS six different tracks on side one and side two contains two tracks, both of which are a repeat of side one, track two, the Tracking Ability Test. The reason for this is that these extreme tests can cause the vinyl to be heated to several hundred degrees centigrade at certain points and, therefore, should be played in sequence to allow cooling time and reduce wear.

The first two tracks are the obligatory channel identification and phase tests with the help of some pink noise. The third and fourth tracks check the crosstalk between the channels. A burst of pink noise is recorded on the left channel only alternating with a low-level reference burst of pink noise at -25dB on the right channel only. By muting your left channel, you hear on the right channel the crosstalk from the left channel alternating with the reference burst. If both the reference burst and the crosstalk are at the same volume, your crosstalk is -25dB. The test is repeated with -30dB and -35dB bursts. Track 4 repeats the test for right-to-left crosstalk.

Next is the Tracking Ability Test, which is a tone recorded with increasing amplitude ranging from a 40-100 microns in 10 micron steps. When the cartridge starts to miss-track, a clear buzzing noise is heard. Finally, there is the Tonearm-Cartridge Resonance Test, which consists of an audible tone that is modulated with a sub-audible low frequency.

VERDICT THIS OFFERING FROM Roksan utilises some very clever techniques and is clearly made to very high standards – highly recommended
★★★★★



Analogue Productions

The Ultimate Analogue Test LP

PRICE: £39 CONTACT: 01733 350878
WEBSITE: ANALOGUESEDUCTION.NET

THIS TEST LP was created with Barry Wolifson from Sterling Sound in New York after consulting with a variety of experts in the field. The LP does not explicitly include wider system checks, such as channel phasing and identification. However, phasing checks can be made using the first side one track together with the fourth track on side two, and channel identification can be made using tracks two and three.

Tracks four to eight are used to calibrate the RIAA equaliser of a phono preamp and an AC millivolt meter is required. The last two tracks check VTA, wow and flutter. These require an intermodulation distortion meter and a frequency meter!

Side two starts with an anti-skating test using a large amplitude signal, which can be checked audibly. The next two tracks are pink noise recorded laterally and vertically, which should sound smooth across the audio spectrum. However, the sleeve notes state that these tracks can also be used for cartridge demagnetising and for running in a new cartridge.

Track four is a tone recorded out of phase on both channels as a check for channel balance and distortion. The fifth track is a tonearm and cartridge resonance test and the final track is an unmodulated groove for listening for any residual noise.

Although many of the tests can be made by ear, the record suggests the use of some test equipment and even an oscilloscope for checking phase, which may be outside the scope of many users. It is nevertheless a great test record.

VERDICT AN EXCELLENT TEST record that will be the LP of choice for audio engineers or anyone with some audio test equipment. Many of the tests will not be suitable for non-technical audiophiles
★★★★★

Clearaudio Trackability Test Record

PRICE: £61 CONTACT: 01252 702705
WEBSITE: AUDIOREFERENCE.CO.UK



THIS AUDIOPHILE EDITION test record is a perfect tool for determining the real tracking abilities of your tonearm/cartridge combination. Like some of the other records here, it starts out with some 1kHz tone recorded at 0dB on the left, right and both channels for channel identification and phasing. The rest of side one is devoted to the trackability tests consisting of six tracks of 333Hz mono tone recorded in increasing amplitude from 50-100 microns. When a buzz starts to appear with the tone, this indicates the cartridge is starting to miss-track. These six tracks are repeated to check the tracking at the inner part of the groove.

These are very much 'torture tracks' and do not represent what you will find on a regular LP pressing. Don't worry if you cannot get your cartridge to track correctly at 100 microns, or even 70 microns as all arms and cartridges are different. What these tracks are good for is optimising the adjustment of the anti-skating in conjunction with the tracking force and VTA to minimise the miss-tracking across the record.

Side two commences with a concentric locked groove for checking for any visible eccentricity. The arm should stay in one position with no apparent swaying as the record rotates. Finally, there are 15 minutes of 3.15kHz mono tone for adjustment of the azimuth alignment (you are aiming for an equal output on both channels). This track can also be used as an audible check for any wow or flutter.

VERDICT ★★★★★ **THIS IS ANOTHER excellent test LP that is well-engineered and primarily for tracking force, anti-skating and cartridge azimuth adjustment**



Hi-Fi News Analogue Test LP

PRICE: £20 CONTACT: 07908 056978
WEBSITE: MAINS-CABLES-R-US.CO.UK



THIS TEST RECORD was originally released in 1996 by Len 'The Cartridge Man' Gregory and then updated in 2002 – with a frequency sweep track and extended pink noise tracks – as an audiophile pressing on 180gm virgin vinyl.

This disk now has 17 tracks and each track is separated by locked grooves, which means that the arm has to be physically lifted onto the next track. Side one includes the channel identification, phasing and pink noise tracks, together with bias setting by means of four tracks of 300Hz recorded at increasing amplitudes. The second side contains tracking ability bands at the outside, middle and inside of the disc and cartridge/arm resonance and alignment tests – each of the resonance tracks is introduced by a narrator to facilitate identification. Finally, there is a full frequency sweep test from 20Hz to 20kHz and an unmodulated groove to test the system for residual noise.

Also included with the record is a comprehensive alignment protractor and a copy of an article on the theory and practice of tonearm and cartridge alignment, which has been adapted and updated from a definitive 1968 publication by John Crabbe in *Hi-Fi In The Home*. Of course, there are also step-by-step instructions printed on the sleeve to take the user through the set-up procedure.

This is a comprehensive and easy to use test LP from our sister publication that is also excellent value for money.

VERDICT ★★★★★ **A HIGH-QUALITY test LP that is great value for money with everything you will require on one disk – perfect!**



A test record is an essential tool to ensure the proper set up of a record deck. Most records include channel identification and phase checks as well as checks for crosstalk between the channels. If there is a significant difference in crosstalk between the left and right channels,

this indicates your cartridge probably needs adjustment. A tracking ability test usually consists of a tone recorded at increasing amplitudes. This assists setting the tracking weight, which should be within the range recommended by the cartridge manufacturer.

Tracking ability will depend on your tone arm and cartridge combination. At very high levels, your cartridge will start to miss-track and this is indicated by a buzzing sound. The point that this occurs should be the same on both channels. If it is the same your bias has been set correctly.



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Bit part player

David Price fondly looks back at Marantz's first mass-market Bitstream machine, the early nineties' CD52 Special Edition Compact Disc player

In the beginning, there were two very distinct tribes when it came to CD player design, namely the Philips-based machines and the Japanese ones. The former, such as the Philips CD100, had DACs that only ran up to 14-bit resolution, which was considered a bit odd given the format's 16-bit potential, but oversampled the digital datastream four times. The Japanese machines, meanwhile – such as the Sony CDP-101 – didn't oversample, but worked with the full 16-bits available.

As a result, they were very different, sonically with most people in this country preferring the sound of the Philips designs, feeling them to be more organic and tonally smoother than the rather brash, brusque Japanese machines. Generally, audiophiles who supported CD went for the Philips platform, and indeed so did a number of hi-fi manufacturers wishing to introduce their own players. Meridian, Mission and Marantz were but three examples of

this, but the latter company – a wholly owned subsidiary of Philips, naturally worked closest with the Dutch consumer electronics giant.

This meant that Marantz produced a shadow range of CD players – from the first CD63 (closely based on a Philips CD100) in 1983, the company carved a new identity taking a Philips chassis and tweaking it to create something that would appeal to audiophiles.

War, what is it good for?

Early on in the life of Compact Disc, a specification war started. The Japanese, sensing that the Philips machines had a weak point in marketing terms by being 'only' 14-bit, started to promote the 'full 16-bit' nature of their decks. Despite the TDA1540 DAC chip fitted to the Philips players being a fine-sounding device, the Dutch company was forced to respond, and in 1984 launched the CD160, its first 16-bit player and with it Marantz produced its version of the same – the £200 CD273. Fitted with the TDA1541

16-bit, four times oversampling DAC, Philips could now compete in the specification sheet war.

Or so it thought! Japanese machines soon arrived claiming 18-bit, eight times oversampling – such as the Sony CDP-557ES – while the British designed Cambridge Audio CD2 claimed 16-bit, 64 times oversampling. These numbers were arrived at by using existing DACs in multiple configurations, letting manufacturers play the numbers game even more. Meanwhile, the average hi-fi buyer simply went for the one with the highest numbers – 18 x 8 had to be better than 16 x 4.

This was, of course, highly misleading as the bit-depth and oversampling arrangements of any CD player were not the sole determinants of its performance. This was down to more subtle things like the quality of the mechanism, master clock, filter, vibration isolation, passive componentry, power supply, and so on. But that didn't translate to sales brochures and by the end of the

eighties the CD player world was awash with misinformation.

In 1989, the whole wretched 'bits and oversampling' balloon was punctured with the advent of Bitstream. This new Philips technology was a completely different way of storing and processing the digital audio data inside the converter chip itself, and produced a different subjective performance, too – smoothing off what many saw as the rough edges of the Compact Disc medium at the time (see boxout). Bitstream revolutionised the digital world, making digital audio products cheaper and more palatable.

Marantz's first implementation of Bitstream came with its CD52 in 1990 – a good quality £250 machine that replaced the very similar-looking, but

Most people in this country preferred the sound of the Philips designs

multibit DAC-equipped CD50. Now fitted was Philips' first (and now legendary) SAA7350GP DAC chip alongside the (then) latest Philips CDM12.1 swing arm mechanism. It brought new levels of refinement to budget CD players, which suffered from a coarse, fuzzy sound laced with distortion and 'digititus'. It is strange to say it now, but some late eighties budget multibit designs were so bright they could strip paint at 50 yards!

Ever since the advent of the CD273 'Special Edition' some three years earlier, Marantz had always done a tweaked version of its stock player. Designer Ken Ishiwata freely admits that the 'SE' idea was hatched to sell off some stock cluttering up the Marantz warehouse. By retrofitting a few choice capacitors, copper screws and giving the machine a stick-on fascia badge, players could be made to look and sound more desirable.

Keeping it simple

When it came to the new 52, Ishiwata had a great machine to work with, and so he did with a smattering of fancy Elna and Silmic capacitors here and some OFC wiring there. No changes were made to the basic player though – in modern terms, the CD52SE feels a very crude thing to operate, its casework and chassis are a festival of plastic, with an ugly fluorescent display that seemed compulsory back then. The disc tray is

also cheap and cheerful, but at least you get very fast disc access from the era when CD players used bespoke CD mechanisms, and not something originally designed for reading a DVD-ROM inside a PC.

Sonically the CD52SE really impressed. In 1991 it brought the best of both worlds to budget CD sound – first, you had the clarity, openness and freedom from distortion of the new Bitstream convertor, and second you had the extra subtlety, warmth and depth garnered by the Ken Ishiwata modifications package. The result was a great-sounding budget product. Although not as good as £1,000 designs, this was probably the first £300 machine that you could go back to having lived with a high-end CD player. It wasn't searingly uncouth, and moreover it has a really musical character of its very own that just made listening fun.

You could put on any decent recording, and compared with mainstream mid-price multibit machines, the CD52SE's midband felt cleaner and more expansive, with a little more depth. There was less of what used to be called 'digital glare' across the upper midband, less of a sense that vocals and snare drums had been plated with chrome and then had a bright light shone on them! Treble was impressive, with lots of space and filigree detail, and less of a feeling of roughness. Only in the bass did it appear to let the side down, being a touch light compared with some price rivals, but it was always very tuneful.

This all made for a wonderfully accessible, affordable silver disc spinner that gave cash-strapped digital audiophiles a true taste of the high end for not much money. Owning a Marantz CD52SE at the time was akin to driving a VW Golf GTi – it showed you knew what you were doing when it came to choosing an affordable, yet high-performance product. Magazines raved about it, dealers couldn't get enough, and Marantz finally began to emerge

The era-defining CD52SE sounded great, but the Golf GTi Mk II looked better

BITSTREAM – HOW IT WORKS

Before the advent of Bitstream, multibit DACs stored the 16-bit digital word in 16 different physical locations in the convertor chip, selectively emptying them to deliver the final number to the outside world. But by using clever digital signal processing, a stream of 16-bit digital words running at CD's standard 44.1kHz sampling frequency could be transformed into a stream of one-bit words running at a much higher sampling frequency of 11.3MHz (256 times that of the equivalent multibit).

Because this approach created extra noise as a result of the word length reduction, noise-shaping was used to make it appear at very high frequencies that could then be filtered out.

When Bitstream was introduced in 1989, Philips claimed that this was a major breakthrough for CD sound, but another less well-publicised benefit was that 1-bit DACs were less complex and therefore cheaper to produce than multibit DACs, making Bitstream a genuine winner however you looked it.

from the shadows of its parent company to really make its own presence felt in the hi-fi marketplace. Marantz sold them by the warehouse load, and did a quick tweak with a 'Mk II' version late in its life just to keep the production lines running at full pelt. The spin put on this at the time was that the standard non-SE Mk II had most of the tweaks of the Mk I SE, and it was certainly an improvement, but it wouldn't quite have been worth selling your Mk I to get.

Music maker

Whichever incarnation you decide to go for, the Marantz CD52 is a very special machine in the great hi-fi scheme of things. Today it still stands as a very enjoyable-sounding music maker with bags of character, and historically it has been applauded for bringing decent-sounding digital discs to the masses for the first time. Today, the good news is that you'll be able to pick up a good working example for far less than £100 – which is a brilliant bargain if it's a cheap CD source you seek ●



Strike the right note

Overture has been with some of its key brands since it started trading. **Ed Selley** discovers experience counts for a lot

The relationship that dealers have with their brands varies considerably. It is normal enough for there to be 'core' brands that the dealer uses to form the basis of most of its systems, but even by these standards the methodology of Overture is unusual. Founded in 1990, Overture selected Arcam, Linn and Naim as its core brands at the outset. Nearly 23 years later, this trio still performs the same role.

One of the increasingly rare dealers that still has a high-street presence, Overture has maintained a strong relationship with these companies while adding other brands – chief among them Denon and Sonos – to fill in for other requirements customers have. With Sonos, Naim and Linn on the books, it is little surprise to find that Overture has embraced streaming with

considerable enthusiasm, while the rack of LP12's outside the dem room, suggests that it still knows its way around vinyl as well. This has been rewarded with a loyal following of customers, some of whom have been using the store since its founding.

So what do relationships of this long standing mean for the systems a dealer offers? As ever, I asked for three systems that represent both the

Overture selected Arcam, Linn and Naim as its core brands at the outset

company philosophy and the sort of system that it sells to its customers. Store manager Chris, installed me in the newly refurbished dem room and away we went...



THE EXPERT



Overture Ltd

3 Church Lane, Banbury,
Oxfordshire, OX16 5LR
01295 272158, overture.co.uk

arcam.co.uk

quad-hifi.co.uk/

rega.co.uk/

naimaudio.com/

spendor.co.uk/

linn.co.uk



System test music



ADMIRAL FALLOW
Boots Met My Face
CD/WAV



YOUNGER BROTHER
Last Days Of Gravity
FLAC



FINK
Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet
VINYL

System 1 – Classic Rock

THE FIRST SYSTEM under the microscope is perhaps the most conventional of the day, but still features a few surprises in its construction. Although this is the least expensive system I get to hear, it is also the only true separates system, which amply demonstrates the way the industry is changing. As you might expect, one of the Overture 'big three' features heavily, ably supported by other members of the portfolio.

The main player in the system is Arcam. Overture has seen every iteration of the Cambridgeshire brand from the Delta onwards and its enthusiasm for the latest offerings is clear to see. The pairing here is the CD 17 CD player and newly released A19 integrated amplifier. In so many ways this duo represents everything that Arcam should. Here we have two reasonably priced, beautifully assembled and handsome units

In terms of sound per pound, this system is utterly persuasive

that – in the case of the A19 especially – do everything you could reasonably ask an audio component to do. Joining this impressive duo is our recent turntable group test winner, the Rega RP1 (June issue). This budget all-star is the perfect partner for the A19's extremely good MM phono stage. Overture uses the RP1 to offer a vinyl option at a lower price than would be the case if they selected their preferred option of a Linn LP12.

Perfect pairing

Partnering this is Quad's 11L Classic. The latest version of the long-running L Series continues in the tradition of a speaker that looks and feels a great deal more expensive than it actually is. Continued enhancements to the driver and crossover have been made to improve performance further. The end result is an ideal partner for the equally feature-packed Arcams and is a system that walks a neat line between classic good looks and modern subtlety.

It's been quite a while since I've listened to much of Arcam's output

– absurdly talented rBlink (that the A19 can power directly) aside – and the first few bars of Admiral Fallow's *Squealing Pigs* is at once reassuringly familiar and yet intriguingly different. The partnership of the CD17 and A19 has some classic Arcam traits; I'm not sure you could ever provoke them into harshness or aggression and there is a control and cohesion to the sound that is classic Arcam but at the same time, there are aspects that come as more of a surprise.

With faster and more complex music, this system exhibits more agility and liveliness than Arcam's of old. There is a sense that some of the safe presentation that could often be heard is gone and that this system while still unlikely to scare the horses with anything you throw at it – is able to groove in a way that comes as a welcome surprise.

The Quads play a considerable role in this, too. They are as civilised as the electronics that they partner, but there is an energy to them that is deeply appealing. For a small speaker, they have seriously impressive low-end shove and a wonderfully expansive soundstage that seems at odds with the diminutive boxes sat in front of me.

This is brought home, the moment that I listen to the Rega. The live version of Fink's *Sort of Revolution* is richly rewarding and possessed of fabulous bass that has no right to come from speakers this small. The RP1 has the classic sense of life and sparkle that Rega seems to build into all of its turntables and even at this terrestrial price, there is a naturalness to the way it makes music that only very good digital can get near.

Flying start

In terms of sound per pound, this system is utterly persuasive. It builds on everything the brands have historically done well, but adds to these skills with an innate musicality that will do justice to a huge amount of material. When you consider the large number of inputs, impressive build and classically handsome appearance, this was an impressive opening gambit. What does going further up the price point bring?

- 1 ARCAM CD17 £650
 - 2 ARCAM A19 £650
 - 3 REGA RP 1 PERFORMANCE PACK £298
 - 4 QUAD 11L CLASSIC £350
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £1,948**



The Quad is compact, handsome and deeply capable



Two classic British brands combine to great effect

System 2 – Uniti of purpose

THE NEXT SYSTEM is a bit of a twist to how *Dealer Systems* goes. Normally, the further up the pricelist you travel, the more boxes and physical space the system takes up. In this case, Overture sticks two fingers up at tradition. The system you see here is powerful, extremely well specified and immensely capable, but you'd have to be living in a very small space indeed to struggle to accommodate it.

Bolt from the blue

Much of this space saving is due to the Naim Uniti2. The original Uniti was a bolt from the blue for Naim and has since spawned a whole family of 'Qutes.' For a manufacturer that prides itself on boxes to perform specific functions, the Uniti2 is a massively comprehensive piece of kit. In one chassis, the Uniti2 mounts a CD player, 24/192 media streamer, internet radio (with optional DAB/FM), digital, USB and analogue inputs and a 70W amplifier. None of this convenience has been bought at the expense of performance and much of the componentry in the Uniti2 can be seen at work in the standalone models of the Naim range.

Compact, capable and refined electronics need speakers that are able to match and Overture feels that the perfect partner for the Uniti2 comes in the form of the new Spendor A6R. This is the latest addition to the Spendor range and replaces the older A6. These revisions are substantial and include an all new midbass driver and heavily revised crossover. The bass

port has also been changed to take advantage of the improved low end and the 'foot' at the bottom of the cabinet has been made neater, which helps levelling. Spendor is not about radical engineering, instead the A6R is a classic example of its methodology of taking a good speaker and making it better through careful attention to detail.

The result is a system that combines a pair of subtle, elegant but extremely capable units into an impressively good looking and compact system that should fit into most rooms and look the part. The omens are good, but how does it perform?

With the CDs used on system one, added to the Overture, UPnP library, the Naim/Spendor duo immediately shows that evolution rather than revolution has much to commend it in terms of making music. The first thing that grabs you is how incredibly together this system is. From the absolute top of the frequency range to the lowest points of the bass and all points in between, there isn't the slightest sense of crossover between drivers or any point where you feel this system is anything other than completely in control.

The way that these two brands are able to complement each other is deeply impressive, too. The electronics are still recognisably Naim – the way this system hangs on to

This is a system that does a huge amount in an impressively compact form factor



The A6R's classic good looks belie some clever design features

bass lines and rhythms is absolutely peerless and the bass extension and detail it possesses is absolutely phenomenal. At the same time, the Spendors impart a soundstage that is open, full and deceptively large considering their size. The way they go about making music is so refined that it often takes a moment to realise just how impressive the dynamics are. A brief but hugely entertaining burst of Younger Brother's *Elephant Machine* reveals that if you want this system to deliver big slabs of electronic bass, it will do it and do so with immense enthusiasm.

Box of delights

An hour spent with this system reveals why it is such a strong seller for Overture. This is a system that does a huge amount in an impressively compact form factor. More importantly, it makes music in a way that is unfailingly enjoyable. It might be a one box system, but it is very definitely hi-fi.



The Uniti2 is a phenomenal one-box system

- 1 NAIM UNITI2 £2,795
 - 2 SPENDOR A6R £2,495
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £5,290**

System 3 – Majik hour

THE FINAL SYSTEM of the day showcases the last of the main three Overture brands in a configuration that I have never listened to before. Overture generally focuses on the Majik and Akurate lines of Linn products and this system is a stunning combination of Majik components that makes use of the famed Linn integration as well as adopting a fresh new take on an old Linn classic.

At the centre of the system is the Majik DSM. This is another all-in-one player with a formidable combination of onboard UPnP streamer, internal amplifier and no less than 15 inputs spread across a variety of digital and analogue connections. The DSM has its own amplifier onboard, which is able to drive a variety of speakers, but as part of a larger Majik System the configuration becomes something that sounds just a little different.

Now that's Majik

This is because the speakers in question are the Majik Isobariks, the floorstander in the Majik range. This relatively compact design looks conventional enough, but harks back to the original Isobarik with a pair of opposed bass drivers in a ported enclosure at the base of the speaker. Midrange and treble are handled by a conventional set of drivers, including Linn's '4k array' tweeter system. This should give the elegant cabinet a great deal more shove than you might expect, although this comes at the expense of a degree of efficiency, which means that for the very best results, more power is recommended. This being Linn, though, the solution is extremely elegant.

The Isobariks can be sold as a pair of standalone speakers, but in situations like this Linn can supply them complete with a Majik DS100 power amp and 'active cards' that effectively means the isobaric drivers are handled by the beefier 100W output of the Majik power amplifier while the DSM handles the smaller '4k array' drivers with the cards ensuring level-matched performance from both units. The result is classic Linn – compact, clever and creative ('Kreative' even?), but how does it sound?

With the DSM accessing the UPnP library and pausing only to remember that the Linn Kinsky app

really is about as good a UPnP controller as there is out there at the moment, it only takes a few minutes to get a handle on the Majik system. This is a combination of electronics that produces audio in a way that is beguiling and at the same time a little deceptive. There is a refinement and effortlessness to this system that very effectively masks the dynamics it is capable of generating.

Where this is most apparent is the bass response. There is very little that can touch a well-implemented isobaric driver array for tight and

A combination of electronics that produces audio in a way that is beguiling

detailed bass and the Linn is no exception. The overall performance is so smooth and well integrated that you only really begin to realise just how hard the Linn hits when you listen to something else straight after.

This is a system for the grown up – it has no interest in short-term shock and awe, but is instead able to present music in a way that is effortless, civilised and unfailingly believable. I suspect that the more time you spend with it, the more other systems will sound brash and synthetic in comparison.

Bridge the gap

The most impressive aspect of this is that the performance asks very little in terms of space and sacrifices even less in terms of convenience – in fact this Linn is probably one of the most flexible systems available anywhere in the UK for this sort of asking price. Since I last spent any time with the Majik range, Linn has added AirPlay support and the Songcast system allows you to use streaming services like Spotify through the system with minimal effort. If you are looking for a system that bridges the gap between those times when you want a true hi-fi moment with the (regrettably often more numerous) times where you need a compact and convenient all-rounder, look no further ●

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US psychedelia: 1965 - 1969

The experimental pop music of the late sixties retains a potency and adventurousness that still inspires to this day. **Simon Berkovitch** and **JT Rathbone** tune in and turn on...

Whatever the word 'psychedelia' conjures up, there's no denying that psychoactive drugs and the culture surrounding them helped inspire a mini revolution in western youth culture in the mid to late sixties. And it's America – the birthplace of psychedelic rock – we're tuning to here.

Psychedelia refracted rock 'n' roll through an intense musical kaleidoscope to often mesmerising effect, transcending the often-limited recording equipment available at the time. Here was a new music to stretch the abilities and capture the imaginations of the musicians, producers and engineers that attempted to capture its energy on disc.

Phasing, backwards guitars and vocals, heavy use of echo and reverb as well as an increasing use of exotic instrumentation and

electronic effects are all synonymous with studio creations of the period – all assimilated into the out-there recording techniques of progressive rock, Krautrock, dub reggae and beyond. That wild experimentation that took place from the mid to late sixties also arguably helped hasten the advancement of studio wizardry and multitrack recording.

Boundary-pushing pop records by premier league groups The Byrds and The Beach Boys not only excited aspiring musicians, but also alerted major record companies to the financial rewards of taking chances on adventurous – ie expensive – studio recordings. Classic singles like proto-acid rocker *Eight Miles High* and 'kitchen sink production' psych-pop masterpiece *Good Vibrations* pointed the way forward – with the likes of producer Rick Jarrard (Jefferson

Airplane) and sound engineer Dave Hassinger (The Electric Prunes, Grateful Dead) going on to help birth some astounding recordings that delighted in studio trickery and increasingly complicated soundscapes.

As with any new musical cult, there was also plenty of opportunism. But whether the recordings were made by genuine psychedelic pioneers – such as The 13th Floor Elevators or Country Joe And The Fish, who recreated the psychedelic experience by working up their early repertoires in communal LSD sessions – or by recently 'converted' garage, soul and R'n'B groups peppering otherwise straightforward pop records with hip jargon and ear-catching sound effects, the end result for many listeners was indistinguishable. Suddenly, straightforward pop records were humdrum, mundane and square.

13th Floor Elevators

Coined the phrase 'psychedelic rock'

From the strident opening guitar chords of 1966's high-energy debut single *You're Gonna Miss Me* to the eerie coda of *May The Circle Remain Unbroken* from 1968's *Bull of the Woods* LP, recorded just before the group's ragged implosion, the 13th Floor Elevators had a sound and philosophy quite distinct from any other band of their era.

Coming together in Austin, Texas in late 1965, they were unique from the outset, combining high-octane R'n'B with visionary lyrics extolling the questionable virtues of LSD exploration. Indeed, they were the first group to label their music 'psychedelic rock' and use the then little-known term in an album title.

Much of this lysergic philosophy came courtesy of principal lyricist Tommy Hall who, with his pulsating electrified jug, helped fashion their distinctive sound. The true power of the outfit, however, lay in frontman Roky Erickson's wailing vocals (a considerable influence on Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant) and Stacy Sutherland's liquid, rhythmic guitar lines.

Considering the group's gargantuan appetite for mind-bending substances, it's staggering that the Elevators managed to deliver a single recording, let alone two classics of the genre – 1966's *The Psychedelic*



Sounds of the 13th Floor Elevators and 1967's masterful *Easter Everywhere*, both of which were released on the underground International Artists label.

This far-out group of acid evangelists were way too much for the Texan authorities, who pursued them relentlessly, eventually hastening their demise.

The true power of the outfit lay in Roky Erickson's wailing vocals

The Electric Prunes

Took experimentation to new places

An ominous, oscillating fuzz guitar note slowly rises in volume. A splash of chords and an eerie ballad starts to recount an all-too-vivid dream. Suddenly, drums crash, guitars flash and the band pounds into the chorus of one of 1966's most distinctive records. The band was The Electric Prunes and the haunting song, with its expansive effects, was *I Had Too Much To Dream (Last Night)*, their second single with genius engineer Dave Hassinger at the helm, and a psych-pop classic that became a smash hit.

Fresh from producing The Rolling Stones, Hassinger found kindred spirits in the fledgling garage band. All concerned were keen to experiment – particularly innovative lead guitarist Ken Williams – and otherworldly tracks poured out of the intense collaboration, such as the mesmerising *Hideaway* and *The Great Banana Hoax* on The Prunes' second LP, *Underground* (1967).

Sadly, harmony turned to discord. When their manager insisted they record a psychedelic reworking of *Mass In F Minor*, written and produced by David Axelrod, the group broke up and was replaced by session musicians of Axelrod's choosing, but under the Prunes' moniker. The original group recorded one hell of a swansong, however –



the album's highlight, *Kyrie Eleison*, which enjoys a life of its own thanks to its inclusion on the soundtrack to the *Easy Rider* movie.

The two-disc *Too Much To Dream: Original Group Recordings* CD collects the 'real'

Prunes' complete Reprise output (1966-67), while a further double CD of the Axelrod-era recordings – David Axelrod *The Warner/Reprise Sessions: The Electric Prunes & Pride* – is also highly recommended.

The original group recorded one hell of a swansong

The Grateful Dead

The ultimate psych rock live band

On joining Warners in late 1966, the Dead were assigned producer Dave Hassinger and recorded their eponymous debut LP. A polished snapshot of their live act, it disappointed those expecting a psychedelic masterwork, despite its tight, energetic sound. Highlights *Cream Puff War* and *The Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion)* hinted at bolder ambitions, however.

These ambitions were focused on the Dead's astonishing second album – 1968's *Anthem of the Sun* – which, befitting the band's improvisational bent, happened partially by accident.

As recording sessions dragged on, Hassinger – increasingly impatient with the musicians' perfectionism – quit after the band's request to capture the sound of "thick air" for *Born Cross Eyed*. With little over a third of the LP in the can they were left to their own devices and, lacking formal studio knowledge, stumbled on an original way to complete it. As well as studio takes, they recorded multiple concert versions of the five key



songs from the mixing desk and the audience itself. These were then blended to create an epic collage of sound.

What holds *Anthem of the Sun* together is the Dead's musical chops and extraordinary improvisation. Despite the quality of 1969's follow up, *Aoxomoxoa*, the group were never quite as adventurous in the studio again.

The United States of America

The studio project that hit the road

Initially conceived as a studio project, this combo was the brainchild of avant-garde keyboardist and electronic music pioneer Joseph Byrd, who handpicked a diverse group to record an amazing, eponymous album.

Byrd had studied with John Cage, was an associate of the Fluxus group and visualised the cross pollination of rock and electronic music.

Unusually guitar-free in an era of axe heroes, the powerful combination of keyboards and spacey effects coupled with upfront drumming on tracks like *Hard Comin' Love* and *Coming Down* create a driving energy to match many contemporary records.

The icing on the cake is co-writer Dorothy Moskowitz's cool, pure voice – an influence on the late Trish Keenan's sublime vocals with Broadcast in the nineties. The tracks on which Moskowitz features are arguably the album's finest. It's a great shame that, apart from a few demos (collected with some fascinating outtakes on Sundazed's definitive



CD reissue of the album), she retired from recording soon after the band split.

The United States of America did tour briefly to a mixed reception, seemingly imploding in the process. Byrd returned with new personnel for one more Columbia album – Joe Byrd and the Field Hippies' *The American Metaphysical Circus* (1969).

SHOPPING LIST

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



Jefferson Airplane
Surrealistic Pillow
Perfectly captures the moment when folk-rock and harmony-pop veered into proto-psych. *After Bathing at Baxter's* went even further out, but this is their pop masterpiece.



Country Joe And The Fish
Electric Music For The Mind And Body
More overtly political than many of their contemporaries, the Berkeley band weaved a nice line in spacey, trance-like psychedelia.



The Byrds
The Notorious Byrd Brothers
The chiming, guitar-rich folk-rock helped kick start Los Angeles' counterculture, adding more experimental elements with each LP.



Kaleidoscope
Side Trips
Like The Byrds, Kaleidoscope were an eclectic bunch and this debut takes in folk, blues, jazz, bluegrass and Middle Eastern elements. Psychedelia at its finest.



The West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band
Vol. 3: A Child's Guide to Good and Evil
As mysterious and experimental as they came back then, this LP is the pick of their three fine Reprise LPs.



Music Emporium
Music Emporium
Original copies of this obscure private pressing can fetch upwards of £1,000. It's now been reissued, thankfully, for the less flush psychedelic aficionados among us.



CA Quintet
Trip Thru Hell
Another late sixties monster rarity that manages to be groovy, soulful and scary in equal measures. A true classic, even though they never dabbled in sugar cubes.



The Red Crayola
The Parable Of Arable Land
This odd trio cut two original LPs (the other being: *God Bless The Red Crayola and All Who Sail With It*) that sound completely different.



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**ALBUM
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Moody Blues Timeless Flight

★★★★★

14 CDs plus 3 DVDs **Universal**

THESE DAYS THE Moody Blues are not held in much esteem by the rock cognoscenti. They're seen as representing everything that was wrong with prog-rock, their songs full of faux-mysticism, their symphonic sound overblown, their ballads over-earnest and their early albums punctuated with pretentious, spoken-word poetry. It's easy to understand why some critics derided them as the 'Pseudo Blues'. But it's also deeply unfair. In their pomp they created some wonderful, groundbreaking symphonic pop-rock, full of hallucinogenic mystery and pioneering zeal that stands the test of time alongside anything else from those psychedelic days.

Albums such as *Days Of Future Passed* (1967), *In Search of The Lost Chord* (1968), *On The Threshold Of A Dream* (1969), *To Our Children's Children's Children* (1969) and *A Question Of Balance* (1970) were million-sellers and remain the pinnacle of their achievement. After that, a good deal of repetition and the law of diminishing returns kicked in and the chronological sequencing means most

of the best material in this vast collection is crammed into the first four CDs. As the set ploughs on through the later, less rewarding albums, interest wanes and the seemingly endless discs of unreleased/rare material suggests the package is primarily aimed at the committed fan. But even if you're not among them, the Moodies' classic

Put the sixth form poetry aside and you have some of the most timeless music of the late sixties

late-sixties body of work is ripe for reappraisal. It really was made in prog-rock heaven.

The trademark sound of the group's classic recordings was built around Mike Pinder's mellotron, an electro-mechanical, polyphonic tape replay keyboard that allowed him to recreate the sound of a full string orchestra. Pinder - who had

the advantage of having worked as an engineer at the Birmingham electronics firm that developed the instrument - pioneered an expert and innovative way of playing the notoriously unreliable mellotron, creating a woolly, wave-like effect and an off-kilter symphonic sound, which proved perfect for the Moody Blues' psychedelic-tinged pop. Subsequent more sophisticated synthesizers never quite captured the majesty of the mellotron and crisp remastering emphasises its unique sound as well as the group's creative early use of phasing and other studio trickery, heard to best effect on *Legend Of A Mind*, *The Best Way To Travel* and *Have You Heard*. Put the sixth form poetry to one side and add to the mix Justin Hayward's symphonic ballads such as *Nights In White Satin* and *Voices In The Sky*, the whimsy of *Dear Diary* and *Are You Sitting Comfortably* and the irresistible psych-pop rush of *Ride My See Saw* and *Higher and Higher* and you have some of the most timeless music that the late sixties ever bequeathed us. **NW**

MUSICREVIEWS



HOT PICK

Burt Bacharach

The Art Of The Songwriter – Anyone Who Had A Heart

★★★★★

Six CDs

Universal

HE RANKS WITH George Gershwin and Irving Berlin in the pantheon of popular music composers – but it takes a box set containing 140 of his compositions to realise just how staggeringly high the quality control has been over six decades. One disc in this collection consists of Bacharach's own recordings, but his genius lay in his pen not his voice, and so the real glory lies in the five discs of classic recordings of his songs by everyone from Ella Fitzgerald to Rufus Wainwright.

Intelligent remastering lends a certain cohesion to the sound of so many

His songs became standards because they lent themselves to jazz, soul and pop

different artists, styles and eras – and few were ever stupid enough to ruin the cool, breezy sophistication of a Bacharach number with a cheap production; indeed, where ever possible you got the main man himself to take the helm. But it's the sheer diversity on show here that really appeals. His songs became standards because they lent themselves equally to jazz, soul and pop treatments. **NW**



CD/DVD

The Undertones
An Introduction To The Undertones

★★★★★

Salvo



CD

Stooshe
London With The Lights On

★★★★★

Warner Bros

SIMPLICITY IS SOMETIMES better than sophistication. The early tracks on this compilation – recorded between 1978-83 by arguably the finest band ever to come out of Northern Ireland – fizz with an unaffected, breakneck punk-pop brio. It's not just *Teenage Kicks*, which everyone knows as John Peels' favourite record of all time, there are half a dozen more that aren't far behind. As time went on, they became a 'better' band – but the more crafted, self-conscious style of later releases didn't always suit. Perhaps there's something in the old saying that all great punk bands should make one classic album and then break up? **NW**

STOOSHE (PRONOUNCED STOO-SHE) are three girls from south east London with some great tunes, riotous style and truly terrific voices. Are they manufactured? Yes, of course (by SE homegirl songwriter Jo Perry), but the comparisons with Cowell-La-La-Land end right there. The harmonies are tight and lush, harking back to classic sixties girl groups, though with more Vandellas street-girl sass than Supremes-style coquetry they regularly scuff up the production sheen with bursts of cheeky back-of-the-nightbus banter. Their eyes are clearly on the charts but unlike so many that have come before them, they richly deserve it. **DO**



Hi-energy floor fillers vie with a unique cover of the Boss

Pet Shop Boys

Electric

★★★★★

CD

x2 (Kobalt)

ELECTRIC SEES THE Pet Shop Boys focusing firmly on the dancier side of their oeuvre, with Neil Tennant's archly melancholic observations taking something of a back seat to Chris Lowe's bangin' party beats pretty much throughout, and generally showing a frantically shaking booty to last year's more reflective and ambient *Elysium*.

Old school synth surges and classical samples vie for prominence with much more modern computer-generated tones in a dizzying rush of hi-energy floor-fillers with barely a pause for breath on these nine new originals plus an almost unrecognisable cover of Bruce Springsteen's *The Last To Die*. **DO**

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Herbie Hancock
Man-Child

180g vinyl

Columbia/Speakers Corner



MADE IN 1975 this is a funk album with little in the way of jazz-style soloing, the playing may be of a very high standard but the emphasis is on the groove. Hancock plays

all manner of keyboards, which gives him a wide tonal pallet to intertwine with the brass, percussion and guitars of a large ensemble. A group that included heavyweight reed specialist Bennie Maupin and soprano saxophonist Wayne Shorter – players who don't usually get to have this much fun in the studio

This is a mood album rather than something you marvel at for its sophistication of composition, there is plenty going on, but the repetitive nature of the themes and the limited dynamic contrast mean you can kick back and drift onto another plain without trying. Opener *Hang Up Your Hang Ups* is an immediate and irresistible groove, so much so that it has been sampled by a number of recent acts while the first piece on side two, *Bubbles*, is a masterclass in laid-back grooving. *Man-Child* deserves to be played at a decent volume on a revealing system, in other circumstances you will miss it's subtleties, which are patently many and rich on this excellent Speakers Corner transcription. **JK**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



A Guy Called Gerald

Silent Sound
Spread Spectrum



24/96kHz

B&W Society of Sound

A GUY CALLED began as part of 808 State and has subsequently gone on to define British dance music for many. This release, however, barely comes close to approaching the dance, genres for which he is best known. The 50-minute high-definition recording is designed to leave the listener "refreshed and relaxed". I have found this gentle, melodic, sophisticated take on ambient music to be strangely involving and entertaining. **MS**



Eleanor McEvoy

If You Leave



24/96kHz

The Naim Label

ELEANOR MCEVOY HAS become a bit of a celebrity at hi-fi shows, and now she finds her latest recording being released in hi-def on the Naim Label. The singer-songwriter includes her own compositions alongside covers - including reworkings of songs by The Beach Boys and Cyndi Lauper and a pitiful version of Elmore James' *Dust My Broom*. McEvoy has a pleasant enough voice, but it is excruciatingly true that Blue girls cannot sing the whites! **MS**

HOT PICK



A gripping intensity, which at times could be more measured

Sibelius

Symphonies 1 and 4, Minnesota Orchestra, Osmo Vanska



SACD

BIS BIS1996

THESE ARE TAUT visceral performances of two hugely different, symphonies. The Romantic First symphony receives a reading of great power and sweep that literally tingles with electricity. Tempi are fast, and the conductor keeps the music on a knife edge from first note to last. The leaner Fourth is performed with the same sense of immediacy. The intensity is gripping, but one sometimes wishes for a more measured response. Vanska previously recorded both symphonies with the Lahti orchestra, and timings between the individual movements of both performances are close. The recording sounds crisp and natural, with an open unforced clarity, plus a wide dynamic range. **JH**



Stravinsky conducts

Rite of Spring; Firebird Suite (1945) Columbia Symphony/New York Philharmonic



Two CDs

Sony 88765442692

2013 MARKS THE the 100th anniversary of the *Rite of Spring's* premiere. To mark the occasion, Sony has reissued Stravinsky's famous 1960 stereo recording of the work, coupled with his much less well-known 1940 mono version with the New York Philharmonic. The stereo account still stands up very well with the sound seeming a tad cleaner/fresher than the transfer in the big Sony Stravinsky Edition box. The New York performances are impressively gutsy and amazingly well recorded for 1940. Rare session photos and a reprint of Stravinsky's celebrated article *Apropos Le Sacre* add up to an unmissable reissue for collectors. **JH**

BLU-RAY DVD



OMD Live

Architecture & Morality & More

Eagle Vision



RECONVENED IN 2006

for a German TV show, OMD performed this concert a year later and have recorded **two albums** since. It features the complete *Architecture & Morality* album followed by

their hit singles at the Hammersmith Apollo in front of a rapt audience. The visuals are particularly strong and its a bit like a mellow variation on Kraftwerk except for the drum kit and rather more emotive singing. It sounds pretty good, not exactly dynamic, but clean with decent bass extension. **JK**

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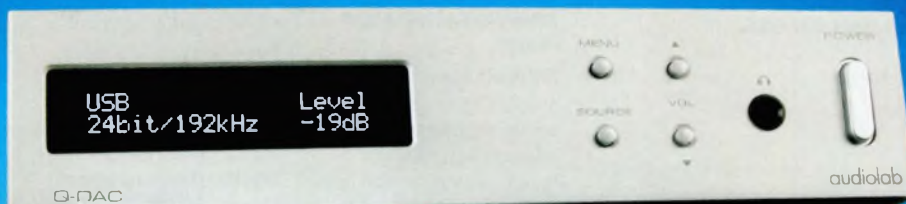
Hi-Fi Choice

Issue No 374 August 2013

PASSION FOR SOUND

Music masters

Audiolab's compact Q-DAC & M-PWR combo!



Dealer visit:

Three real-world systems scaled for UK lounges

38 products on test from Chord, Linn & Sonos through to van den Hul

STREET BEATS
Headphones for music on the move

Network system

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The simplest way to send your ad is via email to: letters@hi-fichoice.co.uk or mail: **Reader Classified, Hi-Fi Choice, AVTech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, Kent BR6 6BG.**

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FOR SALE

DENON DVD-A1 DVD player (not Blu-ray) champagne colour with Denon D Link and remote/manuals. £300. Denon AVC-A1SR amp, champagne colour. With remote and manuals. £350: **07767 270242.**

QUAD FM4 late model with grey/bronze buttons and phono outputs. Mint condition. £140. Radford STA 25 'Series 3' valve amplifier silver wired. Cherished for 15 years. £1095 ovno: **024 76679165 or 07968769595 (Coventry).**

ISOTEK Titan mains conditioner in excellent condition, bought from new, complete with manual and original box. £975 ono: **01303 863424 (Kent).**

KEF Q300 black ash, brand new boxed, magazine prize. I have documents to prove. Highly rated standmounter £230 (£150 below retail): **07884 430988 or 01782 397204.**

TELLURIUM Q Black 1m digital cable. Locking RCA phono each end. As new,

only a few weeks old. £195. (new price £390). Pictures available: **01403 711778 or 07813 367409 or email: lyndon.taylor@tiscali.co.uk (West Sussex).**

NAIM Supercap 2 in mint condition Serial no: 243xxx. 6 years old, original box. £1,820: **email: hh@hhaps.dk (Denmark).**

REGA Planar 3 turntable. Acos S-shaped arm. VGC. £125 ono. Kudos speaker stands, 60cm, silver. Excellent condition. £90 ono. Buyer collects: **07801 231963 (Lancs).**

KIMBER Select KS3038 speaker cable, 2.4m, £4,500. Kimber Select KS1136 XLR interconnect, 1m, £1,150. Kimber Select KS1036 interconnect, 3/4m, £950. Kimber Select 9033 Jumper set, £200. All with cases: **01772 314151 or email: jamesmckendrick@btinternet.com.**

POWER supply for Class A amplifiers, ideal for John Linsley Hood's 1996/1969 or any other low-power Class A

amplifier. Fully built, ready to use, in self contained enclosure, £279: **0207 4998729.**

KEF X300A speakers, only 4 months old, in like new condition, original documents and packaging are intact, asking for £500 (RRP £600), prefer buyer collection: **07741 485209 or email: budtsui@gmail.com.**

SONUS FABER Musica amplifier. Boxed, very good condition £1,000 ono: **07753 271812 (Notts).**

SPENDOR 58E £300 ono. No boxes, buyer collects. Will demo: **email: moss8rg@btinternet.com (Northampton).**

DPA 200 preamp and power amp £300 each. E. A. R. 834L Delux preamp £700. All boxed, in good condition: **07890 896819 (Cumbria).**

GRACE M902 headphone amp £995 (£1,500), Arcam BB3 £85 (£360), Musical Fidelity X10 V3 tube buffer £200 (£300), Michi preamp by Rotel, fabulous, £800 (£1,250): **07811 613140 (Bristol).**



Naim's Supercap power supply is a steal for bargain hunters

PAIR of custom-built speaker stands. 5kg each, finish black hammered. Height: 35.5cm; base: 25 x 22cm; top: 20 x 17cm. Excellent condition. £45 ono, buyer collects: **01258 454084 or email: gandjboutelle@talktalk.net (Dorset).**

PRIMARE CD31 CD player and 130 integrated amplifier (Balanced or RCA interconnects). As new, high-quality system bought ex-demo as second system, but never set up £1,500 (£3,000 new): **07712 875316 or email: jeff.wilding@tiscali.co.uk (Manchester).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY AMS35i pure class A integrated amplifier (silver) boxed, superb, mint condition. Only 18 months old. Can Demo. Reluctant sale (£6,000) £4,000: **01282 421866 or email: jeff21@btinternet.com.**

LINN Sneaky Digital Streamer £500 (£1,015); Townshend Audio Maximum Super Tweeters £400 (£800); Chord Signature Plus 1m RCA interconnect £350 (£765). All items are in excellent condition and come with manufacturer-supplied boxes, packaging and manuals. Excludes postage: **01305 263069.**

USHER S520 standmount speakers, black gloss finish, immaculate condition, boxed, £250 incl delivery. Kudos S50 speaker stands, black, 20 x 15cm top plate,

60cm high, VGC, £60 (£170 new): **01706 345418 or email: mail@rodtheobald.force9.co.uk (Rochdale).**

CREEK OBH-8SE with OBH2 power supply MM, original boxes and instructions VGC £135. Project Phono Box SE2 blk MM/MC, original box and instructions VGC £135. Turntable record disc stabiliser weight alloy 370g, original box VGC £20.

01684 290581 (Tewks) **LEJONKLOU** phono amp. Suitable for MM only. Bought new May 2011 for £425. Bargain at £280. All prices exclude p&p: **01772 715862 or email: cpsquire@yahoo.co.uk**

CYRUS 6DAC amplifier and DAC combined. Unwanted prize and absolutely immaculate. Used for three weeks only and just 'run in'. £580 – almost half price! Post or collect: **01575 572603 or email: russell@sayers.myzen.co.uk (Angus).**

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DAC Magic £100. Pair EB1 Speakers £250. Pair Sounds Style Z2 stands £35. Pair Mordaunt Short Avant 902.1 speakers £75. Rega Headphone Ear amp with RCA output £100. Cambridge Audio Azur 340SE amp £90. Buyer to collect: **02920 568165 (Cardiff).**

200+ vinyl LP records: opera, orchestral, classical, jazz, pop etc. Buyers collect: **01246 865640 or email: johnm_holmes@talktalk.net**

BUYING TIPS **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

(Chesterfield).

ARCAM CD17 in black, 3 months old £450. Linn Majik Sondek, 3 months old in walnut, with trampoline base and clear lid £2,200. Monitor Audio GX50 in gloss white, 10 hours use only £650. All boxed, prefer collection: **email: igreenelectrical@aol.com (Edinburgh).**

ATC SCM12 speakers, cherry finish with matching stands, in excellent condition £500 ono. Audiolab 800P power amp, original black version, good condition £180 ono. Quad 44/405-1 pre/power amps, good condition £275 ono: **0754743390 (Wiltshire).**

REGA P3 turntable. Grado prestige gold cartridge, Michell tecno counterweight, Rega bias 2. Boxed, owned from new, excellent condition. Open to reasonable offers: **01614459770 or email: dan.Overton1@btinternet.com (Manchester).**

WANTED late Van Den Hul Frog gold cartridge. One in need of repair: **01505346791 (Renfrewshire).**

PARASOUND ZDAC DAC Silver as new £359.99. Acoustic Energy AE1 speakers, black £499. Parasound A21 power amp £699: **0797515445 (West Sussex) or email: patwack@aol.com.**

MORDOST cables: White Lightening 2.5m RCA stereo pair interconnects (brand new, boxed) £100. Also: 2.5m and 3.5m SolarWind speaker cables. mint condition £150: **01457871622 (Lancs).**

JAMO D830 speakers, VGC (£1,250) £699 ono. Korg Karma music workstation, excellent condition, includes EXB-MOSS board and stand (£1,500) £699 ono. Can negotiate on collection: **07798607225 or email: simon.corcos@bthft.nhs.uk (West Yorkshire).**

MARANTZ (SP4320) receiver £110 Dual 505/2 turntable £40. Shure SGF2 stylus balance boxed £25. Pioneer (DVL909) Laser Disc DVD player £250. Sonotone (9TA1HC) cartridge, spare stylus (new) £15: **01708457691 (Essex).**

SOMETHING SOLID speaker stands. Fully welded construction, black, 63cm height, mass filled, spiked feet, photo available. Ring for other dimensions. Quality stands. VGC. £50: **01582423791 (Beds).**

NAIM Fraim 1x Cherry Base VGC. Only faint marks at back of shelf. Bought from a used Naim dealer, but never used. Instructions and boxed. £399 (RRP £745). Russ Andrews 1 x 1m DCT Signature Powerkord £285 (RRP £421.50). 3 x 1m Signature Powerkords £275 (RRP £399) All cables in near mint condition and fitted with Clipsal in-line UK Mains Plug with RA fuse and with Wattgate 350i Ag IEC Plug. Cable will be bubble wrapped and sent in box. Buyer to pay postage or collect. Photos available: **02083728376 or email: adelyn@live.co.uk (North London).**

METRUM ACOUSTICS Octave DAC, silver, one-year old, mint condition with original packaging £500. Naim NaitXS amp, Naim Flatcap XS power supply. Mint condition with original packaging cables etc £1,250: **07933109234.**

CARDAS Quadlink speaker cable 5m pair with spades at both ends £245 (£650). Quadlink jumper/links spades both ends £25. Russ Andrews KCAG silver interconnects 0.5m pair £245 (£489): **01202515474 or email johnlangley17@talktalk.net (Bournemouth).**

DYNAUDIO DM 2/6 black ash, mint condition, used for max 20 hours. No box, but have port bungs and instructions. Only mark is on bottom due to spiked stands. £350 ono: **07517147056 or email: jameshollis@mac.com (Surrey).**

SPENDOR A6 floorstanding speakers. Oak finish, excellent condition. £1,200 ono. Can demo. Buyer collects: **01798475319 (Essex).**

QED Revelation award winning speaker cable, 2 x 5m lengths, (unterminated). £80, a saving of around £80 if buying new: **01614323852**

(Stockport, Cheshire).

AUDIOQUEST 'Sky' 72V DBS interconnect 1m/RCA. Little used, fantastic cable, surplus to requirements, must sell. Offers or swap for hi-end power cords (2m min) or mains regenerator/ filter block etc. Ecosse ref 'the Baton' RCA 0.8m brand new £59 (RRP £85). Musical Fidelity A5 DAB/FM tuner, as new, box, remote etc. Radio 2 on this (DAB) blows 'FM' into next year! £495 ono: **01766781211.**

ICON AUDIO stereo 40 MkIII with Jensen caps £1,000. Icon Audio MFV3 floorstanders with Chord speaker cable £500. Pair of Linn SARAS and Naim cable £150: **07531835575 (Glos).**

THREE pairs of missing link cryo reference interconnects, 1 x 1m RCA (£320), 1 x 30cm RCA (£220), 1 x 0.8m RCA to XLR (£240). All with certificates. One pair of Linn black I/CS (£20). Two pairs of Linn silver I/CS 0.5m (£90 each). Russ Andrews 2m headphone lead for Sennheiser 600, 650, etc (£50) and 2m headphone extension lead as new (£40): **07720837194, or email: biggsyla1@sky.com**

DCS PUCCINI XCD/SACD player in silver 2.5 years old. Original box, remote. Unit is in mint condition. Collection from TN14 or can ship. Cost £11,995, asking £7,500 ono: **email: katherinewman74@gmail.com**

WADIA 1701 iPod dock/ transport. Excellent condition, black with original box, instructions, power lead and Wadia supplied digital interconnect. Please note remote control does not work. Get CD quality from your iPod. £125 ono (RRP £400): **07500767281 (Bucks).**

REGA P3-24 turntable with Ortofon 2M Bronze cartridge, external PS £375; Arcam Alpha 9&9P amplifiers £250; Castle Eden speakers £150. All for £700. Buyer collects: **07500992269 or email: chorrc2001-2@yahoo.co.uk (Bristol).**

EB ACOUSTICS XEB2 stand-mount speakers – Oak finish. Used but in excellent unmarked condition. You do not have to wait four months to get your hands on a new pair of these wonderful sealed-box speakers, get these now, they are just about run in! Excellent 87dB sealed-box design, ATM SC11 beaters! Collection only. £480: **07725525001 or email: alan.strudwick@googlemail.com (South Wales).**

TECHNICS SLP-770 CD player, late 80s Technics hi-end CD player with remote and manual. Virtually unused. No signs of wear, plays faultlessly and sounds superb. £170

ono. Sony SCDS-555ES SACD player, gold, manual, remote. Unmarked as new condition, stunning in SACD mode, 15kg of Sony's finest. £495 ono. Siltech G7 25th anniversary 770i RCA interconnect (1.5m), as new with all packaging, locking RCAs. Simply amazing upgrade, bass and midrange are jaw dropping through this cable. £249 ono + postage. VDH hybrid integration interconnect 1m, RCA, as new with bag/ box £89 + post. Can post all: **01766781211 (Gwynedd).**

PROAC Response 3.8 in real Yew veneer. Slight cabinet damage, but not noticeable set up. Otherwise perfect. Amazing deep bass at low volume. Can be tested. £1,400 ono: **07976009835 or email: Steverees67@gmail.com (County Down).**

CYRUS Streamline 1 with remote, as new, 14 months old. Boxed with manual. (£1,600) £700: **07956040064 or email: paul_sims@talktalk.net (Staffordshire).**

LINN system, Majik amplifier, Genki CD, Pekin Tuner, Katan Speakers, Pioneer PDR609 CD player/ recorder, speaker stands. £1,400 ono: **01406365078 or email katherine1954@btinternet.com.**

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Andrew Simpson casts his expert eye over his pick of the best hi-fi websites and online content



AUDIOVECTOR'S NEW WEBSITE AND FORUM

As our review of its X3 Super's revealed back in May, Audiovector is relatively unknown on these shores, so it's worth a visit to its new website to find out what this Danish company is all about.

It's a welcoming environment, with plenty of images, intuitive navigation and information presented in web-friendly

bite-sized chunks. Company CEO Ole Klifoth told me about his plans to keep content fresh by posting regular news updates on its latest hot products, combined with archive information on older products. This latter content is particularly crucial for AV, as what sets it apart from most speaker manufacturers is the option to have factory upgrades fitted from within each model's respective ranges when the mood (and wallet) permits, so products are less likely to become obsolete.

Providing a mechanism for customer interaction is vital, and AV has migrated its old website's forum into the new site, as Ole explains: "We aim to provide ongoing support for customers and interested parties. Our team checks in to the forum every day." I couldn't resist putting this statement to the test anonymously and can happily report that Audiovector replied to my thread within a few hours. Top service.



JAZZED UP SPOTIFY

If you've always been keen to explore jazz, but don't want the hassle of spending late nights in bars, Spotify's new Stylus Jazz app is just the ticket. The app promises "an introduction to the best contemporary and classical jazz" to "find the jazz for you".

The app's turntable-like graphics are a nice touch and clicking 'shuffle my style' prompts the virtual deck into action. Listeners with a broad or yet to be defined palette can leave the slider set to 'all styles' to experience an eclectic medley of music. You can also hone your preferences via the categories Spotify separates jazz into and there's the option to 'star' content and teach the app what you like to help it recommend similar material. The usual Spotify account considerations apply, but this is still an easy way to start you on your own jazz journey.



MIDLAND AUDIO X-CHANGE

Buying used hi-fi products can be a risky business. What looks like a gem could turn out to be money wasted further down the line when you realise what you've bought isn't exactly what the seller said it was, or worse still it goes wrong and the seller is long gone. That's why it's always worth trying to source quality used kit from reputable dealers, and with a decade's worth of experience in selling high-end audio, step forward Midland Audio X-change.

The special offers area of MAX's website has a refined list of esoteric goodies, ranging from Neat standmounts for under £600 to an ex-demo Devialet amp with £1,500 off, all accompanied by detailed pics. MAX has also just launched on Facebook and is posting daily, including albums of its latest preloved bargains.

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CHOICE TWEETS



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Congratulations to @disclosure for hitting the #1 spot with their 1st studio album, Settle, mixed & mastered @MetropolisStudios on PMC BB5s



ACOUSTIC ENERGY
@ACOUSTIC_ENERGY

Newcastle Hi-Fi recently merged with its parent company Peter Tyson. As part of the merger they have also moved... [fb.me/2fhk9MUB](https://www.facebook.com/2fhk9MUB)



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These @CEDIA tips can be applied to any audio room. Do you utilize any of these techniques? [ow.ly/IQe7G](https://www.ow.ly/IQe7G) #Soundproofing



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Before buying a new pair of earphones or headphones, you should understand the specs! This informative video can help [goo.gl/qDUJd](https://www.google.com/goo.gl/qDUJd)



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Cambridge Audio's Minx Go Portable Wireless Speaker keeps the music flowing for 18 hours straight [phonearena.com/news/Cambridge-Audios-Minx-Go-Portable-Wireless-Speaker-keeps-the-music-flowing-for-18-hours-straight_id43811](https://www.phonearena.com/news/Cambridge-Audios-Minx-Go-Portable-Wireless-Speaker-keeps-the-music-flowing-for-18-hours-straight_id43811)



ARCAM OF CAMBRIDGE (@ARCAMUK)

Welcome to the best ever receiver from Arcam - the AVR750 [bit.ly/15tVr34](https://www.bit.ly/15tVr34)

CHATTER

Rega fans will enjoy this short interview with Company Founder Roy Gandy, explaining where it all began and what makes this company stand out from the crowd. A great reminder of why Rega is a mainstay of British hi-fi [youtube.com/user/RegaResearch](https://www.youtube.com/user/RegaResearch)

Ever wondered how vinyl LPs are made? This fascinating archive video filmed at

the old EMI record manufacturing unit in Hayes was doing the rounds on twitter last month: [telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturevideo/musicvideo/8899340/How-to-make-a-vinyl-record.html](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturevideo/musicvideo/8899340/How-to-make-a-vinyl-record.html)

Musical Fidelity was proud to announce its EB-50 in ear cans are so popular that boy band Blue use them (@MFphones)

SOUNDS *for* SALE

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V90-DAC

THE ORIGINAL V-SERIES

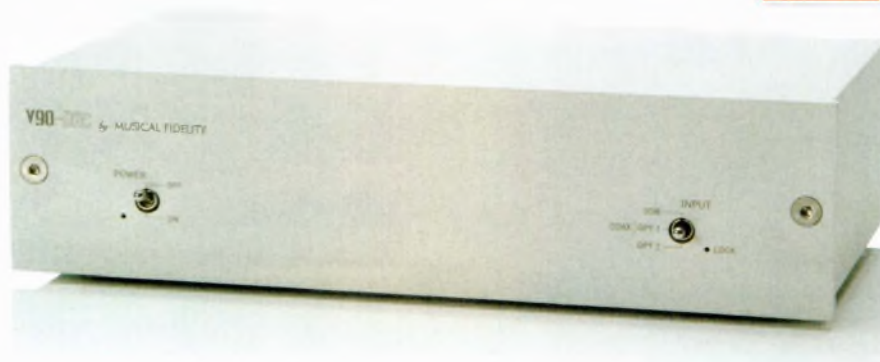
appeared on the scene some five years ago, and happened to coincide with a phone conversation I had with MF's Antony Michaelson where he predicted that we were all doomed, the economy was going down and no one would have any money to spend on hi-fi anymore. Well, he wasn't far wrong, and as a result there's been a new interest in highly affordable mini components such as the Vees. Now though, the new V90 series has been turned around 90° (V90, geddit?), given far nicer styling and casework plus the latest circuitry inside – and has metamorphosed from an ugly duckling into a rather elegant baby swan! Could this represent the end of austerity?

The V90-DAC is, of course, the digital convertor in the series, and feels lovely considering the price. Gone are the garish, gauche typography and graphics, and in comes something akin to Aurex's microsystem of yore – a tiny wee hi-fi separate that's very well made from fine-line extrusions. The fascia and case are both crystal bead shot blast to a fine-textured moonstone finish, and this transforms the look and feel of the product.

Lose the flab

One point the manufacturer makes about this DAC is that the small, single circuit board saves money, allowing – the company says – money to be spent elsewhere. "There is no unnecessary flab, no excess packaging, no excess anything, anywhere. It is just pure, unadulterated, state-of-the-art performance", says Antony in his typical self-effacing way. The DAC chip fitted is claimed to measure extremely well, with a quoted jitter of around 12pps and a signal to noise ratio of -116dB (A weighted). frequency response is said to be "ruler flat", and distortion is 0.00025% at 1kHz and 0.0003% at 20kHz, says Musical Fidelity.

The new Vee gives nothing away in terms of connectivity. There are two coaxial digital inputs, two for



optical and one USB said to run to 24/96 (Asynchronous) resolution, so it won't do the full 24/192 deal, although will still accept inputs up to 192kHz. For me personally, I wouldn't see this as a deal breaker given the paucity of files at the aforementioned resolution. All inputs are said to be upsampled to 192kHz.

A small 'wall wart' switched mode power supply is included; I wonder if we'll see a V90-PSU at some stage to upgrade this?

Having recently reviewed several more costly digital convertors, I don't expect quite so much from this neat little £200 box. First impressions, however, are of a lively performer – fed a TEAC CD transport the Musical Fidelity makes a great job of the recently remastered Freeez first album, *Southern Freeez*. It's not the world's greatest recording, so doesn't make it easy on digital sources, but the V90-DAC is really crisp and clean, and doesn't have any frequency response anomalies to my ears. The V90 isn't artificially veiled, with treble roll-off added to make it sound smoother; rather it gets its civility and finesse from a general lack of distortion. *Caribbean Winter* is lovely, with shuffling rhythms and accurate dynamic tracking – the DAC doesn't sit on the players' accenting one little bit. The result is a lucid, engaging, musical sound that flows along in a

carefree way, completely unexpected from a product of this price.

The picture continues with Supertramp's *Breakfast in America* off CD, with loads of detail and a surprising ability to supply a soundstage that is deeper than one dimension. Not all DACs at £1,000 manage this, so the V90 deserves a pat on the back. The track is a pretty starkly balanced one, but the Vee stays couch, never straying into harshness despite pulling out a wealth of detail. It delivers a nice, crisp, bright treble, but this doesn't grate – reflecting the album's upfront original mix.

Step-change

Hi-res is handled with equal aplomb, the V90-DAC accurately signposting the step-change in fidelity available from high-definition digital – rather than making it sound like slightly better CD. A hi-res 24/96 FLAC file from my MacBook Pro – *Band on the Run* – comes across in wonderfully clear and detailed fashion, the track bristling with atmosphere. Basically, there is no sense that one is listening to a budget convertor. Indeed, only by spending a few hundred pounds more on the likes of Audiolab's Q-DAC (£495), reviewed page 16, will you get any appreciable sonic improvement, which shows what great value this DAC represents. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£199

CONTACT
0208 9002866

WEBSITE
musicalfidelity.com

OUR VERDICT



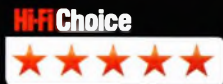
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"A distinct cleaning up of the sound...
"A marked benefit for dynamic range, a consequence of lowering the noise floor, as well as a refinement and a general opening up of the soundstage"

IsoTek EV03 Premier, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013



"More space, lower noise and greater resolution... An increase in timing precision, depth of bass and a much greater sense of musical flow"

IsoTek EV03 Polaris, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013

EV03 Premier

IsoTek's most affordable power cable has at its core three 2sqmm conductors made from 99.9999% OFC (oxygen-free copper) and coated in silver to aid conductivity, with a Teflon FEP dielectric extruded over each conductor. A cotton filler is used to give the cable internal strength and reduce microphony whilst maintaining dielectric performance. The cable is terminated with high-quality 24ct gold connectors, designed and manufactured by IsoTek rather than bought off the shelf. No similarly priced power cable is constructed to such a high specification, with correspondingly impressive benefits to sound and picture quality.

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Cambridge Audio

Minx Air 200 wireless speaker

STANDALONE SPEAKERS

PROVIDE a fashionable way to enjoy music stored on portable devices (as well as desktop computers) without the apparently unacceptable clutter of a separate amp and speakers. When it comes to connections, some speakers use Apple's proprietary physical dock for mooring an iPod or other iDevice, but others such as the Minx Air 200 prefer the wireless route (albeit with analogue inputs as well).

And like the more affordable Minx Air 100 (reviewed issue 371), the Minx Air 200 is unusual in offering both AirPlay and Bluetooth, which includes the fledgling 16-bit, 44.1kHz apt-X Bluetooth transmission standard comparable with CD quality. To date, the number of phones and tablets with apt-X is relatively small, but gradually growing (HTC, Sharp, Motorola and Samsung already support it). Although iMacs are compatible with apt-X, owners of portable iDevices can use AirPlay, which also supports lossless 44.1kHz sampling, or resort to the inferior standard version of Bluetooth in the absence of a wireless network.

Internet radio also features on the Minx Air 200, with five preset stations on the body of the unit and a further five selectable via the iOS or Android app.

Delivering the goods

Available in black or white, the Minx Air 200 is hefty compared with most other wireless speakers, but it is elegantly designed, if somewhat unexciting. Technologically robust, the Minx Air 100 is limited in terms of its performance because of its size, use of a passive sub and lack of power. The Minx Air 200 looks much better equipped to deliver the sonic goods, thanks to the use of a more meaty 200W digital amplifier along with a 6.5in active subwoofer and twin 2.25in BMR drivers.

The rear panel sports a bass gain control, while Ethernet and service ports are complemented by a generic MP3 line-in and analogue



stereo phonos. The latter could see the unit used as a soundbar connected to an AV source such as a TV. In the absence of a streamed source the unit reverts to its analogue input, or can be forced to do so by pushing a button marked X on the top panel or remote. This is also the mute button for analogue sources.

While the Minx Air 100 can be an excellent performer it is rather fussy, much preferring hard-wired analogue over streamed digital sources. Not so, the Minx Air 200, which is much better equipped to extract the best out of compressed audio delivered by AirPlay or Bluetooth. The difference between the analogue line in and digital stream is negligible. Where the cheaper model struggled with Tina Turner's vocal range in *Private Dancer* the Minx Air 200 has a much more balanced tonal range, so that Tina's higher pitch screams are neither shrill, thin nor seemingly on the bright side. The active bass blends brilliantly too, so that the overall effect is meaty and emotional, yet deftly articulated, with excellent clarity across all frequencies.

The Killer's *Losing Touch* streamed over AirPlay is full of energy and requires the Lounge EQ setting to rein in an over-enthusiastic bass response. Generally, all sources benefit from choosing the most suitable of the app's various EQ modes.

The Minx Air 100 did a pretty commendable job with a FLAC of Britten's *Young Persons' Guide To The Orchestra*, but its lower registers felt under powered. The Minx Air 200 by contrast is much more satisfying, plugging the gaps so that the only criticism is the narrowness of the soundstage, an inherent flaw of single unit 2.1 systems.

Stream dream

Also pleasing is how well the Minx Air 200 does with an MP3 rip of the same piece when streamed over AirPlay. The percussion retains its clarity, while the strings are as open and warm as the CD version. As the brass section kicks in and the strings carry the recording to a *forte crescendo* the piece remains a comfortable listen, requiring no volume adjustment to compensate for over emphasis on any particular part of the register.

The internet radio feature is well executed, but choosing higher bit-rate stations is recommended. Classic FM at 128kbps for example has an obvious lack of dynamic range compared with the 320kbps BBC Radio 3.

Overall, the Minx Air 200 is a beautifully refined wireless speaker, which consistently delivers regardless of whatever source you care to throw at it. **AJ**

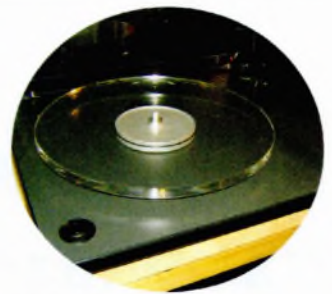
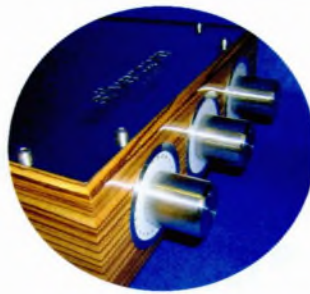
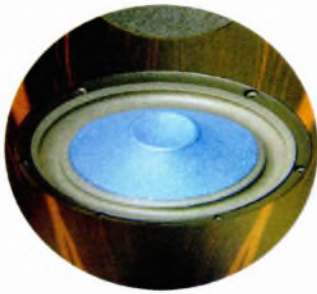
DETAILS

PRICE
£430

WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.com

OUR VERDICT





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"...Graham Slee's tiny mono power amps were also on show, which made a very interesting comparison. Despite the EC amps being several times more powerful, the Sles lost no sense of energy and dynamism."

[Hi-Fi+ Dublin High-End 2012]

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Furutech

ADL H118/iHP-35 headphones

ONLY IF YOU'VE been in a cave for the past few years would it not have come to your attention that headphones have become the new iPod. By this, I mean that the coolest gadget *de nos jours* is no longer a small white iDevice you can show off to your friends, because they've all got one, too. Instead, it is now a large pair of earspeakers that earns you bar room bragging rights – headphones are suddenly all the rage and hi-fi manufacturers haven't been slow to respond.

Alpha Design Labs (ADL to you an I) is a relatively new Japanese brand from cable specialist Furutech. In its short time on the planet, it has specialised in small music playing gadgets, and headphones have played a big part. So it's no surprise that the company now has its very own set of cans, complete with an interesting cable upgrade option to boot. The phones themselves will set you back £225, with a 1.3m iHP-35 upgrade lead costing £75 and a 3m lead £100. All in all, the top spec of the H118 comes in at a not inconsiderable £325.

Quality feel

At this price, it ought to be good, and certainly the quality feels right, as you'd expect from a premium Japanese product. It's a closed-back design, meaning it seals out most of the outside sound – this makes it ideal for noisy outdoor use (although obviously don't use where it could put you in peril!), and many audiophiles believe this to be more desirable in terms of sonics, too. Basically in an enclosed space, the bass can be controlled better and this often results in a tight, propulsive bottom end.

The transducers themselves are 40mm high-resolution extra-large high-flux neodymium drivers, engineered to keep ultra-high frequencies in phase. The voice coils are made with copper-coated special aluminium alloy wire, said to be very lightweight to improve transient response. The stock wire comes with a non-magnetic Furutech rhodium-plated stereo



(Alpha) mini XLR socket, and there's a 3m cable and a gold-plated 3.5mm-to-6.3mm adapter.

The ADLs are certainly a firm fit, lacking the luxuriousness of the similarly priced Philips Fidelio X1/00, for example. But a little fiddling with the adjusters and moving around, and you soon get them feeling comfier. Even correctly placed, some will find them less than a sumptuous wearing experience – think more in terms of firm German car seats than French sofa-style ones! They're certainly not uncomfortable, and indeed they seem to do better over extended wear periods than many, but you'll never forget you're wearing them.

Keeping it clean

These cans have a satisfyingly clean, 'studio' sort of sound that's devoid of any sonic nasties sometimes found on hi-fi headphones. Treble isn't in any way bright or fizzy, the H118s rendering the ride cymbals on Caravan's *Nine Feet Underground* with precision and poise. The midband integrates nicely with this and is detailed and spacious without being overly clinical. It flows along nicely, these headphones refusing to deconstruct the music excessively,

as some can. Bass is decently extended and generally decently tight, although there's a slight warmth in the upper bass/lower midband that gives bass guitars and left-handed piano work an extra shove, making lower frequencies more direct and engaging. It's certainly not an altogether unpleasant experience, although open-backed designs such as the Sennheiser HD650 are a little more even. That said, those hipsters listening to Kanye West on their Beats by Dr Dre headphones will still find the ADL H118s far too wimpishly neutral!

The upgrade lead brings a useful improvement in sound quality, although the extra £100 takes the package into some pretty tough territory. If you're the owner of stock 118s, then you'll really appreciate the extra midband clarity, treble shimmer and bass grip, but if you're contemplating buying the upgrade lead with a new pair of 118s, then you might like to hear the Audio Technica ATH-A900X, which is stiff competition at £340. These are even more detailed and open, albeit a good bit bigger and far less suited to music on the move. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£325

CONTACT
01276 501392

WEBSITE
soundfoundations.
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OUR VERDICT



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Steve Dickenson, Hi Fi Plus 2010

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Noel Keywood, Editor, HiFi World 2012

"A certain magic when it comes to absolute sound quality"

Jimmy Hughes, Hi Fi Choice 2012

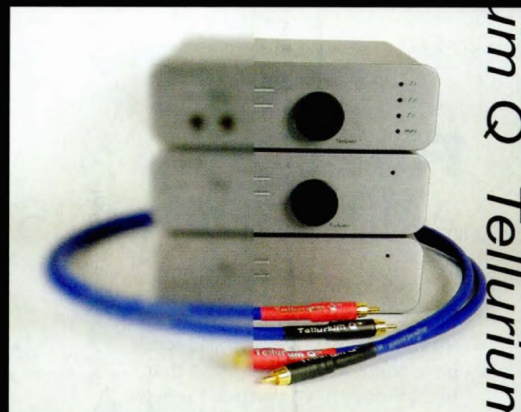
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Paul Rigby, HiFi World 2012



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Audio Origami Stylus Cleaning Magnifier and Brush Kit

LIKE MANY GREAT products – this is a very simple solution to the problem of cleaning a stylus. This handy little kit from Audio Origami consists of a brush containing a tight matrix of vertical carbon fibre bristles designed to remove dirt and deposits from your stylus. However, the guesswork of exactly where to place the brush is eliminated because an illuminated magnifier is also provided so you can actually see what you are doing! All this for a total cost of under £18.

The 21mm diameter magnifier has 30x magnification, which is perfect for viewing the stylus tip and cantilever without giving too much magnification that would make it difficult to keep it stable while you are working. Not only that, the

magnifier incorporates a white LED that is positioned to illuminate the stylus during use. The lens is enclosed in a protective case and the LED is switched on when the lens is pulled out from the sleeve. The power for the LED is supplied by three LR1130 replaceable 1.5V alkaline batteries, which pleasingly are included with the magnifier.

Clean up your act

To clean your stylus, you hold the magnifier in one hand and the brush in the other. While viewing the stylus through the magnifier, move the tip of the brush gently under your cartridge from the back to the front. Similarly, any accumulated 'fur' can be cleaned from the cantilever and from the cartridge underside in the same



manner. The light from the magnifier is more than adequate to illuminate the stylus tip, cantilever and cartridge body. As you can actually see what you're doing, you are far less likely to risk damaging your stylus or cantilever in the process. Although they are available separately, given the combined cost of both items, it is a bit of a 'no brainer'! **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
Magnifier: £8
Brush £10

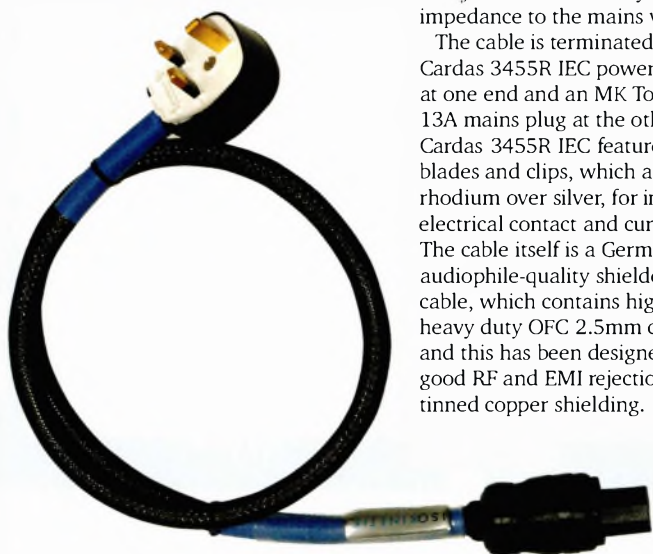
WEBSITE
audioorigami.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



ISOkinetik Melody Audiophile mains cable

ANOTHER MAINS LEAD to join the ranks of audiophile mains cables on the market is the Melody, which is the latest addition to ISOkinetik's growing range of cables. It is a well-made and solidly constructed lead, 1m in length and fitted with an IEC connector.



With all the rubbish generated by electrical equipment in the house that is picked up by the mains wiring, anything you can do to prevent injecting this into the audio chain has got to be a good idea. A high-quality mains lead can help as it is designed to reject this noise and yet offer a low impedance to the mains voltage.

The cable is terminated with a Cardas 3455R IEC power connector at one end and an MK Toughplug 13A mains plug at the other. The Cardas 3455R IEC features copper blades and clips, which are plated with rhodium over silver, for improved electrical contact and current transfer. The cable itself is a German audiophile-quality shielded copper cable, which contains high-quality heavy duty OFC 2.5mm conductors and this has been designed to offer good RF and EMI rejection due to its tinned copper shielding.



DETAILS

PRICE
£100
CONTACT
0208 2418890
WEBSITE
isokinetik.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



I test the cable on several pieces of audio equipment using it with my valve CD player, the power supply of my valve preamp and my phono amplifier, and compare it against 'kettle leads' that are supplied as standard with a range of equipment.

Running the equipment with the Melody cable results in slight, but perceptible reduction in background noise. This reduction gives rise to a clearer and cleaner sound. There is also an improvement in overall refinement across a wide range of music, together with a discernible ease in the way the music is reproduced compared with a standard lead. The sound is fuller and more compelling to listen to.

This is an excellent value upgrade for those standard mains leads supplied with audio equipment and, therefore, comes very highly recommended. **NR**

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Russ Andrews

HC-2 headphone cable

IT NEVER CEASES to amaze me what a difference a cable makes to an audio system. Mains cables, interconnect cables and loudspeaker cables can all have a profound effect on sound quality. The headphone cable is often overlooked in the quest for audio nirvana and many cables supplied with headphones are often designed around comfort and convenience, rather than audio quality. Flexibility, resilience and indeed appearance are of primary concern and while all these things are important, the resultant cable may not maximise the headphone's potential. I was, therefore, excited to hear about Russ Andrews' HC-2 headphone cable.

The HC-2 is a new and improved version of the HC-1 cable for Sennheiser headphones and is compatible with the HD 600/650, HD 265, HD 414 Classic, HD 525, HD 535, HD 545, HD 565, HD 565 II and HD 580 ranges. The HC-2 uses a different, heavier-gauge woven Kimber Kable to the HC-1 and, according to the manufacturers, this produces better sound quality. The HC-2 uses Kimber's unique GyroQuadratic braid VariStrand geometry and employs four GQTCSS Hyper-pure copper conductors. Improvements have also been made to enhance the design and robustness of the Russ Andrews custom-made plugs.

The original upgrade cable was only available in a 2m length (the original cable supplied with the Sennheiser headphones is 3m long). The new HC-2 is available in lengths from 2m up to 5m and can be fitted with either a Neutrik 6.3mm jack or 3.5mm stereo jack plug.

Persuasive action

The first job is to remove the stock cable from my Sennheiser HD 580 headphones. This is not as easy as it might seem as the plugs are a very tight fit in the sockets and it takes a bit of persuasion to get them free without twisting them, which can damage the sockets. Russ Andrews warns that the Sennheiser sockets are not designed for repeated



plugging and unplugging of the cable, so this should not be done more often than is absolutely necessary. The plugs on the HC-2 are colour-coded with a red and blue dot to indicate the right and left channels. The plugs are inserted with the dots on the inside (nearest to your head). Again, they take quite a bit of coaxing in order to plug them in properly.

Take the strain

The next job is to slip on a supplied lanyard, which is designed to support the headphone cable so that no strain is put on the connection between the cable and the headphones. A ring on the lanyard is slipped over the jack plug and slid to the moulded 'Y' piece. Finally, the lanyard is placed over your head and round the neck and the length is adjusted for comfort with a toggle.

As with any new cable, it is important to run it in before attempting any listening tests. I accomplish this by connecting the headphones to a radio and leaving it running for over 10 hours. I then slip the headphones on to listen.

The first thing to say is that the headphones with the HC-2 fitted are very comfortable to wear. Although the Kimber Kable is not as flexible as the original stock Sennheiser cable, the lanyard system more than makes up for this. However, I would have

happily put up with a more awkward design to have the sonic benefits that I hear. The lanyard actually takes all the strain and weight of the cable away from your ears. This is particularly helpful when one inadvertently stands on the cable while moving around, which used to result in my ears getting pulled!

Sonically, the first thing that hits me is a huge improvement in clarity, especially noticeable with the string section of a full orchestra. Previously, these headphones have always sounded a bit raspy and I have attributed that to the headphones – not so! With the HC-2s fitted, the harshness completely vanishes. It is as though I am listening to a completely different set of headphones! Other improvements are reflected in considerably better imaging and a three-dimensionality to the sound. The bass is fuller with far greater realism. All the intimacy of headphone listening is there, but the sound no longer seems to be constrained between my ears! The sound stage is vastly improved, not only from left and right but also front and back.

I really can't find anything negative to say about this cable upgrade. It offers huge improvements and represents, in my humble opinion, excellent value for money. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£169 for 2m
CONTACT
01539 797300
WEBSITE
russandrews.com

OUR VERDICT



What's your room got in common with a jet engine?

Reactions of listeners?
"Wow" and "That's AMAZING"
– heard at the Bristol Show

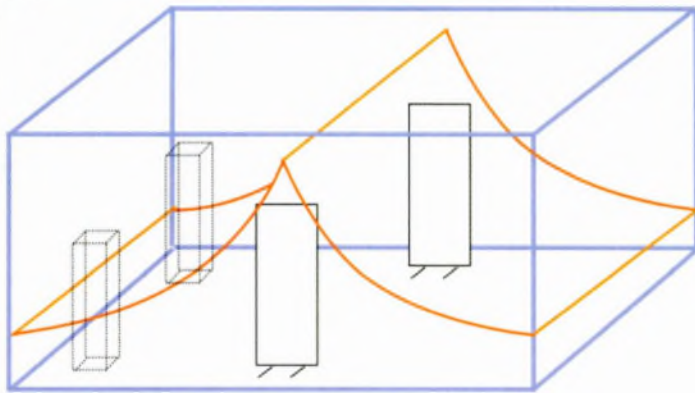
Both cause a lot of unwanted noise – but they're treatable with thousands of carefully calculated holes.

In the Airbus jet engine the front compressor noise is cut down with a special micro-perforated lining for the air intake.

In your listening room the **sound waves** that slop from end to end, and side to side – like the water in a fish tank that's being moved – can be treated in a similar way.

How does that matter? It matters because that unwanted air movement interferes with and **modulates** the music signal. An amazing amount of fine detail is annihilated.

The room is killing off the information you have paid so much to retrieve.



*Air movement reaches peak **velocity** in the middle of the room (only end-to-end shown here) where the panels are most effective*

In effect you are propagating "new" music signals into "old" air. Think of the interference between fresh waves that break on a beach and meet the previous retreating wave.

The solution When you energise the room with a music signal thousands of carefully-calculated micro-perforations in the **LeadingEdge** panels create turbulence as the air, slopping to and fro between walls, passes over their surfaces.

We hear air *pressure* changes as excess bass at the room boundaries, where the air is at zero *particle velocity* and maximum pressure change. It reaches maximum velocity (and zero pressure change!) in the centre of the room where the perforations create **aerodynamic drag** and the panels absorb this velocity energy into an internal honeycomb.

This principle of creating aerodynamic drag, that removes unwanted energy *across the spectrum*, is far more effective than using conventional foam-filled panels that work only at narrow frequency bands.

Significantly, *drag increases with the square of the velocity – when the velocity doubles, the drag increases four times!*

In this way, the LeadingEdge panels are "reactive" – the more unwanted energy bouncing round the room, the more effective they become.

Visitors to our room at the Bristol Show earlier this year were truly astonished as we played music and first covered then uncovered the panels.

There were spontaneous reactions like "Wow" and "That's amazing!"

Panels are available in different sizes and three standard finishes: Cherry, White, and Light Oak though almost any finish can be ordered to match décor.

But you say, "I couldn't possibly fit those into my living room." Perhaps not free-standing ones but had you considered they can be wall-mounted and become part of the room design, even a feature with a beautiful, rich veneer finish?

An ideal solution is to place panels on the ceiling, where they absorb energy from all directions. In this room with 60% glass windows and hardwood floors the panels are a feature, with recessed lighting. The result is a quiet, comfortable room despite all those hard surfaces.



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Loudspeakers: Avalon, Gamut, Kawero!, NEAT, Totem. Cables: Chord Co., DNМ, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, VertexAQ.
Mains: Aletheia, Vertex AQ. Supports: Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi-Fi Racks, LeadingEdge, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ

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Epiphany Acoustics

E-DAC 24-Bit Miniature USB DAC



WITH A Highbrow brand name like Epiphany you might be forgiven for thinking that you'll need to shell out a considerable amount of hard-earned cash on one of the brand's hi-fi components. Not so! The accessory brand, Epiphany Acoustics – to use its full name – is a recent newcomer to the hi-fi industry and prides itself on taking something of a fresh approach to the manufacture and design of its high-performance hi-fi products.

We first heard of the Epiphany Acoustics brand with the introduction of the EHP-02 portable headphone amplifier, reviewed back in the August 2012 issue. It was based on a DIY design by blogger NwAvGuy, who set out to make something superior to the popular, but often considered flawed, headphone amplifier design from fellow internet blogger, CMoy.

Like the EHP-02, the E-DAC is based on a design by NwAvGuy and is a remarkably compact and neat proposition housed in an aluminium enclosure with customised front and rear panels.

It fits neatly in the palm of a hand, measuring just 64 x 20 x 54mm (WxHxD), and is extremely portable and lightweight at just 74g. It's not much to look at, but the brushed casework carries USB-Mini-B input for power and digital audio connectivity from your laptop. Analogue line outputs are provided via a 3.5mm jack on the front and RCA sockets on the back.

Keeping it simple

Setting up the E-DAC is pretty straightforward. Simply connect the supplied cable to the USB-Mini-B on the unit and the other end to the USB port on your computer. It's compatible with Mac, Windows and Linux-based operating systems, but you'll need to make sure you select the option identified as ODAC from the audio output choices in your computer setup menus – this is the name given to the Epiphany's internal digital-to-analogue convertor by developer, NwAvGuy. Then simply connect your chosen



analogue output from the front or the back of the E-DAC to your amplifier, and you're ready to listen.

The E-DAC supports 16-bit and 24-bit sample rates at 44.1kHz, 48kHz and 96kHz. The USB power supply is filtered to ensure that noise is practically non-existent from the USB connection. It uses an on board crystal-controlled oscillator to improve overall performance and is not clocked by either the USB port or computer.

Connecting the Epiphany E-DAC between my MacBook and stereo hi-fi amplifier has an immediate effect on the sound quality output from my iTunes library. Tracks instantly sound more transparent and fuller than I have heard them before, with noticeable improvements to the overall definition across the whole frequency range.

Even though the majority of the material is compressed 256kbps music files, the Epiphany presents a considerable step up in sound quality, and one that enables me to feel as though I am listening into the track, while highlighting subtle elements in the mix that were previously hidden behind a veil of mushiness. The insight to the soundstage is so much more clearly defined too, creating a tangible sense of placement with the mix that gives more space and air to vocals and instruments with pinpoint accuracy.

Female vocalists ranging from Joni Mitchell to Ellie Goulding are handled

with aplomb. Joni's fairly thin sounding mix of *Big Yellow Taxi* is well conveyed through the E-DAC and without any sense of nasality or edginess. Ellie's *Explosions* is similarly well portrayed, even with the close mic recording the harder edged vocals and ethereal backing is nicely presented and considerably easier to listen to at louder volume levels, thanks to the Epiphany's smoothly handled presentation.

Feeling lucky, punk?

Bass is tidier and better defined too, with Daft Punk's excellent *Get Lucky* demonstrating a real sense of timing and pace that's very engaging. An Apple Lossless 24/96 download of Bob Marley's *Could You Be Loved* places the backing singers perfectly in the mix, and you get a real sense of their vocal being more softly sung than I realised before. Bass and rhythm are greatly improved too, giving the track even more infectious levels of pace and energy.

This little black Epiphany box successfully turns computer music into a considerably more enjoyable listening experience. Tracks seem to be somehow tidier and it makes more sense of compressed audio formats, presenting them in an easier-on-the-ear and more enjoyable way. The E-DAC makes a significant step up in the transparency of sound from computer audio, and is a hard device to fault at the £100 asking price. **LD**

DETAILS

PRICE
£100
WEBSITE
epiphany-acoustics.co.uk

OUR VERDICT





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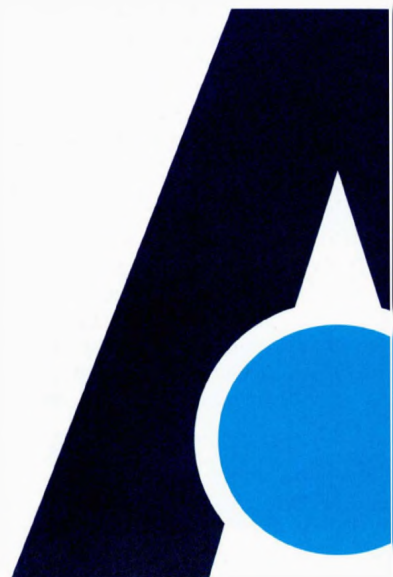


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*HiFi Choice,
May 2013*

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QuteControl for OSX

When I originally reviewed the Naim UnitiLite, I did cast around for a Mac-based control software and came up with QuteControl. One would think that this would be capable of controlling more than the UnitiQute, but alas, no joy at that time.

One of the joys of using apps from the Mac Application Store is that one is prompted for the availability of updates (if you're in the update utility and logged in, that is!). In this way, when test running a Uniti 2 recently I noticed that QuteControl had been patched to 1.3.1 level, claiming 'improved support for NDX and similar devices'.

Lo and behold, QuteControl now appears to be working for me. Developer Thomas Bauer has cleverly reverse engineered the core Naim functionality, which gives you full control including volume and mute, displays basic artwork and allows switching between inputs and modes such as iRadio.

The only downside is that Thomas has yet to crack auto-detecting the Naim device on your network, meaning that you have to enter its IP address. Ironically for me, with a constantly changing DHCP address, this means going to n-stream on the iPad to check what address the name is on – defeating the point of wanting to use the Mac for control if the iPad isn't to hand!

For Mac-using, Naim streamer owners this affordable app should be a no-brainer. Yes, it is a bit rudimentary, but Thomas has done a great job in getting it together and obviously plans to keep it current whenever he is able. Drop him a line if you're concerned about support for your particular kit. **PC**

► DETAILS

PRICE: £1.99

WEBSITE:
FREERIDE
CODING.COM/
SUPPORT/

OUR VERDICT

★★★★☆

DOWNLOAD



Delicious Library 3 for OSX

Will Shipley from Delicious Monster is a bit of a legend in Mac coding circles. Talented and opinionated, his commercial front is a single-product company using its ingenious Delicious Library software to demonstrate the very latest capabilities of each successive Mac OS.

I last used Delicious Library 2 about five years ago – Will has spent all the intervening time coming up with version 3. Is it worth the wait? Delicious Library is always a fantastic way of keeping inventory of your physical media collections – not just music, it also includes books and other tech items. Its primary modus operandi is to use your Mac's iSight camera to scan barcoded items, and v3 has extended support from USB to Bluetooth and notably iPhone scanning.

The new version also adds social aspects, and tightens the existing integration with Amazon – it's always great to discover what people over there on the marketplace 'thought' your treasured items would be worth (does anyone ever really pay these prices?!). There is now a totaliser screen – if only I'd had this at prime credit crunch time it would have been hilarious to have been able to see all of my 'stock' plummet on one screen!

For existing users such as myself, the transition to a Mac Application Store model is something of a double-edged sword. The break from direct sales means that there is no feasible paid upgrade mechanism, so the price has basically been halved in order to make it attractive to all. Not everyone will feel the need to move from version 2, but the uninitiated should download a trial from Will's site – it can be very compelling indeed! **PC**

► DETAILS

PRICE: £17.49

WEBSITE:
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OUR VERDICT

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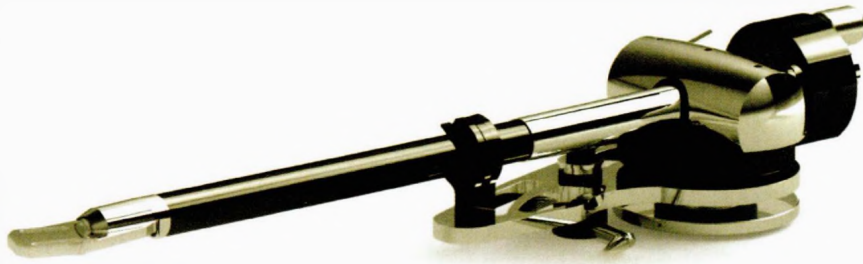


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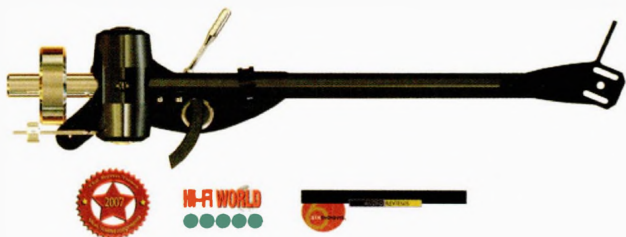


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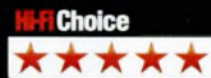
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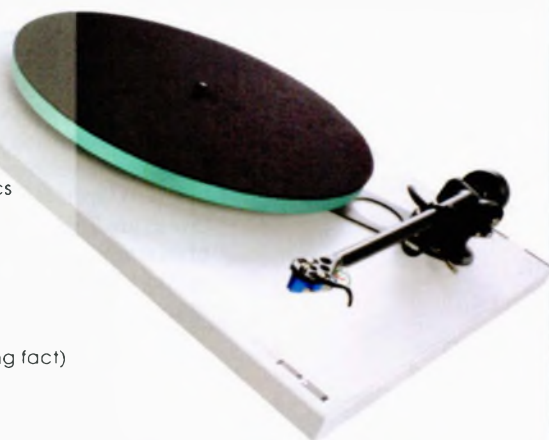


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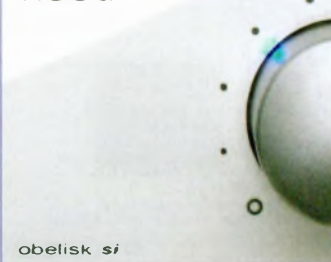


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WE HEAR...

TWO IAG BRANDS HAVE NEW PRODUCTS COMING. First is the Mission M-Cube, which is a cute-looking cubist loudspeaker – it gets an update to M-Cube 3 status to offer “great looks, tiny speakers, powerful and engaging sound”, a little bird tells us. Meanwhile Quad has a product that sports wireless signal transmission via apt-X Bluetooth, in addition to the usual high-quality wired connections. Watch this space for more info in an upcoming issue!

CHORD COMPANY'S CABLE RANGE GETS A TWEAK with the new VEE 3 series. Starting from £55, the British-made Crimson, Cobra and Chameleon cables have been improved to include the new VEE 3 RCA plug. The Crimson interconnect gains new heavy-gauge conductors, the Cobra switches to silver-plated conductors, while the new Chameleon cable gets PTFE insulation and conductors.

DEBUTED AT JANUARY'S CES, MCINTOSH'S NEW MT5 TURNTABLE is the company's 'affordable' offering, claiming much of the performance of the flagship MT10, but for £7,495. It features a silicon-acrylic platter, custom Dural-aluminium tonearm and a Sumiko Blue Point 2 cartridge. Factory adjusted, the new deck comes ready to play straight out of the box.

ARCAM'S NEW £400 irDAC OFFERS INFRA-RED REMOTE CONTROL that works with PC, Mac and Apple iDevices via the HID (Human interface device) control. It also sports special isolation of digital and analogue stages, ultra-low noise power supplies as well as a direct coupled signal path, a Burr Brown 1796 DAC chip, asynchronous USB and a direct iPod input.

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 61 AUGUST 1988

“The way we listen to music in the car is probably less intense, less critical and even perhaps more relaxed than the domestic hi-fi experience,” wrote Jason Kennedy as – in a departure from the norm – he hit the road to check out the best car stereos to find out if there's any value in replacing your factory-fitted Motorola with something costing as much as a good budget amplifier. The verdict on the cassette decks (CD was yet to make the jump), was that they “did display certain consistencies, the most obvious being a tendency towards bass overkill”, as the Goodmans offering scored a best buy, while models from Philips, Pioneer, Alpine, Clarion and Sansui were recommended. Boy racers everywhere took note and bass emanated from Ford Fiestas up and down the country.

In the music world, a diminutive Australian hit the pop charts with her soulless version of *The Locomotion* and the world was introduced to Kylie Minogue. While across the pond in America, the loonies took over the asylum as George Bush and Dan Quayle stepped into the White House.



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 180 AUGUST 1998

“Not yet familiar with the initials DVD? You will be.” wrote editor Stan Vincent. According to those in the know, this new format would take over the world and the letters would grow to be as common as BBC, ITV and CD.

But what of audio? In an effort to discover if this new-fangled DVD would be any good with sound, Alvin Gold tested six DVD decks to see how they compare. The final verdict? “The broad consensus of the panel testers was that it (DVD) wasn't always the nicest sounding unit and often sounded lumpy and excessive at low frequencies, with a sibilant, bright and messy-sounding treble.” In the end, the Denon DVD-3000 just sneaked it over Panasonic's DVD-A350 – both a snip at £700.

Outside of the world of hi-fi, the pop charts conclusively proved 1998 to be a year devoid of taste and reason as the number one spot for the month was dominated by the abominations that were The Spice Girls and Boyzone. Meanwhile the bombing of American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya that killed 224 people are linked to an upstart terrorist by the name of Osama Bin Laden.



DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month **Adam Show-Cotterill**, from Audio Partnership chooses four of his favourite long players...



FREE - FIRE AND WATER

My favourite guitar player and vocalist of all time together in the same band. What's not to like? The poetic beauty of *Oh I Wept* shows Paul Kossoff at his best.



UFO - STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT

I'd have preferred a studio album, but I need these tracks! I had tickets to see Schenker's final tour with UFO and couldn't go due to a new job!



CRY OF LOVE - BROTHER

A fresh US act that came along in 1992 at a time there was a complete dearth of classic rock. You won't have heard of it, but you won't be disappointed.



THE TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT - PRIDE EP

A band so new they haven't released a full album yet, but heavily influenced by Free and The Black Crowes so right up my street. I can't stop playing this at the moment.

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

EDITORIAL TEAM

Editor Lee Dunkley
Production Editor Jake Day-Williams
Art Editor Emily Hammond, Carl Fleischer

CONTRIBUTORS

Simon Berkovitch, Patrick Cleasby, James Hughes, Tim Jarman, Adrian Justins, Jason Kennedy, Paul Miller, Dave Oliver, David Price, Neville Roberts, Ed Selley, Andrew Simpson, Malcolm Steward, Nigel Williamson

ADVERTISING

Senior Advertising Executive Tim Lees
Tel: 01689 869853
Email: tim.lees@hifichoice.co.uk

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions Sarah Pradhan & Kate Scott
UK - New, Renewals & Enquiries
Tel: 08456 777 807
Email: mytimemedia@subscriptions.co.uk
USA & CANADA - New, Renewals & Enquiries
Tel: (001) 877 363 1310
Email: expressmag@expressmag.com
REST OF WORLD - New, Renewals & Enquiries
Tel: +44 (0) 1689 869896

BACK ISSUES & BINDERS

Tel: 0844 848 8822
From outside the UK: +44 (0) 2476 32234
Email: customer.services@myhobbystore.com
Website: www.myhobbystore.co.uk

MANAGEMENT TEAM

Group Editor Paul Miller
Group Art Editor John Rook
Group Sales Manager Joanna Holmes
Chief Executive Owen Davies
Chairman Peter Harkness
Published by MyTimeMedia Ltd
Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green,
Orpington, Kent, BR6 6BG
Phone: 0844 412 2262
From outside the UK: +44 (0) 1689 869840
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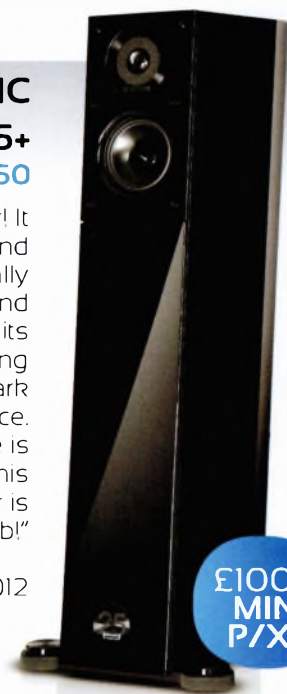
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