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Denon deluxe
Plush AH-D600 cans for sumptuous music on the go



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

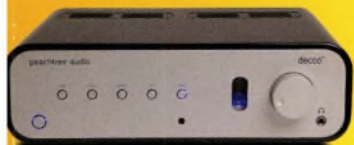
December 2013

Issue No. 378

Superstars

Six fabulous floorstanders raise the roof!

RECORD STORE REVIVAL
Why vinyl still matters



One for all
Peachtree Audio:
hybrid amp & DAC

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PRODUCTS ON TEST:
Chord, Dali, Musical Fidelity, Ruark, Tannoy and van den Hul

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12



Arcam DAC
Latest rSeries box - great flexibility, sound and price



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Hi-Fi World, July 2013

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www.kef.com/LS50



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INNOVATORS IN SOUND



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BADGES EXPLAINED

▶ OUR AWARDS

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|  |  |  |
| 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! |



Loudspeakers are by far the most popular product in the hi-fi market, with manufacturers producing an abundance of models in varying shapes and sizes catering for specific requirements and tastes. Indeed, there are so many new models vying for your attention that we could easily fill these pages with

nothing but loudspeaker reviews each issue!

The speaker market is booming, which is thanks in some part to the increase in the number of new models aimed at networked wi-fi and Bluetooth music streaming from smartphones, tablets and PCs. It's an area that has seen a healthy amount of growth this year, but the hi-fi loudspeaker market is also rather buoyant with new models appearing in all manner of shapes and sizes, from mini-sized models like the Monitor Audio Radius 90, reviewed on page 16, all the way through to floorstanding loudspeakers such as the six fighting it out in our Group Test this month – starting on page 24 – and standmount loudspeakers of varying sizes in-between.

Why so many models? As any hi-fi enthusiast knows, the pair of loudspeakers you choose to partner with your electronics will be the biggest influence on the sound of your hi-fi system – from its frequency capabilities; sonic signature; timing and stereo imaging; to the load they apply on an amplifier. Your choice of loudspeaker is the single most important consideration, affecting the performance of any setup, and with so many to choose from there's bound to be a perfect one out there for you.

Don't forget The Hi-Fi Show at Windsor running from 25th to 26th October. The inaugural event is the perfect place to hear truly great hi-fi – see page 13 for more info.

Lee Dunkley Editor



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

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"The Chord treads a careful line, thinking discretion to be the better part of valour."

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Little Minx

Cambridge Audio introduces the Minx Xi, a flexible streaming digital music system that promises to play it all...

PRICE: £600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0333 900 0093 **WEB:** CAMBRIDGEAUDIO.COM

MULTI-FORMAT MUSIC systems are on the rise, and the new Minx Xi launched by London-based home entertainment specialist, Cambridge Audio, is a new streaming digital music system with the flexibility to connect to a multitude of music devices. The Minx Xi has a built-in Class AB amplifier that claims to deliver a power output of 40W RMS into 8 ohms and 55W RMS into

4 ohms – which should be more than sufficient to drive a decent choice of add-on loudspeakers. System control is via the supplied remote or the free Stream Magic app – available for both iOS and Android devices.

Bluetooth wireless connectivity will be top of the list for music fans wanting to stream content from a smartphone, tablet or computer and the Minx Xi claims support for both

A2DP and aptX-compatible devices, offering the highest possible sound quality the short-range wireless connection format can provide.

Cambridge Audio has also thought to keep audiophiles happy with a Wolfson 24-bit/96kHz DAC onboard and wireless access to music stored on a UPnP NAS drive, PC or Mac and support for hi-res WAV and FLAC file formats up to 24/96 hi-res as well as



Apple Lossless, MP3, AAC, OGG Vorbis and 88.2kHz music files, the maker claims. There's also an Ethernet port for those who prefer wired network streaming hookup.

Internet radio stations can be accessed plus there's built-in support for streaming services that include BBC iPlayer Radio, Pandora and Rhapsody, the makers says.

As well as its wireless and Ethernet connectivity, the Minx Xi handles traditional analogue sources via two RCA inputs at the back as well as a front panel-mounted 3.5mm jack designated for MP3 sources. Toslink optical and S/PDIF coaxial inputs are on hand for digital source inputs, and there are two device-charging USBs (one on the front). There's a 3.5mm headphone socket on the front panel, and the subwoofer input turns the Minx Xi into a compact and stylish 2.1 system, Cambridge Audio says.

Built in a rigid casework in either high gloss black or white finishes, the Cambridge Audio Minx Xi is available now through Richer Sounds stores nationwide.



Cambridge Audio has also thought to keep audiophiles happy with a Wolfson 24-bit/96kHz DAC onboard



COMMENT

RIP FOR DOLBY DOUBLE D

September 12 was a sad day as a man whose innovations have touched just about everyone shunted off of this mortal coil.

We speak, of course, of Ray Dolby, the inventor of the world's most popular noise reduction system. Whether you used the Dolby buttons on your cassette recorder or sat down to watch movies like *Star Wars* in Dolby Stereo, his influence over the last 40 years has been immense.

Dolby's work in the film industry set the standard as his Dolby A noise-reduction system was widely adopted by cinemas up and down the country, following George Lucas' aforementioned sci-fi epic.

But for us, it'll be Ray's Dolby B noise-reduction technology that sticks in the memory. In simple terms the system applied a pre-emphasis to audio recordings, boosting the quieter parts of the performance and then reversing the process during playback to eliminate hiss.

Born in Portland Oregon in 1933, Dolby was always interested in music, having played the clarinet and piano from a young age. But it was the technology of music and why things sounded the way they did that really fascinated him and he grew up taking things apart, before setting up a firm selling Dolby equipment to recording studios in London in 1965.

The first big break came when Decca Records ordered nine Dolby A-301 professional noise reduction units at £700 each and the firm promptly moved to California after the birth of Dolby's first son.

Being close to Hollywood turned out to be an unwitting masterstroke and it wasn't long before Dolby Laboratories became as synonymous with movies as the 20th Century Fox logo. Jump forward to the current day and the success of Dolby – a billionaire – is clear to see. Having brought the world Dolby HX/HX-Pro (Headroom eXtension), the Dolby SR (Spectral Recording) system, Dolby Digital Surround EX and the Dolby AC-3 and True HD codecs, he also won two Oscars, an honorary OBE and has a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

Perhaps the last word should go to the great man: "I would have liked to have been in a position to make a better steam engine or to invent the first internal combustion engine... I just regret that I was born in a time when most of those mechanical problems had already been solved."



B&W adds P7 headphones

Bowers & Wilkins launches its first over-ear hi-fi cans with clever folding design

PRICE: £330 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0800 2321513 **WEB:** BOWERS-WILKINS.CO.UK

WITH SPEAKER-INSPIRED DRIVE unit technology and all-encompassing ear cushions giving noise isolation with high levels of comfort, the new over-ear P7 design “allows you to lose yourself in music”, says the maker. The dual-cavity construction means that the ear pads mould to the contours of the wearer’s head and the snug fit means comfort is maintained and sound is optimised for every listener, it continues. Moving parts are constructed from brushed and stainless steel, as is the folding mechanism. The logo plates are crafted from brushed aluminium and the headband and ear pads are encased in luxuriously soft leather. Supplied with a detachable remote and mic cable for iPhones, the new P7 joins the existing P3 and P5 headphone models.



IN BRIEF

TIVOLI AUDIO ALBERGO+



● Tivoli Audio announces a new addition to its radio line up in the form of the Albergo+, a Bluetooth-equipped digital radio. The DAB, DAB+, AM, FM model is a “tech-packed, yet simple to operate clock radio” the maker says. Designed in northern Italy, where the model was conceived for the hotel market and where it got its name, the new domestic model uses the same long-throw driver as found in the respected Tivoli Audio Model One radio. The maker claims the Albergo+ is straightforward to use with simple hints to help users set alarms, and easy Bluetooth hookup. On sale in black or white costing £199. TIVOLIAUDIO.CO.UK

Yamaha network receiver

PRICE: £450 **AVAILABLE:** OCTOBER
CONTACT: 0844 811116 **WEB:** UK.YAMAHA.COM

Following the recent launch of Yamaha’s CD-S3000 and A-S3000 flagship two-channel components comes the R-N500 network receiver – a one-box solution that integrates modern hi-fi needs inside a single component at a wallet-friendly price. Launched later this month, the R-N500 is a stereo receiver and network audio player in one, housed in a retro style and well-constructed chassis.

As well as having a claimed power output of 80W into 8 ohms taking care of stereo amplification duties, the R-N500 can hook up to

AirPlay music streaming devices, and is geared to iPod, iPhone and iPad owners – Bluetooth and wi-fi connectivity options can also be added. Streaming network activities are taken care of via the Ethernet port and the R-N500 gives access to a world of internet radio stations via vTuner, as well as content stored on a NAS drive or networked computer. Compatibility with FLAC/WAV 24/192 playback is built in and there’s also an FM/AM RDS tuner.

System control is taken care of via the supplied remote control, or

the freely downloadable Yamaha NP Controller app can be used to browse through music sources on a smart device’s display and control music streaming.

As well as modern music sources the R-N500 also handles retro analogue sources and is fitted with a MM phono stage and has four line-level analogue inputs also. Two S/PDIF coaxial and two Toslink optical digital inputs, USB, a full-size headphone jack socket and a subwoofer output are also included. The R-N500 is available in silver and black finishes.





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www.dali-speakers.com



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Significantly it features the matchless Linear Drive Magnet System, which reduces distortion as never heard before.



To learn more about the EPICON series and the revolutionary SMC magnet system please visit our website: www.dali-speakers.com



KEF goes wireless

British speaker brand adds desktop speaker system

PRICE: £800 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01622 672261 **WEB:** KEF.COM/GB

LISTENING TO MUSIC stored on a computer or accessed via a smartphone or tablet device is becoming increasingly popular. KEF's new X300A Wireless is an active mini speaker system with the added bonus of wireless connectivity for streaming via Airplay and DLNA from most Apple or Android devices, the maker says. It's based on the brand's original X300A model fitted with Uni-Q drivers derived from its flagship Blade models.

There's no mention of claimed power output, but KEF tells us that the active models have

built-in dedicated Class AB amplifiers (two per speaker) – one to cater for low/mid frequencies and the other for high ones.

There are also two discreet DACs built-in capable of handling 24/96 files when using the wired USB connection. A 3.5mm stereo jack socket is included too for non wireless sources.

A Setup Wizard can be downloaded for Apple and Microsoft computer operating systems at www.kef.com. The X300A Wireless speakers are available in two contemporary finishes; Gunmetal and Linear White.

McIntosh adds a receiver!

PRICE: £7,295 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01202 911886 **WEB:** JORDANACOUSTICS.CO.UK

High-end hi-fi manufacturer McIntosh Laboratory has announced the launch of its new MA6700 integrated amplifier with built-in DAC. Ordinarily this is sufficient news, but for an additional £800 you can add an AM/FM tuner module that turns the MA6700 into a receiver with 20 station presets for each radio band.

Even without the optional tuner fitted, the MA6700 specification list reads well, with a claimed power output of 200W per channel across all impedances and 11 source inputs, including independent phono inputs to accommodate both Moving Magnet and Moving Coil cartridges.

The onboard DAC looks set to handle high-resolution sources up to 32-bit/192kHz, and McIntosh tells us that its advanced digital engine offers an assignable coaxial and optical input, plus a dedicated asynchronous USB 2.0 input for computer sources.

Also onboard is the maker's High Drive headphone amplifier, which claims to offer increased gain and output power, optimising it for all headphone types.

Weighing in at 34kg, the MA6700 boasts a distinctively McIntosh look and build, and is on sale now.



IN BRIEF

LUXURY PHONES IN UK



● **Distributor**
Decent Audio has added the Audeze LCD-3 headphone to its portfolio.

New to UK shores, the Audeze (pronounced Odyssey) headphones feature planar magnetic drive units that are a departure from the traditional cone or dome systems used in the majority of headphones, says the US maker. Unlike conventional drive units, a planar magnetic diaphragm has a printed voice-coil spread across its surface. When the voice coil is energised with an audio signal, it interacts with the magnetic field and produces an electromagnetic force that moves the diaphragm. The Audeze LCD-3s cost £1,725. To hear them visit:

DECENTAUDIO.CO.UK

NAD VISO 1AP



● NAD continues to expand its VISO product range with the latest evolution of its VISO 1 Wireless Digital Music System. The VISO 1AP adds wi-fi network capability and supports Apple's AirPlay wireless music streaming protocol. Bluetooth, including the apt-X high-fidelity codec, is also included for instant connectivity to compatible smartphones and tablets, the Canadian maker says.

Designed in association with NAD's sister company, PSB Speakers, the VISO 1AP eliminates the docking feature of the VISO 1, but adds a USB port at the rear for direct connection and charging of an iPhone or iPad. It can be wall mounted using the secure custom bracket, and is available now in white and black finishes, costing £499.

NAD ELECTRONICS.COM

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nothing less...”



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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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O'Brien Hi-fi, 60 Durham Road, West Wimbledon,
London Tel: 020 8946 1528

Progressive Audio, 2 Maryland Court, Rainham, Kent,
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Hi-Fi Show preview

Hear for yourself the cognoscenti of high-end audio



IT REALLY IS your last chance now and, depending on when you bought this magazine, you've either got a couple of days until the biggest hi-fi show of the year... or you've missed it completely! Featuring everyone that's anyone from the international hi-fi world in a series of exclusive presentations, listening demos and Q&As, it's a one-off that's not to be missed.

The Hi-Fi Show takes place in the sumptuous grounds of the Beaumont Estate in Old Windsor and there will be 13 Windsor and Wessex suites

overflowing with stunning exhibitors. Here's a small flavour of what you can expect to see during the two-day event.

Naim and Focal are teaming up in the Windsor suites to showcase a stunning system featuring the Focal Utopia Stella loudspeakers alongside 500 Series electronics from Naim. Meanwhile Absolute Sounds will be hosting a wealth of prestigious brands including Audio Research, Devialet, Krell, MartinLogan and Sonus faber to name but a few...

Highlights to look out for

A stone's throw away from the Windsor suites, the Wessex suites are home to exhibitors including Chord Electronics, Musical Fidelity, PMC and T+A.

Chord will be treating visitors to a wide selection of products from its Reference, Standard and Choral ranges alongside some smaller

Chordettesystems. Meanwhile PMC will be showing the fact 12 loudspeaker for the first time at a UK show and will also be showcasing its BB5 SE speakers. T+A also boasts another UK first in the shape of its flagship Solitaire CWT 2000SE loudspeakers, while Musical Fidelity plans to centre proceedings

around its M8 preamp and M8 700 power amps, ably assisted by its M6 CD player and M6 DAC.

Last, but no means least, are the Sandringham Suites, which will include some names less familiar to HFC readers - Hi-Fi Network, Stamford Audio, Pure Sound and BD Audio - alongside some more well-known brands including Audioquest Cables, Flamingo Audio, and Sound Foundations.

Audioquest will be presenting a series of demos to help you choose the best cables for your system, while Sound Foundations will have the full Clearaudio range alongside IsoTek, Furutech, Canor and Blue Horizon goodies



IN BRIEF



BOOK YOUR TICKETS NOW!

● Make sure that you don't miss out on the hi-fi event of the year, tickets are still on sale (just) for the UK's premier high-end audio gathering - The Hi-Fi Show at the Beaumont Estate, Old Windsor on Friday 25th and Saturday 26th October 2013.

We have a fixed visitor allocation for this event and, once fully booked, sadly, no tickets will be available on the day, so you'll need to get cracking to ensure that you don't miss out.

Tickets cost £20, or £15 for subscribers. Please call 02476 322234 now to avoid disappointment and see hifinews.co.uk/show for more details. We look forward to seeing you there!

UK EXCLUSIVES!

● If it's exclusives that you're after, this is the only place to come. Absolute Sounds in its first appearance at a UK event in a number of years will be unveiling its Constellation Performance range with Magico loudspeakers, the Tech DAS Air Force One turntable, D'Agostino Momentum pre and power amps, plus the new Devialet ADH amplifier range.

TAD will be showing its Evolution One, Reference One and CR-1 loudspeakers with C2000 DAC, C600 preamp and M600 monoblocks. Kog Audio will present the stylish Estelon loudspeakers together with a new Vitus CD player/DAC and amplifiers, while Symmetry will feature five new products from Ayre, the revised Brinkmann Balance turntable and the new Etna from Lyra.

Meanwhile there'll be a seminar from world-renowned engineer Crispin Murray on vinyl cutting and Irish singer/songwriter Eleanor McEvoy will be playing a 30-minute set and doing an audience Q&A.

HIFINEWS.CO.UK/SHOW

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IN-DEPTH MONITOR AUDIO RADIUS 90
STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER £350



Little audio dynamite

If there's one speaker that shows less is more, this is it. **David Price** reckons the new Radius 90 is the mouse that roars!

Loudspeakers come in all shapes and sizes, for better and for worse. Some folk love big boom boxes able to supply copious amounts of low frequencies, while others crave a light and airy sort of sound that focuses more on finesse than it does on visceral, flare-flapping volume. It's a simple choice, and comes down to taste in the end, and if you're the sort who is more interested in the latter approach that puts quality before quantity, then I'd respectfully suggest you audition the little boxes you see before you here.

Monitor Audio's new Radius 90 fits the latter category perfectly – indeed it epitomises it. Measuring just 125 x 198 x 140mm (wxhxd), there are few loudspeakers on sale anywhere near as diminutive. But while that has obvious consequences for bass extension, it has real positives, too. Being so small, the Radius 90 is never going to produce bass that goes down lower than Australia. However, by going down no further than Monitor Audio's claimed 80Hz, this speaker isn't going to set off the resonant modes in your room; it won't start booming and boofing in a distracting manner, and so this can never sully the sound further up.

Secondly, its mid/bass unit is so tiny that it can be mounted really close to the tweeter. This brings an advantage that speakers with bigger drivers can never enjoy; the two drive units appear much closer to the ideal of a 'point source'; when listening to them you very much get the sense of them working very well together in both the time domain and also in terms of stereo imaging.

That tiny cabinet, with just 1.5 litres of usable volume inside, comes in a choice of real wood veneer, or piano lacquer white or black (on display here) – gone is the option of silver, which the previous two incarnations

came with. The finish and construction quality of this speaker is truly excellent; it's hard to find fault in any way. Inside, a single through-bolt fixes the mid/bass driver to the back of the cabinet for extra rigidity. Give it a rap with your knuckles and you get a dull 'thunk', perfectly illustrating just how little room there is in the design for unwanted resonances. This means we're listening to the box proportionally less than an equivalently priced floorstander (or larger standmount); there is less overhang, time-smearing and other such nefarious noises.

The drive units themselves are impressive, and this is where the new

The tweeter is superb; spacious and extended, yet smooth and delicate

Radius 90 really distinguishes itself from the previous incarnation. The latest 25mm gold-coated aluminium dome C-CAM tweeter is claimed to extend to 35kHz, while the simple second-order crossover uses high grade metalised polypropylene capacitors and transitions to the bass unit at 2.8kHz. Monitor Audio claims that the high-grade air core and laminated iron core inductors give the lowest possible distortion and insertion losses. The company's Pureflow 2.5mm square-section OFC wiring is used.

The new 100mm mid/bass driver has a cast aluminium chassis for strength and rigidity and a cone that's constructed from metal – this is the key difference to the previous Radius 90HD, which employed glass-loaded engineering polymer.

Quoted sensitivity is a poor 83dB, so be aware that you'll need a punchy solid-state amplifier, putting out at

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Monitor Audio
Radius 90

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
2.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
125 x 198 x 140mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power handling: 100W
• Quoted frequency response: 80Hz–35kHz (-6dB)
• 1x 25mm C-CAM dome tweeter
• 1x 100mm C-CAM bass driver

DISTRIBUTOR
Monitor Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE
01268 740580

WEBSITE
monitoraudio.co.uk

least 40W RMS per channel if you're going to want to be able to produce realistic volume levels.

The new Radius range offers a choice of two active subwoofers, the 380 and 390, but in designer Dean Hartley's words: "We tried to ensure the R90 could be used as a full-range speaker, so we set out to get a balanced, flat frequency response". As such, the speakers can be placed on stands, and Monitor Audio makes an elegant bespoke pair that are pre-wired between terminals at the speaker mounting and at floor level through terminals mounted to the stand plinth; the top terminals neatly auto-connect with the R90 speaker terminals. If bass is felt to be limited, the speakers and stands can be rammed right against the rear wall for boundary reinforcement.

Alternatively, this is one of the few loudspeakers you can position on a bookshelf, ideally rigidly mounted. If you choose to do this, then do make sure it's a substantial one, preferably close to ear height and always Blu-tac the speakers firmly onto the shelf. Finally, there's a single point wall fixing, which works with the Monitor Audio speaker mount or any standard wall bracket. Positioned in any of

They might look small, but they pack one hell of a mighty punch



these ways, with just a small amount of toe-in, plus a decent source and amp that aren't afraid of making bass, you might be surprised by just how deep and strong the Radius 90 can sound.

Sound quality

Those unfamiliar with the Radius 90 who come into a room with a pair of them playing will often do two things; first they'll remark on how tiny they are, and then they'll ask, "But where are the main speakers?". This shows how they're able to make a sound that is almost TARDIS-like – one that totally defies their physical dimensions. They can fool the ear, leaving the listener questioning the evidence that their eyes are giving them. One reason for this is the solidity and speed and articulation of the bass; given a little rear-wall reinforcement, it comes out of its shell and shows itself to be amazingly lithe and communicative. You'll marvel at the way Bernard Edwards' breathtaking bass guitar work modulates up and down on Chic's *My Forbidden Lover*, for instance. It's so fast and fun that you forget that it doesn't have the physicality of, say, the equivalently priced, but vastly larger Q Acoustics 2050i floorstander. Better still, the long-throw mid/bass driver soaks up quite a lot of punishment before it begins to compress things; you'd never use it in lieu of a PA stack at a live gig, but in a medium-sized

The Radius 90 beams vocals and instruments out with laser-like precision

listening room it goes louder, more cleanly than you might think.

Moving up the scale, and the new Radius 90 gives a slightly faster, more searching midband than before, making vocals even more immediate, stereo imaging more explicit and depth perspective better. Played at high volume, Kate Bush's *Snowflake* is a stern test of a speaker, but the wee Monitor Audio acquits itself superbly with this superb recording, showing a richness and warmth that you might not expect from such a modest priced – and indeed sized – box. The two drive units segue way between one another seamlessly, giving a lovely, natural feel to female vocals; I'd say they're better integrated than before, as the old Radius 90HD had



There is practically no direct rival for the Radius 90, as Monitor Audio has pretty much created its own segment. So we're left comparing it with products one size up, namely the Q Acoustics Concept 20 (£350).

This has a lot more bass; indeed the whole balance of the speaker is deeper, smoother and softer – although still excellent. The Q is able to move more air more easily, so sounds a little less compressed at very high volumes and a little more 'relaxed' at lower ones. But it lacks the 'up and at 'em' sort of sound that the Radius has; its ultimate speed and transparency. The Concept 20 is a more well-rounded product, the Radius 90 is a more characterful, fun one!

a slightly softer sound to its low frequency driver than the bright, spry tweeter. The result is a lovely, all-of-a-piece feel to the music, and it's not just tonally clean and smooth, but is also very good at keeping in phase – you don't get the sense that you're listening to two drive units doing their own thing, as you can on some equivalently priced designs. This means the new Radius projects beautifully, beaming vocals and instruments out of its box with laser-like precision.

The speed of this little speaker means that it's remarkably good at throwing you off the trail. You always know it's limited in terms of its bass reproduction, but somehow you just don't dwell on it. Teenage Fanclub's *What You Do To Me* is a fine slice of singalong indie rock, and via a big floorstander has a wonderful physicality courtesy of the energetic bass guitar and drum work. Yet play it through the new Radius 90 and instead you'll find yourself drawn to the sweetness of the vocals and the raunchy, grungey guitar playing, plus the sweet, sparkly hi-hat work. Somehow, this speaker flatters to deceive, making

the music riotously good fun, emotionally affecting and powerful even – but without actually moving the same amount of air as a larger, looser speaker. The result is a slightly different experience to that of a wider range design, but no less fun – indeed the rhythmic alacrity and ability to signpost dynamic contrasts in the music is on a higher level than almost all price rivals.

It's only with classical music that you really feel these aren't quite the universal panacea that you'd hoped. Anyone who's been to a live classical concert will have experienced the visceral presence of a full orchestra; you know those heavily bowed cellos vibrating you back, that sort of thing. But the little Radius 90 simply cannot do this. What it can do – and does – with my favourite Karajan recording of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, is convey the lovely texture of the massed strings – if not the body – and also gives a wonderfully bright and airy window to the recorded acoustic. The tweeter is superb; spacious and extended yet smooth and delicate, it makes for a wonderfully open and finely etched sound. The new mid/bass unit is more detailed and faster



IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm C-CAM dome tweeter
- 2 100mm C-CAM bass driver
- 3 Upper wall-mount fixing point
- 4 Flared, profiled bass port
- 5 Lower wall-mount fixing point
- 6 Single wire speaker terminals

ON TEST

Monitor Audio specifies 83dB sensitivity for the Radius 90 – an entirely believable claim given its tiny dimensions – but our pink noise result of 84.1dB suggests that this is slightly conservative. It's a good result for a speaker this size and what's more it hasn't been achieved by giving the Radius 90 a punishingly low input impedance. The minimum modulus, 20Hz-20kHz, was 5.0 ohms at 280Hz – a bit too low, really, to claim 8 ohms nominal impedance, but nonetheless an amp-friendly result. Impedance phase angles are high enough to drop the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) to 2.6 ohms at 204Hz, but that's comfortably higher than for many modern speakers.

On-axis frequency response errors were well controlled at ± 2.9 dB and ± 3.2 dB respectively, 200Hz-20kHz, and pair matching over the same frequency range was very good at ± 0.8 dB. Despite the diminutive cabinet and fair sensitivity, bass extension was 58Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz and ultrasonic output extended to beyond 40kHz. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall evinced fast initial energy decay, but some treble resonances were visible – worse in one of the review pair than the other – but mostly well controlled except for a high-Q mode at around 7.5kHz, associated with a small glitch in the frequency response.

than before and this improves things further still. The end result is a little loudspeaker that's quite simply big audio dynamite!

Conclusion

Monitor Audio's new Radius 90 is practically a unique product on the market. Another step down in size

The Radius 90 gives a slightly faster, more searching midband than before

from speakers that are commonly perceived to be the smallest – such as the KEF C1s of this world – its diminutive dimensions actually may be a little extreme for some tastes. Many will want something that is physically bigger and less constrained low down. But by the same token, those with smaller listening rooms – which larger boxes can have a tendency to overpower – and/or

people with neighbours or family members to keep sweet, will love this little box. Yes, it loses the bottom octave – or two – of the performance, but it makes up for this in spades with a wonderfully fast, engaging and incisive sound everywhere else, and is sophisticated and seamless, too. If space is limited or you don't want your hi-fi dominating your room, this is a great speaker to try ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ | LIKE: Super-fast, fluid and fun; sophistication; size; soundstaging |
| VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ | DISLIKE: No low bass; needs a powerful solid-state amplifier |
| BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ | WESAY: Exceptionally high performance from an extremely small speaker |
| EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆ | |

OVERALL
★★★★★

Q&A

Dean Hartley

Monitor Audio chief speaker designer



DP: Why make a tiny, but expensive loudspeaker like this?

DH: About 10 years ago, we realised there was a market for a high-quality compact speaker for full-range stereo use. Consumers were buying 'shoe-box' style all-in-one systems, but couldn't find a really nicely finished, great-sounding speaker to go with them. So the Radius 90 ended up being a small two-way speaker that could be used for stereo and as part of a home theatre system.

Do you use any special tricks when you're making it?

The R90 is hand made from MDF, and fabricated in the good old-fashioned way of cabinet making. There is bracing between the tweeter and bass driver and the two driver bolts that clamp the drivers front and back. The whole internal surface is covered using a graduated density, semi-closed cell foam damping material.

Can you explain what's special about the bass driver?

The new C-CAM driver features concave cone profiles and are formed from a continuous uninterrupted dish, which ensures the centre section is as rigid as possible. The build ring provides de-coupling and so significantly reduces distortion. Motor sizes and voice coil lengths have increased to provide a more powerful driving force and increased excursion.

How about the tweeter?

The new design vents internally through a specially designed housing and around the outside of the magnet system into a rear-loading chamber. This provides a much lower resonance and better damping.

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Thanks to its upgraded 10mm Neodymium drivers and careful sound chamber tuning, the ES20 has a dynamic and refined sound signature that compares favourably to headphones many times its cost. The ES20 exhibits excellent accuracy and strong bass performance, delivering a deliciously full-bodied listening experience.

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Unique group tests

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

LOUDSPEAKER GROUP TEST

IN THE EIGHTIES, you not only needed a bunch of expensive equipment to measure loudspeakers, you also needed an anechoic chamber. That all changed when time-gated measurement techniques were introduced, allowing pseudo-anechoic measurements to be made in a normal room using a PC.

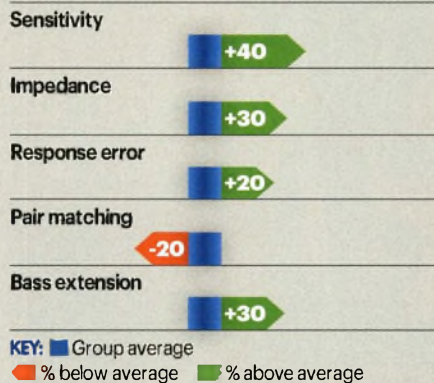
To achieve the most accurate results you need a costly, highly specified measurement microphone and post-processing software.

The measurement microphone comprises a GRAS 40BE capsule, coupled with the same company's 26CB preamplifier and 12AL power supply. Together these achieve an extraordinary frequency response, much wider than that of

most measurement microphones, specified as 4Hz-100kHz, -3dB. They feed a custom preamplifier built around the ultra-low distortion, ultra-low noise AD797 op-amp, and thereafter a carefully calibrated M-Audio Audiophile 192 soundcard.

ARTA software measures frequency responses using a periodic pink noise test signal, with dual-channel measurement removing the effects of the driving amplifier. An average of 10 consecutive measurements reduces any influence of environmental noise. LIMP software is used to measure impedance modulus and phase, via a connector box containing a high-precision series resistance.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



SENSITIVITY

A speaker's sensitivity determines how loud the music is at a given volume control setting. We measure the sound pressure level achieved at a distance of 1m on axis for a pink noise input of 2.83Vrms over the frequency range 250Hz-20kHz, averaged for the review pair.

IMPEDANCE

A speaker's impedance determines how easy it is for an amplifier to drive it - high impedance is easier, low impedance harder. We quantify this by measuring the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) - the load resistance that would cause the same peak power dissipation in a Class B amplifier's output stage as the speaker does, over the frequency range 20Hz-20kHz.

RESPONSE ERROR

To deliver a neutral tonal balance and low coloration, a speaker must give an almost flat sound pressure response versus frequency on the listening axis. We measure the difference between the highest and lowest output sound pressure level, in decibels, over the frequency range 250Hz-20kHz, using 10th-octave response smoothing.

PAIR MATCHING

In order to provide a stable stereo image and consistent tonal balance from both channels, a stereo pair of loudspeakers should have minimal disparity between their frequency responses. We measure the largest difference between the responses of the review pair, in decibels, over the frequency range 250Hz-20kHz, using 10th-octave response smoothing.

BASS EXTENSION

Few speakers maintain their output down to the lowest audible frequency (nominally 20Hz), and bass extension has usually to be traded off against sensitivity and cabinet size. We measure bass extension using the near-field technique and then apply diffraction correction using the KHF tool in LspCAD. The quoted frequency is that at which the response has fallen by 6dB ref 200Hz.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

SOURCE
Audiolab 8200CD
AMPLIFICATION
Creek Destiny
CABLES
Black Rhodium
EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS
Quadraspire

TEST MUSIC

HIGH LLAMAS
Santa Barbara,
CD



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Group**test**

FLOORSTANDING LOUSPEAKERS £1,000-£1,300

Tall stories

£1K floorstanders offer lots of speaker for the money, but does performance increase in proportion to height asks **David Price**

SOMETIME IN THE late seventies, big speakers started appearing with matching stands, to get them off the carpet or out from behind the sofa. The craze took off, and for a while, everything seemed to use them. Then in the nineties, the floorstander was born – a new range of small footprint tower speakers appeared.

Most were closely based on cheaper standmounting models; the same drivers were put in a bigger box, often a metre or so high. This made for an appealing package; thanks to the far higher volume of air their cabinets contain, these floorstanders gave deeper bass with physical scale and power that their equivalent standmounters couldn't ever hope to muster. Another advantage was they were often less compressed and more open sounding too, if done properly. Last but not least, the floorstander was invariably more efficient than the standmount equivalents, being able to

go louder with the same amount of power – a bonus to tube amp users and party animals alike.

The bigger they are...

Since then the breed has really caught on, for the aforementioned reasons. But they don't have it all their own way. Having bigger boxes means the cabinets are harder to damp, and tend to be less rigid than their pint-sized progeny; this can make for loose low frequencies and can even smear and fog the midband and treble, too. Also, they're less room-friendly than their stand-dwelling siblings; you've got a big, potentially boomy cabinet to place, and you won't be able to simply shove it into an alcove or either side of the chimney breast.

Ultimately, it's all down to how well a speaker is engineered that make it stand out from the crowd – so here are six of the best mid-priced models. ▶

ON TEST



Acoustic Energy AE 305
£1,000 p27

Based on the AE 301 standmounter that we reviewed last year, this is a well-executed British-designed floorstander. Construction quality is very high and the drive units are bespoke and carefully done.



Epos Elan 30
£1,000 p29

This British brand shot to fame in the eighties, with some great mid-price designs that sounded refined and fun. This is the latest in the company's entry-level floorstanding range and promises a lot of sound per pound.



Focal Chorus 726 V
£1,200 p31

Now allied to Naim Audio, the Focal brand is beginning to get traction in the UK. Its products are superbly put together and this floorstander is no exception. It's large too, promising a big bang for your buck!



Quad 23L Classic
£1,300 p33

Once upon a time this British brand did electrostatics only, but it has long since got into box loudspeakers and this is its largest yet. Aside from its quality engineering, it offers a level of finish that is frankly sublime.



Spendor A3
£1,295 p35

In a way, the 'runt' of the litter, this speaker is obviously smaller than the others here, and nor is it as attractively styled – with its rather nineties look. But can it deliver the super sound for which the brand is famous?



Tannoy Revolution DC6T SE
£1,000 p37

An attractive, mainstream application of the company's Dual Concentric driver technology, which always guarantees a unique sound. How does this latest mid-size floorstander fare?



Aria 900

Innovation Extraordinaire.

Focal research has led to the creation of a new breed of loudspeaker.



Flax Technology

Aria's unique speaker diaphragms consist of a layer of Flax encased in an ultra-thin fiberglass skin. This hybrid material is as rigid as Kevlar and twice as light as traditional polyglass, making it an excellent choice for sound quality.



Performance

Aria drivers feature a new Zamak (zinc/aluminum/magnesium/copper) basket and tweeters are suspended using Poron, a 'memory foam' material developed for the reference Utopia range which reduces distortion three-fold in critical areas of the audio spectrum.



Choice

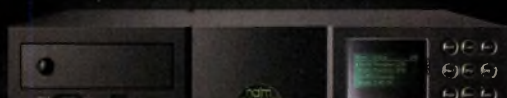
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DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AE 305

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
17kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
900 x 185 x 300mm

FEATURES
• Three-way, reflex
ported loudspeaker
• 28mm tweeter,
3x 110mm mid/
bass units
• Claimed
sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
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WEBSITE
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Last year this magazine was most impressed by the affordable new AE 301 standmounting speaker.

Well, allow us to introduce its bigger brother – which adds a pair of 110mm spun aluminium low-frequency drivers to a similar 110mm unit performing midrange duties. Up at the top of the angled front baffle is a 28mm fabric dome tweeter, and this makes for a largish three-way speaker system with a healthy claimed sensitivity of 90dB. This means the 305 is able to go fairly loud even with moderately power amplifiers, which will be of interest to valve amp users whose equipment often struggles to muster 20W or so!

The cabinet is beautifully finished like its baby brother and is available in a choice of piano black or white gloss lacquer finishes. It's certainly a substantial unit, although not the heaviest here. Still, a rap of the knuckles shows this to be a well

damped cabinet, one that's hewn from 18mm MDF and then exotically painted and lacquered. There's a single, rather novel looking 'slot' port right at the bottom of the front baffle; be warned that confused family members might start posting letters into it! These loudspeakers don't appear to be too fussy as far as positioning is concerned; they work surprisingly well close to a back wall (but benefit from moving out by about 30cm) and like a small amount of toe-in. They sound best with their neat magnetic grilles removed.

Sound quality

Here's a clean, crisp, even sounding sort of speaker that does an awful lot well, without showing any particular strong points or obvious failings. The High Llamas track *Birdies Sing* is great fun to listen to, with a large, spacious presentation – the AEs are well able to throw sound out of the box and hang images far back. The track's beautiful, Beach Boys-like harmonies are smooth and melodic, the lead vocal clean and rich and the guitar parts crisp and well defined – even the cranked-up guitar solo, which can sometimes grate, comes over smoothly. Tonally then, the 305 is well balanced, which should make it easy to match to most systems.

The pattern continues with New Order's *Vanishing Point*, which proves a most enjoyable experience. The AEs set up a thick, strong bass line which underpins the track beautifully, without overpowering the mix. The chiming eighties digital synths are clearly rendered without grating (as can happen with less couth speakers); there is a wealth of detail sparkling out of the mix, yet the music never sounds forced or in-your-face. The 305s are well able to carry the weight and impact of Peter Hook's epic bass guitar work, and vocalist Barney Summers sounds just right.

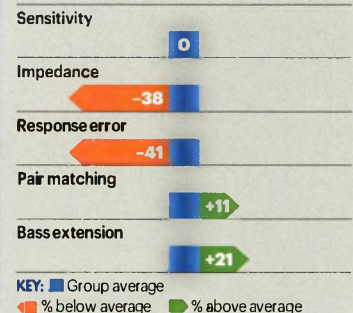
Although not the most revealing sounding design here, the 305s gave the listener a lot to work with; transient performance is good and it isn't frightened to convey the subtle



ON TEST

Acoustic Energy claims 90dB sensitivity for the 305, which is about 2dB optimistic according to our measured pink noise figure of 87.8dB, 250Hz-20kHz. Minimum impedance modulus was 2.2 ohms at 3.5kHz – a figure that would be too low to justify 4 ohms nominal impedance, let alone the 8 ohms specified. Impedance phase angles are also quite high near where the modulus is lowest, resulting in a scary minimum EPDR of 1.0 ohms at 3.1kHz. There is also a dip to 1.8 ohms at 98Hz. Overall, this makes the 305 a very challenging amplifier load. But on-axis frequency response was remarkably flat at ± 2.1 dB and ± 2.8 dB respectively and the cumulative spectral decay waterfall shows fast initial energy decay across the spectrum, albeit with some resonances visible at low levels. Bass extension was disappointing at 69Hz, roll-off being fast below a 3dB peak at 104Hz. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



accenting of instruments. Still, in absolute terms, there is a little plummy from the cabinets audible – careful placement helps, but the slight bass overhang never quite leaves; the small, standmounting 301 sounds a good deal quicker in this respect. Beethoven's *5th Symphony* shows a lack of very low-level detail; this is down to a tweeter that's not the most spacious sounding here. Still, no complaints about the general nature of the treble; it is smooth, nicely etched and never piercing with the reference system. Overall, I like these Acoustic Energy floorstanders very much; they're very effective performers at the price ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth, musical sound; easy to drive and position; fine finish

DISLIKE: Slight bass overhang; nothing else at the price

WESAY: This is a strong all-round compact floorstander

OVERALL



The Legacy Lives On



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Sansui is distributed in the UK by Henley Designs Ltd.

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

Epos Elan 30 **£1,000**

With a reputation stretching back to the eighties, hopes are high for this big-hearted standmounter

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Epos Elan 30

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
15.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
185 x 850 x 289mm

FEATURES
• 2.5-way, reflex ported loudspeaker
• 25mm tweeter, 2x 156mm mid/bass units
• Claimed sensitivity: 92dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Epos Acoustics Ltd

TELEPHONE
01442260146

WEBSITE
epos-acoustics.com

This is the second largest floorstander in Epos' new range of mainstream speakers; although it has three drive units it is effectively a 'two-and-a-half-way' design with both woofers working together, although the lower driver only works under 800Hz whereas the upper one goes up to 3.6kHz where the tweeter takes over. The bass units are 156mm designs with polypropylene cones and bullet-shaped dustcaps; the tweeter is a 25mm doped-fabric dome with a short horn. A simple crossover is used, biwirable unlike many here.

The cabinet uses high-quality real-wood veneer. The company says that extensive horizontal and vertical internal bracing is positioned inside the sturdy 18mm-thick MDF cabinets. They're supplied with plinths, and oddly there's a choice of two baffles – a standard 'audiophile' type and an alternative cloth-covered version. The Elan 30 boasts the highest quoted

sensitivity of the group (92dB); listening tests confirm it certainly goes loud with relatively little power and this makes it ideal for valve amplifiers, for example. It's not too fussy about sitting close to rear walls; our review samples proved happy just 20cm away.

Sound quality

Here's a speaker that sounds both bigger than it looks, and more exciting, too. The Epos isn't the largest here, but no one seems to have told it! The result is an expansive sound, both across the soundstage from left to right, and also in terms of depth perspective, too. Unlike the Tannoy, for example, which is another feisty performer, the Epos doesn't throw everything out at you in your face. There's a little more room to breathe and this is appreciated on the High Llamas track, which is certainly a little forward tonally. The Epos delivers a balanced, but involving sound that lets the listener follow the natural musical progression of the song well. It doesn't deconstruct things, but does still dig deep into the mix to let the music really flow.

The New Order track shows it to be skillfully voiced; this track can be blisteringly in-your-face with some speakers, but the Eposes sit back a little bit, tonally. They carry those lovely chiming eighties synthesisers in their full glory, never clouding or dulling them, but still they have real impact and this, alongside the spinning rhythm of the hi-hats, makes for an emotionally arresting, captivating listen. Again, the Elans seem to 'carry the tune' very well – only the Spondors manage to do better, and these are hamstrung by a slight lack of low bass, which the Eposes are not.

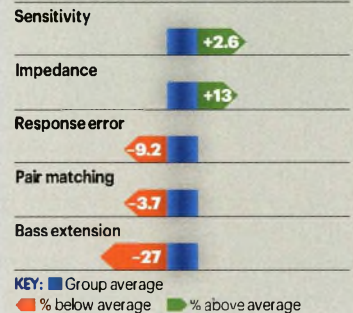
The 1st movement of Beethoven's *5th Symphony* is an excellent showcase for these floorstanders; they have a fine range and prove they are able to dish out low bass without recourse to boom. As with several others here, the drivers are ever so



ON TEST

It would be remarkable were the Elan 30 to achieve its claimed 92dB sensitivity, but our pink noise figure of 90.3dB suggests that a still creditable 90dB is more realistic. This is achieved without ridiculously low impedance, the 3.4 ohms minimum at 310Hz according well with Epos' nominal 4 ohms figure. Impedance phase angles are large enough to drop the EPDR to a minimum of 1.8 ohms at 132Hz, but that's towards the upper end of values for this group. On-axis frequency response error of ± 3.8 dB for both speakers is a good result and would be better, but for the extreme treble being shelved up by about 3dB. Pair matching was OK at ± 1.3 dB. Despite the high sensitivity, bass extension was one of the best in test at 42Hz, with a gentle roll-off beginning below 100Hz. The CSD waterfall shows fast initial energy decay, although low-level resonances are visible. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



slightly audible, giving a little extra colouration, but still this doesn't intrude and the result is a lucid, musical feel to the proceedings. They're a little larger in scale than the Spondors, if not quite as incisive across the midband. Treble is decent, with a crisp and atmospheric sparkle, but still some way behind the best. The good news continues with the Lou Donaldson track, when the Elans get a chance to show their excellent rhythmic prowess; they roll along with the music in a wonderfully easy and unobstructive way. Large in scale, smooth in tone and fleet of foot, the Elan 30 is a quite excellent speaker for the money. ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

LIKE: Big hearted, smoothly balanced music maker; very easy to drive

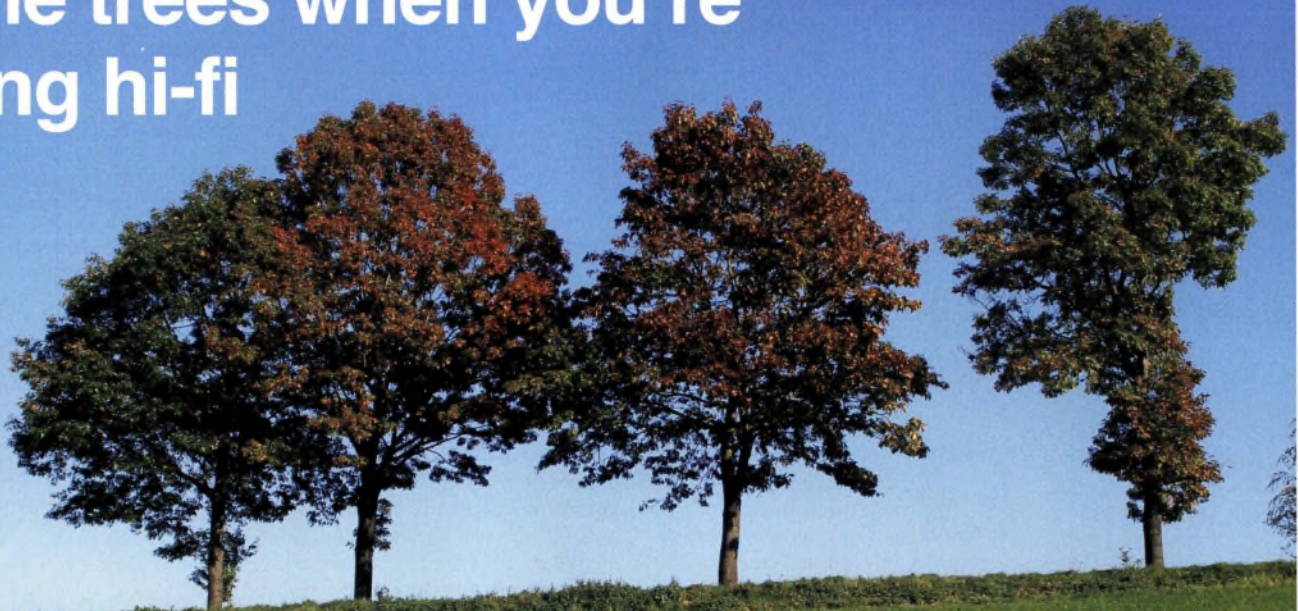
DISLIKE: Lacks ultimate fine detail and transparency

WE SAY: Excellent all-round floorstander that will win many friends

OVERALL



Sometimes you just can't see the wood for the trees when you're buying hi-fi



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clear advice

Let our expert retailers guide you through the myriad of choices and show you some clarity

Focal

Chorus 726 V **£1,200**

A large, visually imposing floorstander, this has the look and feel of something much more expensive

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Focal Chorus 726 V

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
23.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
222 x 990 x 375mm

FEATURES

- Three-way, reflex ported loudspeaker
- 1x 25mm inverted dome tweeter, 1x 165mm mid, 2x 165mm bass
- Claimed sensitivity: 91.5dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Focal JMLAB UK Ltd

TELEPHONE
0845 6602680

WEBSITE
focal-uk.com

Here's a brand that's had rather mixed fortunes in the UK over the years, proving that our speaker market is a hard nut to crack even if you're as big as Focal! Now allied to Naim Audio, it may make a bigger splash. Certainly the Chorus 726 V is the sort of speaker that knows how to make an entrance; if ever there was a box in this group that has showroom appeal, then this is it. Firstly, it is very big – it makes the little Spendor look like a car speaker! Secondly, it has a super-impressive finish – lots of piano lacquer and leathercloth, and the trim rings around the multiple drive units have interesting surfacing. The overall effect is very flash, and many would likely guess this speaker costs closer to £2,000.

It is a three-way design, with a 25mm aluminium/magnesium inverted dome tweeter, plus three 165mm polyglass drive units, one for the midband, two for the bass,

crossing over at 3kHz and 300Hz respectively. The cabinet is solidly built, well braced internally and sports a very large front baffle-mounted reflex port, said to be aerodynamically profiled. Round the back, there are single-wired terminals; full marks for these, as they are the easiest to use here.

The manufacturer claims a high sensitivity, and this is born out by listening; these speakers will be ideal partners for lower-powered Class A amplifiers, and/or tube amps. They prove to be a little more fussy about positioning than some, but the good news is that some experimentation yields results!

Sound quality

An interesting design, this. It gives a big, powerful sort of sound that is superficially very 'fast'; it seems to delight in every steel guitar strum from the High Llamas track, for example. It broadcasts to the world its agility and great transient speed. But hang on, listened to back to back against the Spendor – which is an altogether more refined design – the Focal isn't actually any faster at all. It's a bit brighter and the drive units seem edgier, but it doesn't get the job done any more impressively. And there's a downside, which is that this speaker keeps drawing attention to itself in the wrong way. It gives you the sense that instead of listening to the music, you're listening to hi-fi.

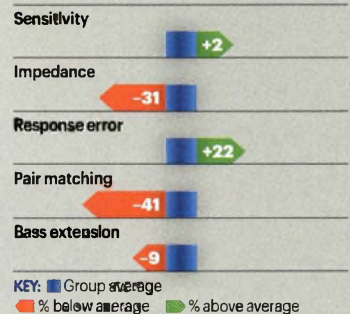
Indeed, the Focal sounds like it looks – which is big, showy and with lots of superficial detailing, which begins to lose its appeal as you try to relax into the music. So yes, it can conjure up a wonderfully punchy bass drum sound on the New Order track, chuck loads of detail at you and spray massive amounts of treble information out, but somehow the overall effect is underwhelming. And worse still, it can be tiring. The 726 V newer quite manages to disappear into the middle distance, and let the music take control.

Bass is impressively extended, and there's obviously a lot of firepower,

ON TEST

Our measured pink noise sensitivity of 89.6dB falls short of Focal's claimed 91.5dB, but still puts the 726 V above the group average. A minimum impedance of 2.9 ohms is specified, but we measured a dip to 2.7 ohms at 114Hz, neither figure being consistent with the claimed 8 ohms nominal. Impedance phase angles are also large at low frequency, reducing the minimum EPDR to an amp-challenging 1.1 ohms at 74Hz. Above-average frequency response error of ± 5.1 dB was the same for both speakers, principally because the output begins rising before 20kHz due to the tweeter dome resonance at 23.4kHz. Pair matching was group best at an excellent ± 0.8 dB, and bass extension of 52Hz a little better than the group average with an initially gentle roll-off below 95Hz. The CSD waterfall shows fast initial energy decay, but some low-level resonance at treble frequencies. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



which really comes into its own at high levels when smaller designs like the Acoustic Energy and the Spendor begin to give away their diminutive dimensions – but still it always sounds a little leaden. Firstly, you can hear the cabinet joining in the fun slightly in the upper bass, and secondly it just doesn't flow particularly well, as the Lou Donaldson track shows. The tweeter sounds like a metal dome of yesteryear, which is to say crisp and well detailed, but slightly clanky and forced. I suspect extended tuning and careful system matching would help with all the above (I've heard the 726 V sound better in other venues), but it's not a speaker for all seasons ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

LIKE: Big sound; goes loud with little power; fine finish
DISLIKE: Doesn't gel rhythmically; lacks subtlety and finesse
WESAY: Lots of speaker for your money, but sound is not to all tastes

OVERALL



Box Design
by Pro-Ject



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Quad **23L Classic** **£1,300**

From a venerable name better associated with electrostatic panels, here's its biggest box to date

DETAILS

PRODUCT
 Quad 23L Classic

ORIGIN
 UK/China

TYPE
 Floorstanding
 loudspeaker

WEIGHT
 17.2kg

DIMENSIONS
 (WxHxD)
 225 x 925 x 316mm

FEATURES

- Three-way, reflex ported loudspeaker
- 25mm tweeter, 3x 125mm mid/bass units
- Claimed sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
 International Audio Group

TELEPHONE
 01480 452561

WEBSITE
 quad-hifi.co.uk

Once upon a time, one of Britain's brightest stars launched a pair of electrostatic loudspeakers that changed the way many listened to music. Quad's Peter Walker has long since passed away, but his brand remains and its speakers are held in high esteem. The 23L Classics hark from the affordable end of the range; they're standard box speakers and not panels. This is the smaller of two floorstanders in the range, and is available in wood veneers, plus premium lacquered finishes – all are superlatively well done.

The 23L is a three-way design, sporting a 25mm fabric dome tweeter with shallow waveguide, 125mm woven Kevlar midrange cone and an identical unit to do bass duties, plus a passive 165mm down-firing ABR (Auxiliary Bass Radiator) to add low-end reinforcement. This new model gets an enhanced crossover with 'top-quality' components used

throughout, including precision-wound inductors, laminated silicon-iron cores for the bass coils and polypropylene capacitors in the signal path. The cabinet carcass uses two different wood materials to minimise resonances and specially selected long-hair acoustic absorbent lining is used inside and twin rear firing reflex ports are fitted. Despite this, the 23L sits happily quite close to a wall and is easy enough to drive.

Sound quality

These Quads have a surprisingly light and spruce sound; there's no sense of them being quiet, shy or retiring. The cabinets appear extremely well damped and don't contribute one jot to the sound, instead that honour goes to the Kevlar mid and bass units, which have a distinctively finely etched, intricate sound that throws masses of detail out at you in an immediate, engaging way. The tonal balance certainly isn't dull, and I'd imagine it could veer towards hardness in the wrong system. *Birdies Sing* is a joy; lots of information pours out with great eagerness and punch, making for a very animated presentation. Dynamics are good, the speakers give a lovely, fast, taut snare drum sound, which sits behind the close-miked vocals. Backing vocals aren't quite as apparent as the Spondors, the Quads preferring to work with the instruments towards the front of the mix.

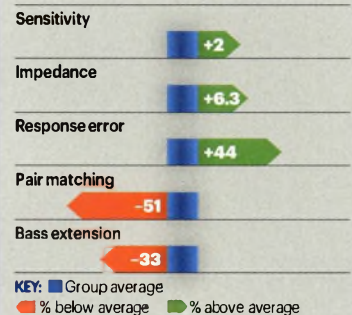
The New Order track follows the same theme; masses of information is ferreted out of the busy mix, with lovely rhythmic interplay between electronic snares and hi-hats. Vocals sound intimate and close-up, and those digital synthesisers sparkle with harmonics. The downside is that the bassline isn't particularly strong, although it certainly bounces along nicely, and there isn't much stage depth to the proceedings; as with the High Llamas track, everything is served up right at you without any room to roam.

The Lou Donaldson piece again shows the Quads' fine rhythms.

ON TEST

Quad's reputation for conservative specification lives on in the 23L, the claimed 88dB sensitivity being fully 1.5dB below our pink noise figure of 89.5dB. This is achieved in part by resort to low impedance, our measured minimum of 3.6ohms being a little lower than Quad's claimed 4 ohms and inconsistent with the 8 ohms nominal specification. Impedance phase angles are quite large at LF, but the minimum EPDR of 1.7 ohms is slightly higher than the group average. On-axis response errors of ± 5.0 dB and ± 3.7 dB would be a lot better, but for a peak at 16kHz. Pair matching error was a little high at ± 1.5 dB, but the largest disparities were above 10kHz. Bass extension is disappointing at 79Hz, the gentle roll-off beginning at a high 130Hz. The CSD waterfall confirms fast initial energy decay, although there is a rather poorly damped resonance at around 3kHz. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



However, although they are explicitly detailed and with lacerative speed, they don't really better the Spondors, yet the latter manages a more beguiling, subtle and natural presentation. This got me musing that the 23Ls sound more like Missions than they do Spondors, which is something you'd never have said of Quads of yore! This isn't to denigrate them; match to a warm source and place them close to the wall and you'll have a vivid listening experience with masses of detail and insight, yet retaining that slightly 'dry' tonality that has been the brand's trademark. Interestingly voiced, they're well worth a listen ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
 ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Fast, dry, detailed sound; fine speed; sublime finish

VALUE FOR MONEY
 ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Light, low bass; bright in some systems

BUILD QUALITY
 ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Classy standmounters with a sparkly, musical sound

EASE OF DRIVE
 ★★★★★

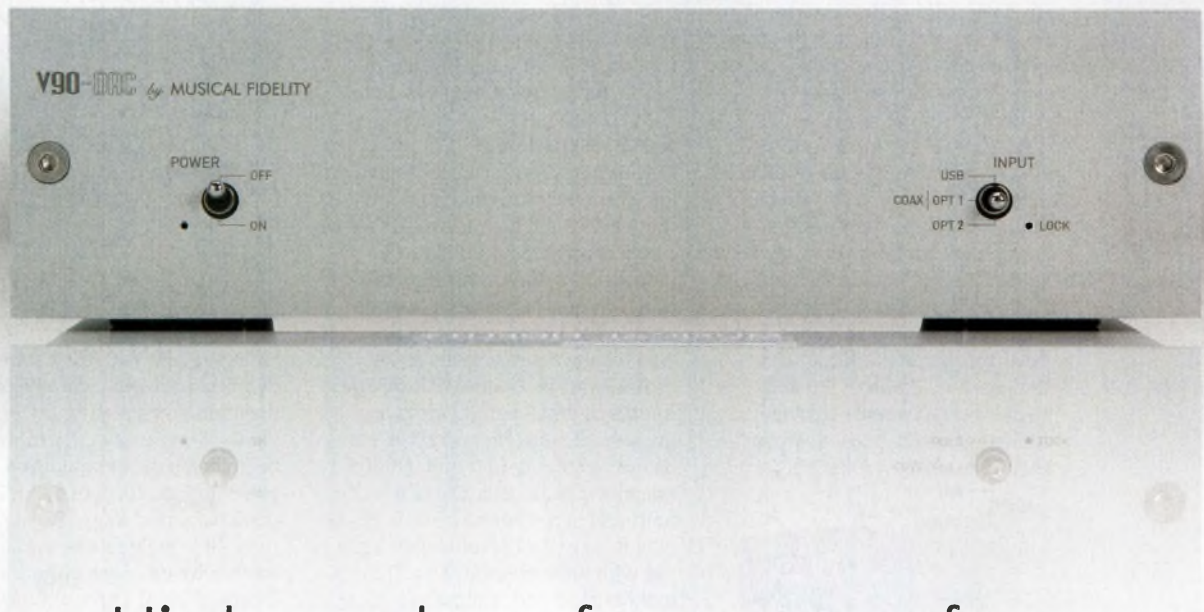
OVERALL



MUSICAL FIDELITY

V90-DAC | DIGITAL ANALOGUE CONVERTER

"The V90-DAC is an upsampling DAC of outstanding quality"



High-end performance from real world sources

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.



Spendor A3 £1,295

Soberly styled and the smallest floorstanders here, these are hardly an audacious fashion statement

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Spendor A3
- ORIGIN**
UK
- TYPE**
Floorstanding loudspeaker
- WEIGHT**
12.4kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
165 x 750 x 250mm
- FEATURES**
 - Two-way, reflex ported loudspeaker
 - 22mm tweeter, 2x 150mm mid/bass units
 - Claimed sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Spendor Audio Systems
- TELEPHONE**
01323 843474
- WEBSITE**
spendoraudio.com

Another speaker brand whose name stretches back in the mists of time (well, the seventies), Spendor has built a name for itself doing civilised, delicate, subtle speakers that stand apart from the mass-market boom and tizz sound. Its early connection with the BBC and its ensuing popularity with audio professionals has only bolstered its reputation. The A3 you see here is the company's smallest, cheapest floorstander and is far less physically imposing than the rest of the group. It's a two-way design, with a 22mm dome tweeter paired to a small 150mm Spendor driver sporting the company's EP38 (Engineering Polymer) cone material. Crossover point is quite high at 4.2kHz, and the speaker eschews biwiring, unlike some others here.

The quality of the cabinetry is excellent, but not as flashy as some; if you're a fan of discreet-looking

loudspeakers rather than imposing style statements, these will fit in well. There's a choice of black ash, cherry, light oak and dark walnut finishes. There's a single rear-mounted bass reflex port, but because the speaker is relatively small it doesn't demand to be moved well out into the room. The downside of its size is the poor quoted sensitivity of 86dB; this speaker needs a sturdy transistor amplifier of at least 50W to get decent sound levels, I'd say. Also the power handling, is lower than some others here.

Sound quality

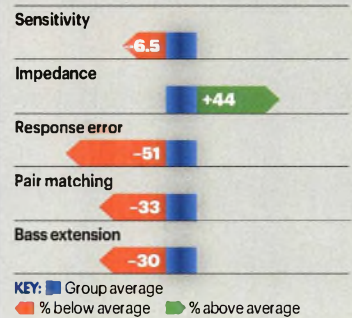
From the first few bars of the New Order track, I find myself surprised by just how good these Spendors are. The amazing trick is that they're extremely detailed and highly sophisticated to listen to, yet don't come over as analytical or dispassionate in any way. Rather, they manage to string together the rhythms of the song better than any other speaker here, and at the same time give a great insight into all the technical aspects of the recording, such as the sonorous, ringing keyboards and Bernard Sumner's plaintive vocals. Moreover, they are surprisingly good at dynamics; even when listening at fairly low levels they sound highly expressive.

Despite that relatively poor bass extension, what bass they do have is absolutely superb; it is just strong enough to announce its presence, yet proves wonderfully supple and propulsive. It seems to integrate really well with the rest of the music, and gets the feet tapping without ever breaking into a sweat. The High Llamas track shows that the A3 has what people used to call "a good tone"; the speakers give a great insight into the recording without drawing attention to themselves. Vocals in particular are a joy; the A3s shine lots of light on Sean O'Hagan's voice, and capture all the angst and emotion, yet never grate. Behind this, those harmonies soar and the instrumentation plays along in a wonderfully satisfying way.

ON TEST

Given its small cabinet it is no surprise that the A3 has the lowest sensitivity here. Spendor claims 86dB, but our pink noise figure of 82.3dB suggests even that is about 4dB optimistic. Payback comes in the form of what is the least challenging amplifier load in the group, with a minimum modulus of 6.2 ohms at 222Hz – just as claimed and justifying the 8 ohms nominal figure – and a minimum EPDR of 2.3 ohms at 121Hz, comfortably the highest of the group. On-axis frequency response errors were remarkably well controlled at ± 1.9 dB and ± 2.2 dB respectively, and pair matching was good at ± 0.9 dB. As further compensation for the low sensitivity, bass extension was also best in group at 40Hz, although the roll-off is very fast. The CSD waterfall shows fast initial energy decay across the spectrum, but some quite high Q resonances at treble frequencies. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Despite being refined and sophisticated to a degree beyond all others in this group test, these loudspeakers show themselves to have superb transient speed; you can hear it from the first bar of Lou Donaldson's *Alligator Bogaloo*; the tweeter helps a lot here – the A3's high frequency unit is a class act. It has lots of air and space without being bright and shows great finesse. It also integrates very well with the rest of the music, to give an all-of-a-piece feel to the proceedings. Indeed, short of the superb Tannoy, the A3 proves one of the best in terms of stereo imaging here. A small speaker, but a big surprise! ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Thoroughly musical sound; delicacy, finesse, speed
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Styling only its mother could love; so-so sensitivity
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** The surprise of the group; sounds better than it looks!
- EASE OF DRIVE**
★★★★☆

OVERALL



Take Centre Stage

 **Pro-Ject**
AUDIO SYSTEMS

hi-finews
HIGHLY
COMMENDED



Xtension 10

The Hi-Fi News 'Highly Commended'* Xtension 10 turntable from Pro-Ject Audio puts you at the centre of the musical performance. Whether it's recreating a rock concert, an orchestral symphony, or whatever else you have in your record collection, the Xtension 10 turns any vinyl recording into a captivating, 'live' experience.

With a retro-styled mass-loaded chassis, which is decoupled by high-grade magnetic feet, the Xtension 10 boasts a near-perfect base for vinyl playback. Combine this with the top-of-the-line 10CC Evolution Tonearm, high-mass vinyl sandwich platter and built-in Pro-Ject Speed Box DS, and you are left with a truly desirable turntable package. All for only £2,250.

The Xtension 10 is only available through these premium retailers...

Analogue Seduction (Peterborough) - 01733 350878
Audio Destination (Tiverton) - 01884 243584
Cranfield Audio (Bedford) - 01234 853044
Oxford Audio Consultants - 01865 790879
Sevenoaks S&V (Bristol) - 01179 743727
Sevenoaks S&V (Reading) - 01189 597768
Vickers Hi-Fi (York) - 01904 691600

Audio Affair (Birmingham) - 01212 247350
Audio Venue (Ealing, London) - 02085 678703
Hi-Fi Gear (Hereford) - 01432 354921
Paul Roberts Hi-Fi (Bristol) - 01179 429370
Sevenoaks S&V (Exeter) - 01392 218895
Tavistock Audio (Devon) - 01822 618940

Pro-Ject Audio Systems is distributed in the UK by Henley Designs Ltd.
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*August 2012 Issue

Tannoy Revolution DC6T SE **£1,000**

The only speakers here with a Dual Concentric tweeter and mid/bass driver were always going to be special

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Tannoy Revolution DC6T SE

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
16.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
256 x 950 x 292 mm

FEATURES
• Two-way, reflex
ported loudspeaker
• 1x Dual Concentric
(25mm tweeter,
150mm mid/bass),
1x 150mm mid/
bass unit
• Claimed
sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Tannoy Ltd. UK

TELEPHONE
01236 420199

WEBSITE
tannoy.com

Tannoy has a redoubtable history of hi-fi speakers too, with a unique selling proposition of the Dual Concentric driver. Basically, this is a 'speaker within a speaker'; by setting the tweeter inside the mid/bass unit, it brings phase-coherence to the sound, and the music arrives at you at the same time, from the same place. Audiophiles call it 'point source', and as soon as you listen to one you can see (and hear) why. The DC6T SE sports this technology – with a 25mm titanium dome tweeter and Tulip waveguide, set inside a 150mm pulp cone mid/bass, married to an additional 150mm pulp cone driver without the tweeter inside. Basically then, it is a two-way, crossing over at 1.7kHz via a low-loss crossover with silver-plated, high-purity oxygen-free copper internal wiring.

The cabinet is a tall, slim affair that comes in an espresso colour real wood veneer, which looks almost

black in some lights, but blends in with the decor beautifully. Although a nice colour, it still manages to look like vinyl wrap, though. The box sits atop a metal plinth with top-adjustable levelling spikes (with spike cups supplied) and contrasting satin black finish. The particle board walls feel solid enough and the speaker has been extensively cross braced inside. The rear-firing bass port is such that these speakers seem to work best a foot or so into the listening room.

Sound quality

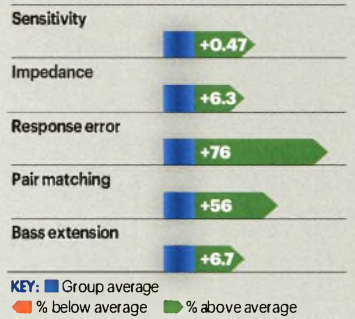
These Tannoys soon mark themselves out as the 'character' speakers of the group; there's no mistaking the bright, vivid, upfront and engaging sound they deliver – allied to a lovely spacious soundstage and fine image placement. The High Llamas track is a barrel of fun, the 6s setting up a breezy, pacey groove with lots of detail – such as the chiming guitars and tight snare drum work – pouring out. Vocals are really direct, the listener seemingly able to hear Sean O'Hagan's every breath and subtlest vocal intonation. Behind these, those lovely harmonies soar like the Beach Boys have just walked into the studio. The whole effect is bouncy, energetic and enjoyable. The speakers are timed very well, capturing the way that the instruments stop and start rather beautifully.

The New Order track shows more distinctive features of their presentation; first, they don't do depth perspective particularly well. Whereas the Spondors and Acoustic Energy offerings give a sense of a good physical distance from the music, where you can sit back and survey the whole recorded acoustic, the Tannoys seem to throw everything right forward and etch some of the lead instruments right on your cranium. It makes for a seat-of-the-pants sort of sound, very involving, but lacking in subtlety all the same. Also, it's obvious that the Tannoys don't worry too much about the low bass. In a sense this is good because you don't hear the boxy boom of, say,

ON TEST

Tannoy claims 90dB sensitivity for the DC6T SE, but our pink noise figure of 88.4dB suggests this is a little optimistic. So too is the 8 ohms nominal impedance, a minimum modulus of 3.1ohms indicating that 4 ohms is more appropriate. Impedance phase angles are large enough to reduce the EPDR to 1.7 ohms at 98Hz, with another dip to 1.8 ohms at 39Hz. On-axis response errors are the group's highest at ± 7.7 dB and ± 7.0 dB due to the switchback treble typical of Tannoy's dual concentrics. Pair matching was also worst in test at ± 2.1 dB. Bass extension is a little disappointing at 61Hz and the near-field response shows a dip at 153Hz, corresponding to a hump in the impedance curve, so the length mode of the interior air volume appears poorly suppressed. The CSD waterfall is mostly clean, but shows distinct resonances at about 5.5kHz, 10kHz and 16kHz. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



the Focals, but on the other hand it's a bit lighter than some of the other loudspeakers on test here. All the same, bass is unerringly fast, fluid and incredibly fun.

The Beethoven piece shows an element of colouration to the sound; where the Spondors give the sense that they dissolve out of the mix, the Tannoys are always there in the picture, so to speak. Like the Focals, their drivers lend a bright, fast, vividly etched feel that hides some low-level detail and instrumental texture, but unlike the Focals, the Tannoys are dynamic and time very coherently, so it's far easier to enjoy them. A great way to play music ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Great fun to listen to; excellent soundstaging

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Cabinet finish looks cheaper than some here

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★☆ **WESAY:** A real character speaker that makes music magic

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL



Group test verdict

He's shifted more than his fair share of hefty speakers, so before he puts his feet up for a well-earned cuppa, it's over to **David Price** for the results

LOUDSPEAKERS ARE SURELY one of the most personal things you can buy, so all prospective purchasers should hear them first; this group test should be taken purely as a guide. People have different tastes, and we can't legislate for all of them! Still, there were big differences across the group; here's what we heard.

The Focal's inability to get into the musical groove marks it down; on the surface it's a powerful box with punch and presence, but it just didn't gel musically. Factor in the rather glassy sounding drive units and poorly controlled cabinet, and it came a

resounding last. Shame, as in other ways it's a lovely package.

From this point onwards, all the other speakers here proved really good in their own respective ways. Although the Acoustic Energy came fifth, it's a really nice loudspeaker, and if you've got a bright source it will really work well. Smooth, easy to listen to yet fun – what's not to like?

The Quads are really accomplished, with a wonderfully detailed and forensic sound that will suit classical music well. Tonally they're a bit dry. Factor in their superlative finish, and they're great value for money.

The Tannoys come third; flawed but enormous fun, everything they play sounds dramatic, big, powerful and arresting. But they're not the most transparent here, as those drive units leave an obvious sonic footprint on the music.

The Epos Elans are the runner up, but some may regard them as the winner, as they manage to combine the Focal's physicality, the Tannoys' fun and much of the Spondor's sophistication and insight; if you are looking for an affordable floorstander that gives lots of sound per pound, this is it!



WINNER

The Spondor A3s pull you right to the heart of the music. So smooth yet super-detailed, these baby floorstanders are wonderfully natural and beguiling to listen to. They're so effortless and natural sounding that everything you play is a pleasure.

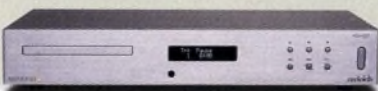


| Make/model | Acoustic Energy AE 305 | Epos Elan 30 | Focal Chorus 726 V | Quad 23L Classic | Spondor A3 | Tannoy Revolution DC6T SE |
|----------------------|--|--|---|---|---|--|
| Price | £1,000 | £1,000 | £1,200 | £1,300 | £1,295 | £1,000 |
| Sound | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Value | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Build | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Ease of drive | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Overall | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Key features | Superb build and finish at the price, plus a lovely smooth and musical sound | Very musically satisfying to listen to with a powerful, wideband sound | Impressive looking package, but sounds a little uncouth and musically muddled | Absolutely stunning build and finish with a super-clean and revealing sound | Wonderfully musical, couth and inviting sound, yet highly detailed, too | Great fun to listen to with excellent rhythms and a big bold sound |
| Two-way | No | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| 2.5 way | No | Yes | No | No | No | No |
| Three-way | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Biwire | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Plinth | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

TRY WITH THESE

CD PLAYER:
Audiolab 8200CD **£700**

Still our favourite mid-price silver disc spinner, it gives nothing away in performance terms to any rival and provides a powerful, detailed source for them to work with. Its digital inputs give it added DAC functionality, and very good it sounds too!



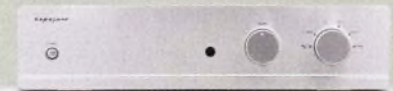
CABLE LOOM:
vdH The Wave/CS-122 Hybrid **£130/£20/m**

Another recent Group Test winner, this interconnect and speaker cable combination makes music snap into focus and lets it fly rhythmically and dynamically. Unlike a number of similarly priced looms, the music has a lovely flowing flow.



INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:
Exposure 3010S2 **£1,350**

This crisply styled one-box integrated amplifier puts out a serious amount of power and sports a stripped-down feature set. Its sound quality is so good that it won July 2013's integrated amp Group Test, and will be an ideal match to any of the speakers here.



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Introducing the NEW NAD D Series



ONE SIMPLE PACKAGE, the **NAD D 7050**

The stylish and compact D 7050 combines NAD's most advanced digital platform, Direct Digital technology with Apple AirPlay® Wi-Fi streaming to create the ultimate plug 'n play solution for wireless music. The D 7050 can also stream any UPnP audio content on a home network along with optical, coaxial and asynchronous USB inputs allowing up to 24/192 signal transmission.

£799

MAGIC FROM A DAC, the **NAD D 1050**

The best way to add Computer Audio and HD Digital to your hi-fi system. Both the digital and the analogue circuits are highly optimized and based on techniques developed over 40 years. The SPDIF inputs support coaxial and optical connectors while the asynchronous USB input uses the D 1050's high precision clock to control the output of the connected USB device for lowest possible jitter allowing up to 24/192 signal transmission.

£399

REINVENTING AN ICON, the **NAD D 3020**

Takes the original NAD concept straight to the 21st century using the latest high speed digital technology. The D 3020 DAC/Amplifier includes coaxial and optical digital inputs along with an analogue input. It's asynchronous USB input ensures the lowest possible jitter from notoriously unstable computer audio outputs along with support for 24/96 HD studio master music files.

£399

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£299
OR LESS

PRO-JECT • DEBUT CARBON • TURNTABLE

With its Carbon armtube and supplied Ortofon 2m Red cartridge, the Debut Carbon sets new standards in its price range.



£299
OR LESS

NAD • C 556 • TURNTABLE

Time to enjoy vinyl collections with extraordinary quality! With a minimalist design, the C 556 turntable offers accurate reproduction by using performance-focused parts and components that put music first.



NEW

£169
OR LESS

PRO-JECT • ELEMENTAL • TURNTABLE

Entry-level "plug n'play" turntable with straight ultra low mass tonearm optimised for the supplied Ortofon OM cartridge



NEW

£1249
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CYRUS • STREAM Xa • MUSIC STREAMER

A pure streamer with analogue and digital outputs. Capable of fully exploiting 24-bit/192 kHz files along with Apple's lossless format. Cyrus Cadence remote control app for iPad/iPhone available free from the Apple App Store.



£499
OR LESS

NAD • C 446 • MUSIC STREAMER

Powerful digital media player featuring Internet radio and a FM/AM/DAB+ tuner. The C 446 allows you to stream your music collection from multiple networked storage devices using DLNA and Universal Plug and Play (UPnP) standards



£1999
OR LESS

NAD • M50 • DIGITAL MUSIC PLAYER

If you love digital music, the M50 will become the heart of your collection, managing and controlling all your music and eliminating the need for a computer. Decodes all the popular formats including Linear PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz and FLAC



£1650

NAIM • UNITILITE ALL-IN-ONE STREAMING SYSTEM

Comprises a CD player, MP3/iPod and USB memory stick playback, digital to analogue converter, high resolution 32bit/192kHz capable network streamer and integrated 50W amplifier in one sleek enclosure.



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PIONEER • N-50 • MUSIC STREAMER

Award-winning audiophile Network player supporting AirPlay® and DLNA wireless technologies, allowing you to stream music wirelessly from your iTunes libraries or iOS devices. When connected to your home network, you can also enjoy a wide variety of online music services remotely.



£649
OR LESS

ROTEL • RT-12 MUSIC STREAMER

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

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£649
OR LESS

£649
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ARCAM • FMJ CD17 / A19 • CD / AMPLIFIER

Arcam's A19 integrated amplifier delivers 50W per channel and includes 7 analogue inputs, a MM phono input and is the perfect partner for the CD17 CD player.



£799
OR LESS

£749
OR LESS

AUDIOLAB • 8200CD / 8200A • CD / AMPLIFIER

The award-winning 8200CD features a wealth of digital inputs that will keep it playing all your music regardless of how it may be stored.



NEW

£399
OR LESS

ARCAM • iDAC • DAC

Designed to be the heart of a digital system. Includes asynchronous USB and a direct iPod input to optimise sound quality. All inputs can be controlled through an IR remote that will also control iPods, iPhones, PC and Mac computers.



£1199
OR LESS

£1499
OR LESS

CYRUS • CD8 SE2 / 8 DAC • CD PLAYER / AMPLIFIER / DAC

With its 2 x 70 w power output and extended range of digital inputs, the 8 DAC amplifier is a great partner for the award-winning CD8 SE2 CD player.



NEW

£349
OR LESS

NEW

£379
OR LESS

MARANTZ • CD6005 / PM6005 • CD / AMPLIFIER

Replacing the 6004 models, the 6005 amp gains digital inputs using the same 24-bit/192kHz DAC as the CD player which now features enhanced USB playback and improved performance.



£599
OR LESS

AUDIOLAB • M-DAC • DAC / PREAMP

Award-winning DAC featuring a USB input with asynchronous data processing along with two coaxial and optical digital inputs. High-res 24-bit/192kHz music files can be played via its coaxial input.



£249
OR LESS

£249
OR LESS

NAD • C 516BEE / C 316BEE • CD / AMPLIFIER

Received an outstanding product award from Hi-Fi News magazine who described the C 316BEE as an "absolute barn-stormer of an amplifier". The C 516BEE is the perfect partner.



£499
OR LESS

£699
OR LESS

NAD • C 546BEE / C 356BEE DAC • CD / AMP / DAC

Enjoy music from your computer without musical compromise via the DAC or listen to music from CD with the MP3 / WMA compatible CD player.



£249
OR LESS

MERIDIAN • EXPLORER • USB DAC / HEADPHONE AMP

Explorer replaces your computer's sound card with a USB-powered DAC featuring Meridian's high quality audio circuitry with up to 24-bit resolution and 192kHz sampling. Includes 96kHz optical and fixed or variable analogue outputs.



£1799
OR LESS

£1799
OR LESS

ROKSAN • CASPIAN M2 • CD / AMPLIFIER

The M2 amp boasts 85wpc and five line inputs while the matching CD features a 24-bit DAC plus dedicated power supplies for the outputs.



£349
OR LESS

£499
OR LESS

ROTEL • RA-10 / RCD-12 • AMPLIFIER / CD

Award-winning amplifier from Rotel. Delivers 40 Watts per channel and includes four line level inputs and a phono input. Ideal partner for the RCD-12 CD player.



NEW

£449
OR LESS

USB
OPTICAL
COAX

MERIDIAN • DIRECTOR • DAC

Featuring a range of connectivity, Director can be used with a wide selection of traditional components as well as high-resolution USB based sources. Director features technology drawn from Meridian's award-winning Reference 800 Series, offering up to 24-bit resolution and 192kHz sampling.



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COM

DENON • D-M39DAB • CD / DAB SYSTEM

This micro component system gives you clean dramatic sound, and more life to iPod and iPhone music libraries via its digital USB input. Includes DAB/DAB+/FM tuner.



NEW

£499
OR LESS



MARANTZ • M-CR610 • CD / NETWORK SYSTEM

Enjoy great sounding music from diverse sources, including Internet radio, music-streaming services, mobile devices, TV and other digital audio sources.



£1499
OR LESS

NAD • M51 • DAC

This award-winning DAC / pre-amp features optical, coaxial, USB and HDMI inputs, all of which can handle files up to 24-bit/192kHz. The M51 will truly transform any system.

YAMAHA • CRX-550 • CD / DAB SYSTEM

Yamaha's CRX-550 offers excellent audio quality from a CD / DAB System. Includes iPod digital connection for superior audio performance, USB input and subwoofer out.

Real Stores

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision have 26 stores nationwide with plans to open more during 2013. Each carries the best in home cinema and Hi-Fi equipment on display, ready for you to watch, listen to and compare in our dedicated demonstration rooms.

Real Products

A wide selection of products from the world's leading manufacturers is in stock and available for you to take home. We also offer a delivery and installation service as well as a convenient on-line click and reserve option for many of our products.

Real People

Our staff are friendly, knowledgeable and passionate about music and film and the equipment needed to get the most out of your collection. They will be delighted to assist you in making the right selection to ensure you enjoy your system for years to come.

Real Value

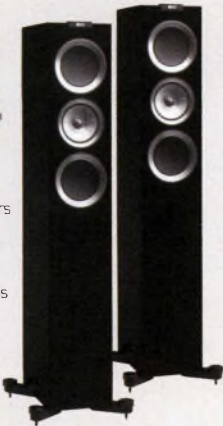
Fantastic value for money is our aim. Although we remain independent, you will be pleasantly surprised just how competitive we can be - with the added benefit of seeing, hearing and touching the product before you buy, and someone to help if things go wrong.

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BOWERS & WILKINS • CM10
Introducing the CM10, a new flagship for the CM series that combines technologies from the Reference ranges with innovative new construction techniques. The result is simply spectacular.

NEW £2999 OR LESS



KEF • R500

The smallest of the floorstanders in the R Series. Uses the latest generation Uni-Q driver array and two 5.25-inch aluminium bass drivers. Its slim proportions and sleek contemporary looks make it perfectly suited for any interior.

£1499 OR LESS



KEF • LS50

An innovative concept derived from the legendary LS3/5a. Rarely the case in such a compact design, the LS50 monitor delivers a rich, multi-dimensional 'soundstage experience' that is out of all proportion to its size.

£799 OR LESS



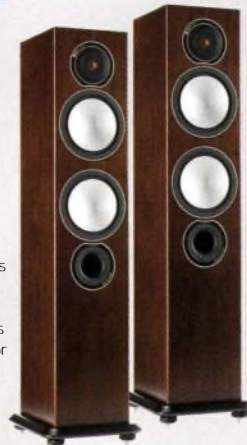
TANNOY • REVOLUTION DC6T SE
Award-winning compact, floorstanding speakers featuring Tannoy's unique Dual Concentric™ drive unit along with trapezoidal cabinets. Exclusively finished in luxury Espresso colour real wood veneer.

£999 OR LESS

MONITOR AUDIO SILVER 6

2.5-way speaker system combining excellent dynamics with a naturally rhythmic sonic character and tight, controlled bass. The Silver 6 is an outstanding communicator of music and film audio.

NEW £999 OR LESS



PSB IMAGINE MINI

Meet the newest and smallest member of the ultra-stylish Imagine Series. The deceptively small Imagine Mini makes a big impact on an already impressive range of award-winning speakers.

NEW £599 OR LESS



Q ACOUSTICS • CONCEPT 20
A truly remarkable new speaker which delivers a level of sonic performance previously only available to audiophiles able to invest in high-end models.

£350 OR LESS

PRICE EXCLUDES STANDS



PMC • TWENTY-23

An open, engaging and communicative loudspeaker that defies its size both the depth of bass and scale of presentation by taking any music or film material in its stride. The sound is vivid and dynamic and delivered with authoritative bass.

£2300 OR LESS



WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 122

Stand/bookshelf speakers featuring a 25mm soft dome tweeter and 165mm woven Kevlar mid/bass driver. The Wharfedale Diamond 122 offer high-performance and great value for money.

£279 OR LESS



SONOS • THE WIRELESS HI-FI SYSTEM

The award-winning Sonos lets you play your favourite tunes all over the house and control them from the palm of your hand. You can even play different songs in different rooms.

ESSAV.COM

NAD VISO HP50 HEADPHONES

Designed for long-wearing comfort and listening with ultra-soft noise-isolating earpads. The convenient three-button Apple remote offers full control of all Apple music and call functionality right at your fingertips, plus voice control with Siri-compatible devices.



NEW

£249 OR LESS



NEW

£949 OR LESS

BANG & OLUFSEN • BEOPLAY A8 WIRELESS MUSIC SYSTEM

The BeoPlay A8 brings a fresh new design twist to the iPod dock, adding wireless streaming through AirPlay® to unleash all of your music with total clarity.



NEW

£499 OR LESS

NAD • VISO 1AP • WIRELESS MUSIC SYSTEM

Streaming system with both AirPlay® and Bluetooth. Ideal for wirelessly playing music from your iPod, iPhone, iPad or any Bluetooth or AirPlay enabled smartphone, tablet or laptop.



BOWERS & WILKINS P7 HEADPHONES

With P7, everything is designed to allow you to lose yourself in music. Bass is tight, vocals are precisely defined, and there's a wonderful sense of space, balance and clarity across the whole frequency range. P7's cable comes with a remote/microphone attachment, so it works seamlessly with your iPhone.



NEW

£329 OR LESS



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We have a national network of stores and a hard-won reputation for outstanding customer service.

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Reading • 0118 959 7768
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Sheffield • 0114 255 5861
Southampton • 023 8033 7770
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Yeovil • 01935 700078

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SEVENOAKS
SOUND & VISION



Shine on

It's big, it's beautiful and it lights up at night! **David Price** is beguiled by Chord's latest SPM 1200 MkII solid-state power amplifier

On the great power amplifier firmament, this has got the lot. The new Chord SPM 1200 MkII is physically large. It is beautifully presented with immaculate aerospace-grade aluminium surfacing and has a striking, architectural quality to its styling. And even if its striking, colourful interior downlighting isn't suited to all tastes, it is still one heck of a piece of work. Put it in your listening room, and it suddenly looks a less shabby place!

More than this though, it has got to sound the part. And to this end there is a special sliding bias circuit designed to reconcile the often

mutually exclusive quest for high power and fine sound quality. Inside are 16 power MOSFETs, which run in Class A mode up to a point, where they 'intelligently' switch to Class AB. The result is that at lower volumes they avoid switching distortion and the grainy sound that can ensue. At higher volumes, they move to Class AB mode where they thump out a claimed 350W RMS into 8 ohms. As most music listening is done at relatively low power output levels – even when the music sounds quite 'loud' an amplifier is rarely putting out more than 10W – the Chord works in Class A most of the time. But for short bursts of transient power,

DETAILS

PROJECT
Chord Electronics
SPM 1200 MkII

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Power amplifier

WEIGHT
18kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
420 x 140 x 355mm

FEATURES
● Quoted power output: 2x 350W RMS
● Aerospace-grade aluminium casework
● 2x balanced XLR outputs; 2x RCA outputs
● Gold-plated WBT speaker terminals

DISTRIBUTOR
Chord Electronics

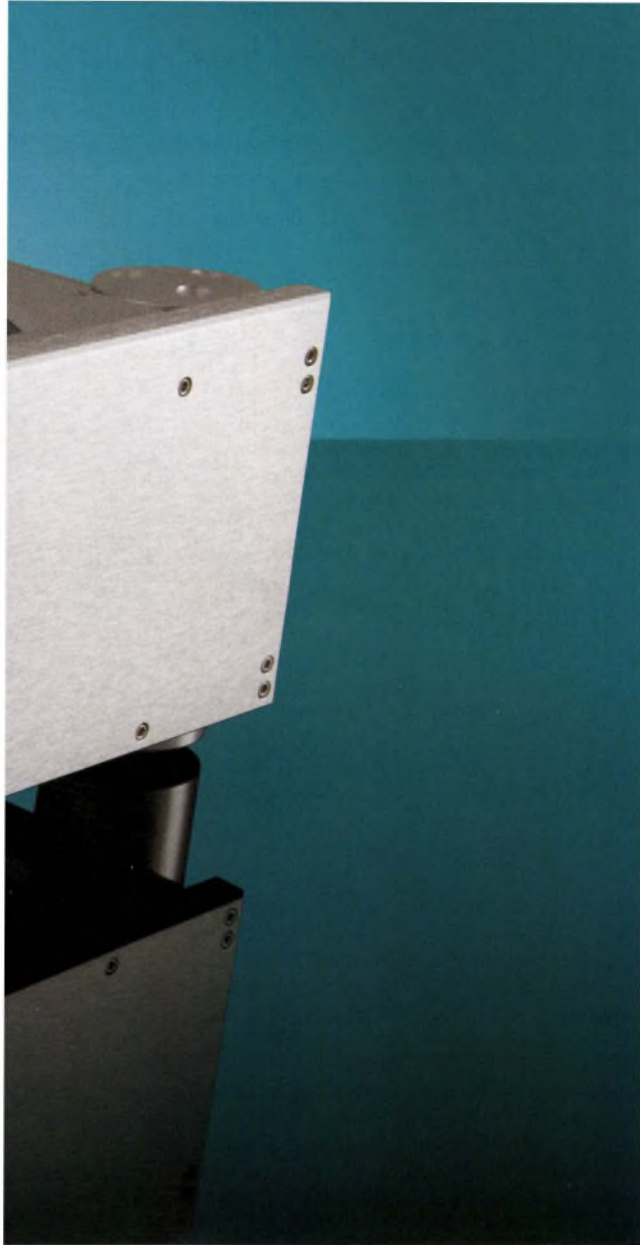
TELEPHONE
01622 721444

WEBSITE
chordelectronics.co.uk

the bias switches and the amp gets to do some heavy lifting. It's clever stuff, but to be fair it isn't new; Marantz was doing something similar with its 'Quarter A' amplifiers in the eighties.

The company has obviously paid a lot of attention to everything that a high-end 'super amp' needs. It has a beefy power supply, with the supply rails operating at a giddy $\pm 90V$ from a switched mode power supply (which explains why it is a little lighter than some rivals). Chord uses what it calls 'dynamic coupling' here; whatever any transient demand is presented to the amplifier stages, the positive and negative rails remain in perfect equilibrium, with each compensating for the demands made on the other. The output signal path is devoid of sound-degrading fuses or resistive components employed for overload sensing. Chord says it uses "the best high voltage, lateral structure MOSFETs available"; these run warm, but not hot, likely due to the sliding bias design.

This new MkII version gets a range of tweaks inside, from a new power-control and sequencing board to refinements to the filter



components of the subsequent amplifier stages, to insure greater high-speed performance while maintaining overall stability. Numerous circuit board and earthing changes have been made to improve high-current power flow across the units and help extend the product's lifecycle, the company says. There's also a reduction of the value of the emitter balancing resistors in the first long tail pair in the second

Get set for a light show like fireworks night...

intermediate stage of the amplifier, for a faster overall response; this is also said to improve the high frequency response.

The SPM 1200 MkII gets a lavishly finished, beautifully styled case, which looks more like something you'd see in a science fiction film than on your hi-fi rack. Just to add to the thrill, it is lit up like the Pudong side of Shanghai; gasp in amazement as green, yellow and blue LEDs scatter a dramatic light-show inside and outside the case. Personally I am not a fan, but at least Chord has tried to do something different.

A beautiful slice of high-end amplifier that does what it says on the tin

RCA and XLR inputs, plus chunky speaker terminals complete the rear picture, plus an (annoyingly) non-standard IEC mains inlet.

Sound quality

The big Chord doesn't sound as showy as it looks – its sonic character is more subtle than its appearance. What you get is a well engineered solid-state power amplifier that has very few faults and shines through its overall, across-the-board competence. It doesn't have a big, fun character and nor will it wow you and amaze; rather, it gets on with the job asked of it with consummate ease, genuine ability and no small degree of finesse.

Simple Minds' *Someone, Somewhere, In Summertime* is an unalloyed pleasure. The SPM 1200 carefully sets up a large, deep soundstage, inside which instruments are placed with meticulous accuracy. Whether it is the pounding snare drums or those dreamy, ethereal vocals, everything is rock-solid and clear as day. Indeed

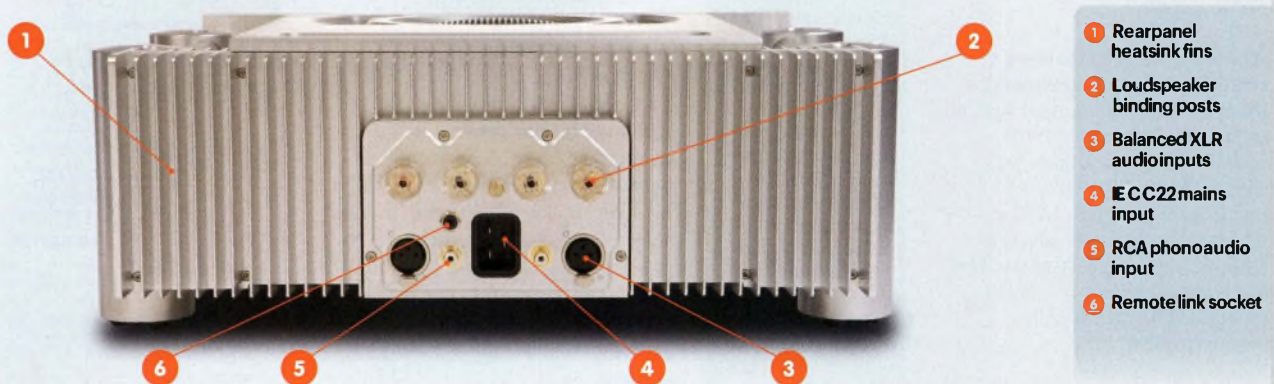
this amp sounds very transparent, letting the listener right into the mix, allowing them to focus on all the different strands with consummate ease. Unlike some rival solid-state designs, the sound is never opaque or hazy; there's none of that transitory grey mist that so often permeates the middle-distance of the recorded acoustic. Rather, the Chord opens a wide window on to the music for you.

However, it does not come over as bright. There's no sense of the white halogen light that the full Class A Musical Fidelity AMS50 shines on things, for example. This isn't to say that the Chord sounds dark and velvety like many tube amps either, it's just that it strikes a really skilful balance between the two extremes. This means you can play a very forward and bracing track, such as *Period Music* by High Llamas, and its searing steel string guitars won't take your head off. To my ears it gets the balance just right.

Its rendition of Zero 7's beautiful *I Have Seen* is a rare pleasure, showing the Chord's refreshing lack of character. It takes an even-handed approach – throwing out lots of lovely delicate, filigree detail. Again, I find instruments and vocals located with a vice-like grip, and the bass is allowed to power along purposefully without disturbing any other part of the music. Dynamic peaks are well signposted and it lets the music progress in a lively, enjoyable way.

However, what some folk won't like about the Chord is precisely this – music never sounds glorious, passionate or gushing; it doesn't tear out its very heart and soul in trying to tell you what's going on. Rather, the SMP 1200 MkII sits back slightly, being beautifully detailed, perfectly poised, refined, subtle and gently powerful without quite rocking out. Then again, hi-fi that gives a larger than life, over-emotive sort of

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Rearpanel heatsink fins
- 2 Loudspeaker binding posts
- 3 Balanced XLR audio inputs
- 4 IEC22mains input
- 5 RCA phonoaudio input
- 6 Remotelink socket

Q&A

John Franks

Chord founder and chief designer



DP: How does the sliding bias system work, in simple terms?

JF: Sliding bias turns the power FETs on more when they are not under load and so the rails have more potential voltage. It's like a checks and balances system, whereby allowing the rail voltages to flex (like bamboo) and become progressively stiffer (exponentially) as their voltages decrease under loading, enables the power devices to put more power into the load, rather than themselves.

Can you explain what's special about the output devices?

Our power MOSFETs are very special dual die parts, made for us by a respected aerospace company and carry our name and part number. They have very soft turn-on/turn-off characteristics, meaning they like to work in their transition region, whereas standard epitaxial power transistors do not, as they have a hard snap-on/snap-off character, giving rise to odd harmonic distortion, which is unpleasant.

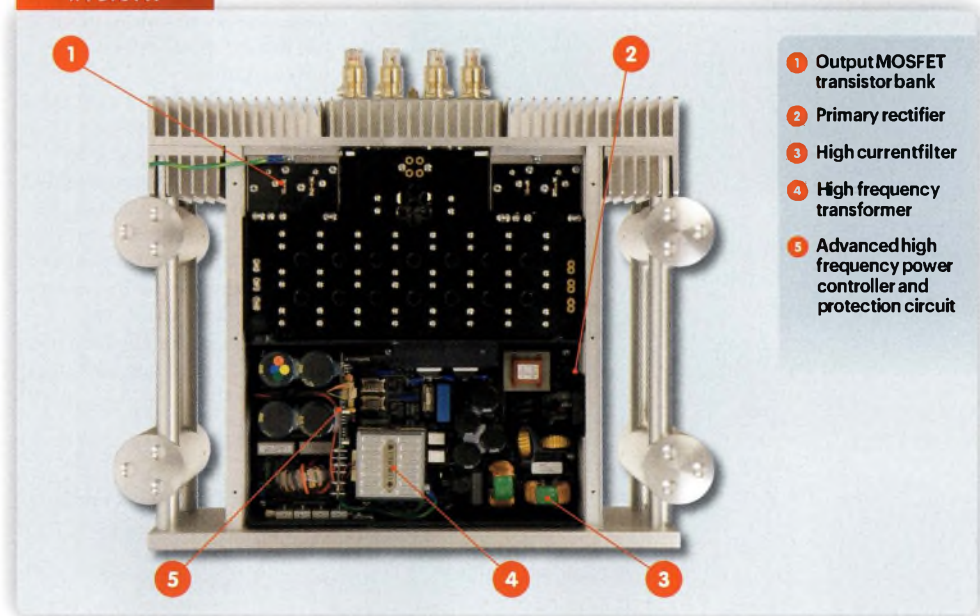
Can you explain how 'Dynamic Coupling' works?

It's a unique system where the positive and negative rails are mutually coupled by a strong magnetic flux. If a high demand is put on one rail, the required energy will actually be drawn equally from both rails. The rails will, therefore, stay completely and perfectly balanced at all times with the mid ground point and each rail in turn. Simply put, this system keeps the amplifier in balance dynamically and the reference point perfectly clean.

Why have you opted to use a switched mode power supply?

Our power supply is a self-contained, self-monitoring module and is fundamental to our amps' exceptional performance. A sophisticated mains input filter ensures that the power supply is shielded from disturbed mains input and is completely untouched by emissions from the amplifier.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Output MOSFET transistor bank
- 2 Primary rectifier
- 3 High current filter
- 4 High frequency transformer
- 5 Advanced high frequency power controller and protection circuit

presentation is invariably flawed in other respects; so it's a case of swings and roundabouts. The Chord treads a careful line, thinking discretion to be the better part of valour.

Bass is always tight and well defined. It is tuneful too, but not in a Naim sort of way and so doesn't dominate the proceedings. At the other end of the frequency range, the treble proves to be very much like the midband, which is of course to say glass-clear and wonderfully detailed and delicate. This gives the music a lovely spatiality and airy feel. Everything feels so even and well integrated and this holds for differing volume levels, too. There's no sense of the big Chord having obvious strengths and weaknesses, or of favouring certain aspects of the music to the exclusion of others.

This is why it is so good both with complex electronica and also classical; it's a dispassionate friend that won't overdo any aspect of the mix, so you can listen right in, way beyond your room's rear wall. Cue up the Linn hi-res recording of the *Allegro* to Bach's *5th Brandenburg Concerto*, and the insight and evenness of the Chord is a revelation; it renders the timbre of the instruments with great skill and accuracy, giving you an authentic sense of being in the concert hall.

However, play an old scratchy vinyl of Nick Lowe's glorious new-wave standard *So It Goes*, and the Chord won't quite get you up out of your sofa and pogo-ing. Suddenly, all that delicacy, balance, and poise aren't quite so useful, and instead what's needed is more of headbanger of an

amp. Sure, you can enjoy the lovely textural elements of the recording, and tap your foot appreciatively, but there's a lack of urgency to the proceedings that some will miss. This isn't a criticism as much as an observation; there's no universal panacea in high-end amplifiers, and you buy to suit your taste!

Conclusion

Here's a beautiful slice of high-end amplifier exotica that does what it says on the tin. It has massive power, superlative build and a sound that befits its price. If you ever wanted an archetypal example of a great-all-round solid-state amplifier – one that makes the best of the breed's strengths and deftly side-steps its weaknesses, this is it. There are a few other super-amps with just a touch more attitude and some with more finesse – but the Chord SPM 1200 MkII offers a brilliantly judged balance. Just don't forget to wear your shades when you switch it on! ●



Musical Fidelity's AMS50 (£8,900) is an obvious rival. This is a massive behemoth of a thing, making the Chord look like a mini-system component! It's black, has heavy heatsinking and it weighs a tonne. It gives 50W in full Class A, making one of the most powerful solid-state amps to run in this mode – that means a lot of heat. Your electricity bill will be shocking. Sonically, it's clearer and more incisive than the Chord, but the difference isn't huge and the Chord has more wallop should you need it. The Musical Fidelity sounds a little brighter and more forensic, whereas the Chord is smoother with a slightly richer tonality.

Ni-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Superlative design and build; powerful, well-balanced sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** The light-show won't be to all tastes; price!
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Fabulous all-round, high-end solid-stage power amp
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL





"Get up and drive your funky soul!"

James Brown

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Hitting the big time

The littlest member of Dali's Mentor family is very small indeed, but as **Ed Selley** discovers it can produce a big performance

Doing things in its own particular way is very much what the Dali brand is all about. Examples include extensive use of ribbon tweeters and the development of a wood fibre material that appears in almost all of the ranges the company produces. To this end, there are some Dali design features that generally stand out from the pack. Chief among them is that with many of its products making use of both a ribbon tweeter as well as a conventional dome, Dali standmount speakers are often

From the very start of listening, the Menuets subvert expectations

among the largest in their category. So it is with the Mentor range, which sits towards the middle of the Dali lineup. The great majority of the range is equipped with two tweeters and has cabinet dimensions to suit.

The exception to this is right at the bottom of the Mentor family tree. The Mentor Menuet is not only small for a Dali speaker, but tiny by any usual little speaker standards. The petite Dali sits as part of the Mentor range, but also part of a distinct family of products in its own right.

To this end the Menuet has some trademark Dali features like the wood fibre mid bass driver – which differs from a conventional paper driver thanks to the introduction of wood fibres into the paper pulp prior to forming and doping them. At 100mm, this is smaller than the ones used elsewhere in the Mentor range. As the cabinet is only 25cm high, the Menuet is fitted with a single tweeter – in this case a 28mm soft dome unit used in the rest of the range, which covers the full upper frequency spectrum rather

than handing over to a ribbon. The cabinet is rear ported, but the port is built into the recess where the speaker terminals are fitted. This means that the port can be angled downwards to allow the Dali to be mounted close to – or indeed on – walls. The rear of the speaker also features a pre-drilled mount for a dedicated wall bracket.

This ability to be used near walls extends to the entire way that the Menuet has been voiced and the Dali can make use of them to augment the bass response. Given that a speaker as dinky as the Menuet is going to have limits to the frequency extension it is capable of, this makes a considerable degree of sense, although the UK has never historically been big on wall mounting. By the same token, the port arrangement means that the Menuet is unlikely to mind being placed on a stand near a wall either.

As a half member of the Mentor family, the Menuet is slightly different in appearance to the rest of the range, but in some ways is none the worse for that. It does without a separate front baffle to the cabinet and is instead veneered all the way around. This gives the Dali a faintly retro appearance, but not shamelessly so and the Menuet is unlikely to offend in most domestic situations. The review pair are supplied in a cherry veneer, but a white and black satin finish are also available. The fit and finish is extremely good as well. Although the cabinets are fairly small, they feel solid and well assembled with excellent quality veneering and substantial speaker terminals helping the Menuet feel worth every penny of the asking price.

As wall mounting is not a practical proposition for the review, the Menuets are placed on a pair of Soundstyle Z60 stands and tested with a Naim Supernait and Cambridge Audio 851A with source

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Dali Mentor Menuet

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
4.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
150 x 250 x 230mm

FEATURES
• 28mm soft dome
tweeter
• 100mm wood
fibre cone
• 86dB quoted
sensitivity
• 4ohms quoted
nominal impedance

DISTRIBUTOR
Dali UK

TELEPHONE
0845 6443537

WEBSITE
dali-uk.co.uk

equipment courtesy of a Naim ND5XS and Parasound Zdac. From the very start of listening, the Dalis subvert expectations. Whatever trickery Dali might claim goes into the Menuet cannot prevent you from subconsciously expecting it to sound small. To be clear, the Dali is still not going to shake buildings to their foundations or double up as a FA speaker, but it sounds far bigger than a model with a frontal area smaller than a piece of A4 paper should.

Sound quality

Not only is there more bass output than you might expect, but the size of the performance that the Menuet can generate is also genuinely surprising. The Menuet's ability to reproduce even fairly sizeable pieces of music with a convincing scale and believable soundstage is something that takes a little getting used to, but is exceptionally welcome nonetheless. With a small amount of toe-in, they produce an extremely consistent and spacious presentation that manages to convey a genuine sense of height and depth as well as good stereo width. While a full orchestra is a challenge for a speaker this small, the Dali puts up more of a fight than you might expect.

These unexpected attributes do not come at the expense of the areas that ▶

The Menuet isn't just small in the Mentor range, it's also tiny compared to most rivals



Q&A

Matt Miller
UK sales for Dali



ES: When wall mounted, does the angled bass port allow for bass augmentation from the wall?

MM: The Mentor Menuet was originally designed to be wall mounted, which is why the bass reflex port has been cleverly engineered to be slightly longer by firing down at an angle into the terminal bay, this allows the cabinet to be tuned to a lower frequency. The use of the wall brackets means that the speakers will be positioned at the ideal distance from the wall for the optimal bass performance. In the UK I would say that 90% of the Menuet speakers sold are either shelf or stand mounted, whereas in Scandinavia, the figure would be more in favour of wall mounting.

Does the absence of the ribbon tweeter that's used in the rest of the range give the Menuet a different sonic character to other Mentor speakers?

Our hybrid tweeter system (soft dome and ribbon) offers the best of both worlds in terms of frequency response and dispersion patterns to give the sound stage a real 3D image in terms of width height and depth to the sound. However, due to the extremely compact design of the Menuet, the use of the ribbon tweeter is not possible. There is a sonic difference in terms of overall performance, but the Menuet does have the Mentor family sound, albeit on a smaller scale. We consider them as the best compact loudspeaker we have ever made.

Are there any electronics that Dali feels works especially well with the Menuet speaker?

I have tried many different electronics with the Menuets and prefer to say that there is no right or wrong when it comes to sound. The listener will decide what is right for them.

IN SIGHT



- 1 28mm soft textile dome tweeter
- 2 Veneer-wrapped cabinets
- 3 Recessed bass reflex port
- 4 100mm wood fibre mid/bass driver

a small speaker should excel at, though. The Dali is wonderfully, almost beguilingly coherent. The two drivers integrate to such an extent that they almost function with the same integration as a single driver design and this cohesion gives them a midrange that is detailed, beautifully defined and immensely enjoyable. The unplugged version of *Year Zero* by Alabama 3 is presented with a real sparkle and energy to it. The guitar is laden with fine detail and it complements the vocals perfectly with no sense that one is being favoured over the other.

Some of the perceived strength of the midrange is down to the Menuet being relatively restrained in terms of treble output. It never feels muffled or artificially reined in and never seems especially explicit at the top end. This is not necessarily a bad thing in that the Menuet is a very forgiving speaker in terms of poorer or more strident recordings, but it does mean that pieces that are more dependent on treble can feel less convincing than some similarly priced models.

The most impressive part of the overall performance is the realism and sweetness never overwhelms a sense of fun and liveliness that it brings to most music. The Dali is accurate without being analytical and it manages to latch on to rhythms with an effortlessness that means they are very easy to listen to for long periods of time. With the Cambridge Audio 851A especially, there is a sense of synergy that is very hard not to like with the slightly matter of fact performance of the 851A keeping the Menuets under control, but still letting their agility and cohesion entertain and enthrall. In keeping with a number of small speakers, the Dalis

benefit when there's plenty of power to show what they are capable of and they will show up limitations with lesser amplification.

Conclusion

Provide it with any degree of care and attention, and the Dali makes a hugely persuasive case for itself. The Menuet might be a small speaker, but it has a performance that means it stands its ground against larger designs. The sheer enjoyment it brings to most music is something that is special at any price and the Menuet is good enough in so many areas that it effortlessly distracts you from wanting more bass output or top end extension. Of course, £900 is a considerable amount of money for what is a very small box, but place this diminutive Dali in a small to medium sized room and make sure your partnering equipment is up to the job and there are few speakers at the price that can hold your attention as effectively. When you consider the handsome appearance and very high quality of finish, you have a speaker that deserves an audition ●

HOW IT COMPARES

The closest competitor we've seen to the Menuet is the Neat Iota. The two speakers are similar in many ways and intriguingly different in others. The Dali is a small conventional speaker while the Neat is rather different from the rest of the company's range in the pursuit of being as small as possible. In terms of performance, both speakers sound larger than they look and excel in midrange lucidity, which makes them extremely enjoyable to listen to. Where they differ is which frequency extreme they are best at. The Dali has a useful extra amount of low end bass than the Neat, but the Iota hits back with a superior top end thanks to its ribbon tweeter.

Ni-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ | LIKE: Cohesive and entertaining sound; great build and looks |
| VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Some limits to frequency extremes reveal shortcomings with lesser electronics |
| BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ | WE SAY: A speaker that entertains and sounds far larger than its small size suggests |
| EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★ | |

OVERALL



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Back in black

Arcam's latest little black box ups the feature count **Ed Selley** finds out if the sound quality still delivers the goods

After a lengthy hiatus from the DAC market, Arcam rolled its sleeves up and returned to the category in 2010 with the rDAC. Since then, the company has extended its range of 'r' products including the truly excellent rBlink Bluetooth receiver and simple rPac DAC. At the other end of the product scale, the company has also launched the flagship D33 DAC that is designed to go toe-to-toe with the increasing numbers of high-end offerings at a (relatively) sane price.

With the rDAC now over three years old and the DAC market moving at a fast pace thanks to demand and technical progress, Arcam has put its little silver box out to pasture and replaced it with a slightly bigger black one. The irDAC might look like a corn fed rDAC with a new paint job, but internally the new model is almost completely different and in many

ways has more in common with the D33 at five times the price. If Arcam has succeeded at the age-old challenge of putting a quart in a pint pot, this could be a very impressive product indeed.

The biggest single change in the irDAC is the switch from a Wolfson DAC to a Burr Brown PCM1796 chip, which has more in common with the rest of the Arcam range. This is partnered with fairly elaborate power supply arrangements. Although the irDAC uses a wall wart power supply, internally it utilises eight separately regulated power supplies that have been developed making use of the experience gained from the low noise supplies in the D33. The irDAC also uses the jitter reduction circuitry developed for its bigger brother.

The good news is that as well as boasting all this technology, the irDAC also offers more connectivity than its

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Arcam irDAC
ORIGIN
UK/China
TYPE
Digital to analogue converter
WEIGHT
0.7kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
190 x 120 x 44mm
FEATURES
• Burr Brown PCM1796 DAC
• 24/192kHz capable across all inputs
• Two coaxial, two optical and one USB input
• IR remote control
DISTRIBUTOR
Arcam
TELEPHONE
01223 203200
WEBSITE
arcam.co.uk

predecessor – and much of the competition as well. The Arcam has two optical and two coaxial inputs as well as a USB-B input all of which gain 24/192kHz capability. It also features an additional USB A socket that can be connected to an Apple device (including Lightning connector units) and take a digital signal straight off them. These are partnered with an RCA analogue output and a single coaxial digital output. Like the rest of the Arcam digital range, the irDAC is exclusively line level and anyone looking for a DAC/preamp will have to go elsewhere. That being said, in terms of inputs, it is now one of the best specced out there. Pretty much the only feature that could have been wished for would have been the fantastic Bluetooth module from the rBlink, but this would undoubtedly have pushed the price up.

The other new arrival and the reason why the Arcam is called the irDAC in the first place is the remote control that it is supplied with. This allows for input selection and offers control over some playback software on computers – it certainly works with iTunes, Foobar and Spotify. The remote appears to be lifted wholesale from the D33 – the 'AES' and 'Filter' buttons don't do anything in relation to the irDAC – and it is no beauty, but given that most of the competition aren't supplied with one at all, it is a

welcome addition – especially as the volume buttons appear pleasingly promiscuous and can also control a Naim Supernait and Cambridge Audio 851A integrated amplifiers.

The general fit and finish of the Arcam is good, too. The irDAC is part of the rapidly expanding rSeries range of components, which means it shares the one-piece body with removable underside and back panel. The little black unit feels impressively substantial and neat touches from the original rDAC like the input lights that glow red when selected and green when signal locked, are retained.

There wasn't anything significantly wrong with the original rDAC, but as well as the useful extra features the irDAC manages to take matters a good few steps forward. The Arcam has a two-setting USB input, the first is driverless and works to 96kHz, while the second uses a driver and allows for 192kHz playback. With the driver installed (which came off the D33 webpage suggesting that the bigger DAC has loaned another piece of technology to the irDAC), the Arcam gets an awful lot right.

Sound quality

In the time honoured fashion of many Arcam products the irDAC is not an especially showy performer. It is impressively smooth and refined and has a tonal balance that should complement a wide variety of different music. The Cinematic Orchestra's *To Build a Home* is wonderfully natural with Patrick Watson's vocals given a crispness and definition that lends the performance a realism and presence that is hard not to like. The soundstage is a solid and believable construction that places the performers in a way that gives them a convincing relationship to one another.

Where the irDAC differs from some older Arcam products is that there is a

sense of excitement that wasn't always present before. Its sound isn't wearing or frenetic – it never makes the Cinematic Orchestra sound anything other than as smooth – but ask it to pick up the pace and it does so with a confidence that was not present before. This gives the irDAC an assurance with certain genres that vastly aids the appeal.

Listening to the eponymously titled debut album by The Music, a jarring and occasionally harsh joyride of rhythm and drive, the Arcam just

Bass is clean, detailed and has the same tonal realism as the upper registers

grips and goes. There is a sense of life and entertainment to the irDAC that hasn't been evident in some of the safer-sounding Arcam products of old. At the same time, the irDAC flatters the recording but does it so artfully that you really only notice when you listen to the same album through something less forgiving.

This fleetness of foot does seem to be at the expense of a tiny bit of bass depth and the Arcam is not the most seismic of performers in the category, but the bass response it does have is detailed, clean and has the same tonal realism as the upper registers do. There are other DAC's at the price that can dig a little deeper though, and in a system with limited bass extension this may be noticeable. The irDAC also manages to be extremely consistent in performance across all the rear panel inputs and the irDAC gives a perceptive performance boost to all sources.

The Arcam also proves to be equally adept with compressed material and 256kbps MP3 files on an iPhone and Spotify via a laptop sound perfectly

enjoyable and the irDAC avoids revealing the limitations of these smaller files.

At the other end of the scale, high resolution files played via a laptop into USB or via a Naim ND5XS streamer via coaxial retain their wonderful weight and realism. Antonio Forcione and Sabrina Scuibba's *Take Five* is fantastically immediate with exceptional detail retrieval. Even if the idea of installing the USB driver doesn't appeal and you don't mind being limited to 24/96, the Arcam still sounds impressively real with the high-res version of Muse's *The 2nd Law*.

Conclusion

The irDAC is certainly an ambitious undertaking, but Arcam has managed to pull it off with considerable finesse. This is an exceptionally well specified digital-to-analogue converter for the £400 asking price and – most importantly of all – the irDAC backs the spec up with a performance that combines everything that is likeable about Arcam with a drive and sense of fun that raises the bar even higher. If you are looking for a line-level DAC under £500, you can call off the search – Arcam has built all the DAC you're ever likely to need ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Excellent spec, solid build, lively and refined sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Slight lack of bass depth

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: A superbly accomplished and beautifully realised DAC that should appeal to a wide variety of users

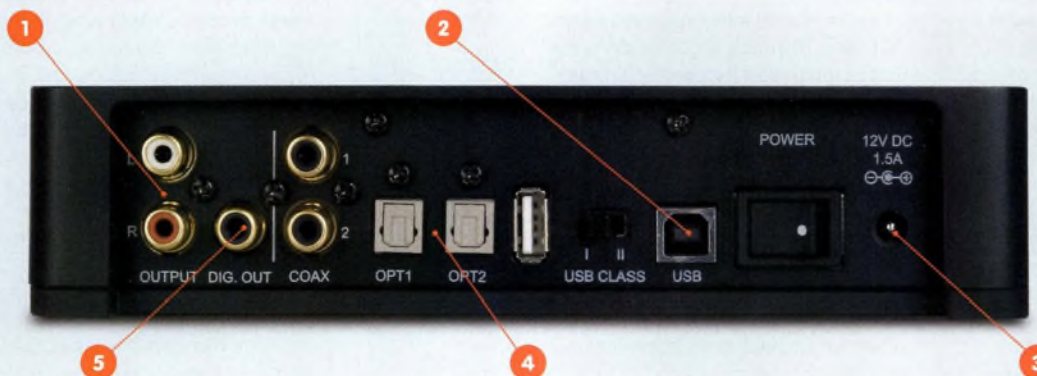
FEATURES



OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



- 1 Stereo analogue outputs
- 2 USB input with driver/driverless switch
- 3 PSU input
- 4 Optical inputs
- 5 Coaxial digital output



Pitch perfect

Already a big fan of the original Nait **Malcolm Steward** takes a look at the latest Naim integrated amplifier, the 5si

I have a long history with the Naim Nait, one that stretches right back to the release – and subsequent purchase – of the original Nait in 1983. In fact, I rescued that amplifier from my loft immediately so that I could listen to it alongside this, its 2013 counterpart. This proves to be a rather fascinating exercise with fundamentally little to choose between the two integrated amplifier designs in musical terms. However, their cosmetics are dramatically different with the new Nait 5si version displaying considerably more control, precision, poise and modernity about its presentation, sounding more muscular and grippier than its elder brother. In terms of musical fluency, though, they are extremely close in the way that they convey music's fundamentals and its nuances.

The original Nait was one of the first so-called half-width products that Naim manufactured, but the design eventually changed – at the turn of the century – and the amplifier became full-width, in the familiar triptych-style case around 43cm wide, which is the format adopted by the Nait 5si.

The 5si is a slick looking confection and looks distinctly more modern and professional than its 'chrome bumper' equivalent from the eighties, but it remains minimalist with only four, line-level inputs and no features or facilities to speak of.

When the Nait was introduced there was never any discussion about how many watts it could produce, which Naim's founder and then MD, Julian Vereker, considered an irrelevance. What he believed more important was that the design could deliver appreciable current into any

real-world loudspeaker that were to demand it. That the amplifier only output around 13W was never mentioned because it was not deemed relevant.

Times change, though, and the new Nait 5si is quoted as having an output of 60W into 8 ohms. The power output has increased from its previous 50W to 60W due to a larger transformer and an improved power supply. Components have been upgraded in critical areas such as the power amplifier stage – where small signal capacitors have been changed to high-quality film types. The PCB layout and wiring loom have been improved following the company's experience with other products like the DAC-V1.

The original Nait never had a headphone jack, but the 5si features a high-quality Class A headphone amplifier feeding a 6.35mm output connection. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that there are now three Nait models in the range – the 5si, the XS and the SuperNait, the Nait 5si is perhaps the closest relative to the 1983 original. It is a bare-bones, minimalist design and although it claims more power, a wider dynamic range, more slam, lower noise and a better defined, more powerful low end than the iconic original, the 5si's character remains intrinsically the same, but has been given a polish.

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim Nait 5si

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
6.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 70 x 314mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 60W into 8 ohms, 90W into 4 ohms
- 4 analogue inputs: 2x DIN, 2x RCA
- 6.35mm TRS headphone socket
- Custom-designed toroidal transformer with two separate windings

DISTRIBUTOR
Naim

TELEPHONE
01722 426600

WEBSITE
naimaudio.com



The original Nait also had a captive mains lead, which meant that those who wanted to fine-tune its performance with an after-market cable – not that it was fashionable in those days – would need to get inside the casework with a soldering iron. Owners of a 5si risk no such danger because the new amplifier is fitted with an IEC connector to accept a regular ‘kettle-style’ mains lead. Like those on some more expensive components, the IEC connector features an almost ‘loose’ attachment in order to dissipate vibrations trying to find their way into the component through the mains cable. Even though this might suggest some compromise

Design simplicity is key to the Nait 5si’s charm

of structural integrity it does, in truth, enhance it.

Sound quality

The 5si demonstrates a pleasingly open, revealing sound and it has no trouble in distinguishing between the Naim HDX in streamer mode and the Krell Connect, both pulling files off my primary music server over Ethernet and feeding them to the amplifier by way of a Chord Company Sarum Tuned Array, BNC-connected, Naim DAC. The character of each of the different streamers emerges with clear distinction even when those differences are truly subtle.

For example, playing Keith Richards’ *Whip It Up* from *Live at the Hollywood Palladium* it captures the propulsive urgency of the snare compared to the more laid-back attack and drive on the *Talk is Cheap* album. It also latches onto the ‘loose but tight’ bass playing and how it powers the song so effortlessly. *Locked Away* shows that the Nait remains a highly persuasive musical performer, but in its latest guise it is equally convincing in presentational terms, laying out a well defined, broad and deep soundstage with clearly positioned instruments occupying distinct spaces within the mix and retaining their individuality, timbre and character.

The Nait contrasts the two albums vividly, demonstrating the superior groove of *Live at the Hollywood Palladium* over *Talk is Cheap*, but also the latter’s rather more pristine recording. The stereo stage is better defined, as is the vivid dynamic portrayal of instruments like the drum kit.

Listen to David Solid Gould Vs Bill Laswell’s *Dub Cf The Passover*, in particular the track *Once We Were Dub* to hear truly vivid instrumental separation and dynamics – especially on the percussion. There is quite brilliant layering in the soundstage

– especially the vocals. There is an excellent portrayal of instruments at the frequency extremes: stygian bass and shimmering, metallic cymbals – it’s truly a high-end portrayal with the Krell Connect front end! Timbral accuracy is also readily obvious on the bass and keyboards – and sounds appear incandescent.

The amplifier really comes to life conveying the two-drummer set-up on *Burn* – the latest 24/96 Naim Label rip by the Sons of Kemet. It

The 5si provides an excellent portrayal of instruments at the frequency extremes

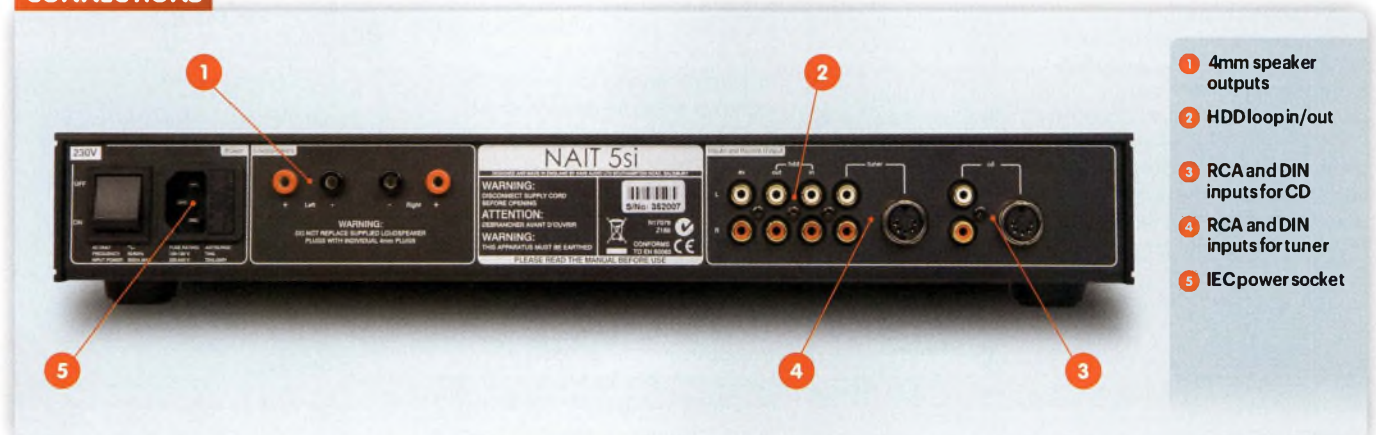
vividly contrasts the styles of the two drummers and generates the sort of excitement that I am sure the band originally set out to create among its audiences playing live.

The Nait proves exceptionally communicative with vocalists of all sorts: from Vinicius Cantuarria on his album with Bill Frisell *Lagrimas Mexicanas* to Marianne Faithfull singing *The Crane Wife 2* on the album *Easy Come Easy Go*. Both demonstrate effectively the concept of conveying the emotion in a piece of music or in a performance.

The Nait 5si also fares well with the wonderfully etched note shape of Joe Pass’ guitar on *Virtuoso*. It vividly brings out the slickness of his dextrous phrasing.

Naturally, an amplifier – especially a 60W integrated – is going to have its limitations, levels beyond which it cannot be pushed and types of music that tax its capabilities. The performance of the 5si, of course, can only stretch so far, but the capabilities of this little amplifier are truly exceptional. For example, it retains the complete tonality of the piano ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 4mm speaker outputs
- 2 HDD loop in/out
- 3 RCA and DIN inputs for CD
- 4 RCA and DIN inputs for tuner
- 5 IEC power socket

Q&A

Roy George

Naim technical director



MS: What was the design brief for the Nait 5si?

RG: The brief was to increase power output: significantly, include a headphone output and to improve sound quality unequivocally.

How did you go about improving the sound quality?

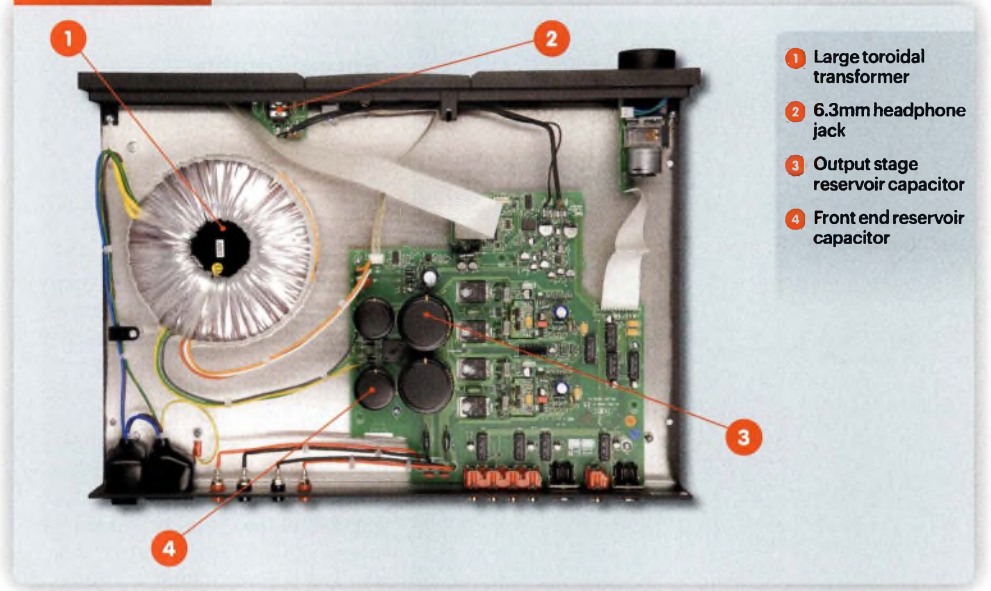
The new Nait 5si builds on the positive qualities of the previous Nait, being a further evolution and improvement of the line. This latest line of Nait includes a passive preamplifier stage followed by a high gain amplifier carefully matched to the passive preamplifier to optimise combined performance. For the Nait 5si, as the previous two iterations of Nait, every aspect of this minimalist design has been considered and improved to maximise performance. These include enhancements from PCB tracking details based on years of experience, minimising capacitance between output transistors and chassis by using ceramic heat transfer blocks and mechanical mounting details of all constituent components to minimise the effect of music-related vibrations on performance.

So where are the differences?

Naim has always emphasised the importance of power supply design on the resulting sound quality of hi-fi electronics and so the Nait 5si power supply is much improved over its predecessor's. The transformer's volume is more than 25 percent larger, considerably increasing its power delivery capability.

Also, since the development of the previous Nait, Naim has conducted more research on component selection for several critical locations in the circuit topologies and benefits of this were applied to the Nait 5si. Many capacitors and resistors have been upgraded to replacements with improved sound quality.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Large toroidal transformer
- 2 6.3mm headphone jack
- 3 Output stage reservoir capacitor
- 4 Front end reservoir capacitor

HOW IT COMPARES

Comparing the Nait 5si to the slightly more expensive - and twice as powerful - Creek Evolution 5350 proves enlightening because the Nait reveals that although the excellent-sounding latter - with its claimed 120W into 8 ohms and 200W into 4 ohms - excels in presentational terms, but in terms of musical communication the Nait has a distinct edge to its performance. Nonetheless, the 5si operates with a noticeable ease and grace that certainly eluded the original Nait. The Nait 5si ultimately sounds a bit more convincing and believable with challenging material than the highly capable Creek does.

when pushed and does not begin to sound strained or uncomfortable as many do: it retains the complete harmonic complexity of notes and their full dynamic contrast, and so, the player's expression and the drama of the composition.

Edgard Varèse's avant garde, percussion-led, orchestral masterpiece *Ameriques* poses a stern test for any hi-fi with its unconventional instrumentation and arrangements. It requires an amplifier to exert maximum grip and dynamic control throughout: the delicate triangle requires similar dynamic expression as does the thunderous bass drum and magnificently strident brass. The Nait 5si demonstrates an amazingly robust and credible portrayal of the Utah Symphony Orchestra throughout this challenging composition mixing extreme orchestral climaxes with the most delicate of percussion interjections. It also seems able to maintain a wonderful perspective on the layout of the orchestra and the acoustic space in which the performance takes place. Most importantly, it maintains Varèse's vision throughout and brilliantly conveys the feelings he experienced as he composed this daring and adventurous work. This is not a recording that is an ideal 'demonstration' piece in conventional terms and it is certainly far too demanding for the majority of true high-end systems. That an inexpensive integrated amplifier can even attempt to play it, let alone make fluent musical sense of it, speaks volumes for the outstanding capabilities of the Nait 5si. I have heard far more expensive pre/power

combinations make this music appear turgid and pointless, which, I believe, is little short of criminal.

This extreme communicative dexterity extends way beyond tackling the fearsome challenge of modernist, avant garde symphonic music and translates to rock music with which the Nait cleverly focuses the listener's mind on the poetry of Lou Reed's lyrics with a gripping ease, emphasising their metre and rhythm and the persuasive way in which the words combine with the music itself to produce a compelling whole - the Nait 5si hammers home the poignant beauty of the poetry in Reed's lines.

Conclusion

The Nait 5si's presentation subtly augments the relevance of the music and enhances its effect upon the listener in a truly captivating way. It's without any sense of blandness and simply goes about conveying beautiful music with appropriate enthusiasm, vigour and poignancy in a way that a great amplifier should ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Superb musical fluency that befits a far more expensive, sophisticated design

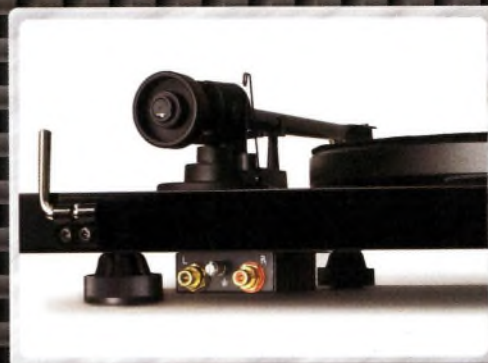
DISLIKE: Not a lot

WESAY: This amplifier offers near-high-end performance and will drive quite demanding loudspeakers with ease

The Carbon Age



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Peaches and cream

If you're after an integrated amplifier with a difference, Peachtree Audio's decco65 is an automatic choice, says **David Price**

Hi-fi was born not long after dinosaurs strode the earth, and do you know what? It hasn't changed much since then. The concept, I mean. Few manufacturers have strayed far from the time-honoured concept of hi-fi separates, where one box does one thing and another does another, and never the twain shall meet.

Peachtree Audio is one of the few that has 'jumped the shark'; it too does hi-fi separates, but they're far more focused on the needs of the end

user than the comfort zone of the manufacturer. Although it's not quite so revolutionary now, this company was one of the first to make amplifiers with DACs in, and the decco65 is precisely this. A very user-friendly device; it has two coaxial digital inputs, one optical and one USB, plus a line-in for analogue sources.

To my eyes, it isn't quite an aesthetic triumph, but its rounded edges, sleek piano gloss black finish and sparkly silver painted alloy fascia owe more to the Apple iDevice generation than

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Peachtree Audio decco65

ORIGIN
US/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier/DAC

WEIGHT
12kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
377 x 111 x 292mm

FEATURES
● ESS Sabre 9023 DAC, 24/192 max. resolution
● 1x coaxial, 1x optical, 1x USB, 1x line input
● Headphone output
● Switchable 6N1P triode tube buffer

DISTRIBUTOR
Anthem AV Solutions Ltd

TELEPHONE
01825 750858

WEBSITE
peachtreeaudio.co.uk

the seventies – something you can't say about the bulk of £1,000 amps. Construction quality is very good and the ergonomics excellent; there are no fiddly switches or complex controls, but there is one feature that stands out from the crowd.

Behind a little window towards the right of the unit, there's a small 6N1P stereo triode valve on display, complete with blue LED uplighting! It's actually a buffer in the preamp section, and not of enormous importance, but I rather like this playful touch – at least it shows a bit of original thinking! Doubtless the hi-fi purists will be scoffing into their real ale, and muttering things about getting a 'real' valve preamp. But you've got to hand it to Peachtree Audio, because people will see it as a great talking point, something to brag about down the pub. It makes hi-fi just that little but more fun.

Inside the interestingly styled casework is a DAC, a preamplifier and a power amp. First things first, and the designer has chosen an ESS Sabre 9023 DAC to do the number crunching. This is a well respected little chip, one that Audiolab – for



example – has had much success with. It provides 24/192 asynchronous USB, which is all you need if you're serious about hi-res; precious few Peachtree customers will lament the lack of DSD compatibility, I suspect. The Class A preamplifier stage offers four digital inputs in total, all of which are galvanically isolated to stop electrical noise entering. Oh, and there's a single analogue line input for your phono stage or tuner.

The decco65 looks like some thought has been put into its design

Another useful feature has to be the Class A headphone amplifier output via the tube, which automatically mutes the speakers when a 6.3mm jack plug is inserted.

The power amplifier uses a Texas Instruments TI 5630 Class D amp chip to give a claimed 65W RMS per channel into 8 ohm speakers, and 95W into 4. Class D is, of course, a highly efficient way of producing power, and because it doesn't waste much energy as heat, more power can be generated in a more compact space. That said, it has its detractors who find the sound can be sterile.

Fundamentally the decco65 has a clean and fairly neutral sort of sound

Ultimately, of course, it isn't the mode of operation that determines this – it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it. But it's interesting to note that the company says the decco65 "has the sonic signature of a great A/B amp".

Sound quality

Here's a genuinely smooth, open and enjoyable sounding little amplifier, one that should win many friends – especially those looking for simplicity and easy listening. Fundamentally, the decco65 has a clean and fairly neutral sort of sound; you won't find a massive bass bloom here or a treble peak there. Instead, whether or not you choose to switch the triode buffer into the circuit, you get a clean and direct rendition of the music that you ask it to play.

That's not to say this Peachtree Audio amp is totally devoid of character; no amplifier has yet been invented about which you can say that. Rather, what the decco65 does

add to the music is pretty benign and what it takes away isn't critical.

The end result is a nicely listenable product that gives you service with a smile, whenever you ask it to. For example, Microdisney's *Loftholdingswood* is a fairly rough and ready sort of recording; you only want to listen to it because it's a great slice of eighties indie pop. Feed the output of an Audiolab 8200A CD player direct into this amp's line input and you hear a surprisingly wide soundstage, with lots of detail, and a good deal of energy, too. There's more power than the on-paper figures suggest; certainly the 65 doesn't run out of puff too easily with Acoustic Energy AE 305 floorstanders to partner it.

Tonally, it's not the most sumptuous; compared to a rival Arcam FMJ A19, for example, you don't get the sense that there's a big, fat bass and a warm, lustrous midband. But still it works well, giving a 'clean' rendition of the music that doesn't impose, and lets you pick through all the elements in the mix to make listening relaxed, but fun. This holds just as much for the warm strains of The Byrds' *Chestnut Mare* as it does for the somewhat harder Microdisney classic; the Peachtree signposts the differences in recording quality very clearly, but doesn't get too analytical. Pushed hard with the volume control rammed against the end stop, this little amp begins to show signs of strain, but short of using it as a disco amp you're unlikely to run into trouble if you use sensible speakers.

One of the main attractions of the decco65 is the digital input functionality, not least because relatively few other amplifiers have this feature – even if the ranks are now growing. So continuing with the Byrds track, I hook up the Audiolab 8200 via a coaxial input, effectively using it as a digital transport. It's fair ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 12V trigger
- 2 S/PDIF coaxial input
- 3 5-way binding posts
- 4 Pre output
- 5 Toslink digital optical output
- 6 Asynchronous USB input

Q&A

Tom Garrett

Technical sales manager,
Anthem AV Solutions



DP: Why do Peachtree products have such unconventional styling?

TG: We have to go back seven years, and all our initial discussions around the potential for computer and streaming audio ended with the conclusion that networked audio was a major part of hi-fi's future. So we needed to design products that would function aesthetically in multiple rooms throughout the house. A stack of 430mm-wide electronics never looked right in master bedrooms but the Peachtree wood wrap, especially with matching speakers, looks at home everywhere. The original seventies solid-state Citation products from Harmon had great wood cabinets, as did Luxman and Accuphase. I'll even say that early Tandberg and Nordmende radios were an influence. With Peachtree we wanted to go smaller and more integrated with soft, rounded curves, as opposed to most modern hi-fi, which looks somewhat industrial.

What type of buyer is the decco65 aimed at, and why?

First are folks with large download collections, looking to upgrade from their plastic computer speakers. Once you show them just how good even a compressed file can sound, they're hooked. Second are entry-level audiophiles. They might spend an hour or so doing serious listening with CD or hi-res files, but also tend to listen to Spotify or Pandora all day long. Fill in the gaps with headphone listening and what you have is a group of consumers who listen to more music than ever before. Third are audiophiles with expensive systems, who want music beyond their main listening rooms.

Why use Class D amplification in Peachtree products?

Well, part of it has to do with low heat output in limited spaces, and part has to do with improvements to the sound of Class D amps in the past 10 years. Not all Class D is created equal, even from within the same manufacturer. A big toroidal transformer is specified because we found the amp simply sounds better.



The wood wrap looks at home everywhere

to say that the company hasn't skimped on the internal DAC's quality; the sound changes to a slightly more direct, detailed sort of rendition, albeit not quite as spacious and tonally rich as the excellent Audiolab. But there is definitely more pace and clarity, which is no small feat considering the talents of the Audiolab's DAC stage, which I'd just been listening to. So the Peachtree's internal DAC is good enough for audiophile use and is certainly not a gimmick, unlike a good number of other amplifiers with this functionality. Ramping the digital quality up to 24/96, I plug my MacBook Pro into the decco65 and summon up my high-quality Audirvana music playing application. The sound on Kate Bush's *Snowflake* is suitably rich and sonorous, dripping with the sparkling harmonics of that beautifully recorded piano. The Peachtree pushes the stereo image very wide out into the room, and is deep too; the effect is highly immersive, and really conveys the emotion of the song. Feed it a good hi-res source, and this amplifier sings!

Of course, the decco65 has been designed with one eye firmly on convenience and domestic acceptability, so you wouldn't expect it to completely wipe the floor with its (mostly far more ungainly) price rivals, which have much less of a preoccupation with style and sleekness. In absolute terms, the amp is a little cool tonally, and doesn't quite catch the powerful, exuberant rhythms of punchy dance music such as Visioneers' *Come Play In The Milky Night*. Nor does its soundstage stretch quite as deep as it might, the decco65

preferring to keep things pretty close to the plane of the loudspeakers. But it's still very listenable nonetheless and the same goes for the excellent headphone output – it makes my Philips Fidelio X1 headphones sound quite superb.

Conclusion

Here we have a fine sounding machine that provides easily accessed, one-box functionality. It takes a digital signal from wherever, converts it to analogue and amplifies it to a high standard, with the minimum of fuss, space and hassle. It has plenty of power for most people's listening rooms and loudspeakers, and gives a pleasantly enjoyable sort of sound with no nasties. Importantly, it also looks like someone has actually designed it, rather than just scooped it off the lab bench into a black metal box. If you're looking for an amiable, one-box amplifier and DAC then, this is well worth trying out. It's a nice package that makes music easy to access and fun to play ●



HOW IT COMPARES
If it's a lifestyle system you're after, Arcam's lovely Solo Mini (£600) is a good choice. It doesn't have the plethora of digital inputs that the Peachtree has, but it has lots of analogue line ins and a built-in CD player and FM/DAB radio. All sources sound superb at the price and design, build and ergonomics are quite brilliant.

If you want like-for-like features Audiolab's Q-DAC/M-PWR (£900) mini separates system gives a range of digital inputs and hi-res USB, but it's fiddlier to use. It is a clear winner for sound with a very tight, powerful and musical performance. But the Peachtree wins hands down when it comes to pure convenience.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ | LIKE: Smooth sound; fine build and ergonomics; nice packaging |
| VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Not quite a match for the best separates, sonically |
| BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ | WE SAY: High quality, fuss-free music listening – what's not to like? |
| FEATURES ★★★★★ | |

OVERALL



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Survival of the **fittest**

Believe the media and the record shop is on its last legs. Not true: the remaining independent secondhand stores are fighting fit and gathering strength as **Simon Berkovitch** discovers

The beloved record shop received another premature burial at the start of the year as the media rang the death knell for HMV. In January, the HMV Group entered administration with debts of £176 million. It survived, bought out by Hilco UK for an estimated £50 million, but the reality is that 103 stores out of 220 have been closed, with a loss of over 1,300 jobs.

These statistics make grim reading, but the media's proclamation that the record shop is dead is plain inaccurate. Slip off the high street and you'll find many secondhand (and new) shops flourishing, and vinyl again the format of choice. Unlike behemoths like HMV, small businesses are developing ingenious ways to survive the recession. In some stores, new and used stock is in successful coalition and social media allows an increased customer base. Other shops are more old school in their approach, but still making a decent fist of things. Meet five match-fit UK businesses and the independent face of 21st-century used record shops...



Meet the experts: team MGE, 50 years, not out

Music & Goods Exchange

No investigation into secondhand record shops is complete without London's Music and Goods Exchange (MGE).

Established in 1967, MGE – AKA Record & Tape or Music and Video – is the UK's longest running chain of secondhand record shops, also incorporating a bookshop and clothing stores under its

umbrella, although “music is the foundation of our business”, senior buyer Richard Scott is keen to point out. The record stores deal in everything from classic rock to cutting-edge dance – with every genre in between. “We have always tried to sell everything,” he says, reflected in the company's “nothing legal refused” policy that has been its cornerstone for nearly 50 years.

The company was recently restructured, with the consolidation of a few departments into the flagship store at 38 Notting Hill Gate – a move that impacted positively on sales. “The record shops have experienced a boost in business, possibly due to an increasing demand in vinyl records. Events like Record Store Day (see page 61) proved just that.”

Record Store Day is just one way in which MGE is evolving, rising to the challenge that online stores and auction sites make to bricks and mortar businesses. “We offer the best-possible prices for records bought and sold to ensure a fresh, ever-rotating range of stock at every price point – from rarities to bargains,” Richard explains. “Initially, eBay and Discogs did take away sellers. However,



it seems that many are returning to real world shops. In our shops, people can get rid of everything they don't want and go home with money in their pockets.”

In an approach also adopted by Oxford's Truck Store, new records are now bedfellows with used stock. “Any type of music that we sell more of than we buy, we now try and source new copies of. That means we can sell over 100 copies of a record during a period in which we only bought five secondhand copies.”

MGE's internet presence is a work in progress, although the company has fully



Keeping the old-school record shop experience alive

Reckless Records

“There’s been a shakeout where only the strong survive,” says Reckless Records’ Charles Taylor – one of the capital’s most robust secondhand record shops.

Charles began Reckless Records in London’s Islington in 1983 and subsequently moved to Berwick Street, Soho. Like MGE, the London store stocks a wide spectrum of musical genres on both used vinyl and CD.

Business is “steady” – a continuing success that Charles attributes to “keeping a light touch on the helm... our employees really know what they’re doing, so it’s a question of letting them get on with it”. Charles is of the opinion that “this was an easy business in the eighties when

CDs were first introduced” but now “top quality stock is never easy to find”. That said, “decent stuff sells for higher prices than before, so we can offer more [when buying].” Recent “decent stuff” includes “a couple of late-sixties/early-seventies rock collections... late-seventies reggae... rare UK folk... even a good Elvis collection”.

Charles is a vocal supporter of the benefits of visiting a physical store instead of delving into the online marketplace:

“Sellers make a choice between the time-consuming hassle of selling on eBay or Discogs for a bit more money and the ease of selling to us for a bit less money.”

In light of comments such of this, it’s obvious that Reckless is very much an old school in-store customer experience – and all the better for it. “We don’t use the internet a lot as we find we can generally sell items in the shop for pretty much the same price as online. Also, customers like to look at records before they buy them.”



Reckless’ Charles Taylor (standing) with The Brainiac 5

RECORD STORE DAY



Record Store Day (RSD) first started in 2007 when more than 700 independent stores in the US came together to celebrate record shop culture, with special vinyl and CD releases made exclusively for the day. The UK has also followed suit, and Saturday 20 April 2013 saw the sixth musical celebration, with 220 new and used record stores alike across the UK and Ireland joining forces for various in-stores from a number of big-name artists such as Paul Weller, exclusive RSD vinyl releases and money-off promotions.

The major celebration in London took place on Berwick Street, in which the Soho street was transformed into a mini music festival during the afternoon, organised by independent record shop Sister Ray, one of the numerous, thriving stores in the area. On the bill was the legendary Wire, Steve Mason, formerly of cult indie act The Beta Band, and one Charles Taylor from Reckless Records. “We helped organise the street festival in Berwick Street on Record Store Day. Our house band, The Brainiac 5, opened the afternoon’s music. It was a great day!” Charles enthuses.

Six of Soho’s best independent record shops – Reckless, Sister Ray, Sounds of the Universe, Black Market Soho, Phonica and Music & Goods Exchange – all joined forces for the day. “We have only recently jumped on the Record Store Day bandwagon, but it was a superb day for our shops,” says MGE’s Richard. “We had drinks, DJs and limited editions. It was definitely worth it and we look forward for future editions. We are now looking forward to the Notting Hill Carnival and have stacked our Soul & Dance Exchange – now at 38 Notting Hill Gate, first floor – with a selection of fresh reggae vinyl.”

In Oxford, Truck Store also got behind the event with gusto, holding three days of in-store events, including a competition to win signed records, exclusive prints for sale and four bands – including John Peel favourite The Wedding Present – playing live in the shop. “We’ve embraced Record Store Day with open arms,” says Carl Smithson. “It ties in very much with what we do here week in week out – celebrate vinyl, cultivate a relationship with music lovers and showcase local talent with in-store gigs. This year we stepped up a level by having a non-Oxford band headline in the form of The Wedding Present. The indie legends played a hot and sweaty intimate gig here, which topped off a great day of live music in-store.”

The results speak for themselves: according to the RSD official website, sales through indie stores reached a new high. RSD singles sales were up around 20 percent and album sales up around 60 percent on the previous year’s already record-breaking total. The day was marked by a massive turnout of those wanting to grab copies of some of the 500 exclusive items on sale in participating stores. Brighton’s Resident Records reported that the first person began queuing at 18:45 the previous day – a punishing 13 hours before the shop opened for business on the Saturday.

embraced the possibilities for promotion, sales and community building afforded by social networks. “We have the usual tools – such as a website, Instagram, Twitter – up and running and regularly post updates of incoming stock. We’ve also made sales via Facebook on account of these updates. Our shops are becoming more interactive, too. For example, when we have unidentifiable white labels, we record sound clips and put



MGE Greenwich has the lot – jazz, folk soul... you name it

these on the record as QR codes. Customers can then listen to them.”

Like other London-based secondhand record stores, steady income comes from tourists visiting Notting Hill Gate, Soho and Greenwich – all locations for MGE shops. “There’s never-ending demand from tourists for classic rock albums – Pink Floyd... The Clash... Doors... Beatles,” explains Richard. Generally, “progressive rock is selling better than ever; many original jazz LPs sell for high prices; and reggae is always popular”.

In a mantra echoed by all of our interviewees, the greatest challenge to shops’ continued survival is “rents and business rates on their way up” says Richard. That said, “this is a business model that has lots of life left”, despite the closure of shops unwilling or unable to move with the times. “Unfortunately for a lot of shops, external factors have forced them to close anyway, but those that are left are in a great position, ready to welcome customers old and new back through their doors.”



Steady business in the 21st century has kept this Mancunian institution going strong

Vinyl Exchange

Just like our other men in the know, Vinyl Exchange's Richard Farnell, director of the Mancunian institution, has record shops in his blood. His behind the counter career started with a Saturday job in Our Price, Sheffield in 1990, moving to Manchester in 1995 and a job at the Vinyl Exchange, starting as a counter person and graduating to vinyl processor, supervisor, manager and eventually owner. He is ideally placed to have a clear overview of both sides of the industry – new and secondhand – spanning over two decades.

Richard says that business for Vinyl Exchange is “steady, but we could always do better. It's not anything like as busy as the late-nineties when turnover was incredible. We used to have people queuing out of the door on busy days.” Vinyl Exchange has adapted to meet this increased challenge. “Online sales are important,” Richard explains. “Our customers are split between online and in-store and the two rarely do both.” To future-proof the business, “the redevelopment of the website is our most ambitious plan for now, and we're hoping that it will become more user friendly.”

Despite auction sites stopping some prime stock coming through the Oldham Street shop's doors for sale, desirable records still appear with pleasing regularity – some of which gets sold on the internet. “I recently bought in a great collection of prog and psych... lots of original pressings and some records worth over £500 each,” Richard enthuses. “We also got a good collection of metal, including a super-rare Venom album, which sold on eBay for £150. These sort of things are great to get, but the real meat and potatoes stuff is usually around the £5-15 region.”

Ben's Collectors' Records

Outside the capital in Guildford, you'll find an even more old-school approach at Ben's Collectors Records. Although a unique experience – largely down to the enthusiasm of owner Ben Darnton, Ben's is like many of the record shops you used to find nestled in off-the-beaten-track locations across the UK. Many of these shops are now endangered species, sadly, but not so Ben's: “Despite the many changes in how we listen to music, business continues to flourish,” he says.

Ben has worked in secondhand record shops since 1980. He set up his first store in Farnham, Surrey, in the early nineties, opening the Guildford branch on Tunsgate in 1993. “[For customers] nothing beats the excitement of scanning a stack of records that haven't been priced yet – that's where my shop is more unusual,” is Ben's succinct assessment of his unique approach. “I've only sold a few things

online, mainly because I don't have the time. I prefer to put everything I buy on display in the shop as soon as it arrives.”

Although not using eBay and Discogs, Ben is far from ignorant of their impact and usefulness when it comes to his business. “Discogs and eBay have helped sales in my shop because they are expensive and I am not, which has helped during the recession. Facebook is good for promoting the latest arrivals in the shop and my regular record fairs. I've also recently opened a Twitter account.”

On HFC's visit, a crowded store mid-week is testament to Ben bucking the trend. Business is in rude health – perversely, with no small thanks to the media's gloomy prognosis. “Recent press coverage of the demise of the record shop in towns has actually been good for me. It has led to (BBC News Business Editor) Robert Peston filming a piece in my shop, which will be aired soon on BBC2. Fame at last!”



Irrepressible enthusiasm and shrewd business sense fuel Ben's

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Dig the new breed: the US-influenced face of contemporary record stores

Truck Store

"We are providing a space for creativity to thrive – the more we connect with the community the better," says Carl Smithson, manager of Truck Store on Oxford's Cowley Road. The store has its roots in Oxfordshire's Truck Festival, appearing first as a pop up in 2010. "We took over an empty shop unit and launched a guerrilla record store." The pop up addressed the lack of independent record shops in the city: "The response from the public was so great that we moved into the shop where the pop-up store had been in February 2011 – and we're still here two-and-a-half years later."

"Business is good," Carl enthuses. "We're trading well against the year and are gearing up for September, when students return and things pick up. We're proof that if you can create a shopping experience that is welcoming and place enthusiasm for



Indie in-stores are key to Truck's success



music at the heart of what you do, record shops have a strong future – as long as the business side of things is done right."

Business at Truck is not just good; it's evolving, too. "We're constantly tweaking the shop to offer the best we can in terms of stock and recommendations. Keen Bean Coffee Club [in-store café] has been a big positive. We've also started holding exhibitions of work from local artists with links to the music scene and also poetry evenings to really stretch the idea of what the shop can be."

Like MGE, Truck's online presence helps to spread the word, branching out to embrace social media. "We've a strong

online presence, but we don't yet do huge amounts of trade through our website. We use it more like a blog for in-store events or

We're proof that if you have enthusiasm for music, record shops have a strong future

recommended albums. We use social media in the same way and regularly take orders or reservations through Twitter and Facebook. It's important to strengthen that connection with customers in every way possible."

WHO KILLED HMV?



"I'm not surprised that HMV got into trouble. They diversified too much and lacked focus – instead of sticking to CD and vinyl they started selling iPods, phones, posters... etc. As for the media, it's the same old lazy stories [about the death of the record shop] every few months, for at least 10 years now." – Richard Farnell, director, Vinyl Exchange, Manchester.

"Maybe the HMV model was condemned. This doesn't mean the record shop as a local, independent business as well as a cultural and social hub is. HMV phased out or marginalised vinyl and got to the point of being little more than a showcase for things you could buy cheaper on the internet or in the super market." – Richard Scott, senior buyer, Music & Goods Exchange, London

"I can see why the likes of HMV are struggling as they have such huge overheads with high rent, rates and the spiralling cost of parking in town centres. HMV would be better off downsizing to smaller premises and concentrating on stocking their shops with new vinyl, as well as CDs, DVDs, T-shirts, books and posters." – Ben Darnton, owner, Ben's Collectors Records, Guildford.

Records are still king

Despite our five shops' different approaches, it's clear that vinyl is still the format of choice and one that will continue to prosper.

"Technology is always evolving, but the vinyl LP seems to endure – especially now it's standard to include a download code," says Carl. "Records are still king," says Ben. Charles and Vinyl Exchange's Richard agree that vinyl is enjoying a renaissance. MGE's Richard nails it: "More and more people are returning to vinyl as a means of listening to music. By buying music on vinyl you are making a statement about how much that music means to you."

And we're delighted to state that it's going take more than a few lazy tabloid stories to kill off this quintet of high-street heavyweights and many others like them ●



Music & Goods Exchange
mgeshops.com

Reckless Records
reckless.co.uk

Ben's Collectors Records
bensrecords.com

Truck Store
truckmusicstore.co.uk

Vinyl Exchange
vinylexchange.co.uk

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Reader review

We've read your reviews and drawn up our shortlist, now take a look at one of the entries that impressed our judging panel

Competition details

Back in the July issue we launched a unique competition giving you the chance to do what we do - write about hi-fi. We asked you to put together 1,000 words about your favourite system and why it means so much to you. The lucky winners will get the chance to write for HFC in a future issue...



A Touch of genius

The price is certainly right, but how does Logitech's Squeezebox Touch compare to more costly rivals?

The arrival of the very competitively priced Squeezebox Touch caused something of a paradigm shift in the music streaming world, where there were already a few high-quality streaming systems on the market; the multi-room Sonos system being one example. So can this £250 streamer really cut it in the hi-fi

market where streamers at that time were at least twice if not three times the price? In one sense the pricing is not dissimilar to a separate SACD/CD multi-player and at a price that makes dipping a toe into the streaming world a genuine possibility, so how does it compare?

One of the great attractions is that the Touch offers a way of bridging the

world of hi-fi and iTunes and the perennial hunt for a particular CD. In a word it offers convenience; to allow accessibility to the music collection on the hi-fi system, iPods and in other rooms in the house.

Logitech products have always had a reputation for straightforward installation and the Touch is no different, the first step being to install the Squeezebox software on your PC or NAS drive depending on where you plan to store your music.

In a multi-room system, the always-on NAS solution has significant benefits as it doesn't rely on the PC being permanently on. The other benefit of the NAS option is that the hard drives will operate at a lower temperature, hence increasing their



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reliability, and can have the added security of mirrored RAID drives. The PC installation simply involves loading the supplied CD into your PC and following the install instructions. Once completed, the software needs to be pointed to your ripped or downloaded music. For a NAS such as the Synology DS211J it's simply a case of downloading the Squeezebox application from Synology's website onto the NAS drive and loading your music onto it.

I typically use Exact Audio Copy and Foobar 2000 to do the ripping to FLAC files and tagging them before transferring them to the NAS. For the most robust streaming performance, either Ethernet or Powerline LAN connections are recommended over wi-fi to connect to the local LAN.

One of the major enemies of low noise audio is digital noise; this is where dedicated streamers like the Touch have an advantage streaming music over Ethernet instead of USB. This is because the Ethernet standard mandates ground isolation, which helps reduce the amount of noise from the source being transferred to the streamer. Upgrading the Touch's power supply to one from Channel Island Audio or Welborne Labs will reduce the supply noise from the original switching supply.

Multi-room environment operation is simple with the Touch able to play independently or to synchronise to any other Touch or other Squeezebox streamer in the house. The infra-red remote is a small one with no display. Other options include using Android or Apple smartphone apps or the Duet wireless remote.

Sound quality

A nice feature is that the analogue and digital outputs can be configured for fixed or variable output, which allows the option of feeding a pre-amp or directly driving a power amp for shortest signal path. Initial listening is done through the pre-amp, with first impressions being a clear and neutral presentation. The hybrid SACD album of the *Allman Brothers Live at Fillmore East* has very good ambience clues and I find it very revealing for soundstage width and depth. The rendition of a FLAC rip of the PCM layer is extremely close to the playback from the Sony SCD-XB770 player, with similar balance and soundstage dimensions. Comparison with the DSD stereo layer demonstrates that the SACD player has the edge in terms of overall soundstage size, smoothness and natural portrayal of this live

performance. Switching to the Rolling Stones' *Midnight Rambler* off the *Hot Rocks* SACD, it's a similar story with the Touch putting in a very close performance to the CD PCM playback. The slightly unfair comparison with the DSD layers may have more to do with the differences in different layers' mixes, but DSD playback has slightly more air and subtly increased bass definition. One possibility is that if the DSD was natively processed from the analogue masters there would be small differences between the DSD processing in FPGAs and the PCM processing in fixed-point DSPs.

Rather than just making the comparison on re-mastered high-definition rock material, the playback

Did the Touch with its small desktop footprint help to shape the market?

of a FLAC rip of Telarc's Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* shows that the Touch can deliver a very convincing performance, with good bass extension to the orchestral drums particularly in *Part II, Le Sacrifice*.

Switching the Touch to directly drive the power amp, the main thing that is noticeable is the small improvement in bass definition on the kettle drums and a slight increase in imaging focus.

Conclusion

The Touch represents an excellent entry point into streamed audio while providing an extremely credible

The Touch: a game changer at a decent price

ABOUT RICHARD

Richard's entry into hi-fi started when he was 14, building a Texan T30+30 kit. He then got a Saturday job at a hi-fi shop in High Wycombe, where he got to build Hafler DH200 and DH101 amplifier kits. John Wright of IMF fame used to come into the shop and convinced him of the merits of transmission-line speakers, leading to him buying a pair of TDL Monitors.

Richard has always been fascinated by how small changes in design can have a significant effect on the listening experience, from component choices to how wiring is routed within a product. His musical taste is quite wide from the rock and blues of Eric Clapton and Led Zeppelin, to a variety of classical music including organ works – for which the TDLs are ideal.

performance at such a great price. With its excellent multi-room support and ease of use, the only real alternatives at the time of release, were priced at two if not three times the cost – which becomes significant if you want to do a multi-room install over three, four or more rooms. Today, with Logitech discontinuing the Squeezebox line with the exception of the SB Radio, the obvious alternatives would be Sonos, the Cambridge Audio Stream Magic 6, Cyrus' Stream X2 or the Naim UnitiQute 2. All of which represent a significant increase in cost over the Touch, although I did see a new one available on Amazon priced at over £700 recently!

The irony is that apart from the Sonos, most of these smaller streamers have arrived since the diminutive Touch was launched. Did the Touch with its small desktop footprint help to shape the market for smaller streamers that could be used in multiple rooms? ●



THIS MONTH



ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

For the best part of ten years, Ed was developing and supporting products from some of the biggest names in audio. He enjoys blogging about his favourite tunes, too.



NEVILLE ROBERTS

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Retired NHS director, electronics engineer and physicist Neville is very much into valve technology. He's a classical music lover and serious vinyl junkie.



TIM JARMAN

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Electronics boffin Tim drives a 1959 Beetle and maintains the best B&O resource on the internet. When he's not rebuilding faulty review kit, he enjoys scouring audio jumbles.



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.



JIMMY HUGHES

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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

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➤ **You look familiar**
Can you explain why some products are reviewed so often? A case in point is the Yamaha AS2000 and the Creek Destiny 2, both in issue 356 and again in issue 373. I guess their recurring appearance is a testament of their longevity and enduring design and that's why you are using these amplifiers as benchmarks against some newer designs?

Mwamba

DP: Not many products are reviewed 'frequently', although sometimes we do *Group Tests*, which by their very nature are a snapshot of what is on sale at the time of writing. It happens that, in the case of the Yamaha, it is a strong seller, and has been around for an unusually long time and so was always going to get another bite of the cherry, so to speak. In the case of the Creek, this was a personal project for me. As I have already explained in these pages, the first time the Creek was group tested, it did unexpectedly poorly. I was (and am still) very familiar with this amplifier and fully expected it to win or come very close to the top of the test.

Creek's Destiny 2: so good we reviewed it twice

The first time round it did badly – and we duly found we had a defective sample. So I always wanted to resubmit it into a *Blind Test*, and lo and behold, it came a close second to the winning Exposure! It was a sanity check for me as much as anything and I also think the guys at Creek felt a sense of a wrong being righted!

ES: Group tests are always a balance between trying to secure new products that haven't featured in the magazine before with some form of fixed reference to compare them against. In a perfect world, we would only have a single product we'd seen before, but timing and logistics frequently mean that we don't have all the amps we want at a given time.

➤ **Bright eyes**
Can you help me improve the neutrality of my system, which presently consists of an AH! Njoe Tjoeb CD player, connected to a Conrad Johnson PV14 pre-amplifier feeding into an Audiolab 8000X7 power amplifier that tri-amplifies my Monitor Audio GR60 speakers.

I am finding that as my tastes in music have become more diverse the system is



Jon can give his system new life with the NAP 100

sounding a little bright in the upper mid-range and the treble – most likely the product of the Monitor Audio GR60's metal drivers.

I am considering changing the speakers to either PMC OB1i or PMC PB1i, but I don't know which will produce similar levels of bass extension as the Monitor Audios. If the solution is to change some of the amplification I'm prepared to do that, but I want to hang on to the CD player.

Jon, Sheffield

DP: The lack of bass you draw attention to is down to a synergistic mismatch between your Audiolab power amps (which were never the fullest sounding of things) and the Monitor Audio GR60s, which although one of my favourites at the price, are again not exactly endowed with 'an embarrassment of bass'! So you've got a choice, power amps or speakers. Personally, I would stick with your excellent

speakers, as even the PMCs won't mask the bass-light nature of the Audiolabs. I'd be tempted to rock on down to your Naim dealer and audition the NAP 100 power amp; this is an excellent £650 design that has plenty of punch, a gutsy bass and a fine current driving capability.

Can you help me to improve the neutrality of my hi-fi setup?

Tonally you'll find it a little smoother and darker than your Audiolabs, and I'd expect it to be a better match.

NR: I used to own an AH! Njoe Tjoeb CD player with all the upgrades installed and can vouch for the fact that it is indeed a very neutral-sounding and lovely player. I'm assuming you have the upsampler installed as well as the SuperTjoeb valve-based clocks? This player does not suffer from any trace of ▶



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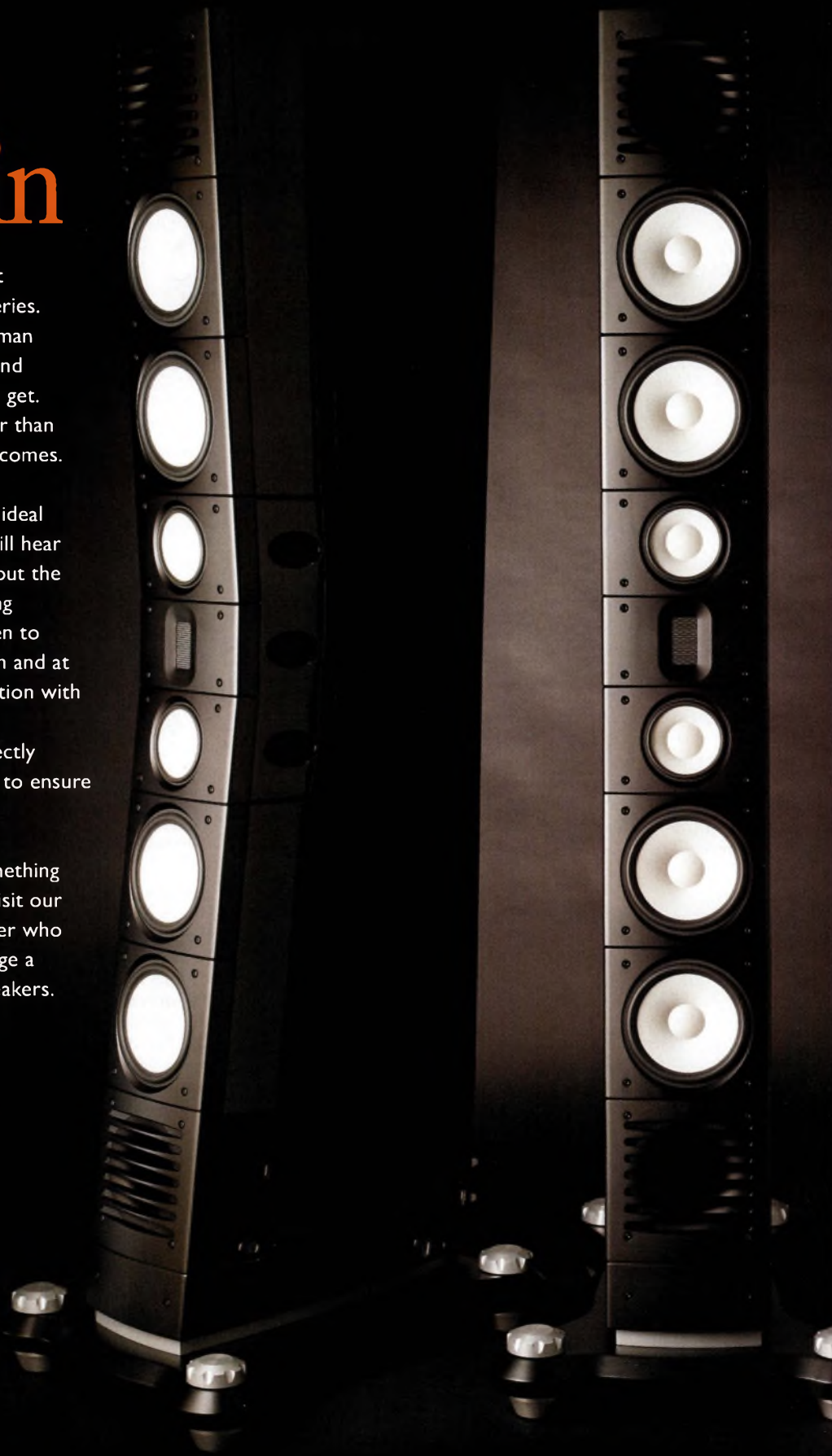
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D-1



C-4.1

a harsh top end that plagues many CD players, so I agree that the speakers may be the cause of the brightness that you are experiencing. The GR60s are a good speaker, but are known for their bright top-end and as everything is about balance in an audio system, they may well not be a good overall match.

I'm a huge fan of transmission lines as they give a well-extended, yet smooth bass response and they can actually tame any room resonances. The soft-dome SEAS tweeters should give you all the detail you have come to enjoy with the GR60s, but in a smooth and effortless way. The old adage of 'try before you buy' is recommended!

ES: Generally, I find there are very few concerns about PMCs and bass extension, so I suspect that won't be an issue. Although they don't use metal drivers, PMCs can still prove fairly well lit at the top end, though, so you may not get the toning down you are expecting. A bit of a leftfield choice might be Sendor's retro SP1/2R2, which has plenty of low end, but wonderfully sorted mid and treble.

➤ **The look of love**
My music source is the much-tested and generally well-received Audiolab CD8200. I have no complaints regarding its sonic performance, but it occasionally jams a CD, half in half out, which frightened the life out of me the first time it happened! I haven't experienced this with less expensive CD players. Is it because the tray is on the shallow side? Also with any track longer than 13 minutes the display stops and then goes berserk. The sound is not affected.

Amplification is a Rotel RA05 with an RA06 providing extra muscle. The

Chris' Audiolab CD8200 has a number of peculiar quirks



issue here is the former gets very hot while the latter hardly takes the chill off its casing. Recently the hot one stopped dead in its tracks, put its lights out and refused to budge. I can only think in protest, at having to do all the work. After a reasonable cooling off period, it came to its senses and normal service was resumed with no apparent ill effects. Is this just a heating problem, and is there cause for concern?

Last summer I wrote to HFC as I thought my amplifiers could be punching above their weight. Your suggestion was a Densen integrated with better speaker cable. Although a B-130 has made it onto my wife's list of things to do, it's nowhere near the section headed '2013'. I won't dwell on the sorry detail, but our living

Despite my system and my wife's funny ways I love them both...

room fire is unlikely to make it through another winter, several springs in the sofa have broken free, and we have a drooping ceiling courtesy of a bathroom leak. My wife tells me she doesn't even want to hear the word 'amplifier' until these jobs are all sorted.

I would never claim to be a relationship expert, but I can with some confidence offer the following tip. Dining room furniture in light oak plus floorstanding speakers in light oak equals massive brownie points. This is all helped along by the fact that Monitor Audio RS8's have to be among the loveliest of their kind ever

made. I know they can be a bit bass heavy, but I sort of like them like that, and in any case moving them further away from the wall would mean a detour to access the conservatory.

Despite my system's funny little ways, and despite my wife's funny little ways I love them both, and one of them sounds great.

I am looking forward to reading the competition entries and who knows someone might have a Densen, so at least I can dream while I wait.

Chris Barker, Colchester

DP: Hi Chris, regarding your issues with the Audiolab and the Rotel, I haven't experienced either. I use the Audiolab 8200CD everyday as a reference, and it has been depressingly reliable, unlike a great many other silver disc spinners I've had over the years. I would suggest you contact the manufacturers, in both cases. It may be you have older firmware and/or slight component issues. Good luck!

TJ: If your amplifier runs hot the first thing to do is to ask your dealer to check the bias current in the output stages for you. The bias current is rather like the idle speed of a car engine, it determines how much work the amplifier is doing when little or no signal is passing through it. These adjustments need occasional checking in nearly all types of linear transistor amplifier (not Class D ones, they work in a different way), since they tend to drift – not enough current results in distortion (especially at low listening levels) and too much leads to overheating. Once every five or so years should do it, or if the amplifier starts to feel unusually hot, or whenever the "upgrade" bugs start to bite!



➤ **The 7 year itch**
My system comprises Marantz equipment and B&W speakers with Chord interconnects and biwire speaker cable. Full list: Marantz PM6004 amplifier, Marantz CD6004 CD player, Marantz NA7004 network player, B&W CM1 on dedicated stands, Chord Cadenza, Chameleon Plus interconnects and Rumour 4 speaker cable.

I've been enjoying this setup with my music for sometime now. I believe it has a good soundstage, good left to right spread (beyond the speakers) and centre staging with some height and depth. But I really have the itch to start upgrading again.

In your experience what should I look to change first – amp, speakers, source – to get that next step up in improvement?

Simon Tomkins

DP: Hi Simon, speakers, definitely. The Marantz kit is good enough to take you up to £1,000 loudspeakers, although you're pushing it if you spend much more. Try a nice, smooth, warm sort of sound – Acoustic Energy's AE305 (£1,000) would be a good synergistic match, as would the Sendor A3s, methinks. If you're a Marantz fan, you can then look to buy the KI Pearl Lite amp and SACD spinner when you're next birthday comes around!

➤ Sound advice

You kindly gave me some great advice in your June edition, advising me to buy an Audiolab 8200CD player and a Dynavecator 10x5 cartridge to bring my system back on track.

I am delighted with the result. The Dynavecator cartridge has made my vinyl sound loads better. Similarly, the Audiolab is a joy, its DAC means I can link it up to my iPad and iMac and play digital music. I can also play audio DVDs through an optical link from my Samsung Blu-ray player. And, of course, I can listen to CDs, enjoying them all over again, too.

I was wondering about the rest of my system, (speakers and amp). I have a Marantz PM7001 integrated amp and a pair of newly reconed Mission 762 speakers.

The amp/speakers sound particularly harsh when first switched on, most noticeably when playing CDs, and take some time to settle down. Only then can I increase the volume without it being so harsh. I first noticed this

My Missions are just not as warm sounding as they used to be

when I got the speakers re-coned earlier this year. The Missions are just not as warm as they used to be.

I imagine it's time to replace the speakers if not the amp as well. Can you advise me? I've heard good reports about Q Acoustics 2050i and Concept 20 speakers. I've also heard good things about the Arcam A19 amp.

My budget is around £1,000 (€1,200 as I live in Ireland, but do get over to the UK).

Paul Kelly, Dublin

DP: Hi Paul, we aim to please! First, as speakers get older they get softer, like a pair of shoes. They have an optimum age when they've settled in nicely, but haven't gone all soggy and/or started falling apart. Reconing

➤ Decisions decisions

Can you advise me on my proposed hi-fi setup? Option 1 is: Harbeth 30.1 domestic speaker, a normal light-frame speaker stand that comes with Harbeth 30.1 speaker or 24in Sound Anchor 4 Post Stands, a Rega Brio-R amp, Rega Apollo-R CD player and Rega RP6/Exact MM cartridge turntable/cartridge.

Option 2 is: Naim Uniti2 all in one, Harbeth 30.1 domestic speaker, Rega RP6/Dynavecator 20X2-H (high output MC cartridge) turntable/cartridge and a Dynavecator P75 MkIII phono preamp.

And, finally, option 3 is: an Exposure 3010S2 amp, Rega Apollo-R CD player, Harbeth 30.1 domestic speaker, Rega RP6/Dynavecator 20X2-H (high output MC cartridge) turntable/cartridge and Dynavecator P75 MkIII phono preamp.

Can you can recommend the best budget hi-fi setup for Harbeth 30.1 speakers that has an integrated amplifier, CD player, phono amplifier, turntable and cartridge, plus speaker cables/RCA/power cables?

Thanks, I appreciate your wisdom.

Kumar

DP: This is a really nasty question to hit us with! So much of it is down to personal taste and/or priorities – and because I am not a clairvoyant, I can't really give you the right answer. So let me answer the question in my own way. First, you like the Harbeth speakers – I get that. And why not;

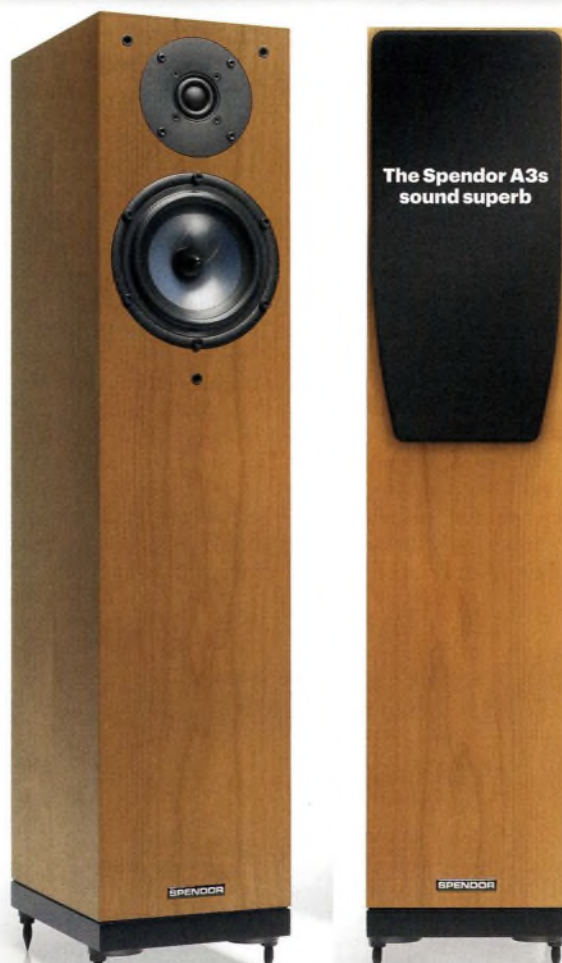


the brand is excellent and everyone is allowed to have their own preference for loudspeakers; like shoes, shirts, cars and watches, let alone tea/coffee, red or white wine and beer versus cider, we all have our own proclivities! So, what else to use?

First, the RP6. I am a massive Rega fan, but if I was spending a good sum on a turntable I would scrim and save and buy a Michell GyroDec with a basic Rega RB303 tonearm, plus a Dynavecator 10x5 cartridge. To me, this is a far more detailed and sophisticated sounding combo.

Amplifier-wise I'd be tempted to go for an Exposure 3010S2 or Creek Destiny 2; in my view these are the class of the field. Then you have the kernel of a great system; you then go and audition it with a range of interconnects and take a view about how your money is best spent. Find a good, helpful dealer and see where you get with your own ears; that's precisely what they're there for!

ES: Having recently heard Naim and Harbeth in partnership and being somewhat astonished by the results, my money is on option 2. You should have superb performance, excellent build and the prospect of being able to look at streaming in your own time.



your Missions has likely disturbed that rather 'comfy' balance you previously had, and is exposing to the world the fact that they were never the last word in sophistication when they were new. Actually, the Marantz PM7001 is still a good amp; I've heard it sound very nice in days of yore. So my instinct would be to give it – and your excellent source components – a nice new pair of speakers to work with. So, take a read of this month's *Group Test*. The Q Acoustics 2050s are excellent, but you can do better still with the likes of the Spondor A3s. These aren't the sexiest things on the planet, but they sound superb with a really well balanced and musical sound. Their maturity would really suit the bright and breezy sound of your Marantz. Alternatively, if you want more of a big, physical sort of presentation, audition the Epos and Tannoys; they're not quite as good all rounders, but have more power and punch. Off you go then, find a dealer and get listening!

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As hi-fi is our passion, we read magazines like yours. We read your great reviews and, when intending to buy new hi-fi products, go for those with 5 stars. Doing that doesn't always guarantee satisfaction. I think there are at least two reasons for that: the type of music you like and how you like it presented (ie in your face, polite, smooth, sweet).

Some years ago I bought a Cambridge 640C (version 1) and combined it with my upgraded Quad 33/404 amps and things sounded superb on my Totem Arros and REL sub. Recently problems arose so it was time to buy a new player. I went for the NAD C545 BEE. This was a great disappointment. The music was too polite and nice.

There was only one solution left for me. Sell the NAD and get a 640C (V2 this time) back. I did and I am happy again!

This is not a story of what gear is best, but what is best for you.

John, Holland

DP: Of course, use hi-fi reviews as a guide John, but they can't legislate for everyone's taste. Reviewers try to explain why a product is good or bad. You need to take as much as this on board as you can and then let your ears be the final judge!

NR: I couldn't agree more John! It's all about balance in a system, musical taste and musical genre.

ES: There's no doubt that synergy is the magic bullet and we often struggle to convey this in reviews. Gaining synergy between components is tricky as it requires progressive system changes and this can be really restricting if you want to make big changes. If you can keep it together, however, comparatively sensibly priced systems can really show far more expensive ones the way to go.



The jury's out on how much detail Ed should provide in his Dealer System features

Letter of the month

PRIZE WINNER

Cable Guy

Reading Richard Vass' letter in the October issue regarding interconnects and cables used, has prompted me to write to you. He makes a very valid point regarding a budget for the cables. It is clear to see from the Zouch Audio feature, for example, that different speaker cables were used in systems 1 and 2. I personally would like to know what cables are used when the systems are reviewed, after all, they are part of the system, aren't they?

While you state that you should sort out the cables and supports with the dealer through listening, the same could be said for all the components. We expect to have to do that, but the dealers presumably choose the cables to go with the systems they assemble for the feature, so what harm would there be in detailing these?

It would give a little assistance when considering a system demonstration, which for many of us, could be a considerable investment.

Derek Gooding, by email

ES: Alas, I've literally just finished another 'cableless' Dealer System as I write this, but I will take these views on board and while we might not add cabling to the total cost of the system, I will endeavour to make more mention of it in future visits.

NR: A very good point Derek, but the problem is: where do you stop? Speaker cables, mains cables, interconnects, phono plugs, mains conditioners, the size, shape and design of the listening room and so on... It is true that all of these will have subtle influences on the sound presented by a system and you correctly point out that this should be auditioned with the dealer wherever possible. However, specifying everything is probably not going to be a great help as it is unlikely that you or your dealer would be able to reproduce everything for a listening test. I find that having as many variables fixed with the items that I am used to and then installing the one item I am reviewing helps me to identify the differences brought about by that one item, so in a sense, it is relative to what you are familiar with. I know it is not always possible to arrange home trials of equipment, but if you can, it would highlight more easily the improvements or otherwise that you will get from a potential purchase.

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Great British Fake Off

In a world of rip-off Rolexes, bogus Botticellis and counterfeit clothing, it's good to know that the humble LP remains untainted by such nastiness, or does it asks **Lee Dunkley**

Honesty is always the best policy, right? I'm sure I am not alone when I say that there's nothing that enrages me more than being deceived or misled over the price of an item – or even worse, being sold counterfeit goods. The realisation that I've been duped leaves me mostly feeling rather foolish and powerless, of course, which inevitably leads to a mixture of emotions that usually manifest themselves in unattractive, yet justifiable responses ranging from being mildly annoyed, to resentment or worse – seething rage!

I am not a particularly outraged or angry person generally, but at the risk of beginning to sound like a *Daily Mail* reader, it can sometimes feel like we're living in the murky world of an episode of *Fake Britain* where unscrupulous crooks lurk around every corner coming up with ever more elaborate ways to rip us off, catch us out and dupe us out of our hard-earned cash. Where's Dominic Littlewood or Matt Allwright when we need them to navigate us through this minefield and help us not to get ripped off?

Forgeries of original artworks and copies of precious jewellery have existed throughout history, but I am neither looking to hang an original Rembrandt on my wall nor wear a Rolex on my wrist (although I'm sure owning either one would be rather nice), so I shouldn't need to

Unscrupulous crooks lurk around every corner with ways to rip us off

about whether it's the genuine article or not. Or should I?

Despite a few trips to Asia I'm not much of a haggler when it comes to bargaining on the price of something – which I believe to be a wholly British trait that is part of our psyche and culture. I am happy to pay the realistic market price for an item in exchange for the goods or services. This has always seemed to be a perfectly fair and just way to go about things to me. But in a culture of online bidding auctions, high demand has seemingly resulted in some unscrupulous goings on targeted towards the inexperienced and vulnerable record collector that has left many of us questioning whether the rarity or original vinyl recording we are intent on making a bid on is a fake or not.

The news that 1,500 counterfeit vinyl records were seized recently from a home in Hertfordshire with an estimated value of around £20,000 if they had been genuine suggests that the problem is much larger than we

might think, and it's happening on our doorsteps. The fakers typically target LP and singles collectors in search of records over 20 years old, and discs by artists like Led Zeppelin, David Bowie and The Clash have all been seized in recent raids.

But it's not just collectors of old-school discs that are being duped, with fans of more recent artists like Eminem, Madonna and Michael Jackson also being targeted if the 4,000 discs that were seized from a home in Birmingham that included these artists among them is anything to go by. Some were being advertised as rare discs with prices as high as £99.

There is an increasing number of genuine record store dealers getting some kind of online presence now, so if you're after collectable or super-rare discs then it's a good idea to seek out your nearest store and wander in for a chat to discuss any authenticity doubts or concerns before buying online – see our UK Record Store feature starting on page 60 for five of our favourite independent secondhand stores.

As with spotting a genuine antique, it takes time for collectors to learn the craft, and record store staff will be able to point you in the right direction in order to help you minimise the risk of buying a dud. Select45rpm.com offers a comprehensive resource with hints and tips on how to spot a fake and is regularly updated with the latest information on what the tricksters are up to as well as a beginner's guide to collecting vinyl records alongside the pitfalls to look out for.

Faking it

As hi-fi fans, we are continuously striving for a highest level of authenticity from the music we listen to in the way the presentation of our favourite artists' recordings are handled and conveyed to us by the components and speakers we select. It's rather ironic, then, that having gone to such considerable lengths to synergise and tweak our hi-fi setups in our quest for a convincing and believable sound that closely represents our idea of a live performance – or that gets us as close as possible to the studio master recording – to learn that the source material we're playing may not always be the original recording we thought it was. Stay vigilant! ●



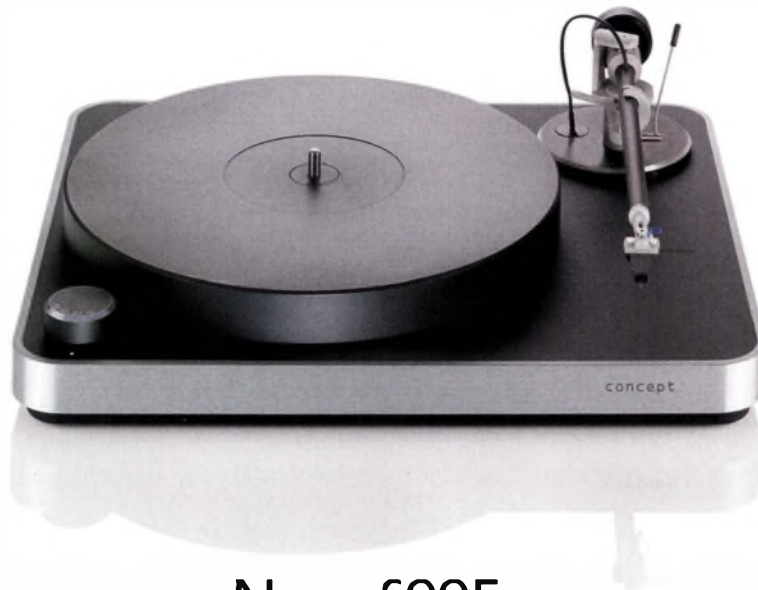
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Sign of the times

A new, bespoke moving coil cartridge that costs the same as the price of a small family car? **David Price** meets the man who's tuning in to the high-end vinyl craze

Some say Britain is a nation of eccentrics, and speaking to Dominic Harper of Northwest Analogue (tel: 01772 616458, northwestanalogue.com) you suddenly realise they might just have a point. He and his wife Natalie run a small company in Preston, which has centred around making slate plinths for Garrard 301 and 401 turntables (now there's a niche market!) for the past few years. But that's Dominic's day job, as he's become rather interested in cartridges of late – but not listening to them, making them! He is on the verge of launching his first moving coil, retailing for around £5,000.

He's a quiet, affable sort of chap, but underneath his mild-mannered exterior he is obviously very passionate about cartridges. Originally training as a tool room machinist, Mr Harper has invested in a redoubtable range of tools to work on cartridges. As he doesn't have the daintiest of digits (no offence, Dominic), I found it reassuring to see a range of implements that let him do the sort of microscopic precision operations you'd normally only see in open heart surgery!

Dominic started "playing around" with cartridges some five years ago, intrigued that they could be modified "sometimes dramatically", simply with cantilever upgrades. He then dug deeper into the heart of the beast and began to investigate coil changes, damper alterations and magnetic circuit adjustments, as well as conducting body material experiments. This led Northwest Analogue to offer a cartridge rebuild service, which has morphed into more of an *à la carte* modification centre.

First and foremost is, of course, the stylus – he's a huge fan of Fritz Geiger diamonds, adding that: "The FG II and FG S tips are the best available". These start from £275, but you can add £100 to this and get yourself a new cantilever. Dominic offers all sorts of different cantilever materials; he says these have a major effect on the sound quality; he thinks boron is a good starting point, as it sounds better than aluminium, but other options are available including ruby and indeed his own special material, which he says outperforms all of the above. If the suspension and coils need adjustment/alignment, then this is £150. Finally, coils in copper start from £300.

Dominic's cartridge rebuild service has proved extremely popular. This has been a massive learning experience for him, and has caused him to think very carefully about how

moving coil cartridges are designed. The quality of his work is excellent, with one famous and respected brand (which shall remain nameless for reasons of commercial confidentiality) asking him to build their cartridges; Dominic declined as he is more focused on doing his own design.

"My first cartridge will be somewhat different from most conventional cartridges in that it has fewer parts", Dominic tells me. "I have found that simple, but efficient designs tend to work best. I have done away with the front and rear yolks and also the rear pole piece. Because of this the coils are mounted directly in front of the magnet. The magnet doubles as the rear pole piece. I have used a unique material to make the cantilever. I found boron to be a touch too analytical and ruby fragile. The new cantilevers have a measured amount of flex to give natural tonality. It shows no sign of flex as a cantilever because a cantilever is very short, but it does flex in ultra long lengths. This is a very important component and plays a large role in voicing the cartridge."

How does it sound?

Dominic proudly describes the sound of his new cartridge thus: "It is an open window on a performance. Speed and detail rub shoulder to shoulder with emotion and musicality. Performances take on a whole new dimension. Every layer of a recording is presented in front of you in a believable wide and deep soundstage. Very extended from top to bottom, but in a convincing and musical way, not analytical and tiring." Having heard a pre-production prototype for several hours, I'd say he's not far off – it is an amazingly 'translucent' sort of device, that takes you right into the deepest recesses of the groove and ekes out every last atom of information, seemingly. I was in the happy position to A-B it against some very serious rival machinery and it totally outshone them.

The cartridge doesn't have a name, so it's all work in progress – he's hoping it will be out in a few months. Meeting Dominic and seeing the fruits of his skill is one of life's finer experiences; Northwest Analogue is a little centre of excellence for something that I care about deeply and I'm sure its time is yet to come! ●



Dominic at work in his tool shop

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Honesty or artefact?

Is a recording really 'honest' if it's altered in post production and does it really matter? **Richard Black** makes beautiful music and tries to get his head around this thorny topic

I made a CD the other month. As you do. When I'm not writing for *HFCI* play the piano professionally, and I occasionally perform or record. On this occasion it was a disc of solo piano music, and since I also work as a recording engineer I looked after the technical side of things too, including the editing and mastering. The composer, who initiated the project, produced that is, attended the session and had plenty of artistic input – later suggesting most of the edits.

Because I was so closely involved from start to finish, I know exactly what happened at every stage. Theoretically, on a project like this, the pianist would turn up at the session well prepared, play the pieces once through, do a couple of retakes here and there for the odd wrong note and external interruptions and then pack up and go home. The editing would take about half a day and 'mastering' would consist of putting the pieces in the right order, checking that the overall level was right and burning a master CD for the factory.

There may be recordings where that happens, but not many. For a start, although I had certainly prepared – I visited the composer and got his input on how the pieces should ideally sound – humans are demonstrably fickle on matters of artistic taste and I've no doubt both his ideas and mine changed, more or less subtly, in the couple of

In the case of this recording the sound quality is pretty honest

weeks between that meeting and the session. Of course, the very different piano and acoustic at the recording doubtless had an effect, too. So we ended up with plenty of takes to choose between, some of them fundamentally incompatible in terms of speed or loudness.

By the time we got round to editing, though (not many weeks later), and in the 'cold light of day', our ideas had changed yet again. As a result, I ended up not just cutting between different takes, in chunks as small as a couple of seconds, but also using advanced editing software to adjust playing speed. This wasn't an option in analogue days, nor, until recently, on digital recordings, but the latest generation of tools can adjust speed and pitch independently with surprisingly good fidelity. So all in all the recording is not really very 'honest': it's not actually me playing, unaided, more like me plus some technology.

The interesting question, though, is whether this matters. The recording isn't there to show off my brilliant piano skills, it's there to introduce the composer's music to a new audience. Would it even matter if he had painstakingly

programmed a 'Disklavier' or similar to achieve the same end? Surely the sole criterion is that the end result should sound expressive and interesting. On the other hand, it does raise expectations of live performance, and as I write this article I'm within days of having to perform all

the music live, preferably to the same standards of speed and accuracy as on the recording – quite a tall order.

In the case of this particular recording, I can at least report that the sound quality is fundamentally pretty honest. I used a single stereo microphone, amplified 'flat' and fed into a stereo recorder, and mastering involved nothing more than adjusting the overall level, which I had set a little conservatively at the session. All the same, given variables of piano and microphone placement, ditto your loudspeakers and you yourself as you listen, I wouldn't care to guarantee that the sound you hear will closely resemble that at any point in the recording venue, no matter what virtues the recording and replay equipment may possess.

Freezing a moment in time

The thing is – as the above illustrates – the whole hi-fi edifice is based on a rather shaky premise: that you can 'freeze' a performance and reproduce it to a high degree of accuracy time after time. To a limited extent it's true, and a live recording from the mid-fifties to about 1980 (the period when technology was good enough to capture a decent range of both frequencies and dynamics, but when people hadn't got quite so inventive about fiddling with things) can be quite close to the ideal, but most recordings are specially created artefacts that are not necessarily representative of anything beyond themselves, including the performers' live act.

Where does that leave our quest for the highest sound quality? Well, for a start, things like distortion, bandwidth limiting and compression (measured or subjective) of dynamics are unequivocally bad news, so systems that avoid them are worth striving for. Beyond that, though, there may be limited mileage in trying to be too dogmatic about good sound. My younger self might have frowned at this, but in the end if it sounds better it is better! ●



Chances are a live performance will sound quite different to the recorded version



RICHARD BLACK
Hi-Fi Choice writer

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“More space, lower noise and greater resolution... An increase in timing precision, depth of bass and a much greater sense of musical flow”

IsoTek EVO3 Polaris, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013

EVO3 Premier

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Ain't that the truth?

A meeting with an old friend over a pint or two provides **David Vivian** with a timely reminder of the complex procedure involved in getting an amp to sound just right

I had a kind of reunion lunch with Chord Electronics' founder and boss John Franks the other day. Mindful of the fact that Chord's approach to digital electronics and amplifier design wasn't everyone's idea of sonic nirvana – the company's championing of high frequency switch-mode power supplies was viewed as fundamentally wrong-minded by some – I was never left in any doubt that Franks was one of the industry's clear thinkers who lost no sleep in forging a design philosophy informed by the exacting disciplines of his background in avionics.

What reminded me of this was re-reading the interview he gave to *HFC* for the 2006 edition of the high-end celebration *Collections* issue I stumbled across (literally) while trying to find a new home for my sprawling stash of magazines. Franks' answers stood out as aligning most closely with the argument that accuracy is paramount; that measured perfection equals musical perfection. Indeed, it was the defining principle that led to Chord rejecting every industry standard DAC chip-set solution and, in a heavily invested collaboration with Robert Watts, re-writing the rule book with Watts Transient Aligned (WTA) interpolation filtering, the evolution of which is on-going and, for some, represents the profusely bleeding edge of digital technology expressed in products such as

It's all about truth. It's trying to get the truth through to the listener

years on, I wondered whether the over-arching vogue for subjective empiricism (if it sounds right, it is right) had softened or manipulated his approach. "Our approach stems from my original work in avionics where you can't fudge an engineering issue," Franks is quick to remind me. "You have to get to the nub of any engineering issue and resolve it down to the nth degree. There is no secondary 'fix'. I brought that philosophy to the company when I started. And it boils down to this: if we couldn't get the DAC that we wanted, we would make our own. And that's why we had Rob Watts develop our range of DACs."

As a user of a DAC64 for many years, I'd be the first to admit it sounds terrific. But it did have a 'Chord sound': very clear, very precise, not very romantic. When I reviewed the Red Reference for *HFC* in 2006, that same character, or lack of it, was even more apparent. Much the same applied to the occasional Chord amplifier that passed through my listening room. Was this 'the musical truth' or

merely Chord's version of it?

Franks demurs once more from embracing the issue of the myriad benign colourations and distortions that can make a component or system sound pleasant or exciting and, again, argues that accuracy is crucial. "The brain is a fuzzy logic device and... we're able to perceive what our ears can't officially hear. But we definitely do perceive it. What we found is that as long as we can control amplifiers with enormous gulps of power exactly where it's needed, not 5 milliseconds later, and also to stop the conjugated networks that are in the loudspeaker coming back and affecting the amplifier, the better things sound.

Stick to the truth

"It's all about truth. It's trying to get the truth of the performance through to the listener. So much of this involves harmonic detail that comes through an amplifier. We use high-frequency power supplies in our amplifiers, but we haven't come at that from the simple idea that it's more efficient or a better way to do it. We did it because we found that we could make amplifiers sound better. We cross-coupled the dynamic power demands of the power supply – it just means that it allowed us to open up the loop responses of the amplifier because the amplifier is far less prone to bursting into oscillation. So by having a very uniform bandwidth on all the amplifying stages – as the gain increases throughout the amplifier – you get a very uniform and even-harmonic friendly type of amplifier. It isn't limited at the front end to keep the back end stable."

As our chat draws to an end, it's clear that Franks is sticking to his guns. Like all high-end designers, he wants to get closer to the musical truth, closer than his rivals. It doesn't mean Chord doesn't listen to its products, of course, just that the design process isn't led by what it hears, only fine-tuned before it's signed off. "Once you've gone to the nth degree technically, you've got to take a step back and apply the final test: the test time. You've got to listen to music when you're feeling good, when you're feeling depressed. All those factors have to be considered. If it's the music that stays with you rather than aspects of its reproduction, you're probably doing something right" ●



Chord re-wrote the rule book by using Robert Watts' DAC chip set solution



DAVID VIVIAN
Hi-Fi Choice writer

Minitest

DAB RADIOS £150-£200

Four contrasting premium-priced DAB radios are given a thorough work out as **Adrian Justins** goes radio ga ga



Ruark R1

PRICE: £180 CONTACT: 01702 601410 WEBSITE: ruarkaudio.com

AVAILABLE IN A range of colours, the R1 is faultless in terms of its build quality. Rear socketry comprises line in, line out, headphones and a USB service port. The attractive fascia is melded from a strong, metallic looking plastic and houses the 3in speaker, which is covered by a stiff grille. Text scrolling is jerky, but the high-contrast OLED display is pleasing on the eye.

Fingertip-sized buttons provide access to five station presets, source, alarm, sleep and menu functions. Navigation is fiddly and accessing the EQ takes several button presses, but you soon get the hang of it.

On the underside is the R1's not so secret weapon, a bass port, which gives it a real sonic advantage.

Choosing the right EQ is essential in order to avoid boomy vocals and over zealous bass, but choose wisely and it's possible to enjoy a full, warm, balanced and natural sound, especially at mid to high volume levels. A Haydn piece on Classic FM deftly handles the switch between strings and trumpet. Rock music has terrific verve, Yes' *Owner Of A Lonely Heart* on Planet Rock, for example, has an enjoyably tight bass with clean treble notes.



VERDICT

Fine looks are matched by peerless performance across all genres. Mostly a pleasure to operate, it's suitable for use all round the home



Revo AXiS X3

PRICE: £200 CONTACT: 01555 666161 WEBSITE: revo.co.uk

IT MAY LACK battery operation, but the ultra-new AXiS X3 is the lightest model here and easily transported. It's also jam packed with features including DAB, DAB+, FM and internet radios, an iPod Lightning socket, wireless network audio streaming, apt-X Bluetooth and connections for headphones, 3.5mm line in and a stereo phono output. Despite that, operating the unit is made relatively simple thanks to a 3.5in colour TFT touchscreen display, which is complemented by a remote control featuring volume and transport buttons.

The touchscreen might more accurately be called a press-screen and hitting icons, labels and keyboard letters may be a challenge for anyone with larger-sized fingers. Nor is the screen of the highest resolution, but the interface is well organised.

The AXiS X3 isn't the loudest of radios, but the Class D amplifier and mono Balanced Radiator loudspeaker do a good job in terms of detail with high-res audio such as the soft vocals and subtly layered folk instruments in The Unthanks' *Sad February*, streamed from an iMac.

With DAB generally, musical performance is accurate and dynamic. The piano at the start of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.5 in E Flat Major* skips daintily along before the horns and strings briefly take over. There's just enough detail to give a satisfying listen for such a small speaker. There is some mid-range distortion at higher volumes, for example from the trumpet, and the dialogue from Classic FM's presenter.



VERDICT

Great value in terms of its features, reasonably enjoyable to use and has the potential to deliver decent bedroom or kitchen sounds





Despite the rise of wireless speaker docks, portable radios remain hugely popular, particularly for use in kitchens, bedrooms and even outdoors. Although the Revo AXiS X3 is a mains-only model (due to its large power-hungry touchscreen) the other models either supplement mains with replaceable batteries or re-chargeable power packs for portable use. The Revo goes off piste a little by offering a staggering range of extra features

with the other models simply providing radio and aux line-in listening. But priced between £180 and £200, these are all premium-priced models, that should really deliver the goods in terms of design, ease of use and performance. The best models make it easy to re-tune and, ideally, adjust tonal balance, while with mono speakers and relatively low power, performance is something of a challenge but not one that can't be achieved.

Roberts Sovereign

PRICE: £200 CONTACT: 01709 571722 WEBSITE: robertsradio.co.uk

THE SOVEREIGN WILL reign supreme on a kitchen counter thanks to its substantial size and unusual angular profile. A modern take on Roberts' Vintage R500, its livery is fit for a queen. Even its OLED display features black text on gold. Finished in vulcanised rubber with faux leather, the radio seems as robust as the current British monarch, but the build quality of the buttons and knobs isn't commensurate with the casing, or indeed the price tag.

The rear of the radio unclips to reveal the large battery compartment, which requires four chunky D-sized batteries, although Roberts claims this will yield 120 hours of use. Viewing the upwards-facing display requires craning of the neck, but the characters are larger than most two-line, 32-character, displays. Controlling volume and tuning using the rotary knobs is fine, but a

shortage of buttons means there is only one 'favourite' station. Otherwise, you can set the radio to only show a shortlist of preferred stations when scrolling through, but this two-step process is not as fast as a quick press on an exterior button. Unlike the other radios, the display doesn't show the time when turned off.

The Sovereign doesn't allow you to change the tone or adjust the EQ and its speaker seems happiest with full, guitar-heavy rock music, such as REM's *Orange Crush* on Planet Rock, which is lively and balanced, but restrained. The 4in full-range speaker is not always brilliantly served by the meagre 2W (claimed) power output as dialogue can sound sibilant and distortion happens too easily at medium volume levels.



VERDICT

The Sovereign tries hard to combine traditional values with contemporary features, but ease of use and performance are disappointing



Pure Evoke Mio

PRICE: £150 CONTACT: 08451489001 WEBSITE: pure.com

THE EVOKE MIO takes the traditional kitchen radio form and combines it with a state-of-the-art DAB tuner in contemporary, eye-catching leather finish. It's available in ten bright colours. The yellow text on black OLED display is brilliantly implemented with letters that scroll incredibly smoothly. By pushing the rotary Tune knob you can pause the text, which is handy for noting names or artists being played. Connectivity is standard with a headphone, stereo out and 3.5mm line-in, plus USB service port. The underside provides access to the recess for the rechargeable power pack, which is a £35 optional extra that provides a claimed 24 hours of use. The volume knob satisfyingly clicks with each incremental turn and tuning is a cinch thanks to the ultra-fast scrolling of station names. You can't adjust the

tone, but there is a kitchen timer built in. Overall, the Evoke Mio is a pleasure to use thanks to its exquisitely engineered buttons and knobs that integrate well with the OLED display. You can even store 30 DAB station presets.

The Evoke Mio's full-range speaker delivers a bright, lively, well-articulated sound that's suited to orchestrated classical pieces such as Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet in A Major* with plenty of fine detail. Switching to Pink Floyd's *Us And Them* on Planet Rock reveals a slight lack of bass, but the jazzy sax is deftly delivered. The Evoke Mio's low power output and lack of tone control make it come up short in terms of impact and at higher volumes it soon becomes tiring.



VERDICT

A fabulously well engineered and attractive machine that's a joy to use. It offers clarity, but lacks impact and is more suited to smaller rooms



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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
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WEBSITE
vandenul.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 mesmerising 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

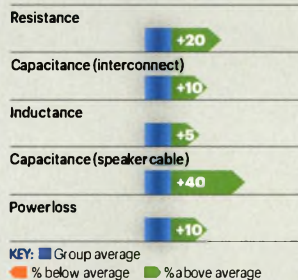


ON TEST

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

★★★★★

One for (sm)all

In a world of large multi-driver loudspeakers, Acoustic Energy's AE1 laid down the blueprint for thoroughly modern mini-monitors, says **David Price**

The eighties was the first decade of hi-fi as we know it today – things that are recognisably modern now began to be so in the eighties, and this holds for loudspeakers more than any other audio separates. Back in those heady days of Duran Duran and the Golf GTi, hi-fi downsized – thanks in no small part to the changing dimensions of the modern British abode. As property prices soared, new-build houses got smaller and the number of 'Yuppie flats' exploded. This saw a gradual shift from the sort of speakers we'd seen in the seventies – with wide front baffles and myriad drive units – to small, minimalist two-way standmounters purposed to work in more compact environments.

From this change in living patterns came two iconic mini monitors. Wharfedale's little Diamond arrived first in 1984, and set the template for baby boxes making great sound. But while they sounded good on the end of a Rega and a NAD, higher-end systems were denied a great small speaker until the arrival of the Acoustic Energy AE1 in 1987. At the height of the eighties boom, when red-brace wearing, Porsche 911 driving city traders captured the zeitgeist, came this great symbol of hi-fi modernity. It sounded superb, and stood for a brave new hi-fi world.

Goodbye seventies

While a handful of brilliant speakers came out of 'the decade that fashion forgot', the vast majority were the exact opposite. They were often three or four-way affairs, and most used rudimentary paper-coned midrange and bass units, and relatively crude paper or fabric dome tweeters. Polypropylene was thought an exotic cone material back then and that's only because it was Bextrene, which these days has been consigned to the great speaker skip in the sky.

As well as archaic drivers, seventies speakers generally sported what

would today be seen as appallingly loose, resonant cabinets. Thin chipboard was often the norm, usually not damped terribly well and only thinly veneered with the obligatory teak wood! This was further aggravated by wide front baffles, which did little for stereo imaging. Round the back, cheapo spring clip connectors were standard. The result was a woolly, ponderous and diffuse sound with low levels of transparency or insight.

Imagine then, how the arrival of the new Acoustic Energy AE1 must have felt? From this brand new English company came a strikingly small (295x180x255mm) miniature monitor loudspeaker that broke every rule in the book. Into the heavily damped and thick 22mm MDF-walled cabinets – finished in the *de rigueur* eighties crackle black – went a 25mm SEAS magnesium alloy dome tweeter. In the eighties, metal domes were cutting edge, the sound of the future.



and there was no way the AE1 could not have one! Then, below 3kHz, an Acoustic Energy-designed and built 90mm ceramic sandwich aluminium alloy cone mid/bass driver took over.

The straight-sided cone was spun from aluminium alloy with a graded thickness across its profile and then hard-anodised black on both sides. As the anodised layers take up one third of the cone's thickness, it was effectively a sandwich of alumina (aluminium oxide) and aluminium, said to be both stiffer and better damped than a pure metal. The cone shaped dust cap was glued to the

Unlike so many other mini monitors, they show real grace under pressure

cone, which was driven by a 1.5in aluminium voice-coil former. The mid/bass driver was reflex loaded by two front-firing 40mm ports, and fed by a crossover mounted on the rear terminal panel – contrary to the fashion of the day it was quite a complex third-order affair with high quality iron-dust-cored inductors and low-loss polyester capacitors.

This all made for a quintessentially eighties mini monitor – one with a pretty smooth frequency response from 70Hz to 22kHz (+/-3dB) and a high power handling of 200W. But the AE1 was also an effort to drive, with a quoted sensitivity of 86dB/1W/1m, necessitating the use of a powerful transistor amplifier – tube amp owners need not apply! Not that this was an issue in the eighties, as everyone thought thermionic valves had gone the way of the dinosaur. So this was the very epitome of the modern reference monitor – it's hard to understate how bang up to date it looked in those distant days of 1987.

Slave to the rhythm

If the AE1 looked like the future, imagine how it sounded. All those big, ponderous boxes with multiple drivers slipping in and out of phase with one another at random points couldn't hold a candle to this little loudspeaker's speed and dexterity. With its two, super-stiff drivers set into a small rigid cabinet, it comes over as a model of clarity, insight and resolution. But there's more – even by today's standards, it's still one of the most energetic boxes around. It

comes over as fizzing with enthusiasm, it has enormous vigour and brio. No matter what sort of music you feed it, the AE1 makes the music magic. No surprise perhaps that it was designed by Phil Jones, a bass guitar-mad musician.

In a sense, this musicality is one of the unintended consequences of the speaker. By designing out all the compromises and imperfections of the big boxes of the seventies, and going for a stripped-back, paired down approach, it showed just how much the complexity of its forebears sucked the life out of recordings. The primary object of the AE1 was, of course, neutrality and transparency – the ability to give an open window on the recording in a way that the BBC LS3/5a tried to, but never quite managed – but it also happened to make it far easier to focus on the rhythmic as well as the textural aspects of the music.

Still, its wonderfully fast attack transients, finely etched low-level detailing and purity of phase can't make up for its one handicap – size. The larger you make a speaker, the more problems you create for yourself in trying to rein in the cabinet and marry the multiple drivers, but you also give the design a chance to make deep, realistic bass. Being so small, of course, the AE1 deftly sidesteps those size-related pitfalls, but cannot change the law of physics and generate vast tracts of grumbling low frequencies. Acoustic Energy claims the speaker begins to tail off at 70Hz, which isn't a bad figure for such a small box, but still you'd never confuse this with a large floorstander!

In some respects the AE1 sounds like a physically small speaker – there's no getting away from this. Feed it some drum and bass from Alex Reece, in the shape of *Feel The Sunshine* and there are drums, but no

The AE1s were as much of the eighties zeitgeist as Porsche's 911



BUYING

Because the AE1 has been around so long, there's no shortage of them knocking around the secondhand scene. An early pair can be had from under £300, if you're really looking – but expect to pay around £500 for an unmarked, boxed set with the optional wood veneer finish, or more if it's the newish AE1 Classic variant. Because many of them have seen use in studios as near-field monitors, many will be scratched or marked, or indeed hammered! The drive units are still available from Acoustic Energy, so it's not game over if a tweeter blows, but obviously a 'one domestic owner pair' is better than one that's had to really work for a living! Factor this into the price. Another consideration is where you're going to put them. The original AE1 speaker stands are no longer available new, but can be had used for under £100, and there's always the Partington Dreadnought stand if you can't find the AE version. AE1s demand heavy, mass-loaded stands, affixed to the floor as firmly as possible, between 16in and 24in high – depending on your listening position. A good pair of speakers on the right stands will give a memorable listening experience.

bass – well, not much, anyway! The bottom octave that floorstanding speaker users take for granted simply isn't there. But this doesn't spoil things; because everything else is so right about the AE1, your attention is simply drawn to what you can hear, which is music rendered in an open and engaging way, with fine image placement, excellent depth perspective and the ability to throw the soundstage far beyond the position of the speakers themselves. Connect the AE1s up to a good modern solid-state amplifier with a fair smattering of power – a Naim SuperNait being an ideal example – and you will be amazed by how loud these little boxes go without break up. Unlike so many other mini monitors, they don't compress things until they're on the ragged edge; they show real grace under pressure.

Little box of tricks

One of the finest designs of its day, the AE1 harks back to a time when loudspeakers were a little more focused than they are now. It was a design that did many things brilliantly, yet had serious shortcomings in other respects. For that this little box will be fondly remembered and never forgotten. Indeed its manufacturer is so proud of it that, a few years ago, it started remaking the AE1 as the 'AE1 Classic', such was the demand. New or secondhand, it's little audio dynamite! ●

A very modern Affair

Audio Affair has become a potent online dealer, but as **Ed Selley** discovers, it hasn't skimped on the instore side of things

Located in the middle of Birmingham's splendidly named Custard Factory district, Audio Affair is a UK dealer that began under slightly different circumstances to many of its competitors. Owner Alex Field started out selling vinyl on eBay and began to move into the online retail of audio equipment from there. Alex made the decision that to be effective as an online audio retailer, it made sense to have physical premises. The showroom was opened in 2007 and since has been joined by a sister store selling pro audio and DJ kit as well as a warehouse for online stock. The total staff now stands at 11.

As a dealer with a foot in both camps, some aspects of Audio Affair differ from more conventional dealers, but some are reassuringly similar. The company is hugely involved in social media and building its online presence, but has lavished a great deal of care and attention on its store, which is beautifully finished and now features a number of brands like Naim and Cyrus that are only available via the showroom and are independent of the online business.

As such, it's time to see how this impacts on the Audio Affair sound. Assisted by sales advisor Richard, I sit down to see what the team makes of our standard three-system brief...



THE EXPERTS



Audio Affair
3 Gibb Street, Custard Factory
Birmingham B9 4AA
0121 224 7300, audioaffair.co.uk

naimaudio.com
proac-loudspeakers.com
iconaudio.com
sugdenaudio.com
audiolab.co.uk
kef.com



System test music



RAY LAMONTAGNE
*Till the Sun Turns
Black*
Lossless FLAC



TORI AMOS
Under The Pink
CD



SCRATCH MASSIVE
Communion
Hi-res FLAC

System 1 – One-box wonder

THE LEAST EXPENSIVE system of the day is also by some considerable margin the smallest. If you can't accommodate this slimline trio, it's time to consider headphones. While it is compact, there is nothing restricted about the specs or performance – this is a system that gets a lot done in a small space.

Audio Affair began selling Naim equipment last year and it has rapidly become a favourite of the team. The flagship SuperUniti is an impressively specified product at the asking price. It is a 32-bit/192kHz-capable UPnP streamer with internet radio and supporting digital and analogue inputs. These are mated to an 80W internal amplifier that should be able to handle most

A system that wins all the arguments be they in the head or in the heart

speakers. Like the rest of the Naim streaming family, the SuperUniti is controlled by the wonderfully slick N-Stream app and Audio Affair has made sure there's an iPad on hand to make best use of this.

Hey good looking

Partnering the Naim is the smallest floorstander in the Proac Response range, the D18. This two-way design is almost classically proportioned and – finished in a lovely cherry veneer – is as much a piece of furniture as it is audio equipment. The Proac has always been more than a pretty face, though. The D18 makes use of a proprietary 6.5in mid bass driver, featuring an acrylic phase plug with a larger magnet assembly than the smaller standmount versions. This is partnered with a ¾in soft dome tweeter with a 'honeycomb' voice coil specific to Proac. Also extremely important to the Proac's overall performance is that they have a side-firing port just above the integral plinth that makes them relatively easy to place near rear walls. It's clever and usefully compact, but how does it sound?

After a minute or so of playing Ray LaMontagne's *Three More Days*, it is abundantly clear that this is a very happy partnership indeed. Naim

and Proac both produce equipment with a very definite character – it would be wrong to call them coloured, but there is a very clear sense of identity to both and when combining products of this nature there is always the danger you'll wind up with oil and water, rather than a gin and tonic. In this case, though, the combination is a happy blend of the strengths of the two brands.

Top gear

The drive and agility of the Naim is readily apparent. There is a deftness to the performance that is completely compelling and somewhat addictive. The Proacs keep this agility entirely intact (they are hardly lead-footed themselves) and add a tonal sweetness that allows the performance to completely convince. Vocals are handled with an effortless assurance that many systems at considerably higher price points can struggle to compete with and the overall tonality of the system is a perfect partnership of both detail and refinement.

There is no sense that the system is over civilised either. The more raw and aggressive *Harrowdown Hill* by Thom Yorke keeps the rumbling electronic bass and discordant midrange as raw and urgent as the artist intended, but then lavishes a wonderful richness and weight to Yorke's vocals and locks them centre stage with the supporting instrumentation arranged behind. The relatively sensitive Proacs combined with the long-held tradition of Naim equipment to have a power beyond that of what the bald numbers might suggest, also means that this system has extensive headroom for something so comparatively small.

The all-in-one system has generally been considered the convenient option for people lacking the space and capital in a 'proper' separates-based hi-fi. This system is a very elegant riposte to this way of thinking. The performance isn't simply comparable to separates at the price, but is instead right up at the top of the pile. When you consider the excellent feature set, lovely build and handsome appearance, you have a system that wins all the arguments.



The SuperUniti packs loads of capability into one box



Proac's D18 is room friendly, handsome and musically involving

- 1 NAIM SUPER UNITI £3,250
- 2 PROAC D18 £2,145
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £5,395

System 2 – Hot and heavy

THE SECOND SYSTEM takes us all the way out to the other end of the Audio Affair portfolio. Gone is the compact solid-state amplification and instead we have three boxes of valve-based goodness partnered with two boxes of digital, which is CD rather than streaming-based. Speaker responsibilities are kept with Proac, but with the increase in budget, there is a further move up the product range meaning that some new technology is available.

With the Proac D30, this means that although the slim cabinet is still visually similar to the D18, the driver compliment is all new. The mid bass driver is constructed from carbon fibre and polymer for reduced weight and increased strength. In the 'R' suffix version seen here, this is joined by a specially designed ribbon tweeter intended to improve performance.

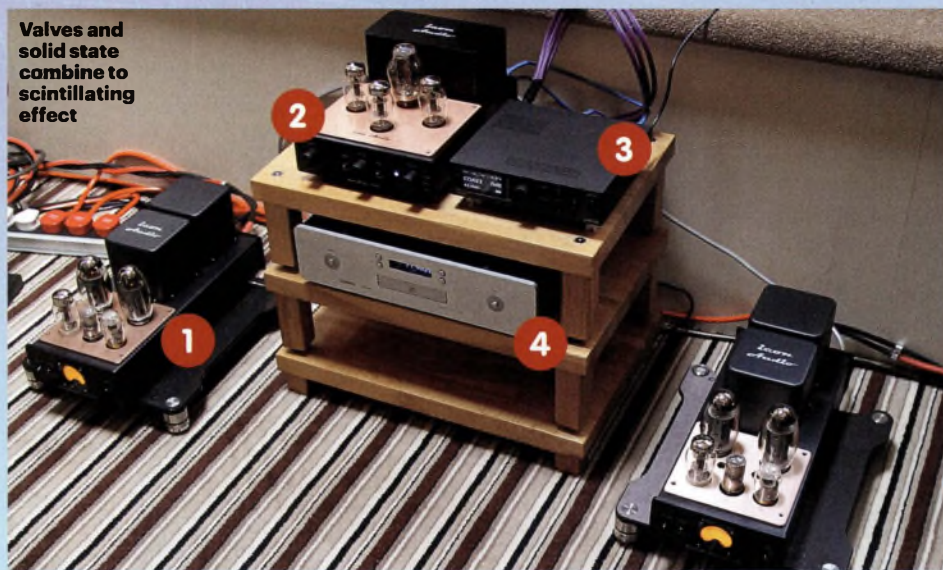
Powering the speakers is a triumvirate of units from Icon Audio. The MB90 monoblocks are both visually striking and technically interesting as they make use of the KT150 valve. These burly tubes help the MB90 produce a considerable 115W per side and this power is in turn marshalled by a LA4 preamp, which adds to the valve compliment with a trio of 6SN7 signal valves and a 274B rectifier.

The digital front end is a combination of the gorgeous and impressively substantial Sugden Fusion CD21SE, which is given a helping hand by Audiolab's superb 8200DAC. Partnering a nigh-on £2K CD player with a £600 DAC might seem odd, but Richard feels that in this system, the results are superior to running it on its own.

Tori party

Cueing up Tori Amos' peerless *Under the Pink*, it is immediately obvious that second guessing the role of a particular component in the system is somewhat irrelevant when the end result is as capable as it is. *Pretty Good Year* is a wonderful demonstration of all of the good points of a valve-based system with none of the downsides. There is a weight and realism to vocals that is arrestingly real and the sense of space the performance has is deeply compelling. There is a lushness to the midrange and upper frequencies not commonly encountered in solid-state systems.

Valves and solid state combine to scintillating effect



Beguiling it may be, but lacking in control and definition it is not. Switching to Admiral Fallow's *Squealing Pigs*, there isn't the slightest sense of bloat or sluggishness. The bass is tight, packed full of detail and clips along with the speed and assurance to make the song work as it should. The system manages to find the detail and texture of the voices and instruments, but at the same time keep the rough edges under control. There is something almost self-effacing about the way that great recordings are presented almost without there being any sense of electronics being present but when the quality isn't so great, this system carefully chips off the worst rough edges, leaving the musical message intact.

Modern art

For a valve system it presents no great domestic issues either. The real-world power output of the MB90s allows for the slender and relatively compact Proacs to be used without any limits on volume and the build quality and design of the components is first rate. The presence of the Audiolab also allows the owner to start dabbling in computer audio if they feel the need. Like Audio Affair itself, this is a traditional approach that is thoroughly modern in implementation.

The ribbon tweeter and carbon mid/bass give the D30R huge ability



- 1 ICON AUDIO MB90 MKII M, WITH KT150 £2,900
 - 2 ICON AUDIO LA4 MKIII PREAMP £1,100
 - 3 AUDIOLAB M-DAC £599
 - 4 SUGDEN CD21SE £1,870
 - 5 PROAC D30R £2,250
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £11,219

System 3 – My Naim is...

FOR THIS ULTIMATE demo of the Audio Affair portfolio the speakers come courtesy of KEF whose Reference range is a very popular part of the store lineup. Although this is a system with a fairly substantial price tag, the dimensions are still something that a standard lounge could take without being dominated.

The minimal controls, the multitude of glowing logos and the acres of brushed black metalwork combine to give a palpable sense of purpose to this front end. The choices are interesting, though. The NAC 252 preamp and attendant SuperCap power supply are from a good deal further up the range than the ND5 XS Streamer that fronts the system. The consensus among the Audio Affair team is that Naim's baby streamer does an awful lot right and there is more to be gained by spending out a bit more on the amplification than on the digital. The ND5 XS takes its files from a UnitiServ rip NAS that allows for ripping, tagging and storage in one smart and compact package.

Towers of power

Fronting the system is the KEF Reference 205/2. The middle of three floorstanders in the Reference range, the 205/2 does an impressive job of hiding its mighty dimensions. Built around a pair of substantial 8in drivers and the distinctive housing that contains a 6.5in Uni-Q driver that mounts a titanium dome tweeter coaxially in the time-honoured fashion of KEF speakers, the 205/2 is business-like in a refined sort of way. The satin walnut finish is handsome and discrete, but if this is all a bit grown up, you can order them sprayed fire engine red.

One of the more surprising things I realise when sitting down to listen to this system is I don't recall ever hearing these two brands combined before. Like the first system, the behavioural traits of the two brands are still readily identifiable, but they complement each other in a way that is to the benefit of both.

With Ali Farka Toure and Ry Cooder's *Talking Timbuktu*, the Naim accuracy and agility is all there – indeed it is quite uncanny how these electronics come across as like the SuperUniti, but enhanced, extended and simply more visceral. The KEFs take these traits and add the focus and exceptional soundstaging that the carefully evolved Uni-Q driver is renowned for. There is also a clear demonstration that there is no substitute for cubic capacity when it comes to the bass. The twin 8in drivers take the detailed and substantial low end that the Naim stack can generate and lends it an authority that is only apparent when you switch to something less capable.

Packing a punch

It is perfectly capable of a bit of wanton aggression, too. Switching to the high-res FLAC of Scratch Massive's *Communion* gives the bass drivers something to chew on and the way that this system pounds through the massive slabs of live electronica is deeply entertaining. There is something impossibly entertaining about the way this concentrated collection of fastidious engineering will let loose and hammer out basslines like a FA system if you want it to. The sheer grip that is exerted over the bass is truly outstanding.

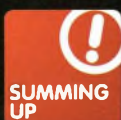
The price tag is not inconsiderable, but spend any time with this system and you won't find yourself questioning it. The way it can go from outstanding delicacy to pile-driving force in an instant without losing tonal accuracy or shrinking that phenomenal soundstage is deeply addictive. When you consider the superb build, easy upgradability and handsome appearance, it is easy to see why the Audio Affair team puts this at the top of the tree.

- 1 NAIM ND5 XS £1,925
 - 2 NAIM NAC 252 £5,530
 - 3 NAIM UNITISERV £2,150
 - 4 NAIM SUPERCAP £3,795
 - 5 NAIM NAP 250 £3,140
 - 6 KEF REFERENCE 205/2 £6,000 (FINISH DEPENDANT)
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £22,540**

All Naim electronics convey serious intent



The 205/2 brings serious focus and soundstage to the system



Alex and his team clearly understand that to survive in a competitive sector, they need to offer an online service that puts them above the box shifters and back that up with a dealer experience that is second to none. The presence of brands that have no real interest

in online sales should be indication enough that this is a store that is up to the challenge of high-end retail.

In terms of meeting the peculiar demands of top-class audio demonstrations in particular, they have succeeded admirably. All three

systems deliver considerable musical enjoyment and some interesting upgrade possibilities within overall dimensions that can be accommodated in a UK lounge. Affairs are supposed to be fleeting, but this could be the start of something beautiful.



Joe Meek

The strange story of the legendary *Telstar* man; the alchemist of pop, **Simon Berkovitch** and **JT Rathbone** reveal all

The life of British independent record producer and songwriter Robert George Joe Meek is the stuff of legend and ultimately tragedy – as well as incredible records.

With source material as eccentric and explosive as the mercurial Meek, it's little wonder he was the subject of a film appropriately named after the record with which he is forever associated: *Telstar*.

Meek's boyhood fascination with radio and gramophones evolved into a production career whose impact is still felt. The maverick producer crafted worldwide hits from the unlikely

setting of a three-bedroom flat above a shop at 304 Holloway Road in London's Islington.

But everything unravelled at the peak of his success: a combination of lawsuits, scandal, shifting public tastes, growing depression and drug-fuelled paranoia left him debt-ridden, desperate and destructive. The final act in the story came on 3 February 1967: on the eighth anniversary of his idol Buddy Holly's death, the 37-year-old first shot his long-suffering landlady and then turned the weapon on himself.

Focusing on the all-important music, simply put, pop perfectionist Joe Meek was a

genius – and an unlikely one at that. Despite being a composer, arranger and producer of million-selling smash hits, Meek could barely sing or play a note, but he had an instinctive grasp of song structure and the possibilities of recorded sound.

This shy Gloucester lad not only had the confidence to build his own recording studio, but also to use it to create intricate, often otherworldly soundscapes with homemade, rudimentary equipment – pioneering the role of the independent producer.

At a time when the British pop scene was dominated by four major labels and a handful of stuffy recording studios, Meek

was both anarchist and innovator, breaking rules as quickly as he pioneered new techniques. He was arguably the first UK producer to use direct injection for guitar and bass, separated performers in different rooms and used a hitherto unheard of amount of echo and reverb – not to mention undertaking a painstakingly complex editing process.

The title of essential double-disc compilation *The Alchemist of Pop* describes him best – and for a brief period in the early sixties, the legendary Joe Meek did indeed have the golden touch, racking up nearly 40 hits between 1960 and 1964.

John Leyton

From actor playing a pop star to number one-selling chart sensation

Best known as a star of perennial Christmas movie *The Great Escape*, actor John Leyton was also one of Meek's first big success stories and a testament to the power of TV over the record buyer.

Signing with Meek in 1960, it was Leyton's third single that was the breakthrough, assuring his musical immortality with a classic written in just under 10 minutes by Meek's songwriting foil Geoff Goddard and produced in ludicrously overachieving style.

Johnny Remember Me is the archetypal Meek recording – and his first number one as producer. All his trademarks are present; galloping rhythm, haunting production and plaintive vocals courtesy of opera singer Lissa Gray intoning the title hook, apparently captured in the unglamorous setting of 304 Holloway Road's toilet!

This unique record was always likely to be a hit, but its chances

were given a boost by the appearance of heartthrob Leyton (as rock star character Johnny Saint-Cyr) surrounded by devoted female fans performing the tune three times in a single episode of popular TV show *Harpers West One*, shortly after its release in 1961. This priceless product placement undoubtedly helped the 45's ascent to the top of the UK charts.

A classic written in just under 10 minutes

The same year's follow-up – *Wild Wind* – was more upbeat while treading similar territory and almost repeated the success, peaking at number two in the singles chart. Leyton scored two more top 20 hits with distinctive, Goddard-penned and Meek-produced songs, the last, *Lonely City* (1962), being among his very best recordings.

Leyton turned from TV star to pop star thanks to Meek



The Tornados

The band that fronted the record that made and ruined Joe Meek

It may seem unthinkable now, but before 1964 there was virtually no American interest in UK-produced pop records. So when The Tornados hit the top spot of the Billboard Hot 100 with *Telstar* over a year before The Beatles' Stateside success, it was big news indeed.

Telstar, easily Meek's most famous and recognisable production, must have sounded as futuristic as the subject matter (the recently launched Telstar satellite) on its 1962 release, with its pioneering sound effects and distinctive, alien-sounding Clavioline organ.

The Tornados were a session group who had featured on a number of Meek productions. Clem Cattini (who drummed on hundreds of sixties records), bassist Heinz Burt and Alan Caddy and George Bellamy (on lead and rhythm guitars respectively), were subsequently joined by pianist and organist

Roger LaVern for the recording of their first and biggest hit.

Meek's second domestic chart-topper was the first ever record by a British group to reach number one in the US.

But what should have been his ultimate triumph and made his fortune soon turned out to be a

Meek's most recognisable production

major source of his downfall. When French composer Jean Ledrut sued him for plagiarism, claiming the track copied his composition *La Marche d'Austerlitz*, all royalties from the worldwide smash were frozen.

Meek's choice of follow up (the lightweight *Globetrotter* over the majestic *Ridin' The Wind*) reduced the group's impact, but they enjoyed a few more hits before splitting in the mid-sixties.

The Tornados hit the number one spot in the US with *Telstar*



The Honeycombs

Beating the beat groups at their own game for the last big hit

When Beatlemania exploded in 1963, the irony was not lost on Meek, who had declined to sign them the year before.

The Beatles' debut was released while *Telstar* sat atop the charts. By 1964, they were the most famous men in the world and had changed the recording industry forever.

Meek needed a hit in the new style – and a bona fide beat group to perform it. Seeing The Sheratons play in a North London club, they fit the bill perfectly. A name change to The Honeycombs – in honour of drummer Ann 'Honey' Lantree – and they were ready for action with *Have I The Right?* – Meek's final chart triumph.

What is telling about Meek's response to the beat boom is just how traditional this hit was: behind the chorus' ferocious beat – created by band members stomping on

the staircase – and the nagging guitar hook, it was basically old-school British pop.

The irrepressibly catchy record hit number one in

August 1964 – at a time when R&B groups such as The Rolling Stones and The Animals were already making Merseybeat last year's thing.



The Blue Men

I Hear A New World: hens' teeth sci-fi electronica years ahead of its time

The rarest of Meek's recordings was never fully released in the producer's lifetime. For many, until its belated official release, *I Hear A New World* remained the most tantalising of his vault of unreleased recordings.

Perhaps the ultimate vanity project, recorded during the first flush of success, *I Hear A New World* was intended to be an ambitious stereo LP issued on his short-lived Triumph label. In the event, just an extremely limited EP saw release in 1960, credited to The Blue Men.

Subtitled *An outer space music fantasy* by Joe Meek, this extraordinary LP, finally issued in 1991, showcases the producer's preoccupation with all things extraterrestrial. Although the sped-up Martian voices sound dated, most of the album's audio innovations would have sounded truly

futuristic if released as planned in the early sixties.

Meek's work on this project is deservedly well regarded. *Globb Waterfall* and the oft-sampled

Magnetic Field could pass for BBC Radiophonic Workshop recordings, while *Love Dance Cf The Saroos* sounds like a Brian Wilson instrumental.



SHOPPING LIST

During Meek's brief reign, 45s were all the rage. Here's eight of the best, all available on the definitive 2CD set, *Joe Meek: The Alchemist Of Pop*



The Moontrekkers
Night of the Vampire
This spooky instrumental stomp charted briefly, despite a BBC airplay ban.



Screaming "Lord" Sutch with The Savages
'Til the Following Night
Sutch's debut release was a suitably OTT affair. A rock 'n' roll gem.



The Packabats
The Traitors
This obscure B-movie theme belatedly graced the title sequence of the excellent 2008 Joe Meek biopic, *Telstar*.



Geoff Goddard
Sky Men
The most endearing track by Joe's principal collaborator, this is a homage to UFO pilots, which both believed in.



Heinz
Questions I Can't Answer
The heavy, driving production of this 45 marks it out as one of the blonde-haired rocker's finest cuts.



The Syndicats
Crawdaddy Simone
Another lost B-side, this slice of proto-freakbeat is a contender for his wildest ever RGM production.



Glenda Collins
Something I've Got To Tell You
Collins cut many great tracks with Meek. Sadly, this, her finest 45, inexplicably flopped in 1966.



The Cryin' Shames
Please Stay
This slow, atmospheric reading of an obscure Drifters' song was Joe Meek's last hit.

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Whilst our flagship models rightly get superb praise from reviewers worldwide for their performance and value, we never lose focus on our more affordable products and regularly update them when the opportunity arises. Such is the case with our Stereo 40. Our original brief over 10 years ago to make the best possible EL34/KT88 valve amplifier for a reasonable price still holds true. Our latest Stereo 40 MK III m incorporates several improvements. Now with a meter which allows a very simple way to check that the output valves are operating at their optimum value and best performance. This will also tell you when a valve is due for replacement or when it is failing. Something other designs don't do. The Stereo 40 is almost unique in its ability to use a very wide range of valves including 6L6, 5881, EL34, 6CA7, KT66, KT77, 6550, KT88. Now made very easy to change if you like "tube rolling".

In our quest to make the best amplifier in its class we also include all the features we think a good amplifier should have including Triode or Ultralinear operation, remote control, a record loop, a warm up/standby facility, valve rectifier, Low Distortion Tertiary output transformers and many more features.

There are also things we don't include like printed circuit boards and transistors both of which we feel degrade the performance of valve amplifiers.

Obviously the overriding priority is the sound quality which must come from good engineering which we believe to be far ahead of the Stereo 40's modest price.

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Our four cornerstones are **Quality Performance** and **Value**. And in the future, **Service** when you need it. In this age of "built in obsolescence" it may be unfashionable to talk about repairs and spares but our commitment to future service means you should be able to enjoy your amplifier for at least 20 years.

All of our amplifiers are designed and finished in Leicester they are commissioned and serviced by the people that designed them so you can be sure of our quality control and long term performance. Our new series of "Low Distortion Tertiary" output transformers are the best we have ever made, enabling us to less global feedback by about 40%.

All our amplifiers are hand made using "point to point" soldering without using printed circuit boards. We are convinced this sounds better. It also allows for easy servicing, upgrades and modifications and long life. Remote controlled volume is useful for fine tuning your listening level to match your taste. High quality components are used throughout including an "ALPS" volume control, silver plated PTFE audio cable SCR capacitors audiophile resistors. Power Amplifier operation is possible by selecting a lower "gain" on the rear of the amplifier (this is done without attenuation which would lose quality). Loudspeakers of nominal impedance between 3 ohms and 10 ohms may be used with virtually no reduction in power or quality. A valve rectifier with choke regulated power supply adds a richness to the sound quality that silicon devices alone are unable to do. Tape and other methods of recording and playback are catered for by the "Tape Monitor". Also useful for Home Cinema applications.

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Electric Lady

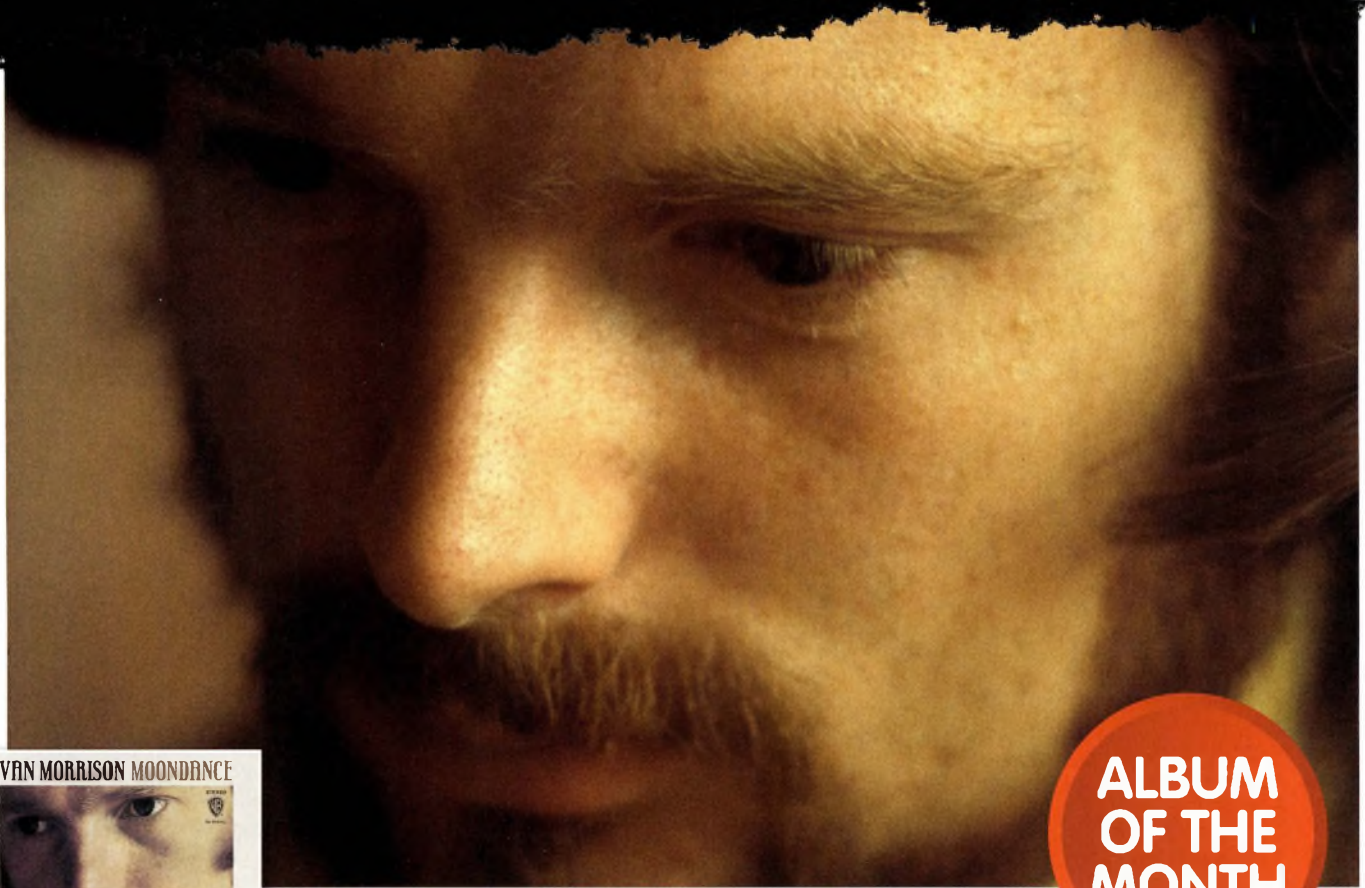


101 The Sons of Kemet
Burn



101 Rachmaninov
The Bells
Symphonic Dances

Musicreviews



Van Morrison Moondance

★★★★★

**ALBUM
OF THE
MONTH**

Four CDs and one Blu-ray disc deluxe edition **Warner Brothers**

IT IS ONE of the mysteries of rock music that Van Morrison's work of unrivalled genius, *Astral Weeks*, was virtually ignored on its 1968 release. Now regarded as one of the landmark albums of all time, it failed to chart and was an abject commercial failure that took 33 years to sell enough copies to go 'gold'. Wounded by the indifference with which it was greeted, Morrison changed tack for the follow-up and abandoned the impressionistic, stream-of-conscious approach that had given *Astral Weeks* its elusive, ethereal quality. Heavily influenced by The Band, the result was 1970's *Moondance*, a rootsier but fluid set of more conventional, accessible tunes steeped in R&B, folk, rock, jazz, swing, country and blues. It was the first album Morrison produced himself. "No one knew what I was looking for except me, so I just did it", he later commented. It became his biggest commercial success since singing *Gloria* with Them in the mid-sixties and more than 40 years on, *Moondance* retains the power to thrill and delight with its exultant, catchy songs and freewheeling

spirit. Its organic feel was not accidental; Morrison entered the studio with the lyrics and structure of the songs in his head, but the arrangements evolved during the recording sessions. This expanded box set offers an insight into the meticulous process of crafting a masterpiece, with countless alternate takes from the sessions. The original ten-track album is presented in two

**More than 40 years on
Moondance retains the
power to thrill with its
exultant, catchy songs**

retooled versions. The first is a straightforward remaster that some may feel is over-intense and too heavy on the bass. The other is a high-resolution 48k/24-bit PCM stereo and DTS-HD master audio 5.1 surround sound revamp, that is crisp and sharp without sacrificing the album's

original analogue warmth. The other three discs offer an almost overwhelming number of alternate takes, demos and mixes and raise the pertinent question of when a good thing becomes too much. Eight versions of *Into The Mystic* and *Caravan*, seven of *Brand New Day* and 13 of *I Shall Sing* (which failed to make the original album) will tax the concentration of all but the most obsessive fan.

Morrison himself has condemned this 'deluxe edition' as "unauthorised" and arguably a record that worked exquisitely as a streamlined 40-minute vinyl statement with not a single superfluous note would have been best left alone. On the other hand, there are some real gems that present much-loved songs in a fresh and intriguing new light. Try the title track with a subtly slower groove and an unfamiliar horn arrangement, an early version of *Caravan* with an irresistible, swaying sax solo and a relaxed *Into The Mystic* played on just acoustic guitar, bass and brushed drums that is a thing of bare-boned loveliness. **NW**

Picture: © Elliott Landy/Landyvision.com



HOT PICK

JOHN MARTYN

John Martyn

The Island Years

★★★★★

18 CD box set

Universal

OVER TWO DECADES working for the Island label, Martyn not only recorded some of the most gloriously eclectic singer-songwriter albums in an era famously rich in them, but never stopped challenging the boundaries of his creativity. This bumper collection includes remastered versions of 13 studio albums made between 1967-87, showcasing his haunting voice and extraordinary guitar picking, plus a cornucopia of previously unreleased material, including a couple of spell-binding live concerts.

This bumper collection includes remastered versions of 13 albums made between 1967-87

The simple, affecting acoustic folk of his debut *London Conversation* (1967) swiftly arced into a more expansive folk-rock sound on *Stormbringer* (1970), before he added an echoplex to his guitar with audacious and groundbreaking results on *Solid Air* (1973). *One World* (1977) was even more experimental, while *Grace And Danger* (1980) offered a more mature, jazzy sophistication. Only Joni Mitchell can match the invention and intelligence of his sonic adventures. **NW**



Bruce Springsteen

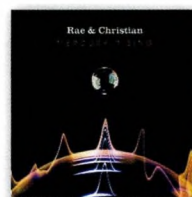
Tracks

★★★★★

Four CD boxset

Columbia

MOST RETROSPECTIVE COLLECTIONS of studio out-takes illustrate why the material was not released at the time – it simply wasn't good enough. Springsteen is the exception, a songwriter so prolifically consistent he could afford to give away to other artists such high-calibre compositions as *Because The Night*, *Fire and Hearts Of Stone* rather than release them himself. Almost every one of these 66 'ones that got away', recorded between 1972-95, but not included on his albums at the time, is a gem. It's that combination of quality in quantity that earned him the name 'The Boss'. **NW**



Rae & Christian

Mercury Rising

★★★★★

CD

Warp

FOR ONLY THEIR third album proper since the nineties, the electronic duo have conjured another luxurious mix of laid-back grooves, gently insistent funk and occasionally soaring choruses. They've called on a team of collaborators to enhance their beats and no-one puts a foot wrong. Ed Harcourt delivers an achingly heartfelt acoustic guitar and piano ballad dedicated to Soviet-era sniper *Rosa Shanina*, while Foster The People's Mark Foster lifts the mood with jaunty electro pop on *Happy* and Jake Emlyn delivers a typically hilarious story of unrequited teen dancefloor love on *My Favourite Game*. It's a beautiful shining gem of an album. **DO**



Janelle Monáe

The Electric Lady

★★★★★

CD

Atlantic

FOR HER SECOND album Monáe further develops her persona of a 28th Century pan-sexual android freedom fighter come back to preach the gospel of free expression and individualism. She mines a rich seam of past genres including soul, funk, R&B (old and new), hip-hop, disco, reggae, bubblegum pop, psychedelia, synth pop, Spaghetti Western soundtracks, orchestral overtures and much more. Throughout, Janelle trips between styles, lending her elastic voice to a rap over a Blaxploitation soundtrack and Erykah Badu on *Q.U.E.E.N.*, gutsy soulpower with Prince on *Givin' em What They Love* and sparring with Solange on the title track. **DO**



Spotify

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AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Nitin Sawhney

OneZero

Vinyl

Blue Note/Universal



THIS ELABORATELY PACKAGED

box set contains five slabs of 45rpm vinyl cut live by world crossover artist Nitin Sawhney, cut direct to vinyl no less. This hasn't been done

since Thelma Houston and Pressure Cooker in the seventies because of the expense and lack of opportunity for overdubs and other studio trickery. Recorded at Metropolis in Chiswick using PMC monitors, you know it's going to sound good. It contains material from Sawhney's nine previous albums and one due for release next

year, and it's a strong catalogue from which to call on. He decided to record live because his current band is so good they can deliver without the need for multiple takes, it also helps that they play acoustic instruments, making for a naturally open, tonally diverse sound. *I Ask You* is co-written and sung by Joss Stone and you won't find a better recording among her own releases. The vibe is mellow and sophisticated with female vocals, flute, guitar and piano taking lead parts in effortless, yet engaging, style. The box contains two CDs of the same material, a DVD of the performance and a booklet. It's not cheap, but it's the best sounding vinyl release by a high-profile, contemporary artist I've ever encountered. **JK**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



The Sons Of Kemet Burn

HOT PICK



24-bit/96kHz

Naim Label

ONE OF THE most exciting and intriguing features of this is the band's unusual lineup, which features tuba, and clarinet or saxophone along with two drummers who between them come up with some of the fiercest, most insistent rhythms it's possible to imagine. Bandleader/composer Shabaka Hutchings draws on his Caribbean roots to produce music with the power of hard rock, a ska groove and the harmonic and melodic colour of bop. **MS**



Kalbata & Mixmonster Congo Beat The Drum



24-bit/48kHz

Bowers & Wilkins

PRODUCERS KALBATA (ARIEL Tagar) & Mixmonster (Uri Wertheim) went into their Tel Aviv studio with the intent of recording a fully analogue reggae album in the spirit of the early dancehall era. They ultimately wound up in Jamaica collaborating with their favourite singers and MCs in search of a truly authentic Kingston, Jamaica sound. The result is a superb combination of technology and performance techniques old and new. **MS**

Nature's Dragonfly



Our DRAGONFLY



Both shown actual size ... in their natural habitat.

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HOT PICK

Paavo Berglund

Icon
Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra



13 CDs

Warner Classics

DURING THE SEVENTIES and early eighties, Paavo Berglund recorded many LPs for EMI. Most were with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, and many were subsequently issued on CD. This set brings together most of Berglund's output for EMI in good transfers. My only (slight) complaint is that Shostakovich's 6th Symphony is now split between two discs, but this is perhaps the only gripe one can raise. The recordings are mostly analogue, but a few are digital. Many were rightly considered hi-fi demonstration discs at the time, and they remain among EMI's best of the period - bright, immediate, and detailed. At under £30, this set is hard to resist! **JH**

Take your pick from a selection of stunning hi-fi demo tunes



Rachmaninov The Bells; Symphonic Dances Berlin Philharmonic Sir Simon Rattle



CD

Warner Classics

SIR SIMON MADE a memorable recording of the Symphonic Dances back in the early eighties with the City of Birmingham Orchestra. This new version is a rich, refined affair, offering smooth polished playing, allied to wide dynamic contrasts. It's an expertly paced account that manages to sound relaxed yet rhythmically adroit at the same time. *The Bells* is played and sung with great sensitivity and scrupulous attention to detail, while the recording encompasses Rachmaninov's huge climaxes with ease. The recordings sound smooth yet detailed, with excellent clarity and a wide dynamic range. **JH**

BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

Pink Floyd The Making of Dark Side of the Moon

DVD

HOT PICK



With 741 weeks in the US charts *Dark Side of the Moon* was always going to make quite an impression, but I doubt even Roger Waters thought he'd still be talking about it 40 years

later. This was originally made as a 30th anniversary DVD and features late keyboard player Rick Wright. It's mostly the band in 2003 and the way the tracks were put together, something that the extras look at in depth. There isn't much footage from 1972 and quite a lot of odd vintage video, but it's a fascinating insight into the creation of a masterpiece. **JK**

Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

These pages are a must-read if you're thinking about buying used kit, or if you have hi-fi you want to sell. It's free to place an advertisement – simply submit your ad of up to 30 words, remembering to include your email, phone number and county.

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FOR SALE

MANAACOUSTICS six-tier equipment rack £350. One turntable with reference top £250. Two power supply tables £50 each. Buyer to collect: **07860 155521 (Middlesex).**

REGA ear headphone amp, black, boxed £80. 5x 1m Chord Silver Siren interconnects £25 each or 5 for £100: **07936 518220 (Swansea).**

NAIM X2 Hi-Caps, Naim NAC 82, Naim SBL speakers (walnut finish): **01623 230472 (Notts).**

WANTED single tannoy GRF corner cabinet with silver duel concentric cone, walnut finish. Cash waiting, will travel: **07983 72880 (Bristol).**

PURE Power P700 mains regeneration unit, three years old £600 ONO. Rega Planar 3, Acos-type arm, spare headshell with Ortofon VMS 20E MkII. Turntable needs attention £50: **01652 640088 (Lincolnshire).**

KUZMA STABI S/Stogi S/ Martin Bastin digital supply. New. Mint. (£3,350) £1,500. Croft Charisma X preamp. MM input. Separate power supply. Re-valved. VGC (£3,750) £1,000: **01453 519700 (Gloucestershire).**

MAGNAPLANAR SMGA speakers for sale, one owner from new, great di pole sound, too big for new flat £125: **email: bernkarm@yahoo.co.uk (Essex).**

RUSS ANDREWS Signature Powerkords x2, 1m length. Wattgate 350 IAG IEC Plug (RRP £440) £300 each or £290 collected. Mint condition, smoke-free environment: **01902 884694 or email jukey39@yahoo.co.uk (Dudley).**

LFD NCSE integrated amplifier (number 187). Gun metal grey finish, mint condition, one year old, very little use. Have original box, packaging and user leaflet (£4,500) £2,250 ONO excludes postage: **+353 87219 4900 (Co. Antrim).**

POWER SUPPLY for Class A amplifiers, self contained, 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. Pair of used Seas 10in drivers £99: **0207 4998729.**

ROKSAN X Platinum pre-amp PR15B-black, remote, manual and boxed, 1 owner excellent condition. 5 line ins including 2 XLRs (1 for A/V) plus 1 tape in/out and 2 twin pair outputs (phono + xlr)!!! £1,200 ONO: **07812 935242 or email: dubmaster@talktalk.net (Surrey).**

ARCAM A85 integrated and P85 power amp in silver with oak finished PMC TB2s that have had the '+' tweeter upgrade. £600 ONO: **01795 522448 or email: reynolds853@hotmail.co.uk**

ATC SCM 11 black, 18 months old, mint, little use, 4yr warranty, original packaging, documents, cash £750 (£1,150) buyer collects. Atacama stands



Looking for a headphone amplifier? Try this Rega offering on for size, it's a steal at just £80...

£45. REL Quake sub £75: **07733 428736 or email: gill@gillbears.plus.com (Huddersfield).**

WANTED late van den Hul Frog gold cartridge. One requiring repair considered. White Beauty also considered: **01505 346791 (Renfrewshire).**

DYNAUDIO Excite X16 Speakers £300 ono (£1000+ new). Dark cherry realwood veneer. Includes Apollo speaker stands - floor spikes, welded construction and filled with silver sand, plus bungs for rear ports. Four years old, but treated well and in good condition, no boxes. Minor cosmetic blemishes to the underside of one speaker and the side of another. Will deliver within a 30 mile radius otherwise buyer collects: **01489 582325 or email: lowtherman1@gmail.com (Fareham, Hants).**

MONITORAUDIO R270HD Floor standing slim speakers piano black lacquer 12 months old £350. Monitor Audio Bronze BXW10 Subwoofer walnut £250 both excellent condition: **07800 606892 or email: schandler@dopag.co.uk (Worcestershire).**

CHORD Epic Twin speaker cable, 3m pair bananas (£293), £140. Chord Chorus 2i/cs, 1m RCA (£280), £120. Chord Cadenza VEE i/cs, 1m RCA (£200), £100 or £325 for the Chord set. Audioquest CV-6 (with 32V/dBs battery)

speaker cable, 10ft pair bananas (£400), £140, Audioquest King Cobra i/cs, 1m RCA (£215), £105, 0.8m RCA (£95) or £295 for the Audioquest set. Van den Hul The First Ultimate 2 i/c, 0.6m RCA (£250), £110). All VGC and in original packaging: **07772 714432 or email: richard.schofield@kcl.ac.uk (Bucks).**

LEHMANN AUDIO Rhinelander headphone amplifier, the critically acclaimed amp, only a few months old in perfect condition, complete with manual, £199: **01303863424 (Kent).**

AVI Neutron V speakers. In piano black gloss, as new condition, hardly used. Boxed, £240: **01642 559204 (Cleveland).**

DENSEN B110 amplifier in silver, recently upgraded to + version £875. Gizmo remote in black £85. MM phono board £85. Or all for £995. Can demo, buyer collects: **075011 30403 (Southampton).**

SPENDOR A5 compact column loudspeakers, black, unmarked, boxed, exquisite sound £1,100: **01952 728773 (Shropshire).**

BOWERS & WILKINS pair floorstanding 683 speakers. Red cherry finish, unmarked and occasional use, factory packing £575: **01908 376966 (Bucks).**

WANTED Marantz AV9000 pre-amp. TEAC X1000R

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!

reel-to-reel. Buyer will collect: **01243 860634**.

MONITOR AUDIO M8 Gold, floorstanding speakers. Purchased in 1993 costing £1,100. Good condition. £150 to a good home: **stephen.geary2@ntlworld.com**

LINN LP12, fluted corner braced plinth, full Cirkus Upgrade, latest laminated Armboard and Lingo Power Supply. Fully loaded bearing with red cap so ready to go. In excellent condition with original boxes and internal packaging, together with set up instructions for the LP12 plus the Lingo manual. £765. Linn Ittok LVII Tonearm in very fine condition – only marks are on the headshell where the cartridge has been fitted. Bearings are beautifully smooth. Comes complete with accessories and Linn packaging. Serial number is 5021438. £450: **0121 7041188** or email: **boballen@sky.com (Solihull, West Mids)**.

BRING your Linn LP12 up to date! I have a lovely brand new Cherry plinth bought from Grahams, but ended up having a black one instead. Half price £200: **0208 5242181**.

WANTED amplifier in mint/near mint condition for vinyl turntable: **01305 814033**

MUSICAL FIDELITY M6 preamp, M6 CD player, F15 power amp. All silver, all boxed, as new: £800 each. Martin Logan Odyssey speakers excellent condition: £1,000. New home forces sale: **07581 390 326** or email: **keithsunasky@outlook.com**.

NUFORCE Icon HDP DAC/headphone amp. 24/192 coax/SPDIF 24/96 USB + 3.5mm inputs RCA/6.3mm outputs. Drives to 96mW @ 600 ohms. Good condition, £400 new; £190 ono + post/pick up: **07792414536** or email: **drherd@talk21.com (Edinburgh/Lothian)**.

YAMAHA AS500 with Yamaha YDS12 for iPod etc, as new boxed £159: **02392 453382** or email: **alanmcleod535@btinternet.com**.

CHORD Indigo XLR balanced interconnects 1m, immaculate condition (£1,340) £495 onv:

01159288006 or email: **RolfyJordan@gmail.com Nottingham**.

GAMUT L3 standmount speakers. Birds eye maple. Superb condition. Grilles, manual etc. Demo welcome. Collection only. Fantastic sound and stunning looks. £1,925 ono (£5,400): **07725 072878 (Leics)**.

CHORD Cobra Plus sub signal leads, 10m (£147), 3m (£70): £100 for both plus postage. EcosseBaton II Ref Interconnects 0.8m (£100): £50 plus postage. Russ Andrews RGB Scart (£200) £60 plus postage: **01772 812992 (Preston)**.

ATLAS Elecktra 1m XLR balanced interconnects. Boxed. Fantastic sound and condition. Can be heard before purchase. £185 onvno: **0115 9288006** or email: **RolfyJordan@gmail.com (Nottingham)**.

PIONEER CS-301 speakers in black finish £45, Mordaunt-Short MS235 speakers in wood finish £45, Bang & Olufsen P30 speakers in wood finish £75: **01302 772495** or email: **adrian.petch@btinternet.com (Lincolnshire)**.

MARANTZ PM6003 integrated amplifier, well reviewed, in mint condition, boxed with manual, light use, bargain, £100. Buyer to collect: **01253 856422 (Lancashire)**.

MISSION 792 speakers, matching stands, gloss, excellent condition £350. 4 Russ Andrews 1m Power Max IEC cables £25 each. Kimber 4VS speaker cables 2.5m terminated £60. Will post. Prices exclude p&p: **01772 468116 (Lancashire)**.

SUGDEN Mystro amp with free Sugden CD 21 (£3,000) £500. As new, one owner. Celestion A3 top of the range speakers (£2,750) £500. Amp three years old, guaranteed until October 2014: **01246 224144 (Derbyshire)**.

SPENDOR A6 floorstanding speakers. Oak finish, excellent condition. £1,100 ono. Can demo. Buyer collects: **01798475319 (Essex)**.

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 onvno: **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 Q100 black ash, brand new boxed, magazine prize. I have documents to prove. Highly rated standmounter £230 (£150 below retail): **07884430988** 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: **02074998729**.

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: **07890896819 (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): **07811613140 (Bristol)**.

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)**.

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**.

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PS Audio

PerfectWave PowerBase

THIS IS A product that can support your audio system in two very different ways! Firstly, it's a very solidly made equipment support that can handle loads of up to 45kg. Secondly, it incorporates a mains conditioner unit that provides filtered and conditioner power to whatever sits on top of it.

The aim of the PowerBase is to solve both physical and mains-borne interference in a single unit. It takes a different approach to vibration control by engineering a holistic multi-tiered system that includes both vibration dissipation and masking. The first subsystem consists of stiff, adjustable sorbothane feet that are attached to a specially damped 16-gauge steel and aluminium bottom chassis that forms the first level of energy dissipation in the system. Mounted inside the base chassis is the second subsystem, formed from soft sorbothane feet supporting a 9kg damped, 6.4mm-thick steel floating platform that your equipment sits on. This combination of a soft suspension with a high-mass floating platform coupled to a stiff suspension lower-mass body forms a broad spectrum mechanical energy dissipation system that is claimed to be extremely effective at reducing induced vibrations from external sources, such as loudspeakers.

In the air tonight

In addition, the PowerBase addresses airborne vibrations by employing masking techniques similar to dither. Masking is a simple system of adding back-randomised noise in much the same way that room diffusors work. The system is engineered to couple the diffused mechanical energy of the platform back into equipment, thus helping mask any airborne vibrations picked up by the stereo system.

The PowerBase also contains a mains conditioner, which has been built to not only handle the electrical power that it has to carry, but also have the physical properties to withstand vibrations and not induce any resonances itself. PS



Audio notes that AC power problems are inherent in both the wall voltage as well as the equipment itself and so its engineers have designed a new low impedance passive common and differential mode filter that is built into the PowerBase. Using large core magnetics and heavy gauge oxygen-free copper windings, PS Audio quotes that reductions of power line noise greater than 40dB can be achieved. The PowerBase works at any AC voltage ranging from 90 to 270V at 50 or 60Hz. The dimensions are 432mm x 356mm x 64mm.

Although the PowerBase itself is fitted with an IEC connector for the input power, it has two US three-pin sockets fitted for the output power, as the thickness of the support is not deep enough to permit UK mains sockets to be installed. Instead, the PowerBase is supplied with two power leads: a short and a long US plug to IEC connector lead, which will be suitable for most audio equipment.

My first impression when I lift the PowerBase from the box is that it weighs a ton – well, 12.2Kg! In place underneath my turntable I connect up the power leads and listen to a wide range of records that I have previously auditioned before fitting the support. I feel that there is an improvement in clarity and openness to music. The background is blacker and vocals seem to stand out further

from the background. When I play *Don't Misunderstand* by Thelma Houston on my Sheffield Labs-2 direct to disc recording, all of the excitement of a live performance that is inherent in the format is very apparent. The excellent imaging places the performers in their correct locations within my listening room. However, I do have a little niggle that the dynamic range feels a teeny-bit restrained with some recordings, although this is a very minor sensation.

I have the Power!

Next I use the PowerBase to support and power my PrimaLuna ProLogue eight-valve CD player. When I play my recording of Vivaldi *Violin Concertos Op.6* by The Academy of Ancient Music on Decca 455 653-2, I once again consider imaging to have benefitted from the presence of the PowerBase.

This is certainly worth an audition with your system and the top black, mirror-polished surface is protected with a plastic cover to enable the purchaser to evaluate the unit without risk of damaging the surface, which is a nice touch! Overall the PowerBase provides further refinements to the sound from my system, which are most noticeable when used with my record deck. **NR**

DETAILS

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£889

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Musical Fidelity

V90-HPA headphone amplifier



WHEN THE ENGLISH language doesn't quite have a word for it, we pragmatically turn to other mother tongues. Musical Fidelity's latest range of V90 mini components can best be described as catching the 'zeitgeist', the spirit of the age, of the hi-fi world. Right now it seems, as the economy picks itself up off the floor and real-term incomes lag behind inflation, we're all after something for nothing – or at least something nice for a lot less than we used to have to pay for it.

The V90 series appears to offer just this; it is way more attractively packaged than the V series it preceded, which looked rather cheap and nasty – even if the electronics inside were precisely the reverse. Still, the V90s have grown into proper little boxes, hewn beautifully from aluminium alloy extrusions and the overall effect is that Musical Fidelity's cost saving line has gone from one extreme to the other.

It now looks like high end that has shrunk in the wash, rather than something that's been stuffed into a case bought from Maplin and given a once-over with a rattle can! Measuring 170 x 47 x 117mm (wxhxd), it's very small and neat.

Let's twist again

The V90 HPA is a headphone amplifier with a twist, which is that it also sports a 24-bit/96kHz-capable DAC with an asynchronous USB connection. Effectively then, it's a 'one stop shop' for those wishing to listen to hi-res music from their computers, the sort of thing you'd place next to your Mac or PC and listen to while you 'work' (if that's possible, of course!). There's also a line-level RCA input for analogue sources, too, and a choice of either 6.3mm or 3.5mm headphone jacks, so both sizes are catered for.

The manufacturer says that: "It's our generic headphone amp circuit inside", meaning it's likely – give or take a capacitor here or a resistor there – to be the same as the (already well received) £400 M1 HPA. Its 250mW amplifier is



claimed to be able to drive: "The vast majority of headphones (from 10ohms to 600ohms)", and said to have typically less than 0.005% distortion across the audio band, with a signal to noise ratio of 109dB (A weighted), and 20Hz to 80kHz (-1dB) frequency response. These are impressive specs sure enough, but as ever the question is whether the sound quality measures up!

Tested with a pair of Philips Fidelio X1 headphones, the HPA produces a characteristically clean, open and well defined sound. There is absolutely no sense whatsoever of listening to a 'cost cut' product; indeed the sound comes pretty close to the pricier M1 HPA. Via USB, the V90 sets up a big, punchy soundstage on Daft Punk's *Get Lucky*, with plenty of power and about two thirds of the volume control left in reserve after I get the headphones about as loud as I can take them. The sound is finely etched and superbly detailed, with just a touch of atmosphere missing, and a slightly mechanical feel to the rhythms; this is in absolute terms, up against the best, so the V90 HPA acquires itself brilliantly at the price.

Via a 24/96 rendering of Kate Bush's *Snowflake* – using Audirvana off a MacBook Pro – the unit shows it itself to be an excellent way to listen

to hi-res computer audio. The icily cold vocals aren't in any way hard or grating, and the lushness of the recording is largely maintained with some lovely depth to the piano work. In absolute terms the Musical Fidelity lacks a bit of 'ballast'; it isn't the most solid and weighty performer low down, but again for the price it is totally beyond criticism. I love the open window the unit gives into the recording and the ease with which you can follow the different strands of the music.

Plug in and tune out

Via the analogue inputs the little headphone preamplifier does better still; the DAC fitted is good, but the preamp circuitry is better in my view, meaning you can use it as a very respectable way to listen to an existing CD player or turntable (via a phono stage) should you so wish, and get even more power, resolution and music out of it. A vinyl pressing of Simple Minds' *New Gold Dream* shows how deep and three dimensional the unit can be, as well as showcasing its taut, tuneful bass, smooth midband and lovely, sparkling treble. Overall, it's another very strong showing from Musical Fidelity's great little range of hi-fi widgets. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£169

CONTACT
020 8900 2866

WEBSITE
musicalfidelity.com

OUR VERDICT



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Townshend Audio

Seismic Vibration Isolation Platform

TOWNSHEND AUDIO HAS been working on Seismic isolation platforms for a long time now. It started with cases that enclosed an air chamber (see bicycle inner tube) and has steadily been refined. The latest incarnation is the most elegant and well made, it also avoids the need for inflation by using a range of cleverly damped springs to accommodate different weights of component.

The Seismic Platform consists of a steel top plate that has a damping layer underneath and a second steel plate beneath that, this sandwich creates a constrained layer that minimises vibration in the platform itself. At this point most support makers stick some rubber feet on and consider the job done, not Townshend Audio. These feet are called Seismic Load Cells and consist of stainless steel cups at either end of a rubber bellows-type arrangement that forms a damped spring. A spring alone would bounce for ages if moved, this approach means the platform sits still should there be footfall around it or movement in the component on top.

Spring into action

What makes the Seismic Platform effective is that the Load Cell can move in three dimensions, so that when the spring is chosen to match the weight of the component it supports, it will isolate it from vibration above 3Hz. As you can have a Load Cell for weights anywhere between one and 32kg, it's possible to choose a Platform that will accommodate almost any piece of audio equipment. The potential drawback is that some components do not have balanced weight distribution. In such situations a weight specific system like this is difficult to level, which is why Townshend can supply Load Cells in different spring rates on the same platform, just mention what you are planning to support when ordering and they will pick the appropriate springs.

Seismic Platforms come in three sizes ranging from 43x30cm (size 1)



to 52x40cm (size 3) with prices increasing according to the spring rates. I test a Size 2 (49x34cm) sprung for up to 7kg (£590) and another for up to 16kg (£630).

I test them by putting components on a rigid Target stand and then placing the Seismic Platform between the two. The first component is Naim's latest UnitiLite. This is a 9.4kg chassis, that's not totally balanced. Using the streamer and amp in the UnitiLite and going from the Target table to the Seismic Platform atop it delivers a dramatic and all round improvement in sound quality. The first thing I note is a massive increase in stereo three dimensionality, notes become solid in the room. Then it becomes apparent that the sound is cleaner, a degree of hardness has disappeared and left a stronger sense of timing in its wake. At the same time the bass goes deeper so that the double bass on Gregory Porter's *Liquid Spirit* has more power and the groove is stronger. The icing on the cake is that Porter's voice has regained its full richness – there is more tonal depth, which makes everything sound more real. Quite a transformation in truth, and one that you'd be hard pressed to replicate with any similarly priced upgrade.

Next I move onto a 6.3kg Rega RP6 turntable on a lighter sprung 7kg Seismic Platform. Here the sense of space increases and the noise floor

seems to go down, meaning that more of the quiet sounds on the record are identifiable. There is more instrumental and vocal texture thanks to a deepening of tone. With Rickie Lee Jones' *Flying Cowboys* album the sense of the band being in the room increases dramatically and dynamic impact brings greater vitality to the sound.

Believe in miracles

The final candidate is a Leema Antila CD player, which is a pretty capable and solid machine. Spinning Beethoven's *Symphony No. 1 in C Major, Op.21* (Klemperer) once again transforms the result from a flat, dynamically restrained presentation to a vigorous and thrilling musical experience. The increase in dynamic range is nothing short of miraculous, now the power of the orchestra is palpable and its precision of tempo clear to all.

The Townshend Seismic Platform seems able to transform the potential of electronic components as well as, if not better than turntables. I am surprised that the Naim and Leema gain the most from proper isolation, but maybe that's a reflection of my expectations. What is clear is that few hi-fi components give their best without isolation and the Platform delivers as much in a neat and effective package and comes highly recommended. **JK**

DETAILS

PRICE
From £550

WEBSITE
townshendaudio.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

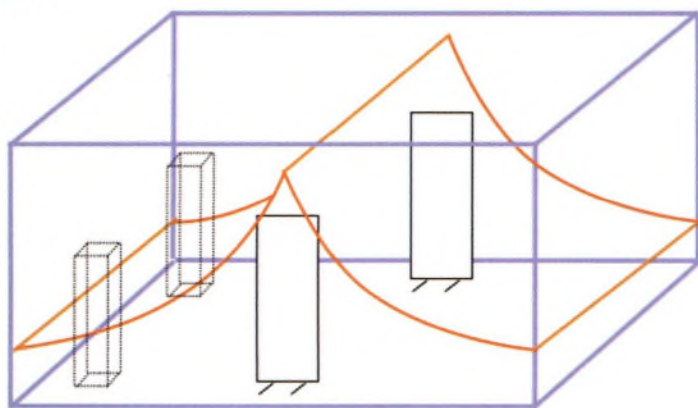
Both cause a lot of unwanted noise – but they're treatable with thousands of carefully calculated holes.

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.



Thousands of micro-perforations create "aerodynamic drag" to absorb energy



Customers say we make some of the best sounds in our studio they have ever heard, so you know we can do the same in your home. Our advice takes account of your best components and guides you where change is needed, in stages you can afford.

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Just listen and you'll know

CD: Accoustic Arts, Bel Canto, dCS, Gamut, Resolution Audio, Vertex AQ dac-1. Vinyl: Aesthetix, Clearaudio, Graham, Spiral Groove, Transfiguration. Tuners: Magnum Dynalab. Amplifiers: Accoustic Arts, Aesthetix, Bel Canto, CAT, Gamut, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, VTL. Loudspeakers: Avalon, Gamut, Kawerol, NEAT, Totem. Cables: Chord Co., DNM, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, VertexAQ. Mains: Aletheia, Vertex AQ. Supports: Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi-Fi Racks, LeadingEdge, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ

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DNM Design

Stereo Solid Core Resolution speaker cable

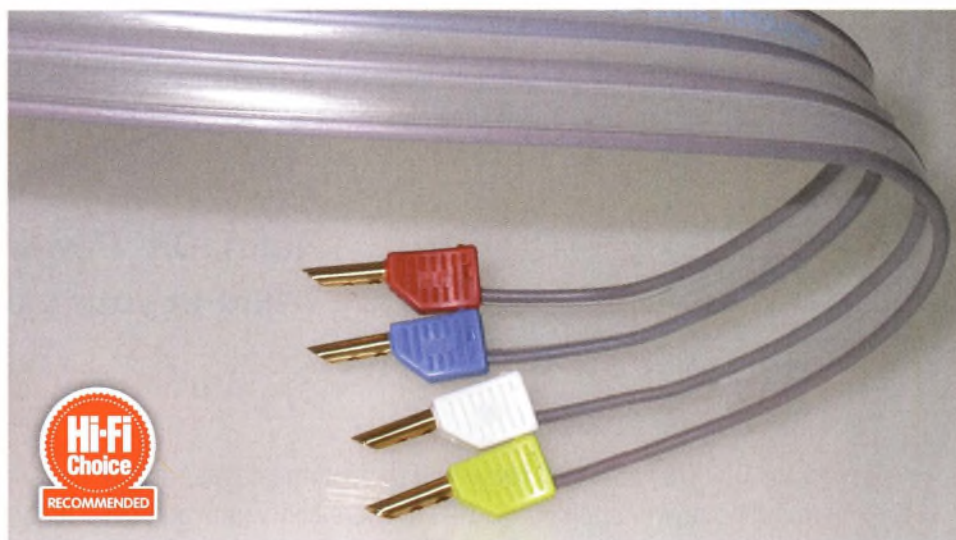
DENIS N MORECROFT has come up with a new speaker cable, the first in quite a while. Denis was the guy who put solid core cables on the map back in the eighties and for a long time his skinny speaker cables were the choice for those looking for great sound at a sensible price. The original DNM cable was replaced by the slightly thicker, lower resistance Precision 2, but recognising that this was still not suited to low sensitivity speakers and long cable runs DNM has come up with a beefier alternative dubbed Resolution.

This is still in the classic spaced pair arrangement that DNM pioneered, but has 1.3mm conductors instead of 0.82mm, making it better suited to the higher currents required by sub 89dB/W sensitivity loudspeakers. It is sold by the stereo metre rather than the mono metre found with most other brands. The reason for this is the DNM cables are sold as a four-core ribbon, which is simply peeled apart for use in a single-wired system or left whole for biwiring. DNM doesn't recommend completely separating them, but peeling enough off for each channel with any remaining length left in one piece and connected to the amp.

Here's the science bit...

The theory behind widely spaced, small cross section solid conductors is that they optimise the amplifier to cable interface and ensure stability, they have high resistance as a result, but Morecroft feels that this is not an issue for domestic situations and that the transient errors caused by heavier gauge cables make them untenable. This theory is almost diametrically opposite that behind the cables I generally use and yet I have consistently found DNM to be the best sounding 'affordable' speaker cable on the market, so it's doing something right.

DNM Resolution is not a very exciting looking cable, but its thin profile makes it easy to hide under a carpet. If you purchase a terminated set of these cables they come with small, colourful plugs that DNM



refers to as leaf plugs. They follow the company maxim of minimising extraneous materials and can be stacked for biwiring.

In the system, Resolution sounds much like DNM Precision and this is a good thing because few cables have the timing skills of this one. Resolution does add a little more weight to the bass, however, and this gives the music a little bit more power, which is always nice. Its talent lies in the definition of leading edges, this is what makes it so precise and musical, giving excellent pace where it's called for and letting band's like Ahmad Jamal's trio on *The Awakening* produce a sound that inspires all sorts of apostrophe-laden descriptions; 'cookin', swingin' and just plain hip all seem apt. Tonally it's even-handed and clean, there's no edginess to the mid or treble and sufficient muscle in the bass. There are more substantial sounding cables around and some that produce greater solidity of stereo image, but they rarely compete with the DNM for musical integrity.

It delivers excellent width of image and plenty of space, there is also a strong sense of presence with all manner of music. Hi-res material could sound a little more push perhaps and one cable I contrast it with does supply this, Tellurium Q Black has a richer tonal balance, which ushers in some more of the

polish you get with a great recording like Herbie Hancock's *River*. Yet going back to the DNM makes the music much more interesting and engaging, there is a coherence to it that the TQ can't match. It's easier to follow individual instruments or voices in a large ensemble, the funky guitar line on *Edith and the Kingpin* being a good example.

Naim that tune

Another interesting contrast is with Naim NACA5 connected to a Naim UnitiLite, this cable has similarly spaced conductors, but they are stranded and much thicker. Put the DNM on after the Naim cable and there is a distinct cleaning up of the treble alongside better timing and no apparent shortfall in authority. The spirit of the music is remarkably well presented thanks to excellent transient definition and the ability to reveal dynamics and bandwidth. I would go so far as to recommend DNM Resolution to Naim users, it does what NACA5 does, but better and maintains the sort of resistive load Naim amps need.

Anyone looking to get maximum musical satisfaction from a decent system should investigate DNM Solid Core cables and those with power-hungry speakers are best advised to try Resolution. A better cable will cost you a lot more. **JK**

DETAILS

PRICE
£33/stereo metre
WEBSITE
dnm.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



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Denon

AH-D600 headphones

IF YOU EVER needed proof that the audio industry was faddish and driven by an insatiable desire to move in on rival companies' markets, then look no further than headphones. A decade ago, these were specialist things bought by geeks, many of whom had a connection with the recording or DJ industry. They were invariably black in colour, and functional objects to which your friends and family paid absolutely no attention whatsoever.

How times have changed! A decade later, everyone in the world either has an iPod, and iPhone or some other sort of iDevice, or an equivalent from the likes of Samsung or Sony. The mystique and the romance of having a small portable digital music making machine has gone, and instead now people's collective attention seems to have shifted to the headphones plugged into them.

It's for this reason that hi-fi manufacturers that have not traditionally paid much interest in such things, now seem very interested in anything that sits around your shell-likes and pumps out a noise!

A design for life

Enter Denon, which has obviously cottoned on to the 'lifestyle' idea; the presentation of the AH-D600 package is the sort of thing your mum might call 'plush', in the same way she'd talk about ruched velvet scatter cushions or fancy velvet curtains. It's a shame the company didn't spend the cash on the build of the phones themselves; it's a little plastic, the like of which you'd never see on Philips Fidelio L1/00s, for example. Worse still, the memory foam earcups are covered in sweaty vinyl, with a white stitching effect that's unlikely to give the AH-D600s universal appeal.

What is good to know, however, is that when you put the phones on your head and tap the casing, the AD-H600s sound quite inert compared to many others. And better still, when those two 50mm 'Free Edge Nano Fibre' drivers have



been run-in for a few days, these phones really begin to shine. What you get is a surprisingly detailed, insightful headphone that digs deep into the music. So much so that it makes a number of already excellent, but more expensive designs, sound quite average in some ways. I'm thinking specifically about the Sennheiser HD650 here, which is something of an established favourite; but against the Denon it sounds quite murky and opaque.

For example, Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* comes over with disconcerting clarity. Being closed back (Denon makes no mention of this, oddly), bass is very tight and taut, yet it breathes better than many similar such designs. The result is a fun-packed, highly tuneful bassline that starts and stops on a sixpence, and pushes the song along with aplomb. Then there's the midband, which is a real ear-opener; it is genuinely very detailed, making the already excellent Philips Fidelio rival sound a bit cloudy and imprecise. It proves great at unpicking the track's rhythm guitar work, and slotting all the elements of the track together beautifully.

Then there's the treble; this for me is where about 95 percent of 'phones stumble and fall. It's usually harsh and tizzy like a Grado or dull like a Beyer, but the Denon again proves consummately detailed and open.

You would never call this a dull headphone; with poor quality programme material and/or a poor source (ie MP3 from your computer), it can be quite lacerative, but feed it with a decently recorded piece of music from a good headphone amp, and it is smooth and even yet intricate and delicate. I love the way it makes a well recorded drum kit sound; a bit of Brand X reveals its ability to render cymbals in a realistically steely way, yet not infuse the sound with hardness or distortion.

Top of the pops

This new headphone proves really impressive; first impressions aren't overwhelmingly good, but the more you use it the better it gets. It is a pretty comfortable design that's not too heavy at 345g, and it has a relatively soft fit on the head where some rivals 'clamp' you much more. This helps you enjoy the AH-D600's powerful, punchy and musically engaging sound more – but it isn't all go and no show; there's loads of detail and this headphone lets you listen right into the mix like few others at or near the price.

Headphones are highly personal things, but if you're looking for an enjoyable, but accurate pair of cans, this should go right to the very top of your shortlist. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£350

CONTACT
02890 279830

WEBSITE
denon.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



MWA-RC Magnetic Wave Absorbers



"Dynamics in the music seem to be more refined with the Magnetic Wave Absorbers fitted and the music flows more smoothly. This is an excellent value accessory for your hi-fi system"

Hi-Fi Choice, October 2013



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MWA-RC caps are manufactured from high quality polypropylene which act reduce the vibrations found on unused RCA contacts on your system.

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SNAKE RIVER AUDIO CABLES

"All I can say is that I'm deeply impressed with these Signature SRA cables, and would certainly use them myself. They're among the most natural-sounding and 'musical' cables I've ever listened to." Jimmy Hughes.

PURIST AUDIO DESIGN CABLES

"These are good cables. So good in fact, I started this review thinking they were the Proteus Provectus that cost ten times as much as the Genesis cables." Alan Sircom.

Analysis Plus, Voodoo Reference, Townshend Audio, Stealth Audio are just some of our Hi End Cable Brands that take your system to a new level. We also supply an impressive range of electronics from companies such as; Electrocompaniet, Astin Trew, Townshend, Bel Canto and Usher Audio, to name but a few.

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Hi-Fi Racks Ltd

Podium Slimline support rack

HI-FI SUPPORTS HAVE to combine good looks with a structure that performs well acoustically, and as such are unlikely to be stocked by your favourite furniture supplier. Leicestershire-based Hi-Fi Racks Ltd produces a range of equipment supports that can be adapted to suit your own requirements. All of its products are designed and handmade in the UK using high-quality solid hardwoods.

Adding to its established Podium and Akorner Reference range, is the recently released Podium Slimline modular rack system that can be expanded as your system grows. The Slimline shares many features with the Podium Reference, but in addition to being sold as a standard four-tier rack, it is also available in the dimensions of your choice.

One size doesn't fit all

To complement its standard range of supports, Hi-Fi Racks also produces matching storage systems for CDs, DVDs, Blu-rays and LPs. The company believes that "one size does not fit all" and, as each unit is handmade to order, it is possible not only to have any size required, but also a combination of hi-fi racks and media storage.

I opt for a Podium Slimline rack that also houses part of a record collection, as well as supporting some heavy valve-based audio equipment. Alas, nowadays, it is virtually impossible to buy something 'off the shelf' that has both storage for records and shelves for hi-fi in one unit, so a bespoke design seems to be the answer.

Following discussions with the company, a design is put together that includes space for LPs on the bottom of the unit, shelves above for valve equipment and an overall width and depth appropriate for placing a turntable on the top.

The Podium Slimline legs and shelves are secured together with threaded rods, making it very sturdy and easy to put together. I go for oak with a satin finish, but black,



cherry, mahogany and walnut finishes are available at extra cost.

The bespoke unit takes a few weeks to manufacture (the standard four-tier model can be delivered within 48 hours) and the unit arrives in several flat-packed boxes with plenty of protective packaging and a couple of photographs showing the finished unit to assist with construction. Assembly is simply a case of screwing threaded bolts into the metal inserts in the supports and then threading the bolts through the holes in each shelf. The correct method is to build the unit upside down. You start by inserting the bolts into the top shelf, then fitting the supports, then inserting bolts into the bottom of each support. Next you place the second shelf over the bolts then screw on the next set of supports. Continue until you have fitted the bottom shelf and finish off by screwing on the four legs. Turn it upright and it's ready to go.

The racks are beautifully made and have a superb finish. Each vertical support is made from a single piece of oak and the shelves are manufactured from planks of oak that have been bonded with the grain 'concave to convex' for rigidity and acoustic properties. This construction also eliminates the risk of warping.

A heavy and sturdy design is an essential requirement for audio equipment supports in order to

eliminate resonances and dampen any vibrations from the equipment, and here the Podium Slimline scores. Further upgrades can be retro-fitted, including spare legs (made to any length at no extra cost), spikes for the legs and floor protectors for the spikes. The standard four-tier model pictured includes the floor spikes.

Rack's the way to do it

With my system placed on the rack and listening to my 1979 pressing of Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italien*, which is on the 'B' side of the legendary Telarc *1812 Overture* digital recording by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra DG-10041, the bass kettle drum that resonates through the military march segments is significantly tighter and each impact of the drum punches you in the stomach! Another classic LP is Branford Marsalis' *Romances for Saxophone* on CBS M 42122 and listening to his arrangement of Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 3*, the haunting saxophone stands out more clearly from the plucking of the double basses and everything is more controlled than before.

The Podium Slimline represents excellent value for money. It can be custom made to your requirements and also upgraded and modified as your hi-fi system changes. The sonic improvements are likely to be a considerable plus, too! **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE

From £349

CONTACT

01572756447

WEBSITE

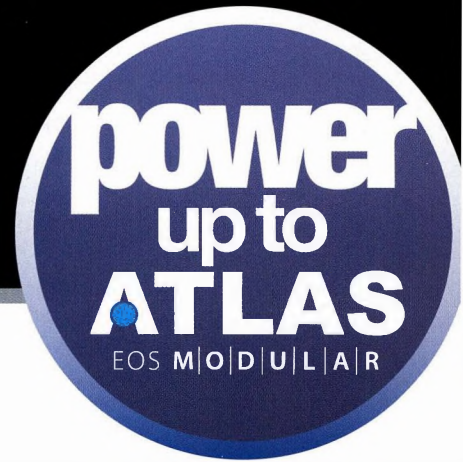
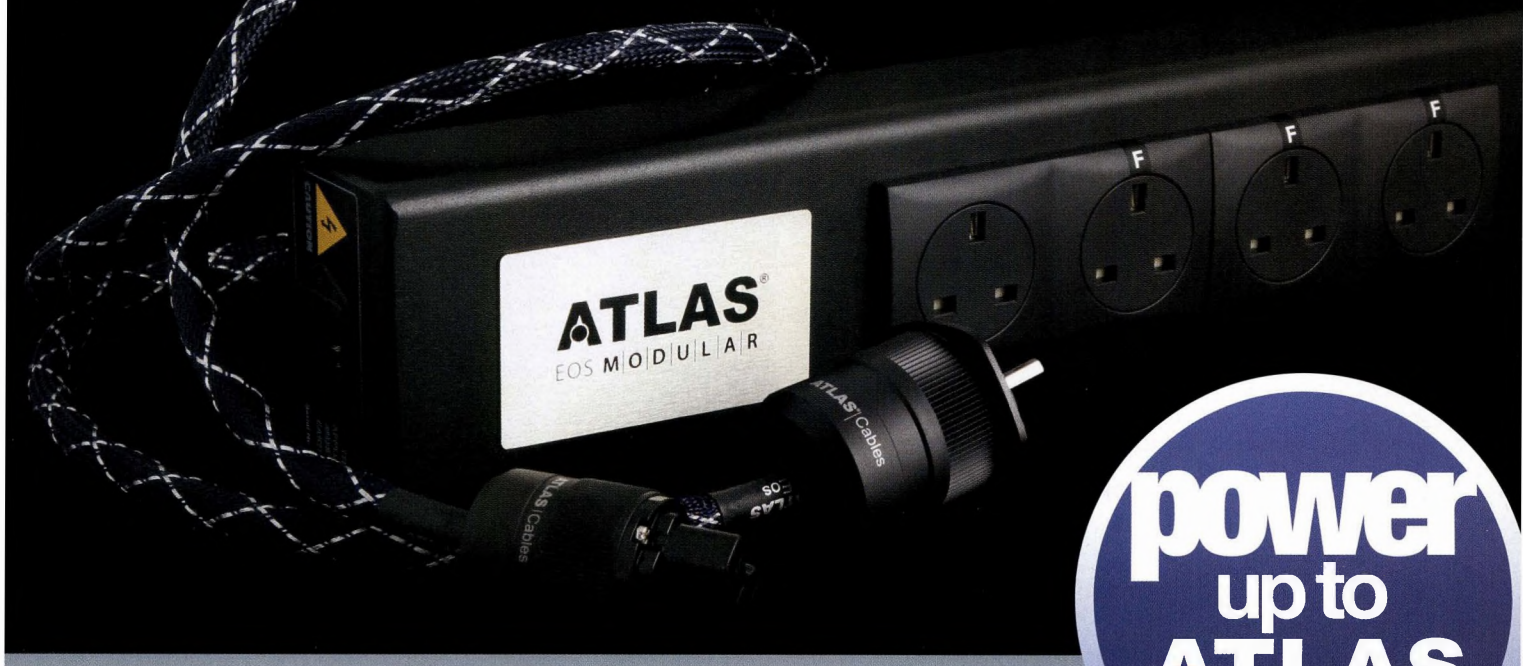
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OUR VERDICT



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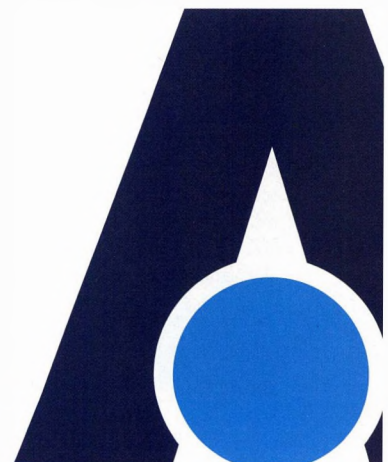


* Our 'Home Demo Kit' case comprises an Eos Modular filtered mains block and a set of 5 Eos power cables (including one 4mm² cable used to connect block to your wall socket).

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ISOkinetik

ISO Denon DL-103 body upgrade



DENON'S DL-103 CLASSIC cartridge has been an industry standard for decades. It is particularly noted for giving a well-rounded and smooth sound while at the same time providing a full and gutsy performance. However, it has a rather cheap plastic body that is glued on to the mechanism, almost as an afterthought. This is probably to help keep the price down for what is otherwise a high-quality product. This plastic body tends to resonate and causes colouration of the signal, resulting in a lack of clarity, particularly with violins that can sound a bit thin and the bass, while being explosive, can be a bit one-dimensional.

The solution offered by ISOkinetik is to replace the plastic body with an aluminium body that has been precision CNC machined from the

highest grade of aluminium. The kit includes a pair of A2 stainless steel Allen key fixing bolts and an appropriate Allen key.

Easy peasy

Undertaking the upgrade is surprisingly simple. The plastic case is held together in four places with glue and all that is required is to gently prise the case apart at the glue points and lift the case off the cartridge (being careful not to break the cantilever or the tiny wires inside). The remaining plastic base is then trimmed carefully at the two front corners with a knife or file and finally the assembly is pushed into the new aluminium case. It is a friction fit and I find that it doesn't require any gluing, although a small dot of Cyanoacrylate adhesive can be applied if you have been a bit over-zealous with the trimming!



A step-by-step video is available to guide you through the process.

After carrying out the upgrade, lots more detail emerges from the wings. Violins gain presence and realism and the bass tightens up considerably. A highly recommended upgrade for anyone with a steady hand and a spare half hour to spend! **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£80

CONTACT
02082418890

WEBSITE
isokinetik.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Mains Cables R Us

Delrin feet



AN ADDITION TO the range of equipment feet supplied and manufactured by Mains Cables R Us of Huddersfield are the new Delrin cone feet. The Delrin feet are available in two sizes and offer a great alternative to the existing feet that are fitted to audio equipment and are often of rather poor quality. Frequently, the feet supplied with items of hi-fi have inferior sonic properties and are only designed to keep the unit steady on your equipment support. The Delrin feet not only support your equipment, but also reduce physical resonances and unwanted vibrations that can find their way into the audio signal.

These feet are made from Delrin, a trade name of DuPont, which is an engineering plastic otherwise known as acetal or Polyoxymethylene (POM). POM is often used in the manufacture of high-end audio

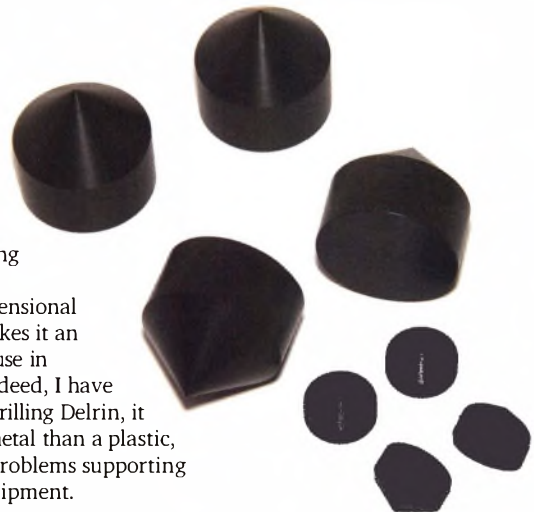
components as it has a unique combination of properties, including strength, stiffness, hardness, and dimensional stability, which makes it an ideal material for use in equipment feet. Indeed, I have found that when drilling Delrin, it feels more like a metal than a plastic, so it will have no problems supporting the heaviest of equipment.

Best foot forward

The Delrin feet are simply placed under the item in contact with the body of the unit (not on the existing feet) so that its feet are lifted clear of the support. If preferred, the feet can also be fixed to the unit with a small piece of adhesive putty. They are available in two sizes to suit most audio equipment: 30mm diameter

and 30mm high for the large foot and 15mm diameter and 10mm high for the small one.

The Delrin feet certainly do what they are designed for, and fitting them to my CD player results in a cleaner sound with noticeably improved dynamics. A value for money upgrade that delivers noticeable sonic benefits! **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE
£7.50 to £9.50

CONTACT
01484 480086

WEBSITE
mains-cables-r-us.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



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Analogue

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| Clearaudio Balance Phono stage, excellent..... | Due in |
| EAR 834P Deluxe ex demo..... | 1299 |
| Conrad Johnson TEA 1b Phono stage..... | 1999 |
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| Graham Slee Reflex, excellent boxed..... | 349 |
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| Hadcock 242 Integra, ex demo as new..... | 799 |
| Kuzma Stabi Reference, excellent boxed..... | Due in |
| Kuzma Stog, excellent..... | 449 |
| Linn Itok LV11, in rare black, excellent..... | 799 |
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| Origin Live stub modified RB250..... | 149 |
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| Thorens TD160mk2/SME Series 3s..... | 179 |
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| Thorens TD170, Fully Automatic, excellent..... | 249 |
| Tom Evans Groove, excellent..... | 899 |
| Trifort Dino mk2, boxed..... | 249 |
| Inlogy 906 Valve phono stage..... | 999 |
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Radios/Recorders

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|---|-----|
| Arcam T51, vgc..... | 79 |
| Arcam Alpha 10 DAB Tuner..... | 249 |
| Cyrus FM7.3, excellent boxed..... | 199 |
| Micromega FM10, super b FM tuner ex demo..... | 349 |
| Musical Fidelity A5DAB Tuner, excellent..... | 449 |
| Nakamichi CR1, excellent..... | 99 |
| Quad 99FM, excellent boxed..... | 299 |
| Rega Radio R, excellent..... | 199 |
| TEAC TR650DAB, ex demo..... | 139 |

Amplifiers

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|---|------|
| Arcam Alpha 9, excellent..... | 179 |
| Arcam Alpha 8, excellent..... | 119 |
| Arcam Xeta 290, excellent..... | 149 |
| Audiolab 8000A, vgc boxed..... | 199 |
| Audio Analogue Donzeta Power boxed..... | 299 |
| Audio Research LS8 Preamp/eq, excellent boxed..... | 699 |
| Audio Research Ref 610 Monoblocks, vgc boxed..... | 6999 |
| Audio Research Ref 210T Monoblocks, ex new boxed..... | 9749 |
| Ayre Acoustics AX7e integrated amplifier, ex boxed..... | 1299 |
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| CR Developments Kalypso Integrated, boxed vgc..... | 599 |
| Cyrus DACXP, excellent boxed..... | 699 |
| Cyrus Straight Line integrated, excellent boxed..... | 199 |
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| Exposure 14/9 Pre and PMS PSU combo vgc..... | 899 |
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| Exposure 7 Pre, vgc..... | 199 |
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| NAIM NAP150, excellent boxed..... | 399 |
| NAIM NAIT 3, excellent boxed..... | 299 |
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| Quad QC24 Preamp, excellent boxed..... | 649 |
| Quad 33/303 pre/power, combo..... | 249 |
| Quad 33/405 pre/power, combo..... | 499 |
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| Unson Research P70, excellent boxed..... | 1999 |

Digital

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| Accuphase DP100, excellent boxed..... | 3999 |
| Accuphase DP75V c/w option boards, excellent boxed..... | 3249 |
| Arcam Alpha 8, excellent..... | 149 |
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| Audiolab 8200CD, nr mint boxed..... | 549 |
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| Audio Note CD2, vgc..... | 399 |
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| Goldenote Koala, near mint boxed..... | 799 |
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| B&W 800D, near mint..... | 9499 |
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| Castle Siring 3, vgc..... | 249 |
| Focal Electra 1008Be with matching stands as new..... | 1999 |
| Focal Electra 1028Be, as new..... | 2749 |
| Focal 806V, excellent boxed..... | 349 |
| Hypenon HPS938, excellent boxed..... | 1599 |
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| Kudos C2, near mint boxed..... | 999 |
| Kudos X2, ex demo boxed..... | 699 |
| Martin Logan Aelius I, excellent boxed..... | 999 |
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| Monitor Audio RX8, Gloss black, boxed..... | 749 |
| Monitor Audio PMC703, boxed..... | 199 |
| Opera Secondo, excellent boxed..... | 799 |
| Proac Studio 130, excellent..... | 499 |
| Sonus Faber Cremona, boxed in graphite..... | 2399 |
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| Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor M, as new with stands..... | 2999 |
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| Triangle Comete ES, excellent..... | 249 |
| Usher Be10DMD, ex demo boxed..... | 8499 |
| Usher S520 in birch, excellent boxed..... | 279 |
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| Audio Analogue Crescendo Amp & CD, ex demo..... | 799 |
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| Onkyo end of line AV amps..... | Call |
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van den Hul

The River 3T interconnect

THE RIVER IS the first in the vdH range to sport '3T', which stands for True Transmission Technology. A detailed explanation can be found on the company's website, but it is designed to be difficult to copy, easy to manufacture consistently, able to be used in a variety of guises and to handle high temperatures. Sonically, the "very stable amorphous structure" is said to be beneficial, due to its non-oxidising nature.

The River is available in either 0.8 or 1.0m lengths and is finished beautifully. It comes with Hulliflex 3 isolation, which has a rubbery feel and is acoustically very inert. Inside, 19 strands of linear-structured carbon-saturated wire are used, plus a silver-plated copper screen. The plugs are high quality, with a positive fit, and the overall impression far exceeds that of many other cables at the price.

I find the River to have a clean, crisp and open sound, but there's still a nice, effusive sort of musicality to it. The cable doesn't try too hard to deconstruct the sound, or to reveal the last nth degree of micro detail, instead preferring to work on imparting the general sense of a musical event.

River dance

Fluorescent from the Pet Shop Boys *Electric* album is carried with great verve, the cable setting up a powerful, thumping bass that syncopates beautifully with the hi-hat cymbal work. It gives a big, warm, bold rendition of the keyboard sounds, and conveys the drama of the song superbly. Switching to a recent recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* shows the cable has a smooth nature that lets music flow well, with very little compression or colouration



considering the relatively modest cost. The music has a pleasingly organic sound that sets it apart from a number of similarly priced designs, which try harder to spit out detail at the listener yet lose the musical plot in the process. This is a very well balanced and highly sophisticated performer that represents excellent value. Hear it if you can! **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£150/1m
CONTACT
0121 2129288
WEBSITE
flamingoaudio.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Nevado

Kaos Bluetooth speaker

BLUETOOTH SPEAKERS AREN'T going to render your nice shiny floorstanders redundant any time soon, but they are making serious inroads into the budget arena, where performance is outweighed by the ability to stream from compatible devices. Enter Nevada's Kaos.

It's not hi-fi, and doesn't pretend to be. But the reason we're including it is that it's actually really rather good for what it is. Every audiophile has a kitchen, bedroom, bathroom or shed where they still want music, and this is a great way to get it.

Set in a sturdy 55 x 55 x 50mm, 227g circular aluminium enclosure is a 3W rated 'splash-proof' drive of around 4cm diameter, loaded in an infinite baffle configuration. Connected to this is a small Class D amplifier with built-in loudness compensation, which automatically boosts low frequencies slightly at

lower levels. This is powered from a 450mAh built-in Lithium-ion battery, and a Bluetooth receiver chip. There's even a built-in microphone for handsfree use and conference calls, and SD/TF card slot that takes up to 8GB. Another alternative is the 3.5mm minijack; a free patch chord is supplied for this.

Easy hook up

The unit easily hooks up to my iPad and dutifully never loses its pairing; switching it on after a long period of non-use, it immediately finds the iPad again and starts working. You will need to charge it via the supplied USB lead, of course. This takes an hour or so and gives a good five hours use as a result. If you don't use it for a short while, the Kaos turns itself off automatically. Side-mounted buttons control the volume, plus track and pause mode.



The Kaos is surprisingly clean and open sounding, and projects well into the room. You'd never confuse it for a hi-fi speaker, but it is surprisingly good as a general audio product, when so many disappoint. It is very listenable and doesn't fatigue, unlike so many rivals, which are crude and shrill. Well built, with a rubber anti-slip mat on the base and bathroom-friendly water resistance, this is a fine little moveable music making device, that's worth the asking price. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£50
CONTACT
02392 313090
WEBSITE
nevadaradio.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



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Andrew Simpson casts his expert eye over his pick of the best hi-fi websites and online content



A RETURN TO THE CLASSICS

What started out as a novel way to share and celebrate the vinyl album in an East London pub's function room, has grown into a cult listening experience that's spread across the social media space, driven by content on the Classic Album Sunday's website. CAS events extend well beyond London, with sessions stretching from Edinburgh to New York, but event details are only a small part of what's



PREVIEW YOUR PRELOVED

You know the story: you spy an ad for that elusive piece of kit you've been hankering after and schlep the length of the country to collect it, only to discover what was described as 'in superb nick' looks like it's gone 10 rounds with Giant Haystacks.

Step forward the friendly folks at 2ndhandhifi.co.uk who, by using YouTube, allow you to get up close and personal with over 100 items that this Stockton-on-Tees company has on offer from the comfort of your laptop. Every product on its website is displayed via a 360° walk around video, giving you a warts-and-all window into its preloved hi-fi.

As with any used purchase, viewing and listening in person is still recommended before buying, but at least you'll be in the picture before you visit.

on offer. The rest is dedicated to the stories and music that goes into the grooves.

Want to know the story behind David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* or find out what legendary producer Joe Boyd calls his top five albums? It's on there – rubbing shoulders with album of the month features, a suggestions list, industry guest blogs, radio podcasts and video interviews. But, as we hi-fi fans know, music can only sound as good as the kit it's played on, and for us audiophiles the site

also has a dedicated hi-fi corner, with features on room acoustics and details of the playback systems used for each event.

Equally accessible is CAS' social media spread and, with active accounts across Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, there are plenty of ways to engage. What the website's rich content gets across more clearly than anything is that classic albums aren't just for Sundays.



FACEBOOKING CYRUS STYLE

A quick glance at cyrusunofficial.co.uk reveals Cyrus has a thriving online fan base, which the Cambridgeshire company clearly values, as its support through Twitter and user-friendly website content including 'how to' videos reveals. So the fact it's now reaching out via Facebook is no surprise.

"As well as using Facebook to showcase our product range, share images and videos, we're getting Cyrus owners to show us their often incredible systems and spark discussions about different set-up options," says Cyrus marketing and website coordinator Hannah Jones. But Cyrus' Facebook discussion isn't just about hi-fi, there's light-hearted music chat and fun competitions to keep users engaged, so whether you're a Cyrus owner or not, head on over and join the fun.

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CHOICE TWEETS



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Here's how to find the best headphones for working out in the gym. Follow Denon on Google+ [t.co/Wu7H9rtj81](https://plus.google.com/+t.co/Wu7H9rtj81)

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Today in 1964 @TheBeachBoys made their TV debut - here's #brianwilson w/ a #McIntosh MC240 mastering Pet Sounds pic.twitter.com/iDAvS8kgVf

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VINY LHUNT.COM @VINY LHUNT
Britpop group Suede announce an 11-LP #vinyl box set: bit.ly/16umgZn

QED @QEDOFFICIAL
We would love to see your #QED set up, tweet us your pictures and see how they compare with others!

MARTIN LOGAN @MARTINLOGANLTD
In case you couldn't join us at CEDIA this year, here's a quick video tour of our booth, shot by CE Pro fb.me/113JzEblC

SOUND ORGANISATION @SOUNDORGYORK
Keeping it tip-top... almost 30yrs old, this @NaimAudio NAP250 amp serviced fully by ourselves pic.twitter.com/HK4VWHApbB

ROCKY MOUNTAIN AUDIO @AUDIOFEST
We're looking forward to some of the video coverage of #RMAF 2013 from Part-Time Audiophile! fb.me/2kNuwJbjx

CHATTER

YouTube Cambridge Audio uploaded a raft of short YouTube videos about its latest hi-fi kit for this year's CEDIA show in Colorado, which serve as a plain English overview of the products CA currently has on offer t.co/YAPPLJkIc5

Facebook Missed the National Audio Show at Whittlebury Hall in September? Head to the event's Facebook

page for a flavour of what was on offer this year and which rooms took the awards facebook.com/NationalAudioShowUK

Linn Linn has launched two fascinating new videos on its website, to explain how its new Exakt technology is taking hi-fi to the next level, by delivering studio master sound quality directly into its latest speakers

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Kai Ekholm, Inner-magazines.com 2012

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Steve Dickenson, Hi Fi Plus 2010

"The Iridium mines details other amplifiers only dream about"

Noel Keywood, Editor, HiFi World 2012

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Jimmy Hughes, Hi Fi Choice 2012

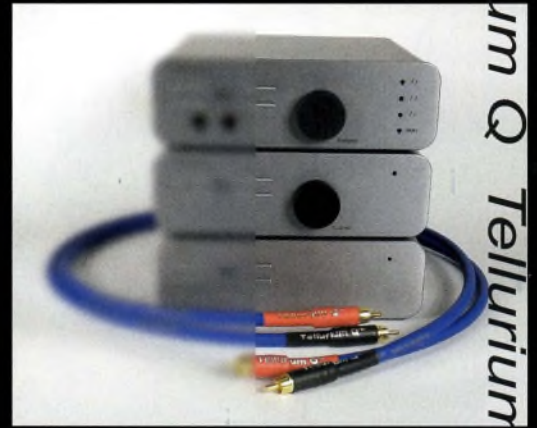
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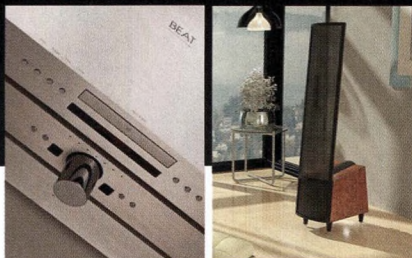
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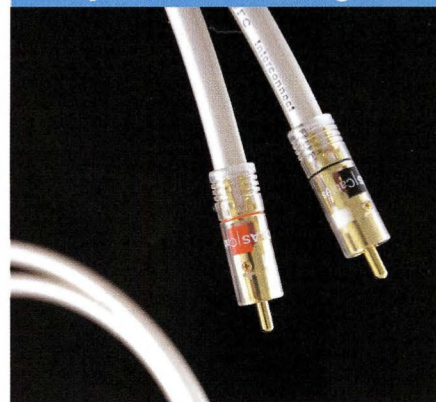
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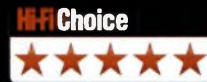
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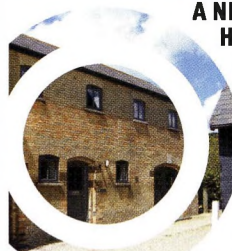
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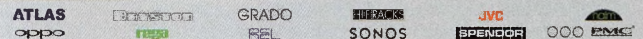
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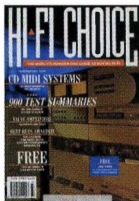
WE HEAR...

LINN PRODUCTS IS ENJOYING ITS 40th year and has a rush of new product releases to prove it. Some are clever consolidations of existing designs and others are quite radical (with a K, naturally)! The headline development is the company's new Exakt platform, which migrates its flagship speaker systems from analogue to digital active processing. Put very simply, Exakt is a digital crossover that does all room correction in the digital domain, but also calibrates itself accurately to every single drive unit in the loudspeaker system being used. After this, it converts the signal to analogue and drives each individual speaker driver via Linn power amplifiers. The difference between existing analogue active crossover Linn systems and the new Exakt digital system is striking and obviously better, says a *Hi-Fi Choice* spy who infiltrated the Linn building recently! Also new is an improved entry-level LP12 subchassis called Kore, costing £300 as an upgrade, but fitted to all new base-model LP12s as standard from now on. Again, it's an obvious improvement. Watch this space for a closer look at its birthday presents!

AFTER KEEPING HIS CARDS PRETTY CLOSE TO HIS CHEST, Touraj Moghaddam, previously of Roksan, seems to have pulled back into the fast lane. His Vertere iPod cables were good, but now he has a flagship tonearm and has just announced the RG-1 and SG-1 turntables. These look seriously special; like next-gen Xerxes. We can't wait to try 'em!

NEVADA IS AN AFFORDABLE PORTABLE AUDIO BRAND on a roll; the new Kaos PRD1 is a £50 DAB/FM radio with digital recording built in. Perfect for the footie or last week's *Any Questions!*

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 77 DECEMBER 1989

This being the December issue, the spirit of giving was clearly in the air and lucky readers were treated to a free JVC 90-minute cassette. Meanwhile the *Update* pages featured news of a multi-disc CD player from Technics

designed to ensure every Xmas party keeps the music pumping from start to finish. The PR blurb accompanying the five-disc, £270 SL-PC20K put it quite succinctly, stating: "Are you so engrossed with drinks, food and music that you never get a chance to welcome guests? Here's the solution". The carousel design of the Technics meant it was possible to replace discs on the tray without interrupting the music, providing unlimited sounds. Imagine a machine that will let you play music for hours on end - it'll never catch on...

Elsewhere George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev met off the coast of Malta (as you do) to bring the cold war to an end. In the US the public were introduced to *The Simpsons* as the first full-length episode aired and pop sensation Taylor Swift was born. Meanwhile, here in the UK, the atrocity that was Jive Bunny sat at the top of the singles charts.



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 184 DECEMBER 1998

In his *Editor's Notebook* intro column Stan Vincent commented on the introduction of the new Monopolies & Mergers Commission's Domestic Electrical Goods Order, which effectively did away with

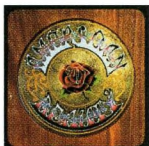
RRPs, leaving retailers to price certain electrical goods as they saw fit. "Suppose there was a retail chain with branches all over the country. Suppose it took a CD player, which would have had an RRP of £300 and sold it in its remotest branch in the Scottish Highlands for £600. Suppose then that it opened up national distribution on this line and dropped the price to £400. It would be perfectly legal for the retailer to promote this as a discount bargain, £200 off. It would still cost £100 more than the old RRP and the consumer wouldn't know." These were indeed confusing times...

Meanwhile, The Spice Girls and B*Witched dominated the singles charts for the month of December, while *Ladies and Gentlemen: The Best of George Michael* sat at the top of the album chart. George decided to celebrate by having a smoke and then going for a little drive...



DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month **Scott Berry** from Computer Audio Design chooses four of his favourite long players...



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During the eighties, I saw quite a few shows back in my native USA. This album reminds me of the adventures and the fun of all those concerts.



JIM WHITE TRANSNORMAL SKIPEROO

Jim White hails from Florida, but I came across him since living in the United Kingdom. He has had a crazy life and it shows in his music!



OSCAR PETERSON WE GET REQUESTS

My wife got me into Oscar Peterson, and we saw his last London tour. He has so many incredible albums, but this classic is truly special for me.



COWBOY JUNKIES ACOUSTIC JUNK

This album is a bit tricky to find, but well worth it. The sound quality of their albums is fantastic and I really like the single-microphone recordings.

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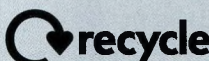
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