

FiiO fidelity

Affordable X3 portable player packs 24/192 audio in your pocket

Melody maker

Does this Marantz network receiver make sweet music?



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 382

March 2014

Sony superstar

New 'Hi-Res' one-box system for all your computer audio

CES 2014 Las Vegas show report inside!

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM:

Mini ATC setup big on sound



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B&W, Cambridge Audio, Harman Kardon, NAD and Yamaha

Record club

Meet the enthusiasts that wax lyrical about vinyl

GROUP TEST

Head gear

Stylish headphones for music on the go and home listening



Power towers

Dynaudio's exciting X34 floorstanders pack a mighty punch



MARCH 2014

£4.50

03



ULTIMATE STUDIO EXPERIENCE

'These are supremely musical mini-monitors with astounding bass punch and rhythmic ability allied to class-leading resolution.'


Hi-Fi World, July 2013


LS50

Enjoy your music precisely the way it was first recorded. Unheard of in such a compact design, LS50 delivers a deeply rich, multi-dimensional 'soundstage experience' that is out of all proportion to its size. Designed using KEF's cutting-edge acoustic modeling, LS50 is the ultimate mini monitor for the home.

www.kef.com/LS50



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INNOVATORS IN SOUND



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CES 2014 Show Report



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Lisa Stansfield *Seven*

BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS



EDITOR'S CHOICE:
Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance



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



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



The future of hi-res audio looks set to shine very brightly this year following the long awaited announcement from US high-resolution music store HDTracks that it will officially launch a UK site by April 2014. This is exciting news for audiophiles that have been unsuccessful in fooling the territory-restricted system by claiming to be a resident of, say Page, Arizona, and will now be able to access some 10,000 24-bit tracks in the music store's catalogue.

Of course, we have had access in the UK to hi-res download material via online music stores from the likes of Linn and Naim Audio for some time now, but their music catalogues are mostly limited to own-label artists. HDTracks claims the new store will have the world's largest catalogue of hi-res music, and has now partnered with every major record label, with new HD material being added to its catalogue regularly.

CES 2014 (see Show Report, p120) is an excellent indicator of what technology will be shaping our world in the year ahead, and in terms of hi-res audio DSD (Digital Stream Direct) is the file format on many lips. Support for DSD hasn't been announced yet by HDTracks, but this is sure to be on the agenda following new DSD hardware from Sony with its Hi-Res audio range (see our In-Depth review of the HAP-S1, p16) and Astell&Kern players also offering support for the format. I for one can't wait to see how hi-res unfolds and to trawl through the HDTracks catalogue when it arrives in the UK.

Lee Dunkley Editor

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Never miss an issue – turn to p20 for our latest subs offer

Azur's full compliment

Cambridge Audio bolsters flagship hi-fi separates Azur 851 Series with three new components



PRICE: FROM £1,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0333 9000093 **WEB:** CAMBRIDGEAUDIO.COM

ADDING TO ITS hi-fi separates range, Cambridge Audio has announced the introduction of three new components. Swelling the ranks to five, the flagship Azur 851 Series now includes the Azur 851E preamplifier, Azur 851W power amplifier and Azur 851D digital-to-analogue converter. The new introductions join the existing Azur 815A integrated amplifier and 815C upsampling DAC/CD player/preamplifier models from 2013 to create a full compliment of separates.

The three models were originally announced at the Munich High End show in May 2013, but with only preliminary details available. We can now confirm that the Azur 851W power amplifier utilises an all-metal chassis and is built around the company's proprietary Class XD amplification system, combining Class A and Class AB amplification for superior power efficiency, which the maker claims runs to 200W per channel into 8ohms or 500W RMS in mono-bridged configuration.

The matching Azur 815E preamplifier replaces the 840E with a more versatile range of inputs including three selectable RCA/balanced XLR inputs geared for high-end sources. A further five RCA inputs are available, plus configurable trigger and IR outputs that allow the 815E preamp to fully integrate with the 815W power amplifier – as well as other modern power amplifiers.

The last addition to the range is the 851D digital-to-analogue converter, which the maker says extends the



The Azur 851 Series adds new preamp, power amp and DAC models to the range

brilliant digital audio handling and upsampling technology of the 851C CD player ready for all your digital sources. The spec sheet details a comprehensive range of digital inputs including coaxial, Toslink optical, BNC coaxial and AES/EBU, plus asynchronous USB that can upsample to 24-bit/384kHz using ATF2 (second-generation Adaptive Time Filtering algorithms). Bluetooth wireless connectivity is also supported via the supplied BT100 Wireless Audio Receiver dongle with aptX.

The full compliment of Azur 851 Series hi-fi separates is available in silver or black brushed-metal finishes. Prices start at £999.95 for the Azur 851D digital-to-analogue converter, 851A integrated amplifier, 851C DAC/CD player and preamplifier and 851E preamplifier all costing £1,199.95 each. The Azur 851W power amplifier costs £1,499.95. All models are on sale now and available from your nearest Richer Sounds store, which can be found by visiting richersounds.com.

COMMENT

BIG BROTHER IS LISTENING TO YOU

How does what you're up to when listening to music shape the sort of stuff you like to listen to? Do you, for example, insist on pumping out banging techno when you go for a run, snuggle under the bedclothes with some Morrissey when you're feeling down or let the dulcet tones of Barry White set the tone when you're in the mood for lurrve? It's certainly a no-brainer to reveal that we like to hear different stuff according to what we're up to, but Spotify is giving the idea some serious thought.

A new feature reportedly being explored by the streaming music service will use special sensors on the listener's body or in their smartphone to measure their heart rate and then use that information to select appropriate music to match what activity the listener is undertaking. The thinking goes that motion, temperature and even sleep patterns could be used by Spotify to

The more we know about you, the better the Spotify engine can be

help provide suggested playlists to suit the mood or activity that you're embarking on.

As Spotify's product manager for discovery and recommendations – Donovan Sung – explained, "Maybe with motion sensors in phones we can start guessing whether users are running, biking or driving? Maybe the phone has a temperature sensor or a heart rate sensor. We could guess whether the user is tense... The more we know about you, the better the [recommendation] engine can be." So, in theory you will be able to use Spotify to get yourself pumped up before embarking on an early morning jog or to calm yourself down before going to bed at night.

Whether or not subscribers to the music streaming service are ready for such intrusion into their life, or indeed if they're not smart enough to choose music to suit the mood themselves (the Orb is not great for getting yourself in the mood for a big night out and similarly Extreme Noise Terror isn't a great choice for wooing the opposite sex), the idea and the application of the technology involved remains intriguing. You can guarantee Spotify will explore it in great depth, whether or not we'll see the fruits of this toil remains another matter entirely.



Denon's first DAC

New standalone USB headphone DAC aims to upgrade computer music



PRICE: £329 **AVAILABLE:** FEBRUARY
CONTACT: 02890 279830 **WEB:** DENON.CO.UK

RECOGNISING THE TREND for enhancing sound quality from computer devices, Denon is set to launch its DA-300USB DAC. It's the first standalone USB DAC to come from the home entertainment giant and boasts the same Advanced AL32 Processing and 32-bit/192kHz digital-to-analogue technology as found inside Denon's flagship CD/SACD players, says the manufacturer.

Connected via USB-B from a computer device the Denon claims to support MP3/MP4, AAC, ALAC, WAV and FLAC HD (up to 24/192), as well as DSD file formats. There are also three digital (1x coaxial and 2x optical) inputs specified for connecting non-computer sources. The built-in headphone amp outputs to a 6.3mm socket on the front, and a pair of stereo RCAs at the back output to a line-level input on an analogue stereo amplifier.

Measuring just 170 x 55 x 170mm (WxHxD) the unit can be positioned either horizontally or vertically (using the supplied clip-on stand), depending on your requirements. Orientation of the display changes with unit positioning.

IN BRIEF

NAD 'ROOMFEEL' IN-EAR 'PHONES

● The VISO HP20 headphones are the first in-ears fitted with RoomFeel technology for a more life-like listening experience, says the maker. Each driver housing is machined from a single billet of lightweight aluminium and fitted with ultra low mass high excursion 8mm drivers for extended bass performance, it continues. They come supplied with five silicone gel tips and a tangle-free cable with in-line Apple-compatible remote control. A neoprene travel case is also included along with a 3.5-to-6.35mm jack convertor, aeroplane adaptor and cable clip. They cost £130 from Apple Stores and Sevenoaks Sound and Vision. NADELECTRONICS.COM



Quad gets active with 9AS

PRICE: £600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01480 452561 **WEB:** QUAD-HIFI.CO.UK

British hi-fi brand Quad has unveiled its 9AS loudspeaker as part of its Studio Monitor Series. The new active model is a master and slave configuration that claims to be driven by Class AB power amplification rated at 100W to each speaker - negating the need for any external amplification requirements. A two-way bass reflex design, the 9AS claims a new 25mm fabric dome tweeter partnered with a 100mm woven

Kevlar mid/bass driver. Measuring 152 x 302 x 215mm (WxHxD), the compact speaker suggests suitability for near-field monitoring, and a three-position bass EQ setting is offered to equalise the bass response for free-standing, shelf and close-to-wall placement options. An optional foot extension is available to tilt the speakers back for desktop installations.

The built-in digital-to-analogue converter is said to hail from the

company's Elite range of CD players (shown below) and claims to handle up to 24-bit/192kHz sources. The master unit caters for digital connectivity via asynchronous USB, optical and coaxial inputs, and there's a set of line-level RCAs and a 3.5mm jack socket for hooking up stereo analogue sources.

Input selection and a swipe volume control can be found at the base of the master speaker unit. ▶



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nothing less...”



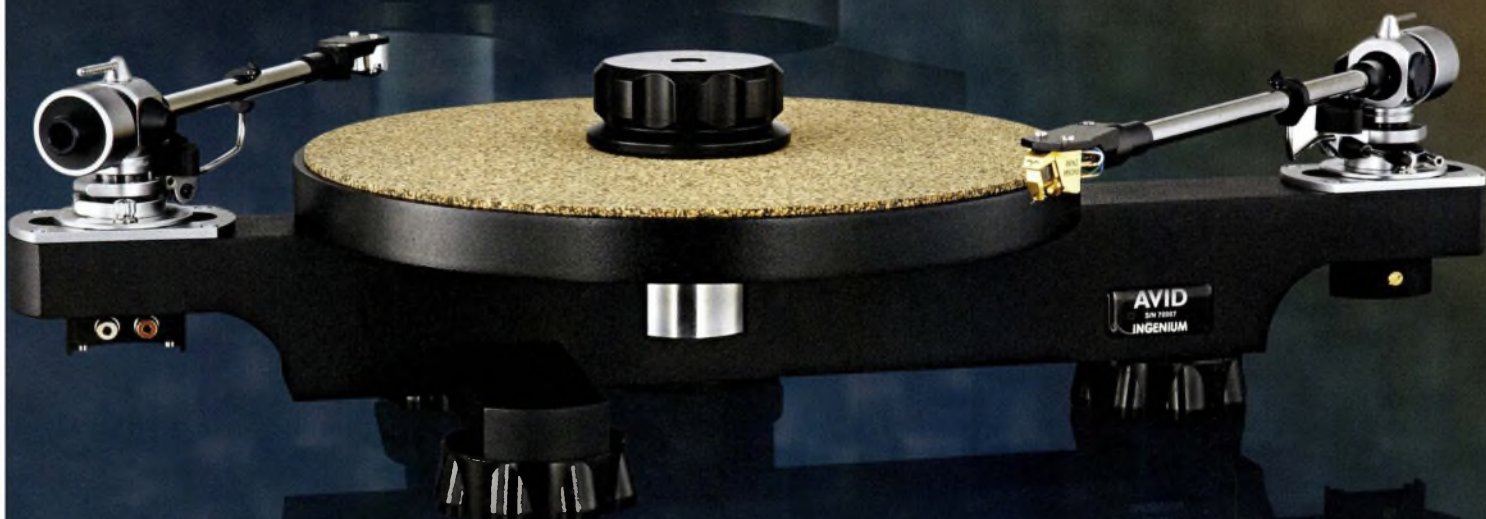
“This level of performance,
convenience and style makes for
an award winning product.”

Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



“Oozes quality in both
construction and sound”

Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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Fanthorpes, Hepworth Arcade, SilverSt, Hull, East Riding of Yorkshire HU1 1JU Tel: 01482 223096

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

The Audioworks, 14 Stockport Road, Cheadle, Cheshire, SK8 2AA Tel: 0161 428 7887

www.avidhifi.co.uk

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Spendor's new mini

D1 standmount replaces popular SA1 mini-monitor loudspeaker

PRICE: £1,795 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01323 843474 **WEB:** SPENDORAUDIO.COM

THIS IS THE second announcement to come from the Sussex-based loudspeaker firm in recent months, and follows the revised A6R floorstander unveiled at the end of 2013. The new D1 is hailed as the smallest speaker in the company's D-line and replaces the well-regarded SA1 mini-monitor loudspeaker. The new two-way mini standmount model claims a rigid cabinet with dynamic damping and measures just 165 x 305 x 190mm (WxHxD). The fuss-free design comes in three contemporary finishes including Spendor Dark and Spendor White lacquer finishes, as well as a Dark Ebony luxury finish. Speaker drives are handled by a new 15cm bass/mid unit while treble is reproduced by the new LPZ tweeter. Stands are available costing £595 per pair.



IN BRIEF

PRIME MERIDIAN



Demonstrating that hi-fi listening using headphones is a serious business comes the Prime headphone amplifier from high-end manufacturer Meridian Audio. The dual-skinned unit is expertly designed by Allen Boothroyd and offers twin 6.35mm headphone jacks for separately wired and traditional headphones, as well as a single 3.5mm output jack for smaller headphones geared towards tablet and smartphone devices. Stereo RCA input and output sockets are provided as well as a USB input that handles 24-bit/192kHz audio files from a computer. The Prime costs £1,200, and a matching outboard PSU is available for £800. **MERIDIAN-AUDIO.COM**

Parasound's P5 premier

PRICE: £999 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 0161 7679043 **WEB:** PARASOUND.COM

American audio firm Parasound has announced the introduction of the new Halo P5 stereo preamplifier to UK shores. First shown at CES 2014 in Las Vegas in January (see Show Report starting on page 120), the versatile component is touted as being suitable for both music enthusiasts – as part of a dedicated stereo system for hi-fi enthusiasts – and for home cinema aficionados – as part of a surround sound speaker setup.

The subwoofer preamplifier output aims to integrate powered subs via a single balanced XLR output or utilising one of the two RCA output connections. It can be level controlled via the front panel and there's frequency cut off

control at the back for integration with the main speakers, the San Francisco-based maker tells us. There is also a bypass facility that sends stereo and subwoofer signals to an AV processor or surround sound receiver.

A built-in Burr-Brown PCM1798 digital-to-analogue converter handles digital sources via USB (up to 24-bit/96kHz) and S/PDIF inputs (up to 24-bit/192kHz).

The generous connectivity options give five RCA line-level inputs – one also with balanced XLRs – plus there is also a phono input and earthing point that caters for both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges with a choice of three load impedances.

IR input and IR loop output jacks and 12V output to trigger power amplifiers and other devices are also incorporated. Front panel 3.5mm jacks for aux input and headphone output completes the Halo P5's connectivity options.

The front panel volume level is motor driven by an Alps potentiometer controlled by the supplied remote control. Parasound tells us. Bass and treble controls can also be found on the front along with a tone defeat button to bypass EQ circuitry, balance adjust, mute and source input select button.

Distributed by Wesco in the UK, the Parasound Halo P5 is available now in black or silver finishes. ▶



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Musaic player

UK startup reveals new wireless hi-fi system at CES

PRICE: TBC **AVAILABLE:** MID 2014
CONTACT: 0207 5588984 **WEB:** MUSAIC.COM



New Musaic players will be launched throughout 2014

LONDON-BASED STARTUP MUSAIC took a trip to the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas (see Show Report, starting on page 120) to announce plans to launch a full suite of streaming products later this year. CEO Matthew Bramble said: "We wanted to design a wireless hi-fi system that's stylish and compact, and would deliver incredible sound in every room." He also adds, "...and can play content from a wide range of streaming services."

The spec sheet claims that the Musaic system caters for all formats including high-resolution 24-bit files up to 192kHz streamed from Apple and Android devices, personal computers, UPnP/DLNA servers and NAS drives. It will comprise different-sized wireless music players

with built-in internet radio presets and touch-sensitive button controls, the maker says. Rooms can be grouped with multiple Musaic systems around the home playing the same music simultaneously. The system will be controlled by freely available downloadable apps, and enables users to browse artists, albums and tracks, create playlist from music stored on their personal computer and control where it is played around the home.

The top-end MP20 Player will feature five separate digital amplifier channels with sophisticated DSP, Musaic says. While the HS20 server stores music for playback without the need to have a computer turned on. Expect to see a full review of the system later this year.

Ortofon Quintet Series

PRICE: FROM £199 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01235 511166 **WEB:** HENLEYDESIGNS.CO.UK

A five-strong moving coil cartridge range has been unveiled by Ortofon. Called the Quintet Series it includes Mono, Red, Blue, Bronze and Black models.

Distributed by Henley Designs, the Quintet Red (£199) is the most affordable in the new series and claims to use a polished Elliptical diamond, copper wire and give an output of 0.5mV. Next up, the Quintet Blue (£325) is fitted with a Nude Elliptical diamond stylus mounted into the aluminium cantilever. It claims improved sound staging, uses 4-Nines copper wire and outputs 0.5mV.

Quintet Bronze (£499) comes with an intricate Nude Fine Line

diamond profile claiming superior tracking of high frequencies. Like the Blue it also uses Pure 4-Nines copper wire, but outputs 0.3mV.

Quintet Black (£649) is the top of the tree with a highly polished Nude Shibata stylus mounted on a boron cantilever and a wide

contact area. Wire material is Aucurum with a 0.3mV output.

The Quintet Mono (£325) is a true mono design, eliminating the need for mono-specific equipment. All Quintet models quote weight as 9g with a frequency range of 20Hz to 25kHz.



IN BRIEF



ICON FLAGSHIP

Valve amplifier specialist Icon Audio has announced the introduction of a new flagship Stereo 845 integrated amplifier. Priced at £6,000 the Stereo 845 features four matched 845 valves, two 6SL7 first stage valves, two 6SN7 output driver valves and a GZ34 driver stage rectifier. The four 845s can be user calibrated using Icon Audio's built-in 'easy bias' meter and deliver a claimed continuous output of 40W per channel. It has four line-level inputs and a tape loop all of which are gold plated, as are the speaker terminals. It can be ordered as a Signature version featuring premium capacitors and valves.

ICONAUDIO.COM



SONY WIRELESS

Home entertainment giant Sony has announced the addition of three wireless speaker systems to its range. Top of the new wireless models is the SRS-X9, which claims to be a high-resolution wireless speaker system equipped with wi-fi Bluetooth, aptX, AirPlay, NFC, and DLNA. It has a USB charging port plus a mini jack input for wired sources and offers network music services from Music Unlimited, Spotify and Tunein Radio. The SRS-X9 is available now costing £599.

The two step-down SRS-X7 and SRS-X5 models are portable wireless speakers with wi-fi, Bluetooth, aptX and NFC. They give 8 and 6 hours respectively from their rechargeable batteries and go on sale in the spring.

SONY.CO.UK

Webwatch

Andrew Simpson casts his expert eye over his pick of the best hi-fi websites and online content



YouTube **Naim's big statement**
Naim's £125k CES-conquering Statement amps have been causing quite an online stir and this YouTube video of their genesis shows you why youtu.be/p6o-R8Qp5Ps. Sign up to the latest Naim news at naimaudio.com/statement



Facebook **Holy Garrard Grail**
Vintage Garrard fans will enjoy this Facebook page packed with meticulously restored examples of the idler-drive legend, alongside decks in action in their heyday. This snap shows Pete Townshend and Keith Moon allegedly enjoying a 301 through 15in Tannoys. facebook.com/AudioGrailGarrard301



flickr **Picture perfect**
We've been very impressed by Audio Affair's recent Flickr galleries highlighting the beauty of quality hi-fi, from unmistakable Aspara and Focal floorstanders to an Icon valve amp in all its glowing glory and sumptuous Acoustic Solid turntable. flickr.com/photos/audioaffair



Facebook **Moorgate's memories**
Moorgate Acoustics posted some nostalgic tongue-in-cheek pics on its Facebook wall in early January from back when hi-fi advertising was given the full eighties Athena poster treatment. How times have changed! facebook.com/MoorgateAcoustics



Lounging with Linn
Linn Lounge is back with a bang in 2014 with a series of events at some of the best hi-fi retailers in the UK and across Europe. Hear music from Daft Punk to Eric Clapton and Talking Heads on a top-flight Linn system. See a full list at linn.co.uk/events?type=linnlounge#list



Digital vs analogue
Which is better? Back in early December Unilet Sound and Vision let you decide via an audio shoot out using top-flight systems at its Surrey store, with analogue taking the top spot. Find out more about the challenge unilet.net/newsletters/analoguevsdigital/index.html

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CHOICE TWEETS

- KEF AUDIO UK (@KEFAUDIO)**
Happy New Year! Keep a look out because KEF promises to bring you lots of exciting things in 2014! #hifitalk #news #offers #comps #KEF
- CHORD ELECTRONICS (@CHORDAUDIO)**
Hugo reference-grade DAC/headphone amp - coming Jan 2014! <http://t.co/kfit6cYSCR>
- MUSIC MATTERS LTD (@MUSICMATTERSLTD)**
Rega's Roy Gandy & Music Matters' Andy Morrish jamming at the Hifi Festival <http://t.co/kDhumYAqgy>
- MONSTER PRODUCTS (@MONSTERPRODUCTS)**
15 years after going their own way, Christine McVie is returning to @fleetwoodmac. What are your thoughts? #DontStop pic.twitter.com/yZn2NrCEcP
- GLOSSOP RECORD CLUB (@GLOSSOPRECORD)**
A report on the BOWIE ON VINYL session inc. a few pics and list of records played: Memory of a free record club <http://wp.me/p3LJKu-5i>
- PIONEER UK (@PIONEERUK)**
We are super pleased that we will be back @SVBristolShow on 21st Feb for another great weekend of Hi-Fi and Av <http://t.co/sm0gnzk2ed>
- VPI INDUSTRIES (@VPIINDUSTRIES)**
Classic Direct at CES! #3D #vpi http://instagram.com/p/i_x7h_OCqN/
- CLASSIC ALBUM SUNDAYS (@CLASSICALBUMSUN)**
The Quietus Essay: Alex Niven argues that in 2014 pop music is losing its retromanic urge, & looking to the future <http://t.co/k3Klrg8Kd>
- HIFI LOUNGE (@HIFILOUNGE)**
HDTracks Are Coming To The UK At Long Last, Will 2014 be the year of 24 Bit Music? - <http://t.co/Hpca5SR5w>
- DENON UK (@DENONUK)**
Denon DHT-S514 - The NEW #Denon soundbar with Wireless Subwoofer. <http://t.co/QP2buVhK0>
- RECORD STORE DAY (@RECORDSTOREDAY)**
Join us in celebrating the culture of the indie record store. APRIL 19, 2014 #RSD14
- SEVENOAKS YEOVIL (@SSAV_YEOVIL)**
Good News for all Sonos users. Sonos has added the Qobuz music service, bringing CD-quality streaming and high-res downloads.



"Get up and drive your funky soul!"

James Brown

The heart and soul of music

Precision; a new luxury loudspeaker range from Tannoy, built to deliver music as it was meant to be heard. With audiophile features such as double-magnet drivers, hand-built crossovers and mass-load cabinet tuning, Precision has music at its heart and soul. Across two stunning floorstanding models, a compact stand-mount and matching centre channel speaker, Precision delivers breath-taking detail and musical dynamics. Built around a brand new 6 inch (150 mm) version of Tannoy's world renowned Dual Concentric™ driver, the contemporary cabinets boast premium fit and finish in a choice of colours. Powerful, passionate and incredibly precise, Precision gets to the heart and soul of music like no other speaker in its class.

TANNOY®

tannoy.com

SONY

I/O



PHONES



Watermelon Man
Herbie Hancock
HEADHUNTERS
DSD 2.8MHz

05:09 06:28

ENTER Options Prev/Next Track Play Queue

Off Off

Hard time

Sony has eschewed streaming for a hard-disk drive in its new one-box HAP-S1 hi-res music machine, says **David Price**



DETAILS

PRODUCT

Sony HAP-S1

ORIGIN

Japan/China

TYPE

One-box system

WEIGHT

5.8kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)
265 x 88 x 304mm

FEATURES

- 500GB hard-disk drive (expandable via USB)
- DSDIFF(DSD), DSF, MP3, WAV, WMA, AAC, FLAC, ALAC, ATRAC, AIFF support
- Quoted power: 40W RMS per channel (4ohm)
- Headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR

Sony Europe Ltd

TELEPHONE

0207 3652413

WEBSITE

www.sony.co.uk

It can be difficult to predict format trends, and even consumer electronics giants can be caught off guard, but a new range of hi-res music machines sees Sony make a welcome return to the hi-fi arena. Things got difficult back in the late nineties, when MP3 files began to replace Compact Disc. The company's instinct had always been to maintain control of the entire music recording and replay chain, from record company to format to player. But for once, this great innovating consumer electronics group was caught on the hop. The next generation of music listeners wanted their content free and easy – and certainly not tied to anyone's hardware. Belatedly, Sony responded with its range of 'Network Walkmans' running the ATRAC format, but it was like trying to push water uphill – the world wouldn't listen. History tells us that just a

It proves fun with a big-hearted, animated sort of character

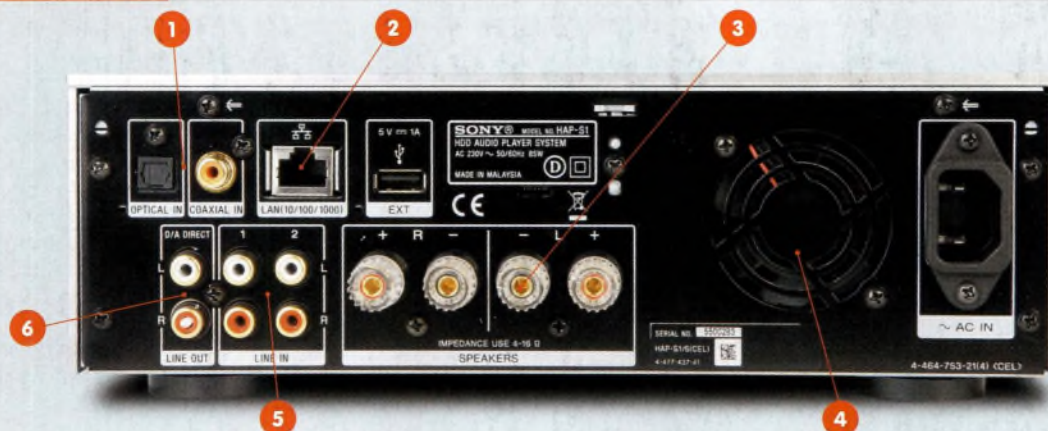
couple of years later, Apple seized the opportunity and wrested the whole shebang from Sony's grip with the iPod in 2003 and then iTunes three years subsequently.

Now though, Sony is back with a subtle but clever evolution of the digital music player. This can only be a good thing, because when it can be bothered the company can indeed do magic. First announced at IFA in 2013, the new HAP-S1 high-resolution music player sets out to give easy access to high-quality digital music in a sleek, one-box package. It has a 500GB hard drive built in, and so forms the heart of a large music library – and importantly it has clever new software that lets you transfer your music library from your Mac or PC with ease.

There's more. The new Sony doesn't just play FLAC and Apple Lossless (ALAC) files at the normal resolutions, plus all the other lower quality compressed file formats further down the chain (AAC, etc), it also supports PCM up to 24/192 and the latest incarnation of DSD. In short, it's the first affordable 'music jukebox' that can genuinely claim audiophile credentials.

This isn't the first hard-disk drive-based music player, as many will well know. We have already seen a slew of such devices appear on the ►

IN SIGHT



- 1 Optical and coaxial digital inputs
- 2 Ethernet port
- 3 4mm speaker binding posts
- 4 Cooling fan
- 5 Stereo RCA inputs
- 6 Stereo RCA output

ON TEST

Sony rather carefully rates the amplifier section of its HAP-S1 at 2x35W/4ohm, a performance achieved by the skin of its transistors at 2x31W/8ohm and 2x38W/4ohm. There is some dynamic headroom amounting to 38W, 60W, 46W and 26W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, but this is still no powerhouse and demands to be partnered with loudspeakers of moderately high sensitivity. Distortion is low at bass frequencies (0.0035% at 100Hz), but increases with frequency, reaching 0.012% at 1kHz and 0.18% at 20kHz (all at 10W/8ohm). Distortion from the digital/DAC stages ranges from 0.0025-0.05% at OdBFs (20Hz-20kHz) to 0.0005-0.029% at -30dBfs over the same frequency range.

The amplifier's frequency response is very extended with -0.5dB points at 3Hz-100kHz although the 0.11ohm output impedance will introduce some variation depending on the impedance trend of the speaker. Effectively superimposed on this, the 'digital' response peaks at +0.5dB/43kHz (with 96kHz media) and +0.6dB/58kHz to -2dB/90kHz (with 192kHz media). Sony is not using a fancy digital filter in the HAP-S1 as its impulse response shows the familiar pre/post ringing. Digital jitter is usefully low at -95psec for all sample rates from 44.1-192kHz while the A-wtd S/N ratio is on a par with a budget CD player at 104dB. The analogue amplifier's S/N ratio is bang on the industry 'average' at 85dB (re. 0dBW). **PM**

market. Philips was one notable example of a company that dabbled with this idea, then gave up. Cambridge Audio and Yamaha also discontinued their HDD players, and moved to network music streamers instead. In fact, the closest thing in existence to the HAP-S1 is the Brennan JB7, which is an altogether less audiophile proposition, as we shall see...

Sony is serious about its new one-box system, having resisted the

It functions more like an 'instant CD player' than a computer audio product

temptation to use cheap, low current consumption, high power Class D power output modules. Instead, it has stuck with Class AB operation on sound quality grounds. Its power amp is of dual mono construction, and is said to have extended bandwidth to exploit hi-res audio sources, up to 100kHz. It's mounted to a commendably sturdy chassis of 3mm thickness aluminium, and a low-noise cooling fan is fitted. This sits on eccentric insulators, made from rubber of specially chosen hardness.

The HAP-S1 sports a low-loss EI ferrite core power transformer, and careful attention has been paid to earthing, with a single ground point and high-strength epoxy glass

circuitboards said to be twice the thickness of rivals. Trick power supply capacitors are fitted, selected for sound quality, the company says, as are carbon resistors. Special signal switching relays are fitted in lieu of semiconductor switches. Overall quality of construction is excellent considering the price and the type of product it is.

Air playing

Before you use the Sony in earnest, you'll have to hook it up to your home broadband network; there's a choice of wired or wireless, with a built-in antenna for the latter - no nasty stubby plastic masts hang out from behind. Migrating music from your computer is done via Sony's HAP Music Transfer software (downloadable from the Support section of the Sony Europe website), which runs on Windows or Mac and automatically copies all your tunes to the HAP-S1's hard drive via your home network. Usefully, it does this in the background, so I am able to play music from the hard drive, or any other source while it dutifully downloads my many files.

Being a hard disk-based system, it gives instant access - there's no lag between the track you choose and when it starts playing. Also, you don't get dropouts as it isn't subject to network glitches, and your computer can remain switched off while you're playing music. I find that it works so well in practice that I'm surprised more manufacturers

HOW IT COMPARES

The interesting thing about the Sony HAP-S1 is that there are no direct rivals. There are one-box systems like the Brennan JB7 500GB (£490), which is a non-network-equipped HDD jukebox with amp, or the likes of the Sonos CONNECT:AMP (£400), which is an amplifier and network music player. Alternatively there's the Arcam Solo Mini (£765), which is neither of these, but offers real hi-fi sound. The Sony does much of this and more - adding true hi-res 24/192 PCM and DSD (5.6) support - as well as its clever hybrid of hard disk and networked operation. It sounds better than the first two rivals, but doesn't match the openness and insight of the Arcam. Then again, the Arcam doesn't have hi-res or a built-in hard drive like the Sony.

haven't done it. My only observation would be that it would be great to be able to record directly from an analogue source, so that you can archive your LPs or tapes too. But you can, of course, record LPs on your computer, which the Sony will automatically copy then play.

The S-1 features Sony's Digital Sound Enhancement Engine, which is designed to make low bit-rate files sound more palatable, and to "restore missing data from compressed audio". In truth, though, it does not do precisely this - rather, it guesstimates what should be in the upper part of the audio band, and also what was in the tail end of the waveform that was chopped off by the MP3 or AAC compression algorithm, and adds it to the music file. A nice feature to have, but ideally audiophiles should stick with the original hi-res music files rather than trying to magic them better via clever DSP!

Sony products are always models of ergonomic excellence, and the HAP-S1 is no exception. The large right hand volume knob is easier to use than an up/down button, and the selector knob to the left works well with the colourful display. In use, it is easier to operate than any network music player - it functions more like an 'instant CD player' than a computer audio product, old school and none the worse for it!

Sound quality

Auditioning starts via its analogue and digital line inputs, to gauge the

amplifier section. This proves to have a smooth, detailed sound that is nicely animated – although tonally slightly thin on Freeez's *Southern Freeez* via LP. There is also some splashiness to the treble and some lack of air and space, although it is pleasant enough. The digital input is better, with a cleaner and more open sound, one that is very enjoyable in its way. It proves to be fun with a big-hearted, animated sort of character, and gets on with the job in a satisfying manner. The HAP-S1 also features a built-in internet radio tuner, using vTuner, and this works well, despite the depressingly low bit-rates used by the broadcasters. Still, it's fine for background music and handy extra functionality.

Moving to the delights of the unit's internal hard drive, it serves up the best sound I've heard so far from some of my hi-res PCM files; Wings' *Band on Run* is very detailed and clean, with lots of atmosphere and a natural rhythmic flow. Dynamics are

Sony is back with a subtle but clever evolution of the digital music player

good, and when fed with beautifully rich source material such as Kate Bush's *Snowflake* in 24/96, it gives a fine account of Kate's piano work. REM's *Texarkana* at 24/192 is great fun, with oodles of power and impressive dynamics. With hi-res files it makes a very nice noise then, but you are always aware of a slightly opaque midband, and a sense of the music being processed.

Dropping the bit-rate down provides a chance to try the unit's DSEE facility; a 256kbps MP3 of Jon and Vangelis' *I Hear You Now* is nice enough. With the Sony system switched off, the HAP-S1 catches the track's warm and fluffy sound, and makes a decent enough job of the rhythms too. Switched on, it really does improve things, adding some air and space to the hi-hat cymbal work; the bass sequencing is more distinct and tuneful, and the lead synthesiser line carrying the melody has better resolved leading edges. Jon Anderson's voice is a little less muffled, but fractionally brighter and more sibilant, however. Overall, I feel this to be a worthwhile facility, especially on lower bit-rate MP3s, although contrary to what Sony might claim, it's not able to make a sonic silk purse out of a sow's ear.

The best I hear the HAP-S1 sounding is via DSD. Miles Davis' *So What*, from *Kind of Blue*, is a joy. There is a great sense of space, a nice natural swing to the rhythms and a lovely lustre to the trumpets. The Sony also manages to summon up a decent sense of the depth of the recorded acoustic – which I know to be a very capacious thing. Instruments are fairly well placed in the soundstage, although there's never really a sense of them being nailed to the furniture in your listening room. This is fair enough though, considering the relatively low price of the unit, and all in all it is a solid performer.

Conclusion

Five years or so ago, the brave new world of computer audio grew up into hi-fi separates with hard-disk drives inside. Products from companies like Brennan, Cambridge Audio and Yamaha offered instant playback of computer files from standalone boxes. Then streamers appeared, and the whole industry began to rally around this model. Sony's HAP-S1 (and its bigger HAP-Z1ES brother) are the first to elegantly combine the two technologies, giving the best of both worlds. It works rather like a 21st century CD jukebox, offering instant music, and plenty of it – but it seamlessly integrates with your computer and its music library via your home network. In my view, this is a brilliant solution.

The Sony HAP-S1 is a special product then, offering an impressively easy and pleasant user experience, allied to excellent build and finish, flexibility and decent sonics. At £800 it's not going to be the greatest sounding system around, but is good at the price, and its rivals can't offer anywhere near the same functionality. Indeed, it's quite an audacious little product, showing a Sony Corporation back on the front foot. Life has just got a little bit more interesting ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

<p>SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★</p> <p>VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★</p> <p>BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★</p> <p>FEATURES ★★★★★</p>	<p>LIKE: HDD storage; software integration; versatility; build and finish</p> <p>DISLIKE: No HDD recording; no USB digital input</p> <p>WESAY: Lovely little hi-res playing package; easy to use and fine sounding</p>
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OVERALL
★★★★★

Q&A

Eric Kingdon

Technical Manager, Sony UK



DP: Why didn't Sony launch its new range of hi-res products earlier?

EK: We have always strived to develop products which offer the best quality of replay in music and entertainment. Thanks to the internet bandwidth available today, bigger file size delivery is possible at faster speed. For a number of years, many recording artists and studios have been mastering material at higher than CD resolution, thus creating a steadily growing range of material. Memory is also cheaper, so storage is economically more viable for large amounts of data. Let's also not forget the work being done in the semi-conductor industry for portable communications; I expect we'll see more high-resolution capability in that sector as well.

Why does Sony continue to support DSD? Is it better than PCM?

DSD is the heart of the SACD format and is highly regarded by many enthusiasts and respected industry figures. As an archiving medium and for its technical potential I believe it has a future and will continue to evolve. Our high-resolution products support both formats and both have high-fidelity merits. Personally speaking, I listen to both, and there are many excellent examples to illustrate the quality on offer. Just recently, I had the good fortune to listen to a DSD recording from Blue Coast Records, which was wonderful.

Why did you choose not to do a network streaming product?

The solution we chose represents a simple and convenient solution for storage. It is one approach and is similar to that enjoyed by many listeners who are happy to have convenient access to their music selection in their listening room. With higher file sizes network stability is important and there are other solutions to gain multi-room access. Of course, we recognise the benefits of a DLNA solution to customers and will always try to provide a solution.

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Hi-Fi Choice
Issue No. 382 March 2014

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CES 2014 Las Vegas show report inside!

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How we te

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

Unique group tests

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

HEADPHONES GROUP TEST

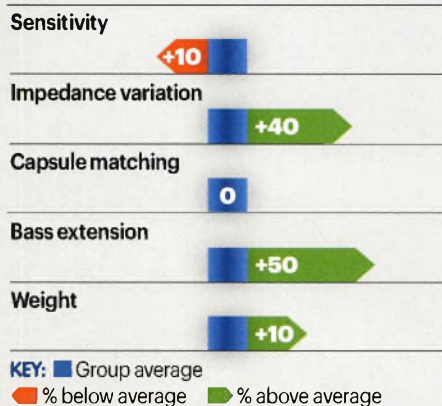
REVIEWING HEADPHONES PROPERLY isn't easy, which is why few hi-fi magazines try. Anyone can don a pair of headphones, play some music and pronounce on their sound quality – but to back up the listening experience with empirical evidence you have to perform acoustic measurements. With headphones that requires costly specialist equipment, experience and custom-written processing software...

The most important item is an artificial ear that imitates the mechanical properties of the outer ear (pinna), so that any physical distortion caused by wearing the headphone is mimicked in the measurement. We then have to make sure

every time we perform a frequency response measurement the headphone is correctly sealed to the artificial ear, or low frequencies will be lost. We also have to take into account the fact that each time we remove, replace and re-measure a headphone, its response changes because it is positioned slightly differently.

We perform multiple measurements on each capsule to generate an averaged response – and use software to analyse where in the frequency range the largest differences occur. More software then adjusts the averaged responses to produce a corrected result that better represents what you actually hear.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



SENSITIVITY

This determines how loud the music is at a given volume control setting. We measure the sound pressure level achieved on our artificial ear for an input of 1V rms at a frequency of 1kHz, averaged for the two channels.

IMPEDANCE VARIATION

Most headphones have an input impedance that varies with frequency across the audible range, which modifies the frequency response according to the source impedance of the headphone outlet. This figure represents the change in frequency response, 20Hz-20kHz, with a source impedance of 10ohms.

CAPSULE MATCHING

No two headphone capsules have the same frequency response, and any disparity can result in shifts in the stereo image. Response also varies according to the placement on the ear, so we perform 10 separate measurements on each capsule and average the results to determine their disparity from 40Hz to 10kHz.

BASS EXTENSION

Headphones, like loudspeakers, differ markedly in the depth of bass that they can deliver. We derive this figure by averaging the -6dB frequency ref 200Hz of both capsules, taking great care to ensure effective sealing to the artificial ear measuring device.

WEIGHT

The weight of a pair of headphones isn't the only issue that determines its comfort, but it is certainly a key factor. We weigh the complete headset, including the connecting cable with quarter-inch jack plug (which often can involve the fitment of a supplied adaptor).

THE ARTIFICIAL EAR:

This eerie-looking item is the artificial ear we use for headphone testing. Key elements of the GRAS 43AG ear and cheek simulator are fitted within a laminated MDF block, which provides the means to mount the headphones on the artificial ear as on a real head.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

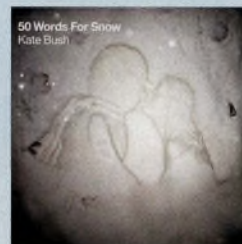
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Group test

HEADPHONES £150-£200

Canned heat

Should I stay or should I go? You can do both with quality headphones. **Adrian Justins** searches for sonic satisfaction

GIVEN THE CHOICE, nobody in their right mind would choose to listen to music through headphones over a decent set of loudspeakers. But there are times and places when the latter simply isn't practical or socially acceptable. One man's Meatloaf is another man's Poison.

In an ideal headphone world, we'd all be using electrostatic models, which are unaffected by issues such as resonances, deflected sound waves and linearity problems. But these require external amplification and tend to be prohibitively expensive. Ever since Henry Koss introduced the first stereo set in the fifties there have been many refinements to traditional electrodynamic headphones, as designers and engineers try to achieve the perfect balance between performance, style and cost. Fashion is a stronger driving force than we probably care to admit, making it no longer unacceptable to wear large,

over-ear cans in public. The general rule of thumb is bigger enclosures deliver better sound and an open back delivers the best bass and biggest soundstage – but using these out and about is not always very practical. A closed back will isolate your ears from external influences even if the bass response is more limited and the soundstage feels more cramped due to sound waves being reflected back towards the ear.

Creature comforts

Despite their large size, many over-ear phones are as comfortable as some of the more portable supra-aural designs, which have ventilated pads across the enclosure that sit on your ear. Of course, the latter offer the best solution for compactness and portability but a good compromise is the on-ear style headphone that features a cushioned circular pad.

ON TEST



AKG K545 £200 p27

Austria-based AKG has been making microphones and headphones for over 60 years. The K545 is designed to deliver studio-quality sonics in domestic situations.



Bowers & Wilkins P3 £170 p29

Designed from the ground up to deliver optimum sound from a small set of headphones. Terminals have been located to make sure that airflow around the drive units is uniform.



Grado SR125i £150 p31

Grado has been making premium headphones since the dawn of CD. The SR125i stands for improved with the previous SR125 given a new driver, cable and plastic housing.



Harman Kardon Soho £180 p33

One of the world's largest consumer electronics companies, HK has a small portfolio of headphones – like the Soho – specifically aimed at style-conscious audio enthusiasts.



Sony MDR-10RC £150 p35

From the company that invented portable audio with its Walkman comes this blend of portability and performance. These cans are an important addition to Sony's hi-res audio portfolio.



Yamaha HPH-PRO300 £200 p37

Music is in Yamaha's veins and the HPH-PRO300 headphones represent its latest attempt at delivering audiophile performance in a dynamic and youthful aesthetic.



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AKG

K545 £200

Big and bold in shape and performance, these pro-looking cans should appeal to anyone with a big head

DETAILS

PRODUCT
AKG K545

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Closed back, over-ear headphones

WEIGHT
266g

FEATURES
• 50mm dynamic drivers
• Metal/plastic headband with leather padding
• Detachable 1.2m cable

DISTRIBUTOR
Harman UK

TELEPHONE
01707 278113

WEBSITE
eu.akg.com

Like their predecessors – the K550s – the newly unleashed K545s are behemoths, with a 3.5cm wide headband that doesn't narrow its entire length. Maybe they have very large heads in Austria where these cans are designed, as even at their smallest size they can accommodate a head with ears 20cm apart. The headband extends by 7cm, when it ratchets with reassuring firmness. It's made from the thinnest of brushed metals and has a nicely padded central section, which is essential as on my own larger than average head they tend to slide down a tiny bit. This is despite the aid of hinged cups (with wonderfully soft leather pads) that force the headband upwards slightly and into a more skull-like shape. In theory, these large, well-padded cups should have excellent noise isolation, leading to better sound for the listener and less annoyance to fellow travellers.

The headband is quite flexible laterally too and the cups twist through 90° to aid storage. They look even more like workmen's ear defenders than the K550s, but their machismo is counteracted by the colour options for the enclosures, which include turquoise and metallic orange. The K545s are £50 cheaper than their predecessor, and they embrace the idea of use away from the home with more flexible connectivity (although a case isn't supplied). The cable can be swapped between one with iPhone control and one without. The cables aren't too thin and have high-quality four-collared, gold-plated plugs, albeit not right angled and hence more prone to breakage. A 3.5-to-6.35mm adapter plug is provided.

Sound quality

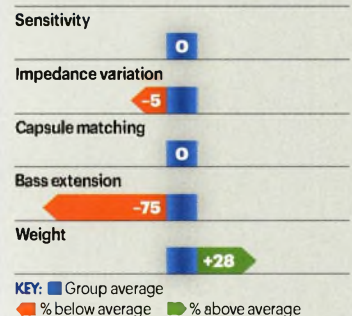
Precise positioning of the K545s is vital, just a millimetre or so out of kilter and the sound is badly affected with bass leaking away. In the upright position on my head sound is not isolated unless I tilt the cans forward a couple of degrees, but then they feel unbalanced and inclined to tip forward. If they had a tighter fit then it wouldn't be an issue. To get the most out of them I have to press them into my ears. Assuming you can get a decent fit you can expect really good things from the K545s, which are highly detailed in the midrange and upper frequencies.

A CD rip of *Snowed In At Wheeler Street* sounds almost like a hi-res download, Elton John's vocals are rich and sonorous while Kate Bush has a wonderful unfettered musicality to her voice that shimmers and penetrates your soul. The guitars of *Spitfire* race along with alacrity and a level of clarity not matched by any other headphone in this test. Minus The Bear's *Listing* has unrivalled punch and verve, the high hat in particular pinging out like a champagne cork on New Year's Eve. Vocals and strings are timed immaculately and transients hold up well. Sonic imaging is especially good

ON TEST

The online spec says the K545 has an exceptionally low sensitivity of 97dB for 1V input, but we measured 115.9dB at 1kHz – a much more typical figure and close to average for the group. There's no error with the nominal impedance figure of 32ohms, which corresponds well with our measured minimum and maximum of 32.6ohms and 36.7ohms. This variation is small enough to restrict frequency response change to 0.2dB with 10ohm source impedance and to 0.5dB with a 30ohm source. AKGs usually provide quite a flat diffuse-field-corrected frequency response and the K545 is no different, albeit with a little excess in output below 1kHz coupled with a shortfall in the presence band above. Capsule matching error of ±6.6dB is typical for a headphone but this AKG offers exceptional bass extension, the figure of 9Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz being easily the best in the group. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



with the *War of the Worlds* SACD with the cylinder opening working its way across a wide and expansive soundstage. No other model delivers such a sumptuous and engaging lead violin with *The Lark Ascending*, which has incredible headroom. Some may find this almost relentless level of transparency a bit much, but if you yearn for incredible clarity and unrivalled smoothness the AKG K545s should definitely be on your radar. The full-sized, over-ear cups are flexible enough for use at home and on the go, but the main problem is that it seems designed for people with big heads, or big hair at least, so a try (on) before you buy is needed ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Highly articulate sound; top build quality; leather padding

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Too big for narrow or small heads; bass leakage; no case

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Superb sounding headphones but only if your head is big enough to fully support them

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Hi-Fi Choice

£1,499
excl stands

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Powerful, well integrated and very refined performance; excellent build

VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A capable speaker with some impressive attributes

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL

Morel Octave 6



www.morelspeakers.co.uk



UK Web Site Launch
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Distributed in the UK by LEARS International
email: hifi1@morelspeakers.co.uk
tel: 020 8420 4333

Bowers & Wilkins

P3 £170

The P3s have all the design panache of B&W's high-end models, but do they have the same cut and thrust?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins P3

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Closed back,
on-ear headphones

WEIGHT
130g

FEATURES
• 30mm driver
• Metallic headband covered with rubberised plastic and a memory foam cushion
• Universal cable (OFC)

DISTRIBUTOR
Bowers & Wilkins

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowers-wilkins.com

Representing the UK (in terms of design rather than manufacture) in this roundup are Bowers & Wilkins, a hi-fi speaker brand recently garnering itself an enviable reputation in the headphone sector thanks to a small but impressive range of high-end cans. The P3 is the company's most affordable on-ear model and is given the succinct tag line of "Mobile Hi-Fi" on its packaging. These headphones don't come with a 3.5-to-6.35mm adapter, but are supplied with two cables, one with an inline remote control for iPhones, iPods and iPads, the other, a non-gain version for all other devices. The cables are Y-shaped, and you need to peel off the ear pads to prise out the plugs. B&W has positioned the terminals to make sure that airflow around the drive units is uniform, resulting in a more linear movement. The cables, like the phones and the headband are finished

in rubberised plastic, which is durable and tactile and lends itself nicely to the black, bright blue, bright red and white colour options. The use of brushed and polished metal elsewhere gives the P3s a distinctive yet restrained and somewhat classy look. Each headphone is hinged and they fold for storage in a stiff plastic container. Each 3cm enclosure sports a dynamic driver with neodymium magnets and B&W has incorporated a mylar damped laminate diaphragm to provide the best balance between stiffness and flexibility.

At 130g the P3s are nice and light, but feel a bit on the stiff side so that the foam pads press in rather than sit on your ears and you feel aware of the lightly padded headband. This closeness of fit may improve the acoustic properties, but can make your ears feel rather warm.

Sound quality

With the P3s hooked up to an Onkyo amp, *The Lark Ascending* SACD reveals a dominant bass character that dampens the zest of the lead violin. The ride is not especially smooth and the sound of the second fiddle doesn't have the clarity heard elsewhere. This propensity to dampen the sound means that *The War of the Worlds* SACD is not as engaging and lively as expected. Higher frequencies don't cut through cleanly. Sonic imaging is, however, good with the unscrewing of the cylinder working its way satisfyingly across from high above one ear to the other.

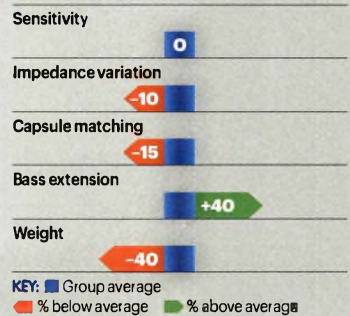
On to the 24/96 DTS Blu-ray audio disc and the vocals in Minus The Bear's *Listing* aren't as resonant as hoped and the track lacks some of its punch, but the acoustic guitar is well timed and overall there's a nice texture to proceedings. Again, that low-end emphasis is responsible for taking some of the definition out of Kate Bush's vocals in *Snowed In At Wheeler Street*.

Bob Marley is another victim in *Could You Be Loved*. The higher frequencies of the guitar and Marley's voice are robbed of their natural

ON TEST

B&W claims 111dB sensitivity for the P3 for 1V input at 1kHz, but our measured sensitivity at that frequency was 118.6dB, so B&W's spec is conservative. The 34ohms nominal impedance also errs on the side of safety - we measured a minimum of 35.1ohms at 736Hz rising to a maximum of 38.7ohms at 82Hz. This variation is small enough to cause negligible frequency response variations of 0.2dB for a 10ohm source impedance and 0.4dB for a 30ohm source. Diffuse-field-corrected frequency response rises gently below 1kHz to a peak at 200Hz before falling away rapidly, hence the poor LF extension figure of 50Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz. Above 1kHz the corrected response also decays rapidly to be around 6dB down through the treble. Capsule matching error of ± 5.8 dB is typical for a headphone and mostly represents different interactions with the left and right artificial pinnae used in testing. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



agility as the bass muscles its way to the forefront of the soundstage. Susan Wong's 24/96 download of *Desperado* is by far the most impressive test track, with both piano and voice showing a deftness of touch masked by the overly forward bass.

The P3s are undoubtedly stylish headphones built to a high standard. There are no real problems with ergonomics as they sit comfortably on your head and fold up nice and neatly for storage. What would otherwise be a reasonably neutral and pleasing performance, however, is dominated by an overly keen bass response so that the overriding effect is a rather flat sound. ▶

HifiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★☆

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★☆

FEATURES
★★★★☆

LIKE: Elegant, stylish design; light and comfortable; foldable

DISLIKE: Too much bass makes for unbalanced and flat sounding performance

WE SAY: This ace of bass leaves us wanting a little more detail on offer elsewhere

OVERALL

★★★★☆



T+A

Caruso Blu

The Musical Miracle Cube



The new *Caruso* Blu sounds even better than its predecessor, looks even better, and boasts the very latest technology.

The combination of active overall design, with three 50 Watts high-performance output stages, new, specially designed speaker drive units and the digital signal processor, delivers an incredible sound experience.

And if that isn't enough for you, simply connect your television to obtain improved sound and BluRay playback.

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The *Caruso* Blu is capable of reproducing music from all modern sources:

BluRay, CD and DVD, Internet radio, Network music servers, USB storage media, Bluetooth music transfer from mobile devices DAB+ and VHF radio, analogue sources such as turntable with phono pre-amplifier, digital sources such as TV sets and set-top boxes.

Hand built in Germany, the *Caruso* Blu from T+A is available in the UK now.

AVOKE

Avoke Limited

Tel - +44 (0)7876 246956

Email - info@avoke.co.uk

Web - www.avoke.co.uk

Grado

SR125i £150

With a distinctive retro styling, these cans would look cool in public, but are best suited for listening at home

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Grado SR125i

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Open back,
on-ear headphone

WEIGHT
170kg

FEATURES

- 40mm dynamic drivers
- Thin metal headband with leather cover
- HPLC copper voice coil wire

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
grado.co.uk

Although it sits in the middle of the New York-based company's six-strong Prestige range of headphones, Grado has recently slashed the prices of its cans so that the SR125i now comes in at the most affordable end of this group. From a style point of view, they have all the visual hallmarks of the Prestige series – chunky cabinets, heavy branding, thin head band and large foam pads.

The flexible headband is formed of narrow steel and covered in leather without any real padding. Unless you are blessed with the natural cushion of a thick head of hair this can become rather uncomfortable after lengthy listening. The cans also look a touch cheap, being formed of lightweight plastic. The enclosures twist freely and easily glide up and down the antenna-like poles so that fitting is easy.

Grado has used a vented diaphragm and non-resonant air chamber with

the driver's diaphragms subjected to a special 'de-stressing' process in order to enhance inner detail.

The Y-shaped cable is by far the most highly engineered cord in this group. Made from ultra-high purity, long crystal (UHPLC) copper voice coil wire and terminated in a 6.35mm plug, it's thick and stiff so not really suitable for use anywhere other than when sat in a comfy chair within 1.8m of your hi-fi amp. That doesn't preclude it from use with a computer (using a 3.5mm adapter), although it becomes inelegant and cumbersome and is best suited to use with a headphone amp, perched on the edge of a desk. The cable and open-back design of the cans together mean they are not ideally suited for use on the move with portable devices or in noisy environments.

Sound quality

The Grado SR125i phones are not bass hounds, but that's not to say you feel particularly shortchanged in that respect. Richard Burton's vocals at the start of *The War of the Worlds* SACD aren't as velvety and enriched as you get with, say, the B&Ws, and as the cylinders come off the tripod the transients tail off quickly. Midrange and upper end are nicely controlled, and everything feels open and airy. The twang of the lead guitar is lively and enthralling.

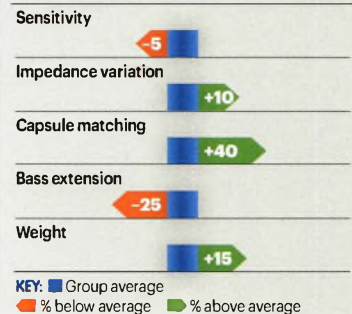
The Lark Ascending SACD is a satisfying, tonally balanced listen, although the crescendo in the fifth minute very nearly distorts. If you want a highly detailed, ultra energetic sound the Grado isn't the model for you, but Minus The Bear's *Listing* sounds clean and there's a touch of warmth to proceedings that you don't get elsewhere. It's a similar story switching to the Musical Fidelity headphone amp, with *Snowed In At Wheeler Street* sounding controlled and a little restrained.

The SR125i don't have the sense of scale you can find elsewhere, but that isn't to say the sound is unsatisfactory. These are intimate, cosy headphones that are like stepping into a pair of

ON TEST

Despite an impedance that's about average for the group, varying between 41.6ohms at 68Hz and 32.0ohms at 1.3kHz, the Grado has the second-lowest sensitivity at 111.2dB for 1V rms input at 1kHz, averaged over both capsules. Still, this is plenty to deliver high SPLs with most sources. Low output impedance is advisable given that the impedance variation is large enough to generate a 0.5dB frequency response change with 10ohm source and 1.0dB with a 30ohm source. Capsule matching error was poor at ± 9.3 dB, suggesting that it interacts rather differently with the left and right artificial pinnae used for testing. Although the SR125i is typical of the marque in having a diffuse-field-corrected frequency response that peaks in the upper bass and also has some excess in the treble, nevertheless it offers the flattest corrected response here and fair bass extension of 26Hz. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



comfy slippers. The punchy drums in the 24/96 download of *Could You Be Loved* thud and diminish rapidly, while the guitar and Marley's vocals are dynamic, but not overly energetic.

Thanks to its open-back design, the Grado SR125i headphones are well suited for use in domestic environments. Fans of full-fat bass should direct their ears elsewhere but the drivers have been tuned to deliver a nicely controlled, easy listen that's unlikely to leave you wanting more in any sonic respect. The thin headband does throw up some comfort issues, but aided by their relaxed character these headphones are ideal for those wanting to enjoy lengthy listening ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Slightly warm, well controlled sonics; heavy-duty cable; light but strong

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No padding so uncomfortable; thick cable is unwieldy

FEATURES ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Pleasing, neutral sonics; great for stay-at-home listening

OVERALL



The Game Changer

Once in a while, a product comes along that 'redefines the meaning of excellence'. That time is now.

Q Acoustics is proud to introduce the Concept 20 loudspeaker.

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

This exceptional performance has been achieved by using breakthrough technology and applying scientific methodology to overcome the fundamental problems of speaker design.

As well as class leading drive units and crossover, the beautifully lacquered Concept 20 cabinet utilises Gelcore™ construction, specifically developed for acoustic enclosures. In effect this is a 'cabinet within a cabinet': separated by a special, resonance cancelling compound. This enables the drive units to simply reproduce music, completely unencumbered by cabinet induced colouration.

The result is nothing short of sensational.

For the very best results the Concept 20 should be used on its unique dedicated speaker stand, which uses the same Gelcore™ construction technique.



Redefine the Possible. www.Qacoustics.co.uk

armourHOME



Harman Kardon Soho £180

Similar in design and operation to the B&W P3s, these headphones have their own unique acoustic footprint

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Harman Kardon
Soho

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Closed back, over-
ear headphones

WEIGHT
140g

FEATURES
● 30mm dynamic
drivers
● Steel headband
with padded
leather finish
● 1.2m straight
cable; 1.2m Apple
iOS inline remote/
microphone cable
or 1.2m universal
remote/microphone
cable

DISTRIBUTOR
Harman UK

WEBSITE
uk.harmankardon.
com

A huge consumer electronics company, Harman Kardon has only recently entered the headphones market, and the Soho is the most affordable model in its small range of cans. Harman Kardon might find itself in hot water with Bowers & Wilkins over the look, which bears uncanny visual similarities to the P3s (reviewed p29). They even follow the same design principle of removable ear pads in order to unplug the Y-shaped cable from each cup. Two cables are provided, one a non-gain type, the other with inline control of an Apple iOS or, depending on which version of the Sohos you buy, an Android device. The cable is terminated in a 3.5mm plug with a rubberised collar, which looks like a weak point in terms of protection. One difference between the Sohos and the P3s is that the Sohos' cups rotate through 90° and fold flat, allowing the cans to be stored in the compact plastic case



supplied. Harman Kardon ups the ante in the quality stakes too by using leather rather than plastic to encase the headband and for the backing on the cups. It all looks rather sumptuous against the stainless steel hinges, headband and trim. Three finishes are available, black, white and an unusual brown.

Not much information is given about the technology within the enclosures, but the 30mm drivers have a 32ohm impedance and claimed sensitivity of 100dB. Like the P3s, the Sohos extend by sliding smoothly, but firmly, out of the headband and the fit is fairly tight at first on the ears and loose on the head, but after a few minutes the cans seem to settle into place.

Sound quality

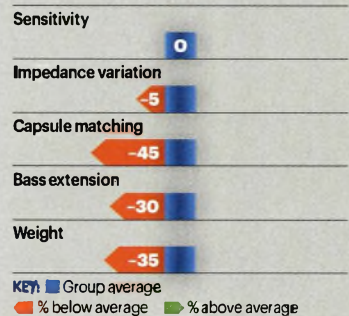
At the start of *The War Cf The Worlds*, you can hear Richard Burton's nervous breath between phrases uncannily clearly, but when he talks his voice doesn't have the richest, most sonorous quality around as the bass response is fairly muted. When the strings kick in, the top end has good detail, but there's a slight brightness. The second chapter, *Horsell Common And The Heat Ray*, reveals plenty of clarity to the top end, but the midrange doesn't have as much zip and zest with hard edges that are softened and the percussion is a tad opaque. The soundstage isn't as large as some other models can muster as the cylinder unscrewing feels rather cramped.

The Sohos have an impressively detailed and open treble response and the solo violin at the start of *The Lark Ascending* is enjoyably reproduced, plus there's a commendable smoothness to the crescendo of the piece. On to my DTS demo with the 24/96 Minus The Bear track *Listing*, and there isn't the level of detail you get from say the AKG, Yamaha or Sony cans, but the Sohos serve up a relatively lively and coherent presentation with no obvious deficiencies. They can't stop the initial piano on *Snowed In At Wheeler Street*

ON TEST

With rectangular supra-aural capsules like those of the B&W, the Soho also offers similar sensitivity at a measured 116.4dB for 1V at 1kHz, and similar impedance too with a range from 32.0ohms at 675Hz to 36.6ohms at 60Hz. Frequency response variations of 0.3dB for 10ohm source impedance and 0.5dB for a 30ohm source are, likewise, negligible. But there the similarities end. Although the Soho's diffuse-field-corrected frequency response is also peaked up at LF, the peak occurs at around 60Hz and is very much higher – almost 10dB. Hence the Soho's superior bass extension of 25Hz. Above 1kHz, though, the corrected response is exceptionally flat. Capsule matching error of ±3.7dB is excellent for a headphone and the best in group. Another departure is that the Soho has an inert headband whereas the P3's wire capsule holders can be heard resonating on pink noise. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



from distorting and Kate Bush's voice lacks a bit of sumptuousness, but the synth hypnotically resonates to the fore. Back on to some 24/96 download action with Bob Marley's *Could You Be Loved*, and again the predominate feeling is of an energetic but slightly softened and restrained sound. The vocals shine through as the drum beats eagerly, but some of the detail in the other instruments is a bit lost. The Sohos aren't the loudest headphones in the sextet, needing relatively high levels of amplification. Despite shortcomings in the detail retrieval department these are pleasing cans in many other respects including comfort and style ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Classy and comfy leather finish; pleasant sound

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Cable plug susceptible to wear and tear; slightly opaque sounding

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A good option for use on the go if not the last word in absolute detail

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

MUSICAL FIDELITY

MF-100

SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE HEAD PHONES



When music matters most

VERY HIGH QUALITY • MUSICAL FIDELITY DESIGNED
NEODYMIUM DRIVE UNITS

Sony

MDR-10RC £150

Not the most exciting-looking cans, but they come from a company that's serious about audio again

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sony MDR-10RC

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Closed back, on-ear headphones

WEIGHT
165g

FEATURES
● 40 mm driver
● Thin metal headband, covered in hard plastic and a padded leather wraparound
● 1.2m connecting cord

DISTRIBUTOR
Sony Europe
TELEPHONE
0845 6000124

WEBSITE
sony.co.uk

Having recently declared itself a hi-fi trendsetter, Sony has unleashed a flurry of impressive-looking kit designed for hi-res audio. Headphones aren't just a part of the hi-res story and Sony's headphone credentials have long been established. The MDR-10RCs, while pitched at the user of portable devices, are also well suited to use at home. The design is more executive than streetwise, but the cans come in three colour options for those seeking a touch of individuality. The metal headband has a plastic underside and is padded all round with a soft leather cover. The same luxurious material is used on the 2cm-deep ring round the cups. The cups rotate slightly, and combine with the right amount of twistability and arm extendability to make the MDR-10RCs easy to adjust and slide into place on your head. Weighing under 170g, they are a very

comfortable fit. They fold up and are supplied with a cheapish pouch, plus you get two cables, one with an inline smartphone remote (compatible with iOS, Android and BlackBerry device). Both cords are reasonably thick and have gold-plated L-shaped plugs, which are less prone to damage than straight plugs. Overall, although made of plastic they have a high-quality finish.

Sony has used dynamic 40mm neodymium drivers with a closed-back design and claims the MDR-10RCs have a dynamic range that spreads as low as 5Hz up to a canine-compatible 40kHz.

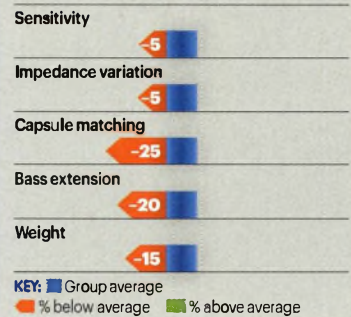
Sound quality

Kicking off with *The War Cf The Worlds* SACD, the MDR-10RCs show themselves to be razor sharp, with a tight, highly articulate sound with the midrange and upper end of the scale. There's plenty of bass, but it doesn't have the same level of refinement with longer notes that drop off and become a bit flabby. Track two, *Horsell Common And The Heat Ray*, starts with a short, repeated bass phrase that the Sony keeps a decent handle on and the cylinder unscrewing creates an impressively broad and high soundstage. The first two minutes of the *The Lark Ascending* bring out the best of the MDR-10RC, showing its almost unrivaled ability with higher frequencies. There's a purity and smoothness to proceedings with the violin's high notes given plenty of headroom. The horn at three minutes in is also exquisitely precise, but as the orchestra joins in and the piece builds to a crescendo the cans almost lose control of the lengthy bass notes. The short snappy drum beats of *Listing* by Minus The Bear are much better fodder, providing the vocals, percussion and guitars with the perfect canvas as the headphones reveal their energetic quality. The Sonys pass the tricky piano test at the start of *Snowed In At Wheeler Street*, played through the Musical Fidelity headphone amp. As the pianist slams down the keys

ON TEST

Sony claims a sensitivity of 100dB SPL for 1mW for the MDR-10RC, equivalent to 114dB SPL for 1V input at the nominal impedance of 40ohms. This accords pretty well with our measured figure of 112.8dB at 1kHz, although the higher impedance - we recorded a minimum of 41.2ohms at 20Hz and a maximum of 47.7ohms at 2.2kHz - inevitably means slightly lower sensitivity than with the 32ohms models here. Frequency response change resulting from that variation in impedance is negligible at 0.2dB for a 10ohm source and 0.5dB for a 30ohm source. Sony promises 'heavy-hitting bass' from the MDR-10C, meaning LF excess - albeit not quite to match the H/K's. The diffuse-field-corrected response peaks at about +11dB at 80Hz \neq 1kHz but, again in common with the Soho, is much flatter at treble frequencies. Bass extension is fair at 28Hz, as is the capsule matching error of \pm 5.0dB. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



there's no distortion, but later as Elton John sings the cans trip up with an impending sense of reverberation. The vocal presentation, however, is first rate from both singers and the synth is svelte and elegant.

The MDR-10RCs certainly seem to get more out of the drum in Bob Marley's *Could You Be Loved*, which has a greater sense of air around it when compared to many other cans that sound a bit flat in this regard.

The MDR-10RCs seem to dig a bit deeper than its rivals here, but isn't always able to keep a tight grip on matters when it does. Otherwise, these are enjoyable cans to own and use with good dynamics and detail ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Impressive dynamic range; exciting well-defined mids and uppers; comfortable

DISLIKE: Bass response lacks control; slightly dull looking

WESAY: Not perfect, but well worth considering



Stunningly
simple
breathtakingly
brilliant



Reach new sonic heights

cocktail **Audio X30**

High Fidelity Storage, Streamer and Server

Yamaha

HPH-PRO300 £200

Designed for use on the go with large cups and soft fitting, but Yamaha hasn't neglected the audiophile

DETAILS

PRODUCT

Yamaha
HPH-PRO300

ORIGIN

China

TYPE

Closed back, over-ear headphones

WEIGHT

200g

FEATURES

- 40mm dynamic driver
- Hard plastic headband with soft plastic-covered cushion
- Removable 1.2m tangle-resistant flat cable

DISTRIBUTOR

Yamaha UK

TELEPHONE

0844 811116

WEBSITE

uk.yamaha.com

With a onbody design, the HPH-PRO300 looks rather synonymous with Beats by Dr Dre, right down to the plastic finish and prominent logo on the outside of the enclosures. They incorporate a newly developed 40mm proprietary driver with neodymium magnets for high efficiency while the ear cushions are fashioned from memory foam and leather, which combine comfort with good acoustic properties. Impedance is highish at 53ohms, but is counteracted by a sensitivity of 107dB.

Yamaha describes the closed-back HPH-PRO300s as being an on-ear design, but the 4mm diameter of the cups is sufficient to encapsulate my ears ensuring a closer, more sound-isolating fit than expected – although they press into my glasses. The headband is hinged so they can fold for storage in a durable soft case. One cable is supplied, which is removable and attaches to one ear cup rather

than the more cumbersome Y shape adopted by B&W. It's a tangle-resistant flat 1.2m cable made from material that seems durable and is designed to reduce touch noise transfer effects. It features an inline remote for Apple mobile devices but a gold-plated 6.35mm adapter is included. The cable's flat construction separates the internal cores to minimise interference. A low-profile right-angle connector plug with four collars should outlast any other connector here and seals the PRO300s' mobile-friendly credentials. The headphones aren't lightweight but, with glasses removed, feel suitably comfortable.

Sound quality

From the moment you first hear Richard Burton's sonorous voice at the start of *The War Cf The Worlds* SACD you know you're in for a treat. Detail retrieval is spot on and I'm mesmerised by the narrator's rich tones. As the strings kick in the PRO300s deliver their sonic goods with energy and precision – despite the poor bass extension result (see On Test) – and is complemented by an impressive performance from the midrange and treble. With the opening of the tripod in track two the soundscape is broad and the sound of the cylinder unscrewing has a wonderful delicacy. The twang of the lead guitar is dynamic and controlled.

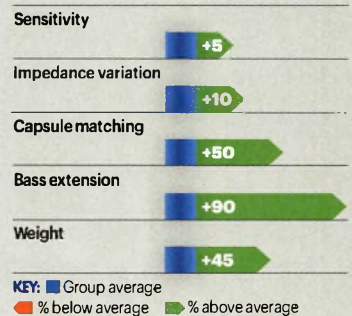
The Lark Ascending SACD is likewise a great listen that's tonally balanced with superb definition that lets you feel the draw of Hilary Hahn's bow across her violin's strings. And with each shift in register you're totally gripped and unaware almost of the headphones' presence on your head.

Minus The Bear's 24/96 Blu-ray version of *Listing* is a delight. Jake Snider's vocals, the acoustic guitar and percussion all breathe effortlessly and are presented with aplomb. The midrange is highly detailed, while the treble is smooth and accurate. These qualities are also apparent with *Snowed In At Wheeler Street*, delivered by the Musical Fidelity headphone

ON TEST

Easily the most sensitive headphone of the group, the Yamaha developed a high 121.6dB SPL at 1kHz for an input of 1V rms. Principally this exceptional sensitivity is due to the HPH-PRO300 having the lowest impedance, ranging from a minimum of 15.8ohms at 22Hz to a maximum of 20.7ohms at 1.2kHz – figures which bear no relationship to the claimed 53ohms at 1kHz. This large variation means that the Yamaha also has the greatest frequency response variation when driven from a finite source impedance, amounting to a total change of 0.9dB for a 10ohm source or 1.5dB for a 30ohm source. Capsule matching was the worst in group at ±10.0dB, high even for a headphone, and the diffuse-field-corrected frequency response was one of the strangest I've seen, peaking between 100 and 200Hz and falling away both above and below, hence the poor bass extension of 73Hz (-6dB ref 200Hz). **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



amplifier, where Kate Bush's voice does its mesmerising thing and Elton John sounds focussed. The piano roll at the start isn't entirely clean and there isn't as much pin-sharp detail as you get from the AKG K545s, but this slight softening of hard edges is arguably a more satisfying listen on the Yamahas. The hi-res *Could You Be Loved* simply rolls along, with that tricky bass nicely kept in check.

Overall, these are terrifically rewarding headphones that deliver a nicely balanced sound. The styling might be very 'street' and robust but the HPH-PRO300s are designed to deliver a high sonic standard and are suited to almost any environment ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

LIKE: Tough looking but comfortable fit; tonally balanced and highly detailed sound

DISLIKE: Only come with an inline remote cable; uncomfortable if you wear specs

WE SAY: Excellent sound and a great fit if you don't wear glasses

OVERALL

★★★★★



Group test verdict

He's given this month's contenders a thorough listen to at home and while out on the streets, so it's over to **Adrian Justins** for the final verdict

ARGUABLY THE MOST

sophisticated looking model here, the B&W P3s are a great 'on the go' headphone in terms of design and practicality. They'll certainly turn heads, but it's what your head hears that matters most and sonically the tonal balance is weighted too far towards low frequencies. Hence, it takes the wooden spoon by a splinter from the Harman Kardon Soho. Uncannily similar looking to the P3s, the Sohos are more luxuriously made and while being more even tonally they don't deliver as much detail as you'd expect for the money.

Just missing a podium spot, in fourth place, is the Sony MDR-10RC, which has a notably wider dynamic range than the two supra-aural cans. The Sonys have boundless levels of energy, but sometimes it feels like they don't have the greatest control. A good solution nonetheless for use both at home and on the go.

Taking third spot are the AKG 545s. In terms of pure sound quality these are arguably the best headphones in this corral. I say arguably because ultra-sharp definition is not everyone's cup of tea and the AKG 545s are more clinical than Sherlock

Holmes' powers of deduction. The other issue is that performance takes a noticeable dive unless the cans remain perfectly positioned and a large headband leaves them prone to slipping.

Taking advantage of this design caveat are the Grado SR125i cans, which are £50 cheaper yet offer a satisfying combination of retro styling with clean, punchy sonics, especially in the midrange. Designed for use in the home, they will reward you with hours of immensely enjoyable acoustics and take a well-deserved second spot.



WINNER

The styling isn't discreet, but if you invest in Yamaha's HPH-PRO300 headphones you'll probably want the world to take notice. They have the highest sensitivity here and despite a dodgy bass extension result in our lab, they deliver an effortless performance.



AKG
K545



Bowers & Wilkins
P3



Grado
SR125i



Harman Kardon
Soho



Sony
MDR-10RC



Yamaha
HPH-PRO300

Make/model	AKG K545	Bowers & Wilkins P3	Grado SR125i	Harman Kardon Soho	Sony MDR-10RC	Yamaha HPH-PRO300
Price	£200	£170	£150	£180	£150	£200
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Capable of an ultra detailed sound with sumptuous bass. Very large headband	Elegant, stylish and practical for travel. Acoustically flat and bass heavy	Distinctive retro look. Great for home use. Plug in, kick back and enjoy	Lovely look and feel for such lightweight on-ears. Slightly opaque sounding	Dull looking, but exciting midrange and uppers. Slight flabby bass	Unsubtle but robust design. Great all-rounder, detailed yet slightly warm sound

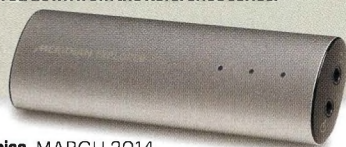
Key features

Closed back	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Open back	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Folding design	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mini-jack adaptor	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Detachable cable	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

TRY WITH THESE

PORTABLE HEADPHONE DAC: Meridian Explorer **£250**

An external headphone DAC is *de rigueur* when listening to tunes on a laptop. You can do a lot worse than Meridian's Explorer, which is elegantly designed and sports high-end components filtered down from the Reference series.



PORTABLE SOURCE: Sony NWZ-F886 **£250**

Sony's first Walkman compatible with hi-res audio has the familiarity of Google's Android OS and is a cinch to load even from a Mac. If you haven't tried hi-res on the go before you'll be amazed at how good portable audio can be when paired with one of these headphones.



HEADPHONE AMP: Musical Fidelity V90-HPA **£169**

To maximise a desktop setup you can't beat a headphone amp such as this model, which boasts top-notch engineering and design all for an incredibly affordable sum. It delivers a clean, open sound and is a dab hand with USB-delivered hi-res music files, but also does sterling work with analogue sources.



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£1999 OR LESS

NAD • M50 • DIGITAL MUSIC PLAYER

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NAIM • UNITI 2 ALL-IN-ONE NETWORK SYSTEM

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£1150

NAIM • UNITIQUTE 2 ALL-IN-ONE STREAMING SYSTEM

All-in-one system featuring a 30W amplifier, FM/DAB/Internet radio and wired and wireless connections to play network digital audio. UnitiQute 2 can play USB-stored music files of up to 32bit/192kHz resolution.



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 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.



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.



ARCAM • irDAC • 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.



CYRUS • CD i / 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 new CD i CD player.



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.



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.



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.



ROTEL • RA-10 / RCD-12 • AMPLIFIER / CD
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HRT • MICRO STREAMER • DAC
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NAD • D 7050 • NETWORK AMPLIFIER / DAC
 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.



ROKSAN • KANDY K2 BT • AMPLIFIER
 Sets new benchmark for performance and is even more powerful than its award-winning predecessor. Features apt-X for direct streaming via connection to any bluetooth-enabled device.



NAD • D 1050 DAC / HEADPHONE AMP
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NAD • M51 • DAC
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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.



MARANTZ • M-CR610 • CD / DAB / NETWORK SYSTEM
 Enjoy great sounding music from diverse sources, including Internet radio, music-streaming services, mobile devices, TV and other digital audio sources.



YAMAHA • CRX-N560D • CD / DAB / NETWORK SYSTEM
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PRICE EXCLUDES STANDS

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



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



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



KEF • LS50

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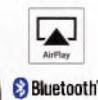


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SOUND & VISION



Back to the future

...in which Tellurium Q resurrects a name from its designer's illustrious past. **David Price** gets set for some time travelling

Hi-fi is full of fantastic stories, tales of great products that came along and took the world by storm. And then there are the those that reside in the 'long lost' category – often these designs are no less able, but for any number of reasons failed to gain traction in the market and never quite made the transition from cult to classic. Inca Tech's Claymore is precisely this. Launched at around the same time as the Audiolab 8000a in

the eighties, it was a far better sounding amplifier (despite being only a little more expensive) and won plenty of friends during its short life, but sadly not enough. The Inca Tech story is one for another day, but the headline we can take from it was the name of the man who designed this excellent amplifier, one Colin Wonfor.

There has been some carping on hi-fi forums that the new Claymore's £3,760 sticker price is too expensive. In the sense that it is a lot more than

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Tellurium Q
Claymore

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
6.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
490 x 75 x 240mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power
72W RMS per
channel (Bohms)
• Switchable MM/
MC phono input
• Built-in USB DAC
• 6.3mm
headphone jack

DISTRIBUTOR
Tellurium Q

TELEPHONE
01458 251997

WEBSITE
telluriumq.com

the original mid-eighties Inca Tech integrated's £345 price, then yes it is. Even allowing for inflation, to be the true spiritual successor to the original, it would have to land at around £1,500, which is Creek Destiny territory. So, for those fans of the original suggesting this new one is overpriced, I'd suggest you think of it as more of a 'Super Claymore' with added bells and whistles – specifically a USB DAC. For me, the real issue is not whether it is or isn't the true son and heir to a great eighties amp of the same name, it's just how it compares to rival sub-£4,000 integrations.

By some criteria, the answer is badly. Not to put too fine a point on it, Sugden's Masterclass IA-4 is a far better built and finished affair, feeling every penny of its £4,100 price tag. The Tellurium Q – at least if appearances are anything to go by – doesn't feel too many pennies of its price. That's not to say the amp is cheaply built, it's just poorly detailed in some ways. It is an avowedly 'all things to all men' sort of design, which is why it has a built-in DAC and full remote functionality, yet people looking for a versatile, easy-to-use



much more linear than those of yore and also features lots of internal wiring that the designer believes to be preferable to doing everything on PCBs. There are 14 separate power supplies used (as opposed to four in the original) and all control and digital functions are isolated from the analogue power supplies to reduce noise and interference. As mentioned, a USB DAC is fitted, and this is only powered up when the USB port is in use and a special proprietary digital filter has been used.

The Claymore has no source selector on its fascia and this is a big mistake, because it necessitates the use of the remote control, which is very poor – its sensor has a very narrow field of view that makes the amp extremely fiddly to use. Another operational quirk is the slipperiness of the feet. They're hard translucent resiny plastic affairs designed to give a "tiny point of contact... to mimic to a small extent the function of a spike without damaging what it is standing on". Apparently aesthetic reasons also played a part too, but whatever the thinking behind them they are infuriatingly slippery on my Audiophile Furniture Base Isolation platform (and worse on others). I end up dropping the amp onto sorbothane Foculpods and the sliding stops and the amp sounds better. Other niggles include a click when switching off and an audible buzz from the mains transformer. Ho hum!

Sound quality

This is a lovely performer – proving natural, easy and fluid almost to a fault. It's not obviously tube or transistor, Class AB or A or anything else for that matter. It just sounds right, offering the very rare combination of an effortless musicality and lots of detail and

depth. You simply don't focus on the amplifier as it covers its tracks so skillfully and instead get on with the music. In a way, the original Claymore did this, but to a lesser extent. At first listen it was a big, warm and musical design with a rich bass and a sweet treble. But there was always just a trace of solid-state 'hash' hanging around in the background and a slightly shiny upper mid that so many MOSFET amps of the day had. The new Claymore sounds tighter, clearer, smoother, better resolved and more detailed, without losing the original's *joie-de-vivre*. It's fascinating to think

This is one of the few integrateds able to get the best out of a good vinyl front end

that the same designer can get a very similar family sound using very different components.

The new Tellurium Q is a highly transparent solid-state amplifier then, with high levels of detail and great grip, yet it never actually presents itself as such. Indeed, the clever thing is it pretty much gets out of the way, leaving the music to do the talking. Cue up Brand X's *Sun In The Night*, and you soon find yourself luxuriating in its lovely, lilting musicality, great speed and fine dynamic articulation, and the amazingly deft way it renders the recording acoustic in all its 'technicolour' glory. You suddenly realise that this amplifier does one of the best vanishing acts at or near the price, and that puts it in some pretty exalted company. The music just flows and the listener gets pulled into its wide and enveloping soundstage.

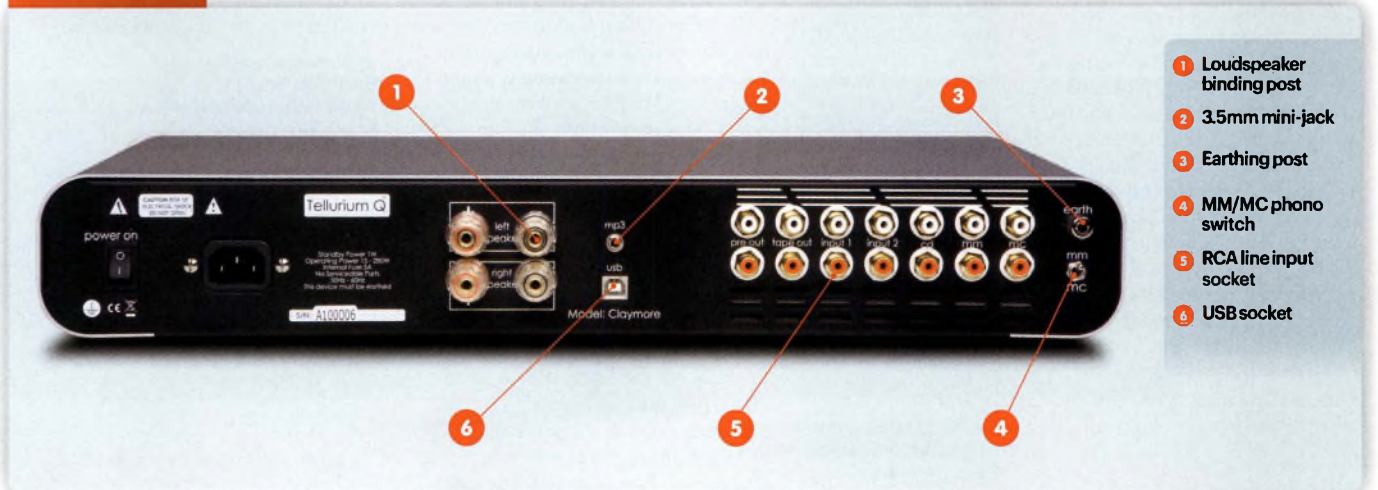
Switch to some punchy eighties pop courtesy of Scritti Politti's *The Word* ▶

super integrated would likely spend a minute with the fiddly new Claymore and then buy the Sugden. More of which in a minute...

It's fair to say the Claymore's looks and ergonomics aren't the best

According to Tellurium Q, the new Claymore bears "little comparison to the original design, but there is a similar family sound". It is based on a new generation of analogue MOSFET power output modules, which are

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Loudspeaker binding post
- 2 3.5mm mini-jack
- 3 Earthing post
- 4 MM/MC phono switch
- 5 RCA line input socket
- 6 USB socket

Q&A

Colin Wonfor

Tellurium Q technical director



DP: Why resurrect the 'Claymore' name for your new amplifier?

CW: Both are/were Class AB integrated amplifiers, and the original Claymore was an excellent amplifier, so we thought we would bring it bang up to date in terms of functionality and performance. This is the way the market is moving so it was really a no brainer!

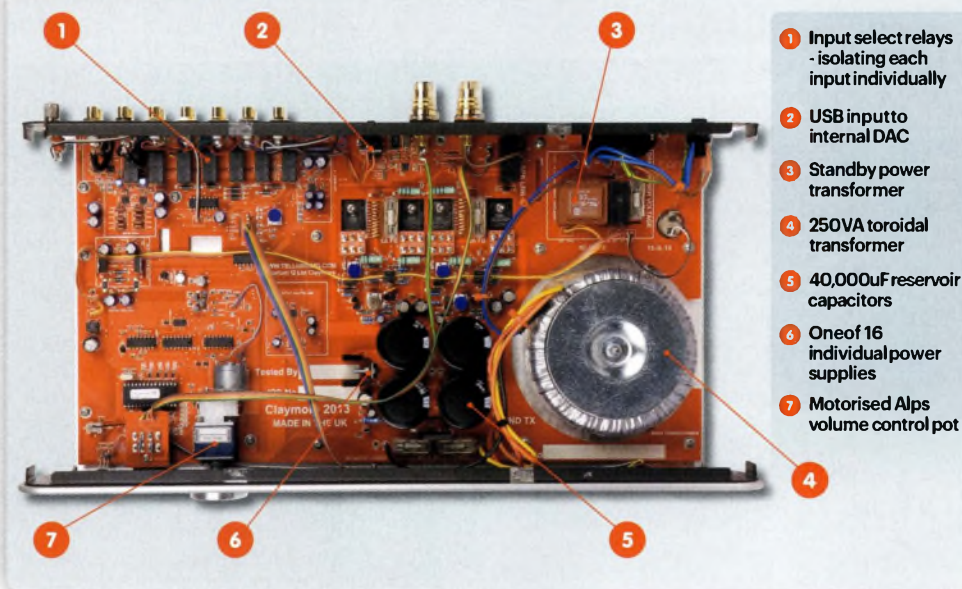
What sort of buyer is the new amplifier aimed at?

Simple – it's for people who love good sound yet also need decent functionality. It provides a range of inputs with connectivity to all sources and it has been done properly. Indeed, the phono stage is so good that it would work well as a one-stop solution for vinyl lovers who don't want masses of kit lying around. We included a DAC for added convenience for the owner too, complete with our own proprietary filter because this really improved its sound.

In what technical respects does it differ from the original Claymore?

There's very little comparison to the original design, although there is a similar family sound. Bass is more controlled and there is much greater dynamic performance and detail – that's because there are 14 separate power supplies in this Claymore and only four in the original. The new amp has microprocessor control and digital conversion, but these are isolated from the analogue power supplies to reduce noise and interference. For example, the power supply for the DAC only functions when the USB port is active, and the power supply for the IR detector is active 100ms after the button is pushed on the remote and is then turned off. Finally, this Claymore uses a new generation of analogue MOSFET power devices, which are much more linear and require different drive techniques to implement. Oh, and the components available today are far better than those of 30 years ago, technology has moved on.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Input select relays - isolating each input individually
- 2 USB input to internal DAC
- 3 Standby power transformer
- 4 250VA toroidal transformer
- 5 40,000uF reservoir capacitors
- 6 One of 16 individual power supplies
- 7 Motorised Alps volume control pot

HOW IT COMPARES

Sugden's IA-4 (£4,100) is an obvious rival and a testing one too. The Sugden is bigger and superficially at least appears better finished. On switch-on the full Class A Sugden gets very hot, so best change all your house's light bulbs to LED ones to compensate for the higher electricity bill! Sonically, it's very clean, crisp, and spry. The Tellurium Q is too, just not to the same degree, it doesn't quite have the 'direct sunlight' white light of the Sugden. Moreover, the Claymore is extremely rhythmically fluid, whereas the IA-4 isn't so much – the former just lilts along in a wonderfully beguiling and effortless way.

Girl and the big fat bassline swings along with great aplomb. The amp certainly doesn't sound like it has vast Krell-like reserves of power and is not able to churn out huge tracts of low frequencies into super-demanding loads, but neither is it obviously weak kneed. It's less of an American muscle car in this respect and more like a well set-up Lotus sportster – because it is so fast and agile. However, the Claymore isn't just all about attack transients, because it has a pleasingly rich tonality; it's not fat or bloated in the least, but it does take the time to convey the texture of the instruments it is playing. This combination of speed and grip, allied to the ability to drill down right into the timbre of the sounds, is as pleasing as it is rare. The result is that singer Green Gartside's falsetto vocals come over as beautifully smooth and seamless, yet very expressive. Behind him, those chiming electronic keyboards play away with great expressiveness.

Like the original Claymore, this new one comes with a very good phono stage, switchable between moving magnet and moving coil on the back panel. This is emphatically not something that Tellurium Q has thrown in to up the feature count; I find it sounds superb, with Deodato's *Midnight Cruiser* an absolute joy to listen to. It proves very detailed yet wonderfully bouncy and dynamic. This is one of the few integrations of recent times I've heard that are able to really get the best out of a good vinyl front end; only when you start spending £500 or more on an offboard phono stage will you get an appreciably better sound. The DAC

input is good too, but not as stellar as the phono stage; a £400 Audiolab Q DAC does much better, with more detail, air and space.

Conclusion

This is a superb-sounding integrated amplifier, but its ergonomics frankly need a little more fettling. Until you actually hear the thing, the user experience isn't particularly appealing – but hopefully the remote control will be improved by the time full production is underway. Certainly though, once your listening session is underway you'll have no qualms, as this is a very accomplished performer that is head and shoulders above cheaper integrated amplifiers, and one of the very best at its price. The Claymore's all-round sonic charm makes it an interesting new addition to the market, and one that is well worth seeking out to audition if you're looking for a great sounding integrated that gets out of the way of the music as much as possible ●

Ni-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Sweet, musical sound; excellent phono input

DISLIKE: Poor ergonomics; sub-par remote control

WE SAY: An excellent sounding yet well specified integrated

The Age of the Superspeaker



Introducing **The New EV01**
By Hart Audio



REVIEWS CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AERO 6
FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER **£650**



Tall story

The Aero 6 is the floorstanding version of our best budget standmounter; **David Price** brings you the long and short of it

Back in the November 2013 issue (377) we reviewed the £350 Cambridge Audio Aero 2 standmount loudspeaker. The Aero 6 is a larger, floorstanding version of the same design, deploying identical drive units with the far larger cabinet volume that comes from having a big box that sits securely on terra firma!

Many will expect the Aero 6 to be better, then; after all, it's nearly twice the price and has far more air inside its capacious cabinet. Trouble is, in doing a floorstanding version of a

Sound is as close to big three-way speakers as you'll get for £1,000

smaller standmount speaker, you open yourself up to a problem that's never easily solved, especially in budget designs, which is how to keep the cabinet under control. The thing is, that bigger box might let the bass driver move air easier, but there's also the worry that it will also move the cabinet. This is the nub of the problem for any larger loudspeaker – how to keep those expanses of timber from flexing and resonating in time to the music, sully the sound.

On a small box like the Aero 2, this isn't such a big problem, as there's less of it. But the Aero 6 sports two 165mm bass units producing a lot more energy than the 2's single, identically sized driver, and has a whopping great (in relative terms) box to keep in line. The performance of the bigger box is a real issue that will ultimately determine the success or failure of the speaker.

Cambridge Audio's Aero series does something very smart that confers it a significant advantage in terms of sound – it uses a single 46mm BMR driver to take care of treble and midband frequencies. The aforementioned device works from 250Hz all the way up to 22kHz, and it gives the Aero a theoretical edge –

namely that the crossover point of the loudspeaker is a good long way from where the ear is most sensitive, in the 1 to 2kHz region. This is precisely where most other two-way speakers cross over, so by shunting the crossover point down the frequency band, the sticky bit where the bass driver kicks in is nowhere near as subjectively problematic. And cleverly, the BMR handles mid and treble frequencies, leaving the most hard working part of the package – the woofer(s) – to get on with playing the bass, without having to worry about the midband as well.

And that's before you even consider how the BMR works; its excellent natural dispersion pattern comes from the fact that it creates much of its sound from surface vibration, in addition to conventional in-out piston motion. This means it diffuses around the room more easily and doesn't have any sort of obvious 'sweet spot' like conventional tweeters. I found it worked exceptionally nicely in the Aero 2; not only is it well integrated with the bass driver, but it is the latest version of the BMR, which no other manufacturer is currently using.

Those twin bass units both feature paper cones. Having experimented for years with cone materials, designer Dominic Baker is now a fan of certain types of paper pulp in speaker cones; he says these have a great combination of stiffness and lightness that other materials can't match. A single large reflex port lets the twin woofers breathe, firing forward into the room. The MDF cabinet has a choice of black or dark walnut finishes, and you won't find bi-wirable binding posts round the back because Dominic doesn't think they offer an acceptable cost/benefit.

Sound quality

Often, moving from a small standmount to a big floorstander creates more problems than it solves, but the Aero 6 emerges as the better of the two speakers in my view. Cleverly, you get all the benefits of

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cambridge Audio Aero 6

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
16.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
338 x 980 x 240mm

FEATURES
• 1x 46mm BMR treble/mid driver
• 2x 165mm paper bass driver
• Quoted power handling: 25-120W
• Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/1W/1m
• Quoted frequency response: 30Hz-22kHz (+/- 3dB)

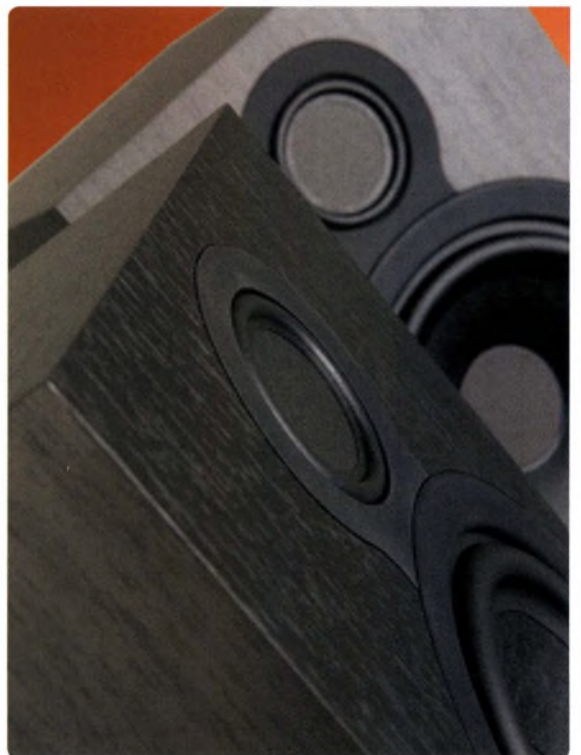
DISTRIBUTOR
Cambridge Audio
WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.com

having two woofers pumping away shifting air, but none of the pitfalls of having a bigger cabinet to keep in check. And fascinatingly, the benefits don't simply manifest themselves as better bass, you also get improvements right up the frequency band. Treble seems a little more relaxed and tuneful, midband is easier, more effortless and more dynamic and, of course, bass is far bigger booted.

Still, this is very much an Aero loudspeaker; both the 2 and the 6 sound like nothing else around at the price, and that's meant in a good way. Their baseline is a wonderfully expansive sound, one that's tonally extremely even and devoid of peaks and troughs. At first listen, this can manifest itself as being slightly over-smooth, but give it a few minutes and as soon as you've realised it's not going to shout at you, you find yourself listening further into the music. The Aeros begin to sound very immersive, and the floorstanders seem to exacerbate this effect, pulling you further into the sound.

Rhythmically, because there's no coruscating treble coming at you, or clanging midband, you can on first appraisal mistake the smoothness and evenness for a slight lack of bite. But you soon realise that these speakers are as fast as anything at or near the price, it's just that they're not crashing their way through the music. You get into a zone, where you can enjoy their natural musicality and effortless ease. It's actually rather hard to

Apparently, the secret's in the cone material...



Q&A

Dominic Baker

Audio Systems Business Director,
Audio Partnership PLC



DP: In what respects can a floorstander better a standmounter?

DB: Because you have twice as much driver area (in the case of the Aero 6) and at least twice as much cabinet volume, you can achieve deeper bass extension and improved power handling. It is up to each designer where he decides to bias this, either more towards power handling or more bass extension. I normally pick a compromise between the two. In the Aero 6 I have used twin bass drivers for better power handling, to ultimately achieve higher sound pressure levels, this is important because floorstanders are often chosen for larger rooms. We have computer modelled the cabinet geometry to avoid standing waves and to choose the optimum position for bracing, so reducing resonance.

Does the Aero 6 have crossover tweaks compared to the Aero 2?

They are identical, which may appear strange at first. But the majority of the response is dominated by the BMR, from 250Hz upwards. What is unusual is the Aero series are voiced/tuned by changing the parameters of the bass drivers to raise and lower bass level until the desired subjective balance is achieved.

What music do they work best with?

As with all good speakers, they should play everything with an even hand. As far as I am concerned any speaker that works better with one type of music than another would suggest that it has a colouration that enhances or detracts depending on the material played, ie it isn't neutral. Compared to its little brother, I would hope you hear the extra scale and weight provided by the twin bass drivers that are tuned for deeper bass. Timing should be better, too. Part of what makes the Aero series unique is the way we use the BMR driver, which acts like an integrated midrange/tweeter unit. So whereas most floorstanding loudspeakers would be 2.5-way or 3-way designs requiring extra complexity in the crossover, the Aero 6s are a 2-way design with the benefit of simplicity.

IN SIGHT



- 1 BMR treble and midrange driver
- 2 Front-mounted bass reflex port
- 3 Loudspeaker binding posts
- 4 165mm bass drive unit; 1 of 2

HOW IT COMPARES

Like its Aero 2 little brother, the most direct rival for the Aero 6 is Q Acoustics' £460 2050i. This is a similarly sized floorstander, albeit slightly taller and heavier, and with the option of a piano lacquer finish for an extra £120, taking it close to the Aero 6's price. The higher spec Q is a far better finished speaker than the Aero 6, which hardly looks special. Still, its sound is something else altogether and here the Cambridge betters the Q for smoothness, ease and general evenness of tonality. The Q is tighter, more forward and has a more sparkly treble, but still you'd never call it harsh. Both are great speakers – but go and hear them for yourself before you buy.

describe, because so few speakers do this – possibly Quad electrostatics and Martin Logan hybrids at the top end of the market, but not many others. The sound coming from the Aero 6s is simply different to almost all other speakers on the market in one respect, thanks to that seamless BMR treble/mid driver and the way it is used. Meanwhile, those twin bass units marry up superbly and make it a delightful listen.

I found that the Aero 2s had a slight lack of atmosphere right at the very top, but the 6s are less guilty of this. Treble isn't as incisive as Q Acoustics' 2050i, for example, but it has a lovely floaty quality that means hi-hats are carried with super timing. On The The's *I've Been Waiting*, it's unusually easy to hear the interaction between the bass, snares and cymbals and this becomes a really key part of the song. Behind this Matt Johnson's plaintive vocals soar, giving the song an epic feel. At the same time, loads of detail is thrust out stage left and right, from guitar licks to backing synths. The effect is powerful, engrossing even, yet tonally it's as smooth as silk – not something you can say of most budget speakers.

For a £650 box, the Aero 6s can shift large amounts of air. They're very efficient, seemingly able to produce high sound pressure levels with a watt or two – making them ideal for low-powered Class A and/or tube amps. I am amazed by the easy way they fill my listening room with vast swathes of sound. Camel's *Three Wishes* is a suitably expansive soundtrack to this, the Aeros firing wide to the extremities of my large listening room, seemingly untroubled by any lack of headroom, even at high levels. The texture of the shimmering backing synths and crisp guitar come over convincingly, and are played together in perfect time. As with the Aero 2s, bass isn't the tightest and tautest you'll ever hear, but the supplied foam bungs help to tighten things up, as does careful placement and firm spiking into your floor. Still, this slight looseness is more than compensated for by their wonderfully effortless nature; this sound is as close to big three-way loudspeakers as you'll get this side of £1,000, or more.

Conclusion

No less distinguished than its smaller £350 brother, the Cambridge Audio 6 is an unusual sounding loudspeaker – in a very positive way. It is one of the most refined, svelte and smooth-sounding floorstanders you can buy without breaking the bank, and has a easy, unflappable quality that makes music in a beguilingly natural way. The extra woofer and umpteen additional litres inside the cabinet simply make the speaker more dynamic and less stressed across the midband, making it an even smoother operator. It also adds an extra octave of bass for good measure, without falling into the trap of so many rivals that substitute quality for quantity. One of the finest affordable floorstanders you'll hear, make sure you audition it now ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Wonderfully smooth, open, even sound; scale; musicality
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Finish not as lavish as some rivals
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Superb affordable floorstander that's civilised way beyond its price
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

OVERALL





IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

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Take a bit of the DALI "old school" hi-fi virtues then add a lot of smart thinking with innovative technology and you'll get an active speaker system that really delivers true hi-fi performance: The DALI KUBIK FREE.

This elegantly designed active speaker offers you the freedom to enjoy your music wherever you want from a wide variety of sources that can be connected via Bluetooth, USB, Optical or Analog inputs.

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If you dream of fantastic sound experiences the EPICON 2 is the perfect escape. Don't be fooled by the size of this speaker – the most diminutive in the EPICON family produces an astonishingly large and accurate three-dimensional sound that will impress even the most rigorous demands of true audiophiles.

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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



X box

The FiiO X3 has generated an awful lot of positive buzz – **Patrick Cleasby** has a listen to see what the fuss is about

You might be forgiven for gaining the impression, that there is really only one option when it comes to portable digital players capable of 24/192 resolution – Astell&Kern. But it was always only a matter of time before other players appeared.

Those in search of an alternative to the somewhat pricey players from iRiver pricked up their ears when FiiO trailed the availability of a more affordable unit using the same Wolfson WM8740 DAC. A similar frisson was felt when it released an excellent portable headphone amp – the E17 – a year or two ago. As ever the assiduous headphone listeners of head-fi.org were the first to take note in both cases, anticipating and buying up the first X3 production runs, just as they had done with the E17.

The device has the same brushed black metal feel as the E17. There is

no possible patent-infringing click wheel – the vital navigation functions are fulfilled by pairs of buttons arranged in pairs beneath the decent sized 240 x 320-pixel screen, lending a slight design echo back to the old Sony Walkman 2 switchgear. The sides of the device are also heavily populated. No shared phones/analogue/digital outputs here, they are all separate and there is also an iPod-like hold button. The micro USB connection is the typical USB 2.0 spec with a discreet red charging LED concealed in the front panel close to the base of the device. Battery life is a claimed 10 hours.

The contents of the package are extremely basic: there are screen protectors, a silicon sleeve, a micro-USB lead and a 3.5mm-to-phono socket adapter for digital hookup. A leather case is available for £30. Replacement silicon skins for £5.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
FiiO X3

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
24/192-capable
Digital Audio
Portable

WEIGHT
122g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
55 x 109 x 16mm

FEATURES
● APE, FLAC, WAV,
AIFF, ALAC, MP2,
MP3, AAC, WMA
and OGG playback
● 8GB internal
memory
● Micro SD slot for
memory expansion
up to a total 72GB
● 3.5mm coaxial
digital and line
analogue outputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Advanced MP3
Players

TELEPHONE
0843 2896880

WEBSITE
advancedmp3
players.co.uk

Comparisons with the lower price level Astell&Kern – the AK100 – are inevitable and although it is slightly taller, the X3 is notably lighter. The history of the firmware support for the X3 has also tracked a similar path to that of its more expensive rival, in that the need for gapless playback, and the promise of USB DAC capability have recently been fulfilled with the v2.05 firmware. The X3 gets one over the AK100 as the DAC functionality is fully 24/192 asynchronous spec, whereas it is capped at 24/96 on the Astell&Kern. An ASIO driver and a detailed setup guide is available so PC users can take advantage of the DAC functionality.

The areas in which the X3 loses out to the AK100 go some way to explaining the significant disparity in price. Most notable is the step down from a touchscreen paradigm to an entirely button-operated one – it is amazing how much you miss this on the return. The onboard memory (8GB for the X3) and single Micro SD upgrade slot are also less generous, giving less than half the total possible capacity of the AK100 at 72GB with a single 64GB card. Getting down to the little niggles, the card slot lacks the protective cover of the AK 100, but the latching action is smooth and doesn't spring the all-too-looseable tiny cards violently enough to cause anxiety on ejection. Finally, the

Decidedly old school, you won't find any touchscreen operation here

absence of aptX should only upset those who are over-attached to Bluetooth speaker setups.

I dutifully upgrade the shipped firmware to the latest version before setting about auditioning. The update method is booting from the firmware file on an SD card while holding the menu and power buttons down.

Happily the FAT32-formatted Sandisk Ultra Micro SD XC 64GB cards I use in the AK100 are accepted by the X3, so the auditioning material is predominantly 24-bit FLAC from either HDTracks or Qobuz. Much like the AK100, a scan needs to be triggered to pick up all the FLAC tagging information.

Sound quality

I initially test out the X3 on typical mobile usage with my habitual Etymotic ER4 headphones using custom moulds. The results are extremely positive – it is immediately apparent that the FiiO has plenty of power to drive whatever headphones you throw at it making it a much more straightforward proposition than the fussy AK100. Deafening yourself is a possibility here, something the AK100 would struggle to achieve.

The sound characteristic is also significantly different. Where the AK100 specialises in a slightly staid but extremely detailed presentation, the X3 is very good at raw excitement at the expense of a little bit of detail.

This makes it best suited to compressed modern pop. Using *Chloroform* by Phoenix from Qobuz as an example, it is hard not to feel swamped by the massive synth

sounds, but the X3 gives a satisfying sense of the midrange being able to cut through the ponderous bass pads. The high frequencies do feel a little constrained, though.

A move to the similarly sourced *Hey Now* by London Grammar reassures to a degree – the vocal has a fantastic richness in this version and the imaging is impressive. There is still some concern that the metals and other high-end effects slightly lack fidelity. This is where the delicacy of the AK100 can be preferable – despite the common converter the voicings are quite different.

Accordingly this is perhaps not one for the classical aficionados. The new

There is no stronger recommendation for the FiiO X3 than that 'I want one' feeling

24/96 Bach *St Matthew's Passion* from Harmonia Mundi does not come across as well on the X3, lacking the choral and instrumental separation necessary for real enjoyment.

Switching to the new USB DAC functionality is achieved by flipping USB Mode from 'Storage' to 'DAC' in the X3 System Settings menu – so long as you have the latest firmware version installed. It is immediately apparent that the OSX Sound preference panel can driverlessly switch to FiiO X3 and the X3 storage is no longer available from the computer. Audio/Midi Setup also defaults to 24/192 output settings.

Listening to the results of this smooth setup using the Decibel player from a MacBook Pro gives an equally smooth sound, with open and impressive soundstaging. Although the line out is separate from the headphone out unlike the AK100, the sound quality with the analogue stage renders the 24/44.1 version of Hot Chip's *Night and Day* much more brashly (in an enjoyable way) than the restrained AK100, but with the vocal suffering from a slightly recessed quality in comparison.

Up the resolution a bit and these concerns are allayed. Edie Brickell's vocal on the 24/88.2 version of her Steve Martin duet *When You Get To Asheville* is as clear as a bell. The voice sits above the banjo picking, all ably supported by a warm bed of strings that have real body, life and soundstage width. The real X3 advantage is felt with the step up to 24/192 conversion, which the AK100 cannot match. *Mr. Pastorius* from Miles Davis' *Amandla* gives a tasteful balance of the faithful trumpet tone. The rough edge to the high frequencies in the cymbals is the only indicator that this is a device doing its 'second' job.

Conclusion

There is no stronger recommendation for the FiiO X3 than that 'I want one' feeling. If it had been more readily available when I procured my own AK100 it would have been a tough call whether to go for the substantial saving or the more luxe operation and increased capacity. Your own purchasing decision should be based on whether your preferred headphones are hard to drive. If they are, the cheaper player is definitely the way to go, unless you want to customise your AK. The only real differentiator is that new firmware has brought DSD playback to the AK100 – even this may follow for the X3 in the fullness of time ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: The cheapest way of putting 24/192 in your pocket
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: The old-school styling may not be to everybody's taste
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: At this price point even the least confident hi-res audio neophyte will want to get in on the action
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



Reasons to be cheerful

Andrew Simpson finds out if Dynaudio's refreshed X34 mid-price tower is a speaker worth getting excited about

Eagle-eyed readers will no doubt have spotted that an almost identical looking Dynaudio floorstander graced these pages back in the October 2013 issue and earned itself a prestigious Recommended badge. That speaker was the Xeo 5, an active design with a wireless receiver. Its cheaper passive cousin, the X34, comes minus the Xeo's internal amplifier, freeing it up to be driven by one of your choosing.

The X34 model shares air-moving hardware with the Xeo 5, so you get a pair of Dynaudio's 5in MSP (magnesium silicate polymer) long-throw woofers with aluminium voice coils and die-cast aluminium

Integration between the midband and top end of the X34 is of a seamless quality

frames. Working in parallel, these drivers cross over to the 27mm soft dome tweeter, which also sports aluminium voice coils.

When upwardly comparing the X34 to Dynaudio's other passive ranges, an extra £1,100 buys you the equivalent model in the Focus range, the Focus 260. This employs a heavier cabinet construction and uses larger coils within its drive units, with stronger double magnets. With a claimed 4ohm load, it also demands a more capable amp to really drive it. Thanks to its more amp-friendly claimed 8ohm load, matching should be less of an issue with the X34. That said, with a quoted sensitivity of 86dB, I expect the X34 will still lend itself to amplifiers with a bit of muscle, but maybe not the arc welding type that their more costly brethren demand.

Like the Xeo 5, the X34 is constructed from 18mm MDF and each cabinet is internally strengthened by two braces. Unlike the Xeo 5, the X34's front baffle is without visible mounting holes for its front grille, thanks to hidden magnets that hold each in place.

Also unique to the Excite floorstander models are cast alloy outrigger feet that broaden their footprint and aid stability. These are a superb design, with recessed rubber feet housing hidden spikes that can be wound into action from above (via a supplied hex key) when citing the speakers on carpets. Finally, the bass is reinforced through a tapered rear port tuned to 41Hz, which can be blocked using the supplied bungs.

Sound quality

For such a relatively lean-looking speaker, I'm surprised by how much punch this packs from its slender profile, and my ears are convinced that the size of the Dyn's mid/bass drivers are larger than specified.

Exploring the X34s with a 16-bit/44.1kHz rip of Elbow's *Asleep In The Back*, I'm instantly gripped by the low kick-drum 'thump' within the *Red* track, as it sucks the air from my room with surprising authority. This palpable sense of sheer grip beyond what you'd expect from such a small speaker is illustrated further, as the Dynaudios dig deeper into the album. The thick looping piano and bass guitar rhythms of *Powder Blue* swirl around my ears with an articulate midrange that has all the confidence of a much larger multi-driver three-way speaker. Although there's plenty of juice on tap via my 260W Musical Fidelity M6PRX amp, they have me winding up the wick more than usual to drive them to realistic levels, so a healthy supply of clean power is needed to make them sing.

DETAILS

PRODUCT

Dynaudio Excite X34

ORIGIN

Denmark

TYPE

Two-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT

17kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)
170 x 929 x 270mm

FEATURES

- 27mm soft dome tweeter
- Bass/mid drive units: 5in polymer woofer
- Quoted sensitivity: 86dB
- Quoted nominal impedance: 8ohms

DISTRIBUTOR

Dynaudio UK

TELEPHONE

01353 721089

WEBSITE

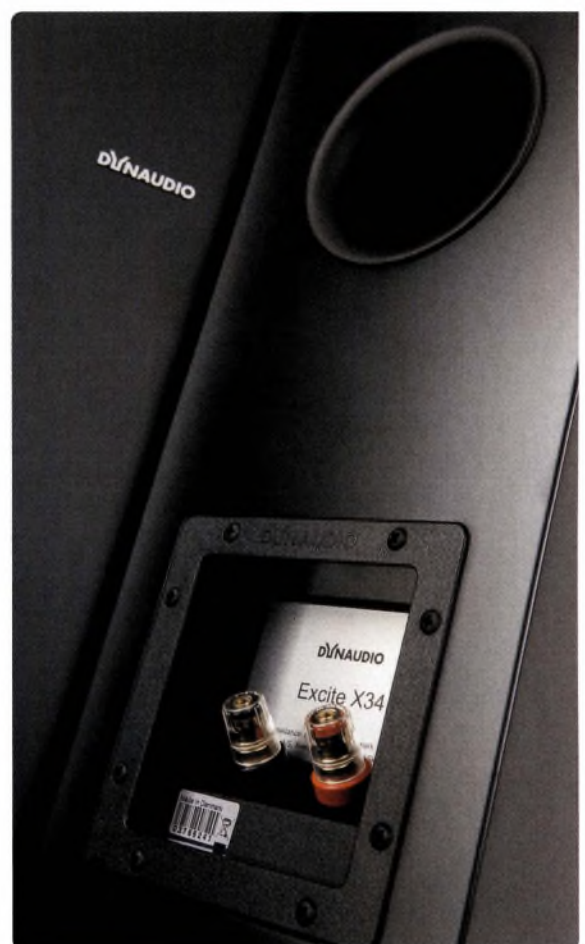
dynaudio.com

Dynaudio describes its range-topping X38 as "the mother of all bass" and listening to the X34 suggests that they are indeed a brother to that mother. Thankfully however, the bass isn't just a case of low-end bravado. The dreamy alt-rock melodies of Mazzy Star aren't at the top of my low-frequency test tracks, but via the X34s, the deep notes of *Fade Into You* possess so much presence and finesse I'm left asking myself why I haven't noticed this dynamic within the track before.

The X34s also welcome space to breathe, and in my room the rear port craves little rear-wall reinforcement. If space permits, moving the speakers further into your listening room helps prevent the lower frequencies from conjugating within the soundstage. If space is of a premium, I'd recommend calling on the supplied bungs (in my room, around 12cm between the speaker's back panel and the rear wall is the tipping point). Thankfully the bungs work well as acoustic tuning devices, by taking away a little bass depth in return for culling boom and keeping the music nicely balanced.

Integration between the X34's midband and its top end is of a seamless quality befitting of a speaker ▶

There'll be no bi-wiring or bi-amping here...





Q&A

Roland Hoffmann

Dynaudio Loudspeakers product manager



AS: How does the new Excite range improve on the previous models?

RH: The new speakers have an upgraded crossover, improved woofers with more headroom and are easier to drive. We've also changed how we've engineered the phase relation of our drive units, and for the Excite floorstanders the sound is focused slightly upwards towards the listener. At this listening position, staging and imaging between the speakers is more accurate, compared to many small floorstanders, which often sound best at knee-height level or when tilted back slightly.

Can you tell us what's special about the X34's crossover?

Our woofers and tweeters generally have a very balanced frequency roll-on/off to start with, so there is no need to use steep filters to suppress any unwanted sound colorations or resonance peaks. We design most of our crossovers as a 6dB filter, but adjust this individually for every speaker model. The X34 employs a first to second order crossover (6-12dB, depending on the frequency), which uses upgraded components from the former Excite models that are closer to what we specify for our Focus series.

Why do you favour single pairs of binding posts that don't cater for bi-wiring/bi-amping?

Without going into the genuine benefits of bi-amping and bi-wiring, one can either design a good frequency split crossover or a good overall crossover. Dynaudio mostly favours an overall impedance correction and a finely tuned and balanced overall filter design. Separating such a design afterwards, and then bridging it with often cheap metal strips for users who choose not to bi-wire or bi-amp is not the right way to go. True bi-amping would separate the frequencies way before they reach loudspeaker's crossover, as in our Xeo range, which employs a DSP-based crossover feeding two separate digital power amps for the woofer and tweeter.

IN SIGHT



HOW IT COMPARES

If you like Dynaudio's house sound and lean towards a slightly warmer presentation, consider Dali's Mentor 5 and 6 models, if you've space to let them spread their wings. If you like your music with more bite, check out PMC's twenty.23, which may not offer the low-end wallop of the Dyns, but has rhythm in spades. ATC's recently revised SCM40 three-way offers an even greater degree of honesty if you like your music warts 'n' all. Lastly, Neat's Motive SX1 that we tested in January, has excellent tonality and is less fussy about positioning, but the Neats may not offer the same levels of grip as the Dynaudios.

in this price bracket. Without being overly bright, the treble is clean and crisp, requiring only a few degrees of speaker toe-in towards my listening position to find their sweet spot. Tracy Thorn's unmistakable voice on Massive Attack's *Protection* sounds pure and natural, and how the X34s render its slight echo in the mic is hairs on the back of the neck stuff.

Firing the speakers almost straight down my 4 x 5m room allows the soundstage to expand well wide of their physical footprint. Within the soundstage, the X34's treble is a tad forward, illustrated by Tracy's voice emanating from a good few inches in front of the X34's front baffle, which gives the music a heightened sense of immediacy and realism, as it brings the performance closer to you.

The uninhibited treble combined with its layered midrange also helps emphasise soundstage depth, by placing instruments and sounds deeper in the mix, illustrating again how the Dynaudios invoke such a three-dimensional soundstage.

Quickening the X34's pulse via a 1973 vinyl pressing of *Led Zeppelin III*

shows that they aren't afraid of letting their Nordic locks down when they hit the hard stuff. The X34s hold the steady acceleration of *Gallows Pole* with ease and hit their stride as the track reaches full throttle courtesy of Messrs Page and Bonham. As the track's tempo shifts, the X34s consistently maintain a sense of vitality, as though they're eager to show off how much they like to be pushed. While they perhaps don't head too far into raucous territory as some speakers that favour the harder brand of rock tend to, the way they present the raw energy of this music in an even-handed manner makes them a composed all-rounder.

Conclusion

The £2,000 floorstander market has plenty of worthy contenders, but thanks to its impressive sense of scale and energy combined with an even nature, the X34 isn't fazed by the competition. Its recommendation does come with two caveats though: firstly, despite Dynaudio's efforts to make these a more amp-friendly speaker, you still need a decent

I'm surprised by how much punch this packs from its slender profile

amount of grunt to really open them up, I'd suggest upwards of 70W. Secondly, like with any serious floorstander, be prepared to spend time and effort positioning these speakers to focus their bass, which means a home demo is even more essential. Get these elements right and you have a speaker that will breathe life into even the most restrained recordings, with an enrapturing sound that's blessed with plenty of detail ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful and refined sound; great quality finish
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Careful positioning required to tune lower bass; needs plenty of power
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Big sounds from a modest-sized speaker that has plenty of detail
- EASE OF DRIVE**
★★★★★

OVERALL





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Melody maker

Marantz reboots the style system with this all-digital affair that pleases **Adrian Justins** immensely by embracing hi-res audio

Of you were one of the few people who bought a style system during the last decade you probably risked derision from your cleaner, never mind your tech-savvy mates unable to fathom why you'd accept all of the compromises of such a purchase.

Now style systems appear to be enjoying a revival. This is partly fuelled by an austerity-induced nostalgia for simpler times. Then there is the need for better quality sound when watching TV on a skinny flatscreen, plus the evolution of contemporary audio delivery mechanisms such as internet radio, hi-res audio, home networking and wireless streaming from smartphones and tablets. Style systems

can satisfy all of these needs. Strictly speaking the Melody Stream (or M-CR510) is a network receiver rather than a system as it doesn't come with speakers, although Marantz recommends partnering it with its own LS502 speakers.

Functionality includes compatibility with hi-res 24-bit/192kHz FLAC and WAV files, while ALAC playback maxes out at 24/96. Obviously, you can't stream hi-res files over the airwaves, but the unit features AirPlay support making it easy to listen to standard (CD) resolution files from Apple products. With DLNA on board it's possible to stream music from computers and non-Apple portables via wi-fi but Bluetooth has been shunned,

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Melody Stream
M-CR510

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Network media
receiver

WEIGHT
2.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
409 x 160 x 302mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power:
60W RMS per
channel
• Sources: vTuner,
Spotify, last.fm,
AirPlay, USB, DLNA
network, iPod
• Lossy formats:
MP3, WMA, AAC
• Lossless formats:
FLAC HD 24/192,
ALAC 24/96, WAV
24/192

DISTRIBUTOR
Marantz Europe

TELEPHONE
02890 279830

WEBSITE
marantz.co.uk

which is a shame as aptX has shown how good Bluetooth can be when listening to down-sampled hi-res audio.

To enjoy the pleasures of hi-res you need to use either the Ethernet on the rear or the front-mounted USB. Spotify and Last.fm clients are built-in, as is a vTuner internet radio.

The socketry selection should meet most expectations, with front and rear USBs, a headphone jack, digital optical audio input, subwoofer output, stereo phono in and banana plug-compatible screw speaker terminals. A digital coaxial input would have been nice, but at least having a digital optical input offers compatibility with decks and with most TVs allowing the Melody Stream to be used as a soundbar (with speakers added). USBs provide iPod playback, but also handily offer iOS device charging. An alarm/timer feature secures the unit's right to be used in a bedroom.

Style-wise, the Melody Stream cuts a terrific dash. At 30cm wide and 8cm tall, it's small enough to sit tidily on a table top or bookshelf and its high-gloss, all-black or black and white design with curved edges gives it an elegant and contemporary feel. The front-mounted USB is the blot on the landscape of an otherwise attractive fascia, but when the unit is viewed from across a room it can hardly be seen. Connectivity on the rear is recessed, a nice touch that helps

keep the various plugs and cables from sight when seen from above. The white text on black LED display is impressive, with a range of letter sizes and icons, and a smooth scrolling action. The unit comes with a large, utilitarian-looking remote control, although its generous proportions ensure all of the buttons are spaciouly laid out and ergonomically it's easy to get to grips with. Additionally, a fair number of controls are embedded into the two circular buttons either side of the central display.

There's also a new Marantz iOS and Android app for smartphones and tablets, which is more enjoyable to use with slick icons and a handy qwerty keyboard making text entry quicker. While the iOS app is happy to stream M4A, MP3 and 16-bit/44.1kHz AIFF files, hi-res files are precluded from playback on Apple portable devices. You can access FLAC files using the Music Server or directly on a flash drive or portable hard drive using the USB connection.

A full manual is provided in PDF form on a CD-ROM, but a printed quick start guide is included with four network setup options, the simplest of which (Ethernet cable aside) is to plug in an iOS device to the rear USB and press very briefly the adjacent red Wi-Fi Connect button. This generates a message on the screen asking for permission to share wi-fi settings – accept the request and you're all networked up, simple as that.

As with all recent Denon and Marantz wi-fi network systems and wireless speakers you have to press the Wi-Fi Connect button very briefly. Any longer than a quick press and the unit goes into WPS search mode as if you had pressed and held the button for the full three seconds. Taking the router option to setting up is also trouble-free, with the Melody Stream simply scanning for my network and inviting me to enter a password or connect via WPS. Text input is about as painless as it can get,

even using a remote control and the single line display rather than the dedicated iOS app.

Output is easy to tweak, using either the app or the remote and LED display. In terms of tonal tweaking, the Melody Stream offers simple bass and treble adjustment and dynamic bass boost. Additionally, there are four presets for boosting and/or cutting lower and higher frequencies to match your speakers. The app lets you select from eight sources, including the music library stored on the portable device and the iOS app doesn't exclude DLNA server integration.

When you land on an internet radio station the app handily lists all available podcasts as well as the live stream option and you can save

For what it is, the way it looks and what it does the Melody Stream is hard to fault

stations as favourites for speedy access. The info button on the handset reveals the codec and bit-rate on the LED screen. Tuning in to a radio station requires a bit of patience as it takes a good 10 to 15 seconds before it connects to the stream and anything can be heard.

Sound quality

For the performance, I cut to the chase and test the Melody Stream's mettle with a 24/192 FLAC download of Haydn's *String Quartet in D* played from a USB flash drive. The unit's energy and ability to deliver every last drop of detail is abundantly clear as the strings whizz along. Everything sparkles with the kind of clarity that's surprising from a unit at the price and the Melody Stream seems happy to hit high volumes without hitting the buffers of distortion, maintaining a pleasing tonal balance. The bass in

Jean Michel Jarre's *Oxygene Part IV* (24/48 AI.AC) can really trip up an inferior system, but here it remains tight and controlled while the treble of the synth glides along.

Similarly, with the 24/192 rendition of *I'm Gonna Laugh You Right Out of My Life* by Claire Martin you can't help but feel enraptured by the delicate tinkling of the ivories and Martin's husky vocals. The Melody Stream does a more than reasonable job too with lower-res sources. The Manic Street Preachers' *Rewind The Film* is pleasing enough, but the orchestration feels marginally opaque and James Dean Bradfield's vocals don't resonate as convincingly as Richard Hawley's.

Conclusion

Marantz deserves praise for producing the versatile Melody Stream. It's a beautiful-looking unit with cutting-edge digital features, and could hardly be easier to use despite the relative complexity of its functionality. But unlike, say, wireless speakers people aren't rushing to buy stylish network media receivers and it may just be ahead of its time. It lacks a couple of killer features – such as Bluetooth – that could potentially attract a much wider audience. But for what it is, the way it looks and what it does at the price, it's hard to fault ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



LIKE: Looks fab, is a blast to own and use and delivers super hi-res audio

DISLIKE: No Bluetooth; ALAC limited to 24/96; large remote control

WE SAY: A delightful product, but can it find a market for itself?

OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



- 1 Wi-Fi Connect
- 2 USB input
- 3 Ethernet port
- 4 Analogue inputs
- 5 Subwoofer output
- 6 Screw speaker terminals



Stream weaver

This keenly priced all-singing network amp promises plenty of style, but what about its sonic substance asks **Andrew Simpson**

You may think you've already seen the D 7050 gracing our review pages in recent months, as it looks strikingly similar to NAD's D 3020 amp and D 1050 DAC, both of which we tested back in issue 379. The D 7050 here, however, is an altogether more thorough package, and employs NAD's Direct Digital circuitry (see Q&A), handed down from the company's high-end Masters Series. This circuit ensures all preamp functions are performed in the digital domain, which NAD says helps keep unwanted noise low.

Being a digital amp means that the D 7050 is bereft of analogue inputs, but digital inputs are well served across four S/PDIF sockets shared over coaxial and optical, alongside USB and Ethernet ports. Output sockets include a single set of loudspeaker terminals, a headphone jack and an analogue preamp out, which can also be configured to feed a subwoofer via RCAs. As with any streamer worth its saline, the NAD accepts the usual range of file types including FLAC/WAV/ALAC and can handle files up to 24-bit/192kHz via its digital inputs and 96kHz via USB,

which is also the maximum that I manage to achieve over wi-fi.

Speaking of wireless, the NAD welcomes streams served via UPnP/DLNA networks, Apple's AirPlay and Bluetooth (via the aptX codec). There's no dedicated internet radio player installed, so you have to stream this from an external device, such as a computer.

Physically the D 7050 doesn't look, feel or behave like most traditional hi-fi boxes, and for this it should be commended for daring to be different. The way its digital display

Effortlessly clean and fluid sounding without being overly bright or revealing

rotates à la smartphone screen, to be legible when laid flat or stood on end, is plain cool.

In the flesh the rubberised matt and contrasting reflective finish is classy, and its two large rotary knobs (for volume and input) are smoothly governed with just the right amount of resistance. Underneath its dextrous finish, the case is actually made from plastic, although it feels genuinely

solid, more so than many steel boxes in the same price bracket. Using a plastic case that doesn't block RF also means NAD can hide the unit's wi-fi and Bluetooth antennas inside, negating rear panel clutter of dongles and transmitters.

Setting up the D 7050 is a breeze. There's no on/off switch on the unit, so the matching remote is called upon to bring the screen to life. Getting it on to a home network simply involves pressing the unit's rear panel WPS button, and likewise on a home router (in my case a BT Home Hub) followed by a few seconds of waiting while the two find each other and the wi-fi symbol becomes static. Operation via NAD's dedicated app is equally simple to get going. Once downloaded, simply select your device and enter your wi-fi key to be given access to all of the D 7050's features, ranging from selecting inputs to specifying the sub's crossover point.

Unlike apps from the likes of Cambridge Audio and Linn, NAD's app cannot access or initiate playback from a music library on your network, so playback needs to be started at the client end of things (for example your computer, smartphone or tablet), and then controlled using the app to select the input you require and adjust the volume.

Sound quality

Fresh out of the blocks and feeding a pair of Audiovector Mi 3 Signature floorstanders, the NAD immediately presents itself as an articulate performer. Unlike similarly priced products with strong personalities, it doesn't have an obvious penchant for one type of music over another, instead it simply gets on with the job and tries to unearth as much musical detail as it can muster.

Streaming The Police's *Walking On The Moon* from Spotify through my iPhone 4s over AirPlay garners

DETAILS

PRODUCT
NAD D 7050

ORIGIN
Canada/China

TYPE
Network streamer/
amplifier

WEIGHT
2.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
70 x 235 x 270mm

FEATURES

- Network music playback (wi-fi, AirPlay, Ethernet and Bluetooth)
- 50W digital Class D amplifier
- USB and S/PDIF inputs
- Support for ALAC/WAV/FLAC/MP3 up to 24-bit/192kHz (96kHz over USB)

DISTRIBUTOR
Seven Oaks Sound & Vision

TELEPHONE
01732 459555

WEBSITE
nadelectronics.com

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Preamp/sub RCA outputs
- 2 4mm speaker binding posts
- 3 IEC mains input
- 4 S/PDIF inputs
- 5 USB (type B) digital input
- 6 Ethernet port

Q&A

Greg Stidsen

Technology & product director



AS: What were your design aims for the D 7050?

GS: To create a modern approach to component hi-fi that relates to the way people consume music today. The D 7050 uses a pure digital approach that addresses music stored on smartphones, tablets, computers and NAS drives.

Why is there no dedicated internet radio software?

We're extremely focused on keeping the D 7050 up to date through software updates and there are various new services in the pipeline.

Why have you used a digital Class D amplifier instead of a Class AB?

In addition to the high efficiency, low heat and small form factor, our Direct Digital amplifier has better signal to noise, lower distortion and a higher damping factor than other solutions. Unlike analogue amplifiers, there are no cascaded amplifier stages causing a build up of residual noise, and there are no conversions from digital to analogue, which also helps keep signals pure as it's in the conversion that non-linearities and timing errors (jitter) occur.

How does the D 7050's Direct Digital circuit work?

Direct Digital is a 'closed loop' digital amplifier that integrates DAC and preamp functions into only one operational stage. The unique thing about this design is that it looks at the analogue output and compares it to a pure pulse-width modulation (PWM) reference and uses noise shaping to correct any deviations from perfection. This error correction loop is much faster than traditional feedback and generates a correction every nine nanoseconds.

What are you most proud of about the D 7050?

The way it makes state-of-the-art digital performance affordable and accessible to a wider audience of music lovers. The D 7050 has, except for power output, the same performance as our far more expensive Direct Digital products like the M2, M51 and C 390DD.



You can have the D 7050 standing up or laying down, the decision is yours

cleaner than expected results, given the limitations of the combined source hardware and software. The D 7050 ensures Stewart Copeland's distinctive cymbal flourishes within the track are crisp enough to allow the source's shortcomings to be forgiven, and Andy Summers' guitar notes retain sufficient jangle to bring my tweeters to life.

Beaming a 16-bit/44.1kHz ALAC file of Carole King's *So Far Away* over AirPlay from my laptop gets far more out of the NAD, as it's put to work extracting the piano notes from within the mix and defining their precise leading edges. Using this streaming solution really throws the door open for it to demonstrate how it can unearth extra degrees of subtlety, and it doesn't disappoint. The D 7050 lets each haunting note from King's ivory keys hang in the air

exceptional vibrancy and the echo of the drum's rimshot clicks take me closer to the studio master. Not that you'd know the quality or content of the source from glancing at the NAD's front panel, as its minimalist display only shows volume, selected input and wi-fi strength, so there's no song name, track information or file type to interrogate.

The bass is evenly controlled, but in power terms it lacks the wallop of some of its rivals. With the D 7050 pushing my Audiovectors to more modest levels, the slow pounding kick drum of Ben Howard's *Black Flies* packs less punch than I'm used to and the bass texture isn't as rich or fulsome as the best at this price, but this is perhaps the trade off it makes in return for its more holographic window into the music.

Conclusion

The D 7050 is a well thought out and stylish package that's achingly simple to use, despite being loaded with streaming options and digital inputs. What this means is that you'll spend more time enjoying your music, which gets to the heart of what hi-fi should be all about. Sound wise its digital DNA is evident, and it may not have the sonic scale or emotion to match the best of its analogue rivals, but it's effortlessly clean and fluid sounding without being overly bright or revealing ●

The NAD should be commended for daring to be different to traditional hi-fi

with just the right amount of natural ring, controlling the track's tempo.

Despite driving a pair of £3,000 loudspeakers, which present a modest load, the NAD keeps everything in check across the frequency band. Although compared to the best of the Class AB breed at the price, it can sound a tad apathetic. King's performance is brimming with emotion and on some levels I'd welcome more of the realism that gets Carole's voice pulling at your heart strings.

Turning back the years to hear Jon Strong's 1993 track *Bad News On The Mountain*, reissued as a 24/192 FLAC on Linn's 40th Anniversary Collection, really plays to the NAD's strengths, especially when piping it directly into the S/PDIF coaxial input. It's a first class recording that the amp exposes with aplomb. Strong's electro-acoustic guitar strings appear to resonate with



The NAD's obvious counterpart is Cambridge Audio's 40W Minx Xi streamer (£600), which lacks AirPlay but offers analogue inputs, a more sophisticated app and internet radio software. Using a more traditional analogue amp, the Cambridge Audio has a warmer and more forward sound that lacks some of the NAD's detailed finesse.

At £1,150, Naim's UnitiQute 2 offers up to 192kHz streaming, DAB, FM and internet radio alongside analogue and digital inputs. Sound wise it has plenty of rhythm that really brings hi-res files to life, although its sound may not be as sympathetic to compressed music compared to the NAD.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: A breeze to use, clean sound and unique looks

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Sounds quite dry; no analogue inputs

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Stylish little package that's easy to use with sensible features. Sonics are even handed, but lack some passion

FEATURES



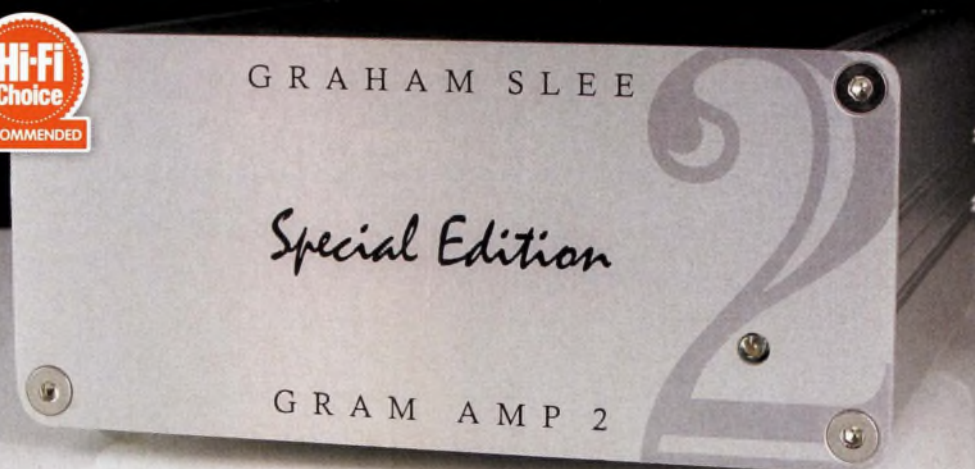
OVERALL



Two Head[amp]s Are Better Than One!

“A level of musical enjoyment beyond what its price tag suggests. Well engineered great sounding unit that brings music to life. Superbly musical... the best at its price.”

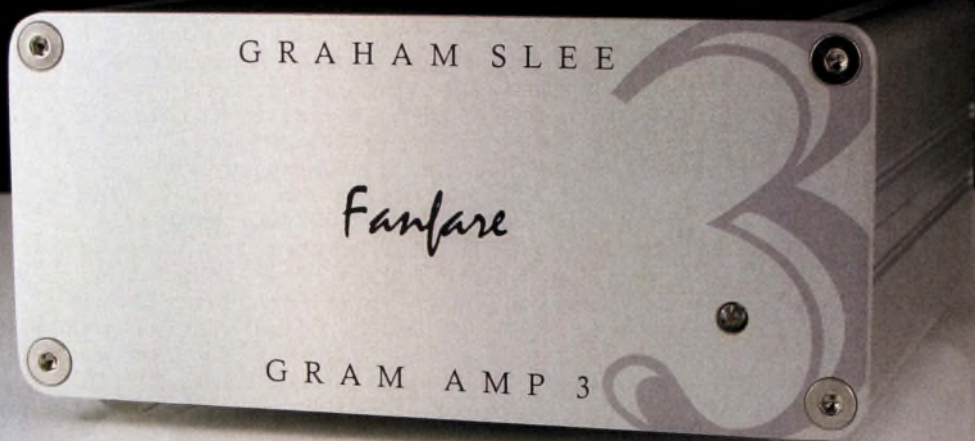
Hi-Fi Choice



Dedicated to MM and high output cartridges - the £260 Gram Amp 2 SE

“Extracting both the music and emotion with utter conviction. The midrange textures were almost tangible, the treble sweet and airy, the bass deep and authoritative.”

Audio Video



Dedicated to low output MC - the £280 Gram Amp 3 Fanfare

Upgrade - the £185 PSU1 power supply steps these legends up a gear!

High output MM cartridges and low output moving coils are as different as chalk and cheese. Each needs a different type of circuit to perform at its best, so why compromise by using a ‘one box does all’ phono stage?



“The optional bigger power supplies managed to lift the performance, particularly the sense of scale and openness.”

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GLOSSOP RECORD CLUB

The vinyl frontier

The first rule about the community-minded Glossop Record Club is its only rule. Listen to albums. On vinyl. In full. **Simon Berkovitch** joins in the fun

Macclesfield: so much to answer for. I have passed through the spiritual home of Joy Division many times on journeys from London to Manchester, but only ever seen it through a train window. I've always fancied a visit. Not like this, though. My train has ground to a halt in Macclesfield station. All railway lines are down, taken out by the worst storm in 60 years. Alternative transport needs to be found quickly if I am to meet 40-year-old music fan Simon Galloway – radio producer and presenter of The Album Zone show, musician and organiser of Glossop Record Club – on time for our interview.

I make the remainder of the journey by bus, zigzagging through verdant Cheshire countryside to Glossop, nestled on the north-western edge of the High Peak, 15 miles east of Manchester and 25 miles west of Sheffield, the largest nearby cities.

It's a fitting distance to travel: Glossop Record Club demands dedication. Some of the Club's regulars travel from Manchester and Sheffield, neighbouring counties of Yorkshire, Cheshire and Lancashire, and the most devoted attendee makes a 140 mile round trip for the free-admission night, which takes place every month in this Derbyshire market town. He found out about the club after a retweet by Radio 6 Music DJ Marc Riley, another local lad.

For your pleasure

"The club motto is: Listening to albums. On vinyl. In full," says Simon. "Essentially, it's about listening to, appreciating and enjoying music; making time to get away from everything else that's going on and to do just one thing. It's a challenge that may well push some people beyond their comfort zone – especially when I ask them to silence or switch off their phones." It was a challenge for the club's organiser, too. "Before that first session, I really didn't know whether I would feel self-conscious when the music was

playing or not. I like to play along on guitar when listening to music at home, so I found it odd not doing that. But that first session surpassed all my expectations and I knew it was the right thing."

That first session took place on 12 September 2013 at the town's Labour Club. The theme was 1973 – the year of Simon's birth – and the featured album was one close to his heart: Roxy Music's *For Your Pleasure*. Attendees are encouraged to bring their own vinyl – the kind of democracy that you are unlikely to find at a Classic Album Sunday session. Around 25 vinyl enthusiasts ("from

It's way cooler to have your music on a record. It makes it real in a way that a digital file doesn't

people in their mid-30s to a guy in his mid-70s") had been alerted to the night – which also saw records from John Cale, Neu! and James Brown being spun.

The club is a homespun affair: "I'm doing this with limited resources and next to no budget," Simon admits. "Making use of social networking has played an essential part in spreading the word. Never underestimate the power of a retweet! It's great for people who have been to share feedback, which I can then retweet. I also share stories on Twitter that I think followers will find interesting – mostly vinyl- and music-related. It reinforces what the club is about." Old-school advertising plays its part, too, with Simon printing up

eye-catching posters and flyers and putting them up around town. Local papers have run features on the club since it began and Simon's done a few radio interviews for the local stations. "I've actually been quite amazed at the interest shown in the club. It's not something I was expecting."

Meet and greet

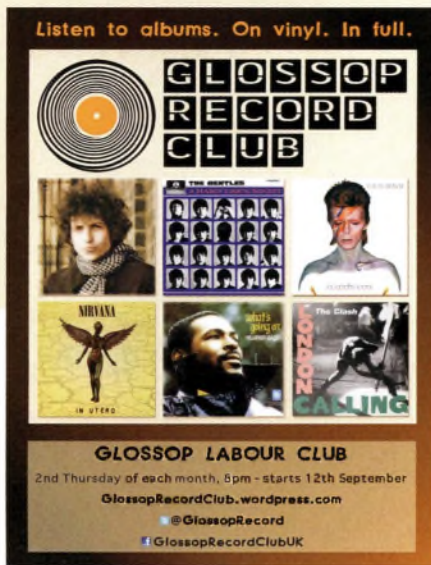
Glossop Record Club meets on the second Thursday of every month – with the exception of the December session – 'Lucky Dip', at which two albums were chosen from names out of a hat (actually an empty pint glass) – taking place the previous week. Successful sessions have included October's 'Elvis (Presley) vs Elvis (Costello)' and November's 'Cult Heroes' night (see We Can Be Heroes). Simon also has a 'Singles' Night' for the night before Valentine's Day, for which he plans to bring along his gloriously retro turntable for an evening of "Dansette roulette".

As well as organising and promoting the sessions, hi-fi enthusiast Simon provides the equipment. "The kit used is a mixture of mostly vintage hi-fi gear," he explains. "I acknowledge its limitations, but my

focus isn't entirely on the equipment. It's the music that drives what I do – and the shared experience of listening with as little interruption as possible along with getting people to rediscover and share their own record collections and stories."

Ego is left at the door of the Labour Club. "I encourage inclusivity," Simon declares. "I organise and promote the sessions, but on the night I act more as a facilitator, making sure the evening runs to time and that anyone who's brought a record gets the chance to play something from it. One aspect I've particularly enjoyed so far is hearing the





records people bring in... not just the music, but also what they have to say about them. It may be something about the musicians or making of the album, or it could be about how that person discovered the record and what it means to them."

The equipment includes a Trio KD-1500 turntable (1970s) with an Ortofon FF15E MkII stylus; a Sony IA-F319R amp (early 1990s); Wharfedale Linton 2 speakers (1971); a Yamaha SW-P270 subwoofer (2010); and a Spirit Folio Notepad mixing desk, feeding a mono mix to the sub. And some lovely Christmas lights.

Christmas Cookin'

Simon's first selection as punters arrive is a great choice: organist Jimmy Smith's *Christmas Cookin'*, a selection of festive standards given a slinky Hammond workout. The sleeve sits pride of place on a music stand, the reverential treatment all featured records receive. The thing that unites this disparate bunch of all ages now assembling is the telltale 12in sleeve under the arm.

At the bar, I get chatting to Dave Carefoot, clutching a Bruce Cockburn album. Dave has come from Preston – a fair distance, but he maintains that "it's not a long way to come to hear good music on vinyl". He is hoping that the Canadian singer-songwriter's 1979 LP *Dancing in the Dragon's Jaws* will be played in its entirety this evening. He picked it "for its jaw-dropping production". Dave approves of the choice of kit used tonight – he has a Cyrus 8VS amp and Systemdek IIX 900 with Moth Arm (Rega RB 250) and Audio-Technica cartridge in his home setup, as well as a

Shanling CD-T80 for CDs. Despite this, he is a firm believer that "the serious listen can only come from vinyl".

On the next-door table, the merits of Dexy's Midnight Runners are being discussed. Elsewhere, recent acquisitions are being enthusiastically compared – an eclectic mix of comedy and novelty 45s, a reissue of Goblin's soundtrack to Italo-horror *Profondo Rosso* and a solo album from Ian Brown nestle on the table like oversized beer mats. Careful with those pints, you gents...

Songs Our Daddy Taught Us

Addressing the 20 attendees – 19 blokes and Becky, who's brought an LP by Volcano Choir along with her – Simon thanks the people for coming and asks everyone to write the name of the album they've brought on pieces of paper, fold them and drop them into the "pint pot of luck". While this takes place, the second side of the Jimmy Smith platter treats us to a very groovy version of *White Christmas*.

The first scrap of paper is drawn by the Labour Club's trusty barman, Martin, and The Everly Brothers 1958 album *Songs Our Daddy Taught Us* is the evening's first album to be played in its entirety. Its owner, Steve McNamee is a big fan. Steve says a few introductory words and then allows the album to speak for itself...

It's a great choice: the needle hits the groove and the room is suddenly filled with raw emotion and that beautiful harmonic blend of voices. Everyone listens intently – those unfamiliar with it concentrate on the dark lyrics; one particular chap silently mouths along with the words about death and deceit, poverty and prison, his Buddy Holly album under the palm of his hand as he lightly taps his fingers on the table along to the music. We're deep in Nick Cave territory here – and surely an inspiration for his murder ballads. Side B finishes and there's a spontaneous round of applause.

Later, Steve tells me that he "fell in love with it straight away" even though *Songs Our Daddy Taught Us* wasn't his usual bag. "I bought it in the Birmingham HMV," he remembers. "It must have been some time around 1984 and it cost me the princely sum of 99p in one of their sales. I always had a soft spot for their early singles, so I took a punt on it. At this time I was

I AM A DJ... I AM WHAT I PLAY

Organiser Simon Galloway's journey from vinyl lover to MP3 user and back again...

"A few years ago I had what I refer to as a 'musical personality crisis'. I got my first MP3 player, which I then filled with about 3,000 songs – all sorts of different music that I listened to on shuffle. At first I thought it was amazing. Howlin' Wolf followed by The Velvets followed by Kraftwerk... I gorged myself on MP3s.



"After a few years, I noticed I was faddish in my tastes, skitting between artists and genres, and becoming listless with music in general – which was unlike me. The slow-dawning realisation was that I'd become passive in my listening, with music drifting past my ears on shuffle, fragmented and disjointed.

"Around the same time I bought an early sixties Dansette RG31, identical to the one which I'd used as a kid. I'd forgotten how physical these machines were. This got me back into buying records, picking up original fifties and sixties mono singles to stack up and play. It was pure enjoyment in a way I just wasn't getting from listening to my MP3 player.

"I got my main turntable repaired – a Technics SL1210 MkII. I invested in a better cartridge. The first record I played was Roxy Music's *Avalon*. I put it on, sat back and listened. This was the light bulb moment for the Record Club: the simple act of putting on a record, properly listening and being free of other distractions was exactly what I'd been looking for. Plus the tactile aspects of handling the record, watching it spin and looking at the sleeve all fed into a more complete and fulfilling experience."

listening to New Order, The Smiths, Dexys and Julian Cope, but this album opened my eyes to a whole new world. The stark, unadulterated sound of it – two voices, a guitar and a double bass – struck a chord with me."

Steve was concerned about how this "one-paced melancholic album with no up-tempo songs on it" would be received. He needn't have been: "I had plenty of people come up to me afterwards and told me how much they had enjoyed hearing it. One guy told me that he had his original copy signed by Phil and Don [Everly] many years ago after a gig in Manchester. Most people who come along to the club love music of all kinds and are open minded to hearing something new. Who cares what genre it belongs to as long as it's good music?"

"I can only speak from personal experience," Simon says, "but I think that maybe some older music fans – and I have to say 'like myself' here, whether I like it or not – are

WE CAN BE HEROES

The top three picks of Glossop Record Club's 'Cult Heroes' night, selected by three of its regulars...



1 RECORD: Syd Barrett: *An Introduction to Syd Barrett*
SELECTED BY: Brett Tremble (41)

"As a teenager, I became interested in Pink Floyd when they released *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*. That led me into getting into early Floyd and the genius that was Syd. When I bought his [1970] album *The Madcap Laughs* and played it to my dad, it was the first record I owned that he hated. My bond with Syd was sealed that day."



2 RECORDS: Melvins: *Houdini*; *Black Betty*
SELECTED BY: Matthew Waiton (36)

"I picked these because they cover the old and new Melvins. *Houdini* is probably their most famous album and is quite typical of their sludgy, experimental sound. *The Black Betty* split [with John Spencer Blues Explosion] is a recent release and shows off their habit of doing excellent cover versions – as well as being a fine example of the Melvins' ferocious double drumming."



3 RECORDS: Ivor Cutler: *Women of the World*
SELECTED BY: Gavin Hogg (43)

"Ivor is the ultimate cult hero. Both John Lennon and Paul McCartney were big fans, as is Franz Ferdinand's Alex Kapranos. Ivor recorded a huge number of Peel sessions, second only to The Fall, which is another signifier of cult status. His music and humour have been part of my life for almost 30 years now. I'm a lot richer for it."

rediscovering the simple joys of playing a record, and that the younger generation see them as the prized possessions they used to be. Credible bands and labels know that it's way cooler to have your music on a record. It somehow makes it real in a way that a digital file doesn't."

With regards to the renaissance vinyl has undergone in 2013 – a year in which the record industry body BPI predicted that more than 700,000 LPs would be sold by Christmas – Simon believes that it "doesn't seem to be driven by the sound quality argument". He says: "It's more to do with the rituals and tactile aspects associated with playing a record and it also suggests a certain level of commitment to music: this person is *serious* about music."

As a counterpoint to the Everly Brothers' glorious melancholy, club regular Brett Tremble – Syd Barrett fan and encyclopaedia of vintage British comedy knowledge – takes centre stage with a clutch of 45s while people grab refreshments. Continuing the

It's about listening to and enjoying music; making time to get away from everything else

festive theme, Brett introduces each record with flair and insight – almost making a convincing argument for the delights of Dora Bryan's *All I Want For Christmas Is A Beatle*, the Barron Knights' accomplished parody of sixties pop groups *Merry Gentle Pops* and Kenneth Williams' *Good Queen Wenceslas* from his 1966 *In Season* EP.

"If there was ever a 'golden period' of comedy records then it was probably from the late fifties, through the sixties and into the seventies," Brett says.

"The range of comedy and novelty songs recorded during those years fascinates me, as does that whole lost vanished world. While many early TV recordings were wiped, the vinyl versions remain as funny as the day they were recorded. There is no one style of comedy record – just as there is no typical 'music of the sixties' record."

Brett, who blogs about esoteric records at The Downstairs Lounge, is suitably enthusiastic about Simon's night. "I heard about it from dropping into the Labour Club

for the monthly Folk Train sessions," he explains. "The Record Club really does bring people with different tastes together to enjoy one common passion. I have listened to albums all the way through that I have only ever heard the singles from and it has been an immensely rewarding experience. There have been records I would never have considered listening to and genres I was just not aware of. Like watching a film in a cinema compared with [the experience of] watching it at home, some things really benefit from being part of a communal experience. It is a pleasure to share someone else's passion and spend an evening with like-minded people. Plus the bar is very cheap!"

Goodnight, Vienna

The next folded piece of paper from the 'hat' reveals something a million miles from The Everly Brothers: Ultravox's *Vienna* album. Glancing around the room at the mixture of age groups, I fear this may be a controversial choice: how exactly are Buddy Holly and Bruce Cockburn fans going to get on with some Krautrock-influenced synthpop? It's no issue for your reporter, who is swiftly happily nodding along to propulsive instrumental opener *Astradyne*, enjoying the excellent system that Simon has assembled.

In 30-something owner Steven Kirkham's introduction to the record, he confesses that he only really knew the title track and big hit single *Vienna* from hearing it about 12 years ago – and he has never heard the rest of the record. It's a great idea – bringing along an unfamiliar album to listen to communally for the first time – and one that yields unexpected results. Did Steven like it? "It took me back to my Commodore 64," was his cryptic response.

The record provokes debate almost as soon as the needle hits the run-out groove. Another Dave – a Family and Neil Young fan as well as a dulcimer player – approaches me as

Simon plays a record from Outfit, the evening's first brand new release. Unexpectedly, considering his musical background, Dave tells me that he thoroughly enjoyed hearing *Vienna*, adding that he "would listen to anything", "still loves to hear vinyl" and that he would definitely attend another Record Club.

There's a scramble for the turntable as the evening draws to a close: like a true man of the people, Simon ensures everyone has a turn at spinning a track or two – even visiting journalists. For what it's worth, I hand him a

45 of Stockport's finest – 10cc's *I'm Not In Love* – and enjoy every minute of its incredible production before it's time to say farewells and help Simon pack up.

It's been another successful night for Glossop Record Club. The Club's regulars have gone home happy, refreshed and enthused, tipped off to some great music, new and old. The Labour Club has locked up. The hi-fi separates are in the boot of the car. Simon's happy and reflects on what the club offers people: "In setting this up, I'm drawing completely from my own experiences... the way my listening and buying habits changed and almost becoming a lapsed music fan and how I set about rectifying that – and I figured I can't be the only person who's gone through this kind of thing or is looking to get deeper enjoyment from music.

"Between the records, personal anecdotes and stories are exchanged about the artists featured in the session... gigs they've been to... the records they've brought... It's great to hear a room full of people talk with so much excitement and passion about music."

It's all about listening to records. On vinyl. In full. And long may it continue ●



Simon's Dansette RG31 from the early sixties



His Tandberg Crossfield 3500X gets used less...

FANTASTIC VOYAGE

The next meeting was a journey through David Bowie's back catalogue, the day after his birthday.

'Bowie On Vinyl', took place on 9 January. "The sessions happen on the second Thursday of each month, and when I saw that the January session fell on the 9th – the day after Bowie's birthday – it was the obvious thing to do," Simon explains. "To say he's my favourite artist is putting it mildly."

Featured albums included 1971's *Hunky Dory* and one from the 'Berlin' trilogy – *Low* (1977), *Heroes* (1977) and *Lodger* (1979) – which was decided via a poll on the website. There were also lots of rarities and Simon got people to bring either their favourite Bowie record/song or a Bowie-related record. Selections included Lou Reed's *Vicious* and The Legendary Stardust Cowboy's *Paralysed*.

David Bowie has been at the centre of Simon's record collecting for over 30 years now. "Alongside Bowie's own releases, I've sought out those relating to him, whether it be artists he's produced or guested with, covers of his songs or the originals of songs he's covered.

"When I was buying records to play on my Dansette a few years ago, I kept coming across the original 45s of the songs from the *Pin Ups* album and started buying these. Unintentionally, I got almost every song on the album apart from Pink Floyd's *See Emily Play*. That led to me paying the most I've ever paid for a single! But it's a nice set of 45s. It's great to stack them up on the Dansette and listen to them how they would have sounded."

Upcoming events include a rock & roll historian's talk on Sun Records and singer-songwriter Steve Roberts on Merseybeat.



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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION

Reader review

We take a last look at some of your systems that excited our judging panel the most

Competition details

Back in the July 2013 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...



"My task is to get the maximum enjoyment from my media that I can." Paul Dalton

"Cadence's flagship design broke many hi-fi rules, but delivered a new benchmark for music." Chris Ward



"The dynamics come across with stunning impact that belies the lack



My Arcam CD73 is played most days and is well cared for – I couldn't be



"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and the Leema Antila to me is up there with the best." Jez Williamson



"The Touch is an excellent entry to streaming, providing a creditable performance." Richard Marshall



"The system that I have right now is so well sorted that part of me is loath to try and change it." Mike Foley



"I've kept my Klipsch La Scala speakers for 17 years, so you can guess I love them!" Nicholas Pledger



"With this system, I hope to pass my love of hi-fi on to the next generation." Martin Abrahams

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THIS MONTH



ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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



LEE DUNKLEY

EXPERTISE: EDITOR

Lee first cut his teeth on these pages back in the dark old days of 1999 as a humble staff writer. Now as editor, he sits atop a golden throne and is enjoying getting reacquainted with his music collection.



DAVID PRICE

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

DP has spent much longer than he'd care to admit buying and upgrading his own hi-fi system, not to mention reviewing thousands of separates over the years.



ANDREW SIMPSON

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Andrew's been passionate about hi-fi since he was a wee nipper. When not obsessing over his next upgrade, he can usually be found under the bonnet of his 1973 MG Midget.

Email us at letters@hifichoice.co.uk or writeto: *Hi-Fi Choice* Letters, AVTech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, Kent, BR6 6BG Your letters may be edited before publication and we cannot enter into personal correspondence

LETTER OF THE MONTH

▶ I need more space

In your response to the World of Confusion letter (January issue) you advised “change your

settings to automatically compress when syncing your iPod, so your higher-res rips don't take up too much space of your iPod's memory”.

My iPod is full with not too many albums and some more space would be most welcome. Trouble is, after pursuing all of the settings on iTunes I don't seem to be able to find how to do this. Is it me or is some clarification of the recommended action needed for us music-on-the-move listeners?

Either way, your help would be appreciated please.

Andy Hanson

AS: Hi Andy, I think this suggestion stems from my reply, so I'll explain in a little more detail how I manage my iTunes library to feed my main hi-fi system with CD and above quality from iTunes, while using compression to manage my iPod's files. Firstly I rip all CDs as Apple Lossless files (also known as ALAC), which is basically Apple's version of FLAC. So my iTunes library running on a Windows laptop contains music at uncompressed bit-rates. To make sure you're ripping in this format, within iTunes head to the settings drop down (the icon in the top left corner), select 'preferences' and in the 'general' tab head to 'import settings and select 'lossless' from the list. The next step is to set your iPod sync settings to convert files only when syncing. To do this connect your iPod (or other Apple device)

so it appears as a tab in the top right corner of the iTunes library window (if you're running the latest version of iTunes). Select the device and click the 'summary' tab. In the 'options' list tick 'convert higher bit-rate songs to' and select from 256/192/128kbps. I'd advise not going any lower than 256kbps to get any kind of decent sound quality, given a standard CD's native bit-rate is between 600 and 1,000kbps and hi-res FLAC files can be north of 5,000kbps.

▶ Speaker's corner

I do hope the picture that's accompanying your review of the Peachtree Audio decco65 (HFC December 2013) and captioned “The wood wrap looks at home everywhere” was a stock photo from Peachtree and does not represent the latest thinking in speaker placement! Break it to your regular readers gently if it does. . .

Nigel Bell, by email

LD: Although we found the Peachtree to be very special it is not, of course, immune to the normal laws of loudspeaker placement, Nigel! As you correctly identify the image used to show off the wood wrap was a stock photo supplied by the manufacturer. Someday, all DAC-equipped compact integrated amplifiers will be made this way...

▶ Hear me now

Over the last 28 years I have been a devoted hi-fi

enthusiast and audiophile with music being at the centre of my life. Due to the desire to extract the very best performance from music, my long suffering wife has sanctioned the continual upgrading of my equipment to what it is today. In 1995 I bought my first Naim equipment and have been in love with its products ever since. I am now the proud owner of an HDX-SSD player, 282 pre-amp and 250 power amp with power supplies together with my wonderful Kudos Super 10 Anniversary speakers. Over the years my

The sound was unappealing and my poor hearing was the cause

ears (my best audiophile 'tools') have even been able to distinguish between different interconnect, speaker cables and audition the very best of equipment. They have served me well in my never-ending quest to find the ultimate system and accessories to bring my music collection to life.

Over the last year I have found that music wasn't sounding as fine as it used to and I was listening much less. The sound was bland and unappealing and I had to admit that my hearing could be the root cause of the problem. It was time to get ▶



It's possible to compress music files only when syncing to a device

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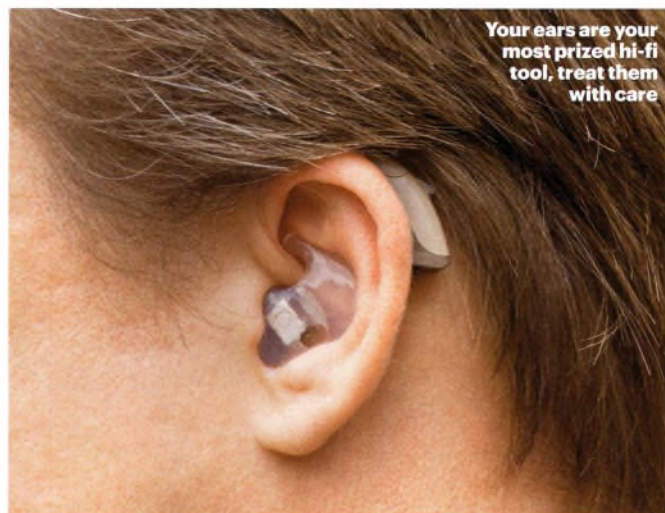
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my ears tested, the result of which came as a shock. My hearing had diminished to such a poor level that hearing aids were prescribed. Together with the Audiologist it was agreed in order to enjoy my music again I must be provided with the best hearing aids I could afford. To say that I was sceptical that my hearing would be restored to previous levels was an understatement, but I had no alternative.

Having spent a considerable amount of money for my hearing aids, the time had come to insert them into my ears, settle down and listen to the music. The aids can be controlled by a remote which can set the sound to either: Normal or Music mode. My initial reaction to the music via Normal mode was disappointing, but I was overjoyed that my super audiophile hearing had returned once Music was selected. I shed a tear,

It's worth getting your ears looked at – it has turned my life around

knowing that my hearing had returned to the same level it was years ago. I would say to all music lovers it is defiantly worth getting your ears checked out if you suspect you are having problems – it has turned my life around.

Roger Hooton, Chippenham

LD: Wise words indeed and a timely reminder that while hearing loss is no respecter of the

music lover, in 2014 the options at least exist to turn the clock back a little. I'm delighted to hear that the spark has been re-lit.

➤ Taken with Tascam

After some CD recording in church, I am considering changing my Audiolab 8200CD player for a Tascam CD RW900SL recorder.

The price is around £550, but I came across a seller in the States advertising it for half that, which supposedly included UK VAT, but then stating that they cannot ship to the UK!! It gives the impression of being grossly overpriced in the UK. Why are Tascam about double the price of TEAC, which is the same company?

I think this subject is unlikely to have much interest amidst so much downloading, streaming, and the overwhelming interest – apparently – in headphones. I thought audio should be listened to on good speakers!! Maybe I'm just old-fashioned.

Bruce Grant

DP: Hi Bruce – it's harder to make direct price comparisons with the United States than you might think, because local US taxes vary from state to state and, of course,

manufacturers have to hedge against fluctuating currency rates so prices vary from time to time. It's important to point out that US-sourced hi-fi will not, generally, work in the UK because of the different mains voltage and frequency; some units are internally or even externally switchable, but many are not – meaning you'll have to use an external mains transformer/adaptor, or get an EU-specific transformer retrofitted to the inside of your machine. Neither are exactly easy options – so for this reason I'd say get a full UK model with the proper transformer for this market and, of course, a manufacturer's warranty.

➤ Show and tell

Hello David, in your Opinion column entitled "It's Showtime" in the November 2013 issue (377), there's a photo of a pair of tower loudspeakers. Did you manage to hear them in action and, if so, may I ask what was your opinion of them? Many thanks.

Adrian Coleman

DP: Hi Adrian – the speakers were MCRU No. 101s, I believe, and cost around £1,800 a pair. The conditions weren't ideal to make any definitive conclusions, but I did like them. They're quite



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➤ Fabulous floorstander

I am looking to upgrade my system, building it around my Creek Destiny 2 amplifier and the Cambridge Audio 751 BD Blu-ray player, mounted on a HiFi Racks Podium Reference. I was, therefore, very interested in the round up of floorstanders back in your December 2013 issue as you used the Destiny 2 as the reference amplifier.

All my other equipment can be replaced if there are grounds for it: the Cambridge Audio 840C (version 1) CD player, KEF iQ5 floorstander speakers, Chord Cobra and Crimson interconnects and Chord Carnival Silver Screen speaker cable. I am fairly satisfied with the sound quality of my current system, but the main problem is the music tends to be too harsh (bright) in the treble when played loudly. The dimensions of my listening room are 5.4m x 4m by 2.3m high and my main musical interests are classical (both audio and video).

Before your test I thought I would start out by auditioning new loudspeakers that are more high end than those you looked at: Spondor D7 (I have read they match well the Destiny 2) and the A6, Monitor Audio GX-200, Usher Dancer Mini-two and Mini-one and the PMC twenty.24. Will my equipment fully extend these speakers or am I going over the top? Which would you go for in this list and do you recommend any others? If I buy any of these I know I

will have to get new interconnects and speaker cables, but which ones should I go for to get excellent sound quality and acceptable top-end brightness? I use the BD player for playing all discs and for FLAC downloads via a memory stick, but should I buy a dedicated CD player?

Peter Payne

DP: Okay, first thing's first – your source. The Audiolab 8200CD is better with CD than the Cambridge 751BD, but the latter has a good transport in it and so I'd suggest you get the Audiolab M-DAC (£600) which is still class of the field, and would substantially upgrade the Blu-ray player across all digital disc types. Next, your Creek Destiny 2 amplifier is a cracker, so this leaves us with the loudspeakers. The Spondor D7 has the best all-round sound; it's open and expansive and very musical. The PMC twenty.24 is more characterful, and some may find it more enjoyable, as it has even more grip and punch in the bass than the D7, and a bit more attitude. The Monitor Audio is beautifully finessed and detailed, giving a very considered, but delicate sound thanks to its superb ribbon tweeter. All are excellent, but it's different strokes for different folks. The Creek drives them all well, but is perhaps happiest with the Spondor when extended to really high volumes. When you've got your DAC and speakers sorted, come back to us and we'll advise on cables; it's pointless suggesting anything until you've done this.



Spondor's D7 speakers are one option for Peter to check out

different to most contemporary speakers of that size and price, inasmuch as they're quite warm and smooth and don't shout out at you. The use of a ribbon tweeter is very commendable at this price, and doubtless contributed to the silky treble and relaxed, open midband. Unfortunately, I can't be sure about imaging because they weren't positioned ideally – thanks to the crowded nature of the 'mini show'. Broadly speaking though, yes I was impressed.

➤ Rega revamp

My current turntable setup consists of a Rega P3 TT (RB300 arm/Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge) connected into a Creek Evolution 5350 amp (with the onboard Creek Sequel 40mm phonoboard) played through Epos Elan 30 speakers. I love this simple setup and my mint secondhand Rega P3 is the best £180 I think I've ever spent, absolutely fantastic value for money.

However, my question would be this: assuming that I am keeping my Creek/Elan combination that I love so much, what amount of money do I need to spend to achieve a discernible improvement in my system by upgrading the turntable? The only thing I've changed on my P3 is replacing the old Rega Bias cartridge with the 2M Blue. The difference was quite startling.

I've heard the newer Rega RP3 & RP6 models and, to be honest, I didn't think they were a huge improvement on my old P3. I'm very happy with the P3, but I've got a little money put aside for a worthwhile upgrade, although I only want to do so if it's a meaningful step up in performance and not a sideways one. I've looked into the Inspire route, but it seems a lot of money for what appears to be mainly cosmetic changes, but I could be wrong.

I seem to have gone full circle with regards to my

music listening habits and find that I'm enjoying listening to my turntable more and more these days. Do you think that my amp and speaker system is good enough for me to appreciate a better turntable than the P3, or is it not quite as simple as that?

Dave Boden

DP: Hi Dave – your problem, if you can say it is one, is that you have a very well matched system already. Each part of it is roughly equal to the others, and the whole shebang works very well together. If you had a Rega P3-24 turntable an easy tweak would have been Rega's TT PSU, but sadly this isn't workable with the earlier P3s. The Inspire Rega plinth is also a nice mod, giving the deck more solidity and a generally more confident and effortless air, so I'd recommend you try this if the price suits. Another mod is, of course, the tonearm; Origin Live's famous 'structural modification' will make your RB300 arm sing. Still, if you really want a major step



DP liked these MCRU speakers he heard at a micro hi-fi show

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change upwards, you're looking at spending £1,259 on a Michell GyroDec SE (and using your existing Rega arm and cartridge). This would give a dramatically wider, larger and more powerful sound – even with your existing Creek/Epos system. It would also stand you in great stead for future upgrades, should you ever feel the need, even though you may not!

AS: As you've probably spotted, there's an ever expanding market for modifying Rega's mid to lower level decks and should you choose, you could end up with very little real Rega left in an attempt to take your P3 into the premier league. In my opinion though, while Rega's well-regarded P3 in its older and current incarnations are good value performers that come equipped with arms of real pedigree, their position in the grand vinyl replay scheme of things is somewhere in the mid-level league. And personally, rather than embark on what could be a costly path to pimp your P3, I'd consider investing in a more substantial deck that's a little more refined. If your Rega is already well isolated on a dedicated rack or shelf, that's not being influenced by a sprung floor etc, then non-suspended designs like Michell's TecnoDec (£800 with arm), or Avid's Ingenium (starting at £800 without arm), which we tested in *HFC* January (379), are

substantial steps on the ladder to high-end vinyl replay. Thanks to their superb levels of engineering combined with user friendly setup, both decks will surpass your Rega in the sound stakes. Although not quite matching that of its suspended GyroDec sibling, the TecnoDec's soundstage is an expansive delight, while the Avid will give you a more transparent window into the music. Both of these decks are likely to be partnered with a Rega-based arm, which will also help to get the best out of your 2M Blue. A turntable rig of this calibre should stand you in good stead

I want to buy a streamer, but am not really sure what to go for

for many years to come and certainly won't be left behind should you choose to upgrade your amp and/or speakers at a later date.

Going back to my earlier point, if you are thinking of taking your vinyl to the next level, ensure your deck's shelf or stand is rigid and well isolated, which is essential for any deck that's susceptible to external vibration.

ES: I agree with DP, going from P3 to RP3 is unlikely to result in a substantial step forward, but I am a little surprised that the RP6 didn't deliver the goods. I suspect



DP and ES agree, the UnitiQute 2 is a superb streamer

that the least expensive way to achieve a further step forward would be to peruse our phono stage group test *HFC* February (381) and see if an external model might give you a further performance boost over the card you are using at the moment.

I agree with Andrew that if you want to push your vinyl replay further, the least expensive option I've heard that behaves like a high-end deck is the Avid Ingenium. This could be ordered with the Rega cutout and make use of the RB300/2M combo you already use and should offer a big jump in performance. Your system should be able to feel the benefit – and the Avid is more than good enough to support updates in the future.

➤ Dream streamer
I am hoping to buy a streamer, but am not clear on what to go for. My first choice is a Naim UnitiQute 2, second

is a Cyrus Streamline 2. I am interested in pairing the Cyrus with KEF LS50 or R100 speakers and the Naim with Triangle Color floorstanders. Please can you give me your opinion on these. If you had a £2,500 budget and you were me, which choice would you make?

Onur Unculu

DP: The Naim has a slightly darker tonality, with a stronger and more tuneful bass – but can sound slightly opaque in absolute terms. The Cyrus is a leaner and more transparent design, but is slightly more 'matter of fact' and doesn't make the music such an event. Basically, your choice is down to whether you want character or transparency. The streaming platforms on both are well proven so no worries there. If it were my money, I'd look at the Naim with some Focal Aria 926s, for a rich, fulsome sound!

ES: I'd have to concur with what DP says, the Naim is the star of this genre of products for me, too. The detailed improvements from the original have left it sounding assured and capable beyond its size and price. If you have an iPad, the n-Stream app is superb as well. I've not listened to it with the Triangles (although I have heard them separately), but I suspect it would be a good match. Don't rule out rival French brand Focal, though. As David suggests, its newer models are starting to show some real synergy with Naim.



Avid's Ingenium would be a decent step up for Dave

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Everybody's changing

In January HMV closed its doors for the very last time on the world's largest music store, marking the end of era. **Lee Dunkley** remembers the greatest flagship store

There are events that happen along the pot-holed journey through adolescence, as you travel between childhood and adulthood, that somehow manage to stay firmly committed to memory, marked forever as a significant event or day to remember. Recalling the images from such events is often so clear that you can almost taste or feel the air, as your senses must have moved into hyperdrive to ensure you captured every detail around you of the momentous occasion and locked it away in the memory banks forever.

One such occurrence for me was a visit to London's Oxford Street during a particularly long summer holiday – the shopping mecca as it was at the time, and still is today. I'm pretty sure the purpose of the trip was for something other than shopping for records, but it's pretty much all I can remember about that particular day, and I am confident it was all I had on my mind as our train pulled into a grubby St Pancras station – this was the eighties and a long time before the clean up and magnificent face lift of what is St Pancras station today.

At the time Oxford Street was a joy to experience with flagship stores for brands of clothes I'd barely even heard of, as well as the world's largest record store at Oxford Circus. The grandiose shop was opened in 1986 by Bob Geldolf – not yet Sir back then – and occupied more than

The closure of HMV's largest store marks a sad day for music fans

60,000 sq ft over three floors. It was huge and very easy to lose a day flicking through the racks and racks of vinyl albums and 12in singles from bands and artists whose names I hadn't yet heard of – musical variety clearly didn't stretch quite as far as I reckoned in the record stores that I was used to visiting in Kettering, and tastes are obviously very different in Northamptonshire to the more eclectic ones found in London. Who knew there was so much unheard of music out there? So much to see, to hear, to discover!

The store covered everything related to music. Literally everything. Specialist music departments for classical and jazz had their own soundproofed and air conditioned environments, creating an oasis of calm conducive to the genre and an air of sophistication away from the buzz and frenetic energy of the rest of the mostly open-plan store. These were also the coolest parts – in terms of temperature at least – of the store to hang out in, which was hotter than hell at times thanks to an ineffective air conditioning system for a building of its size that seemed unable to cope with a moderately sunny day and the large volume of

people coming through the permanently open doors. I'm sure that shoppers must have generated their own heat as they excitedly made their way around the store.

Despite the overheating and the bustling crowds of one of the busiest stores on Oxford Street, the world and his wife seemingly wanted to visit the biggest music store on

the planet. I remember being fascinated by the number of different languages or accents I heard while wondering around, it was truly a melting pot for music buying fans from all over the world. As well as the heat generated by the overwhelming number of punters it was also one of the places where the hottest young thing of the day would put in an appearance and perform a couple of songs – mimed, of course – or spend an hour on a book signing promo. Fans would gather and the store seemed as though it would burst at the seams at any moment.

Days of our lives

In just 30 short years our purchasing habits have changed unrecognisably – you only need to take a look at any UK high street to see the evidence of that – but the closure of HMV's largest record store, on what could be argued is the greatest shopping street in the world, marks the end of an era and a sad day for the thousands of music fans that have journeyed with the purpose of losing themselves in the store, travelling between floors on the escalators.

I read that the former HMV building is being turned into a Sports Direct. I doubt whether that will attract the same kind of enthusiastic shopper as the store previously located in that building, or indeed that it will still be a Sports Direct store 30 years from now.

I know it's not all bad news for the high street, that independent record stores are returning and people are still buying vinyl. HMV has 140 stores remaining, which is 50 percent of the original number in 2013. There will still be an HMV on Oxford Street, but smaller and back at its original historic location. This site has a special story all of its own ●



Picture courtesy of Tupungato/Shutterstock

Sadly Lee will have to make do with smaller HMV stores from now on



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An oasis of calm

David Price discovers a quirky, subterranean side to this year's massive Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show when he goes far from the madding crowd

It's tough being a technology journalist. No sooner have you recovered from the excesses of the festive season than you find yourself packed like a pilchard onto a flight to Las Vegas. Why? Because every year, just at the very beginning of January, that famous American shrine to conspicuous consumption hosts the Consumer Electronics Show – see Show Report on p120. CES is more than just a show, it's a religion – a 21st century temple to the Gadget God. For one very special week, it takes over large swathes of Las Vegas like the Russian army sweeping through Cold War Czechoslovakia. But instead of guns and fixed bayonets, it is network-connected smartphones that its troopers tout.

How earnest these bright young things look, as they charge through the vast conference halls to seek out new wonders from Sony, Samsung, Microsoft and HTC. Regard the evangelical zeal of these hip tech-savvy gunslingers as they manically photograph, blog, tweet and chatter among themselves. For these few fleeting days in January, there's no other place in this world they would rather be.

I'm not sure if it's age, wisdom, experience, cynicism or any combination of the four, but these days I'm beginning to find this all a bit tiresome. These fevered young worshippers at the silicon pulpit are as un self-aware as they are up to date. Every second of the day that isn't

The NFS show is no less than a resting home for the hi-fi dispossessed

involved in interaction with the new products is feverishly spent tapping into some exclusive new smartphone, revealing 'scoops', 'exclusives' and 'previews' for their millions of eager readers, just desperate to know if Sony's latest Bluetooth PlayStation accessory is any good.

I am old enough to have seen it all before. As I write this, it's 10 years to the day that I first went to CES, freelancing for *The Sunday Times*, desperate to discover 'the ultimate tech' for the delectation of my readers. As it happened, that year I confined myself to coverage of the new-fangled SACD format, but was amazed to hear the brays of many of my colleagues at an 'exclusive reveal' of a Sharp Aquos LCD TV. The rapture with which they greeted this was breathtaking; I remember one young American hack whooping: "Like wow, this is so intense", as a Sharp spokesman explained the 32in model would "come in at under \$2,000"...

Now that I'm an old hand at CES, I generally confine myself to the Venetian hotel tower, where a Bristol Sound and Vision-sized hi-fi show can be found, removed from

the cut and thrust of kids cooing about new Panasonic OLED tellies down the road. It's a great event, with lots of fine brands from around the world showing their wares in relaxed conditions. But the joy of CES, what with it being so big, is that if you turn over a few stones you'll find even more things going on.

Just over the road at the Flamingo, for example, is an entirely different show called, erm, 'T.H.E. Show', with a charm all of its very own.

Cottage industry

It is no less than a resting home for the hi-fi dispossessed. Taking up a couple of hotel floors, many of the exhibitors there are 'mom and pop' companies or best friends who've gone into business for fun. Here you'll find weird and wonderful American brands that you'll almost certainly have never heard of. Some of it is pretty amateurish – lots of quirky loudspeakers, a few interesting boxes of electronics and a nice turntable or two. But my highlight was the NFS Audio room, run by charismatic Californians Anton and Mike.

NFS stands for not for sale. The idea, explains Anton, is to make it: "A bit like your front room at home". There are some settees, tables, a colourful light show and a great big stack of speakers. Just around the corner in the alcove, is a huge chunk of vinyl, with everything from Sonny Rollins to Steely Dan. The system changes from year to year – this time round it was a well preserved Sony PSX-800 Biotracer turntable with Ortofon Kontrapunkt B moving coil cartridge, a Sonic Frontiers preamp and Marantz 8B tube power amp driving an old pair of Infinity floorstanders. And very fine it sounded too.

This small hotel room was packed, with people calling in all day and well into the evening; many were old friends, but Anton was just as warm to newcomers who'd stumbled across the room by accident. The talk was of hi-fi, the universe and everything, and a top time was had by all. The absolute antithesis to the packs of hungry tech bloggers found across CES, here was a small slice of hi-fi heaven, forever America. God bless it! ●



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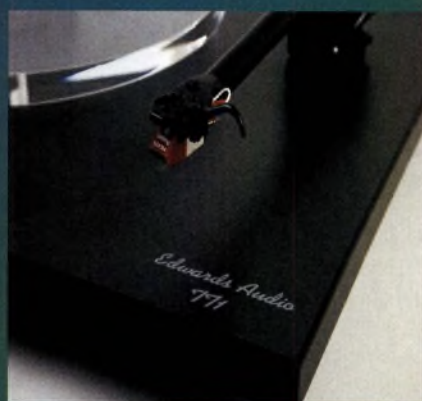
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And now the end is near...

Streaming has changed the way we consume our music and, argues **Nigel Williamson**, it could mean that the album might have to face the final curtain

The long-playing album has been the defining art form of the last half-century. During that time, albums have become aural milestones by which our lives are measured out, as we remember years and dates not by great political events but by the music that soundtracked them.

Nobody can remember what was in the chancellor of the exchequer's budget in 1967, but everyone knows it was the year the Beatles released *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Can you recall in what year foreign secretary Anthony Crosland died in office and was succeeded by David Owen? Not a chance. But if told it was the same year the Sex Pistols released *Never Mind The Bollocks*, you would identify it as 1977. This tendency to chronicle our lives by the currency of significant albums has continued until recent times. Jump forward four decades and do you remember 2007 as the year the SNP won the Scottish parliamentary elections – or the year that Radiohead released *In Rainbows*?

This album held an additional significance for it was the first release by a major artist to be made available as a pay-what-you-want download, overturning at a click of a mouse the established business model of the music industry. Yet at the same time it appeared to prove that the concept of the album – songs carefully sequenced as a cohesive entity – remained as potent in MP3 form as it was when consumed as a vinyl, cassette or digital compact disc.

But record industry statistics for 2013 suggest that the album is becoming an endangered species. For the first time in more than 30 years, no album sold one million copies in Britain. Album sales totalled 92 million, a third of which were downloads. The figure is down from 164 million in 2004, a drop of 44 percent in less than a decade. In the USA the decline in album sales has been even more dramatic. In 2013, album sales totalled 289 million, more than 40 percent of them downloads. Back in 2002 this numbered more than 800 million.

The shifting balance from physical to digital consumption is unsurprising; but the worrying factor is that sales of digital albums have failed to make up for the decline in physical sales. As the 'gold standard' of musical achievement, the album is on the skids.

The one growth area in music retail is streaming, via platforms such as Spotify and Deezer, a delivery system that concentrates on individual tracks rather than entire

albums. Last year British music fans streamed 7.4 billion individual pieces of music, often cherry-picking an album's best track and ignoring the rest. In effect, every track is now a 'single' and that is how many are choosing to consume their music.

"The album is dying in front of our very eyes," respected industry commentator Bob Lefsetz warned at the end of last year. "Everybody's interested in the single, and no one's got time to sit and hear your hour-plus statement."

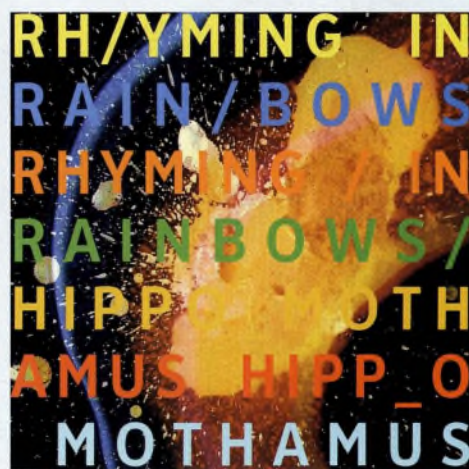
Should we care if the album is becoming obsolete? I believe we should. Growing up in the sixties, I loved the old Wurlitzer jukebox with its stack of 45s, each one representing three minutes of heaven. But by the end of the sixties, the rise of the album had led to a flowering of unrivalled musical ambition, a quantum leap that sparked a creative outpouring that changed our lives. If that process is now being slammed into reverse it's a tragedy.

Some albums are no more than a collection of singles from which you can pick your favourite moments and ignore the rest. But I'd argue you can't fully appreciate, say, Pink Floyd's *Money* without hearing it in the context of *Dark Side of the Moon*. And why would you want to impoverish a work like Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks* by plucking individual tracks and ruining its carefully constructed ebb and flow? And yet that is what we are increasingly doing. Streaming instead of buying albums is like grazing on fast food in preference to a nutritious meal.

Go against the flow

A handful of musicians have attempted to resist the streaming steamroller. Former Talking Heads frontman David Byrne has removed his back catalogue from Spotify and Radiohead's Thom Yorke calls it "the last desperate fart of a dying corpse". But they are modern day King Canutes, attempting to turn back the tide of modern life.

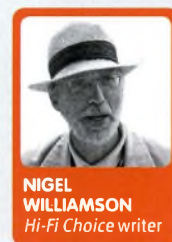
The death of the album won't happen overnight. My generation still has a few record buying years left in it yet. And artists with something to say will continue to record album 'statements'. But they may have to get used to the fact that fewer and fewer people will be listening beyond the ear candy of the lead single ●



Radiohead's *In Rainbows* changed the way albums can be paid for, but was presented in the traditional way

The rise of the album led to a flowering of unrivalled musical ambition

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New year's resolution

The shiny silver disc has had its day, but will 2014 really be the year that we finally move on from CDs? **Ed Selley** thinks it might be and is putting his money where his mouth is

As I write these words I am listening to my first album purchase of 2014, in this instance the very wonderful *Fink Meets The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra*. Being a bit of a sucker for a nice piece of packaging, I've bought my copy on vinyl – indeed a great many of my recent purchases have been analogue. I am not a complete anachronism though and other purchases of late have included some high-resolution and lossless downloads. None of them have been on CD, however, and this has got me thinking about the year ahead.

The electronics I use have been CD-free for some years now. I have the wherewithal to stream lossless and high resolution FLAC over a network and I also have a turntable. Since I retired my Cambridge Audio 840C in 2011, I have not had a CD player in day-to-day use. This hasn't stopped me buying the discs themselves, however. The limits to the amount of lossless material available to buy, especially stuff I want to listen to, meant that although they would never actually be played in a CD player, I had no choice but to keep buying CDs.

This was a problem because I've always loathed the little silver disc. Not the sound quality you understand. I've heard some wonderful CD-based systems over the years and I have no trouble in acknowledging the performance

I have made the decision that this year I won't be buying a single CD

the medium is capable of. No, my problem lies with the flimsy plastic boxes, the microscopic cover notes and the fact that a single journey in my car is enough to mortally wound some discs. I'm not and never have been an especially tidy or well organised person and frequently discover discs that have escaped from their boxes, lying around my listening room like students in the union bar on fresher's week.

This has come to a head and I have made the decision that this year I won't be buying a single CD. My decision partly stems from my dislike of them, but I also believe that my buying options in 2014 are wide enough to make this a practical proposition. I actually took this decision a few days before HD Tracks made its announcement that it will be officially making its wares available in the UK, (putting my years of pretending to be an upstanding citizen of Raleigh, North Carolina to an end), but the announcement only reinforces my decision.

There is now sufficient breadth of choice in the download market that I can buy large amounts of music

without resorting to CD. Much of it is lossless rather than high resolution, but it still means I have CD quality without the discs. The hi-res quotient is slowly increasing too, but too much attention is still focused on re-releasing albums I own rather than putting new material out. I can only hope that some labels start to show a little more confidence in their artists in the months to come. At the same time the prices being charged for material is coming down, too. I still find it hard to stomach the fact that storing and streaming an electronic copy to me costs more than posting a physical CD, but things are improving.

The vinyl solution

My confidence in not having to resort to CD is further bolstered by the continuing vinyl resurgence. 2013 saw a huge variety of albums released on vinyl and the quality of almost all the pressings I purchased over the year was of a very high standard indeed. Furthermore, 21st century vinyl comes with bells and whistles that make the aged format a little easier to live with like supplying a code to gain a compressed copy for use on the move. The standard complaints apply – the prices of some albums are decidedly ambitious and some suffer from a 'blink and you'll miss it' release schedule, but I'm confident that I should be able to fill in the gaps left from downloads.

You could legitimately argue that with CD pricing at rock bottom, I'm making life more expensive and difficult for myself and I don't for a minute think that I'll make any savings over the year. In the great scheme of things though, I have spent the last few years advocating 'post CD' systems and it is time I put my money where my mouth is and tried to make my purchasing match the electronics. I'll be keeping notes over the year on albums I have to forgo purchasing, as they aren't available on either medium, and I don't doubt there will be a block of material I surreptitiously order on January 1st 2015, but I honestly believe that it will be smaller than you might think. I'll be updating you later in the year as to how it is going, but for now wish me luck! ●



Ed can't abide the plastic cases that compact discs come in



Minitest

EQUIPMENT PLATFORMS £85-£235

It's important that what you stand your audio equipment on both looks and sounds good, as **Neville Roberts** discovers

Avid HiFi Avid Platform

PRICE: £200 CONTACT: 01480 869900 WEBSITE: avidhifi.co.uk

THE RATIONALE BEHIND the design of the Platform is to ensure that, in the case of a record deck, 100 percent of the vibrations that you want are converted to an electrical signal while all the unwanted ones are eliminated. These benefits are just not restricted to turntables, though – they can also be achieved with CD players, pre-amplifiers and valve-based products.

The Platform is made from a special wooden plinth, supported on four feet made from a variant of sorbothane – Avid has pioneered a new variant compound, which it considers to have the most impressive vibration absorbing material encountered.

Available in two finishes; black ash or maple, the Platform is very well made and measures 450 x 40 x 385mm (WxHxD). When I place it

under various pieces of my audio equipment I find that there are definite sonic benefits to be had. When placed under my valve CD player, for example, there is an improvement in clarity as well as more accurate instrument placement within the sound stage. With my record deck I further note a general tightening up of the bass, which has both more punch and attack.



VERDICT

A beautifully finished equipment support that results in significant sonic benefits



ISOKinetik ISOdek DAB2 isolation platform

PRICE: £235 CONTACT: 0208 2418890 WEBSITE: isokinetik.co.uk

THIS PLATFORM IS made from two sheets of 15mm black acrylic, fitted with double-sided Delrin and absorbothane feet on the base and separated by four absorbothane pads. Absorbothane, similar to sorbothane, is a unique thermoset, polyether-based polyurethane. This material is visco-elastic, which means that it has the properties of both viscous and elastic material. The material exhibits a superior damping coefficient compared with most polymer rubber, foam or fluids. Delrin is an engineering plastic otherwise known as acetal or Polyoxymethylene and has a unique combination of properties, including strength, stiffness, hardness, and dimensional stability, which makes it an ideal material for use in equipment feet.

The only disadvantage of absorbothane, as far as I am

concerned, is that it tends to stick firmly to any smooth surface, making it difficult to move the platform. As with sorbothane feet, this can be overcome by fitting a disk of black paper to the base of each foot.

The DAB2 platform is very solid, measures 460 x 60 x 400mm (WxHxD) and weighs in at around 6.5kg. Fitting the DAB2 under my record deck results in a very noticeable improvement in the midrange with the music flowing more easily and a perceptible improvement in the dynamic range. I also note that during pauses between tracks or during quiet segments of slow passages of music the silence



seems blacker and quieter. Overall, the sound appears far more natural sounding and realistic.

This is an extremely well-made unit but is more costly than the rest.

VERDICT

A superb isolation platform that delivers the goods both sonically and visually





Although it is likely to cut space on your audio equipment rack, an equipment platform is a worthwhile investment. It not only helps to isolate your kit from external vibrations, but it also prevents them from transmitting sounds to the rest of your system. A platform is particularly important for record decks and CD players where mechanical vibrations can cause an increase in jitter, resulting in degradation of the audio signal.

Other components can also benefit from isolation, such as power supplies and amplifiers, while valve-based equipment is more susceptible to microphony where mechanically transmitted sounds can cause the elements in a valve to vibrate, which directly modulates the audio signal. Apart from providing isolation some platforms can actually play a part in dissipating vibrations as part of their design, which is also very beneficial.

String Suspension Concept SSC Solobase

PRICE: £180 CONTACT: 0203 5442338 WEBSITE: nunudistribution.co.uk

DESIGNED TO SUPPORT different audio components like CD players, amplifiers, turntables, loudspeakers and valve-based equipment, the technology behind the SSC Solobase is claimed to offer a relaxed presentation, a greater sense of body to instrumental images, better dynamics, more grip and presence in the bass and better overall coherence throughout the tonal range. It can also be used with subwoofers and floorstanding speakers on metal, glass or wooden hi-fi racks and supports.

The construction consists of a single wooden plinth that has a total of nine SSC elements fitted to the underside.

The SSC elements are individual feet that have internally sprung disks with a black felt pad on the base (so that they are not too sticky when you're trying to move the platform).

The Solobase measures 440 x 25 x 360mm (WxHxD) and can also be custom made to your own size. It can support equipment up to 80kg in weight and is available in black, white and silver beech finishes. All SSC products are engineered and manufactured in Germany.

Installing the SSC Solobase under my turntable results in a subtle improvement to the sound, especially in the midrange, which seems to

sound more effortless. Also, the bass response is a little tighter and better controlled. Overall, the sound feels slightly more natural and realistic. Everything sounds a little cleaner, although this was quite a mild improvement to my ears.

This is a discrete unit that's both lightweight and rigid. It will enhance the appearance of any system and yield subtle sonic improvements.

VERDICT

A platform that makes your music flow more easily and tightens up bass response



Hi-Fi Racks Ltd Podium isolation plinth 22mm

PRICE: £85 CONTACT: 01572 756447 WEBSITE: hifiracks.co.uk

THIS RUTLAND-BASED FIRM produces a wide range of supports and the 22mm Podium isolation plinths are available in three standard sizes with a choice of four finishes: oak, satin black, high gloss black and high gloss white. If you're looking for a different width and depth you can customise your order online.

The isolation plinths are handmade to very high standards. Shipped fully assembled, the isolation support is manufactured from planks of oak that have been bonded with the grain 'concave to convex' to make it very

rigid, so that it has excellent acoustic properties. This construction also eliminates the risk of warping over time, which can be an issue with a single piece of solid wood. As you would expect with solid wood, the plinth is very heavy and sturdy. This is an essential requirement for audio equipment supports in order to eliminate resonances and dampen out any vibrations from the equipment.

All of Hi-Fi Racks' isolation plinths are supplied with isolation spikes in a choice of black or stainless steel, with or without locking nuts. For anyone

that is worried about the spikes punching holes in the top of their hi-fi rack – fear not! A set of four isolation cup protectors for spikes are also included in the bundle.

With the 445 x 400 x 22mm (WxHxD) Podium isolation plinth fitted under my equipment, the bass noticeably tightens up and the transition from soft to loud passages somehow seems faster.

The Podium isolation plinth certainly offers noticeable improvements in musicality, clarity and dynamics and offers great value.



VERDICT

Superb value for money isolation plinth that improves speed and tightens up bass response



van den Hul[®]

Pamper
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FLAMINGO
audio
moving sounds

Official van den Hul UK distributor

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web: www.flamingoaudio.co.uk

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MOTH GROUP, Bedfordshire, MK45 3HT
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Tel: 01530 414128, www.zouchaudio.co.uk

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

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

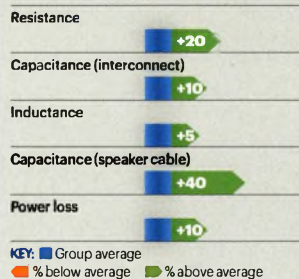


ON TEST

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



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/m, speaker cable £20 per metre unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Flamingo Audio

TELEPHONE
07833 955014

WEBSITE
vanden Hul.com

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

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

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

Sound quality

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

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

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

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

vdH falls slightly short; it isn't 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 ★★★★★	WESAY: Superb value cable loom, one that's an essential audition
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



West life

Bristol-based Nytech was once a name that meant so much to so many. **David Price** remembers its long lost CTA 252 receiver

Sadly, Nytech's classic 'Calculator Tuner Amplifier' is largely forgotten now, but it made a great impression on the British hi-fi market when its star burned brightly in the late seventies. Its name was no mere whimsy – when launched in 1972 calculators were almost the width and depth of an LP record, and plugged into the mains supply, just like the Nytech. It was an age where the world was still transitioning from tube to solid state and electronics weren't as compact as they are now.

The CTA 252 was the first product to emerge from Nytech's new factory, just outside Bristol in Chew Magna. Its designer, Richard Hay, was a talented 28 year old who'd served his time in the illustrious company of

Nytronics Ltd with Richard Hay. Between them they came up with the CTA 252, originally as a custom console for a music centre chassis. That distinctive plastic top surface came from the simple requirement to fit inside a pre-existing case alongside a Dual turntable. It was called 'CTA' because its construction was inspired by an early Canon desktop calculator.

Bristol fashion

It was a classy piece of work, showing much of Hay's Radford DNA. Putting out a modest 25W RMS per channel into a 4ohm load, it drove speakers well and in the words of former Nytech test engineer Phil Balaam: "Had a very unique sound". Part of the reason for this was the AC-coupled power amp design, which

made it a very safe amplifier as far as (not blowing up) loudspeakers was concerned. "It had a capacitor in the signal path, which was frowned on by many on sonic grounds", says Balaam, "but he had some very clever ideas that got around that".

Another interesting facet of the design was the physical construction, with several plug-in printed circuitboards obviating the need for yards of internal wiring (common at the time). Also plug-in was the disc input stage, so MM or MC could easily be accommodated, and the 252 also had a sophisticated FM tuner head, which went on to appear in the A&R Cambridge (now Arcam), T21 tuner.

The CTA 252 had a litany of facilities, from the built-in tuner and phono input, to bass, midrange and

Popular Hi-Fi advised readers to buy it if they couldn't afford a top-end Naim

Arthur Radford and Arthur Bailey, having graduated from Southampton University in 1967 with an electronics degree. Hay had always loved music, but his first passion was aerospace and he'd dreamed of a future with Hawker building fast jets.

Radford Electronics was an excellent grounding for Hay, being a serious engineering company that designed and built its own test equipment – this gave Richard a chance to put his know-how into real, commercial products. At Radfords, he had a launch pad for his talent and his love for valve amplifiers went on to inform his solid-state designs. His son Robert says that Nytech products were essentially, "like valve designs, but executed with solid-state devices, with capacitor-coupled outputs rather than transformer-coupled ones".

In 1972, Radford engineers Dave Alner and Paul Hamblin left to start



treble slider controls, balance and loudness. There was a mono switch, a tape monitor and switching for two pairs of speakers. The tuner got AFC and four presets, which was sufficient at the time as there were so few FM stations on air. Two headphone jacks completed the picture.

The Nytech as we know it today was launched in 1975 for the princely sum of £93. At the time, Britain was ravaged by inflation and its price rose fast, and by 1978 it was nearly twice as much – yet this didn't stop the hi-fi press giving it rave reviews. Indeed its receiver status was often ignored, and it was frequently recommended as an excellent amplifier in its own right. Magazines such as *Popular Hi-Fi* advised readers to buy it if they

Nytechs still surface on the second-hand market for between £50 and £150

couldn't afford a top-end Naim preamp/power amplifier combo.

Recognising the company's future lay with audiophiles and not music centre users, Nytech tweaked the design to make it leaner and cleaner. First, 1977 got a revised XD (eXtra Definition) version with component changes, then a direct, non-switched speaker connection was added and the phono stage improved. This was followed in 1978 with the CIA 252 XDII, which got an improved toroidal transformer that gave it 25W RMS into 8ohms, rather than 4. In 1979 the XDII got a slight facelift with upgraded switchgear, the DIN speaker terminals went to 6.3mm binding posts and the 'link' socket on the back got a higher voltage in anticipation of forthcoming Nytech products.

Richard Hay had been a member of the Active Loudspeaker Standards Organisation along with Linn, Meridian and Naim. It was a working group set up to define standards for active speakers, to provide interoperability between brands. Hay's passion for these systems meant it was never going to be too long before the Nytech receiver started to split up into component pieces, ready to go active.

First, the CPA 602 power amplifier was launched to provide a power upgrade for the CIA 252; it produced well over 60W RMS per channel and had a sound "to rival Naim", says Balaam. This came out in 1979, and

was soon joined by the CTP 102 tuner/preamplifier, which was basically the CTA 252 without power amplifiers. In 1980, the EXO 102/3 electronic crossover and CXA252 crossover amplifiers were launched.

Talking 'bout a revolution

The latter was a revolutionary idea at the time, and owners of CIA 252s and ARC or Linn speakers could add the CXA252 to convert their system to a full active loudspeaker with the power amps in the CXA driving HF and LF for the left channel and the power amps in the CIA 252 doing the same for the right. Balaam says without equivocation: "The difference in musical quality was astounding and became the best value for money upgrade available and made Nytech/ARC active systems highly desirable".

They did indeed prove very popular, with reports of many eschewing Naim active systems for Nytech's new high-end components. "The CPA 602 power amp is the best thing Nytech ever did," confides Balaam, "it's a wonderful sounding thing. People started complaining that the CIA 252 XDII didn't have enough power, so I remember us building up the CPA 602. My main job was to stop it blowing up every five minutes, but we got the bugs out of it pretty quickly!"

Although there were reports of Nytechs driving active Linn Isobariks heroically well, Richard Hay forged a strategic partnership with the Acoustical Reproduction Company. ARC 101, 202 and 050 speakers were



Calculators like this one were a major influence on the 252's look

SOUND QUALITY

The CIA was a fairly straightforward design electronically and stuck firmly to good engineering principles. Careful tweaks to the amp and power supply were able to bring excellent performance to make something far better than the sum of its parts. All Nytechs used the same basic design of a Class AB push-pull amplifier, running off a single supply rail with the speaker AC-coupled to the output. Clever detail design work meant the circuit was able to go down to about 15Hz with less than 1dB of insertion loss, Phil Balaam says. Sonically, even by today's standards the amp is still good, with a bubbly and rhythmic sound and strong stereo soundstaging. Never overly powerful, Nytechs still belied their low power ratings, rather in the same way the NAD 3020 did. They gave a big, ballsy sort of solid-state sound, rather than a mild and meek one. They never quite gave 'hear through' transparency, and lacked tonal light and shade, but were always fun to listen to, and sung with most music. Needless to say, the tuner is insensitive compared to modern radios, but given a good aerial it has a beautifully rich and warm sound, which is equal to almost everything on sale today.

all convertible to run in active mode, with the passive crossover put on the back, so it was easily done. "It did a lot for ARC loudspeakers," says Balaam, "for a fairly small upgrade price you got a system that was in a completely different league". He adds that, "when the big ARC202 speaker came out in active form, a real war started, as people compared it very favourably to the Linn/Naim Isobarik active system – whereas the Nytech CTP102 tuner preamp, EXO102/103 crossover, and two CPA602 power amps driving ARC202s, cost about a tenth of the price".

Some 30,000 CIA 252s were sold over its production run, which came to an end in 1982 when the case moulds had reached the end of their useful lives. Here was a product that had come along, been slightly repurposed and extensively upgraded over a decade, and made a great name for itself and its company – thanks to its superb sound and convenience. Sadly though, tragedy befell the brand with its new factory flooding one winter and various disagreements between the people running the company over its general direction. Nytech ceased trading in the early nineties, but the legacy lives on with Heed, whose modern product range shares much of the original Richard Hay DNA. These days, Nytechs surface on the second-hand market now and again for between £50 and £150 depending on condition, and although they can be rather fiddly to repair, are still very much a bargain ●

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
ATC SIACD & SCM11

Heavy hitters

ATC's take on a lifestyle system still exudes a rather professional air to **Ed Selley**

The level of interest that a statement generates can change drastically with a single additional piece of information. Tell someone you own a car and it really isn't a big deal. If you go on to mention that the car in question is a Ferrari you will find that many people are suddenly rather more interested. So it is the

case here. An all-in-one system with a pair of standmount speakers might be something that is moderately interesting, but if I add the further detail that the system comes courtesy of ATC you should be rather more excited about it.

ATC needs little introduction. With a background in professional audio, the company tends to shun bold

headlines and wild claims and neither does it change anything that doesn't need to be changed. This quiet confidence has resulted in a devoted following. The company is synonymous with products that combine bulletproof build with unburstable performance. Nothing is there for show or decoration and the focus has always been on sound



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
ATC SIACD & SCM11



Quite simply one of the most impressive all-in-one systems on sale today

COMPONENTS

ATC SIACD £2,970

ATC's take on an all-in-one system features a CD mechanism, a pair of digital inputs, USB connection and a pair of analogue line ins. These are then powered by 100W of Class AB amplification, which gives the SIACD the ability to drive a wide variety of speakers.

ATC SCM11 £1,200

The SCM11 is a small, but perfectly formed manifestation of the ATC design philosophy combining the company's distinctive 'CLD' mid-bass driver, soft dome tweeter and a sealed cabinet finished in a smart, but subtle cherry veneer.

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM ATC SIACD & SCM11



quality. This being so, ATC equipment has always been rather business like in design and it makes the electronics you see in front of you here all the more intriguing.

Kings of convenience

The SIACD is part of ATC's small range of electronics and perhaps the one that takes it furthest from its comfort zone. With a CD player, choice of digital inputs and amplifier all in the same box, the SIACD could be viewed as a lifestyle all-in-one system – on paper anyway. Unpack the ATC and it is clear that this is only a convenience system as far as this can be achieved without compromising any standard area of ATC's design criteria.

To this end, the digital inputs save the USB are all 192kHz-capable, and the 100W of power is generated into 8ohms by a hefty Class AB amplifier rather than the more in vogue Class D you might expect to find in a one-box system. Indeed peer into the vents on the top of the SIACD and it becomes clear that a considerable portion of the chassis is given over to the amplifier and the attendant heatsinks. That being said, the SIACD is attractive in the way that simple and functional things often are. The slight outward curve to the fascia sides and flush volume control might almost be

seen as a styling flourish – albeit not one so rash as to have an effect on performance or operation.

The partnering SCM11 speakers are also an example of ATC allowing for a little flourish of styling to creep in provided that the basics are adhered to. To this end the curved sides and elegant cherry veneer give them a domestic acceptability you might not otherwise expect from ATC, but these encase a pair of drivers that show that no concessions have been made in the

I suspect this could be all the computer audio that many people ever need

areas that matter. The 25mm soft dome tweeter and 150mm hand assembled mid-bass driver are classic ATC down to their almost light absorbing blackness and immensely substantial construction. In keeping with the design philosophy of the brand, the SCM11 is a sealed design and seems utterly unfazed by placement near walls.

The resulting system could only be ATC, but with some unique twists to it. The SIACD is slightly less than the conventional full width and exudes a compact, but purposeful appearance.

Above: The SCM11 doesn't conceal its pro audio origins

Above centre: The SIACD is understated and beautifully built with easy to use controls

Above right: The sealed design of the SCM11 makes them unfussy about placement

The controls are a model of logic and operate with a satisfying sense of weight and travel to them and the display is easy to read and dims automatically after a minute or so. Partnered with the SCM11s, the resulting system manages to be usefully compact and extremely flexible in terms of placement in a room, but it still exudes a purposefulness that is not normally the preserve of an all-in-one system. The electronics and drivers have dictated the size of their enclosures rather than the other way around and the system is small because it can be, not because it needs to be.

Listen with mother

Once you stop prodding the controls and sit back for a listen, it only takes a few bars of Mark Lanegan and Duke Garwood's *Black Pudding* to realise that the ATC is a phenomenally revealing system. The detail that is effortlessly extracted from the CD is something you only notice when you go back to other electronics. The professional heritage of the company is made abundantly clear with every note the system plays as you are treated to an unambiguously real performance that is capable of gripping you in a way that is unusual for electronics at this relatively sane price point.



This realism is absolutely free of embellishment and romance, but it also manages to avoid ripping poorer material to shreds. The better the recording you throw at the SIACD, the better it tends to be, but this is not the sort of system that renders a chunk of your collection unlistenable. This is mainly down to how well controlled it is. The SCM11 is utterly unflappable even when pushed hard and when the electronics doing the pushing are as capable as those in the SIACD, the performance that results is superbly refined.

System addict

It is also extremely entertaining. Give it a rhythm – any rhythm – and the ATC latches on with an effortlessness that is utterly addictive. Seaside Steve's *Hubcap Music* pounds along with a togetherness that systems that cost many multiples of this can't match. The control and refinement that the system possesses means you find yourself driving it at higher levels than you might expect because it is so free of harshness or strain. At no stage during the time I spend with the ATC do I ever feel that I am approaching the limits of what it can do.

This astonishing competence seems to stem more than anything else from the way that all the key components have been designed inhouse to work



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DETAILS**

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co.uk/

together. Listened to separately, both the SIACD and the SCM11 are very good – the electronics in particular might even be considered great – but there is a further jump in the level of performance they offer when combined. The grip that the amp of the SIACD exerts over the mid-bass drivers of the SCM11 gives them a performance boost that other amplifiers – even ones that are considerably more expensive – don't always replicate.

The digital inputs of the SIACD are also rather more than a convenience feature too – you might find yourself rather surprised by how good a piece of digital equipment you have to have before you consider using an analogue over a digital connection.

The digital front end is refined and extremely believable, but once again it is the incredible levels of detail that it can dig out of a recording that really stand out. The USB input might not be a hi-res capable asynchronous design, but give it a CD-sized file and whatever the measurements suggest you might hear, I suspect this could be all the computer audio that many people ever need.

All things to all men

In fact, on a wider level this could well be all the hi-fi you need. The ATC is a clever and utterly convincing demonstration that accuracy and realism need not come at the expense of fun or liveliness. This is hi-fi for grown ups – people who have come to the realisation that beyond telephone number power outputs and drivers made from unobtainium, this is a system that delivers genuine musical satisfaction. What makes the ATC even more impressive is that this performance comes from a system that is compact, attractive and built like the studio equipment that the company made its name with. This is an all-in-one system that delivers convenience as a result of clever design rather than any sonic compromise and the outcome is one of the most impressive all-in-one systems on sale today ●





Post-punk Liverpool

There's more to Liverpool than The Beatles and as **Simon Berkovitch** reminds us, the greatest works of the second wave of Merseybeat are pretty tasty too

As punk blew a wild wind across the UK in 1977, it propelled some unique vessels across the Mersey and into the wider musical world – groups more inventive than the majority of three-chord-wonders inspired by the Sex Pistols' call to arms. Although there was a homespun punk scene, late seventies Liverpool, like Manchester, is best remembered as a vibrant post-punk community, birthing records crackling with invention.

Like its ally a short trip up the M62, Liverpool had its own independent post-punk record label in the Factory mould: Bill Drummond (ex-Big in Japan and

future KLF member) and Dave Balfe's (ex-Dalek I Love You and the man who would sign Blur) Zoo Records, home to fantastic records from the fantastically named Echo & the Bunnymen, The Teardrop Explodes and The Wild Swans. Cooperation between the two independents reached a peak with a co-hosted festival – Zoo Meets Factory Half-way – near Wigan, in 1979. For a mere two quid, punters saw some of the era's greatest bands: Joy Division, A Certain Ratio, Crawling Chaos, The Bunnymen and The Teardrops.

Kraftwerk-inspired *Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark* and *Nightmares on Wax* (Pete Burns'

pre-Dead or Alive gothic punk-funk project) operated outside Zoo's perimeter, but also released important post-punk singles – on Factory and Inevitable Records, respectively.

Described by *NME* snapper Kevin Cummins as "the conduit for all the disparate musicians wandering around Merseyside in the late seventies", Roger Eagle – and the club he ran, Eric's – is the catalyst in the development of the scene. Would-be pop stars used the club as a hang out: it was a place to see first-wave punk and proto-post-punk, as well as a place where like-minded souls connected and formed groups of their own.

Loose musical confederations The Crucial Three, A Shallow Madness and The Mystery Girls – all unrecorded – formed from these nocturnal, subterranean hangouts. These groups were temporary alliances of some of the most important names of the late seventies' and early eighties' alternative music scenes.

Coalitions of The Teardrop Explodes' Julian Cope, Wah! Heat's Pete Wylie, Echo & The Bunnymen's Ian McCulloch, The Wild Swans' Paul Simpson and Dead or Alive's outrageous frontman Pete Burns formed and crumbled before all went on to enjoy minor and major success in the eighties.

Echo & the Bunnymen

From arty post-punks to stadium-filling alternative rockers

Formed in 1978, Echo & the Bunnymen's first line up was vocalist Ian McCulloch, guitarist Will Sergeant and bassist Les Pattinson... and one 'Echo', the automated percussionist. Not many groups give their drum machine top billing. This synthesis of man and machine recorded one excellent post-punk single on Zoo: *The Pictures on My Wall*.

In what we imagine to be a case of classic musical differences, Echo was given his P45 by flesh and blood clatter-merchant Pete de Freitas in time for 1980's neo-psychedelic debut album *Crocodiles* and lead single *Rescue* – a fine showcase for Sergeant's angular guitar style, heavy on the reverb and delay.

Second album *Heaven Up Here* was a darker, more emotive affair that broke the top 10.

The group established themselves as a chart act with 1982's catchy hits *The Back of Love* and *The Cutter*, with parent

album *Porcupine* unveiling a broader musical palette.

The fourth album's PR promised "the greatest album ever" and while 1984's *Ocean Rain* may not have delivered quite that, songs like *The Killing Moon*, *Silver* and *Seven Seas* were signifiers of the group's transition to pop stars.

McCulloch left the band in 1988, and the Bunnymen split in the early nineties. After working

Not many groups give their drum machine top billing

together again as alt-rockers Electrafixion, McCulloch and Sergeant reformed Echo & the Bunnymen for comeback hit *Nothing Lasts Forever*, ushering in the band's second phase, far from their post-punk roots (although Sergeant's solo projects continue to draw on more esoteric influences).

The band's first release, 1979's *The Pictures on My Wall*



The Teardrop Explodes

The first vehicle for Julian Cope's gloriously maverick muse

The first member of The Crucial Three to nail his colours to the mast was future *World Shut Your Mouth* singer Julian Cope.

Forming the exquisitely titled The Teardrop Explodes with future Wild Swan Paul Simpson (keyboards), Gary "Rocky" Dwyer (drums) and Mick Finkler (guitar) in 1978, Cope (bass and vocals) made his vinyl debut on Zoo records the following year.

A glorious marriage of the deceptive simplicity of seventies punk and the organ-heavy pop of sixties garage bands like The Seeds and Question Mark and the Mysterians, *Sleeping Gas* was the first post-punk record to add a psychedelic hue to a decidedly monochromatic musical landscape.

The Teardrops' third and final single release for Zoo – *Treason* – pointed to the shiny, pop direction that the band was largely to follow during the

remainder of its brief existence. Signed to a major, 1981 saw the lineup change and the group morph from arty post-punks to acid-drenched *Top of the Pops* regulars, thanks to ridiculously catchy, "bubblegum trance" hit single *Reward* from parent album *Kilimanjaro*.

Treason pointed to the pop direction the band was going

Second album *Wilder* appeared the same year. Though it's a more ambitious proposition that lacks the commercial appeal of its predecessor, it is widely recognised as a much more satisfying, diverse listen.

The Teardrop Explodes imploded in 1982, but unlike the reformations of many of their contemporaries, hell being used as a venue for *Dancing on Ice* is more likely than a reunion tour.

It's safe to say that there won't be a reunion tour



The Wild Swans

The ultimate cult Liverpoolian post-punk group

The Teardrops' first keyboard player, Paul Simpson, was the first to jump ship in 1978, setting in motion the group's rotating door policy for members throughout its lifespan.

Simpson's next move, as a vocalist, was to join forces with keyboard player Gerard Quinn and guitarist Jeremy Kelley to collaborate on arguably the ultimate cult Liverpoolian outfit – The Wild Swans – in 1980.

The first lineup of this legendary group lasted the briefest of periods and released just one single – *The Revolutionary Spirit*. But, what a single. The heady combination of chiming guitars, stately piano, propulsive drums and Simpson's unique vocal style, like a proto-Morrissey, was eerily prescient of The Smiths.

By 1982, the original Wild Swans had folded, although a

more stable third iteration appeared in 2009, releasing *The Coldest Winter for a Hundred Years* (featuring a guesting Will Sergeant).

The Revolutionary Spirit was the last release on Zoo – and the best record that the label put out, according to its co-founder, Bill Drummond.



Bill Drummond

Big in Japan before pioneering 'stadium house'

The facilitator of the incestuous scene that emerged from Eric's was Bill Drummond, whose first group – Big in Japan – reads like a who's who of eighties alternative rock and pop. Members included Holly Johnson (Frankie Goes to Hollywood), Budgie (Siouxsie and the Banshees) and Ian Broudie (The Lightning Seeds). Big in Japan's posthumous single *From Y to Z and Never Again* was the first release on Zoo in 1978 – the label Drummond co-founded with Dave Balfe.

Balfe and Drummond joined forces as a production duo and recording artists, The Chameleons, and oversaw the recordings of early Teardrops and Bunnymen outings.

Drummond resurfaced on vinyl with the folk- and country-tinged *The Man*. Released on Creation in 1986.

It was written and recorded in just five days and includes a nod to his post-punk past: *Julian Cope Is Dead*. Although intending to retire from music

after its release, his next project – sampling outfit The Justified Ancients of Mu Mu – morphed into the 'stadium house' music of The KLF.

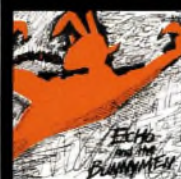


SHOPPING LIST

Our pick of eight of Liverpool post-punk's most memorable and esoteric moments, spanning the classic period of 1979-1982



The Teardrops Explodes
Sleeping Gas
A Kraut-punk take on The Seeds' minimal masterpiece *Pushing Too Hard*.



Echo & The Bunnymen
The Pictures On My Wall
The Bunnymen's mysterious debut cut, and Echo the drum machine's finest hour.



Wah! Heat
Better Scream
The band's first 7in release (back in 1979) and without doubt Pete Wyllie's greatest song, it was also covered by The Teardrops.



Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark
Electricity
A superb early production from Martin Hannett on the original Factory release.



Scott Walker
Fire Escape In The Sky
This Cope-assembled selection is a great example of Post-punk 'Pool's broad church.



Will Sergeant
Themes for 'GRIND'
The Bunnymen guitarist's excellent solo project of cinematic industrial synthscapes.



Various Artists
To The Shores Of Lake Placid
The best and the rest from post-punk Liverpool's most important record label, compiled.



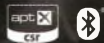
The Wild Swans
The Peel Sessions
Three recordings made for *The John Peel Show* by the dramatic first incarnation of the band back in 1982.



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100 The Souljazz Orchestra
Inner Fire



101 Edgar Knecht
Dance On Deep Waters



101 Chopin
Études by Jan Lisiecki

Musicreviews



ALBUM OF THE MONTH



Small Faces

Here Comes The Nice: The Immediate Years Box Set 1967-1969

★★★★☆

Four CD box set **Charly**

THE SMALL FACES were one of the most dynamic, talented – and ultimately frustrating – British pop groups of the sixties. Like The Who, they emerged from the decade's 'mod' culture and their early repertoire consisted of high-energy soul and r&b covers. Yet in lead singer Steve Marriott and bassist Ronnie Lane they boasted a developing pair of songwriters whose ability to turn out classic three minute pop singles had by 1966 taken them to the top of the charts with *All Or Nothing*. The frustration lay in the realisation that they should have sounded even better. Hamstrung by the cheap skate attitudes of a manager and record label rooted in the disposable, throw-away culture of Tin Pan Alley, corners were cut. The group was required to churn out hit singles (plus b-side) in cursory fashion in three-hour sessions, based on an old-fashioned condescension that pop music was ephemeral rubbish and in six months time nobody

would remember the band, let alone the song. The Small Faces were better than that and by 1967 had demanded more control of their destiny. As they experimented with mind-expanding drugs, their music became more psychedelic and interesting. Yet critical acclaim for this proved elusive. By 1969 the group had fallen apart, its members going on to form Humble Pie and the Faces.

Over 75 tracks spread across four discs showcasing the second phase of the group's career from 1967-69, a messy and chaotic picture emerges of a band caught between a rock and a hard place. Even when robed in hippie threads and psychedelic colours, the Small Faces could never shed their origins as cockney rabble-rousers, particularly in Marriott's raucous, blue-eyed soul vocals. Nor did the group ever quite manage the transition from pop 45s to sustained album success. They tried hard enough, particularly on

1968's *Ogden's Nut Gone Flake*, an ambitious attempt at a hippie fairytale, with spoken narrations by Stanley Unwin. But even in their psychedelic years, their finest and most inventive moments continued to come on perfectly formed three minute hit singles, such as *Here Comes The Nice*, *Itchycoo Park* (which included one of the first and most effective uses of phasing heard on a pop record), the wonderful, raging cacophony of *Tin Soldier* and *Lazy Sunday*, a comic pop vignette of English social manners to match anything Ray Davies wrote for The Kinks. Included in mono and stereo mixes and lovingly remastered from original analogue tapes and studio multi-tracks, these singles rightly constitute the core of the set, although there is sporadic interest in the motley collection of previously unreleased outtakes, alternate versions and live material that completes the collection. **NW**



Rainbow
Since You've Been Gone: The Best Of Rainbow

★★★★☆

CD

Universal



Lisa Stansfield
Seven

★★★★☆

CD

Monkeynatra

POWER CHORDS GALORE, synth hook heaven and every air guitarist's wet dream - heavy rock has seldom been delivered with more pop-savvy panache than when Ritchie Blackmore's Rainbow were in their hedonistic, histrionic pomp. These 15 ball-breaking epics recorded between 1975 and 1983 blazed a trail that helped to define metal. Perhaps Blackmore's greatest skill was to distil a hard rock style associated with 20 minute bludgeoning jams into tightly structured, disciplined bursts of screaming noise with genuine tunes and high-end production values capable of invading the top ten singles chart. **NW**

SHE'S BEEN AROUND the world, but now she's back with her voice as strong as ever. Fortunately, the same can be said of the songs, especially Carry On, which reveals itself as a strutting northern soul anthem of a signature tune.

Rochdale's finest never resorts to diva histrionics and with orchestrations by Jerry Hey, the man behind the strings on *Thriller*, this is a beautifully crafted album that plays well.

Stansfield's sophisticated pop soul sound hasn't gone too far off the beaten track, and she stands a good chance of winning a load more converts with this catchy clutchbag of pop gems. **DO**

Frankie Goes To Hollywood

Frankie Said

HOT PICK

★★★★★

2 CD box set

Union Square

A RARE HANDFUL of bands define the time and place that spawns them in the way that Holly Johnson and co came to symbolise mid-eighties Britain. Their music was stylish, opulent and full of indulgent excess, a perfect soundtrack for the 'loadsamoney' yuppie culture that Thatcherism had created. But they reflected wider social concerns too, such as sexual liberation (*Relax*) and the CND movement (*Two Tribes*), before the group disappeared faster than a government majority in a by-election.

The music was stylish, opulent and a perfect soundtrack to the yuppie culture

Producer Trevor Horn was a notorious perfectionist and his arrangements ooze with sophistication, as throbbing disco tracks are infused with orchestral stabs and rock guitars, all fed through the ubiquitous eighties Fairlight sampler. The rise of Frankie coincided with the emergence of MTV so the group's visual impact became inseparable from the music. For the first time this set collects their best singles and remixes with groundbreaking videos and TV appearances, too. **NW**



The Souljazz Orchestra

Inner Fire

★★★★☆

CD

Strut Records

THE MANY-HEADED MULTICULTURAL beast that is the Souljazz Orchestra returns with another album of funky floor-fillers. Led by keyboard maestro Pierre Chrétien they've been grooving since 2002 and have retained their upbeat vibe and broad range of floating cultural influences.

The essence of their searing soul stew is still Latin jazz, funk and a healthy infusion of Afro beat, but there are also Cuban influences, some Egyptian inflections and much more. It all adds up to an invigorating mix that surprises and rewards repeated listens. The sound is full and rich, with space for both low-end bass and drum punch as well as those gloriously rising brass stabs. **DO**

Do you agree with our reviewers? Decide for yourself and listen to some of this month's tunes at www.hifichoice.co.uk

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★☆

Louisiana Red

The Lowdown Back Porch Blues

180g vinyl

Roulette/Speakers Corner



HAVING TRAGICALLY LOST both parents by the age of five Louisiana Red had good reason to get the blues, but his style is hardly downbeat. In fact on this - his debut album -

he is ebullient, forthright and gunning for world peace. The opener *Red's Dream* has the chorus "I dream I went to the UN and set the whole nations right" in response to the Cuban missile crisis, which is not typical of the album, but shows a rather different mindset to the average bluesman in 1962. Red has a strong and unique voice

alongside a guitar style that while based in country blues is very much his own, he's accompanied by the very capable rhythm section of Kar Lynch (bass) and Panania Francis (drums) who have a great sound that leaves space on the recording for the main act to let loose. Red played with John Lee Hooker in the late fifties and made his first recordings with Chess, but got drafted and managed to get a contract for \$50 with Roulette with sheer bravado. This album comes from a session he did in producer Henry Glover's office, which just might account for the live, undamped sound, expertly mastered for Pure Pleasure by Sean Magee at Abbey Road. **JK**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



David Lynch
The Big Dream



ALAC 24-bit/44.1kHz

Naim Label

NOT SURPRISINGLY, THE second album from the film director sounds much like the soundtrack to one of his movies. A woozy take on Americana in the spirit of Tom Waits, it stuffs a reverb-drenched pillow over the face of folk, blues and rock 'n' roll, topped with Lynch's rather high-pitched, often distorted voice that's by turns reassuring and quietly threatening. This Deluxe version adds some deliriously odd remixes and extra tracks. **DO**



Edgar Knecht
Dance On Deep Water



FLAC 24-bit/96kHz

Linn Records

THE JAZZ PIANIST and his accompanying trio of bass, drums and percussion pick their way through a set of tunes based on the 'Old German Songbook'. Works of the Romantic period get a new lease of life with Knecht's precise, but impassioned playing that ebbs and flows between the dreamy soundscapes of *Lilofee* to the hard bop-influenced *Frühling*. Throughout, the playing is impeccable and the sound of Knecht's piano is sublime. **DO**



Anything Pollini can do, Jan Lisiecki can at least match...

Chopin

Études Op 10 and Op 25
Jan Lisiecki, Piano

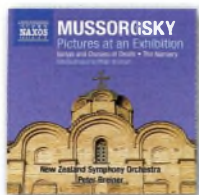


0289 479 1039 8 CD

Deutsche Grammophon



THIS NEW RECORDING of the Chopin Etudes by 18 year-old Jan Lisiecki - the first on the Yellow Label since Pollini's stunning 1972 effort - deserves to be mentioned in the same breath. It has the same effortless technical fluency and mastery of detail, while showing slightly greater poetry and tenderness. It's a commanding interpretation for one so young. The recorded sound is smooth, natural, and very clean - the piano placed in a warm slightly dry acoustic. It's perhaps a wee bit bass light and lacking in front-to-back depth and dimensionality, but perfectly good in its own way. Pollini's old recording was also lacking in amplitude, and this new one is not dissimilar. **JH**



Mussorgsky (Orch Breiner)

Pictures at an Exhibition;
Songs and Dances of Death, The Nursery
New Zealand Symphony Orchestra,
Peter Breiner



8.573016 CD or Blu-ray

Naxos

CONDUCTOR PETER BREINER has pulled out all the stops with this hugely imaginative and enjoyable re-orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures*. It offers a rich kaleidoscope of orchestral colours that reveals the music as never before. Moreover, the arrangement has a distinct Russian accent, compared to the Frenchified tones of the more familiar Ravel orchestration. A huge orchestra is called for (terrific percussion!) culminating in 104 musicians for the *Great Gate of Kiev*. Climaxes expand with ease, making this the perfect disc for those with big hi-fi systems that are capable of moving a lot of air. **JH**

BLU-RAY DVD



The Doors R-Evolution

DTS-HD Master



EAGLE VISION



Lavishly presented in a hardback book, this charts the evolution of the band as presented on American TV since 1967. It includes films made by the band and record company as well as TV appearances. The studio footage for *Wild Child* is particularly good as is the audience mayhem in *Roadhouse Blues*, in fact things tend to gradually improve right up to the last original footage of *Changeling*. With a recent documentary featuring the surviving Doors and a selection of rare clips, this is a fascinating insight into the band. **JK**

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KIMBER Crystal Copper interconnect with 16dB attenuation (£184) £65. Audio-Technica moving coil cartridge AT-F5/OCC £45: **02476 711668 (Coventry).**

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AUDIOLAB 8200CD £600 ONO. Few months old. Call for a demo: **01661 823606** or email: grant.darras@gmail.com (Northumberland).

RUSS ANDREWS Signature Powerkords x2, 1m length. Wattgate 350I AG IEC Plug (RRP £440) £290 each or £570 for both. Cheaper if collected: **01902 884694** or email jukey39@yahoo.co.uk (Dudley).

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SENNHEISER HD650 headphones boxed, excellent condition £120: **01708 344334** or email: j_mcperson@btinternet.com. (Essex)

JK DAC32 little used. Giant killer battery-powered DAC gives stunning sound, huge dynamics, great bass and detail, with special USB cable included. USB in/phono out only £300: **07793 749178** or email: kingjuancho@yahoo.com (London).

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ECA high-end MM phono stage £80. Atacama speaker stands £40, Atacama 4-shelf hi-fi rack £100. Both supplied with spikes and feet. Excellent condition: **07710 256440** or email: eadmike@gmail.com (East Sussex).

PRO-JECT RPM5 turntable with Ortofon 2M Red cartridge. Excellent condition £300 ONO. Buyer to collect: **01909 489684 (Worksop).**

LINN, QED and Monster AV cables for sale owing to change of room. Some brand new. 1M phono-8M optical lengths: **01457 871622 (Lancs).**

CARDAS Cross 1m pair RCA interconnects £145, 1 set of 4 Stillpoints resonance support feet, including additional risers £145 and Vertex AQ Silver Jaya mains conditioner £265: **01202 515474** or email: johnlangley17@talktalk.net (Dorset).

JK DAC32 little used. Giant killer battery-powered DAC gives stunning sound, huge dynamics, great bass and detail, with USB cable included. USB in/phono out only. £360: **07793 749178** or email: kingjuancho@yahoo.com (London).

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

LINN LP12 with SME 309 Magnesium tonearm and Goldring elite cartridge: £950, will split. Pro-Ject phono box SE: £50. TDL Studio 0.5 speakers with plinths: £160: **020 8847 4796 (West London).**

NAD M51 DAC/pre-amp £1,100 (£1,500 new.) Cambridge Blu-ray player 650BD £150. Theta Intrepid power amp £1,400. All immaculate: **07722 871945 or email: martin.summers@gmail.com (SW London).**

GRAVES Audio (GA) Coalesce Balanced XLR Interconnects. Excellent condition, extremely high-quality interconnect. Cryogenetically treated copper. In original presentation box. (£380 new) £160 ONO. Contact me for photos. AT (@)-Tunes SB+ Audiophile Streamer. Two-box, very high-end version of Logitech Squeezebox 3. Huge power supply and very high-quality DAC. Sounds superb and in excellent condition. (£1,000 new) £350 ONO: **02380 601515 or email: bridgens11@btinternet.com (Eastleigh, Hants).**

CLARITY 09 high mass turntable with Rega RB1000 arm made by Claro Audio. Three years old, mint condition, boxed (£2,100) £950, good reviews: **07905 348812.**

KEF LS3/5A Reference Series, Rosewood, near mint, including manuals. Rogers ABI Bass Extenders, Rosewood, excellent condition £1,500. Buyer collects: **01371 850665 (Essex).**

NAIM LNAC 82 x2 Hi-Caps: **01623 230472 (Notts).**

GARRARD four-speed stereo sound record player in mahogany with Elac speakers, £40: **07775 958325 (Leeds).**

CYRUS 781 speakers + Nextel Stands £320, Music Tools Entasis h50 Speaker Stands £410, Vitus SP102 phono stage £12,500 ONO – superb performer/unmatched. Audience AU 24e 1.5m RCA Interconnect £525, Audience AU24 Powercord 3m £795. Nordost Heimdall RCAo.6m X2 £280 each.

Isotek Power Cord Premium Mains Cable 1.5m X2 £50 each. XLO HTP1 RCA 1m £35, Cyrus bi-wire speaker cable 2.5m £30. Signal 7080 RCA interconnect 2x 1m £30, Signal 7081 RCA interconnect 1x 1m RCA set £25, 1x 1m RCA single £15, 1x 2.1m RCA set £35: **01825 841104 or email: mark.hanna@virgin.net.**

KUDOS X2 speakers £700. Naim Nait XS amplifier with sonic bliss PSU and Flashback Cables Y Performance cable £700. Both boxed in excellent condition: **07794339784 (Nottingham).**

YAMAHA AX863SE 7.2 AV Amp with KEF 5005 6.1 surround sound system with REL acoustics quake sub-woofer. Excellent Condition. Boxed with manuals. £400 ONO: **01772 719653 (Preston).**

QUAD 22 + 2 MA II valve mono amplifiers unboxed/unused since Quad service and 22 tone capacitor modification Sept 2010. With invoices, mains lead and 2-pin Bulgian plug. £795: **07747 63 69 65 (Wiltshire).**

NAIM Nait5j and CD5j boxed with manuals, Din interconnects and remotes. Plus 2x 3m of NACA 5 speaker leads with Naim connector plugs. All lovingly looked after in beautiful condition, four years old £900 ONO, prefer buyer collects: **01572 822251 or email: stevefloweris@yahoo.co.uk (Rutland).**

KIMBER KCAG interconnect, 0.5m length, ultraplate phono plugs, deep cryogenic and super burn in enhancements. Mint condition (RRP £602) £300 or £295 if collected: **01902 884694, email: jukey39@yahoo.co.uk.**

WANTED Linn Lingo Mk 1 (shoobox size) PSU for LP12, must be in good working and aesthetic order and come complete with internal interface board, switch, interconnect and power lead: **01159894266 or email hanumike@gmail.com (Nottingham).**

RADFORD STA25 series 3-valve power amplifier cherished for 15 years. I am reluctantly downsizing

hence low £900 OVNO. Silver High Breed Epitome 8 interconnects with phonos £50: **02476 679165 or email: davidhirst244@02.co.uk.**

THORENS TD160S with Rega RB202 arm, in very good condition, arm has ISO Stub End £300 ONO. Please email for photo set & pick up address: **07806658731 or email: wrighto8jonathan@hotmail.com (Leicestershire).**

DYNAVECTOR P75 phono amp MM/MC. Excellent record reproduction £110: **01903 260310 (Sussex).**

MERIDIAN 588 CD player. Very low hours (been in its box most of its life), XLR and RCA outputs. Can demo £875: **07973 426291 (Birmingham).**

200 Hi-Fi magazine for sale. *Hi-Fi Choice*, *Hi-Fi News*, *Hi-Fi World* £120 ONO Buyer collects: **01484 427426 (West Yorkshire).**

MISSION 751 standmount speakers, rosewood finish, good condition but not boxed, complete with manual. Prefer buyerto collect. Ideal for medium-sized room £25: **01908 645353 (Bletchley).**

MANA ACOUSTICS six-tier equipment rack £350. One turntable with reference top £250. Two power supply tables £50 each. Buyer to collect: **0786015521 (Middlesex).**

REGA ear headphone amp, black, boxed £80. 5 x 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 722880 (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).**

KUZMASTABI 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).**

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).**

ROKSAN XPlatinum 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 '4' 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 £45. REL Quake sub £75: **07733 428736 or email: gill@gillbrears.plus.com (Huddersfield).**

WANTED late van den Hul Frog gold cartridge. One requiring repair considered. White Beauty also considered: **01505 346791 (Renfrewshire).**

MONITOR AUDIO R270HD floorstanding slim speakers piano black 12 months old £350. Monitor Audio Bronze BXW10 subwoofer walnut £250 both excellent condition: **07800606892 or email: schandler@dopag.co.uk (Worcestershire).**

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Simple Audio

Listen desktop speakers

SET UP IN 2008 by Peter Murphy, a former MD of Linn, the Glasgow-based Simple Audio has so far concentrated on multi-room audio, competing with Sonos rather than the high-end sector in which Linn operates. Its portfolio currently comprises two models, a portable Bluetooth speaker, the Simple Audio Go and this desktop model, the Listen. Priced at £400 it is certainly a premium product for a desktop speaker, competing directly with the likes of Bowers & Wilkins' MM-1.

The Listen stands out among desktop speakers in terms of its features with a touch-sensitive control panel, subwoofer line-out and versatile connectivity options that add Bluetooth wireless streaming to the regular 3.5mm line-in and USB input. As you'd expect it's compatible with the aptX codec, which kicks in automatically if the source offers it.

Stop, look and Listen

Reasonably sized for desktop placement, the Listen seems built for performance and is not exactly subtle looking. The industrial design is intended to evoke the look of traditional audiophile speakers on stands. Featuring icons for power, mute, source selection, Bluetooth pairing and a volume control, it's nice to use, requiring just the right amount of pressure to change settings. A pebble-like IR remote control is also supplied.

The right speaker features a headphone jack and an aux input on the front edge, with the rear accommodating the subwoofer out, micro USB input, DC power input and the proprietary connection for the passive left speaker. Simple Audio hasn't been mean on cable quality or length, the USB cable is 1.8m and an equally long extension speaker cable is provided, enabling the Listen to be used in rooms where you want more distance between the cabinets.

The speakers' higher-end credentials are established by the use of a bi-amplified design with separately powered tweeters and



mids, complemented by bass-reinforcing pressure drivers. They feature a 3in midrange driver with neodymium magnets and a 1in silk-dome, ferrofluid-cooled tweeter. Each active driver is discretely powered to maximise bandwidth and to accommodate fine-tuned, phase-compensated, DSP-based active crossovers. The Listen boasts studio-quality digital crossovers using a DSP, which is an integral part of the digital signal path. These digital crossovers use band pass filters that are precisely tuned to suit the acoustic response of the drivers, and are phase aligned to help reduce or eliminate phase and/or frequency distortion. Intelligent, dynamic compression is used to manage signal levels to the woofer so that at very high volume levels clipping and/or distortion are minimised. All in all, there's a heck of a lot of engineering and design gone in to the Listen.

The Listen doesn't have an asynchronous USB input, so when using the USB connection it extracts audio from your computer's own soundcard. In the case of an iMac, the rousing trumpet, whistle and strings in John Williams' theme tune to *Raiders Cf The Lost Ark* highlight the remarkable level of detail to be heard from the tweeters, which are bright, energetic and have excellent timing. Stereo imaging is satisfyingly broad

and overall you feel pleasantly immersed in the piece. There is, however, less control with the bass response with the cabinets vibrating aggressively. Switching to another movie soundtrack *Jaws* almost sees the speakers scuttling off the desk top, especially when the two-note signature kicks in for the second time. *Silent Shout* by The Knife happily proves a more sanguine experience, and is well within the capabilities of the pressure drivers. However, there's a slight opaqueness to the midrange, which is much clearer on the B&W MM-1.

Listen without prejudice

Spitfire by Public Service Broadcasting is a reasonable, well-balanced listen, but it just doesn't have the punch of the MM-1. The extra headroom and clarity afforded by hi-res audio music is also a little lost, the longer double bass notes in Pete Alderton's *Soul Cf A Man* for example tailing off quickly, giving the vocals a little too much emphasis.

Its bass and midrange performance is perhaps not as well judged as its truly impressive tweeter, but overall the Listen is a well built speaker that's fun to use, and is a big improvement on any computer's internal sonic performance, and many TV speakers. **AJ**

DETAILS

PRICE
£400

CONTACT
0141 3310 845

WEBSITE
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OUR VERDICT



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Oyaide

BR-12 turntable mat

PERHAPS THE MOST amazing thing about turntables is that you can literally hear every part of them. They are ultra-sensitive, high precision, analogue measuring instruments designed to trace a groove in a vinyl disc down to microscopic tolerances. No surprise then that if you drop the stylus into the groove when the disc isn't spinning, and tap the platter or plinth, you'll hear a noise through your speakers. The better the deck, the less this should happen – ideally it should be immune to all extraneous mechanical vibrations, from motor to plinth to platter.

Sadly, the perfect turntable is yet to be invented. Resonances enter the playback chain via the plinth from the ground upwards and into the system as a whole from the air. No single part of the turntable is immune – even the record itself plays a part, picking up vibrations from both air and ground as well as vibrating on the platter. This is bad news, as the disc should ideally be a completely inert entity that doesn't feed any extraneous vibrations into the stylus. So, you can see why the turntable mat is such an important part of the record playing chain.

Rubber soul

Made from tapered tungsten-mixed butyl rubber sheet, Oyaide's BR-12 is an aftermarket platter mat designed to damp down vibrations and improve sound. It is slightly tacky and thick, but soft and very smoothly textured. Tapping it with your finger produces a dead 'thunk' which decays very quickly, almost as if the vibrations are disappearing down a black hole.

The profile of the mat has a slightly tapered cross section, angled 1° from the centre circle to the edge, to counter the effects of warping. The manufacturer says that if the record is placed on a perfectly flat surface, the warped area will not be in contact with its support and will have a tendency to vibrate at frequencies with a wavelength related to the distances over the warp. This mat alleviates the



problem, although a record weight of over 300g is recommended for maximum effectiveness. Oyaide makes such a thing – the STB-MS vinyl stabiliser – although it isn't supplied in this package.

Another point is the surfacing of this mat, which has 18 'tuning holes' arranged in a special, irregular spiral pattern, and these are also said to minimise vibration. Finally, the rubber itself has a very high friction coefficient that enhances adhesion and prevents slipping. In all my years of fiddling with turntables, I've yet to come across a rubber mat that feels so hard to move one's fingers across – you can glide your digits across most standard types without a care in the world; doing it on this one feels like someone has put on the brakes!

I try the BR-12 on a range of decks and find that on turntables with an already good, 'quiet' platter, it makes less of an improvement than on relatively noisy ones, but in all cases it is real step forward.

Generally, the mat makes LP records sound tonally deeper and smoother, with a less pronounced upper midband and a silkier treble. There is a real sense of the 'edge' being removed from the sound, while the soundstage becomes less two dimensional and more immersive. Bass is tighter yet more fluid, and across the midband rhythms seem to

be more natural yet more engaging. Dynamics are more pronounced, not least because the quieter parts of the music seem to fall back to an inky-black silence when they have previously been a blur.

On a Michell GyroDec with its fairly inert acrylic platter, there is a real improvement, but it is a subtle one, whereas on a Technics SL-1200 with its resonant Mazak platter the difference is profound, dramatically smoothing the sound and deepening it, too. The same effect is heard on a classic Sony PS-8750 direct drive, whose metal platter does a passable impression of Big Ben when you tap it. It seems to improve a Rega P3-24 too, giving a more relaxed and sumptuous sound.

Weight for it

In all cases, adding a record weight makes things sound better still, locking in the improvements and taking them a little further. This mat is quite thick, so you will have to adjust your cartridge tracking angle.

This is an essential audition if you're in the market for a relatively inexpensive and easy vinyl upgrade. Oyaide's BR-12 will win many friends, and the bundled stroboscopic speed disc and overhang gauge only add to its value. Beautifully made and very effective, it's money well spent. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£90

CONTACT
01332 342233

WEBSITE
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OUR VERDICT



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IsoTek EV03 Premier, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013



EV03 Premier

IsoTek's most affordable power cable has at its core three 2sqmm conductors made from 99.9999% OFC (oxygen-free copper) and coated in silver to aid conductivity, with a Teflon FEP dielectric extruded over each conductor. A cotton filler is used to give the cable internal strength and reduce microphony whilst maintaining dielectric performance. The cable is terminated with high-quality 24ct gold connectors, designed and manufactured by IsoTek rather than bought off the shelf. No similarly priced power cable is constructed to such a high specification, with correspondingly impressive benefits to sound and picture quality.

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Tivoli Audio

Music System+ all-in-one system

JUST WHEN YOU thought the music system was set to become a footnote in the history of hi-fi along come a bunch of manufacturers with other ideas. After all, many of us like to access a range of audio files outside of our listening room. And for the hi-fi enthusiast the Music System+ can be used in a dining room or bedroom to spin CDs, listen to the radio or stream music via Bluetooth from a phone or tablet. The inclusion of a radio/ alarm indicates that Tivoli Audio expects many of its customers to wake up to the Music System+.

The Music System+ is compatible with Bluetooth audio, although aptX is absent as is AirPlay. There's also no DLNA networking or even USB playback, which we'd expect to find on a cutting-edge £700 system, and hence no means of playing back uncompressed hi-res audio files.

There is a DAB/DAB+ tuner and the slot-loading CD drive will spin regular CDs as well as CD-R and CD-RW discs, offering playback of MP3 and WMA. I also discover by chance it will play 16-bit/44.1kHz AIFF files.

Wood you believe it?

The unit is substantial in terms of size (36cm wide) and weight (6kg) and is handmade in real wood with black ash, cherry and walnut options available. The presence of 21 buttons on the fascia arguably spoil the aesthetic, but make operating a lot of features a painless process. Unfortunately, the lack of contrast between lettering and surface makes it challenging to identify the buttons, especially in low light – the other finishes look easier to read. The rotary knob for controlling the volume and other settings is plasticky and the double decker matrix display is large and automatically adjusts its brightness according to ambient conditions. It looks fine when static, but letters pulse as they scroll briefly losing legibility. Luckily, you can disable scrolling. The remote control is awful – small, plasticky, ugly and crammed with tiny buttons.



The rear panel houses a 3.5mm aux input, record output, telescopic aerial and a mix input, should you wish to listen to music from an external source while simultaneously listening to the radio. Bizarre. There are twin full-range drivers on the front, complemented by rear-firing bass ports and a downward-firing subwoofer on the base.

You can adjust the treble by +/-4dB, switch EQ on or off (enhancing lower frequencies at lower volumes) and, using the menu, choose between mono, stereo and the so-called SpacePhase Wide mode. Bass adjustment is made using a rotary dial on the rear, which is hardly the most convenient way.

Source selection is straightforward, although I find the Bluetooth completely unreliable with an iPhone 5. When re-connecting, the devices often fail to play ball, sometimes I try to re-pair from scratch, which can take between five and 10 attempts. Also, streaming is rather prone to dropouts, sometimes losing the connection completely.

Getting the most pleasing sound out of the Music System+ is a bit like operating the Tardis, requiring a number of knob tweaks and switch flicking to get the thing just right before it gets properly into its stride. SpacePhase Wide mode automatically engages every time the unit is

switched on and seems to work well, especially from a distance, but not always so that you find yourself playing with it rather than just listening to the music.

Lip up fatty

The main issue, though, is keeping a handle on the bass output, which can be flabby, for example when listening to Kate Bush's *Snowed In At Wheeler Street* on CD. And at moderately high volume the front drivers start to rattle, and the word "you" distorts at the end of the first line of the song. The Velvet Underground's *Here She Comes* is a smoggy mess across the dynamic range. Yet conversely, *Two Tribes* by Frankie Goes to Hollywood rolls along without any obvious failings. A CD-R of AIFF files, originally hi-res FLAC downloads, is also good. Mozart's *Piano Concerto No.17 in G Major* sounding tight as the strings and piano are reproduced with clarity and openness.

The low bit-rate of DAB radio is cruelly exposed on the Music System+, Julius Benedi's *Piano Concerto in E Flat Major* on Classic for example, sounds awfully thin compared with the FM transmission.

Overall, Bluetooth problems and inconsistent all-round performance leave me feeling underwhelmed by the Music System+. **AJ**

DETAILS

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OUR VERDICT



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noun ('hī'fī | 'ha 'faizl)

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noun

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or no distortion, giving a result as
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Black Rhodium

Straight Line Contact loudspeaker plugs

PLUGS AND SOCKETS are a necessary evil for hi-fi. Wherever you have a connection you have the potential to introduce noise and distortion into the audio signal, which is why it is important to use high-quality connectors. This applies equally to mains plugs, interconnect cable connectors and loudspeaker connectors. A new range of banana plugs for loudspeaker cables has recently been introduced by Black Rhodium, designed by their well-known proprietor and cable expert, Graham Nalty.

The range consists of two types of banana plugs: the GN-1 rhodium-plated plugs for crimp-connection onto factory-terminated loudspeaker cables (which can be fitted onto the customer's cable by Black Rhodium if required) and GN-2 gold-plated plugs with screw connections suitable for wire-ended cables,

which are reviewed here. Both types have a carbon-fibre outer shell.

Graham is all too aware of the problems that can occur between plug and socket, so he has designed his loudspeaker banana plugs so that they provide a single, straight-line contact in the socket in order to ensure there is only one place of contact between the plug and socket. This prevents the possibility of noise being generated as a result of multiple contact paths, which can occur when a plug touches the socket over the full 360° of its circumference.

Pull the plug

The plug spigot is made from a tough, non-conductive plastic with a gold-plated steel spring on one side and a gold-plated contact on the other. The spring is not electrically connected to the contact, hence there is only one place of connection



between the plug and socket.

The plugs will fit most cables with conductors of up to 3mm² cross section area.

The plugs are beautifully made and the 1.5 microns gold-plating is of a high quality. I find no difficulty in fitting a set of eight plugs to my loudspeaker cables and they are indeed an excellent, smooth fit into my existing sockets. Sonically, I find subtle improvements compared with my old set of plugs in terms of the cleanliness and vitality of the sound. Not bad from a set of bananas! **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE

GN-2: £20

GN-1: £25

CONTACT

01332 342233

WEBSITE

gnlegacy.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Chord Company

C-power mains cable



DETAILS

PRICE

£50 for 1.5m cable

CONTACT

01980 625700

WEBSITE

chord.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



THE MAINS LEADS supplied with most audio equipment are not of the highest quality and they have the nickname of kettle leads as that's what most of them have been made for! They are made from low-cost, three-wire conductors and no attempt has been made at screening them as kettles are seldom affected by RFI!

The Chord C-power is an easy to fit upgrade to pretty much any audio component that has an IEC input socket. This screened power cable follows the same design principles as every other Chord cable, which means attention has been paid to shielding, conductors and termination. The C-power is fitted with a high-quality over-moulded mains plug and IEC plug. Chord says that over-moulded plugs should not be dismissed, as they have certain advantages. All the terminations are high-pressure crimped and so have no

screws that can work loose. The over-moulding process holds the conductors firmly in place and reduces mechanically induced noise.

Bussmann's holiday

The mains plug is fitted with a high-quality Bussmann 10A fuse and the cable is very flexible, despite the extra shielding that has been implemented within. When I fit it to a CD player in place of the supplied 'kettle lead', I find that there is an immediate improvement in clarity, which is consistent with the shielding reducing the amount of extraneous noise that is injected into the audio system.

Chord's C-power is a well-made, no-nonsense mains lead that is a worthwhile upgrade to the kettle-style power leads that are supplied as standard with many items of audio equipment. **NR**

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Rega RP1, ex demo 159	TEAC Distinction A1000 and A3000 Integrateds, ex demo. Call	Audiolab MDAC, 8200CD ex demo Call	Focal Spirit One Headphones, ex demo Call
Puresound P10 Phono stage ex demo 399	Audiolab 8200 Integrated, Pre and Power, ex demo Call	Chord Qute HD and QBD76HD ex demo Call	GRADO Headphones, most models, ex demo Call

Analogue

Cambridge Audio 640P, excellent 99
Clearaudio Innovation Compact, good condition 1999
Clearaudio Balance Phono stage, excellent 749
Conrad Johnson TEA 1b Phono stage 1999
Garrard 401, Slate Audio plinth 799
Hadcock 242 Integra, ex demo as new 799
Kuzma Stabi Reference, excellent boxed 3249
Kuzma Stogi, excellent 399
Linn Ekos, excellent Call
Linn Sondek LP12/Keel/Ekos SE/Lingo/Troika 4999
Linn Ittok LVII, in rare black, excellent 749
Linn Sondek LP12, Ittok LVII, great condition 599
Linn Sondek LP12, Cirkus, Vaihalla, front mount motor 999
Linn Sondek LP12, Lingo Mk1, excellent 1499
Lyra Erodion Step up 129
Mission 774LC tonearm, excellent 899
Music First Step Up Transformer with custom options 179
NAIM Staghelne S, excellent 249
Nottingham Analogue Spacearm, just rewired by NA 299
Origin Live stub modified RB250 199
Ortofon TA100, excellent boxed 399
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Roksan Xerxes, XPS2, Linn Fit 349
SME 3009, excellent boxed 249
SME 3009/3, excellent boxed 249
Technics 1210, vgc boxed 599
Thorens TD124 c/w plinth 229
Thorens TD170, Fully Automatic, excellent 799
Tom Evans Groove, excellent 799
Wilson Benesh Act 1 Tonearm, nr mint superb 599
World Audio Design Phono 3S, nr mint 2 box unit 69

Radios/Recorders

Arcam T51, vgc+ 179
Arcam DT91 Tuner 199
Arcam Alpha 10 DAB Tuner 179
Cyrus FM7.5, excellent boxed 399
NAIM NAT05, excellent boxed 99
Nakamichi CR1, excellent 159
Rega Radio R, excellent 139
TEAC TR650DAB, ex demo 1499

Amplifiers

Arcam Alpha 9, excellent 119
Arcam Alpha 8, excellent 129
Arcam Xeta 290, excellent 199
Audiolab 8000A, vgc boxed 249
Audiolab 8000MX, excellent 899
Audio Research Donizetti Power boxed 2249
Audio Research Bellini VB/Donizetti cento, ex boxed 699
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Cyrus DACXP+, excellent boxed just serviced Call
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Cyrus SmartPower, excellent 349
Cyrus SmartPower Plus, excellent 3749
Esoteric A03 Power amp, vgc boxed 2499
Graaf GM100 Power, boxed 799
Lyngdorf SDA2175, excellent boxed 199
Marantz PM6004, nr mint boxed 2249
Marantz SC7S2, excellent boxed 3599
McIntosh MA2275, excellent boxed 599
Meridian 558 5 channel monster 299
Meridian 501V preamp, excellent 599
Micromega IA100, great integrated, ex demo boxed 109
Musical Fidelity Xpre, excellent boxed 1199
NAIM NAP250 Olive 2002, vgc+ boxed, service 2010 349
NAIM NAC252, excellent boxed 349
NAIM NAP150, excellent boxed 279
NAIM NAIF3, excellent boxed 1499
Nightingale Armonia, excellent boxed 1799
Nu Force Reference 9Se v3 Monos boxed mint 599
Quad QC24 Preamp, excellent boxed 249
Quad 33/303 pre/power combo 499
Quad 34/405 pre/power combo 399
Sugden Headmaster, excellent 499
Unison Research Aria S2, excellent 499

Digital

Acuphase DP100, excellent boxed 3749
Arcam Alpha 8, excellent 249
Arcam CD92, excellent 199
Audiolab 8000DAC, vgc+ 549
Audiolab 8200CD, nr mint boxed 499
Audio Analogue Crescendo CD, as new 349
Audio Note CD2, vgc 99
Cambridge Audio DACMagic, excellent 449
Copland CDA266, excellent 329
Cyrus dAD3Q, excellent 999
Cyrus DACXP+, boxed just serviced 499
Cyrus CDXT2, boxed new laser from Cyrus 1999
Esoteric X05, excellent boxed 759
Goldenote Koala, near mint boxed 749
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Sony SCD777es, excellent boxed Call

AV/Accessories/Cables

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Cyrus PSXR, from Call
Isotek Aquarius ex demo 1399
NAIM XPS2, (2004), burndy, excellent boxed 2399
NAIM Supercap 2 (2010), excellent boxed, Burndy, SNAIC 2399
Stax, various Call
Ultrason Limited Edition 10 Headphones BNIB Call

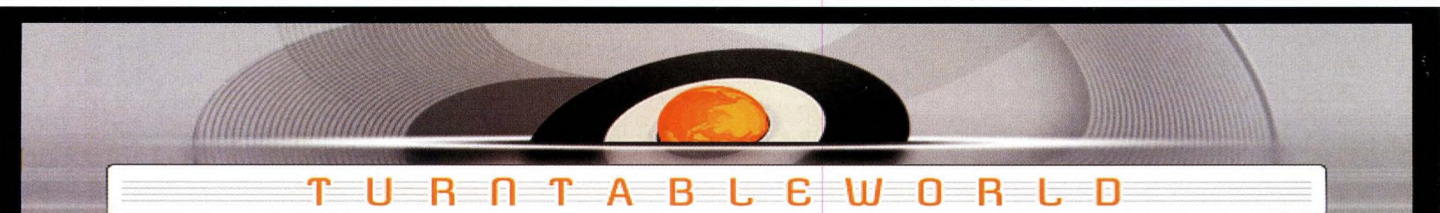
Loudspeakers

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B&W 800D, near mint 9499
Focal Electra 1008Be with matching stands as new 2749
Focal Electra 1028Be, as new 329
Focal 806V, excellent boxed 949
Kudos C30 in Cherry due in Call
Kudos C1, early pair 949
Kudos C2, ex-demo boxed 349
Linn Sara with matching stands, vgc+ 799
Martin Logan Aeon, vgc 899
Martin Logan Aeon s, excellent boxed 899
Martin Logan Source, excellent boxed ex demo 1299
Martin Logan Purity, excellent boxed ex demo 1799
Martin Logan Vista, excellent boxed ex demo 999
Magneplanar MG1.6, superb 1199
Meridian M1 Active speakers, boxed 399
Monitor Audio GS10, in oak, excellent 3999
Monitor Audio PL300, mint crated 599
Monitor Audio RXW12, gloss black, ex demo 999
Neat Elite SX excellent 749
Opera Seconds, excellent boxed 79
O Acoustics, 2010, ex display nr mint award winner 1399
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Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor M, as new with stands Call
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Audio Pro

Addon T10 Bluetooth loudspeaker

SWEDEN IS THE home of Audio Pro, which has been designing and building loudspeakers since 1978. The company has just announced the latest addition to its Addon wireless speaker range – the T10. A single stereo speaker with modern Scandinavian style, the T10 uses the Bluetooth 4.0 standard and aptX for high-quality wireless music transmission to any compatible smartphone, tablet or music-player. It comes as standard in a black or white matt lacquer finish, but a special edition T10 is available for an extra £50 with an orange gloss lacquer finish and a leather handle.

The T10 is fitted with a 'figure of eight' power connection at the rear and a UK power lead is included. The speaker includes a built-in digital amplifier, DSP and digital filters. Measuring 320x 166 x 180mm (WxHxD), it delivers a

quoted 80W and weighs just over 4kg, so this is no lightweight in more ways than one! A pair of 2cm cloth-dome tweeters are set to the outer edges of the cabinet, each one driven by its own 20W amplifier. The 13cm bass driver is similarly powered by its own 40W amplifier.

Connect more

In addition to the Bluetooth connectivity, two wired inputs (a 3.5mm stereo jack and a pair of RCA phono sockets) are provided on the back panel, along with a USB socket to provide power for charging a smartphone. For additional bass reinforcement, a subwoofer can be attached via an additional RCA phono socket. Pairing is easily accomplished by first pressing the 'Pair' button on the remote control and then scanning for the device with the smartphone or other music player.



When I connect the T10 to my smartphone via Bluetooth, I am greeted with an impressive sound stage considering this is a single-box stereo speaker. There is plenty of volume (which is controlled via the remote control), certainly more than enough to fill a good-sized room. The bass is well controlled and decently extended, thanks to the rear-vented bass port and the top end is clear, but in no way harsh. In fact, it is one of the best Bluetooth single-box loudspeakers I have heard. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£300
CONTACT
01908 282498
WEBSITE
audioprodirect.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Epiphany Acoustics

Solaris interconnects



IF YOU'RE AFTER some low-cost, good quality interconnect cables you might want to consider the Solaris range. This is a series of high-quality mini jack and portable audio-based interconnects and cables, featuring gold-plated connectors and silver-plated copper conductors.

The Solaris range includes 3.5mm-to-3.5mm mini-jack cables, 3.5mm mini-jack-to-stereo RCA phono cables and 3.5mm mini-jack-to-6.25mm jack socket cables for use as a headphone adapter. The latter allows headphones supplied with a standard plug to be used with portable equipment fitted with a 3.5mm mini-jack socket.

Epiphany Acoustics also offers the Solaris II range, which uses a much heavier gauge combination of silver-plated and ultra-pure oxygen-free copper wire than used in the Solaris range. The Solaris II also uses low-loss polyethylene dielectric found

in its other high-end cables and interconnects.

Good vibrations

Vibrations are minimised by tightly packing the twisted conductors with cotton filler and close-lapped shielding protects the sensitive audio signals while maintaining flexibility for easy installation. The 3.5mm connectors of the Solaris cables have also been upgraded to heavier duty gold-plated plugs to cope with the larger cable in the Solaris IIs.

The Solaris cables are quite thin (only about 5mm in diameter) and, in my opinion, are aimed at the portable end of the market. Moving up to the Solaris IIs results in a much more respectable 7mm diameter cable that I consider to be better suited for equipment interconnects. Both cables are very flexible.



In use, the Solaris cable provides a sound that is a bit clearer than that produced by a standard 'out-of-the-box' cable – not bad for a 1m cable costing under £15! Moving up to the Solaris II brings additional sonic benefits in the form of a more refined sound with greater realism – and all for an additional cost of just under a tenner! All-in-all, these cables are fantastic value and come highly recommended. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
Solaris: £14 for 1m 3.5mm-to-3.5mm cable and £18 for 3.5mm-to-6.25mm headphone adapter. Solaris II: £23 for 1m 3.5mm-to-3.5mm cable and £28 for 1.2m 3.5mm-to-stereo RCA

WEBSITE
epiphany-acoustics.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



GN-2

Straight Line Contact Banana Plug

I have designed the Straight Line Contact Plug because I enjoy listening to great music and I want to experience the musician's artistry in full. I have listened, compared and evaluated various options and to my ears, the Straight Line Contact Plug gives me the sound I like best.

In the GN-2 plug the connection is made by a thin cylindrical wire, plated in gold to protect the sensitive connection between the cable and the binding post from corrosion which may distort the music.

By reducing the surface area of the contact between plug and binding post this gives a focused contact that delivers a clearer sound quality than conventional designs.

The GN-2 Straight Line Contact Plugs will make a real positive difference to your enjoyment of your music. If they don't, I will happily refund you your full purchase price.

Graham Nally



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Keith Monks

discOverOne record cleaning machine

THERE ARE PRECIOUS few brands that have scaled the high walls of the hi-fi industry, only to emerge blinking into the daylight of the wider world outside. Tannoy is the obvious example – it's even reserved itself a place in the dictionary – and then you're talking Linn and Quad, both of which seem to have seeped out into some civilian circles. Keith Monks has made that transition too – famous for that big old record cleaning machine seen in a grimy corner of hundreds of hi-fi and record shops throughout the seventies and eighties. It's certainly a name to conjure with.

Which is precisely what Jonathan Monks has done. Five years ago he revived his father's company and set about remaking his classic Omni record cleaning machine. At the time, his focus was on the faithful recreation of this legendary device – everyone who has used one knows that it works brilliantly and Jon wasn't willing to be told that the relaunched machine was a shadow of the original.

All well and good. But what about those of us who merely want to restore discs we pick up from record fairs and charity shops? And how about vinyl junkies on a more limited budget? It is for these people that the new discOverOne was created.

Spring clean

It comes in two versions; the one you see here with built-in wash system for £1,595, or for £300 less you can manually apply the cleaning fluid. Much of the saved cost is down to the main turntable, which is no longer a bespoke design. Instead, an adapted Technics SL-1200 clone is used. This may seem odd, but it's a fine piece of lateral thinking, given that there are plenty available for relatively little money, and that these robust direct drive designs are still strong enough to drive a cleaning machine.

Using the new discOverOne is similar to its bigger, older brother. You switch it on, place a dirty record



on the turntable and move the cleaning block across so it covers the whole surface of the disc. Then you press the Mini Cooper screen washer knob and you'll begin to see the brush – and then the record – getting wet. When the disc is wet (but not drowned) with fluid, you return the cleaning brush to its rest position and then phase two of the operation commences. The suction arm (a converted SL-1200 clone tonearm) is moved across to the centre of the disc, and a microswitch starts up the suction pump and pulls the arm from the inside 'run out' groove to the outside 'lead in' groove as it sucks up the fluid. This is a noticeably slower process than with the Omni (which runs at 80rpm to the discOverOne's 33), but if anything it's easier to use. There's auto-shut off when the suction arm finishes its job, and I also find it slightly quieter than the original (the noise is claimed to be 37dB, C-weighted, at 1m).

About a minute later, you're left with a sparkling slice of rejuvenated vinyl. Having cleaned both sides, you'd be crazy not to put it into a brand new polythene-lined sleeve, lest all the scunge deposited inside the old sleeve goes straight back onto the disc surface again. Generally, I find one clean per side sufficient – it has to be a pretty nasty disc to require a second go. But when you do give it

a second clean, it digs deeper than the first, removing practically every trace of gunge – even deep greasy fingermarks. I spent several months giving the original Omni a good testing, and I'd say this new cheaper design doesn't work any less well – it's just slower. I also like the automatic shut-off, when the waste container is full.

Dirty dancing

A cleaned disc plays better, regardless of how dirty it was (or not) pre-ablutions. Obviously, if it was in a bad way, the improvement will be dramatic, as my somewhat 'well campaigned' record collection shows. But even new vinyl can benefit, not least because of the removal of the mould release agent in the grooves. It makes for a brighter, tighter, more focused sound with greater grip and power in the bass. That's the great thing about having a serious record cleaning machine such as this – as well as a basic subsistence tool it gives you improved sound even on discs that you'd think don't need it. The new Keith Monks discOverOne is an excellent product then, giving you almost all the performance of the company's more expensive machines, but at a far more affordable price. Every serious record collector should have one. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£1,595
CONTACT
01983 857079
WEBSITE
keithmonks-rcm.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



These are a few of our favourite things – favourite because they give so much musical enjoyment

An amazing system upgrade for only £400! PICO GROUNDING BLOCKS from Vertex AQ

When equipment sounds wonderful, is well-built and gives great musical pleasure – then it becomes a favourite. We reckon we are lucky to have a high number of ‘favourites’ in our stable.

The **Aurender W20** streamer is a masterpiece of user-friendliness, the streamer for people unsure about streaming! It is easily loaded with most file types from almost any digital source – high resolution downloads (eg 24/96 and 24/192ks/s), CDs, USB stick and external hard drive – controlled from Aurender’s own user interface running on an iPad.



The display shows current track information. Full details of music stored on the hard drives appear on the iPad with album cover art.

Music is stored on two 3TB hard drives but queued and played from a 240GB flash drive to minimise electrical noise. For further mains isolation, free of glare and haze, power for the audio circuits is drawn from re-chargeable batteries.

Operation is smooth and faultless and sound is gloriously natural and full-bodied, floating behind ‘invisible’ speakers, from performers clearly ‘present’ in your room.

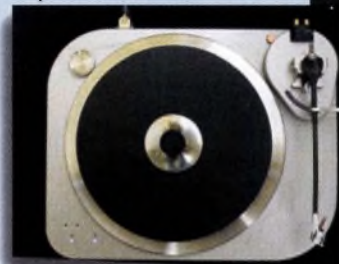
Vertex AQ’s RFI- and vibration-absorption technology now appears in the new and extraordinary **PICO COMPONENT GROUNDING BLOCKS**. “This is one of the best single upgrades I’ve ever made and certainly the most cost-effective one.” said DC of Bristol, speaking of the £400 device.

Supplied with two 1m cables, the Pico is simply connected to unused RCA or XLR sockets on components.

Vibration on circuit boards and electrical ‘noise’ on grounds, or earths – all intermodulating and damaging the music signal – are drawn into the Block to open the sound stage and reveal new drive, emotion and dynamics.



Spiral Groove turntables **SG1.1** and **SG2** and the **Centroid** arm have earned universal praise for their spectacular near-silent operation, retrieving musical information from an inky-black background, thanks to a fundamental re-think of ‘Balanced Force Design’ and fanatical care in controlling energy.



Solid construction ensures that stylus, arm pivot, platter bearing and motor remain in an absolutely fixed relationship, unlike suspended turntables that are perpetually in motion as they attempt to correct for the dynamic forces acting both internally and externally.

Spiral Groove have won several “Product of the Year” awards and comments such as ‘..this may be the best tonearm I’ve heard’ and of the SG2 ‘..it transcends expectations – it’s something special’ both from the US magazine *Stereophile*.

Kaiser Acoustic’s Chiara standmount speaker projects music with astonishing clarity, openness, scale and bass power while ‘disappearing’ itself, leaving an involving performance hanging in space.

Three separate labyrinths in the integral stand drain vibration from the cabinet, the crossover and the drive units which can then operate freely from a firm foundation, liberated from vibration’s distorting, intermodulating effects.

Praise has been heaped on the Chiara, in the on-line review site *The Audio Beat* and in the September 2013 issue of *hifi+* where Paul Messenger wrote, ‘The bottom line is that this is one of the finest loudspeakers I’ve ever had the pleasure of reviewing.’

The Chieras are probably the most musical speaker you’ll ever hear. **You can see why they’re one of our favourites.**



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Just listen and you’ll know

Digital: Accustic Arts, Aurender, Bel Canto, dCS, Gamut, Resolution Audio, Vertex AQ dac. Vinyl: Aesthetix, Clearaudio, Graham, Spiral Groove, Transfiguration. Tuners: Magnum Dynalab. Amplifiers: Accustic Arts, Aesthetix, Bel Canto, CAT, Gamut, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, VTL. Loudspeakers: Avalon, Gamut, Kaiser Acoustics, NEAT, Totem. Cables: Chord Co., DNМ, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, VertexAQ. Mains: Aletheia, Vertex AQ. Supports: Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi-Fi Racks, LeadingEdge, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ Room acoustics: LeadingEdge



Cambridge Audio

DacMagic XS DAC

INCREASINGLY, MANY OF us are enjoying hi-res music stored on a computer having been downloaded from an HD audio website such as Linn Downloads or the Nordic Sound.

To the concert connoisseur using an internal DAC is like asking the LSO to play in the bandstand at Regents Park in a force 10 gale. There is already a handful of external USB DACs on the market including the acclaimed (*HFC 377*) Meridian Explorer, which retails for £250, and the equally impressive £215 AudioQuest Dragonfly.

Size matters

Cambridge Audio ships the DacMagic XS in a much larger box than is needed for its size. The contents have not settled during transportation like a box of cornflakes, but the packaging makes you feel better about spending £100. Cunning, eh? But it's pleasing to discover that the unit is in fact smaller even than the picture on the front. The 5.4cm-long device weighs less than 25g, but seems durable and looks classy with slightly rounded edges and a tough, brushed aluminium finish. Two large buttons are provided for altering the volume in 54 steps. You can also use the slider in iTunes, but the quickest and most convenient method of volume adjustment – the function buttons on a keyboard – are annoyingly disabled.

DacMagic XS is supplied with a 14cm-long USB cable and a soft pouch for protection during storage. Adopting a cable-tethering approach, like the Meridian Explorer, means it won't stick out at the side of your laptop like the Dragonfly does and is less likely to break than a built-in USB connector. One end of the unit sports a micro USB socket the other hosts a gold-plated 3.5mm jack and a tiny LED, which glows when in use. Mainly intended for use as a headphone DAC, you could also hook up the DacMagix XS to a desktop amplifier using the 3.5mm output. Inside is a high-quality



ESS9023 24-bit DAC that supports sample rates up to 192kHz. Minimum headphone impedance is 12ohms and the output voltage is a generous 2V RMS, meaning you shouldn't ever feel short changed volume-wise when using long cable runs or low sensitivity headphones. You can manually switch from USB 1.0, which has a maximum sample rate of 96kHz, to 192kHz-compatible USB 2.0 operation by simultaneously pressing the volume buttons for a few seconds, whereupon the LED changes from green to blue. On a Mac you can easily check the sample rate from within the Audio MIDI utility and manually match the sample rate to the native rate.

I use a set of Philips Fidelio M1 headphones, which are closely matched impedance-wise to the DacMagic XS, and the results are good, but not startling with MP3s. Thomas Newman's *Six Feet Under*, for example, has decent resolution throughout the dynamic range and reasonable bass, but the clarinet lacks a bit of spit and polish and transients tail off quickly. It's a similar story with Kyu Sakamoto's *Sukiyaki*, where the bass feels a bit cramped. Stepping up to some AAC tub-thumping electronica, *Silent Shout* by The Knife is delivered with greater bass response extracting maximum impact from the muffled drums. With *Sad*

February by the Unthanks, a 16/44.1 AAC file, bass again lacks a bit of firmness, but the midrange and upper registers are nice and open, revealing all the emotion of the vocals and chilliness of the piano.

Moving on up

Upping the ante with some 24/96 ALAC fodder in the shape of Susan Wong's *Desperado* it's like removing a pair of wellies and slipping into your favourite slippers. Now my ears are as happy as an eight year old in Hamleys. The additional dynamic range gives everything so much more punch and control, but there's a lightness of touch so that the mesmerising vocals seem to float. Mozart's *Violin Concerto No 4 in D Major* – down-sampled to 192kHz from a DXD 24/352.8kHz WAV file – reveals incredible clarity, especially the lead violin, which is crisper than an early morning February stroll.

The wonderfully compact DacMagic XS doesn't have quite the same amount of authority as the Meridian Explorer (nor does it have an S/PDIF optical output for that matter), but it is less than half the price. Given how masterfully it handles hi-res sources in particular and its sterling work with lower-quality material, isn't hard to say that this is probably the best entry-level DAC around. **AJ**

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Analogue Seduction

Isoclean Anti-Static Disc Cleaner

IT IS TAKEN for granted these days that, in order to get the best sound, vinyl records need to be cleaned thoroughly to remove the mould release agent from the grooves and they should also be cleaned before playing to remove dust and dirt. However, many people are realising that CDs also need to be cleaned not only to reduce disc-read errors, but also to improve sound quality. For this purpose, Analogue Seduction has produced the Isoclean Anti-Static Disc Cleaner, which is a specially formulated anti-static and deep cleaning fluid designed for CD, DVD and Blu-ray discs. Since it is a straightforward cleaning product, it leaves no residue on the disc and can be used as often as required.

To treat a CD or DVD, simply spray the fluid straight from the pump bottle onto the playing side of the

disc and polish off with a clean cloth. Then finish off with a final buff of the cloth to ensure that the surface is completely dry and that there are no residual traces remaining.

The filth and the fury

As all my CDs are perfectly clean (cough!) I acquire some grubby specimens to conduct the ubiquitous 'before and after' tests. Although these CDs play satisfactorily I find that there is an improvement in sound quality when using this product. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the discs are cleaner so the player has to perform less error correction and, secondly, any stray electrical charges that build up on the discs are removed. These charges can produce an increase in jitter (digital timing issues) that can corrupt the audio signal. Reduction of all these unwanted effects at source results in



a performance that is more detailed and musical.

This is an excellent value disc cleaner that can be used before every playing and is therefore to be highly recommended. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£16

CONTACT
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OUR VERDICT



Origin Live

Cartridge Washers



THIS LITTLE KIT consists of five tiny sleeved nylon washers that are fitted around the fixing screws of a cartridge. Although they are supplied free along with Origin Live's own Aladdin cartridge, they are also available separately for use with any cartridge. They are designed to help isolate the cartridge from unwanted vibrations reflected in the headshell or back from the tonearm. A detailed drawing is supplied along with the washers to illustrate precisely how they should be fitted.

When installing, two washers are fitted on each cartridge mounting bolt – one on each side of the headshell. On closer inspection, each washer has a tiny collar on one side and I discover that it is best to fit each so that the collar faces the headshell on each side. That way, the bolt is centred within the hole to help with the isolation.

The fifth washer is placed at the rear of the cartridge and is sandwiched between the cartridge and the headshell to eliminate any chance of the cartridge 'rocking' front to back. This means that the cartridge is supported at three points, which of course makes it very stable.

Angle of dangle

After fitting it is worth checking the VTA of the cartridge as it will now be slightly lower in the headshell than it was without the washers. It is also worth taking a look at the azimuth to ensure that the stylus is still perpendicular to the record in case the head screws have not been tightened evenly. This can be easily done by placing the stylus on a mirrored surface.



With my cartridge, I find a subtle improvement in the image placement when the washers are fitted. This may be down to the isolation effect of the washers or due to the cartridge being well supported at three points – or indeed a combination of both factors. Whatever the reason, at this price it is well worth experimenting with your cartridge. **NR**

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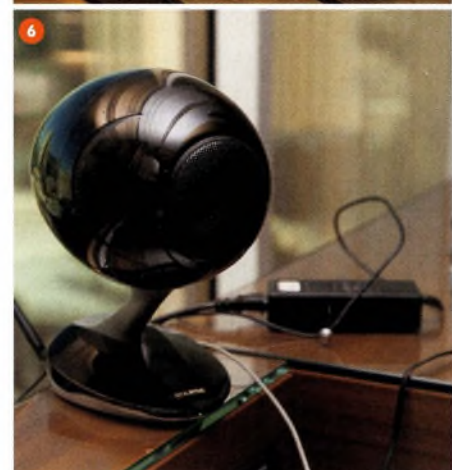
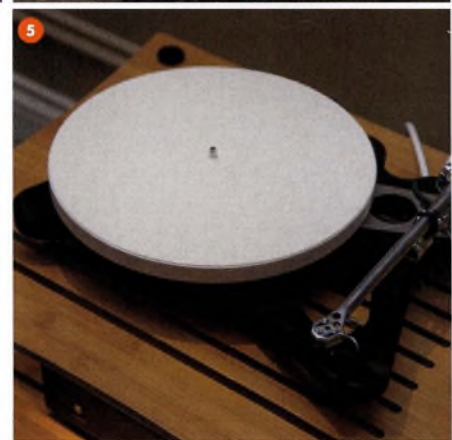
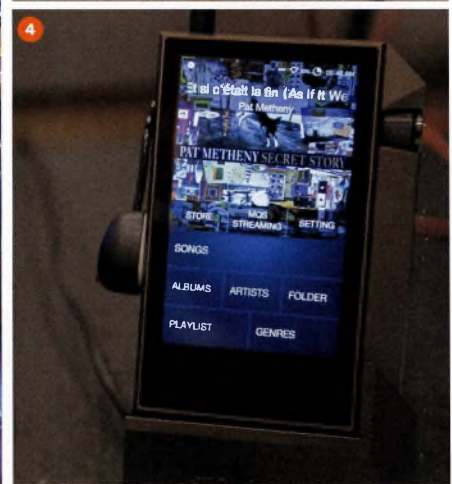
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OUR VERDICT





CES 2014

Jason Kennedy hits the bright-light city of Las Vegas to make his way around the monstrous Consumer Electronics Show

CES IS A massive event showcasing shiny new kit for the year ahead. The speciality audio element is just a small part of the Las Vegas show, but it still takes a full four days to get around. Most but not all of it is in the megabucks ballpark, and it almost seems that you can't hold your head high as a manufacturer unless you have at least one \$50,000 offering. Fortunately, a few companies realise we're not all loaded and have some interesting kit at real-world prices.

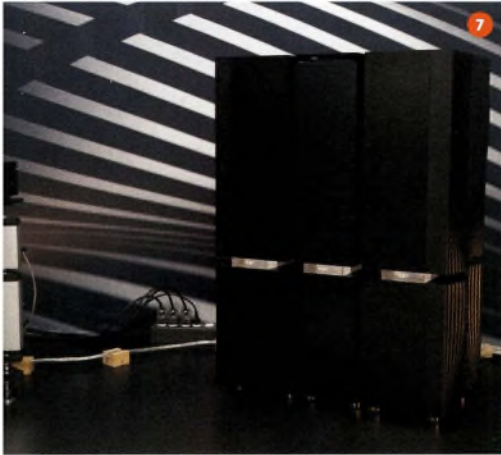
The buzz word this year is DSD, the format that underpinned SACD is enjoying a new lease of life on computer files. Until now it has been difficult to get hold of these files but several companies have started to offer downloads, the most interesting being Acoustic Sounds' Super HiRez service, which has a broad array of material on offer. Nativesd.com is a hub for record companies that have

DSD material to sell and because it's being sold by the rights holders there are no barriers to international purchase as is often the case with US sites. HD Tracks is the biggest name in hi-res downloads but eschews DSD, it is, however, planning to make its extensive catalogue available to us in the UK later this year, which is great news. Now that DSD is so hip, it's a good idea to offer the ability to decode it on new DACs and there were plenty of examples in action, one distributor even recorded his vinyl onto DSD to make the most of Vivid's new G4 Giya speakers.

Mobile is also on the rise with a number of brands offering either high-resolution portable players or DAC/headphone amps for use with smartphones. With Onkyo and others offering playback apps, this looks like being the beginning of something big, albeit in conveniently small packages.

1 Epos K
The K-1 standmount (£360) and K-2 floorstander (£795) run 5.25in main drivers and first order crossover. Back panels can be removed for active operation with digital inputs.

2 Chord Electronics Hugo
A portable DAC crammed with top-notch tech. The Hugo has a Zilinch chipset, 11 hour battery life and is 384kHz and DSD compatible. The asking price is £1,250.



3 Isotek EVO3 Sigmas

This whole system mains conditioner reduces RFI by 75dB and offers 108kA of instantaneous protection for £2,400.

4 Astell&Kern AK240

The native DSD decoding portable player in aircraft-grade duraluminium body has dual DACs and 256GB storage onboard for circa £2,000.

5 Rega RP10

A turbo-charged RP8 with a Brio-R sized power supply, ceramic platter, new bearing and sub platter, plus new all metal RB2000 tonearm. Price is £3,000.



6 Eclipse TD-M1

The TD-M1 has onboard amplification, wired and wireless connectivity including Airplay Direct and a non-oversampling DAC. Not bad for £1,000.

7 Naim Statement

A preamp and two monoblocks with one horsepower per channel, it comes in at £125,000. But it's in a league of its own.

8 Pro-Ject RPM1 Carbon

The RPM1 Carbon features an S-shaped arm made of carbon fibre-wrapped aluminium, giving combined damping and stiffness at a price tag of £350.

9 Bang & Olufsen Form 2i

First introduced back in 1983, the Form 2 is back with revised ear pads plus a remote control and mic in the lead. It comes in a range of colours at £100.



10 Arcam A49

The A49 does 200W into 8ohms and 400W into 2ohms, uses Class G technology and offers power outlets for r-Series ancillaries. Price is £3,250.

11 Wadia

This substantial DAC/digital preamp comes with five inputs including USB, 24/192 conversion plus variable analogue and headphone outputs. All for \$3,000.



12 TEAC 301

This streaming amp/DAC has 40W power, aptX and DSD conversion. The matching UD-301 USB DAC does native and double DSD with dual Burr-Brown converters.

13 Monitor Audio Airstream 100

The Airstream 100 amplifier offers 50W of Class A/B power, works wired or wirelessly, has digital and analogue inputs and costs £400.

14 Creek Evolution 50 CD

This DAC with a CD slot has four digital inputs, two outputs and USB. It has balanced and SE outputs as well as optional Bluetooth for £950.

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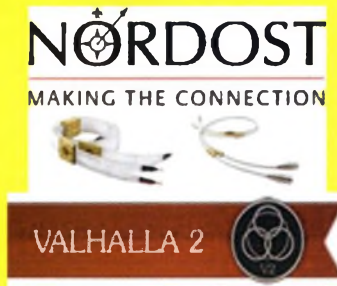
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Cable Lift



Nordost introduced its new Valhalla 2 Reference Cable Range at the High End Show, M.O.C. in Munich, Germany on May 9, 2013. The latest range consists of analogue, digital, and tone arm interconnects, as well as loudspeaker and power cables. The new Valhalla 2 range uses upgraded Dual Mono-Filament technology, along with an innovative proprietary connector called the HOLO:PLUG™. The HOLO:PLUG™ is a patent pending connector, designed to be the best possible interface between the cable and the component. Perfect signal integrity can be measured throughout the system. Designed to transfer every last nuance of detail, and they claim the HOLO:PLUG™ is a miracle of mechanical and electrical integrity. If you have an original Valhalla cable and wish to upgrade to the new Valhalla 2 please give us a call as we have an affordable upgrade path.



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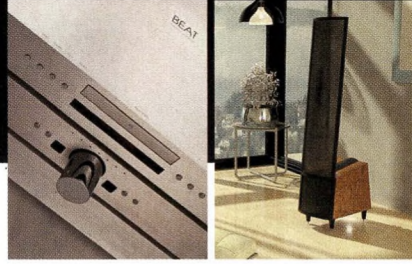
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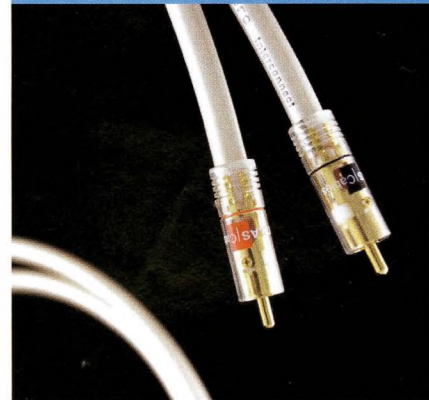
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