



**Krell Connect**  
Network music player/DAC  
blows away the competition

**Bijou Blu**

Musical Fidelity  
V90-BLU adds Bluetooth to hi-fi



# Hi-Fi Choice

**PASSION FOR SOUND**

Issue No. **385**

June 2014

# Spin masters

Six mid-priced turntables to get your vinyl on track

**Sound bytes**

Computer audio made simple

**MUSIC REVIEWS**  
Essential must-own albums

**40**

**PRODUCTS ON TEST:**

Atacama, JBL, PSB, Rega, Sony & Vieta

**Hi-fi racks**

Fantastic furniture that looks and sounds great



**ON TEST:**

**Evolving CD**

Creek's awesome Evolution 50CD brings new strengths to the format

**Superb sonics**

Stunning floorstander from Q Acoustics



Q SERIES

**KEF**  
INNOVATORS IN SOUND



## a class above



Whether your preference is music or movies, the KEF Q Series offers a range of options to accommodate your needs. So, whether you're looking for a two channel system or a complete 5.1 or even a 7.2 AV set-up, the highly versatile nine-model line-up will truly satisfy your need for class-leading audio purity.

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*'For a surround sound experience that delivers true escapism, this package will take some beating.'*

Q300 5.1 System, What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision, August 2011

@KEF Audio



KEF Audio UK





**105**  
**Pure**  
Jongo T6



**56**  
**PSB**  
Imagine Mini

**Music reviews**



**99**  
**Emmylou Harris** *Wrecking Ball*

**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!



Another Record Store Day took place on Saturday 19th April, which saw celebrations across the UK in many towns and cities as fans eager to buy music formed queues outside shops long before they opened. The event first started back in 2007 when more than 700 independent stores in the US came

together to celebrate record shop culture. 2014 marked the seventh UK event, with special edition CDs and vinyl made exclusively for release on the day, and more stores and artists participating than ever before. Despite Record Store Day being passionately supported by vinyl enthusiasts looking to make a genuine purchase, it is being undermined by greedy touts trying to make a fast buck and sell on the collectible cuts via online auction sites to anyone foolish enough to pay over the odds. Paul Weller is the most high-profile artist to speak out about those spoiling the concept of Record Store Day for the genuine fans, and has withdrawn his support. Read the full story in our next issue on a record store event that took place near you.

It's clear that vinyl's popularity continues to grow, as there are more turntables available today than when the format was in its heyday. In our *Group Test* starting on page 24 we have selected six of the latest mid-priced models to see how they compare. Whether you're coming to the format for the first time or looking for a deck to play your old record collection, there's a model that's right for you.

**Lee Dunkley** Editor

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# Hi-Fi Choice Contents

hifichoice.co.uk Issue No. **385** June 2014

## NEWS & OPINION

### 6 **Audiofile**

The latest news on the hottest products from the world of hi-fi coming your way

### 12 **Webwatch**

Essential websites to direct your browser towards for all your hi-fi requirements

### 67 **Letters**

Put your points of view and queries on audio matters to our team of experts

### 77 **Opinion**

The *Hi-Fi Choice* team say it as they see it as they discuss the issues of the day

### 99 **Music Reviews**

The month's essential new CD, vinyl and hi-res releases given a workout

### 130 **Back Chat**

A look back in time, news snippets and an industry insider picks their top albums

## READER SERVICES

### 75 **Caption Competition**

Win yourself some fancy earphones

### 102 **Reader Classifieds**

Sell your unwanted hi-fi for FREE here

### 124 **Next Issue**

The sonic treats to look out for next month



## FEATURES

### 62 **Insider Feature**

How Bob Stuart and Allen Boothroyd shook up the world of hi-fi with Meridian

### 90 **Dealer Systems**

We're off to Cheadle to check out some of The Audio Work's amazing systems

### 94 **Labelled With Love**

Set the time machine to the sixties as we discover how Elektra kicked out the jams

### 118 **Guide To...**

Computer music. Discover why hi-res holds the key to the future of digital audio

## GROUP TEST

24 **It's time to put the needle on the record as we take six turntables out for a spin**



**WIN**  
SoundMAGIC  
earphones  
worth £40!  
p75



**Audiofile:** Devialet's Ensemble system



**Music reviews:** T Rex's eponymous album



**109**  
**Sony**  
SRS-X9 wireless speaker

“There is now equipment available at virtually every price point from affordable to ultra high end.”

**Guide to... Computer Music p118**

**TESTED THIS MONTH**



**42**  
**Krell** Connect network music player/DAC



**46**  
**Creek** Evolution 50CD CD player



**50**  
**Vieta Audio** VH-HA100/VH-CD060



**52**  
**B.M.C.** PureDAC DAC

**REVIEWS**

Kit testing

- 16 Q Acoustics**  
Concept 40 floorstanding loudspeaker
- 42 Krell**  
Connect network music player (Exotica)
- 46 Creek**  
Evolution 50CD CD player/DAC preamp
- 50 Vieta Audio**  
VH-HA100/VH-CD060 integrated amplifier/CD player
- 52 B.M.C.**  
PureDAC digital-to-analogue converter
- 56 PSB**  
Imagine Mini standmount loudspeaker
- 59 ISOKinetik**  
Silver Melody 750 tonearm
- 60 JBL**  
Studio 270 floorstanding loudspeaker
- 88 Chord Electronics**  
DAC64 DAC (retro)

**GROUP TEST**

Turntables £350-£600

- 27 Inspire Hi-Fi**  
Black Magic Si
- 29 Music Hall** MMF-2.2
- 31 Pro-Ject** Debut Carbon Esprit SB
- 33 Rega** RP3
- 35 SOTA** Moonbeam Series II
- 37 Stanton** STR8.150

**MINI TEST**

Audio equipment racks  
£600-£976

- 84 Atacama Audio**  
Eris Eco 5.0 Special Edition
- Russ Andrews**  
Torlyte Rack System
- 85 Hi-Fi Racks Ltd**  
Podium Reference with Isolation Panels
- 85 Isoblu HiFi**  
60 Series



**16**  
**Q Acoustics**  
Concept 40 loudspeaker

**CHOICE EXTRAS**

- 105 Pure**  
Jongo T6 wireless speaker
- 106 Sennheiser**  
IE800 earphones
- 109 Sony**  
SRS-X9 wireless active speaker
- 110 Musical Fidelity**  
V90-BLU Bluetooth receiver
- 113 Phonon**  
SMB-02 headphones
- 114 Blue Aura**  
X30 Bluetooth speakers
- 114 Track Audio**  
Turntable Isolators
- 116 ISOKinetik**  
PEEK Bearing for Rega turntables
- 116 Final Audio Design**  
Heaven II earphones

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

## Hi-fi Ensemble

French audio brand Devialet introduces an ultra-stylish audio system with SAM technology

**PRICE:** £6,290 **AVAILABLE:** MID-MAY  
**CONTACT:** 0208 9713909 **WEB:** ABSOLUTESOUNDS.COM

**HIGH-END AUDIO** innovator Devialet has announced the launch of its first ready-made audio system. The Devialet Ensemble – launched at the Munich High End Show, mid-May – comprises a Devialet 110 amplifier/DAC with a pair of special-edition GT1 speakers and cables made by fellow French company Arohm.

System matching hi-fi components is a considerable art form, but with the Ensemble system Devialet claims to have done all the hard work for

you with an amplifier and speaker partnership that works together regardless of whether it's a digital or analogue source that's connected. Music can be streamed from a computer, tablet or smartphone to the 110 via the built-in Devialet Air high-definition wi-fi technology, or played by a CD player or turntable connected to one of its many inputs, the maker says.

The slim, wall-mountable 110 chassis has the company's ADH

(Analogue Digital Hybrid) technology as the heart of the amplifier, and is coupled with a new innovative technology called SAM (Speaker Active Matching). SAM has been developed by the Parisian-based company to allow any Devialet amplifier to adapt its behaviour to the attached loudspeaker by processing the digital signal according to a detailed mathematical model of the loudspeaker's bass performance (up to 150Hz). It is in effect a form of

**It is in effect a form of bespoke audio tailoring, to ensure the amplifier and the speaker fit perfectly together**



bespoke audio tailoring, to ensure the amplifier and the speaker fit perfectly together, says Devialet.

Designed and made in France, the Devialet Ensemble package blends the 110's dark chrome finish with the Atohm GT1's elegant white speakers. The 110 amplifier/DAC in each Ensemble comes with SAM software preinstalled and optimised for the system's partnering Atohm GT1 speakers to ensure that the acoustical signal produced by the speakers is an

exact replica of the audio signal on the recorded material for the best performance straight from the box.

In line with the company's 'free upgrades for life' policy, SAM will be available as a firmware upgrade to existing Devialet owners. Customers will be able to select their own speakers from a database and download and install the software.

Look out for our exclusive first review of the Devialet Ensemble appearing in these pages next month.



## COMMENT

### THE THIRD WAY

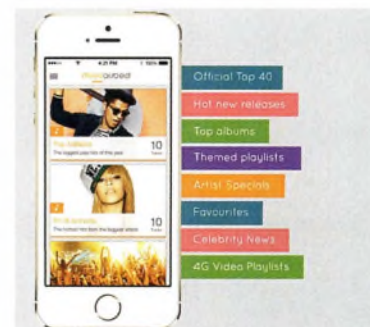
The marketplace in 2014 for buyers of music is rather different to how it was some 15 years ago. Nowadays, if you don't want to go down the old-fashioned route of buying physical media (ie CD or records) you have one of two choices: downloading or streaming. This means that you either purchase songs or albums as individual downloads or you fork out somewhere in the region of a tenner a month to subscribe to a streaming service that (more or less) covers all the new releases as they become available. There is, however, a third way.

A new market is currently emerging of what you might call 'mid-price' 'subscription services, for those that want to get their hands (or should that be ears) on new releases, but don't want to have to fork out a tenner a month for doing so. Nokia's MixRadio and Bloom.fm are both personal radio apps in their basic free incarnations, with more affordable premium tiers. MixRadio+ offers unlimited track skipping, cached playlists and higher-quality audio for less than a fiver, while Bloom.fm charges £1 a month to store 20 tracks on your phone (or a fiver for 200).

The latest addition is O2 Tracks, which as you'd imagine from the name comes via the mobile phone operator. Available on iPhone, Android, Windows Phone and BlackBerry 10 platforms, the service downloads the UK's Top 40 chart, along with other choice cuts and playlists to subscribers' phones every week for just £1 a week (for O2 customers that is, everyone else has to pay a fiver a month).

And it's catching on. Chris Gorman, boss of the app's developer MusicQubed, has revealed that users utilise the app for an average of more than 30 minutes a day, 60 percent of them are women and one in three pay for the service (while the rest opt for the free version). Of these users, 20 percent buy at least one track a month.

Described as the marketplace for those that love music, but don't want to put any work into it, it seems to be appealing to a whole new sector of the market that until now simply wasn't bothering and for that reason alone it should be applauded. ▶



# Yamaha's new series

Japanese audio brand continues to grow hi-fi separates range

**PRICE:** £1,600 & £1,700 **AVAILABLE:** SUMMER **CONTACT:** 0844 8111116 **WEB:** UK.YAMAHA.COM

**FOLLOWING LAST YEAR'S** announcement of the S3000 flagship series topping Yamaha's hi-fi range, comes news of the latest components to join the Japanese audio manufacturer's lineup in the form of the S2100 series with the A-S2100 integrated amplifier and CD-S2100 CD/SACD player being added later this year. Although no specific launch date is given, the new models will be previewed at the Munich High End Show from May 15.

The A-S2100 integrated is based on the more advanced A-S3C00 and utilises Yamaha's own floating and balanced

design for a cleaner, richer sound, and claims to deliver a dynamic power output of 2x 105W into 8ohms. With five gold-plated stereo inputs (including phono) as well as a balanced input, the A-S2100 is capable of handling plenty of analogue sources.

The CD-S2100 is based around the same CD/SACD transport as the flagship CD-S3000 and features a USB DAC capable of handling 24-bit/192kHz asynchronous and DSD formats. Both models are available in either silver or piano black finishes.

## IN BRIEF

### SONORO MUSIC SYSTEMS

● Sonoro brings colourful radio and CD music systems to the UK. The GoLondon (shown below) is a portable radio with FM/DAB/DAB+ tuners and comes with dishwasher-safe interchangeable sleeves. An optional rechargeable battery pack is also available.

SonoroSTEREO is a CD/FM/DAB/DAB+ radio with Bluetooth aptX streaming capability, while SonoroRADIO and SonoroCD offer the same radio tuner and Bluetooth functions, but add alarm clock facilities. All models are available in a choice of funky colours and prices range from £129 to £499.

**SONORO-AUDIO.COM**



## Dynaudio adds Evidence Platinum

**PRICE:** £58,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 01353 721089 **WEB:** DYNAUDIO.COM

Demonstrating its 40 year loudspeaker experience, Dynaudio introduces a new reference loudspeaker called the Evidence Platinum. The imposing new model tops the flagship Evidence range and stands at 194cm tall and weighs a total of 115kg. The unconventional cabinet design is the result of seven years of development by a specialist team of loudspeaker designers and builds on the Evidence Master introduced some 12 years ago.

The respected Danish speaker maker says the new Platinum Evidence model improves on the original Evidence Temptation and Evidence Master loudspeaker models. It utilises experience gained from the development of models across its other speaker ranges, and employs advanced drive units and crossover components with the highest level of fine tuning. The diaphragms of the bass and midrange drive units are made from Magnesium Silicate

Polymer offering low mass, high rigidity and are driven by ultra-lightweight voice coils with powerful magnets. The four bass drivers are enhanced by bass reflex ports at the back of the cabinets, which are shaped to eliminate harmful resonances, while the Esotar2 tweeters achieve a frequency response that exceeds 25kHz, says Dynaudio.

Finished in choice of fine piano lacquered wood grain veneers and black gloss finishes, the front baffles are constructed from high-grade aluminium measuring 4cm thick at the mid section for superior resonance-free acoustic control, Dynaudio says. Two types of base plinth feet are included for hard floor or carpet installations.

To be among the first to experience Dynaudio's new Evidence Platinum loudspeaker visit Analogue Seduction - the UK's exclusive Platinum dealer - for a demo by calling 01733 350878 or visit [www.analogueseduction.net](http://www.analogueseduction.net).





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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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**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](http://www.avidhifi.co.uk)

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# More Exakt

Linn adds Exakt platform to Akurate range

**PRICE:** £25,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 0500 888909 **WEB:** LINN.CO.UK

**LINN'S EXAKT PLATFORM** has been extended to its Akurate range of components. Exakt technology was first launched last year into the flagship Klimax system, and the platform has now been added to the Akurate line with the Akurate DSM and Akubarik loudspeaker incorporating Exakt technology. Inside each Exakt loudspeaker model is a digital engine that enables a range of performance-enhancing capabilities and a Linn specialist to optimise the system's performance to any environment for the best possible sound no matter what the source, room characteristics or preferred speaker positioning, says the Glasgow-based hi-fi manufacturer.

On sale now, Akurate Exakt Akubarik speakers are available in wood veneer and numerous bespoke high gloss options. Exakt modules are also available to existing Akurate and Akubarik owners and are priced at £14,000 for an upgrade package.



## IN BRIEF

### PRO-JECT DAC BOX DS UPGRADE



Owners of Pro-Ject's DAC Box DS (reviewed HFC 379) can now get a free upgrade that will enable it to handle the increasingly popular Direct Stream Digital (DSD) hi-res music format. The DAC Box DS, which offers optical, coaxial and asynchronous USB inputs handled by a Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC and fitted with switchable filter settings – steep and optimum phase, adds DSD format capabilities over USB only. DSD is gaining popularity as an alternative to FLAC and WAV files, and will be preinstalled on all new models. Existing owners can get their free step-by-step guide to upgrading by visiting the support pages at: [HENLEYDESIGNS.CO.UK](http://HENLEYDESIGNS.CO.UK)

## High-end headphone amp

**PRICE:** €1,490 **AVAILABLE:** MID-MAY  
**CONTACT:** 01444 258258 **WEB:** BEYERDYNAMIC.COM

Headphone manufacturer Beyerdynamic has announced the introduction of the A 2 headphone amplifier, which will be launched at the Munich High End Show, starting May 15. The Beyerdynamic A 2 excludes onboard digital-to-analogue circuitry, and is designed for music fans that already own a DAC or are looking to achieve pure analogue signal paths, says the German maker.

The top-of-the-range model is housed in a seamless unit with rounded edges and has a tinted glass top plate that shows off the

unit's internal circuitry through the 'soundwave' window. It has two stereo RCA inputs at the back for connecting up analogue input sources, which are selectable from the backlit buttons on the front. Two 6.35mm headphone jack outputs and a volume control are also provided on the front panel.

Beyerdynamic tells us that the unit is designed to drive high-end models like its own T 1 (£880) headphones, and offers the unique capability of separate user adjustments for impedance and sensitivity via slide switches found

on the underside of the unit to match the impedance to the specific characteristics of the headphones being used – ranging from 16 to 600ohms – for superior matching and sound quality capabilities. An additional gain switch is used to adjust the level of the connected source and that of the headphones, and the ALPS motorised potentiometer on the front can be controlled via the supplied infrared remote control.

On sale from mid-May, each A 2 headphone amplifier is supplied with a headphone stand. ▶



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# Webwatch

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



## Create your cables

Looking for no-nonsense bespoke hi-fi leads at sensible prices? Then head to Van Damme Trading's YouSpec cable builder, an interactive microsite that lets you specify cable length, type and choice of terminations [vdctrading.com/youSpec](http://vdctrading.com/youSpec)



## Panasonic petition

Since it went off sale back in 2010, DJs and hi-fi fans have mourned the passing of Technics' SL1200 vinyl spinner, so much that an online petition's been raised to bring it back, with over 9,000 signatures at the time of writing. Have your say [chn.ge/1iyJXiV](http://chn.ge/1iyJXiV)



## Geek unique

As the darlings of digital hi-fi, portable DACs are in high demand. And judging by its 2,146 backers that gave \$303,061 in total, Geek's Kickstarter-funded dinky USB DAC and Class A amp range packs in some serious audiophile promise. See what all the fuss is about at [antheMavs.co.uk](http://antheMavs.co.uk)



## Why vinyl

This short doc explores why, despite its perceived shortcomings, vinyl is still the format of choice for many music lovers. Featuring interviews with record store owners, DJs and vinyl fans, this film makes the case for the format's unique appeal [youtu.be/CUIMbwvYVOI](http://youtu.be/CUIMbwvYVOI)



## Arcam's new website

Top marks to the Arcam team for launching the Cambridge company's swish new website recently. With an enviably clean look, the site is brimming with blogs, product info (including some discontinued lines) heaps of advice and support. Check it out for yourself and head to [arcam.co.uk](http://arcam.co.uk)



## Music Matters

From hi-fi show live performances to product launch days and industry interviews with KEF, Naim, Nordost and Rega, we've been enjoying Music Matters' YouTube films in recent months. See what you've been missing at [youtube.com/MusicMattersLtd](http://youtube.com/MusicMattersLtd)

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## CHOICE TWEETS

**MCINTOSH LABORATORY (@MCINTOSHLABS)**  
Get #McIntosh sound in your #phones with our new #MHA100 #headphone #amplifier. [bit.ly/1i2mJBp](http://bit.ly/1i2mJBp) [pic.twitter.com/iwNisUvJC](http://pic.twitter.com/iwNisUvJC)

**KEF AUDIO UK (@KEFAUDIO)**  
KEF Muon has undergone further technical enhancements and upgrades - find out what these evolutionary steps are: [facebook.com/KEFAudioUK](http://facebook.com/KEFAudioUK)

**BRISTOL SHOW (@SVBRISTOLSHOW)**  
What brands/products would you most like to see at the #BristolShow 2015? Fri 20 - Sun 22 Feb. [bristolshow.co.uk/Contact.lasso](http://bristolshow.co.uk/Contact.lasso)

**TANNOY PROFESSIONAL (@TANNOYPRO)**  
#ThrowbackThursday #TBT The actual microphone used by the Queen in 1947 #tannoyoundsbetter #tannoy instagram. [com/p/mmxC8FSIDV/](http://com/p/mmxC8FSIDV/)

**CYPHER LABS LLC (@CYPHERLABS)**  
Would love to have you enter our blog contest! Enter your review about our product for a chance for it to be featured [a.pgth.me/59ZqBf](http://a.pgth.me/59ZqBf)

**VACUUM LAB (@VACUUMLAB)**  
The war against #vibrations and #resonance continue [flic.kr/p/mu3WpV](http://flic.kr/p/mu3WpV) #hifi #hiend #audiophile

**LINN (@LINNPRODUCTS)**  
What's your favourite vinyl album cover? Tweet us a photo of it alongside #VinylAdikt. Here's one of ours: [pic.twitter.com/Bj9jhjKNo](http://pic.twitter.com/Bj9jhjKNo)

**DIVERSE VINYL (@DIVERSEVINYL)**  
Record Store Day - Complete list of exclusives ordered <http://t.co/nS3qzwZVtz>

**MOORGATE ACOUSTICS (@KIPPER248)**  
Today we are demonstrating a comparison between the Naim NDs and Chord DSX-1000 streamers! Both fine contenders [fb.me/2avR7ETIW](http://fb.me/2avR7ETIW)

**SPOTIFY (@SPOTIFY)**  
We're rolling out "Your Music" to everyone during the month. Get to know our newest feature! #PaintItBlack <http://spoti.fi/OIjw3Z>

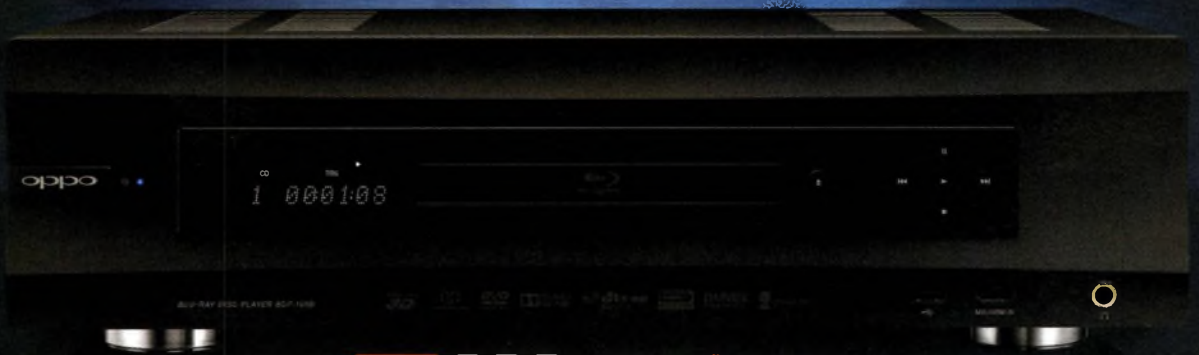
**LINTONE AUDIO (@LINTONEAUDIO)**  
Our next show will be with Rega Research which will also be a service clinic and will let you know the date when fixed.

**ARTCOUSTIC UK (@ARTCOUSTICUK)**  
Wow! One of the busiest days we've ever seen on our Inspirational Flickr site. 950000 views now. <http://goo.gl/2pII2H> Near 1 Million views

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# DON'T FORGET DAD!

Father's Day is sneaking up quickly (June 15th) so why not get organised now and treat Dad to a subscription to his favourite magazine? We have some great offers available – grab a subscription for less than £20 or treat him to a full year and get a great free gift too. You could even treat yourself!

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## Hi-Fi News

## Hi-Fi Choice

## Home Cinema Choice

## What Satellite

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# Loving music

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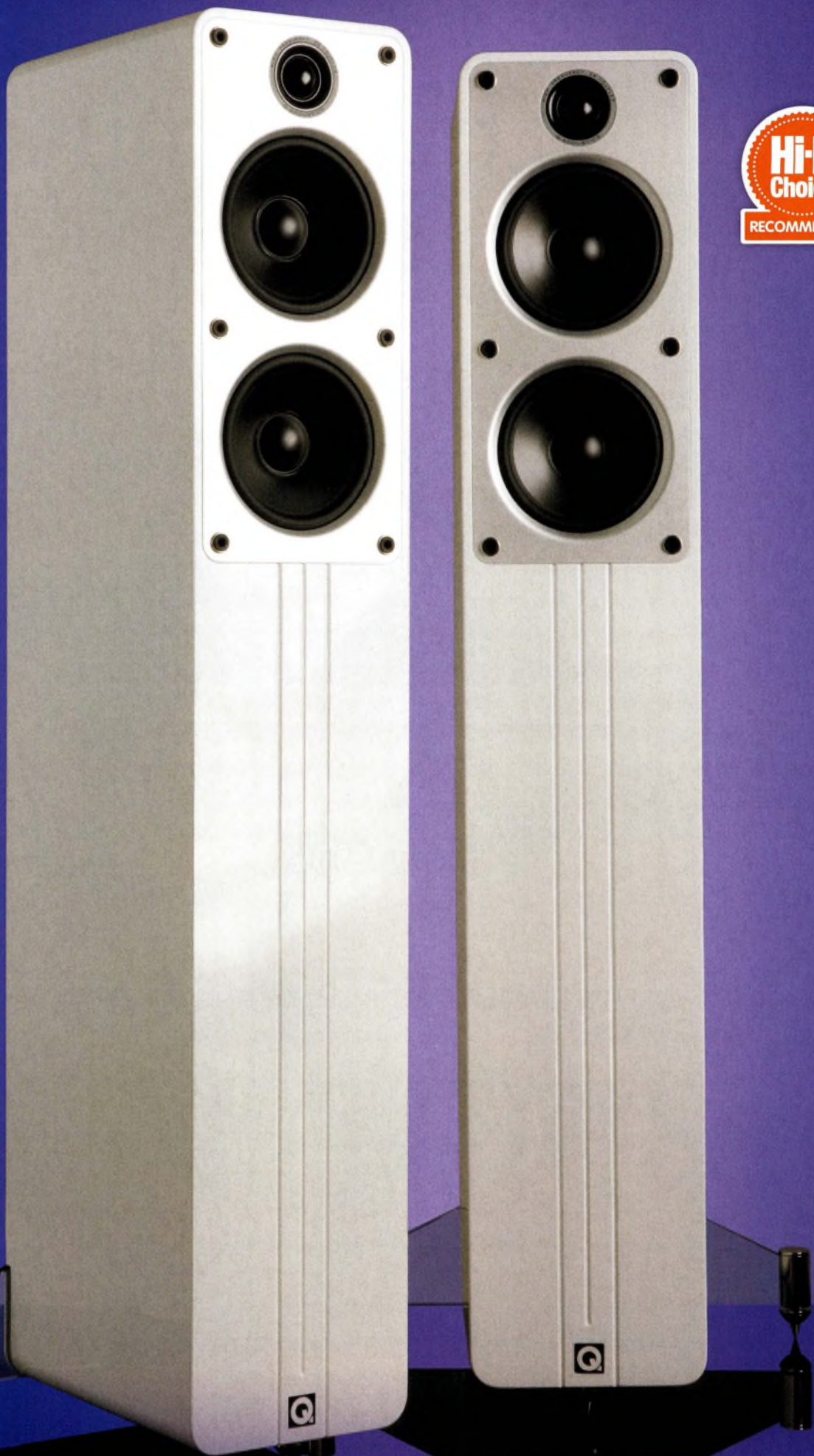
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# Tall story

Once upon a time, there was a little speaker that grew into a big one. **David Price** tells the tale of Q Acoustics' new Concept 40

**T**he concept is clear – to make a good speaker great. There are several ways of doing this, the obvious one being to spend large amounts of money on the drive units. A fancy ribbon tweeter here or some expensive carbon fibre mid/bass drivers there, perchance? The other way is to work on the cabinet, and if you think about it, this is even more critical than the drivers, which can't do their best if they're spoiled by boomy boxes.

In a way, cabinets can do no right, as all they can do is lower the performance potential of drive units by accentuating standing waves – smudging and blurring the sound from inside. Indeed, no matter how good a drive unit is, as soon as it is screwed into a cabinet, things can take a turn for the worse. Ideally then, you wouldn't have any cabinets at all; that's why Andrew Lloyd Webber's sound designer Martin Levan suspended naked Tannoy drive units over the audience's heads in the West End version of *Starlight Express!*

Q Acoustics has worked long and hard to get around this problem, before seemingly hitting on the solution. Designer Karl Heinz Fink has taken a respected cheap standmounter – the 2020i – and made it extra special by mounting its drivers in a superior, stiffer, better-damped box, and calling it the Concept 20. Suddenly, the limitations of the 2020i – which I had ascribed to the drivers – have disappeared.

And now we have this, the floorstanding version of the Concept 20. Rather than doing a tweaked version of the existing (and excellent) floorstanding 2050i, the Concept 40s are basically stretched 20s with spikes on the end. So they're physically a little smaller (about two inches) than the 2050is, but cost twice as much. And fascinatingly, when you bang the cabinets of the Concept 40s, it feels like you've just hit lead-lined concrete. Actually you haven't, of course, because they are made from Gelcore, first seen on the 20s.

This cabinet is said to be “ultra low resonance”, thanks to its “cabinet within a cabinet” design, as Q Acoustics' Steve Reichert puts it. The inner and outer cabinets are pulled together by a special adhesive (Gelcore) that binds the two cabinets, but which never sets. The idea is that the energy created within the enclosure excites the inner cabinet, but this kinetic energy does not degrade the performance of the drive units as in conventional loudspeakers because the Gelcore layer disperses the energy by converting it into heat. The Concept 40 adds a sturdy three-way spike arrangement too. So the speaker sits securely on whatever surface it is placed on.

Unlike the Concept 20, which uses rehoused 2020i drivers, the Concept 40 uses two new bespoke 125mm bass/midrange drivers set into an aluminium fascia plate. They look visually identical to the single one in the Concept 20, but the motor has been improved and the magnet strengthened. Like all Q Acoustic speakers, the drivers aren't off-the-shelf designs, but bespoke for the exact application. The 25mm soft dome tweeter cuts in at 2.3kHz, and is the same fitted to all Q Acoustics

speakers, using ferro-fluid cooling with advanced multi-layered cone material (rather than treated fabric) with ‘super-decoupling’ from the loudspeaker's baffle as well as integral damping. This is topped off by an aluminium fascia plate featuring a butyl clamp. Crossover is a fourth-order ‘Linkwitz-Riley’ design to ensure that there are no phase inversion problems around the crossover frequency, the company tells us.

Available in a choice of high gloss black or high gloss white finishes, the Concept 40 is a nicely presented product at the price, but lacks the stunningly sophisticated finish of Monitor Audio's £1,250 Silver 6, for example. The problem is that Q Acoustics loudspeakers have always been exceptionally well turned out

**With the Concept 40s it's not the loud bits that impress, it's the quiet ones**

at their respective price points, but never before has the company faced the big boys in the £1,000-plus sector. The 40 doesn't compare badly to most in this section of the market in terms of finish, but it certainly doesn't win hands down as the £500 2050i would, for example. Things toughen up in the speaker world very quickly, and the Concept 40 has a fight on its hands.

Quoted sensitivity is 90dB, and in practice I don't think this is unrealistic; it's not a particularly hard speaker to drive, although a good 50W per side from your

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT:**  
Q Acoustics  
Concept 40

**ORIGIN:**  
UK/Germany/China

**TYPE:**  
Floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT:**  
18.5kg

**DIMENSIONS:**  
(WxHxD)  
170 x 972 x 288mm

**FEATURES:**

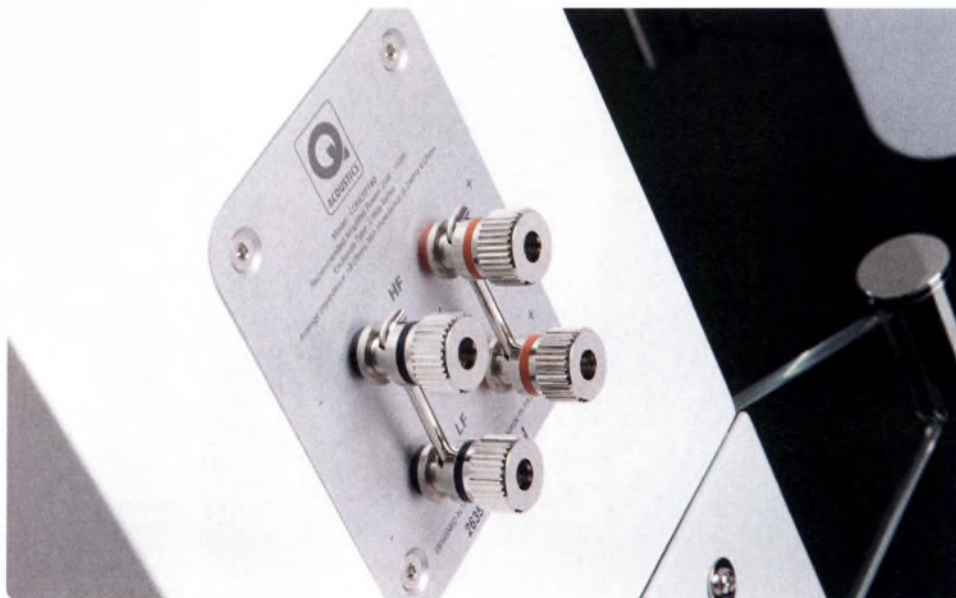
- 1x 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 2x 125mm mid/bass drivers
- Quoted power handling: 25-150W
- Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/1W/1m
- Quoted frequency response: 53Hz-22kHz (+/- 3dB)

**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
Armour Home Electronics

**TELEPHONE:**  
01279 501111

**WEBSITE:**  
qacoustics.co.uk

**Bi-wiring is possible with these robust binding posts**



amplifier is always nice to have. I find it works particularly well with solid-state (Creek Destiny) and tube (World Audio K5881) amplifiers alike. The speakers come with foam bungs, which can be fitted or removed according to taste; as ever they sound more open and expansive with their ports breathing freely, but faster and tighter when they're foam filled. It all comes down to your room and your music tastes, in the end. In my room I find that they work best at around 30cm out from the rear wall, slightly toed-in on their integrated tripod stands, with the bungs in place.

### Sound quality

Any £1,000 Q Acoustics speaker is always going to be an interesting proposition, not least because the £500 2050i isn't far off the standards of many speakers of this price. As it transpires, the Concept 40 proves a good deal better than the 2050i, propelling it at a stroke up to the ranks of the best at the price.

If you've heard the 2050i, you'll know it's a very clean and musical device, without too much character of its own; whatever music you play it just gets down to work and lets rip with a warm, open and enjoyable

sound. None of this is lost in the Concept 40, but you get a wealth of extra musical insight, which takes it way beyond the 2050i. Indeed, in terms of transparency, it's like night and day. You can hear immediately what the cabinets in the 2050i are doing wrong, because none of it is present in the Concept 40. The sound seems far faster, more open and yet more subtle too, and the spaces in-between the musical notes seem to drop back to vanishingly low levels.

Cue up Air's *All I Need*, and you can hear the difference from the opening bars. The Concept 40 carries the guitar part on the lead in a delightfully subtle way, showing the delicacy of the finger work on the strings, while the instrumental timbre is more realistic. When the lead vocal line kicks in, it has a wonderfully silken sound – intimate, confessional, emotional. The gentle percussion pushes out more forcefully, the 'quieter' cabinets of this new speaker better able to carry dynamic accenting, and this brings with it a greatly increased sense of rhythmic flow. The song seems to have a real trajectory, to be going somewhere instead of ambling



Monitor Audio's Silver 6 (£1,250) is the closest rival. It is an excellent all rounder, with very few obvious weaknesses. It is better presented – it looks a lot more expensive than the £250 price premium suggests; indeed its finish is superlative whereas the Q is merely very good. Sonically, the MA sounds a little bigger and more gutsy, lending greater physicality to the proceedings. It's also very tight and sounds more rhythmically explicit. The Q has a more spacious, tonally sweet and inviting sound meaning that many will believe it to be the nicer one to listen too. As ever, a live audition is recommended.

around lazily. All this comes from the wealth of subtle musical clues that are lost by lesser speakers; it's not the loud bits that impress, it's the quiet ones.

Feed the Concept 40 some punchier rock, and it shows itself in an even better light. Saxon's *Strangers In The Night* is a powerful piece of early eighties soft metal, all power chords, crashing drums and close-miked vocals. Through lesser loudspeakers it can sound congested, but the new Qs are wonderfully clean and open, throwing the sound out as if they have dissolved out of the room, retaining only a ghostly vestigial presence. Bass is surprisingly strong for this modestly sized floorstander, and pleasingly even too – devoid of any false bass peaks. Notes stop and start quickly and are played tunelessly. The midband is a joy; those gravelly vocals are carried respectfully; they aren't airbrushed to the point of blandness, but neither are they edgy or forward – again this suggests a nice, flat response. Treble is good too, the crashing cymbal work sounding decently metallic, but not grating. Still, you'd ideally want just a little more space and smoothness; the gold dome tweeter of the Monitor Audio

### It doesn't shout out at you or fall over itself trying to impress you

Silver 6 does better here, with a touch more openness and air.

The first movement of Dvorak's *New World Symphony* is wonderfully carried, again the Concept 40s showcasing their excellent sound staging, pin-sharp image location and tonal evenness. This isn't an easy piece of music for any loudspeaker; dramatic, dynamic and full range, it's a veritable assault course and throws up weaknesses fast. Even on crescendos, massed strings stay clean and never get shrill; at the same time the Concept 40 shows excellent spatial accuracy, and impresses with its low-level detail too. String timbre is superb, you can really hear the bite and body of the cellos. The result is an utterly convincing rendition of the great classical music standard. All sins are those of omission; within its performance envelope, the new Q proves excellent. The only criticism is that you'd ultimately want more power, scale and physicality – something you will surely have to shell out more to achieve.



**Bungs come supplied. Whether you'll need them is a matter of choice**



**IN SIGHT**

- 1 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 2 125mm bass/midrange drivers
- 3 Bass port - bungs are supplied
- 4 Bi-wirable binding posts
- 5 Three-way spike system

**Q&A**

**Steve Reichert**

Q Acoustics product designer



**DP: Where does the Concept 40 sit in the Q Acoustics range now?**

**SR:** The Concept 20 continues to be an amazing success and, because we wanted to build on this in an incremental way, the Concept 40 seemed the perfect idea. Of course, we don't rule out producing an even bigger Concept model in the future...

**How does it differ from the Concept 20, apart from the price?**

It remains a two-way design, but gets an additional 125mm mid/bass driver. Both of these are upgraded versions of that fitted to the Concept 20, with larger magnets and superior construction. The tweeter is the same, as is the cabinet's Gelcore construction, although obviously it is a full-size floorstander now. Still, the special Concept series build means it has remarkably low cabinet resonance, which allows optimum performance from the drive units.

**What difference does this special cabinet make to the sound?**

In our opinion it makes a fine set of drive units into a speaker that is shockingly good considering its retail price. The new Concept 40 delivers a sonic performance that until now has only been enjoyed by audiophiles and music lovers who could afford high-priced, high-end loudspeakers.

**Do you have any recommendations about setting it up?**

Because the Concept 40 can deliver such an extraordinarily three-dimensional soundstage, we recommend that you sit in an equilateral triangle in relation to the speakers. In this position you'll experience the amazing 'walk in' soundstage that this speaker is capable of delivering.

**ON TEST**

Q Acoustics claims 90dB sensitivity for the Concept 40 and our measured pink noise figure of 89.4dB is not far short. But the forward response of the Concept 40, measured on the tweeter axis, shows a gentle rise in output above 4kHz, confirming the intention that the speakers not be pointed at the listening position. This will flatten out the treble, but also reduce the effective sensitivity to around 88.5dB. Even with the treble rise, frequency response error (200Hz-20kHz) was held to a creditable  $\pm 3.2$ dB and  $\pm 3.3$ dB for the pair, and matching over the same frequency range was excellent at  $\pm 0.8$ dB.

Minimum impedance modulus was measured as 3.9ohms at 232Hz - close to the specified 4ohms - and impedance phase is well enough controlled to prevent the minimum EPDR falling below 2ohms. We measured a dip to 2.2ohms at 130Hz, plus two to 2.3ohms at 20Hz and 390Hz, so the Concept 40 presents a not too testing amplifier load. Bass extension is fair at 48Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz, but the roll off below that is fast. Although the CSD waterfall shows only low-level resonances in the treble, kinks in the impedance plot and near-field bass response indicate a marked 'organ pipe' resonance of the enclosed air at about 190Hz. **KH**

**Conclusion**

The Q Acoustics Concept 40 is an extremely able loudspeaker, and excellent value even at £1,000. It is amazingly well rounded, having practically no obvious weaknesses, and a whole lot of strengths. Right across the range - from detail and dynamics to tonal balance and musicality, it scores very highly indeed.

And that's its brilliance, because there is so much to like and so little that disappoints. It's only in its treble performance that it is not one of the best in class; it's certainly not bad by any means, but some similarly priced rivals do a better job here. But that is more than made up for by its superb abilities in almost every other area.

Most of all, what I like about this new floorstander is its naturalness;

it doesn't shout out at you or fall over itself trying to impress you. Indeed, it doesn't present much of a character at all, which is just as it should be. And for that reason it's well worth an audition. Highly recommended ●

**Ni-FiChoice**

**OUR VERDICT**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Superlative imaging, easy musicality; intricate, detailed sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Treble is less silky or spacious than some rivals

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Lovely sounding, brilliantly balanced package

**EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

**OVERALL** ★★★★★

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# How we test

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

## Unique group tests

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

### TURNTABLE GROUP TEST

**ENSURING A TURNTABLE** is properly set up takes considerable care and effort, and it therefore isn't practical to audition this group with our usual blind listening test panel. Instead, we extended our test period over a week, allowing for each deck to be tested with its supplied cartridge (where applicable), to gauge the ability and value of the overall package. Before testing begins, we check all the cartridges that come pre-installed for correct alignment, downforce (using a Shure SFG-2 Stylus Force Gauge) and anti-skate.

The decks are tested without lids (where supplied) and in sequence with both their supplied cartridges and our reference Ortofon

2M Blue, to ensure consistency across the group while making sure that a supplied cartridge isn't holding back a strongly performing deck. Obvious differences between the two cartridges are duly noted and the differences are not used to overly sway the overall ratings, which are largely based on the performance of each deck heard through our reference cartridge.

For isolation, each turntable is sited on a 35mm-thick travertine slab, supported on three Michell Tenderfeet. This base sits atop a wall-mounted solid oak shelf.

All six decks are put through the same cycle of music from four different test records, each chosen to reveal varying audio traits.

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Absolute speed error at 33.3rpm

+40

Peak Wow & Flutter

+30

Rumble (through groove)

+20

Rumble (through bearing)

-20

Tonearm resonances

+30

KEY: ■ Group average

■ % below average ■ % above average

### ABSOLUTE SPEED ERROR

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

### PEAK WOW & FLUTTER

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

### RUMBLE (THROUGH GROOVE)

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

### RUMBLE (THROUGH BEARING)

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

### TONEARM RESONANCES

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

### OUR GROUP TESTS

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

We don't publish pages of graphs, but we do understand the importance of transparency. So, readers may view full QC Suite test reports for our key reviews by going to Downloads on our homepage and clicking on the access link. [www.hifichoice.co.uk](http://www.hifichoice.co.uk)



### ▶ REFERENCE SYSTEM

#### PHONO STAGE:

Primare R32

#### AMPLIFIER:

Musical Fidelity M6PRE/M6PRX

#### LOUDSPEAKERS:

Dynaudio Focus 260

#### CABLES:

Cambridge Audio/Van Damme

### ▶ TEST MUSIC

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Clay



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Three Hours



#### THE DOORS

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The Quintet Series also includes a true-mono cartridge, for accurate reproduction of older mono recordings.



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# Group**test**

**TURNTABLES** £350-£600

## Needles and spins

With LP sales on the up, there's never been a better time to upgrade your aging wheels of steel says **Andrew Simpson**





**VINYL'S ONGOING REVIVAL** is arguably the hi-fi industry's greatest survival story. While its following is more niche today than in was in its heyday, vinyl continues to appeal to new audiences and long-standing music and hi-fi fans alike. Why? Because put simply, its musically rich sound can still leave many digital devices out in the cold.

To unearth its sonic potential, you'll need a decent deck. Thankfully there are plenty of new top-quality spinners to chose from that will do your LPs justice for years to come.

We've cherry picked six mid-priced models, which adopt various approaches to getting the best out of the black stuff. All six on test are non-suspended designs and use a range of materials to prevent unwanted influences reaching the record's surface. Even better, some

come as complete packages with pick ups installed, allowing you to get them up and running in no time.

### Easy life

Both the Pro-Ject and Music Hall packages fall into this category, and to make life even simpler, the Pro-Ject also sports electronic speed switching between 33 and 45rpm. With the Inspire and Rega models you'll have to change the belts manually, as the money's been invested in the acrylic chassis and bracing tech, married to a quality arm and cartridge combo. Joining us from Illinois, the SOTA employs its own unique materials housed in a dashing real-wood finish. Finally, Stanton's heavyweight take on Technics' legendary SL1200 completes the lineup and provides more features than you can shake a glow stick at.

## ON TEST



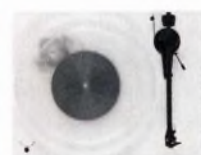
### Inspire Hi-Fi Black Magic Si £560 p27

From the master of turntable upgrades comes a UK-built, stripped-back design that oozes style. But all that acrylic isn't just for effect, so how will it fare in the sonic stakes?



### Music Hall MMF-2.2 £350 p29

With three decades of hi-fi knowhow behind its quality components and carrying a Goldring cartridge and Pro-Ject tonearm, this Czech deck's got a lot to offer and we smell a bargain.



### Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Esprit SB £425 p31

Pro-Ject's Debut Carbon gets upgraded with a slab of acrylic and a sexy speed control. Throw in a carbon arm wand and Ortofon pick up and you've got a package that's hard to beat.



### Rega RP3 £550 p33

This fuss-free package represents the latest iteration of Rega's vinyl spinning icon and gets some structural engineering to support its top-flight tonearm and inhouse pick up.



### SOTA Moonbeam Series II £600 p35

This US deck's traditional looking plinth hides a wealth of modern materials aimed at faithful music playback. Can its uniquely crafted approach keep the competition at bay?



### Stanton STR8.150 £500 p37

Festooned with features including an in-built phono stage, cartridge and S/PDIF out, this direct drive heavyweight DJ deck's got the lot. But can it cut it in the audiophile arena?

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# clarity

clear advice



# Inspire Hi-Fi Black Magic Si £560



Stemming from the land of the legendary twisted spire, this deck offers plenty of style and sonic substance

## DETAILS

- PRODUCT**  
Inspire Hi-Fi  
Black Magic Si
- ORIGIN**  
UK
- TYPE**  
Belt drive
- WEIGHT**  
3.8kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
450 x 100 x 350mm
- FEATURES**
- 33 and 45rpm
  - Rega RB202 tonearm
  - Acrylic platter
  - Acrylic/Sorbothane coned feet
  - Optional record weight and external PSU
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Inspire Hi-Fi
- TELEPHONE**  
01246 472222
- WEBSITE**  
inspirehifi.co.uk

**F**rom upgrades for Linn, Rega and Technics decks to selling its own range of belt, direct and idler drive designs, Inspire Hi-Fi has carved out an impressively broad church of turntable products in recent years.

At £560 sans cartridge, the Black Magic Si is the company's entry-level offering and comes equipped with an Inspire-branded Rega RB202 tonearm. The Inspire is a belt-driven design, with the Si running a low vibration Premotec AC motor, situated at the 12 o'clock position. The deck's sub-platter is Inspire's own design that's been precision machined from a block of acetyl, which is then bonded to an aluminium shaft that runs inside a bronze bearing sleeve. Speed change between 33 and 45rpm is manually controlled, by moving the deck's belt on the motor's two-step pulley. This being Inspire, there are also lots of inhouse upgrades to chose from at extra cost, including a £55 polished record weight and £320 external PSU, that's built around a

quartz speed generator and offers electronic speed switching. Inspire can also supply the Si with a range of cartridges ready fitted at extra cost.

Fresh out of the box the Black Magic's simple curvy lines and 'nightfire' red finish are pure eye candy. The deck sports a hidden on/off switch at the MDF plinth's rear and its looks are also aided by a 20mm precision-machined acrylic platter, which matches the three acrylic coned feet that are bonded to the underside via Sorbothane pads.

Cartridge swapping is made easy thanks to the way it overhangs in free space, although this can also leave your precious pick-up vulnerable without protection from below.

## Sound quality

With an Ortofon 2M Blue fitted to the Inspire's arm and the *Made To Love Magic* LP placed directly onto the platter's acrylic surface, we're ready to rock in no time. Overall the Inspire is a pacey little performer, which favours a neutral presentation that's neither lacking in detail or too forensically revealing. Kwaakhu Baah's congas in Nick Drake's *Three Hours* immediately get my attention, as the Inspire takes control of their rhythmic slaps to get my foot tapping. And when Drake's guitar's tempo picks up the pace, so does the Inspire, which gives the music plenty of life to keep it engaging. This strength also makes the Inspire one of the most enjoyable decks on test during Goldfrapp's *Clay*, as there's a real sense of the drama building when the tempo quickens.

The Inspire's expansive soundstage is among the best on test and the



## ON TEST

A simple but effective design, Inspire's Black Magic Si is one of three decks in this month's Group Test to benefit from a Rega or Rega-sourced tonearm. The RB202 employed here offers low friction, little or no bearing play and a very well-controlled tube resonance at -140Hz. The deck itself is similarly effective, the aluminium/bronze bearing assembly achieving the lowest rumble figure in our test of -71.9dB (DIN-B wtd re. 1kHz/5cm/sec). The in-groove rumble is necessarily slightly worse, but at -68.0dB is still creditable and, with the optional record weight mating your vinyl LP to the acrylic platter, improves further to -68.8dB. Absolute speed was slightly slow on our sample, but at -0.19% will not be audible. Wow and flutter is not in the same class as its exceptional rumble figures but, once again, a peak-weighted 0.04% for both wow and flutter (0.08% total) is perfectly typical for a deck at this price. **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Absolute speed error at 33.3rpm

-20

Peak Wow & Flutter

+20

Rumble (through groove)

0

Rumble (through bearing)

+30

Tonearm resonances

+20

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

Spanish guitar on Tracy Chapman's *She's Got Her Ticket*, is voiced wide of my left speaker's plane.

With the Goldfrapp track, the Inspire's bass is solid and well defined. Although it doesn't quite reach the wall-shaking depths that the Stanton achieves, the low end that the Inspire does extend to has plenty of clarity and sounds less boomy than its cheaper rivals. Across all the music on test, the Inspire images impressively well. Nick Drake's vocals in particular are placed centre stage, surrounded by plenty of air and space and the detail in his voice shows this to be one of the most revealing turntables on test ● ▶

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Stunning looks, and finish; transparent sound; decent arm

VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Not the cheapest on test; cartridge costs extra

BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** One of the most revealing decks in the group with plenty of detail and good bass

FEATURES



### OVERALL



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# Music Hall MMF-2.2 **£350**

This Czech deck offers plenty of turntable for your hard earned. Is this the biggest bargain of the bunch?

## DETAILS

- PRODUCT**  
Music Hall  
MMF-2.2
- ORIGIN**  
Czech Republic
- TYPE**  
Belt drive
- WEIGHT**  
4.9kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
415 x 118 x 320mm
- FEATURES**
- 33 and 45rpm
  - Pro-Ject tonearm
  - Goldring Elektra MM cartridge supplied
  - Suspended AC motor
  - Includes dustcover
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Armour Home Electronics
- TELEPHONE**  
01279 501111
- WEBSITE**  
armourhome.co.uk

**W**ith nearly 30 years in the business, Music Hall has been building turntables since 1985. Its decks bear some resemblance to Pro-Ject's designs, as both carry parts made in the same Czech factory.

The plinth, motor, sub-platter and stainless steel/bronze bearing are all finished to a very high standard and the deck comes fitted with a Pro-Ject branded one-piece alloy tonearm and removable clear plastic dustcover. To complete the package, the Music Hall also includes a pre-installed £65 Goldring Elektra cartridge, making it ready to play straight from the box.

The deck's large plastic sub-platter is driven by a 16V AC motor, mounted at the 10 o'clock position. Attention has been paid to preventing vibration entering the replay chain by mounting the motor on a horizontally suspended tensioned rubber band, while the deck rests on three padded feet with soft rubber centres, which provide a good support. Perhaps to help keep costs down, the Music Hall

employs a painted alloy platter that has a slight ring to it when tapped, although a felt mat is also included and helps to nullify this. The tonearm feels well made and setting its tracking force is made easy, thanks to the counterweight's printed scale. The arm's wire and hanging weight method of providing anti-skate is a bit fiddly to orchestrate, when compared with the slider method employed by the Rega arms installed on some of the other decks tested here.

## Sound quality

Experimenting with the Music Hall's supplied cartridge reveals this to be an adequate performer to get you started. It's quite bold sounding, with a decent bottom end for the money, but if you really want to get the best out of this turntable you need to budget for something a little more sophisticated. Playing Tracy Chapman's *She's Got Her Ticket* reveals the supplied cartridge's limitations early on, with voices and cymbals sounding quite sibilant. Everything sounds a bit clouded and instruments are not that well separated with the Goldring cartridge.

With the Ortofon 2M Blue installed everything snaps into greater focus, albeit with a little less clarity than the Pro-Ject and Inspire models manage to muster when carrying this pick up, especially on Nick Drake's material. The Music Hall sounds pleasant enough, but doesn't allow the flute within Drake's *Three Hours* to escape the speaker cabinets with the freedom that the Rega and Pro-Ject models afford it, which leaves it sounding more lifeless and boxed in compared with its rivals. The Music Hall's sound

## ON TEST

While the Music Hall MMF-2.2 may bear a resemblance to Pro-Ject's Xpression range of turntables, the technical performance of our sample was superior (compared with the Xpression Carbon). With a similar metal platter, lightly damped by a similar felt mat, rumble was just -69.1dB falling still further to an impressive -70.4dB measured through the bearing. This is about 2-3dB better than I had measured for the Xpression recently and representative of the best in this test. Evidently the bearing, fashioned from stainless steel and bronze, is a higher-tolerance part on this deck. The resonant modes seen with the Debut Carbon in this test are also absent here, despite the similar motor assembly. Wow and flutter is par for the course at 0.09% (peak-weighted), showing some ±100Hz sidebands, while speed accuracy is slightly fast at +0.37% (no bad thing as TTs typically slow with age). **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Absolute speed error at 33.3rpm

-30

Peak Wow & Flutter

+20

Rumble (through groove)

+20

Rumble (through bearing)

-10

Tonearm resonances

-20

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

does have a pleasing mellow edge to it though, which complements some material more than others. It manages to soften the harder edges of The Doors track which makes it easier on the ear, but conversely with the Nick Drake track it's more difficult to hear the start of the guitar notes and the way his nails pluck the strings.

The Music Hall's bass is well rounded with the 2M Blue fitted, although I sense some softer edges in the upper bass across the Tracy Chapman and Goldfrapp tracks compared with some of the better turntables in the group, which are able to exercise a touch more grip in this area ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Well built; decent arm; includes cartridge

**DISLIKE:** Painted alloy platter; not the most detailed or musically insightful

**WESAY:** A good value and pleasant-sounding package to get you started

### OVERALL

★★★★★



---

MUSICAL FIDELITY

---

MF-100

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# Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Esprit SB **£425**



Auto speed combined with a carbon arm, acrylic platter and 2M Red cartridge, this deck has lots to offer

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Esprit SB

**ORIGIN**  
Austria

**TYPE**  
Belt drive

**WEIGHT**  
4.9kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
415 x 118 x 320mm

**FEATURES**

- Auto speed 33 and 45rpm
- Carbon fibre tonearm
- Ortofon 2M Red cartridge supplied
- Acrylic platter
- Includes dustcover

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Designs Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166

**WEBSITE**  
henleydesigns.co.uk

**T**his model sits atop the three-strong Debut range and improves on the £325 Debut Carbon by adding an acrylic platter and electronic speed change between 33 and 45rpm (78rpm is manually selected).

Even in standard guise, the Debut Carbon sports Pro-Ject's 8.6CC one-piece carbon fibre tonearm (with line and weight anti-skate) and an £85 Ortofon 2M Red MM cartridge, which are both carried over to the SB model under review.

It also features an external 15V DC wall-wart PSU to drive its AC motor, which is mounted using the same rubber band method as the Music Hall deck. Whereas the MH's motor is suspended by this rubber band, the Pro-Ject motor is also screwed to the plinth through two small rubber pads that give the motor a more rigid mounting. There's also a phono cable junction box at the rear, so you can

upgrade the supplied interconnects at a later date. Isolation is further aided by four Ortofon isolation feet that support the deck's 28mm MDF plinth.

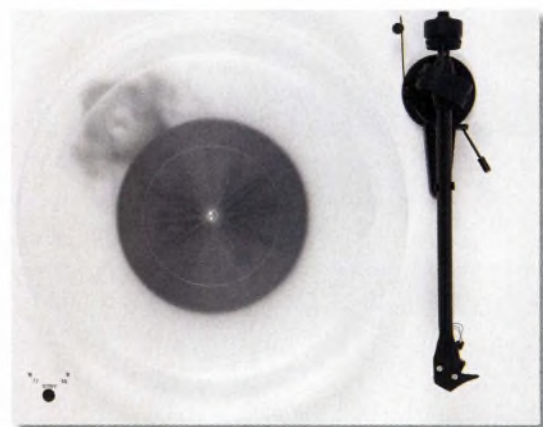
The electronic speed control lets you jump between 33 and 45rpm, indicated by corresponding blue LEDs that flash while the platter gets up to speed. A longer push on this button turns the deck on/off. For 78rpm fans there's good and bad news, as this deck does facilitate this, but you'll have to manually move the belt to a bigger cog on the pulley (when in 45rpm mode) to make it happen.

## Sound quality

Like the Inspire, the Pro-Ject's acrylic platter is designed to be used without a mat and that's how it's tested. Though there's almost £100 between them, the supplied 2M Red cartridge isn't leagues behind our reference 2M Blue, and the Red offers a clean treble with well extended bass, so you should get plenty of enjoyment out of it before the upgrade bug bites.

The Blue improves on the Red by offering a more refined bass, better fine detail retrieval and a smoother midband, which can clearly be heard on the Goldfrapp song.

On The Doors track, Jim Morrison's performance has plenty of attitude thanks to how the SB manages to retain a degree of bite without sounding too hard edged. The SB's soundstage is almost as wide as the best in the group and while the instruments may not have all the energy that the Rega gives them, the SB has greater separation.



## ON TEST

While there's no rotational servo at work here, the flashing 33/45rpm LED times out after some five seconds at which point the acrylic platter is firmly up to speed. Our sample was bang-on target, suffering a miniscule -0.01% speed error, which is not only the best of the group here but a significant improvement on the -0.35% speed error recorded for Pro-Ject's original Debut Carbon deck two years ago. Wow and flutter is very similar at 0.08% (peak-weighted), flutter being very slightly worse. The latter is linked to a series of clearly defined resonant modes at 41Hz, 82Hz, 123Hz and 164Hz that appear on the rumble spectrum, pushing the overall figure down by some 2dB to -66.8dB (or -67.7dB, DIN-B weighted, measured through the bearing itself). Nevertheless, these figures are still in keeping with a sub-£500 deck, let alone one that includes an arm and £85 MM! **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Absolute speed error at 33.3rpm

+30

Peak Wow & Flutter

+20

Rumble (through groove)

-30

Rumble (through bearing)

-50

Tonearm resonances

-20

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

The SB's midrange is very well balanced. It's not quite as analogue-like and rich as the Rega's, or as forward as some of the other models, but it's a very smooth and detailed affair with just the right amount of presence to ensure the music remains even across its frequencies. While sounding strong, Nick Drake's voice is carefully presented and I can hear the delicacy with which he holds the ends of each note with a little intentional reticence, hinting at his character. Guitar strings resonate with a natural beginning and end and the SB really gets to grips with the style of Drake's guitar work and not just the notes being played ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Smooth sound with bags of detail; quality cartridge; top-class arm

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★☆

**WE SAY:** A super bargain that's easy to use and has a well balanced class-leading sound to it

**FEATURES**

★★★★★

### OVERALL

★★★★★

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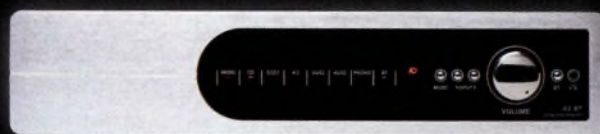
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# Rega RP3 **£550**



Famous for its low mass non-suspended decks, this mid-range model brings a 40-year legacy to the table

## DETAILS

- PRODUCT**  
Rega RP3
- ORIGIN**  
UK
- TYPE**  
Belt drive
- WEIGHT**  
5.6kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
445 x 115 x 360mm
- FEATURES**
- 33 and 45rpm
  - Rega RB303 tonearm
  - Double brace tech
  - 24V hand-tuned motor
  - Elys 2 cartridge supplied
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rega Research Ltd
- TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071
- WEBSITE**  
regaco.uk

**T**he RP3 is the latest in a long line of decks that have followed the Planar, launched some 40 years ago. Rega's designs have come a long way since then, but it still applies much of its tried and tested principals around lightweight rigid materials, which makes its decks world famous. The RP3 sits above the £230 entry-level RP1, which was 2013's *Group Test* winner. What the RP3's extra £320 buys you is a better arm and cartridge, combined with trickle-down tech from its higher-end models. The RP3 uses the same basic plinth as the RP1, but also gets Rega's 'Double Brace' technology via phenolic resin braces mounted to the plinth's top and bottom between the tonearm and main bearing, forming a stressed beam assembly.

Rega owners of old will note the return of the 12mm glass platter with a felt mat to support LPs. The platter sits atop a hard plastic sub-platter driven by a 24V AC motor, which is hand tuned to eliminate resonance

while avoiding speed variation that decoupling can introduce. Stemming from Rega's legendary RB300, the latest RB303 tonearm brings this deck right up to date by making use of Rega's three-point fixing, a quality arm/interconnect cable and one-piece cast alloy tube. The arm's downforce is applied using a turned spring inside a dial on the bearing housing, which helps to track warped LPs. The Elys 2 cartridge is Rega's own moving magnet model and while you can buy the RP3 for £475 without this, given the Elys 2 normally sells at £119, its worth paying the extra £75 for the bundle.

## Sound quality

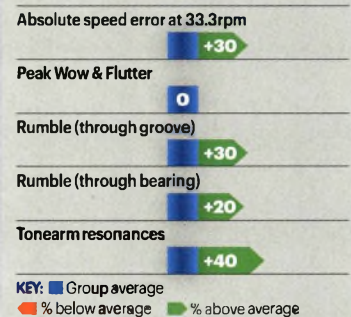
With the Elys 2 affixed to the RP3's headshell, the Rega's sound is bristling with energy. Nick Drake's guitar sounds warm and full bodied, but perhaps not as explicit as the Pro-Ject and Inspire performances. The RP3 package also has an expansive soundstage, which makes The Doors track sound less congested than competing renditions from the SOIA and Stanton models. And it's not just soundstage width that the Rega likes to explore, as it does a dandy job of letting Jim Morrison's voice and the flute in the Nick Drake song soar above my speakers.

While the Rega doesn't have the low-end grunt of the Stanton, its lower bass has enough impact to give it conviction, which is further complemented by the rhythm and zest of its upper bass. On the Tracy Chapman track, the Rega really digs out the reggae undertones and gets my head nodding along to its addictive beat.

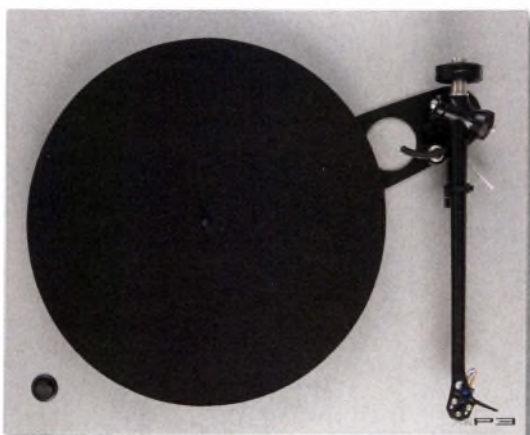
## ON TEST

Rega's RP3 is based on the brand's rigid and lightweight 'double brace' chassis and plinth. Rumble through the groove is around 2dB lower with the felt mat in place at -69.4dB and, via the bearing itself, right up there with the Inspire deck at -71.5dB, representing a massive 6dB improvement over the RP1 we tested last year. The wow and flutter spectrum is very similar in shape and components to the spectra derived from the RP1, the cluster of low-rate sidebands amounting to -0.09% of the 0.11% total peak figure. New Rega decks typically run slightly fast to account for a slow down as the motor ages, but the absolute speed accuracy of this sample was spot on. The RB303 tonearm is a real star, its resonant modes - starting with the primary tube bending mode at 139Hz and harmonics at 215-300Hz - are all well damped. Bearing friction is <10mg in both planes and play is negligible. **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Substituting the Rega pick up for our reference 2M Blue takes the RP3 up a gear, especially in the treble, which becomes more fluid. Across both cartridges the RP3's character makes for a highly musical performance that's less analytical than its closest rivals. In many ways it makes The Doors track sound more palatable at higher volumes, partly because the RP3 doesn't shine too bright a light on the track's sharper edges, with the flipside being a slight loss of detail at the song's extremes. On the whole, though, the Rega is bags of fun and a very enjoyable listen. As a package its blessed with a sound that's very easy to live with. ▶



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Brilliant arm; quality cartridge and bags of musical fun
- DISLIKE:** Manual belt change; trades some insight for warmth
- WE SAY:** A well thought-out package with a great sound that will win many fans

### OVERALL



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**hi-fi** /'hī'fī/ informal  
*adjective*  
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(/'hī'fīz /'hā'faɪz/)

**high fidelity**

*noun*

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Please visit [www.exposurehifi.com](http://www.exposurehifi.com)



# SOTA Moonbeam Series II £600

Hailing from across the pond, will the Moonbeam's approach to vinyl replay shine new light on the music?

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
SOTA Moonbeam Series II

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
Belt drive

**WEIGHT**  
5.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
440 x 130 x 340mm

### FEATURES

- 33 and 45rpm
- Tonearm included
- Turcite bearing
- Height adjustable feet
- Optional dust cover

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Analogue Seduction

**TELEPHONE**  
01733 350878

**WEBSITE**  
analogueseduction.net

**F**ounded in 1997, Illinois' SOTA turntables offers a range of high-end suspended designs with sumptuous real-wood finishes, which are predominantly aimed at the US market. Thankfully some of the company's more affordable offerings have made their way to our shores, with the Moonbeam Series II being SOTA's entry-level model.

It features a wood-veneered 40mm thick plinth, made up of bonded MDF layers. The Moonbeam also favours extensive use of polymer materials to minimise vibration in the replay chain while dissipating resonant energy. Its 9mm-thick platter is made of a special high-density polymer, with a thin foam-like layer bonded on top to act as an interface between the record's surface and the platter. The platter then sits on a 20mm-thick white polymer sub-platter, which is driven via a flat section belt from a Premotec 24-pole AC synchronous motor, that's mounted rigidly within a cut out in the plinth at the 9 o'clock position.

Speed change between 33 and 45rpm is by moving the belt on the motor's two-stepped pulley.

The Moonbeam's bearing cup is made from Turcite – a Teflon-impregnated, self-lubricating polymer designed specifically for ultra-precise bearing applications. SOTA claims that this material provides the bearing with an almost unlimited life while remaining quieter than alternative metal-to-metal bearing assemblies. The Moonbeam also comes supplied with an OEM Rega RB100 tonearm.

It resides on three adjustable legs of threaded rod and lock nuts, bonded to circular plastic feet with soft pads at their base, for easy levelling.

## Sound quality

Fresh out of the box the Moonbeam's Premotec motor emits a slight noise at start up, which I trace to its pulley rubbing the top of the motor housing. With a thrust washer installed under the motor spindle the motor runs silently. And with our reference 2M Blue cartridge installed, the listening test can begin in earnest.

First impressions reveal a clean and agreeable performance across the Nick Drake track, although when pushed, the SOTA lacks the detail retrieval of the Inspire or the buoyant energy of the Rega. Compared with the best on test, it can sound a little lacklustre when faced with the more challenging material here. The Doors track demands plenty of drive in the lower midband, married to an open yet smooth top end to get the best out of it. While it puts in a controlled effort on this track, the music lacks the power awarded to it by some of the other decks here.



## ON TEST

SOTA's claims for the efficacy of its bearing are borne out by our measurements, which have its DIN-B wtd rumble down at a very low -71.4dB, several dBs lower than SOTA's own specification in fact. On the other hand, the platter and its integral soft polymer mat offer less damping than expected because the in-groove rumble, while still good, is less spectacular at -67.5dB. The Rega-derived tonearm is a real boon, offering <10mg friction in both planes with minimal play in the bearings. The Moonbeam's principal weakness, however, is its speed stability. The +0.67% absolute speed error is acceptable because motors tend to slow with age, but the broad, low-rate wow is more worrying as it amounts to 0.1% (peak-weighted). The combined W&F figure is 0.15%, very similar to the Stanton, but comprising low-rate rather than high-rate fluctuations. The subjective impact will be very different. **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Absolute speed error at 33.3rpm

-40

Peak Wow & Flutter

-30

Rumble (through groove)

-20

Rumble (through bearing)

+10

Tonearm resonances

+20

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

The SOTA's bass is quite substantial and packs as much wallop as the Inspire, its nearest price rival, although it's perhaps not quite as well defined. Nor is its soundstage as wide as the Rega's or as well populated as the Pro-Ject's, and some instruments seem to have less space around them. The flute's notes for example during *Three Hours* don't hang in the air with the same sense of effortlessness, compared to the best of breed here.

With the Goldfrapp track the SOTA seems on much safer ground as it gives the performance plenty of atmosphere, hinting at what this deck is really capable of with perhaps a little more refinement. ▶

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Classic looks; platter; decent sound with generous bass

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Basic arm; no cartridge; build could be better

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Shows plenty of promise, but needs some refining to really compete with the best at the price

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

# Xpression Carbon

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March 2014



February 2014



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 **Pro-Ject**  
AUDIO SYSTEMS

\* Bordeaux finish shown



# Stanton STR8.150 £500

With S/PDIF output and adjustments galore, this player has got the lot. But how does it measure up sonically?

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Stanton STR8.150

**ORIGIN**  
USA/China

**TYPE**  
Quartz-locked  
direct driver

**WEIGHT**  
16.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
450 x 146 x 353mm

**FEATURES**

- Auto speed 33, 45 and 78rpm
- Phono preamp and S/PDIF output
- Brushless DC motor
- Height adjustable 8in tonearm
- Moving magnet cartridge included

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Focusrite Audio Engineering Limited

**TELEPHONE**  
01494 462246

**WEBSITE**  
uk.focusrite.com  
stantondj.com

**T**echnics fans and DJs alike will have spotted that this spinner is the latest in a long line of 'super OEM' decks that have sprung up to follow on from where the longstanding Technics SL1200 range left off.

Weighing in at a hefty 16kg, the Stanton is this group's heavyweight and weighs 4kg more than Audio-Technica's equivalent model, which we tested last year. In place of the usual 'S' shaped arms fitted to these types of decks, the Stanton gets a new 8in straight arm option, signified by the 'STR8' model name. The Stanton's rubber damped platter is direct driven by a 16-pole, three-phase, brushless DC motor, which claims exceptionally low speed error.

Compared to its Technics ancestor, the Stanton looks a bit plasticky, although it's solidly built and the navy blue finish and silver feet leave it looking less industrial than some super OEM rivals. As you'd expect, it's fully loaded features wise. You get auto speed select (including for

78rpm), pitch control, start and stop speed fine tuning, a strobe light and a handy S/PDIF (coaxial) output for digitising your vinyl. Conspiracy theorists may also welcome the 'reverse' setting when looking for those secret coded messages hidden in their black stuff's grooves.

The deck's short alloy/steel arm is equally versatile, with a large watch bezel-like dial around its base allowing for instant height adjustment. And while a removable headshell aides cartridge swapping, I find its coupling allows far too much flex. Completing the package is Stanton's Trackmaster V3 cartridge.

## Sound quality

The Stanton is bit of a mixed bag sonically. In many respects it's got the potential to be one of the best decks in the group, but it is held back in a few crucial areas. As you'd expect, its supplied cartridge is built for more brutal use than an audiophile group test and while it gives a big and bold sound, it's easily outclassed musically by our reference 2M Blue, which is quickly called into duty to replace the Stanton's inhouse cartridge.

Of all the decks on test, the Stanton offers the finest bass control. On the Goldfrapp track, the low notes start and stop like clockwork, with no sense of overhang. Treble is equally tight, and the track's repetitious keyboard melodies are played out with reassuring precision, leaving you in little doubt that this deck likes to show off its impressive timing. Likewise on the Tracy Chapman song, the Stanton demonstrates it's firmly in the driving seat, as the song's beat motors along with pinpoint accuracy.



## ON TEST

Stanton's powerful direct-drive motor certainly confers excellent speed accuracy (within  $\pm 0.01\%$ ) with what appears to be complete freedom from low-rate drift. This is at the root of the deck's excellent subjective pitch stability and bass drive, although higher-rate wow and flutter speed variations are actually poorer and more complex in nature than with many of the conventional belt-driven decks here. With peak-weighted wow of 0.05% and distributed flutter of 0.1%, the overall figure of 0.15% is the highest on test. These broad flutter modes also manifest in the rumble spectrum around 20Hz and 100Hz, but are sufficiently low Q in nature that they do not impact on the excellent -71dB DIN-B wtd figure for through-bearing noise (rapid start/stop times and a 'torquey' motor are not always without penalty). The partnering arm shows correspondingly complex break-up modes. **PM**

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Absolute speed error at 33.3rpm

+30

Peak Wow & Flutter

-30

Rumble (through groove)

0

Rumble (through bearing)

0

Tonearm resonances

-40

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

However, because the music is all served up at once, the melody and rhythm seems somewhat sacrificed.

The Stanton doesn't dissect the music in the same way as many of the other decks on test, which create an intricate sonic landscape that your ears can explore. Instead, the Stanton's sound is much more in your face, which is great for some material, but more subtle recordings such as *Three Hours* are made to sound more artificial and less like a real performance. With the right cartridge and an arm that's more tuned to audiophile playback the Stanton could fly, but you'll need to experiment to get this right. ▶

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★☆

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★☆

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★☆

**FEATURES**

★★★★☆

**OVERALL**

★★★★☆

**LIKE:** Battleship build; S/PDIF output; bass control

**DISLIKE:** Sound lacks finesse; plasticky finish

**WESAY:** Big sound with lots to offer; good foundations to build on

# Group test verdict

The dance floor's cleared and this month's group test has left **Andrew Simpson** all in a spin as he reveals the decks to get you grooving

**WHAT THIS GROUP** highlights is there is no magic formula guaranteed to get the best out of the black stuff, and it's great to see such a diverse range of approaches working towards the same goal – maximum detail retrieval with minimum loss from those tiny grooves.

The first to be sent packing is the SOTA. It's an interesting deck, and with a little more finesse it will more than justify its price tag. It's quite rich sounding, but lacks the control and dynamics of our *Group Test* favourites.

Next out the door is the Stanton. This is a fantastically well-engineered

machine with vice-like bass grip, but its sound lacks sophistication. As well as upgrading its supplied cartridge, it could do with a better arm which would push its price up considerably.

The Music Hall is a good-value package to get you started, and its supplied cartridge is a perfectly adequate intro to the world of vinyl. But compared with the rest of the group, its alloy platter feels like a cost saving exercise and you can't help but notice that spending a bit more will get you a more sonic thoroughbred.

Aside from cost, there's very little separating the Rega and Inspire

models in terms of sonic appeal, and which you go for comes down to personal taste and wallet size. With its supplied cartridge, the Rega is arguably better value and its sound is more bouncy and energetic than the Inspire's, and with a warmer tone. The Inspire on the other hand sounds more insightful and shines a bit more of a transparent light on proceedings, which seems to get closer to the original. My personal taste is for the latter approach, but I'd be more than happy with the Rega if my budget was limited.

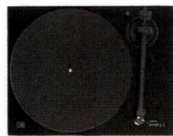


**WINNER**

With its carbon fibre arm, acrylic platter and Ortofon 2M Red cartridge, the Pro-Ject screams outstanding value. What really sells it is how these ingredients combine to provide a sonic recipe brimming with musical detail. At its price it really sets the standard.



**Make/model** Inspire Hi-Fi Black Magic Si



**Make/model** Music Hall MMF-2.2



**Make/model** Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Esprit SB



**Make/model** Rega RP3



**Make/model** SOTA Moonbeam Series II



**Make/model** Stanton STR8.150

	Inspire Hi-Fi Black Magic Si	Music Hall MMF-2.2	Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Esprit SB	Rega RP3	SOTA Moonbeam Series II	Stanton STR8.150
<b>Price</b>	£560	£350	£425	£550	£600	£500
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Value</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Build</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Features</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Overall</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Key features</b>	A fantastically revealing deck that presents plenty of detail with solid imaging	Well built and great value starter pack with a pleasant sound. Hard to beat at the price	The best all-rounder in the group marries quality components with an incredibly appealing price tag	A good-value package that's well put together. The Rega's sound will win many fans	Attractive-looking deck that feels solid. Shows plenty of promise, but really needs refining	Huge spec and built like a tank with bass grip to match. Sound lacks sophistication compared to rivals

### Key features

	Inspire Hi-Fi Black Magic Si	Music Hall MMF-2.2	Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Esprit SB	Rega RP3	SOTA Moonbeam Series II	Stanton STR8.150
<b>Cartridge</b>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Speed change</b>	Manual	Manual	Auto	Manual	Manual	Auto
<b>Drive</b>	Belt	Belt	Belt	Belt	Belt	Direct
<b>78rpm</b>	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<b>S/PDIF</b>	No	No	No	No	No	Yes

### TRY WITH THESE

#### MOVING MAGNET CARTRIDGE: Ortofon 2M Blue £170

Our reference for this *Group Test*, this mid-market MM enjoys features borrowed from Ortofon's more premium ranges. It's well built, easy to install – thanks to its pre-threaded mounts – and with a healthy output, offers a clear and open presentation with plenty of bite.



#### TRACKING FORCE GAUGE: Shure SFG-2 £38

Setting your cartridge's ideal tracking force needn't be a dark art. And while your tonearm may have its own gauge, Shure's simple seesaw design will give you a lifetime of accurate fine tuning to get the best out of your arm and cartridge combination. A sound investment.



#### PHONO STAGE: Rega Fono MM £198

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**AUDIOQUEST • DRAGONFLY v1.2 DAC / HEADPHONE AMP**  
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**ROKSAN • CASPIAN M2 • CD / AMPLIFIER**  
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**ROTEL • RA-12 / RCD-12 • AMPLIFIER / DAC / CD**  
 Amplifier with DAC that supports iPod USB and Bluetooth audiostreaming. Includes four analogue line-level inputs and a phono input. The RCD-12 CD player is an ideal partner.



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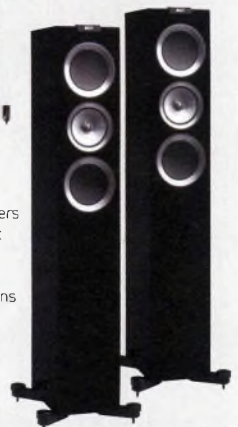
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# Just connect

Into the crowded streamer market comes Krell's new high-end Connect. But it's a design with a difference, says **David Price**

**W**hat the world needs now – to quote the great Burt Bacharach – is love, sweet love. Well perhaps, but there's a sizeable number of consumer electronics companies who think this is no longer quite so pressing, and instead we should all be given network music players to play with. So much so that now it feels like you can't move for the things. Love isn't all around anymore – as The Troggs once sang – audio streamers are!

Krell's new Connect needs to be special then. Indeed, the Connect has the additional burden on its shoulders of being a Krell, something it has to live up to rather than play down. This

great brand has long been a major player in high-end hi-fi, and it won't do for the Connect to be merely average. Fortunately, as we shall see, it is not.

The Connect comes in a choice to two versions. For £2,500 you can buy the streamer itself, and an additional £1,000 gets you a high-quality internal DAC fitted – making it a source component in its own right. Both variants play a plethora of files – the important ones being FLAC and WAV at up to 24-bit/192kHz, but ALAC, AAC, Ogg, WMA and MP3 are also supported. Our review sample comes with the DAC built-in, but the cheaper version simply has a digital

## ► DETAILS

### PRODUCT

Krell Connect

### ORIGIN

USA

### TYPE

Network music player/DAC

### WEIGHT

8.1kg

### DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)  
433 x 88 x 427mm

### FEATURES

- 6 to 24-bit, 44.1kHz to 192kHz PCM playback
- FLAC, Ogg, WAV, WMA, Apple Lossless, m4a, MP3 files
- ESS Sabre ES-9018 DAC chip
- RCA and balanced XLR outputs

### DISTRIBUTOR

Absolute Sounds

### TELEPHONE

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### WEBSITE

absolutesounds.com

output, making it ideal for those that already have a digital converter or DAC-equipped CD player.

The unit itself is based on the Stream Unlimited platform, and uses a Stream 700 board. The digital output signal from this is buffered with similar technology that was engineered for the Anti Jitter Module used in Krell's £12,000 Cipher SACD/CD player, no less. It then goes to a pair of ESS Sabre ES-9018 DACs operating in dual differential mode, and to a Class A, fully balanced, fully discrete analogue output stage, which uses Krell Current Mode topology.

Being a Krell it is compulsory for it to look big and bold, and so it does. The central section sports a long LED light that glows red or blue depending on the mode – standby or operating. To the right is a small 320 x 240-pixel, 90mm diameter backlit LCD screen.

In my view, additional fascia mounted navigation buttons would make a lot of sense here, so that it's easier to use. However, I'm sure the company would reply that there's a perfectly good Krell Connect (iOS or Android) app available for free download, and that is the best way to



There's nothing unique about the way the Connect works; anyone familiar with anything from a Squeezebox to a Linn Klimax DS won't have trouble setting it up. As ever, wired connection is better but wireless works effectively, too. Setup is the normal process of entering your network password, after it has had a look around for wireless-enabled devices. The remote control is used to enter the code, and then you're off. I use it in conjunction with a UPnP-equipped RipNAS storage device and

**The Krell doesn't just give a sense of the recording, it absolutely nails it**

my MacBook Pro running the latest version of Twonky. The Krell Connect app is run on an iPad.

**Sound quality**

Unsurprisingly, there's a distinctive Krell family sound to the Connect – one that impresses and charms in equal measure. It's no shrinking violet, so you don't need to worry about falling asleep in the middle of your listening session. The powerful, percussive, fluid bass is a great help here, as Propaganda's *The Chase* proves. The synth bass line modulates up and down with heady aplomb, sounding wonderfully untroubled by what is going on further up the frequency scale. At the same time, the Connect cuts through this track's rather dense wash of synthesisers, throwing out loads of detail and a capacious soundstage. Treble is svelte and smooth too, and timed beautifully – the Krell manages to bring all of the music together in a believable, coherent and organic way.

At first listen, the Connect presents itself as a light, bright and tonally

spry device – you'd never confuse it with a rich, fat-sounding classic turntable, for example. But it's so much more than this, as it plays a clever trick of rendering the music in a very clean and detailed fashion, yet is never harsh or objectionable. Indeed, when it's been on for a few hours, it acquires a seductive creaminess to its tonality. Right at the beginning of its warm-up cycle it can seem a little matter of fact, but when the Connect gets into its stride it becomes a really beguiling performer with a knack of cutting right to the song's heart and soul.

For example, Steely Dan's *Deacon Blue* comes over in a beautifully lucid way; Donald Fagen's deadpan vocals sound unusually animated and tuneful, while backing saxophones and trumpet have a believable timbre to them that's rarely heard in a digital source component. Walter Becker's delicate guitar work is better etched than I am used to hearing, while at the same time it never once descends into brittleness. Indeed, the way the Connect allows all the elements in this very fine recording to play along with one another is a joy to behold – it manages the deftest of party tricks of enthralling yet never tiring the listener. Above all, the Krell doesn't just give a sense of the recording, it absolutely nails it.

Move from CD-quality to high-resolution recordings, and unlike some streamers I've tried, the Krell doesn't suddenly get a personality transplant when you ramp up the resolution. There's a proportional increase in sound quality, just as it should be; the music acquires extra energy, detail, drive, power and precision right across the frequency range. Treble becomes slightly smoother and a lot more sparkly, bass is firmer and fuller and the midband widens out even more and drops back, showing the Connect's ability ▶

control things. It's right, of course, but I know some customers would be happier with a method of operation that didn't require something else that could crash or get lost. The remote looks and feels lovely, but its tiny buttons won't win prizes from those with bigger digits. Still, at least the company has taken to the trouble to craft a bespoke controller out of two aluminium extrusions locked together by allen bolts. No plastic here!

**Those big bold looks make it impossible to mistake this for anything other than a Krell**

**CONNECTIONS**



- 1 Wi-fi antenna
- 2 RCA line outputs
- 3 Balanced XLR outputs
- 4 12v trigger sockets
- 5 Ethernet connection
- 6 Coaxial digital out
- 7 USB socket

## Q&A

**Peter Mackay**

International sales & marketing VP



**DP: Why wait until now to do streamer?**

**PM:** Consumer interest in downloading and storing music (standard and high resolution) is at an all time high, so it made sense to introduce the Connect and offer streaming capabilities with enhanced sound performance to music enthusiasts who are moving away from the silver spinning disc.

**Why didn't you fit any control buttons on the Connect's fascia?**

In the majority of cases consumers prefer remote operation using a tablet or smart phone for control. This affords a clean and uncluttered front panel for the Connect, and the online app allows for ease of use and control with a tablet or smart phone.

**So why go to the trouble of making that beautiful remote control?**

We must acknowledge the select few customers who may not have a tablet or smartphone and rely on a supplied remote control. In most cases, the supplied remote will never be used. However, if we didn't include one we would soon hear about it!

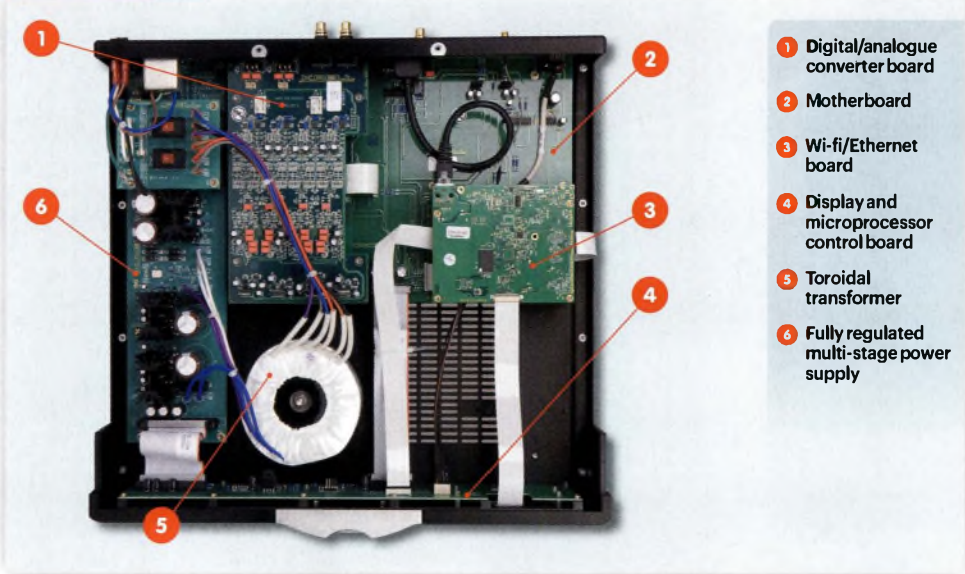
**Why did you make the Connect so big and so bulky?**

The industrial design and scale of the Connect matches perfectly with our new Foundation AV Processor and Illusion Preamplifiers. Although the streaming engine is relatively tiny, the remaining area inside the chassis is taken up with a massive power supply section and fully balanced/fully discrete analogue output stage, which is an under-spent area in most other brands.

**Why doesn't the Connect have DSD compatibility?**

During development of the Connect, music storage devices and/or music streamed over the internet were not DSD decoded. This is now changing and DSD compatibility is under review in engineering.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 Digital/analogue converter board
- 2 Motherboard
- 3 Wi-fi/Ethernet board
- 4 Display and microprocessor control board
- 5 Toroidal transformer
- 6 Fully regulated multi-stage power supply

## HOW IT COMPARES

Costing just short of £3,500, Marantz's NA-11S1 is a direct rival to the DAC-equipped Krell Connect. The finish is better than the Krell's and the fascia with blue ambient lighting is interesting. The display isn't as good, but the Marantz's nav is straightforward enough for this not to matter. The Krell's remote puts the NA-11S1's to shame. Sonically the Marantz is beautifully smooth, silky and sophisticated, with oodles of low-level detail. It's a joy to listen to, but the Krell delivers a more tactile sound that communicates on an emotional level better; it's a fraction less refined, but considerably more fun. Both are excellent, so go listen for yourself.

to create a superbly spacious recorded acoustic given half the chance. Wings' *Band On The Run* is an unalloyed pleasure; it's a great album that to my mind has never quite sounded right on vinyl or CD, but at 24/96 via the Connect it comes over as tonally fulsome, spatially three dimensional and musically gratifying. Once again the Krell's basic character shines through; things are fast and thrilling with fantastically dynamic pan rolls crashing their way across the soundstage, left to right then back again. Denny Laine's multi-tracked guitars are beautifully carried, and his and Paul McCartney's vocals smooth and intricate. Suddenly the track comes alive.

Extended listening reveals the Connect to be a fantastic companion, then. Unlike several rivals that make all the right hi-fi noises but never inspire you to listen all night – whisky and water in one hand, guilty cigarette in the other – you develop ever more respect for this machine. And if you can put your drink down long enough to grab your iPad and reach for The Who's *Won't Get Fooled Again*, you'll find yourself aghast by Keith Moon's electrifying, machine-gun snare drum work and Townshend's glorious power chords. The Krell is consummately neutral and transparent, letting all the richness of recordings come out while capturing their full visceral impact – it's quite a thing to experience. This means that unlike some rivals, which seem to have been voiced in one way or another, this streamer works uniformly well across a wide range of source material – whether it's the louche soul grooves of Isaac Hayes'

*Theme From Shaft* or Bob Marley's *Smile Jamaica*, the Connect just, you know, connects!

## Conclusion

You would expect Krell's new streamer to be something special, and sure enough it is. Its sonics are outstanding at the price; I have tried many different machines at the £4,000 price point and the Connect can hold its own with any of them, or better. Of course, it's always a matter of taste, but the great thing about this is that it's so neutral, open and transparent that it doesn't tie itself up in knots trying to flatter one type of music or another. As any digital audio designer knows, this isn't an easy tight rope to balance on. Personally, I'd like to see a slightly more comprehensive user interface and a larger screen, but it's fair to say most folk will barely bother with the old fashioned 'hands on' approach, as the app is excellent. Overall, an essential audition if you're lucky enough to be in the market for such a product ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Naturally musical sound with power and punch; build quality

VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Some may want fascia controls and a larger screen

BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** Superb sounding, high end streamer with real musical appeal

FEATURES



### OVERALL



Arcam has achieved  
air superiority



The airDac lets you enjoy Arcam's superior sound quality from AirPlay sources and can also stream your music via UPnP from your computer, NAS drive or music server.

**ARCAM**

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Hi-Fi  
Choice

EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

# Natural selection

The latest in a long line of affordably priced Creek CD players is the Evolution 50CD.

**David Price** thinks it chooses itself

**A**nd so it goes. The humble Compact Disc player, once a vestigial box with no inputs and a single pair of analogue outputs is increasingly becoming a preamp with a DAC and optical disc transport built in. Gone are the days when it was seen as an end in itself, now it is to all intents and purposes a digital music centre. Creek's new Evolution 50CD silver disc spinner is precisely this, and costing under £1,000, is being positioned to take on the market leader, Audiolab's 8200CD.

Not an easy place to put up your tent, then. The £1,000 CD player market is a tricky one – with some very capable kit from Roksan and

Cyrus set to make life hard. But then Creek has a redoubtable reputation for fine-sounding, affordable CD players – Mike Creek has made a career of doing really nice-sounding products that mere mortals can afford. So the Evo 50CD should be good; the question is how good, and how well does it deliver all the extra functionality that it offers?

To basic CD playing, it adds several digital inputs, a Bluetooth option and source switching allied to a volume control, so you can plug it straight into a power amplifier should you wish. Indeed, the Evo 50CD also offers a degree of operational refinement that Creek hasn't previously been able to give. To

wit, you get a swish slot-loading mechanism, backlit control buttons and rather nice OLED display. It comes with a system remote that integrates with other Creek components too. This can also alter display and button brightness levels, as can the front panel menu button.

The machine is very nice to use, just as luxurious in feel as its Audiolab 8200CD rival, which is really saying something. Those backlit buttons are a great feature if you're a bohemian who likes to enjoy his music in relatively low-light conditions.

Although a real ergonomic success, some may wonder why there is no front panel volume control facility on the machine's handsome front panel. Designed to form the centre of a digitally connected system, if you lose the remote control suddenly you've lost one of this machine's most important functions.

As you'd imagine, the back panel is bristling with features like its five digital inputs (two optically isolated Toslinks, one galvanically isolated USB, two transformer isolated coaxial), and two digital outputs plus a Creek RC remote control bus. You'll also like its choice of RCA phono and balanced XLR outputs. You can toggle through the digital inputs on the front panel SRC (source) button.

Under the hood, there's more than the usual attention to detail that

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Creek Evolution 50CD

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
CD player/DAC preamplifier

**WEIGHT**  
5.5kg

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

**FEATURES**  
● 2x Toslink and 2x coaxial digital inputs  
● 1x USB input, 1x aptX Bluetooth input (optional)  
● 2x digital outputs  
● 1x RCA phono out, 1x balanced XLR out  
● Wolfson WM8742 DACs

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Creek Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01442 260146

**WEBSITE**  
creekaudio.com



filters in the output of the DAC use high-grade OPA2134 op-amps in each channel, configured in balanced mode. This offers symmetrical filtering and both single-ended and balanced output capability with low impedance high-current output capability. The slot-loading mechanism is an amalgam of ruggedised specialist parts that were chosen specifically for their durability and good sound quality. It gets custom servo control software, to which much effort was devoted to write, says Michael Creek.

### Sound quality

The new Evolution 50CD has an interesting sound, one that is very well rounded and enjoyable across the board. Tonally, it's unmistakably a Creek, which means that the bass is a little warmer and more sumptuous than some leaner, meaner rivals – while the midband is a tad smoother and more spacious. But this also means the player is less intense in the upper midband, giving a more laid back sound than some. Where CD is concerned, many will think this to be no bad thing. Overall, it gives it a marginally more 'analogue' feel than immediate rivals such as the Audiolab 8200CD, which comes over as obviously less beguiling to listen to – albeit it no less fun.

Push some well-recorded rock music such as REM's excellent *Welcome to the Occupation* into the slot-loading drive and you'll be greeted by a very nice noise. Overall, the sound is well balanced with the slightest warmth in the upper bass, which gives things a pleasing body. More valuable, though, is the fluidity of the bass guitar work, which modulates up and down with an ease that you don't expect from digital. It integrates beautifully into the music and underpins Peter Buck's ringing Rickenbacker guitars further up. Michael Stipe's vocals sound

highly impassioned as if he's really pushing himself, and the 50CD captures the urgency brilliantly without ever sounding raucous. It picks through the wall of multi-tracked guitars with ease, placing them in a wide soundstage and giving them space. The drum and cymbal work is also excellent, with a light, airy top end that's decently smooth.

This essential musicality isn't lost when you move to electronic music

### You'll need to spend upwards of 10 times the Creek's cost to get an improvement

either, showing the player is basically very well balanced. Yello's *Cf Course I'm Lying* is a deep, brooding song done on soft, smooth analogue synthesisers and the Creek captures their timbre nicely, showing its skill at conveying subtle, low-level details. Tonally it's smooth with that big fat bass showing itself off again, as does its nice airy upper midband; Billy Mackenzie's backing vocals are wonderfully carried, sounding eerily pure and natural. It's also good at rhythms, but here you begin to notice it doesn't have the Rottweiler instincts of its closest rival, the Audiolab 8200CD, which seems to drill down into the interplay between the snare and hi-hat with more energy and commitment, making the Evo 50CD sound just a little laid back by comparison. Dynamically the Creek is very good and it captures the accenting on peaks slightly better.

Moving to the digital inputs, and via USB it proves a fine partner to a MacBook Pro running Audirvana Plus. It's worth noting that – in its current version – the Evo 50CD only offers decoding at up to 24/96 using this input, rather than the 192kHz

you'd expect to find in a good mid-priced machine such as this. There's a 25W toroidal mains transformer, with three separate secondary voltage windings for analogue and digital circuitry. Low-impedance, specially chosen power supply capacitors and voltage regulators are fitted for the best possible sound, and organic polymer capacitors pop up at key points in the analogue and digital circuitry, along with high-grade WIMA polypropylene capacitors in the output filters. Two Wolfson WM8742 24-bit DACs run in dual differential mode, and Creek says that special low-jitter clocks are fitted. The analogue reconstruction

**The Evo 50CD is to all intents and purposes a superb digital music centre**

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 Creek remote control bus
- 2 Coaxial digital output
- 3 Balanced XLR outputs
- 4 Galvanically isolated USB input
- 5 Analogue outputs
- 6 Optically isolated Toslink inputs

## Q&A

**Mike Creek**  
MD Creek Audio



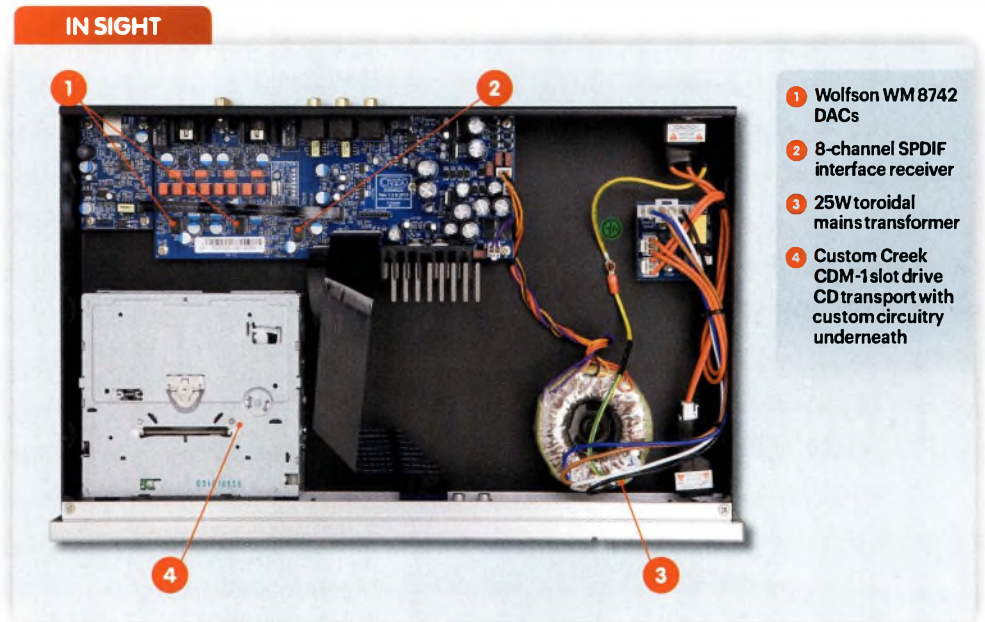
**DP: What design hurdles did you face making the new Evo 50CD?**

**MC:** The main one was to resolve the clocking issues for multiple sample rates and sources. The first priority was to clock the CD circuitry from a dedicated discrete master clock and use an I2S audio interface to the servo mechanism with local reclocking of the data right next to the DACs and master clock. Sharing this capability with the needs of receiving multiple different digital sources created many technical issues, which are not immediately apparent. Multiple, galvanically isolated S/PDIF inputs and outputs, with a separate clock recovery system based upon a Wolfson WM8805, provide excellent performance from all sources. A galvanically isolated asynchronous USB input, supporting multiple sample rates and optional Bluetooth capability, all served in a small and relatively inexpensive form, complete the package. It makes designing amplifiers trivial by comparison!

**Why did you use Wolfson DACs?**

Although Creek has previously used both Crystal Semiconductor and Burr-Brown DAC chips before, we developed a prototype DAC using a lower-cost Wolfson part and were all impressed with the way it sounded during development. Wolfson is a British brand, developed in Scotland, so we felt that if the results were positive, we should try to use local technology. It is important to use a device with a low noise floor, with high dynamic range and low distortion. The Wolfson WM8742 used in the Evo 50CD is capable of extremely high performance and low distortion when deployed correctly. We found the major measured and sonic improvements were associated with running separate left and right DACs and the differential aspect just added a cherry on the cake.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 Wolfson WM8742 DACs
- 2 8-channel SPDIF interface receiver
- 3 25W toroidal mains transformer
- 4 Custom Creek CDM-1 slot drive CD transport with custom circuitry underneath

sampling frequency that's possible (any higher sampling frequencies will be downsampled to 96 or 88.2). This doesn't seem to adversely affect the sound, though, and The Scorpions' *China White* at 24/96 is as powerful and punchy as I hoped, with wonderful texture to the raucous, cranked-up electric guitars. Indeed, the soundstage is suitably vast, the speakers seemingly disappear into the room as I am assaulted by those power chords, making for a visceral sound. At the same time, those stinging cymbal crashes and wailing vocals never quite step over the breach into harshness, while still making a real impression. I can hear the typical Wolfson DAC sound – a big but slightly loose bass allied to a spacious midband that extends up to a well-lit treble that gives cymbals a satisfyingly metallic feel – and it certainly works well here.

The Eroica Quarter's reading of Mendelssohn's *Octet Op.20* at 24/96 is a delight, the fine DAC section is well able to convey the delicacy of string tone. It's with this sort of music that hi-res digital really comes into its own; suddenly CD doesn't seem fit for purpose any more. Here, the Evolution 50CD serves up a spacious recorded acoustic with satisfying depth, convincing scale and a fine sense of the feel of the concert hall. The music flows in an enjoyable and tuneful way, giving an immersive listening experience. Again, it doesn't quite have the searching, forensic low-level detailing of the Audiolab, but it sounds no worse for it – indeed tonally it is sweeter and more palatable with the 8200CD sounding a little sandpaper. In absolute terms,

there's a slight diffuseness to the sound and a lack of true three-dimensional image projection, but you'll need to spend many times the Creek's cost on an exotic high-end DAC to get a dramatic improvement. Yes, this talented new machine really is rather good.

## Conclusion

Creek's avowed intention with the Evolution 50CD is to produce an excellent all-round package – one that manages to combine real operational flexibility with convenience and top-notch sound. And overall it has succeeded – sonically this new machine is excellent, proving a great long-term listen. It's also highly flexible and is rather nice to use too – thanks to the sleek slot-loading CD drive, backlit buttons and fine OLED display. As such, if you're looking for an excellent do-it-all digital device, this is an absolutely essential audition. It makes a great case for the continued existence of Compact Disc players, no less! ●

## HOW IT COMPARES

The Creek's closest rival is the Audiolab 8200CD (£800), and it looks swisher than the Creek. Sonically the Creek is a little warmer and more sumptuous; bass is a tad warmer and fruitier and it has a more supple, rhythmic feel. This translates up to the midband, which is fractionally more laid back, but no less enjoyable. The Audiolab sounds more intense; everything comes at you with more force and ultimately better dynamics and detail. It does sound slightly more processed, though, partly down to its dry tonality and the fact that the Creek is more mellifluous. Both are excellent at the price, and are well worth comparing in your system.

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Slot-loading mech and backlit buttons; sweet, musical sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No fascia mounted volume controls
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent sounding, highly versatile silver disc spinner
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

### OVERALL

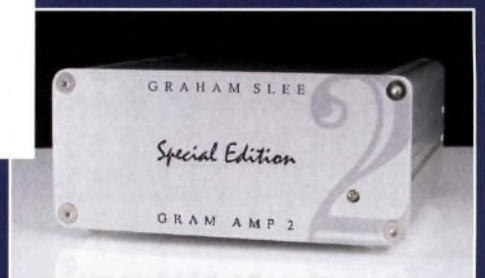




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# Viva España

Spain's Vieta Audio is back in the UK with new stereo components. **Ed Selley** rolls out the welcome mat...

**W**hile two-channel audio has been staging something of a fight back of late, the bulk of new product has come from existing manufacturers returning to the category, while new arrivals have tended to be at slightly higher price points than ones we would define as entry level. This makes the duo you see here especially interesting. Not only is Vieta Audio returning to the UK after sufficiently long a period of time that it is new for many people (me included), but the products it is returning with are at the affordable end of the market.

The range arriving in the UK is an extensive one. The VH-HA100 amp and VH-CD060 CD player are the

flagship components, however, and find themselves going head to head with the usual suspects in the budget two-channel sector.

The specification of the two units is conventional enough. The HA100 is a 100W design (although the conditions under which this figure is generated such as distortion and impedance are unspecified) with four line inputs on the rear and a single 3.5mm line input on the front, a tape output and a moving magnet phono stage. You also get a full-size headphone socket and switchable A and B speaker outputs as well as a full set of tone and balance controls.

The CD060 is a decidedly minimalist proposition. The mechanism supports

CD and MP3 playback and is decoded courtesy of a Burr-Brown PCM1796 DAC, but in connection terms you are limited to a coaxial and optical output and a single RCA stereo output. This means neither amp nor CD player offer any form of digital input or USB connection, which places them at a disadvantage compared with some of the competition.

The overall build quality of the duo is reasonably solid, but there are some issues across both products that rather spoil the effect. The good news is that the metal casework feels solid and well assembled with thick front panels and good-quality paint finish on all surfaces. The not so good news is that the amp turns up with a slightly bowed rear panel that doesn't inspire a huge amount of confidence. The volume control is also not ideal. To allow for remote control Vieta has used a rotary encoder, which doesn't need to be motorised in the way a conventional potentiometer would, but as there is no display on the amp it is impossible to tell what volume the VH-HA100 will start at, which is likely to catch you out sooner or later.

The CD player also suffers from a noisy and clunky mechanism that is a

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Vieta Audio  
VH-HA100/  
VH-CD060

**ORIGIN**  
Spain/China

**TYPE**  
Integrated  
amplifier/CD player

**WEIGHT**  
4.8kg/4.2kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 70 x 87mm  
430 x 76 x 87mm

**FEATURES**  
VH-HA100  
● 4x line inputs  
● 1x phono input  
● 1x line output

VH-CD060  
● 1x phono input  
● 1x line output  
● Blue VFD display

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Aqord Distribution

**TELEPHONE**  
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**WEBSITE**  
aqsound.com

far cry from anything you would find in a Japanese house brand product at the price. As well as being somewhat inelegant when loading a disc, it is audible when it spins up and seems to introduce noise via the speakers too. While the amp is solid if a little austere, the CD060 simply doesn't feel like a £350 product and given the CD category is currently undergoing something of a squeeze, it doesn't have the shelf appeal that some of the competition does. The remote supplied with the two units is not an ergonomic masterpiece, but is easy to use and covers most of the functions across both products.

### Sound quality

With the Vieta components running as a pair and connected to a pair of Neat Iota loudspeakers, the news is rather more positive and suggests that Vieta has been putting the bulk of its attention on the inside rather than the exterior. With the Cinematic Orchestra's *In Motion #1*, the pairing is assured with its presentation of the different musical soundscapes and diverse instrumentation. The massed strings are powerful and well defined and free of any harshness or stridency. There is a useful balance between sounding sufficiently detailed and lively to excite without ever being overly bright. When the altogether harsher recording of UNKLE's *Another Night Out* is wheeled out, the Vietas capture the fury of the piece without reminding you of the rough and ready presentational style.

Splitting the duo up and listening to them separately via my resident Naim ND5XS and Supernait 2 begins to explain the breakdown of roles and responsibilities fairly well. The CD060 is something of an ugly duckling, but it is at least a deeply civilised performer with a richness to the midrange and bass that helps to keep aggressive recordings like the UNKLE

piece sounding listenable. The amplifier is more matter of fact and in many ways more impressive. There is a sense that within the constraints of its price tag, this is a powerful and accurate amplifier. There seems to be no shortage of headroom – substituting the larger Morel Octave 6 presents no issue for it and there is real punch to the low end that makes faster and more bass-driven music sound exciting and engaging.

A final welcome touch from the amp is that both the phono stage and headphone stage are more than simple convenience features. Both are capable of competing with sub-£100 rivals – although the lack of volume marker can prove a real problem

### As an opening gambit this augers rather well for the return of Vieta

moving between headphones and speakers, so this is something you should take into account. The phono stage doesn't really suffer from the same issues – it has a useful amount of gain and is acceptably quiet in use. Whether it is going to see more use with the average customer than a digital input is a question I'm not equipped to answer, but if you're after a phono stage-equipped amp, the Vieta makes a good case for itself.

Combining the relative strengths and weaknesses, the pairing manages to be lively and yet ultimately forgiving. It is happy with a variety of music and can drive a wide selection of speakers without any sign of strain. There is little hiding that the HA100 can deliver more with different digital sources. Using a Cambridge Audio DacMagic 100, which is £150 less than the CD060 sees it deliver a slightly leaner, more accurate but still

very civilised performance with FLAC rips of the same CDs. It is hard to ignore that for an extra £50 over the CD player, you can help yourself to Arcam's seriously talented iRDAC and put the performance in a different league. There is no doubt that the CD player gains from being in the same company as the amp, but it doesn't necessarily follow that the reverse is true.

### Conclusion

The budget two-channel market is a competitive and challenging environment at the moment and it is always good to see a new arrival in it. Vieta has managed to get many of the basics right with these two products. Ultimately, for me at least, it is the HA100 that makes a stronger case for itself while the CD060 is a pleasant enough sounding unit, but faces stiff competition. Slight concerns about the build quality of that rear panel aside, this is a powerful, accurate and very capable amplifier. It forms a happy partnership with the CD060, but equally it is happy with a number of other digital sources that would lend rather greater capability to your home setup. As an opening gambit though, this augers rather well for the return of Vieta ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT: VH-HA100**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful and detailed sound; solid build; useful phono stage input

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No digital inputs; some rough edges to styling

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** An engaging and powerful performer, but a digital input would be nice

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

**OVERALL** ★★★★★

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT VH-CD060**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Build; smooth, unforced sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Limited connectivity; noisy mechanism; clunky interface

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A pleasant enough sounding player that faces stiff competition from better-equipped rivals

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

**OVERALL** ★★★★★

### CONNECTIONS





Hi-Fi  
Choice

EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

# Pure love

Followers of fashion know that DAC/preamps are all the rage, and with the PureDAC, it's justifiably so, says **David Price**

**T**here's more to life than hi-fi you know, and indeed many consumers are beginning to think the less of it you have, the better. This is heretical stuff to those who grew up during the seventies and eighties, when we were taught that if it didn't come in umpteen separate boxes, it simply couldn't be any good. Now, though, suddenly there are all sorts of possibilities presenting themselves. The most obvious example of this is the DAC/preamp. It's a sort of Sports Utility Vehicle of the hi-fi world, promising to do lots of important things very well, without you needing to own the component parts.

This is what I had thought B.M.C.'s new PureDAC to be, but the company claims it is more than this, and uses a host of proprietary technologies to make an unusually sophisticated marriage between the two. Indeed, its

maker calls it a 'digital/analogue power converter' no less – something that integrates all analogue functions into an extremely short signal path while performing each single function better than the traditional way. "Virtually lossless" digital conversion is achieved by the company's proprietary Current Injection circuitry, and there's passive sample noise filtering and a special Discrete Intelligent Gain Management system.

As far as the end user is concerned, it still presents itself as a multi-source DAC and headphone amp with a (digital) preamplifier thrown in. The showroom appeal is further heightened by the low price and swish build quality. The backlit acronym on its fascia stands for Balanced Music Concept.

It's a pretty striking-looking thing, and the wide expanse of metalwork comes from high-quality aluminium

extrusions that have been specially anodised to give a luxurious, silky feel. The ornate styling confers additional status on the product, but B.M.C. says the central curative also functions as a well for reducing resonance in the casing. Power it up and the mirror section of the front panel lights up like a Honda Civic dashboard. Bright white LED light issues from behind, labelling all the control buttons for you and displaying the digital source selected and the sampling rate used. The worst part is the slightly fiddly buttons, which aren't the easiest to use.

It's very tidy inside too, with a decently sized toroidal transformer rigidly bolted onto the lower case extrusion. Digital audio, logic, analogue audio and headphone driver stages all have their own separate power feeds, and inside the sections for important functional groups like master-clock, DAC and USB. Special balanced current capacitors are used for their low-impedance characteristics, and are said to have an absolutely symmetrical charge and discharge pattern. Low inductance automotive fuses and film bypasses are featured everywhere in the circuitry. Next to the transformer sits the control PCB, which interfaces with the front panel displays and switching, and behind is the main

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
B.M.C. PureDAC  
**ORIGIN**  
Germany/China  
**TYPE**  
Digital-to-analogue  
converter/preamp  
**WEIGHT**  
5.4kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
365x 103 x 328mm  
**FEATURES**  
• 16 to 24-bit,  
44.1kHz to 192kHz  
PCM; DSD playback  
• ESS Sabre 9016  
DACchip  
• Headphone  
amplifier with  
independent level  
control  
• Fully balanced  
operation  
• High-quality  
toroidal transformer  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Colab Audio Ltd  
**TELEPHONE**  
07702 168000  
**WEBSITE**  
colabaudio.com



“headphones with strong motors, like Beyer Dynamics Tesla series or Fostex’s TH900” as benefitting especially. Speaking of plugging things in, round the back you get AES/EBU, Toslink, coaxial and USB digital inputs, while a pair of balanced XLR and unbalanced RCAs send the music out. There are also special link sockets for connecting with other members of its family.

### Sound quality

I have no experience of any past designs, but the PureDAC doesn’t take long to tell me it has been very well thought through. I start listening using it purely as a DAC, into an integrated amplifier, just to gauge its mettle, and am more than a little surprised to hear it cope with one of my favourite torture tracks – REM’s *Life And How to Live It* – without breaking into a sweat. Frankly this CD is hard work even via a really good CD player; the vinyl version is a lot more listenable. But the PureDAC isn’t fazed, and delivers an even, open and enjoyable rendition.

That’s going some for any 16/44 converter, so horrible is this digital disc; Joe Boyd’s puritanical production (think the opposite of Duran Duran’s lavish soundscapes) full of ringing Rickenbackers isn’t easy to get right. But the song bounces along; tonal balance is even and the piercing guitar work doesn’t grate as much as feared.

Meanwhile, singer Michael Stipe grumbles through the track in his folksy way, the PureDAC conveying those gravelly vocals clearly and cleanly. Rhythmically, things romp along, and I get a fine sense of the micro dynamics of the song, the subtle accenting that make it so much more involving. All of which tells me that the PureDAC is a clean, open and even-sounding device, and one that’s particularly strong on low-level detail.

Switching to full-blown preamplifier duties, I am even more encouraged. Driving either good solid-state or tube amplification, it doesn’t let itself down when substituted for the superb MF Audio Passive preamplifier. Fed digits by an Esoteric CD transport, it makes light work of Randy Crawford’s *You Might Need Somebody*. A warm and breezy but powerful Tommy LiPuma production, the PureDAC really gets into the swing of things. Vocals have an admirable purity of tone, but are still carried with emotion and passion. Backing brass stabs and electric guitars again have excellent texture, coming over as real, believable instruments with realistic timbre. At the same time, things move along well in rhythmic terms, the song getting a sense of its own trajectory, moving ever closer to a resolution. Overall this little box comes over as a detailed and neutral

### The PureDAC doesn’t take long to tell me it has been very well thought through

performer; it doesn’t have a distinctive, larger-than-life character and nor does it try to impose one on the music. Basically it just gets out of the way, letting the listener get to the musical heart of the matter.

Moving across digital sources, and the USB input is no less handy. Via a MacBook Pro running Audirvana, Herbie Hancock’s *Rock It* comes over just as smoothly as any silver disc, but with significantly more detail, depth and dynamics – just as it should. This powerful track with swinging dynamics, pioneered the use of electronics in dance music. The PureDAC shows its alacrity at capturing the leading edges of snare drums, letting the music come over at ▶

board, much of which is taken up by power supply componentry.

The balanced preamplifier section is said to be properly integrated with the DAC’s current-to-voltage converter, which converts and filters the DAC’s current, eliminating the need for an extra stage. The DAC fitted is an ESS Sabre 9016, used because it covers all standards including DSD64, DSD128 and up to 32-bit, 384kHz PCM via the USB input. The S/PDIF inputs are limited to 24/96. An important part of the package is the headphone amplifier, which is claimed to deliver high currents (the balanced output is said to be close to 0ohms!). B.M.C. cites

**A rather stylish look is matched by an impressive sonic showing**

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 XLR balanced output
- 2 Toslink digital input
- 3 AES/EBU digital input
- 4 Coaxial digital input
- 5 B.M.C. Link switch
- 6 RCA line output

## Q&A

Karl Smith

Director Colab Audio



**DP:** Where does the PureDAC sit in the great scheme of things?

**KS:** Our Pureline currently includes PureDAC and PureVox speakers, while the PureAmp will be released at Munich and a Pureline media server will be on dem there too. A phono stage will also come soon. Basically, it's the affordable entry point to the brand designed for budget conscious audiophiles. We also have a high-end range that includes the DAC1 DAC/PREamp, MCCI phono stage, CS2 integrated amp, M2 monoblocks, BDCC1 belt drive CD player/transport and Arcadia loudspeaker. This is complimented by special mono crystal interconnects, phono cables and speaker cables.

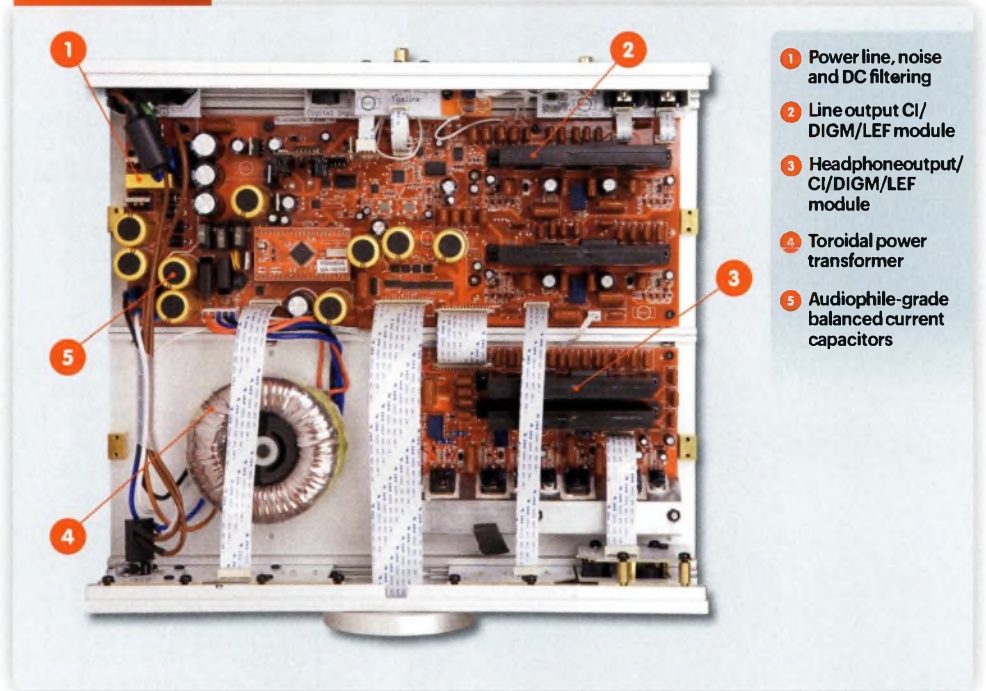
**What is Digital Intelligent Gain Management system?**

A traditional analogue volume control divides a good DAC output signal to a fraction of its original value, adding gain twice afterwards (pre and power amp). DIGM is a new and definitely better approach. The PureDAC changes the gain, or to be more precise, the conversion factor of the I/V converter resulting in a variable signal output level. When the volume is reduced with DIGM, the noise, distortion and stability improve. DIGM is digitally controlled, but works on the analogue domain only. Combining the PureDAC with an amplifier extends the gain management advantages by letting the PureDAC manage the amp's gain to an optimum combination. Volume control with DIGM improves the overall sound instead of downgrading it.

**What is Current Injection?**

Current Injection (CI) absorbs a source signal current (eg DAC output) and routes the original current in a way that the output voltage is made from the original and so virtually lossless. Any op-amp or standard feedback amp replaces the original signal by a copy. We consider it natural to keep the number of copies as low as possible for preserving quality. When the PureDAC combines with an amp, the amplifier's gain stage is replaced by a CI stage, which clearly improves the sound quality.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 Power line, noise and DC filtering
- 2 Line output CI/DIGM/LEF module
- 3 Headphone output/CI/DIGM/LEF module
- 4 Toroidal power transformer
- 5 Audiophile-grade balanced current capacitors



Although it doesn't compete on price - it's half the cost - Audiolab's M-DAC is a valid comparison here. It doesn't win for style, but has an excellent OLED display with lots of useful information about sampling frequency, level, etc. and that's something the B.M.C. would benefit from. Sonically, the PureDAC makes the M-DAC sound a little crude and coarse around the edges. But you can't criticise it for detail or its rock-solid sound staging, which still gives the pricier rival food for thought. Both, but especially the M-DAC, could do with a slightly warmer tonality, although having said that, the PureDAC is very close to neutral.

great speed. The result is a powerful, propulsive sound with plenty of space between the beats; instead of blurring and slurring things as lesser DACs do, it reveals itself to be pin sharp. The dynamic crescendos on this track are pretty marked, and these are tracked very faithfully by the PureDAC, making for a real seat-of-the-pants listening experience. At the same time, it peppers the soundstage with low-level detail, providing an enthralling yet intricate performance.

In absolute terms, and against high-end reference products, the PureDAC shows a slight narrowing of the soundstage. Also, it is tonally quite 'matter of fact', and some will prefer a slightly warmer and silkier presentation. Still, you'd never call the PureDAC in any way harsh or cold sounding - it isn't, it just lacks the lustrous warmth and body that you'd get from a DCS Debussy, costing five times the price, for example. This isn't a criticism as such, it's merely a factual observation, and unless the PureDAC goes up against truly expensive hardware, most listeners will feel charmed by its excellent all-round ability.

Certainly, in terms of its price point, the amount of detail, delicacy and finesse you get is really rather unexpected. Cue up Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, for example, and this lovely spacious, beguiling piece of music comes over in a wonderfully believable and enjoyable way. Across the formats and the genres, this is a fine performer.

## Conclusion

One of the ancient hi-fi laws laid down way back in the mists of time - probably somewhere around the seventies - is that sound quality stands in inverse proportion to style or functionality. Well, products like this confound such notions - here's a lovingly built, stylishly presented device with a wide range of inputs and facilities, it costs surprisingly little for what it has got, and sounds superb. Indeed, any suspicions that you might be harbouring that the PureDAC is 'all show and no go' will be quickly dispelled when you plug one in and give it a listen. Its evenness of tone and general across-the-board competence is such that it should appeal to lovers of many types of music, running a wide variety of systems, too. Who says that you can't always get what you want? ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Open, powerful, detailed sound; features; styling; build

VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Control buttons a little fiddly

BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Excellent sounding, versatile DAC/preamp that's fantastic value for money

FEATURES



OVERALL



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**REVIEWS** PSB IMAGINE MINI  
STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER £599





# Mini adventure

PSB successfully proves that less can be more as **David Price** has fun with the new Imagine Mini standmounter

**I**t's not easy being a Mini. You're always aware that everyone else is bigger than you, stronger than you and in some respects more attractive too. You have to fight for your already modest position in life, because it's so easy for other larger objects to overshadow you.

Sometimes less is more, and when you're talking about hi-fi loudspeakers diminutive dimensions can be an advantage. While little loudspeakers cannot move vast amounts of air, the air that they do move is less affected

## It's remarkable just how big sounding a well-executed small speaker can be

by cabinet resonances, because it's easier to make a more rigid small box. Then there's the proximity between the tweeter and mid/bass driver; the closer the two are, the better the 'point source'. This makes for superior stereo imaging and focus, as any dual concentric speaker fan will tell you.

So PSB's Imagine Mini has several things going for it from the off. Expect it to throw stereo images into the room the like of which you'd normally only hear at a live concert, and also to sound fast, tight and fun.

Interestingly, the Imagine Mini asks its 25mm titanium dome tweeter to do a little more work than usual, as it crosses over at 2.2kHz. This is fairly routine for a larger two-way speaker design, but less so for something of this size. It mates up to the 120mm mid/bass drive unit with a rather unusual clay/ceramic compounded polypropylene cone, and has a special Turbo Magnet system, which is said to increase the force factor of the compound magnet and improve the bass performance.

PSB hasn't scrimped on the cabinet, either. Coming in a choice of five finishes – Black Ash, Dark Cherry, Walnut, High Gloss Black or High Gloss White – it is very solidly constructed for a speaker of this size, and finished to a high standard. The usual 'knuckle rap' test delivers a satisfyingly dead thunk. The moulded rear panel houses a single pair of speaker binding posts and a rear bass reflex port. Positioning is easy – two to three metres between one another, just a few centimetres from the rear wall, and slightly toed-in according to taste. The main trick is finding stands high enough to get their tweeters at ear-height; I use Atacama SE24s.

## Sound quality

Starting off with some smooth ambient electronica courtesy of Groove Armada's *Dusk, You and Me*, it quickly becomes clear that this is a classy little loudspeaker. The music projects confidently out into the room, the boxes appearing to dissolve into thin air – indeed, it's remarkable

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
PSB Imagine Mini

**ORIGIN**  
Canada

**TYPE**  
Standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
143 x 234 x 212mm

**FEATURES**  
• 25mm titanium  
dome tweeter  
• 120mm  
polypropylene  
mid/bass driver  
• Turbo Magnet  
system  
• Bass reflex loading

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sevenoaks Sound  
& Vision Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01732 740944

**WEBSITE**  
psbspeakers.com

just how big sounding a well-executed small speaker can be. Tonally, there is no sense of the bass falling off a cliff, as the Mini sounds surprisingly fulsome in the upper bass. In absolute terms, of course, the bottom octave is missing, but the richness of the balance above that flatters to deceive. At the other end, treble is crisp and surprisingly refined for a speaker of this price. For example, the trumpet sound has a realistic rasp, and hi-hats have satisfying shimmer, but never veer into harshness.

Cue up something denser and more frenetic like Felt's *Textile Ranch*, and the PSBs keep themselves together. This track is packed with closely layered jangling guitars, and can descend into a muddle on lesser loudspeakers, but the Mini dives into it with aplomb. The upper midband is admirably smooth, with no nasty shrillness, and the snare drums bite through the mix cleanly. Things flow beautifully, the PSBs proving well able to capture the rhythm of the music as well as the subtle dynamic accenting that breathes life into the song.

It's only when you play powerful, wideband music that the PSB hints at its own mortality; 808 State's *Azura* has massive swathes of pounding synth bass, crunching dynamics and a thumping electronic percussion – and here the Minis sound a little less comfortable, especially at higher volumes, and you can tell their tiny cabinets are labouring under the strain of all the air they are being asked to shift.

## Conclusion

In absolute terms this is not the most transparent or dynamic speaker, but for the price it's ideal for what most people want from a small speaker. The Imagine Mini is an excellent little box with a real charm of its own; if your listening room is space-limited you'll do well to give it an audition ●

**Don't be fooled by the petite dimensions, the sound is large**



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



#### VALUE FOR MONEY



#### BUILD QUALITY



#### EASE OF DRIVE



#### OVERALL



**LIKE:** Large, spacious sound; rhythmically and dynamically convincing

**DISLIKE:** Limited bass; needs a 50W amp (or more) for best results

**WE SAY:** Charming little loudspeaker that's lots of fun to listen to!

*Cranage Hall*  
Cheshire

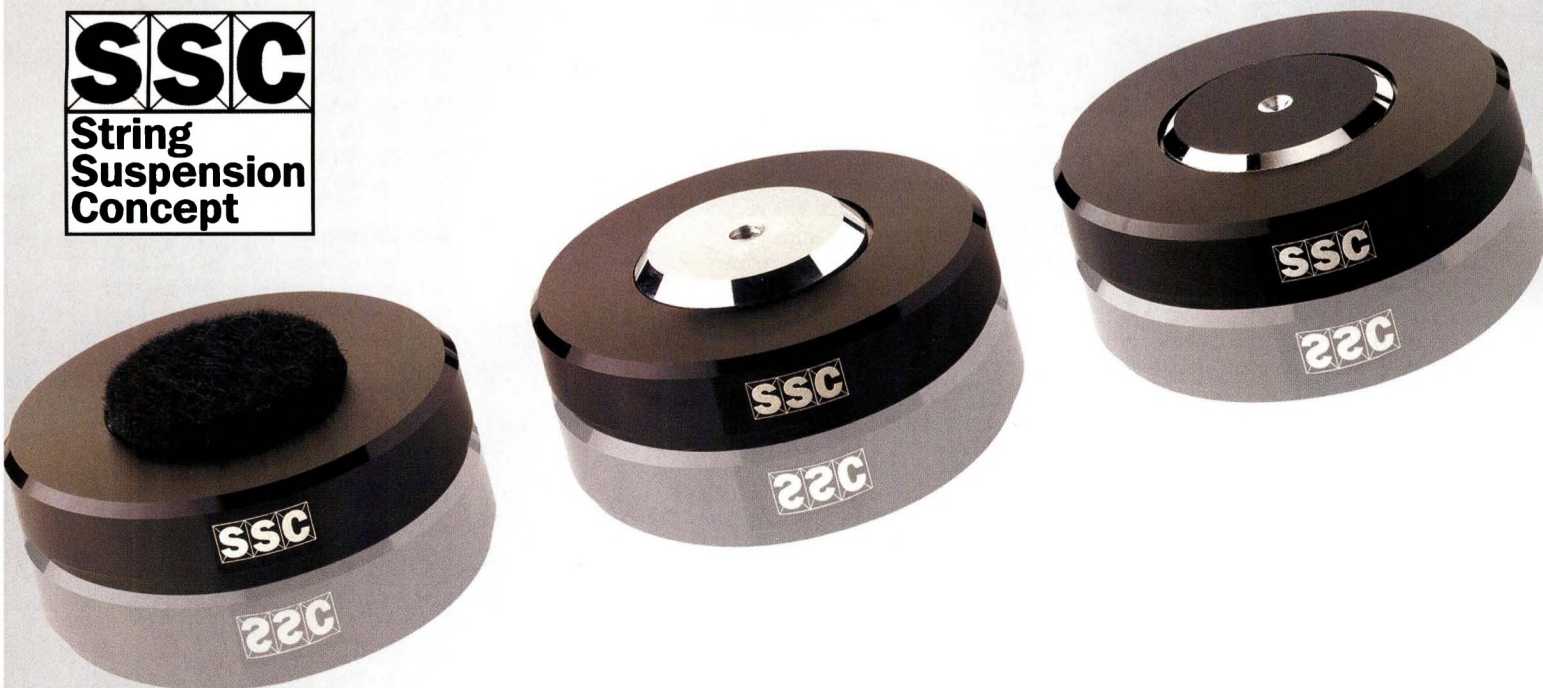
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# Melody maker



Meet the latest addition to the ISOkinetik range of tonearms as **Neville Roberts** takes the new Silver Melody 750 for a spin!

**T**his tonearm is actually manufactured by Japanese firm Jelco, which is one of the largest tonearm OEMs in the world. The company was first established in 1920 as a producer of high-end audio plugs and accessories and has built an enviable reputation in the business over the years, providing tonearms for turntable manufacturers that don't have the capacity to make their own. Jelco has supplied arms to Acoustic Research, Koetsu, Grado Labs, Audioquest, Pro-Ject, Ortofon and Ariston as well as ISOkinetik. This one is a bit different as it has been produced specially for ISOkinetik.

The arm has a silicone-damped, single-point jewelled suspension system, which was patented in 1977 by Ichikawa San, the man behind Jelco. The detachable SME-style 0.5in connector headshell makes cartridge installation and exchange very simple. Working with the design team in Tokyo, ISOkinetik upgraded the internal wiring of an SA-750 to a high-quality twist of pure silver within a premium-grade dielectric. It's available as a 9in, 10in and 12in tonearm and in silver-grey or black finishes. As an optional upgrade, a silver-wired magnesium and rosewood headshell is also available.

ISOkinetik has long produced asymmetrical counterweights for Rega arms and it made sense for it to apply this same concept here, hence the Silver Melody 750 is fitted with an underslung static balance weight. This drops the centre of gravity closer to the stylus and thus improves the tracking within the LP groove. ISOkinetik recommends the use of its Silver Melody 2 tonearm cable and a package is available that includes both arm and cable, together with a choice of either Audio Note Silver or Eichmann Silver Bullet phono plugs.

After installation, the final job is to unscrew the knurled cap on the top of the bearing and then apply some of the supplied silicone damping oil into the exposed cup. This can give an element of control to the arm by damping out any unwanted arm resonances and reigning in excessive behaviour from exuberant cartridges!

An effective mass of 13.5g with the standard headshell makes the Silver Melody 750 a lower mid-mass arm (low is 10g or less and high is greater than 25g). However, this, coupled with the damping ability of the arm makes it well suited for use with a wide range of cartridges. The arm is supplied with all you need for setting it up on your record deck, including a

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
ISOkinetik Silver Melody 750

**ORIGIN**  
Japan

**TYPE**  
Tonearm

**LENGTHS**  
9in, 10in or 12in available

**FEATURES**  
• 3-point fixing with VTA adjustment with a detachable headshell and interconnect cable

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
ISOkinetik

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 2418890

**WEBSITE**  
isokinetik.co.uk

full-size paper mounting template and a combined specification, technical drawing and instruction sheet.

## Sound quality

After setting up the arm correctly, the first disk on my turntable is an excellent recording of Vivaldi's *Concerto In D for violin and strings* on Telefunken Das Alte Werk. The music immediately grabs me with a fantastic attack from the strings, with no sign of harshness. The bass is well extended and has a superb tonal clarity in the lower registers. In particular, drums have a clear and clean impact, which demonstrates that the arm and cartridge are working in perfect harmony. The excellent bass control is surely down to the use of damping oil in the bearing.

A superb solo harpsichord recording, the JS Bach *Partita No 1* by Trevor Pinnock sparkles along with an effortless enthusiasm. Then, for a complete change of musical style, I play *Don't Misunderstand* by Thelma Houston. The vocal presence is palpable and totally convincing. Both these recordings demonstrate excellent detail and clarity while in no way diminishing the smoothness and refinement of the performance. This is a real credit to the silver wiring.

## Conclusion

I get a real sense that the Silver Melody 750 is in complete control of the cartridge at all times and the bass, midrange and treble are always in balance with each other. A truly great arm doesn't impose its own fingerprint on the music – it should provide the perfect physical environment for the cartridge and add no colour of its own. This is certainly the case here.

Another thing that strikes me is the beautiful finish on all of the elements of the arm. This is a superb performer as well as excellent value for money and will suit a wide range of turntables and cartridges ●

**The tonearm is available in a choice of lengths and finishes**



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**BUILD QUALITY**



**FEATURES**



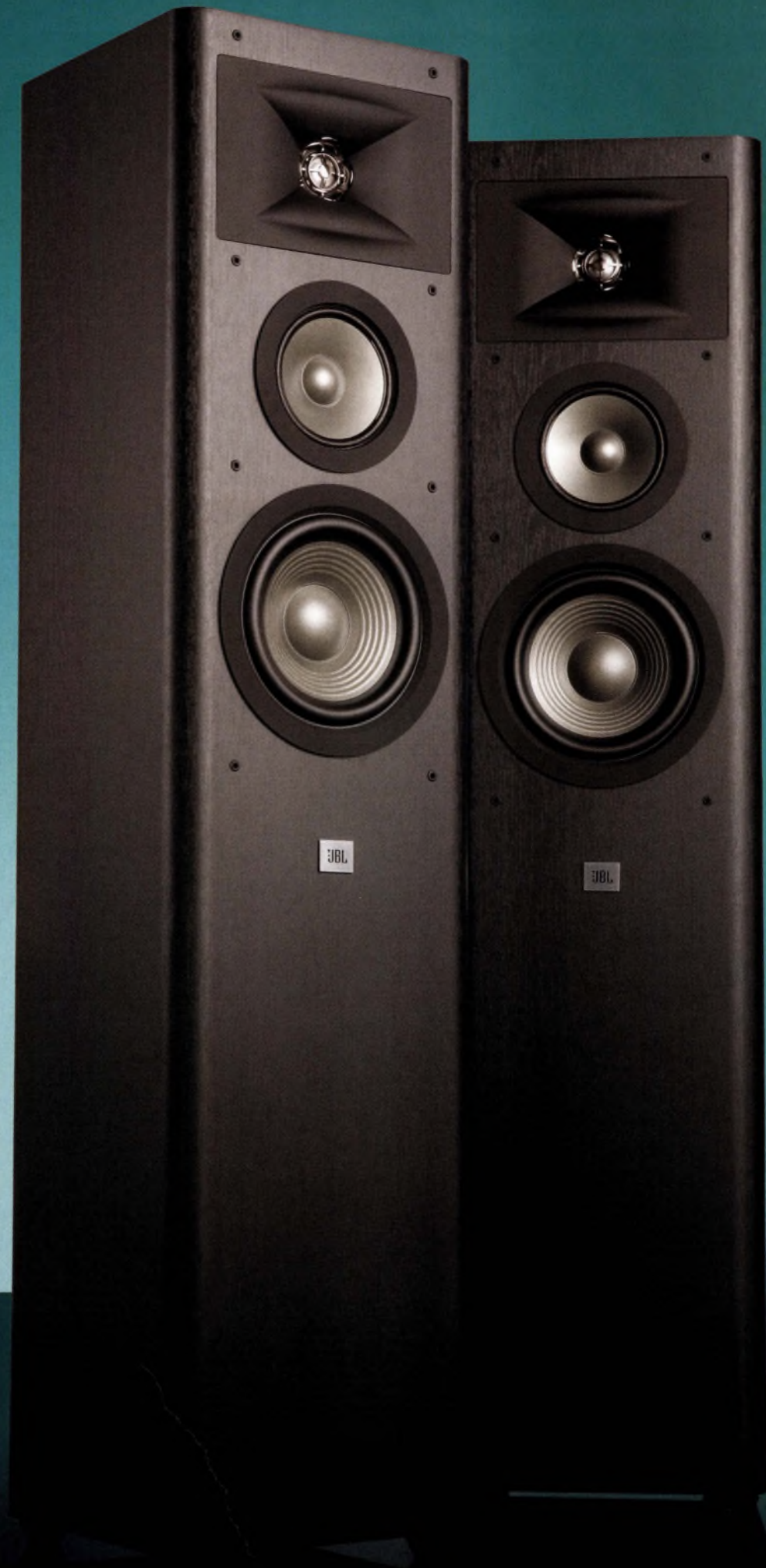
**LIKE:** Excellent detail and clarity combined with a superbly well-controlled bass response

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**WE SAY:** A fantastic arm that is beautifully made and brilliant value for money

**OVERALL**





# Young Americans

JBL's Studio 270s are the first to appear from the new range. **Lee Dunkley** raises an eyebrow at the entry-level floorstander

**F**loorstanding loudspeakers are hugely popular right now, with seemingly more models vying for our attention on a daily basis. It's a competitive market that has been growing consistently stronger since floorstanders first grabbed our attention back in the nineties. Their popularity is a win-win for music fans as the wealth of models means quality is high and prices competitive.

It's fair to say that American loudspeaker companies are often viewed with slightly raised eyebrows in the UK, but here JBL follows more elegant speaker designs rather than the muscular monitors it is better known for. The Studio 270s are priced just shy of £600 a pair, and are a heck of a lot of speaker for the money –

## Vocals have a naturalness and warmth to them that I rather like

market forces outside the UK means they are priced individually on the company website.

Hailing from the new Studio range, the 270s are JBL's entry-level floorstanding models in its nine-piece speaker lineup. Standing at over a meter tall, they make a sizeable impression in my listening room, but the rounded corner cabinets are a neat touch that helps soften the feel of that rather sizeable footprint. The review pair are finished in black wood grain, but models are also available in what JBL calls Espresso – brown. The robust cabinets are neatly presented and each is topped with a black gloss insert that gives them a luxurious edge over similarly priced rivals. The shiny gloss top is a nice touch, but it shows up dust and sticky fingerprints far too easily for my liking.

The rear connection panel is home to bi-wirable binding posts – a rarity at the price – and there's a large bass reflex port that suggests the 270s are best positioned away from rear walls. The rubberised feet that support the cabinets can easily be swapped for the supplied carpet spikes, depending on your needs. The three-way driver arrangement is eye catching, but easily hidden behind push-fit grilles should the 25mm CMMD tweeter, 100mm and 165mm PolyPlas mid and bass drivers not be to your taste.

## Sound quality

JBL says the design cues for its Studio 200 range are taken from its own professional M2 Master Reference Monitor speaker, and utilises HDI (High Definition Imaging) waveguide technology and cabinets and driver enhancements to achieve powerful vocal and bass performance. Speaker placement suggests the 270s should be 1.8 to 3m apart and at least 51cm away from side walls, but no hints are given for distance from the rear walls.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
JBL Studio 270

**ORIGIN**  
China

**TYPE**  
Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
16.1kg

**DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
237 x 1,010 x 244mm

**FEATURES**  
● 25mm CMMD tweeter  
● 100mm PolyPlas midrange driver  
● 165mm PolyPlas bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity: 88dB  
● Quoted frequency response: 45Hz-22kHz

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Harman UK

**TELEPHONE**  
01707 278113

**WEBSITE**  
uk.jbl.com

Gold-plated bi-wiring binding posts are a boon at the price



First impressions are good, and with the JBLs placed around 30cm from my rear wall they produce a large amount of bass from the off with Daft Punk's *Get Lucky*. The bass quantity seems to be more than anticipated, but the amount of energy is engaging and the 270's drivers propel the track along with boundless enthusiasm that makes listening a lot of fun. The bass is perhaps slightly augmented due to the speaker's close proximity to the rear wall, and moving the pair further out into the room helps to reduce the amount of bass energy, making it more listenable over longer periods.

Voicing is perhaps a bit forward and up front, but vocals have a naturalness and a tiny amount of warmth to them that I rather like. You can listen right in to *Royals* by Lorde and hear her every breath without it being over shadowed by the track's tremendous bass line, which is dynamic and expertly handled.

A slight hint of cabinet colouration leads me to play a percussive 24/96 track by Kuniko to investigate further. The 270s are able to create an expansive soundstage across the width of the room that extends beyond its walls as well as forwards into the room. It's an engaging performance that is only made slightly less convincing by the occasional cabinet buzz that's evidently excited by the rather challenging percussive music.

## Conclusion

The 270s may not be the most neutral sounding pair of floorstanders, but their engaging voicing and energy are plenty of fun. They deliver the kind of performance and 3D soundstaging that makes you want to keep on listening – and that's what hi-fi should be all about after all. Even at lower volume levels their performance is beguilingly good, and is sure to put anyone that hears them under their spell, especially at the price ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**LIKE:** 3D-like soundstage; bags of energy and fun

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★  
**DISLIKE:** Some cabinet colouration; looks won't be for all

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**WESAY:** Engaging floorstander that puts in a performance and a smile on your face

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL



# Back to the FUTURE

Meridian is one of hi-fi's most innovative brands. **David Price** recalls its early years with Bob Stuart and Allen Boothroyd

**B**ack in 1972 the world was a different place. Colour TV was bleeding-edge technology, quartz digital watches were for millionaires and computers only appeared in sci-fi films. "So many things that people have hobbies for now, just didn't exist back then," says Meridian co-founder Bob Stuart. Having studied acoustics, psycho acoustics and electronic engineering at Birmingham university, then on to Imperial for his MSc in operational studies, he didn't have to think too hard about what to do with this education. "For people like me, if you didn't want to design weapons systems or medical systems, hi-fi was the place to be", he says.

At the same time, young Royal College of Art graduate Allen Boothroyd was beginning to make a name for himself in a career that would see him become one of Britain's most respected industrial designers. It was chance that he was introduced to Bob, via a company they both had worked with in differing capacities. Stuart had just won a competition in *Wireless World* magazine to redesign a famously unreliable hi-fi amplifier of the time, and was obviously a precocious young talent.

"I suppose the real word is naivety", says Allen about his first collaboration with Bob. He found himself being asked to co-design the now-legendary Lecson AC1/AP1, an elaborate two-box amplifier that turned out to be one of the most striking-looking things to have come out of the seventies. "Completely mad, but quite interesting", is

how he now describes it – and that's an understatement. This perspex and corrugated aluminium package is now on show in New York's Museum of Modern Art and London's Victoria & Albert Museum.

Its space-age styling was based on what Allen calls his (lack of) knowledge of how electronic products worked at the time. "I thought about it as analogue, with the signal coming in on the left-hand side of the box and coming out on the other, and the coloured sliders were designed to give a graphic representation of what was going on inside." He was trying to make something that's normally mundane look and feel exciting.

In the case of the iconic Lecson amp, there was a lot of clever circuitry inside, and it

## The toughest job, says Bob, is when they have to design a 'pragmatic' piece of equipment

impressed many people in an industry that was dominated by big beasts, a generation older and less free thinking. Suddenly, Boothroyd and Stuart became the Jobs and Wozniak of their day on the British hi-fi scene. Both brilliant in their field, together they caused a tremor that – slightly – shifted the tectonic plates of the electronics industry. "That certainly got us off to a good start", says Allen modestly.

Within a couple of years, Bob and Allen decided to start their own research and development company in Cambridge. "We thought we could do our own thing better", Allen remembers. Called Meridian because

they were geographically at 0° longitude, the name had to be amended to Boothroyd-Stuart Meridian soon after because Allen's wife, "Discovered there was a company in Leeds [with the same name] that made knickers or something".

Allen's styling of the Lecson certainly raised eyebrows, but Bob wasn't about to be upstaged. He had the idea that amplifiers could sound different. It seems strange now, but the conceit of the day held that – to use Quad's Peter Walker's oft-quoted phrase – an amplifier was "a piece of wire with gain" and no more. How then could a group of transistors, resistors, diodes, and capacitors have a sound of their own? The only way something could sound different is if the circuit hadn't been designed properly, and there was a technical fault somewhere – or so the received wisdom went.

## Thinking inside the box

Meridian's first product was the M1 speaker. Rather than being a big, fat, wide wooden box with countless drive units plastered all around its front baffle – which was the fashion of the day – it was tall, slim, narrow and elegant. More importantly it sounded superb, due to a combination of excellent cabinet design, top-quality drive units and the decision to place the amplifiers in the boxes. Instead of needing a separate power amplifier, all the active M1s required to make (very powerful) music was a tiny preamplifier control unit. This was born the 101, another important Boothroyd-Stuart moment.

Launched in 1978, Allen says he didn't want Meridian's first ever hi-fi separate to look conventional, "so I put it into a window extrusion, a sort of mullion, and chopped that into bits, and tried to persuade Bob to fit the electronics into it". It was tiny, and sported a dual-ganged silky volume control and crisp source selectors. Although not the dramatic visual statement that was the Lecson, the first Meridian electronics box



A design classic the Lecson AC/AP1 now resides in MOMA and the V&A

The perfect hi-fi partnership:  
Boothroyd and Stuart



**MERIDIAN 100 SERIES**

In the seventies world of big, brash and garish boxes, Meridian's first range of electronics couldn't have looked more different. The first component was the 101 preamplifier, which was designed as a controller for the M1 active loudspeaker. Soon though, the M1's power amps were taken out of their cabinets and put into similarly sized (140 x 50 x 300mm) boxes, with separate power supplies. By 1980 you could buy the company's top amplifier system - the 101/105 - for a whopping £600, twice the price of a Linn Sondek turntable. It sounded extremely detailed and refined by the standards of the day, with a highly capable 110W RMS power amplifier section that was able to drive even the largest, power-hungry monitor loudspeakers.

The modular construction made it ideally suited to driving active loudspeakers, and so the system was easily upgradable. The 101 got an improved IMCOS phono module, and Meridian ported out its technology into a more affordable variant, the 101/103, which pushed out around 50W per channel for £490. Then Meridian's 104 tuner appeared, with house styling to match the 101 preamplifier. A £225 FM-only design offering six screwdriver set presets with a small analogue tuning meter, it was another beautifully understated affair with fine sound quality. The range was subtly refined and improved over the years and became ever more popular. Recognising this, its designers received their second gong from the Design Council in 1982. It was superseded by the Meridian MCA component amp.



"had a distinct style, and made the user interface as simple as possible", says Boothroyd. He recalls it having nice flip switches that were, "much too expensive, but gave you a feeling of quality". In quintessential seventies style, it was finished in brown.

A whole range of small form factor 100-series components soon followed. The 103 power amplifier was split into tiny modules, and the 105 followed the same theme. There was even a matching 104 tuner, again little larger than a cigarette packet, but still featuring presets for the listener's favourite FM radio stations. It wasn't just the packaging that was clever. The 100-series system sounded superb, thanks to Bob's circuit design and decision to use unusually expensive components inside. By then, he recalls, "there was quite a movement

about understanding the importance they made. It was nothing like the old reference designs of transistors - it was a complete reboot". People noticed, and Meridian had phone calls from all over the world; indeed Canada became the company's largest market.

**Working together**

"Part of our success is that we never wrapped boxes around electronics, and most other companies did. Well, we have occasionally done so, but it never really worked", says Bob. "We've always collaborated right at the conceptual stage of the product", adds Allen. "I think it's a sensing process, because I have to sense what's important to make the thing work properly, not compromising the performance. Bob then tries to accommodate my more wild suggestions as to what the product might be, because there is no point for a British company to try to make something that looks like it has come out of the Sony factory! First of all, we can never compete with their price and secondly, life would be duller if we didn't have more interesting product." The toughest job, says Bob, is when they have to design a 'pragmatic' piece of equipment. "This is the worst challenge, to say 'here is a white box and it has to be this wide and that tall, and then to make it pretty'. We prefer it when we have more freedom to create something like sculpture, as in the 100 series."

For the early part of the eighties, Meridian wowed the hi-fi world with its 100 series and matching M1 and then M2 loudspeakers. However, the company lacked a disc-playing source component; traditionally Meridian systems were fed by turntables, their pick up cartridges driving the phono module of the 101. But then along came the future and radically shook up not just what Meridian was

to do, but the wider world in general. Bob and Allen began working on a new generation of electronics, one that was better optimised for the digital world that awaited them, that was more versatile and able to work across a wide range of sources.

"With the arrival of Compact Disc, we began to think about the possibilities," says Allen. "Bob disappeared into his digital hole and had a marvellous time trying to work out what this was all going to mean, in terms of the product view. We didn't know quite what people were going to buy, whether they were going to add digital sources to their existing systems or replace everything they'd got with new. But something wonderful was about to arrive, so we produced a rather wild concept called the Modular System, which was a way of plugging sources together rather like Lego. You could decide how many you wanted, to get the system to do different things. It had a preamp on one side, a power supply on the other and you could put a number of inputs between it, or an FM tuner or whatever."

The Meridian Component Amplifier (MCA) that came out of this has proved one of the less well remembered Boothroyd-Stuart products. This is a shame, because the idea to offer a source-agnostic amplifier, with a range of expandable modules, phono, tuner, line inputs, etc, was a prescient one as well as



Meridian's M1 speaker had the amplifiers in the box

## INSIDER FEATURE MERIDIAN



Bob Stuart with just some of the amazing products that made Meridian so well respected

being good common sense. Very much of its time, it reflected a feeling that abounded in the early eighties of us all entering a brave new technological world, with the old certainties of hi-fi gone. In this context the MCA was perfect, but it also made commercial sense, too. Allen notes that having just the 101 preamp and a pair of speakers to sell to the world “was a difficult sell to the industry”; audiophiles might have wanted fewer boxes,

### Boothroyd and Stuart became the Jobs and Wozniak of their day on the British hi-fi scene

but retailers didn't! So the MCA, with its multiplicity of add-on units worked in this respect too.

#### Laser love

Alongside the 'DISC MM' and 'DISC MC' input modules on the options list for the MCA was one marked 'DISC CD'. It provided a line-level input for the amplifier tailored to the output voltage from the very first Compact Disc players. The technology was launched in

Japan in autumn 1982, and reached the UK in spring 1983, and by this time Meridian was actively developing its first player. The MCD, as it came to be called, was the first British silver disc spinner, and conferred audiophile respectability on a format that most people knew relatively little about at the time. “We thought we better get into this,” remembers Allen, “and we couldn't afford to make our own laser arrangements so Bob took a Philips CD100 machine apart and decided which were the good bits and which weren't...”

“Actually, we worked closely with Philips”, says Bob. “At that time we were lucky they were looking for a company with some credibility to give to CD, because when it first came out, there was a lot of gnashing of teeth, particularly among turntable manufacturers, as you can imagine. Even the music industry itself was suspicious; one of the bits of history that's not well remembered was that CD launched in Europe and the American music industry fought it for a year, saying things like ‘we don't give away our crown jewels’, ‘we don't want to make the product too good’ and so on...”

What Bob liked about CD was that it was consistent. “Vinyl was a disaster because the needle kept getting broken and the discs were scratchy, it never sounded right, especially when you got to the end of the groove. Vinyl never sounded natural and it was never grounded. When I examined Compact Disc I knew what it was capable of. We'd done quite a lot of work on digital before CD, so we spent a lot of time making it sound right, and very quickly got into a zone where, okay, there were clear differences between different digital sources.”

The MCD launched in 1984 and the MCD Pro, which followed a year or so after, didn't just put Meridian on the global hi-fi map, it put Compact Disc on it too. Philips was delighted with the positive reviews that its format was now getting. “We weren't doing

### MERIDIAN MCD PRO

In the early eighties, Bob Stuart found himself involved in the early stages of development of Compact Disc, through his technical connections with Philips in Holland. Meridian became the very first British hi-fi company to launch its own silver disc spinner, barely a year after the format had started (1983). The MCD was based on Philips' first-gen platform – sharing the same CDM1 Pro laser transport, diecast metal chassis and 14-bit, four times oversampling Philips TDA1540 chipset. However, the Meridian machine was reworked and the result was a fabulous-sounding machine, the best digital disc player on sale at that time.

“There were clear and important architectural differences between the different platforms”, says Bob Stuart. “There was a sort of Sony/Japanese way of building a player and there was Philips/European, and the latter had oversampling. We discovered jitter effects and power supply issues, we went into new territories. The Philips platform sounded so radically better than the Sony system, which was deeply flawed. I mean they sounded like a bag of nails, there was no way you could have fixed that, there was an engineering correctness in Philips.”

The MCD Pro followed in 1985 (for £675) with improvements including beefier power supply arrangements, a low jitter master clock, absolute phase switching and error indication. It wasn't until the early nineties that high-end Japanese CD players were able to do anything comparable.



them any harm, indeed I think we did them quite a lot of good. We got specialist reviews that said CD was better than vinyl, and to them that was important. Later, the fact that we were able to make the MCD Pro sound so good was incredible for us cause it actually changed the whole perception of the brand.”

#### Brave new world

Just seven or so years after its inception, Boothroyd-Stuart Meridian had been responsible for some of the most innovative active loudspeakers ever made, done some of the most beautifully packaged and finest-sounding separates and invested the new Compact Disc system with copper-bottomed audiophile credibility. Indeed, it arguably did more to get CD accepted by audiophiles than anything Philips or Sony ever did. Surprisingly though, the pace of innovation did not slack, and Meridian Audio has continued to do some seriously interesting things, with more still to come, says Bob Stuart. Still, few can doubt that the period from 1978 to 1985 was a remarkable time for the company, and for audio itself. Bob and Allen were key players, and made their own little bit of history ●

The MCD CD player put Meridian on the global hi-fi map







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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.



### NEVILLE ROBERTS

#### EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

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



### JASON KENNEDY

#### EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Former HFC editor Jason loves music so much that he has dedicated his life to finding the ultimate system. A long time vinyl nut, he also enjoys a well-streamed file.



### 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.



### LEE DUNKLEY

#### EXPERTISE: EDITOR

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

Email us at [letters@hifichoice.co.uk](mailto:letters@hifichoice.co.uk) or write to: 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

## ▶ Hum's the word

I have to confess that I'm not especially well versed in the 'black arts' of hi-fi and find it rather confusing. I buy your magazine from time to time more to 'window shop' and imagine what I would treat myself to if I was ever lucky enough to win the lottery and have to confess that a lot of the stuff you write about goes over my head, but hey it's nice to dream!

I have a Denon UDM30 CD receiver, which I use as an amp and I have an Eclipse TT430 turntable hooked up to this. As there is no phono input, I have a Btech BT26 phono stage between the two and this plugs into the cassette inputs on the back of my amplifier. The problem is that the turntable has an earth wire hanging off the back of it, but neither my amplifier or the phono stage have an earth connection to attach this to. Whenever I

turn the amp's power on I have a low-level hum constantly in the background – I imagine this is to do with the earth connection.

I also have an Arcam R-Dock for my iPod (which I have plugged into the MiniDisc input of the amp) and the hum on this is so bad (when it is powered up) that I have to keep it permanently turned off. I know that some of these components are cheap, but I don't really have any money to upgrade them and wondered if you can advise me on what I'm doing wrong or if there is an affordable solution to my woes? Thanks in advance.

Charlie Zeuss

**JK:** What a pain, that shouldn't happen even with budget kit. You can earth the turntable to the amp by putting its earth tag under one of the screws in the casework, just loosen a screw and wrap the wire around the

bolt then do it up. The R-Dock should not need earthing, but you could try using a different input or changing the place that the dock is plugged into the mains, try using a socket that's different to the amp's outlet or vice versa.

**DP:** Hi Charlie. This is a tricky one; a humming vinyl source isn't surprising if you've not tethered your earth lead to a ground point on the amplifier

## My amp doesn't have an earth socket and my turntable hums...

chassis, but what I am more surprised about is the hum when using your Arcam R-Dock via the tape input. You likely have an earth loop, which you can try to eliminate by connecting different combinations of kit to different mains outlets; if you're using a

mains extension box then also try removing this. Alternatively, it could be your Denon receiver that is faulty, it might be worthwhile getting this checked by a qualified electrician.

If it was me, I'd take this chance to upgrade the system. I'd go and buy a decent secondhand integrated amplifier with a phono stage built in. This needn't be too expensive – look for an old Mission Cyrus One, NAD 3020 or Creek CAS4040 (all under £100 second hand) and you'll have an excellent-sounding classic amp with a good MM phono stage. Get a demo before you buy, so you can hear it working; if it crackles or hums or smells funny, then walk away. Alternatively, you could buy a more modern design such as a Rega Brio (£200-ish, second hand) or Cambridge Audio 650A (£150); you'll need a phono stage for the latter – buy a QED Discover (£10 on eBay) and run it off the internal 9V battery.

When you've got your 'real' integrated amp, then look at a secondhand turntable – a £50 Dual CS505 or a £100 Rega Planar 2 will give you a listening experience on a different level to the thingummywhatsit turntable you have now. Find a decent friendly dealer and buy a new Audio-Technica AT-93E cartridge (£25) from them, or pay them a fiver to fit it for you if you can't do it yourself. This done you'll have a really enjoyable sounding hi-fi for just a couple of hundred pounds, and the hum should have well and truly buzzed off!

A second-hand Mission Cyrus One holds the answer for Charlie



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### ► Wizard of Oz

**Just visiting from Oz and reading your informative mag. I'm having trouble running digital files into a NAD M51 into a Creek Evolution 50A into a Rotel RB990 BX into a pair of Magnepan MMG's. I don't hear any difference hooking up the Rotel. I wonder if the problem is the NAD preamp hitting the Creek preamp and cancelling out the Rotel? Hope this makes sense to you.**

*Michael Barker, Australia*

**NR:** Hi Michael. I think the problem is the NAD going into your Creek preamp – another device with a preamp. The problem is that you have effectively two preamps, and so two volume control circuits in series. This will only degrade the sound coming out of your NAD M51, which you really need to connect directly to your Rotel power amp. You want to aim to minimise anything in the signal path as much as possible. Serially linked volume controls, especially digital ones, may be causing all sorts of problems both by

introducing distortions and with equipment matching. Your Creek may have the optional FM radio and/or DAC modules installed and that is most likely why you are using it in your system. When you say you don't hear any difference hooking up the Rotel, do you mean switching between using it as your power amp and the built-in power amp of the Creek? If so, I suspect it's a consequence of the degradation of having the two in series. Try connecting the NAD directly to the Rotel and that should improve matters.

**ES:** I agree with Neville, unless you are also running an analogue input, I'd try the NAD directly into the Rotel to see if this gives a performance boost. I don't think that preamps cancel each other out as such, but it's possible that the Creek's performance is the dominating factor in the electronics.



**NR:** As David says, Charlie, there are most probably two issues here. Firstly, the earth lead from your record deck must be connected to an earth somewhere to get rid of the hum. The second issue is almost certainly a hum loop caused by multiple earth connections – you will probably find that your phono preamp (and perhaps the R-Dock) has a connection to the mains earth, as well as your Denon UDM30 integrated amplifier/receiver. I have known many a hum issue to be cured by the removal of an earth connection at the mains plug on a piece of equipment, as the earth will then be only carried through the earth screening of the interconnects, thus breaking the loop. However, I cannot possibly recommend doing this for safety reasons as it would mean that the piece of equipment would not be earthed when the interconnect cables are removed. As JK suggests, you can safely connect the earth lead from your turntable to one of the case screws on the back of your Denon. A final thing to consider is making sure the power supplies of the Btech BT26 phono stage and the R-Dock are as far away from your system as possible, especially the record deck and Btech. They are probably of the 'wall-wart'

variety, which can radiate all sorts of noise that can be picked up by the sensitive parts of your phono stage.

**► Torn between two I'm looking to get some new speakers and I'm struggling to choose between a Quad 25L Classic or a Tannoy Precision 6.2 (which my local dealer is offering me for the**

### Should I go for Quad or Tannoy loudspeakers? I can't decide

**same cost). Having had a demo of them both I think the Quad is detailed but dry, and the Tannoy dynamic. I'm torn as I like both, but am not sure which to go for.**

*Ian Bauer*

**DP:** Urgh! Not one of those 'which is better' questions, Ian? Before I answer please let me lay down a few Q&A ground rules. First, there's good hi-fi and there's bad hi-fi. Almost all the good stuff appears (or has appeared) in the pages of this magazine, whereas the bad stuff tends not to (if we can possibly avoid it). But within the good stuff, there is hi-fi that works for

you and hi-fi that doesn't. Hi-fi separates don't exist in a bubble – even two very good speakers such as the Quad and the Tannoy – will perform relatively well or badly depending on what they're used with. Moreover, personal taste comes into play, too.

That's why it's hard for me to give you an insightful opinion if you don't actually tell me what other components you'll be using the speakers with – because synergy plays such a big part. Also, your music taste is important – are you a classical fan or a death metal worshipper? Please give us as much detail as possible. The more you give, the more you will get back.

As you identify, the Quad 25L Classic is a somewhat cerebral-sounding speaker. It has a lovely clean, tidy, ordered sound that puts everything in the right place, but you'd never call it exuberant. If the Quad was a person, it would be a fifties bank manager with everything immaculate, tidy, orderly, prim, proper, in the right place. The Tannoy Precision 6.2 is more of your Austin Powers character; flamboyant, big hearted and with a tendency to show off – but lots of fun, all the time. It's a straight choice between these two extremes, and ultimately only you can decide. It might help to consider your music taste; if you're into classical and acoustic material, I'd go for the Quads. If it's more rock, pop, soul and jazz, the Tannoy is best. ►



**Quad's 25L Classics sound particularly good with classical and acoustic types of music**



Tellurium Q interconnects will help add bass

### ➤ Where's the bass?

My current system is Cyrus 6SE CD player, an ageing Audiolab 8000S amplifier, Neat Motive 2 speakers, Atlas cables and interconnects. The problem I have is the overall sound is bass shy and the treble is too hard, which gives a sound that is worse than my car stereo. Would changing the amplifier to one with tone controls solve the problem? Can you suggest any suitable replacements? The speakers are bi-wired and I like most music.

*Stephen Hitchcock*

**DP:** Hi Stephen, this really doesn't surprise me. The Audiolab 8000S was a decent amplifier, but you'd never mistake it for a single-ended triode valve amp! Tonally it's a little lean, with a dry, matter-of-fact sound that's prone to being slightly hard and shouty (with the wrong ancillaries) in the upper midband. The Cyrus 6SE is a good player with lots of detail, grip and insight, but it too isn't very sumptuous – like all Cyruses it is very slightly on the dry side of neutral and certainly won't 'sweeten the pill' of anything else that it is in a system with. Finally the Neats. Yes, you've guessed it, not the world's warmest speakers, although we love them for their musicality. So, you end up with a classic case of a poorly matched system – a bit like having a sports car with hard suspension, fitting it with massive diameter wheels and pumping the ultra low profile tyres up too hard, and wondering why it rides poorly!

There are several ways out. One is to scrap the system and start again, but that's too drastic. I'd experiment with cables and setup, and see where you get. Buy yourself some Tellurium Q interconnects; whichever suits your budget really. These are smooth, spacious and more euphonic sounding than most, and will likely tame down your

### LETTER OF THE MONTH

#### ➤ Matchmaker

Amplifier-speaker matching is clearly not an exact science and subject to personal preferences and individual circumstances. However, operating within safe limits has got to be a priority as we are told an underpowered amp can damage the speakers, and it is desirable to have some power in reserve.

In your piece on system matching (*HFC* 356), you state: "a loudspeaker rated at 150W does not imply that either you need a 150W amplifier to drive it or it will fail if 151W are applied", but you advise picking one that is at least "within a factor or two of the power of your amplifier". The manufacturer of the speakers in question quotes a minimum amplifier power rating of only 15W – some way off 150! Is there a way of calculating what amp power output is required to comfortably drive a pair of speakers that takes into account their RMS, impedance and sensitivity?

My current system consists of MA RS8 speakers (Nominal impedance 6ohms, 174W RMS, 90dB) bi-amped with Rotel RA05 (40W into 8ohms) and RB06 (70W into 8ohms) I am bi-wired with both amps connected to the speakers, does this mean I am putting 110W into the speakers? If I was single wired then presumably only the power amp would be connected giving just 70W. Should the amp ohms be the same as those of the speaker?

*Chris Barker*

**DP:** I am sure some bright spark could design an app for this problem Chris, as it ultimately comes down to maths and physics, but there are so many variables at play. It's not simply down to RMS power, impedance and sensitivity – the elephant in the room is the room itself. This includes the size, the type of furnishings, the shape and even the number of people in it.

That's why it's a good idea to buy an amplifier that is towards the upper range of your speakers' quoted operating power (ie if your speakers are 15-150W, go for 60W or more). The larger your room and the louder you like your music, the more you need to hold to this. Also, you should look to match speaker loads to amplifier output stages, but this again is something that isn't simply reducible to a few statistics – because a speaker's impedance varies with frequency. Short of having specialist measuring equipment, the best way to check for a mismatch is to use your ears. Put some bass-heavy, dynamic material on at high volumes and listen for signs of distress. Any sign of strain, muddle or distortion will tell you it's time to try another combination, a good sign that your amp isn't happy with the speakers it's trying to drive. Looking at your own system, it seems about right; if you have a medium-sized listening room you should be getting decent volume levels without any appreciable strain.



Bi-wiring is an affordable way of making an upgrade

A good way to think about the effects of bi-wiring is to liken it to moving to a four-wheel-drive car after being in a two-wheel-drive one. Effectively it puts down the power better, rather than simply increasing it. Driving speaker drive units individually puts less strain on the amplifier doing the driving, compared to the one that has to drive them both, so it's likely to be less compressed or breathless when pushed. If you have one brilliantly designed amplifier with an ultra-stiff power supply and an ideal damping factor, there is far less benefit to be had from bi-wiring. But such a thing isn't common at any price let alone this, in my experience. Effectively then, bi-wiring is a good working compromise, one that gets around the failings of power amplifiers – which are only mortal, like the rest of us.

That said, some – myself included – would suggest you simply bought a better amplifier and more expensive cable in the first instance, and ran the system mono-wired. Spending the most you possibly can on an intrinsically excellent amplifier will have the greatest effect, rather than complicating things by buying two lesser amplifiers and more cable. In my opinion, bi-wiring makes best sense when you're wanting to make a small upgrade to your system by buying a second power amp and set of speaker cables, and running in with your existing kit – which is to say, when you don't want to change your main amplifier. That's when it can give a handy performance upgrade.

**ES:** Just to add to the complexity, power handling and intended operating envelope are also not always the same. In the case of many speakers – especially more sensitive ones, the speaker might be able to accept an input voltage of 100V, but this is purely the design limit of the components and nothing to do with the power that the amp actually needs. A case in point would be something like the Audio Note AN-E, which will accept at least 70W of power, but is designed to work with as little as 5W. If in doubt, the manufacturer will have a better idea of the ideal figure you need.

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harsh treble, and fill out the bass slightly. Then I'd install both the amplifier and CD player on Veda FoculPods (£25 per pack of four; you need two packs). I keep saying this until I am blue in the face – these are the best value upgrade you can make, and you'll be amazed at what they do to the sound. By successfully disconnecting your hi-fi from most of the vibrations in the room, they make a huge improvement. Expect a fuller, deeper and more fluid bass, and wider and smoother midband with sweeter treble.

Finally, experiment with positioning your speakers. Toe them in slightly, spike them carefully and run them a little closer to the back wall than you'd normally do; see what this does to the bass and the overall tonal balance, which by now should have smoothed out a lot. If it's still sounding like a dentist's drill, then I'd advise the purchase of a Rega Brio-R integrated as the next step, which will really fill out the sound and sweeten things up. Good luck, and don't look back!

**ES:** I obviously have less time to mess around than David! I don't like old Audiolab and would bypass the cable experiments and go straight for something like a Rega Brio or Creek's wonderful Evo 50A integrated. If you have a system mismatch, I don't believe it's worth playing with the incidentals, you should cut straight to the chase.

**JK:** Both the Cyrus and Audiolab could be called lean in a tonal sense and the Motive 2 is not exactly fulsome either, so it's not surprising that you are in need of bass. I would suggest you get an

amplifier with a bit more welly, if funds allow then the Rega Elicit-R (£1,598) will maintain – enhance in fact – the timing skills of the system and give it more body. If that's too much then I'd agree with DP and ES' suggestion of the Brio-R, it's not as powerful or refined, but will work very nicely in your system. The other move I'd suggest is Townshend Isolda speaker cable, there is no cable that has better bass, but it also times and images with alacrity. It's expensive, but you'd never need another speaker cable.

➤ **Socket to me**  
After reading the review of the QED Signature Audio 40 interconnect in the April 2014 issue, I decided to purchase one. Unfortunately, the plugs on this interconnect won't fit onto the sockets of my Arcam A28 (75W) amplifier. I've now disposed of the interconnect – I couldn't be bothered with

### I can't get QED Signature interconnects onto my amp

the hassle of sending it back to HiFi Cables. I've now gone back to using my Kimber Timbre interconnect. I've also written to Armour Home in Manchester to tell them that their QED Sig Audio 40 is incompatible with Arcam amplifiers. I'd always thought that the plugs on interconnects were universal. Perhaps it would be a good idea for QED to withdraw this product? I've used other

**It is possible to connect QED Signature interconnects to Arcam's A28, it just takes the right technique**



interconnects with the Arcam A28 amp, such as Chord and Black Rhodium and they fit perfectly. I think it is essential that the hi-fi industry should know that this item is useless with the Arcam A28 amplifier.

Alex Kieppas

**LD:** Hi Alex, thanks for your letter. We've never experienced an issue ourselves with incompatible interconnects, but we passed your letter on to QED to get a response to the concerns you raise. The response we received was: "We do owe Mr Kieppas an apology (I'm presuming Alex is male) because a quick investigation has revealed that he is in fact the third person to raise this issue. There is emphatically no problem with the plugs on the new QED Signature Audio 40 cable; but we have clearly failed to satisfactorily explain the 'locking' aspect of the new plugs. We apologise to Mr Kieppas for the inconvenience this must have caused. To fit the new cable, the outer locking cylinder of the plug has to be screwed forward, to

loosen the gripping 'blades', whilst the plug is pushed into place on the socket. The locking cylinder is then screwed back to lock the plug onto the socket. Needless to say, users must always remember to do this when connecting/disconnecting the cables."

**NR:** Ah yes, Alex – the fiendishly cunning 'locking phono plug' issue! In fact, quite a few audiophile phono connectors employ a locking collar to enable the earth connection to be clamped onto the phono socket to ensure a good connection. This is usually accomplished by twisting the barrel of the plug and, unfortunately, people think that the plug assembly itself has become loose and tighten it up before inserting into the socket. The result of doing this is that the clamp is tightened and this stops the plug from being inserted into the socket, so be aware of this potential issue. Careful inspection of the phono plug should reveal if there is a collar clamp fitted. You'll need to make sure that this is loosened before insertion.

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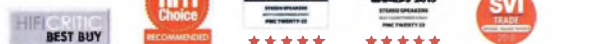
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# Bentley rhythm ace

Naim has broken with tradition and introduced a new mobile system that comes equipped with its own luxury listening room. **David Price** gets out his driving gloves...

In the seventies, Naim customers were a puritanical lot. Had the company deviated from its minimalist credo and dared to add some superfluous function or other to its amplifiers back then, they'd have shouted the house down. In that age of austerity, no concessions to convenience were countenanced by these devout disciples!

Perhaps it's a sign of progress then, that in 2014 the latest and most spectacular Naim hi-fi system ever is gilded with more than just an extra input or two – indeed it comes with an entire car fitted as standard. Meet the £180,000 Flying Spur W12, Salisbury's most expensive ever music machine. In addition to a multiplicity of music sources, over a kilowatt of power and eight channels of audio, it's bundled with four wheels, an exceptionally large body and an equally ostentatious engine.

Naim Audio has no experience of high-end car design, so called upon the services of Bentley Motors, which has been doing such things for the best part of 100 years. The end result is the fitment of a twin-turbo 600BHP W12 engine of six litres displacement. This counts as one of the system's superb-sounding music sources, along with the six-disc CD changer, iPod input, SD card and HDD.

One of the most impressive aspects of the Flying Spur is its listening room, which is much more opulent than the

**It's the best hi-fi I've ever heard that's able to travel at speeds of 200mph**

space. Obviously, the need to enjoy music of the highest fidelity was paramount for Naim when planning it, but Bentley engineers have cunningly managed to incorporate a steering wheel adjacent to the central fascia-mounted head unit to aid directional change on the move. The CD player has been thoughtfully given its own lidded box to sit in, next to which is a cubby space for storing gloves, SD cards and Werther's Originals.

Cleverly, four of the room's loudspeaker arrays double up as doors that open and close to facilitate the movement of people in and out of the listening room. The room is well damped, providing excellent acoustics for high fidelity music reproduction, and an eery calm when on the move.

The sophisticated loudspeaker system uses eight bespoke Balanced Mode Radiators set into the heavy gauge steel-backed 'door' cabinets, which are sturdily damped and braced. As well as making the enclosures highly rigid, this structural reinforcement provides safety benefits



should your listening room be forcibly repositioned by the owner of a lesser mobile sound system. Specially designed subwoofers act resolutely but imperceptibly, while the room's symmetrical reflective surfaces break up the 'deadness' of the thickly padded, hide-lined cabin. Without the extra thick glass and beautifully lacquered woodwork, the Naim listening room would likely have all the atmosphere of an anechoic chamber.

On the move, it sounds sublime. It's the best hi-fi I've heard that is capable of travelling at 200mph – but not on 'The Queen's Highway, of course officer! Regardless of source, the Naim for Bentley package is able to deliver a natural musicality that transcends anything in other cars. Once you get over the not inconsiderable thrill of piloting the Flying Spur down dale and up dual carriageway you're left with your music. This delight doesn't diminish; even after the tenth play of your favourite CD or music file, you still find yourself enraptured by this system. True high-end performance comes from the effortless extension of the bass, to the seamless way it knits into the lower midband. It's from the near translucent tonality to the wonderful texture of voices and instruments and the silky, spacious treble. It's a lovely listen.

## Need for speed

Like the huge W12 engine, able to thrust this 2,500kg behemoth up to crazy speeds without a moment's hesitation, the Naim For Bentley system is a thrill you never tire of. Even when stuck in central London traffic, just when the engine's 616 stallions don't count for much, you can console yourself that your 1,100W high-end hi-fi system is being powered by one of the finest petroleum generators that man has ever devised. Bentley's Flying Spur is a brilliant autobahn-storming, A-road assaulting luxury speed machine. But it's made all the more special still by the Naim hi-fi, and somehow I doubt that even the company's most devoted fans would disagree! ●

**Naim's new system has a chassis quite unlike any hi-fi we've ever seen**



DAVID PRICE  
Hi-Fi Choice writer



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# Pranks for the memory

Whatever happened to music being fun? A misty-eyed **Jake Day-Williams** fondly looks back on the days when he had hair and musicians had a bit of cheekiness about them

It's the early nineties and a younger version of myself with strange baggy clothing, hair that is yet to thin out and a belly full of booze is standing waiting expectantly in a North London club to hear a DJ that all of the music papers and magazines in the know are calling the next big thing. Suddenly from out of the darkness a lank-haired bloke not much older than myself steps behind the turntables, lifts the tonearm and places the needle onto his first record. The sound that screams out of the speakers is one of the rawest ear-piercing sonic assaults I and the other members of the audience have ever experienced and – in truth – it's the sort of thing that would make your ears bleed if you listened to it for more than 30 seconds. The DJ was the then-unknown Aphex Twin (admittedly, he might still be unknown to one or two of you) and the record that he decided to open his first London set with was a sheet of sandpaper.

As someone that had grown up listening to guitar-based music who was just starting to realise the fact that electronic music – or doorbell as one of my chums with questionable musical taste likes to call it – could be just as beautiful and exciting, this was a real epiphany. I was blown away by the way that Richard D James (as he is known to his mum and dad) was producing sounds that

## There was always a sense of fun behind it all so it wasn't just strange noises

you'd like to sit down and listen to on your headphones on a relaxing Sunday afternoon. Most of my mates hated it, my parents loathed the dreadful noise that screamed out of the speakers in my bedroom and to this day I have heated arguments with anyone that hears it as to whether or not it's really music. In a word it was my punk and I loved every minute of it.

But perhaps what I liked best about it was the cheekiness and fun that seemed to be behind the music. Don't get me wrong, this was the era of acid house (which I loathe) and all and sundry were happy to stick the boot into these 'drug-addled lunatics dancing like morons to repetitive beats'. What I liked about Richard D James was that he had the same auteur streak that the likes of Bowie, Eno and John Cage had revealed before him, but there was always a sense of humour behind it all so that it wasn't just a strange collection of noises belching and farting out of his home-made equipment.

One of my favourite stories about the Aphex Twin concerns one of the many remixes he did for chart acts that wanted to cash in on his kudos. As legend tells, he was commissioned to remix a single for The Lemonheads, but when the courier came to collect the tape, he realised that he'd forgotten all about it. He had never listened to the original and couldn't be bothered as he disliked the band so much. Instead, he grabbed an old track that he hadn't finished and didn't really have a use for, handed it over and was paid four grand for his work.

It's this sense of fun that seems to be missing from today's music and though Lady Gaga wearing a dress made out of pork chops or Madonna snogging Britney Spears is all very post modern – I fear I'm starting to sound desperately middle aged here – there doesn't appear to be anyone making music today with the same sense of fun as the Aphex Twin did playing a piece of sandpaper the best part of 20 years ago or – staying on the theme of sandpaper – the Durutti Column album *Return of the Durutti Column*, which had sandpaper on the outside so that it ruined any albums that it was sandwiched between.

Today's music all seems so safe, so carefully packaged and marketed towards its specific audience that pranks such as these are unlikely to be carried out by the likes of Elbow, Coldplay or whatever other dreary middle of the road dross is filling the charts these days.

## The sound of silence

All of which brings me rather neatly to the recent news that Vulfpeck has made its new album *Sleepify* available for streaming on Spotify. I have to admit I've never heard of them and had to do a little research to find out that they're a Michigan-based funk group, but that's not the point. You see, what makes *Sleepify's* 10 tracks so interesting is that every single one of them is made up of complete silence. Vulfpeck have cunningly asked their fans to stream the new release on repeat over night. Because the album consists of silence it doesn't disturb anyone and they get paid each time it's played. The band is using the money to pay for a tour that will be free of charge to their fans. Now that's what I call music... ●



**Vulfpeck introduce the sound of silence to their fans**



# The perfect high-end system, in two simple steps:

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# What I really, really want

As a devout music collector, **Jimmy Hughes** can't resist getting his hands on a re-issue, or mono recording, and with prices dropping ever lower it's a great time to buy...

**W**hen it comes to record companies selling you stuff you've already got, the list of enticements to make you buy is (almost) endless. Special editions; bonus tracks; out-takes; remixes; remasters; DSD; vinyl; CD; SACD; Blu-ray; new stereo; original mono. Me? I get suckered in every time.

I fell for the 'original mono' reissue of Bob Dylan's first nine albums, despite having the stereo discs and a dinky little stereo/mono button on my preamp that does much the same job. I've long lusted after the Beatles in Mono, as sometimes the mono takes vary from the stereo ones.

As a dutiful collector, I bought all Fritz Reiner's Richard Strauss recordings on RCA Living Stereo CDs, only to go and buy them again when they were re-issued on SACD. So far, Sony/RCA has spared us a Reiner Mono Originals set. But wait – what's that speck on the horizon?

Why it's a new Sony box that brings together all Reiner's celebrated RCA Living Stereo Strauss recordings with the Chicago symphony, PLUS the Strauss he recorded in Dying Mono with the Pittsburgh orchestra in the forties and fifties for Columbia. At £21 for 11 CDs, it's a snip.

Anyone who spends most of their life buying LPs and CDs inevitably ends up with a serious space problem. With your house full to the rafters, the lure of re-buying something you already own loses its appeal – even when it

**We all like looking at sleeves, but ultimately it's all about the music**

looks nice and the price is low. Then cometh a terrible thought. If we don't prop up record companies with our wallets,

record shops will close and the supply of new releases dry up. Indeed, that's already happened – there are fewer new recordings being made and fewer shops to buy from. What we are seeing is more bulk reissues; big boxes at crazy prices. DG has just embarked on a reissue of Leonard Bernstein's recordings for the Yellow Label – Volume 1 (60 CDs) for about £100. Incredible value; or is it?

Why buy CDs when you can stream stuff off the internet? Even rabid collectors like me are doing this via services like Spotify. Once, I had to own the recording – whether on vinyl or CD. Now it's enough just to listen to it.

We all like looking at sleeves, and reading liner notes, but ultimately it's about the music. And anyway, aren't those monster boxes of 20+ CDs somewhat unwieldy, making it difficult to access the material you want?

With streaming services like Spotify, access is super fast – it's so easy to dip in and find the stuff you want. Using Spotify's Premium service, I find the sound quality

comparable to what I get from CDs. If there is a difference, I can't get too worked up about it.

So, more and more, the streamed option appeals for its cheapness and convenience. At the same time, I worry that maybe I should still buy the CD in case some wonder

DAC or CD player comes along and, at a stroke, transforms the sound of my silver disc collection.

If that happened, and the CDs you want are no longer around, you're stuffed. And what if or when the streaming service suddenly stops because the internet's playing up? As seductive as streaming is, having a disc to play remains the safer option. I'd hate to be totally reliant on streaming.

With SACD having been a *success d'estime*, maybe Blu-ray Audio can establish itself as the de-facto platform to supplant CD. Could this be the sonic equivalent of crack cocaine the record companies have sought for so long?

## Drawing them in

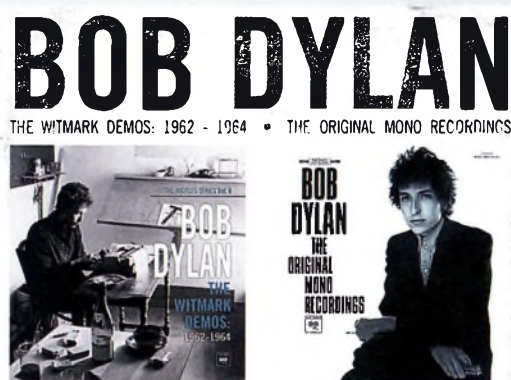
The combination of superior sound quality coupled with extended playing times is a potent one. It would certainly tempt me to buy material I already owned on CD. But, what else could the record companies do to reinstate the umbilical cord to my credit card?

The value approach, where we're offered large numbers of discs for a low price, certainly tempts. But making the product look and feel sexier is even more effective. Packaging the discs so they're things you want to own or collect is a huge incentive to buy.

Albums that look like mini LPs, with labels that mimic the original vinyl, bring the memories flooding back. Cheap plastic jewel cases and skimpy four page booklets don't. I want something worth keeping and collecting.

I also want it cheap. And there's the rub. Recorded music has become so devalued. When I was paying £25 for Bernstein's DG Mahler 9 in the eighties, I couldn't have imagined a 60-CD Bernstein set for just £100.

Now the genie's out of the bottle, you can't put it back again. We all want more and more for less. Indeed who's to say that £100 isn't too much for 60 CDs of material recorded 25+ years ago? For some punters, that may be waaaaay too expensive. Ain't life a bitch? ●



**Jimmy fell hook, line and sinker for the Bob Dylan mono recordings**



**JIMMY HUGHES**  
Hi-Fi Choice writer

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- No more floor radiated boom
- Neighbour friendly

*“the benefits of decoupling were immediate and surprisingly obvious.....giving notable improvements in imaging and clarity”*

Paul Messenger- HiFi Critic (Jul, Aug, Sep 2013)

Microtremors

Sorted.



# Is this RIP for rock 'n' roll?

Why, asks **Nigel Williamson**, is there such an obsession with nostalgia and re-issues from the past? Is rock really stagnating and where will today's Beatles and Stones come from...

**A**ccording to music industry bible *Billboard*, the three biggest money earners in pop last year were Madonna, Bruce Springsteen and former Pink Floyd mainman Roger Waters. The top earning live act was Bon Jovi. The Rolling Stones weren't far behind; even though they only played 23 concerts in 2013 they grossed £77 million by playing to 326,998 people (an average of almost £250 per ticket if you were wondering about the maths).

Madonna and Jon Bon Jovi are in their fifties, Springsteen is in his sixties and Waters and the Stones are septuagenarians. Not so much sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll as bus passes, arthritis and pop music turned heritage industry. The most eagerly anticipated releases in 2014 are a rumoured new album from U2, currently celebrating 35 years as recording artists, and deluxe reissues of the first three Led Zeppelin albums, originally released more than 40 years ago and now remastered for the umpteenth time by Jimmy Page.

As a child of the sixties, I shouldn't have a problem with this. I was lucky enough to see the likes of the Stones, Zep and Floyd when rock music was still young and it is a privilege and a pleasure to get to review on these pages every month reissues of classic albums I bought as a teenager and have loved ever since. What's more the work

## The thrill of the new has given way to nostalgia-driven boxed sets

of these artists has stood the test of time and it is only right and proper that it should be rediscovered by new fans. And yet there are a couple of questions that cause nagging concerns. What effect is this fascination with all our musical yesterdays having on the creation of new music? Is youthful creativity being crushed under the weight of rock history? It's hard to recall the last time specialist rock titles such as *Mcj* and *Uncut* featured anyone under 50 on their covers – and it often seems that the repackaging of the back catalogue of a select coterie of canonical acts is the only thing that keeps the major record companies in profit. Where are today's equivalents of Zep and Floyd whose work will in time take its place in the rock canon alongside the old gods?

Rock music used to be about the thrill of the new. The glory of the three-minute pop song was its ephemeral disposability. Every week you knew a new batch of records by unknown names would come along to fill next month's charts in an endless churning process that kept pop fresh, vibrant and exciting. If rock 'n' roll was about anything, it

was surely about living in the moment. It was an attitude captured when in 1964 at the height of Beatlemania, Ringo Starr was asked what he planned to do when it was 'all over'. He answered that he hoped to go back to Liverpool and open a hair salon.

Today the thrill of the new has given way to a nostalgia-driven industry of boxed sets, reunion tours and lifetime achievement awards. The last time rock music really 'mattered' to a new generation was arguably during the Britpop wars between Oasis and Blur. But even they have now joined the heritage bandwagon – just last month I reviewed a 20th anniversary deluxe reissue of Oasis' debut album, *Definitely Maybe*.

I'm not suggesting that rock music is dead. Classical music and jazz both continue to thrive many years after the peak of their creative heyday. But perhaps rock has reached a similar point in its evolution. It was 1954 when Elvis Presley first entered a recording studio in Memphis and maybe a certain stagnation is inevitable when an art form reaches its 60th birthday.

The Beatles and Stones were able to break new ground because they were unburdened by the past. New bands today are in thrall to the past and are judged against rock's high tide of the sixties and seventies. The bands of the past were not necessarily better songwriters or more accomplished musicians; but like Hillary and Tenzing's conquest of Everest, they had the incalculable advantage of climbing the mountain before it became a stampede.

## End of an era?

A good tune will always be a good tune and there must be an infinite number still waiting to be written. But when it comes to creating music that sounds new and different, today's bands face an almost impossible task. Just as Bach, Mozart and Beethoven represented the peak of classical music and Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and John Coltrane took jazz to its zenith, rock music has exhausted its potential to innovate and no longer has the ability to surprise us. I hope I'm wrong. But even if I'm right, I can't get too upset about it. After all, I've got those Led Zep reissues to look forward to reviewing next month ●



**Definitely Maybe** was recently reissued, despite seeming as though it came out yesterday



# Minitest

AUDIO EQUIPMENT RACKS £600-£976

Looking for something to stand your hi-fi on that looks great and doesn't adversely affect sound quality? **Neville Roberts** is here to help



## Atacama Audio Eris Eco 5.0 Special Edition

PRICE: £300 for a two-level base module + £150 per additional shelf  
CONTACT: 01455 283251 WEBSITE: [atacama-audio.co.uk](http://atacama-audio.co.uk)

**LIKE OTHER SUPPORTS** in Atacama's range, the Eris Eco 5.0 is made from a carbon-treated high-density bamboo resin composite. These modular supports are beautifully finished with a nice wood grain throughout. The bamboo shelves feature a unique micro growth pore structure offering both vibration-absorbing and sound-dampening properties compared to traditional hardwood and veneered supports. Each shelf is curved to the front and measures 490 x 40 x 500mm max. (WxHxD). They are fitted with mini isolation gel pads designed to decouple the framework from the supported bamboo shelves. There are aluminium cones fitted to each leg that are designed so residual

resonances are dissipated through to the floor. The cones incorporate Atacama's ASIST (Atacama Sonic Isolation System Technology) gaskets to help dampen any ringing within the steel legs.

These are solid and well-made units that successfully combine good looks with excellent resonance control. I find there is superb sonic isolation with my record deck when placed on the top shelf and no sign of any colouration when I wind the volume up on my system!

### VERDICT

An elegant and sonically well-designed rack that blends in well and is very user configurable



## Russ Andrews Torlyte Rack System

PRICE: Base unit from £460 + from £250 for each shelf  
CONTACT: 01539 797300 WEBSITE: [russandrews.com](http://russandrews.com)

**THIS RACK TAKES** a slightly different approach to reducing vibration than the others. Instead of using heavy and dense materials it utilises a proprietary material called Torlyte, which is very solid, but also very light. The light wood finished material is made up of a honeycomb-like structure, which has excellent internal self-damping properties and provides effective isolation between the equipment placed on top and items placed underneath.

Each of the Torlyte shelves is supported on a trio of solid oak supports. The modular approach allows for an initial purchase of a base unit consisting of two shelves bolted together on three oak pillars and supported by spiked feet as standard. However, if you intend to use the rack on a hard floor, you can fit Jumbo Cone Feet, which are

available separately. Additional units can be fitted consisting of a Torlyte shelf and three more oak pillars that terminate in a cone shape at the bottom, with the points locating in the Allen key recesses in the pillar securing bolts of the shelf below.

All of the shelves are 540 x 25 x 495mm (WxHxD). The oak pillars that separate the base unit shelves are available in 150mm, 210mm and 345mm lengths, with additional shelf unit pillars available in heights of 105mm, 145mm and 175mm.

Light it may be (both in weight and colour), but flimsy it isn't and I have no problems with it supporting my weighty valve monoblock amplifiers! Musically, what strikes me is a fast presentation with good clarity and sparkle, but without any edge or brassiness to the sound, indicating a low colouration.



### VERDICT

The modular Torlyte rack system will reward you with great detail and super clarity





I remember in the seventies having one of those home-assembled hi-fi supports, made from thin, laminated chipboard and consisting of two modules – one that slid underneath the other with the flexibility to adjust the width to fit the available space. My heart sinks when I recall that I stood my record deck on that contraption because of all the colouration that the flimsy wood must have added to the sound! Fortunately, we've come a long

way since then. Apart from the obvious aesthetic qualities, audio equipment racks must provide a sturdy support to all your equipment and reduce the possibility of transmitting unwanted vibrations from one piece of equipment to another. They should also help isolate the equipment from the floor and dissipate vibrations wherever possible. Quite a tall order you might think, but all the four items here manage to do this quite effectively.

## Hi-Fi Racks Ltd Podium Reference with Isolation Panels

PRICE: £244 per tier CONTACT: 01572 756447 WEBSITE: hifiracks.co.uk

**ESTABLISHED IN 2007** by Bradley Walters, Rutland-based Hi-Fi Racks can make almost all of its racks to a custom size in addition to the standard sizes available. The model on test is a standard four-tier rack and is available in walnut, oak, cherry, mahogany or maple hardwoods with shelves to match or finished in satin black. Each 46mm<sup>2</sup> vertical support is made from a single piece of oak and the shelves are manufactured from planks of hardwood that have been bonded with the grain 'concave to convex' to make it very rigid, so that it has excellent acoustic properties. This also eliminates the risk of warping.

As you would expect, the racks are very heavy and sturdy. These are considered to be essential requirements in order to eliminate resonances and dampen out any unwanted vibrations from the equipment. Each standard shelf is 595

x 40 x 400mm (WxHxD) and weighs more than 10kg. The isolation panels that sit on the shelves are 462 x 22 x 400mm for the intermediate shelves and 595 x 22 x 400mm for the top shelf. The isolation panels are made from the matching hardwood and provide further isolation for any equipment placed on the support. Each tier and isolation panel is separately supported on metal spikes that fit into metal recesses on the shelf below. A single tier can support up to 150kg.

The racks are beautifully made and have a fantastic satin lacquer finish. With my record deck standing on the top shelf, I am presented with a sound that is superbly controlled. This is exemplified by tight, stomach-punching bass kettle drums and crisp high hats, thus proving that the combination of solid construction and isolation panels is working well.



### VERDICT

A superbly finished rack that delivers both on good looks and sound quality



## Isoblue HiFi 60 Series

PRICE: £175 per standard shelf. Height extensions available at £65/£75 for 35mm/65mm extensions CONTACT: 0208 1236777 WEBSITE: isobluehifi.com

**AS TURNTABLE SPECIALISTS,** Isoblue HiFi is very keen to ensure that its range of equipment supports are suited to both analogue and digital components.

All the shelves are made to order with individually veneered finishes applied to the MDF shelves and solid wood supports. The finishes available are black ash, cherry, mahogany, natural ash and natural oak. The system is modular in design so you can add shelves as your needs grow.

The inverted triangular construction of the inter-shelf supports means that they are rigidly fitted to an upper shelf and the inverted apex forms a line contact in a lower shelf. In order to provide stability, a pair of grooves are cut in the upper surface of the shelves, one on either side, to hold the apex of the supports for the next level in place, preventing them from

slipping sideways while at the same time allowing the shelves to slide forwards and backwards to facilitate connection of the equipment. The base shelf is supplied with a pair of supports into which four metal spike feet can be screwed.

Each shelf measures 635 x 20 x 396mm (WxHxD) and the standard rack provides a usable vertical space of 100mm between shelves. To accommodate larger equipment, pairs of extensions are also available to increase the vertical space by an additional 35mm or 65mm.

A standard four-tier rack is quite a compact unit and although it will comfortably accommodate a record deck, it won't take up too much space in a room. Taking my record deck for a spin on the rack, I am treated to an easy musicality in the sound produced that is a delight to listen to.



### VERDICT

A compact, yet rigidly designed rack that can deliver a delightfully musical sound



van den Hul®

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

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

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Cable loom

**ORIGIN**  
Netherlands

**TYPE**  
Interconnect/  
speaker cable

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

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Flamingo Audio  
**TELEPHONE**  
07833 955014

**WEBSITE**  
vandenhul.com

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

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

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

## Sound quality

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

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

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

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

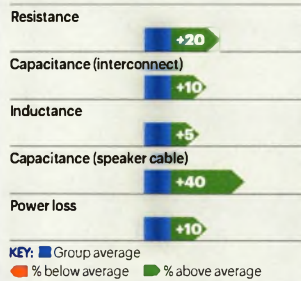


## ON TEST

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

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

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE



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

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

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Very musical, engaging sound; open and detailed
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Slightly constrained stage width
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WESAY:</b> Superb value cable loom, one that’s an essential audition
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL





# Out of this world

**David Price** tells the stellar story of one of the world's most innovative DACs thus far designed, Chord Electronics' DAC64

One of the finest-sounding digital-to-analogue converters ever made was born after a chance meeting that is the dictionary definition of happenstance. The story starts when our key protagonists meet at the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show in the early nineties. The first is Rob Watts, the digital electronics whizzkid who gave the world some of the finest-sounding DACs of the early nineties when he was designing for his company, Deltec Precision Audio. The second is John Franks of Chord Electronics, a company that was beginning to make inroads into the hi-fi world.

A casual conversation turned into something that created the DAC64, and no, it wasn't about hi-fi! Rob takes up the story: "DPA and Chord shared the same US distributor, and I met John in Vegas one year. We started chatting, and I asked him where Chord were based. He said 'Maidstone'. 'Oh, that's interesting', I replied, 'because my parents have

just bought a house in Maidstone'. John asked whereabouts and I replied, 'a place in Allington'. 'That's interesting,' he says, 'I have just sold a house there.'" And yes, you've guessed it, Rob's parents had just bought John's house! "We were fated to work together", he adds.

This led Rob to demonstrate his own Pulse Array DAC technology using Field Programmable Gate

**It remains one of the nicest digital converters to listen to and to look at**

Arrays to John. Rob was already making a name for himself in the wider hi-fi world by then.

At this time, the mainstream CD player market – which was now booming – was dominated by variations on the theme of Philips' newish Bitstream technology. CD player makers either bought the

SAA7350 chips off the shelf, or stuffed the older ones such as Philips TDA1541s in. But Rob was doing something radically different, wanting to completely remake the DAC and digital filter in reprogrammable memory chips that he could code himself. At the time, only dCS was doing anything like this; everyone else was buying in someone else's chip and then putting it in a fancy box.

"Around that time, the capabilities of FPGAs started to get very serious", remembers Rob. "I realised that I could do the interpolation filter function as well as the DAC. Ever since the early eighties, when I studied electronics at university, I realised that the interpolation filters in use then and today, were fundamentally limited and had severe timing problems. This was based on studying sampling theory, which clearly states that to perfectly reproduce a sampled bandwidth limited signal you need an infinite tap length filter. Using conventional filters



(about 100 taps max.) would have severe timing problems. I also knew, by studying hearing, that the ear/brain could resolve  $4\mu\text{s}$  of timing, but CD is only accurate to  $22\mu\text{s}$  – the missing timing is reconstructed by the interpolation filter.”

Rob put this idea to John and after “a lot of time and effort”, he demonstrated the prototype DAC64 complete with the first 1k tap Watts Transient Aligned filter, “and it knocked our socks off”. Rob did all the electronics, and Chord duly encased it in one of the company’s gorgeous aluminium housings.

It wasn’t just Rob’s unique, custom-made digital filter that made it sound the way it did, though. Another other key aspect was the buffer, which meant that Rob “could hear a jitter-free source, so this was a big advantage. Today, I have digital phase lock loops DPLL that matches the sound of buffers, which is great as buffers can’t be used with video. Without the DAC64 buffer, it would not have led to the DPLL development, which has solved other problems too”, Rob adds.

### When I’m 64

Finally, as its name suggests, the new Chord DAC sported ground-breaking 64-bit architecture. This was remarkable in its day, especially when you consider that 15 years later we were only beginning to see the ubiquity of 32-bit DAC chips from the likes of ESS, for example. Rob takes up the story: “This core was as a result of being worried about coefficient truncation issues, signal truncation, and other problems. So the best solution was to use a sledgehammer and run with 64-bits as I had plenty of gate capacity. Today, I have completely solved the truncation issues, by employing dither and noise shaping techniques, and the multiple DSP cores are now 48-bit. But today I am working with much more parallel cores at much higher speeds.”

Lesser companies might have been content to dump Rob’s brilliant, bespoke circuitry in a black box, possibly with an extra thick slice of brushed aluminium for a fascia, for good measure, but not Chord. Rather, the aesthetics of the DAC64 were almost as radical as its electronics. The 7kg casing felt like a hollowed out billet of aluminium, and an inspired touch was the top-mounted ‘magnifying lens’ that showed off the electronic crown jewels – so to speak

– inside. But the internal illumination didn’t just flood the circuitboard with light, it also provided status indication. At switch on it was blue, and when locked onto a digital signal red LEDs lit up to give a purple hue. Yellow LEDs lit to show that either of the RAM buffers were switched in. It was about as tactile and visually interesting as you could make a DAC.

Round the back, there was a choice of Toslink optical, coaxial S/PDIF via a BNC jack, and AES/EBU via XLR – all selected by a toggle switch. Another toggled between the two RAM buffer settings, and there was a choice between balanced XLR and RCA phono audio outputs. Designed at the turn of the millennium, no USB input was fitted, but it was able to accept a 24/96 signal via its coaxial input – ideal for the DVD players of the day. It wasn’t capable of the full 64-bits that its name alluded to; rather it referred to the 64-bit DSP core used to do number crunching – the seventh-order noise-shaping for the Pulse Array DAC was done with 64-bit precision. Inside, you can see the Xilinx FPGA chips that do the maths, and because it was pretty high-powered stuff back then, the unit runs surprisingly hot.

Any fan of high-end digital back in 2002 would have been amazed to hear the DAC64. Fed by a serious high-end CD transport, and good-quality coaxial digital interconnect and given an hour or so to warm through, the results were startling. In the pre-DAC64 world, there was only a handful of high-end designs that gave anything close to an analogue sound. Most were stark, mechanical-sounding devices that resolved detail well and impressed with their power and punch, but few were able to provide a rounded, smooth, open and natural sound – something that vinyl,

**John Franks introduces his latest: Hugo**



### DAC'S ENTERTAINMENT

The DAC64 was one of the most exciting moments in Rob Watts' career he tells me, but right now he is rediscovering the feeling with his latest DAC design, the Chord Hugo. This is no less innovative than the DAC64, and is basically a refinement of all the technologies he brought to market with it, adding more interesting and bold ideas. "I am very, very, excited about Hugo. This is the result of six years of digital design work, looking at lots of key aspects, lots of listening and new developments," he tells me.

"I believe it is more groundbreaking than the DAC64 was. The reason is that the Hugo has changed my appetite for music. I am listening much more now, and get far more pleasure from music with Hugo. The change in musicality was completely unexpected. I knew it was going to be better than the Qute DAC, but it was devastatingly better, and in ways I had not expected. Not only that, I knew the sound of the individual parts before it was all put together – but it is performing much more than the sum of all the improvements I'd put into it. Indeed, this still puzzles me!"

Watch out for a full review of the new Hugo in next month's issue.

despite its other faults, does very well. The new Chord DAC was different. Tonally it was smoother than most, almost as if there was a slight roll off in the higher frequencies, although you'd never call it dull. At the same time, the bass was warm. Across the midband, it was expansive, spacious and above all natural, so the result was a sound that had all the superficial appeal of analogue. But more than this, it timed brilliantly. The 64 was able to piece together the musical information in a way that made rivals sound frigid, as if they were playing by rote, robotically recreating the sound without passion. The Chord on the other hand served up beautifully syncopated music, with all the rhythmic snap and dynamic drama of a live performance. Somehow, it just didn't sound processed, as others did – and still do.

The combination of this lovely, fulsome tonality allied to its ability to faithfully render the natural rhythm of the music in all its glory, made for a unique listening experience. It simply didn't sound like anything else.

### The legend lives on

In today's digital world, it lacks a little inner detail and is disadvantaged by its lack of USB connectivity and 24/192 functionality. Yet it remains one of the nicest digital converters to listen to and to look at, and that's why it's become a legend. Every now and then, you'll see one for sale secondhand for around £800. Meanwhile, Chord Electronics' modern DACs continue to wow us ●

# Works of art

The Audio Works features some of the most exclusive brands in the UK and **Ed Selley** is blown away by the results

**M**any dealers never really deviate from the pattern of brands and system construction that they originally embarked on – some have been offering the same brands for years. Other dealers, however, can reach an epiphany after a period of time that leads them down a radically different path to the one they set out on. Based in Cheadle, just south of Manchester, The Audio Works is an example of the latter. Now in its twentieth year of business, founder and owner Larry Ogden was originally an advocate of the Linn/Naim 'Flat Earth' philosophy, but over the years has migrated to a different approach – and indeed no longer stocks those brands.

In their place has come a portfolio that can genuinely lay claim to being unique in the UK. Larry and colleague Ed Needham mix more well-known brands such as Sugden and Rega with much less commonly seen products like Accuphase, Nagra and Lavardin to create the sort of systems you listen through rather than to and are equally capable of being used with CD, streaming or vinyl.

## Mix and match

To this end the three systems featured in this month's visit make use of these brands and are intended to try and express The Audio Works philosophy at different price levels. I am genuinely excited at what I am going to hear.



## DEALER DETAILS



### The Audio Works

14 Stockport Road, Cheadle,  
Cheshire, SK8 2AA  
0161 428 7887  
theaudioworks.co.uk

lavardin.com  
focal.com/en  
avidhifi.co.uk  
luminmusic.com  
accuphase.com  
tannoy.com  
dcsLtd.co.uk  
nagraaudio.com  
albarrymusic.com



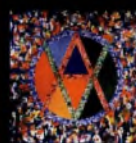
## System test music



**FINK**  
*Fink meets  
the Royal  
Concertgebouw  
Orchestra*  
Vinyl



**GRETCHEN PETERS**  
*One To The Heart,  
One To The Head*  
Lossless FLAC



**AFRO CELT  
SOUND SYSTEM**  
*Sound Magic  
Volume One*  
CD

## System 1 – French fancy

**OUR FIRST SYSTEM** combines two firm HFC favourites with an amp that compliments them to superb effect. The Avid Ingenium and Focal Aria 926 have been reviewed recently, but the third member of the system needs a little more introduction. The Lavardin IS Reference is a small, simple integrated amp that's very special.

Lavardin hails from Tours in central France. On the face of it, a 45W solid-state amplifier with four inputs and no remote control might seem ambitiously priced at over three grand, but like all Lavardin products the IS Reference is built around a design that is intended to be resistant to what Lavardin calls 'memory distortion'. This remains a contentious issue, but nonetheless there is a certain something about the way this little amplifier goes about making music.

Partnering the Lavardin is the Avid Ingenium. This new entry-level offering left a positive impression on me when I reviewed it a few months ago (HFC 379). This simple yet beautifully engineered turntable is the least amount of money you can spend on a turntable that offers a glimpse of high-end performance. The version seen here is fitted with the equally talented Pro-Ject 9c arm and Ortofon 2M blue cartridge, which gives you a very capable combination for less than £1,500. The Lavardin can be equipped with a phono stage, but in this system, Avid's Pulsus phono stage has been drafted in to do the job.

The 45W of the Lavardin are used to drive a pair of Focal's 926, the smallest floorstander in the Aria range. The key innovation is a trio of 'F Sandwich' drivers that use a layer of flax in them to allow for the production of a driver closer in design to the costly 'W Sandwich' type used in the more expensive models. We have a stylish Gallic duo fronted by some textbook British engineering – how does it pan out?

### Size matters

The Focal might be a big speaker, but it's also a sensitive one and coupled with the useful gain from the Pulsus phono stage, the Lavardin has no trouble sounding very big indeed. This is a system that manages to effortlessly convey the size and scale of *Fink Meets The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra*

without ever sounding strained or challenged. The performance on *Berlin Sunrise* shows up most of the areas that this combo excels at. The quiet intro reveals that the Avid has an impressively low noise floor and as the piece builds the Lavardin has no trouble letting the Focals sound effortlessly big. The swell of the massed instruments is felt as much as heard and there is a real impact to the sound that only a big speaker properly driven can deliver.

If you ask for something smaller – in this instance, the pared-back styling of Mark Lanegan and Duke Garwood's *Black Pudding*, the system responds in kind. With so little to each track, there is nowhere for any mistakes in tonality to hide and, put simply, there are none. The presentation of Lanegan and Garwood, square centre between the speakers and with a genuine sense of their space is a real demonstration of what vinyl is capable of and I know of few decks priced at the Ingenium's level that can do this so effortlessly.

The final piece of this very appealing puzzle is that there is a very definite sense of fun to how the system performs. A spirited rendition of Lowell George's *Thanks, I'll Eat It Here* is full of perfect timing and head nodding entertainment. My time with the system is limited, but it is clear that this combo is unfazed by any genre of music and as enjoyable as it is capable. From the outset, The Audio Works unique product combinations are delivering superb results. What happens when you up the ante and increase the budget?

- 1 AVID INGENIUM TURNTABLE INC PRO-JECT CARBON ARM £1,260
- ORTOFON 2M BLUE CARTRIDGE £170
- 2 AVID PULSUS PHONO STAGE £1,300
- 3 LAVARDIN IS REFERENCE AMPLIFIER £3,129
- 4 FOCAL ARIA 926 SPEAKERS (WALNUT) £1,798
- MUSICWORKS REVO 3-TIER TABLE £1,300
- AUDIOMICA MICA TRANSPARENT INTERCONNECT 1M £475
- AUDIOMICA KAMMER CLEAR SPEAKER CABLE 4.5M £305
- MUSICWORKS REFLEX IEC LITE MAINS BLOCK £450
- MUSICWORKS REENTRY IEC MAINS LEAD £125
- MUSICWORKS REVIVE IEC LEAD £750
- MUSICWORKS REVIVE 'LITE' IEC LEAD £350
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £11,412



### System 2 – Blumin marvellous

**SYSTEM TWO IS** notionally simpler than the first, comprising a digital source, integrated amplifier and a pair of speakers, but as a combination of brands it is still unique in the UK and while it might look more than a little retro, it's one of the most sophisticated streaming systems you can currently buy.

The Lumin A1 network player's ultra-minimalist design is built around a pair of Wolfson DACs and a pair of Lundahl output transformers. As well as handling the 'normal' streaming formats up to 24/384, it is also DSD-compatible.

Partnering the Lumin is one of the more seldom seen brands in the UK. Accuphase is one of Japan's most highly regarded high-end brands. Its products – finished in champagne with many featuring VU meters and wooden side cheeks – might look retro, but the technology is right up to date. The E-360 boasts 100W a side and makes use of a proprietary volume control called AAVA, which does without any form of resistor. £6,500 might seem a lot of money for an integrated amp, but the build quality is absolutely staggering and the attention to detail quite superb.

#### Fifties flair

If the Accuphase looks a little retro, the Tannoy Turnberry GR looks like it fell through a hole in time. Part of Tannoy's Prestige range, the styling is effectively unchanged from the fifties. Inside, however, much has been updated over the previous version, let alone its ancestors. The new GR driver takes technology from the flagship Kensington model including new driver materials and use of cryogenically treated components. The huge cabinet with its details and crenulations remains, making the Tannoy either the least cool or coolest speaker on the planet depending on your standpoint.

Forget any notion of a vintage sound, though. With a lossless rip of Gretchen Peters' *One To The Heart, One To The Head*, the presentation is bang up to the minute. This means that there are quite astonishing levels of detail unearthed by the system, but the effect is so unforced you never really perceive it to be as forensic as it is until – as in my case – you listen to the album on less talented electronics later on. Peter's voice is simply sensational – free of the

slightest sense of compression or artefact and with all the emotion of the album completely intact.

With material I am utterly familiar with like the Cinematic Orchestra's *Every Day* these slightly disparate components gel together in a way that a few one-make systems would kill to achieve. The resonating bass in *Burn Out* is perfectly reproduced – those 10in drivers in the Turnberry don't need to move very far to shift the required air and the grip that the Accuphase exerts on them is enough to give this system a fleetness of foot you simply wouldn't expect from such a large speaker. Winding the tempo up further with Little Dragon's *Ritual Union*, does nothing to ruffle the feathers of the system, although Yukimi Nagano's sugar-sweet vocals seem a little odd coming from something as burly as the Tannoy, it's like hearing a lion miaow.

A final performance of Dvorak's *New World Symphony* courtesy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra via DSD shows that when it comes to the performance of a full-size orchestra, there is little to touch a member of Tannoy's Prestige range being driven by supremely well-sorted electronics. The exceptional dynamic range of the piece is bread and butter to this system and the Lumin makes the business of streaming DSD – something that can result in a good degree of head scratching – as simple as any other format.

This unique combination of state-of-the-art streaming, Japanese high-end horsepower and British pomp and circumstance is unfailingly capable, immensely flexible and completely addictive.

The Tannoy might look old hat, but the performance is bang up to date



- 1 TANNOY TURNBERRY GR LOUDSPEAKERS £5,000
  - 2 LUMIN A1 NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER £4,995
  - 3 ACCUPHASE E-360 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER £6,500
- QUADRASPIRE Q4 EVO SHELF 4 £400  
MUSICWORKS REVO 2-TIER TABLE £850  
AUDIOMICA RHOD REFERENCE INTERCONNECT 1M £605  
AUDIOMICA DOLOMIT REF SPEAKER CABLE 4.5M £570  
TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £18,920



Japanese high end meets sophisticated streamer in a highly potent combination

## System 3 – Front-end finery

### HERE'S THE ULTIMATE

expression of The Audio Works philosophy of a system you listen through rather than to and this system might be the most extreme example of front end first I've ever seen. Like the previous two it's set up and installed with enormous care and attention paid to isolation and cabling. It also marks a return to Focal speakers, but at a different end of the range to the Arias.

The Diablo is the smallest member of the Utopia range and packs all of the substantial technology of the rest of the range into its compact cabinet. Larry has been one of the longest serving Focal dealers and understands implicitly the demands these singular speakers require.

This leads to the superficially unusual pairing of the Focals with a dCS CD player that occupies three boxes and comes at a price that would buy a well specified Porsche Cayman. The Vivaldi series represents the culmination of dCS' experience in digital and comprises DSD upsampling transport, external clock and DAC.

### Sticking with you

Acting as the glue between these components is a pairing of two more brands not often seen in the UK – Nagra and Albarry. Just 30 seconds of Martha Tilston's *Stag's Bellow* is enough to recognise the same happy synergy that underpins the other

systems is present here. The Diablo pays only cursory attention to the laws of physics, producing a vast and open soundstage with pinpoint positioning of performers and incredible detail. The dCS has an extraordinary ability to pull everything off a disc without tipping over into a merciless evaluation of the flaws of the piece.

Finishing off the day with some Afro Celt Soundsystem reveals that this system is simply devastating. The slow building *Sure-as-knot* is effortlessly unpicked, expanding into a massive wall of sound. It seems faintly improbable that a two-way standmount should demonstrate even more low-end shove than the two much larger speakers used in the other systems, but the Diablo has obviously made some sort of pact with its namesake that imbues it with a potency that no speaker of this size should have. I'm sure there are cogent arguments for spending more money on speakers to better compliment the source, but none seem especially valid when confronted with the Focal.

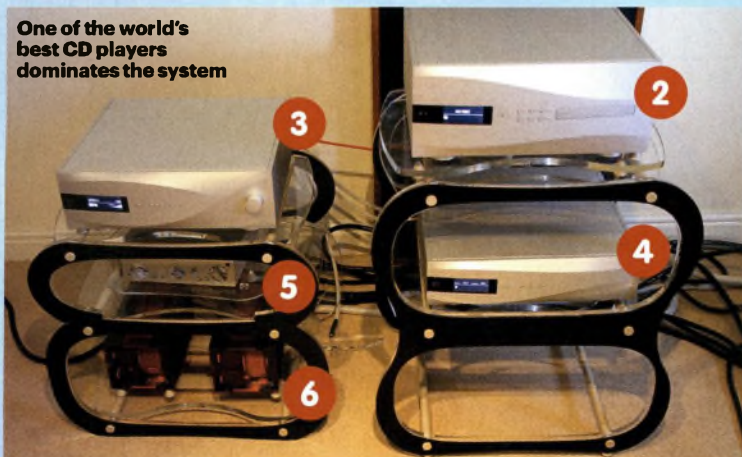
On paper, this system is less logical than its two more terrestrially priced counterparts – it will seem odd to spend more than twice the price of the amplifier and speakers on the source, but the way the electronics combine is as cohesive as the other systems here and it can easily take on pretty much any other system I've heard at this price.



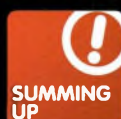
The Focal is awesomely talented with huge scale

When you consider that the Diablo is far easier to get working happily in a more conventionally sized UK lounge and that even with three substantial boxes of dCS, it is still impressively compact. In short, this a quite sensational system.

One of the world's best CD players dominates the system



- 1 FOCAL DIABLO UTOPIA SPEAKERS AND STANDS £8,799
  - 2 DCS VIVALDI TRANSPORT £24,500
  - 3 DCS VIVALDI DAC £20,000
  - 4 DCS VIVALDI CLOCK £9,700
  - 5 NAGRA MELODY PREAMPLIFIER £6,000
  - 6 ALBARRY M108 MONO BLOC POWER AMPLIFIERS (PAIR) £6,495
- MUSICWORKS REVO 3-TIER TABLE £1,300  
MUSICWORKS REFLEX ULTRA MAINS DISTRIBUTION BLOCK £390  
MUSICWORKS REVIVE IEC LEAD 6 £750  
AUDIOMICA ORMUS CONSEQUENCE AES CABLE (PAIR) 1M £1,525  
AUDIOMICA EUROPA ULTRA REF INTERCONNECT 1M £1,320  
AUDIOMICA MIAMEN CONSEQUENCE SPEAKER CABLE (4.5M) £5,100  
TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £63,985

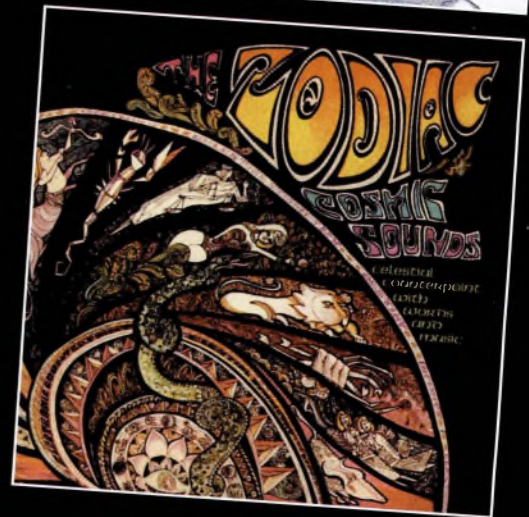
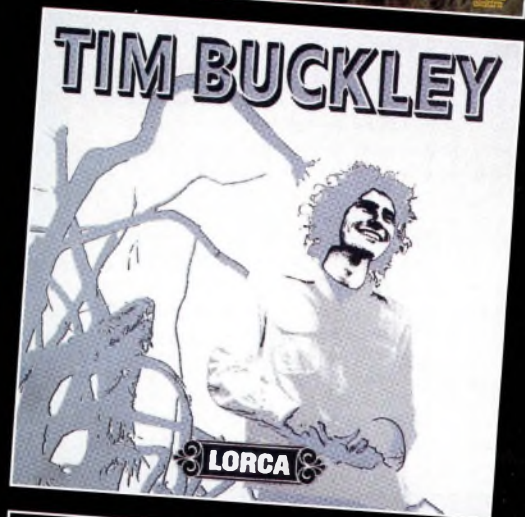


In this day and age, it is not too difficult for a dealer to find brands that are not commonly seen at rival premises. What is harder is turning these products into a portfolio that works together and compels you to seek them out. Larry has managed to do this with a success that

makes this undoubtedly one of the key destination stores in the UK – one that will attract visitors from far and wide.

What is more impressive still is that although many of the products at The Audio Works are undoubtedly high end, the performance of the comparatively

sanely priced system one still gives a big slice of the philosophy and intent of the more expensive examples. There are some very rare and exciting brands on sale at The Audio Works, but the completed systems it offers are even more exciting still.



# Elektra

**Simon Berkovitch** returns to the sixties to rediscover a cult label spreading its wings and kicking out the jams

**E**lektra is the template for the successful independent. It was co-founded in 1950 by American businessman Jac Holzman, and during the fifties and early sixties it offered a diverse selection of folk, jazz and gospel. It was the label's embrace of pop and rock midway through the decade, starting with the influential Paul Butterfield Blues Band, that not only brought it commercial success but also underground cool – encapsulated by the unstoppable rise of The Doors.

Jim Morrison and company were Elektra's first breakthrough rock artists and the hole they

punched in the charts allowed a diverse array of innovative US artists to clamber through, to varying degrees of commercial success. The Doors' fellow LA group Love, fronted by eccentric genius Arthur Lee, delivered the label's first stone classic LP – *Forever Changes* – in 1967. This was a key year for Elektra, as it launched its Nonesuch Explorer Series sub-label, a touchstone for fans of world music (later included on the Voyager deep space probes), as well as scoring a US number one with The Doors' *Light My Fire*.

This commercial peak led to the label being a haven for misfits and mavericks. The

wildest strains of rock music came courtesy of high-energy Detroit groups MC5 (with 1969's *Kick Out The Jams*) and The Stooges (two inspirational proto-punk albums). Unclassifiable troubadour Tim Buckley and ex-Velvet Underground chanteuse Nico also called Elektra their home – and created some of their most adventurous records while signed, leaving mainstream labelmates such as Bread to pick up the tab. They may not have troubled the charts in their lifetime, but they're now rightly seen as artists and innovators.

The British underground was also represented by some of the

most enduring work from acid-folk pioneers The Incredible String Band (*The 5,000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion* and *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*) and a one-off album by experimentalists AMM (*AMMmusic*), now mind-bendingly expensive in its original vinyl pressing.

Here we're zooming in on the late sixties incarnation of Elektra, up until its merger with Asylum Records in 1974. It was revived as an independent by the Warner Music corporation in 2009, but it's the music that spilled out of the grooves of this era that – in the words of the MC5 – truly kicks out the jams.

## The Doors

One of rock's most enduring, controversial groups

**T**hanks to handsome, larger-than-life frontman Jim Morrison, his on and off-stage antics and a fantastic discography, it's little surprise that The Doors were the go-to group for the Hollywood makeover treatment at the hands of Oliver Stone.

By far the most high-profile group to have appeared on Elektra, they stayed loyal to Jac Holzman's label for the lifespan of the band's Morrison-fronted lineup. In taking their name from Aldous Huxley's book *The Doors of Perception*, the quartet of vocalist Morrison, keyboard player Ray Manzarek, guitarist Robbie Kreiger and drummer John Densmore were siding with the burgeoning psychedelic underground. Musically, the organ-led group may have soaked up jazz, tough R&B and Indian raga (most explicitly on the debut album's epic closer *The End*, which was used in *Apocalypse Now*), but retained

an accessible edge that their acid rock contemporaries lacked.

Debut album *The Doors* (1967) was pretty much the group's live set, as well as home to two of their most famous compositions – *Break On Through (To the Other Side)* and *Light My Fire*. Second album *Strange Days* was a more experimental studio-based affair, while *Waiting For The Sun* was the group's first chart-topping LP in the US.

### The most high-profile group to appear on Elektra

*Morrison Hotel* (1970) ushered in a harder rock sound, opening with the uncompromising *Roadhouse Blues* and paving the way for the tough, rootsy R&B of the final album with Morrison fronting the band, *LA Woman* (1971) – home to classics *Riders on the Storm*, *Love Her Madly* and the fabulous title track.

**After dalliances with booze and drugs Morrison tragically died at the age of 27**



## The Stooges

Raw rock and roll helmed by one hell of a frontman

**S**lated by the majority of critics and largely ignored by the record-buying public, if ever a band can be called ahead of its time, it's The Stooges. The group's two blistering albums for Elektra – *The Stooges* (1969) and *Funhouse* (1970) are a massive influence on late seventies punk rock and beyond. (The Damned, Sex Pistols and The Birthday Party have all dipped into The Stooges' songbook.)

Formed in Detroit in 1967 by Iggy Pop, a frontman notorious for his abandoned performances, the stripped-down, maximum energy rock and roll that makes up The Stooges' debut album had no contemporaries – with the exception of labelmates and fellow Motor City allies the MC5.

Now-classics such as *1969, I Wanna Be Your Dog* and *No Fun* are held in the same high regard as the tablets from the mountain, with Iggy cast as punk rock Moses, but this brutal

yet sophisticated music was at odds with much of the post-psychedelic sounds that were around at the time.

Second album *Fun House* was even less compromising. Combining wild saxophone with Ron Asheton's molten riffs, Steve Mackay adds another layer of

### An explosion of primal experimental rock and free jazz

controlled chaos to the proceedings on tracks such as the blistering *1970, Down On The Street* and the title track. By the time we've hit album closer *LA Blues*, rock and roll structure has been abandoned altogether and we're left bathing in the white heat of an explosion of primal experimental rock and free jazz – territory that is still being gleefully explored over 40 years later.

**'Ahead of the times' doesn't do justice to The Stooges' sound**



# Love

From folk rock and rhythm and blues to orchestral majesty

**N**amed by labelmate Jim Morrison as one of his favourite bands in 1967, Love is one of the ultimate cult groups, with *Forever Changes* held in the highest regard.

Formed by talented eccentric Arthur Lee, fusing the folk rock of The Byrds and rhythm and blues, the group had a minor hit with a cover of *My Little Red Book* (1966), but real greatness lay in their own compositions, written by Arthur Lee and Brian MacLean.

Second album *Da Capo* (1966) featured one side of shorter songs of different textures and moods including the curious *7 And 7 Is* and blissful *Orange Skies*, and a side-long, improvised rave-up entitled *Revelation*.

Third and best album *Forever Changes* is the work on which the grand reputation of Arthur Lee and Love resides. Like Brian Wilson's *Pet Sounds* the previous year, the album was

a major leap forward for the group musically.

Fantastic single *Your Mind and We Belong Together* (1968) was the original lineup's last

hurrah, with Lee recording another album for Elektra – *Four Sail* (1969) – with an entirely new group in a spikier, more electric style.



# Tim Buckley

An extraordinary voice, redefining the role of the singer-songwriter

**E**lektra may have had a fair few singer songwriters on its books, but Tim Buckley was in a league of his own.

Buckley's extraordinary voice may have been present on his eponymous, folk rock debut album for the label in 1966, but it was on second album *Goodbye And Hello* in 1967 that he began to set the controls for the outer limits.

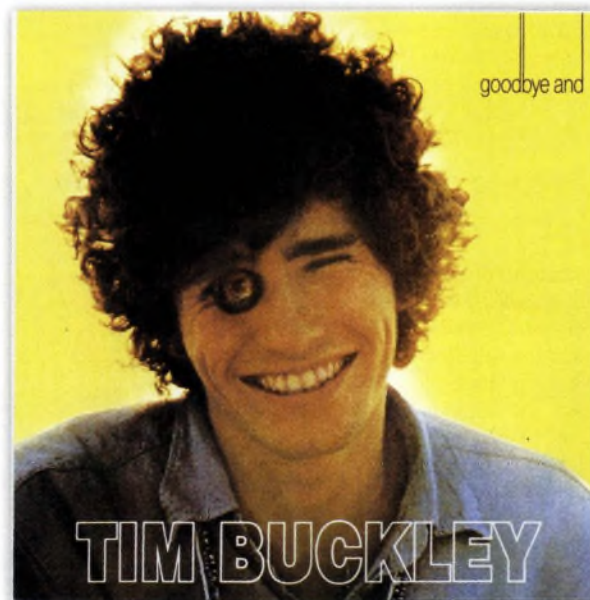
*Goodbye and Hello* saw Buckley – and lyricist Larry Beckett – pushing the boundaries of folk rock composition, with ambient textures (*Hallucinations*) and abandoned, soaring vocals (*I Never Asked To Be Your Mountain*) added to the album's set of late sixties pop songs.

Third album *Happy Sad* has an even more impressionistic feel, with lengthier jazz-tinged compositions such as *Strange Feeling* coexisting with excursions into beautiful

chiming songs such as *Buzzin' Fly* and the loose R&B workout *Gypsy Woman*.

His final album for Elektra, *Lorca* (1970), was his furthest

flight out yet. The influence of modern jazz and contemporary classical composition is felt most keenly here and the pop signpost was largely ignored.



## SHOPPING LIST

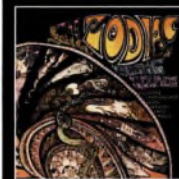
Eight additional gems from the mid sixties to the early seventies, spanning wild improvisation, folk rock, raga rock and proto-punk.



**Fred Neil**  
*Bleeker and MacDougal*  
Seminal album from folk rock pioneer and author of *Everybody's Talkin'* and *Dolphins*.



**Paul Butterfield Blues Band**  
*East-West*  
A milestone in raga-influenced rock and template for West Coast musicians wanting to stretch out.



**The Zodiac**  
*Cosmic Sounds*  
Psychedelic cash-in performed by a crack team of session musos, notable for early use of the Moog synthesiser.



**AMM**  
*AMMmusic*  
Free improvisation at its wildest. Still sounds like the unfettered future of music. Very expensive in its original pressing.



**The Incredible String Band**  
*The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*  
The UK acid folk underground was represented on Elektra by ISB at their peak.



**Nico**  
*The Marble Index*  
Produced by fellow ex-Velvet John Cale, this is an astonishing, dark work only comparable to other Nico albums.



**MC5**  
*Kick Out The Jams*  
High-energy, free jazz-influenced rock and roll, Detroit-style. Quite simply one of the best live albums: full stop.



**Gary Ogan & Bill Lamb**  
*Portland*  
An early seventies obscurity worth the admission for the weightless, Big Star-esque *I Want To Live* alone.



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**100 Grace Jones**  
Nightclubbing

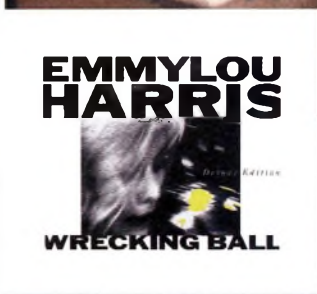


**100 Various artists**  
C86



**101 Sibelius**  
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John Storgårds

# Musicreviews



## Emmylou Harris Wrecking Ball

★★★★★

**ALBUM  
OF THE  
MONTH**

2 CDs plus DVD expanded edition **Nonesuch**

**ON THE RELEASE** of *Wrecking Ball* back in 1995, many of Harris' traditional fans wondered – as she herself later put it – if she had been kidnapped by aliens. She was, after all, the ultimate 'sweetheart of the rodeo' who had made her name singing aching harmonies with Gram Parsons before going on to make a series of classic records in the seventies and eighties that sat in a burnished place somewhere between orthodox Nashville country and denim-clad Laurel Canyon troubadourism.

But by 1995 she was approaching 50, had recorded almost 20 albums and was in a comfort zone that suggested she would carry on repeating herself with diminishing returns for the rest of her career. Regeneration came when she was captured not by aliens as she suggested, but by the cavernous soundscapes that producer Daniel Lanois had created on U2's *Joshua Tree* and on Bob Dylan's 1989 album *Oh Mercy*. Invited to produce

*Wrecking Ball*, Lanois set about creating an album that felt and sounded like nothing Harris had ever recorded before. Her core fans were so bewildered that *Wrecking Ball* barely charted at the time. Yet over the years it has come to be admired as the artistic high watermark of her long career.

"From the very first song, the sound of what was being played around me, it was as if I'd been sleeping and I woke up," she recalls of the sessions. "I knew something magical was happening. All I had to do was sing."

With the possible exception of Phil Spector, no producer has a more distinctively epic style than Lanois. At times it can overwhelm those he's producing, submerging their individuality into the deep, gothic swamp of his trademark sound. But when producer and artist share the same vision, the results can be stunning. That's precisely what happens here as he underpins Harris' exquisite

vocals with rich, haunting layers of sonic texture so that his production becomes almost her duetting partner. The music was rooted in country, folk, gospel and blues, but Lanois' sonic wizardry and audacity – walls of shimmering guitar effects, echoing percussion and ghostly reverb – turned the record into a template for the emerging 'Americana' movement. The choice of material – Dylan, Neil Young, Lucinda Williams, Gillian Welch, Steve Earle, Hendrix – was similarly inspired as Lanois coaxed out of Harris a wider emotional range than we'd heard from her before, from the pure and pristine to the cracked and fragile. A second disc of previously unreleased out-takes that failed to make the final cut includes songs by Leonard Cohen and Richard Thompson. That they're every bit as wondrous as the songs that made the original album shows just how deep was the well Harris and Lanois had struck. **NW**

## MUSICREVIEWS



### T Rex

T Rex

★★★★★

Two CD deluxe edition

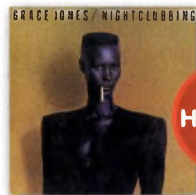
A&M/Universal

**MARC BOLAN POSES** symbolically with an electric guitar on the cover of the 1970 album on which the acoustic, bongo-bashing, Tolkien-loving duo Tyrannosaurus Rex were transformed for the first time into wannabe teen heart-throbs T Rex. The full-on glam rock swagger of hits such as *Hot Love* and *Telegram Sam* was still a little way off, but this was the set on which instead of sitting cross legged on the floor like a hippie sage, Bolan learnt to wiggle his hips and pout like a pop star.

### Offers an intriguing insight into one of pop music's most joyous reinventions

Still in transition between hippie oracle and teen idol, the throbbing boogie of *Jewel*, *Seagull Woman* and *Is It Love?* sit surprisingly easily alongside the last, lingering cosmic warbling and strumming of his earlier incarnation.

This expanded and remastered edition adds the wonderful non-album single *Ride A White Swan* as well as a disc of previously unreleased acoustic home demos that offers intriguing fresh insight into one of pop's most joyous reinventions and tragic loses. **NW**



### Grace Jones Nightclubbing

HOT PICK

★★★★★

Two CD deluxe edition

Universal

**FIRST RELEASED IN** 1981, Jones' fifth album was an influential four-to-the-floor dance classic that captured the post-disco zeitgeist. Now remastered from the original analogue tapes for the first time in 35 years, it sounds as sophisticated as ever, mixing angular post-punk pop, funk, Georgio Moroder-syle electronica and a reggae tinge supplied by the rhythm section of Sly & Robbie with the revolutionary influence of house music, emerging from Chicago at the time in the productions of Frankie Knuckles. A second bonus disc adds 12in remixes and previously unreleased tracks from the original sessions. **NW**



### Lilly Allen Sheezus

★★★★★

CD

Regal Recordings

**BACK AFTER FOUR** years of baby raising, it would be a lot to expect Lilly Allen's latest to match the freshness of her 2006 album. Sure enough, it doesn't, but there's much to enjoy on *Sheezus*, not least first single *Hard Out Here*, which is a smart, shiny pop gem for anyone with a brain.

From the Kanye-mocking title to 'borrowing' MIA's sound on *Air Balloon*, Allen is clearly a magpie, cherry picking the best elements and regurgitating them with the kind of bite in the lyrics you won't get from Bee or Riri. In doing so she's produced a bright, fizzy pop album that gives you something to think about beyond its shiny shimmy. **DO**



HOT PICK

C86

★★★★★

CD

Cherry Red

**ONCE UPON A** time there was a thing called 'indie' which roughly translated as skinny white boys (mostly) who shunned the lure of mammon in favour of artistic integrity, tinny guitars and a distinctly lo-fi approach to production.

The original C86 was a compilation tape available by mail order from the NME, which sought to provide a snapshot of 1986's indie scene.

This re-release triples the original single CD running time with a host of other bands of the era. At the time, it seemed too disparate to constitute a scene, but now youngsters barely born at the time are rediscovering an era when it was cool to put music ahead of 'likes' or units sold. **DO**



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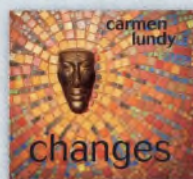
## AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

### Carmen Lundy Changes

180g vinyl

Pure Pleasure/Afrasia



**CARMEN LUNDY IS** a jazz singer and composer from Miami and *Changes* is the latest in a line of well-regarded releases that date back to her 1985 debut. Her style on this album falls within the remit of smooth or dinner jazz, thanks to a singing style that scales the heights in such an effortless fashion that you wonder why so much skill could have maintained such a low profile. Lundy also wrote the majority of the nine pieces on here, they put her equally talented band through their paces albeit in such a style that the

music flows over you, soothing away trouble and strife as it goes.

There is a Latin feel to many of the tunes thanks to Oscar Castro-Neves who plays guitar as a special guest, long-time cohort Anthony Wonsey reinforces the vibe with Fender Rhodes and piano, while rhythm and brass sections add to the tonal shadings. It's a subtle but fine recording, one that requires plenty of transparency, but which rewards with a rich, vibrant sound that projects Lundy right into the room. It has decent dynamics and oodles of finesse to match, something that's equally true of the singer and her band, although I do find myself having to suppress the urge to say: "Nice!". **JK**

## HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



**Roller Trio**  
Tracer - The Real World Sessions



Apple Lossless

B&W Society of Sound



**Barb Jungr**  
Hard Rain



ALAC 24bit 44.1kHz

Linn Records

**THE ONE-TIME MERCURY** Prize winners combine sax, guitar, drums and electronics in a kaleidoscope of rhythmic and harmonic inventiveness. Sometimes it's clearly jazz at others it's closer to rock, but their imagination is inspiring and you're never sure how a piece is going to play out. There are abrupt shifts in tempo and rhythm, but always with a cohesion that rejects free playing in favour of evolving themes that hold the pieces together. **DO**

**THE FIRST LADY** of British cabaret jazz has already produced two albums of Dylan covers. Her third focuses more on his political songs, but leavens the freewheelin' bread with a few Leonard Cohen tunes including *First We Take Manhattan* and the results are mesmeric. Her voice is impassioned and striking and pushed to the fore by the sparse, piano-led accompaniment. *Chimes Of Freedom* is the highlight, every phrase packed with feeling. **DO**



**Sadly, there aren't any moments where the heavens open or time stands still...**

## Sibelius

Complete Symphonies; 3 late fragments  
BBC Philharmonic, John Storgårds



CHAN 10809 3 CDs

Chandos

**A NEW CYCLE** of the Sibelius symphonies is a real treat. Alas, the performances don't quite hit the mark. The interpretations lack deep insight and there are no moments when the heavens open or time stands still. Storgårds lets the music speak for itself, but more personality and temperament would have been welcome. The earlier Chandos Sibelius cycle with Leif Segerstamm is somewhat willful, but musically a lot more interesting, showing much greater flair and charisma. The recordings are sonorous and rich, but not too reverberant, with clear balances and a wide dynamic range. The orchestra is placed in a warm, crisp acoustic and climaxes expand impressively. **JH**



0289 479 1033 6 CDs

DG

**Mozart**  
Piano concertos 20 (K466) and 25 (K503),  
Martha Argerich,  
Orchestra Mozart,  
Claudio Abbado



**ALTHOUGH SHE HAS** a huge repertoire, Mozart has never figured much in Martha Argerich's recordings. She gives a magisterial performance, with many interesting and unusual insights, teasing out the hidden detail in Mozart's music. *K503* is one of his biggest most extrovert concertos, and she is equal to every demand. The demonic *K466* is likewise impassioned and powerful, and Argerich conveys its strength and pathos with unflinching command. The late Claudio Abbado and the Orchestra Mozart are with their distinguished soloist every step of the way, and DG's live recordings sound spacious but incisive. **JH**

## BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

**Lou Reed**  
Transformer & Live at Montreux 2000

Blu-ray

EAGLE VISION



HOT PICK

The Montreux footage shows Reed with his words and a muscular band, they play 16 tracks - only one of which was on the classic album also documented here. There is no footage from the era, but we get Reed, Ronson, Bowie and Scott among others going over the songs. As Lenny Kaye puts it: "Lou brought back portraits from the wild side", songs that Dave Stewart considers to be pure poetry and when Reed reads them you realise he's right. Reed says *Transformer* was "just an album" but it was among the best of its time. **JK**

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# Hi-Fi Choice

# Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

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## FOR SALE

**PRECISION** Eikos CD player fully upgraded by Tom Evans just under two years ago to his very latest specification with external power supply at a total cost of £3,600, asking £1,575 (have now moved to streaming). Audiolab 8000T tuner £115 (£800) had from new, but hardly ever used: **01202515474** or email: **johnlangley17@talktalk.net** (Bournemouth).

**KIMBER** Select 9033 number set with super burn in £250. Kimber Orchid digital XLR 1/2m £130. Kimber HD19 HDMI cable 0.75m £50. Isotek Sigmas mains conditioner £950: **01772314151** or email: **Jamesmckendrick@btinternet.com** (Lancashire).

**PROAC** Studio 140 Mk1 floorstanding speakers in maple. Due to weight, buyer collects. Unmarked A1 condition. £750: **07597499299** (Hampshire).

**CUSTOM DESIGN** wall-mounted turntable support, black steel frame, toughened glass shelf, complete with all fixings in as-new condition. Offers please: **01293 524587** or email: **davedagenham@hotmail.co.uk** (West Sussex).

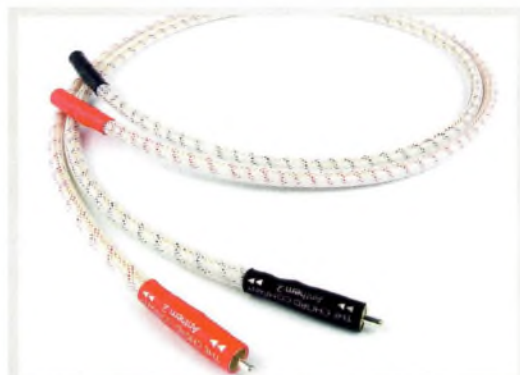


**PROAC** Speakers Response D1 for sale. Cherry finish with black grilles. As new £850. Buyer to collect: **01628626085** or email: **dandipotter@indosmail.com** (Maidenhead).

**NORDOST** 4m pair Blue Heaven Revision 2 speaker cables. Boxed and in excellent condition. Superb cables for just £300. Sugden CD21SE high-end CD player. In excellent condition, complete with box, remote and manual £750. Cambridge Audio 640C CD Player. As new, complete with box, remote and manual. Buy this highly regarded player for just £125: **07809408774** (Devon).

**NAIM** Intro 2 Speakers, beech finish. Excellent condition, original boxes and floor spikes. £275: **07837 654593** or email: **kinkyafro@gmail.com** (Lincoln).

**SOMETHING SOLID** speaker stands. Fully welded construction. Black, 63cm height, mass filled, spiked feet, photo available. Ring for other dimensions. Quality stands. VGC. £40: **01582 423791** (Beds).



**CHORD** Anthem 2 RCA interconnects, 1 metre, boxed, 2 pairs (£300 per pair). Chord Epic Twin speaker cable, 3 metres (£350). All as new, all £150 per pair. Linn Ikemi CD player, immaculate (£2,200), £550. Buyer collects: **07870159725** or email: **johnsidebottom@hotmail.co.uk** (Somerset).

**SPENDOR** A3 dark walnut floorstanders, includes boxes and packing material, £550. Collection only: **07930 397120** or email: **david.blumenstein@gmail.com** (London).

**CLASSICAL LP** collection for sale. Over 2,000. Many highly rated performances. All in really excellent condition. Sell as one collection or smaller quantities: **07804 782950** or email: **hope.colin@yahoo.co.uk** (Maidenhead).

**ACOUSTIC INSIGHT** Aurousal VSx speakers, to me sound same as latest Focastage floorstanders reviewed May HFC. Excellent condition with boxes dark cherry £895, sale reason colour change wanted: **0208 9513178** (Middlesex).

**KEF** Reference One. Great example of this classic bi-wirable floorstander in black finish. Denon D-F10 mini system. (£2,000 new). Supplied with all cables etc.

£450 Buyer collects. Will split: **07888853675** (North London).

**HEYBROOK** TT2 turntable, Grace G-707 arm & Dynavector 10X5 cart with Clearaudio Synchro speed controller, VGC £500, collection only: **07938 835982** (Middlesex).

**CYRUS** X Power. Light use and good condition, but not boxed. Buyer to collect. £500 ono: **01252430067** or email: **kevin.pennycook@gmail.com** (Farnborough).

**NAIM** Supernait 2 bought November used 2 weeks. As new. Remote, instructions, boxed. Cost £2,750, will accept £1,950: **0772 9620621** (Worcs).

**ELAC** FS207.2 fabulous sounding and looking loudspeakers with ribbon tweeters, work well with valve and solid-state amplifiers. £300 spent upgrading crossovers internal wiring. £500: **07793 749178** or email: **kingjuancho@yahoo.com** (London).



**ARCAM** A38 integrated amp £850; Arcam CD37 CD player £850; Arcam T32 FM/DAB tuner £400. All units in black and in excellent condition with manuals, remotes and original boxes: **02380738935** or email: **golf3385@hotmail.co.uk**

**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!



**MUSICAL FIDELITY** V-Dac MkII £80, X-Cans Mkl £40. Headphones: Grado SR80 £40, Sennheiser HD580 (minor cosmetic issues) £35. Townshend Seismic Sink platform black £95. **079315 71915** or email: **tjohnston@atlas.co.uk (London).**

**MARANTZ** KI Signature CD player. CD 6000 OSE KI sig - immaculate condition, champagne silver, original box, remote etc. £225 ono: **01614 459770** or email: **dan.overton1@btinternet.com (Greater Manchester).**

**PROAC** Response 3.8in speakers with yew veneer, plinths and spikes. Sound is perfect. Some marks on cabinet so pics on request. Not noticeable when set up. £1,400: **email: steveees67@gmail.com.**

**TOTEM** Model 1 speakers for sale. One owner from new. £550: **01628626085 (Berkshire)**

**HMV** X1119 valve radio from the 1950s in wooden cabinet. 19.5 x 14.5 x 10in (wxhxd). Still in perfect working order, but preset buttons need some cleaning and an aerial is required. £50 ono: **07941387692 (Kent).**

**RUSS** Andrews Signature Powerkords, 1m length, Wattgate 350i IEC plugs. Mint condition, RRP £440 - £295 each or £575 for both. Cheaper if collected: **01902 884694** or email: **jukey39@yahoo.co.uk (W. Midlands)**

**KRELL** KAV 300i 2x 150W in fabulous condition £765 inc remote, Excellent condition Krell KAV 500 5x 100W power amp £1,250 can be bridged to 2x 400W & 1x 100W. Pair 2m Transparent Ultra XLR cable 6 yrs old GC. £650 ono. Pair 1m Transparent super XLR cable 2yrs old VGC. £350 ono. Pair 1m Transparent Plus XLR cable 2yrs old VGC. £270 ono. Pair 2m Transparent Ultra RCA cable 8yrs old GC.

£500 ono: **0795 8 319976** or email: **simon\_hope@btoopenworld.com (Oxfordshire).**

**WANTED** B&W CDM 9NT speakers in cherry wood. Must be in excellent condition: **02072619494,** or email: **michaeljohngerrish@hotmail.com (London)**

**LEEMA** Antila MKI, hi-end CD player in excellent condition, hardly used. Boxed and including all accessories, buyer collects and demo £987. **07736395 424 (SELondon)**

**COPLAND** CDA266 CD Player, Copland CSA515 amp (150W), AVI S2000M pre-amp, Martin Logan Aeries i loudspeakers. All immaculate, only used 6 times in last 7 years due to unsuitable room. £1,500: **email: philipburrows@hotmail.co.uk**



**PMC** GB1 compact floor-standing loudspeakers, immaculate cherry veneer, in original boxes, £450: **01403255153** or email: **richermail@aol.com (West Sussex).**

**POWER** supply for Class A amplifiers, self contained, suits John Linsley Hood's or any low power Class A amplifier, £279. Pair of used SEAS 10in drivers, £99: **0207 499 8729.**

**FIRESTONE** Audio Fubar II USB DAC and 'Supplier' power supply (both boxed) £80. No damage, scratches, etc: **07875 976185** or email: **gt1957xbla@gmail.com (Glasgow).**

**REGA** Planar 3 turntable with RP300 arm, with cartridge, plinth and cover. Rega instructions and cartridge set up. Buyer collects £150: **01483729543 (Woking, Surrey).**

**MISSION** Stance stands, black, 59cms high. In VG condition, but no floor spikes or packaging £30 ono: **07903578225** or email: **dibster1@yahoo.co.uk (Manchester).**

**TRICHORD** Diablo MM/MC phono amp with never connected PSU. Two and a half years old, mint condition, boxed £500: **07905348812 (Watford).**

**EAR** 834 Delux preamp £900 ONO. AVI S2000M preamp £400 ONO. AVI S2000M Tuner £300 ONO: **07890896819 (Cumbria).**

**NAIM** NAC 82 + 2 Hi-Caps, Naim NATO2 tuner: **01623230472 (Notts).**

**DENON** RCD-M39DAB, Denon RCD-M38DAB, Dali Zensor 1 speakers, Tannoy Vi Mercury standmount

speakers, Q Acoustics 2010i standmount speakers, Wharfedale 9.1 standmountspeakers. All boxed, buyer to collect. Open to offers: **01977 695 385 (West Yorkshire).**

**NAIM** NAP 90, NAC 92, CD 3.5, Flatcap, boxes and book £1,125. KEF Ref 104.2, boxes £500. Soundstyle WG3A/V AV unit £150. Mission 753F, boxes £175: **07770601097 (Hants).**

**NAIM** CD 5i CD player as new. Bargain at £425. Pro-Ject headphone amplifier in box as new £60: **07973426291 (Birmingham).**

**QUAD** II Mono valve amps/Quad 22. Pair Quad II amps unused since complete overhaul by Quad. Preamp Quad-modified for tape/CD. Complete with mains lead and bulgin plug £795: **07747 636965.**

**MARANTZ** PM6004 amp £165. Sony NS700 SACD/DVD player £45. Denon 1906 AV receiver £75. KEF 'Eggs' 1005 5.1-surround

speaker system £150. Aiwa ADF700 cassette deck £20. All excellent condition: **01691 610589 (Shropshire).**

**SUGDEN** A21aL Class A integrated amplifier. Latest model, little used in second system £950: **01952 728773 (Shropshire).**

**AUDIOLAB** 8200CD CD player for sale in black, in excellent condition. Superbly transparent sound £400 ONO. Nordost Red Dawn 1m RCA interconnects £115: **01484 427426 (West Yorkshire).**

**DALI** Royal Menuet II speakers. Good condition, boxed with manual £150 ONO: **01326374797 (Cornwall).**

**MARANTZ** 6004 amp, CD, Dali Icon speakers. Cambridge 650T tuner. Two years old VGC £550: **01273 500173 (East Sussex).**

**RUSS ANDREWS** Kimber Kable Hero HB Ultraplate phono analogue interconnect 0.5m. Boxed as new £299: **07800606892** or email: **schandler@dopag.co.uk (Worcestershire).**



**REGA** Elicit R amplifier, 6 months old, as new condition. Complete with original packaging and receipts. £1,200: **07933109234 (Leicester).**

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# Pure

## Jongo T6 wireless speaker

**THERE ARE NOW** more ways to wirelessly stream music to multiple rooms than there are balti houses in Birmingham. Using Caskeid synchronisation technology, Pure's Jongo system takes a different tack to rivals like Sonos by offering wi-fi streaming via the Pure Connect service (as well as accessing the music stored on your playback device and network). You can, however, switch from wi-fi to Bluetooth to bypass the app and stream directly from other music services on your tablet or phone. Bluetooth also offers compatibility with laptops, but it is not aptX quality and at the time of writing is restricted to single speaker use. The good news is that an update to provide multi-speaker Bluetooth, which I have seen demonstrated to good effect, is in the pipeline and expected soon.

### Only connect

The T6 is the flagship model, with a spec that includes a claimed 100W output, split between two 5in concentric drivers, with tweeters encircled by full-range drivers. Each speaker has a 3.5mm jack and a USB socket, which is compatible with an optional Ethernet adaptor for use without wi-fi. Build quality is very good, but overall the look is a bit on the dull side and lacking allure. Pure has just unveiled a range of brightly coloured mesh covers as alternatives to the existing plain black one.

Wi-fi setup and operation requires the Pure Connect app and a suitable phone or tablet. You can use the app and enjoy Pure's basic service (Pure Connect Green) without paying any fees, which provides access to over 20,000 radio stations, more than 200,000 podcasts and programmes and the rather endearing Pure Sounds archive of 140 recorded noises such as birdsong, white noise and, my favourite, a vacuum cleaner at work.

There are two subscription options for listening to albums and single tracks. Pure Connect Blue (£4.99 per month) lets you stream as many



tunes as you like from the millions available, while Pure Connect Violet (£9.99 per month) includes offline downloading. The streaming bit-rate is a miserly 128kbps, comparing unfavourably with Spotify's 160kbps, or 320kbps for premium users.

Setting up is initiated by pressing a wi-fi button on the rear, which generates a temporary wireless network. A set-up screen appears in your device's browser, allowing you to hook the Jongo T6 on to your router and re-name the speaker. Further speakers can be added by piggy backing on to the first speaker and are easy to add. As with Sonos, you can create stereo pairs, which is how I test the Jongo, using two T6s. Pairing is done using the app when playing music, and again allows you to name the pair. The app lets you adjust the bass and treble levels of the pair or of individual models, as well as control the volume to greater degrees of subtlety than using the tablet or phone's external volume buttons. Switching to Bluetooth involves finding and pressing connect to the T6 in your tablet's list of devices.

The Pure Connect app is reasonably easy to use, with good-sized artwork thumbnails and a logical layout. As well as the subscription services you can easily access content stored on the device or connected by DLNA. Folders are nicely displayed as are

track names and playback controls, but in terms of file compatibility the Jongo T6 lives off a strictly standard or low-resolution diet of WMA, AAC, MP3 and MP2 fodder. It will have a go at highly nutritional FLAC, ALAC and AIFF tracks before spitting them out and moving on.

### Lorde of the dance

When listening to Lorde's *Royals* on the Pure Connect online service, the Jongo T6 is hamstrung by the low bit-rate, with a lack of high-frequency detail all too evident. Consequently, vocals are a bit thin and bass is over emphasised, and when driven loud reverberation is notable with an excess of air pushing through the non-ported driver. Switching to higher-quality AAC tracks improves matters with the same track sounding much more solid and coherent. The trumpet in the *Raiders of the Lost Arc* theme tune is lively and energetic and when the strings kick in the whole piece feels nicely balanced. A minor annoyance is that when listening over wi-fi you sometimes hear loud clicks between tracks.

Overall, the Jongo system's electronics are impressive and the app is a pleasure to use, but the concentric drivers' inconsistent handling of low frequencies spoils the performance ●

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£250

CONTACT  
0845 1489001

WEBSITE  
pure.com

#### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

# Sennheiser

## IE800 earphones

**IN A PSYCHOLOGICAL** sense, we all have a value that we decide consciously that we won't exceed for a given product. This figure varies from person to person, but the average tends to help form the market and the products within it. It is not immune to outside influences, though. Before the arrival of the tablet and smartphone, the market for earphones tapered off to virtually nothing much above £100. Now, you have a vast choice at £150 and even at £300. In short, there are a fair few options.

The Sennheiser IE800s might still strain your internal value calculations, however. Sennheiser's flagship will set you back a mighty £600, which puts them firmly in the upper echelons of earphone pricing. Furthermore, where many of the competition offer multiple armatures in complex housing, the IE800s use a single dynamic driver on either side. This driver is a bespoke design with a claimed bandwidth of a faintly astonishing 5Hz to 46.5kHz, which means the enclosure can be smaller.

This enclosure is an extremely unusual piece of design. Instead of a metal or plastic housing, Sennheiser has opted for ceramic in the interests of resilience and resonance control. As such an enclosure can only be made as a single piece, the driver and its extensive decoupling must be pushed back into the enclosure. At the back of housing, two stainless steel ports tune the low-end output of the driver and this means that unlike many in-ear monitor type designs, the IE800s leak a little noise back to the outside world.

### The bling thing

The result is the IE800s are not particularly dramatic looking – anyone hoping that their £600 will buy them something with an element of bling to it will be disappointed. Another unusual decision Sennheiser has taken is that the IE800s make use of conventional rubber domes rather than custom moulds. Sennheiser



supplies plenty of domes to ensure a decent fit, though, and this means there is no waiting period while the moulds are made up. The build quality is excellent, although the Kevlar-reinforced cable has no inline remote or microphone (one is available as an option), which means that they are not as flexible when used on the move.

You will inevitably wear the IE800s for long periods too because the result of all this technical wizardry is a truly wonderful-sounding earphone. The Sennheisers are able to match armature designs for detail and sheer soundstage, but as there is only a single driver the cohesion that they display from top to bottom – and they really go very low – is absolutely fantastic and one of the most utterly convincing demonstrations of a full bandwidth driver I have ever heard.

What sets the Sennheisers apart from rivals is that this performance is available both with lossless and hi-res material supplied via a high-quality headphone amp and less capable sources. Via Furutech's exceptionally capable ADL Cruise and with the hi-res FLAC of Kraftwerk's *Minimum Maximum* the Sennheisers capture the vast bandwidth of the performance and the space it was recorded in with unsettling ease for earphones. If you then listen to the same piece on Spotify via an iPad, the

IE800s are more able than you'd expect to extract the same magic.

Much of this talent stems from the IE800's sensitivity. They can achieve respectable volume levels from even relatively puny headphone amplifiers. This is not to say that they don't benefit from a bit of power – they can sound a little restrained at low levels – but they perform incredibly well on the end of equipment that rivals will chew up and spit out. The consistency across different compression rates and partnering equipment is something that sets them apart. When you combine this with the comfort they offer, you have a superlative partner for anyone that commutes long distances.

### On the move

And it is this group of people that should be looking at the IE800s – steep asking price and all – and working out where their upgrade priorities lie. If you face the nagging realisation that you listen to far more music on the move than you ever do on your home hi-fi, you need to look at the IE800s as the most practical upgrade you can make. These are expensive earphones for sure, but they represent a seamless balance of technology and far ability and the result is a truly magnificent performer. **ES**

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£600

WEBSITE  
[en-uk.sennheiser.com](http://en-uk.sennheiser.com)

#### OUR VERDICT





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Musical Fidelity P270 amp s/h serviced £750

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Rega Mira int 60+60w amp used VGC £300

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# Sony

## SRS-X9 wireless active speaker



**FROM SPEAKERS TO** portable players and from amplifiers to networked servers, Sony has certainly been pulling out all the hi-res stops recently. The latest addition to the fold is the SRS-X9 wireless speaker, which at £600 will knock a serious dent in your pay packet, but then this is no ordinary wireless speaker.

Forged from glass and aluminium, the cabinet looks beautifully classy and should possess exceptionally good coloration-free rigidity. The price, though, is that an external antenna is required for the wi-fi and Bluetooth receivers, and this chunky piece of plastic somewhat spoils the view if extracted and rotated into view. The rear panel, which houses all of the inputs, is made of less exciting but equally strong polycarbonate. The impressive design work continues with the array of touch-sensitive controls positioned along the rear of the top surface, which are triggered into life by a proximity sensor. A plastic handset offers control of power, source and volume, as well as playback. The only downside of the procedure is that the upward-facing icons on the speaker's top surface aren't clearly visible from a distance so you may be forced to get out of your comfy seat for visual conformation of certain commands.

More effective is to use Sony's SongPal app, which is available for iOS and Android devices.

### Let's network

A number of options exist for getting the speaker hooked up to your wireless network including WPS and using a LAN cable connection to a computer, but I decide to opt for the SongPal app, which guides you through a combined wi-fi and Bluetooth process. It is all very straightforward and once completed offers the option of playing back songs stored on my iPhone by either method, as well as providing a means of accessing networked content, which since the iPhone is a hi-res no-go zone is where my better quality goodies are located.

SongPal has a number of playback settings including DSEE HX, ClearAudio+ and an equaliser, with a selection of presets and customisable sliders. It also acts as a controller for sources such as TuneIn internet radio, Spotify, YouTube, Netflix, Amazon's Cloud Player, Sony Music Unlimited and Deezer.

Oddly, it seems to choose Bluetooth or the iPhone's own speaker as the default, even when I've just been using the network and getting back to using the SRS-X9 via it proves to be over complicated. The other downside about using the app is that when the phone rings, music playback stops.

### You can happily crank up the volume without fear of inducing distortion

With Bluetooth the sound quality of standard-res music streamed from an iPhone proves quite delightful. The power output is high for such a compact unit (just 43cm wide) with the bass from an MP3 of David Bowie's *Changes* sounding meaty, refined and free from colouration. Higher frequencies have plenty of zip about them with an unexpected hint of warmth, while the vocals are smooth and you can happily crank up the volume beyond acceptable levels

without fear of inducing distortion. The main caveat, which applies to all sources, is that sonic imaging is not exactly the widest and straying from the sweet spot one becomes acutely aware of the directionality of the music.

Streaming over wi-fi from the TuneIn radio app and Spotify reveals similar qualities as MP3, although the latter offers higher quality data rates if you have a premium account.

### Mr muscle

The SRS-X9 really flexes its muscles when streaming hi-res files, and the SongPlay app integrates nicely with DLNA sources, providing playback of FLAC and ALAC files up to 192/24 resolution. It's especially rewarding with orchestral pieces, the strings in Haydn's *String Quartet in D major, opus 76*, are crisper than an Arctic sunrise. It's an extremely revealing presentation for such a small cabinet and blends cohesively with the lower frequencies. The bass in Bob Marley's *Could You Be Loved* is tighter than Fagin's purse strings, while Susan Wong's vocals in *Desperado*, like the piano's higher octaves are delivered with precision and energy.

Overall, the SRS-X9 is mightily impressive for such a small unit, both in terms of performance and versatility. All Sony needs to do is iron out the one or two bugs in the SongPlay app. **AJ**

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£500

CONTACT  
0845 6000124

WEBSITE  
sony.co.uk

#### OUR VERDICT



# Musical Fidelity

## V90-BLU Bluetooth receiver



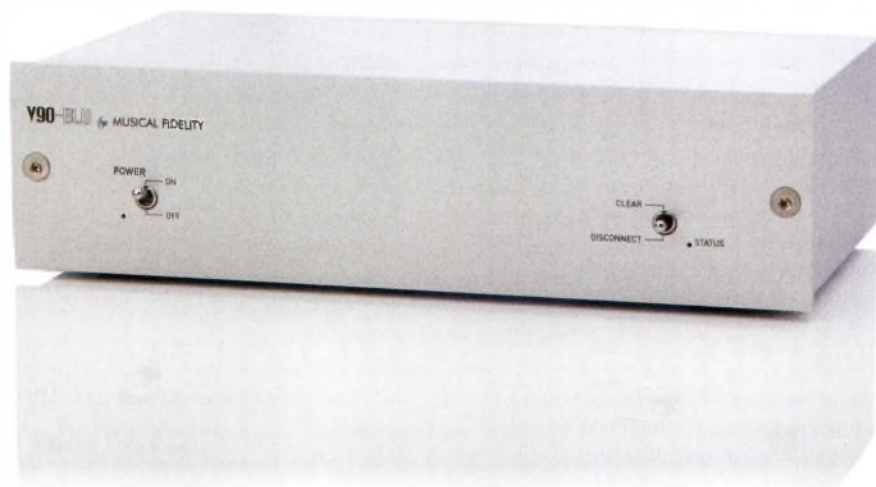
**NOT A LOT** of people know this, but aptX has been around for donkey's years. Indeed, it's practically as old as MP3. But this curious little audio coding algorithm has only fairly recently gained fame and fortune. The reason for this is Bluetooth, which has its own really rather quirky story, too...

In 1997, programmer Jim Kardach came up with a system that would let mobile phones talk to computers wirelessly. At the time he was reading Frans Gunnar Bengtsson's novel *The Long Ships*, about Vikings and king Harald Bluetooth. Good old Harry united Danish tribes into one kingdom, so this protocol's name isn't a silly, throwaway one – Bluetooth was all about pairing up electronic devices.

Together, Bluetooth running aptX would seem like an ideal marriage. Bluetooth is easy to pair and pretty robust, while aptX makes it a serious music data transmission system. And Musical Fidelity's V90-BLU recognises its growing popularity. Okay, so it's not the best-sounding wireless transmission protocol ever, but aptX Bluetooth is simple to use and gives sonically enjoyable results. This Bluetooth receiver and DAC is said to upsample and reclock the data, then feed it to its own 24/192 DAC, or out via a coaxial digital socket to another, better digital converter. Cleverly then it appeals to two types of buyers; high-end audiophiles can hook it up to their £10,000 DCS DAC for the ultimate in sonics, or you can just stick it on the end of your kitchen system to play your favourite tunes while you're doing the washing up.

### Do-it-all device

It's actually a highly versatile device, as it also functions as a DAC. Its coaxial (running up to 24/192) and optical (24/96) digital inputs can be switched between one another, so it works as an input expander if you need such a thing. There's also a handy bypass mode; via the rear panel RCA line inputs and outputs, it can be added in circuit between your preamplifier and power



amplifier. When it detects an aptX music signal coming its way, it will automatically switch to this until the signal ends, whereupon it defaults back to bypass again. The BLU's compactness helps here; at just 170 x 47 x 102mm it's easy to conceal if you need it out of the way, although the quality of the casework at the price is superb if you want to show it off.

As a DAC it's good enough for its intended applications. Driven from a CD player into the coaxial digital input, it's no M6DAC – but then again it's far less expensive and manages to give a decently detailed, nicely spacious and unerringly musical sound. Sueno Latino's eponymously named single bounces along beguilingly with a most enjoyable rendition of the powerful synthesiser baseline, the spacious keyboards and bird chirping in the background. Tonally it's a little light compared with more expensive Musical Fidelity DACs and lacks the latter's silkiness, soundstage depth and subtlety, but at the price it does remarkably well. You're into spending £400 or so before it's comprehensively outclassed as a straightforward digital converter.

As its name suggests, its real vocation is when number crunching data arrives wirelessly via Bluetooth, encoded in aptX format. From my Apple MacBook Pro (anything running OS X 10.6.5 or later supports

aptX), the V90-BLU serves up a powerful and enjoyable sound that really suits the medium. Okay, it lacks a little subtlety compared with good CD, and there's an opaqueness to the midband and a narrowing of depth perspective, but still the good essential ingredients of the BLU's character when playing silver disc are preserved. AptX does a surprisingly good job, if you want decent sound, but don't want to go over it with a fine-toothed comb. A skim through my file-based music collection – from David Bowie's *Let's Dance* to Kate Bush's *Army Dreamers* shows strongish bass, crisp clean treble and wonderfully upfront sound.

### Free and easy

In terms of ultimate fidelity, any good wi-fi-based music streamer running uncompressed music files sounds appreciably better, but you mustn't forget that this little bit of kit is a far easier thing to use, and it's communal too. In the eighties, your friends brought their mix tapes round to your house, and now they can play their music on their mobile devices through your system again. That's the real joy of aptX Bluetooth, it's so free and easy, and the V90 BLU makes the very best of it. It's another fine, flexible and well-finished component from Musical Fidelity's burgeoning V90 Series. **DP**

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£200

CONTACT  
0208 9002866

WEBSITE  
musicalfidelity.com

#### OUR VERDICT



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**HI-FI Choice, October 2013**



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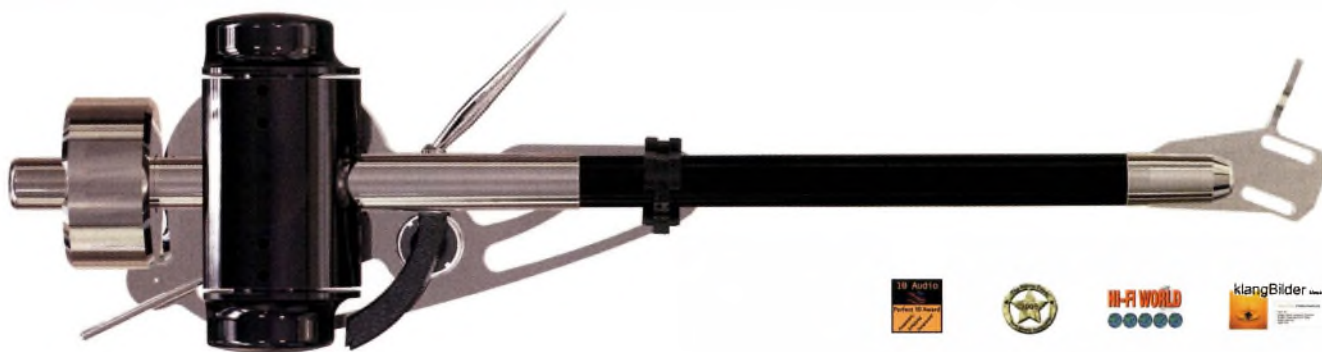
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# Phonon

## SMB-02 headphones

**THE NUMBER OF** headphones available at the £250-£300 point has pretty much reached the level where we could conduct a group test a month of them and probably not cover them all. In this congested arena, any new arrival has to stand out from the pack to stand a chance of succeeding.

On the face of it, the omens don't look too good for the Phonon SMB-02s. These are a closed-back design that fit into the hybrid size grouping and they don't look especially different to much of the competition. The back story of Phonon is a little unusual, however. The company is the result of two Tokyo DJs and a former Teac executive who devised a specific type of driver of slightly mysterious origin called the PHD. This is a small vibrating device that is designed to resonate in harmony with the main driver of a speaker and fill in the gaps that the driver misses. The SMB-02 is equipped with a PHD on either side making this the first mobile version of the concept.

### Ear we go again

As well as these mysterious PHD devices, the Phonons make use of a pair of 40mm dynamic drivers, which are set relatively far forward in the enclosure. The pad is just about large enough to enclose the ear completely, which means that they can feel a little constrictive although the overall design is comfortable to wear with a good amount of sprung pressure on the headband. The earpads themselves have a considerable amount of movement in the vertical axis, but more limited amounts in the horizontal, which can exert a little too much pressure on the back of the head if you have ears that stick out more than average.

The SMB-02s are sized more like a semi-portable hybrid, but there are some aspects of the design that make them better suited to use at home. The first is that the cord is fixed and no less than 3.4m long, which makes them superb for use in your listening room but more of a challenge on the



move. As you might expect, there are no inline controls or mic on the cord either. The build and general fit and finish is good, however. The Phonons are light at 271g, but still manage to feel solid and well assembled. The deliberately wonky lettering of the Phonon logo is a bit odd looking, but otherwise all the materials used are up to the standard demanded at the asking price.

The exact function of the enigmatic PHD driver is not necessarily much clearer after spending time with the headphones. At no point do I have a eureka moment and identify a sound to be specifically down to the PHD. This being said, I do have plenty of moments where I find much to like about the way they sound. Although DJs were involved in the creation of the brand, the performance is a world away from the augmented bass and top end of some dance music-orientated products. Bass isn't lacking – there is plenty of it – but it is instead the natural complement to a full and detailed midrange that is impressively smooth and controlled.

In fact 'smooth' is a word that crops up repeatedly in my notes. This should not be taken to be a polite term for dull – the performance with Rival Sons' *Head Down* is potent and full of the attack needed to make the album sound like it should. Where these headphones excel is that they manage

to avoid the harshness or thin sound that the album can suffer from with some rival offerings. With genuinely well-recorded material the sound is truly impressive – the detail in the high-res FLAC of Emily Barker's *Dear River* is effortlessly presented in a coherent and spacious performance.

### Smooth as silk

This smoothness can rob the Phonons of the last ounce of excitement with truly ballistic material – if you exist solely on a diet of full-bore electronica you might want to look elsewhere – but the SMB-02s manage to approach a wide variety of music with an assurance and control that makes them a fine all rounder. They are usefully sensitive too. Although the long cord means they are not as convenient used on the move, they are perfectly suited to being hooked up to an iPad as well as via a full-sized headphone socket. There is no escaping the fact that there is a huge amount of competition, but the SMB-02s manage to carve a particular niche that might be of use to you. These are lightweight and comfortable home headphones that will work from a variety of sources and be entirely listenable while they do it. If Phonon can produce a pair with swappable cords, these cans could be contenders for top honours. **ES**

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£300

WEBSITE  
[bd-audio.co.uk](http://bd-audio.co.uk)

#### OUR VERDICT



## Blue Aura X30 Bluetooth speakers

**BLUETOOTH SPEAKERS ARE** usually a single-box solution to the problem of getting sound to fill a room from your smartphone, tablet or laptop PC. However, the X30 is one of the few Bluetooth speakers that is actually a stereo pair.

Featuring the latest Bluetooth (4.0 and aptX) and NFC (Near Field Communications) connectivity technology, the X30 speakers measure 112 x 175 x 145mm (WxHxD) and weigh 1.5kg each. They are connected to each other by a supplied 3m Blue Aura twin-shielded Quick Connect cable. One of the speakers houses the connectors and also the 25W per channel Class D amplifier, which has a quoted frequency range of 55Hz-22KHz.

In addition to the Bluetooth connectivity, the X30s can be connected either via an optical

digital input or a pair of RCA analogue inputs, all of which are accessible from the back panel. A subwoofer output is also included and for users wanting to wirelessly 'daisy chain' speaker systems together, there's a USB socket for the Blue Aura WAS1 wireless system.

### Looking good

The X30s are finished in either Graphite or Sahara faux leather and can also be wall mounted using an optional bracket. An angled desktop stand is available. The remote control is used to turn the X30s on, adjust the volume and select the input source.

Having enabled NFC and the S Beam facilities on my Samsung Galaxy SIII, I power up the X30s with the supplied remote control and tap the X30 box with my phone. I then get a message onscreen confirming I wish to pair the device – job done!



The X30 certainly has plenty of volume and my first job is to turn it down using the remote control! As expected, the stereo separation is excellent and the sound is full, spacious and open, although the midrange is a little peaky with vocals sounding edgy at times. I also find that I can move around the room and still get a good sound and stereo image. The X30s are an effective way of getting sound from a Bluetooth device at the price. **NR**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£289  
**CONTACT**  
01480 477738  
**WEBSITE**  
blueaura.co.uk

#### OUR VERDICT



## Track Audio Turntable Isolators

**THERE ARE TWO** schools of thought regarding the best way to isolate turntables and other items of audio equipment from their surroundings: squishy feet or pointy spikes. Track Audio is firmly in the latter camp and has recently launched its new Turntable Isolators, which are a new spike design for use with turntables and CD players. The Turntable Isolators feature a unique design based on an ingenious viscous damping system for dissipating undesirable vibrations and converting them into heat.

Of course, a metal spike foot can be had for a few pence each, so why spend this sort of money on these? The quality is second to none – they positively ooze refinement and the finish on the spikes is more like what you would see on jewellery. Track Audio uses computer modelling techniques and ultra-high precision

machining from "the highest grade" stainless steel to manufacture the Isolators and ensure super-fine tolerances.

### Plates of meat

The feet are supplied with three different sizes of threaded bolts to suit most sizes of foot fittings on turntables. The height of each foot is easily adjustable by loosening a locking ring and turning another ring to set the height, then finally tightening the locking ring using two removable spigots that fit into holes around the outside.

If you are concerned about marking the surface supporting platform or stand with the spike, don't be. The tip of the cone at the bottom that forms the spike is at a very obtuse angle and

results in only a very slight indentation, if any, and this is designed to hold the isolator in place and stop it moving. There were no visible marks evident on my oak equipment rack when using them with my turntable and I perceive a slight tightening up of the bass, as well as excellent imaging. These are not 'night and day' enhancements, but improvements nonetheless. Their exquisite looks can't be bettered – in fact they look so good that I am reluctant to remove them from my system. **NR**



#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£350\*or four  
**CONTACT**  
01494 723755  
**WEBSITE**  
trackaudio.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 Nalty*



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For more information or best advice on Seismic Isolation visit [www.townshendaudio.com](http://www.townshendaudio.com)  
email or phone us on +44 (0) 20 8979 2155.

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engineering Hi-Fi

## ISOkinetik PEEK Bearing for Rega turntables

ONE OF THE many components of a record deck that can have a bearing on sound reproduction is the quality of the central bearing. A number of high-end manufacturers have incorporated PEEK in their high-specification bearing assemblies and ISOkinetik has just launched a PEEK bearing sleeve that is designed to be used as an upgrade for Rega turntables and derivatives as well as for its range of turntables.

PEEK (or Polyether ether ketone to give it its proper name) is a colourless, organic, semi crystalline thermoplastic of the polyaryletherketone (PAEK) family and is used extensively in the aerospace and medical industries due to its robustness, low coefficient of friction and high-wear resistance. The ISOkinetik PEEK bearing sleeve is supplied with a ceramic central ball bearing and can also be supplied with ISOkinetik's ISOLube

turntable bearing oil for an additional cost of around a tenner.

Installation is simply a case of unscrewing the securing nut under the turntable and withdrawing the existing phosphor-bronze bearing from the top of the plinth, replacing it with the PEEK bearing sleeve and re-tightening the securing nut. The ceramic ball is then inserted into the bearing, followed by a few drops of oil. Finally, the spindle is inserted and allowed to settle onto the ball, displacing the excess oil at the top of the bearing. If no oil is displaced you'll need to remove the spindle and add a few more drops before reinserting the spindle.

### PEEK-a-boo

After fitting the PEEK bearing, the first thing I notice is that the sub-platter is taking much longer to settle onto the ball than it did



previously with the old bearing. It used to take about 30 seconds to displace the air and any excess oil and it now takes over five minutes! This demonstrates that the bearing is indeed made to a tight tolerance. Listening tests after fitting the bearing reveal a noticeable improvement in imaging with better focus on individual instruments. Percussion has a real crispness and bite with greater attack and clarity. The lower bass is also more extended. Overall the sound is more realistic making this an excellent upgrade and one that is highly recommended. **NR**

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£80

CONTACT  
0208 241 8890

WEBSITE  
isokinetik.co.uk

#### OUR VERDICT



## Final Audio Design Heaven II earphones

AFTER YEARS SPENT being the extremely high-end Japanese brand you've never heard of, Final has moved into headphones and earphones with a calm assurance and no small degree of success. The Heaven IV in-ear design has already passed through *Choice Extras* and now it is the turn of the most affordable model in the range – the £90 Heaven II – to be put to the test.

At first glance, it isn't easy to tell why the II is nearly half the price of the IV. The crazy cigarette tin carry case has gone, but otherwise the Heaven II is almost identical to its big brother. The metal housings with their removable rubber domes have been retained and only the slightly thinner cord gives any clue to there being any form of economising going on. Internally, the Heaven II retains a balanced armature in each enclosure. This is a genuinely impressive achievement as the bulk of the

competition at this price level tends to lean towards dynamic drivers.

### Heaven sent

The use of armatures means that the Final needs to have an excellent fit in your ear canal with a decent seal to the outside world. If you can achieve this there is much to like about the Heaven II. The main benefit is the impressive sensitivity, which means that even low-powered headphone amps won't struggle to drive the Heaven II to real-world levels. The tonal balance is excellent, too. The massed instruments of The Souljazz Orchestra's *Hidden Flame* are entirely convincing with both a real sense of scale and enough detail to allow you to discern individual instruments.

This fine detail is present across the frequency range and means that the top end is incredibly revealing, but impressively forgiving and while it



can show the benefits of lossless audio, it is also perfectly happy with compressed material. Compared with burlier dynamic driver types, the bass extension is not as deep or as powerful, but it never feels short of low end and the same detail the Final has in the upper registers is present too. If you are looking for an earphone at the £100 point, the Heaven II is very convincing. **ES**

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£90

WEBSITE  
final-audio-design.com/

#### OUR VERDICT



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# Computer music

Your PC doesn't have to be just for boring things like emails and work, you can also use it to give your music a whole new lease of life

**C**omputer audio is now one of the most important growth areas in two-channel audio. It is no longer the preserve of the budget category or lifestyle setups and there is now a wider selection of equipment available at virtually every price point from the very affordable to the ultra high end.

At the same time, the supporting infrastructure that allows computer audio to deliver on the promises of sound quality and convenience has made equally significant progress. Storage is cheap and getting cheaper. It is also getting smarter and easier to use – not always a given in the world of IT. Further aiding this process, playback and ripping programs have been improving in leaps and bounds too. The best playback software is now impressively stable, easy to use and almost endlessly customisable to your specific needs. Some of this comes courtesy of hi-fi manufacturers creating ever more effective control applications while other options come from software companies direct, looking for new custom.

The final piece of the puzzle – the availability of lossless and hi-res audio material to actually buy and use without any intervening steps – is also making progress. It is fair to say that

developments in this area still lags behind the quality of the playback equipment and supporting ancillaries, but retailers are selling more music in more formats than ever before and the trend is on the up. We are reaching the stage where ripping and tagging is something that can take a back seat once your legacy material has been correctly archived.

There are two ways to get into computer audio, either by streaming it directly from storage via network or playing it out via your USB socket to a

## There are two ways to get into computer audio; streaming or via your USB socket

compatible DAC. There are pros and cons to both, but there are important differences. The USB approach is simple and cheap, requiring the purchase of a decent USB lead long enough to reach your hi-fi and a DAC with a USB input. The streaming approach is a little more involved, as you need a streamer, some UPnP software, a wireless router and ideally a NAS hard-disk drive. It is easier than it seems, though, especially if you structure it carefully from the start.

The most important decision to make is how to store your digital music.

We'd recommend Free Lossless Audio Codec (FLAC) as the best compromise, because unlike the computer file equivalent of CD music – WAV – FLAC files allow the use of 'metadata'. Embedded inside every FLAC file along with the music is a little string of data containing information about the song, such as the artist, name, genre and cover art. It makes cataloguing and searching your digital music library so much easier.

## Keep it tidy

In the early days of storing music on hard disc when storage was expensive, FLAC offered the benefit of being 'compacted'. Although none of the music data is discarded – unlike MP3 or AAC – FLAC is better at keeping its files 'tidy' and eliminates redundant space on the disk.

Arguments rage in computer audio circles about whether uncompact WAV files sound better than FLAC. It is important to take two things into account. The first is that all FLAC files can be restored to their original file size and type – the only difference is that increasing the compression will increase the effort it takes to restore the file. The second is that some software now rips to uncompressed

## MUSIC NON-STOP

As well as ripping your own music, one area of computer audio that is becoming increasingly important and useful is on-demand streaming services. These online music providers offer access to a massive amount of music stored in the cloud that you can listen to whenever you want via the internet. These services are great for listening to an entire album from an artist where you may have thus far only heard a single track.

At the moment, the best known of these services is Spotify. The Swedish-based company offers a free service with adverts as well as 'Premium' subscription options that remove the ads and increase the quality and enable you to use them without wi-fi for £5-10 a month. The quality of the service currently tops out at 320kbps Ogg Vorbis, which is perfectly listenable on a home system and has the advantage of being something that a 3G connection can handle, which means that Spotify has a fine mobile app for use on the move on your Android, iOS, Blackberry or Windows Phone.

The biggest competition to Spotify in the UK at least comes from Last.fm. This is a slightly different service in that it uses learning software to build a continuous radio stream from your preferences and this 'scrobbling' technology is increasingly clever and will often find you artists that you had no idea existed and who are just your cup of tea. Other services such as Rdio, Napster and Grooveshark are also available.

The biggest development over the last year has been the advent of lossless streaming from some services. The first company to offer this was another Scandinavian service WIMP, which remains unavailable in the UK. The UK does have the option of lossless streaming from French site Qobuz, however. For £20 per month, you get access to the site's entire library of FLAC files. This technically points to never having to buy music ever again, but the catalogue still lags behind Spotify in terms of both size and comprehensiveness and unless you really do have a no-strings-attached unlimited broadband deal, you may find yourself hitting your download limits very quickly. Although a lossless FLAC file doesn't put too much strain on your broadband, it's probably best to avoid this service if your provider is on the slow side.

At the moment, these services are more easily accessible to people who have decided to use computers and DACs as it is a simple matter of selecting the streaming service instead of your normal playback software. Network streamers are slightly less well served in terms of accessing these services, but Spotify is arriving on more devices as its new 'Connect' service gains traction. This uses a mobile device to access the Spotify menus and then gives the streamer the details to access the track directly. At the time of writing, we know a few companies are set to announce this and there are undoubtedly more in the works.

They read the music into RAM memory, which doesn't require continuous and electrically noisy hard disk usage while playing, which is a major boon. All are free to trial, and cost up to £70 to buy the full versions.

## The harder they come

Next comes the hard disk. Of course, every computer has one and there's no need for you to buy additional storage to get a sound from your speakers. If you have your whole music collection on your computer, however, it's a very good idea to buy a bespoke hard drive to store it on – not least because it frees the internal drive up for general use. A simple portable hard drive will suffice for those playing their music out from their computer via USB although there are some benefits to solid-state (SSD) types over conventional hard drives as they have faster access and fewer read errors, which helps as far as sound is concerned.

Those intending to stream their music via a network should seriously consider investing in a dedicated Network Attached Storage (NAS) drive. The beauty of this is that it's very easy to use with any networked music streamer, thanks to its built-in media server software – which in the case of some drives is increasingly sophisticated. This means you don't have to download and run UPnP server software such as Twonky or Asset – which you'd otherwise have to do to make your streamer 'see' your computer as a music source on the network. Many NAS models are 'bay' types that allow you to select your drive size and use one as a RAID type backup, but nothing is more effective than a second drive that is connected only for backing up if you want true peace of mind.

If you're using a PC and a USB DAC, you'll need to install the USB audio driver for the DAC. This is supplied by the manufacturer and will normally be downloadable from its website. Never connect the USB DAC to the PC before you've installed the driver. If you're using a Mac, there's no need to install a driver – although Mavericks may need you to change your MIDI and sound settings to allow hi-res playback. Now it's time to set up the computer's sound system for best performance. In the PC environment, JRiver has a tools/options sub-menu that lets you select 'Wasapi Event Style' that bypasses the internal audio mixer – this is the computer audio equivalent of pressing the 'source direct' button. Next, you must tell your PC to output

FLAC – ie exactly the same data rate as WAV, which should result in an identical performance only with much easier tagging.

Okay, so where do you get these music files that you want to play? There are two ways – people rip (or 'record') their existing CD collections or download new music. The first is easier said than done, not because it's tricky to do, but because it's a tedious task that takes weeks if you have a large music collection. If you own thousands of CDs, your easiest option might be to have a professional organisation do the work for you. Prices vary as do some of the options available in terms of formats, tagging and storage. If you have a huge collection and the budget for it, it's by far the fastest option, but some might find the prospect of sending their entire CD collection away via a courier to be a tad traumatic!

## The hard stuff

Once you have your files, you have a simple choice between a USB-capable DAC or a streamer. The first option is the most straightforward, but to get the best out of it you need to think carefully about the software you'll be

playing your files with. Most people will be familiar with iTunes, which is an easy way to play music stored on computers, but it isn't ideal for lossless and hi-res use, not least because it doesn't play FLAC files by default and cannot handle higher sampling rates at all. Instead, it's sensible to invest in a software player that turns off all the extraneous

## The best playback software is stable, easy to use and customisable

processing that goes on in any computer, and bypasses any internal sound mixing or signal processing.

Again, a number of options are available, but JRiver (jriver.com) for the PC or Audirvana Plus (audirvana.com) for the Mac are excellent starting points. Both Windows and OS X are set by default to up or downsample the audio output, and/or mix system sounds into it, whereas these applications will give you 'bit-perfect' playback where what comes out is exactly the same as what went in.

**Audirvana Plus is a good hi-res software player**





the sound to the USB DAC, so click on the Output Mode Settings box and specify your USB DAC as the output device. With Macs, go to Preferences/Audio System in Audirvana and specify your USB DAC as the Preferred Audio Device. Make sure you've got Exclusive Access Mode and Integer Mode selected, and you're good to go.

Streamer users can relax, as there's no need to fiddle with USB audio device settings. The best results are normally achieved with wired networks – this is not so much because

## It is essential to invest in some serious music playback software

the performance of wireless is always inferior, but because you are removing some of the variables that can affect performance that you have no control over. Some NAS drives allow for direct connection via Ethernet, but the most effective way of connecting drive and streamer together is via a router as this will make the drive available to more than one streamer and allow for use of a control app via a phone or tablet. The quality of most manufacturer supplied apps is now very good, but Bubble UPnP (Android) and PlugPlayer (iOS) are decent options.

Once all of this is done, you'll have the makings of a serious computer audiophile system. Both the USB DAC and the streamer-based approach will give you access to hi-res files of very high quality, and if you've only ever used CD before, you will be blown

away by the performance that some files offer in comparison. Take care to get the basics right and you will have a system that allows for a very happy combination of performance and convenience so that you can experience more music from more places than ever before – there's never been a better time to make the switch.

### Player's association

If you want to be the turn the music up on your computer, don't use iTunes or Windows Media Centre. These are fine for chart pop and background music, but in sonic terms they send the music round the houses and back again, before reaching the outside world, going through all manner of strange and unnecessary processing before coming out of your speakers. Also, particularly in the case of iTunes, there's no default FLAC support, which in true Apple style means the user is cut off from the main music format that the rest of the planet is using!

That's why it is essential to invest in serious music playback software, and the good news is that there are numerous such players available, all of which have a slightly different presentation, visually and sonically. Mac users should investigate Audirvana, PureMusic, Amarra, Cog, Neutrino or Ayre Audio. PC users will want to check out Foobar20000, AIMP 2, MediaMonkey, Winamp Full, JetAudio, JRiver, MusicBee or Jaangle. It's a good idea to see which ones best suit your particular needs and then download the demo versions to try for yourself, then you can buy the one you like best of all ●

**Linn's Sneaky DSM is a great single-box streaming system**

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[www.hi-resaudio.com/artist.php?abid=192897](http://www.hi-resaudio.com/artist.php?abid=192897)



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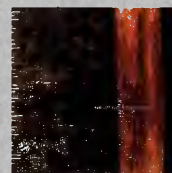
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**NINE INCH NAILS HESITATION MARKS**  
Industrial noise smiths NINs have been advocates of hi-res since the days of S&D. Their latest effort is

available as a well-priced 24bit download off their website and gives the sparse, jagged recordings a little more presence.

[store.nin.com/product\\_info.php?cPath=1&products\\_id=99](http://store.nin.com/product_info.php?cPath=1&products_id=99)



**ANTONIO FORCIONE & SABINA SCIUBBA MEET ME IN LONDON**  
Albums mastered at 24/192 are still unusual and this lovingly presented

remaster of one of the Naim Label's most enduring albums is one of the best. This is fine recordings gives two great musicians real space to show what they can do.

[www.naimlabel.com/recording-meet-me-in-london-192.aspx](http://www.naimlabel.com/recording-meet-me-in-london-192.aspx)

**NEXT MONTH:** Transferring your LPs and cassettes into a digital format – we show you everything you need to know

## RIPPING YARNS

If you decide to rip your entire CD library yourself prepare to be bored (although one of the most effective methods is to rip discs while you are sat at the computer doing something else), and make sure that you use a good ripping program. Many audiophiles rate dBpoweramp ([www.dbpoweramp.com/cd-ripper.htm](http://www.dbpoweramp.com/cd-ripper.htm)) as the best sounding, although it is not available for the Mac, so OS X users should try Max (<http://sbooth.org/Max/>). Both will let you rip music to high-quality FLAC files, and add album art and metadata – automatically or manually. Another option is a special ripping box, like Zoneripper, or VortexBox, which will automatically rip your CDs and then store them on its internal hard drive. These really come into their own if you are planning on continuing to buy a large number of discs – conversely, they are less

worthwhile if you plan to move to buying all your music as downloads after ripping your existing collection. The availability of downloads has improved to the extent that this is now a viable option.

As well as the longstanding purveyors of all things hi-res, Linn and Naim – who have been tirelessly pumping out material at sampling rates up to 24/192, US based HD Tracks recently announced plans to start selling in the UK via a dedicated site that's scheduled for launch later this spring, although no firm launch date was available at the time of writing. French service Qobuz is offering more of its catalogue for sale here too (some restrictions still apply). Elsewhere, sites like Bleep, Bandcamp and Deutsche Grammophon are hard at work providing CD-quality material at real-world prices.



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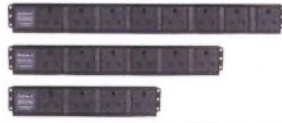
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**When equipment sounds wonderful, is well-built and gives great musical pleasure – then it becomes a favourite. We reckon we are lucky to have a high number of ‘favourites’ in our stable.**

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.’

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# Next month



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We listen to the 683 floorstander from the British speaker brand's new 600 Series

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Six top-brand budget amplifiers priced from £200-£400 get put through their paces

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French hi-fi manufacturer's £6,290 ultra-stylish audio system with new SAM technology gets first UK review

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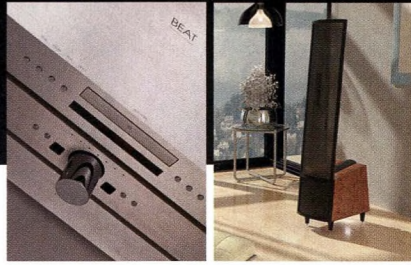
# HIFI CHOICE ADVERTISERS INDEX

ABSOLUTE SOUNDS	11
VIETA	74
ARCAM	45
AUDIO EMOTION	131
AVID HIFI	9
BILLY VEE	71
BLACK RHODIUM	112,115
CLARITY ALLIANCE	26
CLEAR AUDIO	28
CREEK	65
DOUG BRADY	32
DYNAUDIO	80
EXPOSURE ELECTRONICS	34
FLAMINGO AUDIO	86,87
FOCAL	78
FURUTECH	55
GSP AUDIO	49
HIFI SOUND	117
IAG INTERNATIONAL	132
ICON AUDIO	108
INSPIRE HIFI	98
ISOTEK	66
K2	15
KEF	2
MAINS CABLES R US	97
MARK GRANT	111
MUSICAL FIDELITY	30
NUNU DISTRIBUTION	58
OPPO	13
ORIGIN LIVE	112
PJ HIFI	68
PMC	76
QUINTET	23
RUSS ANDREWS	121
SEVENOAKS SOUND AND VISION	39,40,41
T+A	73
TANNOY	107
TELLURIUM Q	121
THE CHORD COMPANY	104
THE RIGHT NOTE	123
TOWNSHEND AUDIO	82
XP CARBON	36

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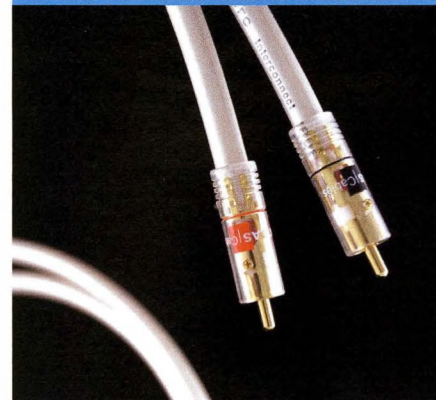
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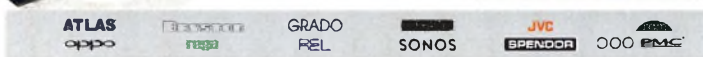
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## WE HEAR...

AMUT FANS WILL BE PLEASED TO HEAR OF a new range of loudspeakers designed to replace the super high-end E1 Superiores lineup. The new RS series looks similar, but there are substantial differences to the cabinets and drive units, we hear. Meanwhile the company has changed UK distribution and will be dealing direct from now on.

NEWS REACHES US FROM THE WILD WEST that Kudos has a new loudspeaker coming this summer. The Welsh company is believed to be close to launching its X3, a prototype of which recently wowed the crowds at an event hosted by Chester-based hi-fi dealer Acoustica. Full production is not expected to start for at least a couple of months, but the prototype stage is pretty much completed, says our supergrass.

PETROLHEADS CONSIDERING TREATING themselves to a new Lambo may like to know that there's now a Monster sound system option available. A trifling \$50,000 will buy you a bespoke hi-fi for your new Lamborghini Veneno Roadster. Currently the world's most expensive production car, it costs just \$4.5m, so the extra cash for a fancy stereo is unlikely to put off prospective purchasers. You'll have to join the queue behind Monster's Noel Lee, who has already bought one of just nine being made.

AUDIOPHILES AFFLICTED WITH NOISY MAINS supplies may wish to know that notorious murderer of mains mush IsoTek has a brand new high-end power conditioner. The EVO3 Titan is available now.

## THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



### HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 70 JUNE 1991

Featuring reviews of 27 of the latest CD players, the silver disc was clearly in the ascendancy back in 1991, but then-editor Andy Benham was concerned about what the rise of Compact Disc would mean for vinyl. In his editor's intro Andy talked about the sad demise of Nipper, the fox terrier that was so famously immortalised on EMI's HMV record label and suggested that vinyl might be heading in the same direction. As he put it: "That EMI, and indeed the other record companies, should be caught in such an unsightly rush to bury the humble record speaks volumes for the relative profit margins of each format, as well as reminding everyone concerned that the music business is a lot more about business than music". Though he didn't want to be a Luddite, he felt that vinyl still had a part to play in our enjoyment of music. How very right he was...

Elsewhere, the pop music charts were dominated by Seal (whose eponymous album topped the charts for two weeks), while Jason Donovan's horrific *Any Dream Will Do* was the best selling single. These were dark, dark days.



### HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 191 JUNE 1999

"Sony has done it," wrote editor Jason Kennedy in a frenzy of excitement before continuing, "After a late start the company looks like it will be the first to offer a new high-density medium to the audio market". Jason had been one of the select few journalists lucky enough to be in Milan as Sony gave a first public airing of the format to an expectant press. The SCD-1, as it was called, was a two-channel stereo player with no digital output and so no multi-channel capability. It was available for a mere £3,400 and though it's appeal was certain to be limited, Jason revealed that the stereo performance was very impressive indeed. At launch there were only 20 titles available to buy on SACD, with 10 per month promised following the launch. With DVD-A still not unveiled. It appeared that Sony had got the upper hand on Pioneer in the digital format war...

Meanwhile Napster launched with a plan to shake up MP3 music distribution, Apple released its very first iBook and George W Bush announced his intention to stand as President, but surely no one would vote for him... would they?



## DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month **Rob Watts** digital designer at Chord Electronics chooses four of his favourite long players...



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This is a nice crossover with classical music and electronica. It's great to just chill out and relax with its tight rhythms.



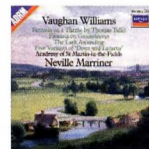
### JACQUELINE DU PRÉ THE CONCERTO COLLECTION

This reminds me of my mentor Mike Priestland, who encouraged me in my early design days. I thank him for his support.



### PINK FLOYD WISH YOU WERE HERE

Although most people's favourite Floyd album is *Dark Side*, in my opinion it's the album that followed. It's a beautiful, brooding, mesmeric work.



### VAUGHN WILLIAMS THE LARK ASCENDING

This will remind me of my summers spent walking in the hills. Also, *Fantasia On A Theme Of Thomas Tallis* is possibly my favourite piece of music ever.

# Hi-Fi Choice

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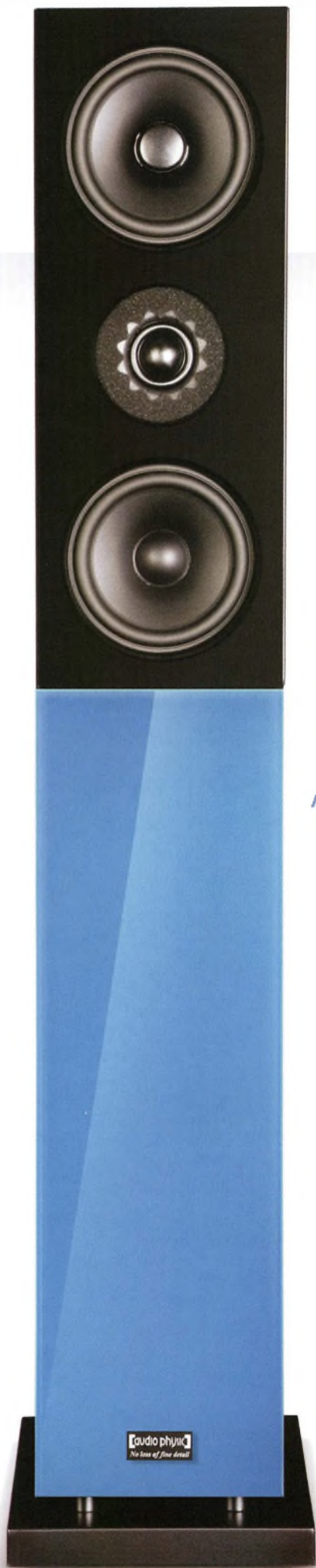
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