



Chord on the go

Portable Hugo DAC/headphone amp strikes all the right notes

Instant replay

How to digitise all your old LP, cassette and tape recordings



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 386

July 2014

Superstar system

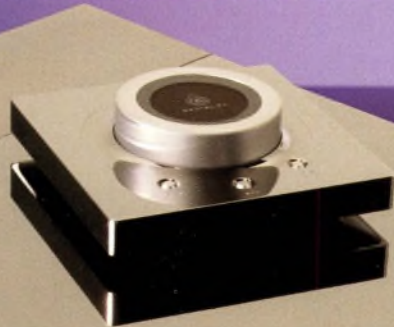
WORLD EXCLUSIVE
1ST FULL TEST

Revolutionary Devialet amp and speakers set new sonic standard

30

PRODUCTS ON TEST:

Arcam, Cyrus, KEF, Marantz, NAD, Sonus faber and Yamaha



Rhythm master

B&W's 683 S2 floorstander will get your toes tapping

GROUP TEST

Turn it up!

Six of the best integrated amplifiers under £400



oppo

PM-1

Planar Magnetic Headphones



Proprietary Planar
Magnetic Technology

Life-like, Natural Sound
Quality



Balanced Ohno
Continuous Casting cable

Cable for mobile devices

Wooden storage box

Selvedge denim carry
case



High Sensitivity &
Scalability

Plush Padding &
Reduced Weight for
Exceptional Comfort



oppo-bluray.co.uk



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Beth Orton *Central Reservation*



Paris-based audio specialist Devialet caused quite a stir in hi-fi circles when it launched its D-Premier amplifier in 2010 – appearing with an inaugural review in our sister title *Hi-Fi News & Record Review*. More recently the technology has evolved into a range of beautiful and slender amplifiers that quickly earned admiring glances for their stylish looks and versatility, as well as audiophile acknowledgments for their spectacular performance.

Regular readers will no doubt recognise our cover star as the Devialet Ensemble hi-fi system that was the lead *Audiophile* news story last month. *Hi-Fi Choice* is proud to be the first hi-fi magazine in the world to get its hands on this perfectly balanced and sophisticated system. As any reader will know, combining hi-fi components is a considerable art form, but Devialet has done all the hard work for you with its Ensemble system, matching its entry-level Devialet integrated amplifier, now upgraded to 120 following the new software announced at the High End Hi-Fi Show in Munich last month – see our *Show Report*, on page 84 – with Atohm GT1 SE speakers.

One of the main new innovations in the Devialet amp is SAM (Speaker Active Matching), which has been developed as a form of audio tailoring that ensures amplifier and speaker fit together perfectly.

The Ensemble is the first complete system to utilise the new technology, but this is only part of the story. To find out more read our *In-Depth* review, starting on page 16.

Lee Dunkley Editor


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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!



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Connect four

Heed Audio launches four-strong Thesis amplifier range at Munich's High End Show



PRICE: £1,600–£2,850 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01242 511133 **WEB:** HEEDAUDIO.CO.UK

A SUNNY MORNING in mid-May at the High End Show in Munich was the location for the announcement of a new amplifier range to come from Budapest-based Heed Audio. The four-strong range is housed in what the company describes as 'retro-futuristic' casework, and centres around the Thesis Alpha preamplifier (£2,850). The minimalist designed preamp has six source inputs and is partnered with the Thesis Pi power supply unit (£1,600). It's a twin

power supply unit that drives the analogue circuitry stage of the Alpha preamplifier as well as the matching add-on Phi phono stage.

The digital circuitry inside the Alpha preamplifier claims to be built around the company's Obelisk Da digital-to-analogue convertor (reviewed issue 373) and supports two analogue and four digital inputs including S/PDIF, Toslink, BNC and USB. A matching remote control handset with source selection is also provided.

Driven by the Thesis Pi PSU, the third model in the range is the Phi phono stage (£2,300), and claims to be a 'no compromise' phono preamp aimed at vinyl connoisseurs and offers very low noise characteristics, huge dynamic range, plenty of headroom and an extremely smooth frequency response.

Its twin circuit design means that it can cater independently for moving magnet (MM) and moving coil (MC) cartridges. It can accommodate two

COMMENT

RECORD BREAKER

You've got to love Jack White. Quite aside from being one hell of a musician, he's also fighting the good fight to keep music interesting. While other musicians released limited edition vinyl for Record Store Day, Jack went one better by producing the world's fastest record. To explain, White recorded and cut directly to acetate the single *Lazaretto*, before rushing it to United Records Pressing, where the vinyl was cut and stuffed into sleeves featuring photos from the event before being delivered to stores. The entire process smashed the previous record of a day, taking just 3 hours, 55 minutes and 21 seconds after recording began.

But Jack didn't stop there. The album that the single comes from (also called *Lazaretto*) is taking what can be done with the black stuff to a whole new level. Jack's humorously dubbed the release an 'Ultra LP' and in truth, Ultra doesn't even come close to how exciting this record will be. For starters, the grooves on side one run from the centre out and there's a lock groove on the outer rim of the disc. Underneath the label on both sides is a hidden track - simply place the needle on the label and you'll get to hear a couple of crackly hidden tunes. White has already experimented with this 'underlabel groove' on a previous release he did with his band The Dead Weather, but what makes this one different is that on side A the track is at 78rpm, while on side B it's at 45rpm - making this an LP that has three playing speeds.

The first track of side two has been recorded with two different intros - acoustic and electric - and depending on where you put the needle you'll end up listening to one of the two. They cleverly blend into one halfway through the track (this is a world first, no less).

Perhaps most amazing of all is the 'hologram' of an angel that appears to float above the 'in dead wax' run out area on side one. Produced by artist Tristan Duke it really has to be seen to be believed and no words that we write here can do justice to it. Jack, we salute you and wish that there were more vinyl pioneers doing what you're doing. The special release of *Lazaretto* goes on sale on 10 June and you can see the magic for yourself here: bit.ly/SzITqZ. ▶



The four-strong range is housed in what is described as 'retro-futuristic' casework, and centres around the Alpha preamp

turntables simultaneously and claims easy user-customisation for cartridge gain and impedance matching via easily accessible rear panel jumpers.

The fourth and final model in the new range is a monobloc power amplifier called Omega (£1,750). The solid-state design claims to deliver up to 160W continuous power, but in keeping with the Heed Audio tradition it doesn't mention under what load conditions this is measured. The Hungarian audio

maker prefers to let the sound do the talking. On launching the Thesis, Heed's marketing and sales director Alpar Huszti said: "The new Thesis range, with its characteristic visual appearance and unique life-like sonic presentation, pulls clear of the familiar pack of audio products to stir emotions in the Heed tradition".

See our full High End Show report on the other highlights from Munich that grabbed our attention starting on page 84.

Trend setting on the go

Ted Baker adds audio range for fashion-conscious music fans

PRICE: £180–£200 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0845 1304278 **WEB:** TEDBAKERAUDIO.COM

DESIGNER CLOTHING BRAND Ted Baker has unveiled two audio products in a new lineup. Ted tells us that it hasn't simply slapped its name on someone else's product, but built its own models with the help of acoustic experts to create genuine hi-fi sound.

Rockall is a double-folding over-ear headphone composed of brushed stainless steel, soft padding and supple materials, the maker says. Specs are yet to be announced but they come in brushed silver with black or tan headband and ear cushions, or brushed Champagne gold with white headband and ear cushions. Price is £180.

Fastnet is a folding speaker with integrated microphone housed in brushed aluminium and leather casing. It is equipped with Bluetooth aptX version 3.0 for wireless, and a 3.5mm stereo line-in socket for wired connections. The built-in rechargeable battery offers around six hours between charges, the maker says. It's priced at £200 and is available in four colour finishes.



IN BRIEF

PRO-JECT 32-BIT USB BOX



● Distributor Henley Designs has announced a new addition to the Box Design lineup from Pro-Ject. The new USB Box S+ matches the size and aesthetic of others in the 'S' range, and claims to use a PCM5102A chip from Burr-Brown, which handles asynchronous USB streaming up to 32-bit/384kHz. Sample rates are displayed on the front panel with 44.1, 88.2 and 176.4 files up-sampled to 352.8kHz, and 48, 96 and 192kHz files up-sampled to 384kHz. Two settings tailor the sound between Finite Impulse Response and Infinite Impulse Response filters.

It's compatible with Windows, Apple and Linux systems, and gold-plated RCA output and USB type-B input sockets are fitted at the rear. Available now costing £169. HENLEYDESIGNS.CO.UK

Naim Audio adds Muso wireless speaker system

PRICE: £895 **AVAILABLE:** SEPTEMBER
CONTACT: 01722 426600 **WEB:** NAIMAUDIO.COM

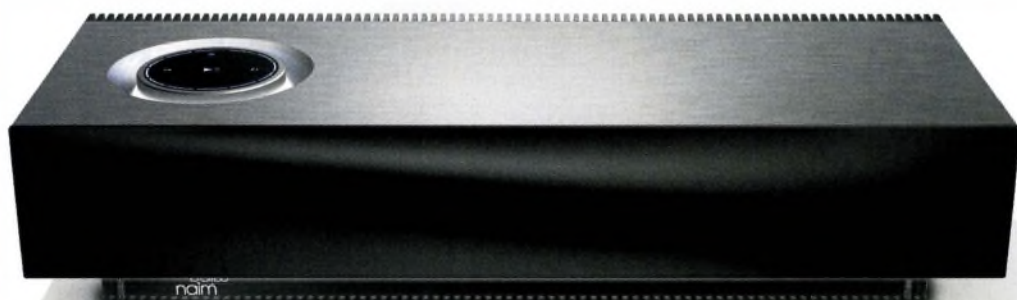
Following one of the biggest hi-fi news stories from a British-based audio brand in January with the announcement of its £125,000 Statement NAC S1 preamplifier and NAP S1 mono power amplifiers set to arrive later this year, comes news of another new model to join the Naim Audio lineup. 2014 looks set to be a busy period for the Salisbury hi-fi manufacturer, as it also unveiled its first wireless speaker/soundbar system called Muso at The Vinyl Factory last

month. Scheduled to go on sale in September, we're told the Muso will stream high-resolution music from both Apple and Android smartphones and tablets as well as laptops and other storage devices. Its advanced connectivity includes AirPlay, UPnP, Bluetooth (aptX), internet radio and plans to offer support for popular streaming services – this is to be confirmed.

Muso claims 450W of power from six 75W digital amplifiers driving six custom-made Naim

speaker drivers, and can be linked with other Naim systems to create a multi-room system.

Hi-res 24-bit/192kHz audio is catered for, and a new control app for iPad, iPhone and iPod as well as Android devices will allow you to make playlists as well as giving access to thousands of internet radio stations. The new control app will also be available in September and will be compatible with existing Naim streaming products as well as the new Muso. ▶



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



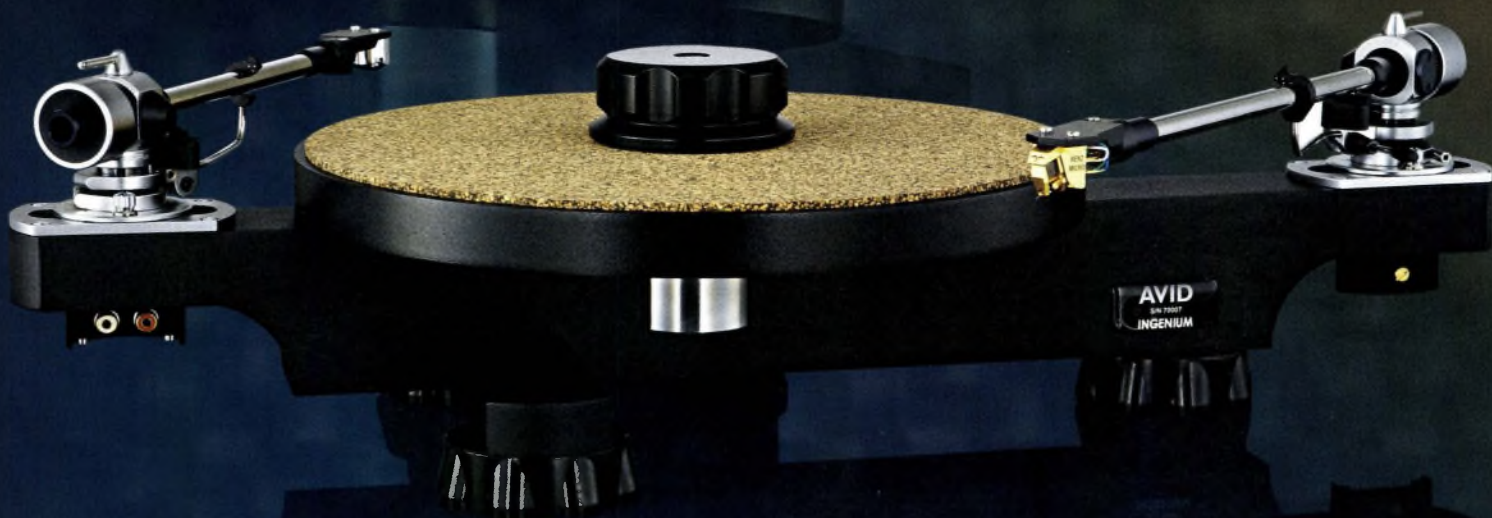
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Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio Magazine, January 2013



"Oozes quality in both construction and sound"

Paul Rigby, Hi Fi World, March 2013



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

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Meridian milestone

DSP loudspeakers celebrate 25 years

PRICE: £10,000-£43,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01480 445678 **WEB:** MERIDIAN-AUDIO.COM

IT'S HARD TO believe that Meridian Audio first launched its digital loudspeaker some 25 years ago in 1989. To celebrate this quarter century milestone, the Huntingdon-based high-end audio maker has announced a Special Edition series of DSP active loudspeakers available to order. The three SE models will feature a new Meridian-designed semi-horn-loaded tweeter with Beryllium-dome, as well as new electronics and DSP including

Meridian's EBA (Enhanced Bass Alignment) technology and driver clamp rings for enhanced stability, the maker says.

Meridian hasn't forgotten existing owners of DSP speaker models either, and DSP5200, DSP7200 and DSP8000 – including the Anniversary Edition – can be upgraded with the new Beryllium-dome tweeter and a completely new electronics and DSP package. Upgrades come with a full warranty for the entire loudspeaker.



IN BRIEF

AT-LP60 USB TURNTABLE

Respected record deck maker Audio-Technica has introduced the AT-LP60USB turntable aimed at anyone looking to easily digitise their record collection. The sleek new design includes a turntable fitted with a phono cartridge, PC and Mac compatible software, a USB cable that connects the turntable directly to a computer, a built-in phono preamp and a host of other accessories. The bundled Audacity software has plenty of audio editing features and converts the audio on a record to MP3 and WAV digital audio files, as well as other formats, for playback on portable audio players, computers, and home and car audio systems. The AT-LP60USB costs £140, and is available to buy direct from the Audio-Technica website. **AUDIOTECHNICASHOP.COM**



Beyerdynamic on the go

PRICE: €99-€279 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01444 258258 **WEB:** BEYERDYNAMIC.COM

Following the launch of the audiophile A 2 headphone amplifier announced by Beyerdynamic last month, comes further new models to join the German headphone brand's line-up, including the introduction of several new portable ear and headphones

First up is the T 51 i over-ear, closed-back hi-fi headphone. The new T 51 model joins the acclaimed and ongoing T 51 p headphone model, but adds a new cable. The headphone looks identical to its sibling and also employs Tesla transducers, optimised bass reflex

channels and is fitted with soft ear-cushions. It addresses the T 51 p's lack of in-line remote providing the ability to control smartphone music playback.

The new version is Apple-certified, has a built-in microphone to enable users to take calls, and comes with a specially reinforced cable for life on the go.

Fans of Beyerdynamic earphones will be pleased to learn that the company's long-standing DTX/MMX range of in-ear models has undergone a makeover. The new generation is based around three



models: the DTX 72 iE, DTX 102 iE and the MMX 102 iE multimedia headset, equipped with a softer, more flexible connection cable. Models are now available in up to three different colour finishes. There's no word on UK pricing, but all are available to order from the company website. ▶



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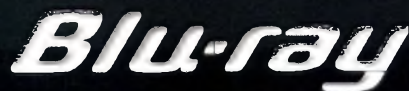
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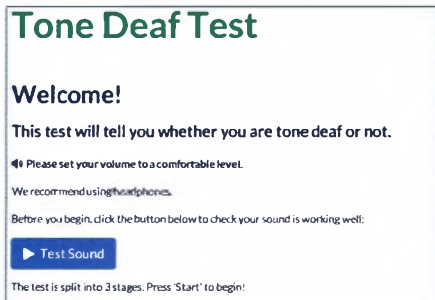
Andrew Simpson casts his expert eye over his pick of the best hi-fi websites and online content



Inspiring vinyl
Vinyl fans enjoyed Bowers & Wilkins' Instagram comp last month, when lucky winners bagged some 685 speakers by posting an inspiring pic of their favourite LP with the **#LoveVinyl** hashtag. See the snaps at [instagram.com/bowerswilkins](https://www.instagram.com/bowerswilkins).



KEF Connects
Described as the 'creative website for music lovers' the newly launched KEF Connects site provides behind the scenes perspectives from musicians, producers, engineers, scientists and designers with a shared passion for music. Explore what's on offer and take a look at kef.com/kefconnects.



Tone deaf test
We couldn't resist taking part in the Tone Deaf Test that was tweeted last month by **@MartinLoganLtd**. Do you reckon you can tell your falling notes from your ascending ones? Why not spend five minutes finding out just how well your audiophile ears fare at tonedeafest.com.



Bespoke Audio Company
If you're in the market for a premium preamp head to The Bespoke Audio Company's new site: thebespokeaudiocompany.com. The Hastings-based brand has also launched on Facebook ([/TheBespokeAudioCompany](https://www.facebook.com/TheBespokeAudioCompany)) and Twitter ([@thebespokeaudio](https://twitter.com/thebespokeaudio)).



Lucky winners
Hot on the heels of Record Store Day, High Wycombe's The Sound Gallery recently gave away a new Rega RP1 deck. Tweeters had to re-tweet **@TheSoundGallery's** comp tweet, which pulled a whopping 2,795 RTs, with this lucky family winning the star prize pic.twitter.com/BNKbOBN7ni.



Naim goes wireless
Naim has been tantalising us with the launch of its first wireless system recently. Muso is due for release in September, and you can stay up to date with all of the latest developments by subscribing to the new Muso news service. Check out the microsite for yourself: naimaudio.com/muso

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ANALOGUE SEDUCTION (@ANALOGSEDUCTION)
Have you heard yet about the Road to Rio trade in scheme from Arcam? Save up to 20% on a new Arcam receiver bit.ly/1hxKHVr

SEVENOAKS (@SEVENOAKS_SSAV)
@NADElectronics launches **@Spotify** Connect in award-winning D 7050 Direct Digital Network Amplifier

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The entire catalog by **#TheDoors** is on sale today **@iTunesMusic!** Check out the music, the DVDs, **#TheDoorsApp** & more. <https://t.co/soylrJK350>

THE CHORD COMPANY (@CHORDEABLES)
Do you own one of the fabulous **@ChordAudio** Hugo DAC's? We have a special range of cables designed specially for it. <http://bit.ly/1fq50Jc>

WILSON AUDIO (@WILSONAUDIO)
Want to see a 360 degree view of Wilson Audio's current products? You can on our FREE app for iOS and Android! Go <http://fb.me/6QPIHr67N>

VINYLIHUNT.COM (@VINYLIHUNT)
Sales of **#vinyl records** on **#RSD14** rise 2,000%. Two. Thousand. <http://bit.ly/1pv0oWx>

PUREAUDIO (@PUREAUDIO)
Here is an internal photo of our Vinyl preamplifier. This is a true dual mono design. What you see is the top... <http://fb.me/25OZuw0NW>

THE VINYL FACTORY (@THEVINYLFACTORY)
Did you know that 26% of young people don't listen to the music they buy on vinyl? **#crazy #vinyl** [instagram.com/p/nqdcy0inGh/](https://www.instagram.com/p/nqdcy0inGh/)

PINK FLOYD (@PINKFLOYD)
Today (18 Apr) we remember Storm Thorgerson, who (with his colleagues) was responsible for most of Pink Floyd's iconic album covers and other images.

CYRUS AUDIO LTD (@CYRUS_AUDIO)
Discover Music - Try Infected Mushroom, Vicious Delicious. A favourite test track of ours, great for assessing the separation of a system

BEYERDYNAMIC (@BEYERDYNAMICHQ)
We are celebrating our 90th Anniversary with a limited edition of the T 90 Jubilee! t.co/WQvtlMiJvo

RECORD STORE DAY UK (@RSDUK)
<https://t.co/61cKOvsDyt...>
Check the video [@billybragg](https://www.youtube.com/user/billybragg) made for us on **#RSD13** great bloke who knows **#SupportYourLocalRecordShop #RSD14**

pure virtuosity



For more than a quarter-century, Sonus faber has represented the pinnacle of loudspeaker aesthetics. From its earliest models, incorporating real wood, furniture-grade finishing, seductive curves and even grilles that reveal style and inventiveness, this repository of Italian artisan skills and artistry has achieved what was once deemed impossible: creating speakers that sound as beautiful as they look.

Along with a series of models paying homage to the great luthiers of Cremona, the company has since been inspired by the Teatro Olimpica in Vicenza. It is appropriate that this new family of speakers considered the standards of a famed venue as the ne plus ultra of the reproduction of music with vivacity and power... exactly what defines music from opera to orchestral to rock music to soul to jazz. To achieve this, Sonus faber has exploited all that it has learned since its inception.

Like all Sonus faber loudspeakers, Olympica represents what is possible, while respecting what has mattered.

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DETAILS

PRODUCT
Devialet Ensemble

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Amplifier and
speaker package

WEIGHT
Amp: 5.65kg
Speaker: 8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
Amp:
383 x 40 x 383mm
Speaker:
200 x 330 x 250mm

FEATURES

- Amp: Class A/D hybrid analogue/digital
- Speakers: Atohm GT1 SE with matching Zef cable
- AIR streaming module
- Fully configurable inputs for Ethernet, USB, RCA (line-level and S/PDIF) Toslink
- Firmware updates via SD card/website
- 24-bit/192kHz upsampling DAC
- Phono stage

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Forward thinking

From one of the most advanced hi-fi designers of our age comes an amp and speaker package to set the standard. **Andrew Simpson** investigates

Challenging hi-fi's conventions has been at Devialet's core since the French high-end maker launched its groundbreaking D-Premier amp back in 2010. Concepts including customising settings via an onboard SD card and online configurator, along with firmware releases ensuring your amp stayed up to date brought fresh thinking to long-term ownership.

Devialet's range has since expanded into four models, and with each comes increased connectivity, power and configuration options. At the heart of all Devialet amps beats the same ADH (Analogue Digital Hybrid) amplification, which is a modern take on Quad's Current Dumpers of yesteryear that uses analogue Class A voltage amplification working in parallel with digital Class D dumpers. All Devialet amplifiers also employ 24-bit/192kHz upsampling Texas Instruments PCM1792 DAC chips, developed into its proprietary Magic Wire circuit.

Sitting at the centre of our package is Devialet's new entry-level 120 amp (£4,490 on its own), which morphed

Even at low levels this system opens the music up with stirring dynamism

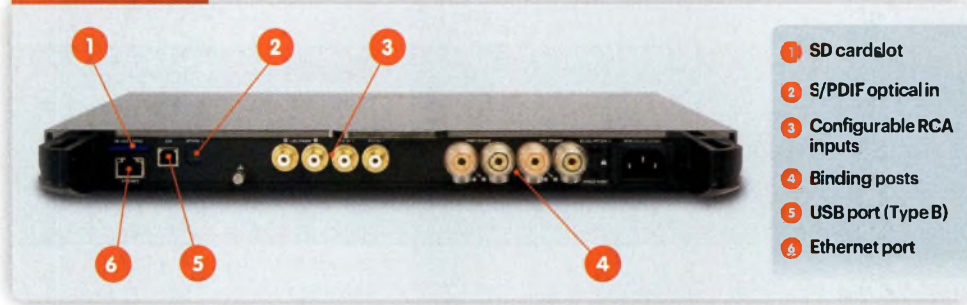
from the 110 model via new firmware, increasing its 110W output to 120W. Joining the 120 in our Ensemble is a pair of Devialet branded Atohm GT1 'Special Edition' loudspeakers with matching white Atohm cables.

What sets this pairing apart from other bundles is the clever use of Devialet's SAM tech, which tailors the amp's supplied signal to match the spec and real-world behaviour of the speakers' bass drivers.

The Atohm's cabinets are formed via layers of 3mm MDF bonded together to achieve their curved sides. Each speaker houses a metal grille-covered soft-dome tweeter with copper-clad aluminium wire voice coils and neodymium magnets, alongside an alloy coned mid/bass driver using Atohm's LDS peripheral suspension and a Kapton/Nomex coil former. The bass driver also sports a snug-fitting removable circular fabric cover.

In the flesh this is one cool combo to behold (providing you can keep fingerprints at bay). The amp shares the same dark chrome chassis as its 200 stablemate, that's milled from a ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 SD card slot
- 2 S/PDIF optical in
- 3 Configurable RCA inputs
- 4 Binding posts
- 5 USB port (Type B)
- 6 Ethernet port

single block of aluminium with a sliding cable-hiding cover at its rear. You can even wall mount it vertically!

Its physical controls extend to just a logo-shaped power button, which joins a porthole-like digital screen providing a window into the amp's working world, displaying volume and selected input. The minimalist theme continues with the classy matching remote that hosts just four buttons for power, source, mute and tone (bass/treble/balance), while a large rotary dial governs volume level. A longer press on the control's source button reveals the incoming sample rate on the amp's screen, useful for checking that what you're getting from the speakers is what you ordered at the source.

Making the most of Devialet's suite of user controls requires paying a visit to devialet.com's configurator area and customising the amp's settings, before downloading them onto the amp's pre-installed SD card. The site's intuitive interface allows for tailoring inputs and settings via simple diagrams of each amp's rear panel, making tweaking easy. Options include switching a set of the 120's RCAs between line-level, S/PDIF, or phono inputs for connecting a turntable. At the click of a mouse you can also limit the amp's power output and change the remote's commands.

To keep costs down the 120 eschews the sub-out option and AES/EBU (XLR) socket that are fitted to the more expensive Devialets higher up the range. Nor do you get the internal phono daughter board that caters for custom matching cartridge loading and sensitivity settings.

Easy streaming

To stream networked music pop your network details into the online Configurator and download Devialet's AIR software to your computer's taskbar. Because AIR runs in the background of other programmes, you simply commence playback via your usual method (Spotify, JRiver and iTunes in my case), right click the AIR icon and choose your streaming

method via AIR or Ethernet (if you're hardwiring the amp to your router) to pipe a bit-perfect signal into the amp's master clock. There's also a downloadable USB driver and control app for Android and iOS devices, the latter of which lets you select input and volume level.

Sound quality

Across the board, this package is one of the most musically cohesive combinations I've heard. From the opening drums of Tori Amos' *A Sorta Fairytale* via a 16-bit/44.1kHz rip streamed over

Lower frequencies remain controlled, detailed and very natural sounding

Ethernet, the sheer uncoloured clarity and holographic window this package opens into the music is utterly captivating.

Devialet's SAM tech may only be weaving its spell on the bass drivers, but the knock-on effect in the treble is tangible. Amos' voice sweeps through the midrange and treble seamlessly, with no sense of the tweeter and mid-bass driver competing at the critical crossover point. With Amos' vocals placed slightly forward in the soundstage, I sense that the amp and partnering speakers are working together in perfect synergy, to deliver her singing with a breathtaking realism that's full of both genuine depth and drama.

Likewise, the Devialet combo times the percussion with effortless accuracy, and each note's opening transients are rendered with just the right amount of attack to pack enough punch without becoming hard edged in any way.

Befitting of an amp at this price, the Devialet's volume control allows for finite levels of incremental adjustment, and even at low levels this system opens the music up with

SAM TECH

SAM is a pre-programmed DSP model of a loudspeaker's low frequency behaviour that "matches the air pressure received by the recording microphone with the output of the loudspeaker" says Pierre-Emmanuel Calmel, Devialet's co-founder.

SAM is not a feedback-controlled correction, a room compensation regime or a form of 'bass boost'. Instead, correction is applied dynamically, sample-by-sample in the time domain according to the loudspeaker's cabinet dimensions, volume, compliance of the air, mass of air in the vent and reflex losses. All bass driver parameters are accommodated including resonance frequency, Q and force factor, moving mass, suspension compliance, diaphragm area, etc.

By fully controlling the amplitude and phase response of the speaker's output, SAM promises to maximise the bass extension of any 'mapped' speaker without ever forcing its drivers outside of their safe excursion limits.

With Devialet's SAM at the helm, the speaker has every chance of fulfilling the designer's dreams for deep, clean and powerful-sounding bass - reducing boominess and distortions that might otherwise colour the critical midrange. PM

stirring dynamism. Likewise there's plenty of power at the other end of the scale, and with the Atohm's sat atop a pair of (filled) 600mm Atacama Nexus stands, the music that flows forth has a sense of scale and grip that a speaker of this size has no right to possess. Bass in particular is blessed with enough power and slam to challenge my preconceptions of just how much air a pair or 150mm drivers in such a modest cabinet can move, which is testament to what the Devialet amp is able to get out of them without heading into boom territory.

Piping a 16/44 rip of Four Tet's *Plastic People* into the Devialet's USB port gets the party into full swing in the bass regions, but what's even more impressive is how this pairing ensures the lower frequencies remain controlled, detailed and natural sounding. Despite remaining deep within the soundstage, the double bass for example within Emily Barker's *Tuesday* (streamed at 24/96) is clearly articulated and brought to life without being forced to the fore. Instead, because the soundstage is so open, I'm able to hear deep into its recesses and uncover layers of detail at will.

Conclusion

Getting a system to sing isn't just about buying the most expensive kit you can afford, it's about choosing components that work together, and only then does the magic happen. The Ensemble takes the trial and error out of this process, and by accurately driving its speakers as they're designed to be driven you get to hear both products at their best. This package provides an exceptionally smooth and balanced insight into the music, and while it ain't cheap, that you get the same Devialet tech fitted to its amps costing four times as much with quality speakers thrown in, makes this a high-end bargain ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Superb sound; setup options plenty; top-notch build quality

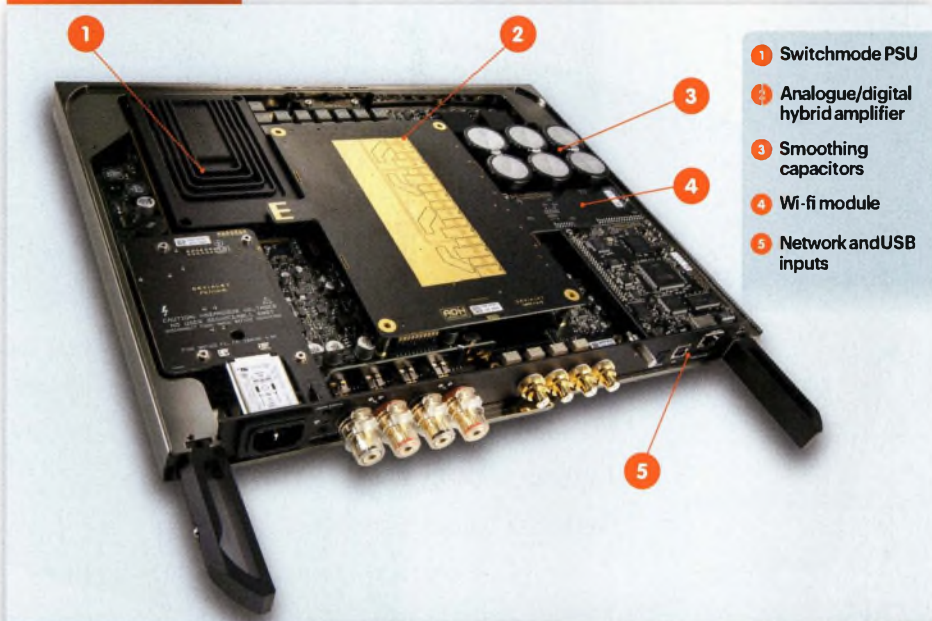
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Only one analogue input

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Cutting-edge tech partnered with great-sounding speakers in a stunning user-friendly package

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

DEVIALET 120



- 1 Switchmode PSU
- 2 Analogue/digital hybrid amplifier
- 3 Smoothing capacitors
- 4 Wi-fi module
- 5 Network and USB inputs

ON TEST

Tested with the latest v7.1 firmware installed, this 120 ADH amplifier met its 120W/6ohm specification with a full 2x75W/8ohm, doubling to 2x 150W/4ohm – this power achieved with a peak level (0dBfs) digital input and the volume control set at +0.5dB (not 0dB). The output impedance is vanishingly low at <2mohm. Distortion

at this output is still a fabulously low 0.0005% through bass and midrange, a performance largely maintained over the top 40dB of its dynamic range (from 75W down to just 7.7mW). The A-wtd S/N ratio is also a huge 116.8dB at this level. Distortion does increase with frequency, however, particularly above 10kHz, reaching

0.018% at 20kHz/1W/8ohm. The harmonics at this level are inaudible, of course. The response is flat out to +0.08dB/20kHz with 44.1/48kHz media, -0.1dB/40kHz with 96kHz files and -4dB/90kHz with 192kHz files. As with earlier Devialet amps, jitter is incredibly low – just 24psec at 10W output with 24-bit/48kHz media. PM

Q&A

Pierre-Emmanuel Calmel
CTO and president, Devialet



AS: Why have you chosen to pair this Devialet amp with Atohm's GT1 speaker?

PC: We love the GT1's qualities in terms of detailing, imaging, natural sound and bass. Despite its compact size, it's still able to rock our 400m³ showroom and consequently, many customers are buying GT1s to partner their Devialet amps – in fact, around half of the Devialet components currently being sold through our Paris showroom are part of a Devialet Ensemble package with GT1 speakers and Atohm cables. The GT1s embody the elements we believe are necessary to make the most desirable audio systems: beauty, compactness and, of course, performance.

Will SAM's database be expanded to tailor match more speaker brands and models?

Although we have no plans to offer other amp/speaker packages under the Devialet brand, SAM is potentially compatible with any passive electrodynamic speaker. We are launching the technology with support for around 12 models from different brands, and the number is increasing every week. We aim to have more than 200 models supported in the near future – we have several engineers working on this in our acoustics and signal processing laboratory in Paris.

Our engineers can perform a combination of measurements to build an accurate real-time model of any pair of speakers. This is used as the basis for developing a specific SAM profile for the speakers before releasing the profile on our updated SAM configurator. We can do this on our own, but we'd much prefer to work with loudspeaker manufacturers who can provide us with technical data and we're open to any collaboration.

Will customers be able to recommend which speakers you develop SAM profiles for?

Yes! We're actually asking consumers to vote for the speakers they want to see supported first, and you can take part at votehorsam.devialet.com.

ATOHM GT1 SE



- 1 28mm silk dome tweeter
- 2 Rear bass port
- 3 Speaker cable binding posts
- 4 150mm alloy bass driver

ON TEST

The GT1 claims 89dB sensitivity, but our 86.8dB pink noise figure suggests that 87dB is more realistic. Sensitivity could have been higher had lower impedance been used – we measured a minimum modulus of 4.1ohms at 204Hz. With modest LF phase angles this results in a minimum EPDR of 2.2ohms at 134Hz, but there is another

dip to 2.2ohms at 20kHz and a third to 2.4ohms at 44Hz. On-axis response errors, 200Hz-20kHz, were very well controlled at ±2.9dB for each speaker, with a gentle rise as frequency increases. Pair matching was poorer at ±1.9dB over the same frequency range due to some narrow-band disparities in the high treble; below

10kHz the error was an excellent ±0.6dB. Bass extension was 60Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz; with SAM enabled it fell to below 20Hz. Engaging SAM made no difference to the 1.0% THD level at 100Hz for 90dB SPL at 1m. The CSD waterfall shows fast initial energy decay; low-level breakup modes were visible in the lower treble. KH

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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 group test is supported by rigorous listening tests, backed up with objective lab testing

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER GROUP TEST

BEFORE ANY LISTENING took place, all six amplifiers were run in for three days to ensure that they all had settled down to optimum operating capability, and during the main listening session they were all kept powered up to eliminate any sonic differences during the warm-up cycle. At the start of the test session, the six integrations were carefully level matched with a pink noise test tone that was output while the voltage on the speaker terminals was measured. This provided highly accurate volume parity, ensuring that sonic differences couldn't be swayed by level inconsistencies.

The reference system was centred around Chord Electronics' new Hugo DAC, connected

via van den Hul The River interconnects. This gave high quality sound via a Cyrus CD Xt Signature CD transport for playing CDs, or a MacBook Pro computer running Audirvana when listening to hi-res programme material. Each unit was placed independently on a Quadraspire Sunoko Vent equipment support, to give it the greatest possible chance of delivering its best sound. All amplifiers were initially auditioned with Q Acoustics 2050i loudspeakers, a highly regarded floorstander that is representative of the type and price (£500) of speakers they will be used with. High-end speakers were also tried, including the Sonus faber Olympica II – reviewed p42.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Dynamic power

+40

Speaker load tolerance

+30

Distortion vs. level and frequency

+20

Signal-to-noise ratio

-20

Frequency response

+30

KEY: ■ Group average

■ % below average ■ % above average

DYNAMIC POWER

In addition to measuring the amplifier's continuous power output, we also check on its delivery under dynamic, music-like conditions up to 1% distortion.

SPEAKER LOAD TOLERANCE

Not simply a measure of how much power is available into a standard Bohm load, but how the amplifier's output behaves into progressively lower and more difficult loads.

DISTORTION VS LEVEL AND FREQUENCY

This bar value represents a measure of distortion and its consistency across both the whole audio band and the amplifier's entire dynamic range.

SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO

This is a direct representation of the amplifier's A-weighted Signal-to-Noise (S/N) ratio at 1W output into an idealised Bohm load.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

We measure the 'flatness' of the response from a subsonic 5Hz to an ultrasonic 100kHz, but we also determine how well it handles different speaker loads.

OUR GROUP TESTS

and In-depth Reviews are subject to exhaustive lab testing by **Paul Miller** using the **QC Suite Functional Testing Station** (left).

Paul has tested more hi-fi equipment than any reviewer in the world, so you know you're in safe hands. We don't publish pages of graphs, but we do understand the importance of transparency. So readers may view full QC Suite test reports for our key reviews by clicking on the red download button on our website.

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REFERENCE SYSTEM

CD TRANSPORT
Cyrus CD Xt Signature

DAC
Chord Electronics Hugo

LOUDSPEAKERS
Q Acoustics 2050i

EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS
Quadraspire

CD TEST MUSIC

KRAFTWERK
Computer World
Computer World



SQUEEZE
45s And Under
Pulling Mussels From A Shell



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* Bordeaux finish shown

Group test

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS £200-£400

Power points

As the hi-fi market reinvents itself, small affordable amplifiers are changing too. **David Price** tries six of the latest and greatest

IN 2014, ANYONE going into a high street hi-fi store will be assaulted by wireless loudspeakers – they're the big new thing. After all, we've all got Bluetooth and wi-fi-equipped smartphones now, so why not cut out the middle man and render traditional separates obsolete? Well, one reason is that these 'smart solutions' simply don't sound as good as ye olde separates hi-fi. If you want the best sound per pound, you will still need to go the conventional route with an integrated amplifier at the heart of your system.

Still, you can sense something of a sea change among traditional amplifier manufacturers. The latest crop is just that little bit more versatile than the last generation, and in products like NAD's D 3020 we're beginning to see more innovative ways of packaging them too – not to mention the inclusion of

things like built-in DACs and Bluetooth. Standing up like a Sony PlayStation, it's designed not just to fit into a separates system, but also sits comfortably next to a computer. It's an interesting design, and all of a sudden makes the other five amplifiers here seem rather dated.

If you want the best sound per pound, you will need an integrated amplifier

Back to basics

Marantz's PM6005 may look totally conventional, but it does have digital converter functionality, which means you can plug in everything from your Sky Box to your Blu-ray, as well as one of those old-fangled CD players

should the need arise. It's one step ahead of the rest in this respect, as Cambridge Audio's 651A, Pioneer's A-50, Vieta's VH-HA100 and Yamaha's A-S201 don't have digital inputs at all, and instead follow the conventional integrated amplifier rulebook by including that quaint old thing, a phono stage. Although it doesn't sound so cutting edge, the venerable vinyl disc is currently experiencing a major revival.

So, here we see a range of different answers to producing an affordable integrated amplifier, and the onward march of technology means they're being designed for subtly different demographics. We're certainly in a transitional phase, and I suspect it won't be too long before the next generation all get Bluetooth connectivity and DACs built in. Meanwhile sonic differences remain, as this group shows.

ON TEST



Cambridge Audio Azur 651A £350 p27
If you want a model that personifies the purist approach to integrated amplifiers, look no further. The brand specialises in excellent sounding hi-fi at affordable prices, and the 651A doesn't deviate from this philosophy.



Marantz PM6005 £380 p29
Until recently Marantz had been following a 'no frills' approach, but suddenly we see the fitment of a DAC to the company's entry-level integrated. Still, it retains the lovely build and finish along with its pleasingly handsome style.



NAD D 3020 £399 p31
This put the cat among the pigeons. The original 3020 integrated pretty much defined the budget breed back in 1978, and the new D did the same last year. Far smaller, vertical standing and sporting a built-in DAC, it's radically different.



Pioneer A-50 £350 p33
This big Japanese name has returned to specialist two-channel separates of late, having taken a detour with multi-channel. Its return has been impressive, with some fine-sounding products offering great value, and the A-50 looks just this.



Vieta Audio VH-HA100 £280 p35
As a new name branching out into the two-channel audio market in the UK, we welcome this new Spanish hopeful. Its hi-fi credentials are unproven here, but this attractive, affordable integrated looks set to challenge



Yamaha A-S201 £200 p37
Another company that has returned to the two-channel fold, Yamaha has redoubtable design and engineering resources and is, of course, a highly respected musical instrument manufacturer too, as well as making some tasty motorbikes!



ortofon

accuracy in sound



Q uintet

Since 1948 Ortofon have introduced nearly 100 different moving coil pick-up cartridges to the hi-fi market. Their latest models in this long and proud heritage are the Quintet Series.

All Quintet cartridges use the same ABS thermoplastic bodies and neodymium magnets, but each model in the range has its own sonic expression that reflects its status. From the well-rounded **Quintet Red**, through the smooth **Quintet Blue** and spacious yet dynamic **Quintet Bronze** up to the pure audio excellence of the **Quintet Black**, this series offers something for every discerning listener at a very attractive price.

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



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Cambridge Audio

Azur 651A £350



This well-built product seemingly accepts almost every source around and packs a serious sonic punch too

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Cambridge Audio Azur 651A
- ORIGIN**
UK/China
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier/DAC
- WEIGHT**
8.4kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
430 x 120 x 350mm
- FEATURES**
- Quoted power: 75W RMS per channel
 - 5x line input, 1x MM phono input
 - 16-bit/48kHz USB
 - 1.0 digital input
 - 6.3mm and 3.5mm headphone socket
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Richer Sounds
- TELEPHONE**
0333 9000093
- WEBSITE**
cambridgeaudio.com

This fine-looking integrated presses all the right audiophile buttons, so to speak. The company has form as a purveyor of no-frills hi-fi equipment for a small amount of money. The 651A is a relatively substantial product by the standards of this group – although it isn't alone in having a slightly flimsy pressed steel top plate. The front fascia is a lovely chunk of brushed aluminium, way nicer than the company was offering just a few years ago. It's crowded with bass, treble, balance and volume controls, plus input selection and a front 3.5mm 'MP3' socket. It offers six inputs including USB (digital) and MM phono.

Inside there's a largish toroidal mains transformer, which makes for a strong power supply to underpin its claimed 75W RMS output power. Separate transformer taps for left and right channels are provided, as are twin rectifiers and separate rails for the left and right power amplifier sections – these feature proven Sanken output transistors running in Class AB mode. A 'high-grade film type' volume potentiometer is fitted, and Cambridge Audio's CAP5 protection system saves your speakers should overloads, faults and/or clipping occur. The built-in DAC runs USB 1.0 up to 16-bit/48kHz resolution, meaning that it won't be

able to play out high-resolution music from a computer.

Sound quality

Off to a good start, fundamentally, this amplifier sounds right. It simply has no weak areas, and has various strong ones that frankly you wouldn't expect at this end of the market. Bass is a little lighter than you'd get from an integrated at twice the price, but is par for the course here, and what there is, is nicely fluid and bouncy. It powers the song along in an enjoyable and unselfconscious way, and blends well into an open and textured midband by the admittedly undistinguished standards of the group. This then pushes up to a decently airy and smooth treble, the result being a budget amplifier that sounds anything but.

For example, the Kraftwerk track has one of the most impressive rhythmic sounds here, with wonderful insight into what the band's two drummers (or 'electronic percussionists' as they prefer to call themselves) were doing together. Compared to the Vieta for example, there is a whole extra layer of detail to the song's rhythms.

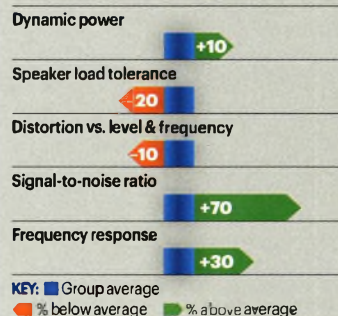
At the same time, texturally the Cambridge Audio is excellent. Again, it sounds far more tonally natural than the others reviewed here. It makes every other amp sound rather



ON TEST

Under the plain bonnet of this affordable amplifier lurks the performance of a far costlier product. Its 2x75W rating is bested to the tune of 2x90W and 2x140W into 8/4ohm loads with a dynamic capability of 116W/203W, respectively. Distortion is exceptionally low, falling below 0.001% (to 0.0004%) from 1W to 80W into 8ohm loads. Inevitably, THD increases at higher frequencies and into lower impedance loads, but a figure of 0.0065% for 20kHz/10W is still very low indeed. The 651A is also a very low-noise, wide bandwidth design that offers a huge 96dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) and a response flat to within -0.3dB from 20Hz-20kHz, rolling-off by just -1.8dB at 100kHz. This is a 'wide open window', so avoid digital sources with excessive ultrasonic output (noise or otherwise) to avoid a potentially grainy sound. Otherwise, it's a belter! **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



misty, foggy, opaque or processed. This is obvious whatever music is used via the analogue inputs – the Fun Lovin' Criminals and Squeeze tracks are radically different recordings and it tells you so, whereas others like the Pioneer don't. The 651A also goes surprisingly loud very confidently too, keeping its spacious soundstage, decent depth perspective and positive stereo imaging right up to high levels. The USB input is surprisingly decent, but is still aimed at upgrading the terrible DACs inside computers rather than standing in for serious hi-fi designs. Overall then, the Azur 651A can count itself as something of a star ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Clean, powerful, detailed, natural sound; finish
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly flimsy casework
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★☆ **WESAY:** Excellent budget amp with the accent on sonics
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



Different Class



A lifetime of electronics design expertise has led to Arcam's finest ever amplifier, the new A49 integrated amplifier. Its ultra-refined class G topology represents the pinnacle of Arcam's engineering heritage and sets new standards of performance. An audition will confirm that power is nothing without control.

ARCAM

www.arcam.co.uk



Marantz PM6005 **£380**



Coming from a respected brand, this amp has a vast range of features and a superlative finish at the price

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Marantz PM6005
- ORIGIN**
Japan/China
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier/DAC
- WEIGHT**
7.6kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
440 x 105 x 370mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power: 45W RMS per channel (8 ohms)
 - 5x line inputs, 1x MM phono input
 - 24-bit/192kHz digital input
 - Loudness control
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Marantz UK
- TELEPHONE**
02890 279830
- WEBSITE**
marantz.co.uk

Here we have an illustrious company that started in the US as a purveyor of some of the best-sounding valve amplifiers ever made. Then Marantz's ownership ended up with Philips for several decades, where it became famous for excellent Japanese-built affordable hi-fi separates. Now it's partnered with Denon and is offering an ever broader and more interesting range of products, with the PM6005 being the company's entry-level integrated amplifier. This is a smart-looking device that offers five line-level audio inputs plus a built-in DAC with a choice of optical or coaxial in. Unlike the Cambridge Audio, it's a full-fat 24/192-capable chip, although it doesn't have USB connectivity, which is rather puzzling. Most other things are fitted to the Marantz, however, including an MM phono input, tone controls and two pairs of (rather flimsy) speaker terminals.

It's not quite as heavy as the Azur 651A, but is still very sturdily built considering the modest retail price. Inside, Marantz says the preamp and power amp sections are kept separate and feature discrete components rather than integrated circuits, which can sully the sound. Specially selected components – including custom main capacitors – are fitted, as is a shielded toroidal transformer. A Crystal

Semiconductors CS4398 DAC is used – which is also seen in Marantz's higher-end products – and this is carefully shielded.

Sound quality

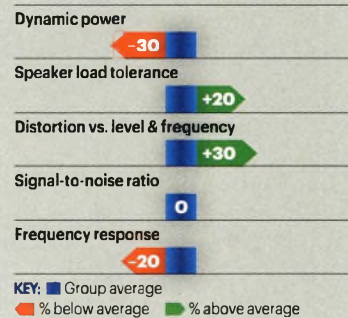
The Cambridge Audio is a hard act to follow, but then again Marantz is pretty good at doing affordable amps that sound great – and so it proves with the PM6005. Overall, it ranks very close to the 651A, with almost all the good points of the Cambridge Audio offering, but a few key distinguishing features. First, if anything the Marantz sounds a little tidier and better polished; its tonality is slightly warmer, slicker and more expensive sounding. By contrast, the Cambridge is ever so slightly rougher and more raucous. Second, the Marantz has a slightly wider soundstage, with better depth perspective too. Vocals hang back slightly rather than being thrown at the listener, for example. Third, it seems to be fractionally better on global dynamics; loud bits sound louder, quiet bits quieter. And this works with the amp's fine timing to give a very open and fluid sound for such an inexpensive design.

The result is that whatever music you play, the Marantz seems able to get to grips with it, and let it flourish. It doesn't editorialise quite as much as the Cambridge, and compared to the

ON TEST

Rated at 2x45W/8ohm, Marantz's PM6005 delivers closer to 2x56W/8ohm in practice, with 2x79W/4ohm increasing to 81W, 135W, 160W and 125W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions. The maximum 11.2A current will be sufficient for most speakers likely to partner this amplifier while the 0.056ohm output impedance will not result in any response variations. Interestingly, its native response is not wholly 'flat' but shows a shelf at very low frequencies (max -0.15dB from 20-200Hz) and through presence and treble (max -0.3dB from 5kHz-20kHz). The 86dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. OdBW) is perfectly 'average' while distortion is largely unaffected by output power at -0.007% through the midrange at 1-50W/8ohm. Not unexpectedly, distortion increases at the frequency extremes, up to 0.035% at 20Hz (low bass) and 20kHz (high treble) at 10W/8ohm. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



other amplifiers here it is a revelation in its transparency and naturalness. It certainly gives a neutral yet highly enjoyable sound. However, as the Squeeze song proves, it's just a little bit less emotive than the 651A. This aside, it beats all the others here, and some into a cocked hat, but just can't quite convey the drama of a song like the Brit. Rather like your suave, posh cousin, the Marantz is a real charmer that lacks a certain edge! I find that across all its sources, this amp simply sounds better than it should at the price, and delivers a hefty punch with one of the strongest bass performances of the group, too. What's not to like? ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Clean, smooth, powerful and polished sound; build
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly flimsy speaker binding posts
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent performer that belies its budget price
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL





THE NEW CONCEPT 40 LOUDSPEAKER

Q Acoustics introduces 'Concept 40', an elegant new floorstanding loudspeaker which sets new standards of sonic performance at its price.

Award-winning pedigree

In common with the Concept 20, its award-winning little brother, the new Concept 40's unparalleled soundstage and sheer musicality is achieved by incorporating outstanding drive units into a lacquered, State-of-the-Art, 'Gelcore™ Construction', ultra-low resonance cabinet.

'Gelcore™ Construction, specially developed for acoustic enclosures, is in effect a 'cabinet within a cabinet', separated by a resonance absorbing compound. This enables the drive units to simply reproduce music, unencumbered by the level of cabinet induced distortions found in conventional designs.

*"Superlative...brilliantly balanced package...
excellent value...wonderfully clean and open...
bass is surprisingly strong...the midband is a joy"*

HiFi Choice, June 2014



June 2014



May 2014

www.Qacoustics.com



NAD D 3020 £399



With its vertical operation and wide range of digital inputs, this could be the shape of integrateds to come

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
NAD D 3020
- ORIGIN**
Canada/China
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier/DAC
- WEIGHT**
1.38kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
58 x 186 x 219mm
- FEATURES**
- Quoted power: 30W RMS per channel
 - Built-in DAC (24/96 max via USB)
 - 1x line, 2x optical digital inputs, 1x coaxial, 1x aptX Bluetooth, 1x asynchronous USB
 - 6.3mm headphone socket
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Sevensoaks Sound & Vision
- TELEPHONE**
01732 459555
- WEBSITE**
nadelectronics.com

When the D 3020 came out last year, I thought it a little odd. I didn't quite 'get it', and failed to see why NAD would change the form factor so dramatically. Now, though, the idea has sunk in. Just as the original late seventies 3020 was a genre-defining product – a small, compact, black integrated that was full of useful features yet cost very little – so the D 3020 begins to look like the shape of integrated amplifiers of the future. Its 'stand-up' design is striking, and looks and feels lovely with its rubberised side panels, backlit fascia and top panel. It can be used on its side too, and NAD supplies sticky feet for this if needed. There's a big, rubberised volume knob with clever display behind a tinted perspex fascia, and the source indication is backlit. The amp is a joy to use, and great fun, too.

Inside are NAD's latest Class D power modules, specially developed and bang up to date. The amp is claimed to put out 30W RMS per side into 8ohms, with up to 150W on 2ohm peak transients no less. The circuitry uses the latest version of NAD's PowerDrive circuit, and has Soft Clipping to protect speakers from the amp being overdriven. It offers two optical and one coaxial digital inputs, plus asynchronous USB (working up to 24/96) and wireless aptX Bluetooth. This and a 6.3mm

headphone aside, facilities are minimal on this attractively styled, modernist machine.

Sound quality

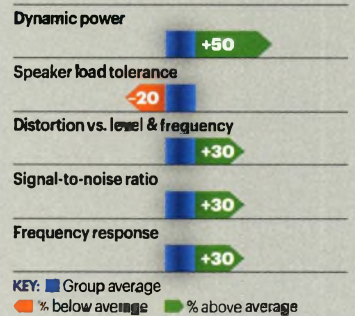
What's so interesting about this amplifier is that it uses radically different technology to NAD's classic 3020 amp (and derivatives) to get a superficially similar sound. That rich, fruity bass is there, as is a lively midband that's bristling with detail and a wide, expansive soundstage. Treble is crisp and clear, but decently smooth too – just like classic NADs used to be. But in other respects the D 3020 is quite different; it sounds a little more 'etched' than its predecessors, or indeed most of the other amplifiers here. There's a sense that it pushes right into the guts of the recording and throws out masses of detail, but there's also a slightly electronic, processed sound, which leaves you wanting the more natural strains of the Cambridge Audio or Marantz with acoustic music like Randy Crawford.

Actually, it does vary according to the type of music you listen to. The Kraftwerk track is a joy, the NAD appearing to be massively detailed and it manages to slot it all together in a surprisingly enjoyable way. Bass is a good deal more sumptuous than most others here except the Vieta, but the NAD has loads more detail and insight. Once you get used to that

ON TEST

NAD's specifications for the D 3020's power output are slightly wayward, but the 'real world' 60W/8ohm and 65W/4ohm (increasing to 140W/4ohm under dynamic conditions) still mark the amp out as more capable than its '30W' rating might suggest. Distortion is tightly managed via digital or analogue inputs with a consistent 0.014-0.017% from 20Hz-20kHz (re. 10W/8ohm) and 0.006-0.027% over its rated 30W range. Like all quality Class D amps, its (analogue) response is unaffected by speaker load impedance, the 'gentle' treble reaching -0.7dB/20kHz and -8.7dB/100kHz from 8ohm down to 1ohm. Response via its digital inputs mirrors this within the limits of the incoming sample rate. The A-wtd S/N is also fine at 89dB (analogue) and very good at 96.6dB (digital), both re. 0dBW. Jitter is not in the Deviatelet class [see p16-19] at 960psec (re. 10W), but is acceptable at the price! **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



spotlit midband you begin to relax into the music and enjoy its strengths. The trouble is, turn the volume up with speakers of average or below sensitivity, and suddenly on the first big bass transient on *Computer World*, the NAD goes AWOL, momentarily muting to pull itself back from clipping. Effectively then its output power is quite limited, which means you need to match it to sensitive loudspeakers, and/or not listen at high levels. Still, when properly partnered, the D 3020 sounds propulsive and detailed, and this holds for its analogue or digital inputs. All of which makes it an interesting little box for sure ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Styling and packaging; rich sound; USB/Bluetooth connectivity
- DISLIKE:** Limited power, so it needs sensitive speakers
- WE SAY:** Superbly packaged modern integrated, but not for parties!

OVERALL



MUSICAL FIDELITY

MF-100

SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE HEAD PHONES



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NEODYMIUM DRIVE UNITS



Pioneer A-50 £350

Packed with facilities allied to a fine finish and a serious power output, this would seem to have got the lot

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Pioneer A-50
- ORIGIN**
Japan/China
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT**
11.1kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
435 x 139 x 357mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power: 90W per channel
 - 5x line, 1x MM phono input
 - 2 pairs of speaker outputs
 - 6.3mm headphone socket
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Pioneer GB
- TELEPHONE**
0330 1231240
- WEBSITE**
pioneer.co.uk

Having spent a good few years making fine plasma TVs and multi-channel music systems, Pioneer has come back to two-channel, applying its usual high standards along the way. The A-50 boasts excellent finish allied to a wide range of features, plus an awful lot of power – on paper at least. 90W RMS is claimed, making it one of the most powerful here. This is possible at the price due to the use of Class D, which is a less expensive way of getting power, not least because it's more efficient and doesn't require costly heatsinks. Bafflingly though, the A-50 is still a big, heavy beast. To unearth its sonic potential, you'll need a decent deck. Thankfully there are plenty of new top-quality spinners to chose from.

Featurewise, it's very similar to the Yamaha – it's almost as if those two Japanese manufacturers were following one another! This means tone controls, a wide range of inputs including moving magnet phono and source direct mode, which bypasses the bass, treble and balance adjusters. There's also a Power Amp Direct Mode, useful for multi-channel systems. Internally, short signal paths are used together with selected passive components such as Schottky barrier diodes. Special attention has been paid to grounding the

manufacturer says, and the power supply is isolated.

Sound quality

The Pioneer is a fair performer at the price, giving a little away in its ability to make music fun compared with the others here. Much like its more expensive A-70 brother – reviewed issue 368 – it has a pleasingly smooth and even tonal balance with no nasties. To get this sort of grown up sound from an amplifier of this price would have been amazing 10 years ago. All its sins are those of omission; rather than having areas of howling incompetence, such as a horribly fierce treble or vague, pendulous bass, that transforms the fundamentals of the music, the Pioneer simply doesn't do some things as well as most of the rivals in this roundup. Taken in isolation, it's a perfectly pleasant performer and you'd be happy to live with it on a daily basis.

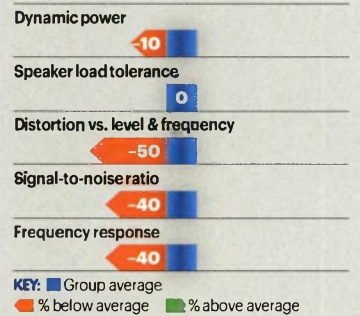
For example, the Kraftwerk track shows how it can set up a decently involving groove and keep the song moving along. It has a fair amount of detail too, but ultimately its midband sounds both a little nasal and congested, and rather two dimensional spatially. Still, nothing it does here is unpleasant; *Computer World* rattles along at a decent pace,



ON TEST

As the other Class D amplifier in our test, Pioneer's A-50 is slightly more conventional in execution than NAD's D 3020. Power output is higher at 2x85W/8ohm and 2x130W/4ohm, with a dynamic capability of 100W, 180W, 310W and 190W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, but the A-wtd S/N ratio is rather weaker at 76.7dB (re. 0dBW). Also, in common with bridged Class D networks, the A-50's response is very dependent on the impedance trend of the attached loudspeaker. Into a 'flat' 8ohm load there's a treble rise, peaking at +1.4dB/38kHz, while into 4ohm it droops to -1.1dB/20kHz and -3.3dB/38kHz. There is a noticeable treble loss into even lower impedance loads. Distortion is low at bass and midrange frequencies (0.0007%-0.0015% from 20Hz-1kHz), but increases steeply at HF, reaching 0.06% at 20kHz. This is not 'high', of course, but reflects the Class D filter network. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



pulling the listener in to a surprising degree. There is a fair amount of scale to the sound, and it doesn't appear to shrink as the volume is turned up. Indeed, under duress the Pioneer remains cool as cucumber, with little sense of strain until things get very loud. If you're really going to criticise the A-50, it's the lack of micro dynamics that lets the side down; on Randy Crawford it seems to sit on the stronger rhythmic accents of the song more than the Cambridge or Marantz. This gives a slightly flatter and less intense sound than you can get from the best of the rest, but it still makes a nice enough noise. A big value amplifier, but not the best sounding ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★☆ **LIKE:** Impressive build and finish; smooth tonality; pleasing musically
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Muddled midband; flattened depth perspective
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Powerful, pleasant-sounding integrated that's nicely presented
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

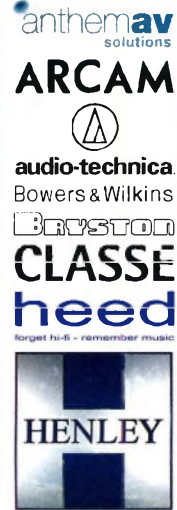
OVERALL



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www.adairacousticdesign.co.uk
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020 8943 3530

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Soundcraft Hi-Fi
Ashford
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SCOTLAND
Glasgow Audio
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www.glasgowaudio.com
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Holburn Hi-Fi
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01224 585713

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Vieta VH-HA100 **£280**



Though new to the UK, this Spanish manufacturer offers a variety of affordable audio products

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Vieta VH-HA100
- ORIGIN**
Spain/China
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT**
4.8kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
430 x 70 x 285mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power: 100W per channel
 - 4x line input, 1x MM phono input
 - 3.5mm minijack line in
 - 6.3mm headphone socket
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Aqord Distribution
- TELEPHONE**
0161 6117174
- WEBSITE**
aqsound.com
vieta.es

Some say that separates hi-fi as we know it has reached the end of the line. The argument goes that the world is going wireless, and we'll all be wanting ultra niche products to reflect our diverse lifestyles. Interesting then to see yet another new hi-fi brand appear – new at least to these shores as Vieta has existed for nearly 60 years in its native Spain. You wouldn't call it a specialist audiophile company in the Cambridge Audio sense though, as it does produce car kit, audio and headphones too, and has had no small degree of success with the latter. Despite costing under £300, the HA100 is the top product in the amplifier range, and offers a claimed 100W (on the website) although it's unclear how this is actually measured.

The Vieta clearly lacks the lavish build and finish of the Japanese integrated amplifier designs on test here, looking a little less expensive, and nor does it offer the precision feel of the far heavier Cambridge Audio either. Still, its top plate is a good deal stronger than some of the models on test, and it's fairly competitive in terms of its specification. There's a choice of four line inputs and an MM phono stage, although no DAC is offered. There's a front panel mounted 3.5mm input socket and 6.35mm headphone socket. Inside, it boasts a toroidal power transformer.

When operating it runs surprisingly hot, certainly more so than all the other integrations here.

Sound quality

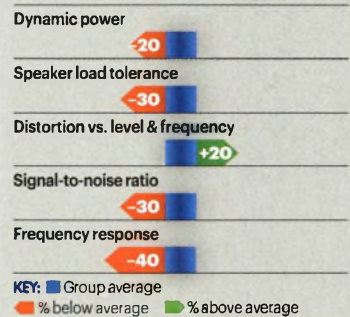
Given that Vieta is something of an unknown quantity for yours truly, the company having no audiophile pedigree in the UK at least, I am pleasantly surprised by the warm and sumptuous sound that greets me from the VH-HA100. It's certainly quite different to some here, and strikes a slightly different balance with a fairly fulsome bottom end. I wouldn't say bass is exceptional, but it has more weight than most in this test, and moving up the scale the midband is enjoyably expansive. It gives a powerful, epic feel to the Kraftwerk track, for example, and proves well able to eke out a lot of detail. It sounds a good deal sweeter than the Pioneer, and clearer and less opaque than the Yamaha, although it can't quite match the Marantz and Cambridge Audio. Treble isn't particularly spacious, but it's nicely smooth and sweet, and together the Vieta presents a very listenable sound at the price; I particularly like its vocal quality.

It even impresses with its timing, too. It's a little indistinct compared to the Cambridge Audio or Marantz, and seems to soften attack transients which slows things down slightly, but still this little amplifier proves really

ON TEST

One of three Vieta amplifiers available, the VH-HA100 is the most powerful and (in the manual) is rated at 2x75W/4ohm. In practice this would probably equate to a 2x50W/8ohm specification, but the amp actually achieves 2x65W/8ohm and 2x86W/4ohm with sufficient headroom to accommodate 90W, 145W, 165W and 115W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions. So this is a reasonably capable little amp, albeit one that can run very hot so adequate ventilation is a must! Distortion increases gently with output level, from 0.015% at 1W to 0.04% at 50W/8ohm through bass and midrange frequencies, our sample reaching 0.2% at 20kHz on the right channel only. The 'smooth and sweet' treble is a product of a very obvious HF roll-off that starts through the presence band and falls to -0.8dB/10kHz and -2dB/20kHz while the A-wtd S/N is a little below average at 80dB (re. 0dBW). **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



rather emotionally expressive. The Squeeze song is good fun, bouncing along nicely inside a reasonably spacious recorded acoustic. The Vieta does sit on the music's real dynamic accenting a touch, but it doesn't hinder it too much; this aside it has an agreeable nature that likes to let the music get on with things. Again, its warmish tonality works wonders on the Fun Lovin' Criminals track, giving a wide and powerful sound. Sadly though, this amp doesn't run up to high levels quite as gracefully as some here, so it won't be a first choice for student parties. This is certainly an impressive amplifier in its way, unassuming but enjoyable ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
 - VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
 - BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
 - FEATURES**
★★★★★
 - OVERALL**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Pleasingly musical sound; unassuming styling
- DISLIKE:** Lacks transparency compared to some
- WE SAY:** Affordable and endearing integrated that should win friends

When you hear the new
twenty[®]·26
 a want will become a need



The pinnacle of the **twenty[®]** series, the **twenty·26**, features the same traits as its siblings - finesse, delicacy and musicality - but with an added ability to convey huge dynamic impact and the sheer scale of a musical performance. This exceptionally transparent design excels with a vast array of amplifiers due to its ease of drive and well-tempered balance, and delivers the greatest level of overall clarity of any of the **twenty[®]** series, or indeed of any speaker in this class.

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twenty·21



twenty·22

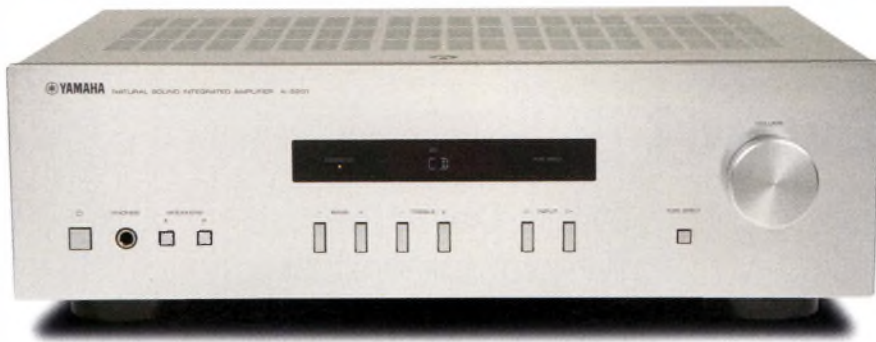


twenty·23



twenty·24





Yamaha A-S201 **£200**

Can this Japanese giant get the balance right with its entry-level integrated and impress here?

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Yamaha A-S201
- ORIGIN**
Japan/Malaysia
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier
- WEIGHT**
6.7kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
435 x 141 x 333mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power: 100W per channel
 - 4x line, 1x MM phono input
 - 2 pair of speaker outputs
 - 6.3mm headphone socket
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Yamaha UK
- TELEPHONE**
0844 8111116
- WEBSITE**
uk.yamaha.com

There's no doubting Yamaha's pedigree in hi-fi. It has been a major player since the early sixties, and has always invested heavily in new technology to give its products the edge. The new A-S201 is an evolution of its S200 entry-level integrated amplifier, and has been designed with convenience in mind as it moves away from the more retro-styled gear of the past few years. At the price, it's well finished and has beautifully clean styling – you simply wouldn't believe it to be a cheap unit until you touch the flimsy pressed steel top plate, which is about as thin as Yamaha can get away with. The fascia uses a combination of a fluorescent display and buttons to vary bass, treble and source, and there's a Pure Direct mode to bypass these. The company claims 100W per channel for the A-S201, and this comes courtesy of carefully laid out circuitry. Yamaha says the power transformer sits near the power amp circuit to reduce power loss. Signal ground and power supply ground share one common point to give what's claimed to be a better signal-to-noise ratio. A moving magnet phono stage is included, and the amp features a power management function that can switch

it off at a preset time (2, 4, 8 or 12 hours) if desired. Low standby power use is also claimed.

Sound quality

Interesting, this. It's abundantly clear that the Yamaha isn't an expensive amplifier in some respects; it's not over burdened with bass, for example, and the treble isn't the most spacious ever heard on an integrated amplifier. But its musical performance has a coherence to it that some others here lack. It's interesting to contrast it with the Pioneer, which is more powerful and punchy, but sounds rather opaque by comparison. The Yamaha doesn't over reach itself, trying to bite off more than it can chew and the result is that what you do get is very well digested. *Computer World* just breezes along, the amp throwing out a good deal of detail into a narrower soundstage than some here, but it is better delineated and images are located more securely.

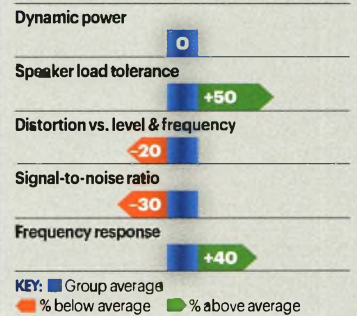
Although not powerful by the standards of the group – only the NAD seems less potent – again within its performance envelope it is convincing. The powerful Kraftwerk bass transients don't upset it one jot, and it holds everything together better despite throwing out less prodigious bass levels. The crescendos



ON TEST

This is the most powerful amplifier in our Group Test, and the most tolerant of difficult speaker loads, but it only meets its basic 100W/8ohm specification by a whisker at 2x105W. More importantly this increases to 2x185W/4ohm and a very substantial 215W and 415W into 4 and 2ohm, representing a maximum current of 14.4A at <1% THD. Interestingly, and unlike previous/costlier Yamaha amps, the A-S201 has a slightly below-average 80dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) while distortion is optimised for a -10W delivery, increasing from 0.002% here to 0.015% at 1W and 80W. Distortion also increases at both low and high frequencies from 0.002% at 1kHz to 0.03% at 20Hz and 0.045% at 20kHz. The response shows an insignificant treble roll off of -0.1dB/20kHz while stereo separation holds up very well at 90dB through bass and midrange, falling to a respectable 72dB/20kHz (re. 10W), **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



on the Squeeze song are the same; the amp holds things together and the result is musically convincing unlike some others here. True, tonally the Yamaha lacks variety and much in the way of colour, but its basic default position is slightly warm and woolly and that makes everything sound agreeable. The Fun Lovin' Criminals track again shows limited power, but the A-S201 is more interested in having a stab at the complex interactions between the drum machine snare and hi-hats than some here. It proves a friendly, enjoyable and rather pleasing little integrated that represents great value for money ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Agreeable, enjoyable tonality; good rhythms; styling
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Casework is too flimsy; captive mains lead
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Fine design with great style and decent sonics
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



Group test verdict

The verdicts are all in and checked and it's over to **David Price** to reveal the final results of this month's impressive integrated amplifiers test...

IT'S A CLOSE run thing, but the Pioneer takes last place. It's not a bad amplifier at all, it's just outperformed here. The A-50 looks great, is decently put together, has plenty of features and oodles of power. It's just that it doesn't string the music together in a particularly incisive way, and sounds a bit processed compared with the best of the rest here.

The Yamaha ranks fifth. Again it's a very nice amplifier for the money. It's a little less sturdily built than the Pioneer, but it's beautifully styled and has a more organic sound, one that's a little less opaque.

The Vieta was the surprise of the group. It doesn't win any prizes for styling or bulk, but it proved nice to listen to and seemed to enjoy making music a lot more than the sixth and fifth-placed rivals. It's unassuming yet proves a most enjoyable listen, with a warm and musical sound. Only a lack of clarity and insight pulls it down.

In third place comes the NAD. In some ways it's less charming to listen to than the Vieta, and it sounds slightly more artificial in its tonality. But it's a brilliantly versatile and innovative product, and shows the way the world is going. Sonically it's

very good fun to listen to for a Class D design, but if you're after a warmer and more romantic sound – or if you want more power – you can do better still.

The Marantz is runner up. In a way, or indeed on another day, it might have been the winner. It is an excellent amplifier that goes pretty much head to head with the superb winner of this *Group Test*, but it just doesn't quite have the same levels of emotional commitment to the music. Still, if you prefer your sounds smooth and sophisticated, this is the one to buy.



WINNER

By a whisker, the Cambridge Audio Azur 651A takes the top spot. It's a cracking-sounding amp at the price thanks to its clarity, grip, dynamic articulation and overall musical cohesive. Whatever you play, it takes a back seat and lets it flood out of your speakers.



Make/model Cambridge Audio Azur 651A



Marantz PM6005



NAD D 3020



Pioneer A-50



Vieta VH-HA100



Yamaha A-S201

	Cambridge Audio Azur 651A	Marantz PM6005	NAD D 3020	Pioneer A-50	Vieta VH-HA100	Yamaha A-S201
Price	£350	£380	£399	£350	£280	£200
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
	It's a close-run thing, but this is the best sounding of the group; great value	Superb, polished performer with fine finish comes in a very close second place	An innovatively packaged product that's highly versatile with good sound	It looks great and is powerful with plenty of features, but it lacks a natural sound	The unassuming Spanish newcomer is surprisingly nice to listen to	Fine value budget amplifier with smooth sonics that's lacking in power

Key features

Feature	Cambridge Audio Azur 651A	Marantz PM6005	NAD D 3020	Pioneer A-50	Vieta VH-HA100	Yamaha A-S201
Line inputs	5 RCA	5 RCA/optical/coax	1 RCA/2 optical/coax	5 RCA	4 RCA	4 RCA
Headphone out	3.5mm & 6.35mm	6.35mm	6.35mm	6.35mm	6.35mm	6.35mm
2 speakers out	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Digital USB	16-bit/48kHz	No	24-bit/96kHz	No	No	No
Phono stage	MM	MM	No	MM	MM	MM

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CD PLAYER: Rega Apollo-R £550

One of the very best CD players below £1,000. It's not the most detailed or the most forensic, but it has a wonderfully musical feel that immerses you in the performance. It's also tonally smooth and sweet, so it should match a wide range of amplifiers and speakers.



DAC: Arcam irDAC £400

From the company's popular rSeries range this DAC offers style and build unimaginable a few years back, with a wide range of inputs and some serious digital processing inside. Sonically superb, it is warm, open and musical too.



LOUDSPEAKER: Q Acoustics 2050i £440

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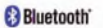


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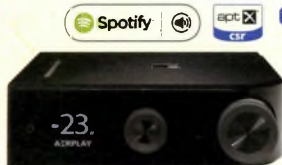


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Choice **EXOTICA** SONUS FABER OLYMPICA II
FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER £6,998



Chosen one

Any new Sonus faber speaker is special says **David Price**, but can the Olympica II floorstander live up to the promise?

The past few years have been a prolific time for Sonus faber. The company now has a burgeoning range of products; no sooner was the 'affordable' Venere range launched than the Olympica popped up at last year's High End Show in Munich. The II you see here is in the middle of a three-strong range; the I is a standmount, whereas the III is a larger floorstander with an additional bass driver to the II's existing three.

The woodwork is lovely, the detailing exquisite, the finish immaculate – and yet the speaker feels even nicer still. It's funny how when other speaker companies go to town on build and finish, they never seem to get it quite so spot on. The review samples come in gorgeous walnut wood with maple joints, the top, front and rear baffles get natural

It goes for a warmish midband that casts a gentle amber light across everything

leather (not vinyl) surfacing and the side-firing vertical reflex ports are covered by a perforated metal sheet. If any other company were to do this, it would look gaudy and vulgar, but here it's divine.

There's an interesting drive unit complement, starting with a 29mm silk dome tweeter based on that of the high-end Aida. It has an 'Arrow Point' damped apex dome, which is said to be a synthesis of the classic dome and ring transducer, and a new Neodymium magnet-powered motor system. The 150mm midrange driver uses a composite former eddy current-free voice coil, and the cone sports a blend of traditional cellulose pulp, kapok, kenaf and other natural fibres, and is said to give the most natural sound. This gets a transparent viscous surface damping coating. The woofer is a 230mm affair with a sandwich cone membrane that

combines a heart of hi-tech rigid syntactic foam with external layers in treated cellulose pulp. There's a 1.5in voice coil and powerful long stroke magnetic motor.

The units cross over at 250Hz and 2.5kHz; this isn't particularly unusual, although Sonus faber says the progressive slope crossover design has its amplitude/phase response optimised for best space/time domain performance. Claimed frequency response is 40Hz to 30kHz, and sensitivity is quoted at 88dB/1W/1m. Suggested amplifier power is 50W to 250W with a nominal impedance of 4ohms; a good, strong solid-state amplifier is needed. Listening tests show the speakers work surprisingly well close to a rear wall, although ideally you'd want them out at least a metre into free air, and slightly toed into the line of sight of the listener. Generally, the Sonus fabers prove pretty easy to get along with by the standards of their price class.

Sound quality

The II is a nice size. In a largish (but not huge) British listening room, it sits perfectly. By the time you get to spend £7,000 on a pair of speakers, you're getting into tricky territory; electrostatics, ribbons, hybrids, etc, all often prove hard to partner and position. Yet there's no such drama here – it delivers an expansive and three-dimensional sound with no tonal anomalies.

Bass is firm and insistent, but never overpowers the room or the music; instead you feel it's an important constituent part of the whole, rather than something that stands out on its own. As Black Uhuru's *Great Train Robbery* shows, it can start and stop with alacrity, being fleet of foot enough to really get into the musical groove. Yet you never get the feeling that the speaker is trying to embellish the music; down in the bass especially, it's clean and taut and matter of fact in the best of ways. If you want a huge, booming cacophony don't buy this.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sonus faber Olympica II

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
68kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
370 x 1,055 x 472mm

FEATURES

- 29mm 'Arrow Point' dome tweeter
- 150mm pulp fibre composite midrange driver
- 230mm sandwich membrane bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m

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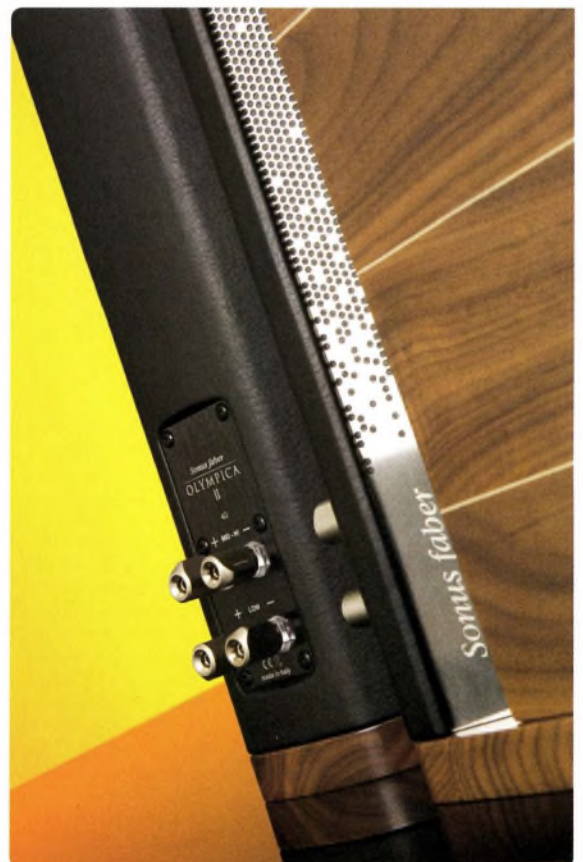
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Put on the amazing eponymous track from electro stylists LFO and you'll soon realise that it is commendably well extended, if not exceptionally so.

One satisfying thing is how well the bass melds into the midband; it's very seamless and all of a piece. There's no sense of two drive units competing – as happens on lesser three-ways – instead you're lead to a wonderfully fragrant midband with space and colour. The Sonus faber isn't one of those ultra clean speakers that sounds like it's trying to be a monitor; instead it goes for a slightly warmish midband that casts a gentle amber light across everything. This isn't a criticism, because it takes a fraction of the edge off some really steely recordings like The Castaways' *Liar Liar*, making it just that little bit more palatable. What I like about the midband is that it manages to be detailed and high in resolution without veering into hardness and shrillness; some high-end speakers don't and can have you running for the door when you play less than perfect recordings.

The high frequency performance is good, and pretty much up to par with the rest of the speaker. At this price you might crave the smoothness and delicacy of an Apogee ribbon or a good electrostatic panel like a

Build quality is impeccable and those curves are to die for



Q&A

Livio Cucuzza

Industrial Design Dept chief,
Fine Sounds Group



DP: What type of customer is the Olympica series aimed at?

LC: These loudspeakers are built for anyone who loves music, and the sound signature typical of Sonus faber loudspeakers. They're for people who love details and natural materials like wood and leather and who are sensitive to the Italian craftsmanship. The Olympica collection fits in the middle of the overall Sonus faber range, an area that has always been very important for us – once with the Cremona collection and now with the Olympica line.

Who designed it?

As chief of the Industrial Design Department, I did! But every project is a result of the entire design team, now in charge for all the brands of the Fine Sounds Group. This special shape is used to control every inner resonance of the cabinet, which itself is a combination of aluminium, solid wood and HDF. From the ergonomic point of view a vertical slot reflex port on the side aims to give the client the possibility to optimise the bass response in his own listening room. This done, the speaker should sound great with every kind of good music.

What source components and amplifiers would you recommend?

I suggest that Sonus fabers should be used with components that enhance the qualities of naturalness and acoustic transparency. Every audio system's sound is a very personal choice, tightly connected with individual taste, of course. During our tests, we observed very good performances with powerful McIntosh amplifiers, as well as with velvety Audio Research vacuum tubes and versatile Wadia products.

IN SIGHT



- 1 29mm silk dome tweeter
- 2 150mm midrange driver
- 3 Bi-wiring binding posts
- 4 230mm sandwich cone membrane woofer

HOW IT COMPARES

Costing £3 less than the Sonus faber, Spendor's ST 1s beautifully built. Sonically it's very even and balanced; it's not what you'd call a 'character speaker'. Bass is strong, nicely propulsive and yet not overblown. The Olympica is very similar here, but stretches up to a midband that is a little warmer and less 'clean' than the ST. However, the Italian speaker sounds more engaging, and has a lovely tone on classical music where the British one is a little more matter of fact. Treble is fractionally cleaner on the Spendor, but there's very little in it and over. If the Sonus faber comes over as having a little more brio in its sound, to go with its superb styling.

Martin Logan. But those speakers can have their own issues and fall behind the Olympica II in the bass, for example. The important thing is that the Sonus faber's treble doesn't pull the otherwise very high standards of performance down. It's a fine example of a well-designed dome tweeter, and gives a lovely sparkle to the hi-hat work on the earthy rock of REM's *Near Wild Heaven*. Feed it the opening cymbal of Isaac Hayes' *Theme From Shaft* and it serves up a sweet and tactile sound, the tweeter proving sensitive enough to get up close with the sticks on the cymbals. It integrates beautifully, giving the impression you're listening to one loudspeaker per channel and not two or three.

This is a very well voiced speaker then, one that's tonally coherent with no difficult spots that draw attention to mismatched drivers or poorly executed crossovers, but how does it fare in the time domain? This is always a leading question for big three-ways, as there's a lot to integrate. Happily, the Sonus faber works very well, with a decently taut and grippy sound that never smudges or blurs leading edges. It lacks the razor-sharp transients of a good

electrostatic, but there's not much in it and the Olympica II comes over as fast and controlled. So much so that it lets you focus right in on differing strands of the music, and follow them with ease. This ability to separate out the different elements in the mix is the mark of a fine loudspeaker.

Another aspect of a speaker's phase performance is its imaging and depth perspective, and again it scores highly. Spatially it's a wide and expansive performer, which – although lacking the sheer vastness of a large panel loudspeaker – manages to sound far less shut in than some conventional rivals. Cue up a classical Deutsche Grammophon recording of Beethoven's *Pastorale Symphony* and you're left in no doubt that the Olympica can place instruments in the orchestra accurately and resolve right back to the rear of the hall. Only on full-blown dynamic crescendos do you ever get a sense that it isn't quite as powerful and expressive as larger, cost-no-object designs. It's a delicate but detailed sound then, one that's sophisticated, dynamically engaging and musically satisfying – and never less than lovely to listen to.

Conclusion

Pretty much all £7,000 loudspeakers are accomplished in one way or another, so the choice of purchase comes down to the performance characteristics you value most. The Olympica II appeals to those seeking a great all rounder, something that gives a powerful, spacious and detailed sound with an even tonal balance, strong bass and smooth, extended treble – whatever type of music you care to play. It is brilliant in no single area, rather its strength lies in its high general competence. It's an important new player in the high-end floorstander market and well worth an audition if you're looking for a consummate multi-tasker ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Balanced tonality; satisfying musicality; build and finish

VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



DISLIKE: Slight lack of dimensionality, but otherwise nothing

WESAY: Gorgeous, beautiful sounding premium floorstanders

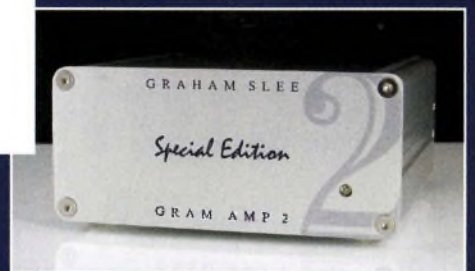
OVERALL



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Setting the standard

Sounding like no other digital converter that **David Price** has heard, Chord's DAC/headphone amp is a landmark product

For this writer, one of the most disappointing things about digital audio – and especially CD's 16/44.1 specification where the problem seems most acute – is its timing. It just doesn't quite seem to accurately reproduce all the nuances you hear in music when listening in real time. The major issue to my ears is that if you go to a jazz club to hear Randy Crawford sing, then come back home and play the CD the digital disc just

doesn't have the natural ebb and flow of the live concert.

In this respect, vinyl LPs do better. Sure, they have a multitude of other problems, but always seem to time more convincingly when played on a decent turntable. The reason for this, according to Chord Electronics designer Rob Watts, is that digital audio is fundamentally constrained by (what, if it were a television you'd call) its frame rate. Because it has a limited number of samples ('frames')

per second, it can't completely accurately resolve the 'inter-aural' timing of the music. Watts thinks this is a serious flaw, and the lower resolution the digital signal is (ie CD compared to hi-res), the more acute the problem becomes.

Rob isn't a digital audio engineer by training, this discipline was in its infancy when he studied electronics engineering at Cardiff, back in the eighties before co-founding DFA. He also researched psychoacoustics, and this has stood him in great stead for what he is doing now. All his designs – from the early DFA Enlightenment DACs of the nineties to the groundbreaking Chord DAC64 – have shown an understanding for the problems of digital audio that go beyond simple considerations of frequency domain distortion. Rob says that – in simple terms – the brain samples sound in real time every 4 microseconds, whereas CD refreshes its 'frames' every 22 microseconds. It's CD's inability to work as fast as the brain that causes its problems in the time domain, why it doesn't sound natural. And the unique design of the Hugo DAC addresses precisely this failing.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Chord Electronics
Hugo

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
DAC/headphone
amplifier

WEIGHT
0.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
100 x 20 x 132mm

FEATURES
● 32-bit/384kHz,
DXD, DSD64,
DSD128
● aptX Bluetooth,
optical, coaxial, 2x
USB inputs
● 6.3mm and 3.5mm
headphone, RCA
phono outputs
● Rechargeable
battery operation
● Volume/output
level control

DISTRIBUTOR
Chord Electronics
Ltd

TELEPHONE
01622 721444

WEBSITE
chordelectronics.
co.uk

He contends that conventional digital filters don't have the ability to properly resolve musical transients. Their poor 'frame rate' effectively chops off the leading edges of some notes, meaning the brain can't recognise them as music in the way it does when hearing it live. His Watts Transient Aligned digital filter is designed to address this, by sampling the 'frames' faster than usual and interpolating the values for the lost 'frames' in-between the captured ones. This is done using a huge Xilinx Field Programmable Gate Array, rather than off-the-shelf chips from existing manufacturers. Using an FPGA lets Rob write his own code for the WTA digital filter, and those in the Hugo are more sophisticated than any that have come before because of the vast number of gates the new FPGA has. He's worked in a digital filter with a far higher tap-length than that seen in stock DAC chips – 26,000 in the Hugo compared with the approximately 150 in standard DACs.

For this reason, the Hugo should sound different to every other DAC around. The Xilinx FPGA also has another trick up its sleeve. It consumes just 0.7V of power, which is dramatically lower than older such devices. This has made the idea of an ultra high-quality portable, battery powered DAC possible – and Chord ran with it. Indeed it's a double win, because you get the sound quality benefits conferred by not having an AC mains transformer throwing noise into the DAC, and also the portability benefits too. The Hugo can be used everywhere. I've even plugged it into the auxiliary inputs of my Nakamichi car system and used my Sony Xperia Z phone as a Bluetooth source! The



Those 'windows' indicate the Hugo's status using a variety of colours

brilliant thing about the Hugo is that the same FPGA that gives it its special sound, also makes it the most handy DAC you could ever own.

Chord hasn't stopped there. The DAC supports PCM formats up to 384kHz including DXD and will natively play DSD64 and DSD128 in DoP format. It also has a very high-quality digital volume control and the choice to run the Hugo as a line-level device like a normal DAC. It has headphone and RCA phono outputs, plus USB, optical and coaxial digital inputs, and aptX Bluetooth. All of these functions are controlled by small unlabelled buttons on the body, while inside the unit's large lens, LEDs light up in different colours to indicate source selected, battery charge status and Crossfeed setting. There's also another separate lens that shows – by different colours – the sampling frequency. It's all quite confusing at first, but perseverance pays off and you'll begin to find it a very intuitive little gizmo.

Sound quality

I review a lot of fine hi-fi, but it's very rare to come across something quite as special as this. The Hugo has an ease, a fluidity and a naturalness that's unique; as far as its ability to make music flow in an organically enjoyable way, I've heard nothing quite like it.

Anyone that has owned a Chord DAC64, QBD76 or Qute will know what I'm talking about, as there's something about these (other Rob Watts) designs that seems to go beyond what's normally expected of digital. The Hugo goes further still, and the difference is centred around the way the music flows. It simply doesn't time like others, it presents the music in an organic way that you don't equate with digital. The improvement is most obvious on 16/44 (ie CD), where the filtering papers over the cracks that aren't as obvious with higher-resolution music, but you'll hear it everywhere.

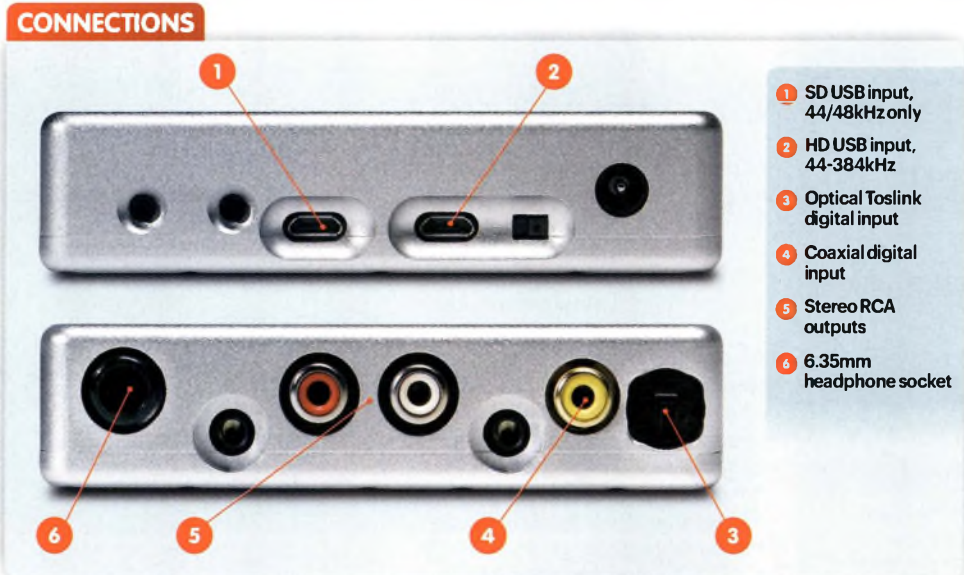
Put on simple female vocals such as Kate Bush on *Oh England*, *My Lionheart* through a good conventional DAC and you'll get a

The Hugo has an ease, a fluidity and a naturalness that's truly unique

decently warm, fulsome performance that sounds impressive in hi-fi terms. But through the Hugo you're pulled into the music as it mesmerises you. You become far less interested in the hi-fi aspects of the performance, and drawn like a moth to a flame, right into the song. It's only when it's finished that you realise the soundstaging was superb, the detail resolution amazing and the tonal balance silky smooth. It pulls this trick off again and again.

Play REM's *Welcome To The Occupation*, for example, and suddenly you're drawn into the music's natural groove. The band's playing is so beautifully syncopated with one another and the Hugo shows this to you like no other DAC I've yet heard. It's like it has a sixth sense.

It is impressive in hi-fi terms too; bass is powerful yet wonderfully supple, bouncing up and down like a giant rubber ball. The midband is startlingly open and detailed, and soundstaging is sublime. Able to lock individual elements in the mix in space like they'd been etched into granite by a laser, it reminds me of studio-quality analogue open-reel



Q&A

Rob Watts

Designer, Chord Electronics Ltd.



DP: Why do you think your WTA filter times so well?

RW: I started developing my own Pulse Array DAC technology using Field Programmable Gate Arrays, and then the capabilities of FPGAs started to get very serious. I realised that I could do the interpolation filter function as well as the DAC with them. Ever since the early eighties, 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 talked to Chord's John Franks about the idea and he liked it, so we went ahead. A lot of time and effort later, I demonstrated the prototype DAC64 which had the first WTA filter – where the missing timing is reconstructed by the interpolation filter – and it knocked our socks off!

How would you say Hugo differs to the DAC64?

The DAC64's 64-bit 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. I have solved the truncation issues by employing dither and noise shaping techniques in the Hugo and the multiple DSP cores are now 48-bit. But today I am working with much more parallel cores at much higher speeds. The benefits are much better soundstaging precision, as the inter-aural timing is used for location of sound. The big surprise was the bass, it sounds like there's another octave of bass there. This I later realised, is because the starting transients of a bass note are used by the brain to detect the presence of bass, so reproducing the timing of bass allows you to better perceive it. I believe the Hugo is more groundbreaking than the DAC64 was, because it has changed my appetite for music.



The Hugo's portability means you can enjoy its superb performance anywhere

tape in this respect. Even on older low-fi recordings – like ELO's *Turn To Stone* – you can hear Geoff Lynne's vocals bouncing off the four walls of the studio vocal booth, and this is completely independent of the umpteen channels of guitars, drums, strings, etc also going on in the mix. At the same time his voice drips with harmonics that you normally don't hear with CD, these coming to the fore because it feels like a layer of distortion has been washed away – it's like someone's wiped the CD lens clean. Treble is on another level too. The Hugo doesn't sound bright, but when there's a hi-hat crash it resounds around, sparkling pristinely and then seemingly taking twice as long to decay as you'd expect. This is the sort of trick I've only heard from high-end vinyl tracking super-expensive moving coil cartridges, or the best dCS digital converters costing 10 times the price of the Hugo.

Cue up Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* on CD and you can hear so much air and space to the music that you think you're listening to a 24/192 hi-res file. It's all so smooth, open and airy, yet this high-resolution sound is so brilliantly integrated. Unlike a number of multi-thousand pound DACs I've heard, it doesn't just do detail, rather it strings everything together in a most convincing way. It's so expressive and emotive you wonder why you ever doubted CD. And running the gamut of hi-res options the Hugo offers, things get better. DSD via the USB input is breathtaking, giving an icily clean and pristine sound yet it simply isn't recognisable as digital. 24/96 PCM via FLAC is most people's idea of

hi-res, and this too is a joy. I've never heard Wings' *Band On The Run* sound quite so lifelike before. The really fascinating thing, though, is what it does to decidedly lo-fi music files, like a 192kbps MP3 of Daft Punk's *Get Lucky*. I've played this file across a multitude of DACs over the past year or so and never heard it sound so musically satisfying before; indeed it seems better than most other DACs playing the CD!

Conclusion

In the Hugo, Chord Electronics has made one of the finest digital converters in the world – and it just happens to be portable. It works brilliantly as a fixed-level output DAC, but has an excellent digital volume control that can drive a power amplifier with ease, and is also great powering a good set of headphones. This is a landmark product because it makes all flavours of digital sound so nice to listen to. And as many of my fellow vinyl aficionados will agree, that takes some doing ●



Being a no-compromise DAC with a volume control, headphone amp and rechargeable batteries, there's not a lot that compares directly to the Hugo. In more conventional separates terms, Naim's DAC-V1 (£1,250) is its closest rival. It has a powerful, open and even sound with lots of drive and punch, plus a spacious treble too. But the Hugo simply sounds more natural and 'analogue', music flows better and seems less contrived. Dynamics are more explicit and the soundstaging is better, going massively wide stage left and right when called upon. The Naim is excellent, but it still struggles against the brilliant Chord.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Supremely natural, open sound; portability; flexibility

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Halts the vinyl revival in its tracks

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Nothing less than a landmark digital product

FEATURES



OVERALL



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CD plays on

For those looking for their best – and likely last – ever CD transport, Cyrus gives you its CD Xt Signature. **David Price** listens in

History appears to be repeating itself. The sound of vinyl never really came good until the format looked distinctly over the hill, and now we see the same thing happening with Compact Disc. As DAC technology gets ever better, suddenly we're finding that the little silver disc is actually capable of really rather fine sound. Digital-to-analogue converters are at last able to properly do the job they were designed for, and CD is finally beginning to sound right. Of course, the forward march of technology means that physical media aren't going to be the favoured format of the future – expect the world to migrate to hi-res files stored on computer devices and away from optical discs stored on shelves. But still CD has an enormous worldwide following for whom it makes an awful lot of sense. Reflecting this, Cyrus'

range of CD players is getting ever smaller for the aforementioned reason. But it has consolidated its range and the new CD Xt Signature is said to be the very best the company has ever made, no less. Well I certainly hope so, because it is without doubt the most expensive!

Five years ago, I remember Cyrus' Peter Bartlett sitting down, looking me square in the eye and telling me his company was investing hundreds of thousands of pounds in its very own optical disc mechanism. Many in the audio business would have thought this to be about as sound business sense as flying halfway around the world with a huge bag of money and then throwing it into the North Atlantic. Let's just say, when you could buy any old DVD-ROM drive, tweak it lightly and chuck it in your CD player for pennies, Cyrus' new Servo Evolution mechanism

didn't appear to make commercial sense – especially when the curtain was coming down for Compact Disc as hi-res began its inevitable ascent.

Perhaps it was a canny move after all, though, because as supplies of OEM optical disc transports either dry up or get ever further away from audiophile applications, there's more of a need for such a thing. The company's decision to bet the farm on a superlative CD mechanism not only gave its own silver disc players a new lease of life, but has made them sustainable into the future – as well as permitting the release of products such as this. Despite the continuing demand for CD players, there are very few people selling bespoke, high-quality CD transports any more.

The CD Xt Signature is Cyrus throwing the kitchen sink at the problem. It has all the best bits of everything the company knows about silver disc spinning. This starts with the improvements made to Cyrus' recent Anniversary System CD player, which includes the latest version of the Servo Evolution firmware that controls the way the laser tracks the disc, to optimise the accuracy with which it does it. It uses a special front slot-loading assembly and a specific laser is fitted along with bespoke motors too. Altogether, the mechanism is able to track the pits in the disc as accurately as possible says

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cyrus CD Xt
Signature

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
CD transport

WEIGHT
3.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 73 x 360mm

FEATURES
• Servo Evolution
mechanism
• Backlit LCD
• 1x optical, 1x
coaxial digital out
• Cyrus MC-BUS
connections

DISTRIBUTOR
Cyrus Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE
01480 410900

WEBSITE
cyrusaudio.com

Cyrus. This gives over 20 percent fewer read errors than the Philips CDM12 mechanisms used in the previous generation of Cyrus (and many other) CD players. The idea is that by not having to come back to retry the read, there's less power supply drain from the servo; it's better to get it right first time.

Then there are the tweaked power supplies. Normally Cyrus puts a good, small toroidal transformer inside its half-width box and offers the option of a larger, stiffer power supply in a separate box – which sells as the PSX-R for £500. But in the CD Xt Signature, the lack of any DAC circuitry makes space for more sizeable power providers. Two separate power supplies are said to provide huge reserves of juice, which effectively removes any need for an offboard PSX-R power supply. These power feeds are heavily filtered so they're as pure as possible on reaching the mechanism. So while the Xt Signature might be expensive, it effectively has the equivalent of a £500 PSX-R inside. The company says the unit also features an advanced loader with LED disc detection technology for better detection and loading control.

A quick word about the Servo Evolution mechanism. Being so finely tuned, anyone who knocks the unit while playing will find that it may pause or jump, as the laser momentarily loses track. That's because it's been set up to read from good discs in optimum conditions. This also means that the mech is a bit fussier than some about playing poor discs, and slightly slower accessing tracks too. My experience with SE mechs tells me that if your CD collection is about as reflective as a black hole, you'd be better off with a less specialised machine. To those of us who treat our discs reasonably well, however, the CD Xt Signature

plays them perfectly. Meanwhile if you have got a few dodgy discs, I find that a clean with Russ Andrews' excellent ReVeel works wonders.

Sound quality

The essential sound of the Cyrus is smooth, stable and rhythmically coherent. It has a mastertape-like ease and flow to the music, and instruments are rendered realistically in the recorded acoustic like few other transports I've heard. Despite its diminutive physical dimensions, the scale and general confidence of the sound is immense. The only thing that marks it down from seriously high-end designs is its bass, which isn't quite as prodigious as you'd get from a five-figure Esoteric, for

It brings a sense of openness, depth and dimensionality to CD that you rarely hear

example. It's solid and confident, firm and articulate – and certainly a good deal stronger than the transports in similarly priced CD players.

The taut bottom end feeds up to a most excellent mid-band which seems very good at digging down into the spaces between the notes on music with repetitive beats, be it the jazzy strains of Herbie Hancock's *I Have A Dream* or the thumping drum and bass of Goldie's *Inner City Life*. Rather than a perfunctory reading of the rhythms on these tracks, it pushes right into the music to retrieve the entirety of the note. Compared to the excellent but cheaper Audiolab 8200CD for example (which is the sort of CD player prospective CD Xt purchasers will be upgrading from), there's a more relaxed and supple feel to the music as a whole. It sounds less stressed, less brittle and more like an

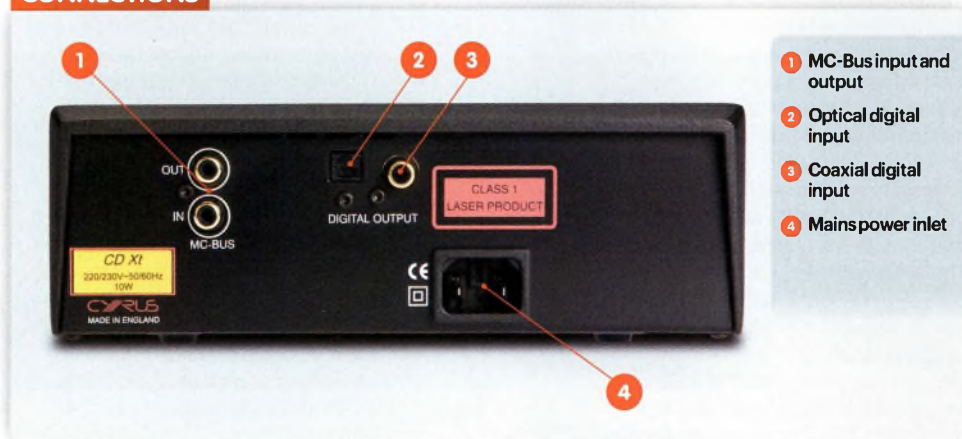
organic event before your very ears. Indeed, this really defines the Cyrus; it has a sense of ease that simply doesn't sound like digital. The music flows organically, rather than coming over as forced or artificially enhanced in some way.

Treble is excellent too, being crisp and smooth and well extended. Again, it's amazing how a transport can change the 'feel' – if not the actual tonal balance – of the high frequencies. The shimmering cymbal work on Rain Tree Crow's *Pocketful Cf Change* is something to behold, sounding so spacious and three dimensional set in front of David Sylvian's moody vocals. This open top end helps enormously in the transport's excellent rendition of spatial clues; rarely do you hear a three dimensional soundstage so convincingly recreated from a 16-bit digital disc. Percussive instruments, which play a big part on this track, seem like they're being reproduced in Cinemascope, such is the immersive sound that stretches wide left and right of the loudspeakers. Only the very best CD players (transport and DAC combinations) can pull this trick off, in my experience.

Conclusion

It's an awful lot to spend on 'just' a transport, but I have never heard anything that comes close at this price. The Cyrus CD Xt Signature doesn't quite have the measure of the ultra high-end designs still on sale, but it's a lot cheaper, and indeed is way better than Cyrus' basic CD t transport. It brings a sense of openness, depth and dimensionality to Compact Disc that you rarely hear, along with a wonderfully smooth, even and stable sound that's rare in its solidity and sophistication. Good news then, CD is still alive and kicking – don't throw away your little silver beer mats just yet! ●

CONNECTIONS



- 1 MC-Bus input and output
- 2 Optical digital input
- 3 Coaxial digital input
- 4 Mains power inlet

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Stable, spacious, musical sound; slot-loading design

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Disc mechanism struggles with poor discs

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: Superb 'affordable high-end' silver disc spinner

FEATURES



OVERALL





Sweet spot

Is your space for full-range speakers a little on the tight side? **Ed Selley** wonders if Morel has the answer

With the exception of REL and other longstanding subwoofer manufacturers, the concept of the 2.1 system is something that has really only come into its own since the arrival of the sub/sat package in the home cinema boom at the start of the millennium. The concept of small speakers that take up little space and are underpinned by a subwoofer that can be tucked away out of sight had advantages for getting a home cinema system into a space that otherwise couldn't accept one. It didn't take a genius to see this could be applied to a hi-fi setup too.

Israeli speaker company Morel already makes some fairly compact speakers, but the smallest offerings in the range are the SoundSpot SP-1 and SP-2 loudspeakers specifically designed as satellite speakers. The larger SP-2 tested here is a sphere that mounts a 100mm mid bass driver

with a 19mm soft dome tweeter placed concentrically. As well as being aesthetically pleasing, the use of a spherical enclosure is sound acoustic practice too. The enclosure is the smallest it can be for a given internal volume and it also eliminates the points of resonance and standing waves that affect conventional square loudspeaker cabinets.

The SoundSpot sphere is a compact little thing about the size of a shot put, but not nearly as heavy. To maximise the spherical cabinet's internal volume, the SoundSpot SP-2 is made from 1mm steel that is otherwise unbraced giving as much space inside the enclosure as possible. The 100mm driver is a bespoke design that's built inhouse by Morel with a 32mm voice coil covered by a magnetic grille.

As spheres have a habit of rolling around, the SP-2 uses a rubber foot that acts as both the means of placing

it on a flat surface and, by sliding it along a runner on the underside, you can also attach it to a wall. This is useful and a neat touch, but actually getting the SP-2s to point at the same angle is an art rather than a science and there is no indent for speaker cable to leave the foot. Worse by some margin are the speaker terminals that utilise tiny holes only accessible at a given mount angle with an aperture adjusted by an allen bolt that has the bite of a toothless pensioner!

The partnering PSW10 subwoofer is a more pleasing proposition. As the numbering suggests it makes use of a 10in (254mm) driver powered by a 200W built-in amp. The design is unusual but attractive with the bulk of the cabinet volume being around the driver instead of behind it. Unlike the steel satellites, the cabinet is made of fibreglass resin, but like the rest of the Morel lineup also does without any internal bracing. The controls and connections are all logical enough, but for reasons unknown the PSW10 does without any numbering on the crossover making setting a specific crossover a bit of a guessing game. This and the satellite speaker terminals are really the only detractors to the SoundSpot 2.1 Ultra system, though. The build quality is excellent and the white gloss finish is immaculately applied. Black and champagne options are also available.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Morel
SoundSpot 2.1 Ultra

ORIGIN
Israel

TYPE
2.1 satellite/
subwoofer speakers

WEIGHT
1.5kg/15kg

DIMENSIONS
140mm satellite
enclosure
Sub: (WxHxD)
443 x 370 x 254mm

FEATURES
• Satellite: 19mm
tweeter, 100mm
mid driver
• Sub: 245mm bass
driver
• Quoted
impedance: 6ohms
• Quoted sensitivity:
86dB

DISTRIBUTOR
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These mini balls of fun are ideal for those that are short on space

Sound quality

Connected to a Cambridge Audio 851A integrated amplifier and Naim ND5 XS streamer, the Morels don't prove too challenging to install. Best results are obtained with the SP-2s on Soundstyle Z60 speaker stands and the sub placed centrally between them. Provided that the PSW10 stays between the satellites, the perception of a stereo performance is generally convincing. After a little trial and error, I manage to set a decent crossover too, which doesn't put the SP-2s under any strain but allows the sub to be effectively omnidirectional and underpin the two satellites as unobtrusively as possible.

The performance that results manages to clear the biggest hurdle that any 2.1 system faces in that it almost always sounds like two speakers instead of three. The integration is smooth and well controlled and the SP-2 in particular possesses many of the abilities that the larger Morel Octave 6 speakers impressed us with. The concentric drivers play to the strengths of the type with an impressively cohesive and well integrated performance that has a comparatively large sweet spot and means that the SP-2s don't need to be up close to work convincingly.

The presentation is generally detailed and consistently believable. Ray LaMontagne's *Till The Sun Turns Black* is warm and expansive with real depth and presence to the vocals and impressive decay to supporting instruments. The SP-2s are able to deliver the required scale to sound convincing and should allow for use in a reasonably sized room. Larger scale pieces like the *TRON Legacy* soundtrack are still handled well and

One of the smoothest crossovers I've encountered in a 2.1 speaker system

even with levels bordering on the antisocial, the Morels don't harden up or sound strained.

The spherical body of the SP-2s does genuinely make itself felt in that there is precious little sense of an enclosure when you listen to them. Combined with the concentric drivers the effect is wonderfully cohesive with two evenly dispersed points of sound that combine to give a genuinely believable soundstage that also manages a little sense of front-to-back depth too. The PSW10 doesn't disappear quite so effectively as the

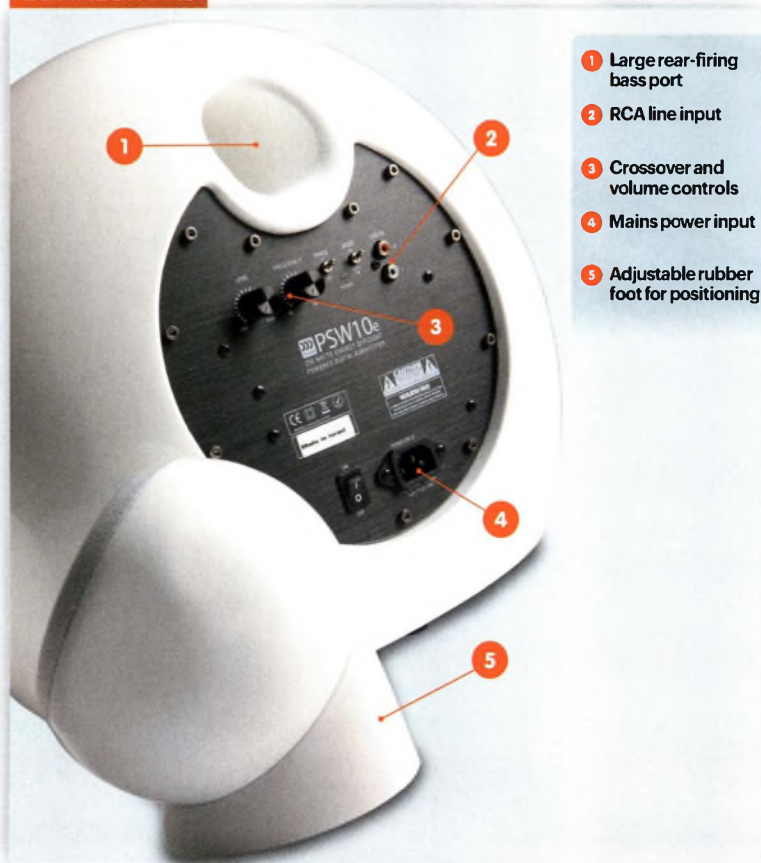
satellites, but the enclosure is still impressively controlled and inert and that large rear port is silent and pleasingly unobtrusive.

The system can't completely escape the presence of that third speaker required to give effective stereo, though. After a little playing about, the crossover between the SP-2 satellites and the PSW10 subwoofer can be made impressively smooth and imperceptible – indeed, this is one of the smoothest crossovers I've encountered in a 2.1 speaker system of this type. The problem is that the PSW10 is not as agile as its partnering satellites. With smoother acoustic pieces of music it is able to effectively fill in the lower registers, albeit without the level of fine detail that the SP-2s excel at, but as the tempo increases the PSW10 never quite manages to keep up with the speed of the piece. If you reduce the volume level the problem is alleviated, but you will then need to raise it again for less potent pieces – and this is done on the back panel rather than via a remote. Placing the PSW10 on an isolation platform does improve matters a little, but this of course represents an additional outlay.

Conclusion

In fairness to Morel, this is an issue that affects almost every 2.1 speaker system, and if you don't exist on a diet of pounding electronica the PSW10 is a more subtle and nuanced performer than many competitors. The performance usually manages to be a convincing stereo presentation and that this also comes from a trio of components that are well built, handsome and – speaker terminals aside – easy to install. If you need to wall mount speakers for your system this Morel represents a very fine implementation of the sub/sat principle and one that delivers considerable musical satisfaction as well as impressive convenience ●

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Large rear-firing bass port
- 2 RCA line input
- 3 Crossover and volume controls
- 4 Mains power input
- 5 Adjustable rubber foot for positioning

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★
- EASE OF DRIVE**
★★★★★
- LIKE:** Impressively full and controlled sound; excellent build
- DISLIKE:** Slight lack of bass detail and control; fiddly speaker setup
- WE SAY:** A frequently impressive system that is just a bass tweak and some binding posts away from excellence

OVERALL



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Mains electricity is distorted by numerous factors as it travels from power stations to our homes, eroding your systems performance. The **New Discovery Range** from IsoTek delivers highly effective yet eminently affordable solutions to enhance sound and picture quality, whilst also protecting your valuable equipment from power surges and voltage spikes.*



"A distinct cleaning up of the sound...
"A marked benefit for dynamic range, a consequence of lowering the noise floor, as well as a refinement and a general opening up of the soundstage"

IsoTek EV03 Premier, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013

EV03 Premier

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- 1.5m standard length

EV03 Polaris

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IsoTek EV03 Polaris, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013



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Air apparent

Arcam's versatile little DAC proves to be mighty impressive, but asks **David Price** has it got what's required to take the crown?

Of you're fed up with all those pesky wires, this is for you. Essentially it's a high-quality digital-to-analogue converter that also works as a UPnP music streamer and an AirPlay receiver. As such, it's an amazingly versatile device – playing music from your Network Attached Storage drive or computer, or any AirPlay-compatible iDevice, wirelessly. It even syncs with Android mobile phones, which can 'throw' music at it to play out.

Most buyers won't be interested in the intricacies of its chipsets and networking protocols. Rather, they will enjoy the fact it's a universal music medium that plays anywhere. We all have smartphones, tablets and computers with music on them, and the airDAC lets you play it out through your hi-fi. Marvellous!

Switch it on and it sets itself up as its very own local network, which you can select on your computer. Then, you can select AirPlay as your music output device and everything that would go to your computer goes to the airDAC. You can load up iTunes, press the button that pops up when it senses an AirPlay network and suddenly you're playing your favourite songs through your hi-fi. It's that easy – I have my Sony Xperia phone playing tunes in under a minute.

AirPlay is free and easy, and even works for computer audiophiles running specialist music player apps like Audirvana. By changing the output setting in the Preferences menu section for example, I have my hi-res music

playing. The caveat is that the system only runs up to 16-bit, 44.1kHz, so my 24/96 Kate Bush *50 Words For Snow* has its digits forcibly rearranged down to CD-quality.

Those wanting hi-res playback will need to turn to the airDAC's UPnP functionality, and this is a little fiddlier to set up. The process is best started by connecting the airDAC to your router via an Ethernet cable, after which you can get into the settings via a web browser page and reconfigure to your heart's content. The Arcam streams up to 24/96 when working via UPnP. Arcam supplies a free SongBook app, which on my iPad is slightly glitchy.

It also has coaxial and optical digital inputs, that you can hook up your CD or Blu-ray player to, and the source is displayed on the front panel. There's a pair of RCA analogue line outputs that you connect to your amplifier, or you can port the digital datastream out to a better DAC via the coaxial digital output. Design-wise, it's not a million miles away from the irDAC (HFC 380), which means a gorgeous alloy casing with non-slip rubber base, a four-layer PCB inside and multiple low-noise separately regulated power supplies – a Burr-Brown/Texas Instruments PCM5102 DAC chip (running up to 24/96) is fitted rather than its brother's Burr-Brown PCM1796.

Sound quality

What you get is a typically Arcam sound – a little on the warm side of neutral, with a nice sweet treble and

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Arcam airDAC

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Wireless DAC

WEIGHT
1.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
190 x 42 x 120mm

FEATURES

- Burr-Brown/TI PCM5102 DAC
- Wireless AirPlay (up to 16-bit/48kHz)
- UPnP (up to 24-bit/96kHz)
- S/PDIF, optical inputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Arcam

PRICE
£400

CONTACT
01223 203200

WEBSITE
arcam.co.uk

an expansive yet smooth midband. Wired is always better than wireless, so the airDAC gives its best via coaxial or Ethernet. You get a bright, spry, sound with loads of energy and drive, and a surprisingly powerful bass too.

Aphrodite's Child's *The Four Horsemen* is an energetic, expansive affair that's great fun to listen to. I am struck by how fast and involving the sound is, without the Arcam adding any undue harshness or edge. I'm also bowled over by the wonderfully wide soundstage – although just when I begin questioning the sanity of Arcam's pricing policy I start to notice a tendency for the music to cluster around the plane of the speakers; its depth perspective is no match for more expensive DACs.

Via AirPlay from Audirvana, there is a slight thinning out of stage depth, although it still sounds very good indeed. Herbie Hancock's *Rock It* is extremely fast and animated, with a pile-driving bass allied to powerful snare drum and hi-hat work delivered with riflebolt precision. The swirling ambient sounds of Fragile State's *Every Day A Different Story* are lovely to behold; there's something innately musical about this DAC that makes whatever you play sound fast and fun. It doesn't lack refinement either; admittedly you'd do better from the Audiolab M-DAC, but it's more expensive and lacks the airDAC's wireless functionality.

Conclusion

Overall then, Arcam's new baby digital converter is an excellent product. Its feature count is superlative at the price, as is its build, yet it still takes the sound quality side of things dead seriously – and is styled as nicely as many DACs costing five times as much. Oh, and it's by far the most accessible hi-fi implementation of AirPlay so far, making this fine convenience format all the more appealing ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Superbly styled wireless DAC with great sound and flexibility

DISLIKE: Limited to 24-bit/96kHz playback; no Bluetooth or USB

WE SAY: AirPlay streaming fans are well catered for, but Arcam's irDAC offers a more solid spec

OVERALL





Second coming

In its new Series 2 guise, B&W's popular and affordable 683 floorstander has just got better, says **David Price**

Buyers have come to know what to expect from the £1,000 price point. Lavishing this sort of sum buys you a physically largish box that is nicely if not luxuriously finished. It gets you a decent set of drive units, and you'd expect to be looking at three per speaker at least – and that's precisely what you get here.

Here's a three-way, four driver floorstander that's just over a metre tall when sitting on its plinths (not shown). The vinyl wrap finish isn't bad, but it's far from perfect. I am

They pull you into the syncopated playing and keep you there till the music stops

disappointed to see our white review samples have three different shades of white across the speaker; the box, front baffle and driver trim rings all come in fractionally different hues. The upside is that the cabinetry is really solid. The finish may be mediocre, but the build is excellent. It's very well damped; compared to Focal's 926, for example, they feel as dead as an anechoic chamber.

The drive unit complement is a mixture of old and new. The 25mm tweeter is B&W's Decoupled Dome design, using an aluminium structure which is said to be "extremely thin" for lightness, and this is surrounded by a thicker aluminium ring for rigidity. The whole assembly is physically separated in its own gel-filled cavity, to prevent the lower frequencies muddying its sound. At 4kHz, this crosses over to the Kevlar fibre cone FSTTM midrange driver. In the 600 series B&W says its 150mm midrange drivers have been tweaked to deliver lower distortion levels, while smaller voice coils further

increase sensitivity. New Anti-Resonance Plugs are fitted and are claimed to reduce higher-frequency break-up. The Fixed Suspension Transducer' design sees the edge of the cone mounted in a narrow ring of foam designed to radiate as little sound as possible – giving a virtual 'surroundless' suspension design.

At 400Hz, the midrange drive hands over to a pair of 165mm aluminium coned bass drivers made using a new method similar to bracing the tweeter with twin layers of aluminium. The 683 S3 is a thoroughly modern music maker then, having strong metal domes and cones at the top and bottom of the frequency band, with a taut, dry-sounding Kevlar midrange. Its choice of drive units should give it a distinctive sound, and a modern one at that. The manufacturer claims its sensitivity to be 89dB/1W/1m, making it a fairly efficient design that should be good for higher-powered valve amps and normal solid-state alike. The cabinet is a reflex-loaded design that I find works best at about 1m from the rear wall, but foam bungs are supplied to make it usable

DETAILS

PRODUCT
B&W 683 S2

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
27.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
190 x 985 x 364mm

FEATURES

- Three-way bass reflex design
- 1x 25mm aluminium dome tweeter
- 1x 150mm Kevlar midrange cone
- 2x 165mm aluminium cone bass units
- Quoted power handling 25-200W

DISTRIBUTOR
B&W Group Ltd

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowers-wilkins.
co.uk

from about 20cm should your room demand this.

Sound quality

The 683 S2 is no shrinking violet. It's not about soft, sumptuous sound with a relaxed gait. Rather, it plays music like it's got ants in its pants; it's very fast and almost restless in the way it manages to eke out every rhythmic nuance. There are few speakers I've heard near the price that match its infectious rhythmic gait and intensity.

Tonally, it's a little on the bright side. Not excessively so, but that Kevlar and aluminium combo was never going to be dull. The different drivers integrate very well. There's a slight sense of splash from the tweeters compared with some of the best at this price, but it's not excessive and in their defence the B&W metal domes are fast and expressive. The 683 S2 weaves its tweeter in with the very different Kevlar midband driver very well, which in turn delivers that distinctive B&W 'etched' midband sound. The difference between this and the new Focal flax driver, for example, is marked. The B&W drive unit is very fast, quite intense and sounds like a searchlight is being directed on the mix, a sort of sonic super trooper. This makes for an intimate, upfront presentation with oodles of detail and dramatic dynamics. Yet the speaker doesn't descend into harshness; it's not hard and indeed sounds less nasal than earlier B&W boxes.

Then, almost as if by magic, the speaker crosses down into the bass, and this is even more seamless than the switch from treble to mid. The twin 165mm bass units are impressively discrete, and they mate well to the reflex-loaded cabinet; there's no sense of huffing and

Though build quality is superb, the finish isn't quite top-notch



Q&A

Mike Gough

Senior product manager, B&W



DP: What would you say the Series 2 brings to the party?

MG: It has been improved in multiple ways, but the headline story is its adoption of the Decoupled Double Dome tweeter, first revealed in the £3,000 CM10 model in 2013. In the new 683, this lighter, stronger dual-diaphragm tweeter assembly delivers superior first break-up performance (improved to 38kHz from the 30kHz of the outgoing model) combined with baffle-mounted decoupling, a breakthrough technology in our conventional loudspeakers. Both improvements are instantly discernible; the new 683 has a purer, cleaner treble than ever, plus a beautifully resolved and substantial soundstage that will fill even large rooms easily. Improved bass drivers are also fitted, again using a dual-layer construction that helps push away the first break-up mode and keep the drivers perfectly pistononic for longer.

Why use aluminium in the treble dome and Kevlar in the mid driver?

We adopt diamond in our premium models, but the parts cost of a diamond-dome tweeter assembly are considerable, as you'd expect! When used correctly – and when combined with new technology, as outlined above – aluminium is a perfectly sensible diaphragm material at this price point. Kevlar may be getting on, but it still works well, too. We like to think we know how to use the material to its best effect and as we manufacture all our drive units ourselves we have exceptional control over our quality standards. That's not to say we aren't aware of the virtues of other materials, but if ever we do decide to move away from Kevlar, the replacement solution will need to be pretty special.

Why does the 683 have a vinyl finish when rivals use fancier ones?

A good cabinet ensures better drive unit performance. Even in our affordable models we work hard to ensure structural strength. In this price class, we'd rather put the emphasis on that than on 'surface' factors such as a glossy paint finish.

IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm aluminium dome tweeter
- 2 150mm Kevlar midrange cone
- 3 Binding posts
- 4 165mm aluminium bass cone

puffing, nor do you feel like you're listening to the bass several milliseconds after the treble. Those rather utilitarian-looking cabinets prove immaculately well behaved, never letting the bass slow things down. True, it's not the tightest ever speaker down below; even with the foam bungs in place you'd don't quite get a sense of bass notes switching on and off like an LED. In fairness though, no other £1,150 floorstanders do this either, and the key point is the innate musicality; the low notes bounce along in a most pleasing way.

They certainly capture the power and menace of The Human League's *Darkness* brilliantly. Whereas other speakers concentrate more on the textural elements of the sound, the 683 S2s lock onto the percussive elements of the song, weaving everything together to give a gripping performance. But you don't get the sense that these are speakers that fall over themselves to do the 'pace, rhythm and timing' thing. They're accomplished at this, but never sound like they're trying; instead the music flows in a natural way. It's dramatic and often enthralling to listen to, but everything is melded together so skillfully that you relax into the music and get into the groove.

It's not like they're using their bright and spry sound to make them sound artificially fast either. Their speed

comes down to good old-fashioned grip and control rather than tonal hardness and edge. This means they work whatever music you play; Herbie Hancock's *The Prisoner* is just as much fun and the B&Ws remain completely on message. I've heard other speakers seem more natural tonally, and possessed of a more believable piano sound, for example. But somehow it doesn't matter, because they pull you into the syncopated playing and keep you there till the music stops. The ride cymbals could be sweeter and more spacious and the piano more fruity, but you're not left wishing they were. Instead, you get a cohesive yet propulsive presentation that makes you want to listen more.

You can force the 683 S2s out of their comfort zone, because sometimes the tweeter can draw attention to itself; the bashing, crashing hi hat on Corduroy's *9:28 From Shibuya* pushes the treble units towards coarseness, they just can't resolve the silky, downy sheen as well as some price rivals. But there's so much being done right that it doesn't spoil the fun. You just take in that lovely, detailed midband and the seamless way it feeds into the bass. You bask in the excellent stereo imaging and surprisingly good stage depth, the sense of intimacy to the vocals and the general dynamic expressiveness of the music. Never a dull moment, as they say.

Conclusion

This is a fine pair of floorstanders with an enjoyable, detailed and insightful sound of its very own. There's a wide choice in this part of the market, and personal taste, music taste and system synergy will all play key parts in your purchasing decision, but you really must audition B&W's 683 S2 if you seek a serious speaker at this price ●

HOW IT COMPARES

Monitor Audio's Silver 6 (£1,250) rather puts the B&W's finish to shame; it's a beautifully turned out design in a range of lavish, high-end gloss lacquers and real wood finishes. Sonically it's a better all rounder, but less accomplished in the musicality stakes. Tonally a little richer and more delicate, it fails to boogie like the B&W. Q Acoustics Concept 40 comes over as a smaller and less powerful performer, but its sound is startlingly clear and it makes music in a wonderfully engaging way. Again its finish is extremely good and makes the 683 S2 look sub par in this regard. Having said that, you can't deny the B&W's consummate music-making skills.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Engaging, detailed and spacious sound; solid build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Poor finish at the price; treble less smooth than some

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: Punchy, musical sounding mid-price floorstander

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



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Easy peasy

Music streaming without the wi-fi woes?
Andrew Simpson plugs in to Simple Audio's network player

Founded in 2008, Simple Audio may seem like a relatively new kid on the hi-fi block, but this British company's knowhow stems from some impressive lineage, with its senior designers and engineers being former Linn Products employees.

The Roomplayer with Amp is the dearer of Simple Audio's two Roomplayer models, with the identical-looking £599 DAC/streamer only version sacrificing a set of speaker outputs to get its price down. Paying an extra £100 for the fully fledged 50W IcePower Class D amp version is certainly money well spent, as this makes it a much more versatile one-box solution – just add speakers.

Alongside an eight-layer PCB, the Roomplayer houses a Wolfson DAC that caters for files up to 24-bit/192kHz from the usual list of lossy and lossless formats including MP3/WAV/AIFF/FLAC/ALAC. This, of course, is all standard fare for any modern music streamer jostling for position in today's market, as is the Ethernet connection for hard wiring to your router to access music on devices across your home network.

What sets the Roomplayer apart from most other streamers is that it eschews wi-fi streaming in place of

Simple Audio's Powerline tech, which sends digital audio through your home's mains electricity network. The company says that this method allows for much faster data rates compared to wi-fi, while avoiding signal drop outs and excessive buffering with high-resolution content. To stream via Powerline, you'll need to budget for Simple Audio's £60 Bridge wall-wart connector, which plugs

The Roomplayer's control in the upper bass makes a very engaging sound

into any nearby mains socket and connects to the Roomplayer through an Ethernet cable.

With its rigid aluminium chassis and tempered glass top, the Roomplayer feels solid and compact to the touch. Aside from a tiny 'pairing' button there are no manual controls on the unit, nor is there a remote control, in fact you'll be hard pressed to tell this is a hi-fi product at all at first glance. Inside the Roomplayer's deceptively unadorned case, however, hides a clever brain that's geared up for an array of multi-room streaming

options. Controlling the Roomplayer is done entirely through Simple Audio's desktop software (for Windows and Mac) or dedicated iPads/iPhones (an Android app is in the pipeline).

The software lets you create individual profiles and tailor each user's music library, so your brood's One Direction tracks need not rub shoulders with your Ozzy Osbourne classics. You can also create individual playlists and add radio stations to a favourites list for quick access.

Using multiple Roomplayers across your home network allows for a variety of multi-room streaming options. You can pipe the same music to every player, pair a group of players together or play different music through each unit.

Despite offering such a wealth of configuration options, getting the Roomplayer up and singing is painless. There's no on/off switch, so hook up your speakers before connecting the mains lead. You then need to hold down a small 'pairing' button on the unit's lower right edge, until a short green flash on its front panel LED tells you the player has found your network. Next, download Simple Audio's software and open its desktop icon, select the Roomplayer(s) on your network to name (by room for example), before importing your playlists and creating user profiles should you chose to.

Simple Audio's software also boasts integrated apps from third-party streaming services TuneIn, WiMp, Rhapsody and Deezer, and while it handily shows the incoming bitrate for internet radio, it's a shame I can't see this type of info for music stored in my music library through Simple Audio's interface.

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Roomplayer with amp
- ORIGIN**
UK
- TYPE**
Digital music system
- WEIGHT**
1.2kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
200 x 50 x 200mm
- FEATURES**
 - 50W Class D amplifier
 - Ethernet and optional Powerline mains streaming
 - Wolfson 24-bit/192kHz DAC
 - Playback support for MP3/WAV/AIFF/FLAC/ALAC
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Simple Audio
- TELEPHONE**
0141 3310845
- WEBSITE**
simpleaudio.com

The fuss-free front panel hosts 3.5mm jacks for headphones and MP3 players

Sound quality

From the fist swipe of the app's virtual play button, I'm aware of how much clarity the Simple Audio strives to pull from the music. Whether it's MP3s delivered via my iPhone or hi-res FLACs sent over Ethernet, all formats get the same levels of attention and you'll never catch it sounding complacent or lacklustre.

Partnering the Roomplayer with a pair of Q Acoustics 2020i bookshelf speakers makes for a tidy and articulate sounding package. Streaming an MP3 file of Duran Duran's *Ordinary World* from my iPhone 4s gets the Simple Audio sounding clean and clear across the board. Cymbal and acoustic guitar in particular are rendered with impressive lucidity, highlighting how polished and dynamic sounding this

Despite offering such a wealth of options, getting it singing is painless

recording is. The hi-hat drum shots in the upper midrange are crisply formed with enough echo to give the soundstage real depth. Despite their size, the Simple Audio lets the little Q Acoustics fill the room with a dense soundstage that lifts the Roomplayer above many a budget streamer.

Channel separation is admirable for such a modest package. With a 16/44 FLAC file of Morrissey's *Hold On To Your Friends* streamed over Ethernet, my eyes and ears dart from speaker to speaker as the Roomplayer extricates the opening guitar strums and looping riffs, as they leap across the soundstage, pushing the speakers wide and building the anticipation for the track to begin proper. And when the song's bass and percussion kicks in, the music has enough weight and



authority to convince me that an extra power amp could secretly be lurking in the background, giving the Roomplayer a helping hand. It's not, of course, and what I'm hearing is the unit's Class D innards driving the Qs with ease. With the speakers atop a pair of Atacama stands placed 20cm from a rear wall, upper bass across the Morrissey track has more presence than I've heard from other one-box streamers in this price range, although it can sound a little too forced with more complex material.

Despite its Class D DNA, the Roomplayer isn't a dry or cold performer by any means and it can turn its hand to bringing out the rich analogue nature of many an acoustic performance when asked. Playing a 24/96 ALAC file of Mark Knopfler's *Miss You Blues*, the Simple Audio's sound has the atmosphere of an intimate live performance, with Knopfler's gravelly tones sounding suitably relaxed and well worn as they flow seamlessly within the soundstage. With some less sophisticated streamers, this recording can sound bereft of tonal character and somewhat bland. But the Simple Audio gives the track just the right amount of warmth and poise to bring it to life.

Using the Roomplayer to drive the more demanding load that my Audiovector floorstanders present, shows that this little box doesn't flinch under pressure. While in absolute terms it may not have the

same levels of grip to really drive their bass like the monstrous Class AB amp that they're typically fed by, the Roomplayer does bring a sense of sweetness across the midrange and control in the upper bass that makes for a very engaging sound nonetheless.

Conclusion

This is a neat and discreet streaming solution that's easy to use, with a neutral, detailed sound. It's also a top-quality DAC, and thanks to its sensible connectivity options including a preamp output and multi-room networking, growing a bigger system around it is made easy. Partner with a pair of good-quality standmounts to let the Simple Audio's sonic energy shine through and you'll have a system that really lets the music do the talking ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Rich and engaging sound; unassuming styling; intuitive interface

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: S/PDIF digital inputs would be handy

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Those who like their hi-fi to be heard and not seen are in for a real treat

FEATURES



OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



- 1 S/PDIF outputs (coaxial & optical)
- 2 Speaker binding posts
- 3 RCA analogue inputs
- 4 Preamp outputs
- 5 Ethernet and USB ports



RECORD STORE DAY™

APRIL 19, 2014

The annual celebration of all things vinyl goes from strength to strength as **Simon Berkovitch** discovers when he takes a trip to Oxford

There's a hundred-strong queue of punters snaking down Oxford's Cowley Road, all itching to get into Truck Store, the city's "independent music hub". The postman's barely got his trousers on: it's just gone 8am and Truck doesn't throw open its doors for another hour. These dedicated vinyl junkies are hoping they stand a decent chance of bagging the most desirable offerings of the limited edition wax that's available exclusively through bricks and mortar shops today. Yet the majority of these early birds look like latecomers compared with the super-eager customer leading the charge into the racks. "Our first guy was there before 5am," says Truck Store's manager, Carl Smithson. "That's dedication. We gave him one of our T-shirts for the effort." Welcome to Record Store Day...

The third Saturday in April means just one thing for music fans: Record Store Day (RSD). Each year, this global event inspires scenes of hardcore devotion that even make Truck's earliest of risers look like a Johnny-come-lately – Huddersfield's Vinyl Tap saw its first punter starting to queue at 9:30pm

on the Friday evening, beating the shop's previous record by two-and-a-half hours.

It all began in 2007 in the US, when over 700 independent stores came together to celebrate vinyl culture. Fast forward to 2014 and it's such a high profile event that it boasts no less than Chuck D – co-founder of hip-hop legends Public Enemy – as its ambassador. Vinyl "webbed the sounds of the world across the planet long before the www," he enthuses, before waxing lyrical

RSD 2014 releases range from luminous *Ghostbusters* vinyl to classical CD boxsets

about the symbiotic relationship between great shops and great music. "Motown's Berry Gordy had a record store. Elektra founder Jac Holzman had a record store. The Stax label had their Satellite Record Shop right next to their studio. Keith Richards opens a conversation with Mick Jagger as teenagers on a train platform

because he had a stack of hot blues records in his arms after leaving a shop. You should have an idea of what I'm saying here."

This was the UK's seventh such celebration, with over 200 stores taking part in 2014. Special vinyl, CD and cassette releases and promotional items from major and indie labels alike were made exclusively for the day, ranging from picture discs from David Bowie and One Direction and 7in singles from Blur and Paul Weller, to super-limited, beautifully packaged obscurities from the global underground and reissues of classic albums across a wide range of musical genres.

Hundreds of artists across the country also performed at independently owned shops. Artists as diverse as Adam Ant and Spiritualized took to the stage at London's Rough Trade stores, while indie favourite Get Cape, Wear Cape, Fly played to a packed house at Oxford's Truck Store. Other special events included artist meet-and-greets and in-store DJs, as seen at Music and Video Exchange on bustling Berwick Street, Soho – the epicentre of London RSD action and home to numerous independent stores.



Vinyl enthusiasts form an orderly queue down Oxford's Cowley Road ahead of Truck's opening time on RSD



The first punter was rewarded with a Truck Store T-shirt

"DON'T PAY OVER THE ODDS!"



Heed Huddersfield's Vinyl Tap's advice to beat the touts selling RSD vinyl at inflated prices online...

Vinyl Tap in Huddersfield specialises in both new and used vinyl, but this is just one part of its empire: it has been in the business for over 20 years, operating a vast mail order

enterprise for rare and collectible vinyl on the outskirts of the town. This is the third year that Vinyl Tap has participated in RSD and, like Truck, buyer John-Paul Craven says it's all in the planning...

"It started in February, when we attended a meeting of ERA (Entertainment Retailers Association). The effort that goes into the day beforehand – ordering and sorting – made the day run smoothly," he says. "Then there's getting it on to the website in preparation for the following week."

Big sellers on the day included the limited edition records from Pet Shop Boys and Nirvana, as well as the notorious One Direction picture disc, "which was good as it went to people who might not have ever been to a record shop before".

With regards to the rest of the releases, "some you couldn't have seen selling in a million years, but look at how in demand the Ghostbusters picture disc was – who can say what will do well or whether a release should come out?"

John-Paul believes that RSD has a positive impact on business throughout the year, as "it reminds people that real-life record shops are there and have great stuff in them".

Vinyl Tap's most enthusiastic punter was queuing outside the store from the previous evening to get his hands on the wax booty available on 19 April – a real dedicated music fan. But what about those who are just out to make a buck, hoovering up the more desirable releases to sell online at inflated prices? "They are only a small percentage," record collector John-Paul believes. "Personally, I think they taint the day, but it's important not to focus on this too much. The way to do most damage to them is not to pay over the odds on ebay! Shops quite often still have stuff at normal prices that is going for money online. If you are prepared to queue early and then visit shops elsewhere either on the day or later in the week then you stand a strong chance of getting what you are after."

Vinyl Tap plans to expand on its best-ever RSD event by installing a stage for instores throughout the year, starting with an appearance from punk legend Wreckless Eric on 22 May. www.vinyltap.co.uk

This year's RSD is Truck Store's fourth, having held one each year since opening in early 2011. Its parent company, Rapture Entertainment, celebrating its tenth anniversary in 2014, numbers three stores: the aforementioned Oxford shop, a branch in nearby Witney and one in Evesham, Worcestershire. Truck's appearance – as a pop-up shop as part of 2010's OX4, a multi-venue festival inspired by Texas' South by Southwest – addressed Oxford's lack of independent record stores. Launching as a guerrilla record store, the pop-up quickly took root in the empty shop it had occupied, with Carl taking on the role of manager.

Knowledgeable Carl and his team of passionate music fans may make RSD look easy but, like every record shop participating, the winning formula is the

Vinyl, CD and cassette releases and promotional items alike were made exclusively for the day

result of some serious behind-the-scenes graft. "The work starts quite far in advance for us," he explains. "Once the official list of the UK releases has been published, and the pre-sale info starts coming in, we try to get an idea of what to order by getting customers to send us their wants lists. This has proved particularly useful with some of the more obscure titles. This year, the deadlines were much earlier than the previous one's – partly due to the bank holidays, I think, but also as a result of feedback that the record companies needed more time to process orders... although that didn't stop some titles running late..."

Carl continues: "We then look back over the previous year's sales and the wants lists

and have a marathon session putting together our orders. Once that's all on order, the following weeks are spent organising the live music aspect of the event – booking bands, designing posters, doing any press we can and usually fielding a hundred phone calls, tweets and emails asking if we're getting certain titles, how many copies and so on. You get used to saying the same thing over and over again!"

Let's get ready to rumble

The real fun starts about a week before the event as the stock begins to come in. "First a couple of titles will arrive alongside other orders, then the floodgates open," says Carl. "There were a couple of days I think we almost broke Barry, our TNT driver. Then it's a case of getting it all priced up, labelled and the evening before is spent rearranging the shop to make room for it all."

One thing Truck doesn't have to make room for is a stage, as its retro-chic café doubles as an elevated performance area. "Live music was something we wanted to make integral to the store here, so we have a stage and FA built into the shop," explains Carl. "We've hosted over 150 acts – from great local bands to really big names – such as indie legends The Wedding Present. Record Store Day is a fantastic opportunity to put together a lineup that reflects this, so we had a great mix of local and national talent. From the thriving Oxford music scene we had We Aeronauts – who are something of a pocket-sized Arcade Fire – and Robin Bennett from The Dreaming Spires, representing the strong Americana scene here in Oxford. Luke Sital-Singh was a particular highlight for me – he's going to be a big star. Then our old friend Get Cape, Wear Cape, Fly put in his usual enthusiasm-filled performance. He goes way back with both Rapture and Truck Festival, so we



The day crossed the generations, with all ages eager to snap up some vinyl

RECORD STORE DAY



Robin from The Dreaming Spires represents Oxford's Americana scene



Truck favourite Get Cape, Wear Cape, Fly entertains the crowd



We Aeronauts: like a pocket-sized Arcade Fire, apparently



Luke Sital-Singh is destined for big things according to Truck's Carl

"OUR BEST DAY FOR OVER 10 YEARS"

London's Music and Video Exchange let the music do the talking with DJ sets and on-roof musicians

Across its London branches in Soho, Greenwich and Notting Hill Gate, Music and Video Exchange (MVE, part of the Music and Goods chain) busted out the Technics 210s for a heavyweight battle of the DJs – all of whom are members of staff.

The event, commemorated by an eclectic CD from Sean 'The Knowledge' P and Richard Sen that was available free on the day, saw sets from RUFUS & Bambi, Jonny Goodfella, Tommy Koi and Dr Kruger – as well as from Sean and Richard – taking shoppers on an incredible musical journey through jazz, soul, funk, house, techno and beyond.

The Soul and Dance Exchange, located in the attic of the Notting Hill Gate record store made like an old-school pirate station during the afternoon, as it was also home to *misoul.com* for three hours, broadcasting its A to Z of *misoul* from there. And, channelling the spirit of the Fab Four's legendary Apple concert, retro rockers Black Cat blasted through a raw set from the shop's rooftop.

"It was a fantastic day all round," enthuses senior buyer Richard Scott. "Black Cat's rooftop gig was spectacular, but a bit too loud for the neighbours, so we had to cancel the second set in the afternoon."

MVE had "over 30 of the RSD titles, multiples of most of them" and only had a handful of copies left in the racks at the time of writing. The most requested record of the day was the Pet Shop Boys 12in, which sold out within 30 minutes.

RSD 2014 was another success story for MVE with tills more overworked than 2013's event. "We did better than last year on the day," says Richard. "Our Berwick Street branch did about 35 percent better than last Record Store Day, which was previously our best day for more than 10 years – if not ever."

www.mgeshops.com



One Direction on a list between (veteran punk band) OFF! and (electronic artist) Oneohtrix Point Never broadens the appeal of the day and gets a completely different group of people through the door of the store – which is surely the point of the day?" And it's a valid one: everyone from pre-teens to pensioners are packing out Truck. All are united by a common cause, despite their differing tastes and ages. And it's a cause that readers of these pages know well: passion for sound.

But despite the mixed crowd of music fans of all ages ringing the tills and enjoying the live music, is Record Store Day an anomaly when compared with the rest of the year? Is the vinyl bubble set to burst? Not according to Carl: the format is "absolutely here to stay" and he refutes the assertion that the surge in popularity is just a passing fad. ▶

were pleased he could take part. The day ended with local reggae band Dubwiser, who had people dancing in the aisles."

Ultra vivid scene

The Dreaming Spires' Robin Bennett also goes way back with Oxford's independent music scene. As a teenager, Robin set up the aforementioned Truck Festival in 1998, now an Oxfordshire institution, drawing big names such as White Lies and The Cribbs to this year's tribal gathering at Hill Farm.

Today, as a duo with local legend Tony Poole, he plays to a full, appreciative house in Truck, bagging the early afternoon slot. It's the first of a few sets Robin performs in record shops today, also cutting loose at the RSD after-party in the Amersham store, "part of the ever-larger wave of fringe activity which is stimulated by RSD," as he puts it. The Dreaming Spires' contribution to a four-way split EP on UK Americana imprint Clubhouse is part of this wave. Although not an official RSD release, the EP is released on the day and is in four or five indie stores – including Truck and the Amersham store.

"All the shops I went to seemed to be in great health and demonstrating the way for record shops to survive – by diversifying appropriately, whether it's selling guitars, cowboy boots or coffee; acting as a hub for the music community; and being passionate about the music they sell," Robin reports. "It's vital to have outlets where music is valued so there can be some economy built around it to support the creators and labels,

too. The publicity around RSD is a chance to draw attention to music and that people still making it are crafting beautiful physical products to go with it – whether that's the Clubhouse label's excellent sleeves or Get Cape, Wear Cape, Fly's release consisting of a download and a wrestling mask."

Get Cape, Wear Cape, Fly's RSD release is a good example of the eclectic nature of this year's list of official RSD releases – a list that ranges from luminous *Ghostbusters* vinyl to classical CD boxsets. RSD has also grown to include much more commercial artists, such as One Direction and Katy Perry. To some,

RSD 2014 saw a surge in vinyl sales, with an increase of 133 percent on the previous week

this reeks of bandwagon jumping, does damage to independent labels as majors take priority over indies in vinyl pressing plants and dilutes the credibility of the annual event. To others, including Truck's manger, the inclusion of artists that appeal to a much younger audience is in the spirit of RSD – and important for the survival of bricks and mortar record shops in the longer term.

"The big talking point was One Direction bringing out a picture disc. Many have criticised this, but to me this was a masterstroke," Carl reckons, going on to explain his case with succinct logic. "Having

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adjective

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RECORD STORE DAY



Truck's Carl Smithson serves up some of the black stuff for another satisfied customer

"The range of people buying vinyl is testament to its staying power," he says. "We have customers who always buy new release albums on vinyl; others who are replacing worn out Pink Floyd or Bob Dylan LPs with 180g represses; and then there are those who are re-buying more recent albums they've probably had as downloads or even CDs, but really feel a connection to. We call these latter titles 'modern classics'... we sell lots of copies of albums by artists such as Arcade Fire, Bon Iver, Jeff Buckley, Neutral Milk Hotel and – of course, with it being

The winning formula to RSD is the result of some serious behind-the-scenes graft

Oxford – Radiohead. On top of these, you have the stalwart crate-diggers, those who take a punt on random pre-owned albums and the *NME*-reading kids who can only afford the odd 7in single but truly treasure it. The fact that this 'vinyl revival' has spread in so many directions and can't be pinned to one single trend suggests to me it'll definitely survive."

Happily, industry statistics appear to back up Carl's enthusiasm. BBC news reported that this year's RSD saw a "surge in vinyl sales, with an increase of 133 percent on the previous week". This increase was led by yet another vinyl outing for The Stone Roses' debut album (the biggest selling album that week, although not actually an exclusive Record Store Day release), in which sales grew by 62 percent when compared with the previous year. Perhaps most pleasing of all is the fact that it's a younger generation that's increasingly pushing this demand.

"The vinyl format, while still popular with baby boomers that grew up with it and nurtured by events such as Record Store Day, increasingly also appeals to an engaged audience of younger artists and consumers alike, who appreciate its iconic heritage as part of rock and pop culture," says Gennaro Castaldo, spokesman for the British Phonographic Industry (BPI). "LP sales doubled in volume last year to 780,000 units – the highest annual total in over 15 years, and with sales up again this year, we're close to seeing the greatest demand for vinyl recordings in nearly two decades."

And, of course, it figures that this demand for vinyl should run in parallel with a demand for equipment to play these platters on, bringing new blood into our wonderful world of hi-fi...

A day to remember

This seemingly unstoppable demand for vinyl has ensured that Truck Store, and other fine independent musical outposts around the UK, has definitely had a day to remember – both financially and artistically. But there's no rest for Carl and the staff after Dubwiser shook Truck to its foundations and the last happy punters left the shop: there's RSD 2015 to think about.

"We always have a post-RSD meeting to assess what we did right and wrong; what we can learn and how we can adapt... There's a dialogue going on already." And it's because the best record shops, like Truck Store, are encouraging dialogue between punters, local and national labels and musicians, thinking to the future, and adapting to the changing face of retail that we can be hopeful that Record Store Day 2015 will be an increasingly community-minded, independent-focused event, uniting the generations with passion for sound ●



SHOPPING LIST

This year's RSD has 600+ exclusive titles to choose from on the day. Blink and you may well have missed these eight platters that mattered



David Bowie
Rock 'n' Roll Suicide
(UK); 1984 (US)
Two 40th anniversary 7in picture discs from the Laughing Gnome. Prices have already shot through the roof on ebay.



Luke Haines
Lou Reed Lou Reed
The Black Box Recorder head honcho's love song to the Velvet Underground's frontman. Limited to just 500 copies.



Joy Division
An Ideal For Living
Joy Division's megare rare debut given the reissue treatment for RSD 2014. Expect these faithful recreations to be super scarce.



Nirvana
Pennyroyal Tea
The original plans for the single were shelved due to Kurt's suicide. Bagging one of these singles made Vinyl Tap's John-Paul a very happy man.



Ray Parker Jr
Ghostbusters
No need to be 'fraid of no ghost with this glow-in-the-dark picture disc to light your way. Can the bank holiday classic really be 30 years old?



Pat Shop Boys
Fluorescent
One of RSD's most wanted: two exclusive mixes of the track from 2013's *Electric* album. MVE sold out of its copies within 30 minutes.



Songs: Ohia
Journey On: Collected Singles
Nine 7in singles and CD box set with 24 page booklet. Truck Store's manager Carl's most wanted RSD booty.



Paul Weller
Brand New Toy
At just 500 copies for the UK, this was one of the most limited releases from a major artist this year – and one of the most controversial, too.

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THIS MONTH



NIGEL WILLIAMSON

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

As one of HFC's chief music reviewers Nigel certainly knows a decent tune when he hears one. He recently put the cat among the pigeons by suggesting rock is stagnating.



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.



ANDREW SIMPSON

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

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



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.



More ways to get in touch:

You can also send your questions to us via social media: twitter.com/HiFiChoiceMag facebook.com/hifichoice.co.uk

Email us at 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

LETTER OF THE MONTH

▶ Life begins at 50

I am approaching 50 and never having bothered before with anything hi-fi I find myself wanting a classier sound without having to think about spending silly amounts of money.

I simply have a large number of songs on my phone, Queen being my favourite, and I'm fed up with it sounding tinny all the time. I'm not clued up about what to do here. I know I don't want cables and wires and I must be able to move around with it. I am thinking about Spotify, but not through my phone speakers, no way.

Hopefully I don't sound like a thicky compared to all you clued-up people and I hope that you can help me out.

Mick Broadbent

NR: Hi Mick, by far the simplest way of getting the best sound from your MP3 files is to use a Bluetooth speaker. I'm assuming you have a smartphone that has Bluetooth? If not, you can connect it using a lead plugged into the headphone socket.

There is a huge number of speakers on the market spanning a wide range of price points and sound qualities. Take a look at the Bose SoundLink Mini, Cambridge Audio Minx Go or Damson Oyster to name but three. The nice thing with Bluetooth speakers is that no wires are required, apart from a mains power supply. Some come with a rechargeable battery making them portable, if that is an important requirement for you. You will be pleasantly surprised by the room-filling quality you can get by simply using the playback software on your mobile phone.

AS: It would be good to know what kind of phone and music library you use, as recent technologies have led so some improvements in what you can do with your phone's audio (although it's still some way off a decent CD or turntable-based system). Here's a few pointers on how to get the best out of your phone, but you will still be restricted by the device's audio limits. I'm presuming you're using iTunes, so firstly make sure your import settings are set to 'rip' CDs with little or no compression. Apple Lossless Encoder is the setting to chose for CD-level sound quality. Likewise when buying downloads, go for files with the highest 'bit rate' (kbps) available.

Next, ensure the music that's synced to your phone is being transferred with as little compression as possible. Less compression will reduce the

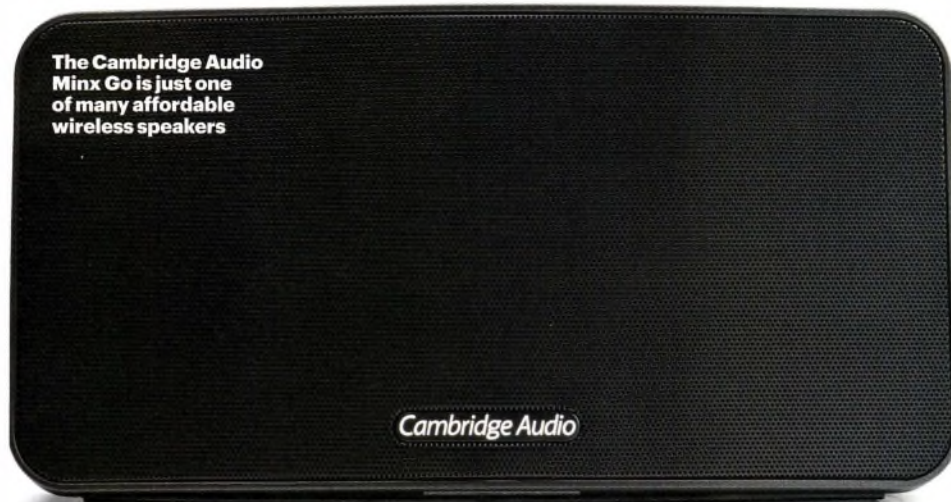
amount of music your phone can hold, but what you transfer will sound better. To change the sync settings in iTunes, connect your phone, select the summary page and check the 'convert higher bit rate songs' is un-ticked or set to as high a level as possible.

Now you have two options to get audio from your phone,

How do I make the music from my mobile phone sound less tinny?

depending on if you have a phone running Android or Apple software. For Android phones check if it has the superior aptX Bluetooth codec installed instead of the standard SBC type (there's a handy phone list here:

aptx.com/category/phones) and if so, look to buy a product that accepts aptX wireless streaming. I'd recommend Cambridge Audio's Minx Xi, which at £600 offers an all-in amp, streaming, radio and headphone package with audiophile credentials. For Apple phones, check to see if you're phone runs AirPlay, which will allow you to send a bit-perfect signal from your phone via Apple's proprietary wi-fi tech. NAD's £799 D 7050 one-box system accepts both aptX and AirPlay, guaranteeing you a more future-proof solution. The Minx is quite warm sounding with great bass for the money, while the NAD is far cleaner sounding. Beyond this ▶



The Cambridge Audio Minx Go is just one of many affordable wireless speakers

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THE RESULT IS AN UNPRECEDENTED PRECISION

Use your head

I've been interested in hi-fi and the pursuit for aural magic for over 20 years, enjoying the mysticism around technology and the aspects of music and human emotion that simply cannot be measured.

My system comprises of a Naim ND5SX streamer, Heed Obelisk Si MkII amplifier, Neat Motive 2 loudspeakers, Lehmann Rhineland headphome amplifier and Denon D-7100 headphones, Cyrus solid core interconnects and DNM Reson speaker cable.

While the sound produced through the loudspeakers is what I can only describe as magical – I can't imagine needing to upgrade for the foreseeable future – the experience through the headphones is less impressive, appearing veiled, although having impressive bass, lacking the realism I know the ND5SX is capable of producing.

Although my initial demonstration of the headphones was quite good, it's only after longer term listening that I realised that the headphone experience isn't to my taste.

Since the Rhineland seems generally well regarded I was wondering if swapping the headphones would help. I require a closed-back design (AKA wife friendly!) and have a budget of £500-£1,000.

Alternatively, would changing the headphone amplifier help, interconnects or even adding a power supply for the ND5SX?

Dean Stevens



DP reckons Stax's SRS-3170 holds the answer for Dean

NR: Well Dean, your Lehmann Rhineland is a great unit, but finding a great pair of headphones is very much influenced by personal choice, so I would agree with you and would look at your headphones first. You may find that, for example, a modestly-priced pair of Sennheiser closed-back circumaural headphones, like the Momentum, suits your ears better. It is definitely something to try before you buy. The other alternatives, while having a definite effect on the sound quality, are not, in my opinion, likely to result in the significant change that will convert you back to headphone listening with your current setup.

DP: Given your budget is up to £1,000, I'd implore you to live on lentils for a month and stretch to £1,195 for a Stax SRS-3170 electrostatic system. This includes the electrostatic ear speakers and the driver amplifier, so is all inclusive. You'll find that this has a dramatically more open and even sound, with loads more detail, definition and musicality than a similarly priced dynamic headphone or headphone amplifier combination. It's well worth the money, in my view.

realise the limitations further down the line and like you, are loathed to start ripping their CDs again in a superior format or learning new software. The good news is iTunes is far more versatile for audiophiles than it used to be. As our guide says, it doesn't support FLAC files, which is the preferred format of most audiophiles, but Apple has been offering its own software equivalent, ALAC (Apple Lossless Encoder), for some time. So if you want to stick with iTunes make sure you change your import settings to rip CDs in this format going forward.

Audiophile labels like Naim Music and Linn Records also offer hi-res ALAC files up to 24-bit/192kHz alongside FLAC alternatives, which iTunes can store and playback, providing your computer and DAC can output/accept this level. Apple's AirPlay in iTunes will also allow to stream up to 24-bit/96kHz wirelessly from your library. The bigger issue with iTunes is piping the music from your computer into an external DAC while stopping your computer's soundcard interfering with it en route, which is one of the big advantages of software like foobar2000 and JRiver as they cleverly bypass the soundcard ensuring an unfettered signal.

As hi-res being offered through the iTunes stores, there may be changes afoot if internet speculation is to be believed!

Mr music lover

I am a music lover and am trying to put together a two-channel music playback system for my room (sized 19 x 13 feet). I listen to music

you'd be better off storing music on a computer or NAS drive hooked up to your system, perhaps running an app from your phone as a remote control for playback.

DP: Paradoxically I am in the opposite situation to you – approaching the big five-o and never having bothered before with anything not hi-fi! But I digress. Given you don't want wires and complexity, why not start with an aptX widget like Arcam's rBlink (£160) that lets you stream your music from your tablet or phone into a hi-fi system? You don't specify a budget, so let's assume you want a good basic amplifier – I'd suggest a Rega Brio-R (£500) which is a superb sounding yet compact integrated. As for speakers, best go and listen for yourself, but Q Acoustics' Concept 20 (£350) are great little boxes that pack a big punch. Together this system will sound cracking, you'll be amazed how good it is considering its dinky size and simplicity.



Ok computer

I've been enjoying your helpful guides recently, especially last month's one covering Computer Music, which has given me the impetus to finally get to grips with this area of my own system a bit

iTunes doesn't support FLAC but I want to use it – what can I do?

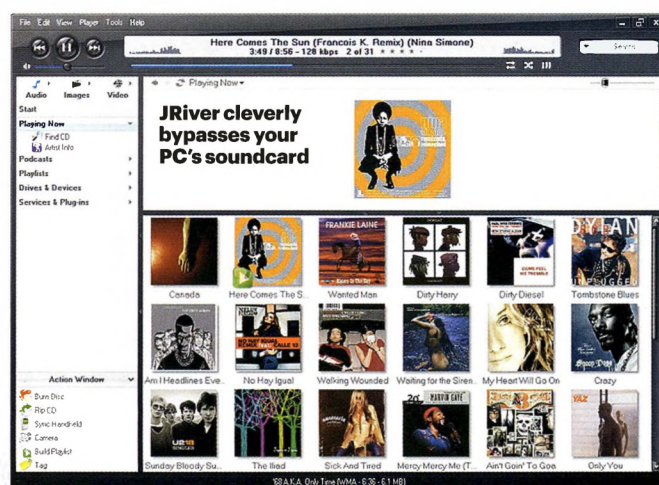
more. My system is largely analogue based (Musical Fidelity amp, Cambridge Audio CD4SE CD player, Rega RP3 turntable and R3 speakers). Having copied my CDs into iTunes mostly for my iPod, I was disappointed to read that iTunes won't support FLAC or offer any hi-res downloads.

I now want to build a decent-sounding digital library to stream into a new DAC I'm planning to buy, but

am reluctant to copy all my CDs again into different software like JRiver or Audirvana Plus which I'm not familiar with, and I'd really appreciate some advice on my options! Do I need to start again?

Stanley Owens

AS: Hi Stanley, I imagine lots of music fans have gone down a similar route with iTunes, only to





The Spondor A6R would be DP's choice of speaker for Anurag

at moderate volume levels. Though I listen to all genres, my favourite is country, light classical, classical vocal and instrumental, reggae, pop, flamenco and world fusion.

I am trying to identify the right speaker for my room and my music tastes. I am looking for an easy on the ear speaker that provides a good sound stage, doesn't lose rhythm and is tonally neutral. After listening to some speakers I have shortlisted a few: Harbeth Compact 7ES-3, Neat Classic Elite SX, ProAc Response D18 and Spondor A6R.

Have you reviewed any of these? What would be a good choice? Can you also suggest an amp that will match with your suggested speaker?

Anurag Moghe, India

DP: Hi Anurag, I haven't heard the ProAc and so can't comment, but I have reviewed/heard the Harbeth, Neat and Spondor. They're all very good speakers, with a quintessentially 'British'

sound – meaning they're pretty well balanced, not shouty, have a decently accurate tone and get into the music nicely without showing off. The Neat is the most fun to listen to, doing rhythms especially well, although it's perhaps not the most neutral or transparent. The Harbeth has a good stab at this, but is still fun to listen to. The Spondor tries to be all things to all people, and largely succeeds. It has a big sound with a good soundstage, a nice musical gait and a very refined tone. For me, this would be the safest bet, especially as you haven't told me what amp you're using. Personally, I'd drive the Spondor direct from a Quad Elite QSP power amp, which has a very clean sound and plenty of watts. Use a good passive pre or drive direct from the source if it has a variable output.

► **Ultra vivid screen** I live in Australia and I read HFC every month. I was reading your review of the Cambridge Audio Aero 6 speakers and something sent

me into a reverie. I have been interested in music and audio since I was a child in Calgary. I remember one day I heard a pair of Quad ESL electrostatic loudspeakers (they call them ESL-57s now, but at the time they were just the ESL) in a shop called the Boutique of Sound at the Westbrook mall. I said to Bob, the excellent salesman (who in later years went on to become my friend): "Where is the man playing the guitar – is he behind the curtain?" He threw the curtains back and, of course, there was nothing there but cardboard boxes! The things I took for screens were actually speakers and so I was hooked for life.

He had a Quad 33 and 303 power amp driving the ESLs with a Linn Turntable as source. Somehow I got the idea that the UK was the centre of the audio universe. It took years to find out that there were other things out there, but the impression stayed with me. Anyone who has heard about British hi-fi will have heard about the Quad ESLs.

Are the Quad ESL-2905 loudspeakers any good?

This brings me to my first question, have you ever reviewed the newer Quad ESL loudspeakers? I notice you have covered the Martin Logans from the US, but apparently not the Quads. After reading your article I did a little research on the web and Quad still makes a version of the ESL-63, but with much better bass and power handling called the ESL-2905.

Is there any chance you could review these speakers and let me know how they sound? I don't think they are sold here, but I would still love to know what they are like regardless.

Thanks for the great magazine. I just love spinning a record or two and reading through the pages

► Rock's not dead!

Hello Nigel, Your article 'Is this RIP for rock 'n' roll' was so sad. You are looking for new music, and can't find it!

It's out there, if you look. The new music world is incredibly alive and vibrant. Live music is alive and kicking. In the last month I've seen Flower Corsano Duo, Shapeshifter, Stephen O'Malley, Fear of Men, 65 Days of Static, Cold Pumas, Led Bib, Crookes, Umberto, Dum Dum Girls and Bo Ningen. And these were just the headliners. Will any of these become as huge as Led Zeppelin or the Stones? No idea, but all of them were superb and all of them were exciting.

You say: "The last time rock music really mattered to a generation was arguably during the Britpop wars between Oasis and Blur". Arguably indeed. You should join me at some of the gigs and see how passionate the audience is about the bands playing for them.

One thing's for sure, rock 'n' roll will never die, it will always be re-invented.

Just in case you need a reference point, the first album I bought was *Led Zeppelin I*, and the Velvet Underground and Ten Years After were around when I first got into music.

Guy Pettigrew

NW: I agree there is plenty of new music out there, Guy – I still get around 50 new CDs in my postbag every week! But the point is not really whether you or I find this new music 'exciting' or if Bo Ningen are as good as Ten Years After; the discussion was about whether pop music in a digital age, which offers so many other sources of entertainment to divert us can ever have the same broader social, cultural and even political impact it once exerted. Sadly, I'd say the answer is almost certainly no, however many good new bands are out there.

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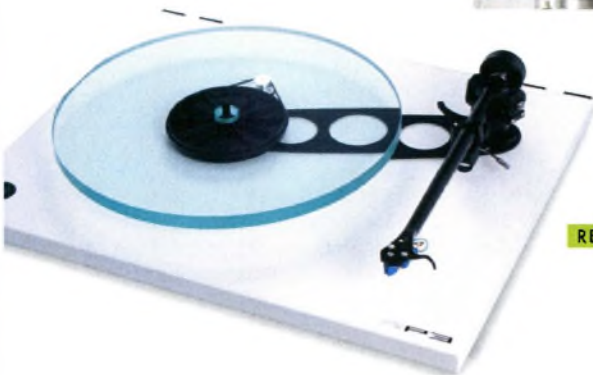
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Quad's ESL-2905s are a little sedate for DP's taste

on a Saturday afternoon when it's too damned hot to go outside!

Jack Davis

DP: London calling the great dominions! You're right to say that the UK is in fact the centre of the audio universe Jack, and everyone is just pretending! As for the Quads, I have heard the ESL-2905 at length and can vouch for them as excellent high-end loudspeakers. They've got that distinct electrostatic sound that feels like the music is coming out of a vast expanse of inky blackness. Some love it, but I am conflicted. The 2905s are highly effective at telling you what is wrong with conventional box loudspeakers, but to my tastes they're a little sedate and don't move enough air to get my beloved reggae and techno going properly. In their defence, while the bigger MartinLogans move more air, the Quads – while sounding less fun – still come over as a little more integrated and 'all-of-a-piece'. As they say, you pay yer money and takes your choice. As for it being too hot to go outside, I'm afraid we wouldn't really know what you're talking about back here in the motherland...



Needle work

I really want to upgrade my budget

Project Elemental Deck to something a bit more specialised and better sounding. I will be pairing it with an Arcam FMJ A19, which I bought because it has its own phono stage and Bowers & Wilkins 685 S2s.

I want to upgrade my turntable can you advise me where to start?

My choices for turntable are the Avid Ingenium, Rega RP6, Project 6 Perspex and the Mitchell Gyrodec SE. I'm not sure about tonearms, I have heard that the Pro-Ject tonearms sound good and I really wouldn't be able to afford the SME tonearms. I could probably stretch to the Rega and Jelco arms, but if these are no better than the Pro-Ject I would stick with it. Lastly the cartridge, I have been reading reviews and the Ortofons seem to get good reviews whether it's the 2M Blue or 2M Black, but I don't know if I should maybe get

the MM edition or the MC 1. I have heard the MM 1 just screws into the tonearm, is this correct? The MC cartridges need to be screwed in using a screwdriver as this is really the problem point for me I'd be hoping to get the best cartridge, but one that won't involve a lot of tinkering around to get the perfect setup. Since everything here is over £1,000 I would like to get the best turntable that should do me for years to come. I hope that this all makes sense. I am leaning towards the Ingenium or the Project Perspex.

Shane Dorrian

AS: Hi Shane, firstly the basic turntable that you buy will be the foundation to getting the best sound from your vinyl, so I'd put as much of your budget into this as you can, as you can always upgrade the arm and cartridge later on. Of the ones you've suggested the Gyro SE is probably the best performer. It's also a suspended design and, therefore, will require a little more time and care setting it up and keeping it in tune. You will, however, certainly be rewarded in the sound stakes for your

efforts. The others are all very well made, with perhaps the Avid having the edge in terms of build, but you should try to give them all a listen if you can as they offer quite different musical presentations.

You should also consider Michell's non-suspended TecnoDec. In terms of arms, Rega and Pro-Ject do indeed make some cracking arms for the money, which usually come as part of the deck's package. These will also work well on the Avid and Michell models (but check the available armboards).

If your budget can stretch and if its these two decks you're looking at consider investing in something like Michell's Tecno Arm (a top-class reworking of Rega's design) or Audio Note's latest Arm 1 Version II, which offers exceptional levels of insight that won't hold either deck back.

On cartridge types: MM (moving magnet) and MC (moving coil) use the same mounting systems of two small bolts though the arm's head into the cartridge's mounting lugs. Some cartridges come with pre-threaded holes making them easier to fit, as this does away with the tiny nuts that hold the bolts in place. You'll also have to connect the arm's tiny push-fit wires to the cartridge's pins and align it all properly, so if all this sounds a bit daunting, perhaps get your dealer to fit your cartridge of choice when you buy the deck.

The difference between MM and MC types is in their internal designs, MMs have magnets attached to their moving cantilever, which opposes fixed coils, and for MC types it's the other way around. This means that MC types don't usually have replaceable styli like MM types. This means replacing it when its worn will be more costly. Also bear in mind you'll need a high-output MC cartridge to feed your Arcam's 'MM only' phono stage. I'd start with an Ortofon 2M as you suggest, but also consider Nagaoka's offerings for a sound that's more full bodied.

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Spaghetti Junction

Getting behind your hi-fi and sorting out the tangled mess of cables can improve the performance almost as much as investing in new components explains **Jason Kennedy**

Spaghetti, it's wonderful stuff unless it's behind the hi-fi, then it's not only unsightly to many tastes but there are those that think it undermines sound quality. In the past I've tended to pay lip service to the notion that cables shouldn't be mixed up, but a reviewer's system rarely sits still so things quickly get jumbled and before you know it there's a jungle of cables going every which way. But does this really matter, does the fact they cross each other and frequently touch have any bearing on the sonic results?

A recent experience would suggest it does. I have been using a Naim NDS streamer for a few months and getting excellent results, but not such great ones as to warrant the outlay this piece of hardware requires, especially when it's combined with a 555 PS (a total in the region of £13k). So Naim's man on the ground Steve Harris came over to have a look and listen, in truth it was only the former that he needed when he saw how many interconnects, Ethernet cables and power cables were arrayed behind the system.

We started out by 'de-stressing' the power umbilicals between NDS and power supply, essentially this means dressing them so that there is as little tension as possible, which with a stiff cable like the Burndy is more of an issue than usual. But it's worth avoiding in any cable, avoid twists and tight bends if you can. The next stage was to

All it takes is a bit of patience with dressing so that cables don't touch

look at all the cables that were behind the system and try to find ways to route them in order to avoid close proximity. Some smaller cables went round to the side of the rack and others were positioned such that contact was completely eliminated or minimised, which involved moving components in some instances.

This primarily had the effect of improving timing, a quality that Naim and many others, including the author consider to be the key to accurate musical reproduction. The effect it had on the piece we were using – Henry Threadgill's *Bermuda Blues* (a raw jazz piece with double bass, drums and brass) – was to bring out the funk element of the music. It also made the drummer's rim shots sound like Stuart Copeland of the Police, indicating that more reverb was being resolved and that each note had a fast and strong leading edge.

This took no money and not much time to achieve, yet it was the sort of improvement that you could easily pay quite dearly for if it involved a cable upgrade. And that was the sort of upgrade it sounded like. It's also not

difficult to maintain if you don't swap components all the time, all it takes is a bit of patience with dressing so that cables don't touch one another and you have an upgrade that in my system at least would usually cost several hundred pounds.

Later we started looking at the network that the NDS was deriving its signal from, at Steve's suggestion I found an old single outlet mains conditioner (unmarked, but possibly a Trichord) that had been lying fallow and put it between the wall and the extension feeding the router and switch. This had the effect of removing grunge from the soundstage so that quieter sounds could be heard, the sort of result you get when plugging source components into serious conditioners to be frank. It's an inconvenient truth that everything matters in revealing systems, but a disconcerting one that the power feeding mainstream networking devices is so crucial, I may have to find a linear PSU for the switch now.

CAT's the way to do it

This also opens the can of worms that is differences between Ethernet cables; in a system that's transparent they naturally have a bearing. We tried a variety from AudioQuest and Chord Co as well as non-audio oriented CAT7 and heard differences with every change. It was not always black and white, but the effects were broadly what you expect with cables of a similar topology – Ethernet has a well defined spec and the various CAT levels are related to degrees of shielding. In the end Chord Co's entry-level C-Stream produced the best combination of timing and bass weight with the NDS. Later on I made some more comparisons using a Resolution Audio Cantata streamer and found that AudioQuest's Cinnamon delivered the most detail, air and Copeland esque rim-shots. As ever it's different strokes for different devices.

Of course, the spaghetti factor is equally applicable to Ethernet cables. Throughout the system the rational is: the lesser the tangle the better the sound ●



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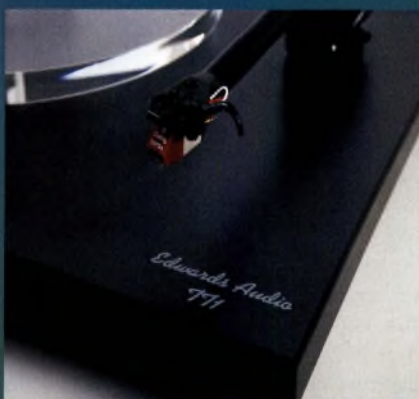
Apprentice MM
Phono stage



SP2 floor standing
Speakers - gloss



MC3 reference
Phono stage



Apprentice TT

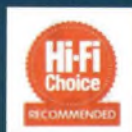


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Viva la resolution!

Chord's new Hugo digital-to-audio converter is so good that it's going to rock the digital audio world, reckons **David Price**, who appears to be more than just a bit smitten

Sometimes magazine journalists can go off on one. It's great to have a passion for your subject, but you have to remember that your readers may not share your proclivities. Any good writer should worry about drifting into self-parody; it's not good to be so outspoken that you make Geoff Boycott look like he doesn't have much to say about cricket by comparison. Anyone with an intricate knowledge of their subject will have strong opinions on the respective merits of this or that. But it's important not to get yourself locked in 'transmit' mode all the time.

Because of this, I'm reluctant to jump on bandwagons, or indeed off them. Often it's best to sit back and watch how all these new adventures in hi-fi play out. But sometimes, you've just got to stand up and be counted. One major moment for me was back in the early nineties, when it looked like everyone was believing the hype that CD was better than vinyl. Another was 10 years later when the world seemed to be moving to multi-channel and someone needed to stand up for stereo. Both times, I stuck my head above the parapet and got shot at from all directions. If I had a pound for every letter I've got from readers calling me a Luddite I'd have a lot of pounds!

Now events have once again forced me from my golden slumbers. Hearing Chord Electronics' new Hugo DAC has made a major mark on me. Ever so slightly, I feel a tiny tectonic plate has shifted, certainly in my soul. The Hugo is so good that, like the latest Adrian Newey Formula One racing car in a field of also-rans, it has carved out a sizeable lead for itself in almost no time at all. As the song says, there's something happening here, but what it is ain't exactly clear. The Hugo makes ye olde Compact Disc sound so good that I am beginning to question all that past antagonism.

It's important to remind ourselves just how good the latest generation of DAC chips from the likes of Wolfson, Burr-Brown, ESS Technology, etc are. They're better than ever, and it really is possible to do a highly capable digital-to-analogue converter now at a relatively low cost; you only need look at Audiolab's £600 M-DAC to see this. However, in order to do a truly exceptional DAC, you still need to go your own way. Just as the likes of Aston Martin hand builds its own cars and borrows precious little from other manufacturers, so the leading DAC makers use their own technology. dCS springs to mind here – its top Paganini four-box system sounds astounding, but is sadly

commensurately expensive too! The other DAC brand I've heard that stands apart from the rest is Chord Electronics.

While dCS DACs are the product of a team of engineers lead by Andy McHarg, at Chord it's basically all from the not inconsiderably large brain of Rob Watts. Rob is a man I've known for 21 years, mostly from

the other end of a telephone admittedly, but I've long been in awe of his digital audio designs. I remember hearing the DFA Enlightenment DAC back in the mid nineties, which along with the Pink Triangle DaCapo (John Westlake, latterly of Audiolab M-DAC fame, take a bow) was the best in the world back then. Rob's first product at Chord was the DAC64 over a decade ago and at the time I'd simply never heard anything else like it.

Striking the right Chord

The Hugo is its spiritual successor, but it is far better in my view, thanks to the massive increase in processing power and the concomitant increase in resolution of the digital filter. In the Hugo it's an amazingly powerful thing and delivers a sound that is quite unlike almost anything else I've heard. In some respects the dCS stuff is even better, cleaner, more open and more detailed, but it's many times more expensive and tellingly still doesn't quite have the exuberant *joie de vivre* of the Chord. There's something absolutely unique about the Hugo in the way it strings detail, definition, rhythm and dynamics together; I simply haven't heard CD sound quite like this before.

There, I've said it – a controversial statement that some folk will mull over for proof of my sanity and/or acuity of hearing. Instead of saying it's very good for the price, or another fine design from Chord, my heart tells me that I have to front up my thoughts. Being familiar with previous Rob Watts creations – from the DFAs right up to the most recent Chord Qutes – I think the Hugo is another giant leap for digital kind. I would implore you to have a listen. For this writer, digital audio – and my relatively unloved CD collection in particular – has just got a lot more interesting ●



Read my Chord Hugo review on pages 46-48



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Go with the pro?

A loudspeaker is a loudspeaker, isn't it? Should it really make a difference if it's for use by a professional in a studio or an audiophile listening at home? **David Vivian** investigates

Early in her career, so the story goes, Kate Bush preferred to mix-down her albums with the help of Wharfedale Diamond speakers. A cute, pocket money bookshelf design of some renown in its day, the budget baby *du jour* was about as far removed from the pro-spec, near-field monitors favoured by most recording studios as you can imagine. Her reason was she wanted to model the sound for the kind of real-world systems the vast majority of her fans would listen to her music on. Whether this worked as she intended is a moot point. Optimised for real-world listening they may have been, but far from sounding manipulated in any sense, I can't recall an early Kate Bush album that didn't shine all the brighter when played on a domestic high-end system.

I suspect she validated an approach that for some sound engineers lives to this day. It might be necessary to scrutinise every strand of a production via ultra analytical studio monitors, but it's the overall musicality experienced by the end user that really matters and it's unlikely to sound anything like what's heard standing behind a mixing desk equipped with regular studio transducers.

Which brings us to the heart of the matter. Do we imagine that the oxygen-starved summit of high fidelity ambition is to replicate as far as possible the 'studio sound' with its unerringly honest, warts 'n' all transparency, plaster-cracking volumes and heart-stopping dynamics? Or do we want a system that has been skillfully tailored to maximise musical enjoyment and communication?

It's a divisive question and one that interrogates the very notion of 'hi-fi'. Thumb through any *HFC* speaker *Group Test* and you'll find as many sonic 'personalities' as you will products on test. Speakers are, and always have been, the one component that leave a sonic fingerprint on a system sound. Which take, if any, is 'right' is a matter of taste and system context. I think this is as it should be. It's a large part of what makes hi-fi as a hobby so fascinating.

To suggest this line of thinking to speaker manufacturers that produce distinct lines for recording studios and domestic living rooms – I'm thinking, in particular, of ATC and PMC – is a dangerous business. ATC founder and boss Billy Woodman is emphatic: "A high fidelity loudspeaker is a high fidelity loudspeaker, whether or not it is for the professional or the audiophile. We do not differentiate between the two in any aspect of performance." PMC's

founder and boss Peter Thomas concurs. "We believe there is only one way to design a loudspeaker, be it for the professional or domestic market, and that is the right way," he asserts. "Our speakers are designed so they are voiced the same for studios and the home, as there is only one 'right sound'."

Peter goes on to explain that the only things separating its pro and domestic models are aesthetic and functional. "Differences do exist between the two markets," he continues, "but these are concerned with the shape of speaker, the look of the speaker and whether they are active or passive. Each market's application influences these factors. The active design also allows drive unit protection to be built in to make the speaker extremely reliable and bomb proof. Reliability is a big issue for pro designs operating at high SPLs."

Keeping it neutral

Anyone who's visited a recording studio will have a fuller appreciation of what Peter means by this. "However, speaker designs have to enable successful use with a variety of different amplifiers. And we still provide the same voicing as our studio monitors to ensure an accurate reproduction of the music. We also produce wide dispersion designs for excellent imaging."

ATC's approach is no less single minded. As Woodman explains: "Our design philosophy has always been predicated upon the notion of 'neutral fidelity', which requires an almost fanatical dedication to the detail in the design and development of both loudspeaker drive units and complete loudspeaker systems."

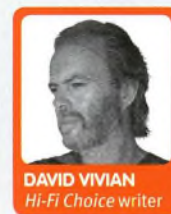
You can't argue with that. Or the fact that both companies' domestic speakers consistently get rave reviews. Although they're aiming for the same thing, they do sound different. And while some studios favour ATC monitors, others prefer PMCs and yet others B&Ws. Even in that ultra-demanding world, there is no absolute truth. With hi-fi there never is ●



Are PMC's twenty.21 loudspeakers for professionals or audiophiles and does it matter?

A high fidelity speaker is the same, whether it's for pros or the audiophile

with its unerringly honest, warts 'n' all transparency, plaster-cracking volumes and heart-stopping dynamics? Or do we



DAVID VIVIAN
Hi-Fi Choice writer



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Jumping the shark

As the Sex Pistols asked, ever get the feeling you've been cheated? A rethink is required for Record Store Day to restore its reputation, says **Simon Berkovitch**

Loons queuing outside shops overnight. Glow-in-the-dark *Ghostbusters* and pathetic picture discs. Skiploads of hardly super-limited, mega-expensive, "classic" heavy vinyl reissue yawnathons. Ebay ghouls. Pressing plants prioritising the demands of majors at the expense of independents. These are a few of my least favourite things about this year's Record Store Day, so can we just say it? Record Store Day has well and truly jumped the shark.

There's an episode of *Happy Days* in which the Fonz jumps over a shark on water-skis. How tragic. How gimmicky. How desperate. According to the bible of Wikipedia, "the usage of 'jump the shark' has subsequently broadened beyond TV, indicating the moment when a brand's evolution declines." Can you hear John Williams' theme from *Jaws* playing as a v-shaped wave looms in the direction of Record Store Day and its undignified scramble for unessential, unappealing vinyl detritus?

I wish that Bill Hicks were still with us. The legendary US comedian had a few things to say about a meeting between Vanilla Ice and Satan, so I'm sure that he'd have a few restrained, tasteful comments to make on the subject of One Direction and Katy Perry hawking their wares for a so-called celebration of independents.

Your local record shop needs your support the other 364 days of the year

and fired my enthusiasm via reports of great indie stores and even greater limited edition releases. Just a couple of years later, the money-sniffers are mobilised. As soon as The Man's vampires sink their fangs in, it's commoditised quicker than you can say Simon Cowell. On seeing 2014's releases, my friend was very vocal about how he wouldn't be touching RSD with a bargepole this year.

Where was the quality control? When the fetishised, conglomerate-endorsed limited edition is more important than the music itself, something's definitely up. Do One Direction fans own turntables? The fact that their RSD offering was a picture disc – not exactly known for its audiophile chops – speaks volumes. It also irked me that it grabbed most of the headlines. There's so much better stuff out there, kids! It's like McDonald's headlining food week while Ferran Adrià sits at home chopping the onions. Well, it's something that Richer Sounds was a partner for Record Store Day – a decent port of call for someone buying a first turntable, at least.

We've drifted apart, Record Store Day and I. It was good when it started. A vinyl-mad friend was living in the US at the time

This year's Record Store Day was the busiest ever. Soho's Berwick Street was a mass of music fans. So where are these people the rest of the year, as shops outside of London are increasingly in the crosshairs of giants like Amazon? They can't all just be trying to scoop up the most desirable limited editions on RSD, rubbing their hands in anticipation of a pretty penny on ebay, can they?

There's more than one shark infesting these waters, that's now clear. Just ask Paul Weller and Mark E Smith.

Weller's super-limited RSD release was the most controversial. Record Store Day UK investigated the activities of North West-based independent retailer Townsend Records following complaints about online sales of *Brand New Toy* – a record that eluded most of Weller's fans. The investigation "discovered irregularities in the management of an ebay account linked to the store". So much for sticking to RSD's Code of Conduct – and not exploiting your customers.

At least Townsend Records won't be doing it again: it has been informed that it will not be permitted to participate in 2015's RSD. Disillusioned, Weller himself will not be taking part in subsequent Record Store Day events.

Similarly, The Fall's release, *White Lightning* on Secret Records, was "a release that we were not involved with in any way, without asking us or telling us about it", The Fall's statement on the group's unofficial website reads. Yes, Record Store Day's clearly all about the music, man – and not at all about fleecing groups' loyal fanbases.

Despite ebay touts, grim multinationals, duff releases and fraud, I'm still behind the bricks and mortar record shop. Forget RSD: your local record shop needs your support the other 364 days of the year.

Reasons to be cheerful

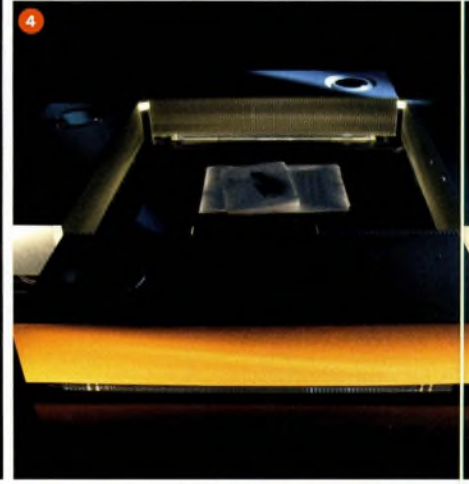
Record Store Day has lost its way. That said, Truck Store's event got it absolutely spot on and kept the flag of independence flying in Oxford. It was fun, frantic and – most importantly – it plugged back into the community from which it had sprung. Whether Record Store Day's organisers can pull off a similar trick for 2015 and get back in touch with what made the event worth backing in the first place remains to be seen ●



Is this really what supporting independent record stores is about?



SIMON BERKOVITCH
Hi-Fi Choice writer



Munich 2014

With nearly 500 exhibitors and 1,000 brands, the High End Show at MOC Munich is always a special event

HI-FI ISN'T JUST a stay-at-home hobby. The industry is an international travelling circus, and follows a set schedule of shows all around the world. From Milan to the Rocky Mountains and Bristol to Shanghai, you'll see many of the same faces on tour at different times of the year, as manufacturers take their wares around the globe. Tongues wag in hotel bars, and one favourite topic is the best international venue. Time after time, most people say Munich.

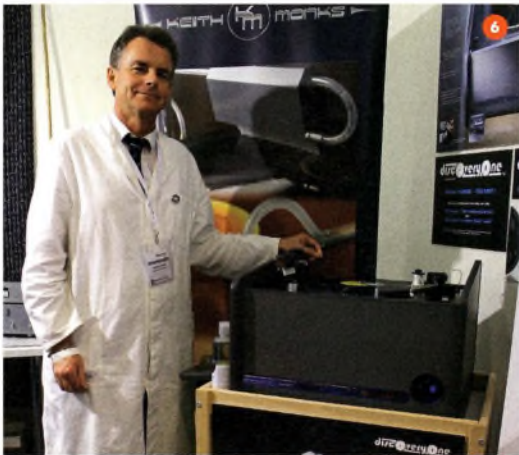
It's hard to imagine a better place for an international high-end hi-fi festival – which is effectively what the High End show has become. Although busy, it's never too crowded unlike the other annual high-end fest at the Venetian at Las Vegas CES. It's easy to get to, walk around and has a relaxed and friendly feel that attracts families and spouses; it has a glamorous feel that's far less geeky than usual.

Still, Munich isn't beyond parody. It's self-consciously high end, and when pockets are bottomless, you tend to get some really wacky stuff, some of which is of questionable aesthetic taste or sonic merit. This year, there seemed to be a little less silliness. Previous years have seen some very OTT turntables and vast horn loudspeakers, but 2014 seemed to be a bit more grounded – with a wider range of more affordable and less precocious kit.

Munich is always great for vinyl fans – with plenty of glamorous vinyl spinners, record cleaning equipment and LP records on sale – but this year there were some nice-sounding hi-res digital systems and a diverse range of loudspeakers of all shapes and sizes for your pleasure. As ever, a fine time was had by everyone who attended what is the probably best date in the audiophile diary.

1 Chord Electronics

Chord had a significant presence at the show. John Franks demonstrated its top system with PMC's monster BB5 SE loudspeakers.



2 ARSLab Superb 90

All the way from Latvia comes this affordable (€2,200) big banger complete with retro orange paint scheme.

3 Amphion Apila L

These new Finnish speakers are designed to work in challenging acoustic environments, with a unique dual driver compliment and special DSP.

4 Naim Muso

Munich's *couleur de nos jours* was orange, and the Muso showed why. This compact one-box wireless hi-fi system wowed with its range of striking hues.

5 IsoTek EVO3 Mosaic Genesis

Keith Martin showed his latest power regenerator and conditioner, based on the flagship EVO3 Genesis, but more compact and affordable.

6 Keith Monks Discovery One

Jon Monks donned his white coat for some serious grime busting, showing his latest entry-level record cleaner.

7 Marantz NA8005

At last, a new mid-price streamer! The handsome box (top) builds on the NA7004's success with standard and DSD 5.6 playback via network and USB.

8 dCS Vivaldi

Reminding the hi-fi world it is one of the great forces in digital, Cambridge-based dCS fielded its stunning flagship four-box CD transport/DAC/clock/upsampler.

9 Blue Horizon record cleaner

There were plenty of vinyl accessories, but this raised an eyebrow. It's an early prototype, but is developed in conjunction with Loricraft so it should be good.

10 PMC twenty.26

Britain's studio speaker boys were back in Bavaria with a bang! This new big three-way is top of the twenty series, and made a very nice noise in the PMC room.

11 Scherer Evince

One of the stars of the show was this new speaker using classic transmission line topology, but with a horn-loaded forward-facing driver.

12 Sonus faber

There's always one *really* audacious room, and this year it was Sonus faber and MacIntosh, screening Daft Punk live in glorious multichannel surround sound.

13 Micromega MyAMP

Although full of expensive high-end exotica, there's always an affordable surprise. This year, this little £600 Class AB amp stunned with its super sonics.



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THE MUSIC ROOM OF GLASGOW LTD, Glasgow, G3 6AX
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ZOUCH AUDIO LTD, Leicestershire, LE65 1BQ
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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

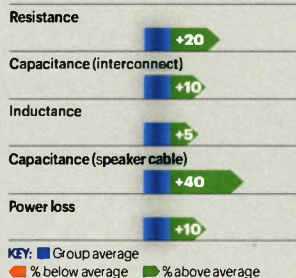


ON TEST

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

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

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cable loom

ORIGIN
Netherlands

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
● Interconnect:
silver-plated copper
with Hulliflex jacket
● Speaker cable:
silver-plated copper
and carbon hybrid
speaker cable with
Hulliflex jacket

Prices:
interconnect
£130/1m, speaker
cable £20 per metre
unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Flamingo Audio

TELEPHONE
07833 955014

WEBSITE
vandenul.com

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

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

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

Sound quality

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Very musical, engaging sound; open and detailed

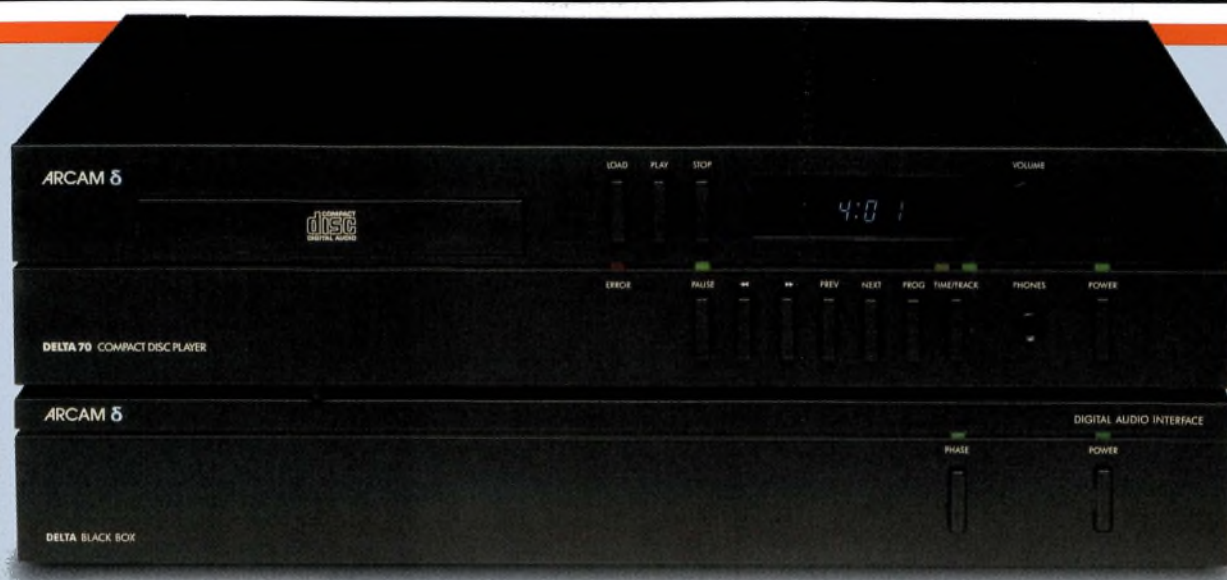
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly constrained stage width

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Superb value cable loom, one that's an essential audition

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL





Black magic

David Price tells the story of the first affordable standalone digital-to-analogue converter, Arcam's Delta Black Box...

D always did have a little bit of an instinct for the unusual", confesses Arcam's John Dawson. And that's precisely what the Arcam Black Box was. Indeed it was so different that no other company offered a similar product for anything like the price back in 1988.

The Delta Black Box – to give it its full name – was the world's first affordable offboard digital to analogue converter. Nowadays, in a world that seemingly has more DACs than pieces of music to play on them, such a claim doesn't sound terribly impressive, but back in the mid eighties it really did feel like the stuff of audiophile science fiction.

Looked at though today's eyes it was a relatively simple engineering achievement. Take the signal coming out of the Philips digital platform of the day – the CDM4 transport for example – then do some number crunching with the SAA7220 digital filter and feed it into the TDA1541 digital converter chip.

But the technology to interface the CD drive mechanism with the converter and filter chips in a separate box simply didn't exist back then; there were no commercial

S/PDIF (S/Philips Digital InterFace) receiver chips on sale.

John Dawson, then the company's managing director, asked his engineering team to make it happen. The project started, but when they realised there were no chips on the commercial market to do the job, it looked like they would have to put it on the back burner. The boffins simply couldn't see a cost-effective way of splitting up the CD drive and the

It's a very special product in the great Arcam scheme of things

subsequent digital processing into different boxes. But by sheer chance, John met up with an old university colleague who'd come into the factory to get his Arcam Alpha amp repaired.

Enquiring into what his old friend was up to, he replied that he was now the business manager for a small electronics company up the road called Newmarket Semiconductors. He was launching some custom ICs based on Ferranti's work on uncommitted logic arrays. John

explains that these were used, "when you've got a bunch of silicon on a chip made in mass production, and the end user specifies the metallisation layers – that is the printed circuit layout of the IC actually decides the functionality of it. It's a very quick and cost-effective way of getting a custom IC."

Eight weeks and £10,000 later, Arcam had a custom 1000-gate array chip that did the job. "At that point, we had all the ingredients to put the Black Box together economically, and that's what we did", he explains.

This unique bespoke Arcam ASIC (Application Specific Integrated Circuit) is what made the Black Box possible, and by extension what started the craze for offboard DACs, the very same one that's now enjoying a second wind nearly 30 years later with the advent of computer-based audio. The result was a £250 digital-to-analogue converter that shook up the hi-fi industry.

So how did the Black Box fit into the Arcam range, and into the wider hi-fi world? Back in the mid eighties Arcam was growing into a larger, more professional company with a far wider product portfolio. It had just launched the Alpha series of budget

amplifiers and was now about to bring out its more upmarket Delta series. The brave decision was taken to include a Compact Disc player – still the stuff of high-end dreams back then. The Delta 70 was the product, and it was a bespoke design with lots of Arcam input.

“We decided we wouldn’t just badge-engineer something, as our colleagues at Mission up the road had recently done quite successfully with Philips”, remembers John. “We’d do something a bit better if we could, as we wanted to have our stamp of engineering on it. So we bought a CD manufacturing licence and went to Philips in Belgium. They sold us basically a drive and a bag of chips, and the rest of it was up to us. That means we were able to do our own power supplies and analogue back end, and do the job better than the commercial boys were doing.”

Risky business

At the time, Arcam had a choice to buy the existing first-generation 14-bit, 4 times oversampling CD player platform, or wait for the 16-bit version. It may seem a no-brainer now, but back then it was still regarded as a bit risky; after all, what if the next generation wasn’t as good? In the end, Arcam decided to wait for the 16-bit chip, and one of its new and special features was an S/PDIF output. The Delta 70 was finally launched in 1987, and became “very popular very quickly”. John proudly remembers: “It was the sort of player Linn dealers were happy to sell”.

Over the next year Arcam sold around 5,000 Delta 70s at £500 a go. “But we thought, was there anything else we could do with what we’ve learnt? So we thought, why don’t we do a plain old outboard digital converter on its own, but at very low cost. Because we were seeing all these 16-bit players coming out all with digital outputs”, Dawson recalls.

The Delta 70 was already an impressive piece of work. “It had the best we knew of how to do the D-to-As, and how to isolate the power supplies and keep the drive well isolated from the analogue supplies and so forth”, he remembers. But, “the idea was that if we did it in a separate box, we’d avoid all the noisy stuff from the CD drive and the decoding of the CD in the box – we could keep it simpler in terms of what digits were around and make it much more predictable and do better power supplies and make it cleaner.”

The prototype Black Box was an instant success. It was a clear upgrade to the already very capable Delta 70 CD player, as well as a wide range of other players, more and more of which were coming out with digital outputs – even the cheap ones. John Dawson took one home one evening and played Fairport Convention’s *Liege And Lief* through it and remembers that: “I heard more. There was more stuff on there, you could hear the reverberation tail away and things like that. We thought oh, we’ve probably got a winner here!”

The productionised Black Box sold for £250 and was the talk of the town for a while. With Philips TDA1541 DAC chips, it was quite a lively sounding device – and a bit noisy by today’s standards. However, you’d never say it wasn’t nice to listen to. Indeed, that particular Philips DAC has become something of a cult for some classic digital fans of late. Especially compared with the Bitstream machines that followed a couple of years later, it was a very engaging and entertaining performer.

Arcam was very proud. “We could do it at a reasonable price and we sold lots of them. Because we’d had the good fortune/skill/luck (although you make your own luck, right?) to be the first affordable product in the consumer space at the time, we made a real impact”, he recalls. But the Black Box was more than just a simple commercial success, it was a landmark for Arcam.

There was always a sense that the Cambridge company didn’t quite have the prestige of fellow British brands Linn and Naim. This was partly down to the more audacious marketing of Glasgow and Salisbury; John admits Arcam wasn’t as effective in this department. So there was a real need for the company to compete for engineering kudos. “It was difficult for a company like Arcam to unseat – in the UK at least – the Linn-Naim axis, which was always regarded as

BIT PLAYING

Amazingly, the first generation of Philips CD players were only actually 14-bit machines. This shows just how close to the edge the Compact Disc specification was back at the time of its launch in 1982 – akin to offering a new digital format at 64-bit/768kHz now. Philips and Sony pushed hard to do the very best they could. Sony’s first domestic CD player worked at 16-bit, but Philips only managed 14-bit, attaining 16-bit noise performance by oversampling the signal four times. It was a clever trick, which made for a fine-sounding machine, but there was no way the replacement DAC chip was going to have just 14 bits.

When Arcam bought its CD licence from Philips, it opted to wait for a few months for the new chip. Given that being early to market was vitally important, it must have seemed a long delay – not least because its Mission rival down the road was already developing a CD player too. But it was a good decision, because the second-generation Philips CD platform had an S/PDIF out, which made the Black Box possible. It also had the TDA1541 16-bit, four times oversampling DAC chip. It became immensely popular, and was one of the finest-sounding early DACs. By modern standards it’s rather crude with an upper midband that many find hard, but it’s certainly one of the most musically involving digital converters around.

the best,” he says. “But in my opinion, in our history we often did and do a better job, or a comparable job for much less money, or a better job for comparable money. But it’s very hard to get that recognition and so we’ve had to rely on bits of technology and bright work to gain an edge.”

Shape of things to come

Arcam’s Delta Black Box was precisely this – a clever bit of work from a company that was hungry to do better and be seen to be so doing. It was more than this, though, as it kickstarted the fashion for standalone DACs, one that burned brightly for several years, but then began to flicker out. John says: “DACs were used to make CD players sound better, but eventually CD players did sound better, so the advantage became more marginal.” Fascinatingly now, though, the breed is coming back and the work of the original Delta Black Box has stood Arcam in very good stead for this – its current range of DACs are excellent.

Although the original project was the result of imaginative thinking and intensive engineering development work, it may never have happened had one man wanting an amplifier fixed not walked through John’s door back in the mid eighties. In a sense, it’s a very special product in the great Arcam scheme of things. As John Dawson puts it: “It was serendipity, dear boy!” ●

The unique chip that made the DAC possible



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
STAX

STAX
SRM-007tII

INPUT

1

2

3

4

POWER

PRO ONLY

PRO ONLY

VACUUM TUBE OUTPUT DRIVER UNIT FOR EARSPEAKERS

All in your head

Do you need to keep your music to yourself? With a headphone system as good as this, **Ed Selley** thinks you might just want to

The bass response is deeper than you might expect and wonderfully full and textured at the same time



Last year, I was delighted to become a father for the first time. While I've generally found the whole experience to be brilliant, there's no escaping the fact I have less time to listen to music. When I do get the chance, I'm often pushed towards using headphones to keep the noise down. I don't begrudge this – I have access to some excellent headphones and I know that this isn't forever.

What if it was forever though? I'd never really considered the possibility of a life beyond speakers up until this point, but spending time 'buttoned up' got me thinking. Is it possible to

have a headphone setup that doesn't merely provide an alternative to speakers when you can't make any noise, but actually provides a superior listening experience? Up until very recently, I would have doubted that such a thing was possible, but after some time spent with this little ensemble I'm not so sure.

What we have here isn't merely a pair of headphones and a headphone amplifier, it is instead probably the ultimate expression of headphones. It uses technology that is complex and difficult to perfect and that requires a unique product to make it function at all. This is not a convenience item for

COMPONENTS

STAX SR-009 £3,695

The ultimate expression of the Stax Electrostatic Earspeaker principle, the SR-009 uses an all new electrostatic driver alongside a completely revised industrial design.

STAX SRM-007II ENERGISER KIMIK EDITION £2,295

The SRM-007II is the flagship energiser that acts as both headphone preamp and the powerplant for the electrostatic drivers. The Kimik Edition features specific modifications to further improve the overall performance.

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM STAX



use only when you can't make too much noise, it's something different.

Stax has been making distinctive audio products since 1938, and 2014 marks the 60th anniversary of its first electrostatic product – a tweeter that saw the light of light of day in 1954. Six years later, the company launched its first headphones – and from the outset termed them 'Earspeakers' – that made use of the same principle.

Insane in the membrane

Some 56 years of evolution brings us to the SR-009 you see here. The flagship of the current range is the culmination of everything Stax knows about headphones placed in a single utterly compromise-free package. The electrostatic membranes – that create sound via an electrical current being passed across them – are a new ultra-thin polymer type. These are in turn motivated by new 'MLER' Electrodes that provide a more even drive. These drivers are placed in enclosures that are round for the first time in years instead of the classic rectangle that we associate with Stax.

As with any Stax Earspeaker setup, the SR-009 is only half of the story. The electrostatic drivers need current to run that is far beyond the ability of a conventional headphone amp to deliver, which means that the SR-009

is partnered with the SRM-007tII. Stax describes this as an 'Energiser' – a three input headphone amp that also generates the required power to run the electrostatic drivers. This particular energiser has been through an upgrade process carried out by UK distributor Symmetry Systems. This ensures that the quartet of valves are cryogenically treated and partnered with a replacement high-quality mains fuse. These detail changes

The quality is a level up from anything I've ever seen on a pair of headphones

unlock a considerable performance boost from what is already an extremely capable device.

As a partnership, the two devices are understated but the more time you spend with them the more you appreciate the level of care and attention that has gone into them. I'm not going to pretend that the SR-009 is anything other than a very large sum of money but hold them in your hands and you start to appreciate that they are wonderful things. There is no ostentation or unnecessary decoration anywhere on the SR-009, but the

Above left: The SRM-007 is a three-input amp able to drive two pairs of earspeakers at once

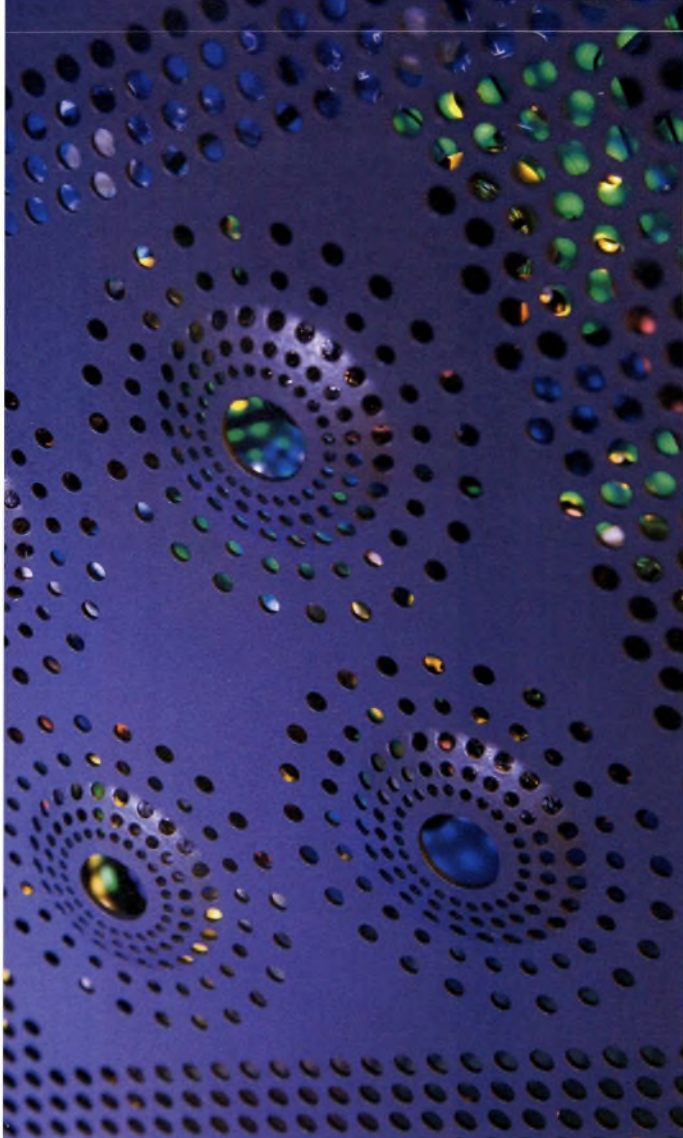
Above: The build quality and attention to detail is outstanding

Above far right: The SR-009 is big, but supremely comfortable

quality of the materials is simply a level up from anything I've seen in a pair of headphones. The Stax also manage to come across as substantial and yet at the same time avoid feeling like a high-end neck workout when you wear them. In fact, I think that the SR-009 is the most comfortable design that Stax has produced. The floating inner headband combined with the perfect spring loading of the outer section make for a pair of headphones that you can wear pretty much indefinitely.

The look of love

The SRM-007tII energiser is similarly elegant and understated. The Stax offers one XLR and two RCA inputs that are available to two pairs of Stax Earspeakers (allowing for his 'n' hers listening if you fancy) as well as looping back out to an amplifier should you hang on to conventional speakers after investing in it. Operation is self-explanatory and an object lesson in simplicity. It might be easy to describe the SRM-007tII as retro, but in this case, I don't really think that's fair. The Stax look like, well, a Stax. The functionality is so completely self explanatory and the design so effective that there is no need to change it. Fetishists of high-quality controls (of which I



might be one) will also note that the volume control is perfectly weighted and geared – not just well done, but perfect. There's no remote, you'd only lose it through lack of use.

Lack of use is not an issue that is likely to befall the Stax duo themselves, though. Ensure that the SRM-007tII has a few minutes of warming up behind it and supply it with some decent sources and you will find yourself understanding the asking price in three minutes and justifying to yourself why you need a pair in five. There are attributes this duo possess that are untouchable in any other listening device be it headphone or conventional speaker.

Driving ambition

Trying to put my finger on why has taken a little while, but I think it stems from the use of electrostatic drivers in a way that enhances their strengths and virtually eliminates the weaknesses. I love electrostatic speakers – their speed, tonal accuracy and lack of crossover deliver an immediacy that can leave cone speakers floundering – having said that, I'm not blind to their faults. The limited bass response, indifferent volume output and definite listening sweet spot have ensured that I've never taken the plunge.



TELEPHONE:
01727 865488
WEBSITE:
symmetry-systems.
co.uk
stax.co.jp

The Stax deliver all the positives in spades – indeed this might be the single most revealing transducer I've ever used – but the nature of their use obviates the problems that affect their full-size brethren. As they are on either side of your head, the sweet spot is impossible to miss and with a smaller area to drive, the bass response is deeper than you might expect and wonderfully full and textured at the same time. Sensitivity

The volume control is perfectly weighted – not just well done, but perfect

isn't an issue either. Anyone seeking to boil the fluid in their inner ear might need to look elsewhere, but for everyone else there should be more than enough headroom on offer.

This means that listening to the Stax is almost otherworldly at times. There is little sense of the performance coming from a pair of headphones and the SR-009 has a soundstage that many conventional speakers would kill for. There is a complete lack of constraint to the presentation that makes something with a little scale utterly spellbinding. There's no such

thing as a quick listening session with the SR-009 – I pretty much had to be dragged away from them on more than a few occasions to return to the business of parenting.

Head of the class

These Stax headphones make a case for themselves that goes far beyond being the best way to listen without making excess noise, although they deliver on that brief effortlessly. More than this, for me at least, the Stax are also the ultimate implementation of an electrostatic speaker. Half a century of painstaking evolution has produced something truly extraordinary and quite magnificent and at the same time ensured that the SR-009 and SRM-007tII are utterly practical and quite up to the task of being used day in day out, being no more difficult to use (and a great deal more comfortable) than a pair of £50 cans you could pick up in your local Argos store.

This everyday greatness is what sets amazing products out from the pack and rarely is it more apparent than it is here. You can choose this combo knowing that you could live without a pair of box loudspeakers and still appear saintly in the eyes of your neighbours. Rarely has considerate behaviour been so much fun ●



Brain

Feed your head with some of West Germany's most mind-blowing music with **Simon Berkovitch**

Some of the greatest music to come out of West Germany in the seventies came from **Brain** – a haven to titans of Krautrock like Neu!, Klaus Schulze, Cluster and Harmonia.

Bruno Wendel and Günter Körber formed the Hamburg-based label Brain in 1971 as an offshoot of Metronome Musik. Their credentials for running an underground record label were impeccable: both had worked as A&R men for Ohr, also parented by Metronome and the home to Ash Ra Tempel, Guru Guru and Tangerine Dream.

Wendel and Körber set about signing the cream of the West

German scene. Judging by the roster that they assembled, commercial considerations were low on their list of priorities. Other Ohr (and sub-label Pilz) acts such as jazzy progressive rockers Embryo and electronic ambient masters Popol Vuh were encouraged to migrate to Brain and subsequently recorded excellent albums for the label. Experimental artists Cluster, who had previously released an uncompromising album for Philips and were subsequently dropped, were also welcomed.

Brain also became a colony of the Tangerine Dream empire: both ex-member Klaus Schulze and leader Edgar Froese enjoyed

prolific recording relationships with the label, furthering the cause of analogue synthesisers and sequencers in the process.

As well as nurturing its Krautrockers, Brain also cast its net both internationally and stylistically. It licenced and issued albums from UK artists as wide ranging as Caravan, Alexis Korner and Spirogyra, often in radically different sleeves, as well as some recordings from Sweden's progressive Love Records. Homegrown hard rock was represented by German acts like Birth Control, Jane and, the most globally successful group on the label, Scorpions. (There's no accounting for taste.)

Körber left Brain in 1976 to start the Sky label, another haven for innovative electronic musicians. Most of the label's greatest releases came out during the period of 1972 to 1978 – the timeframe of this primer – although it threw out some curveballs from Klaus Schulze deep into the eighties.

Thanks to CD bootlegs – and the eventual legitimate reissues – that began to appear in the nineties, a new generation of enthusiasts were able to feast on some prime grey matter, as many of the Brain releases from this classic period were as scarce as they were expensive in their original vinyl pressings.

Neu!

The new sound of West Germany hits the Autobahn – and it's still speeding to the horizon

The first classic Brain LP arrived soon after the label's formation. The eponymous debut from Neu! – the unstable partnership of guitarist Michael Rother and drummer Klaus Dinger – looked and sounded like no other album from 1972, drawing on neither American rock and roll clichés nor the excesses of British progressive rock. On album opener *Hallogallo*, the new sound of West Germany had arrived: insistent wah-wah guitar setting the controls for the horizon, propelled by deceptively simple drum patterns; a direct influence on all contemporary groups who claim their sound as *motorik*.

Neu! has its roots in an early incarnation of Kraftwerk, which saw that group as a short-lived trio of Rother, Dinger and long-term member Florian Schneider. Leaving after aborted sessions for Kraftwerk's third album, the duo named themselves Neu! (German for

new), signed to Brain, and with producer Conny Plank recorded three seminal albums for Brain.

These great works were not achieved without difficulty. Second album *Neu! 2* (1973) saw the group out of money and remixing tracks *Super* and *Neuschnee* from a recent single at different speeds to make up the second side of the LP. Third and best record *Neu! '75* (1975), the last of the duo's original

Neu! has its roots in an early incarnation of Kraftwerk

studio albums, came after the group's first split, and the creative differences between the two are clear to hear: Rother's ambient approach, as on the gorgeous *Seeland*, dominates the first side, whereas Dinger's songs, such as the aggressive *Hero* are proto-punk in their intensity and structure.

Each side of third album *Neu! '75* plots out a distinct solo career for Rother and Dinger



Klaus Schulze

Prolific composer who recorded some of his greatest work for Brain

When it comes to describing composer and musician Klaus Schultze, the use of the word 'prolific' is almost an obligation. He released over 60 albums during his ongoing recording career – starting with an appearance on the debut Tangerine Dream album (1970) and time spent in the ranks of ferocious acid rock trio Ash Ra Tempel in the early seventies.

Schultze's debut for Brain was *Blackdance* (1974) – a record that still impresses. Despite liberal use of primitive synthesiser on the previous year's double album *Cyborg*, this 1974 album was the first release on which an ever-increasing arsenal of noise-making machines appeared. *Blackdance* was the first of a grand run of albums for the label throughout the seventies and early eighties, which saw acoustic instruments used in a mesmerising coalition with electronics.

Picture Music (1975) featured one lengthy composition on each side of the LP (a trademark he also shared with his ex-bandmates Tangerine Dream), as did the same year's slowly unfurling *Timewind*, which also gleefully upped the synthesiser ante, as well as being Schultze's

Timewind gleefully ups the analogue synthesiser ante

first album to embrace the potential of a sequencer.

Moondawn (1976) is arguably the album on which Schultze truly found his style, now having the kit – expensive gems such as Moogs, ARPs, EMS Synthi-A and sequencer – to be able to fully realise his vision. Indeed, the album's titles – *Floating* and *Mindphaser* – perfectly sum up the late-seventies Klaus Schultze trip.

Timewind was the first Schultze album to feature a sequencer



Cluster

This duo casts a long shadow over experimental and pop music

Through an ever-evolving range of musical styles over 15 albums, the constant in Cluster is the partnership of Hans-Joachim Roedelius and Dieter Moebius.

Cluster was founded in 1971, an evolution from the even more avant-garde group Kluster. Conny Plank joined the duo for the self-titled, major label debut for Philips, which was, unsurprisingly, not a commercial success, but it led to the group finding a home at Brain, where they remained until 1975.

The first recording for the label, *Cluster II* (1972) created perfectly formed galaxies of sound over its six tracks. It remains a bold, emotive listen, hugely influential on many electronic musicians today.

The second album was an even more radical departure. *Zuckerzeit* (1974) makes a detour into melody and rhythm, creating its own

unique variant of electronic pop. Clattering drum machines and fizzing synths dominate the album. It's like nothing else in the Cluster

canon – surely down to the influence of producer Michael Rother, with whom Roedelius and Moebius had collaborated on the Harmonia project.



Harmonia

Unlike many supergroups, this union was more than the sum of its parts

Michael Rother was far from idle in his time out from collaborator Klaus Dinger after the fallout from *Neu! 2*: he formed Harmonia, a Krautrock supergroup with Cluster's Hans-Joachim Roedelius and Dieter Moebius.

The three musicians set about building their own studio to realise the project, which eventually spanned two albums for Brain, *Musik von Harmonia* (1974) and *Deluxe* (1975). A collaboration with Brian Eno was also recorded in 1976, but remained unreleased during the group's lifetime (emerging on CD in 1997, entitled *Tracks and Traces*).

The first Brain album, *Musik von Harmonia*, is arguably the sound of Neu! joining Cluster, rather than vice versa, forging a new direction in the process.

Follow up, *Deluxe*, is more like Cluster joining Neu!. Throughout *Deluxe*, melody

dominates, but there's plenty of scope for bold adventures in electronics, too.

After these two releases, Rother temporarily returned

to his partner for *Neu! '75*, but Cluster ran with the template on *Zuckerzeit*, on which the Neu! guitarist's presence was keenly felt.

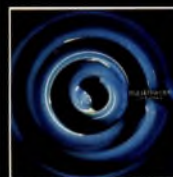


SHOPPING LIST

More Brain food comes in these tasty Germanic flavours – classic Krautrock that blurs the lines between ambient electronics, jazzy prog and free rock



Embryo
Rocksession
Embryo's blend of jazz-influenced progressive rock had a harder edge than its UK contemporaries. Released 1973.



Edgar Froese
Macula Transfer
The Tangerine Dream main man's greatest solo recordings found a sympathetic home on Brain. Released 1976.



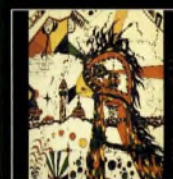
Guru Guru
Känguru
The most accessible outing from this Free-rock trio, featuring Ax Genrich's acidic, Hendrix-inspired guitar (1972).



Liliental
Liliental
Another Krautrock supergroup, with members of Cluster, Kraan and legendary producer Conny Plank (1978).



Popol Vuh
Brüder des Schattens - Söhne Des Lichts
Elements were used in the soundtrack of *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1978).



Günter Schickert
Samtvoegel
A reissue of Schickert's outsider classic. Echo-heavy excursions for solo electric guitar. Released 1975.



Thirsty Moon
Thirsty Moon
The group's first LP is worth the admission for the driving, sound effect-heavy monster *Big City* alone (1972).



Yatha Sidhra
A Meditation Mass
The original issue of this gem was packaged in an amazing gatefold sleeve – and now commands a high price (1974).

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100 Kellis
Food



100 Taylor McFerrin
Early Riser



101 Prokofiev
Symphonies 3 & 7

Musicreviews



Led Zeppelin

Led Zeppelin; Led Zeppelin II;
Led Zeppelin III

★★★★★

ALBUM
OF THE
MONTH

All remastered as expanded two-disc sets **Swansong**

IT'S AN INDICATION of how Zeppelin still bestrides the rock firmament that the expanded reissues of their first three albums recorded more than 40 years ago are probably the most keenly anticipated 'new' releases of 2014. That these shibbolethic landmarks in the rock canon are regenerating such excitement is down to the fact that each original album has now been repackaged with a second disc of "previously unreleased work in progress with rough mixes, backing tracks, alternate versions, and new material recorded at the time", as guitarist Jimmy Page puts it. Over the years Page has remastered the original albums at least twice before and curated various box sets and compilations, but never before have the Zep vaults been raided in this fashion for the rare stuff craved by collectors. There's an analogy to be made with the Beatles, whose anthology series released at the zenith of Britpop in the mid-nineties,

was arguably more significant than anything put out by Blur or Oasis. Zep fans hoping for similar fresh insights and clandestine delights will not find quite the same cornucopia of lost gems, for the three volumes in the Beatles Anthology delivered 155 previously unheard tracks. Here we get a more meagre 26 - but it's still sufficient to make these essential purchases for anyone who has ever rocked out to the band once dubbed 'The Hammer of the Gods'.

If Page's latest remastering of the original albums is any different from previous efforts, it is a matter of fine degree. Vitally, he continues to refuse to compress the sound, for no band has ever more effectively utilised a soft-loud dynamic shift; try, for example, the startling juxtaposition of acoustic folk and heavy rock riffs on *Babe I'm Gonna Leave You*. But to the 'new' material. The bonus disc with *Led Zeppelin* (1969) contains no studio out-takes (the

album was recorded so fast there weren't any), but presents a live concert recorded in Paris at the time with Plant in leonine form and Page in his pomp on an epic 15-minute version of *Dazed And Confused*. The additional disc with *Led Zeppelin II* (1969) takes us deep into the creative processes of the studio with alternative mixes, backing tracks and the previously unreleased *La La*, a thrilling instrumental mix of Californian acoustic guitars and one of Page's most melodic solos. It surely only failed to make the album because Plant never got around to writing any words. Most insightful of all is the second disc accompanying *Led Zeppelin III* (1970), offering seven alternative studio versions and three unreleased compositions, including the instrumentals *Jennings Farm Blues* and *Bathroom Sound* plus an atmospheric acoustic duet between Page and Plant on the blues classic *Keys To The Highway/Trouble In Mind*. **NW**



Beth Orton

Central Reservation

HOT PICK

★★★★★

Two CD expanded edition

3 Loop Music

RELEASED IN 1999, Orton's second album received a Mercury Music Prize nomination, won her a Brit Award as Best British Female Artist and sold half a million copies. Its success came as part of the backlash against the brash triumphalism of Britpop and seemed to restate the traditional folk troubadour values of the likes of Sandy Denny, John Martyn and Nick Drake, but updated for the 21st century with the addition of subtly looped trip-hop beats.

Orton's down-tempo stylings made her the queen of the briefly lived 'quiet

Her voice is a natural instrument capable of expressing sorrow and joy in equal measure

is the new loud' movement, but 15 years on her gentle blend of acoustic folk and understated electronica hasn't dated. Above all, it's her bitter-sweet voice that makes *Central Reservation* quite so special. Technically her voice was all over the shop; yet it was a wonderfully natural instrument capable of expressing sorrow and joy in equal measure, affecting, beguiling and a welcome breath of fresh air in a world full of artifice. **NW**

HOT PICK



Kirsty MacColl
All I Ever Wanted:
The Anthology

★★★★★

Two CD box set

Salvo



Kellis
Food

★★★★☆

CD

Ninja Tune

THE TRAGIC DEATH of Kirsty MacColl back in 2000 robbed British pop of a uniquely perceptive singer/ songwriter with a rare and delicious wit. In a 20 year career she only ever made five albums, but these generous 43 tracks remind us just how much we really miss her as an artist who was never prepared to repeat herself.

From the eighties new wave of *They Don't Know* through the poignancy of *A New England* and, of course, her fabulous Pogues collaboration on *Fairytale Of New York* (surely the best Christmas record of all time) to her later adventures in Latin music, there really was nobody quite like her. **NW**

KELLIS HAS COME a long way since *Milkshake* in 2003. She's now back with her sixth album, her first since 2010's *Flesh Tone* and unsurprisingly given that she has a cooking show in the US, it's all about grub. But while the themes may be culinary, the music is refreshingly varied. She's still largely in the pop R&B vein, but *Breakfast's* soaring chorus elevates it to modern anthem status, while *Jerk Ribs'* low-slung funky backbeat and horn stabs lean towards a more classic soul direction. She's developed an earthier rasp to her voice, which gives the pop sheen a bit of edge, and she's more than capable of belting out a killer chorus. **DO**



Taylor McFerrin

Early Riser

★★★★☆

CD

BrainFeeder/Flying Lotus

JAZZ VOCALIST BOBBY McFerrin's son has taken a different tack to his dad, favouring quirky electronica to create his beats. He does however, have some great tunes and is clearly adept at creating moods through the subtle application of colours and tones.

There's a strong neo soul influence à la Eryka Badu and a passing nod to the minimalist soundtracks of the likes of Jon Hopkins, but McFerrin plots his own course, whether it's gentle melancholy on *Florasia* or getting all jungle with the skittering drums of *4AM*. Sometimes he does both, with the opening dreamy textures and live cymbal brushes of *Post Partum*. One to watch. **DO**

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

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

HOT PICK

Ahmad Jamal

The Piano Scene Of Ahmad Jamal

180g vinyl

Epic/Speakers Corner



AHMAD JAMAL WAS a significant influence on the cool blues of Miles Davis and is considered by many to be as important as Charlie Parker in the development of jazz.

This album, released in 1959, pulls together material recorded in 1951 and 1956, on some tracks Jamal is accompanied by Ray Crawford on guitar and Eddie Calhoun on bass and on others Crawford is replaced by Walter Perkins on drums. It's a mono recording and not one that garners much comment nowadays, this is a serious

omission because it's 12 numbers are all very fine. The recording's vintage is immediately evident in a slight hardness to the sound, especially piano, but there's also a transparency and immediacy that you only get with live studio recordings, tube electronics and simple recordings. Jamal has an effortless yet melodic style that avoids schmaltz because of its restraint. There is a tension to the playing that few manage without resorting to attack and it's evidence of why he is held in such high regard. The work with guitar is particularly good, partly because such pairings are rare, but also because the two musicians have such tight rapport. Speakers Corner deserves five stars for bringing this gem to light. **JK**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



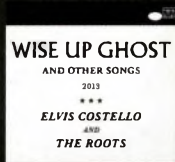
9Bach
Tincian



Apple Lossless

B&W Society of Sound

EVERYBODY'S FAVOURITE WELSH language experimentalists are back with their second album, though this time one of the songs is sung in Greek. All the way through, Lisa Jen's ethereal vocals float delicately across songs that vary from folk rounds to something getting close to pop tunes. Bass, drums and guitars are augmented by harmonium, harp and occasional electronic loops to produce a deliciously evocative blend of old and new. **DO**



Elvis Costello
Wise Up Ghosts



ALAC 24bit 44.1kHz

Linn Records

SOME HAVE CALLED Costello's collaboration with The Roots his hip-hop album, but there's much more to this pairing than a clashing of styles. Costello is well versed in the styles from which hip hop draws its influences and The Roots have shown they're an extremely versatile outfit. Together, there's a bit of a dub-lite feel to the dreamy sound of these songs as drums, horns, organ and samples edge in and out of the spotlight with that distinctive voice. **DO**



Sviatoslav Richter

Solo Recordings



480 8745 33 CDs

Decca

THE ORIGINAL 22-CD Richter/Philips Authorised Edition boxed set was a magnificent collection. This reissue adds a further 11 CDs to the original and sells for about £60! Richter's playing is as magical, and inspirational as ever. His many live performances are here, but the set also includes the legendary 1958 Sofia recital, plus the solo recordings made for DG in the fifties and sixties. The breadth of Richter's repertoire is astonishing and the set features works by Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Chopin, and Liszt through to Prokofiev and Webern. The later (digital) recordings have good sound, but the Sofia recital requires a certain indulgence. **JH**

With 33 discs to choose from, there's something for everyone here



Prokofiev
Symphonies 3 and 7
Bournemouth
Symphony orchestra
Kirill Karabits



4137 CD

Onyx

THIS IS THE first instalment of a cycle of the 7 Prokofiev symphonies by Karabits and the BSO, and it augurs well. The neglected third symphony gets the disc off to an impassioned start, and highlights the conductor's care over balancing, and maintaining clarity, even in quite densely scored passages. The enigmatic seventh is sensitively played and Karabits brings out its mix of buoyant toughness and resigned melancholy. The recordings sound very open and detailed, with excellent clarity and plenty of impact. Tonally, the sound is a little bright/forward, albeit very clean, though the deep bass could be a bit weightier. **JH**

BLU-RAY DVD



Joni Mitchell
Woman of Heart & Mind/
Painting With Words and Music

Blu-ray

EAGLE VISION

HOT PICK



Painting With... is a live performance in front of a small audience from 1998 in which Joni is joined by top-notch musicians and delivers excellent renditions of post Blues era tracks.

Woman... looks at her life and best-loved albums, revealing a highly intelligent and dedicated artist who used emotional turmoil as the source for her song writing. From Graham Nash through Charlie Mingus and beyond, hers has been a diverse and fruitful career, which makes this highly watchable for both fans and newcomers alike. **JK**

Nature's Dragonfly



Our DRAGONFLY



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MARANTZ Champagne PM 7200 Kl amplifier in



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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: **07870 159725 or email: johnsidedbottom@hotmail.co.uk (Somerset).**

PROAC Speakers Response D1 for sale. Cherry finish with black grilles. As new £850. Buyer to collect: **01628 626085 or email: dandipotter@indosmail.com (Maidenhead).**

Q ACOUSTICS 2050i speakers for sale, white gloss finish, immaculate condition, £400. Buyer to collect: **07940 659384 (Brighton).**

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 £800: **01772 314151 or email: Jamesmckendrick@btinternet.com (Lancashire).**

PRECISION Eikos CD player fully upgraded by Tom Evans just under two years ago to his very latest spec. with external power supply at a total cost of £3,600, asking £1,575 (I have now moved to streaming) Audiolab 8000T tuner £115 (£800) had from new, but hardly ever used: **01202 515474 or email: johnlangley17@talktalk.net (Bournemouth).**

PROAC Studio 140 Mk1 floorstanding speakers in maple. Due to weight,



REGA Brio amplifier. Two years old, moderate usage £300. Monitor Audio BX5 Floorstanders, two years old, perfect condition £250: **07908 945608 (Battersea).**

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!



AKG Q701 Quincy Jones Signature Line Headphones in white, one and a half years old, mint condition, boxed (£340 new) £170: **07905348812 (Watford)**.

buyer collects. Unmarked A1 condition. £750: **07597 499299 (Hampshire)**.

CUSTOM DESIGN wall-mounted turntable support, black steel frame, toughened glass shelf, complete with all fixings in as-new condition. Offers please: **01293524587 or email: davedagenham@hotmail.co.uk (West Sussex)**.

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: **07837654593 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: **01582423791 (Beds)**.

SPENDOR A3 dark walnut floorstanders, includes boxes and packing material. £550. Collection only: **07930397120 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 INSIGHTS Aurousal VSx speakers, to me sound same as latest Focalstage 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 minisystem. (£2,000 new). Supplied with all cables etc. £450 Buyer collects. Will split: **07888853675 (N. London)**.

HEYBROOK TT2 turntable, Grace G-707 arm & Dynavector 10X5 cart with Clearaudio Synchro speed controller, VGC £500, collection only: **07938 835982 (Middlesex)**.



AERIAL ACOUSTICS 10T speakers in Rosewood (£8,000 new), asking £2,200. Lexicon processor DC2 (£4,000) VGC £950: **0152614055 (Fleet, Hants)**.

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 speakers with ribbon tweeters, works well with valve and solid-state amps. £300 spent upgrading crossovers internal wiring. £500: **07793749178 or email: kingjuanchao@yahoo.com (London)**.

MARANTZ KI Signature CD player. CD6000 OSE KI sig - immaculate condition, champagne silver, original box, remote etc. £225 ono: **01614459770 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: steverees67@gmail.com**.

TOTEM Model 1 speakers for sale. One owner from new. £550: **01628626085 (Berkshire)**

RUSS Andrews Signature Powerkords, 1m length, Wattgate 350HEC plugs. Mint condition, RRP £440

- £295 each or £575 for both. Cheaper if collected: **01902884694 or email: jukey39@yahoo.co.uk (W. Midlands)**

KRELL KAV 300i 2x150W in fabulous condition £765 inc remote, Excellent condition Krell KAV 500 5x100W power amp £1,250 can be bridged to 2x400W & 1x100W. Pair 2m Transparent Ultra XLR cable 6 yrs old GC. £650 ono. Pair 1m Transparent super XLR cable 2yrs old VGC. £350ono. Pair 1m Transparent Plus XLR cable 2yrs old VGC. £270 ono. Pair 2m Transparent Ultra RCA cable 8yrs old GC. £500 ono: **07958319976 or email: simon_hope@btopenworld.com (Oxfordshire)**.

WANTED B&W CDM 9NT speakers in cherry wood. Must be in excellent condition: **02072619494, or email: michaeljohngerrish@hotmail.com (London)**



NORDOST Red Dawn RCA interconnects. Superbly transparent sound, mint condition, were £300 will take £100: **01484 427426 (West Yorkshire)**.

LEEMA Antila MK1, hi-end CD player in excellent condition, hardly used. Boxed and including all accessories, buyer collects and demo £987: **07736395424 (SE London)**

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**

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: **02074998729**.

FIRESTONE Audio Fubar II USB DAC and 'Supplier' power supply (both boxed) £80. No damage, scratches, etc: **07875976185 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)**.

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KEF

X300A wireless speakers



I REMEMBER SEEING a pair of O'heocha wireless speakers at the Bristol Sound and Vision Show a decade or so ago, and thinking what a good idea they were. Then I looked at the price, and duly changed my mind. All thoughts of home-friendliness and domestic acceptability disappeared when I realised I could buy a family car for the same money.

There are plenty of wireless speakers on sale now, but the KEFs are more expensive than most. They're much more like real hi-fi speakers with wireless and USB functionality added. They're decently finished, although don't expect them to be as gorgeous as the LS50 standmounter that we saw in last month's *Group Test*. The cabinet is rigid and well damped, and comes finished in a choice of Gunmetal (grey) or Linear (white) textured wrap. It contains a two-way Uni-Q driver array, a 25mm vented aluminium dome tweeter and a 130mm magnesium/aluminium alloy mid/bass unit. Bolted to the inside are two Class AB amplifiers delivering 50W and 20W to the bass and treble drivers respectively via a bespoke crossover, making the speaker a true active design. An internal DAC and wireless module is also fitted.

The X factor

The X300A has a 24-bit, 96kHz capable USB input, and the speaker will play out true 24/96 too – so there's no downsampling. There's also a 3.5mm analogue input and wireless capability via AirPlay or DLNA. Handily the system can be switched to work in desk or stand (free space) mode via a selector on the rear of the master speaker. Foam plugs are supplied for the rear-firing bass ports should you wish to ram them close to a wall.

For setup, KEF has a free software wizard (downloadable from www.kef.com) for Mac OS X and Windows. In convenience terms, the only real downside is that – although the speakers can receive sound wirelessly from a local



network – they need to be physically connected to one another by a USB lead, which partly negates the benefit of wireless operation. From a technical point of view, this makes sense because you only need one wireless interface card, but from non-technical customers' point of view, some will wonder why they can't have truly wireless operation from both boxes. This isn't a criticism of the KEF package as such, it's an observation about the current breed of wireless loudspeakers.

This is an engaging and eminently listenable pair of multimedia loudspeakers that boasts a crisp and musical sound. The X300A gives a clean performance that has a good deal of detail and grip. ABC's *Stranger Things* proves an enjoyable listen, the KEF system setting up a nice, firm groove and getting into the spirit of the song. Vocals are smooth and there are no areas where the speaker gets shrill or unpleasant – which sets it apart from most computer speaker systems at a stroke. Treble is decently extended, although you wouldn't call it especially finessed.

The KEF system is decently powerful. Essentially it's intended for near-field use and the power output is more than enough for small to medium sized rooms. It's clean and dynamic, and doesn't get too worried, even when asked to play serious

reggae from Black Uhuru, in the shape of *The Great Train Robbery*. One area where it excels is imaging and soundstaging; here the KEF system proves able to throw stereo images out well into the room and focus them far better than rivals. It has surprisingly good depth too, providing, of course, you set the speakers up properly and toe them in just a touch.

X marks the spot

Still, the X300A does sound slightly processed when compared with a small amplifier and a conventional pair of wired, passive bookshelf loudspeakers. By these standards the package isn't quite as convincing – you'd get noticeably superior sonics from a pair of KEF C1s and a NAD D 3020, for example.

This is the problem that speaker systems of these type all face, because their additional complexity isn't the most cost-effective when it comes to sonics. In terms of domestic acceptability, it's a wholly different story, of course – only a cable manufacturer would deny just how nice it is to live in a world without wires! Designed to upgrade the so-so computer sound systems used by so many people, the KEF X300A works very well for what it is – the only downside being its relatively high price. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£800

CONTACT
01622 672261

WEBSITE
kef.com/gb

OUR VERDICT



High End Cable Panda Feet

WHAT HAVE PANDAS got to do with hi-fi you may ask. In reality, the reference to pandas simply serves to highlight the fact that the Panda Feet, designed by Dave Jackson of High End Cable and manufactured for him by Atacama Audio, are made from a carbon-treated bamboo resin composite material. Fear not – the manufacturer isn't trying to bamboo-zle you (sorry!) into buying something that isn't eco friendly, since the material used is not a food source for humans or endangered animal species, such as bamboo-loving pandas!

As well as being eco friendly and sustainable, bamboo is fast being acknowledged as one of the finest materials for use in hi-fi supports. However, this sustainable product has never before been used for audio cable supports.

High End Cable Panda Feet will guide and support most makes of hi-fi cables from ribbon cables, oval cables and round cross-section cables.

The bamboo Panda Feet can help to improve the sound of your hi-fi by lifting your cables off the floor, which helps to minimise the effects of vibration. They can also be used under power blocks and power conditioners when there is no room left on your rack and the only space available is the floor.

Take the strain

These feet have more than adequate load-bearing qualities as they can support loads of up to 25kg – more than enough for your average cable!

Standard cables are accommodated by having the round groove side uppermost. Ribbon cables are supported by turning the block over and using the thin slot instead. For



smaller cables that may need something more than gravity to hold them in place, sets of four Panda tie bands are also available.

I find these feet to be particularly effective when placed under my loudspeaker cables. I certainly notice a cleaning up of the midrange when they are installed. Overall, this is a very well-made product that is capable of delivering subtle sonic improvements. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£30 individually,
£100 for a set of four.
Tie bands are £5 for four

CONTACT
01775 761880

WEBSITE
highendcable.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Russ Andrews GQ-24 iPod interconnect

CONNECTING YOUR IPOD

directly to your hi-fi system via the docking connector on the bottom of the iPod bypasses the iPod's internal volume control and other internal circuitry. This will inevitably mean an improvement to the overall sound quality as the iPod is designed primarily for 'music on the go' and powering personal earpieces or small headphones. Of course, a direct connection to your audio equipment requires an interconnect cable fitted with a suitable iPod connector and this is precisely what the GQ-24 cable from Russ Andrews offers.

The cable is based upon Kimber's GQ range of mini interconnects that use a four-wire braid of ultra-pure copper conductors, known as Kimber GyroQuadratic cable weave, that has been designed for superior RFI cancellation. The cable connects to a high-quality dock connector at the

iPod end and to an appropriate set of connectors at the system end. These connectors can be either a pair of RCA phono plugs, a 3.5mm stereo mini-jack plug or a 5-pin DIN plug for use with some Naim equipment or similar. Note that the cable only outputs a stereo signal from the iPod and does not charge or sync your player. The GQ-24 is compatible with all iPod generations (except the Shuffle), iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad fitted with the old-style docking connector. It is not compatible with newer Lightning connector iDevices.

Apple of your eye

The output from the iPod docking connector is not only a line-level output, unlike the standard mini-jack output that is designed for driving earphones, but it also has the advantage of bypassing the digital volume control, which can have a



negative effect on sound quality.

As expected, bypassing much of the iPod's internal circuitry results in a noticeable improvement in sound quality, compared with the more traditional approach of feeding the system from the earphone output jack. You can expect to hear more detail and better dynamics than when using the standard output jack. This really is a great cable and very much to be recommended. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
From £33

CONTACT
01539 797300

WEBSITE
russandrews.com

OUR VERDICT



MICROMEGA

Micromega 'My' is a range of compact size products with a footprint of only 140mm x 150mm, that offer exceptional performance and value for money. Available in Black or White finish.



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Hi-Fi+, Issue 96 (UK)

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Hi-Fi Choice, Jan '13 (UK)

I was carried away by the music – which, really, is all you can ask for"
Hi-Fi World, Mar '13 (UK)

"The MyDAC comes highly recommended"
AVForums, May '13 (UK)

"A fast-paced and exciting performance"
What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, Apr '13 (UK)

"The Micromega MyDAC is an instant audiophile classic"
C-Net, Mar '13 (USA)

"An exceptional product and unbeatable value for money"
AVCesar.com, May '13 (France)

"MyDAC comes close to digital audio sources at 20 times the price"
Audiofil, Mar '13 (Croatia)

"Magic box!"
La République du Son, Apr '13 (France)

"A stunning bargain"
The Absolute Sound, Jul '12 (USA)

"The MyDAC is a revelation"
Realisation, Apr '13 (France)



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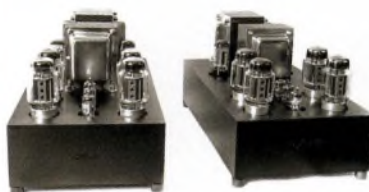
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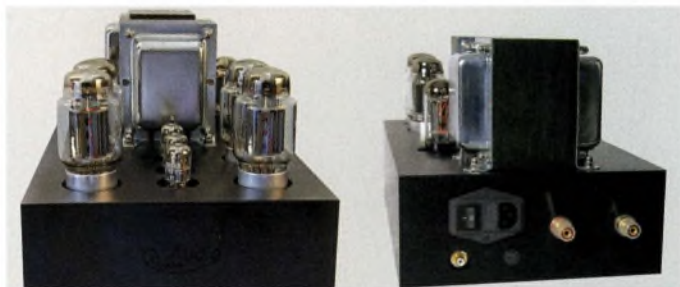
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Web Details

www.gvalveaudio.co.uk
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SNAKE RIVER AUDIO CABLES

"All I can say is that I'm deeply impressed with these Signature SRA cables, and would certainly use them myself. They're among the most natural-sounding and 'musical' cables I've ever listened to." Jimmy Hughes.

PURIST AUDIO DESIGN CABLES

"These are good cables. So good in fact, I started this review thinking they were the Proteus Provectus that cost ten times as much as the Genesis cables." Alan Sircom.

Analysis Plus, Voodoo Reference, Townshend Audio, Stealth Audio are just some of our Hi End Cable Brands that take your system to a new level. We also supply an impressive range of electronics from companies such as; Electrocompaniet, Astin Trew, Townshend, Bel Canto and Usher Audio, to name but a few.

So for free advice, great products and a service that aims to put the emotion back into your music, why not **call us at Mackenzie Hi Fi on 07905 362545** or check out the website www.mackenziehifi.com

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MCRU

EU/USA Adapter Mains Plug

MANY OF THE heavy audiophile power cords available today are fitted with USA or EU mains plugs that cannot be easily removed without risk of damage. Even if the mains plug is removed, fitting a 13 amp UK mains plug onto the bulky cable can be extremely difficult without the correct tools.

The end result is often a compromise between looking elegant and having all the wires making a good and safe electrical connection to the UK mains plug pins. The other solution is to use an adapter plug to convert the existing fitting to a 13 amp UK fitting. However, the adapter itself needs to be a high-quality unit otherwise many of the benefits of an audiophile power cord will be lost.

To address this problem, MCRU developed a EU/USA adapter plug in response to a number of requests

that it had received from audiophiles, who wanted to use USA mains plugs in UK sockets without tampering with the cable. This audiophile-grade adapter plug will accept Schuko European plugs or USA Nema plugs and convert them to a UK plug.

No touching

Ideally, you want as few contact surfaces in the mains circuit as possible, but where these are unavoidable, they need to be of a quality to ensure a negligible contact resistance. To achieve this, MCRU employs a plating company to gold-plate all the internal contact pins of the adapter.

This UK-based company, which has been in business for over 50 years, is able to provide audio-quality plating services to MCRU. The adapter is also fitted with a top-quality Bussmann 13 amp fuse that



has gold-plated end-caps. The outer casing of the adapter has been manufactured to be as slim as possible so that it does not add to the bulk of the original mains connector.

This is a very neat alternative to cutting off the American or European plug and then trying to cram bulky power leads into a 13 amp plug. An excellent solution! **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£29.50

CONTACT
07908 056978

WEBSITE
mcru.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Servisol

Aero Duster cleaner



A SOMEWHAT UNUSUAL product to be reviewing is a can that contains compressed, liquefied inert gas – and nothing else! The Aero Duster, manufactured by Servisol, is designed to provide a dry, powerful blast of gas for the easy removal of dust and other loose contaminants from delicate parts around tape heads and in other audio and video equipment, as well as computers, televisions and even clocks and watches.

This product contains no solvents and the built-in nozzle and supplied extension tube enable the blast of gas to be accurately directed into the most awkward of places. It is also ozone-layer friendly as it contains no CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) or HCFCs (hydrochlorofluorocarbons).

The gas is also completely non-flammable. The product is available in two sizes – the Aero Duster 100 can contains 200ml, while the Aero

Duster 105 contains 400ml. The technical data available for the product describes the odour that is produced by the Aero Duster as being “slightly ethereal”. This obviously refers to an odour resembling ethyl ether, rather than being ‘heavenly’ or ‘celestial’, and I can indeed detect a slight alcoholic smell when I use it!

Tape that and party

To clean around the tape heads of my reel-to-reel tape recorder, I fit the extension nozzle to the can (as this enables me to hold it upright when in use, as directed to do by the instructions) and give a few little squirts of the gas while holding the nozzle close to the sides of the tape heads. Some tiny pieces of fluff that have accumulated and got firmly wedged into those areas over the years are instantly sent airborne and easily removed.



I also find it a very effective dust remover inside equipment that has been sitting in my audio racks for many years. It is surprising just how much dust gathers on circuit boards, especially those situated underneath ventilation holes. The Aero Duster can safely be used around the circuit boards without any real risk of damage to the surface-mounted electronic components. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£6.76 for the Aero Duster 100 and
£12.06 for the Aero Duster 105

CONTACT
01278 727200

WEBSITE
cricind.com

OUR VERDICT



Opera-Consonance

Record Cleaning Machine

RECORD CLEANING

MACHINES often adhere to the 'function over form' design school with many looking rather purposeful in construction. Not here. Silky metal casting and unfussy solid switches, platter and suction arm all cut a neat profile.

Lifting the machine confirms it's a weighty bit of engineering and this gives you a sense of the power that may be on tap. Setting up is simplicity itself. It comes with a separate IEC mains power lead and the sprung-loaded suction arm simply slots into place. The platter comes with a robust clamping disk that firmly screws down on the record. This grips the central spindle and has a neat rubber flange that ensures that no cleaning liquid gets to your precious record labels.

There's a rubber hose exiting the rear for draining excess liquid and I raise the machine 15cm or so and dangle this pipe into a jam jar. With an LP in place on the cossetting, foam-covered platter and the clamp screwed down I'm ready to go.

Spit and polish

No cleaning fluids are included and none are recommended, so you'll need to provide your own. Consonance and AA-Acoustics – the UK distributor – believe that each vinyl fan will have their own preferred cocktail. They're probably right, but some liquid to get you going would have been nice. I generally use 50/50, IPA/distilled water, but I've learnt that experimentation is essential, depending on the age and condition of the records I'm cleaning.

A nylon brush is supplied that looks like it's used for spreading cleaning liquid, but don't be tempted to do this. It is only intended to clean the vacuum arm should you get a build up of grime and dust on the velvety leading edge that sucks down on the record surface. You'll also need to provide your own wet cleaning brush to spread liquid and work the surface of your records. Again, it would have been nice if this was bundled.



I use my own goat-hair brush that has the ideal compliance with firm yet soft bristles.

With a suitably grubby LP securely clamped in place I flick the switch marked 'turntable' and the platter turns slowly, but with great torque. I carefully spread a liberal amount of cleaning fluid around the record, gently working more troublesome areas with my brush until the whole surface is wet. Then swinging the vacuum arm across, I flick the vacuum switch. The room is immediately filled with a sound akin to a jumbo jet taking off. The arm sucks down firmly on the record, leaving a shiny, nearly dry disc in its wake. After only two or three rotations I'm satisfied that anything lurking in the bottom of those precious grooves is no longer there. Turning off the vacuum, the arm rises off the record when its spring loading defeats the diminishing suction.

Unclamping the record, it passes a visual test and is dry enough to be slipped straight into a fresh sleeve, but I give it a spin instead. The LP is transformed. Silences are inky black again and loads of fine treble detail is restored to voices and cymbals. Sometimes cleaning is best repeated to get to deeper dirt, but one pass seems enough here. Once finished, the Opera-Consonance is very easy to wipe down.

Some high-end record cleaning machines gently sip off cleaning liquid with a precise suction wand that softly coaxes grime from the grooves with meticulous accuracy. Other machines revolve in both directions on the basis that two points of attack are better than one. Some manufacturers provide extra suction arms to cater for 45s as well. The Opera-Consonance machine has none of these features. This is a single-minded record cleaning option that goes for force over subtlety. With a claimed 1,250W of rotational and suction energy on tap, this irresistible force may not be every audiophile's preference on their cherished, ultra-rare pressings, but it does a very thorough job on the LPs the vast majority of us own or pick up at record fairs. It's very noisy, but I've come to see this as a necessary price to pay for the good job that it does.

Clean up your act

If you're serious about your vinyl and keeping it in tip-top condition then you need a record cleaning machine. At this price point you might opt for Okki Nokki (reviewed HFC 383) or Moth machines for some extra features, but this is an extremely effective and attractive alternative that does exactly what it says it will do. **CW**

DETAILS

PRICE
£495
CONTACT
01273 325901
WEBSITE
aa-acoustics.com

OUR VERDICT



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Verdict:

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Against:

- nothing



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Musical Fidelity

V90-AMP micro amplifier



CONSIDERING HOW JOLLY

useful the things are, it's amazing that we don't see more products like Musical Fidelity's dinky new V90-AMP. What's not to like in a tiny little unit, measuring just 170 x 47 x 117mm (WxHxD) and weighing 710g, that puts out a decent 20W RMS per channel from a box that's about the same size as a videotape?

The Japanese, of course, know the value of small things, so have given the world all number of micro amps. Remember the Sony TA-88 or TA-77? Then there was Aurex whose brand rose to fame by making its fabled Microsystems. Aiwa did a brilliant miniature pre-power, and Hitachi, and the list goes on. Now, Musical Fidelity has taken up the cause of getting more from less.

The V90-AMP joins a wide range of V90 micro separates, including DACs, headphone amps and aptX Bluetooth receivers. Pair it up with the latter and you've got the makings of a very versatile system, because the V90-AMP already has a DAC built in, with its own USB input and a mini optical socket that doubles as an input for a line-level analogue source. To complete the picture, there's a volume control bypass switch, so you can leave it out of the circuit should your digital device be able to control volume.

Around the back

The rear panel has old-fashioned spring clip speaker terminals. That means you'll have to cut off your banana plugs if you're using terminated speaker cable, and you won't be able to squeeze in your old 200-strand Monster Cable either. But if you're using the V90-AMP as nature intended, as a good-quality second or third amp, then you'll probably be less worried about using thinner cable. More baffling is the use of an IEC C6 coupler, or a Mickey Mouse mains socket as it's known to its friends – another means lead to lose at the bottom of your cable drawer. More intriguingly there's also a rear-mounted DC output, said to be "for future MF product only"...



The amp is easy to use, as you'd expect. Source selection is automatic, so there's no need for fiddly front panel switches. Whatever else you've got plugged in, when the USB socket gets a signal, the amp switches to this. If there's no signal via USB it switches back to the optical/analogue socket. This makes it well suited to multi-room applications with an Apple AirPlay/AirPort system, for example. Indeed, it would be ideal for Sonos users. This little unit is finished to the usual high standards of the rest of the V90 range, which means beautifully surfaced aluminium all round.

With a claimed 20W from such a small box, the only way Musical Fidelity's engineers were going to do it was by using Class D modules. These generally have lower power consumption, produce less heat and claim more music power. Opinions are still divided about the relative merits of this type of operation, but in the V90-AMP it works well. The sound is smooth, polished and relaxed – which belies what you'd normally associate with a small, lowish-power amplifier.

Feed its analogue input with a good CD player (using the appropriate adaptor) and you'll find it an agreeable listening partner. For example, Paul Weller's eponymous album is pleasantly smooth and flows nicely; *Into Tomorrow* has a nicely

sumptuous bass and decently sweet treble. Switch to the optical digital input and it proves to have a good DAC built in; the soundstage tightens up a little and there's a better sense of detail and slightly improved dynamics. Via USB it's capable of 24/48 playback and it bounces along nicely with some high(ish) resolution REM. Tonally the amp proves even, with a satisfying bass, although in absolute terms there's a slightly grey feel to the music. This isn't entirely unexpected at the price, but other similarly priced (but much larger) amplifiers do better here.

Our friends electric

The real test for the V90-AMP is with powerful electronic music, and here it falters a little. It's simply not muscular enough to carry the shuffling rhythms of The Orb's *Little Fluffy Clouds* as I'd expect, unless you've got a very efficient pair of loudspeakers. Trouble is, most small systems have small speakers too and these are the least sensitive around. If, however, you play gentler and less propulsive music, the Musical Fidelity won't disappoint. It's not the most riveting listen, but is never unpleasant and can get its mojo working with catholic material. A fine little product, just don't expect it to replace your kW's! **DP**

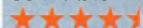
DETAILS

PRICE
£249

CONTACT
0208 9002866

WEBSITE
musicalfidelity.com

OUR VERDICT



Orb

DF-01i Vinyl LP Record Flattener



PICTURE THE SCENE – you spend ages carefully setting up your turntable VTA to within a fraction of a millimetre, and then you place a prized purchase on the platter, only to find it's warped! All those careful adjustments are rendered useless when the warp swoops under your stylus, lifting your cartridge skywards. Quite apart from the reduction in audio quality, even a slightly warped record will result in a localised increase in stylus pressure, causing unnecessary wear that could eventually damage the disc. However, a solution is now available in the form of the Orb DF-01i Vinyl LP Record Flattener.

The DF-01i uses a heating technique that is applied by means of two semiconductor heater films, one above and one below the LP. By thermally controlling the heating and then the cooling phases, the

warped record is allowed to properly relax and return to its original flat state. The machine heats only the outer edge and centre of the record, but not the grooves. The process takes four hours (two to heat up and two to cool down). Most LPs can be treated, except for flexi-discs, Sheffield Lab, BMG Ufa and Super Analogue discs.

Flat's the way I like it

Many of the records I purchase these days are second hand. One such purchase is slightly warped, so I place it in the DF-01i and press the start button. After about four hours, the LEDs flash to show the process has finished and I remove the record and place it on my turntable. The outcome – a perfectly flat LP! On playing the record, I can confirm that there are no audible changes resulting from the process – except the lack of the faint 'whoosh' I used to hear when the



warp passed by – a result! I then borrow a very badly warped LP and this is also rendered perfectly flat by the DF-01i.

The price of the Orb DF-01i may be outside many people's budget, but there is no denying that it works extremely well. It is an ideal investment for people with large collections, as well as for record dealers and the like. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£1,080
CONTACT
01733 350878
WEBSITE
analogueseduction.net

OUR VERDICT



Chord Company

C-stream Ethernet cable



AUDIOPHILES REALISE THE quality of the audio signal is influenced by many factors – not only within the analogue domain, but also the digital one. It is, therefore, important not to neglect the quality of digital interconnect cables, including those connecting your streamer to your local area network.

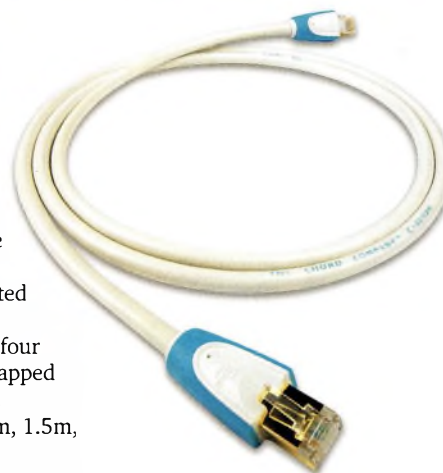
Following the update of its analogue cable range, Chord Company has now launched a new range of Ethernet cables, some of which incorporate its proprietary Tuned Array cable-tuning technology. All the cables are designed to bring noticeable sonic benefits and maximise the performance of DACs, transports and high-quality Ethernet-enabled audio components. The cable here is the C-stream entry-level Ethernet cable.

The C-stream has gold-plated signal contacts with an over-moulded plug surround with a non-compression

cable strain relief. Inside the cable are OFC conductors and low-density polyethylene insulation. The twin conductors are precisely twisted with each pair featuring an overwrapped foil shield. The four pairs are additionally overwrapped with a further foil shield. The C-stream is available in 0.75m, 1.5m, 3m, 5m and 10m lengths.

Stream lover

This cable is certainly well made and the connectors are noticeably superior in construction to the usual all-plastic RJ45 plugs that are often fitted to Ethernet cables and which squeeze the cable for strain relief. The C-stream, on the other hand, has a firm plastic clip and a gold-plated metal screen around the pins. As expected, the plugs are really easy to click into the RJ45 sockets on both



my Squeezebox Touch and my network hub.

When I play music streamed from my PC, I can clearly detect a subtle improvement in spatial positioning of instruments, compared with a standard computer Ethernet cable. I attribute this to the minimisation of cable-induced jitter, which can so easily be introduced through cables that have poor or non-existent screening. Nice one Chord! **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£40 for a 0.75m cable, up to £90 for a 10m cable

CONTACT
01980 625700
WEBSITE
chord.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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Custom Design

Milan Compact equipment rack

THIS IS NO fly-by-night high volume box-shifting operation. Custom Design is an established Newcastle-based, family run company that designs and manufactures a range of hi-fi equipment furniture in the UK. The products are hand made, and customers can even get bespoke items made up specially to order, for a price premium. With 28 years of manufacturing experience behind it, there's a quality to the products that you don't see in the work of some more recent entrants to the market, and the Milan Compact 4 tested here is no exception.

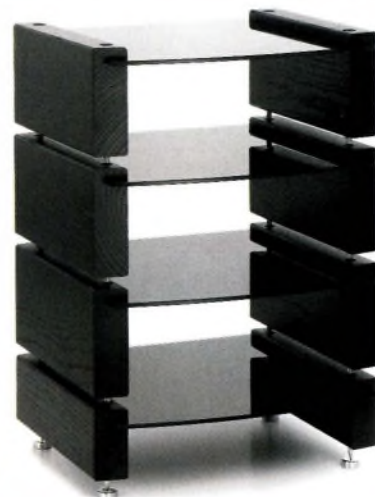
A high-quality rack for half width components (it measures 410 x 585 x 400mm, WxHxD), is a rare beast. It's ideal for Cyrus, Musical Fidelity M and V90 ranges and, of course, any number of Japanese mini-systems on the market from the

likes of Teac, Denon, *et al.* Custom Design also makes a full-width version, but the Compact range has a charm all of its own if you're spatially challenged, and/or prefer to use the aforementioned equipment.

Shelf-ish outlook

It's available in a selection of solid hardwoods including oak, walnut and ash. The 6mm glass shelves come in a choice of clear or black, have polished edges and are designed to support up to 25kg each. The radiused front edge gives a pleasing, softer look to the rack, and there's a range of shelf spacings from 155mm to 300mm. It's a modular design that you can add to as your system grows.

Compared to standard domestic furniture, the Milan Compact is a substantial improvement. A Cyrus transport and amplifier combination benefit significantly in sonic terms, as



well as looking the part. There is a sense of a smoother, more open sound that despite being tonally less intense, is actually more musically satisfying. Music sounds faster and flows better, yet doesn't grate or tire. Bass is the major area of improvement, with a tighter, tauter and more tuneful feel – it sounds far less leaden and lumpy. Instrumental separation improves slightly, too. All in all, then, this is an excellent piece of furniture. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£660
CONTACT
0191 2624646
WEBSITE
customdesign.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Lindy

HF-110 headphones



NOT A LOT of people know Lindy, but actually it's a well-established German company that started out in 1932, no less. It has been family run since then, and specialises in smallish consumer audio products. Lindy has a UK office based in the North East and is now attempting to move into the British hi-fi market proper. To do that, it has a range of affordable headphones available in a variety of flavours – and the HF-110 is a full-size, hi-fi open-back model.

The circumaural, over-ear design uses 42mm drivers with neodymium magnets and copper clad aluminium wire CCAW voice coils. The ear cup frames are a good-quality plastic with metal grilles fitted to vent the sound. The headband is well padded and easily adjustable, and the earpads are described as a "breathable soft protein leather material", but it feels more like vinyl to me; a spare set is

included in the pack. Also supplied is a soft case to protect the headphones when not in use. A 3m-long detachable cable is supplied, with a 3.5mm-to-6.3mm jack adapter. Generally the HF-110 is very well made indeed; it's not quite up to high-end standards, but certainly doesn't feel cheap.

Hear me now

Cueing up a classic slice of The Waterboys, in the shape of *Glastonbury Song*, I am greeted with a powerful, detailed sound that really keeps my attention. You'd never call the HF-110 overburdened by bass, but that's good because unlike some popular bass-heavy headphone brands, you don't get the sense that the song has been remixed, badly. Instead, the lows are crisp, propulsive and integrated well into a clean midband that places instruments



accurately and doesn't grate. Tonally, it's a little on the thin side with vocals lacking the body you'd expect, but using a good headphone amp helps here. Treble is crisp and usefully extended, making it a surprisingly refined design at the price. If you're after good, inexpensive hi-fi headphones, these come as a nice surprise and are well worth investigating. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£80
CONTACT
01642 754000
WEBSITE
lindy.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



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Tony Bolton, Hi Fi World 2014

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hi-fi+ Products of the Year 2010

Hi Fi World
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2012 ★★★★★

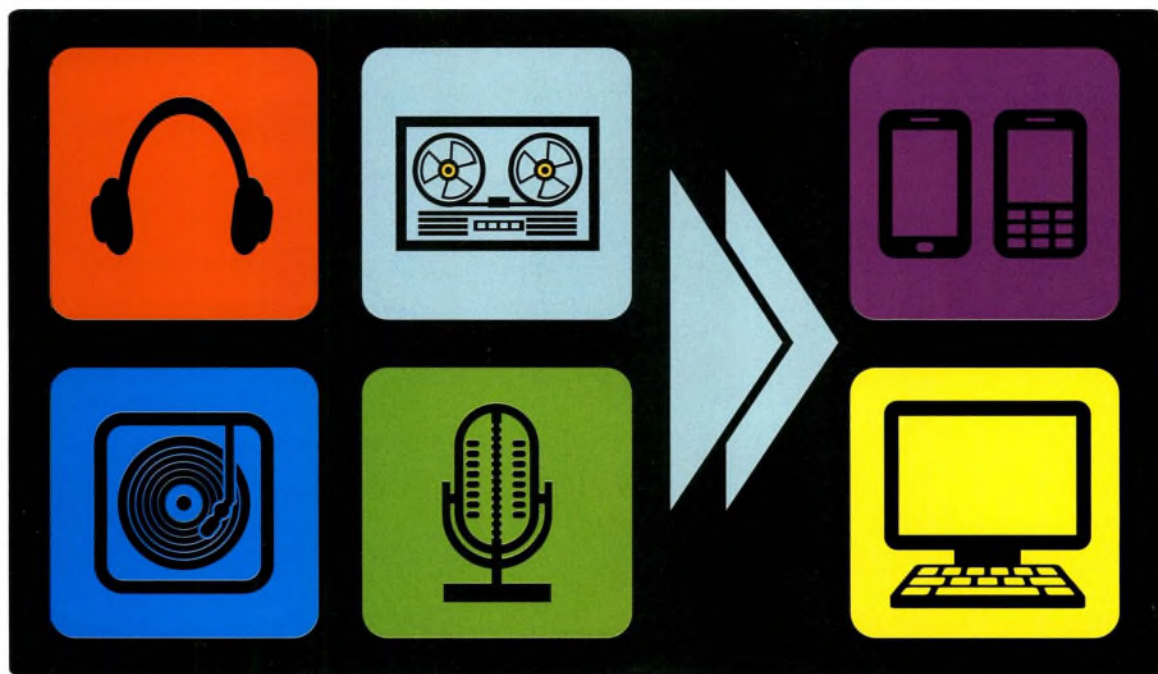
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Digitising LPs and cassettes

Want to make a digital copy of your precious analogue recordings as a backup or just for convenience? Here's what you need to know...

LP and cassette tapes have a place in our hearts, and are capable of producing rewarding audio quality on a home hi-fi. But while removing an LP from its sleeve, placing it on a turntable and lowering the stylus onto the vinyl is a thrilling experience, it's not nearly as convenient as selecting a track and pressing the 'Play' button on a digital media player.

One of the major issues is the vulnerability of a record to physical damage. One slip of the hand could send the stylus skating over the surface, leaving a permanent scratch that results in the tell-tale repetitive click each time it is played. Similarly, audio cassette and reel-to-reel tape recordings are susceptible to damage from external factors, such as strong magnetic fields or the breaking down of the binder that bonds the magnetic material onto the tape due to poor

storage conditions. Magnetic tape that has not been played for some time is also prone to 'print-through', which occurs when the magnetic pattern on one layer of the tape copies onto the adjacent layers, resulting in pre and post echoes that are audible during quiet passages. Making a digital copy of your music before any damage has occurred serves as a useful backup to safeguard your investment.

Let's get digital

Whatever your reasons for wanting to digitise your analogue music, you're going to need some suitable hardware and software. The analogue source may also need some sort of pre-processing in the analogue domain, which is a fancy way of saying it might need some amplification and equalisation! You shouldn't need any of this for open reel or cassette players, but it will be necessary for a

record deck as the output from the phono cartridge will require RIAA equalisation and some amplification and impedance-matching (the amount required depends on whether the cartridge is of the moving magnet or moving coil type). The exception to this is if you are using a crystal or ceramic cartridge, which requires neither amplification nor equalisation. Most cartridges suitable for 78rpm records are likely to be of this type.

The next thing you need to do is to convert the analogue signal into a digital one. You can, of course, use the line input on your PC's sound card as this will take the standard line output from your analogue source, but we wouldn't recommend this as a PC sound card is unlikely to be of sufficiently high quality for this purpose. Furthermore, you may well run into earthing problems as both your PC and hi-fi will be earthed, and

you may well end up with a hum loop. Fortunately, there are analogue-to-digital convertors (ADCs) many of which are very reasonably priced, that will do a far better job and also provide some sort of isolation to avoid potential hum loops. For example, a Xitel INport includes opto-isolators and will produce a CD-quality 16-bit/44kHz digital output via your PC's USB port from any line input. A bit more upmarket is a NAD PP 4 Digital Phono Preamp with phono/line inputs and both line and USB outputs that can be purchased for under £200 and produces a 16/48 digital signal directly from a MM or MC phono source, as it has all the necessary RIAA equalisation and amps built in.

Finally, you will need some software to record the digital data and save it on your computer in the format you require. This may also allow you to edit your recording, remove noise and split the file into separate tracks.

Making a digital copy serves as a useful backup of your music

Depending on how you want to store the digital files, you may wish to add MP3 tags that contain detailed information on the track for display on your media player. This isn't necessary if you wish to simply burn the digital file onto a CD for playing on a CD player, but is useful for other formats.

Starting to record

It is always best to save your initial recording in the highest resolution possible. This will be dictated by the



hardware you are using. Many of the devices will produce 16/44 or 16/48 PCM data that can be saved by your recording software as uncompressed WAV files. If you have access to a high-end analogue-to-digital convertor (ADC), you can save your files in higher resolution, such as 24-bit and higher sampling rates of 88kHz or 192kHz. From these, you can then produce the other formats as required.

Usually, the ADC comes with some recording software for your PC, or you can use your own. A word of warning when using your own software – if the hardware can support higher

NAD's PP4 produces a 16-bit/48kHz digital signal directly from MM or MC phono sources

It's even possible to digitise your reel-to-reel recordings



recording rates, make sure your software is fully compatible with your ADC. Some software can only record at 16/44 CD quality.

Whether you are recording from cassette or LP it is very much like recording a 'live' session that is potentially subject to unwanted interference. This may be due to the limitations of the analogue media, such as tape hiss or record surface noise. Or it may be a result of external factors, such as a click from a refrigerator switching on or the dreaded beeping from a mobile phone being picked up by your sensitive phono stage! The latter issue will probably render the recording useless and you'll have no alternative but to start the process all over again. Other things, such as tape hiss and a scratch on a record, you can't do anything about, but you may be able to effectively cure it by software – see later. Whatever the issue, it is wise to monitor the recording carefully at this stage and we recommend the use of headphones as this tends to be more analytical and you have less chance of missing something that you may want to deal with later. Have a pen and paper handy to write down the exact time that a noise occurs as this will help you find it again when you come to edit your recording later. Don't try and break your recording into separate tracks at this stage. Just record each side of a record or cassette and you can then use your editing software to break it into tracks later.

Editing your recordings

There is a vast amount of audio editing software available, ranging from free downloads to bespoke products that offer a wide range of facilities. All of them allow for some basic functions, such as splitting the file into individual tracks. Some software can do this automatically by detecting extended quiet passages, but be careful when using this as they often set the start of the next track at the start of the music, rather than leaving a short pause before it

GETTING STARTED

If all you are looking to do is be able to play your old records, cassettes or reel-to-reel tapes on your computer, iPod or MP3 player, and if high quality reproduction is not an issue, the process is very easy. All you need is a record deck fitted with a ceramic or crystal phono cartridge, tape deck or open reel player and a PC fitted with a sound card.

If you have a turntable with a tonearm that is fitted with a ceramic or crystal cartridge, this produces a voltage that is high enough for feeding directly to the input of a PC sound card without any additional amplification. If it has been fitted with a higher-quality magnetic cartridge, you will need a phono amplifier to boost and shape the signal to enable it to be plugged into the sound card. Fortunately, you can obtain these for a very low cost (battery-powered units can be found for as little as £12) just search online. If you want to digitise your collection of cassettes or open reel tapes, all you require is a cassette deck or tape player with 'line out' sockets and they can be plugged directly into your PC's sound card.

Of course, you will need a lead with suitable plugs at each end to connect the record deck or cassette player to the PC. At the player end, you will probably have two phono sockets – one for the left channel and one for the right. At the PC end, you will almost certainly have a 3.5mm jack socket, so you will need a lead with a pair

of phono plugs at one end and a 3.5mm jack plug at the other. Again, these are very easily obtained from high street hi-fi and computer outlets or online.

At the PC end, your sound card or laptop will have several sockets for connecting inputs and outputs, such as speakers, a microphone and a line input. Fortunately, they are often colour coded as follows: lime-green for speakers and headphones, pink for a microphone and light-blue as the line input. There may also be other coloured sockets for use in surround-sound setups and for connecting a joystick for use with games. Anyway, the one you want to connect your analogue source to is the light-blue line input socket. Apple MacBooks have a combination audio port that can also be used for audio input and instructions on how to do this can be found at <http://support.apple.com/kb/ht3625>.

Finally, you will need some software on your PC to record the sound. If you haven't already got some simple sound recorder software, a good place to start is with the freely available Audacity download. The cross-platform software for recording and editing will record from your soundcard to your computer's hard disk, save the files in MP3 format so that they can then be played out from your computer or on a variety of portable music devices so that you can hear your records and cassettes again on the move.

GUIDE TO...



With a USB turntable you can connect to a computer to digitise your vinyl



starts. If you use the automatic facility, make sure you can make fine adjustments to the position before saving the tracks.

If your records have a significant amount of surface noise or there is excessive tape hiss, some software will allow you to filter this out to some extent. Use this with caution, however, as it will inevitably filter some higher frequencies and reduce the overall quality of the sound to some degree.

Another issue with records will be clicks and pops caused by scratches, dust or static. Again, the software may

It is best to save your initial recording in the highest resolution possible

have a facility to attempt this automatically, but the results are somewhat variable. If you have the time and the patience, the best way is to do this manually. Using the notes you took during the recording, you can quickly find the offending click on the waveform as it usually shows up as a short spike. Using the software, simply highlight the offending spike and delete it. Yes, you have effectively shortened the recording by doing this, but given that it is usually a fraction of a millisecond, you really won't notice it – honest! Slowly work your way through the entire piece and at the end

of the process, you will have a recording that can actually sound better than the original!

Playing tag

You now have a folder containing the nicely edited WAV files. If all you are planning to do is produce a CD of these, then stop here as you can simply copy these into your audio CD burning software. If, however, you want to use them with a media player or streamer, you will want to convert them to a more efficient format that will save space and is compatible with your player. Once you have converted them, these formats (unlike WAV and CD) have the ability to store additional information in the file, such as cover art, title, artist, etc, that can be displayed on your player's display screen. These are known as MP3 tags and software is available that can add them either manually or automatically.

Software exists that accesses online databases, matches the waveforms of your recordings with libraries of known recordings and then populates the tag information for you. In my experience, this is surprisingly effective and will save a considerable amount of work. However, this automated process won't work with more obscure material, in which case the tags will have to be completed manually. Very often, the music player will look for a file called 'cover.jpg' or similar in the same folder as the music files and use it as the cover art for the album. This

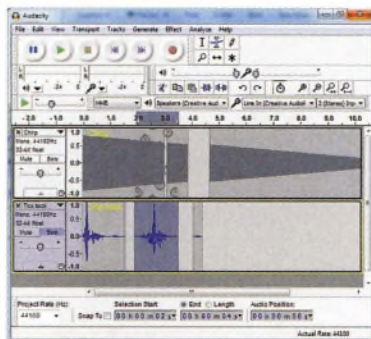
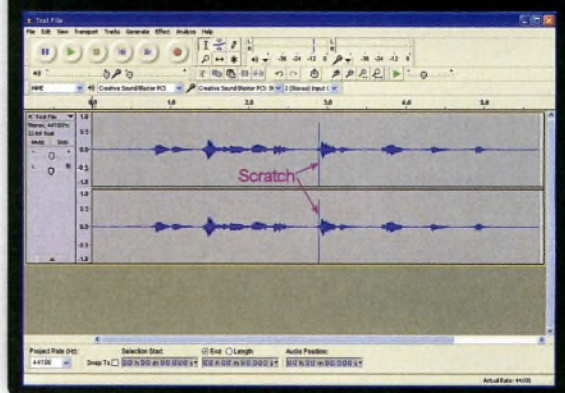
AUDIO FILES FOR AUDIOPHILES

Once you have your recordings safely stored as audio files on your PC, you have the opportunity to tidy them using a sound editing package. The edited results can then be saved in a format suitable for your chosen media player or streamer.

For advanced features, there are some excellent professional editors available, such as Sound Forge Pro from Sony. There are also packages of combined video and audio editing software like the Roxio Creator Suite of media software. There is also plenty of freeware available such as Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>), which is perfectly suitable for tasks such as trimming the beginning and ending of your recording and editing out clicks and pops.

For basic tasks, all the software works in much the same way. You highlight the area of the waveform you wish to change and treat it as you would if editing text. You can cut and paste sections, or delete them to remove clicks and scratches or to tighten up the start and finish of a tune. You can also select a section and fade it in or out automatically, which is very useful for reducing any surface noise.

The software can also automatically attempt to remove clicks and other noise. You can even experiment with special effects, such as adding reverberation and echo, should you wish to do so!



Free software like Audacity can be used for your recordings

only needs to be a file of about 400-800 pixels square, so it shouldn't take up much space, but you can use any picture you like for this purpose.

Now that you have put in all this work, make sure that you make a

copy of all your digital music on a backup disk. This is preferably an external USB or NAS (Network Attached Storage) drive that you can store remotely from your computer in case the unthinkable happens!

So there you have it – all of your precious vinyl or tape safely stored on your computer and media player. What you lose from going from the master analogue format to a digital format, you will most likely gain from the fact that you have removed many of the imperfections from the original. Plus you now have a safe backup of your investment in your collection of music. Now go try it yourself ●

NEXT MONTH: Integrating a subwoofer into a hi-fi system – we show you everything you need to know

DIGITAL RECORD DECKS

How can you have a digital record deck or cassette player when records and cassettes are analogue? There are such things as USB record decks or vinyl converter turntables. These are the perfect solution if you have a set of old vinyl records, haven't got anything to play them on and want to convert them into a decent-quality digital format for playing on your PC, digital music player or streamer.

The real benefit of a USB record deck is that it bypasses your PC's sound card and feeds digital data directly to your computer via a USB port. The data is saved onto your hard disk as an audio file using sound recording software. PC sound cards do not, generally speaking, have inputs or analogue-to-digital converters designed for hi-fi use and you can run into problems with earthing loops between the record deck and the PC causing hum. A USB record deck

has its own analogue-to-digital converter that will, as a minimum, generate CD-quality 16/44 digital audio straight into your USB port.

There are decks to suit most pockets starting from around £50 to £250, and some will even play 78s. Generally speaking, these decks mostly support speeds of 33 and 45rpm and have a standard analogue output for connecting to a hi-fi amplifier line input, which enables records to be played on a hi-fi system that does not have a phono input.

Similarly, you can use a low-cost portable USB cassette player for around £20 – £30 or a stand-alone hi-fi separate deck for about £120 for digitising cassettes. Many of the USB record decks and cassette players come bundled with some recording software for use on your PC or recommend a freely downloadable package, such as Audacity.

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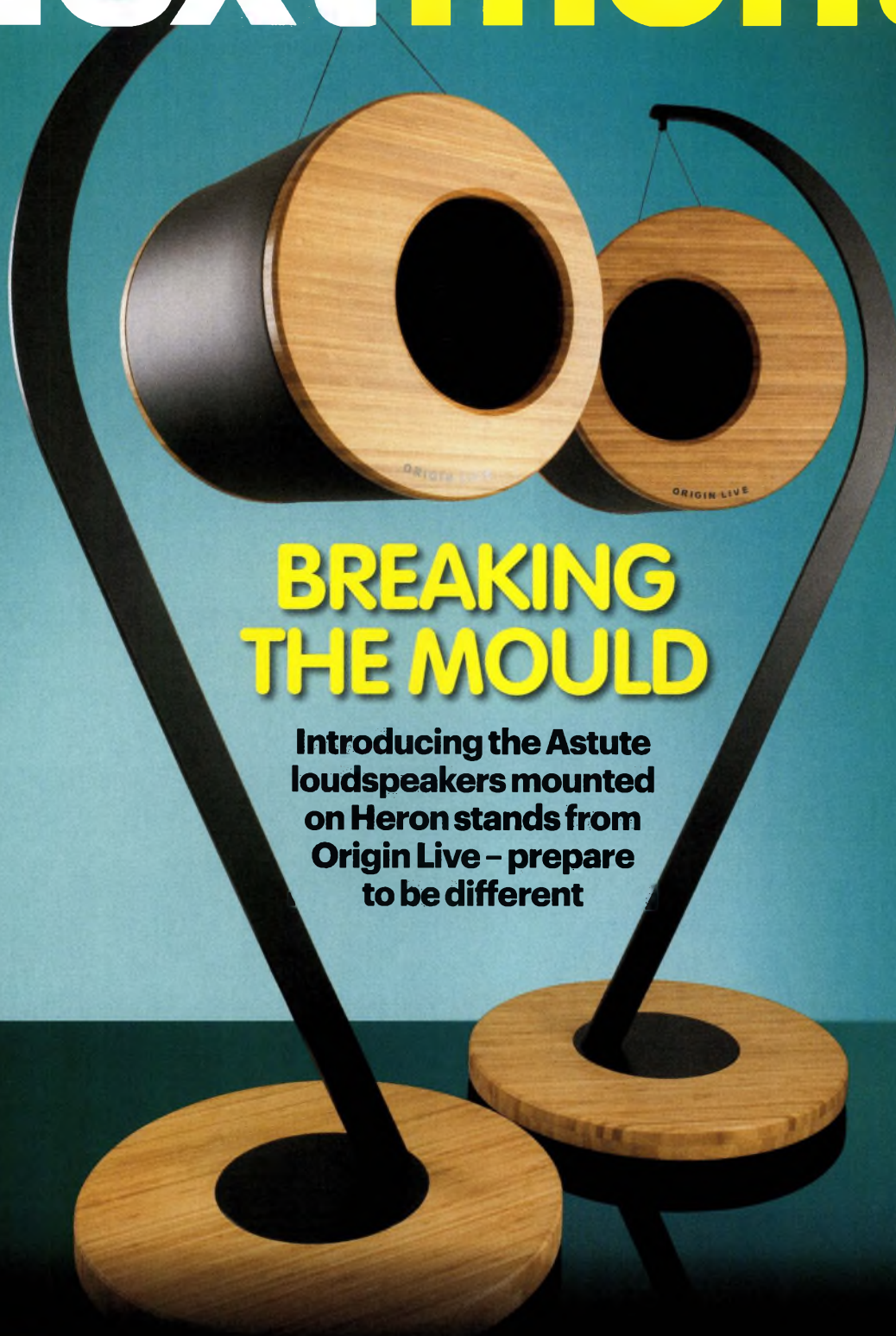


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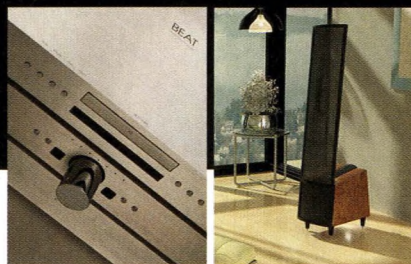
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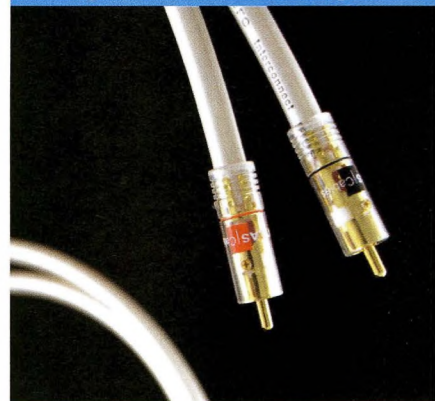
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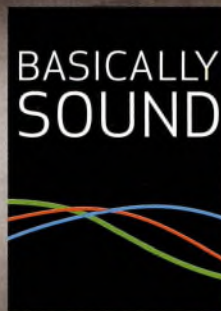
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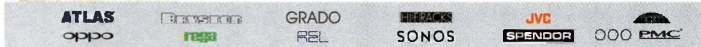


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WE HEAR...

MUNICH SHOW HOTEL BARS ALWAYS THROW UP surprises, and a nice one was news of a new Scottish amplifier manufacturer called Oran. Founded in 2012 by chartered engineer Roger Duerden, it's only now stepping out into the sunlight with a new range of interesting-looking products that combine valve technology with sophisticated control electronics to keep them in tune. Clever stuff, and our spy was also impressed by Roger's sartorial elegance (tweed jacket, Oxford brogues) and passion for classic Triumph Dolomite Sprint motor cars. Traditional values in a modern setting, as they say...

ONE CURIOUS PRODUCT ON THE ISOTEK stand at Munich was a prototype Blue Horizon record cleaning machine. Based on the original Percy Wilson design, and also the more modern Loricraft refinement of the same name, *Backchat* was told that it was being produced in conjunction with Loricraft and should have similar functionality and performance, but get to market at £1,295 in the UK. Cosmetically the Blue Horizon unit wasn't finalised – it's been hinted that the production machines will look sleeker. Expect it to be a very strong contender, and to go on sale later this year.

MICROMEGA'S MYAMP WAS ANOTHER highlight at the MOC. Company president Didier Hamdi seemed especially proud of his petite new integrated amplifier, complete with its superb-sounding Class AB circuitry and clever cooling technology using an almost silent, ultra long life fan. It sounded stunning through big Focal speakers, but also made a very nice noise through a small pair of Micromega standmounters, more of which next month perhaps?

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 96

JULY 1991

"While it is always nice to see new technological developments enter the marketplace, the question that has to be asked is do we really need a new format?" asked editor Andy Benham as MiniDisc and Digital Compact

Cassette were in the process of being launched. "The answer is a qualified yes, but while the industry undoubtedly does need a new, digital, recordable format to sit alongside CD, what it doesn't need is a choice of at least four, which is what is currently on offer (DAT, CD-R, DCC and Mini Disc). I just hope that the DCC/Mini Disc battle is settled fairly quickly. The thought of numerous bemused consumers sitting at home with Betamax videos and no software springs readily to mind and is a situation we could well do without repeating." We'll leave you to insert your own joke here...

Elsewhere, diva Axl Rose from Guns and Roses assaults a member of the audience before storming off stage in a hissy fit after spotting them recording the show using a camera. Just imagine how much of a nightmare he'd have today with camera phones...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 168

JULY 1997

In the section that is currently called *Audiofile* these days (and was called *Instant Systems* back in 1997), there was a bundle from a name not normally associated with hi-fi. Looking like a system produced by B&O, the SD1 was actually made by JVC. It "incorporates separate components, but they're the width of a midi system and finished in champagne aluminium with cast side panels and discreet displays". A mere £5,000 bought the AX-SD1 amp, XL-SD1 CD player, TD-SD1 cassette deck, FX-SD1 tuner and SX-SD1 loudspeakers. But how did it perform? "Its key strength," wrote Jason Kennedy "is coherence, implying good timing and transparency that combine to create palpable, fluent music. Inevitably it's not the most dynamic or bone-crunching system, but makes up for this by remaining unflappable up to decent volume levels, producing a clean, even balance."

Meanwhile the sovereignty of Hong Kong was handed back to the People's Republic of China and Woolworths closed leaving children having to find somewhere else to get their pick 'n' mix fix.



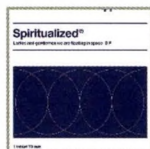
DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month **Karl Smith** Director Colab Audio picks four of his all-time favourite long players...



BIG STAR RADIO CITY

Surely the most influential power pop record! I love its textured feel. *September Gurls* could have been written for my better half Sarah...



SPIRITUALISED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN...

Greatest break-up record ever! Jason's pain is palpable in his vocals and the wonderfully arranged gospel choir and orchestra.



WILCO THE WHOLE LOVE

From very humble beginnings, Wilco have honed their musical craft, and this album has some of their finest arrangements ever.



RADIOHEAD HAIL TO THE THIEF

Surely one of the band's most cohesive mixtures of indie rock and electronica. My 14 year old son Ben loves *There There*, so it must be good!

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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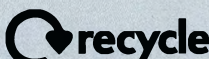
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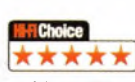
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