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## Retro replay

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# Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 392

Yearbook 2014



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  - Cables
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October 2013 - Precision 6.2



Precision 6.2



Precision 6.4



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Precision 6.2 / 6.1 / 6C / TS2.12 system

# Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

# Welcome

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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!



Welcome to the *Hi-Fi Choice* Yearbook 2014 – a very special edition celebrating a fantastic year of audio for music fans and hi-fi enthusiasts alike. Inside this 164-page bumper issue you'll find the ultimate collection of the greatest-sounding hi-fi products to pass through our respected reviewing process over the past 12 months. Every product is a coveted *Hi-Fi Choice* badge winner applauded by our team of hi-fi experts and music fans below for a winning combination of outstanding audio performance and value for money that stands above its peers. For this essential guide we have gathered over 70 top-performing audio components and accessories from 19 different categories so that you can compile your ultimate auditioning list of must-own hi-fi to build a great-sounding system tailored to your individual needs.

What's more, our eight-page *Music Reviews* section compiles the year's finest album releases to show off your system while our *Retro* pages revisit yesteryear kit that's still worth tracking down. Enjoy!

**Lee Dunkley** Editor

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ENTERPRISE HOUSE, ENTERPRISE WAY,  
EDENBRIDGE, KENT TN8 6HF

## REVIEWERS



**DAVID PRICE**



**DAVID VIVIAN**



**ED SELLEY**



**ANDREW SIMPSON**



**JASON KENNEDY**



**CHRIS WARD**



**NIGEL WILLIAMSON**



**NEVILLE ROBERTS**



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Hi-Fi  
Choice

EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

# Creek

## Evolution 50CD

This neat CD player incorporates DAC and preamp capabilities, breathing new life and versatility into the format

Once a vestigial box with no inputs and a single pair of analogue outputs, the humble CD player is increasingly becoming a preamp with a DAC and optical disc transport built in. Gone are the days when it was seen as an end in itself, now it is to all intents and purposes a digital music centre. Creek's Evolution 50CD silver disc spinner is precisely this, and is perfectly placed to take on the market leader, Audiolab's 8200CD.

To basic CD playing, it adds several digital inputs, a Bluetooth option and source switching allied to a volume control, so you can plug it straight into a power amplifier. It also offers a degree of operational refinement that Creek hasn't previously been able to give. To wit, you get a slot-loading

mechanism, backlit control buttons and rather nice OLED display. It comes with a system remote control that integrates with other Creek components too.

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

As you'd imagine, the back panel is bristling with features like its five digital inputs (two optically isolated Toslinks, one galvanically isolated USB, two transformer isolated coaxial), and two digital outputs plus a Creek RC remote control bus. You'll

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£950

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
5.5kg

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

**FEATURES**

- 2x Toslink;
- 2x coaxial digital inputs
- 1x USB input;
- 1x aptX Bluetooth input (optional)
- 2x digital outputs
- 1x RCA phono out;
- 1x balanced XLR out
- Wolfson WM8742 DACs

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Creek Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01442 260146

**WEBSITE**  
creekaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 385

also like its choice of RCA phono and balanced XLR outputs. You can toggle through the digital inputs on the front panel SRC (source) button.

Under the hood, there's more than the usual attention to detail that you'd expect to find in a good mid-priced machine such as this. There's a 25W toroidal mains transformer, with three separate secondary voltage windings for analogue and digital circuitry. Low-impedance, specially chosen power supply capacitors and voltage regulators are fitted for the best possible sound, and organic polymer capacitors pop up at key points in the analogue and digital circuitry, along with high-grade WIMA polypropylene capacitors in the output filters. Two Wolfson WM8742 24-bit DACs run in dual differential mode, and Creek says that special low-jitter clocks are fitted. The analogue reconstruction filters in the output of the DAC use high-grade OPA2134 op-amps in each channel, configured in balanced mode. This offers symmetrical filtering and both single-ended and balanced output capability with low impedance high-current output capability. The slot-loading mechanism is an amalgam of ruggedised specialist parts that were chosen specifically for their durability and good sound quality. It gets custom





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

servo control software, to which much effort was devoted to write, says Michael Creek.

### Sound quality

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

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

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

This essential musicality isn't lost when you move to electronic music either, showing the player is basically very well balanced. Yello's *Cf Course I'm Lying* is a deep, brooding song done on soft, smooth analogue synthesisers and the Creek captures their timbre nicely, showing its skill at conveying subtle, low-level details. Tonally it's smooth with that big fat bass showing itself off again, as does its nice airy upper midband; Billy Mackenzie's backing vocals are wonderfully carried, sounding eerily pure and natural. It's also good at

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

rhythms, but here you begin to notice it doesn't have the rottweiler instincts of the Audiolab 8200CD, which seems to drill down into the interplay between the snare and hi-hat with more energy and commitment, making the Creek sound just a little laid back by comparison. Dynamically it is very good and it captures the accenting on peaks slightly better.

Moving to the digital inputs, and via USB it proves a fine partner to a MacBook Pro running Audirvana Plus. It's worth noting that – in its current version – the Evo 50CD only offers decoding at up to 24/96 using this input, rather than the 192kHz sampling frequency that's possible (any higher sampling frequencies will be downsampled to 96 or 88.2). This doesn't seem to adversely affect the sound, though, and The Scorpions' *China White* at 24/96 is as powerful and punchy as we would hope, with wonderful texture to the cranked-up electric guitars. The soundstage is suitably vast, the speakers seemingly disappear into the room as we are assaulted by those power chords, making for a visceral sound. At the same time, the stinging cymbal crashes and wailing vocals never quite step over the breach into harshness, while still making a real impression. We can hear the typical Wolfson DAC sound – a big but

slightly loose bass allied to a spacious midband that extends up to a well-lit treble that gives cymbals a satisfyingly metallic feel – and it works well here.

The Eroica Quartet's reading of Mendelssohn's *Octet Op.20* at 24/96 is a delight, the fine DAC section is well able to convey the delicacy of string tone. It's with this sort of music that hi-res digital really comes into its own; suddenly CD doesn't seem fit for purpose any more. Here, the Evolution 50CD serves up a spacious recorded acoustic with satisfying depth, convincing scale and a fine sense of the feel of the concert hall. The music flows in an enjoyable and tuneful way, giving an immersive listening experience. Again, it doesn't quite have the searching, forensic low-level detailing of the Audiolab, but it sounds no worse for it – indeed tonally it is sweeter and more palatable with the 8200CD sounding a little sandpapery. In absolute terms, there's a slight diffuseness to the sound and a lack of true three-dimensional image projection, but you'll need to spend many times the Creek's cost on an exotic high-end DAC to get a dramatic improvement. Yes, this talented new machine really is rather good.

### Conclusion

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

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

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

#### OVERALL





# Black velvet.



Vinyl is black. Notes are black. Anodised aluminum is blacker than black. The much-acclaimed Confidence C1 Platinum is the epitome of a point-source loudspeaker in a new black design. Mesmerizing with superb qualities of precision, from an incredibly capable, dramatic, spectacular bass to silky-clear, subtle, velvety highs. It features Dynaudio's innovative DDC technology, the legendary Esotar<sup>2</sup> tweeter and expertly built and elegantly finished cabinets, making it the finest sounding and most distinguished two-way Confidence yet. The new Confidence C1. It's intoxicating.

All there is. **DYNAUDIO**





# Cyrus

## CD Xt Signature

**F**ive years ago, Cyrus' Peter Bartlett told *HFC* 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 taking a huge bag of money and throwing it into the sea. Let's just say, when you can buy any DVD-ROM drive, tweak it lightly and chuck it in your CD player for pennies, Cyrus' new Servo Evolution mechanism doesn't appear to make commercial sense – especially with the curtain seemingly coming down for compact disc as hi-res begins its ascent.

The 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.

### 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 we'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 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 midband 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, it pushes right into the music to retrieve the entirety of the note. Compared with the excellent but cheaper Audiolab 8200CD (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

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,750

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**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

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 386

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 our experience.

### Conclusion

It's an awful lot to spend on 'just' a transport, but we 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. It brings a sense of openness 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! ●

### 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







# Quad Elite CDS

**T**his is the latest version of Quad's CD player, and a clear step up from most budget offerings. Quad players started in the mid eighties with the 66, which was targeted at buyers willing to spend a little more to get a better performance, but was never intended to be a high-end deck. The company's silver disc spinners have always been overshadowed by its superb range of electrostatic loudspeakers, so its players are still less well known than perhaps they should be. The headline feature of the Elite CDS is the 24-bit/192kHz upsampling DAC, replacing its predecessor's 24/96 converter.

The unit is a little unusual looking, having a three-quarter width sculpted aluminium case with crenellations at the back, and an understated fascia with the minimum of controls – just four to cover the transport functions and disc open/close. The display is basic but clear to read, although the rather wobbly disc tray lets the side down a bit at this price. Inside the CDS gets a new transport mechanism and servo system, custom designed by Quad engineers; track access is swift, but the button layout is confusing at

first. A new master clock is fitted, as is the aforementioned Crystal CS4398 24-bit DAC. Quad says high-quality electronic components are specified, with multi-layer circuit boards. Round the back there are analogue outputs and proprietary Quad Link connectors, plus an IEC mains input.

## Sound quality

As soon as the Quad's laser lights the silver disc inside up, it becomes abundantly clear that this is a rather special-sounding device – one whose sonics are commensurate with its higher price. The Elite CDS boasts a beautifully detailed, delicate yet powerful sound.

Kicking off with New Order's *Vanishing Point*, the opening few phrases display a wonderfully natural drum machine sound (if there is such a thing!), with an excellent sense of timing. The music isn't thumped out at the listener in a brutish way, but still manages to be tremendously impactful and invigorating. *Vanishing Point* can tend to sound really rather compressed and muddled on lesser players, but here it is neither; the Quad signposts the snare drum accent playing once every four bars that rival

decks either gloss over or completely miss. And yet it all seems so effortless and undramatic, the CDS shows no sense of strain. Behind the frenetic drum track glides some beautiful keyboard work, chiming like only early digital synths should. Vocals are gorgeously smooth yet float like clouds over the main mix, rather than being submerged. Most impressive of all is Peter Hook's bass guitar work;

**As soon as the laser lights up, it becomes clear this is a special sounding device**

suddenly it appears effortlessly in front for all to hear, and wonderfully tuneful. Everything is set perfectly in its place in the mix, too.

## Conclusion

Randy Crawford's *You Might Need Somebody* is wonderfully spacious, with elements of the mix glistening in perfect focus. Rhythmically the song hangs together superbly, and the player's transparency allied to its smoothness makes for an effortless, but nonetheless engaging listen ●

### DETAILS

- PRICE**  
£800
- ORIGIN**  
UK/China
- WEIGHT**  
4.5kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
321x 70 x 310mm
- FEATURES**
  - Crystal CS4398 24-bit DAC
  - 1x RCA phono line output
  - Quad Link connector
  - Tray-loading CD drive
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
International Audio Group Ltd
- TELEPHONE**  
01480 452561
- WEBSITE**  
quad-hifi.co.uk
- REVIEWED**  
HFC 383



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Wonderfully open, clean, natural sound; build quality

VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Fiddly ergonomics; basic display and wobbly disc tray

BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Highly accomplished mid-price CD spinner

FEATURES



### OVERALL





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Whatever the size of your room, seductive New Silver delivers glorious wideband audio to every corner without ever filling the floor.



## SILVER 8

Clean, open, detailed  
and musical sound

AUGUST 2014





# Rega Saturn-R

**A** minimalist-looking player from most angles, the Saturn-R doesn't even have any buttons for its DAC section visible on the front panel, yet it has all the key flavours of digital input including USB. But that's not all because there are digital outputs too, two sets of them, one direct from the transport mechanism and the other from the DAC. Which is a first in our book. And lest you think that Rega has taken the guts of an Apollo-R and the salient parts from its DAC and stuffed them in one box, there is at least one key indicator that this is not the case. The USB input is a proper asynchronous type that can accept up to 24-bit/192kHz signals – full HD digital audio in other words.

## Sound quality

While warming the Saturn-R up in the other room and even at low level it becomes pretty apparent that it has a rhythmic integrity that is so far ahead of the norm it's uncanny. There are very few CD players that can do pace, rhythm and timing well, but this is a member of that select club. Equally clear is the slightly forward nature of its presentation. If you are looking for tonal sweetness it may not be for you. If, however, you want to feel like the performance is taking place right in front of you, then it is.

Sound is a shallow thing, quite often a very nice thing, but not the reason why we love music. It's the heart of the music that this CD player gets to so well, it reveals tone and imaging,

but these are secondary to interplay, musicianship and composition. The various layers in a mix become apparent and the energy and feeling even more so, it literally refreshes the parts that other CD players don't even know exist and in an extremely coherent fashion.

Rega's Apollo-R does a similar thing but is a little cruder, while the Saturn-R is more revealing and subtle. Live recordings are made obviously live and menacing pieces such as Massive Attack's *Inertia Creeps* become even darker. What we love most of all is the way it revives your music collection. This machine reveals what's good about them, what's interesting and – critically – why it is that you purchased them in the first place.

And, of course, it's a fully fledged DAC. In selecting USB, we discover that file playing delivers a more refined result than the disc and nearly as an engaging one. The timing remains strong and is superior to a number of pretty decent standalone DACs. If you want a rich and relaxed sound just hook up a laptop running JRiver and you will get as much out of the converter, you will also find yourself having a lot of fun.

Jeff Beck and Joss Stone's rendering of *I Put A Spell On You* has plenty of rhythmic solidity and you really appreciate Beck's fabulous playing, more perhaps than Stone's voice, but that could be a matter of taste. We try a number of tweaks with the Saturn-R to see how much more it can do,

## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,580

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 82 x 325mm

### FEATURES

- Digital inputs: 2x optical; 2x coaxial; asynchronous USB
- Digital outputs: 2x coaxial
- Outputs: single ended RCA phono
- Supported sample rates: 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 192kHz

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Rega Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071

**WEBSITE**  
rega.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 384

the most effective is a PS Audio P5 mains regenerator. This gives the player considerably more refinement by cleaning up the sound and letting it deliver a lot more hi-fi virtues. It doesn't enhance its ability to engage and enthrall, but does give the sound more depth and tonal richness, and these are nice things to have.

## Conclusion

If you are into hi-fi in order to get greater enjoyment out of your music collection, there are few CD spinners that will do a better job than this one. If on the other hand you are a dedicated audiophile, the lack of finesse and holographic imaging may not be to your taste. But ultimately hi-fi should be a conduit to the glory of music and in this respect the Saturn-R is in another league to the majority of the competition.

It's not such a shiny piece of male jewellery and the remote is initially baffling, the red display can also be hard to read in bright light. This aside we can think of no reason why every music lover in the land does not need to own this CD player. With the comprehensively equipped DAC it can also do wonders for your downloads and hi-res files ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

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★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Enjoyable and musically engaging CD player

**DISLIKE:** Finish is not as slick as some

**WE SAY:** If you like music you will love the Saturn-R. It reaches the parts that few digital components can

#### OVERALL





# Exposure 1010 Series

**A**vailable with black or silver anodised aluminium fascias, the 1010 CD player and 1010 integrated amp extol a rather British restraint. The steel casework isn't as robust as some, but construction is solid. The sharp lines of the CD front plate house a simple array of push-button relay controls that operate all functions with a gentle press. The CD tray feels a little flimsy, but operates smoothly enough. The matching amp is reassuringly weighty and sports the same silky aluminium fascia as the CD player. Around the back of both units connections are retained in sturdy backplates securely fixed to the chassis. Exposure claims some internal components in the 1010 series are shared from its higher priced models.

The amp has three pairs of RCA inputs, a fixed gain AV input and a tape record connection. Single-wire speaker connection is enabled by flush-mounted 4mm shrouded speaker sockets.

## Sound quality

Right from the very outset this combination commands your attention. Together the components seem to deliver a passion for music that just gets your toes tapping, and they achieve a rare balance between accuracy and soul.

Ben Harper's *Gold to Me* leaps from a stable soundstage with absolute authority. Bass lines have powerful weight, yet clear leading edges that

help you lock into the compelling drive of the track. The Exposure combo comes across as having brilliant timing and infectious rhythm, especially around the lower registers. Yet this pair also possesses a true lightness of touch, a smooth, informative midband coupled with an airy treble that suggests the combination is very even-handed in delivering all the music on the disc. The CD player successfully picks up on Harper's subtle rubbing of guitar slide on steel strings way back in the mix. Equally, hand chimes in the track are tightly focused and continue long after some other budget CD players have lost some of the decay detail.

Switching to Mutya Buena's track *Just A Little Bit* confirms the system's natural ability with timing and rhythm. It locks straight into the funky groove, with cleanly separate bass, drums, vocals and brass all gelling into this modern soul classic.

Turning back the clock with a spin of Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony* can show up budget systems as they struggle to wrestle the bass weight with critical midband detail, but in this instance the combo doesn't panic. Organ weight is convincing, although things get a little congested when the full orchestra joins in.

Strong rhythmic bass control is usually the preserve of 'muscular' amps and smooth, lifelike vocals generally come from plenty of midband detail or valves. Given there's only a claimed 50W on tap and no tubes in sight, where is this magic coming from?

## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
CD player: £415,  
integrated  
amplifier: £445

**ORIGIN**  
Malaysia/UK

**WEIGHT**  
5kg/7kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD) CD/amp:  
440 x 90 x 310mm

### FEATURES

- Analogue RCA output and optical out (CD player)
- 50W per channel RMS 8 ohms (amp)
- 3 analogue RCA inputs (amp)
- Fixed gain AV input; line level 'tape' output (amp)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Exposure  
Electronics Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01273423877

**WEBSITE**  
exposurehifi.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC379

The 1010 player excavates plenty of rich detail from CDs and treble energy feels extended. It gets to some extra truth that other players smooth off for an easier listen. In isolation this could be too revealing in the wrong system. At the other end of the spectrum, bass power can be punchy and full, so again, a mismatched amp or inefficient speakers could lose the quality message this player dredges up.

If the 1010 CD player is a class act for the money, then the 1010 amp is a bargain. Where the CD finds extra treble and bass detail along with great timing, the amp has a flair for relaying the emotion of music. Great timing is preserved and its wonderful midband helps get all the pivotal information and intonation around voices and instruments. Bass has weight and attack, yet also warmth and agility.

## Conclusion

The real magic happens when these components work together. Where the CD could be too revealing, particularly on harsher tracks, the amp helps with some forgiveness and extra insight into the music. Like any great double act, they play to one another's strengths and support each other when things get tough ●

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Rhythm and timing; treble detail and tuneful bass; understated looks

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Display hard to read; otherwise nothing at this price

#### BUILD QUALITY



#### FEATURES



**WESAY:** Revealing player with great timing, extended treble and strong bass

#### OVERALL







# Marantz

## CD6005/PM6005

**R**esiding on the very first rung of the Marantz silver disc-spinning range ladder, the CD6005 has the very same reliable CJKT690 disc playing mechanism fitted to its predecessor, feeding a Crystal Semiconductors CS4398 DAC, digital filter and noise shaper IC. The major concessions to modernity are the new remote control and a front panel USB input for iPod.

The PM6005 integrated amplifier gets rather more drastic surgery, following the fashion for offering a bundled DAC built in, meaning you can hook up anything that outputs a coaxial digital or Toslink signal and play it direct through the amp via the built-in 24-bit/192kHz high Crystal Semiconductors CS4398 (as per the CD6005). High-quality Japanese Sanken 2SA1694 and 2SC4467 output transistors are used to deliver a claimed 2x 45W RMS per channel into 8ohms.

Generally, the quality of finish seen in both these components belies their low prices. You're never really aware you're in the cheap seats, so to speak, because the controls work smoothly and there are no disconcerting bangs and pops.

### Sound quality

As you might expect, this Marantz combo sounds big, fat and warm. Both components have been voiced to hide their budget origins as well as is possible, and they don't sound like your average, cheap, screechy budget hi-fi separates. Indeed, they're so

good that you can put them through some pretty accomplished, high-end speakers and they still won't give the game away.

First, each component in isolation. Driving a Creek Destiny 2, the CD6005 sounds very nice indeed. Treble is crisp and spacious – maybe not the world's sweetest or best finessed – while midband is smooth and open with a good sense of image placement. Bass does its own thing happily, sounding surprisingly strong and tuneful for a cheap deck and the result is very enjoyable.

Running the PM6005 from an Audiolab 8200A CD player, it's spooky how that rich, slightly soft and hazy sound of the CD6005 is repeated with its matching amplifier. The rather sudden action of the volume control gives too much loudness from around nine o'clock to 12 on the dial, making it hard to trim lower listening levels easily. But when you've got used to this, you'll struggle not to like the big-hearted nature of this integrated. It seems to bounce along with a smile, determined to enjoy whatever you play through it, without a care in the world.

UB40's *One in Ten* is very tuneful, the Marantz pushing out plenty of bass that sounds surprisingly supple, while the midband is wide and airy, with lots of detail to the percussion. Vocals aren't as smooth as they might have been, but never grate; indeed the amplifier's only real sin is that of omission, as it fails to drill down into the low-level detail.

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
 CD6005: £350  
 PM6005: £380

**ORIGIN**  
 EU/China

**WEIGHT**  
 6.6kg/7.6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
 (WxHxD)  
 440 x 338 x 105mm

**FEATURES**

- CD, CD-R/RW and USB (iPod) playback
- Support for WAV, MP3, AAC and WMA music files (CD)
- 24-bit/192kHz Crystal Semiconductor CS4398 DAC (CD)
- Quoted power output: 45W RMS into 8ohms (amp)
- 5 RCA line inputs, 2 digital inputs (amp)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
 Marantz UK

**TELEPHONE**  
 02890 279830

**WEBSITE**  
[marantz.co.uk](http://marantz.co.uk)

**REVIEWED**  
 HFC381

Put a warmish, softish CD player together with a warmish, softish integrated, and there are no prizes for guessing what sort of sound they make. But the great thing is they'll suit percussive, but tonally light and bright speakers – such as the Acoustic Energy AE301 (HFC 369) standmounts – down to a tee. Hook them up with the powerful Q Acoustics 2050i (HFC 365) floorstanders and you have a very synergistic combo. It's as if Marantz has designed a system to be used very successfully in 'real-world' budget conditions, and compensated for the stark nature of many inexpensive speakers.

### Conclusion

Designing budget separates such as these is the art of the possible and it all comes down to how cleverly you make the compromises. Neither of these components will threaten the best £1,000 product, but nor will you be lamenting the fact that you haven't spent such a sum. Essentially, any transgressions are those of omission, they won't offend, but they don't give you as much as other, pricier designs will. Anyone that's interested should go and audition them. We're sure you will be beguiled ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
 ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Open, smooth warm sound; fine build at the price; styling

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
 ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Flimsy binding posts on the amplifier

**BUILD QUALITY**  
 ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent budget CD player and amplifier with a surprisingly fine sound

**FEATURES**  
 ★★★★★

#### OVERALL





# Marantz SA8005

**T**his Marantz has the feel of a good camera; all the controls are crisp, positive and delicate. The brushed metal fascia is superb, and is agreeably sculpted to avoid the generic blandness that afflicts many Japanese products. But perhaps the major point of differentiation from its mainstream £1,000 rivals is that the SA8005 offers two-channel Super Audio Compact Disc playback. This is very much a legacy format now. What will prove more useful for most UK audiophiles is its USB, optical and coaxial input-equipped DAC, so it can play a far wider range of formats. As well as PCM computer music files at up to 24-bit, 192kHz, it includes Direct Stream Digital (DSD), which is the native coding system for SACD. Better still, it does 'double speed' DSD (ie DSD5.6). This runs at twice the data rate, giving theoretically superior sound, and the SA8005 is currently one of the few machines on sale that is built for this.

## Sound quality

The job of a £1,000 CD player is to provide an obvious improvement to the rather two-dimensional sounding machines populating the sub-£500 price bracket. However, the SA8005 is unlikely to be used with the very best ancillaries money can buy, so it does need to be reasonably easy going – a high intensity, full-on sound may well grate in a mid-price system, after all.

With this in mind, the Marantz hits the spot perfectly; it is a powerful and

confident sounding machine, far more so than any budget CD player or DAC, which will sound rather thin and veiled by comparison. It has a relatively full-bodied tonality, although you'd never call it 'fat' or 'euphonic'. Via a really high-end amplifier and speakers, it still sounds musically rewarding, yet feed it into the sort of system it's more likely to be used with, and it fits perfectly. There's lots of detail, a strong bass, a decently open and realistic midband and a smooth, warmish treble. Stereo imaging is expansive and location within it pretty good; it also takes a fair crack at dynamics.

Given the SA8005's highly agreeable personality, our first port of call is My Bloody Valentine's *When You Sleep*. It's a searing wall of feedback and assorted studio effects overlaying cracked up, compressed guitars. This track is very good at forcing mistakes from front ends, but the Marantz copes manfully. It is uncomplaining and workmanlike – it just gets on with the job of playing the song without any fuss. Oh, and it is also without a searing, harsh treble or a forward upper midband, too. So we can say that this is a seriously couth CD spinner; it falls into no traps that give away its status as a relatively inexpensive product in the great scheme of hi-fi things.

Via SACD Simple Minds' *New Gold Dream* is superb; it proves to be a big, confident sounding player that gives a slightly warm and rose-tinted view of the world. It sets up a wide recorded

## DETAILS

### PRICE

£1,000

### ORIGIN

Japan

### WEIGHT

8kg

### DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)  
440 x 106 x 341mm

### FEATURES

- CD, SACD, CD-R/ RW and DAC playback
- Support for WAV, MP3, AAC, WMA, DSD2.8 and DSD5.6
- 24-bit/192kHz Cirrus Logic CS4398 DAC
- Discrete headphone amp

### DISTRIBUTOR

Marantz UK

### TELEPHONE

02890 279830

### WEBSITE

marantz.co.uk

### REVIEWED

HFC390

acoustic, although it doesn't hang back as far as we'd like, and proceeds to make music in an enjoyably effervescent way. The player really catches the timing of the music, and gives a great sense of flow from verse to chorus to verse. It unravels the various layers of the mix in an easy, unaggressive way – making for an informative sound that seduces more than it thrills.

The SA8005 is never boring, but it lacks the intensity and vitality of some of the better, more expensive machines. Certainly though, it proves most able considering its price; there's a sense that Marantz has carefully measured it up against its rivals and made it just a little better.

## Conclusion

The SA8005 is one of those unerringly capable designs that gets on with the job in a most agreeable way. It's an excellent, highly effective disc spinner with handy DAC functionality built in, but a few years into its life it may well spend most of its time playing hi-res DSD music – when DSD5.6 could be as common as 192kbps AAC is now. Factor in the player's fine build quality, and what's not to like? ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Warm, smooth, sophisticated sound; facilities; build

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Not quite as detailed as some rivals

#### BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Super sounding, well made mid-price disc spinner

#### FEATURES



#### OVERALL





# oppo



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## BDP-105D

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Darbee Visual Presence

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Dual Sabre<sup>32</sup> Reference DACs

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Headphone amplifier

Coaxial and optical digital inputs

oppodigital.co.uk



# Krell Connect

**W**ith the Krell Connect you get to choose from two flavours: for £2,500 you can buy the streamer itself, while an additional £1,000 gets you a high-quality internal DAC fitted. Both variants play a plethora of files – the important ones being FLAC and WAV at up to 24-bit/192kHz, but ALAC, AAC, Ogg, WMA and MP3 are also supported. Our review sample comes with the DAC built-in, but the cheaper version simply has a digital output, making it ideal for those that already have a digital converter or DAC-equipped CD player.

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

## Sound quality

Unsurprisingly, there's a distinctive Krell family sound to the Connect – one that impresses and charms in equal measure. The powerful, percussive, fluid bass is great, as Propaganda's *The Chase* proves. The synth bass line modulates up and down with heady aplomb, sounding wonderfully untroubled by what is going on further up the frequency scale. At the same time, the Connect cuts through the track's dense wash of synthesisers, throwing out loads of detail and a capacious soundstage. Treble is svelte and smooth too, and timed beautifully – the Krell manages

to bring all of the music together in a believable, coherent and organic way.

At first listen, it presents itself as a light, bright and tonally spry device, but it's so much more than this, as it plays a clever trick of rendering the music in a very clean and detailed fashion, yet is never harsh or objectionable. Indeed, when it's been on for a few hours, it acquires a seductive creaminess to its tonality.

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

Move from CD-quality to high-resolution recordings, and there's a proportional increase in sound quality, just as it should be; the music acquires extra energy, detail, drive, power and precision right across the frequency range. Treble becomes slightly smoother and a lot more sparkly, bass is firmer and fuller and the midband widens out even more and drops back, showing the Connect's ability to create a superbly

## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£3,500

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**WEIGHT**  
8.1kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
433 x 88 x 427mm

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

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9713909

**WEBSITE**  
absolutesounds.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC385

spacious recorded acoustic given half the chance.

Wings' *Band On The Run* is an unalloyed pleasure; it's a great album that to our mind has never sounded right on vinyl or CD, but at 24/96 via the Connect it comes over as tonally fulsome, spatially three dimensional and musically gratifying. Once again the Krell's basic character shines through; things are fast and thrilling with fantastically dynamic pan rolls crashing across the soundstage, left to right then back again.

The Connect is consummately neutral and transparent, letting all the richness of recordings come out while capturing their full visceral impact – it's quite a thing to experience. This means that unlike some rivals, which seem to have been voiced in one way or another, it works uniformly well across a wide range of source material.

## Conclusion

We have tried many different machines at this price point and the Connect can hold its own. Of course, it's always a matter of taste, but it's so neutral, open and transparent that it doesn't tie itself up in knots trying to flatter one type of music or another ●

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★☆

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

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

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

### OVERALL







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## ONE-BOX SYSTEM



# Naim mu-so

**E**ffectively, this is a box with loudspeakers, amplifiers, DSP and a network-enabled preamp all built in. It streams music from network-attached storage, smartphones, tablets, USB sticks and ye olde MP3 players, and can work as a standalone system or part of a multi-room setup.

Music comes via AirPlay (from Apple iDevices), or from the UPnP streamer. There's also aptX Bluetooth, which is what many will use. It plays internet radio and works with Spotify Connect. There's also a USB socket (which can play out the digital signal from an iPhone, iPad, iPod – or off a USB stick). There's an optical digital input too for DVD players, gaming consoles etc. and a 3.5mm analogue input, although disappointingly no RCA phono sockets.

The mu-so sports six drive units behind its front grille, including two tweeters, twin midband drivers and two elliptical 'figure of eight' bass units. In a nod to the famous Linn/Naim 'Six Packs' of the eighties, they are actively driven by six (STMicroelectronics IA516B/STA311B 75W Class D) amplifiers.

### Sound quality

We haven't heard anything quite like the mu-so before. It fills a medium-sized room with sound in an effortless way despite not being a full-sized

system. Not only that, it isn't just 'sound' that it makes, but a convincingly musical performance that has an integrity and a rightness that you just don't expect from a single box such as this.

We discover the mu-so works best a good way from rear or side walls, where it can breathe properly. The bass never booms, but is nicest about 50cm out into free air, with the unit firing in the direction of the listener roughly at ear level. This done it gives you a commanding performance, seeming to do the reverse of the 'music squeezed through a toothpaste tube' effect. Its front speaker baffle is small, yet the scale of the music completely belies this. It has a TARDIS-like quality, except the other way around where what comes out is far larger than from where it came.

Tonally it's surprisingly neutral when correctly sited. Bass is really taut and a good deal more extended than you might expect, although you never get the subterranean growl of the bass line from Supertramp's *Child Cf Vision* that you'd find in a full-sized hi-fi. Its ability to reproduce the middle and upper notes of the bassline is excellent, though, as well as conveying the keyboard work in a crisp, undiluted way. The talent that the Naim has at distinguishing between different strands of the mix regardless of how loud or quiet

they're playing marks it out – its combination of clarity and power is genuinely special.

The midrange isn't as expansive or as translucent as a separates system, but again it's so much better than a normal one-box offering. It lets you follow the flow of the music, listen into the mix and enjoy things just as you should. Indeed it's remarkably uncompressed and unconstrained; you can even feed it pounding house music like *Who's In The House* by The Beatmasters, and it doesn't get flustered. It goes loud and retains a sense of rhythmic integrity and dynamic ease that seems to defy the laws of physics. Because of this, music seems easier to listen to than you'd expect from something this size. At first there's a sense of subconscious confusion while your ears attune to what they're hearing, rather than what you expect to hear.

Feed it a Deutsche Grammophon recording of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* and even this type of programme material comes over in an impressively natural, unalloyed way. Of course, it can't reproduce the space and the scale of the recording in its entirety, but it does capture the textural feel of the orchestra as well as the flow of the music. It's also good at signposting differences in dynamics, so you can sense how the music broods then builds up to a crescendo. The treble surprises here too, giving a spacious feel and marking out the recorded acoustic well in spatial terms.

### Conclusion

There's no doubt that the mu-so is a superb product; it's no substitute for a full-size hi-fi and doesn't set out to be, yet it provides music from a one-box system of a clarity and power that is absolutely exceptional.

Factor in its excellent wireless and streaming capabilities and it's an extremely persuasive package ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£895

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
13kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
628 x 120 x 256mm

**FEATURES**

- UPnP; aptX; AirPlay; wi-fi
- Ethernet; USB type-A; optical digital and 3.5mm analogue inputs
- 24-bit/192kHz DAC
- Quoted output power: 6x 75W
- Support for WAV, FLAC and AIFF (24/192); ALAC (24/96); MP3; AAC; OGG and WMA

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Naim Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01722 426600

**WEBSITE**  
naimaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 391

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Sound quality; stylish packaging; connectivity, build and finish

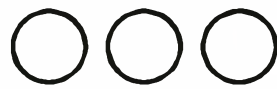
**DISLIKE:** Styling won't win everyone over, wireless setup not intuitive

**WESAY:** Brilliant one-box music system with quality to spare

### OVERALL







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twenty:22 - Awards '12



twenty:22 - June '12



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# Primare

## NP30

**T**his box of tricks is based on the MM30 'media board', a £1,300 add on that slots into ports in Primare's I32 integrated and PRE32 preamp, turning them into fully fledged network players. As well as placing this module into its own isolated case, what the extra cash buys you in the standalone NP30 streamer is a dedicated power supply and output stage with an extra buffer, alongside a wealth of connectivity.

Digital inputs include USB type A and B (asynchronous) for hardwiring laptops or iPods directly, alongside S/PDIF inputs shared over three optical (Toslink) and only one coaxial (RCA) socket. Wi-fi is catered for via a rear-panel stubby antennae, but as this is limited to 16-bit/48kHz, the Ethernet port is our preferred solution. Output-wise alongside a pair of line-level RCAs and an S/PDIF (RCA), there's a pair of XLRs, which are fully balanced right from the DAC.

### Sound quality

From the opening bars of Devon Sproule's *Don't Hurry For Heaven* streamed via a 16-bit/44kHz FLAC rip over Ethernet and with the NP30 driving our preamp from its balanced outputs, we know we're in the company of an experienced beast. The Primare isn't like many a streamer or digital front end, which all too often sonically leap straight out of the speakers like an eager puppy, with dazzling zing that may be initially impressive, but quickly

becomes tiresome. Instead it is quite the opposite, being more relaxed in character with a refined tone that's a joy to listen to for hours on end. In this respect it reminds us of a top-flight vinyl rig when a given arm, cartridge and turntable are working in perfect harmony to provide a sound that's effortlessly balanced.

This sonic trait seems to stem from the NP30's midrange, which remains smooth and lucid without being in any way forward or overly attention grabbing, helping to bring out the best in Sproule's unforced singing. The way it stays true to Devon's relaxed vocal style tells us it's happy to sit back and let the music flow with natural rhythm and pace. With the slow-rolling melody of Sproule's *The Easier Way*, the streamer gives the melody just the right amount of bluesy ambience, presented in a convincingly proportioned soundstage so the percussion and slide guitar have space to express themselves.

Moving on to a 16/44 ALAC rip of Dennis Wilson's *Pacific Ocean Blue* highlights the NP30's ability to stay on its toes, anticipating grand dynamic swings, which it delivers with ease while ensuring the music maintains consistent levels of energy and momentum without any overhang. The funky and more complex grooves of this track really lets the Primare show how effortlessly natural sounding it is. The soundstage is again expansive and accessible and as you'd expect of a streamer in this price bracket, instruments are well

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£2,000

**ORIGIN**  
Sweden

**WEIGHT**  
8.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 95 x 370mm

**FEATURES**

- Burr-Brown 24-bit/192kHz upsampling DAC
- Wi-fi and Ethernet streaming
- USB and S/PDIF inputs
- XLR, RCA and S/PDIF outputs
- WAV/AIFF/FLAC/ALAC/MP3/AAC/WMA/OGG file support

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Karma-AV

**TELEPHONE**  
01423 358846

**WEBSITE**  
primare.net

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 387

separated. But what's more telling is how we can hear each instrument's unique characteristics when pinpointing them within the soundstage. The track's bass guitar sounds tight with slightly rolled-off EQ, while the rhythm guitar rings with more echo and the cymbals sound crisply defined.

As with the Sproule album, the Dennis Wilson material highlights that it's blessed with an analogue richness that's as reminiscent of a top-notch phono stage as it is a DAC. Wilson's vocals flow with a languid ease that tells us what we're hearing is about as close to the album's studio sessions as we're going to get within our listening room. The music is full of atmosphere that seems to bring to life the energy of the recording.

### Conclusion

Behind the NP30's top-quality understated casework lies a deceptively smart product. Its dedicated app is one of the easiest and most intuitive, making the Primare a breeze to get to grips with. Its DAC is seriously good, giving the music a sophisticated mellow tone that both digital and analogue fans will enjoy in equal measure ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Articulate and effortlessly musical; great app; XLR outputs

**DISLIKE:** Just one coaxial S/PDIF input (but three optical)

**WESAY:** Combines a well executed streamer with a superb sounding DAC and with preamp functionality to boot

#### OVERALL







# Ruark R7

**O**n the coat tails of a slew of stylish and successful radios and speaker docks, the R7 is Ruark's most ambitious – and expensive – radio product yet. It combines DAB and FM tuners, CD-quality aptX Bluetooth, DLNA network streaming, internet radio, CD playback, auxiliary analogue and digital inputs and a 2.1-speaker configuration in one beautifully crafted unit the size of a saxophone case. The R7 is the reinvention of the radiogram, especially when mounted on its spindle legs (it also comes with puck feet), combining cutting-edge audio technology with yesteryear looks that wouldn't look out of place in *Mad Men* Don Draper's Manhattan pad.

The rear side's metre-long panel has more than enough acreage to provide clutter-free sockets including dual RCA phono line inputs, a Toslink optical, S/PDIF coaxial and a handy USB socket for charging mobile phones and tablets. Two 75ohm F-type inputs are provided for DAB and FM aerials. As you'd expect for a £1,999 product, Ruark has turned its back on Class D amplification and under the hood is 160W power supply coupled to linear Class AB discrete component amplifiers.

## Sound quality

Although it can't handle DSD, we kick things off with the CD layer of *The War of the Worlds* SACD. Not only is the output surprisingly powerful, but the sonic quality seems so good that we have to check that it's the PCM downmix we're listening to and not DSD after all. Richard Burton's

sonorous *Eve of War* introduction is so rich and detailed you can hear the air drawing into his lungs between sentences and it almost sounds as if he's in the room with us. When the strings kick in, the R7 reveals its subwoofer is no shrinking violet and its out-of-the-box setting requires a smidgen of attenuation in order to eliminate reverb and optimise the bedrock for the building blocks of the higher frequencies.

The overall musical spectrum is impressive and the cabinet seems immaculately tuned so that there's no coloration. The higher frequencies of the wailing synth and flute are pin sharp and blend wonderfully with the midrange of the acoustic guitar. Overall, the Class AB amplification delivers an energetic and lively sound that's as cosy as a Martian's heat ray. Sonic steering is good too, with impressive stereo imaging, the various frequencies of the chimes and bells at the start of *Time* on Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, for example, sounding dynamic and shooting off in all directions around the room.

Network streaming includes FLAC and WAV, but is hit and miss with ALAC files, with the R7 able to decode some 24-bit/48kHz tracks, but not 16-bit/44.1kHz. At least it automatically skips unplayable tracks in a playlist. One successful stream in terms of decoding and quality includes the wonderful *Hey Laura* by Gregory Porter, an iTunes AAC download. His vocals are deep and beautifully rounded, gliding effortlessly in harmony with the tinkling piano and percussion.

## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,999

**ORIGIN**  
China

**WEIGHT**  
30kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
1,000 x 175 x  
400mm

**FEATURES**  
• CD (CD-Audio, MP3), DAB, DAB+, FM, MP3, WMA, AAC, FLAC, WAV, A2DP, aptX Bluetooth  
• DLNA streaming over wi-fi with UPnP  
• 2x 5.5in dual concentric drivers  
• 1x 8in long-throw subwoofer

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Ruark Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
01702 601410

**WEBSITE**  
ruarkaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC384

Bluetooth streaming from an iPhone is pleasingly reliable and boasts an aural quality that almost matches the unit's CD playback, just falling short in terms of sonic headroom and clarity. With John William's main title theme from *Jaws* the threatening double bass two-note sting is strong and punchy and you can push the volume to its maximum and still listen comfortably, although the sub starts reverberating and the higher frequencies of the percussion and woodwind sound a tad shrill. The radio tuners are well implemented, and the R7 does a commendable job with DAB transmissions, especially fully orchestrated classical music, Beethoven's *Pastoral symphony*, for example, is detailed and articulate but smooth and balanced throughout as the piece escalates in intensity and diminishes in equal turn.

## Conclusion

No audiophiles are going to chuck out their hi-fi separates system in order to accommodate it, but the R7 radiogram reboot is a great deal more than simply an attempt to cash in on the current vogue for retro-looking systems. On build quality and design alone it goes some way towards justifying its price tag (especially compared with some of the designer console tables that are available), but what seals the deal is that it's a real pleasure to operate and, more importantly, it delivers a remarkably powerful and pleasing sound ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Design; ease of use; clean, powerful sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** No hi-res ALAC playback or DSD; no app control

BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



### OVERALL







# Sony HAP-S1

Sony has eschewed streaming for a hard drive in its new one-box HAP-S1 hi-res music maker, and the gamble has paid off

**A** new range of hi-res music machines sees Sony make a welcome return to the hi-fi arena. Things got difficult back in the late nineties, when MP3 files began to replace CD. The company's instinct had always been to maintain control of the entire music recording and replay chain, from record company to format to player. But for once, Sony was caught on the hop. The next generation of music listeners wanted their content free and easy – and certainly not tied to anyone's hardware. Belatedly, it responded with its range of 'Network Walkmans' running the ATRAC format, but it was like trying to push water uphill – the world wouldn't listen. History tells us that just a couple of years later, Apple seized the opportunity and wrestled the whole shebang from Sony's grip with the iPod and iTunes.

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

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

This isn't the first hard-disk drive-based music player, as many

will well know. We have already seen a slew of such devices appear on the market. In fact, the closest thing in existence to the HAP-S1 is the Brennan JB7, which is an altogether less audiophile proposition, as we shall see.

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

The HAP-S1 sports a low-loss EI ferrite core power transformer, and careful attention has been paid to earthing, with a single ground point and high-strength epoxy glass circuitboards said to be twice the thickness of rivals. Trick power supply capacitors are fitted, selected for sound quality, the company says, as are carbon resistors. Special signal switching relays are fitted in lieu of semiconductor switches. Overall quality of construction is excellent considering the price.

## DETAILS

### PRICE

£800

### ORIGIN

Japan/China

### WEIGHT

5.8kg

### DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)  
265x 88 x 304mm

### FEATURES

- 500GB hard-disk drive (expandable via USB)
- DSDIFF(DSD), DSF, MP3, WAV, WMA, AAC, FLAC, ALAC, ATRAC, AIFF support
- Quoted power: 2x 40W/4ohm
- Headphone output

### DISTRIBUTOR

Sony Europe Ltd

### TELEPHONE

0207 3652413

### WEBSITE

sony.co.uk

### REVIEWED

HFC382



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

Being a hard disk-based system, it gives instant access – there's no lag between the track you choose and when it starts playing. Also, you don't get dropouts as it isn't subject to network glitches, and your computer can remain switched off while you're playing music. It works so well we're surprised more manufacturers haven't done it. Our only observation would be that it would be great to be able to record directly from an analogue source, so that you can archive your LPs or tapes too. But you can, of course, record LPs on your computer, which the Sony will automatically copy then play.

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

### Sound quality

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

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

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

Moving to the delights of the unit's internal hard drive, it serves up the best sound we've heard so far from some of our hi-res PCM files; Wings' *Band On Run* is very detailed and clean, with lots of atmosphere and a natural rhythmic flow. Dynamics are good, and when fed with beautifully rich source material such as Kate Bush's *Snowflake* in 24/96, it gives a fine account of Kate's piano work.

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

REM's *Texarkana* at 24/192 is great fun, with oodles of power and impressive dynamics. With hi-res files it makes a very nice noise then, but you are always aware of a slightly opaque midband, and a sense of the music being processed.

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

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

### Conclusion

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

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

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

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

### OVERALL



Like a 21st century CD jukebox, the HAP-S1 is an elegant beast



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
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# Arcam miniBlink



**N**owhere on the top three sides of the packing box can you see the word Arcam. Instead, this portable DAC is described as a 'miniBlink', with '123' added on one surface. Now this isn't because Arcam is a modest company with much to be modest about, it's because the Cambridge-based operation is selling this little device into a market that neither knows nor cares who or what Arcam is. In other words, the miniBlink is unashamedly a mass market, consumer audio product. And why not?

Arcam has been quick to market with an extensive range of wireless and/or network-equipped DACs. This shows that the company has been fast to recognise the potential of a brave new audio world where mobile phones and tablets are now our music sources. Indeed, we're getting to the stage now where computer audio is designed for dads with their ripped CD collections, while the cool kids are content with their mobile devices and downloads!

So the miniBlink is squarely aimed at a younger demographic, and maybe their more hip, groovy and swinging parents too – but certainly not at folk who have concerns that aptX may not be a sufficiently high-fidelity medium to transmit digital audio over.

All the miniBlink has to be is small, cute and ultra easy to use – and it is. It weighs just 40g and measures 60 x 30 x 75mm (WxHxD), meaning it's small enough to be portable. Indeed, Arcam intimates that this is how it

sees many miniBlink customers using it, flitting between friends and family music systems for the few years we have before everything on sale gets Bluetooth connectivity built in.

It's claimed to be "as easy as 1-2-3" to set up, and so it proves. All you do is unpack the unit, plug it into the USB power supply that comes in the box, switch your device's Bluetooth on (if it isn't already) and press the miniBlink's one button to pair it. This done, it will light up a lovely shade of violet. Oh, and don't forget to plug the supplied RCA-to-3.5mm cable into your hi-fi; there's also a 3.5mm-to-3.5mm lead included too. The whole process is done and dusted in just under a minute.

## Shows that aptX can be great with a lively, detailed and just plain fun sound

Arcam says "much" of the miniBlink is taken from the company's £160 rBlink. This is the audiophile version, with an S/PDIF output and a swanky alloy case. The miniBlink feels like a very light plastic pebble; it's beautifully surfaced with a gloss finish, but you wonder how long it will last without being scratched.

It sports a Burr-Brown PCM5102 24-bit DAC, which is a fine design; we think the biggest limiting factor won't be this, but the very cheap USB power supply and the rather modest connecting leads. Although adequate, the miniBlink would surely sound

significantly better with either or both of these upgraded.

Audiophiles shouldn't worry about aptX. Standard Bluetooth sounds gruesome, but this special wireless protocol that piggy-backs onto it offers decent sonics. It's claimed to be as good as CD, but we've never heard it that good; rather it's best described as matching top-quality AAC, which is certainly no bad thing.

## Sound quality

When it's had a few minutes to warm up, the miniBlink shows that aptX can be great with a lively, musical, detailed and just plain fun sound. For example, Grace Jones' *Private Life* comes over with plenty of power and passion driven from an aptX compatible smartphone. The miniBlink shows itself to be excellent at capturing the song's dynamics, and there is a similarly impressive punch to Sly and Robbie's percussion work, with a lithe, supple bass guitar and wonderful thwack to the bass drum. Tonally it's not the deepest, darkest sounding thing we have ever heard; instead it has a bright and spry sort of nature that picks out loads of detail with zest and vigour. But you'd never call it hard; it comes over as being a well executed, low distortion design.

## Conclusion

The miniBlink is ideal for its intended market, giving portable music fans a taste of quality sound that they may not be used to, yet it remains highly enjoyable to more tweaky hi-fi types too ●

### DETAILS

PRICE  
£90  
TELEPHONE  
01223 203200  
WEBSITE  
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### OUR VERDICT







# Chord Electronics

## Hugo

Sounding like no other digital converter that we've ever heard, Chord's DAC/headphone amp is a landmark product

One of the disappointing things about digital audio is its timing. It just doesn't quite seem to accurately reproduce all the nuances you hear in music when listening in real time. If you go to a jazz club to hear Randy Crawford sing, then go home and play the CD it just doesn't have the natural ebb and flow of the live show.

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 his 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.

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

### DETAILS

#### PRICE

£1,400

#### ORIGIN

UK

#### 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

#### REVIEWED

HFC386



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

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. We've even plugged it into the auxiliary inputs of a Nakamichi car system and used a Sony Xperia Z phone as a Bluetooth source! The 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

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

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

We 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, we've heard nothing quite like it.

Anyone that has owned a Chord DAC64, QBD76 or Qute will know what we're 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 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 pulled 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 we'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 us of studio-quality analogue open-reel 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 we'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 we'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. We'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*. We'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 fellow vinyl aficionados will agree, that takes some doing ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Supremely natural, open sound; portability; flexibility
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Halts the vinyl revival in its tracks
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	<b>WESAY:</b> Nothing less than a landmark digital product
FEATURES ★★★★★	

### OVERALL







# NAD D 1050

**N**ew Acoustic Dimension, as the company used to call itself, has made quite a splash with a range of affordable electronics set into a new form factor by industrial designer David Farrage, who has also done NAD's VISO I speaker dock, among other things. Like its partnering D 3020 amplifier (reviewed *HFC* January 2014), the D 1050 DAC sports a radical casework that can be used either horizontally or vertically. It has a very swish front display that backlights the input selected and the sampling frequency – the large knob selects the digital source and there's a 3.5mm headphone socket.

This new NAD box feels nice to use – although the action of the source selector switch isn't the slickest – and you can't help liking the rubberised case with its bright metal grille set behind it. This gives a welcome element of visual flair to an otherwise quite utilitarian device. The back panel is very busy indeed – it offers balanced XLR outputs, as well as standard RCAs. One pair of optical and one pair of coaxial digital inputs,

plus a single asynchronous USB. Inside, there's a Cirrus Logic CS4398 Delta Sigma DAC with active oversampling filters. Signal paths are said to be 'ultra short' on multi-layer circuit boards and surface mount components. Power is supplied by a very modest-looking wall-wart type switched mode unit.

## Sound quality

This proves something of an enigma as in many ways, on some music, the listening panel rates it as an exceptional performer, yet on other music it seems to fall off the scale and sound nowhere near as convincing. It also divides opinion, as one of the three consistently marks it down a bit, while the other two rave about it.

The D 1050 has a characteristically NAD sound, which is to say it has an apparently quite dark and velvety sort of tonality with a little bit of upper mid edge for good measure. One listener notes a lack of top-end sparkle to the high treble, making Beth Rowley's vocals on *Little Dreamer* sound a bit unatmospheric, while the piano is slightly processed

and synthetic sounding. But still one panellist declares: "This is one of the best, I can hear her singing with the musicians, it is good with leading edges and extremely expressive". Another agrees that it is great for attack transients, sounding very fast and expressive, adding that it makes a compelling case for itself musically.

The third panellist isn't so impressed, saying that it just doesn't have the definition of rival offerings, and is somewhat lacking in tonal balance. He admits it times well on guitar tracks, but suggests that this could be down to it being a touch mid-forward. He comments that it does really rather badly on Kraftwerk's *Man Machine*, which is not what you'd expect from a DAC you'd previously thought "times well". Even the biggest fan of the DAC on the panel agrees that: "It makes a complete horlicks of Kraftwerk!"

## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£399

**ORIGIN**  
US/China

**WEIGHT**  
1kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
58 x 186 x 208mm

**FEATURES**

- 16 to 24-bit/32/44.1/48/88.2/96/176.4/192kHz
- Asynchronous USB, 2x coaxial, 2x optical amplifier
- Balanced XLR outputs

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision

**TELEPHONE**  
01793 461650

**WEBSITE**  
nadelectronics.com

**REVIEWED**  
*HFC* 379

## Conclusion

This is a very 'Marmite' product and while two members of our listening panel love it, the other is left out in the cold. So – more than any other DAC that we've reviewed in the last 12 months – this is something that you will really need to give a proper audition to before you buy ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**OVERALL**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Sound quality; stylish packaging; connectivity; build and finish

**DISLIKE:** Styling won't win everyone over; wireless set up not intuitive

**WE SAY:** Brilliant one-box music system with quality to spare





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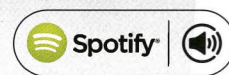
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### NAD • D 1050 DAC / HEADPHONE AMP

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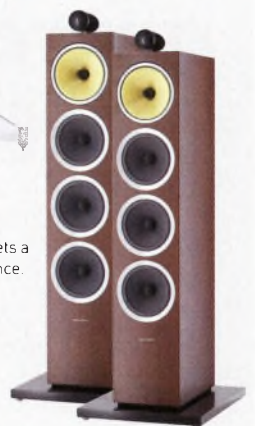
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## QNKTC AB-1.2 USB DAC



**THIS CATCHIILY ENTITLED** 'Quantisation Noise Killed The Cat' DAC has the third version of the analogue board, and plays hi-res audio (up to 24/192) from Windows, Linux and OS X computers. Inside are good basic building blocks for a budget DAC – the very respectable Asahi Kasei AKM4430 DAC (the excellent £3,650 LongDog DAC – *HFC* 377 – uses similar), Gollodge crystal oscillators running at 22.5792 and 24.576MHz (giving multiples of 44.1 and 48kHz), and an Atmel AVR32 general-purpose MCU programmed in open source C. Like the Raspberry Pi PC, this DAC has been designed with experimentation in mind, so you're effectively buying a whole world of fun if you're that way inclined!

makes a surprisingly nice noise. We find ourselves rather mesmerised by Art of Noise's beautiful *Moments In Love*. There's no point getting a hi-res version of this, as it was recorded on a mid-eighties Sony digital recorder running at 44.056kHz, but you wouldn't know it. The sound is clean, but not in a sterile way. Rather, it is smooth, spacious and well textured, and this is completely unexpected given its very modest price.

tonal smoothness and sweetness; in an attempt to render every last bit of data off the file, it sometimes sounds more gravelly than the rather suave QNKTC. Herbie Hancock's *Rock It* at 24/96 shows that the Norwegian DAC is tonally quite 'well lit'; it's never harsh, but you get the sense of a crisp autumn morning with brilliant sunshine throwing everything into sharp relief.

Overall then, if USB is your only option if you're looking for a DAC and you're on a tight budget, the QNKTC AB-1.2 is an excellent product to consider – a perfect example of how tweakiness and geekiness can raise hi-fi's game ●

### Sound quality

Hooked up to a MacBook Pro running the latest version of Audirvana and feeding a Creek Destiny 2 and MAD MyClapton speakers, the QNKTC

Compared to the Audiolab M-DAC (at almost six times the price, *HFC* 368), there's a slight lack of low-level detail and it doesn't give you the last few percent of the song's dynamics. But the Audiolab doesn't have the

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£110  
**TYPE**  
USB DAC  
**TELEPHONE**  
+47 90639918  
**WEBSITE**  
qnktc.com  
**REVIEWED**  
*HFC* 381

### OUR VERDICT



## Valve Audio Devices DAC-10



**STRIKING THOUGH IT** is, most customers won't be buying the DAC-10 for its styling – it's what is under the hood that counts. And there are six glowing thermionic valves – two Souz 6SN8S drivers, a pair of mil-spec CV574 rectifiers and twin 6N6P double triode valves. VAD says these have been selected for reliability and robustness. The triode valve analogue output stage operates in pure Class A, and modern tube best practice is followed with good new old stock valves specified, short signal paths and point-to-point silver wiring.

### Sound quality

There is a certain 'rightness' to the sound of the DAC-10. It comes over as a simple conduit for the music, letting it blossom and flow.

Sometimes high-resolution files can disappoint, sounding more impressive from a hi-fi perspective, but not necessarily more musical –

but not here. Herbie Hancock's *Future Shock* at 24/96 is extremely clean and ordered, with oodles of space in the mix, yet massively powerful, too.

The DAC communicates the song's chord progressions beautifully, giving a great sense of the song having a strong direction to follow. Rhythmically superb, it doesn't force the beats out at you, preferring instead to charm and beguile the listener. Bass is amazing enough via 16-bit, but at higher resolutions it is breathtaking. The picture is the same for DSD too, with Alex de Grassi's *The Water Garden* coming over in a natural and spacious way. Indeed, so open, even and effortlessly musical is the DAC-10, that we have to scabble around for things to say about it. The only obvious flag it flies is that it is a tube design. There is still a little bit of



hiss to be heard at very high volumes – it's rather nice and comforting, but it's still there whereas a good solid-state design will give you an 'inky black' silence. The bass lacks that last few percent of tightness, it's ever so slightly soft on leading edges, lovely as it is all the same. Having said that, the DAC-10 is an auspicious debut. It's a wonderfully natural and enjoyable sound – not something you always associate with digital audio. If you're lucky enough to be able to afford to consider a top-class DAC, this is an essential audition ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£6,995  
**TYPE**  
USB & S/PDIF DAC  
**TELEPHONE**  
01604 922704  
**WEBSITE**  
valveaudiodevices.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
*HFC* 381

### OUR VERDICT







# Korg

## DS-DAC-100

### 1-Bit USB DAC

**B**etter known for its DJ equipment and musical instruments, Korg has recently started launching a number of hi-fi products. The DS-DAC-100 is a USB-only DAC and is the big brother of the portable DS-DAC-100m USB headphone DAC (HFC 387). Although principally designed to drive a decent pair of headphones, it has a pair of RCA phono and balanced XLR outputs. It is a beautifully made unit measuring 207 x 60 x 160mm (WxHxD). It has a striking appearance that is both elegant and stylish perched on top of three spiked feet for support, and comes with matching spike shoes to protect surfaces from damage.

In addition to standard PCM, it supports 1-Bit DSD native playback from a PC or Mac. An audio driver for both Windows and Mac operating systems (downloadable from the Korg website) is required in order to support this mode and the higher sampling rates of audio.

A neat row of LEDs on the front panel indicates the incoming audio sampling rate – the last two LEDs show DSD inputs of 2.8 or 5.6MHz respectively. In the centre of the panel is a good-quality rotary control for adjusting the volume of the headphone output.

Korg's DS-DAC series uses similar technologies gained from its experience with DSD recording, and its first DSD DAC was released in Japan in 2012. When used with Korg's AudioGate playback and format conversion software, music is routed directly to the DAC-100 and completely bypasses the computer hardware. The AudioGate software allows for DSD playback, which is a particularly good feature. The software can even convert PCM files up to 24-bit/192kHz to DSD on the fly, using the processing power of your PC to do the work. The AudioGate software is different from other proprietary playback software in that it undertakes much of the digital-to-analogue processing itself, rather than using the hardware. Although the audio quality in conventional USB DACs is better than using the built-in DAC of the computer as it is more sophisticated, the processing is nevertheless done within the DAC hardware and so the audio quality cannot be controlled. Since Korg's AudioGate software performs the processing that is inherent in digital-to-analogue conversion, all of the audio quality can be controlled. By using the computer's power instead of depending on external hardware,

the processing can be performed in an ideal and precise manner, which Korg says results in superior audio fidelity. The DAC-100 supports single-bit DSD at 2.8MHz or 5.6MHz and PCM 16 or 24-bit from 44.1 to 192kHz. By developing both the hardware and the application, Korg considers that it is able to ensure comprehensive audio quality, even on up-converted file formats.

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£480  
**TELEPHONE**  
01908 304699  
**WEBSITE**  
korg.com/uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC388

#### OUR VERDICT



#### Sound quality

The AudioGate user interface is easy to use and has a wealth of information displayed about the audio file being played. Starting off with CD-quality 16-bit/44.1kHz files, the Korg's performance is very enjoyable but not particularly exceptional. However, with the AudioGate software playing higher-resolution FLAC files, the dynamic range is excellent. In particular, with a recording of a Vivaldi Cantata on the album *Vivaldi L'Amore Per Elvira* by La Serenissima at 24-bit/88.2kHz, the soprano is musical and effortless during the crescendos.

We next play a 24-bit/192kHz recording – Beethoven *Piano Concertos 3, 4 & 5* by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra – and here the higher resolution files clearly make themselves known. The piano, which is a difficult instrument to record and sound consistently convincing throughout the dynamics of a full-blown concerto, is reproduced with a sparkling clarity and presence that is as good as we've heard.

#### Conclusion

All in all, the sound quality delivered by the Korg impresses, especially when playing higher-resolution files. If you're looking for a DAC that can play DSD files, then the Korg DS-DAC-100 should be high on your list ●





## ATC SCM7



It's only since the eighties that ATC has made domestic loudspeakers, and even now it doesn't change its range very often. This is the company's most affordable speaker yet, as it's far smaller than most of its products, but still fairly big by the standards of most standmounted loudspeakers.

The two-way design sports a new ATC designed and manufactured 25mm soft dome tweeter with neodymium magnet and precision alloy wave guide, working with a 125mm ATC designed and built mid/bass unit with an inhouse, hand-wound precision flat wire coil and 3kg optimised motor assembly.

Compared with many loudspeakers, the ATC seems rather old fashioned – but that is because it doesn't have any of the features that some regard as gimmicks, such as elaborately shaped cabinets or fancy-sounding cone materials. You might say it is conservative with a small 'c', and none the worse for it; certainly the construction quality is excellent. One trait it shares with all ATCs is that it needs a lot of power to drive; the company claims 84dB/1W/1m sensitivity and this is below par for a modern loudspeaker, but understandable considering its size and infinite baffle design. ATC says it is an easy load, but it still needs a serious amount of watts; we'd advise that at least 40W RMS per channel is needed to make the SCM7 go loud in

even a medium-sized room – so do take care to match carefully.

### Sound quality

This little speaker sounds nothing like your average standmounter. What it doesn't do is throw a massive sound into the room, hanging holographic images all around. Nor does it thump out large amounts of bass, or indeed go loud in an easy and lazy way. Rather, the ATC brings its own unique skill set to the party, and few others can match it. It's tight, taut, rhythmic,

### Not having a big cabinet thrumming away unlocks a whole world of detail

propulsive, expressive and unerringly musical. More than most it gives you the sense that music is foremost an emotional experience.

Bass fans will love its tunefulness, but miss hearing the bottom octave of their favourite songs. Its midband is very good in its way, but doesn't sound sumptuous or especially sophisticated, and the treble is solid but doesn't have any special, ethereal quality. But cue up Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* and suddenly you're engrossed, absolutely captivated and pulled right in. It's the high quality, small and sealed cabinet that does it; it doesn't store any energy and has no bass port to huff and puff, and the result is that

bass transients are lightning fast with no overhang. At the same time, the ATC really showcases dynamic accents, and together this makes for a seat-of-the-pants listen.

The Smiths' *Girl Afraid* is enthralling, fast and fluid. Tonally it's a bit dry, but it still gives a decent sense of what's going on in the recording.

### Conclusion

Not having a big cabinet thrumming away unlocks a whole world of detail, making Herbie Hancock's *Speak Like A Child* a pleasure. Piano has a solidity of tone that you can't not love, while flutes and flugel horns have a simple purity that's only available when there's no cabinet joining in. Even with a light bass, jazz sounds gloriously propulsive, the listener getting their rhythm cues elsewhere. Bliss ●

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£810  
**ORIGIN**  
UK  
**WEIGHT**  
7.5kg  
**DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
174 x 300 x 215mm  
**FEATURES**  
● 25mm tweeter  
● 125mm mid/bass  
● Quoted sensitivity: 84dB/1W/1m  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
ATC Loudspeaker Technology Ltd  
**TELEPHONE**  
01285 760561  
**WEBSITE**  
atcloudspeakers.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC384

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Wonderfully propulsive; taut bass; clean midband; build

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Poor bass extension; needs lots of power

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Fantastic, characterful speaker that won't appeal to all

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★☆☆

#### OVERALL





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## STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



# ATC SCM19

**T**his is the smallest speaker in ATC's domestic range that has an equivalent in its professional monitor series (the SCM20ASL Pro). That is an active model with a different tweeter – they share the same mid/bass unit and physical volume, despite the numerical difference. Like other ATC two-ways it's a sealed, infinite baffle design because ports introduce a loss of driver control below resonance. The acoustic price you pay for this is reduced sensitivity and extension, but this is a trade off that ATC prefers, and power is relatively inexpensive these days.

The main driver is a 150mm SL (super linear) spec unit with an integral 75mm soft dome and 9kg short coil/long gap motor assembly or magnet. This is why the SCM19 weighs so much for a speaker of its size – if audio equipment was judged by its mass/price ratio it would win every time. ATC doesn't recommend a particular stand height for the SCM19, but suggests that the top-most part of the surround on the mid/bass unit be at ear height.

### Sound quality

ATC's smaller speakers have a delivery that hits the ground running so to speak. Immediate, upbeat and highly entertaining in a youthful, spirited way. The SCM19 is a rather more mature loudspeaker, it has a much more pro audio sound

inasmuch as it is very low on character and revealing in a calm, restrained manner. It takes a while to appreciate just how much it lets through because colouration is so low. This is a very good thing for the music because you hear more of what the artist intended and what they heard in the control room at the studio.

This is the true advantage of a monitor, in a world where there is no absolute sound – we rarely listen to purist audiophile recordings that attempt to capture a totally natural sound – the best we can aim for is the sound that was conjured up in the studio, a sound that was arrived at with studio monitors. And given the amount of studios that use ATCs you have a good chance of emulating that with its domestic loudspeakers.

With Donny Hathaway's live recording of *The Ghetto* that means massive image scale in height and depth alongside smokin' keyboards, conga *et al* that build an irresistible groove. You can hear the recording is not the cleanest possible, but more obvious is the atmosphere that takes over the listening room, it's a party on a disc no doubt about it. This ATC has superb bass, it goes low but is tight and fully textured. When partnered with a decent amplifier it stops and starts with total precision. So when a pianist uses a damping pedal you know exactly how he or she is doing it. This is partly because this is a very quiet loudspeaker, the box makes very

little contribution and the absence of any bass port removes the resonances that such devices can introduce. Overhang is not in evidence yet serious low end is, you can get quick bass by avoiding deep notes, but that is not the case here.

Melanie de Biasio's album *No Deal* has the Belgian chanteuse singing over often quite deep synth bass alongside piano and a rhythm section. It's an inky black recording from which the SCM19 extracts an enormous amount of character. The way the voice has been treated is particularly obvious, but this doesn't undermine its appeal. You can hear way down into the mix and appreciate the subtlety of playing from every member of the band, this in the context of very open vocals but quite dark instruments. All is laid bare but thanks to the speaker's ability to stop and start precisely on cue the timing remains spot on.

Put on something less controlled like Frank Zappa's *Roxy Ey Proxy* and you can immerse yourself in the raw vitality of a well honed live band, appreciate the distortion in the PA system and revel in the compositional genius of the man without effort. Piano really shows what this speaker can do. We get totally carried away with Haydn and Beethoven pieces that usually fail to keep us interested.

### Conclusion

The SCM19 makes a good case for the assertion that what's right for the studio is also best for the home. Transparency is what you want in both locales, the engineer might be listening for something different to the music lover, but they both want to hear as much as possible. In that respect this is a killer product. It tells you exactly what's going on in the mix be it good or bad. It lets you hear how Jimi or Jimmy or Jeff played the mind blowing stuff they did and that's what life should be all about ●

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,996

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
17.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
265 x 438 x 300mm

**FEATURES**  
● 25mm soft dome tweeter  
● 150mm mid/bass  
● Quoted sensitivity: 85dB

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
ATC Loudspeaker Technology Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01285 760561

**WEBSITE**  
atcloudspeakers.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC390

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Very revealing; superb bass and fine timing; well built

VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Needs more power than average to give of its best

BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** When it comes to bandwidth and transparency per pound, the SCM19 is particularly good

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL





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- Alan Sircom - Editor

### The Absolute Sound (USA 2014):

"I hope more people will participate in the deeper enjoyment of music in their homes because products like the H80 make it more accessible. The H80 is the real deal...and a sweet deal, too." - Kirk Midstkog - Reviewer

### HiFi & Musik (Sweden 2013):

"It will take a while for me to recover after this. This may be the best value for the money I have reviewed in my career." - Jonas Bryngelsson - Editor

### Lyd & Bilde (Norway 2013):

"Home run (klokkeren inntertier)! To say that HEGEL did it right with the H80 is an understatement. AMPLIFIER OF THE YEAR" - Lasse Svendsen - Editor



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# KEF

## LS50

**J**ustifiably popular, the LS50 gets off to a great start thanks to its rather lovely looks. There aren't that many standmount loudspeakers around that are likely to appease partners that are averse to having hi-fi around the home, but this might just be the exception to the rule.

Its lovely 130mm 'rose gold'-coloured, magnesium/aluminium coned mid/bass driver makes a bold visual statement. Set into this is a 25mm aluminium tweeter, forming KEF's patented Uni-Q array, which appears to come from a single-point source – it's far more than just a gimmick. Crossover point is 2.2kHz.

The cabinet is really beautifully done too, with a stunning piano black lacquer and superb detailing – this loudspeaker looks far more expensive than it actually is.

The front baffle is curved and made from a special polyester resin combined with glass fibre and calcium carbonate. The rear panel, meanwhile, sports luxurious single-wire terminals and a decidedly unconventional-looking bass reflex port. It feels solid when you rap it with your knuckles, and is quite heavy given its relatively diminutive dimensions. KEF claims a sensitivity

of 85dB, which is about middling for a box of this size.

### Sound quality

The LS50 is a larger than life loudspeaker, throwing voices and instruments wide into the listening room, giving that uncanny feeling of the sound hovering out into the space, completely detached from the speakers. Soundstaging is superb. UB40's *Tyler* is amazing, a vast expanse of music with each instrument in the mix located with laser-like precision.

The treble is really good for a speaker of this type. It's smooth and well integrated with the midband, and nicely spacious too – making for a lovely, even, full-range speaker that conveys the air of a good recording. Indeed, it's so insightful you can also hear the tape hiss on *Tyler*. The only caveat is that it's more directional than you might hope; there's definitely a sweet spot; owners will need some experimentation here.

It has an even, uniform tonal balance. It doesn't sound particularly powerful down in the bass, but what bass there is, is enjoyably tuneful and well extended. Ever so slightly warm, the LS50 doesn't dry out the recording, sucking the natural

tonality out of instruments. Instead, it allows them to be heard in their full glory, and this extends to vocals, where there's a tangible and believable timbre. Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* sounds natural, with no sense that the KEF is editorialising.

### Conclusion

Indeed, the LS50 doesn't add much; it's actually a pretty neutral performer and throws out lots of fine detail from recordings. It's great at conveying the gaps between the beats on The Smiths' *Girl Afraid*, so you can hear right in and enjoy the attack transients of the strummed guitar chords. This gives the speaker real clarity, and also makes for a rhythmically satisfying feel. There's some slight overhang in the upper bass, which pads the sound out slightly, but this aside the KEF is a snappy thing to listen to. Music bounces along with heady abandon, and so do you! ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£800

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
7.2kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
200 x 302 x 278mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 25mm Al tweeter, 130mm Al/Mg mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity: 85dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
GP Acoustics Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01622 672261

**WEBSITE**  
kef.com/gb

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 384

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Soundstaging; detail; transparency; build; finish

##### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Treble more directional than some

##### BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Beautiful looking little box with great sound

##### EASE OF DRIVE



##### OVERALL







Lars & Ivan



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# Monitor Audio Silver 1

**A** little fuller than many rivals, it's almost as if the Silver 1 has been working out at the gym and power eating at the same time – and that's because it has a larger mid/bass unit than you might expect, given its height. Instead of the usual 'small footprint, narrow baffle' design, Monitor Audio has gone for a 150mm driver, which makes the speaker wider. Fitting a 150mm driver where you'd normally expect something smaller confers a sense of ease and power to the Silver 1 that many rivals lack. The driver's cone is Monitor Audio's standard C-CAM design, with dimpled RST cone technology it's stiff and light. Matching this is a new C-CAM gold anodised aluminium/magnesium alloy dome tweeter with a damped rear chamber and dome venting. This crosses over from the mid/bass driver at 3kHz. Both units are rigidly bolted to the cabinet, and split two ways via a crossover with polypropylene film capacitors and silver-plated OFC wiring. There's a single bass port on the back, along with bi-wiring posts.

## Sound quality

Here's a small speaker that sounds rather bigger than you might expect. New Atlantic's *I Know* sounds wonderfully crisp and punchy; bass is tight and has very little sense of any overhang. The notes from the bass synthesiser start and stop extremely clearly, giving a powerful and pulsating feel. The midband sounds clean and

detailed, the Silver 1s throwing out lots of information from the innards of the mix. You wouldn't call it forward, but it is certainly explicit and well defined, and this extends to the treble.

As well as giving a tighter, tauter bass than you might expect from a budget speaker, the other benefit of being small is the stereo imaging. The sound comes from something close to a single-point source, letting it fire out into the room coherently to paint big, bold, three-dimensional stereo images. This is partly because the tweeter and mid/bass unit are located so close together on the front baffle.

This makes for a wonderfully expansive rendition of Isaac Hayes *Shaft Original Soundtrack*. The recorded acoustic sounds positively cavernous, in all three dimensions. Inside this, instruments are located with great precision considering the price of the speaker; it doesn't give you electrostatic levels of image location admittedly, but it's not that far off.

One of the big problems with small speakers is dynamic compression – they're physically not able to shift enough air to track instrumental dynamic changes accurately. Happily, this small box proves better than most. This is likely down to the larger drive unit, plus the very rigid cabinet. It certainly makes for a decent performance in this respect; for example, the frantic firecracker drum work on Rush's *Red Barchetta* is kept together brilliantly. As the song builds to a crescendo, the speakers keep

## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£500

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
6.95kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
185 x 312 x 263mm

**FEATURES**

- 1x 25mm C-CAM dome tweeter
- 1x 150mm C-CAM bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Monitor Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01268 740580

**WEBSITE**  
monitordaudio.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 390

getting louder without compressing or distorting the music, and are very adroit at communicating the small micro dynamics of the cymbals, for example. Ultimately at high levels there is a slight softening of dynamic peaks, but it is far less intrusive than some other similarly priced rivals.

The Silver 1 doesn't obviously excel at any one particular aspect of the musical performance, instead preferring to relax into the music and let the listener enjoy it without drawing attention to itself. It's surprisingly convincing with large-scale classical orchestral music, such as a Deutsche Grammophon pressing of Beethoven's *Symphony No.6* (Berlin Philharmonic, Karajan) just as long as you 'tune out' the lack of low bass. It has a wide soundstage, and it drops back way behind rear wall. Its surprising clarity and transparency gives a clear window on the musical world without sounding bright or forward.

## Conclusion

Overall this is a super little box and the beautiful finishes merely add extra icing to the cake. If you're looking for something that's small but perfectly formed, you've found it ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Big, punchy, detailed sound; superb finish; value

**DISLIKE:** Limited low bass; needs a reasonably powerful amplifier

**WE SAY:** Highly sophisticated yet affordable standmount speaker

### OVERALL







# Monitor Audio Silver 2

**A**fter a conservative start to speaker production, by the eighties Monitor Audio was pushing the envelope with metal dome tweeters – and then gold domes – and the Silver 2 features just this in a standard 25mm size. It also has a metal-coned mid/bass unit, which is unusually large at 200mm and requires a fractionally wider front baffle than is fashionable these days. This big driver has been squeezed in, so that the loudspeaker doesn't look too bulbous. It confers real benefits; larger drivers tend to have more in reserve, sounding more effortless and promising higher efficiency if implemented correctly. In the case of the Silver 2, it's quoted at 88dB, which is decent, and it duly goes a lot louder with the same amount of power as the ATC SCM7 (reviewed on page 38).

The speaker itself is beautifully finished and comes in selected premium quality wood veneers or high gloss finishes. The sense of opulence is heightened by the C-CAM gold dome tweeter and the dished metal mid/bass unit. The 20mm-thick, well-braced cabinet is very sturdy when given the knuckle rap test, thanks in no small part to single bolt-through drive units. Monitor

Audio says silver-plated copper wire is used internally, along with premium polypropylene film capacitors. The bass port sits discreetly around the back, and neat magnetically fixed grilles are also supplied.

## Sound quality

With a large mid/bass driver, this was always going to be an interesting contender, and so it proves. It's an excellent-sounding loudspeaker, blessed with plenty of clarity and immediacy plus weight and depth, and its very own distinctive, highly detailed sound. Rather like a lazy, large-engined luxury car, the Monitor Audio can deliver all the power it needs, but does so in a more relaxed and less forced manner than many similarly priced rivals. Those big mid/bass units don't augment its bass output particularly, but they offer a more gutsy yet relaxed presentation that's very good at carrying dynamic accents that most others miss.

Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* is a joy. Percussion is better accented than most, giving a superior sense of rhythmic flow, and the crashing keyboard cadences push out in a more arresting and explicit way. But at the same time, the tonal purity is

such that the piano sound is beautifully carried. Behind this, violins soar in a wonderfully accurate and expressive way, and the speakers catch the drama of this great song.

## Conclusion

The Silver 2 pushes out a wider soundstage than its rivals. It can't match the KEF LS50 (page 43), but it isn't far off and gives a great sense of space to recordings. You can really hear inside and drill down into the low-level detail, in a way that many rivals simply don't allow. The Smiths' *Girl Afraid* is wonderfully open and detailed, but still carries the emotion within the song. Snare drums sound tight, while treble is delicate and smooth; the tweeter reveals real delicacy that makes rivals seem rather ragged in comparison. The only real downside is just a touch of upper and lower bass box boom, but it's certainly no worse than any of its rivals at this price point ●

**DETAILS**  
**PRICE**  
 £650  
**ORIGIN**  
 UK/China  
**WEIGHT**  
 9.7kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
 (WxHxD)  
 230 x 375 x 323mm  
**FEATURES**  
 ● 25mm C-CAM tweeter  
 ● 200mm RST mid/bass driver  
 ● Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
 Monitor Audio Ltd  
**TELEPHONE**  
 01268 740580  
**WEBSITE**  
 monitoraudio.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
 HFC 384

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Refined treble; dynamics; detail; musical ease; finish
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Upper bass isn't rock-solid, but it's still fine
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent all rounder with a performance way beyond its price
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

### OVERALL







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## STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



# Polk Audio RTiA1

**A**lthough relatively new to the UK, Polk's £299 RTiA1 has been wowing American customers since 2008, which is a sterling endorsement of its design. The bi-wireable two-way driver complement comprises a 25mm silk/polymer-composite dome tweeter and a 130mm polymer/mineral-composite bass mid unit.

Both units were designed using Polk's Dynamic Balance technology, which uses a full-field heterodyning laser interferometer system to analyse and minimise driver resonance. Also chasing down unwanted contributions, Polk's Power Port technology aims to reduce port noise, or 'chuffing'. A dispersing cone is placed at the mouth of the port on the rear and is designed to improve the air flow in the same way that a long, flared port would do on a larger floorstanding speaker. The claimed result is lower turbulence at the mouth of the port and a reduction in distortion. There's also a second port on the front to resonate at the same frequency as the enclosure's internal depth resonance. As the radiation of the front and rear ports are out of phase with the drive-unit output, resonance peaks should be suppressed.

### Sound quality

The A1s sound quite different to British price rivals from the likes of KEF, Monitor Audio and B&W. Whatever benefits accumulated by the various anti-resonance measures,

these speakers have been voiced with extreme skill for a specific result. The mid-range is beautifully presented and subtly spotlighted to achieve a tremendous sense of hear-through clarity and detail. Tonal colours seem slightly saturated, giving a richness and tactility to instruments and vocals you simply don't expect from a speaker of this size or price. Likewise, the speed and expressive reach of the dynamics are almost scarily good. Better still, it's all securely grounded with an agile, supple bass performance that, while far from visceral, is taut and tuneful.

The A1's ability to present fine detail in a musically coherent yet uninhibited manner while bypassing the kind of forensic analysis that can sometimes let structural elements of the music dominate at the expense of tonal texture and timbral shading is a rare joy. Here you get it all in a way that appears to be completely unforced and natural. For instance, jazz pianist Joe Sample's muscular two-fisted keyboard runs on the classic track *Carmel* always sound impressively clean, crisp and focused on our ever-engaging Monitor Audio Bronze BX2s. But through the A1s, the tumbling notes seem punchier and pacier, more pristine yet more harmonically replete. Similarly, Amy Whitehouse's voice on *F\*\*k Me Pumps* gains aerobically as well as emotionally. It's simply a more powerful presence.

The speaker's imaging skills are of an equally high order. Given a bit of space to breathe (at least a foot from back

### DETAILS

#### PRICE

£299

#### ORIGIN

USA/China

#### WEIGHT

5.4kg

#### DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)

187 x 305 x 292mm

#### FEATURES

• 25mm silk polymer composite dome tweeter

• 133mm polymer composite bass driver

• Quoted sensitivity: 89dB/1W/1m

#### DISTRIBUTOR

D&M Audiovisual Ltd

#### TELEPHONE

02890 279830

#### WEBSITE

polkaudio.com

#### REVIEWED

HFC 391

and side walls, preferably more) soundscapes are convincingly proportioned, as deep as they are wide. Musicians, singers and instruments have easily discerned spatial relationships and, once again, a sense of palpable physicality that's hard to credit given their modest size and price. Grand piano, the undoing of many a small speaker, holds no fear for the plucky Polks. They even make a decent fist of giving some weight and harmonic structure to the lower octaves. In short, they're a bit addictive.

Remarkably uncoloured, but far from neutral in the dull sense, the A1s are even handed with all types of music and, despite obvious physical limitations, sound expansive with great bass and dazzling midband insight. Crucially, they're alive to the pulse of the music and endowed with a keen instinct for nailing its beauty. If their presentation is ever so slightly hyped, it's in a good way.

### Conclusion

Elegant design, real wood finish, ease of drive and general unfussiness about placement only add to our feeling that the best kind of hi-fi product is a bargain. You're looking at one right here. We recommend a listen ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Midband insight; tuneful bass; fine timing and musical communication

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Slightly hyped sound

#### BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** Highly enjoyable and characterful standmount that hardly puts a foot wrong

#### EASE OF DRIVE



#### OVERALL





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## STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



# PSB Imagine Mini

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

Sometimes less is more, and when you're talking about hi-fi loudspeakers diminutive dimensions can be an advantage. While little loudspeakers cannot move vast amounts of air, the air that they do move is less affected by cabinet resonances, because it's easier to make a more rigid small box. Then there's the proximity between the tweeter and mid/bass driver; the closer the two are, the better the 'point source'. This makes for superior stereo imaging and focus, as any dual concentric speaker fan will tell you.

So PSB's Imagine Mini has several things going for it. Expect it to throw music into the room the likes of which you'd normally only hear at a concert, and to sound fast, tight and fun.

The Mini asks its 25mm titanium dome tweeter to do a little more work than usual, as it crosses over at 2.2kHz. This is fairly routine for a larger two-way speaker design, but less so for something of this size. It

mates up to the 120mm mid/bass drive unit with a rather unusual clay/ceramic compounded polypropylene cone, and has a special Turbo Magnet system, which is said to increase the force factor of the compound magnet and improve the bass performance.

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

### Sound quality

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

into thin air – indeed, it's remarkable just how big sounding a well-executed small speaker can be. Tonally, there is no sense of the bass falling off a cliff, as the Mini sounds surprisingly fulsome in the upper bass. In absolute terms, of course, the bottom octave is missing, but the richness of the balance above that flatters to deceive. At the other end, treble is crisp and surprisingly refined for a speaker of this price. For example, the trumpet sound has a realistic rasp, and hi-hats have satisfying shimmer.

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

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

### Conclusion

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

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£599

**ORIGIN**  
Canada

**WEIGHT**  
3kg

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

**FEATURES**  
● 25mm titanium dome tweeter  
● 120mm polypropylene mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01732 740944

**WEBSITE**  
psbspeakers.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC385

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



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

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

**WESAY:** Charming little loudspeaker that's lots of fun to listen to



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## STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



# Spendor D1

**F**amed for producing loudspeakers since the days of the BBC LS3/5A back in the mid seventies, Spendor has produced the D1 as its successor – the result is a tiny loudspeaker that's purported to deliver extremely high-quality sound.

The D1s are designed to work rammed against a rear wall or on a bookshelf, where they'll get a welcome extra thump down below. The speaker also gets two brand new D-series drivers. First is the 22mm Spendor Linear Pressure Zone tweeter, which has a sequential geometry micro-foil. Meanwhile, EP77 – a material first developed for the D7 – is used for the 150mm mid/bass driver. This is claimed to be rigid but non-resonant, and is mated to a cast magnesium alloy chassis, high efficiency motor system, optimised electro-dynamic damping.

The two units swap over at 4.8kHz via a crossover sporting high linearity plastic film capacitors and high saturation inductor cores. No series attenuating resistors are used, and silver-plated copper wiring is fitted. The rear terminals are of super quality, but are non-bi-wireable.

### Sound quality

Assuming you have a decently powerful amplifier, you can't help but be impressed by just how big this speaker sounds. Direct comparison with the old SA1 shows that the D1 is a little more efficient, but it's still not

good by modern standards. It's brilliant by LS3/5a standards, of course, but next to your average modern KEF or Tannoy baby box, the Spendor is quieter. So any prospective purchasers will need an amplifier of at least 60W RMS per channel to get decent levels even in a smallish room.

Suitably set up, run close to the back wall and toed-in just a touch, it gives an unforgettable sound. Talk about squeezing a quart into a pint pot – it throws images wide left and right, in an amazingly unselfconscious way. Aside from an obvious lack of 'thump' from the lowest octaves of the music, it shows absolutely no concessions to its diminutive dimensions. It is smooth, well integrated between the mid/bass unit and the tweeter, and yet has a naturally spry and airy disposition that's bubbling with detail. Fed Kraftwerk's *Tour De France Étape 3*, you hear the leading edges, but not the actual thunderous bass itself. This works surprisingly well, as it allows the listener's brain to fill in the gaps.

Given a bit of hip-hoppy acid jazz in the shape of Galliano's *Stoned Again*, it sounds like it is on springs. Wonderfully bouncy, the little box imparts the song's every rhythmic inflection and microdynamic accent. Elements of the mix dash around the room, the speakers throwing out a bewilderingly wide soundstage given their size. Inside this, things are balanced; vocals appear very intimate, with a fine texture to the

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,795

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
5.7kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
165 x 305 x 190mm

**FEATURES**  
• 22mm linear phase hybrid soft dome tweeter  
• 150mm EP77 polymer coned mid/bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity: 85dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Spendor Audio Systems

**TELEPHONE**  
01323 843474

**WEBSITE**  
spendoraudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 389

singer's voice. Bass drums thunk with great speed and snares cut through the mix like the proverbial cutting implement through animal fat. The lack of overhang in the cabinet, added to the innate speed of the drivers, means that the music almost seems to be speeded up.

Feed the D1 with a well-recorded classical piece such as Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic playing Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* on Deutsche Grammophon, and you're struck by the air and space. The new tweeter is streets ahead of the previous dome fitted to the SA1, offering more insight and atmosphere. The SA1's certainly isn't bad, but the D1's is superb at the price, indeed we're not sure you'll find a better HF unit on a sub £3,000 speaker. It isn't a fancy ribbon design, but has much of the openness, sparkle and lustre – this is most welcome with classical because it carries the subtle textures of the strings with delicacy and refinement.

### Conclusion

The Spendor D1 is an essential audition if you're spatially challenged or unwilling to let large speakers change your life ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Highly musical and detailed sound; excellent image projection

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No low bass means sound won't be to all tastes

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Brilliant mini-monitor, one of the very best ever

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL







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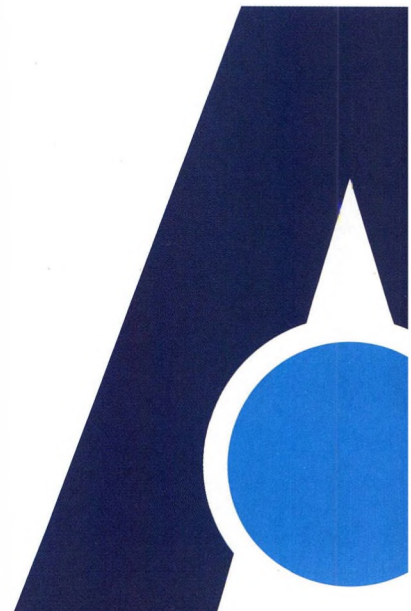
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*HiFi World, July 2013*

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## STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



# Tannoy Precision 6.1

**B**eing a Tannoy, the Precision 6.1 has a Dual Concentric drive unit. And as anyone who's heard one knows, this is no bad thing. This one is said to have an extremely uniform sound radiation pattern that shows off the benefits of Tannoy's technology to best effect. High frequencies radiate from the centre of the low-frequency unit through a carefully designed exponential horn. The result is a far wider on-axis area that you can listen from, and superior stereo projection. The crossover further time-aligns the two drivers, meaning that the sound appears to come from the same point-source just behind the drive unit.

To the untrained eye, the Precision 6.1's drive unit looks like a single full range design, and not a big one at that at 150mm in diameter. The outer mid/bass part sports a cone made from a selected blend of paper pulp fibres, and is chosen for its natural sound, says Tannoy. The inset WideBand tweeter uses a titanium dome for high rigidity and low mass, and is said to be superior to aluminium in terms of where and how the response breaks up.

The rear of the cabinet features a distinctive binding post panel, which

has gold-plated binding posts. The company also offers its signature fifth terminal to earth the driver chassis to the amplifier ground, which is said to reduce RF interference.

### Sound quality

This is a quintessential high-quality Tannoy that gives a wide, expansive and room-filling sound. It's not what you'd call tonally warm, but neither is it hard and steely; the balance is well judged and the general impression is one that is ever so slightly 'well lit' across the upper midband, but not excessively so. It picks out vocals, lead piano and guitar lines and throws them into the room with confidence, while at the same time not forcing the listener to take cover behind the sofa.

At higher frequencies, the mid/bass unit crosses over to the tweeter in a pretty orderly way, where you become aware that you are listening to a metal dome – it's not quite as smooth and well damped as a fabric dome, or as seamless and delicate as a ribbon. All the same, it integrates well and shares the same slightly 'vivid' character of the mid/bass unit. The result is an atmospheric and extended treble. It's not coarse or hard and lends a lovely metallic twang to delicately struck hi-hat cymbals.

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£900

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
7.3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
224 x 330 x 257mm

**FEATURES**  
• 25mm titanium dome tweeter  
• 150mm treated paper mid/bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Tannoy

**TELEPHONE**  
01236 420199

**WEBSITE**  
tannoy.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 383

Its size means it's only going to give a finite amount of bass, which means that the very bottom notes of a bass guitar simply aren't there. That's fair enough, as you don't buy a relatively small standmounting speaker for guilty subterranean pleasures. What bass there is, is decently controlled and tuneful – it doesn't impede that lovely open midband, and sits back and adds a bit of heft to percussion, to push the song along in a crisp and tidy manner.

The result is a clean and open speaker that images beautifully and seemingly disappears from your listening room. We kick off with Animal Nightlife's *Native Bcy* and the Precisions romp along. Rhythmically, the cabinet stays out of the action to a large extent, with no untoward honking or booming, letting the Dual Concentric driver get its claws into the music. This it does very well, serving up a musically satisfying sound that bounces from the start of the track all the way to its very end. It gives a really enjoyable sense of there being a musical event, as opposed to just going through the motions.

Feed the Tannoy some heavier and more challenging material, such as Genesis' *Dance on a Volcano*, and things are no less fun. The speaker has a good go at capturing Phil Collins' thunderous pan rolls and the bass drum is tight and taut. Again, the midband is finely etched and highly detailed, throwing out large amounts of information into the room with heady abandon; the guitar work feels very intricate, and Collins' vocals are breathy and captivating. On this denser material at higher volumes there's a bit of compression, but that's the price you pay for a small speaker.

### Conclusion

Overall, the Precision 6.1 is one of the few boxes at this price that is truly able to leave its cabinet behind and offer an 'out of body experience' ●

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**LIKE:** Clean, spacious, detailed and engaging sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**DISLIKE:** Limited bass extension; stiff competition

**BUILD QUALITY**



**WESAY:** Beautifully presented, musically satisfying stand mounters

**EASE OF DRIVE**



### OVERALL



## SUSPENDED LOUDSPEAKER



# Origin Live Astute

**P**erhaps better known for its tonearms and turntables, Origin Live is keen to prove that there may be alternative ways to reproduce high fidelity music. In the new Astute loudspeaker it has created a relatively dead barrel from a multi-laminated tube capped with solid bamboo ply front and back. Nothing wants to resonate, and asymmetrically offset dual concentric drivers set within the front baffle ensure that standing waves have little chance of forming.

Designed to be used with an active subwoofer, the Astutes cover the 85Hz-20kHz frequency range with a pronounced roll off from 100Hz. Deeper bass duties are then picked up by your subwoofer of choice.

The speakers hang from elegant Heron stands (£770), but Origin Live offers a number of engineered wall and ceiling fixings if you prefer.

### Sound quality

Spinning *More Money* from Barry Reynolds' *I Scare Myself* LP on vinyl, treble, mid and bass energy just seem

more dynamic. It's as though we're hearing our favourite music, source and amplification with a secret veil lifted. Frequency response feels extremely even and without over emphasis, but it's the cleanliness of the sound and the sheer dynamism of the frequencies arriving at our ears that is so very refreshing. It's hard to put sound dynamics into words, but the quality and timbre created by the Astutes delivers an energy that is potent, yet unflagging and incredibly accurate. And rather than merely reproducing laboratory standards of frequency and amplitude, the Astutes dive straight into communicating your music. Given Origin Live has clearly paid so much attention to engineering and physics we are ready for a clinical presentation of music, but the opposite is true. Drums really kick, fretted basslines start and stop with different finger pressures and we're able to appreciate a rapport between backing singers and musicians that we haven't felt before.

Turning to James Taylor's *Machine Gun Kelly* on vinyl and the informal,

live acoustic soundstage floods the room. Suspending these quality drivers projects a compelling holographic image that is tall, wide and utterly stable. Hanging the dynamic drivers appears to unlock an extra presence and realism to voices, releasing them from other midband detail and deepening the stereo image front to back.

Playing Donna Summer's *I Feel Love* on CD, we start to wind the volume up. This is a classic side effect of high quality and an intuitive response to a lack of distortion. These speakers are happy to reproduce convincing dynamics at very low volume levels or party hard, and the disco anthem is soon projected into every corner of the room. The powerful dynamics within Giorgio Moroder's mesmerising synth lines loop around Donna's sultry vocals, tempting others in the house to come and enjoy the music with us. It is at this moment that we realise that the Astutes are probably tapping into some tried and trusted 'public address' philosophies where highly dynamic hanging speakers regularly bring live stage concerts to life.

### Conclusion

The Astutes are a beguiling combination of engineering decisions and unique technical features that add up to a highly coherent and very musical whole. The separation of single-minded bass duties from highly dynamic mid/treble energy allows each driver to excel and floating the speakers at any height you wish gives sonic rewards and protection from prying hands in equal measure. They look stunning to us, and if we had interior design flair we're not sure we'd need to look elsewhere. They are remarkably unphased being positioned near rear walls, but appreciate a little air around them. They look unique and don't sound half bad either, what's not to like? ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£4,995  
**ORIGIN**  
UK  
**WEIGHT**  
12.9kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
340 x 340 x 350mm  
**FEATURES**  
● Dual concentric drivers  
● 1in compression tweeter  
● 8in paper midrange driver  
● Quoted sensitivity: 91dB/1W/1m  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Origin Live  
**TELEPHONE**  
02380 578877  
**WEBSITE**  
originlive.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 387

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



##### VALUE FOR MONEY



##### BUILD QUALITY



##### EASE OF DRIVE



##### OVERALL



**LIKE:** Impressive dynamics; innovative design; elegant styling; high build quality

**DISLIKE:** Styling may not appeal to all

**WE SAY:** Eye-catching speakers with design flair that manage to convey musicality at any volume



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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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

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

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

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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Acoustic Energy AE 103

**D**espite being physically unimposing for a floorstanding loudspeaker, you'd never think the AE 103 is any way less well built than similarly priced rivals as it's a decidedly heavy and sturdy speaker for its size. The gently sloping front baffle gives it a distinctive appearance and the bright metal trim rings around the drivers lend a classy look.

This is a very well executed small floorstander, offering a lot for the price. Our AE 103 comes in vinyl-wrap walnut, but it is done well and black and gloss white finishes are options too. The drive units are bolted into the well damped, rigid cabinet and loaded by the manufacturer's trademark, distinctive slot-shaped reflex port. This is at the bottom of the front baffle, which is a wholly good idea because it makes the speakers far less sensitive to placement near boundary walls; we find that they work well as close as 20cm from a rear wall. Round the

back you get a single pair of non-bi-wireable binding terminals.

### Sound quality

The AE 103 has a bright, snappy and enjoyable sound that has a naturally musical nature and a good bit of power for when required. It's decently tight, taut and composed. One listen to 808 State's *Ancodia*, and you're in no doubt it's different to its rivals.

You can hear the tweeter adding just a little liveliness to the proceedings; hi-hats and the top harmonics from snare drums seem a lot better lit. By the standards of its rivals tonal balance falls around the middle; not too sharp or too soft. Bass has a good deal of bounce and extension; it doesn't go quite as low and nor does it quite have the effortless feel that larger loudspeakers have, but it's not too far off. The only real letdown is a slight muddling of the attack transients on some of the complex, looped, sequenced electronic bass; there's a bridge about two thirds of

the way through the track when the AE 103 seems to momentarily lose its composure in the low frequencies.

Generally it proves a great dance music speaker, and works really well with other types of music. The String Quartet's *Ordinary World* displays a good tonality with plenty of space to the recorded acoustic. It certainly doesn't seem as compressed as some rivals. There's no substitute for cabinet size, and when it comes to delivering a large, easy sound the AE 103 is a prisoner of its petite dimensions. John Martyn's gorgeous *Solid Air* shows a good tonality, but again the tweeter lends the music an edge that gives the balance a boost in some respects.

### Conclusion

This is a fine speaker that responds well to good amps and sources. Properly set up you can enjoy its good rhythms and dynamics, and sense of musical flow. Overall it's a seriously impressive performer at the price ●

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£550

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
14kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
185 x 850 x 280mm

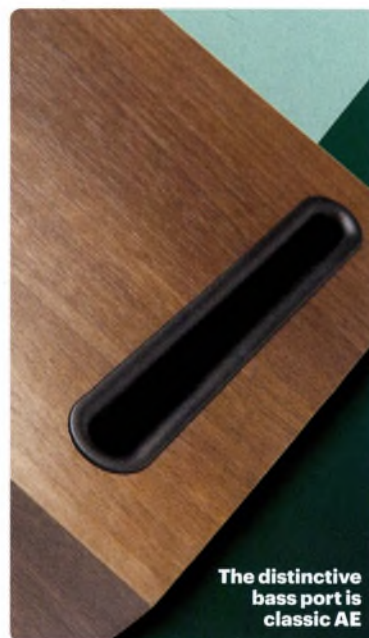
**FEATURES**  
● 28mm fabric dome tweeter  
● 2x 110mm aluminium bass units  
● Quoted sensitivity: 89dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Designs

**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166

**WEBSITE**  
acoustic-energy.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 391



The distinctive bass port is classic AE

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Punchy, propulsive, musical sound; build and finish

##### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Lacks finesse compared with the best of the rest

##### BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Great value compact affordable floorstander

##### EASE OF DRIVE



##### OVERALL





# Spendor D7

## Technology or Music?

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If you're after a great all-round, affordable, high end loudspeaker, here it is *Hi-Fi Choice issue 370 2013*

Spendor's approach is the most radical I've seen, going where no hi-fi manufacturer has gone before. D7 is extremely capable and very neutral, but most importantly it puts the music first *Hi-Fi + Dec 2013*

However it's been achieved, we can't help but marvel at the sound. Spendor D7's set the standard for speakers at this price *What Hi-Fi Oct 2013*



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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# ATC SCM40

**T**here is absolutely nothing about this loudspeaker to suggest it is built to its price, and you're reminded of this when you try to move it. The drive units look highly anachronistic, and that's because they are – especially the midband driver. ATC began its life building drive units for professional monitor speakers, and then started making its own. Very few companies make midrange domes these days, because they're hard to get right. The benefit of a dome, as well as excellent dispersion, is that it is phase-coherent with the dome tweeter – which is to say it radiates sound waves in a similar manner. This brings excellent integration to that critical tweeter/midrange driver relationship. This 75mm soft dome mid driver uses a hand-doped acrylic diaphragm and suspension system, using a “secret ATC formula”. It mates to an ATC-designed and built 25mm dome tweeter with a doped polyester diaphragm and suspension, with

alloy wave guide. The bass driver is 164mm in diameter and features a hand coated paper pulp diaphragm, chosen for its balance of low mass, damping and rigidity, and there's a huge motor assembly behind.

### Sound quality

The big ATC is unerringly revealing of what you put into it, and certainly doesn't sugar the pill. But if you imagine that it is cerebral, analytical and dispassionately forensic then think again. Feed it a high-quality source via a smooth, punchy solid-state amplifier and you get a startlingly fine sound back.

You get a large, wideband sound that's starker and more open than anything else we've heard at this price. This is made more apparent by its superb bass; arguments rage about the merits of infinite baffle boxes, but ATC has got this one working brilliantly. The only downside is that it makes lesser amps feel like a jogger running in concrete trainers!

Kraftwerk's *Tour de France Soundtracks* is breathtaking – rarely have we heard its low frequencies in such sharp relief. Positioned just 30cm from our rear wall and toed-in slightly, the speed, power and grip is superlative. The attack transients on the synth bass are superb, starting and stopping with the speed of an LED. On songs with vast tracts of low frequencies such as the Moog bass on 4hero's *Cosmic Tree*, the bottom end is rock solid, prodigious and ultra tight, but give it an indie guitar track like REM's *Maps and Legends* and the speaker is relatively circumspect. Basically, it tells you what's going on if it is going on, and if it isn't then it doesn't! This is the mark of a serious wideband monitor loudspeaker, and a reminder that so many reflex ported designs simply aren't doing bass right. Conventional-holed boxes have practicality and ease-of-drive in their favour, but can bring problems related to phase integrity across the whole frequency. This often means the bass can sound like it's a fraction of a second behind.

Not so the SCM40, and the way it integrates its superb low frequencies with the midband is a joy; in this region it's more searching than many, but is never harsh unless the source is. It sounds like a veil has been lifted from in front of the music and it gives an explicit insight into proceedings.

### Conclusion

Given a serious source and recording, the SCM40 is superb – we know no price rivals with this level of accuracy, speed and insight. It strings the rhythmic elements of the mix together brilliantly, punching out subtle dynamic inflections in a satisfying and visceral way. But it will have you fretting about how best to drive it, because you know it's capable of a level of transparency that you'd expect from speakers three or four times its price ●

### DETAILS

PRICE  
£3,275

ORIGIN  
UK

WEIGHT  
31kg

DIMENSIONS  
(WxHxD)  
265 x 980 x 300mm

#### FEATURES

- Infinite baffle cabinet design
- 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 75mm soft dome midband driver
- 164mm bass driver

DISTRIBUTOR  
ATC Loudspeaker  
Technology Ltd  
TELEPHONE  
01285 760561

WEBSITE  
atcloudspeakers.  
co.uk

REVIEWED  
HFC 389

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Superlative clarity; excellent phase coherence; sublime bass

VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Hard work for an amplifier; too revealing for most

BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** A great modern monitor loudspeaker, but not for all

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL







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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Cambridge Audio Aeromax 6

**B**arely 18 months since it first launched its Aero range, CA has gone for a revamp and a new name. Our abiding impression of the Aero 6 floorstander is of a great budget box with a unique sound that's just a little too soft and fluffy. The new Aeromax has tightened up, though; it was understandable that designer Dominic Baker paid so much attention to the original's novel drive unit complement, but he's had time to refine the rest of the speaker and the result is that the cabinets are now better braced. No less profound is the fitment of the latest fourth-generation Balanced Mode Radiator (BMR), which partners with twin bass drivers. Married to this is better OFC internal wiring and upgraded speaker terminals. What you get is an almost uniquely even sound, totally devoid of the sort of peaks and lumpiness in the midband that all but the very best boxes suffer from. It really is uncanny, and the mods make it even easier to

enjoy. It works well close to a rear wall, but it excels around 50cm into the room with the bung removed.

### Sound quality

The basic sound of the Aeromax 6 is very smooth, satisfyingly musical and eerily unlike pretty much every other loudspeaker in its price bracket and indeed many others, too! The first choice to make is whether to use the supplied foam bung in the bass port; in our room we fit it because it tightens up the bass. As mentioned earlier, this is less necessary if you're able to run them away from the rear wall, otherwise we'd advise that you keep it in. This done, the Aeromax 6 delivers a superb rendition of 808 State's *Ancodia*; showing off an almost holographic soundstage, cathedral-like in its breadth.

The speaker never comes out and bites you across the midband, meaning it's remarkably relaxing to listen to, yet can never be called boring. It oozes detail that's subtle

and unexpectedly fine at the price. This is plenty of fun, but better still the Cambridge Audio proves highly adept at playing rhythms. This trait it shares with its predecessor, only more so; the 'max' is faster, tighter, tauter and has less overhang in the bass. It's also more expressive, and carries dynamic inflections – better than its predecessor ever did.

The String Quarter's cover of *Ordinary World* comes across with real emotional poignancy, while the acoustic guitar finery of John Martyn's *Solid Air* shows that the Aeromax isn't beyond criticism; it has a slightly 'papery' tone that can't carry the widest range of sounds from ice cold to sumptuously warm; everything is a little sweet and soft regardless of the original recording.

### Conclusion

It may not quite have the glassy clarity of some rival higher-end loudspeakers, but still the Aeromax 6 proves a joy to listen to and own ●



### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£900  
**ORIGIN**  
UK/China  
**WEIGHT**  
17kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
240 x 980 x 344mm  
**FEATURES**  
● 46mm BMR treble/mid driver  
● 2x 165mm doped paper bass drive  
● Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/1W/1m  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Richer Sounds  
**TELEPHONE**  
0333 9000093  
**WEBSITE**  
cambridgeaudio.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC391

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

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

**LIKE:** Wonderfully smooth, open, even sound; scale; musicality  
**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price  
**WE SAY:** Superb affordable floorstander, that's refined beyond its price

#### OVERALL







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# FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER





# Epos K2

With a rather unusual approach, the K2 is an important speaker for Epos and could well be the shape of things to come

**T**his speaker isn't a dramatic change of trajectory for Epos, but it's certainly a clear move in a certain direction. It ushers in a brave new world of active operation for the company; you see, the K2 isn't actually active, but it has the capability to be so built in. In a few months' time, there will be an Active-K module that will transform the K2 into something completely different...

Look at the back and you'll see that the lower part of the rear baffle is designed to unbolt, and in its place you can fit the Active-K module. Built into this is a Creek Audio-designed power amplifier, complete with good quality, multi-input DAC with asynchronous USB and Bluetooth receiver. Suddenly, the K2s have the ability to work as wireless speakers, and be driven from a range of digital sources – or even an analogue input.

Buying into the K2 now means you'll have a clear and powerful upgrade path for the future. But where does this leave us before the Active-K pack arrives?

The speaker is a two-and-a-half-way design and is quite diminutive for its price. The drive units comprise one 25mm silk dome tweeter with a "carefully designed" short-horn faceplate that's said to reduce refraction distortion, and provide an even, on-axis response, with high sensitivity. This hands over to a 156mm mid/bass driver using a polypropylene cone and a bullet-shaped dust cap. Finally, this drops down to another 156mm driver that handles bass frequencies only.

## Sound quality

In essence, the new Epos has a very musical sound. It's not frantic, brightly etched and in your face; rather it's quite laid back, assured and confident sounding. But whereas some speakers that exhibit these sort of traits end up sounding rather boring, the Epos certainly does not.

It offers the enchanting combination of being relaxed in nature, but engaging in action. Even at fairly low levels, it locks into the lilting groove of Tom Tom Club's *Genius Cf Love* and bounces along. There's a sense that the music is unexpectedly propulsive; the K2 really has an innate musicality to it that pop, rock, reggae and jazz fans will love. Still, this bounce doesn't come at the expense of brightness, because it appears a very even-handed performer – something that really comes into its own with classical

## Everything's so subtle and fluid, and not every speaker at this price gets it

programme material. B&W's latest 683 has a far more explicit upper midband that makes the track's rhythm guitar work sound a little scratchy, for example. The Epos by contrast tones it down slightly, but the instrument in no way loses impact; instead we are able to follow it better throughout the song.

It's this counterpoint between rhythm guitar, bass drum, bass guitar, snare and hi-hat that makes *Genius Cf Love* so sublime; everything's so subtle and fluid, and not every speaker at this price point gets it. There's also the dynamics to consider, and the K2 tracks these brilliantly; it's not an overly compressed song, so you do really get to hear some light and shade in the way the drums are played, for example, and the Epos carries this very well. Its prowess with attack transients – the ability to catch leading edges of notes as they happen – allied to a dislike of sitting on dynamic accenting – is what makes this such a lively speaker, despite not sounding in the least bright.

In the same way you can hear the B&W's Kevlar midrange cone and the Monitor Audio's metal hybrid affair, so you can hear the Epos' polypropylene

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£999

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
11kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
185 x 875 x 250mm

**FEATURES**  
● 25mm soft dome tweeter  
● 156mm polypropylene bass/mid driver  
● 156mm polypropylene bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity 90dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Epos Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01442 260146

**WEBSITE**  
eposLtd.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 388

one. This gives an ever so slightly warm and soft sound compared with these rivals, and it's also rather forgiving too. Put on a bright, bracing song like Madonna's *Holiday* and while many price rivals will ram it down your throat, the Epos steps back a little bit. Instead, the accent is more on the lower midband and bass, rather than further up. It gives the song a little bit more body, and a silkiness that other speakers at the price lack. This blends in with a cough sounding tweeter, that matches the smoothness of the mid/bass and bass drivers. Even the tinselly hi-hats sound sophisticated.

A slick slice of Blue Note jazz courtesy of Lee Morgan's *The Sidewinder* shows what a lovely smoothie the Epos K2 is, and how it likes to get into any groove. Its skill at contrasting the respective levels of instruments proves excellent; instead of ramming everything at you, it steps back a pace or two, so you can get a better sense of scale. There's a decent feeling of space; it has a wide soundstage left-to-right and hangs instruments a little behind the plane of the speakers. The effect is immersive, letting you get lost in its wall of sound. Still, this little floorstander doesn't quite have the depth perspective of its Monitor Audio rival in our listening room, tending to be less good at letting things fall back into the distance.

## Conclusion

If you're going to criticise the Epos anywhere, it's got to be the bass. By the standards of its price class it's very good – but in absolute terms it doesn't quite have the ability to switch on and off like a square wave. When played at high levels, it loses a bit of weight and articulation, and doesn't quite capture the physicality and punch low down. We'll be intrigued to see if the active version changes this, and we strongly suspect it will. All the same, the speaker's low end never sounds less than well balanced and fluid, and is excellent at the price ●

### HifiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Smooth and easy, but highly enjoyable sound; active option
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Nothing at the price
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Excellent floorstander with an active life ahead of it
<b>EASE OF DRIVE</b> ★★★★★	

#### OVERALL



## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Focal Aria 926

**F**ocal's announcement that it is using a different cone material in its new Aria 926 speaker is more significant than you might first think. The material that a cone is made from is critical, as it's the contact point between the speaker and the air it is there to move. It affects the transient response of the driver, its rigidity and the resonance or lack thereof.

The 900 Aria showcases a new recipe – the French speaker specialist has cooked up a sandwich of glass fibre, a special type of textile fibre called flax and glass fibre again. Flax is a way to damp the glass fibre; the latter material is very rigid and light, but it isn't the most acoustically inert. Flax is, however, so the two should make a happy combination.

### Sound quality

The Focal family sound is generally very fast, sharp and engaging; these speakers go loud without compression and punch hard on transients, making

them lively listens. The new 926 does all of these things, but it seems to do everything with a little more elan than the earlier 800 series. There's a sense that the new cone material gives a smoother and more subtle sound, yet it is no less detailed – indeed it's quite the reverse. We find the 926 to be a fine advertisement for its maker's new driver technology, sounding as it does 'all of a piece' and really rather natural. Certainly it's never screechy or dull. Instead, it strikes a considered balance that preserves all those key characteristics we know and love from Focal, yet seems to do things in a more mature and even-handed way than the company's past offerings at this price.

The result is a big, expansive and open-sounding box that's smooth and detailed from bottom to top. Being a three-way, it feels like it has a lot in reserve, so when crunching crescendos arrive – such as that powerful electric guitar noodling by Bill Nelson in *Be Bop Deluxe's*

*Modern Music* – there's no sense of the speaker sounding breathless and lapsing into stridency. At the same time, those flax cones invest the midband with a transparent feel, meaning it is better able to show the differences between recording studios than many other similarly priced boxes. The *Be Bop Deluxe* disc sounds a little bright and bracing, whereas Isaac Hayes' *Shaft* is a whole lot warmer and more sumptuous – it's good to know the speakers aren't adding too large a sonic footprint.

Staying with Hayes, *Ccfe Regio's*, is every bit as warm as it should be, without the sense that the speaker is losing the rhythmic plot. Although a little softer sounding, those flax cones are just as fast at capturing the attack transients of a snare drum rim shot or the dull pounding of the bass drum, and the result is an enjoyable unfatiguing listen. In absolute terms, there's just a little bit of warmth in the upper bass, which is often an issue with larger floorstanders that aren't hewn from granite. It's far from an unpleasant effect and careful room placement minimises it further.

You might think that with a slightly sweeter midband sound, the metal tweeter will stick out a little more than with previous Focal boxes, but it proves enjoyably smooth. At high volumes, the 926 is quite superb; distortion is so low that you can push it right up to the point that your flares start flapping, the Aria slamming out tuneful bass without the merest hint of complaint. Across the mid, it is excellent – fast and poised and wonderfully engaging – and treble glisters away with a lovely crisp yet smooth hi-hat sound.

### Conclusion

Overall then, these new floorstanders are an unqualified success; we really enjoy our time with them and would recommend them to anyone in the market seeking a lively listen ●

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,798

**ORIGIN**  
France

**WEIGHT**  
25kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
294 x 1,035 x 371mm

**FEATURES**  
● 25mm Au/Mg TNF  
Inverted dome  
tweeter  
● 165mm and  
2x 165mm flax mid  
and bass drivers  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
91.5dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Focal UK Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
0845 6602680

**WEBSITE**  
focal.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC383

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**LIKE:** Easy sound, but with great speed and detail; build quality

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★  
**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**WESAY:** Highly capable, fine looking mid-price floorstanders

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

#### OVERALL





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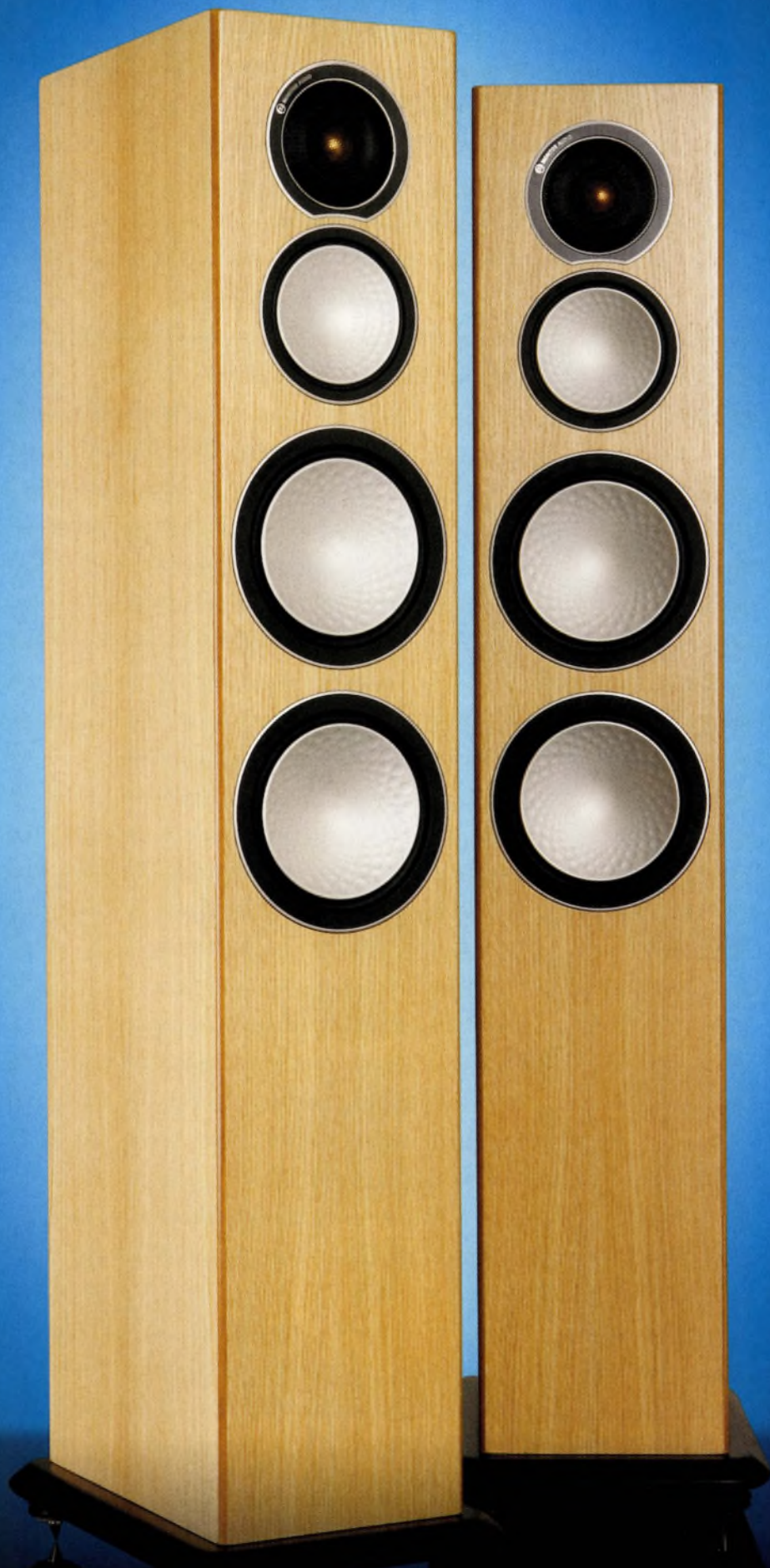


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# FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER





# Monitor Audio Silver 8

Monitor Audio's new Silver 8 floorstander is packed with go-faster goodies, and the result is a super sound that many will enjoy

**B**enefiting from a range of nice goodies handed down to it from MA's impressive Platinum and Gold series, the Silver range is notable for being Monitor Audio's cheapest real three-way design, as well as running two smallish bass drivers in parallel.

The S8 is a three-way with the addition of a 100mm midrange unit and two 165mm bass units. Running them in parallel lets the speaker shift a decent amount of air and retain its narrow dimensions.

Importantly, though, the midband driver is the same – albeit slightly smaller – unit as the bass drivers. This will provide not only a good tonal match, but it should keep good phase too, and have similar dispersion characteristics. All are C-CAM RST types, a catchy acronym for Ceramic Coated Aluminium Magnesium with Rigid Surface Technology. Roughly translated, this means a thin hybrid metal cone that has been dimpled to resist bending. Metal cones are stiff and light, but can come a cropper in the distortion department because metal isn't the least resonant material yet invented – hence the need for the RST. The tweeter uses a 25mm C-CAM dome, so again you get a tonal consistency that you'd lose if Monitor Audio had opted for, say, a silk dome. It vents internally around the outside of the magnet system into a large rear-loading chamber above the separate midband chamber.

## Sound quality

The Silver 8 is surprisingly unfussy. We stand it about 30cm from the rear wall, gently toed-in and it sings. It has a surprisingly clean and neutral sound – unlike some rivals that also use metal coned drivers. Indeed, if anything it is ever so slightly on the warm side, and certainly able to live with a lively sounding source or amplifier. We'd judge it to have a perfect tonal balance considering the kit it's likely to be used with.

It sounds wonderfully integrated and all-of-a-piece. Thomas Dolby's *One Of Our Submarines Is Missing* comes over with a combination of detail and decorum that we hadn't expected at this price. This is an early eighties analogue recording, and we are able to discern the very subtle tape hiss in the background, which isn't something all similarly priced designs do, yet above this the various instruments separate out beautifully. Bass is strong and well articulated, midband crisp yet smooth and the treble beautifully detailed.

The Silvers image superbly; they provide a broad spread of sound and

## It just gets on with the job of playing music in a subtle yet sophisticated way

you don't need to sit exactly on-axis to get everything in all its glory. Rather than firing the sound out like a sniper rifle, they're closer to a bank job-spec sawn-off shotgun, dispersing all over. This gives a seamless, almost electrostatic-like sound; it spreads out easily into the room and the bass, mid and treble driver integrate well.

Not only is the sound clean, it is fast too – yet it gets its speed from its excellent tracking of transients rather than any artificial tonal edge or 'zing'. It gives the very pleasant combination of openness and musicality, which proves infectious on Black Uhuru's *Party Next Door*. The 8s serve up large tracts of bass, which is tight and well articulated, with no sense of the speakers falling over their own feet, so to speak. Further up, that midband driver kicks in at 500Hz to give an even and spacious sound until the tweeter joins the party at 2.7kHz. You don't hear the transition and the impression the speaker gives is that you're listening to a large point-source. It's not quite as holographic

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,250

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**WEIGHT**  
23.3kg

**DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
185 x 1,000 x 323mm

**FEATURES**  
● 25mm C-CAM dome tweeter  
● 100mm C-CAM midrange unit  
● 2x 165mm C-CAM RST bass units  
● Quoted sensitivity 90dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Monitor Audio Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01268 740580

**WEBSITE**  
monitoraudio.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 387

as, say, a Tannoy Dual Concentric (see page 55) but it's not far off, and better than most price rivals in its ability to conjure up a cavernous soundstage.

Indeed, one great talent of the 8 is its ability with vocals; there's a sense of natural ease that makes even the most challenging female voices a pleasure. The harsh, nasal tones of The Cookie Crew from Beatmasters' *Who's In The House* are surprisingly palatable with a wonderful sledgehammer bass set behind some frantic keyboard work and staccato drum machine beats. That dome tweeter really is very good, and marries so well with the midrange driver that you'd be forgiven for thinking you were hearing a far more expensive speaker.

Interestingly, the Silver 8 has no real weaknesses. It doesn't hurt, offend, frighten or intimidate – it just gets on with the job, does it well, and doesn't make a fuss. The only criticisms you can make is that it's not quite as open, three dimensional or powerful as other, more expensive and larger designs. At its price though, to criticise would be churlish, because it's just so darned competent at everything you can throw at it. Perhaps some would say it lacks a little character, that it doesn't editorialise as much as some price rivals. It certainly gives a less stylised or contrived sound, but we definitely don't find it dull.

## Conclusion

As any good football manager knows, the easiest way to win is not to lose – and the Silver 8 is an arch exponent of this. It simply doesn't give goals away; there's little weakness on show in any respect. Those seeking a more characterful sound might have less time for it, but anyone wanting a really capable floorstander that just gets on with the job of playing music in a subtle yet sophisticated way will love it ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Clean, open, detailed and musical sound; finish

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**WE SAY:** Superbly competent all-round performer

### OVERALL

★★★★★

## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Neat Acoustics Motive SX1

**U**pdates to its ranges are something Neat does once every blue moon and so when they do happen they are worth taking note of. The most visible change to the Motive SX1 is the tweeter. The titanium unit of old has been replaced with an aluminium design. Although it's heavier than titanium, the resonances are easier to control and the process of anodising the tweeter means that any notional loss of stiffness is kept to a minimum.

The tweeter is partnered with the same 135mm mid bass drivers as before and the cabinet has the same distinctive rearward lean to aid the time alignment. The cabinet porting exits through the bass of the speaker. For this reason, the plinth and spikes are fixed. The advantage of this is that the SX1 is not too fussed about placement close to a wall (although best results are gained being at least 30cms out), but we discover that on a suspended floor, the Motive can be a little lively. Neat supplies a set of foam

bungs to limit the output, but best results are gained on solid floors or isolating platforms.

### Sound quality

The overall balance of the Motive is one that perhaps trades that last tiny percentile of detail in a performance for an even-handed accessibility with a wide variety of music that makes this an appealing partner across a wide variety of genres.

There is a clearly discernible sense of fun to the way that the Neat goes about making music that adds to the involvement it can create. Seasick Steve's *Hubcap Music* has a sense of life and drive to it that makes for an engrossing performance. Picking this overall perception apart is tricky, but it seems to stem from an exceptionally well balanced presentation from top to bottom that avoids over emphasising any part of the frequency response. The handover between midrange and the new tweeter in particular is impressively

seamless and this means that anything that happens within the Neat's frequency response does so in happy balance with everything else.

For what is a relatively compact and slender floorstander, the bass response is genuinely impressive. Although the Motive is happiest on a solid surface, the potent low end is apparent on all surfaces. As well as a genuine amount of impact, that is felt as much as heard, there is detail and agility that aids believability. Push the Neat to antisocial levels and the port can become audible, but at more sane volume points it works seamlessly with the drivers.

At the other end of the frequency extremes, the SX1 has a sweetness to the upper registers that is largely responsible for the forgiving way that it performs, even fed with less than perfect material. The handling of voices in particular is unambiguously real. Their placement as part of the wider recording is entirely convincing and it emphasises its ability to focus on the wider performance rather than picking it apart. The soundstage has a good sense of scale and there is plenty of detail between the speakers. Reducing the toe-in seems to widen things, although it's at the expense of the three dimensionality.

A characteristic that also remains constant is that although the Motive SX1 is not especially difficult to drive, it benefits from amplifiers that have good current delivery and that exert a sense of control. The amount of power needed to reach a decent volume level is not that high, but the Neats thrive on that power delivery being of a high standard, and the excellent bass response seems to really come alive when driven from solid-state power.

### Conclusion

The Motive SX1 is one of the top performers at the price and should be added to any shortlist of speakers ●

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£1,885

ORIGIN  
UK

WEIGHT  
14kg

DIMENSIONS  
(WxHxD)  
160 x 925 x 200mm

FEATURES  
● 25mm inverted  
anodised aluminium  
dome tweeter  
● 2x 135mm:  
polypropylene cone  
mid/bass units  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
87dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR  
Neat Acoustics

TELEPHONE  
01833 631021

WEBSITE  
neat.co.uk

REVIEWED  
HFC379

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



**LIKE:** Lively and engaging sound; excellent tonality; solid build

**DISLIKE:** Works best on a solid floor and needs capable amplification

**WESAY:** A superb revision to an already capable speaker



# ortofon

accuracy in sound



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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Q Acoustics Concept 40

**R**ather than doing a tweaked version of the existing (and excellent) floorstanding 2050i, the Concept 40s are basically stretched 20s with spikes on the end. This means they're physically a little smaller (about 2in) than the 2050is, but cost twice as much. And fascinatingly, when you bang the cabinets of the Concept 40s, it feels like you've just hit lead-lined concrete. You haven't, of course, because they are made from Gelcore.

Unlike the Concept 20, which uses rehoused 2020i drivers, the 40 uses two new bespoke 125mm bass/midrange drivers set into an aluminium fascia plate. They look visually identical to the single one in the Concept 20, but the motor has been improved and the magnet strengthened. The 25mm soft dome tweeter cuts in at 2.3kHz, and is the same fitted to all Q Acoustics speakers.

We find that they work best at around 30cm out from the rear wall,

slightly toed-in on their integrated tripod stands, with the bungs in place.

### Sound quality

If you've heard the 2050i, you'll know it's a very clean and musical device, without too much character of its own; whatever music you play it just gets down to work and lets rip with a warm, open and enjoyable sound. None of this is lost in the Concept 40, but you get a wealth of extra musical insight, which takes it way beyond the 2050i. Indeed, in terms of transparency, it's like night and day. The sound seems far faster, more open and yet more subtle too, and the spaces in-between the musical notes seem to drop back to vanishingly low levels.

Cue up Air's *All I Need*, and you can hear the difference from the opening bars. The Concept 40 carries the guitar part on the lead in a delightfully subtle way, showing the delicacy of the finger work on the strings, while the instrumental timbre

is more realistic. When the lead vocal kicks in, it has a wonderfully silken sound. The gentle percussion pushes out more forcefully, the 'quieter' cabinets of this new speaker better able to carry dynamic accenting, bringing a greatly increased sense of rhythmic flow. The song seems to have a real trajectory, instead of ambling around lazily. All this comes from the wealth of subtle musical clues that are lost by lesser speakers; it's not the loud bits that impress, it's the quiet ones.

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

### Conclusion

The Q Acoustics Concept 40 is an extremely able loudspeaker, and excellent value even at £1,000. It is amazingly well rounded, having practically no obvious weaknesses, and a whole lot of strengths. Right across the range – from detail and dynamics to tonal balance and musicality, it scores very highly indeed. Most of all what we like about it is its naturalness. And for that reason it comes recommended ●

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,000

**ORIGIN**  
UK/Germany/China

**WEIGHT**  
18.5kg

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

**FEATURES**

- 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 2x 125mm mid/bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Armour Home Electronics

**TELEPHONE**  
01279 501111

**WEBSITE**  
qacoustics.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC385

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



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

##### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Treble is less silky or spacious than some rivals

##### BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Lovely sounding, brilliantly balanced package

##### EASE OF DRIVE



##### OVERALL





*exposure*  
high fidelity engineering

# 1010

**hi-fi** | 'hī'fī| informal  
*adjective*

of, used for, or relating to the reproduction of music or other sound with high fidelity.  
noun ( pl. -fis | 'hā 'faizl)

indulge your senses with real hi-fi sound

**high fidelity**

*noun*

the reproduction of sound with little or no distortion, giving a result as similar to the original as possible.



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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Spendor A6R

**F**or the new A6R, Spendor claims “a dramatic uplift in dynamics, resolution and low-frequency extension”. This small-to-medium-size box sports a new mid/bass driver that uses the company’s latest EP77 ‘engineering polymer’ cone, new surround and suspension materials. These are said to improve low-level linearity and mechanical stability. To go with this is a re-engineered crossover, devoid of series-attenuating resistors to minimise thermal modulation distortion. It also gets precision-wound high-linearity tapped inductors. Sitting just a few inches away from the rear wall, toed-in a few degrees they sound like they’ve been made for our listening room.

### Sound quality

The difference between the A6R and many flashier rivals is it doesn’t bowl you over, but instead just seems to step aside and let you and the music get along together. Rather like a car

salesman who’s happy to leave you alone in the showroom to play with the object of your desire, the Spendor has a light, but deft and skilful touch. It knows how and when not to interfere, where less sophisticated, more impetuous rivals fall over themselves to demonstrate their punchy bass or laser-etched treble.

This means you can play pretty much any type of music and they’ll still let it sing. Take Manix’s *Living In The Past*; it’s pretty much the last piece of music we would ever imagine Spendor using to voice this new speaker, but still the A6Rs sing their hearts out – or rather let the music sing its heart out.

Bass is excellent and we can confirm that Spendor’s special port design works very well. Even at high levels, there is no huffing, puffing or chuffing, and the low frequencies remain tight and supple. True, it isn’t ultra-taut like a good infinite baffle speaker, but it is still a very good implementation of a reflex port that

lets the bass driver do its job accurately, with little interference. The result is a lovely, lilting musicality with just a tiny bit of softness and looseness, which any ported speaker gives. The low frequencies prove very even too; there’s no big ‘hump’ around 100Hz to give the (false) sensation of a strong bass. But when called upon to deliver vast tracts of low frequencies, the A6R doesn’t balk – it proves able to dispense enough bottom end to flap your flares, if not quite blow your wig off.

The midrange performance is lovely. It’s incisive and detailed without sounding like a speaker that’s trying to be incisive and detailed. Rather it has a smooth, gentle, delicate sort of character that seems to dissolve away and let you focus on the mix; there’s no honking or squawking from the cone, no sense that you’re listening to something artificial. In absolute terms, that mid/bass unit lacks the amazing translucency of a ribbon or an electrostatic panel, but it’s never muddy or grey or metallic sounding. Once again, it’s sheer even-handedness wins the day.

Cue up some lilting jazz from Hank Mobley’s *Soul Station* and there’s a fantastic sound to the saxophone that drips with rich, resonant harmonics. Behind this, a wonderfully fluid groove gets going courtesy of great drum kit work; despite not throwing everything at you on a plate, it proves to be highly rhythmically adept.

### Conclusion

It is very good at soundstaging too; it just seems to be able to throw out excellent stereo with precious little setting up or fine tuning. But time spent getting a few degrees toe-in, and the listening height right via the spikes pays dividends, and they’ll end up projecting music like a hologram in your lounge. If you want your music to do the talking and not your loudspeakers, this is a must hear ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£2,495

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
18kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
192 x 875 x 280mm

**FEATURES**

- 29mm wide-surround dome tweeter
- Spendor 180mm EP77 mid/bass unit
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Spendor Audio Systems

**TELEPHONE**  
01323 843474

**WEBSITE**  
spendoraudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 381

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Clean, open, even sound; musicality; fine build

VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Looks are perhaps a little underwhelming, but nothing else at the price

BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



**WESAY:** One of the very best mid-price floorstanders around

OVERALL







## THE CONCEPT 20 LOUDSPEAKER: NOTHING SHORT OF SENSATIONAL



*"you find yourself immersed in a vast stereo soundstage"*

Hi-Fi Choice, June 2013



*"It proves cabinet resonances need be a problem no longer"*

Hi-Fi News, March 2014



*"Looking for a top-quality sub-£500 standmount speaker? Ignore this one at your peril."*

What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, Awards 2014



*"Superb...a scale and volume of sound that seems scarcely credible from such a small cabinet"*

What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, March 2013



Concept 20 Speaker Stand  
Hi-Fi Choice  
Group Test Winner, Nov. 2014



BEAUTIFULLY ENGINEERED SOUND

The 'Concept 20' is a special loudspeaker which goes beyond anything that Q Acoustics has achieved before. It's a beautifully styled product which we confidently believe provides a level of sonic performance previously thought impossible at its price point.

To achieve this extraordinary result, Q Acoustics' design team applied advanced technology to address the fundamental problem of cabinet resonance; widely recognised as the single biggest hurdle preventing 'high end' sonic performance at an 'affordable' price.

The 'Concept 20' proves cabinet resonance need be a problem no longer.

Its Gelcore™ Construction: 'cabinet within a cabinet' design, incorporates a bespoke, resonance absorbing, non-setting adhesive which converts kinetic energy and disperses it as heat. This substantially reduces distortion and allows the individual drive units to deliver their optimal performance.

[www.Qacoustics.co.uk](http://www.Qacoustics.co.uk)



## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Sonus faber Olympica II

**T**here's an interesting drive unit complement in the Olympica II, 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. The woofer is a 230mm affair with a sandwich cone membrane that combines a heart of hi-tech rigid syntactic foam with external layers treated with cellulose pulp.

### Sound quality

The II is a nice size. In a largish (but not huge) listening room, it sits perfectly. Bass is firm and insistent, but never overpowers the room or the

music; instead you feel as if 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.

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, 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 we 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 MartinLogan. 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.

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£6,998

**ORIGIN**  
Italy

**WEIGHT**  
68kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
370x1,055x472mm

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

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9713909

**WEBSITE**  
absolutesounds.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 386

### Conclusion

This is a very well voiced speaker that's tonally coherent with no difficult spots drawing attention to mismatched drivers or poorly executed crossovers. Big three-ways often struggle when it comes to timing, but happily, it works 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 in on differing strands of the music, and follow them with ease ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Balanced tonality; satisfying musicality; build and finish

**DISLIKE:** Slight lack of dimensionality, but otherwise nothing

**WESAY:** Gorgeous, beautiful sounding premium floorstander

#### OVERALL





# HOME CINEMA

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## WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKER



# Dynaudio Xeo 6

**R**eplacing the Xeo 5 (HFC 376), the 6 boasts a bunch of new features packed into a more compact cabinet. Along with an updated remote control, there's a control panel on each speaker's top for adjusting volume and switching input.

As per the previous range, every Xeo speaker can be individually assigned to left/right/mono duties via rear panel switches, to identify them within two-channel and larger surround sound setups. You can also allocate them within a 'zone' to cater for multi-room Xeo systems. To further aid placement, there are room position EQ settings and switches for adjusting bass response for near wall, corner or neutral placement.

### Sound quality

Dynaudio seems to have engineered these speakers to not let their demure proportions stop them from getting the most out of the music. Kicking off with the Xeos switched to the neutral

EQ setting, with their back panels 55cm from the boundary wall and firing down the listening room with just a few degrees of toe-in, we're surprised by just how much welly they have. A 16-bit/44kHz FLAC of The Stone Roses' *Breaking Into Heaven* sees them lay forth an encompassing soundstage, that's solidly woven together. John Squire's multi-layered lead guitar is densely rendered with his Gibson's riffs sounding expansive and full of body.

The Dyns handle the mix admirably, and take it all in their stride. Cymbals are articulated with a clear openness that allows their shimmering tones to remain gentle, without being overwhelmed by Squire's six-string onslaughts coming at you from all angles, or pushed to the sidelines by Mani's energetic bass lines, which also gets plenty of airspace.

Feeding the Hub with a 24/96 FLAC rip of Neil Cowley Trio's *Couch Slouch* reveals that the cut of the Xeo's jib is the polar opposite of the track title's

sentiment. Each instrument sounds highly animated as the speakers strut their funky stuff and you have a real sense of the three musicians being completely in tune with one another. What this highlights is how well the Xeos time across the frequency band, especially with notes' leading edges which are rapidly rendered. You get the impression that each speaker's drive units are working together in a seamless and cohesive manner, and this really helps to make instruments sound whole and fully formed.

With a 16/44 AIAC rip of Ron Sexsmith's *Late Bloomer*, the Xeos ensure bass notes have enough presence to underpin the music with plenty of punch and detail. With this track you also get the sense that Dynaudio has paid close attention to how the bass is projected at the listener, to prevent the lower frequencies from ambling around at the back of the soundstage. Instead the speakers ensure the bass can envelop the soundstage, reaching the listener in a focussed manner without sounding too forward.

When presented with the more meaty bass of Goldfrapp's *Clay*, the Xeos dig deep into the lower frequencies, where they lend plenty of low down power without letting the bass become too flabby sounding.

### Conclusion

Comparing the Xeos with some of the best passive floorstanders at this price, including those from Dyn's own stable, shows that while they can't ultimately achieve the same levels of sheer grunt, the bass they muster is delivered with a sense of authority. If there has to be a criticism – and it's a minor one – despite the improved interface and subtle LED volume level display on each speaker, we'd still welcome slighter steps within the graduated volume levels for greater degrees of fine tuning, to help get it just right for every scenario ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£2,925

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**WEIGHT**  
14.7kg

**DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
170 x 854 x 246mm

**FEATURES**

- 3x 50W digital amps per speaker
- 1in tweeter
- 2x 5in mid/bass drivers
- Portable wi-fi receiver with analogue and digital inputs
- Room position EQ settings

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Dynaudio UK

**TELEPHONE**  
01353 721089

**WEBSITE**  
dynaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 388

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Ease of use; controls; balanced and powerful sound

**DISLIKE:** Volume needs better stepping; Hi-res 24/96 streamed at 16/48

**WESAY:** Wellthought out updates and better sound improves on the original Xeo package

#### OVERALL





# IsoTek® Discover the IsoTek Effect

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...  
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IsoTek EV03 Premier, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013



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

IsoTek EV03 Polaris, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013



## EV03 Premier

IsoTek's most affordable power cable has at its core three 2sqmm conductors made from 99.9999% OFC (oxygen-free copper) and coated in silver to aid conductivity, with a Teflon FEP dielectric extruded over each conductor. A cotton filler is used to give the cable internal strength and reduce microphony whilst maintaining dielectric performance. The cable is terminated with high-quality 24ct gold connectors, designed and manufactured by IsoTek rather than bought off the shelf. No similarly priced power cable is constructed to such a high specification, with correspondingly impressive benefits to sound and picture quality.

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- C15, C19 and C7 IEC options
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## EV03 Polaris

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**HI FI CHOICE**

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### FEATURES

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- Easily driven
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# Eclipse

## TD-M1

**P**erhaps the best-known manufacturer of single driver speakers, Eclipse's unique 'Time Domain' principle has created a range of distinctive and seriously impressive products. The TD-M1 represents an attempt to marry this technology with a degree of convenience that should broaden the appeal to new customers. To this end, it's a self-contained system with amplification and inputs all built into the speaker housings.

The choice of inputs is useful too. The TD-M1 is AirPlay enabled, but also features a USB B socket that is 24/192-capable for direct connection to a computer. These connections are decoded via a Wolfson WM8741 DAC, which has been adapted to work both in conventional upsampling mode, but also in a custom non-oversampling mode. Connectivity is completed by a USB A socket for direct connection of an Apple device and a 3.5mm analogue connection. Other than an absence of Bluetooth, the Eclipse is well set up as a desktop audio device.

### Sound quality

From the outset, the single most important point about the performance of the Eclipse is that the single driver experience the brand is

renowned for is completely intact in the TD-M1. This means that if your music tastes stem to genres making use of the word 'dub' or you have a hangar to fill with sound levels that can boil the fluid in your inner ear, stop reading this and go and explore some of the other speakers that are reviewed in the preceding pages to this one instead. Two 8cm drivers (and this measurement includes the surround too) simply aren't going to vibrate your eyeballs.

If your musical tastes are broader than this, though, and you can grant the Eclipse the nearfield listening position that they benefit from, the TD-M1 is not simply good for an all-in-one, but sensationally good judged by the standards of any £1,000 system. The whole purpose behind the Time Domain principle is to create a speaker better able to follow the variation and nuance of a piece of music and this means that the TD-M1 delivers a performance that is at times almost supernaturally fast. Almost everything else at the price sounds processed and compromised in comparison.

The other trump card is the cohesion across the bulk of the audible frequency range. From 100Hz to the upper threshold of adult hearing, the TD-M1 sounds

truly exceptional. The WAV download of Fink's *Hard Believer* has a presence and a realism that is incongruous coming from such small speakers, but serves as a reminder that truly convincing music reproduction lives or dies on the midrange performance. This is not to say that the Eclipse can't handle frequency extremes – the upper registers in particular are deeply impressive and there is plenty of low-end detail if not physical impact – but the aspects that make music come alive are handled in such a way as to make them the absolute focus of attention.

The non-oversampling mode is more than a gimmick too. With acoustic material and compressed files it fills the performance slightly and makes it fractionally warmer and smoother. The 'standard' DAC mode can extract a little more detail and sometimes generate a little more front-to-back depth, but there is an engagement to it that is wonderfully compelling. The ease of adjusting between the two modes makes experimenting simple and will allow you to choose to suit your taste.

### Conclusion

The more you listen to the TD-M1, the more the presentation can often be likened to listening to a decent pair of open-backed headphones. The music arrives at the ear with little sense of the enclosure and with a definite soundstage provided that you are within the very sweet spot that the Eclipse produces. If you are outside this sweet spot, the stereo presentation declines, which further emphasises how the TD-M1 is used to best effect. The wonderful speed, tonality and integration is retained, but each speaker becomes an individual unit rather than a stereo pair. This means that the Eclipse is not a plonk and play device and will require a little careful fettle to achieve its very best ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£999

**ORIGIN**  
Taiwan

**WEIGHT**  
5.3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
155 x 242 x 219mm  
(WxHxD)

**FEATURES**  
● Wireless-equipped  
AirPlay speaker  
● 24/192kHz-capable USB input  
● Single 8cm driver  
● Black and white finishes available

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Eclipse

**TELEPHONE**  
0207 3284499

**WEBSITE**  
eclipse-td.net

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 390

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**LIKE:** Incredibly involving performance; excellent build

**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**DISLIKE:** Limited bass and outright volume; no Bluetooth; it's not cheap

**BUILD QUALITY**



**FEATURES**



**WE SAY:** A supremely talented system that might be the ultimate computer speaker

**OVERALL**





# Elac

## Air-X 403

**S**tarting at £2,499 for these entry-level 403s plus £349 for the base station, these speakers are aimed at serious audiophiles. The cabinets contain the Air-X Amp, which the Air-X Base station sends the music to. The latter is the central control unit to which a wide variety of sources and output signals can be connected. Music is losslessly transmitted at 24-bit/48kHz. The amplifiers used inside are Class AB. The combined output is claimed to be 150W (into 4ohms), and an internal 56-bit DSP chip allows tweaking of the sound to suit the listener's environment.

### Sound quality

The problem with some wireless loudspeakers can be that they're often wireless first, and speakers second – or indeed last. This is something that most certainly does not afflict the Air-X 403. As soon as you start listening it's clear that this is a fine hi-fi design – which also happens to have the option of active, wireless operation. You can hear the essence of Elac's BS 403 very easily; because this is what the Air-X version is, but with added functionality. All of which means that you get a very smooth, delicate, detailed sound that you would never call boring. In short, the

Air-X version comes very close to offering the best of both worlds.

The 403 is a smallish standmounter, but doesn't sound anywhere near as compact as it looks. It is able to fill a largish listening room with big, confident sound with an ease that we wouldn't expect. Furthermore – and this is possibly at least in part due to its active operation – there is no sense of the music being squeezed through a toothpaste tube, as is sometimes the case with small speakers. The stock BS 403 is rather inefficient, and needs a powerful transistor amplifier to give of its best, but here in active mode it is relaxed, expansive and surprisingly easy.

James Taylor Quartet's *Stepping Into My Life* is a lovely late nineties slice of gentle soulful funk and the Air-X 403 shows the recording in all its finery; it's laid back and warm, and so the Elac system is too. There's very little sense of the cabinets inducing boom or of the speaker having a sweet spot in the bass; the downward firing port seems to work well.

Next we feed it something a little more intense, Supertramp's *Child Cf Vision*. This is a slightly forward sounding album, even the LP version is a little bright, but the Air-X 403 keeps a good balance. Yes, there is definitely a more brilliant light cast

on the upper midband than with the James Taylor Quartet track, and the greater dynamics really make themselves apparent, but the Elac speaker system keeps everything well controlled. Bass is punchy – if not terribly extended, the midband clean and spacious and the treble smooth and wonderfully sophisticated. Indeed, the excellent recording quality of this Supertramp song illustrates just how sweet sounding the tweeter is. We've heard several evolutions of this high-frequency unit and this seems the best yet; it sparkles with detail and has a wonderful sense of space, but still never sounds bland or over smooth.

Running from a MacBook Pro into the USB input is no less impressive, with Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony* sounding expansive with excellently resolved low-level detail and fine imaging. It places instruments accurately and boldly, giving a commanding feel and even makes a good stab at recreating the concert hall's sense of perspective.

The active speakers are better still when fed direct, bypassing wireless. There isn't a massive jump forward in sound, suggesting that the wireless has been done very well. There is a subtle improvement in grip and low-level detail, with a slight deepening of the soundstage. Going back to wireless, this time feeding the base station with an analogue input from an Audiolab 8200CD player, again gives very good results – it remains smooth and surprisingly detailed, showing that it doesn't treat analogue signals as a poor relation. The Texas Instruments PCM1803 A/D converter is obviously a quality item.

### Conclusion

The new Air-X is one of the best sounding wireless solutions on sale right now and is well worth auditioning if you're looking to live in a world without wires ●

#### DETAILS

- PRICE**  
£2,848
- ORIGIN**  
Germany/China
- WEIGHT**  
7.8kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
166 x 308 x 280mm
- FEATURES**
  - Jet 5 tweeter
  - 150mm AS-XR mid/bass driver
  - Quoted power: 2x 150W into 4ohms
  - 24/48 wireless
  - 2x optical, 1x USB, 1x RCA phono, 1x 3.5mm analogue inputs
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Hi-Fi Network
- TELEPHONE**  
01285 643088
- WEBSITE**  
hifi-network.com
- REVIEWED**  
HFC 391

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Crisp, clean, smooth sound; robust wireless
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No coaxial digital in or aptX Bluetooth as standard
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Serious sounding active standmount loudspeakers with 24-bit/48kHz wireless
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

#### OVERALL





# Xpression Carbon

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February 2014



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# REL Acoustics

## Serie S2

**T**his newly designed sub is part of a new range of models that REL calls Sub-Bass Systems, and has been three years in the making. Looking over the neat styling and flexible design it is easy to appreciate where your money is being spent. The cabinet is constructed from marine ply for better rigidity and superior bracing, and the solid billeted piece of aluminium on the top face is said to aid the dispersion of unwanted energy from the cabinet.

Available in gloss piano black and white lacquer finishes, removing the front panel grilles reveals the front-firing 250mm long-throw paper maché driver that is reinforced with a super alloy plate for greater rigidity. It's driven by a claimed 250W amplifier built by REL, which it says is designed to perfectly match and give the correct power for the relative size of the S2's cabinet and drivers. Underneath is a 250mm carbon fibre passive driver, and even the shape and height of the feet are designed to optimise performance.

The controls and connections on the rear panel have been simplified for ease of set up, and if you're not keen on trailing a cable from your amplifier to the sub there's a wireless receiver already built in. It uses the company's

own Longbow uncompressed audio system to receive signals up to 15m away from the sending unit – available separately for £200. The sender utilises both high-level and LFE (where applicable), and is a simple pairing device with no need for the use of your home network hub, so though we don't use the S2 in this way, it should be straightforward to connect to an amplifier and set up.

### Sound quality

Positioning the S2 correctly in the room is without doubt the most important thing to get right. For optimum performance in the listening room we find it works at its best positioned in the corner, placed in fairly close proximity to a pair of Dynaudio X38 floorstanding loudspeakers, and angled so that it fires diagonally down the length of the room. After some fine tuning using the controls on the back with a broad range of different musical styles containing natural low bass, we're ready to rumble.

REL explains that because of the nature of the driver material it uses, it is necessary to spend some time running the unit in before it reaches optimum performance levels. Each model has already spent several hours being run in before it is sent out, but

REL recommends a few additional hours in situ and some reduction of the gain setting once it has had time to fully warm up.

The addition of the S2 into our system is a revelation, and instantly results in more drive and energy to the lowest register. It brings a satisfying smile to our faces when listening to Jennifer Warnes' *Ballad Cf The Runaway Horse*, giving the impression of a significantly fuller and larger soundstage, while the double bass that underpins the track sounds even more achingly sad than ever, showing the extent of low bass information we've been missing.

The inclusion of the REL with the Dynaudio floorstanders doesn't impact on their performance in any negative way whatsoever – it only appears to enhance their capabilities further and draw attention to the perception of the amount of midband detail. Lorde's *Rcyals* is very well extended and will show off the bass capabilities of any loudspeakers, but by adding in the S2 it's easy to appreciate just how extended the bass line is, showing off the track's impressive range and highlighting the quality of the recording.

Nowhere is the inclusion of the REL more effective than with hi-res material. A 24-bit/48kHz version of Jean Michel Jarre's *Oxygene* demonstrates just how rich and three-dimensional this track can sound, as the REL opens up its impressive scale and soundstage, breathing new life into the recording.

### Conclusion

The REL S2 merges beautifully into our system, adding a greater sense of scale and depth to tracks. With some fine tuning, it is unobtrusive and impresses anyone that listens with its pace and insightfulness on recordings old and new. It shows off hi-res audio to tremendous effect and will compliment any hi-fi system ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,000

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
18.1kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
349 x 368 x 426mm

**FEATURES**

- 250mm long-throw active drive
- 250mm passive radiator
- Class D amplifier
- Quoted power: 250W

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
REL Acoustics Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01656 768777

**WEBSITE**  
rel.net

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 387

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Impressive musicality; smooth integration; flexibility

**DISLIKE:** Slightly high price; the wireless transmitter is a £200 add on

**WE SAY:** Adds speed and dynamic energy to any system, and is musically engaging

#### OVERALL





# Devialet Ensemble

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

**C**hallenging 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 use 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 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 amplifier'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

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

fingerprints at bay). The amp shares the same dark chrome chassis as its 200 stablemate, that's milled from a 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 control that hosts just four

## DETAILS

### PRICE

£6,290

### ORIGIN

France

### 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

### DISTRIBUTOR

Absolute Sounds

### TELEPHONE

0208 9713909

### WEBSITE

absolutesounds.com

en.devialet.com

### REVIEWED

HFC 386



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 amplifier'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.

## Sound quality

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 our 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.

Across the board, this package is one of the most musically cohesive

combinations we've heard. From the opening drums of Tori Amos' *A Sorta Fairytale* via a 16-bit/44.1kHz rip streamed over Ethernet, the sheer uncoloured clarity and holographic window that this package opens into the music is utterly captivating.

Devialet's SAM technology 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, we 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

## Lower frequencies remain controlled, detailed and very natural sounding

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 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 our preconceptions of just how much air a pair of 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, we are 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 that 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 certainly isn'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-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Superb sound; setup options aplenty; top-notch build quality
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Only one analogue input
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WESAY:</b> Cutting-edge tech partnered with great-sounding speakers in a stunning user-friendly package
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

**OVERALL**  
★★★★★



**Amps don't come much prettier than this**



# Cambridge Audio Azur 651A

**T**his fine-looking integrated amplifier presses all the right audiophile buttons. 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 considering what it costs – although it does have 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).

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, meaning that it won't be able to play out hi-res music from a computer.

## Sound quality

Off to a good start, fundamentally, this amplifier just 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 for the money, 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. This then pushes up to a decently airy and smooth treble, the result being a budget amplifier that sounds anything but.

For example, Kraftwerk's *Computer World* from the album with the same name has an impressive rhythmic sound, with wonderful insight into

what the band's two drummers (or 'electronic percussionists' as they prefer to call themselves) were doing together. Compared with similarly priced pretenders, there is a whole extra layer of detail to the song's rhythms revealed.

At the same time, texturally the Cambridge Audio is excellent. Again, it sounds far more tonally natural than its price would suggest. It makes rivals sound rather misty, foggy, opaque or processed. This is obvious whatever music is used via the analogue inputs – the Fun Lovin' Criminals' *Up On The Hill* and Squeeze's *Pulling Mussels From A Shell* are radically different recordings and it tells you so. 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.

## Conclusion

The USB input is surprisingly decent, but is still aimed at upgrading the terrible DACs found inside computers rather than standing in for serious dedicated hi-fi designs. Overall then, the Azur 651A can count itself as something of a star ●

## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£350  
**ORIGIN**  
UK/China  
**WEIGHT**  
8.4kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 120 x 350mm  
**FEATURES**  
● Quoted power: 2x 75W RMS (8ohms)  
● 5x line 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  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 386



## 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





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# Icon Audio Stereo 845 PP

**T**o maximise its power potential, the Stereo 845 runs in push-pull mode, telling us that it is not one of the more specialist, far-out valve amplifiers. The Stereo 845, however, is a valve amplifier designed to fight it out in a modern solid-state world; you won't need to change your speakers or suddenly start listening to simple acoustic music with no bass to keep it happy.

The Stereo 845 follows Icon Audio's general best practice – which means a rigid steel chassis into which good quality low distortion, tertiary wound output transformers are bolted, and these are potted to reduce noise. High quality passive components are used throughout, including Solen/SCR capacitors, with the option of Jensen copper foils. Silver-plated copper internal wiring (all hand wired, point to point) is used, along with a Japanese-sourced ALPS volume control. As well as the four Psvane 845 valves, two 6SL7 first stage valves and two 6SN7 output driver valves are used, along with a GZ34 driver stage rectifier.

## Sound quality

It might not come as a total surprise to learn that the Stereo 845 is warm sounding, although in fairness it's never gloopy and syrupy, with a bass like it is walking through treacle. Instead it is fast and lithe, but still has

a vast thump down south, seeming like the audio equivalent of a JCB. It's pleasingly sumptuous but never sounds overblown in a well balanced system. For example, the walking bassline on Black Uhuru's *Party Next Door* is a delight with our reference Sonus faber loudspeakers doing a passable impersonation of a FA stack at Glastonbury.

Moving up to the midband, and the Stereo 845 doesn't lose much warmth, although it does dry up slightly. Everything gets a nice, rosy glow, meaning that recordings that were previously viewed as a little acerbic suddenly seem to calm down and chill out. There's never any sense of the sound being laser etched out right in front of you; instead you're drawn into this wide and deep soundstage, with a lot of the action going on behind the plane of the speakers. Things hang back a little, yet it is so expansive that you still feel quite immersed in the proceedings.

It's a lovely sound, no matter what sort of music you like. It gives a beautiful clarity and ease to even some of the most uneasy human voices – like Bob Dylan's for example. *Highway 61 Revisited* is a lot less strident than normal. There's no doubt that this is a wonderful power valve to have driving your speaker cones; it's so clean yet warm in a way that almost no other valves are. Yes, like lesser tubes it is coloured, but it's

far more resolute and detailed sounding, and doesn't make the music descend into some sort of audio comfort blanket.

The treble is lovely. Suddenly, cymbals played through even a top quality Class A solid-stater like the Musical Fidelity AMS35i seem a bit steely and scratchy. Also, they don't time as well; the filigree hi-hat work on Rush's *Subdivisions* sounds more like it's being played on a drum machine on lesser amps, whereas the Stereo 845 seems to flatter the sound of both Neil Peart's vast drum kit and his playing. The Icon Audio has an easy sound – rather like a large Harley Davidson motorcycle, it just never seems to break into a sweat. No matter how complex the music gets, it just shrugs it off and keeps playing.

## Conclusion

Even at high volumes, the Stereo 845 displays grace under pressure in practically any living room. It sounds powerful and assured – you just can't push it as far as a solid-stater. It oozes character and its own unique charm – making a sound that virtually no other amplifier can ●

### DETAILS

- PRICE**  
£5,995
- ORIGIN**  
UK/China
- WEIGHT**  
35kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
440 x 240 x 400mm
- FEATURES**
  - Quoted power 2x 38W RMS (8ohms)
  - Class A triode front end, push pull output
  - 4x 845, 2x 6SL7, 2x 6SN7, 1x GZ34 valves
  - Power amplifier direct option
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Icon Audio Ltd
- TELEPHONE**  
0116 2440593
- WEBSITE**  
iconaudio.com
- REVIEWED**  
HFC 388

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Fat, sumptuous, silky sound; power
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Nothing, if this is your thing
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WESAY:</b> Magnificent, mellifluous sounding and mad!
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	
<b>OVERALL</b> ★★★★★	



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# Micromega MyAmp

**O**f you were 99 out of 100 small amp manufacturers, you'd probably do things differently to this. Looking inside the MyAmp, the cynic in us had expected to see a few nondescript Class D modules. But, surprisingly, the company has gone the Class AB power amplifier way. This doesn't in itself guarantee superlative sound, but it tells us the designers haven't been content to take the obvious option. Micromega uses a Class AB circuit that claims a solid 30W RMS per channel and twice that into half the load – this suggests its 260W LLC Resonant Mode power supply is up to the job.

It has an ESS Sabre Hyperstream DAC built-in, giving 24/96 via its electrically isolated USB input and 24/192 via optical and coaxial digital inputs. This means you can plug your CD player, DAB radio, Blu-ray player or PlayStation in, as well as your computer to play your hi-res files. Another inclusion that's really rather useful is aptX Bluetooth.

## Sound quality

With a detailed midrange and unexpectedly powerful bass for its size and price, the MyAmp doesn't sound like most small amplifiers. Even driving our reference £7,000 Sonus faber Olympica II loudspeakers and fed from a £9,000 dCS Debussy DAC, it isn't exactly overwhelmed.

Via any of its three analogue inputs, it remains enjoyably smooth and even, never descending into coarseness, even with thin sounding and forward source material such as *Gangsters* by The Specials. This track proves great fun, with a bouncy and supple bass, a clear and detailed midband and a crisp, lustrous treble. There is certainly no sense of this being a cheap 'lifestyle' audio component; instead it sounds precisely like the fine compact amplifier it is.

Moving to some slicker and more sophisticated soul music, it continues to impress with Isaac Hayes' *Cafe Reggias*, which sounds surprisingly sumptuous and inviting. This track is beautifully recorded and has some delicious silky string sounds running right through, which the MyAmp handles very respectfully. Unlike lesser small budget amplifiers, it remains both smooth and composed, doing just enough to give a realistic timbre to those gorgeous sweeping strings. At the same time, it bounces along in the bass and serves up a satisfyingly spacious recorded acoustic. In absolute terms, you can tell that there is a very slight softness to the cymbals, and lower down it doesn't quite have the transparency of more expensive amps, but it makes a good stab at getting things right.

It's time to try some seriously powerful percussive music and so K-Klass' *Rhythm Is A Mystery* is duly

cued up – a powerful, pounding house track from the early nineties with massive tracts of thumping synth bass. If this doesn't get an amplifier out of its comfort zone then nothing will, but the MyAmp responds rather demurely. It kicks out great big slabs of low frequencies, and even at high volumes remains relatively composed, showing few signs of being perturbed by what it is being asked to do. It gets a bit warmer admittedly, but doesn't seem to be sweating musically, remaining balanced across the frequency range with no obvious signs of discomfort higher up. This track can sound a little bit forward, partly because it was recorded on early nineties DAT machines, but the Micromega doesn't make a fuss and remains eminently listenable. It should be able to drive any average or above average sensitivity pair of speakers; anything above 88dB should really move air in your room.

## Conclusion

If you are looking for a compact amplifier to make music in your study, bedroom or kitchen we can think of few that are much better than this ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£480  
**ORIGIN**  
France  
**WEIGHT**  
1kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
140 x 75 x 140mm  
**FEATURES**  
● Quoted power: 2x30W RMS (8ohms)  
● 1x USB, 1x optical, 1x coaxial digital inputs  
● 3x analogue inputs  
● ESSSabre Hyperstream 24-bit/192kHz DAC  
● Headphone output  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Wireworld UK  
**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9919 00  
**WEBSITE**  
wireworldcable.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 389

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Size; style; packaging; sound; flexibility

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

#### BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Lovely, characterful, compact integrated amplifier; best in class

#### FEATURES



### OVERALL





**These are a few of our favourite things – favourite because they give so much musical enjoyment**

An amazing system upgrade for only £400! PICO GROUNDING BLOCKS from Vertex AQ

**When equipment sounds wonderful, is well-built and gives great musical pleasure – then it becomes a favourite. We reckon we are lucky to have a high number of ‘favourites’ in our stable.**

The **Aurender W20** streamer is a masterpiece of user-friendliness, the streamer for people unsure about streaming! It is easily loaded with most file types from almost any digital source – high resolution downloads (eg 24/96 and 24/192ks/s), CDs, USB stick and external hard drive – controlled from Aurender’s own user interface running on an iPad.



The display shows current track information. Full details of music stored on the hard drives appear on the iPad with album cover art.

Music is stored on two 3TB hard drives but queued and played from a 240GB flash drive to minimise electrical noise. For further mains isolation, free of glare and haze, power for the audio circuits is drawn from re-chargeable batteries.

Operation is smooth and faultless and sound is gloriously natural and full-bodied, floating behind ‘invisible’ speakers, from performers clearly ‘present’ in your room.

**Vertex AQ’s** RFI- and vibration-absorption technology now appears in the new and extraordinary **PICO COMPONENT GROUNDING BLOCKS**. “This is one of the best single upgrades I’ve ever made and certainly the most cost-effective one.” said DC of Bristol, speaking of the £400 device.

Supplied with two 1m cables, the Pico is simply connected to unused RCA or XLR sockets on components.



Vibration on circuit boards and electrical ‘noise’ on grounds, or earths – all intermodulating and damaging the music signal – are drawn into the Block to open the sound stage and reveal new drive, emotion and dynamics.

**Spiral Groove** turntables **SG1.1** and **SG2** and the **Centroid** arm have earned universal praise for their spectacular near-silent operation, retrieving musical information from an inky-black background, thanks to a fundamental re-think of ‘Balanced Force Design’ and fanatical care in controlling energy.



Solid construction ensures that stylus, arm pivot, platter bearing and motor remain in an absolutely fixed relationship, unlike suspended turntables that are perpetually in motion as they attempt to correct for the dynamic forces acting both internally and externally.

Spiral Groove have won several “Product of the Year’ awards and comments such as ‘..this may be the best tonearm I’ve heard’ and of the SG2 ‘..it transcends expectations – it’s something special’ both from the US magazine Stereophile.

**Kaiser Acoustic’s Chiara** standmount speaker projects music with astonishing clarity, openness, scale and bass power while ‘disappearing’ itself, leaving an involving performance hanging in space.

Three separate labyrinths in the integral stand drain vibration from the cabinet, the crossover and the drive units which can then operate freely from a firm foundation, liberated from vibration’s distorting, intermodulating effects.

Praise has been heaped on the Chiara, in the on-line review site The Audio Beat and in the September 2013 issue of hifi+ where Paul Messenger wrote, ‘The bottom line is that this is one of the finest loudspeakers I’ve ever had the pleasure of reviewing.’

The Chieras are probably the most musical speaker you’ll ever hear. **You can see why they’re one of our favourites.**



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## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



# Monitor Audio A100

**S**upporting AirPlay rather than Bluetooth, the A100 is very much aimed at the Apple crowd with their MacBooks, iPhones and iPads crammed with AAC, AIFF and ALAC files in iTunes. That's not to say non-Apple devices are excluded from the party, PCs and DLNA sources connected to wireless routers can join in the fun if they can run iTunes (version 10 or later) and/or can be controlled by Monitor Audio's remote control app (iOS and Android).

When using AirPlay to stream from a desktop or laptop running OSX you can indulge in full-fat 24/192 ALAC lossless files. DLNA also provides a means of enjoying lossless hi-res files including 24/192 FLACs. Airstream Direct additionally allows you to stream audio from an iOS device in the absence of a wi-fi router.

Old-school tethering is possible thanks to a front-mounted USB jack that offers music playback of iOS devices, but not Android ones. You can, however, hook up the A100 to a TV or CD deck using its digital optical input or stereo phono analogue input and can output to a powered sub.

Operation comes via an app, which is rather uninspiring to look at. It takes an age to re-connect with the unit every time you access it, doesn't always show all of the networked sources and crashes occasionally. Perhaps it's no surprise that Monitor

Audio doesn't actually mention the existence of the app in its own instruction manual.

### Sound quality

With 2x 50W output, there's enough clout on offer to drive any small-to-medium sized monitors rated between 4ohms and 8ohms impedance. With the analogue input connected to a CD drive we're instantly enamoured by the smoothness, detail and staging. The finger clicking and bass plucking at the start of Diana Krall's *My Love Is* is quite sumptuous and the vocals have a mesmerising quality that fills the listening room with ease.

It's not just the amazing clarity that a class A/B amp offers, but the sense of airiness and balance throughout the dynamic range that impress. The amp does need at least 20 minutes to get the sonic juices flowing properly, but once fully warmed up it purrs like a Range Rover, effortlessly bounding along and taking the roughest of tracks comfortably in its stride.

The King's Singers' version of Paul Simon's *The Boxer* is equally engaging with spine-tingling harmonies that really have to be heard to be believed.

Nor is it a case of clarity over warmth and energy. The vocals at the start of Chris Jones' *Darlin' Cory* are hauntingly engaging, while the guitar strums with refinement and gusto.

Results with AirPlay are no less impressive, *Silent Shout* by The Knife

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£399  
**ORIGIN**  
China  
**WEIGHT**  
1.9kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
359 x 55 x 204mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power: 2x 50W RMS (8ohms)  
• 1x optical digital, 1x RCA inputs  
• Network music playback: Airplay and wi-fi  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Monitor Audio  
**TELEPHONE**  
01268 740580  
**WEBSITE**  
monitoraudio.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC388

proves that bass extension is particularly impressive, underpinning the mid-range and high notes of the synth to perfection. For sheer definition you can't beat a bit of *Animals* by Martin Garrix, and the A100 is bang on the money, especially with the crescendo and popping sounds that really ping out with awesome precision.

DLNA streaming of hi-res files is the cream on the cake, offering incredible scale and depth to recordings such as a 24/192 download of Mozart's *Violin Concerto No.4 in D Major*.

### Conclusion

All in all, the A100 is a fairly simple proposition – wireless streaming, a couple of wired inputs and a high-quality DAC and amplifier. There are no built-in third-party services such as Spotify, Deezer or internet radio, and USB playback is severely limited. But streaming from other devices is a cinch when using AirPlay. While not quite as slick or reliable, DLNA compatibility at least provides access to hi-res audio downloads and rips. The sonic rewards are so stupendous that it is no great difficulty to forgive the minor foibles ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Superb performance; cool design; AirPlay integration

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** No display; poor app; slow to start up; hi-res is a faff

#### BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Operation isn't perfect, but it delivers the sonic goods beautifully

#### FEATURES



#### OVERALL







# Quad Vena

**I**n its new Lancaster Grey finish, the Quad Vena looks different to the norm – but not in a bad way. The styling of the whole range is tastefully retro, but the grey paint job gives it a harder, more purposeful edge. Indeed, there's a touch of the Quad 33/303, which is a great thing, although it's possibly not the most universally appealing hue to your average buyer of this sort of product. Still, if this colour scheme isn't to your liking you can specify your Vena in more exotic gloss finishes for a £100 price premium.

It feels a real quality item; the slightly vague and cheap feeling volume knob lets it down a bit, but this aside it comes across as quite solid with some nice, crisp-acting switchgear. There are few features to speak off – certainly not fripperies, anyway – aside from the built-in DAC (the same Cirrus Logic CS4398 used in the Quad Platinum CD players) and, of course, aptX Bluetooth. Otherwise, you're looking at a choice of two RCA line inputs. The Class AB

power amp section is claimed to put out 45W RMS per channel, and there is no reason for us to doubt it.

### Sound quality

Via its analogue line inputs the Quad sounds clean, crisp and musical. Despite not using the same circuitry as more traditional, larger and more expensive Quad amplifiers there is still a lot of the house sound to be

### A civilised but animated performer that really gets the speakers bouncing

heard. It's musically informative and engaging, with a pleasingly detailed presentation. You would certainly never call it boring, but then again it is never harsh or searing; Quad has struck exactly the right balance meaning it's a civilised performer that you can listen to for long periods.

Switch to the built-in DAC section, and the same high standards

continue; once again you hear a civilised but animated performance that really gets the speakers bouncing with Malcolm McLaren's *Waltz Darling*. Tonally the Quad is pretty even and neutral; never warm yet not hard, it sits in a well-judged position in the middle. There's a touch of dryness and a slightly well lit feel to the upper midband, but this never descends into something that has you wanting to switch off. Indeed the Vena proves to be a very capable performer across all inputs, because it doesn't obviously sound like a compact audio product.

Bass isn't particularly grippy, but is still lithe enough to make Caravan's *In The Land Cf Grey And Pink* relaxed in a hi-fi environment and doesn't require any concessions for its price or wireless functionality ●

### Conclusion

The two-dimensional feel it gives to the stereo mix is perhaps its biggest weakness, but few amplifiers at this price point do better. The Vena is relaxed in a hi-fi environment and doesn't require any concessions for its price or wireless functionality ●

### DETAILS

- PRICE**  
£600
- ORIGIN**  
UK/China
- WEIGHT**  
6.1kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
313x 94 x 302mm
- FEATURES**
  - Quoted power: 2x 45W RMS (8ohms)
  - 2x RCA lineinputs, asynchronous USB, USB for docking, 2x optical, 1x coaxial digital inputs
  - AptX Bluetooth
  - 6.3mm headphone input
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
IAG Group Ltd
- TELEPHONE**  
01480 452561
- WEBSITE**  
quad-hifi.co.uk
- REVIEWED**  
HFC390



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Styling and packaging; powerful, detailed, animated sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Plastic volume knob
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Excellent, versatile, modern integrated amplifier
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

#### OVERALL





# Roksan

## K2 BT

Roksan's new amp sports aptX Bluetooth for those wanting to ditch the wires and stream music from their portable device

**S**ome 30 years ago, the genesis of a turntable started, one that was to put Roksan's name on the map. The product was superb, the company new and the future full of promise. What followed was a range of loudspeakers and then electronics. Some manufacturers suffer from vanity and over reach themselves producing a wide product range when they had previously specialised in one particular area – but Roksan did not make that mistake. Unusually, all its designs were done to a very high standard.

In the intervening years, we've seen Roksan building on its products, with the current entry-level one being the Kandy K2 series, launched some five

years ago at the Bristol Show. The amplifier, originally selling for the princely sum of £750, wasn't the world's best looking, but anyone who heard it in a well set-up system would be sold on it. Since then, in the space of just a few years, seismic changes have transformed the hi-fi world. The rise of computer audio was being talked about in 2009, but in 2014 it's actually here. We all now have at least one device that has music on it and the ability to beam it to the outside world in at least one way. Cables were enjoying their harvest years five years ago, but now the world is going wireless, with wi-fi and Bluetooth leading the charge.

While the former is ideal for computing and home networking, the

latter is particularly well suited to portable devices, because it's cheap to implement and doesn't require lots of juice from a battery. Also, syncing it up is a doddle, with no annoying WEP passwords to play with. What stopped it being used for music until recently was its low data transmission rates, which permitted only seriously compressed digital audio. Now though we have aptX. Whereas Bluetooth's early forays into music sounded pretty dire, aptX gives up to 24-bit/96kHz resolution digital audio, and is scalable, adaptive and lossless.

Roksan has integrated this into its latest K2 amplifier. Confusingly it is still called the K2, but now it gets the BT suffix to recognise its Bluetooth functionality, but that's not all. This is more than just chucking in a Bluetooth chip, as the amplifier has had some more work done inside. The power supply section has been stiffened up, with a new and very large 500VA toroidal transformer with five regulated supply rails coming off it. This is said to increase the damping factor, which will result in tighter bass, and Roksan adds that it has also removed some unwanted noise from the mains. Some other small detail changes have been made to the circuit boards and relays. The chassis and case have been redesigned for better ventilation – the result is 150W

### DETAILS

- PRICE**  
£895
- ORIGIN**  
UK
- WEIGHT**  
14kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
432 x 102 x 380mm
- FEATURES**
  - Quoted power: 2x 150W RMS (8ohms)
  - 5x line inputs
  - 1x MM phono input
  - aptX Bluetooth compatible
  - 2x preamplifier output
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Designs
- TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166
- WEBSITE**  
henleydesigns.co.uk
- REVIEWED**  
HFC381



per channel into 8ohms claimed, and nearly twice that for 4ohms.

The K2 BT is slightly odd looking, but in a nice way. Its fascia has a certain visual charm – there’s a touch of retro sixties modernism in the radiused end to the inset mirror trim section, indeed you might even call it slightly art deco. It has LEDs to indicate which of the five line (plus Bluetooth) inputs are in use, and there’s also a moving magnet phono stage. Round the back, in addition to the socketry for the aforementioned, there are two sets of preamp outputs, the usual loudspeaker binding posts and a socket for the small supplied Bluetooth antenna. The amp comes with Roksan’s RMX111 learning remote control, a decent and functional device. Bluetooth syncs up easily, proving to have a range of around 15m in our tests, which is half that of the claimed maximum.

**Sound quality**

The last version of the K2 sounded great – it might not be the world’s most detailed amplifier, but it has a wonderfully big-hearted nature that is bristling with enthusiasm, making any sort of music it plays a pleasure. This new BT version is even better, having all the musicality of its predecessor, but just a fraction more power, grip and overall refinement.

First and foremost, how does it sound via its new Bluetooth input? Well, the answer is not bad at all. In truth, you’d never choose this input over a high-quality CD player or DAC, but then again that’s not quite the point of its inclusion on the new amp. With this feature, you get the ability to sync up your phone or tablet to your hi-fi in a very easy, fuss-free way – one that’s a good deal easier than plugging in a cable to a fascia-mounted minijack socket. You can then use your iPad, or whatever, to mete out the tunes as you do whatever you’ve got to do – from playing computer games to browsing the internet.

Rather than a high-end hi-fi sound, the K2 BT’s Bluetooth connection gives an enjoyable and bouncy rendition of your music, devoid of any particular hardness or glare. In absolute terms it seems a little bass-light and the stereo imaging is pushed a little more between the two loudspeakers and out towards the listener. Flick to the same music file coming from the original disc source via a CD player, and you’re soon aware of there being more air and space and bass. Still, a wirelessly sent file is perfectly listenable, and

outperforms many budget CD players we’ve heard. It’s a great feature to have, and one that we suspect even many hardened audiophiles will find themselves using when they’re sure no one’s looking!

What of the other inputs? Through the line-level ins, the K2 BT is at its absolute best, and it is superb. We’ve heard practically every mid-price integrated around, and the Roksan gives absolutely nothing away to any of them. It has a wonderfully even tonality; it’s not bright, screechy, (what some would call) transitory, or any other unpleasant ‘y’. Rather, it has a very sophisticated tone, bristling with detail, but never forward or intrusive. There are only four British brands doing this specific sort of sound right now, one of which is, of course, Roksan, the others being Creek, Rega and Arcam. Of the four smoothies, Roksan is the most animated sounding – it is this rare

**It’s the seamless way that the bass melds with the midband that really delights**

combination of couthness and uncompromising musicality that makes it so special.

Manix’s *One More Time* is a vast slab of nineties-style drum ‘n’ bass, with ultra-fast looped hi-hats and snare drums set behind sparse keyboards and female vocals, above some massive thumping sub-bass. Many amplifiers would fall apart trying to keep the bright-sounding midband honest while wheezing under the weight of the bassline, but the K2 BT is absolutely unfazed. It serves up vast tracts of very low frequencies as effortlessly as if it is playing whisper-quiet classical guitar music. Better still, it isn’t analytical or matter of fact – the Roksan seems to be having as much fun as the listener, (ie us) whose thoughts begin to move to turning the music up still further.

It’s the essential smoothness and civility of the K2 BT that means that you can do precisely this; our ears are telling us that this amplifier is neither harsh nor fuzzy sounding. Rather, it lets you hear right into the stereo soundstage, where it often hangs elements of the mix back quite a long way; at other times when called upon so to do, it throws them right out at you.

The bass is great then, but it’s the seamless way that it melds with the midband that delights; once again

the Roksan is even and open and confident about the job in hand. Visioneers’ *Shine* showcases this beautifully – its richness of tone allied to its speed, bass grip and midband insight gel beautifully. The shuffling rhythms of this track can throw some amplifiers off their feet, especially at higher volumes, but the K2 BT is solid as a rock and smooth as silk. The amplifier bubbles with energy, showing a lovely rhythmic gait and wonderful dynamic alacrity.

World of Twist’s *The Lights* is a great integrated amplifier torture track. It starts off innocently enough, but builds up layer upon layer to end up as a dense patchwork of acoustic instruments and synthesisers. This amplifier proves totally up for the challenge, tracking the pulsating bass, crashing keyboard pads and guitar noodling with absolutely no complaint. The new K2 BT is really rather impressive at soundstaging too, with a very expansive recreated acoustic, and instruments located within this with rifle-bolt precision. There are very few amplifiers that we can think of at this price that are so musically expressive yet architecturally correct.

**Conclusion**

There are two key points to be made about the new Roksan K2 BT. First, while Bluetooth is a very handy little bit of extra functionality, it is not the standout feature of this amplifier – its superb sound quality is. Second, it’s not the most attractive or ergonomically accomplished amplifier ever made, but as soon as you hear it you’ll excuse it almost anything. With this in mind, we’d suggest anyone with around £1,000 and in the market for a modern music-making machine auditions it. But whatever you do, don’t sit there all day playing tunes from your iPhone – because when you feed it with a decent source it really begins to sing ●

**Ni-FiChoice**

**OUR VERDICT**

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Smooth, powerful, punchy, musical sound; Bluetooth
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Styling is not to all tastes
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Fantastic affordable audiophile integrated, now with added convenience
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

**OVERALL**  
★★★★★

Art deco or retro sixties modernism? You decide...



# Teac AI-301DA

**B**oasting a Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC and an asynchronous USB input, the AI-301DA is a Class D amplifier with a subwoofer pre-out and a slew of inputs that could well see it gainfully employed in a living room alongside a TV, DVD or CD deck. It has a few other tricks up its sleeve, including a built-in headphone amplifier and aptX Bluetooth. Another nice touch is that Teac provides free software, called Teac High Res Audio Player, which extracts those DSD files out of your computer and passes them on to the DAC.

The digital optical and coaxial inputs offer 24/192 and 24/96 compatibility respectively. The Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC eats 5.6MHz DSD and 32-bit/192kHz PCM signals for breakfast, should you choose to cook some up via the USB input. This allows native DSD bit streaming and converts 5.6MHz files directly to analogue signals without the need to first convert them to PCM, although it also supports DoP (DSD over PCM) conversion.

## Sound quality

The AI-301DA can muster two channels at 40W (claimed) and has enough in its tank to comfortably drive a pair of speakers with an impedance between four and eight ohms. We're blown away by the clarity and openness of our DSD

collection. The violins and cellos in Vivaldi's *Concerto in D minor opus 4 no.8 Allegro* have an energy and vitality that almost penetrates our joints. The mid-range shines and the low frequencies are mesmerisingly smooth. Compared with a standard-resolution version, the piece is much more beguiling.

Dropping down to a 24/96 FLAC download of Steely Dan's *Time Out Cf Mind* is still totally engaging with a punchiness that's normally absent when listening through a built-in computer DAC or speakers. Donald Fagen's vocals are airy and resonant and the percussion has an unexpected dimensionality about it that seems to come from above.

*Fantasia* on Greensleeves, another hi-res FLAC download, shows the Teac has a deftness with sumptuous strings that are immaculately timed, grabbing us by the collar and carrying us away to a meadow. We can almost taste the cucumber sandwiches before we're rudely awakened by a bit of head-thumping bass from Lorde and her *Royals*. This time we listen via Bluetooth and as pleasingly coherent as it is, with no loose or woolly bass notes we don't feel the same spine-tingling quality to her vocals as with better-quality formats.

The gap between wireless and hard-wired connections is proven by a comparison of CD and Bluetooth versions of Diana Krall's *My Love Is*.

## DETAILS

- PRICE**  
£400
- ORIGIN**  
Japan
- WEIGHT**  
21kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
215 x 61 x 254mm (WxHxD)
- FEATURES**
  - 2x 40W RMS (8ohms)
  - 2x RCA line inputs, 1x asynchronous USB, 1x optical, 1x coaxial digital input
  - 2.8MHz/5.6MHz DSD native playback, 32bit/192kHz hi-res
  - Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC
  - aptX Bluetooth
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Onkyo Europe
- TELEPHONE**  
+49 8142 4208141
- WEBSITE**  
teac-audio.eu
- REVIEWED**  
HFC 389

The latter is decent and has plenty of verve and gusto, but there's a small but significant increase in detail with the CD version. Krall's seductive vocals are a touch more resonant and the double bass twangs that much more so that the long low notes hang tantalisingly as you sense the air vibrating around the strings.

Teac's choice of a digital amplifier rather than a Class AB one means the AI-301DA has an inherently clinical edge to its sound. This seems to matter less with higher quality sources than it does with more compressed ones, but it can be quite unforgiving with low bit-rate music streamed from Spotify or vTuner internet radio, where holes in the dynamic range are dissatisfying.

## Conclusion

There's an awful lot to like about the AI-301DA, especially the way it handles DSD files over USB by combining flawlessly with the Teac HR Audio Player software. It's highly versatile in terms of its file handling and makes a more than compelling case for itself as a desktop amp for the computer-using audiophile ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Good design; DSD handling; inputs
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** iTunes incompatibility; clinical digital sound; no AirPlay/wi-fi
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Superb with hi-res; versatile enough to use in the living room and compact enough for the study
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





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 Audiologic phono stage and line preamp dem 2499  
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 Benz Micro Ruby Wood H, boxed plenty of life left used 599  
 Benz Micro L04, boxed plenty of life left used 499  
 Benz Micro Gullwing, superb boxed used 899  
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 Cartridge Man Music Maker dem 499  
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 Clearaudio Innovation Compact, good condition dem 1999  
 Clearaudio Urvy Tonearm excellent boxed dem 699  
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 Conrad Johnson Premier Six phono preamplifier dem 599  
 Consonance Cyber 40 phono stage dem 599  
 Garrard 401, Slate Audio plinth dem 599  
 Graham Phantom Supreme 12", SME cut dem 599  
 Haddock 242 Export, dem 299  
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 Lehmann Black Cube phono stage dem 299  
 Lehmann Black Cube SE phono stage dem 299  
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 Linn Sondek, Iltok, Valhalla, vgc+ used 849  
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 Linn Sondek, Lingo, Naim Ato, superb used 2499  
 Linn Sondek, Basik plus, Valhalla, VGC+ used 699  
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 Luxman PD300, fantastic condition used 799  
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 Mana Reference table used 299  
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 Michell Focus One, Focus arm, excellent & boxed used 499  
 Moth phono stage dem 249  
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 Rega RP6, excellent boxed used 599  
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 Roksan Xerxes RB300, PSU, boxed used 549  
 Roksan Xerxes, XPS2, Linn Fit used 349  
 Roksan Xerxes, XPS, SME Fit used 349  
 Graham Slee Fanfare Amp3 dem 179  
 Graham Slee GramAmp2 dem 119  
 Graham Slee Elevator EXP Step up used 299  
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 SME V12, nr mint boxed dem 349  
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 Thorens TD209 turntable package dem 699  
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 NAIM NAT101 & SNAPs, excellent £500 NAIM service used 899  
 NAIM NAT101 & NAPST, excellent boxed used 899  
 Nakamichi BX300e used 149  
 Nakamichi BX2, excellent used 149  
 Nakamichi CR1, excellent used 99  
 Pure 701ES DAB Tuner used 89  
 Quad FM3, vgc used 99  
 Quad FM4, late grey version, excellent used 179  
 Revox B250 Tuner in black/gold finish used 349  
 Rotel RT1080, excellent used 149  
 Rotel RT650 Tuner used 299  
 Sony Minidisc MDS JB920 used 79

## Amplifiers

AAesthetix Calypso, excellent boxed used 1999  
 AMR 777 Integrated dem 999  
 Analek MB50 Class A Monos dem 2499  
 Anthem Integrated 2 Valve Integrated dem 2749  
 Arcam A70 Integrated, vgc+ used 1999  
 Art Audio Jola 520b, excellent used 1199  
 Audia Flight Pre and Flight 50 Class A power dem 599  
 Audio Analogue Maestro Ref Pre/Monos £15k new dem 499  
 Audio Analogue Maestro Ref SE integrated dem 499  
 Audio Analogue Puccini SE amp, Black dem 379  
 Audio Analogue Maestro Integrated dem 499  
 Audio Project ap60 integrated dem 499  
 Audio Research Ref 610 Monoblocks, vgc boxed used 14299  
 Audiolab 8000QMs, silver, excellent boxed used 899  
 Audiolab 8000C excellent boxed used 199  
 Audiolab 8200A vgc boxed dem 499  
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 AVI Lab Series, excellent boxed with remote used 849  
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 Chameleon Ruby Power Amplifier used 199  
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 Chord Electronics SPM1200b, excellent used 1299  
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 Consonance Cyber 10 Integrated dem 799  
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 Consonance A120, ex demo mint dem 399  
 Creek Destiny Integrated dem 699  
 EAR B90 Power, excellent boxed used 2199  
 EAR B34T Integrated amplifier used 1499  
 ES Labs DS X4 digital, excellent boxed dem 299  
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 GraafGM50B Mk11 Integrated dem 2999  
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 Micromega IA100, great integrated, boxed used 599  
 Musical Fidelity A1 FB1 Preamp & PSU new 499  
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 Musical Fidelity M3, excellent boxed, REDUCED used 649  
 Musical Fidelity M1PWR, excellent boxed used 349  
 Musical Fidelity X-T100 Integrated dem 249  
 NAIM NAC82, excellent boxed used 899  
 NAIM NAP250, olive excellent boxed used 899  
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 NAIM NAC72, excellent boxed used 349  
 NAIM NAC42/NAP110, excellent boxed used 499  
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 Rega Luna, rare item used 199  
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 Resolution Audio Opus 21 S80 Integrated dem 499  
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 Suggden A21SE in Titanium, boxed, excellent used 1399  
 Talk Electronics Humcane 3/Tomodato .1 monos dem 1999  
 TEAC Distinction A1000 Integrated, ex demo used 599  
 Union Research Simply Italy Integrated dem 999

## Digital

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 Arcam Alpha 8, excellent dem 1999  
 ArcamAlpha 7, remote, excellent dem 899  
 Arcam Alpha 8se, excellent boxed used 499  
 Arcam CD23, excellent used 129  
 Arcam CD73, excellent boxed used 3999  
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 Arcam Alpha 9 DCS ring dac chipset, lovely! dem 5999  
 Arcam CD72, excellent remote boxed dem 499  
 AstinTrew AT3000 CD dem 379  
 Atoll ST200 streamer dem 499  
 Atoll 100SE DAC dem 499  
 Audio Alchemy digital transmission interface/psu used 14299  
 Audio Analogue Maestro SE CD dem 899  
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 Ayre Evolution DVD dem 1999  
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 Musical Fidelity M1 CDTB dem 749  
 Musical Fidelity M3 in black used 649  
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 Musical Fidelity CD1008 Pro, near mint boxed dem 249  
 NAIM CDX, excellent, boxed remote used 899  
 NAIM CD5, remote, SNAIC, new laser used 899  
 NAIM CDS3, excellent boxed, remote used 1099  
 NAIM CDS3, excellent boxed, remote used 349  
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 NAIM DVD5, excellent boxed used 1199  
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 Suggden Masterclass CD original version dem 1999  
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 Tube Technology Fulcrum DAC (inc DAC64 chip) dem 749  
 Tube Technology Fusion 64 cd player dem 1199  
 Union Research CDE dem 3999  
 Union Research CD dem 1399  
 YBACG-10, ex boxed, £1600 new, BARGAIN dem 749

## Loudspeakers

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 Acoustic Energy AE1 Mk11 in Gloss black dem 799  
 Alacritly Audio Caterhun Classic, flightcased, £2k newused 499  
 Arcadyis LS3/5A look & soundalikes, £800 new dem 499  
 Art Audio Stiletto in Maple dem 599  
 Aspara Acoustics HL6 in Oak new 1999  
 Audio Physic Tempo in Cherry, fair dem 699  
 Aurum Cantus Music Goddess in Gloss black dem 699  
 B&W CDM1, vgc+ used 249  
 B&W DM601s3, vgc+ used 249  
 B&W DM602s3, vgc+ used 349  
 B&W DM603s3, vgc+ used 1999  
 B&W 804s, excellent boxed in cherry used 8999  
 B&W 800D, near mint, boxed used 1299  
 B&W N805with matching stands, excellent! used 349  
 B&W DM602s3, vgc+ used 549  
 B&W DM683, excellent boxed dem 349  
 DiapasonAres used 199  
 EB Acoustics ER1 new 999  
 Eminent Technology LFT8, some marks used 499  
 Epos M22 in Cherry dem 599  
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 Hecc Statement in gloss black, £3k new dem 1499  
 Innersound Eros 111 hybrid e/static & amp, BARGAIN dem 799  
 Kef Reference 102 with Kube, excellent used 149  
 Kef IQ5, excellent boxed used 249  
 Kef Q100, brand new, sealed box new 249  
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 Kudos X2, vgc boxed dem 799  
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 Leema Acoustics Xero, vgc+ boxed, REDUCED used 299  
 Leema Xero in Mahogany dem 349  
 Linn Kan, boxed used 249  
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 Linn Keosa, fair in black, REDUCED used 199  
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 Meridian M1 Active speakers, boxed used 3999  
 Monitor Audio PL300, mint crated dem 699  
 Monitor Audio GX50, near mint boxed used 599  
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 Monopulse Model C used 399  
 NAIM SBL, vgc+ used 699  
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 Nola Boxer speakers in black new 749  
 Nola Contender in Cherry dem 1499  
 Nola Micro Grand Reference inc stands, £15k new dem 5995  
 Opera Callias SP dem 999  
 Opera Mini dem 199  
 PMC Twenty Three, mint boxed in oak used 1799  
 PMC Twenty Three, mint boxed in oak used 1799  
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 Quad 21L Floorstander used 199  
 Quad Electrostatics ESL2905 Classic Vintage new 4499  
 Red Rose Rosebud £2.5k new with (used) stands dem 799  
 Reference 3A DaCapo in gloss black dem 699  
 Revel M22, excellent boxed new 599  
 Revolver RW45 floorstander in Cherry dem 699  
 Revolver Rynas Gold in Black, £14k new dem 4995  
 Revolver Cygnis in Maple/Black, £5k new dem 2495  
 Revolver Music 1 dem 350  
 Rogers LS7, excellent boxed with free stands used 299  
 Sonus Faber Ellipsa, superb boxed used 599  
 Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor, boxed with stands used 1399  
 Sunfire True Sub Subwoofer dem 399  
 Tannoy Super tweeters, fair condition used 449  
 Thel CST.2, vgc+, just refurbished... used 2499  
 Tolern Many Signature, boxed near mint used 2999  
 Tolern Mile in black dem 449  
 Tolern Aro Designer series in gloss black dem 249  
 Tolern Rokk in mahogany, excellent used 499  
 Tolern Staf new 999  
 Usher BE718 dem 799  
 Velodyne MicroVee in black dem 499  
 Velodyne DD18 sub in black dem 1999  
 Velodyne DD15 sub in black dem 1499  
 Velodyne SPL 800 Ultra sub in black dem 499  
 Ventas H3 (Lowther drivers) in gloss black, 100db dem 2999

## Special system deals

Audio Analogue Primo CD/Amp combo dem 499  
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 Oreile EVO Cd and amp was £2700 used 799  
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 QUAD 77 CD and Integrated Amp used 399

## Accessories/Cables

Audeze LCDX excellent dem 849  
 Audeze LCDXC excellent dem 899  
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 Elemental Audio Equipment Rack dem 499  
 Elemental Audio speaker stands dem 499  
 Ergo AMT phones with Amp 2 (£2.5k new) dem 1499  
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 Call HiFi Racks 3 ber rack in Oak dem 199  
 Isolek Nova power conditioner dem 499  
 Isol-8, various cables etc dem 499  
 Isol-8, Substation Integra used 499  
 Lehmann Rhineland used 199  
 Musical Fidelity M1 HPAB dem 399  
 Musical Fidelity TripleX power supply em 399  
 NAIM XPS DR, ex demo new 199  
 NAIM Flatcap XS, excellent boxed dem 2599  
 NAIM Supercap, various excellent boxed dem 499  
 ProAudio Bono Reference Platform dem 399  
 Quadraspire Q4, 4 shell in Oak dem 499  
 Telerium Q Interconnects, various dem 999

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# Analogue Works Turntable One

**P**ositioned slap bang in the middle of Analogue Work's record player range, the One is sandwiched between the Zero (£650) and Two (£1,600) models. All three have the same bronze/steel bearing and the Zero also packs a Rega RB202 arm and gets a bamboo or MDF plinth and wall-wart PSU in place of the One's birch-ply plinth and standalone PSU. The cheaper Zero also comes equipped with an acetate platter instead of the more substantial damped alloy platter sported by the One and Two decks. The Two builds on the One package by including AW's reference power supply, selection of upgraded isolation feet, a bunch of platter mats and a dust cover.

Thanks to the range's deceptively simple design, all of the Two's extras can be applied to the One model as and when funds permit and they take seconds to fit, so upgrading need not require trading your deck in, or having to return it to the factory for extensive tinkering.

Our model comes sporting a £300 Jelco SA-250ST tonearm, which despite being lesser known on these shores than the usual Rega-derived variants, is a reviewer's delight in terms of build quality and ease of use.

## Sound quality

Using the £85 Ortofon 2M Red that comes pre-installed on our test model reveals the One to be a very capable music maker. In many ways its sonic

signature reflects its physical design, which seems to be somewhere between the high-mass vibration-killing decks usually of Germanic origin and the lower-mass non-resonant designs stemming from the likes of Rega and Pro-Ject.

Bass is well formed, deep and reassuringly controlled, while it projects plenty of life in the midrange without sounding too bright, and there's no sense of ringing from its well-damped platter.

With Bon Ivor's *Lump Sum* turning circles atop the deck's foam Gimp mat, we're presented with a dense soundstage consisting of many layers. The opening vocals resonate with the echo of a cavernous cathedral, as they extend from what sounds like the other side of the wall behind the speakers. This gives the music plenty of depth, and sets the scene for lead singer Justin Vernon's vocals to come to the fore with full-bodied presence, revealing just how expansive the deck's soundstage is front to back.

Despite the motor's low-torque design, the One's timing sounds spot on and treads a fine line between not hurrying the rhythm along, or having to play catch up by chasing the music down the record's grooves. Instead, the turntable's grip on the music's pace allows the Bon Ivor track to progress at its own natural tempo, without any sense of delayed overhang or notes being rushed and curtailed. Guitar strums start and stop with the precision of a Swiss

watch, while the bass line's vibrancy keeps our ears pricked up.

The One's talent for bass reproduction is further highlighted with the deck digging deep into John Martyn's *Solid Air*. It quickly reveals the intricacy of the double bass that underpins the song by gracing its melancholic notes with lots of texture, which can be felt as well as heard. But can it go low while keeping its composure? Massive Attack's *Unfinished Symphony* is the perfect track to help answer this question, and the arm and cartridge pull out all the low-end wallop the grooves have to offer while keeping a cool head.

## Conclusion

You don't need to spend much time with this turntable to realise that Analogue Works has carefully considered every aspect of its design, engineering it for maximum performance while ensuring that it remains eminently user friendly. It's a perfect sonic match for the Jelco arm, which combines for an expansive and full-bodied sound that's begging for the best cartridge you can afford for long-term enjoyment. If you're in the market for a turntable upgrade, put this right near the top of your list ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
From £799

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**WEIGHT**  
12kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
460 x 120 x 360mm

**FEATURES**

- 6.7kg damped alloy platter
- Belt driven by separate AC motor
- Separate PSU box
- Adjustable feet

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Divine Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
01536 762211

**WEBSITE**  
analogueworks.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 388

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Superb build; ease of adjustment; expansive and engaging sound

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Push start platter may take some getting used to

#### BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Lovely looking and well engineered turntable that gets the basics right

#### FEATURES



### OVERALL







Wireworld Platinum Starlight USB



AudioQuest Diamond Ethernet



Atlas EOS 4sq Rhodium Power



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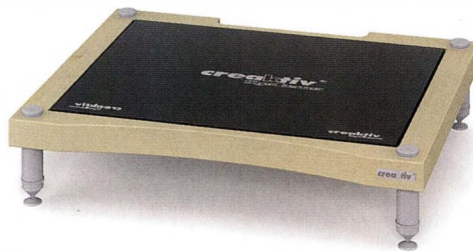
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# Avid Ingenium

**N**othing on the Ingenium is there for decoration, but the layout is different to any other Avid we've seen before. The chassis takes the form of a two-piece cruciform with the longer section housing the bearing and tonearm mount and the shorter crossbeam adding stability. The motor is derived from the Diva and sits behind the main chassis member.

The most visually distinctive aspect is the bearing. This is set forward from the centre of the chassis, which means that you can see the entire assembly rotate if you are seated in front of the turntable when it plays.

There are some other rather neat touches too. The cork-topped platter used on other Avid turntables is retained and the feet add some useful isolation. The excellent Avid clamp is also an option.

The Ingenium differs from other Avid models in that you need to decide what arm mounting you want when you order it – the usual suspects are catered for and the review sample is fitted for and supplied with an SME cutout and arm (£1,015).

## Sound quality

With the Nagaoka MP150 attached and connected to an Avid Ingenium phono stage, the turntable makes a very strong case for itself. In keeping with its bigger brothers, it is not an intrinsically romantic sounding turntable. It is completely free of any softness or bloom and it is sufficiently

revealing that it will show up the limitations on poor pressings. The rather better news is that with discs of any quality at all, it is capable of a truly exceptional performance.

The most immediately arresting aspect of the presentation is the seamless integration from top to bottom that means you tend to sit back and enjoy the performance rather than spend time analysing particular facets of it.

With the sumptuous soundscape of the Hidden Orchestra's *Archipelago*, the Avid produces a wonderfully full and inviting performance that spreads and layers the performers in a tangibly real soundstage.

There is a considerable sense of control to the performance, too. With the faster and more aggressively presented *The Bones Cf What You Believe* by Chvches, the Avid gets on top of the rhythms and simply pounds along. After a considerable period experimenting with some of the more curious ends of our record collection, it proves itself to be pretty much unflappable across the entire spectrum of music. The calm neutrality of the Ingenium is as happy with the pared-back simplicity of Fink as it is hammering through the pounding basslines of *The Prodigy*.

It takes a little while to realise that it does something very unusual at the price. The Ingenium is almost entirely self-effacing. More than anything else, it is a platform for the arm and the cartridge that you choose to partner it

## DETAILS

- PRICE**  
From £825
- ORIGIN**  
UK
- WEIGHT**  
5.8kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
390 x 305 x 130mm
- FEATURES**
  - Choice of arm mounts for 9in and 12in tonearms
  - 33/45 RPM speeds available
  - Supplied clamp
  - Inverted stainless steel bearing
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Avid HiFi
- TELEPHONE**  
01480 869 900
- WEBSITE**  
avidhifi.co.uk
- REVIEWED**  
HFC379

with, rather than a part of the performance in itself. It is, in the best possible way a tool to aid your enjoyment of music rather than something that sets out to be the source of enjoyment itself.

This means its character is subtle to the point of being reclusive. Having listened to a twin arm version with an SME on one side and Audio Note's Arm III on the other, it reveals a detailed and agile bass response with commendable depth to low notes. The same 'take no prisoners' approach to poorer recordings seems to be in part down to the SME, but this is not a deck that will flatter something that is compressed or hissy. That being said, the noise floor is impressively low and the excellent clamp makes short work of warped records.

## Conclusion

The Avid is a subtly different proposition to other turntables at this price point, as the ease with which it accommodates an arm that costs more than the deck demonstrates.

When you consider the Ingenium allows for a wide variety of arms to be attached, you have a turntable that has the potential to make many vinyl lovers very happy indeed ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Assured confident and neutral performance; superb build quality
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Won't flatter poor recordings; no cover; limited facilities
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** A hugely capable turntable that should shine with a variety of equipment
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





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# Inspire Hi-Fi Black Magic Si

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

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

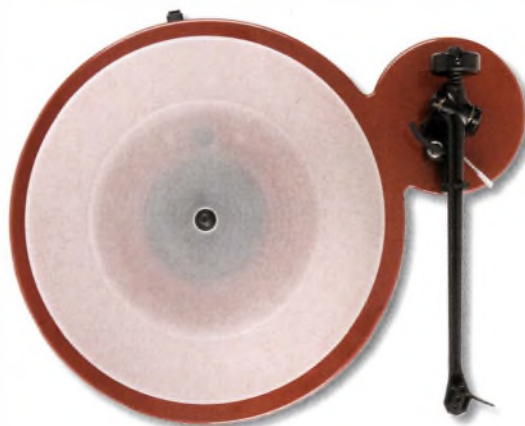
Fresh out of the box the Black Magic's simple curvy lines and 'nightfire' red finish are pure eye candy. The deck sports a hidden on/off switch at the MDF plinth's rear and its looks are also aided by

a 20mm precision-machined acrylic platter, which matches the three acrylic coned feet that are bonded to the underside via Sorbothane pads.

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

## Sound quality

With an Ortofon 2M Blue fitted to the Inspire's arm and Nick Drake's beautiful *Made To Love Magic* LP placed directly onto the platter's acrylic surface, we're ready to rock in no time. Overall the Inspire is a pacy little performer that favours a neutral presentation that's neither lacking in detail or too forensically revealing. Kwaakhu Baah's congas in *Three*



## DETAILS

- PRICE**  
£560
- ORIGIN**  
UK
- WEIGHT**  
3.8kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
450 x 100 x 350mm
- FEATURES**
  - 33 and 45rpm
  - Rega RB202 tonearm
  - Acrylic platter
  - Acrylic/Sorbothane coned feet
  - Optional record weight and external PSU available
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Inspire Hi-Fi
- TELEPHONE**  
01246 472222
- WEBSITE**  
inspirehifi.co.uk
- REVIEWED**  
HFC 385

*Hours* immediately get our attention, as the Inspire takes control of their rhythmic slaps to get our feet tapping. And when Drake's guitar's tempo picks up the pace, so does the Inspire, which gives the music plenty of life to keep it engaging. This strength also makes the Inspire an extremely enjoyable listen with Goldfrapp's *Clay*, as there's a real sense of the drama building as the tempo quickens.

The Inspire's expansive soundstage is particularly impressive and the Spanish guitar on Tracy Chapman's *She's Got Her Ticket*, is voiced wide of our left speaker's plane.

## Conclusion

Although the Black Magic Si doesn't quite reach the wall-shaking depths that the very best decks at this price can, the low end that it does extend to has plenty of clarity and sounds less boomy than its cheaper rivals. Across all the music on test, the Inspire images impressively well. Nick Drake's vocals in particular are placed centre stage, surrounded by plenty of air and space and the detail in his voice shows this to be one of the most revealing turntables around ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**LIKE:** Stunning looks, and finish; transparent sound; decent arm
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★☆  
**DISLIKE:** Not the cheapest; cartridge costs extra
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**WE SAY:** One of the most revealing decks we've heard with plenty of detail and good bass
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





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# Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Esprit SB

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

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

It also features an external 15V DC wall-wart PSU to drive its AC motor, which is mounted to a horizontally suspended tensioned rubber band. The Pro-Ject motor is also screwed to the plinth through two small rubber pads that give the motor a more rigid mounting. Additionally, there's a phono cable junction box at the rear, so that you can upgrade the supplied interconnects at a later date should you wish. Isolation is further aided by four Ortofon isolation feet that support the deck's 28mm MDF plinth.

The electronic speed control lets you jump between 33 and 45rpm speeds, which are indicated by corresponding blue LEDs that flash while the platter gets up to speed. A longer push on this button turns the deck on/off. For 78rpm fans there's

good and bad news, as this deck does facilitate this speed, but you'll have to manually move the belt to a bigger cog on the pulley (when the Carbon Esprit SB is in 45rpm mode) to make this happen.

## Sound quality

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

## DETAILS

- PRICE**  
£425
- ORIGIN**  
Austria
- WEIGHT**  
4.9kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(W x H x D)  
415 x 118 x 320mm
- FEATURES**
  - Autospeed 33 and 45rpm
  - Carbon fibre tonearm
  - Ortofon 2M Red cartridge supplied
  - Acrylic platter
  - Includes dust cover
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Designs Ltd
- TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166
- WEBSITE**  
henleydesigns.co.uk
- REVIEWED**  
HFC 385

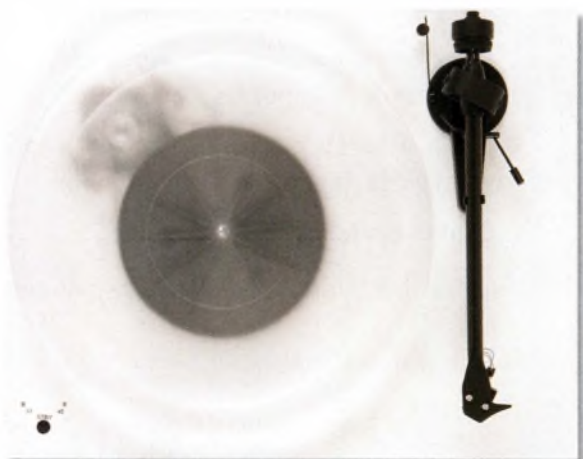
The Blue improves on the Red by offering a more refined bass, better fine detail retrieval and a smoother midband, which can clearly be heard on Goldfrapp's *Clay*.

With The Doors' *L.A. Woman*, Jim Morrison's performance has plenty of attitude thanks to how the SB manages to retain a degree of bite without sounding too hard edged. The SB's soundstage is pretty wide, and while the instruments may not have all the energy of the very best at this price, it has decent separation.

The midrange is also very well balanced. Again, it's not quite as analogue-like and rich as some or as forward, but it's a very smooth and detailed affair with just the right amount of presence to ensure that the music remains even. While sounding strong, Nick Drake's voice is carefully presented in *Three Hours* and we can hear the delicacy with which he holds the ends of each note.

## Conclusion

At the price this Pro-Ject deck screams outstanding value, but what really sells it is the way it's brimming with musical detail ●



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Smooth sound with bags of detail; quality cartridge; top-class arm
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** A super bargain that's easy to use and has a well balanced class-leading sound to it
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL



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AC/HFN/76

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AC/HFN/83





# The Funk Firm Flamenca

**D**espite its conventional looks, the entry-level Flamenca continues to live the Funk ethos, thanks to some unique features. It sports a glass platter, but eschews Funk's proprietary vector belt drive system of a motor with two slave pulleys for a more conventional periphery belt drive from a single motor pulley. The motor is intentionally cited at the deck's front left corner because Funk believes putting a motor at the rear allows motor and/or structural vibration to travel along the belt causing the cartridge to vibrate side to side. However, putting the motor pulley in line with the tonearm allows these same vibrations to instead travel down the arm tube that's held firm by the bearing.

Speed is controlled electronically via a knurled silver knob for 33.3 and 45rpm, with discreet trim pots for speed fine tuning. For spinning duties the deck's 10mm-thick glass platter rests on a finely engineered steel plate with a case-hardened spindle that turns against a steel ball sitting at the base of a close-tolerance brass bearing sleeve. The deck's 25mm-thick plinth is made from three layers of MDF bonded together to aid damping, while four chunky rubberised circular feet give stable support.

Completing the package is Funk's F6 tonearm, which employs a thread bearing, whereby the arm tube is effectively suspended from a polymer loop. This loop connects to a single

polymer thread inside the arm, which exits through the bottom of the tube where it attaches to the lower bearing housing to hold it steady.

The deck comes with a thick felt mat as standard and Funk includes an inhouse 3mm Achromat with our test rig, costing £57 extra.

## Sound quality

Supplementing the thick felt mat for the Achromat gives a more dynamic sound with crisper edges and better instrument separation. It costs more, but on clarity grounds is a wise upgrade. It's difficult to describe the Funk's sonic palate because its strengths lie in transparency, without adding too much of its own personality. The Funk strives for a balanced sound without overly favouring any element of the soundstage or its presentation. Armed with an Ortofon 2M Blue pick-up (HFC 375) and plumbed into a Primare R32 phono stage, the Flamenca nails its lack of colouration to the mast via Joy Division's *New Dawn Fades*. This track can often wrong foot an unsuspecting deck as with turntables favouring a rockier and more polished presentation it can sound raw, but devoid of character. While more laid-back machines let the track's murky tones saturate the mix, removing the edgy nature of Curtis' no-holds-barred vocals, the Flamenca leans to neither side and instead presents the song evenly. Guitars are conveyed with just the

right amount of body and tonal appetite, and it's the content of their long drawn-out notes that the Funk subtly brings out, which breathes life into the music. Meanwhile the rapid drum strikes are rendered with a clean, short echo, before falling away into the darkness of the soundstage, behind our Dynaudio Focus 260 floorstanders' physical footprint.

While the Funk's imaging isn't as ultimately precise as some of its similarly priced stable mates, the way it really opens up the soundstage is beyond many of its peers.

The Flamenca's sound is far from forward and it seems to want to push the music upwards and outwards, rather than straight at the listener, which also adds to its sense of openness and lack of congestion. There is a definite sense of letting the music speak for itself about this deck, that's reminiscent of how a unipivot arm presents the music.

## Conclusion

Look-wise the Flamenca doesn't stand out from the crowd. But its transparent and airy sound is very inviting and when partnered with the right pick-up, you'll be rewarded with an open window into the music ●

### DETAILS

- PRICE  
£850
- ORIGIN  
UK
- WEIGHT  
5.4kg
- DIMENSIONS  
(WxHxD)  
414 x 110 x 320mm
- FEATURES
  - 33 and 45rpm electronic speed change
  - 12V DC motor
  - Funk F6 thread bearing tonearm
  - External wall wart PSU
  - Removable dust cover
- DISTRIBUTOR  
The Funk Firm
- TELEPHONE  
01273 585042
- WEBSITE  
thefunkfirm.co.uk
- REVIEWED  
HFC 391

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<p><b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★</p> <p><b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★☆</p> <p><b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★</p> <p><b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★</p> <p><b>OVERALL</b> ★★★★★</p>	<p><b>LIKE:</b> Open and transparent sound; simple yet clever tonearm design</p> <p><b>DISLIKE:</b> Belt can be fiddly to fit; not for hardcore bass junkies</p> <p><b>WE SAY:</b> Deceptively conventional looks hide a turntable of true sonic merit</p>
--	--

## TURNTABLE PACKAGE



# VPI Nomad

**T**aking over the role of VPI's entry-level deck, the Nomad boasts an onboard phono stage and headphone amp and Ortofon 2M Red pick-up. So when the upgrade bug bites an obvious choice is a better stylus from further up the 2M range – given its styli are interchangeable, with similar outputs and loading figures to match.

The Nomad sports an in-house 10in tonearm with a stainless steel rod through the gimballed/yoke bearing. Textured black MDF is the order of the day for the deck's plinth and 26mm-thick platter. And while the felt mat that's supplied does the job, it feels a bit thin and flimsy in contrast to the rest of the deck, which is superbly finished with smoothly rounded corners and a brushed metal control panel that could shame decks at twice the price.

Once unboxed, VPI proudly boasts a set-up time of four minutes, which lays down the gauntlet.

### Sound quality

With the Nomad feeding our Musical Fidelity preamp via line-level inputs, we get a sense of just how dynamic sounding this package is. Fleetwood Mac's *Isn't It Midnight* from *Tango In The Night* bristles with life. The track's opening drum beats burst from our Dynaudio loudspeakers and make their presence known across the soundstage with clarity and weight, before the accompanying instruments

and Christine McVie's vocals kick in to fill the midrange and treble with lots of energy. With this album, the Nomad lets you know how big a soundstage it's able to conjure, which is frankly on a scale we weren't expecting given the deck's modest price. The Nomad highlights the marching percussion of *Caroline* as superbly mixed across the left and right channels, placing each beat well wide of our floorstanders' physical parameters, with the looping lead guitar hook voiced wider still.

While it may read like we're stating the obvious by describing the Nomad's sonic signature as a very 'vinyl' sounding deck, what we mean is it's not an overly clean or clinical machine. Instead it prefers to play to what many analogue fans love about vinyl, by presenting the music with a warmer quality that's easy on the ear for long term, fatigue-free listening.

*Methane River* from Bill Fay's self titled album sounds organic and true to the era it was originally recorded, with the music adopting a lush, rich tone, which can be heard in the soft acoustic guitar strokes and fulsome bass. We've known this LP to sound more polished on decks that go for a more analytical presentation. The Nomad lets the horn and string sections sound effortless and unforced, but on some sub-£1k decks the instruments extend from the soundstage with finer detail.

Swapping the 2M Red's stylus for the 2M Blue with its improved nude

elliptical diamond at £130 (HFC 375) brings extra accuracy and clarity to the Bill Fay track, while retaining its rootsy natural sounding tone, revealing that the Nomad's sound welcomes extra fine tuning from a better sounding stylus, or cartridge when funds permit.

Bass control and extension are also notable weapons in its sonic arsenal. The overemphasised rumbling low end of Interpol's *Untitled* can sound laborious on some lightweight rivals as it quickly blurs into a murky groan that swamps the soundstage, but with the Nomad bass notes are kept in check and given the space to extend without becoming overwhelming. The Nomad's bass notes aren't lightning fast, but nor are they sluggish, and the resulting start and stop of bass guitar strings and kick drums resonate with natural sustain.

### Conclusion

The Nomad is a well built turntable with a top-notch tonearm for the money. It has clearly been engineered for a warm and traditionally analogue sound to show those looking to take a first step on their vinyl journey why the format is still relevant and rewarding in today's digital age ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£795

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**WEIGHT**  
5.9kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
470 x 109 x 343mm

**FEATURES**

- Belt-driven turntable with manual speed change
- 24V AC motor
- 10in tonearm
- Ortofon 2M Red cartridge supplied

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Renaissance Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
0131 5553922

**WEBSITE**  
renaissanceaudio.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 390

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Rich analogue sound; quality build; features galore

**DISLIKE:** Basic platter mat; not as analytical as some sub-£1k decks

**WE SAY:** Superb VFM from an established high-end brand with a sound and spec that belie its price

### OVERALL





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ACOUSTICS

ARCAM

ATLAS Cables

audiolab

AUDIOVECTOR

Bard audio

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# Audio-Technica

## AT-95E

**THE AT-95E TRACKS** between 1.5g and 2.5g (we get best results around 2.2g), weighs 5.7g in total so will balance in most tonearms with ease, and has a standard 47,000ohm recommended loading. The company claims a 3.5mV (mV at 1kHz, 5cm/sec) output, which is decent but nothing special and a frequency response of 20Hz to 20kHz, which is fine.

With its detachable stylus, the joy of the AT-95E is that if you break it you can slot a brand new one in without breaking the bank. Better still, if you're feeling tweaky there are various fancy aftermarket alternatives, such as the LP Gear ([www.lpgear.com](http://www.lpgear.com)) ViVid Line for around £60. Or, if you're feeling keen, superglueing a brand new stylus to your AT-95E body will further improve the sound. This is precisely what Linn did back in the

mid-eighties to make the Linn Basik cartridge – although it did it to the 95's cheaper AT-93 sibling, which had an inferior spherical diamond fitted.

### Sound quality

The AT-95E provides an extremely good basic level of performance in a totally fuss-free way, for a very small amount of money. Housed in a good basic turntable – such as a Rega P3, for example – it sounds fast, fun and frenetic, making music a pleasure to listen to and throwing loads of detail out at you. It tracks surprisingly well and delivers a spacious and deep soundstage that captures the fundamentals of the music brilliantly.

Tonally, it's ever so slightly bright and forward, but then again the vinyl medium isn't, so the AT-95E has some help here. The result is an explicit, well defined sound that has a taut, lithe bass and an open and engaging



midband. In absolute terms, it pushes images just a little forward and into your face, but it's all relative and by CD standards sounds quite laid back. Treble is decently smooth and couth with no obvious nasties, although it's not the last word in extension.

Tonally it could do with a slightly more generous bass, but careful setup can help here. Properly aligned in a semi-decent tonearm, tracking at the right weight and given an LP side or two to warm up, the AT-95E is capable of a surprisingly good sound. Overall, it's a cracking little MM phono cartridge for any starter or classic deck – pick up a bargain now ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£30  
**TELEPHONE**  
0113 2771441  
**WEBSITE**  
[eu.audio-technica.com/en](http://eu.audio-technica.com/en)  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 387

### OUR VERDICT



# Ortofon

## Quintet Blue

**THE QUINTET BLUE** cartridge comes housed in a body that's made of a special acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) thermoplastic material, chosen for its lightweight and durable properties. Internally it packs fixed neodymium magnets and it uses an elliptical stylus of the nude type, whereby the whole stylus is a solid diamond that's bonded to the cantilever.

At 18mm, it has a tall body so it's worth checking that your arm can be adjusted to accommodate its height and VTA. Once at the right height, its rectangular body and threaded mounting holes make it easy to align, although its output pins could do with being more widely spaced to make wiring up a bit easier.

### Sound quality

A few bars into Little Dragon's *Nabuma Rubberband* reveals just how

unfussy the Blue is, as it presents all the detail in the track with real dynamism. It treads a fine line between being highly revealing and warm, making for a thoroughly engaging cartridge. Listening to Syd Barrett's *The Madcap Laughs*, lead guitar notes in the instrumental section sound sharp but never harsh, with chords struck firmly before reverberating with natural echo.

Its soundstage is expansive left to right and it also possesses a great deal of talent for bringing instruments within it to life. On Eric Robinson's World of Music version of *La Traviata* it really plays to how the piece moves from quiet passages to louder sections with great effect, pulling us into the music. Each instrument gets the space to let its notes grow, which it knits together into a cohesive whole, revealing a highly measured and neutral presentation.



Picking up the pace with REM's *Green* album shows it is equally capable when letting its hair down. *Turn You Inside-Out* makes a grand entrance that's full of impact and depth, while the guitars are cranked up with raucous energy, without becoming too hard edged when the volume heads north.

Bass, meanwhile, is incredibly well articulated and evenly presented without ever sounding overly emphasised or rolling off too early, making the Ortofon's presence and detail felt without becoming overwhelming on more demanding bass-heavy music ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£325  
**WEBSITE**  
[henleydesigns.co.uk](http://henleydesigns.co.uk)  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 389

### OUR VERDICT





# icon Audio

## Stereo 60 MkIII M KT150 Integrated Amplifier



"It knows few equals and in these value conscious days makes it a pearl almost beyond price" Roy Gregory

hi-fi+

ICON AUDIO  
STEREO 60 MKIII  
KT150 £2599.95

OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VERDICT  
A lovely sound with plenty of power and adjustability. A well developed design.



*designed by David Shaw*

In 1958 GEC introduced the KT88 probably the best ever Hi Fi valve. For 52 years it reigned supreme. Then came the Tung Sol KT120. Bigger and better, with more power to suit the demanding loudspeakers of today. Now we are announcing the arrival of the KT150 bigger still, but more refined. In recent months we have been working to get the best out of this fabulous new tube and we think it is simply astonishing! Single Ended, Ultralinear and Triode.

As a company run by Hi Fi enthusiasts we regularly evaluate our amplifiers to ensure they are the best of their kind. Whilst we do not make changes for change sake, if we can make a significant improvement to the sound quality and reliability we will do so. The new MK III version of the Stereo 60 now comes with several improvements in sound and performance, and build quality. This is our biggest integrated amplifier. It is ideal for someone wanting a very dynamic fast sound. It has a big power supply, big output transformers, and uses the excellent new KT120/KT150, and comes with many features. An excellent alternative to a transistor amplifier, the ST60III M will deliver the finest detail of modern recordings in a more vivid way and present jazz and rock music without harshness.

**Two Amplifiers in One. The importance of Triode** The triode sound is preferred by many hi fi fans, although the power is lower in the ST60 is still ample for all but the most demanding levels. Ignored or neglected in the past we gave equal priority to the triode function so the full quality is maintained. With our UL/Triode switch you can change from 80 watts to 40 watts of pure triode sound at the flick of a switch.

**Now with "Easy Bias" Meter** We think of our amplifiers as musical instruments. Like a piano needs occasional tuning, big amplifiers need the bias checking. This way you can be sure of 100% performance all of the time. Simple with our "easy bias" meter. If the pointer is in the "black" it's correct! Also useful to check if your valves are worn or faulty. Long term performance is important to us and this useful aid will take the guesswork out of maintaining your amplifier.

**Attractive Valve cover** Most valve amplifier covers look as though they were done as a cost saving after thought, and don't exactly enhance the look of the amplifier. They are rarely seen in advertisements. We think that something you will use every day should look attractive. That's why we use 18 pieces of laser cut Perspex assembled with a further 20 precision components. See picture on our website.

Our new series of "Low Distortion Tertiary" output transformers are the best we have ever made, enabling us to reduce global feedback by about 40%. All our amplifiers are designed and finished in Leicester. Warranty and service is done by the engineers that designed them so you can be sure of long term performance. We incorporate a "standby" switch in order to protect those precious cathodes from damage until they have warmed up. All of our amplifiers are hand made using "point to point" soldering without using printed circuit boards. We are convinced this sounds better. It allows for very easy servicing, upgrades and modifications. Remote controlled volume included for fine tuning your listening. High quality components are used throughout including an "ALPS" volume control, silver plated PTFE audio cable SCR capacitors audiophile resistors. A choke regulated power supply adds a richness to the sound quality that silicon devices alone cannot do. Recording loop included. In short we have created an amplifier of excellent flexibility and quality which retains the qualities traditional of traditional design and performance. Bespoke upgrades available including silver/copper capacitors, valves and design. (\*Excluding EL34)

Buy through your dealer or direct from us, free delivery, 30 home trial, part exchange welcome. Choosing any Hi Fi component never easy. As long established company you can trust our advice and service. Icon Audio have one of the biggest and most respected ranges of amplifiers from our 1w HP8 to our 150w MB150. See our website for more.

Ring or email for sales and service. We sell and fit a wide range of valves and upgrades. Dealers throughout the UK and the World.

# Graham Slee

## Gram Amp 2 SE

A **JFET OP-AMP** design, the Slee uses Graham's own 'FastActive' EQ circuit, which is said to bring more accuracy to the music than passive or more traditional active circuits.

The Special Edition is the second model in Slee's four-strong moving magnet range, adding more gain than its entry-level £180 Communicator sibling. It can be upgraded with the £185 PSU1 power supply, to use in place of the supplied switched mode 'green' 24V DC wall wart. As well as a range of dedicated MC phono stages, Slee also offers a £640 Elevator EXP MC step-up transformer, to be used in conjunction with its MM stages when running low output MC pick-ups.

### Sound quality

Out of the box, this has a very 'analogue' sound that's almost valve-like in its nature.

With Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* it immediately gets to work with the layered percussion, surrounding it with plenty of air and binding its beat together, so that notes follow on from each other cohesively, facilitating the flow of the music. It doesn't force proceedings and instead lets the musical detail do the talking to get your attention. The way the piano notes are given time and space to ring effortlessly within the soundstage is really quite captivating.

Between the tracks, surface noise is more obvious through the Slee than the Rega (opposite), especially within the gaps of our *Unhalfbricking* LP, although once the music begins this becomes unnoticeable. And once the Slee sets Sandy Denny's vocals free from our speakers, this is even more of a distant memory. The Slee gifts Denny's voice with a softness that other phono stages struggle to match



with such consistency, especially during her more powerfully sung sections. The Slee's bass is very impressive, but reflecting its relaxed nature it's not as controlled as the Rothwell Rialto. This aspect of its performance doesn't overshadow the Slee's virtues by any means, but it's worth partnering it with a cartridge that has plenty of grip to balance things out.

Overall, the Gram Amp offers a level of musical enjoyment beyond what its price tag suggests. Instead of being overly analytical, it's warmer and more relaxed in nature, which will float many analogue lovers' boats ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£260  
**TELEPHONE**  
01909 568739  
**WEBSITE**  
gspaudio.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 381

### OUR VERDICT



# Musical Fidelity

## M1 LPS

**WHAT YOU SEE** here is basically Musical Fidelity's ViNL sans all the fancy bits. This means the cartridge loading and gain switching facilities are gone, along with the backlit dot-matrix display; in its place is a simple MM/MC selector. The new LPS offers fairly standard cartridge loading and gain settings; our measurements show the former to be 47kohm and 100ohm for MM and MC respectively. Our measured input sensitivity is a catholic 8.41mV for MM and 1.0mV for MC. So the Musical Fidelity box will work with most modern moving magnets or coils.

### Sound quality

The LPS sounds oh-so-clean. There's vanishingly low noise, no audible hum and a lovely open soundstage, which is allowed to come out and show itself the second you drop the needle on the record.



Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* is a joy, with a decently wide and open sound. Bass is taut and lithe, although you'd never call it generous, midband is nicely detailed and intricately etched and treble is crisp and open – albeit just a little less sparkly than some rivals.

The tonal balance is pretty even, with everything well proportioned, but it veers ever so slightly to the smooth side – which is absolutely as it should be with a phono stage of this price. That means you can spin up some pretty forward discs, such as Deodato's *Night Cruiser*, and not be assaulted by the large amounts of treble energy from those perfectly played brass stabs. The LPS keeps

things together nicely, while letting the music flow. It separates out all the performers well, rendering all strands of the mix skillfully and showering the listener with detail. Soundstaging is impressive, with better depth perspective than some price rivals.

In absolute terms, it has a slightly processed and mechanical quality compared with the best £1,000 phono stages. But at the price, its competency is unsurpassed and it falls into none of the traps its rivals do – it has low noise and no funny technical issues. If you're after a well made, user-friendly, fine-sounding budget phono stage, this is it ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£300  
**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9002866  
**WEBSITE**  
musicalfidelity.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 379

### OUR VERDICT





## Rega Fono MM

**RESPLENDENT IN ITS** case with glowing logo, Rega's Fono MM is a dedicated moving magnet-only design, so those who favour low output moving coil cartridges will have to look elsewhere.

Its EQ circuits are part active, part passive with the active element reserved for low-frequency duties and passive for high frequencies. Rega has kept the PSU output impedance low and the Fono enjoys trickle down tech from its more costly MM/MC input-sporting Aria phono amp. Its rear plugs are close together, which makes fitting over-sized RCA connectors a bit awkward.

### Sound quality

The Rega's audio personality is focussed around opening a window into musical detail, meaning that it offers refined sound with a wide soundstage. During Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* more intense sections it allows the instruments to spread from



the centre of the soundstage to well wide of the speaker plane. Another string in its bow is its penchant for bringing out the rhythm of the music. Daft Punk's melodies bounce along at a pace and the Fono seems to revel in picking up the tempo when the chorus kicks in. *Get Lucky* also exposes its particular brand of bass, which isn't there in abundance, but the bottom end that the Rega does possess is controlled and without any tendency to boom.

Compared with similarly priced rival offerings, the Fono MM's upper bass and midrange are more evenly balanced in the great scheme of things, which helps Fairport Convention's *Unhalfbricking* get

across all of the little nuances that are buried in the mix. Compared with the Slee and Rialto here, the Rega isn't quite as full bodied and ultimately lacks the same levels of impact, but its bass control is much tighter than the Gram Amp 2.

For less than 200 sheets of your hard-earned cash, the Fono gives you a grown-up sound that's transparent and with a dash of verve. It is blessed with a bubbly energy that should be a welcome tonic for budget or dull-sounding vinyl front ends craving a bit more life. In absolute terms it doesn't have the sonic authority of its more costly rivals, but it's still an accurate and highly entertaining performer ●

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£198

WEBSITE  
rega.co.uk

REVIEWED  
HFC 381

#### OUR VERDICT



## Rothwell Rialto

### BOASTING SEVEN POWER

supply filtering stages, three Class A gain stages and discrete transistors, the Rialto is claimed to be better designed to work with the ultra-low signal levels of moving coils, when compared with op-amps circuits.

Moving magnet and moving coil circuits are fixed at 47kohm and 100ohm respectively. The Rialto's power source is via a supplied 24V DC wall wart, which Rothwell says isn't worth upgrading thanks to the extensive power supply filtering that's already installed.

### Sound quality

Opening up with the pumping rhythms of Daft Punk's *Instant Crush* tells us that this phono stage will take some beating. The dynamic swings of the percussion sound effortless and possess more oomph than most rivals. Despite hearing this track repeatedly, we find ourselves foot-tapping along to the

melody, anticipating the band's next move. Hearing music through the Rialto shifts our reviewer's focus and we find myself concentrating less on the boundaries of the soundstage it creates and more on what's happening within it. The way it allows Daft Punk's keyboards to run up and down the frequency spectrum with real freedom draws us in as our ears chase the notes around its sonic landscape.

Nevertheless with REM's *Automatic For The People*, the soundstage is as deep as it is panoramic and it has a flair for knowing when to let instruments come to the fore and shine within the mix to bring the music to life.

It fares particularly well through its MC circuits, which give nothing away to its MM input and better them in some respects, especially with more orchestral material. With vocals the Rothwell is an equally capable performer, for example it replays



Sandy Denny's voice with delicacy combined with similar tonality and body to the Slee's rendition of Fairport Convention's *Unhalfbricking*. The Rialto really gets across Denny's beguiling talent to swing from intimate to powerful within the same breath. As it's more expensive than most rivals and rather plain looking, it needs to work harder than most to justify its cost. But across both MM and MC inputs it proves to be an enthralling all-round performer that's sonically able to compete with phono stages at twice the price ●

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£380

TELEPHONE  
01204 366133

WEBSITE  
rothwellaudio  
products.co.uk

REVIEWED  
HFC 381

#### OUR VERDICT



## Beyerdynamic T90

**THIS HEADPHONE IS** among the second tier of Beyerdynamic's extensive range. It is an open-back design built around a pair of dynamic drivers utilising a feature the company describes as using 'Tesla' technology. This uses a strong magnetic current to motivate the driver, which in turn is lighter – and more responsive.

There are some minor black marks, though. The 3m cable is captive and makes do with a standard plastic moulding where it joins the earpad and there is further visible (and, therefore, vulnerable) cable between the housing and the headband.

### Sound quality

The T90 is a pretty sensitive headphone and requires more power than most to reach our test level. Having achieved this, though, it makes a strong case for itself from

the outset. The word that keeps cropping up in the listening notes is "smooth", but this is rather deceptive and does the T90 something of a disservice. The presentation is extremely well controlled, which means that there is absolutely no trace of noise or harshness to it. The result is a headphone that manages to handle pretty much everything that you can throw at it.

As well as this control, it also has an exceptionally spacious presentation that allows for a completely convincing performance of even very sizeable recordings, while sounding suitably intimate with smaller ones. The way that it handles Kraftwerk's *Minimum Maximum* is particularly impressive with a vast, detailed and immersive soundstage. The bass response is equally accomplished with plenty of power and authority to it. There is also a sense of excitement

with the more up-tempo performances that makes this headphone a compelling listen.

None of this comes at the expense of a believable and accurate tonal presentation, though. Max Richter's *Recomposed* is presented with absolute conviction and every instrument has the space it needs and a tangible weight and decay to the strings. This is equally apparent with Nirvana's *Come As You Are* and it does a better job than many at opening out dense and aggressive recordings. It might not be cheap, but the consistent ability it shows across all genres and recording qualities is a class apart ●



### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£500  
**TELEPHONE**  
01444 258258  
**WEBSITE**  
polaraudio.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 388

### OUR VERDICT



## Grado SR125e

**PART OF GRADO'S** latest series, the SR125e has the classic styling and hallmarks of the brand that make it instantly recognisable. The usual chunky foam pads cover large cabinets housing the 40mm dynamic drivers, bold branding on each earpiece and a slim headband that all adds up to the yesteryear look and feel that divides opinion.

### Sound quality

These cans are much better utilised for home listening, via the supplied 6.35mm adaptor, although their open nature means that they let in external noise and you'll need some peace and quiet to enjoy them at their best.

The SR125es produce a nicely balanced frequency response that allows you to sit back and enjoy the music without it becoming fatiguing. Unlike some fashion-lead models, this headphone isn't going to swamp you

with bass, but this isn't to suggest that its limited in the lower frequency range in any way. It has a pleasantly extended response that digs out oodles of low detail on Elbow's version of Peter Gabriel's *Mercy Street*, and you're not left wanting in the bass department.

The SR125e isn't tweaked for big dynamics and can sound a little restrained at times. This characteristic could also be described by some as having warmth, and aids the Grado's suitability for longer listening, meaning that before you know it a couple of hours have slipped by. It's easily done, and Laura Mvula's vocals on *Live With Metropole Orkest* wash over us in an effortless way as the open and airy sound places us slap bang in the concert hall in a prized front row seat.

The SR125e is something of a dichotomy when it comes to its

suitability for use on the move or home listening. Its musicality is undeniable, but despite the 3.5mm jack plug fitment, the bulky cord, sound leakage and styling are unlikely to make them desirable for on the move use. Even at home you'll need a quiet spot to enjoy them at their best, but compromises are worthwhile for such good performance at the price ●



### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£150  
**TELEPHONE**  
0279 501111  
**WEBSITE**  
grado.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 389

### OUR VERDICT





## JBL Synchros S700



**WITH A STATE** of the art look and feel, the S700 has iDevice functionality and built-in LiveStage DSP which the company says “delivers a more realistic sound experience”. This feature is made possible by its own internal Li-ion battery, rechargeable by USB in around two hours, although you can run it in passive mode. It comes supplied with a USB charging cable and two audio cables with an inline remote control and mic (one for iOS and one for Android). We find it manages about 15 hours in powered mode before it needs recharging.

### Sound quality

In passive mode, this is a clean and crisp sounding headphone, with a strong bass and a lively, engaging midband. It doesn't have the refinement and sophistication of the Philips Fidelio X1, or the intimacy of the Sennheiser HD650s, for example, but what it does have is an infectious

musical *joie de vivre* that neither of the aforementioned rivals quite attain. It's bouncy, fast and musically engaging, making it fun to listen to. Much of this comes from the excellent bass, which is very strong but never overblown, and tight and punchy. Although the balance is a little bassy compared with some, you don't get the sense that it detracts from the rest of the music.

The midband is fairly transparent, it succeeds mostly through its lithe handling of leading edges, which gives the S700 a peppy feel. It's pretty dynamic too, compressing things less than similarly priced rivals. Treble is good – crisp, extended and spacious. Generally speaking you wouldn't call it particularly refined up top, but it works well enough. For example, hi hat cymbals have their distinctive metallic 'zing' but don't grate like some Grados. The LiveStage DSP is less successful. It can make some music sound bigger, wider and more



punchy, but it does sound a tad artificial and can bring about some odd phasey effects with some music, as well as adding a bit of upper midband glare. It works nicely with low bit-rate MP3s, livening them up, but audiophiles will be happier with it switched off.

Overall, this is an enjoyable headphone that's versatile and beautifully built and presented. Anyone thinking that just because it's active it can't succeed in purist hi-fi terms may well be surprised ●

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£300  
**TELEPHONE**  
01707 278113  
**WEBSITE**  
uk.jbl.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 383

#### OUR VERDICT



## Shure SRH1840

### TRADITIONALLY KNOWN AS

a manufacturer of high-end earphones, the SRH1840 represents something of a departure for Shure. The open-back design is built around a pair of 40mm neodymium drivers that are pair matched by hand. It is supplied with replacement pads and a 2.1m detachable cable. The build quality is excellent too and everything has been assembled with a view to it lasting a long time and being easy to sort out and repair if it goes wrong. As an open-back design, it leaks a lot of noise but given that Shure has the closed-back SRH1540 at the same price, there is a more suitable portable option.

### Sound quality

The Shure is not especially sensitive, but doesn't place any undue demands on the Chord Hugo we use to reach the test level. Once there, it demonstrates generally excellent performance. There is an impressive

balance of realism and excitement. Detail retrieval is very good indeed and even extremely subtle nuances can be picked out of the performance. Everything sounds convincing and well proportioned, but there is a sense of life and excitement that makes Emily Barker's *Reckless* enjoyable rather than just a reference exercise.

The sense of space that the Shure generates is also truly exceptional. The large scale *Recomposed* by Max Richter is given all the space it needs and when you combine this with the very high levels of comfort, you have a headphone that can really perform in a way that allows you to forget that you are wearing it. This effortless presentation is underpinned by bass that while not as seismic as the Beyerdynamic opposite, is detailed, clear and seamlessly integrated with the upper registers. The SRH1840 is also able to be driven to high levels without displaying any signs of hardening up or aggression.



The Achilles' heel appears with Nirvana's *Come As You Are*, which isn't flattered by the accuracy and detail that the SRH1840 can extract. It's presented as a dense and confused mass of voices and instruments largely because it is. Shure hasn't completely set aside its pro audio heritage, which means the more forgiving Beyerdynamic is the better all rounder. It is hard to ignore the SRH1840's ability to disappear with some material and depending on your listening preferences, this is a must audition and a mighty fine effort ●

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£467  
**TELEPHONE**  
01992 703058  
**WEBSITE**  
shure.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 388

#### OUR VERDICT



## Fostex HP-A4



**THIS COMPACT BUT** well-made headphone amplifier supports DSD 5.6MHz and PCM 16-bit or 24-bit from CD-quality 44.1kHz up to 192kHz sampling frequencies. Apart from the 6.35mm headphone socket, the front panel has a smooth volume control potentiometer and an array of four push buttons to select the source, a switchable filter, low or high gain and audio output selection. There is also a line of LEDs to show power and input audio stream data rates.

The rear houses the USB, a pair of RCA phono sockets, a pair of Toslink optical connectors for digital input and output and, uniquely, a microSD card slot for upgrading the firmware.

### Sound quality

Although the unit is 'plug and play' when used with a Mac, a driver is required for use for those of you that

own a PC. When connected, the unit appears as another audio device in Windows. However, to take advantage of the higher resolution replay of the unit over standard 16/44 CD-quality, Fostex has developed an audio player that integrates nicely with the HP-A4. This player is a standalone application that doesn't need to be installed on the PC – you just run it and load your hi-res files into it to play them.

When we connect the HP-A4 to our PC, we discover that there is bags of volume for our headphones and there is a very noticeable improvement in quality when playing test files at the higher resolutions. Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3* at 24/192 resolution, for example, simply sparkles with effortless clarity and fullness. All in all, this is a quite superb performer that renders very compelling performances from a PC ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£269  
**TELEPHONE**  
03301222500  
**WEBSITE**  
scvddistribution.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 387

### OUR VERDICT



## Oppo HA-1



**LESS THAN A** year after the excellent PM-1 headphones were released, Oppo has its own matching DAC/preamp/headphone amp. The HA-1 borrows a good deal of circuitry from Oppo's Blu-ray decks including the ESS 9018 Sabre32 DAC and digital filter chip. Although touted as a "high performance headphone amp", it doubles as a USB DAC, stereo preamp with Bluetooth streaming. In short, it's packed with facilities.

### Sound quality

We first audition the HA-1 as an analogue preamplifier via its RCA line inputs, where we find it offers plenty of detail and insight, with a smooth, sophisticated and fairly neutral sound quality considering its price point. Sonically via line in you can do rather better with several all-analogue preamps at this price – it can sound a little mechanical and opaque by

comparison – but it packs vastly more functionality in for the money, so it's not strictly a fair comparison.

When you switch in the DAC section, things begin to hot up. 808 State's *Pacific State* comes over with a surprising degree of bass weight, and oodles of detail. It's easy to hear that trademark ESS Sabre sound; you get a high precision render of the recording, with its many dense layers. It's an explicit rather than a romantic sound, and gives a seat-of-the-pants listening experience. Added to this is that solid bass, which punches things along.

Using the HA-1 as a headphone amplifier with Oppo's PM-1 cans

shows how well suited the unit is to the task of driving them. They make a very nice noise with Malcolm McLaren's *Waltz Darling*, which is a captivating listen when on some systems it can sound a little murky. The Oppo combo scythes through the mix brilliantly, with a blisteringly fast yet relatively refined rendition of the song. It carries the attack of the electronic percussion in all of its glory, and sounds wonderfully propulsive and fun. An excellent match to one of the best pairs of headphones on the market, if you own the Oppo PM-1 you would be foolish to overlook the HA-1 ●

### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£1,199  
**TELEPHONE**  
0845 0609395  
**WEBSITE**  
oppodigital.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 390

### OUR VERDICT





## Astell & Kern AK240

**THE DEFINING FEATURE** of this flagship portable player is the extra XMOS processor, which provides native DSD support at both 2.8MHz and 5.6MHz. There's enough space to accommodate 350 hours of music at 24/96 resolution, plus a microSD card slot for a further 128GB of storage. It's made from premium-quality materials and a rather lovely leather case is supplied.

### Sound quality

Using unbalanced Audio-Technica headphones DSD playback is music to our ears. Vivaldi's *La Stravaganza Concerto in D Minor Opus 4 no 8* is an incredibly decisive and utterly unblemished sound. The cellos are so clean and dynamic it feels as if they are playing inside your head and their terrific verve and energy almost lifts you off the floor, while the violins sound sweeter than a summer pudding served with clotted cream. Dropping to a 16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC

download of Vaughn Williams' *Fantasia On A Theme By Thomas Tallis*, the marginal drop off in overall clarity is more than compensated for by a profoundly elegant and beautifully timed performance. The player takes the variation in loudness within the piece in its stride, with no danger of distortion during the crescendo.

Changing pace with an AAC download from iTunes of Martin Garrix's *Animals*, the AK240 again serves up the audiophile goods. The bass is meaty and powerful and the mids and highers of the synth are belted out with such gusto and tightness that you can happily crank up the volume without fear of aural fatigue setting in.

Linn's 24-bit/48kHz studio master download of Peter Gabriel's *Don't Give Up* with Kate Bush has a cleanliness

and polish that transports you to the recording studio. It's not as finely detailed as top-flight DSD, but makes the CD version seem muddy and strained. The punch in *Sledgehammer* makes Vitali Klitschko's upper cut seem more like a slap from Charles Hawtreay.

Operationally it's not perfect, but the AK240's ability to take medium-resolution files and squeeze every last drop of sonic goodness out of them (plus its native DSD playback), makes it a truly wonderful player ●



### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£2,200

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 2008282

**WEBSITE**  
unlimited.com  
astellnkern.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 387

### OUR VERDICT



## Sony NWZ-F886

**LOOKING AND FEELING** more like a smartphone than a Walkman, the NWZ-F886 runs on version 4.1 of Google's Android operating system and offers compatibility with WAV, AIF, FLAC and ALAC files up to 24-bit/192kHz as well as sporting an S-Master HX digital amplifier, which Sony claims will reduce noise and distortion and is optimised for HD tracks. Lower bit-rate files are boosted by so-called Digital Sound Enhancement Engine (DSEE) HX technology. There's built-in noise reduction that (only) works with the supplied in-ear headphones and 32GB of built-in flash memory, which is enough capacity for around 180 tracks of approx four minutes duration at 24/192. Drop that to 96kHz and the capacity rises to 350.

### Sound quality

The NWZ-F886 does a superb job sonically with the supplied earphones. With the EQ set flat,

Claire Martin's 24/192 *I'm Gonna Laugh You Right Out Cf My Life* is detailed and smoother than an otter in Speedos. The tonality is neither bright nor warm, but totally neutral with Martin's spine-chillingly husky vocals combining sumptuously with Richard Rodney Bennett's deftly tinkled ivories. The electric guitar in Meshell Ndegeocello's 24/96 *Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* shimmers sublimely, perfectly complimenting the haunting keyboards and seductive vocals.

The utterly familiar sound of Bob Marley singing *Could You Be Loved* is proof of how beneficial hi-res audio is to portable music, the 24/96 download from Linn is a simple blend of percussion, guitar and haunting vocals that reveals a rhythm and energy that makes the MP3 version sound utterly flat and unengaging.

Switching to standard resolution there's no hiding the drop off in clarity, with *I Miss The Tokyo Skyline*

by the Manic Street Preachers simply not yielding as much detail. Still, standard-resolution stuff is on a par with an Apple iPhone 5.

We're not huge fans of the fiddly operating system and the capacity is limited in terms of storage and battery life when used with hi-res material, but both are forgivable in the face of such good performance ●



### DETAILS

**PRICE**

£250

**TELEPHONE**  
0845 6000124

**WEBSITE**  
sony.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 381

### OUR VERDICT





# Black Rhodium Symphony Chrome/Twirl

**T**his British brand has been around for many years now, and has proved popular for its fine, honest sound quality and strong value for money. The Symphony is a well known mid-price cable that uses a double core, screened design. As with many cables at its price point, silver-plated copper conductors are used, and they're set inside low-loss PTFE insulation and a silver-plated copper braided screen. The Symphony is then terminated with good quality chrome RCA plugs.

Twirl loudspeaker cable completes the Black Rhodium loom. It's a fairly recent design, a twin core affair, but with a total outer diameter of 6.4mm (3.2mm per core). Silicone rubber insulation is used, and the wire is carefully checked for directionality, then twisted along the length of the cable – the manufacturer claims this prevents any loop aerial effect. Double thickness insulation is fitted, and our Twirl has rhodium-plated Z plugs (£100) – gold-plated Z plugs are an option at £50.

## Sound quality

This loom is well received by our blind listening panel. It presents a generally powerful sound that is large in scale. It proves quite distinctive tonally, with the bass being a major facet of what makes its sound so good – its power, roundness and timbre is remarked upon by the panellists. Listening to Lorde's *Rcyals* the Black

Rhodium loom is very well balanced – whereas some other cables we've tested manage to deliver either a light bass, or an overblown one that is plodding and/or semi-detached from the rest of the frequency range. "Unlike many others, the bass is three dimensional," one panellist puts it, by which they mean it has a good timbre and integrates well with the music. Across the midband, the song's female vocals are clean, although a little less warm and inviting than some other cables we've seen.

This is picked up on in Julian Lloyd Weber's *Sunset* by one panellist, who notes that there isn't quite enough tonal colour in the midband – it's described as "a bit samey". Still, the Black Rhodium has a good deal of detail, as you can really hear the bow work, which is described as "really convincing". Indeed, this panellist considers its bass warmth, midband detail and clean treble to be "the best combination of everything"; this loom

## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£341

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**FEATURES**

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper conductors, PTFE dielectric
- Speaker cable: copper conductor with silicon rubber dielectric

**Prices:**  
interconnect £160/1m, speaker cable £13.50/1m unterminated

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Black Rhodium

**TELEPHONE**  
01332 342233

**WEBSITE**  
blackrhodium.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC387

is certainly a very good all rounder. One thing the panel does agree on is that it seems to work better with jazz and classical tracks. The treble smoothness and the lack of stridency across the midband, allied to a generally lyrical feel and an open nature appear to really flatter more mellow music. On more densely recorded rock tracks such as REM's *Welcome To The Occupation*, the Black Rhodium sounds nicely rhythmic and detailed, but the slightly 'grey' midband seems to make the track sound slightly opaque. And, "while it digs deeper into the recording," notes one panellist, "it can't hold on to it".

## Conclusion

This is a very fine performer and decent value for money. It gives a very fine, enjoyable sound considering its rather modest price ●



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Clear, powerful and musical sound yet smooth too

**DISLIKE:** Midband is not quite as sweet as some rivals

**WE SAY:** Highly convincing performer at the price

### OVERALL







# QED Reference Audio 40/Signature Revelation

**L**ike so many interconnects, the Reference Audio 40 is a silver-plated copper affair, arranged in a special complementary way – the two conductors have different diameters, and this is said to give an alternative path for high-frequency audio signals to avoid time smear. The foamed polyethylene dielectric is claimed to reduce the amount of signal lost to cable capacitance. QED's Analoc plugs are fitted and are said to be a low eddy current design with copper used instead of brass. They feature an outer locking cylinder that needs to be screwed forward before the plug's 'blades' can be locked onto the RCA phono socket, then the locking cylinder needs to be tightened back up for a (very) secure fit.

The Signature Revelation speaker cable uses 10 silver-plated oxygen-free copper central conductors, which are claimed to provide very low resistance alongside high levels of detail. These cores are separately insulated and arranged around a hollow core of polyethylene; QED calls this its Aircore technology and it's claimed to reduce inductance.

## Sound quality

Before the QED loom, the panellists have taken a mixed view of the various wires played to them. They've found positives and negatives, liked some and been lukewarm about others. But two out of the three listeners express a strong preference for this set of cables, applauding it for its clean, open, even sound that doesn't try to do anything too clever. Instead it is very

accomplished at almost every facet of the music, and makes things look rather easy.

"Everything is joined up," says one panellist, and so it proves. Lorde's *Royals* plays better than it has through most others we've tested. Although not necessarily the warmest or most expansive performance, it just seems to gel the bass with the rest of the music – which is something several others have failed to do.

It doesn't sound too steely in the midband, giving a nice smooth sound to female vocals, and treble is crisp and finessed. Musically the loom works very well, the beat bouncing along in an enjoyable way. The result is a surprisingly easy listen, when previously it hasn't made sense.

REM's *Welcome To The Occupation* is described as sounding, "head and shoulders better" by one panellist. There is a fine sense of depth to what can sound a pretty close and claustrophobic mix. One can hear

## DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£242

**ORIGIN**  
UK

### FEATURES

● **Interconnect:** silver-plated copper with foamed polyethylene dielectric

● **Speaker cable:** silver-plated copper conductor with Teflon dielectric

● **Prices:** interconnect £100/1m, speaker cable £17/1m unterminated

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Armour Home Electronics

**TELEPHONE**  
01279 501111

**WEBSITE**  
qed.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 387

lots of detail too, with the keyboard backing track coming through from the second verse, where previously it had been submerged. Tonally the QED isn't the warmest or most sumptuous loom ever, but it is very even and transparent and doesn't seem to be trying to add or subtract anything much. This means that it's likely to work well with a wide range of systems. Moving on to Duke Ellington's *Wabash Blues* the pattern continues. One adoring panellist describes it as, "good bass rhythm and control, nice, cohesive, great sound, head and shoulders better".

## Conclusion

Another of the panellists isn't quite so enamoured; they find the QED a little too anodyne and bland when playing Julian Lloyd Webber's cello work on *Sunset*. All of which just goes to show how much taste plays a part, but still this remains a superb result considering its low price ●



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Wonderfully easy yet open and engaging sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** A superb cable loom; nothing to criticise at the price

FEATURES



OVERALL





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CD6005 Silver CD Player **£279**



Diamond 220 **£199.95**



Debut Carbon Turntable **£325**



DAC-2000 Digital To Analogue Converter **£15**



Silver RX6 Floor-standing Speakers **£800**



Kandy K3 Integrated Amplifier **£1249**



Zensor 3 Bookshelf Speakers **£299**



Phono Box MM/MC Phono Preamplifier **£79**



M-DAC Digital To Analogue Converter **£599**



Bronze BXS Floor-standing Speakers **£499**



Kandy K3 CD Player **£1249**



Mercury V1i Bookshelf Speakers **£134**



Black Cube Stamp Power Amplifier **£649.95**



miniBlink Bluetooth DAC **£90**



MR4 Floorstanding Speakers **£350**



8200AP 7.1 AV Processing Pre-Amp **£1249**



2020i Bookshelf Speaker Pair **£169.95**



Concept Moving Magnet Cartridge **£150**



HA-PS0 Headphone Amplifier / DAC **£299**



Airstream A100 Wireless Amplifier **£399**



DIVA Digital Versatile Amplifier **£499**



MX1 Bookshelf Speakers **£99**



Radius 5.2 Turntable w/ Nima Tonearm **£1650**



uPlay Stream Hi-Fi Music Streamer **£149.95**



Airstream S300 Wireless Speaker **£249**



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**LOW PRICE**

**QED**

Bespoke

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Per Metre **£3.95**

**LOW PRICE**

**MISSION**

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**Black Rhodium**

5 Lengths

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From **£52.90**

**LOW PRICE**

**audioquest**

Bespoke

FLX-SLiP 14/4 Installation Cable

Per Metre **£5.80**

**LOW PRICE**

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MAKING THE CONNECTION

3 Lengths

Blue Heaven USB Cable A to B Plug

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**LOW PRICE**

**QED**

Bespoke

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Per Metre **£2.20**

**LOW PRICE**

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3 Finishes

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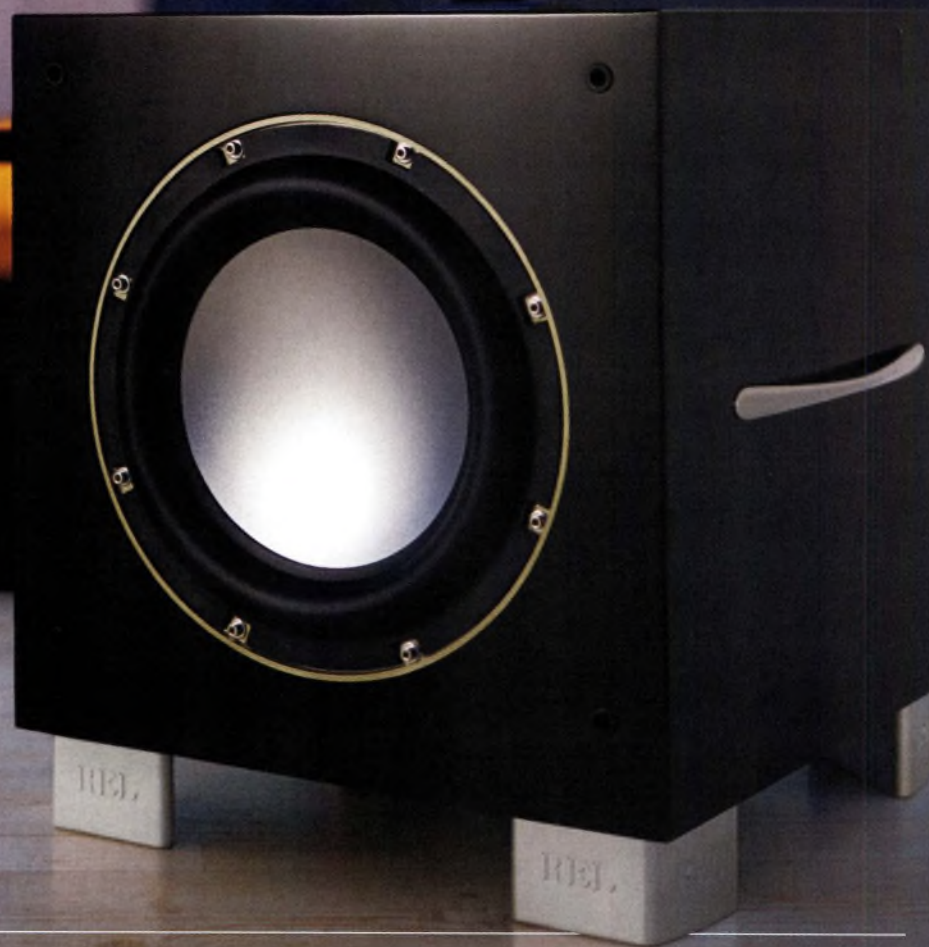
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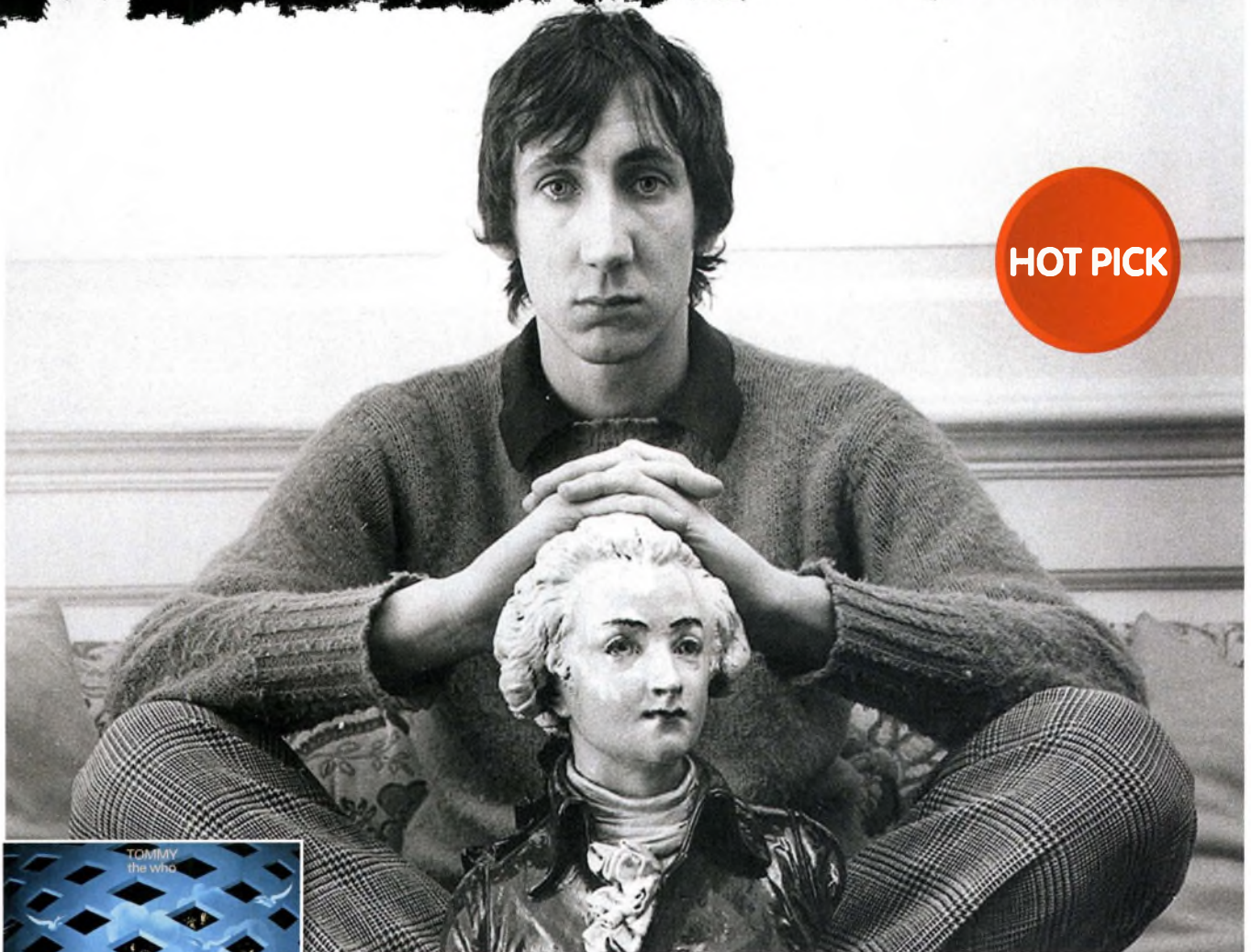
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# Music reviews



HOT PICK



## The Who Tommy Deluxe

★★★★★

Four-CD set **Universal**

**CONTRARY TO POPULAR** opinion, Pete Townshend's famous story of the pinball playing "deaf, dumb and blind kid" was not the first 'rock opera'. By the time *Tommy* appeared in 1969, the Pretty Things had beaten The Who by a year with their album, *SF Sorrow* concept. Nor is it even the Who's best 'rock opera' and most critical opinion now recognises *Quadrophenia* four years later as a more mature and fully realised work. But that said, there is no denying that *Tommy* is a landmark album and represented a new pinnacle of ambition that opened up possibilities previously unimagined in rock music at the time. In the years that followed its release, *Tommy* became not so much an album as an industry. A grandiose 1972 version featuring the London Symphony Orchestra and Chamber Choir was followed by Ken Russell's 1975 film. By the nineties they had been joined by a Broadway stage production. Townshend has also reprised the

work regularly on stage with The Who and two years ago lead singer Roger Daltrey took his own solo version of *Tommy* on the road.

These expansive spin-offs have tended to take the focus away somewhat from The Who's original 1969 album and this latest deluxe reissue allows a welcome opportunity to return to the source in a freshly remastered edition, augmented with further discs including Townshend's original demos, full-band studio outtakes and a dynamic live recording of the work from a 1969 concert performance in Ottawa, Canada.

Townshend's skills as a songwriter ensured that the majority of the tracks are capable of standing on their own and can be enjoyed outside the 'operatic' concept. *Pinball Wizard*, for example, ranks alongside any of the Who's early chart singles as a classic three minute pop song, while the "We're not gonna take it/See me, feel me/Listening

to you" sequence remains one of the most dramatic in rock music. Some of the character pieces such as *Fiddle About* and *Cousin Kevin* have proved less enduring and seem clumsily constructed to advance the plot. Today words such as groundbreaking and ambitious still apply, but overall it's hard not to conclude that *Tommy* struggles to live up to the genius tag bestowed upon it at the time. If it is a masterpiece, then it is a distinctly flawed one.

The bonus material adds an interesting insight into how Townshend grappled with the enormity of his ambition and built up the tracks by multiple overdubs featuring not only the power trio of bass, drums and electric guitar, but acoustic guitars, piano, organ trumpet and French horn. The remastering works hard at creating a warm and natural tone to the original tracks and the 5.1 surround mix on Blu-ray has a sharp clarity. **NW** ▶



## MUSIC REVIEWS



### Grateful Dead

Sunshine Daydream



3 CDs plus DVD

Rhino

ON AUGUST 27, 1972 the Grateful Dead played a show in Veneta, Oregon that has since attained legendary status as the Holy Grail among fans who trade tapes of the band's concerts. It has taken more than 40 years to be officially released, but the three-hour set justifies the show's exalted reputation as every style and genre of American music is cosmically transmuted into some of the most audacious, freewheeling rock'n'roll ever made.

The Dead recorded all their concerts direct from the soundboard and stored

**This is perhaps the ultimate must-have Dead album – the finest show they ever played**

everything methodically on 16-track analogue tape in a vast vault. Painstaking restoration and remastering of the 40 year-old tapes has resulted in pristine sound. For a band that was always more comfortable on stage than in the studio, this is perhaps the ultimate must-have Dead album, a celebration of what many believe to have been the finest show the band ever played. **NW**



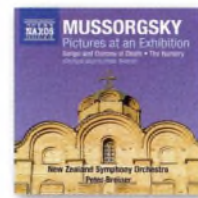
**Jan Lisiecki**  
Chopin Études  
Op 10 and Op 25



0289 479 1039 8 CD

Deutsche Grammophon

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



**Mussorgsky (Orch Breiner)**

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



Naxos

8 573016 CD or Blu-ray

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



### Rebecca Ferguson

Freedom



CD

RCA/Syco

**X FACTOR CONTESTANTS** shouldn't be as good as Rebecca Ferguson. Her's is a deeply heartfelt voice, able to convey rare depths, passion, empathy and longing. No small feat for a runner up. She tends to stick to R&B themes of men lost and found, but with a healthy dose of self-worth and inner strength shining through the vulnerability. Her second album features a series of pop soul songs all co-written by the lady herself and it's every bit as strong as her first. The arrangements are polished and give her voice plenty of room to breathe. Standouts include the pumping rhythms of the single *I Hope*, the quiet defiance of *My Freedom* and the surging soul power of *Fake Smile*. **DO**



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### AUDIOFILE VINYL



**Otis Rush**

Right Place, Wrong Time

180g vinyl

Bullfrog/PurePleasure



**RECORDED FOR**

**CAPITOL** in 1971, but not released until five years later, this is considered a highlight of Rush's four decade career and it's not hard to hear why. His style is

reminiscent of fellow Chicago bluesmen Buddy Guy and Albert King, with a thin-toned guitar sound and plenty of string bending. Much of this album is pacey, rocking blues with backing by brass, organ, piano and rhythm, all the players of which are as solid as you like, I particularly like the subtle piano of Mark Naftalin.

The sound is big thanks to the size of the band and some restraint when it comes to limiting/compression, which is rare for the genre. It was recorded at Wally Heider's San Francisco studio where CSNY, the Steve Miller Band and Creedence Clearwater Revival made some of their classic albums. Rush was a consummate blues guitarist and singer that much is clear, his style was perhaps not quite distinctive enough to achieve the prominence of Guy and perhaps there is some truth in the album title, because he deserved to do better. The playing on many of these numbers is first class and on *Lonely Man* and the instrumental *Easy Go* it's clearly on a par with the best in class. **JK**



## HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



**Laura Mvula  
with Metropole  
Orkest**  
Sing To  
The Moon



ALAC/FLAC 16/44

**B&W Society of Sound**

**A MEETING BETWEEN** the Mercury Prize nominee and the hippest orchestra on the planet seems like a match made in heaven and indeed, so it is. Electronics, chamber strings and multi-tracked vocals have been replaced by beautiful arrangements that enhance rather than reimagine the originals, which always sounded like they were conceived with an orchestra in mind. A superb interpretation of an already wonderful album. **DO**



**The Gloaming**  
The Gloaming



ALAC/FLAC 24/48

**B&W Society of Sound**

**THE GLOAMING ARE** an odd hybrid of traditional Irish folk and New York experimentalism. To the fore is Martin Hayes' plaintive violin, ably accompanied by piano, voice, guitar and hardanger fiddle on a series of sean-nós (old style) traditional songs. This is no exercise in nostalgia, though, and the five master musicians use the old songs as jumping off points to explore new directions and derive new depths of emotion. **DO**



**Each Brandenburg  
is scored for  
different combos  
of instruments**

## Bach

The Six Brandenburg Concertos  
The Dunedin Consort; John Butt



CDK 430 2 SACDs (CD Compatible) **Linn Records**

**JOHN BUTT AND** the Dunedin Consort deliver a lively and very musical account of Bach's Brandenburs. Unlike some performances, which set out to emphasise the bizarre and unusual aspects of the scoring, Butt tries to keep the more extreme details in check. He's aided by a well-balanced recording that sounds rich, warm, and detailed, yet transparent and clear. Each Brandenburg is scored for completely different combinations of instruments, so good modern performances, highlight and celebrate the huge variety of Bach's music. Common to all six works is the enthusiasm and vivacity of the playing, and it's that which makes it special. **JH**



HMC 902146 CD

**Bartok**  
Violin Concertos 1  
and 2; Isabelle Faust,  
Swedish Radio  
Symphony orchestra,  
Daniel Harding



**Harmonia Mundi**

**THE TWO CONCERTOS** for violin by Bartok are very contrasting pieces. The early first concerto, by turns lyrical and ardent then animated and grotesque, and the mercurial folk-inspired second concerto each inhabit very different worlds. Isabelle Faust makes the most of these extremes, and one is constantly astonished by the swings of mood and variety of pace, especially in the second concerto. She is admirably seconded by Daniel Harding and the SRSO, and Harmonia Mundi's recording sounds effortlessly smooth and refined, despite a wide dynamic range and some impressive deep bass. **JH**

## BLU-RAY DVD

**The Rolling Stones**  
Stones in Exile

DVD



In 1971 The Rolling Stones left the UK as tax exiles and spent a summer in France writing and recording *Exile On Main Street*. This documentary tells the story of the decadence of the time interspersed with the songs that ended up on one of their most influential albums. The extensive footage and stills give a real flavour of the place and time, while extended interviews with the band and others fill in the details that didn't make the final cut. What's most remarkable is how such a shambolic situation resulted in such great music. **JK**

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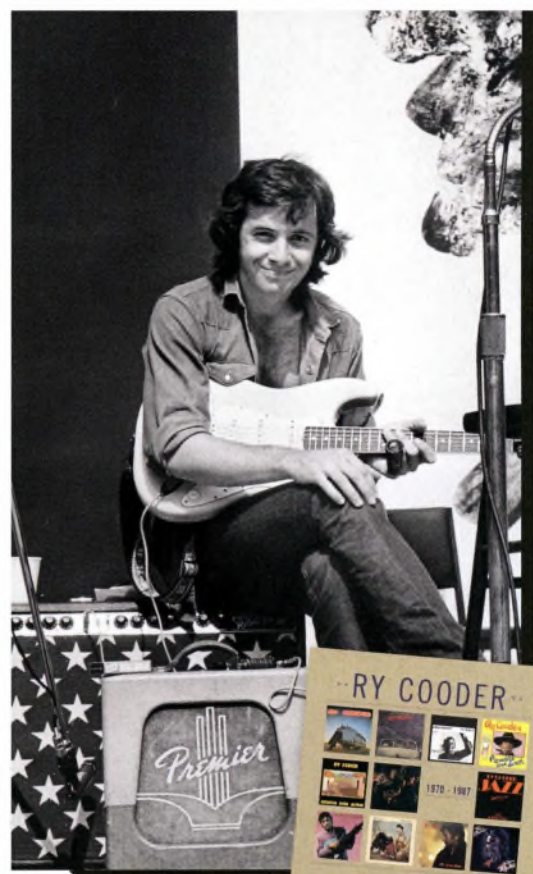
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## Ry Cooder

1970-87

★★★★★

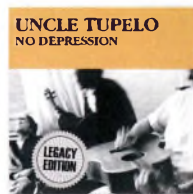
11 CD box set

Rhino

**BEFORE HE BECAME** a world music convert and began working with African and Cuban musicians, Cooder was the godfather of what we now call 'Americana'. This 11-disc set compiles all of the albums he made during his first golden age, an extraordinary journey that spans blues, folk, R&B, gospel, jazz, country, rock, Tex-Mex and Hawaiian styles. In effect, it's an encyclopaedic primer in indigenous American roots music, arcane but never academic, and always played with intuitive good taste.

**An extraordinary journey that spans blues, folk, R&B, gospel, jazz, country, rock...**

Cooder was only an average singer, but any vocal shortcomings are more than compensated by his virtuosic guitar playing. His 1979 album *Bop 'Til You Drop* (included here) was the first digital recording in pop. Interestingly, today it sounds decidedly clunky, while the warmth of earlier analogue albums has stood the test of time so that the likes of *Into The Purple Valley* (1972) and *Chicken Skin Music* (1976) sound as fresh today as when they were originally recorded. **NW**



## Uncle Tupelo No Depression: The Legacy Edition

★★★★★

Two CD expanded edition

Sony

**COUNTRY MUSIC BACK** in the early nineties was dominated by Garth Brooks, while on the other side of the musical coin indie rock was about to be eclipsed by a new movement called grunge. Enter Uncle Tupelo, a bunch of kids from the rust bowls of Illinois with a debut album that managed to combine the two; wistful melodies accented by mandolins and pedal steel that harked back to Hank Williams hitched to stinging rock guitars. The album birthed a movement that came to be known as alt-country. Now augmented by a second disc of demos and out takes, it still sounds invigoratingly fresh and bold. **NW**



## Alfredo Catalani Ero e Leandro (Symphonic Poem): Contemplazione; Il Mattino, Orchestra Sinfonica di Roma, Francesco La Vecchia

★★★★★

8 573074 CD

Naxos

**ALFREDO CATALANI IS** remembered for just one work – the opera *La Wally* – but he wrote other things, including some attractive orchestral pieces. The main work here is a dramatic, richly scored symphonic poem based on the Hero and Leander legend. *Contemplazione* is a rich, slow movement that's very lyrical and ardent, without being heavy or overly serious. The disc ends with *Il Mattino* a 'Sinfonia Romantica' here receiving its world premiere recording. The playing of the Rome orchestra is very good and the recording sounds excellent, with fine range and detail allowing you to savour the subtleties of Catalani's scoring. **JH**



## Ann Peebles

I Can't Stand The Rain

★★★★★

CD

Fat Possum

**Peebles' glorious voice is the very embodiment of seventies soul**

**ANN PEEBLES' URGENT**, impassioned voice is a hallmark of classic seventies soul. Backed by the veteran Hi Records rhythm and string sections who saw service with Al Green and OV Wright on their biggest hits, and produced by legendary R&B mastermind Willie Mitchell, her poised, insistent vocals soared, entreated, scolded and cajoled with equal fervour on a string of hits. Her five classic Hi Records albums have been re-released and while they all contain gems, 1974's *I Can't Stand The Rain* offers the best value for money, with at least two solid-gold classics (penned by Peebles and her husband Don Bryant) in the title track and *I'm Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down*. **DO**



## Grieg Holberg Suite; Two Elegiac Melodies; Erotik; String Quartet, Australian Chamber Orchestra, Richard Tognetti

★★★★★

1877 SACD

BIS

**HERE'S AN IMPRESSIVE** collection of Grieg's music for string orchestra, very well recorded. The disc begins with an arrangement of Grieg's *G Minor String Quartet*. The full body of strings lends the music greater colour and a wider range of dynamic extremes. It also demonstrates the vitality and virtuosity of the players. The popular *Holberg* suite is played with impressive vivacity, while the Two *Elegiac* melodies are suitably emotional. Massed strings are always a challenge to record and reproduce, but BIS has come up with a recording that combines warmth with clarity and brilliance with sweetness. **JH**

## BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

### Springsteen & I Bruce Springsteen

EAGLE VISION



Exec produced by Ridley Scott, this is a homage to the high priest of showmen rock 'n' rollers. It's made by and of the people who have been influenced and inspired by Springsteen.

It's more watchable than most rockumentaries because of the variety of user content interspersed with live footage, albeit of variable quality. There are many three word sum ups including one old lady's "happy, handsome and hot". It's great viewing even for non fans and reveals that while Bruce is indeed almighty he's also a fellow human being at heart. **JK**

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# KORG





## Frankie Goes To Hollywood

Frankie Said

★★★★★

2 CD box set

Union Square

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

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

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



Two CD deluxe edition

## Grace Jones Nightclubbing

★★★★★

Universal

**FIRST RELEASED IN** 1981, Jones' fifth album was an influential four-to-the-floor dance classic that captured the post-disco zeitgeist. Now remastered from the original analogue tapes for the first time in 35 years, it sounds as sophisticated as ever, mixing angular post-punk pop, funk, Georgio Moroder-style electronica and a reggae tinge supplied by the rhythm section of Sly & Robbie with the revolutionary influence of house music, emerging from Chicago at the time in the productions of Frankie Knuckles. A second bonus disc adds 12in remixes and previously unreleased tracks from the original sessions. **NW**



Two CD box set

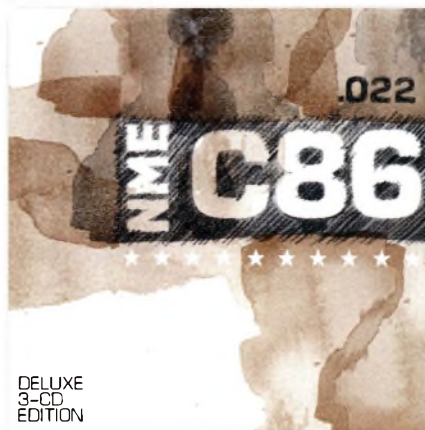
## Kirsty MacColl All I Ever Wanted: The Anthology

★★★★★

Salvo

**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**



Discover for yourself how skinny white boys sounded back in the eighties

## Various artists

C86

★★★★★

CD

Cherry Red

**ONCE UPON A** time there was a thing called 'indie' which roughly translated as skinny white boys (mostly) who shunned the lure of mammon in favour of artistic integrity, tinny guitars and a distinctly lo-fi approach to production.

The original C86 was a compilation tape available by mail order from the NME, which sought to provide a snapshot of 1986's indie scene.

This re-release triples the original single CD running time with a host of other bands of the era. At the time, it seemed too disparate to constitute a scene, but now youngsters barely born at the time are rediscovering an era when it was cool to put music ahead of 'likes' or units sold. **DO**



C289 479 1033 6 CDs

## Mozart

Piano concertos 20 (K466) and 25 (K503), Martha Argerich, Orchestra Mozart, Claudio Abbado

★★★★★

DG

**ALTHOUGH SHE HAS** a huge repertoire, Mozart has never figured much in Martha Argerich's recordings. She gives a magisterial performance, with many interesting and unusual insights, teasing out the hidden detail in Mozart's music. *K503* is one of his biggest most extrovert concertos, and she is equal to every demand. The demonic *K466* is likewise impassioned and powerful, and Argerich conveys its strength and pathos with unflinching command. The late Claudio Abbado and the Orchestra Mozart are with their distinguished soloist every step of the way, and DG's live recordings sound spacious but incisive. **JH**

## BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

### Lou Reed

Transformer & Live at Montreux 2000

Blu-ray

EAGLE VISION



The Montreux footage shows Reed with his words and a muscular band, they play 16 tracks - only one of which was on the classic album also documented here. There is no footage from the era, but

we get Reed, Ronson, Bowie and Scott among others going over the songs. As Lenny Kaye puts it: "Lou brought back portraits from the wild side", songs that Dave Stewart considers to be pure poetry and when Reed reads them you realise that he's right. Reed says that *Transformer* was "just an album" but it was among the best of its time. **JK**









## Oasis

### Definitely Maybe: Chasing The Sun Edition

★★★★★

HOT PICK

3-CD expanded edition **Big Brother Recordings**

**CAN IT REALLY** be 20 years since the Britpop wars were considered of sufficient cultural significance for the spat between Oasis and Blur to make front-page news in tabloids and broadsheets alike? Indeed it is, and two decades on the ability of Oasis and the quarrelsome Gallagher brothers to court controversy is undimmed: on the announcement that the group's 1994 debut album is to be reissued, former lead singer Liam resorted to Twitter to urge Oasis fans to boycott the expanded new edition.

He probably said it just to irk Noel, who has raided the vaults to augment the original album's 11 songs with another 33 tracks spread across two further discs, including demos, live recordings and the rather good stand-alone single *Whatever*.

History moves at a pace these days and its judgement has not been particularly kind to Oasis. While Blur's Damon Albarn has gone on to be

acknowledged as the most inventive and original British pop auteur since David Bowie, Oasis have been dismissed as a one-trick pony who recorded seven more-or-less identical albums recycling ideas borrowed from the Beatles with ever-diminishing returns until they broke up after another inevitable fight between Noel and Liam in 2009. There's something in the criticism. But if they only had one trick, their debut reminds us that for a while at least, the trick was damn near irresistible.

"How can you remaster something that's already mastered? Don't buy into it. Let it be," Liam Gallagher tweeted. In the narrowest sense, he has a point. The original 52 minute album was brilliantly produced by Owen Morris to create a sonic palette characterised by a swagger, volume and aggression that surely requires no further tweaking – and it will take more acute ears than mine to detect any significant differences between the 'old'

and 'new' masters on offer here. But then the point of a 20th anniversary reissue is surely not to sound radically different, but to evoke nostalgic familiarity.

Listening to *Definitely Maybe* in 2014 is to understand why Oasis connected a new generation to the notion that rock 'n' roll mattered and could define their lives in a way that few bands have managed since. From the snarl of the perfect opener *Rock'n'Roll Star* and the hedonistic rush of *Live Forever* via the classic riff of *Cigarettes and Alcohol* to the heart-rending *Slide Away* and the sardonic closer *Married With Children*, there's not much subtlety. It's triumphalist and bragging as the best, purest rock 'n' roll so often is. The extras are packed with memorable moments, too, including previously unheard acoustic versions of *Live Forever* and *Shakermaker*, an early demo of *Half The World Away* recorded in Noel's hotel room and ace b-sides such as *Fade Away* and *Listen Up*. **NW** ▶



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## SUPPORTED BY







**Dr. John**  
Gris Gris

★★★★★

CD

Real Gone

**MALCOLM JOHN 'MAC'** Rebennack (that's Dr John to you and I) is best known for his funky New Orleans R&B piano playing. But his 1968 debut was a more singular affair – a weird, psychedelic take on voodoo ritual with Cajun overtones and ghostly, disembodied voices.

The album's most famous song, *I Walk On Guided Splinters* was later covered by Paul Weller. Its spooked sound is typical of the album, although much of the rest is even more outlandish and mysterious. The original stereo mix – retained here in all its spectacular exaggeration – adds to the album's unique and wonderful strangeness. **NW**



**Chromeo**  
White Women

★★★★★

Parlophone

**FOR THEIR FOURTH** album, the Canadian electro duo have created a tribute to eighties pop funk that could show Daft Punk a thing or two. *White Women* is packed full of R&B rhythms, fizzing pop hooks, choppy guitar riffs, rock bombast, bleeping electronica and a whole lot of fun. The soaring falsetto harmonies of opener *Come Alive* are pure Prince. *I'm Jealous'* infectious beat counterpoints a tale of a player's inner feelings, while Beyonce's li'l sis Solange pops up for an unshowy cameo on *Lost On The Way Home*. This isn't how the eighties were, but in some, slightly better alternative universe, it's how they should have been. **DO**

## Elton John

Goodbye Yellow Brick Road

★★★★★

Expanded deluxe box set four CDs plus DVD

Universal

**BY ELTON'S EIGHTH** album in 1973 the costumes and the campy were getting increasingly outrageous, but the larger-than-life showmanship was not permitted to get in the way of the burnished songcraft. *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* included some of the most poignant songs John ever penned with lyricist Bernie Taupin. Several had a cinematic theme, evincing the bittersweet taste of Hollywood fame led, of course, by *Candle In The Wind*.

## The larger-than-life showmanship was not permitted to get in the way of the songcraft

But the sheer diversity of the original album's 17 songs is breathtaking.

The remastering sounds crisp and lends a souped-up roar to potent rockers such as *Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting*.

Also included are a live Christmas 1973, show at Hammersmith Odeon, a period documentary on DVD, and demos, out-takes and cover versions by the likes of Ed Sheeran and Emeli Sandé, which might appear a little overblown, but the material is strong enough to bear the load. **NW**



**Father and son come together for a bit of west African harping**

## Toumani and Sidiki Diabate

Toumani and Sidiki

★★★★★

CD

World Circuit

**THIS IS THE** first joint venture by undisputed master of the west African harp Toumani with his eldest son and the results are impressive with young Sidiki (23 actually) clearly a chip off the old block. It's acoustic kora duels all the way. The playing is simply stunning, with lightning-fast glissandos counterpointed by busy, shifting, chameleon rhythms that drive the pyrotechnics of each soloist to greater heights.

Sidiki's playing tends to be fierce and fiery where his dad's is more considered, not so showy, but perhaps more evocative and nuanced. The blend is often sensational, with the pair playing to each other's strengths to create a masterpiece. **DO**

## AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

### Aretha Franklin

Live at Fillmore West

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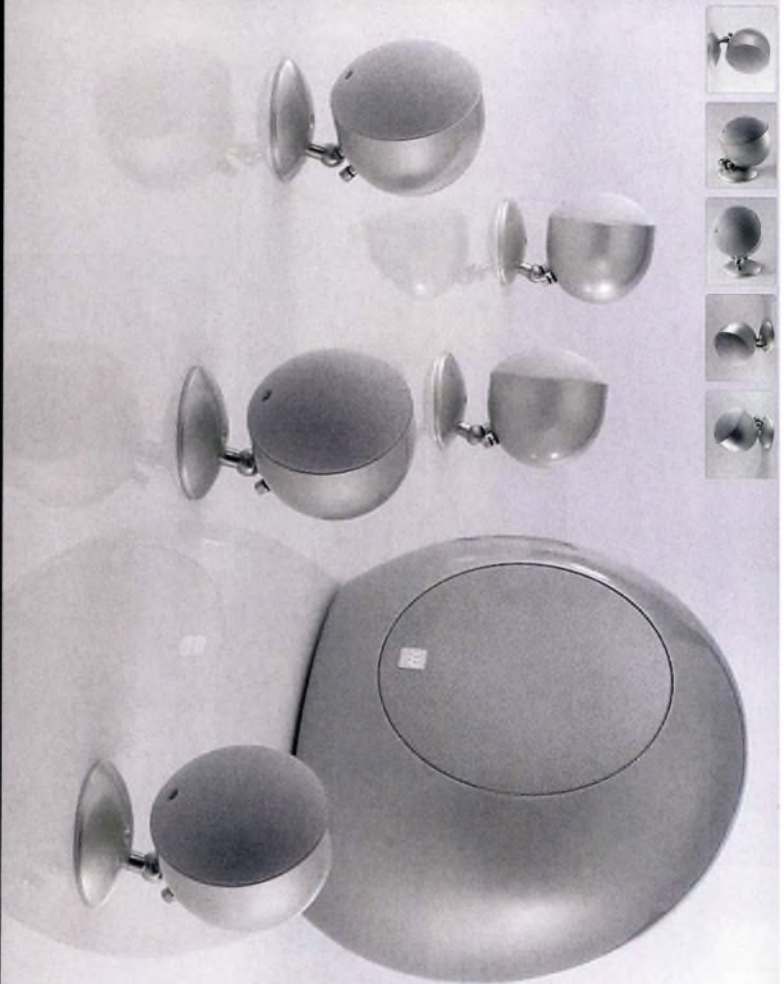


#### IF YOU'VE EVER

experienced Joe Cocker's *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* you will have some idea of what to expect from this 1971 performance by the queen of soul. Staged

at the quintessential counter culture venue, it features an all-star cast playing a variety of great songs some of which would have been performed by their originators in the same place. It kicks off with a rendition of *Respect* that would have made Otis proud and which introduces the scale of the ensemble: brass with King Curtis,

keyboards from the inordinately funky Billy Preston and drums courtesy of latter-day break beat king Bernard Purdie. Add in backing vocalists from the first church of hot soul, conga and Cornell Dupree on guitar and you start to get the idea. What that doesn't tell you is how much energy is coming from the audience, they push Aretha to new heights of intensity. There's only one Franklin original, *Spirit In The Dark*, but two versions, the second with Ray Charles on guest vocals. Highlights include *Love The One You're With* with a far tighter band than CSN and a highly individual version of *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. The sound is thin by the highest standards, but the soul power is in the top flight. **JK**



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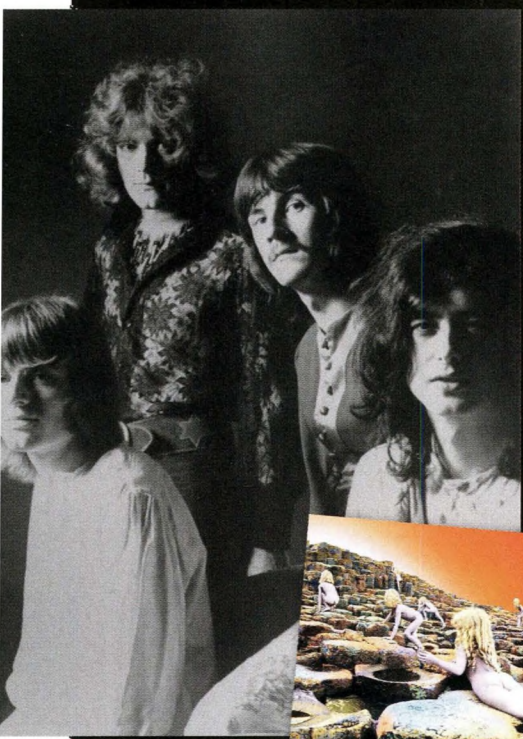
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## Led Zeppelin

Led Zeppelin IV Deluxe Edition

★★★★★

Two CDs

Rhino

**AFTER THE FIRST** three Led Zep albums got the expanded two disc treatment earlier this year, here comes the behemoth – the second-biggest selling British album ever, remastered by Jimmy Page and augmented by a second disc that includes previously unheard alternative mixes of each of the original album's eight tracks. The band's fifth album, *Houses Of The Holy*, is simultaneously released in a similarly expanded version. But *IV* was Zep's

**So do the 'new' versions of the original tracks add anything? Sadly the answer is no**

Himalayan peak and by comparison its follow up barely got above the tree line.

So do the 'new' versions of the original tracks add anything to what made the original so memorable? Sadly the answer is no. *Battle Of Evermore* and *Going To California* sound disarmingly like the Incredible String Band, while the main difference in the fabled 'alternative' Sunset Sound mix of *Stairway To Heaven* is that it simply sounds muddier. **NW**



## Sarah Jane Morris

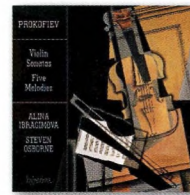
Bloody Rain

★★★★★

CD

Fallen Angel

**SINCE TOPPING THE** charts back in 1986 with the Communards on the hit *Don't Leave Me This Way*, Morris has sidestepped the mainstream and forged her own independent path. Her voice is as expressive as ever, sounding like a British Nina Simone on a set of protest songs about such varied subjects as child soldiers, homophobia, honour killings and political tyranny. Backed by a brilliant cast that includes jazz saxophonist Courtney Pine and James Brown's horn man Pee-Wee Ellis, it packs a dramatic punch, often uplifting, occasionally harrowing, but always passionate and challenging. **NW**



## Prokofiev

Violin Sonatas;  
Five Melodies  
Alina Ibragimova  
(violin) Steven  
Osborne (piano)

★★★★★

CD

Hyperion

**PROKOFIEV'S TWO VIOLIN** sonatas have received a number of fine recordings over the years, but this new coupling goes straight to the top of the list. Ibragimova's technique is remarkable; all the more so, because she plays with little or no vibrato, yet hits every note absolutely perfectly in terms of intonation. Like all great artists, she makes everything sound easy and natural. The Hyperion recording is superlative, being natural and unexaggerated, yet crisply focused and very detailed. You feel you can count the hairs on the bow, yet somehow the sonic perspective is not claustrophobic; despite a fairly close balance. **JH**



## The Baroque Era

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**THE EARLY SEVENTIES** witnessed a revolution in the performance of early music. The aim being to authentically recreate the original sound of the period. And, to add that extra slice of authenticity, the record label itself had to specialise. So in 1974, Decca resurrected its L'Oiseau Lyre label, and launched Florilegium. It would grow into one of the biggest and best labels for authentic performances. This is the first of three Florilegium boxsets, and it's devoted to music of the Baroque era. The recordings are good and offer a nice weighty richness and bloom compared to the lighter thinner sound typical of DG/Archiv. There's also the original LP sleeves used for each CD. **JH**



## Prokofiev

Symphonies 3 and 7  
Bournemouth  
Symphony orchestra  
Kirill Karabits

★★★★★

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Onyx

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# Everybody's changing

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

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

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

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

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

singles from bands and artists whose names I hadn't yet heard of – musical variety clearly didn't stretch quite as far as I reckoned in the record stores that I was used to visiting in Kettering, and tastes are obviously very different in Northamptonshire to the more eclectic ones found in London. Who knew there was so much unheard of music out there? So much to see, to hear, to discover!

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

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

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

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

## Days of our lives

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

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

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



Picture courtesy of Tupungato/Shutterstock

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



**LEE DUNKLEY**  
Hi-Fi Choice editor





# Mission control

It's time to turn back the clocks and remember the huge mark that Mission's superb Cyrus One and Two integrations made on Britain's amplifier market

**L**aunched in 1977, Mission fast became a successful loudspeaker manufacturer with bold, innovative designs like the 770, but the company didn't take long to get into electronics and the 776/777 preamplifier/power amplifier combination was equally radical. It had a DC battery-powered preamp stage and a striking-looking power amplifier with an iron fascia into which the Mission logo was cast. It was an amazing flagship product, but the company needed something more mass market, and the 778 integrated was born.

This sported an equally imaginative, but rather less flamboyant half-width look, said to have been inspired by the first Sony PCM-F1 video recorder. Its fascia was the epitome of modernist minimalism, using just three identically sized control knobs for volume, input source and record source respectively. The latter feature was novel at the time, and handy in an age when home tape recording was popular. Apart from a headphone

socket on the side, a good MM/MC phono stage inside and a power button to the right of the fascia, that was your lot in terms of frills. Its all-discrete transistor design gave a clean-sounding 50W RMS per channel.

From the 778 came the Cyrus One. Launched in 1984, it shared the same dimensions and much of the chassis, but with a few detail changes. The inhouse styling was virtually identical,

## Its bright and bubbly sound really suited the warm vinyl front ends of the day

but this new cheaper integrated had a top case made from a NASA-developed plastic called Nyrol. It was the first Mission product not to have a number, instead being named after the Persian king Cyrus the Great.

"Initially we wanted to build affordable amps, tuned to bring the extended hi-fi benefits of more

expensive kit," remembers Cyrus' technical director Peter Bartlett. "I can recall demonstrating the Cyrus One against amps costing 10 times as much, and wiping the floor with them. This was one of a small number of hi-fi products that truly changed the game at the time. Commercially, Cyrus amps were intended to make a fabulous sound with Mission speakers for students on a budget."

## The chosen One

The 30W RMS per channel Cyrus One proved an overnight sensation. It offered much of what the far more expensive 778 had done, including its superb styling (sadly it lacked its moving coil phono preamplifier), but cost just £130 on launch. In 1984, this was a direct rival to NAD's contender at the time, the 3130, which felt cheaper and more plasticky, and also had far more prosaic styling. Champagne corks were popping at Mission then, until the orders got ever higher and the company began to struggle to fulfil



them. "After the first year we realised that we had to reconsider our manufacturing processes," says Bartlett, "as demand totally outstripped our manufacturing capabilities of the time. We duly attempted to make them in the Far East but sonic consistency was an issue, so instead we made the decision to build a state-of-the-art factory in Huntingdon."

It wasn't surprising that the Cyrus One sold so well. Compared with its rivals it seemed like budget esoterica, rather than the Creek CAS4040s of this world which – although very worthy sonically – were hardly the stuff of high-end hi-fi dreams. Even if it didn't sound impossibly exotic, the One certainly looked it. It was also great fun to listen to; although limited in outright power and a little light in the bass, it had a bright and bubbly sound that really suited the warm vinyl front ends of the day, and the slightly soft and fuzzy sounding speakers. Its phono stage was excellent, providing a fast, detailed and engaging sound. With CD players of the day, it was a little stark and in your face, but modern silver-disc spinners and DACs suit it better now.

By 1985, the company was making hundreds of amplifiers a month, as well as selling a deservedly popular range of loudspeakers. When the production side stabilised, Mission's next act was to launch the Cyrus Two. Selling for £250, it shared its sibling's dinky size, but was a considerably reworked design inside. Power went up to 50W RMS per side with double the current-driving capability, a moving coil phono input was reinstated and the disc stage was tweaked with 11dB improvement to its signal-to-noise ratio. Like the Cyrus One, internal construction comprised a single printed circuit board and large toroidal mains transformer. Fast complementary power transistors were run in Class AB mode giving direct coupled output. Rear connections continued as upward-facing RCA phono sockets – great for access, but a real dust trap!

Most interesting about the Mission Cyrus Two, though, was its socket for the £200 external add-on PSX power supply. This considerably improved the amplifier's sound, bringing a much greater sense of ease, depth and smoothness to an already clean and musical performer. The stock Cyrus Two was something of a fast and furious listen, like its older brother, but on steroids, whereas the

addition of the PSX really smoothed it out and gave it a far more high-end sound, like a larger pre-power amplifier combination. The Cyrus Two/PSX sounded more grippy, bolder and had stronger bass – making it particularly suited to the new era of inefficient eighties loudspeakers like Celestion's notorious SL6. These would make mincemeat of a Cyrus One and made a Two struggle, but the PSX really did upgrade its capabilities enough to countenance far harder loads than Mission's own loudspeakers.

### The glory days

For a short period in the mid eighties, Mission could do no wrong. Peter Bartlett recalls: "People were amazed by the ability of this diminutive little amp. The *Hi-Fi Choice* year book had NAD, Pioneer and other amps listed, but the Cyrus amps dominated. I knew of retailers at the time who took deposits against deliveries in three months! Mission became the most attractive agency to stock and, although we had every retailer scheduling six months in advance, we still could not keep up with demand. The glory days of hi-fi!"

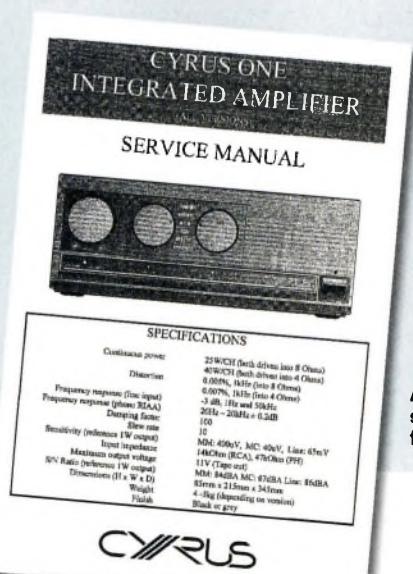
By the end of the decade, Mission began to tweak its baby amplifiers. Both kept their special 70MHz output devices, but internal components "evolved", as Peter Bartlett puts it. The company went through every element of the circuit design to squeeze the best out of it, without radically redesigning what was basically an excellent product. "The Cyrus One and Two models incrementally got better and better," says Bartlett. In 1986 the amplifiers appeared with a backlit Cyrus logo instead of an LED indicator, along with the use of a metal case. The big moment was in 1990, when the case was heavily redesigned; rather like

### MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

The Cyrus brand of today is an offshoot of Mission, but both companies have undergone countless changes since the latter launched in the mid-seventies. Farad and Henry Azima's company was a great British success story, but there was no shortage of superstition on their part according to ex-MD Peter Bartlett; they believed odd numbers were lucky, which is why 'Mission Cyrus' had seven and five letters respectively! Loudspeakers proved an early success in the seventies, then the Mission Cyrus amplifiers set showrooms alight in the eighties. So much so that in the nineties, Mission began acquiring its rivals. The company's research and development department grew as Quad, Wharfedale, Roksan and other brands were purchased. The team included many specialists working first on the then-new FEI technologies and later in NXT Distributed Mode loudspeakers. In 1996 NXT was set up as a standalone company that was later floated at £1.2 billion; understandably this dominated the group and it duly sold its 'non-core' audio businesses. This saw Roksan, Quad and Mission being unloaded between 2001 and 2003, and Peter Bartlett buying Cyrus in 2005. He sold most of his stake last year and is now technical director.

each new generation Porsche 911, it looked very similar to the old one, but was better in many ways. Both One and Two models went to superior diecast aluminium cases, with revised fascias sporting a new, non-backlit Cyrus logo with no mention of Mission to be seen. They also had a flip-up power switch and tiny round LED pilot lamp, plus a dual-ganged volume/balance control and switchable muting.

In 1991, the world said goodbye to the classic Cyrus One and Cyrus Two, and with it the Mission name on electronics altogether. The Cyrus 3 arrived and evolved the design language of its predecessors; arguably it was the purest-looking product since the 778 and a thing of beauty with its slightly softened, less angular case with beautiful detailing. The amp benefited from several high-end audio engineering concepts such as the non-ferrous magnesium metal chassis, and it also had a remote control, which was becoming essential on any mid-price amplifier. Selling for £499, it was considerably more expensive than the (then) £399 Cyrus Two, and sounded quite different with a more sophisticated, grown-up nature. The simple, affordable magic of the original Mission Cyrus amplifiers was gone, but lives on in many satisfied customers' listening rooms; even to this day it's a fine sounding bit of kit. Given that Cyrus continues to service them, bargain hunters looking for a classic amp could do a lot worse ●



An original service manual for the Cyrus One



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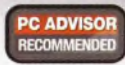
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# The future's bright

Futurologist **David Price** looks into his crystal ball and predicts that 10 years from now it won't all be about manned spaceflights to Mars or the latest Apple iDevices!

**W**hen I was a child back in the seventies, I obsessed on 'the year two thousand', seeing it as an emblematic turning point, after which we'd all be living in 'the future'. At the time, it felt like there was an Apollo space mission launching every month, and we all shared a sense of wonderment and hope that the onward march of technology would turn all our lives into something we'd never imagined before.

The arrival on TV in 1974 of Gerry Anderson's *Space 1999* only confirmed this – by the end of the twentieth century we'd have bases on the moon with all nations working for the good of humankind. And the delivery mechanism would be technology – computers would hold the key, along with orange boiler suits and facial hair!

It's now 40 years on, and where are we now? The fact that I got excited recently by China landing an unmanned probe on the moon shows the gap between my youthful dreams of the future, and present-day reality. This saddens the eight-year old schoolboy in me; I grew up during the Space Race and feel cheated that it was never fully run. Or was it – perhaps it took place in inner space, not outer?

If we want to look at where our development has gone, we should look at things closer to home, like the computer I am writing these words on. While the schoolboy in me is still gutted we're not flying Eagle Transporters and zapping

## Computing power will transform the future more than any mission to Mars

NASA computer in the Kennedy Space Center in 1969. The amazing integration of electronic circuitry is surely no less impressive than those grandiose engineering projects like putting men on the moon?

This sort of computing power is now on sale for pennies. For example, the new £30 Datawind tablet was originally developed for third-world countries, but still sports a 1GHz processor when the faster computers on sale in the seventies were a paltry 1MHz. In a way, this is as profound as moon bases, yet somehow harder to fathom. Cheap, powerful hardware means we can do practically anything with software. For example, the Datawind can be purposed for playing or controlling music with a level of sophistication unimaginable just a decade ago.

This dramatic ramping up of our computing power will transform the next 10 years more than any mission to Mars. Nowadays, new 'things' don't come about from the endeavours of multinationals, like they used to. In the old

days, Sony or Philips would send its men in white coats off to a research facility, only to appear blinking into the sunlight a few years later with the way we'd all be listening to music in the future. But software doesn't require such actions any more and this is surely one of the most important developments of the new century.

Now, music is suddenly disappearing into the ether – it's either on a virtual cloud or on your hard drive under the stairs, flying around your home network. And in 10 years expect virtually all your physical media – from music to movies to magazines – to have disappeared into cyberspace, yet be instantly accessible from any number of gadgets yet to be invented. The term 'smart home' is used too often by property developers, futurologists and people with fashionable glasses, but in a few years it will gain traction as people want everything from their TV to their bath and fridge controlled by their iPad. That fifties American dream of full automation is becoming a reality.

## Back to the future

Of course, this is going to have an effect on the way we listen to music too – indeed for many people it will mean the end of what we call 'hi-fi'. There's no separate section of a MacBook Pro to exclusively deal with music, so why should your house's central computer have one? Rather, every form of media – from television and video phones to computer games and music – will begin to arrive via the same route. If people want separate hi-fi, then it will have to be fully compliant and controllable by one of the house control protocols we haven't invented yet!

There's a crumb of comfort for us old-fashioned, living-in-the-past types. With so many of our boxes having migrated to a small single control centre under the stairs, there will be more room for old-fashioned books and LPs. Some people will never give up on physical media, and indeed it may well become more special and coveted. Who'd have thought that in 2024, maybe the only things on display in your living room will be a big stack of vinyl? Maybe the future is bright, after all! ●



**The future DP dreamt of hasn't happened, but in many ways it's been bettered**



The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the attitudes or opinions of Hi-Fi Choice or AV Tech Media Ltd. Picture: ©Andreas Meyer



# Scale model

With its LS3/5A monitor, the BBC attempted to offer a grown-up sound from a small loudspeaker, it's time to listen with Auntie...

**T**here is plenty of fine classic hi-fi, and many excellent products that have stood the test of time. But the BBC 'monitoring loudspeaker type LS3/5A' goes beyond this and has become the stuff of legend. What was revolutionary about it was its performance relative to its physical dimensions. Before its arrival, all small speakers were regarded as sonically inferior to larger ones. There was no sense that a diminutive design could in some ways be better than a big one.

"It's a loudspeaker that gives the impression of having a lot more bass than it actually has," says Spondor's Philip Swift. "Nobody put so much effort into compact, low coloration loudspeakers than the BBC."

The story starts back in the early seventies, when our national broadcaster decided it required a compact speaker for its outside broadcast vans. This prompted the

commencement of work in the corporation's Research Department, under the stewardship of HD (Dudley) Harwood at Kingswood Warren. A team led by TE Sommerville and DE Shorter had been undertaking research into acoustic scaling, and came up with a quarter-scale monitor. The legend goes that it was thought to have good performance down to 100Hz, despite only having been designed to reach 400Hz, for speech-related purposes. The team found it worked well with music material, especially when wall mounted. It was dubbed the LS3/5, and found its way into mobile TV control rooms for producers to monitor mixing desk output.

Shortly before the BBC was about to issue licences to a number of companies – as well as the BBC's own Equipment Department – to manufacture it, the drive unit supplier changed some characteristics of the

mid/bass driver, and the speaker was carefully reworked. When this was finally done, it was renamed LS3/5A and commercial production licences were finally granted to a number of British loudspeaker companies.

This two-way infinite baffle design uses a specially selected KEF B110 Bextrene mid/bass driver and T27 SP1032 19mm mylar dome tweeter. The latter is fitted with a perforated metal grille, which BBC engineers said, "has a small effect on the frequency response, which is wholly beneficial as it raises the output somewhat at high frequencies". Thick strips of felt surrounded the tweeter to reduce secondary waves reflected by the cabinet edges.

## Box of delights

The box itself is extremely carefully constructed and damped. The cabinet walls are 12mm birch plywood, braced on every joint with beech wood battens. Lots of work went into its design, to the point that different types of hardwoods were auditioned for the bracing. For example, one seventies report states that BBC engineers found Pirana Pine to have clearly audible colouration due to it resonating with the bass driver chassis, and so was rejected. The cabinet walls received a layer of Bostik sound deadening panelling, and a layer of 16mm anechoic-grade foam went on the sides, along with two layers of deadening pads and a 25mm layer of foam. The result was a heavy, highly acoustically inert box.

The crossover was unusually complex for a small speaker, using 26 elements. One of the reasons for this was that it was designed to work optimally with a wide variety of drive unit samples. In the event of a tweeter blowing, the service engineer would measure the replacement unit and select the appropriate tap position on the autotransformer to give optimal frequency response. The crossover itself is mounted behind the tweeter and damped by a thick felt

**A legend in the making: the LS3/5A**





pad to prevent resonance. "It was this elaborate crossover network, done very carefully and very skillfully, that gave a much better sounding speaker" says Philip Swift.

Construction techniques varied from manufacturer to manufacturer, with Audiomaster pulling each crossover component tight onto the board to prevent resonance, while Rogers used the long legs of the components to keep them away from the board. Even the grille cloth was carefully specified to be in contact with the felt stripes around the tweeter or there would be a frequency response anomaly.

The BBC's Equipment Department manufactured small numbers for reference purposes, to maintain quality control with outside suppliers. Legend has it that each licensee would keep a BBC-built pair of speakers to use as a production reference; an official production test schedule required these to be compared to the licensee's production run speaker using high-quality tape

## After a period of inactivity, it is back in production via Stirling Broadcast

recordings of a variety of programme material. Quality control was rigorous, with lots of companies that applied for licences being rejected.

As it transpired, the first two manufacturers were Rogers and Chartwell, then Harbeth (the company formed by Dudley Harwood on leaving the Beeb) and Spondor (formed by Spencer Hughes, chief engineer of the BBC's acoustic scaling speaker project) followed. Then other licensees including Audiomaster (whose designer Robin Marshall later founded Epos) and RAM, Goodmans and KEF. More recently, others such as Stirling Broadcast have embarked on LS3/5A production. The first LS3/5A bore the Rogers brand, was released in 1975 and is now a collector's item.

Some believe Rogers made the best versions, because the company was first to market. It's certainly true that there were minor component variations – Rogers bought in its chokes and Chartwell wound its own. For a good part of the seventies, Rogers and Chartwell Electro Acoustic Ltd were both owned by Swisstone Electronics, and the speakers were reportedly made on the same line. In truth, the LS3/5A was very closely

### LS3/5A VARIANTS

In the late seventies, Jim Rogers produced the JR149, using the same drivers as the LS3/5A in a cylindrical aluminium housing. Aside from looking radical, the round enclosure is more rigid and holds fewer standing waves, making for a better sound. As a key manufacturer of the speaker, Spondor has also done several revisions, such as the S3/5se. The original seventies Spondor SA1 was a direct rival and the company's brand new D1 is its spiritual successor, says Philip Swift. In the nineties, Harbeth re-engineered the speaker to produce the HL-P3ES, which sounds similar, but is again a better all rounder.

The LS3/5A itself got just two major changes over the course of its long life, the first being when it became 11ohms instead of 15, and the second when it was made bi-wirable. Aficionados have strong views about the relative merits of both. Rogers' matching stand/subwoofer – the AB1 – came along in 1995 and transformed the baby box into a far more usable loudspeaker. More recently, however, the little speaker has been resurrected by Stirling Broadcast which has been granted a licence to make the LS3/5A V2. This uses Stirling's own drivers, as KEF's are no longer available, but is said to retain the authentic BBC sound.

specified and highly tolerated, so there will be a very high degree of uniformity across the manufacturers, with some brands lying slightly above the average, and others below.

In 1988 the little box got the first of two updates, with the mid/bass unit getting a more lossy vinyl material in its surround. The crossover was also tweaked to bring the frequency response a little closer to the original target, and also to make the speaker fractionally easier to drive. The speaker was no longer specified at 15ohms – quoted impedance became nominally 11. Subsequently bi-wiring was introduced, bringing the LS3/5A into the modern era.

Some think the LS3/5A to have a sublime and unique sound that has never been bettered, others believe it to be an outdated anachronism, limited by its ancient drive units with their low-tech cone materials. What's certainly agreed is that the 83dB sensitivity of the speaker makes it essential to use a powerful solid-state amplifier – around 50W RMS per channel at the very least. The LS3/5As also work best on frame stands – such as those made for the Linn Kan – very close to a rear wall.

Properly set up and with good partnering equipment, LS3/5As sound very smooth and well balanced, almost euphonic. There's a dramatic lack of boxiness to them that lets you listen right into the sound. However, they have a very small scale by the standards of most speakers,

and there's a sense you're peering through a compact looking glass. Bass is surprisingly enjoyable for a speaker that almost has none, being tight and clearly delineated. The midband is most pleasing in its clarity and neutrality, and the treble is smooth and delicate, but not very extended.

The LS3/5A seems happiest with light acoustic and small scale classical, where its fine tone and subtlety can shine through. Put some crunching heavy metal on and you'll feel let down by the lack of bass extension, slightly compressed dynamics (especially at higher volumes) and a rather unatmospheric high treble. Its problem is that it just can't shift air like big speakers, and goes to pieces if asked to.

### End of an era

Ultimately, the LS3/5As problem was that it had had its day fairly early into its life. Spondor still has original documents from the company's founder Spencer Hughes – who was involved with the original design – saying that, "the advent of pop music will lead to a requirement for speakers that can take more power". So, best think of this as a specialised product that does a few things well and others not quite so adeptly.

Up to 1988, over 60,000 pairs were made, and after a period of inactivity, it is back in production again via Stirling Broadcast. Expect to pay between £500 and £1,200 depending on age, type and condition; £800 should get you a very nice, usable pair which if looked after is unlikely to ever depreciate ●

An early advert for the LS3/5A from Chartwell





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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**

**L**oons 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





# Sci-fi choice

Step back in time with us as we remember ADC's 1700, a turntable from the time of quartz crystals, space exploration and *Star Wars*...

**L**aunched in November 1979, the ADC 1700 turntable arrived blinking in the bright sunlight of a brave new technological world where computers, space exploration and science-fiction all seemed to meld into one glorious vision of the future. It was bold, brilliant and fresh – at a stroke, the beige-ness of the seventies was banished. In a world of *Star Wars*, Kraftwerk's *Computer World* and *Blake's Seven*, this new turntable looked as bang up-to-date then as the latest Apple gadget does now.

This expensive (£140) and large (470 x 382 x 153mm) machine was a quartz-locked, direct drive design. At the time the 'belt drive versus direct drive' war was raging hardest. Direct drive technology was getting cheaper, better and beginning to displace ever more belt drive decks. Direct drive meant that the motor was mounted right at the centre of, and around the underside of the platter, the spindle and bearing housing and the motor effectively acting as one. Whereas traditionally you had a rubber belt transferring the drive from a separate motor on belt drive decks, on a direct drive model the platter was directly attached to the motor itself.

This meant there was no need to change a belt, and that overall performance wasn't affected as the belt deteriorated. But more significantly, any rubber belt decouples the motor's torque from the platter, and is less well able to respond to minute speed variations from dynamic wow, whereas direct drive didn't suffer this. Adding a quartz crystal reference to the servo system gave the direct drive motor an

**With classical music the ADC 1700 is impressively quiet and civilised**

absolute speed reference on which to lock, and this made for even better speed stability, better than any belt drive system could hope for. To wit, the ultimate deck that mainstream turntable buyers around the world aspired to was a quartz-locked direct one – and so the words 'Quartz Speed Control' were duly inscribed on the ADC's plinth in clear white type like a badge of honour!

At the time of launch, Audio Dynamics Corporation was a division

of British turntable company BSR Ltd, based in Warley in the West Midlands. The ADC brand itself was originally American, formed by Peter Prichard in New Milford, Connecticut in the early sixties. The company was responsible for some innovative cartridges using induced magnets. It also did some rather interesting low mass tonearms – the LMF-2 and 1 using carbon-fibre armtubes, and the AIT-1 being a cost-cut aluminium tubed variant. They ranged in price from £44 to £70, which wasn't cheap at the time.

ADC was a good brand, then – and an excellent badge for BSR to attach to its new range of mid-priced turntables. The ADC 1700 topped this new premium range of decks, with quartz-locked direct drive motor and semi-automatic operation. The ADC 1600 was the same, but lost the switchable quartz-lock, and the ADC 1500 went to belt drive, manual operation with a cheaper stainless steel tubed, S-shaped tonearm. All came with ADC cartridges bundled as standard, adding substantially to the value of the package.

All the new ADC decks sported a satin-black painted, injection moulded ABS plinth that had



damping foam squirted inside. The result, however, was a plinth that was neither as rigid or as inert as ADC claimed, even if it was better than many competitors. The deck got some very decent isolating feet, closely resembling Micro Seiki Microsorbers, although they were neither as good or as expensive. This made for a relatively cheap-to-produce but sophisticated looking plinth, which did a reasonable job of isolating the record from the outside world. In truth, you still needed to place it well away from your loudspeakers, and take the horribly resonant green tinted dustcover off for best results.

### Platter of fact

The platter is a 302mm, 1kg disc of aluminium that is dynamically balanced, and features strobe indents at the bottom. ADC made a big deal of using an LFD linked to the quartz lock circuit, as opposed to neon. Its sharp, square wave pulses of light were obviously something worth getting excited about! The quartz lock system itself, running at 5.8MHz, was switchable so the speed could be varied by as much as 6 percent by any budding punk rockers or disco divas of the day. The platter is topped off by a great looking, 'podule-effect' rubber mat, but it is of poor quality, and can easily be upgraded with the likes of an Origin Live Platter Mat (£40). "Only an atomic clock is more accurate", said ADC in its advertising copy – and to its credit the system still works perfectly on our sample 35 years on. The company claimed 0.03% WRMS wow and flutter, an excellent figure, with a very respectable -70dB (DIN B) of rumble.

One of the major selling points of the 1700 was its tonearm. ADC was a bit coy about what it exactly was, but suffice to say it has the same open cradle suspension, micron-polished, ball race lateral instrument bearings and lead out wires as the respected LMF series, but with a black anodised aluminium arm tube and a slightly different decoupled counterweight design. This, allied to its carbon-fibre headshell, would lead one to suspect that it is ADC's LMF-1 arm by any other name. Whatever, the arm is unexpectedly decent, notwithstanding the fact that it was purpose-designed for ADC cartridges, which by this era were relatively high compliance affairs that needed low mass arms. In 1979, 'low mass' was all the rage, but now it's harder to find high compliance cartridges.

The ADC 1700 came with a £60 XLM Mk III cartridge, with tapered aluminium cantilever and nude elliptical stylus tip that tracked between 0.75 and 1.5g. Very low tracking weights were desirable back then, because it was thought it would cause less record wear. Ironically, people began to realise that low mass cartridges mistracking slightly at 0.75g caused much more wear than standard medium to high mass ones ploughing the record groove securely at 2g! If you're serious about using an ADC arm, either separately or in the 1600 or 1700, and can't find a decent specimen of an ADC cartridge, then an Ortofon OM10 (£30) is your best bet. These date back to this era of ultra low mass and are still on sale new now.

Even with a fresh OM10, don't expect the ADC to slay modern turntables, it certainly doesn't do that. But it does have a clean, easy and smooth sound that makes listening to music an enjoyable experience. The bass has a speed and solidity that many belt drive designs of then and now lack, and the midband is decently open and detailed. Treble is smooth and crisp, and the overall effect is of a musically engaging turntable that breezes through your LPs. Considering you can pick up an ADC 1700 for under £100, that's a lot of sound per pound!

The trick is to site it right. This goes for other non-suspended subchassis decks that lack the sheer physical mass to soak up airborne or ground-borne vibrations – you need to keep them away from these as much as possible, ideally on a good wall shelf. This done, you begin to reap the benefits. Direct drives always sound punchy and engaging, and the ADC is no different. Its tonearm is a little soft sounding, seemingly thinning out the

**One of the main selling points of the ADC 1700 was its tonearm**



### THE PLASTIC AGE

The ADC 1700 was the flagship turntable from British company BSR, an organisation struggling to keep its market share having suffered a serious sales assault from Japanese manufacturers like Pioneer and Kenwood earlier on in the seventies. At the beginning of that decade, BSR and Garrard reigned supreme making relatively crude idler drive turntable chassis that were fitted into everything from music centres to portable record players. Several years later though, both companies were on the back foot, reeling from the Japanese invasion.

Using the ADC brand – which had considerably higher kudos than BSR – was a great idea, and the company tried hard to make a modern looking, technology-packed turntable that ticked all the marketing boxes. The 1700 had semi-automatic operation, marking it out as a non-specialist design, and direct drive with quartz lock too. The low mass arm was a feature that was regarded as *de rigueur* in the vinyl world. Sadly, the ADC 1500, 1600 and 1700 arrived a year or two too late. People were beginning to take a real interest in compact cassette as a sound source and compact disc was already starting to be talked about. Quite a few ADC decks were sold, but were soon forgotten and now sit unwanted on online auction sites – making them a great used bargain.

soundstage and pulling things in from far stage left and right – just what an ADC ALT-1 does when mounted separately. The upside is that the arm has a bit more subtlety and detail than you might expect from something bundled onto a semi-automatic deck.

### Perfect partner

With an original ADC QLM36 cartridge fitted, complete with a new, old stock stylus, the 1700 proves a pleasant listening partner. The ADC cartridge has a little more fluidity than the Ortofon, really livening up period rock music from the likes of Nick Lowe and The Eagles. With classical music it is impressively quiet and civilised, not zero-ing in on surface noise as cheap modern turntables do. It sounds solid and stable even on crescendos, and the ADC cartridge tracks well – even if the deck and cartridge do seem to suck a bit of tonal colour and spatial scale out of the recording.

ADC's 1700 is no stellar performer, but it's an interesting little curio from a day when vinyl was done differently. Moreover, 35 years after it was launched, it is still serviceable and ridiculously cheap secondhand as well as being in surprisingly plentiful supply. If you consider that you can pick up a terrible, plasticky USB turntable for the same sort of money now, it's a no brainer if you're looking for a starter deck or you're coming back to vinyl after all these years ●





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# New year's resolution

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The vinyl solution

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

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



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







# Black magic

They might be everywhere now but standalone digital-to-analogue converters used to be unheard of, until Arcam's Delta Black Box...

**I** 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

**The unique chip that made the DAC possible**



### 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!” ●



# Make time for music

We all like to sit down and listen to music, but asks **Nigel Williamson** how many of us just listen without getting distracted by all the other nonsense that's going on in the world?

One of the reasons I enjoy writing for this august publication is that I know *Hi-Fi Choice* readers are a highly discerning audience and take their music seriously. After all, if you spend large sums of money on the best audio equipment money can buy, then whether your taste is for rock, jazz, world music or classical, you are going to listen carefully and appreciate every note and nuance.

But I've recently been making an anecdotal study of how people consume music and I've come to the conclusion – and let me say this as politely as possible – that *HFC* readers are probably freakish in their attentive listening habits. Most people seldom listen to recorded music with anything like their full attention; they use it as a distraction while cooking dinner, driving to work, tweeting and texting and generally going about their humdrum daily routine.

No harm in that if it gets you through the day and it is undeniable that music can make most chores and tasks in our daily grind considerably more pleasurable. But there comes a point when music becomes mere background noise to our daily lives, a reassuring hum, the presence of which we barely notice until it stops and we are startled by the silence, a commodity it seems you can only find in the modern world by climbing a mountain or trekking into a

## Turn off the TV and phone and make music central to our lives again

forest (and even then, best make sure it's not on a flight path). We now even have entire genres of music deliberately

created not to require our attention, from 'dinner jazz' to the banalities of the 'drive time' playlist. My admittedly unscientific survey of listening habits suggests that even many of those who call themselves music lovers and are regular purchasers of CDs seldom have time to sit down and fully immerse themselves in the listening experience; friends, family, the demands of digital media or essential household tasks invariably intervene before too long. David Harrington, the leader of the Kronos Quartet, once told me that he sets aside one hour every day to listen to a piece of music he hasn't heard before and that time is sacrosanct with no distractions allowed. But for most of us, our modern lives have become too congested to justify ring fencing time to listen to music without doing something else at the same time; it somehow seems idle and self-indulgent not to multi-task and to tackle those jobs around the house or office that we've been putting off while listening to Mahler's fifth or

the Arctic Monkeys' latest offering, for example.

Yet we don't treat a book with such cavalier disregard for the subtleties of the creator's vision. Even in this age of digital eReaders, a novel requires our full attention. We can read it on the bus or the tube, but it is still an act of total immersion in which we lose ourselves in another world. So why do we not treat recorded music with the same respect and fold away the newspaper, stop texting our friends and listen with the same attention as we would in a concert?

Perhaps the answer is that there is too much music invading every aspect of our lives. Music has become ubiquitous. It comes unrequested and with no off-switch in supermarkets and in elevators, in airport lounges and in restaurants. Has its constant presence devalued the listening experience and the sheer quantity of unwanted music diluted our appreciation of quality?

## The big switch off

A few years ago Bill Drummond, the Scottish musician who found fame in the eighties with KLF, launched 'No Music Day' in order "to draw attention to the cheapening of music as an art form due to its mindless use in contemporary society".

As a principled stand against the bland muzak being piped at us in the world's shopping malls and waiting rooms it's an initiative that has much to commend it. But as a music lover, the concept of a day without music has always left me feeling uneasy. Why not come at the problem from the other end and concentrate on the quality control? Instead of railing against being forced to listen to cheap music in inappropriate situations – understandable and justifiable though the complaint is – let us instead make time in the day to listen to great music properly in circumstances that allow no distractions and create a unique sense of place, time and occasion around the audio experience.

What we need, perhaps, is not a 'No Music Day' but an 'Only Music Day' – a day when we turn off the TV and the phone, ignore the emails, tweets and texts and allow time to immerse ourselves fully in the listening experience and make music central to our lives once again ●



**Making time for listening to music without distractions is something we should all do**





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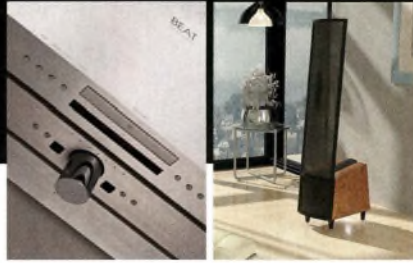
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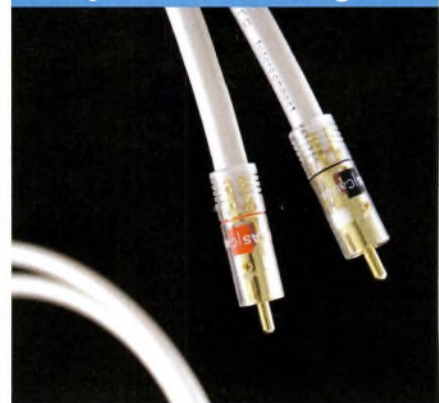
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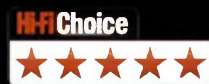
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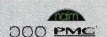
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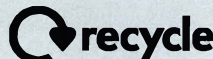
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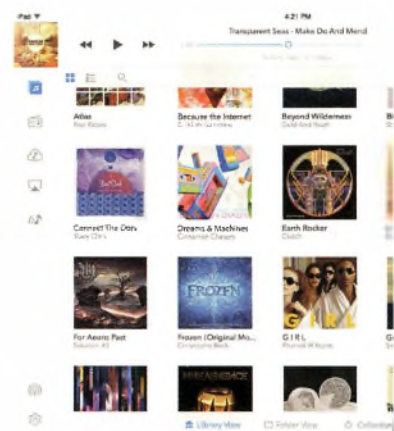
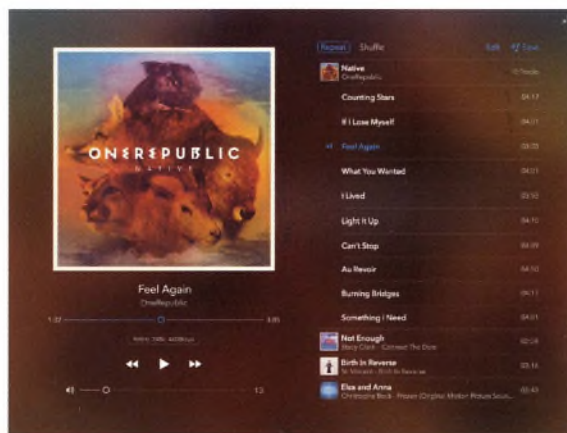
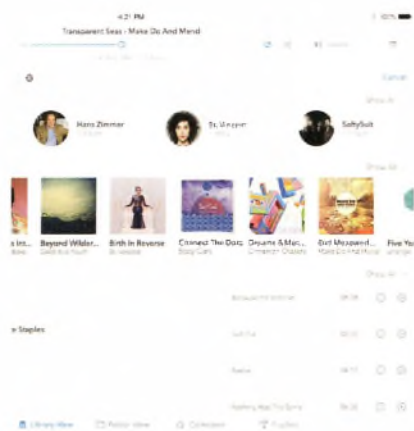
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