

THE ESSENTIAL HI-FI GUIDE

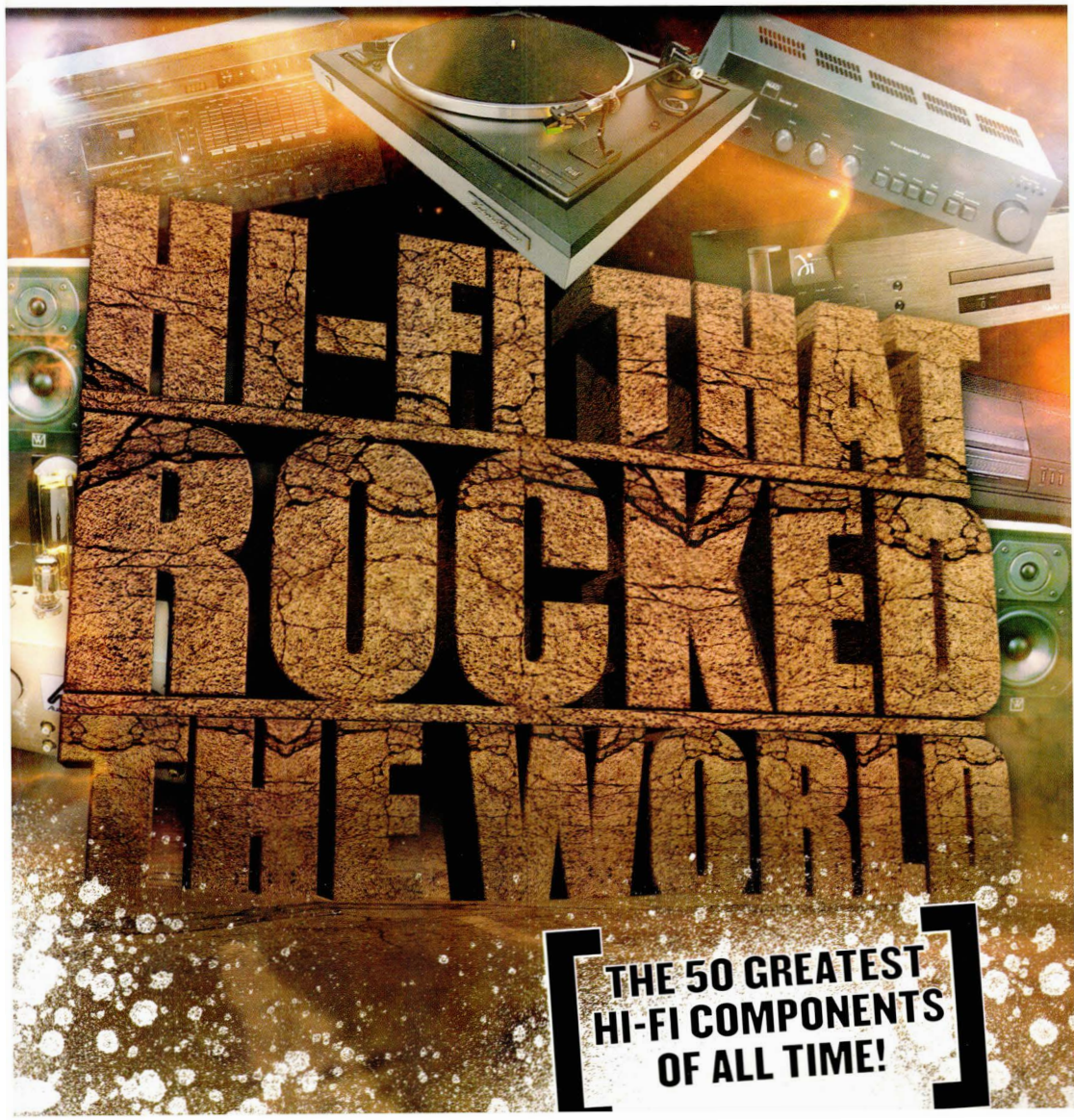
# HI-FI CHOICE

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MAY 2006

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The history of this sceptred isle is rich and deep. The Romans, the Normans, Elizabethan pride and Victorian power... and then, of course, there's our hi-fi. No other nation can lay claim to a richer heritage in audio reproduction for the home – decades encrusted with hi-fi jewels that have earned rapturous worldwide acclaim.

Ours is a history that mixes home-grown excellence with exotic influence from abroad, from budget hi-fi of startling ability to benchmark-busting doyens of the high-end scene. And all in search of a single goal: to raise the quality of our musical experience to new and scintillating heights.

This supplement is intended as a tribute to the people and products that made it all possible. We began by asking our reviewers to come up with a list of the most important hi-fi components ever sold on these shores. The list was focused purely on audio excellence, each of our writers drawing on their individual and collective experience to nominate products that made a difference, pushed the boundaries and changed the hi-fi scene forever.

We whittled it down until eventually, the list numbered 50 – all placed in a democratically agreed countdown from 50 to number one (for more info on our methods, see Paul Messenger's column on p26). No such list can ever be considered definitive and you may well disagree with our conclusions, but that's half the fun. Whatever... in our opinion, this is *Hi-Fi That Rocked The World*. Enjoy!

*Tim Bower*  
Tim Bower Editor

## **Klipschorn**

### **LOUDSPEAKER**

Launched: 1946

Original price: \$400/pair (US price)

**50** A genuine original, and the only hi-fi loudspeaker to have been in continuous production for sixty years, the Klipschorn is still available today, though how you get hold of a pair is anybody's guess. UK availability has been very sporadic for years, though it was actually manufactured under license in Britain by Vitavox in the 1950s and 1960s, at £165 each.

## **“Designed when hi-fi was monophonic”**

This large and very substantial three-way corner horn was designed in an era when hi-fi was monophonic, and amplifier power could be counted on the fingers of one hand, so sensitivity is very high. For stereo, it requires a room with two corners 4.5 metres apart, and if it doesn't have the smoothest sound around, it does deliver remarkable dynamic realism and edge-of-seat excitement. A touch of vintage magic for the single-ended club.

## **Roksan Xerxes**

### **TURNTABLE**

Launched: 1985

Original price: £500

**49** CD already threatened vinyl's dominance when Roksan's principal Touraj Moghaddam appeared with a radical and innovative new turntable design called the Xerxes.

Very different from sprung-subchassis stereotypes of the era, the Xerxes' solid plinth is more akin to Rega designs than Linn, but the plinth top board is cunningly shaped and cut to control vibration.

Other clever features include a removable centre spindle and a motor mounted on a spring-loaded shaft, both helping to reduce unwanted vibration reaching the disc. The net result is a top-quality

performer that's easier and more foolproof to set up and use than its subchassis

rivals. No wonder a Xerxes.20

variation on the original theme is still available today.



## **Nakamichi 1000ZXL**

### **CASSETTE DECK**

Launched: 1979

Original price: £1,275

**48** To some, the Compact Cassette never was real hi-fi, but one only had to use a 1000ZXL to realise how good it could be. Nakamichi was always primarily a cassette tape specialist, and had built a fund of know-how as an OEM supplier of mechanisms to other brands in the early years of the format. All of this expertise went into creating the fabulously well-equipped and complex 1000ZXL, which managed to wring more bass, treble,



signal-to-noise and detail out of cassette than anyone had expected to find. Not only that, it looked a million dollars (especially in the gold-plated – honest – Limited Edition), and was manually adjustable for everything, making it a tweeker's ultimate toy, and an automatic choice for professional users.

## Naim CDS

### CD PLAYER

Launched: 1991

Original price: £3,000

**47**

"Only Naim could make a two-box, one-box CD player" commented one observer. Arch vinyl protagonist Naim

Audio, for years a hostile critic of the silver disc, finally bit the CD bullet, with a characteristically individualistic and innovative player – and wowed the audiophile community with the results.

The two-box CDS didn't stereotypically separate disc drive from DAC, rather Naim followed its own tradition of separating power supplies from the

player proper.

There wasn't even a digital output, the internal link using a parallel connection in place of the usual serial technique. Other innovations included spring-decoupled internals and special light-absorbing paint in the top-loading well. The CDS evolved into CDS2 and the current CDS3, as further refinements came along.



## Wadia 16

### CD PLAYER

Launched: 1996

Original price: £7,000

**46**

The post-disc-reading manipulation of digital signals has considerable potential for improving sound, but also some pitfalls, and Wadia established itself as a prime creative mover on the digital audio scene with its very clever Digimaster 2000 DAC (digital-to-analogue converter) unit that first appeared in the late 1980s. However, it wasn't until one-box designs like the Wadia 8 and then the Wadia 16 subsequently appeared that the audio world began to really appreciate how good high-end CD replay could be.

Incorporating Digimaster filter technology, a highly respected TEAC-sourced transport mechanism, and one of the most substantial mechanical chassis ever used for hi-fi, the Wadia 16 established itself as one the most dynamic and convincing CD players of the 1990s. It also sported a high-resolution digital preamp, complete with four digital-only inputs and a clever volume attenuation system. Exceptionally forward thinking!



## Denon TU-260L

### RADIO TUNER

Launched: 1991

Original price: £100

**45**

Unlike some of its Far Eastern rivals, Denon is an audio specialist, and therefore remains tuned in to the requirements of the specialist hi-fi scene. Even so, I doubt whether

## "It topped UK sales charts for a decade"

any of the engineers responsible for creating this little budget tuner anticipated that it would top the UK sales charts and stay there for a decade.

Towards the end of its life, special production runs had to be set up exclusively to supply continuing UK demand for this delightfully simple but highly effective device. Three factors contributed to this: first, it was cheap; second, it had long wave as well as medium wave AM (alongside FM of course); and most important it was simple, because those designers understood the virtues of simplicity. Even in today's DAB-chummy world, the TU-260L lives on, in a heavily revised TU-260L II.

## Cambridge Audio P40

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1971

Original price: £75

44

Appearing at the start of the 1970s, this style statement symbolised all the (short-lived) British optimism of that time. This was the first amp to use a toroid rather than a C-core transformer, it was much slimmer than all the competition and sounded better than its rivals too – until it broke down.

This was usually sooner rather than later, because the outside design consultants who'd done the work knew plenty about electronics, but



little about production engineering. Staff were brought in and a much better, more reliable and successful P50 soon emerged. These two models really set the agenda for much of British hi-fi amplification thereafter, and their influence is clearly seen in subsequent products like the A&R A60 and Audiolab 8000A.

## A&R Cambridge A60

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1975

Original price: £160

43

The original incarnation of Arcam – the initials stand for Amplification and Recording – the A60 was the cornerstone of Britain's 'budget audiophile' movement that revived the hi-fi scene in the late 1970s. A super-slim, 35 watts per channel integrated with a featureless black front panel and a wooden wrap, it proved the point that if British amps weren't as glitzy, feature-rich or as powerful as their Far Eastern competitors, they knew a lot more about what makes a system sound musical.

The A60 might have borrowed inspiration from Cambridge Audio, but its understated styling made it very distinctive in a crowded market, and the combination with Rega Planar turntable and Mordaunt-Short Pageant II speakers became the classic budget audiophile system of its era.



## KEF R104aB

LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1975

Original price: £185 per pair

42

If the BBC LS5/6 and Spondor BC1 had set the agenda for the modern standmount monitor speaker system in the late 1960s, KEF was the company that cashed

### "An early example of computer modelling"

in during the 1970s with its Model 104s. The original 104 arrived in 1973, but the 104aB (the initials stand for 'acoustic Butterworth') followed soon after, and was an early example of using computer modelling for crossover design.

Basically, the speaker is a two-way design in a 30-litre enclosure. It used a 200mm Betxtrene-coned B200 main driver, plus a T27 tweeter. Instead of a port, however, a passive 330x230mm ABR (auxiliary bass radiator) offered the same function with better control. Sensitivity was notably low, but amplifier power had become much cheaper in the solid-state 1970s.

## Krell KSA-100

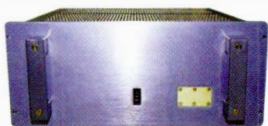
### POWER AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1980

Original price: £1,800

**41** Of all the American 'high-end' brands, and despite its relatively brief history, Krell has certainly been the most successful in the UK, due partly to the innate quality of its products, and partly the skill of distributor Absolute Sounds.

The first ever Krell, the KSA-100, made its US debut in 1981, and appeared in the UK soon after – though in truth the less costly KSA-50 that followed a little while later had greater impact on these shores. Though they looked like classic US muscle amps, their 100-watt and 50-watt power ratings seemed quite modest, because these were Class A amps over most of their range. They therefore ran hot, but also sounded exceptionally sweet, with marvellous transparency and imaging.



## Creek 4040

### INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1982

Original price: £115

**40** Although good sounding British amps were well established by 1980, they were still significantly more expensive than the imported competition – until Mike Creek came along with the very understated little 4040. It wasn't perfect, and was only rated at 35 watts per channel. But it gave a decent account of itself

**“It cost even less than a NAD 3020A”**

in our listening tests, provided the operating conditions weren't too severe. And above all, it cost even less than a NAD 3020A.

It became a firm favourite with the sort of dealers that favoured specialist British brands, who saw it as part of a first budget system. It was often partnered with components such as Rega turntables and Mordaunt-Short speakers, and the system offered obvious future upgrade potential using Linn and Naim components.

## SME 20A

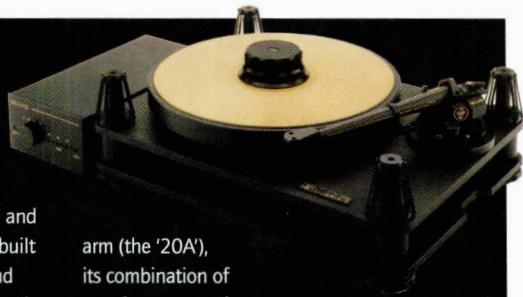
### TURNTABLE

Launched: 1992

Original price: £3,800

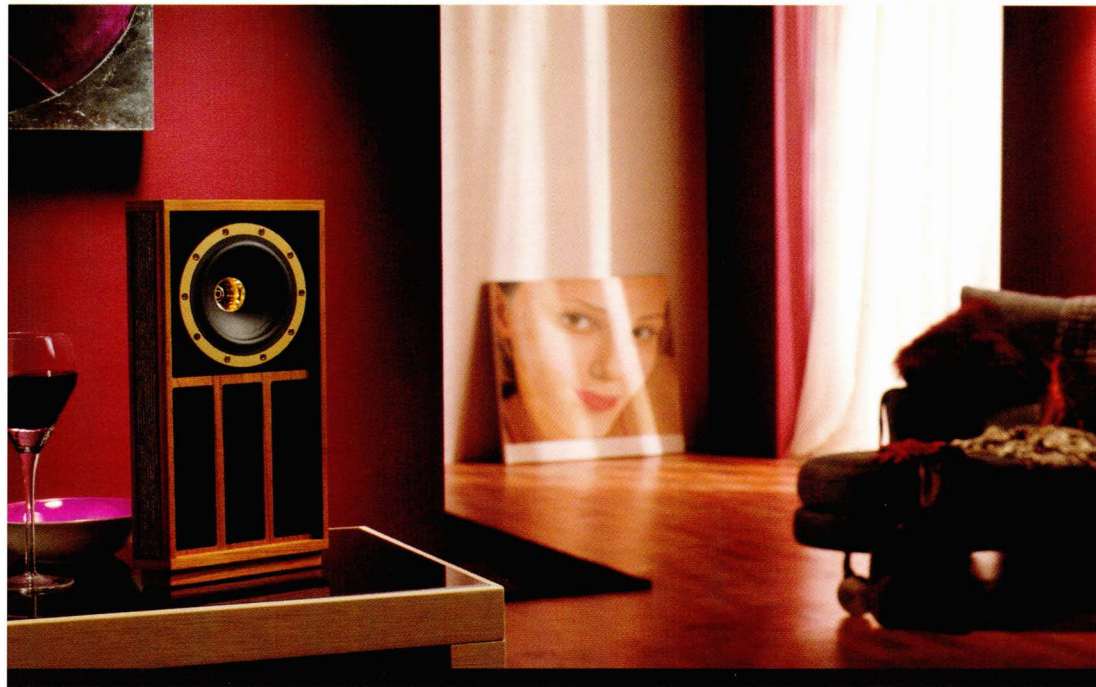
**39** Back in the 1950s, Alistair Robertson-Aikman, owner of SME and a skilled and fastidious engineer, built himself a pickup arm, because he couldn't find anything good enough on the market. His friends talked him making some more, and it soon came to be regarded as the finest in the world.

Nearly forty years later, and for similar reasons, he built the Model 20 turntable, which again quickly became a classic. Equipped with a Series V



arm (the '20A'), its combination of massive construction, compact dimensions and foolproof set-up all came together to create a performance of magnificent dynamic range, very low coloration and superlative stereo imaging. An improved Mk2 version was introduced in 1995 and continues in production today.

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## Sony SCD-1 CD/SACD PLAYER

Launched: 1999

Original price: £2,500

**38** It's seven years since SACD, in the form of Sony's SCD-1, first put its head above the parapet with the promise of 'better-than-CD' sound quality. But with a rival alternative called DVD-Audio seeking to perform a similar task, and the public at large seeming much more interested in other recent novelties like music-with-video (on DVD) and MP3 downloading, the future for either high-resolution format looks far from certain.



That said, the massively engineered SCD-1 did a fine job of pleading the case for SACD, and even though the range of software available was rather restricting, it was clear that the format offers considerable potential, with a freedom from stress and strain that seemed very 'un-digital'.

## Townshend Elite Rock

### TURNTABLE

Launched: 1982

Original price: £299

**37** Max Townshend started building



cartridges in the 1970s, but couldn't find a turntable to do them justice. Then he came across the Rock, a drastic rethink of record player design created by engineer-enthusiasts at the Cranfield Institute of Research.

The most striking thing about the design is the silicone fluid filled trough that is swung across the record surface to damp the arm/cartridge fundamental resonance, as well as absorb some cartridge vibrations, very close to where these occur, by means of a paddle attached to the end of the tonearm. Both the plinth and the acrylic-topped platter were cast in Gypsum. In the right combination, with Excalibur tonearm and a suitably high-quality cartridge, it's capable of exceptionally clean and analytical 'rock solid' bass reproduction. The basics of the design are still available today, in the heady guise of the £4,900 Rock Anniversary.

## Pioneer PL-12D

### TURNTABLE

Launched: 1974

Original price: £50

**36** When hi-fi entered its consumer boom period in the mid-1970s, Pioneer was very well positioned to grab a substantial share of mass market sales. The PL-12D (and its PL-112D successor) dominated sales of budget turntables simply through making sensible, good looking, manually operated belt-drive decks with properly integrated tonearms.

## "It definitely looked the business"

While it didn't set any new standards for performance, the PL-12D was easy to set up and use, and had a decent tonearm. It was never going to match the sound quality available at similar prices from more specialist brands like Connoisseur, but it definitely looked the business, performed consistently and reliably, and – perhaps most importantly – it avoided intimidating all those people who were getting into hi-fi for the first time.



## Sony WM-D6C Walkman

### PORTABLE CASSETTE RECORDER

Launched: 1984

Original price: £229

**35** Known universally as the ProWalkman, and definitely more Pro than Walkman, Sony's delightful portable recorder might have been too bulky and heavy for convenient Walkman operation – it measured 18x9x4cm and weighed more than half a kilo – but its record/replay performance could match or beat the majority of full-sized decks, especially when driven by Exposure's custom mains PSU.

It became a cult classic, however, through its battery-powered ability to make top quality stereo recordings 'in the field' (or rather discreetly in the concert hall), enabling enthusiastic amateurs to roll their own top-quality live stereo recordings of favourite musicians.

## Cambridge Audio CD1

### CD PLAYER

Launched: 1985

Original price: £1,500

**34** The world's first two-box CD player (beating Sony by a few months) was a radical attempt to tackle the limitations of early CD replay hardware. Three selected Philips DACs per channel delivered genuine 20-bit resolution, and a lead-beam suspension system reduced data errors, making error-correction less necessary and resulting in a much cleaner signal.

## "A true reference performer in its day"

Five selectable anti-aliasing filters successfully overcame many of the phase problems that arose from early CD mastering techniques.

A true reference performer in its day, the two-box layout was widely copied elsewhere, even though the only reason the player took the two-box route was because the sheer quantity of electronics in the CD1 wouldn't fit inside a single chassis. Later designs would better exploit two-box technology.

## Philips CD100/Marantz CD63

### CD PLAYER

Launched: 1983

Original price: £300

**33** In 1983, just launching a CD player was novel, but these two (essentially the same beast with different trim, from Philips and its then subsidiary) had a clever feature called 'oversampling' that allowed the use of filters with much better phase response and lower distortion than most others, conferring a significant sound quality advantage.

By today's standards, the sound is not so wonderful – a bit thick and congested – but it was

streets ahead of many of its contemporaries, which sounded harsh, screechy and shorn of detail and dimension. Philips took some bad press for offering only '14-bit' resolution, but the oversampling addressed that restriction and now it's almost universal practice to use low-bit technology with oversampling. But most journalists misunderstood digital audio for an embarrassingly long time.



## Audiolab 8000A INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1983

Original price: £250

**32** Audiolab's 8000A first came to the market in 1983 at £250, and a version called the 8000S is still available today (at £500). The full story is far more complicated.

When Audiolab began, the superior sound quality of British amplifiers was established, but customers missed the lack of features like tone controls.

Audiolab addressed this with a solidly reliable design that recalled the Cambridge Audio models from the early 1970s. In 1997, Audiolab was



purchased by TAG McLaren, and the 8000A was redesigned and re-launched under the TAG McLaren Audio brand. However, that operation didn't last and in 2004 TMA was sold to Chinese-owned IAG, which re-launched the Audiolab line in 2005. Now the 8000A's spirit lives on in the revived 8000S, which offers remote control but no tone controls.

## B&W Nautilus LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1993

Original price: £35,000/ pair

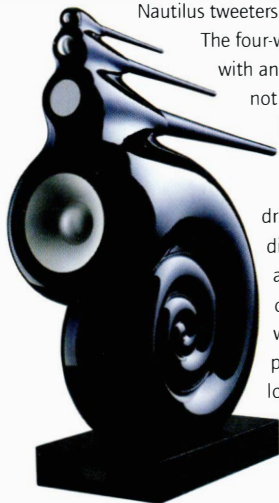
**31** B&W's Nautilus flagship remains unchanged in price as well as content to this day, and is reportedly selling better than ever. Since 1993, it has inspired other aspects of B&W's line-up, including the tube-loaded Nautilus tweeters used in most models.

The four-way Nautilus is supplied with an active crossover, but

not the eight channels of high quality power amplification needed to drive a pair. Each

driver has a metal diaphragm of an appropriate size for the operating band over which it behaves as a pure piston, and each is loaded by its own

damped and tapered transmission line.



## SME 3009 II TONEARM

Launched: 1963

Original price: £23

**30** In SME – the initials stand for Scale Model Equipment, in case you wondered – British hi-fi set a standard for light engineering precision and finish that remains the envy of the world to this day. The Mk II version of the 3009 appeared a year or two after the original,

**“Remains the envy of the world to this day”**

adding thread-and-weight bias compensation. Thanks in part to clever and flexible mounting arrangements, which made it easy to set up and align different cartridges, it went on to dominate the tonearm scene right up until the late 1970s. Considered a natural partner for high compliance moving magnet cartridges like Shure's V-15 series, though less well suited to the stiffer moving-coil types, the SME 3009 II was also a virtually automatic choice for fitting to motor units like the Thorens TD160 and Garrard 301/401.

## Tannoy Dual Concentric

FULL-RANGE LOUDSPEAKER DRIVE UNIT

Launched: 1948

Original price: Evarious

(eg: 380mm version cost £37.50 each in 1959)

29

Tannoy's history goes back to 1926, long before hi-fi existed, but the company came to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s as Britain's leading supplier of PA systems. The famous two-way Dual-Concentric drive unit was designed as a 'hi-fi PA' speaker by Ronald Rackham in 1948, combining on the same chassis a horn-loaded tweeter firing through the middle of a 380mm bass/mid driver.



It was soon adopted as a monitor by recording studios around the world, and thence spread into the emerging hi-fi sector. Classic examples with Alcomax magnets and 380, 300 and 240mm cones are still made today, but the DC driver concept has spread to all sizes, most recently a tiny 100mm device used in the Arena satellite speaker.

## Quad 22/II

PRE/ POWER AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1959/ 1953

Original price: £25/ £22.50 each

28

Quad's 22/II (the QC22 pre-amp plus two II monoblock power amps) was the quintessential British stereo amplifier combination through much of the 1950s and 1960s. The II – which supplied power to the preamp – stayed in production for rather longer than the 22, preceding it in the mono era, and carrying on after the arrival of the solid state 303.

While the II only delivered 15 watts, it always seemed more powerful than that figure suggested, and remained stable into any load, including the notorious Electrostatic. Secondhand examples still command high prices today, and current owner IAG recently built a cool, retro QC-24/II-40 combo that's very much in the spirit of the original.



## Meridian MCD Pro

CD PLAYER

Launched: 1986

Original price: £750

27

This was the CD player that proved you could get something approaching audiophile-grade performance out of polycarbonate discs. It was also the CD player that put Meridian firmly on the digital audio engineering map, a position that, a decade and a half later meant Meridian was central to the design of DVD-Audio's lossless data-compression system.



## “It set the tone for audiophile players”

Like its MCD predecessor, the MCD Pro was built on a standard Philips CD100 top-loading chassis. Unlike the rather modest tweaks applied to the 'toe-in-the-water' MCD model, the MCD Pro was a very heavily modified affair, with 'stretched' casework to accommodate bulkier power supply arrangements. It broke the mould for CD and set the tone for every 'hot-rod' audiophile player since.

## Lowther PM-series

### LOUDSPEAKER DRIVE UNIT

Launched: c.1940

Original price: unknown

**26**

In the 1940s, the tie-up between Paul Voigt (of Voigt Corner Horn



fame) and Peter Lowther created the unique PM-series drive units that are still in production today. The initials stand for 'permanent magnet', because alnico magnets were a 1940s innovation – previous drive units used DC-powered electromagnets – while Voigt's lightweight paper double cone diaphragm is still as effective for full-range operation as anything developed since.

## “A magic that has a cult following”

Designed expressly for the highest possible horn-loaded efficiency, to suit the very low power amps of the era, the Lowther approach – for all its limitations – still possesses a magic that has continued to inspire a cult following to this day. There are even clubs devoted to the Lowther sound!

## Acoustic Energy AE1

### LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1988

Original price: £700/pair

**24**

When Phil Jones first introduced the AE1 in 1988, the hi-fi world immediately took notice, even though

Phil's background was in Pro Audio. This tiny little speaker wasn't the first miniature with serious hi-fi capabilities, but it was the first that really knew how to rock'n'roll.

The small metal-cone bass/mid unit and metal dome tweeter could take enough power even to handle a Pro environment, while the super-tough

## B&W DM110

### LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1983

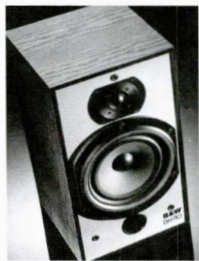
Original price: £129/pair

**25**

The secret to a successful speaker design

is largely a matter of achieving a good balance or compromise between often conflicting variables. The DM110 was just such a model. Its basic formula is stereotypical enough – a large two-way stand-mount, with 22-litre ported enclosure and a 220mm bass/mid driver – and it has both antecedents and successors in B&W's long and successful history, right down to today's equivalent DM602 S3.

But the 110 was the one that really hit the spot, both in performance and marketplace timing. An obvious Best Buy in the same issue (*HFC 35*) that only grudgingly recommended the Wharfedale Diamond for small rooms, it was the DM110 that proved an outstanding match for the family lounge.



little wood-based enclosure was reinforced with a plaster lining. The AE1 founded a new brand that's still going strong today, and did much to revive interest in metal-cone main drivers. A rather different, but similar sized, AE1 MkIII was introduced in 2004 at £1,690 per pair.

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## Thorens TD124

### TURNTABLE

Launched: 1957

Original price: £52

**23** Swiss brand Thorens has an ancient heritage of producing high class music boxes, so the move from one kind of mechanical music reproduction into a more modern version based on vinyl discs was very logical.

The ultimate in turntable luxury during the 1950s and 1960s, the TD124 was a massively



## “The ultimate in turntable luxury”

engineered, top-of-the-line idler-wheel-drive model. It might have cost twice as much as the Garrard equivalent, but had an instant-start capability, based on moving a sub-platter into contact with the main platter. Ultimately Thorens can share the credit (with US brand AR) for introducing the suspended subchassis approach on the TD150, but there are still those who favour the solidity of the TD124 approach.

## Mission 778/Cyrus One

### INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1983

Original price: £240/ £150

**22** The genealogy of this pretty little amplifier is surprisingly complex. In 1983, Mission added a cute little three-knob amplifier called the 778 to its regular electronics kit – sharp-looking shoebox shape, half the width of regular components, with a moulded plastic case. By 1987, the same tidy casework housed the less powerful and costly Cyrus One, as Mission ‘spun off’ its Cyrus sub-brand.

## “Mission added a cute little amplifier”

Both were *Hi-Fi Choice* Best Buys, and the original plastic case has since been replaced by much classier cast alloy. Cyrus is now an independent entity – and a very successful one at that. And the ‘shoebox’ casework now accommodates all manner of other components, including power supply upgrades, so the whole system looks stylish and compact on its matching rack. Very good; very lifestyle.

## Spendor BC1

### LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1969

Original price: £52 each

**21** The BC1 (the initials refer to the Bextrene plastic cone of the main driver and the Celestion HF1300 tweeter) was the first speaker design from the BBC’s Research Department to achieve real commercial success. It used a plastic cone main driver for improved consistency, plus an alnico magnet, a thin-wall bitumen-damped birch-ply enclosure to move colorations down from the crucial midband, and an elaborate high-quality crossover network.

The BC1 set a standard for voice monitoring that became an industry reference point, and it remains a redoubtable sonic performer today, especially on modern speaker stands. But there’s no doubt that a smallish speaker from thirty years ago looks large by today’s standards.



## Pink Triangle

### TURNTABLE

Launched: 1980

Original price: £298

20

A relative latecomer, Pink



Triangle was always dwarfed by arch-rival Linn. But this clever design was historically significant for a number of innovations that helped advance the art and won many admirers, who prized it for its neutrality. It was the first, for example, to use an acrylic plastic platter, in order to achieve better mechanical coupling between disc and platter. It also had a cleverly designed suspension that could bounce straight without 'yaw'.

The combination of extremely light platter and servo-controlled DC motor led to some criticism of 'slowing under load', and quality control was never great. But no one disputed its considerable success in reducing vinyl colorations, or that it offered a valid alternative to the Thorens/AR/Linn approach whose legacy lives on today in both the likes of Audio Note's TT1 turntable and the new Funk decks, designed by PT's Arthur Khoubessarian.

## Goodmans Maxim

### LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1964

Original price: £35/ pair

19

Designed by Laurie Fincham (now with THX, but spent much of his career at KEF), the original Goodmans Maxim

from the 1960s was the first true 'miniature' loudspeaker, and its startlingly impressive performance has inspired countless imitators from numerous brands to this day (such as the BBC LS3/5a and Wharfedale Diamond). It measured 14x27x16cm and had power handling of just seven

## "Inspired countless imitators to this day"

watts, but if used with care was quite capable of putting much larger and more pretentious speakers to shame. It is rumoured that BBC engineers set up a 'blind' listening test, placing a pair of Maxims on top of a pair of their enormous monitors. There was considerable disbelief when the curtain was pulled back and the subjects were told they had actually been listening to the Maxims.

## Leak Trough-Line

### FM RADIO TUNER

Launched: 1957

Original price: £35.50

18

Leak's valve Trough-Line FM tuners went through major shape changes during the 1950s and 1960s,

exemplifying the evolution of hi-fi itself. The original had a pale 27x18cm fascia and no casework, for building into furniture. 1961's Trough-Line II adopted a more familiar posture, properly encased and with a 29x11cm front, but spoiled this by using plastic, with curved ends, in brown and cream.



In 1964, the Trough-Line 3 ushered in the modern look with a black and silver metal fascia that's still very much with us today. As is the Trough-Line itself, preferably in still later stereophonic form, as this radio is still regarded as one of the finest FM tuners ever made, and continues to command serious secondhand prices.



## Audio Note Ongaku INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1988

Original price: £30,000

**17** The Ongaku put the ultra-simple single ended triode (SET) valve amp back on the British hi-fi map, after half a century of obscurity. This outrageously expensive and alarmingly heavy valve amp was built in Japan by Hiroyasu Kondo, a man dedicated to building the best amplifiers with no holds barred, whose sad death was reported in January 2006.

Because it avoided using feedback, this beautifully built tube amp wasn't the most neutral

around, and only produced 27 watts per channel. But it sounded glorious and magical, aided by considerable quantities of pure silver in the wiring. In fact, it sparked a revival of interest in all manner of valve amplifiers, and the high efficiency speakers which are their natural partners.



## Mission 700 LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1980

Original price: £110/ pair

**16** Mission's 700 – a 22 litre standmount, not unlike B&W's equally popular DM110 – was one of the most successful speakers of the early 1980s, and will always be remembered for adopting an 'inverted' driver arrangement, mounting the tweeter below the bass/mid unit rather than above it as tradition had previously dictated.

The idea was to equalise the path length from both the drive units to the listener, and so improve crossover integration, an approach subsequently followed by a number of other brands, though still a minority. And it's hard to say what contribution it made to a speaker that looked (with real wood veneer) and sounded rather impressive, with notably good transparency in view of its very competitive price. This, and other Missions that followed, will always be remembered as 'British budget classics'.



## Arcam Alpha CD PLAYER

Launched: 1990

Original price: £380

**15** Arcam had already learnt the CD ropes with its Delta models before bringing its first Alpha to the market. While this unassuming and discreet little player – based on a mix of Arcam and Philips technology – didn't look particularly special, it did deliver performance way out of its price class, somewhat embarrassing its more costly stablemates.

The Alpha had never been a beer-budget machine, but it ruled the middle market for many years, undergoing regular evolutionary changes and spawning numerous variations along the way, yet always retaining its core capability of sound quality to match or beat its rivals. After roughly a decade the Alpha gave way to its DiVA replacements, which have gone on to repeat the Alpha's success.



## Michell Gyrodec

### TURNTABLE

Launched: 1984

Original price: £595

14

Although the Gyrodec was a comparative latecomer on the turntable scene, its roots go back to the 1960s. Then, Transcriptors made (or rather got the late engineer John Michell to make) a number of outrageously styled turntable designs which often appeared on the sets of prominent movies like *A Clockwork Orange*.

When Transcriptors failed, Michell got going, and its Gyrodec revived the very distinctive concept of



using a series of peripheral weights to create high platter inertia. The idea has been widely imitated elsewhere, and the Gyrodec itself has undergone numerous refinements and variations down the years. But its unique blend of fine sound and extravagantly sexy styling has kept the value high and the customers coming.

## Naim NAC12/NAP160

### PRE/ POWER AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1974

Original price: £218/ £358 (price from 1978)

13

The hi-fi establishment laughed when this amp first appeared. It was seriously expensive and didn't even have tone controls. In those days all amps allegedly sounded the same, so what was the point? Improving source components slowly convinced the industry that amps did sound different, and that tone controls were a bad thing. The 1970s ugly duckling became the darling of the 1980s, and by 1990 no self-respecting amp had tone controls.

Naim Audio can take much credit for introducing minimalism and turning people on to the idea of amplifier sound quality, but the NAC12/NAP160 combo incorporated numerous other innovations. Outboard preamp power supplies, star-earthing, modular interchangeable MM/MC phono stages and 'passive' phono stage equalisation have all subsequently found numerous imitators elsewhere.



## Rega RB300

### TONEARM

Launched: 1983

Original price: £90

12

The 1970s saw widespread recognition of the importance of high-quality turntable design, and by the end of that decade a number of costly high-performance tonearms with improved structural integrity had arrived to take advantage. But this made real hi-fi an expensive pursuit, way beyond the reach of the typical turntable user of the time. The sea change began in 1983 with Rega's RB300, which used pioneering injection alloy casting techniques to create a tonearm from a single continuous piece.

It matched or bettered the performance of other super-arms, and did so at a fraction of the price, so became a popular choice as a separate tonearm. And it dramatically improved the overall performance of Rega's popular Planar 3 turntable. There are now several variations, including the splendid RB1000, and it's also fitted as a standard item by a number of other turntable makers.

## Dual CS505

### TURNTABLE

Launched: 1981

Original price: £90

**11** For wannabe audiophiles in

the 1980s, a Dual CS505 was the standard-issue turntable. A belt-driven design with a rather spindly semi-automatic tonearm, the CS505 was the last great budget turntable to appear before CD burst on the scene. Except CD didn't 'burst' – it actually grew quite slowly, with CD players starting at around £500 and very little, mostly classical, software at first. It wasn't until 1986 that CD made its mark.

## “A Dual CS505 was the standard issue”

Although both tonearm and motor ultimately limited performance compared to simpler designs of greater mechanical integrity, it always had low price firmly on its side. In its CS505-4 guise, the Dual even made it past the Millennium.



## Wharfedale Diamond

### LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1982

Original price: £69/pair

**10** Wharfedale's 1982 new product launch seemed reasonably uneventful, except for an unusually tiny two-way speaker called the Diamond. No one expected it to change the world, but Wharfedale's strategy proved correct. Tiny, simple and efficient, on a bookshelf in a small room it sounded great, and soon found its way into student bedrooms throughout the land.

The Goodmans Maxim might have shown the way nearly twenty years earlier, but the Diamond was much cheaper (in real terms), and it hit the market at just the right time. Soon, every student had a pair and the Diamond was a best seller. Then, every speaker maker produced a Diamond-sized sub-miniature. The name is still preserved in the Wharfedale catalogue today, though the speaker has changed beyond recognition.



## Garrard 301

### TURNTABLE

Launched: 1954

Original price: £26

**09** Originally an engineering spin-off of the Crown Jewellers, Garrard engineering became then one of the biggest names in turntables. In those days, a transcription motor needed to operate at three (or more) different speeds (33, 45 and 78 rpm), and most used a stepped pulley driving the inside of the platter via a movable idler wheel.

The 301 (and its late-1960s restyled 401 successor) is a massive affair with a powerful

motor. Idler drive had become unfashionable by the 1970s, and Garrard lost its way some time after that, but interest in the old but beautifully built devices revived during the 1990s. Good secondhand examples fetch high prices and are hard to find, but Loricraft Audio does a good job at revitalising them.



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Creek products continue to break new ground in 2006. Witness its latest Destiny range.



## Marantz CD-63 MkII KI Signature

### CD PLAYER

Launched: 1996

Original price: £400

08

Because Philips is better known for lightbulbs than hi-fi, its then subsidiary Marantz took the hi-fi lead when Philips (with Sony) launched the CD format. For several years, Marantz players were badge-engineered variations on Philips themes, but Marantz has a proud hi-fi heritage and felt it could get more out of the basic Philips component.

Enter the brand's Europe-based technical guru Ken Ishiwata, who tweaked and breathed on the



CD-63SE, instituting a number of significant changes, and created this CD-63 MkII KI Signature, voted European CD Player of the Year. It has a lovely warm, lush character that might gloss over the finest detail and most dramatic dynamics, but is always smooth, elegant and fundamentally musical. And that is perhaps the reason why this was the biggest-selling CD player of the 1990s.

## BBC LS3/5a

### LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1974

Original price: £104/pair

07

This diminutive monitor was designed by the BBC's Research Department, and has been made under licence by a number of different firms – most notably Rogers – over the years. It's based on selected examples of KEF's B110 bass/mid unit and T27 tweeter – widely available during the 1970s and 1980s, but very hard to find today – mounted in a small, sealed birch-ply enclosure of about four litres.

Intended as a small speaker for near-field Outside Broadcast monitoring use, it proved subjectively very informative and convincing, despite a lack of deep bass. An elaborate crossover with fine components gave superior integration, and a particularly clear and natural sound. It's still available today from Stirling Broadcast, with specially commissioned drivers in place of the defunct KEF units, and costs from £900 for this v2 version.



## B&W Nautilus 801

### LOUDSPEAKER

Launched: 1998

Original price: £8,500/pair

06

The 801 was the top model in the Nautilus 800 range at its 1998 launch, though it's fair to say that the smaller 802 was a better match for British rooms. The range was stuffed with innovations, including a massive curved-back bass enclosure, a 'surroundless' midrange driver in a conical external Marlan enclosure, and a tube-loaded tweeter mounted on the top.

The range became an instant worldwide hit, and has since undergone two major upgrades. First, with 2001's Nautilus 800 flagship model, and then an all-new 800-series in 2005. The latter features numerous improvements, including a diamond diaphragm tweeter on top models like the 801 D (£10,500 per pair).



## Pioneer A400 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1989

Original price: £230

**05** For most of the 1980s, it was generally accepted by audiophiles that all amplifiers from all major Japanese manufacturers sounded dreadful. That may not have been literally true, but it was a common preconception, and there were some grounds for it. Pioneer had certainly made some turkeys on the amp front, but came up smelling strongly of roses with the astoundingly successful A400, its closely-related but less powerful A300 brother and their follow-ups.

**“It sounded lively, sweet and open”**

A modestly specified amplifier (about 50 watts, no tone controls, no gadgets), it sounded beautifully



lively, detailed, sweet and open, and left quite a few small specialist manufacturers of competing products badly bewildered. There was no particularly hi-tech secret to it, just good design based on 'golden-eared' listener feedback in both Japan and the UK. Internal components were generally 'bog-standard' and many a tweeker had a field day replacing parts, but even in stock form, it blew most of the competition away. It took quite a while for the other big names to catch up, but nowadays of course there are plenty of fine-sounding European and Far Eastern amps.

## Rega Planar 3

TURNTABLE

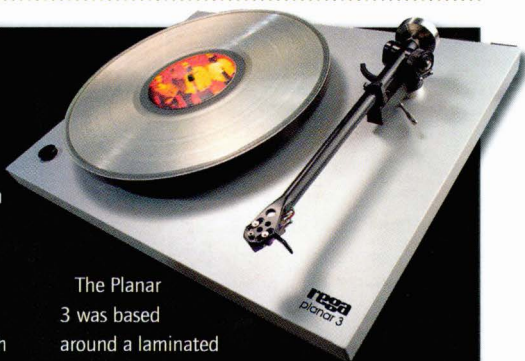
Launched: 1973

Original price: £68

**04** If Linn changed the whole perception of hi-fi, by focusing attention on the turntable rather than the speakers,

Rega was the company that was making simple, good-sounding turntables at a third of the price of an LP12. It was therefore affordable by a much greater number of hi-fi enthusiasts.

While Rega's Planar 2 and 3 turntables didn't match the Linn's performance, they were very clever mechanical compromises that produced a thoroughly musical result that was streets ahead of their price competition. In fact, so much so, they remained on back order for years, with waiting lists sometimes stretching for months.



The Planar 3 was based around a laminated board plinth, with a carefully suspended synchronous motor belt-driving a glass platter turning on a high precision main bearing. It received regular improvements, such as adding control electronics to reduce motor vibration, and is essentially still available, although seriously updated and now known as the P3 (£298).

## Quad Electrostatic LOUDSPEAKER

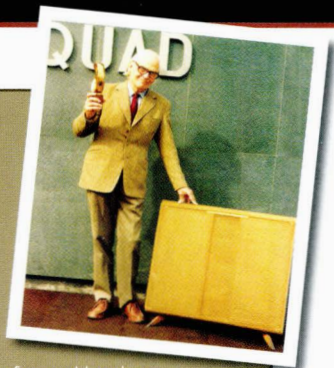
Launched: 1957

Original price: £52 each

**03** For many years, Quad was the Gold Standard in British high fidelity, with products designed on sound, conventional engineering principles. But the Quad Electrostatic Loudspeaker (the original name, variously shortened to ELS or ESL, seemingly according to taste, and sometimes with a 57 added to distinguish it from its ESL-63 successor that first appeared in 1981) was something genuinely radical. Designed by company founder Peter Walker, it was the first practical full-range electrostatic speaker – a two-way, three-panel design, using Mylar polymer diaphragms that were as light as a feather.

But 'practical' and 'full-range' are relative terms.

It was practical to the extent that you had to put up with a pair of central heating radiator wannabes sitting well clear of lounge walls and use a power amp that would remain stable even when fed into effectively a capacitor. Plus, it was full bandwidth only if you were prepared for a rather lean, dry bass. It was limited in maximum output too, but its wide dynamic range and delicate transparency could weave a magic spell that some still believe is unmatched, even by its successors. An authentic classic.



## NAD 3020 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Launched: 1979

Original price: £80

**02** There are things no budget amplifier is supposed to do. Like sounding better than products costing ten times as much, driving difficult high-end hi-fi speakers, or being so musical that people use

**“We are still reaping the rewards today”**

extremely expensive turntables to show its potential. The original NAD 3020 did all this... and more.

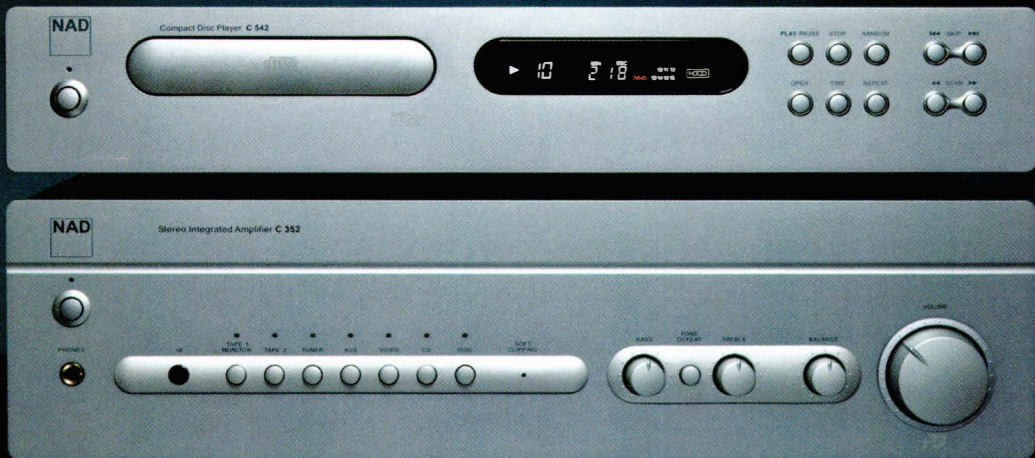
On the surface, it had little going for it. It was from a small, unknown manufacturer, it wasn't exactly pretty and it delivered an anaemic 20 watts per channel, at a time when every big-name brand was



making sleek, shiny and large products that could deliver much more power – on paper at least. No one seemed to care that the pursuit of power was often at the expense of sound quality.

Then the 3020 hit the streets. The dark, warm sound was a paragon of natural-sounding musicality. So what if it was a bit blurry round the edges and didn't have pin-point imagery? It always sounded and performed bigger than it had any right to. Every other amplifier manufacturer had to rethink its plans after the NAD 3020 and we are still reaping the rewards today.

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# Linn Sondek LP12

## TURNTABLE

Launched: 1972

Original price: £80

**01** A great sounding turntable, without question, but Linn's Sondek LP12 was (and is) much more than that. In the early 1970s, specialist British hi-fi manufacture was knocked sideways by crass government economic policies. Numerous famous names of the era went into liquidation, and even the survivors suffered considerable damage, leaving the UK hi-fi market wide open to large and aggressive Japanese multinationals.

Linn (along with other 1970s start-ups like Naim, Rega, Meridian and A&R Cambridge, now better known as Arcam), stimulated a renaissance in British hi-fi manufacture – a revival that's still going strong today. And the key component was unquestionably Linn's turntable.

The Linn is an icon that changed the way people perceived hi-fi. Prior to the Sondek, people bought inexpensive source components and amplifiers, in the belief that there was little to choose between the alternatives, and devoted the lion's share of the budget to the loudspeakers.

## “It changed the way people perceived hi-fi”

Linn heretically preached the opposite approach, claiming that the turntable was the most important component of all, as there was no point in spending large sums on speakers to reproduce poor source signals. The company placed heavy emphasis on demonstration and dealer training, and managed to convince much of the trade of the validity of its approach.

Linn's success in demonstrating the superiority of the Sondek LP12 also punctured the myth of



Japanese hi-fi superiority. One of Japan Inc's major innovations of the era was the direct drive turntable, but when Linn persuaded people actually to listen to turntables playing music, the penny dropped that the sexy looking direct drive turntables were far less good at the subtle art of reproducing music than an 'old-fashioned' belt driver, albeit a well set-up, well made one.

Although its engineering was invariably impeccable, one can fairly point out that Linn's progress also involved skilful marketing. But both were based on the careful putting together of synergetic components, and the painstaking development of an essentially simple design.

Over the years, the LP12 has evolved through a series of updates – Nirvana, Valhalla, Lingo and Cirkus from Linn itself, plus a plethora of upgrades by other companies – and a succession of improving ancillaries – Basik, Akito, Ittok and Ekos tonearms, Asak, Troika, Arkiv and Akiva cartridges – all of which have helped keep it in the vanguard of high-quality vinyl replay. After 34 years, the price has risen: the basic motor unit costs £1,400 but depending on configuration, expect to spend up to £6,000 for a new LP12. But it still sets the benchmark for others to beat, even today.



## The bitter end

It's been fascinating, putting together this supplement of the 50 most important and influential hi-fi components of all time. We don't claim the list is definitive. How can we? List-writing is as much about stimulating dispute and irritation as agreement.

But our list was at least democratic, arrived at by polling *Hi-Fi Choice's* leading contributors and then number-crunching the results. As a guide, we circulated a list of around 90 'possibles', inviting additions from the respondents, and ended up with nearer 120.

The final list has its biases and prejudices, for sure, but that doesn't detract from its interest. It's unquestionably Anglocentric, which I guess was pretty inevitable. Plenty of great components have originated outside Britain, for sure, but few of us have had the chance to try many for any length of time.

Another bias was the way each list reflected the age of the contributor. Besides restricting the number of old components – even yours truly's experience only dates back to the late-1960s – there's heavy representation of 'my first hi-fi' components, dating from the time when respondents were in their early twenties. But that does mean our list includes plenty of budget and mid-price components, alongside those that pushed the performance envelope in their eras.

It came as quite a surprise to discover that each of our respondents had come up with a quite different pecking order, even though some components were universally admired. This is partly because each individual has experienced different components over the years, but also

because music itself comes in bewildering variety, affecting each of us in different ways. Our individual expectations of what we want our hi-fi to achieve vary just as widely. We reviewers make our judgements based on all sorts of criteria – imaging, coloration, timing, dynamic range, musical communication and so on – but each of us has our own individual set of priorities.

The criteria for inclusion were deliberately left vague, though not without some initial debate. Should we, for example, include the Apple iPod?

### “We circulated a list of around 90 possibles”

Its impact on audio in general has been enormous, but does it count as a hi-fi component? “Not really” was the final decision, emphasising that performance was considered more important than advances in functionality.

Some of the components in our list are still available, albeit somewhat updated from their originals. Others will sometimes turn up second-hand, sometimes at very reasonable prices. For inspiration, check out the *2nd Hand Hi-Fi & Home Cinema Buyer* supplement in *Hi-Fi Choice* each month; keep an eye on eBay; or watch out for an 'audio jumble' happening in your area. Bear in mind that very old components might need proper restoration – the valves and capacitors in valve amps may need replacing, and the surrounds of old loudspeaker drive units are inclined to suffer fatigue. But despite this, these classics still hold their own, even today. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

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