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AUGUST 2009

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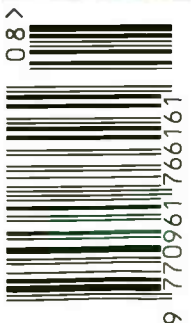
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welcome

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verdicts

●●●●● **OUTSTANDING**
●●●●● **EXCELLENT**
●●●●● **GOOD**
●●●●● **MEDIOCRE**
●●●●● **POOR**
£ **VALUE**



Ever been to a hi-fi show? They're quite an experience, don't you know! With hundreds of manufacturers under one roof, there's so much to see, and to hear, too...

For me, one of the particular highlights of a specialist show is the chance to 'meet your maker'. Well not literally, unless you decide to go poking around underneath a particularly large valve amplifier, or manage to impale yourself on an unusually pointy speaker spike. No, by this I mean you can talk to

many of the characters in the international audio industry. You'll regularly see the supremos of companies such as Roksan, Funk Firm, Avid, van den Hul, Absolute Sounds, Townshend, Naim and Sugden for example, plus a great many others, all suited and booted, talking to their doting fans (or grumpy customers)! And if you're really geeky, just go to the bar to spot the journalists and PR people deep in conversation...

The thing is, every hi-fi show has its own distinctive character. I do love the UK shows, but sometimes they can be a little too parochial, which is why *Hi-Fi World* goes out in force every year to the Munich High End Show. This amazing event has vast amounts of kit from every corner of the earth. Of course, as you'd expect, there's a lot of German market-specific stuff (easy to spot because it's got lots of black acrylic with gold plated knobs on), but there's a good deal of British kit too, plus some superlative Japanese high end and now Chinese and South Korean kit as well. All of human life is there, along with their weird and wonderful products, from tonearms made from violin bows to remanufactured V-FET output transistors.

Noel, Adam and myself had an epic few days out in Munich; read our four page show report on p80. We all lived to tell the tale, even if the copious amounts of bread and sausages consumed didn't do our waistlines much good (and the less said the better about the bitter). It was also great fun to meet some globe-trotting *Hi-Fi World* readers out there, even if my most memorable moment came when I espied a team of ten portly North Europeans sporting 'Danish High End Club Munich tour 2009' T-shirts, some of whom were striking 'curious' poses for the camera. Oh well, anything can happen at Munich, and it usually does!

David Price, editor

testing

To ensure the utmost accuracy in our product reviews, *Hi-Fi World* has extremely comprehensive in-house test facilities, and our test equipment - from big names like Rohde & Schwarz and Hewlett Packard - is amongst the most advanced in the world.

Loudspeakers are measured using a calibrated Bruel & Kjaer microphone feeding a Clio-based computer

analyser, using pulsed and gated sinewaves, in a large room to eliminate the room's influence. Pickup arm vibration is measured with a Bruel & Kjaer accelerometer.

No other UK hi-fi magazine has in-house testing, and none has access to such advanced tests across all types of equipment. That's why you can depend on *Hi-Fi World* reviews.



ELECTRONIC MAGAZINE

Go to our website www.hi-fiworld.co.uk to buy an electronic version of this magazine, individual issues or a subscription. At present we do not offer back issues, but hope to soon.

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32

Cyrus's brand new CD8 XP d DAC-equipped integrated.



36

Arcam's gigantic new AVR600 do-it-all AV receiver.



40

Simaudio's sweet sounding Moon CD3.3 CD player.



112

Ortofon's seminal new Cadenza moving coil cartridges.



100

The blistering Timestep Technics SL-1200 turntable, complete with SME V and Koetsu!



12

Emille Labs' gorgeous high end valve integrated amplifier.

AUGUST 2009

VOLUME 19 : NO. 6

ACCESSORIES

CABLE SUPERTEST 17

Adam Smith rounds up six interconnects and six loudspeaker cables, at budget, mid and high end price points respectively.

PURE AVANTI FLOW 71

Steven Green tunes in to a versatile new DAB radio.

AMPLIFICATION

EMILLE KI-40L 12

Noel Keywood reviews this feisty sounding high end tube integrated amplifier.

CYRUS 8XP D 32

David Price tries out an interesting new modular DAC-equipped integrated.

ARCAM AVR600 36

This respected British specialist's new flagship AV receiver gets the Patrick Cleasby treatment...

DIGITAL

SIM AUDIO MOON CD3.3 40

David Price is beguiled by this sweet sounding high end CD spinner.

LOUDSPEAKERS

ZU ESSENCE 62

Noel Keywood experiences these unusual high end floorstanders!

SYSTEMS

TEAC REFERENCE 600 27

This beautifully made mini-component system gets an audience with David Price...

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO SONATA 66

An interesting new affordable mini system is auditioned by Paul Rigby.

OLDE WORLDE

FERROGRAPH SI 87

Adam Smith tells the story of a cult classic nineteen seventies loudspeaker.

FEATURES

THE NXT STEP 28

Noel Keywood is your guide to some interesting new loudspeaker technologies.

THE GLOBIES 72

It's that time of the year again! David Price and Adam Smith give out Hi-Fi World's alternative awards!

MUNICH HIGH END SHOW REPORT 80

David Price and Adam Smith trek around one of the world's best hi-fi shows for three days, and here's what they've got to show for it!

VINYL

VINYL NEWS 98

Paul Rigby with all the latest black plastic releases.

STEP CHANGE 100

David Price assembles the ultimate Technics SL-1200 turntable package including Timestep PSU, SME Series V tonearm and Koetsu Red cartridge!

DENON DP-200USB 105

Patrick Cleasby reviews this new premium priced USB turntable.

LORICRAFT PRC3 106

Paul Rigby tries out a super new record cleaning machine.

ATTWOOD CONCERT STAGE 109

Tony Bolton auditions an impressive mid-price phono stage.

ORTOFON CADENZA 112

Noel Keywood purloins a pair of brand new high end moving coils from the Ortofon stand at the Munich High End Show!



6 NEWS

Words from the front...

44 SUBSCRIPTIONS

Ensure your copy every month and save money too!

46 MAIL

A bumper thirteen pages of your views and queries this month!

69 COMPETITION

Your chance to win A.N.T. Audio's superb Kora 3T Ltd. phono stage worth £775.

74 WORLD STANDARDS

All our favourite new kit listed for your perusal!

84 AUDIOPHILE CD

Paul Rigby rounds up the latest audiophile CD releases.

89, 91, 93, 95, 97 OPINION

The team get to grips with matters music, hi-fi and life!

120 DIAL-A-DEALER

A comprehensive guide to UK hi-fi retailers.

123 FREE READERS CLASSIFIEDS

Three pages of second-hand bargains.

128 NEXT MONTH

What we hope to bring you in the next issue...

129 ADVERTISERS' INDEX

130 CLASSIC CUTS

...and finally, the Rolling Stones' 'Some Girls' 1978 waxing gets the Paul Rigby treatment this month.

news



LOOK SHARP

KEF's new Concept Blade loudspeaker is the result of three years of exhaustive testing, expert analysis and intricate experimentation, the company says. As a concept piece, it highlights KEF's research and development prowess, showcasing the brand's capabilities that are sure to influence future products. At its heart is the Single Apparent Source technology, which mates with KEF's Uni-Q driver design to give "a loudspeaker with unrivalled coherence throughout the entire frequency range". The materials engineering in Concept Blade is complex and sophisticated, it's said, with every component being designed from the ground up.

The four 10" (250mm) bass drivers running in opposed symmetrical pairs deliver distortion-free low frequencies, KEF say. They are side firing so their acoustic centre coincides with those of the tenth generation KEF Uni-Q midrange driver and tweeter – the Single Apparent Source technology. This is found in the driver itself, with the tweeter carefully positioned so that it has the same acoustic centre as the midrange driver. Formed from critically braced liquid crystal polymer – a light but immensely stiff material – and backed by a huge 3" (75 mm) voice coil to move any break-up way above its operating range – the Uni-Q device incorporates a 1" (25 mm) titanium dome tweeter whose mechanical characteristics are said to be free from resonance in its operating band thanks to rear chamber loading and a patented dome profile, developed using Finite Element Analysis. This means that the entire frequency range is radiated from one point in space.

This is all housed in a critically curved cabinet constructed from a carbon fibre/balsa wood composite – as found in ultra-high performance cars, used for its exceptional lightness and rigidity. The parabolic curvature of the cabinet increases cabinet strength, meaning sound is only generated from driver movement and not from distortion of the cabinet. Concept Blade is described as "more than just a concept, it is a tangible development of an ongoing series of KEF technologies, which will feature in many new KEF models in the future". And you never know, the speaker itself might just reach commercial production... For more information, click on www.kef.com.

TRI VAMP

One of the most impressive new turntable designs in a long time – in this magazine's opinion – comes from Thorens. The new TD 309 Tri-Balance turntable was launched at the Munich show, and is available from September 2009 in a choice of Black or Red with an estimated retail price of £800. Its designer is the highly respected Karl-Heinz Fink, the man behind a number of impressive loudspeakers, including the darling of *Hi-Fi World's* budget boxes, the Q Acoustics 1050i. It sports an innovative "Tri-Balance" suspended sub chassis system, with an interesting suspension system to make setting up easy. A low noise, voltage controlled DC motor drives a short square section belt to the inner platter, with adjustable belt tension for purists to wring the best performance out of the drive. An aluminium subplatter with single line contact to a "fused silica" (read: "glass") platter is used. The deck also sports an all new low resonance TP92 arm with precision Japanese bearings, adjustable for azimuth and overhang. Initially the TD 309 will be supplied with a Switch Mode Power Supply (SMPS) delivering the necessary 12V DC. This was chosen from many on the basis of sonic performance. Later in 2009 Thorens will launch an optional upgraded linear power supply which will improve performance considerably. For more information, click on www.thorens.ch.



GENESIS...

The third generation of Adam Audio's Classic series profit from technological improvements from the award winning high end Tensor series, the company says. The Adam proprietary ART transducers give way to their successors, the new X-ART transducers. This new transducer has an extended ('X') frequency response and a higher efficiency. The new lower midrange drivers and woofers match the ones used in the ultra high-end Tensor series. In addition, the bigger Classic MK3 models are equipped with new base plates and spikes to improve the decoupling from the floor. Another new feature found in the active Classic MK3 speaker is the A/B amplifier, which has been designed by ADAM to perfectly complement the X-ART tweeter. This amplifier ensures that one of the outstanding features of the tweeter, its frequency response up to 50kHz, can be realised with no limitations, Adam Audio say. For more information, click on www.adam-audio.de/professional/.

AMERICAN HERITAGE

Klipsch's classic Heritage Series horn-loaded loudspeakers are returning to the UK. The unique, built-to-order line-up includes the only speaker in the world to remain in continuous production for sixty years. Descended from a single revolutionary loudspeaker, designed by founder Paul W. Klipsch in 1946, the four-strong 2009 range has for its flagship the legendary Klipschorn. This mighty behemoth, which stands 1.28m high and weighs 79.5kg, is essentially identical to the model developed sixty years ago. Featuring a horn-loaded Phenolic diaphragm 1in compression driver tweeter, 2in midrange and a 15in fibre-composite woofer the Klipschorn achieves a sensitivity of 105dB, making it – like all Heritage speakers – an ideal partner for today's new generation of valve amplifiers. Next down in the range is the La Scala II, originally designed in 1963 as a P.A. speaker for Arkansas gubernatorial candidate Winthrop Rockefeller, this fully horn-loaded, 3-way loudspeaker sounded so good that people wanted to use it as a domestic hi-fi speaker, the story goes. Smaller than its legendary forbear, this model features a grille to cover the mid and high frequency horns and an exposed bass horn cabinet. Originally designed as a centre-speaker to be used in conjunction with a pair of Klipschorns, the 3-way Cornwall III offers the full-range bass response of the Klipschorn – thanks to its direct-radiating 15in woofer – but with a sensitivity and output that approaches that of the fully horn-loaded models. A riser base, to lift it from the floor, comes as standard. Last but not least is the most affordable (and biggest-selling) model in the Heritage line-up, the Heresy III. Easy to place because of its relatively compact dimensions (it stands a 'mere' 60cm high) the 3-way Heresy, which was first produced in 1957, has been improved over the years so that it now boasts a more powerful woofer, a bi-wire network and a titanium diaphragm-equipped tweeter and midrange units. A slant riser base for floor placement (removable for cabinet installations) is supplied as standard. All the speakers in the Heritage range are built to order in Hope, Arkansas, USA. Prices are £5,999 for the Klipschorn, £3,399 for La Scala, £1,699 for Cornwall III and £849 for Heresy III. All speakers are priced as singles and are available in either Black Ash, Walnut or Cherry wood veneer finishes. Available from selected dealers and online at www.klipsch.co.uk. For further information call 0845 0822454.



BLACK CELEBRATION

Specially made to celebrate Ken Ishiwata's thirty year anniversary with Marantz, the new KI Pearl SACD player and amplifier are made in a limited edition batch of only 500 worldwide. Distinguished by their unique 'silk black' finishing, Ken Ishiwata has applied some very special tuning to both units. Underneath the Pearl SACD player's 5mm aluminium cover is a Xyron Disc Tray with Precision Super Audio CD Drive, the latest toroidal transformer, and the Marantz-exclusive HDAM SA2 circuitry. The Pearl integrated amplifier pushes out 90 Watts per channel into 8 Ohms or 140W into 4. Its two-stage circuit construction guarantees a breathtaking signal to noise ratio, says the company. For more information, click on www.marantz.com/kippearl, where you can also buy the KI reference SACD (given away free with every Pearl SACD) - but you'd better hurry because (yes you've guessed it) it's also a limited edition!



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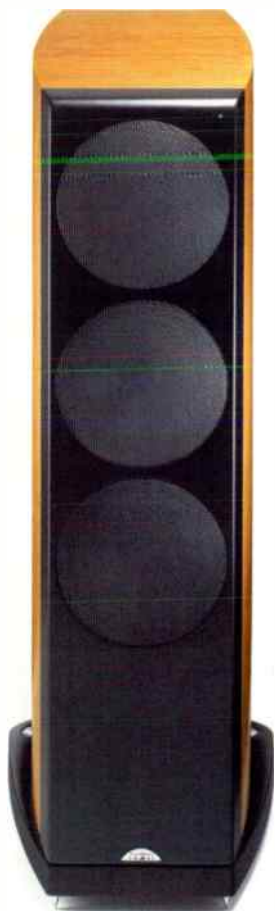
World Radio History



HI PERFORMANCE

Mordaunt Short's high end Performance range is now joined by a new compact model. "Timbre-matched to perfectly complement the rest of the series, Performance 2 is designed to be the ultimate standmount stereo or home theatre loudspeaker", the company says. It features MS's Aspirated Tweeter Technology, carried-over from Performance 6, with an elongated metal diffuser to "breathe" the tweeter. This is coupled to Mordaunt-Short's Continuous Profile Cone driver, in 165mm form, mounted to the rear of the cabinet to isolate front baffle distortion. To develop "the ultimate crossover", exhaustive research determined the ideal combination of DVP (Dual Value Parallel) capacitor values for maximum performance. Premium components were then selected, including ClarityCap capacitors in all critical parts of the crossover.

The speaker's unusual shape eliminates colouration and has unsurpassed inherent mechanical strength, dramatically improving sound quality, it is claimed. This is enhanced by a heavy cast metal base with optional spiked feet. Such profiling is possible through the use of a complex polymer resin. Enabling injection moulded monocone construction the compound's density can be varied to within less than one hundredth of a gram. So, while the outside of the Performance enclosure is rock-hard, the inner section is far less dense, delivering high acoustic damping and low stored energy. The cabinet is finished in stylish Midnight Black, Granite Grey or Brilliant Silver lustre, and there's a bespoke stand for an inert, acoustically neutral foundation. For more information, click on www.mordaunt-short.com.



STANDING OVATION

Another major Munich moment was the launch of Naim's Ovator S-600 high-end floorstanding loudspeaker. Described as "a technically advanced loudspeaker system targeted at the music lover", it has taken three years to bring to market and uses some very interesting technology, in the opinion of this magazine. Indeed it's the first use of Balanced Mode Radiator technology, popularised by Fink Audio Research, which had a key part in the design process. The BMR midband driver offers "no discontinuities of crossover or dispersion in critical voice band", Naim say, and it's partnered to two new Naim low-distortion high-linearity bass drivers. The BMR is mounted in an isolating enclosure positioned by leaf-springs, a favourite of Naim's speaker design chief Roy George. The whole cabinet is mounted on a high pressure diecast plinth, with adjustable stainless steel spikes. The crossover shows great attention to detail; easy to convert to active operation, it sports "the finest components chosen by listening to bring the ideal combination of technical excellence with listening pleasure", primary inductors are audio-grade laminated core with extremely low DC resistance to improve control, and audio-grade ClarityCaps are used, including the very special ESA types in the feed to the BMR. Naim claim the Ovator S-600 is especially easy to set up, and its vital statistics are 1,168x401x434mm, and weight 61kg. For more information, click on www.naim-audio.com. [See our special report on p28 - Ed.]

X(WALK)MEN

Sony's latest offering in the crowded MP3 player market is the X-Series. Its key features are a 3" OLED touchscreen and digital in-ear noise cancelling headphones, the latter claimed to be a world first. The big and bright colour screen can be used for viewing films and videos, the software makes it easy to download music-related content directly from YouTube for example. A web browser is included and this can be set to automatically download your favourite Podcasts whenever you enter a Wi-Fi equipped area. Sony also claim that the X Series delivers the, "best ever Walkman sound quality" thanks to its S-Master digital amplifier. A big claim - we say don't throw away your WM-D6Cs just yet! Prices start at £209 for the 16GB version, going up to the £279 for the 32GB model. For more information, click on www.sonymstyle.co.uk.

TUNE IN

It's not everyday a new high end tuner is launched, so we're interested to hear of Electrocompaniet's new ECR 1. This model has been developed to extend the Electrocompaniet product range with a long awaited FM/RDS/DAB/Internet radio. It also includes RDS (Radio Data System) for viewing Radiotext. A fully fledged 192kHz/24bit DAC section, including sample rate converter, is included to handle the delicate digital to analogue conversion of the digital radio. Three digital inputs are also provided, letting the ECR 1 be used as a standalone external DAC. Optional plug-in modules are available to include DAB and/or internet radio, and a USB interface will also be made available. Like all other models in the Classic line, the ECR 1 features a fully balanced and symmetrical analogue output section, terminated in a balanced and single-ended output connection. For more information, click on www.electrocompaniet.no.





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LIGHT RELIEF

Candela and Luau lights by Vessel are gorgeous hand-held ornamental lights that illuminate the moment they are taken off their recharging stands. Perfect for moody music moments, we think! For more information, see www.ecotradingstore.com.

DIAMOND LIFE

Wharfedale have a new range of Diamond loudspeakers - the first to emerge being the Diamond 10.1. This latest evolution of the classic Wharfedale Diamond 'bookshelf' speaker replaces the hugely successful, multi-award winning Diamond 9.1, and sports a new cabinet, which is "an ambitious design previously unseen at such affordable prices", Wharfedale say. Also key are the high-quality drive units, including a mid/bass cone made from woven Kevlar. Peter Comeau, Wharfedale's recently appointed Director of Acoustic Design, has been responsible for voicing the Diamond 10 Series prior to production. The Wharfedale Diamond 10.1 loudspeaker is available from July, with a suggested retail price of £199.95 per pair. Four high-quality cabinet finish options are available at launch - black, rosewood, cherry and walnut. For more information, see www.wharfedale.co.uk.



MP FREE

Advisors to the British government have warned that around seven million people in the UK partake in illegal downloads, costing the economy tens of billions of pounds. Researchers found 1.3m people using one file-sharing network on one weekday and estimated that over a year they had free access to material worth £120bn, thanks to fast broadband which allows the download of 200 MP3 music tracks to be downloaded in just five minutes. The government says work must be done internationally to tackle the problem. Intellectual Property Minister David Lammy is reported to have said that these statistics put into context the impact illegal downloads have had on copyright industries and the UK economy as a whole. He added that, "this is not an issue confined by national boundaries and I am sure that other [EU] member states and their copyright industries will find this report of use in the development of policy."



SPACE 2009

The new £89.95 Eton G6 Buzz Aldrin Aviator Radio celebrates fifty years of Space Exploration and forty years since NASA astronauts Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong landed on the Moon. Its maker calls it a "space aged, pocket sized, world band radio for the traveller, radio or aircraft enthusiast". It will tune into just about everything on MW, FM, shortwave and the aircraft band, it's claimed, and it is one of the few modern designs to cover the Long wave, perfect for listening to the cricket throughout Europe in the summer. The feature list includes stereo sound, night-time back-light, fast or slow tuning, international clock and wake-up alarms keep you on schedule, wherever your travels take you. For more information, call +44(0)23 92 313090 or click on www.etoncorp.co.uk.

SPOTTED!

Some people will do anything to get their picture in the pages of this hallowed magazine! Ken Ishiwata caught sneaking a copy of his fave hi-fi rag in through the out door of the Munich High End Show at the end of May...



Sporty Forty

Noel Keywood finds Emille Labs' new KI-40L integrated to be a most unusual sounding valve amplifier...

Valve amplifiers come in a variety of categories, and understanding them helps make sense of what can be a fairly confusing field - especially nowadays where 'high end' has become synonymous with valves and there are ever more of them. Into this field comes Emille Labs KI-40L, which I thought was an elegant and visually intriguing design based around a common arrangement of EL34 output valves working in push-pull - until I looked closer, that is. The slim, parallel sided envelope wasn't an EL34 at all but - surprisingly - a KT77, a fairly rare GEC substitute recently reissued by JJ of the Slovak Republic (see www.jj-electronic.com) and NewSensor (see www.newsensor.com), a U.S./ Russian venture with manufacturing in Russia. Of these, Emille use the latter and it's a valve that gets plenty of praise on the internet, that's for sure.

The EL34 is a popular valve in the Far East, and I like its lean, clean sound, full of delicacy and detail. It doesn't have the grunt of the big triodes, like 211s and 845s, but it is a lot more svelte than the 6550, if not with the speed and kick of a KT88. However, for all round subtlety combined with affordable price and plentiful supply the EL34 is a great choice and a pair come for a very reasonable £35 or so. The KT77 is a variant of the EL34 originally produced by GEC back in the 1950s under the Genalex brand name and is reputedly a guttser sounding valve with a bit more body to its sound, but I admit I have never heard them. Originals are rare, and in their KI-40L Emille Labs use NewSensor's new production version Genalex, with a replacement cost of around £64 for a matched pair. These come with gold plated grid wire, carbonized screen grids, and a tri-alloy clad plate structure. So I thought the KI-40L was going to be a nicely honed amplifier with well balanced pedigree, very suited to a Far East audience including Emille's home market, South Korea...

But it wasn't quite like that. Emille seem to be harbouring within their factory walls some fairly knowledgeable and skilled tube nuts, because measurement showed the crucial output transformers of this amplifier are of exceptional ability and the sound was commensurately surprising. So by no means is this a standard issue EL34 design, classically epitomised by Mullard's 5-20 amplifier. The KI-40L is an altogether more sophisticated beast in every area, with a sound that had me both surprised and impressed. It was so clean, correct and punchy as to be quite eye popping; the KI-40L is a valve amp for real purists and has obviously been designed for listeners with very high expectations.

In line with its substantial £5,780 price tag, you get a substantially built amplifier weighing 30kgs, no less - a two man lift if your name is not Jeff Capes. Measuring 457mm wide, 460mm deep and 256mm high the case is sizeable, but not so big it cannot be accommodated in most domestic settings. Cut outs in the aluminium side facilitate cooling and act as hand holds. Clear acrylic top panels are vented for cooling too, but KT77s don't need the heater current of big triodes or the 6C33C, so heat production isn't great, equivalent to a 9 Watt light bulb. The light anodised aluminium bodywork with its satin finish looks both modern and smart. Press the side mounted power switch and the amplifier lights immediately, which surprised me for a few seconds before I realised that the preamplifier tubes have orange LEDs beneath them to strengthen the usual glow from the filaments. This being a refined design, there's no switch on noise at all - no thrum, hum or anything else. Emille say they make all

their own transformers in-house and I suspect this includes the mains transformer, explaining its lack of mechanical hum.

Also quick to light is the small, round bias adjustment meter that sits on the front panel. Fixed bias gives more power from a valve but, contrary to what you might think from its name, needs adjustment. It's a simple, occasional process with the KI-40L, performed by turning a small potentiometer that sits just behind the front panel, by inserting a small plastic screwdriver (supplied) into each of four access holes. It's simply





SOUND QUALITY

I recognise the sound of this amplifier as one highly preened by the use of boutique components all the way through, reminding me very much of the sort of sound I used to get in the past when component tweaking World Audio Design valve amplifiers. Componentry has a big impact upon sound in valve amplifiers, where there are far fewer components than in solid-state amplifiers and so each one has a proportionately greater effect. The biggest indicator of this was the KI-40L's super clear, but drily accurate and very brisk presentation that I summarised in

my listening notes as "stark but dramatic". Spinning Celine Dion's 'I'm Alive' from the CD 'A New Day Has Come', released a tidal wave of detail at me, from a vividly forward midband that was seemingly bathed in an intense light. This painted Ms Dion as a starkly lit image centre stage with a microphone that seemed to be picking up almost superfluous amounts of information about what her oral parts were doing – if you'll pardon me putting it that way! – and I got the whole production thrown at me too, backing singers, added reverb and all else the mixing engineers had decided to embellish this track with.

The amplifier's delivery is so full on, in best valve amplifier fashion, that it wasn't so much a case of straining to hear what the Emille was doing so much as having it thrown at me, complete with kitchen sink! I'm very much a valve amplifier man, as regular readers will know, so I've heard a few, but the KI-40L still took

a matter of turning it so the needle settles into a small green area on the meter scale. It has a useful extra function of showing when the valve needs replacing, the KT77 being rated for 5,000 hours minimum, run hard. It isn't run hard in this design though so should give nearer double that figure. Beneath the meter lie the bias valve selector, and then a five position input selector. Flanking this selector, at left and right are separate volume control knobs that move against click stops and are attached to high quality, audio grade Alps Blue Velvet potentiometers. Setting volume is none too easy with these I found – they need synchronised wrist movement – and there is no remote control to do it for you. You must set each knob visually so its reference indent is in the same physical position. Independent volume controls provide

a way of setting channel balance without degrading crosstalk though, which is why they find use in high quality amplifiers.

The back panel carries gold plated phono inputs, left and right channels being separated at either sides of the chassis, as this is a dual mono amplifier Emille say, and indeed channel separation was a very wide 99dB we found under measurement. There are 4 Ohm and 8 Ohm loudspeaker outputs from a tapped secondary winding.

Power is connected by an IEC cord and Emille supply a fuse, screwdriver, handling gloves, plus manual. The lot comes packed in a wooden chest no less, with fishhook hasp to hold the lid closed - very natty. The KI-40L is straightforward and hassle free to use: just switch on and go. As always, valve amplifiers do take a good fifteen minutes or more to really get into their stride, but that's all you need...

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<p>WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★</p> <p>Oil Mini Sub & Vision</p>	<p>WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★</p> <p>Orion & Gemini Two Invers. of high quality filters</p>	<p>BEST HIFI NEWS HIFI NEWS HIFI NEWS</p> <p>Sigmas</p>
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me by surprise. It isn't gently smooth, lullingly soft or easily spacious; it isn't like my own warm but expansive and relaxing 300B amplifiers, nor like our MB845 thermionic equivalent of a Mack truck, which makes solid-state sound wimpish. The KI-40L peers right into a performance with a bright light.

It has enormous bass grip, very deep bass too, just as our measurements suggested it might, so bass lines were always forceful and very apparent. I'm not unused to valve amplifiers that have stronger bass than solid-state, but again the KI-40L left me in no doubt that it was exceptionally muscular in this area, the walking bass lines in Angelique Kidjo's 'Tatchedogbe' thundering around the listening room like a herd of charging elephants.

I think that the apparent

"it brings a high intensity light to play – the antithesis of what's expected from valves..."

speed of the amplifier, a function of the way it delivers bullet-fast leading edges, helped bring a sense of speed and timing to bass, plus clinical precision, that made for a quite dramatic "take no prisoners" sound. Emille wind their own output transformers and as this amplifier has unparalleled bandwidth at both ends of the frequency spectrum there is something a little unusual somewhere under the bonnet, explaining why the KI-40L is no run of the mill design. And as I said earlier, valve amps trumpet their differences in a way solid-state amps do not. That the KI-40L has wideband transformers is subjectively fully reflected in its sound: bass runs dry and deep, as if Nautilus were close by. Treble had an airy, open quality that revealed the shimmering decays of cymbals in 'New Day', but a vivid strength forced this perception upon me.

Turning to LP I thought would bring me some salvation, but the KI-40L showed its mettle here too, its brisk, forward midband bringing Mark Knopfler's voice close up to the mic., through a crisp clarity that shone a light on his gravelly drawl in 'Madame Geneva's' from the beautifully cut LP 'Kill To Get Crimson'. The view was vividly frank and revealing, again an unembellished window onto the recording with dry analysis, pushed out by strong midband dynamics. The KI-40L showed that its sonic characteristics transfer from CD to LP, so strong are they. Apart from a

lighter timbre to Knopfler's voice I again noticed that the amplifier also has unusually airy treble whose harmonics seemed to ring out into infinite space.

Here the KI-40L is very specifically different from the herd and is a design apart in many ways. There may well be other valve amplifiers in the world able to match it this respect, but so far I haven't heard them. Valve amps don't normally work out to radio frequencies, but this one does and it seems to have a commensurately different quality. That's not to say that it doesn't have the classic strengths of a valve amplifier; expanded dynamics, super clear midband, deep soundstaging, but it has no soothing cloak to throw over music, rather it brings a large magnifying glass and a high intensity light to play – the antithesis of what's

expected from valves.

Equally startling in a different way is the amplifier's bass grip: its seemingly endless extension downward into subterranean depths and its conspicuous power aren't what I expect to

encounter. The KI-40L also exerts astonishing grip and control, and this would suddenly make itself known in moments like the powerful and resonant single strike of a drum in 'Madame Butterfly', that had real heft to it. Renee Fleming's voice was thrown from the loudspeakers with quite some force: I think opera lovers will find the KI-40L's revelatory midband and projective power quite breathtaking. And lovers of Dance would enjoy the thunderous bass line behind Goldfrap's 'Ride A White Horse' that is driven along by those KT77s. With the leading edge of the synthesiser spotlight, its sweeping chords penetrated the room well and Alison Goldfrap seemed to have gained new powers of enunciation.



CONCLUSION

This isn't a valve amplifier for those who like valve amplifiers! It's quite a different animal to most, and something of a new experience for me. Whilst Quad II-eighties are clean and fast as valve amplifiers go, the Emille Labs KI-40L makes them sound mild mannered and discreet. Its stark ability lays its table out very plainly for all to hear. I sense some special engineering in the background here, for the KI-40L has a highly tuned and individual sound, a presentation all of its own. With a sense of great power plus extraordinary insight and resolution, it paints a strongly lit canvas of sound on which instruments and singers are portrayed with striking clarity. If you want to hear a rather special kind of valve amplifier this is one worth auditioning.

VERDICT ●●●●●

Unusually open and fast sounding valve amplifier, that's both deeply detailed and forceful.

EMILLE LABS KI-40L £5,780

Angelsound Audio

+44 (0)1923 352479

www.angelsoundaudio.co.uk

FOR

- deep controlled bass
- vividly open midband
- extended treble

AGAINST

- twin volume controls
- no remote control
- limited power

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The KI-40L had a measured output power of 28 Watts per channel on both channels, from both 8 Ohms and 4 Ohm taps, so secondary coupling efficiency was good. However, this is less than the 40 Watts claimed (using Emille's 2% distortion limit) and because the KI-40L clips suddenly and hard, like a solid-state amplifier (indicative of substantial negative feedback), it could not produce significantly more than this, with 240V mains input. So the 40 Watts claimed appears optimistic.

Distortion levels were unusually low, especially at low frequencies (40Hz) where the KI-40L was as linear as in the midband. Distortion was very low at high frequencies too, measuring just 0.05% at 10kHz, 1 Watt.

The bandwidth of the KI-40L was extraordinary. Its high frequency limit measured 150kHz, -1dB, and it was flat up to this frequency, free from resonant peaking of any sort. It extended down to 4Hz at low frequencies and this again is a very low limit for a transformer, so Emille's output transformer is an unusually capable design.

Input sensitivity was high at 150mV for full output, useful where an external phono preamp with limited gain is used. Hum and noise were negligible at -88dB.

The KI-40L produces an unusual set of test results from a valve amplifier, with ultra wide bandwidth – more than most transistor amplifiers by a big margin – and very low distortion at all frequencies. Power output was disappointing, but adequate all the same when using high sensitivity loudspeakers. Measurement shows the KI-40L is quite different from most valve amplifiers. NK

Power	28 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	4Hz-150kHz
Separation	98dB
Noise	-88dB
Distortion	0.05%
Sensitivity	150mV
Damping factor	4

DISTORTION



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Wired For Sound

Adam Smith connects up to a wide range of interconnects and loudspeaker cables at budget, mid-price and high end price points...



There are few areas of the hi-fi industry that attract such diverse opinions as cables. Heated discussions over topics such as vinyl versus CD or DAB versus FM, pale into insignificance by comparison. At one extreme, you have the cable sceptics who take the attitude, "well, it's all just a bit of wire isn't it?" At the other are the cable-worshippers whose systems are incomplete without six feet of platinum plated, rare earth oxygen-free metal, surrounded by seventeen layers of high tech, military standard dielectric, which costs more than most people earn in a year...

The reality is that both positions are wide of the mark, and somewhere in the middle lies the right answer. Of course, precisely where depends on the personal proclivities – and the system being used – of the prospective purchaser. So the task in hand is to find a cable that suits you and your hi-fi – it's a little to simplistic to paint cables in arbitrary good versus bad terms. Care and patience in choosing the right cabling should help to balance anyone's system.

With this in mind, we thought it was high time to take a broad look at what's available, to see what your money buys you at different price points both in material and sonic terms. We structured it by choosing two affordable items, two mid-price designs and two heading into exotic territory, for both analogue interconnects and loudspeaker cables.

To give a sense of the sort of improvements gained from a good but basic starter cables, Techlink's Wires XS interconnect (£30) and Chord Company's Carnival Classic loudspeaker cable (£45 for a 3m pair) were used. In all cases, the interconnects were 1m lengths, tested between both CD player and preamp plus turntable and phono stage, and all loudspeaker cables were terminated 3m lengths.

INTERCONNECTS

Kimber Tonik	p18	£59
Van den Hul The Thames	p18	£125
Missing Link 'The Link	p19	£280
MIT CVT Terminator 2	p19	£440
Siltech Classic Anniversary 550i	p20	£935
Clearer Audio Optimus Reference	p20	£960

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

Black Rhodium Jive	p21	£82
Supra Rondo Bi-wire	p21	£105
Merlin Scorpion	p23	£450
QED Genesis Silver Spiral	p23	£470
Synergistic Research Tesla Accelerator	p24	£1,520
Silver Arrow Daddy Reference	p24	£1,800



Kimber Tonik

KIMBER TONIK £59

This entry level interconnect uses three ultra-pure copper conductors in what Kimber call their 'Tri-Braid' field geometry, whereby the three conductors are interwoven. There is no overall screen and Kimber claim that this is not necessary as the aforementioned geometry performs just as good a job at rejecting RF interference – which is the function that the screen usually performs. Terminating each end are Kimber's 'Ultratike' phono plugs and the cable is also available in a balanced configuration, with studio grade, silver plated XLR connectors. Finally, attenuated versions are also available for signal matching, should you require this.

Swapping the budget reference Techlink Wires XS interconnects to the Kimbers brought about a subtle but effective change. Essentially, where the Techlinks can be a little opaque in terms of fine top end detail, the Toniks proved a real step forward. Treble gained a useful crispness and the upper mid and high end seemed to snap into better focus, giving a superior view of what was happening during the performance, particularly in the case of larger bands or orchestras.

Bass lines were vivid and nicely underpinned the main performance without ever tending to dominate. Equally, across the midband, everything was well weighted and blessed of fine insight. Although accomplished in the terms of soundstaging depth, I found the difference the Kimbers made to be less pronounced – not least because the Techlinks are nicely atmospheric in this respect, if a little hazy in terms of absolute instrument placement.

Whilst the Toniks definitely pulled performers into line with a vengeance, they weren't as three dimensional as is possible. There was a less dramatic sense of perspective than some cables I've heard, although this comes as no surprise considering their modest pricing. A musically enjoyable cable offering plenty of sound per pound.

VAN DEN HUL THE THAMES £125

This new affordable interconnect is specially designed "to provide the best possible signal transfer quality between your high end turntable and preamplifier at an affordable price", according to distributor Henley Designs. This is achieved through the use of a cable that exhibits a very low parasitic capacitance in order to minimise cartridge loading, plus a hybrid conductor design that utilises silver coated oxygen-free copper conductors enhanced with Linear Structured Carbon – a van den Hul development. In addition, the cable features an additional steel wire embedded between the two conductors for strength, but which also serves as a handy earth wire for your turntable.

As someone who has used Van den Hul's Royal Jade loudspeaker cables on many occasions, I would swear that I could have identified The Thames interconnects blindfolded! I mean this in a good way as they definitely have van den Hul's signature sound; one that is richly detailed and sumptuously layered with a fine sense of space, atmosphere and midband fluidity.

The Thames are definitely quite laid back performers, but by no means boring, capturing rhythms very well indeed and seemingly adding in a nicely judged extra layer of low end detail. Ultimately the vdHs may be a little too smooth for some, but I suspect many with brighter ancillaries will love them, thanks to the rich palette of sonic colours that they have at their disposal.

As a final observation, that the design works to their intended purpose seems to have paid off as they were definitely even happier when placed between turntable and phono stage. As the blurb suggests, they do indeed perform very well in terms of low level resolution – making sure that none of those precious microvolts are corrupted in between stylus and preamp. Recommended.



Van Den Hul The Thames

VERDICT ●●●●

A clean and detailed performer, this cable is a fine budget buy.

KIMBER TONIK £59

Russ Andrews

+44(0)845 345 1550

www.russandrews.com

FOR

- top end detail
- fine musicality

AGAINST

- limited depth perspective

VERDICT ●●●●£

A richly rewarding interconnect with superb low level resolution and fine tonality.

VDH THE THAMES £125

Henley Designs

+44(0)1235 511166

www.henleydesigns.co.uk

FOR

- midband flow
- low level detail

AGAINST

- too smooth for some?

MISSING LINK 'THE LINK' £280

Moving into dearer territory, we have Missing Link's 'The Link' Interconnect, the base model in their Link family of cables, and smaller brothers to the 'Link Cryo Reference' reviewed very favourably by editor David Price in June. The Link also takes as its basis 99.999% pure silver, constructed in a solid core, and surrounded by a silicone jacket. This is further surrounded by a braided cover for protection and aesthetics and each end of the cable is terminated in Eichmann bullet plugs. The Missing Link are firm believers in crimping their cables to the plugs, but they then also surround the joints with solder as well for solidity. The final braid is available in a choice of Black, White, Purple or Blue – the aesthetics of the finished product are decent, although it's fair to say that the company has not lavished large amounts of thought to the cable's visual presentation. Whilst this may deter some of the 'cable-as-male-jewellery' brigade, others will like the fact that the money's obviously been spent on the wire inside...

In use the Link proved distinctly out of the ordinary, offering a very detailed and crisp sonic picture. Leading edges of notes were beautifully precise and forthright, with no sense of hesitancy or blur. Equally, the tail end of the action rang out well across the soundstage, never outstaying its welcome but adding just the right sense of precision and timing to proceedings. This was matched by the bass end of the spectrum which was lithe, tight and focused, as well as being more than capable in both rhythmical and detail terms.

To my ears, and in my system, I found the Link a little recessed sounding across the midband – it doesn't have an upfront presentation that grabs you by the seat of the pants. Instead, this cable is smooth and sumptuous, working on subtlety rather than flair. As such, it will prove an excellent palliative for those with brightly lit systems, but should fare less well in softer systems where some extra oomph is needed.



Missing Link 'The Link'



MIT CVT Terminator 2

MIT CVT TERMINATOR 2 £440

Instantly recognisable by the big box along their length, the MIT CVT Terminator 2s benefit from MIT's 'Multi Pole Network' technology, which aims to expand the bandwidth of a cable by increasing the single frequency pole of a conventional wire to a multi-pole type. To this end, each MIT design contains a network box fitted with a number of high quality components and, in the case of the CVT Terminator 2, expands the cable to an eight pole design. The new CVT cables are also known as 'Hybrid Terminator' as they feature networks integrated with the Terminator modules used on more expensive designs, and also use a CVT Coupler to deal with energy reflected back at the source component. MIT state that this combination of technologies "control energy reflection at the input whilst increasing the articulation bandwidth at the output". The whole shebang also comes wrapped up in a very stylish, sturdy and well made construction.

Firing up the MITs really made me sit up and take note. Generally, cable differences are reasonably subtle and occasionally only reveal themselves after a protracted listening period, but the CVT 2s are far from subtle in their operation! These shake your system awake, giving a slumbering amplifier a healthy boot up the input sockets, whilst simultaneously seeming to coax the music from your source with brimming enthusiasm. Bass was superbly articulate, detailed and punchy, bracketed by a crisp and spry top end.

However, these aspects surrounded a seriously impressive midrange, which was open, characterful and revealing, but without being forensicly hard. Yes, the MITs are definitely not laid back smoothies like the van den Huls, and they also take a good few days of continuous running to find their feet, being a little imprecise in the meantime. That said, though, they are vivacious, fun and seriously exciting performers.

VERDICT ●●●●●£

Delicate, smooth and finessed cable that should be partnered with forward sounding systems for the best sound balance.

MISSING LINK THE LINK £280

The Missing Link

☎ +44(0)1623 844478

www.the-missing-link.net

FOR

- superlative treble precision
- fluid, musical bass

AGAINST

- gentle midband
- aesthetic presentation

VERDICT ●●●●●

Lively, gripping and engaging sound makes for a visceral listening experience.

MIT CVT TERMINATOR 2 £440

Audiobility

☎ +44(0)870 777 2991

www.audiobility.co.uk

FOR

- build quality
- superbly integrated sound

AGAINST

- long run in



Siltech Classic Anniversary 550i

SILTECH CLASSIC ANNIVERSARY 550i £935

Now we are heading into serious territory, with this cable only leaving you with a handful of audiophile LPs worth of change from £1,000! Upon opening the box however, it's possible to see where at least some of this budget has gone as the cables are nothing short of stunning. Heavy and sturdy, and featuring phono plugs and termination pods so highly polished I could see my face in them, I was almost afraid to touch the 550is in case I left fingerprints! Siltech are of the opinion that it is less about the conductor material than the purity of it, and so the Anniversary 550is are based around G7 silver-gold conductors, which Siltech claim has "no audible distortion". This conductor is wrapped in EPTFE Polyimide Air FEP E-Silicon insulators in a dual balanced coaxial configuration.

If the MIT cables had me sitting upright in my seat, the Siltechs nearly had me falling off it, as they once again took the music in hand and really showed what it was all about. Once again, the staples of crisp, clear treble offering majestically soaring highs plus solid bass imbued with fine detail and oodles of pace were well in place, but what was in-between these almost took my breath away. Just as everything seems brighter, new and more vivid after a summer rain shower, so everything I passed through the Siltechs seemed more lifelike, more insightful and more 'real' somehow. I didn't seem to be listening to a record or CD any more, but the band themselves, set up nicely at the end of my room.

This sheer transparency across the midband was a revelation and just kept me coming back for more and more. Female vocalists simply stepped out of the loudspeakers and orchestras seemed to have doubled in size compared to my £30 Techlink cables. Nothing escaped the Siltech cables, but they were never less than totally composed and vividly enlightening. Superb.

CLEARER AUDIO SILVER LINE OPTIMUS REFERENCE £960

This company is another relative newcomer to the audio scene, being founded in 2003, and the Silver-Line Optimus Reference items are the flagship interconnects. These feature 6 nines Super Pure Silver conductors insulated by super low loss polyethylene. Clearer Audio's six layer Star Shielding system also makes an appearance, with all layers grounded in what is termed a 'Parallel Earthing System'. Clearer Audio claim this results in an attenuation over the EMI spectrum of greater than 130dB. To augment this, the Optimus Silver Lines are fitted with Super Suppressor ferrite rings and the whole cable is braided. The Optimus References are very sturdy however; almost too sturdy as they are unyielding and unwilling to bend very much, which makes installation and positioning tricky.

Sonically the Clearer Audios offer a fascinating sound. They are supremely clean and open, with fine detailing and a dramatic absence of noise and low level 'mush' suggesting that Clearer Audio's attention to RF shielding has been successful. As a result, quieter passages of music come through uncannily loud and clear, and the Optimus Silver References proved themselves more than able to pull each and every subtlety in from the furthest reaches of an orchestra pit.

Although their soundstage isn't quite as expansive as some others, the instruments within are rendered with breathtaking clarity, their positions rendered with architectural precision - these interconnects have an exceptional ability to lock all performers firmly into place. Considering that this is underpinned by a lucid, flowing and well weighted bass, you have a highly cohesive sounding cable that thoroughly justifies its premium price tag. That ultra tidy and well ordered sound will win these many friends.



Clearer Audio Silver Line Optimus Reference

VERDICT ●●●●●
Exceptional cables that are beautifully made and sound absolutely divine.

SILTECH CLASSIC ANNIVERSARY 550i £935
JE Sugden and Co. Ltd
☎ +44(0)1924 404088
www.sugdenaudio.com

FOR
- profound detail
- midband space
- construction and finish

AGAINST
- not cheap!

VERDICT ●●●●●
Exceptionally quiet, tidy and focused sounding cables with excellent low level detail and interference immunity.

CLEARER AUDIO SILVER LINE OPTIMUS REFERENCE £960
Clearer Audio
☎ +44(0)1702 543981
www.cleareraudio.com

FOR
- superbly balanced sound
- electrically very 'quiet'

AGAINST
- physically unwieldy

BLACK RHODIUM JIVE £82

And so to the loudspeaker cables! In the past decade or so, Black Rhodium have established themselves as purveyors of fine quality cables (of both interconnect and loudspeaker variety) over a wide but ostensibly affordable price band. The Jive loudspeaker cables are the second step up in their range, above the excellent value for money Disco series. Jive is said to improve on its smaller brother by "means of doubling the conductor size to deliver extended bass and more precise stereo imaging". The Jive consists of 24 tinned copper conductors, 0.2mm in diameter, twisted together and held in a silicone rubber sheath. A bi-wire version is also available containing 4 conductors, and the cables can be provided terminated in either spade or 4mm banana plugs.

Firing up the Jives after a spot of listening to my starting points, the Chord Carnival Classic, revealed a subtle shift in overall sonic nature. The Chords are quite peppy, occasionally betraying their budget price by becoming a little sharp and fizzy, but the Black Rhodium cables are an altogether smoother proposition. The top end and upper midrange are well judged and nicely balanced, offering insight but without heading towards sharpness.

Equally, the Jives maintained an air of quiet competence no matter what sort of music they were fed with - precisely what is needed with a budget loudspeaker cable. At the bottom end, things had a fine sense of authority and weight, although bass wasn't quite as propulsive as with some cables. Jive is a very cleverly voiced design considering the ancillaries it's likely to be used with - it makes the most of modest amplifiers and loudspeakers without pushing either into stridency. An impressive entry level wire then - just as we'd expect from Black Rhodium.

*Supra Rondo 4x2.5T***SUPRA RONDO 4X2.5T £105**

The second of our more affordable loudspeaker cable contenders comes from Sweden's Jenving Technology, under the Supra name. Trading now for over thirty years, Supra say that their aim is to make "no nonsense design" products with the highest possible quality and their portfolio extends to loudspeaker, interconnect, digital cables and a huge range of connectors, amongst others. The Rondo family of loudspeaker cables come one above the entry level Classic series and are available in both conventional and bi-wire formats. In both cases the cable consists of 2.5mm diameter tin plated oxygen free copper conductors in a PVC jacket, and Supra supplied the review items terminated in their Combicon plugs which are in two parts - one is a screw terminal that clamps onto the cable and then a banana or spade 'end' is screwed into this. Supra strongly espouse this solder-free method on sound quality grounds, but it does theoretically allow the cable to be open to the air and eventual oxidation.

Connecting the Rondos up for normal, non bi-wire, operation revealed a highly detailed and insightful sound. The top end of the frequency spectrum was impressively forthright and this gave the overall sound a confidently projective nature, although this would be something to look out for, for those people whose systems are already a little bright. Still with good source material the Supra was there to make the most of it - and the midband was also very open and detailed, with a real sense of atmosphere, even if it proved a fraction less rhythmically committed than some rivals.

At the low end, the Supra's bass dug impressively deep, giving a clear rendition of the attack transients of a bass guitar string being plucked for example - even if outright dynamics were subtly softened. Interestingly, the low frequencies were little warmer than the spry midband would have suggested, making this cable quite a sumptuous listen, if not the most incisive cable on the market. A tidy yet slightly sumptuous sounding piece of wire, this proved an impressive product.

VERDICT ●●●●£

Fine starter speaker cable with a well balanced and pleasingly neutral sound.

BLACK RHODIUM JIVE £82

Black Rhodium

☎ +44(0)1332 342233

www.blackrhodium.co.uk

FOR

- excellent value for money
- smooth, even performance

AGAINST

- rhythmically relaxed

VERDICT ●●●●

With a spry and crisp treble and midband allied to a warm bass, this is a pleasantly euphonic cable to listen to.

SUPRA RONDO 4X2.5T £105

Wavelength Distribution

☎ +44(0)1223 441299

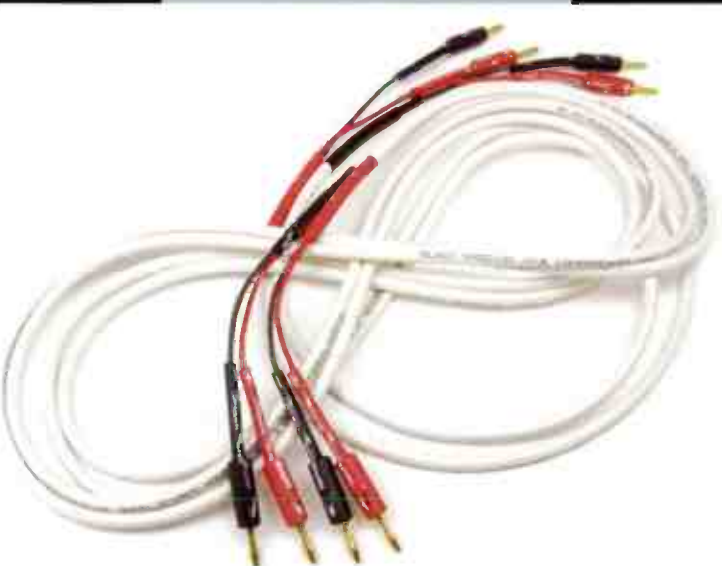
www.supracables.co.uk

FOR

- pleasing tonal balance
- tidy, clean character
- atmospheric treble

AGAINST

- well lit top end

*Black Rhodium Jive*

emillé

just for your musical bliss



KI-40L

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World Radio History

MERLIN SCORPION £450

Merlin Cables are another member of that elite band of small British manufacturers who are gradually carving a name for themselves in the wire world. Indeed, they've recently succeeded in making their cables available through Amazon, which is an impressive feat. This, combined with their thirty day home trial offer, means that finding their cables need not involve a long and protracted trek to a dealer miles away. These Scorpion cables are second only to the Dragon in their range, and consist of a 'Hybrid Core' construction that Merlin claim offers the best of both solid core and multi-core worlds. This involves the use of twelve miniature solid core centres, surrounded by an Inert Resin Coating, spun into a helical spiral to improve RF rejection, and then surrounded by a thick copper screen. As a result of this complex construction, Merlin do not generally supply their cables unterminated, but offer banana plugs or Furutech spades at each end.

Kicking the music into life through the Merlins revealed a lovely, bright, clean and crystal clear top end, underpinned by a highly detailed and pleasingly characterful midrange. As a result, singers came across very well, and the nature of individual instruments was easy to pick up on and follow. Setting up a nicely balanced soundstage, the Scorpions proved to be most adept at bringing the music out of the loudspeakers in a naturally believable way, which was very enjoyable to listen to.

At the low end, I found the bass to be satisfyingly warm and fulsome – making this cable ideal for bass-light systems, although it wasn't quite as propulsive as some others. With particularly distinguished treble and midband performance, the Scorpion is perfect for lovers of choral, folk and acoustic music and/or forward sounding systems. These cables sing with whatever music you play, or whatever system you play them with.



Merlin Scorpion



QED Genesis Silver Spiral

QED GENESIS SILVER SPIRAL £470

In terms of loudspeaker cable, I think QED probably have one of the best known names of all, as there's a very good chance that the majority of people reading this will have taken their first step on the cable ladder thanks to QED 79 strand – the person writing this certainly did! However, the Genesis Silver Spirals are a little more technically advanced than good old 79 strand, and mark a substantial step up in both price and performance. The Genesis Silver Spirals have nine bunches of 5 nines silver plated copper, wrapped in ultra thin low loss LDPE insulation in a triple concentric spiral geometry. This is covered by an isolated PVC outer jacket and the resulting cable is delivered all coiled smartly in a very neat pouch. It is also certainly chunky – at over 16mm in diameter, you won't be hiding this under the carpet!

In use, the Genesis Silver Spiral is as transparent as it looks physically. The silver content certainly adds a fine level of filigree detail to proceedings, but the whole cable is very well judged, although with an overall balance that is on the brighter side of neutral. Treble detail is impeccably ordered and crisp, and the midrange projects beautifully out of the loudspeakers to deliver a well weighted atmospheric result.

All this is handily backed up by a solid and punchy low end that also turns in a lithe and swift sense of fluidity across the upper bass and lower midrange. This means rhythms are dealt with expertly and the Genesis Silver Spiral has no trouble boogying when required. Instruments and vocalists came through with body and depth, meaning that the music seemed in no way curtailed or held back, but allowed to breathe and flow. A very fine premium priced loudspeaker cable, best suited to smooth, mellow systems.

VERDICT ●●●●●
 Atmospheric and lucid sounding cable with a satisfyingly pleasant sound.

MERLIN SCORPION £450
 Merlin Cables
 ☎ +44(0)870 321 0215
 www.merlincables.com

FOR
 - top end detail
 - midrange insight
 - pleasing overall balance

AGAINST
 - gentle rhythms

VERDICT ●●●●●
 Excellent cable that offers a musically satisfying and sonically balanced performance.

QED GENESIS SILVER SPIRAL £470
 Armour Home Electronics
 ☎ +44(0)1279 501111
 www.qed.co.uk

FOR
 - musical integrity
 - well balanced

AGAINST
 - nothing at the price



Synergistic Research Tesla Accelerator

SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH TESLA ACCELERATOR £1,520

Moving into the high end bracket of this test, the Tesla Accelerators are Synergistic Research's new cables named after Nikola Tesla, the scientist who made huge progress in the fields of electricity and magnetism, and gave his name to the unit of Magnetic Flux Density. Appropriately, the cables incorporate some very unusual technologies, including the Tesla Tricon cable geometry that Synergistic Research claim "focuses the signal in the same way that a lens focuses light". The other notable feature is Zero Capacitance Active Shielding, which claims to, "significantly improve cable bandwidth especially in the areas of low frequency extension and control" by applying a DC Voltage to the cable's shield through miniature DC sockets woven into the cables. A plug-in 'wall wart' power supply is provided to aspirate this, and blue LEDs in the cable show when it is active.

Starting with the shielding unpowered, the Tesla Accelerators proved highly impressive from the off. They have a focused sense of feisty musicality combined with a lightness of touch about them that seems to not impede the music's passage from source to loudspeaker in any way at all. In essence, I was struck by their neutrality across the entire frequency range and the way in which they simply allowed the music to flow. And then I plugged the power supplies in, and things really took a leap forward...

Now the upper mid and treble gained more air and detail. In the tradition of so many subtle upgrades, everything just seemed that little better etched within the soundstage. Most notable was at the low end, when bass detail took a huge leap forward, and my loudspeakers seemed to have been given a clip round the ear and told to really perform - or else! The Tesla Accelerators made light work of whatever I threw at them, seemingly loving it all.

SILVER ARROW DADDY REFERENCE £1,800

Silver Arrow may be a new name to many but they are becoming well known thanks to their use of exotic materials such as palladium in their interconnects. The intriguingly named 'Daddy Reference' loudspeaker cables reviewed here don't go quite this exotic, but still make use of multiple 99.99% pure silver foils in an air, natural cotton and PTFE dielectric matrix to give rise to what is apparently "one of the finest speaker cables on Earth", no less! Admittedly, the finish is very good, although the cables are surprisingly light in weight which does tend to diminish the sense of perceived value, but as always it's the sound that counts...

Sonically speaking, the Silver Arrows fare better than their understated looks might suggest. Immediately they announce themselves as sprightly performers, with fine levels of top end and midrange resolution, and a nicely judged sense of spatiality and timing. In soundstage terms, things are well weighted, pleasingly deep and with everything immaculately ordered in-between the loudspeakers.

At the low end, bass is clean and tight, not perhaps digging as low as some other top contenders, but always remaining unerringly tuneful. As is so often the case, the tradeoff from losing a little welly however, is that the upper bass is highly taut and swift, allowing bass lines to start and stop with great precision - making for a very propulsive sound. All in all, the Daddy References are utterly enjoyable musical companions. They simply have no objectionable traits, which is just what you want from a cable - other than that esoteric price tag of course!



Silver Arrow Daddy Reference

VERDICT ●●●●●

Technically unique and with exceptional sound, this takes the science of cables to a new level.

SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH TESLA ACCELERATOR £1,520
 ABC Audio
 ☎ +44(0)208 819 4274
 www.abc-audio.co.uk

- FOR**
- fabulous neutrality
 - eye-opening bass detail
 - effective active shielding

- AGAINST**
- not cheap, sadly!

VERDICT ●●●●●

Finely balanced performers with great upper bass speed and overall resolution.

SILVER ARROW DADDY REFERENCE £1,800
 Rochester Hi-Fi
 ☎ +44 (0)845 300 9056
 www.rochesterhi-fi.co.uk

- FOR**
- lithe upper bass
 - pleasingly sweet tone
 - consistency

- AGAINST**
- formidable price

To those outside our cloistered circle of audiophiles, a cable is a cable, and that's all. The non-believers cannot possibly see why hi-fi buffs get excited over such things and more importantly, why we should bother spending such ridiculous amounts of money when the equipment usually comes with one in the box in the first place! The problem is of course that, whether we like it or not, there's more to it than that – as this test showed.

Taking the interconnects first, the prices of those items tested ranged from £59 up to £960 and the contenders came in all shapes and sizes. Starting with the Kimber Toniks, these are fine and steady performers, offering a decent step up in terms of detail and precision over my chosen £30 starting point interconnects. If rhythm and timing are your passions, then the Kimbers can be given a confident recommendation at their price. If you do like a bit more atmosphere however, then look no further than the slightly pricier van den Hul Thames, which is a superbly detailed and relaxed performer that punches well above its weight in sonic terms and suits a vinyl source down to the ground – just as the manufacturer claims...

Spending a little more will put you into Missing Link and MIT territory, and it was here for me that differences became more pronounced. Starting with the Missing Link cables, they're not the most lavish in terms of presentation, but they were certainly highly polished in their sound. So much so that the midband might be a little too recessed – if you're a headbanger like me. The other side of this is that if you're running a bright or maybe even starkly explicit sounding system, their poise and polish makes them absolutely ideal. The MITs however carry no such caveat – they are

simply rhythmical, lively, detailed and fun. Granted, they could be a little too much on the end of a more forward system, but I'll wager that more people will love them than loathe them.

For the biggest outlay of all in the interconnect class, we have the Clearer Audio Optimus References, which are hefty and solid almost to the point of being a bit awkward to deal with! Persevere though, and they reward with a distinctive sound that's characterised by the complete and utter absence of any unwanted noise – they're a classically neutral reference cable, which is precisely what so many system builders crave. Then we have the Siltech Classic Anniversary 550s which could either be cables or jewellery, depending on your point of view. If you wear them round your neck though, you'll be missing out as they're one of the most impressive sounding interconnects I've yet heard. These, I felt, would move even the most hardened cable sceptic!

Moving to the loudspeaker cables, we have the black Rhodium Jive and Supra Rondo 4x2.5T at the budget end. The smooth Jives are a bargain frankly, and turn in a properly grown-up performance for a properly

"to anyone who still doesn't believe cables bring real changes to the sound after they've chewed through this little lot, there's probably no arguing with you!"

budget price. The sound never screams "cheap!" at you when you listen to them, which is just what you should be looking for at this end of the market. Ditto the Supras, which are generally warm and easy-going performers, with a smidgen more treble detail and a touch less drive in the bass. An effective mid-price cable, especially if your listening material is of good quality, and comes via a smooth CD player or turntable.

Moving to the middle ground, the Merlin Scorpions are a neat step up from the budget items, developing a clear and well defined sense of authority across the mid and treble and a well balanced soundstage. Ultimately their slightly genteel

bass didn't suit my system, but I could still discern their many fine qualities.

The QED Genesis Silver

Spirals however need no such qualification, as they proved great all rounders – well weighted throughout the frequency range, atmospherically



Synergistic Research Tesla Accelerator.

detailed and beautifully made, they're an essential audition at the price if you're running a smoother sort of system.

Coming to the top of the tree, and changing the order slightly, we have the Silver Arrow Daddy references. These are intriguing designs as they really are rather super, offering a mature and polished take on things. A little more low end weight would have been nice in my system, but actually many will crave their balanced but gutsy nature. The Synergistic Research Tesla Accelerator proved exceptional value. Oh, yes, they have the power supplies

and the flash shielding and the blue LEDs but one listen will make you realise that these are *not* simple showroom gimmicks – they really work. With confidence and detail the like of which I've seldom heard before – plus a brilliant bass with those unusual power supplies running – these should be at the top of your audition list if you have the system and the budget to do them justice.

So, to anyone who still doesn't believe cables bring real changes to the sound of your system after they've chewed through this little lot, I think there's probably no arguing with you. Likewise, to those conspiracists who think it's all a con and they're almost as good (or as bad) as each other regardless of price, I would implore you to go and listen for yourself – the differences can be profound. Match carefully to the system you're using – and the sort of sound you love – and a sensibly chosen set of cables is a sound investment.



Siltech Classic Anniversary 550.

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AMPLIFICATION

Wavac MD805m Valve monoblocks. One owner from new and very very rare indeed. Stunning reviews. cost new (£17000) 16 months old only, unmarked condition, original box and packing. £8295

Plinius P8 Power amplifier. Boxed in quite excellent condition. One very minor mark to front plate. One owner from new, great reviews. (£3600) £1495

MBL 7008 Integrated amplifier. One owner, boxed, manuals. As new condition. Brilliant reviews. (£6500) £4878

Van den Hull (VDH) Array A-1 pre-amplifier. One owner from new and a very rare item indeed. Costing the best part of £3000 when new, this pre-amplifier will surprise many with its incredible performance. (£3000) £1395

MBL 6010D Reference Pre-amp. Boxed in as new condition, one owner from new and a huge saving on new price. (£16800) £7999

Quad 909 Power Amplifier. One owner from new, 4 months old. Unmarked, boxed, manuals. (£999.95) £625

Eastern Electric MiniMax Pre-amp. Boxed in as new condition, one owner from new and only a few months old. 5 year warranty. FREE Chord SuperScreen mains lead (£95) Fantastic reviews. (£1195) £795

DIGITAL

Accoustic Arts DAC1 mk4. Full balanced operation, current spec. One owner from new, unmarked condition. Boxed, manual. 5-year warranty for the new owner. (£3950) £2295

McIntosh MCD201 SACD player. One owner from new in outstanding condition with original box/packing. Great reviews. Built in pre-amp, so can be used directly into a power amplifier. (£3495) £1895

Sugden CD21 Series 2 one owner from new, unmarked condition, boxed, manuals, remote. (£1400) £895

Linn Ikemi CD Player. Absolutely mint condition. One owner, boxed, manual. A simply stunning red book cd player. Uniquely, the Linn has an AES/EBU digital output, making it an excellent transport for use with a high end DAC. (cost new £2000) 5-year warranty £1049

Raysonic 228 two box cd player. Stunning red book cd replay. One owner, upgrade vintage Mullard NOS valves included (cost £300). Unmarked condition. (£3800 - £4100 inc valves) £2495

MSB Platinum DAC III. One owner from new. Amazing Stereophile review. Boxed, manuals, unmarked. With volume control and balanced analogue input. (£6600) £3650

Perpetual Technologies P-1a 24 bit upsampler with the upgrade Monolithic PSU, both boxed, one owner from new in excellent condition (£1350) £495

LOUDSPEAKERS

LSA2 Towers - Signature Series Loudspeakers. Excellent condition (some minor marks), one owner, original boxes, packing, approx. 15 months old. Stunning in Rosewood finish. (£3575) £1695

Quad ESL 989 in the vintage finish (additional cost option). One owner from new. Original boxes, packing. Stunning condition and very rare and highly desirable. (£5000) £2195

Audio Note AX-2 Loudspeakers. One owner from new, 2 years old, boxed in unmarked condition, a real bargain speaker. (£595) £249

Revel Performa M22 Speakers. One owner from new, boxed in cherry. A couple of minor marks. Stunning performance. (£1700) £949

Manger 103/3 ZeroBox ZB speakers. One owner from new and around 30 months old. These are very rare and cost new today £7.5k for the standard finish and £8.5k in the Burr veneer finish of this pair. Boxed in excellent condition £3295

MBL 111E Loudspeakers. Finished in black. One owner from new, very very rare. (£24500) £15475

Audio Physic Avanti V. Current spec in cherry. One owner from new (approx 13 months old), boxed, manuals. Unmarked. Great reviews. (£8395) £4995

Tannoy Turnberry SE - very rare and only 4 months old. One owner, boxed as new - huge saving on new price. (£3350) £2295

Tannoy ST200 supertweeters. Top of the range and only 4 months old. One owner from new. Boxed, unmarked. Being sold only as a package with the Superlinks below. (£1200) £749

Tannoy Superlinks - for use with any Tannoy supertweeter. One owner only 4 months old. As new. (£300) £150

ATC SCM19 in Cherry, one owner, as new. (£1524) £995

ATC SCM 50 ASL active speakers in Yew, one owner, unmarked. Current spec (£9415) £5495

Audio Physic Virgo V. Latest spec, approx 13 months old and finished in Cherry. (£5033) £2995

ANALOGUE

Krell KPE Reference Phono Stage (2-box). One owner from new, comes with manual (no original box and packing) excellent condition and regarded by many as one of the finest available. (£2600) £895

Whest PS20 complete with MSU20. One owner from new, stunning 2-box phono stage in black, original box and packing. Incredible reviews. (£1299) £595

Pathos in the Groove mkII phono stage. Spectacular performer with separate battery power, disconnecting the phono stage directly from the mains. Unused, as new. (£1800) £895

MAINS CONDITIONING

Isotek Titan. One owner from new, original box and packing. Unmarked condition. (£1695) £825

Vertex AQ Taga - 6-way distribution mains filter. Great reviews. One owner from new, unmarked. (£868) £595

Vertex AQ Jaya, boxed with manual, some very slight marks, one owner. (£302) £225

Isotek GII Minisub, boxed new, unused. Huge saving on new price. (£599) £425

Isotek Premium Mains Cable, boxed as new - 1.5m - Three Core Annealed Oxygen Free Copper for better signal transmission. (£75) £49

CABLES

Vertex AQ HiRez Solfonn XLR interconnect. 1.5m. 8 months old. Original Technology demonstrator for the new HiRez range of cables. As new condition, stunning performance. (£2990) £POA

HMS Sestetto Mk2 XLR Digital Cable Wonderful digital aes/ebu cable with original box and packing. 1m Length, 110ohm. £95

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Esoterica

Developed by the company's specialist high end 'Esoteric' engineers, TEAC's new PD-H600/AG-H600DNT mini component system proves less is more, says David Price...

Remember Aurex? Back in the late seventies, Toshiba's premium brand invented the concept of the high end mini system. The TEAC Reference 600 system you see here is surely its true spiritual successor. It comprises the new AG-H600DNT Stereo Internet-Radio Receiver with DAB and matching PD-H600 CD Player. And with a combined system price of £1,000, they have design input from TEAC's own premium brand - Esoteric.

The £700 AG-H600DNT receiver sports a claimed 75W per channel from the direct FET Power MOSFET amplifier with discrete dual mono layout and large toroidal power transformer. There's a DAB/AM/FM RDS and Internet-Radio tuner, courtesy of the latest Frontier Silicon Venice 6 module (which is one of the best currently available). The amp sports six inputs (including phono, tuner, CD, iPod, Aux, plus one for an optional £30 DS20 iPod dock), with a front-mounted USB port for easy connectivity of external digital sources. Complete with Ethernet and Wi-Fi capability, a Tone Direct switch and dimmable dot-matrix fluorescent display, its vital statistics are 295x90x320mm and 6.8kg.

The £400 PD-H600 CD player also uses a toroidal power transformer, and has a smooth loading, well finished sliding disc drawer. The transport plays CDs plus data discs with MP3 and/or

WMA files, via the 24bit/192kHz Delta-sigma D/A converter. Round the back there's the usual analogue line outs plus a single coaxial digital output. The front dot-matrix FL display (also dimmable) matches that of the receiver. Vital statistics are also identical, with weight being one kilogram less. There's a USB port for MP3 file playback. Both units are said to feature audiophile-grade components throughout, and the circuits have been carefully designed to simplify the audio signal path, says TEAC. Needless to say, the thick black aluminium finish looks superb.

SOUND QUALITY

TEAC amplifiers have always had a very distinctive sound - peppy, bouncy and energetic with a strong, grippy and supple bass, a wide open midband and a bright spry treble. The AG-H600 does all this, but lacks some of the midband fuzz that the cheaper Reference amps possess. It brings a cleaner, more three dimensional soundstage, and a degree of tonal richness which - if it cannot be called warmth, can certainly be described as a dash of colour. Factor all this in with a characteristically clean and open TEAC CD player sound, and you have a very engaging system for your one thousand notes.

Madonna's 'Borderline', a thin and clanky sounding piece of mid eighties pop, proved surprisingly listenable - not smooth you understand, but not the expected aural assault course

either. I was impressed by the big, fat bass line, and also the relative restraint with which Ms. Ciccone's nasal strains were rendered. Likewise, Coldplay's 'Speed of Sound' began with crashing digital piano chords, pleasantly sparkling with harmonics. The drum kit thumped gutsily through my Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers, the amplifier appearing to have every one of its seventy five Watts alive and kicking. The track's nice on-and-off-the-beat hi-hat work was beautifully timed, while the morass of keyboards through the song's bridge to the chorus sounded suitably sweeping and ethereal. Enjoyable stuff - but the fun continued with Miles Davis's 'Kind of Blue', where the TEAC showed it wasn't just a party-starter; it could do subtle and considered too.

This is an interesting system - one which I hope you don't let get under your radar. Whether you're looking for a second hi-fi for a spare room or simply feel the need to downsize, the TEAC Reference 600 offers excellent sound - with the emphasis very much on scale, pace and punch - plus that trademark Japanese battleship build. All its various sources (even including the MM phono stage, surprisingly) worked well, but best of all were the TEAC's CD and amplifier sections, which do their job far better than expected. A truly distinguished small system, this takes over where Aurex left off.

TWEAKING

Golden rule number one is use the 'Tone Direct' switch - without this it goes back several leagues - and leave the system on for a couple of hours before serious use. We placed it on an Audiophile Furniture Base isolation platform, and used Missing Link Link Cryo Reference interconnects between CD and receiver, and Silverman Clarity mains leads. Admittedly, all this raises the price of the total system considerably, but the point is that the system is good enough to generously reward careful set-up. Poorly fettled it can sound forward, but properly configured it's just plain fun.

VERDICT

Superbly versatile, finely finished and with a powerful, expansive and vividly musical sound, this is a superlative small system.

TEAC REFERENCE 600 £1,000

TEAC UK Ltd.

+44 (0)845 130 2511

www.teac.co.uk

FOR

- powerful, punchy sound
- clarity and detail
- design, build, finish
- flexibility

AGAINST

- explicit sound needs smooth speakers



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to work in practice - although Magico say otherwise as I'll explain later.

KEF BLADE

This is a concept loudspeaker, commercially unavailable, but shows where KEF are going. The single Uni-Q drive unit that covers midrange and treble is being developed to possess a stiff, rear ribbed, almost low profile cone possessing controlled behaviour, driven by a large diameter voice coil. At its centre lies a metal dome tweeter with an improved waveguide to smooth high frequency response irregularities. KEF also use laser interferometry and Finite Element Analysis to design their loudspeakers and control sonic behaviour, as well as cabinet behaviour, so the Blade driver and cabinet are heavily researched. To make the Blade act as a point source over its whole operating range KEF have positioned the bass units around the single Uni-Q driver, and rigidly coupled them together back-to-back to force cancel, as the cutaway



The Magico M5 loudspeaker uses a sandwich cone comprising carbon nanotubes knitted into a material that covers a Rohacell foam core. This gives a very light but stiff cone able to achieve pistonic motion, they claim.

diagram shows. As always KEF use a lot of advanced engineering to ensure their loudspeakers are at the forefront of what is possible.

New to me were Magico loudspeakers from the USA (see www.magico.net). They claim to make cones act as rigid pistons by using rigid carbon nanotubes attached to a

Rohacell foam diaphragm in sandwich construction. The cone is driven by a large diameter coil, I was told, which helps ensure motion is pistonic (i.e. there are no break up modes in the cone). Magico cross over to their own ring radiator tweeter or ribbon tweeter, according to the model, and also Nano-Tec bass units. Magico loudspeakers are ultra expensive - from £6k up through £20k and more I was told, but they sounded very good at the show.

It's fair to ask whether Naim's NXT based BMR drive unit points the way ahead for loudspeakers. The light cone that moves in one piece as a piston is a myth, laser interferometry has clearly demonstrated. In practice cones 'break up' and cease to act like pistons at high frequencies. By driving a flat plate the BMR runs a coach and horses through this old way of doing things. Is it the future? It certainly looks that way. The forward response of Naim's BMR will be consequential and we have yet to measure this. But its range of

coverage is extraordinary by today's standards. In future, one piece, three-dimensional moulded plates may be possible, excited by distributed drive motors to take performance even further, so there is room for development.

At *Hi-Fi World* we have heard many NXT panels, from TDK computer loudspeakers through to the Cyrus Ikon, and there's no doubt they all sound distinctively smooth and cohesive. Apart from the utterly lovely sounding new build Quad ESL-57 electrostatic loudspeakers being run by Quad Music Wiedergabe at the Munich Show this year (see www.quad-musik.de) the most impressive show loudspeaker I have heard recently was the large Podium Sound (see www.podium-sound.com), unsupported, non-NXT(!) panel that I happened across at a

Taiwan audio fair in 2008. Of all the large panels I have heard this one was perhaps the most impressive. It uses exciters to drive a large panel, NXT-style but outside NXT patents. In theory this suggests output will not be as smooth and controlled as a true NXT design, but all the same the Podium is non-pistonc except at



The Podium Sound 0.5 loudspeaker, a flat panel driven by rear exciters. Not quite NXT, but similar - and sounds good.

its lower limit and gives an in-phase signal from front and rear, so it lacks cancellation side lobes. It sounded conspicuously clean and relaxed to me, even in fairly busy Taiwan show conditions. I mention this just to illustrate that there's mileage in driving large panels modally and there are many ways of doing it. However, a large panel like the Podium faces the usual panel limitation that it cannot reproduce deep bass, a limitation NXT suffers too if used in simple large panel form. Which is why NXT developed the BMR drive unit which Karl Heinz Fink has put into production form in this new Naim floorstander.

So loudspeaker technology is moving forward and today's understanding of the properties of structures is slowly taking hold in high fidelity it appears, to bring us better sound.

A brand new, improved Quad ESL-57 from Quad Music Wiedergabe - a design now over 50 years old but still sounding great at the Munich High End Show.





XP-dition

Cyrus's new XP platform is making its way to the shops now, with an interesting new take on the company's modular upgrading philosophy. At its heart is the Cyrus 8 XP d DAC-equipped integrated amplifier. David Price listens in...

The times they are a changing. In 2009, we're no longer in a world when people buy generic 'one size fits all' products – which is why the perfectly fine Ford Mondeo family car now reputedly sells but a fraction of the numbers of an equivalently priced BMW 3-series. Likewise, worthy high street clothes chains struggle to compete with outlet shops selling last season's exclusive designer labels, and no one wants a cooking PC whilst Mac stores seem permanently as crowded as Oxford Street on Christmas Eve. We're living in a consumerist world where customers now feel they have a right to dictate terms to manufacturers, and not the other way round. And why not?

How many things that you own are exactly tailored to your needs? Not many I'd guess, but I'd also hazard that it's an awful lot more than your parents had thirty years ago. In the light of this, it's more than a little odd that so much specialist hi-fi continues to be cast from precisely the same mould as that on sale back

in the nineteen seventies. We as an industry seem to have this era indelibly stamped right through us. Like a stick of seaside rock, it reads "source, amplifier, speakers" when you snap it (us) in half...

In the old days of course, there was a reason that you had a source box, an amplifier box and speakers – we couldn't fit them all in together very well. But now, with ultra large scale integration, a nifty line in op-amps and surface mount technology, hi-fi products are constrained more by the designer's imagination, and less by good old fashioned physics.

Cyrus, although not *quite* at the vanguard of the 'hi-fi for life' revolution, has certainly been far closer to it than most British companies. Its small footprint components with cleverly packaged electronics which are just as good (and very often better) than huge, chunky, showy separates, have proved very popular with a certain type of hi-fi buyer who regards less as more.

Now though, after the conspicuous success of its 'Servo Evolution' platform CD players, the

company's next move is into the new frontier of modular amplifiers. The basic building block is the new XP integrated amp, which uses a preamplifier based on the same circuit topology as Cyrus's £2,275 DAC XP – and is described as "a very high quality audiophile amp with five digital inputs". Cyrus's Peter Bartlett notes that, "although the XP preamps are not fully dual mono like the DAC XP, the components and layout are based on the same concept as the more expensive model. This has allowed us to expand the tuning of the sound to be more open than the vs2 models". The component budgets are said to be much higher than the previous vs2 version of the Cyrus 6 and 8 integrated amplifiers, giving a claimed improvement in smoothness, detail and dynamics.

Here's where it gets interesting though. There's also the option of a digital board, indicated by a 'd' suffix – as in the Cyrus 8 XP d you see here. This incorporates a high quality Burr Brown DAC "of about the same performance as a CD6 SE", which coincidentally is said to be



the same as that fitted to the Naim HDX music server. The digital board provides two S/PDIF and two optical digital inputs, plus a newly developed USB input designed to work with a computer, making nine inputs in total. All these are easily selectable on the front panel of the Cyrus 8 XP d tested here, or via the remote.

The USB input is designed to work directly with computers. The computer sees the Cyrus 8 XP d as a sound card and automatically directs the digital files stored on a computer to the Cyrus USB input. Cyrus claim that "they sound better to us than files stored on a media server because the power supply and digital layout we have incorporated are less noisy. Because the USB section is powered by the connected computer, the incoming (electrically quiet) file is converted in a lower noise environment". Peter Bartlett notes that, "this is a much more audiophile proposition than our Cyruslink LinkServer from five years ago because the ground plains in this new 'd' equipped amp do not contain noisy hard disk drives or switch mode PSUs".

The new model also has a new power supply section that now has many levels of regulation for the amplifier plus a separate toroidal transformer for the control sections. This makes for a very low noise power feed for the DAC section, plus a separate transformer for the preamp and power amp sections. There's also the option of a PSX-R power supply.

This new XP platform is sold in three variants – the new Pre XP d preamplifier at £1,300, the Cyrus 6 XP at £900 offering the same preamp and a 2 x 40 watt integrated amp (with a £400 factory upgrade 'd' digital card), and the £1,500 Cyrus 8 XP d with a larger power amplifier

(a claimed 2 x 70 Watts) and PSX-R port, plus the digital card.

But there's more, because all models fitted with the d card can be further upgraded with the high performance Qx series DAC card. This adds reclocking and a more sophisticated Burr Brown DAC for an extra £400 – and if the Qx card is ordered at the point the amp is purchased, the cost is just £300. Any amp in the XP range is upgradeable to another and thereby benefits from a PSX-R, d digital card or Qx DAC upgrade. The result is a modular and highly upgradeable range of amplifiers, with the only problem being the customer (or the hi-fi journalist's) need to understand the wide variety of options now available!

As you'd expect, the Cyrus 8 XP d is a nicely finished bit of kit – there is real quality in the way the unit is put together. I love the purism of its design – devoid of fussy appurtenances or cheesy retro styling cues, it's very much its own amplifier. Particularly pleasant is the informative green backlit LC display, which tells you the name of the input and the sampling frequency (it's amazing how many DACs don't do

conspicuous lack of gloop, muddle, smear or 'hash'. Earlier Cyrus integrations were always cleanish sounding, but with a sizeable side-servicing of softness added to that basically dry nature. The XP d is augmented by quite a bit of extra detail, additional air to the treble and superior dynamics. In crude terms, it feels like a veil has been lifted – the amplifier takes you a little closer to the band, giving more strongly defined soundstaging and a more positive centre image to vocals.

The new integrated gave an eloquent rendition of 10cc's 'I'm Mandy, Fly Me', with a taut driving bass line, wide open midband (with a sense of the recorded acoustic falling way back behind the speakers) and very crisp, spry treble. Notably, the amp showed absolutely no sign of forwardness even through my ever-so-slightly bright Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers – proving this to be a svelte smoothie indeed. By contrast, the rather more expensive Sugden IM4 I use as reference was a good deal more shouty across the midband, adding a slight chromium plated tinge to vocals and percussion – even if it was more transparent with it. There

"a great new modular amplifier that's completely in tune with the exigencies of modern life..."

this!), while the main volume control was easy to use given the relative complexity of the unit. Still, for a unit that's closing on £2,000, I can't say the remote control distinguished itself – it's not bad, but the quality of the main amplifier rather puts it to shame...

SOUND QUALITY

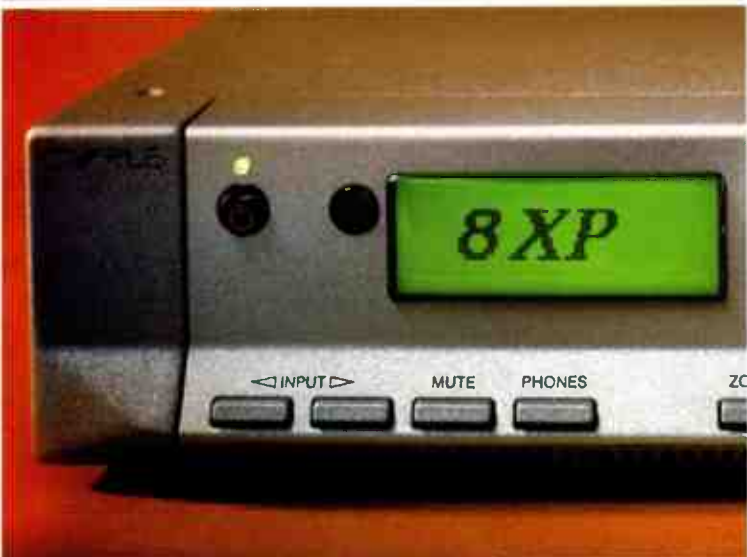
Just to be contrary, I kicked off my listening using one of the Cyrus 8 XP d's many analogue line inputs, coming via an ANT Audio Kora 3T Ltd. phono stage from my Sony TT-S8000/Origin Live Silver/Ortofon Windfeld turntable. This, I reasoned, would give as good a benchmark of a high quality analogue source as is reasonable.

The result was most promising, the basic analogue section of the amplifier showing itself to be a step change over the previous 'vs2' incarnation. That there's no fundamental change in its personality is perhaps to be expected, but it has certainly undergone a rigorous routine of grooming and physical exercise. ELO's 'Last Train to London' showed real 'hear through' clarity, a vanishingly low noise floor and a

was also a great sense of space via the Cyrus; maybe it's a little more laid back rhythmically, but there's no sensation of having the music forced at you. This makes it a very amenable long time listening companion.

Moving to a fruity, full fat analogue recording in the rather lovely 'Theme From Shaft' by Isaac Hayes (complete with the legendary Stax Records backing band), I found the Cyrus pulled just a touch of depth and warmth out of the recording. Whereas with the Sugden, you'd be aware of a dramatically different recorded acoustic, the Cyrus had a tendency to make everything sound a little clean and tidy, regardless of the original tonal footprint of the recording. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing, as the track romped along and proved consummately enjoyable, but in stock form without PSX-R it's fair to say that the Cyrus 8 XP errs on the smooth, dry side of the tracks.

Switching to the digital inputs, and a (£950) Cyrus CD Xt SE transport was entrusted to feed the digits in to the 8 XP d. Although the d DAC isn't quite as highly specified



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as the DAC in the highly reviewed Cyrus CD8 SE CD player, Cyrus say that the CD 8 SE's transport section isn't quite as good (due to its different circuit topology), so the CD Xt SE transport via the d DAC should be almost as good – a better transport driving a slightly inferior DAC will always work better than the other way around. Whilst I didn't have a CD 8 SE to hand, we're going to do a follow up feature on the many possible permutations, including of course (just to further complicate things) the (£400) Qx DAC upgrade, and adding PSX-Rs to both amp and transport. Phew!

Anyway, driven by the CD Xt SE transport via a coaxial digital cable, the Cyrus 8 XP d sounded very pleasant. It's fair to say that the d DAC isn't the warmest sounding of devices (Cyrus say the QX option brings a deeper, darker tone), but it worked very effectively all the same. It has a very bouncy, propulsive sound, with impressive dynamics and an 'up and at you' sort of nature, as 4hero's 'Morning Child' proved. I was impressed by the speed of the bass, which was supple and pushed the song along with aplomb, and also the clean and open midband. Treble was well articulated, with a sheen to the ride cymbals and plenty of 'glint' to hi-hats, while this same air helped pick out the rich upper harmonics of the cellos. Female vocals were rendered with delicacy and also a rather surprising immediacy – the d DAC takes the listener up close and personal, bristling with information and enthusiasm. My only substantive criticism was of a soundstage slightly limited in width and depth; it felt very much as if you were in the stalls, getting the music coming right at you but without the sense of perspective that you'd find elsewhere.

Rush's 'Distant Early Warning' was interesting: this is a very dense, highly produced slice of eighties prog rock (if there is such a thing?), dominated by chiming digital keyboards and confected guitars. The Cyrus did very well indeed, showing the CD Xt SE's excellence as a transport in the way it managed to keep things together without so much as a wobble towards the off-beat. Once again, there was the sense of swathes of detail pushing to get

out to the listener, but the Cyrus nevertheless displayed real grace under pressure. Cymbals, although a little brightly lit, had delicacy and timed superbly, whilst Geddy Lee's lead vocal line – never a completely harmonious instrument – had real insight. Behind this, the keyboard tracks were nicely carried, along with drummer Neil Peart's frenetic skin work. Bass – never prominent on this album – went reasonably deep but timed superbly.

Switching to something altogether more civilised, the beautiful soul/jazz strains of Fourplay's 'Dream Come True' distilled the very best of the Cyrus 8 XP d package. An arresting mid-nineties analogue recording (and mastering), this brilliantly showcased the amp's speed, agility and highly focused soundstaging. True, it wasn't as expansive as some, but the d DAC nevertheless threw out a rock-solid centre image, captured the nuances of the playing masterfully and turned what can be a slightly languid sound (on the wrong equipment) into the vibrant live event that it surely was.

Again, I wasn't overpowered by the bass, but it was wonderfully fluid and all-of-a-piece, accompanied by a clean and detailed midband. Acoustic piano had a tangible, believable texture, cymbals came over with speed and rim shots gained great punch. It was a tight, light and feisty rendering of some classic 'dinner jazz', just as it should be.

CONCLUSION

As a standalone amplifier, the Cyrus 8 XP is noticeably improved from its previous 'vs2' incarnation, gaining a wider dynamic range, greater speed and more natural musical flow. No longer can the amp be excused

as 'pleasantly warm', as it's now far more incisive and open, but nor is it by any stretch of the imagination forward or bright. The d module adds a very useful digital to analogue converter that makes every digital source I tried (including computer audio via USB) sound crisp and rhythmically engaging; feed it a serious source like Cyrus's matching CD XT SE transport and it really flies. Admittedly, it's not the deepest, darkest or most subtle of performers, but compared to any similarly priced standalone DAC it needs no excuses made. The Qx module (£400) option with its higher specified DAC from further up the Burr Brown range, should be nicer still.

Overall then, this new Cyrus 8 is a great new modular amplifier that's completely in tune with the exigencies of modern life - with all its multiple inputs, sources and concomitant complexity. Best of all, it's highly upgradeable, eliminating that other bane of contemporary living – built-in obsolescence – at a stroke, and that can't be bad.

REFERENCE SYSTEM
 Sony TT-S8000/OL Silver/
 Ortofon MC Windfeld turntable
 A.N.T. Audio Kora 3T phono stage
 Cyrus CD Xt SE transport
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 Sugden IM4 integrated amplifier
 Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

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MEASURED PERFORMANCE

For such a small case the Cyrus produces a surprisingly large amount of power, no less than 84 Watts into 8 Ohms and 132 Watts into 4 Ohms. However, with 5 Watts continuous draw the case gets quite hot, although this amounts to a lot more music Watts (20-30) because of the fluctuating amplitude of music. The amp runs quite warm even with no signal, likely due to quiescent current biasing it into Class A at low levels to minimise crossover distortion. Cyrus amplifiers have traditionally returned low distortion figures and the 8 XP d is no exception, producing a worst case result of 0.0136% at 1 Watt, 10kHz, seen in our analysis, and this is a very good result indicating clean treble and lack of edginess or grain. Bandwidth was wide and the amplifier appears to be direct coupled, so there should be no low frequency phase shifts. At 240mV sensitivity is high enough to work with low gain external phono stages.

The digital convertor has an absolutely flat response across the audio band but distortion at -60dB was on the high side at 0.45%, against a norm of 0.22% nowadays. It identified a 24bit/96kHz input and downconverted it to 48kHz, giving an upper bandwidth

limit of 23kHz (-1dB). Distortion dropped to 0.18% at -60dB, not a low value for 24bit resolution.

The Cyrus 8 XP d measured well, but it will run warm or hot in use and digital conversion could usefully have been more linear. All the same, it is powerful and clean – especially for its small size. NK

Power	84 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	1Hz-52kHz
Separation	-90dB
Noise	101dB
Distortion	0.01%
Sensitivity	240mV

DISTORTION



(HD)mi Way

Arcam were not always firm believers in the audio side of HDMI, but their new all-formats flagship inevitably has to bow to the need for the now ubiquitous connector. So how does the AVR600 sound in the brave new world of HD and full strength surround audio all down one pipe? Patrick Cleasby finds out...

The last time I used an Arcam AV receiver it was the AVR350 we used as a surround music reference. In those days, while providing HDMI switching for video, Arcam simply passed audio through due, they said, to unresolved issues with jitter in the high frequency interface.

While waiting for Blu-ray and HD-DVD to battle it out I adopted a policy much like that of Arcam, in that I simply made do with six channels of uncompressed PCM audio, in a DVD-Audio/SACD style (younger readers may like to ask a relative what those formats actually were...) via analogue connection.

But now it feels to me that the time is right for HDMI – things should have stabilised, and all the incremental changes in HDMI standards seem to have abated somewhat. Many fans of UK designed hi-fi obviously agree, as initial shipments of the AVR600 were all taken up with fulfilling customer orders, but we have finally got our hands on a review sample. And Arcam now seem happy to draw audio from HDMI, irrespective of jitter.

192kHz sample rate is handled too, available on recent Blu-ray music discs from 2L for example.

Fed native DSD code from SACD by an Oppo DV-980H DVD player the Arcam also handled it well, but this took Arcam by surprise, as the handbook makes no mention of accepting or converting DSD and when contacted their Chairman said he would need to speak to the chief engineer (who was in China at the time) about whether this function was buried in one of the chipsets, also suggesting we were feeding in PCM from the Oppo by mistake. However, a menu check showed native DSD flagged up on the Oppo and an Onkyo receiver confirmed this by flagging up DSD when fed the same signal. It looks as if Arcam will be making unexpected changes to their handbook, adding a function!

The video side of HDMI is all covered, including Deep Colour and progressive film frame-rate 24fps (to achieve this be careful with settings as the manual contains a small paper addendum, to the effect that 1080P is to be set expressly and not defaulted)

Other changes since the days of

been an unwelcome addition, but it is good to see this 'NAS straight to amplifier option', effectively taking the likes of Slim and Sonos out of the networked music picture. If you can't run an ethernet cable to your AV setup, a simple Airport Express or a networking over mains product can give you the ethernet port you need to get your Arcam on the network.

In keeping with this new 'network aware amp' model, it is possible for owners to perform firmware upgrades via the RS232 port (although this should ideally be done by a dealer). Thankfully, the AVR600 was delivered to me with the all-important 1.8 firmware version pre-installed, but even for anyone on that level, I suspect further updates are going to be required...

And as if all this were not enough, the receiver has a DAB tuner, a VHF/FM tuner, an internet Vtuner and an AM tuner. Internet radio opens up the world's online stations and around 10,000 are available!

OUT OF THE BOX

As soon as the Arcam AVR600 came out of its box, I was struck by its bulk and weight. The silly marketing coinage of 'Bauhaus Powerhouse' for this machine feels somewhat apt – there is that attractive deep vent below, and the usual Arcam green LED window is located high up on the front, with discrete buttons below tying it back to earlier designs, so a DVI 137 doesn't look out of place beside the AVR600. But that interface has been getting less clunky LED and more computery, and restarting the box feels more like rebooting a piece of computer kit than switching

"'Let's Go Crazy' was a devastating induction into finally hearing a film as it would be in the dubbing theatre..."

The Arcam AVR600 represents a massive sea-change over the slim, simple AVR350. It is a 7.1 channel receiver in which audiophiles can use two unwanted Rear channels to bi-amplify the front loudspeakers. The HDMI switching has become five inputs into two outputs, and now accommodates all manner of HD audio decoding options, including crucial Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio. PCM up to 24bit at

the AVR350 which are of particular interest to this digital music fan, are the inevitable Arcam rDock iPod integration, and the equally obvious option to simply point the amplifier to a hard disk full of music, whether directly attached by USB, or available remotely on a home network. The AVR600 attaches through standard RJ45-terminated ethernet. There is so much else going on in this box that wireless networking would have





on an amp. There is also a fair bit of clunking noise through the speakers to accompany a power down - not attractive!

Getting your Arcam AVR600 into place should really necessitate the services of two burly men. Though slightly more physically compact than my venerable Yamaha DSP-AX1, giant internal toroidal transformers make this is a very heavy box of tricks...

Although many may opt for getting 'the beast' dealer or installer installed, the AVR600 is among the least forbidding surround flagships to set up. This is all down to the simple and tasteful on-screen set-up menu, the look of which will be familiar to anyone who has played with an Arcam AV product in the last four years or so, but here is more pristine than ever, rendered in full HD.

All you really need to do to give yourself something to work with in terms of speaker level trims and EQ, is to plug in the supplied microphone to the AVR600's front 3.5mm input (ingeniously also capable of Toslink S/PDIF), locate it in your ideal viewing/listening position and run the automatic setup. This process is so intelligent it doesn't even need you to tell it you have small or large loudspeakers in the old style, and it uses its microphone scan to propose an ideal room EQ to you. Now I would normally be very sceptical of all these promises, preferring to set up myself, and eschewing EQ. But I was very happy with the set-

up, which immediately gave a very involving sound-field, which was only enhanced by activating the room EQ.

It is a fact of life that since the advent of Sky HD, TV testing of this mode of use inevitably is important. There is now so much Dolby Digital 5.1 programming available, from Sky 1 HD, BBC HD and Channel 4 HD to all the HD movie channels.

Once that was done the Dolby processing side of the amp revealed itself to be extremely dextrous in generating a convincing surround experience - notably giving a good account of itself in conveying front to back (and vice versa) pans. Well-mixed surround music presentations like Tim Burton's 'Sweeney Todd' are truly spellbinding in their tonal richness and dramatic, enveloping surround. Even stereo programmes, as ever ably drawn out into the room by using Dolby Pro Logic II Movie (DTS Neo:6 processing options are also available), often have the power to startle with their holographic placement of certain effects and instruments. Bizarrely the one that really made me jump was the electronic percussion on a Breakfast TV clip of Mathew Bourne's 'Dorian Gray'! The only frustration is the classic HDMI 'negotiation' lag on amplifier AV channel selection. Worse, and less typical, is the fact that audio can be mute for a variable number of full seconds after each Sky operation - fast forward, rewind, whatever, even with all HDMI audio 'off' option set

as per Arcam recommendation.

Stereo music is as much a joy as stereo TV - using stereo direct from a DVI 137, 1st CD masterings of Bronski Beat's 'Age of Consent' and The Cure's 'Boys Don't Cry' were so beautifully presented they even persuaded my other half to remark upon their sonic excellence. Similarly, the overall visual and audio presentation of PJ Harvey's BBC Sessions simply forced us to stay glued for the whole presentation, with the buzzband sound being rendered with remarkable individual instrument separation and clarity, notably on 'Dress'.

USB hard disk music play was tested using a USB stick containing MP3 tracks recorded on a Denon DP-100USB turntable (regrettably, the port does not supply enough juice to spin a bus-powered drive - curses!). The USB device is accessed via the 'NET' channel selector, and a simple track name display on-screen is enough to navigate your folders and select tracks. Sonically, tracks played in this way sound extremely lively, but the real meat is in the great trick of making any track on a uPnP server on your home network accessible via the same simple interface. I would love Arcam to swish up the on-screen interface a bit with artwork support, etc., but at the moment it is serviceable for album by album listening, and great sound can be had from CD resolution FLAC. Regrettably, any attempt to play 24bit

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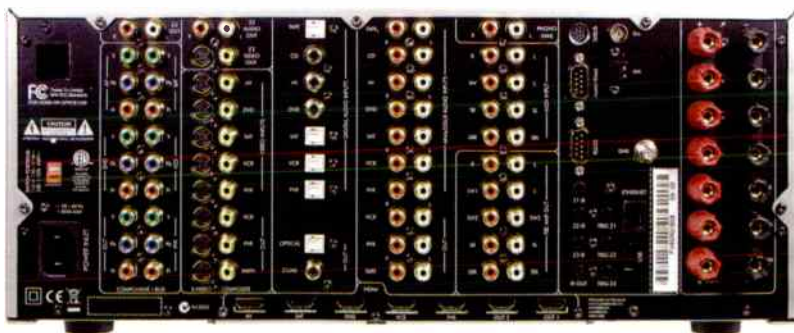
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FLAC, which is becoming increasingly prevalent from 'Studio Master Quality' vendors, results in unknown format messages; disappointing.

On the subject of 24bit audio, my long deferred (Denon Link aside) experience of DVD-Audio/SACD piped straight into the amp was finally achieved. And what an experience it was! The DVI37 converted surround DSD tracks like Destiny's Child 'Bootylicious' into hi-res 5.1 PCM, squirted it down the HDMI, and the AVR600 turned it into

a lovely, cogent surround whole.

Pure PCM propositions like the 24bit stereo 'Music Is Love' DVD-A from David Crosby are even better. It simply blew away its CD equivalent, with right channel tablas rising out of the mix. Moving onto the surround 'Song with no Words' the naturalistic, quad-like all round staging was sheer bliss via the AVR600.

Finally the *piece de resistance*: HDMI bitstream Dolby True HD decoding was done via a Toshiba EX1 HD-DVD player, playing Prince's

'Purple Rain'. The epic launch of 'Let's Go Crazy' was a devastating induction into finally hearing a film as it would be in the dubbing theatre – Dolby Digital Plus 5.1 was so-so, HD-DVD player decoded True HD was marginally better, but AVR600 decoded True HD really sounded like listening to 'Purple Rain' in surround DVD-Audio, while watching the film in enhanced colour 1080p24. It doesn't get much better than that...

CONCLUSIONS

Just about every currently imaginable mainstream video and audio format is ably dealt with by the AVR600. But what's plainly a five globe product in every respect is let down by details. The necessity of handling the now ubiquitous HDMI format has introduced long switching/startup lags which have frustrated many and continue under the current version 1.8 firmware. Perhaps firmware upgrades can fix these gremlins in the near future? The phono stage is an afterthought that falls way below current market standards, but it may be useful to lure potential purchasers by pointing out that, should they have SACD collections, it will play them beautifully too. Flawed genius!

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 - networking functionality
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- AGAINST**
- audio lag
 - temperamental HDMI
 - phono stage

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Power output measured a healthy 105 Watts into 8 Ohms and 182 Watts into 4 Ohms. In Direct mode, avoiding the input A/D, bandwidth reached 68kHz and it also appeared to be direct coupled and reach D.C. since full output was swung at 1Hz. Via the input A/D the upper limit was a high 38kHz, suggesting 96kHz sample rate, better than many receivers that still use 44.1 or 48kHz. Input sensitivity was a curiously high 50mV (CD, Direct), so the AVR600 will seem to go loud very quickly as volume is increased.

Frequency response of CD via digital input was flat to 21kHz and distortion low at 0.22% (-60dB), a good result. 24/96 code was handled well too, bandwidth extending to 44kHz and distortion falling to 0.13%. With 24/192 the same 44kHz response limit was reached, but output fell smoothly to reach -7dB at 90kHz instead of being limited by an anti-alias filter. The receiver also handled SACD code, bandwidth then being sharply limited to 33kHz but as distortion was a very low 0.07% SACD was more linear than PCM, as it should be - a good result showing the AVR600 exploits SACD well. Receipt of an SACD signal is not flagged up on the green display panel.

The VHF/FM tuner has reasonably flat frequency response, although a -1.7dB dip at 8kHz before the MPX filter peaks, due to mistermmination, at 12kHz. This will give a soft balance but an easy going sound, in conjunction with low measured distortion. Hiss measured -65dB at full quieting, a relatively poor value as quality VHF/FM tuners go, -70dB or thereabouts being more usual, so faint hiss will likely be audible in Radio 3 silences.

The LP section was incorrectly equalised on both channels, with a +4dB lift in the 75uS characteristic above 1kHz and roll down below 100Hz. Gain was enormous, just 0.12mV in being enough for full output – enough for an MC cartridge, even though it is for MMs. There seems to be excessive analogue gain in the AVR600. Arcam were contacted about this and said there was "a hardware malfunction or a set of production components that are at extremes of tolerance" in our sample. They claimed a production sample measured okay. Ours was very wonky though and I have never encountered anything like this on Japanese rivals.

Phono section apart, the AVR600 measured very well in every respect and is a top quality receiver of enormous ability, measurement showed. NK

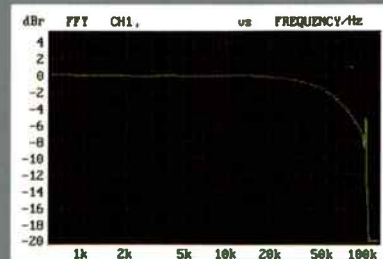
Power	105watts
Frequency response	1Hz-68kHz
Separation	74dB
Noise	-66dB
Distortion	0.002%
Sensitivity	50mV

CD, DVD-A, SACD	
Frequency response	3Hz - 21, 44, 33kHz
Distortion (-60dB)	0.07, 0.13, 0.13%

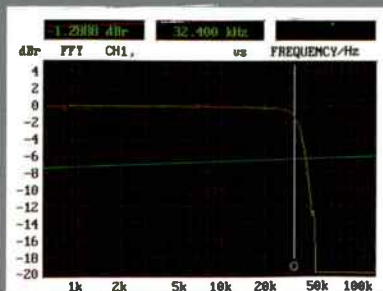
VHF/FM	
Frequency response	40Hz-14kHz
Stereo separation	42dB
Distortion (50% mod.)	0.15%
Hiss (CCIR)	-65dB

Signal for minimum hiss	0.6mV
Sensitivity, stereo	53µV
Disc	
Frequency response	55Hz-1.5kHz
Separation	62dB
Noise	-62dB
Sensitivity	0.12mV
Overload	20mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE, 192k PCM



FREQUENCY RESPONSE, SACD



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World Radio History

At least the Moon took me deeper into the mix, closer to the rear of the studio walls, if you like. Indeed I found it quite curious that the Moon was both a relaxed, lucid and organic sounding performer, and unusually revealing of the source material it was asked to play. Usually it's one or the other - either the player is voiced to sound romantic (i.e. with a rolled off treble in an attempt to sound warmer) or voiced to be clean (i.e. ruler flat). The CD3.3 is slightly on the warm side, but it remains very revealing indeed.

Fun Lovin Criminals' 'Up on the Hill' was pure pleasure, the Moon CD3.3 setting up a big, thumping groove to underpin the track. Inside this, all that additional percussive



instrumentation came across with great clarity and - more importantly - rhythmic flow. Hi-hats floated out with natural grace, just as they should, rather than sound like they were emanating from a cheap, looped drum machine on repeat. The Moon seemed particularly good at conveying those 'inky black' spaces between the notes, rather than simply blurring and slurring the notes in to one another. Of course, this is also a classic Naim trait, but the Moon seemed to focus more on making those inter-transient spaces silent, whereas the Naim tended to put the emphasis on the attack transient immediately following the space. It's a subtle distinction, but in practice it means the Moon is just as rhythmically engaging, but a little less dynamically pronounced sounding.

The combination of a smooth, slightly warm tonality, with a searchingly open midband and tight but organic timing marks out the Moon's own unique character. Happily it's a very good one across all varieties of music, because whilst some players can do brilliantly with Rock and averagely with Classical, or soporific with pop and seductive with jazz, the Moon proves a very well voiced machine across all genres. For example, classic nineteen seventies rock from Supertramp - 'Oh Darling' from the 'Breakfast in America' album - came over as both powerful and beautifully delicate at the same time. With a well recorded disc such as this (albeit in CD form a tad bright), the CD3.3 could showcase its superb treble performance. Spacious,

atmospheric and extended, those hi-hat cymbals were brilliantly rendered for a CD player of this price - I have heard worse coming from a half decent moving coil cartridge playing my vinyl pressing of this album, which is no small feat as analogue should always beat digital at the high frequency game.

4hero's 'Morning Child' showed that final facet of this player's character - the great way it conveys the texture of acoustic instruments. The track's soaring cor anglais, powerful strings and beautiful female vocals courtesy of Carina Anderson proved an intoxicating mix for this reviewer, the Moon delivering a wonderfully emotive rendition of this superb song. But I couldn't help

noticing the accuracy of the violin sound - whereas many silver disc spinners deliver this in a manner more akin to electricity power cables scraping on a bit of 'wet and dry', the CD3.3 couldn't have been more different. It just sounded so natural - wiry but not with all the associated harshness and grain. Likewise, brass instruments came over completely unsullied - you could hear the rasp of trombones as clear as day but gone were all those digital artefacts, scraping and crunching away in the background.

CONCLUSION

The more I lived with the Simaudio Moon CD3.3, the more I loved it. I had the 'X' version with balanced outputs, which I ended up using to the complete exclusion of the RCA outs, and I also found it responded well to a particularly long warm up period. But part of my growing love for the player came simply because it has hidden depths. It's a very nice sounding machine from the word go, but it just keeps on surprising you - in a nice way - the longer you listen to (or with) it. True enough, it seems

quite sensitive to recording quality, but I think that's because it's so transparent, yet it seems particularly impartial about your choice of music. Whereas some higher end machines seem 'voiced' to get the best out of a particular type of music (Naim machines love visceral rock, Marantz favour sultry soul/jazz), the Simaudio remains highly agnostic - worshipping the god of all music, whatever that may be.

Taken in isolation, I find it hard to fault. Sonically, you could say that it is slightly less taut and tight than (the admittedly £1,000 more expensive) Naim CDX2 or not quite as expansive sounding as the (even more expensive) Electrocompaniet EMC IUP, but compared to anything else at its own price point it does very well. If you really wanted to quibble about something, you'd mark it down for the slightly muddled front panel and the upfacing, exposed screw heads on the top panel, but there you go. If it was me, I wouldn't let these foibles put me off what's one of the most musically satisfying silver disc spinners at or near its price. I can think of few better ways to pass those long snow-bound Canadian winters - while your extremities are being frozen off, here's something to take you closer to the heart of your favourite music.

VERDICT

Subtle, self-effacing yet magnificently musical all the same, this distinctive digital disc player proves a brilliant listening companion.

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CD-3.3X £2,350
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 - tremendous insight
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 - DAC functionality
- AGAINST**
- control layout
 - exposed case screwheads

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our convolved impulse analysis of frequency response of the Moon shows it displays just a slight high frequency roll down, amounting to -0.3dB at 20kHz, barely enough to be discernible, but enough all the same to ensure the CD3.3 will not sound overtly bright.

Distortion levels were low throughout the player's dynamic range, measuring 0.0015% at peak level (0dB) and a low 0.178% at -60dB, as our distortion analysis shows. This suggests the Moon will sound smooth, free from harshness. The EIAJ Dynamic range did not quite match that of the best players (113dB), measuring 111dB, but it was very good all the same.

An output of 1.94V is right on Philips standard, but less than many so in a direct comparison the Moon will be less obvious and disadvantaged.

Signal related jitter from the digital output was low at 40pS with a 1kHz, -60dB signal, but there was some random jitter of 200Hz rate, measuring 120pS - not too bad but could be better.

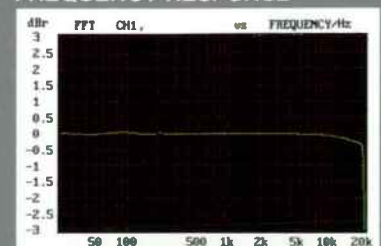
The CD3.3 is a neatly engineered player that turns in a good set of measured performance figures in most areas. NK

Frequency response (-1dB)
 CD 2Hz - 20.6kHz

Distortion (%)	
0dB	0.0015
-6dB	0.002
-60dB	0.21
-80dB	2.8

Separation (1kHz)	
	-125dB
Noise (IEC A)	-112dB
Dynamic range	111dB
Output	1.94V

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



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Letter of the Month

RADIO POLITICS

I am astonished that Steven Green would change his political allegiance merely in reaction to poor government policy about DAB [see p93, May 2009]! After all, ignorance of technical issues seems equally rife among the political class generally. Worse, even among the technically literate belief in differences between hi-fi systems seems distorted by two sorts of opposing views, one technically-based: "20kHz is the upper limit to adult hearing so 44.1kHz is perfectly adequate a sampling rate", the other personal: "I've some hearing loss due to too many rock concerts so I wouldn't be able to tell the difference". The former confuses engineering measurements with perceived effect, and the latter fails to acknowledge that a hi-fi system is just a hearing aid.

Although some of us with our obsessive upgrading mania are perhaps over-motivated in favour of the sound of music, the promotion of the benefits brought by music that sounds well is paramount if youngsters are to grow up wishing to buy hi-fi and that means governments which promote music and music making of all kinds in schools and elsewhere. Which of them is more likely to do that?

Jim Thorpe

Hi Jim. My comment was admittedly rather flippant, and it was influenced by the fact that it now looks a foregone conclusion that the Tories will get in at the next election rather than me actually wanting that to happen. I would say though, that it was partly through following how the government has handled



DAB – via Ofcom's regulation of it – that led me to change my political allegiance from Labour (to Liberal). Ofcom simply puts into practice the government's preferred "light-touch" method of regulation, which in reality simply means allowing companies to self-regulate wherever possible. Light-touch regulation is the style used by all of the government regulators, and it was my opposition to the practise in general that led me to stop voting Labour.

Staying on this subject, although the credit crunch is now having a majorly negative effect on the country as a whole, I have to say that it has been very satisfying to see that the FSA's light-touch regulation of the banks has been exposed for the complete and utter failure that it was.

To answer your final question, although there's more chance of DAB sounding fantastic than them getting into power, I'd personally say that the Lib Dems would be

the most likely of the parties to properly promote music in schools and elsewhere. New Labour's answer would probably be to do it on PFI where some big company (which has no experience of music) is given a huge contract for which it has to provide very little in return. And the Tories would probably just "leave it to the private sector" completely; or in other words music wouldn't end up being promoted at all. **SG**

Whilst we're delighted that Steve gave his considered reply to Jim's letter, I'd just like to point out that Hi-Fi World magazine itself doesn't have a party-political position, and wouldn't like to get drawn into the wider political debate! There are many avenues for such a thing, but we're not one of them. That's not to say however that we're impressed with this particular government's Digital Radio strategy, by any stretch of the imagination...

DP

SPEAK NO EVIL?

Dear David - average aluminium tweeters have never sounded like two dustbin lids being bashed together, let alone by a twelve year old - girl or boy! And to say that the Usher Be-10s make your average pair of electrostatics (whatever that means!) sound like a pair of disco speakers is, frankly, utter tosh. Quoting from your very own opinion column, who of your regular readers could ever entertain spending upwards of £10k for a pair of speakers? And further, dear David, to put down nearly all loudspeakers, as you kindly put it, with such words as, boomfy, squawk, dries and hardens the sound, holding a megaphone, slurring and blurring, unholy sound of cheap transducers, chewing through the music "like a bulldog with a wasp in its mouth". For goodness sake, where are you coming from these days; this sort of journalism belongs in "What Hi-Fi Sound and Vision", which is where you will end up if you don't watch it!

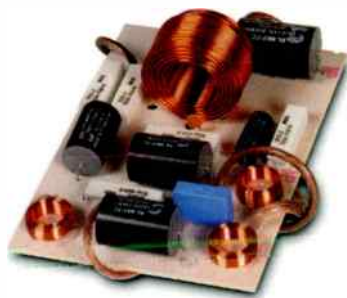
If you are so worried about your "el cheapo" speakers - you know the ones, Epos, Quad, ATC, Ruark, B&W, Spondor, Dynaudio, Proac, Dali, Tannoy, etc. - then have a peruse of Mr Comeau's feature, where he says you can improve your grotty old "el cheapo" speakers with all that megaphone and squawking stuff by understanding the critical role of the crossover. The man himself says even fairly nondescript drivers can be made to sound stunning (his words, in your magazine), by making sure the crossover gets the best out of them, so there, it's mostly down to careful crossover design, says the man. That's all I have to say for now, I do love the magazine though!,
Regards,

Phil Miles

Thanks Phil - I take your combative criticism of my words in the constructive spirit in which it was meant! Okay, so I was - shall we say - using a little rhetorical embellishment in the opinion column you're referring to - but actually my substantive point still holds. Of all the different types of hi-fi component, I think loudspeakers are still the furthest from perfection - and still the most variable. The trouble is, most people don't hear what's wrong with particular speaker designs if they spend any amount of time with them, because the ear (or - more precisely - the brain attached to it) 'tunes out' so many of the problems. In the same way that you can't really tell how bad a fast food burger is unless you cook one from raw ingredients yourself, so it's hard to accurately get a 'take'

on a speaker unless you're constantly hearing many different types to contextualise things.

For example, hear a good electrostatic and most equivalently priced box loudspeakers sound 'boomfy' and uneven. You're aware of listening to several drivers pushing and shoving in time (well, almost), and you also hear how they can each 'set off' the cabinet. You can also hear how slow, and time-smeared, the overall sound can be, and how diffuse its imaging is, and how the port wheezes like an old smoker. Then there are the sounds of the respective cone (or dome) materials



Can the sins of a loudspeaker be fixed by the crossover?

- aluminium, paper, polypropylene or Kevlar all have distinctive signatures, as do HDA, glass fibre or carbon fibre to lesser extents. These can be ameliorated by a good crossover design, but not eliminated, as I am sure Peter will agree. Move to a good box loudspeaker, such as the aforementioned Usher Be-10, and it shows up a whole different set of problems for the electrostatic - softer bass due to cabinet flexure and limited bass panel size, a slightly plasticky tonality (due to the type of film used) and a lack of high frequency air (due to the design constraints of electrostatic panel tweeters). There's also sometimes a lack of dynamics at high levels, due to the physical difficulty of moving so much air in the way an electrostatic does, and so on...

My point is this - good crossover design or not - loudspeakers are very conspicuously subject to the laws of physics, and there is no single way of transcending these. There are various clever working compromises designed to get around particular problems, but this is where the debate stops I am afraid. It's about finding the working compromise that you like best, or the one that works for you in your system with your music tastes. **DP**

NOT NUTS

I'm not after advice - just an observation really; I have to admit I read your magazine like other blokes with different hobbies might read performance car magazines or 'Nuts' - drooling over the unobtainable! As a father of a young family my available spend, including on my media of choice - vinyl LPs - is limited. It occurs to me that there must be a relationship between the spend on kit and any improvement in playback quality which must diminish past a certain point. Initially as you spend more you'll get a big increase in reproduced sound past a point though you must surely reach a situation where the more you spend returns only slight improvement. I guess the tipping point would vary for different people but I wonder if even you all would not admit that the extra £2,000 on that top-of-the-range deck is really giving you two grand's worth of improvement.

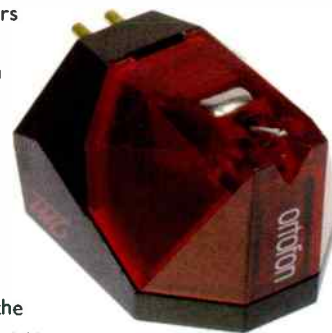
For me I think I've reached that point with my rather basic set-up - Thorens TD160S turntable with RB251 and Ortofon 2M Red, Cambridge Audio 640P phono stage, and Arcam A75+ integrated amp. My only concern at the moment are my speakers - I'm waiting to replace my rather old Mordaunt Short 20i when my kids get old enough to stop putting their lovely little fingers in them. I think that the best upgrade for my money from now on will be records, records and more records. Enjoy the music!

Phil Turner

Hi Phil. Yours is a not uncommon refrain, but also a subjective one and I suspect after upgrading the loudspeakers to the likes of Usher's S-520, you may well like to consider a better phono stage!

Your record deck will do a fine job as it stands and I see no reason to upgrade if you are happy. However, I'm a big Ortofon fan but thought the Black a big step up from the Blue or Red, well worth the extra. Past that, there's little justification in going further unless the charms of a moving coil take your fancy.

NK



Ortofon Red MM cartridge - clearly bettered by the Black.



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I really enjoy your website and find it very informative (and read it every day).

— Richard Holbrook

I have never replied to online audio reviews but wanted you to know that I have enjoyed several articles.

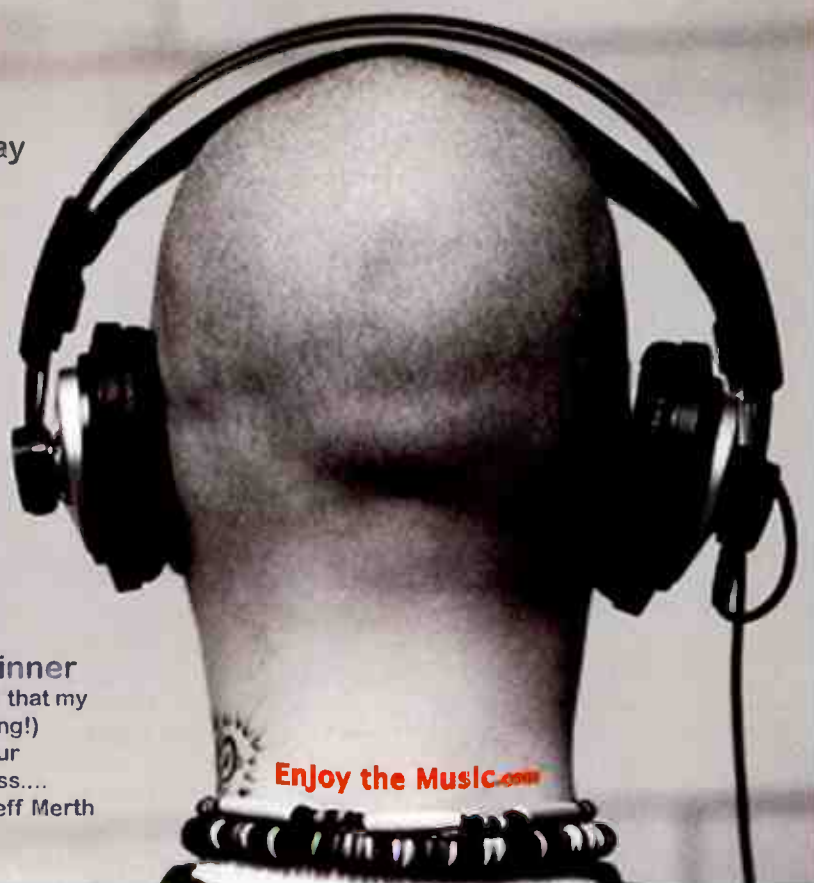
— Craig Mattice

What a great review! — Paul Kittinger

Enjoy the Music.com Contest Winner

In fact, the Axiom Audio EP500 works so well that my wife and I both stood mouths open (not kidding!) as it shook the rafters and window glass in our house. Amazing! Love that palpable, tight bass.... Thank you again for the awesome prize! — Jeff Merth

Enjoy the Music.com



WALK ANOTHER WAY

Having read your excellent feature 'Walk This Way!' in June's edition, I wonder if you could tell me whether it was possible to use the Sony Walkman (any model) as a tape source through one's amplifier within a hi-fi system?

Your article reminded of my first "wow" experience of audio following my fourteenth birthday in 1982. The WM-2, a gift from my Nan which included, JMJ's 'Oxygene' (not cool for a post punk, Joy Division-obsessed teen!) sounded just unbelievable. Had it not been for the Walkman, I may never have smashed my 'tower system' to bits and embarked on a twenty five year hi-fi addiction that began with a NAD-JBL-Celestion system and spiralled out of control until a few years back when I used the 'twelve-step programme' (i.e. walking twelve steps past your local hi-fi dealer) to bring things back in check and settle with a system I cherish. Your magazine should carry a warning that continued reading may induce a relapse!!

Hughie Day

Hi Hughie - apologies for the addictive nature of this magazine - we do our best not to make it interesting, but sometimes things go wrong and it comes out - as literary agents would say, "unputdownable"! Greatly appreciate the 'twelve step method' (can you suggest an eBay equivalent for me and my classic car purchasing proclivities?), and yes - I can confirm that a decent Walkman can be plugged straight into a hi-fi amplifier via a 3.5mm minijack to two phono lead (available from the Chord Company, Supra, and many others). Alternatively, if you buy the mighty WM-D6C, then there's a line out so you can plug that same lead into the line socket, rather than the headphone out.

Get a good model, as recommended in my feature, and ensure it's all clean and tidy, and you'll find they're capable of great sound - even by today's standards. The whole point of my feature was that - unlike modern day iPods - the best Walkies were so well engineered from an audio point of view that they can be considered 'real hi-fi'. **DP**

WHERE NEXT?

I'm sure this must be one of the most frequent questions asked and maybe one of the most difficult for you to answer, but where do I go next with my system, if anywhere?

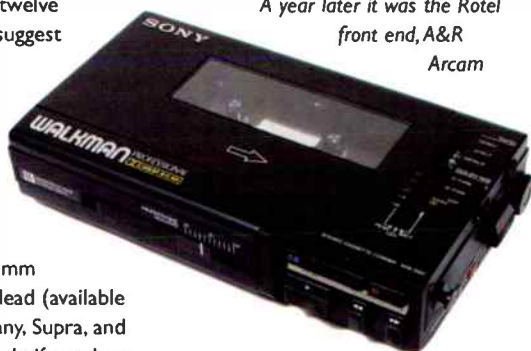
I was bitten by the hi-fi bug at sixteen, some twenty seven years ago

when I shared a bedroom with my brother who banned me from using his Dual 505, Akai receiver, AR18 system - when I left a record on that warped in the sun. Having nothing to play music on drove me mad so a couple of mags were purchased and I set about trying to figure out what was what. A trip to Richer Sounds' second shop at Stockport was a revelation to me. I was mesmerised... floor to ceiling hi-fi, absolutely crammed to the rafters with everything imaginable!

My first system comprised a Rotel RP820 deck, Audio Technica AT95 cartridge, Sanyo amplifier (with five band graphic equaliser no less), Sanyo cassette deck and some original Wharfedale Diamonds (from Comet when they were a good bet for okay hi-fi). I got it all home and... well it sounded pretty crap to be honest. I spoke to Richers and they said that the speakers were to blame... too inefficient.

I was suitably confused and bewildered, but took them at their word and took the Wharfedales back to Comet who agreed with Richer's diagnosis and suggested some Solovox S80s (I think). They were three-way boxes that looked brilliant. This system at the time sounded okay to my ears, even my brother said it was pretty good and not a million miles from his...

A year later it was the Rotel front end, A&R Arcam



Sony Walkman WM-D6C - a top quality player complete with line out.

Alpha Mk 1 and a pair of KEF Coda 3s (£49 from Richers... I remember as I had to save up for them at the time) and that was it. I was totally hooked and have over the past twenty seven years crept up the hi-fi upgrade trail from base camp hoping to one day make it to the top.

Here's where I am at the moment: TEACT1 transport with modified clock and power supply, Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 21 DAC, Cyrus Pre-X and power supply, Rotel RB1092 power amplifier and Linn Kaber loudspeakers.

The problem is I'm at a point now where I simply, genuinely don't know what to do, or where to go next. My system is good to my ears, still impresses

me at times, but mainly just gives me hours of enjoyment.

The system feels like it has evolved around three key components for many years now, the transport, DAC and speakers. That seems to me to be where I may have gone wrong. Should I have been so determined to keep hold of the Kabers (they are donkeys years old now), is the DAC really that good compared to what's come onto the market since its heyday, is the transport really good enough for me to hear the best from the DAC?

So that's where I am - stuck half way up the 'mountain of upgrade' gazing up at the peak wondering if I've got the energy or knowledge to ever make it, or should I stop here and just admire the views?

If you could point me in a different direction then I would look at chucking between £500 - £1,000 at a worthwhile upgrade, I'll go down the second hand route - but not eBay! Typically I'm a sucker for a slightly analytical sound (if it's on the disc then lets hear it please... nice and clear!) listen to mainly rock from Journey to Zeppelin and like it pretty loud.

Any help with the next stage of my journey to the summit would be most welcome, if I make it to the top (if those numbers ever come up) then I'll stick a Hi-Fi World flag atop.

Dave Mayer

Since you like a fast, detailed and powerful sound I suggest you listen to Monitor Audio GS20 or GS60 loudspeakers. Alternatively you might like to wait for the forthcoming Platinum Series PL200, which should be very interesting.

Somewhere in your story you switched from an Audio Technica AT95 cartridge playing sun ripened LPs to a tweaked Teac transport. If you still have LPs and the NAD deck, swap the AT for a Goldring 1012GX or 1022. **NK**



Monitor Audio GS60 loud-speaker, a great sound at a reasonable price.



Quadral Pico loudspeakers - setup details needed.

Hi Dave - a bit leftfield, but as you've got a punchy solid-state power amp with lots of power, and you like a slightly analytical sound, have you considered One Thing modified Quad ESL57s? Admittedly, it's just a little over your budget, but I feel this would be a shortcut to the top of the mountain - an escalator to hi-fi heaven, if you don't mind the horribly mixed metaphors. Pick up some good old Quads, and ship them off to One Thing for modding. What you'll get back will amaze you - truly powerful, dynamic and visceral, yet with vast soundstaging and insight - and yes, all the analysis you could possibly wish for. They are spectacular speakers - Paul Rigby runs a pair, and Noel and I have waxed lyrical many times about them. These could be part funded with the sale of your Kabers, but make sure you hang on to the TEAC transport and MF DAC, they're both as good as you'll reasonably get at the price. **DP**

ALTO ANALOGUE

Hi! I don't trust the Italian dealers I know, so I need your help. I'd like to improve my hi-fi chain by replacing my Denon DL103 with a more dynamic and detailed cartridge. I listen to a lot of all kind of music with a Rega P3/RB 300 turntable, Rega Planet, Linn Majik Preamp (MM, MC phono input), Linn 2250 Power amp and Monitor Audio 703 loudspeakers. In the next months the cartridge is the only thing I can afford, even if I hope to invest about 1,000 euros to replace the P3/RB 300 next year. Suggestions from the dealers are Rega Exact, Dynavector 10x5; Denon DL 103R.

Federico from Florence

Hi Federico - I would suggest an Audio Technica AT-OC9ML II which is a little over your budget (but only a little), but it works superbly in the Rega P3 (I have used this

very combination), and it is more than good enough to survive an upgrade next year. I would then suggest retaining the tonearm (and OC9), and adding a Michell GyroDec SE when funds permit. This done, you'll have a very potent and well balanced vinyl front end - easily good enough to see you through the pre and power amps, and a new pair of speakers. **DP**

FOUR PLAYING

Saturday morning with a cup of fresh coffee, music blasting and a copy of Hi-Fi World in hand is one of my true joys in life. More of the same please!

I would like to ask Mr David Price your advice please? I have just bought a pair of Quadral Pico speakers and very happy I am with my new purchase. It was your very positive review which was one of the reasons I bought a pair and they are a vast improvement on the B&W CM-1s they replace.

As you reviewed the speakers and have vastly more experience than I with regards to setting up speakers, I would like to ask your opinion on a few matters with regards to the set up and what you found to be best. Your advice will save me having to try many different combinations of the questions below for the next six months to get them right. I know that every listening room is different and therefore every set up will be different, but your advice would be guidance to me and not a hard fast rule. My questions are:

Did you get the best results from connecting to the HF binding post or LF binding post with speaker cable? Did you get the best results with grills on or off? What toe in did you find worked best, i.e. direct at listener, etc... What did you find was the best distance to back wall for ideal bass. I use Kimber 8tc speaker cable and have 8tc binding post links, would you recommend changing the binding post links which came with the speakers for the 8tc links that I

have?

I can of course discover the answers to all of the above questions myself by trying all of the above combinations, but I would still be interested in your own findings, you may save me the time of having the headache of trying all of the above combinations and may help me from a subconscious point of view wondering if I've got it right. I know you must get many requests like this and I would be grateful for your time.

John Gardner

Hi John - I ran my cables direct into the LF binding posts, and used the Picos with the grills off. I toed them in about 10 degrees, and no more, running them about 30cm from my rear walls, and at about 70cm off the floor. Yes, I'd certainly try swapping the links for the Kimbers. Of course, I'm always happy to answer such questions, but must emphasise that all I've told you is how to get the best from the Picos in my listening room - not yours! As ever, I implore you to spend an hour or so setting them up properly. **DP**

OUT AND ABOUT!

I'm about as confused as a hedgehog in Bruce Forsyth's dressing room! My new Samsung flatscreen LED television only has a digital audio output, no RCAs, and I want to connect it up to my Audiolab 8000C preamp (which will be feeding Ikon Audio 845 mono valve amps and Wilson 5.1 speakers).

I've been told I can do this via my SKY HD+ box, as that has RCAs, but would I be better off buying a new preamp? I have no interest in surround sound - with Wilsons one doesn't need it!

Chris H

Crikey! An Audiolab 8000C will stifle your Ikon Audio 845 valve amplifiers and is no match at all! It's best to



Ikon Audio MB845 valve power amplifiers can run with a passive preamp or a simple valve power amplifier - but not a chip based solid-state design!

use a high quality valve preamp, or a passive preamp like the Creek OBH-22 I use, because the Icons' high sensitivity of 440mV will match most sources without preamplification. Your choices of preamplifier range from Croft through to World Design and on upward to the new Musical Fidelity Primo we reviewed last month.

Try using the analogue outputs from your Sky HD+ first and see what you think. Doubtless the D/A convertor inside will be cheap, so a hi-fi convertor hooked up to the TV's S/PDIF digital output will give better sound, but if this streams Dolby Digital surround-sound a standard PCM convertor won't handle it; you would need to use an AV receiver, or perhaps the Onkyo PR-SC886 preamp I tested last month. **NK**

SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

I have a Cambridge Azur 640 amp which I have been very taken aback by its potential. The problem I have is I realise that to get the most from it would be wise to upgrade my CD player as well. I understand that the Azur remote I have with the amp will also work with the accompanying CD player (Azur 640C). However I know that there is probably a much better CD player that would improve upon this. So before I fork out the money, can you recommend a better player for around the £300 mark. All the best and keep up the good work.

Ciaran Johnson,

Hi Ciaran. At the price I think not. Cambridge do a very good job and you cannot easily better their products at the price. However, if you have an old CD player with a digital output then a £230 Cambridge DAC Magic should upgrade it nicely, and is an alternative approach you might like to consider. Perhaps surprisingly, I often use a Samsung BD-PI500 Blu-ray player as a budget CD transport in AV setups because it has ultra low jitter on its S/PDIF digital output. You can get its recent replacement, the BD-PI600 for a ridiculously low £160 if you would find its ability to play DVD and Blu-ray useful, remembering its load times are slow for CD. I know this is all a bit left field, but then we do try to work outside the box as well as in it! **NK**

CROSSOVER

Amen to Peter Comeau's comments about the complexity of crossover design and its importance to the final sound (HFW, June 2008). I will remember visiting Wilmslow Audio's showroom in the early 1980s to listen to two kit speakers they sold based on the KEF



Cambridge DacMagic convertor, flexible and sounds great at the price.

B110 and T27 units. The 'CS1' was the standard KEF 'constructors' series' kit and the 'LS3' had additional cabinet damping and a BBC LS3/5A crossover. Both speakers were well-balanced, with flat response, and had the same drive units in essentially the same cabinets but there was no mistaking the difference in sound quality - particularly in stereo imaging. I had to have the LS3, even though it was considerably more expensive.

Peter's articles in HFW have been a joy to read and full of interesting insights on what makes hi-fi work. I wish him well on his Chinese expedition - and hope he still manages to find time to share some thoughts with us from time to time.

Alasdair Beal

Thanks for your kind comments Alasdair, which I forwarded to China in case he's missing his fans in Blighty! It is good to hear from a

*real life design engineer rather than an armchair expert because it gives a good idea of just how much can go into a loudspeaker design. Peter was slated to appear at the next Audio 09 Show at Writtlebury Hall, Sept 26th-27th (see www.chestergroup.org) and I understand he will be flying back from China to be there. **NK***

THAT'S LIFE!

Just bought the latest issue of Hi-Fi World (July 2009) and find I have won a new pair of KEFs! What I will do is burn them in with my office system, which currently uses Mission's M71i, bought from Richer Sounds at half price, in July 2003. Very pleased I am with them, as they suit perfectly the other components, the main item being a NAD 7155 Receiver (about 35 Watts), bought circa 1982, by my late father. If I prefer the KEFs then I shall retire the Mission's, if not...

Once the KEFs are run in, I shall then substitute them for the 57s, for a couple of weeks, just to see how they sound. If I like what I hear, I'll send you a report, but given how much I like my current system, I am unlikely to keep them as my main speakers, 'cos I really do love the sound I get from my Quads, on the end of the WAD. My musical tastes are Folk/World/Acoustic and a wide variety of other music, being a particular fan of Early Music. Not into Rock or Heavy Metal, but do have some early Rock'n'Roll stuff, from fifties to eighties (Shadows, Stones, Byrds, Eagles, Moody Blues, etc.)

I have had an ongoing love affair with valve driven Quad 57s since 1977, when my then girlfriend introduced me to her father, who had a complete Quad stereo system, the front end of which was a Connoisseur BD2 with SME 3009 Mk2 Improved, with Stanton 500 cartridge and an upgraded stereo phono stage in the Quad 22 preamp, which had its own dedicated power supply



KEF iQ30 loudspeakers - a fine small 'speaker, if not quite a match for Quad ESL-57s, although you will find they have better bass!

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and which made a big difference to the overall sound. The relationship lasted about six months, until she cottoned on that I was actually more interested in her dad's hi-fi! Oops. But one has to get one's priorities right. Of course, I have kicked myself on numerous occasions since then, but that's life!

The irony of it all is that she was as into hi-fi as I was, which is where the problem lay, as we were always fighting over the sweet spot. Three is a crowd. Definitely an 'Unholy Trinity'. Shame really, as she was the only woman I have ever met - who had any real interest in music and hi-fi, that is. Could have been a match made in heaven, as she wouldn't have complained about the size or colour of - the kit. But we all make mistakes.

Russ Betts

Thanks Russ - your private life was awfully good fun to read about, but could I suggest that for your sake, next time you pen such a confessional paean, put a false name on the end? In the meantime, if the love of Russ's life is reading this - you know who you are - then don't hesitate to phone us to dish the dirt on his possibly "unusual" late night listening habits! **DP**

Hi Russ - and congratulations! I don't think the budget iQ30s are quite in the same league as Quad ESL-57s, so go easy on them! You will find they are modern, well focused and great value all the same. A real fun loudspeaker and accurate as well. Do let us know how you get on. **NK**

FIVE STAR FAILURE

I am one of a great number of hi-fi enthusiasts who has been guilty of trying to hunt down second-hand bargains and have built up many hi-fi system(s) over the years made up of mismatched '5 star' products. The result has been lots of time, effort, money and endless frustration! With the amount of money that I have spent on second-hand gear over the years, I could easily have afforded a top-notch brand new system which I could have auditioned before purchase and been happy with for years afterwards.

Now that I am a few years older with a significantly higher income I would like to make sure that I buy a system which works well together so that I can forget(!) about the hi-fi and just enjoy the music. I am currently the proud owner of a Michell Odyssey with black HR power supply and black TecnoArm a tonearm - mine by the way is serial number 100 - the very last one made!

Recently I remembered an old issue of Hi-Fi World where you did a feature



Shipping Yamaha NS1000 loudspeakers in from Japan is risky, says David Price.

on system matching and one of the systems was based specifically on this turntable. I also have a Musical Fidelity X-150, a Trichord Dino and Chord Odyssey cable which also featured in the suggested system.

It seemed logical that perhaps I should just complete the system as chosen by yourself by adding an Ortofon Rondo Bronze (to replace my worn Sumiko BPS Evolll) and a pair of Pinsh I speakers, as I have just sold mine. However, one problem is that there is nowhere that I could demo this setup before buying primarily because Pinsh speakers are not stocked anywhere, they just do home demos. Even if that was not the case it is rare, particularly up North, that any dealer has all of the products that you are interested available to demo. What they do instead is suggest alternative products that they do stock (of course!)

The second problem is that the cost of the equivalent Pinsh speakers (1.2) now cost £1,500 which is £500 more than when they were reviewed by yourselves.

Another interesting option has also arisen is a friend of mine who lives in Japan has offered to ship some Yamaha NS-1000M speakers to me. The speakers are roughly £1,000.

I'm sure you've already realised where I am going with this letter? The question is what is the best way to go with my system from here to get the best sound per pound (I only listen to vinyl)? Should I just buy the Pinsh 1.2 speakers to go with my existing setup or would I get a better sound from the Yamaha speakers if I replace my amp? Also, if I go with the Yamaha which amp should I go with? I believe they work best with valves or Class A amp?

I would greatly appreciate your help in this matter. I would also be interested to hear what you think about my point

on the difficulty of auditioning particular components together as few dealers stock them all in the same place.

James

James - thank you, thank you, thank you. Your miserable, wretched, guilty track record of buying any old thing because it's recommended by a magazine and/or cheap second-hand is manna from heaven for me, as it's precisely what I've been banging on about (not to do!) for the past six years as editor of this magazine. So, I'll repeat once again - try before you buy!

The trouble is of course that you've just told me what a sticky wicket it is, buying 'unseen', and then you're proposing to do precisely the same thing all over again! Doh! No, no, no!

Your Michell is superb, as is your arm. Your amp is very good, as is your speaker cable. What's left of course is your phono stage which is a great budget product but not able to mix it with the big boys, so to speak, and your speakers. First, I'd suggest getting an Audio Technica AT-OC9ML II (£399) moving coil cartridge - as good as the Ortofon but £100 or more cheaper - and a new phono stage. I would strongly recommend an ANT Audio Kora 3T Ltd. This done you'll have brilliant front end, that will squeeze every last pip out of the Musical Fidelity amplifier, which is already a strong mid-price performer. Speakers? Well don't - what ever you do, go and buy without a dem. NS1000Ms shipped from Japan could arrive in any condition - would you buy a used car in the same way, with no pedigree or guarantee of quality? They are truly great speakers - but they've got to be perfect to be so described, and I suspect they won't

be. Instead, I suggest you audition AudioSmile Kensais, Yamaha Soavo 2s and Monitor Audio GS10s at this price - go forth and listen. If you can't hear them with the same source as yours, then find a machine all the dealers happen to stock together (a good **balanced sounding** CD player such as the Cyrus CD8SE, for example) and bring your own amplifier along to dem - thus eliminating as many variables as possible. **DP**

TWEEKY

I have discovered a free tweak that I cannot recall ever seeing published, which may be of interest to readers who own speakers like the Dynacos mentioned in Peter Comeau's March 2009 article (i.e. those designed to be used with their grilles in place). I have owned a pair of Tannoy M20 Gold MkII since new in 1989. Whilst they are relatively modest and originally bought as a stop gap when funds were tight, with a couple of minor mods over the years (Spectra Dynamics sound deadening panels, upgraded crossover components) I have continued to prefer them to anything I have heard that I could afford, and they have survived successive upgrades to the rest of my system. Like those Dynacos I always use them with the grills in place, finding any benefits of removal to be offset by an over-forward top end.

Now to the tweak. For the first time recently when dusting the room, I decided to remove the grills and vacuum them. To my delight, I have discovered a clear improvement in the sound enough for me to want to listen to my vinyl and CD collection all over again. Unlike Peter Comeau of course I cannot prepare frequency response graphs (and it would now take another twenty years before a comparison could be made!), but all I can say is that I can hear much more clarity without the brashness that comes with the grills off. Clearly, twenty years



Clean your loudspeaker terminals with Kontak, and don't forget all other mechanical connections too.

of fine dust caught in the grill fabric was doing the sound no favours! Warning to any readers wanting to try this - you must remove the grills before vacuuming, or serious damage to speaker cones is likely!

David Deeks

Hi David - thanks for that. And while you're at it, why not clean the loudspeaker terminals with isopropyl alcohol or (better still, albeit slightly more expensive) Kontak? This will remove lots of oxidation (you'll see the cotton bud go grey as it all comes off). Finally, a great fillip for ageing speakers is tightening up the drive unit screws. They loosen off after a while, so a good session with a screwdriver will restore some dynamics and definition. Just make sure you don't overtighten them though - you don't want to be stripping any threads! **DP**

TRANSFORMATION

I bought a brand new Marantz PM 94 amplifier nearly three years ago from the USA. It was from old stock.

The amplifier is nearly fifteen years old and was complete in its own box and manual, etc; it has rosewood planks at either side and weighs 25Kg; it dates from 1991, which I think was one of the later models. All I need is a power converter, but was wondering if you could help by telling me what the wattage is because I do not want to make a mistake buying the wrong power converter. I have checked its manual, but cannot find anything. At the back it says 120V, 60Hz and 200 Watts Max on its other 2 pin power switches.

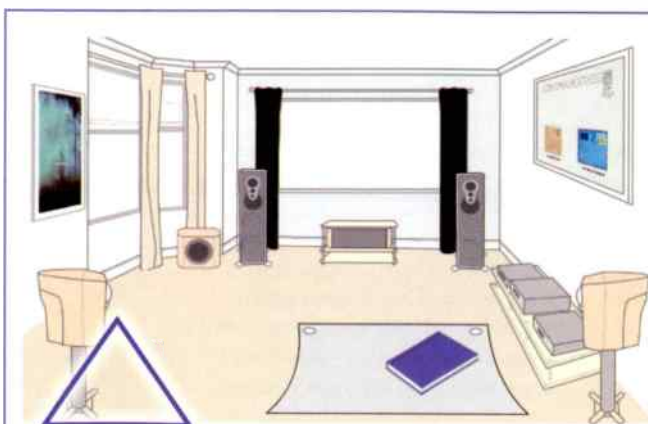
I be very grateful if you could help and was also wondering if I could connect two turntables? I have a Michell GyroDec turntable and a Garrard SP25 MKIII turntable that can also play old LPs and 78 records, etc. The amplifier also has two speakers, which are KEFs and are very good quality. If you get this message I will look forward to hearing from you.

Michael Overton

You would normally use an auto-transformer to step down 240 to 120, and 300-500 VA rating will suit. The 200 Watt figure you refer to is the load that can be handled by the power outlet only. The amplifier is rated at 150 Watts per channel and runs in substantial Class A, but all the same is unlikely to consume more than 100 Watts quiescent current. It is worth checking to see if it has a universal transformer inside, in which case you can simply reset it to 240V operation and do not need an external transformer. If you are unsure about any of this get a qualified engineer to do it. **NK**

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Browsing in a local charity shop rekindled my interest in vinyl. The artwork and the amount of easy to read and informative cover and insets reminded me of past pleasures in owning and listening to vinyl. Could I



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Room: klimax

resist the temptation? No - I arrived home with two boxed sets, both in pristine condition - Deutsche Grammophons recording of Beethoven Missa Solemnis (Wiener Philharmoniker / Karl Bohm) for £3 and Schumann Liederalbum with Ely Ameling on Philips for £1. Fortunately I had in store (wardrobe top shelf!) my 1970s Clockwork Orange Transcriptors Hydraulic Reference turntable with SME arm/ADCI0E MkIV cartridge. These were hastily put back in service. Even without a clean and check of the settings, what a sound revelation after listening to CD for some twenty years. I know I will be buying more vinyl - pre-played and/or new!

The Transcriptors is a work of art which I admire greatly and would like to keep, but (probably) it is no longer considered to be state-of-art. Browsing the web I find that it can be serviced for around £125. It was bought new and has been well looked after, so is it worth the servicing or would I do better to buy new?

There is also the question of the SME 9 inch arm and cartridge. If I keep the Transcriptors, would the Arm benefit from being rewired? Or would I be best advised to change the arm/cartridge for something more modern? If so, which arm/cartridge would you pair with the Transcriptors?

These impulse purchases coincided with me looking seriously at replacements for my Quad ESL63 speakers, as my smaller lounge is no longer suitable. I now have a dilemma; which to tackle first? Do I get the speakers right for my room (my preferred choice) or look at the front end? All purchases will be made from income rather than savings, so upgrading will be progressive over the next twelve or so months. What would you recommend? I offer you a budget of around £3,000.

This will be a dedicated stereo hi-fi system and will not form any part of a surround sound system.

To complete the picture, my amplifiers are Shanling SP80-C monoblocks (EL34 tubes) into Quad ESL 63s (to be replaced). I will almost certainly be equipping myself with World Designs Phono Stage and Preamp. My Victorian listening room is approximately 12 feet wide with central bay window by 22 feet long. Speakers either side of the bay window firing down the length of the room. Ceiling height is about 8 feet, suspended wooden flooring with thick rugs. Musical taste is symphonic/ orchestral/ chamber/ opera/ lieder/ piano, and some lighter contemporary work but not heavy rock / head banging material!

Gordon



Martin Logan The Source loud-speaker is a possible replacement for Quad ESL-63s, thinks Noel.

You may not find it so easy to reacclimatise from Quad ESL-63s back to conventional loudspeakers, especially as your room suits Quads. However, ESL-63s are a little warm and soft by today's standards, so you might just be happy enough to move on. I had to abandon mine (or should I say they abandoned me by falling apart!). If possible try auditioning Martin Logan The Source (see our review in November 08 issue) price £1,600, as this will give you that wonderful electrostatic see through clarity. **NK**

Hmmm... interesting problem Gordon! The Transcriptors Hydraulic Reference is still a very, very good deck in its own right - especially if it is isolated from the outside world properly on a wall table, and the dustcover is removed before playing. My instinct would be to get it serviced, and replace the cartridge with a Goldring G1042, which works very well in an SME 3009S2. This won't quite give you the quality of a modern day machine such as a Michell GyroDec, but it will work very well all the same, and is a beautiful thing to have in the house. Then, go for a good modern pair of loudspeakers - this is tricky, as the '63s are easy to better in many respects, but not improve upon all round. I would certainly listen to the Martin Logans that Noel recommends, and also consider the new Yamaha Soavo I Pianos, which we are reviewing next month. These improved versions of the Soavo 1s cost £3,000 and should give you most

of the delicacy and transparency of your Quads plus loads more speed, power, dynamics and grip. **DP**

FATIGUE

Help, please! I have recently got back into listening to music after years of ignoring my system because of the fatiguing sound bad CD reproduction often seems to result in. I am a convert to digital streaming. I use my PC with dbPowerAmp to rip CDs to FLAC and a Logitech Squeezebox Duet to select and stream what I want to play. This works very well provided I correct the often bad tagging from online databases. I use a Cambridge Audio DacMagic DAC which is connected using S/PDIF to both the stream receiver and my old CD player (NAD 525i). This is so my wife and family can play music without needing to use streaming.

The heart of my system is a Naim 122x/150x pre/power combo which replaced my old NAD 3020e. My old B&W 601 S2s are still in place and I haven't heard any other speakers that make me think 'wow' these are so much better than what I have.

The electronics sit in an old MDF TV/Video cabinet, the NAP 150x on top of the NAC 122x on the bottom shelf and the DAC on top of the CD player on the shelf above. The top used to accommodate my turntable but this has died and gone to vinyl heaven. I use Chord Crimson interconnects and Rumour speaker cable.

My listening is done in the lounge and I have headphones for when this conflicts with what the rest of the family want to do. The room is pretty much a rectangle of about 12ft by 25ft and the speakers are positioned on the long wall and so have to be quite close to the wall about 10in out on Atacama stands. There is no other workable place for them. I listen to a lot of classical music (symphonies Beethoven, Bruch, Tchaikovsky) and acoustic material (Norah Jones) but I do have the odd head-banging moment with the likes of U2, Deep Purple, Pink Floyd et al.

I have musical training and like to hear the musicianship clearly. I want as little colouration from components as possible. I have a reasonably clear idea of where I want to get to but I don't know what order to proceed in and a few other niggling issues. I think the DacMagic is very good for what it is but can I am sure be bettered, especially with orchestral music (violins) and music with a lot going on when things can get a bit muddled. I'm thinking Chord QBD 76 although I do wonder if the Squeezebox Transporter wouldn't be just as good given the budget I'm aiming at.

I wish I could hear some speakers that I think are an improvement but having listened to PMC GB1s, Neats (up



AudioSmile Kensai – a lovely sound from a modern miniature.

to Momentum 4i) and B&W 804s, I've yet to be impressed. Next stop Spendor A6 and perhaps SP2/3R – what do you think? I will eventually upgrade the amplification with a Flatcap 2x. The rack has to go, if only because it's ugly. Where should I start?

Marcus

B&W do a fine job and you are now well attuned to the sound of their loudspeakers, from a woven Kevlar bass/midrange unit and aluminium tweeter, so I would naturally suggest you move up the scale but as the 804s didn't impress, perhaps something a little bit more radical might suit, like Martin Logan electrostatics. They'll make you think, especially with strings and choirs where individual performers and instruments will be clearly discernible. My only slight reservation here is the Naim amplifiers won't especially suit, so try hearing them in a showroom first; only valves suit electrostatics. Alternatively, try listening to our benchmarks, the Spendor s8es, since they suit classical well, or perhaps try £4k KEF Reference 203/2s that are a super accurate and highly crafted loudspeaker. **NK**

Hi Marcus - well it's difficult to advise considering you neglect to mention what "the budget I'm aiming at" actually is! You say you like a low colouration sound, but given that "there's no other workable place" for the speakers but close to the wall, then you're really looking at a pair of high quality standmounters, I suppose. As regular readers will know, the AudioSmile Kensais impressed us greatly in this respect, but I wonder if they might be too small for you - lacking low bass? If so, then consider Monitor Audio GS20s which have a

very clean, open and accurate sound, with a tad more low end thanks to their small floorstander orientation. Or if you think you need to stick with standmounters, then Yamaha Soavo 2s are superb - with great openness and clarity; treble is a little less finessed than the AudioSmiles but bass is stronger and larger in scale. I very much like Spendors, but they're a tad on the warm side, which is precisely not the sort of sound you say you like (i.e. B&Ws). It's hard to say whether the Chord QBD76 would be overkill with your computer audio system - if depends on the quality of your FLAC rips, for one thing. Work on the speakers first, then come back to us about the DAC. **DP**

ALL I NEED IS EVERYTHING

I must say I was very disappointed with your Jelco review in the February edition. No attempt to check this arm out on a suspended subchassis deck (clearly a key market for this must be the Linn upgrade/replacement market - it has a Linn fitting even!). Not a word about its ability with classical music, or with a better cartridge than the OC9. The dealer that gets puffed in the piece is out there comparing it to an SME V and saying it sits happily on £4,000 decks! Can this be right? Some attempt to put it in the wider pecking order of things would be justified.

It's better than a Nima and an AO'd RB250. Okay that's useful (I've tried both and been unimpressed too). But the Nima is a unipivot and a different beast altogether, and the RB is designed for suspensionless decks; both have a Rega mount, not Linn ones. What about compared to Ittok 2 to Ekos, to old classics like the Alphason HR100, or to current contenders for space on Linn-mount decks? How does it handle standard test records - what does it

track at, when does it break up, what does it do badly, and how does this compare to the competition. I've been tempted to buy one but the review was no help at all (given I have an LP12 and listen to chamber music, not synth bass, with a Lyra cartridge not an old MM Goldring). Sloppy review- lazy doesn't even sum it up. I'd even be annoyed if I was the manufacturer because even with the glowing words, it still fails to address a lot of key questions prospective buyers would be asking. What a let-down.

Tom

Hi Tom. Whilst we wouldn't endorse certain dealers comparing it to an SME Series V, we can report that the Jelco is a fine tonearm. Our review was done on one of the first samples arriving in the UK, and time pressures were such that we were unable to try it on a range of turntables. However, I am planning a system feature with a Michell GyroDec (suspended subchassis) and ATOC9 at this moment, and I'll also be trying the 12" version of the same. We will also be doing a review of the Jelco on a modified Technics SL1210 in a forthcoming issue, so rest assured that our coverage of this arm will continue.

Adam was asked to put the Jelco against price rivals, which he did, and this is perfectly fair and standard reviewing practice. Obviously, reviewing it against classic arms like the Alphason and Ittok is problematic as it depends on the condition of these arms, whose sonics can deteriorate with age. Likewise it would be unfair to try it against the Ekos which costs nearly five times the price - as the manufacturer/importer I am sure would be quick to remind me.

Whilst the review may not have suited your particular purposes, the purpose of the review was to compare the Jelco 750D to the original Sumiko MMT from whence it came. As the review points out, it is a close ancestor to the Jelco, and we were keen to compare the two for historical perspective.

Sorry that you feel the review didn't suit you - obviously we can't compare every arm to every other through history on every deck, but we do try to run through as many permutations as we can, when we can - which is why you'll see continuing coverage of this interesting arm.

On a final point, it is customary to review products with every type of music - just because one particular type of music was not mentioned in the text it doesn't mean it wasn't tried. Often, the less remarkable results are sub-edited out to get the

text to fit onto the page. If Adam reported that it performed nicely with Bach's Fifth Brandenburg (or whatever), but with no notable moments, this would have been cut out to allow space for more illuminating comments. Remember that reviews are merely summaries of a reviewer's experience and not a complete beginning-to-end account. Remember too that space is a major limitation and we have a wide range of products competing for it, so we have to work within tight production constraints - much as we would rather not to have to! **DP**

David. Thanks very much for the reply. I've calmed down a bit now, I was a bit annoyed when I wrote the email as the review didn't tell me what I picked up the article to find out! I do appreciate the constraints you are under (I was a daily paper journalist myself for eleven years) and am grateful for this response. I have been toying with buying this arm to replace my Alphason HR100S (on my old but highly-spec'd and well-fettled LPI2). I am still tempted to take a flyer on it, but I am wary of grand claims



Jelco 750D - perhaps not the right choice for a really critical system.

after recently having a complete debacle with the Roksan Nima which sounded lovely on unchallenging stuff with a beat, but couldn't track soaring tenors or fortissimo choirs for toffee (not with my Lyra Helikon anyway). I'm looking for something less boring than my old Ittok, somewhere in between the resolution of my current Alphason and the warmth of the Nima, with the nuance to capture the refinements of chamber music but also with the ability to track Elizabeth Schwarzkopf at full tilt, or a big Monteverdi tutti with 5-part choir plus orchestra, with decent soundstage information to feed my ESLs...

What I was really seeking from the review was reassurance that this isn't just a souped-up Ittok, great for boogie merchants but lacking in the nuance and subtlety I really need in my system (the Nima had a big build-up from a local dealer but was a serious let-down in the end - the fact I took it off and downgraded to a twenty year old arm says it all really). I've been tempted to flex the plastic and pick up something

like a Naim Aro but at this moment the timing isn't great, my wife would kill me if she saw the statement...

Current system: LPI2/ Hercules II PSU/ Cetech carbon fibre subchassis/ Lyra Helikon/Alphason HR100S-MCS, Whest PS20/MU20 phono stage, 47 Labs transport and Chord DAC64, EAR/Yoshino V20 integrated amp, Isotek Sigmas mains conditioner, Townshend Seismic sinks and Isolda DCT300 cabling all round. Speakers are Quad 57 ESLs (One Thing rebuilt on One Thing stands) with Townshend Maximum Supertweeters and Quad brackets. It's not your average system these days; I don't even own a TV, let alone a flat screen one with multichannel sound. Also running about 1,500 LPs to just 900 or so CDs and I would say vinyl gets an easy three to one majority of play.

Tom

Hi Tom - good to know the blood pressure is falling now! I can see by your system that you're completely into your hi-fi - I respect you for that. Just reading about what you've got tells me you've made a lot of very intelligent and informed buying

but not such a good thing on a Technics, for example...

My own thoughts would be along the lines of a Naim ARO as you say (which I know to work well with a Lyra Dorian, as I've tried it); you'd find this very lively, musical and fluid - but it has a slightly soft bass and not the most extended treble, thanks to its unipivot design I suspect. It's clearly superior even to a perfectly preserved Ittok - indeed it's better in many ways to the Ekos too. But still it seems too expensive for you, so I would suggest an Origin Live Encounter (£970). It's a fine working compromise, with a subtle, even handed yet dynamic and musical sound at the price. **DP**

Tom, your high expectations, tightly focused requirements and super revealing replay system are in total more than a little intimidating, I feel. I suspect an SME312S and an expensive Ortofon Cadenza are called for. These are the Rolls Royces of the business, I am listening to them now and the whole presentation is so polished, smooth yet lifelike I could not conceive of better. **NK**

IN IT FOR THE MONEY?

Some interesting statistics came to light. The MCPS/PRS reported that of the 13 million songs available for sale as downloads, over 10 million failed to sell one unit. Indeed, some 80% of download revenue comes from 52,000 songs.

Then the International Phonographic Industry stated that 95% of the 40 billion downloads in 2008 were illegal.

It does seem that most people are downloading a small section of what's available and that internationally there's a lot of illegal downloading going on. I don't condone illegal downloading; fortunately for those concerned the legal downloads still raise a lot of revenue. This led to me wondering how harmful illegal downloading is, and the concept of royalties in general?

Copying music isn't anything new. Looking through my vinyl collection, some of the discs have a cassette symbol on them, with a black skull and crossbones. Remember that? The Home Taping is Killing Music campaign. We now know it didn't do anything of the sort. To my mind a bigger threat to music came from the electronic drum machine, the synthesiser, and the six string active electronic bass. Perhaps too, the loss of revenue arguments don't take into account the possibility that people tend to copy music they wouldn't ever buy anyway. The likelihood is if someone really wants music for their collection they'll go out and buy it.

Years ago, home movie enthusiasts had a copyright problem. Many people

decisions, rather than a random series of impulsive purchasing events - as are so often seen in these pages! My only worry is you're trying to 'load' too much on to the poor old Jelco 750D. It's £450 arm - why should it be any better than the Nima, let alone the Linn Ekos or suchlike at five times the price?

The Roksan Nima is a great budget arm, but it's a unipivot, and this means it's less consistent (in my opinion) with various different cartridges - it's highly possible than the Nima was/is a complete mismatch both for your Lyra cartridge and your Linn LPI2. The Linn Ittok of course, is a fine match for the LPI2, but I suspect yours is a bit tired - in perfect fettle, they should sound very lively and dynamic, not least because of an armtube which is not as well damped as some. Ditto the Jelco, whose S-shaped tube isn't the quietest, and this makes for a bright airy sound - possibly a good thing on a warm sounding Sondek,

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wanted to make films which had a commentary and background music on the magnetic stripe of the film itself. While some copyright free music was available, choice was limited. To copy most music onto stripe was therefore illegal. The Institute of Amateur Cinematographers came to the rescue. Through them it was possible to obtain the necessary licences. Enthusiasts could obtain annual MCPS/PRS licences which allowed the physical copying onto stripe, and a further licence (PPL) to enable one to broadcast the sound to the family or film club members. The cost was nominal. It was a cheap scheme which made an illegal act legal and so most people used it.

That might sound very small scale, but had a similar licensing scheme been introduced to make downloading legal for private, home use, it could have raised a large sum of revenue for the music industry.

And what of CD royalties? Many a time I've heard an artist complain they're losing revenue through people copying CDs. I think there's another side of the coin which is never considered. The fact is, there are many artists who are receiving royalties when they never contributed to the music in the first place.

This happens in two ways. First by inheritance, and second by royalty purchase. Should the offspring and families of deceased artists receive royalties in this way? Think of the Presley, Harrison and Lennon families, to name but three cases for example, who are receiving money every time someone buys a record to which they never contributed. I've no problem with artists amassing fortunes when alive and others benefiting via the inheritance system in the same way that anybody else can, but after the artist is deceased? That's another thing.

It's a similar situation with those who purchase other people's royalties. I believe at one time Michael Jackson owned some of the Beatles royalties, for instance, and thus received money every time a Beatles record was played. Why should it be possible for people to do that, when they've not contributed artistically to the product? If the royalty system were changed CDs could actually become cheaper.

The trouble is, so much of the copying regulations are trying to shut the door after the horse has bolted. It's as though the industry was taken by surprise when it learned that computers came with CD copiers. Likewise the film industry with DVD copiers. Now the industry wants to stop illegal downloading after the technology to do so has been established and according to those statistics, well used. Had a licensing scheme been introduced and



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Pirate Bay - a site that enables free access to copyrighted material. Still going, in spite of a recent Swedish court ruling against them.

the royalty system been fairer, the industry might have found a higher proportion of legal sales, to everyone's satisfaction.

Melvyn Dover.

It's difficult to gauge the impact of illegal downloading, but now we can download for free from Spotify this at least gives music lovers a way to hear an album before buying it and, I hope, will encourage both sales and musical enjoyment. Apple's iTunes is another way to buy a track rather than fork out for an album, as I still do, then find it's going to join the hundreds played once and never again.

Whilst illegal downloading on a small scale can broaden musical appreciation and encourages sales of worthy albums rather than hyped ones, piracy on a large scale is simply theft, and in most cases it is theft carried out for commercial gain. It appears a benefit to the recipient of the goods, when those goods come cheap or free, but there is a long term cost to us all if it undermines artists. I have no sympathy for Pirate Bay and the 'free' world it supports and find their arrogant attitude distasteful. Similarly, I have seen shopping centres in Malaysia full of ultra cheap CDs and DVDs - and apparently they were all counterfeits. Having bought some thinking they were cheap simply because of exchange rate differences etc., I was shocked to find a few years later that a crack down by Malaysia on piracy closed the lot! So not one of those CD/DVD outlets was selling legally obtained goods. That's the scale of the problem when it gets

out of hand. It's a pity that the music business sullies its image by pursuing individual downloaders through court action when they are not in it for commercial gain and continues to try and sell us a negotiable 'right to listen'. **NK**

The trouble is, we are between a rock and a hard place. On one hand is the music industry, which has been far too complacent, far too keen to protect its (one time) monopoly on the 'manufacture' and sale of music, and far too myopic about what its customers actually wanted from it. Like an old fashioned nationalised industry, it was slow to react, arrogant and out-of-touch. Of course, there were always notable exceptions, but the mainstream non-indie side is guilty as charged, as far as I'm concerned.

However, on the other side, there's no skirting around the issue - downloading music without paying for it is stealing, like walking in to WH Smith and sticking a CD under your jacket. There's simply no room for equivocation about this. The thing is of course that people say, "oh well, it was free, so it's alright really, isn't it?". No it isn't - just as you'd know it was wrong to steal that CD from Smiths if the shop assistant wasn't there watching you, so you should know it's wrong to download an illegally copied music file now. There are two reasons I'm saying this - [a] because it's technically, legally, correct and [b] if you personally choose to selectively opt out of the law (which is what you're doing when you download an illegally copied file), then you won't have music in fifteen years

time. Or rather, we'll have masses of 'Britain's Got Talent' acts, and no credible recording artists - simply because they can no longer afford to live like that...

So we do need to arrive at some kind of consensus where people get used to paying a (modest) fee for music - otherwise all the quality will be driven from the industry, and we'll be looking back at this time in our history as "the music age", when people once considered recorded sound an art form. What that consensus is, or how to get there, I do not know. But we would be very interested to hear from readers on how you would like to listen to and/or buy music in an age where CDs are no longer sold. **DP**

TOP TIP

Recently, I received an Award Winning album, which on first audition was a complete disappointment. I received the LP via the Royal Mail in Vinyl. This was a critically acclaimed work which had been in receipt of world-wide approval. I eagerly opened the package and the sleeve was undamaged (good start). In order to give the LP a right and proper aural examination, I reset the Roksan/

Then it struck me... a simple adjustment and the vibrancy and power of the production was clear. The LP now bounced and clattered along, the difference in the sound from the Acoustic Energy AE1 Mk3s was so immense that I feel it is simply the decent thing to do and pass this on as a Hi-Fi World Top Tip. If on receipt of a recording you feel that there is a lifelessness apparent, look to your turntable, for therein lies the problem: switch the turntable speed to 45rpm rather than the more typical 33rpm. Elbow's 'Seldom Seen Kid' is indeed a vast improvement when played at the recommended speed.

Brian Oakley

I have this problem all the time Brian, especially with 12in singles that play at 33rpm and there's nothing on the label to say so. **NK**

"I THINK I NEED HELP"

A funny thing happened to me on the way out of Richer Sounds, while clutching a new DacMagic to replace my old faithful DacMagic. I saw a second hand CD4 SE in the window for £60. Being in a bit of an impulsive mood and remembering its budget World Classic status I bought that as

better. I was wondering whether I should look to a new power cable for the CD or a better power unit for the DAC to see if there could be extra atmosphere squeezed from these units?

Then I read the excellent Letters page response from Cambridge Audio in your March issue and moved over to my Marantz DVD player. Following his explanation of the filter limitations in using the DacMagic with Red Book CDs I added a Monarchy Audio upsampler and then send a 96kHz signal to the DAC. Result? By spending £400 pound on two extra boxes (plus cables) I can make a £300 DVD player sound as good as a £60 second-hand classic! I then read Noel's column about keeping it simple and wondered whether I was deluding myself?

I think I need help. Perhaps to repent, I have now learned my lesson and having read your magazine for fifteen years I'm sure I must now qualify for specific guidance to bring me back to sanity.

Here we go. Speakers are often very pleasing but with some muddle in complex lower frequencies. Room is stone walled cottage type with 8 foot ceiling perhaps 4x5 just about, there are bookshelves and two sofas. The love of my life is the type who likes simple uncluttered things, likes the speakers for their proportions and as long as they remain close to the wall she is content. The other half has no idea how they sound as she is impaired somewhat in the musical appreciation department.

Musical tastes are around Americana, rock, pop, folk, blues, gospel and a bit of jazz. The question now for me would seem to be: is there a 'speaker which fits the bill in the £500 to £800 bracket or should I postpone instant gratification for the sake of future upgrades and move up a league?

There is a third alternative, to modify the TDLs (I have a crossover spec with suggested upgrades) though reticent due to inherent incompetence with practical type things. Would improved crossover with new tweeters and/or other drive units answer my yearnings? I could find some one to help out if it all gets too technical. Rest assured any suggestions will be followed exactly.

yours,
A Repentant Audio Sinner

The TDL 4s were a bit thick at the bottom end I recall and suspect a pair of Q Acoustics 1050is would go a long way to solving your problems, although they are not balanced for near wall use and may sound a bit bass heavy. KEF iQ50s also give a clean lower end and suit smaller rooms.

NK



Q Acoustics 1050i
- inexpensive but offers a great sound and, with strong bass, can replace a TDL 4.

Ortofon Rondo Bronze, carefully placed the record on the turntable, reached for my Espresso and prepared to be spellbound...

Frankly, I was less than impressed, the vocalist was dreary in the extreme, the production whilst clearly smooth, had a languid, soupy quality, the whole affair was a lifeless clotted dirge. I was at a loss... perhaps the fault was mine, maybe some serial tweaking was in order?

well. Obviously once the new boxes were smuggled into the house and connected up to my Audio Analogue Puccini and TDL4s the experiments started.

I liked the new DAC very much, flexible and very listenable with the downside that while I like the sound everything does seem a bit like it was recorded in the same studio; is that a shortcoming or is it consistency?

The CD4SE by itself is probably just as good and with some music rather

If I were you, I'd spend a little bit of time and money fettling your existing system with decent supports and interconnects. This done, relax and enjoy while you start saving for the big one - a serious pair of speakers. I'd counsel Missing Link Link Cryo Reference interconnect between your Cambridge CD4SE and your Audio Analogue amp, and Chord Odyssey 2 cables going to the speakers. Quadraspire make great supports, but if you don't want a whole new rack then why not invest in an Avid Platform for your CD4SE? Then, clean all the contacts with Kontak, and use a decent mains power lead such as a Silverman Clarity I. You should find the system really begins to sing - then you can upgrade to a pair of speakers in the £2,000 bracket when you've saved up. Come back to us then for advice!
DP

AIM FOR GOAL

I was delighted to read Paul Rigby's article in February's edition, about setting a hi-fi goal and aiming for it. I've been wrestling with exactly this knotty problem myself. I don't want to waste time and money on unnecessary upgrades for small incremental increases in quality, to then find my format of choice is being phased out and having to buy everything again. I've built a pair of speakers with drive units and plans from Commonsense Audio. These I think are superb, by far the best speakers I've ever owned and consequently want to make these the cornerstone around which to build the rest of my system.

My next decision is to opt out of format wars and go to computer audio. As I already have a Mac iBook I intend to focus on Apple Lossless and AAC. This will allow maximum flexibility both at home and mobile. I'm thinking of using a Squeezebox duet as my main source, accessing an Apple time machine loaded with all my CDs in lossless format, and also using it to listen to internet radio.

So far so good I think, so what's the rub, I hear you ask? Well I'm hoping you can help with advice on an amplifier. Previously, I've owned a Sugden A21 which I really enjoyed, and maybe advice on whether or not I need a DAC of some sort? Like Paul Rigby I'm hoping to settle on a system that can meet my current and future requirements, and by accomplishing this save a fortune by avoiding the incremental upgrade route.

Steve Dixon

I do wish readers would give us a budget to work with! Can you imagine someone writing in to a car magazine, saying "hello please recommend me a car - err, that's it?". Given that you were in the

Sugden league before, I guess that a Naim SuperNait won't be out of your price range? This is a clean, punchy but smooth and detailed high end integrated with a built-in DAC, making it ideal for computer audio. Alternatively, you could go back to Sugden and buy an A21 SE. Just a little cheaper at £2,250 it has the clearest, cleanest and most open sound you'll find for this sort of money - although speaker matching is much more of an issue, so your new speakers will have to be reasonably efficient. Also, you'll need a good quality DAC, such as Cambridge Audio's excellent little DAC Magic (£230). **DP**

TUNER TWEAKS

Why does no one make an FM tuner to the quality of the Hitachi FT-5500 II? None of the current FM tuners (mostly DAB/FM combinations) have the same low noise and sensitivity to make the best of what is still a high quality music source - FM radio.

I had this thought after fitting a Wattgate 350i plug and IEC socket to the Hitachi. I had years ago fitted a Bulgin plug to replace the captive lead (I was not very confident of my metal working skills back then), but even this with a Kimber cable, mains noise filter, voltage dependent resistor, damping panels to the case and gold phono sockets brought the tuner to life. The sound opened out with a spacious image, good depth, detail and bass. I noticed recently that Russ Andrews were offering for hire an IEC socket punch to make the rectangular hole for an IEC socket and Wattgate. I thought that the quality of the Wattgate compared to the Bulgin plug would produce a further improvement. This modification produced more of the same, a wider detailed image against a quieter background with more obvious bass. A more realistic

against the Hitachi at nearly 80dB (almost the theoretical maximum) with a sensitivity to capture weak signals to make the most of a station. It also has an excellent signal strength meter to discriminate between the strongest signals. Yet inside it looks nothing special, without any exotic components, fairly standard for twenty years ago. What is the reason that no one is attempting the same standard or better now, cost, a small market, or lack of interest by manufactures or all of these?

A good web site for FM tuners is Restoration@AbSoundLabs.Com who recently helped me replace a battery in the Hitachi to retain station memory.

**Peter Graves
Hartlepool**

Ah, the long discontinued Hitachi FT-5500. It was a fantastic performer, a gem spewed out by a massive Japanese company that in the past even produced audio chips, but now you'll find the name most commonly on earth moving equipment! All the same, it had a somewhat grey, flat sound like a lot of 1970s product, but this can be cured by upgrading the audio stages, (see www.fmtunerinfo.com/FT-5500MKIImod.pdf). One day I will do this to mine, which I still treasure.

Isn't it sad that a thoroughly good radio transmission system like VHF/FM has to be swept away on whimsy. DAB was purposed to reach cars effectively, where most radio listening is done, so the BBC decided to sacrifice the vast static radio market for this end. This has hardly given manufacturers confidence in the future of the VHF/FM market, because it has confused the buying public with talk that VHF/FM was to be made obsolete, severely suppressing sales.

Nowadays, what we need for



Hitachi FT-5500 MkII tuner - a fantastic performer, but with a 1970s sound unless tweaked, says Noel.

sound, all from a tuner twenty years old! Yes, Russ Andrews there is also a burn in period even with an IEC socket and Wattage as the tuner sounded worse and better at the same time when first switched on after the modification, but has improved rapidly since.

So my question. Why is the performance of tuners only so so? Usually noise figures are around 70dB, some a little better at 72 or 73dB,

better VHF/FM is Software Defined Radio, which could give even better results than the Hitachi, Radioscape modules have shown me (see www.radioscape.com), but I suspect the broadcast establishment has convinced itself VHF/FM is archaic and worthless for no other reason than it was conceived a long time ago - and we all know that if it's old, it's rubbish, don't we? **NK**

Kind of Zu



Just as the name suggests, the Essence captures the spirit of Zu Audio's charismatic loudspeaker line, says Noel Keywood...

It looks different - and it is. Zu's new Essence loudspeaker comes with its own view of what is important in loudspeakers and treads its own particular path. I'm reminded of the Daily Mail's verdict on the Sex Pistols here: number one in a field of one! But Zu loudspeakers are in a field of two, first laid out by Lowther. The lightweight, Lowther coated paper cone with parasitic centre cone is something of a cult item around the world. They pop up to haunt me in obscure corners of the Far East, where the Lowther religion seems to have a strong hold. Dropping into a dealer in the fierce midday heat of Penang I'm greeted with the sight of Lowthers, and a cheery "you like Lowthers?" simply because my gaze fell on them. Playing the polite Englishman I say, "yes, of course" and hope we can speak about something else. But I liked the Sex Pistols, irrespective of what the Daily Mail thought of them - and you may like the Zu Essences too!

The Essence is purposed to fulfil the promise of a Lowther, namely to provide a simple, efficient loudspeaker that needs little power and delivers a very fast, engaging sound - rather than the often ponderous gait of so many big speakers that seemingly become bogged down and dynamically smothered. To this end Zu make their own, large paper cone drive units, having a chunky, industrial appearance, played up by the fixed central aluminium phase plug, coarse surface black cones and basket, topped by a punched metal grill that hides little of what it covers. At the centre of the main cone is fixed a smaller 'parasitic' cone, there to radiate sound direct from the voice coil when the main cone mechanically decouples at high frequencies, unable to follow fast accelerations. It's an old idea, found most famously on Lowthers, and is in effect a mechanical crossover network.

That's the idea anyway. In practice these systems are designed on simple basic principles and give uneven results, not helped by using an inconsistent material like paper. What makes me wince with Lowthers is their ragged treble: it's very sharp and zingy, does violins no favours and can be quite piercing. Yet it is projective and without an overpowering sense of general treble excess you do get to hear metallic percussion instruments like cymbals and triangles within a dense mix, seemingly lifted out in a fashion that defies other

loudspeakers - and the Zu Essence manages this well too.

The Essence main drive unit reaches 3kHz, a lower limit than the Lowthers I have measured, so Zu add a ribbon treble unit that, like most ribbons, kicks in at 6kHz. On axis, it provides flat output up to 20kHz, but it is so far from the parasitic cone that there inevitable phase cancellations and what you hear depends upon head height, although they integrate reasonably well at a distance, I found.

Unlike, say, quasi-point source KEF Uni-Q units, the Essence is sensitive to listening position and I took this into account when positioning and listening to them. I preferred them when tilted back on their spikes, which strengthened high frequency output. Although they seemingly snap into focus, as the ear hears it, at a specific position the large measured dip in their frequency response remained fairly obvious, softening Sade's vocals in 'Smooth Operator', for example, bringing a small sense of fluffiness to the outline of words and a softening of her delivery. But because of the tweeter's presence the sound isn't dull; quite the reverse, upper treble sparkles as usual from a ribbon and this doesn't go unnoticed, for the ribbon unit is quite obvious in what is doing.

I like to relate sound to a loudspeaker's technology and measured performance, guided by our Clio measurement system, on-going input from loudspeaker engineers and my interest in the subject.

But back to the physical side of the Zu. In keeping with the philosophy of light-touch, full range paper cone drive units this one is connected directly to the amplifier, Zu say. The idea is that nothing will get in the way to degrade the sound, especially the usual inductor that feeds bass units and compromises electrical damping. But as Laurie

Fincham of KEF pointed out, that still leaves acoustic and magnetic damping to control the cone, and the Essence bass unit is quite well damped acoustically. This gives the big cabinet comparatively light bass unless the Essences are moved back close to a rear wall. Then I found they needed turning in to fire at me direct, and happily this positioning accords with that suggested in the handbook. Bass then became solid and deep and was in good balance with the rest of the frequency range. Thunderous subsonics are not there, but this helps bass lines sound quite spry. Zu have had to use a large cabinet to get the light paper cone to go low, so the Essence isn't small, standing 125cms tall, 30.5cms wide and deep and weighing 30kgs. It's twenty five percent higher than the average 1m floorstander, so it has visual and physical presence, but near wall placement counteracts this to a great extent, so the cabinet doesn't eat living space.

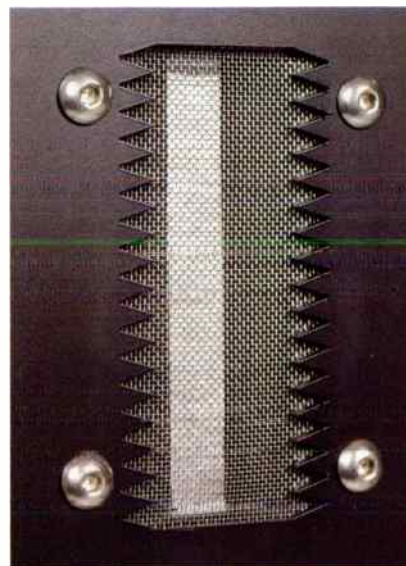
The Essence has a reflex port in its base, and it fires out through foam that provides a measure of acoustic damping. Floor ports offer quite good results I find, those once used by Castle Acoustics being early exemplars.

The rear panel carries an unusual spade clamp, for the American market where spades are popular, not 4mm banana plugs as used elsewhere. This clamp will accept 4mm plugs but it is an inelegant way of handling them.

As this is in essence a single driver loudspeaker, with a tweeter fill-in, biwiring is not on offer. With an overall impedance value that measured out at 12 Ohms the Essence is a very light load that draws little current, helping under-utilised solid-state amplifiers run cool, and valve amps to work with alacrity. The Essence is ideal for low power single-ended (SE) amplifiers, and the 9Watts or so available from a typical 300B SE is ideal, unless you want to run a disco. I used our Icon Audio MB845 valve amps as usual, fed directly by Stello DA-100 DAC for CD and Eastern Electric Minimax valve phono stage for LP, fed by an Ortofon Cadenza Bronze MC cartridge.

SOUND QUALITY

As I have already explained, measured limitations are quite obvious in use, but this doesn't explain it *all* by any means. Let's take an unlikely candidate for the loudspeaker: 'Mars', from Holt's 'Planets'. As expected strings were edgy and a little coarse, over lit and over obvious. But I was suitably impressed the way horns



rasped out and - especially - how single kettle drum strikes bounced out of the speakers with well described timing and firm impact. In that kettle drums in this recording usually murmur politely somewhere in the background with other loudspeakers, the Essences showed they could perform sonic feats beyond most rivals. As 'Mars' draws to a conclusion, the orchestra's final recurring passages, or *ritornelli*, had a terminating impact that was outstanding, clearly drawing a line at the end of the movement. The Essence may not be a smoothie, but my goodness it has an extraordinary ability to lift music up by the scruff of the neck, give it life and find its meaning in so doing.

On an altogether different tack, but in similar vein, Sly and Robbie's 'Make 'Em Move' thundered along nicely through the Essences, again a little spiky and forceful up top it seemed, but with a well defined bass line from Mr Shakespeare. When the tempo suddenly changes halfway through the track, however, the Essences resolved these changes with massive grip and incredible resolution, making for a heart





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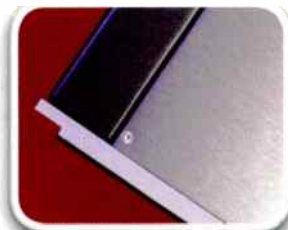
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VERDICT ●●●●



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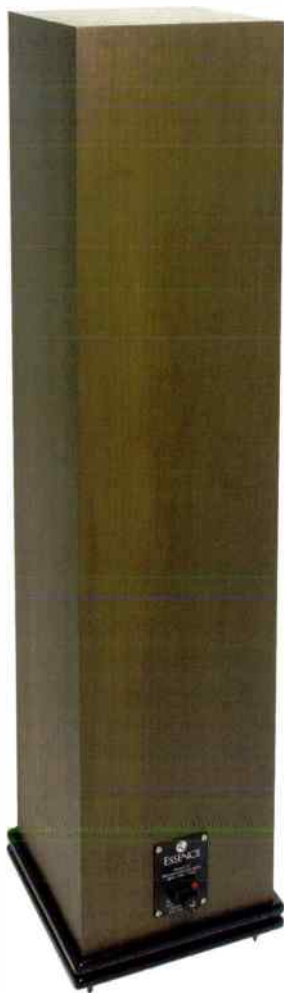
David Price, Hi-Fi World July 09

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VERDICT ●●●●

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World Radio History



"it's not a smoothie, but the Zu has an extraordinary ability to lift music up by the scruff of the neck, give it life and find its meaning in so doing..."

magnetism-free loudspeakers, I wheeled out my almost new, for archives only, Jimi Hendrix box set, recut onto new 180gm vinyl. With the extraordinary advantage of grooves being read by a brand new Ortofon Cadenza Bronze moving coil cartridge, I listened to Jimi Hendrix apologising to the audience before playing 'Wind Cries Mary', with a life and freshness as if the recording had been made yesterday. What followed was incredible, a live session that sounded better than the best you can hear on vinyl today - and I thought old Hendrix recordings were pretty mediocre in quality (based on my original LPs).

The Essences worked with LP extremely well, and with a decent front end plus a valve amp inbetween, showed that they were able to put Hendrix back on stage in a way that had me more than impressed - I was all but amazed. Noel Redding's bass line was clear as a bell, a steady thud from Mitch Mitchell's kick drum was there in strength, and Jimi's voice was full bodied, supremely clear and very crisp. Taken from live microphones, there was a great sense of atmosphere and even the audience, although whooping and hollering (obviously a US recording!) were clearly differentiated and kept well apart from the band. This performance alone hoisted the Essences well up the scale of enjoyment, close to decent large Tannoys, and although they are not as able as Yorkminsters, the Yorkies do cost £9k - and are covered in Tygan!

So the Zu

Essences are an *unusual* proposition. Acceptably accurate in spite of the Rhondda Valley making an appearance in their response trace, they may not be the smoothest operators but they bring extraordinary life to music and are a beguiling experience, one that draws you right into the music. I ended up quite amazed by them in many ways. Very left field, perhaps, and expensive too, but purposed and able to find the soul of a musical performance and lay it out before you. In conclusion then: flawed but amazing. A very exciting listen; No 1 in a field of two.

stopping experience. With organ hovering clearly between the loudspeakers within a lively ambience, 'Make 'Em Move' fulfilled its promise: it made me move, through the Essences - and I have to say they manage better than most here. Good with Reggae then!

'Rockferry' was a little muddled and coarse, and 'Warwick Avenue' from Duffy's 'Rockferry' CD, revealed some nasality and cuppiness to her voice, as well as the slight softening of upper harmonics I have already mentioned. Intelligibility was good all the same: Duffy's lilting Welsh tones were nicely conveyed and I could hear every nuance in her delivery. Svelte definitely not, but gripping and exciting definitely...

It got better with LP, 'Rockferry' sounding more dimensional and atmospheric than the CD, the Essences highlighting differences between the media. Amy Winehouse's 'You Know I'm No Good' fairly bounced along, supported by a firm, fluid bass line, gentle but well etched interjections from saxophone and even a nice, clear rendition of the words "chips and ale" - bless her romantic heart! - that most loudspeakers miss.

Sensing a very strong ability to put the life back into music that so often has the life drawn from it by solid-state amplifiers feeding

VERDICT ●●●●

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FOR

- 'seat of the pants' sound
- extended treble
- featherweight load

AGAINST

- lacks smoothness
- midband warmth
- cuppy colouration

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The large, light paper cone is super efficient, as light cones are, but needs a large box behind it to go low - hence the size of the Essence. Sensitivity measured a massive 91dB from one nominal watt (2.8V) of input - and with an impedance of 12 Ohms the Essence in truth draws a real 0.65 Watts to achieve this high volume. As a load then, it is a featherweight, making it ideal for low power amplifiers in particular. Just a few Watts will make the Essences go loud.

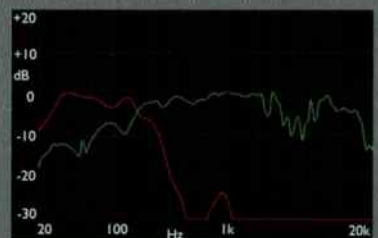
The bass/midrange unit is loaded by a foam damped floor port that excites a room's vertical mode strongly, giving support to upper bass frequencies. Port output is broad and well damped our response graph shows (red trace) and centred at 45Hz. The impedance curve reflects this and also shows an impedance curve that stays above 10 Ohms over most of the audio band.

The Essence gives widely varying frequency response with measuring microphone position. The bass/midrange, with its parasitic centre cone reaches 3kHz and the ribbon tweeter works from 6kHz upward, as most ribbon tweeters do. There's a dip of around -6dB between the two, as our frequency response analysis shows, its precise characteristics varying with microphone/ ear position due to phase cancellations, attributable to the distance of the tweeter from the parasitic cone. Listened to on-axis, the tweeter extends up to 20kHz, but from below its output rolls away steadily above 10kHz. The Essence is relatively smooth and even across most of the audio band though, from 150Hz up to 3kHz, and this will usefully contribute to overall perceived sound quality. Bass

distortion was very low, below 1% at 40Hz and the port 4% at this frequency, so bass should sound clean. The decay spectrum was clean too, lacking overhangs, so this is a loudspeaker free from colouration too.

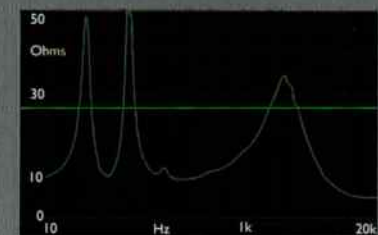
The Essence is a modern attempt to exploit the properties of a lightweight paper cone bass/midrange with parasitic cone and static phase plug. Tweeter integration is poor and high frequency response erratic as a result, but otherwise the Essence will have a fast, clean and distinctive sound that will make it attractive, especially to single-ended valve amplifier aficionados who tend to favour such loudspeakers. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDANCE





Sub Size

Cambridge Audio's new Sonata mini-system packs the punch of full size separates hi-fi in half the space, says Paul Rigby...

I wouldn't relish the task that faced the design team at Cambridge Audio, co-ordinated by Technical Director Matthew Bramble. The brief was to create a mini-system for those with a discerning musical palate, one that was the solution to that interminable question, "just because my hi-fi is small, why does it sound terrible?"

"Low-priced products can be bought off the shelf," said Bramble but, and this was his problem, they were packed with components where, "some other designer has done the work. Yes, you can influence it and the resultant mini-system can be a pretty good performer but you have no real control over the internal components, there will always be compromises. We don't like to do that, we like to implement our own ideas, creating our own components and including our own house sound."

That meant the design team at Cambridge creating their own amplifier mains transformer, building their own tuner chip, putting together their own CD transport, and more. What Bramble and his team have produced therefore, is a modular mini system comprising

matching separates that span 285x270x60mm, available in black or silver. The heart of the system, the DR30, is a 2.1 receiver featuring a 40W amplifier and DAB tuner with RDS (a FM/AM-only tuner version, the AR30, is also available as an alternative). The similarly sized CD30 CD player can also be joined by a DVD player (not reviewed here), the DV30. The little lot is topped off by a pair of lightweight Sirocco S30 bookshelf speakers, available in oak and black and measuring 225x160x225mm.

Featuring a simple yet effective display, the DR30 is adorned only with the essential controls such as a source selector, headphones socket, MP3 socket for non-Apple products and, on the rear, speaker binding posts (as opposed to the usual, basic spring-loaded affairs often seen on mini systems), a Record Out for a tape deck, a Sub Out to

enhance CD or iPod play, plus a Sub In socket to access the low frequency affects channel on a video DVD. There's also room to plug in the included iPod dock.

Internally, the DR30 features a custom-made toroidal transformer, as opposed to the more commonplace EI model found in this audio category. The toroidal, says Bramble, produces, "less flux leakage, meaning that it distorts the waveform much less." The upshot is that this transformer introduces less noise into the system. It also enhances signal regulation promising more 'oomph' in the bass region. Cambridge has included custom-made ICs for input switching and for volume changes.



"Sometimes it's worth commissioning something because you can get it made exactly as you want it: taking out the bits you don't need and then get the price as low as you can. We were able to have a bespoke chip which is better quality for the facilities we wanted to utilise," said Bramble.

"the Sonata proves that, while physical size may be reduced, attendant sound quality doesn't have to be compromised..."

The same philosophy extended to the CD player which, alongside the basic external controls and rear ports plus, internally, the Wolfson 8716 DAC features a new CD transport tweaked to perform with audio CDs (as opposed to a cheaper, computer-type drive aimed at accessing computer data). The Cambridge model comprises a simple drive, laser head and motors along with a new-build servo and specially written control software. Cambridge is proud of the new drive and its relatively low jitter rate of around 300 picoseconds compared to other mini-systems whose jitter can be high.

This is down to the company's separation of the noise from the power supply and the digital noise from the DAC. "We minimise it via filtering and multiple regulators," said Bramble. "When a DAC runs, there has to be a threshold when a decision is made to say that a particular musical signal is either a 1 or a 0. In fact, there will be a small voltage created just before that decision is made either way. Intrusive noise from the power supply can affect that critical 'decision point' voltage. It's this that creates the jitter as the moment when the 'decision point' is reached is altered. Even though that change is just picoseconds, that alteration has a measurable effect on the sound output."

The Cambridge-badged loudspeakers were designed by Mordaunt Short's Graham Foy. Created to produce a dynamic, punchy sound, the Sirocco S30s feature a small, sturdily braced cabinet and a woven, composite 4.5in bass/mid cone alongside a soft cone, dome tweeter. Each driver was created via a menu of standard components which were then forged especially for the S30s and tuned to match the simple crossover which,

said Bramble, "encourages a natural roll-off." The aim being to improve midrange performance.

SOUND QUALITY

As you'd expect for a system of this type, set-up is pretty straightforward. However, the Sirocco S30 speakers are best stand mounted and

positioned close to the wall, around 8cm away to enhance bass. Toeing in, however, is flexible and depends on the room. I would encourage experimentation.

Loading up the Sugababes' 'Stronger' from 'Angels With Dirty Faces' I was immediately struck by two principal points. Firstly, the Sonata is eminently civilised without compromising any single facet of the overall sound. So, despite the damaging, inherent excessive peak limiting on the CD, the grating sibilance had gone whilst the harsh upper mid frequencies had been tamed. Vocals were also coated with a velvet-like presentation that was most agreeable. Lower bass was largely absent, whilst upper bass was surprisingly taut and full for such a small speaker, which reminded me, somewhat, of Spendor's S3/SRs.

The other noticeable feature was the spacious, airy character of the soundstage which was also reflected in Carol Kidd's 'A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square'. The resultant presentation was considered and unhurried, allowing the players time to compose themselves. This track also highlighted admirable upper mid detail, especially via the double bass string resonances – a difficult frequency band to master.

The Sonata proved adept at slight-of-hand, its inherent musicality, for example, successfully masking the lack of treble extension on cymbals and a slight forwardness of the treble at high volume.

More mid-detail was derived from Can's 'Yoo Doo Right' from 'Monster Movie' where Irmin Schmidt's nasal keyboard subtleties are often masked beneath guitar and drums. Not here. Also, the attendant iPod dock, a well made addition,

may have suffered from a slightly 'thin' sound but, again, that incisive midrange certainly compensated.

Finally, the tuner was a bit of a Curate's Egg. Testing it via a roof mounted aerial, the FM radio was a little cumbersome to use. Manual station selection was slow and unwieldy while, due to the poor sensitivity of the FM facility, only one local BBC station was found on the automatic scan. Every other station, whilst offering a relatively rich and full mid/bass performance when compared to DAB, suffered from excessive hiss. So this feature works best in areas of high signal strength, near a transmitter.

Although the inherent bitrate problems of DAB meant that the music became tiresome over extended periods at higher volumes, the general performance was excellent providing a clean and vibrant presentation with Radio 4's 'Gardeners' Question Time' sounding particularly fresh, benefitting from the Sonata's naturally airy sound stage.



CONCLUSION

For such a compact and inexpensive system, the new Cambridge Audio Sonata packs a large punch. The attention to detail showed in its design and construction has resulted in a system that displays an excellent CD performance via a fine amplifier mated and well matched loudspeakers. It is of course ideal for small rooms but, due to its relatively powerful amplifier, able to drive medium sized spaces, the Sonata proves that, while physical size may be reduced, attendant sound quality doesn't have to be compromised.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Chord Anthem 2 interconnects
Chord Epic Twin loudspeaker cables
Atacama Equinox XLPro SE Hifi Rack
Atacama HMS 1 stands

VERDICT

Super little system with serious sound from diminutive dimensions.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO

SONATA CD30	£199.95
DR30 2.1	£349.95
SIROCCO S30	£149.99

Cambridge Audio

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FOR

- super CD performance
- incisive midrange
- design and engineering

AGAINST

- so-so FM sensitivity
- slightly restricted treble

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Here's your chance to win one of our favourite sub-£1,000 phono stages, that so impressed David Price in his review in April 2009's *Hi-Fi World*. Here's what he said...

"Alex Nikitin's work is very well known within the industry, and highly respected too. As chief engineer for Creek Electronics for the best part of the nineties, he played a big part in the success of that company – and duly helped bring high quality sound to those on a budget. "I came up with an idea of a very simple phono preamplifier design, using an unusual transistor type for amplification. There are only three transistors per channel in the Kora 3T circuit using a local negative feedback in a single-ended Class A circuit with a

passive EQ in a single stage voltage amplification arrangement. I first built this circuit as not more than proof of a concept, however my biggest surprise was when I had a listen. The sound quality of this circuit rivals most elaborated solid state designs", Alex told me. The £775 Kora 3T Ltd. is hand made to order only, with tightly toleranced capacitors and Holco resistors throughout, Black Gate bias capacitors, and ultra low noise PSU and a red LED. It comes in a little black box (48x91x133mm) and weighs under a kilo.

This phono stage is in a gang of one at the price by being very smooth and understated. Rather than etching the midband detail onto your cranium as you listen – which is the path that a number of so-called high performance rivals tread – the Kora

was very subtle, soft and beguiling. In a well balanced high end system, the result is dynamite, because you can listen right in to the mix, enjoying the Kora 3T's delicate nature and that of the music itself. Steely Dan's 'Glamour Professional' was a joy; this is a bright and snappy recording but oozing detail, and it veritably flooded forth. I found a wonderfully energetic, rolling bassline that started and stopped just as it should, wonderfully sonorous hi-hats that were given all the sheen they deserved, and a fluid and engaging midband that hardly suffered any loss of definition over the twice-as-expensive Icon Audio PS3. This is an exceptional phono stage – both at the price and in its own right. It's not quite as sweet, euphonic or beguiling as the very best money can buy, but like every great 'affordable audiophile' product gives much of that high end magic at a far more realistic price".

For a chance to win this great phono stage, just answer the following four easy questions. Send your entries on a postcard only by 31st July 2009 to: **August 2009 Competition, Hi-Fi World magazine, Unit G4, Argo House, The Park Business Centre, Kilburn Park Road, London NW6 5LF.**

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- MULTIPLE ENTRIES WILL BE AUTOMATICALLY DISQUALIFIED
- PURCHASE OF THE MAGAZINE IS NOT A PRE-CONDITION OF ENTRY
- NO CORRESPONDENCE WILL BE ENTERED INTO
- THE EDITOR'S DECISION IS FINAL
- NO EMPLOYEES OF AUDIO PUBLISHING LIMITED, OR OF ANY COMPANIES ASSOCIATED WITH THE PRODUCTION OR DISTRIBUTION OF THE PRIZES, MAY ENTER

QUESTIONS

[1] Who did Alex Nikitin work for in the 1990s?
 [a] Naim Audio
 [b] Meridian
 [c] Creek Electronics
 [d] Arcam

[2] How is the Kora built?
 [a] mass produced
 [b] by robots
 [c] hand made
 [d] on a production line

[3] What colour case does it have?
 [a] blue
 [b] green
 [c] black
 [d] amber

[4] How much does it weigh?
 [a] over 3kg
 [b] precisely 5kg
 [c] "under a kilo"
 [d] less than 100g

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A beautifully simple stereo headphone amplifier design using Mullard ECL83 valves. It works directly from any source. The circuit uses twin high specification E/I output transformers that can be switched to drive any headphones between 16 to 300 Ohms.

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WD25A Standmount Speaker Kit

"The one aspect that stands out is the easy ability to resolve instruments and voices ... bass quality and definition is a revelation"

Cabinet kit (pair) £349

The aperiodic enclosure offers the bass clarity and definition of a larger closed box, together with the efficiency and easy amplifier load necessary for users of valve amplifiers. Available with SEAS STD soft dome treble unit, or high performance SEAS Millennium treble unit.

WD25A STD kit (pair) £269

WD25A EX kit (pair) £699



WD25T Floorstanding Speaker Kit

"The WD25T always sounds crisp and taut, but can 'rumble' menacingly giving impressive physicality reminiscent of far larger boxes. Imaging is superb, the midband is also special; it's very open with masses of detail about the condition of the recording"

Cabinet kit (pair) £549

Cunningly arranged as an aperiodic enclosure leading to a lower sealed compartment, the WD25T combines the optimum damping of aperiodic loading with the bass extension of a large closed box. Available with STD soft dome or high performance Excel treble units.

Both the WD25 kits are based around a SEAS 26cm (10") paper cone bass unit with an efficiency of 89dB for 1W. The crossover has been developed for an easy drive 6 - 8 Ohm load making the system ideal for all types of amplifiers.

WD25Tv2 STD kit (pair) £329

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Flow Smart

Avanti Flow is Pure Digital's second Wi-Fi Internet radio product, following the launch of the sophisticated Evoke Flow late last year. Steve Green tunes in...

This is billed by Pure as "a complete connected tabletop digital audio system", and that's a fair description given its large size (385x125x225mm), the sizeable claimed 75W output power, and because it sports an iPod dock as well as allowing owners to stream music stored on their computers. The Avanti also supports DAB, FM with RDS, and is upgradeable to DAB+.

The Avanti comes very solidly built, and its design is attractive and modern thanks largely to the excellent yellow-on-black 128x64 resolution OLED display, which shows five lines of text at a time. Initial setup was quick and easy, albeit that it required me to register the device on Pure's The Lounge website. The Lounge website was also the place where you can enter your favourite Internet radio stations, on-demand streams and podcasts, so that they appear in the favourites menu on the device itself.

In operation, the menu structure on the Avanti could have been more intuitive, but the long and thin remote control did have buttons to take you to the most commonly used menus. It was quite fiddly to press the up/down buttons without pressing the select button though, which was quite annoying as these were the most-pressed buttons on the remote. Controlling an iPod via the remote control was very easy. Pure didn't exactly make learning how to control the iPod intuitive at first though, because to navigate backwards through the iPod's menus you had to press the 'options' button, not the 'back' button!

The Avanti worked reliably with Pure's own Flowserver UPnP music server (which supports PC and Mac), although it had an on/off relationship with Windows Media Player 11's UPnP server. The media player itself was excellent. There were dedicated buttons on the remote to control playback, tracks could be fast-forward or reversed at two different speeds, and tracks available on the

server could be searched for by entering the first few letters of the title, album or artist, although entering the text was a slow affair. Internet radio stations could also be searched for in a similar way.

Wi-Fi reception quality and range were both good, and Internet streams were very reliable, although streams took quite a long time to start playing. There were also a few other outstanding issues. Pure hasn't implemented Microsoft's 'Intellistream' technology yet, for instance, which means that the 128kbps WMA streams from many of the bigger UK commercial radio stations are only played back at 32kbps, so the quality is far worse than it could be. And despite the manual claiming that the MP3, WMA (up to v9), AAC, WAV, MP2 and Real Audio formats were supported, the media player couldn't play AAC files unless they'd been encoded using iTunes, and it wouldn't play MP2 or WMAv9 files at all. Thankfully, these issues can all be resolved because the firmware on Wi-Fi radios can be upgraded over the Internet, but it's a bit disappointing that Pure hasn't managed to at least implement Intellistream yet. Some good news, though, is that the BBC's WMA Internet radio streams are now available for Wi-Fi radios, and these are at higher quality than on DAB.

DAB reception quality was average, as there was occasional bubbling mud sounds on the weakest DAB multiplex I can receive, but the other multiplexes were received reliably. FM reception was very poor, although this is the case on virtually all products that also include DAB. The Avanti provided 30 presets for DAB and 10 for FM. On the back of the unit there was a 3.5mm auxiliary input to allow playback from MP3 players, a headphone socket, and



a small USB socket for upgrades, although firmware upgrades are normally delivered via Wi-Fi.

The Avanti is vying to compete with micro systems rather than with Wi-Fi or DAB portable radios, and as such its sound quality stood up well to the competition, albeit that the sound itself is very different to that on a typical micro system. On the downside, the stereo imaging is lost to a large degree due to the speakers being so close together. But on the plus side, the Avanti's use of a subwoofer gave the sound much greater depth and presence. Also, at the Avanti's £240 price point, the sound provided by similarly-priced micro systems tends to have significant flaws of one kind or another, whereas the only negative thing to say about the Avanti's sound was that it was occasionally a little constrained due to the small size of its forward-facing speakers.

Other than that, the Avanti provided fine levels of detail and precision, the treble was good, and due to its use of a subwoofer the sound was anything but thin. I also find that the sound on small systems that use a subwoofer tends to be very engaging to listen to, and the Avanti was no exception, although the subwoofer itself wasn't the best I've heard to date.

Overall then, assuming that Pure will address the outstanding issues in the near future, the Avanti would make an admirable second system, and it is a strong competitor to similarly priced micro systems.

VERDICT

This package is impressive all round, and definitely worth considering as an alternative to a micro system.

PURE AVANTI FLOW £240

Pure Digital

+44 (0)845 1489001

www.pure.com

FOR

- fine sound
- diverse range of radio
- excellent display

AGAINST

- some unresolved issues
- fiddly remote control
- unintuitive menu system

The Globbies

It's that time of the year again! David Price and Adam Smith take a slightly askance look at the wonderful world of hi-fi separates in the past year, and hand out the industry's most coveted awards. Well, sort of...

THE 'RETRO REAPPEARANCE' AWARD

It cannot have escaped anyone's notice that retro is in. Everywhere you look, people are walking around decked out in eighties clobber, the charts are full of old bands settling their differences and reforming, and the car industry seems awash with blasts from the past. Not all of these are a success of course, as for every cute and stylish Fiat 500 there is a rather half-hearted and blobby re-badged Volkswagen Golf called the Beetle. This technological reminiscence has not escaped the hi-fi industry either, but on the whole it has been rather more successful. And for us, the crowning glory has to be the relaunch of the Musical Fidelity A1 integrated amplifier. The original was a surprise and the new one even more so, particularly after MF's pronouncements that power, power and more power was where true hi-fi nirvana was at. Still, the new A1 is a blinder. Okay, so maybe the volume control buttons blot its copybook ever so slightly, but nonetheless we love it, and we're delighted to see it back! AS



THE 'WHAT ON EARTH IS THAT THEN?' AWARD

Think about it. With the possible exception of some classic late seventies Bang & Olufsen separates, one instinctively knows what any given piece of hi-fi is. Tuners have dials or digits to tell you the frequency, plus a tuning knob or buttons to change it. Amplifiers have heatsinks or case ventilation. CD players have drawer recesses or slots for discs. Turntables have... well, you get the idea. But what of this odd box of tricks? The trouble with Linn's Sneaky DS is that it looks like two isolation stands stuck together with a Linn badge in the middle. Worse still, just like a PlayStation, you can turn it on its side. Ermm, what is that about? With no knobs or sliders to give the game away, this product's problem is that you wouldn't want one unless you knew what it was. And even if you did want one, then you wouldn't lie awake at night dreaming about its delicious form. Worse still, even if you do know it's a network music player, then you might not actually know what one of those is in the first place. It's a brilliant product, but doesn't half confuse the natives - bring back cassette decks, all is forgiven! DP



THE 'POWER MUNCHER' AWARD

As the phrase "eco-friendly" becomes ever more prevalent, it's true to say that few facets of life in general have escaped the spectre of environmental awareness. The resources that run our entire world are finite, so it makes sense to be careful with them, but the trouble is this doesn't always fit with the home entertainment industry. Plasma televisions suck more juice than their old cathode ray forbears, and valve amplifiers are hardly paragons of efficiency. As a result, many companies are pursuing the efficient loud-speaker/digital amplifier route to combine quality with environmental friendliness. Not so Kingsound, however! Storming into the market with some full-range electrostatics, the Prince IIs are marvelous news, but the downside is their efficiency (or lack thereof). 73dB is frankly rubbish, and means that serious amplification will be needed - the sort that will dim your house lights when you turn it on! Crank 'em up, Doris! AS



THE 'RECORD BREAKER' AWARD

We at Hi-Fi World have a lot of equipment pass through our clutches, and some of it is rather fragile. On the other hand, there is equipment that is built like a tank and would probably survive anything - I've heard a rumour that you can take an SME V, drive over it a few times, then use it to whack in a few fence posts in the garden and it still won't have as much as a paint chip on it. And no, I'm not going to put this to the test... This was in my mind when I encountered Jonathan Monks of Keith Monks Record Cleaning Machines fame at the Bristol Hi-Fi Show this year, and he was telling me how someone had caused one of his machines to grind to a halt for the first time that he knows of, in over forty years of manufacture! Apparently, our very own Editor, Mr. David Price [who he? Ed.] had been so engrossed in making the most of this superb machine that, in his own words, he "merely cleaned so many records with so little concern for the state of the cotton thread running up the suction arm, that it... ermm... all sort of got a bit stuck". Rumours that the waste fluid jar had to be sent to Sellafield for decontamination are, as yet, unconfirmed. AS

THE 'MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN' AWARD

Some things in life were never meant to come together. Oil and water, for one example, MPs and honest expense claims for another, and anyone who has tried combining a dirty cat with bath water will know that the results can be very messy indeed. The same rules apply in hi-fi as well – turntables simply don't work as in-car audio (although, believe me, I've tried...), you can't obtain good results from loudspeakers if they're acting as pot plant stands as well and naturally, valve amplifiers and A/V systems are two opposites that can never attract. Interestingly however, it appears that no-one told our intrepid publisher Noel about the last one, otherwise I'm sure he would have had second thoughts about plugging Onkyo's monster all-singing, all-dancing solid-state multichannel AV preamp, the PR-SC886, into a pair of Quad II-Eighty valve power amps, but plug them in he did! And do you know, the sky didn't fall in, the portal to hell didn't open and Noel didn't find himself enveloped in a solid state black hole. In fact all that happened was music; very good music, too! Once again, Hi-Fi World hurdles technological boundaries and comes up trumps! AS



THE 'MAGIC TOUCH' AWARD

It saddens me to say this, but what's obvious to all Japanese companies goes over the head of many of their British equivalents. You know, the touchy, feely thing - the physical, visceral sensation of using hi-fi. In the seventies, when many UK companies (with some notable exceptions) were making electronics with all the aesthetic and tactile appeal of a biscuit tin, the Japanese were making far more average sounding products that felt like a little piece of perfection. From the massive high end Marantz receivers to entry level Pioneer cassette decks, they all worked with rifle-bolt precision and came immaculately well presented. A stark reminder of this was when I reviewed the new EAT Forte turntable - complete with its magnificent Ikeda tonearm. Here was something that looked rather old hat - lacking the 'stealth bomber' sex appeal of an SME Series V, for example. But taking the headshell's fingerlift between finger and thumb, and hand cueing the cartridge on to the disc was the most lovely sensation I've had without a icy pint of Kronenbourg in my right hand on a sweltering summer's eve. The Ikeda just feels gorgeous - even the dizzy heights of the brilliant SME don't surpass what must be one of the very best built tonearms ever. Silky as a silkworm on something very silky, sliding down a Teflon coated ski-slope - it is sublime! DP



THE 'OUR LOSS IS THEIR GAIN' AWARD



When I opened a press release from Andy Giles Associates recently, to find the face of our very own Peter Comeau smiling back at me, I was rather taken aback. Of course, the reason is, as Noel mentioned last month, Peter has taken a job as Director of Acoustic Design for IAG in China and will be overseeing a whole host of new products for their companies, including Wharfedale and Mission. Naturally we're all very sad indeed to wave a farewell to him as he heads off East but we wish him all the very best and feel glad for IAG that they will be taking on one of the most capable and nicest people in the industry. So Peter, this award's for you, and if you feel like jumping on the retro bandwagon I mentioned earlier and resuscitating the 1980s Mission 780 Argonauts, I'll have the first pair please. In eighties grey 'Light Ash', naturally. AS

THE 'PICK YOUR JAW OFF THE FLOOR' AWARD

To be brutally frank, Compact Disc players are not sexy things - certainly if you've spent more years than you'd care to mention basking in the lavish beauty of classic turntables, complete with their shiny Perspex, polished brass and sandblasted aluminium structures, magnesium diecast tonearms and cartridges fashioned from the exotic woods of the Oomba Boomba tree, indigenous to only one corner of a distant Micronesian island... Well, Oracle's CD1500 mk II changes all that. Instead of the obligatory steel wrap box with compulsory brushed aluminium fascia and rabble of unlovely buttons, this exotic confection looks like something DaVinci himself would have crafted, on his day off from painting the local church roof. Hewn from aluminium which is expertly brushed on top and lovingly lacquered to seal in the sheen, the Oracle looks like no other CD player we've ever seen. A token display and a few basic buttons are the only things that sully its elegant lines. Sculptural beauty, this expensive bit of kit is all the more impressive because of the exceedingly nice noise it makes. The only downside is the £8,000 price tag - but if you're not prepared to spend this then learn to love silver pressed steel! DP





WORLD STANDARDS

These are the best products we've heard that are currently on sale in the UK, complete with the date they were originally launched and their current retail prices.

TURNTABLES

PRO-JECT GENIE 2 2008 £175
A masterpiece of minimalism, this is well made for the money and includes a decent Ortofon OM3 moving magnet cartridge. Great sound per pound.

REGA P2 2008 £220
Some say the cheapest real hi-fi turntable money can buy - excellent value for money engineering, easy set up and fine sound.

TECHNICS SL1200/II 1973 £395
Slick build makes it a respectable performer, although the cheapo arm limits it - fit a Rega RB250 and it's suddenly a brilliant mid-price machine.

REGA P3-24 2008 £400
Seminal affordable audiophile deck with fine bundled tonearm. Tweakable, and really sings with optional £150 outboard power supply.

MICHELL TECNODEC 2003 £579
Superb introduction to Michell turntables - on a budget. Top quality build and elegant design make it the class of the mid-price field.



ROKSAN RADIUS 5 2003 £750
Fantastic value allied to intelligent, interesting and 'out of the box' design makes for a wonderful entry-level superdeck. Open and musical sound is more inviting than Michell TecnoDec rival, and the bundled Nima Unipivot arm is a superstar.

FUNK FIRM VECTOR II 2009 £860
Innovative engineering gives a nimble, pacy and musical sound that's one of the best at the price.



MARANTZ TT-1551 2005 £999
Cracking deck/arm/cartridge combination, this must surely be the best sounding 'plug and play' package at this price point.

MICHELL GYRODEC SE2005 £1005
Design icon with superlative build and finish. Sound is beautifully smooth, effortless and exceptionally expansive. No longer peerless at the price, but still a brilliant platform.

AVID DIVA II 2008 £1,200
Commanding performer with great speed, dynamics and detail allied to an expansive soundstage; surely the one to beat.

ACOUSTIC SOLID CLASSIC WOOD 2008 £1,350
Majoring on impact, punch and drive, this is an impactful mid-price turntable in sonic terms as well as physical size.

PROJECT RPM 10 2006 £1,500
Brilliant 'fit and forget' deck that gives everything it plays a clean, warm, enjoyable sound - but not quite as effective in absolute terms as some price rivals.

REVOLVER REPLAY 2007 £1,500
Revolver spring back into the vinyl market like they've never been away, with a stylish and solidly built LP spinner. Welcome back!

SCHEU ANALOG BLACK DIAMOND 2007 £1,500
Stylish and highly capable turntable with seriously impressive bass. Comes with tweaked RB250 and high output Benz Micro MC cartridge as a package - superb value for money.

THORENS TD2030 2006 £1,895
Excellent design and a supplied Rega RB300 make this a highly capable vinyl spinner. Blue tint to the Perspex base is rather pretty, too!

MICHELL ORBE 1995 £2,500
The top Michell disc spinner remains a superbly capable all rounder with powerful, spacious sound that's delicate and beguiling.



LINN LP12SE 1973 £3,510
Surely hi-fi's most iconic turntable, the legendary Sondek goes from strength to strength. New Keel subchassis and Radikal DC motor add precision and grip to one of the world's most musical disc spinners.

SME MODEL 10A 1995 £4,556
Exquisitely engineered deck and SMEV tonearm combo that's an extremely accomplished performer with classical music.

CLEARAUDIO REFERENCE 2003 £4,000
The company's best value vinyl spinner; good enough to get the best from almost any tonearm and cartridge combination. Brilliantly open and neutral sound; superlative pitch stability; stunning build and styling - Michell Orbe does most of this at half the price, however.

ACOUSTIC SOLID ONE 2007 £4,000
Huge turntable, both in terms of sheer mass and sonic dynamics. Fit up to three arms and enjoy, just don't damage your back moving it...

AVID VOLVERE SEQUEL 2007 £4,600
Stylish high end vinyl spinner with industrial strength build quality and a sound to match. Exceedingly neutral yet powerful sound is edge-of-the-seat stuff.

McINTOSH MT10 2008 £8,995
Big, expensive, controversially styled and glows more than some might consider necessary, but an astonishingly good performer.

EAT FORTE 2009 £12,500
Lavishly finished two box, two motor turntable with gorgeous Ikeda 407 tonearm bundled. Exceptionally stable and unfussy performer with a relaxed but highly enjoyable gait.

TO NEARMS

REGA RB251 1984 £136
Capable way past its price point, the new 3-point mount version of the classic RB250 serves up a taut and detailed sound. A little lean for some tastes, but responds very well to rewiring and counterweight modification.

MICHELL TECNOARM A2003 £442
The late John Michell's clever reworking of the Rega theme, using blasting, drilling and rewiring! Surely the best overall performer under £500.



ORIGIN LIVE SILVER 2006 £599
This expertly fettled Rega boasts a superbly even, transparent and tuneful sound. Gives away only a small degree of finesse and dimensionality to top arms.

HADCOCK 242 SE 2000 £649
Latest of a long line of unipivots, with added mass, revised geometry and better finish. Musical like no others at the price.

SME 309 1989 £767
Mid-range SME comes complete with cost-cut aluminium armtube and detachable headshell. Tight, neutral sound with good tonality, but lacks the IV's pace and precision.

SME SERIES IV 1988 £1,127
Offers nine tenths of the SME V's magic at just over half price. Exquisitely built and finished, and a design classic. Faces stiff competition these days, but lovely nevertheless.

AUDIO ORIGAMI PU7 2007 £1,300

HFV's best tonearm of 2007 is a derivative of the classic Syrinx PU3 updated to spectacular effect. Hand made to order, with any mass, length and colour you care for. Fit, finish and sound truly impressive.

NAIM ARO 1987 £1,425

Charismatic unipivot is poor at frequency extremes but sublime in the midband; truly emotive and insightful.

HELIUS OMEGA 2008 £1,595

Stylish and solid lump of arm with fabulous build quality, that turns in a dynamic and weighty performance.

SME SERIES V 1987 £1,614

The so-called Best Pickup Arm in the World isn't quite, but comes pretty close. Vice-like bass with incredible weight, ultra clear midband and treble. Does everything except beguile the listener.

LINN EKOS 1987 £1,700

Subtle mods over the years, including revised bearings and the recent new wiring has kept it a serious contender in the superarm stakes. Lacks the SME's slam, the OL's clarity or the ARO's emotion, but has a feisty musicality all of its own.

GRAHAM PHANTOM 2006 £2,495

Sonically stunning arm with magnificent bass dexterity and soundstaging. Build quality almost up to SME standards, which is saying something...

ORIGIN LIVE CONQUEROR 3C 2002 £2,650

Latest carbon tubed version of OL's penultimate arm is a breathtakingly capable device with a dizzying fast and neutral sound.

**TRI-PLANAR PRECISION 2006 £3,600**

Stunning build, exquisite design and surely the most naturally musical and lucid sound around makes this a remarkable pickup arm.

CARTRIDGES**AUDIO TECHNICA AT-110E 1984 £29**

Great starter cartridge that's refined, detailed and musical beyond its price.

ORTOFON 2M RED/BLUE 2007 £60/£120

The first new budget MM designs for many years, Ortofons 2M Red and Blue are high resolution designs that are an engaging listen

**GOLDRING G1042 1994 £135**

One of the best MMs going, with sweet and extended treble and punchy, muscular bass.

ORTOFON SAMBA/SALSA 2006 £150/£200

Fine cartridges that offer that MC magic at an affordable price. Samba is more dynamic and forward, Salsa rather smoother but both are great performers and track well.

DENON DL103R 2006 £200

Awkward to get working properly with a poor mounting arrangement, yet it rewards with a musical performance that makes similar priced cartridges sound cold.

DYNAVECTOR DV10X52003 £250

A distant descendent of the classic Ultimo 10X, this has warmth and sweetness in spades, allied to a punchy bass. Beats G1042 comfortably.

AUDIO TECHNICA AT-OC9MLII 2007 £399

New and improved stylus and cantilever plus serious price reduction equals stunning dynamics and clarity. A real bargain

ORTOFON 2M BLACK 2007 £350

Staggeringly good high-end MM that uses a stylus from the MC Jubilee and easily rivals similarly-priced MCs

DYNAVECTOR DV20X-H2003 £395

The best modern budget MC combines deliciously sweet sound with fantastic get-up-and-go. High output version works a treat with valve phono stages too.

**LYRA DORIAN 2007 £495**

Incisive and musical, the Dorian is one of the most revealing cartridges at the price.

ORTOFON KONTRA' B1999 £720

Surprisingly articulate performer by Ortofon standards. All the brand's usual polish and detail allied to real vim. Loves making music!

**ORTOFON RONDO BRONZE 2005 £500**

Excellent mid-price moving coil with real rhythmic alacrity and a decent deal of finesse.

ZYX R-100H 2005 £625

Exceptionally tight sounding and detailed cartridge with the musical skills to match, this is up with the very best at the price, with a presentation all of its own.

BENZ MICRO GLIDER L2 2008 £650

Crisp, clean and detailed MC; particularly impressive at both ends of the frequency spectrum

TRANSFIGURATION AXIA 2007 £890

Musically adept and highly resolute cartridge with impressive tracking abilities. Top end lift means careful matching required, however..

ORTOFON KONTRA" C2004 £1,000

The most secure tracking MC we've heard; its super clean, fast, detailed and neutral sonics make it a brilliant partner to warmer sounding turntables.

ORTOFON MC WINDFELD 2008 £1,799

Ortofon's new flagship MC is a sophisticated and alluring performer that takes the vinyl experience to a new level.

KOETSU RED K SIGNATURE 2007 £2,399

The new K Signature adds a hefty dose of insight and finesse to the already impressive Red and the results are fabulous

DIGITAL DISC PLAYERS**CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640C V2 2006 £250**

Superb entry level CD player; crisp, composed, musical sound plus fine build and ergonomics.

REGA APOLLO 2006 £498

Highly rhythmic and beguiling performer, although lacks some warmth of tone. Superb ergonomics and design

RUSS ANDREWS DAC-1 USB 2007 £599

Not just a USB gadget, but a truly accomplished upgrade DAC that makes the best of CDs, MP3s and digital radio

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640H 2005 £599.95

Fine sonics and decent build make this our favourite affordable HD music server.

MARANTZ SA7001KI SIG2006 £600

Brilliant CD/2ch SACD spinner with a big, sweet, analogue-like sound - CD is totally competitive at the price with the best dedicated machines..

AUDIOLAB 8000CD 2006 £450

Ultra clean and transparent sound with great detail retrieval; just a tad bright and analytical for some, though.

SHANLING CDT-80 2005 £650

Very impressive mid-price machine with a big, sumptuous, expansive sound - better still when tubes are changed.

**CAMBRIDGE AZUR 840C 2006 £800**

Well built CD player with a silky, yet detailed sound and a whole host of useful facilities. Excellent value for money.

NAIM CDSi 2008 £895

Naim's new italic 'i' variant improves even further on the original mid-price classic, offering super tight, grippy and musical sound.

EASTERN ELECTRIC MINIMAX CD 2005 £925

Highly accomplished tube-equipped all rounder with a clean, open and musically lucid sound; superb value.

**CYRUS CD8 SE 2008 £1,200**

New Servo Evolution mech makes this the most musically engaging machine at the price, with super smooth tonality to boot. Optional PSX-R adds bass and dimensionality.

BENCHMARK DAC-1 USB 2007 £999

Pro-biased DAC with useful range of inputs and impressive headphone outputs, too. Save £250 if you don't need the USB-equipped version.

ELECTROCOMPANET PC-1 2008 £1,034

Tidy and polished-sounding CD spinner with strong bass and an assured sense of confidence

EXPOSURE 3010 2003 £1,200

One of the most 'analogue' CD players, second only to the Shanling. Wonderfully beguiling balance leaves you looking for the tube output stage.

STELLO CD-T100/DA100 SIG 2008 £1,270

Fine top loading transport linked via i2s to an excellent upsampling DAC. Confident, detailed, explicit and architectural sound but smooth too.

REGA SATURN 2007 £1,298

Wacky looks surround a highly accomplished CD spinner that marries a smooth midband to excellent bass grip.

EDGAR CD-1 2007 £1,350

Quirky Slovakian CD spinner with all-valve output and a truly spine-tingling performance.

RAYSONIC CDI28 2007 £1,599

Spaceship styling and fine build around a highly competent mid-priced CD spinner means a feast for the senses.

CHORD QBD64 2008 £3,000

Bespoke architecture gives a truly uniquely musical sound that's beguilingly musical in nature, with dizzying incision and grip.

SHANLING SCD-T2000 2007 £2,250

Updated version of original SCD-T200C standardises upgrades optional on the older model and adds a few more tweaks for good measure. The result is a stylish player that works superbly with both CD and SACD

TUBE TECHNOLOGY FUSION 64 2006 £2,200

Unique digital and analogue audio engineering makes for an exceptional CD player that, on some programme material, is peerless.

**NORTH STAR MODEL 192 TRANSPORT/EXTREMO DAC** 2006 £2,918

Superbly finessed and loquacious sound allied to excellent build and finish make for a brilliant value high end buy.

ELECTROCOMPANIET EMC-1UP 2003 £3,450

Quirky yet extremely capable high end upsampling CD spinner, with a musical fluency that beguiles more than it impresses.

ACCUSTIC ARTS CDP1MK2 2007 £3,985

Styling not to everyone's taste but build quality is impeccable and the performance is stunningly musical.

NAIM CDX2-XPS2 2003 £4,950

A fine high end machine, but add an XPS2 and it becomes one of the most charismatically engaging 16bit machines we've ever heard. Plays music with such passion!

NAIM CDS3 2003 £7,050

The most polished Naim CD to date; tremendously capable and musical, but lacks the Rottweiler quality of the cheaper CDX2-XPS2.

ACCUSTIC ARTS DRIVE 1 MK2/TUBE DAC 2 2007 £7,980

Superbly built high end CD transport and DAC combo that shows just what the format can be capable of. Very tangible, musical sound with wonderful dynamics and glistening harmonics. Only curious styling and clunky build detract from its brilliance!

ESOTERIC X-01 2005 £8,995

Breathtaking feat of digital audio engineering, and surely the best sounding combination CD/SACD spinner money can buy.

LINN KLIMAX DS 2007 £9,600

Landmark network music player, offering brilliant sonics at up to 24/96 resolution from hard disk/NAS. Expensive, but you can hear why...

NAIM CD555/555PS 2006 £14,000

Very probably the best CD player yet made - certainly the most expensive; a digital tour de force.



DIGITAL RECORDERS

SONY RCD-W3 2002 £250

Usual superb Sony ergonomics make for no-nonsense budget buy. Fine direct digital copies, but analogue input poor. Middling sonics, but there's a digital output!

NAIM HDX 2009 £4,405

Interesting one-box network enabled hard disk music system gives superb sonics together with impressive ease of use.

PHONO STAGES

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640P £99

Excellent entry level design that raises the bar for budget phono stages. Crisp, smooth yet brightly lit sound on both MM and MC that's a vast improvement on most budget inboard designs.

PROJECT PHONOBOX LE2004 £99

Great little box that improves on most bundled phono stages found in budget integrated amplifiers, adding detail and definition and a measure of smoothness too.

TRICHORD DINO 2002 £299

Great all rounder with switchable MM/MC. Fast, fluid and smooth like no others at the price.

JOLIDA JD9 2006 £400

Hybrid tube/solid state phono stage with a good range of adjustability. Excellent value for money and a fine, dynamic sound.

GRAHAM SLEE ERA GOLD V 2004 £460

Wonderfully warm, open and musical nature makes this an essential audition for those wanting a top value mid-price phono stage.

PURESOUND P10 2007 £400

Guy Sargeant's new MM phono stage is an absolute belter. Simple but very effective.

AQVOX PHONO 2 CI 2006 £598

Brilliantly versatile yet affordable phonostage with a beguiling sound, but careful matching essential. Balanced operation of real benefit.

ICON AUDIO PS1.2 2007 £599

Excellent value valve phono stage with good range of facilities and fine imaging abilities.

A.N.T. AUDIO KORA 3T LTD 2008 £775

Exceptionally musical and natural sounding all discrete transistor phono stage, with highly lucid, valve-like presentation.

ANATEK MCI 2007 £850

Spectacularly good MC phono stage that offers serious insight underpinned by powerful and tuneful bass.

**LINN LINTO** 2000 £900

A musical and incisive performer, with more speed than the Delphini at the expense of detail and tonal colour.

QUAD QC24P 2007 £995

Dynamic performer that can be used on its own as a complete phono-level preamp.

EASTERN ELECTRIC MINIMAX PHONO 2006 £1,099

Highly capable valve phono stage with a relaxed yet involving demeanour. More beguiling than rival transistor designs, but sacrifices little in detail terms.

TRICHORD DIABLO + NCPSU 2006 £1,198

Highly musical performer, this is one of the best phono stages at or near the price, but lacks the polish of the rival Whest.

ICON AUDIO PS3 2008 £995

One of the very best valve phono preamplifier's we've heard, with an expansive, engaging and organic sound that makes vinyl a joy to listen to.

AMPLIFIERS

AUDIOLAB 8000S 2006 £400

In other life, this sold for three times the price, making it a stand-out bargain now. Very clean, powerful and tidy sound but not the world's most beguiling.

ICON AUDIO STEREO 25 2008 £500

Cracking entry-level valve integrated, with a warm and engaging sound. Limited power so needs careful partnering, though.

ROTEL RA-06 2008 £550

Vivacious sounding device that, whilst lacking the finer musical points, wears its heart on its sleeve and has plenty of power to match.

NAIM NAIT 5i 2007 £725

The italic 'i' version remains one of the most musically competent and dynamically engaging integrations at the price.

CAMBRIDGE 840A V2 2007 £750

Version 2 addresses version 1's weaknesses to turn in a mightily accomplished performance, offering power, finesse and detail.

JUNGSON JA-88D 2006 £899

Stunning value for money Class A monster integrated; extreme power and clarity at a puzzlingly low price.

**SUGDEN A21A S2** 2007 £1,299

More power and greater transparency improve even further on the already impressive A21a to give truly impressive results

NAIM NAIT XS 2009 £1,250

With much of the sound of the Supernait at half the price, this is powerful, articulate and smooth beyond class expectations.

SHANLING STP-80 2007 £1,199

Well built and surprisingly muscular valve integrated. Engagingly musical.

CREEK DESTINY AMPLIFIER 2006 £1,200

Superb build, useful power plus a deep full bodied sound make this an excellent mid-price buy.

ELECTROCOMPANIET PI-2 2008 £1,430

Powerful integrated with seriously solid bass and impressive dynamic abilities. Superbly musical.

SUGDEN A21A S2 2008 £1,469

Crystalline clarity, dizzying speed and forensic detailing makes this seminal design the most musical at the price, but power limited so needs sensitive speakers.

ANATEK A50R 2007 £1,600

Simple integrated amplifier with spectacular bass grip and effortless dynamics.

**UNISON RESEARCH S62002 £1,625**

Tremendously musical and lithe sound with real finesse and subtlety too. Very slightly upper mid forward encourages careful partnering with ancillaries (Revolver R45s are ideal), but overall fantastic value for money.

**MOON i-3RS 2008 £1,890**

Grippy and clean performer with fine sound-staging and build quality.

COPLAND CSA29 2006 £1,998

Unfailingly svelte, sophisticated and smooth - both to listen to and look at - this is a truly desirable high end integrated.

NAIM SUPERNAIT 2007 £2,475

Technological and sonic *tour de force* from Naim that combines impressive functionality and connectivity with superb sound quality.

VINCENT SA-TI/SP-T100 2006 £2,300

Impressively built and stylish pre/power combo that take any kind of music and make the best of it

LUXMAN L-550A 2007 £2,800

Monster Class A integrated with powerful and revealing sound and a whole host of useful features, including a highly competent MM/MC phono stage

AUDIO RESEARCH VS155 2003 £2,895

The Naim NAP250's tubular alter ego; oodles of power allied to a strong bass and smooth open midband makes this a brilliant all round amplifier. Lacks the subtlety and finesse of the low powered single-ended brigade but makes up for it with sheer brio.

LEEMA TUCANA 2007 £2,995

Leema's success story continues with this integrated amp that combines power, detail and great musicality in a solidly built package

**SUGDEN IA4 2007 £3,650**

Goodly amount of Class A power, icy clarity and a breathtakingly fast, musical sound make this one of the very best super-integrateds.

AV AMPLIFIERS**YAMAHA DSP-AX861SE2007 £700**

Highly capable A/V amplifier with mind-boggling array of surround sound options. Even has a decent MM phono stage!

ARCAM AVR350 2006 £1,500

Superbly accomplished do-it-all AV receiver package, with an uncommonly, warm, natural and musical sound. A winner goes from strength to strength.

DENON AVR-4308 2007 £2,000

Huge behemoth festooned with facilities and sockets, plus two remotes! Fortunately it's a brilliantly flexible and powerful performer.

NAIM AV2/NAP 150/NAPV 175 2002 £4,190

Brilliant audiophile multichannel pre-power amplifier combo; not as good with music as a two-channel Naim set-up at the same price, obviously, but surprisingly close. Elegant control layout plus a strong, clean and brilliantly engaging sound make this a serious crossover product. Ultimately lacks power compared to similarly priced Arcam gear, but is more musically involving.

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS**CHANNEL ISLANDS VHP-1 / VAC-1 £390**

A truly exceptional headphone output stage; the best at the price and an essential audition.

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-CAN V8 2008 £350

Open and explicitly detailed sound plus serious bass wallop and the ability to drive anything to very high levels makes this a great partner for most mid-to-high end headphones.

SUGDEN HEADMASTER 2003 £600

Unusual combined preamplifier and headphone amplifier, this boasts a surprisingly smooth and open sound.

PREAMPLIFIERS**CREEK OBH-12 2000 £220**

Brilliant value budget passive, giving little away in sonics to far more expensive designs. Connectivity and build aren't great, but what do you expect at this price?

**MF AUDIO PASSIVE PRE2003 £1,500**

Effective pre with switchable gain via a transformer, and balanced operation. Open and incisive sound, yet makes most active rivals sound edgy by comparison. Silver version at the twice the price adds transparency.

**MODWRIGHT SWL9.0SE £2,000**

Captivating sound quality that will transform your system. Build quality is equally impressive and value top-notch. Highly recommended

NUFORCE P-9 2007 £2,200

Impressive two box preamp with superb resolution and an engaging sound.

MELODY PURE BLACK 101D 2007 £3,295

One of the best preamplifiers we have ever heard. Takes the clarity and openness we expect from valves and adds a staggering level of grip and detail. Stunning.

MUSICAL FIDELITY PRIMO 2009 £7,900

Staggeringly expensive, but one listen explains why. Wonderfully exuberant sound that can only come from a top quality tube design.

POWER AMPLIFIERS**ROKSAN KANDY LIII 2008 £600**

Fine budget power amp that punches well above its weight.

QUAD 909 2001 £900

The latest current-dumper has a smooth and expansive character with enough wallop to drive most loads. Not the most musical, but super value all the same. Lovely build, finish and Quad's legendary service are nice.

NAIM NAP150 2002 £795

Driven by a decent source and a NAC112, this gives highly enjoyable results - providing you like the Naim sound! Taut, fast and feisty despite its relative lack of power.

SUGDEN MUSIC MASTER 2003 £1,300

Quintessential Class A Sugden sound is not warm as many expect, but extremely neutral and open with real tonal colour. Superb when partnered with efficient loudspeakers like Revolver R45s, but many will find it underpowered

**NUFORCE REFERENCE 9SE V2 2006 £1,750**

Brilliant value for money monoblocks with massive power and super-clean, three dimensional sound.



ROTEL RB1092 2007 £1,595
Hugely powerful digital amp with neutral midrange and a wonderfully spacious treble

CHANNEL ISLANDS AUDIO D100 2005 £1,595
Clean and musical Class D monoblock power amplifiers in a neat, small package.

SILK GLOWMASTER KT88 2007 £1,699
KT88 based power amplifier offers dramatic clarity and excellent bass left.



ICON AUDIO MB845 2009 £2,499
Creamy and seductive yet blisteringly fast and musically lucid, this pair of 845 tube monoblocks is staggering value for money.

QUAD II-40 2005 £3,230
Modern tube monoblock power amplifiers with plenty of power, liquid and open mid-band and spacious, airy treble. Explicit, engaging sound, but not as euphonic as some.

GRAAF GM20 OTL 2003 £3,300
Awesome output transformer-less valve power amp gives dazzling speed and incision, with an ethereal soundstaging and delicious filigree detail. Tremendous punch belies its humble 20W power rating. Factor in one of the most exquisite finishes this side of an Aston Martin and it's very hard to say no...

ELECTROCOMPANET NEMO 2009 £4,450 (EACH)
Monoblock power amplifier with breathtakingly open and fast sound, and apparently infinite reserves of power. Match with a smooth source for big audio dynamite!

QUAD II-80 2005 £6,000
Quad's best ever power amplifier, this is a dramatic performer with a silky but dark tonality, blistering dynamics, serious power and a compellingly musical sound. They don't come much better than these...

LOUDSPEAKERS ACOUSTIC ENERGY NEO 1 2007 £199

Tidy and well balanced standmounters with pleasing clarity and detail.

B&W 686 2007 £279
B&W's new baby standmounters offer a sophisticated and mature performance that belies both their dimensions and price tag.

USHER S-520 2006 £320
Astonishingly capable budget standmounters that offer detail and dynamics well beyond their price and dimensions

MORDAUNT SHORT AVANT 9141 2007 £300
Another pair of storming budget floorstanders from Mordaunt Short. Detailed, punchy and crisp.

REVOLVER RW16 2004 £400
Outstanding standmounter with tonal accuracy and speed that totally belies its price; good sensitivity for a small box makes it great with valve amps too. A budget audiophile classic.

LEEMA XERO 2007 £650
Superb mini-monitors that belie their modest price tag with a bold and finessed performance

ACOUSTIC ENERGY AE1 CLASSIC £845
Brilliantly successful remake of an iconic design; not flawless, but surely one of the most musical loudspeakers ever made.

SPENDOR S3/SE 2004 £950
A natural successor to the BBC LS3/5a, whose impressive neutrality, imaging and evenhandedness makes this a superior, if less charismatic, loudspeaker.

WHARFEDALE OPUS 2-MI 2007 £999
Large standmounters with impressive mid-range dome and fine integration across the frequency range.

RRR FS100 2007 £1,055
Mind-boggling amount of loudspeaker for the money. Big and sturdily built with serious bass and awesome soundstage scale. A real bargain.

YAMAHA SOAVO 2 2007 £1,200
Just as capable as their floorstanding brethren, the Soavo 2s have an assured sense of sophistication and poise.

REVOLVER RW451 2006 £1,199
Very musical floorstander that's clear, concise and truthful, whilst being exceptionally amplifier friendly - a dreamboat for valves.

ONE THING AUDIO ESL57 2007 £1,450
One Thing Audio's modifications keep the good old ESL57 at the very top of the game.

KIBRI NAIMA 2007 £1,550
Unusual-looking omnidirectional loudspeakers with an absolutely captivating performance. Huge soundstage and bags of clarity - brilliant!

GURU QM-10P 2007 £1,595
Quirky but adorable standmounters that are way off the pace in respect of detail and power, but amazingly capable at playing a tune and pulling you in to the music.

MARTIN LOGAN SOURCE 2008 £1,599
Brilliant entry level electrostatics, giving a taste of loudspeaker esoterica for the price of most moving coil boxes. Tremendous clarity, evenness and delicacy, although not the world's most powerful sound.

USHER BE-718 2007 £1,600
Beryllium tweeters work superbly, allied to a fast and punchy bass driver. The result is subtle, smooth and emotive.

SPENDOR S8E £1,895
Generously large, silky smooth delivery, this dynamic sounding floorstander is an excellent all rounder.



MONITOR AUDIO GS60 £2,000
Brilliant modern rock loudspeaker with a fantastically lithe and engaging sound, but partner carefully with a warm front end.

YAMAHA SOAVO 1 2006 £2,000
Musical and transparent floorstanders with impressive dynamics and cohesion. Fine build and finish.



ISOPHON GALILEO 2007 £2,100
Big standmounters that really grip the music and offer quite startling dynamics and grip.

MONITOR AUDIO PL100 2008 £2,300
The MA boys pull out all the stops for their flagship 'Platinum' series standmounter with stunning results.

PMC OB11 2008 £2,950
Cleverly updated floorstanders give scale and solidity in slim and well finished package.

KEF IQ30 2009 £330
Beautifully built, classily styled standmounters with exceptional image projection and a very clean, detailed sound.

MOWGAN AUDIO MABON 2007 £3,995
Massively capable loudspeakers that offer dynamics, scale and clarity in an elegantly simple package. Wide range of finishes, too.

B&O BEOLAB 9 2007 £5000
Technically impressive and visually striking loudspeakers with sound quality that more than matches their looks.

ARS AURES M1 2006 £5,995
Sublime build and finish allied to an insightful, assured and even-handed musical performance makes these an essential high end audition.

QUAD ESL-2905 2006 £5,995
The old 989 with all the bugs taken out, this gives a brilliantly neutral and open sound like only a top electrostatic can; still not a natural rock loudspeaker, though.

REVOLVER CYGNIS 2006 £5,999
Revolver pull out all the stops and show what they can do with this magnificent flagship loudspeaker. A superb monitor that is like a mini B&W 801D in many ways.

B&W 801D 2006 £10,500
In many respects, the ultimate studio monitor; dazzling clarity and speed with commanding scale and dynamics.



ISOPHON CASSIANO 2007 £12,900
Drive units featuring exotic materials allied to superlative build quality result in an immensely capable loudspeaker. Not an easy load to drive, however.

ACCESSORIES

MONITOR AUDIO IDECK2006 £200
Fine design, impressive flexibility and a lucidly musical sound make the iDeck the current iPod dock champion.

ISOTEK GII VISION 2006 £550
A genuinely effective and surprisingly cost effective upgrade, but results could vary so a home dem of the power conditioner is recommended.



TOWNSHEND MAXIMUM 2003 £800
Classy ribbon supertweeter with flexible level settings and cool styling - you'll be amazed at the difference it makes, especially with Quad electrostatics.

HEADPHONES

SENNHEISER MX-550 2005 £19
Our unqualified recommendation for those seeking a serious sounding pair of in-ear phones. Smooth, detailed and musical.

SENNHEISER PX-100 2002 £29
Cracking pair of lightweight open back cans ideal for personals, but good enough for real hi-fi use. Superb build allied to a smooth and engaging performance make them the spiritual successor to the HD400s.



GOLDRING DR150 2006 £70
Excellent build and fine sound makes these budget cans superlative value for money.

SENNHEISER HD-590 1998 £199
The company's best real-world cans to date. Open and smooth with plenty of detail. Brightly lit midband makes them an ideal partner for a valve headphone amp.

SENNHEISER HD-650 2004 £250
Not the best headphone in the world, but a superb all round reference all the same. Very crisp, detailed and even sound allied to superlative build and fine comfort makes all most people will ever want. Cable upgrade yields great results.

STAX SR-007T OMEGA II/SRM-007T 2006 £2,890
Simply the best headphones we've ever heard at any price, these sweetly translucent electrostatic earspeakers are like no other headphone, or loudspeaker for that matter...

INTERCONNECTS

TECHLINK WIRES XS 2007 £20
Highly accomplished interconnects at an absurdly low price. Stunning value for money.

WIREWORLD OASIS 5 2003 £99/M
Excellent mid-price design with a very neutral, silky and self-effacing sound. Superb value for money.

CHORD COMPANY CHAMELEON 2 £90/M
One of our favourites, these are musical performers with a smooth yet open sound.



DNM RESON 2002 £40/M
Neutral and transparent - a steal!

VDH ULTIMATE THE FIRST 2004 £260/0.6M
Carbon interconnects that help you forget the electronics and concentrate on the music. Miraculous transparency. Tight and tuneful bass mixed with air and space results in a cracking cable for the money.



TCI CONSTRICTOR 13A-6 BLOCK 2003 £120
Top quality 'affordable' mains outlet block, with fine build and good sonics. Well worth the extra over standard high street specials, which sound coarse and two-dimensional by comparison.

MISSING LINK CRYO REFERENCE 2008 £375
Currently our favourite 'affordable high end' interconnects, with a deliciously smooth, open and subtle sound without a hint of edge or grain. Superb value, inasuch as it's as good as some designs at three times the price.

TUNERS

DENON TU-1500AE 2006 £120
Excellent entry level analogue tuner; slick sonics and fine feature count makes it a bargain.



CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640T 2005 £250
Sweet sounding digital/analogue hybrid with fine build and finish at the price.

MARANTZ ST-7001 2006 £299
Super performance on FM coupled with its ability to get the most from DAB broadcasts makes this the best affordable tuner.

YAMAHA TX-761 2007 £350
Sets the standard for FM performance at the price and is no slouch on DAB either.

ARCAM FMJ T32 2009 £550
The world's first DAB+ hi-fi tuner, and it also happens to be the best DAB/FM hybrid we've heard to date. A brilliant product that deserves to succeed.

CREEK CLASSIC TUNER 2006 £550
No tuner offers better sound per pound; wonderfully three dimensional and smooth from bottom to top.

MYRYAD MXT-2000 2005 £800
Truly sumptuous sound and excellent build is all most will ever need in a tuner; superb.

MAGNUM DYNALAB MD-100T 2006 £1,895
One of the best ways to hear FM that we know; superbly open and musical sound in a quirky but characterful package.



SYSTEMS

YAMAHA CRX-M170 2007 £200
One heck of a lot of quality performance on DAB, CD and FM for £200! Optional matching £120 NX-E300 loudspeakers aren't too shabby either.

TEAC DR-H300DAB 2008 £329
Nicely built and styled mini with fine performance on all sources that even plays DVDs!

NAD C-715DAB 2008 £429
Small, neat looks cover a truly capable system that shows just what a compact design can achieve.

ARCAM SOLO MINI 2008 £650
Half the size and two-thirds the price of a full-sized Solo, the Mini gives very little away in terms of performance to its bigger brother.

ARCAM SOLO 2005 £1,249
Excellent all-in-one system, with a warm, smooth and balanced sound to match the features and style.

LINN CLASSIK MUSIC 2008 £1,250
Neat update of the original and best one-box stereo system; superbly musical sound beats equivalently priced separates.

MERIDIAN F80 2007 £1,500
Fantastically built and versatile DVD/CD/DAB/FM/AM unit, designed in conjunction with Ferrari. Ignore nay-sayers who sneer that it isn't a 'proper' hi-fi product; most see sense when they listen to it...



AURA NOTE MUSIC CENTRE 2007 £1,500
Lovely shiny CD/tuner/amplifier with fine sound quality and dynamic abilities.

SHANLING MC-30 2007 £650
Quite possibly the cutest all-in-one around with fine performance from the CD player, tuner and MP3 player input. Very low power, though.



NAIM UNITI 2009 £1,995
Uniquely versatile one box music system with excellent ergonomics and sonics to match. A landmark product for Naim.

LINN CLASSIK MOVIE 2007 £2,250
Superbly built all-in-one that offers excellent sound across all formats and is surprisingly easy to use.

MARANTZ 'LEGEND' 2007 £22,000
The combination of SA-7S1 disc player, SC-7S2 preamp and MA-9S2 monoblocks delivers a truly jaw-dropping performance. Start saving now....



PHIATON

One interesting aspect of the Munich Show was the emergence of South Korean audio brands. No, not LG or Samsung - they're more 'consumer electronics' than hi-fi - but companies such as Phiaton. They presented an impressive range of headphones, offering soberly styled specialist hi-fi designs (which sounded great) and some more 'racy' lifestyle-y items too. Maybe Sennheiser doesn't need to worry just yet, but the quality was high all the same. DP

RIPNAS

Now here's a thing - a high end, hi-fi specific, hard disk based music server! The RipNAS Statement does what it says on the tin - put a CD into the slot and it rips using a high quality algorithm in the space of 4 minutes, which is considerably slower than iTunes precisely for the reason that it's ripping for maximum data integrity. This beautifully hewn all metal machine is available in 500GB or 1TB sizes via a hard drive, but there's also the option of Solid State Drives (SSD) as well. The RipNAS is designed to connect to a computer network, and accessed via uPnP software - just like a Squeezebox or suchlike. Watch out for a review soon. DP



MAGICO

Best sound of the show for me was to be found in the room shared by Magico, MIT and Spectral Audio, where the new flagship Magico M5 loudspeakers were playing. Incorporating Magico's ring radiator tweeter, twin 6in 'Nano-Tec' midrange drivers and twin 'Nano-Tec' 9in woofers, the sound was magnificent in scale and grandeur, and truly captivating in emotional terms. Frankly, I had trouble believing that I was listening to a music server as the source. Still, \$90,000 per pair - ouch! AS

TRANSROTOR

Of all of the world's great turntables, there are few that compare to this stunning Transrotor - at least in respect of looks. This made your reporter's heart miss a beat, and caused his jaw to move suddenly southward. Fortunately, I managed not to drool on it, but it was a close run thing. As ever at Munich, the Transrotor room was full of elaborately styled vinyl spinning devices, and as ever it was hard to actually grasp what the underlying design and engineering philosophy was - apart from making working pieces of art such as this. DP



MASTERSOUND

Another day, another valve amp. In any other context this stunning MasterSound Evolution 845 would have been accorded the status of a god, but at the Munich show it almost looked a little small and understated. Fortunately you couldn't say this about its sound - unlike many amplifiers here it was actually connected up - and proved precisely the reverse. Delicious! DP

GLOWING BOTTLES

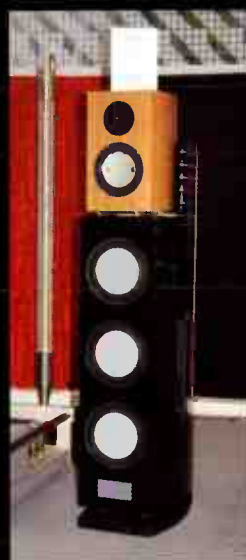
This isn't the sort of show where you look around and say, "wow - there's a valve amp!" It's more the sort of show where you're quite bemused when there isn't one. And in the great scheme of tubular belles, even the mighty 300B is relegated to the status of a mere ECC83 - it's as common as muck here. Indeed, the Munich show is so valvey that 845s aren't that much less ubiquitous - a tube that Noel and I revere. And you can forget about just buying new ones - every variant of New Old Stock classic valve was on display too. If you like 'glass audio', you'll love this show. DP

**MEL AUDIO**

I'm a big fan of this quirky Italian company, which produces hi-fi that is both superb sounding, beautifully hand built and sculptural in form. It looks striking, but unlike so much at Munich it would not sit easily in a house owned by a Bundesliga footballer, complete with his chrome wheel adorned, smoked glass shrouded black Range Rover parked outside in the drive. Designer Enrico Lusuardi was as ebullient as ever, but sadly still looking for UK distribution... DP

NEWTON MEETS SAXSISTERS

Finally, for when all this reproduced music became too much, light relief was provided by the talented "Newton Meets Saxsisters" - three lovely ladies who walked the show continually, entertaining guests with a fine mix of saxophone-based jazz classics. Not only visually appealing and musically adept, they also provided a fine point of reference to remind us all exactly what real instruments sound like! AS

**ISOPHON**

Dr. Roland Gauder's full range of Isophon loudspeakers were on display, including the brand new two way standmounting Odessa, using similar drive units to the Hi-Fi World reviewed Cassianos. Playing, however, were the new flagship Tofanas - a twin box design that made superb use of Accuton's ceramic coned drive units and diamond tweeter and turned in a polished, punchy and emotive sound. AS

**TANNOY**

One corner of Munich will be forever Scotland - in the Tannoy room, that is. Representing a popular brand of Scotch Whiskey, we espied several German gentlemen sporting not-so-fetching kilts, dispensing the aforementioned giggling juice. Next to this were a number of towering Tannoys, such as the Canterbury pictured here. Try as I did, I simply could not find Noel languishing behind one clutching an empty bottle of Glen McSpornan! DP

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The Reel Thing

Utter the word 'Ferrograph' to most audio enthusiasts and they will instantly think of open reel tape decks, but this enigmatic British company also made amplifiers and tuners. But probably the rarest of all its products was the legendary S1 Monitor loudspeaker, says Adam Smith...

An enigmatic name, highly respected but from a bygone age, the British Ferrograph recorder company was famed for its open reel tape recorders of the nineteen sixties, but also made a few other things along the way. Probably the most well known of these was the F307 amplifier, which eventually became the F308 and spawned a bigger brother in the form of the F608. There was also a matching tuner, the SFMI. Probably the rarest of all items, though, were Ferrograph's S1 Monitors.

It was in 1972 that the S1s first saw the light of day, and my 1973 *Hi-Fi Year Book* shows them as retailing for £95 – a not inconsiderable sum of money in those days, especially when one considers that the mighty Celestion Ditton 66s were only £4 more. This bought you a three way design measuring 650x350x440mm and weighing 27kg, and sat on top of some pretty, but sonically dubious castor-based stands. Internally, the early S1s consisted of a KEF B139 bass driver, a 4in (100mm) Goodmans cone midrange driver and a 1in (25mm) Goodmans soft dome tweeter.

Many people refer to the S1s as being transmission line designs, but this is not the case – they are actually reflex designs using a long triangular port that runs from the bottom right corner of the cabinet, up the back and exiting at the top right hand side of the baffle, stuffed firmly with wool to offer a high level of damping. The three drivers are connected by an 18 component crossover with third order slopes at 400Hz and 3.5kHz, plus several notch filters for driver optimisation.

In terms of updates, the only major one was the change of midrange driver to a Peerless dome type a few years later. Marantz's Ken Ishiwata is of the opinion that

this version of the S1 is one of the best imaging loudspeakers he has heard. Other than this, the rather drab grey painted cabinet and black stand gave way to a truly hideous teak finish with vile brown weave grille and white stands later in the speakers' life, but by the end of the 1970s they quietly faded from the catalogue and, seemingly from people's memories.

SOUND QUALITY

The S1s are a true monitor quality loudspeaker in the best sense of the word, delivering a beautifully balanced midrange and treble that offers insight, fluidity and a real feeling of being drawn into the music. Never harsh or shouty, they seemingly remain unflustered no matter what you throw at them. If a recording is bad, they will certainly let you know, but don't come over all mean-spirited and really rub your nose in it.

Naturally, a KEF B139 with a large damped port means plenty of bass but those expecting sogginess and wallow might find themselves a little surprised. Okay, so they don't stop on a sixpence like a pair of Yamaha NS1000Ms, but bass lines are magnificently detailed, pacy and surprisingly lithe. Measurement in the anechoic chamber at Goodmans showed a gentle rise in low end output below 70Hz before tailing off again to be 3dB down at 32Hz, so they really don't need a subwoofer! Another unusual facet is their sonic 'intensity', as they do not need to be cranked up loud to project in a manner quite unlike any loudspeaker I have ever heard.

In amplifier matching terms, the S1s are quite benign. Electrically an



easy load thanks to an impedance that does not drop below 7 Ohms, their downside is a sensitivity of around 84dB, meaning that they do need a few Watts to wake them up, otherwise they can sound lacklustre.

One of the few models that prove that not everything loudspeaker-wise from the 1970s was a complete disaster, the Ferrograph S1s were uncommon when new and virtually unknown now, so can be picked up for an absolute song. Yet they still show just how a properly designed monitor loudspeaker of yesteryear can hold its head even today.

BUYING

Something of a rarity, when a pair does turn up it seems to fetch very little money indeed owing to the fact that few people know of them. Mine came from John Howes' Audiojumble for £50, in a very battered state and the last pair I saw on eBay, complete with the later dome midrange drivers, failed to sell for £40. The fact that they are a little 'aesthetically challenged' probably doesn't help here, but pound for pound they are an astonishing bargain. In terms of tweakery, a set of proper 4mm binding posts will fit in the holes that the push terminals sit, the usual upgrades to internal cabling and crossover componentry are well worth pursuing, and a proper pair of solid stands to replace those cute but useless wheeled ones makes great sense – owing to their 44cm depth, you may have to go for some purpose-built ones like I did, but the expense is well worth it. In replacement driver terms, replacement KEF B139s are abundant, as does the original Goodmans midrange driver, and I found an Audax 25mm tweeter that replaces blown original Goodmans items perfectly, but the Peerless midrange domes are rather rarer, so do check for driver health before parting with any cash.

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"Ever fancied owning your own record label? Fred James did..."



paul rigby

Ever fancied owning your own record label? I don't mean the type you find on MySpace. You know, ten CD-Rs full of three-chord guitar riffs, waiting on a shelf in jiffy bags, an email address, a logo drawn on Microsoft Paint and Bob's your uncle. Oh, no. I mean a proper label with history! Fred James did...

Based in Nashville, USA, James is a performing artist, runs production companies and has his own roster of artists. Putting all that to one side however, he's still a music fan. "I've always been a bit of a label nut and, because I travel in the same circles, came into contact with many record people", he told me.

Some of these contacts included one or two elderly, venerable gentlemen who would disclose their secrets, that they were the owners of long-standing, often completely obscure, record labels whose history sometimes ran back to WW2. Casual chats lead to serious discussions and James suddenly realised that he might have the opportunity to actually own a piece of history.

Take the Nashville-based Bullet, one of the first, post-war, independent labels, started during late 1945 and responsible for some important releases such as B.B. King's first two records plus other works by the likes of Wynonie Harris and Big Joe Williams.

"I was able to strike up an agreement that was structured very much like a publishing deal with them," said James, "so that I would have the rights but we would split the revenue 50/50. This was new money for them."

New money indeed, because it never occurred to these old label bosses that, thirty to fifty years after

they launched their respective labels, anyone would have any interest in the works. "In fact, the first label I acquired was Champion, then Rogana and Rich. The latter two were owned by ex-DJs who worked for the top R'n'B radio station in the country, based here in Nashville - WLAC, in the fifties: Hoss Allen and John R Richberg, respectively. All of this would be seen as a plain conflict of interest today and wouldn't be allowed, but not then. I approached both."

Once the rights were secured, James then had to secure sources to enable him to reissue this buried treasure onto CD. Finding the masters, especially for the larger, older labels, was a problem. "The label bosses looked at [masters] as disposable. They were very careful in keeping up their publishing contracts. They understood the value of that but, for the most part, they tossed away all the masters. So I then spent many years tracking down rare records and getting to know record collectors and dealers."

It wasn't all doom and gloom for James, however. While some labels, such as Poncello and Champion necessitated dubbing from vinyl via James's old Pioneer turntable, others such as Ref-O-Ree, provided almost its entire archive on tape.

It was during the examination of these tapes, recorded during the late sixties, that James discovered just how much confidence some of the specialist engineers had in their work.

"The earliest master we got hold of were 4-tracks via Ref-O-Ree. We had gone to great pains to track down all the associated 45s. We did this so we could match the reverb, compression and so on with the output from the masters to achieve the proper mix. But when we finally

heard the masters we found out that everything was already printed. That is, on the original masters, all of the reverb settings, the compression settings and so on had been included there and then. Normally, a studio would record the masters flat and then tweak settings during the mix. I can't imagine anyone being so sure of themselves today, that you would print to the master tape every effect."

Of course, other reasons for doing this would be money: combining the master with the mix would not only save time but it would also save tape. It was intriguing for James, however, to see how set in their ways the engineers were back then. Even when, around 1969 and 1970, the label acquired 8-track machines the engineers retained 4-track recording for a while and then only expanded to six tracks. Even those two extra tracks were not used for the original track but to add a separate demo, for example. Hence, the combination of economy and confidence continued – almost out of habit.

James now has a healthy stable of historical labels including, "Bullet, Delta, Surespeed, Champion, Cherokee, Calvert, Poncello, Ref-O-Ree... I think I've had enough!"

Now you can judge the quality of these rediscovered labels for yourself because you can hear the lot via SPV, in the UK. Generally available via any decent Internet retailer and, if you can find one, High Street record shop, each label is packed in a neat digipack with titles such as 'The Champion Record Story', 'Bullet Record Blues' and 'The Delta Record Story'. On Amazon, for example, just enter the record label name and SPV in the search engine to find the right releases. Every CD offers an excellent cultural education and, of course, some great music. ●

THE SEVENOAKS SUMMER

STOCK CLEARANCE

Listed below is just a small selection of our clearance items. There is up to an incredible 70% off the original RRP on these end-of-line* hi-fi and home cinema separates, speakers and accessories. Stock is limited and when it's gone, it's gone so don't miss a chance to pick up a bargain!

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- Arcam FMJ P7 Power Amplifier £1,549.00
- Arcam FMJ AV9/P7 Processor/Power..... £1,999.00
- Dali Suite 2.8 Speakers £499.00
- Spendor S3a Speakers £599.00
- Spendor S5a Speakers £899.00
- Spendor S6a Speakers £1,199.00
- Spendor S8a Speakers £1,549.00
- Spendor SR5 Surround Speaker £349.00
- Spendor C5a Centre Speaker £449.00

BRISTOL 0117 974 3727

- Arcam AVA P1000AV Power Amplifier £999.00
- In Focus IN82 DLP Projector £1,949.00
- KEF KHT2005.3 AV Speaker Package £549.00
- KEF Ref 201 Speakers (Inc Stands) £2,529.00
- Linn Chakra 5100 Power Amplifier £899.00
- Monitor Audio Bronze BR2 Speakers £149.00
- Monitor Audio GS20 Speakers £1,104.00
- REL R-505 Sub Woofer £649.00
- REL T-2 Sub Woofer £319.00
- Spendor C5a Centre Speaker £419.00

BROMLEY 020 8280 1880

- Arcam DiVA DV137 DVD Player £549.00
- Arcam Logo Sub Woofer £299.00
- Arcam Muso Speakers £399.00
- Cyrus CD6s CD Player £349.00
- Loewe Individual 26 Selection LCD TV £1,049.00
- Loewe Individual Compose 46 HD+TV £3,045.00
- Loewe Xelos A32 HD+ DR+ LCD TV £1,499.00
- Q Acoustics 1000i AV Speaker Package £349.00
- Teac CRH2571 CD / DAB System £199.00
- Teac Ref 300/III CD / DAB System £315.00

CHESEA 020 7252 9488

- Arcam DiVA AVP700 AV Processor £939.00
- Arcam DiVA P1000 AV Power Amplifier £1,104.00
- Cyrus 6 v2 Amplifier £454.00
- Cyrus Discmaster 8.0 DVD Player £519.00
- Demon DVD1940 DVD Player £149.00
- Demon DVD2930 DVD Player £324.00
- Monitor Audio Radius H225 Hear Spks £129.00
- Monitor Audio Silver In-Ceiling Speakers £399.00
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- Ump Classic Movie DVD System £1,299.00
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- Mitridian G55 AV Power Amplifier £1,849.00
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- KEF KIT510 DVD System £574.00
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- Marantz PM15 S1 Amplifier £909.00
- Marantz RC3001 Universal Remote £194.00
- Pioneer DCS370 DVD System £199.00
- Pioneer DVI X50 DVD Player £289.00
- QED HDMI 4x4 Matrix Switcher £844.00
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- Spectral CL1552 Equipment Stand £1,299.00

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- Arcam FMJ P38 Power Amplifier £549.00
- Cyrus AV Master 8.0 AV Processor £519.00
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- KEF KHT3005SE AV Speaker Package £1,039.00
- KEF XQ10 Speakers £454.00
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- Loewe Xelos A32 DR+ 100 LCD TV £1,124.00
- Monitor Audio RS5 Speakers £324.00
- Panasonic TH42PZ81 Plasma TV £974.00
- Panasonic TH50PZ80 Plasma TV £1,284.00

MANCHESTER 0161 831 7868

- Arcam DiVA DV137 DVD Player £499.00
- Artcoustic Diablo Surround Speakers £634.00
- Artcoustic C1 Centre Speaker £374.00
- Loewe Xelos 26 LCD TV £729.00
- Monitor Audio GS60 Speakers £1,699.00
- Monitor Audio Radius R45 Rear Spks £44.00
- Revel S12 Surround Speakers £214.00
- Tivoli Model 1 One Portable Radio £59.00
- Yamaha AS2000 Amplifier £1,199.00
- Yamaha CDS2000 CD Player £789.00

NORWICH 01603 767005

- Audica CS-S1 Surround Speakers £99.00
- Creek Destiny Amplifier £779.00
- KEF KHT6000ACE Surround Speakers £199.00
- Lexicon RT10 Universal Disc Player £1,374.00
- Musical Fidelity XT100 Amplifier £899.00
- ProAc D15 Speakers £1,199.00
- Loewe Xelos A32 DR+ 100 LCD TV £1,124.00
- Spendor AS Speakers £974.00
- Spendor SA1 Speakers (Inc Stands) £280.00
- Yamaha DV966500 DVD Player £280.00

OXFORD 01895 241773

- Primare A30.2 Power Amplifier £599.00
- Primare CD21 CD Player £849.00
- Primare CD31 CD Player £1,299.00
- Primare I21 Amplifier £649.00
- Primare Pre 30 Pre Amplifier £749.00
- Tese CRH2571 CD/DAB System Inc Spks £180.00
- Teac RX1 DAB Radio £49.00
- Tivoli Model 3 AM/FM Clock Radio £115.00
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- Yamaha DVDS1700 DVD Player £199.00

SEVENOAKS 01732 459550

- Arcam DiVA AVP700 Processor £899.00
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- Primare DVD26 DVD Player £499.00
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- Spendor C5 Centre Speaker £489.00
- Spendor C5.2 Centre Speaker £484.00
- Spendor SR5 Surround Speaker £549.00
- Sunfire True EQ Sub Woofer £1,099.00
- Yamaha RXN600D AV Receiver £299.00

SOUTHAMPTON 023 8033 7770

- KEF KIT510 DVD System £574.00
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- Marantz PM11 S2 Amplifier £2,144.00
- Marantz PM15 S1 Amplifier £999.00
- Marantz VP15 S1 DLP Projector £3,499.00
- Mordaunt Short Mezzo 6 Speakers £499.00
- Pioneer PDX20 CD System £389.00
- Quad 89 Power Amplifier £389.00
- Sony 5100 Z4 DVD Player £244.00
- Yamaha BDS9900 Blu-Ray Player £454.00

TUNBRIDGE WELLS 01892 531543

- Arcam DiVA DV137 DVD Player £599.00
- Arcam FMJ P7 Power Amplifier £1,899.00
- Cyrus CD6s CD Player £349.00
- Demon AV19300 AV Receiver £489.00
- DVDO i-Scan VP50 Video Scanner £1,399.00
- KEF KIT760 DVD System £649.00
- Living Control Music Box 3 Server £1,999.00
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- Partington Dreamlight Broadcast £199.00
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- Marantz MM8003 Power Amplifier £974.00
- Project Debut III Phono USB Turntable £194.00
- REI R-505 Sub Woofer £749.00
- Yamaha DVNS2700 DVD Player £274.00

NOTTINGHAM 0115 911 2121

- Harman Kardon AVR155 AV Receiver £289.00
- Harman Kardon TU970 DAB Tuner £199.00
- KEF iQ90 Speakers £999.00
- KEF KHT1005.2 AV Speaker System £929.00
- Loewe Spherus R220R+ LCD TV £2,074.00
- Monitor Audio Bronze BR2 Speakers £149.00
- Monitor Audio GSPX Surround Speakers £999.00
- Monitor Audio Radius R270 Speakers £249.00
- Musical Fidelity A1008 Amplifier £1,949.00
- Quad 12L2 Speakers £249.00

*Some items are ex-display but all are sold with full warranty. These products are only available from the stores listed and are subject to availability - please confirm before travelling. All prices were correct at time of going to press. End-of-line and clearance offers are not available in conjunction with any other offer or promotion. Advert valid until 31/07/2009, E&OE.

"I can't help feeling that the design ethos behind most transistor amplifiers is farcical for serious audio work..."



noel keyword

A loudspeaker that's a health hazard isn't anything new it seems; in fact it's traceable back to Victorian times when it was noticed that electric arcs could be made to 'sing' - and electric arcs produce life-threatening ozone gas. So I was amazed to see the purple glow of a plasma arc coming from the rare Lansche Audio No3 loudspeaker in a room at this year's Hi-End Show in Munich, Germany. It's an arresting sight, no doubt, and you can see why if you type 'plasma tweeters' into YouTube. Yet it was the amplifier driving these loudspeakers that was even more intriguing I felt after a little reflection, because it used custom manufactured audio V-FET output transistors. Finally, I've stumbled across a solid-state amplifier built on similar lines to a valve amplifier and it's worth saying a little more about this product.

But it was the loudspeakers that first caught my eye, although I smelt them before I saw them! The Lansche Audio No 3s are a two way design using a conventional bass/midrange unit and their own horn loaded plasma tweeter (see <http://ib-lansche.de>). Plasma tweeters have no diaphragm so there is no moving mass and, in simple outline at least, this should result in near perfect treble reproduction. If only life were so simple! Lansche say their tweeter does not produce ozone, which has a strong smell, because it uses a ceramic catalyst to prevent this and because it operates at a very high temperature. So perhaps the peculiar odour I smelt was produced by something else; I recall that Japanese mains transformers used to pong when they got hot because a fish byproduct was used in their construction. So I can't be certain the plasma tweeter was the culprit,

but the odour was pungent and quite strong, and I couldn't help but link it to the loudspeakers in my mind. All the same, the intense purple glow of the arc deep inside the horn diverted my attention away from thoughts of being poisoned by ozone whilst listening to music. Sound quality seemed good, although noise from the Show intruded as always.


A single Japanese gentleman sat beside a set of amplifiers driving the loudspeakers and he was alive enough: I know because I spoke to him! Dr Kazuhiko Nishi explained that he was the President of Digital Do Main Inc (see www.digital-do-main.com), manufacturers of the natty looking amplifiers sitting beside him; the Lansche loudspeakers were on loan in their room. Because the Hi-End Show has no fewer than four large halls full of extravagantly styled and finished products the elaborate extrusions used in the B-1a power amplifiers barely registered with me. However, when Dr Nishi explained that Digital Do Main Inc made all their own (static induction) transistors, including the output V-FETs - a 1970s fabrication technique - and that each V-FET had an active surface area equivalent to one hundred conventional output transistors, my ears pricked up. Fabricated in a vacuum with a deposition of silver to help conduction, he told me, it was obvious that Digital Do Main were attempting to overcome the limitations of ordinary power transistors optimised not for audio work, but for their ability to handle and switch large currents at relatively low cost.

By way of contrast Digital Do Main claim their devices are for audio alone and produce even order distortion harmonics only. They also work at far lower current densities than are the norm for transistors. The oft quoted strength of valves is that

they produce benign sounding second harmonic distortion and this does account for their sense of smoothness I believe. But also important is the fact that valves operate at far lower current densities than transistors and this is likely why they lack their hardness of tone and slightly opaque midband, lower currents exciting conductor and dielectric colourations less. Output valves such as KT88s and 300Bs were designed specifically for audio reproduction and transistors need to be purposed likewise, but they are not at present - this amplifier being an interesting exception.

So will Digital Do Main's B-1a amplifier sound like a valve amp? Probably not because I suspect microphony and secondary emission add further to the valve sound and the Digital Do Main amps will lack both. However, possessing the strengths of valves without their weaknesses, I can't help but feel this amplifier is going to sound a lot better than most solid-state designs. And, just as the best sounding valve amplifiers use valve power supplies, so the Digital Do Main amps use V-FET power supplies, Dr Nishi was keen to point out.

So here's a solid-state amplifier that uses the same thinking that goes into the best valve amplifiers and is similarly constructed around dedicated audio amplifying devices. It isn't cheap at 1 million Yen (£6,550) but it may well reveal what is holding solid-state back quality wise, and lead the way to better amplifiers. For I can't help feeling that the design ethos behind most transistor amplifiers, where standard IC building blocks containing twenty or thirty crappy transistor junctions are used blithely as if they were just one device, is farcical for serious audio work. Perhaps when this radical Japanese amplifier hits our shores we will find out whether I am right or not. ●



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" yes, cables do make a difference but no, you don't need to obsess over them... "



adam smith

I must open with something of a confession this month, namely that I experienced a moment of trepidation when tasked with carrying out a cable group test. Well actually I slammed the phone down, and ran and hid whimpering behind the sofa, but before long a sense of perspective prevailed and I decided to take on this formidable task! As I mentioned in the review, the range of opinions on cables veers wildly from enthusiast to enthusiast, and takes in the extremes of fully paid-up sceptics to out and out obsessives. This sure seems to be a topic on which strong opinions are frequently generated...

From my own point of view, I am certainly not a sceptic, but must confess to a generally fairly hesitant approach to the whole proceedings. As a degree qualified electronic engineer I cannot help but feel that there is certainly plenty of scope for cables with differing capacitances, inductances and characteristic impedances to have an effect on the sound. The whole system of amplifier output stage, cable and loudspeaker is electrically quite involved and has the potential to be finely balanced. It is most certainly not beyond the realms of science that altering one of these factors will indeed impact on the sonic performance, be it in straightforward frequency response terms that everyone understands, or a more involved effect that takes in the stored energy, impulse response or RF susceptibility of the setup.

The trouble is that this seems to open the door to a whole host of 'characterful' individuals who make wild claims about their cables, some of which are amusing, some of which are fanciful, and a faint few that are downright ridiculous! On a purely personal level, I still have problems with the concept of a directional

cable; certainly in terms of screening, if such an item is only terminated at one end of its run, then behaviour of the item with respect to noise suppression will be altered according to which way round it is connected, but I cannot help but think that if a basic cable really is directional, then there is something fundamentally wrong with it!

The problem for the more casual purchaser is then how to cut their way through this miasma of technobabble in order to make sense of it all, and find the cable that is right for them. Obviously this is where magazines like *Hi-Fi World* come in, to try and give you a helping hand through the maze and I hope I provided a helpful stepping stone with this month's group test.

From my own point of view, the test, and the candidates involved, proved very interesting. It would be nice to think that as the price went up, so did the performance but I found this not to be the case necessarily, and even then I am merely one listener with one pair of ears, even if they are admittedly superb [if you do say so yourself! Ed.]. The key here is that each person has different tastes, and my opinion of the excellent van den Hul Thames as occasionally a little over-smooth may be exactly what someone else needs in their brighter system.

It was interesting to hear that none of the cables under test were in any way disastrous, but some definitely showed more promise than others. I was also pleased to hear that some of those new technologies actually do work. I have encountered MIT cables before and the mysterious activities going on in their little black boxes are highly effective at releasing the inner heart of the music. Equally, I was prepared to be rather underwhelmed by the results gained by powering

up those crazy active shields on the Synergistic Research Tesla Accelerator loudspeaker cables, but the differences were immediate and quite obvious. Finally, I managed to stop fondling the Siltech Classic Anniversary 550i long enough to listen to them and realise that they are indeed, rather special...

Of course, I am not advocating that you go out and buy them for your budget setup, because the key in choosing such items is to fit them into your system; building your system around them is far from being the right way to go! Also take time to ponder whether your hard-earned moolah would be better spent elsewhere. Consider for a moment that the £935 price tags that the Siltechs carry would upgrade my Audio Technica ATOC9MLII cartridge to an Ortofon Kontrapunkt b, or just about add a Hi-Cap to my Naim Supernait and, good as those Siltechs are, either of these would bring about a far bigger change. A cable should never be treated as a cure for something that is wrong or missing in a setup, but judicious application of the right item can fine tune your sound by that final degree.

So there we are, my cable cards are laid on the table. Yes, they do make a difference but, no, you don't need to obsess over them or set out to buy the dearest item you can possibly afford! As Patrick Miller of Sugden Audio, distributors of the Siltech interconnects, put it very succinctly and with typical Yorkshire understatement, "they're overkill on a £2,000 system and probably the weakest link in a £30,000 one". As always, the important thing is to listen, find an item you like and then think for a moment whether it really will sit into your system effectively and if it is the best route to take. As with so many things in life, striking the right balance is the key. ●

vinyl section

contents

AUGUST 2009

www.hi-fiworld.co.uk

STEP CHANGE 100

David Price assembles the ultimate Technics SL-1200 turntable package - including Timestep PSU, SME Series V tonearm and Koetsu Red Signature cartridge!

DENON DP-200USB 105

Patrick Cleasby reviews this new premium priced USB turntable.

LORICRAFT PRC3 106

Paul Rigby tries out a super new record cleaning machine.

ATTWOOD CONCERT STAGE 109

Tony Bolton auditions an impressive mid-price phono stage.

ORTOFON CADENZA 112

Noel Keywood purloins a pair of brand new high end moving coils from the Ortofon stand at the Munich High End Show!

news

ROLLERCOASTER 12s

Last month, we looked at a range of 10" vinyl releases via Rollercoaster Records. This month, we'd like to tell you about that company's 12" selection. Starting with the understated title 'Rock! Rock!, Rock!' which focuses on Johnny Powers who recorded for Sun Records and was the first white artist to sign for Tamla Motown. This album features a wide selection of his work.

'Rockaphilly!: Philadelphia Rock'n'Roll' and 'Rockaphilly!: More Philadelphia Rock'n'Roll' takes the archives from the Arcade label which featured a number of fifties rarities and, as Arcade also handled Bill Hayley, a number of guest appearances from his Comets. Finally, look out for 'Three Piece' from the original Crickets, Buddy Holly's backing band. Recorded in 1987.



Crickets

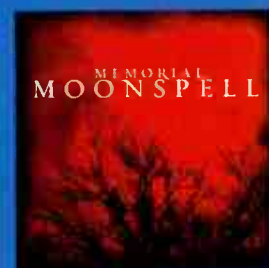
Three Piece



HE AIN'T HEAVY...

...but, then again this rocking set of releases just might be! Newly reissued on Devil's Jukebox (www.lamf.biz) is The Damned's excellent 'Machine Gun Etiquette' from 1979, featuring the sublime, 'Smash It Up'. Now presented as a double album with extra rarities and limited to 666 copies. Out now on Speakers Corner is Santana's 'Lotus', a whopping great 3LP live album, recorded in Japan in 1973 but rarely seen on general release - especially in vinyl form. A superb album.

Next we have three from SPV, in Germany. Creedence Clearwater Revisited's 'Recollection' is a triple LP recorded in 1997 during their Canadian tour. 'Memorial', on the other hand, is doom goth metal at its best, being the seventh album via Moonspell. A double vinyl LP in a gatefold, it sees the band at their heaviest. Rose Tattoo's 'Pain' is a 180gm reissue of the 2002 album offering heavy blues-like rock'n'roll in a Led Zeppelin kind of way, offering a fun time by fans of the legends.



COWBOY JUNKIES

The Cowboy Junkies' 'Trinity Revisited', reissued on Diverse Records (www.diversevinyl.com), has been mastered by the legendary British engineer, Ray Staff and pressed by the audiophile-friendly Pallas, in Germany (who also handle Speakers Corner and Pure Pleasure). This is a live interpretation of 'The Trinity Sessions'.



HELIOCENTRICS

The Heliocentrics, a UK-based jazz/psyche outfit, have been joined by Ethiopian jazz legend, Mulatu Astatke with this new release, 'The Heliocentrics and Mulatu Astatke' (Strut), adding a progressive funk vibe to Astatke's light jazz touch.

CLASSIC RECORDS TRIO

New out on the US-based label are two 200gm reissues from Big Star: the power pop trio that, during the seventies, sat on the cusp of pop, respecting the Beatles dominated past whilst stretching into the future. '#1 Record' (1972), the band's superb harmony-inflected debut is full of jangly guitars whilst the equally impressive 'Radio City' saw the dominance of band member, Alex Chilton, and his pop-centric vibes.

Classical fans should also look out for Villa-Lobos' 'The Little Train of the Caipira' and Ginastera's 'Estancia' and 'Panambi'. Excellently mastered direct from thick, 35mm magnetic film which negated any possibility of print-through problems, retaining excellent sound quality, these pieces from 1958 exude the best from the primitivism movement.



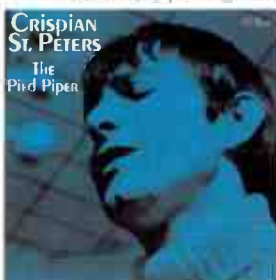
VINYL LOVERS & MONK



On the Vinyl Lovers label are two albums from Ozric Tentacles: 'Erpland' (1990) mixed reggae and dub with Asiatic vibes that fell easily into classic Dance culture while 'Sliding Gliding Worlds' is a mid-paced, trippy outing from 1988 with

plenty of melodies. Next, a retrospective from the mid-sixties singer-songwriter, Crispian St. Peters. 'The Pied Piper' features his hits 'The Pied Piper' and 'You Were On My Mind'. More contemporary, is the intriguing seven-track 10" EP from Michael Buble who sings the songs from the 2001 film, 'Totally Blonde'.

As a label, Monk tends to concentrate on older recordings including three from the legendary guitarist, Django Reinhardt: 'The 1938 Paris and London Debut Sessions', 'From The Ultraphone Shelves' and 'The Last Years Of Peace 1936-1937'. All three albums are presented in 78rpm-like brown, die-cut sleeves.



TWO FROM MO-FI

Mobile Fidelity has released two new LPs for jazz fans. McCoy Tyner's 'Sahara' is a brilliant release from 1972 offering such energy and inspired keyboard playing from Tyner that the LP became one of the most significant jazz LPs of the seventies. Although vibraphonist Milt Jackson doesn't quite hit the same heights on 1962's 'Invitation', originally on Riverside, it is an excellent sextet 'happening'.



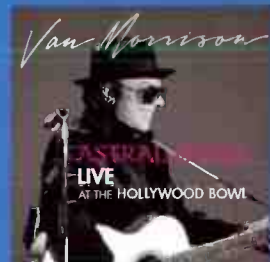
...AND FINALLY

There's a few to get through, so settle down. First up is Van Morrison who revisits old times with 'Astral Weeks At The Hollywood Bowl' (Listen To The Lion Records), a new double album, gatefold that looked again at the 1968 classic for the first time. Excellent stuff.

The Beastie Boys have also revisited a classic album - 'Paul's Boutique' (EMI) is now 20 years old. This digitally remastered 180gm vinyl, in a double gatefold fold-out sleeve, includes a digital download offer plus bonus audio commentary from the band.

No so much revisited as rediscovered, 'U.S.: Music With Funkadelic' (Westbound) by United Soul, a side project of the members of Funkadelic without George Clinton, has never been issued - until now.

Beirut's 'March Of The Zapotec And Realpeople Holland' (Pompeii) is eclectic, to say the least. A new indie release, combining bedroom-created synth noodling with Mexican funeral marches. One for the adventurous.



no sense that's it's a crude bodge job. The SME armplate is £89.95, with combined fitting costs of the armplate (and arm itself) and power supply an additional £95. Fitting either of the above is not beyond a modestly competent DIY-er – or even me – getting to the armplate is simply a case of undoing a fair number of screws (and not losing them), then pulling the deck's feet and base off, pulling the mid-section out and then taking out the stock arm – about thirty minutes. The PSU wire takes minutes when everything's off, so to speak.

The mat is specially made by Steve Herbelin of Herbie's Audio Lab. It's an extremely 'tacky' rubber that lightly but effectively sucks the record on to the platter, and at the same time damps the platter acoustically, so when you tap it you no longer get that dreadful 'ping' sound. Instead, it just goes 'doomp', suggesting itself as an extremely effective device for the job in hand. The downside is that it's not the world's most sexy looking mat, and of course unlike the similarly priced SoundDeadSteel Isoplatmat adds no extra flywheel effect. I've found – through lots of experimentation – that the SL-1200 does like a little extra mass, although not that much. Via the standard inboard PSU it rather struggles with the likes of Puresound's £249.95 Copper Mat, which is just too heavy, although Sound Hi-Fi are offering this with the Timestep PSU, which reportedly works better with cleaner power going in to its motor.

SOUND QUALITY

Having spent a lot of time with my original modified Technics, which used the stock SL-1200 power supply plus a superbly modified Rega RB250 tonearm and Lyra Dorian cartridge, the first thing I did after I'd run the new deck in was to transplant the Lyra cartridge to the SME of the new deck. The Dorian is a beautiful sounding design in my view, but has a noticeable upper treble peak, so I thought it best to eliminate it – initially at least – in my listening.

The Timestep SL-1200 seemed to take a while to warm through; I left the unit powered up and running for a few days. As before, I also put it on a Base Isolation platform, although the Timestep '1200 didn't have the benefit of the Isoacoustic isolation feet as well, unlike the first modded deck I tried in September 2007. Once it had all settled, run in and warmed

through, it was crunch time...

I first cued up a DCS pressing of the Doors' 'L.A. Woman', their brilliant mid-period album featuring the epic 'Riders on the Storm'. As many will know, this features an opening section with gentle hi-hat work and a walking bass line. I was initially struck by the warmth of the sound, the SL-1200 really capturing the fact that this is an analogue recording – and from 1971 at that. Bass guitar was both fulsome and tuneful – the notes were very tight and strongly articulated, yet the deck also captured the subtle accenting in the playing. Midband was spacious, with oodles of detail, and fell back behind the speakers far better than my previous modded Technics by comparison. Fascinatingly, that slight upper midrange 'glint', which always plagued the stock SL-1200, was gone. In its place was an inky blackness so to speak – there was no



Timestep SL-1200 power supply - connects easily and brings a major improvement to the sound, especially across the midband...

evidence of 'metal plating' going on. Up top, the cymbals were sublime, and the whole track had an airiness that was breathtaking.

Moving to Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' from 'Houses of the Holy', and the pattern continued. This time I was struck by the immediacy of Robert Plant's vocals, and the accuracy of image placement within the soundstage. I found the definition across the midband superb – guitar notes were unexpectedly crisp on what is, after all, a thirty five year old analogue recording. Still, the Timestep SL-1200 brilliantly caught the way the song built up to a crescendo, and the soaring guitar and drum breaks at the end. Needless to say, those epic John Bonham drums were pure joy. I found the fundamental signature of the basic SL-1200 to be there in its entirety, which is to say that wonderfully propulsive,



'up for it' sound, and a bass that seems just a little larger than life. But all the nasties – the lack of depth perspective, the 'shiny' midband and a general monochrome tonality – had gone completely.

Cue up a track with a strong groove, such as Scritti Politti's 'The Word Girl', and you can hear the difference that new PSU makes. It's almost counterintuitive to say this, but it feels looser. Given that the strength of the stock deck is its tautness and tightness, you'd think you wouldn't want to depart from this. Well, with that brilliant vice-like grip comes a slight sense of frigidity, kind of like a robot dancing. The Timestep deck retains the metronomic timing of the original, yet it's no longer so intrusive. The deck doesn't shout out at you that it's trying hard to keep perfect time anymore – it just does, and goes with the musical flow. This is an interesting point, because it's one of the greatest objections that 'the belt drive lobby' have to direct drive. Direct Drive is (rightly in my view) accused of being superbly tight but just a tad mechanical – and the Timestep SL-1200 shows this needn't be so. The deck let me enjoy singer Green Gartside's vocal inflections in all their subtle glory, the new PSU making his words seem as sweet as honey.

Enamoured as I was with this sound, I still wanted more. I've always adored SME Series V tonearms, but not uncritically. I feel they're just a little 'over damped' sounding, sometimes sucking a little of the emotion out of a performance in their brilliant and relentless search for detail. In my experience, it's possible to circumvent this tendency with an astute choice of cartridge such as the brilliant Koetsu Red Signature. Now, the Koetsu is a



flawed gem – it is not on the pace in terms of its fine detail retrieval and treble air, nor its rather soft bass. However, if there's a more musical and mellifluous sounding pickup, then I have yet to hear it. On it went, into the SME V...

Fully loaded with Timestep PSU, SME V and Koetsu RS, the Technics SL-1200 is a revelation. It's simply not the same turntable as that version you see in use every Friday and Saturday night – although the brilliance of the Timestep Technics shows just how great those jobbing DJ decks could all be. The Koetsu-SME combination is surely one of nature's best – each flattering the other to give their most, whilst almost completely circumventing their respective downsides. More impressive still then, that the newly powered SL-1200 platform was willing and able to show all this. The Crusaders' 'Street Life' showed a breathtaking rendition of Randy Crawford's vocal – tonally deep, dark, smokey and velvety (just as she is in real life), the opening bars of this 1979 jazz funk classic were captivating. Then the backing kicked in, pushing out a beautifully tangible sound in to my room, all playing brilliantly together with a sense of electricity sparking around the room.

Kraftwerk's 'Computerwelt' kicked off with fissile energy – the Technics showed all its grip to best effect, and it was now allied with a delightful rhythmic flow that made the song's precise combination of beats and notes suddenly sing lyrically in front of my very ears. Whereas the Lyra would have told me all about the back of the soundstage, the Koetsu reminded what was really going on at the front. Vast amounts of detail were proffered forth, but not pushed into my face or rubbed into my nose. Instead, I sat back and enjoyed a captivating five minutes of classic electronica, completely oblivious to what it was being played on.

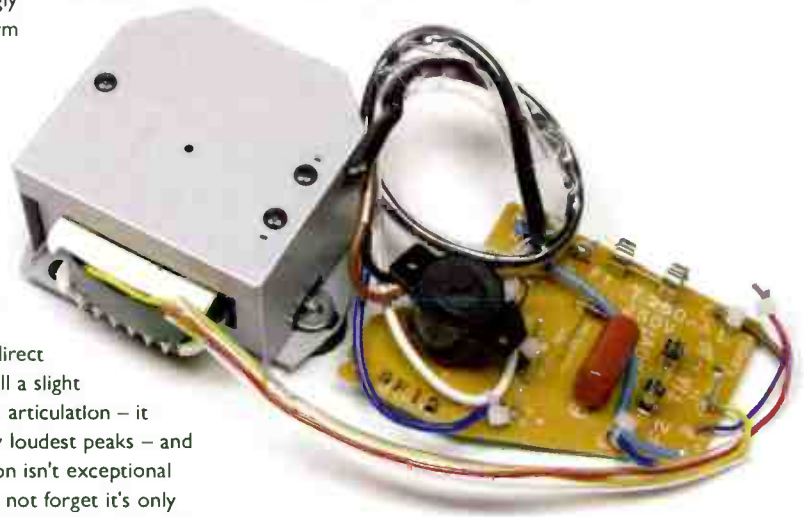
In absolute terms, the SL-1200 is still not quite perfect. It retains its slightly 'closed in' left-to-right soundstaging (a distinctive charac-

teristic seemingly regardless of arm fitted), and it struggles with really low bass (although upper bass is among the very best in the business). Also, compared to a top reference direct drive there's still a slight lack of dynamic articulation – it sits on the very loudest peaks – and imaging precision isn't exceptional either. Still, let's not forget it's only an £800 turntable (with the Timestep PSU) and despite its foibles remains one of the most musical turntables at any price.

My only personal caveat about this particular combination is that I feel the stock feet simply aren't good enough – the deck responded almost too well to being placed on two Audiophile Furniture Base Platforms, whereas my previous Technics project with its Isonoe feet, only needed one layer of isolation to give of its best. This shows the isolation feet as a weak point – something to remember.

CONCLUSION

The fundamentals of the SL-1200 are excellent, and the more it is modded, the more they shine through and all the other issues fade into the background. What characterises this package is that it lets you enjoy the music in an eerily direct and unmediated way, something all too rare in hi-fi of any origin. For me, the most useful part of this exercise was to discover that for just £300, any Technics SL-1200 can be substantially improved with the new Timestep PSU. So along with that new arm, this is what your Technics SL-1200 now deserves most!



Timestep PSU mod uses a new National Semiconductor LM317L low noise regulator, expensive Vishay rectifiers and premium Nuvotem 'Audio Grade' toroidal transformer...

MENU PRICING

Technics SL-1210	£479.00
SME armplate	£89.95
Timestep PSU	£299.00
strobe disable	£49.95
audiophile mat	£89.95
total fitting cost:	£95.00
SME Series V	£2,095.00
Koetsu Red K Signature	£2,344.05
TOTAL	£4,943.90

TIMESTEP SL-1200 £4,943.90

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MEASURED PERFORMANCE

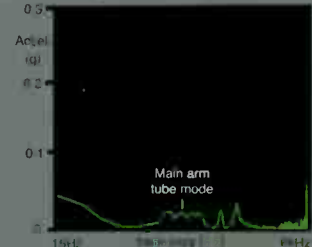
The SL1200 MkII ran at exactly the right speed, our speed stability analysis showing 3153Hz against the 3150 target value – a negligible 0.1% fast error. Unweighted wow and flutter, as much a measure of test disc eccentricity than anything else, was a low 0.094% with the DIN test disc carefully centred using a locked outside alignment groove. Weighted IEC Wow and Flutter was a very low 0.061% – it doesn't get much lower. So the Technics is measurably very speed-stable and accurate.

The SME V arm is meant to be one of the best and our measurements of its vibrational behaviour using a Bruel & Kjaer accelerometer show that this reputation isn't undeserved. The main tube mode is negligible at 0.02g, distributed around 400Hz. Few arms measure as well as this. High frequency modes were negligible too – unusual. This should be a super clean sounding arm, devoid of arm tube character and with great low

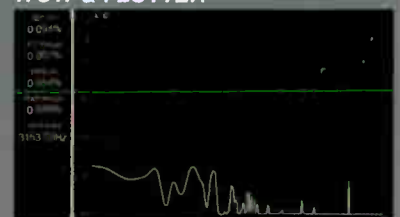
frequency dynamics and wide imaging. Measurement-wise this combination ranks amongst the best available for playing LP. NK

ARM VIBRATION

Arm vibration behaviour



WOW & FLUTTER



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Spin Cycle

Here's a thing - a quality turntable that records direct to USB flash memory! Patrick Cleasby wonders if it will work for the iPod generation...

Despite the fact that the vast majority of recorded music is now available digitally - whether on CD, iTunes or Spotify - there will always be instances of music lovers wanting to preserve digital copies of old unavailable vinyl B-sides, or those special, nostalgia infused crackles of a well-loved copy of 'Night Owl'...

USB turntables have been around for a while, so where is the novelty in the DP-200USB? Well the Denon's unique selling proposition is that it records MP3s to a flash drive. However you will still need to go to a computer to make use of the DP-200USB's other innovative feature - its 'Trans Music Manager' software, which attempts Gracenote's Music ID database lookup for track tagging using waveform analysis, as well as permitting track editing.

So in a market where the typical ION USB turntable is under £100, can the premium £199 price tag of the new Denon DP-200USB be justified?

GOING FOR THE SPIN

While not as cheap-looking as the ION USB rival, the pricier Denon still has a very plasticky appearance. But the fully automatic (except autostart for 10 inchers) turntable works well, plays 33s and 45s, and has a replaceable stylus with a claimed 400 hour life. Given it's likely to end up in houses with no phono stage equipped devices, under the platter is what Denon call an "equalizer

switch" which when 'on' gives a line level output via the fixed phono outputs. The power cable is also fixed. As well as setting the equaliser appropriately you have to put the drive belt on the driving roller, and put the supplied platter and rubber mat in place. Then you're able to play what the manual rather quaintly calls "analog records"!

Seizing a pile of my other half's somewhat mistreated 1980s American vinyl, as representative of the kind of material likely to be played on such a device, I assessed the analogue sound delivered by the turntable by plugging into the phono inputs of the Arcam AVR600 currently on test. Malcolm McClaren's 'Madam Butterfly' 12" appeared to be generating a decent, listenable resolution - results with LPs were more variable depending upon the state of the vinyl, but the Fine Young Cannibals' first LP impressed with a spritely rendition of 'Johnny Come Home', maybe just a bit lacking in the loping bottom end to anchor the track.

From there, it was simplicity itself to assay the direct-to-USB stick method of recording. Insert stick, press record and you're away (but with automatic levels only, unfortunately)! Denon's manual states a 1GB fob is enough to store 300 albums. They also state that other data on the drive should be backed up, and that other USB devices should not be used. Once on the stick, the music needs to be attached to a computer to transfer or play files, or a USB-

equipped audio device to play them.

I used a 4GB Verbatim fob to record, and played back using the AVR600 USB port. The key test was whether the sound from the fob got close to the deck's own analogue capabilities, and the good news is the sound was if anything improved, with an element of compression tightening up that flabby FYC bass...

Attempting to tag the recordings, Trans Music Manager was a bit lumpy running on a recent spec Sony VAIO PC under Windows Vista, and was sadly unable to Music ID a selection of ten relatively popular tracks, possibly due to their beaten up nature. Editing-wise, personally I would choose other software such as Audacity.

While the results were never going to match audiophile quality 24bit transcription using an expensive interface, the simplicity of the task and the decent quality of the 192kbps MP3 audio, means the DP-200USB is worth considering for those who don't want greater MP3 quality. This is, lets face it, a lot of people - and for that reason the Denon should suffice nicely for them.

CONCLUSION

Of course, the Denon is never going to be the vinyl front end for most of the readership of this magazine, either from a technical or an aesthetic point of view. However, as a tool to record your analogue tracks in the most elegant and automated way possible, it may be worth a punt.

VERDICT ●●●●
Expensive compared to the discounted competition, but shrewd thinking and clever technical design makes this ideal for those looking to avoid all the faff of recording into a computer.

DENON DP200 USB £199 95
Denon UK
☎ +44(0) 1234 741 200
www.denon.co.uk

FOR
- a market-defining product
- passable sonics
- convenience

AGAINST
- 16bit 192kbps MP3 only
- uninspiring finish
- price

To The Vortex



One of the most respected vinyl record cleaning machines on the market, Loricraft has upgraded its classic PRC3 to 'SE' status. Paul Rigby stands, mucky records at the ready...

Cleaning machines of the calibre of the Loricraft are almost unique in the hi-fi firmament. Firstly, they not only serve a niche (the vinyl market) but address a particular breed of vinyl 'creature'. Not the occasional vinyl spinner with a collection of three LPs. Oh no, this piece of meticulous engineering is for the chap who is not only dedicated in his search for new vinyl from home and abroad but is fanatical in his need to seek out rare, second-hand, items. He (for it's invariably a *he*, searches in old charity shops, rummaging on aching knees, in dark, dusty, web-strewn corners filled with discarded socks and bra straps whilst braving the possible collapse of half empty Monopoly boxes and dog-eared Mills & Boons from the shelf above [okay, to whom do I make the cheque payable? - *Ed.*]. More than that, like some latter-day explorer in search of the source of the Amazon, such fanatics will, without any care for their own safety, willingly enter local Record Fairs and stand next to some of the smelliest and most disgusting individuals society has to throw at us, in an endeavour to wrestle that rare item

from the teetering vinyl box that sways dangerously from the rear of the trestle table [that's enough about Patrick Cleasby! - *Ed.*]. Is it not right that such dedication and bravery should be rewarded with a tool that matches their devotion? The Loricraft PRC3 Mk.3 SE is such a tool – and all vinyl fanatics should take note.

Created to thoroughly clean records without leaving any residue or liquids behind, the Loricraft promises to not only remove all of the dirt and gunge from the grooves of your records but also the muck often found in second-hand platters and the Mould Release Agent, the pressing lubricant that remains in brand new vinyl. All of the latter infestations will not only hamper the progress of the needle through the record groove but will degrade the overall sound quality.

DESIGN

The PRC3 SE is one of the latest variants of the popular Loricraft PRC3 record cleaner. I say "one of" because Loricraft has also just released a 'DL' version which is basically an SE plus a Perspex cover, hinges

and arm rest for a total price of £1,799.

The new SE version, reviewed here and compared to the basic PRC3, features the addition of veneer on the outside and inside of the casing to enhance the looks and aid sound-proofing. The SE also includes a slightly more powerful, 16.5 litre, pump – up from 15 litres.

The Loricraft is presented as a closed box system with an acrylic-type, air-tight, cleaner liquid-proof top. I did, therefore, wonder where all the heat from the pump escaped to, until Loricraft confirmed that holes in the feet served that ventilation purpose along with the inner box design to encourage maximum air flow. Hence, you should never cover the feet or the whole system will switch off and reset once the unit has cooled down. The feet can also be adjusted for chassis levelling purposes.

As for the pump itself, this is a high quality model that can run at full pelt for extended periods without overheating. Then again, this is a powerful pump so how noisy is it? 'Not very' is the answer. In fact, the PRC3 is a very quiet machine, aided by the internal arrangement of the pump to allow asymmetrical sound absorption to reduce standing waves inside the box.

I actually found that the Loricraft ran quieter than its direct competitor,



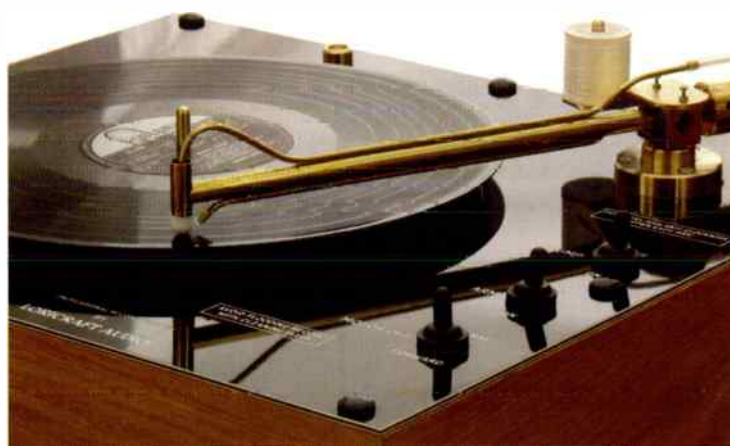
which uses basically the same cleaning technology, the Keith Monks RCM Omni Mk.VII (reviewed in the January 2009 issue of *Hi-Fi World*) but this was mainly down to the choice of platter as the Monks uses a metallic, rather clanky moulding.

On the subject of design comparisons, the PRC3 SE is much lighter than the beast that is the Monks – which will give you a hernia as soon as look at you. The Loricraft is also much easier and quicker to set up because the Monks demands a strict, post-transport, stripping of transport bolts, tags, covers *et al.* whilst the automatic features of the Monks also require more servicing than the Loricraft.

For those who want the automation features however, and a chassis that looks sleek and modern, they will nigh on hate the Loricraft which more resembles a hobbyist machine than the piece of furniture that is the Monks.

Cleaning fluid application on the Loricraft is manually applied, as is the brush (both are automatic features on the Monks) while the waste collecting jam jar is strapped onto the side of the chassis (it's inside, on the Monks) which makes the PRC3 look like a student with a back-pack.

Many – myself included – actually prefer this 'design' commitment. Yes



cleaning brush into any funny angle that I desire. What irritates me more is having to open the car bonnet-like platter lid of the Monks to get at the cleaning liquids and waste inside. Every time I had to open the Monks lid and prop it open with the included 'stick', I kept feeling like a Morris Minor owner whose fan belt had gone again.

OPERATION

The operation of the PRC3 SE largely follows that of the Monks and is derived from a record cleaning method first mooted by Percy Wilson, technical editor of *The Gramophone* magazine, during the late-fifties. You place your record onto the platter. Once cleaning liquid has been applied, a brush is used to dislodge the dust and gunge that resides in the record grooves. You then lift the attached arm to the centre of the record and activate the built-in vacuum pump. The pump then creates a sucking action at the tip of the arm nozzle. The thread you see sitting underneath the nozzle is there to act as a 'spacer' to encourage the vacuum or vortex effect at the nozzle's tip. With each platter rotation, the arm tracks the record outwards, taking advantage of the natural centrifugal force, simultaneously sucking up both liquid and grime, which is deposited into the jam jar-like bottle attached to the machine. The result? A pristine, dry, static-free, record ready to play.

For a more effective clean, instead of the above, standard, method, flood the LP with cleaning liquid (I heartily recommend L'Art Du Son which Loricraft also supply) then use the brush to agitate the liquid all over the record and then leave for two whole minutes. Rotate the platter forwards, using the brush to form a 'bow wave' of liquid. This will help eat into the fats that adhere the dust. Then use the vacuum. Then re-soak, agitate, wait, then brush in

the reverse direction (an option unavailable with the Monks) and vacuum again.

SOUND QUALITY

I tested new vinyl, my own older vinyl bought when new and second-hand LPs. The second-hand LPs proved the toughest cases to crack and highlighted that even a Loricraft cannot repair groove damage which will still remain audible, of course. Utilising my intensive cleaning technique I expected to hear a reduction in cracks and pops and I did. What I did not expect to hear, over all three categories of vinyl tested but made especially more apparent with second-hand vinyl, was the improvement in overall sound quality.

I didn't believe what I was hearing to begin with and had to repeat the tests on several occasions to make sure it wasn't a fluke. But yes, cleaning with the Loricraft actually improves the sound over all frequencies. The sheen of the original music was restored. The soundstage was widened and detail, only present in those extremes, was revealed for the first time. Brass was positively vibrant, voices more emotional, bass and piano livelier, the presentation more exciting and more involving. In short – the Loricraft gives you 'more'.

CONCLUSION

It may be advertised as a record cleaner but I would disagree with the description. The PRC3 is more than a cleaner, the Loricraft PRC3 SE is a deep cleaner. It's also a sound restorer, removing the malaise, encumbering all vinyl: new and old, 7" and 12" plus 78s. It raises and removes a carpet of accumulated micro-grime and grease to give you back your music. In effect, the PRC3 can be quantified as a significant hi-fi 'upgrade', and as such provides fine value for money even at its premium price.



the Loricraft switches look like the bomb bay controls on a Lancaster bomber but they're firm and practical, I like to monitor the waste cascading out of the vacuum arm to see that all is working correctly, I much prefer to add cleaner in my own way in my own time, thank you very much, and, finally, I prefer to swish the included

VERDICT

Despite the hobbyist looks, this is a supremely effective cleaning machine that has a dramatic effect on overall sound quality.

LORICRAFT PR3 SE £1,599

Loricraft

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loricraftinternetshop.co.uk/page008.html

FOR

- deep cleaning action
- relative ease of use
- build quality

AGAINST

- hobbyist design



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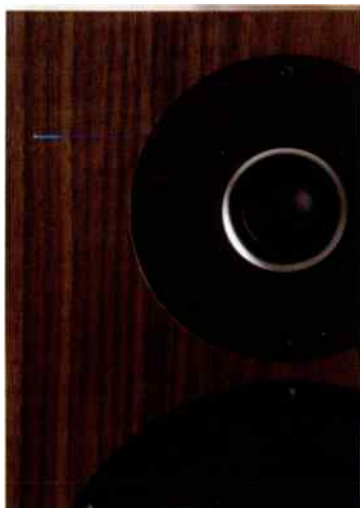
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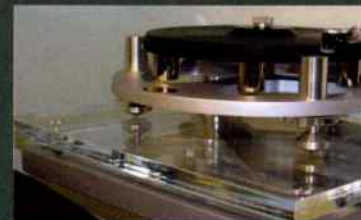
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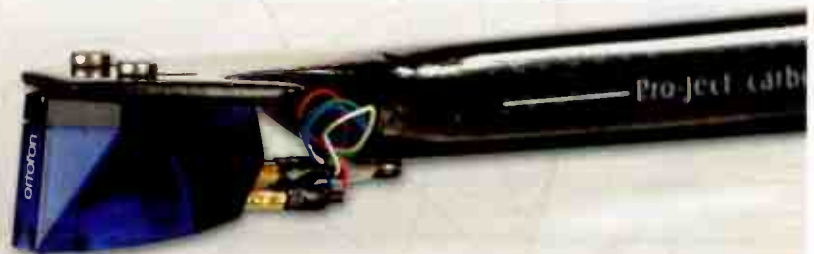
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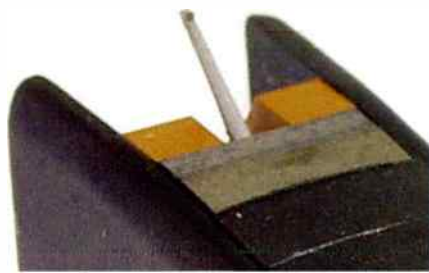
and stress free. Sadly, there are no parallel sides to aid easy and accurate alignment in the headshell, necessary to minimise distortion.

SOUND QUALITY

Well crafted moving coil cartridges are always a special experience – and Ortofon's especially so. I was in heaven reviewing both these units because by the time you spend this sort of money on one of their MCs it will show the art behind their technology. Ortofon's expensive MCs, including those here, combine beauty with accuracy, a combination that has me enthralled whenever I listen to them, which is quite often because I choose to live with a Kontrapunkt b, with its ruby cantilever. It's fast and concise, has a liquid clarity, sweet treble that is sonorous beyond the ability of CD by reproducing cymbals and triangles that ring, not clank, and it has an unerring sense of balance too. The b digs into the groove to reveal a wealth of detail, it sets up a wide sound stage and populates it convincingly with lively images of performers and instruments. It's viscerally engaging – but DP observes it's coolly accurate rather than romantically engaging. Since Leif Johanssen of Ortofon insinuated the same at the High End Show, as he pressed the boxes into my grasping hands [your words not mine, Noel! Ed.], I was a bit deflated by the thought that somehow the Kontrapunkt b wasn't quite the object of desire I had come to assume; it's a bit like confusing Kate Moss with a Fresian, I suppose!

The new Cadenza Blue suited my system nicely – but the Bronze did too quite frankly – although it was fairly obvious that the Bronze will better withstand solid-state 'shout' whilst the Blue is arguably too forthright for a solid-state phono preamp followed by a solid-state amplifier. My system uses a 300B valve amplifier designed and tweaked to avoid harshness and shout, so the Blue could stretch out and show its mettle, as could the Bronze which

The tapered, tubular aluminium cantilever of the Bronze, with a nude Replicant stylus attached to it. Tracking force 2.5 gms.



was just as impressive, albeit in a different way. In a nutshell then the Blue and Bronze sound different in detail only, and which is 'best' may come down to the system and personal preferences.

Both cartridges are, aurally, a fantastic experience. Think deep soundstaging, a sense of precision that challenges CD, wonderfully wide timbral resolution and beautifully sonorous treble that lacks the monochromatic, jittery quality of digital. They are also supremely even and svelte: the sound stage stretches wide, instruments and singers have vivid life – even a practised and critical pedant like me can't find fault in a wonderfully engaging panorama that is supremely fluid and easy to enjoy, yet exciting too. At this price level Ortofon engineer flat, accurate frequency response, devoid of the treble peaking that afflicts so many MCs, making them very obviously

"The new Ortofon Cadenzas achieve a level of fidelity that silences my critical faculties..."

– almost painfully – overbright. Both Cadenzas here avoid this problem.

I started off with the Blue in our office system comprising SME M2-10 arm on a Pioneer PLC-590, Eastern Electric Minimax valve phono stage feeding a Creek OBH-22 passive preamp, followed by Icon Audio MB845 power amplifiers connected to our Spondor s8e loudspeakers, quite a balanced system where the forward and detailed Minimax is contained by the smooth Spondors. The Blue was challengingly fast and deeply detailed, giving drums in Phil Collins 'I Don't Care anymore' on a 200gm vinyl re-release of 'Hello I Must Be Going', deliciously resonant impact, as they roll across the soundstage. The initial impact is hair trigger-fast and the decay of the drum kept dry and controlled. With a torrent of fine detail from cymbals and rim shots tumbling out with a sweetness of tone that only good analogue can manage, I was as impressed as ever by this cartridge (referring to its predecessor). Forced to consider it, I could see that the new Blue, like the outgoing Kontrapunkt b, put speed and revelation ahead of richness of tone.

My usual way to decide whether this goes too far is to spin bright and hard recordings and see whether they become unacceptable in these properties. So out came some newly pressed oldies, like The Who's

'My Generation'. By no means a great recording, I still found the LP enjoyable, even if the Blue is analytically revealing and I did find myself wondering what studio equipment it was that produced such a clanky sound, rather than listening to the music.

Bolting the Bronze in changed this. It has more presence in the lower midband, making for a texturally richer and more enveloping presentation that better drew me into the music, rather than encouraging me to sit on the sidelines and analyse it. Now 'My Generation' thundered out into the room – helped a little by a judicious increase in volume I'll warrant! – and I stopped wondering about what they were using in the studio and enjoyed the music. The Bronze is every bit as revealing as the Blue but fuller and a little more vivid with hand drums, cellos and male vocals in particular.

At home, differences between the cartridges were much the same as those I heard in the office. However, with a smooth sounding SME312 arm on a Garrard 401, an Icon Audio PS3 phono stage feeding my 300B amplifier direct, and tuned WAD KLS9 loudspeakers as well as B&W 683s to represent mainstream, the Blue was more at home and less obviously off balance in any sense. It still had striking insight and a vividly fast and detailed delivery, although a little less so than the Kontrapunkt b I had to remove before it, surprisingly. It seems that Ortofon are keen to steer away from the glassy and bright balance of rivals, so the Blue is a little more even keeled than the Kontrapunkt b whilst the Bronze offers a richer and even more musically engaging experience.

It has the same beautifully formed bass of the Blue, that is both tight and powerful, a richer lower midband that seemingly knits bass to midrange better to make for an enveloping sound stage that's a trifle more expansive than the Blue. I only had doubts when Glenn Gregory from Heaven Seventeen sang "kith the boys goodbye" in 'Come Live with Me'. Why it missed the sibilant content of "kiss" I'm not sure, since our measurements show, but the Blue captured "kiss" with surgical precision that left me in no doubt

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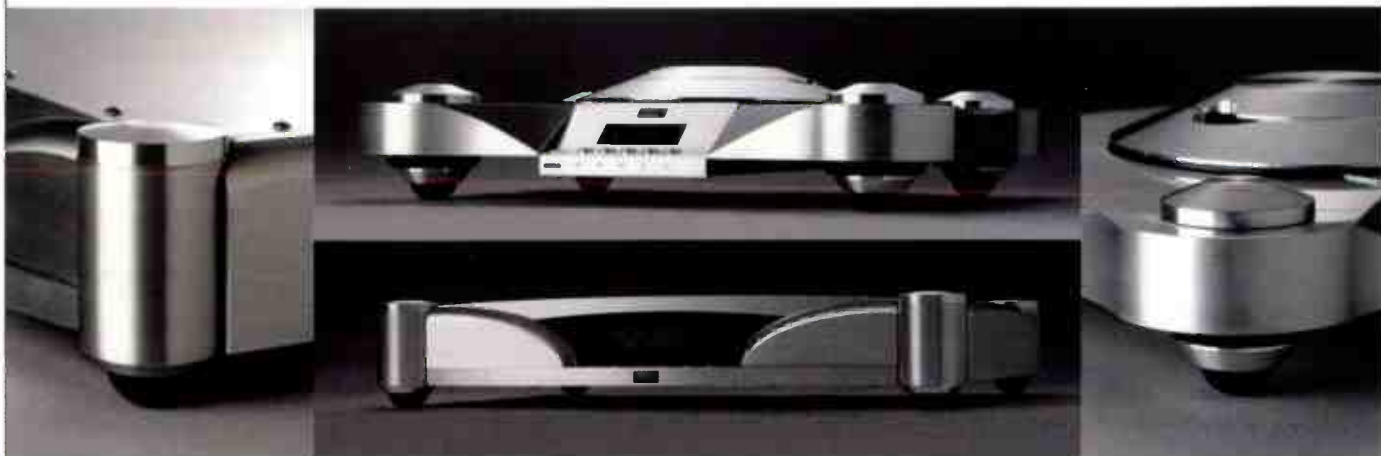
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CLASSIC CONTACTS

When a classic goes 'poof' your troubles have just started, but there may be a good ending. Replacing failing parts can improve the sound, so here is a short listing of all those companies who specialise in getting a classic up and running again after its deposited a small ring of soot on your ceiling!

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OCTAVE AUDIO WOODWORKING
(Bristol)
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Tel: 0117 925 6015
www.octave-aw.co.uk

NEXT MONTH

No matter what you're doing this summer, make sure that you've got your order in for September's *Hi-Fi World*, because it's packed with a diverse diet of weird and wonderful kit! We're running a major review of the latest Yamaha Soavo 1 Piano loudspeaker [pictured], which is the new, heavily reworked version of an old favourite. There's also an exclusive review of the superb Vivid B1 loudspeakers, straight from the pen of the original B&W Nautilus designer. For those on a tighter budget, our take on Cambridge Audio's new 650C CD player will appeal, and vinylistas will love our review of Avid's brand new SuperDiva turntable. We've also got a round up of all the latest and greatest affordable digital-to-analogue convertors. Here's just some of what we hope to bring you...

DAC SUPERTTEST: FIREYE II USB, FUBAR II USB, BERESFORD TC-7510, MUSICAL FIDELITY V-DAC, CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DACMAGIC, SYMPHONY MINI DAC PRE & BENCHMARK DAC-1

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ADVERTISERS INDEX

2nd Hand Hi-Fi	119
3GA	104
ABC Audio	42
Adam Audio	IFC
Analogue Seduction	114
Audio Components	124
Audio Emotions	26
Audio T	34
B&W	10
Big Ears	108
Billy Vee	111
Classique Sounds	116
Cymbiosis	116
Decent Hi-Fi	110
Eil.com	84
Electrocompaniet	OBC
Emille Labs	22
Enjoy the Music.com	48
Heathcote Audio	111
Heatherdale Audio	110
Henley Designs	68, 104, 114
Hi-Fi Sound	119
HiAudio	58
High End Cable	108
House of Linn	54
Ian Harrison	116
Icon Audio	118
Jordan Acoustics	64
KEF	30
Kudos	110
LFD	124
Lyngdorf	126
Mantra Audio	114
Melody	8
Midland Audio Exchange	122
MIT Cables	38
Musical Fidelity	126
Origin Live	90
Parts Conexxion	104
Radlett Audio	124
Renaissance	48
Retro Reproduction	108
Rochester Hi-Fi	126
Sevenoaks	92, 94
Sound HiFi	110
Sounds Fowndation	14
Sugden	90
Tannoy	16
The Chord Company	96
Turntable World	119
UKD	86
Usher	IBC
Walrus Systems	88

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SEPTEMBER 2009 - 8TH JULY

OCTOBER 2009 - 5TH AUGUST



ROLLING STONES

SOME GIRLS

1978

"on sound quality alone, this series of remasters is definitely worth it..."

When musos talk about 'classic' Stones albums, they always harp on about the early sixties releases or 'Exile On Main Street', 'Beggars Banquet' and 'Sticky Fingers'. However, for the albums released between 1972 to around 1977, those same observers go a bit quiet. There are good reasons for that: Keith Richards was hooked on drugs whilst Mike Jagger was hooked on being a celebrity. The result? The band didn't produce the goods. After 1982, Jagger and Richards' arguments on band direction tore apart the creative heart of the outfit: Richards wanting to follow his rock roots and Jagger wanting to investigate contemporary trends. In between these destructive periods, the Stones produced two worthy albums, 'Tattoo You' (1981) and the best album of the pair, 'Some Girls'.

An importantly timed album, 1978 was awash with revolutionary and conflicting musical forces. It was no surprise, then, that 'Some Girls' contained elements of punk, disco and new wave. The album was certainly focused but was also packed with energy via full-on, powerful rock tracks such as 'When The Whip Comes Down' and 'Before They Make Me Run' plus cross-boundary efforts such as the disco-infused blues number 'Miss You'.

Based in the USA, Stephen Marcussen has been the engineer for the newly remastered 'Some Girls' album and, in fact, for the new remastering of the Stones back catalogue which is currently being reissued via Polydor in batches of four, on CD. 'Some Girls' was

created via, "the original master tapes comprising quarter inch, half inch plus other bits and pieces from different sources. They may be old but they were all in good condition, nevertheless", said Marcussen.

Even good quality tapes can present a problem however and, for 'Some Girls' that included some essential servicing of the original, thirty year old masters. "Much of the splices were a problem and required fixing. When they were originally splicing the tapes, I don't think that they were planning on playing them back in the 21st century."

There are some projects and some mastering engineers who, when confronted with a set of masters, use the opportunity to create a new mix. Sometimes this approach can be valid. For example, some of the original sixties Byrds mixes were aimed at sounding good on tinny transistor radios and were hence highly compressed. Marcussen didn't want to take the remix route with the Stones roster. "No, I remastered the tapes 'as mixed'. I took the final mixes and remastered those. These are the 'hallowed' tapes, you don't mess with them."

However, within that comparatively narrow remit, the tapes still required processing. The last batch of Stones' CD issues have been on the shelf for a long time and technology has moved on, so Marcussen was able to better balance the music itself, slightly toning down potentially bright vocal performances and lifting the bass to give it more body, power and focus.

"They haven't been treated in a long time, they certainly need to be looked at again for today's standards. The aim was to bring a sense of consistency with the album," said Marcussen. This aim was pursued by the band itself, incidentally, who had a personal role in the project, rubber stamping or, if they found any problems, requesting tweaks.

Potential buyers of 'Some Girls' and the rest of the remastered CDs (there are no vinyl versions or any fancy hi-res downloads mooted at the moment) will ask the important question: are they worth the asking price of £9 each? After all, there are no extras on these discs. That's right, not one extra track over and above the basic selection. Some will disapprove of the entire project quoting a lack of value for money. However, if you take this newly remastered series on face value – that is, in terms of sound quality alone – and if that aspect is of prime importance, which it will be to most readers of this magazine, then this series is *definitely* worth it. Frankly, it's the best sounding series of Stones albums on CD. If you are a digital fan, these are the best sources in town.

Polydor has released 'Some Girls' as part of the second tranche of Rolling Stones catalogue releases alongside 'Tattoo You', 'Emotional Rescue' and 'Undercover'. This followed the first batch which is also out now that included: 'Black And Blue', 'It's Only Rock'n'Roll', 'Sticky Fingers' and 'Goats Head Soup'. Look out for more releases in the future.

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