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JANUARY 2015

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2014 AWARDS ISSUE

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Pre-amplifier



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- BENCHMARK MEDIA DAC2 HGC
- FOCAL ARIA 926 LOUDSPEAKERS
- JBL AUTHENTICS L16 WIRELESS SPEAKER
- CAMBRIDGE AUDIO STREAM MAGIC 6 V2 NETWORK PLAYER

7 PAGES OF LETTERS - THE BEST WINS A PAIR OF KEF Q100 LOUDSPEAKERS! (UK ONLY)





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"I felt I was listening to a more lifelike rendition of the music...good vocal projection combined with tight timing and a natural tonality make this cable extra special"
Tony Bolton

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HI-FI WORLD November 2014

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welcome

EDITOR

Noel Keywood
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Our 2014 Awards Issue brings together an intriguing collection of products. Nothing is quite what it seems; all of them have an unusual or distinctive feature that, set in a background of good engineering, lifts them out of the ordinary.

Take the almost-bizarre McIntosh MA8000. At first sight it looks like a standard pattern U.S. super-amp. You know the idiom: large, heavy - and with more of everything, especially weight and power.

Well, the McIntosh does have all these things, but not for the usual reasons. It's a transistor amplifier that uses output transformers - truly unusual. A great perceived benefit of transistors was always that they don't need heavy, cumbersome and expensive output transformers, unlike valve amplifiers. Yet McIntosh turn this design logic on its head and come up with a great amplifier that, for technically sound if obscure reasons, works wonderfully well. We were all mightily impressed by this beast.

Icon Audio's Stereo 845PP may appear to be world's apart from the McIntosh, but it too uses forceful engineering to overcome problems most designers shy away from, in this case to run no fewer than four transmitter valves in one chassis. It's big and it's very heavy, just like the McIntosh, and it is a transformer feast, again like the McIntosh - but what a sound!

Audeze headphones have achieved a great reputation in their short time in the marketplace. They too are innovative, using planar magnetic drive units rather than the usual mini-cone drivers, to give a gorgeously smooth sound, a step up on everything else around. The LCD-3s were a fine example of what headphones can do when engineered well.

You can see the same thread of ingenuity and innovation in Martin Logan's amazing Summit X hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers and Usher's Dancer Mini-Xs, with diamond coated tweeter. These aren't run-of-the-mill products, short on innovation and long on hyperbole; they are genuinely advanced loudspeakers - and they sounded it. It's always great to be able to review products like this.

So whilst so many hi-fi products seem stuck in rut, this is not universally true. It's still possible to sit in front of many new products, or clamp them over your head, and be wowed. This issue collects together the products that wowed us in 2014.



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verdicts

●●●●●	OUTSTANDING	amongst the best
●●●●	EXCELLENT	extremely capable
●●●●	GOOD	worth auditioning
●●●	MEDIOCRE	unremarkable
●●	POOR	flawed
●	VALUE	keenly priced

testing (see www.hi-fiworld.co.uk for full explanations of all our tests)

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

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Distributed by Seymour Distribution Ltd 86 Newman Street London, W1T 3EX Tel: +44 (0) 20 7396 8000 Printed by Artisan Press Limited Tel: +44 (0) 116 235 5221
Our Agents in Malaysia Millennium Hi-Fi & AV Simon Chang Showroom & office, 500-1-3 First Floor Wisma Indah (Shen Court), Jalan Tun Razak 50400 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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news



ARCAM RAISES THE BAR

Arcam sprang a surprise by unveiling a new soundbar and subwoofer at a special event in London. The Cambridge-based company had kept the new products a closely-guarded secret until their unveiling at the Hospital Club in Soho.

Arcam Managing Director Charlie Brennan said the new products were aimed at bringing audiophile sound quality to a new audience. He said: "There is a clear gap in the soundbar arena for an audiophile approach. While convenient in reality, most soundbars offer a fairly poor audio performance for TV and are dreadful on music".

The soundbar features six 'speakers – a bass, mid and tweeter per side – powered by a 100 Watts per channel amplifier and housed in a low-resonance aluminium enclosure. Other features include on-board decoding for all current high-definition audio formats including Dolby True-HD and DTS-HD, anti-jitter circuitry, 4 HDMI inputs, coaxial and digital inputs as well as aptX Bluetooth compatibility. The unit can be controlled via its own remote control, or a dedicated smartphone/tablet app is available for both iOS and Android. Also unveiled was the Solo Sub featuring a downward-firing 10-inch bass unit driven by a 300 Watt amplifier.

Also coming soon from Arcam are a new dedicated two-channel hi-fi amplifier and a combined SACD/CD player and streamer. Watch out for reviews of the new products in a forthcoming issue of Hi-Fi World.



CHORAL ENSEMBLE

Chord Electronics has launched the Choral Ensemble, a new support system for the Choral range of components, the new equipment support is based around a machined 30mm-thick aircraft-grade aluminium plate, supported by four stackable solid aluminium Integra legs. It's a high-mass design.

The Choral Ensemble equipment support can be configured to any height and the Integra leg system allows any component from the Choral range to be combined with Chord Electronics' full-sized equipment. The system enables users to select from Chord's Reference, Standard and Choral ranges, in one vertically aligned system. Prices: single tier with Integra legs, £1,350 and single top-mount tier with Integra feet, £1,215.

Call 01622 721444 or click on www.chordelectronics.co.uk for more information.



HEADING

Cyrus has launched its most powerful stereo amplifier to date. The Stereo 200 power amp retains the company's trademark shoebox-sized die-cast aluminium casing yet – as its name suggests – produces some 200 Watts per channel of power.

The result of two years of research and design, Cyrus describes the Stereo 200 as a hybrid design – meaning it marries a new, high-powered Class D output stage with a traditional linear power supply featuring a low-noise toroidal transformer.

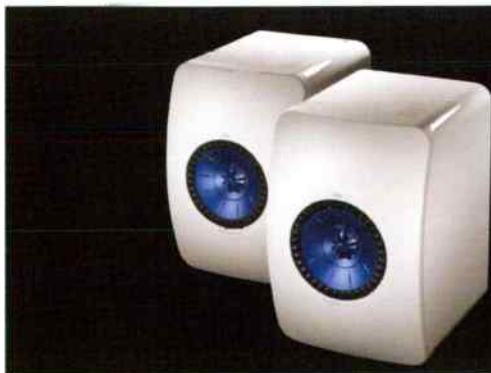
Cyrus says the class D output filter uses a ferrite-shielded coil with oxygen free copper and polypropylene metal foil capacitors in order to achieve the best possible distortion figures, damping factor and sonic performance.

Both balanced and standard RCA input connectors are provided and other features include extensive filtering for the mains power supply and gold 4mm loudspeaker binding posts.

The Stereo 200 is designed to fit into the Cyrus amplifier range between the X Power and Mono X 200 Signature and is on sale now priced at £1750.

The Cambridgeshire company has also announced a new upgrade scheme for current owners of older versions of many of its products. Customers can upgrade their existing units to the latest specifications from prices starting at £350.

For more details contact your local Cyrus dealer or go to www.cyrusaudio.com.



COLOUR UPDATES

KEF's LS50 speakers have now been released in piano white finish. Available now, they are priced at £800.

Meanwhile Quad's Vena amplifier is now available in rosewood, piano white and piano black.

Click on www.kef.com and www.quad-hifi.co.uk respectively for more information.





ABSOLUTE CLEARAUDIO

Absolute Phono is an active headshell moving coil phonostage, in which the input to the phonostage is mounted within a modified tonearm headshell. A tiny amplifier, fitted within the headshell, boosts the output signal from the cartridge at source. This amplified signal then passes to the main RIAA phonostage. The signal is then equalized and fed to both unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR outputs, each with its own output driver to ensure the utmost fidelity.

The Absolute Phono Inside uses the Absolute Phono's circuit design but incorporates it within the phonostage's main body. Current amplification alleviates the need for cartridge loading at the input stage and also eliminates the usually required capacitors and resistors at various points through the signal path.

Both unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR inputs are provided for connection to any tonearm on the market.

Absolute Phono and Absolute Phono Inside incorporate an anti-resonance sandwich construction machined from solid blocks of aluminium and panzerholz wood. The power supply, located in a separate matching chassis, keeps mains interference to a minimum. Resistors and capacitors are Clearaudio Silver Glimmer capacitors and non-magnetic Dale resistors.

Absolute Phono and Absolute Phono Inside are equipped with a bright blue single multi-function switch for on, off, mute and standby modes.

Both are available in black or silver and are price at £8,995 each.

Click on www.soundfoundations.co.uk or call 0118 981 4238 for more information.

CRITERION AUDIO OFFERS ABYSS

A comparative rarity in the industry, Criterion is a new hi-fi dealer. Based in East Anglia and now open for business, it is one of the very few dealers in the UK that can provide the audiophile headphone design, the Abyss AB-1266, on demonstration.



As such, it offers a purpose-built headphone room, featuring a bespoke acoustic oak finish with a glass door that includes a drop-down acoustic seal. The room is detached from the other Criterion Audio demonstration areas to prevent sound leakage. Attention to detail includes a resilient channel fitted to the plasterboard that has two layers of 15mm Sound Shield plasterboard, with Green Glue between the boards and SilenSeal sealer around the perimeter of the walls.

For more information click on www.criterionaudio.com or call 01223 233730.

B&W WIRELESS SPEAKER...

The new T7, wireless, powered speaker features a honeycomb of interlocking cells that provide support and reduce vibration.

Allowing you to stream directly to it from any Bluetooth-enabled device, it supports aptX, features a 12W Class D amplifier and runs on a rechargeable lithium battery. Price is £300.

Click on www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk for more information



NAPSTER IN AUDI

Napster, the popular premium music streaming service, will now provide musical entertainment in select Audi models. Drivers of the 2015 Audi A6, A7, and Audi TT models, using a head unit, can choose from more than 32 million songs, thousands of audio books, personalized playlists and many more features and play them through the car's speaker system.

The Napster app and Audi's 'MMI connect' app must be downloaded onto a smartphone in order to use the streaming integration. The apps are available for iOS and Android devices. Further expansion of the Napster integration is planned for additional Audi models in 2015.



DYNAUDIO FOCUS XD

The new Focus XD loudspeaker works from its digital input via a DSP (Digital Signal Processor) to a digital amplifier at native 24bit/192kHz resolution. Each driver has its own amplifier, thus providing the individual Focus XD loudspeaker models with 300W (200 XD), 450W (400 XD) and 600W (600 XD) total output power respectively per speaker.

Each Focus XD model has an analogue input (RCA) in addition to the digital input. Also, the Focus XD can be wirelessly connected to a Dynaudio Hub. The Hub accepts both analogue and digital audio sources, such as computers, Bluetooth receivers or televisions and sends the audio signal wirelessly to the Focus XD speaker.

Price for the 200 XD is £4,500, 400 XD is £7,250 and £600 XD is £8,950.

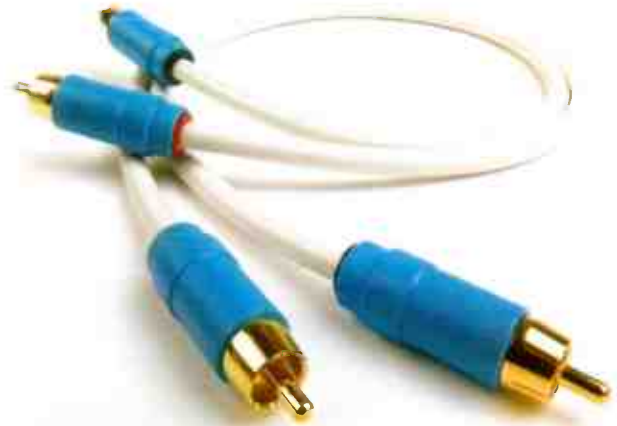
Click on www.dynaudio.com for more information.



CHORD C-LINE

The Chord Company has launched an entry-level interconnect cable that introduces the company's proprietary ARAY techniques. The Chord Company's Tuned ARAY technology was originally developed for the Sarum cable range. The C-line features pseudo-balanced oxygen-free copper conductors with fully floating high-performance shielding and is optimised for CD players, DACs, phono-stages and streamers. C-line also benefits from direct gold-plating technology, plus over-moulded strain-relief for the cable's plug terminations. It is priced at £45 for 1m and £35 for the 0.5m version.

Call 01980 625700 or click on www.chord.co.uk for more information.



PRIMARE'S BD32

Primare's BD32 MkII universal player features improved circuit design, 4K upscaling and Netflix support. The player includes support for Blu-ray, DVD, CD, SACD and DVD-A. The built-in media player can reproduce files at up to 24bit/192kHz resolution from USB and DLNA compatible sources via a wired network and Wi-Fi with the USB dongle supplied.

The stereo output circuitry uses the Crystal DSD DAC CS4398 in conjunction with Primare's analogue output stage comprising Burr-Brown op-amps, WIMA and EPCOS polypropylene filter capacitors and large MELF resistors and a single-ended output stage comprising a single MOSFET transistor fed by an active current source rather than passive resistor. Price is £3500.

www.karma-av.co.uk or phone 01423 358846 for more information.



MAGICAL MINIATURE S200

Monitor Audio's new Airstream S200 wi-fi speaker supports Apple Airplay, Airstream Direct, Bluetooth, Bluetooth aptX and DLNA. iOS devices can be plugged in to the S200 directly. It also offers a 3.5mm stereo jack for analogue.

Each speaker is constructed from a mineral-filled polymer and features a proprietary gold dome C-CAM tweeter flanked on angled baffles by dual 76mm-CAM metal cone bass drivers, which are augmented by a rear-firing Auxiliary Bass Radiator (ABR). The signature C-CAM drivers are directly powered by three separate class-D amplifiers optimised by digital processing.

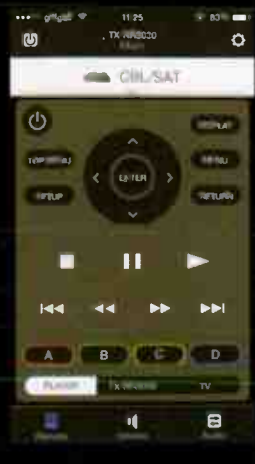
Available in a white or black finish with toughened glass end trims, the S200 is priced at £200. Click on www.monitoraudio.co.uk



ONKYO SPOTIFY & APPLE

A firmware update enabling Spotify Connect on 2014 model network-ready Onkyo A/V receivers, controllers and HTiB packages is now available for free download.

The update allows Spotify Premium subscribers to stream over twenty million tracks from the Spotify smartphone and tablet application to their A/V component, with the service bolstering a suite of existing streaming options bundled with Wi-Fi-enabled Onkyo home theater products. Spotify Connect also allows users to make calls or use other apps without interrupting playback since the technology is built into the receiver.



...AND B&O WIRELESS SPEAKER

B&O has launched the BeoPlay A2, its first Bluetooth speaker. Designed by Cecilie Manz, the portable BeoPlay A2 includes Adaptive Power Management that both monitors and anticipates the audio signal in order to save battery life. It makes it possible to feed the exact amount of power needed by the amplifiers - and only when they need it.

BeoPlay A2 features True360 omni directional sound technology that lets everyone enjoy the sound no matter where they are sitting. Finally, the flat design has a solid aluminium core and a polymer shell. A short leather strap lets you carry BeoPlay A2. Price is £299.

Click on www.unlimited.com for more information.



Premium VAC



Professional musician Rafael Todes finds himself transported to the concert hall via the sound of VAC's new Signature Mk IIa pre-amplifier with phonostage.

Last year I was fortunate enough to review the VAC Phi 200 monobloc power amplifiers - and duly purchased them for their revelatory qualities. The VAC Signature Mk IIa pre-amplifier was designed to drive the Phis and therefore awakened my curiosity.

VAC is based in Sarasota in Florida and well-known on the U.S. high-end scene, being something of a reference product.

The pre-amp takes the form of two striking lacquered units, a control unit and a power supply. There is an optional high-quality phonostage which the review sample included.

Two umbilical cables link the power supply to the control unit, the phonostage having its own dedicated

lead. Good hi-fi housekeeping overall!

The units also come in silver, with a 1/4 inch thick CNC-machined aluminium chassis and a 3/8 inch faceplate. There is a blue VAC logo on the fascia which glows red when the pre-amp is in mute mode. Two substantial, weighty knobs control input and volume, and four smaller knobs control mute/cinema mode/power and monitor functions.

VAC supply a hefty remote control that handles volume via a motorised pot. There is a mute button - but interestingly no input selector on the remote as it was felt that this was an unnecessary compromise for the sound!

There are six standard line inputs (five when the phonostage is fitted) of which three are RCA and two are switchable between RCA and

balanced. There is also a cinema bypass input, which remains unaffected by the volume control. On the optional MM/MC phonostage there is also selectable load.

Each line stage channel uses a pair of low impedance triode sections in push-pull mode with zero feedback and run at fairly high current (approx. 15 mA/triode). Input coupling is via 1:1 transformer - which simplifies the handling of SE inputs as one simply changes the point of ground reference with respect to the primary winding.

Output coupling is via a step-down transformer, which works into an internal fixed 300 Ohm load. Rather like a small Class A power amplifier, it will work well with both high impedance loads and very low impedance loads.

As with the input, conversion to SE output is accommodated by moving the ground reference on the output transformer secondary winding. In addition, an ungrounded position is available; this works with either SE or balanced loads and can break a severe ground loop if needed.

The output impedance is around 150 Ohms, and very stable due to the avoidance of negative feedback. The lack of feedback also better isolates the input from any reactance presented by the power amplifier. Gain is approximately 11dB, and about half a dozen tube variations can be used (6DJ8, 12DJ8, 6922, 7308, 8416, ECC88, E88CC).

The control unit contains six valves for the phono section and a pair of valves (ECC88) for the line

the massed strings more realistic than I have ever heard in my system. The raw excitement generated by the VAC combination was pure electricity.

Laid out before me was the closest thing to the experience of actually being in an orchestra playing this piece - which I last did under Simon Rattle's baton at the Royal Festival Hall.

The instruments have an organic, life-like quality to them which is something I struggle

"laid out before me was the closest thing to the experience of actually being in an orchestra playing this piece - which I last did under Simon Rattle's baton at the Royal Festival Hall"

stage, as well as a pair of valves to drive the tape monitor section.

The unit is hand-soldered and looks like a work of art both inside and out!

SOUND QUALITY

First up for the listening session was one of my favourite LP recordings. Vintage Decca and Britten conducting his 'Sinfonia Da Requiem' (1940 commissioned and later rejected by the Japanese government). It is a truly miserable piece, but beautifully recorded in 1964.

This LP really tests a phono-stage's ability to reproduce the hardest corners to reach of high-fidelity music reproduction. There are a glut of orchestral textures and colours which need superb resolution to come alive.

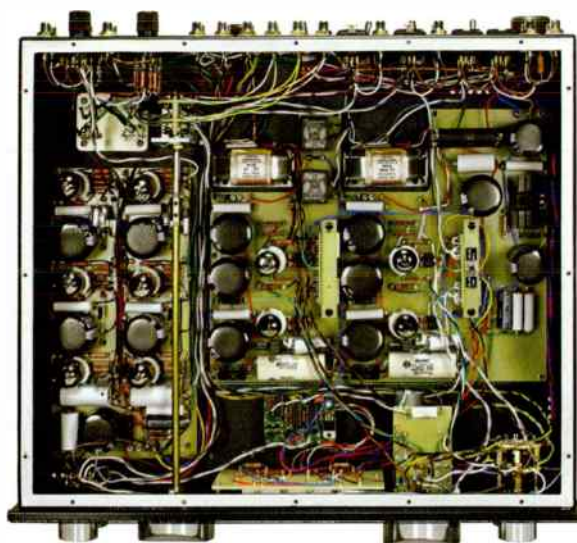
The VAC handled all this with aplomb. Indeed, it provided an incredibly vivid account of the recording, with a truly humongous soundstage.

During the 'Dies Irae', instruments and textures flew from every corner of the soundfield, the drums shaking my listening room,

to achieve with digital sources.

The biggest differences I notice over my JE Audio valve pre-amp is the solidity and weight to the mid-range. It gives this disturbing music a greater sense of gravitas.

The brass section has a core to the sound, the way a trumpet sounds



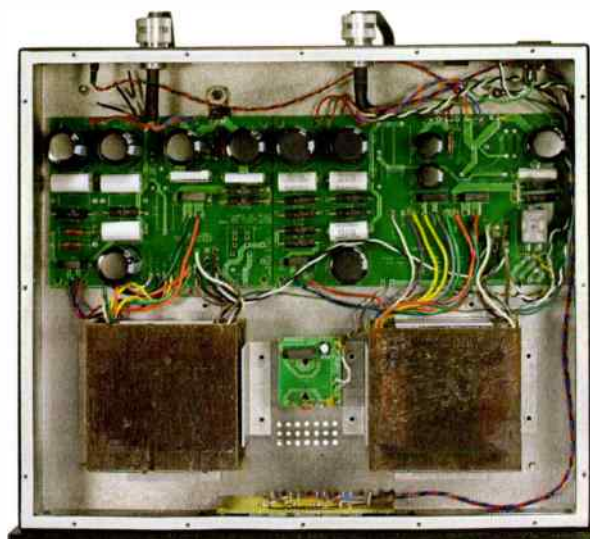
Inside the control unit, hand-soldered, a work of art to behold!

in the flesh and often not when reproduced. The VAC brings immense coherence to the recording.

Moving on to some jazz on vinyl and what better than the album 'Night Hawk' by Coleman Hawkins and Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis. This is a recording I've used many times as a reference. Two great tenor saxophonists engaged in mellow musical dialogue. I'm struck by how much more detail is coming off this recording via the VAC pre-amp as compared with what I'm used to.

The piano has always been a

Rear view of the control preamp, MM/MC Phono options and cartridge loading.



Interior of power supply case, with independent mains transformers for line/phono stages.

"Game-changer"

Hugo redefines the DAC genre

"Superb"

★★★★★

*What Hi-Fi Sound and Vision,
grouptest winner*

"A landmark digital product"

★★★★★

Editor's Choice, Hi-Fi Choice

"Chord's best-ever DAC"

Hi-Fi +

"Spectacular"

Ken Kessler, The Telegraph

"Breaks all records"

★★★★★

Hi-Fi World

"A game-changer"

Hi-Fi Critic

"My reference DAC"

head-fi.org

"Incredible"

avforums.com

"Remarkable"

theear.net



**WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2014**

DACs

Best DAC £1000+

Chord Hugo

Hugo THE WORLD'S FIRST REFERENCE-CLASS MOBILE DAC/HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

- Home and mobile use (10hr+ battery)
- Unique custom-made Chord FPGA
- Five digital inputs (inc. Bluetooth)
- Playback up to DSD 128 and 384kHz PCM
- Use as a digital preamp
- Built to last

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problem. It has always sounded slightly muffled. I thought this was just a characteristic of the recording. The VAC phonostage, though, manages to extract every last ounce of detail from the piano and seems to make it sound like a more modern instrument.

It's not that it is changing the timbre of the piano, but more that it is resolving much more detail. This is also evident in the plucking of the bass, which starts and stops beautifully and has a largesse to it without being bloated. Again it's not a timbral matter, so much as there is more detail being resolved.

Antonio Forcione's 'Tears of Joy' is a superbly-recorded Naim release which exists on both vinyl and CD. It can sound good on virtually any system as it has small forces and a wide range of pitches and timbres which don't compete with each other.

However, via the VAC I'm aware of hearing new things on this recording. I can perceive the lower notes on the bass guitar speaking with much greater presence and clarity. The guitar has incision and bite, the cello timbre is highly accurate and there is a helicopter view right into the mix of the album. I can hear the master engineer's choices, such is the feeling of reality created.

The result of such accuracy and clarity is that the piece becomes more engaging. I am aware of more textures - and musicians participating in the album. Can vinyl get better than this?

Stravinsky's 'Ragtime' for eleven instruments (1918) is a highly-skilled attempt to bring jazz into the classical concert hall and provides a brilliantly scored tonal palette of bizarre sounds as conducted by Sir Simon Rattle on the EMI label. This CD with the VAC pre-times to perfection, the eleven instruments holographically - and stunningly - reproduced. The wit and sardonic jibing of the players is beautifully portrayed.

The bass is about as tight and fast as any valve pre-amp I've ever heard, the speed of it only bettered by the fastest solid state pre-amp - one of the perils of valves.

There is nothing gloopy about the VAC's sound. It's fluid and liquid - but organically so, not artificially.

CONCLUSION

The VAC Signature Mk Ila is a very special pre-amp. It has both

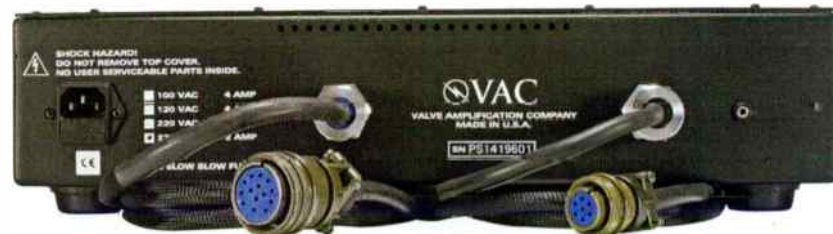
muscle and finesse, is refined and very accurate, whilst possessing an ability to get to the core of the music-making it is portraying. It is a beautiful object to behold and a look under the bonnet is a testament to the thought and care that has gone into its genesis.

It sets a very high bar for other pre-amps to reach and is worthy of the highest recommendation.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Inspire Monarch turntable
SME V tone arm
Lyra Scala cartridge
VAC Phi 200 monoblocs
Esoteric K-05 CD player
B&W 802D 'speakers
PS Audio PS10 mains regenerator

Rear view of the power supply, with two cables, one for the line stage, one for the phono stage.

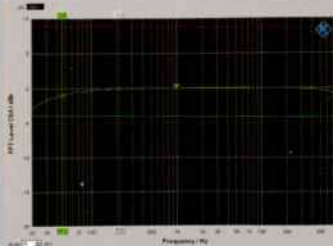


MEASURED PERFORMANCE

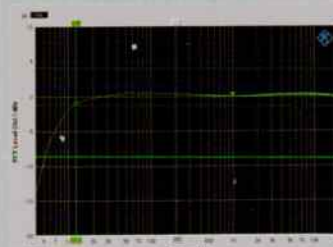
The line inputs of the VAC had x3 gain, through unbalanced (phono socket) and balanced (XLR) inputs and outputs; gain did not differ between these inputs or outputs as it often does. Overload occurred at a high 8V out. The gain value is normal enough, equating to an input sensitivity of 330mV (for 1V output, at which most power amps deliver full power).

Frequency response was flat across the audio band and did not alter throughout the range of the volume control. Bass did roll off a little early though, measuring -1dB down at 40Hz.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE Aux



FREQUENCY RESPONSE Phono



Our analysis shows this and the sound may be a little lean against some preamps.

In the same vein, the phono stage had a sharp warp filter that introduced at useful -10dB attenuation at 5Hz, but low bass was better supported through this stage. RIAA equalisation was accurate, our analysis shows, giving flat frequency response across the audio band.

Moving coil gain was x4300, equivalent to x1433 in an external phono stage, making this a low-ish gain MC stage best suited to high output moving coil cartridges. Equivalent input noise measured 0.24mV and this was a little high too, since around 0.08µV is possible with an input transformer, giving -9dB less noise.

The VAC Signature Mk Ila measured well all round, except that its MC input has some hiss and is best not used with ultra-low output MC cartridges. NK

LINE	
Frequency response	46Hz-77kHz
Separation	87dB
Noise	-108dB
Distortion	0.08%
Gain	x3
Overload	8V out
PHONO	
Frequency response	12Hz-20kHz
Separation	67dB
Noise	2.4 / 0.24 µV
Distortion	0.12%
Gain (MM/MC)	x500 / x4300
(54/73dB)	
Overload (MM/MC)	10 / 150mV

VAC SIGNATURE
MK IIA
£11,250 or £14,375
with MC phono
option



OUTSTANDING - amongst
the best

VERDICT

Stunning phono/pre-amp of reference quality that sets the standards for others to follow

FOR

- stunningly sophisticated sound
- great musical insight
- phono stage quality


AGAINST

- expensive
- may take a few months to fulfil order
- bass bettered by the best solid state pre-amp

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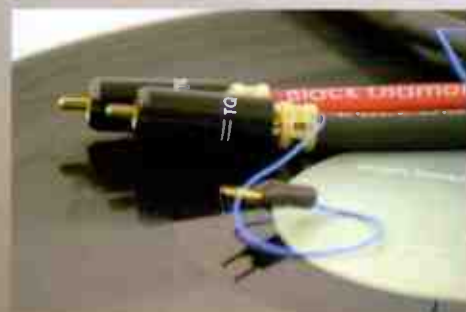


"In short, I can honestly say the Tellurium Q Black Diamond interconnects and speaker cable are the very best leads that I have ever had in my system."

Tony Bolton, HI FI World 2014



HI-FI WORLD
VERDICT ●●●●●



HiFi Pig Review

"The top end was clearly beyond what the K2 [Audioquest] had to offer me and I was really trying to hear something that presented itself to me which would lead me to believe that it was a bit over the top, harsh and spitty but it just didn't happen. A true increase in perceived bandwidth was shining through with strings giving small nuances of reverbs that I hadn't heard so well articulated before"

"Nordost-with-substance"

The new Ultra Silver

Dan Worth, Hifipig.com

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★ HI-FI WORLD AWARDS 2014



Welcome to Hi-Fi World's 2014 Awards. Our expert review team tests hundreds of products each year to bring you the best from the world of hi-fi. But, inevitably, some shine just a little brighter than others - be it for sheer sound quality, great innovation or simply outstanding value for money. So here's our pick of the top products from the past 12 months...

AWARDS 2014	WINNER
BEST AMPLIFIER	p16
BEST VALVE AMPLIFIER	p17
BEST LOUDSPEAKER	p18
BEST BOOKSHELF SPEAKER	p19
BEST DAC	p20
BEST NETWORK PLAYER	p21
BEST TURNTABLE	p22
BEST CARTRIDGE	p23
BEST DIGITAL SOURCE	p24
BEST LOUDSPEAKER CABLE	p25
BEST INTERCONNECT CABLE	p26
BEST HEADPHONES	p27



★
**BEST
AMPLIFIER**

McIntosh MA8000

Reviewed: July 2014 £9995



Big, bold and beautiful sounding... that was our view of the mighty McIntosh MA8000 integrated amplifier/DAC. Weighing in at 45kg and producing some 300 Watts of output power per channel the MA8000 is obviously no shrinking violet. But while it has power to spare, the McIntosh also has no end of other attributes.

The MA8000 displays a subtlety, detail and flow to its musical presentation that put us in mind of some of the best tube amplifiers. With any genre you want, the MA8000 will bring out the best in the music.

"Individual instruments are rich in timbre and bass especially rolls into the room with captivating force" we said. "The mid-band is also lush, generous and totally satisfying".

This amplifier complements the system around it. Combine that with its iconic styling – what audiophile's soul isn't stirred by the sight of those distinctive glowing blue power meters? – and bomb-proof build quality and it's no wonder we rated the MA8000 the best solid-state amplifier to pass through our listening room in 2014.



★ BEST VALVE AMPLIFIER

Icon Audio Stereo 845 PP

Reviewed June 2014 £5999

Icon Audio produced a world first with the Stereo 845 PP, a pure triode stereo integrated amplifier using mighty 845 valves. Pushing out 40 Watts per channel, the amp is a push-pull design using four matched 845s, a pair of 6SN7 first-stage valves, two 6SL7 output drivers and a GZ34 driver-stage rectifier.

Designer David Shaw's aim was to provide a warm, luxurious valve sound allied to real bass power. Suffice to say he succeeded - in spades. The 845 tubes give the Icon Audio a seamless, fluid and eminently musical sound, as well as seismic low end kick.

"The 845 is able to ascend from near silence to thundering instrumental crescendos with apparent ease and gave a lovely flow and feel to the music as well" we said. "There's no evidence of the flabby bass and blunted edges of some other integrated tube amplifiers". Subjectively, 845PP is a sonic power house.

Whether you prefer jazz, rock or classical, the Icon Audio sounds vivid, alive and thoroughly realistic.





BEST LOUDSPEAKER

Martin Logan Summit X



Reviewed: February 2014 £14988

Martin Logan's Summit X sits at the top of the company's range of hybrid electrostatics, priced at a hefty £15,000. But, as we found, there's little to match it in terms of sound quality whatever the price.

It features Martin Logan's largest and best XStat panel – 44in tall and 11.3in wide – allied to a compact bass cabinet featuring two 10-inch drivers (one firing forward and one downward) powered by their own on-board amplifiers.

What you get is a tour-de-force of loudspeaker engineering – one that produces a holographic soundstage allied to massive, clean bass power.

"You simply cannot get better clarity than this" we said. "You can't get a more even sound free from phasiness and you'll never hear violin sounding as it is meant to, apart from in this big XStat panel".

Indeed, we concluded that you'd be hard pressed to find a better loudspeaker anywhere at any price.



★ BEST BOOKSHELF SPEAKER

Usher Dancer Mini-X Diamond DMD

Reviewed January 2014 £2450

Usher has forged a deserved reputation for superbly-engineered, beautifully-made loudspeakers - and the Dancer Mini-X continues that tradition. This is one of the select few manufacturers to build all its drivers in-house and the DMD in the Mini-X's title refers to its proprietary tweeter - a diamond-metal-diamond structure. This is paired with a 7-inch bass/mid-range driver. Both sit in a beautifully veneered, layered-wood cabinet that curves inwards towards the rear, giving a high-quality feel to the package.

Not only does it look good, it sounds superb too. The DMD diamond tweeter is among the best of its breed - with an excellent high-frequency delivery, while bass is both powerful and realistic.

"Nothing seemed out of place through the Ushers with every element of the music occupying its correct place within the sonic palette" we said. "Most importantly they present sounds in an infectious and involving manner no matter what musical genre takes your fancy".





BEST DAC

Resonance
Invicta Mirus DAC



Reviewed September 2014 £4,499

With new DACs appearing seemingly every week what makes the Invicta Mirus worthy of a Hi-Fi World Award? Well, for a start it turned in the best measured performance of any digital-to-analogue converter we have tested to date with an extraordinary 131dB EIAJ Dynamic Range. Secondly, it sounded sublime.

All this is due to the fact that Resonance uses not one, but two of the highly-regarded ESS Sabre32 DACs with all eight of their internal channels paralleled. That translates into a thoroughly smooth yet enthralling presentation.

"It has a musical coherence, top-to-bottom integration and easy flow to its sound that makes listening sessions stretch into hours" we said.

Other standout features include an SD card slot on the fascia which enables the playback of DSD 64 and 128 files, a digital volume control as well as user-selectable filters for tailoring the sound to individual tastes.



★ BEST NETWORK PLAYER

Simple Audio
Roomplayer+

Reviewed October 2014 £699

Network streaming was one of hi-fi's big growth areas during 2014. But to some the intricacies of UPnP players, DLNA, wired/wireless, FLAC, WAV, Ogg Vorbis and what-have-you seemed about as understandable as a two-hour seminar in quantum theory. Hence the likes of the Roomplayer+ - a one-box streamer/amplifier aiming, as its manufacturer's name implies, to make it all as simple as possible.

The Roomplayer+ consists of a 50 Watts per channel Class D amplifier with a Wolfson DAC capable of handling file sizes up to 24/192 as well as all the usual formats.

Set-up is a breeze and the Roomplayer+ collects together your entire music collection no matter what machine it is stored on and then allows for a wealth of user options such as creating profiles and playlists or tailoring libraries for individual family members. And despite all this flexibility, sound quality hasn't taken a backseat. The Simple Audio is clean, clear and precise with just a slight hint of warmth which makes for a pleasingly smooth presentation.





★
**BEST
TURNTABLE**

Timestep RA
Technics SL-1200
MK2/Timestep
T-01DD Controller



Reviewed January 2014 £3680

This is a Timestep package with a distinct difference – the ability to play records at any speed from 14rpm to 170rpm! At its heart is a modified Technics SL-1200 MkII fitted with an SME M2-9RT arm and Timestep's own headshell, arm lead and mounting plate. This is connected to the Timestep D-01 DDS Speed Controller which not only allows the user to choose 16,33,45 or 78rpm, but also enables non-standard speeds to be selected by use of a rotary control in steps of 0.01rpm or 1rpm.

It means the combination can play any record at any speed – a boon for those whose record collection stretches long back into the past.

We found 78rpm discs especially benefitted from the Timestep's abilities.

As reviewer Tony Bolton noted, "I have used it at all speeds with excellent results".

"If you want to get the best out of your 78s and very good reproduction from your microgrooves then the Timestep RA is the best I have yet used for that purpose".



★ BEST CARTRIDGE

Ortofon Quintet Black

Reviewed May 2014 £649

Top of Ortofon's new Quintet range, the Black is a moving coil cartridge with a body made of ABS – a thermoplastic material that is both lightweight and impact resistant. Neodymium magnets are used internally, while the cantilever is made from Boron tipped with a Nude Shibata diamond which has a wide contact area with the groove walls for maximum detail retrieval.

Fitted to a Clearaudio Magnify arm the Quintet Black proved itself something of an audiophile bargain – with a decorum and an air of quality unusual at this price point.

On Tchaikovsky's '1812 Overture' the Ortofon was in its element. Violins had a satisfying rasp while the cannon going off seemingly had enough impact to cause damage to the listening room.

Alternatively, on simpler material such as Simon and Garfunkel's 'Greatest Hits' there was a delicacy and smoothness to the presentation.

The Ortofon Black undoubtedly possesses the sonic class and all-round ability of some cartridges costing significantly more.





BEST DIGITAL SOURCE

Oppo BDP-105D



Reviewed December 2014 £1050

Like its fellow award winner from Resonance, the Oppo BDP-105D is based around one of the world's best DAC chips in the shape of the ESS Sabre 32. It offers high-end CD, DVD-A and Blu-ray audio, and you can also connect a computer to its USB input for playing high-resolution files at up to 384kHz sample rate.

Playing video DVDs and Blu-rays, the BDP-105D also decodes all video disc audio formats, especially DTS HD Master Audio and Dolby TrueHD. With a digital volume control on board, it can drive a power amplifier directly.

On CD even old discs sounded less hashy and confused than on other players with a smooth, silky flow - always easy on the ear yet never short of detail. Higher-resolution material was rich and deep with a great sense of air and rich sense of atmosphere.

The Oppo has the ability to play almost every silver disc out there and make them sound superb.

What more could you want?



★ BEST LOUDSPEAKER CABLE

Tellurium Q Black
Diamond

Reviewed June 2014 £630 Per Mono Mtr

Tellurium says precious little about the construction of its range-topping Black Diamond speaker cables – apart from revealing the plugs are made to its own specification and include in their specification the rare earth element that gives the company its name.

But perhaps their reticence is understandable when the product sounds as good as this – after all, why let others in on the secret? Used in a variety of systems the Black Diamonds consistently revealed a wider perceived bandwidth, bigger soundstage and the ability to present transient details in an effortless fashion.

The lack of overhang to the beat also made rhythmic music seem more natural in timing, and the silence between notes more defined.

“There was nothing to fault the texture or tonality of even complex sounds such as pianos and harpsichords” we said. “They just sounded real and right – as did vocals, with subtle micro-detailing to the sound that lifted it away from the system”.





**BEST
INTERCONNECT
CABLE**



Chord Company
Signature Tuned ARAY

Reviewed November 2014 £765 1Mtr Pr

One of Chord's flagship cables, the Signature Tuned ARAY is made from high-quality silver-plated conductors and PTFE insulation with two layers of silver braid for screening. This is covered with a white PTFE outer extrusion, and Chord fit ultra-low mass RCA plugs. The silver pin is in turn surrounded by PTFE insulation, as is the silver-plated return connector.

In use the Chord Signature had exceptional spacial separation, making tracking instruments easy on even the most complex pieces of music.

Michelle Adamson's vocals on Shponggle's 'Brain In A Fish Tank' had space to flow naturally, while the layers and differing textures of the sounds were clearly delineated.

On Bach's 'Preludes And Fugues' the music had a palpable body and natural flow not evident on lesser interconnects. "The pieces sounded far more natural and flowing" we said. "The harmonics were so successfully decoded that it was like listening to a more life like rendition of the music".



★ BEST HEADPHONE

Audeze LCD-3

Reviewed June 2014 £1725

With scores of manufacturers now in the headphone market, any new product has to be special to stand out. But stand out the Audeze LCD-3s do. Unlike most traditional rivals, these are magnetic planar headphones. They use a thin, ultra-light diaphragm to move air, much like an electrostatic loudspeaker. The result is a superbly smooth and cohesive presentation with a silky, dark quality that is free from spiky treble and also any apparent colouration.

The open-backed design contributes to an expansive sound. With Otis Redding and the Muscle Shoals horns the LCD-3s captured both the strength and expressiveness of the vocals whilst giving a full throaty rasp to the instrumentation.

"These are monitor quality headphones and a beautiful musical experience that shades all else" we said. "If you want to hear extraordinary sound quality that makes music of all types sound simply exciting and enjoyable, without artifice, listen to a pair of Audezes".



"It knows few equals and in these value conscious days makes it a pearl almost beyond price" Roy Gregory



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**ICON AUDIO
STEREO 60 MKIII
KT150 £2599.95**



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VERDICT

A lovely sound with plenty of power and adjustability. A well developed design.



Stereo 60 MKIII KT150 our finest "modern" integrated amplifier with Tung Sol KT150 valves from £2,599.95

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Leicester UK

Focal Point

French firm Focal has used flax to build the drivers in its new Aria range of loudspeakers. And they sound superb, says Jon Myles.



Not much has changed in the basic design of a domestic loudspeaker over the past 50 or so years. They still consist of a cabinet, drive units and (usually) a crossover. Not all that different from the boxes seen in the first flowering of hi-fi in the mid-1960s.

During that time we've witnessed the eclipse of vinyl by CD, the rise and demise of reel-to-reel, cassette and eight-track tape and now music stored on hard disks or streamed to our homes by remote servers situated across the planet.

The most dramatic changes in loudspeakers concern material technology, manufacturers now using an array of materials to try to perfect the sound. Instead of paper, we now have Kevlar, aluminium, titanium and beryllium, alongside a variety of proprietary composites with their own acronyms.

We can now add flax to that list – yep, the same thing used to make linen, linseed oil and some cigarette papers (really). For that's one of the main features of Focal's new range of Aria loudspeakers. It may not sound all that exotic at first but the French company claims flax's natural properties make it ideal for use in the manufacture of loudspeaker mid and bass drivers. For a start it's as rigid as Kevlar yet also light and self-damping.

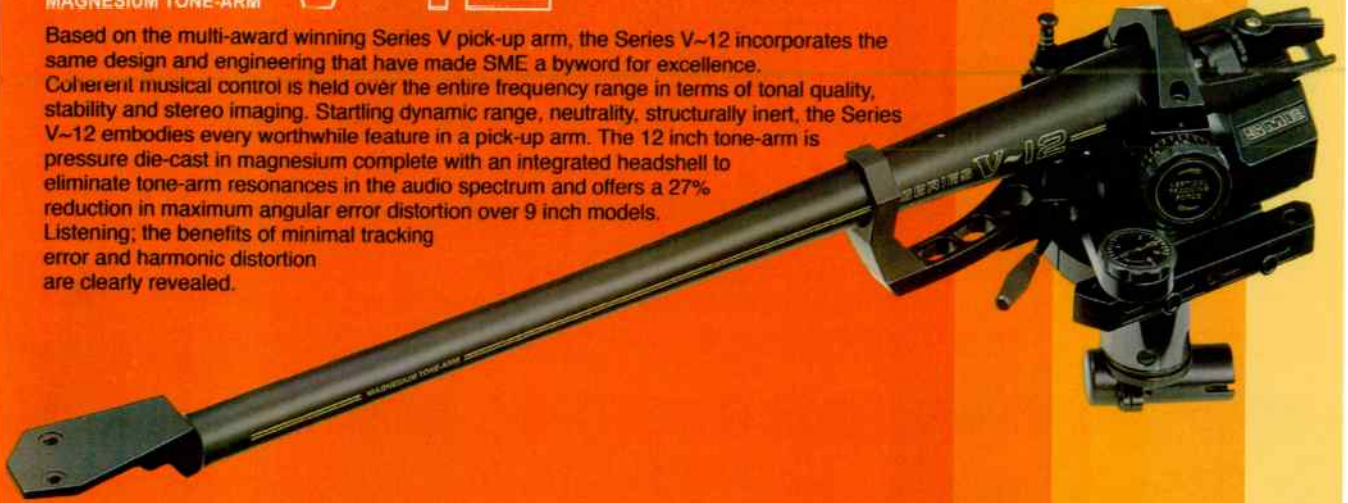
The 926 model reviewed here is the smallest of three floorstanders in the Aria range – but is still a fairly large loudspeaker at just over a metre tall. It's joined at present by a pair of standmounts and a centre speaker.

The 926 is a true three-way model with a pair of 165mm flax bass drivers sitting below a 165mm midrange unit. These are mated with a 25mm aluminium/magnesium inverted dome tweeter which is itself a new design. It uses Poron memory foam between the dome and its bracket – similar to the suspension system employed in Focal's range-topping Utopia series – and sits in a waveguide to help aid dispersion.

Two separate ports are used – a down-firing one to add bass extension and a front-firing partner which is said to add speed and impact. Clearance for the former is provided by an aluminium alloy base fitted with adjustable spikes.

SERIES V-12 MAGNESIUM TONE-ARM

Based on the multi-award winning Series V pick-up arm, the Series V-12 incorporates the same design and engineering that have made SME a byword for excellence. Cohesive musical control is held over the entire frequency range in terms of tonal quality, stability and stereo imaging. Startling dynamic range, neutrality, structurally inert, the Series V-12 embodies every worthwhile feature in a pick-up arm. The 12 inch tone-arm is pressure die-cast in magnesium complete with an integrated headshell to eliminate tone-arm resonances in the audio spectrum and offers a 27% reduction in maximum angular error distortion over 9 inch models. Listening; the benefits of minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion are clearly revealed.



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SOUND QUALITY

For some reason, many of the Focal models I've tried in the past have never really hit the mark with me. I've often found them a bit bright and hard-sounding – needing silky-smooth electronics to tame the top end.

But the Aria 926s are something entirely different. In fact, from the moment I fired them up I quickly realised they are a world away from their predecessors. They have a natural, even smooth, presentation – yet allied to a good deal of punch.

Playing Dylan Howe's 'Subterranean' – a jazz reworking of David Bowie's Berlin-era albums – the Focals threw out a wide, deep soundstage with plenty of detail.

Howe's drumming came over as punchy and tight while the twin saxophones of Brandon Allen and Julian Siegel were bright and clean-sounding but never veered into edginess. Instrumental separation here was impressive – synth lines, piano and even the quietest bass hooks being easy to follow.

I quickly realised the Focals have the ability to pick apart the individual strands of a recording and then put them back together as a coherent whole.

Trying something with denser textures, such as the Cinematic Orchestra's multi-layered 'Motion', the sea of samples was presented with no sense of clutter. Instead the Focals laid down a solid foundation from the bass upwards, letting the music flow into the room with both structure and depth.

Little musical cues become more prominent than on some other loudspeakers, helping me immerse myself in the aural panorama.

Interestingly, this is one of the first new loudspeakers to emerge from Focal since the company's merger with Naim and there seemed

a definite synergy when the 926 was paired with the latter's recently-revised Supernait amplifier.

Streaming 24/96 files from Scott Walker's 'The Collection' via the Supernait and a Naim NDX, vocals were rich and resonant – every catch in Walker's voice between lines beautifully captured. The inherent evenness and lack of colouration of the Focals let the traditional Naim strengths of pace and rhythmic drive shine through.

With a 91dB sensitivity the Focals will also go extremely loud from very little power – needing just a fraction of the Naim's 80 Watts per channel to fill a listening room. They also stayed very clean as I ratcheted up the volume control – evincing no sense of stress or strain. In fact, my eardrums would probably give up before the Focals started to struggle.

If there's one criticism it's that the 926s have prominent bass and can sound a trifle slow on some more up-tempo tracks. There was a slight overhang noticeable on Leftfield's 'Rhythm And Stealth' – a feeling that the bass wasn't quite

keeping up with the rest of the music.

Judicious positioning can help here. Although front-ported, the 926s do benefit from being positioned clear of side and rear walls. A pair of foam bungs in the front ports also helped bring them back into line in a smaller room.

To be fair, Focal recommend they are ideally suited to rooms of around 215 square feet – with a listening distance of at least 10 feet away. I wouldn't argue with that – anything significantly less and bass could become a bit boomy.

Get them right, though, and they do that rare thing of sounding natural and detailed while imparting music with a great deal of fun and punch.

CONCLUSION

There's no doubt Focal have come up with a terrific loudspeaker with the Aria 926s. They are a tremendously enjoyable listen – combining bass punch with a smooth midband and detailed treble. They also don't need much power to go exceedingly loud. Which makes for a winning combination I feel.



With the plinth removed the lower port is revealed.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the Aria 926 was unusually flat, our pink noise analysis shows. The smoothness of the trace suggests few local resonances and low coloration. There is a slight lift at high frequencies, above 10kHz, but this is small and unlikely to be easily apparent.

The 926 will not sound warm and lack of a crossover suckout around 3kHz will ensure detailing is strong; there will be no softness in the sound.

The Aria 926 is clean and very accurate measurement shows, a step up

on most rivals.

Frequency response changed little off-axis, so the cabinets can be positioned to point straight down the room; they do not have to be angled in at listeners.

Our analysis shows low frequency output below 200Hz is raised in level, and is a little lumpy. Focal have given the 926 strong bass all the way down to 40Hz, below which it cuts off sharply; there are no sub-sonics. Both ports peaked around 40Hz, shown in the red trace.

High bass levels inside the cabinet drive three substantial resonant modes, a 200ms decay analysis showed, hence the lumpiness. Bass will overhang a little, possibly seeming slow, and likely have some character too: these are classic drawbacks to strong bass.

High bass output helps the 926 deliver a massive 91dB sound pressure level from one nominal Watt (2.8V) of input. With an overall impedance of 7 Ohms, it achieves this without drawing excessive current from an amplifier.

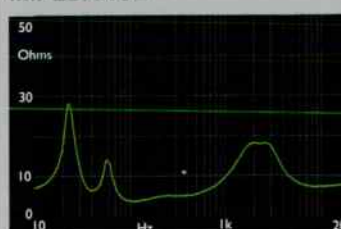
The Aria 926 has very low coloration across most of the audio band and is accurate. It is sensitive too, needing no more than 40 Watts to go loud. Bass is inflated though, and coloured by overhangs; port bungs were useful, measurement showed. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDANCE



FOCAL ARIA 926 LOUSPEAKERS
£1800



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

An excellent loudspeaker with punch, detail and a wide soundstage. Need sufficient room to work best but reward with a superb presentation.

FOR

- big, wide soundstage
- smooth and detailed
- lack of colouration
- distinctive looks

AGAINST

- strong bass
- need plenty of space

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0% Finance: 20% deposit, then
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*subject to status & conditions

NEW

MHP1000 | headphones

by McIntosh Laboratory, Inc

Intimately experience the legendary McIntosh sound with the MHP1000 headphones.

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0% Finance: 20% deposit, then
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*subject to status & conditions



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A new Benchmark

Benchmark

It may be small, but the Benchmark DAC2 HGC DAC/headphone amp does a lot, Martin Pipe discovers

Benchmark Media Systems is a name currently better-associated with professional audio than hi-fi, certainly in this country. In addition to DACs, it produces pro-grade USB analogue-to-digital converters (to digitise audio for subsequent manipulation by computer), microphone pre-amps, cabling and power amps. The New York firm believes decent measurements correlate to decent sound quality. Indeed, the manual that accompanies the versatile DAC2 HGC is packed with technical information including measured performance graphs

And yes, we do mean versatile. The DAC2 HGC is equipped with two optical inputs, two coaxial inputs for connection to CD players/transports, and a USB 1.1/2.0 computer connection port that works asynchronously to minimise jitter.

You also get the ability to decode

DSD streams as well as PCM ones (up to 24-bit/192kHz) via USB so you can play DSD from your computer, and there are two line inputs.

The unit is capable of acting as a passive preamp - the beautifully-finished and smooth-running volume control is motorised and levels can be controlled via a no-nonsense remote handset.

That volume control also works with the crowning glory - a decent headphone amp, with two outputs, that works with digital and analogue sources. The DAC2 HGC is in fact a development of the best-selling 'reference-quality' DAC1, which Benchmark tells us finds regular use in many recording studios and mastering rooms.

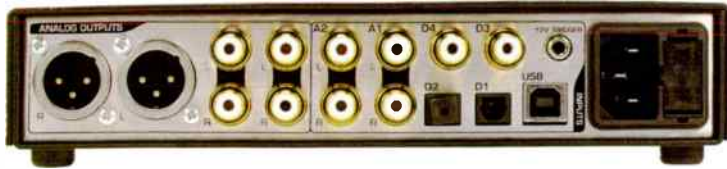
By today's standards, though, there are some key omissions that the new unit addresses. The DAC1 may be compatible with 192kHz PCM sampling rates via the digital inputs, but it lacks DSD support and only has a USB 1.1 interface. In many respects, though, it set standards for what was to follow - the unit is exceptionally well-built, and compact,

yet manages to find space for an internal switch-mode power-supply (which is internally-screened to prevent noise breakthrough). Also inherited are jitter-reduction and visual confirmation of the selected input; the DAC2 adds indication of incoming sampling-rate and resolution (e.g. 16/24bit).

You also get a digital pass-through output mode (also active with USB), audio-muting, fixed XLR attenuation 'pads', and the ability to invert a digital input's polarity. Another interesting idea from one of those later DAC1 variants is, albeit in refined form, responsible for that 'HGC' suffix. This stands for Hybrid Gain Control - a system that combines 32-bit digital control over output level, implemented in DSP, with the analogue volume control (a traditional potentiometer)

Another fundamental difference concerns the DAC chipper. The DAC1 was equipped with the Analogue Devices AD1853, but inside the DAC2 HGC you'll find that recent 'wonder chip' the Sabre32 ESS-9018, with four of its eight DAC





Two sets of phono outputs and a pair of XLRs are complemented by two analogue inputs, two coaxial digital inputs, two optical digital inputs and the all-important USB port.

sections deployed per channel in a balanced configuration.

PERFORMANCE

I drove the DAC2 HGC primarily from three sources - an inexpensive Sony CD player with optical output, a Squeezebox Touch and a Mac Pro computer with a convenient USB 2.0 port. Thanks to the latter, native DSD playback could be tried. The DAC's output was able to directly-drive my Linn LK280 solid-state power amplifier and attached Acoustic Energy 'speakers directly, thanks to its volume-control facilities. To assess the headphone amplifier, Onkyo ES-HF300 and Sony MDR-1R 'cans' were pressed into service.

Kicking off with Garrett Brennan's 'Alta Powder Day' (2.8MHz DSD64 DSF Blue Coast download). This grassroots outing - acoustic guitar, slide guitar, harmonica and vocals - was recorded without overdubs in a Wasatch Rockies log-cabin.

Here it was presented with the openness, appropriate sense of scale and communication of the

minutiae that brings you closer to the performance - even human flaws like breathing sounds and string-chatter are resolved. Comparatively 'low-tech' CDs succumb to the DAC2 HGC's impressive detailing too. Wearing the Sony headphones and listening to The Jimi Hendrix Experience's 'Can You See Me?' I could hear a mixing-desk control crackle as a guitar chord was panned rather unsubtly from left to right.

Talking of headphones, the DAC2 HGC's ability to drive such transducers is impressive. At no time did they run out of 'oomph', kick-drums, organs and bass lines alike retaining their depth and power - although it has to be said that none of the 'phones at my disposal are particularly difficult to push into viable music-making.

As an experiment I connected a pair of B&W LM7 bookshelf speakers to one of

the headphone sockets. And they fared surprisingly well, in terms of delivery, with no audible strain. I suspect that the DAC2 HGC can thus accommodate practically any headphones.

CONCLUSION

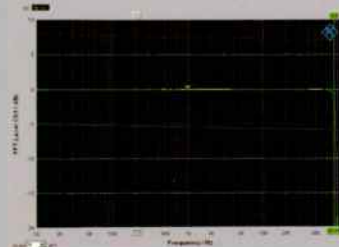
The DAC2 HGC gave a very good account of itself in all of its roles. With decent sources and cans, could this represent the ultimate in late-night listening? It certainly sounded like it to me.



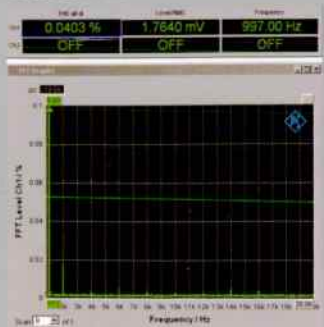
Inside the Benchmark is a screened switched-mode power supply, large output devices that drive any headphones you care to connect, and a motorised volume control.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



Frequency response extended to 90kHz (-1dB) upper limit with 192kHz sample rate data, our analysis shows. This is a very high upper limit by current standards, giving extended analogue bandwidth. There are no filter options and this is the Sabre's fast filter.

Distortion at -60dB was fairly low at 0.04% via the rear analogue phono outputs, against a common value of 0.016% for the ESS 9018; I suspect this is attributable to the output op amps used.

EIAJ Dynamic Range measured a high 123dB via the rear analogue phono outputs, a figure that is amongst the best stand-alone hi-fi DACs going, ignoring twin-Sabre32 designs that exceed 130dB.

Unfortunately, as volume was wound down distortion and noise increased rapidly. At mechanical half volume (on the volume control knob) dynamic range decreased to 114dB.

The front headphone outputs gave different and worse results, the presence

of noise giving 114dB dynamic range at full volume, decreasing to 106dB at half volume. This is better than CD, but unimpressive.

Output from XLR measured a low 3.5V and phono 1.8V. Headphone outputs also gave 1.8V - plenty enough for all phones.

The preamp stage had unity (x1) gain and an output overload of 3.7V, so it is in effect a line volume control.

The Benchmark DAC2 HGC has noise and distortion not usually seen in Sabre32 based DACs. Levels were low, so it still measured better than CD, when playing 24bit, but results could have been better.

Frequency response	4Hz-90kHz
Separation	111dB
Noise	-120dB
Distortion	0.024%
Dynamic range	123dB
Output (phono/XLR)	1.8V/3.5V

BENCHMARK DAC2 HGC, £1750



EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VERDICT
A transparent yet analytical DAC with plenty of headphone drive.

FOR
- potent and revealing
- insightful
- line stage and multiple digital inputs aid flexibility

AGAINST
- lack of balanced AES-EBU input might disappoint some
- can run rather warm
- usage can be less than intuitive

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KEF R500, Hi-Fi News & Record Review, November 2014



mail



LETTER OF THE MONTH PRIZE



KEF Q100 LOUDSPEAKERS

Visit our website at www.hi-fiworld.co.uk or send your emails to letters@hi-fiworld.co.uk. Letter of the month wins a pair of KEF Q100 loudspeakers.

Answers by: NK - Noel Keywood; PR - Paul Rigby; TB - Tony Bolton; MP - Martin Pipe; RT - Rafael Todes; JM - Jon Myles.

For more advice see Letters from earlier issues at www.hi-fiworld.co.uk/letters

A pair of KEF Q100 loudspeakers are on their way to **ROB NICHOLS**, Letter of the Month winner in our December 2014 issue.

Letter of the Month

THE LADDER UP

I've been reading your great magazine for longer than I can remember. And probably like all the other readers have tried to use your experience in slowly trying to climb the great sonic hi-fi ladder. Does anyone ever get near to the top? I doubt it. I particularly like trying to read between the lines and try to get some sort of synergy between components, something you don't always talk about. I think you should.

Anyway, I ditched my CD player two years ago, bought a DAP (Digital Audio Player), ripped my favourite CDs and binned the rest - nobody wants 'em anymore. I started downloading hi-res - most of it is amazing, although hardly any new stuff is hi-res; why are they still sticking to CD and rubbish MP3 formats?

I keep saying to people CD won't exist in 5 years. I know that was said about vinyl in the eighties and how wrong everybody was. I could be wrong again! Aren't people fickle?

Finally, I would like to thank your magazine, particularly Noel, for his views and his knowledge. After trying out different recommendations, I went to listen and did not buy without hearing; take your amp to a dem and let your ears be the judge. The acid test is what you hear in your own listening environment, since it is a component too.

I still play vinyl on my Gyrodec, through my beloved Almarro SE valve

amp, but my latest acquisition is a pair of Martin Logan Electromotions - I know Noel loves 'em. They are amazing even late at night. After hearing them I'll use the old analogy, the penny has dropped. My system won't be for everyone, we are all different.

For the moment - no make that a long time - I'm happy with it. I just want more new hi-res!

Thanks.

**Robert
RAM Electrical
Leeds.**

Hi Robert. That is a lovely system. The Almarro Single Ended valve amps look fabulous and sounds it too, and there's nothing that can match such an amplifier feeding Martin Logan electrostatics. From hi-res, you will hear every fine detail.

On the subject of "reading between the lines" and "Noel loves 'em", beware of what you divine! In different circumstances I would



Martin Logan Electromotion hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers. "They are amazing - even late at night", says Robert.

probably choose to buy and live with Martin Logan's Summit X. It has their superb XStat panel atop a powered bass bin that is well matched to the panel. The Electromotion is an

oppo



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HEADPHONE
OF THE YEAR
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Planar Magnetic
Headphones

PM-2
Planar Magnetic
Headphones



HA-1
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altogether simpler and less expensive model that takes up little room space and, being unpowered, reacts to the behaviour of a partnering amplifier. Bass can range from indistinct to tight and well defined, for example. It is a good reviewer's tool for this reason; I could not review an amplifier using a Summit X because it has a powered bass bin.

The Electromotion is also a tad forward in the upper midband and this makes it very revealing, again useful when reviewing. I can hear fine detail easily; they lack the stiction of dynamic loudspeakers and work even at low levels.

Then there's the razor sharp imaging that renders a centre loudspeaker unnecessary in a surround-sound setup, which I also need for reviewing, as well as home entertainment; I swap between stereo through my World Audio Design 300B amplifier and a surround-sound system, both using Electromotions.

So the reason I use budget electrostats isn't quite that I think they're the best; even Martin Logan would shudder at this. It is that they happen to be a fine reviewing tool as well as a great electrostatic loudspeaker - and I do love electrostatics.

But here's the rub. Many people feel electrostatics lack "warmth". And that is true. They lack the deep "thrum" you get from a box that adds reverb, in effect, and gives every box its sound. It's a property of all box loudspeakers and, if like me, you cleverly (or so you think at the time) absorb this rear energy when building such a speaker, the box enhancement dies and you end up with a perplexingly dull and flat sound. At a fundamental level, this experience left me sceptical about box loudspeakers. I designed and built a good one and it sounded terrible!

All the same, boxes and their sound are what we are all used to - and I enjoy 'em as well. The one big question in high fidelity I could not answer is that if marooned on a desert island would I choose Tannoys or Martin Logans?

So my message is: be careful what you divine about products a reviewer uses. They could well suit the reviewer more than they'd suit you, for obscure reasons. But all the same, I know that your Electromotions, driven by an



The pretty Almarro SE single-ended amplifier. It uses 6C33C "Russian Trawler" valves that give a bright red glow.

Almarro, will be giving you a sound like no other. Wise man!

NK

OPPO REVIEW

I read the review of the Oppo BDP-105D Blu-ray player (December issue) with great interest. Noel Keywood's analysis of measured performance of the Oppo was fascinating. However, in view of his comments and praise regarding the unit's performance with CD he omitted discussion of the vital (to my mind) measured performance at this data rate (16/44.1). Of particular importance are distortion at -60dB, and dynamic range. Can you please comment on these test results?

I note Noel's praise of the Audiolab M-Dac and Q-Dac, as alternatives to the Oppo. However, I am put off from purchasing either Audiolab, despite excellent performance at high resolutions, because of the lack of linear power supply (unless this is purchased separately from a third party) and (most importantly) because of the

distortion that Noel measured at CD resolution. If the Oppo's measured distortion at 16/44.1 is as class leading as it is at higher resolutions then I will certainly consider purchasing the Oppo in favour of other DACs recently reviewed. This is despite the caveats Noel discusses in his review, such as lack of filter options and eccentric/patchy format support at high resolutions.

My interest in the measured performance of the Oppo at lower data rates stems from the fact that I typically use only up to 24/96 PCM (via optical connection). The bulk of my music collection is CD resolution (as I'm sure is the case for most people). Consequently, my priority is firstly that a DAC have the best possible technical performance at CD resolution, and secondly that the DAC have further consistent performance at higher data rates, rather than vice versa.

I have one other query regarding the Oppo. I note that measured performance is consistent across high



"I will certainly consider purchasing the Oppo in favour of other DACs" says Chris Lloyd. But it must give good results from CD.



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res PCM (on SIPDIF) and SACD, but is this also the case for USB? I know that in the past the technical performance of some devices (music players, DACs, streamers, etc) has varied (jitter, distortion, etc) according to the input used. In such instances the USB input was usually the weaker performer due to power supply noise/isolation issues from noisy PCs. I look forward to the forthcoming review of the Benchmark Audio DAC 2 HGC.

Further, thank you for printing my letter in the November 2014 issue. As a consequence of Noel's recommendation in his reply, I purchased Mark Knopfler's 'Kill to get Crimson' album. A lovely disc, well produced, agreed, but with some compression which frankly I would have preferred were absent given the largely acoustic nature of the music. To elaborate on and clarify the point I made in my previous letter, I have no problem with the use of compression by musicians/producers/etc. as an artistic tool to aid production of a recording in the studio. Compression can be applied to specific instrument tracks to create a particular effect, or can be used to engineer a sonic 'soundscape' for a recording as a whole.

Radiohead producer Nigel Godrich is a master of the gratuitous use of compression in this way. The recordings are beautifully engineered and are very satisfying to listen to, although the dynamic range is clearly nothing to shout about and the end result does not sound (nor is it intended to sound) natural. The end result is entirely artificially engineered, but is also enveloping and powerful. In my opinion, compression is effective when used in this context. However, if a musician or producer seeks to represent something akin to a natural acoustic in a recording (as very often should be the case for many musical sub-genres) then I feel that compression should be used only very sparingly (if at all).

All too often I find that compression is applied willy-nilly to modern recordings, as well as to many re-masters of older material, often where a recording is largely acoustic in character and so the use of compression is inappropriate and detrimental. In such examples, the dynamics and subtlety of the music are destroyed. The music doesn't ebb and flow naturally within its acoustic space. The interplay that could or should be apparent between musicians and/or musical parts is reduced. The sound is homogenised. Drums don't resonate naturally, organ pipes lose scale and impact, bass guitar lines don't funk, vocal parts lose

presence, etc.. I find that such recordings are less able to involve and so emotionally move the listener and, as a consequence, the listener loses interest and so the rason d'etre of the music is lost.

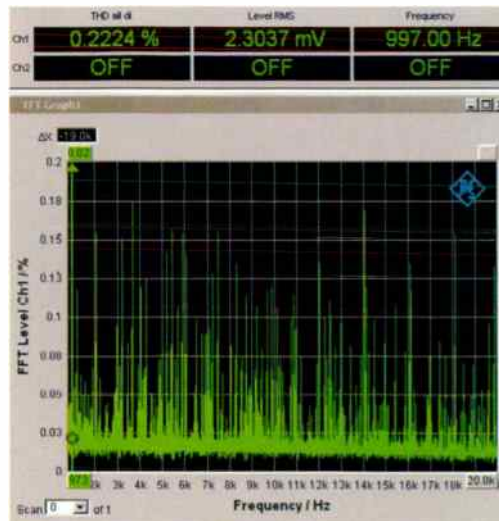
Regards,
Chris Lloyd

Hi Chris. I did – and still do – brush over the technical performance of CD for one simple but gruesome reason: 16bit quantisation produces noise that imposes a strict distortion limit of 0.2% at -60dB. This is a function of 16bit's limited resolution, and no reflection upon the DAC itself. Audio analysers see and measure noise as distortion and although it is 'noise' as we would ordinarily define it, it puts energy into the harmonically related measuring bands of the analyser, resulting in a distortion reading. Sorry not to make this clear, but it is a somewhat obscure technical point that takes space to explain and likely is of little interest to many readers.

Narrow band spectrum analysis minimises this phenomenon, but it does not eliminate it when the noise is strong and spectrally dense.

PCM being a well defined system, this distortion value is consistent and is not a function of the DAC or the hardware of the player. And that's why I do not, these days, usually quote the value. The lowest distortion reading I have ever extracted from 16bit is 0.18%, so you may well see this value quoted in past Measured Performance results, but it is inconsequentially lower than 0.2%.

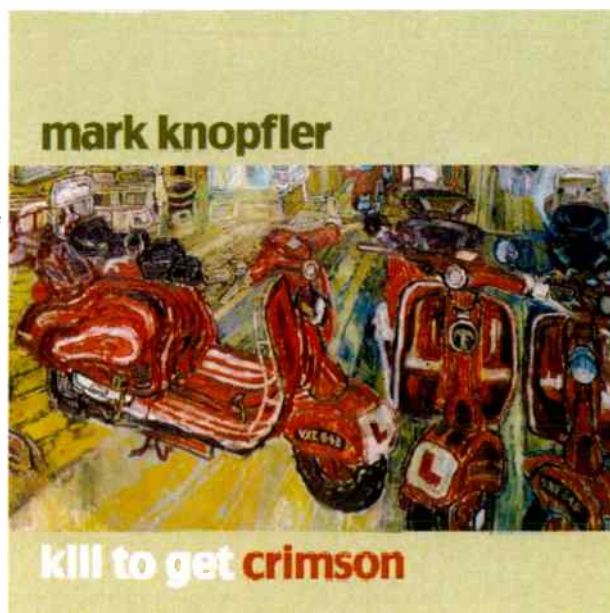
By way of contrast, an advanced DAC



Distortion on CD players is generated by the limited resolution of 16 bit digital code, not by the player, our audio analyser (and Philips test discs) show. Expect 0.2% at -60dB; this value cannot be bettered. By way of contrast, 24bit manages 0.02%, ten times less distortion. Our analysis shows the quantisation noise that plagues CD and a distortion figure of 0.224% at -60dB - as good as it gets.

like the ESS 9016/8 Sabre32, whilst producing 0.2% or so with 16bit, will produce 0.02% with 24bit, in other words ten times less distortion.

There are large differences between modern DACs when processing 24bit, that stresses their abilities, but none with 16bit that swamps them with its own deficiencies. So the 24bit distortion result says something useful about a DAC, whereas a 16bit figure says nothing about a DAC at all and is in fact misleading about its abilities.



Noel says Mark Knopfler's Kill to Get Crimson LPs sound good; Chris Lloyd says they sound compressed!

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In spite of all this, I did listen to CD through the Oppo BDP-105D Blu-ray player and it sounded superb, quite obviously better than most DACs except the Audiolabs, mainly because they have such effective filters. This is a point most people, including reviewers, miss. The Optimal Transient filter set (there are three of them) roll off upper treble with CD but also reduce ringing, including pre-ringing, through the filter and the improvement in sound is quite marked.

The Oppo lacks these filters, but then so do all other Sabre equipped DACs, because Audiolab had these filters custom designed by John Westlake - and he is one of the few digital/analogue engineers around who knows what's required. Even the optional filters in the Sabre itself aren't very useful, likely because they are simple designer-default options. Sadly, most modern DACs can run custom designed filters but few manufacturers bother - or are able - to design them, in spite of their hyperbole.

In case you are wondering how, if 16bit has such a hard performance limit, it can sound different between players and good on the Oppo, it is because the Sabre32 has been designed to produce non-repetitive digital noise patterns, and suppress jitter - in other words it manipulates digital deftly. I was taken aback at how good the Oppo sounded with CD, even old CD that it cleaned up quite noticeably.

The player gave identical results with USB as S/PDIF, although you are right that USB convertors have, mostly in the past, stained the sound with processing noise. This is becoming less common now.

Kill to Get Crimson compressed? Yes, I guess it may well be; it does have presence and not the stark range of some recordings. It's still lovely though; I'm a minor Mark Knopfler fan. There is the lyrical content to consider too and his laconic style and beguiling prose strike a chord with me. **NK**

NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

I noted your comments on the possible sonic affects of negative feedback in your review of the Ekco amplifier in the October issue. And I thought you might find a story from the 1979 Chicago CES Audio Show interesting in reference to this subject.

I was staying with my friend Murray Zeligman who was showing his modular



The Ekco EV55 SE amplifier has switchable feedback, labelled 'NF Adj'. "It bothered me that worse measurements sounded better" says Allen Edelstein.

2 way/3 way speaker, the Precedent Audio MZ Mod 3, a very interesting modular design using KEF drivers in a system with transmission line loading for both the bass and mid range sections, along with the first David Berning preamp. As an amp we were using an Audionics BA 150, a 150 Watt (very conservatively rated) hybrid amplifier. The hybridization was interesting because both the front end and output stages were tubes (horizontal output tubes with screen drive to make them operate in triode mode). Only the driver stage was bipolar because the unusual output stage needed high current to drive it and tubes weren't up to the task. Interestingly the amp had variable negative feedback ranging from 14 dB to 0 dB.

One evening Davis and Murray demonstrated the sonic affects of the

negative feedback on the BA 150 for me. As the negative feedback was reduced in steps, sound with each reduction became less like reproduced sound and more like live sound. I knew that as the negative feedback was reduced the harmonic and IM distortion increased and the output impedance (damping factor) was getting higher meaning less flat frequency response due to interaction with the speakers variable impedance.

So I wasn't too surprised because by then I knew conventional measurements were poor clues to reproduction in audio. But it still bothered me that worse measurements sounded better.

So I asked Murray and David if they ever measured anything that correlated with sonics, expecting a shrug of the shoulders. But they both said yes. Linearity (defined as if 1 volt in produces



World Audio Design 300B amplifier, designed by us way back in 1993, had switchable feedback. Switching feedback off made it measurably worse - but it sounded better. Oh dear! See what Allen Edelstein says about this.

5 volts out then 2 volts in should give 10 volts out) was the one factor they both found had a correlation. They said negative feedback was inversely related to linearity. And that's the one explanation they had for what I was hearing.

By the way, just as an additional side comment on linearity, both said that triode outputs were inherently more linear than tetrode or pentode and both utilized triodes in all their own amplifier designs.

Hopefully, this tale sheds a little light on the negative feedback/no (less) negative feedback discussion and leads to further discussion. As for me I had a great time playing audio buff at the show and I miss Chicago CES a lot, as do many of my friends. And I got to eat some great tasting, huge Chicago steaks too.

Allen Edelstein
New Jersey,
USA

Hi Allen. Thanks for your 'Letter from America' (!) and experiences. Feedback is a peculiar and interesting subject. Transistor amps must use it, they are so fundamentally poor; on valve amps it is an option. Triodes actually apply feedback through 'degeneration', making them intrinsically linear, if low gain devices. Switching feedback in and out is an interesting idea, and a challenging one from a designer's viewpoint. As you say, it makes an amplifier measure worse but sound better. At which point head scratching begins!

Anyways, I think you will like the news that CES will be previewed in New York, likely easy for you to reach - and steaks aplenty. Brits can get there too: it is a 6 hour flight at reasonable cost for those who may like to visit the Big Apple and be wowed. **NK**

CD QUALITY

My collection of vinyl is sourced from both second-hand record-shops and charity shops, even some boot sales, and I have been fortunate in acquiring some astonishing vinyl from yesteryear, the best quality mainly 1950s and 1960s, and a few from 1970s. What I do not understand is how many of the engineers, with limited technology and equipment, produced audio quality which, quite frankly, puts a lot of modern recordings to shame. Why is it that I can only listen to about thirty percent of my CDs on my Martin Logan Electromotion loudspeakers, the remainder being a distinctly unpleasant experience? Putting

on vinyl on one of my three record decks comes almost as a relief!

Fine, CDs are not the last word in quality, but one can obtain excellent recordings if things are done correctly. I have a Dave Grusin live CD which really captures the performance and ambience of the concert hall, excellent dynamics and minimal compression. So it can be done if the engineer knows what they are doing.

The vinyl of some of my Les Paul discs, jumps out from the speakers, and completely eclipses the CD equivalent. The comparison between CDs and similar vinyl has been interesting.

Almost without exception, the CDs have been from poor to almost good, whereas the vinyl, allowing for a few clicks and pops, have been, on average, excellent, and so much more information from those grooves.

Of course, one has no or little information on the master tapes that were used for the CDs, equalisation and compression settings, etc. Am starting to look at high resolution downloads, but the jury is still out, as far as I am concerned.

I recently sold an Audio Technica LP 120 Direct Drive deck on an auction site, which was originally bought really to test suspect second-hand records, before playing them on better equipment. I know you reviewed that deck some years ago, and slated it.

Heavily modified and damped by me, I was quite astounded how good that deck could sound on vinyl, given

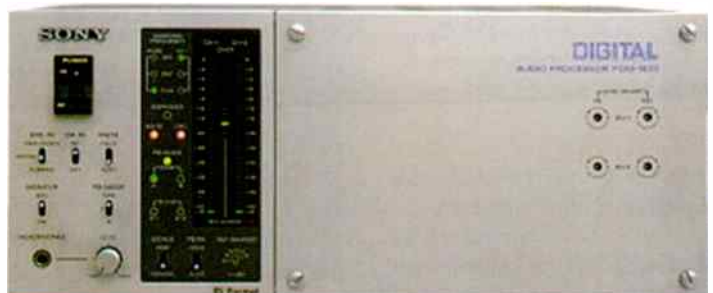


America's massive Consumer Electronics Show (CES), held in Las Vegas, now has an 'Unveiling' in New York. Allen Edelstein can get a steak there without the need to travel to Vegas.

it's basic construction. OK, the wow and flutter wasn't the very best, and the top plate was plastic, but with an AT95E or 2M Red attached, it gave a good account of itself. I used industrial acoustic-grade-cork to dampen the platter underside, and between the steel plate and plinth base. The cork pads / sheets were samples, so cost me nothing except time. After applying the treatment, the platter, which rang like a bell, was acoustically virtually 'dead'. A Rega mat also helped, as a replacement.

The effect was that any tendency to feedback was diminished significantly, and bass response, I think, was tighter. Not suggesting that for a moment, the deck surpassed Rega, Project, or similar decks, but worth a go, for little or no cost to modifying a base model. I have attached a picture of the AT deck I modified.

I see that Pioneer now have a Direct Drive rival to the Technics 1200 deck, and from web blogs I see, Technics-fans have not been impressed. Let's be honest, if you're a Technics fanatic, nothing except a Technics will do. Would



Sony PCM 1630 digital adaptor - an early 1980s studio product for converting analogue audio to digital. Also popular was Sony's PCM F1.

be interesting if you could review the new PLX 1000 deck with the damped arm, and damped base, even though it is primarily a DJ deck, but so was the AT120. Technics fans keep splitting hairs on the wow and flutter figures of the 1200 series (I know that you are Timestep advocates, so am prepared to be shot down in flames!)

I have had experience of Gyrodec, Thorens, Rega, Goldring Lenco, SME, Audio-Technica 120 and 1240 decks, Sony, Garrard, amongst others, and more pairs of speakers than I wish to own up to. But the Martin Logan Electromotions, driven by a good amp/preamp and with a good source, are truly fabulous speakers, and even eclipsed my beloved Harbeths, which was a shock, when I first heard them. Long live vinyl! (and FM).

**Ron Koorm
Harrow
Middlesex**

Hi Ron. I think CD's problem was not CD, so much as Neolithic digital. What we hear from CD is decided more by the original Analogue-to-Digital convertor (ADC) used to make the recording in the studio, than the player in our home. In hi-fi we naturally tend to look at the replay chain sitting in our lounge, rather than the record chain that is hidden from us in studio somewhere. But it isn't the player that is the weak point - it is the ADC.

In the early days, meaning the 1980s, CD and all things digital were considered "perfect" simply because they were digital, but the truth was very different. I remember hearing an early classical recording that was swimming in digital distortion; it was shockingly bad. Thinking he had a massive 96dB dynamic range to play with, the recording engineer had obviously recorded at a low level to avoid overload on crescendos (musical peaks) and this put the music in the zone of very high distortion. Bear in mind here that digital distorts at low levels, the reverse of analogue that distorts at high levels. The result was appalling sound.

Over the years ADCs have improved and digital distortion has diminished. Also, realising that early 16bit digital wasn't perfect after all, engineers now keep recording levels up to avoid distortion, as well as play loud of course. So early digital recordings in particular commonly sound bad, meaning coarse, edgy and devoid of subtle low level detail.



Pioneer's new PLX 1000 Direct Drive DJ turntable. Is it for hi-fi use, wonders Ron Koorm?

The CD itself simply carries this miserable sound into our homes.

Early CD players did also produce distortion, in the order of 1%-2% measurement showed, but once Philips introduced Bitstream architecture to avoid the sins of the ladder convertor, this subsided, lessening the contribution of the player.

In contrast to Neolithic digital, late analogue recordings (i.e. 1970s) were being laid down on high speed analogue studio recorders of enormous complexity and capability. The Studer A80, introduced 1970, is often quoted in this context, a large and - of course - expensive professional recorder.

So as LP faded out, it had reached the zenith of analogue quality, a peak so high it is being returned to today. For example, Cookie Marenco at Blue Coast Records records live to analogue tape before encoding to DSD. In total and complete contrast, early CD is rubbish simply because early ADCs were rubbish.

This explains the awkward and unsatisfactory changeover from LP to CD: they were worlds part technologically.

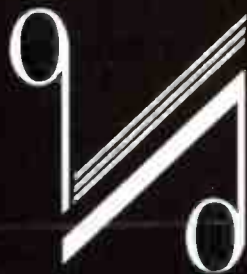
ADCs have progressively improved, like all things digital, and nowadays a good 16bit recording (or more likely a 24bit truncated to 16bit) committed to CD can



The Hanpin DJ5500 turntable, their top model, uses a 16 pole Direct Drive motor. All lesser models use an 8 pole design that rotates less smoothly. Since most modern Direct Drive turntables are produced by Hanpin, an OEM, their performance will depend upon which motor type is selected. So not all Direct Drives are the same - and not all are good simply because they are Direct Drive.

Vena

Compact Digital Amplifier



"Powerful, detailed hi-fi sound via all inputs makes the Quad Vena a worthy winner"
Group Test Winner, Hi-Fi Choice (November 2014)



Quad celebrates 77 years of audio innovation with the launch of Vena, a compact integrated amplifier sporting a wide range of digital and analogue inputs, plus superior-quality wireless streaming over Bluetooth with aptX support. D/A conversion is handled by the same high-performance 24-bit/192kHz chipset used in the company's acclaimed Platinum CD players and, as one expects of Quad, the Class AB power amp section is of the highest quality. With a range of finish options to suit any setting, Vena is an exceptionally neat solution for superb sound from any source. From smartphones, tablets, PCs and Macs to traditional hi-fi separates.

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QUAD

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sound very good. We have some fabulous demo CDs at Hi-Fi World, obviously made with knowledge and care.

However, whilst sounding hard hitting, clean and dynamic, they lack the subtle detail and atmosphere often apparent in 24bit. To me they often sound a little too good - a slightly sterile contrivance I feel. There is huge dynamic range (measurement confirms), but little sense of atmosphere, as if a whole layer of low level detail is missing, which it likely is. Enjoyable then - even impressive - but not especially organic or natural; if I close my eyes and think 'is this real?' the answer is no, it is still a simulacrum, albeit a good one.

Digital at 24bit resolution largely overcomes this feeling; I find it smoother, more relaxing and more believably natural.

I'm glad you like Martin Logan's Electromotions. Regular readers will know I use them too, but their forward and brutally revealing electrostatic midband does highlight differences between recordings, spotlighting imperfections such as jitter and digital distortion. I think you are experiencing this. They are a wonderful tool for reviewers, if a hyper-critical one.

The Direct Drive turntables you talk about come from OEM supplier Hanpin, a Taiwanese company (www.hanpin.com.tw). Early designs weren't good, we found, but I am told their more recent motors are more sophisticated and speed stable than those we tested. As you say, their platters and plinths need damping, because they are lively. The DJ arm is difficult to replace - and it needs replacing! **NK**



Blue Coast Records, California, record to analogue tape before transcribing to DSD, they told us. In the professional world, high speed analogue tape is now looked upon as offering superb quality.

ARCAM AVR750

I've retired from the A/V business but my last 10 or so years was spent around earlier Arcam AV products. The sound quality was always what you'd expect at their price points but the real problems centred around chronic reliability and picture switching issues, especially their flagship AVR 600. As result of much head scratching and money the result is the AVR 750.

Your review obviously found the sound quality on the money but nowhere was there any mention of its picture performance. Frankly I'm not much bothered by any of that stuff either but let's face it, if all the video R&D were stripped out, plus all the surround circuitry you'd end up with an amplifier at a fraction of the cost and presumably worthy of 4 maybe even 5 Globes. I've no connection with Arcam

but just feel a little credit in the right direction can't go amiss.

*Best Regards,
John Oakman*

When video goes via 'pass through' it doesn't get processed in the A/V receiver, so we do not assess video processing functions. Our mandate is to cover audio comprehensively and properly and that is all there is space for. The AVR750 simply failed to do what most rival receivers can manage at one-third the price. Whilst sound quality was undeniably good this wasn't enough to counterbalance its limitations. We wanted to like it too but our readers generally do not appreciate what they see as undue generosity - and understandably so. It's a hard world! **NK**



John Oakman thinks we should have been more generous to Arcam in our AVR750 receiver review.



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WIN QUAD'S SUPERB VENA AMPLIFIER/DAC WORTH £599 IN THIS MONTH'S GREAT GIVEAWAY!

Here's your chance to win the superb Quad Vena amplifier/DAC we reviewed in our November 2014 issue. Read the review excerpt below and answer the questions.

"At its heart it's a 45 Watt per channel integrated amplifier – but its connectivity options go farther than any previous piece of equipment from Quad at the £599 price-point.

It has two analogue inputs, two optical and one coaxial digital input and both Type A and B USB sockets. The former allows the

connection and charging of Apple iPods, iPads and iPhones while the former facilitates connection to your computer-based music collection.

In addition music can be streamed from computers and portable devices via Bluetooth with aptX codec support.

Completing the feature set are optical and coaxial digital outputs and stereo analogue outputs for connecting to an off-board power amplifier.

All this can be controlled by the compact but functional and easy-to-use remote control.

Inside, a linear power supply

is built around a decent toroidal transformer while digital-to-analogue duties are handled by a Cirrus Logic CS4398 DAC. That's the same one used in Quad's Platinum DMP CD player and capable of accepting files up to 24bit/192kHz.

All this is housed in a relatively-compact aluminium case measuring just 313mm x 93.5mm x 302mm (W/H/D) and weighing in at 6.1kg.

Indeed, there's more than a hint about Quad's first ever solid-state amplifiers in its looks – just updated for the 21st century."

For a chance to win this great prize, just answer the four easy questions at right. Send your entries on a postcard only, by January 5th 2015, to:

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Notting Hill,
London W10 5AP**

QUESTIONS

[1] How much power does it produce?

- [a] 35 Watts
- [b] 555 Watts
- [c] 65 Watts
- [d] 45 Watts

[2] What codec does Bluetooth use?

- [a] Dolby AAC
- [b] DTS HD MA
- [c] AptX
- [d] Opti-mod

[3] Who makes the DAC?

- [a] Burr Brown
- [b] Cirrus Logic
- [c] ESS
- [d] Wolfson

[4] What is the case made of?

- [a] Aluminium
- [b] Wood
- [c] Bubble gum
- [d] Gold

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- THE EDITOR'S DECISION IS FINAL
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entries will be accepted on a postcard only

**OCTOBER 2014 WINNER: ADL X1 HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER
Mr. Andrew Meakin-Scott of West Sussex**

Ear Kandy



Less than a year ago, we enthused over Roksan's K2 BT integrated. Here, says Martin Pipe, is the K3 - its more refined relative.

In terms of layout and design, the K3 is very similar to the K2 BT we reviewed earlier on in the year - note the large toroidal transformer, the switching relays and heatsink for the output MOSFETs.

Back in April, we concluded that the Bluetoothed ('BT') version of Roksan's acclaimed Kandy 2 ('K2') gave you a lot of amplifier for its £900 asking price. In addition to the convenience of access to mobile music libraries, it offers numerous inputs (among them an MM phono stage), remote control, MOSFET amplification and a presen-

tation that combined guts and speed.

Now we have the K3 which, although endowed with an upmarket 'mirror-free' finish, is very similar to the K2 BT. In Roksan's view, the K2 BT was a 'stepping stone' between the original K2 and the K3. And the new amp is part of a range; matching K3-series components include a CD player and an off-board power amplifier for those who fancy bi-amping their speakers.

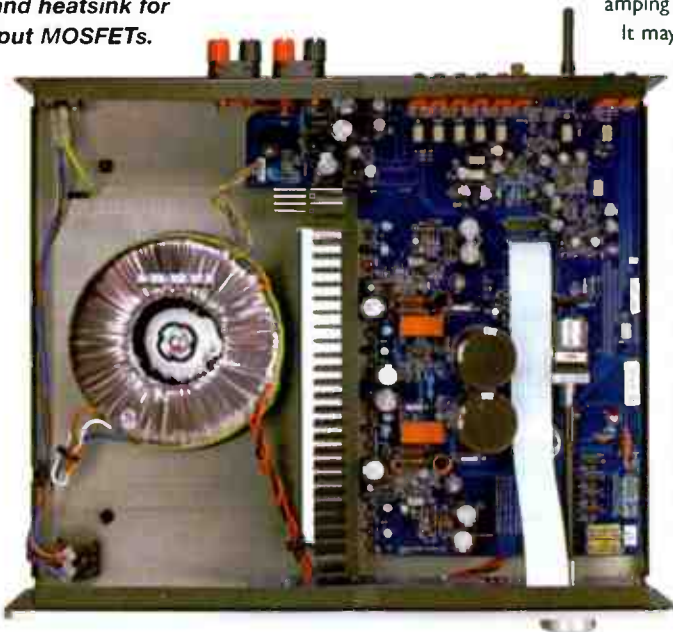
It may not have that 'BT' suffix, but the K3 - which sits alongside the K2 BT - includes as standard that all-important Bluetooth facility, complete with apt-X codec support. As before, the Bluetooth module sits under the amplifier's main board internally, its aerial socket being brought out to the rear panel. The amp is supplied with a stubby little aerial that protrudes horizontally; this is not hinged in any way, and care is needed to avoid snapping it.

As with the K2 BT, there's no way of applying external digital sources

to the Bluetooth module's DAC. Indeed in terms of wired connectivity, the K2 BT and K3 are identical down to the positioning of the rear-panel connectors.

Your speakers are, as before, connected via sturdy pairs of binding-posts that will also accept banana plugs. Among the equipment the input-socketry caters for are CD, four further line-level sources and a turntable with MM (or high-output MC) cartridge. No dedicated facilities for analogue recording are provided, although Roksan has brought out the connection between the pre- and power amplifier sections to the rear panel. Thanks to this arrangement, you can feed an active subwoofer or additional power-amp (for speaker bi-amping). An alternative is to, courtesy of the 'bypass' switch, feed the K3's own power-amp directly from a line-level source (such as the front-channel outputs of a surround processor).

All flexible stuff, then. Miniature sealed-relays, controlled by a microprocessor, switch between the inputs. In my experience, this solution combines practicality, reliability and minimal signal degradation; it's one that you'll find in much



more expensive amplification. The microprocessor also looks after the motorised volume control, and carries out commands received from the remote handset).

SOUND QUALITY

Thanks to its connectivity options, I was certainly spoilt for choice when it came to listening to music through the K3 and my Acoustic Energy speakers - Bluetooth, vinyl and conventional line-level sources (among them a Squeezebox Touch and a Sony disc player/Arcam irDAC combination). Let's start with the latter. Here, the K3 follows in the footsteps of the K2 BT. A number of tracks fared particularly well - 'Oh Yeah' from Can's masterpiece Tago Mago, and Change's soulful 'Searching'.



Both of these tracks harnessed the natural rhythmic flow that the K3 is capable of and, as a result were enthralling to listen to. The bass was firm and well-articulated, while treble elements never erred towards the fatiguing superficiality associated with overbrightness. In this respect, the K3 combined the undoubted strengths of the K2 BT - pace and energy - with a slightly more neutral character. With rock music this positive impression was reinforced; I could bring my speakers close to concert levels with no signs of grittiness or loss of control.

Yet for all this the K3 also fares well with classical music - among the listening choices a copy of Beethoven's '5th Symphony' and my frequently-played CD of Holst's 'Planet Suite' demonstrating a good dynamic balance between restraint and unleashed power; subtleties are not masked during busy passages, while the imaging properties are retained even at high listening levels.

The phono stage is audibly of the K2 BT's heritage - listening to the same Squeeze and Run-DMC LP tracks I chose when reviewing the latter yielded very similar results. That's no bad thing. We're talking punchy and rhythmic here; this is pretty good stuff for an integrated phono stage although, as noted with the earlier model, it's a pity that no sensitivity adjustment (if only internal gain-setting jumpers) to

accommodate different cartridges has been provided. But even if you do have to manually-raise or lower volume to achieve the desired listening levels relative to other sources, there's musical insight on offer.

Bluetooth is definitely worth having if you store music on your smart device - it's very easy to configure and use - although sound-quality is ultimately being sacrificed for convenience. Yes, the K3 can make use of the high-quality apt-X codec if your partnering device can. But if the music you're playing is in MP3 or AAC form it's going through

two sets of lossy compression before it reaches the K3's amplifier stages. This can squeeze dynamics, and mask detail.

CONCLUSION

An evolution of the successful K2 BT, this new Roksan builds on the existing model's strengths - a sound characterised by pace, punch and detail, allied to practical benefits like a well-stocked connectivity department - with a little more finesse if needed.

This, together with the better finish and remote control, help to justify the £300 premium I feel.

Plenty of analogue connections on offer including MM phono and the ability to integrate with a subwoofer, external power amp or AV system.



MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Roksan K3 produced 145 Watts into 8 Ohms and 240 Watts into 4 Ohms. Since modern loudspeakers commonly fall into the 6 Ohm region it will produce around 200 Watts under typical conditions so it has plenty of power. Damping factor measured 31 so the amplifier will keep a tight grip on bass and sound well controlled.

Frequency response via CD and the other inputs, except phono, rolled off gently above 20kHz; Roksan choose not to extend supersonic output. The MM phono stage was accurately equalised

and this too measured flat across the audio band.

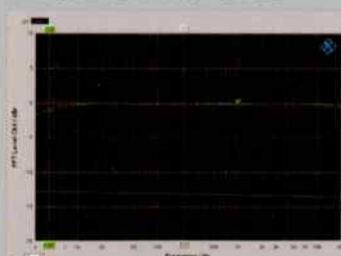
Distortion levels were very low, measuring 0.018% at 10kHz into 4 Ohms, our analysis shows. A stable harmonic pattern as output level was increased suggests the K3 will sound clean and have easy going treble lacking edginess. This amplifier is likely to be mild mannered up top.

The MM phono input measured normally, having 5mV sensitivity and a good overload margin of 50mV. Noise was low at -82dB.

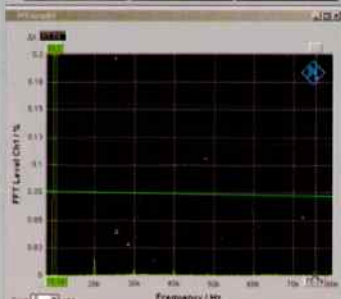
Bluetooth had flat frequency response to 20kHz and a noise floor of -65dB, giving a result similar to CD although with less dynamic range.

The K3 measured well in all areas, having low distortion and plenty of power. With good Phono and Bluetooth stages as well, it should give the sort of clean, punchy sound Roksan amplifiers are known for. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



Power	145watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	4Hz-33kHz
Separation	91dB
Noise	-99dB
Distortion	0.01%
Sensitivity	500mV
Disc	
Frequency response	4Hz-20kHz
Separation	67dB
Noise	-82dB
Distortion	0.02%
Sensitivity	5mV
Overload	50mV

K3 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER £1250



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

Roksan have once again delivered the goods. Although it's good with all kinds of music, the K3's vitality and scale makes it a particular winner with rock and dance music.

FDR

- broad connectivity
- integrated phono stage comparable with decent budget off-boards
- rhythmic flow, dynamics and resolution

AGAINST

- bluetooth module's DAC can't be used with other digital sources
- no level-matching for phono stage

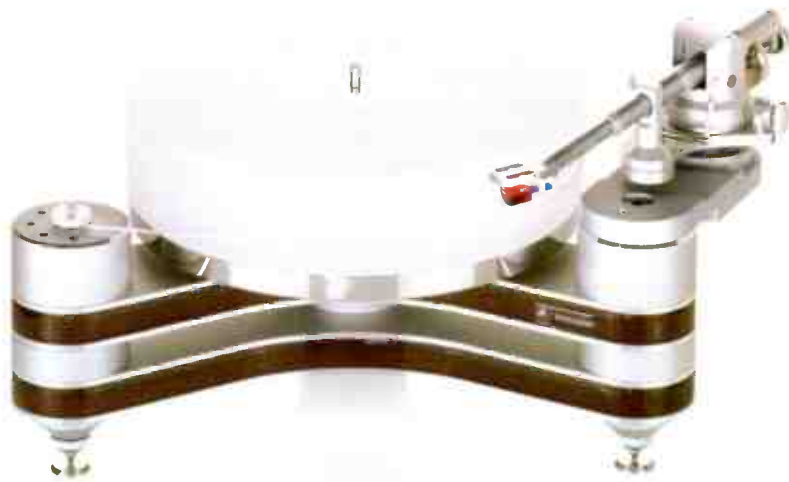
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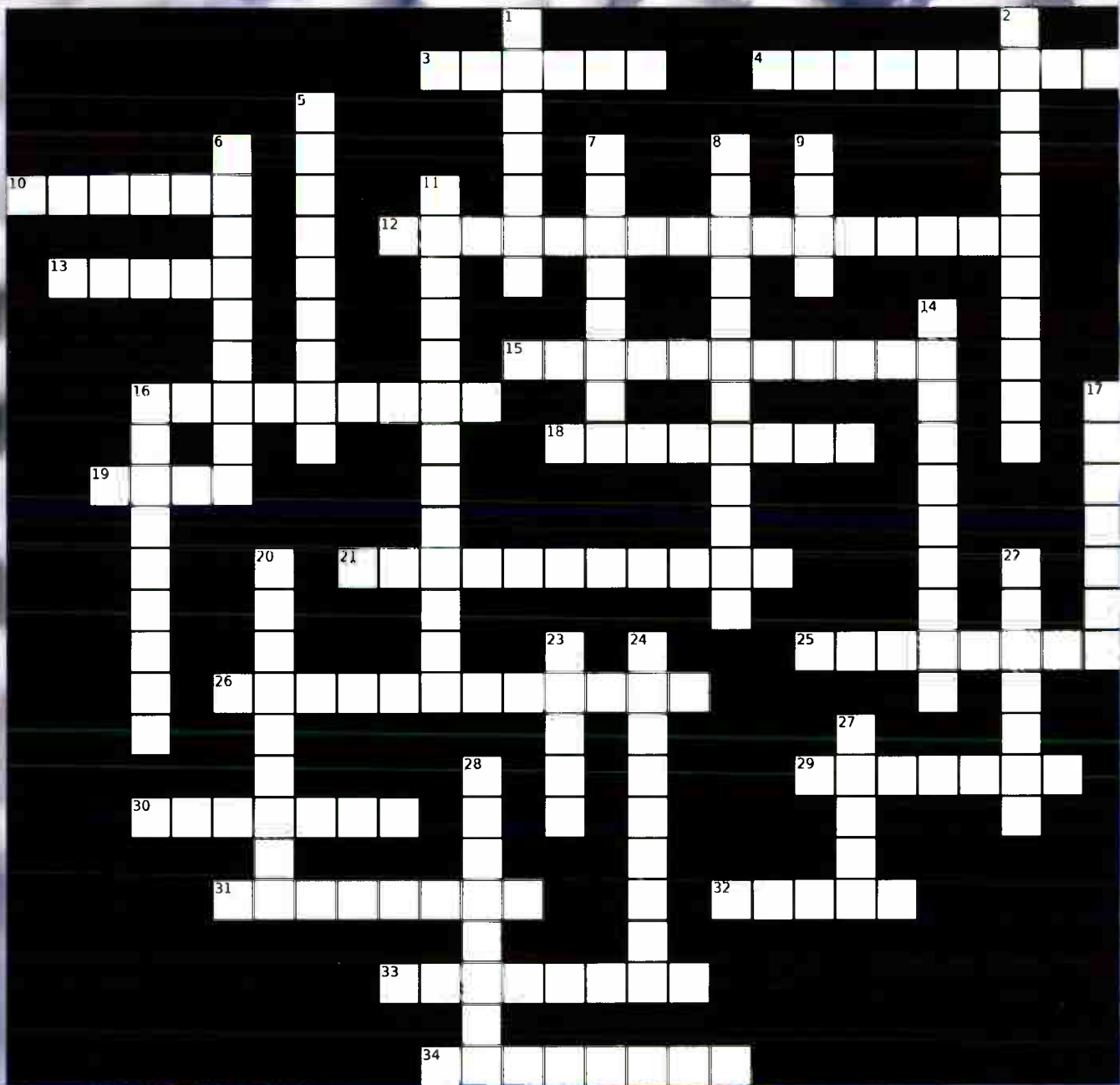
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Christmas Crossword



ACROSS

- 3 Classic studio tape machine (6)
 4 Where The Beat es recorded (5,4)
 10 A dog or a speaker driver (6)
 12 DAT stands for (16)
 13 Single box music system from Cyrus (5)
 15 Quasi-ribbon speakers from America
 16 A Lancashire town - and first voice on Radio 1 (8)
 18 French amplifier maker (8)
 19 Famous for its electrostatic 'speakers' (4)
 21 Home of the annual National Audio Show (11)
 25 Early electronic instrument controlled by hand movements (8)
 26 Invented the phonograph in 1877 (6,6)
 29 Firm founded by Spencer and Dorothy Hughes (7)
 30 Developed the CD system along with Sony (7)
 31 Helps keep amplifiers cool (8)
 32 Another name for valves (5)
 33 Home of Linn (8)
 34 Bohemian (8)

DOWN

- 1 Woody (7)
 2 Hi-Fi World editor (4,7)
 5 A hi-fi retailer or a Kent town (9)
 6 Elvis presley's mansion (9)
 7 Not digital (8)
 8 Tannoy Kensingtons are what? (12)
 9 Salisbury-based hi-fi company (4)
 11 Founder of Wharfedale (7,6)
 14 Roxy Music singer (5,5)
 16 aptX is a codec for which wireless system? (9)
 17 What we used before the iPod (7)
 20 Home of country music (9)
 22 Bassist with The Clash (7)
 23 Better than CD? (5)
 24 Lead singer in Public Image Ltd (4,5)
 27 Company behind the Newton personal assistant (5)
 28 This company supplied amplification for Woodstock 8)

Answers

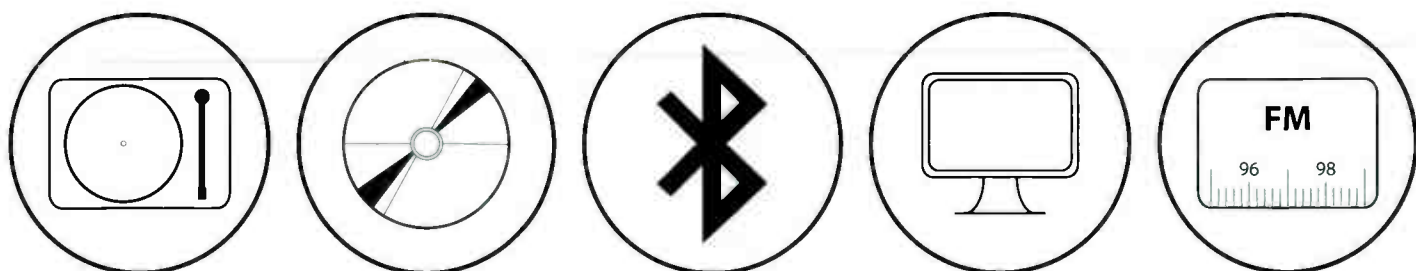
Across

3. Studer, 4. Abbey Road, 10. Woofer, 12. Digital Audio Tape, 13. Lyric,
 15. Magnepanar, 16. Blackburn, 18. Devallet, 19. Quad, 21. Whittlebury, 25. Thoremin,
 26. Thomas Edison, 29. Spendor, 30. Philips, 31. Heatsink, 32. Tubes, 33. Scotland,
 34. Rhapsody

Down:

1. Guthrie, 2. Noel Keywood, 5. Sevenoaks, 6. Graceland, 7. Analogue, 8.
 Loudspeakers, 9. Naim, 11. Gilbert Briggs, 14. Bryan Ferry, 16. Bluetooth,
 17. Walkman, 20. Nashville, 22. Simonon, 23. Vinyl, 24. John Lydon, 27. Apple,
 28. McIntosh

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World Radio History

A kind of Magic



Martin Pipe checks out Cambridge's 'reboot' of its versatile Stream Magic 6

Here we have an updated form of Cambridge's acclaimed Stream Magic 6 - a versatile and recognisably-styled source component that combines the talents of USB/coaxial/optical DAC, network/USB music streamer and internet-radio tuner. Instead of calling it the Stream Magic 7, though, Cambridge have simply appended a 'v2' to the name. And indeed the two machines look identical. However, there are significant differences between them - to the extent that you cannot upgrade an earlier model to the new v2 spec.

So what are these changes? Cambridge has been particularly keen to trumpet the fact that Spotify's streaming service (albeit the paid-for version) is now within grasp. This involves using your existing Spotify app to select music and 'pass it' to the player.

There are also a faster microprocessor and DSP under the bonnet. As a result, searches and browsing through music-collections and radio-station lists are speedier. Playback of digital files now goes beyond 96kHz/24-bit, while the USB ports are USB 2.0-compliant for more responsive browsing of attached storage devices. The new model also benefits from a redesigned Stream

Magic Lite Android app (with iOS to follow).

All of the original Stream Magic 6's key features - selectable digital filters, 24-bit/384kHz upsampling by Anagram Technologies, Wi-Fi, unbalanced/balanced analogue outputs, the ability to store internet radio stations as 'presets' for quick recall, dual Wolfson DACs and front-panel LCD screen are retained. So

too is the digital pre-amp mode, which allows the volume and stereo balance of the analogue output to be adjusted - albeit via DSP, rather than a potentiometer. As a result, a power amp can be driven directly. Podcasts are available too.

Unfortunately, the Wi-Fi connection still only caters for the 2.4GHz band. Where I live, there are numerous Wi-Fi networks competing



Internally, the Stream Magic 6 v2 continues the Cambridge tradition of high-quality interior design/layout and careful component selection. The DACs are Wolfson WM8740s, operated in differential mode (one chip being dedicated to each channel). The white object at the top is the Wi-Fi transceiver.

Vinyl is black!



The Evo ! Used by Hi-Fi World to evaluate the new Beatles records. The EVO comes fitted with the legendary SME 309 tonearm loved by so many and a cartridge of your choice. We have worked with direct drive turntables and moving coil cartridges for 33 years and the EVO has evolved into a mature product that is used by many as a reference and is quite simply a world beater. We can supply completely new units with 6 year guarantees, used ones with 5 year guarantees, or we can convert your own.



The Beatles in Mono !

With the eagerly awaited release of the Beatles' newly remastered mono albums just around the corner, what better time for Miyajima's hand-crafted mono, stereo and 78 rpm phono cartridges to come to the UK?

Japan-based Miyajima have been making phono cartridges for more than three decades. Only recently discovered by American and European audiophiles, they have since received rave reviews all over the world and deservedly so.

With several patents under his belt, Noriyuki Miyajima is a passionate music-lover and a true artisan manufacturer. Every Miyajima cartridge is handcrafted in-house by a dedicated full-time team of six based in in Fukuoka, Japan. The cartridge bodies are individually precision-milled from rare and exotic hardwoods including ebony, rosewood and mpingo African blackwood.

**Clearaudio Goldfinger - Miyajima - Benz LPS - Denon DL103 - DL-102 mono - Audio Technica AT33
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for spectrum - with predictable results. On several occasions, I was happily listening to an internet radio station (like Radio 3, available on this player's client in 320kbps AAC form) and then playback would suddenly grind to a halt. Switching to Ethernet may have been less convenient but at least the music wasn't sporadic. Cambridge - and, for that matter, other manufacturers - should cater for the less-crowded 5GHz band forthwith.

Cambridge's redesigned app, freely downloadable from Google Play, is excellent. You're given a list of available content (your 'smart' device's own memory or networked storage) to choose from. This can then be sent to the selected Stream Magic device for playback. What is particularly noteworthy is that the files are streamed 'as-is' via the network with no conversion. I was able to, for example, play AAC, FLAC, WAV (PCM) and MP3 music tracks stored on my Samsung smartphone; the Stream Magic 6 v2's display confirming the codec and bitrate.

That's audibly superior to the usual Bluetooth route associated with smartphone/tablet content libraries, which rely on your device's music playback application.

PERFORMANCE

When I first tried listening to music from network or USB devices, the unit would play only the selected track; annoyingly, it wouldn't automatically play the next track in the folder/album. Instead, you have to add desired tracks to a playback queue in the desired sequence. However, there's a get-around. Using the select knob, move to the desired folder and then hold down the control - all tracks contained within are then added to the queue and played in track-number order. Repeat and random playback are also available.

The Stream Magic 6 v2 is compatible with the key codecs. On the lossy side we have MP3, AAC, WMA and Ogg Vorbis while in lossless we have ALAC/FLAC (and for that matter uncompressed AIFF/WAV) support all the way to 24-bit/192kHz. With a range of high-bitrate MP3s and AAC files streamed from network storage, sound quality surpassed expectations with clarity and balance. Internet radio also fared well and even when tuning into Radio 4 (128kbps AAC) the resolving power of the Stream Magic 6 v2 laid bare background noise (like the



whirring of the BBC's studio PCs). Radio 3 was a delight, especially the evening concert and a typical Late Junction journey through tone and rhythm.

With high-quality material the sound quality is in keeping with the lofty standards set by the original. At a recent press event, I was treated to a demo of the new unit running Spotify - one of the songs played was the instantly-recognisable title track of Steely Dan's Pretzel Logic. At home, and with a FLAC rip of this album streamed to the Stream Magic 6 v2, the music leapt out at me - especially the keyboard work - with snap and precision. With my Sony transport playing the original CD via the optical input, the presentation and character were practically identical.

Aphex Twin's welcome return to recorded output, Syro, is a tour-de-force of complex rhythms and

tonal textures. Within the constituent tracks swirl a compelling atmosphere that the Stream Magic 6 v2 recreates so well. Even the finer details come across (this album, it seems, was recorded at least partially with analogue equipment, if the tiny snippets of tape-hiss are anything to go by!). Connected to a budget Sony CD player the Cambridge also let me know just how far The Beatles' studio techniques had developed in the four years between Help! and Abbey Road.

CONCLUSION

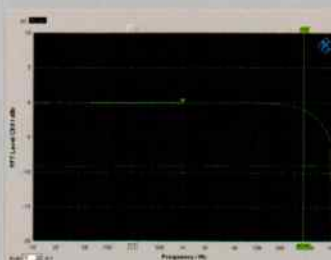
The Cambridge Stream Magic 6 v2 is flexible, sounds good and maintains its manufacturer's reputation of providing high-value hi-fi. It transformed the performance of a budget CD player while thanks to that free Android app I haven't heard my smartphone music collection sound better anywhere!

There's little you can't connect to the Stream Magic 6 - optical, coaxial, USB (now compliant with the faster 2.0 spec) and networked sources are all catered for.

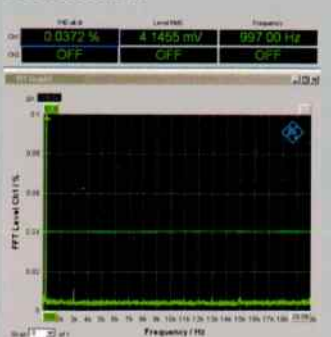
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the Stream Magic 6 v2 extended to a 40kHz (-1dB) upper limit with 192kHz sample rate data, our analysis shows, through the S/PDIF electrical input. The filters made little difference to this result. They have minimal affect at 44.1kHz sample rate too, so the tonal balance of CD is unaltered.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



The optical TOSLINK input works to 192kHz sample rate, which currently is unusual because most optical receivers at present manage 96kHz sample rate and no higher.

Distortion at -60dB with 24bit data measured 0.04%, a low value.

With low distortion and low noise EIAJ Dynamic Range measured a high 116dB via the rear analogue XLR outputs, a figure that is good, if not now comparable to better stand-alone hi-fi DACs that exceed 120dB. All the same, the Stream Magic 6 v2 betters CD (103dB) when playing 24bit, so it conveys the benefits of high-resolution digital. Results from memory key test files (flash memory) were the same as via S/PDIF.

The new Stream Magic 6 v2 measures well in all areas. It can be used as a high-quality stand alone DAC, as well as a streamer, or a way to read high-resolution digital files from a memory key, turning in excellent results in all these roles. **NK**

Frequency response	4Hz-40kHz
Separation	111dB
Noise	-114dB
Distortion	0.04%
Dynamic range	116dB
Output (phono/XLR)	2V/4V

CAMBRIDGE STREAM MAGIC 6 V2 STREAMER/DAC, £700



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VERDICT

One or two niggles don't detract unduly from the Cambridge Stream Magic 6 v2's potential as a good all-round digital music source.

FOR

- a versatile multi-function player
- energetic and punchy
- excellent smartphone app circumvents Bluetooth's limitations

AGAINST

- can't 'seek' through individual tracks
- No 5GHz Wi-fi support

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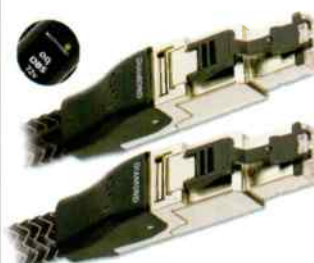
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Christmas Wishes

High-resolution digital devotee Jon Myles picks the ideal stocking fillers to get his bits in good order. Mind you, he might need a big stocking for some of these!

NAME: Jon Myles

STATUS: High-resolution digital devotee

FOCAL SPIRIT ONE S HEADPHONES £149 www.focal.com

There are more headphones out there than you can shake a stick at – finding the right ones for the daily commute can be a tricky business. So welcome the Focal Spirits. Unlike other portable 'phones they don't over-egg the bass or treble but instead have a smooth, relatively neutral sound with just a touch of low-end boost. They also look good and are extremely comfortable to wear for long periods. And they don't have Beats emblazoned on the side...



APPLE IPOD CLASSIC 160GB £180 www.apple.co.uk

You'll have to move fast to track down one of these last remaining new units from Apple, or look to eBay, but it'll be worth it because until Apple killed off the Classic some weeks ago it was the best iPod in the range. Enough storage to hold thousands of high-res tracks, the great click wheel control and an aluminium body that just oozes class still makes it a true design icon. Its sound quality also edges that of the more popular iPod Touch.

NAIM MU-SO WIRELESS SPEAKER SYSTEM £895 www.naimaudio.com

And talking of design statements – Naim's first wireless speaker is the equal of anything to emerge from Apple's Californian brains trust. Featuring six drivers and 450 Watts of power it has all the traditional Naim virtues of drive, rhythm and exceptional timing as well as a startling level of insight. It'll handle files up to 24/192kHz and also boasts AptX Bluetooth, AirPlay, UPnP, Spotify Connect and internet radio compatibility. It's illuminated, circular, solid aluminium volume control is also a thing of true beauty that trumps any remote control.



ROBERTS STREAM931 DAB/DAB+/FM/INTERNET RADIO £150 www.robertsradio.co.uk

I love listening to music and radio in bed – and the Roberts Stream931 lets you do it in style at a wallet-friendly price. Its three-way speaker system combines a clear midrange (essential for voice-driven radio) with a clean and surprisingly powerful bass. But that's not all – the Roberts also sports wi-fi connectivity for accessing your own digital music collection, as well as a USB port for playing direct from a memory stick – and it has Spotify Connect built in. Indeed, the only thing it seems it can't do is make the morning cuppa.

MCINTOSH MA8000 AMPLIFIER £10,000 www.jordanacoustics.co.uk

This is my Christmas fantasy present, a bit big for most stocking - granted - and most wallets. But there are amplifiers and then there are AMPLIFIERS – and the MA8000 is firmly in the latter category. Big and bold with 300 Watts of pure McIntosh power on tap, it's powerful enough to handle just about any loudspeaker you care to throw at it. But the MA8000 has more than just power. It is also supremely detailed with a delicious, creamy presentation that brings to mind some of the best valve amplifiers. In addition, there's an on-board DAC for connecting other sources as well. And you get those big, blue power meters that light up brighter than most Christmas trees.



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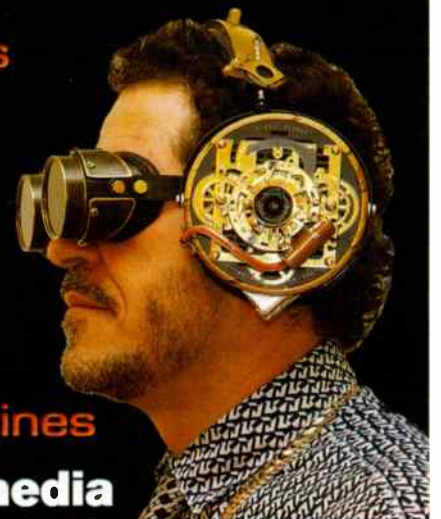
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Christmas Wishes

From the affordable to the downright expensive - Rafael Todes keeps his fingers-crossed!

NAME: Rafael Todes

STATUS: classical musician and valve aficionado

ARCAM MINIBLINK £90
www.arcam.co.uk

This is a small Bluetooth receiver and DAC that, when plugged into your hi-fi, means that you can stream from your phone to your system using AptX technology. It's not intended for high-end listening but does a great job with Spotify, with all the convenience of music at your fingertips. A really effective product!



SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH FUSES
www.highendworkshop.co.uk

Mains supply is one of the most important factors in sonic quality and yet most audiophiles will happily spend hundreds of pounds on a mains cable with a nine pence fuse inside!

I tried some of these in my system and they made a striking difference. Greater clarity and soundstage and a no-brainer for the improvement/cost ratio.

A SELECTION OF MULLARD VALVES
www.langrex.co.uk

Tube-rolling, as the Americans call it, is an esoteric pastime which can yield some interesting results. Mullard were at the forefront of quality valve production in decades gone by and 'new old stock' (NOS) can be the Rolls-Royce solution. I've recently dealt with Langrex, based in Billingshurst, who supplied the military with valves and were Mullard's main dealer. They have a large selection of well-classified and tested valves which takes the danger out of buying them abroad or from eBay!



CHORD HUGO
www.chordelectronics.co.uk

This is a highly artful DAC and headphone amplifier that, at £1400, may be a substantial stocking filler but surpasses any DAC I know at this price. There is a smoothness and refinement which is rare at many multiples of its asking price, it is portable and also highly versatile. It works in an eccentric way with a series of coloured LEDs and takes a bit of getting used to - but it's worth it!

PS AUDIO £1949 TO £4400
www.signaturesystems.co.uk

Another giant stocking filler. The PS10 is the mother of all mains regenerators. It can really show how much difference to any system clean mains can make. This is the top of the range and can cope with several hundred watt monobloc amplifiers. There are cheaper and less powerful conditioners in the range. To say that the differences are dramatic with it in a system is an understatement. It throws out a truly three-dimensional soundstage against a pitch black background and allows more details to emerge.



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Avid Acutus Ref power supply	dem 2499	Arcam CD17, as new boxed	dem 449
Avid Valvere SP turntable	new 2749	Arcam Alpha 7, remote, excellent	used 119
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Benz Micro Ruby Wood H, boxed plenty of life left	used 599	Arcam CD73, excellent boxed	used 199
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Cartridge Man Music Maker	dem 499	Arcam Alpha Plus, excellent	used 99
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Clearaudio Concept MC package	dem 999	Atoll 100SE DAC	new 299
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Clearaudio Innovation Compact, good condition	dem 1999	Audio Analogue Maestro SE CD	dem 399
Clearaudio Unity Tonearm, excellent boxed	used 699	Audio Analogue Paganini (later model)	dem 399
Conrad Johnson TEA 1b Phono stage	used 1999	Audio Synthesis Transcend CDT (Modded SONY)	dem 1999
Conrad Johnson Premier Six phono preamplifier	used 1999	Ayre Evaluation DVD	dem 349
Consonance Cyber 40 phono stage	used 599	Bewitch (Puresound) A8000 CD	used 99
Gorrad 401, Slate Audio plinth	used 799	Cambridge Audio Dacmagic (newer model)	used 999
Graham Phantom Supreme 12", SME cut	dem 599	Chapter Audio Sannet CD & Neo remote	dem 1999
Haddock 242 Export, Leema	dem 299	CEC TL51XR, lovely belt drive unit	used 699
Leema Elements phono stage	dem 299	Chord Qute EX DAC, excellent boxed	dem 799
Lehmann Black Cube phono stage	dem 299	Consonance Tarandot CD	dem 399
Lehmann Black Cube SE phono stage	dem 299	Consonance CD2.2 Linear MK11	new 799
Linn Sondek, Intok LV11, excellent	used 899	Consonance 120 Linear	dem 299
Linn Sondek, Intok, Valhalla, vgc+	used 849	Consonance Droplet, vgc+	dem 899
Linn Sondek, Cirkus, Valhalla, front mount motor	used 599	Cyrus DACXse, excellent boxed	used 949
Linn Sondek, Lingo, Naim Ara, superb	used 2499	Cyrus DIT5se, excellent, boxed	used 449
Linn Sondek, Basic plus, Valhalla, VGC+	used 699	Cyrus Streamline, excellent, boxed	used 549
Linn Sondek, Grace 707, basic psu, VGC+	used 599	Denon DNP720AE, near mint boxed	used 199
Linn Sondek, Lingo, Project 9CC, Dynavector 10X5	used 1499	EAR Acute 3, mint boxed	dem 3749
Linn Basic Plus, vgc+	used 149	Exposure 2010CD, remote	dem 199
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Mana Reference wall shelf	used 299	Linn Karik 3, excellent boxed remote	used 499
Mana Reference table	used 299	Marantz CD63KI, vgc	used 199
Michell Gyrodex Export, Technoarm A, boxed	used 1199	Marantz CD10, excellent boxed new belt kit	used 449
Michell Technoarm A in black as new mint boxed	used 449	Marantz SA7001, nr mint boxed	used 199
Michell Focus One, SME 3009, excellent,	used 399	Marantz CD6004, nr mint boxed	used 199
Moth phono stage	dem 249	Meridian 506/20 with MSR	used 399
Musical Fidelity XLP5V3 phono stage	dem 99	Meridian 508/20, excellent	used 10499
Musical Fidelity XLP5V8 phono stage	dem 199	Moon CD 3.3x E3k new	dem 1499
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Rega RP8, Apheta Cartridge, excellent boxed	dem 1249	Myryad Z20DAC, excellent boxed	used 199
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Rega RP6, excellent boxed	used 599	NAIM CD5, remote, SNAIC, new laser	used 599
Rega EOS phono stage	used 199	NAIM CD5, remote, SNAIC excellent	used 449
Reveler Rosewood, G1022, excellent	used 199	NAIM CD53, excellent boxed, remote	used 1899
Roksan Xerxes RB300, PSU, boxed	used 349	NAIM CD53, excellent boxed, remote	used 1999
Roksan Xerxes, XPS2, Linn Fit	used 349	NAIM CDX, excellent, boxed remote, late model	used 699
Roksan Xerxes, XPS, SME Fit	used 249	NAIM CD53i, 2 months old	used 799
Rotel RP3000 Direct Drive TT with matching arm	used 799	NAIM CD3.5, vgc	used 299
Rotel RP855/AT110 with spare stylus, excellent	dem 179	NAIM DVDS5, excellent boxed	used 499
Graham Slee Fanfare Amp3	dem 119	Pathos Endorphan, crated	dem 3499
Graham Slee Gram Amp2	dem 299	Prima Luna Prologue 8, ex demo boxed	dem 1299
Graham Slee Elevator EXP Step up	used 199	Quad 99DCP, excellent REDUCED	used 399
SME 3009/3, excellent boxed	used 249	Rega Planet 2000, excellent	used 199
SME 3012, excellent	used 799	Rega Apollo R, excellent	used 449
SME V12, nr mint boxed	dem 349	Rega la DAC, excellent	used 199
Systemdek, Syrinx PU2, excellent	used 399	Rega DAC, excellent boxed	used 349
Technics SL120, SME3009 excellent	new 1199	Rega Saturn, excellent boxed	used 599
Thorens TD160 HD turntable	new 249	Rotel RCD02, vgc	used 79
Thorens TD170, Fully Automatic, excellent	used 249	Rotel RCD1072, excellent, remote	used 249
Thorens TD160, Audio Technica arm, boxed	used 249	Sony BD500	used 99
Thorens TD209 turntable package	dem 699	Sugden Masterclass CD original version	dem 799
Thorens TD203 Blue turntable	new 999	TEAC VRDS5, excellent remote	used 249
Thorens TD125S c/w SME3009, excellent	used 399	The DS Pro Progeny DAC	used 249
Tom Evans Groove, 0.85mv/100 ohm, excellent	used 849	Tube Technology Fulcrum CD transport	dem 699
Tom Integrated Elite Rock, Merlin, Excolibur	used 999	Tube Technology Fulcrum DAC (inc DAC64 chip)	dem 899
Trichord Dino 2 c/w NC PSU & HP Cable	dem 3499	Unison Research CDE	new 1599
VDH Calibri M/C cartridge	new 1999	YBA GC-10, ex boxed, £1600 new, BARGAIN	used 399
VDH Candor M/C cartridge	new 749		
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VTL TP2.5 phono stage (new)	used 799		
Wilson Benesh Act 1 Tonearm, nr mint superb	used 799		

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Christmas Wishes

Paul Rigby hopes Santa shares his love of analogue replay.

NAME: Paul Rigby

STATUS: Hi-Fi World's own Mr Vinyl

KOEPEL RECORD DIVIDERS

www.soundfoundations.co.uk

I have a collection of over 4,000 LPs and they are in no sort of order. In fact, if you asked me to find a particular album I wouldn't have a clue where to look. Kate Koepel's laser-cut wood record dividers offer order to my chaos. Prices range from £295 for a full 7" alphabetical set and £395 for the full 12" set version.



JETHRO TULL - WARCHILD

A four disc box set featuring a 40th anniversary reissue of the 1974 Tull album, 'WarChild', that saw the band return to conventional songs from its earlier operatic LP structures. It includes the original album and bonus tracks (three previously unreleased), remixed in 5.1 surround and stereo by Porcupine Tree man Steven Wilson. You also get an 80-page booklet with extensive scribbles, plus an aborted film script synopsis and track-by-track annotations from Ian Anderson. Price is £20.

DECENT AUDIO WALL SHELF

www.decentaudio.co.uk

I bought myself a Miyajima Zero mono cartridge because a large part of my vinyl collection features original, wide-grooved, mono discs. Problem is that my turntable cannot hold a second arm. I need a dedicated mono deck, therefore, but how to install it? The Decent Audio wall shelf will be essential. I already use one underneath my reference turntable and have never regretted it. Price is £200.



MIYAJIMA ZERO (TYPE B STYLUS)

www.time-step.com

While I already have a Zero mono cartridge with a Type A stylus, for wide-grooved mono recordings, if I used this with records that, in general terms, were pressed after 1967 then the Type A stylus may just damage the grooves. What I also need is a Type B stylus which reduces the size of the stylus from 1.0mil to 0.7mil. This, of course, also goes for modern mono reissues. Price is £995.

KING CRIMSON - STARLESS

A box set based upon the excellent King Crimson album 'Starless and Bible Black' from 1974. King Crimson certainly know how to handle their album reissues. Included are nineteen CDs of live material from the 1973-74 UK and European tour, a CD of studio material, two DVD-A discs and two BD discs of hi-res/5.1 surround sound with a booklet, memorabilia, album and poster prints plus another three bonus audio CDs of odds and ends. Price is £130.





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HiFi World, July 2013

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Christmas Wishes

Martin Pipe hopes Santa brings analogue and digital goodies with him...

NAME: Martin Pipe

STATUS: Head-in-case expert

BEATLES BOX SETS (£300 EACH)

We've been enthralled by The Beatles In Mono box set. The earlier albums were supposed to be heard that way. Stereo releases of these LPs have an unnatural soundstage, except for three of the later LPs (Yellow Submarine, Abbey Road and Let It Be) that were mixed in stereo. I can't buy a 'mixed' box set, and so I'd like both please! Pity the stereo LPs were sourced from digital archives rather than the original analogue master tapes, but you can't have everything..



TEAC CD-P800NT (£400) www.teac.com

This versatile CD/network player impressed me when reviewing it for the November 2014 issue. I can play my existing music from audio servers, as well as any CDs. It will handle DSD files and hi-res PCM. With Internet radio and USB playback I was sorry to see the review sample go. Santa, please fix this!

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO G2 (£100) www.cambridgeaudio.com

The integrated speakers of smartphones and tablets suck, right? Headphones aren't always convenient, and carting around your hi-fi is hardly practical. So how about a compact Bluetooth speaker? A four-speaker array delivers a surprisingly-fulsome sound, while its internal 10-hour rechargeable battery can also be used to charge your mobile device. With dimensions of 189x67x55mm, Cambridge's new G2 will slip nicely into that stocking.



MOTH RECORD CLEANING MACHINE MK2 KIT (£335) www.britishaudiostore.com

I'd like a record-cleaning machine - and instead of watching dreary Boxing Day TV I'd like to build one from a kit! This DIY version of the Moth RCM Mk2 is a 'wet' cleaner with a vacuum-powered drying phase. You do have to build the enclosure, though; 15mm plastic laminated construction board is recommended.

BENCHMARK ADC1 (£1600) www.benchmarkmedia.com

I do a lot of archiving of analogue material, for myself and others, and the two-channel Benchmark ADC1 scores over my existing pro-grade kit. It's much smaller; it supports 192kHz/24-bit conversion and it has a USB interface (limited, alas, to 96kHz sampling) as well as industry-standard digital outputs (up to 192kHz here). Use a good laptop with software like Adobe Audition and the result is pro-grade digital recording in the least possible space.



Christmas Wishes

Tony Bolton hopes Santa helps him clean-up this Christmas.

NAME: Tony Bolton

STATUS: Resident vinylista



AESTHETIX ABCD-1 CARTRIDGE DEMAGNETIZER £200.00

www.coolgales.com
www.hifisound.co.uk

This is an interesting device that claims to demagnetise your moving coil cartridge in the same way that we used to degauss tape heads. The concept is that a fixed high frequency signal of varying amplitude is passed through the cartridge. The ABCD-1 is battery operated and plugged into the pick up signal leads. Pressing the button activates the process and the red light goes out when it is finished.

I found it to be very effective on the three cartridges that I have tried it on so far, giving the effect of cleaning and polishing my sonic window onto the music.

PRO-JECT MEASURE IT 2 £90.00
www.henleydesigns.co.uk

I tried out this stylus balance recently as a Soundbite and was so impressed with the usability and packaging of it that I felt it needed to be included in this wish list. I would be very pleased to get one of these for Christmas. The packaging is well presented and each component, including the calibration weight and the screwdriver that is for opening the battery compartment, all have their place. It is durable, practical and well presented - the perfect present for a vinylhead.



STONE'S BEESWAX FURNITURE CREAM £5.99
www.lakeland.co.uk

This wood furniture polish has been made to the same recipe in Devon since 1760 when it was invented by Exeter pharmacist Dr. Stone. It contains beeswax, white spirit, pure soap and essential oils but no silicones or artificial additives.

The results that it gives on any polished wood surface, such as the plinth of my Linn Sondek, are amazing. The wood develops a really deep glow that shows off the graining of the plinth beautifully. It is easy to apply and polish off and is now available nationally through Lakeland.

WORLD DESIGNS WDHD3S HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER FROM £499.00
www.world-designs.co.uk

I reviewed this back in the September 2014 issue of this magazine and it has stuck in my memory as being one of the most pleasant to listen to headphone amplifiers that I have had in the house. It is available in either kit of pre-built form, has adjustable impedance for headphone matching and a volume control on the front. The sound of the ECL 83 valves is delightful and it is my current reference point for affordable headphone amplifiers.



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I have used this fluid in both the bath type of record cleaner (Disco Antistat) and the vacuum type of cleaning machine and have found that it gives excellent results in both environments. If used in a bath cleaner I would recommend having another bath to be hand-filled with distilled water for rinsing the record afterwards.

The fluid does not incorporate alcohol so is safe to use on both vinyl and shellac. It is effective and affordable.

"So much around us has fallen into a bland, 'no-style' style ethos"



Noel Keywood

find retro unsettling. It's great to see the past re-visited and re-interpreted - I think to myself, "wow doesn't that look good". But then I think "hmmm... am I just stuck in the past?". Should I be appreciating the genuinely and creatively new, from Apple say, rather than easily sliding back to what I have known because subconsciously it resonates with me, evoking fond memories?

Well, "fond" if you forget the bad bits. Anyone who owned a British Leyland car, like the Austin Maxi 1750 I proudly bought in my youth, back in the early 1970s will laugh at this statement. Mine followed the script: the engine fell off its mounts, the suspension collapsed and the head gasket blew. I won't accuse the Maxi of being stylish so much as cleverly functional. But the point here is that much of what we may fondly look back on was an expensive horror story at the time. My car today is less space efficient than my Maxi of forty years ago - but at least it works.

As a metaphor, that strikes me as appropriate: much of what we have today may look bland but underneath it works well. We seem to have traded style for reliability; preferring to live in a predictable world rather than a stylish one.

In hi-fi nothing better illustrates this than the timeline of the valve amplifier. Originally they were considered unlovely and unreliable, often being hidden away in wooden cabinets that today we find a little gross; the Quad II power amplifier is a prime example.

Modern valve amplifiers are style updates and this surely is a large part of the attraction of such amplifiers. It's style as Victorians would know it, meaning visual complexity bolstered by ornamentation.

The Victorians liked to decorate their buildings with carved reliefs,

neo-classical fluted door columns, and all sorts of weird roof decorations few would look up to see - even Gargoyles. Stripping all this stuff off to a barren, functional, even brutalist (shuttered concrete) shell came later. Think Royal Festival Hall on London's South Bank.

Hi-fi and other products followed this path into brutal simplicity of style, where form was seemingly swapped for reliability. But the tide is turning it appears: trad style is being revived, if in a more reliable modern interpretation.

The form of early valve amplifiers definitely followed function, and this is usually a good underpinning for acceptable style, both in the product's lifetime and after it: think Land Rover Series I or Garrard 301. But the finish of valve power amplifiers was often poor because they weren't meant to be seen.

These days valve amplifiers - power amplifiers in particular - are better finished. In the early 1990s we chrome plated the steel chassis of our own World Audio Design amplifiers to give them glitz, then came a brushed chrome finish.

People liked these finishes, but they added to cost. The thrifty alternative is all around us, a powder coat finish that is smooth and lustrous and hard-baked to be durable. Practical - yes; visually engaging - no.

The valves of a valve amplifier are its ornamentation, adding visual complexity, whilst the large transformer blocks add a sturdy and evocative backdrop: think Bankside power station, on London's river Thames, now home to Tate Modern.

The valves themselves don't just do a job, they animate in starting to glow at switch on and their form is truly linked to function.

The new Tung Sol KT150 'Gherkin' shaped valve is a beautiful

example of this: its form gives it strength, to avoid resonance and microphony in the electrode assembly. Items like this, are 'new retro'.

Why do we find them attractive today? Possibly because so much around us has fallen into a bland, 'no-style' style ethos. There's no structural complexity to catch the eye, no animation and bland finish.

Today's bland-box hi-fi amplifier is a perfect example. These things look the way they do because the folded, sheet steel under-chassis and top cover do the job and are cheap to produce. It's a cost issue in a world where price is king, for the product is expected to have a short life span, not last for ever.

Style-wise there's only so much you can do to ameliorate the glib outline of this assembly. Most popular nowadays is to add an extruded alloy front panel. This looks and feels solid, and has form in its three-dimensional surface contours but it is just a tiddly bit up front. Its form doesn't follow any particular function; it is there to cover a flat steel plate.

Retro in hi-fi gets away from such structural blandness. It also gets away from another carbuncle that has grown from it: spurious decoration. That is, the attachment of bits and pieces, usually cheap plastic pressings, that are supposed to add "style". Yuk - I hate this more than all else.

Am I stuck in the past, in appreciating that which functions and is made to look good within its own functional constraints? Possibly.

But if form should follow function, and it can successfully do so, then it will appeal to us all, whatever our age/generation.

If it doesn't - that's a failure of design, not a failure of our sensibilities. Retro may be unsettling but it may also be more than that, a way out of blandosity! ●

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"Even the classical guys liked a spot of opium now and again"



Paul Rigby

Sometimes understanding the reason for, and the background of, a particular genre of music not only extends your appreciation of it but allows you to understand where the group is coming from, why they adopted that particular style, why they sang about this or that subject and why they experimented in that particular way.

Take the psychedelic movement, a unique style of music that is forever associated with the sixties but is often misunderstood. It is thought by many fans that psychedelia was drugs. That the music followed LSD.

This is just not so or, rather, there is more to the genre than that over-simplified assertion (there has, after all, been drugs within every genre of music throughout musical history, even the classical guys liked a spot of opium now and again: Berlioz, Stravinsky, Schumann...). In fact, before you even get to the music itself, you could split the psychedelia genre into two parts: USA and Britain (with the rest).

American psychedelic music tended to be a response to strong cultural ructions. In the USA's case Vietnam and the increase in more radical politics from civil rights, human sexuality, women's rights et al. Americans used the psychedelic genre partly to seek escape and partly to seek change.

The UK and European movements were forged in a different way. They were resisting change by looking at the past or an alternative fantasy for answers. Hence, British bands tended to be draped in Edwardian clothing connected to a yearning for a pastoral, more innocent time. Mixed in with this yearning came investigations into fantasy and an attachment to British authors such as Tolkien and Lewis Carroll. Even the associated drug

imports, such as LSD, allowed the bands to investigate 'new worlds' and see this one in a completely new way.

Of course, famous artists such as Pink Floyd, Sgt. Pepper-era Beatles and Donovan all advocated this approach but the bulk of the movement was propped up by many smaller bands and lesser known singer-songwriters.

This was where the hardcore psychedelic music was to be heard. Here, commercial concerns were important but not as essential or as structured and the psychedelic genre itself was often the first and only goal, not just a stepping-stone within a larger career (stand up The Rolling Stones).

When speaking of specialist psychedelic groups, it's useful to group them together onto a specialist psychedelic reissue label to save the fan time and effort searching. This is where Grapefruit comes into play, a division of the Cherry Red record label (www.cherryred.co.uk/grapefruit).

Before we dive into the hard stuff, however, fans of the genre looking for the motherlode need to be wary. For example, even normal was strange. Tinkerbell's Fairy dust sounds like a psychedelic band to reckon with, doesn't it? More so, because their album was cancelled immediately after it was manufactured (which is why copies on eBay can be found in excess of £1,000 each).

But this supreme rarity is merely late '60s pop with a shallow coating of psychedelia. Which is not to say this album is bad. It's actually a great listen but it's not hardcore psychedelia.

For that, look no further than Kaleidoscope (1967-1969). 'Further Reflections' features the band's entire output plus rarities and a real fairy-tale sound with folky swirls and

beautiful melodies.

Similarly, The Piccadilly Line were kosher underground players, regularly performing at the UFO and Middle Earth clubs. Their wonderfully named 'The Huge World of Emily Small' was light and poppy, yes, but with added high harmonies, whimsy and a touch of the baroque.

The Mike Stuart Span recorded a classic early psychedelia single called 'Children Of Tomorrow' which had early Floyd stylings and that same yearning for utopia. The Grapefruit album of the same name features their complete career within a single jewel case. The band eventually transformed itself into Leviathan, another collectable rarity outfit.

Powered by Flower Power, Skip Bifferty produced one album (presented on the self-titled Grapefruit CD along with rarities) that was seen as generous by their label RCA because none of their singles charted. Nevertheless, the band were expected to make it big. They didn't. This album offered a mixture of psychedelic rock and pop along with experimental venturings.

There are, of course, plenty of other examples within this level of psychedelia-induced fame. Bands such as The Alan Bown, The Sorrows, The Poets and John's Children (starring one Marc Bolan), all make up the scene that included much musical experimentation, the first stirrings of world music with its cross-cultural inclusions, its fusion of rock, folk and soul and its spawning of a host of innovative and music changing ideas: from prog rock and heavy metal to Krautrock and electro. All in all, psychedelia should be given more creative credit. ●

See Paul Rigby's musings on *The Audiophile Man* (www.theaudiophileman.com)



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"The majority of stereo recordings are an artificial creation"



Tony Bolton

In my column last month, following my listening experiences with the Miyajima Labs Premium BE II mono cartridge, I discussed the concept that listening to a monophonic recording is actually an experience that is closer to that of listening to music at a live concert than compared to the majority of stereo recordings. I posited the theory that the majority of stereo recordings are an artificial creation, formed from a collection of monophonic recordings that are then placed on a soundstage, using the facilities of the mixing desk to create an artificial sonic soundscape in front of us.

I also commented that having attended a great many concerts of all sorts of musical genres the vast majority of live sound had a closer resemblance to "widescreen mono" than it did to the neatly pinpointed creation of most modern stereo recordings. The live experience, when you are either in a small enough venue or close enough to the stage to get a stereophonic spread of sound, usually results in the central performers being more closely grouped together and there being a far greater width to the extremes of left and right than seems to occur in the presentation of most recorded soundstages that we are used to hearing.

I also added the comment that I, as much as anyone else, enjoy the results of this sonic sleight of hand but questioned what we are actually trying to reproduce when we listen to our hi-fis. Are we trying to recreate the studio event or a fictitious but perfect performance taking place in front of us?

This has caused some interesting comments over the last few weeks from various colleagues within the industry. What has surprised me was the general agreement that the stereo

recordings that we take for granted are not necessarily truly representative of the real event.

One person that I had this conversation with suggested that we have come to expect the way most stereo recordings are processed as a way of compensating our mind for the lack of visual clues as to the placement of the performers. This set me thinking, because we are also very used to seeing artists on the screen nowadays and I have noticed that the way a lot of broadcast concerts are mixed seems to involve sonically placing the performer in a certain spot of the soundstage. The fact that this does not always refer to the image and camera angle being shown on the screen seems to be a concept that is conveniently ignored by the engineers in charge of the show.

This conversation also set me wondering what I am actually listening for when I play a mono or stereo record. Am I relating to the music in the same way with each format? With this in mind I grabbed a selection of records that I have in both mono and stereo formats, that were also contemporary pressings and in equally good condition. I ended up choosing the Clifford Curzon recording of the 'Grieg Piano Concerto' that I used the stereo copy of in the Funk Firm review this month, Edith Piaf live at the Paris Olympia in 1961 and Jaques Loussier's 'Play Bach No. 1'.

I sat down and played them all, but instead of my normal way of analytically listening to the recording, I tried to step back from myself and analyse what I was responding to when listening to these records.

It proved a somewhat difficult but interesting exercise and I have come to a few conclusions.

I found that I thoroughly enjoyed the stereo versions of these records but was letting part of my attention focus on the staging of the sound in

front of me, so I was conscious of an instrument appearing in a certain space.

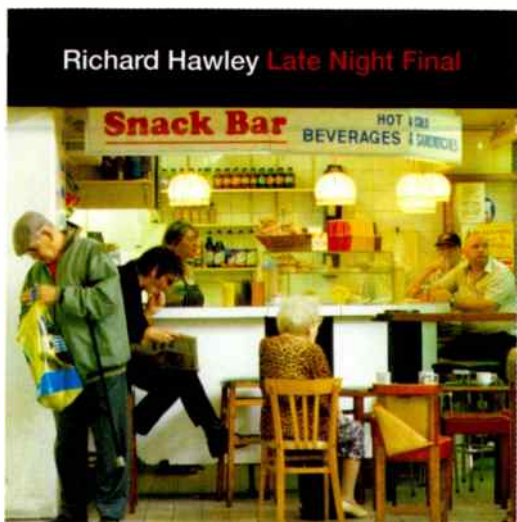
When I listened to the mono versions I found that I was, I felt, more focussed on the music itself and the tune being played. I was presented with a soundstage that was reasonably wide but far deeper than the stereo equivalent, but I was less concerned about trying to picture the exact position of each section of an orchestra or a certain performer.

Of all of the records chosen the Piaf, being of a solo voice with an orchestral accompaniment, should have had the smallest change in presentation from mono to stereo. In general it did. Piaf's voice was centre stage on whichever record was being played but because of the width of the sonic clues being provided, as to the size of the venue, I had more of an impression of the diminutive figure in black being the focus of my attention.

Otherwise, from the point of view of being more focussed on the musical content of the grooves, rather than any technical aspect of the recording itself, I found that I generally found the mono records more musically satisfying.

Don't get me wrong, I enjoy the fantasy stereo soundscape, that a skilled sound engineer can place in front of me, as much as the next man, but – and this is where I come back to my original question – is it as accurate a reproduction of the live music experience as listening to the monophonic version? I think not. It takes us into a perfect, but artificial environment.

If the object of the exercise is to reproduce the live musical experience, then I think mono, played with a suitable modern cartridge through a stereo system produces, to paraphrase Peter Walker of Quad fame, 'a closer approach to the original sound.' ●



Richard Hawley *Late Night Final*

RICHARD HAWLEY

Late Night Final
Setanta

Former member of the Longpigs and regular touring guitarist for Pulp, Hawley is well equipped for a solo career. This northerner from Sheffield is nowhere near as tough as his steel-like visage promises. In fact, he is capable of a baritone-fuelled display of careworn anguish and the exploration of heart-worn subjects through a sequence of carefully crafted songs that leads you to consider Scott Walker as a muse.

Released in 2002, it's easy to lose yourself in this LP as you might a book. In this album, Hawley broods and ruminates, backed by his arrangement of wistful instrumentation. What you have here is a contrast of sorts. A place and a time in which a psychedelic atmosphere is controlled and fuelled by a direct passion.

This album is crammed full of heavy-hearted introspection and the probing of feelings and the reflection upon what has been lost

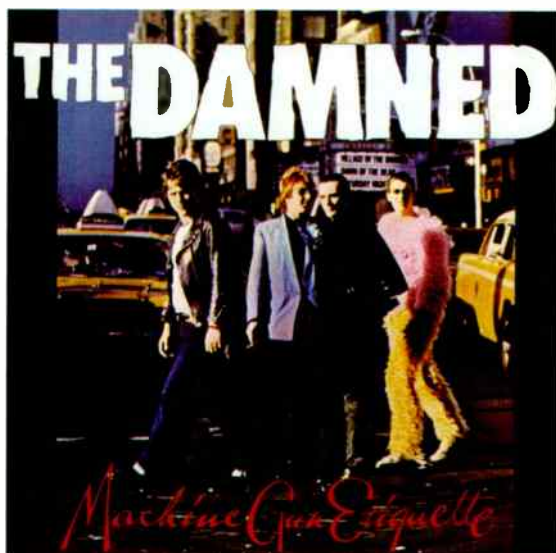
and what cannot be recaptured.

Bathe in the track 'Love Of My Life' and try, just try, to stop yourself swaying with the hypnotic, ethereal rhythms, while on 'Long Black Train' unlock those boxes of heavy duty emotion in your head that you've been saving for a rainy day.

All in all, I feel desperate to lock Hawley in a room with The Wedding Present's David Gedge and only let them out when they slide their new, heart-wrenching masterpiece, under the door.

For now, you can wallow in The World Of Hawley. Reflective and crafted, 'Late Night Final' always demands your attention.

Also look for Hawley's so-called self-titled mini-LP (2001) that set the quality bar high and introduced us to his crooning vocals. His songwriting skills were further explored during his second album 'Lowedges' (2003), a collection packed with emotion and sentiment, but never syrupy.



THE DAMNED

THE DAMNED

Machine Gun Etiquette
Let Them Eat Vinyl

Spread over two pieces of vinyl and set within a high-quality gatefold sleeve, this limited edition coloured vinyl release is a reissue of the band's third LP, originally released in 1979. This album saw the band reform without original band member Brian James. Subsequently, the song creation was a rather more democratic affair and the resultant LP was deemed an instant classic.

In fact, the quality of the album is on a par with their lionised debut. 'Machine...' is also a brave album because it tackles musical areas that their contemporaries would never have hosted. So you hear touches of Marc Bolan, Electric Prunes, MC5 and much good humour and even some self-parody. Classic tunes include 'Love Song' and 'Smash It Up'.

What we have here is the vinyl version of the original 25th anniversary edition, released on a

single CD in 2004.

That means you receive alternative versions of the three singles and the non-album B-sides. The Ed Hollis mix of 'Love Song' was previously unreleased. You also get the 'Smash It Up' instrumental track and 'Smash It Up Part 4', the Wessex Studio version, again, previously unreleased. Also included is the rare Radio Edit 45 version of 'I Just Can't Be Happy Today' and the single versions of 'Noise Noise Noise', 'Burglar' and the 'Turkey Song'.

As well as this LP, look out for two additional Damned LP releases from the label. 'The Chiswick Singles...And Another Thing' is a two-disc collection featuring all of the A-sides and B-sides from their time with the label, plus live cuts and alternative versions. Meanwhile, 'Tiki Nightmare: Live In London' records a July 2002 gig from the Shepherd's Bush Empire.

“Another compilation of Elvis

Presley? Enough, already!” Well, yes, you could think that but, let’s face it, there are compilations and there are compilations.

This collection of Presley songs was originally released in 2003 as the sequel to the previous year’s highly successful ‘ELVIS: 30 #1 Hits’. Hence, this compilation is seen as a companion piece because it features those No 1 singles that did not appear on the previous release.

There are other intriguing tracks contained within, including the previously unreleased recording of ‘I’m a Roustabout’. This track is a different song to the one released within Presley’s movie of the same name. Film producer Hal Wallis rejected this version and ordered a different song of the same title to be written.

You will also notice a remix of ‘Rubberneckin’ by Paul Oakenfold,

of arguably lesser quality than that other remixed hit ‘A Little Less Conversation’ but technically superior.

As for the quality of the assembled songs? Some people will prefer the first collection but others will see this as a superior compilation. That is, not a better collection of music but a better compilation. Mainly because this array offers a wider range of Presley’s vocal talents and tracks his career over highs...and lows (i.e. ‘Dixie’, ‘Don’t Cry Daddy’ and ‘Memories’).

So, you have the fifties hits in there (e.g. ‘Blue Suede Shoes’) but you also have a useful selection from the sixties such as ‘Little Sister’ and the immortal ‘Viva Las Vegas’, while from the seventies there is ‘Moody Blue’ and ‘Promised Land’.

The previous compilation shoe-horned hits into a package while this one offers useful balance. It certainly paints a picture.



ELVIS PRESLEY

Elvis 2nd To None
Music On Vinyl

For this album Leonard Chess pointed James in the direction of the Muscle Shoals’ recording studio in 1967. She certainly found her mojo in that legendary facility because this album is one of her very best. It was produced by Rick Hall who also owned Muscle Shoals and had at his command a stream of top songwriters and musicians on tap.

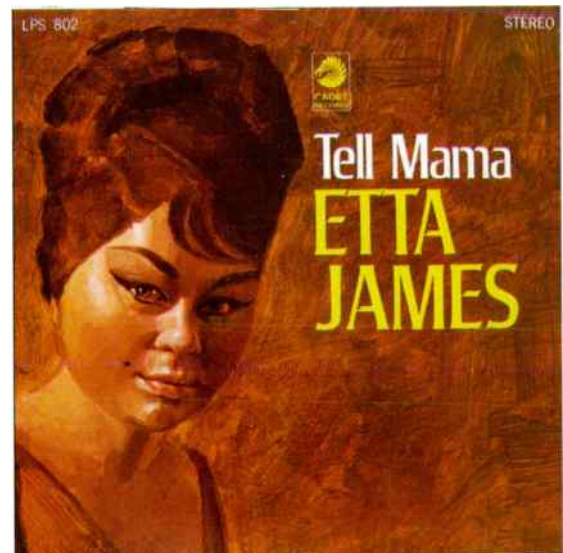
In fact, top stars such as Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett made their best albums at the studio. For James the final album cut was a tremendous success, headed by the driving title song, a real soul gem. That was successfully contrasted by the moving soul ballad ‘I’d Rather Go Blind’ along with great cover tracks such as ‘Security’, which was an Otis Redding vehicle.

It’s interesting to see that Bear Family has utilised German-based Pauler Acoustics (associated with the label Stockfisch which many readers will be more familiar with)

to provide a DMM master of this LP. For some veteran vinyl users, the DMM choice will trigger warning lights of bright treble and harsh upper mids. Frankly, though, this isn’t an issue in today’s mastering market or, more specifically, with this issue. You tend to find DMM problems with older, eighties, pressing where the use of primitive DACs and associated formats produced a screeching playback.

We’ve seen how good DMM vinyl can be via Music On Vinyl, now Bear Family display top-quality playback on this LP, exhibiting extended upper frequency dynamics and tightened lower bass. You can also hear that the pressing plant has removed irritating vinyl elements such as pre-echo.

Look out also for another Bear Family vinyl release, Johnny Burnette and the Rock’n’Roll Trio. It’s a classic collection of undervalued rock’n’roll songs from a contemporary of Elvis Presley.



ETTA JAMES

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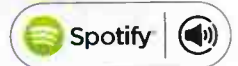
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WHAT Hi-Fi? AWARDS 2014

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Award-winning DAC featuring a USB input with asynchronous data processing along with two coaxial and optical digital inputs. High-res 24-bit/192kHz music files can be played via its coaxial input



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MARANTZ • CD6005 / PM6005 • CD / AMPLIFIER

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ROTEL • RA-12 / RCD-12 • AMPLIFIER / DAC / CD

Amplifier with DAC that supports iPod USB and Bluetooth audio streaming. Includes four analogue line-level inputs and a phono input. The RCD-12 CD player is an ideal partner.



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£1899 OR LESS

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ROKSAN • CASPIAN M2 • CD / AMPLIFIER

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NAD • M51 • DAC

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Price excludes stands

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NEW £1149 OR LESS
WHAT Hi-Fi? AWARDS 2014



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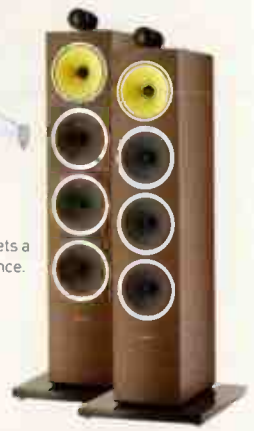
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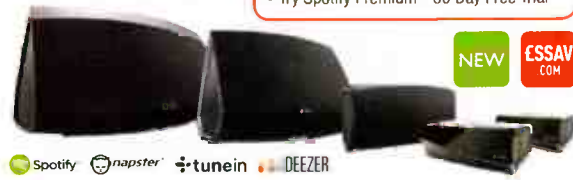
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Wireless World



Retro styling meets 21st century wireless technology in JBL's L16 Authentic one-box music system. But does it cut the sonic mustard? Jon Myles finds out...

All-in-one wireless speaker systems seem to be all the rage at the moment and it's not too difficult to see why.

For a start they take up much less room than a traditional full-size hi-fi system – an important consideration when living space in our crowded cities is becoming more and more constrained.

Secondly, with an increasing amount of people storing their digital sound files on smart-phones, tablets or desktop/laptop computers they bring a welcome degree of convenience to the business of music replay.

Hence the growing number of units like JBL's £900 Authentic L16 one-box system. Not that, to look at it, you'd immediately guess this was a piece of equipment designed

to harness our growing libraries of digital downloads.

Instead it bears more resemblance to a long-forgotten over-sized radio beamed straight from a living room of some 40 years ago.

Which is no coincidence. JBL has obviously decided that retro sells – which is why the L16 is based on the company's legendary Century L600 bookshelf loudspeaker from the

1970s.

Hence you get a wooden walnut-veneered cabinet allied to a foam grille sporting a distinctive waffle-like pattern.

Under the vintage-like exterior, however, is some thoroughly 21st century technology – including Bluetooth, DLNA, Apple AirPlay and high-res 24/96 capability.

It's a big beast measuring 294mm x 818mm x 369mm (h/w/d) and



weighing in at a hefty 16.3kg.

Behind that retro grille are three speaker drivers per side – a 1-inch tweeter, 2-inch midrange and 5.25-inch bass unit which makes the L16 a true three-way design. The latter are augmented by bass reflex ports situated underneath the cabinet and surrounded by a substantial metal housing to add rigidity to the cabinet. Pointed feet raise the unit off whatever it is sitting on to give the ports sufficient air to operate efficiently.

Each speaker is driven by its own dedicated 50 Watt amplifier giving a total of some 300 Watts of output power.

Along with its wireless capabilities, the L16 sports a digital optical socket as well as a pair RCA jacks that offer a choice of line-level or MM/MC input to allow direct connection to a turntable. It's a nice touch which helps set the L16 apart from most of its rivals.

There are also two USB ports hidden beneath a removable cover on the top plate for charging devices, as well as a 3.5mm analogue minijack plug.

OPERATION

Getting the L16 up and running is a simple matter of connecting it to your wi-fi network or pairing it with a Bluetooth or Apple AirPlay device.

Two neat dials on either side of the top face of the cabinet allow input control and volume adjustment but for full system functionality the best way is to download JBL's free app to your mobile device (available on both Google Play and the Apple App store).

This gives access to your networked music library as well as allowing control of the bass, mid and treble settings.

One slight niggle is the positioning of the RCA, optical digital connections, on/off switch and MM/MC/line-level switch on the underside of the cabinet thus making access a little fiddly. Why all this couldn't have been positioned on the rear of the unit for easier access is a bit of a mystery. Just remember to connect all the cables you need before putting the L16 in situ.



SOUND QUALITY

A little like its looks, the L16 has a touch of the 1970s about its sound – and I don't mean that in a bad way. Instead think something like Wharfedale Denton 'speakers – rich, warm and full-bodied.

It means whatever genre of music you plump for is relayed with an easy-going, smooth nature that encourages you to sit back and relax.

Jimmy McGriff's 'McGriff Avenue' streamed via Bluetooth rolls out of the speakers with a deliciously creamy quality that still manages to contain detail and drive.

As is to be expected from a JBL, the low-end is a particular strong point with Wilbur Bascomb's electric bass thumped out with massive vigour and presence. It doesn't overwhelm however, allowing ample room for McGriff's classic organ riffs and the saxophones of Ronnie Cuber and Bill Easley.

Pump up the volume here and the JBL

'Sandinista' opus in 24/96 and the mid-band and treble show pleasing detail and definition. That rather warm nature means the presentation is not entirely accurate with a slight softening of leading edges but it's never less than mellifluous and easy on the ear.

As for the phono stage – let's just say it does an adequate job and has no obvious nasties. It probably won't usurp anyone's current vinyl replay system but it's a neat feature for those looking to try out the format.

Dropping down to some compressed files from an iPhone and the L16 utilises its own proprietary Clari-Fi technology which the company claims actually analyses digital files during playback and 'rebuilds' those elements lost in the compression process. I'm always dubious about this sort of technology but it did seem to add a little bit more body and substance to higher bit-rate MP3 files.

That, coupled with the L16's innately relaxed nature, means it does a good job of masking the deficiencies of poorer quality material.

As such it's ideal for those looking to play music from their mobile device or tablet. It doesn't aspire to absolute accuracy or finesse but does relay music with a sense of fun and a big, warm sound that will win over many listeners.

At £900 it couldn't be described as cheap – you could, for example, add similar facilities to an existing hi-fi system for much less. But if you're looking for a space-saving system that combines copious connectivity options with a room-filling sound the L16 has a lot going for it.

CONCLUSION

A classy design and big, bold sound make JBL's Authentics L16 one of the more interesting one-box speaker systems on the market. Fiddly wired connections are a drawback but overall it's a competent unit with much to like.



stays remarkably civilised – easily going loud enough to fill a medium-sized room without strain.

Sheer cabinet size means the very lowest registers don't come into the equation but there's still a real earthy thump to the sound that provides a solid foundation to the music.

Stereo separation is also quite good considering the speakers are quite close together in a single cabinet. No, it won't rival a set of dedicated hi-fi speakers but the sound does manage to escape the confines of the unit to give a sense of a soundstage.

Moving to The Clash's

JBL AUTHENTICS L16 £900



EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VERDICT

A versatile one-box music system with a warm, involving sound. Lots of fun.

FOR

- big, clear sound
- classic retro design
- versatile connectivity

AGAINST

- not cheap
- fiddly wired connections

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FESTIVE QUIZ

Test your hi-fi knowledge over the festive period with our bumper Christmas quiz. Award yourself one point for every correct answer.

1) The Sex Pistols first record company was?

- a) EMI
- b) A&M
- c) Virgin

2) Which company owns headphone maker Beats?

- a) Boots
- b) Apple
- c) Monster

3) Where is the California Audio Show held?

- a) San Francisco
- b) Palo Alto
- c) Los Angeles

4) Electronics giant Philips founded what in 1910?

- a) A football club
- b) Holland's biggest factory
- c) A record division

5) The working title of The Beatles' 'Abbey Road' was what.....

- a) Matterhorn
- b) Everest
- c) The Zebra Crossing Album

6) Terry Chimes was The Clash's original drummer. But how was he credited on their debut album?

- a) Tory Crimes
- b) Tony Cripes
- c) He wasn't

7) Electrical resistance is measured in what?

- a) Amps
- b) Voltage
- c) Ohms

8) Which company owns the brands Quad, Castle and Wharfedale?

- a) IAG
- b) Independent Audio
- c) Microsoft

9) FLAC is an abbreviation for?

- a) Free Lossless Audio Codec
- b) Freakishly Limited Analogue Converter
- c) For Lovers of Audio Compression

10) Jerry Lee Lewis famously did what in 1957?

- a) Set fire to his piano on stage
- b) Announced his retirement
- c) Married his 13-year-old cousin

11) Which of these isn't a Linn product?

- a) Majik
- b) Klimax
- c) Rockit

12) What was accidentally omitted from the design of legendary Manchester nightclub The Hacienda?

- a) A cloakroom
- b) A sound system
- c) The bar

13) The ESS Sabre32 is a form of what?

- a) Sword
- b) Sports car
- c) DAC

14) Dexys Midnight Runners performance of 'Jackie Wilson Said' on Top Of The Pops was accompanied by what?

- a) General amusement
- b) Van Morrison dancing
- c) A picture of darts player Jocky Wilson

15) Antony Michaelson is the founder of which hi-fi company?

- a) Yamaha
- b) Musical Fidelity
- c) Dali

16) Loudspeaker company Magico hails from which country?

- a) America
- b) Hungary
- c) Scotland

17) The first Apple iPod had how much memory?

- a) 2GB
- b) 5GB
- c) 10GB

18) Vivid's Giya G3 is a what?

- a) Loudspeaker
- b) Flat-screen TV
- c) Award-winning album

19) Focal's Aria loudspeakers use what material for their main drivers?

- a) Paper
- b) Reinforced steel
- c) Flax

20) Boleskine House – former home of author and occultist Aleister Crowley – was once owned by which rock legend?

- a) Jimmy Page
- b) Ozzy Osbourne
- c) Alice Cooper

21) McIntosh's XRT2K loudspeakers feature how many drivers per channel?

- a) None
- b) 110
- c) 55

22) Akio Morita co-founded which company?

- a) Sony
- b) Nintendo
- c) Koetsu

23) Audiophile and jazz musician John C. Koss produced the first set of what in 1943?

- a) Stereo headphones
- b) Recording microphones
- c) High-fidelity tweeters

24) The UK Government plans to switch off analogue radio by which year?

- a) They haven't a clue
- b) Maybe by 2020
- c) At some stage

25) Spotify is a type of what?

- a) Household cleaner
- b) Surveillance system
- c) Music streaming service

RATE YOURSELF:

10-20 points: You obviously haven't been paying attention to Hi-Fi. World these past 12 months. Try reading a few back issues!

20-30 points: You are a well-balanced individual who knows their stuff but hasn't entered the anorak-wearing stage yet. Congrats!

30+ points and above: Very impressive - you can claim two portions of Christmas pudding covered by three tots of brandy!

ANSWERS:

1) EMI, 2) Apple, 3) San Francisco, 4) A Football Club, 5) Everest, 6) Tory Crimes, 7) Ohms, 8) IAG, 9) Free Lossless Audio Codec, 10) Married His 13-year-old Cousin, 11) Rockit, 12) A Cloakroom, 13) Dac, 14) A picture Of darts player Jocky Wilson, 15) Musical Fidelity, 16) America, 17) 5GB, 18) Loudspeaker, 19) Flax, 20) Jimmy Page, 21) 110, 22) Sony, 23) Stereo headphones, 24) A point for choosing any one answer. Two points if you chose all three, 25) A music streaming service

vinyl section

contents

JANUARY 2015

www.hi-fiworld.co.uk

FUNK FIRM FX3 TONEARM 87
Tony Bolton grooves along to Funk Firm's new tonearm

news



AUDIO FIDELITY

New from US-based Audio Fidelity (www.audiofidelity.net) is Wendy Carlos' Original Motion Picture Soundtrack of 'Tron' (1982), spread over a two disc gatefold. An impressive combination of electronic and orchestral score.

Also available is Sade's 'Stronger Than Pride' (1988) adding edge, fire and intensity.

SPANISH HARLEM

Peruvian rockers Tarkus (Vinilissimo; featuring Telegraph Avenue members) 1972 self-titled LP had great songs and an interesting vision but was too 'out there' for Peruvian fans.

Also look out for 'Algo Salvaje' (Munster), a Spanish nuggets-type beat and garage collection plus 'La Onda De Elia Y Elizabeth' (Vampi Soul), an early seventies soft pop/pastoral outing from two Colombian sisters. All at www.munster-records.com.

JAMES BROWN!

He just demands an exclamation mark. From Sundazed (www.sundazed.com) comes 'Love Power Peace', a live show from The Olympia Theatre, 8 March 1971 (with the exception of two tracks from other 1971 live sets). Shelved in 1971, this three LP set, mixed from Brown's own tapes, includes tracks from the supporting acts that were not included on the original 1992 CD.



DEAD KENNEDYS

From Cherry Red (www.cherryred.co.uk) is 'Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables' (1980) a sarcastic, left-wing, punk tirade debut from the Dead Kennedys. A genre-defining punk album.



PURE PLEASURE

From Pure Pleasure (www.purepleasurerecords.com) is Freddie Hubbard's 'Straight Life', his best LP featuring George Benson and Herbie Hancock. Exciting and, often, astounding.

Also look out for the 2013 issue of Stacey Kent's 'The Changing Lights', a double album, displaying Kent's naughty yet romantic vocal delivery plus Eric Bibb's 'Natural Light' (2003), full of ideas and an appreciation for music.

VINYL180

Direct from Vinyl180 (www.vinyl180.com) are two batches of LPs from Dinosaur Jr and Echo & the Bunnymen. From the former are 'Where You Been' (1993; moody and dark with rough edges); 'Without A Sound' (1994; concise and countrified) and 'Hand It Over' (1997; hard rock with folk-rock structures). From the latter, there is 'Porcupine' (1983; psychedelic-inspired, elaborate and well constructed) plus 'Ocean Rain' (consistently strong songs, evocative and majestic).





MOVING ON

From Music On Vinyl (www.musiconvinyl.com) is Miles Davis' 'Miles Smiles', the brilliant, unpredictable, adventurous Quintet recording plus Roland Kirk's 'Volunteered Slavery' (1969) featuring post-bop blues and beat/African poetry. Simple yet complex.

The Legacy Edition of 'Elvis: That's The Way It Is' combining Presley's studio tracks, recorded in Nashville, and four live concert performances recorded in Las Vegas during Presley's 1970 Summer Festival season at The International Hotel. This 4LP version includes unreleased material and a sixteen page booklet.

James Taylor's 'That's Why I'm Here' (1985) featured three Top 10 hits including the title track, 'Only One' and 'Everyday' while Taylor-esque folkie, Tom Rush's self-titled 1970 effort had none but was a solid effort.

Dr John's new release 'Ske-Dat-De-Dat: The Spirit Of Satch', features songs associated with Louis Armstrong. It isn't perfect but it takes chances and just about works - but only because of the man himself.

DJ Krush's 'Jaku', a 10th anniversary edition spread over two LPs, combines fragile beats with the blunt MC rap delivery of Aesop Rock and Mr. Lif.

Finally, 'Blues Jam In Chicago Volume One and Two' (1969 & 1970) combines collaborations between the early versions of Fleetwood Mac and prominent blues men such as Willie Dixon, Otis Spann and Honey Boy Edwards. Volume 2 has the edge: free-form, it features more vocal and instrumental variety.

SIREENA DUO

From German-based Sireena (www.sireena.de) is the brilliant 'Adonis' (1979) - a Genesis/Eloy-esque debut from Anyone's Daughter, Moog influenced, symphonic and rather epic in nature.

Also look out for Le Mur's 'In Tenebris', prog-influenced heavy rock taking elements of Hawkwind and Out Of Focus.



...AND FINALLY

Indonesia guitar guy Deaw Budjana's 'Surya Namaskar' (MoonJune; www.moonjune.com) offers a prog/jazz fusion outing backed by Vivvie Colaiuta and Jimmie Johnson.

Gregory Alan Isakov's alt.folk and 'The Weatherman' (Suitcase Town Music; suitcase-townmusic.com) is melancholy, yearning and mellow notes from a talented songwriter.

Will Z offers 'Dark Tales Of Will Z.' (Headspin; www.clearspot.nl) featuring occult rock/acid-folk. Foreboding but Hammer House of Horror camp.

Fred Bigot's 'La Voix De La Route' (Les Disques en Rotin Reunis; disques.rotin.free.fr) 10", five-track EP is a left-field, avant-garde piece. The B-side has three tracks on separate grooves (inner, middle and outer).

Jamie Saft, Steve Swallow and Bobby Previte's 'The New Standard' (Rare Noise Records; www.rarenoiserecords.com) offers a traditional jazz trio. Anything but formulaic, it touches other genres while all play with perfect symmetry.

The Moons' 'Mindwaves' (Schnitzel; www.schnitzel.com) mixes dark psychedelic rock with swaggering, upbeat vibes and glam touches.

Like your math/post/prog rock? Give NLF3's 'Pink Renaissance' (Prohibited; www.nlf3.com) a try. Beautiful constructions, complex and perfectly played.

'The Far Out Monster Disco Orchestra' (Far Out; www.faroutrecordings.com) offers disco orchestral camp grooves played by Brazilians, packed with remixes from Mark Pritchard, Theo Parrish et al.

'Friends From Rio Project' (www.faroutrecordings.com): a fresh look (it was first mooted in 1994) at Far Out's original idea of recording music from Brazil aimed at European dance floors. Features a host of Brazilian underground stars and mostly original material.

HHY & The Macumbas' 'Throat Permission Cut' (Silo; www.cargorecords.co.uk) is a unique industrial exploration utilising brass and other organic instrumentation. Refreshing and ominous.





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Sound FX

Tony Bolton settles down to listen to The Funk Firm's new FX3 arm.



There must be something particularly inspiring in the air in Newhaven, on England's South coast, since the Funk Firm, who are based there, seem to be introducing new designs of tonearm every few months.

This latest model, the FX3, is available in either 9 inch or 12 inch long versions, and can be supplied with a choice of internal wiring. Prices start from £1584 for the 9 inch unit and £1884 for the 12 inch.

This arm uses conventional gimbal mounted ABEC 7 bearings, which support an arm tube that is made of aircraft-grade aluminium alloy. The counterweight is split into two parts that are mounted in a plastic housing. This is placed on the stub at the back of the arm and moved to balance the arm.

The weights are underslung so as to be on the same level as the stylus, thus helping tracking ability. Downforce is applied by sliding a weight along the reasonably accurately calibrated arm tube in a manner that reminded me of the old Mayware Formula 4 arms of yore.

The anti-skate mechanism resides on the left of the arm and involves a weight on a pivoted L-shaped arm being lifted by a projection on the pick-up arm.

The mass being moved is adjusted by rotating the weight

around a fine screw thread. It looks simple but proved effective in use and very easy to fine tune by ear.

Arm height is set by slackening the grub screw in the mounting plate and physically moving the arm to the required height. This is made easier by the large acrylic plate that sits just below the arm, that I found convenient to grip when setting the arm height.

The headshell is the customary minimalist arrangement from the Funk Firm, with a good range of adjustment so most cartridges can be accommodated with ease. A cardboard alignment gauge is supplied.

Although this arm is a slender looking thing, a few moments handling made me realise it feels solid. This is because of the Funk Firm's FX Cross Beam technology that they claim gives a particularly

rigid arm tube. I have been unable to find out any more about this since the technology is being patented. Suffice to say, the FX3 feels a lot tougher than it looks.

I set it up on my Clearaudio Master Solution turntable in place of the resident Magnify arm. I then attached a Benz Micro Ace L moving coil cartridge and got some records spinning.

Being in a jazzy frame of mind I settled down to an LP of Billie Holiday tracks and was immediately taken with the way the gently swaying beat of 'I Gotta Right To Sing The Blues' flowed from my speakers. A mid paced track, this can sound a little plodding if the playing



The counterweight is first positioned so that arm is floating level and free, then the tracking force set by moving the weight on the tube to the appropriate marking.

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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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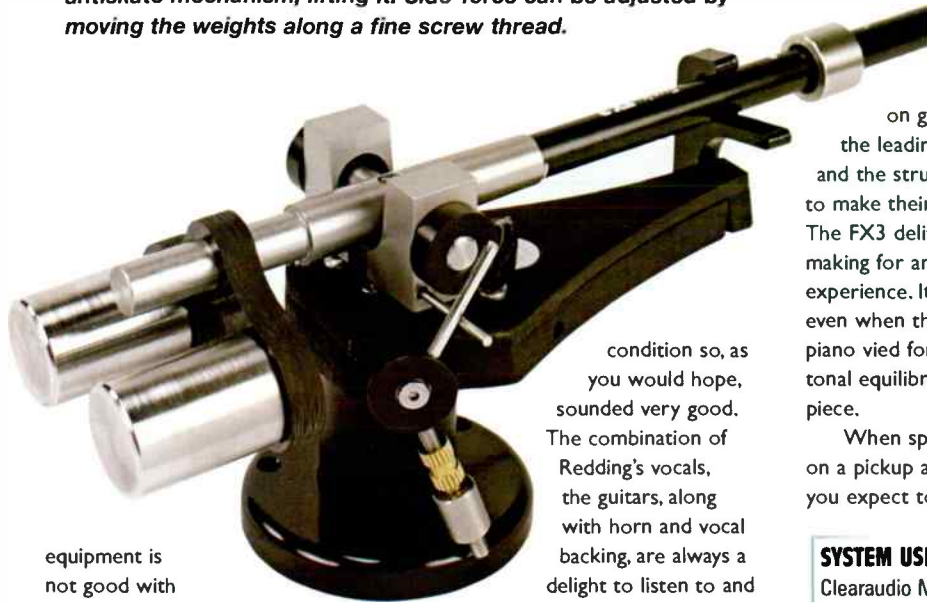
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As the arm moves across the record, a rod engages with the antiskate mechanism, lifting it. Side-force can be adjusted by moving the weights along a fine screw thread.



music.

The opening of this track relies on getting the sound of the leading edges of both drum and the struck piano chords right, to make their correct initial impact. The FX3 delivered with perfection, making for an exciting listening experience. It remained unflustered, even when the full orchestra and piano vied for attention, maintaining tonal equilibrium throughout the piece.

When spending around £1600 on a pickup arm there are things that you expect to be right, and other

SYSTEM USED

Clearaudio Master Solution turntable with Benz Micro Ace L MC cartridge.

Leema Acoustics Agena phonostage and Tucana II amplifier.

Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers.

areas where there may still be slight compromises to be made.

The Funk Firm FX3 strikes that balance, I think, very successfully. In ultimate terms there could be a fraction more weight to the very lower bass and I have heard bigger and deeper soundstages open up on my system with other arms, but the FX3 strikes a fine balance between all aspects in an unfussy, fundamentally correct way. Throughout all of my listening to it, I felt comfortable with the sonic balance displayed in front of me.

Every aspect of the sound felt engaged with the other parts to create a very persuasive sonic picture. Funk Firm's arm seemed equally adept with the differing genres of music I played, was easy to set up and use and can, I believe, be regarded as a very well executed design that deserves to be successful.

It is a must for any audition list at this price point.

condition so, as you would hope, sounded very good. The combination of Redding's vocals, the guitars, along with horn and vocal backing, are always a delight to listen to and the FX3 provided a nicely balanced take on the sound.

I felt comfortable with the differing aspects of the performance - there was enough bass, the timing was tight, the vocals were suitably projected - overall it made for a sonic presentation that was difficult to criticise. It just seemed balanced, with not too much or too little of anything.

My last few records explored more demanding classical fare and ended with the Curzon recording of 'Grieg's Piano Concerto'.

This is an original pressing which has been very well cared for, but is not in immaculate condition, although I would have been hard pressed to know that as the inky black silence of the run-in groove was split by just one, well suppressed little pop before the rumble of the timpani began the

MUSIC USED

Grieg. 'Piano Concerto in A Minor Op.16.' Clifford Curzon (piano) The London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Oivin Fjeldstad. Decca Records. SXL 2173. 1959.

Billie Holiday. 'Billie Holiday'. Stateside Records. (E.M.I.) SL 10007. 1962.

Otis Redding. "The Great Otis Redding Sings Soul Ballads.' 4 Men With Beards Records. 4M105. 2001.

Air. 'Premiers Symptomes'. Source Records. 7243 8472451. 1999.

equipment is not good with subtleties of rhythm. In this case it played very well, with the easy-going beat having just enough lift to it that it made my feet tap and fingers snap. I also noticed the way that the multiple layers of her voice were captured and displayed, allowing me to engage with the music in an absorbing manner.

From this I moved onto some modern electronica and the easy-

"... with the easy-going beat having just enough lift to it that it made my feet tap and fingers snap."

going sounds of Air's first LP, a compilation of early singles released between 1995 and 1997, called 'Premiers Symptomes'.

This is good, late night mellow listening and I found myself getting drawn into a large but not cavernous soundstage upon which gently-shuffled rhythms and strange synthesized noises floated, some moving while others remained static, forming a substantial part of a track.

I felt that the arm's presentation was even, with no particular focus on the centre of the soundstage unless the music called for it. The spread of sound seemed even right up to the sonic edges, which appeared to be a good foot outside the boundaries of the loudspeakers.

Next day I started off my listening with Otis Redding in fine voice singing 'Soul Ballads'. This is a modern 180g reissue and in mint

FUNK FIRM FX3 PICKUP ARM, FROM £1584



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

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FOR

- solid but agile bass
- well-lit mid band
- good timing
- well-balanced sound

AGAINST

- nothing except price

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Wizard Design

In-ear monitors with 10 drivers per side? Yes, that's Noble Audio's new K10s. Jon Myles is impressed.

A Wizard, 10 drivers and a man named Kaiser Soze. No, I'm not making this up – they're three of the key ingredients that go to make up Noble's new in-ear headphones.

Wizard is the epithet accorded to Noble company founder Dr John Moulton by the on-line, in-ear monitor (IEM) cognoscenti due to the quality of his range of custom-fit earphones.

Kaiser Soze is not the ruthless crime boss from *The Usual Suspects* but instead the man behind the design of Noble's latest K10 'phones.

And they're different because they feature no less than 10 (yes, 10) balanced armature drivers per side. That's two pairs of bass, mid-frequency, mid/high-frequency, high-frequency and super high-frequency drivers in a hand-built acrylic casing not much bigger than the size of your thumbnail.

It means the K10s are a true four-way design (yes, there's a crossover in there too) with all the sonic benefits that should offer. In effect they are a universal fit version of Noble's flagship custom-fit design – bringing much of the sound quality at a more realistic(ish) price.

Of course, even this level of technology doesn't come cheap – the Nobles will set you back a cool £999.

Unpack them from their crush-resistant carrying case, however, and you can start to see where your money is going. The earphones themselves, for example, use gold-plated pentalobe screws in the casings while the detachable cable is a woven design that loops over the ears and while flexible is also sturdy enough to stay in place once fitted.

Also included are 12 pairs of ear tips to suit individual users, plus a cleaning tool and an ownership card.

SOUND QUALITY

Two words describe the Noble K10s well: astonishing clarity.

Over the years I've used a variety of in-ear headphones – including Sony, Sennheiser, Shure and models from the more exotic end of the Etymotic range – but the K10s are cleaner, more focused and just downright more musical than anything that's gone before.

Bass is deep, rich and full while higher up the frequency register the leading edges of instruments are crisp, with real definition.

Plugged into an Apple iPhone 5s and playing New Order's 'Technique' there was no sense of bloom or thump to Peter Hook's bass, just a solid firm foundation. Gillian Gilbert's and Bernard Sumner's synth work existed in their own space, with great air around individual notes.

The five drivers in each earpiece blend seamlessly – with no obvious indication as to where one takes over from the other. What they do do, however, is give the Nobles a frequency response lesser rivals just cannot match.

Consequently, to hear them at their best you'll need something a little more sophisticated than an iPhone. So cue up Resonance's remarkable little USB headphone DAC replete with its highly-regarded ESS Sabre chipset.

This takes detail to another level. Nils Lofgren's guitar work on 'Keith Don't Go' has such a visceral quality you can picture his fingers sliding over the frets. It's crystal clear but not in a harsh or aggressive

way – just accurately portrayed and superbly lifelike.

On a 24/96 file of the Koln Concert – played through the Herus via a MacBook Pro – Keith Jarrett's piano had both body and realistic timbre.

You can also hear his yelps and growls as he wrestles with the famously not-quite-in-tune instrument provided for the performance. Other earphones can muffle those details but not the Nobles – which instead bring out the full live experience.

They will also go satisfyingly loud without exhibiting any undue strain. Indeed, they're so free of any smear or obvious break-up that it's easy to push the volume control to unhealthy levels if you're not careful.

But that's part of their beauty. They portray music with such utter conviction you simply get lost in your favourite recordings – hearing little touches and embellishments that you simply hadn't realised were there before.

CONCLUSION

The Noble K10s are an exceptional pair of earphones. If you ever thought in-ear monitors were inherently sonically compromised because of their small size and miniscule drivers then these might just change your mind.

OK, they are not exactly cheap. But one listen will convince you it's money well spent.



NOBLE K10 IN-EAR MONITORS £999



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

A true marvel. The Noble K10s are probably the best in-ear monitors I've yet heard. Demands to be listened to.

FOR

- 10 drivers per side
- extended frequency response
- crystal clear clarity
- deep, realistic bass

AGAINST

- price
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WANTED: AUDIO-
Technica aluminium alloy
S-shaped spare pipe
for AT1100 tonearm
(detachable) Tel: Toni
07971 953628

GRADO 325 headphones,
£100 ono, A&R T21 FM
tuner, £30 ono. Tel: 01743
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£450. Tel: 01505 346 791
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RUSS ANDREWS Power
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Monster M1000 Reference
interconnect cable with
lockable phono's, £40.
Quad FM3 tuner, serviced
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Tel: 01825 72 2936 or
Email: stewart.partridge@tesco.net

PS AUDIO GCC250 Class
'D' control integrated,
remote, list £2960, £400.
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MkIV, remote, £300.
Wilmslow stand mounted
speaker, full range, £150.
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King speaker, £350. Tel: 020
8531 5979

TEAC AGH 600DNT
amplifier, tuner, FM, DAB,
internet plus PD600 CD
player, boxed, unused
(£999) accept £330.
Bowers & Wilkins AS2
subwoofer, boxed, £75.
Both collect only. Tel: 020
8220 0380

REL Q50 Subwoofer, £120,
excellent mint condition.
Audion Silver Night 300B
single ended, integrated,
five line input with Border
Patrol P/S, excellent, £950.
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RUSS ANDREWS Silver
Classic PowerKord, 3 foot,
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headphone amp, nearly
BNIB, (£490) £250 +
P&P. Kimber KS9035
silver/copper jumper set,
fitted WBT silver spades,
(£1000+) £350. Tel: 0151
608 4481

THORENS TD165,
Shure N75ED cartridge,
new stylus, £200. E.R.A.
turntable, no arm, new
blank armband, £85. Quad
FM1 tuner (untested) £40.
Rose RV 23S valve MC-
MM two box pre-amp,
£375. Arcam One CD
player, no remote, £35.
All immaculate. Tel: 01722
334 694

REL STENTOR III
subwoofer, £550. 11 years
old, just serviced, teak
sides, piano black top. Very
good condition. Tel: 01772
314 151 or Email:
jamesmckendrick@btinternet.com

SENNHEISER
HEADPHONES HD 560
Ovation, boxed, £75.
Sansui 3-way floorstanders,
American export, tone
controls, £120. Collection
only. Zerostat Anti Static
gun, original, £26 including
postage. Other odds and
ends, cables etc. Tel: 01455
220 214

PURE POWER P700
mains regeneration unit
£500. 01652 640 088.
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£100. 01652 640 088. I.P.L.
Acoustics S3TL Kevlar
black ash £100. Tel: 01652
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Castle Knight I
standmount. Buyer to
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offers. Tel: 01977 695 385

QUAD 909 stereo amp.
Delivered UK mainland.
£325. Tel: 01302 391 030
(Doncaster)

GARRARD 301,
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excellent, SME 4 tonearm,
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Ittock tonearm with 'T'
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top of the range. Pristine
condition. Serviced
and setup by precision
engineer. No wear on
main bearing. Motor runs
quiet. Switches 33 to 45
rpm. £280. Tel: 01277 219
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MISSION FREEDOM
770 loudspeakers, £75.
Tannoy Revolution R2
floorstanding speakers,
black ash, boxed, £95.
Rotel RCD 991 CD player
(with 'dither!'), boxed,
£175. Tel: 07796 442 577

ATLAS NAVIGATOR All
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£140. Tel: 01825 722 936
(Mid Sussex)

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E600 CD, E50 tuner, £550.
Collect only. Sony ST5066
retro tuner, very good
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boxed, £50. Technics SL5
turntable, £70. Tel: 01708
457 691

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System comprising of
562 Control unit, 504 FM
Tuner, 500 CD Transport.
DSP 5000 Speakers and
System Remote. Excellent
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SONUS FABER
Concertino speakers with
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Fidelity X-Dac v3 £170,
Pr 3mtr bespoke Silver
High Breed Quintessence
speaker cables, banana
terminations, £75, Arcam
DVI 137 DVD Player
excellent condition
£220 Tel Coventry
02476 679165 or
davidhirst244@o2.co.uk

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Prestige Gold cartridge
with Fritz Gyger stylus.
In original presentation
box. £265. 07740 991513
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CLASS A amplifier power supply, self contained free standing unit, suits John Linsley Hood's 1969/1996 designs and similar amplifiers, £299 or near offer accepted, price includes posting. Tel:- 0207 499 8729.

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GARRARD 401 in excellent condition, plinth, SME 3009, Shure V15ii. Stylus 2013 by Expert Stylus Company. Additional used Shure stylus. Refurb. by Loricraft in 2008, serviced 2013. £975. London. Tel. 0208 332 6181

NAIM NAIT 5i, £300. Naim CD5, £250. Naim NAC42.5/NAPI40 (silver bumpers), £250. Epos ES14 plus dedicated stands, £100. All with original packaging, manuals, cables etc. Tel 07826629725. Inverness.

ICON AUDIO MFV3 Super MkII (Made for Valves) 92dB floorstand L/S in Piano Black, cost new £1,699.95 offered pre owned fully working and unmarked at £700. Tel 07826 155 637

WANTED QUAD 44 preamp grey with phono sockets, non workers considered. Contact Mike 01758 613790.

WANTED: TOP quality Hi Fi separates and complete systems, Naim, Linn, Cyrus, Meridian, Audio Research etc, fast, friendly response and willing to travel/pay cash Please call me on 0781 5892458

FOR SALE, pair of Celestion sl700 speakers and stands in excellent condition £600 o.n.o. Contact David 01758 614380.

CREEK DESTINY CD2 player in Black. Only a couple of weeks old. Boxed. Genuine reason for sale. £750. Project Head Box SE headphone amp. Excellent condition. £75. Tel: 0115 9328540 (Derbyshire)

RUSS ANDREWS Ultra Purifier Block (£740) with additional Mains Zapperator (£94) plus 8 Clarity mains modules (£800) installed internally. Mint condition £900 collected. Pictures upon request. Tel 01902 884694 Email: jukey39@yahoo.co.uk

MERIDIAN M80 CD/DVD AM/FM DAB radio R/C dock, white leather, boxed. £595. Tel: 01733 352 712

AUDIO ORIGAMI PU7 excellent condition, 10 hrs use. Under 12mths old, boxed 6mths. As new in box, high quality arm leads and phono plugs fitted. £1500 ono. 07442808094 Email: roy.meir@primusbroadband.co.uk

QUAD 33/303 for sale, boxed £200; also Quad 606 for sale, boxed, £400, all good condition. Telephone Banbury 01295721399; collection only. Email: philip.miles10@gmail.com.

KEF R500 speakers as Brand New Group Test winner November 2014 £895 Telephone 07956 121 013

GRADO 325 headphones, £100 ono, A&R T21 FM tuner, £30 ono. Tel: 01743 245 888

QUAD 909 stereo amp. Delivered UK mainland. £325. Tel: 01302 391 030

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 these 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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(Graham Tricker, Bucks)
Classic tuners, radios and amplifiers restored, repaired.
Tel: 01895 833099
Mob: 07960 962579
www.gtaudio.com

TECHNICAL AND GENERAL
(East Sussex)
Turntable parts - wide range of spares and accessories, plus arms and cartridges. Tel: 01892 654534

CARTRIDGE MAN
(Len Gregory, London)
Specialist cartridge re-tipping service and repairs. High quality special cartridges. Tel: 020 8688 6565
Email: thecartridgeman@talktalk.net
www.thecartridgeman.com

Dr MARTIN BASTIN
(Shropshire) Garrard 301/401 restoration, renovation and service. Special plinths; rumble cures, etc. Tel: 01584 823446

CLASSIC NAKAMICHI
(Paul Wilkins, Worthing, West Sussex). Restore, Repair & Service Nakamichi Cassette Decks. Tel: 01903 695695
Email: paul@bowersandwilkins.co.uk
www.bowersandwilkins.co.uk

ARKLESS ELECTRONICS
(Northumberland)
Specialist in repairs, restoration and modifications to all amplifiers, valve or solid state, ancient and modern.
Tel.: 01670 530674
Email: info@arklesselectronics.com
www.arklesselectronics.com

CLASSIQUE SOUNDS
(Paul Greenfield, Leicester)
ESL-57s restored, rebuilt, fully renovated or improved. Leak, Quad valves amps etc.
Tel: 0845 123 5137/
Mob: 0116 2835821
Email: classique_sounds@yahoo.co.uk
www.flashbacksales.co.uk/classique

ATV AUDIO
(Henry Dulat, Surrey)
Repairs, restorations and upgrades to valve and transistor amps and all analogue audio including Revox.
Tel: 01372 456921 Mobile: 07730 134973

REVOX
(Brian Reeves, Cheshire)
Revox tape recorder spares, service and repair. Accessories also available.
Tel: 0161 499 2349
Email: brian@revoxservice.co.uk
www.revox.freeuk.com

ONE THING
(Coventry) Specialist in electrostatic panel manufacture and repair. Can refurbish ESL 57s and 63s as well as Leak Troughlines and Quad IIs.
Email: one.thing@ntlworld.com
www.onethingaudio.com

EXPERT STYLUS COMPANY
(Wyndham Hodgson, Surrey) Stylus replacement service for all types of cartridge. Including precise profiling for 78s. Tel: 01372 276604
Email: w.hodgson@btclick.com

OCTAVE AUDIO WOODWORKING
(Bristol) Unit 2, 16 Midland Street, St Phillips. Bristol.
Tel: 0117 925 6015
www.octave-aw.co.uk

WEMBLEY LOUDSPEAKER
(Paul MacCallam, London)
Comprehensive loudspeaker servicing.
Tel: 020 8 743 4567
Email: paul@wembleyloudspeaker.co.uk
www.wembleyloudspeaker.com

LORICRAFT AUDIO
(Terry O'Sullivan, Bucks)
Garrard 301/401 and their own 501 repair, spares and service.:
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www.garrard501.com

QUAD ELECTROACOUSTICS (Cambs)
Quad's service department, able to repair almost all Quad products, from the very first. (Also Audiolab, Mission & Wharfedale).
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www.quad-hifi.co.uk

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NEXT MONTH FEBRUARY 2014 ISSUE



MERIDIAN 808v5 CD player and DSP 7200SE loudspeakers.

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...and we will also be running an in-depth review of so much more.

PICK UP THE FEBRUARY 2015 ISSUE OF *HI-FI WORLD* ON SALE DECEMBER 31ST 2014, OR SUBSCRIBE AND GET IT DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR: SEE PAGE 58

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Studio 204,
Buspace Studio,
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London W10 5AP

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 MARCH 2015 - 6TH JANUARY

AWB

AVERAGE WHITE BAND 1974



"while 'Pick Up The Pieces' was the major hit there are a host of tracks here that should have been too"

“We were in the process of making that second album for our first label, MCA. Went to their office in Los Angeles and they turned us down, turned the record down and almost turfed us out. We then played those same tapes to Atlantic’s Jerry Wexler and he signed us up on the spot. We then went on to remake the album for Atlantic and ‘Pick Up The Pieces’ became the big, worldwide, hit” said Average White Band singer/bassist Alan Gorrie.

And how MCA must have been kicking themselves. It’s been done before, of course. Witness Decca and The Beatles - but this was certainly one mistake MCA regretted.

Gorrie said “Actually Wexler was having a small party with a friend in the Hollywood Hills. Our road manager Bruce McCaskill, who’d worked with Eric Clapton, he knew Jerry Wexler very well. We crashed their quiet party that night. To get to Jerry Wexler and to be signed by Atlantic was actually one of the original dreams of the band. Not so much because of Wexler, but Atlantic had half of the records that we all loved on that label”.

Atlantic was at the time a major force in soul, R&B and funk and the Average White Band fitted in perfectly. Which was interesting because just about everyone on that label and everyone who heard their major hit ‘Pick Up The Pieces’ were convinced that the band was black. Not so, this was a white band from Scotland, of all places.

“The band was drawn from all over Scotland” said Gorrie. “We formed in London but we’d all met in a little jazz/blues club in Perth called the Blue Workshop and that’s where I met Onnie and Roger. I was at the Dundee Art College and met these guys through that situation and Robbie, our drummer, who came to that same club, the Glasgow guys did the same. When everyone had finally moved to London that’s when we finally decided to get together in the summer of 1971.”

The band quickly moved to the USA, were signed to MCA, produced a debut LP that did very little and then, after moving to Atlantic, broke with the second LP release, AWB.

“We kind of heralded the disco era” said guitarist Onnie McIntyre “...although we were never a disco band. To be honest, ‘Pick Up The Pieces’ really started as a hit in the clubs and then it crossed over into radio and chart success”.

The band experienced tragedy when drummer Robbie McIntosh died of a drug overdose. “We were in Los Angeles at the time and it was just a devastating thing. Fortunately Atlantic Records were very supportive and helped us get through it. They said ‘You gotta get back into the studio and record again. You gotta find a new drummer.’ Fortunately Steve Ferrone was in Los Angeles at the time and he had recently been to some of our shows in Los Angeles that week. He was a friend of Robbie. He was obviously the natural choice”.

AWB itself is filled with stylish tracks such as the gutsy ‘Person To Person’ that has a Tower Of Power-like funk vibe. In fact, while ‘Pick Up The Pieces’ was the major hit, there are host of tracks here that should have been too. ‘You Got It’ demands repeat plays, while ‘There’s Always Someone Waiting’ is full with foreshadowing, and ‘Work To Do’ picks up where the Isley Brothers left off.

The album can now be found within a magnificent and reasonably priced box-set that packs in nineteen CDs including all of the officially released albums plus alternative tracks, rarities and mixes and a fifty-two page booklet including interviews.

“The idea for the box set was floated by Demon Records last year” said Gorrie “and I think everybody was sort of relieved that somebody had finally come to the table with a proposition to do a proper retrospective of a lot of music. It’s only in the compilation of it and working with the record company that I have been shocked by some of the things that I’d forgotten about while helping to keep everything on track.

I never thought when we started that we’d have the chance to make that many records. It’s fair to say that, when record companies were fronting the money to make records, unless you had a degree of success time after time you didn’t get to keep making records. We must have done something right”.

PR

USHER

The USHER *Dancer Diamond Series* features the world's first amorphous DLC (diamond-like carbon) diaphragm tweeter. This is a tweeter which is second to none in the current market. To find out more, visit www.usheraudio.com or your nearest USHER dealer...



"2012 Editor's Choice" Awards --- AUDIO ART

Mini-X Diamond

2-way system: 1.25" Diamond DMD dome tweeter, 7" midrange
Sensitivity: 87 dB @ 1 watt / 1m
Nominal impedance: 8 ohms
Frequency response (-3 dB): 41 Hz ~ 40 kHz
Power handling: 100 watts
Crossover frequencies: 2.3 kHz
Weight: 15.5 kgs/34.2 lbs. per piece
Dimensions (w x d x h): 26 cm x 37 cm x 43.5 cm;



Behind the scenes

Dr. Joseph D'Appolito a world renowned authority in audio and acoustics designs the crossover and performs prototype testing/final fine tuning for Usher Audio. Consulting to a couple of famous audio companies, Joe always finds the tremendous value Usher Audio products represent a delightful surprise in today's high end audio world.

Rueyma Electric Technology Co., Ltd.

No.29-2 Jhonghua Rd., Taipei City 100, Taiwan
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pure virtuosity



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

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

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



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